

THE
DEVIL'S
ANGELS MC

BOOK 7 - CHUBBS

A black and chrome motorcycle is parked on a grassy hillside. The motorcycle is the central focus, shown from a front-three-quarter view. It has a large headlight, a prominent front fender, and a large fuel tank. The background features a hazy, golden-brown sky with soft clouds and a dark, silhouetted mountain range on the left. The overall lighting is warm, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

LOLA WRIGHT

The Devil's Angels MC

Book 7 – Chubs



Lola Wright

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Adult Content Warning: This book is intended for readers 18 years of age and older. It contains adult language, violence, explicit sex and may contain triggers for some people.

First edition

Editing by Pam Clinton @ [pccProofreading](#)

Preface

Chubs

To survive this harsh world, I've lived a life of lies and secrets. From a young age, I was taught the dangers of trusting others. When my world imploded, I knew those lessons were warranted. I was forced to flee the only place I'd ever known and the only people I loved.

In a desperate situation, with no one to turn to, I met a large biker who insisted on taking in a scared teenage boy. No questions asked, and none answered. He put a roof over my head and food in my stomach. He gave me hope, and I gave him my loyalty.

The Devil's Angels MC became my new family, and I grew into the man I'd wanted to become. My life was good, and I thought I had it all, but then I met Lucy. Shy, tiny, with beautiful dark red hair, I knew she was meant to be mine. Ignoring the danger of ghosts from my past, I envisioned a life of beauty with my woman.

Lucy

Chubs was mine. I knew it when I met him, and I never looked back. It didn't matter to me what name he went by. He was my future. He had a past to fear, but I never thought it would tear us apart in the manner it did. The day he left broke something inside of me. Rage filled my soul where only love had resided before.

Leaning on my family and the club, I push my way through some dark months. Vowing to never allow a man to betray me again. I pick up the pieces and face my new lonely life.

Once an epic love story, now only ashes remain.

This book is not a stand-alone. The Devil's Angels MC Series must be read prior to this book for the story to be understood.

Acknowledgements

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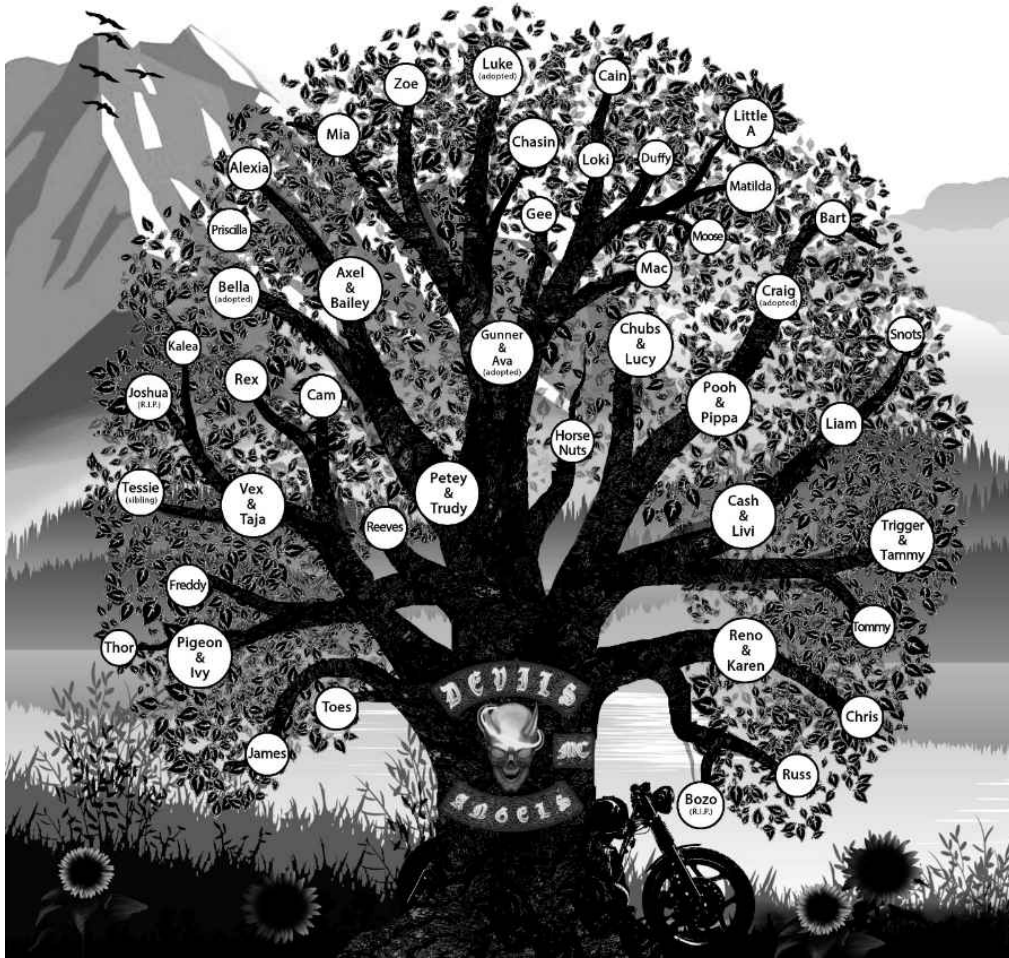
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Mature content. Discretion is advised. Recommended for age 18 years and up.

Contains sexual situations, violence, sensitive subjects, offensive language, and mature topics.

Content warning for some readers.

The Devil's Angels MC Family Tree



Prologue

I'm living a lie. A big fat, huge lie that's going to be the end of me. I don't know how to fix everything for everyone that matters most to me in this world, but I know I must do what I can. Some will not understand, some will be grateful. Some will hate me until the day I leave this earth, I'm afraid, but I see no other way to keep them safe.

Who am I risking it all for? Lucy, my woman, who deserves all good and no bad in her life. Instead, she got me. She gets the very best of me, but she's going to hate the other parts of the person I really am. The man who has lied to her face while promising her a life I'm not going to be around to live with her. The person whose life spiraled out of control several years ago when I trusted the wrong people. The person who has several names and yet goes by my favorite one, Chubs. The simple, happy-go-lucky biker with a heart of gold and an unexplainable food addiction. The club brother that everyone loves and respects. My brothers and sisters, who accepted me without question. They've trusted me with their lives, secrets, and even their kids. They gave me loyalty, brotherhood, and a home when I probably didn't deserve any of it.

Gunner, Axel, Petey, Trigger, and the rest of The Devil's Angels MC own a huge part of my heart, and there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep them safe and clear of the mess of my life. Knowing that I'm keeping things from them just about kills me, but it's for the best. If I survive what must be done, I have no illusions as to how my club will react to the way I'm planning on handling things. I've kept my secrets to myself, but in doing so, I've broken the brotherhood code. I didn't take my issues to the table or include the club in my decisions. That will not be forgiven, and I'll most likely be seen as a deserter and no longer worthy of the patch. I'll be treated as such, and even if I survive what's coming next, I may not survive the club punishments. Does this matter to me? Absolutely, and I'll lose a part of myself if I'm stripped of my patch, but I've made my decision. I'd rather have them all alive, living a good

life and hating me, than dead. I can't be the cause of Pippa losing Pooh or Ava raising her family alone. Trudy deserves to live her happily ever after with Petey. Axel needs Bailey to tame his craziness, and Alexia needs her daddy. I'm replaceable, but those people are not. It guts me, but I know that eventually, Lucy will move on and find her happiness with someone whose past hasn't come calling.

Many may never understand why I didn't choose these people over my blood family, but I understand completely. The club will be angry and hurt, but they'll survive my treason. My blood family is in peril, partially because of me, and I can't turn my back on that. For years, my being gone was the best for them, but things have taken an ugly turn, and I'm going home to do what needs to be done.

Chapter 1

Chubs

I'm racing down the highway on my CVO Tri Glide Harley trike and trying to enjoy one of the last rides she and I will have together. It's a beautiful, dark red bike with subtle flames throughout the paint, and it's been the best bike I've ever owned. I know it sounds strange that I'm going to miss my bike when I'm leaving so many things behind, but it's become a part of me, and I hate knowing I'm abandoning her too. Shaking those thoughts off, I crank up the music and try to clear my mind. Not long after, I'm pulling into a used car lot. I made sure to pick one several towns over so I wouldn't run into anyone I know. Shutting off my bike, I step off and approach the car that caught my eye last week when I was driving through this town on club business. It's the most non-descript one on the lot and perfect for what I need. Walking around the car, I peek inside it and confirm my decision. Leaving my shades on, I pull on a ball cap and approach the office.

"Nice bike," says the young salesman as I pull the door shut behind me.

"Thanks. How much for the silver Toyota?" I ask, not wasting time with niceties.

"\$4,900.00," the salesman answers immediately.

I'm guessing he's figured out that I'm not here to chat but want to get shit done fast.

"Okay, thanks. I'll have to think about it," I say before turning abruptly and leaving the office without another word.

I knew before I even entered the building that I was going to get this car, but I'm not the one who's going to do the actual buying. I have a few friends that are willing to help, so they'll be here within a few days to buy it with the cash I'll be giving them. One more thing completed, and now it's time to get some others done too.

Pulling out of the lot, I pull my phone from my pocket and make the call. After I disconnect, I pocket my phone and hit the throttle.



“You working at New Horizons today?” I ask Lucy as she brushes her hair while standing in the bedroom doorway.

“Yeah. I’m helping Pippa apply for more government grants.”

“Not sure when I’ll be done today. Are we spending the night here or at the clubhouse?” I question while sipping my coffee.

“Here, I think. You like the smells we wake up to, with the bakery being below the apartment. Besides, I need to start going through my clothes tonight too. Not sure what all I’m taking on the trip, but I may need to pick up a few things before I leave,” Lucy answers as she takes a seat next to me on the couch.

“Works for me,” I mutter as she steals my cup for a sip. The coffee I’ll share, but if she makes a move toward my donut, it’s game on.

“I’m happy that I get to spend time with my family, but I hate leaving you,” Lucy murmurs as she hands the cup back to me.

“Me too, Lucy, my love. Enjoy the time with them, though. When you get back, I want to show you the piece of land I’m buying from Vex for us to build our home on. It sits against a section of the club property. No houses in sight but only a few minutes’ drive to the clubhouse. Vex’s house is in the other direction but still a short drive. We’ll be isolated and yet close.”

“Love that idea, Chubs. How soon before we can start building?”

“I’m hoping before fall. I’d like to get the driveway built, well drilled, and maybe get the garage done. I took the house plans to Gunner’s contractor, and he said they could probably get a good start on things before snow hits.”

“That would be great!” Lucy responds enthusiastically.

“We better get going. I have Church later and have some things to do first,” I say as we stand, drop my cup off in the sink, and leave the apartment.

Giving Lucy a long, hard kiss goodbye, I watch silently from the back door of the bakery as she walks to her car. I watch as she waves at me before maneuvering her car out of the parking lot and to the street. I continue watching her car as she drives away down the street, and my heart hurts. I hate myself for giving her hope of us building a home, a life together, when I know the odds are slim of that happening, but I have to keep her from getting suspicious.

I’ve kept so many things from her, the woman I love more than life, and the guilt is crushing. Some days the weight of it is just too much to keep carrying, but my choices are limited. If Lucy knew everything, she’d risk her life for me. I can’t go through that kind of fear again. I still have nightmares from the time we were both shot, and she nearly died. She’s tiny but fearless and has no self-preservation when it comes to me.

Closing and locking the back door, I walk to the kitchen area. Spotting Ava, I walk to her, drop a kiss on her smiling cheek, then reach for a cinnamon roll. Taking a bite, my eyes nearly roll to the back of my head. Even after having eaten thousands of them, her cinnamon rolls still have this effect on me. To be honest, most foods do, though.

“Chubs loves Ava,” I state as I lift what’s left of my roll in a salute to her skills.

“Ava loves Chubs. You hanging with us for a while? I have a new recipe for strudel you can taste test,” Ava says with an impish grin.

I groan miserably because I can’t, and it physically hurts knowing that. Sadly, I shake my head no.

“I’ll save you some. Trudy packed you some snacks for later. Grab them on your way out.”

This perks me up some, and I give Ava my best smile before making my way through the swinging doors that lead to the

front of the bakery. Trudy's busy with customers, but I spot a bakery box with my name on it, so I grab it, wave to Trudy, and head outside to my bike. Swinging my leg over the seat, I open the box, eat a few of the treats before putting the box in a saddlebag. I do this carefully so nothing gets crushed, even though I'd eat them anyway. I have before, and I would again because there's no sense in wasting food. The thought of wasted food causes a shiver to run up my back. Shaking off the bad thoughts, I start my bike.

Pulling into Cash's driveway, I shut off my bike and let myself into the house. Hearing voices in the kitchen, I walk in that direction. Cash is wiping off the counter while Livi's feeding Liam in his highchair. The baby is a toddler now and is absolutely adorable. Chubby with blond hair and big blue eyes, he's the spitting image of his dad, only in miniature form. Taking a seat next to him, I briefly wonder what his food tastes like.

"Hey, Chubs. How's it going?" Livi asks with a smile while trying to aim a spoonful of food at Liam's moving head.

Liam giggles, smears the food on his mouth around his face with his hand before grabbing the spoon and pulling it within reach. He doesn't eat the food as expected but instead blows on the end of the spoon, causing the food to spray at Livi. Laughing, Livi grabs a napkin and cleans her shirt and Liam's face.

"Liam's latest trick with applesauce," Livi says with a grimace.

Now I'm wondering if his applesauce has cinnamon in it, but I fight that thought and turn to Cash. Watching him disinfect an already spotless counter, I grin. Cash doesn't realize every single one of us in the club knows about his OCD. We do, but most of us are smart enough not to mention it to the very large, very quiet club enforcer. Pooh and Axel—not so smart. I've watched, gleefully I might add, both getting their asses handed to them by Cash for even mentioning it. I like my head attached to my body enough that I keep my mouth shut.

“You working today, Cash?” I ask.

“Going in later. Pooh opened today,” Cash answers before putting his cleaning tote under the sink. “Why? What’s up?”

“Wanted to talk with Livi,” I answer quietly and look away when Cash swings his head in my direction.

“Talk,” he orders.

“Have the Feds approached you lately?” I ask Livi, knowing there’s no way Cash is going to let me speak with her privately.

“Not lately. Not since the last time I told you about,” she answers softly.

“I don’t want you to take any heat from them over me. They come at you, send them my way. I’ll deal with them, but it’s not right they’re pressuring you and James,” I say with a tinge of anger in my voice.

“Be easier if you just told us what the problem is, Chubs. We’d both help, as would the club,” Cash says as he takes a seat across the table from me.

Standing, I pour a cup of coffee and raid the fridge until I find some string cheese. Sitting back down, I look at Cash and answer, “Can’t do that, brother. My problem and I’ll deal with it, but I’m not putting you, Livi, or the club at risk for me.”

“Pissing me off, Chubs. Club would have your back, no matter what,” Cash bites out.

“Know that. That’s exactly why I’ll deal with this on my own,” I state as I stand to leave, wanting to get away from Cash before I give in to the urge to share too much.

“What about Lucy, Chubs? Is it fair to keep her in the dark?” Livi asks, still using a soft voice.

“No, it’s not. Nothing about this is fair, but that’s life,” I answer as I give Liam, then Livi a kiss on the cheek and walk out.

As I'm closing the door behind me, I hear Cash mutter a few choice words. I grin because I know he's only cussing me out because he cares.

I ride to the garage and swap my bike for the wrecker. Leaving there, I head to the clubhouse, and when I enter, I find Craig waiting for me. Scattered around the main room are several of the pets, with Mac singing from the top of the bar. I laugh when I realize he's singing the John Jones song "I'm Only Human After All," and without missing a beat, he wing-waves at me. Giving him a thumbs up, I turn to Craig.

"You babysitting everyone today?"

"No, Gunner's in his office. He's on babysitting duty. He even said he'd watch Bart while we do my learning things," Craig answers.

"Where're the twins?"

"At Axel's. He's got all three of the girls today because Bailey's doing books at the garage. They're doing a spa day. Whatever that is," Craig says with a mild look of confusion.

"What that is, is a good video opportunity for me and you. You in?" I ask with a grin.

"Hell, yeah!"

"Where's Luke?" I ask, looking around the room.

Luke's usually anywhere that Axel's at or with Craig, but he's not here, and Craig didn't say he was at Axel's with the girls.

"He's with Bella at the Aunts' house today. I don't think he wanted to do a spa day," Craig answers with a laugh.

We take the path through the woods and veer off to Axel's backyard instead of following it to Craig's fort. Creeping silently, we climb the steps of the deck and stop next to the sliding glass doors. Keeping tight to the building, I pull my phone out and get the camera opened and set to video. I smile when I hear Craig smother a giggle at the conversation coming through the opened kitchen window.

“But you’d look better in pink, Uncle Axel,” Mia states decisively.

“Gold!” argues Zoe.

“Pwink!” says Alexia in her little girl voice.

“Which one is best for my skin?” Axel questions the girls in a serious tone.

That being the comment that caused Craig’s smothered giggle.

“The gold one. That’s the one Mommy uses the most,” Zoe insists.

“But he’s a pink ballerina!” argues Mia.

Leaning my head out far enough to see through the glass door, I spot Axel. Jerking my head back, I bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud and alerting him to unwanted visitors. When I get myself under control, I peek again then turn on the video. Holding the camera to film inside the house, I keep my head out of sight. Craig drops to his knees, peeks around my legs, and then does the same as I did. Sitting on his heels, holding his hands over his mouth, he looks up at me, and I can see the laughter in his eyes. This is priceless and much more fun than towing cars.

“Gwold!” Alexia says, changing her mind.

“Okay, gold. Put it on thick, though,” Mia orders.

“Why’s the container shaped like a gold pig?” Axel asks.

“Mommy likes pigs, I guess,” Zoe answers with a shrug.

“And it will make my skin smooth?” the big bald biker questions.

“It makes Mommy beautiful,” Mia answers confidently.

“You have to lay down, Uncle Axel. Yes, like that. Close your eyes. Mia, put the cucumbers over his eyes. Here, Alexia, you can put the gold stuff on. Smear it all over because that’s the best way,” orders Zoe.

I have a moment of concern that Craig's going to piss his pants when I see him grab himself. After a moment, though, he gets it under control. Grinning, he peeks through the window again. Still holding the camera up, I lean enough to see the spa day going on.

Axel's laying on the couch, head resting on the arm. Little Alex is smearing some thick, bright metallic gold concoction all over his face. His eyes have slices of cucumber over them, and Mia is busy painting his fingernails a bright, sparkly purple color. Zoe is supervising while smearing her own face in gold too. Next to the couch is a small children's table set up, complete with a tea set. Sitting next to the plastic teapot is a plate of cookies, and my stomach grumbles in protest of not being able to reach them.

All three of the little girls are wearing princess-type dresses and toddling around on plastic high heels. That's not surprising for three young girls. What's surprising is that Axel's wearing a pink tutu around his waist with navy blue Nike basketball shorts underneath. The tutu doesn't really go with The Devil's Angels t-shirt he's got on but matches perfectly to the high-heeled sandals that he's wearing, even though they only fit on about half his foot. My guess is Bailey's not going to be happy if his huge feet stretch out her shoes, but that's his battle to fight.

Craig and I wait patiently while the girls finish up on Axel and then add the facial stuff to their own faces. Since Zoe already did hers, she helps the other two get theirs as covered as Uncle Axel's is. Each girl puts cucumber slices over their eyes and lays down on the floor around the couch.

As quietly as possible, I slide the door open, and Craig follows me in. Walking up to the couch, I make sure to get a shot of each person, especially a good close-up of Axel. This is pure gold—no pun intended. Craig earns my love when he snatches up a few of the cookies and hands all but one to me.

“How long do we leave this stuff on?” Axel asks.

“Don’t know. At least until we’re beautiful,” Zoe answers with authority.

“Every one of you young ladies are already beautiful,” Axel assures them, and I have to admit, warms my heart with his words.

“Loves you, Uncle Axel,” Mia answers while the other two girls nod their heads.

“Love each of you,” Axel returns.

Our fun ends when my phone pings with an incoming text. Mia lifts a cucumber off her eye and spots Craig and me standing near the couch.

“Hi, Chubs! Hi, Craig! Want to have a spa day with us?” she asks innocently.

Axel’s body freezes for a moment before his hands push the cucumber slices up, and his eyes land on me. Axel bolts to his feet but, unfortunately, forgets he’s half-wearing high heels. His ankles twist sideways, and his large body crashes to the floor, nearly taking out his two nieces. Kicking the heels off, he stumbles to his feet. The gold facial stuff must be really thick and sticky because the cucumber slices are now stuck to his forehead above his eyes like forgotten goggles. It’s a sight to see.

With the girls giggling and Axel glaring, I stop the video and pop a cookie in my mouth. Grinning around the cookie, I look down at Craig and see he’s ready. He knows what we have to do, no explanation necessary. We turn and haul ass for the door with Axel right behind us.

Craig’s smart and leaps over the steps, landing on the lawn and never looking back. I grab the rail, sling my feet to the side in a smooth jump, and land a few feet behind Craig’s fleeing body. We make tracks and don’t stop until we reach the clubhouse.

Rushing through the back door, then the kitchen door, we slide to a stop inside the main room. Gunner is sitting at the bar with Pigeon, both watching our wild entrance.

“I don’t even want to know,” Gunner states while holding up his hand to stop any explanation we might offer.

“I do!” Pigeon says with a wide smile.

“Ballerina Axel spa day,” Craig chokes out, laughing and trying to catch his breath.

“Video?” Pigeon asks hopefully while holding his hand out.

“Of course,” I answer while handing my phone over.

I’m proud of the video we got, but prouder still that I did that run with a cookie in my mouth, two more in my hand, and I never dropped a crumb.



Being a foodie and a wrecker truck driver, I know every inch of Denver and its outlying suburbs. Being a people person, I’ve chatted with every form of human working or living in those areas. Race, sex, financial status, political beliefs—none of that matters to me. Everyone has an equal chance with me until they prove otherwise. I don’t judge based on anything other than someone’s actions. Because people seem drawn to me, open up to me, I believe they can sense that, and it’s earned me trust and friendships with people others might avoid. I’ve also learned to keep my ear to the ground for tidbits of information that may someday be useful. Today is one of those days.

Pulling the wrecker to a stop in front of a Chinese take-out joint I love, I shut it off and jump out. Forcing myself to walk past the door of the restaurant, I aim myself to the alley that runs alongside of it. I’m in luck and spot the few men playing dominos that I was hoping would be around today.

“Hey, guys. How’s it going?” I ask as I come to a stop next to an aged white guy who goes by the street name of Black. I don’t know why or how that became his nickname, and I don’t ask those kinds of questions. I quit asking about the story behind street or road names after my club brother Pooh was tagged with his. That incident still brings on a laugh and an icky feeling in equal strength when I think about it.

“Hey, Brother Chubs. Fancy seeing you in these parts. On a call?” Black asks with a grin while the other men give me nods or a chin tip in greeting.

“Not yet. Heading out to one shortly,” I answer while sniffing the aroma floating in the air. Damn, I should have stopped inside the restaurant before hitting the alley. “Thought I’d drop by and see how you’re all doing.”

That simple comment opens the men up, and they each give me a rundown of the happenings in their worlds. I listen closely, respond when needed, and make a point to ask questions so they know I’m sincere about checking in on them. And I am sincere about it. I enjoy my time spent with people I’ve come to know that others might tend to look down upon.

After several long minutes of chatter, I join in on a game of dominos, lose twenty bucks to Black, and bow out of the next game. When the laughter of my loss passes, I aim serious eyes at Black and quietly ask my questions.

Gaining the information I need, I hang out for a few more minutes before saying my goodbyes. The best way to gain knowledge is to engage with the older folk who hang out on the stoops or in the alleys. They see and hear everything because the other people don’t see them as a threat. They’re fixtures in those areas, and people overlook them all the while they’re filing away everything that happens on their streets. If you’re on good terms with them, they’re a wealth of knowledge of the goings on in their area.

I pull away with my take-out order and head to the first tow of the day. I only make it a few blocks when I realize I have a tail. Not surprising since I’ve had one most days for the last several months. Fucking Feds are getting on my last nerve. I have things to do, plans to set into motion, and they slow me down.

Just for fun and to annoy them, I start making fast right turns. Speeding up between turns, it’s not long, and I’m the one following them. When they stop at the intersection, looking in both directions for me, I laugh loudly. Honking my horn, I flip

them off when each guy looks in their mirror. Whipping the wrecker into the lane next to them, I time my acceleration perfectly when the light turns red, and I leave them in my dust. Fed that, suckers!



“Put the mallet down, Trig. We both know you’re not going to clock me with it,” I say in an amused tone.

“You might think you know that, but I seriously haven’t decided yet, Chubs!” he shouts in my face.

Finally noticing how close he is to the edge, I remove the smirk from my face and eye him seriously. Holding both hands up in a placating manner, I regret my decision to return the wrecker before Trigger’s shift ended today. I’ve been avoiding him a lot lately, and I was a fool to think not seeing me might calm his legendary temper. Now, he has me cornered in the club’s garage, and I’m not seeing an easy escape.

“I’d like to hear some truths too, Chubs. So don’t think I’m going to run for Petey to intervene,” Tessie states as she stops next to Trigger while wiping her hands on a grease rag.

I know better than to assume she’ll side with anyone over Trigger. Those two are joined at the hip most days, and Axel, my club’s vice president, accurately calls them The Dangerous Duo. Most of the guys that work at the garage know better than to cross Tessie because she’ll rat their asses out to Trigger in a second, and he’ll make them sorry they did. Trigger’s not only overprotective of his young protégé but also loves that girl like she’s his own. Knowing all of this, I give Tessie a warm smile and flash puppy dog eyes at her. Her stance softens a bit, and I start to think I may survive, after all.

Still standing nose to nose with me, Trigger lowers the mallet to his side but growls out, “Why are there Feds harassing you? What do they want, and why the fuck won’t you let the club help?”

“Yeah, Chubs. Why?” Tessie semi-parrots Trigger’s questions while placing her hands on her hips.

“I’ll tell you my secret if you tell Trigger yours,” I return, looking at Tessie, and fight a grin at the instant response from both humans.

Trigger’s head swings Tessie’s direction while her body stiffens in alarm. I’m suddenly no longer on Trigger’s radar, and Tessie looks like a deer caught in the headlights. Yep, I may survive this encounter in one piece, after all.

“What secret would you keep from me?” Trigger asks with a confused look on his face.

“No secret! He’s lying! Chubs doesn’t know nothing about anything!” Tessie shouts nervously, with guilt written all over her.

Trigger turns to face her fully, myself forgotten for the moment, and I take that opportunity to slide along the wall toward the big bay door. As I listen to Trigger question Tessie, I feel a moment of pity for her. I too love that girl to death, and I just threw her under the Trigger bus to save myself. Not my proudest moment, but unfortunately, it was necessary. I only need a few more days before putting my plan in motion, and I can’t have it derailed. Hopefully, I can make it up to Tessie someday. If I survive my plan, I’m going to have a lot of apologies to make at some point. Realistically, I know not everyone will forgive me, but life is full of hard choices. I’ll choose every damn time to have the people I love hate me forever if it keeps them breathing. It’ll be hard losing them from my life. Crushing, actually, but I don’t see another way.

I make it to my bike, climb on and start it up. As I’m riding past the open bay doors, I punch the throttle and swallow down my guilt. Again.

Chapter 2

Lucy

Pippa and I work on the grant applications for a few hours before she gets called away. While she left to help with an intake, I continued filling out the applications. Any grant money would help, but a few of the ones we applied for today would provide a steady influx of funds for several years. They're so important that I take the time to double, then triple-check them for errors. When they're perfect, I close my laptop and stretch the kinks out of my back and neck.

Walking into the kitchen for a drink, I see a couple of the residents making sandwiches. Scooting around them, I open the fridge, grab a Coke before heading back out the door. As I exit the kitchen, I hear a loud bang, a few curse words, a mumbled, "dang it, Lucy," but I don't bother looking back. Taking my drink, I walk out the back door and take a seat next to the patio table. One sip of my Coke, and my phone rings.

"Hey, Daddy. What's up?" I say, answering my phone with a smile.

I love my dad, and I'm a proud daddy's girl. I make no excuses for that.

"Hello, Lucy. Just calling to make sure you're ready for our trip. Is there anything you need for it yet?"

"I'm going through my clothes tonight, but if I need anything, it won't be much. I'll have time tomorrow to get whatever else I might need," I answer, already knowing what he's going to say next.

"Use my credit card and get anything you think you'd like. Lisa did her shopping a few days ago with your mom," Dad says.

"Dad, I don't need to use your card, you know. I do have money of my own," I reply, stating the words he's heard a thousand times.

“I know that, honey, but you’re going to need clothes for a few formal events, and those are because of me,” Dad responds with a sigh.

He knows how much I hate the formal events but love him enough to support him regardless. He hates me spending my own money on clothes for those things and always tries to insist on paying.

“Will you feel less guilty if I spend your money then?” I ask with a small laugh.

“Yes, definitely, and go wild if you want to,” the Governor of Colorado answers with a relieved laugh.

“Okay, Dad. I’ll do my best to spend your money tomorrow and make you proud.”

“You always make me proud, Lucy. Love you,” Dad says in a sincere voice.

“Love you too, Dad,” I answer before disconnecting our call.

Looks like I’m going formal clothes shopping tomorrow, even though I’d rather do nearly anything else. Asking Tammy, Trigger’s woman, to go with me will ensure that I end up dressed in a stylish, elegant manner with minimal fuss. Taking another sip of my Coke, I stand and go searching for Tammy to ask for her help.



“Did you get everything you needed?” Chubs asks while licking his fingers clean of brownie crumbs.

“Everything and a few extras. Taking Tammy with me was brilliant. Even my dad was impressed with how much damage she did to his credit card in a few short hours. Mom and Lisa asked if she would go with them next time,” I answer with a laugh.

“Tammy’s good people. Perfect for Trigger too, but I wonder if she knows he literally buries money and gold coins everywhere,” Chubs says absently.

“He still does that? I thought that was just something he did for a while after he started getting regular paychecks.”

“Still does it. Said he grew up with nothing, often going hungry, and promised himself he’d never be broke again. He’s a man of his word because he has stashed emergency cash everywhere,” Chubs answers with a wide grin.

Being an accountant, my mind flashes to all the money he’s not making by hiding instead of investing.

“And before you ask, yes, Bailey is aware and got him to agree to invest more and hide less. She even got him to write out a description of all the various places he’s hidden money and add it to his will. Everyone has their own quirks, and money is Trigger’s,” Chubs says with a snort.

This is very true, so I move on to a different subject.

“Have the Feds hassled you lately?” I ask, knowing I’m encroaching on a touchy subject.

“Let’s not ruin our quiet time with talk of them. They don’t matter,” Chubs requests quietly.

I take a seat at the table next to him and place my hand on his forearm. I wait patiently, silently, until he sighs and meets my eyes.

“You are my entire world. My heart, my soulmate. You know this, and I know it’s returned to me tenfold, Chubs. I’ve sat back, letting you handle them as you chose because you asked me to. Because I trust you and the promises you’ve made to me. I’ll stand beside or behind you, whichever you need, but please remember that at some point, we need to move forward with our lives. The life we decided together we want to share. Our wedding, building our home, starting a family. I know you love me, but I also know you’re still keeping things from me. I hate that whatever happened in your past is now affecting our future, and you don’t trust me enough to let me in.”

My heart breaks a little when I feel him flinch at my words, but he’s the one being stubborn. I love this man, but I’m at my wit’s end with all the secrets. He’s erecting a wall between us

when a little honesty is all that's needed instead. When he doesn't respond, I sigh in defeat. Getting to my feet, I walk to the bedroom and quietly shut the door behind me. Feelings hurt, anger rising, I choose to shut him off from me before I say things I might later regret. Starting to sort through my clothes, my tears threaten to fall when I hear him leave the apartment. They fall unchecked when I wake in the morning to see that he never returned.



Knowing there're big things going on with the club, I decided to hang with Bailey at the gym today. I don't text or call Chubs, and I don't receive any either. Cash is working when I enter the gym, and I return his chin lift before entering the office. I set my laptop and purse in a chair then flop down on the couch.

"Hey, Lucy. You okay?" Bailey asks with concern, looking up from her seat at the desk.

"Yeah," I answer unconvincingly.

"No offense, girlfriend, but you don't look it."

"Men," I say, knowing that will explain everything in one word.

"Ahh, I see. Do I need to call the other Ol' Ladies and plan an ass-whooping party for Chubs?" Bailey questions with a smile and one hand picking up her cell phone.

"Not yet, but keep your phone close."

"You want to talk, honey?" Bailey asks in a soft voice.

"No, but thanks. I want to break or punch things. I want to destroy something. Is that Candy lady still coming around? Maybe she'll get in the ring with me," I answer, and even I can hear the violence in my voice.

"I love you too much to let you get in the ring with her. She's kicked Axel and Pooh's ass on many occasions, not counting the toy store, and you're a third her size. If you're feeling that

suicidal, go for a ride with Tessie!” Bailey shouts before snorting a laugh.

The door opens, and Cash fills the doorway. Without a word, he points a finger at me and then the gym before walking out. I pull myself up and off the couch, shoot Bailey an evil grin, then follow the large biker.

Still not speaking, Cash turns to me and reaches for my hand. He starts wrapping tape around it, then the other, before sliding MMA-style gloves on each. He picks up the striking pads and walks to a corner of the gym before turning to face me.

“You’re not getting into a ring, ever, with Candy. I’ve been working with her, and she’s gotten deadly good. I’ve been doing that, mostly for my own amusement, for the day Axel pisses her off again, but also because it’s good for her. Besides, she likes you and the other women and would never hurt you,” Cash explains before lifting the pads for me to strike.

I start slowly, more of a warm-up period, while my brain slides from Chubs to my striking. Cash murmurs instructions and encouragement as I pick up my pace. After several minutes, sweat is coating my face, and my arms are tired and feeling heavy. When Cash finally drops his hands, I’m exhausted. Taking seats on the mats again, Cash starts removing my gloves and tape.

“Talk,” the Viking biker orders quietly.

“He won’t talk to me,” I answer immediately, knowing my fears are safe with Cash.

“He won’t talk to any of us. Why’s that got you so twisted today?” Cash asks. “Something different?”

“Just a feeling I’ve had for a few weeks now. I’m not sure I can explain it, but my gut is telling me that something big is coming,” I respond in whispered frustration. “Making it worse, I’m leaving town with my parents and sister. Not sure what might happen while I’m gone or what I’ll come home to.”

Cash stays silent for a few beats before speaking again.

“No matter what happens with Chubs, no matter what’s got his head so fucked up, no matter what decisions he may make, you are not alone in this. You have us. Me, Livi, Axel, Bailey. The whole club has got you, Lucy. Anything you need, anytime, you call, and I’ll be there. I know we’re a poor substitution for him, but you and I will deal with whatever happens. I feel it too with Chubs. Something’s changed, but I have no clue what it is, either. We’ll figure this out. As friends, as family, as a club. Yeah?”

Sincerity and frustration equally lace his words and roll off his body. The only thing about this conversation that’s surprising to me is how many words this quiet biker has spoken. Cash isn’t big on using words, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel deeply about things. Wrapping a thickly muscled arm around my shoulders, I let him tug me close.

“Yeah, Cash. Thanks for today. I needed to hit things,” I say while pulling back enough to look up at his face.

“You keep working on your striking, and I’ll be turning you loose on Axel’s ass soon,” he jokes as he stands, pulling me to my feet beside him.

When his phone buzzes, I give him a quick hug then turn for the showers.



Walking into Axel and Bailey’s house later that evening, I head toward the kitchen. Dropping our take-out meal on the table, I turn in time for little Alex to crash into my legs. Bending, I scoop her into my arms, place her on my hip, and land a loud smooch on her forehead. Giggling, her little hands land on each side of my face before she squeals excitedly, “Auntie Lucy!”

“Hello, my beautiful girl! I’ve missed you!” I say to her sweet face.

“Missed you too!”

“Where’s Mommy?” I ask.

“Mommy’s in the cwoset. Cwalset. Where the clothes are. She’s saying swears a lot,” she answers in a whisper like she’s telling me a secret.

“Okay then. Umm, why is she swearing? Is she locked in there?” I ask as I set Alex on her feet and start toward the bedroom, somewhat alarmed.

“Cuz Daddy’s a pig,” Alex responds in a serious tone.

“Hey, Lucy. And yes, it’s because Alex’s daddy is a pig. Oink oink,” Bailey states, flashing Alex a wink and a smile as she enters the room. “That man has never figured out what the purpose of a hanger is, and I’m tired of picking his clothes up off the floor. So yeah, not a proud Mom moment, but I may have sworn a little as I again cleared the closet floor.”

“A lot. Not a little,” Alex corrects while climbing onto a chair to peek into the take-out bags.

Bailey cringes a little as I laugh at the honesty of children.

I take a seat next to Alex and help her pull out the food containers while Bailey grabs drinks. Once we’re all eating, Bailey speaks.

“Chubs is pushing buttons on a lot of the guys. Ava too. I know it doesn’t help, but you’re not the only one he’s hiding things from. I can’t imagine your frustration over it, though. I told Axel if he ever did that to me, I’d whack him where it hurts the worst.”

“Whack what?” Alex asks innocently as Bailey and I grin at each other.

“Whack him upside his head,” Bailey answers.

“And I’m guessing he covered his junk when you said that,” I state with no doubt in my mind.

“Yep. I’m always telling the guys that he’s smarter than he acts,” Bailey replies with a laugh.

“When are the ladies coming over?” I question while deliberately changing the subject.

Bailey gives me a knowing look, but like the great friend she is, she gives me that play.

“They should start arriving soon. With the men all tied up with club business, tonight’s a great night to work on Pippa’s wedding plans.”

No sooner were the words spoken, and the front door opens with a whoosh. Craig comes through the door first, then steps aside to hold it open for the women and other kids. After everyone enters the house, Craig shuts the door with some force and shouts in an irritated voice, “You’re welcome!” before stomping to the couch and throwing himself down on it.

I notice my eyebrows aren’t the only ones raised in surprise at Craig’s show of attitude. I bite my lip when I see Tammy turn toward him and place her hands on her hips. Seeing the same as I did, Craig stands back up and mimics Tammy’s stance. Shit’s about to go down.

“Would you care to explain your attitude, young man?” Tammy asks in a deadly quiet voice.

“Again?” Craig tosses back with sarcasm tinging his voice.

“Your mom and I have already explained, several times, why Axel is going to be the best man. It’s not your decision to make, even if you don’t agree with it. So now, can you say hi to everyone and then go play with the kids so we can get to work?”

While Tammy’s speaking and fighting for patience, Craig’s signing the words automatically for Luke’s benefit. I’ve noticed Craig always does that if Luke’s in the room, and it’s amazing that he never forgets his best friend’s hearing challenge. Though in true Craig style, I’m positive I see him adding a few gestures that have nothing to do with Tammy’s words but everything to do with what Craig thinks of them. I duck my head to hide my smile at his audacity but nearly

laugh out loud at Ava's expression. She obviously caught those same gestures too.

"Hi, everyone. I'm going to go play with the kids now so you adults can continue planning the wedding that I'm not a part of. Have fun with that," Craig barks then turns and leaves the room with the other kids following him.

After a few beats of silence, Pippa says, "Should I be afraid to sleep with both eyes closed tonight?"

"You should be fine, but I'd hide all the sharp objects just to be sure," Trudy states in a subdued voice.

"Is he really not in the wedding at all?" I ask Pippa with a frown.

"He shot down the idea of ring bearer and usher. When Pooh jokingly said he could be a flower girl, I thought there was going to be bloodshed. He wants to be the best man or nothing. Said that if he's not the best man, then he's not even going to attend," Pippa explains with a sigh. "Craig also thinks Bart should be a part of the ceremony too. He keeps insisting that Bart is family and, therefore, should be included. As odd as this may seem, as a little girl I never dreamed of my wedding including a skunk. Not one damn time."

I laugh at Pippa's comment, but I'm not sure any female in the room dreamed of a wedding including a skunk. Only Craig would see that as a normal idea.

"Why not have him walk you down the aisle?" Livi suggests.

"Because I asked Trigger to do that," Pippa answers while pressing her fingers against her temples.

"Luke's coming to the wedding. What if Craig stood off to the side, upfront, and signed the ceremony? He's the best anyway, and he always looks out for Luke to make sure he feels included," Ava offers up another solution.

"That's a great idea! He can be the interpreter!" Bailey agrees.

"I'll do it, but know I'm only doing it so Luke doesn't feel left out like I do," Craig announces from the hallway before

turning away and slamming a door shut behind him.

“Chubs swears that kid has bat ears and their hearing abilities,” I mumble to the stunned room.

“What’s the odds that he’ll only sign the words spoken during the ceremony?” Tammy asks the quiet room.

