



SNAKE

PIPER STONE

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Snake

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

I've enjoyed being able to bring the Montana Bad Boys back, giving them new life in the Missoula Bad Boys series. But this wouldn't have happened without the encouragement of so many of my fabulous readers, who asked for Snake's story to be written.

However, there was one lovely lady in particular who inspired me when I wasn't certain if his story was needed. Thank you, Chasity Gosnell Mahala, for all your words of wisdom and love for my Bad Boys.

My heroine was named after you.

PROLOGUE



*B*rothers in arms.

Bad boys, cowboys, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and
Marines.

We'd been labeled delinquents, incapable of redemption.

And we'd gone our separate ways.

Heroes. Monsters. Sinners and saints.

Above all we were men honoring our country even while a
terrible secret loomed just below the surface.

There were those who would never forget, praying we'd never
return.

Others would stop at nothing to prevent us from doing so.

We were intent on finding salvation by protecting those we
loved.

But demons from a single act would never allow us to forget.

Six men determined to right the wrongs from our past.

Six men prepared to do what it took.

No matter the cost.

Together in life.

Together in death.

CHAPTER 1



S *nake*

“Jesus Christ,” Mustang muttered as he dove behind the overturned tank beside me, smoke and fire billowing from the burned-out hull, the acrid stench suffocating.

The rapid pop of automatic weapons came from every direction. This was nothing but a shitstorm.

“The fuckers knew the minute we arrived,” I snarled. The second I darted my head around the side, another spray of gunfire erupted. They’d come out of nowhere, the trap unlike anything any of us had experienced so far. But there was no doubt our unit had been set up.

“Where the hell are they coming from?” Reaper hissed as he rubbed sweat and dirt from his face. The sound of gunfire was deafening.

I shook my head, fighting to catch my breath. We’d been asked to check on the location, never expecting a fucking setup. Some asshole in our company either hadn’t done his job or our unit had been betrayed.

“We’re getting out of here,” Hawk yelled. “It’s too hot.”

“Hot ain’t the word for it,” Vader snapped. “He’s right. We’re sitting ducks where we are.”

As a flash caught my eye, I reacted automatically, firing off several shots, the bullets catching three of the insurgents at

close range. The force pitched them back by several feet, but I kept firing, anger tearing through me. As blood sprayed from two of the three men, I watched as if in slow motion as they tumbled to the dirt. There were dozens more where they came from.

A lone enemy soldier burst through the smoky haze, his weapon pointed at Vader. I didn't hesitate, my training taking over. The three shots issued weren't enough for me. It would never be enough.

"Thanks, buddy," Vader breathed.

"Goddamn it. The asshole almost had us. There are more of them behind that building. I'm going to chop them into pieces." Scorpion shook his head. "You coming with me, bud?" He grinned as he glanced in my direction. The two of us were thrill chasers, refusing to back down no matter what we were forced to face.

"Get back to the chopper," Hawk commanded. "Now!"

"Party pooper," Vader said as he laughed. We all knew the score. This was one fight we couldn't win.

When another flash drew my attention, I blinked several times, uncertain what the hell I was seeing. "Whoa." Was that a kid? There was no way. The entire area had been ravaged by warfare. No one could survive out here.

Scorpion pushed my arm. "Let's go."

"There's someone out there."

Another round of gunfire drowned out my words, but my gut told me I was right. I inched forward, scanning the area. The smoke cleared just enough and when I squinted, I knew I was right. It was a goddamn young girl. Oh, hell, no.

"Come on, Snake. Hawk's right," Mustang screeched over the din of firepower, immediately trailing after the others.

"I'll be right there." I couldn't allow an innocent girl to be caught in the crossfire. Without thinking, I took off running.

"Get back here!"

I heard Hawk's voice, but nothing would prevent me from saving her life.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Gasping, I jerked up, thrashing my arms. I was suffocating, unable to focus. I pitched forward, dropping onto something hard.

“No. No!”

Woof! Woof!

I scrambled backwards, trying to find my weapon, my heart thudding to the point all I could hear were echoes. They were everywhere. Oh, God. The girl. She...

As I sensed a warm presence, rage tore through me. Kill. Kill...

Then I felt wetness against my face. What the...

Woof!

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to control my breathing. When I opened them again, I stared into the most beautiful brown eyes. “Apollo,” I whispered then wrapped my arm around his neck. “It’s you, buddy.” My God. I’d been ready to kill my dog. Blinking, it took a few seconds before I could focus. Then I realized I wasn’t in the desert any longer. There was no war to fight, no bloodbath to endure.

Other than the one inside of me.

Half laughing, I leaned my head against the side of the bed, ravaging despair tearing through me. I’d thrown myself to the floor because of the terrifying nightmare. “Third one this week, buddy. They’re getting worse.” I was covered in sweat, every muscle aching. Especially my leg. I rubbed it for a few seconds, grousing over every aspect of my life.

Apollo sat down on his haunches, his tail thwapping against the hardwood floor.

“Don’t look at me that way,” I grumbled and struggled to stand. As a jabbing pain slammed down the length of my leg, I

fell onto the bed face down. I fisted the covers, pushing my way to a sitting position. I refused to be a goddamn invalid. I'd ignored the pain this long. I could keep doing so indefinitely. "Besides, I could end up hurting you." My violent tendencies were also getting worse, my anger a restless beast clawing at my skin on a constant basis. I glared at the cane, refusing to use it. The idiots from the hospital had told me I'd never walk again. I'd proven them wrong.

Purposely ignoring the heart-pounding throb, I lumbered toward the bathroom, the pain and stiffness stealing my breath.

For some crazy reason, my beautiful baby boy had never lost patience with me, and I was thankful he remained by my side. Even when I acted like a dickhead, which was happening more frequently. I wouldn't give a shit about anything if I didn't have him. Exhaling, I forced myself to stand, my muscles stiffer than usual. I needed a huge mug of coffee.

No, what I needed was a shot of bourbon. What the hell. I'd have both. It was the best way to start another day in paradise. Half laughing, I managed to throw on a tee shirt and stumble into the bathroom, turning on the water. After dousing my face, I grabbed the toothbrush, piling on too much toothpaste. Then I made the mistake of glancing in the mirror.

I no longer recognized the man staring back at me.

I rolled the bristles across my teeth as I narrowed my eyes, finally touching the ragged scars I'd been left with.

"You're lucky to be alive," I'd been told by at least a dozen people.

"You should be thankful you made it back home," another four or five had told me.

"You have your whole life ahead of you." Even my father had told me that. The problem was I had no idea what that life entailed. How many times had I shoved a pistol into my mouth? I wasn't scared of dying. In fact, I relished the thought. I just didn't want to leave Apollo alone after everything he'd been through.

After spitting and rinsing, I grabbed a towel, wiping my face. “Who the hell are you?” It was funny how my reflection never answered.

Chuckling, I raked my hands through my hair then headed to the kitchen, popping a pod into the Keurig machine. “You hungry, boy?”

He cocked his head as he always did when he thought I was being stupid. I grabbed his bowl, filling it with food then putting it on the floor. He woofed in appreciation before dropping his head into the bowl. At least I could make someone happy. After adding milk to my coffee, I debated the bourbon. What the fuck? I had nothing to do today.

Like every other day.

After pouring a hefty amount, I inhaled the aroma before taking a gulp, and almost felt like a human being again. Then I stared at the inside of my cabin, the place needing a lot of work, which I’d promised myself I’d do a dozen times in the months since my return. There always seemed to be an excuse to push off doing anything until the next day. Then the next. I was lucky to have the place, cheap enough I could afford it off disability.

Get a job.

That’s what my father would tell me the next time he called. Maybe I wasn’t ready. No, I preferred staying behind closed doors, refusing to go outside unless it was necessary. If it wasn’t for the few horses I owned, I likely never would. I took another sip, feeling pretty good for the first time in a couple of days. Maybe I’d venture out to go on a horseback ride today.

What else? Is that all you’re going to do for the rest of your life?

Fuck the inner voice. I was content for the moment, something new and different.

Then my peace was interrupted by a knock on the door. What the hell? If it was some idiot trying to sell me something, they’d get my full wrath.

Apollo went nuts, barking up a storm as he raced toward the sound.

Grunting, I took another swig of coffee, hoping whoever it was would just go away. After a few seconds, that's exactly what I thought had happened.

Until the asshole pounded on the door a second time.

I slammed the mug on the counter, not caring liquid had sloshed over the side. As I took long strides, I prepared myself to give the intruder a raft of shit. The moment I flung open the door, Apollo jumped up just like a good boy, almost knocking over the idiot who had the misfortune of knocking on the door. The poor soul had no idea they'd be entering into a lion's den.

"Hey there, boy. You're a cutie pie. Oh, yes, look at you."

Wait a minute. It was a woman's voice, the soft lilt sending a shower of electricity right through me. That hadn't happened in a very long time. Still, I didn't want whatever she was selling, no matter what she looked like.

"Down, boy. Get over here, Apollo," I barked, my tone gruff intentionally. "You have the wrong house, lady." He was far too enamored with her, his tail swirling in a perfect circle.

"I assure you that I'm no lady and I'm never wrong about where I am or the reason why."

There was an edge to her voice and I'd yet to meet her. It usually took people at least fifteen minutes before they expressed their hatred for me. I was filled with dark amusement at my inability to come back with a biting comment.

That also never happened.

I could barely see her, but it was obvious Apollo was happy. He never reacted that way to strangers. The visitor bent over, patting him on the head, making cooing noises. Her attention to my pup wasn't going to do her any good. I was still ready to launch into her for invading my privacy without being invited.

Until she stood and I was peering into the most gorgeous set of green eyes I'd ever seen, the dim light unable to shadow how

large and luminescent they were. I was momentarily paralyzed, trying to figure out something to say. Another shot of electricity soared through every muscle going straight to my cock. I'd never had this kind of reaction around any woman. She was so gorgeous I turned my face away, hiding the ugliness of what I'd become. My breathing was more rapid than usual, anger sweeping through me, but it had nothing to do with the fact she'd dropped on my doorstep.

I hated myself.

However, there was no denying I was one horny man, my cock aching from the sight of her voluptuous body alone. I had mental images of all the nasty things I wanted to do to her.

Peeling away her tight blue jeans, revealing the luscious prize underneath.

Feasting on her swollen pussy lips, licking her furiously until her sweet juice covered my tongue.

Only after she came in my mouth would I fuck her like the savage man I'd turned into.

Jesus. I had to get my head out of my ass. I shouldn't be thinking about fucking her, but she had wide eyes of innocence that begged for corruption by one big, gruff Marine.

She coughed on purpose, forcing me to glance in her direction once again. "Excuse me. The clock is ticking."

What clock?

"Whatever you want, I'm not interested. You're gonna need to leave," I told her.

"You're not a very nice man, are you?" I'll be damned if she didn't take a step forward. There was a formidable quality about her that was appealing, even if her haughty attitude was off-putting. Still, nothing a good roll in the hay wouldn't cure.

"Nope. Just do yourself a favor and get out now."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." She punctuated the six words with a sharpness that I hadn't heard since being in the service.

And I didn't like it one bit.

Who did she think she was, coming into my place with an attitude?

“Why the hell not?” Christ. I sounded like an impetuous child.

Dressed in faded blue jeans and a tight red tee shirt, the thick leather bomber jacket she wore was the same color as her cowboy boots. In her arms was some kind of rubbery roll, her eyes piercing through mine holding more than just a hint of frustration.

“Because this is exactly where I’m supposed to be. Are you Corporal Ricardo Garcia?” she asked dryly as she closed the door behind her, determined to come into my space. Who the hell did she think she was?

“I was. I’m not that man any longer. And you are?” Let me guess. The hospital had sent some two-bit shrink to tell me that I needed counseling on a regular basis. Fuck that. I’d get through this like I had everything else in my life as of late. Alone.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, you asshole.

“I’m Nurse Garrington. However, you can call me your savior.” She dropped the roll onto one of the chairs then immediately removed her jacket, allowing me to see the full degree of her hourglass figure, her aroused nipples poking through the thin fabric making my mouth water.

The dim light couldn’t hide her stunning features, my pulse continuing to increase. I had difficulty taking my eyes off her breasts, my cock pressing hard against my jeans. She cocked her head, obviously realizing all the filthy thoughts that were running through my mind. As she breathed in and out, I took a few seconds to appreciate the lushness of her mouth. Her lips were soft and rosy, far too tempting to devour. No matter who she was. That wouldn’t be in my best interest.

“Ain’t no one going to be my savior.”

“Well, that’s going to depend on you, Corporal.” She glanced around the room then purposefully walked toward the double window behind the couch, opening the blinds.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Wincing, I purposely turned away squinting, fighting the rage that was swirling to the surface.

“We need more light, Corporal.” Her answer was matter of fact and it was apparent she couldn’t care less about my personal space.

“Don’t call me corporal. That was a freaking lifetime ago.”

“Then pray tell, what do I call you? Mr. Grumpy works for me.”

“Excuse me?” She’d just challenged me? I tensed all over again, cocking my head to keep from spewing words I might regret.

“Would you prefer Angry Beast?”

My God, the gall of the woman. I had no comeback. Again. Shaking my head, I looked away.

“It’s Snake.”

“Hmm... The nickname suits you. Slithering here and there.” Her eyes opening wide, she sighed and shook her head. I watched in fascination as a warm flush crept along her jaw, slowly trickling up both cheeks. When she spoke again, the tone was less acidic. “That was shitty of me, and I apologize.”

I’d already gotten under her skin. Good. Maybe she’d hightail it out of my place.

“It’s my call sign, but you wouldn’t know anything about what goes on in the military,” I huffed, allowing the irritation I felt to come across loud and clear. Of the four shrinks I’d seen for maybe a day and a half, only one had any knowledge of horrors inflicted during times of war. I could tell she was no different, a precious princess who’d taken up a cause to make herself feel useful in life.

“Why is that?” Her arrogant defiance had returned.

“Because you haven’t spent a single day in the military, facing dangerous situations before breakfast every day.”

She said nothing, which meant I was right.

I took a single step closer, instantly blown away by her light fragrance, the hint of citrus and something intoxicatingly floral assaulting my senses. “Yeah, you heard me. There were times that I couldn’t stomach eating the crap food we were supplied. The stench was just too ripe. And of course, seeing the images of men ripped to pieces, their intestines hanging out wasn’t appetizing either.”

She glared at me dryly, obviously figuring out what I was trying to do. Then her expression cooled, a slight sparkle appearing in her eyes.

“I’ll give you an A for effort, Snake, but I don’t have a weak stomach or thin skin. It doesn’t matter what you say to me or how you try and run me off. I’m. Not. Leaving.”

Goddamn, the woman was tenacious.

Look at her nipples. They’re hard as little pebbles. Why don’t you go over to her and rip off that tight little tee shirt she has on?

Hissing, I turned my head, restraining the beast inside of me.

“What the hell are you doing here and just who are you? I ain’t sick.”

“If you’re looking for my qualifications, I’m a licensed registered nurse with a degree in physical therapy. If you want to be technical, I’m a few courses shy of getting my psychology degree.” She dared to walk closer, her eyes never leaving mine, the bite in her voice a reminder the woman was full of venom.

Apollo whined, wagging his tail as if enjoying every moment of our caustic banter. Well, the pup better get prepared. Things were about to get heated. “I don’t need a shrink, lady. So just go back the way you came.”

“Let’s see,” she said as she crowded my space, tapping her long manicured nail against her lips, which of course forced me to stare at them longingly.

I huffed in response.

“What do I know? I know you are a highly decorated Marine who served in Afghanistan. I know you were captured and held for several months, burned in a horrific fire. When you were finally rescued, you had no memory and the wrong dog tags plastered around your neck. You remained in a hospital overseas for months of recovery, which unfortunately didn’t include regaining your memory of the incident or of your true identity. Only after a United States senator made it her mission to track down what happened to you was it discovered that you’d been listed as missing in action then deceased, finally returning to your hometown a hero. How am I doing so far?”

My God, the audacity of the woman hadn’t just gotten under my skin. Her attitude had just pushed my last ounce of patience.

“You know jack shit.”

She threw out her arm. “Allow me to continue.” Now the little woman stood within a few inches of me. When she placed her hands on her hips, I couldn’t help gazing down the length of her luscious body one more time, the earlier filthy thoughts bordering on vile. I wanted to strip away her clothing, revealing the prize underneath. Then I wanted to drive my cock so deep inside her sweet little pussy she screamed out my name. The sinful thoughts forced my cock to twitch, an ache developing.

“What I just spouted off could be read in any military file. But here’s what else I know about you, Corporal Garcia. You’re rude, arrogant, insufferable, and selfish. You think just because you were wounded serving your country that you get a pass, allowing you to be an asshole and an introvert. You missed two appointments with me. Two!” She accentuated her terse words by holding up two fingers, shoving them in my face. “But that was only after you tossed aside two other very qualified physical therapists who subsequently refused to work with you. They called you difficult, impossible, and not worth their time.”

“Then why did you bother?”

“Because I’m not a quitter. Because everyone who sacrificed themselves to protect our country deserves to have the best life they can.”

Her glare continued and I shifted my gaze down her long, shapely legs, forced to swallow given all the lurid thoughts running through my mind. It took everything I had to remain in control.

“However, in my book your behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. I spent years in school, working two jobs while studying, volunteering to go overseas to help wounded soldiers. As far as your comment about seeing a warzone, you’re wrong again.”

“Oh, yeah? Let me guess, you took a tour of a facility overseas, which had been cleaned of the blood and gore before you got there.”

I knew I was pushing all the buttons, but I was beginning to enjoy toying with her, seeing what she was made of.

She rubbed her chin, glancing off for a few seconds before answering. “Oh, no. I was there for almost two years. Let’s see. While serving in the same war you did, I was shot, almost killed twice, and thought I would never make it home. You see, our medical station was bombed, three of the best people I’d ever known blown to bits like you said in front of my eyes.”

When moisture slipped into her lovely eyes, I’d never felt so much like a shit in my life. I wanted to say I was sorry, but I couldn’t piece the words together.

“Not that you’ll care in the least, but I spent some time in a hospital myself. But I had the determination and strength to make it back home so I could resume my life. So, here’s how we’re going to play it, *Corporal Garcia*. I’m going to lead you through these exercises, and I’m not leaving until I do. I’m going to help you get better.”

Her words hung in the air, crushing in on me like a tight vise. And my cock just got harder, my mind whirling around

grabbing her by the arm, dragging her over my knee for her insolence. This was my home. Mine.

But dear God, I wanted her so badly I could barely think straight.

My breathing ragged, I was flabbergasted and couldn't put three words together that would make sense. No one had talked to me like that since I left the military. At least not unless they wanted a hard kick in the teeth.

When I didn't say anything, she took two long strides, grabbing the mat then making herself right at home by shoving aside the coffee table.

"Do you always treat your patients this way?" I managed. I remained shocked at my initial reaction to her. My cock hardening, my blood pumping, and my fingers itching to wrap around her long, dark curls just before I yanked her closer. It had been disturbing, visceral, and had immediately put me on the defensive. That normally pushed people away. Not her. Now, as she tossed me a look over her shoulder, I made a promise to myself that the feisty woman would belong to me in every way.

"Only when their wit and charm threaten to bowl me over." She glowered at me then looked away, as if dismissing me.

I fisted my hand, flabbergasted that she'd managed to silent the angry asshole inside of me.

"I suggest you get into some comfy clothes, Corporal. I need you as flexible as possible. Then we are going to work and work hard. I'm going to do things to your body that will make you cry like a baby. But when I'm finished with you, you're going to scream out in satisfaction."

Lady, you have no idea what you just did. I'm going to tie you down and fuck your brains out. But only after I feast on your pussy.

I almost said the words out loud. Fuck. She was a tiny thing against my six-foot three-inch frame. I could crush her with a single hand, yet she had no issue challenging me.

“I’m waiting and in case you haven’t figured it out, my time is valuable. Get moving,” she said harshly.

I had become insufferable. At least that’s what my buddies who’d served alongside me said. What the hell did I care? However, the woman standing in front of me had a viperous tongue to rival her beautiful exterior. That told me she had a deadly poison swirling in that gorgeous body of hers, ready to strike at any given chance.

She glared at me with those sultry eyes of hers and I gritted my teeth.

Then she pointed toward the hallway. “Now!”

While a part of me wanted to toss her out the door after giving her one of my usual nasty retorts, what I actually did surprised the fuck out of me.

I headed toward the bedroom to change.

CHAPTER 2



*E*hasity

Oh, my God. What had I actually agreed to?

As soon as I'd walked into the brute's ranch, I'd been swept away by Corporal Garcia's good looks. His large frame was in near perfect muscular shape, which I hadn't anticipated given his time out of the military and his lack of interest in any physical therapy. From my standpoint, his chiseled facial features had been sculpted by a god. I was happy that my expectations had been shattered.

Then he'd opened his mouth and the extreme, yet inappropriate feeling of attraction had burst into flames, crumbling to ash within seconds. Men had a distinct way of crushing all the sinful thoughts women had by simply opening their mouths.

He'd not only acted like a bully, he'd also patronized me with his words and his gestures. That never boded well for my brusque personality. Perhaps I'd been too hard on him, but at this point, I'd already lost my patience. *Snake* wanted me to crumble, running away with my tail between my legs, which I refused to do.

The man was all fire and brimstone, pushing every one of my boundaries. The fact he smelled like sandalwood and a heavy spritz of citrus had pulled me into a strange vacuum. The last time a man had rendered me speechless for more than ten seconds was the single date I'd experienced in high school.

Chuckie Boy's idea of a date had been to drive me to the outdoor stadium, trying to get into my pants near the fifty-yard line. Kicking him in the balls hadn't been my finest moment, but during the next few years, I'd thought of the incident fondly during difficult times.

I took several deep breaths, trying to control my nerves and my heavy breathing. Thank God I hadn't started perspiring in front of the man. That would have given him ammunition to continue treating me like shit. I'd been warned about him by four professionals who'd told me there was no way he could be rehabilitated. I'd laughed. Now I knew why.

As the pup whined, I glanced down at him. "Why is your daddy so pigheaded?"

Apollo lowered his head, lifting a single paw into the air.

Snake was without a doubt the most difficult patient I'd ever attempted to work with, and we'd just met. He was also the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on. I was breathless, very naughty girl images floating in the back of my mind. Maybe because I'd studied his picture more than once before deciding to accept the tough task. He had scars on his face, but from what I'd read, he thought they made him look like a monster when in fact, the burn treatments and subsequent plastic surgery he'd received at a hospital in Germany had been incredible.

He was the epitome of tall, dark, and dreamy, his blue eyes like the clearest part of the Caribbean Sea. I would have become mesmerized by them, lured into my naughty girl thoughts if I hadn't seen the anger and venom that came from deep inside. Still, he was the kind of man fantasies were made of. Muscular in all the right places, he had the physique to tackle the limp over time.

If he had the drive to do so, which by all accounts didn't exist.

Whatever he'd gone through had changed his personality. Maybe at least I could fix his body.

Shuddering, I placed the mat on the floor, trying to determine which exercises I'd start with. I had no doubt he'd fight me

whatever I decided. To hell with him. I was a professional. He wasn't going to treat me like anything else. As I smoothed down the rubber, my mind continuously wandered to thoughts I shouldn't be having. There'd been an instant spark between us, but he was so irritating. I'd obviously been single for far too long.

I almost laughed. I hadn't engaged in any adult activity in three years, maybe more. Unless my collection of vibrators counted. The moment I stood, I sensed his presence, the crackle of electricity sizzling sections of skin.

After swallowing, I lifted my head, making certain I wore the same stern expression as before. He stood in the doorway, his eyes open wide. He'd changed into shorts, allowing me to see just how gorgeous and muscular his long legs truly were. He'd been doing something to keep them from atrophying. And the colorful tattoos on his arms drew my attention as well. They were intricate in design, but some of them were reminders of his violent nature.

When he didn't come any closer, I pointed to the mat. "Come here. Let's get started."

He walked toward me with a slow and deliberate gait, acting like the same holier than thou self as before. This was going to challenge every ounce of professionalism.

"What do you want, *sweetheart*?" Mr. Grumpy asked.

Sweetheart. The man had just plucked my last nerve.

The question was also loaded, his tone exacerbating the slight fake southern drawl he'd used. I chose to ignore his sexual banter. I doubted it would be his last.

"Get down on your back. We're going to do some stretching exercises. I suggest you get yourself a similar mat to make this easier when you exercise on your own. You'll need to stretch several times a day."

"That's not going to happen."

"Oh, yes, it will."

Even if I have to hogtie you in order to make that happen.

“You’re a pain in the ass.”

“So I’ve been told.” The man’s stubbornness defied all comprehension. “Do you not want to get better? Are you happy being the big grump, refusing to come out of your house?”

“Yeah, maybe I am.”

“Unbelievable,” I muttered. How many buttons was he planning on pushing?

“Lady. You can leave if you don’t like it.”

What an asshole. The upturned corners of his lips told me in no uncertain terms he was enjoying every minute of this.

I pointed to the mat, keeping a stern schoolteacher expression on my face.

Snorting, he kept his hard glare for a few seconds before doing what I asked. The moment he laid down, my eyes fell to the thick bulge between his legs. Shit. He was still fully aroused.

Get your mind out of the gutter. He’s a patient. There are rules.

To hell with the rules.

I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing then dropped down onto my knees next to him. At least his nastiness would keep me from doing anything stupid. “Take a deep breath. It’s important you breathe as you exercise. I’m going to lift your uninjured leg to test your extension abilities.”

“Talk English, *nurse*. Some of us are idiots.”

“I need to test your abilities to know how to provide the best care. You’re not an idiot, Snake. In fact, you have a genius IQ. You were trained in some of the most dangerous work in the Marines, which means your skills could allow you to do anything you wanted.” Shit. Why had I spouted that off to him?

“In other words, why am I wasting my life away doing nothing. Right? You’re just a shrink in disguise. To hell with that.”

“You’re also an arrogant pain in the ass with a God complex. You refuse to care about anybody other than yourself, which is going to leave you old and lonely. And quite frankly? From what I’ve seen, that’s exactly what you deserve.” A single bead of perspiration dared to slip down my temple, which of course he noticed, grinning like some delinquent kid in a candy store ready to tear the place apart. But it was obvious he didn’t respond to compliments. I had no problem dishing out exactly what he was looking for as long as it made him angry enough to show off. I jerked my hands away, chastising my behavior.

“Do I make you nervous, sweetheart?”

“Crocodiles make me nervous, Corporal. Wolves in heat make me nervous. You just piss me off.” My frustration was growing. If I could hear it in my voice, so could he. It was providing far too much satisfaction for him.

At least my snarky comments garnered me a natural grin. “I assure you that I have sharp teeth, Ms. Garrington, and I ain’t doing this.”

When he dared to try to get up a second time, I planted my palm on his chest, straddling his legs. “You will not fight me or so help me God, I will make you suffer.”

For the first time, a full smile crossed his face, his eyes twinkling. “I’d like to see you try, lady.” In a flash, he rolled me over, straddling me, his muscular thighs pressing against my hips. When he yanked my arms over my head, a moment of sheer terror roared into my system, a single vision almost creating panic.

But I managed to stop it, grasping that even as difficult as Corporal Garcia intended on being, he wasn’t a monster.

Just a man suffering from PTSD.

And a jerk determined to throw me off my game.

“Get your hands off me,” I hissed, although there was no conviction in my voice. From this vantage point, I was able to bask in his glorious body, drinking in his musky essence. The

citrusy scent was traveling far too deep into my system, exciting every nerve ending.

Bad girl. He's a patient.

I closed my eyes, turning my head.

“Look at me,” he growled.

His command sparked something inside of me, an intense need so compelling that I obeyed him instantly.

“When you’re in my house, you will follow *my* rules.” His words were thrilling, which shocked me more than I could rationalize and as he lowered his head, my breath skipped several beats. I could swear the man was going to kiss me.

And I wanted him to devour my lips as aggressively as he was espousing his anger.

Do not do that.

Swallowing, I tried everything I could to control my breathing, but it was no use. My mind and body revolted at the same time, bumping my hips up, gaining enough leverage I was able to toss a leg over his. Seconds later, I managed to hoist him over onto his back.

He was shocked, his expression full of anger at first. Then he grinned like a mischievous child, allowing his heated gaze to fall to my breasts as he licked his lips. “A fighter, eh? You’ve met your match.”

“I don’t think so.” I pushed his arms out to the side, gasping for air as my long hair splayed across his face and chest. He smelled of testosterone and desire, a dangerous combination.

“Be careful, naughty little nurse.”

Was he threatening me? No, he was just trying to break my resolve.

He dragged his tongue across his lips for emphasis, even issuing a husky, guttural sound.

“Hmmm... So, you like challenges. Then work with me. Use that anger you have bottled up inside and fight me. Show me you’re better than me.” I continued glaring down at him when

my body was starting to betray me, my nipples aching from desire, my panties damp.

“Give it your best shot, nurse.”

“It’s Chasity.” I had no business telling him, yet it felt right or important for him to know.

Why did you tell him your first name?

“Chasity,” he repeated, his tone much softer than before. “It suits you.” But his gaze continued to be full of fire and need, which confused me as much as the hunger lingering in my core.

Tick. Tock.

Seconds passed and I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe.

“Why is that?” I finally rolled off, gently bending his knee. It was the only tender gesture he was going to get today. I expected a snarly return.

“Because it’s beautiful like you are.”

Were the words said honestly or was this some new game?

I was so shocked, I stopped in mid-action and the feel of heat rising on my cheeks embarrassed me so badly I almost walked away. Then I firmed up my grip, said nothing, and started the therapy session. He wasn’t going to get to me, no matter how insanely gorgeous he was.

As I pressed his leg back at an awkward angle, I darted my look into his eyes. He was doing everything he could to hide the pain.

Snake gritted his teeth, slamming his fist against the floor.

“You’re doing great,” I told him, moving to the other leg and repeating the exercise.

“I can’t do this shit.”

“Yes, you can.”

“You’re a pushy bitch.”

Laughing, I lifted my eyebrows. “You have no idea. My brothers thought I was just a little girl. They soon learned I

could best them at almost everything.”

“Oh, yeah?” The way his hooded eyes gazed at me left no room for imagination. His thoughts were entirely inappropriate.

So were mine.

I’d never been so drawn to a man, craving his touch.

Stop it. He needs your help.

My little voice was right, but the swell of longing continued to fight with my rational mind.

I shifted his leg out to the side, pressing down, which forced me to crawl closer to his heated body. “Yes. I’m never going to let any man best me.”

I wasn’t certain why I made the proclamation, other than to warn him that I had no intentions of getting involved.

“Be careful, Chasity. Issuing a challenge of this nature to a man like me might not be in your best interest.”

“I’m always careful but I also get exactly what I need.” I managed to maneuver through a few additional stretches, but I could easily tell he wasn’t pushing himself at all, allowing me to do all the work.

“That so?”

“Yup,” I retorted, then I’d had enough with his brazen attitude. I shifted the maneuver, stretching the muscles of his damaged leg in a different direction.

His reflexes reacted instantly, jerking his body so that I was pitched against him, our lips only a few centimeters apart. His reaction was more chivalrous than I’d thought him capable of, wrapping his arm around me to keep me from tumbling off.

Then he narrowed his eyes, his breathing becoming more ragged than before.

I was stunned how insanely intoxicating his scent was as it filtered straight into my core. I was suddenly hot all over. Swallowing, I dragged my tongue across my dry lips, the feel of his taut body against mine igniting something deep within.

“Be careful there, little Chasity. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.” The sound of his husky voice penetrated every cell and synapse in my body, rendering me virtually useless for a few seconds.

“I... Um...” His lips were soft and moist, the kind meant for kissing at all hours of the day, sucking on well into the night.

Girl, you need to check your libido.

The attraction to him was wild and uninhibited, just like the man. I was lightheaded, still unable to control my breathing.

“What’s wrong, cowgirl? Cat got your tongue?”

That did it, his usual foot in mouth approach breaking the wanton moment. Perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps? Oh, God. I’d fallen down some crazy abyss.

When I scrambled off him, crawling backward by a few feet, he eased his arms behind his head, gazing at me with a twinkle in his eyes. “I’ll repeat my earlier question. Do I make you nervous, sweet thing?”

“Nervous? You? Not a chance, buster.” I rose to my knees, yanking fallen strands of hair behind my ear. He was watching my every move like a hawk, the twinkle in his eyes yanking on the vixen inside of me.

“I’ll offer you a single warning. When I crawl under your skin, which I will enjoy doing, you might be surprised how much you find me irresistible.”

There was no reason for me to shiver at his words, but I did. Although the attraction between us was strong, I couldn’t afford to allow the desires I’d thought long dead to be brought to the surface.

I couldn’t risk that again. I wouldn’t.

Never.

That’s the promise I’d made to myself.

After...

Don’t think about it. Let it go. He can’t hurt you unless you allow him.

I wasn't that girl any longer. I was stronger. And I was very much alive.

"Just wait, my little pet. Our time together isn't over. I will come for you again."

CHAPTER 3



*E*hasity

Thirty minutes had passed. Thirty minutes of absolute torture, but mostly because of the continued attraction we shared.

“Goddamn it,” Snake snarled and tried to push me away. “You’re an evil woman.”

“Yup. You’re right. I prefer to see my patients able to walk and talk so they can spend the rest of their time on earth pissing off anyone who annoys them.”

He sucked in his breath so hard I was certain he’d crack a rib. “What a ballbuster.”

I planted my hands on either side of him, peering down in an effort to keep his attention, fighting with the butterflies that hadn’t left my stomach since I’d fallen on him. “That too. Soldier. Get moving. We have ten minutes left and you are going to work every second of them.”

“I can’t do it,” he growled.

“Yes, you can, and you will.”

“Just leave me alone.”

I’d worked him over with leg exercises, pushing him to the limit of what he could tolerate. He still had excellent muscle strength, but if he didn’t exercise his injured leg, he would slowly start to lose it. I refused to allow that to happen.

But I sensed his frustration increasing, his inability to make his leg move the way he used to be able in the past a strangling moment.

“Ten more. You can do it, Snake. Just breathe and try.” I rubbed his thigh, keeping my fingers in a firm hold. He remained quiet for a few seconds, never blinking as he stared at me. He’d had so many knots in his muscles when I started, but even through his heightened anger, the exercise was already helping.

“Not a fucking chance.” Jerking away from me, he rolled over, immediately struggling to his feet. When he slammed into the couch, I sensed his anger bursting through the surface. As he fisted his hands, his entire body tensing, I could tell he was ready to blow a gasket.

If I backed off now, he’d succumb to the darkness that seemed to have a firm hold on his psyche. What I didn’t anticipate was the horrible level of his rage. I was barely able to rise to my feet, backing away before his anger erupted. He raked his arm across everything on the coffee table, hissing as the items were tossed to the floor. Then he moved to the small bookcase, yanking it away from the wall, dumping the contents without hesitation.

He pounded his fists against the wall several times, forcing me to wince, the horrible sound reverberating in my ears.

“Just get out,” he snarled.

“No.” Why did I have the urge to add ‘you can’t make me’? The conversation and the interaction were absurd.

“You better do it or else.”

“Are you threatening me?” Goddamn, the man was infuriating.

“Yeah. Maybe I am. It’s obvious you don’t know what I can do.”

When he took long strides in my direction, I stood my ground. Yet when the asshole dared to try to move me, I shoved him with all my might. There was that signature grin of his again, which had now worn down my patience level.

He'd also already slithered under my skin, my inability to stop thinking lurid thoughts a clear indication I wasn't the right therapist for him.

Who else is going to do it?

"You can't scare me, Snake. I refuse to back down or succumb to your bullshit. But I will leave because I will not be threatened by you or any man. I refused to allow that to happen before and I'm not going to do it now. Besides, I've passed my daily tolerance for your presence and your mouth." I started to turn away from him then jerked around once again. "And another thing. Do your damn exercises or you will have a limp for the rest of your life. It's entirely up to you. It's clear that without the structure of the military you've become undisciplined. You also need anger management." I kept my head held high, clenching my jaw as I stared into his eyes.

"Doing what? Just what do you suggest now, Nurse Pain-in-my-ass?"

God, I wanted to wrap my hands around his throat.

How much more was I going to allow the man to push me? "Like painting. You know, art? I don't know. Knitting. Do something that fills you with passion. Something that keeps your mouth shut."

His nostrils flared, his chest puffing out like a typical male being challenged.

But I was drawn to him like a fly to honey. Of course I knew what happened to every single fly who found themselves caught in the sticky mess.

And I was headed straight for the stickiest kind.

Only after a full five seconds of tension, incredible sexual tension that left me hot and wet all over did I take a step back, yanking the mat into my hand. I fought with the thick rubber as I tried to roll it, cursing under my breath. I couldn't believe he'd gotten under my skin that far. I'd placed a wall around me that had been impenetrable.

Until him.

Ugh. I was furious with myself.

And to make it worse, he remained silent, staring at me with his baby blues, acting as if I'd just tossed his world upside down. Apollo lifted his head, his tail thumping, and the little whine he issued meant he was used to his Daddy Dog's ugly behavior. It had been a long time since I'd been this enraged, my mind a foggy mess as I stormed toward the door, yanking my coat into my other hand, shoving it under my arm.

"You're not going anywhere," he growled.

I almost laughed. Now he wanted me to stay? I threw him a look over my shoulder, trying so hard not to think of him as anything but my patient. "Oh, yeah? Who's going to stop me?" My, oh, my. He looked like a little slice of heaven.

Think of something else.

Whipped cream. Dark chocolate.

Wait a minute. All that did was push me into a fantasy realm. Oh, no.

Snake raked his hand through his hair, his chest heaving. The way he was staring at me was entirely different, the look in his eyes bordering possessive.

"I am, sweetheart."

As soon as I placed my hand on the doorknob, he advanced like a predator, yanking me away and twirling me to face him. His forceful actions caused me to drop the roll, my jacket falling to the side, and my natural fighting instinct kicked in. I pummeled my fists against his chest, my pulse racing.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demanded. When he lowered his head, my brain was muddled by an intense rush of feelings.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Trying to piss me off."

"Try again, sweetheart." He pulled me against his chest, grinding his hips back and forth, and I was instantly shaken, my stomach doing flipflops from the feel of his thick, hard cock pressing against it.

What is he doing? A wave of desire unlike anything I'd ever felt rushed into me, the sensations creating a need that defied the one thing I'd promised myself I'd never do.

Care too much about a patient again.

I wanted nothing more than to shove him away, but I didn't seem to have the initiative, my body trembling in his hold. It felt so good to be in his strong arms, and for a few precious seconds, there was no doubt he was the kind of man who could protect me.

Then something snapped inside, and I came to my senses, using everything I could to break the powerful connection. After managing to take a step away, I slammed my fists against his chest. After that, I'd lost all sense of resolve, slapping him hard across the face.

All he did was grin, eager to continue our angry banter. Then he wiped his mouth with his arm. Why did he have to make a worn-out tee shirt look so sexy? I took several deep breaths, nervous as a kitty.

"You know, it occurred to me. You want to talk to me about discipline. I think you're the one who needs a taste of the way I handle it since you're one bad girl."

"Are you out of your mind? I haven't done anything wrong."

"Oh, yeah? You come into my house, acting as if you're the authority, spouting off shit about my record and my recent actions without asking me a single question. You just assumed you knew me well enough to have the right to disrupt my life, coming in like a freight train. Well, lady, you know nothing about me or what I went through."

All he had to do was snap his hand around my wrist and I knew there was no getting away from the brawny man. Still, I wasn't the kind of woman to give in that easily.

As he dragged me back into the room, I continued fighting with him. But I realized I was in trouble because a part of me was refusing to fight back. "Let me go."

"That's not going to happen." His grin was positively evil and when he planted me in front of the couch, all the wicked

thoughts I'd had before swarmed into the furthest reaches of my mind.

"I'm going to ask you one more time before I get really nasty. What do you think you're doing?"

He gripped my hips, the smile on his face one I wanted to wipe off. "Giving you exactly what you deserve."

"And that is?"

As he reached for the button on my jeans, I gasped in horror, shocked at the level of excitement that left me breathless. There were even stars floating in front of my eyes. Since when had a man affected me to this level?

"Giving you a hard spanking. That should teach you the value of getting to know someone before you assume the worst." He lifted his heated gaze, a sly smile crossing his face before yanking down my zipper, tugging the thick material over my hips.

"What? Are you out of your mind?" A what? Was he kidding me?

A spanking?

This man wasn't just an intolerable asshole. No, he took being a Neanderthal to an entirely new level, even if he was sexy.

Rugged.

Dangerous.

Delicious.

Oh, hell, no. I had to stop thinking that way.

A strange moment of remembrance flushed through my mind, and I was instantly frozen. But as I looked into his eyes, warmth spread through me like wildfire. Even if he was a sexy beast, I refused to allow him to take control.

Snarling, I fought him with everything I had, pitching my body from one side to the other, but to no avail. The man was far too strong.

"I guess that's for you to determine," he chortled in response.

I was so shocked I couldn't react quickly enough, the air sucked out of me when he managed to jerk my jeans all the way down my legs to my knees. This was insane. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

"You are nuts, but not for the reason you think. Let go of me." My reaction was without thinking. For a second time, I slapped him hard across the face, a slice of pain trickling into my palm.

Snake grunted when the force of the blow shoved his head to the side.

I was horrified at what I'd done. I'd never used physical violence under any circumstances.

As he slowly returned his head in my direction, I had no doubt by the intense look in his eyes that I'd just provoked the beast.

I'd underestimated him or maybe I'd overestimated my qualifications. Either way, there was no doubt I wasn't getting out of this.

"Because of that, you're getting spanked without your panties." The man was more savage than I believed. When he slipped a single finger under the waistband, grinning as he snapped his wrist, all I could do was open my mouth wide. I'd never been treated in such an egregious manner, like a bad little girl.

Why couldn't I say anything? Why had all the words left my vocabulary?

"Now you'll learn not to confront a very bad man."

Was he kidding me? I was incensed, unable to think clearly, which is why the brute of a man was able to plop his ass down on the couch, yanking me over his knees.

I slammed my hands on the hardwood floor, still dazed while he brought his hand down four times in rapid succession.

Then my natural, what he'd called 'bitchy' tendencies kicked in and I fought with everything I had, managing to pitch my body off his lap and onto the floor.

“Oh, you like to play rough, do you?” he asked in a deep, husky voice, the tone penetrating every cell in my body. Before I could scramble away, he’d yanked me back into position, throwing his good leg over both of mine.

Rough. Even the way the word reverberated in the back of my mind seemed odd, but it was as if he could read what I needed. A strange series of sensations tore through me, a need so powerful that I couldn’t breathe. Then a crazier thought interrupted the first.

The exercise with his other leg would be good for him. What the hell was wrong with me? Finally, I found my voice as he cracked his hand across my naked bottom twice more. “Stop this now or you will suffer the consequences.”

“Mmm... That only makes me want to continue. I do so love being threatened by a beautiful woman.”

The fact he’d given me a compliment in no way would be able to get him out of this mess. When this was over I would bring the wrath of hell down on him.

No, you won’t. You’re aroused by his dominating actions.

Where had that come from? I was not.

You are too.

Why was I fighting with the little voice inside my head, the one that usually kept me from doing irrational things like confronting a grump like Snake? And who the hell gave him the call sign of Snake? I’d heard just about everything, but a reptile?

He brought me back to reality by yanking my jeans all the way down to my feet, which allowed him to bring his massive palm down on my thighs.

“Ouch! You better stop it!” I warned as I threw back my arm.

“There you go threatening me again, Nurse Ratched. That’s gonna cost you.”

Now the bastard was making fun of me. And he was having a glorious time with this, the gleeful sound of his voice pissing me off. How dare he! I squirmed like my life depended on it,

thrashing back and forth, pushing up from the floor. When he grabbed one arm, yanking it behind my back, I was horrified, cursing up a blue streak as he continued the savage spanking.

Panting, I was shocked as the pain continued to build but even worse was that I was so aroused I was able to gather a scent of my feminine wiles.

Which meant he could as well.

No. No... This was insane. I closed my eyes, the fight starting to ebb away, desire roaring its ugly head to the surface.

His lips are kissable.

Let's face it, the man is fuckable.

Just imagine grinding against his thick, throbbing cock. I bet it's huge.

Oh, my God. What was wrong with me? I was actually thinking of him in sexual terms? Okay, so it was all true, but I was nuts to think something so egregious. I could get fired for the sinful thoughts alone. Right?

I bucked hard a few more times until I just couldn't do it any longer. Then I dropped my head, taking shallow breaths as the agony drifted into nothing but utter pleasure, my pussy throbbing. The second he eased my legs apart as much as the tight confines would allow, I shuddered to my core. There was no doubt he was able to see just how wet I was.

This couldn't happen.

“Finish already. And by the way, Corporal Garcia. This will never happen again. If you try, I'll... I'll...”

“Go ahead. What will you do?”

I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. What was going on with me?

The glowing was a sick testament to exactly what was happening. I wanted him. But not just for a quick roll in the hay. I wanted him to touch me.

Taste me.

Fuck me.

Break me.

The ridiculousness of it was startling, but he smelled so good yet so dangerously bad for me; his thick musk had awakened the woman inside I'd believed dead and buried.

His dark chuckle was a clear indication he had no intentions of following the rules. I closed my eyes, squirming back and forth, sucking in my breath from the realization of how hard he'd remained. I struggled to stop thinking about how long and thick his shaft had to be. I fought with myself not to imagine what it would be like to have his face buried in my pussy. And I sure as heck wasn't going to allow the visions of him thrusting his cock deep inside to remain in my mind.

Oh, God. This was bad, oh-so bad.

"I'm just getting warmed up. By all rights, I should yank off my belt, giving you the blistering of your life."

Was he kidding me?

"Don't you dare think about it or I'll... Or I'll..."

