



Prey

THE KING'S MEN MC

V.T. DO

PREY

PART II

KING'S MEN MC

BOOK TWO

V.T. DO

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CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNINGS

This is a dark romance, and some readers may find it triggering.

Trigger Warning includes:

- Dub-con
- Unprotected sex
- Stalking
- Voyeurism
- Violence

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RYLEIGH

I WOKE UP TO SILENCE.

I didn't think I had ever sensed a silence so profound.

My eyelids felt heavy, as if there was something placed on top of them to keep me from opening my eyes, and my limbs felt as weak as a newborn kitten.

What happened?

I let out a small groan and twisted my body to the side of the bed, trying to think back to the last thing I remembered and coming up blank.

What the hell had I been doing?

Did I drink last night?

Something pushed into my mind, something important. There was something I was supposed to... do? Remember?

I couldn't quite get a grasp on it.

The memories started to connect slowly, but it took my brain a second longer to make sense of it all.

I was—

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Where the hell am I?

Sweat coated my skin, and I flung off the blanket that had been thrown over me.

I was barefoot and still in the same clothes I had been before...

A pounding headache took hold.

From the fucking drug.

Xavier—*Roman Stone*—had drugged me, then brought me back to this...

I looked around, confusion clouding my vision.

What the fuck?

I was in a cabin.

His killer cabin?

Shivers ran up and down the skin on my back. I felt both hot and cold at the same time.

Was this where he took his victims, right before he killed them?

Tears stung my eyes.

If I wasn't in love with him, I was at least halfway there, and it turned out to be nothing more than a fucking lie.

All of it.

Every word spoken, every touch shared between us.

Nothing more than a stupid lie that I was stupid enough to fall for.

I shook my head.

I didn't have time for self-pity.

I was alone now, but I didn't know how much longer that would be the case.

Creeping out of bed, I quietly made my way out of the room.

The view from the windows showed I was surrounded by nothing but trees.

He took me to the woods.

Oh, God.

I thought I was going to be sick.

I quickly pushed it down. I didn't have time to be sick.

There was no time to panic, even if I could feel it boiling beneath the surface of my skin and clouding my vision.

Don't. Panic.

I came to a small and cozy living room, and I almost cried out loud when I saw the front door just several feet away.

I tried the doorknob, but it didn't budge.

Fuck. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

I tried it again and again and again, even though I knew how futile it was.

Tears of frustration stung my eyes, and I shook my head.

This couldn't possibly be happening to me.

How could this be happening to me?

I moved away from the door and tried the closest window.

It was stuck. Probably nailed shut, for all I knew.

In my angry, panicked haze, I didn't think as I grabbed a nearby chair and, with a shout, threw it against the glass with all my strength, only to duck straight down in fright when the chair bounced back toward me.

It narrowly missed me as it fell to the ground, the wooden leg splintering a bit.

I stared at it with wide eyes before turning my gaze back to the window.

Not even a crack.

What the hell?

The doorknob turned then, and I didn't have time to run and hide.

I stood, feet frozen to the floor, as the door opened, revealing a rough-looking, big man.

A man who had seemed like nothing more than my very own gentle giant just weeks before. That wasn't the case now.

I swallowed and took a step back. His eyes narrowed on the move.

Fear took hold, making it hard to breathe, and it didn't help that he had been silent the whole time he stood there watching me with an impassive face.

He was such a good actor.

I had myself convinced the soft look he had shot my way was reserved solely for me.

I was fucking wrong.

There was nothing soft about the man, not even an ounce. I knew that now.

He knew I was the witness in that alleyway.

He knew I was the one who had sent him to prison for the last two years. He knew all along.

I didn't know how he found out, but he knew, and I was scared shitless.

I took in a deep breath, trying to will away the tremble in my bottom lip.

I took a hard swallow, ignoring the huge lump lodged in the middle of my throat.

My eyes stung, and I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

I was without my voice.

However, I must have made a noise, and that seemed to push him out of his reverie.

He came inside and shut the door behind him, the slam hitting me with its finality.

I didn't know why, but at that moment, I thought that the slam of the door was what separated me from past Ryleigh to this new strange girl that I wouldn't recognize for a long while to come.

I blinked, and everything came back into focus.

He walked over to me.

I shook my head.

That didn't stop him.

"P-Please," I begged. I didn't know what it was that I was begging for. For him to let me go, to not touch me... to not *ruin* me?

All of it.

I would have said all of that if only I could find my voice again.

He ignored my plea and bent down, hoisting me up and over his shoulder. I struggled in his hold, but it was of no use. He was just so much stronger than me.

I *knew* that.

His strength had been one of the very first things that attracted me to him, and I hated the way my skin still tingled where he touched me.

Could still feel how he affected me.

I didn't want to be affected by him.

I didn't, but I was, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

He tightened his arms around me and dropped off a bag I had just noticed he was holding in his other hand before making his way back to the bedroom.

My panic was making it hard for me to think, my heart feeling like it was going to claw its way out of my throat the closer we got to the bed.

"No!" I screamed, using my fists on his back.

It didn't seem to do anything to him.

Tears fell down my cheeks as he flipped me over. I was on my back on the bed, and he rested his heavy weight on top of me.

I closed my eyes and tried to buckle him off of me.

He grabbed my wrists in one hand and held them up above my head. I had on nothing but what I had gone to bed in, my

panties and one of his t-shirts.

I would have taken it off if it weren't the only thing offering me some semblance of protection against him right now. It wasn't much.

I might as well be naked with the way I was feeling, and I wished I had more clothing on, if only to protect myself from this brute of a man.

Tears seeped out of my closed eyelid.

"Open your eyes, Ryleigh girl," he said, speaking for the first time since I woke up.

I shook my head, trying to hold on to my composure.

Then I realized there was no room for pride when you're fucking scared shitless.

I burst into tears.

"Shit," I heard him muttering on top of me.

He shifted us then, until he was on the bottom, and I was on top, one hand cupping the back of my head, holding me to his chest, and the other on my butt cheek.

I shouldn't take comfort in the position.

I should have wanted to get as far away from him as possible. Instead, I reveled in the closeness, curling into him as I cried into his chest. I wasn't crying out of fear anymore, but sadness.

Sadness for the fact that the man I thought was mine, and the love story I thought was so great, was nothing more than an illusion, concocted by a man who hated my guts.

He tightened his arms around me when my sobs got louder.

I didn't care to be quiet.

I didn't care about anything anymore.

The man drugged me, abducted me, and brought me back to a remote cabin. I was allowed to cry as loud as I wanted.

"Baby, you're going to make yourself sick, crying like this."

I pulled back and glared at him. Though the fear wasn't gone completely, it was pushed to the background in place of my annoyance.

"I'll cry as much as I want," I said, my voice thick from the tears.

His lips twitched suspiciously. If he laughed at me now, I might just slap him. After a moment, he relaxed his hold against me and pushed my head back down to his chest. I should not have complied, but looking at him was starting to hurt my heart, and I didn't want him to see.

"Alright," he conceded. "Cry for as long, as loud, and as hard as you need."

"That's so generous of you," I muttered sarcastically, but now I didn't feel like crying as much. I kept my head on his chest and looked off to the side of the room. The occasional tears would slip past my eyelids and down to his chest, but even those started to dry after a short while, and I didn't know what to do next.

I didn't know how to handle this man, and what was more, I didn't want to.

I shut my eyes, shutting out the world, focusing on nothing but the steady strum of his heartbeat. My eyes grew heavy, and before I could stop myself, I had fallen asleep.

I didn't think I would have been able to fall asleep like this—in his arms—but I did, and I vaguely remembered him placing me back down on the bed and pulling the covers over me.

Then, the feel of his lips lightly coasting across the skin on my cheek, and that was all.

I fell into a deep sleep.

ROMAN

I WATCHED HER SLEEP FOR A WHILE, UNABLE TO MAKE MYSELF walk away.

It would be awhile before she started to feel more like herself, when the drug would finally wear off, and she would have more fight in her for me.

But right now, she was mostly weepy and tired.

I ran my hand up and down my face.

I didn't know what to do right now.

Drugging her and taking her back here had been a last-minute plan.

I realized that I was quickly running out of time when I found her sneaking into my apartment and looking around for the answers we *both* didn't want her to find.

She was getting curious, and honestly, I was tired of keeping secrets from her.

I was tired of the evasive answers, of Micah's stares, and of Dominic's quiet curiosity.

I was tired, so I did something rash.

I prepared to take her back with me to the cabin.

The drug shipment the club was working with had already been distributed, and they were on their way to the East Coast, so things weren't as busy at work as they had been.

While she was sleeping off the drugs, I had made preparations for my “leave of absence” for the next three weeks.

Technically, there were no days off, but I was high enough in rank and had done my part that Dominic didn’t complain too much about.

I didn’t tell Micah about my impromptu trip, but I knew it wouldn’t take him long to figure out what was happening and where I was.

I was hoping he would leave me alone.

I knew that was fucking wishful thinking on my part.

I shook away the thought, returning my attention to the sleeping girl in my bed.

Right where she fucking belonged.

I had two weeks with her. I knew we couldn’t stay in this cabin forever. After two weeks, we both had to return to the real world.

I hoped by that time, when I let her go, she would return to me willingly. That she loved me enough to give me—and the club—her loyalty.

There was no other option.

I risked a lot taking her here and showing her my hand.

And I wasn’t going back to fucking prison, which could very well happen once I let her go.

Micah would have called me stupid over that.

Hell, I fucking felt it now.

I reached for her and lifted a strand of her dark, midnight hair away from her face.

She wrinkled her nose a little from the move but didn’t wake up.

I couldn’t find it in me to regret the decision.

Not now when she was right here with me, exactly where she should have been all along. When there were no more

secrets between us, and I didn't have to be Xavier to her anymore.

I could be with her as Roman, and that would just have to be good enough for her.

I cupped her cheek and let my thumb slide across her bottom lip for a bit before I pulled away and stood up from the bed.

I walked back out to the living room, to the groceries I had unceremoniously dropped on the middle of the floor earlier, and set about making dinner.

I had bought this cabin for half the market value since pretty much everything had been gutted.

I rebuilt this place with the help of Micah and Dominic.

It took us three months, but it was well worth it, considering all the modern amenities we'd built in the place.

We could survive here for weeks, as long as I kept the fridge well stocked with food, and I had done that.

The trip I took to the closest grocery store, about half an hour from here, had been to pick up any last-minute shit I might have forgotten. I had grabbed some of Ryleigh's girly shit from her bathroom and bedroom, to make her comfortable here, but I probably missed some things due to my haste.

I snorted a little at the thought.

I doubt she would be comfortable for a while, but I knew my girl.

I knew what I needed to do to make her comfortable. I smiled a little and shifted on my feet from the thought. Fuck, I knew exactly what I could do to get her to relax.

I made a simple meal of spaghetti and meatballs.

It was a comfort food, and it was one of the first meals I'd learned to make when Micah and I took off from that hell hole we'd grown up in.

I was just about done with the sauce when I heard her. She was trying to be quiet, but I had trained my entire life to be

astute with my surroundings. Most of the time, it was life and death, but not now.

I had heard her the moment she climbed out of bed. I didn't acknowledge her. I gave her a moment of privacy, unsure how she would react.

There was no way out of this cabin, not unless I allowed it, and even if she somehow could get out, we were two hours away from the closest city, and I knew these woods like the back of my hand.

She wouldn't be able to escape.

My skin heated with awareness the moment she came out the bedroom door. I ignored her, letting her stand there, staring at me.

I grabbed two plates, and once I added the spaghetti, I topped it off with the tomato sauce I had made from scratch before turning to her.

“Hungry?”

She startled in surprise when our eyes met.

I knew my eyes glinted with heat as I took her in from head to toe, from the oversized black shirt she had borrowed from me to go to bed in the night before, which nearly engulfed her whole, to her bare legs, messy hair, and flushed cheeks.

I didn't need to lift her shirt up to know that she had on pale pink panties underneath, covering her mouthwatering, neatly trimmed pussy.

She blinked and took a step back from the predatory look in my eyes, her gaze moving to the two plates I had set out.

“Fuck no,” she muttered, and it took me a moment to realize what she was talking about.

“Come on. Don't you want to reserve your strength for when you try to run away from me?”

She blinked up at me. “Is this a fucking game to you?”

The fire grew in her arresting gray eyes, and it was taking everything in me not to walk over to her, lift her up in my arms, and kiss the ever-living hell out of her.

She made it so easy for me to want to lose myself to her.

To *drown* in her.

I took note of her fists clenching at her sides.

I wondered what she would do if she found just how turned-on I was from her anger.

She could take that anger out on me, any way she wanted.

“As much as I find you amusing, no. This isn’t a fucking game to me.”

“Then why take me?”

“To keep you.”

I didn’t show any outward expression as I said it, but it was the fucking truth.

I was keeping her.

She stared at me for a moment, her mouth gaping open, and she stood there for a beat.

Unable to stand the distance between us anymore, I walked around the counter and came up to her.

I cupped her shoulders, hating the way she flinched at my touch.

There had been a time when she didn’t try to get away from my touch but moved closer and closer, as if she couldn’t get enough.

There was no artifice when it came to this girl—something I was completely fascinated by.

I was surrounded by people who all wore masks, and how well they had gotten to wearing them, but this girl—this innocent, sweet girl—showcased her every thought in those unnerving eyes.

I wanted to lose myself to her.

Inside her.

Until all that was left for her would be me.

“Come on,” I urged softly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and bit her lip in consternation.

I waited patiently.

Being patient wasn't my strong suit, but I realized when it came to her, I had the will of a saint.

I groaned and reached over, pulling the abused flesh between her lips and swiping across the plumpness with the pad of my thumb.

She held still.

I was so achingly aware of her delicate frame. I always had been, but somehow, hidden away from the world, in this cabin with her looking at me like this, her delicacy was so much more pronounced.

I was a big fucker, but she should know I didn't want to hurt her—at least, not any more than she could handle.

And I'd make fucking sure she'd like it when that happened. She'd always liked it when I *did*. This time would be no different, whether I was fucking her as Xavier or Roman.

My cock stirred from the thought, and I shifted a little before straightening back up to my full frame.

Her eyes tracked my movements, like a cornered prey would watching a predator before the jaws closed in for a big bite.

I grinned, baring my teeth.

“Come on, Ryleigh. Come eat.”

I walked back to the kitchen without looking back at her, and only after a short moment, she hesitantly followed.

Her eyes briefly made their way to the door, and I let out a small chuckle.

“You really think I would let you roam around the cabin if the doors weren’t locked?” I thought back to the chair lying on the floor I’d picked up before starting dinner. “And I’m guessing you already tried the window. There’s no escape, so you might as well just sit down and enjoy this nice dinner I cooked, yeah?”

The fire was back in her eyes, and I almost smiled at her.

I resisted, but just barely. She looked mad enough to throw the chair again, but instead of trying to break the window, she would probably aim it at me.

Would she look at me this way if she knew the sight of her was turning me the fuck on?

I loved her fire.

Fuck me, but I wanted to burn in it.

I watched her sit in one of the chairs by the small dining table in the middle of the room. She watched warily, as if she was afraid I might pounce on her without notice.

I might be planning on that, but it wouldn’t be unwelcome on her part—I would make sure of that.

And if there was anything I was going to accomplish during our time here, it was to take away all the wariness, all the apprehension, and all the fear from her eyes. There was no other alternative.

She was going to love me as Roman as much as she had loved me as Xavier.

I set one of the plates out in front of her.

“Dinner,” I said, my voice sounding rough, even to my own ears.

She eyed the plate suspiciously.

I watched her with some amusement. “You really think I did something to it? Why would I go to all this trouble to bring you here just to poison you on the second night?”

“Has it only been one night?” she asked, looking out the window.

“You slept all last night and most of the day.”

She scowled at that. “I wasn’t sleeping. I was drugged.”

I shrugged. I had to get her out of the apartment. Drugging her was the easiest way for me to do it.

She shook her head and muttered something under her breath. Judging by her expression, I would say it wasn’t anything good.

I kept my face neutral.

She was a surprising combination of amusing and fucking adorableness.

A lethal combination.

I made my way to the fridge and brought out one can of soda for her and a beer bottle for me before sitting down next to her. I opened my beer, taking a large sip. I pretended I didn’t notice her eyes on me, the heat in them scorching me from the inside out.

I waited for her to hesitantly take the first bite before I dug in.

We didn’t say anything while we ate.

I didn’t mind much. I had lived most of my life in silence, considering my companion for most of it had been Micah, and that fucker was about as talkative as a fucking tree.

Once I decided to move away from Sacramento, I found myself in even more solitude than before, and though it took some getting used to at first, I found I liked the silence a hell of a lot better than talking just for the sake of talking.

It had been something else once I joined the club.

Things weren’t just loud, they were chaotic.

Finally, she put her fork down and leaned back against the chair. She closed her eyes and started rubbing her belly.

I wanted my hands to take over for her, but I doubted she would want me to touch her right now, so I kept my hands to myself, like a good boy.

One eye peeked open at me, and then another, until she was looking me over, those grays set in curiosity.

“How did you know?” she asked quietly after some time.

“Know what?”

“That it was me. That I was the one who recorded you and sent it to the prosecutor.”

Technically, her old man did most of the work. I knew it as much, and I wondered if she was wording it this way, trying to protect him from me.

“There are cameras all over the streets near that club. We had your identity mere hours after we found out there had been a witness to the case.”

“But I didn’t see anything.”

I shot her a look. It didn’t matter what she saw or didn’t see. She was still the one that recorded the entire thing, recorded my voice.

Jesus, I didn’t know when I had ever been so fucking talkative during a kill.

“So you waited all this time before you...”

She trailed off and looked to the side.

I watched her, taking in her profile, and for the first time, I had a hard time discerning what she was thinking or feeling.

“Being the judge’s daughter allowed you some protection. You weren’t just a random woman off the streets.”

“So instead, you decided to seduce me and take me.” Her bottom lip trembled. “How cruel.”

I frowned at her. “Ryleigh—”

She shook her head and pushed away from the table, standing up. “I’m tired,” she said. And then I watched as she walked back inside the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

I didn’t follow her right away, even when everything in me said to.

Instead, I gave her some time to think and for me to calm down.

Of course, she would have thought I set out to seduce her as some sick game of revenge.

That would have been far easier had it been the case.

I didn't set out to seduce her or use her.

I had set out to kill her.

Then I saw her and...

Fuck, I just wanted to keep her.

I stood up and started cleaning, washing the dishes, and wiping down the counter before I leaned against it and looked at the closed door separating me from my girl.

There wasn't a lock on it, but it was still an obstacle—a physical barrier—and I didn't like it one fucking bit.

Without a thought, I opened the door, careful not to be too rough. I didn't want to scare her.

She barely acknowledged me when I walked inside, though I knew she was aware of me based on the tensing of her shoulders.

“You think I seduced you as some sort of game?”

She turned to me, and—thankfully—her eyes were dry, even with the hurt clear as day in them.

“Didn't you? What would you have me think, *Xavier*?”

“Roman,” I said gruffly.

I realized she hadn't ever called me by my name, and I wanted to hear it from her lips now.

I stared down at her, and she took a deep breath. “R-Roman.”

Fuck. That was the sweetest fucking sound. How would it be when she called out my name while in the midst of ecstasy?

Heaven.

It would be like heaven.

“I didn’t seduce you as some sort of a game.”

I was fucking thirty-two years old. I didn’t have time to play those kinds of games with her, and what was more, I didn’t want to.

Her eyes told me she didn’t believe me.

“I sought you out because I wanted to kill you.”

She flinched at my bluntness, but I realized some time between when she closed the door on me and as I was cleaning the kitchen, brutal honesty was the only way to go from now on.

“I fucking hated you. And that hate, baby? It only festered each day that I had spent locked up.”

I stepped further into the room, and she scooted further up the bed.

I kept going until I had her trapped against the headboard.

I barred her in with both arms on either side of her. She closed her eyes, turning her face to the side as if she was afraid to look at me.

I cupped her cheek, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Until I saw you for the first time,” I said softly. “I was fucking hooked at first sight.”

I had killed twice for her now. The first time was when I caught a stupid fucker following her home from campus, and the second was when the bastard from her building pulled her into the alleyway and tried to hurt her.

I might have gotten my hands bloodied before, but it was never to protect someone.

It was never like this with anyone.

“How could you not see how fucking obsessed I am with you? What do you think I was going to do? Seduce you and discard you?”

The way her breath stuttered told me that was exactly what she thought.

I grabbed her hand and held it to my chest. “Can’t you feel how my heart fucking beats for you?”

She opened her eyes then, a storm brewing. She tried to yank her hand away. I tightened my hold.

“You’re sick. You don’t care for me. You don’t fucking love me. You said it yourself. You’re fucking obsessed!”

I nodded. Perhaps she was right. But it didn’t make my feelings for her any less real.

“Let me go, Roman. Please. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I can’t,” I rasped out. And how fucking true that was. Perhaps there had been a moment when I would have been able to let her go. If such a moment existed, I didn’t know about it, and it had long passed now.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t leave you alone.” My thumb glided from side to side underneath the tender skin below her eye. “Fuck, why can’t I leave you alone?”

The last part was said more to myself than to her.

I didn’t know what it was about this girl that I couldn’t let go.

I wanted to own her.

I wanted to take her and keep her. I wanted to protect her as much as I wanted to hurt her for making me want her like this.

I wanted to hurt her for making it so that I hadn’t belonged to myself for the last two years. Even when I hated her, I didn’t belong to myself. My thoughts had been preoccupied with her and her alone.

Fuck if I didn’t want to be all those things to her.

So lost in my own thoughts, I didn’t even see her move.

That was my mistake.

A flash of movement caught my attention, and I turned just as Ryleigh came at me, a small knife in her hand.

Where the fuck had the knife come from?

I knocked on her wrist, hard enough for her to drop the knife, but not hard enough that she would bruise.

But I had underestimated just how badly she wanted to hurt me, and just how quickly she moved for such a tiny little thing.

She caught me on the shoulder.

Blood started seeping out from the cut flesh, but I barely felt it.

The wound was superficial, and I might have hurt her more than she hurt me.

She grabbed her injured wrist and looked at me with wet, accusing eyes as the knife clanged to the floor. I ignored that and grabbed hold of her wrist.

It showed how fucked my mind was. I didn't even realize she had it on her body. Where did she get it? The kitchen, perhaps, when my back was turned.

I should have paid closer attention to her.

I wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Why the hell did you do that?" I asked, trying to ascertain just how badly I had hurt her. I didn't think I did any damage, but there was something... *breakable* about her just now, and I wondered if I had used more strength than needed.

"To get away from you," she hissed out, trying to pull away from my grasp.

I clutched her chin with my other hand and lifted it until she met my eyes. "That was stupid. I could have hurt you."

"You did hurt me," she accused, and as if to prove her point, she pulled on her hand once more.

"Ryleigh," I said, frustration making my voice tight.

"Just let me go," she said softly. "Please. I won't tell anyone about you. Just let me go and leave me alone."

"I wish I could," I said, a little desperately.

Fuck, but how many times had I wished she didn't captivate me so badly?

How many times had I realized Judge Hudson's daughter was going to be my downfall?

And even knowing all of this, even knowing I was as bad for her as she was for me, I couldn't fucking leave her alone.

"I tried," I told her.

Not hard enough, but I had tried. When I realized I couldn't kill her, that I was incapable of it, I tried to walk away. Let her live her life, and I would go about mine.

There was no room for love or relationships in my life.

What did I know about providing a stable, happy environment for someone like her?

A man like me shouldn't have even touched her with my dirty hands. But I hadn't been capable of letting her go, and now it was too fucking late.

She looked up at me with those stormy gray eyes of hers once more, holding me in a trance. Thick, dark lashes surrounded the pale-colored irises, and I was hit with the sudden urge to kiss away her misery.

To remind her how good it was between us.

It was complete shit the way we started, and I had been hiding a big part of my identity from her, but there was one thing we were so fucking good at.

So *fucking* good at it.

We didn't say anything for a beat. Our faces were so close to each other it felt like we were sharing the same breath.

Her eyes darkened, and I knew my desires were reflected in those eyes of hers.

Knew that whatever force that was pulling me toward her, she felt it too.

She could call me a monster all she wanted.

She could call me her stalker... her hunter.

But she couldn't deny that she was my willing prey in this moment.

So I did the only logical thing left.

I slammed my lips against hers in a brutal kiss and took in her taste, knowing there would never be a time when I didn't crave her.

Fuck.

She struggled against me at first, but I grabbed her waist and pulled her into my lap, lining us up so she could feel how hard I was against her.

She gasped when I pressed in against her, and I took full advantage and plunged my tongue inside her mouth.

Her fists pounded against my chest, trying to push me away.

I deepened the kiss, gliding my tongue across hers and taking in her taste, a low groan working its way up my chest.

She shook her head, but I followed her lips.

"Kiss me back, baby," I muttered against her when I pulled away so we could both catch our breath.

"No," she said.

I glided my lips softly over hers.

Her hands came up to my chest, and she held them there. I felt that hesitation, and I pounced.

I deepened the kiss. "Kiss me."

"No," she said again, only this time, it was said in a much weaker tone.

I moved my hand up and down her side. She shivered against me.

I leaned back far enough to take in her face fully. Her eyes were glazed over, and her lips were swollen.

She looked good like this.

She looked like... mine.

She looked like *mine*.

And despite what she had said, she wanted me to kiss her.
She just didn't want to want it.

Unable to help myself, I leaned back in, took her lips in
mine, and kissed her once more.

Losing myself to her.

RYLEIGH

I DIDN'T KNOW WHEN I STOPPED FIGHTING HIM AND, INSTEAD, started fighting against myself.

I was fighting over the urge to give in and let him kiss me like this. Like he craved the very essence of me.

I almost moaned in pleasure when I felt his wet tongue glide over my bottom lip. My breasts felt heavy, my skin felt like it was on fire, and—very noticeably—there was a pounding ache between my legs that only he had ever been able to quickly evoke out of me.

With everything that had happened, I almost forgot how good it always felt with him.

How fucking badly I always wanted him.

I shifted from side to side.

Roman pulled away once more, taking me in with dark, hungry eyes.

I didn't think a man had ever looked at me like that.

I didn't think a man had ever kissed me like that.

Not before him.

My lips still tingled from his abuse, and it was taking everything in me *not* to beg him to kiss me again.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I should not be feeling this way about a man who abducted me.

Who lied to me about who he was from day one.

Who... was in a notorious MC. I didn't know the extent of what the club did, but I knew enough to know it was bad.

If I had thought my parents wouldn't like Xavier, they would hate Roman.

As they should.

As *I* should.

I should not crave his touch the way I craved air.

Just moments before, I had come at him with a small knife he had carelessly left out on the kitchen counter, with every intention of hurting him badly enough so that I could escape, and now—

Now, I wished he would hold on to me a little tighter.

I had never felt so conflicted in my life.

And so damn confused, I could cry over that.

Tears stung my eyes, and I tried to look down, to look away so he wouldn't see me anymore—or perhaps, so I wouldn't have to look into his devastating, dark brown eyes—but he wouldn't let me.

He cupped my cheeks with both hands and tipped my face up until I stared right into his eyes.

Roman had always been gentle with me. Sure, he liked to play rough in the bedroom, but outside of it, this big man had treated me like I was made of the most precious glass. Had made me feel safe, and now I realized it was nothing more than a fucking illusion.

If there was anyone I wasn't safe with, it was him.

The tears I had tried so hard not to show, fell and touched his fingers.

He frowned.

I was crying, not because he had kissed me, or even because I was scared of him.

No, this was much worse.

I was crying because I wished he would kiss me again.

I wished he would kiss me despite my weak protests.

Wished he would let me deny my own participation in this sick twisted game he played.

Let me be the innocent one, while he took on the role of a bad man, who took whatever he wanted, no matter what.

“Ryleigh.” His voice came out soft. Almost as if he was breathing out my name.

I blinked.

More tears fell.

“Do you want me to kiss you again?”

“No,” I protested weakly. *Yes.*

And fuck, but I hated my own weakness in that moment.

He didn't say anything for a moment, his inquisitive gaze taking me in.

I felt naked. He seemed to know what I was thinking... feeling, without me ever saying anything to him.

It had always been the case.

When did another person look at me and not see the front I tried so hard to put on and instead see me for who I really was?

I couldn't even remember.

I had spent so long trying to be the person everyone wanted me to be, I lost a part of myself in the process.

I doubt even my own parents knew who their daughter was.

My lips trembled, and more tears fell.

He made a soft protesting noise in the back of his throat and kissed me again. My hands moved up to his neck on their own accord, my nails digging into his skin as indecision waged war inside my heart.

Did I push him away or pull him closer?

What should I do with my hands?

Fuck, *but* what should I do with my hands?

I whimpered against him, and he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine.

I was afraid to open my eyes.

His hands came back down to my waist, gripping me in his death grip.

I swallowed around the lump stuck in my throat and opened my eyes to look at him.

“You can tell me no,” he said. “It won’t matter. I’m not a good man, Ryleigh. And I won’t pretend to be one.”

I frowned before my confusion cleared.

He was letting me keep my innocence.

Give me the pretense of fighting him because it didn’t matter.

He wouldn’t give me a choice.

“No,” I breathed out.

“Fuck,” he whispered, his hot breath fanning over my face.

He kissed me again.

I gripped his neck. “No. Stop,” I said when he pulled away.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.”

He pulled me in closer to him until I wrapped my legs around his trim waist.

He pushed me down against the mattress, crawling on top of me, my legs still wrapped around him.

Roman was like a warm, heavy blanket on top of me, and I didn’t know if I should feel scared or comforted by that fact.

He rocked against me, and I couldn’t help the small gasp that escaped.

“Please,” I whimpered. I didn’t know what I was asking him for, only... just...

“Please.”

“Shh,” he said. “I got you. You’re mine. No matter what you say or do. No matter how hard you fight me. You’re mine.”

I closed my eyes when his lips moved down my jawline before finding the skin where my neck met my shoulder and suckled on it.

My nails raked down his back as he continued to push his hips against mine, imitating the sensual movement I was just getting used to from him before everything had gone up to shit.

“Stop,” I begged half-heartedly.

“You feel so good beneath me,” he said.

He pulled down my shirt, exposing my collarbone and the tops of my breasts.

A slight spasm worked its way around my body, from the small of my back to my abdomen, and finally, further down.

I tensed when he glided his lips downward until he reached the supple flesh.

I swallowed as he lowered more of my shirt, exposing more of me.

“Stop,” I said—or at least, I thought I had.

Don't stop.

No sound came out.

He looked up and met my eyes. I didn't know what he was looking for, but he must have found it because, with a small groan, he covered my nipple with his mouth.

I arched toward him, and he palmed my other breast with his large hand, fondling me, playing with me, driving me crazy.

I threw my head to the side, my body pushing against him.

I didn't know what to focus on, his unnerving gaze, his lips, his *teeth* that had come out to play, or his hand—his

fingers plucking on the aching tip of my other breast.

My hands pushed down on his broad shoulders, trying to get him to let up, yet pulling him back against me moments later.

He thrust his hips, lining himself up perfectly against me.

I felt his hardness against the softest part of me. We might as well not be wearing anything with the way it felt.

He did again, and again, and again.

My eyes rolled back. “No,” I muttered.

Yes.

He grunted and kept up a steady pace.

“No,” I said. It didn’t sound like a protest.

One more time, and I was gone.

Pushed over the cliff, I didn’t think I had any control over how hard or fast I had fallen.

I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Roman let go of my nipple with a pop of his mouth and kissed his way gently up my body.

He buried his face in my neck, giving me time to compose myself without having to look at him.

My heart was beating erratically inside of my chest, and I wondered if he could hear it, being so close to me like this.

My chest pushed up against him every time I breathed, my sensitive nipples pressed against his chest, hard to ignore.

I was sure he could feel the way they pebbled from his touch. I blushed just thinking about it.

My embarrassment seemed to be the one thing that got me back to reality. To the situation I was in.

My eyes widened, and I moved my hands in between us to shove him off. It took three times before he even realized what I was trying to do.

Slowly, he got off of me, his eyes staying on mine.

My cheeks flamed, and I looked away from him, sitting up.

“Ah, baby. You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

I used to love it when he called me ‘baby.’ As if staking a claim on me. I had never been someone’s ‘baby’ before, and I liked that I was his. Liked the dark possessiveness in his voice as he said it.

What a fucking fool.

I made a small protesting noise. It was easy for him to say it. He didn’t lose control with his captor. He didn’t *crave* his captor.

I closed my eyes and turned away.

He touched my shoulder. I pushed him off and slid over to the edge of the bed.

He followed, his heat radiating off him and covering my back, though he didn’t touch me again.

I didn’t know if I should be thankful for that or not.

I wished he would just leave me alone so I could think.

I could still feel the effects of what had just happened.

The skin on the inside of my thighs tingled. I shifted a little on the bed.

“Now what?” I croaked out.

He didn’t say anything for a moment. I felt his heat on my back, and I resisted the urge to move closer to him. “Now? We get ready for bed.”

“And then?”

“We sleep.”

I let out a deep breath I was holding.

The anger I felt earlier was back, giving me the courage to look at him. I leveled a glare at him. “What happens tomorrow? Are you going to let me go?”

“Do you want me to let you go?”

“Yes,” I gritted out.

He smiled. I ignored how beautiful he looked with a smile on his stupid face.

He climbed off the bed and stood in front of me. I directed my gaze on his middle, taking in the tight black shirt he wore and the flat of his stomach that looked—*was*—hard to touch. He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “Liar,” he said softly before making his way to the bathroom.

I could only stare after him, not knowing what the fuck was going on.

“What the hell?” I muttered.

He heard me, though, because his chuckle was the last thing I heard before he closed the door behind him.

I QUICKLY WRAPPED the towel around myself and looked at the closed bathroom door.

It didn’t have a lock, and I must have taken the fastest shower ever known to mankind.

I was afraid he might do something—or worse yet—I was afraid I might beg him to.

I shook my head.

Since when was I without my control?

Since when did I let a man—any man—get to me simply because he was beautiful?

But even I had to admit there was something about Roman that got to me, even on day one. And Roman wasn’t just some random man.

He was...

He was Xavier. The man I thought could be mine.

I had been fascinated with his looks at first, but it was everything else about him that held me captivated.

I almost made it too easy for him to take me, didn’t I?

I frowned, not liking the direction of my thoughts. I walked closer to the mirror. Steam had fogged up the glass. The clothes on the counter caught my attention.

So he came inside the bathroom while I was showering. I just didn't notice.

I frowned.

I shouldn't let my guard down.

I needed to stop looking at him as Xavier, and instead, see him as the monster that was Roman Stone.

The man who had essentially stalked me ever since his release from prison. And who had abducted and taken me to a remote cabin somewhere, I still didn't know.

I should be scared of him.

I should hate him.

I should be disgusted by his touch.

I was just hurt more than anything else.

I swiped my hand across the mirror and took in my reflection before quickly looking away. I didn't think I recognized the girl in the mirror.

A knock came at the door, and I jumped, covering my mouth with my hand to keep from making any noise.

"Come out, baby. There's no point in hiding," came the gruff voice from the other side.

I wished he would just call me by my name.

Wished I could stop reacting to him like this.

I grabbed the first thing my hand came in contact with—a black comb—and threw it at the door.

It made a loud clacking noise when it hit before falling to the ground.

He chuckled as he walked away, as if he found my violence amusing.

Creepy fucker.

I quickly looked through the clothes he had gotten me.

His shirt and—

I gasped and opened the door before I thought better of it.

Roman was standing in front of the bed, his back to me. I hesitated for a quick second. It wasn't like the hot shower I just took erased the size of him in my memory, but I still pulled up short when I got within touching distance from him.

He turned when he heard me, and I took half a step back. His heated eyes took me in from head to toe, and I tightened my grip around the towel.

I didn't let him distract me.

“You went through my drawers!” I yelled out.

He smirked. “I thought you would be more comfortable in your own underwear.”

“What the fuck? Who does that?” I asked, coming in closer to him.

This wasn't the most intimate of all the things we had done, but it was the only thing I could hold on to at this point. It was the only thing flaming my anger, and anger was good because if I wasn't angry with him, then I was... defeated.

Or worse yet, willing.

He took in the closing gap between us, his dark eyes flashing.

I stopped talking when I noticed his expression. I turned away and was about to go back to the safety of the bathroom when he snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me toward him until my body was plastered against his hard one.

I wiggled against him.

He firmed his hold as he leaned down. I froze when I felt his lips against my ear.

My chest pushed in and out with every breath I took, as we stood there, not saying anything to each other.

I focused on a small spot on the wall of the room.

“What do you think will happen when people start looking for me? They will, you know.”

We both knew it.

I should be happy if he gets caught for this. Yet, the thought of Roman going back to prison made me... uncomfortable.

I should want that, shouldn't I?

Him being locked up and staying as far away from me as possible.

“What do you think will happen?” he asked, as if he didn't know.

As if he didn't plan that far ahead, and yet, Roman didn't seem like the kind of man to just act on impulse.

So either he keeps me hidden away forever, or he kills me, but he had said earlier he couldn't do that—wasn't capable of it.

I was banking on that to be true.

But then, what would happen? I would just be stuck here in this cabin forever?

The thought sent a slight panic running through me, and I quickly shoved it down. There was no need to panic now.

Not yet.

When I felt his arms loosening around me, I took advantage of that and pushed away from him. He was staring down at me with unreadable eyes when I braved a quick look back.

I didn't wait for him to change his mind and grab me again. I quickly made my way to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind me.

I let out a small sigh and leaned back against the door, taking in my surroundings.

Now what?

ROMAN

I STRIPPED DOWN TO MY BOXERS AND CLIMBED ON THE BED.

I doubt she would have liked it if I got completely naked.

I shifted on the mattress, trying to get the image of her with nothing but a towel wrapped around that delectable body of hers out of my head.

I hadn't answered her when she asked what would happen next because I had no fucking clue.

I didn't know where to go from here, and I knew we couldn't hide away in this cabin forever, no matter how badly I wanted to.

She was right.

It would only be a matter of time before people started to notice she was missing. The only option was to let her go.

I had never intended to keep her with me for good. Not here, at least. Just enough time to make her as fucking obsessed and possessive of me as I was with her.

Until she realized she was mine, and that was all there was to it.

The doorknob turned, and I sat up a little and watched as she walked out the door.

My shirt looked good on her.

It engulfed her slight frame perfectly and came down almost mid-thigh.

Her legs...

Jesus, for being so short, this girl was all legs, wasn't she?

Her eyes widened when she found me on the bed.

She looked out to the door, and I shook my head. "Get in bed, Ryleigh."

"Why?" she asked warily.

"To sleep."

She eyed me skeptically. "Just to sleep?"

I resisted the urge to grin. "Just to sleep."

Kissing her had been unplanned. I hadn't planned on touching her, not unless she asked me, but fuck me, the temptation of her close by had been almost too much to ignore.

So I didn't.

And when I found my own desires reflected in her eyes...

I was fucking gone.

Any flimsy control I'd convinced myself I had, disappeared in that moment.

I patted the space next to me.

She looked at the door once more.

"Ryleigh. I give you my word. We're just going to sleep, but if you leave this room, I will get up and haul your ass back to bed. I'm in the mood to play, but I doubt you would want me to chase you... would you?"

She bit her bottom lip before hesitantly walking closer to me.

She pulled the covers back and climbed in, trying to stay as far away from me as physically possible.

Her back was to me, so I didn't bother to hide my reaction.

I smiled and reached over to turn off the lamp.

I had never smiled more than I did when I was with her.

Prison didn't exactly give me plenty of reasons to smile about.

My childhood was nothing to smile about.

In the club, when I did smile, it was never in amusement. And people tended to feel uncomfortable when I smiled at them.

I lay back down on the bed and wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her in close to me.

She tensed.

“You told me we were just going to sleep.”

I rolled my eyes. “We are.”

I buried my face in the back of my neck and closed my eyes.

“Roman?”

I squeezed her against me. “Sleep, Ryleigh.”

It took a few moments before I finally felt her body relax against me, and then she finally went to sleep.

I stayed up most of the night watching her before sensing dawn peeking through the window.

When I didn't think I could stay awake any longer, I reached inside the bedside drawers and pulled out a pair of handcuffs, cuffing it around her wrist and one of my own.

Then I snuggled back against her and went to sleep.

I KNEW I was drifting between sleep and consciousness. Knew it was my dream—a fucking fantasy happening—when I saw my sole obsession climbing over my body and holding me close to her.

“Roman,” she whispered, and it took everything in me not to reach out and grab her. Keep her close to me.

She moved on top of me, her warm, tiny body pressing down on my hard-on and driving me insane.

I let out a small groan when she whispered my name once more.

“Roman.”

Fuck.

Her voice was heaven and hell all rolled up into one. She had the kind of voice that could ruin a man like me.

Could ruin me.

“Roman.”

“Ryleigh.”

I could hold on to her like this for the rest of my goddamn life—

She shifted in my arms, bringing me away from the dream and back into reality.

I stirred awake, though I didn't say anything for a moment, reveling the feel of her in my arms.

I waited to see what she would do.

She rolled onto her back and lifted her arm up. The one I had handcuffed to me.

I held in a grin when she let out a small sigh.

Then, with the tiniest of movements, I felt her finger prodding my side.

“Roman.”

I didn't move.

She poked me again.

“Roman.”

I squeezed her to my side.

“What?” I asked, my voice gruff from sleep.

“I have to use the bathroom, so unless you want to lay in a puddle of my pee, I suggest you unlock the handcuff.”

I couldn't help but laugh over her words. I opened my eyes and found shy eyes and blushing cheeks.

I had fucked her in about ten different positions in her apartment a few days ago. Had seen the way she lost herself in ecstasy, and she was getting shy on me now?

Despite all we'd done, I realized just how little time it really was... for her.

For me, everything had been going on for two years.

She always had this air of reservedness around her, but this shyness was really fucking me up a little bit.

Time seemed to have held its breath for us, and I had to fight the urge to keep her permanently glued to my side. Wouldn't that just be fucking perfect?

I didn't say anything when I reached over to the bedside table for the key, and not looking away from her, I unlocked the handcuffs from both of our wrists.

She didn't move for a moment.

"Ryleigh?" I asked, amusement tinged my voice.

"Yeah?" she asked softly.

"Don't you have to use the bathroom?"

She blinked in surprise, and her blush took on a deeper shade of crimson as her eyes widened. She quickly climbed off the bed.

"Right," she said, walking away from me.

I kept my gaze on her ass the entire way.

I never said I was a gentleman, and right now, it was taking everything in me not to suggest she lift her shirt and show me what was mine.

I shifted a little, my morning wood making it impossible to think.

Letting out a small groan, I sat up on the bed, my feet touching the cold floor.

I didn't know what time it was, but it was early.

The sun barely peeked through the clouds.

Her propensity to wake up every morning at six worked better than any alarm clock out there. I was sure she had been up a while.