“Zero,” Ava and I answer at the same time.

Chapter 3

Chubs

I successfully avoid the two Feds that have been dying to corner me for a few more days before my luck runs out. Walking out the back door of a favorite diner of mine, I'm suddenly faced with both of them, and their impatience radiates off of them in waves.

"Hey, guys. Why the long faces?" I joke as I angle myself to brush past them.

"You're coming with us today. Let's make this easy on everyone—" the agent I refer to as Mole Face starts to say before I interrupt him.

"Got a warrant?" I ask with a laugh because I know they don't.

"We're done playing this by the rulebook, Brock. Get in the car," agent number two, or Pig Ass as I call him, states in a demanding tone.

"Rulebook?" I question sarcastically as I plant my shoulder against Pig Ass's with enough force to make him take a step backward. "No one's ever told me you guys follow rules. What page of your rulebook says it's standard procedure to use force, blackmail, and threats to get someone to do what you want them to?"

"This doesn't have to get ugly, Brock," Mole Face barks while reaching for my wrist.

"I disagree," I state as I plant both hands on his chest and shove hard. "I like ugly."

As I finish my words, I swing out with a booted foot and crash it into the side of his knee, dropping him like a stone. Turning swiftly, I pop a few right hooks into Pig's chin before finishing with a left. My blows rock him, but he stays standing. While we square off, Mole rejoins the fight from the ground and wraps his arms around my legs, throwing me off balance. Pig

takes advantage and tackles me. I slam hard onto the cement, with his stout body landing on mine.

“What the fuck’s going on?” a male voice shouts at the same time I start throwing elbows into the agents.

“They’re trying to rob me,” I grunt out, lying through my teeth and not caring in the least.

Asa, the cook of the restaurant I just walked out of, comes to my defense. Young guy, somewhat heavysset, he uses his feet with wicked intent. I almost grin when I hear the pained gasps and exclamations of the agents when his feet meet with vulnerable places. Fighting my way to standing, I take a step to stand near Asa.

“We’re federal agents!” shouts Pig Ass as he rolls away, desperate to avoid any more boot marks on his hide.

“Only thing I hate worse than a thief is a Fed,” Asa growls back as he continues his assault, now with my help. I laugh a little at that comment as Asa renews his attack, proving how true it is.

After a few more well-placed kicks, the agents gain their feet and make tracks to their car. As they climb inside it, Mole shouts, “This isn’t over!”

“Come back for seconds anytime!” Asa returns, breathing heavy.

After the car leaves, I turn to Asa and place a hand on his shoulder.

“No way to thank—” I start before Asa cuts me off.

“No need to, Chubs. You’re good people, and my mom would disown me if she ever knew you were in trouble and I didn’t help. Glad I was here. I’m not going to ask any questions, but just know if there’s anything we can ever help you with, you know where to find us,” Asa says quietly but firmly before walking back inside.

Walking to my bike, I straddle it before strapping on my helmet. Time to get to the garage before Trigger comes into

work. I'm not sure I'm up for another fight today and especially not with that tricky little bastard.



Opening the apartment door, I'm greeted with silence. Entering the bedroom, I strip out of my dirty clothes and head for the shower. After cleaning all the dust and grime off myself, I towel off first my hair, then my body. I pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before taking a seat in the living room and switching on the TV.

I'm somewhat nervous about Lucy coming home after the way I left last night. It was beyond wrong of me to walk out and spend the night alone at the clubhouse, but I just couldn't tell her another lie. If I were smart, I'd do something to make her hate me so it wouldn't hurt her so much when I leave. I'd push her away to make it less of a blow when I'm gone, but I'm too selfish. I don't want to see the hurt that she's going to go through because of me, and I don't want to give up what little time we have left together. Those memories may have to last me a lifetime if I'm still standing at the end.

Hearing the door open behind me, I brace. I listen to the familiar sounds of Lucy kicking off her shoes and hanging her purse on the hook behind the door. When she walks past my chair on her way to the bedroom, my heart drops a little in my chest. Lucy never walks past me without touching my shoulder or running her fingers through my hair. She also never forgets to give me a kiss and to greet me after being apart. She's hurt and most likely mad at my leaving last night. I deserve it, though.

I stay put in my chair as Lucy closes the bedroom door softly, and before long, I hear the shower running. Normally, I'd join her, but her shutting the door was a clear sign that I'm not wanted. I respect her wishes and continue waiting. A few minutes after the shower shuts off, Lucy emerges from the bedroom. She's wearing her sleep t-shirt and shorts with the puppies on them and is combing out her wet hair. I maintain my silence but continue to watch her every move. Taking a

seat on the loveseat, she finally meets my eyes and speaks in a low but serious tone.

“No matter what’s hiding in your past, nothing can make me stop loving you. If you need to fix something, I’m here to help if you want or need it. I can deal with anything as long as I know I have you. If you need me to quit asking about things, I can do that too. What I can’t do is continue being lied to. I need you to understand that all I’m asking for is to have you in my life, no more lies, and please, Chubs, no more walking out and leaving me alone like last night. That hurt more than anything. I’m not asking you to tell me all your secrets if you don’t want to. If I ask something that you don’t want to answer, then say that, but please don’t lie to me. If you can do those few things, I’ll always be yours for as long as you want me. If you can’t, I need you to tell me that now.”

Thinking over her words, I know I’m cornered. Lose her tonight or in the very near future. Either way, I’m still going to be lying to her. There’s only so much I can say to her, but in the end, it’s all going to hurt her.

“I love you more than anything in this world, Lucy. Nothing compares to how I feel about you. I can’t, won’t, talk about my past or family, though. That’s for your safety and theirs. Under no circumstances do I want you to help in any way with this thing with the Feds. That’s why I haven’t talked about why they’re coming at me after all these years. I don’t want you to get involved. I need you to stay out of that. You nearly died the last time you tried to save me, and I can’t ever go through that again. Promise me you won’t get involved,” I insist.

“Promise me that after they leave, we’re going to start on our plans for our wedding, family, and house,” she returns with a raised eyebrow.

“I need that promise,” I insist while trying to dodge her demand.

“So do I,” she responds with a slight tilt of her head.

Thinking over her words, I reply carefully, “The Feds are only a part of the problem. I have other issues that have to be resolved before I can make that promise.”

“So, you talking about buying the land from Vex and making plans about building a home there was what? A half-lie to me? An attempt to placate me or give me the impression you’re not working on an exit plan?” Lucy asks with a bite to her voice.

I groan miserably and rub my hands down my face. Taking a deep breath, I answer the best I can.

“Not completely. I want a home with you so much that sometimes I forget that I have other obligations too. I get ahead of myself, and it’s not fair to you. You have every right to be upset and concerned about what’s happening with me, with us. I have lied to you, to everyone, but I haven’t felt like I had a choice. I’m sorry for that, but I can’t change it either. I don’t want to lie to you again, so no, I can’t give you that promise. I’m sorry.”

Lucy stays silent for so long I start to think she’s done talking. Staring deep into my eyes, I see the flicker of pain in hers before she masks it. Standing, she walks into the bedroom, and I slump in my chair, feeling defeated. Moments later, Lucy reappears, but instead of holding the brush, she’s dressed again and pulling her suitcase behind her. Sitting upright in alarm, I open my mouth to speak when her empty hand shoots into the air, palm facing me. I close my mouth and wait for the world to fall out beneath me.

“I’ve tried to be understanding and supportive. I’ve waited, hoping whatever was wrong would resolve itself, and we could go back to being Lucy and Chubs. It’s apparent that’s not going to happen anytime soon. I’m going to make this easy for you, Chubs. I’ll stay with my family until we leave on our trip. That way, you won’t have to feel the need to lie again. I won’t call or text you while we’re gone, and that should give you enough time to rethink that promise. When I get back, we can talk again. If you decide you don’t want to fix this, I’ll pick up my things and get gone.”

With those words, without a hug or kiss goodbye, Lucy walks out, and the world disappears beneath me.

Chapter 4

Lucy

Heart shattering, I walk into my dad's office. When he sees me, he wordlessly stands and walks toward me. Cupping my face, he raises it until we meet eyes. After a moment, he releases my face, then wraps his arms around me, and pulls me to his chest. I wrap my arms around him and finally allow the tears to fall. Resting his cheek on the top of my head, he gently rocks us back and forth while weathering the storm. When the tears start to slow, my dad speaks for the first time since my arrival.

"I know Chubs is the cause of this because nothing else can knock down your barriers. So, here is my father's plan for how we're going to handle it. Tonight, we get drunk. Off our asses drunk. Tomorrow, we find a quiet, peaceful place to bury his body while I come up with a plan as to how he's going to suffer before death claims him."

I can't stop the small, wet giggle that escapes as my dad gives me another hard hug before letting go and stepping back. He reaches down and grabs a tissue off an end table before handing it to me. I wipe the tears off my face before blowing my nose. Tossing the tissue into a garbage can, I turn back to my father.

"I don't want him dead, Daddy."

"You have a kind heart, Lucy, but I must insist. He hurt my daughter, and he had been warned about the consequences if he ever did that," he answers with a small smile.

"I walked out on him tonight. I never thought I'd ever do that," I say with a small snuffle.

"Out of anger or to protect your heart?" my dad, the governor of Colorado, asks.

"Both. Angry because he's not being truthful with me. Angry because he's my whole world, but I no longer feel like I'm the

same for him. Trying to protect my heart by leaving him before he leaves me, I guess,” I answer, being as truthful as I can.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with him, Lucy, and that man loves you like a father hopes his daughter is loved.”

“He loves me, Daddy. I know that. Maybe just not enough to make me his first priority like I’ve made him mine. Maybe I’m just being too demanding. Maybe I need more from him than is fair. I don’t know, Dad. I’m hoping this time apart will help us figure out how to go forward.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Just be my dad,” I answer sincerely.

“Always, my little Lucy. Now, let’s take a break from thinking and go get our drunk on. We have plenty of time to figure everything else out later.”

Walking into the kitchen, I see my mom sitting at the island, wine glass in hand. My sister Lisa is pulling a pan out of the oven and then turns toward Dad and me. Spotting us, she drops the pan, and I watch as tater tots fly everywhere. Assuming the Lucy curse has just struck again, I open my mouth to apologize, but Lisa cuts me off.

“I’m helping Dad bury him. I swear to God!” she shouts as she charges toward me.

“Lisa, I...” I start to explain just as she reaches me.

Lisa grabs both of my arms and hauls me in for a tight hug. I accept the hug, knowing Lisa has my best interests at heart. When she pulls back, she smooths one thumb under my eye before bumping our foreheads together gently.

“Your face gives away that you’re hurting. You’ve been crying, and I hate that. I love Chubs. He’s family, but he’s not you. Dad and I can do the planning while you hang out with Mom if that makes it easier for you,” she says adamantly.

“No one is burying Chubs,” I tell her with a small smile. “Not yet, anyway.”

“I’m a patient person. I can wait,” she retorts while using my arm to pull me to a stool next to Mom’s. Taking a seat, I turn to my mom.

“Sorry to bust in causing a ruckus,” I say to the woman who’s always had my back.

Before speaking, Mom gently tucks a chunk of my hair behind one ear, then cups my chin.

“You’re not busting in; this is your home too and always will be. As for the ruckus, that sounds more like your dad and sister planning murder and mayhem than you. Before I ask you what you’d like to drink and if there’s anything I can do to wipe that sadness out of your eyes, I need to ask them one thing. When and where? Okay, now that they know I’m joining their plans for mayhem, do you want wine, my darling girl?”

Have I ever mentioned how lucky I am for being born into this family?

Leaning forward, I brush a light kiss on her cheek. Mom puts her hand against the back of my head and holds me there for a few extra beats before letting go. Leaning back, I answer her with a nod. I’ll start with wine, but this night may call for stronger stuff before it ends.



Waking up the next morning in my childhood room, I slowly stretch. Relaxing back into my pillows, I realize I don’t have a hangover. Since I seldom drink, I usually end up with a headache but not today. I can probably thank my dad for that since I’m sure he mixed my drinks with very little alcohol as he’s done in the past. He also insisted that Lisa and I each take two ibuprofen with a complete bottle of water before bed. I’m also grateful that no one pushed for details last night because they know I’ll talk when I’m ready.

I’m startled into sitting upright when my bedroom door suddenly flies open. My heart rate settles back to normal when I realize it’s only Lisa being Lisa again. In pajamas covered in

llamas, she runs full speed at me before jumping high to land on the bed next to me. The bed bounces, and I'm nearly tossed out of it, but Lisa grabs my arm before that happens. Flopping onto her back next to me, she tosses a sassy grin at me.

"How old are you?" I ask dryly.

"I'll never be so old that I stop tormenting my little sister," she replies with a snort.

"Pain in the ass," I state with a sigh.

"You love me anyway," she insists.

"Only because Mom and Dad make me," I fib but say it in a serious voice.

"You keep lying to me, I'm going to pin you down. You won't like me doing that," she threatens.

As kids, she would pin me by sitting on my stomach with her knees holding my arms tight to my sides. Then she would lean over my face, spitball threatening to fall, and I'd squeal in terror. I'd promise whatever it was she wanted me to agree with, and she'd suck the spitball back into her mouth with a grin. She was a demon child. She always won, and I always hated that she wasn't as tiny as me. I'm still way smaller than her, but now I have a secret weapon she's unaware of. My secret weapon is named Cash.

Rolling quickly, I put her into a headlock, then wrapped my legs around hers, immobilizing her.

Surprised, Lisa tries to get free but doesn't succeed. After a minute of struggling and making no progress, she relaxes. I grin and then whisper-shout in her ear, "Mom and Dad adopted you but couldn't take you back because the pound had a policy of no takebacks, no returns. You bought it, you keep it! Then they had me and insisted that I at least pretend to love you! It's been horrible, and I'm glad the truth is finally out there!"

Leaning my head down slightly, I swipe my tongue across her cheek while she squeals in disgust. Years of being tormented,

and I finally get some revenge. Thank you, Cash.

“Girls! What in the world?” Mom chides as she enters my room.

“Mom! She licked my face!” Lisa shouts as she rattles like a third-grader. I guess that pretty much answers my question about how old she is.

“I’m guessing payback for all the times you sat on her,” Mom replies as she sits on the edge of my bed.

Mom stares at me with one raised eyebrow. I stare back for several seconds before asking in disgust, “Do I have to let her up?”

Before Mom can answer, the entire bed drops to the floor with a crash. Stunned, my hold on Lisa releases, and she scrambles away. Mom simply repositions herself a little further from the edge and smiles serenely.

Leaning over the edge of the bed, I see the broken slats of wood that used to support the bed springs and mattress.

“I should have had this bed replaced years ago. We’ll order a new one today. Get moving, ladies. Breakfast will be ready in five minutes,” Mom announces before squeezing my kneecap, knowing it will make me squeal then she leaves the room.

“Brat,” Lisa tosses over her shoulder as she heads for my door.

“Snitch,” I holler back as I climb off the broken bed.



Me: Sorry Pips but I won't be in today.

Pippa: No worries. Thanks for all the help this week. Hope you have a fun trip.

Me: You're welcome. Remind Craig that him and I have a lunch date when I get back. I haven't forgotten.

Pippa: I will but there's no way he'll forget. He loves his lunch dates with you!

I tuck my phone into my back pocket as Mom comes into the room. Walking straight to me, she looks my face over carefully. I know she notices the slight swelling around my eyes from the crying jag I had, but she doesn't mention it. Instead, she gives my forehead a brief kiss before taking a seat in her favorite chair. With far less grace, I flop down on a loveseat and sigh.

"Where's Lisa?" I ask.

"She's in the kitchen on the phone and pouring iced tea for us. Said she'll bring them in when she's off the phone."

"That sounds good," I murmur while staring out the nearest window.

"Things will work out how they're supposed to, Lucy. Might be how you want them to, might not be, but either way, you'll get through it. You're a fighter, a survivor. You always have your family to lean on, but you also have that club. Chubs might be the club member, but you have earned their loyalty and respect just as much as he has. Bailey loves you like a sister. Axel, that overgrown man-child, feels the same way. I don't always understand his type of craziness, but I know his loyalty to you runs deep. As your mother, that means way more to me than his quirks. The kids see you as their aunt, especially little Alex and Craig. If things don't work out for you and Chubs, you're not losing them too. They won't allow it. I promise you that," Mom says with firmness in her tone.

I nod slowly then meet her eyes.

"I'm not afraid of them cutting me out. I'm afraid that I'll pull away from them."

"Because it would be painful to be around them if Chubs is there too," she states knowingly.

"Yeah, but then I think of not having Bailey as my best friend anymore. How that would gut me too. Or spending time with Craig and the rest of the kids. How much I'd miss working with Pippa or laughing over Tessie's latest driving lesson and who it traumatized."

“You’re getting way ahead of yourself. Quit thinking about all of it as one big crisis and take things one day, one problem, at a time. This may be just a bump in the road, honey. All couples have them, and maybe it’s just your turn,” Mom advises.

I nod in agreement, even though I know it’s more than a bump.

Lisa walks into the room, carefully carrying three glasses, and I hold my breath until she sets them down on the coffee table. Grinning, she throws up the victory sign.

“What is it Mac calls the weird things that happen when you’re around?” Lisa questions while taking a seat next to me.

“Being Lucy’d,” I answer while Lisa hoots in laughter.

“You’re a force of nature, Lucy. That’s something to be proud of,” Dad says as he enters the room and takes a seat near Mom.

“Dad! Will you ever admit that the universe revolts—” Lisa starts her old joke before Dad cuts her off.

“Coincidences. Force of nature. Magnetic pull. No idea why things seem to happen near Lucy, but I do know she’s not to blame for any of it,” he insists for the thousandth time.

“Jinxed. Cursed. Snakebitten. Catastrophic,” Lisa counters with a saucy grin at Dad’s sigh.

Having heard enough, I pull the throw pillow from behind my back and smack Lisa in the face with it. Lisa grabs for the pillow, but Dad snatches it away from me first.

“Is this the behavior we can expect for the whole trip?” Mom asks in a resigned tone.

“Yes,” Dad, Lisa, and I answer at the same time.

The universe might revolt around me sometimes, but fate was kind when she granted me this family.

Chapter 5

Chubs

After Lucy walks out, I don't even bother going to bed. Sitting in front of the window, I stare out, not seeing a thing. As I've been doing for months, I run every scenario through my head again, trying to find a different solution. When dawn breaks, I admit that there isn't a perfect answer for this problem.

Sighing, I stand and start my day of finalizing my plans.

My phone's been blowing up for hours now, and I've ignored every call, text, and voicemail. There will be a price to pay at some point, but that's so far down my list of concerns it's not even a blip on my radar.

Pulling into the driveway of my next stop, I shut off my bike, pull the envelope of cash from my saddlebag, and approach the house. Using my key, I open the door and walk straight to the table. Setting the envelope on it, I take a moment to look around at a home that has become a second home to me.

Double-checking that the directions to the car lot that I wrote on the envelope are easy to follow, I walk out and lock the door behind me. Another loose end completed.

Straddling my bike, I pull my phone out and flip through the texts.

Axel: You missed Church. Where are you?

Pooh: Prez is getting pissed. Call in or get here soon, brother.

Trigger: Where the fuck are you? Where you're NOT is at WORK or the clubhouse! I'm going to fuck you up this time!

Petey: Not cool, Chubs. Check in.

Ava: You skipped breakfast! WTF Chubs?

Pippa: This is Craig. Either hide good or call. Gunner is getting that look. Even Assman is pissed.

I smile at Craig's text. Not because Gunner or Axel is pissed, but because Craig obviously figured out Pippa's latest

passcode again. It's been an ongoing battle for her, and she should just give it up and buy him his own phone. He's smarter than any of the adults realize, and it's not going to end well for them for that reason. I see Rex, our tech genius, having to reset Pippa's phone. Craig will change her passcode again, and she'll think she simply forgot it. Again.

Heart aching, I note that not one of the dozens of texts is from Lucy. I ignore the rest of the texts and send one of my own.

Me: Money's on the table.

The response is immediate and exactly what I expected it to be. The car I chose will be tucked away, loaded, and waiting for me by evening.

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I fire up my bike.



I have one last thing to do, and this one hurts. I wait until the auto shop is closed, and I know Trigger is gone, before going there. Behind the shop is a storage barn, and I pull up to it, dismount, open the door, and walk inside. Walking to the corner, I pull the tarp off of my trike and run my hand along the tank lovingly. With a sigh, I recover it, say my goodbye, and walk away.

Immediately after I found the car I was going to purchase, I tucked my trike away in storage. I started riding my old bike again because I knew I'd have to leave a bike abandoned on the road. I couldn't do that to my trike because it was such a part of my and Lucy's life together. While I love my old bike too, I won't feel as bad leaving it behind, especially knowing that's where one of the men placed the tracking device. Lucy's gone, my trike is safe, and now I must find food.

Sitting at the back of the room, I eat my meal and down my beer in silence. I avoid making eye contact with anyone, and no face is familiar to me here. I go completely unnoticed. After eating and receiving an order to go, I slip out a side door and make my way to the hotel. It's shoddy, inside and out,

with sketchy as hell shit going down all around it, but no one will find me here. No club members or Feds, and I need sleep.

Come morning, I ride off as the sun is rising. I soon find myself parked along the highway near Denver International Airport. Checking the time, I turn my gaze to the sky and watch a smaller, private plane gain altitude rapidly. I watch it until it disappears out of sight. With a hollow feeling in my stomach, I ride away.

I have a productive day, but I'm numb throughout it. I put myself on autopilot and just get through it without much thought. Stopping my bike behind a very questionably run strip club, I send a text. Within a few minutes, the back door opens, and a large, barrel-chested man steps through. Without a word, he holds out a piece of paper to me, and I take it. I give him a nod of thanks, and he disappears back inside. Good people can work in bad places, and he just proved it. This paper is worth more than any price that can be put on it, and I won't forget his help. This is the information that Gunner's searching for and may be the one thing that saves me a beating at that man's hands for ignoring his calls. While I would truly love to be a part of The Devil's Angels and Morales family's plans, I can't. Instead, like the snake I feel I'm becoming, I'm going to use it as a distraction for my own exit. Yeah. I've sunk to a new low.



On the ride to Pigeon and Horse's house, I work hard at hyping myself up for the next few days. By the time I got off my bike, I have a smile on my face, and my acting skills sharpened. I have to be the Chubs they're used to and expect, or I may find myself locked in the basement at the clubhouse. Acting normal is the only way they won't lock me down.

Somehow, I survive my club President's anger, mostly due to having the information he needed and because he has more serious things to handle. I'm smart enough to realize that out of sight, out of mind is my best strategy, and quickly volunteer

to be a ranch hand. It doesn't save me from one hell of an ass-chewing from my Vice President, Axel, though.

“Want to explain why Bailey is mad at you?” he asks sarcastically.

“Lucy and I had an argument. That's all.”

“That's not all. Lucy and you don't argue. Ever. And Bailey wouldn't be mad at you over a simple argument,” he retorts angrily while crossing his massive arms over his chest.

He knows I'm dodging the truth, and it's made him an unhappy biker. It's disconcerting to see Axel mad. I'm not sure how to handle him this way since it happens so seldom and never at me.

“With everything going on lately, we've had some added pressures. We'll be fine, brother.”

“You're important to me, Chubs, but so is Lucy. You're my club brother, but she's the closest thing Bailey has to a sister. As your VP, I have to side with you if there's a split. But—and it's a big one—I'll make you regret every bad decision you've ever made if those decisions hurt Lucy in any way. Also, the next time I call or text you and you blow me off, we're heading for the ring. Our Prez would already be thumping you around if he didn't have so many spinning plates at the moment. Club rules apply to all of us, even you. Also, out of loyalty to you, may I suggest you avoid Trigger at all costs?”

With that, another one of the people I love most walks away angry at me. Just like it was with Lucy, I realize those may have been our last words ever spoken to each other.

Shaking off the guilt, I follow Pigeon and Ivy to his truck. I spend the next few days helping at Ivy's ranch and acting like the Chubs everyone is used to. I flash smiles, make jokes, and even wrestle Horse over food. The day finally comes for me to say goodbye to the life I came to love and return to the one I never wanted.

Chapter 6

Lucy

As our plane banks to the side after takeoff, I swear I see a lone biker parked outside of the airport. My heart clenches, and I know it's Chubs watching our plane leave his universe. It's painful to even draw breath, so I don't bother trying until reflex kicks in. Regret for not spending that last night with him hits hard, but I refuse to accept all the blame.

When I can no longer see the biker, I lean my head back on the headrest and close my eyes. Concentrating on breathing one breath in, holding for three seconds, and then releasing it slowly, I'm unaware of the concerned eyes aimed in my direction. I stay deathly still until our flight attendant asks about my drink preference.

"Coke, please."

I receive my drink and turn to see Lisa watching me closely.

"I'm okay, Sis. Really. I'm going to shove all things Lucy and Chubs into a box and forget about them for the next week. I just want—need—to spend time with Dad, sightsee with, and do battle with you. I have a few more moves I haven't used on you yet," I say with a small, forced grin.

Lisa continues to study my face for a few more beats before going along with my play.

"Which one of those gorgeous, tatted bikers do I have to thank for teaching you skills to use against me?" she asks.

"Mostly Cash, but Axel, Pooh, and Vex have all worked with me before too. They're big on the women having some self-defense abilities. You should come to the gym and take some classes with me," I explain.

"Cash? The godlike Viking man? Sign me up," she orders.

"I thought for sure you'd insist on Vex. He's the pretty one but doesn't like being called that. Said he's tired of people asking

if he has a dick. By people, he means Axel and Craig,” I say with a small laugh.

“Can you imagine if Craig were Axel’s son? I would pity Bailey so much, but her life would never be boring,” Lisa declares with a snort.

“Not to interrupt, but do you think the guys would let me come to the gym for classes too?” Mom asks from across the aisle.

“Absolutely they would. They’ve designed several levels of classes just for women now. I didn’t know you were interested in self-defense, though,” I answer.

“With all they do for New Horizons and the women there, I have to admit I’m very impressed with them. The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve realized that any training, any knowledge, is never a waste of time learning. Hopefully, it’s never needed, but if it ever is, I should be prepared. Could us three ladies take the classes together?” Mom questions.

“That’s a great idea, Mom. Count me in,” Lisa adds.

“I’ll set it up when we get back,” I respond, and I realize I like the idea of my mom and sister taking their own safety seriously.

“Lord help me,” Dad mutters while flipping through a folder of official-looking papers.



A few mornings after we arrived in Washington, D.C., I awake suddenly, panting for air. I don’t know what woke me, but I feel very unsettled. I listen for any unusual sounds before lifting my head and looking around the room. Nothing is out of the ordinary, but I’ve learned to trust gut instincts. Climbing out of bed, I pad around the room, checking door locks and windows. Everything is secure, and nothing is out of place, and yet the bad feeling persists. Sitting on the bed, I grab my phone and look to see if I have any texts. There’s one.

Chubs: I love you, always will, and I’m so sorry for not being all that you deserve. I don’t expect or hope for your

forgiveness but one day I hope you'll understand why I made the decisions I made. I wish you all the happiness possible because you deserve only the best. I love you, will to my dying breath, and beyond.

I reread the text several times, but the words don't change. Chubs, my heart and soul, just told me goodbye. Instantly, I know he's left not only me but Denver and The Devil's Angels behind. Setting my phone down, I lay across the bed, then slowly wrap myself in the comforter. I force my mind to go blank and refuse the tears that threaten to fall. I simply exist for a few hours before the door that connects Lisa's room to mine opens.

When Lisa sits next to my hip, I move an arm enough to pick up my phone, open it to Chubs' text and hand it to her. After a silent moment, my sister sets my phone down, lifts the edge of the comforter, and settles against my back. Wrapping her arms around me, we stay cocooned from the world for a long time.



“I can have him found if you give me all the information you know about him,” Dad insists for the second time.

“I won't let you get involved, Dad. He's made choices, right or wrong, but they were his to make. There're things about his past you don't know and, because of your position, can't know. Please don't let his past ruin your future too,” I say in a weary voice.

“Do you know more than he thinks you do?” my dad questions while turning away from the window to face me.

I hear the hint of accusation in his tone. Dad knows his daughters well. I nod my head once, then tilt my chin in a slightly defiant way. Instantly, Dad's hands land on his hips, and he frowns.

“You nearly died once protecting this man. Please, for all that is holy, promise me you won't do that again!” Dad says in a raised, alarmed voice.

“Don’t shout, Gordon,” Mom insists before turning to me.
“What do you need, Lucy? Do you want to fly home today? Lisa and I can come with you. Do you want to move out of the apartment and come back home? Whatever you decide, you have us to help.”

Thinking it over, I answer with the last bit of energy I can muster today.

“No, I want to stay here. I need a little distance from Denver and the Angels right now. Ava’s going to lose her shit, probably break things, and I would like to avoid that scene for a few days. I’ll get interrogated by club members too, and I’m not sure I’m ready to face it yet. I have decisions to make but not today. Today, I just want to be sad. Tomorrow, I’ll move on to anger.”



True to my word, I woke up the next morning angry. I skipped right past the first stage of grief, denial, and moved into the pissed-off-at-the-world angry phase. Maybe I didn’t completely skip denial because the last several months, I’ve been denying what was right before me. Chubs was going to move on, and I wasn’t going to be a part of his future. Fuck him.

I climb out of bed and head for the bathroom. Taking a long, hot shower does nothing to calm my emotions, though. Going through my morning routine, I hear Lisa call my name. Stepping out of the bathroom, I notice she’s ready for the day.

“What?” I bite out and then try to rein in my temper.

“Well, good morning to you too, Sunshine. I ordered us breakfast. Mom will be here in a few minutes to eat with us. Dad is in meetings all day, so he’s left already.”

“Fine,” I snap before taking a deep breath and giving her an apologetic look.

“Here’s the deal, little sister. I get that you’re hurting, and I understand what you’ve lost. I too loved that man, but mostly because I thought he was perfect for you. Turns out, I was

wrong about that, and he'll have to answer for it someday. Until then, I'm here for you, no matter what. You can spit fire, cuss like a sailor, kick things, whatever you need to do to feel better and heal your heart, and I'll still be standing next to you. If you want to move back to Mom and Dad's home, I'll come over every day to be whatever you need. If you want to live at the Governor's Mansion instead, I'll hate it, but I'll come there. I personally would love it more, though, if you moved into my condo, and we could terrorize the world together again. So, you be as angry as you need to be, and I'll be angry beside you. Deal?"

Nodding my head, I walk across the room and throw my arms around my sister. She does the same, and we stay standing there together until there's a knock on the door. Pulling away, Lisa walks to the door and opens it to find our mom. Mom looks at Lisa, then me, and enters my room. She makes her way to me before pulling me in for a hug. Lisa joins us, and we three Douglas women stand together, as one, before taking on the day.

Chapter 7

Chubs

I leave Denver in the middle of the night, taking very little with me. I ride one direction, then another, until I'm positive I'm not being followed. Once I hit the highway, I twist the throttle. Finding the car exactly where I wanted it, I park my bike, smash my cell phone, and stow the handgun I usually carry in the saddlebags. Retrieving the car keys, I carefully place my Devil's Angels cut into the trunk next to the items that were left in it for me. Working quickly, I close the trunk, move the car onto the pavement before brushing away its tire tracks. To give myself the best head start, I leave a confusing scene on purpose. Was I taken by the Feds, or did I leave on my own? I know they'll launch a search, and Rex won't rest until he gets answers, so every minute counts. As I drive off, I can't help but look in the mirror at my bike left on a lonely highway. The need, desire to turn back hits hard, but I ignore it.

I drive west for several hours before pulling into a deserted rest stop. I grab the backpack sitting on the seat next to me and exit the car. The sun's not up yet as I make my way inside the building. Setting the backpack on the countertop, I pull the items I need from it.

I glance up and am almost startled by the man I see in the mirror. Tired, blank eyes stare back at me as I plug in the clippers. Getting to work, I shave my curls off, leaving my hair a scant inch in length. Lately, I had let my scruff grow into a short but messy beard. That gets shaved off next, leaving my face completely bare for the first time in a long time. Cleaning up the mess I made, I splash cold water on my face.

It takes a few attempts, but eventually, I get the blue contacts placed in my eyes, which are now burning like hell. Blinking rapidly, I nearly make myself dizzy, waiting for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I change my clothes. Instead of blue

jeans, t-shirt, and a cut, I'm nearly unrecognizable in a polo shirt, slacks, and nice shoes. I miss my boots instantly. Cussing under my breath, I pack everything away again and walk out.

Placing a pair of sunglasses on my face, I note the sun is breaking free of the horizon. Tossing the backpack into the backseat, I notice a cooler behind the driver's seat. I almost smile, knowing that it's going to contain my favorite thing. Next to the cooler sits a duffle bag. Opening it, I'm shocked but pleased to find several useful items. A road atlas, binoculars, extra ammo, a couple different types of knives, a small toolbox with a few basic tools, an envelope of cash totaling \$500, all in small bills, candy bars, licorice, and bags of gummi bears. All useful and appreciated gifts.

Pulling out of the rest area, I open the cooler one-handed. I pull out a Coke, then a sandwich, as I push down on the accelerator. A few more hours, and I turn north.

I continue my drive, trying to keep my mind off what I left behind and instead focusing on what I'm heading toward. I stop only when necessary and keep as separated from people as possible. When I get too tired to continue, I find another rest area and park near the back of the lot. I recline the seat as best as I can, pull a jacket over myself, and try to sleep.

When I wake, I instantly realize my mistake. I will never forget to remove those contacts again as I'm desperately trying to open my eyes that seem to have been glued shut. Rubbing my eyes only makes the situation worse. Tears running down my face, I finally get my eyes open and find a face pressed against my car window. Instinctively, I slam my body backward and shout in surprise.

The face disappears at the same time I realize it's not a threat to me but a young boy. His face reappears, this time with a wide smile that's missing a few teeth.

"Peek-a-boo!" he shouts, then giggles at himself before ducking down out of sight again.

Body relaxing, I wait for him to reappear. I turn the key far enough to slide the window down and place my face so it's close to the moving glass. When he pops back up, I shout, "Boo!"

Not expecting our faces to be nose to nose, he squeals and bounces back a step, wide-eyed.

"You scared me," he accuses.

"You scared me," I return.

"Why are you crying?" he asks.

"Not crying. Sore eyes. Do you have parents here with you?" I ask while looking around the area where I'm parked.

"Yeah, my mom. She's inside changing my brother's diaper. He pooped."

"Aren't you supposed to be with her?"

"Yeah, but he stinks, so I came outside."

"You shouldn't have left your mom," I tell him in a stern voice. "What if she needs help? You should stay with her to help and protect her if she needs it. And you should never talk to strangers when she's not there."

I watch as he fidgets and thinks over my words.

"I better go check on her," he states before breaking into a trot toward the restrooms.

Starting the car, I drive slowly through the parking lot so I can keep the boy in sight. When he enters the building, I pull off to the side and wait. A few minutes pass before a young woman exits the building, carrying a diaper bag over her shoulder, an infant seat in one hand, and the other hand gripping that of the young boy. He smiles and waves when he spots me, but the mom doesn't notice. Once they're all safely in their car and pulling out, I park and use the facilities before hitting the road again. The boy reminded me of Craig and Luke, and a pain hits my chest at all I'm going to miss out on.



At the end of another long day of driving, I stop at a convenience store. Wearing my sunglasses and avoiding eye contact, I buy food, drinks, and a burner cellphone. I drive for another few hours before finding a run-down, off-the-beaten-path hotel. Gathering my things, I rent a room and make my way to it.

I take a shower, eat, and then pull out the phone. Once I have it powered up, I make a call. When I hear the voice on the other end, time freezes. It takes me a few seconds to speak, knowing the bomb that's about to get dropped.

"Brother," I say in a low gravelly tone due to the emotion gripping my body.

"What? Who is this?" my younger brother, Alessandro, barks after a short pause.

"It's me. Are you alone, and can you talk?" I ask quickly, worrying he might hang up on me, thinking this is a prank call.

I wait, not saying anything further, and the silence drags on. Finally, he answers.

"No. I'll call when I can."

The call ends abruptly, and I breathe deeply for a few minutes. I haven't heard that voice in many years, and I wasn't well enough prepared for how it would affect me. I can only imagine how he must be feeling about hearing mine as well. It's not often a dead man calls his brother several years after he died.

Chapter 8

Lucy

With effort, I get a lock on my emotions and put a bland look on my face. I follow Mom and Lisa while we explore Washington, D.C., dine out, and shop. I ignore the concerned looks from my family and go through the motions. Other than Lisa, Mom, and Dad, no one would ever guess that I'm completely dead inside. I smile when it's appropriate and feign interest in things I could give two shits about. The only emotion I actually feel is anger, and I refuse to let it show.

On our last night in D.C., we are attending a formal dinner party given in honor of my dad and his colleagues. I've been dreading it the whole trip, and Dad has insisted several times I don't have to attend, but I'm going anyway. I had promised to before we left Denver, and I'm not backing out now.

I put the finishing touches on my makeup and stand just as Lisa enters my room.

"Holy shit! You look fabulous!" Lisa shouts.

I give Lisa a small curtsy that makes her laugh before returning the compliment.

"You look fabulous too."

"Let's go kick some D.C. ass," she declares before sliding her arm through mine and pulling me toward the door.

Stepping into the elevator, I ignore the two well-dressed men standing at the back. I especially ignore the once-over they give us. When the door slides shut, one of them speaks.

"Which floor, ladies?"

I don't answer but reach over and hit the button for the lobby.

"Going somewhere special?" a different deep voice asks.

I, again, don't answer or look over my shoulder, but Lisa does.

"To a dinner," she answers politely.

“And after this dinner, what then? Interested in meeting in the lobby for a drink, maybe?” the voice questions.

The door slides open at that moment, and I start to step out when a hand lands lightly on my elbow. Looking down, I see it’s a man’s hand and not that of my sister. I pull my arm away and glance up at the smiling man.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you, but I didn’t want you ladies to walk off without an answer,” he says while placing his hands in his suit pockets.

“No, thank you,” I respond in a flat tone.

“We have plans,” Lisa adds.

As we take a few steps away from the elevator, the men follow and then step in front of us. Hands up in a placating manner, smiling charmingly, the dark-haired one says, “Come on, ladies. One drink. That’s all we’re asking for.”

I feel my anger start to bubble up, but I bite back on it and again say, “No, thank you.”

I step to the side, me now being the one pulling Lisa along, and start to pass when they again block our way. I stop, sigh, and look up to make eye contact.

“Please move, and please take the word no as our final answer.”

“But, ladies—” he starts before I cut him off.

“Get out of our way before I put my heel through your scrotum,” I hiss.

A loud, unladylike snort escapes Lisa. Whether her laugh was at my words or the shocked look on their faces, I don’t know which. I brush past them, Lisa laughing, somewhat hysterically, beside me when I notice my parents only a few feet away. Mom’s eyebrows are at her hairline, but my dad’s are lowered as he glowers at the men.

“Let’s go, Daddy,” I order as I continue toward the exit.

Once seated in the limousine, I primly adjust my dress then look at my mother.

“Sorry you had to hear that,” I mutter.

“I’m not. That was perfect. Every mother wants to raise daughters that will stand up for themselves, and I have. My life is now complete,” she responds in a calm voice before turning to look out her window with a small, smug smile on her mouth.

I pretend not to hear her small laugh, and I continue pretending when it sets Lisa off again. Looking at my father, I’m humbled by the pride shining in his eyes.



“This party blows ass,” Lisa says while leaning against the balcony railing next to me.

“They all do. I don’t know how our parents have done these things for so many years.”

“They’re better people than we are, I guess,” Lisa states.

I sat quietly throughout dinner and let my family members carry the conversation. I answered the few questions I was asked and kept a small smile plastered on my face. I was the picture of decorum, and luckily, nothing catastrophic has occurred. I no longer consider a tray or a plate crashing to the floor as catastrophic, though. After dinner, when the mingling started, I took a glass of champagne off a tray and made my way to the balcony. I’ll never take more than a tiny sip or two from my glass, but it keeps the waitstaff from approaching. Lisa found me shortly after, and we’ve been people-watching ever since.

“Not to be mean, but that dress Senator Pullman’s wife is wearing might explode before the night is over,” Lisa muses.

“She somehow always fits 20 pounds of potatoes in a 5-pound sack and survives the night,” I reply.

“True. Maybe her dressmaker uses fishing line instead of thread.”

“If I wore that dress, my girls would have ended up on my plate during the second course,” I say.

“Same.”

My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my clutch to see I have a text from Bailey.

Bailey: Gunner’s picking you up from the airport tomorrow. Have him drop you at my house.

I place my phone back in my clutch without answering.

“Have you told anyone with the club that Chubs texted you?” Lisa asks in a subdued voice. “Have you asked any of them if he left town?”