"Oh, I've thought about it since the minute you allowed that acid tongue of yours to give me a lashing. As a matter of fact, I think that's exactly what you need. Just hold on."

Oh, my God. There was no way I was going to stand for this. I managed to push myself off his lap, tumbling backwards, the jeans trapped around my ankles keeping me from going anywhere. I turned over, gasping for breath. "You're... horrible."

"Good. Now you know exactly what I am. I suggest you remember that and don't come back."

Hold on. He was acting possessive, so he'd frighten me off. Oh, he'd totally misjudged me. I struggled to my feet, shaking my head, trying to think of the perfect comeback.

There was none.

No man had ever infuriated me the way he had. When he gave me a wry smile, shifting those gorgeous eyes of his down to

my smooth pussy, I should have felt ashamed.

Instead, I was so angry I couldn't think straight, my fingers fumbling as I fought to yank the zipper in place. When he had the utter gall to turn around, dismissing me, something came over me that I'd never experienced before, a deed I had no doubt I'd end up regretting later. But the asshole wasn't going to be allowed to get away with what he'd just done.

So, instead of calmly leaving, I did exactly the opposite, flinging myself in his direction.

But he'd anticipated my move, swinging around to face me just as I tumbled into his arms, smacking his chest with my fists, using every ounce of strength I had.

Then the unexpected happened, an act so brazen that it took my breath away.

The moment he fisted my hair, all time stopped.

Then he crushed his mouth over mine and all bets were off.

CHAPTER 4



S *nake*

Maybe I shouldn't have kissed her.

I definitely shouldn't have spanked her, but the sexy dark-haired vixen was a pain in the ass on purpose. I knew there were special places in hell for men like me, but why start paying attention to rules now? I'd never done it before.

Was it her caustic mouth that had dragged me from the depths of my personal hell? Or her incredible beauty? I wasn't certain of anything but that I'd never wanted to kiss a woman like I did at this moment. It didn't make a damn bit of sense, but lately nothing had. What I knew was that we shared an animal attraction that couldn't be denied.

I was fire and she was ice, but the combustible banter was only the half of it. Her body hummed from the chemical connection we shared.

What I also knew was that behind her fiery eyes was a woman begging to be freed, a girl held captive in chains just like I'd been for years. Maybe that's why we'd been drawn to each other, our need bordering on the dark side. Tension knotted my shoulders, my leg hurting like a son of a bitch, but the pain wasn't enough to stop my actions.

As I tangled my fingers in Chasity's long strands of dark, curly hair, all I could think about was how soft it was and how the sunlight had created a violet shimmer. I hadn't been able to

take my eyes off her the entire time she'd been extending her brand of torment, so I'd offer her mine in exchange.

I dragged her closer, onto the toes of her boots, keeping her close enough she wouldn't be able to wiggle her way out of my hold. Just the way the heat had built up on my palm had almost driven me insane. I hadn't spanked a woman in... well, never, but it had been the right thing to do.

I swept my tongue inside, making certain the little filly knew that I was the one in charge. She continued to pummel her small fists against me, and I was still marveling that her thin fingers had been able to cause so much frigging pain. I hadn't felt that kind of torture in one hell of a long time.

Her soft cries only aroused me even more, my barbaric needs always smashing through the surface from the taste of her, like the sweetest cherries. The girl had chutzpa, still fighting me even if she knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell she was getting out of my hold. After sweeping one hand down her back, gathering a fistful of her bottom, I forced her to arch her back so I could grind my cock against her stomach.

She finally stopped fighting me, fisting her hands around my shirt. When she slipped one underneath, her fiery touch pushed me past the point of no return. There was no way I could hold back now.

And I certainly had no intention of doing so until I satisfied my needs.

Every sound she made fueled a strange blue-hued fire that threatened to consume what was left of my rational mind. Maybe I didn't want to think straight, or even at all. I was getting pretty damn good at doing that lately.

While I knew she was nothing more than a pretty little succubus who likely feasted on flesh after every physical therapy session, I'd never hungered for a woman as much.

I tugged on her head, forcing it back as I gorged on her mouth, the hint of cinnamon adding a perfect spark to the fire. The way she was continuously undulating her body created friction

and my cock ached to the point if I didn't get some relief soon, I would likely go mad.

As she rubbed her fingertips up and down my chest, my muscles tensed. I was a broken man, very little of my body without scars. But the physical ones didn't bother me nearly as much as those hiding in the dark abyss of my mind. Still, I knew I was a mess inside and out. How could such a beautiful woman find me attractive? That sort of happiness wasn't meant for a man like me.

When I eased back from the powerful kiss, I breathed across her face, chuckling darkly before nipping her lower lip. She continued to tremble in my hold, every inch of her soft porcelain skin glistening. Her eyes were closed, her long eyelashes skimming across her cheeks tightening my balls.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she whispered.

"Nope."

"Maybe we should stop."

"Yup." While she didn't object when I picked her up, forcing her to straddle my hips, I sensed her increasing tension.

"It can never happen again. I don't need anyone in my life."

"And I ain't looking for a relationship, sweetheart. That ain't me."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. Then what are you doing?" She opened her eyes, searching mine. This time there was a mischievous glint in them. But I also sensed she was nervous, uncertain she was making the right decision. What the fuck? I hadn't deflowered anyone in a long time.

"I think you know what's going to happen next. I'm going to do exactly what I've wanted since the moment you walked in through that door. I'm going to rip off your clothes and fuck you." The statement wasn't pretty, but this wasn't about romance. I took long strides into the bedroom, winking at Apollo when he followed. "You need to guard the place, buddy. This isn't for you." I kicked the door shut, still able to hear his whine.

It was funny how my leg had stopped hurting.

Then I drove her against the wall, jerking the shirt over my head and tossing it aside. When I pressed both hands on the opposite sides of her head, her lower lip quivered, and I issued a low and husky growl.

“This isn’t going to happen,” she muttered then raked her eyes down the length of me, her luscious tongue sliding across her lips. I wanted to suck on each one, pulling her tender tissue between my teeth.

I’d never felt like such a carnivore before, but there was nothing I wanted more than to drive my tongue deep inside her tight channel. “Oh, yeah, it is, darlin’.”

“I’m not your darlin’ or your sweetheart.” Her voice was breathless, so darn sexy I could listen to her for hours.

“You’ll be anything I want you to be.” I wrapped my hand around her throat, tilting her head then dragging my tongue back and forth across the base of her earlobe before sliding the tip all the way down her long neck. The taste of her was sweeter than candy but mixed with a little spice. Maybe I’d devour every inch of her first. “You’ll do exactly as I tell you to do.” I kissed her again and although she struggled at first, I sensed her increasing need.

She rolled her hands over my shoulders, tangling her fingers in my hair as she squeezed her thighs against me. Her scent rocked my world, enough so my balls ached to the point of pain.

Everything was a push/pull with her, creating explosive heat. I spun her around, pushing her hard against the opposite wall. She pushed her hands against my chest with enough force the kiss was broken. Then she dragged her tongue across her lips.

“God, I want you,” I growled, pulling back so I could drop my heated gaze to her luscious breasts. She eased her legs to the floor, giving me a pouty look.

When I yanked at her shirt, she slapped my hands then slowly drifted her own hands to my chest, using her long fingers to knead my muscles.

“Mmm... Touch me.” She dared whisper the request to a man like me. I sensed her continued apprehension, but her needs were as filthy as mine, outweighing any rational thought.

“See something you like?” I dropped my gaze as I slid my hand under her shirt, cupping her breast. Her slight shudder allowed me to continue. I flicked a single finger back and forth across her nipple, hissing from the fact the lace was in my way.

Not for long. I’d rip the damn thing off her if I had to.

My cock was thrumming against my shorts, straining to get out. I wasn’t going to be able to keep the beast from finding freedom but for so long.

“Maybe,” she managed. The moment a glint formed in her eyes, I anticipated exactly what the little filly was going to do.

She bent her knees, managing to dart under my arm, her soft laughs continuing to fuel a need I hadn’t even known I had.

All I had to do was whip around, snagging her arm with one hand, jerking her backward with just enough force she yelped.

Then I dumped her onto the bed.

“Haven’t you figured out by now, darlin’, that you’re not getting away from me?”

She immediately rose onto her hands and knees, her glare entirely different than before. I dropped my shorts, enjoying the way her eyes opened wide, the look of lust entrancing.

“You’re one very bad man.”

“You got that right.” I took a deep whiff and a rush of adrenaline rolled through me from the scent of her perfume, both bottled and au naturel. I couldn’t wait to have my tongue slathered with her pussy juice.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why? Because when I see something I want, I take it. Period. And I want you, baby, more than you know.”

“You underestimate me,” she purred then yanked off her shirt, allowing me to catch sight of her magnificent breasts for the

first time.

“How so?” I shifted my hand down my chest, every muscle tensing from the lustful way she was looking at me.

“I don’t take orders from anyone.”

“Hmmm... You’re going to learn to take them from me. Right now, I’m going to lick that sweet pussy of yours until you come in my mouth seconds after screaming out my name. Then I’ll drive my aching cock deep inside.”

“That’s not possible. I can’t allow you.” While she spoke the words, there was no conviction in them. Besides, the girl had no idea she’d already become mine.

After crawling on the bed, I cupped both sides of her face, lifting her head and forcing her to look me in the eyes. “And darlin’, there’s nothing you can say or do to stop me.”

* * *

Chasity

You can’t do this. You just can’t.

For some crazy reason I wasn’t doing anything at all to stop his advances. In fact, given my words, I’d encouraged him to act like a beast. My body was a treacherous bitch, allowing the rough and tough man to see me in a state of undress, let alone adopt the theory that he could have anything he wanted by offering that sly smile of his.

No. This was morally wrong, so sinful that if I were Catholic, I’d have to go to confession every day for a month. No, a year. I involuntarily dragged my tongue across my bottom lip, which caused the larger-than-life man to growl like the beast he pretended to be.

And he’d spanked me. I still couldn’t get over that he’d treated me like a child.

What did you do to him?

No, I was patient for the most part until he plucked my last nerve.

I was shaking all over, unable to accept that the man was going to ravage me.

The protective side of me told me to run far away, but I couldn't. He'd become a strange drug, setting me free of the cage I'd placed myself in for protection. Why now? Why him?

I'd tried to remind myself at least a half dozen times he was my patient, but nothing was working. Then I'd tried to remind myself that I was just as damaged as he was, but around him I didn't feel that way any longer. Nothing could stop my wicked visions.

Snake rubbed his thumbs across my cheeks as he stared into my eyes, his chest rising and falling rapidly. There wasn't a single doubt in my mind about what he was going to do to me. This was crazy, horrible.

Delicious.

Perfect.

He was absolute eye candy, his physique powerful and structured, tattoos covering a good portion of his chest and both arms. I was transfixed by the art, but they were nothing in comparison to his sculpted body or his long, thick, throbbing cock. How could a man be built to such perfection yet want nothing to do with keeping it honed?

As I allowed my gaze to fall, he smirked while watching me. I reached out, tracing one of the artistic figures with my hand but he yanked it away.

"Not so fast, little girl."

"I can't touch the merchandise?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Do you think you're buying me, lady? Not a chance. You see, I'm broken beyond fixability. Isn't that what they told you?"

There was such sadness in his tone as well as the fury the dwelled within.

“How come you don’t look broken?” I purposely scanned his face, smiling as I did so. “From where I am, you look pretty devilishly handsome to me.”

Why are you doing that? You’re encouraging him. Maybe that’s exactly what he needed.

“Oh, really?”

“Without a doubt.” His heated breath sent another wave of tingles through every muscle, the carnal look in his eyes keeping my pulse erratic.

He licked around my lips before slowly using two fingers to lower the straps on my bra, pulling down the material and exposing my breasts. Another shiver trickled down my spine as I watched his eyes light up like firecrackers before he dropped his head. He brushed the tip of his tongue across one nipple while pinching the other between his thumb and forefinger. Almost immediately my body swayed in reaction, the hint of pain mixed with pleasure forcing me to swoon.

A part of me still wanted to shove him away, but the electric sensations tearing through me were unlike anything I’d felt in such a long time. A slight moan slipped past my lips as he twisted my hardened bud, plucking it several times, gripping and twisting until it hurt, but the pain was delicious. I was almost delirious from it, hungering for more. He rolled his lips to my other breast, taking his time to lick my skin before engulfing my nipple.

I was forced to grip his arms to keep from crumpling to the bed. The fact I was lightheaded, my heart racing did nothing for my mental faculties. He lifted his head only a few seconds later, the husky sound of his heavy breathing tickling my ears. A sly smile crossed his face as he reached around me, deftly unsnapping my bra just a second or two later.

Chuckling, he threw it against the wall, immediately shoving me down on the bed, yanking one leg into his arms. He said nothing as he fisted my boot, jerking it off. The man had a definite need for the dramatic, pitching it aside then the other. Then he gripped the two edges of my jeans, not a second’s worth of hesitation before he tugged them over my hips.

His breathing was even more labored, the heated look of lust in his eyes becoming primal. After dropping the dense material to the floor, he cupped my mound, pressing his thumb against my clit. Then he drove two fingers inside, hooking them and pushing in deep. I was almost out of my mind from the rumble of pleasure.

“You’re wet for me,” he muttered.

“Uh-huh.” I couldn’t think clearly let alone answer him. Goosebumps had formed on every inch of my skin from embarrassment. I didn’t know this man. I’d never had a one-night stand, let alone kissing a man after knowing him less than an hour.

I was so going to hell.

He knew exactly what he was doing to me, his irises mere pinpricks as they pierced mine. I’d never seen such a beautiful man, but his eyes were so haunted, his hunger knowing no bounds.

I continued to shiver, yet with every touch from the rough pads of his fingers, every look tossed my way, I was drawn further into a raging desire unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

He rubbed up and down my pussy, his eyes never leaving mine. Seconds later, he gathered my legs into his arms, spreading them wide open, an intense growl erupting from his throat as he pressed his mouth between my legs.

“Oh, God.” Stars rushed across my eyes, sparkling like diamonds against the dull ceiling. I smacked my hands on the bed, shocked that he had the ability to throw me into a crazed moment, sensations tearing through me like wildfire. All while sucking me through the thick lace.

He issued several growls as he moved his head back and forth, purposely making sucking sounds as he feasted on his prey.

I couldn’t watch, couldn’t think, and I wasn’t about to try to urge him on.

Why not? You deserve pleasure.

I bit my lower lip to keep from letting go of any other sound, but it was becoming difficult given the amount of pleasure. Just the way he yanked aside the material, his tongue finding my wetness was proof of his possessive nature. He shifted his head, sliding his tongue between my swollen folds.

“Yes. Yes.” I blinked furiously; the way he drove his tongue inside, lapping my cream was a pure slice of heaven. I wiggled and moaned, even laughing softly. Every time I moved, the thick comforter scraped across my bottom, which created another round of pain from the spanking. I should be angry and incensed but with every swipe of his tongue I was falling deeper into a spell that I never wanted broken.

He teased me for several additional seconds before I sensed his patience had run out. As soon as he ripped off my thong, he lifted me up by my hips, resting my thighs on his shoulders.

Shocked, I crunched the bedding under my fingers, my eyes open wide. I was helpless, completely at the man’s mercy. The second he darted his tongue around my clit, I couldn’t hold back a series of ragged whimpers, panting after doing so. He pushed my legs apart as much as possible, using his fingers to keep me spread wide open.

My face flushed from a combination of embarrassment and sheer rapture. He took his time flicking his tongue back and forth several times before sucking on the tender tissue, leaving me so sensitive that every sound I made was breathless.

“Yes. Yes.”

He pulled away, blowing on the inside of one thigh then the other. There was no tenderness in the man, just a need that had to be fulfilled. As he buried his face in my pussy, I issued a high-pitched yelp, electric vibrations shooting through every muscle. He was rough in his actions, thrusting both his tongue and several fingers inside.

Every sound he made seemed to fuel his fire as well as the darkness I’d seen deep inside of him. Yet he was full of passion, his needs so powerful I was pitched into a wave of rapture almost instantly. The man knew exactly what I wanted without telling him anything, sucking on my clit then shifting

to my tight channel, keeping his fingers flexed open as he fucked me with them.

I tossed my head back and forth, yanking on the covers as he brought me so close to a magnificent orgasm then pulled away, leaving me shaking all over. “Please.”

“Please what, little Miss Chasity?”

“Please let me come.”

“Not yet. Not until I’m finished, and you taste far too damn good.”

Even the sound of his voice sent dazzling waves of ecstasy through me, the crackling hum reverberating in the darkest reaches of my body. Panting, I struggled to get to him, but it was no use. As he licked up one inner thigh then down the other, the fire tearing through me became uncontrollable.

He buried his face against one, shifting it back and forth, flicking his tongue. There was no way I could take it any longer. As I clawed the bed, I heard his dark laugh. When he dared to slide his thumb into my dark hole, an orgasm exploded from deep within. Gasping, I jerked up, blinking several times. There was no chance at focusing, my breathing so ragged that raspy noises were pushing past my lips.

I could tell my entire body was shaking, bucking hard against him. He refused to let me go, staring down at me as he rolled his head back and forth, licking every drop of my cream.

A single orgasm drifted into a second and the beautiful wave that crashed over me was as close to pure ecstasy as I’d ever experienced.

“Oh, God. Yes. This is...” My thought disappeared, the bliss becoming too intense. The lightheadedness remained, but almost immediately I was as torn as I’d been before, the guilt overriding the joy. What was I going to do?

When I finished shaking, Snake issued a long, slow, and husky growl before biting down on my inner thigh until I cried out from pain. Then he licked the area where he’d bitten, soothing the discomfort.

I was shocked how amazing it had felt. My heart was racing to the point a dull echo rang in my ears. We'd just met but it was as if he already knew what I needed and what my body had craved for so long.

As soon as he eased my legs to the bed, he crawled over me, swirling the tip of his tongue around my bellybutton. I stiffened, fluttering my hand to the ugliness that I'd been left with. He didn't say a word about the scars crisscrossing my stomach or the ones on the inside of my right thigh. I shoved it aside, his touch keeping me completely ignited. I rolled my fingers down his chest, teasing his cock by running the edge of my fingernail back and forth across his sensitive slit. His shaft was fully engorged, the veins on the side pumping with blood and I had to wonder how it was going to fit inside.

He dragged his tongue up by several inches, every sound he made deep and guttural. Electricity flashed through both of us at the same time, the jolt powerful enough I whimpered. I kneaded his chest, digging my fingers into his muscles. He shifted my legs further apart as he eased between them. I wrapped one leg around his thigh, finally sliding one hand around his neck, pulling him down until our lips were almost touching. His breathing was scattered, his eyes darting back and forth. They were a rich blue, so dark that they were infused with a deep violet, flecks of gold surrounding his irises.

As he slowly lifted my right arm, intertwining our fingers, I lifted my gaze, noticing the scar on the inside of his wrist. I shuddered from the realization of what he'd attempted to do. When he lifted my other arm, he rubbed his thumb around my palm in lazy circles.

"You have no idea how beautiful you are," he whispered, his hot breath cascading across my jaw. "I love when you fight me. That makes your pussy that much sweeter to claim." The tickling sensations drifting through me intensified and I allowed my eyes to roll closed as he clasped our fingers together.

I bucked my hips in a vain attempt to beg him to fuck me.

“Are you needy, my little nurse?”

“Yes.” God, yes. I was more than ready.

“Do you hunger for my cock?” His tone was gravelly, another low rumble vibrating from his throat.

“Uh-huh,” I managed as I nodded. He bit down on my chin, the pulsating rumble continuing.

“Then say my name. Tell me you want it.”

“No,” I muttered.

He dug his nails into my palms, keeping his body aloft to torment me. “Say it!” His command was not to be denied, which is why I did exactly that, shaking my head.

His eyes flashed as they’d done before and he bit down on my lower lip, creating instant pain. As the taste of blood burst onto my tongue, he laughed softly, rolling his lips from one side of my jaw to another. “You forget how much of a beast I am. Say it!”

He shifted his cock against my stomach, and I bucked again, the feel of his thick shaft between my legs tantalizing. When I remained quiet, he grinned and squeezed my hands then acted as if he’d release me.

“Snake. Please fuck me. Just fuck me. Do it. Hard. Rough. I need you.” The words tumbled from my mouth.

There was no reason to say anything else, no additional need to tease each other. He dragged the velvet tip of his cock across my thigh before settling his body on top of me. There was nothing like the feel of his full weight crushing me into the bed, but I needed his cock inside of me. As I wiggled back and forth, his grin grew wider. I fought to release my hand, finally managing to tug it away, slipping it between us.

Chuckling, he hooked his arm under my leg, lifting it higher, leaning on his elbow as I stroked the base of his cock. The feel of his thick shaft throbbing against my hand was incredible. As I pumped up and down, his breathing increased in tempo. He never blinked as I toyed with him, but the moment I pressed his glistening cockhead just past my swollen folds, he

thrust all the way inside. The action was deep and raw, my muscles struggling to accept his wide girth.

“Oh!” Another series of stars floated across my field of vision, my muscles clamping and releasing several times, pulling him in even deeper. Yet he pulled out, showing me just how much he was in full control, allowing just the tip to remain inside. Then he pushed up on his fingertips, forcing my leg to extend fully before plunging inside again.

My muscles struggled to accept him, stretching to accommodate his girth. His actions were brutal, the slice of pain adding to my dark cravings. As he drove into me again, I raked my nails down the front of his chest, my pulse skipping as my blood pressure increased. Then he developed a rhythm, burying his cock in even deeper, providing the kind of brutal fucking that I'd longed for during the lonely nights.

His chest rose and fell as he remained hovering above me, never blinking as he continued fucking me. Then he dropped his head just as I lifted mine, our lips colliding together, the need building to a frenzied state. The kiss became heated and desperate, two people needing to feed off the other in order to survive. Butterflies swarmed my stomach, my mind filling with endless possibilities as the passion erupted between us.

Everywhere my skin touched his was seared, white-hot crackles sizzling every inch of my body. He tasted of bourbon and my pussy, with a hint of coffee so inviting, more so than I ever would have imagined. I devoured his mouth as he swept his tongue inside, exploring the darkest recesses. I'd never been kissed this way before, so all-consuming and powerful that no other man would ever be able to come close.

When he pulled away by a few inches, we were both breathless, his hard pounding driving every whimper and moan from my throat. There was something almost manic about the way he was fucking me, his entire face pinched, every muscle tense. We were feeding off each other, and as we locked eyes, I was lost in his fiery sapphire gaze, realizing that it would become easy to drown in them.

I felt a part of him becoming undone, as if he was spiraling out of control, his hunger knowing no bounds. I didn't care, but I should. What I was doing was wrong, but it felt as if I'd waited my entire life to feel this kind of ecstasy.

The pleasure he was driving into me was building to an explosion of sensations, my pussy muscles still struggling to accept just how deep he'd plunged inside of me. Panting, every cell in my body was on fire, tingling to the point I floated away into a wondrous moment of sheer bliss.

"Come for me, Chasity. I need you to come." His tone was so demanding that my body responded almost instantly, prickles flashing along every inch of skin seconds before a climax swept in unexpected and violently.

"Oh. Oh..." I tossed my head from side to side, pressing my face against his arm, my breathing labored. He slowed down, rolling his hips, somehow managing to drive himself in even deeper. I threw my other leg around him, flexing my fingers open as I pressed my hand against his chest. My God. The man's skin was so hot, and I watched as beads of sweat trickled across the furrowed lines in his forehead.

As soon as he thrust harder and faster than he'd done before, I was driven into another orgasm, this one leaving me aching all over.

"Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh."

"Good girl," he muttered. "So good." He lowered his head, nuzzling his face against my neck.

I wrapped my arm over his shoulder, aimlessly rubbing my thumb up and down. He was so tense, his breathing labored, and I sensed he'd yet to get enough.

Maybe it would never be enough.

CHAPTER 5



S *nake*

Control.

The little pain-in-the-ass-nurse thought she was going to get control.

Not a chance.

Without any warning, I rolled Chasity over, pushing her into a sitting position. There was a look of utter surprise in her eyes that kept me hard as a rock. I couldn't get enough of her. She was so wet, her pussy tight, and the lingering taste of her in my mouth was sweet ambrosia that I knew I could become addicted to.

Even if the asshole inside of me was already laughing, chiding me that I'd stepped over a fucking line. Yeah? So the hell what?

She tossed her head back and forth, allowing her soft curls to float down over her breasts. My mouth watered all over again at the thought of sucking on her tender nipples. Her areolas were the color of soft, deep pink roses, her nipples so hard I wished I had a pair of clamps hidden away in one of my drawers. I couldn't resist flicking my two index fingers back and forth across them, my cock swelling even more every time she made the same purring noise she was doing right now.

When she swung her head down, her long strands cascading across my chest, it took everything I had not to fist her hair,

dragging her down to suck my cock. With lips so damn luscious, I could only imagine what they would look like wrapped around my shaft.

I'd fuck her mouth soon enough, but right now, I wasn't finished with her sweet pussy. Goddamn, she was hot, every touch scalding my skin. And she liked it rough. I could tell beneath the little vixen she portrayed was a woman longing to submit.

She was the kind of woman who needed a man's firm hand. I grinned at the thought, even though it was a bit Neanderthal.

The second I pinched her nipples, she issued a scattered moan, and it took everything I had not to explode deep inside of her. But I wanted more. "Ride me, my little nurse."

She narrowed her eyes, the same rebellious nature I'd seen from almost the minute she'd walked into the door rearing to the surface again. I was still in shock, maybe in awe by the way she'd treated me. That took guts. I twisted her nipples, refusing to let go, unable to take my eyes off her as she bucked hard against me. Her lovely mouth twisted from a combination of pain and pleasure, her eyelids now mostly closed.

Even the way her long lashes skimmed across her cheeks kept me fully aroused.

"That's it, girl. Take what you want. This time."

Chasity squeezed her thighs against me, keeping her palms pressed against my sides. When the little vixen began to rake her nails down my chest, sucking on her lower lip, I started to lose control all over again. She had a way about her that spun me out of my comfort zone, ripping aside the very thick armor I'd placed around me. No one else had been able to do that, let alone wanted or cared enough to try.

The need to devour her was stronger than before, so much so, this wasn't enough. I craved to experience everything, taking every inch of her I wanted. She dropped down, taking scattered breaths, planting her hands on either side of me. There was such a powerful look in her luminescent eyes that I allowed myself to become mesmerized by them.

But only for so long. I fisted her hair, lifting my head and dragging my tongue around her mouth. “I’m not finished with you yet, baby.” I tumbled her onto the comforter then jumped off the bed, grabbing her by the hand.

“What are you doing?”

Her tone was now demanding. It would appear I’d need to do something about that. I yanked her onto the floor, lifting her off her feet. I couldn’t help but grin by the way she was scrambling to cling to me, wrapping those long legs of hers around my calves. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’re not going far.”

As soon as I reached the dresser, I spun her around onto her feet, pressing her against the edge of the cheap wood. She laughed nervously when I kicked her legs wide open, yanking her away by a few inches. Then I pulled her hair away, wrapping it around my fist with one hand, returning the tip of her cock to the tight entrance of her pussy with the other.

“This is how real men fuck.” I yanked on her head, keeping a firm hold as I went deep inside all over again. Just the way her pussy muscles clamped around my cock was enough to drive me to a new level of insanity. She was hot and wet, the feel of being inside of her a drug I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to live without. I slipped my arm around her waist, sliding my hand between her slickened thighs. The moment I rolled my finger around her swollen clit, her entire body started to shake.

She gasped and arched her back, her grip on the dresser becoming white knuckled. I’d never felt this possessive about a woman in my life, but it was so powerful I released my hold on her hair, instead wrapping my fingers around her lovely throat, squeezing until she issued a subtle whimper. Yet her eyes were closed, the woman somehow trusting me even though I had her life in my hands.

I’d never wanted to please a woman like I did her. I pinched her clit between my fingers, smiling as she writhed against me, meeting every hard thrust with one of her own. I could tell I was bringing her close to another orgasm, her breathing erratic.

“That’s it, baby,” I whispered in her ear. “Come for me again.”

She dragged her tongue across her lips, and I noticed in the mirror her lower lip was quivering. I plunged more savagely, adoring the sound of my skin slapping against hers. I sensed she was riding a wave of euphoria, which allowed me to finally let go.

As my balls swelled, I pulled her all the way against my chest, cupping her mound. When my body started shaking, she reached back, pressing her palm against my face.

I erupted deep inside and as soon as I did, a horrible sense of sadness and anger swept through me, igniting the violent side of me that was impossible to control. As I filled her with my seed, the ugliness inside of me broke through the surface.

She was right. This couldn’t happen again. She deserved better than a monster like me.

* * *

Chasity

“Oh...” I had my head down on the steering wheel, trying to control my breathing, which had been impossible the entire return trip. I wasn’t hyperventilating, but I was pretty darn close. I couldn’t remember half the drive from his ranch.

Him.

Snake.

Mr. Grumpy.

I couldn’t sit out here forever. I had other patients, people who actually wanted help. I jerked my head up, determined to push the incident out of my mind. Then I grabbed my purse and the mat, fighting with the door handle for a few seconds. As I stepped out into the late morning sun, an old, familiar feeling swept through me, and I was instantly put on alert. Hairs raised on the back of my neck as I tipped my head toward the parking lot.

The hospital faced a busy strip of road, the normal late lunch traffic drowning out all other noise, but I could just hear the distinct sound of metal scraping down the side of a car. It was the last sound I'd heard before...

No. I wasn't in Baltimore. I was in majestic Missoula, Montana, God's country. A place where most people didn't bother locking their doors at night. A location that had some of the most picturesque scenery in the country. A wonderful place to raise a family.

The chances of him showing up were next to impossible. Even if he'd managed to get out, he didn't know anything about my past or my family. I took a deep breath, surprised the fear had found its way back into my life. Why now?

As horrid memories surfaced, I was thrown into a trancelike state, which hadn't occurred in over a year.

My hands were shaking, the sense of urgency breaking through the icy claws threatening to suffocate me.

I stormed inside, heading down the long corridor, barely acknowledging the two people who said hello. When I reached the clinic, I threw my head over my shoulder. While the dark, brooding custodian was casually looking at me, no one else had followed me inside. As I gathered the familiar smell of the floral air fresheners our director insisted on using, I allowed myself to feel safe.

Exhaling, I shifted my thoughts back to Snake, allowing the humiliation of my behavior to shove aside the terror.

I was in my office, and he wasn't here. While the reassurance had allowed me to breathe, I couldn't shake the feeling someone had been watching me in the parking lot.

No. No. Snake. The asshole. He'd seduced me and...

Wham!

"Goddamn son of a bitch." Why? Why? Why? Was I braindead? Did I need a CAT-scan? There had to be something critically wrong with me.

“What the hell?” Shelly came rushing into my office, pressing her hand over her heart. “Are you okay?”

“Dandy. Peachy. How could I be any better.” I was still shaking all over.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on or should I guess?”

I was already pacing the office. Tossing my purse against the wall hadn’t made me feel any better. I needed to smash it across everything in my itsy, bitsy office; however, I knew doing something that violent wouldn’t do me any good. “I’m fine.”

I was anything but fine, both incidents now weighing heavily on my mind.

“Uh-huh.” She leaned against the doorway, folding her arms, watching me as I turned and took three steps, turning again and taking three steps. Goddamn, I needed a bigger office.

“I said I’m fine.”

“Can we go for a third time? What happened?” When I grumbled under my breath, she half laughed. “Oh, yes. What’s wrong with me? How could I forget? You decided to take it upon yourself to pay a home visit to Mr. Grumpy of the Year. Right?”

I threw her a look and wanted to rake out my own eyeballs. What in God’s name had possessed me to go there in the first place? No, what alien had crawled up my ass, allowing me to be stupid enough to kiss him back? Allow? Hell, he was forceful and unforgiving. Then he’d, he’d... Gah. I couldn’t think about the rest. It was far too humiliating. To top everything off, my butt hurt.

But nothing that he’d done bothered me as much as how I’d enjoyed the experience, already craving more. Given everything I’d been through, I should run free of men for the rest of my life. And he’d been controlling, dominating. I’d enjoyed it? How?

“You’ll break free from all the inhibitions and fear regarding passion and intimacy when you find the right man.”

The last psychiatrist had made me laugh by saying that. What if she'd been right?

A few tiny crumbs of my hard shell had fallen off, the ugly therapy sessions also returning to my mind. *Don't go down that road. You're strong. Fight it.*

His face. His grin. His laugh.

Swallow and breathe. One. Two. Three. Four.

"Is that a yes?" she asked. Shelly wasn't only a good friend, maybe the best one I'd ever had, she was also one of the managing administrators of the hospital, and very good at her job. She also liked the rules to be followed, and I'd broken a cardinal one. I should blame her for the fact I met Mr. Grumpy at all. She'd encouraged me to consider taking the case after the other therapists had threatened to quit if forced to continue working with him.

No, trying to work with him.

Finally, the images faded and I was able to take that deep breath, channeling my rage to a heightened level.

"Why did you talk me into meeting that asshole, son of a bitch, pissant turd man from hell?" If I analyzed myself, I'd say the ridiculous amount of anger was based on the guilt I felt. For all I knew, I could have set him back months in his therapy. Wait a minute. He hadn't seen anyone for his extreme anger issues since returning to the States.

"Hmmm... Why don't you tell me how you really feel about him?" Shelly gave me one of her infamous motherly looks.

"He's a fucking asshole. That's how I really feel about him." I realized I'd raised my voice by at least two full decibels and cringing, finally stopping long enough to rub my eyes. "He's controlling. Harsh. He has an attitude the size of... Oh! I don't know what."

"You're speechless. I need to write the date down. Or maybe the world is ending." Shelly laughed and I glared at her.

You wanted him. You found him attractive.

Dominating.

Sexy.

Gorgeous.

“Shut up, little voice,” I hissed under my breath.

“Okay, now you’re talking to yourself. That worries me. Do you want to tell me exactly what happened?” Shelly came further into the room, closing the door behind her.

“He’s not just insufferable, he’s intolerable. He’s a big jerk,” I spouted off the words while visions of his naked body flashed into my mind. I’d enjoyed every minute of the way he fucked me, my pussy aching from still feeling him buried deep inside. “And he doesn’t want anyone’s help. Meanwhile, he could lose the ability to walk at all if he’s not careful.”

“I warned you about him. Corporal Garcia doesn’t believe he needs assistance of any kind.”

“Yeah, I know what you said, but he’s violent and aggressive. He even broke a few things in his house. Who the hell does that?” I heard the exasperated tone in my voice and sighed. The last conversation we’d had was the clincher that he’d used me and nothing else.

“You’re coming to the office from now on for our appointments.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m done with physical and mental therapy. Whatever the reason you came here, it didn’t work,” he’d said as he’d glared at me like I was the enemy.

“Then I’ll send a deputy to escort you.”

He’d grinned, raking that same heated gaze down to my toes.

“Try it, baby. You’ll be surprised the lengths I’ll go to so that doesn’t happen.”

The hatred in his voice had stunned me, especially since we’d just been intimate. I could only imagine the horrible deed he’d commit to keep from getting help.

“You did read that he has violent tendencies. Right? It’s in his file on the first page.” Shelly wasn’t exactly admonishing me, more like making fun that I was as angry as I was.

“I know. You did. But I thought I could break through that tough exterior of his. I failed. He’s just... *growl*.”

Was it possible he’d followed me to work, maybe to make good on his point? No. Snake might be an asshole, but he wasn’t a stalker. Just thinking that way had me rubbing my arm, trying to keep from scratching it. I noticed Shelly was watching what I was doing. As I slowly lowered my hand, she sighed.

“Look. I know how you are, and I thought if anyone could get through to him, you could. Some soldiers just can’t be helped.”

“He’s a Marine, not a soldier. A decorated Marine who went through hell in serving his country. He deserves our respect and our support.” I said the few sentences with a little too much passion, which made Shelly smile.

“True, but I think he might respond better to a male therapist,” she said coolly.

“No!” I threw my arm out in my usual dramatic form. “I don’t care how big the guy was who you sent; Snake would tear him apart limb from limb.”

“Snake, huh? I can tell you really like him.”

“Like I would by being tied down in the desert sun with a thousand scorpions headed in my direction?” I eyed her warily.

She folded her arms, scolding my dramatics with her eyes.

I raked my hands through my hair, still muttering under my breath. “No! Yes, kind of. Maybe.”

“Uh-huh. Remember, he’s not a lost puppy dog you can save.” Laughing, she shook her head.

“No, he’s a man.” *A big, strapping man who made me feel safe and wanted and...* Shit. What was I doing? I waved my hand at her, looking away. “He has such a soulful look, but he’s so haunted. The scars are an everyday reminder of the man he lost. I want to help him. I really do, but I might end up punching him in the jaw. Oh, wait, I already did that.”

“You did what?”

“Nothing.”

She took a deep breath. “I’ll assume he deserved it. Let me give you some advice. I’ve seen so many men and women come and go, some achieving more success than others. There’s one constant in every case. They need to want to be helped. They need to sink so low that they realize without help, they’re going to spiral out of control. Until Corporal Garcia reaches that place in his life, nothing and no one will be able to help him.”

“I’m not giving up on him, but I was very clear in that he would come to the hospital for his subsequent appointments.”

She grinned. “You are tenacious, but don’t beat yourself up if he doesn’t respond according to directions.”

“He won’t push me away. I refuse to allow it.”

“You are a glutton for punishment.”

Punishment. The word sent quivers all the way down my spine. He’d been in such control of me, refusing to allow me to get away.

And I’d liked it. How had that been possible? How had I even allowed him to touch me? I’d thought that impossible.

I had to have a screw loose myself. “He had a dog there. Did I read about a cute puppy in his file?” I moved to my desk, riffling through the stack of my current patients, finding his file near the top.

“I’m certain there’s a notation. Apollo was a stray he found while serving. The two developed a bond, but he was left behind. One of his buddies made it his mission to get the dog to the United States.”

I flipped through several pages until I found the page listing Apollo. “Holt Wills.”

“Mustang to his friends.”

Hearing the moniker, I lifted my head. “Mustang. They all have nicknames.”

“Which you should know are important to the men and women who serve. Holt is a good guy. He lives here in town. His family was close friends with mine. As a matter of fact, the men who were on the helicopter on the day he was captured all live here in town.”

“Really?” I took a deep breath, my thoughts drifting to some pretty nefarious thoughts. “They should be an excellent support system.”

“If you’re thinking they’re going to help him from what little I learned about Corporal Garcia’s case, they’ve tried.”

“Not *my* way.” I couldn’t help but grin.

Shelly sighed and looked away.

“What? Say it.”

Shrugging, she didn’t look me in the eyes.

“Don’t get involved. Is that what you wanted to tell me?” I asked, although I already knew the answer. She’d heard almost all my stories from the time spent in Afghanistan, only one of them troubling her.

“I’m just warning you. Nothing more. You have a life. Don’t get caught up in his.”

“What life?” I asked. “I work twelve hours a day and go home to an empty little house.”

“You could always change that. I told you that I know a few hot men.” Her singsong voice drew me away from the file.

“You’re not fixing me up with some broken-down cowboy.”

“Ha, ha. You need someone in your life.”

Someone. I shuddered internally thinking about all the oaths I’d likely broken by having sex with the man. God, I still smelled like him. His scent was intoxicating, all woodsy and full of testosterone. “I have a drawer full of someones in a rainbow assortment. I’m doing just fine.”

“Uh-huh. Well, at some point you need to step away from your fantasies into real life. That will make you far happier.”

I wasn't entirely certain about that.

"When is his next appointment?" she asked.

"Day after tomorrow. And no, we are not taking bets on whether he's going to show up. I will hire some huge man to handcuff and bring him here. I swear to God I will."

"Well, that I'd like to see. Don't get lost in one patient. You have two more today."

"I know." Sighing, I couldn't stop thinking that there had to be something to spark the man he'd been before. Anything. I laughed to myself. As if he would take up painting. That was ridiculous.

"Also remember that you can't win them all."

"I also know that, Shelly, but he's in so much pain. I keep thinking there's more to his story than what happened overseas."

"Being captured and tortured can destroy a man."

"Granted, but I sensed an uneasiness about him that goes further back. Maybe it's because he can't remember much of his past. I just sense there's something else. Anyway, I know. I promise I won't get wrapped up in him."

"Good. You'll sleep easier if you don't."

Sleep. I doubted I'd get any tonight. I'd have far too many sinful fantasies.

And ugly ones.

"Oh, and before I forget it. Emily's bachelorette party is tomorrow night."

"Shit. I forgot all about that."

"You are coming," Shelly told me.

"Raunchy Ride? Is that the real name of the place?"

"You bet. The place is a far cry different since the new owner took over. But," she said, an evil grin sliding across her face, "the name is perfect. The place is full of tall, dark, handsome, sexy cowboys just ready to fulfill your fantasy."

When she laughed, I cocked my head. “No, thank you.”

“You are coming. Period. You can’t disappoint her.” She gave me a hard look. She was like a den mother determined to control a bunch of kids.

“Fine. I’ll go, but I’m not leaving with anyone.”

“O-kay. Whatever you say, sunshine.”

I laughed and headed to the therapy room. I’d made a mistake in becoming intimate. I needed to shove it aside and move on and that’s exactly what I planned on doing.

* * *

The next time I glanced at my watch, four hours had passed. I was exhausted, ready to go home. I tumbled into my office, grabbing my purse from the floor, cursing under my breath that I hadn’t gathered everything that had fallen out of it during my tirade.

“Hey. Look what just came for you.”

Shelly’s voice floated into my office. As I turned around, I was surprised to see what she held in her hand. There were four of the most beautiful red roses in a crystal vase.

“Those are for me?”

“Yep. Just arrived. I’m curious who sent them,” she cooed as she sat them on my desk.

“Nosy, aren’t you?”

“Well? I am your best friend.”

“One I could kick to the curb in a split second.” Smirking, I grabbed the card, laughing as the shocked look in her face.

“My feelings are hurt.”

“Right. Your feelings are never hurt.”

When I hesitated, she walked closer. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you have any idea who sent them?” I glanced at her, driven into my own set of horrible memories.

“No, but they were from a local florist. Oh, you think... No. I mean a very local florist that you couldn't find on the internet.” Her eyes opened wide.

“You don't know that.” *He can't hurt you. You're fine. Breathe and don't go down that dark road.*

Shelly sighed. “You won't know until you open the card.” When I stood frozen, she studied my eyes. “Is there something you're not telling me?”

“No. I'm just surprised.”

I hadn't told her every detail of what I'd been through, the horrible two months when I'd been ready to beg for death. She was a sweet girl, completely incapable of handling a terrible story of that nature. However, she knew enough to be a concerned friend. A cold shiver trickled down my spine. Almost a year had passed. I was just jumping to conclusions. I reminded myself that there was no chance he'd found me.

Taking a deep breath, I yanked out the card, uncertain what to expect. Then I shook my head, relief flooding me. “The man is one of few words and this is exactly what he'd say.”

“You must share. Pretty please?”

As I turned it over, she burst into laughter. “You're right. *Sorry.* How appropriate. Not too flowery, just exactly what needed to be said.”

At least he realized he'd treated me like shit, especially at the end when he'd jumped out of bed after he'd erupted inside me. It had been so fast I thought something had been wrong. Oh, no. He'd jerked his clothes into his hand, stopping long enough at the door to instruct me to get my clothes on.

It had been that moment something had snapped inside of me, allowing another round of anger to rush in. I'd almost kicked him in the groin, even if it was for the best. “At least he realized what an ass he'd been. I'll accept it. For now.”

“Maybe that means he'll actually show up to an appointment.”

“Don't hold your breath. Besides, I'd truly like to see him in handcuffs.”

“You are one bad girl.”

“You bet I am.” Only I could never tell just how true the statement was. I leaned over, gathering a whiff and sighing. Maybe I’d take the file with me, reading it for the fourth time over a glass of wine.

I grabbed my things, heading for the door. Before I turned out the light, I glanced at the roses again. Why did they leave me with a sick feeling in my stomach? Things had changed. There was no reason to feel anxious.

But as I turned off the light, I could swear I felt eyes watching me.

Just like the ones I’d run away from.

CHAPTER 6



S *nake*

Beautiful.

Sultry.

Pain in the ass.

Those were the words that had rolled through my mind the rest of the afternoon. The way Chasity had challenged me had left a bad taste in my mouth, even if her sweet pussy had left me thirsting for more.

I'd noticed her scars, wanting nothing more than to ask her about them, but it wasn't my place for one thing. I'd also been too busy fucking her like a wild animal.

I glared at Mustang as he pressed his hand on the door.

"I'm not taking no for an answer," he stated, lifting both his eyebrows, daring me to say no.

He'd even put his boot across my threshold to keep me from slamming the door in his face. While I appreciated that every member of the team had checked on me on a regular basis since I'd returned, I didn't need a babysitter.

Like hell you don't.

"Hiya, baby," he cooed as Apollo jumped on his legs, the pup's tail wagging ninety miles an hour. I had him to thank for bringing the stray to the States, keeping him safe and loved

until I'd returned. There were so many memories he and I had shared together, including when I'd found Apollo, the pup all skin and bones.

"What do we have here? What a little baby," I said as I crouched down, sick to my stomach at the puppy's condition. How could any human do this to a dog? I noticed Mustang as he rounded the corner, laughing as he stopped short, staring at me like I was some kind of lunatic.

Maybe I was. Still, I wondered how the dog had gotten into the compound in the first place. While it was sprawled across a couple of acres, the security boundaries were tight, and they weren't near the sleeping quarters.

The dog lifted his head, his eyes glistening. The pup couldn't have been more than a few months old, but he was skin and bones, his ribs showing. He was filthy from head to toe, flies buzzing around him. I was shocked that he was able to wag his tail.