I heard the toilet flushing before the faucet turned on.

Ten minutes passed since she'd turned the water turned off, and nothing but silence came from the bathroom.

Still, she didn't come out as I expected.

Another ten minutes passed before the doorknob turned, and I found myself finally able to breathe properly.

She shot me a strange look.

It took a moment before I realized it was because I was frowning. I morphed my expression to a relaxed one and stood up to my full height, stretching my muscles and pretending I didn't notice how her eyes ate me up.

Attraction had never been the problem between us, and she was never good at hiding her reactions and emotions from me.

I strolled to the bathroom, and just when I reached the door's threshold, I turned.

She didn't take her eyes off me fast enough, and now those baby grays were directed at my crotch.

Her wide eyes jumped up and met mine, her skin going from pink to red.

I laughed. "You can look all you want, baby. Seems only fair, considering how much time I spent watching you."

Her eyes flashed, seething at my words.

She was probably thinking back to the pictures she found on my phone. Did she really think I had left my phone unlocked by accident?

Or that I was the kind of man who would be so careless and not guard my privacy like it was my lifeline. And in my line of work, it literally was.

No, the only reason she got into my phone was because I let her.

I laughed and walked inside the bathroom. Just before I closed the door, I added, “If you try anything like yesterday, I promise we’ll end up in the same position. And this time, I don’t know if I can stop with just a kiss.”

A gasp of outrage was the last thing I heard before the door clicked shut behind me.

I had already hidden the knife she used, along with anything sharp in the kitchen.

I would not make the same mistake twice.

I quickly got ready for the morning, debating on a morning shower. I didn’t want to leave her out there by herself for too long, so I decided against it.

Who knew what kind of trouble she could get into.

I quickly dressed in a black t-shirt and joggers before coming to the kitchen.

She’d helped herself to my clothes.

She was still wearing my shirt but had added gray sweatpants rolled up several times over at the waistband.

She looked fucking good in my clothes, and a possessive part of me roared to life at the image.

She glared at me. “Don’t look so satisfied. This is only a slightly better alternative to only wearing a shirt in front of you.”

I stalked toward her. She caught on too late. I had my arms wrapped around her waist and pushed her against the wall, my body crowding her.

I glided the tip of my nose across her jawline, smiling when I heard her breath stutter.

“Do you really think this bit of fabric can protect you from me? Besides, I have already seen everything, and trust me when I say, the image of you naked is so ingrained in my memory, I would still remember it well into my nineties.”

“If you live that long,” she said darkly.

I laughed.

She slammed both hands in my chest and looked up at me, the storm back in her eyes.

“Shall we test out this theory?” I asked.

Rather than give her time to make a decision, I pulled both of her legs up until they wrapped around my waist. I pushed up against her, lining us up in the best way possible.

Her head moved to the side. “Roman.”

I couldn't tell from the tone of her voice if it was a plea or protest. And fuck if I could think straight. Not when she felt so good in my arms.

Like she belonged here and nowhere else.

My lips found the side of her neck, and I suckled on the soft skin there, pushing up against her even more.

Her fingernails dug into the skin on my back, and she bit her bottom lip.

I pulled away and took her in. Those pale eyes of hers had gotten dark from arousal, and it was driving me fucking crazy. There would be very little I wouldn't do for that look in her eyes. I pushed in against her once more.

A small moan escaped her lips, and I made it my life's mission to get her to make as many of those seductive noises as possible.

I pressed a small smile on her skin before pulling back.

We didn't say anything for a moment, and not for the first time. I wished I could read Ryleigh's mind. Slowly, I helped her unwrap her legs from me and pulled back half a foot.

Frustration tinged her eyes, and I winked. “Let's eat. Unless you want me to have you for breakfast.”

She let out a small sigh. “Not happening.”

“Don't say things you don't mean.”

She grabbed the rag I had used to wipe down the counter last night and threw it at me. I chuckled and easily ducked out of the way, setting about making her some breakfast.

RYLEIGH

LIKE DINNER LAST NIGHT, WE ATE BREAKFAST IN SILENCE.

I tried not to look over at him.

I failed on several occasions.

At this point, I didn't even try to work out the confusing mess of my emotions.

What bothered me most was that I was falling back into the same thought processes I had when I was with him as Xavier.

That I wasn't scared of the man, even though I should be. I should try harder to escape, but I wasn't afraid. Most of it had to do with the fact that when I looked at him, I didn't see Roman Stone, the man who went to prison because of my dumb luck. I saw Xavier, the man who held me so tight I didn't think I could breathe unless he was nearby.

It was just so much easier to see the illusion when he wasn't doing anything to me the way I thought Roman Stone might.

And how badly I wanted to believe in that illusion.

How badly I wanted the man sitting next to be the one I had gotten to know over the last few weeks.

My bottom lip trembled, and I looked around the cabin, trying to distract myself from my thoughts so I wouldn't do something stupid like cry in front of him.

Again.

I could feel the heat of his stare on my skin, and I pretended not to notice.

Perhaps one of the reasons why I wasn't feeling as scared as I should was because this cabin looked nothing like a killer's cabin.

It was almost... cozy.

And it offered some of the most high-tech, modern amenities I had ever seen.

It was a comfortable cabin, and I imagined if he had taken me here as Xavier, I would have been excited.

It would have created the illusion of the most romantic getaway.

I took in a deep breath.

But he didn't take me here on a romantic getaway.

He drugged me and took me here, and there was no way for me to leave.

"Whose cabin is this?" I asked.

He didn't answer me until I looked over at him, and even though I had mentally braced myself for the impact his gaze would have on me, I was still caught breathless.

"Mine," he answered.

I had figured that out, but his answer still surprised me.

His lips twitched as he took in my expression. "What, baby?"

I shook my head. "You just don't seem like the kind of man to own a cabin in the middle of the woods."

"You mean like a killer?"

I shrugged. "You said it, not me."

He was full-on smiling then, and I had to look back down at my half-eaten breakfast. I didn't have much of an appetite anymore. I pushed the plate away from me.

"All done?" he asked.

I nodded.

He looked at my plate, frowning a bit, but he didn't comment on it. He stood up, grabbed his empty plate and mine, and walked over to the sink. I didn't bother offering to help him clean up. I wasn't here as a guest but as a captive.

I needed to remind myself of that.

I sat there and watched him make quick work of washing the dishes and wiping down the counter. He kept the place surprisingly clean, though from what I had gathered from his apartment, Xav—*Roman*—was the kind of man who kept his place meticulously cleaned.

Something occurred to me then. “Does Micah know about this place?”

He looked up at me from where he stood in front of the sink.

“Yes,” he answered carefully.

“Does he know you took me here?”

“Does it matter?”

I looked down. “I guess not. But... he doesn't like me, does he?”

“He thinks you're my weakness. He thinks you'll be the reason I get myself killed.”

I frowned up at him. “Why would he think that?”

He walked around the counter and came up closer to me. I resisted the urge to back away, or show him how wary I was.

He cupped my cheek, and I swallowed.

“He's not wrong.”

I shook away his touch. “Stop toying with me.”

I tried to move off the chair, but he pressed in closer to me, turning me around until my back dug into the dull, round edge of the island. Both arms came out on either side of me, grabbing the edge and trapping me in place.

“I'm not toying with you.”

I laughed. There was nothing humorous about the sound. “You say I’m your weakness?”

He didn’t say anything. Just watched me with those devastating brown eyes of his. “I’m not. I’m the person who sent you to prison.”

“Who says you can’t be both?”

“Me!”

“You’re wrong,” he said calmly, and I really hated that.

I felt like I was on the edge of losing control. Yet, Roman was able to hold onto his with an iron-clad grip. Or perhaps I didn’t affect him as much as he said I did.

“Then why am I here? Do you usually take the women you call your weakness captive?”

“There has only been you, so I’m figuring this out as I go.”

I frowned. I should not be affected by Roman saying there had only been me. I shouldn’t.

I shook my head.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked instead.

A shuttered look came over his eyes, and I almost regretted asking it that way... but no. There was something wrong with him *and* with Micah. Even after one encounter with the man, I knew there was something wrong with him.

Micah was a dangerous man, to others and to me, no matter how much Roman tried to play it off that I was safe with his brother.

It was a shame that I didn’t get that vibe from Roman from the start.

I had thought he was charming.

My very own dark prince who would protect me from all the dragons in the world.

Instead, he was the dragon keeping the princess hostage.

“Why are you guys like this?” I forged on.

He pulled away from me, and I missed his heat instantly.

“What happened to you?”

Perhaps it was a trauma in his childhood, but this was not how a normal man reacted when he confessed to a woman that she was his weakness.

“Lots of things,” he said, making me slightly choked up.

I should not feel sorry for the man. I should not want to walk up to him and hold him tight, vowing never to let him go.

Perhaps there was something wrong with me as well.

“What?” I asked, my voice barely audible. But he heard me.

“What happened to you at fourteen?” he asked instead.

Now it was my turn to be closed off. “W-What do you mean?”

“It means I looked into you. When I decided that I would come after you as soon as I got out of prison. You’re the judge’s daughter, there should be nothing missing or suspicious about your life, but your parents pulled you out of school at fourteen, and there’s a chunk of those months missing after.”

“That’s none of your business.”

Perhaps I would have told him about everything that happened to me at fourteen, from the abduction to the cliffside and even to the dismissive way my parents had been about the entire event, yet became helicopter parents overnight, to the point of suffocation afterward.

I would have felt comfortable telling Xavier this, but not Roman.

I shook my head and got off my seat.

He took a step toward me, and I backed away. I did not need him to intimidate me with his sheer size.

But he kept coming closer, and it felt like everything in this room was getting smaller and closing down on me,

making my vision fuzzy.

I couldn't think.

"Stop!" I yelled.

To my surprise, he did, looking at me with wide, shocked eyes.

I took a deep breath. "It's none of your business."

"But there is a story there."

"You wouldn't tell me anything about your childhood. Why should I tell you anything about mine?"

"It's not just my story to tell. It's Micah's too."

"The man who hates me, you mean?"

"He doesn't hate you."

I shook my head. "No, he just wishes I was out of your life, and if I give him a good enough reason, he would do it, with or without your protest."

And I knew what I said was true.

I had thought the name Micah sounded familiar when Roman introduced us, but now that the dots were starting to connect, I realized *why* it sounded familiar.

Micah Stone.

Officially, he was just a member of the King's Men MC.

Unofficially, he was Dominic Madden's enforcer.

His entire job description was to eliminate anyone who got in the way of the club's business.

How the hell had I forgotten?

I closed my eyes.

He would have no problem killing me.

"Ryleigh—"

"Stop, okay?"

I walked back to the bedroom, bracing myself for when he would come after me and force me to talk to him. Surprisingly enough, he let me go.

I sat down on the bed, my hands shaking, and I didn't know if it was from thoughts of Micah, the fight with Roman, or everything in between.

I buried my face in my hands, trying to keep the tears at bay.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

I STAYED in the room for the rest of the day.

I ignored Roman when he knocked on the door for lunch and again at dinner.

The clock on the nightstand read eight o'clock.

Another day had gone by at the cabin.

Would my parents be worried?

Although, ever since I moved into my apartment, our communication had dwindled, and I doubted they even noticed I was missing at this point.

Lucky for Roman.

How long would it have to be before they realized something was wrong and would send people to look for me?

I worried about the person I would be by the time that happened.

I tensed when the door to the room opened, but I didn't bother looking over at him.

I felt him standing at the threshold, watching me on the bed.

He didn't say anything for a beat, then I heard his footsteps as he walked across the room and stopped at the edge of the bed.

I knew he was purposely making noises as he walked so he wouldn't startle me.

If he wanted, I wouldn't have heard him, and I realized with some bitterness, I didn't know the man all that much.

How could I say I had fallen for him when I barely knew him?

I probably hadn't.

I was probably just caught up in the illusion that I had found someone who was solely on my side.

I closed my eyes when I felt him sit down on the edge of the bed.

"We grew up poor," he said.

I tried to figure out what he was talking about, and tensed when I realized he was telling me about his childhood.

I held my breath for three long seconds to keep from making any noise, and he continued.

"My dad was a fucking drunk. He was mean enough when he was sober, but once the alcohol hit, he was downright scary. He wasn't a big man, not even close to how tall I am now, and nowhere near as big as Micah, and you've seen how big that fucker is."

I smiled a little, even though nothing he said was remotely funny.

He moved his hand to my shoulder, and I jumped slightly. He didn't do anything but hold it there, though, and after a while, I found myself able to relax back on the bed. His fingers glided over my skin lightly, and it wasn't... unpleasant.

It was kind of soothing.

"He seemed big when I was a kid, though. Fucking huge, and probably the scariest motherfucker I had ever seen. There's something wrong with that. You're not supposed to see your dad as a monster."

I didn't say anything to that, but I was listening, and I couldn't help but imagine the little boy Roman had been,

scared out of his mind in his own home.

I was luckier than him. Far luckier.

I didn't see my dad as a monster because he wasn't.

Sure, he could sometimes be neglectful, mostly because of his work, but I didn't grow up fearing his shadows.

I blinked and realized tears were building.

“Micah's only two years older than me. He was nothing more than a child, but he took it upon himself to protect me as best as he could. For the longest time, it was just him and me against the world. I guess because of the way we grew up, he still sees me as that little boy he needs to protect.”

I laughed a little at that. It was impossible to see Roman as helpless. He wasn't. He was strong, sure, and secure. At times, he was the only reason I felt safe.

How fucking ironic.

“Where's your mom?”

“She died when I was ten.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “I'm sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” he responded, yet I could still hear the tinge of pain in his voice. I couldn't imagine losing my parents at any age. He lost her when he was a kid.

“Do you miss her?” I asked.

He didn't answer me right away, but when he did, a sort of gruffness took over his voice. “Every day.”

I turned around and looked at him then.

We didn't say anything for a moment, and then he moved, and I didn't...

I didn't protest.

He lay down on the bed and pulled me tightly into his arms, resting my head on his chest. His fingers tangled in my long hair, and I closed my eyes, trying to pretend I was lying in Xavier's arms and not Roman's—

Only it was getting harder and harder to separate the two.

What would happen once I see Roman as Xavier and Xavier as Roman?

When I could feel safe in Roman's arms.

I took in his scent.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged like it was no big deal, but I knew he was still affected by it. A childhood of abuse didn't just go away.

"I didn't tell you this to make you feel sorry for me."

"I know," I whispered.

But now I imagined a little boy who looked just like Roman but wasn't Roman.

He had my eyes.

What would it be like if I had a child with Roman?

How would things work out with what he did for a living?

And why was I even entertaining that idea?

I shouldn't.

I shook away the thought and burrowed closer into him. He tightened his arms around me, and we didn't say anything for the rest of the night.

ROMAN

I'D ONLY BEEN TO THE OCEAN ONCE. I WAS TEN.

It happened right after our mom passed, and Micah—being the good big brother that he was—wanted to cheer up his broken brother, even when he was hurting himself.

I didn't know why he thought bringing us to a large body of water would help, considering the way our mom had died, but Micah took us out to the ocean, nonetheless, and he stole a sailboat. I didn't know what he was thinking that day, but he had been determined to get as far out as possible.

At some point, he stopped and just lay there, looking up at the bright blue skies, tears dripping down the sides of his face.

I didn't say anything about that, and neither did he.

As young as I had been, I knew I needed to give him a moment to mourn quietly.

So while he looked up at the sky, probably wondering if there was a God or heaven, and if so, perhaps our mom had made it there and felt no more pain, I looked down at the ocean.

At the blue-green water just within reach.

And I felt my heart racing from all the possibilities the ocean held. A world that would always be beyond my reach, knowing I would sooner plunge to my death than I would ever discover its secrets.

And fuck, a part of me wanted that so fucking bad.

It was the first time I had ever contemplated taking my own life.

It would have been so simple, too.

I didn't know how to swim. It was a risk Micah took, taking us so far out, but we weren't thinking back then.

We were just two boys, drowning in the grief of losing our mother to such a horrible, ugly death, and we didn't know what to do with ourselves.

Micah looked up at the sky as if he wanted to fly, and I looked down at the ocean as if I wanted to drown, and it had felt like such a relief to admit that.

Looking into Ryleigh's eyes brought on those feelings—but in the best way possible.

She was the storm in the ocean, and I wanted to risk my life just to be in her glory.

I didn't want to die, though.

I just wanted to drown in her eyes.

To just let go and let those expressive grays of hers wash out all of my misery.

I just...

I just wanted her.

Shortly after seeing her that first time, I decided that I wanted her badly enough to cross every single line.

I wanted her badly enough to commit every sin in the book.

I wanted her badly enough that I would die before I ever gave her up.

That day, I became less of myself and more of someone who was solely, completely, and unabashedly... *hers*.

It was early in the morning. Dawn was barely breaking, and the sun hadn't peeked through yet. She would wake up soon.

I didn't know where she went when she slept, and why she had such a hard time staying asleep most of the night, but I was hit with an urge to be strong enough to fight her demons, even in her dreams.

It was fucking stupid, considering I was playing one in her reality.

But I didn't know how to not be that for her.

I didn't know how to leave her alone, and I didn't know how to let her go. I didn't know how to do the right thing and just let her live her own life.

I didn't know how *not* to be Roman Stone.

I let my fingers run gently down her cheek.

Even though she let me hold her in my arms last night, there was always a wall between us that I wanted to tear down with my own hands.

I wanted to eradicate that wary look in her eyes when she looked at me as Roman, and get back to that soft look she had given me as Xavier.

I wanted the softness back, and her defenses had never been lower than when I moved inside her.

I shifted restlessly on the bed, holding my breath when her face started to change slightly, and I knew she was on the verge of waking.

I didn't move, wanting my face to be the first thing she saw when she woke, and if I had it my way, that would always be the case for the rest of our lives.

Her eyes slowly opened, and there was that softness in her eyes that hadn't been present since she first woke up at the cabin.

Then awareness seeped in, and I fucking hated that.

I wanted the softness back, so I did the only thing I could think of at that moment.

I leaned down and kissed her.

She stayed still beneath me for one long second, and then she kissed me back, wrenching out a low groan from my lips.

Fuck.

I deepened the kiss, molding my lips firmly against hers.

My hand found one tit through her shirt, and I played with it, squeezing slightly before my finger sought out her hard nipple, loving how she responded to me instinctively.

Her foot slid restlessly against my legs as she moaned in response, and she wrapped her arms around my neck, bringing me in closer so that I couldn't escape, even if I wanted to. I didn't.

I couldn't imagine ever getting tired of kissing her.

I fucking loved the way she responded to me. And I loved how genuine she was. She couldn't hide her response to me. Not with the way she blushed, or the fluttering of her eyelids to let me know how satisfied she was.

Whatever lies she might utter from her lips, her body told me the truth.

She wanted me.

She wanted this.

I kissed her harder, my lips moving against hers in brutal movements, my fingers pinching her nipples and tugging them.

A small mewl came from her lips, and I couldn't tell if it was from pain or pleasure.

Probably both.

She loved it when I hurt her, and I fucking loved hurting her. Showing her just how out of control she made me feel, how fucking desperate I had become under her gaze.

"Baby," I murmured against her lips. I pulled away so we could both catch our breath. I tugged on the blanket and let it fall to our feet, my eyes taking in her bare legs and rumped shirt.

She looked so fuckable this morning, and my cock was so hard, it took everything in me not to jizz in my boxer briefs right then and there.

I wouldn't come until I was inside her.

It hadn't been that long since I fucked my girl, but already, I was missing this, missing her.

We were going to get back to the way things had been as Xavier and Ryleigh, only this time, we would do it as Roman and Ryleigh, and there would be no fucking secrets between us.

I would own everything.

Take everything, and what was more, she would *want* to give me everything.

She opened her eyes and looked at me.

I didn't say anything as I lifted the shirt off her, leaving her in nothing but white panties.

My thumb pressed down on her clit through the thin fabric, and she arched toward me, seeking more of my touch.

I leaned down and took one hard nipple in my mouth, my fingers continued to play with her, bringing her to the brink of ecstasy, only to pull away at the last minute.

"Roman," she complained.

I closed my eyes.

"Say my name again," I said, pulling her panties to the side and exposing her.

She whimpered when I gently pressed the tip of my fingers against her entrance.

"Roman."

Her hips rocked up and down against me, and I smiled, leaning down, nipping and sucking on the skin on her neck, her collar bone, the top of her tit... I moved down and took her nipple back into my mouth, rolling it around with my teeth.

Her hips lifted, trying to get in more friction, and I cupped her drenched pussy, pushing her back down on the bed and keeping her still. She glared at me.

“Be a good girl and hold still for me.”

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. The storm raged in her eyes’ gray depths.

If she wasn’t so turned on, I had no doubt she would have slapped me.

I smiled, watching as her eyes rolled back when I pressed the pad of my thumb against her clit.

Her chest heaved as I used my tongue to lick her nipple, her breathing coming out in a stuttered gasp.

She pulled on my shirt with both hands as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. I pressed my thumb harder against her, and a whimper escaped her lips.

“Roman, please.”

“What do you need?” I asked.

Another whimper came out.

“Do you need my fingers? Or do you want me to fuck you with my cock?”

She nodded, probably saying yes to both of those things.

My girl fucking loved it when I played with her pussy.

I lowered my hand and buried two fingers inside her pussy, feeling her clenched around me.

She screamed out my name.

Fuck, but I could probably come from this alone.

I started to finger fuck her hard and fast. I placed my other hand on her belly and held her still as my fingers worked her over, feeling her wetness come out of her tight pussy.

It wouldn’t take that much for me to get her to come.

“Fuck, baby. Look at me,” I gritted out when her eyes slammed shut.

I pulled my fingers out and slapped her pussy three times. She let out a low noise in protest.

“Look at me,” I repeated.

She glared at me, causing a small smile to form on my lips.

“Don’t look away.”

She licked her lips, and I plunged my fingers back inside her. Her legs trembled from the move, but she didn’t look away from me like the good girl she was.

I quickened my pace, spreading her legs further out by moving my hips between them.

Her body started to shake, and I finger-fucked her harder.

“That’s right, baby. I want you to come for me.”

Her hips thrust up when she came, her head turning to the side and her eyes closing.

I didn’t tell her to look at me again.

Fuck, but she was beautiful when she came.

I made quick work of removing her panties and throwing them behind me somewhere on the ground, turning back to her to see she was still trying to ride off the orgasm.

I pulled her up until she was sitting on the mattress, and she was still getting off that high because she was pliable in my arms.

She let me move her however I needed, and I directed her arms over one of my shoulders so that she was hanging off me as I spread her legs, gliding my hand to her pussy and rubbing her slit viciously back and forth.

Her legs shook as she hung onto me tighter, trying to keep from falling back, and I kept going, letting my middle finger slide inside her and moving my hand against her pussy.

“Roman!” she screamed as a gush of wetness came out.

She squealed when she felt it, trying to get away from me.

I held her tightly, continuing my movements and trying to prolong her orgasm.

“Oh, God. Roman. Please.”

Her thighs clenched as she struggled more in my arms.

I pushed her back on the mattress and sat down between her legs.

Her cheeks were flushed, and I couldn't tell if it was from her arousal or her embarrassment.

She had nothing to be embarrassed about.

I looked down at her pussy, and her hands moved over, trying to cover herself.

I groaned and pulled her hands away, holding both of her wrists in my hand and pressing it down against her stomach as I went back to looking at her red, swollen pussy.

Fuck me, but I knew she would be like this.

I knew she would be this responsive to me, and I fucking love that I just made her squirt.

“This pussy knows who owns it, doesn't it?” I said, flicking my fingers over her clit.

She clenched her legs around me.

“Roman, please.”

Fuck.

I leaned over and kissed my way up her body, stopping at all of my favorite places, starting with her mound.

She sucked in a sharp breath as I placed a small kiss there and went up to her belly button, letting the tip of my tongue dip inside.

I let go of her wrists, and her hands automatically went to my hair. She tugged on the strands roughly, especially when I got to one nipple, sucking on it slightly before moving over to the next and giving it the same treatment.

Finally, I got to her lips.

She didn't stop me when I pressed a scorching kiss against her.

Instead, she opened her mouth and invited me in, letting me deepen the kiss until we were both delirious with want.

I pulled away and looked at her directly in the eyes.

We didn't say anything when I shifted on top of her and pulled off my boxer briefs.

I kicked it away and reached between our bodies, grabbing my dick and giving myself three hard strokes.

She licked her lips when I nudged her entrance with my tip.

I sank into her without warning, and her mouth gaped open, but no noise came out.

Fuck me.

I closed my eyes and settled myself fully inside her, my blood spiking until all that was left in my world was her.

The way she smelled, the way she looked... the way she felt.

A humming of electricity started out at my lower back until it grew more forceful the longer I stayed buried inside her.

I rocked my hips against her, and she gasped, her legs moving up and wrapping around my waist.

I thrust again, opening my eyes and taking her in.

"Fuck, Ryleigh. You feel so good around me. You were made just for me, weren't you?"

I moved my hips once more, this time harder than the first two, and I didn't stop.

I started to fuck her, slowly, deeply, roughly.

Her tits bounced every time I plunged back inside her, and her back arched, trying to get closer to me.

"Answer me, baby."

She nodded as tears clung to the corner of her eyes. "Yes. For you. I was made just for you."

Her words urged me on.

I pumped my hips faster and harder against her, pressing her body against the mattress as I fucked her.

She cried out, her hands coming up to my biceps and holding them there. I pulled back slightly and let my hand drift up, wrapping it around her neck.

I squeezed lightly, and she looked at me with wide eyes, though she didn't tell me to stop.

I slammed back inside her, and her eyes rolled to the back of her head as she let out a small whimper.

I did it again as I squeezed her neck once more.

She shifted restlessly against me.

“Fuck, look at this. Do you like being under my mercy? Being my little sex doll? Mine to use however I fucking please?”

She gave out an answering moan.

“How close are you?” I asked when I felt like I was moments away from coming undone.

“Close,” she said, clenching her inner walls around me.

“What do you need me to do to get you there?” I asked. “Do you need me to play with your clit? Fuck you harder?”

Her nails dug into my skin. “Just like this, Roman. I just need you to... like this... just... don't stop... Roman—”

Her legs jerked, and her entire body quivered as she came, letting out a scream loud enough to rock the whole cabin.

And that was what pushed me over.

My cock pulsed and throbbed, and I felt it swell before I spilled inside her. Black dots danced around my eyes, and unable to hold on to my weight, I crashed down on top of her, burying my face in her neck.

Fuck, but it had never felt like this with anyone.

Never felt so absolutely shattering that I was afraid to move.

Afraid to breathe.

Afraid reality would penetrate this little bubble we found ourselves in.

Her hands rubbed up and down my back as if trying to comfort me somehow.

I was probably getting too heavy for her.

Bracing my weight on my arms, I pulled back and took her in, from those glazed gray eyes, flushed cheeks, and swollen lips.

She didn't say anything.

I focused on the way her chest pushed in and out against mine, the way her hard nipples rubbed up against my skin before I leaned down and kissed her softly, kissed her sweetly.

I might not be able to let her go.

There might be something wrong with me, as she said.

But I could be a sweet man for her.

I could be soft.

I could be gentle.

For her, and only her.

And that was all there was to it.

WE SHOWERED TOGETHER, and I made her come once more by kneeling down and eating her out against the shower wall. After I brought us back into the bedroom, I towel-dried her thoroughly and dressed her for the day in one of my shirts and sweats.

I should probably have let her dress in her own clothes at some point, which I had brought with me, but I had left them in a duffle bag in the car.

I loved her in my clothes too fucking much to get the bag right now.

And she didn't seem to mind that I was taking care of her like this, showering and clothing her, which was good because I loved caring for her.

Nothing would make me happier than to do this for the rest of our lives.

She watched with hungry eyes as I dressed myself in similar clothes.

Ryleigh had been quiet all morning, save for the noises she made during sex, and I didn't know how she was feeling or what she was thinking.

I wasn't stupid.

I knew sex wouldn't solve all our problems, but if it worked as a bridge to get us back to where we needed to be, then I wouldn't fucking mind using it one bit.

I looked her up and down, taking in her small form, engulfed in my clothes, and down to her small feet peeking out. Her toes wiggled when she noticed my attention, and I smiled a little, walking over to her.

I lifted her up in my arms.

She let out a small squeak in surprise and wrapped her arms and legs tightly around me, as if she thought I would let her fall.

I could scoff at the thought.

As if I would let that happen.

I braced both hands underneath her ass and walked from the bedroom to the kitchen, setting her down on the kitchen stool.

I felt her eyes on me the entire time as I went and made us something to eat.

I didn't know how she felt about all that had happened this morning.

She had been vocal, but it was mostly when I was touching her. Now that she wasn't under a cloud of delirium, now that

reality had penetrated, I wondered if she regretted letting me touch her.

I didn't know.

I quickly made scrambled eggs, toast, and four pieces of bacon for us before setting her plate in front of her.

She stared down at the food, not saying anything.

I wrapped her hand around a fork, then leaned down and kissed her temple firmly.

She didn't recoil from me.

"Eat, baby."

She hesitated for a beat before forking up some of the egg and slowly taking a bite.

I watched her, unsure of what my next move would be.

Slowly, I sat down and dug into my own breakfast. Like much of the meals we shared in the cabin, this one was had in silence, with me watching her eat, and her pretending like she didn't notice I was watching her.

I leaned against the back of the chair when I was done, and she was about three-quarters of the way done.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, the slow buzzing noise loud in the silence between us. I pulled it out, seeing Micah's name flashing on the screen.

I put my phone on silent and shoved it back into my pocket.

She watched me curiously.

"Aren't you going to answer him?"

"Nope," I said, not bothering to explain.

"Does he know you're here with me?"

"Micah's a smart man. I'm sure he can guess. Give him enough time, and he might even show up on the front step."

She blanched at that.

Fuck. I didn't say that to scare her, only to prepare her for it.

"Hey, I won't let anything happen to you," I said, wrapping my arms around her body. She didn't fight me. If anything, it felt as if she had moved in a little closer to me, seeking out my protection from all the monsters in the world. And Micah might be the biggest monster of them all, but that monster would never harm her.

I wouldn't allow it.

"How would you know?" she asked, her hot breath hitting the skin on my neck.

I swallowed, trying not to let her closeness affect me so badly.

"Because I know my brother. And even if he wants to hurt you, I won't let him." I cupped her chin and tilted her head back until she looked at me. Her gray eyes glistened in the morning light. "Trust me."

She pulled back a little from me. I tightened my hold on her. "Trust you? I don't even know you."

Fair point.

But I had never once lied to her about my feelings. I might have lied about everything else, about why I was living next door to her, about who I was, but never about my feelings.

"You know Xavier."

She shook her head. "Even as Xavier, you kept all the details about your life away from me. You were afraid that if you told me too much, I might have guessed who you really are."

"You know how I feel about you."

She eyed me dubiously. "You mean your obsession with me? How long before that fades? How long before this gets too hard and you want a way out?"

"With the way I'm feeling? How about a million years from now?"

She rolled her eyes. “Be serious.”

“Then forever,” I answered her, my voice gruff. If she thought she could wait out until my obsession with her faded, she would be waiting forever.

She bit her bottom lip but didn’t say anything to that. Gently, I pulled the abused flesh away from her teeth.

“You say you don’t know me. So let’s change that. Ask me anything you want to ask. And I promise I won’t lie to you. Just remember this, some aspects of my job aren’t pretty. So only ask if you think you can stomach the answer, yeah? And in return, you won’t lie to me. We will be completely honest with each other.”

She looked off to the side. “The truth?”

I nodded. “The truth.”

“How long have you been stalking me?”

“The day after I got released from prison. I got Kai to show me your apartment, and since then, I have been watching you every chance I got.”

Her eyes widened in surprise over my answer, but she didn’t say anything.

I waited for her to digest that information.

“Did you put cameras in my old apartment as well?”

“Yup. It was pretty easy, considering I had your schedule down pat.”

“You say this like it’s so normal.”

I shrugged. “Part of my job is to learn about anyone who might be a risk to Dominic and the club, and utilize Micah to make sure they’re no longer a problem.”

She shuddered against me. “Like me?”

“No, baby. You were much more personal to me than that. And the moment I decided to keep you is the moment you stopped being a problem for the club.”

“When was that?” she asked. I tried to gauge how she was taking this in, but in those rare moments, she was able to keep her face from revealing her thoughts.

“When was what?”

“When you decided to... keep me.”

I smiled. “Oh, I don’t know the exact day. Probably about a week after I started watching you. Probably that first night, when I jerked off to the thought of you.”

Flames burst around her cheeks, and my grin went up a notch.

“Be serious.”

“I already told you. No more lies. That wasn’t a lie.”

She took a deep breath. “Do you, uh, do that a lot?”

The last part of her sentence was said in a whisper as if she was afraid someone might be around to hear.

I could laugh over that.

Such an innocent little thing.

“Are you done?” I asked, pointing at her plate. She pushed it slightly away and nodded. “Good.”

I stood up, pulled her back into my arms, and let my hands come down to cup her ass.

“I can walk,” she said, sounding breathless.

I massaged her ass cheeks as I walked us to the couch. She shifted slightly against me, and I smiled, knowing I would find her wet and wanting if I had my hand down her panties.

My girl was fucking insatiable. Lucky for her, I was a man with a big appetite.

I sat down, holding her in my lap, her legs wrapped on either side of me, and her pussy pressed down firmly against my cock.

I grabbed her hips and ground her back and forth, eliciting a small moan from both our lips.

I stilled her and took in her expression.

She licked her lips, trying to get away from me.

Shaking my head, I tightened my arms around her, keeping her still. “I like you where you are.”

“We can’t talk in this position.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Her mouth gaped open. “*Because!*”

“Because?”

“You’re distracting me.”

“Tough. Now ask your questions, baby.”

I tightened my hold around her hips when she tried to climb off me once more, and she let out a sigh of resignation.

Good girl.

She would learn soon enough that I was in fucking charge when it came to us, and what was more, she loved it when I was in charge.

“You still haven’t answered my last one.”

I thought back to what we were talking about. “You want to know if I jerk off a lot while thinking about you? Fuck, yeah, baby. I do. Just as I know you have been thinking about me when you touched yourself at night.”

Her face heated. “You watched.”

I let her see the hunger in my eyes. “Of course I fucking watched. You are mine. Everything about you, from your greedy little cunt to your delectable little body—” I let my hand run up to her chest, feeling her heart thud heavily against my hand. “—to your heart, soul, and mind. I own every part of you. Isn’t that right?”

I watched as her throat bobbed up and down, and her eyes fluttered shut. My hand drifted up and wrapped around her neck. “Baby?”

She cleared her throat and pulled away. “I should slap you for that.”

I smiled. “But you’re not gonna. ’Cause you fucking love it when I watch, and one of these days, when you’re ready, you’re gonna touch yourself with me in the room, watching you, directing you. Yeah?”

She cast shy eyes down, but not before I caught the desire in them. She wanted this as much as I did.

“Any more questions?”

“Yes. One more, and I’ll be done for the day.”

I cocked my head to the side and waited.

“Did you know I was going to look through your phone that night?” she asked quietly.

She didn’t need to clarify which night. She meant the night I drugged her and took her here.

“I guessed it. My apartment has cameras, and I received a notification the moment you stepped inside. You were curious, and I knew my lies wouldn’t hold up anymore. I grabbed the drugs I used on you, delegated all the shit I needed to do to my men, and got home. I took the lock off my phone—” My lips twisted in humor, and she scowled at that. “—to make it easier for you, and I hid the drugs beneath my pillow for when I would need them. I didn’t think you would. I thought I would drug you while you were sleeping and bring you here. Would have been less traumatizing, I suppose.”

She shook her head, her scowl darkening. “Oh, yeah, that would have been so much easier.”

I squeezed her side for that sarcastic comment, and she jumped a little.

She opened her mouth, probably to yell at me, but I shut her up by fusing our lips together in a searing kiss.

Her back went stiff at first, until I sank my teeth into the soft, pillow bottom lip, and she gasped. I plunged my tongue inside, and I kissed her harder, my hands coming down to her ass and grinding her against me.

She groaned, getting in closer to the kiss, and it didn’t take long for her hips to move against me, seeking out that

delicious friction that had me seeing stars.

I groaned against her lips when she pressed down on me, my hands kneading her ass, loving every fucking moment with her.

I pulled away first.

She let out a small whimper in protest, and I nipped her bottom lip to get her to quieten.

She rubbed harder against me.

I wrapped my hand around her neck, feeling her pulse jump from the contact, pulling back and resting my forehead against hers.

Our breath mingled in the small space between our lips, and we didn't say anything.

When I felt like I could finally catch my breath, I pulled away and looked into her gray eyes.

“Wanna watch a movie with me?”

She frowned, as if that was the last thing she expected me to say. I raised one eyebrow and waited patiently for her answer, holding back my grin.

She let out another soft sigh, and I almost lost the battle then.

“Fine.”

I laughed and pulled her off my lap, depositing her on the soft cushion beside me before I got up and turned on the TV, trying to walk off the hard-on.

Fuck me, but this newfound self-control was going to be so fucking *hard*.

RYLEIGH

WATCHING A MOVIE WAS THE LAST THING I EXPECTED HIM TO suggest, but that was what we did for most of the morning.

Roman picked a scary movie because why wouldn't he?

Typical man.

If he wasn't going to make me come, the least he could have done was let me pick the movie, but I didn't say anything when it started playing, especially when I caught the tinge of amusement dancing in his warm brown eyes.

Besides, I wasn't really paying attention to the movie.

I was still thinking about all that he had said.

He had been watching me.

For months now.

How could I not know?

Not have any sort of inkling that there were eyes on me?

And the fact that I was even confused about how I should be reacting to this revelation said more about me than it did about him.

I should be disgusted.

It should feel like my skin was crawling wherever he touched me, not heat that seemed to ignite from the very core of me, making me want to get closer to him, and closer still, until all that was left was a girl who had become an extension of his body.

I closed my eyes, not from the terrible image on the screen as the monster came out to play, but over the horror of my thoughts, over the lust I felt with the devil sitting right beside me.

He grabbed my hand, and I jumped.

“Alright?” he asked. “Too scary?”

He thought I closed my eyes because of the film.

Mutely, I nodded.

He pulled me closer to his body, letting my head rest on his chest.

His lips found the top of my head, and he kissed it softly, tightening his arms around me.

I tried to shake away my thoughts and focused back on the film.

Twenty minutes later, the credits rolled, and I couldn't figure out if the movie had a happy ending or not.

I couldn't even remember the protagonist's name, so it was good he didn't talk about the movie.

He stood up and held his hand out to me.

I placed mine in his automatically and let him pull me to a standing position.

I guessed, in some way, I did trust him.

He pulled me back into the bedroom, and my heart jumped at the sight of the bed. I had him this morning, and still, I craved him.

I had felt the reminder of him between my legs all morning, even after showering together. The feel of him moving inside of me stayed firmly etched to my very core, and I didn't think it would go away any time soon.

I grimaced.

He didn't wear protection.

I really needed to remember to ask him to put on protection before anything happened again.

The chances of me getting pregnant right now were low but not impossible. I couldn't figure out if Roman was purposely "forgetting" to put a condom on.

He sat me down on the edge of the bed, and I looked up at him, trying to keep from showing too much on my face.

He pressed his hands down on my shoulders until I was lying with my back on the bed, my legs hanging over the edge.

My heart felt like it was trying to claw its way up my throat, and I could only lie there and watch him.

"Be a good girl and stay like this for me, yeah?"

I licked my lips and nodded.

He smiled at me, and the fucked-up part of my brain was actually fucking glad I was able to earn his approval so easily.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of what my parents would think if they knew I was like this with a man who was holding me captive. Worse yet, with a man my dad hated with his entire being.

I heard the front door open and close. I didn't bother looking up but stayed where I was.

It didn't take him long to get back inside the cabin, and when I found him at the doorway, there was a duffle bag in his hand.

I looked at him curiously. A darker part of me wondered if he brought me... *sex toys*.

I wasn't completely opposed to the idea.

Roman set the bag on the bed next to me, and my skin tingled a little from the slight weight added to the mattress.

He looked over at me just as he unzipped the bag and pulled out...

My dress?

"You packed my clothes?"

"Yeah," he answered casually.

“Then what the hell have I been doing, wearing your clothes for the last two days?”

Hell, I was in his clothes right now, with his big shirt and too-long sweatpants.

He was the one who dressed me this morning.

My cheeks flamed.

I let him dress me this morning... like a little doll.

I closed my eyes, biting back a small groan threatening to come out before opening my eyes when I felt his hands on me.

Meticulously, he tugged off the sweatpants and let them drop to the floor.

An ache started to grow in the center of my pussy, especially when he ran his fingers over the fabric.

My breath caught, and my hips started to rock back and forth, wanting more of him.

“Roman,” I said, a slight whine in my voice that made him smile. Good to know he found me amusing.

His hands roamed up my hips, inside my shirt, and up my ribs before he cupped both of my breasts in his large hands.

He kneaded them a bit before clasping my nipples between his fingers and pulling on them.

“Stop teasing me,” I said.

“But you like it when I tease you. Don’t you, baby?”

My legs rubbed up and down against each other when he rolled the hardened nubs.

I let my hands come up to his forearms, but I didn’t stop him.

At this point, I didn’t think I could even if I wanted to, and fuck, but I didn’t want to.

I did like it when he teased me.

“Roman.”

He lifted my shirt off me, and I was left in nothing but my panties.

He looked down at me on the bed, his eyes darkening even more than usual, and his erection pressed against his pants.

I licked my lips.

I never experimented with tasting him. I had offered, but he never took me up on it, and briefly, I wondered if it was because he thought I would be bad at it.

But no, I had seen the way he looked when I said I wanted to do it for him.

I blinked up at him when he pressed his thumb against my nipple.

“Lost you there, didn’t I?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied, trying not to let the fact that he was playing with me like this get to me.

I failed when he plucked my nipple harshly, my spine arching backward, trying to get away from him and yet move closer at the same time. He grabbed my hand and pulled me up to a sitting position, and took my dress, putting it on me.

I held out my arms so he could loop them through the straps, then he pulled the fabric down my body until it bunched up around my waist.

“Are we going somewhere?” I asked.

“Yeah. We’re gonna go shop for whatever girly shit you might need.”

“Shopping? Wait, why would I need *girly shit*. How long are you planning on keeping me here? I can’t just stay in this cabin with you, Roman. You have to let me go.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we could stay here forever,” he muttered.

“Roman.”

He ignored me, grasping my chin with his hand until I looked at him. “I don’t need to remind you to behave when we get out there, do I? I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I will if they stand between me and what’s mine.”

“Roman.”

He shook my chin a little. “Ryleigh. Tell me you understand.”

What the hell? How was this okay? But I could tell by the determined look in his eyes that he was serious.

“Have you done that? Hurt someone because they got in your way with me?” I asked.

“Do you want to know the answer to that question? Because I told you, no more lies, and I mean it. But be sure you really want to know the answer.”