“No, and I’m not going to. I’ll get questioned to death by everyone, but I’m not getting involved. It was his choice to leave, and if he wanted them to know anything, he’d have told them. He’s gone. I can feel it, and the text was his goodbye to me.”

“Honey, they’ll be worried to death. They won’t know if he left by choice or not,” Lisa says.

“He chose it that way, not me. Please don’t get involved either. He has his reasons, even if I don’t agree with how he’s doing things. That club loves him, and he decided to turn his back on them too.”

Lisa doesn’t respond, but she does lean her shoulder against mine in silent support. Before she even opens her mouth to speak, I somehow know what’s she’s about to ask.

“How much digging into his past have you done, little sister?”

“Enough to know he left by choice and that he left because it’s important to him. He’s not the kind of man to leave his club and me without it being gut-wrenching for him. I’m angry beyond words, actually, but a part of me understands why he chose this path. I’m angry, though, because he didn’t have to do this alone. I guess the anger comes from knowing he placed me so low on his priority list. As stupid as it sounds, I’m jealous of the fact that I wasn’t more important to him than

why he left. Digging deep inside myself, I know that's where the hurt is coming from, and it makes me hate that part of myself. He chose this, not me, but I'm left feeling like an ass for being selfish."

"Lucy, my God, you have every right to be angry! You've given everything to that man, and he walked away from you. Be angry, be selfish. You've earned that right," Lisa argues vehemently.

"He had solid reasons for why he did it, but I'm not sure I can forgive him. For now, I'm going to embrace the anger because it helps fight off the hurt. It gives me a cushion from all the other emotions I can't handle right now," I answer quietly.

"I'll be angry with you then, and you take whatever time you need before tackling the other crap that goes along with his betrayal," Lisa advises. "But please don't let this make you self-destruct along the way."

I hear and acknowledge her words, but they don't soothe the thought that self-destructing may be my only way to avoid the crushing weight of pain coming my way.



I give my family members goodbye hugs and listen to their words of advice and encouragement before walking toward the huge, intimidating president of The Devil's Angels MC. I force a small smile on my face as I note the deep concern in his eyes. I know he feels it's his duty to break the bad news to me, and he's going to try his best to soften the blow. While others stare at the man who towers over everyone with a sense of wild stamped on him, I only see a man who loves his family and friends deeply. Gunner carries the weight of responsibility on his broad shoulders well, but I know the situation with Chubs is a heavy load even for him. When I reach him, I'm suddenly engulfed in a bear-like hug before he releases me, grabs my suitcase, and leads me toward the exit.

He finally speaks once we're seated in his huge truck and leaving the airport.

“Did you have a nice trip, Lucy?”

“Yes, it was nice to spend time with my parents and sister.”

“I’m glad to hear that, little one,” Gunner says quietly before pausing.

I know what he’s gearing up to say, but I stay quiet.

When he speaks again, his voice has deepened and gotten very serious.

“I need to talk with you about something, but before I do, I want to remind you how important you are to the club and everyone associated with it. Lucy, you are loved and respected by everyone. Every single one of us has not, nor ever will, forget what you did for Chubs, the club, the kids, and Bailey. No matter what happens in the future, you will always have the club at your back. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you, Gunner. What do you need to talk with me about?” I ask while bracing myself to hear the actual words.

Before answering me, Gunner pulls the truck into a gas station and parks off to the side. Turning to me, I watch him steel himself for what’s about to come.

“Chubs didn’t show up at Ivy’s when he was supposed to. He didn’t answer any calls or texts, so Rex tracked his bike and found it abandoned alongside a road several miles from town. We don’t even know why he was in that area. His phone was smashed, gun still in the saddlebags, and keys in the bike, but no sign of Chubs. We haven’t been able to find him anywhere,” Gunner explains while watching me closely.

“Was Rex able to get anything from his phone?” I ask carefully.

I need to know if they know about the text he sent me before he left town.

“The SIM card was broken, and nothing can be recovered from it. Rex can’t find anything of value from the phone. Did

he text or call you? Do you know anything that can help us find him?”

I hesitate to answer because the last thing I want to do is to lie to a man who has treated me so well. To a man that loves his club brother and is worried about his safety. Chubs has put me in a very awkward situation, and my anger rages to the surface. This is just another black mark I’m adding to my list of things I’m pissed at Chubs for, but I fight for control as I answer.

“No, I don’t.”

“Anything would help, Lucy. It might seem small, but—”
Gunner starts before I cut him off abruptly.

“Take me to the bakery, please.”

“I know you’re—”

“Now, Gunner. I need to be alone, okay?” I snap before slamming my teeth together and turning to face the side window.

“I’ll take you there, Lucy, but you’re not going to be alone for long. Bailey’s not going to let that happen. Take some time for yourself but know you’re not alone in this. Every one of us will help you in any way we can. We’re not giving up on finding him. We will find him. I’ll give you some space, but if you know anything that could help us with finding him, please, God, let one of us know.”

I nod curtly but keep my head turned to hide the tears his concern has brought to the surface. I know he feels the pain of Chubs’ disappearance nearly as much as I do, but he doesn’t have the guilt I’m carrying for having to lie to his face. I know this is just the beginning of having to lie to people I love because of the one I love most.

When Gunner parks his truck in the back lot of the bakery, I reach over and grip his hand tightly for a moment. He grips mine back before I pull away, open the door, and slide out. I take my suitcase from Gunner without looking at him, turn, and make my way to the back door of the bakery.

As I pull the door open, I nearly break, turn back, and rush into his arms for comfort when he says with feeling in his deep voice, “Love you, Lucy. Please don’t cut us out of your life over this. We’ll find him, and when we do, I’ll beat his ass for causing you this pain.”

Glancing back at his beautiful face, I respond in a firm, steady voice.

“I’m not losing the rest of you too. Love you, Gunner.”

With that, I enter the bakery, ignore the looks from everyone, and go straight to mine and Chubs’ apartment. Entering it, I close the door, place my back against it, and slide to the floor. I pull my knees up, wrap my arms around them, drop my head, and let the tears come.



When Bailey arrives, as expected but dreaded, I have my defenses back in place. Blank face, calm voice, but the rage is still roiling in my stomach. After a long hug, she pulls back to study my face. I know she can tell I’ve been crying, but she doesn’t mention the telltale tracks of wetness streaking my face. Instead, she asks a question I don’t have to lie to answer.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. I feel like the floor has disappeared beneath my feet, and my reason for living is gone. I don’t even know how to be okay, but it looks like I have no choice but to figure that out.”

“The club will find him. They won’t stop until they do. You know that about them. In the meantime, we’ll get you through each day, one at a time, until he’s back home. Go take a shower, get into some comfy clothes, and I’ll make us a tea,” she orders gently.

I nod and make my way to the bedroom. Walking in, I stop, and a wave of pain rolls through me when I see different items that belong to Chubs still sitting around the room. My brain knows he’s gone, but nothing in our bedroom indicates that fact. It looks exactly like it did the last time I was here, and

that's an unexpected blow. I guess I just assumed our apartment would be as devoid of him as my new life. He didn't take anything with him that I can see, and it's unsettling.

Pushing past those feelings, I leave my suitcase by the bed, gather my PJs, and hit the bathroom. I stand under the hot water until I have my emotions back under control, then step out. I go through the motions of getting ready for bed without allowing my thoughts to drift to the fact that I'll be doing that alone.

Bailey is sitting in the living room with two cups of hot tea. I pick one up and cradle it in my hands as I take a seat next to her.

"I know Gunner asked you some questions, but now that you've had time to think a little, do you know anything that could help locate him?" Bailey asks in a hushed voice.

"No, nothing. I know some Feds had been harassing him, but he never said why," I answer in a steady voice.

The lies are adding up, but I'm hopeful they'll get easier to spew at some point.

"Rex won't stop until he finds something," Bailey murmurs.

"What do the guys think? Did he leave on his own, or did he get taken?" I ask because I'm curious about how the club is leaning on this.

"It's about 50/50. A few think the Feds took him for some reason no one knows about, and the others think he left by choice. Most likely to protect you or the club from some threat. I think he left to protect us simply because it's Chubs and something he'd do."

"If he left by choice and comes back, how will the club view that?" I asked with obvious concern.

"I don't know for sure. I know the club would have to vote on a punishment if it's warranted, but what that would be, I have no clue. I don't know if it's a beatdown kind of broken rule or a stripped patch. I can ask Axel what he thinks," Bailey offers.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for the answer yet,” I mutter before taking a sip of my tea.

“I don’t think anyone has thought that far ahead yet. We just all want him found and to be okay, you know?”

I nod, indicating that I understand, but my mind is racing because I know Chubs knew the answer but chose this path anyway.

“Would you be offended if I said that I just want to be alone tonight?” I ask into the silence.

“Of course not, Lucy. I get it. I really do. I just wanted to be here if you needed me. I’ll get out of your way, but please call if you need anything. Do you want to meet for lunch tomorrow? Or come hang out at the gym with me?” Bailey asks as she stands to leave.

I stand and walk to the door with Bailey as I answer, “I don’t think so, but thank you. Maybe in a couple of days, though.”

“Fair enough. Call if you change your mind. Love you,” Bailey states before giving me a hug and walking out the door.

I lock the door behind her, place our cups into the sink, and drop onto the loveseat. Exhaustion slides over me, so I curl up on my side and try to get some sleep. After an hour passes and my mind is still too busy to sleep, I stand up and approach the bedroom again.

Flipping the overhead light on, I stare around the room. I see one of Chubs’ shirts thrown across the back of the chair and a pair of his boots sitting next to it. The top of his dresser looks like it did every single day we shared a room. Change, candy wrappers, a pair of fingernail clippers, and a photo of us together all compete for space. Next to our photo is one with all the club’s kids posing together with Mac photobombing it from behind them. Hanging from the corner of the mirror mounted above is one of Gee’s t-shirts with the words “Every Butt Needs a Good Rub” printed across it in bright purple glitter. On the other corner of the mirror are the goggles Chubs had made specially for Mac to ride his bike with him.

Looking at the closet, I see our clothes neatly hanging with a slight gap between his and mine. Mine take up over 80% of the space. A pair of battered black Chucks sit under his clothes alongside a small box filled with miscellaneous motorcycle parts, and that's it for his belongings.

Stepping into the bathroom, my eyes glide over his toothbrush and comb. Nearly every other item in view is mine or a shared item like toothpaste. It suddenly dawns on me how little he kept here and that he didn't take a single thing with him that I can tell at first glance.

His room at the clubhouse never had more than a couple changes of clothes, a few towels, and bathroom necessities. I thought that was because he didn't consider it his home, but I completely believed this apartment was the beginning of our life together. Moving throughout the apartment, I slowly come to the conclusion that maybe he never planned on a life with me. Maybe I was simply a layover for him. Someone to pass the time with until he was ready to leave. Leaving a few belongings behind is no hardship and can be easily replaced. Having a full life, planning a future, buying items together as a couple would complicate the exit. I was left behind as easily as he abandoned his property.

I shove down the sob climbing up my throat and stalk to the kitchen. Grabbing a trash bag, I start gathering his items. When they're all in the bag, minus Gee and Mac's items, I toss the framed photo of us on top and tie the bag shut. I drag it to the door and place it in the hallway. Going back to the bedroom, I strip the bed, gather the used towels, and push the overflowing laundry basket out the door to sit next to the trash bag.

I remake the bed, set out a few clean towels, and then head for the kitchen to throw out his snacks. Opening each cupboard, I find none. I should have expected that. Making another walk-through of the apartment, I find nothing left of Chubs. Nothing except a petite woman, hollow inside except for anger, determined to never allow any man to make her feel like this again.

Chapter 9

Chubs

Keeping my phone close, I wait. While I do that, I can't keep my mind from going back in time. Hearing Alessandro's voice has dragged memories to the surface that I buried deep for years. I had to do that to mentally survive all that happened when our father was arrested and our family's futures were permanently altered.

Enzo Zanetti is a bad man and makes no apologies for that. He's always felt that he had few choices in life, and he made the best ones he could at a young age. He's a tough, hardcore criminal that climbed the ranks of the Vero crime family, and he did it quickly. When he took his oath of omertà, the code of silence and honor, he was the youngest member to ever do so. He was a single man with no living family members to dissuade him from this path. From the tough streets of Chicago, he wanted to make a name for himself. He achieved his goals, but life has a way of getting messy when you least expect it to. Enzo met Giana Rossi, and that simple meeting set into motion a chain of events that have placed me in a shabby hotel, miles from where I want to be.

Enzo never planned on falling in love, getting married, or having children. He only planned to someday be the boss, the don. Upon meeting Giana, his plans changed. Being as ruthless as he was known to be, he never considered that he wouldn't be able to protect his family. Arrogant and still young enough to fear nothing, he pushed his way into Giana's life. A few short months later, they were married. Not long after that, Giana was expecting her first child. Instead of giving birth to one, she had twins.

My sister Aria and I became a team from the moment of conception. Being eight minutes older than her, I have always felt a deep sense of responsibility for my sister. A year later, our brother Alessandro was born. Three babies kept our mother busy but content with her life. Our father worked long

hours to ensure that his family would always have everything they ever wanted. I think our mother was somewhat blind to what our father did to give us that great life. That is, for a while, and then the blinders came off abruptly.

Mom finally realized, or fully acknowledged, Dad's profession when she overheard a conversation not meant for her ears. Alessandro and I were fully aware of what our father did to earn money and that we were meant to follow in his footsteps. Aware but not compliant. Dad had been slowly exposing that side of his life to his sons for years, hoping we'd take to it, yet we didn't. In fact, both of us were violently opposed, and that's the conversation our mother had walked into.

From a young age, I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and being a made man was not it. I loved school and learning, so becoming a teacher was all I'd ever wanted to be. My grades were so good I was able to skip some classes. Because of that, I was eligible to take a few college courses along with high school coursework. I explained this to my dad and told him I was taking this opportunity. In his mind, all the things his sons needed to learn could be taught by him and the streets. While proud of me and my accomplishments, this was a clear sign that I wasn't going to work for the Vero family. When Alessandro sided with me, Dad got frustrated and started shouting. Gentle, kind Giana Zanetti stormed into the room and tore into our mobster father, the man she loved more than anything. While she was a force that day, she didn't realize at the time that there were others that had more say than her. In the life my dad had chosen, a lot of our individual choices were taken away from us. There were expectations for Enzo's sons, and not even he could sway the path we were meant to follow.

When the phone rings, it startles me back into the present. Flipping it open, I hold it to my ear and wait to hear Alessandro's voice again.

"You better start explaining to me how you can make a phone call from beyond the grave," Les growls.

“I escaped from the safe house when I found out the Feds guarding me were working for the Vero family. They never meant for me to testify but be eliminated instead. Dead people can’t testify against crime families,” I answer in a calm voice though my heart is racing in my chest.

“Holy fuck, Adriano, I can’t believe I’m talking to my brother again,” Les says in an incredulous voice after a long silence.

“Same. Missed you, little brother.”

The silence between us seems charged with emotion and yet calming at the same time.

“We have so much to talk about, but I have to ask why you’ve called now. Why didn’t you call when you got away from them? Where have you been?” Les rushes through his questions before taking an audible breath of air. In a voice filled with pain, he rasps out, “You let us think you were dead.”

“The way things were going back then, you, Mom, and Aria were safer with everyone thinking I was dead. If the Vero family knew I was still alive, they would’ve used you three as leverage to get to me. Torture would have been the word of the day, and you know the methods they’d have used on you three. I’m calling now because things have changed. Federal agents found me and have been pressuring me to return to Chicago and testify for them. Not the two that were supposed to kill me, but I assume they’d show up eventually. Maybe the two new ones are dirty too. I don’t know for sure, but I knew something was up when I told them I wouldn’t testify, and yet they wouldn’t leave me alone. Why was anyone looking for a dead man anyway? They found me, so I knew others could too. So, I put out some feelers and started gathering intel,” I explain carefully.

“What have you found out?” Les asks with dread in his voice.

“The Feds realized they had some dirty agents and supposedly cleaned house. They’re also building a new case against the Vero crime family and need witnesses from the past to build a

RICO case. Dad, still being in prison, was their first choice, but he'll never talk. He'll be loyal to his death even with the deal they offered him. I don't know if anyone is aware that Dad took both of us on some of his jobs and not just me. If so, you're not safe. Have you been approached by Feds?"

"No, no one has questioned me at all. Not since the night they took you, that is," Les replies.

"Then they believe I was the only one our dad had in training. The only one who saw things they could use against the family," I say and breathe a sigh of relief, but it was premature.

"We do have a problem, though. It's with Aria. Leonardo Romano has announced that he plans on marrying her," my brother states irritably.

"Are they dating?" I ask in alarm because I remember Leo and his father. The senior Romano being a very effective hitman who puts no value on a human life.

"No, Aria has refused all dates, even his calls and texts. But he's being very persistent and hasn't let up. I even called him about it, but it did no good."

"You know how things work in that family. If they want compliance, it's either done through force, murder, or marriage. If she were married to him, no one in our family would dare to go against them because she would pay the price. Our sister would become a prisoner in her own home. Maybe they do know the Feds are working on another case. I need to think about all of this, but no matter what, we have to find a way to keep her out of his reach."

"You haven't been around your sister in a long time, Adriano. She's a force of nature and doesn't take well to interference in her life. She's still mad at me for calling Leo in her defense. She even gave Mom the silent treatment for telling me about Leo bothering her," Les says with a small laugh.

"Aria? Really? Since when has she ever been silent?" I ask in amazement while remembering how talkative she's always

been.

“Since we were told you were dead. It changed her into a person I hardly recognized,” my brother says in a solemn voice.

A pang of guilt hits me hard, but I have to push it aside. I can't change the past, and I have work to do to change our futures.

My brother and I continued talking for another hour, catching up and enjoying the ability to do so. Before disconnecting, we set a time for me to call him tomorrow. I flip the phone closed and feel true loneliness creep up on me. I'm no longer connected to The Devil's Angels or Lucy, and yet I'm not back with my blood family either. I recognized the feeling immediately because it's the same kind of loneliness I felt when I first left Chicago.

Barely 17 years old, no belongings, money, or transportation, Feds on my ass, I had few options but to run. Going back to my family was out of the question. They would be watched, and I'd only put them in danger if they were caught helping me. Same with any of my friends, so I put to use the lessons Dad had taught me. I stole what I needed and left Chicago behind me.

I can still clearly remember the fear of suddenly being on my own and being hunted. I knew the consequences of being caught, but I hadn't fully accepted the reality of my new life either. I had fought against my father wanting me to become a criminal, but I ended up becoming one just to survive. Irony at its worst. After a few weeks, I had finally accepted the fact that sometimes we don't have choices and that my survival instinct could override my morals. I vowed to be a better man as soon as I could safely become one.



Leaving the hotel early in the morning, I drive for a couple of hours without noticing much about the scenery. My mind is occupied with Lucy. I know by now she's back in Denver and probably planning my demise. No doubt Bailey's searching for the best places to dispose of human remains and Axel's

coaching both. I don't blame any of them for whatever they plan because I deserve it with the way I left.

I spot a truck stop sign and move to the right lane to catch the exit. Parking in the large lot, I pull on shades and a hat before making my way to the door. Entering, I glance around until I find a small table near the large windows. Taking a seat, I scan the parking lot and find nothing out of the ordinary.

"Hi, I'm Marsha. I'll be your server today. Can I get you something to drink while you look over the menu?" a perky brunette says, standing next to my table.

"Hi. Coffee, please."

The young lady walks off, and I turn back to the window. I watch truckers fill their semis with gas, chat between themselves, and wait for my drink. I also notice the large amount of lot lizards going from truck to truck offering their sexual services. We sometimes have to do things to survive, and it's not my place to judge them for their choices when I've made questionable ones myself. Glancing at the menu, I make my decision as Marsha drops off my coffee.

"The Lumberjack breakfast, please. Side order of American fries, extra bacon, sausages, two extra pancakes, biscuits and gravy, orange juice, and a large coffee to go," I tell Marsha.

"The Lumberjack breakfast comes with hash browns, three eggs, bacon, toast, and two pancakes, sir," the server informs me of something I already know from reading the menu. "Did you still want the side orders?"

"Yes, and please add in an extra order of toast too," I answer while holding the menu out to her.

I watch as she stares at her order pad in confusion before closing it, taking the menu, and walking off. A minute later, she reappears with my juice, another set of silverware, and glass of water. I say nothing as she sets them on the opposite side of the table from me, apparently assuming I have another person joining me.

It's not long, and Marsha's back with my to-go coffee, ketchup, jelly, and syrup. Another few minutes, and she appears with a large tray holding my breakfast on several plates. After carefully setting everything on the table, she turns with a smile and asks, "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, thank you, Marsha," I answer politely before turning to my food.

Keeping an eye on the parking lot, I devour my meal. Just as I'm finishing the last few bites, Marsha reappears. Looking at each of the empty plates, then at me, she slides the bill onto the furthest edge of the table before retreating to the kitchen. I almost snort at the look on her face. Geesh, Marsha, your hand is safe. I haven't eaten one of those yet.

I use the facilities then make my way back to my car. I leave the lot and watch carefully for a tail. Several miles later, I relax, knowing I don't have one. After a few more hours, I take an exit and make my way to a Walmart. I shop quickly, gathering snacks, drinks, a few changes of clothes, and other necessities before hitting the road again. Long after the sun has disappeared, I find another sketchy hotel and rent a room. After a quick shower, I have a few snacks before getting to work on the new me.

Opening one of the shopping bags, I pull out the hair dye. Scanning the directions, I head to the bathroom with dark brown hair and walk out a blond. Keeping my face shaved of scruff, hair and eyebrows now blond, I add a pair of black framed reading glasses and look myself over in the mirror. Wearing blue jeans, dark gray t-shirt, and black hoodie, I look like a million other guys in America. Satisfied that I'll blend in easily, I undress and flop down on the sleeping bag I had laid out on the bed. This being the same bed I sprayed a full can of Lysol on when I got here after I stripped it of all its bedding. I may be heading toward my death, but I don't want the autopsy to show I had become friendly with lice and bed bugs.

Picking up my phone, I shoot a text to my brother.

Me: Anything happen today? Can you call?

Within a minute, he answers.

Les: No, nothing. Not alone. When are you hitting town?

Me: Not for a while. Feds will be watching for me there. The club will be looking for me too so I can't leave a trail of any kind that clues them into where I'm going.

I had explained a little about the club to my brother during our previous call. I, however, had not told him about Lucy. I'm not ready to talk about her yet, and I'm certainly not ready for what Les will think of my choices.

Les: Stay safe. Love you, Drew.

Me: Be alert. Watch everything. Love you too, Les.

I flip my phone shut, but just having read his and Aria's nickname for me brings up a rush of emotion. We were so close, the three of us. Drew, Aria, and Les. I called us "The Three Musketeers" once during dinner as I refilled my plate when Aria, staring at it, corrected me.

"Maybe 'The Three Little Pigs' would be more appropriate."

I smile a little while thinking back on those innocent times. We never doubted that we'd always be together, sharing our lives. We had always said we'd either live together or buy homes close to each other. Les and I had made it very clear that Aria would never have a man in her life if we didn't think he was good enough for her. We vowed it, even though we all knew she would never be with a man that we didn't approve of anyway. Aria did her share of scaring off possible girlfriends for us too. She kept a close watch on any female eyeing either of her brothers and was not afraid to use sharp words to keep them in check. We had so many plans, and then real life stepped in and changed everything.

Chapter 10

Lucy

The world doesn't stop turning because of a broken heart, so after a few days, I go back to my normal routine. I spend the day with Pippa and Tammy at New Horizons, saying less than usual, and after a few questions, they leave me to my work. Surprising me, Tammy stops beside my desk as she's leaving the room, places a gentle hand on my chin, and brushes her lips across my cheek.

"Anything you need, honey. Anything," she whispers before releasing me and walking out the door.

I put my head down and get busy. A few hours later, Craig and Pooh walk into the office where Pippa and I are working. Craig's hands, face, and clothes are clean, and it reminds me that we have a lunch date.

Stopping next to my chair, he grasps my hand with his, then leans his head against my shoulder in silent support. I squeeze his hand before dropping a kiss on his head and say, "I'm good, little man."

Pulling back, his eyes rake over my features before he gives me a small chin lift in acknowledgment.

"We can do lunch another day, Lucy."

"Are you trying to get out of our date?" I ask in what I hope is a playful tone.

"No, but I get it if you want to pass on it for a while."

"Craig can go to lunch with me and Pippa instead, Lucy. You doing alright?" Pooh asks with concern coloring his voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Craig's mine for lunch, though. You two go enjoy a quiet meal and work on those wedding plans. I'll bring Craig home later today if that's okay," I state.

"Sounds good if you're sure," Pippa says.

Standing, I shut my laptop, grab my purse, and force a smile before answering.

“Positive.”

Once seated in my car, Craig turns to me with a big grin. I notice that he’s missing a front tooth and gasp.

“Pretty cool, isn’t it?” Craig asks with a smirk and one finger pointing to the missing tooth.

“Very cool, and it’s about time you started losing them. We were starting to think you were scared of the tooth fairy.”

“She’s not real, but don’t tell anyone I know that. I got lots of cash for that tooth. I have a lot more to go, and I want to make good bank on them,” Craig answers.

“How much did you get?” I question as I drive away from New Horizons.

“\$50 bucks! Everyone was sneaking into my room to put money under my pillow, so I pretended to be asleep. Guess being the first kid at the club to lose a tooth is a good thing. I gave Luke \$15 of it, though.”

“\$50 bucks! Did Elon Musk drop by with a cash bag for you too?” I ask, astonished at how much he made. “Oh, sorry. Elon Musk is—”

“A billionaire. I’ve heard about him. SpaceX, Twitter, Tesla. A geeky smart guy like Rex, but he pretty much pisses money. Oops. Sorry for the swear. And no, he didn’t sneak into my room, but my mom, Tammy, Trigger, Pooh, and Axel all did. I fell asleep for a while, but I did wake up when Bella shoved cash under my pillow. Those are the ones I saw, but others might have been there too,” Craig says casually.

“Very nice of you to give Luke some of your money, but why did you do that?” I ask, somehow knowing what he’s about to say.

“He knocked it out for me. Got tired of everyone talking about how I should’ve lost several teeth by now, so I asked Luke to help me out. He didn’t want to do it at first, but I talked him

into it. He elbowed me in the mouth, and waa-laa, tooth fell out. We have to wait a few weeks before we take out another, or peeps might get suspicious,” he replies matter-of-factly.

“Oh my God, Craig! That must’ve hurt!” I shout, cringing at the mental image.

“It’s like that old thing women always say about how they forget the pain of spitting out a kid as soon as they hold it. I forgot all about the pain when I saw all those bills under my pillow,” he says with a laugh that seriously sounded a little maniacal.

“I promise not to tell anyone, but please, don’t let Luke elbow you again,” I request as I pull into the restaurant Craig likes.

Slamming the car door shut, Craig grins at me. I don’t even bother to repeat my request because I know he’ll do whatever he chooses to anyway.

We enjoy our meal, and Craig catches me up on everything that’s happened since I left. He carefully avoids mentioning Chubs’ name, and I follow his lead. After leaving the restaurant, we drive to one of our favorite places, FurEver Homes. It’s the animal rescue that Ivy used to work at and where Craig got Bart, his pet skunk. Because the club does a lot of volunteer work here, the employees are used to seeing us wandering the barns and outside areas of the rescue, so they just wave at us as we walk past. Craig leads me directly to the livestock barns.

I walk slowly down the aisle, looking into each stall and greeting whatever animal is inside. Craig, on the other hand, races up and down the aisle, trying to decide who to pet first. Stopping at a stall, I watch a mini-sized cow eat her hay. She moos softly when she notices me, then continues munching her dinner.

Keeping one eye on Craig, I feel the weight of the world settle on my shoulders again. My sense of loneliness is overwhelming, and my chest tightens with it. Starting to feel anxious, I try to slow my breathing to a normal rate. Instead,

I'm panting shallow breaths, and the perimeter of my field of vision is darkening. Leaning against the stall, I know I'm having a panic attack, but I can't get it under control.

"Lucy, let's sit down for a minute. Come on. I got you," Craig's voice penetrates my brain as he grasps my hand and tugs gently.

I take the few steps to the bale of hay and drop down on it, still holding his hand.

"It's going to be okay, you know. Just breathe slowly. Breathe with me, Lucy," Craig encourages in a quiet, calm voice while taking audible breaths in then out in an even pattern.

I adjust my breaths to match his and fight back the panic. Slowly, it starts to work, and my vision returns. After another minute, I lean back against the stall behind me, exhausted. Craig continues holding my hand and sits silently beside me. When I finally look at him, all I see is concern and love. Impulsively, I wrap my arms around him and hug him tight to me.

After a moment, he gasps out dramatically, "Now I'm the one who can't breathe."

I let him go, and he smiles up at me, but I can still see the concern in his eyes.

"I'll be okay, Craig. Just going to take some time. You knew how to help me calm down. How?"

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

Curious now, I make a promise.

"I won't tell anyone. Did Pippa have panic attacks after the shooting?"

"Not that I know of, but maybe. Another person has them sometimes, and I asked the guy, that we won't call by name, how to help someone when that happens. He showed me on the internet what to do."

“You can say his name, Craig. He’s your friend, and he loves you very much.”

“Yeah, I know he does. I feel the same way about him. I get why you’re upset because I miss him too.”

“So, are you going to tell me who else has panic attacks? I promise I won’t tell anyone else unless it becomes an emergency-type situation.”

“Bella. She has them sometimes ever since she shot that guy that broke into the Aunts’ home. I saw her having one once and got scared. After she felt better, she explained what had happened and why. She doesn’t want to worry everyone, so she asked me not to say anything. Big Petey, Trudy, Pooh, hell, even Ava and Axel would lose their minds and follow Bella everywhere if they knew. Trudy would probably get Axel to dig up that guy’s grave just so they could mutilate his body. That’s if Pooh didn’t already do it,” Craig answers, then gives up a small laugh, most likely visualizing that scenario.

I have to admit the kid’s probably spot on with his thoughts on that subject.

“If there’s ever anything I can do to help her, let me know. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Lucy. Let’s go see the dogs now. Maybe you should adopt one, and I’ll help you take care of it,” Craig says with a sly grin.

“You want to adopt one but tell your mom it’s mine. I know the game you’re playing, but let’s go see their little faces.”



Spending time with Craig and the other kids tends to calm my raging anger, but the calm doesn’t last long. I know Chubs leaving me has changed my perception of love, trust, and people in general, but I can’t seem to tame the anger. I’m literally mad at the whole world. I see Axel and Bailey together and how great they are as a couple. It’s not jealousy that comes to the surface. It’s disgust that he may do the same to her someday as Chubs did to me. He’ll give her false hope

of a future, then rip it away. The rational side of my brain knows I'm wrong at assuming this, but I have to fight hard to keep those thoughts hidden. It's exhausting, and that just makes me madder.

Entering the clubhouse, I groan inwardly at all the happy couples hanging around. Ava and Taja's pregnant bellies even irritate me. I walk directly to the bar and wait for Toes to notice me. When he does, I order a Jack and Coke. Eyebrows go up all around me, but I ignore them.

"Uh, hey, Lucy. Um, did you say a Jack and Coke?" Toes questions while taking a few steps back from me.

"Yes, I did. Please and thank you," I answer while climbing up on a stool next to Pigeon.

"But you don't drink alcohol," Toes says with confusion still written on his face.

"Do now," I reply flatly.

"Maybe now isn't the best time to start," Horse advises in a quiet voice from the other side of Pigeon.

"I strongly disagree," I reply in the same flat tone while raising an eyebrow at Toes.

Toes instantly turns to reach for the Jack, slips instead, and lands on his ass behind the bar. Vex leans over the bar and grins down at him.

"You okay down there, Toes? Break anything valuable?" Vex asks while the men at the bar all laugh.

I clearly hear Toes' mumbled "fucking jinxed" but pretend I don't. I wait patiently for him to gather himself and make my drink. He sets the mixed drink on the bar and slides it down the length to me. Pigeon stops its movement when it reaches me. I nod at him, pick up the drink, and swallow half of it. Again, I ignore the raised eyebrows.

"Anything you need, Lucy? Anything we can do for you?" Vex asks in a sincere voice.

“No, but thank you. I’m just taking it one day at a time.”

“Bailey and I would love it if you wanted to stay with us for a while,” Axel offers from a nearby table.

“That’s very nice, Axel, but I prefer to be alone right now. I’d love to have little Alex spend a night with me, though,” I reply, knowing full well Axel would be sleeping on my couch if that ever happened.

“Can’t I just buy you a car or something? Be reasonable, woman!” Axel exclaims loudly.

I finish off my drink and signal for another before answering.

“Don’t need a car, but a few days with Alex would be very comforting for me.”

“You’re just being evil now when I was only trying to be nice! A few days? Crazy talk, little Luce. No more booze for you!” Axel shouts in alarm while several of the other people laugh at him.

Once again, Toes slides the drink down the bar instead of approaching me. For some odd reason, I get a little evil pleasure from his fear. Slugging a large amount of the drink back, I set the glass down just as I hear my name called. Turning toward the voice, I see Gunner approaching.

“Hey, Lucy. We need to talk. Let’s do it in my office,” he orders but does so in a nice tone.

I leave my drink, slide off the stool, and follow Gunner to his office. Taking a seat in front of his desk, I fold my hands and place them on my lap. He shuts the door and takes a seat behind his desk, eyes on me. I wait, holding his gaze.

“You and Chubs were great together as a couple, and you were the best thing for him. I watched you two, and I know you were loyal to him in the way every man wants in his life. I can’t tell you how sorry I am that this has happened to you, but I also know you’re not telling me everything. I need some honesty from you, Lucy,” Gunner states in a firm, no-nonsense voice.

“I don’t know where he’s at, Gunner,” I reply in the same voice.

“See, here’s the thing, Lucy. If I suddenly came up missing, bike left along the highway, my woman would be tearing this world apart looking for me. Ava would leave no stone unturned, and nobody would be allowed to rest until I was found. You have that same kind of loyalty for Chubs, and yet you haven’t even asked a single one of us if we’ve found anything. Rex said you haven’t questioned him at all, and you know he’s the one that will find some trail. Why is that? Why aren’t you burning Denver to the ground looking for your man?” Gunner questions with blatant accusation in his tone.

“Ava and you have a stronger bond. Marriage, children, a home. Chubs never gave me any of those things,” I bite out and then realize the truth of that statement.

“I call bullshit on that. What do you know that you’re not sharing? Do you know where he is or who has him? Did he ever tell you his real name?” Gunner questions in a hard voice.

“You’re his club president. Are you saying you’ve had a member in your club for years and yet don’t know his real name?” I shoot back at him.

“Chubs joined the club when my dad was president. I run background checks on everyone associated with the club, but that started when I took over. I never went back and ran them on members that were already patched in. Quit avoiding the questions,” he returns.

“I can’t help you, Gunner.”

“The fuck you can’t!” Gunner shouts before visibly straining for control. When he appears to have regained some, he continues. “You know enough that you’re not concerned he was kidnapped by the Feds or a rival gang. You’re mad, not worried. That tells me that you know he left by choice. Why were the Feds harassing him? What did they want, and why would Chubs leave without telling anyone?”

My temper snaps, and I stand up, placing my hands on his desk while leaning into them, our faces close.

“Maybe he just left me because I wasn’t worth his time anymore! Maybe it was easier for him to run than man up and tell me himself! Maybe he met someone, and I was in the way! What I do know is that he’s gone without a word, and I’m left here to pick up the pieces while being accused by an MC club president three times my size that I’m to blame in some way because he failed in knowing his own members! Fuck you, Gunner! In fact, fuck this whole club that centers around the large egos of men!” I shout, somewhat hysterically, before grabbing a jar filled with pens and heaving it against the wall behind his head.

I watch with satisfaction as the jar explodes and ink pens fly in every direction. Lowering my eyes to his shocked ones, I whirl, yank the door open, and storm out. Halfway across the main room, I drop the doorknob I was still holding, ignore every single person, and head directly to my car. Getting in, I slam my door, start the engine, and drop it into gear. I hit the gas and hear the tires tossing gravel in every direction as I race toward the gate. Lucky for the club, whoever’s on gate duty gets it open before I crash through it, as I fully planned on doing.

Halfway to the bakery and my apartment, I decide it’s time to make some plans of my own. I make a stop at a large department store, buy the items I need then go home. Dropping my items in the kitchen, I shrug off my hoodie and shoes, then get busy.

Three hours later, my personal belongings are packed into totes sitting near the door. I’ve ignored all the texts and phone calls that have been coming in while I packed, but now I pick up my phone. Not to acknowledge the messages but to make a phone call.

“Hey, little sister. What’s up?” Lisa says.

“I’m packed. Can I still stay with you for a while?”

“I’ll borrow Dad’s truck and be there in 30 minutes,” Lisa replies immediately.

Twenty-five minutes later, my dad and sister entered my apartment, and we moved me out of it. When we’re finished, I take the key into the kitchen at the bakery and drop it on the counter. Using Chubs’ IOU notepad and pen, I leave Ava a note explaining that I need some distance from the club for now. I thank her and then leave two months’ rent with the note. I walk out without looking back at another piece of Chubs I chose to leave behind.



“Want to talk yet?” Lisa asks over her steaming mug of tea.

“No.”

“Fair enough. Want to watch a movie?”

“No.”

“Want to make cookie dough and eat it instead of baking the cookies?” she offers.

“Yeah, let’s do that. And drink. Let’s do that too,” I answer as I make my way to her kitchen.

Lisa follows me, then opens a cabinet, waving her hand in front of it like a model on a game show.

“What’s your poison?”

“I only know the name of a few drinks, like Pina Colada, tequila, Jack and Coke. Might be best if you decide what we’re drinking tonight,” I offer while pulling out the ingredients for chocolate chip cookies.

“Watermelon margaritas it is then,” Lisa answers while setting a blender on the countertop.

We work in companionable silence until Lisa switches on the blender. Louder than normal noises emit from it, followed by smoke. Lisa quickly hits the off button then we both take a step back. When it stops smoking, Lisa steps closer and takes the lid off. Peering inside it, she grins.

“It might not be as slushy as I like it, but it’ll do,” she says.

At that moment, the blender gives a half-hearted gurgle then starts up on its own. Pink slush blows Lisa’s hair back, covering her entire face, then sprays everything in its path. Dodging the alcoholic ice bombs as best as I can, I dive to grab the cord. Yanking it from the wall, I turn around to find Lisa staring at me.

I cover my mouth with both hands as I watch the icy mixture slowly slide down her face and plop onto the counter and floor. I bite down on my lip when I notice her hair is stuck in a dramatic wind-blown manner. I almost giggle out loud when a glob slides down her forehead then covers one eye. Lisa remains silent, probably traumatized, but continues to stare at me with her one uncovered eye.

My sister slowly reaches a delicate hand up and pushes the slush out of her eye, then uses it to wipe some of the mess off her face. Her white gauzy blouse is beyond saving, so she doesn’t even bother trying. I’m still covering half of my face and trying desperately not to laugh at her and the situation. I lose that battle when a large icy clump drops from the ceiling and lands on the top of Lisa’s head. She continues to stand silently until gravity helps the clump follow the same path as the previous ones. Jerking her hands to her eyes, she wipes both clear and pins her gaze on me again.

“How could I have forgotten what it’s like to live with you?” Lisa asks in a calm, controlled voice.

“This has nothing to do with—” I start, but Lisa cuts me off mid-denial.

“Bitch. Run!”

I know that tone, so I run. I make it to my bedroom door, slam it shut and lock it behind me. I can hear Lisa muttering some pretty strong swear words in the hallway, but I ignore them and head for the shower. I might not have gotten the worst of the margarita fiasco, but I got enough to be sticky. Closing the

shower curtain, I stand under the warm water while laughing at the image of Lisa covered in watermelon-colored slush.

When the bucket of ice-cold water crashes over me, I can't stop the scream. First, I know I locked the bedroom door, and second, well, it was fricking cold! I hear Lisa's laughter, then her voice.

"Fucking payback, little sister!"

Then I hear our mother's voice.

"What in the world did you two do?" Mom screeches.

Lisa and I both scream a little in surprise that we're not alone anymore. I slip and nearly land on my backside but catch a hold of the curtain in the nick of time.

"Mom! What the hell? You just scared the shit out of me!" Lisa accuses in a high voice.

"Did you dye your hair pink?" Mom somewhat shrieks back.

"Could you two have this conversation somewhere that I'm not showering?" I ask loudly.

"What is it with you two girls? Every time you get together, you cause a ruckus!" Mom says, but I can hear her voice fading, so I know they're leaving the room.

I finish my shower, get dressed and walk back down the hallway. Stepping into the kitchen, I stop. Mom's on a step stool, washing down the cupboards while my dad is mopping the floor. When he notices me, he grins.