"Where the hell did he come from?" he asked as he walked closer.

Shrugging, all I could do as smile, which was rare for me. Maybe the dog had been sent to me like some divine intervention. "He suddenly appeared just outside the door. Pretty little thing, if you can get through all the filth."

Mustang knelt, gently placing his hand on the pup's head, his gaze falling to what appeared to be several old injuries. "He's been abused."

"Yep. Bastards."

"What are you going to do with him?"

I thought about it and knew I couldn't turn the puppy away. Not now. Not in such a treacherous warzone. He wouldn't make it another week.

"I'm going to nurture him back to health. What the hell did you think?" I brushed my hand over the pup's muzzle, smiling

when the adorable creature crept closer. “And I’m going to name you Apollo.”

Apollo was still tight with the man, which I’d been jealous of at first, but then I realized that what he’d done was almost equal to what Vader’s girl had done for me. Only through her tenacity had I been found, returned to my life.

“I’m not in the mood to go out,” I told him, although I walked away, allowing him to come inside.

“It’s just to Raunchy Ride tomorrow, for God’s sake. You need to get your ass out of here occasionally.” He closed the door, crouching down and taking Apollo’s paw.

“Fuck that. Why bother?”

“You’re in a shitty mood again. What’s going on?” He finally stood, watching as the pup trotted to his bed in front of the fire, shaking his head as he smiled.

I headed for the refrigerator, grabbing two beers, tossing him one. “Just had a visit from a physical therapist today.” *The most beautiful creature on this God-given earth. And I’d treated her like trash at the end.* What the hell was wrong with me? I popped off the top, taking a long pull.

“Here?”

“Yeah. She had the nerve to come here. To my house. Can you believe it?”

“I didn’t think that kind of thing was allowed.”

“Oh, trust me. Ms. Ballbuster doesn’t follow any traditional rules.” I shook my head.

He took a deep breath. “Well, she certainly got to you, buddy. I haven’t seen you this animated in a long time.”

“Do not go down *that* road. What was it she said to me?” I thought about her brash words and had to smile. She certainly knew how to push my buttons.

As well as the rest of me.

My cock ached all over again just thinking about her. “Oh, yeah. If the mountain wouldn’t come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must come to the mountain. Her statement pissed me off.”

“Did you tell her so?”

“Oh, I told her. Little Miss Nurse Garrington refused to listen. Oh, no. Now, every muscle aches like a son of a bitch.” I wasn’t going to tell him the reason I ached was because I’d turned into a beast of a man.

“You’re whining.”

“I am not whining!” But of course I was. “I just need my privacy. That’s all I ask.”

“Yeah, I hear you. That wasn’t cool, man. Not cool at all. Doesn’t she understand what you went through?”

“She said she does. She even served overseas herself.” What she’d told me remained in the back of my mind. I’d assumed she had no freaking clue about the horrors and tragedies, but like everything else about her, she surprised me.

“Maybe you should talk to her supervisor.”

“I ain’t gonna do that. I can handle her all by myself.”

He chuckled and thumped down on the leather sofa, his gaze shifting to the other side of the room. “Yeah, I know you can. I also know you’re a messy housekeeper and your taste in art is unusual but I’m curious. Why is your lamp broken?”

Exhaling, I glanced at the debris I’d left in the corner. “I wasn’t very happy about something she said.”

“That means she crossed a line.”

“It don’t mean shit. Just let it go.” Why had I allowed my rage to get the better of me? *Because she refused to take your crap.*

“Sure. Now, about tomorrow night. You need to at least stop by and grab a beer. I think Vader has some big news he needs to tell us about.” He grinned as he stared at me, challenging me with those eyes of his.

The five men who'd returned home before me had all built lives for themselves. They had girlfriends and wives, houses, and real jobs. What did I have to show for myself? There I went again, feeling sorry for myself.

"I don't know." I did miss getting together with them. We'd been a tight group, relying on each other while overseas. Yet we hadn't gotten together, talking about the incident that haunted each one of us since my return. I understood why. They all felt guilty, as if they were to blame for the fact I'd gone against orders, determined to get the girl to safety. Shit. The dream had put me right back into it. That was part of the reason for my extreme mood. Who was I kidding? I was surly all the time since I'd returned.

I took another long swallow, hating the tension between us. We used to talk about anything and everything, including hopes and dreams. Then they'd been dashed by one stupid decision.

"Do you ever think about it?" he asked quietly.

"Not if I can help it."

"You ever have dreams? I mean about the entire experience."

I shook my head, lying my ass off as I'd gotten so good at doing. "You?"

"Sometimes. It's funny. I keep going back to when you found Apollo. That's the only thing that pulls me out of the pit."

"Yeah, I hear you. I'm blessed to have him. I keep thinking about your face when I found him."

Mustang laughed. "Scrawny thing. Remember how you used to steal food for him?"

I'd forgotten all about that. "You never told on me."

"It was just extra food, dude. I fell in love with him too."

A part of me continued to think Apollo would be better off with a family instead of a broken-down asshole. "I know you did."

When he sat forward, I knew he had something else to talk to me about. He rolled the bottle from one hand to the other, taking several shallow breaths. “Look, you’re going to need to deal with having the grave dug up. You know that.”

Yeah, I did. I hadn’t been able to visit my tombstone, the grave where another soldier’s body had been laid to rest. I didn’t have what it took inside of me. That would make it too real and far too painful. “I’ll get around to it.”

“Well, the kid’s parents contacted the state department, and you know how it goes. They’re tired of waiting, even with the circumstances.”

I reared back, realizing what the hell was going on here. “Did Hawk put you up to this? Did he send you?”

Mustang never looked sheepish but on this day he did. “He thought I could break it to you better than he could.”

“Fuck that.” I finished off my beer, tossing it with a hard crack into the trash and grabbing another. This wasn’t going to be the night I gave up drinking. There was far too much on my mind, including the gorgeous raven-haired beauty.

“Hey. I’m sorry, man, but I honestly think it’ll be the best thing for you to do. My guess is that’s haunting you, which is causing you to have nightmares. And don’t try and tell me that you aren’t.”

“What are you, a shrink now too? First little Miss Chasity, now you? I’m over it.” I popped the top on the second, one, guzzling almost half. Nothing had been able to dull the pain and I doubted anything would in the near future, if ever.

Mustang rose to his feet, swaggering toward me. “Maybe that’s what you need.”

“The shrink or the bullshit?”

“Jesus, man. You’re luckier than a lot of Marines and you know it. You have your health, your beloved dog, and a nice little ranch. You need to try and move on. I think having his body exhumed will be one step closer to putting the past behind you.”

Bristling, I took two long strides, punching him in the jaw before I could stop myself. In doing so, the bottle smashed to the floor, the sound reverberating in my ears. Hissing, I wasn't certain how the man would react.

Apollo lifted his head but didn't bother barking. He'd seen me this way more than once.

Mustang rubbed his jaw, keeping his head turned away from the hard blow.

When he placed his beer on the table just as calmly as could be, I felt more like an asshole than I had before. I exhaled, realizing I'd just punched my best friend, and I deserved to have him walk out the door, slamming it in my face.

Mustang turned like he was going to leave then took a hard swing, catching me off guard.

My reaction was instant. I lunged toward him, issuing two brutal jabs. Then he got in two of his own before we both tumbled to the floor, scrapping like we'd done when we were younger.

Apollo stood over us, barking his head off.

We were both cursing, rolling over several times until I managed to wrap my hands around his throat. Then we both stopped. I couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"You still fight like a girl," he huffed as he struggled to move to a sitting position.

"You still don't know how to throw a punch." I couldn't help but grin as I rubbed my jaw, pain bursting through my head.

"You want me to try again?"

I lowered my head, trying to catch my breath, Apollo licking my face furiously. "I'm sorry, man. You're just trying to help."

"Yeah, well. I'm not certain I'm going to do that again." He struggled to his feet, throwing out his arm.

As I glanced up, I could tell how troubled he was by my behavior. Maybe Chasity was right, and I needed to figure out

a way to deal with my anger issues. I gripped his arm, allowing him to jerk me to my feet.

“You’re right. It’s time to allow his parents to have closure.”

He eyed me skeptically, twisting his neck back and forth. I heard a cracking sound and groaned. “I’ll let Hawk know.”

I closed my eyes, realizing if I didn’t get my head out of my ass, my entire life would pass me by. “I’ll tell him tomorrow night.”

He grinned, nodding several times. “I’m glad to hear it. Should be fun anyway. We haven’t all gotten together this way since you returned.”

“I know and it’s my fault.”

“Nothing’s your fault, buddy. “

“I think the therapist just rattled me today.” The admittance was harder than I thought it would be. Even shoving aside the electricity we shared, the fact she’d managed to shove aside my armor had given me a lot of think about, most of which I hadn’t wanted to do. However, she was an unstoppable force that would keep coming at me until I bent.

To top it all off, my leg did feel better because of her mangling maneuvers.

“Well, set your boundaries with her anyway.”

I raked my hands through my hair, forced to realize I’d become the kind of person I would have hated years ago. I’d become almost exactly like my father. As much as I wanted to, at this point, I wasn’t certain I could stand seeing Chasity again. My behavior had been deplorable. But that wouldn’t change. She just didn’t deserve the raft of shit I’d continue to give her. “She’s not for me. Too pushy. Even if she did help some today.”

He eyed me with a slight grin then shook his head. “Then tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow night for sure.”

Mustang chuckled before heading to the door. “You still got a mean right hook on ya.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

“I think I like that girl,” he added.

“Don’t go there.”

We both laughed, but I sensed he was finished with my ridiculous actions, just like everybody else in my life. Hell, I didn’t need anyone. Right? I had Apollo. After closing the door behind him, I leaned against it, staring down at my pup. “Thank God for you, buddy. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

* * *

“Where are you?” I called, the slight crack forcing me to spin around, taking several shots. The popping of gunfire continued to sound all around me, the whir of the helicopter blades drowned out by the shitshow all around me. I noticed another flash, the girl moving behind one of the burned-out buildings. Maybe I could get her to safety if she stayed right where she was.

I wiped dirt and sweat from my face, lowering as close to the ground as possible, springing forward when there was a split-second break in the horrific action.

Then bullets whizzed by me, at least one of the fuckers noticing what I was doing. I swung around, firing indiscriminately. Then a bullet slammed into my shoulder, I tumbled backward, fighting to breathe. Hell, no. Nothing was going to stop me from getting to her.

I picked myself up, ignoring the pain and bolted forward. I would do this no matter the odds. I would save her.

Gasping, I jerked up in the darkness, blinking several times. What the fuck? I was covered in sweat, my heart racing. Then I heard Apollo’s tail thumping next to me. Reaching out, I

rubbed my hand down his tummy, able to laugh since he was on his back, unaffected by my terrible dream. How many times did I have to go through this? How much pain was I supposed to suffer?

After slowing my breathing, I reached for the glass of bourbon on the nightstand, chugging the remainder. I had to get some decent sleep, or I would go mad.

As soon as the visions started to fade, I laid back down, staring at the blackened ceiling. The darkness was killing me. I flipped on the light on the nightstand, relief flooding me the moment the room lit up in an orange glow. Maybe that's what had brought on the nightmares. Hell, I didn't know anymore.

The second I closed my eyes, I could see Belle's face from all those years ago, her bright eyes when she'd first ridden with me on the old Harley I'd fixed up, totally against my dad's wishes. At least the memory brought a smile, one of the few I'd had. She'd been fascinated by it, watching me as I'd tinkered with the engine a dozen times. Then she'd begged me to go for a ride, unrelenting until I'd agreed.

I'd been shocked how much she'd loved it, wanting to ride forever. I would have let her. She was the one bright star in a sea of shit in my life at that point. If only she hadn't hooked up with some bad boys that held Missoula hostage.

Or so we'd thought.

Yeah. We'd believed ourselves to be kings of the mountain. I yanked my arm from under the covers, turning it over. I'd even had a tattoo done, albeit crude, with the symbol we'd used. Stupid kids. Stupid, irresponsible kids.

Belle. You didn't deserve to die the way you did.

When I finally closed my eyes, her sweet face slid into my vision. "I'm sorry," I whispered, and I had a feeling she'd heard me.

"Jesus. We're can't get through this," Holt yelled, from the distance.

The smoke was so goddamn thick I couldn't see a thing. "Come on, Belle. Where are you? Where are you, girl?" I stumbled over a fallen limb, landing on my face. Pain tore through my face and shoulder, but I refused to stop, lumbering forward into the swirl of blackness. I could swear I heard her call my name. The others were close. I could hear them fighting just as hard as I was.

"Stop. Breathe. I got you," Riggs told Holt. There was utter terror in his voice.

"This is crazy. We can't do this," Holt moaned.

"Yeah, we can." Riggs might be certain but at this point I didn't think any of us could make it. We'd pledged to protect each other through thick and thin, life and death. But not like this. Please, dear God. Not. Like. This. I continued struggling with the underbrush, realizing I was going in circles. Then I bolted toward a clearing, only to realize I'd make a complete three-sixty, ending up where I'd started.

I dropped to the ground, the air sucked out of me. "I can't... I tried... No. Use."

"We have to. I can't. I won't," Holt yelled again, struggling to breathe as much as I was.

"Fuck, no. Get out of here. I'm not coming back until Belle is found. Do you fucking hear me?" Riggs started racing toward the fire again, but Maverick tackled him from behind.

"No! We're not losing you too. We're getting the fuck out of here," Maverick growled.

"No. No..."

Exhaling, I opened my eyes, anguish tearing through my head as well as my heart. My vision was foggy, my mind an ugly blur and when I wiped my eyes to try to see, I realized I'd been crying in my sleep.

CHAPTER 7



*C*hasity

Roses.

I'd always loved them. My mother had a little garden just outside the back door, the beautiful pink and red roses fragrant and lush. She'd tended to them sometimes for what seemed like hours. Pruning. Feeding. Watering. My dad had wanted to cut them down several times, even threatening to do so. It was the one thing my mother had said she'd leave him over.

And I believed her.

At first, I didn't understand why he didn't like them. Until the fateful day when I was playing catch outside, missing the ball then tumbling into the three massive bushes. Thorns had pricked nearly every inch of my body, including my face. It had taken my mother three full hours to pick them off me.

I'd cried for hours, never wanting to go near them again. That was the time I'd been forced to realize that often something so beautiful had a dark side.

As I stared at the roses I'd been sent, my stomach churned. They were gorgeous, perfect specimens in every way, but I hated them. I walked closer, trying to understand how I could loathe something so exquisite.

I was a trained professional, including in psychology. I knew that fears of this nature could be conquered. Snake had sent them because he was sorry, the gesture lovely. Here I was

thinking terrible things about them. Half laughing, I remembered a few things my professors had talked about in trying to get over night terrors or other fears.

They can't hurt you unless you allow them to.

Easier said than done for so many people, but this was a small, simple fear. Right? I was up to the challenge, determined to get over it right now. So I grabbed one from the vase with every finger.

I felt the sharp pricks immediately, and almost in slow motion, I allowed the rose to fall to the floor, several of the delicate petals floating away. Then I noticed the thorns before allowing my gaze to slide to my fingers.

Bright red drops of blood adorned the pads of three fingers. I held my hand into the light, fighting the anxiety that was churning in my stomach, the lightheadedness that had swept through my head.

There was no florist in the world who left thorns on a bouquet of roses.

Unless requested.

Was that possible?

Shaking, I grabbed the entire vase, tossing it into the trash. Then I stared at the blood as it trickled down my fingers. This couldn't be happening again. No. I refused to believe there was anything sinister about the delivery. Just a mistake, an accident and nothing more. I had a mind to call the florist and complain.

But what good would that do?

When I heard a knock on the door, a moan slipped past my lips. Was I scared? I'd done everything to shove aside the past, refusing to fall into the anguish and nervousness that had kept me from working for a couple of months. I'd never been prone to jumping to conclusions. Why now? What was wrong with me?

Shelly popped her head in, immediately jerking back. "Are you okay? What happened?"

“Nothing’s wrong. There were thorns on the roses.”

“That’s crazy. Let me get you a paper towel. Do you need bandages?”

Now I laughed, albeit the sound was as nervous as I was. “No. They’re just tiny pricks.” I followed her out of my office to the breakroom, noticing a tall, rugged man in the waiting room. At first, I thought it was Snake.

Of course it wasn’t.

Shelly grabbed a paper towel as I moved to the sink, turning on the water. “Who’s the hunk in the waiting room?”

“That’s why I came to your office. That’s Holt Wills.” I must have looked confused to her. “You know, Mustang?”

As soon as she mentioned the name, I stiffened. I’d spent a couple of hours poring over Snake’s file. While the information was detailed, most of it wasn’t helpful in corroborating my belief there was something other than his capture and subsequent lengthy hospital stay that caused his sudden outbursts.

“Why is he here?”

“To see you.”

I grabbed the towel from her hand, pressing it against my fingers. “Did he say why?”

“No, but he was very insistent about being able to talk with you.”

“Huh. Well, maybe he has some good information that can help me.”

Shelly laughed. “After yesterday, you’re still determined to treat Corporal Garcia?”

“More than ever.”

“I’ll give you credit for trying but remember what I said yesterday. What do you want me to do?”

“Show him into my closet.” I couldn’t help but grin. Space was tight, the hospital needing a massive renovation, which

wasn't going to happen any time soon. I was lucky to have any private space at all.

Shelly continued to grin as she headed toward the lobby. I took a few seconds, studying my fingers. The blood had stopped flowing, the discomfort minimal, but I was dragged back to unpleasant memories.

“There isn't a place you can go where I won't find you. We are meant to be together.”

It was the last time I'd heard his voice and it continued to send shivers straight down my spine. The trial had been brutal, leaving me sick inside, hating the justice system. I'd even called his attorney a barbaric piece of garbage at one point. That hadn't been my finest hour, but the pompous man had rattled me to my core. At least I was hundreds of miles away and he was secured in a decent facility. I could only hope he was receiving the treatment he deserved.

Pain ripped through my limbs, the agony as I twisted, trying to break free of the thick ropes never ending. The bastard wouldn't break me, no matter what he did. I refused to allow him. My stomach churning, I shifted on the cold, hard floor, the freezing temperatures making the environment even more unbearable. I hauled in a deep breath, which only exacerbated the anguish. And I could hear him laughing in another room, waiting until I was exhausted from struggling, more compliant so he could easily torment my body, teasing every one of my senses with the violet wand before using the cattle prod. Then he'd wait until I begged him to stop, his cock standing at full attention the entire time.

The darkness was overwhelming, but my determination remained. I would escape one day. Then I enjoy every moment of watching him suffer.

“Fuck.” As I swam up from the wretched black pit, I remained stunned that my mind had dragged me into the horrors I'd endured. While my psychiatrist had told me when the

memories started to return that meant I was healing, finally able to lock away the past, the torture of reliving them was far too painful.

Even after closing my eyes, it took almost a full minute before the visions vanished, leaving me hollow and cold inside. My hand shaking, I brushed it through the fallen strands of hair, pushing them behind my ears. Then before I realized what I was doing, I'd ripped a handful from my scalp. As I held out my hand, I stared at the curls folded against my fingers. It had been exactly the way he'd shown me a handful when I'd been a bad girl deserving punishment.

But the monster's selection of discipline was completely unlike what I'd experienced with Snake. Maybe I was healing after all, allowing a man to touch me not only intimately, but commanding every inch of my willpower as well as my desires.

Jesus. I'd thought I was ready for this. Maybe I was wrong. I quickly deposited the hair into the trash, still tingling all over, but I was just as strong if not more so than before. I'd made a promise to myself the bastard would never break me down and I would keep it.

Period.

I waited another full minute before heading to my office. The moment I stepped inside, it was like I'd stepped into a battle zone.

"Who the hell do you think you are that you can just push my friend to the breaking point?" he demanded.

I was taken aback, the nervous tic on the corner of my mouth unusual. I was used to being confronted, but not by someone I'd yet to formally meet. "And you are?" I made certain my voice was as cold as a polar ice cap.

Huffing, his glare pierced right through me. "My name is Holt Wills, but my friends call me Mustang. You aren't my friend."

While I wanted to lash out, that would serve no purpose. "Well, Mr. Wills. You can either calm down and tell me why you're here and what you're talking about, or you can leave.

It's entirely up to you. If you don't leave of your own accord, I will have security toss you out. And funny thing, Mustang. They are bigger than you are. So. Do I make myself clear?" I dropped the towel into the trash, noticing he was watching every action I took. At least he had the good sense not to act amused.

His brow crinkled then he shook his head. "Yeah, he said you were a ballbuster."

"He? Am I to assume you're talking about Corporal Garcia?"

"Exactly, but you already knew that. Didn't you?"

Heat flushed my face, his nasty demeanor not what I needed this morning on top of everything else. "Fine. Do you want me to repeat what I just said?"

He remained disgruntled, but his body language shifted, some tension easing. "He's not just some guy that you can pretend to care about. He's a good man who went through a lot of shit."

"I know that, Mustang," I said on purpose and the tension thickened between us. I had no intentions of allowing another rugged Marine to try to boss me around. My dance card was filled. "Which is why I'm trying to help him. If you're his friend, then you'll understand."

"Help? You came to his house without being asked."

His attitude was already getting on my nerves. I folded my arms, walking closer.

"Because he missed several appointments, and threatened two other therapists, who refused to have anything to do with him. One incident was bad enough our administrator had to talk the therapist out of calling the sheriff. Your friend needs help, and not just with his physical impairment."

That seemed to get him, his face sagging. "I didn't know it was that bad."

"Oh, it's bad, although he doesn't want to face the fact he needs as much assistance as he can get. Why don't you sit down so we can have a decent conversation?" I pointed to the other chair in my crowded little office.

Mustang hesitated and I knew he was debating whether or not he could trust me. When he finally sat down, I took it as a win. Then he chuckled in a disgruntled manner, and I finally exhaled, realizing I'd been holding my breath. "I think he likes you."

"Oh, really? Was it when he told you how horrible I was to him or after he complained that I refused to take his bullshit? Or perhaps it was after he threatened me with bodily harm?" Okay, so the last part was stretching it but Mustang needed to know that unless his friend accepted help, he would lose more than one battle, including his need for violence.

As he burst out into laughter, I sensed we were making headway. "That's Snake. He was always rough around the edges, but since he came back, he's entirely different."

I eased into my office chair, trying to find the right words, if there were any. "You were in the military long enough, I'm certain you know the war and all the atrocities every branch of the military had to endure were very personal as well as tragic. There are thousands of men and women suffering because of what they had to face."

"Yeah, I know, but he has a chance at life, and he refuses to take it."

"I'm not a miracle worker, Mustang. I'm not going to cure him, but I am going to try and help him be able to walk, with or without a cane. As far as his anger issues, all I can do is make a few suggestions."

"He'll never use a cane. Never. I wouldn't bother."

"I noticed that, but it could either be a cane or a wheelchair. It's entirely up to him." I'd seen the thick wooden rod leaning against the wall in his bedroom. I'd also sensed it was doing nothing but catching dust. "Bottom line. I need your friend to be cooperative, including not missing his appointments. If you're willing to help encourage him to show up every once in a while, fantastic. If not, then don't accuse me for doing nothing more than the job I was hired to do."

As he eyed me circumspectly, I refused to back down, cocking my head and keeping my hard expression. “Fair enough.”

“I’m glad we have an understanding.” I remained unblinking, hoping the man would share even a few small details that might prove to be helpful.

He rubbed his jaw, leaning forward. “Snake never liked rules. He got himself into all kinds of trouble while serving.”

“I can only imagine. Have you guys talked about the incident in question when he was captured?” I could tell by the look in the man’s eyes that he’d endured just as much pain, likely from guilt. That was also typical of men who served together, one listed as dead for so long while the others lived.

He shook his head. “Nah. He refuses and the rest of us have tried to move on.”

“Which is difficult for all of you.”

“I’m not going to lie and say it isn’t, but the five of us found ways.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist, but I can tell you that until the six of you talk about what happened together, you’ll never be able to let it go.”

“That’s something I’ve been told more than once. Do you really think you can help him?”

I wish I knew the answer. “Only if he allows me to. And only if he lets me in. I’m not going to try and hurt him, but I will push hard against his fallback of heavy drinking and ignoring life and all those around him.”

He sat quietly for a few seconds. “Don’t give up on him, Doc.”

“I’m not a doctor.”

“Well, you’re a hell of a lot better than a lot of doctors I’ve been forced to see.”

Wow, a compliment. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot. I came barging in here. The least I can do is answer a question.”

“Did something else happen to Snake? I mean before he left for the war or after he returned?” By the pinched look crossing his face, I knew I was right.

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“I’m asking you. If you don’t want to tell me any details, I totally understand, but it would be helpful to know just how many obstacles I’m facing.”

I’d never seen man so uncomfortable in my life. “Let’s just say tragedies seem to follow him. I don’t know a lot of details, but he did go through something before he was eighteen. Whatever it was put the edge in his personality. I think that’s why he was so reckless at times, barreling into a dangerous situation without listening to his sergeant or the rest of the guys he served with.”

“What happened on that day in Afghanistan?”

He thought about what I was asking and turned his head, staring at the roses. “None of us really know because he’s never told a soul. He just ran off all of a sudden into the line of fire when Hawk and the rest of us were trying to get him back. We did try and go after him, but the five of us would have died that day if we’d stayed. It tore us apart.”

“I’m not blaming you or anyone else for what happened, Mustang. He made a decision that altered his life,” I told him, softening my voice.

“Whatever it was meant something to him. A life to be saved. Something like that. Don’t think badly of him. As I told you, he’s a damn good man.”

“I believe you because I’ve already seen it. By the way, what you did for Apollo and Snake was wonderful.”

“You’ve been reading up on me?” At least he grinned.

“I’m thorough in everything I do.”

“That’s good to know.” He rose to his feet, extending his arm. “I’m sorry about confronting you. He was just so different last night, angry but... I don’t know. Different. But I could tell he liked you.”

Heat rushed over the back of my neck, a few focused and filthy thoughts forming in my mind.

“At least that’s something.”

* * *

Snake

There was almost nothing I hated more than a dive bar, especially one that was as crowded as Raunchy Ride. However, I’d made a promise and I was intent on trying to keep them after breaking so many in my life.

I rubbed my hands on my jeans before heading inside, the blaring country music already getting on my nerves.

“That’ll be five bucks, buddy,” one of the two gruff-looking bouncers told me.

While I paid the fee, a part of me wanted to start some shit with the man for no other reason than the way he was glaring at me, a sly grin on his face. What the hell was the man staring at, my scars? Fuck him. I resisted punching him in the face as I walked past, hissing seeing the number of people in the joint. Too many. I wasn’t into crowds or music, people, or chitchat. But I reminded myself I was doing this for Vader.

I found the group easily enough, their booming voices able to drown out a good portion of the off-key music.

“Hey. Hey!” Hawk noticed me first, the dim lighting accentuating his genuine smile. “I thought you’d hole up in that place for years.”

“Don’t put it past me,” I grumbled, realizing the entire helicopter unit had already arrived. Even Phoenix had joined the group, which halfway surprised me. He and I went just as far back as I had with the members of my team, but he’d gone in his own direction after the devastating events surrounding Belle. Now the man was my neighbor, our horse fences butting together. I’d known he’d become friends with Hawk, but I

didn't think he was close enough to be included in on whatever announcement would be made.

"Come and have a beer," Scorpio shouted over the noise. "On the house, and I get to say that since I own the joint."

That I could do. As beer was poured from one of three pitchers, the glass slid in my direction, I did what I could to try to relax. The lingering effects of the nightmare had hit me hard, keeping me on edge the entire day. Other than tending to my horses, I'd done jack shit, which I knew had to stop.

"So what's the big announcement?" I asked after taking a gulp of the lukewarm brew.

"Just hold your horses," Vader said, the almost nonexistent lights unable to hide the twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm glad you showed," Mustang said across the table.

"Yeah, well, you kind of bullied me."

"Bullshit. I just pointed out your faults." His grin made me laugh.

"I'm certain you did, and I have plenty for you to do so with." I glanced around the bar, surprised how packed it was. Scorpio had done an incredible job of turning the place around. Hearing a series of feminine whooping noises, I shifted my attention in the direction of the noise. Then I narrowed my eyes, watching a girl walk in. My balls tightened, a single bead of sweat forming over my upper lip. After shifting, I managed to lose the girl in the crowd. Then I noticed her again and took a deep breath.

Long, dark curly hair.

A shimmer across her face.

A figure that would stop a man in his tracks.

There was no way Chasity was in the bar. It couldn't be her, although karma had been a bitch my entire life. I turned away completely, catching Mustang's eye. Then I glanced away quickly, my pulse racing.

What was wrong with me? She was just a girl, nothing special. *You're lying to yourself again.* I shook my head. Coming here had been a big mistake. Huge.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Nothin’.”

“Uh-huh. You have that look of consternation on your face.”

“Don’t you mean constipation?” Reaper teased.

“He’s just been hiding in that ranch of his for far too long,” Phoenix chastised.

“You’re watching me?” I challenged, although I had a grin on my face.

He shrugged. “Maybe. You need to get out more. Come work with me.”

“I’m busy,” I lied.

“Right. You forget I drive by your place every day. I’m serious. I need help.” His push to get me to work with him had become annoying. And I knew he wouldn’t stop.

“I do just fine, and I thought that gorgeous woman of yours kept you busy so you wouldn’t bug me. Plus, you have far too much construction going on.” I couldn’t help but tease him since he’d taken it upon himself to create an animal sanctuary, turning his entire ranch into a special facility. His father had been none too happy, but Phoenix had always done things his own way.

Maybe that’s why we’d remained friends after... after what happened in the mountains.

“It keeps me busy. That’s for certain,” he mused. “But well worth it. You know. I’m not kidding, Snake. I could really use some help, someone I trust. The project is a lot more than I thought I’d be biting off. Wren is amazing but she can’t do everything that needs to be done.” When he lifted a single eyebrow, I shook my head.

“I’m no carpenter.” He’d found himself an incredible woman. It was good to see everybody at the table was happy. Good for them. I was grouching again, which I’d become damn good at.

“But you are good with animals,” he challenged. “Wren and I really could use some help. I’m not kidding about that. I have no freaking clue what I’m doing.” His laugh was boisterous.

I glanced over my shoulder, almost positive Chasity was here. However, she’d vanished into the bowels of the bar. Damn. After the way I’d treated her, the last thing I needed was to run into her inside a raunchy bar.

“Maybe I’ll consider it,” I said in passing.

Mustang gave me a harsh look. “The gig sounds perfect for you.”

I resisted the usual anger I normally experienced. “As I said, I’ll consider it.” I could tell the guys all glanced at each other with that ‘knowing’ look. The second I shifted my gaze toward Chasity again, Mustang walked around the table.

“I’ve seen that look before, although it’s been forever. A pretty girl, huh?”

After taking a huge gulp of the beer, I was ready to head to the bar to order a tall, stiff drink. “Not just any girl.”

Mustang leaned back then grinned. “The lovely physical therapist?”

While he posed a question, I had a feeling he’d looked her up. I slowly turned my head, giving him an icy glare “You leave that girl alone. She was only trying to help. Even if her method of doing so is a complete irritation.”

He threw up his hands, the grin widening. “I wouldn’t touch her. I’m taken.”

“Very funny. You know what I mean.”

“I have a novel idea. Why don’t you go talk to her?” he chided.

“What are we talking about?” Scorpion intervened, leaning over the table.

“Our boy is sweet on a girl, a physical therapist.” As soon as Mustang answered, I shot him the bird.

“Stay out of my business,” I warned.

Vader and Reaper laughed, Vader clearing his throat before he spoke. “It’s about time, my friend. You need to venture out.”

“Stop telling me that!” I snarled and pounded on the table, almost knocking all three pitchers over. When the group quieted, I took several deep breaths. “I’m sorry about that. I’ve just had a few rough nights.”

“You too?” Phoenix asked.

“Yeah.” I hated to admit yet another weakness.

He sighed, keeping his voice low. “The nightmares are getting pretty bad. I can’t shake them.”

I lifted my head, studying his eyes. He was just as tortured as I was. “Same. They’ve been getting worse the last few weeks.” When I was certain the girl I’d been staring at wasn’t a dead ringer, I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off her. She seemed as uncomfortable as I was.

Then some asshole tried to hit on her. I bristled, snarling under my breath. No one touched my girl.

Hell. What was I doing? Now I was Mr. Possessive all of a sudden? We didn’t even like each other. Still, it bothered the heck out of me seeing the way all the men were gawking at her.

“Maybe you could just buy her a drink to apologize,” Mustang suggested, sliding in next to me.

While I grumbled under my breath again, I knew it wasn’t a bad idea. “Yeah, why not?” I noticed a waiter had just left the table where she was now standing all alone. “I’ll be right back.” I headed in the guy’s direction, grabbing him before he could make it to the bar. “The large party of women over there? Is that your table?”

“Yep. A bachelorette party. The girls are hot. What about it?”

“The gorgeous woman with the long curly hair who just ordered, whatever she’s having, I’m paying for.”

Chuckling, he threw a glance over his shoulder. “Good luck, buddy. She’s a cold fish, but sure. Why not?”

When I fisted my hand, giving him a hard look, he opened his eyes wide. I wouldn’t allow anyone to debase what belonged to me.

“Sorry, man. I just call them as I see them.” The waiter backed away before I could make good on my threat.

Mustang was right after all. I did have a thing for her. What bothered me is that for all her snappy comebacks, she had no idea that I could snap at any time. Exhaling, I waited for a few seconds, where I was currently standing allowing a much better view. The light over her table shimmered across her face and shoulders and damn if my cock wasn’t at full attention. I’d wanted to avoid her. Now I’d just bought her a drink? *Good idea, moron.*

Grouching, I headed back to the table, the ache in my balls as painful as when I’d been around her.

Hawk was the only one who’d been quiet. When he sauntered over, I faced him. “Mustang told me you were okay with allowing the Ramirez family to make arrangements,” he said, not bothering to look me in the eyes. He knew more than the others how much the gravesite itself had bothered me. The last thing I needed was a reminder of death, even though I’d begged for it more than once.

But God hadn’t wanted to get rid of me just yet.

As I fisted my hand around the glass, I knew I had the capability as well as the desire to crush it between my fingers. “Yeah. I don’t want to be there.”

“It might do you some good,” Reaper said quietly.

“Nope.” Nothing was going to help the continued anguish rolling through my mind. While I remembered very little about my captivity or certain aspects about my past, the two incidents of tragedy lingered front and center, punishment in my mind. Maybe I deserved the pain.

“Maybe it will do us all some good,” Mustang added.

I closed my eyes, wishing I’d had the privilege of meeting the young man who’d taken my place, keeping my future grave warm. If that didn’t make me want to live, nothing would.

Or so sayeth the last great psychiatrist I’d fired.

“I say we have a toast to Justin Ramirez. A soldier who wasn’t forgotten.” Hawk lifted his glass, glancing at every man around the table.

A cold shiver shifted down my spine, but I lifted my glass as well. At least the young man would finally have his final resting place.

As well as peace.

Something I would never have.

CHAPTER 8



*C*hasity

A few minutes earlier

“Raunchy Ride.” I said the words out loud, chastising myself for agreeing to come to the place. It wasn’t that I hated enjoying a good time, but I wasn’t in the mood to be pawed by anyone. I’d continued to debate whether or not I wanted to attend the bachelorette party all day. I had no desire to pretend to have fun, especially given the foreboding feeling that remained in the back of my mind. However, I knew Shelly wouldn’t allow me to live it down if I didn’t show, even if I only stayed for a half hour.

As I walked closer to the entrance, I still had the heebie-jeebies. I remained leery of almost everyone, which was ridiculous. I’d also turned around in a full circle, searching the well-lit parking lot. Other than a few people heading toward the bar, there was nothing ominous hiding in the shadows. Swallowing, I couldn’t rid myself of the sick feeling I was being watched.

You need to stop it. The roses were an anomaly.

If only I could buy into what my inner voice was saying.

Sighing, I headed toward the entrance, my muscles tightening. I was no longer a bar hopper under the best of circumstances. Those days were long gone. Even before I reached the door, the blaring music assaulted my senses. The beefy bouncers,

while attractive, annoyed me the second I walked in, acting as if I was intruding. After paying the entrance fee and stepping further inside, the sight of a band stuck behind a wire cage did nothing to provide a warm welcome. I half expected to see beer bottles tossed at any moment.

I felt like a fish out of water, about ready to turn around and leave when I heard boisterous laughter from the darkest part of the oversized room. The ratio of men to women was seventy/thirty, at least some of the cowboys I'd consider eye candy. As I weaved my way through the raucous crowd, my ass was grabbed at least three times, which boosted my already surly mood.

"There you are!" Shelly called, beckoning me over.

By the time I reached the festive table, it was obvious I was late to the party, the dozen or so girls surrounding the table already on their way to full intoxication. They'd shoved several tables together, taking up a decent spot in front of the dance floor. Their table looked like an entire Mardi Gras was happening, balloons and streamers everywhere. As I crowded closer, I couldn't help but notice there were at least ten cowboys who had their eye on the group. I'd make it twenty minutes, tops.

"She's here!" Maggie yelled from the other end, picking up and blowing a noisemaker, the sound loud enough I cringed.

"I'm so glad you came," Emily drawled. The girl was wearing a tiara and a virginal white outfit that Madonna would probably be embarrassed to be seen in. No, she wasn't trying to draw attention from every red-blooded male in the room, the beacon screaming, 'a few more nights to fuck.' I was never getting married. There was no need for a ranch with all the trimmings, including two or three kids running under my feet. I predicted she'd be divorced in less than three years.

I knew I shouldn't think that way, but I remained in a surly mood.

"I'm sorry. I had a few things to take care of," I muttered, trying to plant a smile on my face. I barely knew Emily, although she worked in the hospital.

“Well, it’s time to par-tay,” Shelly said, her grin widened by the margarita she had in her hand. And I had a feeling it wasn’t her first one.

“The party wouldn’t be the same without you here,” Emily exclaimed as she headed in my direction. The girl was already slurring her words and it wasn’t even nine o’clock yet. When she wrapped her arms around me, I stiffened. She leaned back seconds later, lifting her arm into the air. “Oh, gorgeous waiter. This girl needs a drink. Maybe five. She needs to catch up.”

“I’m fine. Really.” I knew my words wouldn’t be heeded. When the band switched songs, the entire table screeched their happiness as to the choice, the girls guzzling their drinks before heading toward the dance floor.

“Live a little, honey,” Shelly advised, tugging on my arm.

“I do just fine, thank you very much.”

“Come on. Dance.”

“Maybe later. I will have that drink.” I hung back, gritting my teeth as I watched the group taking over a significant portion of the dance floor. As the waiter approached, his grin far too mischievous, I wanted nothing more than to shrink into the woodwork. This just wasn’t me.

“What will you have, beautiful lady?” He’d obviously been told the reason for the gathering.

“Just a glass of red wine. Do you have a menu?”

He cocked his head, obviously amused. “This is a country bar.”

“Then whatever you have, which I suppose is rotgut red.” Sighing, I rolled my eyes and remained tense, the loud music and significant crowd suffocating. I couldn’t help scanning the interior, almost jealous there were so many people having a good time.

The pulsing beat was getting on my nerves, country bar or not.

“Hey, sugar,” a gruff voice said.

“I’m not interested,” I said without looking at him. I didn’t care if he was Henry Cavill, I still wouldn’t be interested.

Because you have a thing for Snake.

Now my little voice had to act up again. Great. It was going to be a long night.

At least the guy shuffled off without making a scene.

I tried to act like I was having a good time when the girls continually tried to get me to come onto the dance floor, but I couldn’t let go of the strange sensations. As the wine arrived, I nodded politely, reaching for my wallet. I wasn’t going to stay long enough to run a tab.

“No need,” he said. “One of the cowboys bought the drink.”

My entire body went tense, my mouth suddenly dry as fear swept through my system. “Where is he?” I wasn’t entirely certain he’d heard me given my hoarse whisper. No. It was just another cowboy who thought he’d get lucky tonight and nothing more.

The waiter gave me a onceover then pointed to the other side of the room. “Over there. Blue shirt. He seemed real into you.”

Why did I have the feeling the waiter wasn’t certain why? Perfect for my ego.

I was forced to take a deep breath in an attempt to calm the increasing terror. Then I managed to find the courage to turn halfway around, shifting so I could catch a good look at the sender.

Relief shifted into my system first followed by the tingling sensations I’d had when I’d spent time with the grumpy cowboy with the glistening eyes. Snake. While he was trying not to pay any attention to me, I noticed he’d taken three quick glances in less than a heartbeat.

Hmm... Maybe I’d gotten to the man. At least I wasn’t losing my touch.

Somehow, the moniker just didn’t suit him. I debated whether I should go over and offer my thanks. If I did, what would that

mean? Was this just a friendly gesture? Why was I overthinking it?

Go tell him thank you. Don't be a bitch.

I rolled my eyes as I twirled the wineglass back and forth. My inner voice was pushy as hell. But she was right. I didn't need to be rude. If I was determined to continue working with him, then the polite thing to do would be to say 'thank you' and to make certain he knew what had occurred before could never happen again.

Even if just the thought about what we'd shared drove a lightning bolt straight through me, firecrackers finishing off the electric event. I casually took a sip, doing what I could to calm my nerves.

And my dark desires.

I took another sip and grimaced. Where did they get the stuff, a convenience store? It was terrible.

"Why don't you come dance with me?" This time the voice was more demanding.

I flashed him a smile anyway. He was decent looking, but with his slick-looking leather suit jacket and skintight black jeans, I sensed he was collecting arm candy and nothing else.

"No, thanks."

He sniffed then had the nerve to wrap his fingers around my arm. "What's it gonna hurt?"

"What will hurt is if you don't take your hand off me. I will cut it off and smile about doing so."

When he backed away, he shook his head and the next thing out of his mouth was the word I hated the most.

"Bitch!"

"Really?" I purred. Then I tossed the wine in the guy's face. What a shame to waste such a cheap vintage but the sacrifice was well worth it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Snake didn't like what was going on. Before he had a chance to cause a fight, I slid

the glass onto the table, shoving the asshole out of the way.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” the guy growled.

“Well, if you weren’t such a nice guy, I would have done worse.” When he acted as if he was going to retaliate in some drunken manner, I shifted around him, heading toward where I’d seen Snake.

And of course... he wasn’t there. Great. However, there were five other buff, rugged men, including Mustang and they were all staring straight at me.

When Mustang grinned, the flash of heat drifting up from my neck to my cheeks irritated the hell out of me. I had nothing to be embarrassed about. Well, that is unless Mr. Grumpy had told everyone what had happened. By the way they were leering at me, I’d say he had. How dare the asshole do that? If word got out, I’d be toast at the hospital. Would he do that to me?

Yes, he would in his less than chivalrous behavior. He would get a huge piece of my mind the next time I saw him. The coward couldn’t even look me in the eye. To hell with him.

“Oh, shit,” Mustang snapped.

I turned just in time to see Snake issue one hard punch to the asshole who’d accosted me. And my savior acted as if he was prepared to punch the guy again. With chiseled cheekbones and flashing eyes, he was a forbidden vice wrapped up in skintight jeans and a shirt accentuating his sculpted abs. I had to stop thinking that way.

The touchy-feely jerk went down without bothering to fight back. And the girls in the party all started to clap. Oh, this wasn’t good at all. No, in fact, this was terrible. I needed to go back to the table, doing what I could to act disinterested. But my curiosity got the better of me and I shifted again, giving Mustang a dour look. All five men were grinning at me like they knew a secret.

This night couldn’t get any worse. It wasn’t possible.

Exhaling, I decided it was best to leave it alone but the second I turned around to head back, not paying close enough

attention to where I was walking, I bumped into a solid brick wall and gasped.

“What is wrong with you? Now you’re punching out men in a bar?” I snarled at him, planting my hands on my hips.

“He was accosting you. That wasn’t acceptable.”

“I can fight my own battles, thank you very much.”

“He would have eaten you alive,” Snake retorted, his eyes twinkling from putting me on the spot.

I shoved up my sleeves, trying to push aside the fact I was just as aroused by being this close to him as I’d been before. The entire situation was getting out of hand. “Once again, you don’t know me very well. I’m a piranha, which means I enjoy feasting on flesh.”

“That’s exactly what I thought.”

“You’re still an asshole.”

“Yup. Now I am curious. Are you following me now, Nurse Ratched? Perhaps you’re making a checklist of my behavior for your records?” Snake snarled in the same hateful voice I’d heard enough of already.

He really wanted to pick another fight with me?

“Me follow you? Not a chance, buster. I’m here with friends. Perhaps you were trailing after me, which is why you ordered a glass of wine. Well, too bad.”

He narrowed his eyes, his jaw clenching, which drew my attention. He hadn’t shaved since I’d seen him before, and the two-day shadow added to his sexiness. He was like an impenetrable force.

“Too bad? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that what I told you at your house still applies. We are not a couple.”

He looked dumbfounded. “Who said anything about us being a couple just because we had sex?”

“Why don’t you say it louder. Maybe your friends didn’t hear you when you told them what happened between us. Or maybe the rest of the bar didn’t hear your exclamation.”

“Are you out of your mind? I didn’t say jack shit to anyone,” Snake hissed but crowded my space. “I sent you the damn wine to apologize.”

“You mean after sending thorny flowers? I got the message. I did when I was at your ranch. You don’t like me. Well, guess what? The feeling is mutual.” When I tried to walk away, angrier than I’d been before, he yanked me back, crushing me against his chest. His scent was just as intoxicating as before, which didn’t bode well for me given the fact my nipples were already poking through my sweater.

He allowed his eyes to fall, his nostrils flaring. “I guess we agree that we don’t like each other.”