His non-answer already told me all I needed to know.

A part of me said to leave it alone.

I looked him in the eyes when I said, “Yes.”

He seemed surprised over that. “Yes,” he answered back.

I tried to swallow, but there was something lodged in my throat. He waited for me to ask for the details. I had enough of his truth for one day, though, so I just nodded.

He helped me stand up and smooth down my dress, grabbing a pair of my sandals in the bag and setting them on the floor.

I grabbed his arm to keep my balance as I slipped into the sandals before Roman grabbed my hand and led me out of the bedroom to the front door.

I hesitated at the threshold.

It hadn’t been that long since he had taken me here, but the thought of leaving this cabin somehow left me feeling ill.

I didn’t know what to make of that, so I stepped over the threshold into the bright sunshine.

I blinked against the intrusion of light and walked over to his truck.

He opened the door and lifted me up, belting me in. I held my breath when I felt his forearm touch my nipple, and he shot me an amused smile before closing the door behind him and making his way to the driver's seat.

Then we were off.

I couldn't tell where we were, just in the mountains somewhere. It was a bumpy ride going down, and it did nothing to help my sore muscles.

I barely did anything, but it felt like I had put my body through the wringer.

Roman looked over at me, but he didn't say anything. After a moment, he reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it.

I shouldn't feel calmed by this, but I did.

There were a lot of things I shouldn't think, be, or feel when it came to Roman Stone, but I did.

I didn't know how to turn these things off.

He never let go of my hand the entire time we went down the mountain.

I tried to look around for anything that was familiar, but there was nothing. Something told me we were far away from home.

It took about forty-five minutes to get down, and another fifteen to come to a small local store. And I finally saw the sign.

I looked at him in surprise when he pulled the truck into the parking lot. "We're in Big Bear Lake?"

He nodded, his eyes focused out the window.

I tugged on his arms until he looked at me. "That's more than seven hours away from Sacramento!"

"I know that," he said dryly.

“Why are we all the way out here?”

“I have a cabin here that no one knows about, not even your dad.”

I didn't have a response to that, so I said nothing. He chucked my chin affectionately.

“Close your mouth, sweetheart, before I think of something creative to keep it occupied.”

My mouth snapped shut, and he let out a light chuckle. “That's disappointing. I was hoping you wouldn't obey this time.”

I gasped in outrage at the use of his word *obey* as he opened the door and climbed out of the truck.

He made it to my side moments later, opening my door and unbuckling the belt.

He hauled me out of the truck and set me down. My legs shook from being in the car for so long, and my butt was numb.

I glared at him but was thankful he was holding me up.

The bastard just winked at me before leading us to the doors of the small grocery store.

“Remember,” he said quietly. “You do as I say when I say it. You don't talk to anyone, and you don't draw attention to yourself.”

I could only nod.

I should be looking for a way to escape, but it seemed I was completely under his spell.

I didn't want to get him in trouble.

I looked around the almost empty store.

Roman led me to the beauty aisle, and I looked around for any familiar brands I used. They didn't carry a lot of it.

Most of their products were some sort of natural stuff made by companies I had never heard of.

I picked the one that was as similar to my products at home as possible while Roman followed me around, carrying the basket.

He also went to the junk food aisle, picking out chips, popcorn, and cookies.

“Are you hoping to make me gain weight so I wouldn’t be able to run away?”

He scoffed. “As if you could outrun me, baby.”

A startled gasp took away my retort, and I turned to see a middle-aged woman looking at us with wide eyes.

I bit my lip to keep in my grin, looking over at Roman to see what he would do.

He only smiled, slapped my ass once, and led me away.

“Hey,” I said, rubbing the poor abused flesh, glaring over at him, and cursing him under my breath as we walked to the self-checkout place.

Roman quickly paid, and then we headed back to the truck.

I stayed beside him as he put our bags away, looking around at my surroundings. I brought my eyes back to him when he turned to me. “Hungry, baby?”

I opened my mouth to answer when my stomach beat me to it, growling so loudly in the parking lot, I was surprised it wasn’t mistaken for thunder roaring in the mountains.

Roman paused while I blushed red, then he threw his head back and let out a carefree chuckle.

I could only stand there and watch him, feeling like an absolute dork for letting my captive take my breath away. Any embarrassment I might have was pushed to the back at the sight of him like this.

Physical attraction was never the problem between us. Roman made it so fucking easy to be attracted to him just by being the most beautiful man I had ever met.

His laughter slowly died away, and he looked down at me. The softness I was so used to seeing on Xavier’s face was

back on Roman's.

God, how much I had missed that.

Seeing the softness in this rough man and knowing it was reserved just for me.

He stepped in closer to me, and I did the stupid thing and stayed where I was standing, letting him invade my space—my reasoning with his senses.

He cupped my cheeks with both hands, and it took everything in me not to shut my eyes and burrow in closer to his touch.

“Ryleigh,” he said gently.

Did he know how much I loved the sound of my name coming from his lips?

Did he know my heart skipped a beat every time he uttered the two simple syllables?

It almost affected me as badly as it did when he called me baby in that possessive tone of his.

As if he was reminding me, and the rest of the world, that I belonged solely to him.

He leaned forward, and I closed my eyes, wanting so badly for him to kiss me right now, right here, in this unfamiliar parking lot. More than I wanted my next breath.

“Roman,” I whispered against his lips.

I felt his lips graze mine when the growl of engines took us by surprise.

He pulled away and looked off to something—someone—to my side, frowning a bit.

The engine growled louder, and I told myself not to be scared, yet I couldn't help the way my heart reacted.

I moved closer to him, and he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest.

I should have felt safe—and I did, to some extent—but it was hard to feel calm when I could feel how loudly his heart

was beating against my face, and when I looked up at him, I saw something in his eyes that I had never seen before.

Fear.

Not for him.

No, when he turned down and looked at me, that fear was reserved just for me.

He pressed something hard into my palm.

I looked down and found the key to his truck. I frowned at him, not understanding why he gave it to me.

“Get in the car and drive off, you hear me?” he said, a hard edge to his voice.

“What about you?”

I tried to look back to see what had him reacting like this, but he shook my shoulders, bringing my attention back to him.

“Ryleigh, tell me you understand. Get in the car and drive. I don’t give a fuck where you drive off to, as long as you fucking drive and don’t stop. Got it?”

“Roman.”

He shook his head. “Baby, we don’t have time. Just go.”

He pushed me toward the driver’s side, and I climbed in, feeling dazed.

He tapped on the roof of the car, startling me out of my thoughts, and I looked over to see three big bikers approaching us.

“Start the car and go,” he yelled through the closed window. My hand shook as I started the car, and Roman took off away from the truck.

The big bikers gave chase, one of them meeting my eyes through the window, but he didn’t stop.

What the hell was that?

I put the car into drive, looking both ways. If I went right, it would take me out of the parking lot, and I could head North and return to Sacramento.

I could go back to my life.

The life I had before I met Roman.

I blinked, tears making my vision blurry, and I felt them drop to my thighs.

If I went left, it would lead me to where Roman had taken off.

My bottom lip trembled.

I already knew what my decision was before I even made it.

I turned left, my heart feeling like it was trying to lurch out of my throat.

It didn't take me long to find Roman and the bikers. I blinked away the tears and took in the scene.

He was outnumbered, but he was handling himself well.

One of the big bastards was already unconscious, while Roman took on the other two, a bald one who was only taller than him by an inch or so, and another one who was shorter and leaner than both of them.

We both knew the second one would be easier to take out, so Roman mainly focused on the bald one.

I let out a small scream when he took a hit to the rib, my hands shaking.

I didn't even have my phone. What the hell could I do?

Fuck, but what could I do?

I searched around his truck for anything that might help.

Nothing.

Did he really have nothing?

Roman gave the smaller man of the two a mean uppercut, knocking him out completely.

Then he faced the bald bastard, his face bloody. Roman wasn't moving as quickly as he had, and I knew he was injured.

The two charged each other at the same time, and the bald one tackled him to the ground.

I let out a small scream, covering my mouth as I watched in horror as the bald man pounded on his face over and over again.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for Roman to maneuver his leg out from under the man, until he flipped them, and he wasted no time punching the man's face until he was nothing more than a bloodied, unrecognizable mess.

I didn't even think the man was moving.

I should be disgusted by the show of violence.

I was just relieved.

I wanted to go to him, and hug him, and kiss away all of his injuries.

I rolled down the window, about to call to him, when movements caught my attention.

It was the first man. The man I had thought was unconscious. He wasn't now.

He was up, and in his hand was a metal pipe.

"Roman, watch out!"

Roman raised his head up, but I knew he wouldn't be able to get away in time.

I didn't think as I pressed my foot on the gas and drove toward the man.

He turned around and faced me when he heard the truck coming. Our eyes met for a brief second, his widening in surprise before he tried to jump out of the way.

I clipped him on the side and watched as he bounced on the concrete.

Oh, fuck.

I was going to be sick.

I drove the car back to Roman, with the passenger side near him, and hopped out of the car.

He looked at me, surprise evident in his eyes.

“What are you doing back here?” he asked, not sounding too happy with me.

“Later,” I said, not knowing if the bikers had more friends coming but knowing Roman wasn’t in any condition to fight.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and tried to haul him up.

He looked at me with incredulous brown eyes. I shook my head and tried again.

He stumbled to a standing position, and together we walked to the truck. I let him climb in and quickly made my way to the driver’s side.

Then we drove off, leaving the bikers behind. I didn’t bother looking back to see if they were moving. I couldn’t allow myself to worry about that.

“We need the hospital,” I said, pulling out of the parking lot.

I vaguely remembered the direction Roman took to get here, but if he didn’t tell me where we were going soon, we might find ourselves in the middle of nowhere.

“No hospital,” he grunted out.

“Roman, you’re injured.”

“No hospital.”

Anger coursed through me from his words. “You stubborn man! Will you just let me take care of you for once?”

I took in a deep breath, trying to regain some control, which he obliterated with a small touch of his hand to my shoulder.

Tears fell down my cheeks, and he slid in closer to me.

“Take care of me at the cabin,” he said softly.

I could only nod through the lump forming in my throat.

Roman showed me where to go.

I was afraid he might pass out on me halfway there, and I would have been completely lost. I wouldn't have been able to drive him to the hospital since I didn't know where anything was.

Luckily, he stayed lucid for the entire ride, his hand clutching his ribs.

"Turn here," he said, his voice sounding off.

My fists tightened around the steering wheel as I did as he instructed and took a right turn.

An hour later, we were back at the cabin, I was a mess, and Roman didn't look like he had any more energy.

Even still, he climbed out of the car by himself, and he seemed surprised when I came up to him and wrapped my arms around his waist once more.

I couldn't seem to bring myself to let him go.

I had to hold him close.

I didn't have any familiarity with violence.

I had never even been in a fight before, so it was taking everything in me just to stay standing.

He opened the door to the cabin, and we got inside. I closed the door behind us.

Now would be a good time for me to make my escape.

He was injured and wouldn't be able to chase after me.

My hands shook.

I couldn't bring myself to leave him, no matter how stupid that was.

We stumbled our way into the bedroom. Roman lay down on the bed.

"Where's the first aid kit?" I asked.

"Under the sink, in the bathroom," he grunted out.

I turned and ran to the bathroom, grabbed the first aid kit, and returned to him. I sat down next to him on the bed.

His eyes were closed, and if it weren't for all the blood, I might have thought he was sleeping.

My hand hovered over his body.

I didn't know where to touch him.

One eye peeked open, startling me.

"I won't self-combust if you touch me," he said, one corner of his mouth tilting up in a small arrogant smirk. I could feel my shoulders relaxing at the sight. "In fact, I think it's required for you to touch me."

"Be serious about this, Roman," I answered, even if his teasing did make me feel better.

My hand came down to the hem of his shirt. "I need to take your shirt off."

His grin went up a notch. "Sweetest words I have ever heard."

I rolled my eyes, though my lips twitched from the small smile threatening to show. I pulled his shirt up and off him. He leaned forward, helping me. I took in all the skin he exposed, and all the new marks I was sure would bruise in a day or two.

He wasn't as bad as I had initially thought. Most of the blood seemed to have come from his face because his torso was okay. Just small nicks and cuts here and there from when that man tackled him to the ground.

Most of the cuts were hidden because of his ink. I took in the realistic skull tattoo wearing a crown sitting on his right pec, next to a small cut that had stopped bleeding during the drive here.

My fingers traced the outline of the tattoo, my lips trembling.

I didn't know if I wanted to cry or throw up. Perhaps both.

"Dominic did them," he said suddenly, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"What?" I asked, trying to figure out why Dominic was being brought into the conversation now.

“The tattoos.”

“He did all your tattoos?” I asked, surprised.

“Most of them. Some I had before I joined the club. I think Dominic was a tattoo artist before he joined the club. He even got his license. And the man’s good.”

I didn’t know the president of the King’s Men club very well, and honestly, he scared me, but even I had to admit these were good.

I didn’t respond as I let my eyes move down his body.

His right rib cage seemed to have taken the brunt of the beating, and I let my fingers gently skim over it, over the rune-type tattoo that covered most of the skin there. I quickly pulled away when he let out a sharp breath, but he grabbed my hand and pressed down on his warm skin.

“Does it hurt a lot?” I asked.

My eyes came up to the small wound on his arm from just a few days before. It had felt like such a long time ago when he opened the door for me in his apartment, and I caught sight of the bandaged arm.

Now, though it hadn’t exactly healed, it *was* healing nicely.

It didn’t open back up during his fight, but I couldn’t imagine it to be feeling comfortable right now.

“It’s fine. It’s not broken, just sore. I think an ice pack on it for a couple of days will do the trick.”

I eyed him dubiously.

He held out one of those little cold compress packs from the kit and handed it to me. “Put this in the freezer for me, will you, baby?”

I nodded and hurriedly did as he asked, returning to the bedroom and sitting next to him on the bed. I silently took in all the small nicks and cuts he had around his body.

Feeling restless, I stood up again and went to the bathroom, grabbed a clean cloth, soaked it in hot water, and returned to him.

I climbed back on the bed and held the cloth up slowly. He watched me as I used it to clean the blood from his face.

We didn't say anything, and I felt the intensity of his stare on me the whole time.

I only stopped when he wrapped a huge hand around my wrist.

I looked at him.

"You came back for me."

I shot him a scathing look. "You really expected me to just drive off and leave you there?"

"Most would. Especially if they were in your situation."

"You mean, held against their will."

His hand skated up my forearms, stopping when he reached my elbow. "Are you scared of me?"

I should be fucking terrified of him.

Instead, I had been fucking terrified *for* him for most of the day.

I pulled my hand away. "You should go shower. It would be easier to dress the cuts when you're clean."

The look he shot me told me he knew I was trying to change the topic.

"Help me."

I shook my head. "You don't need my help with this."

"Are you sure? I could slip and fall, injuring myself even more in that bath. I won't be able to get up, and you won't be able to help me up. I'll have to spend my night there. Are you really willing to do that to me?"

My mouth opened, but no noise came out. He couldn't be serious.

"You're guilting me into showering with you?"

He shrugged. "You really think so? I'll just go by myself then."

I should have let him. Yet the image of him falling in the bathtub was almost too much to bear, and I found myself calling out before I thought better of it. “Wait.”

He stopped, looking over at me with puppy eyes.

That stupid ass.

I cursed him out under my breath as I moved off the bed and helped him to the bathroom.

I turned on the shower, letting it warm up first before I turned to him.

Slowly, he walked over to me, and I couldn't tell if he was walking slowly because of his injuries or if he was afraid of doing something to scare me off.

Probably both.

I licked my lips when his hands bunched around the fabric of my dress, and he lifted it up and off me.

My nipples pebbled under his scorching gaze and the cool air as he hooked his thumb under my panties, shoving them down and letting them fall to my feet.

I stepped out of them and looked at him. I was fully naked now, and Roman's eyes created a blazing trail as he looked me up and down.

I wiggled my toes when he focused on them, seemingly fascinated by the red nail polish I had on there.

I had kicked off my sandals sometime between the front door and bedroom before.

“Help me,” he said after a while, his voice thick with his arousal.

“So you can take off my clothes, but you need me to take off yours?”

“Can't bend that way without hurting my ribs,” he replied.

He seemed amused, and though I was sure he was being serious, I also knew he found this to be way more humorous than it needed to be.

I let out a small sigh and bent down to help him remove his shoes. I realized too late, we should have taken off his clothes before I got naked because now I was on my knees in front of him without a stitch of clothing on. The position was too intimate for my nerves, especially when I looked back up at him and found his brown eyes had darkened in hunger.

I looked away and helped him with his socks. He braced his weight on the counter and lifted one leg for me, then the other.

I reached up and undid his jeans.

I sucked in a sharp breath when I pulled them down, along with his boxer briefs, and came face to face with his monstrous cock.

Fuck.

I had seen his cock before.

Had felt it move inside me.

I knew he was huge, but to see it like this?

My mouth watered with the urge to take the tip into my mouth to see what he tasted like.

It didn't help that he was hard.

“You keep looking at me like that, and the last thing we will be doing is showering.”

I stood up quickly, nearly losing my balance. Roman reached his hand out for me, grabbing me by the elbow and keeping me steady.

“You don't have the strength for that.”

“Always have the strength to fuck you,” came his gruff reply.

I rolled my eyes, though I did feel a tinge of heat move through me, settling around my core.

I knew without touching myself that I was wet.

And this was possibly the worst time to get turned on.

I wrapped my arms around his middle and led him to the shower.

He stood in front of me, his back taking on most of the spray, his eyes focused intently on me.

As usual, I didn't know what he was thinking just by looking at him, but I knew his cock was still hard, and it bobbed up and down between us.

I grabbed the shampoo bottle and squirted some in my hand. Lathering it up, I reached up for him. He tilted his head slightly toward me.

He did as I asked, and I rubbed the shampoo through the short strands of his hair.

He stood back to his full height and washed the shampoo away. He didn't have a conditioner, so I grabbed the body wash next and squirted it in a clean cloth hanging from the hook.

He stood still and let me clean his body.

I ignored his cock and leaned down to clean his legs and feet, and when I stood up, there was almost a tenderness to his eyes that was really starting to mess me up.

I blinked, hoping the water from the shower would cover the fact that tears were forming in my eyes.

I didn't stop him when he grabbed the cloth from my hand, and he helped me clean up.

"I can do that," I said, trying to take it back. He held it away from me.

"Let me take care of you."

I bit back the protest wanting to escape from the look in his eyes.

Knowing it was a losing battle, I didn't bother to argue, and I let him gently clean me thoroughly.

I shivered when he ran the cloth over my pussy, cleaning up between the lips before pulling away.

He was about to clean my legs when I stopped him.

“I got this part.”

He nodded and watched me run the cloth up and down one leg, then the next. By the time I straightened, he had already lathered the shampoo on his hands, and he rubbed it through my long hair.

I winced a little, just thinking about how my hair would fare after two days of using no conditioner. I had bought a conditioner bottle but left it in the truck. He pulled me under the spray and washed off all the soap, and before I knew it, we were out.

Roman handed me a large towel and grabbed one for himself.

We toweled dry and were back in his bedroom in no time.

I grabbed two pairs of his sweats, one for me and one for him, along with a couple of t-shirts and a clean pair of panties for me.

I felt his eyes on me while we dressed.

I was done before him and collapsed onto the bed, Roman falling soon after.

I turned my head to take in his face.

A bruise was already forming around his jaw and near his cheek, and a slight swelling was overtaking his left eye.

I was sure he was going to look and feel worse tomorrow.

“My mom used to tend to me after my dad got into one of his rages and beat the shit out of Micah and me,” he said without looking at me.

I didn't say anything. I didn't even move, afraid he might not say anymore if I did.

I lay there and listened to him.

Roman was always such an enigma. It was a rarity to learn anything new about him.

“This kind of reminds me of that time.”

I was sure the beatings weren't a happy memory for him, but perhaps the time spent with his mom was because he was smiling a little as he said it.

I couldn't help but imagine the scared little boy he had once been.

I didn't know how to mix that image I had of him into this Roman, who was so big and strong, he almost felt invincible.

Almost invincible.

Today proved that he could still bleed like the next man. Could still get hurt.

I didn't know why, but my heart hurt from the thought, and I suddenly wished there was something I could do to ensure he would never be hurt again.

I cleared my throat. "How did she die?"

He moved his head to the side and looked at me. "The official police report said that she was in a drowning accident."

I let out a broken breath of air.

"And unofficially? How did she really die?"

"She was trying to stop her deadbeat husband from stabbing her sons with a fucking knife because he lost big at the horse track, and he was in a fucking bad mood. She *mouthered* off at him—his words. He held her head down under the lake water until she stopped struggling in front of her two boys."

I slid in closer to him without thinking, wrapping my arms around his waist.

He pulled me in closer to his chest, but I stopped him.

"You're hurt," I said.

"It's on my other side. You're fine."

He didn't give me time to fight him. He pulled me back until I was completely sheltered by his side.

“I’m sorry,” I said because that was all I could say to something like that. There was no magic word to turn back time and give him and Micah back their childhood or even bring their mom back.

“It happened a long time ago,” he replied.

“Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, “I suppose you’re right.”

I snuggled in closer to him, taking in his warmth. Just when I thought I could let him go, he found a way to get back under my skin.

I tightened my arms around him.

I didn’t want to let him go.

ROMAN

I SAT UP ON THE BED, BITING BACK A GROAN WHEN IT CAUSED pressure on my ribs.

Ryleigh was asleep soundly next to me.

The crunch of the tires on the gravel outside the cabin reminded me why I had gotten up in the first place.

Someone was outside.

Possibilities ran through my mind. It could just be some random person stumbling through and finding my cabin by pure luck, or it could be one of the members of the fucking Devil Sinners, though that seemed highly unlikely, considering no one knew I owned this cabin besides Dominic, Micah, and Kai.

Which brought me to my third option.

Micah finally figured out where I was.

I climbed off the bed, careful not to disturb the sleeping girl beside me. She let out an adorable little snore before turning away from me and hugging my pillow.

Fuck, but I didn't want to leave the bed or her.

I walked to the drawers and grabbed my gun hidden there.

I took off the safety and quietly made my way to the front door.

It was better to be safe and sorry, and with Ryleigh here, I wasn't taking any chances.

My muscles protested with each step I took, reminding me that I hadn't gotten out of that fucking fight unscathed.

If Ryleigh hadn't come back for me, Micah would have had to bury his little brother.

But she came back for me.

She could deny it all she wanted, she fucking loved me, and I was going to make sure she knew that by the time this little *trip* of ours was over.

I peeked out through the front window and found a big ass black truck parked next to mine.

The porch light on made it easy for me to take in the scene.

The engine was off, and a huge man stood in front of it, his arms crossed over his chest and his face set in an impassive tone.

He didn't move when I put the safety back on the gun and shoved it in the waistband of my sweatpants as I made my way out to the front door.

I came out barefoot, taking in the cool mountain air as I looked back at him before sitting in one of the chairs on the porch.

He let out a small inaudible sigh that I only noticed from the shift in his shoulders before walking over, sitting in the chair next to me, and looking out at the woods.

"I should have fucking known when you decided to ignore my calls," Micah said.

I grunted but didn't say anything to that.

I saw him move his hand to cup his jaw, rubbing his beard from the corner of my eyes. "Is she in there?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

He scoffed. "Does she know?"

I didn't need him to clarify what he meant. "Yeah."

"So that's it? The girl figured it out, and you fucking abducted her and brought her here?"

He didn't need to know how much I helped her figure it out. "Pretty much."

"What the fuck were you thinking? Dominic got you out for the murder of Richard Jones, but I guarantee he won't be able to work his magic if that girl decides to run to her dad about this."

"She won't," I argued, a dark note in my voice.

"And how the fuck do you know?"

"I know. She won't."

"Because she's so in love with you?"

I couldn't say anything about that because Micah didn't believe in love.

Sure, he loved me, and he loved the club—in his own psychotic way—and he loved Dominic and Kai like they were family, but he didn't believe in *falling* in love.

He would have laughed in my fucking face had I said it.

"And what about you?" he asked. Though he didn't raise his voice, I knew my brother well enough to know he was fucking angry.

"What about me?"

"You gonna tell me you love her?"

I didn't have a reply to that. What the fuck did I know about love.

And that fucking word felt too tame to ever describe how I felt about Ryleigh.

I said nothing, my fists clenched on my side, something I was sure Micah didn't miss.

"She's going to be your fucking downfall. What the fuck am I supposed to do to protect you from that when you don't let me?"

I turned to him sharply. "I don't need you to protect me. Got it? I'm my own man, and I know what the fuck I'm doing."

“Yeah? Is that why you look like shit?” He cupped the back of my neck and pulled me closer to him, his eyes looking over the injuries that he could see on my face, which were plenty. Those fuckers made good on their promise when they said they would ruin my ‘pretty’ face.

Those fuckers were just jealous.

“Who did this?” he asked quietly. I didn’t miss the anger simmering in his voice. A part of me almost didn’t want to tell him because I knew the minute I did, he would go after them.

Not that I didn’t think they deserved it, but him going after them would rob me of the chance myself. If I didn’t have Ryleigh with me, I would have driven to their fucking headquarters and blown the entire shit-place to pieces.

“They’re mine. I don’t need you to fight my battles for me. You seem to forget that I am more than capable of taking care of myself and those under my protection.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Is this your way of telling me to leave the girl alone?”

“Yes. Ryleigh’s mine. You need to understand that, and you need to leave her alone.”

He shook his head and pulled away from me, his shoulders taut from the tension. He stood up, and I watched him pace back and forth on the porch.

“Fucking hell,” he said quietly under his breath. “Why this girl? Why this fucking girl? Why does it have to be the judge’s daughter?”

I shrugged. Fuck if I knew. He acted like I had control over this obsession. I fucking didn’t.

“Fine,” he snarled out. “Keep your little fucking toy. But I want to know who the fuck hurt you, ’cause I know there ain’t no way that tiny little thing in there can do this much damage to you.”

I grinned. “How would you know?”

He rolled his eyes, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared me down.

I might be fucking stubborn on a good day, but Micah was something else entirely, and I knew he wouldn't fucking leave if I didn't tell him.

The last thing I needed was for Ryleigh to wake up and find him eating breakfast in the kitchen.

“The Devil Sinners. I didn't even know they were in this area.”

His eyes glinted, and I knew what that meant. He was fucking bloodthirsty.

“They're migrating to Texas. California seemed to have gotten too... dangerous for them.”

I grinned.

Technically, the Devil Sinners took control of California before the King's Men. Even before the Mansen Brotherhood. They were an older chapter, their club forming three generations back. But the fucking new blood who took the throne as president of the club about a decade ago didn't know how to run shit. He was driving the club to the fucking ground, and when Dominic decided to settle in Sacramento, he also took away most of their business.

They couldn't go to an all-out war against us because we had them beat in numbers and tactics.

And now the little cockroaches were leaving.

“Don't worry. I'll make sure they won't be able to cause any trouble in Texas. Would be hard to, if there's not a fucking club.”

I shook my head and stood up. “I'm not worried. But don't you have something better to do than to go hunting?”

He shrugged. “The Mansen brothers are still fucking hiding like cowards, and unless I have someone on the inside working for Mayor Gallagher or Judge Hudson, there's no way to tell where the fuck they are.”

His eyes moved past me and to the front door, a light flickered in his silver eyes. If Ryleigh's eyes reminded me of a storm in the ocean, raging and beautiful, then Micah's eyes

reminded me of a lake—calm, cold, still water, and just as beautiful. His eyes reminded me of the lake our mom died in. It shouldn't bring me comfort the way it did, but I already knew I was fucked in the head. There was no use denying it. I should be scared of my own brother.

I wasn't.

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "No."

"If you're so adamant about keeping the girl around, might as well make her useful and have her spy on her father for us."

"We're not using Ryleigh as a fucking spy, got it?"

He shrugged off my touch, shooting me a bemused stare. If he thought for one second, I would be okay with him using her... then fuck, that was exactly what he thought.

He leaned back against the porch rail. "Whatever. When are you coming back home?"

I wondered if he really had given up on the idea, or if he was changing the subject to placate me.

"A week or two," I answered.

"And you're sure the girl won't talk?"

I nodded, even if there was a niggling doubt in my gut that said I couldn't be sure she won't go to her dad once I let her go.

"She came back for me."

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I was fucking outnumbered with the Devil Sinners. I got most of them out, but the first one recovered faster than I thought. He was coming toward me, and I would have fucking died. I'm sure of it. She ran him over with my truck and drove us back to the cabin."

Micah didn't say anything to that, but I could see in his eyes that there was begrudging respect there.

He looked off to the side. "Kai's initiation is coming up. Just make sure you're there when it happens, yeah? The kid

looks up to you, and he might act tough, but he would be crushed if you're not there."

I nodded. "I haven't forgotten."

Kai might be the heir, but Dominic wasn't going to just hand over the entire empire over to the kid. He was doing what every one of us had to do. He had to go through the initiation process, and he would have to do something for the club.

Micah killed for the club.

I brought in a business system that made the club millions and took care of a traitor.

Kai was going to get the evidence we needed to find out who the key players were in the Mansen Brotherhood, to discover who was trying to uproot our entire operation.

That was probably fucking tricky, but the kid was smart, and damn nifty with his fingers.

He would just need access to the mayor's work computer in his office before he hacked into the system.

We couldn't be sure if that was where he was keeping the evidence, but I had no doubt the man would have kept something that would implicate not only himself, but everyone in his circle. It was just about finding it.

His work computer was more secure, so that was where we were starting.

"When is he moving in?"

"This coming week," Micah answered.

I nodded, thinking about the implication. If Kai retrieved the proof, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Judge Hudson's name was on that list.

As much as I wanted to nail the bastard, I didn't like knowing it would hurt Ryleigh.

"Did you interrogate the bastard in the shootout?" I asked.

Almost a week had passed since some bastard had decided to burn down one of the warehouses we operated in. During

the inspection, the bastards had snuck up on us, trying to take us down. Luckily, they were outnumbered and unskilled, and though most of them had gotten away, I managed to tackle one of them to the ground before he could escape.

Not without injury.

My hand moved up to the bullet wound that Ryleigh had helped me dress the night of, not knowing the reason behind it.

That was probably what drove up her suspicions and why she decided to search through my apartment for answers.

Frustration tinged Micah's eyes. "The bastard is a fucking street rat, hired to do someone's dirty work. He doesn't know anything."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Pretty sure he would have told me when I started to cut off his toes," Micah answered casually, as if he were discussing the weather. I didn't need to ask how the man was faring. He was probably fish food in the ocean by now.

I shook my head. There were too many inconsistencies, and I didn't fucking like it one bit. The Mansen brothers were hiding somewhere, with the help of some very powerful people, and now the location of one of our warehouses was disclosed.

The only way anyone could have known about it was because we had a fucking rat in the ranks.

I clenched my fists, and Micah thumped me on the shoulder to get me out of my thoughts. I gritted my teeth when he hit a particularly sore spot, and judging by the glimmer in his eyes, the bastard knew it.

"Next time I fucking call, you fucking answer. If you make me drive seven hours just to get to you again, I'll pummel your ass to the ground."

I chuckled. "I'd like to see you try, old man."

He rolled his eyes at me and walked off the porch. I watched him move to his truck, the engine roaring to life before he pulled away. I didn't need to ask about how he

would handle the Devil Sinners, and though I wasn't happy about being left out of the action, I couldn't complain too much. Not when I was walking back to my girl sleeping in my bed.

RYLEIGH

I WAS AROUSED.

Somewhere between being in my own dreamland and entering reality, I knew I was aroused.

The muscles around my pussy quivered when I felt a slight, wet pressure against it before my legs were shifted apart, making room for the huge man lying between them.

He licked up my slit with the flat of his tongue, and I groaned, moving in closer to him, trying to get more of him to me.

He hummed against me, the vibration making my insides feel funny as he spread me out even further by pushing my legs back toward my chest, lapping his tongue over my swollen clit.

“Oh, God,” I exclaimed, blindly reaching my hand down for his hair, tugging on it.

I still had my eyes closed.

I didn't know how long he had been at this, but it must be a while, because I was so close.

It should freak me out that he had touched me while I was asleep.

I was just wet, lust making me stupid.

“Roman!”

I pulled on his hair harder, and he doubled his effort, lifting one leg up and burying two fingers inside me.

I screamed out from the sensation, and he gave me no time before he was fucking me with them.

I yanked on his hair, moving back against the bed when it almost became too much, but Roman pulled my leg back, keeping me still as he continued to work me over.

“That’s it, baby. Does this feel good?”

I sobbed and nodded at the same time. Fuck, but it felt good. So good.

“Then come for me.”

His tongue teased my clit, and that was all it took. I blacked out as I came.

Roman kissed his way up my body, cupping my cheeks and kissing me as I tried to ride off the orgasm. I could taste myself on his lips.

“Wrap your legs around me, baby.”

I shook my head.

He kissed me harder. “Do it.”

I wrapped my legs around him, my feet digging into his tight ass, bringing him closer to me.

He fumbled between our bodies, grabbed his cock and directed it toward my entrance. He plunged deep inside of me.

We both groaned at the same time.

I tightened around him and opened my eyes to take him in through the bright rays of the morning sun.

I didn’t need to look at the clock to know it was much later than I usually slept. I must have been really tired last night.

And it was as I predicted. Roman looked worse this morning than he did yesterday.

I frowned and cupped his cheek, feeling the softness of his beard.

He snuggled into my touch, his brown eyes soft.

He rocked his hips against me once, and I gasped.

“H-How are you feeling?”

“Strong enough to fuck you.”

My inner walls clenched from his words, and he pulled out of me until just the tip remained before slamming back inside, hard.

Fuck, but it hurt so fucking good.

I shifted my hips from underneath him, and he squeezed my side. “Don’t try to top from the bottom, baby. Hold still while I fuck you.”

I let out a frustrated whine. “You’re not fucking me. You’re torturing me.”

He smiled a little at that and moved his hips again, several times, each time he came back inside of me was much harder than the last. My eyes rolled to the back of my head at the sensation.

“Roman.”

Tears stung my eyes. I didn’t know how much more of this I could take, and I didn’t think I could come when he was moving like this. There wasn’t enough friction to drive me over the edge.

He moved his hand down and grabbed my breast, gripping it forcefully before he pulled on my nipple.

I grabbed his wrist and tried to get him to lessen up when it became too much.

“Tell me you like it when I make it hurt.”

I shuddered. I shouldn’t fucking like it when he makes it hurt. There was something wrong with me because I could feel more wetness seeping out of me between us.

He moved his hips in and out of me two more times.

I swallowed.

“Baby.”

I looked straight into his eyes, brown, bottomless eyes—and I swore, I saw my own soul reflected there—and said

softly, “I like it when you make *me* hurt.”

He let out a small groan and nipped roughly at the skin where my neck met my shoulder, hard enough that I felt it all the way down to the very depths of me, hard enough that I couldn't help but convulse slightly beneath him.

And then finally, *finally*, he fucked me.

He quickened his pace, the thrust of his hips coming in rough, shallow stabs that had me seeing stars. My blunt nails raked down the skin on his back. I couldn't get enough of him.

And the pain seemed to spur him on.

We were nothing more than two sides of the same coin. And like me, Roman loved it when I hurt him, when I fought him.

When I pretended I didn't want him, just so he could forcefully take from me what was already freely given, if only he worked a little harder.

Just a little harder.

Harder.

“Please,” I moaned out. “Hurt me. Use me.”

Please fucking love me.

Could he sense it?

Could he sense the desperation bleeding from my voice?
Could he see the gut-wrenching feeling blooming deep in my belly, trying to claw its way out of me just to get closer to him?

Could he see how badly I loved him?

So much so, it fucking hurt so good.

The truth was right in front of me all along. Why I wasn't more scared that he had drugged me and taken me to his remote cabin.

Why I didn't hate him for stalking me or for watching me in my most intimate moments without my permission.

I *fucking* loved it.

And I fucking loved him.

That was why I drove back to the cabin with him. Why I tended to him, why I slept in his bed, with him beside me, and why I felt so fucking safe, even when I caught him sneaking out last night to talk to his brother—the man who, no doubt, wanted me dead.

Tears streamed down the sides of my face.

Loving him fucking hurt because I didn't see a way for this to end in which he could be my happily ever after.

He was a criminal. My stalker.

A fucking hunter.

And I was nothing more than his prey. The judge's daughter.

My loyalty should be to my dad. Should be on the right side of the law.

But I didn't think there would ever be a scenario in which I wouldn't try to protect Roman from it all.

“Please,” I whispered against his skin.

Sweat clung to us as he moved faster, and faster, and faster...

My breasts bounced with every hard thrust, and my teeth vibrated from the force.

He wrapped my hair around his palm and pulled it to the side until I tilted my head to give him access to my neck.

He wasted no time nipping the tender skin there.

He was going to mark me, and I knew that was what he wanted.

He wasn't careful with me, and what was more, I didn't want him to be.

He pressed my body down against the mattress, making me feel trapped, but in the best way possible. I didn't want to get out of this.

My eyes closed as I exploded.

He grunted and pulled out of me as I came. I didn't get a chance to catch my breath or come down before he flipped my body around, yanking my ass up until it was positioned in the air, and impaled me with his cock from behind.

My hands fisted the sheets on the mattress as I buried my face in the cover as Roman moved.

His pelvis hit my ass every time he pounded back inside me, and he smacked my ass cheek roughly.

He grabbed my hair once more and pulled on it while he fucked me, and all I could do was lie there, no longer having the energy to do anything but let him use me.

“Fuck, baby. You're so fucking tight around me. Feels so good wrapped around my cock.”

He slapped my ass once more before pressing his thumb against my back hole. He didn't enter, but he let me know it was there.

“One day soon, I'm gonna fuck this hole, aren't I? I'm gonna fuck all of your holes, and what's more, baby, you'll fucking enjoy it.”

I nodded, the image of me taking him in any way he wanted was too much.

I fell once more, and Roman soon followed, squirting his cum inside of me.

I felt a trail of wet heat falling down the back of my legs, and when he finally pulled out, I collapsed inelegantly on the bed.

He kissed his way up my body, carefully biting the ass cheek that he had abused moments before, drawing out a small squeak from me. I felt his lips on the small of my back, up my spine, sending shivers of pleasure across my skin as he finally reached the base of my neck.

He kissed me there once, laying back down on the bed and pulling me on top of his body.

I buried my face in his neck, reeling.

Even if he let me go right now, how the fuck was I supposed to let him go?

How the fuck was I supposed to go to my dad or the cops and tell them about any of this?

I didn't know.

I didn't know what the fuck he had done to me, but I didn't like it one bit.

So much for trying to be my own person, getting away from my parents, and figuring out my own path.

How could I do that when it felt like he owned every aspect of me?

I blinked and snuggled in closer to him, craving the softness he always gave me after being so rough with me during sex.

And he didn't disappoint when he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in closer to him.

His hand ran up and down soothingly on the small of my back, his fingers thrumming along my spine. I focused on his movement, trying to bring myself down after all that.

This was the second day in a row that he had woken me up with sex.

I wondered if he had some sort of fetish.

His hand came up to my hair, his fingers tangling up in the long, messy waves. I flinched a little when he got to a small tangle at the end, and he leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"Sorry," he said.

I hummed against him in acknowledgment.

"Are you feeling okay?"

I pulled back to look him in the eyes, my confusion clear on my face. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"You're just quiet this morning."

"And you're up early. How long have you been awake?"

He laughed, the bruise around his eyes became more prominent from the move. “Hmm, I got up around three and never went back to sleep.”

I blinked. “You mean when Micah showed up?”

He seemed surprised over that. “You were supposed to be asleep.”

“I was. I don’t know what woke me up, but it did, and I got curious when I found your side of the bed empty. I’m surprised he didn’t stay the night.”

“Didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m safe from him... right?” I asked carefully. He told me to trust him, to not be scared of Micah because he was here, but still, I couldn’t help but shudder as I thought back to those silver, inhuman eyes of his.

It was like night and day compared to Roman’s brown ones.

“That’s right,” he said confidently. “You don’t have to worry. But Micah can be a lot to handle. Just know you’re safe with him, especially when it’s time for me to introduce the two of you properly.”

Righttttt.

I didn’t think there would ever come a time when I would be safe around Micah, no matter what.

I didn’t say that, though, because Roman might not have known I was awake when he went out to see his brother, but Micah noticed me almost as soon as I moved to the window and looked out at them.

And there had been a glint in his eyes as he watched me that I didn’t like very much.

I could almost see him planning my demise in that vicious mind of his.

I moved my head up and kissed his jawline, letting his beard tickle my lips before I sat up and looked down at him, both hands splayed on his chest.

We were both naked.

I noticed that when I woke, but the thought had been the furthest thing from my mind. Now that I was taking us in, I wondered how he had taken my clothes off without waking me up.

His cock jumped against my back, surprising me.

Was he ready to go again?

He grinned mischievously at me, and I shook my head and hopped off the bed.

“Where are you going?” he growled, attempting to get me back in his arms.

I shook my head. “You might be able to go again,” I said, eyeing his hard cock warily. “But I’m still sore.”

He looked at me regretfully, and I made myself stand still when he got off the bed and headed toward me. He cupped my cheeks in both hands, lifting my face so that I was looking him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

My mouth opened slightly in shock. His apologizing was the last thing I expected, not because I didn’t think he wasn’t capable of it, but because he had been so unapologetic in his words and actions.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “I like it.”

I shivered when his eyes turned knowing, and he pulled me back into his arms, his hands coming down to knead my ass cheeks.

I pressed my breasts against his middle, holding still.

All too soon, he pulled away from me, grabbing my hand and taking me to the bathroom.

We got ready for the day slowly.

It wasn’t like we had places to be, or things to do.

It had only been a few days since he brought me here, but he didn’t tell me when we were going home, or *if* we were, but

we had to.

I had a job, which I should really be checking in on soon.

I might have had some time off after finishing a project, but my manager would expect me to start picking up a new project soon.

And I didn't know the details of Roman's job description, but I doubt being the VP to the notorious King's Men MC offered a lot of time off.

He couldn't possibly think we could hide out here indefinitely.

I moved in sort of a trance all morning, and Roman was distracted by his phone, making discreet phone calls for most of the day away from me, driving up my irritation.

I wanted to bring up the subject of going home so many times, but at the last minute, I always ended up chickening out.

Before I knew it, dusk was hitting the sky, and I couldn't think of one remotely productive thing I had done all day.

I looked around the cabin, feeling the walls close down on me. I was so desperate for human interaction that I latched onto him when Roman walked back inside after taking another phone call outside on the porch.

"Do you want to watch a movie with me?" I asked, a tinge of desperation in my voice.

He pulled up short and looked at me.

I resisted the urge to squirm from my seat on the couch.

"Ah, I'm sorry for neglecting you most of the day, baby."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say it was okay, but it wasn't okay. It really wasn't.