"Lisa's taking a quick shower, then we're taking our daughters out for dinner. Hopefully, with enough shampoo, she'll be able to get her hair to lay down flat again. Love her, but I wasn't thrilled about going to dinner with her new 'do,'" Dad says before barking out a laugh. "I only left here a few hours ago, and you two have already found a way to wreak havoc on Lisa's condo."

"I didn't do anything. It was all Lisa," I reply.

“You girls shouldn’t be left alone together. Maybe you should move back home instead,” Mom offers, but I know it’s because she wanted me home with her and not moving in with Lisa to begin with.

“Yeah, maybe you should,” Lisa says behind me, then pushes past to lean against the fridge. “That way, you can ‘Lucy’ their appliances instead of mine. Here an hour, and I’m down one Ninja blender already.”

“Dear Lord,” Mom mutters, and Dad laughs while shooting a wink my direction.



For the next few weeks, I pretty much dodged everyone associated with the club except for texting a little with Bailey. She was upset at first but said she understood after I explained that I couldn’t take the interrogations from the members anymore. Yep, I threw Gunner’s large body right under that bus. Yep, I feel guilty for doing it because he’s one of my favorite people, but I almost caved and told him all I know. I need a little time to shore up my defenses. I’m hoping that Gunner not getting information out of me might keep the others from trying too.

I can’t explain to myself why I feel the need to keep Chubs’ secrets, though. I should tell the club everything and let them decide what should be done with their member. Even knowing that I’m not sure I could ever trust Chubs again as a person or boyfriend, I’m not sure it’s my place to expose his former life. He made choices without giving me a say, so it’s no longer my place to speak for him. I think that’s what I believe anyway. My thoughts on that change from day to day, so we’ll see what tomorrow brings.

I’m still going to New Horizons to help out, but I avoid Tammy and Pippa by going in the evenings. I ran into Pippa once when she came back for an intake, but all she did was give me a hug and tell me she wouldn’t ask any questions I wasn’t ready to answer. I nodded in appreciation, and she left the office to deal with the intake.

Since moving in with Lisa, I've been going to her gym with her instead of the club gym. I don't like it as much because there's no class for me to do striking or takedowns. I spend a lot of time on the treadmill and have amazed myself at the increasing distances I can run. I'm closing in on the six-mile mark when my phone beeps through my earbuds. It's from Pippa, so I hit stop on the treadmill and open the text, breathing heavy.

Pippa: Craig here. You ever coming back?

Me: Hey Craig. Pips know you have her phone again?

Pippa: Hope not. Got a few texts to send yet. ???

Me: Yeah, I am. Just needed a break.

Pippa: Ignore the guys. They have their panties twisted. Want to hang out with me?

Me: Yes. When?

Pippa: In the morning. Everyone is busy but me.

Me: 9:00am. Pick you up at your house.

Pippa: kk. Love you.

Me: Love you.

"Club?" Lisa asks while stopping her treadmill.

"Craig. Wants to hang out tomorrow morning. Want to come with us? We'll probably go out to eat breakfast and maybe hit up a park or something."

"Yeah, sounds good. You're buying," Lisa orders then snaps my leg with her towel.

"Never doubted that for a second," I mutter while walking a large circle out and around her on my way to the locker room.

After showering, we stop at a small coffee café. Taking our drinks to an outdoor table, we sit quietly for a few minutes, watching the people on the sidewalk rush about their day.

"It will get easier, Lucy. Maybe I should say it'll ease, but you'll find a new path. New things to enjoy. Takes time. When

Donny cheated on me, I didn't even want to face the world for weeks. I was angry, hurt, positive I'd never trust again, and felt like an idiot for loving him. Then, one day I woke up and realized it didn't hurt quite as much."

"I know it will. I just hope I don't tear the world apart before then."

The loud crashing sound draws our attention to a minor car accident at the corner. The drivers of each car get out and start yelling at one another, arms waving in irritation. I know the exact second Lisa directs her eyes to the side of my face. I pretend not to notice that she's grinning at me.

"That had nothing to do with me. Not every disaster can be tossed at my feet," I say without emotion.

"Bet there are members of the club that would disagree with you on that. I've heard a few rumors that Gunner upped the clubhouse insurance when you started hanging out there."

"We don't listen to rumors."

Lisa snorts out a laugh before picking up her purse and coffee cup.

"Let's get out of here before the building catches on fire."



I wave to Bella and Luke as we drive past them and stop in front of Pooh's house. Craig comes flying out the door before I even have the car in park. He climbs into the backseat after setting his backpack in first. Buckling up, he grins at me in the mirror. Pooh salutes us with a smile while standing on his sidewalk.

"Hi, Lisa! Hey, Lucy. It might be best if we leave using the back road. Tessie's on her way to the clubhouse," Craig advises.

I don't hesitate to drive away from Pooh's, taking the road toward the backside of the club property. Glancing in the mirror, I see Tessie's Jeep sliding sideways onto the road, Pooh dropping his coffee cup and diving onto his deck before

the Jeep drives in the opposite direction. I breathe a sigh of relief and give Craig a thumbs up.

“Hey, Craig. How’s it feel knowing you’re going to be dining with two gorgeous ladies today?” Lisa asks.

“Two’s always better than one,” he quips.

“After breakfast, what do you have planned for us?” I query.

“We’ll have to make a stop somewhere with some grass,” he answers, but it sounds like he’s distracted. Before I can look in the mirror to see why he continues speaking.

“I know you’ve been sad, so I brought Bart to cheer you up.”

Bart, his pet skunk, lands on the console between Lisa and me. Without hesitation, he crawls into Lisa’s lap.

“Isn’t Bart a sk...” Lisa starts to ask before realizing he’s sitting on her lap.

Screaming loudly, Lisa jerks away and throws her hands in the air, nearly unseating Bart. Freezing in that position, she becomes silent.

“You knew he had a pet skunk, Lisa,” I remind her, fighting laughter.

“Oh shit! Yes, I did, but I didn’t know it was going to be sitting on me! Scared the crap out of me,” Lisa exclaims before slowly relaxing.

Bart rolls to his back and stares up at Lisa. She reaches out a finger and runs it over the pad of his foot before smiling. Within a minute, she’s petting him, and he’s nearly purring in pleasure.

“I’m sorry, Lisa. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Craig says sincerely.

“It’s okay, Craig. He just startled me. It’s not every day a person has a skunk appearing in their lap, you know,” Lisa returns before cuddling Bart closer to her. “Wow. He doesn’t smell at all.”

“Of course not. Pippa makes him take baths too,” Craig says with no small amount of disgust in his voice.

“Lucy, my favorite sister. We have to do a thing,” Lisa states, and I notice the mischievous smile on her face.

“No, we don’t, and I’m your only sister,” I answer, knowing that her smile means we’re going to get into some kind of trouble.

“Come on! It’ll be fun! Craig will get a kick out of it too! Please!”

And that’s how we ended up at the Colorado Governor’s Office with a skunk.



Craig is still laughing in the backseat when we drop him off at the clubhouse later that day. Lisa’s not faring much better. She’s quiet for a few minutes, then starts laughing hysterically again. Craig waves goodbye after he gives Lisa and me each a kiss on the cheek, and Lisa cuddles Bart one last time.

“Mom’s going to call us,” I say as I wave to Toes at the gate as we drive through.

“She can’t holler at us too much since it was Dad who turned Bart loose in the meeting room,” she answers between gasps.

“That’s true. We only scared Mrs. Godfrey, and nobody likes her anyway. Dad took it from there. Oh God, did you see how hard he was laughing when the entire room emptied out, nearly trampling each other? He’s way worse than we are.”

“His security staff! The big bald guy knocked down the smaller guy and stepped in the middle of his back running away! When the little guy stood up, he had a shoe print on his jacket! Oh damn, I literally piddled a little!” Lisa shouts before dissolving into laughter again.

“Please, tell me you’re sitting on something other than directly on my car seat!” I screech.

Lisa tips somewhat sideways in the seat, then rights herself before shaking her head no at me. Kicking her shoes off, she places the bottom of her feet against the dash of my car, tears running down her face.

“First, get your pissy ass off my seat! Second, get your feet off the dash! If I have an accident, your knees will go through your eye sockets and embed in your brain!”

“Don’t have an acc... never mind. I forgot who I was talking to for a second there,” she answers while placing her feet back on the floorboards.

When my phone buzzes with a call, I glance at it to see Mom’s name. I leave the phone where it’s at. No way am I taking that call. Then Lisa’s phone starts up, and she takes a deep, calming breath before hitting the speakerphone button.

“Dad did it, not us!” Lisa shouts into the phone.

There are a few beats of silence before we hear our mother’s beleaguered voice.

“Oh Lord. Let me get a glass of wine before you explain what your dad did that you two weren’t a part of.”

“She doesn’t know yet,” Lisa says to me with a grin.

“Shhhh! You dumbass! You’re on speakerphone!” I whisper.

“Heard both of you. What don’t I know yet, and what did you two not do but your dad did?” Mom questions in the perfect Mom voice. “Forget I asked. There’s something on the news about...”

Lisa hits the end button in panic, and Mom’s voice disappears.

“Oh God, we’re so fucked,” Lisa tells me with just a hint of a smile.

“You maybe. You just hung up on our mother,” I reply with a smirk.

“I’ll tell her my phone got jacked. You know, from being so close to you,” Lisa returns before she starts laughing again.

I punch my sister in the shoulder, but that excuse might actually work.



A few more weeks pass, and I find I have good days and bad days, but the bubbling anger hasn't gone away. Little things set it off, and I decide it's time to go to see Cash.

Walking into the gym, I don't look at anyone but make my way to the office. Walking in, I see Bailey at her desk and little Alex napping on the couch. Bailey stands up and we hug. When she releases me, I take a seat next to Alex on the couch.

"You're here to hit things, aren't you?" Bailey asks with a knowing look.

"And to see you and my goddaughter."

"It's good to see you again. Been a while. You've lost weight, Lucy," Bailey observes accurately.

"Yeah, a few pounds. Sorry it's taken me so long. I haven't been a good friend lately," I admit.

"No apologies. You need to take care of yourself first, and you needed some time. I get that."

Remembering what Gunner said about me not asking if they'd heard anything about Chubs, I do just that now.

"Rex find anything yet?" I ask in a quiet voice.

Bailey stares at me for a moment before shaking her head.

"No, nothing yet," she answers with another assessing look.

Gunner must have shared his suspicions of me with Axel, and now Bailey is wondering if he was correct.

The door opens, and Axel walks through it. He sits a stack of papers on the desk, turns to me, then scoops me off the couch for a hug. My feet are over a foot off the ground, but that doesn't stop the large man from giving me a long hug.

"Hey, Axel."

"I'm hugging you, but I'm not talking to you."

When he stands me on my feet, I take my seat again on the couch before looking up at him.

“Everyone knows you can’t do the silent treatment for long,” I state matter-of-factly.

“I can this tim...” he cuts himself off when I grin at him.

“I’m sorry for not coming around lately,” I admit honestly to the large, beautiful biker.

“You can be mad at Ch...” Axel stops again. “Fuck, this silent shit is hard!”

Then he storms out the door, slamming it behind himself.

Bailey gives a soft laugh before turning serious.

“You know how Axel is about family, and he considers you his family. He’s been worried about you, but Gunner told him to leave you alone. Also, he’s pissed about something Craig teased him about.”

“I know he does, and I love him for that. We harass him a lot, but he’s a good man. What’s Craig teasing him about?” I ask curiously because those two always have some beef going.

“Something about you, Lisa, and Craig turning Bart loose on some stuffed shirts, and Axel felt left out of the fun. You know how much he hates being left out of anything.”

“I’ll make sure to call him first the next time we take Bart on adventures. I’m going to go hit things, but I’ll stop back in so I can have some Alex time when she wakes up.”

Bailey nods, and I stand before walking out. Looking up, I see Cash, Axel, Vex, Candy, and James all watching me walk toward them. James opens his arms, and I walk into them. When he’s done, I move to Vex, then Cash, and when I step back, I’m surprised when Candy grabs my arms and drags me in for her hug. She pats me on the head before whispering in my ear.

“I have skills. Use them.”

Candy releases me, steps back, and walks away.

After she's out of earshot, Axel speaks up, looking at Cash.

"Ask Lucy what Candy said to her. I tried to eavesdrop, but I couldn't hear it."

Cash looks at Axel in a what-is-wrong-with-you look before turning to me, "Go get ready, and I'll meet you at the speedbags."

"Ask me yourself, and I might answer," I say to Axel as I stride past him.

"I can't because..." he starts, then stops abruptly.

I force a laugh, hoping it sounds natural, before entering the locker room.

After practicing my striking with Cash, I make my way to James for takedown practice. We chat a little, then get busy. When I'm too exhausted to do anything more, I thank James and head for the showers.

Candy is sitting on a bench, unwrapping tape from her wrists when I enter. Looking up, she immediately stands, walks to the door, and locks it behind me. She grips my arm and pulls me into the shower area, then turns to look at me intently.

"Something wrong?" I asked, confused.

"I'm a street rat. Pretty much raised myself living on the streets. Surviving that way isn't easy, but you learn things. Certain skills and how to read people. That kind of stuff. Chubs wouldn't have left you unless he had no other choice. Wouldn't have left his club, either. Way I see it, he left to protect you and the club from something or someone coming after him. To me, that means you could be in danger. You might be considered leverage or a threat to someone depending on what they want from him. You need to start being careful. Aware of who's around you and who you trust. Stick close to the club. They'll protect you if something happens," Candy says in a hushed voice.

I'm stunned at her words and take a minute to sort through them. Before I can, though, she continues.

“You can trust me. I know you don’t know me well, but you can, and I’m loyal as fuck.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, mind reeling. “Why would you be loyal to me, though, and why are we whispering in the showers?”

“Because you’re important to Chubs, and you never know who might be listening. That’s rule number one,” she answers simply.

“I was important to him,” I answer, and the bitterness in those few words is evident.

“You are,” Candy emphasizes. “I met Chubs a few years ago. Long before I had my little incident with Axel at the toy store. He never treated me as anything but a friend, with respect, even knowing I was homeless at the time. He was kind to me when few others were. I’ve never forgotten that. He’d want you safe, and I owe him. I’ll keep my ears open and let you know if I find anything out.”

“You don’t believe he was kidnapped or taken?” I ask.

“No way. I know some club members are thinking that’s a possibility with the Feds sniffing around, but no. Chubs left on his own, and the Feds are chasing their own tails.”

Without another word, I pull out my phone and exchange numbers with Candy, the woman that kicked Axel’s ass.

“Where do you live?” I ask, already having an idea of the answer.

“I’m between homes right now,” Candy mutters evasively.

“Not anymore. Let me get a shower, and then you’re coming with me, Candy,” I order. “You’re staying with me and my sister for now, but I think I know of a perfect apartment for you that’s recently become available.”

Chapter 11

Chubs

For the next few weeks, I drive from town to town, state to state, in a crisscross pattern. I stay to myself, watch my tail, and make sure I don't leave a trail for Rex to find. Speaking with my brother each day, I gather the rest of the intel I need. I've formulated my plan, and while I know it's crazy to think I can pull it off, I've resigned myself to trying.

I intentionally wait until it's dark to enter the city limits of Rockford, Illinois. I'm extra meticulous in finding a hotel because I'll be staying for more than a night this time. The time has come to finish what should have ended years earlier.

Before the sun comes up, I've left the hotel and am sitting in my car, watching a residence in a suburb of Chicago. Glancing again at the current picture my brother sent to my phone, I realize my first target just walked out the front door. Climbing into a low-slung sports car, Leonardo Romano backs out of his drive.

Leonardo was not even on my list of targets until Les told me about how Leonardo was planning on marrying our sister, whether she wants that or not. That information moved him into spot number one and saved his dad for another day.

Reaching down to start my car, I hesitate when another car, a few houses down from mine, starts then slowly pulls away in the direction of Leonardo's. I wait until that car turns at the first intersection before I tail them.

Unsure if the car following my target is Feds, a rival, or a possible security team, I carefully keep both cars in view but at a distance. From my research, I know where Leonardo is most likely going this time of day, so I decided to take a different route. I arrive at the office building and park one block away. Pulling my hoodie up over my head, I find a bus stop that has a perfect view. Taking a seat on the bench, I wait.

Within a minute, Leonardo's car pulls to a stop in front of the office building, and he steps out. Glancing around first, he then enters the building. Within seconds of the door closing behind him, the other car parks only a few spaces from where I'm sitting. Keeping my hoodie up and shielding my face, I pretend to be engrossed with my phone.

Observation was always a skill that came easy to me. People give away things about themselves unintentionally, and I'm good at picking up on those things. Little details matter, and I watch for them. When the guy sitting in the passenger seat opens his window to drop his cigarette out, I notice his watch. It's flashy and expensive. Not the kind of watch a federal agent could afford, so I'm confident in ruling them out. I also know these two men aren't Leonardo's security because they tried to stay hidden from him. That leaves a rival, and that gives me an idea.

I casually stand, walking past the car while keeping my head down, focused on my phone. With the camera set to video, I carefully aim it at the passenger. Circling the block, I return to my car. Happy to see the video captured his face, I shoot it off to Les. I don't wait for his response before driving away. I have more people to locate and to start getting a feel for their routines.



Sitting on the flat rooftop, I carefully assemble my rifle. Once that's done, and it's loaded, I drop down to my stomach and brace the barrel against the bricks that line the roof. I wait patiently, watching the lit window through the scope for the opportune time. When my target takes a seat at his desk, phone to his ear, I squeeze the trigger. I feel the recoil but ignore it as I pull the trigger three more times.

Sitting up again, I quickly break the rifle down and sling the case over my shoulder. Zipping my hoodie up, covering the case completely, I make my way to the opposite side of the building. Climbing down the way I came up, I walk through

the empty alley to my car. I drive away, hearing sirens behind me. My work for tonight is not done, though.

Within the hour, I'm on my back, under a car. After placing the explosives on the rear axle, I carefully push away until I can stand. Keeping an eye on my surroundings, I use the shadows to make my exit, then I wait. As predicted, it's not long before my next target leaves the club he's been drinking at. When the time is right, I dial the number to the cell phone I'd bought weeks ago. The explosion is deafening, and that \$20 phone was well worth each cent I paid.

My next stop isn't much of a stop at all. I go old school with Molotov cocktails tossed through a few businesses' back windows before I leave the area on foot. These businesses aren't real businesses anyway. They're just fronts for money laundering, so I feel no guilt at seeing the flames.

I slide into the driver's seat of my car and take a deep breath. I've caused chaos tonight, and it feels damn fucking good.



“Your room is ready, Mr. Johnson. Second floor, turn right at the top of the stairs,” the clerk says while handing me a set of door keys.

“Thank you.”

Taking the keys, I make my way up the outside stairs to another non-descript motel room on the outskirts of the city. Rundown, depressed area, I won't be noticed because nothing about my clothes or car stands out. I've become adept at fitting in wherever I am, chameleon-like. If you look like the others around you, it's easy to blend in.

Setting my duffle bag on the floor and food bags on the foot of the bed, I strip down to my boxers before I look out the window to study the parking lot. I always memorize the lay of the land wherever I'm staying. Taking a moment to check all avenues for an escape or attack, I move to take a seat on the bed. Leaning my back against the headboard, I flip on the TV

and listen idly as I open the take-out food bags. It's been hours since I ate anything substantial, and I'm starving.

After eating and licking my fingers clean, I take a shower and pull on clean boxers. Returning to the bed, my interest is peaked at the news story coming from the TV.

"Seven men were found dead today. The bodies were badly beaten and mutilated, and identification hasn't been made as of yet. According to a source from the police department, the men were not killed at this location but were dumped there. Identifying them may be difficult since fingers, teeth, and other parts of the bodies are missing. The police are not, at this time, looking at this as the work of a serial killer but rather a deal gone bad type situation," the news anchor says.

"Sounds gruesome," states the other news anchor while giving a fake shudder.

"Genitals were all missing too, so yes, very gruesome," responds the first news anchor. *"We'll keep following this story and will report any new updates as soon as we have them."*

I grin because I know who those seven men were. Good riddance. The world's a better place with them no longer a part of it. I pick up my burner phone from the nightstand when it rings. Answering, I don't have to look to see who the caller is since only one person has this number.

"You have a hand in that? What's on the news?" the voice on the other end asks.

"Played a small part," I answer and jealously listen to the sound of a potato chip bag being opened.

"Are you close yet?" my brother questions.

"Yeah. I'll be busy for a few days, so if you don't hear from me, don't worry."

"Aria's worried about what's been happening, but Mom's solid. Aria may never forgive you. You know that, right?" my brother asks with concern in his voice.

“I know. I can’t change the past, so I’ll have to deal with it if she doesn’t,” I answer in a low voice.

“Deal with it? As close as you two were? You were inseparable! I think you’re underestimating her capacity for anger and the resentment she’ll feel at being left in the dark,” my brother warns. “She mourned your death, brother. We all did, but it nearly killed her. She hasn’t been the same since, and now to find out you were never dead?” my brother trails off.

Aria has been my biggest regret and knowing it changed her kills a part of me for real this time. Life is all about the choices you make, but I had few to choose from. Aria got caught in the crossfire, as did my mom and brother, and I’ve never stopped regretting that fact.

“I just hope we’re all alive in the end to argue about who was right and who was wrong,” I say.

“Yeah, me too. I’ve got to go. Talk later, brother,” my brother says before disconnecting.

Setting my phone down, I think of the challenges I’m facing in the next few days. I have to survive them because I have more life to live, far away from my current location. I have a lot of people to explain my decisions to and to beg for forgiveness from. One in particular, and that’s the one person who deserves everything I’ve got to give.

Standing, I pull on my jeans and hoodie, pulling it up to cover my head, grab the hotel keys and my wallet. Opening the door, I carefully search the parking lot for threats. Seeing none, I hustle down the stairs and to the vending machines I saw tucked into a corner under the balcony. Pulling cash from my wallet, I start the long process of buying enough snacks for a day or two.

Chapter 12

Lucy

I'm probably going to die today, so I don't bother with makeup, and I barely brush my hair. I do make sure I have clean panties on because my mom, like all mothers, has warned me for years about dying while wearing dirty panties. I'm almost past caring about things like that, but I wouldn't want to die and leave my mom disappointed that I didn't heed her advice.

Walking into the clubhouse, I wave half-heartedly at those who greet me. Stopping next to Axel's stool, I hold my hands out, knowing little Alexia will dive into them. A beautiful smile lights up her cute face, and she does as I expected. Cuddling her close, I almost smile at her little girl giggles.

"I'm giving you an extra minute this time, but don't think that's how it's always going to be," Axel tells me with a scowl.

Ignoring him, I walk off with his daughter and take a seat at a nearby table. Sitting Alexia on the table in front of me, I take her hands and examine her latest manicure. Obviously, one of the twins did the honors because she has fingernail polish nearly to the first knuckle.

"Very pretty!" I tell her as she preens a little.

Little Alexia is very much her father's daughter.

"Hi, Lucy!" Mac screeches as he lands on the table next to Alex.

"Hey, Mac. You're looking hot today," I say, telling him what he wants to hear.

"True dat," he responds while doing some of his own preening.

"You want to hang out with me and Tessie today?" I ask with a smirk.

"Why you hate me?" Mac squawks as I expected he would.

Looking closely, I notice he's missing a few feathers, and some skin is peeking through.

"What happened to your feathers, Mac?" I ask.

"Prissy happened," Axel answers with a grin as he takes a seat at my table.

"Go away, Assman!" Mac screams while shaking his wings in a threatening manner.

"Don't make me call Prissy over to pluck a few more feathers, birdbrain," Axel returns.

I slap Axel's hand when he reaches for his daughter, and this makes Mac cackle loudly.

"Prissy still not falling for his charm?" I question Axel.

"No! Mac's a hottie! Mac's charming!" Mac screeches, then goes silent when Priscilla lands on the table next to him.

"Shut it, boy," Priscilla orders in her perfect southern accent while staring down her beak at Mac. "Away from my baby!"

I don't know if Prissy wants Mac away from Alexia or if she's calling Axel her baby because she's obsessed with both.

"Danger zone! Evacuate!" Axel warns while scooping his daughter off the table, giving Prissy's feathers a stroke and then hustling away.

"Hi, Miss Prissy. How are you doing?" I ask while stroking a finger over her crest of yellow feathers.

I ignore Mac's gagging sounds and wait for Prissy to answer.

"It's good," she drawls.

"I brought you both a surprise, but you have to be nice to each other to get it."

Again, I ignore Mac's gagging sounds. He's so dramatic, but Prissy's no slouch in that department either.

"How nice?" Prissy asks while tilting her head a little.

"No biting each other or pulling out feathers," I answer.

I reach into the bag I had set on the floor next to my feet, and pull out a small child's piano, and set it on the table. Both birds' attention instantly locks on the new toy. I realize I should have bought two to prevent the battle I should have anticipated.

Mac pecks on a key and hoots in laughter at the sound it makes. Prissy waddles closer and, using her foot, taps another key. She gives a tinkling little laugh before doing it again. I breathe a sigh of relief and hope the truce lasts. If not, Mac may need someone to knit him a sweater before winter hits.

"Hi, Lucy! You ready to go?" Tessie shouts from the doorway, wide smile in place.

I groan but push to my feet to fulfill my deadly obligation of teaching her how to drive. I ignore Horse and Pooh holding out their helmets to me but almost take James up on his offer of his bulletproof vest. I contemplate whether it would make my death less painful but pass on it when I realize I don't really care anymore. That's become my go-to feeling about most everything lately.

"Let's go sit in my car while I explain how these lessons are going to go," I mutter as I pass Tessie and exit the building.

"Save your breath, Lucy! You'll need it when the firemen are using the jaws of life to extricate you!" Axel shouts as Tessie flips him the middle finger.

"I know the rules, Lucy. The men have all explained them to me many times," Tessie states as we take our seats in my car.

"There's a difference between hearing their voices and listening to the actual words, Tessie. You will not be driving fast. You will not be bouncing off cars, curbs, or trees today. You will not slam on the brakes. Pay attention to me when I say you press the gas and brake pedals gently. Not stomp on them," I say in a clear, concise voice.

"Yeah, got it. Give me the keys and... hey! That hurt!" Tessie exclaims, jerking her arm to her side and rubbing the spot on the underside where I pinched her.

“Yes, it did. Repeat back to me what I just told you.”

“Uh, you said, um, follow the rules,” Tessie says but with a slight question in her voice.

I stab my index finger into her temple, making her jump away from me.

“What the hell, Lucy?” she asks with shocked wide eyes.

“You weren’t listening. If you don’t listen and do exactly as I tell you, I’m not going to be the only one in pain today. You fuck up or don’t listen, and I’ll inflict pain on you. Pain is a great motivator, Tessie. The guys went easy on you because you’re a young, beautiful girl that we all love. They never wanted to hurt your feelings by telling you how much you suck as a driver. Same with Taja. I’m not one of the guys, and I give fuck-all about the world anymore, so things have changed with how your driving lessons are going to go. The first dent or scratch you put into my car, we’re going to find Rex, and I’m getting a taser from him,” I explain calmly.

“Why don’t we take my Jeep instead?” Tessie offers with a hopeful look.

“Why don’t you learn to drive like you’re supposed to instead?” I return.

“You’ve turned mean, Lucy. I’m sorry, but it’s true. I don’t want to do this anymore. I’ll just wait until Freddy has a day off and—”

“Yes, I have, and no, you won’t. I’m your instructor, and you’re going to learn, or both of us will end up at the hospital. I guarantee you’ll have more bruises than me, though. One more thing I should mention. If you actually do total my car, I’ll tell Taja about you kissing Horse,” I explain with a bite to my voice. “Yes, I know about that, and I know Horse was a total gentleman while trying to explain—again—to you why he can’t go there. You’re not being fair to a guy who’s trying very hard to do the right thing because of your age, and you keep putting him in bad spots with his club brothers. That, along with your bad driving, ends today.”

Tessie stares at me, open-mouthed, for several seconds before her eyes drift past me. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the majority of the club standing by the door of the clubhouse, watching us. I also see money exchanging hands, so I know they're betting on the outcome of today.

"Chubs has a big mouth," Tessie grumbles while holding her hand out.

"Among his other faults, yes," I mutter before setting the keys in her hand. "Do you understand the rules?"

"Yeah, Lucy, I do, but I don't think you're being fair," Tessie snips while starting my car.

"Life's not fair, Tessie. Learn that lesson now," I reply while buckling my seat belt. "Take a breath, put your foot on the brake, then put the car in gear. Slowly, let off the brake. Slowly, Tessie, or prepare for an afternoon of pain."

We drive off club property with it, and us, intact.



Returning to the clubhouse several hours later, I'm in one piece, and Tessie's only sporting a few bruises. I was right. Pain is a great motivator. I feel zero guilt for being so hard on her because she needed to learn before she seriously hurt herself or someone else.

I ignore the men who rush outside to view my car and take a seat at the bar. Waiting for my drink, I watch Gee, wearing a t-shirt reading "Jiggle Master," and Snots play tug-of-war with a knotted rope. Duffy, Ava's temperamental cat, is sleeping soundly in a chair, and the father/son team of Loki and Cain are laying side by side, keeping a quiet eye on everyone. I roll my eyes in exasperation when Snots spots me, drops the rope, and scurries behind the bar. He dropped the rope so quickly Gee ended up flying backward before landing upside down. It takes a moment of wiggling, but he finally rights himself and looks around in confusion.

"Incoming!" Toes shouts, and I turn in time to stop my drink from sliding off the end of the bar.

“Thanks for today, Lucy,” Tessie says before giving my neck a quick hug.

“You’re alive!” Mac says emphatically as he lands on the bar in front of me, feathers ruffling.

“Shut it, Mac,” Tessie grumbles before lightly poking him in his new bald spot.

“We’re just as surprised as Mac is,” Gunner says with a laugh as the men re-enter the clubhouse.

“I’m going home. I’m too tired and sore to deal with you all tonight,” Tessie states in an exhausted voice before walking out.

“Car doesn’t show any damage. Why’s she sore?” Trigger asks in confusion.

“No idea,” I reply before taking a large swallow from my drink.

When no one speaks, but I find all eyes on me, I take another drink, then set my glass down. I’ve never liked being in the spotlight, and this moment feels like there’s a large one shining on me and me only. Before any of them can start asking questions I don’t want to answer, I ask one of my own.

“Where’s Ava?”

“She’s forking Little A,” Gunner answers absently while staring hard at me.

“I’m going to need you to explain that a little more,” I say with a Mac-like head tilt.

“Little A—the pig I adopted—likes it when someone scratches him with a fork. I have no idea why, but apparently, forking a pig is a thing,” Gunner responds, and I breathe a little easier when understanding hits my brain. “And it calms Ava to spend time with him and the donkeys.”

“How’s she doing with the pregnancy?” I ask.

“Pregnancy is going great. Ava’s temper isn’t doing so well since Chubs left, though,” Petey answers. “Maybe you talking

with her could help.”

“Not sure that would, Petey. Two women with hair-trigger tempers mixed together might just cause murder and mayhem instead. There’s nothing I can say to her to make her feel better about him missing. I know from personal experience,” I say while finishing off the last of my drink.

“Does this help?” Petey asks in a quiet voice while giving a nod of his head toward my empty glass.

“Hasn’t yet, but I’m hopeful.”

“It won’t, Lucy, but I’ll drink with you if you want to try,” Petey offers before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead then shouting for refills.

I lean into his shoulder for a moment, then pull away and wait for my next drink to come sliding down the bar. Several hours later, I place my foot on the floor and pray it helps stop the ceiling from spinning. Petey was right. The alcohol didn’t help, and now I’m going to have to pay the consequences for hoping it would.



Slowly cracking open one eye, I wait until it adjusts to the light before opening the other. When I’m sure the sunlight won’t cause my head to split in half, I push myself up to my elbows and look around. This action causes a scream to erupt from the depths of my soul and to shoot a lightning bolt of agony through my brain.

Grasping my head, I focus my eyes at the two staring back at me from only a foot away.

“What the hell, Axel?” I moan.

“How’d you know it was me?” he asks incredulously.

“I’m in your living room, and what other muscle-bound bald guy would be sporting a sparkly gold face mask here? Do I even want to ask why your face is smeared in that gold concoction?”

“It’s good for my skin. The twins and Alex have a daddy/daughter dance after their recital coming up, and I want to look my best when Alex and I beat Gunner. No way has he been practicing, and I have. We’re going to mop the floor with him,” Axel replies smugly while handing me a cup of coffee along with two aspirin.

“Pretty sure it’s not a contest.”

“That’s exactly what he’ll say when he sucks ass there,” Axel says with a large grin.

“What’s the odds that you’re going to show up in matching outfits with your daughter?”

“I have no shame in my game, so they’re pretty high. The guys are already placing bets, so get in on it while you can.”

“Do I need a ticket for this, or can anyone come?” I inquire.

“I got you covered.”

“Hey, Lucy. Want some toast or juice?” Bailey asks as she enters the room with Alex on one hip and Prissy on her shoulder.

“Did I wake everyone with my scream?”

“No, we ladies just came back from Pippa’s. Did you wake up to that?” Bailey asks while tipping her chin to Axel.

“Yes, and I’ll never see the color gold again in the same way,” I mutter.

“Give me my daughter and my girlfriend. We have nails to buff,” Axel states while snatching away both kid and bird before leaving the room.

“Petey said you did some damage last night,” Bailey says with a laugh.

“To the clubhouse or just to my aching head?”

“Both. Snots scooted out the door the first time it opened, and it took Livi an hour to find him. Toes threw a towel down, screamed that he was resigning from this sea of unnatural

black witchcraft he's been enduring, and stormed out. His words, not mine. You passed out, and Petey carried you here, but before that happened, Gunner called Lisa so she wouldn't worry," Bailey tells me.

"I only have one question. Did anyone get video of something I'm never going to hear the end of?"

"Let's get you something to eat before we get into all of that," Bailey says before flashing me an amused look.



Me: Did you rent out the apartment yet?

Ava: No. It's yours if you still want it.

Me: I'm not asking for myself but thank you. I have a friend that needs a roof over her head. Can she move in?

Ava: If you trust her, then yes, of course.

Me: I should tell you it's Candy. Axel won't be happy but she's living out of her car and really needs the place.

Ava: Absolutely she's welcome! Axel will pretend to be mad but he'd be upset if he knew she was homeless. The key is at the bakery so she's welcome to move in anytime.

Me: Thanks! I'll help her get settled.

Ava: Let me know if she needs anything.

Me: Will do.

The look on Candy's face was humbling, to say the least. She stood in the doorway of the tiny apartment, speechless that this was now hers. Lisa and I grew up in a loving, comfortable home. Our parents were—are—involved in our lives, and neither of us ever worried about shelter or food. Seeing Candy now, I think about how many kids grow up without those basics.

"This would be the nicest place I've ever lived in," Candy says in a subdued voice. "But I can't accept it. It's charity. I work and don't need charity."

“It’s not charity, Candy. I had paid the rent ahead because I wasn’t sure if I’d come back or not, but you’ll be paying it yourself when it’s due again,” I explain.

“I can’t afford a place like this. I don’t make much, and I haven’t been able to find a better job yet,” she insists.

“I think we can help with the job situation,” Lisa says.

“How? I don’t have much of an education, and I’m not good with people?”

“There are a lot of things you are good at and qualified for that have nothing to do with college. I work in real estate, and I’m always looking for people to help set up homes for open houses, or collect rent from the properties I manage, or do maintenance, lawn care, the list goes on and on. You have friends, Candy. Friends that will help you find better employment opportunities. Ava owns the bakery and a catering company. The club owns several businesses. Lucy works at a shelter for domestic violence victims,” Lisa explains in an encouraging tone.

“What do you do now? What do you like to do or feel you’re good at?” I ask.

“I’m a bouncer at Tory’s bar downtown. It’s a real dive, but they didn’t care about my anger issues when I asked about work,” Candy replies.

“The club owns a strip club that employs security. If you like that kind of work, I’m sure Freddy would give you a try there,” I state. “You would make more than you do at that other place. You have time to think about it, though. Rent’s paid, so that gives you some room to breathe.”

“I could really live here. Have my own place and everything. I don’t even know what to say, but thanks,” Candy says with the first smile I’ve seen from her since the time she pinned Pooh, then Axel, to the mat.

“You like animals, Candy?” I ask suddenly.

“Yeah, I do. Never had any, but Ava brings hers to the gym, and I really like that little pig. Why?”

“Because I know of an opening at an animal rescue! They’re always short-handed, and if you take the evening shift, you don’t have to deal with as many people,” I explain.

“I don’t know much about animals, but I’d learn and work hard,” Candy insists.

“You get settled in, and I’ll make some calls tonight. Tomorrow, we can run out there and see what you think of the place.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. Thanks, Lucy. Thank you too, Lisa. Even if I get a different job, if you need help with your real estate stuff, I’d be happy to help,” Candy says sincerely.

We exchange hugs and leave Candy to her new home.

Chapter 13

Chubs

Sitting on the hotel bed, I listen to the local news broadcast. As I suspected, the Vero crime family is mentioned several times with a discussion about how they seem to be the target of the latest crime spree that started over a week ago. One reporter is shown standing next to a burnt-out car while another is behind a business highlighting the fire damage done to it.

After the reporters give their stories, the news anchor introduces the spokesperson for the Chicago Police Department.

“Captain Fitzgerald, can you comment on what your department is doing about this crime spree? Also, do you believe the public is at risk, or is this an internal cleansing for the Vero crime family?”

“At this point in the investigation, we don’t believe the public is at risk. We’ve consulted with federal agents that are knowledgeable about this particular crime family, and they feel strongly that this could be an internal coup of sorts. They have been known to battle for power amongst themselves in the past, and that could be happening again.”

“At what point does law enforcement step in, or do they when it’s an internal thing?”

“We’ll investigate these crimes as we do any others, and if a suspect or suspects are identified, we’ll follow proper procedures. Currently, though, we haven’t identified a perpetrator. As is often the case when a crime is committed against a crime family member, we may not know who that person or persons are until the family has meted out their own justice.”

“That is very true. Thank you, Captain. We’ll keep following this story and will be doing regular updates.”

Leaning back against the headboard, I turn the volume down on the TV. I open my Coke and set it on the nightstand before turning to the take-out bags sitting next to me. I pull containers from the bags and carefully set out my dinner. Digging into my food, I groan in appreciation. A few minutes of bliss before my phone interrupts my meal.

Wiping my hands on a napkin, I flip open my phone.

“Hey.”

“I have to ask you something, brother. The seven men that were found dead, missing their dicks, was that you too? When I asked before, you said you played a part, but I don’t know how they fit into your plan,” Les questions.

“Those seven men were from a problem in Denver. Those weren’t fresh bodies when the authorities found them. Sex traffickers, who mostly moved young girls. I didn’t eliminate them myself. I just found the location of where they were doing a drop-off and turned it over to the club and some friends. It’s just a happy coincidence that they were dumped here while I’m doing my own thing. It’ll confuse the Feds and keep them busy trying to figure out how they tie into the Vero problem. It’ll also keep the Vero family nervous trying to figure it out also. Being worried about losing your dick is a big distraction,” I reply in between bites.

“Sex trafficking kids? Fucking hell, Drew. They didn’t die hard enough if you ask me,” Les barks into the phone.

“That feeling will triple if you ever get the pleasure of meeting Bella. The club saved her from that fate. Then a member adopted her. Beautiful, kind, and smart. Sad that a girl like her wasn’t wanted by her own mother, so she was sold to the highest bidder.”

“I think I’d like your club brothers. Sound like good people. Hope to meet them someday,” Les says.

“That’s something we need to talk about. Things are going to heat up around here, and I’d rather you, Mom, and Aria aren’t caught in the crossfire. I’m going to text you an address and

instructions. Delete all of it after you've memorized it, though. If something happens to me, take the women and go there. You—”

“I'm not leaving you here alone. We can send Mom and Aria, but I'm staying,” Les interrupts me.

“If something happens to me, Les. Not now. If any of you three disappear, they'll assume you're in on the coup, so we can't do anything to make them suspicious.”

“What are you planning for tomorrow?” Les questions.

“Nothing for a few days. Letting their suspicious natures make them paranoid. Paranoia plays heavy on the mind, and soon they'll all start doubting each other.”

“Dad called today. He just wanted to check on Mom and Aria. He said the same thing you did, basically. Said not to arouse their suspicions by leaving town. Also said he has no idea as to what's going on,” Les informs me.

“That must be irritating for him. Things are going down, and he's not being kept informed even though he still works for them from the inside,” I say in a snarky tone.

“I get your anger with him, Drew. I get mad all over again some days, but he's still our dad. He still loves all of us. He took your death hard,” Les gently reprimands.

“He was training us to be killers, Les. He's doing life in prison for his actions and yet wanted us to become just like him. I do love him, but I'm bitter about his choices and how they kept me from you, Mom, and Aria all these years. It confuses my head and my heart because I missed out on having my family, and yet because of him, I made another family I love just as much. I broke Lucy's heart and my own to fix mistakes I never made,” I reply adamantly.