“Nope. You can let me go now, but I do expect you in my office tomorrow. I will hunt you down.” Having his muscular frame pressed against me kept me electrified and the feel of his hard cock almost forced an audible shudder. I refused to give him the satisfaction.

He had the nerve to grin, which kept me quivering all over. “I don’t follow your orders.”

“We’ve been through this, cowboy. You know what I’ll do. Just let me go.” By now, there were about eight people watching us intently, not including his friends who were having a good ole time. I’d never been so embarrassed in my life. What was wrong with me? I should have left well enough alone.

“Fine.”

“Fine,” I repeated then managed to jerk my arm away. When I pointed my index finger, he growled and acted like he was going to bite it off. Then I spun on my heels, taking long strides back to the table. The girls had returned and every one of them was staring at me.

“What just happened?” Shelly asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all, but I think it’s best I leave. The air in here is bad for me.”

Emily gave a pouty look. “Don’t go. Please.”

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise. I don’t think I can stomach remaining.”

Shelly started to laugh, leaning closer. “You have it bad for that man.”

“Stop it. I do not. He’s an arrogant ass and will always be. But I’m a professional and I’m going to leave before I do something I’ll regret.”

“Okay, girl.”

“Have fun, ladies.” I weaved my way through the crowd, stopping at the perfect location where I could toss him another hateful look.

Then I rushed outside, still hating the fact I was so attracted to him.

Men.

They were the bane of the universe.

* * *

Snake

“What exactly was that?” Hawk chortled.

“The son of a bitch deserved to be knocked on his ass,” I growled, the rush of adrenaline from sparring with her rippling through my veins. I’d warned him that if he ever laid a hand on my woman again, he’d be drinking out of a straw for six months. My woman. She’d made a point of letting me know how much she’d hated spending time with me.

Still, I’d never felt so possessive in my life.

I wanted her. Bad.

“I’m not talking about the bad cowboy. I’m talking about the girl. She’s gorgeous.”

Snorting, I glanced in his direction. “Piranhas appear cute until they open their mouths. That woman has long, sharp teeth and she enjoys gnawing her victims.”

“O-kay,” Reaper chortled. “You have a thing for her.”

I took two steps away from the table, my cock still pulsing. When she turned around and glared at me again, every muscle in my body stiffened. Damn, the woman was hotter than hell when she was pissed off. And the feel of her curves pushing against me had almost made me drag her into the bathroom for a quickie. The thought left my mouth watering.

As I backed toward the table, I took a deep whiff. Her perfume lingered, but not nearly enough. I wanted every inch of my skin covered with her sweet scent, the nectar of the gods.

“Yep. You’re right. That was the chick Snake is smitten with,” Mustang said, half laughing.

“Who says smitten any longer?” Vader teased. “How old are you?”

“Older than dirt but you’re right. Our buddy is in love.” Scorpion whistled.

“Just shut up. We don’t like each other. I’d go as far as to say we hate each other’s guts.” Maybe so, but I wanted to drive my tongue past her swollen folds, lapping up her cream just like I’d done before.

“You know what they say about two people who hate each other but can’t get enough?”

I glared at Vader. “Don’t go there. She really pissed me off. More than usual. There were a few things I should have said to her.”

“Then why don’t you follow her?” Mustang encouraged. “You know. Just to tell her off and all.”

I glanced at his face and thought about his suggestion. “Why the hell not? Sorry, Vader. There’s something I gotta do. You can tell me your big news later.” I pushed my way through the

bar, racing outside and moving to the middle of the parking lot. She'd managed to disappear. "Damn it."

After I'd waited for a few seconds, a car came zooming from the back lot, skirting around me.

The lovely, yet bratty Chasity was driving. Grinning, I jogged toward my truck, pressing the unlock and jumping inside. I'd revved the engine in seconds, flooring it the second I got out onto the street. If the little filly thought she was going to accost me in the middle of a bar, she had another think coming.

I noticed her taillights a few seconds later and continued to follow, thinking of all the things I wanted to say to her.

And all the things I wanted to do.

While I knew the smartest thing was to keep away from her, that just wasn't going to happen. She'd plucked my last nerve and she was going to hear about it.

I kept my distance, refusing to allow her to know I was following. The best thing to do was to catch her off guard. Maybe that made me a very bad man, but I was at a point in my life that I couldn't care less what people thought of me.

Well, most people.

And what the hell was the comment regarding the flowers? First of all, I wasn't a flower man. Second, even if I hated the girl, which was debatable at this point, I'd never send her ones with thorns. It had to be psychiatric speak. Yeah, she was just pushing me. Well, I was damn good at pushing back.

As about a dozen images popped into my mind about what I wanted to do her, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. Where the hell did this girl live? She finally made a turn heading toward the mountains. How long had it been since I'd ridden the Harley around the mountainous curves?

I knew the area well, including all the cabins and ranches lining the road she'd turned on. When she made a final turn on a dead end, I made mental note of the location just in case I wanted to make a return visit.

She pulled down a long driveway and I waited, keeping the engine idling. I wanted her to have plenty of time to get nice and comfy. After three or four minutes, I backed up, rolling down the gravel, turning the headlights off halfway there. She was already inside. After climbing out, I raked my hands through my hair before heading for the door. A single crack coming from the woods caught my attention.

If I didn't know better, I'd say even the wild creatures thought she was hot. I laughed softly to myself before pounding on the door.

Hearing nothing, including footsteps, I pounded again. Then I kept doing so. The woman wasn't going to ignore me.

I noticed her face in the closest window and turned my head slowly. Then she flung open the door so fast, I was shocked at her level of fury.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing here?" she demanded. My God, the woman looked good enough to eat.

Which is exactly what I had planned for her.

Touching.

Tasting.

Fucking.

And not necessarily in that order.

"What do you think, sweetheart?" I crowded her space as I'd done before. She'd removed her boots, now standing in her bare feet.

"What I think is that you have balls to follow me home. What I also think is that you don't have any manners... at all." Her last few words were breathless as she took a step closer, and I couldn't help but notice her lower lip was quivering.

"I got two balls, my sweet girl, and they're both ready for you."

"Oh, yeah?" While venom continued to flash in her eyes, her chest rising and falling indicated just how aroused she'd become.

I planted my foot in the door.

She gave me a hard shove, the gleam in her eye increasing. The woman was having way too much fun with this. It was time to take full control of the situation.

“Out!” she commanded.

“Not until I’m finished.” I butted against her, pushing my way inside and slamming the door behind me.

“Get out!”

“We have unfinished business.”

“Like hell we do.”

A wry smile crossed her face as she continued backing away, ending up in the kitchen.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? Are you going to grab a knife to defend yourself with?”

“Maybe. Just answer the question,” she demanded.

If she thought playing hard to get was going to work on me, she had no clue what I was made of. When I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, she pressed her hand against my chest. “Because I’m going to spend another few hours devouring every inch of you.”

“I don’t think so.” She moved onto her tiptoes, leaning in, her sweet breath floating across my jaw. She had no idea how hard she made me.

“Then think again.” I could barely recognize my voice, the tone dripping with lust. I dropped my head, keeping our lips less than an inch apart. “Yeah, think again.” When I captured her mouth, every tense muscle finally relaxed. That’s what she did to me.

After making me crazy with her toxic mouth and her innuendoes.

She wrapped her fingers around my shirt, moaning into the kiss. When she rubbed her hips back and forth, the friction made the ache in my cock that much greater. I tugged on her

head, thrusting my tongue inside, and the way she wiggled in my hold was as if she was trying to gain control.

That wasn't going to happen.

I swept my tongue back and forth, finally able to dominate hers. Every soft whimper erupting past her lips, every squeeze of her long fingers created even more of an ache. I could barely breathe from the rush of adrenaline coursing through every vein like a wildfire. My needs were totally out of control, my mind a complete blur.

Of course I should have expected the bratty side of her to rise to the surface. Just when the kiss was getting good, she shoved me with both hands, breaking the connection.

Then she spun around, shaking her finger at me. "You're not good for me."

"Nope."

"Maybe you should leave."

"You know that's not going to happen."

She came at me just as fiercely, smacking her palms against my chest, her breathing ragged. "It will if I say it will." The look in her eyes was a mixture of fire and ice, which suited her perfectly.

"Not a chance. You keep forgetting I'm in charge."

When she dragged her tongue across her lips, taking several shallow breaths, I narrowed my eyes. Then she came at me, sliding her arm around my neck, tangling her fingers in my hair.

I rolled my hands under her bottom, lifting her off the floor. This time she kissed me, crushing her mouth over mine, sliding her tongue in as she wrapped her legs around me.

For a few seconds, there was no sound, no care about anything but driving my tongue down her throat. I squeezed her bottom, a fire ignited from the electricity shooting between us. Crazy with need, I turned us around in a full circle before sucking on her tongue.

She wiggled and moaned, raking her fingernails down the back of my neck. The moment of intimacy was as explosive as I'd ever experienced, my mind blown from the passion erupting between us. After a full minute, I allowed her to pull away, both of us gasping for air.

"Let me down," she said in a husky voice.

"No."

"I think you want to."

"Why is that?"

Her smile was sly and as she slid a single finger down the side of my face, it was the first time I wasn't shaken by someone touching my scars. "Cause I'm going to suck your cock."

* * *

Chasity

Irresistible.

Why was such a sullen, brooding pain in the ass kind of man so irresistible? Why was I questioning it at this point? I wanted to rip off his clothes just as much as he did mine. We were consenting adults, even if he was a cocky son of a bitch.

Snake allowed me to slide to my feet, the look on his face carnal. I'd wanted to kiss him inside that bar but only after I'd punched him in the face. The fact he followed me home meant he was either nuts or our lust couldn't be denied.

I slowly dropped to my knees, staring into his eyes as I fumbled with his belt buckle. I sensed I had a smirk on my face, but that matched the mischievous one on his. His breathing was labored, that glorious chest of his heaving as I took my time pulling the thick strap of leather from the brass buckle.

When I ran my fingers across the thick grain, he snickered.

“Be careful, little girl. That belt would make fine marks across your rounded bottom, which is exactly what you deserve.”

Why did his words send a thrill right through me?

As I pretended to struggle with the button, he growled several times.

“If you make me wait too long, I will issue a hard spanking.”

“No, you won’t.”

“What makes you so certain?” he asked, his eyes already glassing over.

“Because you’ll be far too busy moaning.” I unzipped then immediately pushed the thick material aside, taking a deep breath and holding it. There was nothing like the intense scent of a man in need. When I licked my lips, his body started to shake. “Down, boy. You’ll get yours.”

“You better be ready to deep throat me.”

“Have I failed you yet?”

He laughed and the sound lit up the entire room. If only he could let go like this all the time. “Oh, I will test you, every part of you.”

“You already have.” He narrowed his eyes, shaking his head as a low growl continued for at least twenty seconds. When he fisted my hair at the scalp, I managed to pull away, wagging my finger.

“Not yet, big boy.” I waited until he fisted his hand, pulling it away before tugging his jeans all the way down his thighs. The man had gone commando, another sexy as hell thing in my mind. His cock was fully engorged, his balls hanging low. I rolled a single finger under his shaft, around one testicle then the other.

“Fuck. What you do to me.”

“I plan on doing a lot more.” When I wrapped my hand around the base, he was forced to lean against the edge of the island, shaking his head. I could swear he was cursing under his breath, but I was too busy enjoying myself to concentrate on

what he was saying. When I dragged the tip of my tongue across his slit, his legs almost buckled.

“Careful there. I might fall down.”

“That’s why I’m around. To help you.” At least this time he grinned, his eyes still twinkling.

As I rolled his balls between my fingers, he shook his head. Then I couldn’t resist squeezing them, using just enough pressure he hissed.

“Woman. You’re killing me here. Suck me.”

I blew across his cockhead then rolled my tongue back and forth, determined to keep him in delirious need after what he’d done to me the day before. I continued to pump the base, rolling my hand up the length of his shaft. Then I couldn’t stand it any longer, sucking on the tip.

He allowed me to toy with him for a few seconds longer before gripping both sides of my head, pushing it down by a couple of inches. “You are going to take every last inch of me.”

I took several deep breaths then continued to swirl my tongue across his shaft, pumping on the tip with my mouth.

“Fuck. God, you are driving me insane.” Snake rolled onto the balls of his feet, gasping for air. I could tell he was running out of patience with me, the man used to being in control.

I shifted onto my knees, twisting my hand around the base as I took more of him into my mouth, the tip finally hitting the back of my throat. That’s the moment he took over, pushing down my head until my throat was stretched. My slight gagging sound filtered into the air and he growled all over again.

As he started to fuck my mouth, he lowered his head, his eyes sparkling with fire. I was mesmerized by them for a few seconds, my heart racing. He had a strong effect on me, so much so I found myself lost in the moment as my core heated, my skin on fire.

He twisted his hand, digging his fingers into my scalp, jutting his hips forward brutally. After squeezing his balls again, I planted my hands on his thighs, squeezing his taut muscles. I sensed within seconds he could lose all control, erupting deep into my throat. I wanted to taste him, to drag my tongue through his thick cream. I had a feeling he wouldn't allow me to do that, at least not this time.

"Goddamn, your mouth is hot," he muttered, panting after issuing the words. "Maybe I'll let you do this every day." He pumped several additional times then pulled all the way out, stumbling away from the island, wiping his mouth as he laughed softly. "But I want more. Do you know what I'm going to claim?"

I dragged my tongue around my lips, shifting my hips back and forth. "What?"

"Your tight little ass."

There was no reason for his words to shock me other than I'd only done it once before, hating every second of it. Somehow, I knew he wouldn't stop, taking what he wanted just like he'd done before.

He yanked me up from the floor, cupping the side of my face. "You better remove your clothes, or I'll rip them off you. And I won't be gentle."

When I shook my head, he pulled out a Swiss army knife, flicking open the blade.

"You wouldn't dare," I huffed.

He grabbed a fistful of my sweater and before I could stop him, he sliced through it.

"You son of a bitch," I said, gasping at what he'd done.

"See? Maybe you won't deny me again." He shoved the knife back into his jeans pocket, yanking both sides of the sweater away, his eyes hooded as he lowered them to my naked breasts. "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to go into a raunchy bar without a bra? My mouth watered from the moment you walked toward me."

“No, but she did warn me to avoid rogues like you.”

“I guess she didn’t do a good enough job. Huh?”

Maybe there’d been a teensy part of me that had been hoping he might be there. He cupped both breasts forcefully, immediately pinching my nipples. The wash of pain was exquisite, my mind immediately shifting into a blissful haze. I threw back my head, forced to grip his forearms to keep from falling.

After exhaling in an exaggerated manner, he dropped his head, suckling on one nipple, biting down after several seconds. Every sound he made was guttural, animalistic, and it kept me fully aroused. I shifted one arm around his shoulder, fingering his scraggly strands of thick, wavy hair. His natural, rugged appearance would stop any woman in the street, even if he had no idea how gorgeous he was.

Every sound he made pushed a moan past my lips, every touch searing my skin. As he rolled his lips across my chest, flicking the tip of his tongue back and forth across my nipple, pulsing light flashed in front of my eyes. I was aware he’d reached for the button on my jean skirt, slowly unfastening it. I didn’t object and couldn’t even if I’d wanted to. He was completely in control, and it thrilled me as much as what he was doing to my overheated body. I shouldn’t be able to tolerate it, but with him it felt right.

The scent of my desire wafted between us, the fragrance mixing with his and it was a smell I could drown myself in. Everything was a beautiful blur as he dropped my skirt. There was no need to ask me to step out of it, my reaction immediate. He bit down on my hardened bud, the incredible flash of pain mixing with the burst of pleasure and I was in awe.

When he slipped his fingers under the elastic of my thong, only then did a series of quivers roll through my body. He had a way of undressing me with his eyes that left me filled with excitement but being completed naked in front of him was entirely different. I’d never felt so vulnerable in my life.

He could do anything he wanted to me, and I wouldn't be able to stop him.

When I was completely undressed, he pulled back, his eyes no longer responsive, both glassy and so dark they'd become mirror to his haunted soul. I was floating on air, trembling all over. He pushed me toward the kitchen table, raking his long arm across the few items I'd placed on top, spilling papers and magazines to the floor. Then he eased me down, pushing my legs up and apart.

I curled my toes, keeping my thighs wide open for him. His throat growls spun a tale of predatory desire, a need that was so primal it couldn't be ignored. There was no pretense, no romance in what he was doing. This was nothing more than savage fucking, as if he was mating with me.

The moment he thrust the entire length of his cock inside, I jerked up from the table, panting from the effort my muscles used as they expanded. His shaft throbbed as it filled me, swelling even more. He gripped my hips as he stared down at me, yanking me down to the edge, fully seating himself inside.

I was aware he was fighting with his jeans, removing them completely. As he leaned over, he shook his head. "You will never be fucked the way I'll fuck you. Over and over again."

Even the way he drew out the words was sexy, driving me to an immediate state of euphoria. I pressed my palms against his chest, forever marveling how ripped his muscles were. He had the perfect body, sculpted as if a creation of some Nordic god. I could do nothing but touch him all day, exploring every inch, but I doubted I'd ever be given the chance. He was far too hungry.

And savage.

Exhaling, he leaned down until his head was only inches from mine, blowing a swath of hot air across my face. I couldn't stop shivering, my mind a beautiful blur of filthy images, envisioning all the places he could fuck me. I was such a bad girl.

Grinning, he raked his gaze down the length of me then jerked my body up by a few inches, leaving only the tip of his cock inside. When he repeated the move, I dug my nails into him, which seemed to turn him on even more.

“What do you want?” he asked, his upper lip curling.

“Everything.”

“Be careful what you ask for, little girl. You never know the kind of beast you’ll call in from the wild.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“I’ll remember you said that.”

CHAPTER 9



S *nake*

I was a dangerous man, and she had no idea what she was in for.

My beautiful Chasity.

The woman I couldn't seem to get enough of.

The one I needed to stay away from.

That just wasn't going to happen.

I was too far gone, my desire refusing to be denied. All it had taken was seeing two men pawing her like animals and that was it. As I peered down at her luscious body, my warped mind had already planned all the dirty things I was going to do to her. I shoved my cock back inside, the warmth of her pussy muscles as they clamped down everything I craved.

And all that I needed to stay away from.

Maybe I'd find the strength one day.

But not tonight.

Tonight I was taking her all over again in ways it was obvious she hadn't expected of me.

I dug my fingers into her hips, my chest heaving as I peered down into her sparkling eyes. She had the look of wonderment as she kneaded my chest, her long nails scraping against skin that had ached for a woman's touch for far too long. Even the

way her breasts jostled from the force I was using was a huge turn-on.

“So, you like it rough, huh?” I growled through clenched teeth.

“Yes.”

All I could do was smile as I thrust into her again. And again. I wanted to bring her to a round of ecstasy that she'd not soon forget. As I jerked her up and down the table, she tossed her head from side to side, the LED lighting casting shimmers in her long curls. I could do this for hours. Maybe I would.

As I pumped like a crazed man, her moans escalated, the sound sweet echoes in my ears. I gritted my teeth, my jaw aching from the hard clenching, struggling to hold on for as long as possible. I needed to fill her ass with my cum. I wanted her to have a reminder of what I could do. The thought sent another round of filthy images skittering through my mind.

I fucked her long and hard, finally realizing she was close to an orgasm. When I slid my hands under her bottom, lifting it off the table, she gasped then laughed, throwing her hand over her mouth. I swirled the tip of my finger around her clit, studying her reaction. Then I drove two into her tight channel beside my cock, drenching them with her juice.

“Oh, my. That is...” Chasity jerked up from the table, her eyelids half closed, her hands fisted as she pressed them against the table. “Yes. Yes...”

“Wait, little girl. Not until I tell you to come.”

“So... mean.”

“You bet.” I continued pumping with my fingers and cock then shifted my hand, rolling the same two fingers down the crack of her ass. The moment I swirled the tips around her tight hole, her eyes opened wide. “Breathe for me, baby. This is gonna feel so good.” I didn't wait for her reaction, shoving them inside, pushing past the tight ring of muscle.

“Oh, fuck. Oh. My. God.” Her scream was high pitched, her body bucking.

“Come for me. Now!” Her body responded to my command instantly, her entire body shaking as a climax swept through her. She was absolutely stunning when she came, her skin glistening and a single bead of perspiration covering her upper lip. I was enthralled watching her, basking in the glory of her pleasure.

But even that wasn't enough for me.

I didn't stop, rolling onto the balls of my feet, driving into her savagely until a single orgasm seemed to explode into another.

Her cries were strangled, her mouth forming a perfect O. I could eat her alive at this moment, feasting on every part of her.

Gasping, she eased her arms to the sides, lolling her head as her body continued to convulse. Only when her breathing returned to normal did I pull out, lifting her legs even higher as I bent over, licking up and down the length of her pussy.

She mewled and gasped, blinking furiously as I dragged my tongue through her sweet ambrosia. When I buried my tongue inside, she wrapped her fingers around my hair, pressing my face down.

“God, so good. So... good.” A warm flush crept up from her long neck, scattering in blotches across her cheeks as if she was embarrassed at her enjoyment.

I continued licking until I was satisfied, easing her down and backing away. She stared at me with lazy eyes, skimming her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“I'm not finished with you yet.” I gathered her shivering body into my arms, immediately pushing her tummy against the island. Then I pressed my hand on the small of her back. “Do not move. If you do, the belt comes out.”

She gripped the edge of the island, swinging her head around to stare at me. When I started opening drawers, a puzzled look crossed her face. “What are you looking for?”

“I'll know it when I see it.” Finally, in the fourth drawer, I grabbed what I was hoping she used on a frequent basis. As I held up the wooden spoon in the light, she gasped.

“No. You’re not spanking me.”

I couldn’t help but notice she hadn’t moved, her rounded bottom begging for an additional round of my marks.

And I would be happy to give them to her.

I twirled the spoon several times, grinning like some delinquent kid before taking a whiff of the wood. “Yes, perfect.”

“You’re insane.”

“Your behavior at the bar calls for a reminder that you belong to me.” The words came easily and didn’t seem to shock her. “That’s what all bad girls should get. One. Hard. Spanking.”

She continued to glare at me with her infamous rebellious look, still not moving when I moved behind her, pressing my flexed fingers against her back.

“Now, you’re going to count them off for me.”

“No.”

I gave her a stern look, shaking my head. “That just upped the number you’re going to receive from twenty to thirty. Would you like to go for fifty?”

“No! Oh, God, no.”

“Then count them off.” I cracked the spoon down twice, my body tensing in pleasure from the sound of the wood slapping against her skin. I’d always known I was a dominating man. Perhaps there was a little sadist inside of me.

“One. Two.”

“I think you need to say thank you for disciplining you.”

She opened her mouth to retort then thought better of it, pursing her luscious lips while keeping her glare. “Fine. Sir.”

“That’s more like it.”

I delivered four in rapid succession, once again twirling the handle.

“Three, four, five, and six, sir. Thank you for spanking me.”

“Ah, perfect.”

As I continued the spanking, she squirmed and moaned, still counting off although the sounds were breathless. I kicked her legs further apart, barely able to concentrate given how beautiful her swollen lips had presented themselves. They were glistening and so pink that my mouth watered all over again.

After three more, I took a deep breath.

“Twenty, twenty-one, and twenty-two, sir and thank you for fucking spanking me.”

Her attitude only fueled the fire burning deep within, the embers never dying out after our last round. The moment I rubbed the handle up and down her pussy, she bucked hard, gasping for air.

“You’re so wet. I think you enjoy being punished.”

“Never. Sir.”

I gently pushed the handle inside, every muscle in my body tingling. She rocked backward, meeting the slender invasion, arching her back as she closed her eyes.

“Such a naughty girl.” I thrust a few times then returned to the round of discipline, cracking the spoon against her upper thighs. The way she cried out was sweeter than any symphony. My cock was fully engorged, my balls fully swollen, and satisfaction was needed soon.

By the point I was finished with doling out her punishment, she had her face pressed against the island, her slender back heaving. I slipped my fingers into her wet pussy, electricity shooting through them all the way down both arms. She was even wetter than before, undulating her hips to meet every thrust. Her brow was pinched, her mouth twisting as whispers of pleasure slipped from her throat.

I was far too gone to remain gentle any longer, sliding my slickened fingers to her asshole just like I’d done before. When I pressed them inside, she pushed up from the counter, jutting out her hips. I spread my fingers wide open, driving as deeply inside as possible until I couldn’t take it any longer.

The moment I wrapped my hand around the base of my cock, she arched her back even more, issuing a blatant invitation.

It was almost impossible not to be the brutal man I was with everything else, but I refused to hurt her.

Even if I'd hurt almost everyone else I'd cared about.

She was different. Special. No, she was perfect.

I closed my eyes, my heart thudding against my chest as I pressed the tip inside her tight little hole, immediately shaking from the influx of sensations. I wanted to be gentle, but as I pushed another inch inside, I was forced to realize the last of my control was slipping.

“So tight,” I managed, taking shallow breaths.

Chasity hung her head, her breathing as rattled as mine. When I drove another inch inside, she drove her bottom back by a few inches, forcing the remainder inside.

“Fuck. Yes... God, yes.” She undulated her hips, making certain my cock was fully seated. The heat and tightness were overwhelming, my mind blown by just how good it felt fucking her tight asshole.

After a few seconds, I became nothing more than a beast, pounding into her with such ferocity that she was shoved against the edge of the countertop. She didn't seem to care, jamming her hands on the edge, still meeting every savage thrust with one of her own.

Our guttural sounds combined, spinning around us, keeping the beast inside of me in total control. I gripped her hips as I'd done before, picking up my rhythm, pushing her to the point she was moaning continuously.

As my balls tightened, echoes rumbling in my ears, there was no chance I could hold back any longer. I threw my head back, gasping for air. Then a roar erupted from deep within.

“Yes!” Her muscles convulsed as I filled her with my seed, and at least for a few seconds, the horrible emptiness faded, a moment of peace settling into my system.

If only it could last.

* * *

Chasity

Creak... Tick. Tick. Tick.

What?

Cold. Terror. Anger.

I was swept up in all three, blinking to try to focus, the blinding light creating intense pain behind my eyes. As I tried to shift, another moment of raw terror jetted through me. Was I paralyzed? What had the bastard done to me? Then I realized why I couldn't move. Thick bands of steel were holding me down, my arms and legs spread wide, the bright light fixture swinging slightly over my head, the creaking sound stirring me from unconsciousness. I twisted my arms, trying to determine the strength of the shackles. There was no way I'd free myself.

My stomach was woozy, my head so fuzzy I couldn't focus. Where was I? How had I gotten here? I remembered almost nothing but... A man. He'd bumped into me then... Blackness.

A whimper escaped my mouth and I fought against the bitter nausea to lift my head. When I did, another wave of terror swept through me. I was completely naked. What little I could see of the room indicated a facility or workshop of some kind. No, wait. What was on the tray? Medical instruments?

"No. No!" My scream was met with laughter.

"Hello, my beautiful Chasity. It was finally time to begin the rest of our lives together."

I jerked up, flailing my arms, still moaning as I blinked several times. I wasn't tied down. The room was warm, and I was covered in sheets. I slowly turned my head, fighting the disgusting images, willing them to fade away, never to return. Then I noticed I wasn't alone.

What? Wait a minute.

Snake.

He stirred in his sleep, rolling over to face me. I remained where I was, allowing the ugly vision to fade as my eyes became accustomed to the dark. Then I basked in the fact he was in my bed in my house, and it felt right. So comfortable. In fact, I could get used to this.

I bit back a laugh. That is if we didn't argue all the time.

Swallowing, some of the anxiety finally faded but I was left with an ache so intense my breathing was rapid. After a few seconds, I was able to slide under the covers again, lying down and twisting so I could cradle my body next to his. When he put his arm around me, I'd never felt safer. No one could ever hurt me if Snake was around.

* * *

Warmth.

My eyes were heavy as I tried to open them, the incredible feeling of utter warmth keeping me in a beautiful moment of bliss. A strange noise seemed so far away, yet it called to me as if I was supposed to awaken. Shifting, the warmth suddenly faded, a crisp chill trickling down one arm. Everything seemed heavy, including my eyelids, but I finally managed to open them, taking a few seconds to get used to the darkness.

My mind was still foggy, trying to process why every muscle in my body ached as well as what I was hearing. Then all I could do was smile. Every inch of skin was on fire because of the few hours spent fucking in almost every room of my small house before dropping into bed. I'd had wine. Snake had consumed bourbon. There'd been no small talk or fake attempt at romance, but the heated closeness of our bodies had been wonderful.

I rolled over, sliding my arm across the sheets, longing to feel the same heated connection. Then I realized he wasn't in the bed. When I lifted my head, only then did I realize what I was

hearing. My phone. After glancing at the clock, I exhaled. It was after three in the morning.

I didn't care who was calling me at this point. I shifted further onto the other side of the bed, pressing my face into the sheets. The cool linen still smelled like him. When the phone stopped ringing, I dragged the covers up higher, enjoying the warmth. Given the slight heat remaining, he couldn't have been gone that long. Why leave in the first place? He wasn't the kind of guy to hang around after hot sex.

Maybe he'd called to say he'd gotten home okay. I bit my lower lip, half laughing in my sleepy state of mind as I closed my eyes once again. We hadn't exchanged numbers. We were simply enemies with benefits. As soon as I started drifting off, the shrill sound of my phone dragged me all the way awake. Who in the hell was calling this time at night? Oh, God. What if something had happened with Shelly or one of the other girls?

I tumbled across the bed, fighting to get into the living room where I'd left my phone, managing to snag it on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"I heard a quote once that made me think of you."

The whispered voice was one I didn't recognize, raspy and unusual. I also couldn't tell if the caller was a male or female. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

No. No. No...

"Angela Carter once said 'A broken heart is never a tragedy. Only untimely death is a tragedy.' So true."

What? It wasn't possible. There wasn't a chance that... My arm started to itch from the rush of blood.

When the call went dead, I took a deep breath, pulling the phone from my face. A cold shiver trickled down my spine, not only from the words that had been said, but also from the fact the number on the screen came from my office phone. "What the hell?" My hand was shaking, my thoughts drifting

to the roses. Had Snake told me he'd sent them? Had he confirmed it?

Oh, God. I wasn't certain at this point. We'd been so busy being unable to keep our hands off each other that I couldn't be certain at all. Was it possible the prank caller had spoofed my office number? Maybe. I guess. Hell, I wasn't certain.

I glared at the screen for a few additional seconds then redialed the number. As usual, my voicemail came on after three rings. Had someone broken into the therapy offices? Given our unit was an actual wing attached to the hospital itself, the custodians had a key. Had one of them made the call? If so, why?

That was crazy. I glanced at the partially open blind and raced toward it, shutting it immediately then crowding the wall. The same fear that had exploded within me almost two years before had found a black hole in the center of my brain, and it wasn't going away any time soon. Maybe I was still asleep. I knew better. As I started scratching my arm, I closed my eyes briefly.

Get control. You can do it. Breathe. One. Two. Three. Breathe. One. Two.

"Damn you, asshole."

If someone had spoofed the call, they'd selected the number on purpose to let me think my office space had been invaded. And what was the quote supposed to be, terrifying?

It was, the meaning clear, but I did what I could not to think about it.

After checking the front and back door, I backed away, turning in a full circle, wishing Snake hadn't left. He would have protected me. *You're being silly.* Maybe it was a prank caller. I knew better. Should I contact the sheriff? And tell him what, exactly? Maybe one of the custodians had made the call. One of the guys seemed sweet on me. The explanation sounded the most rational and I'd feel comfortable with it, albeit still creepy, except for the quote issued.

He'd been in love with me, or so he'd said. I couldn't do this, and I certainly wasn't going back to sleep. And I definitely wasn't heading into the office early. I'd do a little work on learning more about Snake and what he'd been through, including the incident Mustang had referred to. I'd made a few notes, although I'd yet to find the time to do any research. Now seemed like as good a time as any other.

I walked back to the bedroom, grabbing a robe, running my fingers across the sheet one more time before heading for the second bedroom I'd turned into an office, stopping short a few inches away. The door was cracked when I'd purposely closed it.

The air was ripped from my lungs, my mind a complete blank for a few seconds. Then his face appeared out of nowhere, the vision so clear I was instantly paralyzed.

"Come here, little girl. You can't run from me. I will find you." His deep voice echoed in the forest. Then the snow grabbed the sound, floating it toward the sky. Every time I heard his voice, I cringed inside.

I crouched down, the ice and snow pelting against my face almost refreshing. There was only one shot at escaping, and I had to take it. I kept as low to the ground as possible, trying not to make a single sound. If he found me, there was no doubt he'd make good on his earlier threats. Oh, God. Why hadn't someone found me? Why?

Shuddering, I folded my arms, my body temperature already starting to drop. He'd made certain I had no clothes, nothing that would help me get away from his prison. But I didn't care. I would make it this time. I would survive and the monster would go to jail.

The only sound was the wind whipping through the trees. I counted to ten then crept out of my hiding place, constantly glancing over my shoulder as I trekked the opposite way of where he'd gone. I'd paid attention to everything he said, finally believing I knew the way to some sort of civilization.

Or so I prayed.

I made it a few feet then a several yards, becoming more confident I could do this.

After another hundred or so yards, I was almost gleeful, certain I noticed smoke coming from the chimney of another house. I raced toward it, exhilarated from the possibilities. I was getting closer. Closer. Yes. Yes. I could do this.

As I rounded the corner, the frigid temperatures making it difficult to breathe, tears of joy filled my eyes.

Then reality set in. I'd been going in a complete circle, right back to the horrible cabin I'd been kept in for months.

"Hello, baby girl. Did you think you could get away from me that easily?"

"Fuck." The vivid images were so real, more so than I'd experienced for almost a full year.

No. The voice definitely wasn't the same and the asshole wasn't here. He couldn't be.

Calm down and breathe.

A lump formed in my throat, and I backed away instinctively, returning to the bedroom and my closet, flicking on the light. I tried to be as quiet as possible as I grabbed down a shoebox where I'd stored the gun. I'd purchased it as soon as I returned to Montana, my father insisting after everything I'd been through.

I'd laughed at him, explaining I didn't believe in them. I did at this moment, especially if someone had broken into my house.

My hands continued to shake as I snapped the magazine into the Glock, remembering how the store clerk had looked at me funny when I'd asked for a G-19, giving me the heated onceover. I'd neglected to tell him that I was trained to kill, although it had been on the tip of my tongue. The truth was I'd insisted on going through rigorous weapons training prior to leaving for Afghanistan.

Even though I'd served in the capacity of being a nurse, not a combat soldier, I was glad I had my father's instincts. If I hadn't, I'd be dead by now. Once in the attack on our medic station and the other with the asshole who'd dared turn his back on his weapon just once.

I grabbed the weapon with both hands, stalking toward the partially open door. Thank God it didn't creak as I pressed it open with my shoulder, my eyes already accustomed to the darkness. Even though I saw nothing, I headed for the bathroom, flicking on the light in the small space. Then I headed for the kitchen. The moment I turned on the light, all I could do was smile.

The spoon had been placed in the center of the island as if done strategically. Why wasn't he here? Maybe he could tell me what I needed to do or that I was overblowing things.

Huffing, I retrieved the gun and walked out of the kitchen. I kept it in both hands as I returned to the office, flipping on the light switch.

That's when I realized what had happened. Snake had gone snooping after I'd fallen asleep. No. No. No... I rushed toward the desk, turning on the lamp. I always closed the files I was working on, fearful a page would drop to the floor. It was wide open, papers scattered. Even the chair was out more than where I usually kept it, which meant he'd sat at my desk going through every piece of paper.

Shit.

Including the notes I'd written about my discussion with Mustang. Damn it. If I knew the man at all, he'd think I betrayed him. He'd likely be angry with his friend as well. Shit. What had I done? No, he shouldn't have been snooping. This was my house. My rules. He walked into a closed-door room and invaded my privacy.

While you were invading his.

That wasn't accurate. I was trying to help him.

By sleeping with him?

My little voice couldn't understand the complexity of balancing professionalism with the need that even now burned deep within. Instead of waking me up, challenging me as to what I was doing, he'd walked out.

Another note to make about the man. He avoided confrontations when real emotions were involved.

Only that wouldn't go into his regular file. That was very personal and something I'd keep all to myself.

As I eased onto the chair, all I could do was groan.

After placing the weapon on the desk, I yanked out the notes from my conversation with Mustang. What in the world could have happened before he turned eighteen that was so horrific? I sifted through the papers until I found his personal information going back to when he was a child, detailed as part of a mental evaluation he'd received. As I scanned the information, it seemed he had normal parents who worked hard to put food on the table.

His grades weren't fabulous, but they weren't terrible either. He'd graduated with a B average. There was no noted family tragedy of any kind. If there were any issues with law enforcement, they'd been expunged. What was I missing? As I drummed my fingers on the desk, I decided to turn to the internet, allowing my fast fingers to fly.

I typed in various headers on Google, coming up with nothing. Even when I used his name, stories regarding his return from the dead took up more than one page. I continued flipping, barely scanning the headings. Then one registered too late, prompting me to go back.

Bingo.

I pulled up the article, which was a truncated version of the front page of a then local newspaper. The facilities in their entirety had burned, including all the records and past articles. The three paragraphs were all I was going to get.

A fire.

At the Sapphire Range.

Unfortunately, I was way too young to remember anything about it. “Six young men, all under the age of eighteen are lucky to be alive given the horrific fire occurring on Sapphire Ridge,” I read out loud, skimming a couple other sentences. Then hairs stood up on the back of my neck. “According to some prominent members of the community, the young men, also known as the Bad Boys of Missoula, were responsible not only for setting the fire but for...” I lifted my head. “The death of a young woman.” I took a deep breath. Was there some correlation as to what happened in Afghanistan to the fact the girl died on Sapphire Ridge?

The few other details in the limited story were of almost no use. There was no mention of the girl’s name or whether or not charges had been filed. Given their age and the timeframe, I doubted there would be but so much information left regarding what happened.

What I did know is that karma obviously hated me.

Without a doubt Snake wouldn’t show up to his appointment. Even worse, my instinct told me he’d never want to see me again.

Maybe I’d really believed something could come out of what had started. Or maybe I’d involuntarily been looking for a protector.

For some crazy, emotional, undetermined reason, I lowered my head onto the desk and started to cry.

CHAPTER 10



S *nake*

As soon as Mustang opened the door, I threw a hard punch, knocking him all the way to the floor.

“What the fuck?” he barked, immediately rubbing his jaw.

“Don’t you dare get in my business ever again. Do you hear me?” I took a long stride backward then spun on the heels of my boots, storming toward my truck. Seconds later, I felt a hand on my shoulder, spinning me around.

“What are you talking about?” He rubbed his jaw, glaring at me incredulously.

“You stood there at the bar acting like you didn’t know who she was.” I took another swing, anger tearing through me like wildfire.

Mustang smashed his fist against my jaw, the force pitching my head to the side. As soon as Zorro bonded out onto the porch, Apollo went nuts, trying to claw his way out of the truck.

“Now you’ve upset Danni’s dog,” he growled, taking a step back and reaching for the long-haired black Irish setter. “She’s gonna be pissed at you even more than I am right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” I snapped, twisting my head so I could glare at Apollo. The two dogs adored the hell out of each other, had become fast friends long before I’d interrupted their happy

little lives together, which I continued to feel guilty over. Zorro ruled their house, Mustang falling in love with the dog as soon as he'd met him. When I noticed Danni opening the door, I cringed. She was just as formidable as Chasity, which had cooled Mustang's heels.

"You're right. I am upset," Danni huffed from the door of the ranch. "But only because you two are little kids, two brothers who need to best each other all the time. I should have a sandbox installed. Would that make either one of you happy?" Her voice had the typical cutting edge, but I also sensed amusement. "What is going on?"

The girl was exactly what Mustang had always needed in his life, feisty and beautiful, her copper-colored hair suiting her personality.

"Just a little disagreement, sweetie," Mustang told her, his tone still gruff.

"Uh-huh. I'm no fool. Now let Apollo out so he can say hello to my baby, or you'll be in hot water with me." Her demand was not to be denied.

Danni always had a way of making me laugh, which was definitely what I needed right about now. I shifted to the side, opening the door, shaking my head as Apollo jumped out.

"Asshole," I muttered.

"Jerk," he countered.

"Come on, you two. Let's go inside and leave the boys to their squabbles," Danni said in a lilting voice as she guided them inside.

The two of us stood staring at each other. Then I was the one who looked away.

"So are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on or do I need to guess?" Mustang asked, breaking the tension.

"You told Chasity about my past? You betrayed my trust?"

"I would never betray you." He glanced away for a brief second, which meant I was right. Damn it.

“Then you’re telling me that you didn’t have a conversation with her? Don’t you dare lie to me because I found notes she’d written at her house detailing a conversation the two of you had.”

He grinned, which kind of pissed me off. “You were at her house? Let’s see. Would that have been after you left the bar in a huff?”

Shit. The man had caught me. I groused under my breath before looking away. “Fine. I was at her house.”

“Because you hate her so much you just had to tell her in person. Right?”

“That’s beside the point. The reason I was there is my business!” The extra vehemence I used was telling. “She was prying into my business, and I don’t like it. What did she do, track you down?”

He looked sheepish then scratched his head. “If you want the truth...”

“What?”

“I accosted Chasity at her office, accusing her of meddling, forcing you to do something you didn’t want to do.”

“You did what?” When I took a long stride in his direction, my anger and the protectiveness I felt about her rushed to the surface.

“I was wrong. Okay? I could tell how much she cared about you.”

“Damn you! Both of you.”

“Come on, dude. You’re already a hell of a lot more alive since that woman entered your life than you’ve been the entire time since you returned.”

I shoved my hands in my back pockets and took a deep breath. “You told her about Sapphire Ridge.”

“Buddy, I don’t know all the details about Sapphire Ridge, so what could I tell her?” He huffed then kicked his boot into the gravel.

“Then why the notes? She’s trying to piece together a puzzle. I don’t want her to do that.” Then she’d know just how ridiculous her decision to have anything to do with me really was.

Sighing, he acted as if he didn’t want to answer. “She’s determined that what’s driving you to bouts of anger and even more despair wasn’t just about being captured.”

The woman had figured more out about me in a little over two days than all the shrinks combined. And I didn’t like it one bit. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone snooping, but I was curious about her story. She was far too good to be true, which meant she was hiding something. My gut was never wrong.

“Is she right?” he asked when I still hadn’t said much of anything.

“No,” I snapped. “Yes. Maybe. What the fuck do I know? Do I look like a damn shrink to you?”

“Jesus. I think what’s really going on here is you like that girl.”

“Like hell I do.”

“Bullshit. You can lie to yourself, although I have a feeling you couldn’t look yourself in the mirror. But you certainly can’t lie to me. There wasn’t a person in that bar last night who didn’t know you two were going to end up together last night. Don’t try and deny it.”

“I’m not denying anything. But it’s not happening. I have zero time for a relationship.”

Mustang rolled his eyes. “Time is all you seem to have, my friend. How many times are you going to continue giving me that line?”

I snarled under my breath, a vision of her when I’d cut her sweater one I’d never forget. “Yeah, okay. I like her, but she’s pushing me too hard.”

“Maybe not hard enough. Don’t you have an appointment today?”

“Did she tell you that too? Did she also give you a diagnosis?” I kept my cold glare on him. I’d wanted to beat him for accosting her as much as for helping her. Yeah, I already had it bad for the girl.

“I think she mentioned something about anger management?” There was a gleam in his eye I wanted to wipe off.

Instead, I thought about her suggestion. Art. Painting. Hell, I used to draw pretty good when I was a kid. Maybe I’d do that. As far as the appointment went, not today. I had more important things to do.

* * *

Chasity

“A no-show, huh?” Shelly asked.

I’d waited at the window in the outer office, hoping he’d at least drive up. I wasn’t certain what I’d been planning on doing if he had, maybe running after him. And what? Apologize for giving a shit? That wasn’t my style. “Nope.”

“After last night?” She inched closer, winking at me. “I know what happened. The entire bar sparked from the electricity you two share.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not trying to be. Let’s face it. How many men go after a guy for hitting on someone they hate?”

Her grin was almost infectious, but I was forced to admit that while I’d acted annoyed at what he’d done, I’d been secretly thrilled he’d come to my defense.

Why did his name pair with the thought of passionate sex to make me blush like some school kid? Why deny my feelings any longer? “I know the rules. Not fraternization with patients.”

“When you put it that way, then why bother? Just so you know. There are no official rules, Chasity. But I do caution you to be careful, just like I did yesterday. Take it a day at a time. You obviously have chemistry together. There’s nothing wrong with exploring it.”

“He caught me by surprise. That’s it.” I started to fall off into dreamland when she cleared her throat, bringing me back to a cold, harsh reality. A relationship was the last thing I needed.

“And need I remind you what happened overseas?”

“I know. Don’t you think even working with Snake has brought up unwanted memories?” I shivered thinking about the phone call. However, the moment I’d driven into the parking lot, the custodian who’d watched me before was right there at the window. He was much more likely to be stalking me than a horrible man who would never see the light of day again. “What’s the name of the night custodian?”

“There are at least six of them. Which one are you talking about?”

“The big, brooding-looking guy? The one who never talks?”

Shelly narrowed her eyes. “You must be talking about Drake Myers. Why?”

“Because I had a phone call that came from my office phone, the caller disguising his voice with a weird quote.”

She took a deep breath. “Well, it’s possible since every custodian has the keys to every office that he used your phone, but then he’d need to know your cell phone number, which is only available to a select few people. I can have reception trace the call and see if it did indeed come from there.”

“Would you do that? I don’t mind if he has a crush on me, but it was weird. Unnerving.”

“Did you happen to tell Corporal Garcia about the call?”

I laughed nervously. “Are you nuts? After what he did to the cowboy at the bar? Snake is not my protector. He’s not even mine. I doubt after what happened he’ll ever want to see me

again.” I chewed on my lower lip, worried that Snake would go off. He had such a short fuse.