"When are we getting out of here?"

He eyed me curiously but didn't answer.

"Do you have a plan? You really think we can hide out in this cabin forever?"

"Wouldn't that be nice?" he muttered.

I shook my head, narrowing my eyes at him.

His lips twitched.

“Movie?”

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but I was hit with a sudden weight of fatigue, I shook my head and closed my mouth.

“Sure. A movie,” I said instead.

He looked like he wanted to say something but changed his mind at the last minute.

I watched him as he moved to the TV.

“Roman?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“How did you get out of prison?”

If I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have noticed the way he tensed over my question.

I suppose this was a test of sorts.

He told me he would never lie to me, so would he lie to me about this?

Him getting out of prison wasn't legal because even though my memories of that night were fuzzy at best, I knew he had killed the man.

My recording proved as such.

I didn't send the wrong man to prison.

He was guilty, but he was just let go on some evidence that had torn the video recording to shreds.

And since my identity was supposed to remain anonymous, the prosecuting attorney couldn't just bring me out on the stand to testify, especially since I didn't really see anything.

I was sure that if I had been a random woman off the street, I would have been forced to testify long ago, but there were some perks to being a judge's daughter.

That also meant Roman had to be let go when new evidence came up.

The question was, how did it come up?

He stood up and turned toward me, his brown eyes taking me in intently.

I didn't think he was going to answer me at all.

Perhaps he would try to distract me with sex.

He surprised me when he said, "A man confessed to the murder right before he took his own life."

I frowned. "But... You killed him, right?"

"You really want to know the answer?"

I swallowed, hesitated, then nodded.

"I killed him."

"Then why would this man confess?"

"Dominic made him write a confession letter before the man shot himself in the head with his own gun."

"Why?"

Why would someone do that? Why would they take the fall?

He let out a small sigh and walked back to me, sitting down, but for the first time, he placed some distance between us.

About the length of a small body, by my guess.

"The man betrayed the club. He would have died by Dominic or Micah's hands either way. But this way, we got his death to mean something. His sins are forgiven in the eyes of our men, and his family is taken care of in the way we always take care of the family of our fallen brothers."

I took a deep breath.

I didn't know how I was supposed to feel about that. Dad always said they fabricated the evidence, but to hear him tell me all this so calmly, as if it wasn't a big deal.

It was a big deal.

He played the system, and he got out.

How was I supposed to feel safe about the system my dad had spent most of his life trying to uphold?

I looked at him.

His eyes were closed off to me.

I didn't like this Roman very much. It reminded me of the way he had looked right before he drugged me.

The monster from my own nightmare.

"What was prison like?" I asked.

"Hell," came his curt reply.

"But you survived it."

"By the skin of my teeth. Don't forget. It's hell, and no one wants to be locked up like that."

I looked around the cabin. "Like what you're doing to me?"

He leaned in closer to me, and I moved back. I didn't like the way he was crowding me now.

I pushed his chest away, trying to get him to lessen up, but he didn't even budge.

"You've only been here for a few days, baby. I was in that hell hole for two fucking years because of you."

My eyes widened, and I slapped his chest hard.

That surprised him enough to pull back and for me to escape.

I stood up, facing him and keeping a safe distance.

"I didn't know you back then. I was just doing what I thought was right. You think I like being in that situation? You think it's fun for me to listen to you kill a man, scared shitless out of my mind that you might have seen me and I would be your next victim? You think it's fun to know that the King's Men MC was gunning for me, and the only reason I was safe

was that I thought my identity was being kept a secret. Apparently not secret enough because I was still being fucking hunted down!”

He smirked and stood up. I backed away when he took a step toward me.

“And yet, you are the one who was free for the last two years. You went on with your life while I fucking defended mine in that hellhole.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “Yes, it is.”

I pulled back and looked at him. Really looked at him.

“You’re mad about that. You’re angry at me.”

“Can you blame me?”

“You told me I was safe with you.”

I cried when he cupped my cheek, my heart pounding so hard against my chest that I was afraid I might pass out.

“You are safe with me,” he said. “That doesn’t mean the anger that festered for two years will just go away.”

My bottom lip trembled. “I didn’t know you at the time. I owed you nothing.”

And even though the truth rang in those words, there was still an uncomfortable weight that settled on my chest, and it did not ease up, no matter what I did.

I took a deep breath and let it out quickly. Roman followed the movement with his eyes.

His brown eyes swirled with some unnamed emotion, both fascinating and terrifying to me in equal measure.

“I know,” he said softly.

He squeezed my cheek gently once before pulling back.

I blinked up at him in surprise as he walked back to the bedroom.

My legs could no longer hold me up, and I unceremoniously sank to the floor, my chest heaving with each heavy breath I took.

What the hell just happened?

RYLEIGH

I DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG I STAYED WHERE I WAS ON THE floor, but my legs were starting to get numb, and Roman still hadn't emerged from the bedroom.

I didn't know what he was doing in there, but whatever it was, it should be enough time for him to cool off, right?

I stood up on shaky legs and moved toward the bedroom.

Roman was sitting on the bed, his legs hanging over the edge, and his back to me.

I hesitated at the threshold.

I realized then, in our relationship, Roman had always been the first to make a move.

He reached out to me, he initiated almost every kiss that we shared, and now I was standing here, watching him, unsure of what I should do or if he would welcome my touch if I walked over to him right now.

I was more afraid of his rejection than I was of his anger.

The messed-up part of this was that I understood why he was angry.

I understood it, even when I knew I didn't do anything wrong.

I had been so scared then, and I turned to the one person I knew could take care of this and take away all of my fears.

And inadvertently, I had given my dad one of the biggest wins of his entire career, only for it to be taken away within

two years due to a false confession, and the suicide of a man who didn't really commit suicide.

Even after learning all this, I knew I wouldn't tell my dad about it.

Besides, it shouldn't matter because the man who confessed was dead, and there was no way to prove that he had lied about it.

I choked in a stuttered breath when I realized I had been holding my breath since the moment I came into the room.

I knew he was aware of my presence, but he didn't do or say anything to acknowledge me.

That didn't sit well with me.

Slowly, I walked inside the room.

He tensed when the bed dipped as I climbed on, and I hovered near him for a long second before I carefully wrapped my arms and legs around him from behind.

His body was so stiff, I was afraid he might break into a million little pieces with the right pressure, but then he relaxed into my hold, and I couldn't help but lean into him, taking in more of his touch.

"I'm sorry you were in there for two years," I said.

I couldn't bring myself to say I was sorry for being the one to send him there because it was as I said. I didn't owe him anything.

Besides, it was because of this that brought him into my life.

I should have resented that.

Only now, I couldn't imagine how my life would be without him in it.

I had been so lost since I graduated from college. Perhaps even long before that. I didn't know what to do with myself, and there was a part of me that hated my life.

Hated the loneliness in it. Hated my inability to connect with anyone.

But that wasn't the case anymore, and I knew, given a chance to go back and change anything... I wouldn't be able to bring myself to do it.

I kissed him on his back, right where his spine was and felt him shudder against me.

He was affected by me.

I knew that, but to feel this big man react to such a simple kiss from me and I... I felt powerful.

He turned around until he was facing me, wrapping his arms as tightly around me as I had my arms around him.

We didn't say anything as we stared into each other's eyes, and I knew then, everything would be okay between us.

It had to be because there were no other alternatives.

THAT MOMENT SEEMED to be a turning point for us.

I didn't fight him *as much* when he tried to dominate every situation between us, and he brought in my computer and iPad from my apartment the following afternoon so I could start working again.

I didn't even know he had taken them with him.

I didn't ask him when he would take us home because now that I had some semblance of freedom, I didn't mind being in this remote cabin with him so much.

He confessed on the third day that he had been texting my parents through my phone so they wouldn't worry before he gave it back to me.

I read through the texts and found one from my mom telling me her friend's son was coming over to the house this Sunday, and she wanted me to be present.

There had been a dark possessiveness in his eyes when he told me that wouldn't be happening that got me all tingly inside.

We spent most of the daytime talking to each other and the nighttime exploring each other's bodies before falling into a restful sleep, only to do it all over again.

A week passed by quickly, and I knew when I woke up that following Monday from the look in his eyes that I was finally getting what I wanted all along.

We were going home.

And I was fucking depressed over that.

We were quiet when we packed up and got in his truck, then Roman set off on the long drive home.

I spent most of it staring out the window, watching as everything passed me by in a blur. The rest of the time I spent sleeping.

A dark cloud loomed over me, and it seemed to get darker and heavier with each mile we ate up.

I didn't want to leave the cabin, I realized.

I didn't want to leave the safe bubble we found ourselves in, and mostly, I didn't want to leave him.

But how could we go back to the way things were, when we had been nothing more than Xavier and Ryleigh?

I shouldn't want to be with Roman Stone, and he was giving me a chance to run away from him, I knew it.

Because no matter how he wanted to spin this, the moment he let me get back to my apartment, he would be giving me the chance to call my dad or the cops on him.

He would be giving me the chance to send him back to prison.

Nausea tried to claw its way up my throat from the thought.

I didn't want him to go back to prison.

I wanted him to stay right by my side. No matter how bad the world might get.

Just stay by my side.

I wanted so badly to be cut by his jagged heart. I wanted his dark, possessive love that I knew would both hurt and heal me. I wanted it all with this hunter who had never let me go in his mind, all these years. He might have spent two years behind bars, but I had been a prisoner in his thoughts.

And how badly I wanted him.

How badly I wanted him to take me and keep me.

Take away my choices so I wouldn't have to be the bad guy and admit I wanted this bad man to be mine and only mine.

I didn't want this choice.

I wanted the illusion of being held captive back at the cabin.

I wanted him to tell me how I should feel and what I should do, to take away all the weariness that had been pressing down on me since that day at the cliff.

I wanted to be hunted by him.

Fuck me, but I wanted to be the sole object of his desire, his obsession.

I wanted him.

I blinked away the burning in my eyes when we finally pulled up to my apartment building.

I looked up at it.

It had once represented a place I could call my own. A place to get away from my parents.

My sanctuary.

Now, it just looked too different, too abnormally shaped, too *off* for me to want to get back in there.

“We’re here,” Roman said softly.

Like me, he had been quiet for most of the day.

I didn't know what he was thinking, and I didn't dare look at him.

I opened the passenger side door and climbed out, reaching down by the floorboard for my bag.

I chanced a glance at him.

His eyes were unreadable.

“Go rest, baby. It's been a long day.”

I frowned. “What about you? Where are you going?”

“I have church.”

I blinked, not sure I heard him right. “Church?”

Was he going to confess all his sins?

He grinned. “That's what we call club meetings.”

“Oh.”

I bit my lip and looked away from him.

It wasn't like I had forgotten about his job or who he was. It was just easier to ignore it when we were in the cabin.

I never thought I would miss it so intensely.

“Be careful,” I said.

His face was soft when he nodded. “Go.”

I blinked and moved back, closing the door behind me.

I stayed where I was until he drove off and until I couldn't see his truck anymore before making my way back to the building.

I barely remembered the elevator ride up. Or when I used my own keys to open the apartment door, or even when I changed into my pajamas and climbed into bed.

I looked up at my ceiling.

Somewhere in this room were the cameras Roman installed to watch me when he wasn't around.

I looked around but couldn't see anything.

Of course I couldn't. I wouldn't have known had I not seen the pictures he saved to his phone from the video recordings of me.

I should feel disgusted.

I fell asleep instead, feeling anything but.

ROMAN

ONE DAY PASSED SINCE I DROPPED HER OFF AT HER APARTMENT building.

One day since I'd seen her.

I kept waiting for the cops to show up at my door, taking me away.

Kept waiting for her bastard father, Bennett Hudson, to show up with that smirk on his face because he finally caught me again.

None of those things happened.

She didn't call anyone. After checking the cameras, I knew she had gone straight to bed as soon as I dropped her off, and she spent most of the day today working, trying to catch up on what she had missed.

Micah had been watching me closely ever since I walked into the church last night, as if he was afraid something might come out and take me from him.

That obviously didn't happen.

Dominic looked at me curiously and asked where I went last week.

I told him a part of the truth.

I told him I had gone to the cabin but hadn't told him about Ryleigh yet.

I didn't know how to bring that up, and what was more, I didn't know how he would react.

It didn't help that my face was looking the way it did. Staying a week at the cabin had helped it heal some, but not fully, and the brothers at the club could probably tell something, or someone had fucked it up.

I told Dominic about the Devil Sinners only because I wanted to know how thoroughly Micah handled them.

I didn't bother to ask for the details, not when we had bigger problems.

Someone had been stopping our distribution out of state. Someone who knew the route we took to get the drugs out of there. Someone who had the backing of some pretty powerful and smart people, I bet, considering we had no idea how the fuck it had happened.

Luckily the brothers who had done the drop took quick action and destroyed all the evidence that could implicate the MC. But we were looking at over hundreds of thousands of dollars of destroyed merchandise.

Micah had suggested planting someone on the inside for us. I knew who the fuck he meant, and if he thought I would ever send Ryleigh into some shit like that, he had another thing coming.

I wouldn't send her in even if Dominic dictated it.

I never thought I would go against my president for anyone, but I knew, and judging by the look in Micah's eyes, he knew I would, too, for her, because he hadn't brought it up again.

What a fucking scary thought.

That I was really too far gone for this girl, I didn't know how to get back to the way it used to be.

I didn't want to.

Which was how I found myself standing in front of her apartment door after a fucking long day at the club, anticipation strumming under my skin.

We parted on an odd note when I dropped her off at her apartment yesterday, and I wanted to take that away.

I wanted back the natural way we always interacted with each other, whether it was as Xavier or Roman. I didn't want whatever the hell last night was, and it was high time I took matters back into my own hands.

I gave her time to think.

One day was fucking enough, and now, I was going to make sure I occupied her thoughts. Nothing more and nothing less.

I used my own key and let myself inside her dark apartment, save for the lights coming from her bedroom.

She was still awake, and a part of me wondered if it was because she was waiting for me.

Wasn't that a fucking thought?

I had never had anyone wait up for me before, but no, that couldn't be it because she didn't know I was going to show up tonight.

And noises were coming from her bedroom that told me she definitely wasn't expecting anyone to drop by tonight.

Her door was partially closed, and I quietly pushed it open to be greeted by the best fucking sight in the history known to man.

Ryleigh was lying on the bed, her shirt pulled up to her collar bones, her bra pushed down, pushing those perky little tits up while she pinched one nipple with one hand. The other she had between her spread legs.

She had been wearing shorts today, but those, along with her innocent plain white panties, were discarded on the floor by the bed.

Her eyes were closed, and she hadn't noticed me yet.

I didn't make a noise as I came in closer to her, watching how she worked herself over roughly, her legs moving restlessly on the bed as she tried to get herself off.

Fuck me, but what a sight.

She was everything I could fucking want. I could feel my cock throbbing against the confine of my pants, begging to be let out, and sink into that little piece of heaven I had found for myself on this godforsaken earth.

I licked my lips just as she opened her eyes, gasping when she saw me standing there and stopped touching herself.

“Keep going,” I said, my voice thick.

“Roman,” she said. A mix between a moan and a protest.

“Baby, keep going. Touch yourself. Show me how you get yourself off when I’m not here to give special attention to my sweet little cunt. Show me.”

She shook her head.

I pulled off my shirt, and heat flared in her eyes as she took in all the skin I had on display. She bit her lip, and I could see the glistening of her pussy lips when she shifted her hand slightly.

Fuck, but she was a work of art.

I shoved my pants down, along with my boxer briefs, and kicked them away before I grabbed my cock, stroking the length roughly a few times.

“Keep going, baby,” I said.

She let out a hiss of air as if she was in pain and began to move her hands once more, pinching and pulling on her taut nipple with one hand, and playing with her clit with the other one.

I stroked myself faster, harder.

It wouldn’t take long for me to come like this.

“You’re a fucking creep, you know that,” she moaned out.

I grinned over at her, feeling precum seeping out from the tip. “Perhaps so, but I’m your fucking creep. Now rub yourself harder, Ryleigh. We both know how much you like it when I play rough.”

“Oh, God. Oh, God.”

She did as I instructed, rubbing harder over the swollen nub of her clit, her back arching.

“Baby, use your other hand and spread your pussy lips out for me. I want to see you glistening with want.”

She moaned and did as I asked.

Fuck, but it was getting hard to try to control myself. I wasn't fucking coming before her.

“Fuck, do you know how sexy you look like this?”

A soft mewl escaped her lips, but it seemed my baby was robbed of words.

“Put a finger inside you. I want you to feel how wet you are for me.”

She obeyed so beautifully, inserting a finger inside herself. I licked my lips.

“Now fuck yourself with it. Imagine it's me doing it to you.”

She pumped her finger in and out, trying to mimic the movements I made whenever I finger fucked her.

That image right there. That would be what I would carry with me well into my old age when I no longer had the strength to drive her over the edge of insanity.

“That's it, sweet girl. How close are you?”

“Close,” she cried out.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Her hips rose as her mouth opened in a small scream when she came. It wasn't as intense as the ones I gave her, though it was still hot.

And a huge part of me fucking loved that only I could drive her crazy like that.

I pumped my dick harder, feeling the familiar tingling sensation near my lower back that told me I was close.

I stepped in between her legs and looked down at her bare pussy glistening with arousal. That was all it took.

“Fuck,” I shouted, as my dick swelled and I expelled my release onto her pale stomach.

She sucked in a sharp breath, creating a dip there, and I painted her with my cum.

Fuck me, but this was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. The caveman in me roared to life at the sight of her marked like this.

If I could, and if it weren't fucking disgusting, I would have her coated in my cum for-fucking-ever.

I chuckled a little at the thought.

She braced her weight on her elbows and looked up at me. “What's funny?”

I shook my head and lay on the bed, pulling her into my arms.

She went without protest.

“Nothing. How was your day?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You don't know?”

I laughed. “I have an idea.”

She shook her head. “Like I said, fucking creepy.”

I squeezed her side a little for the comment, and she jostled beside me.

“Hey, stop it.”

My hand glided away from her side and toward her stomach. I rubbed my cum into her skin, and she watched me with dark, stormy eyes.

“You didn't call the cops,” I said.

“Still thinking about it,” came her smart retort.

I shook my head, letting my hand come down, and cupped her cunt.

“Or your dad.”

“Roman, please stop talking about my dad while you're touching my pussy.”

I let out a choked laugh at that. “Fine. Let’s talk about something else.”

I gently swirled the pad of my finger around her clit.

She held her breath for two long seconds before letting it out. “If you want me to concentrate, you’re going to have to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” I asked, taking on an innocent expression.

She rolled her eyes and wrapped her hand around my wrist. She didn’t pull me away. Instead, her hips were gently moving up and down against my hand.

“You’re mine, yeah?”

She licked her lips and looked me in the eye. I squeezed her cunt, wanting an answer.

“I’m yours,” she agreed.

And we both fucking knew what that meant.

She was mine in all ways, and there was no fucking way she would be the reason I would go back to prison a second time.

She wouldn’t call the fucking cops or her bastard dad or whoever the fuck she would call in situations like this.

She was mine, and that was all there was to it.

RYLEIGH

ROMAN SPENT THE NIGHT WITH ME, BUT EARLY IN THE morning, he got up.

Something was going on with the club. Something he didn't want me to know, and a part of me was actually grateful.

What would I have done if he had told me something about the club and Dad had shown up at my apartment?

I already decided not to tell anyone about my little "trip".

What would I say about that anyhow?

That I was in love with my fucking stalker?

Yeah, that was a no-go.

I got up with Roman when he did and watched with some surprise when he went into my walk-in closet to get ready.

"When did you leave your stuff here?" I asked when he walked out dressed in his own clothes.

He shot me that arrogant look of his that always seemed to make my heart flip-flop inside my chest. "Does it matter? I will spend my night here, or you'll be with me at my apartment. I don't want to spend a single night away from you if I can help it."

"Why don't you just move in with me then," I said sarcastically.

Face serious, he replied, "I thought you would never ask. I'll move my stuff in as soon as I have the time."

I looked at him with wide eyes, sputtering a little.

He smiled. "Use your words, baby."

"I was being sarcastic."

"I'm not."

"We've known each other for a minute."

He shook his head. "Not me. I've known you for over two years now."

"As my stalker, you mean?"

He chuckled my chin affectionately before straightening his posture, his hands moving down to smooth the fabric of the fitted black shirt he had on. Not that he needed to. He looked perfect, as always. I was almost sad that he was covering up all that perfection. Not that I would have voiced that thought out loud. The man already had a big enough ego. No need to add to it.

"Kiss me goodbye," he commanded.

I leaned up and kissed him because even though we'd just finished a ridiculous conversation, there was no way I could deny him when he looked at me like that.

He cupped my neck and pulled me in closer to him, deepening the kiss.

"Tell me you'll miss me," he muttered against my lips.

I pressed another kiss against his lips once more before I said softly, "I'll miss you. Will you miss me?"

The last question was said in whispers. I didn't want to show Roman all of my vulnerable parts, but it seemed I was hopeless when it came to him.

He pulled back and looked at me with clear brown eyes.

"Like crazy," he responded, eliciting a small smile from my lips.

As much as I thought it was necessary to fight him on certain things, I really didn't want to.

It was exhausting.

I just wanted to lie in his arms and be the carefree, happy girl I once was, when he was still Xavier.

“I don’t want to know the details of your job,” I said. Roman cocked his head to the side, curiosity set behind his eyes. “I think it would be best if I didn’t know. Plausible deniability and all that.”

The last sentence made him smile, and he nodded, his thumb moving restlessly against my jawline, distracting me. His fingers were rough and calloused, and it always felt so good against my skin.

I covered his hand with my own, and he stopped moving.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

With soft eyes, he leaned back down and kissed me once more. “Yeah, baby girl. I’ll be careful.”

“And you’ll come home to me?”

He nodded. “I’ll come home to you.”

With that, he pulled away and walked out the door.

I stayed where I was for a moment.

“He’ll come home to me,” I whispered to the empty room.

A part of me knew how stupid it was to get involved with a man like him. Dad would most likely disown me if he knew, but for the first time...

I didn’t think I cared.

I just wanted to be by his side.

THE MORNING WENT BY SLOWLY.

I was slow to get ready, but I finished my work quickly after getting myself into gear. When Roman brought me my laptop and iPad back at the cabin, I took on two projects at once.

Working as a children's book illustrator gave me some flexibility, even if I was working for a publishing house.

Though it was a little more work than I was used to, it helped to take my mind off what a mess my life had become.

I shut off my computer by three o'clock and stretched my sore muscles.

Things were somewhat getting back into the rhythm of normalcy.

I went to the kitchen and looked around at the fridge, but I had been gone for a little over a week. Some of the food had gone bad, and the others that hadn't couldn't really be combined to make a decent meal.

I wanted to make Roman something for when he got home.

I could fight him all I wanted, but I still had to admit to myself just how much I wanted to take care of him.

And I really did want to.

I quickly put on my shoes, grabbed my purse, and headed out the door to the elevator.

I thought about what I wanted to make for dinner with my very limited culinary knowledge. It would have to be something easy.

Something even I couldn't mess up.

So lost in thought, I nearly jumped when the ding of the elevator rang out before the doors opened and revealed none other than Angelica.

Angelica, with two other girls, had been my roommate at a university apartment during my sophomore year. They had all been friends since high school, and they never let me forget it, making me feel like an outcast in my temporary home, as it was.

It was the night I drove them to the nightclub, thinking they genuinely wanted to hang out with me when instead, they just needed a ride, that I happened to hear Roman killing that man—the corrupt police officer.

The chain of events that had placed me straight on Roman's path had started with them.

I didn't know what happened between her and her friends, but Angelica lived in the building, and what was more, I didn't think she was using her own money to pay for the rent. She had someone. I grimaced over the thought of her and a *sugar daddy*, and tried to neutralize my expression.

It wasn't my place to judge, and it was her life.

We looked at each other for a beat, neither of us saying anything.

I had half a mind to let this one pass and take the next elevator, but no. I wasn't going to run or hide from her.

Quietly, I got on.

She moved off to the corner, and I pretended she wasn't there.

Kind of hard to do when I could feel her stare boring into me.

It hadn't been that long since we both graduated, but there was something different about her.

Not just her look, though that was different, but something else.

Something small that I couldn't really put my finger on, but enough for me to take notice.

"Where did you go?" she asked, startling me out of my thoughts.

I turned to her and frowned. "What?"

"This past week. Where did you go?"

I blinked, unsure of how to answer. How did she even know I wasn't at my apartment?

"We're not friendly enough for me to tell you anything that's going on in my life," I said impassively.

The last thing I wanted was for her to be back in my life. She could just be like the hundreds of people living in this

building with me.

A stranger.

Her lips twisted, and I looked away from her.

“Please mind your own business,” I added.

I could see the dark look that covered her face from the reflection on the doors. She opened her mouth to say something, but thankfully, we arrived.

I got out as soon as the elevator doors opened, only to pull up short when I noticed all the police officers around.

My heart pounded in my chest, and for a moment, I feared my dad had somehow figured out about Roman and me, but no.

That couldn't be the case.

It didn't look like they were here for me... or Roman.

No one even glanced my way.

Angelica passed me and approached a woman standing in a small crowd.

“What's going on?” I heard her ask the woman.

I walked a little closer to them.

“Didn't you hear? The man on floor seven disappeared. They think he left on his own and didn't tell anyone, but his mom wanted a formal investigation. She thinks her son was killed.”

“Oh. I don't think I know anyone on floor seven,” Angelica replied.

“He's a really nice man. I've seen him a couple of times. Always had a smile ready for anyone. I think he was getting together with that girl on floor six.”

I blinked. My floor?

“I think her name's Tiffany or Trixie, or Trinity, or something with a T.”

They continued to talk, but I was no longer paying them any attention.

My heart sped up, but this time for a completely different reason.

A man who had been getting together with Trinity had disappeared.

And it just so happened that the first night I spent with Roman was the night I was nearly assaulted in an alleyway by my neighbor one floor above me, who had been flirting with Trinity when I first saw them.

Roman had beat the crap out of the man. He saved me, and I thought that was it.

But now the man had disappeared?

I licked my suddenly dry lips.

It was a coincidence, right?

I never really did believe in coincidences.

I walked out of the apartment building, squinting at the blinding sun, unsure of what to think.

I knew Roman was a dangerous man. I knew it.

He had even admitted to hurting people because they had gotten in the way.

I blinked.

What was I supposed to do now?

PERHAPS IT WAS because of all that I learned, making my senses heightened, but it felt like there were eyes on me the whole time I was out.

I couldn't tell if it was just my imagination, or perhaps the police had gotten a clue, connected me with Roman and were now following me, or something else, but I was jumpy and paranoid. I fucking hated that.

I got back to my apartment after going to the store in a sort of daze.

I did everything in a sort of daze.

I barely remembered when the sun started to set, but by the time the lock clicked on my door and Roman entered, the whole place was encased in darkness.

“Baby?” he called out.

His hand fumbled with the light switched, and he turned it on, coming to a stop when he found me sitting on the couch in the living room.

“Hey,” he said, his eyes set with caution. He stepped closer to me, and closer and closer, until he was sitting down on the coffee table in front of me.

He grabbed my hands with his and looked me over. “Everything okay?”

I blinked at him before looking down at the hands that encased mine.

Like always, they were warm and dry and brought on a sense of safety within me.

I tried to imagine them covered with blood.

Blood of men who had gotten in his way to get to me.

I couldn't.

But I knew they had been.

He must have known the cops had come to the apartment building, and an open investigation was taking place into the disappearance of Dylan Brown.

I had finally learned the name of the man who had assaulted me. Residents in the building were encouraged to come forward with any information regarding Mr. Brown.

I didn't go to them at all, but yeah. I saw his picture while carrying my groceries back to the apartment.

It was the same man.

“Roman?”

“Yeah?”

Saliva built in my mouth. He told me he wouldn't lie to me. Not anymore. Perhaps it was stupid of me, but I believed him. I believed he would tell me the truth, no matter how gruesome.

But he also told me to only ask questions if I could handle the answers.

I didn't know if I was capable of handling this.

Could I accept a man who did very bad things with some very questionable people?

I might not know much about being in the one percent of motorcycle clubs, but I knew that once you were in, you stayed in.

And Roman was high up in rank, it wasn't like he could just walk away.

What was more, I didn't think he wanted to.

I swallowed. “I made baked salmon and salad. It's not much, but I hope you're hungry.”

The look in his eyes told me he knew that wasn't what I had been about to say.

He smiled at me, his eyes soft and tender. I couldn't help but smile back at him, just as everything I had come to think of myself shattered into a million broken tiny pieces.

It was so loud in my mind, I wondered if Roman could hear it.

“That sounds perfect. I'm starved.”

I let out a small chuckle, tears burning my eyes, not because of who he was but for who I was now.

He stood and pulled me up along with him.

He started to walk toward the kitchen. I stayed where I was. He looked back at me. “Ryleigh?”

It felt like there was a line I was about to step over that would forever distinguish between past Ryleigh and the one I

would be from now on.

My heart skipped a beat, and I crossed over that line, letting him lead me to the kitchen.

ROMAN

FUCK, BUT I WAS BEAT.

The investigation into Dylan Brown was more of a nuisance than I expected.

They wouldn't be able to tie me to Ryleigh's apartment, I made sure of that, but I was sure half the cops on the precinct would have recognized me on sight, and so for the past three days, it was mostly me trying to bypass them in the building without being seen.

Ryleigh hadn't asked me, though I knew she had put two and two together.

I was surprised she let it go, and perhaps that was her way of telling me she would be willing to not only accept but overlook this *little* aspect of my life. Forget that I was a bad man who had done a lot of bad shit, but see that I could be good to her.

For her.

There was also Kai's initiation coming up, which depended on whether the kid succeeded in his mission.

I leaned back against the cushioned chair at one of the nightclubs we owned.

It was closed for the day, but the place would soon be crawling with workers as they got ready for the night.

For now, I was just enjoying the peace and quiet.

The doors burst open, and Dominic's booming laugh carried through the room.

I let out a small sigh.

It had been peaceful and quiet just a moment ago.

I peeked an eye open when two sets of heavy footfalls came closer to me, and I looked up to see Dominic and Micah standing in front of me, one with a happy face, and the other with an impassive one.

Dominic kicked my leg. "Rough night?"

I sat up. "Nope. Just resting a bit."

"What for? You never stay out with us anymore. I don't know where you're spending your nights, but how about bringing that sweet little pussy around to introduce to the brothers?"

I sat up and looked at the man who had been like a brother to me since day one, trying to rein in my anger.

He should have known me well enough to know if I was spending this much time with a woman, she wasn't just a pussy I would go about introducing to the brothers or *sharing*.

Dominic's eyes glinted, and I pulled up short.

This was a test.

He wanted to know who I was spending my time with, and he wanted to know just how important she was to me. And the more important I made her out to be, the more curious he would get. It would only be a matter of time before he would want to meet Ryleigh.

And I almost fell right into his trap.

Dominic crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

Behind him, Micah rolled his eyes.

Yeah, I got what Micah thought about my obsession with Ryleigh. And I almost proved him right by nearly playing right into Dominic's hands.

The man might be like a brother to me, but I knew he wouldn't want a woman, especially *this* woman, to get between us. He would see Ryleigh as a problem before I could convince him otherwise.

"Not the right time," I answered easily, forcing my shoulders to relax.

"When is the right time?"

"When I'm sure I won't stab someone for looking at my woman too long."

I might not want him to know the extent of my obsession with her, but I needed to make it clear that she was mine and no one else's.

Dominic didn't say anything for a moment.

Then he threw his head back and laughed, patting me on the shoulder a couple of times.

"Possessive bastard, ain't he?"

"Yes," Micah agreed. "Possessive and stupid."

Dominic eyed him curiously before he sat down across from Micah and me.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" I asked.

Dominic's smile widened, and he was about to answer me when the doors opened again, and Kai swaggered in.

The kid still looked like he usually did—angry at the world—but there was something light about him today.

He smiled when he caught sight of us at the table, his smile taking on a cocky note that I knew well.

"No shit," I said, making Dominic laugh. "He did it?"

"He sure did. That's my fucking boy for ya! Whatever he set his mind to, he would accomplish. Just like his old man."

Kai walked up to us and dropped something small on the table.

"My gift," he said, his lips twisting a bit in amusement. A flash drive that I was sure contained some pretty damaging

stuff about some people.

Kai was a whiz when it came to computers.

I had never seen another person who could work one with so much ease, and I knew that skill would be useful once he fully pledged.

“How did you manage?” I asked.

“Fucking luck. The bastard didn’t even think to put in protection for his office.”

He meant Mayor Gallagher.

“Once I got in front of his computer, everything else was pretty easy.”

“Don’t cuss, son,” Dominic said affectionately, ruffling his hair.

He pulled away. “I’ve heard worse at the club, Dad.”

Dominic just grinned and shook his head. At this point, I was sure there wasn’t a cuss word that he hadn’t heard before.

“What do you plan on doing with this?” Kai asked.

I felt Dominic’s eyes go to me. I looked over at him, one eyebrow raised.

“Why don’t you look through it and decide, yeah? I trust you, brother, so whatever you think, I’ll go with it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him slightly.

I should be touched that he trusted me with something so big—and fuck, I was, a little—but I also knew there was another reason behind this.

Months had passed since my release, and when I told everyone I would take care of Ryleigh.

As far as everyone knew, she was still going on about her life.

I wondered when someone would bring her up, but between obtaining more business for the club to fighting off the Mansen Brotherhood, who had all been nothing but fucking ghosts for the last month, no one brought her up.

I looked over to Micah, but as usual, his face gave nothing away.

I grabbed the flash drive and offered a small grin at Dominic.

“Yeah. I’ll look through this.”

Dominic wrapped his arm around me, smiling wide. “I know I can count on you. You, Micah, and Kai. You’re the only ones I really trust in this godforsaken world.”

I nodded.

It had been the same for me, too.

But now there was Ryleigh.

The flash drive weighed heavily in my palm, and I squeezed it, feeling the sharp edge digging into my skin.

I had a feeling whatever was on here would have the power to hurt Ryleigh, and fuck, I didn’t know how to handle that.

THE ROOM WAS BATHED in darkness, saved for the small lamp on my side of the bed.

I had my laptop nearby, and Ryleigh was asleep next to me.

If she thought there was something off about tonight, she didn’t say, nor did she ask.

I hadn’t expected her to.

Ryleigh was very good at turning her head the other way, and it was only that one time when she guessed I was hiding something major from her, that she started to dig around for information.

This time was different.

She knew all that there was to know about me, she just didn’t want to know the details.

And this would be one of those details I was sure she wouldn't want to know about because I was looking at the contents of the flash drive now, and it was as we expected.

Mayor Gallagher did keep insurance on his associates.

There were properties they owned that weren't under their name but a corporation. I bet if I looked into those corporations, I would find nothing but a shell.

Why did they need these properties, and why did they need these properties to be hidden from the public eye?

I was willing to bet my fucking fortune that the fucking Mansen brothers were hiding out in one of them, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

What was more, it seemed they were taking a page from the King's Men's book, because these properties weren't just used to hide rats.

They were going to use it to take over our drug distribution ring.

There was also a list of all the known associates of Mayor Gallagher.

And Judge Bennett Hudson was on top of the list.

The information had all sorts of blackmail material on important figures in California, and even in Washington, D.C.

It also implicated Mayor Gallagher, which told me the others in his circle had the same shit stored somewhere in their computers.

They kept insurance on each other to make sure no one would turn.

I shook my head in disgust.

There was no loyalty in this group.

It made it easy to go against each other. It also meant the group was highly unorganized. What if we weren't the only ones watching them?

What if there were government officials as well?

If we put ourselves in the middle of this, it might be how we unintentionally put ourselves directly under the FBI's radar—even more so than we already had.

Ryleigh shifted slightly on the bed, and I closed out of the screen just as she opened her eyes and looked at me softly.

Fuck, but this kind of softness was something I would kill to protect.

I knew that, and I wondered if she knew it too.

She smiled at me sleepily, and I felt my heart clench.

Was this more than just an obsession? I didn't know, and I was afraid of what the answer might be.

“Hey, why aren't you asleep?” she asked.

“Just had a few things to do. I'm sorry if I woke you.”

She frowned. “You didn't.”

Her eyes moved to the computer. The screen had already turned black.

“Are you about done?”

I shut the laptop closed and set it on the nightstand. Lying back down, I pulled her into my arms.

“Yeah, I'm done.”

She snuggled in closer to me. “Good. You barely sleep as it is. You should really sleep when you can,” she mumbled, her eyes already drifting shut.

I reached out and turned off the light, bathing the room in complete darkness.

Her breath evened out, and I knew she had fallen asleep.

“Ryleigh?”

There was no answer.

I squeezed her to me.

“I fucking love you,” I whispered.

And the confession didn't scare me as much as I thought it would.

What the fuck was I supposed to do with the flash drive now?

I LOOKED DOWN at the text I had just sent her, telling her I would be home late tonight, again.

Two days had passed, and I was nowhere near a decision about the flash drive as I had been when I first held it in my palm.

And like a fucking coward, I had been ignoring Ryleigh.

I didn't know how to look into her eyes while simultaneously working to destroy her dad.

It had to be done.

I knew that.

But Ryleigh didn't.

She didn't know the kind of man her father was.

Hatred for the bastard burned in my heart. I was in this fucking dilemma because of him.

I might be a bad man, but I never tried to hide it.

I never took on a government position, vowing to protect the law like he had done, but it was still my decision that would end up hurting her, and at the end of the day, that was all that would matter to her.

I closed my eyes.

I had been leaving the apartment early and coming home well past when she had gone to bed.

I watched the screen as the three dots appeared, telling me she was texting me back. They disappeared after a moment, started back up again, and disappeared once more.

I waited, and when they didn't reappear again, I shoved my phone back into my pocket.

"Trouble in paradise?" Micah asked, taking a seat beside me.

I hadn't even heard him come up.

Jesus. It was distractions like this that got men killed in our world.

Though I didn't show any outward reaction to him, I knew he probably sensed my surprise.

He shook his head in disgust. "You need to fucking focus when you're out in public."

"I know that," I said defensively.

"Then act like it."

"What do you want?"

"Have you decided what you're going to do about the flash drive?"

I shook my head. "I'm still thinking."

"Keeping her bastard father out of jail isn't the way to go. You can have your little toy to play with, but don't let her be the reason Dominic questions your loyalty to the club."

"I'm not going to betray the club," I said, unable to keep the anger from my voice. "Jesus. What do you take me for?"

He shrugged. "It's hard for me to tell with you these days."

"I'm still me."

"No, you're a fucking fool, is what you are."

I didn't say anything for a moment before I let a small smile curve my lips. "One of these days, you're going to fall, and you're going to fall hard, brother. And I will be there to remind you of this conversation."

"Don't insult me like that. I don't have a fucking heart."

I laughed. "Yeah, you do, no matter how badly you wish that weren't the case."

“You wish.”

I didn't bother arguing with him. He wouldn't have believed me anyway, but I just knew, when us Stone men fall, we fall hard.

It would only be a matter of time for him, and I feel bad for whoever that unlucky girl would be once that happened.

“Come out to the bar tonight,” he said, and I paused at his voice.

“Why?”

“Because you have been missing for weeks, and people are starting to talk. It's good for you to be around, for the brothers to see that the VP isn't as distracted as he seems.”

Yeah, going out was the last fucking thing I wanted to do.

We were getting way too old for this shit, and all I wanted to do was crawl into bed with Ryleigh and let her fight away my demons, even if it was only for a few hours.

But I knew why he said that.

I nodded. “Yeah. All right. I'll see you there.”

RYLEIGH

I SHIFTED MY CAR INTO PARK AND LOOKED UP AT THE SKETCHY bar in front of me.

According to my phone, Roman was there.

He didn't know that I had set up location-sharing on his phone a few days ago when I had decided it would be a good idea for me to know where he was at all times. Not because I thought he would cheat on me or that I didn't trust him, but for safety.

And admittedly, with all the stalking he had done to me, it seemed only fair that I did it to him too.

It had been a last-minute decision, really.

He came home one night looking like he had rolled around in the dirt the entire day and had walked straight into the bathroom without so much of a greeting.

I didn't follow him while he went to shower.

Instead, I noticed him place his phone on the bedside table, and out of curiosity, I wondered if he had put the lock on it yet.

He hadn't.

So I tracked him.

He didn't know that I usually looked up his location throughout the day while he was gone.

It made me feel better.

And now he texted saying he might not return to my apartment after days of avoiding me?

This was the longest we had gone without sex, and I knew sex wasn't the answer to everything, but I missed him.

I missed him when he was lying on his side of the bed, thinking I was asleep, while I had been waiting up for him most nights.

I missed the possessive way in which he took me, the feeling of him moving inside me, and most of all, the feeling of him pulling me into his arms afterward.

One of the few rare moments that he became soft with another person.

When he became soft with me.

Something had happened to make him pull away like this, and I was a little scared to ask him what that was.

I couldn't shake the feeling that it might have something to do with me.

So here I was, parked in front of a bar I thought I would never step foot in, not in a million years.

I jumped a little when the front door opened, and a group of people walked out, one woman and two men.

The woman had her arms wrapped around both men, kissing one then the other, before they led her to a car.

It was obvious they were trying to find a place to fuck.

I swallowed.

One man was enough for me.

I couldn't imagine what it would be like with two men, and those two looked like rough bikers.

This was probably where members of the MC hung out, and I wondered if someone would recognize me as the girl who sent their VP to prison.

I lowered the cap I had on, covering the top half of my face.

Even from inside the car, I could hear the booming music coming from inside the bar.

This wasn't my scene.

I was never really one to go where it was crowded or loud, and here I was... stalking my *boyfriend* as if this was normal for me.

What was I even doing here?

I didn't know.

I just knew that if he kept ignoring me like this, I would go fucking insane.

I should hate the person I had become with him.

Wasn't the whole point of a relationship to improve who you were as a person?

I didn't know.

Taking a deep breath and bracing myself for whatever might happen once I got in, I opened the car door and climbed out.

The music was already giving me a headache. The scent of cigarette smoke, weed, and body odor didn't fucking help.

What the hell was Roman doing here?

And was he here on some sort of club business?

I shook my head.

Who the hell could conduct business with all this noise?

I doubted this was where they held *church*.

I pushed the door open, and no one even turned my way.

Probably because I had more clothing on than all the women here, who were all showing various degrees of skin.

In fact, I stood out a little because of the way I dressed, in black leggings, black boots, a huge sweatshirt, and a muted blue cap on my head.

No one seemed to recognize me, and I considered that a blessing.

Noises coming from the bar drew my attention first, and I turned and found a woman dressed in jeans shorts, black ankle boots, high heels, and what looked like a black lacy bra top, dancing on the bar top.

I half expected her to fall off when she started to bend down to twerk, but she was amazingly well-balanced.

Once the song finished and she stood up, I almost wanted to applaud, but I was sure that would just make me look like a dork, so I turned away and walked further into the bar.