The silence stretches between us before Les quietly breaks it.

“I know, Drew. We've paid for his choices, and it's not fair. When he went to prison, the family made it clear that we were to stay put, stay under their watchful eye. We've lived with

them hanging over our heads for years now. Mom was ordered to stay married and stay supportive of Dad. The family didn't want Dad to go over the edge if Mom were to leave him. He might talk, and they couldn't have that. I think that's part of the reason Dad still does work on the inside for them. To protect Mom from them. They don't dare touch her, or he could turn against them, but it's like walking a tightrope. They could decide to have Dad taken out, and at that point, Mom has no value. Jesus Christ, why couldn't he have just been a car salesman?"

I couldn't agree more.



Over the next several weeks, I make the Vero crime family's life hard by doing what I call hit-and-runs. After doing one, I'd lay low, usually changing hotels, for several days before going after another member in another manner. Using the long ago learned lessons of my father, I've caused a lot of chaos for a family of criminals that like to hide in the shadows. Thanks to me, they're right out on Front Street for the world to see.

Sitting outside at a small coffee café, I keep my sunglasses on and hat pulled low. I wait patiently, sipping my coffee, eyes on the sidewalk on the other side of the street. When I see what I'm here to see, my heart literally stops for a few beats.

My sister, Aria, walking with another female, has her head up and her eyes carefully watching her surroundings. She's not obvious about it, but I know—knew—her tells very well. It seems they haven't changed since I last saw her. While her companion chatters on, oblivious to the world around her, Aria has already clocked that she has a tail.

I move my eyes to the two men sitting in a car and watch them to be sure they're only here to observe Aria. Les mentioned that all three of them are tailed from time to time, and today seems to be Aria's turn. The family is keeping tabs on whoever they consider a possible asset and/or threat.

I look back to my sister and duck my head a little more when she and her friend cross the street, heading toward me. They

pass my table by mere feet before entering the café. Glancing carefully at the men, I find them parked and waiting for Aria to reappear. I casually zip up my hoodie and pull the hood over my hat blocking my profile. Holding my phone like I'm scrolling through it, I snap a picture of the men.

I hold my breath when Aria exits the café with her friend and a large container of coffee, then takes a seat at the table in front of me. Aria sits facing away from me, and I start breathing again.

"I don't think he's a very good hygienist. We could find a better one if we tried," the blond woman with my sister says.

"You only feel that way because he dumped you. You thought he was a great hygienist when you two were dating," Aria replies flatly.

"That's not true! I'm just not sure our patients are comfortable with a male hygienist!"

"Not true. We've never had a single complaint about him, and he's a great addition to the practice. Maybe if you didn't foolishly hook up with a co-worker, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Ruining someone's career because you made a mistake is beyond wrong, Allison," Aria states in a calm but serious tone.

"It would just be easier to let him move on to a different job," the blond says in a whiny voice. "It's just too uncomfortable with him there now."

"That's a 'you' problem. Not a 'me' problem. We agreed that we'd never date within the office. You did, and this is the consequence. I'm heading back to the office. I have a 12:45 appointment. You coming?" Aria asks while standing with her cup in hand.

"We're not done having this conversation, Aria!"

"I am. See you later," Aria states before walking away.

After a moment's hesitation, the blond hurries to catch up to Aria, and I watch them walk back the way they had come.

Within a minute, the car with the men follows at a distance. I don't move for several minutes. Not until I can no longer see my beautiful sister and not until I can breathe normally again. The pain of being so close and yet not being able to talk with her is overwhelming. Not having her in my life has been impossibly hard. I had to train my mind to treat it like a death just to survive it myself. When it's possible to move, I leave the area, walking several blocks to my car.

I need to finish things, and soon, because I need my family safe.



“The photo is the same as the first one you sent me. Those men are all soldiers for the Vero family. I'm not positive on who is aligned with what members, though. All are dangerous,” Les says. “If they're following other members around, then your assumption is correct. There really is a takeover being planned. Your deeds will be blamed on other members and cause total chaos. Perfect timing for you to be here now.”

“Yeah,” I agree before saying what's really on my mind. “I saw Aria today. She's beautiful. Looks so much like Mom.”

“Yes, she does. They're close. Mom's usually the only one who can get through to Aria when she shuts down. I spend a lot of time at the house, but she doesn't open up to me like she does with Mom.”

“It hurts my soul to know she's become so different than the sister we grew up with. I hate that I'm to blame for that,” I quietly say into the phone.

“You're not to blame. You had no choice but to run, and us still being alive is proof of that. Circumstances are the cause, but hopefully, with you back here, she'll return to the person we used to know.”

“With everything going on, maybe you should move back home. I don't think it would raise suspicion within the family at all,” I state.

“I was planning on talking to you about that. I can pack a few bags after work today. I’d feel better being there with them.”

“Good. They won’t think anything of it, will they?”

“Not at all. Mom called me earlier and said that Aria’s nervous about Leonardo on top of all that’s happening, so that’s reason enough.”

“Okay, brother. I’ll let you get back to work. Talk later,” I say before disconnecting.

I grab my wallet, hat, and hoodie before making my way to my car. I need to drive a few towns over and restock supplies. It’s time to dye my hair again, buy snacks, more burner phones, and the other necessary items to continue my reign of hell.

Moving to a different hotel, I go through my normal routine. When finished, I make my way to the bathroom. Not long after, I’m a ginger-haired man, eyebrows and all. Looking in the mirror, I realize how much weight I’ve lost since leaving Denver. I look nothing like the man that left there. Even my usual smile is missing.



Once again, I find myself prone on a rooftop. It takes me several minutes to find the correct home from the distance between us. I don’t like what I’m about to do, but I see no way around it. I need them to be distracted, paranoid, and going after each other so I don’t have to do all the work of breaking down their crime syndicate.

Peering through the high-powered scope, I watch for the person I’m targeting today. Normally, I’d never do this kind of thing during the daytime, but I want them to never feel safe. Patiently, I wait.

When the FBI agent in charge of the Chicago division appears in view, I’m not completely surprised. The fact that he’s taking a poolside seat with a capo from the Vero family proves little. He could be a friend or there as an investigator. I doubt the

latter, but it's possible, and I don't like jumping to conclusions. Also, it matters little to me or my mission.

I wait until both men are sitting comfortably with their drinks in hand before I place the crosshairs where I want the bullet to hit. Its deadly force tears through the top of the table sitting between the two men. While both men are diving for cover, I pump two more rounds into the pool.

Once again, I break down my rifle, secure the strap of its case over my shoulder before leaving my perch. Since the house I'm sitting on is secluded from view of the other homes and it's vacant, I take my time getting to the ground behind the garage. Using the back entrance, I enter the garage, stow my gear in my car, and calmly back out. Driving down the residential street, I don't notice a single person looking around in surprise or suspicion. This is Chicago. Hearing a few gunshots is not uncommon, and most people prefer to mind their own business. As for home security cameras, if they look for anything, they'll find the lenses have been spray-painted black.

I take a long, circuitous route back to the hotel, always watching for a tail. When I find none, I return to my temporary room. I wait until dark before walking the parking lot until I find a car sitting by itself, and I exchange license plates with it. No sense in not taking every precaution, so I exchange plates often.

Returning to my room, I flip on the TV and find an action movie. I'm trying to keep my mind busy because I know what the date is today, and it's been eating at me. Today is Pooh and Pippa's wedding, and I'm hundreds of miles away. I won't get to see her walking down the aisle toward her future and one of my best friends. I won't get to celebrate their big day or see Craig's face when he realizes he finally has a dad to be proud of. I won't get to see Tammy's tears of joy or the ones that Trigger will try to hide.

Worse yet, I know Ava and Taja must have had their babies by now, and I'm not there to welcome them to their new world.

I've said a prayer every day since I left that both have healthy babies and easy deliveries. I've worried about Taja and Vex, especially since their earlier tragedy.

Trying to pull my mind back to the movie, I know it's not much use. The memories and worries are flooding my system, and I'm helpless to stop them. Has Tessie made the clubhouse a drive-thru yet? Has Bella told anyone other than me about why she's saving her money? Does Craig know that he'll have to attend regular school soon? Has Mac found his stash of cashews in Axel's garage yet? Did Ivy's brother leave her life, or is he still causing her issues? Has Lucy moved on to a new man, one who doesn't mislead her with lies? Does she hate me? Will she ever forgive me?

Jumping off the bed, I know I must leave the room and find something to busy myself with before I call her and beg her to wait for me. It wouldn't be fair since I don't even know if I'll be alive past tonight, but the urge to ask that of her is great. I gave up so much, but hope is hard to kill. There's a part of me that hopes she'll wait for me forever, in case I can survive this, but I know how selfish that is, and she deserves so much more.

I get into my car and leave the hotel behind. Sleep is not going to come, so I may as well get some surveillance done. Twenty minutes later, I find myself outside a nightclub that holds the person I'm most curious about. While the nightclub is probably nice inside, it's situated in a sketchy neighborhood.

I find a safe spot for the car, then stick to the shadows to return to the back lot of the nightclub. I watch as people come and go for a few hours before the ones leaving far outnumber those coming. The music is finally cut off, and I know it's closing time. Dozens of people pour out and drunkenly make their way to cars. When there are only a few cars left, I move into a shadow close to the car I've been watching all night.

Two men exit the building, with one locking the door behind him while the other is engrossed in his phone.

"Night, boss," the man who locked the door says before walking to a crotch-rocket-type motorcycle.

“Night. See you tomorrow,” Leonardo says as he leans against his car, still looking at his phone.

Motorcycle guy starts his bike, revs the engine a few times before blasting out of the lot. My plans change instantly when I look around and know that we’re completely alone. I secure my hood and pounce.

“What the fu—” he shouts before my fist makes his words end on a groan.

When he hits the ground, I lean down and deliver a few more hard blows to his face. While he’s stunned, I run my hands over him and remove the gun tucked into his shoulder holster. Tossing it aside, I commence the ass-whooping of a lifetime. Fists and feet, I give no mercy.

When he stops moving, unconscious but alive, I pick up his gun and phone. Holding it near his face, the phone comes to life. I quickly go to settings, set a pin code, and shut off location. I pocket the phone, stick the gun in the back of my jeans and then pull his wallet, a burner phone, and keys from his pocket.

Popping open his trunk, I drag him to it and then muscle his body inside. I close the trunk, go to the driver’s door and climb inside. Starting the car, I drive it a block over to another parking lot of a vacant business. Pulling out a knife, I stab two tires. Jogging back to the nightclub, I use his keys to enter it. I make quick work of smashing bottles of alcohol before setting it ablaze. Once again, using the shadows for cover, I return to my car and drive away.

Leonardo will need to spend his time healing and not plotting on how to force my sister into marriage.

Returning to my room, I pull out his two phones. They’re a wealth of information that I can use to my advantage. Names, numbers, some addresses, and a lot of texts of associates in the criminal world. It’s also clear that Leonardo is in on the plan to take over the family to better his position.

Sleep may come easier now that I’ve gotten in a workout.

Chapter 14

Lucy

Chubs has been gone for months now, but my heart hasn't even begun to heal yet. I take one day at a time and hope to get through it still sane at the end of it. I refuse to make plans for anything further than a day or two in advance. I can't look that far ahead, or a whole lifetime of emptiness is staring back at me. Baby steps is what Lisa reminds me when I get overwhelmed.

Pooh and Pippa's wedding has come and gone, and it was beautiful. The women were stunning, the men all handsome, and the kids adorable. Craig stood off to the side and signed to Luke during the ceremony. Craig improvised with his own version of the wedding vows, raising more than a few eyebrows along the way. Ava and I snickered a few times over what was being signed, but all in all, the wedding went off without a hitch.

The only time things got uncomfortable for me was when Pippa tossed her bouquet, and it landed in my lap. I hadn't stood with the other single women waiting to catch it, and yet I ended up with it. My mind wanted to rage at the injustice of it all because if Chubs were here, I would most likely be the next bride. But he's not, and that ship has sailed. Instead of ripping the bouquet to shreds, I smiled serenely at Pippa's horrified expression and gave her a wink. She relaxed, and the festivities resumed.

"You Lucy'd yourself that time," Lisa whispers with a small frown. "After the reception, we can torch that fucker."

"It's fine. If the bouquet hadn't hit the ceiling fan, it wouldn't have landed in my lap. I should give it to Tessie for luck. She wanted it so bad, she leveled three women trying to get into position."

"That was hilarious! That one women's dress ended up near her own ears!" Lisa says with a snort of laughter.

“Can I have this dance, please?”

I turn to find Axel standing next to my chair, bright smile in place.

“Is it going to be a normal dance, or are you going to toss me around like a bag of beans?” I ask because, well, it is Axel.

“Normal, I promise.”

I stand and take his arm, but I know I’m making a mistake, especially when Lisa wishes me luck.

As we come to a stop on the dance floor, the music starts up again. I groan and turn to make my getaway, but Axel holds onto my arm.

“Come on, Lucy! It’ll be fun! I know all the moves, so you just need to follow along. I’m a great leader!”

“Why can’t Bailey dance this one with you?” I whine as Axel starts dancing and moving me with him.

“She threatened Big Al and the Twins if I tried making her, so I chose you instead. You’re a lucky girl!” Axel answers gleefully as he twirls me away and then back into him.

“I’m not doing the lift!” I shout to be heard over the music.

“That’s the best part! Of course, you are!”

I cringe so hard when I see the others stepping back off the dance floor. Their hooting can be heard two counties away, and all faces are sporting big smiles while I try to find a way out of this Axel-sized predicament. I give up when I spot Bailey laughing her ass off, giving me two thumbs up, and little Alex clapping while swinging her dress back and forth.

While I love the movie *Dirty Dancing* and all things Patrick Swayze, I never thought I’d have to dance to “I’ve Had The Time of My Life” with a large, bald biker. A biker, I must admit, that has some seriously good dance moves.

Still, I’m not thrilled when he picks me up and then spins us before setting me back down and grasping one hand to send me out for another twirl. When he backs a few steps away,

Tammy, Tessie, Taja, Livi, James, and a drunken Horse join him dancing the sequence of moves prior to the lift. When Axel nods his head at me, I think to myself, fuck it. I take two running steps and am lifted high in the air to raucous applause. When Axel finally sets me back on my feet, I grin up at him.

“Thank you, Axel. That was fun.”

“I like you best when you smile, Little Lucy. I just needed to see one today,” Axel says sincerely. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” I say before making my way toward my table.

“How come Axel gets a dance, but I don’t?” Craig asks.

“He made me, but I’ll dance with you because I want to,” I answer.

“Come on, Lisa. I can handle two girls at once,” Craig says before grasping both our hands and leading us to the dance floor. “Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll marry the twins, and I’ll already have it all figured out.”

After Craig came a succession of bikers, their women, and kids, all making me feel a part of this family and special day. No one left Lisa out of the fun either, and we both smiled at our parents enjoying themselves as well.



“Your kid is a pork chop,” I grumble to Ava while shifting Chasin’s body to my other arm.

“I know he is. I can’t believe how fast he’s growing,” she says while glancing in our direction. “He and Liam will be the only defensive lineman needed for their high school football team.”

“Can I hold him?” Candy asks from beside me.

“Yes, please, before my arm falls off,” I answer while transferring his chubby body to Candy.

Candy and I are hanging out in Ava’s catering kitchen while she tests out new appetizer recipes. Candy has become a close friend of mine and Lisa’s, and we spend a lot of time together.

Ava is thrilled to have her as a tenant and sings her praises often.

We've come to find out that Candy isn't one to sit still for long. She likes to keep busy, so it's not uncommon to find her in the bakery kitchen washing dishes or clearing tables. She refuses to take pay for helping out, and it's quite amusing to watch her and Ava battle over that topic.

Candy and I meet at the gym a few times a week and work out together now. My mom and Lisa join us for some of the classes, and the guys tailor them to suit our individual needs. Lisa and I are constantly amazed at how quickly our mother has gained skills and how hard she works at them. The Governor of Colorado's wife, Miriam Douglas, even insists the guys aren't pushing us hard enough. I think a huge reason she likes coming is because of Candy and Axel's ongoing battle of wits. I've even caught her betting on the outcome a few times with Pooh.

"How do you like working at the animal rescue?" Ava asks Candy.

"Love it. I'm learning a lot about animals too. Pigeon and Ivy asked if I'd work for them at the ranch part-time, and I'm thinking about it. It would only be during their busy times, but a day here or there would be nice," Candy answers while smiling down at Chasin.

The door to the kitchen opens and in walks Trudy and Bella. Bella moves to check out what Ava's making, and Trudy zeros in on Candy and Chasin. Trudy stares hard at Candy until Candy sighs and hands over the baby. Axel is right—Trudy's a baby hound.

It's not long and the door opens again with Petey, Gunner, Rex, and Horse entering. The men greet everyone as they head directly for the trays of appetizers. Horse moans after each bite until Rex smacks the back of his head.

"Do you have a favorite, Horse?" Ava asks as she pulls another baking sheet from the oven.

“Aren’t they all the same?” he questions before popping another into his mouth.

“Jesus, Horse. There’s a whole lot of stupid inside of you,” Rex mumbles around a bite. “Ava’s not cooking these because you’re too cheap to buy dinner for yourself. She wanted opinions on which are the best ones.”

“I like them all, Ava,” Horse replies while reaching for more.

“Thank you, Horse, but please excuse me if I don’t take your opinion seriously. You didn’t even notice the difference between stuffed mini peppers and candied bacon-wrapped shrimp,” Ava declares with a laugh.

“Shrimp? There was shrimp in that?” Horse questions in a higher voice than I’ve ever heard out of him before.

“Yes, these ones have... oh shit, Horse! You’re allergic to shellfish!” Ava shouts in alarm.

“Oh fuck! I’m going to die!” Horse wails before running to the garbage can.

“Anyone have an EpiPen? I volunteer to jab that sucker into him. You know, to save his life and all that jazz,” Rex says dismissively while looking over the latest tray of food placed on the counter.

I pull a couple of antihistamine tablets from my purse and hold them out to Petey. Petey, in turn, holds them out to Horse, but he’s busy trying to make himself vomit, and his gagging sounds are making Gunner turn an interesting shade of green.

“Take these, you simple fuck,” Petey insists, but Horse ignores him.

Candy stands from the table, takes the pills from Petey, and approaches Horse. Wrapping her arm around his head, she pulls it backward until his face is out of the garbage can. Then, without warning, she shoves the tablets into his mouth and uses two fingers to push them down his throat. Removing her fingers, she holds his jaw shut while stroking his throat. There

is no sound in the room, but stunned silence, before Horse shrieks like a banshee lit on fire.

“What the hell?” Petey gasps out before nearly falling off his stool laughing.

The room erupts in wild laughter except for Candy. She calmly washes her hands, then pulls her car keys from her pocket and turns to Horse.

“Let’s go, Princess,” she orders.

“Go? I’m not going anywhere with you! You just shoved your hand down my throat like I’m a damn dog! Not to be petty or anything, but you washed your hands AFTER instead of before! Just sayin’, I feel a little violated!” Horse shouts a little hysterically.

“Fair enough. And you’re welcome for me buying you a few extra minutes before your death, you ungrateful dick. But while you’re standing here being just that, your mouth is starting to look like a toilet plunger. Just sayin’,” Candy returns sarcastically before tucking her keys away and sitting back down in her chair.

If I’m reading the look she’s giving Horse correctly, he’s in danger of having a shrimp shoved somewhere he seriously does not want one.

At her comment, all eyes swing to Horse and his rapidly swelling face. Candy nailed the description of his mouth, though. I’m not sure I’ll ever look at him again without remembering this moment.

“I totally get the toilet plunger reference, but I’m getting more of a ‘Cherry, the Sex Doll’ vibe,” Rex states while waving a hand in front of Horse’s obscenely huge, red lips formed in an O shape.

Horse knocks Rex’s hand away and turns to Ava.

“Wis is yo fwalt!”

“No, dumbass, it’s yours. Do you want to stand around arguing that or head to the hospital before we have to find an urn for

your ashes?" I ask as I stand.

"Stay and relax, Lucy. I'll take him if you let me use your car. No fucking way am I letting him ride bitch on my bike looking like that. People might get the wrong idea," Rex says while dragging Horse behind him. Grabbing my keys, I hold them out to Rex.

Seconds after the door closes behind them, Axel carrying Alex with Bailey following, enters. Bailey's eyes are wide as she turns to me.

"What the hell happened to Horse? That *was* Horse, right?"

"Shrimp allergy," I answer with a grin.

"Is he going to live?" she asks.

"Yeah, because he's too stupid to die," Gunner replies, starting another round of laughter. "God looks out for those ones."

"Okay, whatever. Horse is gone, and let's leave him that way. Listen up! Alexia wants to tell everyone something. Go ahead, baby girl," Axel says when everyone's attention is on him and his daughter.

"Daddy is having a baby!" she crows, then throws her arms up in the air, nearly smacking Axel in the face.

"If any man could, it would be your daddy," Gunner states dryly.

"Bailey's pregnant?" Bella shouts, catching on the quickest.

"No! Daddy is!" Alex argues.

"We're pregnant, and as much as Axel wishes it were different, I'm carrying the baby. We found out today," Bailey says softly while smiling broadly at Axel.

Back slaps, hugs, and congratulations take place before things settle down a bit. When they do, I pull Alex out of Axel's arms and give her a big hug.

"Are you excited to be a big sister?" I ask.

"Yep," she says while nodding excitedly.

“You’ll be great at being a big sister,” Candy adds from beside us before turning to Axel. “What do you want? Boy or girl?”

“Girl, definitely,” he answers instantly.

Surprised at his answer, I ask, “What if it’s a boy?”

“A boy is my second choice, so that would be great too!” he replies, cheeky grin in place.

“I don’t care as long as it’s healthy and acts nothing like its father,” Trudy adds as she takes Alex out of my arms, winks at Axel, and walks off.

“You’re a great dad, Axel. Any kid would be lucky to have you for their parent,” Candy tells him sincerely before slugging him in the arm and walking off.

“She still scares me a little,” he admits while rubbing his arm.

“She’s good people. Had a rough life and no role models, so she did the best she could to get by and survive. I can respect that,” I say quietly.

“It was bad enough having her hang around the gym. Then she started turning up everywhere. With you, Ava, or Trudy. I had some doubts about her, but Ava told me a little bit about her life. I’m glad you set her up in the apartment and helped her get a better job. The club is starting to see her as one of ours, so if she needs anything else, let me know. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” I answer. “I’m really happy for you and Bailey.”

Before Axel answers, Petey joins us and holds out his phone to Axel.

“What’s up?” Axel questions as he takes the phone.

“Bella did us a solid. Just sent me a video you’ll want to see. Let’s call this your congratulations-on-your-new-baby gift,” Petey explains as he taps the play button.

Horse’s gagging sounds come through clearly, but the part that had Axel howling starred none other than his former nemesis, Candy.

Chapter 15

Chubs

From a safe distance, I watch as my mother, sister, and brother drive down the street. I know where they're going, so I don't pull out behind them. I wait and watch to see if they're being followed by anyone and breathe a sigh of relief when they're not.

I make a stop for drinks and snacks before parking across the street from our church. Same church at the same time we attended every Sunday when I was a kid. I recognize a few of the stragglers as they rush to get inside before the service starts. They're the same stragglers as before, and it's somehow comforting to know some things don't change over time.

I get my first good look at my mom and brother when they exit an hour later. Mom has aged but in a beautiful way. Elegant as always, she speaks with another patron while my brother scans the area while staying close to Mom and Aria. He hasn't changed much over the years. Less gangly teen and more bulked-up man, and that's about all.

Aria is speaking to him, but I know the second he spots me. I should be unrecognizable, but he's suspicious of anything out of the ordinary because that's how Dad trained us. I start my car, put it into gear, and drive slowly away. His eyes stay locked on me the entire time, but he shows no other signs of concern. A few minutes later, I received a text.

Les: Watch the news.

I'm several miles away from the hotel, so I flip on the radio, tune it to a local station, and listen as I drive. I do a fist pump when the news I'm hearing is good for me and bad for my enemies. My plan is working—they're turning on each other.

“Two more bodies washed up on shore yesterday, and they've been identified as members of local organized crime. We've been told by an unidentified source that there was an attempt

on the life of another member of this same crime family. We'll keep you updated as the investigation continues."

The news report helps soothe my frayed nerves a bit. As long as they're killing each other off, even if some of it's my fault, my hands won't be as bloodied. I smile as I drive, feeling better about my chances of survival. Unfortunately, I get very little precious time to feel that way before reality sets in.

The next morning, I am driving back to my old childhood home and see a familiar face. Two, to be exact. I cruise on past their car and park several blocks away. Donning my usual disguise, I grab a basketball out of the trunk. Walking to the end of the block that Mole Face and Pig Ass, the two Feds that found me in Denver, are parked, I enter the basketball court.

I have a perfect view of their car as I shoot the ball and retrieve it. There's a group of young guys playing a game at the other end, but they ignore me. After doing this for a while, I walk to a bench and take a seat. Sipping on water, I must come up with a plan about how to handle them.

I knew they'd watch for me to show up at my mother's home, but I thought they'd have given up by now. They weren't here yesterday, so why today? Do they suspect I may be the cause of the recent problems? Are they still trying to build a case and need me as a witness?

I watch as a car leaves my mom's driveway, but I'm too far away to know who is driving. The Feds make no move to follow it, though. It's the house they're watching and not whoever just left. I wait another half an hour, then return to my car. I shoot off a text to Les.

Me: Got feds watching mom's house from 1 block south. Who just left?

Les: Must be Mom because Aria left when I did this morning. How do you know they're Feds?

Me: They're the same two that found me in Denver. If no one's home, why are they sitting on the house?

Les: Looking for you or expecting trouble?

Me: Could be either. Warn the women.

Les: Will do.



I watch the bank and surrounding area for hours. Not seeing anything suspicious, I follow the black Lexus when it leaves. Hanging back, I triple-check that neither of us are being followed. When I'm positive we're not, I call my brother.

"Take a right at the next intersection."

"I'm being tailed. Is that you?" Les asks.

"Yeah, it's me."

I direct Les to a small park near the waterfront. I park at the furthest end from his car, then make my way to a bench under a tree. I watch him walk toward me and the smile that grows on his face as he gets closer. I step forward and hug my brother for the first time in over a decade. When I finally step back, we both take a long look at each other. I'm not ashamed to admit that my eyes are wet, and my heart mends just a little bit.

"My God, it's been so long, Drew," Les states with a small wobble in his voice.

"Too long. Way too fucking long. You look great, brother."

"You don't look anything like yourself," Les says with a laugh.

We take a seat on the bench, and I stay quiet while he searches my face for some resemblance to the brother he knew. He won't find much. I've changed my appearance, but life has changed the rest of me.

"I don't know if Aria would recognize you. Mom, neither."

"Then I've done something right. It's best I'm not recognized anytime soon," I answer while running a hand over my short hair.

"Dad called today. He's worried about Mom and Aria. He said he thinks it might be best if they did leave town now. Hide out

for a while until things calm down,” Les informs me.

I think about it for a minute before slowly nodding my head.

“They’re tied up with their own problems right now, so they probably won’t even notice if the women leave at this point. I was worried about it before but not so much now. You should go with them. I know a place that would be safe.”

“I’m not leaving you here to fight alone. No sense in arguing. I won’t do it. Aria can take Mom and go. I’ll need to tell them why, though,” Les explains.

“You didn’t say anything to Dad about me?” I ask.

“No, of course not. I’m not sure what he’d do with that information, and I don’t want to find out. The women should know, though. They might refuse to leave otherwise. Do you want me to talk with them, or are you going to?”

“It’s going to freak them right the hell out, but I agree. They need to know. What’s the best way of doing that?” I ask, concerned.

“We need to keep them contained because there will be a lot of screaming, swearing, and crying. You may even get shot,” Les says with a grin. “Might be best for you to come to the house. Anywhere else, and someone might overhear.”

“Are you sure the house isn’t bugged? Even outside around the patio?” I question.

“Positive. I check daily. We can do it in the study, and I’ll go through it again before you show up.”

My brother and I figure out the details then chat for a short while before going our separate ways.



I continue with my surveillance of my mother’s house but only spot the federal agents a couple more times. I still haven’t figured out what they’re up to or why they only show occasionally, but I know I can slip past them if needed.

During the last few days, the crime spree has continued, and all without my help. The mob is killing each other off at an alarming rate, and with their heightened security, I've laid low, letting them do the dirty work. Having been raised in that life, I know the other crime families are smelling blood and will take advantage of the turmoil. Another reason for me to steer clear for the time being.

Tonight is the night I'm going to let my mom and sister know I'm still alive. I'm oddly excited and yet dreading it all at the same time. I can only imagine the pain they've endured these years. With Dad in prison and believing I would turn rat, and then being told I was killed in a car explosion while working with law enforcement. Their lives imploded around them through no fault of their own.

The other problem I'm facing is convincing Mom and Aria to leave town. Neither are going to want to, but my mom will listen to reason. According to Les, Aria may not. Of course, it's easier for our mother to go along with the plan since she doesn't have a career to worry about, but Aria does. Not only a career but a business too.

I park a few blocks from my old home, then text Les. When I get the all-clear from him, I weave my way through their neighbors' lawns until I'm standing on the back patio. Standing in the blackness of night, I take a deep breath, then slip through the door. Emotion hits me hard, and my hands begin to shake. My brother is standing a few feet away, silently watching me, letting me battle for control.

The lighting is dim, but I can tell nothing's changed. The scent, the feel of my childhood home is achingly familiar. The same lamp is sitting on the antique secretary's desk my mom always used to write out her grocery lists. The same grandfather clock is standing next to the desk, waiting to announce the top of the hour. The kitchen is to my left, dark except for the light above the oven that Mom has always left on at night.

I can hear the women talking softly from the living room, and my heart squeezes tight. I look at Les, and he dips his head once, acknowledging my struggle. Reaching out, he grips my bicep in support. When I nod back, he releases me, holds up one finger, then disappears through the large double-sized doorway into the living room. I listen carefully to him speaking, but my eyes never stop soaking in the sights of my past.

“Mom. Aria. We need to talk for a minute,” Les states.

“About what’s going on with the family or something else?” Mom asks.

“Both. I don’t know how to say this to you, but things went down differently than we thought, were told, when Dad was sentenced. There’s... uh, well, we were lied to—”

“Stop!” Aria shouts, and I can clearly hear the anger in her voice.

“Aria, please, I have—” Les tries again.

“No! I don’t need to know what other way he died! I’ve accepted what we—” Aria continues, talking over Les, but this time, I hear an edge of panic in her voice.

“Aria! Please, honey. I need to hear what Les is trying to tell us,” Mom interjects.

“Then you listen, but I don’t need a new set of nightmares to live with! He’s dead, Mama. Does it matter how?” Aria asks in a desperate tone.

When I hear movement, I know Aria’s going to bolt out of the room. Decision made, I step into it. Les sees me first, but Mom’s eyes follow his immediately. Guilt, anger, sorrow, and emotions I don’t have a name for hit me hard. I watch the color drain from my mom’s face, and her hands fly to cover her mouth.

“Mom? What’s wrong? Mom?” Aria asks in concern when Mom remains deathly still, staring over my sister’s shoulder.

Lowering her hands from her face, Mom whispers raggedly, “Adriano.”

Aria remains still for a moment, then turns to see what has her mom and brother’s attention. When her eyes meet mine, she freezes. I move slowly, stiffly, into the room and stop a few feet away from their chairs.

Mom stands on shaky legs, then rushes toward me. I get my arms open in time for her body to crash into mine, pulling her in tight. I absorb her sobs and rest my chin on top of her head. I’ve made mistakes and hard decisions, but at this moment, every one of them was worth it.

“Adriano. Oh my God, my boy. Oh God, I’ve missed you,” Mom mumbles raggedly into my chest. She doesn’t ask how or why. She just clings to the son she thought was dead.

Lifting my head, I look at Les, then Aria. He has tears streaming down his face, unchecked, with no embarrassment. Aria hasn’t moved a single muscle, but her eyes are roving my features, probably looking for the brother she remembers. I’m not that person anymore. Not in appearance, mind, or soul, but I watch her silently while she searches for him.

Mom leans back and places her hands on both sides of my face. Looking down into her beautiful face, I feel a peace I haven’t felt in a long time. Mom pulls my head down and kisses both of my cheeks while her body continues to tremble.

“My boy,” she whispers.

“Missed you, Mom,” I whisper in return.

“Stop! Don’t you dare do that to her!” Aria shouts as she stands, reaching for our mother’s arm.

“Aria, please listen to me,” Les begs while reaching for Aria’s hand.

Aria jerks back as if she were burned and whirls to Les.

“Why are you going along with this shit? Why would you want to put her through it?” Aria says in a cutting tone.

Tucking Mom under an arm, I keep her close while addressing my nearly hysterical sister.

“Missed you too, Aria. So damn much. I can explain, but I get you need some time to accept the truth that’s standing in front of you. I—”

“No! No, no, no, no! Get out of this house! Go! You are NOT my brother! My brother would never have let his family think he was dead! My brother loved his family! My brother is dead! Why are you doing this to us?” Aria’s voice started out strong but ended in a tortured whisper.

After another moment of staring hard at me, she pushes between Les and me and bolts from the room. I can hear her feet running up the staircase and then a door slam. Looking at Les, I can see his indecision about following her.

“Let her be. Let her have some time alone,” Mom advises before stepping away from my side and turning to face me again. “You need to explain what happened and why you’re just now returning. I need to hear everything, but I haven’t forgotten anything about you, my son. You can talk while I warm up leftovers.”

I beat my mother and Les to the kitchen and sit at the small table we always used for breakfast. Without thought, I sit in the chair that was always mine. Mom notices because she pauses, smiles gently, then waves a hand in front of her wet eyes. I grin, then look toward the refrigerator hopefully. Les snorts before taking his own chair, and Mom starts pulling dishes from my favorite appliance.

The three of us talk for hours, covering several topics, from the why and how of my reappearance to where I’ve been to what I’ve been doing since leaving Chicago. Numerous times Mom’s eyebrows hit her hairline, once when I explained that I’ve become a biker and again when I explained about the federal agents and their role in what happened. I answer every question fully but stumble a bit when asked if I have a woman in my life. I tell them about Lucy, my feelings for her, and

what I'd hoped would be our future, but how that's changed now since I've left. Mom shakes her head insistently.

"No, Drew. A woman who loves with her whole heart will forgive most anything. If you love her like you say you do, you'll find a way to regain her trust."

I nod my head, not because I believe her, but because I don't want to argue about it. I didn't explain, though, that Lucy and I may never get the chance to work things out because I don't expect to live that long. Les and I had agreed earlier to not go into too much detail about my plans. No sense in worrying the women after having "died" once already. I wonder now if I should have even let them know I was alive because if I don't survive this, then they'll have to go through all that pain again. Les vehemently disagreed, saying they deserved to know, and I went along with his opinion.

"How old was I when I fell out of my bedroom window, and you caught me by the shirt and pulled me back inside?" Aria asks suddenly from the doorway.

"Les was seven when he fell, and I caught him. You were sitting on the bed, ripping the heads off your Barbies because they were all blond, and you had decided to hate on blonds that week. He fell because he lunged to catch the heads because he knew you'd change your mind and be upset that you only had headless Barbies after that," I answer without looking in her direction.

"Okay, that's right. You could have been told that, though. How many stitches did Les get when you were teaching him to skateboard?" she continues in a defiant tone.

"You got eight in the back of your head because you were too stubborn to wear a helmet. Les never tried skateboarding. He stuck to bikes. Les broke his left arm in second grade because you dared him to jump his bike on a ramp you made. It collapsed, he wiped out, and we all got to go to the hospital while he got it set and cast. You broke your right arm when you were 10 when you fell off a horse at your friend's house. You backed your car into Dad's the day after you got your

driver's license, then tried claiming it was a mechanical failure. You also received three tickets for speeding the first month you had your license," I explain while turning my head to look at her.

"Three? You only told me about one!" Mom exclaims.

"What was the name of our Pug?" Aria asks, completely ignoring Mom.

"Never had one. We had an English Bulldog, and his name was Mr. Smith. And I still think that was the stupidest name ever, but you insisted. Les and I gave in because we, along with our parents, spoiled you. Les wanted to name him Winston, and I wanted to call him Diesel. You got your way, and I think it damaged his soul because that dog was definitely a few fries short of a happy meal."

"How come Les and I got injured as kids, but you never did?" she questions.

"Because I'm smarter than you two put together," I answer, using the exact words I used many times when we were kids.

"And because he was usually inside emptying the fridge," Les mutters with a grin.

"Oh, that brings up a great question. What's your all-time favorite meal?" Aria asks with raised eyebrows.

"Whatever is being served at that moment."

"What's the one food you absolutely won't eat?"

"Haven't found one yet."

"What was my first boyfriend's name?"

"Toby, and he was a punk. Probably still is. You refused to listen to me and Les about how he wasn't good enough for you, but you dumped him instantly when he called me fat."

"Where did Les hide his pot from Mom and Dad?"

"Hey! Don't throw me under the bus!" Les shouts when Mom's head swings in his direction.

“At the bottom of your tampon box. He kept his bong in the hole in the wall he made at the back of his closet.”

“I hate both of you!” Les barks then groans when Mom slaps his leg.

“Who was my favorite band?”

“The Eagles, but you secretly loved the Bee Gees more.”

“What’s Les allergic to?”

“Bananas and penicillin.”

“Me?”

“Nothing but good behavior,” I answer and smile at Les and Mom’s laugh. “Any more questions, Aria, or am I your brother?”

My beautiful sister continues to stand in the kitchen doorway, staring hard at me for another moment.

“You might be.”

“I am, and I’m sorry for leaving you. I’m so sorry, honey. I get you’re mad, but please, don’t hate me forever. For a while, yeah, I’m okay with that. But not forever. Please, Aria. I can explain.”

“Don’t have to. I sat on the stairs and heard what you had to say. I don’t hate you, but I am angry about everything. I need to think about this. In the meantime, I have to go get ready for work.”

“We have things to talk about. Stuff that’s happening with the family and how it could affect you, Mom, and Les. Can you stay home today instead?” I ask hopefully.

“No, I can’t. I have appointments, and it’s a pain to reschedule so many. We can talk tonight when I get home around 5:30, though,” Aria responds.

“My little sister, the dentist. Proud of you, Aria. Brother’s a banker, and I’m a tow-truck-driving biker who shares the cab

with a pig and a bird. Mom must be so proud,” I say with a grin.

“A dentist with her own practice,” she responds airily.

“I can’t show until after dark,” I inform her, turning serious again.

“Then we’ll plan dinner for 10:30 tonight. I’m sure Mom will want to make all your favorites, so we’ll have plenty of time to talk then,” Aria answers before turning and leaving the room.

“I have to go too. Got a few things to do, but I’ll be back tonight,” I say, standing.

Mom stands and moves in for a hug. She holds on to me a little longer than I expected but finally releases me when I drop a kiss on top of her head. Les walks me out the patio doors and watches as I slip away.

Chapter 16

Lucy

I tell Lisa goodnight and head to my bedroom. Once inside, I sit on the bed and pick up my tablet. I sign on and go to the Chicago news station I've been following since Chubs left. Watching the broadcast, I grimace. I have a pretty good idea who may be behind a lot of the crime happening there.

Regardless of how I feel about Chubs these days, I still feel the now familiar feeling of fear creeping through my body. He's basically on his own, no club at his back, in a city that's at war.

Having done a lot of research, I recognize several of the names mentioned. I even saw old footage of Enzo Zanetti's arrest and trial and a picture of Chubs when he was young. He was adorable. Chunky build, big brown eyes, and curly brown hair, he resembled his father somewhat. The picture showed him walking between two guys in suits that screamed FBI agents. There was even a picture of his parents' home, the place he grew up at.

"Hey, Lucy, did..." Lisa says from the doorway.

I startle, not having heard the door open, then quickly place the tablet screen side down in my lap. I couldn't have looked more guilty if I tried, and of course Lisa catches it.

"Hmm, what'cha doing?" she asks as she takes a seat next to me and reaches for the tablet.

Gripping it tightly, I reply, "Nothing. Getting ready for..."

"Seriously? You're going to try to tell me you weren't up to something and that your death grip on your tablet means nothing?" she asks while trying to get control of my tablet.

I turn, pulling the tablet away from her, and drop my upper half on top of it on the bed. Lisa laughs before pouncing on me. She positions herself so she's sitting on my bum, then tries reaching under me for the tablet. I buck the best I can, hoping to unseat her, but I don't.

“Unless you’re hiring a hitman to take me out, hand over the tablet because we’re sisters and have no secrets. If you don’t, I’m going to be forced to tickle you until you do,” she warns.

“Lisa! Stop! It’s none of your business,” I sputter.

“Counting to three,” she says.

“Mind your own business, you nosy bitch!” I order, then gasp when she makes good on her promise.