“And you aren’t going to tell me about the reason why you think that.”

“Not yet. I’m headed to my office now. I have paperwork to handle.” Why were my hands icy?

“Is that why you’ve been standing at the window since you arrived? Are you waiting for Snake?”

“I guess I’ve been hopeful.” I didn’t want to admit that I was freaking terrified of walking into my little cubicle. It sounded ridiculous even just thinking about it. I patted her on the arm and headed directly for the door, sliding my key into the lock. I threw it open, ready to toss my purse on the desk when I sensed something odd that bothered me. Backing away, I turned on the light.

Whoever had been inside my office had stripped off every petal from the roses, creating a heart design in the center of my desk. Even worse, the strands of hair I’d ripped out had been carefully placed in the center, as if done lovingly. I’d felt sick all morning long, thinking the anxiety was about Snake, even accepting a little guilt for no real reason. Now I knew the reason was because my body had sensed danger, knowing that I’d walk into a nightmare.

But was this some crush gone too far or something far more ominous? Why did I have the feeling things were going to get worse?

I backed out, closing the door behind me. This wasn’t anything like I’d expected upon returning to my hometown, and nothing I wanted a part of. But one thing was certain. I would confront Snake to see if he’d been responsible. Okay, so my rational mind knew he hadn’t made the call. Perhaps I was hoping for a logical explanation against all odds.

“What’s wrong?” Shelly asked as I headed for the door.

“I just need some air.”

“No, tell me what’s wrong?”

I stopped short, trying to catch my breath. “I think I have a stalker. Maybe Drake. Maybe not.”

She didn’t hesitate, immediately heading for my office. When she backed out, I could sense her growing tension. “I’m calling security and the sheriff.”

“What if it’s an innocent gesture?”

“Breaking and entering isn’t innocent, no matter who did it or the reason why. Even if Drake was at first doing his job, this is unacceptable. You can use my office for the rest of the day. I know you’re busy with patients.”

All I really wanted to do was to go home and crawl under the covers, but I had a feeling nowhere was safe. “If it’s alright, I need to make a couple phone calls.”

“Of course.”

I nodded, moving to the corridor leading to her office. If Corporal Lance Rollington had found me, I’d need to make some tough decisions.

Including leaving the home I loved more than anything.

As soon as I sat down, I riffled through my purse, yanking out my wallet. It took me several seconds to find the card the detective had given me all those months ago. I was shocked when she answered the phone.

“Detective Martin.”

“Detective, this is Chasity Garrington. I hoped I’d never have to talk to you again. I don’t mean any offense.” I laughed nervously, the same anxiety I’d experienced before rearing its ugly head. I swirled a portion of my hair in my fingers, rocking back and forth in the chair. Just seconds before I was ready to rip out another portion of my curls, I caught myself, placing my palm against my knee.

You’re better than this.

You don’t need to hurt yourself.

Maybe I couldn’t handle a real life, a normal life. Allowing my hand to curl into a fist, I held my breath until she

answered.

“Chasity. You were on my mind earlier this week.”

“Why is that?” Oh, God, no. What if...

“I was finalizing old cases so I could archive them and ran across your file. How are you doing?” the detective asked. She’d been tenacious in her investigation, refusing to buy into media hype that my story had been overblown. Without her involvement, Lance would never have been hunted down.

“I’m doing pretty well, but I did have a question.”

“Of course.”

“Is Corporal Rollington still locked away?”

She hesitated, which caused another lump to form in my throat. “As far as I know. Why?”

“It may be nothing, but I had a strange phone call, and my office was broken into.”

“I hate to ask you this, but the call, was it similar to what you remembered?”

It had all started with a few phone calls, no one on the other line at first. Then it had escalated to heavy breathing. After that, laughter. Then nothing for three weeks until he stood outside the hospital where I’d worked in Baltimore. Two days later I was taken. At least remembering the details no longer made me sick to my stomach.

“No, entirely different, but the feel was the same. I’m not certain if that makes any sense.”

“Actually, it does, but let me double check on his status. Don’t jump to any conclusions. And I hate to say this, but it’s entirely possible given the media coverage that there is a copycat out there.”

I thought about what she was saying and closed my eyes. “Another freak trying to destroy my life?”

“But he didn’t, Chasity. You survived and I have a feeling you’re doing fantastic.” While Detective Martin’s sentiment was genuine, I sensed a small amount of concern. The case

had been very personal for her. In her diligence, we'd become friends of sorts.

"I know. I'll just feel better if I know for certain."

"What number can I call you at?"

I'd changed my phone number, but I'd refused to alter my identity like several members of law enforcement had suggested. That had left me without a comfort zone when he wasn't put behind bars for the rest of his life. He'd conned experts and the jury into believing he'd been out of his mind, PTSD to blame. That meant there was a good chance he'd be 'cured' one day, set free to torture other women. After supplying her with the number, a sick sense of knowing remained firmly planted in the back of my mind.

The nightmare wasn't over. If I was right, this time he'd make good on his threat that if he couldn't have me, no one could.

* * *

Snake

Art supplies.

What a crock of shit.

Not only were they expensive, but I had no clue what I was looking for and that sent another wave of irritation throughout my mind. I'd snarled at the clerk who'd tried to steer me in the right direction, finally purchasing way too much crap.

All because a sexy little nurse pretending to be something she wasn't had suggested it.

I'd dumped it in the cab of the truck, uncertain it would ever see the light of day. As I stopped at the grocery store for dogfood and a few supplies, I was determined to hole myself up in the ranch. Or maybe I'd go to the cabin in the mountains where I could really get some peace without being pestered.

That sounded like a plan to me.

I took long strides into the grocery store, yanking one of the baskets into my hands, grumbling under my breath.

I'd draw a picture for her alright, but she wouldn't be happy with the results. Half laughing, I started dumping cans of food into the cart, not caring what I purchased. I had no taste for food any longer, couldn't care less about eating. The only thing I had a taste for was...

Ah, fuck. Her sweet pussy.

I dragged my tongue across the seam of my mouth, my grip on the handle white knuckled. When I turned the corner without looking, the hard cracking sound was as jarring as the direct hit with another shopper.

While the beautiful lady opened her eyes wide, I narrowed mine. Did karma hate me that badly?

"Snake," Chasity said, her wide eyes immediately flicking with anger. "You missed your appointment today."

"It's funny. I didn't see the sheriff come banging at my door." The same tightness in my chest I'd experienced before appeared out of nowhere.

"That's because he was busy talking to me."

Her answer wasn't expected and the same need to protect her shifted to the forefront of my mind. "Why? What happened?"

"Nothing you should be concerned about. But I'm curious and feel I need to ask you a question. Did you break into my office at the hospital just to annoy me, leaving petals from the roses you sent me all over my desk?"

Her accusation was laced with rage, but it also was tainted with raw fear. What the hell was going on with her? "First of all, I ain't the kind of man to give a lady roses. That's far too passe for my tastes. Second of all, I was at your place. Or did you forget what we shared?"

My words were laced with arsenic, which she didn't deserve, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I expected a swift, nasty retort, but the fear in her eyes turned into terror.

She looked away, but not before a single tear slipped past her long lashes. A strong ache formed in my heart, a need to protect her sweeping through me like a tidal wave.

“What’s wrong, Chasity? Did somebody hurt you?”

“Nah... no. Of course not. Just some asshole trying to get to me. That’s all. And don’t you go off halfcocked like you did last night.”

“I just did what came naturally to me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I’d never felt so uncomfortable in my life. Seconds ticked by. “Do you need protection?”

I noticed her hand was shaking as she tried to nonchalantly brush her tear away before I noticed it. “From you? Does that come with a dose of rage or just hatred for me?”

Ouch. I deserved that. “I don’t want anybody hurting you. That’s all.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need any help from anyone.”

She didn’t need to say it, but I knew she what she was thinking. *Especially not from you.* Exhaling, I growled at the customer trying to get past us, which prompted Chasity to roll her eyes.

“At least let me protect you.”

“You just can’t help yourself. Can you? You want to be the big he-man, acting one minute like you care then snapping at anyone for getting close. Then you run away when things get tough.”

“You broke the rules, lady. You asked my friend about me.”

“Because you weren’t being forthcoming!” Her voice had risen, and she was instantly ashamed, her face turning bright red. She darted a look around her and pulled her cart away from mine, immediately trying to get as far away from me as possible.

I should stop her. I should tell her she was wrong. Hell, I should have asked her out on a date. *What is wrong with you,*

asshole?

As she started to walk away, my throat tightened, but I couldn't stand what was happening between us. "I purchased some art supplies like you suggested. I'm going to start painting." I blurted the words out in such a way as if I was asking a teacher for a compliment on my improved behavior.

She stopped walking and I was able to notice her slight smile. "That's really wonderful to hear. I can't wait to see one of your works of art. I mean if you'll let me."

A rush of adrenaline flowed through me, my mind a total blank as to what to say. If I wasn't being an asshole, nothing felt natural any longer.

She waited, maybe hoping I could get my head out of my ass and act like a normal human being. I just didn't have it in me. Her sigh was one of disappointment and it stuck a knife into my gut.

"Well, I hope you'll reconsider coming for an appointment, but I won't push you any longer. It's a decision you need to make." When she walked off, I wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab her.

But the anger and hatred for myself wouldn't allow it.

So I did what I was best at doing.

Not a goddamn thing.

* * *

Paint.

More colors.

Red. That's what I needed. Red.

Laughing, I yanked the bottle of beer into my hand, gulping a good third then slamming the bottle back down. Apollo whined, his tail thumping against the floor. I sensed he was staring at me, trying to figure out why his Daddy Dog was such a loser.

“Don’t look at me that way. I’m trying, buddy.”

His tail kept thumping and I stuck the new paintbrush into the open can of red, using bold strokes as I dragged the brush across the canvas. I repeated the move, my actions becoming more aggressive.

And more.

And still more.

My chest was heaving, the agony of the past few days breaching the surface. I dropped the brush onto the table then took a step back, critiquing what I’d done.

“What the fuck is that?” I was horrified at what I’d created, the monstrous piece reminding me of a murder scene. Maybe I could paint a body in the middle of the gore. Snarling, I thought about using another color.

Then I couldn’t take it any longer, the pain of the past, the inability to be a normal human becoming so overwhelming that I lost my shit. I grabbed the canvas, using every ounce of strength to try to twist the frame, so repulsed by my creation that I slammed my fist through the canvas before tossing it against the wall. Then I raked my arms across the open paints, watching in glee as they splashed vivid colors of rage and hatred all across the walls and floor.

I burst into laughter, turning in a full circle to fully embrace the mess I’d created.

Then it hit me hard, a boulder smashing down on me, the ache turning into raw agony, and I dropped to my knees, holding my head in my hands. I wasn’t used to crying. That wasn’t me. It wasn’t manly, but the tears flowed down my face, scalding my skin. I sobbed like a baby, unable to control myself. What was wrong with me?

The racking sobs continued, drowning out almost everything else but the hard thudding of my heart. Then I heard a little whine, and it broke my heart.

When I felt Apollo’s tongue licking my cheek, doing his best to comfort me, I was horrified at what I’d done. To my house.

To my baby. To the woman I cared for more than any I had my entire worthless life.

As I wrapped my arm around him, pulling him close, another wave of self-hatred swept through me. The poor baby's fur was covered in paint.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I am just so sorry. You deserve someone better than me. Maybe you should go live with Mustang. He'll take much better care of you." The tears continued to flow as I eased back, rubbing his muzzle. When he lifted a single paw, placing it against my chest, I slid all the way to the floor, pulling him into my arms.

I wasn't fit to be around anyone.

Maybe it would be better off if I was dead after all.

CHAPTER 11



*C*hasity

Safe.

I was safe.

Right?

After the run-in with Snake, I'd gone home, checking every single room in the house, my weapon in my hand. Nothing had been disturbed, every glass and dish left in the sink where I'd placed them, my nightgown still hung on the back of the bathroom door. My chest of drawers hadn't been rifled through nor had a single picture been moved even a centimeter on the bookshelves.

But I knew instinctively someone had been inside my house. I'd always had an innate instinct and it had only failed me once. I refused to allow that to happen again. I'd already called for a locksmith, a representative meeting me at my house later today. I'd pushed off two appointments so I could be there. While a deputy had come to the office the day before to take my statement, he hadn't seemed optimistic he could find anything. He'd even had my office dusted for fingerprints, but I wasn't hopeful.

The sound of my phone made me jump. I grabbed it, hesitating to look at the screen much less answer. Thank God the detective was calling, hopefully with the information I wanted to hear.

“Chasity, Detective Martin.”

“Please tell me he’s locked away tight and sound.” I squeezed my eyes shut, my heart racing.

“Yes, he is.”

“But?” I’d heard the slight glitch in her voice.

“But he was moved to a different facility.”

“What do you mean different?” My anxiety was already on the rise.

“Minimum security. He has certain privileges.”

The words seemed muddled at first. “Did he escape?” I took a deep breath, uncertain I wanted the answer.

“No,” the detective said, the same edge to her voice as when I’d talked to her before. “He hasn’t left. I made certain of that.”

“There’s another but.”

She sighed and I heard noise like she was drumming her fingers on her desk. “He’s allowed a pass once a month to leave, but he’s supervised twenty-four hours a day.”

The lump in my throat grew, leaving me completely suffocated. I was forced to sit down, every muscle in my body tense. “So a monster who kidnapped and held and tortured me for two months was allowed to walk out of a facility? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“He’s had a year of treatment and the doctors believe he’s no longer suffering from the same psychosis as before.”

“They are fucking insane!” I shouted, dropping my head into my hand. “He’s an amazing con artist. You and I know that. Hell, the jurors saw that firsthand at trial!” I couldn’t calm down, my entire body shaking so badly my teeth were chattering. My entire world had just been turned upside down, the system failing me. I’d warned everyone what he would do, the lengths he’d go in order to be set free.

“I know,” she said calmly. “I already have an appointment with the psychiatrist treating him, but you know HIPPA laws. I

likely won't get very far.”

“Of course you won't. No one will because we're not family and his mother and father turned a blind eye, acting as if their decorated war hero of a son wasn't capable of what he did to me.” Tears formed in my eyes, and I refused to allow them to fall. I'd been stupid enough to blurt out my fear in front of Snake, allowing a single tear to fall, but he'd seen it. No one was ever going to think of me as weak again. Not ever.

“Just try and calm down. There are only a few places he's allowed to go, and his parents have full responsibility of him when he's on leave. I did check. He hasn't been out of the area. Not once.”

But he had access to a phone.

Snorting, I fisted my hand, doing my best to keep a rational mind. “You don't seem to understand that Lance has both his parents and the doctors wrapped around his little finger. And you don't seem very concerned.”

“I am concerned, Chasity, and I'll do everything I can to keep him from being set free, but I'm not the attorney nor am I the victim. You should consider returning to Baltimore even for a few days so you can talk to the judge and his doctors.”

“I am not returning to Maryland. I have a life and that *bastard* isn't going to take anything else from me.” Now I was yelling, spots of red forming in front of my eyes from the rage.

“Just calm down. Let me see what I can do. Okay?”

All I could do was laugh. “Sure. Thank you very much.” Anxiety rolling through me, I ended the call, holding the phone to my head. I couldn't go through it again. I didn't have the strength. When I heard a knock on my office door, I was ready to launch into whoever dared to do so.

The poor receptionist saw my face and I was certain she was going to pass out.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Garrington, but there's this... man out here who refuses to leave, and he doesn't have an appointment. I didn't know what to do.”

A man, huh? I had a feeling I knew exactly who it was. Maybe sparring with him again was exactly what had been needed. "Show him in." The dark tone in my voice was almost unrecognizable.

She opened her eyes wide, never having seen me this upset. "Okay. If that's what you want."

I stood, brushing my hands down my jacket then folding my arms. Why was Snake intent on driving me crazy with every action he took? I kept a cold expression on my face as he barged in, and it was obvious he was looking to pick a fight.

"Close the door, Amanda," I told the poor girl, reminding myself to apologize for my behavior later.

The second she did, he advanced like a predator. I hadn't really paid any attention to just how tall he was, so much so I was forced to look up into his eyes. The same tingling sensations were there, another shot of electricity, but I was finished playing his ugly game.

"You listen up, Nurse Ratched."

"Don't you ever call me that again."

"I will if I want to."

"And I can slap you if I want to." My last retort seemed to catch him by surprise, the same sexy curl of his lip creating a sickening wave of desire.

"Yes, you can, and you do it well," Snake said, shaking his head.

"What do you want? It's obvious you don't think you need my help, so why bother stopping by to tell me?"

His jaw clenched like I'd seen a few times before, ready to bite my head off but I was prepared for him this time. "I came to tell you that I'm too dangerous for you."

"Dangerous?" I laughed, the ugly sound reflecting the bitterness and fear that had formed a dull ache in my stomach. After what I'd been through, his kind of danger was exciting. "You obviously don't know me well enough. What if I not only like danger but crave it? What will you say then?"

Now he was befuddled. “Bullshit.”

“Try me.”

He shifted from foot to foot, his brow furrowing and without a doubt, he was indeed the sexiest man alive. “Fine. Then how about going out with me but I get to choose what we do.”

It wasn't really a question but a statement. “Fine. Give it your best shot.” I agreed without thinking about it, but as soon as I did, the heat erupting in my core became an intense volcano, my panties instantly damp.

He narrowed his eyes, his baby blues piercing mine. Then he nodded. “You leave early today.”

“I'm already leaving early. I have a contractor coming to my house at two. You will not interfere with that.”

“Fine. Three o'clock I'll be at your house. Wear jeans and don't expect flowers or anything frothy.”

“Frothy?”

“You know what I mean.”

“You mean romantic,” I snarled. “I wouldn't expect that from you at all, Corporal Garcia.”

His entire body was tense, his muscles strained against the tight confines of his clothing and all I could think about was ripping them off him.

Way to go. Another professional moment.

When he grabbed both sides of my face, pulling me toward him, I gasped and snapped my fingers around his wrist.

“And you will do everything I tell you to do.” His deep voice was sweet velveteen sliding down every inch of my body. The man could make me swoon like no other. The second he crushed his lips over mine, stars floated across my periphery of vision.

The man could kiss, his gruffness stimulating the deep part of my core. As he pulled me onto my toes, sweeping his tongue inside, all the walls I'd built seemed to crumble to my feet. He made me feel special and wanted, the passion we shared

tumultuous but everything I needed. With every guttural sound, every ragged breath, I was pulled deeper into the sweet bliss he'd shown me.

He dominated my tongue just like he wanted to do my life. The horrible experience I'd gone through was fading quickly, replaced with sheer joy. I shouldn't want him, but I wasn't certain I could live without him.

When he finally broke the kiss, he dragged his tongue around my lips, his fingers digging into my skin. "You're mine. All mine. And no one is ever going to hurt you." Seconds later, a sly grin crossed his face and he swung me around, pitching me over the edge of my desk. When he brought his hand down on my bottom four times in rapid succession, I was momentarily stunned. Seconds later, my panties were damp, my pussy quivering for his rough touch.

As he cracked his hand from one side to the other, I closed my eyes, my nipples swollen and aching. I allowed myself to become lost in the moment, breathless with wonder as another round of excitement tore through me.

"What's that for?" I breathed.

"For being hardheaded. For not telling me what was going on. And a reminder that you're required to obey me." There was a husky sound to his voice, throaty and seductive.

"Yes, sir." The two words came easily. When he slipped his hand under my shirt, tweaking my nipple, the pain provided a strange sense of being.

As if I was always meant to belong to him.

When he backed away, I remained where I was for a few seconds before turning around, my face flushed. Swallowing, I couldn't seem to put any words together. He had that kind of effect on me.

He tilted his head, his playful look disappearing. Then I could swear his entire body sagged as he remained unblinking. "And I do need your help. My leg aches all the time."

I took a deep breath, trying to keep from squealing. I'd won a hard-fought round and I was damn proud of myself. "Then I

hope you brought a change of clothes because we're getting started right now."

His glare was as commanding as before, but he nodded.

* * *

"Ms. Garrington, I'm Sheriff Beckham."

The sheriff had knocked on my door, which surprised me. I'd expected a follow-up call, maybe. Not a visit. That was almost as unnerving as the reason I'd contacted the sheriff's office in the first place. I stared at his badge and opened the door wider, noticing the locksmith I'd hired was watching intently. Did everybody need to know my business? The contractor had been thirty-eight minutes late and it wouldn't be long until Snake showed up. I could only imagine his reaction when he realized what was going on. Additional stress I didn't need.

"What do I owe this pleasure to, Sheriff?"

He glanced around my small place before turning to face me. At least the man had a pleasant smile. "I thought I'd talk with you myself. I did have a chat with Drake Myers."

"Oh, you did?"

"He admitted to placing the flower petals on your desk."

I wasn't certain whether to be relieved or not. "Did he send the flowers?"

"He did say he purchased them."

"With thorns."

The sheriff laughed. "I don't think he had anything to do with that. From what I could ascertain, it would seem to me that the man is very attracted to you."

Wonderful. A dead end. While I should feel another sense of relief, the nagging in the back of my mind remained. Exhaling, I shook my head. "And the phone call?"

As the sheriff scratched his head, I sensed he was conflicted about the answer. "Well, no. He insisted that he wouldn't do

something like that and from what I understand, the call was made to your personal cellphone that isn't listed on any of the hospital sites. Is that correct?"

"You're right." Shelly had also checked on that, including talking to a member of the IT department. There'd been no obvious breach in security.

"And unless you gave it to him, accidentally of course, I honestly don't think he made the call. Unfortunately, it would appear the call was made from your office, but I have to tell you that hackers can spoof any number easily."

"Meaning it's a dead end."

"At this point, yes. Now, do you want to press charges against Mr. Myers? It's my understanding that he was fired from his job."

Hearing the news hit me hard. "I didn't want that to happen, not for a sweet gesture. No, I don't want to press charges." Just then I heard a loud motor and glanced at my watch. Snake was early. Great. How was I going to explain the locksmith and the sheriff?

He also heard the noise and smiled. "I don't want to interrupt your day."

"I appreciate you coming all the way out here." Why did I have a sense he wanted to ask me additional questions? When he glanced at the locksmith, I took a deep breath.

"Just out of curiosity. Did someone bother you at the house?"

What was I supposed to say, that my crazy mind had pictured someone going through my things? "No, I just lost my keys."

"Ah." It was obvious he didn't believe me given my weak attempt at lying, which I wasn't very good at. "If anything else happens, don't hesitate to contact us again. Okay?"

Nodding, I followed behind him to the door, noticing my date had arrived on one big, steel Harley. As Snake climbed off, I was forced to take a deep breath. He was dressed in all black, looking very much like the stud he was. My heart skipped several beats, my stomach full of butterflies.

He was taking me at my word.

After the sheriff walked out, he shook hands with Snake, both conversing for a few seconds. Great. They knew each other. I could only imagine the questions I was going to get.

“Are you about finished?” I asked the locksmith.

“Almost.” He stood, trying the lock. “That should do it. Here are your keys.” He walked closer, placing a set of them in my hand. “I’ll email you the invoice if that’s alright.”

“That’s fine.” As the contractor pulled out a pad to write down the address, I glanced over his shoulder. Snake had lifted his head, staring right at me as he and the sheriff continued their conversation. After providing the email, I checked the lock myself, backing away as Snake took long strides in my direction.

If I didn’t know better, I’d swear his limp was much better after the session. He’d surprised me, working hard, only expressing his anger once. I took that as another win. I was racking them up, which gave me a smile.

Snake walked inside and I continued to back away. When he closed the door with a hard thud, I had a quick opportunity to glance all the way down the length of his long, muscular body, including admiring the thick bulge between his legs. My filthy thoughts were getting out of control.

There was something even more commanding about him and when he cupped the side of my face, rubbing his thumb back and forth across my bottom lip, all I could do was shiver. For all his bravado and anger, I’d never once been nervous or afraid of him. He was all protector wrapped up in a surly package, but I sensed underneath it all, there was a gentle man who would never allow anything to happen to me.

Snake took a deep breath, the slight growl sliding from the dark recesses of his throat forcing my nipples to harden. When he lowered his head, I found myself rising onto my toes, encouraging our lips to touch. “You look stunning,” he whispered. “But you’re in way over your head. You can always back out.”

“Is that what you want me to do, or what you expect?”

My question threw him. Snake seemed more uncomfortable than I'd seen before. When he wasn't able to hide behind his edgy bravado or determined rage, he was just like any other man, uncertain how to handle asking a woman out. I found that endearing. Maybe there was a little marshmallow creampuff in the middle.

I wrapped my fingers around his shirt, arching my back. “As I've told you plenty of times. You underestimate me.”

His grin was more natural than usual and for some reason took my breath away. When he captured my mouth, all the playfulness and irritation we'd played out faded away, replaced by an intense longing. He wrapped his other hand around the back of my neck, his hold firm as if he would never allow me to get away.

I was the one who swept my tongue inside, trembling in his hold as his scent floated all around me. While the man didn't need aftershave or cologne to make me lightheaded, the fact he'd worn an exotic scent only made me swoon harder.

When the kiss ended, I expected him to grill me, relieved as well as surprised when he didn't. He wanted me to ask for his help. While a part of me wanted to, I was fearful doing so would lead to a heightened level of possessiveness I wasn't ready for.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked instead.

“Where are we going?”

“For me to know and you to find out.” His grin widened, his playful side unexpected.

It was almost as if a chip had been removed from his shoulder, allowing him to enjoy a moment, even if he planned on being the one in charge. I grabbed my jacket, trying to act as if riding on the back of a motorcycle was something I'd done a million times.

After I locked the door, shoving the keys into my jeans pocket, he eyed me warily. I walked past him, flipping my hair on purpose, still holding my head high. The bike was huge and

powerful looking, complete with chrome exhaust pipes and massive handlebars. My legs were quaking from the thought of not being protected by thick sheets of metal like my truck. I only hoped the man knew what he was doing.

Who was I kidding? He'd probably started riding them at eight years old, trying to be the badass listed in his file.

When I struggled to get one of the helmets from the back of the bike, I heard him snort behind me. "What? I can do this."

"Uh-huh. Give it to me." He approached, pulling my hands away and grabbing the second helmet. "So, you've never ridden before."

"Um. What makes you say that?"

"Your lower lip is quivering for one thing."

I twisted my lips, giving him a pouting look. He just shook his head. "I know what I'm doing," I insisted.

"Right. Here's the thing, sweetheart. You need to hold on tight and whatever you do, don't let go. You like it rough and act as if you thrive on danger, then that's what you're going to get." He was gentler than I'd anticipated, placing the thick plastic around my head, brushing hair from my eyes before snapping it in place. Then he lifted a single finger in front of my nose. "And you will do exactly what I tell you to do at all times. Understood?"

I couldn't help myself, taking a step backward in order to salute and almost falling over the motorcycle. His massive hand was wrapped around my arm before I fell back even a couple of inches, keeping me steady then bringing me close. He lifted my chin with the same finger he'd used to issue his command, his eyes full of fire.

"I'm gonna rock your quiet little world, Chasity, but I ain't gonna let you get hurt no matter how hard you attempt to push me away. I don't take no for an answer."

Why did I have the feeling he'd made the statement based on whatever the sheriff had told him? Still, the words were more comforting than I wanted to admit. He rubbed the tip of his finger across my chin then backed away, yanking his helmet

into his hand. Like a seasoned pro, he slipped it on, immediately easing onto the bike. Then he threw me a look over his shoulder, the helmet unable to hide the mischief in his eyes.

I climbed on, wrapping my arms around his chest. The heat between us was combustible. Just being this close to him made my heart skip several beats. I placed my feet in position, hoping I was doing it right then closed my eyes. Why did I goad him into something this risky? What if I died on this ride?

“You ready?” he called after revving the engine. I could tell he was pushing down on the gas pedal on purpose, allowing the vibrations to filter through my legs to my chest. The hum shifted into my pussy, and I bit back a moan.

“For anything.”

Did the man snicker? When he took off, he wasn't easy or gentle, zooming down the driveway way too fast in my opinion. I was fearful he wouldn't stop at the end, but when he slowed down, I pressed my face against his back, unable to stop terror from skipping through me. What had I been thinking? Was I out of my mind?

The second he took the turn, heading onto the two-lane road, my stomach lurched, and I was really glad I hadn't eaten much of anything all day. There would be nothing more embarrassing than asking him to pull over on the side of the road so I could toss my cookies after my scene of bravado.

He didn't pull any punches or seem to remember that I was a novice to both his driving and a motorcycle. With every mile he increased the speed until it seemed like we were flying. I was rigid, so stiff that it was difficult to breathe. At one point I wasn't even certain I was. I kept my eyes closed, fearful that if I opened them, I'd fall off.

When he took a hard curve, I let out a scream, squeezing my thighs against him as the vibrations continued to create wave after wave of electric sensations. Panting, I could tell I was shaking, my heart exploding inside of my chest as a rush of

adrenaline kicked in. As he slowed down, coming to an idle, I gasped for air.

“You okay back there?” he asked, his deep voice resonating like wildfire through me.

“I’m fine.” Dear God, my voice sounded like I was a little girl terrified of her own shadow.

“You’re sure, cause it’s about to get dicey.”

Was he just trying to scare me? “I am fine. I’ll have you know I love thrills.” Why was I trying to prove myself to him?

I had a feeling he was enjoying tormenting me. “Keep holding onto me, sweetheart. The fun is about to begin.”

Fun? Was he kidding me? As he pressed down on the accelerator again, zooming away from the stop sign, the chill in the air increased. He was headed straight to the Mission Range, the mountains spreading all around the city. Some of the most incredible locations I’d ever been in my life were in the various mountain ranges. I hadn’t thought about the fact that since I’d returned home, I hadn’t taken a trip to any of my favorite places.

He seemed right at home, maneuvering the bike around several slower cars, easily exceeding the speed limit. I finally willed myself to open my eyes, the adrenaline rush still building in my system. I was floored that I was finally starting to relax, enjoying the view as well as the closeness to him. Heat resonated off his body, warming mine.

After a few more minutes, I was able to lift my head, becoming more exhilarated than I’d been in years. The views were even more incredible as he came closer to one of the peaks. I couldn’t help myself, throwing my head back and yahooping.

I could tell by his body language he was laughing, obviously surprised I was having such a good time. Why hadn’t I done this before? I intertwined my fingers together, not realizing I’d lowered my arms until his thick bulge pressed into my hands.

As he slowed, I could swear I heard him growl. “Be careful, my bad girl.”

“Why?”

All he did was laugh before weaving his way through a canopy of trees. I hadn't even known a road existed there. Where was he going? I didn't have long to wait to find out.

The sight of a stunning waterfall tumbling over craggy rocks, settling into the most gorgeous cerulean blue lagoon took my breath away. For all the locations my parents had taken me and places where I'd hiked, I'd never seen this very private location on any map.

He slowed the bike, stopping it on a grassy knoll overlooking the lagoon. I didn't wait for him, easing off the bike, still shaking from tension and excitement. Then I managed to rip off the helmet, holding it under my arm as I walked closer to a flat area of rocks overlooking the small cover.

Even from where I was standing, I was able to feel the mist as the fall hit the water with such ferocity the sound almost drowned out everything else. I was in awe and for the first time in as long as I could remember, completely happy and at peace.

I turned toward him, jumping up and down like a kid, my smile a mile wide.

The brooding man had removed his helmet, but he remained on the Harley staring at me, the backdrop of the afternoon sun highlighting his massive frame like a beautiful work of art. I wasn't certain what he was thinking but after all the sparring we'd done, it no longer mattered. He made me feel protected. Cared for.

Was it possible we could have a future together?

No. I couldn't think that way.

However, he was a man full of surprises. When he pulled off a bag strapped to the back of the bike, I studied him for a few seconds.

His eyes never left me. He placed the duffle on the grassy area closest to the rocks, removing a blanket. I'd never taken him for the picnic kind of guy. I chastised myself for stereotyping him. He was far too complex to continue doing so.

After dragging the bag closer, he swaggered toward me, his expression one of purpose. When he gathered me into his arms, pulling me onto my toes, the charge of current from before was nothing in comparison to the tingling sensations occurring now. He fisted my hair, tangling his long fingers in my curls, tugging ever so slightly to make certain he had my full attention.

All I could concentrate on were his rose-colored lips and how incredible they felt when he devoured me with his mouth. I placed my palms on his chest, darting my eyes back and forth across his. There was a seriousness in his tone I hadn't heard before.

"I'm going to tell you this once, Chasity, so you better listen up."

"Okay."

His nostrils flared, his jaw sharp and the muscles in his neck tense. "I'm not good for you, not at all, but since the moment you came into my life, I can't get you out of my mind. You're the air I breathe and the energy that flows through my veins. You're the only creature of beauty I've set my eyes on in a long time."

When he took a scattered breath, my heart fluttered. "What are you trying to say?"

He never blinked nor did a muscle move. But when he spoke again, it was that moment when I knew my life would never be the same.

"What I'm saying is that you had a chance to walk away, but you refused to do so."

"Because I didn't want to."

As he narrowed his eyes, he crushed me to his body, his cock pressing against my stomach. "Then so be it. As of right now, Chasity Garrington, you belong to me."

CHAPTER 12



S *nake*

Chasity.

Beautiful.

Ballsy.

Bratty.

Mine.

The words continuously flowed through my mind as I dragged her head down, capturing her mouth. I'd done it several times before, but the feel of having her in my arms in the only place that had ever given me peace forced me to realize I couldn't do without her.

Some asshole had threatened her. That much I knew, even if Gage had refused to tell me what they'd been talking about. Roses. The lock change at her house. Some jerkoff breaking into her office. They all added up to a stalker, which yanked at every part of me. However, it had become painfully clear that she was hiding something from me. Maybe it was all about trust and I certainly hadn't earned that level.

She'd thought I'd been asleep when she'd awakened from a traumatic nightmare. I'd heard her words, begging to be released. Her woeful sounds had dragged at every part of me.

The dream she'd suffered had seemed violent enough it drove me out of the most restful sleep I'd had in a long time. My

thoughts were drawn back to the scars I'd noticed. Then I pulled my arm into the light, staring at the single time I'd sliced open my vein. It hadn't been my finest moment, the permanent scar meant to keep my head in check. Was she a cutter? Is that how she handled pain?

No. I didn't buy it. Still, something terrible had happened to her, the dream all the evidence I needed.

After awakening, she'd curled up in my arms and I'd known at that moment I should walk away from her. Not because of whatever she'd suffered but because I feared I could do worse. She didn't need any extra baggage from me. It was also the very reason I'd walked into her office in the first place, guzzling down bourbon to calm my nerves. What I'd been searching for had nothing to do with my file. I'd wanted to see if I could find out what she was being forced to endure so I could rip the son of a bitch into shreds.

One thing was for certain. Whatever she'd gone through made my stories of torture inconsequential. I'd tried to walk away from her, but nothing had been able to snap the tether. No anger or frustration, no amount of alcohol or throes of violence. The painting had changed everything, making me want her even more.

Her suggestion for anger management had sealed her fate.

This woman would never be free of me, even as damaged as I was. She was mine. Period.

No one was going to touch her. Not a single soul. Or so help me God they wouldn't recover from my wrath.

The taste of her set off bottle rockets in my brain, the need to consume her stronger than ever. Just having our lips crushed together ignited the savage beast in me. I wanted to have every inch of her naked skin next to mine. I craved having the full weight of my body crushing down on hers as I shoved my cock inside, but she deserved more than just the intimacy that had snared us in the first place.

She deserved everything.

My only concern was how she'd handle the ugliness of my life. Dread filled me, the kind that squeezed against my chest painfully. Would she end up hating me when she learned the truth?

Chasity pressed her fingers against my face, pulling away. Her breathing was as ragged as mine and when she pressed her forehead to mine, I sensed she was overwhelmed by what I'd said.

I backed away, dragging her with me. Just the way her eyes were searching mine meant she wasn't certain I'd meant what I'd said in my sudden outburst. Hell, how could I blame her? I was a grenade ready to go off at any time. How much would she be forced to endure?

She sat down on the blanket, crossing her long legs, constantly eyeing the bag I'd brought with me. I would never be a romantic guy, but I couldn't drag her all the way up here without something to eat or drink. It was a date after all.

"Are you going to sit down or stare at me from afar?" she asked, her tone teasing.

I sat down with a huff, yanking off my jacket, tossing it aside. "Satisfied?"

"Are you going to be grumpy all afternoon and evening?"

"What if I am?" I turned my head, giving her a heated look.

"Then I might thumb a ride back. I'm certain I can get one easily." She yelped when I dragged her over my lap without hesitation, bringing my hand down across her butt several times. It was a shame she had jeans on. Grinning, the pinch as my cock pressed against the tough denim forced me to shift my hips. That only caused her to moan.

"Ouch!" she protested.

"Yep. I suggest you remember that spankings hurt." I let her go, barely able to keep the straight look on my face. When had I experienced so much joy? I couldn't remember. In fact, there was very little I remembered between the incident at Sapphire Ridge and just before the incident outside Kandahar.

She wiggled against me again before managing to free herself from my clutches. “You’re a very mean man.”

I burst into laughter. “Yeah, so I’ve been told.” When I tweaked her nose, she couldn’t have been more surprised.

“So, what do you have there?” The purring sound of her voice was going to do me in. She motioned toward the bag, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

She didn’t need to be told twice. The look on her face was priceless, the sparkle in her eyes allowing me another moment of sheer pleasure. “Wine? You drink wine?”

All I could do was shake my head. “When I was recovering in Germany, one of the nurses used to tell me about a little winery near the hospital. One day, I was allowed to take a short excursion. The doctors thought it would do me some good. She took me there and I loved everything I tasted, probably too much so. The doctors weren’t thrilled, but I think that was the day I made the decision I wanted to recover and come home.”

“I’m so glad you did,” she half whispered. The sudden awkward moment was a reminder that she still didn’t deserve the heavy baggage that gripped me like a noose. “Do you want me to open it?”

“Sure.” I sat up, folding my arms across my knees, staring at the water. I had no idea what to say to her. I wasn’t good at small talk. I also didn’t like feeling like a fish out of water.

“You are a surprise all the way around, Snake. Cheese. Fruit. Pâté? Who are you?”

When she handed me a glass of wine, I had a feeling she wanted a real answer. “A man with very little memory left from the past.” I was surprised I’d been so frank.

“But the doctors told you at least some of them would return.”

“Yeah, all six of them said that, but my mind has only grabbed a few glimpses of my past. It’s so limited, I’m starting to wonder if everything I experienced prior to going overseas is

nothing but a locked box of jumbled thoughts and a few visions. It's funny. I remember the important people in my life like my parents and the guys from the unit, but when I came home, I had no idea what my favorite food was. My mom told it was Mexican, but I can't stand even a bit of it now."

She laughed as she moved closer. "Okay. Then what is your favorite food now?"

"Steak. A good Caesar salad with shaved Parmesan Reggiano. Fish of any kind, which I hear I hated before. It's not such a stretch that I like red wine." I shifted my gaze, noticing how thoughtful she was.

"That must be terrible for you."

"I thought so in the beginning, but I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't a blessing."

"How so?"

"The way I figured it, I get to experience things as if they were new. Music. Movies. Food and drink. I have fleeting images and thoughts about who I was but nothing concrete. I stopped trying."

"But you remembered Apollo."

"Yeah. I missed him so much in the hospital I ached. I thought he was dead."

"He's a beautiful dog and it's obvious he adores you."

"He is. I love animals, maybe more so now that I've returned." I tried to hide the emotion in my voice, funneling it into something lighter, but I gathered by the look on her face I'd failed.

She shifted closer, taking a few seconds to trace her finger around one of my tattoos. "Then maybe you can find a job where you can work with them on a regular basis."

"It's funny you should say that. I have a buddy who is in the beginning stages of turning his expansive ranch into an animal sanctuary. You should see his plans. He'll be able to safely house hundreds of animals of different species. My friend's

wife is a veterinarian, so she's already committed to being on staff. The plans are incredible."

"Now that sounds amazing. You're animated when you talk about it."

"Maybe I like animals more than people."

"That I understand," she said quietly. "I'm curious. What made him want to make such a significant change?"

Chuckling, I studied her face and the way she was fascinated with the crude ink on my forearm. "Well, Phoenix has no interest in running the ranch the way his grandfather did. Plus, he fell in love with a woman who adores animals, and her dream was to have a rescue facility where animals of every kind could come and feel safe and wanted."

"That's beautiful. He must really be in love with her." She had a faraway look in her eyes, and it almost killed me. What could I offer her of any value, other than pieces and parts of a broken man?

"He's head over heels." I had to laugh. "He asked me to consider working there."

The look of excitement on her face was endearing but caused another significant ache. "You should do it. Apollo can be the ambassador."

Just hearing my pup's name brought me a moment of sadness and disgust. "We'll see. It's funny, I painted last night and before you go getting all happy, I destroyed it and pretty much the room I had set up as a studio."

"Why?"

I swirled the wine in the plastic cup, still amused that I enjoyed cabernet as much as I did. "I don't really know. I felt compelled to do so. Maybe because I painted crap. I know I used to be able to draw. That was a memory that came to me yesterday. I think I lost my talent."

"So you remember that you used to draw?" She was baiting me with the lush curve of her lips as they formed a pout.

“Yeah, I guess I do. I think I was good back then. What I produced was shit.”

“Nonsense. You’re angry because you can’t control your emotions given your nightmares. Yes, I know about them.” She looked away as soon as she mentioned it.

Leaning over, I gripped her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her to return her gaze. “You have them too.”

Her eyes opened wide, the beautiful flecks of gold shimmering against her virescent eyes. I could stare into them for hours, except at this moment they were filled with a flash of fear.

“You were awake.”

“I couldn’t help but be awakened by your scream.”

“I screamed?”

“Yes, after you begged someone not to hurt you.” I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off her.

“I never begged.”

She tried to look down, but I still wouldn’t allow her to shut down, lifting her chin with a single finger. “What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now.” She was insistent. When I dared rub my fingers across the scar on her arm, she tried to jerk away.

“Don’t, Chasity. Whatever it is, it won’t scare me away.”

As she lifted her chin, I could tell tears were forming. “It’s okay. I’m over it now.”

I fisted my hand, lifting my arm, waiting as her lovely eyes fell to my wrist. “I lost control but as soon as the blood started flowing, I realized I wanted to live.”

She wrapped her long fingers around my wrist. “I’m so glad you did.” When she brought the damaged area to her mouth, I shuddered involuntarily.

“Let’s not talk about anything bad right now. Okay?” she asked, her tone demure.

I wanted so much to know what the fuck she was dealing with, but I would be a hypocrite if I pushed her. “Understood. How’s the weather for you?” I lifted a single eyebrow, waiting to see how she responded.

Finally, a smile returned to her face, and she pulled out a few items of food. “Perfect, just like the date.”

“I thought this wasn’t a date.”

“Oh, it is.”

An awkward silence settled between us.

“The parents of the young man who’s buried underneath my tombstone want to exhume his body and give him a proper burial.”

When she stopped mid-action, I realized it was something that hadn’t been placed in the file. “I had no idea.”

“My parents thought they were burying me. Several of my friends were there mourning my death and I was lying in a hospital bed unable to remember my goddamn name. The fuckers switched my dog tags. So one family was left hopeful and the other in despair. I can’t imagine how much my mom suffered.”

“Then she celebrated when you returned.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I wish I could help you bring back your memories or take away the mental anguish, but only you can do that with the help of true professionals.”

“You sell yourself short, Chasity. You’ve been the only person who made sense out of the muck I was drowning myself in. Last night? That was after I realized in my ridiculous fury that I’d covered my dog, the one who survived his own torturous experiences, with paint. I could have killed him because I’m so fucking mad at the world. That dog loves me more than anything. I don’t have any understanding of why. I don’t walk him enough. I don’t buy him a lot of toys. Hell, his favorite thing to do is to play ball outside and I don’t remember the last time I did that with him. I feed him. I give him water. He has a

soft bed. That's it. I think I'm going to give him back to Mustang."

I was forced to take several deep breaths after issuing more words than I'd said at one time in as long as I could remember.

The woman with a heart of gold remained quiet, which meant I'd shocked the hell out of her. I almost stood and walked away, but the moment she placed her hand on mine, I was able to exhale.

"When I was in Afghanistan, I treated a wounded soldier, holding his hand after he'd been brought in. He was clinging to life, fighting with everything he had. He begged me not to leave him and even though it was one of the worst days my team had experienced, I managed to stay with him."

"What happened?"

"He died, at least he was declared brain dead for ten minutes. When he was resuscitated, the doctors were certain he was brain dead, but I kept talking to him, encouraging him to wake up. I spent hours doing so, long into the night. I'd never felt so helpless in my life."

I cocked my head, studying her face. "And?"

She took a deep breath, looking away. "He recovered, no permanent damage. He was so thankful that he had a new lease on life. It was amazing to see how happy he was. About three weeks later, he was transferred stateside. I cried when he left because I was so happy for him."

"A beautiful story." But it wasn't the one I was hoping she would tell me.

"It was. Then I heard through my supervisor that three weeks later he walked into his parents' house, slaughtering them and his younger sister." She slowly turned her head toward me, and I was forced to take a deep breath. "There are several horrible, tragic stories. I don't want yours to be one of them."

"I don't know what to say."

"I pushed you because I don't want you to fall into that kind of despair. You're an amazing man who deserves every chance at

happiness and if you hate me because I want the best for you, then fine. I'll accept that. One piece of advice I hope you'll take. Don't give Apollo away. The reason he loves you with all his furry heart is because you rescued him from one of the worst situations imaginable. He knows what's in your heart. He doesn't need toys. He only needs you and your love."