I coughed when someone blew their cigarette smoke into my face. I looked up to see a mean-looking man staring at me with a smirk on his face.

“Are you lost, baby?” he asked me, his voice gruff, probably from years of smoking.

I didn't answer him, moving out of the way when it looked like he was about to grab me. Luckily he missed, and seemed to leave me alone, or perhaps he was too drunk or too high to put in the effort.

I could feel my face getting red from the mounting frustration I was in, and just when I was about to give up and leave, the crowd parted, almost by magic, revealing Roman sitting in the back.

Micah was beside him, looking bored, but I knew he was probably aware of everything that was going on. Which was why I probably shouldn't have been surprised when his gaze zeroed in on me.

I held my breath, trying to remind myself that he wouldn't hurt me, especially not with Roman sitting right beside him, even if it was getting harder to hold that thought with the way his inhuman silver eyes glinted in the dimmed bar.

I took a step back and stopped myself.

He smirked.

I turned my attention away from him and to the other man sitting next to Roman, and my heart seemed to drop.

I would have recognized Dominic Madden anywhere.

Unlike Roman, his face was plastered all over the news. He was the face of the King's Men. The infamous president who had brought this club up with his bare and bloodied hands.

I swallowed, but it didn't seem like he noticed me.

I returned my gaze back to Roman, just in time to see a woman with blonde hair and long legs sitting on his lap.

What the hell?

I blinked in surprise and anger when she wiggled her ass against him. She might as well give him a lap dance in the middle of this bar with the suggestive way she was rubbing up against him.

My lower lip trembled.

Had I been wrong?

Did I really mistake his obsession with me as something akin to forever, when Roman had only been thinking temporarily?

Did I mishear him when he whispered to me two nights before, his fucking confession when he thought I was sleeping?

I fucking love you.

I didn't hear him wrong.

So why was he letting some other bitch touch what was mine?

I looked up in time to see an annoyed expression crossed over Roman's face, and then he lifted her off his lap.

My shoulders sagged, especially when she said something to him, her face set in anger right before she stomped off, bypassing me.

And that drew Roman's attention to where I stood, watching the scene.

His eyes widened in surprise for a beat, before something flashed in them, something that almost looked like panic.

I didn't know what set it off, but I didn't want to be around to find out.

I pivoted and ran out of there.

Behind me, I heard a booming laugh, but that couldn't be right.

Micah wasn't the kind of man to laugh.

He was more like a fucking robot. An emotionless, deadly robot.

I squealed when I felt arms around me just as my hand reached the outside doors.

He hauled me up against his body, his lips touching my ear as he said menacingly, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

I should have been scared of the way he sounded.

Should be, but I wasn't.

My feet weren't even touching the ground anymore, and if no one had been paying any attention to me before, they certainly were now, with the fucking angry giant carrying me around.

I didn't say anything as he carried me out of the bar and straight to his truck parked off to the corner.

"My car," I said as he walked past it.

"Tough. You're getting in my truck, and I'm driving you home."

"I can't just leave my car here at this bar, of all bars!"

That got him to stop walking.

He didn't say anything. The only noises coming from him were his hard, angry breaths.

Oh, fuck.

I'd poked the dragon, and now I had to face the consequences.

He held out his hand in front of me.

"What?" I asked.

“Give me your car keys.”

“Why?”

He shook me. Hard.

Okay. I got it.

I grumbled under my breath and pulled my keys from my pocket, placing them in his hand.

He walked back to where I was parked, opened the door, and hid the keys underneath the seat.

“Micah will take your car home.”

And then he started walking toward his truck once more.

I wanted to protest.

To tell him the last thing I wanted was for Micah to touch any of my things.

It almost felt sacrilegious. Like I might have to find a priest to perform an exorcism on it afterward.

I smartly kept my mouth shut.

He opened the passenger side and deposited me in like I was nothing more than a bag of wheat before walking to the driver’s side and hopping in.

He started the truck pretty quickly after that, and then we were off.

ROMAN

MY FISTS TIGHTENED AROUND THE STEERING WHEEL.

I didn't say anything, trying to calm the fuck down.

Fuck me, but I thought my heart had stopped beating when I saw her standing there in the middle of the bar, afraid someone might have recognized her.

Afraid I wouldn't be able to protect her, even with Micah by my side.

It didn't look like Dominic had seen her.

He would have texted me by now if he had.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

I didn't need to ask her how she found me.

The little minx didn't think I knew she had put a tracking device on my phone.

I let her have her fun. I didn't think there would be any harm to it, considering I had put tracking on her phone too.

I should have fucking checked on her. Perhaps then, I wouldn't have been so surprised seeing her standing there, like a fucking gazelle in a room full of lions.

The little innocent didn't even know.

And Micah had been fucking amused by the entire thing.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked.

I looked at her, even though I could barely see her in the dark interior of the truck.

What the fuck did she want me to say?

Right now, I didn't know how to open my mouth without saying something mean that would no doubt make her cry.

And fuck me, but that was the last thing I wanted.

She thumped me on the chest.

What the fuck?

“Roman.”

My jaw clenched as I pulled us to the side of the road, letting the engine rumble in the quiet night.

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don't know. Anything? To let me know what you're thinking? Or hell, feeling?”

I turned to her. I knew she couldn't see me, but I had no doubt she could feel my eyes on her.

She shifted a little further away from me, her side hitting against the door.

I smiled in the dark.

She was trapped in here with me. Where the hell did she think she could go?

I unbuckled my seatbelt and then reached over for hers. She jumped from the click that sounded out to the near-silent car.

“You want to know what I'm feeling?” I asked her, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her toward me.

She struggled in my hold, flinching when another car drove past us, but I didn't let her go.

I moved her onto my lap, positioning her so that she was straddling me. I pushed her down so she could feel my fucking hard-on.

How could I not be hard when she was so close by?

“Roman,” she said, a tinge of panic making its way through her voice.

“I’ll ask you again. What were you doing there?”

I wrapped my fist around her hair when she tried to look away from me, and she let out a small cry when I pulled on it roughly.

“Looking for you,” she said, struggling in my hold. Didn’t she know that only pushed her sweet little pussy against me more?

She moaned when I pushed my hips up against her.

“Roman, what are you doing?”

“Why were you looking for me? Didn’t I tell you I had to be out late tonight?”

“You didn’t look like you were working when that girl was grinding on your lap,” she hissed out.

I grabbed her hips and moved them back and forth, eliciting another moan from her lips.

“Roman.”

“You mean Tammy?” I asked.

“Tammy,” she spat out. “Is that what you do whenever you tell me you have to leave for work early and stay late— Oh, God.”

Her hips automatically moved against me. I didn’t think she realized she was doing it, which made the action even hotter.

“I haven’t touched another woman since I saw you,” I said, my hands digging into her waist.

“She was touching you!”

“And I told her to get off. I know you saw that, or are you just going to ignore that part because you’re craving a fight?”

“Fuck you.”

“Why did you come, Ryleigh?”

“Because you ignored me, you bastard!”

I stilled her with my hand, wishing there was some light so I could see the look on her face. But the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to us in this part of town. The windows in my truck were tinted, so no one should be able to see us.

I wanted to keep it that way.

“What do you mean?”

Her voice was thick when she answered, “I don’t know what happened, but I can feel you pulling away, and I want to know why.”

I leaned my head back against the seat cushion and closed my eyes.

Fuck.

Of course, she would have picked up on the fact that I was avoiding her, but until I decided what to do about the flash drive, I didn’t want to look at her. I didn’t want her to influence my decision.

And how fucking easy she would have been able to.

“Why are you ignoring me?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t you be grateful for that?” I retorted back.

She stilled on top of me. “What are you talking about?”

“You should stay away from me. I’m not a good man.”

Her breath hitched, and I didn’t fucking know why I said that.

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

No, that wasn’t what I fucking wanted.

I didn’t want her to stay away from me, and if she tried, I would follow her to the end of the earth.

Which meant I was nothing more than a fucking hypocrite.

She straightened her back, and I imagined the storm swirling in her eyes had I been able to see her.

“Well too fucking bad,” she said, making me smile. “You pummel your way into my life, and you wouldn’t take no for an answer. You made me like this. You made me want you, so now, you’re fucking stuck with me.”

Her hands came up and fisted my shirt.

She pulled me closer to her until I could feel her breath against my neck.

“Why force yourself into my life if this is just temporary?” she asked softly.

“A moment of stupidity,” I answered before I thought better of it.

She sucked in a sharp breath, and I knew I had hurt her.

Fucking hell.

She tried to climb off me, so I wrapped my arms around the small of her back and pulled her in closer.

“No, let me go, you bastard. Don’t fucking touch me anymore. I’ll make the smart decision for both of us and walk the fuck away.”

I shook my head, the thought of her walking away sending an intense panic coursing through me, and I did the only thing I could think of.

I kissed her.

Her tiny fists pounded against my chest.

I kissed her harder.

She shook her head, trying to get away from me, and I pushed her against the steering wheel, trapping her to me as I kept kissing her.

“I’m sorry,” I said, pulling away. “I didn’t mean that.”

She hit my chest once more. I didn’t do anything to stop her. I deserved it and so much more.

Fuck, but I was an ass.

“What are you doing to me?” she asked softly, her voice thick as if she was trying hard not to cry.

I didn't know what I would do if she cried. Didn't think I could handle her tears.

I might destroy the fucking world.

I nipped on her bottom lip. "Reminding you."

"I'm not the one that needs reminding."

"You're right," I said, pressing my lips against her again. She wasn't the one fighting or pulling away.

I was, only because I didn't know how to stay loyal to the club without hurting her.

But that was my fucking problem to deal with, and I would just have to figure out a way to do this where I remained loyal to the club without hurting her in the process.

I closed my eyes and molded my lips around hers.

She moaned against me.

"Fuck, baby. Fuck. You taste so good. I fucking missed this."

I really did. I didn't know how badly until I had her in my arms again.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, grinding her pussy down against my dick.

Fuck.

"Baby, sit up a bit."

She pulled back, and I could sense her confusion, but she did as I asked.

I reached down the side of the truck until I found the small blade hidden there, and I pulled on the fabric of her leggings, on the crotch area, running the blade through.

The sound of the fabric ripping filled the car, and she gasped.

"Hey, why did you do that?"

"No time," I mumbled against her neck. "Need you right fucking now."

My fingers found her panties, and I pulled them to the side, exposing her hot, wet pussy.

My fingers pressed in against her, groaning a little when I found her slick with want.

Her head fell against my shoulder, and she made those little noises from her lips that almost had me coming undone.

“Take my cock out of my jeans,” I said, teasing her pussy lips with my fingers.

She arched into my touch, her hand fumbling with the button on my jeans before pulling the zipper down.

She tugged on my boxer briefs and pulled out my throbbing cock, her thumb moving over the tip and taking in some of the precum.

I gritted my teeth to keep from coming too soon.

Her touch always made me feel like a fucking teenager, touching pussy for the first time.

She gently stroked her hand up and down my length as if afraid of hurting me. The innocent move shouldn't have affected me the way it did, but it did.

She wasn't a fucking virgin when I met her, but she wasn't experienced either.

She was actually quite shy, and I had yet to see her fully own her sexuality.

As much as I loved her shyness—and I fucking loved her shyness—I wanted to be the one to bring out her confidence.

“Harder, baby,” I said. “Go a little harder.”

She whimpered, stroking me harder, and I closed my eyes, seeing fucking stars.

It felt so good.

I didn't think I could last much longer, and I wanted to come inside her. I wanted to fill her pussy with my cum, and her belly with my baby.

I wanted to tie myself to her in every way possible, and I wouldn't stop until that was accomplished.

I cupped the back of her neck and squeezed slightly. "Put my cock inside of you."

She did as I asked, directing the tip to her entrance.

The feel of her wetness touching me was almost too much and not nearly enough.

"That's it, baby. Bring me inside of you."

She sank down onto me slowly.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and brought her closer to my body, needing more of her.

Her hips slid back and forth, driving up my blood and bringing me into a frenzy.

God.

I grabbed her hips and helped her move harder, faster.

She gasped as she rubbed her clit against me, and I yanked on her hair so that her head was tilted back. I took her lips in a searing kiss. "Fuck, baby. You feel so good. Use me. Use me for your own pleasure. Take what you want."

She nodded, and then she was moving on her own accord. I couldn't see her features, but I could make out her silhouette.

I could see the way she moved as she took what she needed to get off.

My hand moved down her body, squeezing one tit roughly before making its way lower, until my thumb found her clit.

I rubbed against the swollen nub, and that was all it took to drive her over the edge.

She moved faster against me, her back arching just before she came with a shout.

I followed soon after her, my cum shooting inside of her pussy, and feeling her pulsate around me from the move.

She leaned forward and rested her head against my shoulder. Her chest pressed against mine, and she was breathing hard.

I ran my hands up and down her back, trying to catch my own breath.

“All right?” I asked.

She nodded against me.

I smiled. “Have I robbed you of your speech?”

I felt her shrug, making me chuckle.

I held her to me and reached over to the glove compartment, grabbing the tissues I kept there.

It took a moment before my hand found them, and I helped her move off me and back to the bench seat.

“Lie down while I clean us up,” I said.

She stiffened but didn’t fight me when I pushed her back, cleaning her up.

“I have a jacket in the back you can use to cover the rip in your pants.”

She gasped in outrage. “It didn’t just rip, you bastard. You cut it.”

I smiled at the accusing note in her voice as I worked to clean us up the best I could before setting her back in her seat and pulling the seat belt over her.

She shifted a little. “I might make a mess on your seat.”

“Don’t give a fuck about that,” I muttered.

“You didn’t use a condom,” she said, and I couldn’t tell what that tone in her voice meant.

“Don’t want anything between us.”

“But I’m not on birth control. Are you really okay with bringing a baby into this world?”

“What’s wrong with this world?”

“It’s fucked up.”

True.

“I’ll protect you and any children you give me,” I said, and that was the fucking truth. I would lay down my life for my family. And that was exactly what she was.

RYLEIGH

I SQUINTED SLIGHTLY WHEN I FELT THE SUNLIGHT ON MY FACE.

It was becoming more of a common occurrence for me to wake up after the sun had risen.

I supposed, in a way, I felt safe with Roman's arms around me.

We didn't talk much after he drove me home.

We had gotten ready for bed as soon as we got to my apartment, and some time in the night, I saw Roman look at his phone before he got up and went to the front door.

I only heard a low murmur of male voices before the door was shut, and then he was back in the room, placing my car keys on my desk before gathering me into the safe cocoon of his arms once more.

We slept the entire night, and now it was morning.

Not late morning, but not early either, and even more surprising was that Roman was still here.

He was usually up or had already left the house by this time.

His hours were erratic enough as it was. I didn't know when I would get to spend a lazy morning with him, so this was a pleasant surprise.

I frowned slightly at the memories of the night before.

Nothing was resolved.

I still didn't know why he had been avoiding me for the last three days, and no matter what he thought, sex didn't solve anything.

I didn't want a relationship based purely on sex, and if I really thought about it, I didn't think that was what this was, but that didn't reassure me.

Roman was just so... unpredictable.

I was still frowning when he opened his eyes and looked at me.

His expression was soft, his lips tilted slightly upwards in a small smile.

"Good morning," he said, his voice rough from sleep.

I smiled as he wrapped his arms around my middle and pulled me in closer to the warmth of his embrace. I cleared my throat. "Good morning."

We didn't say anything for a beat as we looked each other in the eyes. I took in his warm irises, down to his beard that was probably due for a trim, his full lips set in soft lines, and his hair, which had gotten a little long since we met.

"Are we going to talk about yesterday?" I asked.

He raised his hand and curved it gently around my neck before saying, "What's there to talk about?"

I shot him a scathing look. "Nuh-uh. That's not how this works. We talk it out. Okay? I don't think I can stand it if you keep acting the way you have these past few days. Tell me what's going on, Roman."

He watched me for a moment, and I couldn't understand what the flash of emotion I saw in his eyes meant. I frowned slightly, and he shifted his hand to cup my cheek, his thumb coming up and rubbing the wrinkle away.

I didn't think he would answer me when he finally spoke. "Something's been happening at the club. I'm still trying to figure out what needs to be done. I'm sorry I've been a little distant lately, baby. I just didn't want whatever's going on to affect you."

“Well, that’s stupid.”

He pulled back, seeming surprised.

I leveled a glare at him. “I get that things can be... *busy* at the club, but should I expect you to be like this every time it happens? Why would you think I would be okay with that? I don’t like the distance, especially when you won’t talk to me, so I’ll start to make things up in my head, and honestly, it’s really tiring. I don’t want to feel like I have these past few days ever again, Roman. I don’t want to feel this unsteady.”

I could feel tears stinging my eyes, and he tried to pull me in tighter against him.

I resisted. “Don’t. I don’t like the person I’ve been. You think I liked going to the bar to track you down? I didn’t. I hated it. I want to be able to trust you, but you need to make sure that I can.”

It was his turn to frown. “You can trust me, baby. I told you nothing is going on with Tammy. I hadn’t even touched another woman since the day I saw you.”

“You really haven’t?”

I knew he had said it before, but when he first saw me, we were nothing to each other. Or perhaps, enemies would be a more apt description.

Whatever we were, we weren’t together, and it was months after that when he made his move, inserting himself into my life.

“Why would I lie?”

I shook my head. “I don’t—I mean, just look at you.”

He smiled arrogantly at me, and I fought against the urge to roll my eyes at him. He leaned over and kissed my cheek, his beard tickling me. “You’re good for a man’s ego, baby.”

I slapped him on his hard stomach, trying to keep us on track. It would be so easy to let him distract me, but then, we would have gotten nowhere.

“You need to talk to me,” I said.

He nodded, his eyes soft, but I continued before he could speak.

“I just don’t want to feel this way anymore, and if you don’t think you can handle it, then you need to let me go.”

He tightened his hold on me. “Fucking never.”

I splayed my hands on his chest, taking in the steady drumming of his heartbeat.

“Fair warning,” I whispered.

“Or what?” he asked, adopting the same tone of voice as me.

“Or you’ll be my prey. I’m giving you a chance to back out now—” I said, even if the thought of him letting me go made me want to puke. “or I’ll be the hunter this time. And I won’t stop until you are completely caught in my trap.”

His smiling face was the last thing I saw before I felt his lips on mine. He moved them softly against me, kissing me with a sort of gentleness I rarely got from him. Most of our kisses had been frantic, hard, and desperate.

But this one was so gentle I wanted to cry when he pulled away.

He pressed his thumb against my bottom lip, took me in once more, and with a groan, pressed another kiss against me.

When he finally pulled back, both of us were breathing hard.

He kept his lips close to mine when I heard him say softly, “Too late.”

I HUMMED HAPPILY to a pop song I had heard recently while working on my iPad.

My next project was on a family of bears, and I was having a blast creating all the different expressions on each of them to go with the storyline.

Roman had left for *work*, even if he considered work to be different from most people. I was back in my apartment, getting back to my routine and feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted from my chest.

I was happy.

My phone chimed from where I had set it next to me on the sofa, and I reached out for it, looking at the new text message that had just come in.

I could feel my good mood deflating as I read the text from my mom.

My relationship with my parents was still a bit rocky, though better than it had been when I first moved into this apartment.

At least we were communicating now, though not as much since I got back from the cabin.

I didn't know how to talk to them without feeling like I was betraying them somehow, yet I couldn't make myself let Roman go.

It was an unnerving thought, to think that there would come a time when my parents would make me choose between them and Roman, and I wouldn't choose them.

No matter what I said this morning to him, I was just as incapable of letting him go as he was with me.

Perhaps there was something unhealthy about our relationship.

I couldn't bring myself to care at this point.

But I couldn't ignore my parents now, especially when Mom just invited me to their house for an early dinner.

It had been so long since I stepped foot into my childhood home, the thought of it almost felt foreign.

I knew if I refused, she might come here, and the last thing I needed was for her to show up unexpectedly and come face-to-face with Roman.

I shuddered at the thought of my high society mom meeting the VP of the King's Men MC.

I texted my mom back and slowly went to my room to make myself presentable enough to be Bennett and Vivian Hudson's society daughter once again.

THERE WAS a sort of heaviness in my stomach that seemed to only become more pronounced the more miles I ate up, until I found myself parked in front of my parents' estate.

Over 8,000 square feet, with seven bedrooms, two home offices, a home gym, and seven and a half bathrooms, it was much too big for three people to live in.

I imagined it was even more so now that it was only two of them.

My parents didn't share a bedroom.

They hadn't since I was fourteen—or at least, I thought it was fourteen. I didn't know exactly when they stopped sleeping in the same room, but I discovered it at fourteen, and even then, it had struck me as odd.

Now, I couldn't imagine sleeping apart from Roman.

If he was home, I wanted to follow him around like a little lost puppy.

So sleeping apart was out of the question, but my parents seemed happy with their arrangement.

I took a deep breath and shut off my car, climbing out of it.

My childhood home looked like the house from *The Notebook* on steroids. It was white, with navy blue shutters and a big wrap-around porch, which had been my favorite thing about this entire house growing up.

It had southern charm, as I'd heard one of my dad's friends say once.

When I was still living here, my parents hosted parties regularly.

We stopped doing that when I was fourteen, after the incident at the cliff, when they didn't want anyone to know that their daughter had been abducted by some terrible person and suffered some amnesia afterward.

I looked down at my feet as I walked up to the house.

The loss of memory was what bothered me the most.

I lost hours of my life, which I was sure was crucial to remember.

The doctor who examined me said I wasn't raped, but sometimes, I wondered if I had been assaulted in other ways.

And when I was finally released from the hospital, my parents brought me home, keeping me secluded.

As if there was something shameful about being abducted when it hadn't been my fault in the first place.

I didn't ask to be taken. Didn't ask to be pushed off a cliff and didn't ask for injuries that took months to recover from.

I blinked, and suddenly I was standing at the front door.

I looked up at it, taking in the silver door knocker that glinted in the sun. The door had been painted blue recently.

Despite being built in the mid-40s, the house had been kept in good condition.

It had been in my family since my great-grandpa's time. It was one of the first things he bought when his business started taking off.

He owned a factory that manufactured machinery parts for planes, cars, and tanks.

His business really took off with the war.

I supposed my dad could have kept the family legacy alive. He could have done something with the business that would have brought in more money, but his passion was the law. He

left the family business behind, and with no one around to take over, my grandpa had to sell.

I always assumed that since he defied his dad and went his own way in life, he would be more understanding when I wanted to do the same thing.

Neither of my parents thought my job could support me, let alone any future family I might build.

They wanted me back home and apply to law schools.

They wanted me to follow in Dad's footsteps.

It was one of the main bones of contention between us.

The door clicked open, startling me out of my thoughts, and I looked up at my mother's gray eyes.

Same eyes as me.

Except hers were now narrowed in a frown as she looked me up and down. "What are you doing, just standing there?"

"Oh. Nothing."

I hadn't realized she was watching me as I pulled up to the house.

She moved off to the side and allowed me to go in.

I stepped inside and looked around.

Everything was still the same. Still as organized and as clean as it had been when I moved away for college.

"Don't just stand there. Why don't you come into the kitchen and help me prepare dinner?"

I nodded.

My parents had people working for them. Marsha came in and cooked and cleaned, but my mom loved cooking.

If she had the time, she liked to spend it in the kitchen.

I looked around and didn't see Marsha anywhere. I assumed she had been given the day off.

I sat down on the kitchen stool by the island and watched her, knowing this was what she actually meant when she said

she wanted my help.

I would only get in the way if I tried to do something.

“Tell me, how are you?” Mom asked as she started chopping up the lettuce for a salad.

I watched the way the knife sliced through the leaves before I answered her. “I’m good. I just started two new projects, so I’m keeping busy.”

Her lips thinned into a line at the mention of my job, and I held back the urge to sigh.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked to change the subject.

She moved to the cabinets and took out a large bowl. “Oh, he’s in the office with Billy.”

I nodded. William Gallagher was my dad’s oldest friend. He was also the mayor, so I could see why they remained close, even after twenty years.

They grew up in the same circle, and now they worked in similar fields.

“I’m gonna go say hi,” I said, hopping off the stool.

I didn’t think I could handle sitting in the kitchen and watching her cook in silence. I should have shown up a little later, when I was sure the food was done cooking.

She made a small noise of acknowledgment but didn’t look up when I walked out of the kitchen and up to Dad’s office.

I could already hear voices coming through the slightly opened door, and I was about to knock when I heard something that made me pause.

“Those King’s Men bastards won’t know what hit them,” William said.

My breath caught, and I held still, trying not to make any noise.

“Are you sure?” Dad asked.

“Positive. My informant told me they’re going to do the drop-off tonight. Most of the key figures will be there,

including the slimy little bastard, Roman Stone. And this time, when we put them away, it will be for good. There won't be another scapegoat around to get him out of this."

"This is huge, William. Do you know what this will do for our reputation? We'll be known as the people responsible for taking down one of the most notorious crime groups in the country, and once they're out of the way, we can put in Stephen and Samuel."

Who?

Stephen and Samuel... I heard of those names before.

I couldn't remember where or how, but I had heard of those names before, and something told me those weren't names I wanted to hear.

Dad was somehow involved in all of this?

I covered my mouth to keep from making any noise, trying to focus on the more pressing issue.

There was a drop-off tonight.

And it was most likely a trap that Roman was walking into.

I ran shaky hands through my hair, trying to calm my raging heartbeat.

What was I supposed to do?

I had to...

I had to...

I choked on a breath.

I had to warn him.

But how?

And even if he believed my warning, would Dominic and Micah? They only saw me as the girl who sent Roman to prison.

I was untrustworthy in their eyes, especially since my dad was involved.

Would they really believe I was going against my own father?

I swallowed and backed away from the door when I heard their footsteps approaching it.

I hid behind a small alcove, just across the hall from his office, holding my breath when the door opened.

Dad said something that made William laugh, but I didn't hear it. How could I, with all the blood rushing through my ears?

I stayed where I was until I was sure they weren't there anymore, then I got out of my hiding place and walked into Dad's office.

I tried the doorknob, and luck was on my side, because it unlocked.

I had only been in here a handful of times.

And I had never been in here by myself.

This was his space.

I knew that since I was little, and my mom knew it too. She had no interest in being in here anyhow, and here I was, breaching it.

I swallowed and looked around, moving toward his desk.

His computer was off, and I shook the mouse to wake it. The screen came on, and it must not have been that long since it fell asleep because I was brought to the home screen without having to put in a password.

Panic rose as I looked around before opening his email. Finding nothing useful there, I pulled up the messaging app connected to his phone.

I found the location of the trap for Roman at the top.

From an unknown number.

With the time.

Ten o'clock tonight.

I wrote down the number and address before closing out of everything and shutting off his computer.

I looked back at his desk when I got to the door to make sure nothing was out of place before I snuck out of there.

I left the house without saying anything to anyone.

It wasn't until I had pulled away from the property that I texted Mom, telling her I wasn't feeling well.

I had to go and save Roman.

I would not let him go back to prison.

Never again.

RYLEIGH

ROMAN WASN'T ANSWERING HIS PHONE.

I had been in a state of panic since leaving my parents' house.

The drug drop-off location happened to be in San Francisco, a little over two hours away, so driving there took up most of the day. Even still, I got to the place with some time to spare.

Finding the location was a little harder than I thought, especially when halfway there, I realized it was taking place at a shipping port.

I had never been to one before, and I didn't know where to go or where to even begin my search.

I parked my car about a block away and pulled on my cap. At least this would hide my face. I was also in dark clothing, so I hoped to blend well into the night.

Or my clothing could do nothing but draw attention to myself.

I blinked at the thought. I fucking hoped not.

I tried Roman again.

I was sent to voicemail after the third ring.

Frustration burned my heart, and anger.

Why the hell wasn't he picking up?

What if I didn't make it in time?

What then?

I didn't know, but I couldn't fail.

I couldn't.

I snuck into the port, which wasn't hard, considering it was almost empty at this time of night.

It was well past closing time, and there shouldn't be people around unless they worked here... or were here to do something illegal.

All I had seen so far was a guard walking around, but I was sure there were cameras all over the place.

I pulled the cap on my head and lowered my face. If they did catch me on camera, I hoped they wouldn't catch sight of my face.

It wouldn't take long for someone to identify me if that happened.

I walked around the port, not really sure where I was going. I tried to pull up a map of it on my phone, but the service was slow.

I was getting more anxious with each minute that passed, and I still didn't know where Roman was.

He was here.

He had to be here, but where?

I stopped when I came upon rows and rows of large shipping containers.

A small chill raked up my spine. This looked like a scene from a horror movie.

I hid between two of the containers.

This would be where they hid the drugs... right? It seemed like an ideal place, or was that too obvious?

Footsteps came up from behind me, and I quickly moved to the next row, pressing my back against the container and letting out a small sigh of relief when the footsteps started to get further away from me.

I closed my eyes.

I didn't want to do this.

I wasn't good at this sneaking around and breaking the law thing.

Not that I thought I would be good at it, but the adrenaline that people talked about that came with this sort of thing?

Yeah, it was manifesting itself as pure, unadulterated panic for me, to the point where I had to physically force myself to move.

I just wanted Roman.

I wanted his arms around me, and I wanted this whole thing to be over.

I opened my eyes and readied myself to move again.

I could do this.

I just had to save Roman, and then we could go home, and I could revel in the safety of being in his lap with his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I held onto that image as I pushed myself off and started walking again.

I got about three feet away before I was grabbed from behind.

Fear made my heart jump as I struggled against whoever held me. He covered my mouth with his hand, and I could taste something salty from his palm.

Gross.

I kicked my feet back, trying to hit him but found air.

He pulled me back.

This was it.

I was fucking dead, and before I could even warn Roman.

I would be dead, and Roman would go back to prison.

Tears stung my eyes as the man brought me to another blue shipping container.

I looked up and found the number 72 written on top.

The doors quietly opened, and I came to a group of men inside. A small lamp hung in the corner, illuminating each of their faces.

I was still too panicked to realize that I recognized a lot of these faces. And in the far back, near the left corner was...

Roman!

I cried and struggled harder in the man's hold. His grip tightened as he twisted my arms behind my back and pushed me down on the floor until my knees knocked on it.

I gritted my teeth to keep in the pained noise.

Roman's nostrils flared, turning angry eyes on the man holding me.

He took a step forward when Micah placed a hand on his middle, stopping him.

"Found her wandering around, prez. She doesn't look like she belongs, so I brought her here."

The man pulled my hair back, so that I was looking up at the group of men.

I found Dominic right away.

His eyes flared in recognition.

Of course, he would know who I was. I had a feeling most of the men here knew who I was.

Dominic looked to the side at Roman before he turned back to me, smiling. I resisted the urge to shudder in revulsion.

"My, my. What is the judge's daughter doing here?"

Roman shoved off Micah's touch and walked over to me, and even though he'd be outnumbered if he tried to protect me from Dominic, a sense of safety still settled upon me.

My bottom lip trembled as he turned to the man holding me.

"Let. Go."

The man's hold loosened on me marginally, but he didn't let go.

Roman didn't give out another warning. He pulled his hand back and punched him.

The man let out a cry as he fell back. I would have gone with him, too, had Roman not taken hold of me and pulled me into his arms. My legs shook as I stood, and I clung to him, tremors working their way up and down my spine.

We turned to Dominic.

"Roman. What are you doing?" Dominic asked.

Roman tightened his arms around me. "She's mine. I'm protecting what's mine."

Dominic didn't seem surprised by that, and I wondered if he knew about this—about us—all along.

"Against the club? Against me?"

"It doesn't have to be against you. I'm still loyal to you," Roman answered carefully.

"Yeah? Have you decided what you're going to do with the flash drive?" Dominic asked.

Roman stiffened beside me. He didn't say anything for a moment, and his hold on me was getting tight, enough that it was starting to hurt.

I didn't say anything. I didn't dare to make a sound.

I was so afraid of something happening to him, or me, that all I could do was stand there and try to follow along with their conversation.

What flash drive? What decision did he have to make?

"I'll do whatever you want me to do with it."

"I asked *you* to make a decision."

Roman nodded. "And I will. But leave her out of this. She has nothing to do with that or what's going on here."

"Nothing to do with this? She's the reason you were sent to prison. Her bastard father was the one who handed down the

verdict. She's as directly involved in this as any of them."

"She's not like them," Roman said sharply.

Dominic's eyes moved to me. "Then what is she doing here? How does she even know about this?"

Roman grew taunt and silent at that. He didn't know why I was here, and I almost forgot the reason I came in the first place.

He glanced sideways at me, his brows lowered, showing his confusion.

He probably thought I tracked him here by his phone, and I had thought of that, but the service sucked in this part of the city.

"Baby, what are you doing here?" Roman asked.

I sagged against him. Even when he didn't know the reason, he didn't think the worst of me.

I looked at him, then at Dominic, and licked my dry lips before I spoke.

"It's a trap," I said.

Dominic's eyes widened, and he pulled out his gun.

Roman pushed me behind him and faced the man.

Micah was watching this whole scene quietly, his body poised for attack. The thing was, I didn't know who he was getting ready to attack. His president or his brother.

"What do you mean it's a trap, girl?" Dominic asked me.

I balled my fists around Roman's shirt. I always thought being with Roman was the biggest betrayal to my dad.

It turned out, denying him the chance to put these men away would be.

"My dad knows about the drop-off. I-I don't know how. I heard him talking about it today."

Dominic's eyes narrowed on me. "And you decided to come here, and what? Warn us?"

I opened my mouth to answer that was exactly what I was doing when he held out his hand to stop me.

“Be really sure about how you want to answer that,” he said softly. “Once you decide to be in this with Roman—with the club—you’re fucking in. There will be no other way. You will be loyal to the club and not to your dad. Got me?”

Tears burned my eyes.

I already knew that driving here.

I still drove here anyway.

I looked up at Roman to find his soft brown eyes on me. I didn’t look away from him when I answered, “There’s no other choice.”

ROMAN

EVERYTHING HAPPENED PRETTY QUICKLY AFTER THAT.

Ryleigh handed over the phone number that had been used to text her dad and the fucking Mayor about this to us. I was sure Dominic would want Kai to look it over, but I wouldn't be surprised if the number belonged to a fucking burner phone.

This drop would have been fucking huge. It was one of the few times we were distributing goods overseas, and somehow those fucking bastards found out about this?

We already suspected a rat in the ranks. This just fucking confirmed it. Only, I had no fucking clue who it might be or how they even got pledged in the first place.

Dominic, Micah, and I parked a fair distance from the port.

We stood in front of Dominic's car, a humongous SUV that fit the man well.

We didn't take our bikes since that would have drawn too much attention.

Fuck all that would have done for us.

Ryleigh sat in her car, parked next to us, with a sort of desolated look in her eyes that I wanted to fucking kill to take away.

This wasn't something I could kill to resolve.

My fists clenched at my sides, and we watched men in uniform move through the port.

They wouldn't find a fucking thing.

We made sure of that.

Beside me, Dominic laughed in disbelief. I was sure there was a part of him that didn't believe Ryleigh had been telling the truth.

This proved she was.

As much as I hated her pain over betraying her father, I was so fucking proud.

She was fucking mine.

I owned every aspect of this tiny girl, including her loyalty.

And this shit just made it easier for Dominic to see things from my side.

Dominic turned to me, his eyes glimmering.

"I could fucking kill you for keeping this from me," he said.

"You could," I agreed. "But you're not gonna. Where else would you find such a kickass VP."

He grinned. "You're fucking lucky I'm in a good mood. Don't want to have to mess up your pretty face and scare the girl."

"You think I'm pretty?"

He thumped me on the back. "What happened to *taking care* of her?"

"I *am*," I said, knowing that wasn't what he meant. But it was the only way it would be.

"I'd much rather not talk about my brother's sex life, if you don't mind," Micah said, speaking up for the first time.

I turned to him. He had been on my side since the start, yet I still didn't know how accepting he was of my relationship with Ryleigh. Even now.

"Are we good?" I asked them.

Micah nodded, and Dominic patted me on the back once more before turning to Ryleigh.

“You should take her home. We’ll talk later. And you can bring her to celebrate Kai’s initiation.”

I nodded, grateful for the invitation.

This was Dominic’s way of saying he accepted Ryleigh, the judge’s daughter and all.

I walked back to her car and opened the driver’s side.

She jumped and looked at me with wide, fearful eyes.

For a moment, I thought she was scared of me. Fuck, but didn’t she know I would have cut off my own arms before I’d ever hurt her with them?

But then her eyes cleared, and her shoulders relaxed.

I cupped her cheek and waited until she met my eyes.

“Let me drive us home, baby,” I said softly, so as not to scare her even more. She looked dead on her feet.

She opened her mouth, to say what, I didn’t know, before she shut it and nodded.

I helped her climb out and led her to the passenger side door.

It seemed she was moments away from collapsing.

Fuck, her adrenaline must be coming down, and I didn’t know how she would be once that happened.

I could feel Dominic and Micah watching us, but they didn’t say anything. I opened the door for her and helped her in, bending down and buckling her up.

“I can do that,” she said softly.

“I know,” I replied. “Just let me take care of you. I need this.”

She looked at me with wide eyes. “You need this?”

I nodded, cupping her cheeks. Fuck, but I could still feel the panic—the fucking *fear* from seeing Travis’ hands on her. The fucker was lucky I didn’t break ‘em for touching what was mine.

My free hand clenched into a fist at my side. She looked at it for a beat, then nodded.

“I need you to take care of me,” she said softly.

I leaned over and kissed her, though I didn't prolong the kiss, considering the audience watching us just several feet away.

Fuckers.

Didn't they have something better to do?

And the way she tried to follow my lips with her own, as if this wasn't enough...

Fuck.

“Let's get you home.”

“My dad—”

“Will be fine tonight. Maybe a little pissed,” I interrupted. I didn't smile as I said it. As much as I fucking hated the judge, I didn't revel in her hurt.

She blinked, then nodded.

I quickly moved over to the driver's side and got in. Taking one last look at my brothers, I drove off.

Ryleigh was quiet on the drive home.

She faced the window, and I would have thought she had fallen asleep if the lights outside had not caught her reflection, showing me she was wide awake.

We didn't move when I finally pulled into the parking lot.

I shut off the engine, and we stayed in the car for a moment. Safe in our own little bubble.

Then, “Roman?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Do you think we'll ever get to go back to the cabin again?”

She missed it. That had been the place I took her to when I decided to drug her and abduct her. But she missed it, and she

probably felt safe there.

I knew the feeling.

Everything had been so easy.

“Yeah. When things settle down a bit, I’ll take you there, and we can stay for as long as you want.”

“Promise?” she whispered.

“Promise.”

I’d give her the world if she asked for it.

Getting out of the car, I quickly walked over to her side and opened the door.

She already had her belt unbuckled. She climbed out, and without another word, I scooped her up into my arms. She automatically wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

“I can walk,” she half-heartedly protested.

I squeezed her to me. “Remember. I’m taking care of you tonight.”

A small sigh escaped, and she snuggled in closer to me.

The lobby wasn’t as busy, but we did run into a few people.

I didn’t give a fuck.

We hopped on the elevator, and I looked at our reflection on the doors, her wrapped up so tightly around me.

We looked good like this, and I saw my first genuine smile of the night.

The bell dinged, announcing our arrival on her floor, and I got off, moving straight to her apartment.

I was serious when I said I was moving in with her. She was mine, and I didn’t plan on spending a single night apart from her if I could help it.

Moving in would be the practical choice.

I used my own key to unlock the door and walked in through the dark apartment.

I bypassed everything and headed straight to the bathroom, setting her down on the counter. She sat there and watched me as I turned on the shower, letting it warm up before making my way back to her.

“Let’s wash the day off, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I’d like that.”

“Good.”

I took off my clothes first, loving the way her heated eyes took me in. I would never get tired of the way she looked at me.

I ran my hand down from my abs to my cock, giving myself a few strokes, and she licked her lips.

I smirked and stepped up closer to her.

I reached for the hem of her shirt, tugging it and lifting it off her.

She shivered slightly as I took in her creamy, pale skin against a lacy, baby-pink bra.

She looked both innocent and fuckable.

I pressed my thumb against her nipple through the bra, and her mouth gaped open, but nothing came out.

“Fucking perfect,” I said, leaning forward, tugging the cups down until her tits sprang free and pulled one dusky pink nipple into my mouth. I suckled on it, and she moved toward my touch, groaning.

“Roman.”

I rolled the hardened nub between my teeth, tugging on it slightly and eliciting another sound from her.

Her hands came up to my head, her fingers shifting through the short strands, tugging on them every time I sucked more of her into my mouth.

Finally, I let go of her with a pop and pulled her down from the counter.

She looked up at me with trust in her eyes.

Trust that I knew I would do every unimaginable thing possible to keep.

I tugged on her leggings and panties until they pooled around her ankles, snaked my arms around her waist, and hauled her in close, carrying her inside the tub.

She watched me as I grabbed the shampoo and squirted it on her hair.

Her hands reached out to massage it, but I stopped her, pulling her wrists away.

“Let me,” I said, my voice thick with emotion.

After scaring half a lifetime out of me tonight, I was going to need to keep her close to even feel remotely sane again.

She seemed to sense that I needed this, because she nodded, letting her arms fall down to her sides.

I cleaned her up carefully before quickly cleaning myself, my touch reverent on her skin and hasty on my own.

For the first time, there wasn't really anything sexual about the way I touched her.

But there was intimacy. There was safety.

My hands were steady, strong, and sure.

And she seemed to really need this as much as I did.

Once I was done, she leaned against me, giving me her body weight. That was all right.

More than that.

I was a big man.

I'd carry all of her weight if she let me.

We moved to the bedroom after I towel-dried us, and I pushed her down on the bed, her legs hanging over the edge.

Then I proceeded to run her favorite lotion all over her body.

Some sweet-smelling floral concoction that always made me want to fall into her touch. She watched me the whole time.

We didn't talk.

There was no need.

She said all she needed to say back at the port.

There was still the shit with the flash drive I was keeping from her, but tonight, I just wanted to enjoy having her in my arms and under my care.

We went to bed naked, and I held her close in my arms the entire night and well into the morning.

AFTER THE SHIT that went down at the port, we laid low for the next couple of days, waiting to see how the judge and the mayor would react to their failure.

They didn't disappoint.

The mayor had personally come into one of our clubs a few days after the failed bust. He seemed to know where we were all hanging out, so I was sure some bastard was out there keeping watch on all of us.

I had to be careful, or they might see Ryleigh and report back to her father before everything was resolved.

Dominic was in one of his happier moods, despite the failure of the drop. We both knew things would have been a lot worse had they caught us.

We would all be donning orange jumpsuits now.

And Kai's initiation was coming up, which was what we were discussing when the mayor stopped in for his *friendly* visit.

So friendly, he brought along two extra friends in uniform.

Dominic looked up and waved at the mayor.

None of us bothered to stand to greet them, which Mayor Gallagher seemed to take as a personal slight.