Being super ticklish, it’s not long before I can’t breathe, and Lisa has gained control of the tablet. Sliding off me, she leans against the headboard and looks at the screen. Her eyes widen, then turn in my direction. I drop my face into the bed and wait. I hear the broadcast replaying, and I know the questions will start soon.

“Chicago? Why would you watch a Chicago news station? Does this have something to do with Chubs? It does. Holy shit! What do you know that you haven’t told me? Haven’t told Dad? He could help, Lucy!”

I pull myself up to sit next to Lisa and take the tablet back. Looking at her, I try to explain.

“Dad can’t get involved for a couple of reasons. One, Chubs chose to leave me, and I don’t want him back because he feels forced. Pretty sure I wouldn’t take him back anyway. Second, Dad has a career he’s worked his whole life for, and Chubs’ family is involved in organized crime. Dad can’t help without risking his career, and I don’t want that. You absolutely can’t mention this to anyone.”

“I won’t, I promise. Is Chubs a one-man crime spree now? The mob? He seriously had me fooled into thinking he was this gentle, caring guy. Lucy, are you sure about this?” Lisa questions.

“I don’t know what, if any, crimes Chubs has committed or if the mafia is imploding on their own. I’m not sure why he felt he had to return unless it was to keep his mother safe. He only spoke once about where he came from and how he ended up

here, and he didn't include a lot of detail. Most of what I know, I found out on my own."

"Maybe you need to speak with the club? If you've washed your hands of him but obviously, still care what happens to him, turn your information over to Gunner. Let them decide what to do or how to handle his leaving the club."

"I know I should, but for some stupid reason, I still feel loyalty to Chubs. He didn't want them to know, so I've not said a word. I should have earned some kind of award for surviving Gunner's talks. The man is intimidating as hell. Then I got cornered by Trigger and realized Gunner went easy on me. For now, I'm not going to tell the club anything, though."

"Okay, I get that. I won't say anything unless you do something stupid and go to Chicago. Then I'm telling Dad, Gunner, Trigger, hell, even Craig," Lisa declares.

"Fair enough. Now get out of my room so I can get some sleep," I answer while giving her shoulder a shove.



Walking into the clubhouse, I take a seat at the bar next to Pooh. I look for Toes, but he's not behind the bar. Instead, I see James. He's fallen for Mac's favorite game, and that's arguing. Mac's standing in front of James on the bar, and it only takes a second to realize what the argument is about.

"Yes, firemen run into danger but not as often as cops, Mac," James explains patiently.

"Do too," Mac insists while ruffling his feathers.

"No, they don't. They get a call here or there, but cops go from one complaint to another. Plus, people don't generally shoot at firemen," James states.

"Peeps like fireman!" Mac screeches.

"People don't like to follow the laws, but they like us when they need us," James continues.

“Fireman rule,” the feathered menace states like it’s a fact known to everyone.

“Are you trying to piss me off, Mac?” James asks suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’m bored,” Mac answers before strolling away from James and coming to a stop in front of me and Pooh.

“What’s shaking, Lucy?” Mac asks.

“Why are you picking fights with James?” I ask instead of answering.

“Assman’s not here,” Mac explains.

James sets my drink in front of me, replaces Pooh’s beer with a full one, then turns to me.

“Cockatoos are so much nicer than Macaws. Prettier too. Cockatoos rule. They’re better dancers too,” James says with a wicked grin.

“Suck it, Copper!” Mac shrieks, then flings a peanut at James.

James walks off chuckling, while Mac mutters a string of swear words.

“Hey, Pooh, Lucy. Can I talk with you for a minute? Before dinner’s served,” Bella asks quietly as she comes to a stop next to us.

When we both say yes, she points to the door then proceeds to walk outside. We follow and find her taking a seat in a lawn chair, so we do the same. Looking at her face, I can tell she’s nervous.

“Something wrong?” Pooh asks with concern.

“No, everything’s fine. You’ve both told me before that if I ever needed something, I could come to you.” When we both nod our heads, she continues. “I need your help. You know how I’ve been working to save money? There’s a reason I wanted to earn the money and not just have it given to me.”

“What can we help you with, Bella?” I ask, curious as to where this is going.

“I need someone like you to back me up, to support my decision, Lucy, and I need Pooh to teach me to ride a Harley,” she states.

Pooh stares at her for a few beats before asking, “Of course, I’ll teach you, but why didn’t you ask Petey?”

“Because I’m not sure how Mom will take this, and Pops might be busy keeping her calm,” Bella answers with a cheeky grin.

“I’ll support you however I can, Bella, but I don’t think Trudy will be upset that you want to learn to ride,” I say.

“She’ll be fine with me learning to ride. That’s not what’s going to cause a problem, though,” Bella responds, then turns to look at Pooh. “Club rules state that each member must buy their own bike when they join. Even Gunner and Axel had to work to earn the money for their first bike. Am I right?”

“Yeah, that’s correct. But you wanting to learn to ride has nothing to do with that. You don’t have to buy your own bike to ride on club property. I have a bike that—” Pooh explains before I cut him off.

“You want to join the club as a member, right?”

“Yes, I do. I get my driver’s license next year, so I’d like to start learning to ride now. I’ve saved my money, and I have most of what I need for the bike I want to buy.”

“You 100% have my support, and I’ll throw the world’s biggest hissy fit if anyone tells you that women can’t join,” I tell her while shooting a silent Pooh a look.

“Pooh?” Bella asks tentatively.

“Why, Bella?” Pooh questions. “Why join the club and go through the bullshit of prospecting and all that when you’re here anyway?”

“When I was the most terrified I’ve ever been, when the traffickers had me and Carmen, I didn’t know if we’d survive. I had pretty much figured out why they had us and had kind of accepted that I was going to be repeatedly raped, and the fear of that was literally suffocating. I was too young to understand that death would have been more merciful than what they had planned. I was so scared. I couldn’t even speak. Then you and the club showed up, saved us, and I could breathe again. It took time, but I started to trust that people could be kind and not hurtful, basically for the first time in my life. You gave me that, and it’s a gift I can never repay. Axel, Gunner, Pops—they did too. So did the women. I want to be that person for someone in need too, and being a club member can make that happen. While you guys were awesome at the time, it would have been less scary if a woman had been with you. As a member, I would be there when they’re rescued. I plan on graduating, going to college, and becoming a counselor for victims of sex trafficking, but that’s helping after the fact,” Bella explains in her quiet but not timid voice. “I want you to sponsor me, Pooh, but I’ll understand if you don’t want to. If the club votes against me joining, I’ll still become a counselor and then find a club who will accept me.”

I hold my breath while she and Pooh stare at one another in silence. I watch as Bella’s chin tips in that stubborn tilt she does when she’s determined. Glancing at Pooh, I can clearly see pride shining in his eyes as he looks at the young lady he helped save. When Pooh suddenly stands, I have a moment of panic that he’s going to walk away from Bella without answering. My shoulders sag in relief when he doesn’t.

Leaning down, Pooh grips Bella’s hands and pulls her to standing. Moving his hands to each side of her face, he tips his head down enough to rest his forehead against hers.

“Biggest honor ever would be sponsoring you, Bells. Of course, I will. Love you, girl.”

“Thank you, Pooh. Love you too,” Bella responds with a wobble in her voice.

Giving Bella a quick hug, Pooh steps back, then grins.

“We can talk with your parents tonight about learning to ride because I want Trudy’s consent and not her wrath. When do you want to talk to them about me sponsoring you?”

“After I learn to ride. Let’s dodge that bullet for now,” Bella says with a laugh. “We’ll keep that a secret for now.”

“I won’t say a word,” I assure them.

“I know you won’t. When we talk to Mom about me joining the club, will you please be there, Lucy? She really likes and listens to you, and you always cut through the crap and get right to the point. I know Ava will support me too, but I don’t want her to have to keep a secret from Gunner, and she would have to if I told her now.”

“Absolutely. So, you do know that Axel’s going to pitch a fit when he finds out you asked Pooh and not him, right?” I ask, smiling because that’s a conversation I want to be here for.

“That’s just the icing on the cake,” Pooh says with a huge grin. He’s already envisioning the pouting that’s going to happen.

“Yeah, I know he’ll be upset, but he can’t keep a secret, so I couldn’t talk with him now without everyone knowing what I’m planning. He’s such a gossip,” Bella states with an eye roll and smile.

“True,” I say before pulling her in for a hug. “So proud of you, Bella.”



Walking into the kitchen, I get busy helping the other women get dinner finished and served. As I’m setting the last few dishes on the bar so everyone can serve themselves buffet style, the main door swings open. In walks Cash’s family members, and as usual, the Aunts are giving everyone hell.

Cash’s dad, Lars, is being pushed in his wheelchair by his caregiver, Terry. The Aunts, Lola and Lottie, follow them, with Cash, Livi, Liam, and Snots bringing up the rear. Snots spots me and immediately runs for cover behind a chair. Liam

is holding Livi's hand but lets go and trots in my direction, arms outstretched. I bend down in time to scoop him up and cuddle him close. Liam is a stout, blond-haired, good-natured little boy who loves his Aunt Lucy and finds me whenever we're both here. His other favorite person is Bella, and she stops close to ruffle his hair.

"I'm just saying, Terry, that there's gay, then there's gaaaaay," Lottie explains while saying the last gay in an exaggerated high-pitched voice.

"And you have packed ten pounds of gaaaaay in a two-pound sack," Lola says as she walks past Terry and Lars and takes a seat at a nearby table.

"James is as gay as I am, and you don't harass him," Terry argues while stopping Lars's wheelchair at the table next to Lola.

"No, he's not. James is gay and normal. You're just a hot mess," Lottie states with a wave at Terry's clothing options for today. "And James isn't trying to convert poor Snots into being whatever it is you are by dressing him like some freak of the doggie world."

Looking over Terry's outfit, I hold back a snort. Elton John's stage outfits have nothing on Terry's clothing today. Terry's always been unique in his clothing, but he's outdone himself today. Lime green velvet jogging suit with black biker-type boots, but they're made into platforms. Very tall platform boots with numerous buckles, chains, and even a small bell attached to the laces. Rhinestone-studded sunglasses pushed to lay across his forehead, and a lot of gold and sparkly jewelry.

Terry is himself, and I like that he doesn't change to fit others' perceptions. Not that I would ever wear the things he does, but he's happy in them, so more power to him. I approach and lean my shoulder into him. When he notices me, he drops his head, and I kiss his cheek. He, in turn, kisses my temple, then the top of Liam's head, before turning to resume battle with the Aunts. Above and beyond all the fighting with the Aunts, Terry takes

excellent care of Lars and is a permanent fixture in their family.

“Hey, Cash, Livi. What do you feed this kid?” I ask while adjusting Liam’s chunky body on my hip.

“He’s an easy keeper,” Cash says before reaching out to take his son. “Another few bowls of mac and cheese, and you won’t be lifting him anymore.”

“Probably not.”

The door flies open, and in comes Tessie, Taja, and Vex, who’s carrying baby Kalea tucked against his shoulder. Tessie stops beside me and slings an arm over my shoulders.

“I have this driving thing all figured out now. Won’t need any more lessons, but thanks for the help,” she says confidently.

“You have two more, and you’re not getting out of them. Then I’m giving you a road test, and if you pass, Gunner said he’d lift the ban on you driving on club property. Even though we both know you’ve ignored the ban several times,” I remind her.

“I think you just enjoy torturing me,” Tessie groans before removing her arm and stalking away.

“We have to talk. I need to know how you got her driving without endangering everything around her,” Taja says with a huge smile.

“I have skills, but those are my secrets,” I answer before holding my hands out to take Kalea from Vex.

The most beautiful man I’ve ever seen suddenly scowls at me, turns suddenly, and walks off. Shocked, I look at Taja in bewilderment.

“You know how everyone has teased Axel for never wanting to let anyone hold Alexia? Vex was especially hard on Axel and harassed him mercilessly. Now that he has his own daughter, he’s finding he doesn’t like sharing her either. He won’t admit it openly like Axel did, but he’s very stingy when it comes to letting me and Tessie hold her. He’s pretty much

quit working at the strip club because he hates being away from her that long,” Taja answers, then laughs loudly.

Vex turns from where he’s standing and throws a glare in our direction, but it doesn’t stop me from laughing with Taja. We watch, somewhat gleefully, when Trudy walks up to Vex and holds her hands out. Vex hesitates, glares at Trudy, but hands the baby over. When Trudy turns to walk away, Vex follows and continues hovering when Trudy takes a seat. Men and their daughters.

“Hi, Taja. Do you like my new shirt?” Craig asks, focusing solely on Taja.

“Yes, I do! It’s very nice,” Taja says enthusiastically while bending down to give Craig a hug.

“Hi, Craig. Notice me? I’m right here,” I joke since he notices little when Taja’s in the room.

“See you, Lucy. Hello. I have seats for us over here, Taja,” Craig states, then takes Taja’s hand and pulls her behind him.

I turn and find Luke and the twins, Mia and Zoe, standing behind me, grinning. I sign hello to Luke then say hi to the twins. When they continue to grin at me, I start to get worried.

“What’s up?” I sign and say out loud at the same time.

“Daddy said that you are going to tell Craig that he has to start school next week, and we want to be there when you do. There’s going to be an epic meltdown,” Zoe states excitedly.

“Wait. Why am I the one telling Craig? That’s Pooh and Pippa’s job,” I reply.

“Because Pooh and Pippa don’t want to die in their sleep,” Mia says before giggling loudly.

“Well, your daddy is wrong. Not my circus, not my monkeys,” I insist.

I watch as Luke signs and start shaking my head, no, halfway through his words.

“Doesn’t matter that I don’t live on the property. It’s not my job to tell him. Trigger and Tammy don’t live on the property either, so one of them can.”

“He’s my fishing partner, and I don’t want to lose that. He never listens to Tammy, and they just argue non-stop. Tag, you’re it!” Trigger says as he walks past, tossing an evil grin over his shoulder.

“No! You all need to man up and do it yourself!” I shout at Trigger’s retreating back.

The kids laugh and walk off. Looking around the room, I notice most everyone has a full plate in front of them except for Rex. He’s sitting in a recliner at the back of the room, sunglasses still on his face. It dawns on me that he’s sleeping. Walking to the bar, I fill a plate, grab a beer, and walk across the room to Rex’s side. Setting the food on the small table next to him, I shake his arm as I repeat his name. When Rex jerks awake, I take a seat in a chair next to him.

“You need to eat, Rex,” I say softly as he pulls his glasses off and rubs his face.

He looks exhausted and somewhat disoriented for a moment before he focuses on me.

“Hey, Lucy. Thank you, I’m starving,” Rex states as he scoops up his plate and starts shoveling food into his mouth.

“Slow down. There’s plenty more,” I add with a small laugh.

“Sorry. I don’t remember the last time I ate a real meal. Been living on energy drinks, coffee, and candy bars. Thank you for the food, Lucy.”

Guilt hits hard because I know why he’s so exhausted. Rex isn’t the type to give up his search for Chubs, and I could end it for him. I have the information he’s looking for, but I don’t feel it’s my place to share what Chubs wanted kept secret. Again, I question myself as to why I’m giving Chubs loyalty when the club has stood behind me, not him.

“Anything new?” I ask in a subdued tone.

“Nothing solid. I found a Facebook post from a waitress talking about how much food a guy ordered and ate, but she couldn’t give me much of a description. Sounded like it could have been Chubs, but I can’t find a reason why, if it was him, he’d have been in that particular town. So fucking frustrating,” Rex answers between bites.

“If he doesn’t want to be found, why keep looking for him?”

“Why do you assume he left by choice? Feds had been here off and on for months, talking to him, wanting something. Why aren’t you assuming they took him?” Rex questions while looking hard at me.

“Cash said he had a chat with the Feds after Chubs had left, so I figured they had nothing to do with it,” I reply, trying to sound convincing.

“Uh huh. What aren’t you telling us, Lucy? If he left because he wanted to, then that’s his choice. I just need to know that’s what happened because I can’t quit searching until I know he’s not being kept hostage for some reason.”

“If I hear anything, I’ll let you know,” I mumble before standing and walking away.

I fill a plate and take a seat with Ivy and Pigeon. They’re about the only ones here that haven’t questioned me about Chubs, and I’m hoping that doesn’t change today.

“Hi, Lucy. Are you still coming out next week to go over the financial stuff for the loans for the ranch? We want to get going on the rest of the buildings and updates needed,” Pigeon asks.

“Yeah, I can come out any day you’re available.”

“When you come, remember to wear boots. We’ll squeeze in a riding lesson for you while you’re there,” Ivy reminds me.

“That sounds great. I might bring a kid or two with me if that’s okay.”

“Absolutely. Bella was coming out on Friday to spend the weekend, so if you come then, she could ride with you and

save Petey the trip. Luke will probably want to come out too since he's been doubling up on his lessons," Ivy suggests.

"How's he doing?" I ask.

"Awesome! He's really bonded with Lucky, the horse he rides. Luke does great with all the animals, but he and Lucky are definitely bonded," Ivy answers excitedly.

When Pigeon snorts out a laugh, I look to see what he's laughing about. Gee, Ava's pig, is strutting across the floor in a T-shirt that reads, "Pig in a Blanket" across the back. On his feet are the cutest red flip flops with little kites on them. Behind him is his best friend, Snots. Not noticing me, Snots stops, flops onto his side, and immediately starts snoring. Gee snorts a few times, then gives up and flops belly down next to his friend and starts his own snoring.

While looking down at the chubby pair, I feel a whoosh of air and look up to see Priscilla landing on Ivy's outstretched arm. Prissy coos and kisses Ivy a few times before settling down.

"She's so beautiful," I murmur, gaining Prissy's attention.

"Yesssss, ma'am," she says in her beautiful southern accent.

"She's humble too," Pigeon adds with a grin. "Humble and beautiful, Miss Priscilla."

"No cap," Prissy states before flaring her yellow crest.

"Where's Bailey and Axel?" I ask, realizing they're not here.

"Ma man's sick," Prissy states slowly, then makes her cute little cooing sound.

"Axel's sick? Or has his pregnancy symptoms kicked in already?" Pigeon questions while grinning at Prissy.

His grin disappears when Prissy sticks her foot onto his plate, withdraws an asparagus spear, and flings it at his face.

"What the fuck, Prissy?" Pigeon complains as he picks the veggie off his shirt. "You weren't here for the last pregnancy. I asked a valid question."

“You such, fird foy,” Prissy speaks very slowly, but her words aren’t as distinct as usual.

“You suck, bird boy!” Ivy repeats before laughing out loud.

When Prissy stands, her crest feathers on end, and sticks her face into Pigeon’s, I join Ivy in laughing. Pigeon makes a desperate attempt to avoid her beak and nearly falls off his chair. This makes Ivy and I laugh even harder, and Prissy moves to the table in front of Pigeon’s plate. While staring Pigeon down, Prissy drinks from his glass by dunking most of her head inside it.

“No! Oh crap, Prissy, no, don’t drink that! It’s beer!” Ivy shouts as she hurriedly covers the glass with her hand.

“Just what we need. A drunk large-assed bird that already has an attitude,” Pigeon mutters while taking the glass from Ivy.

“Peer?” Prissy asks with a head tilt.

“It’s not good for birds, sweetie. Don’t ever drink it,” Ivy explains while Pigeon takes the glass to the sink behind the bar.

“Neva,” Prissy agrees.

“Have you had any before? Like, before you came to our table?” I ask suspiciously.

“Yup,” Prissy states while popping the “p” loudly.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” Ivy says worriedly. “Where’s Ava? Maybe she’s run into this with Mac and knows what to do.”

“Just saw her head into the kitchen. I’ll get her,” Pigeon says as he returns to our table then leaves it again.

“She’s probably fine. She didn’t get that much,” I state and then watch as Prissy slowly tips over and lands face first in Pigeon’s mashed potatoes.

Ivy quickly picks her up and is wiping her face clean when Ava and Pigeon arrive at the table.

“Mac got into a few mixed drinks once. It can be very serious, but the vet told me what to watch for. Mostly, don’t let them fly at all. Mac was slurring his words, and he was hungover the next day. Scary as hell but amusing once I knew he was okay. Let me take her into the kitchen and see if I can get her to drink some water. Someone call Axel, please,” Ava says as she takes Prissy from Ivy.

Before Ava makes it to the kitchen door, Prissy starts singing loudly. It takes me a few seconds to place the song due to her slurring, but “The Night the Lights Went Out In Georgia” has new meaning after hearing a drunk cockatoo belt it out. Her lights were certainly going to go out tonight. When Prissy disappears into the kitchen, Mac picks up the song where she left off. He tosses in several loud laughs, most likely because he knows Prissy’s going to be in a world of hurt tomorrow. Knowing how bratty Mac can be, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out he’s the one that talked her into indulging.

A few minutes later, Axel comes crashing through the door, looking frantic. I point toward the kitchen, and he barely slows when he gets to the swinging door. A loud crash, a wail, and then swearing comes from behind the door as all heads turn in that direction.

Toes comes stumbling through the door, holding both hands over his face. James tosses a bar towel at him, and it lands perfectly on his shoulder. When Toes just stands there, not making any moves to use the towel, I get up and approach him. Taking the towel in one hand, I pull at his arm with the other. When his hands drop, I press the towel to his bloody nose. His eyes are both already swelling, and he has a huge knot on his forehead, but he’s on his feet and should survive. I continue holding the towel, giving him a minute to collect himself. When he slowly opens his eyes and spots me, he snatches the towel from my hand and leaps backward. Shocked, I take a step back too.

“You! I should have known you are here! Bad shit always happens when you’re around!” he shouts at me while pointing at my face with a finger.

“That’s not nice! Don’t holler at her!” Craig bellows as he charges across the room to stand between Toes and me.

“It’s true! She’s fucking evil!” Toes continues his rant.

Craig draws back and swings hard before I can stop him. Toes bends forward then drops to the floor, not knowing whether to hold the towel to his nose or cup his boy parts.

“That dick punch wasn’t Lucy’s fault either! That was all me!” Craig fumes. “Axel ran you over, and I dropped you. Apologize to Lucy, or I’m calling for Loki.”

“It’s okay, Craig, he just freaked out,” I attempt to calm things down.

“It’s not okay, Lucy. Toes called you evil, and that’s just number one bullshit,” Craig continues angrily.

Pooh steps beside me, leans down, and speaks quietly with Craig for a moment. Eventually, they bump fists and turn to walk away, but Craig takes my hand and insists I walk with them. When we get to the table I was sitting at, I tug on Craig’s hand. When he looks up at me, I lean down and hug him.

“Thank you for sticking up for me,” I whisper in his ear.

“Chubs asked me to look out for you, but I would’ve done it anyway,” Craig says in a quiet voice.

My heart clenches at his name, but I push it aside. What Craig just said makes me lean back and look at him closely. I wait a few seconds until Pooh walks off before squeezing Craig’s hand.

“You knew he was leaving,” I state, not ask.

“Yeah, but I haven’t told anyone. I heard things and asked him. He said he trusted me, so I’m not saying a word.”

“He does trust you, and you’re a great friend. I’m glad you’re mine too,” I say.

Craig smiles, and I see another missing tooth. When I point at it, his grin grows.

“You raking in more money?” I ask.

“Yep. I’m going to ride that train until I have no more teeth,” Craig says with an impish grin before walking away.

Family dinners at the club are never boring.



I’m sitting at my desk at New Horizons, watching Tammy pace. Today is the day everyone has been dreading. The kids are back at school, and that means it’s Craig’s first day. I don’t know who broke the news to him, but I’m grateful I didn’t have to do the honors. Tammy makes another lap around the office, then checks her phone again.

“If she has a problem, she’ll call,” I say for about the tenth time.

“I know, I know. Pooh’s with her too. They thought it was best that both took him his first day. Tomorrow, he’ll ride with Ava or Trudy and the other kids. God, I hope he doesn’t get expelled his very first day,” Tammy says while nibbling on a thumbnail.

We both look toward the door when Pippa walks through it. I take a moment to look her over for battle wounds but find none. Her clothing isn’t wrinkled, and her hair looks like it always does. Maybe this didn’t go as badly as everyone expected.

“Well?” Tammy questions instantly.

“It went very well. We met his teacher and went over where he’s at with his studies. She seems very nice, and Craig was polite but quiet. She said that for the next few days, they would be testing him to see if they’ve placed him in the correct class. Pooh did a full pat down before we walked into the school just to make sure he didn’t have something in his backpack that he’s not supposed to. Like, you know, a skunk,” Pippa says with a small laugh as she sits behind her desk.

“He didn’t, did he?” Tammy questions.

“No. We had Petey stop over and take Bart to the shop with him this morning so Craig wouldn’t be tempted.”

“Good thinking,” Tammy mumbles before taking a seat in the corner.

My phone buzzes next to me, and when I glance down, I see a text. It’s from Pippa. Hmmm. I pick up my phone and read the text.

Pippa: Craig here. Tell mom I’m ready to go home now. This school sucks donkey balls.

Me: I don’t think school lets out for hours yet, Craig. You’re supposed to stay for the whole day.

Pippa: I don’t think that’s a good idea. Bad things will happen if I do.

Me: Your mom will be hurt if you don’t even try. One day won’t kill you, I promise.

Pippa: Not me, but...? These kids are dumb. Like, really dumb. I learned this stuff years ago.

Me: The teacher said they were going to test you to see what grade to place you in. Give it a chance and you might find you like school.

Pippa: Fat chance. Bye.

Me: Bye.

“I can’t find my phone. What the hell? I had it on me in the car,” Pippa states while digging through her purse.

“Pooh might want to brush up on his pat-down procedures. Craig just texted me,” I say with a grin.

“Well, hell. He ask you to come get him?” Pippa questions with an arched eyebrow.

“He wanted me to tell you he’s ready to go home,” I admit.

“He’s been there an hour! I’m never going to survive the whole school year,” Pippa moans while Tammy and I laugh at her predicament.

Surprisingly, Craig finished out the school day without a problem.

After work, I head directly to the gym and find Candy there, already working out on the punching bag. Glancing around the gym, I see Pooh and Cash are holding classes, but Axel is sitting at the check-in desk, head resting on it. Walking to stand in front of the desk, I lean into it and study the large, bald-headed biker.

“What’s up, Axel?” I ask.

“Nothing important. Same shit, different day. I’m on my deathbed, but nobody cares,” he answers in a muffled voice.

Looks like The Devil’s Angels MC Vice President is in full-on pout mode today.

“Pregnancy symptoms?” I question.

“Probably. Pretty sure I died a few days ago, but whatever,” he replies, finally lifting his head.

I have to admit he does look like death warmed over. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his skin is missing its usual healthy tan coloring. Feeling sorry for him, I pull a water bottle from my bag and hand it to him.

“Drink this,” I suggest.

“It won’t stay down. Not much has,” he says, then moans, dropping his head back onto the desk.

“You shouldn’t be here. Why don’t I give you a ride home?” I volunteer.

“I don’t want to give whatever the hell this is to Alex, Bailey, or Prissy. Just in case it’s not sympathetic pregnancy symptoms again.”

“You have a room at the clubhouse. I’ll drive you there, set you up with some fluids and broth, and call Taja. She should probably take a look at you.”

“You would be my guardian angel, and I’ll never forget you did this for me,” Axel states as he stands.

“I’ll tell Cash that I’m taking you home. Meet me at my car. Here’re my keys.”

Axel heads toward the exit, and I walk to Cash’s side. I explain about Axel and turn to leave. Candy appears at my side, questioning look in her eyes. I explain again about Axel being sick and me taking him home.

“Give me five minutes, and I’ll ride with you,” Candy states and walks away before I can tell her it’s not necessary.

Walking to my car, I get that creepy feeling of being watched. I stop in the middle of the lot and look around. I spot a black SUV across the street with two men in it looking in my direction. When I take a step toward them, the vehicle starts and quickly pulls away. Odd, but I realize I’ve gotten paranoid lately, and that’s all this probably is too.

When I get to my car, I find Axel curled up in the backseat sound asleep. I wait, and Candy appears soon after. We chat quietly on the drive, with Candy glancing back at our slumbering princess every few minutes. When I take the last corner on the side road the clubhouse is on, I find the road blocked by a familiar-looking black SUV. I brake and start to slow when Candy shouts at me.

“Don’t stop! Don’t stop, Lucy! Go around the end of their vehicle and stomp on the gas! Go!”

Startled, I turn the wheel to the right just as two men step out from behind the vehicle. Both hold their hands up in what could be perceived as a “please help, we broke down” gesture, but instinct tells me that’s not the case. I try to squeeze between the rear of their SUV and the shoulder of the road, but there’s precious little space, and I had sped up too much.

“What the he...” Axel moans as the front left corner of my car clips the bumper on the SUV, violently shoving theirs out of the way and making mine skid sideways.

Fighting for control, I don’t let up on the gas as Candy continues to shout instructions. When I’m straight on the road again, I do as she screamed and stomp on the gas.

I can hear Axel on his phone, and glancing at Candy, I see a handgun in her hand. She's watching over her shoulder, so I look in my mirror and see the SUV is doing a quick turn to follow in pursuit.

"You're doing great, Lucy. The gate will be open, so haul ass through it. James is letting everyone on club property know to lock down. Gunner's there too. Candy? You know how to use that?" Axel asks in a calm voice.

"Yep. I never leave home without Black Betty," she responds.

"Good to know. When we hit the clubhouse, Lucy's going to drop me off, and then you two go straight to my house. I want someone armed with Bailey and Alex. Don't leave until James or Gunner comes there. Okay?"

"Got it, boss," Candy answers just as I drive through the gate and see James shutting it behind us.

I stop only long enough for Axel to bail out of the car and Gunner to hand Candy Mac. Then I drive directly to Axel's house. Bailey opens the door, and Candy hustles me and Mac into the house, then locks the door behind us.

"I'll check windows and doors," Candy states, then walks away.

"Where's Alex?" I ask, not wanting to say something that she might overhear and scare her.

"In her room, watching a Disney movie. What's going on?"

"I'm not really sure. An SUV was blocking the road just before the club property line, and two men tried getting us to stop. Candy said to keep going, so I did. I was bringing Axel home because he wasn't feeling well, and Candy came along for the ride. Axel got out at the clubhouse with Gunner," I explain.

"Wow. Wonder who they were and what they wanted," Bailey says.

"The license plate is government issued. As in, Feds. I didn't get a good look at them, but I think they might have been the

ones harassing Chubs,” Candy answers as she enters the room. “We’re secure here. Alex is being entertained by Mac and Prissy, and she’s explaining all about Disney movies to them.”

Candy walks back out of the kitchen, and we follow. Taking seats in the living room, I watch as Candy stands to the side of the front window and keeps an eye on the road. I pull my phone out and call Ava to let her know we have Mac and to see if she needs help, but she said she’s fine. Trudy’s at her house, and Petey’s on his way home.

It’s not long, and Axel calls Bailey to let her know everything’s good. By the time James made it to the corner, the SUV was gone. They must have turned around after seeing us drive through the gate.

“Let me talk to him when you’re done, Bailey,” Candy orders, and Bailey hands over her phone immediately.

Candy takes it and then walks out the front door, shutting it behind her. I’m sure she’s filling the guys in on the license plate and who she thinks it was.

“Want to stay for dinner?” Bailey asks.

“I better not. I promised Axel I’d set him up at the clubhouse for the night because he doesn’t want anyone to catch whatever he has,” I explain as Bailey grins.

“I’ll make him some food and grab a change of clothes for him then. I think whatever is wrong with him is just in his head, but it’s better to be safe than sorry, I guess.”

Stopping back at the clubhouse, Candy and I carry in the items Bailey sent for Axel. Several of the members are there and discussing what happened, so I place everything on the bar and point to them when Axel looks in my direction. I turn to leave, but Gunner’s voice stops me.

“I want you sticking close to club members for a while, Lucy. Whoever it was, and I think Candy was right, might not have been looking for you, but it’s possible they were. If they only wanted to talk to you, they could have approached you most

anywhere. They didn't, though. They tried stopping your car on a deserted stretch of road, and that concerns me."

"I'll stick with her unless I'm at work. During those times, she can hang with one of you guys," Candy states.

"That work for you, Lucy?" Gunner questions.

"Yes, that's fine. I'll make arrangements with the guys when Candy's working. Thank you."

"Any idea why they'd want to talk with you?" Gunner asks.

"No, none. They never tried before," I answer, without mentioning that the men had been sitting outside the gym earlier. I certainly don't mention that they may have been following me all day, and I hadn't noticed.

"Maybe they think you know something they don't. Today's move was that of desperation, and that's never a good thing," Gunner informs me with a warning in his voice.

I nod in agreement and let Candy herd me out the door. Once we're on the road back to town, Candy speaks up.

"Might be easier to tell that man what he wants to know and let him deal with these Fed Fuckers. I'm not scared of much, but even I wouldn't want to be on his bad side."

I nod, acknowledging her comment, but silently give myself a pat on the back for not caving into Gunner's intimidation factor. Yet.



We stopped by Candy's apartment long enough for her to grab some spare clothing, then drove directly to Lisa's condo.

Candy headed for the shower she had missed earlier, and I explained what had happened to Lisa. I didn't want to tell her or make her worry, but I had to explain my new shadow. Lisa listened closely, agreed with Gunner over her very own sister, then asked what I wanted for dinner. We did agree that our parents didn't need to know about my little run-in, literally, with federal agents.

“You need to have Trigger fix your car tomorrow. It’s drivable but needs work,” Candy advises while sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, eating Chinese takeout.

“I didn’t even think about it. Hell, I never even looked at the damage,” I admit while helping myself to more noodles. “We can take it to the shop before we go to New Horizons. Are you sure you want to be on babysitting duty?”

“Sure. I love my apartment, but it gets lonely sometimes too,” Candy responds between bites. “I’ve never really had girlfriends before either, so this is fun for me.”

“And we love having you hang with us,” Lisa adds sincerely.

When there’s a knock on the door, Lisa stands, but Candy holds up a hand to stop her. Picking up her handgun, Candy approaches the door.

“Who’s there?” Candy growls.

I can’t hear whatever the answer is, but Candy relaxes and flips the lock. Opening the door, she holds it wide while my parents walk past. Mom nearly stumbles when she sees the handgun, but Dad simply grips her arm as they join us in the living room.

“Want to explain?” Dad asks while quirking an eyebrow.

“Candy is over-cautious,” I reply, but it comes out sounding more like a question than a statement.

Dad’s eyebrow remains raised as he stares me down. I’ve never been good at lying, even though I’ve gotten in lots of practice lately, but especially to my dad. I sigh, and look at Lisa, hoping she can answer his question diplomatically.

“Two guys tried stopping Lucy’s car on the road to the clubhouse. We had to push our way past, causing a few dents and scrapes to her car. She was safe, though. I was armed, and we had Axel dying in the backseat. Pass those dumplings, Lisa,” Candy says nonchalantly.

Dad’s other eyebrow joins the first near his hairline, and my mother gives a little squeak of concern as I toss an exasperated

look at Candy. She doesn't notice, and I don't think she'd care if she did.

"We have no idea who they were or what they wanted. It probably wasn't even me they were looking for. We just got a bad vibe, so we didn't stop," I mumble, wilting under their stares.

"And Axel? Dying? What's that about?" Dad questions.

"Axel's a bit dramatic and a known hypochondriac, so he's probably fine. His lunch might not have agreed with him, or he has a cold coming on. I was giving him a ride to the clubhouse because he didn't want to stay at the gym while feeling crappy," I explain. "Are you hungry? I ordered way too much."

"Chubs' influence, I'm sure," Lisa murmurs.

"No, thank you, we already ate. Speaking of Chubs, does what happened today have anything to do with him?" Dad asks.

"Probably," Candy responds at the same time as I say, "I doubt it."

Mom continues to be silent and watchful. Dad sighs heavily before taking a seat on the couch.

"You need security until we know," Dad states firmly.

"She's got it. Me and the club members when I'm working," Candy answers.

"I'd feel better if you'd let me attach a security detail to you, Lucy. The guys from my office could—" Dad starts before I cut him off.

"No, Dad, but thanks for the offer. You know how I feel about your security guys. I have nothing but respect for you and Mom and how you've served our state, but I've never wanted that fishbowl existence. I'm not complaining about my childhood or any of that. You two gave us a great life. I just don't want the attention it draws when you have state police officers following you everywhere," I explain.

“I’ll go along with your decision for now, but if anything happens to threaten your safety, I will do what I think is best. Security detail or locking you down somewhere. I’m not going to sit back and let you get hurt because of someone else’s past. We clear?” Dad asks in a hard voice.

“Clear.”

“I thought Gunner was the only one you should fear, but damn, girl, your dad is kind of fierce too,” Candy mumbles.

“I’m entrusting my daughter’s safety with you, Candy. You sure you’re up for the job?” Dad queries.

“Yep, I got her covered. Not going to lose the first real friend I’ve ever had, sir,” Candy replies in a low, respectful voice.

“Thank you, Candy. I think she’s in good hands with you,” Mom adds quietly while placing her hand on top of Candy’s.

“Appreciate that,” my new bodyguard answers.

Chapter 17

Chubs

“I know it’s not ideal, Aria, but it’s the smarter move,” I explain again.

“I have a business to run and patients that depend on me, Adriano!” Aria exclaims irritably as she grips her hair at the sides of her head in both hands. “Mom should go. I agree. But I can’t just up and walk away for what could be weeks.”

“Mom’s not going to go without you too, and you know that,” Les interjects.

“Why are you staying then? Do you think Mom will be okay with you two here, doing God knows what and putting yourself in danger, and her and I just going away on a vacation?” Aria questions, hands now on her hips.

“No, she won’t be, but she’ll leave town if she knows it’ll keep you safe,” I answer while hoping guilt will get Aria to agree.

Shoulders slumping, my sister stares at me. I can see the fight in her eyes, and I know she’s the most stubborn of us kids, but she also loves our mother and wants her safe. I know I’ve won when she uses both hands to rub her face and then nods curtly.

“Fine. I’ll speak with my business partner and tell her I have a family emergency and have to leave the state. She’ll have to cover any emergency patients, and my regular appointments can be canceled for now. Any idea how long this could take? Do I tell her a week or a year?” Aria asks with a bite in her tone.

“Hopefully, only a few weeks, and thank you. Things will be easier if we’re not worried about you and Mom too. With Les taking a leave of absence from the bank and you two out of danger, we can accomplish things quicker, I hope,” I reply while pulling her to me for a brief hug.

“I better go start making some calls, then. When do you want us on the road?” Aria asks as she steps back.

“Leaving during the night is best, so midnight tomorrow. Pack what you need and get a nap if you can because you’ll be doing most of the driving. You need to get there as soon as you can, so you won’t get much rest along the way. We need to go speak with Mom now. Thanks, little sister.”

“Talk to you in a while,” she says, then walks for the staircase.

“Let’s go convince our mother to leave her sons behind to keep her daughter safe,” I mumble, and Les follows me to the kitchen.

The next evening, having convinced the women this is the best move, I sit down at Mom’s desk and write a note. When I’m finished, I walk to the backpack I left by the door and slide the note inside. Double-checking the contents of the backpack, I can’t think of anything I forgot that the women would need. Heading back to the kitchen, I find Les packing a cooler for them. I add some drinks, then make a thermos of coffee and sit it beside the cooler. When Les finishes, we each pour a cup of coffee and take a seat.

“After they’re gone, are we staying here or the hotel?” Les questions.

“We’ll stay here tonight. Too much movement might attract attention, and we need to avoid that. Tomorrow, we’ll move to a new hotel,” I answer.

“We set our bags by the garage door. We’re ready,” Mom states as she enters the kitchen.

I stand and pull her into my arms for a hug. I hate having just been reunited with her and Aria, and now we’re being separated again.

“Please be safe and keep your brother that way too,” she whispers.

“We’ll be safe, and we’ll stay in contact with you. You remember everything I told you, right?”

“Yes, I do. The note is inside the backpack, along with cash, guns, and ammo. Drive straight there, stopping only for gas or necessities. Keep our eyes open and alert. Leave our cell phones here and only use the one you gave us,” she answers as she steps back.

“And don’t tell anyone anything except what you instructed us to say,” Aria adds somewhat sarcastically as she enters the room.

“Thank you, and again, I’m sorry all of this is happening, but it’s our best option for now. Les and I’ll stay in contact and call if anything happens. You are armed for a reason. Don’t hesitate to protect yourself and Mom if needed,” I state in a serious voice.

“We’ll call or text when we get there. Be safe, brothers. You still owe me for losing that bet years back, and I aim to get paid,” Aria says with a wicked grin before giving me and Les each a hug.

“What bet?” I ask curiously.

“The one that ruined Mom’s view of me as her little princess. Who could spit the farthest, and I kicked both your asses. You each owe me a triple scoop at Willard’s Ice Cream Shop.”

“Forgot about that. Whatever flavor you want, it’s yours,” I answer with my own grin.

Once we get everything loaded into their car, I head back inside so I’m not spotted when they leave. Les waves them off from the garage and then joins me watching from behind the living room curtain. After several minutes of no other vehicles moving on the street, and we feel comfortable that they’re not being followed, we head back to the kitchen.