When she was the one who got up, heading toward the water, I was floored by her words, but even more by what was in her heart. And I'd never felt like such an ass in my entire life. I watched her for a little while, sipping on the wine as I tried to figure out what to say to her. I gulped down the rest, tossing the plastic into the bag. When I finally walked to just a foot behind her, she didn't act as if she'd registered my presence, but I could tell by the extreme electricity we'd shared from minute one that she had to know I was standing right behind her.

"I want to be there with you," she said, her tone jabbing another knife into my gut.

"The exhumation?"

"His funeral."

I hadn't really thought about going but she was right that I should. Maybe some of the demons would abate. Whatever my situation, the Marine deserved a proper sendoff. "I'd like that."

She nodded. "I hope one day you can trust me enough to tell me what happened while you were over there, but I will never push you."

"I do trust you more than I can explain." Seconds later, I flanked her side, staring down at the water. "This is my favorite place in the world. I came here as a child." Laughing, I realized what I'd just said. "I knew I was bringing you here, but I didn't know why until now."

She tipped her head, a slight smile crossing her face. "Then this is a wonderful memory."

"It is. I've spent hours here, although I haven't stopped by since I got back."

"With your friends?"

“I never brought anyone here until today. The location brings me peace.”

“It’s just beautiful. You should paint this. Exactly like this.”

“I should, huh?” I asked, trying to shift the conversation to something lighter. The look on her face was serene, the corners of her mouth turning up about the sexiest look I’d seen on her.

Nodding, she darted a look in my direction. “How’s that anger management going?”

All I could do was laugh. “It’s going to take time.” A hell of a lot of time.

“Well, cowboy,” she purred as she shifted around to face me. “There’s a dazzling outside art show I used to go to. I noticed a flyer this morning. It’s in town for a few days.”

“Art show?” I winced hearing her suggestion.

“Oh, so the big he-man couldn’t handle something like that.”

“Baby. I can handle anything. You just don’t know what I’m made of.”

“I’d say piss and vinegar.” When she gave me a saucy look, I issued a low growl.

How the hell did she manage to peel away so many protective layers? “Is there music at this great event? Food?”

“Why, yes, growing boy. There’s even wine and beer. And who knows, you might get some inspiration, even if you won’t admit you had a good time. We could go for a couple hours after I get off work tomorrow. Of course, that’s after your appointment in the morning.” The woman had baited me, and I’d fallen for it.

Every time she challenged me, I wanted to rip off her clothes. The caveman in me was coming out again. “Fine. I’ll pick you up.”

“And the appointment?”

I gave her a hard look. “I’ll be there.”

“Uh-huh.” She bit down on her lower lip, and I could tell it was to keep from laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. I can imagine what you’ll say about being at the event. ‘This is girly stuff. What am I doing here? Can we go now? I’ll just sit over here and have a beer or five while you shop.’ Right?” She mimicked my voice far too well.

“Very funny, lady. Careful imitating me.”

“Did I do a good job? Brooding? Intolerable? Grouchy?”

I took her by the hand, yanking her toward me. “Woman. You have no idea what you do to me, but we need to work on that mouth of yours.”

“My mouth? Yours screams for a bar of soap.” While we both laughed, I knew that our physical attraction would only go but so far. She needed to be able to trust me. The only way to do that was to share aspects of my life I never wanted to address again.

Another moment of awkward silence settled between us, and it gnawed at me. We had to be able to talk. Her sharp inhale was enough to twist all the muscles in my gut.

“I’m so sorry about what you went through. I know that is woefully inadequate since I couldn’t imagine the torture, the not knowing.” As she brushed her fingers against my cheek, I nuzzled into her hand. She was so gentle, so incredibly loving.

From the moment she’d walked into my house, I’d expected to see pity in her eyes. I’d seen none of that, only raw determination to get what she wanted out of me. And now, her gaze had softened, allowing me to see past the armor she’d placed around herself. “In Kandahar, my unit was given instructions that turned out to be bogus. We thought we were rescuing some innocents. Instead, it was a setup, and we were attacked. We were all determined to take out as many of the insurgents as possible until our commanding officer realized that it was a deathtrap. But I noticed a young girl, at least I thought I saw her hiding then trying to run away and I reacted on instinct, going after her.”

“Oh, wow. Did she exist?”

“What haunts me to this day is that I don’t know. I was attacked from behind, knocked unconscious. When I woke up, I was in a shithole with at least a dozen other Marines from various units. I’d been bloodied and beaten, and that’s all you need to know about what I went through. The men of my unit did try and save me against direct orders, but the assholes keeping me had been tipped off. They set the building we were housed in on fire. But that was just the beginning of the nightmare. I was presumed dead sometime after that, confirmed when my dog tags were found on another man’s burned body.”

“Why didn’t they check dental records or fingerprints?”

“From what I was told, it wasn’t possible, but I’m not entirely certain. What I do know is that I’ve wasted a lot of time blaming everybody for what I went through. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future or if I’ll ever fully recover, but I know what I want and that’s you in my life. And maybe one day you can trust me enough to tell me who’s terrorizing you.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Grumpy,” she said as she wrapped her arms around my neck. “That’s what the sheriff came to tell me. There’s a custodian who was a little too sweet on me and took things much too far. He didn’t do any harm, just scared me.”

“What’s his name?”

Her body tensed, another telling sign. “Why? So you can beat him up?”

“I won’t do that. I promise.” I’d do what was necessary in order to protect what belongs to me. My chest ached, the protector in me already armed and ready, if only in my mind.

Chasity hesitated before answering. “Drake Myers. Before you go down that brutal path, he’s not a bad guy, just a man who didn’t realize the girl he had an infatuation with was damaged.”

The haunted sound in her voice sparked a well of emotions. “You’re not damaged. But if someone hurt you, they will

suffer.”

The second she placed her fingers against my face, it was as if a lightning bolt thrashed through my system. I continued to be shocked at the way my body reacted when I was anywhere close to her. “You have far too much to worry about to add me to the list. I’m fine.”

“Then why change the locks?”

“Because I’d already contacted the company to take care of it for me. Nothing more. Like I said, don’t read anything into it. We’re here to enjoy the night. Almost like a date. Right?”

“Absolutely.”

I nodded as I searched her eyes, ignoring the fake smile crossing her face.

And I knew one thing for certain.

She was lying.

* * *

Chasity

Lies.

I’d never been good at them. Even as child, the few times I’d fibbed to my parents had been unsuccessful, my deceit resulting in getting my bottom whooped. I could tell by the hard look in Snake’s eyes he didn’t believe me, but the last thing I wanted was for him to hunt down poor Drake, beating him to a pulp. I didn’t care what the detective had told me; Lance had found a way to continue tormenting me.

His parents were rich, powerful people in the Baltimore area, his father holding some position of importance in government. That’s how their son had been able to get the best attorney representation, his testimony able to convince a jury that his injuries and ten minutes of death had been the reason for his psychotic break.

No one would ever be able to convince me he hadn't been like that before, even if his behaviors hadn't manifested into kidnapping and torture.

How could I share my fears with Snake? He'd go off the deep end, which wouldn't help him or alter my fears. The only thing I could do was get his mind off his intention to protect me from everything harmful.

I pulled away, giving him a mischievous look. The truth was that just being close to him made me feel like no one would ever be able to hurt me, but even a rock of a man like Snake couldn't fight off true evil. I wanted nothing more than to believe Lance hadn't found a way of fulfilling his last promise. If Detective Martin confirmed the corporal was still nestled in seclusion, only then would I be able to breathe a sigh of relief.

As far as this glorious afternoon, I was determined to shove aside the fear and trepidation, enjoying the time we had together.

When I continued to back away, he cocked his head.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"If you want me, you'll need to catch me."

"Come here. Right now." His nostrils flared as he narrowed his eyes, the powerful muscles in his arms drawing my attention. Just one look at the gorgeous man and my mouth watered.

"Nope," I said, although I allowed my heated gaze to fall to the thick bulge between his legs on purpose. He'd given me a gift of trusting me with a portion of his story. That had left me with shivers.

A primal expression crossed his face. "Then you will pay the price of defying me."

"So be it."

Laughing, I blew him a kiss then took off running toward the trees. I had no idea why he brought out the playful side of me, his ability to drive out the ugly demons even for a short period of time something I would never forget.

We weren't destined to be together, but the passion he exuded, the desire I felt around him brought more happiness than I'd experienced in years. I had no intentions of letting go of the elation and peace just yet. I glanced at the sky, muted gray mixing with the last of soft blue as twilight continued to fall. We wouldn't get home until after dark. That wouldn't normally bother me but this time it didn't. At least he was taking me home.

I couldn't hear him from the hard thudding of my heart, fighting my way through the thick batch of forest, jumping over a few fallen limbs. In a few short minutes, I'd shifted from being the victim of a horrific crime, chased like a fawn attempting to flee the strong legs of the man determined to cut her life short, to a strong woman enjoying a game with a man I'd already fallen hard for.

One so damaged that he could likely succumb to his darkness and anger, which was nothing I should be a part of.

But I couldn't stay away.

The hunger inside of me only continued to grow, feasting on needs that had been abused during a blip in time where I'd ceased to exist, other than being a puppet for a madman. The irony wasn't lost on me, but the deliciousness of now being in control of the moment, basking in the slight apprehension that bordered on controllable fear exhilarating. I'd never felt so free or alive, willing to unmask the thick shield of steel I'd built with every panel, every rivet drilled into place.

I knew he'd find me. Of that I had no doubt.

What he would do was exactly what kept me running, as if a fever had taken full control of my mind and body. The beautiful afternoon was fading into twilight, the light no longer able to reflect past the thick canopy of green. But I didn't care. I was no longer afraid.

A laugh bubbled to the surface as I jerked to a stop, hiding behind a massive tree trunk, trying to catch my breath. At first, I didn't hear anything. Then I was forced to bite my tongue to keep from exclaiming as the huge man lumbered through the forest, determined to find the woman he'd laid claim to.

If only he knew what his statement had done to me, which was nothing that I'd expected.

He'd slipped a key into the lock, freeing not only my heart but my soul.

For now...

What if I was locked away again, this time for good?

CHAPTER 13



*C*hasity

Freedom.

In working with men and women who'd served in the military, especially those who'd been captured, I'd learned so much about my own sense of freedom. That had been forged in steel the day I'd been taken, shoved inside a darkened cage, not knowing if I'd ever see the light of day again. But neither the horrible imprisonment nor the taunting and torment I'd endured had bothered me as much as the loss of freedom.

I'd realized how much I'd taken basic tasks for granted. Waking up and going to bed when I wanted. Taking a walk just to clear my head. Purchasing a bottle of wine or going out with friends. Even reading a book or watching my favorite show on Netflix had been denied.

They'd been things I'd thought about and craved the entire time. But not nearly as much as being outside in sunshine or snow, especially during a spring shower. I adored the fragrance of flowers and moss growing on trees, freshly cut grass, and the air after a thunderstorm. Those had been stripped away from me.

Now I was running not for freedom but because I was free and lighthearted, able to laugh even while being chased. Because I knew the man hunting me would never hurt a bone in my body and never take away my precious freedom. Snake hadn't just

ignited a fire deep inside. He'd nurtured the lost girl to come out of her shell without having any idea he was doing so.

If only I could do the same thing for him.

Maybe our shared freedom was allowing him certain pleasures he'd forgotten about during his times of torture.

It was difficult not to laugh as I continued weaving my way through the trees, darting a glance over my shoulder every few seconds. When I stopped for a second time, I held my breath so I could hear how far he trailed behind me.

When I heard nothing except for sounds of nature, I took a deep breath. Maybe he'd given up? No, that wasn't like him. The man was a fighter in every way, determined to get what he wanted.

And he wanted me.

I leaned against the tree, admiring the pretty wildflowers growing in the shade, the last shimmer of sunlight sparkling through the leaves and finding their way to highlight the colors. Their fragrance was mild but incredible.

Then I gathered a whiff of sweat and musk, the combination heady. That was only seconds before he grabbed my arm, whipping me around the tree.

"My. My. You really thought you could get away from me?" His chest heaving, his eyes were more hooded than normal, both piercing mine and dripping with lust. "You should know better. What I told you before was accurate."

"Which part?"

"That I take what I want part."

"I don't remember you saying something like that," I said, still defiant with the man. His eyes twinkled in response. Then I gave him a wry smile, allowing a soft purr to slide past my pursed lips.

He took it as an invitation, or maybe he didn't believe he needed one. He pulled me toward him, shaking his head. "You should learn not to defy me."

“Oh, yeah?”

“Um-hm.”

I gave him a sweet smile as I rubbed my fingers up the length of his arms. “I knew you’d catch me.”

“Then why did you run?”

The silly man should have known what I’d do. “Just because.” I managed to pull away, shifting to the right.

“Come back here,” he said.

“I’m having fun.” When I took off sprinting in another direction, I sensed he was losing patience. At least for once we were both laughing.

“No, Chasity. Don’t go that way.”

“Why?”

“Chasity, come back here. I’m serious.” He had an urgency in his voice.

I turned around in the direction of the sound, carefully walking backward. As soon as I heard a single crack, Snake bolted through the trees.

“Do not move.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Just stay right there.”

A trickle of fear slid down my spine. When I slowly tipped my head over my shoulder, I heard another crack just seconds before I felt a series of vibrations.

Then it seemed like the earth fell out from underneath me. My scream was high pitched, the inertia flipping my stomach as I dropped by several feet. When I finally heard running water, I realized the dimming light had hidden the edge of a cliff. I managed to grab onto a limb or a root, shaking all over as I was spun from side to side.

I heard his voice seconds later, the soft velvety tone able to rise over the much louder sounds of the river water tumbling

over rocks. Why hadn't I heard the sound before? *Because you were too busy laughing at one-upping him.*

That was true enough.

In all the times I'd been to the mountain range, I'd missed the lagoon and waterfall. Now this. The area must have had significant rain, washing out a portion of the cliff, exposing roots from several trees.

"I'm going to fall," I said, which was ridiculous, yet my dangling feet felt like lead weights. As I tried to pull myself up, I dropped another two feet.

"Don't do that. When I tell you not to move, you will listen to me next time."

He was on his belly, peering over the edge. "You have your hand wrapped around a root, but it's not very strong."

"Okay. What now?" My voice was shaking as much as my body, the hard thumping of my heart echoing in my ears.

"Now, I pull you up." How could the man be so calm and collected while I was dangling over the edge of a cliff? I was sick inside, trying to keep from panicking, but my fingers were already slipping.

"I can't do this."

"Yes, you can. Look at me," he instructed.

I gauged the number of feet between us and shuddered. "Your arms aren't that long."

"You better learn to trust me, sweetheart."

Swallowing, another crackling sound drew my attention, and I was stupid enough to glance over my shoulder. Big mistake. Huge. The real reason I didn't hear the water before was how far below me it was. If I slipped, crashing into the rocks, there would be nothing but a puddle of blood and broken bones.

"Do not look down. Just listen to my voice."

Still shaking, everything seemed to be in slow motion. I finally lifted my head, every muscle tense. "I am." I scrambled to try to grab another root or limb. Anything. Another creaking noise

stopped me, and I gasped, another wave of fear becoming paralyzing.

“Okay. I’m going to get you out of this. I need you to reach for me.”

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” he said. By now, I thought he’d be furious with me, barking orders, but the fact he remained calm meant I was in trouble. “Come on, honey.”

After taking another deep breath, I let go, stretching my arm as far as I could. He lunged further over the edge, but there had to be almost two feet of difference.

“Stretch more. See if you can plant one foot on something.”

“Like what?” I was almost hysterical. *Calm down. He won’t allow you to fall.*

“Just try. Maybe there’s an exposed root or a rock.”

My heart was racing so hard it pulsed in my throat. I slowly lowered my head just enough that I noticed an indentation. I gingerly placed my foot in the slot, clawing the root I was holding onto to try to lift my torso. “I think I got it.”

“Okay, wonderful. You’re doing great. Let’s try this again. On three. One. Two. Three.” There was more of an urgency in his tone and as soon as I reached for him again, I felt more dirt and debris tumble over the edge.

Stretching, his fingers were almost in reach. Almost. Almost. Then I lost my footing, dropping back again, exhausted from the effort. “I can’t do it.” Tears slipped from the corners of my eyes, a strong pull to just let go that paralyzing moment.

“Yes, you can. And you will.”

There was the stern man who’d groused at me the moment I’d walked into his house. “I’ll try.” The quake in my voice was increasing, fear crawling along every inch of skin.

Let go. Just let go.

No. I wanted to live. *Breathe. Live.*

“Hold on.”

When I no longer was able to see him at the top of the ridge, I thrashed involuntarily, the sudden drop by another few inches forcing a yelp. “Where did you go? Don’t leave me.” My shouts were ridiculous. I didn’t really think he was going to leave me, but the terror was increasing. I didn’t want to die today.

I heard nothing for a few seconds. When he popped his head over once again, he grinned. “Did you really think I’d walk away from you, sweetheart?” He glanced past me, his breathing more labored than before.

“I told you, I’m not your sweetheart.” I tried to laugh as tears stung my eyes.

“This will be easier. I’m going to lower my belt down and you’re going to grab the loop. That’s all you need to do.”

“Okay. I can. I will.” I was breathless, every slight cracking sound almost paralyzing.

“Come on, baby. You can do this for me.”

Additional debris and dirt trickled down the slope and I resisted the urge to look down. When a rock almost hit me in the head, the tears rolled down my cheeks. “I don’t know if…”

“Listen to my voice. That’s all you need to concentrate on. Okay? When you see the belt, just slip your arm through it. I’ll do the rest.”

The pull to look down increased.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked, which was so unexpected that the draw to look down vanished.

“Red.”

He slid the belt down, easing what appeared to be half his body over the edge.

“You’ll fall!”

“I’m not going to fall. What’s your favorite food?”

The belt came within a few inches. “Um. Pizza. I think.”

“You think, huh? Thin or thick crust?” He was grinning. How could he grin when I was dangling close to death? “You look like a thick girl. I mean pizza.”

“You’re still insufferable.” I threw my arm through the loop he’d created, winding the leather around my wrist. “Thin, thank you very much.”

“I like both, baby.” Snake hoisted me up by several inches. Then I noticed the strain on his face and the way he scrambled to his feet was nothing short of miraculous.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I scrambled to try to get my feet to latch onto anything, clawing my other hand into the muck as he continued to pull.

“I bet you’re a mushroom girl.”

“Pepperoni and sausage, the spicier the better,” I managed to grit out, gasping for air as the rush of adrenaline pushed my heartrate even higher. When I was able to grab the edge, his massive hand slapped onto my arm, his grip tighter than anything I’d experienced before.

Suddenly, I was in his arms, tears springing from both eyes. As we both heard a light crashing sound, I clung to his shirt, pressing my face against his chest. I sobbed for a few seconds, doing what I could to control my breathing.

“Ssshhh...” he whispered.

“I almost... You and...”

“I’ve got you. I will never let you go. Never.” He took several deep and ragged breaths, pulling me even closer.

I could hear and feel how rapidly his heart was beating, but the warmth of his body against mine was all I could concentrate on. “Recent rains?”

He chuckled, the strain in his voice increasing. “Over the past couple of seasons, or so I was told. I had no idea how bad it was. I shouldn’t have brought you here. Are you hurt?”

I lifted my head, still trying to catch my breath. “Just my pride. It’s beautiful here and I was the idiot who decided to make it a game and run.”

“Come to think of it, I did tell you to stop, and you didn’t. Hmm…” While he was teasing, the sound of his voice indicated he was still rattled.

“Oops.” I’d never felt so much relief before. He’d been my hero.

He cradled me in his arms for another few minutes then helped me stand. “Do you want me to take you home?”

“And waste the last of this beautiful day? Not a chance,” I whispered, fighting the intense emotions as he rubbed his thumb through my tears, collecting every single one.

“I can tell you’re going to continue to be hardheaded. Aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

His grin was a clear indication he had something up his sleeve.

When he tossed me over his shoulder as if I weighed nothing, I squealed, wiggling in his hold. He simply took long strides through the forest, the fallen limbs nothing of a bother to him. As he brought me out of the shadows toward the blanket, every tingling sensation I’d had before was magnified. He said nothing, but his hold was firm. I doubted he’d allow me another chance of getting away, if only because he’d made himself my protector. Game or no game, he was taking the situation with Drake far too seriously.

When he placed me on my feet, he only backed away long enough to wrangle the jacket off my shoulders.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he tossed it aside.

“Fucking you.”

He deadpanned his reaction, which amused me. I didn’t think he had it in him, his frank answer making me laugh. “Here?” I glanced around the secluded location as a quick sliver of embarrassment coursed through me.

“Yes.”

He kept a smirk on his face as he grabbed my shirt with both hands, yanking the hem from my jeans.

“So you’re giving me the silent treatment?”

“Yup.” The man was having far too much fun with this. When he jerked it over my head, he took a sharp breath, the rumble of sound coming from his chest leaving me breathless.

“Fine. Then two people can play the game.” I tugged at his Henley shirt until I was able to slide my hands underneath, taking sharp breaths at the way my fingers tingled. When I lifted it halfway up his chest, he stared down at me, the look in his eyes unfamiliar. Almost as if he didn’t know me. They were unfocused, his pupils slightly dilated, and I could swear he was lost in a vision or dream.

For a few seconds, the ugliness surrounding the thought scared me. Was it possible my thinking held some amount of truth? There was a small pang in my heart as if I was already losing what didn’t belong to me. At least not in any traditional sense. No matter his he-man claims.

“Did you forget about me, cowboy?” I asked, a series of knots forming in my stomach.

It took him a few seconds to blink three times in rapid succession but as soon as he did, he lifted a single eyebrow. “Do you think it’s possible to ignore a wild child like you?”

“Wild child, huh?” I tore the shirt over his head, immediately tossing it aside before dragging the tip of my tongue across one shoulder blade then down the center of his chest. When I used both hands to grasp his waistband, he shook his head.

“How many times do I need to tell you that you’re not in charge?” I adored the way he cupped both sides of my face, bringing me onto my tiptoes. It was so controlling, yet it made me feel like I was walking on clouds.

I can’t believe I’d used the term even while thinking. But that was the way he made me feel, as if I was floating on air. There was no sense to it and I was finished with trying to understand.

He lowered his head, pressing his lips against mine tenderly, brushing them back and forth. I parted my lips without being asked, but I was the one darting my tongue past his while I slid my hands under his shirt once again. This time he didn’t stop

me as I kneaded his sculpted flesh, marveling in the tingling vibrations that went all the way to my toes.

Every time he was gentle, I wanted to beg him to take me like a wild animal, but he was insistent this time, his wants entirely different. It was impossible to resist his gravitational pull, the draw of current that kept me dangling too close to the edge. I couldn't lose myself around him. If I did, it could be dangerous for both of us.

He pulled away by less than an inch, allowing his hot breath to cascade across my chin. As he backed away, I could tell he was now fully in control, and another shiver slid all the way to my toes. I could marvel in his rugged good looks for a long time, but there was a sense of urgency that continued to shift between us.

Why did it feel like that was because we were on borrowed time?

I shoved the ugliness away as I caressed his chest, slowly licking up the side of his neck, biting down on his jaw. His entire body was humming as if he was a live wire. When he reached around my back, snapping my bra, I sensed he was losing his ability to make this a tender moment.

His breathing was labored, every sound he made low and husky, barely audible yet the vibrations continued to hum in every muscle. The second he tugged off the tight confines, he blinked several times, a split second of a haunted look crossing his face.

There was no more patience on his part. He grabbed my jeans, not taking no for an answer as he unfastened them.

"You need to let me take my boots off," I half whispered.

"Then you better hurry," he grunted before taking a step back, nimble enough to remain standing while he ripped at his combat boots.

I wasn't as graceful as him, almost falling over in my effort, twirling around until I landed on my butt on the blanket. He was wasting no time, already peeling out of his jeans before I had a chance to drag mine over my hips. I sensed he believed I

was stalling, the single shake of his head admonishing me. When he dropped to his knees on the blanket, I stopped all actions, my gaze falling to his fully throbbing cock.

A part of me wondered if I'd ever get tired of looking at the marvelous feature, my mouth watering. He pushed me down with a single hand, offering a look of consternation before taking over the removal of my clothing.

"Are you in a hurry?" I cooed.

"I might be."

"Why the John Wayne impression? You know, a man of few words? Grunting more than speaking?"

He narrowed his eyes briefly before running his fingers down the inside of my leg, using his massive hand to spread them apart. "It's not an impression and the reason I'm in a hurry is because you're very wet." To prove his point, he drove two fingers inside my pussy, ignoring any concept of foreplay.

I was shocked how incredible the rough act felt, gasping as I leaned back, spreading my legs even wider. I was sitting on a blanket in the middle of nowhere, darkness slipping across the sky and all I could think about was having his face buried between my legs.

He rolled the rough pads of his other fingers along the inside of my other leg before pressing his hand on my stomach, encouraging me to lie down. As I stared up at the sky, he added a third finger, curling the tips as he pumped them several times.

I continued to shiver all over, mostly because of the dirtiness of what we were doing. But I loved it. He didn't need to command me to lift my legs. I pulled them all the way against my chest, taking shallow breaths, trying to watch what he was doing. He finally dropped to his stomach, swirling the tip of a single finger around my clit several times. Then he engulfed the tender tissue, sucking as he slid his arms under my legs, curling his forearms around them. He was keeping me wide open and ready, his fingers digging into my skin.

Between the level of excitement and the rush of adrenaline, I was lightheaded, laughing softly as goosebumps popped along every inch of skin. I couldn't seem to stop panting as I rose onto my elbows. His eyelids were half closed, and he was enjoying every second of his feast.

The thought of fucking him here was delicious, leaving me in an early rush of bliss. He was taking his time, licking up and down the length of my pussy, languishing in the taste as he drifted his head back and forth.

Meanwhile, he was driving me crazy, alternating between sucking on my clit and pinching. The combination of pain and pleasure was almost too much. I licked my lips, realizing they were already dry, and he'd only been engaged in carnal activity for a couple of minutes. He had a way of turning me hot as molten lava, keeping me guessing as to what he would do next.

What I knew was that with every thrust of his tongue, every push of his long fingers, I was driven so close to nirvana that my breath was taken away. I drifted into a beautiful place of bliss when he plunged all his fingers into me, flexing them open as he licked me fervently. But as he'd done so masterfully before, he pulled back just before I lost control, leaving me aching inside, my mind turning into a frazzled mess.

“So good. I need to come.”

He didn't respond at first, but when I lifted my head, the way he was looking at me was a clear indication he wasn't going to allow me to bask in extreme pleasure just yet. He was a torturous beast that way.

As he continued driving me crazy, stars floated in front of my eyes, and they had nothing to do with the bright blips of light floating into the darkening sky. “Oh, God. I can't hold it.”

The quick slap of his fingers against my pussy lips was startling, the sharp pain entirely different than I'd felt before. Then he resumed ravaging my pussy, every sound he made completely animalistic. I jerked up, wiggling in his hold, the torment almost too much to bear.

“Please.”

He grunted his response, shifting his lips to one inner thigh then the other, brushing them up and down.

“Please. You’re terrible.”

“If you come, I’ll punish you.” He had a look of mischief in his eyes, but I knew he’d follow through with his promise. I wasn’t interested in receiving another spanking, although I had to admit they set my world on fire.

The way he alternated between sucking and pinching my clit, driving his tongue and fingers inside in a practiced orchestration and caressing my legs was too much to take.

This time, the breath was completely stolen when he plunged the entire length of his tongue inside. I gripped the blanket with both hands, tearing at it to keep from disobeying him, but the moment he drove his thumb into my asshole, there was nothing I could do, the climax rushing through me.

“Oh. Oh...” I was so wet, the orgasm so powerful my entire body was shaking violently. I panted and moaned, no longer able to see anything around me, the haze so thick. The wave exploding inside was dynamic at first, forcing a hard pounding of my heart. Then it slowly faded into a beautiful trickling sensation, allowing me to breathe easier.

I expected him to crawl over me, taking what he believed belonged to him, but when he took my hand into his, pulling me to a sitting position, I eyed him curiously. “Fucking me against a tree?”

“I have something much better than that.” He pulled me to my feet, taking steps backward toward the lagoon. The fading light did little to dim the twinkle in his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I tried to pull away, my instinct screaming he was taking me to the water.

“Trust me.”

“I do, but not in this case.” I managed to rip my hand from his, but he was too quick, gathering me into his arms. Squealing, I

pushed my hands against his chest, my struggles futile. “There are too many rocks. You’ll get hurt.”

“Nah, princess. I’m a tough S.O.B., or are you so quick to forget?”

“Very funny. I’m serious. What if we fall?”

“Like I said. You’ll need to trust me.”

“The water will be freezing cold.”

He glared down, his upper lip curling. “If you aren’t quiet, I’ll need to put that luscious mouth of yours to much better use.”

“You are incorrigible,” I huffed, but it was good to see him this way. There was nothing I could do but trust him. As he walked down the edge, I finally noticed what looked like a depression between the boulders. As he headed for it, I was shocked to see what had to be a curved set of naturally created steps leading down to the water.

“Did you actually think I was going to jump with you in my arms?” he asked as he neared the bottom.

“I wouldn’t put it past you. You do like to live recklessly.”

His snicker filled me with another wave of heat. “That’s why I decided to tame you.”

“No one can tame me.”

“I didn’t say I was finished.”

Laughing, as soon as he neared the bottom, I felt the spray from the waterfall. I expected it to be ice cold, but the warmth was incredible. “Is there a hot spring around here?”

“From the explorations I’ve done over the years, it appears to be spring fed, the water uncomfortably warm. This is perfect.” As if to prove yet another point, now he jumped into the water, his hold remaining firm.

I was delighted that there was a glow in the water as well, almost as if the rocks were glowing. The lagoon was much deeper than I’d thought and when he finally rose from the depths, we were almost directly under a portion of the

waterfall. He laughed from seeing the look on my face, spinning me around several times.

I draped my arms over his shoulders, giving him a saucy look. “How many girls have you brought her over the years? Fess up.”

“No girls. Just one woman, the most beautiful, opinionated creature on this earth.” He’d kept his mischievous expression but as he lowered his gaze, his features changed, becoming more serious.

“Who is she? I’ll kick her ass.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Such violence. You’re the only one I cared about enough to bring here.” He eased his arms under my bottom, lifting me by a few inches.

I slipped one arm under the water, guiding the tip of his cock past my swollen folds. When he pulled me all the way down, I threw my head back, gasping from the pleasure as my muscles expanded. He spun us around several times, the splash of water from the fall sizzling against my heated skin. This was an experience I’d never had and the weightlessness as well as the dazzling tickling sensations was euphoric.

Snake never blinked, his eyes penetrating mine to the point our connection was even stronger. He had a way about him that was controlling yet created a private world of sheer ecstasy.

“Why Snake?”

“Why?” he repeated. “Because I was the one volunteering to crawl through the muck and underbrush, capable of making my mark a hundred yards away. Even in the darkness.” He issued the statement proudly, a slight smile curling on his upper lip.

“That makes sense.”

“Plus, I was cunning in every decision I made.”

“You? Cunning?”

He growled his response, jutting his hips forward, filling me so completely that a series of whimpers escaped my mouth. “Always and don’t you forget it.”

“I doubt you’ll allow me to.” My words were almost slurred as if I’d been drinking more than the few sips of wine. He held me close enough I could feel the hard pounding of his heart against my chest even if the roar of the waterfall made it impossible to hear.

“Never.” He captured my mouth, holding our lips together, allowing us to drift closer to the powerful waterfall. I was certain he’d take us directly under it. Instead, he moved to the side and to a slender spot where he was able to slide behind.

The difference in the noise was incredible, muffled yet creating pings all around us. The light was darker, only a few rocks glowing but the effect was incredible, something I’d never seen before.

He swept his tongue inside, as usual dominating mine but there was more intensity to what he was doing, a need that fractured my resolve. I wanted to get to know everything about him. His likes. His dislikes. And his ghosts. Would he ever let me in?

The taste of him was sweet yet spicy and when he fisted my hair, breaking the kiss, I whimpered, not wanting the moment to end. As his heated breath cascaded across my chin, he nipped my bottom lip before allowing his tongue to trail across my jaw to my neck.

I wrapped my fingers around his hair, digging my thighs into him. He pumped several times, developing a perfect rhythm that was slow and easy, taking his time to enjoy the moment. I remained breathless, closing my eyes and enjoying the electricity we shared.

A golden haze surrounded us and I wasn’t entirely certain it wasn’t a manifestation of my mind, but it was peaceful, lulling me into a quiet moment shared with the man...

Shit. The sense of caring about him was strong, too much so. I knew better, just like I’d known instinctively that getting involved with him was a bad idea and wanting more than what we were sharing was crazy.

He kept his hold, dragging his tongue all the way down my neck, biting down on my shoulder. I could swear he was expanding, his cock swelling. Even as my muscles strained, the pleasure was already driving me to another orgasm.

I felt the tear at first, betraying me by sliding out of the corner of my eye. Even in the dim light, I sensed the moment he noticed it. There was no barrage of questions, no pointed need for conversation. He simply licked the salty bead away, kissing both eyelids after doing so.

As he'd done before, I felt him slip away into his quiet place. He never blinked, never uttered a single word as he slowed his rhythm even more, still fisting my hair, his heart still racing. In those few precious moments of just being together, I felt the last vestige of my resolve slip away, the caring starting to become a dull ache in my heart.

A part of me wanted to push him away, but I wasn't certain either one of us could handle doing that to the other. We were two broken souls, which wasn't good for either one of us, but the insatiable need continued to multiply, growing exponentially every time we touched.

The heat and friction were slowly shifting to a full eruption, my core heated beyond anything I could imagine. Another beautiful orgasm swept through me without advance notice and my mouth opened, ready to allow a powerful scream.

But there was no sound other than the rumble of water tumbling all around us. He pressed me against the rocks, holding me still as he thrust savagely. I locked my feet together, trembling in his arms.

As his body began to tense, a smile crossed my face, and I squeezed my muscles. Almost instantly, he erupted deep inside.

This time wasn't about two strangers who couldn't keep their hands off each other. No, this incredible experience was about so much more.

And it scared me to death.

CHAPTER 14



S *nake*

I'd almost lost her.

Sighing, I closed my eyes, the ache still behind them. I'd forgotten all about the drop-off on the lower ridge until Chasity had started running toward it. Only I hadn't realized just how much of the terrain had been lost to Mother Nature in the last few years from heavy rain and snow. What the hell was wrong with me? Thank God, she hadn't panicked.

The tightness in my chest continued, but it was the ache in my heart that hurt the most. I continued to believe the best thing for me to do was walk away.

I couldn't. Or maybe I was just too stubborn to do so. Whatever the case, I remained antsy, which was one reason I'd started painting.

The second I closed my eyes, a vivid image of the horrible raid appeared. I could almost smell the stench of smoke. After taking a deep breath, terrible pain slammed into my head. Almost instantly I was nauseous, forced to double over as another batch of vivid images rushed into the back of my mind.

"Get your hands off me!" I screamed, twisting in my effort to get away as two enemy soldiers dragged me toward a series of buildings. As soon as they stopped, I managed to kick one in

the groin, jerking free and struggling to get to my feet. I had to find the girl. She was in terrible danger.

I took off running in the direction where they'd dragged me from, the wretched cries of men in agony echoing in my mind. Where was she? What had they done to her? She was just a young girl. I jumped over several bodies, the vacant eyes of men tortured beyond recognition staring back at me. They were right behind me, screaming in their native tongue.

As a weapon was slammed against my head, pain tore through me and I was forced to drop to my knees, my vision instantly impaired. Then a volley of blows was pummeled into my stomach, the agony so intense I retched, falling face down into the mud.

And I could hear them laughing.

“Jesus,” I muttered, shaking my head several times. Why had the memory surfaced? Apollo whined, pressing his face against my leg. “I’m okay, buddy. It’s not real. Nothing is real.”

I’d managed to save one beautiful soul from certain death.

I stood staring at the painting, waiting until the fogginess faded, blood still pumping wildly. Maybe it was good to finally face the mental anguish.

Or maybe I’d go completely insane.

Apollo nudged me again, finally bringing me all the way back to reality.

“I’m an asshole. Right?” I asked as I stood back from the painting, keeping the paintbrush in my hand as I grabbed the bottle of beer. When Apollo didn’t make a sound, I peered down at him. His tail was thumping back and forth, which was an indication that he was agreeing with me.

“Okay, I know. I shouldn’t have left her alone, but I had to come home and take care of you.”

Gggrrr...

When I took a gulp of beer, I almost spit it out all over the painting. I hadn't realized how long I'd worked on the pup's portrait. And I was shocked that it looked damn good. Okay, so maybe I was pushing it, but in comparison to the mess that could never be described as art from before, the likeness was genius.

The thought reminded me I'd promised to take her to the art show. What had come over me? She'd provided an accurate representation of how I'd likely respond, immediately searching for a bar to wait it out until she'd had enough of pretending she liked some flowery piece of trash on an oversized canvas. I should know. Chuckling, I took another swig then took a step further away, trying to think critically.

"Fine. You're right. You're also a pain in the ass, buddy." I grinned then placed the brush on top of the can. "Take a look. I think it's an excellent representation of you. Damn good likeness."

He moved to his feet, trotting over and staring at it with me, cocking his furry head after a few seconds. Then he was completely still.

"What? Am I wrong?"

Woof!

"Hmmm... Okay, I'll work on it a little bit more. I think it's time for your dinner." I took the warm beer with me, preferring bourbon at this point. When I noticed the clock on the stove, I cringed. "Well, maybe I should call it an early breakfast." It was almost four in the morning. My thoughts drifted to wondering whether it was too early to call Chasity.

I rubbed my finger across my jaw as I tossed the bottle in the trash, grabbing his bowl and filling it with food. The visions of her remained fresh in my mind and fucking her in the lagoon had been a wonderful idea.

Even if we were freezing on the drive home.

But I'd felt compelled to be as close to her as possible, letting go of all inhibitions. Oh, the girl had no idea how far she'd crawled under my skin.

The fact she'd loved riding on the back of the Harley had shocked me, although I wasn't certain anything she could do would shock me any longer. She was special.

I placed the bowl on the floor before grabbing a glass out of the cabinet, still able to catch a hint of her scent every time I breathed in. After dropping in a few ice cubes, I poured, my mind still processing when she'd run off into the woods. She was full of surprises.

Apollo's insistent bark drew my attention back to the glass. Shit. I'd overpoured onto the counter. "I think I have it bad for that girl. What do you think?"

He gave me a dour look then returned to eating.

I wiped up the mess and leaned against the counter, watching him as he consumed his food. She'd brought sunshine in my life when all I'd seen for months were turbulent, dark clouds. Still, I didn't want to hurt the girl and I couldn't see us as long term. I rolled the glass across my forehead, the ache for her continuing.

"What do you think, buddy? Should I continue seeing her?"

His growl was low and throaty, and it made me laugh. "I know, you like her." What was there not to like?

Now I was going to an art show because of her. I'd be the epitome of the fish out of water, attending considered a sign of weakness, at least to a group of friends who ate macho for breakfast. A ghost of a smile crossed my face. That was the bullshit they liked to float my way from time to time. However, there was no doubt I had a screw loose. I snickered at the thought.

As I glanced at the time again, I didn't care. What little Gage had told me about the reason she'd called him continued to nag at me. I grabbed my phone from the living room, making the call.

Three rings later, I heard his disgruntled voice.

"What the hell?"

"Is that the way you greet all your friends?"

He huffed. “It’s not even morning yet. Right now, unless there’s a dead body on the side of the road that you had something to do with, I’m not your friend.”

“I’m sorry, but this couldn’t wait. What can you tell me about Drake Myers?”

“What?” he grumbled.

“I need to know.”

“Oh, no. I can’t tell you shit about the call,” Gage grumbled, yawning into the phone.

“I need to know, Gage. Chasity is terrified. She’s tried to hide it from me, but I can see right through her. Plus, I noticed she has a weapon. Now, if that’s not the sign of someone who’s afraid then I don’t know what is.” I heard rustling the background. Maybe he was taking me seriously.

“Interesting.” At least now he seemed wide awake. “Look. This is all I’m going to tell you. Drake is not a bad guy, not by a long shot. I know his parents, for God’s sake. They’re pillars of the community.”

“That means shit to me if the bastard is stalking her.”

“Would you calm down,” he said through gritted teeth. “He likes her, but never had the courage to speak to her. Instead, he sent her flowers then found them in the trash when he was just doing his job. Then made a critical error, creating a heart on her desk with the petals. He’s paying a price of being lovestruck by losing his job.”

“And the phone call?”

When he hesitated, I let him know him by the gruff sound of my breathing. “I can’t explain that, and he swears he didn’t make it.”

I knew the man well enough to know when he was hiding something. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Stop reading into everything. Go back to bed.” His grumbling continued.

I rubbed my jaw, trying to figure out what I could do to find out more. “Never mind, Gage. I’ll figure this out for myself.”

“Hold on. Don’t you dare go and do anything rash.”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you. I know that tone far too well. Remember?”

He was the kid most often labeled a delinquent in our group of Missoula Bad Boys all those years ago. I was a close second. I grinned as a few memories of our antics came into the back of my mind. Then my smile grew big. Being around her was good for me. I’d remembered more details of my past in the last few days than I had all the months I’d been back, even if a significant portion was painful. “Yeah, I remember all too well.”

The silence was entirely different than I was used to with the man. He and I had once bantered about everything.

“You like this girl,” he said almost as an afterthought.

“What’s not to like? She’s beautiful, intelligent, witty, and one huge pain in my ass, but the amazing thing that is that after just two sessions with her, my leg doesn’t ache nearly as much as it used to.”

“Right. You like her for her medical skills.” His laugh boomed over the phone. “Just take it slow and easy. Neither one of you need to fall into something without knowing what you’re getting into.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’m serious. The incident at the hospital has been taken care of. Let it go. Just enjoy the time together.”

“Says a man who can’t commit.”

“Hey. I haven’t found the right lady yet, but when I do, I plan on jumping all over her.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Said like a true romantic. Go back to sleep.”

“Remember what I said.”

As I ended the call, I gazed down at Apollo. There was nothing much I could do unless she confided in me. “Come on, Apollo. You can snooze next to me. I’m not getting any sleep.”

I left the phone in the kitchen, determined to make the demons go away. Maybe another painting would do it.

Or so I could hope.

As I headed for the second bedroom, the walls permanently color coded with my recent bout of anger, my mind drifted to the day on the mountain just before I’d turned eighteen.

Heat so extreme my skin was seared from several feet away.

Smoke so acrid I couldn’t breathe.

Fire so intense it appeared the entire range was lit up like a firecracker.

And sadness so deep that the six of us were instantly broken.

There was such a thing as karma, and I’d already relived the nightmare. Would it come back to bite me in the ass again?

My instinct told me yes.

* * *

Chasity

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, my voice hoarse from screaming.

“Why? Because you belong to me,” he said as he held up the knife, the blade gleaming in the stream of fluorescent light.

“Then why do you want to hurt me?” I was panicking, my mind no longer able to process what he’d done or even worse, what he might do. He was sick, a twisted fuck whose mind had snapped. There was no reasoning with him. But what if I could entice him? I shuddered from the thought, disgusted at myself for even thinking something so repulsive. But maybe.

He dropped to his knees in front of the cage, his face pressed against the bars. I scuttled to the back, terrified of the crazy look in his eyes. "Because I love you. And pain is the only way to find salvation. I promise you that you'll feel so good after I'm finished. Come here, little pet. It's time to play."

Moaning, I opened my eyes, my body stiff and aching. I was terrified to move, fearful the visions were true. After blinking several times, I realized everything in my room was the same as when I'd fallen asleep, the shadows just as I'd remembered, the quietness only broken by the rapid beating of my heart echoing in my ears. I finally eased one arm from under the covers, turning it over twice, my eyes accustomed to the dark.

There were no chafing marks from ropes or the cold steel he used to strap around them. There was no pain from the torment he'd inflicted. There was just the softness of covers and the warmth from the room.

I rolled over, pulling my knees to my chest, fighting the tears I'd refused to shed. As one then two gently slid from the corner of one eye, trickling over my nose to the pillow, I squeezed my fingers around the covers. I couldn't let him beat me. That's what he'd wanted, to break me down so I would never consider leaving him.

A laugh bubbled to the surface. I'd followed through with my plan, getting him to trust me little by little. Only then had I been able to escape.

I glanced at the clock, angry at the interruption. It was a little after four. The bastard had come close to winning again, destroying my happiness. As I closed my eyes, I forced myself to think about Snake. The mountains. The waterfall. The beautiful time spent under the stars. We'd had some wine and cheese, holding each other under the blanket as we tried to warm our bodies. Then the glorious ride home, even if my teeth had been chattering the entire time.

And the man had saved my life at the risk of his own. He was a true hero, a knight in shining armor.

Even if the metal was a little tarnished.

As another laugh slipped past my lips, I pulled the pillow from under my head, wrapping my arms around it. If only he'd stayed the night. Yawning, I realized there wasn't a muscle that didn't ache, but as I started to drift off to sleep, my skin tingled from thoughts of the man I...

"Hey. It's okay. You're safe now."

"No. No!" I screamed, thrashing in the stranger's arms, doing everything I could to break free.

"Chasity. I'm the sheriff. I promise you that man will never hurt you again."

The flashing blue lights drew my attention as I lifted my head, glancing from side to side. There were at least eight police cars as well as an ambulance. They'd found me. They'd rescued me.

"Sheriff. We're bringing him down," another man shouted.

"Come on. Let's get you in the car," the sheriff told me, his tone soft and comforting.

"No. No! I want to see him in handcuffs." I was determined, pushing away from the large man, dragging the edges of the blanket tightly around me. I glanced at my bare feet. They were bruised and bloody from running through the woods. But I'd managed to get away. I'd found a way to get away from the freak. I held my head high, watching as a group of men walked from the thickest portion of the forest.