“What can we do for you gentlemen?” I asked when they got closer to our table, taking in the man’s short stature and average looks.

That was the only way to describe him.

Average looks, average height, just... average.

With shit-brown hair he brushed to the side and brown eyes against tanned skin, he could have just been any other man off the street.

The man just had one of those forgettable faces.

Unfortunately for him, his face had made its way into my memory.

I would have recognized the fucker even if someone had taken a bat to his face.

I smiled a little over the thought.

“Nothing. We’re just here for a nice visit,” one of the bastard’s officers answered.

I barely glanced at them.

“Nice? Then perhaps you should leave and come back when we’re not closed. We open at six o’clock on the dot. In case you didn’t know,” I said.

The other one frowned. “Oh, we know.”

I didn’t say anything else. Just looked them over.

Gallagher stepped up closer to our table, drawing Micah’s attention.

The slippery little fucker pulled up short.

He might think he ruled this city, might think he was a powerful man in his own right—and perhaps he was—but in

the order of the food chain, he was nowhere near the top. He could sense a predator when one looked him in the eye.

“Stop playing games, Madden,” he said, his voice low. “I know you and your men were at the port two nights ago.”

Dominic laughed, turning to me. “We were? How come I didn’t know about that?”

I smirked. “Nah. He’s tripping. I remember hanging out at your house, playing a friendly game of poker. I didn’t realize that was such a crime that it would invite a personal visit from our mayor. Did you?”

I directed the question at Micah, who hadn’t looked away from the bastard once since he arrived at our table.

“Pretty sure it isn’t. So why did he bring protection with him?”

Gallagher shook his head. “I don’t know who fucking tipped you off, but you got lucky. That won’t happen a second time.”

“Is that a threat, Mayor?” Dominic asked.

He shook his head. “No, it’s a promise. It’s my job to get rid of all the scumbags that litter my city, and I promise you, I won’t rest until I do.”

I’d had about enough of this. I might have been able to tolerate his little speech if he truly was doing everything he could for the good of the city. But we both knew that wasn’t the case.

The bastard just wanted to rule this city for himself.

I stood up and stepped closer to him. His eyes widened, and he moved back a step.

“Is there a reason for your visit?” I asked.

“No reason at all.”

I shook my head. “And I’m guessing you don’t have a warrant, considering none of us have broken the law. So there really isn’t a reason for you to come down or bring those

friends with you, is there? If you would like to visit our club tonight, I'll make sure you're taken care of personally."

His eyes flared a little at that. "If you think I would ever need that kind of service—"

"Perhaps not. I'm sure it's just your wife who needs it. It's gotta be frustrating being married to you."

The fucker didn't look like someone who would know where to find a woman's clit even if there was a fucking arrow pointing to it.

He sputtered, his face red, but he didn't say anything.

I pointed at the doors. "You can leave the same way you came in. You don't need me to show you out, do you?"

I took a small step forward, and he backed away until he bumped into one of the officers. They held him steady, and he roughly pulled away.

"This isn't over."

With that, he and his two monkeys walked out the door.

Dominic burst out laughing. "If the bastard had ended that by laughing maniacally, I wouldn't be surprised."

I shook my head and sat back down.

Dominic could joke all he wanted, but we both knew this wasn't over. Not until they either got what they wanted, ended up in prison, or fucking died.

I would much prefer the latter two to the first one.

And preferably without Ryleigh hurt in any possible way.

"HOW DO I LOOK?" Ryleigh asked me, coming out of the bedroom dressed in casual jeans that molded her legs to perfection, a tight-fitted gray long-sleeve shirt, and black boots.

There was nothing special about her outfit.

But on her, it looked almost indecent.

I licked my lips as I took in her curled, long black hair and artfully applied makeup.

“Good enough to eat,” I growled out.

She blushed and looked away, smiling a bit.

Things hadn't been all that great for her since the night at the port. I knew she felt guilty about betraying her dad, but I hadn't found a way to tell her about all the shit he had been up to with his friends.

So all I could do was be there for her.

Things seemed to be better today, and I thought I'd seen a real smile cross over her face, even though I knew she was nervous about coming out with me tonight.

I was taking her with me to the bar, where we would celebrate Kai becoming an official member of the King's Men.

We all knew that kid was training to take over for Dominic one of these days, and fuck, but he definitely earned it.

Kai and Ryleigh didn't interact much in school, from what I'd seen during my stalker days and from talks with Kai.

They were aware of each other, so it would be interesting to see how they'd get along.

She looked back at me, biting on her bottom lip. If she abused the poor flesh anymore, she would spend the rest of the night looking like she'd been kissed all day.

Not such a bad idea.

It would tell all the other bastards out there that she belonged to me.

I crooked my finger at her.

Her eyes narrowed, and I held in a grin, waiting.

After a moment of hesitation, she slowly walked over to me.

She stopped when she was about two feet away.

I moved before she could really react and grabbed her around the waist, hauling her back into my hips.

She let out the most adorable little squeak.

Fuck me, but how the hell was I supposed to keep her away from all the other bastards?

They'd take one look at her and would want to get in closer to her light and warmth.

I scowled just thinking about it, and she shot me an amused look, tinged with a hint of bemusement.

“Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?” I asked, my voice gruff.

She laughed. “Like you want to kill someone.”

Fuck, but I did want to kill someone.

I didn't say that, though. I pulled her down and nipped at her lip.

“You're mine, got it?”

“Yes, I already know.”

“Good, so you'll come to me if any bastards at the bar dare to touch you.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to try, considering how you look right now.”

“Good. That's the fucking idea. But there are still a lot of stupid fuckers out there who don't know how to keep their hands to themselves. They talk to you, touch you, or make you uncomfortable in any way, you tell me, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got you,” she answered lightly.

I frowned at her. “Why do I get the feeling you're not taking this seriously?”

She answered me with a chuckle.

Little brat.

RYLEIGH

I RAN MY SWEATY HANDS DOWN THE SIDE OF MY JEANS AS Roman pulled up outside the same bar I had tracked him to not too long ago.

It was the same scene.

Same crowded place.

Same loud, upbeat music.

Same drunk people, loitering around the front, making me wonder how they would get home tonight.

As if my sense of Déjà vu wasn't strong enough, the doors burst open just as Roman put his truck in park, and three people walked out, one woman and two men.

The woman wrapped her arms around both men, and from the looks of it, she was whispering something flirtatious—*naughty*—to one of the men.

Roman watched me watch them, and I could feel my cheeks flaming from the intensity of it.

When I turned to him, there was a slight smirk on his lips.

“Fuck, do you know what it does to me when you look so innocent?”

My eyes moved down to his crotch area, finding him tenting against his jeans.

“I have a pretty good idea,” I muttered, making him laugh.

He tapped my nose, uttered a quiet, “Stay,” before he got out of the truck and moved to my side.

I had already unbuckled my seatbelt by the time he opened it, and he reached in for me, pulling me out of the truck and into his arms.

I didn’t bother protesting.

It was in his nature to want to move me, or place me, or carry me around.

Weird man that he was.

The light outside the bar was enough that I could make out each of his features, and I focused my eyes on his lips to keep myself grounded.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said, as if it was that easy. I shot him a look, and he added, “I’ll be with you the whole time. And remember, if any of those fuckers—”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it. If they touch me, I’ll tell you. You know, it might be easier if I just tattoo your name across my forehead. That way, there would be no mistake that I came here with you.”

He smacked my ass for that remark. I glared up at him.

“Don’t tempt me,” he said roughly, and it was one of those times when I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

I eyed him carefully, and it wasn’t until he grinned at me that I could feel myself relaxing.

I didn’t think he would tattoo his name onto my forehead, but the man was unpredictable enough that I wouldn’t put it past him to drug me and tattoo his name somewhere on my body. And I might have just given him that idea.

I shivered and wiggled out of his arms before walking away from him.

He laughed, and I knew it wouldn’t take him long to catch up to me, though I probably made it easier for him when I pulled to a stop before I reached the front door.

Micah was standing there watching us, his silver eyes expressionless, as usual.

And I thought Roman was good at hiding his feelings.

I felt my gut tighten in fear.

No matter what anyone said, I didn't think there would ever be a time when Micah didn't scare me.

His eyes took me in, up and down, and I resisted the urge to squirm as a slight chill ran down my spine.

Roman took in his brother watching me, and he grabbed my hand, squeezing it in comfort.

I moved in a little closer to him.

"Hey," Roman said to Micah. "You didn't have to come out and greet us. I know you probably miss me and all that shit, but seriously man, this obsession is really getting out of control."

I looked at Roman with wide eyes. What about the way Micah looked that told Roman he would be cool with him joking like this?

I held my breath as Micah watched us for a beat, just before he shook his head and rolled his eyes.

I blinked.

Wow.

He *almost* looked human.

"Your head's getting big. I don't know how the girl puts up with you."

Wait.

Did he just call me *the girl*? I was sure he knew my name, but did he not want to say or acknowledge it?

Was there something wrong with me that I found the nickname to be strangely sweet, even if it wasn't really a nickname, and there wasn't anything sweet about it?

Roman pulled me closer in his arms. "She puts up with me just fine, don't you, baby?"

“Yeah,” I muttered softly, looking down at the ground.

“Timid little thing, ain’t she?” Micah asked, making me look back up at him. I frowned. I wasn’t timid, but I was sure Micah had the talent to make anyone behave that way.

His lips twitched, and he looked like he was about to smile, but then I blinked, and his expression returned to neutral.

Whoa.

Was he... joking with me?

I didn’t know, and I didn’t really know what to do.

“I’m not timid,” I said.

No one said anything for a moment, then Roman threw his head back and laughed, and Micah smiled—a small one, but I was kind of surprised his face didn’t crack from the unnatural shift of movement.

I had to admit, he was handsome when he smiled.

Micah was a handsome man.

He looked almost like Roman, save for his eyes and cold mannerism.

“Come on. Let’s go in. Dominic is probably wondering where you are, and I know he’s pretty excited to talk to the judge’s daughter.”

My eyes widened at that. “I don’t know anything about my dad’s business. Why would he want to talk to me?”

Micah raised one eyebrow up in question, but it was Roman who answered me. “Baby, I’m sure Dominic just wants to talk to you about you, not your dad.”

“Oh.”

Somehow, that seemed worse.

Micah turned around and went back inside the bar. Roman led me along behind him.

I almost dug my heels in.

The nervousness from the car never went away, but it had quieted down a little for a moment.

It was back in full force, and I didn't know what to do. These people weren't my people.

I didn't know how to interact with them, and worse, I was afraid I might do something or say something to embarrass Roman.

They already judged me for who my dad was. I knew it.

I could feel it in their stares as a group of people parted for Roman to walk by, as if they were the Red Sea and he was Moses.

We came to a table in the back, and I saw a crowd of men nearby. I only recognized two in the middle. Dominic and Kai.

They noticed us right away, and Dominic said something to the men nearby that had them dispersing within seconds.

Roman walked right up to the table, pulled out a seat for me, pushed me down on it, and took one close by, his arm coming up over the back of my chair.

Micah came to the table then, a tray of beer bottles in his hands, each topped off with a slice of lime.

I swallowed.

I wasn't exactly a drinker.

Did they want to drink with me? Or worse, get me drunk so that I wouldn't be so close-guarded and spill all of my dad's secrets?

I was telling the truth when I said I didn't know anything.

I tried not to show any interest in his work, to make sure he wouldn't get the idea I was interested in following in his footsteps.

Dominic waited until the bottles were passed around to everyone—even one was placed in front of me—before he clapped Kai on the back and smiled at him in a way my dad had never smiled at me.

My breath caught as I watched the scene, and I could feel Roman watching me carefully.

“My boy,” Dominic said. He squeezed the lime into the beer before folding it in half and shoving it down. Next, he pressed his thumb on the mouth of the bottle and tipped the beer upside down.

I watched the action, sure I would have to mimic it in a moment.

Kai caught my eyes then, and he smiled at me.

For the first time, he didn't look at me with disdain.

He also didn't look at me with indifference as he had done before the alley incident, as I now referred it to, either.

He looked friendly.

Distant, but that was okay.

I offered a small smile back as Dominic held up his beer.

“To my boy,” he shouted loudly in the bar, enough that everyone heard him, even through the loud music.

They all raised their glasses, and I quickly copied what Dominic had done to his beer before I took a small sip.

Roman moved in closer to me until his lips touched my ear, taking my earlobe between his teeth.

A quick look at his crotch told me he was hard again. Or perhaps he never lost the erection to begin with.

I turned to him, surprised. “When are you not hard?” I whispered to make sure no one could hear us.

He laughed out loud before boisterously responding, “When I'm dead.”

I could feel Dominic watching us curiously.

I turned to him and braced myself for the effect his blue eyes would have on me, and sure enough, I could feel my heart gallop as soon as our eyes met, especially when his eyes started to take on a mischievous glint.

“Tell me, what do you do? Would you like to rebel against your dad and come work for me? I could really use someone with your... ah, bravery.”

I was sure he was referring to my stunt at the port.

I looked at him for a beat.

I was still coming to terms with the fact that I had betrayed my own father for the man I loved, and Dominic was joking about it like it was no big deal.

But even though I didn't know much about club life, I knew loyalty was valued above all else. He was joking, but he wasn't.

He wanted to ensure my loyalty stayed firmly with the King's Men. But my loyalty didn't reside with them. It went to the man sitting beside me, who was playing with the skin on the back of my neck, distracting me.

I smiled a little. “You mean my stalker didn't tell you what I do?”

No one said anything for about half a second, then Kai laughed, easing the tension away.

“Nah. He was keeping you a secret, girl. I hadn't looked at you closely enough, but I think I should have. I can see why he was so secretive.”

It was probably because he was supposed to kill me, but he didn't.

Not that I would bring that up.

Roman tightened his arms around me. “Keep your dirty paws and mind away from my girl, old man.”

“Old?” Dominic asked. “I'm only five years older than you.”

I tried not to show my surprise. He was only thirty-seven? I knew he looked young, but I didn't realize he actually was.

I was sure Kai was around my age.

A quick math in my head told me Dominic probably had Kai at fourteen or fifteen.

Kai met my eyes, smirking a little.

“I think I heard your old bones cracking the other day, getting on your bike,” Roman joked.

“Don’t worry, old or not, I can still kick your ass to remind you who’s in charge.”

At this point, I didn’t know if they were still joking.

I decided not to worry about it, considering I knew Roman could take care of himself.

“They’re always like this,” Kai said to me.

I nodded.

“Congratulations, by the way,” I said. I hadn’t forgotten the reason for the party in the first place.

He offered me an arrogant smile, making him look so much like his dad, I had to look away for a second.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked.

He cocked his head to the side.

“Why did you go to college if you knew you were going to end up, uh, *working* for your dad?”

“Because my boy is damn brilliant,” Dominic interrupted, having heard our conversation. I looked over at him, and he added, “And I wouldn’t let him pledge until after he graduated. He needed to decide what he wanted to do with his life, and he needed to be sure, because once you’re in, you’re fucking in for life. There’s no leaving.”

I nodded, looking down at the table.

I hadn’t realized Dominic wanted to give Kai a choice with his life.

For the second time that night, I found myself comparing Dominic and Kai’s relationship to my parents and mine, and once again, I found my parents lacking.

What did it say, then, about my dad's hatred for the King's Men MC? He always told me they were the ones in the wrong, but I was beginning to think... I didn't much agree with him.

I WAS DRUNK.

Happy drunk.

Roman was off somewhere with his brother and Dominic, though I knew he was close by.

Close enough that he could keep an eye on me.

As for me, I was sitting at the bar top with Kai, who I got along with surprisingly well.

He was a little abrasive, a little angry, and a little defensive, but he was genuine, and drunk me found him pretty funny too.

Kai laughed when he took in my flushed cheeks.

"Ah, man, Roman's gonna have his hands full with you tonight, huh?"

"Full of me," I said, wiggling my eyebrows so he knew exactly what I meant.

He shook his head, watching me with amused eyes.

"I can have myself full of you, if you're up to it?" an unfamiliar voice said next to me. I gasped and turned around, finding a man with dark blond hair, blonde scruff, and blue eyes staring intently at me.

I moved closer to Kai, who wrapped his arm around me protectively.

"Fuck off, Trent. You're barking up on Roman's territory, and I won't feel sorry for you when he beats the shit out of you."

Trent scowled at Kai. I moved in a little closer to my new friend, and further away from Trent and the dark look he was

sporting.

“You talk like she’s his property. I’m sure she can speak for herself.”

Trent turned his expression back to me, with a smile on his face that I’m sure he thought was charming. I just found it creepy. He was nowhere in the same league as Roman, and he was only a little taller than me, which meant he wasn’t all that tall.

Kai was right.

Roman would beat the shit out of him easily.

“I’m with Roman,” I said.

“Why would you be with that fucking shithead, who’s got more brawn than brains, when you could be with me?”

I frowned, not liking that insulted Roman, who was fucking smart as hell. I made a move forward, anger licking up my insides when Kai tightened his arms around me and held me back.

Kai’s chest shook when he let out a sardonic laugh. “That’s fucking funny, coming from you. Hate to break it to you, but you ain’t got brawn or brains. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be insulting Roman behind his back. Bet you wouldn’t say half that shit to his face.”

Trent scowled at Kai. “Shut up. You think you’re better than everyone here because of your daddy. Hate to break it to you, nepo-baby, but you wouldn’t be shit if you had been born without the Madden last name.”

Kai laughed. “This coming from you? Aren’t you only here because your old man’s the old VP, and you got a hard-on for the position long before you even got your first boner?”

I blushed slightly from the crude words but didn’t say anything. I didn’t think I wanted to draw any more attention to myself.

“I earned my spot,” Kai said arrogantly, and from what little Roman had told me, I knew that was true. I didn’t know

the extent of what he'd done to get in, but I knew both Roman and Dominic were proud of him.

"The same can't be said about you," Kai continued. "So why don't you do everyone a favor and fuck off."

Trent shot a scathing look my way. "Whatever. The slut ain't worth it. I'll just wait until Roman gets tired of using the same pussy all the time. Then she'll be begging for my dick."

Kai tightened his arm around me, and even if I couldn't see his face, I could feel the anger emanating out of him. He stood up and pushed me behind him, but not before I caught sight of Trent's wide eyes.

Now that they were both standing, it was easy to see just how small Trent was compared to most of the people here, but especially Kai, who looked like a mammoth right then.

Trent swallowed noticeably and backed away.

It looked like Kai was going to give chase, but I grabbed hold of his shirt.

He turned and looked at me with a frown.

"It's not worth it," I said. I still had a little bit of the buzz from the beer, but not enough to see what a bad idea it would be for Kai to start a fight for me.

He opened his mouth, looking like he was about to argue, and I shook my head.

Finally, he let out a small sigh and sat back down on the chair.

I sat down, too. "What was that?"

There was no way Trent wanted me so bad that he'd risk bodily injury to make it happen.

Kai took a sip of his beer. I did the same thing.

"He's been gunning for the VP position long before Roman joined the club, and is still stiff that it didn't automatically go to him."

“Because his dad was the former VP?” I asked, thinking back to their conversation.

Kai nodded.

I wrinkled my nose. “He would have made a terrible one.”

He looked at me for a beat before he threw his head back and laughed.

I relaxed back in my chair and took another drink, getting back that nice little buzz, only now, it was more like a noticeable hum in the back of my head.

“You know something, Kai?”

“What?”

“You’re not too bad,” I said, taking a sip of my beer.

He chuckled. “Ah, thanks. You’re not too bad either, Ryleigh.”

I sniffed. “That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

He looked at me, frowning a bit. “I hope that’s not true.”

I shrugged. “Roman says nice things about me all the time, but he’s also, like, horny ninety percent of those times, so you know... I don’t remember what we were talking about.”

My voice trailed off as I tried to think back to why I brought up Roman’s horniness.

Kai groaned. “Ah, I don’t really want to hear about that, Ryleigh.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” he said dryly.

“Well, that’s a shame. It’s a great topic.”

He laughed. “I dare you to bring that up in front of Micah.”

I frowned at that. “Nah, he’s too scary.”

He shook his head, his eyes twinkling. Kai had nice eyes. I could see why so many of the girls on campus had a crush on

him.

I reached over and poked his cheek.

He pulled back in surprise.

“Ryleigh, why are you poking Kai?” Roman asked, seeming to have come out of thin air.

I didn’t care. I smiled wide at him and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him in closer to me.

I was surprised he didn’t come over when Trent was here, but it seemed he didn’t know about that, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him.

I didn’t want to ruin the mood.

He laughed and held me off. “Are you having fun?”

I smiled brightly at him. “I am.”

And I was telling the truth. This was much better than I expected, considering how nervous I had been on the ride over.

I didn’t think Dominic and Micah would ever be close to me, but Kai was a good prospect to be my friend.

That had been what I wanted for the longest time.

To just have one good friend.

He chuckled and tweaked my nose. “Can I take you home now?”

He ground his hips slightly against me, letting me feel his hard-on.

Oh, God.

I turned to Kai, feeling a little breathless.

“Told ya,” I said.

It took Kai a moment to figure out what I meant, and he let out a groan in response.

I giggled.

“What am I missing?” Roman asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Kai muttered.

He patted me on the top of my head affectionately before he walked away.

I turned my attention back to Roman. “Take me home and fuck me.”

His eyes turned heated. “Fuck, yeah.”

And that was about all I remembered from the night.

RYLEIGH

I WOKE UP WITH A SMALL GROAN.

My eyelids felt like they were glued shut, my mouth felt full of cotton, and my body ached.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and found warm, brown ones on me.

I leaned back in surprise and winced at the headache that hit me from the sudden movement.

“Good morning,” Roman chirped.

I scowled at him. “Stop being so happy this morning.”

He laughed, and it felt like a box of nails was being dropped on my head.

“And stop laughing,” I croaked out.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Like shit. I am never drinking again.”

“Baby, I had no idea how low your alcohol tolerance was. You passed out as soon as I got you back into my car.”

I looked down. “Then why am I naked?”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but I noticed it now. There wasn’t a stitch of clothing on me.

He laughed and placed his hand flat on my stomach, rubbing it slightly.

Ah, fuck.

If I had the energy, I would mewl over the move. It felt so good.

I wanted to lap up his touch like a little kitten.

“It was my reward for carrying you up to the apartment building,” he said.

“So we didn’t have sex?”

One eyebrow rose, and I found myself blushing.

He moved his hand down until his fingers brushed up against my clit.

I sucked in a sharp breath. I should not be turned on, especially with how badly I had felt waking up this morning.

“Nah. I’m not really into fucking you if I can’t see your eyes watching me, filled with ecstasy.” His smile turned devilish. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t cop a feel.”

He cupped my pussy then, and I felt my chest heaving from the sensation. His fingers teased my clit, and my toes curled. I bit my lip, trying hard not to make any sound. “You belong to me. Your body is mine. If I want to touch you, I will. Is that a problem?”

He rubbed my clit harder.

My back arched slightly, and I shook my head.

I was wet, and I didn’t know if it was from him touching me now, or if he had done it when I was asleep. I didn’t know why that turned me on, but it did, knowing he owned every inch of my body—just as much as I owned him.

My hand moved down his body, taking in the hard feel of his abs.

This was mine.

Mine and mine alone.

He watched me with dark eyes as I slipped my hand inside his boxer briefs.

The headache I had woken up with seemed to have disappeared, or at the very least, forgotten over this familiar

feeling of need.

I needed him.

I craved him.

I pulled out his cock and wrapped my hand around his length.

We didn't look away from each other when I began to stroke him.

"Fuck," he gritted out between clenched teeth. "That feels so fucking good."

I licked my lips. "Roman?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to taste you."

His eyes rolled back, and I didn't know if it was from my words or the fact that I had my thumb rubbing over the tip, taking in some of the pre-cum.

"Fuck, baby. Are you sure?"

"Positive," I groaned.

He always ate me out as if he couldn't get enough of me, but he never once asked me to return the favor. I really wanted him in my mouth. I really wanted him to fuck me like that.

He sat up suddenly, and I blinked up at him as he climbed out of the bed and pulled the sheets away from me, exposing my naked body to his gaze.

His dark eyes took me in with an expression I knew well.

I felt a shiver of fear and a whole slew of excitement from the look alone.

He pulled me up until I was kneeling on the bed. He quickly shoved his boxer briefs down carelessly, and kicked them away before turning back to me.

Fuck, but he was a work of art.

His body was well sculpted with ropes upon ropes of muscle encased in colorful, inked skin that I couldn't get

enough of, even with all the hair covering it.

I didn't think I had ever been with anyone who had so much body hair, and that was probably because any boy I had been with before Roman had been just that—a *boy*.

There was Rhett, my high school boyfriend, and there were some dates in college that never went beyond a bit of rubbing over the clothes.

Roman was all man, and he was all mine.

“I own you, don't I?” I asked.

He growled, the sound both possessive and animalistic.

“Every fucking inch,” he said, moving closer to me.

I smiled slightly at that and let my eyes trail down his body again.

His cock jutted between us, angry looking. I licked my lips at the sight.

He groaned and pulled on my hair roughly.

“Wait,” I called out. I reached over to my bedside table and grabbed a breath mint I had put in the drawer last week. Roman liked to wake me up with sex, and most of the time, he didn't let me brush my teeth until after.

I was not going to kiss him with hangover breath.

He watched me with some amusement as I popped it into my mouth.

His eyes caught something else in the drawer. They narrowed as he reached for it, holding it out in front of him.

“Baby? What's this?”

“My birth control,” I said, daring him to say anything about it.

He hadn't worn a condom since the first time, and just because he wasn't concerned about a baby didn't mean I wasn't.

I had gone to the doctor to get on the pill and did a pregnancy test while he was working one day. I wasn't

pregnant, thank God, and I didn't plan on getting pregnant anytime soon.

He rolled his eyes and dropped the pills back into the drawer.

I poked my tongue out at him, and he retaliated by gripping my nipple roughly between his fingers.

I groaned and grabbed his wrist, though I didn't pull him away.

He twisted the hardened nub, and I moved in closer to him, trying to lessen the pressure.

“You're going to be my good girl, isn't that right?”

He pulled his hand back and slapped the side of my breast a few times before he gripped them both between his huge hands.

I nodded, feeling like there was something lodged in my throat. “Yes, I'll be your good girl.”

“Fuck,” he said as if those words had the power to affect him. “You have fucking amazing tits, you know that? My mouth is watering just looking at 'em.”

I let out a small whimper at his words.

He cupped the undersides of my breasts and pushed them up like the world's finest buffet. I wanted him to devour me so badly. His dark eyes glinted, making more wetness gush out of me and coating the inside of my thighs. He leaned down and took one hard nipple in his mouth.

He looked up and met my eyes as he suckled it roughly before moving to the other one, giving it the same treatment.

My legs shook, and I worked hard to keep upright, but it was getting difficult.

Just the look in his eyes as he feasted on my boobs was doing weird things to my insides.

“Roman, please,” I begged.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take.

He nipped me before he let me go with a pop of his mouth. I looked down, and I could see how red my skin had gotten from his rough treatment.

He looked down, too, and groaned.

“I fucking love it when I mark you. Fucking love it when you wear my brand of ownership.”

I licked my lips but didn't say anything, especially when I caught the spark in his eyes. I wouldn't put it past him to think of some way to mark me more permanently, and I didn't know if the fluttering in my belly was because I loved the idea or if I was scared of it.

Perhaps both.

“Lie down on your back,” he said, his voice rough sounding. I did as he asked, and he helped position me, so my head rested on the edge of the bed. I looked up and could see his hard cock, right in my line of sight.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded.

My pussy wept from those words alone, and I took a deep breath before doing as he asked.

“Wider.”

“Oh, God.”

I spread myself wider. I couldn't even imagine the image I must make like this.

He looked down at me, blazing heat in his eyes as he grabbed his cock and gave himself a few hard strokes.

He walked closer to me until I couldn't see his face anymore. Instead, the only thing I could see was his monstrous cock. Saliva pooled in my mouth at the thought of what he would taste like, and I couldn't fucking wait.

“Open,” he said. I opened my mouth, and he fed me his cock. I hummed around him when I finally felt him around my tongue for the first time. My eyes closed, and I instinctively started sucking on it a few times.

He gripped my hair as a string of curse words left his lips.

Oh, fuck.

I didn't think there could be anything that felt better than him fucking my pussy, but his reaction...

I squirmed on the bed.

To know that I had the power to make him feel like this.

My chest heaved, and I sucked harder, running my tongue over his tip.

There was a very slight salty taste to him, but otherwise, he didn't really taste like anything. But fuck if I wasn't turned on.

He leaned over and cupped my pussy, massaging the lips and eliciting a moan from me, which I'm sure he felt.

"Fuck, do you know how good this feels?" he asked, quickening his hand movements.

If it were anywhere near half as good as it felt when he ate me out, then I would say it felt like something akin to heaven.

I hummed my response, and he squeezed my pussy.

"I'm gonna fuck your mouth," he gritted out. "Just lie there and let me."

I frown a bit in confusion.

Not do anything?

He smiled a little, and slapped my pussy a few times, which had me closing my legs.

He tsked. "Nuh-uh. Be my good girl and keep your legs open."

Ah, fuck.

I opened my legs, and he pulled away from me.

I let out a small whine in protest, which died almost instantly when he started to fuck my mouth with his cock.

Oh, fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

He thrust his hips, his cock moving in and out of me.

This really shouldn't do anything for me, but just knowing how much this was affecting him and I—

Fuck.

It was doing everything to me.

He pushed deeper inside me until I was gagging around the fat tip, my eyes rolling back, and I fisted the sheets beneath me.

The sound I made seemed to make him want to lose control even more, and I knew it wouldn't be long until he came.

My skin quivered, starting near my belly and spreading, and I wanted to rub my legs together so badly.

I wanted a way to relieve the pounding ache that was already starting against my pussy, but his words stopped me.

I must have a praise kink, because I wanted to be his good girl much more than I wanted to come.

He gripped my hair, drawing my attention back to him.

“Fair warning, I'm gonna come,” he gritted out between his teeth. “And I want you to swallow every single fucking drop.”

I hummed my consent, and I felt him swell. My eyes widened from the feeling before something wet hit my tongue.

He let out a shout and came inside my mouth. That slight salty taste was back, though not enough for me to really notice, and I swallowed.

My back arched as I took more of him in my mouth, some escaping from the side of my lips.

Not that he seemed to care.

When his movements finally slowed, I kept my mouth wrapped around his semi-soft cock and lazily sucked on it.

He pulled my hair roughly, and bent down so that I could see his face once more. I didn't know what he was thinking, but I fucking loved the expression he wore.

I whimpered when he pulled out of me, but I didn't really get a chance to voice my objection because he quickly flipped me around, and moved me back up to a kneeling position on the bed next to him, my back to his front.

His hand cupped my pussy, and he began to play with it mercilessly.

"Roman," I said, my legs wanting to give out. He pulled me back up by my pussy and kept up with his torture.

My hips rotated along with the rhythm he set, and it wasn't long before I was on the verge of falling over.

His fingers found my clit, and he swirled them around the swollen nub harshly.

I turned my head around and buried my face in his neck, biting onto the little bit of flesh there as I came, unable to hold on to even an ounce of control.

RYLEIGH

ROMAN WAS BACK AT WORK, AND EVERYTHING SEEMED TO have gone back to normal, though ever since the night at the port, there was something light about him.

Almost as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders now that he no longer had to keep me a secret from everyone.

I was still keeping him a secret from my family, though, and I knew there was no way I could ever introduce him to them now.

My parents hadn't contacted me since I left their house the night of the failed bust, and a part of me wondered if it was because Dad was still trying to deal with all that happened, from his disappointment at not being the one to put away the MC men to his failed informant.

I was sure he didn't know it was me who tipped them off, and I shuddered to think what would happen if he ever found out the truth.

We already had a rocky relationship as it was.

This would completely obliterate it.

I rubbed my chest at the thought.

Despite everything I thought about them, they were still my parents. It wasn't easy to just keep them out of my life.

I didn't want that, but giving up Roman was not an option.

I loved him, and I thought it might kill me if I lost him.

I couldn't spend the rest of my life living for my parents either.

I had to do it for myself, and I wanted to do it with Roman.

I blinked away the sting in my eyes and realized my iPad screen had turned dark. I didn't know how long I had sat there staring at the screen when I should have been working.

But my mind was in a fog, and I didn't think I could work, even if I tried.

My stomach chose that moment to grumble.

It was just as well that I was hungry. There was no way for me to get back to work.

I stood up and stretched my sore muscles before quickly grabbing my stuff and heading out the door.

I was suddenly craving a cheeseburger.

I left my apartment and turned to close the door when I paused, frowning.

A black Baccara rose was taped to the door.

I had thought the roses were from my parents, but that couldn't be the case now.

And if it wasn't them, then who could it be? I knew it wasn't Roman since he would have just brought it inside.

Also, he didn't know it was my favorite flower... did he?

With his stalking tendencies, I wouldn't really be surprised if that was the case, but something told me it wasn't from him.

A pinching sensation exploded on my fingertip when the thorn poked me, but it didn't make me bleed this time.

I had received these three times already: a bouquet on my birthday, one tapped on my door just like this a few weeks ago, and now this.

I pulled out my phone from my purse and dialed Dad. He picked up on the third ring.

"Ryleigh, what is it? I'm a little busy at work." He sounded tired, and I hated the sudden guilt that blossomed in

my chest.

I licked my lips. “Um, sorry. I won’t keep you then, but I was just wondering, did you... did you ever send black Baccara roses to my apartment?”

“Sweetie, what are you talking about?”

He didn’t send them.

My breath froze, and I could only think that he didn’t know what I was talking about.

I stuttered out a response to him that I didn’t remember the words to.

But it was enough to get him off the phone, I was sure, because when I blinked, I was holding onto my phone, the screen black from inactivity.

I swallowed down the bile that wanted to make its way up my throat as all the blood roared in my ears.

Not the first time, not the second time, and certainly not this time.

If he didn’t send them, and Roman didn’t, then who?

Something poked in the recess of my mind. Something I had long forgotten.

For some reason, I started to think back to my abduction at fourteen. I wasn’t picked up off the street.

No, I vaguely remember getting into the car... voluntarily.

And on the dashboard...

My breath hitched.

There was a black Baccara rose lying on the dashboard of the car. But who drove?

It would have to have been someone I knew, otherwise, I wouldn’t have gotten into the car with them, right?

I didn’t know anymore.

I shivered, and it might just be my imagination, but suddenly I felt eyes on me...

I turned around, and Angelica stood there with a sort of vacant look on her face.

I jumped.

“Jesus! Where did you come from?” I asked.

She blinked, and the vacant look disappeared. Frowning at me, she pointed to the elevator. She rolled her eyes, as if to say *duh*.

I narrowed my eyes on her. “What are you doing on this floor?”

“Visiting a friend,” she sneered. “We’re not all like you, a fucking loner freak.”

And then she proceeded to walk to Trinity’s door and knock on it. Moments later, Trinity opened it and greeted Angelica with open arms.

Fuck.

I was really losing it.

I turned away from them and threw the rose into the trash bin by the elevator. I climbed on, and when I turned around, I found Angelica’s eyes on me once more. She looked at the rose in the trash bin, as if she took personal offense that I would throw it away.

The elevator doors closed, cutting her from my view, and I leaned my back against the door.

I had to tell Roman about the roses.

I knew it then.

I also knew he was going to freak out that I didn’t tell him sooner.

Fuck.

I STOPPED by a nearby restaurant and ordered a cheeseburger to go, although I was no longer craving it.

I had completely lost my appetite, and as I sat down on one of the tables, waiting for my food to finish cooking, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I turned and looked around, trying not to make it obvious, when my eyes connected with familiar green ones.

I blinked.

Then a small smile overtook my face as Brent caught my eyes.

He matched my expression and stood up, walking over to me.

I let him pull me into his arms and looked him over.

Brent Ledger had been considered a part of my family since I was little. He studied under my dad, and last I heard, he was a hotshot corporate lawyer in Chicago.

“Hey, what are you doing back in California?” I asked.

His green eyes twinkled, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “It just felt like the right time to come home.”

“Does my dad know you’re here?”

Something flashed over his eyes, pulling me up short. “No, Ryleigh, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell him.”

“Oh.”

I hadn’t realized there had been a falling out between them. They had been close, and I knew Brent was like the son he never had. It would have been easier if Brent had been my brother. Would have taken some of the pressure off of me, even though I knew how weird the thought was, considering how big of a crush I used to have on him.

“Are you working in Sacramento, then?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I just got back. I’m in between jobs.”

“Well, isn’t it a happy coincidence to run into you here?” I said.

He shook his head, looking sheepish. “I actually came to the city for you. Your mom said you moved here. I just didn’t

know I would run into you so soon.”

“For me?” I looked off to the side, trying to gather my thoughts. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked lowly, and I backed away a little when he leaned down toward me.

Whoa.

“What is obvious?” I asked. “I haven’t seen you in seven years. I... I barely know you.”

And I might still be a little bitter that he had cut off all contact with me when he decided to move to Chicago. As if I didn’t matter to him, when he had been one of my best friends growing up, despite the age difference between us.

It probably made sense that he didn’t really want to be friends with someone so much younger than him, but there hadn’t been a single phone call all these years. And now he just showed up out of the blue?

My name was called from the bar top for my order, and I looked back at the bartender holding my bag of food.

I grabbed it from the bartender’s hand, and turned back to Brent. “It was nice to see you again. I have to go.”

Something moved in his eyes. Something I didn’t like very much.

He opened his mouth, but I turned and grabbed my food, waving awkwardly and walking out of there before he could say anything.

Brent didn’t feel like the same man as before, and for some reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling of wanting to run as far away from him as I possibly could.

After getting a few blocks away, I turned to look behind me. Brent was standing outside of the restaurant, looking directly at me. The distance made it hard for me to make out his features.

I quickened my steps until I got to my apartment building. I wasn’t sure what to think.

First the rose, and now Brent?

I took a deep breath, trying to center myself as I exited the elevator.

I had my keys in my hand and was about to unlock the door when an arm wrapped around me. A wet cloth was pressed firmly over my nose and lips, and I struggled, trying to get away.

It didn't seem to matter, and the more I struggled, the weaker I became, until my limbs became weightless, and I felt the dark edges around my eyes, and then...

Nothing.

ROMAN

I WALKED INTO THE BAR WITH A SWAGGER.

Fuck, but I was in a good mood, and it had everything to do with the little temptress waking me up this morning and sucking on my dick with her hot mouth.

Her eyes had twinkled when she heard me let out a long string of expletives. She liked it when I lost control, and I couldn't even be pissed off about it.

I would always feel like I was losing control whenever she was nearby.

And I was okay with that.

I would gladly give up all of my control for her.

I found Dominic and Micah right away, sitting by the bar top.

Kai was behind the bar, probably testing out his bartending skills.

He said something to make Dominic laugh while Micah's eyes glimmered with amusement, and I slowed my movements to take them in.

There was something about the scene that made me want to take it all in.

Things weren't exactly quiet right now. Julien Levine, our biggest client, was keeping the club busy, but right now, at this moment, things didn't seem to be so bad.

Micah turned suddenly, his eyes landing on mine. He probably knew I was here as soon as I stepped foot in the door.

Our childhood had taught us to always be aware of our surroundings, and once we ran away from home, that awareness became even more necessary.

He had been the one I depended on for everything.

I was fifteen at the time, old enough to care for myself but young enough not to know how.

On the other hand, Micah was seventeen, on the cusp of his eighteenth birthday, and he had to work to ensure we stayed safe on the street.

He had been young, and I was sure he didn't know what he was doing most of the time, but to my teenage self, Micah seemed capable of anything.

He had been steady and sure my whole life.

He had been my rock, and it wasn't until I got a little older that I realized my brother must have been scared shitless the entire time. He was just good at keeping it hidden from me.

We had the same crappy childhood, but I definitely got the better end of the stick.

We had come a long way from those two lost boys, huddled together inside a cardboard box on the street, trying to keep the nightmare of killing our father at bay.

He had once been my everything.

My entire world.

Now, I was straying away from him, wanting my entire world to be this small girl, who held what was left of my heart in the palm of her hands.

I nodded my head at Micah, and he indicated to the chair next to him.

I sat down and looked over at Kai.

“What are you having?” he asked.

I smiled. “Is your father not paying you enough? I know having just joined the club, you’re not seeing any of the profit, but you’d think your old man would have given you a pretty little reward for breaking into the mayor’s office.”

“His reward is his club cut. That should be enough for anyone,” Dominic chimed in.

I looked over at Kai and winked. He grinned.

“That’s a shame. A piece of fabric?”

Dominic reached over and punched me in the arm. “Then give yours back.”

I laughed. “You touch it, and president or not, I will kick your ass.”

I fucking earned my cut, and I wasn’t giving it up for all the money in the world.

He shook his head, though his mouth twitched slightly just before he took a sip of his beer.

His face turned serious before he asked, “Have you thought about what you’re going to do with the flash drive?”

I nodded, knowing Ryleigh wasn’t going to like my decision. But I couldn’t just sit on the information and not do anything with it.

This shit was worth something, and those bastards deserved to pay.

“We go to the news outlet with this,” I replied. “I am sure it would be huge to know just how many corrupt people worked on the inside. And this way, no one can pull any strings, no matter how much power they have.”

Dominic seemed surprised by this decision. I was sure he would have used it to blackmail those fuckers to keep them in line. But you couldn’t keep men like that in line, and I didn’t want to always have to watch our backs.

If they disappeared, there would be no one around to back the Manson brothers, and unfortunately, those men were

prominent enough that killing them would have drawn more attention to this city and to the club.

What was more, it didn't matter how much I hated Bennett Hudson, I didn't want the bastard to die by my hands or the hands of the club.

I didn't want to hurt Ryleigh in any way, to cause that loyalty and trust she showed me to be destroyed.

She would be angry at me for sending her dad to jail.

She would get over that anger in time—*I hoped*.

But she wouldn't forgive me if the bastard died by our hands.

This way, everyone got what they wanted, and I was sure Dominic knew why I wanted to do it like this.

He nodded. "Okay. We'll do it your way."

I took in a deep breath I didn't even know I was holding, letting it out slowly and shooting him a grateful smile.

He didn't have to agree.

He could have given this job to any club member, and I was sure they would have done a decent job blackmailing those little fuckers, but he trusted me instead.

I looked at Micah and Kai.

They had been quiet throughout the entire exchange, and I could tell from the look in their eyes that they were fine with this.

I wasn't surprised by Kai's acceptance. I figured he probably had a soft spot for Ryleigh now, and given the chance, I knew they could become good friends.

Micah was a little more unpredictable.

But when I looked into my brother's eyes, I knew things would be okay with him.

He grasped my shoulder and squeezed it affectionately, though his facial expression didn't change.

This would be all I would get from him, and it was enough.

Kai placed a shot of something in front of me. I guessed Scotch from the color of it, and he held up his own glass.