Time to fuel up for what needs to be done.



With my brother’s help and knowledge of all things Vero, our reign of terror on them picks up its pace. Every few days, one of their members or businesses gets taken down or destroyed.

Several of the lower-ranking members have found themselves locked in an abandoned warehouse awaiting their fate.

Wearing masks and gloves to hide our identities, we make sure they have food and water but no other necessities. Not torture, but not fun either. They're not happy little mafia bitches, and most are scared shitless with countless hours to think about what their future, if they have one, will hold.

The biggest problem we face, though, is getting to the top members. They're well-guarded, especially now, and most are lying low. We'll need some way to lure them out, and I have no idea what that will be.

"I'm not sure we have to get to the top, Drew. They only have enough men left to guard them, and their businesses are either destroyed, needing lots of repairs, or are closed because of all that's happened," Les reasons.

"You might be right. Maybe what we should do is let the other families know just how weak Vero is right now. Let them do the rest," I answer.

I have no beef with the other organized crime families in Chicago, and I matter zero to them. I'm not here to rid Chicago of its crime problems. I'm here to ensure that me and my family can start leading normal lives. A life where Aria isn't forced to marry someone, especially a monster. A life where Les can go to work without watching over his shoulder. Where he can feel comfortable enough to maybe marry and have children someday. Where I could maybe, just maybe, do the same thing. Mom could be out from under the Vero's thumb and watchful eye and not live her life as a messenger between them and her husband. Maybe she could finally move on from Enzo and start a new life of her own. While I love my father, he made his choices and needs to live with them. We didn't and deserve our own lives.

"Let's take today off and think how best to go about that. No matter what, though, I'm going to locate the two FBI agents that forced me into their form of WITSEC. They owe me, and I am going to collect," I state in a grim voice.

“We should look into The U.S. Marshal’s Service then too. They’re the ones actually in control of WITSEC, not FBI. So, the agents either lied about who they worked for or they had dirty friends within. Keep in mind, they may not still be breathing. They were working for the wrong side, and after you were supposedly blown up in that car, the family may have tied up those loose ends,” Les advises.

“True, but I’ve always gotten the feeling that my supposed death was to cover up the fact that I escaped them. They would’ve most likely been killed if the family knew I had gotten away. I’ve never had any reason to believe the family thinks anything other than I’m dead. What I haven’t figured out, though, is how and why did two more Feds show up in Denver looking for me. How did they know I was still alive, and how did they find me? Are they actually building a new case against the Veros, or was that a ploy to get me back here, away from the club and Denver? If the two from Denver are working for the family, then the family would know I’m alive, and some move would’ve been made against you, Aria, and Mom. Maybe even Dad if they thought he was aware I was alive, and yet none of that happened. I can assume things, but until I track these agents down, I won’t know for sure.”

“Then let’s take a break from what we’ve been doing and concentrate on the agents and their whereabouts,” Les suggests.

Nodding my head, I pull out my tablet and start researching again. Les takes a seat nearby, pulls out his laptop, and does the same. Several hours later, Les jerks up straight, then shoves his laptop in front of my face.

“Look at these two photos. Same guy in both, right? He’s aged, but it’s him. I’m sure,” Les states.

Looking at both, I nod slowly. That’s one of the fuckers that snatched up a confused and scared teenager many years ago. No doubt about it.

“That’s a newspaper article, only a few months old, about him running for city council. It mentions his district, so that gives

us an idea of what part of the city he's living in. Hang on," Les says while continuing to read. "It also says where his offices are. We've found one of them."

My heart gives a slow thump, then speeds up in excitement. We just might be able to pull this off, and if so, I can return to my woman. She may not accept me back, but at least I'd be able to try. Just to see Lucy's beautiful face again would mean everything to me.

"Let's go check it out," I say.

We spend several days observing the former FBI agent, now turned politician, live his normal life. We know where he works, lives, buys his favorite coffee, and the gym he works out at. We also know where his mistress lives and what nights he visits her. By carefully observing him, we know he's right-handed and carries a handgun at all times in a shoulder holster. We know his wife's schedule and where their son attends an ivy league college. Something that most FBI agents could never afford, the same being with the home they bought. I'm angry knowing that he afforded those things by hanging people like me out to dry. He took payoffs to live beyond his means, and those payoffs cost others their lives. Of course, he's become a politician. He's got the mindset for it and the backing because crime families love having politicians in their pockets.

"We'll move on him tomorrow night when he goes to visit his side piece," Les says with disgust.

"It's fortunate for us that she lives where she does. He's not using his FBI training to his advantage by not putting her up in a more secure apartment. Tonight, let's take a stroll around her neighborhood to double-check for cameras, but I haven't spotted any yet. We'll grab him when he leaves, so she doesn't get concerned when he doesn't show up," I add.

Having helped at the club's security business a few times has paid off. I know what to look for and how to disable most every type of security camera there is, thanks to Rex's thorough training program. I just wished more of his computer

skills had rubbed off on me too. I can get by with what I know, but Rex would be invaluable right now.

I have a moment of harsh regret knowing what my disappearance would have done to Rex. The man is like a dog with a bone when he's working on something, and I can only imagine how many hours of sleep he's missed trying to find me. I hope someday to be able to apologize and gain his forgiveness, but for now, I need to focus so I live long enough to get the opportunity.

"Aria called earlier when you were showering. Said they were one day out from their destination. Also said to tell you thanks for the route you ordered them to take. She said she and Mom have now seen most of the U.S., and she said it sarcastically. You're going to pay for sending them to the four corners of the country," Les warns with a grin.

"I'm gaining debts to be repaid left and right, but it'll be worth it to know they're safe," I reply, knowing I have a lot of people to beg forgiveness from.



Les and I are standing deep in the shadows of the alley that runs behind the apartment building. Bob Morrow's still inside but should be leaving soon. When he does, he must pass me within five feet to get to his car. Lucky for us, his girlfriend's apartment is at the front of the building, and the only other one is currently vacant. Les is closer to the car and will be the distraction I need to get the jump on Morrow. Hearing a door shut, I tense then tug on my gloves while Les does the same.

When the man we're hunting comes into view, Les steps from the shadows, hoodie concealing his features. Morrow's head snaps up as he gauges if Les is a threat or not. With his full attention on Les, I step behind him and put him in a chokehold. Some of the former agent's training comes back to mind because he instantly starts fighting with precision.

He twists in my arms a little and then hammers me in the ribs, but I keep him from being able to reach his gun. Trying to stay in a safe position, I move with his body, but his blows are not

gentle. Using my foot, I trip him and swing us around so he lands on his frontside with me clinging to his back. Tightening my chokehold, his body thrashes before I feel a sharp pain in my thigh.

Realizing I've been stabbed, I shift positions, trying to protect my leg from more wounds. Les drops down next to us and gets a grip on the wrist that has the weapon. The fight doesn't leave Morrow, though, and he battles with everything he has. He's a large, fit man, but there are two of us. Eventually, Les stands long enough to stomp on the hand, forcing Morrow to drop the knife. Kicking it away from us, Les quickly gags our prisoner before he thinks to call for help.

Pulling the handcuffs from my waistband, I get them on Morrow. Then we lift him to his feet. I pull his handgun out of his holster and slide it into my waistband. It may end up being used in a crime, and it'll tie back to him, not us. Les locates Morrow's dropped keys and phone. Then we shove him to his car. Opening the trunk, Morrow is forced inside. Les hands me the keys, then jogs away to retrieve our car, then follows me as I drive away in Morrow's. The whole fight only lasted a few minutes, even though it seemed like a much longer time, and I realized that not one of us said a single word.

Heading straight for the warehouse that contains some of Morrow's old friends, Les stays close behind. We obey every traffic law and still arrive at our destination in only twenty minutes. Until we arrived, I didn't think about the blood running down my leg and soaking my jeans. Now that we have and the adrenaline has retreated, the pain sets in.

Climbing from the car, I take a careful step but stop when a shooting pain goes up the length of my thigh. I take a few deep breaths and try again, this time pushing through it.

Les approaches, looks down at my leg, then asks, "How bad?" "Nothing fatal but hurts like a bitch. Stabbed me in the thigh muscle but only got me once. Let's get this done. Then you can sew me up."

After another brief battle, we get Morrow searched more thoroughly and locked up, tethered to a wall in sight of his co-workers. We toss a few bottles of water next to him and walk out of the building. Locking the padlock on the door, we walk to the two cars. Les, once again, follows me as I find a spot to ditch Morrow's car. I clean it free of my prints and all blood or evidence just to be safe before getting out. Leaving it in a high crime area, keys on the seat, I know it'll be in someone else's hands within the hour.

Returning to our latest hotel room, I pull a first aid kit from my gear and hand it to Les. Removing my jeans, I wash the blood off my leg, then take a seat on the bed. Les pulls a chair up, looks at my wound, then opens the first aid kit. Pulling out a small bottle of antiseptic, he cleans the wound thoroughly. He grabs the bag of supplies he bought on the way here and removes the small sewing kit and fishing line.

Using gauze bandages, I keep pressure on the wound while Les prepares the needle. When he's ready, I remove the bandages and lean back on my hands. Sucking in a harsh breath between my teeth, I force my mind away from the pain and bring Lucy's image up. I concentrate on some of my favorite times with her and refuse to acknowledge how painful being sewn up is.

I focus on remembering Lucy dressed in a beautiful ball gown of deep emerald, introducing me as her fiancé, and how proud I was of that. I think back to her talking about ideas to help Luke and the rest of us to learn sign language and how much effort she's put into making that happen. I remember her anger over the reasons that women need a place like New Horizons and how she's determined to help them. Her excitement when Bailey gave us a gift, a drawing she'd done of us together, and how perfect she'd captured our shared love. Lucy's love and respect for her family and how they've accepted me into their fold, no questions asked. Lucy's desire to get a pet, have kids with me, and build our own home.

"Done. It's not the prettiest, but it should hold," Les states as he stands to throw away the needle.

“It’ll work,” I mumble while covering the wound with a large bandage.

“Do you think he’ll figure out who you are?” Les questions as he returns to his chair.

“Our hoods and face masks kept him from seeing our faces clearly, so no, I don’t. Not yet, anyway. We’re going to have to question him tomorrow because I want to know where his partner is and then make a plan to bring him to the warehouse too. In the meantime, I think he’s going to assume that someone has figured out his involvement with the family, and that’s why he’s sitting with so many of them.”

“Get some sleep, and we’ll go back tomorrow night,” Les says before making his way to the bathroom.

Chapter 18

Lucy

While Craig has whined to anyone and everyone about how much he hates school, he's made it through his first week without incident. I'm sure Pippa breathed a huge sigh of relief when Friday afternoon came. She even joked that Pooh could put the cash for bail money he'd been carrying around back in his safe now. As his reward for going all week to school, Craig's riding with me, Bella, and Luke out to the ranch. Following us on his bike is Horse. We're spending the night, then Horse will follow me back to town, and Pigeon will bring the kids back home Sunday.

I turn into the drive that leads to the ranch house and take a deep breath of relief. I always feel calmer here than in town lately. The kids sit up straight in anticipation of reaching the house, but it'll still take several minutes to get there. Secluded is an understatement, with the house and barns sitting well into the land that make up the ranch. It's beautiful, especially with the animals grazing in pastures on each side of the long driveway.

The second the car comes to a stop, the kids bail out and take off for the barns. I grab my briefcase and head for the house instead. Knocking once, I open the door and walk into the large kitchen and set my briefcase on the table. Walking back out the door, I follow the voices to the horse barn, waving at Horse on my way. He's currently nursing a beer, kicked back on the deck, obviously planning on staying put. Horse, regardless of his road name, does anything he can to avoid being around the horses. Spotting Ivy in a stall, I stop behind Bella and lean around her to see inside.

Ivy's busy putting a halter on a miniature horse. It's what she calls a paint, white with large black patches sprinkled throughout its hair, mane, and tail. It's so adorable. I want to hug it immediately. When she's finished, we step back, and

Ivy leads the mini out of the stall. Stopping in front of the kids, she grins when the mini neighs loudly, startling me.

“This is Castiel, Cas for short, and he’s one of our latest acquisitions. The other one, Jacko, is in the next stall. Both are super friendly and well-trained. Oh my God, you’re going to love this, Lucy!” Ivy says while vibrating with excitement.

“I already do! He’s so cute!” I answer while stepping to the side to get a peek at Jacko in his stall.

He’s nearly identical to Cas in appearance. A few of his markings are a little different, but in size and basic looks, they could be twins.

“Yes, they both are, but what I meant was you’re going to love why I got them!” Ivy exclaims. “They’re a team and are trained to drive and pull a cart. Wait until you see the little wagon they pull! It’s so adorable! I’m going to teach you how to drive a team of horses, and believe me, you’ll want your very own afterward.”

I’m not the only one who squealed in delight upon seeing the mini wagon. Bella could barely stand still, and Luke’s smile grew until it had to be painful.

The wagon is a miniature-sized covered wagon like those used in the 1800s to cross America. The seat is small, only big enough for me and maybe a kid to sit on. The bed of the wagon could hold one, possibly two, small bales of hay only.

What makes it extra cute are the size-appropriate items hanging from the sides that make it look authentic. Hanging from one side is a small toolbox made of wood, an axe, and two lariats. The other side has a lantern, water bucket, and the brake lever. Swinging from the rear axle is a small wooden bucket that I’m assuming is the grease bucket.

“When can I learn?” I ask as I step off so the kids can try the seat.

“Tomorrow morning sound good?” Ivy asks, smiling knowingly at me.

“I want to learn it all. From harnessing the horses to driving the wagon. This is really cool, Ivy, and the kids that come here for your lessons are going to love it too.”

“The ponies are about the right size for you to ride too, Lucy,” Pigeon says as he stops next to Ivy.

“I agree with Prissy. You suck, bird boy,” I respond but smile at his teasing.

“Ignore him. They’re too small to ride, but they can easily pull the wagon and a small adult or child,” Ivy says while wrapping an arm around Pigeon’s waist.

“Didn’t you say something about buying a Shetland Pony for Lucy to ride?” Pigeon questions, then grunts when Ivy pinches his side.

“Keep it up, Pigeon, and I’ll let Tessie take you for a drive,” I warn.

“Speaking of Tessie, what did you do to her? She hasn’t had an accident since driving with you, and I see fear in her eyes when you enter a room?” Pigeon asks.

“None-ya, Pigeon,” I answer and grin at his look of confusion.

“None-ya?” he repeats.

“None-ya. None of your damn business. I improvised a little so you’d understand, but that’s what it means, bird boy,” Craig replies, then laughs outright at Pigeon. “Can we now get back to what we were doing before we were so rudely interrupted?”

“Careful, Craig. Loki’s not here to save you this time,” Pigeon cautions with a smirk.

“But he will be the next time you’re at the clubhouse. You could thump my ass now, but I’ll have him pluck yours then,” Craig returns with his own smirk.

Before I can intervene and save Pigeon’s ass from a good feather plucking, we hear a car engine. Walking to the barn door, Pigeon asks, “You have a client coming tonight, Ivy?”

“No, just Lucy and the kids,” she answers while joining Pigeon in the doorway.

“I’ll go see who it is and what they want,” Pigeon mutters before walking off, Ivy on his heels.

“While they’re busy, let’s brush Cas and Jacko,” Bella suggests.

The boys follow her to retrieve Jacko, and I walk to the doorway to see if I know who drove up. Not recognizing the two women and not being able to hear the conversation happening, I turn to go help the kids when a small detail catches my eye.

Looking closely at the license plate, my heart takes a leap. It’s an Illinois plate. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I get a weird vibe when Pigeon and Ivy both turn to look at me, concern on their faces. Instantly, I step into the shadow of the doorway. Not knowing what to do, if anything, I take a seat on the nearest hay bale and wait. For what, I’m not sure. Several minutes later, Pigeon enters the barn, looks around until he spots me. The look on his face makes my palms start to sweat, but I keep my face blank.

“Need to speak with you outside,” Pigeon says quietly.

I stand and follow him out, finding the car is still there, but Ivy, Horse, and the women aren’t. I know a bombshell is coming my direction, but I don’t try to dodge it. I wait silently for Pigeon to speak.

“Do you recognize either of those women?”

“No, but I didn’t really look that hard at them. Should I have?” I ask.

“Not sure, to be honest,” Pigeon mumbles, then remains silent until Horse arrives next to him.

“Prez said to do as the note asked. He, Rex, and Petey will be here within an hour,” Horse informs his club brother while looking at me with what I’m sure is sympathy in his eyes.

“Note? What’s this about a note?” I ask with a sense of dread creeping through my body.

“Lucy could tell if it’s his handwriting or not,” Horse suggests.

“Yeah. We’ll wait until the Prez gets here, though. Let him decide how he wants to deal with this.”

“Deal with what?” I question.

Before Pigeon can answer, the house door opens, and the two women, along with Ivy, walk out. They stop at the car and retrieve a few pieces of luggage before they enter the bunkhouse. When the door closes, I turn back to face Pigeon.

“Who are they?”

“I’m not sure, and I’m not lying to you about that. They handed me a letter in a sealed envelope and said very little when I asked for clarification. I told Ivy to put them in the bunkhouse until Gunner arrives, and he can get to the bottom of this,” Pigeon answers before pulling me into his side and walking back into the barn.

“Is Ivy coming back so we can go riding?” Bella asks while brushing Cas.

“Not until Gunner gets here. The adults have something going on, and we’re less important at the moment,” Craig replies with a scowl plastered all over his face.

“How do you know that?” Bella asks in surprise.

“You know how. Hearing is my superpower,” Craig answers in exasperation.

“Will I get to ride today?” Luke signs while looking at Pigeon.

“I’ll saddle Lucky, and you can take turns riding him in the round pen,” Pigeon signs back and laughs when Luke gives him a wide smile and a thumbs-up sign.

“Are you going to ride today, Horse, or just hide your sorry self and watch us kids?” Craig asks with his ornery side coming out to play.

“I’ve decided I don’t like you today. Maybe tomorrow I will, but then again, maybe not then either,” Horse states.

Thor, Ivy and Pigeon’s rescue dog, bumps his nose against my side, so I ignore the word battle and pet his beautiful blue-gray head. Crouching down, I put my arms around his neck and smile when he pushes in closer. For having been so abused, Thor’s a little lover. I swear he actually smiles every time someone takes a moment that’s just for him.

“Who’s first?” Pigeon asks as he stops next to us with Lucky.

“Let Luke ride first. We’ll wait,” Bella says, and Craig nods in agreement.

Walking beside Lucky, I join the kids at the round pen. Climbing up to sit on a rail, Bella then Craig joins me while Pigeon watches as Luke leads Lucky into the pen. Carefully closing the gate behind him, Luke climbs onto Lucky and walks off. I smile at Luke’s actions because we’ve all learned the lesson Ivy taught us about leaving gates the way you find them. Open, leave it open. If it’s closed, then close it behind you.

“He’s really improved,” Bella murmurs next to me.

“Luke’s going to be a cowboy when he grows up, so he works hard at remembering everything Ivy’s told us,” Craig states.

“He said that?” Pigeon asks.

“Yep. He said he wants to spend his life away from people and around animals. He thinks Ivy’s the shit and wants to be just like her,” Craig explains.

“He’s not wrong. My wife is amazing, and being like her is a sound decision,” Pigeon says with pride in his tone.

“My wife this and my wife that. Do you call her ‘my wife’ because you forgot her name already? Let me help you out, brother. Her name is Ivy,” Horse says while enunciating Ivy slowly.

“Dick move,” Craig mumbles.

“I call her my wife because she is and because I’m fucking proud as hell that she married me, you mother’s son of a jackass. I want every swinging dick to know it too,” Pigeon answers while giving Horse a shove in the shoulder.

“This has taken an ugly turn,” Bella says.

“No need for violence, Ivy’s husband,” Horse taunts.

“I see your face, and for some reason, I choose violence every damn time,” Pigeon responds with another shove.

Horse barks out a laugh, then returns the shove, moving Pigeon back a step.

“Wait!” Craig shouts, and we all look in his direction. “We haven’t placed bets yet on who’s ass is going to get whooped.”

“\$10 on Pigeon for the win,” Bella and I say at the same time.

“What the hell, you two?” Horse shouts while pointing at us.

“Sorry, Horse, but Pigeon has righteous anger because he feels he’s defending his relationship with his wife,” Bella says while laughing.

“I double down on that,” I add.

“Not fair. Now I have to bet on Horse,” Craig complains. “Or, you two could make a bet between yourselves. That way, we can save our money and just be here for the entertainment.”

“Yeah, Horse, let’s do that. I win, and you have to ride Lucky again,” Pigeon offers with an evil smirk.

Horse’s mouth drops open, and he freezes in place. Glancing past Pigeon, Horse’s eyes move to Luke and a very docile Lucky making circles in the round pen. I beat back a laugh when he visibly swallows, then takes a step backward.

“I’m actually good with you giving me a shove from time to time. It bolsters your ego to think an old man like you still has it. I’ll let you off the hook this time. Anyone want a beer?” Horse states before walking off.

“That was a bust. I was hoping to get another video of him riding,” Pigeon complains but does so grinning wide.

“You have an evil streak,” I state.

“Thank you,” he agrees easily.

The sound of bikes causes the four of us to look toward the drive in time to see Gunner, Petey, and Rex coming to a stop.

When Pigeon turns to me, I wave him off.

“I’ll keep an eye on the kids and their riding. Go see what’s going on, but you better explain it to me later.”

Pigeon jogs to the men, with Horse joining their group, and they stand around talking while Gunner reads the piece of paper Pigeon handed him. When Gunner lowers the paper, his eyes lock on mine. The feeling of dread returns, but I keep my face blank. After a few more minutes of talking, the men head to the bunkhouse.

“What could you hear, Craig?” Bella asks quietly.

Craig, uncharacteristically silent, ignores the question. His eyes meet mine. Then he quickly looks away. When Bella asks again, Craig finds his voice.

“Club stuff. Gunner will talk with Lucy later.”

Craig drops off the rail immediately after speaking, then walks to intercept Luke. Instead of taking his turn, he climbs up the saddle and sits behind it on Lucky’s rump. Luke signals Lucky to move, and the boys start making laps.

“I wouldn’t worry, Lucy. I’m sure it’s not bad news,” Bella quietly says, then leans into my side.

I put my arm over her shoulders, lean into her, and whisper words I don’t believe.

“You’re probably right.”

After several minutes, Bella climbs down and goes to take her turn riding. When I hear soft whining, I look behind me and find Thor. Jumping to the ground, I turn a pail upside down

and take a seat on it. Thor immediately moves close, resting his chin on my thigh as I stroke his fur. Soon after, Ivy's blue heeler appears and sits on my other side.

It's been over an hour since the men went to the bunkhouse, and my nerves are shattered. I know this has something to do with Chubs, but I have no idea how. Are these women searching for him too? Are they law enforcement? How do they know him, and how well? I don't want to think it, but the thought crosses my mind regardless. Is one of them his wife, an ex-girlfriend, a relative? Did he leave me to be with one of them? I didn't get much of a chance to study them, but one was close to Chubs in age, the other not. A mother and daughter, maybe.

Trying desperately to distract myself, my eyes find the kids, still taking turns riding. Luke is acting normal and thoroughly enjoying himself. Bella is being watchful of the boys, the horse, and me, but keeping the boys busy. Craig is unusually quiet and seems to only be going through the motions. His eyes land on me often, then dart away. He's worried and concerned, and that scares the crap out of me.

I look up quickly when I hear a door shut and find Gunner coming in my direction. I look toward Bella, and she says, "I got this. Go."

Standing, I wait for Gunner. When he arrives, he says simply, "Let's go in the house, Lucy. We need to talk."

Taking seats at the kitchen table, Gunner pulls a sheet of paper out of his pocket, carefully re-folds it, and sets it in front of me.

"Do you know this handwriting?"

Looking down, I can only read the first sentence.

"Prez, I need a favor. I don't deserve one, but I'm asking anyway."

"Lucy?"

Looking up, I nod slowly.

“It’s Chubs’ handwriting.”

“I thought so too but needed your opinion. Thank you. You deserve the truth, and I’ll give that to you, but I need to ask you for a favor first. Can you take the kids back to town tonight? Horse will follow and stay with you until Candy gets off work. When I get things figured out, we’ll talk. Stick close to Candy or one of the guys.”

“Okay. I’ll get them and leave now,” I say while standing, picking up my briefcase, and walking to the door.

“Lucy.”

I turn back to face the club president and wait for him to say what he feels he needs to say.

“I’m sorry for how things have been for you. You deserve better than this, and that will be the first thing I explain to him if I ever set eyes on him again. Explain it in a seriously harsh way.”

“You’ll have to get in line behind me, but I appreciate it, Gunner.”



Candy shows up at Lisa’s condo, grocery bags in hand, and surprises both of us when she starts cooking dinner. As she moves comfortably through the motions, she notices our stares. Stopping only long enough to set drinks in front of us, she resumes chopping and sauteing.

“What? Please, don’t tell me that neither of you can cook?” she asks in mock disgust.

“I can’t boil water without causing a fire, but I can prep things somewhat,” I mumble in embarrassment.

“I can cook,” Lisa says, then elaborates with a smirk. “If instant oatmeal, chewy pasta, salads, and sandwiches count.”

“Yeah, no, they don’t, but I got us covered. I’m not an expert, but Ava’s been teaching me the basics. She’s so fucking awesome at it. She lets me help in the kitchen, and I’ve

learned a lot from that,” Candy replies. “I want to be her when I grow up.”

“We all do,” I answer.

While eating a delicious stir-fry, I explain what happened to Lisa and Candy. We talk for a few hours about who the women are and why they’re here but come up with little. Candy’s no-nonsense advice is to not worry until we need to, and Lisa and I agree. When my phone rings, I’m surprised to see it’s Axel calling.

“Hey, Axel.”

“Lucy, I need a ride,” he says in a weak gasp.

Sitting up straight in alarm, I ask, “What’s wrong? Where?”

“The hospital.”

“I’ll come get you, but where’s Bailey? Your dad?” I ask as I stand and gather my purse.

“She’s got Alex, and I don’t want to bother or scare her. No idea where Dad is. Can you...” Axel says, then goes silent.

“Axel? Axel?” I ask in a near shout.

No answer.

“Give me your keys, and let’s go,” Candy states calmly.

Candy and I reach my car, jump in, and she drives at a fast pace. Not long, and we’re stopping outside the clubhouse. Rushing inside, I see no one, so we make our way to Axel’s room. Knocking but not receiving a reply, I push open the door to find Axel sprawled on his bed.

Placing my hand on his forehead, I realize he’s burning up. We try to wake him but to no avail. The man is seriously sick.

“I’ll call 911 for an ambulance,” I tell Candy, but she’s already shaking her head no.

“We can have him at the hospital before they’ll even arrive out here.”

“We can’t get him to my car. He’s too big,” I inform her while sending out a group text to the club members. Hopefully, someone’s close enough to help.

Candy bends low, slings one of Axel’s arms over her shoulder, then grabs a leg and does a power lift. His entire body is now resting across her shoulders, his head lolling from side to side. Surprised, I stand there mute and unmoving.

“Can’t do this forever, Lucy. Get the doors, and I’ll get him inside your car,” Candy says with a grunt, then starts moving through the room.

Placing his large body in the backseat of my car isn’t done with grace, but he’s inside. He’s probably got a head injury by now, but that’s the least of our concern. Candy orders me to climb in with him, and she moves to the driver’s seat. I no more than get the door closed, and we’re moving at a fast rate. Flying past the gatehouse, I see Toes sitting there, playing on his phone. He never even noticed us coming, the gate was still open, or us leaving. There will be hell for him to pay, I’m sure.

I rest Axel’s head in my lap and make sure he’s still breathing. My phone starts beeping with incoming texts, and I glance down at it.

Pooh: At the ranch. Toes is at the gate. Call him.

Cash: James and Livi are on duty but will meet you at the hospital if they can. Texted the Aunts. They’re on their way too.

Gunner: Seriously sick or just in labor?

Petey: Still at the ranch. Trudy’s helping Ava at a catering event. Be there as soon as I can.

Vex: Taja and Tessie are in town. I texted them. They’ll meet you at the hospital.

Horse: On my sway. be in an uber. The ssswhole horse-riding thing fucked with my head and I’ve beeeeen drinking. Beer. Lotsa lotsa beers. Tink I have PsTBbb. Pttsby. PT that thing that meanssss I’mmm fuccked up.

Horse: Lucy? Luuuucy? Youuu therrre?

Gunner: Jesus, Horse. Just stop typing. Stay where you are, and we'll send your mommy over to tuck you in for the night.

Trigger: At the ranch. Riding back with Petey. Tammy and Pippa have the kids so they won't be there.

Freddy: Did you call 911? You'll need them to load him up. I'm on my way to help.

Me: Candy carried him to my car and we're on the way to the hospital. Will let you know what we find out. He's burning up and unconscious.

Petey: I'll pick up Bailey on my way. I'll let her know what's going on then. No need to upset her yet.

Pooh: Candy lifted him by herself? And carried his fat ass all the way out to your car?

Me: Yeah she did.

Cash: That's impressive. Now I'm even a little scared of her.

Pooh: I'm fucking terrified of her. I have no shame when it comes to self-preservation. I'm taking up a pool if anyone wants to buy her flowers. You know, for buying goodwill and all that.

Gunner: Toes didn't help?

Me: Uh, no. We're almost at the hospital now. Explain later.

Gunner: Fucking Toes.

Horse: Fucckkkking Toesss. You stiiilllll here Lucyyy? R U????

Gunner: Put your fucking phone down Horse!

"We're here. Run inside for a gurney and help," Candy orders as she throws the car into park and steps out.

I rush inside and call out to the first nurse I see. It's not long, and they have Axel on a gurney and wheeled inside. He's deathly pale, sweaty, and very silent. I approach the desk and answer what questions I can for them while Candy takes a seat. Sitting next to her, I realize my hands are shaking. It's

scary seeing someone you care about that's normally so full of life laying on a gurney looking like a corpse.

"He'll be fine. He's young, in good health, and too excited to raise his kids to die," Candy states in a no-nonsense voice.

I nod but stay silent. When the doors whoosh open, I watch James and Livi in uniform stroll inside. Spotting us, they move to stand in front of our chairs.

"Know anything yet?" Livi asks in a hushed voice.

"No, they just took him back," I answer.

Doors open again, and Freddy, with one of Cash's aunts on each side, walks in. They join our group, ask the same question, and receive the same answer. Within minutes, Taja and Tessie arrive.

"Where's Toes? Wasn't he at the clubhouse?" Tessie questions while looking around.

"He's still at the gatehouse entertaining himself with his phone. Gate open, not paying attention. I'm going to have a little chat with him about it, and we'll be making a return trip to the hospital when I'm done," Candy says in a vengeful tone.

"I'm so glad my name is James," James mutters.

"You do that, Candy. Man's got a brain the size of a tiny fart," Lottie states with a sniff.

"Let's move to those chairs over there. We're kind of in the way here, and we're going to accumulate more bodies soon," Taja recommends, and our whole group moves to one corner of the E.R.

A nurse steps into the room and asks loudly, "Family of Axel Taylor?"

James, Livi, Taja, and I move to stand near the nurse and listen as she explains.

"They've taken Mr. Taylor for some tests, but we've started him on fluids and are working to lower his temperature. I'll

keep you informed as we find things out. Does anyone know his symptoms or how long he's been ill? Any pain?"

We answer with what we know then go back to our group to wait. Taja stays and speaks with the nurse for a few more minutes, then joins us.

"It's possible it's his appendix. That's what they're thinking at the moment. It's major surgery but common, so he'll be in good hands if that's it. As long as it hasn't ruptured," she informs the group.

"He's been sick for several days, though. Isn't that usually something that comes on fast?" Freddy asks.

"Usually, yes. It may have been worse than he let on, though," Taja says while nibbling on a thumbnail.

Tessie pulls Taja's hand away from her mouth then says, "I doubt that, but ruining your nails isn't going to help him."

"What in the hell are you looking at?" Lola asks loudly while staring daggers at two well-dressed women sitting to the side of us.

The women both give haughty looks in our direction before whispering to each other behind raised hands. When both laugh quietly while still looking at our group, I know we're the center of their conversation.

"Haven't you ever seen a group of friends and family before?" Lottie questions with her own haughty look.

"I can't believe we're forced to sit in this room with the likes of these types of people," one of the women whispers to the other. Her whisper was just loud enough that I know it was intended to be heard.

"It's ridiculous, really. I'm more afraid of what we'll catch out here than whatever Brittany has," counters the other while looking with disdain at everyone waiting in the room.

"Look at that one. She has sores all over her face, for God's sake," the first woman states while pointing openly at a young woman across the room.

“Point at another person in this room, and the surgeon will be removing that finger, along with that stick, from your ass, bitch,” Lola hisses while leaning toward their chairs.

“People have no manners these days,” Lottie says loudly with a dramatic sigh.

“Oh shit,” Freddy mumbles.

Candy snorts loudly then laughs outright.

“You might be older than the hills, but you cannot talk to me like that,” the first woman replies while pulling her high-quality coat closer around her body.

“Can. Did. Will again,” Lola answers calmly.

“You obviously do not know who we are,” the second woman declares. “So, because of that, we’ll ignore your behavior.”

“That’s enough, ladies,” Livi states while looking at the women.

Neither takes a heartbeat of time to consider Livi’s words before continuing with their comments.

“I’m going to assume that you’re the one under arrest,” the second lady says while looking pointedly at Lola. Turning to look at James, she asks, “It’s her, isn’t it? No class in itself should be a crime.”

“I’m not under arrest. Yet,” Lola says calmly, but I start to get nervous when she reaches into her purse. I relax when she only pulls out her phone, though.

Things settle for a few minutes, then Terry, Lars’s caretaker, walks through the door, sees our group, and walks toward us. His outfit is what should be considered a crime, and I ignore Tessie’s laugh as he jingles his way across the E.R. waiting room and leans his head against James’ arm, then strokes it. James just shakes his head and grins at the usual ridiculous behavior of all that is Terry.

Terry’s outfit does raise some questions, though. He’s in complete cowboy gear, from his 10-gallon hat to the glittered

spurs on his boots. Cowboy-type clothing is normal in Denver, but Terry has taken bedazzling to a new height. No joke, his belt buckle is the size of a dinner plate and could be used to signal the space station.

“Looking good, Terry,” Tessie states while waving a hand up and down his body length.

“Just came from the community theater center, and here you thought I’d gone shopping lately,” Terry states with a knowing look. “What do we know so far?”

“What we know is that one’s one of those types,” one of the women stage whispers while the other one nods in agreement.

“What type would that be, ma’am?” Taja asks with false sweetness, but I can hear the anger in her voice.

“A fag through and through,” the other woman states boldly.

The air in the room goes electric and completely silent before Lottie speaks.

“Shut your whore mouth! Right the hell now! One more word out of your uneducated, biased pig face, and I promise you the beatdown you just begged for!”

The women’s faces show their shock at Lottie’s rage but not as much as Terry’s does.

Livi quickly steps between the women and our group and speaks quietly with them. She gets them on their feet and ushers them to chairs on the other side of the room. I lay a hand on Lottie’s arm in hopes of avoiding said beatdown and toss out a silent prayer for the club members to arrive soon.

Terry strides up to Lottie, bends down, and drops a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, but she’s not worth your time. I’ve learned to ignore people like that and their comments. But why would you defend me when you give me so much hell your own damn self?”

“Because you’re ours to torment. You’re family. Besides, she believes her bullshit and thinks she’s the better person. We know she isn’t,” Lola answers while Lottie nods in agreement.

“We couldn’t care less that you’re gay. Only your clothing choices offend us,” Lola adds.

“Does this mean we’re besties now?” Terry jokes.

“Don’t push your luck, Terry. Take the win and walk away,” Freddy advises.

The nurse we spoke with earlier enters the room, then approaches our group.

“Mr. Taylor has been prepped and is en route to an operating room. It’s appendicitis, and unfortunately, we believe his appendix has ruptured. It’s quite serious, and I can answer any questions you have, but I’m sure Taja can as well. I’ll keep you updated as often as possible. There’s a waiting room for the O.R. if you’d like to move to it. You’ll be more comfortable there.”

“Thank you. We’ll move there and wait to hear from you. I can explain what’s going on to the rest of his family when they arrive,” Taja says.

The nurse gives us a smile of reassurance and walks away.

“How bad is this, Taj?” Tessie asks.

Before Taja can answer, the doors open again, and Petey, Trigger, Bailey, Gunner, Pooh, Cash, and Vex enter and walk directly to our group. I reach out and grasp Bailey’s hand and give it a squeeze. Her face is pale. She’s obviously upset and worried but is holding it together. Taja starts to explain what’s going on when I hear those two women running their mouths again.

“Well, well, well. This explains everything. Bikers.”

“I guess this night could get worse. Now we have to sit here with criminals too. I hope I remembered to bring my pepper spray.”

Bailey gasps. Lola and Lottie growl, but I see red. Whirling, I stalk toward them, but an arm wraps around my waist and lifts me clear off the ground. Twisting, I see the arm belongs to James. Setting me gently on my feet next to Gunner, he grins.

“Sorry, Lucy, but it’s my sworn duty to protect the citizens of Denver. Whether they deserve it or not.”

“Let’s get to the other waiting room before James has to prove that again,” Trigger advises.

James and Livi’s radios squawk, and they’re off to handle a call, and our group starts to move when Cash stops dead in his tracks, causing me to crash into his back. Stepping back, I look at him in confusion, but his attention is locked on something across the room. Looking in the direction that he is, I only spot a woman that I don’t recognize.

Her hair is lank and greasy looking. She’s thin, painfully so. Her clothes are revealing and similar to what sex workers on the street wear. She’s looking at our group with horror before she’s on her feet and moving as fast as she can in six-inch heels.

“Katey,” Cash growls, then follows her with Pooh and Vex on his heels.

“Take them with you, Petey. I’ll be back,” Gunner orders then storms off.

Confused about what’s going on, I follow Petey and the group until we’re seated in the O.R. waiting room. Candy and Tessie walk off and return with water bottles and coffee for our group. Bailey’s bouncing her leg nervously, so I place my hand on it. Her eyes meet mine, and I see the worry.

“He’ll be fine, honey,” I say in a reassuring voice.

“I know, but I feel so damn guilty. He should have been home with me and Alex, and I should have insisted on it.”

“None of us knew he was this sick, Bailey. We’re all guilty of assuming he was just being dramatic. He’ll have surgery. He’ll make us all grovel, and then he’ll get back to being excited

about the new baby,” Petey states while tipping Bailey’s chin up to meet his eyes.

“Okay, Pops,” she replies and slowly relaxes back into the chair.

“So, who is that woman, and why did Cash look murderous?” Tessie asks the question several of us have been thinking.

“Her name is Katey. She was a club who... club girl that helped set Ava up to be kidnapped,” Freddy states.

“Set her up to be kidnapped, raped, beaten, and most likely killed, you mean,” Petey says with a snarl.

While the women in our group are showing signs of shock and horror that a female would do that to another female, Candy silently stands and walks out of the room. I look at Trigger in alarm, but he simply shrugs.

“Let her go. She probably just needs some fresh air,” Freddy says in an unconvincing voice.

“Hope not,” Petey mumbles as he paces the room.



“He looks like shit, but he’s breathing. Doc said the surgery went well, but Axel’s got a rough time ahead of him,” Petey tells the room when he returns from Axel’s room.

Petey and Bailey went to see Axel as soon as they could. She stayed, but Petey returned to update us.

While we were waiting for hours, Ava and Trudy arrived after they finished the catering job. Rex made an appearance but didn’t stay long since he said he had things to do yet but did inform Petey that Reeves had taken over guard duty at the gatehouse. Toes may or may not still exist, but I’m too tired to ask.

Tessie left to pick up Vex and Taja’s baby girl from Pippa’s and take her home.

The men returned and were tight-lipped about where they were, but Candy didn’t return with them. Cash eventually got

his aunts to agree to let Terry take them home. Trigger left to help Tammy and Pippa since they have a houseful of kids and pets.

Eventually, Petey ordered the rest of us to go home and get what little sleep we could. He said Bailey refused to leave, so he was staying to keep an eye on her. Turning to me, he asked if I'd mind picking up Alexia and taking her to Bailey's and stay with her. When I nod and stand to leave, Gunner, Ava, and Trudy stand too.

Getting to the lot, I look for my car, but it's gone. Candy must have it, so I follow Ava and Trudy and climb into Ava's SUV. Gunner's bike fires up, and he follows us until I'm dropped at Pooh and Pippa's home.

The sun is up, and I'm exhausted. I retrieve a sleeping Alexia and make my way inside Axel's home. Placing his little sleeping beauty in her bed, I tuck her in. Grabbing a blanket off the rocking chair in her room, I walk to the couch and collapse on it. I fall asleep instantly.