Then I saw his face. He was shackled just like I'd been, led by the group with no possible chance of getting away. And I stared at him. I refused to blink or give him any indication he'd managed to break through my defenses. The asshole didn't deserve another whimper or plea. Never.

The bastard scanned the area, locking eyes with mine. Then a smile crossed his face, his eyes twinkling in the bright sun.

"Get him the fuck out of here!" the sheriff snarled.

The deputies escorted him in a wide arc away from me, but he made certain to maintain eye contact. Then just as they'd delivered him to one of the deputy's cruisers, he threw his head over his shoulder.

"Just wait, my little pet. Our time together isn't over. I will come for you again."

"Get him out of here. Goddamn it!" The sheriff refused to let go of me. I almost lunged forward. I almost allowed him to see he'd managed to get to me.

But I stood strong, refusing to back down now. It would never happen again.

As he was tossed in the back of the car, I finally allowed myself to smile.

The nightmare was over.

* * *

"I'm running just a little bit late," I told Shelly, making the call as soon as I was at the end of the driveway. I'd been shocked that my alarm hadn't awakened me in time, but the extra sleep had felt so good. I was in much better spirits, anticipating I'd get a call from the hunky man who had a soft as a creampuff interior. The thought gave me all kinds of wicked images.

"You're fine. Your first appointment doesn't arrive for almost an hour. And you know who the patient is."

A tiny ripple of happiness floated into my system. "I have a feeling he'll show today." My core was already heated, my panties damp just thinking about him. Him. My God, the man was larger than life, his hunger to experience danger titillating.

"Interesting. I still suggest you take your time," Shelly told me. "Big night?"

"Stop it. I just had some trouble sleeping."

"You are such a terrible liar. I'll see you when you get here."

I ended the call, tossing my phone onto the seat. It was a glorious morning, barely a cloud in the sky. I'd refused to allow the ugly dreams from the night before to dampen my mood, sitting on my favorite Adirondack chair while I'd enjoyed coffee. Then I'd allowed my mind to shift to several naughty places. Who needed breakfast when I was basking in the afterglow of such an incredible night?

After making a turn, I checked the rearview mirror. The traffic was light this morning, the few people on the road seeming in no hurry. Maybe they were tourists gathering in God's country for a late spring break getaway. I took a deep breath, still tingling all over. There was nothing like feeling special in a man's eyes, no matter the circumstances. Snake had been chivalrous yet demanding, a combination I found irresistible.

And he'd known exactly what I'd needed, both body and soul. Still, I had to wonder about the girl he'd tried to save in Kandahar. Was she real or even alive? What if I could track her down? Would that erase some of the horror, eliminating his nightmares? I made a mental note to find out even more about the horrific event. If I could help in any way, it was well worth my time trying to do so.

After all, I was beginning to want to do as much for the brooding, sexy man as possible.

A giggle popped to the surface, and I rolled my eyes as I made another turn. When a truck came zooming by, crossing the double yellow line, the rumble of his powerful engine could be heard over the satellite radio station. The asshole was exceeding the speed limit as many of the cowboy wannabes did in the area. My first thought was to roll down the window, flipping him off. At least the rational side of me screamed that wasn't a good idea. You never knew how people would react nowadays. The slightest thing could set them off.

The area was far too mountainous, the drop-offs terrifying. The last thing I wanted to do was play chicken with some aggressive asshole. My car was much smaller than his big, old Ford.

Besides, at the high rate of speed that he was going, I knew I wouldn't run into him again. I tapped on the steering wheel, wondering whether I should call Snake, just to see if he was going to make it today. Another wave of heat skittered straight to my pussy. At least we were going to the art show after work. I was so excited I'd wanted to take a sick day in order to prepare.

"Girl. You're pathetic."

I laughed from saying the words out loud. I hadn't been this timid in high school. I'd been the girl to ask the guy out more often than the reverse. Of course, since I'd been the nerd girl with huge glasses and absolutely zero shape, I hadn't been successful very often. Not even for my prom. Oh, well, I'd blossomed.

Maybe I would give him a call. Why not? We were both adults. We obviously enjoyed each other's company. As I reached for my phone, it rang and the tiny shiver that coursed through me added a skip to my heartbeat. "Hello?"

"Chasity?"

"Detective Martin." My breath caught in my throat.

"I'm not certain how to tell you this."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's been a development you should know about."

While I heard her words, they weren't registering, at least in the forefront of my mind. I slowed down as I rounded a curve, trying to make out what I was seeing.

The asshole driver from before must have been in an accident. I slowed down even more, my throat closing, and I was suddenly lightheaded.

"I'm sorry. Would you repeat what you just said?"

I could tell the driver was slumped over the steering wheel. Jesus. What in the hell had happened?

"I said..."

“I need to go.” Ending the call, I pulled the car over, taking several deep breaths before unlocking the door and stepping out, leaving the car door open. I had to help the driver.

He’s coming after you. He’ll find you. You need to leave Montana.

Swallowing hard, I couldn’t do this to myself. No. This wasn’t going to happen again. I backed toward my vehicle, reaching into the back passenger seat, wrapping my hand around the weapon. I wasn’t going to be a fool ever again. If the son of a bitch came for me, I wouldn’t hesitate to point the barrel right between his eyes.

My hands shaking, I headed toward the truck, leaving a wide arc between me and the truck itself.

What if the driver was suffering a life-threatening injury? I glanced behind me, hoping there would be another vehicle but there wasn’t. I moved forward cautiously. “Hello. Are you hurt? Is there something I can do to help you?”

There was no reply, but it appeared the driver had run into a ditch. I took another two steps, keeping a distance. “Can you hear me?” I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. I crept a little closer. Then I heard a horrible moan. There was no doubt the driver had suffered a medical emergency. Maybe that’s why he or she was driving erratically.

“I’m here to help. Just relax.”

As the driver moved, I held my breath.

Then the person stepped out.

And I recognized his face and his sickening smile.

“Hello, my pet. Did you miss me?”

Pop!

CHAPTER 15



S *nake*

Waiting.

I wasn't a patient man, especially today. There was no particular reason other than I hadn't gotten any sleep.

Or the fact I was eager to see Chasity again.

As I shifted in my seat, it was difficult not to grin given my cock hadn't stopped aching since the night before. While I knew I wasn't good at dating, I had plans on asking her out for dinner after going to the art show. That is if I survived the event. Maybe she could suggest the restaurant since I hadn't been to anything other than dive bars since my return.

Or maybe we'd eat in.

The thought drove a dozen filthy images into my mind.

After a few seconds, I checked my watch, surprised she hadn't opened her office door. The receptionist had glanced in my direction at least six times, the last time immediately heading behind closed doors. I was antsy. Maybe they didn't think I belonged here. Well, fuck 'em. I was finally getting some help and I refused to allow anyone to stop me. When the girl returned less than a minute later, I'd finally had enough of being stonewalled.

Jerking up, I headed toward her. "Excuse me. Is there an issue with my appointment?"

She smiled, although there was a nervous tic in the corner of her mouth. “I’m sorry, Corporal Garcia. Ms. Garrington is running late. Her alarm didn’t go off.”

I sucked in my breath, actually allowing myself to smile. We had engaged in some very strenuous activities. “Okay. Thank you.” I headed toward the window, too anxious to continue sitting. At least the other two paintings I’d done overnight had turned out well, one of them enough so I was eager to show it to her. The product of her suggestion. It should make her happy that I was finally doing something productive.

I’d even put in a call to Phoenix, asking him if I could come over and see what he’d done with the sanctuary so far. Maybe I could lend a few hours a week to help. Maybe.

It was virtually impossible not to smile when I was around Chasity. She had a spark about her personality that was infused with so many emotions I could sit and listen to her talk for hours.

Even if she was chastising me half the time.

She certainly did have a mouth on her. I flexed my hand, thinking about when I’d spanked her. I’d planned on giving her a stern round of discipline given the scare she caused, but my mind had become preoccupied. Tonight would be different. I’d make certain she realized she was required to obey me. It was difficult not to chuckle. She would fight me all the way.

I remained where I was, uncertain how long I’d been daydreaming about sex. Laughing, I glanced at my watch and my gut constricted. Hell, no. She was now thirty-five minutes late and that wasn’t like her. Besides, she would have called me.

Unless she’s avoiding you.

Oh, hell, no. I wasn’t going down that ugly road again.

Snagging my phone from my pocket, I dialed her number. It rang four times then her voicemail came on. I wasn’t the kind of man to leave a message. Plus, my instinct was telling me something was wrong. I took long strides toward the receptionist desk for the second time, pounding on the counter.

“Miss. What is going on with Ms. Garrington?”

The girl looked at me sheepishly. “I really don’t have an update for her. She should be here any time.”

“It doesn’t take that long to drive from her place here.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

I could tell my sudden actions were terrifying her. I moved to the small opening, cocking my head. “I need to see someone in authority here.”

The girl’s lower lip quivered, but she didn’t react at first.

“Now!”

She jerked up, almost stumbling into her desk then fleeing behind the same closed door as before. I paced the area in front of the counter, hating myself for not grilling Gage even more.

What was she so afraid of?

Why had receiving roses put her on such an edge?

When another woman came out from behind the door, I snapped my head in her direction. “Do you have any information for me on Chasity?”

She had no expression on her face, but her eyes were a totally different story.

She was nervous, maybe frightened.

“My name is Shelly Cambridge. I’m the department administrator. Maybe we should talk in my office.”

“Why? It’s a simple question. Where the hell is she?”

While Shelly attempted to smile, the tic on the corner of her mouth confirmed my suspicions “You’re Corporal Garcia.”

“Yeah, so what?”

She came from behind the counter, taking me by the arm. I glared down at her hand, trying to keep my anger in check, allowing her to walk us further away from the receptionist.

“You were with her last night?” she asked, her voice cracking from worry.

I took a deep breath. “Lady, if you’re trying to tell me that I had something to do with her not showing up today, you’re fuckin’ nuts.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Did she say anything to you, I mean anything you might be concerned about?” Shelly searched my eyes, her anxiety as high as mine.

“Where the hell is she?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. She called me twenty minutes before she was supposed to be here saying she was running late. I’ve tried to call her twice and it’s not like her to ignore my call.”

“What the hell happened to her?” I demanded.

“What do you mean?”

Snorting, I glared down at her, able to tell she was hiding whatever Chasity had gone through in the past. “There’s something she’s afraid of. An experience from her past. A run-in she had. Something. What is it?”

Her face flushed and I was furious with myself that I hadn’t pushed Chasity when I’d had the chance. “She’s my friend and I don’t know you. I’m sorry, Corporal, but I won’t betray her confidence.”

“And I care about her. This isn’t just about some custodian with a crush. Is it?”

Shelly swallowed hard, flitting her eyes everywhere but on mine. “That’s an entirely different situation. She didn’t tell me everything and I’ve tried not to pry.”

“But?”

Her hesitation was accentuated with her labored breathing.

“You’re right, Shelly. You don’t know me except for the garbage I’m sure was spewed about my childish behavior over the last couple of months. I’m difficult. I know it and for the most part, I couldn’t give a shit what other people think, but

not this time. Chasity is important to me. Can you understand that?"

The way her chest rose and fell was as if the weight of the world was crushing in on her. "I do."

"Then please, just tell me what you know so I have an idea what I might be dealing with."

"This goes against company policy," she whispered more to herself, shaking her head several times. "There was a soldier she met overseas that she treated."

"Yeah, she told me that. I thought the guy blew away his family and is behind bars."

Now her eyes really opened wide.

"She didn't tell me that story. She said this man was injured severely, not supposed to make it, but he did. Before he was shipped out, they developed a friendship, as much as possible in a warzone. Then he got his papers. She returned two months later. That's where it all started."

"Meaning what?"

"The guy went nuts and started stalking her, refusing to leave her alone. Notes. Flowers. Love letters." She glanced over her shoulder to make certain the receptionist wasn't paying any attention.

I took a deep breath, holding it. "What the hell did he do?"

I'd never seen anyone so nervous, a single bead of perspiration trickling down the woman's face.

"It escalated. All I know is that one day he came to her home and kidnapped her."

Now I was sick to my stomach, barely able to breathe. "What. The. Fuck?"

"It's crazy and I don't know all the details. She didn't want to relive the experience. From what she said, he's safely locked away in a facility back east. Baltimore. She was there for a couple months herself."

"Facility?"

“You know, to receive mental health treatments. He was charged but managed to win on an insanity plea given what he’d been through in the war.”

For a few seconds, I thought about my odd, ridiculous behavior and was forced to accept the dude could have lost it. That didn’t take away from the rage burning inside, flames licking at every synapse. Fuck. Fuck... And I’d been rough with her. Jesus. If only I’d known.

“I’m sure it’s something entirely different. I just wish she’d call,” Shelly said absently.

I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds while I struggled to gain control. “I appreciate you confiding in me. There is something wrong and I *am* going to find her.”

“Be careful. From what I hear, the guy is dangerous. I only hope we’re both wrong.”

Dangerous. The man had no idea the meaning of the word. “So am I.”

I didn’t wait for Shelly to try to argue. As I bolted out the door, jumping on the Harley, I grabbed my phone, trying Chasity’s number one more time. It rang the same number of times.

“Come on, babe. Answer the goddamn phone.”

When the voicemail kicked in, I revved the engine, shoving the phone into my pocket then yanking on the helmet.

I’d always trusted my instinct. This time I’d pushed it aside. I only hoped in doing so I hadn’t just made the biggest mistake of my life.

I couldn’t care less about the speed limit, powering through the streets, zigzagging around cars and trucks. When I hit the two-lane road leading to her place, I slowed down, trying to pay attention to the surrounding area in case she’d been involved in an accident. There was nothing amiss and when I rolled into her driveway, I was hopeful the reason was something simple, although she was far too responsible not to pick up the phone.

Her car wasn't in front of her house. I left the engine idling, heading toward the porch, trying the front door. It was locked. I took a few seconds, walking to several of the windows, peering in. Nothing inside was amiss that I could determine.

I turned around, staring at her yard. Where the hell could she have gone? Was she just trying to get some space? No, I didn't buy it. Not by a longshot. She enjoyed tormenting me with the exercises. That would keep her on track. The girl could be sick as a dog, and she'd still come to the hospital to make certain I completed my program.

"Calm down and think." I spun in another circle, fighting to keep my anger in check. Even worse, I had a sick feeling pooling in my stomach. This was bad. This was very bad.

Taking long strides, I returned to the bike, barely tossing the helmet on my head before gunning the engine. As I flew down the driveway, I was hard on myself for not spending time on the computer scoping out her past. What did I really know about her? Almost nothing regarding her past other than the brief glimpses of the time she'd spent in the war. However, if she had been stationed with a particular unit, there would be records. All I needed to do was make a few phone calls to discover the truth.

First things first.

I'd pay a visit to Gage, demanding he tell me every scrap of information he knew. Then he'd find out the remaining details. The shit was about to hit the fan.

* * *

"Whoa. Whoa!" Gage snapped as I tossed him against the wall of his office.

"You weren't forthcoming," I managed. "Now, you will tell me everything."

"You need to back off, Snake. I'm serious about this. You can't come into my office and start a fight."

Like hell I couldn't.

I took a deep breath, finally releasing my hold on his shirt. “Then talk to me. Chasity didn’t show up to work. She’s not at her house. There’s no sign of her. What happened to her years ago, and don’t dare and try to tell me you weren’t curious and went looking. It’s something to do with a Marine she helped. Then he started stalking her. That’s all I know. Other than I was told he’s dangerous.”

Gage’s angry features softened. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“I’m standing. Why aren’t you ordering your deputies out to look for her?”

“For Christ’s sake. She’s a grown woman. Maybe she went shopping. Maybe she’s planning a surprise. Hell, maybe she went to see another patient first.”

“Not without telling the people at the hospital where she was going. I was her first appointment.” I jammed my forefinger against my chest for emphasis. “You need to start looking for her.”

He exhaled, his expression remaining hardened. “She hasn’t been missing for twenty-four hours.”

“My God. She could be dead by then.” I slammed my fist on his desk, the sound jarring enough his muscles twitched. “Then you tell me what we’re dealing with. This psychopath who kidnapped her or this love-sick dude she worked with?” I’d surprised him again.

After glaring at me for a few seconds, he sat down in front of his computer. “One might not have anything to do with the other.”

“What? Tell me what!”

“Hold your damn horses.” He typed on the keyboard for a few seconds then shifted the monitor to where I could see it. “Corporal Lance Rollington. He was wounded and she was listed as the attending nurse overseas.”

I stared at the picture of the man and shook my head. He was like any other fresh-faced kid that had gotten in way over his head. Red hair, freckles, wide eyes, and an aw-shucks kind of grin. “Him?”

“Yeah. The details are sketchy, but I was able to find out he was declared brain dead for an extended amount of time. That’s when the doctors think a switch flipped.”

“What did he do?” Wait a minute. That sounded an awful lot like the story she’d mentioned.

“He stalked and terrorized her for weeks, taking her to a remote cabin. After she managed to escape, he was arrested. The trial appeared... brutal.” His exhale was exasperated. “Damn justice system.”

I thought about what she’d told me and took a deep breath. “Did Chasity tell you anything to you about what she suspected?”

“She was very hesitant to say anything to either my deputy or to myself, but I gathered enough that her concern had to do with her past, so I did some investigating.”

“Where is this corporal?”

“Supposedly locked away in a mental facility, but just to be on the safe side, I’m having that confirmed.”

Anger was never far below the surface with me, but right now, the rage was all consuming.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He eyed me warily. “Because I was afraid that you’d go off the deep end. You don’t need that extra baggage in your life.”

I backed away, hating the fact he was right. If the asshole were standing in front of me, I’d beat the shit out of him.

“And what if he isn’t tucked away in this... facility?”

He sat back, his eyes telling me everything I didn’t want to hear. “Then I’ll need to call in the Feds if she isn’t located by this time tomorrow. But right now, let’s not jump to any conclusions.”

“You’re doing nothing?”

“There’s nothing I can do except let my deputies know to keep a look out for her.”

“You don’t even know what she drives,” I retorted.

“Yeah, I took note.”

“That means you’re worried.”

As he drummed his fingers on the desk, he stared at me. “Just a feeling. That’s it. And I’m serious, Snake. Don’t act like you’re going to be the Lone Ranger on this one. You’ll get yourself tossed in jail.”

“Then so be it.” I backed away.

“What are you going to do?”

“Find her. That’s what I’m going to do.” I turned around, taking two long strides.

“Listen to me. For God’s sake, just hear me out.”

Stiffening, I tossed my head over my shoulder. “What else?”

“You need to fully understand what we’re dealing with.”

I shifted all the way around, storming closer, leaning over with my hands planted on his desk. “We? What?”

Gage seemed as uncomfortable as I’d ever seen him. “This part I’m only getting from a newspaper article I found.”

“What?”

“He kidnapped her, held her for almost two months before she managed to escape. He’d...”

“I heard she was taken. Fuckin’ tell me the rest!”

“Corporal Rollington had tortured her. When he was caught, he promised her that he’d come back for her.”

“Where was this remote cabin?”

“The mountains to the west of Maryland. He rented a cabin.”

“Mountains.” That’s where he’d take her, only this time right here in Montana. There were hundreds of miles, cabins everywhere.

“I can’t imagine what she had to go through,” he said under his breath.

His words meant nothing to me at this point.

The news hit me hard enough I jerked back, a severe ache slamming into my head just behind my eyes. “Why the hell wasn’t he locked away for life?” I wasn’t certain how I was able to speak given how hard my jaw was clenched.

“His attorney used temporary insanity. The jury bought it. But he was given a lengthy hospital stay.”

So, Shelly was right.

“Uh-huh. And you and I both know the system can be faked out. If he’s on the loose, he will find her.” The words stuck in my throat, my mind full of horrific possibilities.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.” He stared me in the eyes. “But, if he’s still locked away, then we may be dealing with something else. A copycat maybe.”

An ache in my chest felt like a pressure chamber. I pressed my hand over my heart. “Her car needs to be found. If you aren’t going to do anything, I am.”

“Snake. Wait. Just fucking wait. It’s too early to do anything.”

“You sure about that?” I refused to blink, staring into his eyes for a full minute. He was the one who looked away.

“I’ll have the deputies start to look. Okay? That’s all I can do right now.”

“And you’ll talk to Drake again, because if you don’t, I will.”

“Goddamn it, Snake. If you’d wanted to be a deputy, why haven’t you done anything about it?”

“Because I’m far too dangerous.” I grumbled under my breath as he half laughed.

“Yeah, I’ll talk to Drake.”

“Fine. You do what you need to do. So will I.” I threw his door open, shoving aside anyone who got in my way. As I headed outside, I made the woman I was falling in love with a single promise.

I would unearth every rock, search every forest, and drop into every hole until I brought her home.

And the asshole who'd dared touch her would never again see the light of day.

* * *

“Jesus,” I said under my breath, forced to sit back from the computer. As Apollo jumped up on the edge of the desk, I absently scratched behind his ears. I'd never been the kind of guy to be afraid of anything.

Until I'd spent time in the closest thing to hell I ever wanted to face. The days had turned into nights, the anguish I'd suffered nothing in comparison to what the worthless piece of shit had done to Chasity.

There were few pictures of her taken during the trial, most of them providing nothing of value, but what little that had managed to escape to members of the press churned my stomach and it was made of iron.

The fact she'd gotten away from him not once but twice continued to stun me. I glanced at my watch and realized I'd never felt so helpless in my life. Even worse, I was plagued with deep emotions that were eating at my insides, furrowing their way into my intestines.

I was sick from worry, tense from rage, every muscle aching from need and forget about my heart. It was a twisted mass of muscle, the ragged thumping driving me insane. “What are we going to do, buddy?” I'd searched the limited areas of town where I'd either seen her or knew she'd gone. Nothing. There was no sign of her. That didn't make any sense. I'd even convinced Shelly to call her folks so I wouldn't be the big brute dropping a heap load of concern on their laps.

They hadn't seen her in a few weeks.

I was out of options.

“You feel like doing a little tracking with me?” I asked the pup, waiting until his tail wagged. “Good. You're going to

keep an eye out for our lady friend while I drive.” I rose from the chair, heading toward my gun cabinet, turning the combination. When it clicked, I shot him a look. “Don’t say it. I know what I said about the next time I opened this damn thing, but this is for a good reason. We need to find her.” The ache refused to go away as I pulled out a rifle and my favorite pistol.

At least this time, it could be used with different intentions in mind.

I slapped in a magazine then grabbed another as well as additional bullets for the rifle, finally shoving my phone into my pocket. Then I thought about whether or not Apollo could be used as a bloodhound. He was mostly Golden Retriever, although the mutt side of him was yet to be fully determined.

It couldn’t hurt, even if it was a longshot. It had been a couple of hours with no sightings and no information. I wasn’t a patient man under the best of circumstances and this particular wait was sheer torture. I headed into the bathroom, Apollo dutifully following. Then I grabbed the shirt I’d been wearing the last time I’d seen her. As I pulled it to my nose, the same familiar perfume made the ache deepen, the fury enough I almost knocked a hole in the wall.

It wasn’t just about the lack of control but the sickening feeling every second that ticked by would be a second too long.

In my mind, I could see an hourglass that had just been turned over. Once the sand was drained, she would cease to exist. I hadn’t been able to shake the feeling all day.

“Take a sniff, baby boy.” Apollo’s eyes drifted up to me as soon as I shoved the material under his snout. Then he started whining.

“I miss her too, buddy. So we’re going to find her. You and me.” As we headed out the door, an image of her popped into my mind, the way her face looked when she was challenging me. Her nose wrinkled every time she was upset or angry. And the way her eyes flashed when she was ticked could set a fire inside of any man.

As soon as I opened the door, Apollo jumped inside, his bright eyes encouraging. I rounded the front, glancing toward the mountains. Then I said a silent prayer, which was something I hadn't done for a very long time. I had a feeling she needed it.

Apollo sat calmly in the seat beside me as I decided to trace her steps leaving her house. There were two roads she could have used to get into Missoula, both hilly nightmares. There was also a distinct possibility that she'd become distracted, run off the road.

When I finally reached a fork where one of two roads could be taken, I had to think like her. If she'd been running late, she'd take the shortest route. I made the turn, crawling along and rolling down the window. After a few miles, I was becoming discouraged. There was no sign of an accident, including rubber left on the road from hard braking tires.

"I don't know, bud. Maybe this is a wild goose chase."

My pup remained quiet, barely wagging his tail as I drove the entire length, getting to a point I knew she wouldn't have reached. Then I turned around, more frustrated than ever. I idled for a few seconds, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, allowing a line of cars to pass before heading in the opposite direction.

I'd barely gone a mile when my phone rang. Seeing Gage's number pop onto the screen, I stiffened. "Please tell me you found something."

His first response was to sigh. "Lance Rollington fooled everyone."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means he had a perfect doppelganger willing and able to take his place. He had supervised visits and upon the insistence of the detective who'd worked on the case, he was checked."

"What the hell? Aren't there safeguards? How was that possible? Someone should have noticed the difference."

"Not necessarily. The man has a twin brother."

Oh, my God. “How long has he been out?”

“Over a week.”

“Fuck. Fuck!” I slammed my hand on the steering wheel. “Are you ready to help me now? Are you ready to turn over every goddamn rock?”

“The FBI is already involved. It’s their case.”

“The FBI couldn’t manage to get their thumbs from their asses if they tried. She’s in danger, Gage. I will find her one way or the other. And Rollington won’t survive.”

“Don’t do that. Let me organize a search party.”

When Apollo started barking, Gage’s voice was drowned out.

“What is it, boy?” I slowed down, almost to a stop and he crawled all over me to get to the window.

“What the hell is going on?” Gage yelled.

“I’m searching for her car. Apollo noticed something. Just hold on.” I narrowed my eyes, catching a glimpse of metal.

“Fuck. It appears someone was run off the road.” I pulled over to the side, immediately putting on my flashers.

“Where are you?” he demanded.

“River Road. It’s on her way to work.”

“I’ll have a team there in ten minutes.”

“As I told you before, it might be too late.” I ended the call, throwing the gear into park then climbing out. Apollo bolted, flying over the edge toward the forest below. I tossed my phone onto the seat then took long strides to the edge.

Apollo was continuously barking, his body tense.

“Come here, boy.”

He glanced at me, wagging his tail a few times then resumed barking.

There was definitely something down there. I didn’t hesitate, climbing over the edge, carefully making my way through fallen limbs and other debris, the terrain just as wet as where I’d been with Chasity before.

After twenty yards, I was able to catch a glimpse of twisted metal. The bright red backend of a vehicle was sticking up through the scrubby trees.

And there was no doubt in my mind the car belonged to Chasity.

Another pain formed behind my eyes, and I grappled with the same anguish I'd felt two times in my life, neither one able to save the girl involved. This time, I wasn't going to fail. So help me God.

Adrenaline powered through me like fire crackling on dry logs as I struggled to continue climbing down the hillside. I was forced to stop several times, grabbing onto limbs of trees for support.

Apollo suddenly stopped barking altogether, but he moved around the car, issuing a low growl. "What did you find, boy?"

He barked twice then started to whine. Another rush jetted through me. I had to get to her. In my rush, I tripped, now sliding down on my backside, landing near a drop-off. Cursing under my breath, I steadied myself, able to see the driver's door was partially open. But there was no way to see inside at this point.

When he sat back on his haunches, still whining, a sickening feeling skittered through me. The sound was forlorn, keeping my nerves on edge.

I took a few scattered breaths as ugly visions crawled into my mind. No. I couldn't do this. Not now. She needed me. I did what I could to shake it off, sweat dripping down both sides of my face. I rubbed my arm across my face then continued on, jumping the last few feet.

The prayer was still in the back of my mind as I looked inside. She wasn't in the car, but there were bloodstains covering the driver's side window. Anger boiled in my veins, my mind instantly foggy as I crept closer.

"You can't save her," Maverick called.

“Like hell I can’t,” Riggs snarled, his entire body tense.

“Then I’m coming with you,” I told him, taking a deep breath before leaping through the flames.

“Fuck.” The vision had been so real, stifling my breath. I shook my head then moved to the other side of the car. From what I could tell, she’d tried to fight off her attacker. After a few seconds, I threw my head back and bellowed to the heavens.

The justice system had failed her.

To hell with the system. I would find her my way.

And after I did, Lance Rollington would die.

CHAPTER 16



S *nake*

“It’s too hot,” Maverick called, his voice strained from the smoke.

I wiped my eyes, sweating like a pig but both Riggs and I were determined to save her. “I’m fine. Go back.”

“We live together. We die together,” he yelled, the sound barely audible over the roar of the fire.

“Belle!” Riggs’s cry was woeful, strangled from his heavy emotions.

As I glanced toward the canopy of trees, I knew it wouldn’t be long until the entire ridge was on fire. We wouldn’t be able to get out if we didn’t go now. But I wasn’t a quitter. Not by a longshot. “We go a little further.” I didn’t wait for the rest of them, trying to fight my way into the thickest part of the forest.

Riggs grabbed my arm. “We can’t, Ricky. Maverick is right. It’s just too damn hot.”

“Buddy. Where are you?”

Hearing Gage’s voice dragged me back to the present, but the same despair I’d felt then was tenfold now. “I’m right here. Where the fuck is she?” The back of my eyes hurt to the point I was squinting. The images were fresh, like they’d happened

just yesterday. They were also ones I hadn't experienced before. It would seem my memory was coming back.

Just like Chasity had told me would happen.

"Like I said ten times before, I don't know yet, but we will find her."

"When are the FBI arriving?"

"I don't know. They're going send some field reps from Montana, but from what little I was told, we can expect to see the original men who worked the case fly in at some point."

"Why? Didn't the police handle it in Baltimore?"

"Evidently, Rollington took her across the state line the last time. I wish I knew more but as you might imagine, there's a hell of a lot of embarrassment going around. They're tightlipped."

The last time. This was happening all over again.

"Bastards," I said under my breath and returned to the edge of the road. The deputies were dusting for prints, but I knew they wouldn't find any. Men like Lance Rollington were careful, and he would be even more so this round. This would be his last chance to be with her, his last hurrah. I'd been around men like him. If he couldn't have her, nobody could.

"Just hang in there. I have my best deputies looking for her," Gage reminded me, but it wasn't good enough.

"She'll be dead."

"Let's not jump to conclusions."

I glared at him. "I'm going to search myself. I know the mountains."

"That's like looking for a needle in a haystack and you know it. There are hundreds of miles of terrain, off roads leading everywhere. Hell, there are hundreds of cabins he could have her in. And yes, I'm checking every rental, every owner."

A thought crossed my mind. "Isn't Maverick a mountain tracker?"

Gage took a deep breath. “Yeah, he is. A damn good one.”

“Maybe I’ll call him.”

“He’s one man.”

“Nope. There will be two and a dog that sniffed out the car.” I dared him to fight me on it.

“You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“So the fuck what? If she’s saved, then I don’t care what happens to me.”

Gage shook his head. “I can’t let you do that.”

I backed away, throwing out my arms. “Who’s going to stop me? I’m a free man. I can go anywhere I want.”

“Snake. Just wait. Talk to the agents.”

“Not a chance. Now, either you can give me Maverick’s number, or I’ll find it myself. It’s entirely up to you.”

He cursed under his breath. “I’ll get it for you, but if you hire him, you let him do his job. Got it?”

“I’ll do what’s necessary in order to find her. Period.”

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say. You’re determined to get yourself killed.”

“Not this time. I’m determined to finally live my life.”

He studied my eyes for a few seconds then nodded. “I’ll give you some additional deputies if Maverick wants them. Keep in mind, he likes to work alone.”

“Yeah, well, this time he can get over it.”

I stormed outside of his office, trying to remember everything I could about Maverick. He had his own ranch, a sizeable place just outside of Missoula. That’s where I was headed, hoping he wasn’t on a case. If not, I wouldn’t take no for an answer.

This was far too important.

Chasity’s life had been grasped by a real monster.

Nothing and no one would stop me from finding her.

* * *

Chasity

“Wake up, little pet. It’s time.”

“Mmmm...” As I shifted, a sharp pain soared into my head. When I blinked several times, the flash of light forced my pupils to retract, the ache increasing. “What...” When I tried to move again, I realized I was curled into a ball, stretching my legs out impossible. That’s the moment a horrible image rushed into my mind. “No!”

“Oh, yes, my sweet pet. I told you we never be forced apart. Nothing could keep me from finding you. Were you thinking about me? Missing me? Hungering for me? I couldn’t help but notice that you were a very bad little girl while I was gone. Tsk. Tsk. Don’t worry. I’ll make you a very good girl again.”

His voice.

The dangerous inflections.

His...

Oh, God, no.

I managed to lift my head, my eyes still unable to focus, the ache in every muscle significant. “What... did you... give me?”

His laugh penetrated my eardrums, echoing the same way it had done before. I slid my hand along the surface of something cold, shivering from the realization I’d been shoved into a cage. Another cage. Just like the one from before. When I finally managed to lift my head, my throat still tight, I took several shallow breaths before I was able to see clearly.

“There you are,” Lance said in a jovial tone. “I thought you were going to sleep forever, my little beauty. Just a little cocktail I learned about. You were attempting to get away from me. I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“Let. Me. Go.” My heart hammered against my chest, intense fear in my throat keeping my voice husky.

He sat back, his smile glistening in the dim light. “I’m afraid that’s not going to happen. You see, you and I belong together. Those bastards believed they could keep us apart.”

As he laughed again, I shrank back in the cage, trying to remember how I’d gotten here. Then another realization hit me. I’d shot him. Why wasn’t he dead?

He crawled closer, forcing me to slam my back against the tight confines. Then he pointed his finger, his eyes wild with lust and hatred. “You turned into a real bitch. You know that?” His harsh words were a clear indication his mind was warped. He twisted his mouth, glaring at me with the same venom I’d seen before. “I told you that if I couldn’t have you, nobody could. You wouldn’t listen. I told you how many times that you were mine forever. You fucked with the sanctity of...” When he took a deep breath, I bit my lower lip to keep from whimpering.

I refused to allow him to know he was capable of breaking me. I tried to remember what had happened, but everything was so fuzzy. I’d pulled the trigger. I’d hit him. But he’d...

“Don’t worry, my beautiful creature. I’ll be just fine,” he said, laughing, the sound more demonic than before.

“You won’t get away with this.”

He shoved his face against the bars, sticking his tongue through them. Another wave of revulsion shot through me, enough I recoiled, hissing under my breath.

I could tell I’d made him angry. What I wanted to do was scratch his eyes out, but I had to buy time so Snake could find me. He would. I knew he would.

“If you think anyone is coming to help you, you’re wrong.”

There was no doubt Snake would turn over every rock, climbing to the highest peak of any mountain in order to find me. By the way Lance was staring at me, I could swear he was reading my mind.

“Yes, you were a very. Bad. Girl. That’s okay, my pet. I can handle that. I can fix anything.”

When he hauled himself up to a standing position, I scanned the area where he’d brought me. This was a cabin somewhere, complete with luxurious furnishings. Was this his or had he commandeered it just like he’d done before?

I pressed my hand against the side of my neck. My skin was heated, an area swollen. He’d injected me with something. I held my breath, trying to shove the terror aside. There was blood on his shirt. The bullet had hit a mark, even if the bastard was still living.

As soon as he started humming, my mind was pivoted to the horror from before. What was he planning on doing to me?

The moment I shifted in my cage, he swung around, every gesture exaggerated. “Don’t bother to try and escape. I’ve taken measures to ensure you will always belong to me.”

He was even more out of his mind than before. How had he managed to break free of his confines? I studied the area again, memorizing as much as I could.

Then he slammed something metal against the bars, his chest heaving as he peered down at me. “You will keep your attention on me at all times! Do you understand?”

I bit back all the nasty things I wanted to say. “Yes.”

“Do better, pet, or you will pay.”

“Yes, sir.” My throat was tight, my mind still fuzzy. How had this happened?

Huffing, he looked away, hissing several times. Anger rippled through him, his muscles tensing before my eyes. Blood had soaked his shirt and I sensed he was in pain, although he reveled in discomfort, his addiction to using razors and serrated blades a disgusting memory. “It’s a good thing I’m in a fabulous mood. Or you would suffer!” The last few words were screamed at the top of his lungs.

I resisted reacting, glaring at him with all the hatred that had manifested inside me since the day he’d captured me before.

‘Fuck you’ was on the tip of my tongue, but I resisted. That would only set him off.

“Besides,” he added. “I need to concentrate.” He walked stiffly to a table, returning to humming, which was the one action I remembered had calmed him down. I’d even sung to him to soothe the beast living inside him, which had helped me escape twice before.

Somehow, I doubted he would allow that to happen again.

“What are you doing?” I dared to ask.

His body stiffened, but he turned his head toward me seconds later. “You will see. But you should know that anyone who tried to keep you from me will learn a lesson. I can’t wait until we’re all together. If that lover of yours is as smart as he thinks he is, then he’ll find you. If not, then I guess I’ll need to find him.”

A cold shiver skittered down my spine.

The bastard was going after Snake.

No. No.

* * *

Snake

Fucking lowlife piece of shit.

That’s all I could think about when I was informed of how Rollington had managed to assume his brother’s identity, obtaining his freedom without questions being asked. Gage’s earlier call had been unnerving, but not nearly as much as the way Apollo had howled the moment he’d trotted inside my cabin.

That’s exactly when I knew that someone had been inside my house.

Not just someone but the worthless freak who’d kidnapped Chasity.

“What the hell do you mean he’s been inside your house?” Gage barked a split second after I told him.

While I wasn’t paranoid by anyone’s standards, I’d learned a long time ago that taking extra precautions to try to protect what was mine was in my best interest. That’s why I used a simple trick to tell me if anyone came inside the windows or doors. A toothpick. Granted, it wasn’t foolproof, but in this case, Rollington hadn’t cared about whether or not his presence was detected. He’d wanted to learn more about me and that’s exactly what he’d gotten, going through some of my things.

I’d become his threat. The fact he knew who I was meant he’d been in town for at least a couple of days. He’d left just enough evidence than an observant man would know his world had just been invaded. The fucker was testing me. “I have ways of knowing, Gage. I set traps.”

“Traps?” He almost laughed. “You can’t know Rollington was in your house for certain.”

“Like fuckin’ hell I can’t. Have you found out anything else?”

“Like I told you before,” he growled, “the FBI haven’t been forthcoming, but one of my men did find a gun on the side of the road near where her car was forced off the side.”

“A Glock?”

“Yeah. I’m having ballistics checked, but it would appear she fired off at least one round. I’m having the hospitals checked as well.”

“Don’t be a fool. Rollington won’t go there. You know it as well as I do.”

“It’s worth a try, buddy.”

“He’s baiting me,” I told him as I walked out of the bedroom, listening for any sounds that I’d been left a gift by the asshole. I’d read enough stories, had seen enough true crime to know as unstable as the man obviously was, he was enjoying the game as much as the capture.

“Why?” When I laughed, he cursed under his breath. “I get it. He wants to see what you’re made of.”

“He wants to eliminate his competition.” I continued. “If I also had to guess, he managed to check my record.”

“There’s no possible chance in hell he could do that,” Gage insisted.

I moved into the kitchen, scanning the area. “Then how the hell did he manage to get out? He knows exactly how to maneuver every system. My guess is if you put in a call to the folks in charge of records, you’d learn mine was recently checked.”

He sighed. “Point taken. This is all a game to him.”

“Exactly. I look almost as fucked up as he does. Maybe he thinks I’m his buddy. Whatever the case, I need more information in order to track him. Maybe he took a cell phone.”

“You need to stay out of this.”

“You know I can’t do that. She almost died yesterday, Gage. On the damn washed-out ridge. She dropped off the side because I wasn’t paying enough attention.”

“Stop doing that to yourself. You can’t save the world.”

“No, but I’m going to protect her. Period.”

His sudden quiet meant he knew that had been a game changer. “All I can tell you is I’ll see what I can find out. I already have been on Mission Range.”

“I’m gonna see what Maverick can do. Then I’m going to send the bastard straight to hell.”

“Goddamn it!”

“You know I won’t stop until I find her.” Why had Rollington really come inside my house? It wasn’t just to snoop around in my things. I turned around in a full circle.

I knew enough of manhunts to know if Maverick accepted the job, he’d need something in order to try to track the bastard. I doubted Corporal Rollington would make it easy. He’d been

trained in all aspects of weapons and defensive maneuvers during his stint in the Marines. He'd been in two tours before his injury, his unit located in some of the most dangerous and brutal territory. He'd been trained to hide his tracks and I seriously doubted he'd be carrying a cell phone or some other electronic device like a GPS.

He'd had Chasity's kidnapping planned out long before he'd asked his brother for help. Our only hope might be what information could be gleaned from the twin, although I certainly wouldn't be provided with anything useful. In the FBI's eyes, I was nobody.

"If Rollington is really baiting you then his plan is to kill you in the end."

"He'll need a fucking army. Find out what you can."

"Damn you, Snake."

Laughing, I ended the call, trying to figure out what I was missing. If the fucker wanted me to chase him, he hadn't left a clue to his whereabouts in the kitchen. There were only a few other places to look. As I started to head out, I stopped short, twisting around to stare at the refrigerator. I hadn't noticed it before. The door was partially open. What the hell? Almost as soon as I touched the door, Apollo started barking up a storm.

I threw out my hand toward him as I approached the appliance. "It's okay, buddy." He refused to stop yapping, even frothing at the mouth. I hooked the door with a finger, slowly opening it. The asshole had opened and turned over several condiments and positioned in the center was a picture that had been taken from an old Polaroid instant camera. While smeared with ketchup, upon an initial look, it would remind anyone of blood.

I held it into the light, my entire body shaking. "You motherfucker. I will kill you with my bare hands."

Her hands were tied, her mouth gagged but it was obvious that she'd either been knocked out or drugged. I stared at it for a few seconds, finally wiping it off then shoving it into my pocket.

Snarling, I grabbed the bags full of ammunition and supplies, heading out to the truck. As soon as I opened the door, Apollo jumped in, and I stood for a few seconds staring at the mountains.

“I’ll find you, baby. That’s a promise I’ll keep even if it costs me my life.”

* * *

The look in Maverick’s eyes was enough to irritate me, but I held my glare. He was the only man who could help me at this point. I’d become certain of that after checking out his credentials. A tracker by trade, he worked independently for various law enforcement agencies as well as private citizens, locating lost individuals in the mountains as well as criminals attempting to use the mountains as a hiding ground.

So far, his record was ninety-eight percent success. Knowing his personality from years before, I had a feeling the two percent fueled his continued anger.

“You’re fuckin’ out of your mind,” he said as he lowered his gaze toward Apollo.

“Yeah? Maybe so, but I will track her down with or without your help.”

Maverick shook his head, purposely turning his head toward the mountains. “You know these mountains as well as I do, Ricky. If that bastard has her holed up somewhere, it’ll take an act of God to find her. This isn’t like the search cases I work on. We have no starting point.”

“He wants to be found.”

Half laughing, he raked his hand through his long, scraggly hair. The man was entirely different than when we were kids, barely recognizable. He’d put on a solid eighty pounds, growing at least four inches. He appeared a wall of steel. And his features were as hard as mine, as if whatever he’d endured over the years weighed heavily on his mind.

“What makes you think that?”

As I handed him the photograph, he narrowed his eyes. “Come find me? Where the hell did you get this?”

“It was left for me in my goddamn house. While I was searching for Chasity, finding her car, he’d circled around, coming to my house. He’s obviously been following us for some time. How long, I don’t know.”

“He thinks she belongs to him.”

“Evidently so.”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “After your call, I made contact to some buddies of mine in law enforcement.”

“So you know the whole story.”

“Enough to know I don’t want to touch this shit with a thirty-foot pole,” he answered, handing me back the photograph. “Sorry, buddy, but there are some tracking jobs that aren’t worth the risk.”

“She’ll be killed this time.”

He stood staring at me. I wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face, but what good would that do?

“To hell with you. I’m doing this with or without your help. That woman was kept as his captive for two months. Two. The Feds didn’t do shit back then. What makes you think they’re going to do anything now? I need to find her, Maverick. No, I will find her. I don’t care what I need to do.” As I turned around, he cleared his throat.

“Have you ever trained for this, Garcia? Have you ever tracked a man through dense, mucky forest for days, finding nothing but certain you were on the right track? Did you ever fight grizzlies because they were starving from the recent fires, and considered you fresh meat? Do you even know what it takes to track a man down? It ain’t like the movies.”

As I slowly turned to face him, I debated what I wanted to say. “She’s all alone with a monster, Maverick, and he will hurt her just like he did before. He has a thing for cutting human flesh, creating art, so he called it. She’s scarred on her arm and stomach from what he did to her.”

He continued staring at me for a few seconds before noticing the file I had in my hand. “What else?”

I yanked the file I’d brought to chest level, flipping through the various pages I’d printed. I’d spent three hours searching every site I could think of, finding several well-hidden articles on the corporal. I’d also called in a favor to my old commanding officer, who’d agreed reluctantly to dig through classified files, finding additional disturbing details.

Lance Rollington had displayed signs of dysfunctional behavior before being blown up by an IAD. If what my commanding officer said was true, the corporal was about to be tossed out of the service with a dishonorable discharge after beating another Marine to death in a heated brawl.

Why hadn’t his service record been brought up at trial? When I handed him the notations regarding his record as well as the collage of images of what he’d done to Chasity, I sensed he was seething.

“Why the hell is this piece of scum walking and talking?” he barked out the question, his entire demeanor changing.

“Good question.”

“What do you have on him? Anything I can use to track him with?” he asked casually.

“Just my gut feeling he’s close. As I said, he wants me to find him. This is just a chess game for him now.”

He eyed me even more warily. “I’m expensive.”

“I have money. I don’t care how much it takes.”

Snorting, he studied the picture again before handing the items back to me. “If I do this, he might not end up making it to another trial.”