“To the club,” Dominic said.

We all clinked glasses.

“To the club,” we all repeated.

THE SUN GLARED at me as soon as I stepped outside the bar.

Micah, Dominic, and Kai walked behind me, talking about something I wasn't really paying attention to.

All I knew was, the moment I stepped foot in the parking lot, something felt off, and I didn't know why.

I looked back and met Micah's eyes.

The look on his face told me I wasn't the only one who felt it, and Dominic must have sensed the tension around us, because he held his arm up to Kai and shot him a look, telling him to be quiet.

We stood still, listening.

In the distance, a loud car engine driving by took up the space for a beat, but other than that... nothing.

I would have thought my mind was playing tricks on me if the other men hadn't felt the same thing I did.

I took a step forward, and a small silver ball was thrown from the far end of the parking lot.

It took my brain half a second to comprehend what I was seeing, but it felt like a second too long as a small explosion rang out on the property.

A parked car immediately caught on fire, and men swarmed the place.

I didn't need to look to know who these fuckers belonged to, as some of them had a visible tattoo of a long dagger wrapped around two cobras.

The symbol of the Mansen Brotherhood.

Dominic pushed a scowling Kai back into the bar and pulled out his gun, taking in the dozen men surrounding us.

The doors busted behind us, and all the brothers came out, with their weapons drawn.

There were seven of us and about twelve of them.

Looked like a fair fucking fight to me.

I took in the faces of each of the fuckers, frustration burning a hole inside of me when I didn't see either of the fucking Mansen twins.

One of the fuckers got tired of waiting for us. He fired his gun but missed me by a few feet.

Fucking amateur.

They must have thought this would be an easy fight since there were more of them than there were of us.

They fucking thought wrong, and I was going to show them just how easy it was for the King's Men to take control of this territory.

With a shout, our men moved, starting on the defense and trying to keep them from encroaching on the bar, but it wasn't long before we moved to offense and started attacking them.

They backed away.

I looked around for Micah and found him taking on a big fucker with his bare hands, pushing him toward the car that had caught fire earlier.

I turned away just as the fucker screamed in pain when Micah pushed him into the fire.

The other members of the Mansen Brotherhood heard the scream, and panic entered their eyes.

I wasn't going to stop until I burned each and every one of them to a fucking crisp.

I focused on one trying to run away, leaving his brothers behind.

If there was one thing I hated, it was a coward.

It didn't take me long to catch up to him, and he screamed when I tackled him to the ground.

He shakily grabbed his gun and tried to aim at me, but I grabbed it from his hold and threw it out of his reach.

"You're too fucking late," he said as I pulled my arms back and punched him in the face. "They already have her."

"Who?" I asked, getting a bad feeling. I grabbed his shirt and hauled him up to my face. "What are you talking about?"

He spat on my face and laughed.

Anger coursed through me, and I pulled him up to his feet and walked over to the fire.

We weren't the ones who brought a bomb to the fight, but I was sure as hell willing to use it to make them hurt as much as possible.

I pushed his face over the flame.

He screamed when it licked over his skin, struggling in my hold.

When I pulled him back to face me, his skin was blistered, and he was crying.

"I won't ask again," I said.

When he didn't say anything, I made a move to bring him back there. He cried out. "Wait! Okay. I'll tell you."

I held him off.

"The girl. They have the girl."

My blood ran cold. There was only one girl he could refer to. "Where?"

“I don’t know. The twins are staying on one of the properties provided by Mayor Gallagher. I don’t know where, okay?”

I sneered at him, frustration making it hard to think straight, but I knew he was telling the truth. I threw his body into the flames and blocked out the scream, moving off to the side.

A quick look around told me Dominic had this contained.

I pulled out my phone and looked up Ryleigh’s location.

It pinged somewhere on the highway, unmoving. I would bet everything I owned that they had thrown her phone out the window on their way to wherever they were holding her.

I looked up and met Micah’s eyes across the lot.

He immediately knew something was wrong.

Fuck.

I BURST into the mayor’s office with Micah standing behind me. Two security guards tried to stop us, but Mayor Gallagher called them off when he looked up and saw us from his desk.

Bad move.

I was in the mood for some fucking blood.

“What can I do for you, gentlem—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish.

I was on him as soon as the doors closed and knocked him out of his chair with one punch.

Blood spurted out his nose.

“What is the meaning of this? I will have you arrested for assault,” he said, looking up at me.

“You do that, and this time tomorrow morning, every news outlet will have caught wind of your dealings with the Mansen Brotherhood.”

His eyes widened before he schooled his features. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t?” I asked, pulling out a copy of the flash drive.

He narrowed his eyes at that. “This was taken from your computer. I don’t need to tell you what’s on it, do I?”

He sputtered. “You fucking bastard! You broke into my office. That’s illegal.”

“And so is trying to take over drug distribution in California, no?”

“What do you want?” he asked, using his desk to pull himself up.

“Where is she?”

“Where is who?”

“Where is Ryleigh?”

He seemed confused. “Judge Hudson’s daughter? How should I know?”

“Because the fucking Mansen brothers took her and brought her back to one of the properties you’re letting them use.”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. “They would never—”

I punched him in the face once more. He stumbled back but didn’t fall.

“I don’t have time for this. Where is she?”

“Why do you care?” he asked me, his eyes narrowing. “What the fuck are you doing with her? She’s innocent in all this.”

“Are you going to make me beat the information out of you?” I asked instead of answering.

“Why would I tell you anything?”

“Because I will expose you otherwise.”

“And how do I know you won’t do that, anyway?”

“You’re just going to have to fucking take my word for it. You don’t want to go to prison, Gallagher. There are many members of the Savkin Bratva still in there, bidding their time. I’m sure those fuckheads have a pretty long and unforgiving memory back from when you were a prosecutor, no?”

He visibly blanched at that.

That was the thing about being in law enforcement before going corrupt. Gallagher had pissed off a lot of bad people. He would be in serious trouble if he ended up in the same prison as some of them, which we both knew would happen if shit from the flash drive ever got out.

“So you are going to tell me where they are. You’re not going to waste my time. Got me?”

“G-Got you,” he stuttered out.

RYLEIGH

THERE WAS A STEADY DRUMBEAT BENEATH MY EYELID.

Bile tried to work its way up my throat, and I had to work hard to keep from throwing up all over the floor.

I felt terrible.

I felt sick, and everything hurt.

I let out a small groan and tried to think back to what I last remembered.

Thanks to Roman, I already knew what it felt like to wake up after being drugged, but this was much more intense than the last time.

I must have been given a bigger dose than I could handle.

My face contorted as another sharp headache started pounding against my skull.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and took in my surroundings.

Like the last time, I was in a cabin.

That was where the similarities ended.

This cabin was dingy, musty, dark, and outdated.

It almost felt like I had been transported back into the 1800s, or was cast as an extra for *Outlander*.

But I knew that wasn't the case, considering the fact that I was lying on the floor, both of my wrists chained to the wall.

My back protested as I tried to sit up, and I nearly threw up what little breakfast I had eaten.

I didn't have a chance to eat my cheeseburger.

How lucky for me, as I was sure it would have been splattered on the floor by now.

I breathed out through my mouth.

The probability that Roman had abducted me this time was slim, and I hadn't realized what real terror was until now.

Waking up scared in Roman's cabin was so much different than waking up here and knowing that the men who took me had no qualms about hurting me.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

I pulled on the chains, but it was useless.

I tried not to think about *why* there were even chains attached to the wall in the first place.

I was sure I wouldn't like the answer very much.

Tears stung my eyes as I tried to think of ways I could get out of here, but I came up empty.

There was no way.

Roman didn't know where I was.

I wasn't even sure if he knew I was missing yet.

I didn't know how long I had been out. It was the early afternoon when I was taken, and a look outside one of the two windows showed it was now nighttime. I had no way of telling how late it was, and Roman didn't usually come home until late, anyway.

And though I had my phone on me when I was drugged and abducted, it was probably long gone.

No one was coming to save me.

I was either going to die soon, or they would keep me alive long enough to toy with me.

I swallowed, tugging harder on the chains in my panic.

Everything was so old in this place, was it possible the wall the chains were attached to wasn't completely solid?

I didn't know.

I let out a small whimper as I pulled, straining my muscles and hurting my wrists where it was shackled.

I screamed when the doors opened, and two men I had never met walked in.

I backed into my corner as they stood there, watching me with various degrees of amusement that sent a shiver of fear down my spine.

“Oh, look. Our guest is awake,” one of them said.

They had the same facial features, with heavy-set eyebrows that settled unappealing above deep-set, dark brown eyes. It was hard to tell how big their eyes were, since they were encased with copiously long eyelashes that looked uncomfortable.

Their noses dominated their faces, but one had a flatter nose, while the other one's nose was just wide and pointed.

Lips surrounded by dark, unkempt beards, which were nothing like Roman's, with the bottom lips disproportionately bigger than the top.

But that was where the similarities ended.

One was tall and lean, the other was short and heavy.

The short one stood ramrod straight, as if he thought the posture would add more to his height.

I estimated the short one to be about five inches taller than me, though, so he wasn't exactly short, just shorter than most men. He was the one who had spoken when they first entered.

The taller one stood with his back hunched, so much so that I started to imagine straightening his back for him because it looked uncomfortable.

He deferred to the short one.

They seemed to be close in age, but I got the feeling the short one was older.

They were both unattractive men, and not just because they decided to do something as ugly as drug me and chain me to the wall, but physically, they were unattractive men.

That made them even more dangerous. To live in a world where you had the potential to become a powerful man, and still feel like you got short-changed.

They would likely do almost anything to prove their dominance—their power—including asserting it over me. I was sure of it.

After all, I was outnumbered and chained to the wall.

I didn't say anything.

There were so many reasons why they might have taken me, either because of who my dad was, or because of Roman.

I swallowed down the fear trying to escape my throat in the form of a scream.

I didn't make any noise at all.

They started to walk closer to me, crowding me.

I pushed myself flat against the wall until there was no more space to move.

They crouched down and took me in, as if they were scientists observing a new species for the first time. I had the sudden urge to punch their stupid faces.

That would only anger them.

The short one grabbed my hair and pulled it to the side.

I let out a small groan in pain, grabbing at my scalp and trying to lessen his grip. The chains rattled as I moved, reminding me of the weight on my arms.

He smiled viciously at me as the tall one said, "Remember, we can't do anything to her. He wants her to go back to him."

The short one tightened his grip.

"He wants her back, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind a bit of damage."

I closed my eyes.

Who?

Who wanted me?

“Stephen, we shouldn’t do anything to anger him. You know how he gets.”

Stephen—the short one—tightened his grip on me marginally before he let me go.

I let out a small, subtle sigh as they both stood up.

“I can see why he’s so obsessed with you. You’re a fucking pretty little thing, aren’t you? You won’t tell him if we have a little fun, will you? After all, you already whore yourself to that bastard, Roman Stone.”

I didn’t answer him.

So there was another man who was obsessed with me besides Roman.

What the fuck?

I took in a stuttered breath but didn’t say anything, wanting him to keep talking. To give me more information.

Stephen pulled out his phone and pointed at me. I didn’t need to ask to know he was either recording me or taking my picture.

“Smile, sweetheart. I want to show the fucking bastard what happens when he sics his psycho brother on us.”

I blinked.

Did he mean Micah?

Was Micah hunting them?

Was that why they were hiding out in this cabin that had seen better days?

I didn’t smile for the camera.

He didn’t seem to mind, as he stopped pointing the camera at me and did something else on his phone.

It rang after a while, and I wondered if he would answer.

Stephen nudged the other man with his elbow as he silenced the call.

“We’re waiting for a guest, but why don’t we have some fun before he gets here?”

I shook my head, letting out a small cry when he reached for me. He pulled me up to a standing position and started taking me in as if inspecting the meat quality at a supermarket.

I slapped his hand away as he moved it down my body, and he laughed.

The tall one relaxed with Stephen’s mood and joined in on the fun.

“Feisty little thing, aren’t you?”

I didn’t show any reaction.

“And fucking quiet. Can’t you talk, girl?” the tall one asked me. I shifted my eyes to him before bringing them back to Stephen. He stepped closer to me.

When he leaned down, as if to kiss me, I pulled my head back and headbutted him right in the nose.

He let out a satisfying scream as blood dripped down, but I couldn’t take the time to revel in it because the tall one slapped me.

I fell back against the wall with a small cry.

“What the hell did you do that for?” the tall one asked me.

I pulled my lip back and snarled at him.

He took a step closer to me, and I cowered back.

Grabbing my hair, he pulled me up until I looked him in the eyes.

“We were being nice. But any kindness you might have gotten from us is off the table because of that little move.”

They were being nice.

I spat on him.

He pulled away from me, and when he turned his angry eyes toward me again, I closed my eyes and braced myself for another slap.

Tires crunching beneath the gravel outside saved me from what was sure to be another blow.

Stephen moved to the window and looked out.

“Well, look at that. The bastard showed up.”

Who showed up?

Did he mean Roman?

But how?

I knew, even as I hoped it would be the case, that they weren't stupid enough to let Roman know their location.

I didn't know who showed up, and the anticipation of a third stranger made my knees weak.

I might have fallen down if I hadn't braced so much of my weight against the wall.

I heard the car door slam and then hurried footsteps toward the cabin before the door opened and revealed the last person I ever would have expected.

I blinked, just to be sure he wasn't a figment of my imagination, but he was still there.

And he was looking at me with a panic-stricken expression on his face.

He cautiously looked at the men who took me before anger overtook his expression.

“What is the meaning of this? Why the fuck do you have my daughter chained to the wall?”

My lips trembled. “D-Dad?”

His expression softened, and he walked over to me, grabbing one hand and inspecting the chain.

He looked back at the men. “Let her go.”

I was so relieved that the newest arrival wasn't someone who wanted to hurt me, it took a while for my brain to catch up to the situation and for me to realize he was talking to these men as if he knew them.

How could he possibly know them?

Stephen shook his head. "Yeah, that's not happening."

"Why? Why the fuck would you do this when we've been protecting you from that fucking psychopath."

I understood the words my dad was saying, but the meaning behind them was hard for me to comprehend.

Did he just say he was protecting them from Micah?

What reason could he possibly have to protect them?

They didn't seem like the kind of men he usually associated himself with.

I blinked when they both laughed.

"Are you, though? Protecting us from the fucking King's Men? How do we know you really are when your daughter is fucking their VP?"

Dad turned to me, shock in his eyes. "What?"

I licked my lips, but there was nothing I could say to that. I didn't realize his hate for the MC ran this deep. Enough that he was willing to protect these men from the club?

What happened to the system he worked his entire life to protect?

Was that not bigger than his hate for the MC?

"Ryleigh, tell me it isn't true."

I bit the inside of my cheek, hard enough that a slight metallic taste coated my tongue. I swallowed before I answered him.

"It's true. I'm in love with Roman."

He stumbled back. "You—"

He closed his eyes, and I tried to get to him. The chains held me in place. “Dad. Please. He’s not—”

I shook my head.

He looked at me as if he didn’t know me. “You saw him kill a man. A cop.”

I nodded. “I know.”

I wasn’t under any illusion about what kind of man Roman was.

“And you love him? That monster?”

“He’s not a monster. He loves me.”

“That little weasel can’t love. He’s using you.”

“No,” I said, trying hard to make him understand. But the look in his eyes told me there was nothing I could say that would change his mind.

“Please, Dad.”

At this point, I didn’t know what I was asking for. For him to help rescue me from this terrible situation, or to believe me when I told him that Roman loved me? That me falling in love with the man wasn’t the betrayal he thought it was—even if I did betray him in other ways.

Stephen laughed, the sound empty and mean.

I had almost forgotten the other two men were there.

“You want to know why that night at the fucking port didn’t turn out the way you planned?”

Dad looked at the men before he turned to me, anger clinging to his expression. “That was you? You tipped them off...” I could see him connecting the dots in his mind. “You were home that day. You heard me talking with William, didn’t you?”

I let out a small sob and nodded.

There was no point in denying it.

“I—”

He slapped me.

It was on the same side of my face that the tall one had slapped, but it wasn't as hard.

I cried out.

This slap hurt much more than any beatings I could have gotten from those men.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so sorry. I just... I love him. You protect the ones you love, right? I'm so sorry, Daddy. I'm so sorry."

And I was sorry for hurting him, but I wasn't sorry for telling Roman, and I thought he knew that too.

He shook his head. "How could you? I raised you with my own hands. I fed you, cared for you... love you."

The two men laughed, drawing our attention to them. I recoiled when I saw a rifle in Stephen's hands.

Dad held up his hands and moved forward until he stood in front of me.

"Put that away, and let's talk about this."

Stephen shook his head. "You can't even control your fucking daughter. Letting her open her legs to that bastard, ruining all of our plans, and now you want to talk? We have to save her for him, but you—" Stephen pointed the gun at my dad.

I pulled on the chains, trying to get in front of him.

Dad looked back at me, a warning in his eyes, telling me to stay quiet. As if I could when a crazy bastard was pointing a gun at him.

I shook my head and opened my mouth. To say what, I didn't know.

Stephen did a pump action with the gun and aimed right at Dad's chest.

"No!" I screamed out, and a second later, the door burst open with a loud bang. Shouts came out, along with the sound

of guns going off.

I loudly screamed, and Dad's eyes widened as he rushed forward to shield me with his body.

He wrapped his arms tightly around me and buried my face in his chest as everything around us erupted in chaos.

More men came inside the cabin, and at this point, I didn't know whose side they were on.

Bullets flew everywhere.

One hit the wall near me. I huddled closer to my dad.

"Dad!" I screamed.

He tightened his arms around me. "Shh, it's okay, baby. It's okay. I got you. I won't let anything happen to you—"

He stiffened against me, pulling away slightly.

I looked up and met his eyes, frowning. What just happened?

A bad feeling bloomed in my chest and fell to my gut, weighing me down. I watched him stumble back another step. It felt like time had slowed, or perhaps I was watching everything in slow motion.

I understood what was happening... I just didn't want to.

I didn't want to, and if I wished hard enough to go back in time, would it be possible?

I shook my head as my eyes met Dad's eyes.

Fear left me immobile as tears fell down my cheeks, touching the corner of my lips. It was the only thing that kept my mind solely on reality, even when I didn't want to.

I didn't want this reality.

Please let this be a dream.

Dad's eyes were wide, and his mouth opened, but nothing came out.

I swallowed the bile rushing to my throat as everything in the room quieted down until all I could focus on was him.

He slowly dropped to the ground, revealing Stephen in front of me with a gun aimed at us.

I blinked, my brain feeling like it was encased in mud.

My eyes took in the cabin. Most men were on the floor, unmoving, the smell of blood teasing my nostrils.

I thought I saw the tall one's body...

I blinked again, trying to clear my vision and thought.

Stephen looked like he wanted to kill me.

I couldn't bring myself to care.

A sound rang to his left, then blood splattered out from the side of his head before he dropped to the ground.

I must be seeing things, because the next thing I knew, Roman was in front of me.

He was saying something, but I couldn't hear.

His mouth moved as he grasped my arms and shook me slightly, but no sound came out.

No sound save for the incessant ringing in my ears that was getting louder and louder with each passing second. My knees buckled and I fell.

Micah came into my line of sight, and he handed something to Roman... a key.

Soon, the shackles loosened around my wrists.

Roman tried to help me up, but I shook him off as I crawled to my dad.

I touched his shoulder.

"Daddy?"

He didn't move.

"Daddy, wake up. We have to go now, so please—" My voice was cut off. I took a deep breath, hoping to hold on to my composure. I was a hairline trigger away from breaking. Why did I want to break apart so badly? I didn't understand it. "Please wake up."

His eyes remained closed.

His chest wasn't moving. Why wasn't it moving? Why wasn't *he* moving?

"Please," I begged.

Around me, men moved.

I didn't care anymore.

I didn't care if they were the enemy or if they were on my side. Roman crouched beside me, speaking to me in a voice I had never heard him use before.

"Ryleigh. We have to go, okay?"

I turned to him. He was the strongest man in the world. He could do anything, couldn't he?

He could save my dad.

"Roman. M-my dad's not moving. Can you please—please wake him up for me?"

"Baby," he said softly. "I can't do that."

"Why not?" I asked as tears continued to stream down my face. "I know you don't like him. He doesn't like you either. But you love me, don't you?"

He cupped my cheeks with both hands. "I do love you."

"So please, please, please." I fisted his shirt, pulling him closer. "Please wake him up."

"Baby, I can't."

"Why not? Why not!"

I pulled my hand back and pounded on his chest. "Why can't you just do this for me?"

He tried to pull me into his body, but I fought back. I pulled away from his hold and turned back to my dad.

"Dad. Wake up. Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

Nothing happened.

Hands touched my shoulders, and that was all it took.

I broke down.

I broke apart.

“Please, Daddy, wake up. I’m so sorry. I’m s-sorry I hurt you. But please wake up.”

I leaned down and buried my face in his chest, crying.

A pain I had never experienced before in my life formed in my chest and spread like a disease.

Why did it hurt so bad?

Why was I hurting like this?

I screamed in his chest, but no one seemed to hear.

Distantly, I heard another voice speak. Dominic, perhaps?

“I’m sorry, brother, but we have to go.”

“I know,” Roman said.

He pulled me away from my dad. I fought back.

“No. No! I’m not leaving him. Let go! Let me go right now, you bastard!”

“I’m so sorry,” Roman said close to me.

I struggled harder, but it was no use.

Roman was much stronger than me.

Always had been, but he wasn’t strong enough to give me back my dad.

“Dad!” I screamed when I felt myself being lifted off the floor. “Dad! Wake up. Wake up, please.

I screamed harder, louder.

It didn’t seem to matter.

My dad lay on the floor, motionless, with all the other dead bodies.

My dad...

He was dead...

Wasn’t he?

I turned and buried my face in Roman's chest, crying out.

He tightened his arms around me and walked us out of there.

Out of the cabin and away from my dad.

RYLEIGH

IT WAS RAINING.

How apt.

It seemed the heavens reflected my pain in the weather.

Cold rain pelted against my face as I stood in the cemetery. I was surrounded by people who didn't feel even an ounce of the pain I was feeling, though they didn't show it.

They all looked devastated.

Such good actors.

Their expressions were solemn as they watched the man who had died saving my life be lowered into the ground.

He wasn't the best dad in the world, and for a while there, all I could remember were the failings in our relationship, like how he missed a choir concert at my school when I was ten because he had to work.

He always had to work.

I was sure he spent more time at work than he did at home, and that meant he spent more time at work than he did with me, his daughter.

But watching as they lowered his casket, all the memories came.

Like once, when I was five, he had come home early. Mom was cooking in the kitchen, and he sat on the floor in front of the coffee table with me on his lap, and we worked on a picture together.

I got to draw the people, because that was the best thing to draw, and he worked on the house and the sun in the background.

I added the clouds, and he outlined the grass for me to color in.

I remember coming home in high school, heartbroken because Rhett had broken up with me in front of his friends, calling me weird.

He had stayed by my side all evening, letting me cry on his shoulder.

He told me everything would be okay as long as he was there.

He wasn't here anymore.

I blinked, and more tears came out.

I looked at my mom, who was staring down at his casket with a blank expression on her face.

Then a single tear fell from the corner of her rimmed-red eyes.

A man came up and held the umbrella closer to her.

He said something quietly in her ear, and she nodded.

Even in mourning, she looked elegant.

I wondered, not for the first time, just how much my parents loved each other.

My lips trembled as more tears came.

Someone came up near me.

I didn't need to turn around to know who it was.

He held the umbrella over my head and stepped closer to me until all I could feel was his body heat.

Roman was playing a dangerous game, coming to the cemetery like this.

Someone could recognize him, but it seemed no one noticed.

He didn't wrap his arms around me, afraid to invite attention to us, even though I knew he wanted to.

And for the first time, his warmth did nothing for me.

My dad was dead.

That was all there was to it, and nothing he did or said could take away the pain.

I STAYED in a small corner of the room and watched people mingle around the wake.

Someone laughed, and I felt a tinge of annoyance move through me. Perhaps they didn't get the memo that this was supposed to be sad?

No one knew the full truth of what happened. The Mansen brothers were being blamed for his death, considering he died where they had been staying.

No one publicly knew why they had stayed at that cabin, or who the cabin belonged to, but I knew. It was because of my dad's closest friend, William Gallagher.

The two of them had been protecting the brothers.

They were corrupt.

My dad was corrupt.

But he was being hailed as a hero.

The public thought he had been working to take the brothers down, and had angered them, so they took him to their cabin.

That was the narrative William was sticking to, though I knew an internal investigation was taking place.

There was nothing they could find that would tie the King's Men MC to the cabin, so there was that.

The King's Men MC was safe, and my dad was dead.

I met my mom's eyes across the room, and it was hard not to feel some resentment over the fact that she wasn't grieving as much as I was.

Twenty-three years of marriage, and all she could do was shed a few tears in public?

I looked away from her before she could tell what I was thinking, and I walked out to the backyard, leading to a small garden.

I sat on the stone bench and looked up at the night sky.

My chest still hurt.

Someone sat beside me.

I turned to find Brent there, his green eyes set in desolation.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Ryleigh," he said softly.

I could only nod. I was sure he thought of my dad as his own at one point.

We didn't say anything after that.

But Brent stayed with me, and when it got a little cold, he offered me his jacket as we remained outside, hiding from everything and everyone.

I didn't believe in God.

I didn't believe there was life after death, though I found myself wishing that there was one now.

It would probably lessen the pain a little if I thought, for even a tiny moment, that Dad still existed. That his soul lived on.

But he was dead.

Brent wrapped his arms around me, and I buried my face in his shoulder, letting him comfort me the only way possible right now.

"It's okay, sweet girl. It's okay."

No...

It really wasn't.

A WEEK PASSED.

I had been sleeping at my childhood home.

On the third night, I brought up a cot we had in storage to Dad's office and started sleeping there.

I felt closer to him in there than I did anywhere else in this house.

Mom had been quiet.

I still didn't know how she felt, and I was afraid to ask.

She seemed to be coping a little too well, and I knew it was mean, but I wished she was in more pain.

I couldn't help but feel this way, and she couldn't help the amount of grief she felt, so we had been co-existing in this big house like ghosts, scared at the mere sight of the other one.

I hadn't seen Roman in a week.

Hadn't called him or texted him, though he had done plenty of that.

I just sent his calls to voicemail, but I tortured myself a little by reading his texts.

He had gotten me a new phone before the funeral. I didn't want to know what those men had done to my old one, so I didn't bother to ask.

Most of his texts were of him asking me how I was, or if I was taking care of myself.

He was trying to give me room to grieve, even though I knew it must be driving him crazy.

I just...

I didn't know how to look at him without remembering the look of betrayal in my dad's eyes after learning I was with Roman.

That I tipped the King's Men off at the port.

I also couldn't look at Roman without having the image of my dad cracking a little.

He had always preached about the law. He believed in the system—or at least, I had thought he did.

But to now know that wasn't the case?

How the hell was I supposed to just let my image of him shatter?

I blinked some moisture back into my eyes and looked away from where I had been staring out at the window.

Today was bright and sunny.

We were in the middle of summer, and California had never been so beautiful.

And I was fucking sad.

I could hear my mom walking around upstairs in her room, and I didn't think.

I grabbed my keys and phone and walked out of the house.

Talking to her was the last thing I felt like doing, which was stupid on my part for wanting to be in this house with her, even if it had only been for a week.

I came outside to the warm air, a slight wind picking up.

It felt good against my skin, but I didn't give myself any time to enjoy it.

I set out for a short walk around the neighborhood.

The house was in one of the most affluent neighborhoods of the city.

Our nearest neighbor was about half a mile away from where we lived. We were surrounded by nature, with tall oak trees that had been meticulously cared for, and green, mowed grass and summer flowers.

I looked around.

This was something my dad would never get to enjoy again.

Something about the thought shattered my heart into a million little pieces, and I looked down at the ground as I walked, trying hard not to think.

I was about a block away from the house when something started to feel off.

I looked behind me, but was greeted with nothing but the stillness of the open space.

Was I being followed?

I quickened my pace, wanting to turn back around and run back to the house, but was afraid I would run into—

I didn't know who.

I cut through a walkway that would lead me to the back of my parents' house.

Three minutes later, I was breathing hard, but I could see the big, white house in my line of sight.

Just a few more minutes, and I would be in the safety of the house, just—

Someone grabbed me from behind.

I struggled in his hold, and he tightened his arms around me.

“Get off me!” I screamed out.

“Ryleigh. It's okay. It's me.”

I stilled from his voice.

He loosened his hold around me, but he didn't let me go. He carried me to the waiting truck and deposited me on the passenger-side bench before I could really react. I watched as he ran around to the driver's side.

I waited until he had closed the door before turning a glare at him.

“What the hell, Roman? What are you doing?”

The corner of his lips tilted up in a small smirk.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he asked, turning fully toward me. “I’m abducting you.”

ROMAN

“COME AGAIN?” SHE ASKED ME.

I put the truck in drive and took off.

I had been hanging around this neighborhood for the last three fucking hours, waiting for her to come out of the house. I would have waited all day and night if that was what it took, but luckily for me, my little innocent decided to go for a walk.

Still, it was best to get out of this neighborhood before I drew any attention to myself.

I was done waiting for her to come to her senses.

She could grieve the loss of her father—that was expected—but I couldn't let her grieve out of my sight.

I wanted to be the one to comfort her when she was hurting.

I wanted her close to my side.

It might be selfish, but I couldn't fucking wait any longer.

“It's exactly as I said. I'm abducting you.”

“Are you crazy?” she asked. She wasn't in hysterics like I had expected, so things were going well.

“Certifiably,” I answered, turning out of the neighborhood and feeling like I could breathe for the first time in a week.

She was back at my side.

That was all that mattered.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

I wished I could have told her we were going back to my cabin, but with the Mansen brothers' death and the mayor knowing we had the flash drive, there was too much to do.

I couldn't abandon the club right now.

"Home," I said.

Her lips twisted in disappointment, and she looked out the window.

"I'm sorry, baby."

"For what?" she asked.

"For everything, but most of all, for the pain you're in. I wish I could carry it for you."

She let out a small sigh. "Like I would want that for you."

The weight on my chest lifted marginally at her words.

She was probably angry with me, but she still loved me.

She could be angry at me all she wanted, just as long as she was angry at me by my side.

Everything was right in my world with her by my side.

We drove the rest of the way to her apartment in silence.

I climbed out of the truck as soon as I had it turned off and moved over to her side.

She seemed surprised when I opened the door for her, pulling back from me. I slowly cupped her cheeks and pulled her toward me, molding my lips against hers.

Fuck, but I missed the taste of her so badly.

Missed the feel of her in my arms...

I just fucking missed her.

"Don't ever fucking leave again," I whispered harshly against her lips. I didn't think I could stand it if I had to be away from her again.

I might just burn down the whole world to get to her.

She nodded against me, marginally calming the beast that was raging inside.

I reached over and unbuckled her seatbelt, pulling her off her seat and into my arms.

She wrapped her arms tightly around my neck, clinging to me as I rushed to her apartment.

I watched her from the corner of my eye as I opened the door. She walked in first.

I followed and closed the door firmly behind us, locking it and shutting out the world.

She turned to me, her eyes widening when she got a good look at my expression before taking half a step back.

“Roman?”

Silly girl.

Didn't she know not to run from a predator?

I walked toward her without a word, cupping her cheeks between my hands, and crashed my lips down against her.

She moaned against me and instantly went pliant in my arms.

Fuck.

I hauled her up my body, waiting the briefest moment for her to wrap her legs around my waist before I carried her into the bedroom.

She whimpered against me as I lay us down on the bed, blanketing her small body with my own and thrusting my dick against her sweet pussy.

“Roman,” she gasped, rotating her hips against me, participating.

Black dots danced behind my eyes, and I quickened my movements, wanting to feel more of her.

More.

I just wanted fucking more.

I pulled up the shirt she wore, exposing the black cups of her bra to my gaze.

I pulled that down, and her nipples sprang free.

I latched onto one, and she arched into me, her fingers moving through my hair.

I sucked harder.

“Oh, God. Roman!”

My hands glided down her body, and I quickly removed our clothes.

I blanketed myself over her once we were both naked, grabbed my cock, and directed the tip to her entrance.

She widened her legs, inviting me in.

I plunged forward until I was seated fully inside of her.

We stilled and looked into each other’s eyes.

Her chest heaved, and she licked her lips.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

I was waiting for nothing.

I moved out of her slowly and pushed back in roughly.

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head every time our skin slapped from the move, just as I pulled out slowly once more.

I kept a steady pace as I made love to her.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and buried her face in my chest.

It took a moment for me to feel the tears on my skin.

Panicked, I pulled back to look at her, but she wrapped her legs firmly around my waist, keeping me buried deep inside her.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s this?”

She shook her head, more tears coming out. “Keep going, Roman. Remind me.”

“Remind you of what?” I asked softly.

“Remind me this is all worth it. Remind me how much I fucking love you. And I do. So much.”

A sharp pain sliced through me. Had she forgotten?

Had she forgotten her feelings for me? Or worse, my feelings for her?

Did she need a reminder of how deep my feelings went?

I picked up the pace, and she groaned.

“I fucking love you,” I said. “I fucking love you to obsession.”

She cried out, clinging tightly to me as fresh tears came to her eyes.

I leaned down and licked them from her cheeks before I settled my lips on hers and kissed her deeply.

Time stood still, and for once, the rest of the world quieted as I basked in the fact that I had my girl in my arms.

Her hands came down between us, and she played with her clit, her body arching towards me.

I fucked her harder.

She moved faster, and faster, and faster...

Her mouth opened when she came, but no sound came out.

“Fuck,” I said, feeling myself on the precipice of falling over a cliff.

My cock swelled inside her, and I leaned down and took the flesh of where her neck met her shoulder between my teeth.

I bit her, and she finally gave herself permission to be loud.

She screamed out her release, and I quickly followed, filling her with my cum.

She shifted around beneath me, as if suddenly feeling too much.

I fucking knew the feeling, and it wasn't her clinging to me now, but the other way around.

I held her close, and I held her tight, afraid she might disappear on me into the grief and darkness taking residence in her mind.

I couldn't fucking lose her.

Shit.

I'd seen a lot of death. Mostly caused by my own hands, but never had a death affected me this way.

It put things in perspective, and I realized, I wouldn't be able to handle it if I lost her.

"Stay with me," I whispered against her skin.

I didn't know if she heard me or not, but I felt her tighten her arms around me.

WE STAYED in bed for a while.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed since, and I couldn't bring myself to care.

Things were just easier in this little bubble with her, and I fucking wished I didn't have to leave it.

She was so still in my arms, but I knew she wasn't asleep.

My hand was splayed on top of her belly, moving mindlessly over the skin there.

By the time she shifted on the bed, the sun was just starting to set.

I sat up and looked at her, taking in the calmness of her gray irises, and unable to help myself, I leaned down and kissed her sweetly.

When I pulled away, her eyes were closed, almost as if she was savoring the taste of me.

Wordlessly, I climbed off the bed and went to the bathroom, turning on the faucet to fill a bath for her. I made sure the water was warm enough before I went back into the bedroom.

She looked at me questioningly but didn't fight me when I carried her up into my arms and into the bathroom.

The tub was about halfway filled by now, and I sank us down into the water.

She let out a small moan from the feel of it and leaned back against me.

I took in her naked body, loving every little inch of her, from the mass of wavy black hair to the cute little freckles that scattered about her shoulders, her tits, those mouth-watering nipples, the slight swell at the bottom of her belly button, neatly trimmed pussy, out-of-this-world legs and finally, the cutest little toes.

Fuck, but I loved this girl.

"Let me take care of you," I said, my voice rough.

"Okay," she sighed.

I reached over and turned off the water.

Then, I proceeded to clean her up before taking care of myself.

It didn't take her long to relax in my arms. She still wasn't very talkative.

She hadn't been since I 'abducted' her this afternoon, but I knew she was still grieving.

It would be a while before things started to get better, and I would be here for the worst of it.

I would weather the storm and make sure she made it out on the other side fully intact.

Once I was done, I unplugged the drain and stood up with her.

I carried her back into the bedroom.

She had her face buried in my neck, her soft breath tickling my skin there before I lay her back down on the bed.

I stood at the edge and looked over her wet naked body, just as she did the same with me, her eyes dark with hunger.

I grabbed her favorite peony-scented lotion from her nightstand, and I started to lather her up with moisturizer, her entire body, save for her face.

I knew she had some special lotion for that.

I rubbed it in one arm, then the other, before moving to her shoulders. Her mouth gaped open when I got to her tits, and I played with her nipples a bit, smiling a little at the flush on her cheeks that was already making its way down her chest.

I rubbed some more on her stomach, gliding my hands down on the outside of her thighs and stopping when I got to her foot.

She closed her eyes and let out a small moan when I massaged the arch, her toes curling to indicate her pleasure.

I could feel myself getting hard again.

Fuck, but I didn't think there would ever be a time when I didn't want her.

"You know I love you, don't you?" I asked, letting my hand slide up her legs, stopping around the sensitive part behind her knees.

Her shoulders sagged. "Yeah, I know."

Her voice was soft, but it was one of those rare occasions that I didn't know what, or how, she was feeling.

"You know I would do anything for you, don't you?" I asked.

"Yeah," she whispered.

"So let me take on this pain for you. Let me take care of you."

She looked off to the side, not saying anything. For a moment, I really thought she wasn't going to, but then her

voice came out, soft yet somehow loud in this quiet room.

“My dad’s dead, Roman.”

I took a deep breath.

“I know, baby.”

“And he’s... He’s not who I thought he is—*was*.”

“I know.”

“I still love him.”

I climbed on the bed and pulled her into my arms. “As you should. There’s no reason to think he was a bad father to you just because he had done some things wrong in his life. I’m not a good man. Do you still love me?”

I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath until she answered, “Of course I do.”

I nodded. “Then that’s all that’s important.”

I looked her over, hesitating, but I knew she deserved to know.

“You know Kai’s in the club, yeah?”

She looked confused over the sudden topic change, but nodded slowly.

“A part of his initiation was to do something for the club. He snuck into Mayor Gallagher’s office and got the insurance file he kept on all his associates.”

Her eyes widened. “My dad—”

I nodded. “Your dad’s in there. We have decided to turn the information over to the press and let the cards fall where they may. But your dad’s name is on there, along with a lot of damaging details that tie him to the Mansen Brotherhood. He’s being hailed a hero right now. This will damage his reputation.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, and a part of me wished we had never got the information in the first place. But it was only a brief moment, before I remembered the flash

drive had been the only reason that bastard, Gallagher, gave us the location to save Ryleigh.

“It has information on other men?” she asked quietly.

“Thirty-two by my count.”

She took in a stuttered breath, and when she looked at me, I knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“You should do it,” she said softly, her voice sad.

My fists clenched. “We don’t have to. We can use this to control them.”

She shook her head. “And when will it end? How far will it be before the King’s Men, before *you*, are implicated in all this? I just want it to be over.”

She moved in closer to me and buried her face in my chest.

I wrapped my arms tightly around her, holding her close and looking at the distance.

Fuck.

ROMAN

IT TOOK THREE DAYS FOR THE NEWS TO BREAK.

Every major news network was now focused on Mayor Gallagher and his associates. There was even a criminal investigation into all the bastard's investments.

There had been others involved with his crimes, but there wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind that Gallagher was at the top.

I told the fucker I wouldn't leak the information if he led me to Ryleigh and the Mansen brothers.

I fucking lied.

I didn't know when he would be tried or sentenced, and at this point, I didn't care. I did know he was currently being held in a state detention center while awaiting trial, with his assets frozen because he was considered a flight risk.

The bastard had charged and tried many brothers while working as a prosecuting attorney before he got his mayorship. So I was sure this was good news for a lot of people.

And it wasn't like the bastard could implicate Judge Hudson, considering the man had been murdered on one of his properties.

Ryleigh burst into the apartment a few hours after the first news story was released, crying and running into my arms.

She threw herself at me, but I was prepared and caught her before she could fall.

"Thank you," she said, her voice thick from tears.

I buried my face in her hair, taking in her sweet scent.

“You don’t ever have to thank me for that,” I said. “I would do anything for you.”

Her cries grew harder. “I know,” she said. “I know.”

I frowned. “Baby. You’re going to make yourself sick crying like this.”

“These aren’t sad tears,” she said. I shot her a look, and she smiled sheepishly at me. “Not completely, anyway.”

She was still sad. I knew it.

Her grief wouldn’t just magically disappear, and I knew things were going to be rough for a while, but it did something to me to hear her crying in bed every night when she thought I had gone to sleep.

I wanted to take away all of her pain.

Fucking wished I could carry it for her.

This was the next best thing I could do.

“Will it be okay?” she asked when she pulled away from me. I wiped away some of her tears and waited for her to clarify. “With Dominic. Will he be mad at you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. But he’ll get over it.”

She looked nervous then. “Are you sure?”

“Hey, don’t worry about this, okay? Everything is going to be all right. I promise.”

She didn’t look like she believed me, but everything would be okay.

There was no other option.

DOMINIC NOTICED me as soon as I walked inside the bar.

The mess from the fucking bomb had been taken care of, and the bar looked almost as good as new.

We were only an hour from opening, so there weren't many people around.

Micah stood in the corner, his eyes narrowing on me, but he didn't do anything when Dominic walked up to me, pulled his fist back, and clocked me hard on the jaw.

I stumbled back but didn't fall.

The bar, and everyone in it, got really quiet as they watched the scene unfold.

I didn't do anything but cup my jaw. It was probably going to bruise there later. Thank fuck, my beard would probably hide it from Ryleigh.

"I should kick you out of the fucking club for that move."

I nodded. "You should. I still would have done the exact same thing."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "So it was worth it?"

I thought back to the way Ryleigh had looked at me when she came home.

I had turned over the flash drive, but I had removed all mention of Judge Hudson on there.

He would be remembered as a hero who tried to tear down the Mansen Brotherhood and the drug ring they had unsuccessfully tried to start. Ryleigh would never have to live with her father's shame publicly.

The Mansen brothers were dead, and any men they might have left were scattered, unable to pick up the pieces of the organization.

It was done, and this would be the only good deed I did for the bastard, for shielding Ryleigh from the bullets that resulted in his own life being taken.

I could think whatever I wanted about him, but he died protecting his daughter.

He truly loved her, and that wasn't something I could have said about my own father.

I nodded. “He’s dead, Dom. And I love her. I would do anything for her. So yeah. It was fucking worth it.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until Dominic threw his head back and laughed. “Stupid fucker. You’re gonna let that one girl lead you on by your dick.”

I grinned at him, shaking my head.

“Nah, it’s not my dick she’s leading me around by,” I said. Although she could. He shot me a curious look. “It’s my heart.”

He shook his head, his eyes shrouded in sympathy as if he thought there was something pitiful about falling in love with a girl.

I didn’t try to argue with him.