“Trust me. He won’t.”

“I work alone.”

“Not this time. I’m coming with you.” I tilted my head, daring him to say otherwise. “So is Apollo.”

“He ain’t no tracker.”

“Bet me. He found her car down a ravine.”

He narrowed his eyes, hunkering down so Apollo could come to him. For the first time since he'd opened his door, he formed a smile. “I work long days. Sunup to sundown. We need to get started.”

“I'm ready.”

“Just remember. You do as I say.” Maverick gave me a stern look.

“I guess we'll see.”

“You lag behind, I leave your ass. Got it?”

“You forget. I'm a Marine.”

“This is a whole different ballgame,” he said. “Those mountains are relentless.”

“So am I.”

“One more question. Why is this so important to you?”

I didn't need to think about my answer. “Because I'm not losing her like we did Belle.”

He swallowed hard, his glare turning icy. “Not. Fucking. Good. Enough.” As he bristled, I sensed his demons hiding inside were as brutal as mine. I stepped closer so there was no doubting my answer.

“Because I'm in love with her.”

Maverick narrowed his eyes. “Then let's get started.”

CHAPTER 17



S *nake*

“He’s armed.” Gage sounded out of breath, the noises in the background making it easy to know he was on the road.

“Yeah, I have no doubt he figured out how to get a weapon.” I glanced out the windshield at the snow-covered mountains. There was just too damn much terrain to check.

“No, you don’t understand. Corporal Rollington stole a gun from his parents’ house then robbed a gun store not too far outside of Baltimore.”

His hesitation yanked at my gut. “What else?” I asked more gruffly than normal. Maverick threw me a hard look, but otherwise his face had remained expressionless since we’d taken off two hours before.

“He killed the store clerk then took several weapons and enough ammo to start a damn war.”

“Transportation?”

“He took his parents’ old Jeep. He tied them up after beating his dad.”

“Any sightings of it yet?” I glanced over at Maverick, who was listening intently.

Exhaling, I glanced out the windshield, studying the area where Maverick was going. He’d yet to lay out a plan of any

kind and while it was April, snow still covered the majority of the mountains, the higher elevations with several feet.

Two days had passed. Two days of zero sightings. Two long stress-filled days of not knowing where she was, of not being able to breathe. We'd been to dozens of cabins but had yet to find anything.

"Nothing. My deputies have driven hundreds of mountain roads. I asked the Smokejumpers for their help through Phoenix. They haven't spotted anything, but unless he's on the open road, which I doubt, he'll make certain he isn't spotted. I'm having the interstates and other methods of transportation checked, but I just don't have enough men. Besides, the FBI have taken over everything," he said.

"Let me guess. You gave them the picture I texted you."

"I had to! Jesus Christ. You're not the Lone Ranger." He exhaled, hesitating for a few seconds. "They've been all over the car. His fingerprints were confirmed, but we already knew that. And it was his blood inside the car." Gage was as exasperated as I was. "The Feds seems to think they had a few leads."

"Bullshit. Unless they know this area, they have no clue how many places there are to hide. I appreciate all the information. We're going deeper into the mountains, closer to Sapphire Ridge." I could hear his hesitation and sensed Maverick's tension increasing. None of us wanted to talk about what had happened all those years ago, let alone face anything else that might resemble the horrible occurrence.

"Then I won't be able to contact you."

"So be it. This is far from being over."

"Just so you know, Phoenix organized a group, including the guys from your unit. They're all out looking."

Phoenix had called once so I'd known. "Yeah, I'm aware. We need all the help we can get."

"I'll try and give you a call if anything is found. Good luck but don't get yourself killed."

“I have no intention of it.” I shoved the phone into my pocket, going over everything in my mind.

“A vehicle?” Maverick asked.

“Yeah. A Jeep. It won’t be found. This is far too personal for him. He’s enjoying his freedom, the time spent with her.”

“Then why bait you and provide nothing else?”

I rubbed my jaw, taking a quick look in the back. At least Apollo was sleeping. Maybe it hadn’t been a good idea to bring him. The snow was getting too deep, the terrain too treacherous. His paws weren’t designed to handle these kinds of weather conditions. “I don’t know. I keep thinking we’re missing something.”

“We’re going to need to do the next part on foot, which will slow us down significantly. We’ll be forced to stop for the night.”

“Fuck.” I smashed my hand on the dashboard. Then I leaned back in the seat, envisioning her face. “I gotta find her, Maverick.”

“I heard ya before.” He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

Rollington had been slick, ignoring the use of a phone or anything else that would be easy to track.

Except for his vehicle.

Damn it. He’d left a clue in the picture. I knew it. As I pulled it out, I sensed Maverick was watching me. Her face looked so serene. What had he forced her to endure? I fisted my hand around it, cursing under my breath.

“I do think about what happened on Sapphire Ridge,” he said a full minute later.

I slowly turned my head. “We did what we could to try and save her. You knew Belle as well as any of us. She was a free spirit.”

“Yeah, she was. A true beauty.”

“That’s what I think about Chasity.”

“Belle was carefree but reckless.”

“That too,” I said more in passing, thinking of how Chasity had run through the woods. The fact she’d been able to trust me was something special. More so than I’d originally thought.

“Belle could have gotten out of there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The fire wasn’t that big at first. You know? I went to look for her, but it was like she didn’t want to be found.” He glanced in my direction, his grip on the steering wheel firm.

I thought about what he was saying. “Are you thinking she wanted to die?”

“I don’t know. If only I hadn’t started another fire.”

“Wait. Hold on. Phoenix started the fire.”

“No. His went out. After you guys fell asleep. I went to get more wood. It burned pretty hot but I thought it was under control. We were all drinking. I think I passed out.”

“You weren’t to blame. None of us were.”

“Are you so certain of that?” His gruff voice held an edge.

“I’m not certain of anything at this point except we all have different memories of what happened on that ridge. Maybe we were all to blame. Careless. Stupid. She shouldn’t have been there.”

“You’re right.”

Another awkward silence settled in. “I knew she had a lot of issues she didn’t want to talk about.” How many times had I caught her trying to cut herself? How many times had I tossed the blade, trying to reason with her as she was screaming at me to leave her alone? Karma was a psycho bitch, putting Chasity through the very same experience but not of her own accord.

“To any of us. I tried more than once, but she would get this faraway look in her eyes. She did tell me she wanted to spend whatever time she had left on this earth doing exactly what she wanted.”

“She told me the same thing. We all did what we could to save her.”

“Then you need to stop putting so much blame on yourself for what happened to Chasity.”

“Two entirely different scenarios.”

“Are they?” he asked.

I wanted to disagree again, but maybe he was right. I was trying to right the wrongs from my past. What if I’d put her in even more danger? “What if this freak found out what happened and is using that for some twisted reason?”

“Why?”

“Because he thinks I’m just like him. Deranged.”

Maverick chuckled. “That’s a stretch. But if you think he’s targeting you as well then where would he take her?”

I closed my eyes, racking my brain. Then it suddenly hit me. Rollington had every intention of making this so personal that I cracked even more. There was one sure-fire way to do that. Have her taken to a place I owned. The mountain cabin. “Turn around.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Fucking turn around. I knew where he took her.”

“You’re shitting me.” Maverick slowed, able to find a driveway a few hundred yards later. “Now where?”

“The lower section of Sapphire Ridge.”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Yes, there is.” I yanked out my phone, realizing there was almost no reception. If I was wrong, we’d waste valuable time. All I could do was pray. When Gage’s voicemail came on, there was no other choice but to leave a message. “Gage. I know where he’s taken her. Have a team meet us there.”

* * *

Chasity

Darkness.

It swirled around me as night began to fall, ominous shadows taking over. I hadn't stopped shaking, trying to count off the hours, doing what I could to stay awake, but I was exhausted, the terror stripping away everything but panic and a dull realization that no one was coming to save me. How many days had passed? I wasn't certain. Two, maybe three? I was losing all sense of hope.

And my captor was like a caged lion. At least whatever his horrid plans, they'd kept him from torturing me like he'd done before. I'd cried in silence, refusing to allow the monster to see my tears. He didn't deserve to know how terrified I'd become, not just fearful of losing my life but for the man I'd fallen in love with.

I'd heard him talking to himself, screaming at the top of his lungs. He'd gotten much worse, his behavior completely psychotic. And I could swear he was waiting for Snake to show up.

Oh, God. Snake.

At least thinking about Snake had kept me from going into a deep, paralyzing mode. How long would that last? How long before Lance grew tired of waiting? I gripped the bars, rocking back and forth. There was no sense in praying, but I was hoping that maybe Snake could hear me somehow. Some way. Maybe.

As I closed my eyes, I was able to picture his face, the sexy two-day stubble always drawing my attention. I even liked the way it felt scratching my skin, just enough to stimulate every nerve ending. He had to be the sexiest man alive. I dragged my tongue across my cracked lips, struggling to swallow. I'd been

given no water, no food, and no chance for escape. Lance knew better.

I curled into a tight ball, wrapping my arms around my knees, begging sleep to take me away from the nightmare, if only for a little while.

“Do you know why I adore your body?” Snake asked as he ran his finger down my arm.

“Because of all the orgasms I give you?”

He burst into laughter, not expecting my answer. “Well, that too.”

“What else?”

He took a deep breath, allowing the exhale to contain a husky series of growls. “Because it reminds me I need to ravage every inch of you. In fact, I think I’ll do that right now.” As he gathered me into his arms, I wrapped my arms around his neck, purring in his ear.

“My big bad wolf.”

“Never forget it.”

Clang. Clang.

“What?” I lifted my head, instantly nauseated.

“No sleeping,” Lance snarled. “Where the hell is he?”

“What? Who?”

“That fucking boyfriend of yours? He’s supposed to be smart.” As he muttered under his breath, I shivered all over again.

He dropped to the floor, crawling closer, spittle oozing from his mouth. I had to make a move or I would die.

As I blinked, I couldn’t stop a whimper from escaping. Lance had his face planted against the bars as he’d done several times before. This time, I reacted differently, lunging forward, able to drive my fingers through the bars, jabbing him in both eyes.

He jerked back, howling as he slapped his hand over both. “You bitch! You’ll pay for that.”

I huddled in the back, ready to pounce on him as soon as he opened the cage door. He stumbled around the room, knocking over a small table before smashing his hands down on a dresser. Then he came for me, the look on his face depicting his level of derangement. When he threw open the door, he immediately reached inside.

I was ready for him, jumping toward him, using as much force as I had left. When I managed to pitch him onto the floor, I threw a punch, catching him under the jaw. It gave me just enough time to scramble away, trying to head to the door. Unfortunately, my muscles were tight from the constant confinement, and he managed to snag my leg, yanking me to the floor.

“No!” I kicked out, fighting and clawing the floor.

He grabbed my hair, pitching me backward, my head slamming against the wall. Pain tore through me, stars floating in front of my eyes. Then he was on me in a second, able to drag me onto my feet. He backhanded me with such ferocity, my ears were ringing, and I tasted blood in my mouth.

“No!” I yelled again, praying someone, anyone would hear me.

His chest heaving, he wrapped his hand around my throat, squeezing until I started to pass out. Then he tossed me aside like a ragdoll, immediately turning away. “I thought you knew how much I loved you. I thought you cared. I thought...” He grabbed the table, tossing it across the room.

Then he came for me again. “You’re going to pay for that.” As soon as he grabbed me around the throat again, he yanked out a knife, flicking the blade open.

Then I heard a powerful thud coming from the other room. Did I also hear footsteps? I did what I could to yelp again, praying I was right. “Help. Me.” The sound was barely audible.

“No one is going to help you, especially that worthless boyfriend of yours. I knew what you were doing, fucking him instead of saving yourself for me. I’m going to make certain no one will ever want you again but me. Me. Me!”

“Put the goddamn knife down or I’ll blow your brains out.”

Hearing Snake’s voice forced another whimper. He’d found me. He’d saved me.

I could see the look in Lance’s eyes change. When he smiled, I pounded my fists against him. “Snake!”

Lance slung his arm around my throat, immediately pressing the tip of the knife against my jugular, spinning us around to face him. There were two men in the room, the other giant in perfect control as he held an assault rifle in two hands.

Apollo bounded into the room, barking his head off.

Lance hissed, moving directly behind me. “I thought you’d never come to the party.”

Snake tossed me a quick glance and I could easily tell how furious he was, his entire jaw clenched, his hooded eyes piercing a hole into the monster. “I’ll say this one more time. Put down the knife.”

Laughing, Lance purposely pricked my skin. “I can’t do that. She’s mine.”

The other man shifted, moving closer.

Woof. Woof. Woof.

“Sit, Apollo. Wait. Wait,” Snake said softly.

“Don’t do it or I’ll have to cut her pretty little head off,” Lance warned. He dug the knife into my skin, and I was forced to suck in my breath, shaking like a leaf.

I could see such an array of emotions on Snake’s face, his eyes reflecting everything from horror to anger, but mostly sadness and guilt.

“I love you, Snake,” I half whispered, knowing it would force Lance’s hand.

As the bastard slowly turned his head, pressing his lips against my face, I sensed the change in him. Then I heard the words I anticipated would be the last I'd ever hear.

"I told you. If I couldn't have you, no one could. Bitch," Lance muttered.

"Now," Snake said so calmly I wasn't certain I'd heard the single word.

That's when Apollo lunged forward, his growl unlike anything I'd ever heard. As he tackled Lance to the floor, the other man took a single long stride toward me.

As Apollo snapped at him, Lance reacted, driving the knife into the pup. The howl was heartbreaking. Then he grabbed my leg, dragging me down once again. That's the moment Snake snapped, losing all sense of anything but his need to protect what belonged to him.

Pop! Pop!

"Die, you fucker," Snake snarled.

Lance's fingers were still tightly wrapped around my leg. Everything happened so quickly as I tried to scramble away. Then I was in Snake's arms and could no longer hold back the sobs.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay," he whispered, holding me tightly against his chest.

"Apollo!" I yelped, struggling to see the fur baby.

"You... can't... have... her," Lance said, his voice crackling from agony.

Snake threw out his arm, the other man at the same time. That's when I closed my eyes, jumping when I heard the two additional shots.

Then there was nothing but silence.

CHAPTER 18



S *nake*

“Brothers in arms. Soldiers. Cowboys and Marines. We were called so many things,” Hawk said quietly as he lifted his glass.

“Heroes. Monsters. Sinners and saints. And God knows what else,” Vader said.

I studied the liquid in my glass, taking a gulp of bourbon before joining the others in what they felt was an obligatory toast. I thought about what they’d said, realizing that everything we’d been through would forever change our behavior and our decisions.

Above all we’d been men honoring our country even while our pasts continued to haunt us. This was supposed to be a celebration of life and love, friendship and renewal, but a weight continued to remain like a tight vise. “To Justin Ramirez, a decorated Marine. A fighter. A hero.”

“We honor his life and his legacy,” Reaper added.

“I also want to make a toast to Corporal Ricardo Garcia, a true hero,” Mustang said quietly.

“Absolutely,” Scorpion muttered as he smiled, turning his head in my direction.

“I’m no hero,” I told all of them. I was still shaken from the events, furious with myself that I hadn’t figured it out sooner.

As least Rollington had kept her in a cage instead of torturing her like before.

“You saved your lady’s life.”

I glanced at Hawk, nodding only once. “I did what any man here would do for the lady of his life.” At least I was able to smile even if the next couple of days would be rough.

“How’s she doing?” Vader inched closer.

“She’s doing well. I don’t know how after what she’d been through.” It had been a week since rescuing her. While she’d been quiet, needing time to herself, she’d remained strong, refusing to cry. That had started to worry me. The last tears she’d shed had been at the cabin. My cabin. The fucker had drilled down into my life, trying to destroy something he had no understanding of. In turn, I’d ended his life and I would do it again without reservation.

“She loves you,” Mustang said, his eyes twinkling in the dim light.

“That’s what she said when I rescued her.” I would never forget hearing her words, the strange combination of joy and sadness driving a stake right through my heart. She’d believed she might die on that horrible night and wanted me to know how she’d felt. “I don’t know why.” I grinned.

“True,” Hawk added, laughing. “Because you fit perfectly together.”

She had no idea how anxious I’d been, the anger almost keeping me from doing my job of protecting her. Thank God for Maverick. He’d made certain he had my back.

“And the asshole?” Hawk piped in.

“He won’t be bothering anyone any longer.” While he hadn’t died on the mountain from the four bullet wounds, he’d done so shortly thereafter, but not before issuing the same words to the love of my life he’d done before. He really thought they were meant to be together.

Reaper sighed. “A sad situation if you really think about it.”

“The asshole was like that before he joined the Marines. You know it,” Vader cautioned.

I nodded, learning more about his stellar record. He’d fooled everyone, including his family. From what I was told, his twin brother had opened up about just how evil and conniving Lance had been his entire life. The only reason he’d joined the military was because of a threat from his father. And yes, the situation was terrible. “He got what he deserved and won’t be gaslighting anyone else.”

“You’re a hero,” Mustang said with total conviction. “But don’t let it go to your head.”

Everyone laughed and I glowered at him. “I’m nobody’s hero, but I will die to protect those I care about.”

“Yes, you will,” Reaper stated as he stared into my eyes. “You were always that way.”

Maybe I was, even if I hadn’t been able to save Belle or the mystery girl from Kandahar. At least I’d tried.

“And how’s Apollo?” I could tell Hawk wasn’t certain he wanted to know the answer.

“He’s going to be just fine. Superficial wounds, thank God. I don’t know what I’d do without him.” I’d still thought about handing him over to Mustang, but Chasity had convinced me otherwise.

It seemed the other men breathed a sigh of relief.

Then a quiet settled between us. It was difficult to find the words to say in honor of another fallen Marine.

“The funeral is day after tomorrow,” Hawk said. “I’m going.”

“So am I,” Scorpion managed, although I gathered he was struggling with his decision.

Reaper shifted. “Me too.”

“Yeah, I haven’t been to Boulder in a few years,” Vader said under his breath.

“You coming?” Mustang asked.

I wasn't certain how to answer. I couldn't even go to my gravesite. The thought had made me sick to my stomach. "Maybe."

"You should but none of us are going to push you." Hawk glanced around the table at the rest of the men, giving them a hard look. "Right?"

All I could do was smile. After all this time, he was still our commanding officer.

Mustang cleared his throat. "We're glad you're moving on with your life."

"How so?" I lifted an eyebrow seeing his grin.

"We heard you were painting," Vader said, trying to get out of my reach.

"Let me guess. My lovely Chasity let the cat out of the bag." My grin widened.

"She might have mentioned it," he confirmed.

"I'm going to need to wash her mouth out with soap." My thoughts drifted to her, and my cock ached all over again. We'd gone through so much in such a short period of time that it was hard to fathom.

They laughed but damn if all five weren't nodding in approval. All I could think about was getting back to her. I stared down at my drink, swirling the liquid in the glass before guzzling the rest. When I placed the thick tumbler on the table with a hard thud, all the others could do was grin. "This has been great to reminisce, but I have some places to be."

"Don't look now, but I think the boy is in love." The look on Scorpion's face was almost identical to Hawk's.

"Yeah. Yeah. She's just the flavor of the day." Even as I made the proclamation, I couldn't help but grin, my every thought of all the savage things I was going to do to her body. I'd almost lost her twice. In a few days. Twice. I couldn't get the brutal thought out of my mind. Karma had been shouting out the same things my friends had been for months.

And I'd chosen to ignore their advice. Okay, so I was the most stubborn one of the group. I'd believed that I had good reason. Now I knew I'd been a fool for thinking that way. As I backed away, all five stood at attention, giving me a salute.

"Ten-hut," Hawk announced. "Corporal Ricardo Garcia has finally gotten the stick out of his ass and is ready to live."

I gave my salute in return in the way of my middle finger. "You guys are hilarious." As I started to turn away, a thought came to my mind. "Hey, Vader. What was your big announcement?"

When I twisted my head so I could see his face, I'd never seen the man so excited in my life.

"Well, I'm having twins," he said, his entire body swaying back and forth from happiness.

"That must be a real feat since you're a man," I told him in return. "I hope that lovely wife of yours has something to do with it. Franny. You do remember her, right?"

"Get out of here," he barked in return.

It was good to laugh. It was also amazing to remember that I had friends. Ones who'd fought to protect a way of life. Ones who'd ignored orders to try to save my life.

And ones who never forgot what our camaraderie had meant through the years.

Now I had the love of my life. I had to admit I was the luckiest man alive.

* * *

Chasity

Giddy as a schoolgirl.

That's exactly the way I felt. In all honestly, I'd never been so excited in my life. The moment Snake had called a few moments before, I'd jumped up and down. Poor Apollo must

have thought I was nuts. Maybe the pup was right, but I was so in love with the man I could barely contain myself.

As I lit the last few candles, standing back to look at the warm glow in the bathroom, I was able to breathe normally. All because I'd had an angel on my side, a true hero who'd stopped at nothing to save me. I knew I could wallow in the aftermath of what had happened, but with Snake's help, I'd realized that in doing so, the monster would have won after all.

Besides, I had far too many things to do in my life.

So did Snake.

“What do you think? Beautiful?”

Woof!

Laughing, I hunkered down, rubbing him under the chin. “I was so worried about you, baby boy. You are my hero too.”

His tail thwapped against me, the few licks on my face exactly what I needed. “Let's get everything else ready. Daddy should be home in a few minutes.”

He trailed behind me as I grabbed the bottle of wine and two glasses, taking them into the bathroom. It was almost perfect. I glanced at my luminated reflection in the mirror, able to smile. I didn't look too bad in my sexy new negligee, a gift to myself. If things went according to plans, it wouldn't stay on very long and that was just fine by me.

With a few minutes left to wait, I headed to Snake's art studio, laughing softly at the splashes of color all over the walls. It added to the effect, feeling more like a studio than it probably did before. As I moved to the paintings he'd already done, I marveled at his technique in how he managed to bring everything to life.

“What's your favorite?”

Panting, Apollo moved directly to the portrait of himself, lifting a single paw. “You're biased but I have to agree with you.” The man was so talented, yet he refused to agree with me. I thought about the art show and snickered. Maybe I'd

enter a painting or two into one of the competitions without his knowledge. My instinct told me he would win hands down.

And the risk of punishment was well worth the possible reward.

He barked in response, his tail spinning in a circle. There was a single canvas that was covered in a tarp, and I'd been warned not to look at it or I'd face harsh punishment. As I walked closer, Apollo whined.

"Sshhh... Don't tell your daddy." I threw a look over my shoulder, listening for any signs of his return. Then I grabbed the edge, lifting it slowly.

"I see that when the cat's away, the mice do play," Snake said from behind me, the throaty, velvety tone sending shivers down my spine.

"Uh-oh," I said, slowly lowering the tarp. "I wasn't doing anything." As I turned around, I planted the most lust-filled look on my face that I could manage, easing the tips of my fingers down my neck as I slowly lowered my gaze down the length of him. I'd seen enough to be shocked. My rugged, brutal man had painted a picture of me, the likeness uncanny.

He stood with his legs crossed, his arms folded, and a wicked smile on his face. "Nice try, sweetheart, but I caught you red-handed."

"You're such a tease. I just wanted a teensy-weensy look." I lifted my hand, holding up my index finger, giving him a pouty look.

"Nope. I'm not going to buy it." When he finally allowed himself to slide his eyes all the way down to my crimson-polished toes, he shook his head, the bulge between his legs thickening. "I think we need to take care of that right now before things get fully heated."

"Whatever do you mean?" I swished my hips back and forth as I walked closer, still trying to persuade him not to give me a spanking.

"That means, my little naughty girl, that you need to take off that sexy frock you have on and face the wall, spreading those

long legs of yours wide open.”

“I can’t talk you out of it?”

“Nope. Not a chance.” It was difficult for him not to grin as he walked further into the room.

“It’s gorgeous, just like all the rest of them.”

He tilted his head. “Compliments aren’t going to get you anywhere, but I’m glad you like them.”

“I love them. I think you need to enter them into a contest.”

His eyes opened wide. “Not a chance. Not one. Do you hear me?” He pointed his index finger in my direction. “Or else.”

“Okay, fine.” My mind was already churning.

I kept my lips pursed until he pointed to the wall. Only then did I reluctantly remove my nightie, a swirl of butterflies forming in my stomach. He had a way of doing that to me just by walking into a room.

“Turn around and do as I say.”

“Pretty please? I’ll be a good girl.”

“Oh, I know you will. I’m just going to need to remind you what happens if you disobey me. Maybe we’ll start every day with one.”

“What? You’re going to spank me every day?”

“I think it sounds like a good idea. Maybe twice if you don’t do what I command.” The look on his face was stern, but all I wanted to do was laugh from sheer joy.

We were safe.

We were alive.

And we were in love.

Well, also in lust but that was another story.

I took my time heading to the wall, facing it and placing my palms on the surface. This was humiliating but erotic, every inch of my skin covered in prickles.

As he started to hum, I couldn't help glancing over my shoulder. He was trying to figure out what to spank me with. Why did I suddenly have the feeling what I had planned next would be very uncomfortable?

His humming turned into whistling. "Just stay right there. Don't move."

As he walked out of the room, I glanced down at Apollo, who'd taken a front row seat to watch the round of discipline. "What are you looking at?"

Woof!

"Very funny. I am not a bad girl. Okay, not really." The pup didn't blink and his tail didn't wag. "Fine. I'm a very bad girl. Are you happy now?"

Woof!

Snake was taking his time, trying to add to the anticipation. Just wait until he was under my authority with his continued physical therapy. He'd realize what hard work was all about. As I plotted and planned on how to torment him, I didn't see him return.

Until I noticed the wooden bath brush in his hand. Did he ruin my little surprise?

"I think this will be a perfect addition to my collection," he said casually.

"Collection?"

"I can tell I'm going to need to keep a box full of implements to use. Maybe two since I'll need to keep one in my glovebox." When I glared at him, he shrugged. "I will spank you when it's necessary no matter where we are. That's something you need to realize."

He wasn't kidding.

I should be mortified. Instead, my pussy ached, juice trickling down both inner thighs. How could being disciplined like a little girl make me feel so hot all over? The answer was probably one I didn't want to believe.

I craved his domination. I adored his masterful lovemaking. His roughness.

And his carnal needs, which were often. A few times a day.

Now I could tell my face was flushed, likely matching what my bottom would look like after he was finished. I swallowed, gritting my teeth as he approached.

“Remain in position like a good girl and I’ll only give you twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five?” The lump in my throat grew.

“We could go for fifty.” The glint in his eyes was totally evil.

“No. No! I’m fine. Twenty-five will be just perfect.”

“I thought you’d say that.” He twirled the handle then rubbed his hand from one side of my butt to the other.

That’s when I closed my eyes. This was going to be painful.

The first crack of the wood against my bottom told me I was right. When he issued three more, moving from one side to the other, I moved from foot to foot, ready to hop.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed, already panting.

“Yep. Spankings are supposed to hurt. Maybe you’ll remember when I give you an order you will follow it from now on.”

“Yes, *sir*.”

He laughed softly then cracked the wood down at least six times. I was already starting to lose count. The pain was terrible, but the wetness between my legs continued to increase. Even my nipples were aching to the point the pain matched what was being doled out on my already bruised buttocks. I whimpered a few times, the sound purposely exaggerated. His response was two even harder slaps of the brush. My entire torso was on fire, stars floating in front of my eyes. I wasn’t certain if I’d ever experienced such raw anguish or the sense of floating on air. It was crazy and wonderful.

And I knew I deserved the harsh punishment.

Snake thought he was a monster. But I hoped he'd come to realize he was a true savior, a man with a heart of gold. I closed my eyes as the spanking continued, relishing our closeness, an electric connection that refused to be denied or shattered by our ugly pasts or demons plaguing our minds.

We'd found each other, two broken souls who were finally flourishing in the present, maybe even able to conquer the future.

And I'd never loved anyone as much as I did Ricardo Garcia.

A decorated Marine.

A lover of furry creatures.

My lover.

My friend.

The man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

"Ten more," he said, his tone gravelly. Unforgiving.

The man was dangerous and rugged, exactly what this girl needed to heal her soul.

A single whimper escaped my mouth as he counted off the last few cracks of the hard wood, but my soul was already free.

When I heard him toss the implement aside, a shiver blasted into my core. I was lightheaded, consumed with need.

As he brushed the tips of his fingers from one side of my bottom to the other, finally sliding a single long digit down the crack of my ass, there wasn't a part of me that didn't long to surrender to his needs.

Totally and permanently.

"You did very well," he whispered as he tugged my curls aside, pressing his heated lips against my neck.

"You're a bad man."

"Didn't I tell you that before?"

There was no reason a single tear slipped past my lashes, but even as it did, I couldn't help but smile. He'd rocked my world and in turn, maybe I'd saved his.

As he issued a deep growl, he pulled me into his arms, turning me around to face him. "I need you."

"You do, huh?"

"Always and forever."

"Why?" I pressed my lips against the tip of his nose before darting my tongue around his lips.

He pulled his head away, the look in his eyes that of a primal beast. "Because I love you and because you're mine." The moment he captured my mouth, I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, digging my nails in. Maybe a part of me was concerned he'd slip away, and I wanted to hold onto him as well as this special moment.

It was as if tonight was a new beginning.

Everything seemed different, including the way he swept his tongue inside my mouth, exploring without dominating. I clung to him, gripping his shirt with my other hand, grinding my hips against him.

The roar of passion was electrified, but tender, yet my heart continued to race. The realization he loved me was incredible, my heart swelling as the hunger continued to increase, shattering all my resolve.

When he broke the intimate moment, I gave him a saucy look. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

Laughing, I raked my nails lightly down his face. "Nowhere far. At least not undressed like this." As I pulled away, he shook his head, his heated look more intense than before.

"I like you this way. In fact, I think clothes will be banned inside this house."

"We'll see about that. Come, cowboy."

"Who said I was a cowboy?"

"Well, you do own horses." I flitted out of the room, knowing he would follow. Every part of me was scintillated, my skin carrying his scent. When I entered the bathroom, I took a deep

breath before starting the hot water. He arrived only seconds later, remaining in the doorway as I pulled out the bubble bath I'd purchased earlier that day.

As the tub started to fill, I gave him another saucy look.

"You seem to think you're in charge," he muttered, although I couldn't help but notice he was already unbuttoning his shirt.

"I am. You'll learn that in time." I poured two glasses of wine, purposely turning away from him.

"Uh-huh. Not a chance, lady. I'm your master."

I threw him a look over my shoulder, raking his body over with my eyes. In the glow of the candlelight, every tattoo on his chest and arms was accentuated, shimmering in the light. I wanted nothing more than to drag my tongue along every structured line and curve, not just tasting his skin but experiencing his world. "Maybe."

His laugh was genuine, and he yanked the shirt over his head, his impatience showing.

After placing the bottle of bubbles on the counter, I became the impatient one, easing into the water, my pulse racing. "Hurry."

My request lit a fire under him and within seconds, he was fully undressed, remaining where he was as if allowing me to bask in the glory of his sculpted body. I wasn't certain I could ever get enough of savoring his gorgeous, rugged features.

Snake glanced at the various candles before deciding to join me, taking his sweet time to slide into the water. "I thought you knew I wasn't a romantic guy," he said in his teasing voice.

"Yet here you are. Hmmm..."

"I've yet to tame you." He reached for me, pulling me close enough I was forced to straddle his legs, wrapping mine around his thighs.

"And you never will. You should know that by now."

"Maybe, but it will be my life's mission to try."

“Good.” The word was little more than a whisper as I used the tip of my pinky, slowly sliding it down the side of his face, cocking my head as I traced his strong jaw.

“You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“No, I’m just a simple girl who needed a hero.”

When his eyes clouded over, I pressed my lips against his, brushing them from one side to the other. “You are my hero. You saved my life not once but twice.”

“At least I could.”

I pressed our foreheads together. “You tried to save Belle.”

“Not hard enough.”

“Yes, you did. You need to forgive yourself and your friends. If you don’t, the shadow of the past will eventually strip you of the will to live. And I need you. I want you. I’m not certain I can live without you.”

His gaze remained pointed, his eyes piercing mine as he lifted his hand from the water, flexing his fingers open then rolling the tips down my face, taking his time as if needing to study my facial features. The look in his dark eyes was haunting, yet in them I noticed forgiveness for himself, replaced with an impassioned desire that quickly turned animalistic. When the corners of his mouth turned up, a shiver coursed through me.

Then he wrapped his hand around my hair, ripping back my head until I was forced into a deep arc. He issued several guttural sounds before dropping his head. I anticipated his hot mouth wrapped around my nipple. Instead, he tenderly slid his tongue up and down the scars on my stomach, the ones the monster had created over a year before. He was so gentle, taking his time to trace every line.

And in that moment, I was frozen in time, unable to keep from whimpering from his actions. It was as if he was exorcising the evil, ridding me of the worst moments of my life. In doing so, he was replacing the wretched memories with beautiful ones, a moment of sheer passion and joy.

That’s when the tears couldn’t seem to stop flowing.

When he released his hold on my hair, he eased his hand to the back of my head, pulling me as close to him as possible. “You’ll never need to feel unsafe again,” he stated. When he lifted my hips, guiding the tip of his cock to my pussy, I couldn’t stop shaking.

As his cockhead slipped past my swollen folds, another tremor skipped through me. The second I started to close my eyes, he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck. “Look at me, baby. Don’t stop. I want to see your eyes as I fuck you.” As he wiped the tears from my eyes, I was breathless, the volley of emotions overwhelming.

He pulled me all the way down, my muscles slowly expanding, the sheer pleasure rushing into my system sweeter than before. I couldn’t stop shaking even in the sauna-like steam from the bath. As it continued filling the tub, every movement swished water over the edge. When I reached around him, crushing my breasts against his chest, he issued a low, dangerously husky growl.

The move drove his cock even deeper, the sensations rocketing through me breathtaking. I managed to turn the water off after two attempts, raking my nails down his back.

“God, woman, if I could keep my cock buried inside of you, I would.” He rolled his hand up and down my spine before gripping my hip, digging his fingers into my skin. As he pulled me up and down, my heart raced.

I couldn’t help but laugh nervously as he sloshed water onto the floor. He was such a powerful man, his needs requiring satisfaction.

He never blinked, never took his eyes off mine as he lifted his hips, powering inside of me. I’d never felt so wanted or cared for in my life, the ache I’d felt for so long finally floating away, replaced by even more need than before.

Somehow, he’d become my everything.

As the pleasure turned into rapture, I started bucking against him, gripping his shoulder with one hand as I rode him hard. Every sound we both made was one of combined ecstasy, our

hunger spinning out of control, water splashing everywhere as beads of perspiration trickled down both sides of my face.

“I want you to come for me, baby,” he muttered as he nuzzled into my neck, nipping my earlobe then sliding the tip of his tongue around the shell of my ear.

My core was like lava, so hot that I was fearful I’d explode into flames. With a single touch he could rattle my world, keeping my pussy aching and my nipples hard as diamonds. And he knew it too. He was fully aware of exactly what he did to me, driving me to the point of becoming a very naughty girl.

My bottom still ached, the hot water not doing it any favors, but as a climax tickled my toes, slowly creeping along the insides of my legs, nothing else mattered. I was still lightheaded, my mind a complete blur. Then the orgasm jetted from my core into every cell, and I threw my head back and screamed.

“Yes. Yes...”

He lifted his hips, slamming into me hard and fast, pushing me to the point of losing all control. As the single climax morphed into a beautiful yet wild wave of pleasure, I lost all ability to speak, my vision cloudier than it had ever been. The level of ecstasy was profound, our connection one that could never be broken.

“Oh, God,” I finally managed as the throes of rapture finally started to subside. I was weak, my muscles like Jell-O. He pulled me against his chest, pressing his palm into my back.

I tried to take deep breaths, but my chest was tight, enough so my mouth and throat were dry.

“You know I’m not finished with you yet,” he whispered, the words echoing in my ears.

“Mmm... Good.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised when he pulled me off his lap, turning me around then shifting me onto all fours. There was something dirty and oh-so provocative about being positioned

this way in the middle of the tub, with at least a dozen lit candles the only light in the room.

As he rubbed his fingers down my spine, I couldn't seem to stop shaking. Not from the cold and certainly not from anxiety. I was tingling all over because it was finally as if we were as one, longing to share every minute together.

Snake caressed my bottom, chuckling darkly before slipping his fingers into my swollen pussy, pumping several times. "I can't wait to be inside your tight little asshole." He didn't wait for long, shifting his long fingers to my dark hole. As he pressed first one then two more inside, the briefest hint of pain shifted into another vibration of pleasure.

I shuddered all over again, taking raspy breaths. When he passed the tight ring of muscle, I threw my head back, laughing at the way the stars from my eyes floated across the ceiling. Or maybe it was the flicker of flames.

"God. You're so tight. So freaking tight." His voice remained muffled, full of ravaging testosterone and when he thrust the last few inches inside, I'd never felt so full in my life.

"Yes, fuck me. Just fuck me."

"I will every day, my bratty girl." He smacked me once on the butt before pulling out, driving into me again. And again. The feel of his cock swelling, filling me completely sent another jolt of electricity all the way to my toes.

Together we rocked and I pushed back against him, arching my back. Everything was a wondrous blur, the exquisite passion so intense my throat was tight.

He refused to stop, pulling almost all the way out and plunging over and over. The sound of skin against skin, along with the rapid beating of my heart, was the perfect orchestration. For those incredible moments, all time seemed to stop. There was nothing but us in the moment. No worries. No fears. No unheeded expectations. Just us.

When I sensed he was ready to erupt deep inside, I squeezed my muscles, and a smile crossed my face.

“Fuck. Yes. Oh, Fuck!” he bellowed, his roar permeating the entire room, his body shaking violently.

I ground my body against his, unable to keep from smiling. When he finally wrapped his arms around me, I could tell our hearts were beating as one.

A few seconds passed and when I heard his voice, it grabbed my heart. “I am going to Boulder to attend Justin’s military funeral. I want you there. If you’ll go with me that is.”

“I would be honored.”

CHAPTER 19



S *nake*

Quiet.

There were various kinds of quiet that occurred in life, the lack of any sound often the result of a cloudless day with zero breeze or a break in a conversation.

On this day, it was the result of respect, both taught and earned.

There was no breeze, no noise from traffic. There was also no laughter or tears, just a somber moment as if it was required as another aspect of respect.

And loyalty.

An honor bestowed on a fallen Marine, a man who'd risked his life to save the sanctity of freedom and those of his fellow teammates in a war with an enemy who'd never seemed to have the same sanctity for life, certainly not for freedom.

It had been and still was a war perhaps none of us had wanted to be in, few understanding what it would take to return unscathed.

Maybe that would never be possible, the horrors affecting every single man and woman who'd served. In a warzone where tragedies occurred every second, families broken for the remainder of their lives, the six of us had been lucky.

Were we without scars? No.

Were we without heartache? Absolutely not.

And would we always have nightmares of what we'd endured both together and apart? Of that I had no doubt.

But on this beautiful, cloudless spring day, we were reminded of the very reason all six of us had joined the Marines at the same time.

We'd believed we were invincible, capable of fighting without injury or loss of life. And we'd learned the hard way that not one of us had been left without agonizing baggage. Now here we were together again, still fighting our own personal wars. But we would honor a fallen man.

The six of us stood in a line, all wearing our uniforms, prepared for another forced acceptance of a life cut short too soon.

Hawk. Mustang. Scorpion. Vader. Reaper. Snake.

Once eager, stupid kids who'd finally turned into men.

There would be no silence of pain for Justin Ramirez's family other than the knowledge their son could finally rest in peace.

As the minister began to speak, I felt Chasity's hand slip into mine, her closeness behind me exactly what I needed.

All the wives or girlfriends of those who'd served in my unit were here adding their support, every one of them just as somber, tears in their eyes.

None of us had known Justin, but we'd been told of his sacrifices, his determination to return home to his parents and little sister who'd worshiped him, calling her brother a hero.

The word stuck in my mind, buzzing from being told that I fell into that category. Perhaps to some that's what I was, but in my eyes, I was just a man who'd faltered more than once yet found the courage to rise up from the ashes.

We all had.

She squeezed my hand as the minister led us into prayer, and the ache in my heart started to fade, if only for a little while.

And minutes later, as the casket was lowered into the ground, we all saluted in unison, the six of us still proud to have served such a great country.

Proud to be a Marine.

We remained in position, never moving as the flag covering his casket was ceremoniously folded, finally presented to Justin's mother.

The sounds of the six-gun salute almost broke me, but I stood firm, respectful to the end.

But there were tears in my eyes.

Tears of anger and of relief.

Tears of joy.

I'd been given a second chance when so many others hadn't. How dare I try to fuck it up.

How dare I...

Semper fi.

* * *

"Where are we going?" Chasity asked quietly, her fingers entwined in mine as Apollo nuzzled against her from the backseat.

"There's one more thing I wanted to do before I can put the past behind me."

Two days had passed since the funeral, not nearly enough time to heal, but enough to know that I was ready to move on.

"Then I'm right here."

Her lilting voice sent a shower of emotions through me. "I love you, Chasity. God knows I'm not perfect, but I will be the best man I can be for you."

As she leaned her head on my shoulder, I tried to take a deep breath. "You already are. You're kind and honest, loving and fiercely protective."

“Uh-huh. What else?”

“You’re arrogant and pigheaded, determined and gruff, but I’ve grown fond of both sides.”

I had to laugh. “We shall see with time.”

“Does that mean you want me around for the long haul?” she teased.

As I glanced in her direction, once again I loved the playful side to her. “Baby. If you ever try and get away from me, you won’t like what happens.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Trust me, sweetheart. Just trust me.”

“I do. With my life.”

As her subdued tone returned, I slowed down, making a final turn onto the gravel entrance. My heart was heavy, but it was something I needed to do, maybe to release some of the last demons I held deep inside.

I’d done enough soul searching to realize that I couldn’t bring Belle back, but I would absorb some of her free spirit. I pulled into a parking space, taking a deep breath before cutting the engine. “I’ve decided to work on the sanctuary with Phoenix and Wren. Maybe we can make it something special. Maybe I’ll even paint a few things for the various rooms. Who knows.”

“I think that’s wonderful.”

When she wrinkled her brow, I shook my head. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Well. I might have ignored your wishes and entered your pictures in a contest.”

“Is that why people were inside the cabin when I got home?”

“Well...” She looked at me sheepishly. “I knew you wouldn’t do it. They’re brilliant, incredible. I bet you’ll win.”

“And just what’s the prize?”

“Ten thousand for first place.”

I wanted to be annoyed with her but the love in her eyes had kept me going. “You’re a bad girl. We’ll deal with that when we get home.”

“You are such a mean man.”

“I keep telling you not to forget that, but you like to push my buttons.”

“And you don’t push mine?” she countered.

“That’s why I adore you.” I took a deep breath, trying to find the courage to face this. Then I opened the driver’s door.

Chasity didn’t say a word as she exited the truck, Apollo jumping out around her, scampering toward the freshly cut knoll.

“Where is he going?” she asked as she stood waiting for me to join her.

“My grave.”

She tipped her head, a brief hint of sadness in her eyes. “Animals always know.”

“He lay down on my grave after...” I swallowed hard. “Well, after Justin was laid to rest. Mustang told me Apollo didn’t want to leave.”

I wrapped my arm around her, hearing approaching vehicles behind me before I had a chance to walk her up the hill.

As I turned around, my muscles stiffened, the same ache I’d had at the funeral returning. “You told them.”

“I had a gut feeling. I thought it was important that they were here.” Chasity searched my eyes, her face pensive. “I hope you’re not angry.”

How could I be angry with a woman who’d endured so much in such a short period of time? I slipped my hand into my pocket, making certain the ring was still safely secured in the small pouch. “No, baby. I’m grateful.”

Today would end with a celebration, not sadness.

As the others approached, they were all searching my face. I nodded to each one of them, trying to maintain my composure. There was no need to be emotional. This was saying goodbye to a ghost and nothing more.

Yet we all remained quiet as we walked up the hill. I expected to hear Apollo barking after a few seconds, wondering where I was, but as we crested the top of the hill, he was sitting in front of the freshly dug up soil staring at the gravestone.

It was to be removed in a few days, which was why I'd felt it necessary to pay my final respects to the man I'd once been.

The others flanked our sides, every one of them completely quiet.

There were no words to say, nothing that would change all that had happened, but I was reminded once again just how precious life truly was.

Friendship.

On this day as well as so many others, I was reminded just how precious friendship truly was. Chasity's love had nudged me, reminding me of all the reasons I couldn't toss aside everything and everyone that was important to me.

Apollo shifted, turning to face me, cocking his precious little head. I could tell he was confused, yet his eyes reflected the same kind of loyalty the six of us had shared almost our entire lives. And as he jumped into my arms, not one of us didn't become emotional.

We'd been and would always be brothers in arms.

Soldiers.

Cowboys and Marines.

We'd been called so many things.

Heroes. Monsters. Sinners and saints.

Above all we'd been men honoring our country even while our pasts continued to haunt us.

Some had said we could never return, that we were damaged beyond redemption.

Others had stopped at nothing to try to prevent us from doing so.

But we'd been determined to protect those we loved.

Six men determined to right the wrongs from our past.

Six men prepared to do what it took.

No matter the cost.

We were also six men who'd been given a second chance at sharing an amazing life.

As well as love.

The End

AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

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BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

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Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

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Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

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Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

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Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

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BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

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Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

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Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

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BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

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Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

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BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

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King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

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King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

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BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

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Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

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Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

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Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

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BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

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Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

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BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

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King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

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BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

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Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

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BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

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BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[**Buy on Amazon**](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

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Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

Buy on Amazon

Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

Buy on Amazon

Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Carnal

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

Buy on Amazon

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

Buy on Amazon

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

Buy on Amazon

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

Buy on Amazon

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

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ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

You can find her at:

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