He wouldn’t understand it unless he experienced it himself.

RYLEIGH

FIVE DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE ROMAN ‘ABDUCTED’ ME FROM my parents’ neighborhood.

Mom had texted a few times, wanting to know why I suddenly decided to go back to my apartment, and each time, I had given a very vague response.

After a while, she stopped asking, but I knew I couldn’t avoid her forever.

Not when she was now the only parent I had left. It didn’t matter how rocky our relationship had been since the incident when I was fourteen. I didn’t want the same thing that happened with Dad to happen with her.

I didn’t want her to suddenly leave me like Dad did while things were... not right between us.

Although, to say things hadn’t been right between us as he took his last breath was an understatement.

I tried to breathe past the pain of how he had looked at me, the sting of betrayal clear in his eyes. I just wanted to shut the memories off.

I pulled up to my parents’ driveway, frowning a bit.

It wasn’t my parents’ house anymore.

This was my mom’s house.

I rubbed at my chest from the thought and climbed out, walking to the front door.

It opened as soon as I stepped foot on the porch, and I looked up at my mom.

She looked the same as always.

Still perfect and elegant and pretty.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“Home.”

She looked at something behind me before turning to fully look at me. “This is your home.”

I shook my head. It hadn’t been my home for a long time now, and we both knew it.

She opened the door wider for me to come in and muttered something about making tea.

That had always been her solution to everything.

I wondered if she knew there was no amount of tea for us to drink that would magically fix... whatever this was between us.

I blinked and took in the house I had grown up in. It didn’t change. Not since I was born, and it hadn’t changed since I left about a week ago. Yet somehow, something felt different, and I didn’t know what that was.

Dad rarely spent his time at home, so it wasn’t like his absence should affect the energy in the house, but it did, and for some reason, that seemed much more noticeable today.

I followed her into the kitchen and sat on the barstool by the island as she set about to boil the water.

I didn’t know where Masha, her housekeeper, had gone, and I didn’t ask.

What my mom chose to do with her staff was none of my business, but I thought it would be a good idea to call her back, considering the state of everything.

Perhaps that was why everything felt off today because it wasn’t as clean as usual.

Not like it was messy, but this house had always been in top shape, so even a small mess would be noticeable.

I looked around as she placed a mug in front of me, the steam billowing at the top.

I watched it for a beat before turning to her.

“I talked to William.”

I tried not to show any outward reaction to that statement. I was sure William knew of my involvement with the MC by now, and judging by the look in my mom’s eyes, she did too.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. I tilted my head to the side, and when I didn’t say anything, she added, “About your involvement with that... *man*?”

She wrinkled her nose as if she couldn’t bring herself to say Roman’s name.

“Would you have approved?”

She scoffed. “Of course not.”

I nodded. “That’s why.”

“How could you think it would be appropriate?”

I didn’t say anything. Then, “Because he’s a criminal, right?”

She nodded.

“Did you know about Dad?”

Because Roman might be a criminal, but Bennett Hudson wasn’t an innocent man either.

She blinked, and I knew I had shocked her because she wasn’t able to hide her expression fast enough.

She turned away from me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I nodded. My mother could deny it all she wanted, but she knew.

She knew about Dad and William. Roman might be a criminal, but at least he didn’t hide who he was behind a high

position.

Roman might break the law, but he didn't use his position to abuse the system.

Dad had always been so protective of the legal system, too.

And I didn't know how to reconcile that side of him with the side I had just learned about.

"You will not tarnish your father's name with baseless rumors," she said, and for the first time in a long time, there was a hint of emotion in her voice.

I laughed, and her eyes widened in surprise, hearing the emptiness in the sound. "You think it's baseless? There aren't reporters outside wanting to talk to you about Dad's criminal activities because Roman removed Dad's name from the information released to the press. And you knew all about his involvement."

She didn't say anything to that, but I saw her hand clench around her mug before she loosened her hold after noticing my attention.

I took a deep breath. I didn't want to fight with her, but I had to know. "Do you love him?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Daddy. Do you love him? Or did, or whatever."

"He was my husband. Of course, I cared about him."

"Mom, I didn't ask if you cared. Did you love him the way I love Roman?"

"You're a child. What do you know about love?"

"I know I would be a fucking mess right now if I lost Roman. I wouldn't want to get out of my bed. I wouldn't want to see anyone, and I wouldn't be as put together as you are."

"So you're going to vilify me for how I choose to deal with my grief, just because it differs from yours?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. That's why I'm asking you. I—I don't think you guys loved each other."

And I didn't know why it was so important to me, only that it was.

If I had a baby with Roman, that baby would grow up knowing how much we loved each other. There wouldn't be any doubt.

She shook her head and looked away from me.

“Mom.”

“Leave it alone, Ryleigh.”

“I won't think any less of you, no matter the answer.”

She shook her head.

“Mom!”

“How could I love that bastard?” she shouted.

It was so sudden my heart started racing.

“W-What?”

“You want to know if I loved him? How could I love someone so cold? Someone who would put his own greed over his child's safety.”

I stilled. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head. “The man's dead, Ryleigh. Whatever mistakes he might have made are in the past, and I don't want to talk about it with you, so just leave it alone. I don't know if I love him, all I know is that my emotions are over the place, and I am done discussing it.”

She slammed her mug down on the counter and walked away from me.

I stayed for a while, mulling over her words.

What was she talking about?

Dad would never place his greed over me. He couldn't. He gave up his life protecting me, so there was no way... right?

But something niggled in my mind.

A memory I had long forgotten.

Of my parents fighting in the hospital room after my fall off the cliff.

They had always been evasive when I asked about the investigation, and at the time, I didn't care enough to push.

I had been traumatized enough as it was, and I was in a lot of pain that took months to recover from. I didn't want to dwell on it more than I had to.

But they had been arguing about something, and Mom had been angry.

So angry, I didn't think she had ever shown such strong emotions before.

Tidbits of the argument penetrated my mind, but when I thought I had gotten to something that would have made sense to me, all the memories started to blur into the background.

I blinked.

What the hell?

MY HEART SEEMED to pound louder in my chest the closer I got to the cliff.

It was only about a forty-five-minute drive to get here from my parents' house, but I had not been back since the incident.

I didn't even dare think of this place, but here I was, going back to it.

Something nagged at me to find the answers, and I knew I wouldn't be able to rest until I did.

Did my parents know more about my abduction than they led on?

Did they know the man who had taken me?

But that couldn't be right.

My mind rebelled at the very thought, because if they knew, they would have told the police, which would have led to the man's arrest.

My parents couldn't possibly let the man who had done this to me run free...

Could they?

Tears stung my eyes at the thought.

There was just no way.

My hand shook as I parked the car and looked out at the cliff. The scenery was beautiful, and in another lifetime, I probably would have loved it here.

It would have made a nice place to get married at.

Too bad all I saw while sitting in my car was the memory of the clear blue sky above as I lay at the bottom of the cliff, my body broken.

A voice had called out and told me to keep on fighting. At the time, I was sure it had been my imagination.

Still, it had brought me comfort, even after all these years, to think that I might not have been there alone.

I shook away the thought and turned off the engine before getting out.

I didn't even know how I made it to the edge.

I looked down.

It didn't look the way I imagined it would.

It looked... still and harmless.

Though I knew just how dangerous a fall would be.

It was sheer luck that as I was falling, I hit a boulder that protruded from the side. That had been what stopped my body from plummeting any further.

I pulled back from the edge and sat down, looking out to the open space.

I thought coming here would bring back the memories my brain had tried to bury, but all I got were heart palpitations and shaky limbs.

I didn't know how long I sat there, but the more my memories evaded me, the more frustrated I became. I couldn't take it anymore.

I stood up, brushed the dirt off my jeans, and turned around to return to my car when I froze.

A familiar figure stood there, watching me. I didn't know how long he had been standing there.

Another memory niggled at my brain.

“W-What are you doing here?”

ROMAN

I CAME HOME TO AN EMPTY APARTMENT.

Not surprising, since Ryleigh texted this morning saying she was going to see her mom. But I had been feeling restless since I read her text, and I didn't know why that was.

I ran a hand up and down my beard, taking in the emptiness of the apartment without her in it.

I had lived by myself since I was twenty.

I should be used to the silence by now, and for a while, I had been.

I had fucking thrived in the silence, especially whenever it felt like the world was getting too loud, but now, this silence was... deafening.

Ryleigh brought life to the place, and it just didn't feel right that I was here and she wasn't.

It had felt like this when she spent the week at her parent's house after the funeral, and I still didn't know what to do with myself or all the space.

I fucking hated it then, and even though I knew she would be back soon, I fucking hated it now.

My phone rang inside my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Dominic's name flashing on the screen.

I had left early when I realized my mind wasn't focused on the work, but perhaps I should have stayed a little while longer.

I picked up and held the phone against my ear, hoping he would have something for me to do.

“Hey.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Dominic said, “I just got an interesting phone call from Julian.”

“What did he want?” I asked, sitting down as I took note of the seriousness in his tone.

Julian Levine was one of our best and oldest clients. He was part of a group known as the Four Horsemen. Him and three other men resided in Chicago, and they headed and managed FHM Capital, a commercial banking business that was only getting bigger and more powerful with each year that passed.

He usually trusted the King’s Men to do our job and rarely contacted us unless it was absolutely necessary.

He wouldn’t want anything to taint his image, not when he was publicly known as nothing more than a brilliant, *upstanding* businessman.

People didn’t know just how dirty his hands were.

“He wants to know if he should be worried about the Mansen Brotherhood encroaching on the King’s Men’s territory and how it might affect his business.”

“Why would he think that? We cut off the head. The Brotherhood is dead.”

“Did we?” Dominic asked in a low voice. “Did we cut off the head? Or did we just mark up the face and never check to make sure it was dead?”

I shook my head. “Stephen and Samuel Mansen are dead. I fucking shot the fucker at point-blank, and unless they’re Jesus fucking Christ, they wouldn’t be able to come back from that.”

“But what if they’re not the head?”

I tensed. “Fuck that. If it’s not them, then who?”

“Someone smart. Someone working on the inside. The fucking brain behind the operation, who kept his identity

hidden, letting the Mansen brothers take risks by showing off their ugly mugs,” Dominic theorized.

“Not possible,” I argued. We would have known. Wouldn’t we?

“Then who did Julian just talk to, claiming to be the head of the Manson Brotherhood?” Dominic asked.

“Who?”

“He said his name is Brent Ledger. You ever heard of him?”

“Why the hell would I have heard of him?”

The name didn’t even ring a fucking bell, but something about Dominic’s voice gave me a pause.

“Because I looked into him and found out he trained under Bennett Hudson after getting his law degree. He was close with Ryleigh’s family until about seven years ago when he moved to Chicago for a job. That was also around the time the Manson Brotherhood got sloppy, and we had been able to take control.”

I tried to think of what I had been doing seven years ago.

It was around the time I joined the club.

I had cut off the head of Casey Sullivan, a high-ranking officer for the Mansen Brotherhood, who had wormed his way into the King’s Men, working as a rat on the inside. It was pure fucking luck that I caught the fucker on the phone and followed him. It was also how I rose up in rank to VP so quickly.

But he was right.

The King’s Men were nowhere as big then as we were now. And it was all thanks to the sloppy running of the Mansen Brotherhood.

“He’s still alive?” I asked about Brent, though something told me he was.

Dominic confirmed with a grunt. “Alive and spotted recently in Sacramento. He’s also gathering up his men for

war.”

That uneasy feeling I had all day came back in sharp focus, and I put Dominic on speaker while I checked out Ryleigh’s location.

My blood ran cold when I found her.

She wasn’t at her parents’ house like I expected, but at a certain cliff that I hadn’t been to in seven years. Not since I found myself moving back to California.

What was she doing there?

A memory suddenly came back to me.

Not possible... was it?

It had been years, and I could hardly even remember that little girl on the cliff, barely remember the deranged little fucker that had thrown her over, but she had been about fourteen.

I did a quick math in my head.

Ryleigh would have been fourteen at the time, just two weeks from her fifteenth birthday.

“What the fuck?”

“What?” Dominic said sharply.

“I have to go,” I said.

“Go? Go where?”

“Ryleigh’s in trouble, Dom.”

I didn’t know how I knew this, I just did.

Dominic was quiet for a moment. “Send me the location. Micah and I will meet you there.”

I didn’t bother arguing with him. I hung up, quickly texted him Ryleigh’s location, and rushed out of the door, fucking hoping beyond hope that I wasn’t too fucking late.

RYLEIGH

I WATCHED BRENT AS HE SLOWLY WALKED CLOSER TO ME.

There was something off about the way he looked, similar to how he looked when I ran into him at the restaurant, that sent fear running rampant through me.

He was in a suit and tie, but he wasn't as put together as he normally was. It looked like he had lost weight as the unkempt suit hung off his body. His tie was loosened around his neck, his eyes were bloodshot, either from lack of sleep, alcohol, drugs, or some combination of the three, and his hair was disheveled.

I estimated at least three days' worth of stubble covered the lower half of his face.

I barely recognized him.

“Ryleigh, don't you think I should be asking you that? You should know not to go to places like this. It can be dangerous for a girl like you.”

“W-Why is that? Why would it be dangerous?”

He smiled, and I found myself taking a step back, only to stop when I realized I was only a foot away from the cliff.

His nostrils flared, and I didn't know if he looked happy or concerned that I was standing so close to the edge.

“Why don't you come closer so we can talk,” he said.

“Talk?”

He nodded.

I wasn't stupid.

Something told me I should stay as far away from him as possible. I started to move my way to the side, trying to get away from the edge.

He mimicked my movement, step for step.

"I think I have to go," I said, looking past him to where my car was parked. I didn't think I would be able to run to it, not when he was standing right in front of me and closing in.

"Go where? We haven't talked since your dad's funeral. Don't you want to catch up with an old friend? I'm sure Roman Stone can wait, no?"

He knew about Roman, and he hated him, I could tell. The hatred raging in his eyes was so pronounced, and I didn't know if that hate now also extended to me.

He shook his head at me when I didn't say anything.

"You didn't think I knew? Didn't think I would find out that you whored yourself out to that fucker when you're supposed to be mine!"

I shook my head, and he laughed.

"That fucking ex-roommate of yours is good for something other than spreading her legs for money."

I blinked. *Ex-roommate?*

"You mean Angelica?" I asked.

He nodded, something dark crossing over his eyes. "She was supposed to keep an eye on you for me. But that bitch did something to you, didn't she? That's why you moved out without telling them?"

Oh, fuck. How long had he been using her to spy on me?

"She moved into my apartment building because you told her to, didn't she?"

He confirmed my guess when he nodded. "But she was too much of a bitch to you, and couldn't keep a close enough eye

on you. What a useless cunt. I should have fucking killed her when I had the chance.”

I blinked, trying to get over my shock. I didn't like Angelica, but I didn't want anything to happen to her either.

He shifted a bit, and I flinched, aware of every little movement he made. “I'm not yours. I don't even know you anymore.”

And that was the truth. Seven years was a long time for a person to change. I had changed. It seemed Brent had changed—for the worse by the looks of it.

Or perhaps he hadn't changed. Perhaps this was who he had always been, and I just didn't see it.

“But you are mine,” he said. “You've been mine since you proposed, and I accepted.”

I frowned. “I didn't propose...”

My voice trailed off as another memory came through.

“You mean when I was fourteen? And you were twenty-four?”

I had been a kid, and he had been a full-fledged adult, but he had accepted at the time.

He told me he would marry me.

I blinked. “That doesn't count.”

I knew that was the wrong thing to say when his face darkened. “Oh, yes, it does. I brought you here so we could get married, but you were defiant, even back then. You tried to fight me off.”

I had to remind myself to stay standing. That I had to be ready to make a run for it, otherwise I would have fallen over from the shock of his statement.

“That was you? You abducted me.”

He shook his head. “You came willingly, remember? I didn't fucking abduct you.”

I nodded as more memories rose. Of him giving me a black Baccara rose and suggesting we go somewhere fun.

I had been excited because I had a crush on him, and for the first time, it felt like he was paying attention to me, not my dad.

I remembered him telling me he wanted to take me away from my family after we got married because... how fucking *romantic* would it be—his words.

That was when I fought him, and he slapped me, and then...

A stranger showed up.

Someone who saved me.

I couldn't remember what that stranger looked like, but he was warm and nice, and the panic rising in my chest quieted as soon as he appeared.

"Do my parents know?" I asked, my heart feeling like it was breaking.

He nodded. "Your dad suggested I leave California. If I had the choice, I would never have left you, but your dad's career was taking off, and he could have sent me to jail for a very long time. I couldn't abandon you that way."

He was talking like I didn't want him to go to jail. I wished he had.

"I would have killed your bastard dad if we didn't need his connections. But then the fucking King's Men became more powerful, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it from my exile in Chicago. Leaving the Brotherhood to my useless cousins was obviously a mistake. They wouldn't be able to tell their assholes from their fucking mouths without me."

"Brotherhood?" I asked. "You mean the Mansen Brotherhood? The Mansen brothers are your cousins?"

He nodded. "Smart girl."

The Mayor and my dad's connection to the Mansen Brotherhood made sense now. Brent was their way in. That

was why Dad didn't expose him as the man who abducted his daughter. And my mom must have known about this. That's what she was so angry about, but not angry enough to stop him.

A tear rolled down my cheek before I quickly wiped it away.

"We could have been great together. But you had to go and open your legs for the fucking VP of the King's Men. You let him have the cunt that belonged to me!"

Roman had said those words to me before. He told me my pussy belonged to him, but there had always been a warmth to his possessiveness.

Brent was just crazy.

And he thought I belonged to him?

I couldn't stay here any longer.

Without thinking, I sprinted to the left, away from my car but also away from him. I could hear his footsteps behind me, and I knew he was closing in.

I pushed myself harder, my heart pounding against my chest with a fear I had never experienced before. All the while, my memories started coming back, flooding me and drowning out the reality of my surroundings.

I was here on this cliff, Brent chasing after me, but I was back there, as a scared fourteen-year-old kid, not knowing what he had wanted with me or why.

I had been naïve, and when he slapped my face and told me my pussy was his, I didn't understand.

I didn't understand when he groped me, didn't know his intentions or how much further he would have taken it had my stranger not shown up and stopped it.

But the stranger wasn't here to save me this time.

I was alone in the mountains with a crazy man, and I didn't know how to get out of this.

He tackled me to the ground.

I cried out in pain and struggled to get away from him.

But he was just too strong.

He had been taller and stronger than me at fourteen.

That was still the case at twenty-two.

Tears streamed down my face as he flipped me over, grabbed my wrists in one hand, and raised them above my head.

I shook my head when he leaned down and kissed my cheek.

“It’s okay,” he whispered in my ear. “You were probably brainwashed by the big fucker. I’ll just punish you real quick, and all will be forgiven. You will be mine, and we can forget all about Roman fucking Stone. Okay?”

Punishment?

“No!” I screamed out when he stood up and hauled me up with him.

I tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip around my arms painfully.

If I struggled any harder, I knew he would break my arms.

“Let me go, you sick fuck!”

He slapped me.

My ears started ringing, and I tried to blink away the dizziness as he led me to a nearby tree. It was obviously dead since there were no leaves hanging from the branches, and Brent pulled on his tie.

Before I knew it, he had my arms tied to a branch above my head. He tied it so tightly that my feet barely touched the ground.

I wriggled against the bindings but knew it was useless. I tried to pull on it. The fabric stretched but didn’t give way.

“Please just let me go,” I begged, my voice hoarse.

This didn’t feel like this was happening to me. It didn’t feel real, but I knew it was. I was reminded just how real when

the fabric of his tie bit into my skin, the soft material digging in painfully.

I looked at him through blurry eyes, my heart wanting to claw out of my throat when I saw him pull out a knife.

He used it to cut my shirt open.

I tried to move away from him as he tore the tattered fabric off my body, letting it fall to the ground and leaving me in only my jeans and bra.

His lust-filled eyes took me in.

“You are even more beautiful now than you were back then.”

I was going to be sick.

Especially when he started fumbling with his belt.

“Please,” I begged, but he didn’t take off his pants as I thought.

He tested the belt out with a snap. “Ready for your punishment?” he asked, walking behind me.

He didn’t wait for my response.

He pulled back the leather belt and let it slap against my back in one brutal lash.

It made a terrible noise as it hit me, and nausea started to build from the pain.

My back arched as the leather bit into my skin, and I opened my mouth and let out a blood-curdling scream.

ROMAN

I JUMPED OFF MY BIKE WHEN HER CAR CAME INTO VIEW, BUT I couldn't see my girl anywhere.

Where the fuck was she?

I would have tried calling again, but if she hadn't picked up the last dozen calls, I doubt she would answer now.

I pulled on my hair in frustration as I got to the edge of the cliff, hating the way my heart jumped as I looked over it.

I didn't see her there.

I let out a long exhale. I didn't know why I thought she would be at the bottom, but a small part of me had been terrified that I would be confronted with the same image from seven years ago. The broken body of that little girl had haunted me for close to a decade now.

I looked left, then right. If I picked the wrong direction, I could put her in even more danger.

Fuck, which way should I go?

Then I heard it.

The sound had my heart running cold.

Her scream came from the left.

I didn't think. I just took off in that direction.

I pulled out my gun but came to a stop when I saw them.

This image would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Fuck me, but I wanted to burn down the rest of the world to erase all of her pain.

Ryleigh was half-naked and tied to a fucking tree while the bastard took his belt to her. Tears streamed down from her eyes, and her face contorted in pain.

I could already see the welts forming on her back.

My teeth gritted as I tried to calm the storm raging in my heart.

My hand shook as I held my gun up and took aim, my hand on the trigger.

I would only get one shot.

He pulled his arm back, about to take the belt to her again, and Ryleigh braced herself for the pain.

I pulled the trigger.

He screamed as the bullet shot through the hand holding the belt. They both turned to me.

Ryleigh let out a cry of relief, but I didn't allow myself to look at her.

My eyes were focused on my prey, and I was going in for the fucking kill.

The fucking coward ran.

I gave chase, eating up the distance between us easily, considering the pain he must be in.

I tackled him near the edge of the cliff and rolled him around to face me.

He looked up with wide eyes.

“Do you fucking remember me?” I asked.

I might not have recognized Ryleigh as the little girl from the cliff, considering how much she had grown, but I remembered this fucker.

He hadn't changed one bit.

I didn't give him a chance to answer me. I pulled my arm back and pounded my fist into his face.

Blood spurted out from all his fucking orifices, but still, it did nothing to calm my anger.

He wrapped his arms around his head, as if that would fucking protect him.

I stood up and dragged him up with me. He cried as I walked us closer to the edge.

He struggled.

"Please," he begged, and I wondered if my girl had begged him when he threw her over seven years ago. Did she beg before he decided to take his belt to her?

"You escaped my grasp once," I said in a low voice.

I heard someone coming up behind me, and I turned to find Dominic and Micah standing there, watching me. A quick look behind them revealed Kai untying Ryleigh from the tree before wrapping his sweater around her.

I turned back to the bastard. "It won't happen a second time."

I pushed him off the cliff.

His scream of terror was cut off sharply when he hit the ground.

I looked over the edge, and it took me a second to find his body on the bottom. I knew, unlike Ryleigh when he pushed her over seven years ago, he didn't survive the fall, if the position of his neck was anything to go by.

I didn't feel any satisfaction over it.

All I felt was anger that she had been in danger. That she had been hurt. That she could have been taken away from me if I hadn't gotten to her in time.

Micah came up to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. "It's done, little brother. Go to your girl. Take care of her. We'll take care of this mess for you."

I took a deep breath and nodded, taking the key to my bike out of my pocket and handing it to him.

I nodded at Dominic as I passed and walked over to where Ryleigh and Kai were.

I didn't touch her.

I didn't know where to touch her so that I wouldn't hurt her. What was more, I didn't know if she could handle my touch after what she just went through.

Kai moved away from her when he saw me coming, and I grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him close and saying thank you.

He nodded and went to help his dad.

Ryleigh took one look at me and burst into tears. That was all it took.

I rushed forward and pulled her into my arms.

She buried her face in my neck and sobbed quietly against me. Every tear on my skin was like a punch to the fucking gut, and I buried my face in her hair, taking comfort in having her in my arms.

“It's okay, Ryleigh-girl. I got you. I got you, and I will never let you go again. I promise.”

And it was a promise I would keep until my fucking dying breath.

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT, but Ryleigh still wasn't asleep.

I knew she was tired, considering this was the fifth time she'd yawned in as little as thirty minutes, but she refused to close her eyes and rest.

I got it.

I knew she was afraid of the nightmares getting to her, so I didn't tell her to go to sleep.

I let her rest in my arms. I let her feel safe and protected in the cocoon I had made for us, and I stayed awake with her.

The truth was, I didn't think I would be able to fall asleep, even if she could.

The image of her tied to that tree would dance behind my eyelids every time I shut my eyes, and I had a feeling I would have a hard time letting her out of my sight for a while, if ever.

I tightened my arms around her at the thought, prompting her to shift on the bed and turn to face me.

Her gray eyes took me in.

"Can't sleep?" I asked her.

"No."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She smiled a little, and I felt the constriction around my heart loosen marginally at the sight. "Just having you here helps."

"Good," I said, my voice gruff. "I don't think I can let you go. You might get sick of me."

She laughed softly, the sound was like music to my ears. "I don't think that's possible."

I leaned down and kissed her softly.

"Roman?"

"Yeah, baby."

"Do you think my parents love me?"

I pulled back in surprise. "Why would you ask that?"

"They knew about Brent taking me when I was fourteen. They let him get away with it because my dad wanted to keep his connection with the Mansen Brotherhood, and my mom wanted to avoid the scandal and keep her position in society." Her bottom lip trembled. "If someone hurt my child, I would want to kill them."

"But you wouldn't have to because I would skin the bastard alive before you got the chance," I said thickly.

I knew she wasn't ready to have a kid anytime soon, but once she was, I would work to protect them with my fucking life. I would never let the darkness of this world touch them.

She blinked. "I know."

I let my hand move down her body and settled it over her stomach, imagining it swelling with our child. The fucking image alone had the power to undo me.

"Your parents love you. In their own way, and I think you know that."

"But—"

"Your dad put himself in front of flying bullets for you, and your mom was probably trying her best to protect you. She went about it the wrong way, but you know how she can get when it comes to you."

I couldn't believe I was defending those bastards to her, but I knew it was what she wanted to hear.

And perhaps I was right. That they loved her the wrong way, but they still loved her. And I didn't want her to keep hurting because of them.

It was done.

Mayor Gallagher was going to prison for a long time—at least as long as the members of the Savkin Bratva would let him live.

It wasn't our problem anymore, and there would be no more fuckers popping up to claim leadership of the Mansen Brotherhood. No one would dare, not when Micah had made it his personal mission to take out anyone who tried.

I was going to keep her safe for the rest of our lives.

I pulled her in closer to me.

"How much do you remember about that bastard taking you seven years ago?"

"Most of it," she said.

"Do you remember a man showing up that day?"

She pulled back and looked at me with wide eyes. “I didn’t tell you about—”

I held in a smile, waiting for her to connect the dots.

“That was you?” she asked, her eyes widened with incredulity.

I still couldn’t believe it either.

“Did you know? When you decided to stalk me?”

I grinned at that and shook my head. “No, I didn’t know you were that little girl from the cliff. It had been seven years, and you were barely a teenager at that time. You’ve changed.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “What are the odds?”

“Very unlikely.” I grabbed her hand and pulled it up, letting her palm rest against my chest so she could feel my heartbeat.

So she could feel what had once been a dead organ coming alive at her mere presence.

“It’s fate,” I said.

Her lips twisted. “Fate? I don’t believe in fate.”

I raised one eyebrow over her word. “No? You don’t think you were made for me?”

She laughed. “Only you can make something like that sound so possessive.”

I growled, coming in closer to her face. I was so fucking possessive of her, and that wasn’t going to change any time soon.

“You’re mine and only mine. Got it?”

I was going to get her a fucking patch that said, *Property of Roman Stone*, so no other fucker would even think to encroach on what was mine.

She was smiling when she answered, “Got it.”

I leaned down and kissed her hard, and like every time I kissed her, bolts of electricity ran up and down my body.

It was a fucking addictive feeling.

“Never letting you go,” I muttered against her lips.

She nodded against me. “Don’t ever let me go.”

“You’re mine. You’re my property. Got it?”

“Yes, yours,” she said, kissing me back. “Your property.”

I leaned back and pulled her over my body, so she straddled me.

She sat there and looked down at me, like a powerful queen on her fucking throne.

I grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it up and off her, taking in the view of her pebbled nipples, the small dip near her belly, the flare of her hips, and finally, her sweet pussy that was covered by an innocent pair of cotton white panties.

She ground against me, and I could feel my cock hardening from the move.

I reached up and gripped her tits in each hand, squeezing her roughly before pulling away.

The skin turned red from my harsh treatment as she rocked her hips harder against me.

“Fuck.”

I pulled back and slapped her nipple, and she arched in closer to me.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

I had gotten to her, but not soon enough. The bastard had whipped her four times, causing four lines marring the skin on her back. Only one was open and bleeding when I finally got her home, but those four lashes were four lashes too many.

It made me feel murderous looking at it, and I wished I had prolonged the fucker’s death.

“Strong enough to fuck you,” she said, repeating what I had said to her back at the cabin, taking away my murderous thoughts.

I chuckled and cupped her cheek affectionately, pulling her down and kissing her sweetly.

She smiled against my lips.

“Rise your hips up a little,” I said when she pulled away. I fumbled with my boxer briefs when she did as I asked. I kicked them away from me and reached for her panties.

There was a lot of fumbling on our part to remove that little bit of fabric, and the little minx laughed when her knees accidentally banged against my dick. Not hard enough to do any damage, but it wasn't a fucking love tap either.

“I'm so sorry,” she said, her voice still tinged with laughter as she stroked my length with her tiny hands.

I gritted my teeth when I felt her thumb move over the tip, and I grabbed her side, squeezing to get her attention. She jumped from the move and looked over at me.

“Straddle me,” I said. “Take my dick and put it inside you. I want you to fucking ride me.”

That took away all of her amusement, and she climbed back on me, her legs on either side of my hips.

She pushed up slightly and grabbed my cock, directing it to her entrance, and sank down on me.

I closed my eyes as pleasure moved through me.

Fuck. She felt so good.

She moaned out my name and moved in tiny, unpracticed movements.

Her inexperience made this no less amazing, and I couldn't fucking wait until she gained more skill and confidence.

But for now, this was more than enough.

“Fuck me, baby,” I said. “Take what you need.”

“Oh, God.”

She fucked me, looking glorious as she took what she wanted. I was moments away from coming.

I reached my hands up for her tits and played with her nipples, pulling on the nubs harshly and watching as they puckered beneath my touch.

She rotated her hips faster the harder I played with her.

My girl liked it when I abused her nipples, so I pulled her down until her tits were close enough to suck one into my mouth. Her eyes rolled back, and her movements became almost frantic, sloppy.

She moaned on top of me, her nails scratching down my chest, leaving a trail of red in its wake, and I sucked harder.

“Roman!” she screamed.

I let her go, and she straightened, moving backward and presenting me the sweet view of her front.

My eyes took in her tight little pussy as she grated her hips up and down.

“How close are you?” I asked as she pushed her palms on my abs to give herself more leverage.

Fuck. I wanted to close my eyes and take in the feel of her like this.

It felt so good.

“Close,” she whimpered. “So close.”

I reached over for her clit, and I rubbed over the swollen bud with my thumb, quickening my movements every time she sank back down on me.

“Then come with me,” I said, when I was close.

She nodded.

“Come.”

She screamed out her release, possibly waking up all the neighbors.

I quickly followed after her, letting my cum shoot out from inside her pussy and making a beautiful mess.

She fell on top of me afterward, her chest pushed out against mine as she tried to catch her breath.

I wrapped my arms around her and held her close, taking in her scent, the warmth of her body.

Fuck.

I couldn't lose her.

Not now.

Not ever.

“My greatest obsession,” I whispered.

EPILOGUE

RYLEIGH

I CLOSED MY EYES AND ENJOYED THE FEEL OF ROMAN'S LIPS against my clit.

He lapped over the swollen nub, humming to himself over the taste and taking more of it into his mouth.

My legs muscles clenched, and my toes curled from the sensation alone.

He had been at it for over an hour, lazily eating me out as if he couldn't get enough. As if he was addicted to it—to me.

I had forgotten how many times I'd come, and at this point, I couldn't bring myself to care, considering I was on the verge of coming again.

Tremors wracked my body, and my head rolled back against the pillow. My hips moved back and forth as I prepared for another intense orgasm.

“Roman!” I screamed when he pushed me over the edge.

He smiled against me, his lips slowing as he gave me time to come back to my senses.

He placed a kiss on my center, which had my lips twitching in a smile before he pulled back and looked at me.

“Now, that is the perfect way to start the day,” he said with a wink.

I took in a deep breath, smiling a little.

I SMOOTHED my hands down the fabric of my dress as I sat on the passenger side of Roman's truck.

He looked sideways at me.

“Okay?”

I could only nod.

We were on our way to Dominic's home.

I had never been to Dominic's house before. I didn't know what to expect, but there were various scenes running rampant through my mind. None of them were good.

Roman seemed amused by this.

“Whatever you're imagining inside your head, I promise you, it ain't that. We're going over to celebrate Braxton's twelfth birthday.”

I was surprised when Roman told me Dominic had another son. Today was his birthday party.

The guest list mainly included high-ranking club members, Braxton's friends, and their parents.

I nodded.

“I'm sure it'll be fine.”

It had been three months since the day at the cliff.

The nightmares still haunted me, but it was lessening with time, especially because I had Roman with me.

I still bore the scars of Brent's lashes on my back, something I hated. But Roman had made it his mission to show me just how beautiful he found me, and he had started the tradition of kissing each one every morning as we got ready for our day.

The action never failed to bring tears to my eyes, and today had been no different.

Micah made good on his threat and annihilated the remaining members of the Mansen Brotherhood.

Mayor Gallagher had also been tried and convicted to twenty years without parole.

Not that it mattered much, considering about a week after his sentencing, another prisoner killed him over some sort of dispute.

There was still an internal investigation taking place, but I tried not to think about it.

I didn't want to, considering the man in question had been a fixture in my life since I was a little girl.

I didn't know how my mom was feeling about it either. I didn't talk to her all that often.

She had decided to sell the house she shared with my dad and had moved to Arizona, far from the society she had so deeply entrenched herself in, and away from the people she had wanted to impress so badly.

Our relationship wasn't great, but it wasn't broken.

We had disagreements that neither of us was willing to voice, and I suppose that was how I wanted it.

I didn't want to hear about her disapproval of my relationship with Roman, and she didn't want to hear about my feelings toward how she had prioritized her place in society over my safety.

Had she gone to the police about Brent all those years ago, what happened at the cliff wouldn't have happened.

Roman pulled up to a nice neighborhood, and I looked around in shock.

"This is where Dominic lives?"

Roman laughed. "Surprised, aren't you? He wanted to provide a stable environment for his kids. Kai didn't even know about the club until he was thirteen and got curious about his old man's job."

I looked around.

All I saw was quiet scenery, white picket fences, and money. The nearest neighbor was about a mile away.

It was the most idyllic version of the American dream, and the rough president of the King's Men MC lived here.

What the fuck.

It was like stepping into an alternate universe.

Roman gently tapped my chin with his finger. "You might want to stop looking like that."

I quickly contorted my face to a neutral expression.

He shook his head and laughed at me, climbing out of the truck.

I watched as he walked around the front of the truck and came to my side, opening the door for me and helping me out.

I smiled my thanks before—almost as if he couldn't help himself—he leaned down and placed a breathtaking kiss on my lips.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him close, not wanting him to pull back too soon.

I didn't think there would ever be a time when I didn't crave him.

A cough startled us apart, and I looked over to see Kai standing there, amusement in his eyes.

"This is a kid's party, so how about we keep things PG, yeah?"

I pushed Roman away, my cheeks flaming as I made my way over to my friend.

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly.

Back when I was in school, I would have never in a million years thought that Kai Madden would be my closest friend, but here we were.

Plus, I didn't think he had many people close to him besides the guys from the club.

I was right in my original assessment of him—he was a lonely prince.

I wanted to take some of that loneliness away from him.

“How are you?” he asked, pulling away from me.

I smiled. “Good. I’m excited to meet your little brother.”

Kai grinned, tapping my nose affectionately. “And he’s excited to meet you.”

“Kai?” Roman asked from behind me.

“Yeah, old man?”

I giggled over the nickname.

“You want to let go of my girl before I kick your ass, kid?”

Kai laughed, but he let me go, shaking his head.

Roman pulled me right back into his arms.

I stood on my tiptoes and buried my face in his neck, breathing in his scent for a little reassurance before we made our way inside.

Inside the house was nothing as I had expected.

It was nothing like my childhood home. Not at all.

It was warm, chaotic, and happy.

A cute little boy was running around playing tag with his friend.

“That’s Braxton,” Roman said close to my ear.

I smiled a little when Kai joined in the fun and carried Braxton over his shoulder, causing the boy to erupt in happy laughter.

I looked around the room and found Dominic standing next to Micah, a look of paternal love in his eyes as he watched his boys.

My heart hurt over the sight, and my hand automatically curved over my belly.

Roman couldn't see the movement, as he was standing behind me, but it seemed he could sense what I needed then, because he moved in closer to me, resting his chin on my shoulder.

I snuggled in closer to him.

"I love you," I whispered to him over the noise.

He heard me, though, because he turned his face to the skin of my neck and gently kissed me there. "I love you."

BY SIX O'CLOCK, the party was in full swing, and I was sitting on the porch, watching Roman interact with everyone.

I smiled when he laughed, unable to stop myself from basking in his happiness.

I knew things hadn't settled yet. There was still a lot of shit, and with the *business* he was in, there would no doubt always be new problems on the horizon.

But for now, I was enjoying the peace with my love, and the happiness surrounding us.

Someone came behind me, and I had to work hard not to jump at his mere presence.

He handed me a beer. I looked down at it and wrinkled my nose, though I didn't say anything.

I knew this was Micah's version of a peace offering.

I looked over at him.

It still amazed me how he and Roman could look so alike and yet so different at the same time.

But I knew a little bit about their history now.

I knew Micah had to act as Roman's protector for most of their lives, and that didn't just stop, even though they were both grown men.

I wasn't as scared of him as I was before.

In fact, I found myself wishing he would be able to find his own happiness one day.

“You’re gawking,” he said.

I startled and looked away from him. “You’re the one sitting next to me. Excuse me if I’m staring a bit.”

The corner of his lips curved up with the tiniest hint of a smirk.

“I think you’re going to do all right in this family.”

I shook my head. “Thank you. Because I was totally looking for your approval.”

He let out a slight chuckle. “Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I looked over at him, my mouth hanging wide open.

He turned to me, his silver eyes dancing.

“Did you just... make a joke?”

He winked, and I had to stop myself from reaching out to see if this was actually Micah and not some look-alike.

“I’m just saying. I didn’t think you would be good for him. And I would have killed you the moment I got the chance.”

I shivered and put the beer down. Micah eyed the move but didn’t say anything. I faced forward, not wanting him to see the expression on my face.

Roman found my eyes then, and he looked between his brother and me curiously, though he didn’t seem worried.

He should be because I was right.

I knew Micah had looked at me like he wanted to kill me.

“Don’t worry too much about that now. You’re part of the family. And I always protect my family. So that means I will always protect you.” He paused, and I turned to look back at him in surprise. He just called me family, and I knew, judging from the light in his eyes, that he meant it. His gaze traveled down to my hand, once again curved over my belly. I

stiffened. “You and my future niece or nephew. Congratulations.”

I couldn’t say anything to that.

“I’m guessing my little brother hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

I had only found out I was pregnant yesterday. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, considering I came home one day to find Roman flushing my birth control down the toilet.

The fucker just grinned and looked me straight in the eyes as he did it too.

“By being observant. You’ve been clutching your belly protectively since we got here, and you haven’t touched a drop of alcohol.”

“So the beer was just a test?” I asked, nodding to the cup I had set down.

He laughed. “That’s apple juice.”

“Oh.”

He tugged on my hair playfully, surprising me. I picked the drink back up and took a sip, savoring the sweet and tangy taste on my tongue.

Micah stood up and walked away, shooting one last smile, which I thought was... charming.

Micah could be quite handsome if he smiled more.

Something told me that wouldn’t be the case.

WE CAME BACK to the apartment a little after ten o’clock that night, which wasn’t surprising, considering this was a kid’s birthday party.

Roman grabbed my waist and pulled me into him, kissing me fiercely as soon as I closed the door.

“Fuck,” he said. “I have been wanting to do this all day.”

I giggled against his lips. “We had sex this morning. And you spent an hour eating me out. Haven’t you had enough?”

“Never,” he said seriously. “I will never have enough of you, so get your sweet ass into the bedroom, strip off your clothes, lie back on the bed, and show me that wet pussy of mine.”

Said pussy clenched from his words.

Pregnancy was really messing with my hormones because I found myself even more horny than usual, and I didn’t think that could be possible.

“Wait,” I said when he turned me around and smacked my ass.

He stilled.

“I have something to tell you.”

“Yeah, baby?”

I smiled. This might not be a good time, but I didn’t know when it would be. I had wanted him to be the first to know, but now that Micah had guessed it, I didn’t want to wait.

“What would you like?” I blurted out.

“For you to show me your pussy and beg me to lick it.”

I shook my head, though I could already feel the effect of his words on my panties. “Roman.”

He let out a sigh. “What would I like what?”

“A boy or a girl. I mean, I know we don’t get to decide these sorts of things, but I heard men always have a preference.”

“What?” he asked, his voice low.

Tears sprang to my eyes. I didn’t think I would cry when I told him, but here I was. I grabbed his hand and placed it on my belly.

“Do you want this baby to be a boy or a girl?” I asked, my voice thick.

He stumbled a little, and I was afraid he might fall, but he seemed to right himself quickly enough before he took me in with shock-filled eyes.

“You’re pregnant?”

I nodded, happy tears trailing down my cheeks.

“Are you really surprised?” I asked with a laugh.

He closed his eyes and whispered, “Fuck.”

When he opened them again to look at me, they were suspiciously wet.

“I’m going to be a dad?”

“You’re going to be a dad,” I repeated, my voice thick.

He didn’t say anything for a beat. I watched in surprise as my giant of a man knelt down on the floor in front of me, burying his face into my belly, and crying tears of joy.

He wrapped his arms around my middle, and he held onto me tightly.

I leaned over and hugged him, soothing my hand over his broad shoulders.

I hadn’t known how he would react to the news, but I knew he wouldn’t have reacted negatively, which confirmed it.

He wanted this child with me.

I had no doubt in my mind he was going to be the best dad.

Fiercely protective, freely loving, with just enough strictness to give our child the structure he or she would need in such a chaotic world.

It was all I could have asked for.

end.