What seems like seconds later, I jerk awake to an unfamiliar sound. Sitting upright, I look around the room, not seeing anything out of the ordinary. It's a scratching, grating sound, and it continues. Getting up, I start walking through the house, looking for the cause. Finally locating the room I think it's coming from, I step inside and listen.

"Hi-U."

I nearly jump out of my skin before spinning around to see Prissy standing on a perch near the window.

"You scared me!" I exclaim as she cackles gleefully. "Was that you making that weird noise?"

"Not I," she answers just as the sound starts up again.

Walking to the window, I pull up the blinds and have another moment of terror. Mac is hanging from the window screen with one foot, wings expanded to their full width. His other foot is scratching the screen, creating the noise.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I slide the window open.

“Hanging out,” Mac answers, and I’m sure he thinks that’s a reasonable response.

“You’re tearing the screen all to hell, Mac. Get off there, and go to the door. I’ll let you in.”

“No!” Prissy screeches, but Mac releases his grip and flies away.

“Please be quiet, Prissy. Alex is sleeping. And please be nice to Mac. I’ll get your breakfast ready and add a few extra pecans if you do.”

“Bless your heart,” Prissy coos in her accent, but I know what she really means is that she thinks I’m an idiot of epic proportions.

I ignore the insult and leave the room. I check on Alex and then let Mac in the house. Going to the kitchen, I pull out the bowls of food Axel keeps ready for Prissy. I set out two smaller bowls and fill each with a variety of veggies, fruits, and nuts. I set the bowls on the table for the birds then start a pot of coffee. Alex walks sleepily into the kitchen, so I get her set up with breakfast too.

Me: How’s Axel doing today?

Bailey: Doc said he’s got peritonitis meaning bacteria entered his stomach cavity. Painful and serious but they’re treating it aggressively with antibiotics. He’ll be staying for at least several days. Main concern is that he doesn’t develop sepsis.

Me: What can I do to help?

Bailey: You’re doing it. Petey’s going to switch places with me so I come home to shower, change clothes and sleep a little. Can you stay with Alex or take her to Taja?

Me: I’m staying here. See you when you come home.

Bailey: Love you! Thanks!

The front door opens, then Gunner steps into the kitchen. Carefully looking at his face, I can tell he’s concerned about

the reason he's here. Leaning down, he picks Alex up, cuddles her close before dropping a kiss on her cheek. Sitting her back in her chair, he turns to face me.

"Let's talk."

I nod and follow him into the living room. When he indicates a chair, I shake my head and remain standing.

"Tell me," I state.

"The note I showed you is apparently from Chubs. He didn't explain much but asked that the club keep those two women safe and hidden. I don't know who we're protecting them from or why, and neither of them are talking. He didn't say who they are, just that they're important to him. He said, in fact, that they are his world and asked for a favor he knows he doesn't deserve. The women have been polite but refuse to answer questions as to where they came from or where Chubs is."

The pain that slashes through my chest is unexpected, but I swallow down the gasp it causes. Breathing slowly through my nose, I hold eye contact and nod once. His world? That's what Chubs used to call me, and within months, that title has been reassigned to them. I honestly didn't know he could hurt me more than he did when he left, but he has.

"Rex tried tracking their car's GPS to find where they came from, but it had been wiped. The only thing that checked out is that the license plate is from Illinois. The plate doesn't belong to the car they arrived in, though, so either the plate or the car is stolen. Basically, we know little more than we did before they arrived. We'll keep talking with them, but I don't hold out much hope. The club decided to do as Chubs asked and protect them. They'll be staying at the ranch for now, so we're limiting who can go out there. We don't want to draw attention to the ranch, so with the incident the other day with you and those Feds, don't go to the ranch at all, Lucy."

Again, I nod but remain silent.

“Any ideas of who they are?” Gunner asks the question I knew he’d ask.

“None. Chubs never mentioned women other than those associated with this club,” I answer honestly.

“At some point, you’re going to have to come clean with me, Lucy. When you decide to do that, I’ll listen,” Gunner says in his deep rumble. “I’ll also not judge you for keeping his secrets and being loyal to him.”

“Thank you.”

After Gunner shuts the door behind him, I drop into the nearest chair. I refuse to shed more tears over this man, I remind myself repeatedly as I hold back tears. The best way to stop that from happening is to keep busy. I stand back up and get busy doing just that.



While Alex, Mia, Zoe, Prissy, and Luke are playing in the front yard, I open the large garage door and start looking for duct tape. It’s not a good fix for the window screen Mac shredded, but it’ll keep the bugs out for now. Opening and closing drawers and cabinet doors, I come up empty. Looking high and low, I spot an old toolbox sitting on a bottom shelf. Pulling it out, I set it on Axel’s workbench.

“What up?” Mac asks as he lands on the workbench in a flash of color and floating feathers.

“Looking for duct tape to mend the screen you tore. It’s a beautiful day, and I’d like to let the warm breeze in but keep the bugs out,” I answer as I lift the lid.

With my mind stuck on looking for duct tape, the contents of the toolbox make no sense to me for a moment. Realization dawns on me at the same time it does for Mac. With an ear-splitting screech that lasts for several long, painful seconds, Mac expresses what he thinks of Axel’s toolbox filled to the brim with cashews. It only takes my slow brain another beat or two to figure out that these are most likely Mac’s stolen

cashews. The exact same ones he was saving to take a hit out on Axel.

When a stream of curse words erupts from the angry bird, I desperately try to hush him. Glancing back to see if the kids have noticed, I find only Craig standing directly behind me, mouth hanging open in surprise. When Mac refuses to quiet down, Craig grabs an old towel and tosses it over Mac's head.

"Not cool, pig boy," Mac sputters from under the towel, but his voice has lowered considerably.

"Pig boy? Really, Mac?" Craig tosses back in disgust.

"Remove it," Mac barks.

"Have you calmed down yet?" I ask hopefully.

"Only if murderous is considered the new calm," Craig interjects.

"What's that?" Zoe asks, pointing at the toolbox.

"Your uncle's death sentence," Craig mutters.

"I think it may be the cashews Mac lost," I say while trying to gently shoo the kids out of the garage.

Mac's not ready to remember little ears yet, and I don't need the kids hearing the ways he's planning on eliminating Axel. I have enough issues to sort as it is, and then Prissy lands on the workbench next to Mac. I know that things have just gone from bad to worse.

"Lost? Fucking stolen!" Mac shrieks from beneath his towel.

I had honestly believed that if a bird couldn't see their surroundings, they stayed silent. Mac's blowing that theory all to hell now.

"Lost his nuts," Prissy says, then cackles like a madwoman.

The kids, having lost interest, walk out of the garage and back to what they were doing while Prissy continues to taunt Mac.

"Nutless wonder," she crows loudly.

"Assman's dead!" Mac, very unwisely, shouts.

Prissy strikes with her beak, nearly knocking Mac flat. I make a mad grab for Prissy while Craig gets a grip on Mac to keep the battle from becoming bloody.

“Can you take him home while I put Prissy in the house?” I ask.

“Someone better warn Axel to stay at the hospital. He’s in a weakened state, and Mac’s choosing violence,” Craig advises before he walks off with Mac, still wrapped in the towel and still complaining loudly.



Axel: I’m bored.

Me: That didn’t take long. You’ve only been there a week. You must be feeling better then.

Axel: I’m still fragile but fighting like a warrior.

Me: You’re ridiculous. Think you meant fighting like a princess warrior though.

Axel: I’m pure entertainment. Your parents came and visited me this morning.

Me: They said they were going to. Mom loves you.

Axel: Of course. Your dad doesn’t??????

Me: Yes but he’s grateful Lisa and I were born with enough sense to let you be Bailey’s problem, not ours. Lol.

Axel: Send videos of Alex. I’m missing my girl. Told the doctor I’m leaving tomorrow no matter what. Short visits with her when Pops brought her here isn’t enough. She needs her daddy. So does Prissy.

Me: They both call Pooh daddy now so you might as well stay until you’re better.

Axel: Toes is right—you’re evil.

Me: Mac found his cashews. He’s promising death for you.

Axel: Why me?

Me: They were in your toolbox in your garage.

Axel: I've been set up! I never touched his nuts!

Axel: That came out wrong. His cashews—never touched them. Craig's gotta be behind this.

Me: Why do you always blame that poor kid for everything?

Axel: Have you met him?

Me: Have a good sleep. I must go and bond with Alex since you're fading from her memory already.

Axel: Cruel words, woman.

While Bailey spent most of her time at the hospital with Axel this week, I've helped with the kids and pets so others could visit him too. Also, I've kept Bailey's work caught up so she's not snowed under later.

Candy found me at Axel's house the evening after we took him to the hospital. Surprisingly, the kids absolutely love her, and she's great with them too. Without a word, she stepped up and helped with babysitting, grocery shopping, guard duty of me, and caring for pets. She even mowed Axel's lawn and washed his bikes. One of the best things about the club is that everyone helps when things go sideways, and Candy's fit right in because that's how she thinks too.

When I asked her where she had been, she simply said she'd been helping Gunner with something. No amount of prodding got another word, so I eventually gave up asking. When she returned my car, it was full of gas and sparkling inside and out. When I attempted to pay her back the gas money, she held up a hand and shook her head. End of story.

When I hear bikes, I look out the window and grin. Craig and Luke, each on their own custom-built minibike, are riding down the street toward the clubhouse. Behind Luke's bike trots Cain, tongue lolling.

Gathering up the girls, we head outside to the yard. Spotting Bella in Pooh's drive, standing with several club members, we walk over to join their group. It only takes a second to realize

Pooh's preparing Bella for her first bike riding lesson. Bella's listening intently, so I stay quiet, not wanting to interfere.

"We've gone over the basic parts and their functions, most of which you already knew. Brakes, shifter, engine, throttle, clutch. Any questions?" Pooh asks in a patient voice.

"No, I'm good with the basics," Bella responds.

"What's the first rule of riding?" Petey questions her.

"Safety first," she answers immediately.

"Expand on that," Vex insists.

"No helmet, no riding. Wear the proper gear. Don't try to ride beyond my capabilities, and respect what they are. Be alert at all times of other people on the roads. They're dangerous, unthoughtful, and unpredictable to anyone on a bike. Always leave distance between my bike and the car I'm following. Be extra vigilant at intersections. A careless rider becomes an organ donor," Bella states in a serious tone.

"Come home safe. Do not become an organ donor," Gunner emphasizes, and Bella nods in agreement.

"Never, for the love of God, ride a bike the way Tessie drove her Jeep," Reeves adds emphatically.

"I promise I won't," Bella says with a grin.

"You ready?" Pooh asks her.

"Uh, did you cover—" Petey starts to say when Pooh holds up his hand, silencing him mid-sentence.

"I get you're worried, but we've covered everything the last few days, Petey. It's time," Pooh states.

Pooh sits astride the bike and waits for Bella to climb on behind him. Both put on their helmets. Then Pooh fires up the bike. I step back, taking the kids with me when the men scramble to their own bikes. All except Petey, who remains standing near me. The group rides off, following the road that leads to the clubhouse.

“You’re not going?” I ask, surprised.

“She’s in good hands,” Petey answers in a quiet voice.

“You’re scared to death, aren’t you?” I joke while bumping his arm with my shoulder.

“Fuck yeah. Call me a sexist pig, but watching Axel, Craig, and Luke learn wasn’t half this terrifying. Maybe I’m just too old for this shit anymore,” Petey states before running both hands over his face.

“She’ll be fine, Petey. Pooh would cut off his own arm before he allowed anything to happen to her.”

“I know, but that doesn’t stop me from wanting to keep her in a padded room.”

“What was the deal with that Katey lady from the hospital? Everyone rushed out, but nothing’s been said since,” I ask.

“Candy cornered her and waited for Gunner. He called Ava and asked what she wanted to do since it was her that Katey hurt,” Petey answers immediately.

“And?” I ask, but I’m half afraid of the answer.

“Ava came and spoke alone with Katey for a while. Candy wanted to disassemble the woman, but Ava wouldn’t let her. After they talked, Ava asked Gunner to let Katey leave. Said she didn’t need or want revenge. Said Katey’s life choices were revenge enough. Ava’s right, I guess. Ava’s happily married, owns her own successful business, and has a beautiful family. She’s got everything she always wanted and never thought she’d get. Katey’s got nothing, and that’s exactly what she’s earned.”

“Ava’s a better person than me because I think I’d have at least wanted to get a punch in or two,” I murmur.

“We think alike, little one,” Petey says with a grin.

“Can I ask one more thing?”

“Of course you can, Lucy.”

“Whatever happened to the lady who claimed to be Ava’s mother?”

I watch as Petey’s face darkens with anger, and his words have a lethal edge to them.

“Waiting to see if she’s smart enough to take my advice. Get the fuck gone and stay that way or suffer the consequences. Time will tell, but I doubt she’s going to listen. Trash always seems to rise to the surface, you know?”

“Yeah, it usually does. How’s Ava doing with all that?”

“By being Ava. She deals with what’s in front of her and doesn’t waste time worrying about things she can’t control.”

“I need to be more like her in that regard,” I mumble.

“None of us can control other people’s actions, honey. Pick your battles and ignore the rest of the noise. And remember, we’ve got you if you need it.”

Chapter 19

Chubs

“Aria called. Said they were pulling out of Denver. Should be at the ranch by now,” Les says when I enter the hotel room.

Setting the bags of food on the small table, I turn to see him meticulously cleaning his handgun. Looking at my brother closely, I note that he’s tense and worried.

“They’ll be fine there, Les. Promise. I know those guys, and they’re not going to turn their backs on any woman asking for help. Even if the club hates me now, they’ll circle around Aria and Mom and keep their location secret.”

“I hope you’re right,” he mutters.

“Did Aria remember to buy a new burner?”

“Yeah, said she bought one in Denver and was going to trash the one you gave her after she was done talking to me. She wouldn’t forget something like that,” Les states.

“Good because Rex would be all over stealing her phone to get what he could find on it. Let’s eat and get going. It’ll be dark by the time we’re ready.”

“We’re going to the Vero lake house in Zion, right? Michael’s weekend house?” Les questions.

“Yeah. Since it’s a weekday, none of them should be there.”

We eat, gather our supplies, and hit the road. An hour later, we’re in a small fishing boat and silently gliding through the water. Using an oar, I guide the boat next to the dock. Les secures the boat, and we sit quietly, watching the lake house and the grounds around it. Seeing no signs of life, we move.

Keeping our heads low to stay unrecognizable if the cameras are active, we split up. Working fast, we lay out the explosives, connecting the wires as we go. It’s not long before we meet at the back of the house. Leaving Les there, I jog up the drive until I reach the garage.

Shining my flashlight through the window, I smile. Inside the large building are a few expensive classic cars, jet skis, ATVs, and all the toys needed to enjoy time at the lake. I carefully set the charge that will cost Michael Vero a shit ton of money and aggravation.

Joining up with Les, we make our way back to the dock. Les climbs in the boat, but before I can do the same, the entire property we just sabotaged lights up like a sunny afternoon. Unceremoniously, I dive headfirst into the boat, nearly dumping both of us into the water.

A loud shout comes from somewhere near, then a siren sounds. Les fires up the boat as I scramble to pull my handgun. Before I'm successful, I hear running feet, more shouts, then gunfire. The water near us explodes in a spray. Les hits the throttle, and we're flying across the water, bow in the air, when I hear the unmistakable sound of bullets striking metal. Sound carries over water, and now they have an idea of where we're located.

Standing, I shove Les to the bottom of the boat. Taking over the throttle, I twist it hard. We're in complete darkness on the water, but those on shore with the guns don't care. They're spraying lead everywhere in hopes of hitting something, and I don't want Les to be that something.

Lifting my handgun, I twist and fire behind me, aiming for the dock. I turn the boat to follow the shoreline, using other docks and boats as cover. Skimming along the water, it's not long, and I know we're out of range.

I don't slow the boat even after the twin explosions rock across the water. Being on one of the Great Lakes in a smaller fishing boat in the dark and at a high rate of speed is dangerous and painful. By the time we make it back to our car, both my brother and I are bruised, battered, wet, and freezing.

Listening to the sirens in the distance, we drive in the opposite direction and take a long circular route back to Chicago. We enter our hotel room just as daylight breaks and collapse in exhaustion.

“The news said it was a gas leak that caused the explosion. No deaths but a few million in damages,” Les says.

“They’re kind of right. I tampered with the gas line leading into the house. Neither Vero nor law enforcement wants the truth known.”

“Look, there it is again. The news report about it is back on TV. Wow. Look at that damage,” Les breathes out.

Glancing at the TV, I’m impressed with our handiwork. There’s no repairing the damage. There’s a burnt-out shell of a Rolls Royce sitting sideways in the drive where it landed, and the house is barely standing. Burnt beyond recognition and needing to be leveled, Vero will have to rebuild from scratch.

Looking at me, Les smirks before asking, “What are we fucking up tonight?”



Making sure each person has food and water, we make the rounds of the warehouse. I ignore the name-calling and taunting I receive, knowing their goal is to anger me enough for me to make a mistake. A mistake that could cost me and Les our lives or give the men their freedom back. I won’t be making mistakes, and I double-check that Les doesn’t either.

“Who the fuck are you?” Leonardo spits as we set his food and water within reach. “Why are we still here?”

Neither of us responds, and that angers Leonardo enough that he then literally spits at me. Dodging it, I move onward, but I hear skin hitting skin and a loud groan before a stream of swearing starts.

Looking over my shoulder, I see Les shaking out his hand and Leonardo swiping at the blood streaming from his nose. I grin behind my mask but am a bit shocked when Les punches Leonardo a second time before stalking away. Guess my little brother has a mean streak when it comes to men who planned on forcing his sister to marry them.

Taking seats in my car, Les turns to face me.

“What’s the plan for all of them?”

“I’m not sure yet. Originally, I just wanted to have them come up missing to mess with the others’ heads and to take their numbers down. Now, I’m thinking of alerting the other families to their whereabouts and letting them take care of it.”

“They’d slaughter each of them immediately. Is that something you’re okay living with?” Les asks the same question I’ve been trying to answer for myself.

“Our other option is to alert law enforcement, but they’d just turn them loose if they don’t have warrants or pending charges,” I say with a sigh.

“Not if we left evidence of their crimes,” Les suggests.

I need to think on this because his idea has merit. It’s not as if there isn’t evidence to be found either. Some of these guys have been very careless, and that’s something we can use against them.

“Let’s get to work on that plan. I collected phones and computers whenever I could, so we’ve got a good start already. We’ll head back to our room and start pouring through their sordid little lives.”

At times like these, I wish I had Rex’s help. He’s not only tech-savvy but incredibly intelligent too. He has a knack for knowing what tiny little tidbits of information can lead to and where to look for more. More than once since leaving Denver, I’ve wanted to contact him for his help. This whole ordeal would be going much smoother and quicker with it, but I can’t ask him to choose between me and the club. After the hours I know he’s put in looking for me, Rex may not be willing to help anyway. I’ve burnt that bridge, and I can’t blame him if he outright hates me.

“You work in finance, so you dig in that area. I’ll sort through the other stuff and make notes. We can go over everything together later,” I say.

Les nods and picks up the first laptop. It’s password protected, but Les clicks “forgot password,” and the cell phone I’m

holding pings. I reset the password, read it off to Les, and he gets to work.

It takes the better part of two days to work through the electronics, but eventually, patterns emerge. Who was in charge of what and who they answered to. Who is in charge of the money, weapons, sex workers, and so forth. Which capo each guy works for, and their duties. We get a wealth of information, but not nearly as much or as fast as Rex would have. I now have a greater appreciation for my old club member and his love of energy drinks.

“Let’s label everything and call it a night. After going through all their dirty dealings, I need a long, hot fucking shower and several drinks. Strong drinks,” Les mutters as he shuts a laptop and pushes it away.

“I need food.”

“That goes without saying. I’ll go buy food and booze before the shower while you finish up here,” Les states before standing.

“Sounds good. Don’t go skimpy on the food and remember desserts too.”

Les leaves, and I start sticking notes on the various electronics. Who they belong to, and the basics of what’s on them. When I’m finished, I stack them in a tote and take a quick shower.

An hour later and Les still hasn’t returned. I’m growing concerned, but I’m not panicked yet. Two hours later, panic is setting in. After three hours, I know Les isn’t going to return. Have I gotten my little brother killed?

Me: Dinner?

A few minutes later, I received a text back.

Les: Sounds good. Antonio’s in an hour?

Me: See you then.

I immediately gather my weapons and slide my backpack over my shoulders. Within a few minutes, I’m walking away from

the hotel. Stopping behind it only long enough to insert a new SIM card into my phone and toss the old one in a dumpster.

I walk several blocks until I reach the parking lot where we left the old Harley we'd bought the day Aria and Mom left town. Paid cash to a guy that advertised it on Craigslist. I knew the day might come it could be useful. Pulling on the full-face helmet, I sit astride and fire it up.

Riding back to the hotel, I carefully case the area. Not seeing anything or anyone out of place, I return to my room. Moving the electronics into a duffle bag, I gather other items that I don't want to leave behind. Changing clothes first, then returning to the bike, I strap down the duffle bag and slide everything else into the saddlebags.

Knowing that Antonio's is a setup but needing to know by who, I ride toward that part of town. Leaving the bike behind a bar, I search for a way to view Antonio's without being seen. Since the pizzeria has a small parking lot behind it with a back entrance for its customers to use, I surveil the surrounding area. Whoever is waiting for me to show, they'll be coming and going from the back entrance, not the front. It's what I would do.

The key to not being noticed is to act normal. Most people go through their daily routines without really noticing their surroundings, so don't have your head on a swivel. Blend in clothing-wise by wearing neutral colors, and don't draw attention to yourself by showing nervous energy. Hold your phone like you're taking a call or texting because that's a normal, everyday thing in today's world. I employ all of these techniques while walking the neighborhood.

Knowing the changes I've made to my appearance since leaving Denver works in my favor too. Having lost a noticeable amount of weight along with the short dyed hair and no scruff, there's little resemblance to Adriano Zanetti or Chubs. Taking it a step further, I consciously alter how I walk.

It takes several minutes, but I eventually find a place to observe Antonio's back lot. In the yard of an older home is an

extremely large lilac bush. Having had one in our yard while growing up, I know they're not difficult to get inside. Not seeing anyone around, I push my way into the center of the bush. I break down some inside limbs to create enough space to sit or stand comfortably. Pulling out small but powerful binoculars, I scan the lot while knowing I'm completely concealed.

I watch as my car drives past, and I don't need the binoculars to recognize the two men sitting in the front seat. The two Feds from Denver have somehow mustered up enough brain cells to locate and grab Les.

The car parks, and the men exit it. They enter the building but return a few minutes later. After speaking together, they take up positions to keep the car and door of the restaurant in view. I hunker down and wait.

After a considerable amount of time, they meet back up at the car. I pull my cell out and shoot off a text to Les, knowing they have his phone.

Me: Tired of waiting. Where you at?

Les: Parking the car. You inside?

Me: Yeah and I've ordered.

I laugh a little when one bolts for the back door and the other rushes toward the front. It's a short wait before both storms out the back door in frustration and return to the car.

Les: You're not here.

Me: I'm at Antonio's in Naperville. Where are you?

I watch as they talk and apparently come up with a Plan B.

Les: Meet me at Mom's. We need to talk. Found some things out.

Me: Your mom's or mine?

I know this throws them for a loop when they go back to discussion mode before answering.

Les: Yours.

Me: Okay but I can't until morning. Got things to do later.

Les: Needs to be tonight.

Me: Can't. Have breakfast ready when I get there.

As soon as they get inside my car, I prepare to move fast. I need to get to the bike, locate the direction they're heading, and follow them. After they drive past my hiding spot, I push out and break into a run.

Back on the bike, identity hidden behind the helmet, I ride in the direction they drove. Splitting lanes and pushing my luck at intersections, I finally see my car a half block ahead of me. I tuck in behind a UPS truck and follow. Staying unseen becomes harder once they've turned into a residential area, but I manage it the best I can.

I take note of the street and appearance of the house they stop in front of before I ride past. It has safe house written all over it, and I should know. I spent time being moved from one to another years back, and they all have a similar feel to them.

Knowing where they're at for the time being, I leave to locate a new hotel and to finish moving everything to it. Once I'm set up in my new location, I pull up maps and bird's-eye views of the house and the areas around it. I do my research and come up with a plan of getting my little brother back. I'd like to accomplish it without bloodshed, but a lot of that will depend on them.

In the middle of the night, I find myself once again creeping around a sleeping neighborhood. Locating the house is easy, but it has cameras, and I didn't have time to disable them. Worse yet, it most likely has alarms too. The only plus side is that the homes are further apart than in most neighborhoods, with the safe house set even further apart and on the corner.

My movements are detected by a neighbor's dog, and he vocalizes it loudly. Swearing quietly, I step behind a tree and go still. The tree's not large, but I'm hoping it's dark enough

that I remain unseen. After several minutes and some hollering by its owner, the dog quiets down.

Making it to the house undetected by its occupants, as far as I know, is tricky, but I am soon leaning against the back of it. Sliding along the wall, I peek into each window as I pass it. Most are covered with blinds, but people seldom realize that window blinds should have the slats turned up, not downward.

On the third window, I see what I've been searching for. I can see Alessandro, in the dim light from a nearby room, sitting on a bed, back against the wall. He's handcuffed to the headboard in an awkward and uncomfortable position but alive. The light isn't enough to see if he's injured or not, though. I watch silently for a few minutes before lightly tapping once on the window. No response from my brother at all. I wait, then tap again. This time, his body jerks slightly, and he raises his head.

I wave my hand and know the second he realizes what woke him. Les raises his hands and holds up one finger before pointing toward the door of the room. I nod, understanding his communication, and check the window. It's locked, of course, because why would they have made things easy for me?

I jerk in surprise when Les starts hollering loudly but soon realize he's doing what he can to distract his captor. Claiming that he needs to use the bathroom, I know this might be our only chance to get him free. Keeping close to the house, I move again until I'm standing outside the back door. With a little luck on our side, the bathroom is located on the opposite end of the house from where I'm now standing. Pulling a few tools from my back pocket, I wait to see if Les succeeds.

I can hear muffled voices from within, but I can't hear the words clearly. Hoping against hope, I attempt to pick the lock. It takes longer than it should, but the lock gives way, and I slowly open the door. Slipping inside, I listen for movement. What I do hear is Les and another voice arguing from the direction of the bedroom. Moving as carefully as possible, I ease that direction.

“How many times can one man piss in a day, you fuckwad?”

“Give me water, and this is the result, dick face,” Les growls back.

“Piss yourself. I don’t give a fuck,” the agent says with a laugh.

“Really? I’m pretty sure this would be considered cruel and unusual punishment. Opening yourself up to a lawsuit,” Les warns sarcastically.

“Yeah, because that’s my biggest worry in this world. But, since I’m stuck here with you and would rather not smell you soaked in piss, I’ll take you to the bathroom. Warning you now, though, that if you give me any bullshit, I’ll shoot you in the fucking dick. *Capisci?*”

“Yeah, asshole, I understand,” Les states.

I ease into the doorway of another bedroom while listening to the sound of the handcuffs jingling. When Les passes the door cuffed in front, I prepare to attack. The agent comes into view but inexplicably turns suddenly to face the room I’m standing in. Our eyes meet, his showing shock, and I lunge.

Slamming into him, I drive his body hard into the opposite wall of the hallway, enjoying the whoosh of air that leaves his lungs. Throwing an elbow at his face, he ducks it, and throws a punch of his own. It lands against my cheekbone and drives me back a step. Before I’ve recovered, he throws another. This one lands hard against my ribs. Then I get a few in on his body.

Les throws his cuffed hands over the agent’s head and bends him backward, giving my punches a clear path. The agent doesn’t give up, though, even outnumbered. The house takes damage as the fight rages on, and I know we need to end this and get out fast. When the agent finally drops to the floor, I see our chance.

“Drop him, and let’s go,” I rasp out, and Les immediately pulls his hands over the agent’s head.

Moving quickly to the back door, I exit and turn to find that Les isn’t behind me. Stepping back inside, I spot my brother

rushing through the kitchen with a laptop and phone in hand. I reach out and take the items from him before heading back out the door. As my feet hit the ground, I hear a single gunshot. Whirling, I watch in horror as my brother faceplants in the doorway.

Pulling my handgun, I step over my brother's prone body and fire once into the house in the direction of the last place I saw the agent. When another shot rings out, and the doorjamb shatters near my head, I drop low to keep Les behind my body. Seeing a flash of movement and knowing the agent is moving down the hallway, I fire again, this time at the wall. Hearing his grunt of pain, I know the bullet has struck home. Walls are seldom good cover, as he just found out.

Stepping around the corner, I find the agent laying on the floor, gripping his left side. I slam my foot on his hand then kick the gun out of his reach. Picking it up and tucking it into my waistband, I make my way back to my brother.

Les is struggling to get to his feet, so I wrap an arm around him and help get him standing. Bending, I pick up the laptop and phone I'd dropped when the shooting started. Then I get my brother moving. I force myself to only think of ways to get away and not about Les's injury. Pulling him along, I move as rapidly as possible.

We make it to my bike, and I get myself and Les on it before starting it up. I lower Les's arms over my head and around my waist, hoping he stays conscious during the ride. Still not having spoken, I hit the throttle, roaring away.

Once we're a few miles away, I slow to avoid drawing attention. Staying away from highways and the interstate, I use smaller and less traveled roads until we reach the hotel. With quick movements, I get Les and I off the bike and into our room. Laying him on the nearest bed, I speak for the first time.

"Where are you hit?" I ask while barely breathing at all the blood covering his clothes.

"Head."

My stomach bottoms out, and my knees begin to shake. Flipping on all the lights in the room, I turn back to my brother. Les has his cuffed hands up and cradling his head, so I gently pull them down. His hair, head, and face are caked in blood, but I don't see active bleeding. I grab a washcloth, wet it, and start cleaning off the blood while hoping it's not serious. When I finally locate the wound, I breathe in relief.

The bullet must have deflected or hit at an odd angle because it didn't penetrate his skull. It's deeper than what most would call a graze, and it's going to leave a hell of a scar along his temple, but Les can live with a scar.

"My fucking head is splitting in half," Les mumbles.

"It nearly did get split in half, but you'll survive it."

"Hurts to even open my eyes."

"Then don't," I answer with a laugh.

"Your only brother is shot in the head, and you're laughing?" Les accuses indignantly but in a quiet voice.

"Relief-induced laughter. Sorry, brother. I'll get you some Tylenol. Then I have to go move the bike. I don't want it sitting out front in case someone got a description," I explain.

"Need something stronger than Tylenol."

"It's the best I can do for now. I need you to stay awake while I'm gone. I shouldn't be long," I say as I set a bottle of water and Tylenol on the nightstand.

"Okay."

Checking myself in the mirror, I change my hoodie to one that's not covered in blood and wash my hands before leaving the room.

I ride the bike for a few blocks until I find a place to park it. Before jogging back to the hotel, I cross the street and enter an all-night gas station type mini-mart. Walking the aisles, I pick up items we'll need to lay low for a few days. Luck on my side, I spot spray cans of paint. Buying a few bright red ones, I

pay for my stuff and leave. After I check on Les, I'll return to the bike and change its color.

I find Les in the same position as when I left, except that he's placed a pillow under his head. Unpacking the bags, I help him sit up against the headboard and realize he's still cuffed.

"Good thing nobody busted through the door while you were gone. They'd have taken one look at these cuffs and gotten the wrong idea of the kind of man I am," Les jokes while I work on the locks.

The handcuffs unlock, and I toss them aside. I grab another bottle of water and hand it to Les, watching him closely. His movements appear normal, and my worry lessens a little more. Grabbing the first aid kit, I disinfect the wound, then place a bandage over it.

"You need a shower but don't get that wet," I advise. "Any dizziness? Double vision?"

"No, just the headache. I'll be careful."

The next day is spent going through the laptop and phone we took from the safe house. As with the others we've acquired, I made sure to disable location tracking and GPS. We find nothing that indicates the two men were working with any of the crime families, and that's a relief. Except for the fact that I shot a legit federal agent, that is.

"What's our next move?" Les asks as I flip on the TV to the local news station.

My attention is immediately caught by the ongoing report and videos currently onscreen.

"Apparently, the war has escalated between the known crime families in the Chicago area. Our crime reporter has stated that there are several members of the Vero crime family that haven't been seen in several days, a few for weeks now. Late yesterday, four bodies washed up on shore and yet were not identified as those of any of the missing men. The four were instead identified as members of the Bianchi family, a long-time known enemy of the Vero family. Authorities are

questioning whether these murders are in retaliation for the missing men. Also, lending credence to this line of thinking is that there were two fires yesterday at Bianchi family businesses. Completely destroyed, the cost was in the millions of dollars.”

I watch as videos of the damage flash on the screen, followed by surveillance-type pictures of various members of both families. Things have heated up, and knowing the mentality of crime families, I know neither side will back down.

“They’re doing our work for us. I appreciate them for that,” Les states dryly. “If nothing else, mobs are full of predictable responses to anything that upsets their lives.”

“Yep, and we need to exploit that as much as we can,” I agree. “Let’s eat first, though.”

Chapter 20

Lucy

When I moved to Lisa's condo, I knew it was temporary. I love my sister, but I like my independence and my own space. Today, I made the decision to look at properties and homes for sale. I haven't decided if I want to buy a home that's ready to move into or build, but I'm taking the first step. I'm hoping that doing so will pull me out of the funk I've been in the last couple of days.

I spent the day with Lisa, but I'm not overly intrigued by anything we viewed today. When we leave the last home, she leaves for her office, and I sit in my car for a moment, wondering if I'm really ready for this step. I jump in my seat when there's a knock on my window. Looking up, I see James looking back at me. I had totally forgotten he was shadowing me today. Lowering my window, I start to apologize when he cuts me off.

"Follow me."

"Okay," I answer, confused.

Several minutes later, tailing James on his beautiful dark green Harley, I stop my car in a familiar parking lot. FurEver Homes Animal Rescue, with its sprawling barns and land, sits in front of me. Getting out of my car, James meets up with me, and we walk inside.

"Why are we here?" I ask.

"Fur therapy," James says in a serious tone.

He speaks with Dale, an employee that is more than a little creepy. Then we skirt our way around the offices to the barns that house the various animals. Opening a door, James waves me inside.

"Let's walk through and see if anyone calls to you. If so, we'll hang with them for a while, then go to the next barn. I know it seems odd, especially since Snots is such a psychotic little

mutt, but hanging out with him always improves my mood. I don't tell Livi that because why ruin my fun of picking on her dog, but he's calming when I need it the most," James says with one of his blinding smiles.

I nod in agreement, so we stroll the aisle, giving attention to the various dogs in their kennels. It breaks my heart to see so many unwanted pets and makes my anger rise at their owners. The rescue has cards on the door of each kennel with information about the dog or puppy and a warning if needed. Some huddle at the back and shy away from eye contact. Others bound to the front and beg for attention. Some, sadly enough, have been here so long they don't even use the energy to look up anymore.

"Hello, little one. How cute are you?" I ask while crouching down and extending my hand.

The medium-sized dog of questionable heritage approaches cautiously then extends his neck to sniff my hand. When nothing bad happens to him, his little tail gives a wag, and he inches closer. I wait patiently until he licks my hand, then nuzzles his head into it. I look up at James and find him smiling softly at the mutt.

A volunteer I haven't seen before approaches and explains that the dog has only been here a few weeks. I look up at the information card, but breed is listed as unknown.

"I thought they DNA'd the dogs when they came in," I say while pointing to the card.

"The tests are kind of expensive, and we're running low on them, so he hasn't been tested yet. Hopefully, he will be soon. He's been very shy since getting here, but if you want to let him into the aisleway, you can," she answers.

I open the kennel and sit back down on the floor. Within a minute, the dog inches out and then moves quickly into my lap. I cuddle him for a moment, then stroke his soft, thick tan-colored fur. He burrows his head into my stomach, and his tail starts wagging like mad. James laughs, then takes a seat next

to me, reaching over to pet the dog. When the dog turns his head enough to give James a side-eye look, he pulls his hand back slowly.

“I think he prefers women,” James jokes as the dog circles a few more times before finding his perfect spot. He lays in my lap, the side of his head against my belly, and he can keep James in sight.

“I’m going to let you get some therapy time in and go wander some more,” James says as he stands, then walks off.

I sit quietly with the dog and realize quickly that James was right. Fur therapy was exactly what I needed. Looking around, I realize I’m alone in the dog barn, so I tell the dog all my concerns, problems, and fears. I would put money on the fact that while he may not understand my words, he definitely understands my mood. A tail wag or nuzzle. The little mutt seems to know what I need most and when.

When James returns, he again sits next to me on the floor, wrists resting on his raised knees. He stays silent for several minutes before speaking softly.

“Nothing that’s happened this year has been fair to you, Lucy. You’ve been through it, and I can’t tell you how much that hurts my heart. I became a cop because I like helping people, and yet I’ve had to sit back and watch you struggle. You’ve hidden it well, but my years on the force have given me the skills to see past walls and masks. I want to help, but no words can fix what happened and make you whole again. If you ever want a break from real life, let me know. I’ll get creative and come up with something to give you that chance.”

I absorb his words and know he’s sincere as hell. I nod solemnly, then lean my head against his bicep for a moment. Sitting up straight, I carefully set the dog on his feet and then stand. Urging the dog into his kennel, I ignore the guilt from having to close the door behind him. Turning to James, I respond to him.

“Thank you, James. I may take you up on that offer. Also, thanks for bringing me here. Fur therapy is a real thing, and I believe in it now. Can I buy you dinner?”

“You’re welcome, but no. I’m paying, and we’re going to consume all the calories we want and have dessert,” he says with a wink. “Let’s go embarrass ourselves.”

On the way out, I stop at the desk and write a check for a large donation. Ignoring Dale’s constant staring, I slide the check across the counter to him and follow James out the door. We didn’t embarrass ourselves, but that wasn’t from lack of trying. We just didn’t care what anyone around us thought.



Axel: Need a favor.

Me: Name it.

Axel: Can you come to the police station and bring bail money without telling anyone?

Me: So, what you really want is for me to come to the hospital and help you escape. Answer is no. Bailey said the doctor wants you there for another day. Besides, I was joking about Alex calling other men “Daddy.” Kind of.

Axel: Not nice but I really did mean the cop shop. Please????

Me: Are you serious? Why did you get arrested? For what?

Axel: Trumped up bullshit charge of indecent exposure. Speaking of, can you stop at the gym and bring me my duffle bag? It’s in the office. I need to cover all my good parts ASAP.

Me: Oh my God! Indecent exposure? Did you take a piss somewhere public? Again? Why aren’t you at the hospital?

Axel: Can we discuss this after I get out of this hellhole? Help me out, Lucy! I’m too pretty for jail! Guys are already giving me lustful looks and I’m too weak to fight them off. I would really like to keep certain parts of me virginal.

Me: TMI!! Be there soon but you better not be making this up to mess with me or I’ll end up with an assault charge.

Axel: I'm not joking! I really do want to stay a virgin in that ass... aspect. Haha! See what I did there?

Me: I'm on my way and yes, I saw that. Good one, ASSMAN! See what I did?

I tell Candy I have to run an errand, but she refuses to let me leave alone. I try to explain that I'll be completely safe because of where I'm going, but she parks her butt in the passenger seat of my car anyway.

I make a quick stop at the gym, wave to Cash and Pooh, and enter the office. Bailey is working at the desk and looks up when I walk in. I look around until I find Axel's gym bag and lift it, slinging it over my shoulder. At Bailey's raised eyebrows, I say the only thing I can think to say.

"Axel asked if I could bring this to him. Guess he needs something out of it."

"Hmmm. Guessing he wants clothes since I took everything but his phone when I left the hospital today. Thought that would keep him there until tomorrow, but now it looks like he's found a way around that. I have to take Alex to her dance practice, so I'm just going to ask that you don't let him have the bag if he's planning an escape attempt."

"From the hospital, right?" I ask.

"Well, yeah."

"Okay, see you later," I answer, then bolt out the door.

I really hate lying, but I seem to be the keeper of everyone's secrets lately.

During the ride, I explain what I know to Candy about Axel's request. Her eyebrows raise, and her head swings in my direction before a grin breaks across her face.

"This is going to be good," she mutters while adjusting her seatbelt.

"If you want to score points with the club members, they love a good video of someone doing something stupid. Just a

suggestion.”

Her grin grows, and she holds her phone up in one hand.

“Battery is at 90%. Think that’s enough life to capture whatever Axel’s done now?”

“Never know with him,” I mutter as I park near the police department.

Walking across the lot, I hear my name called. Turning, Candy and I stop and wait for James and Livi to catch up to us.

“What are you doing here?” Livi asks.

“Axel texted saying he needed bail money,” I answer.

“Thought he was spending another day in the hospital,” James says.

“I don’t know the details. Something about bail money and indecent exposure,” I reply with a grin.

“I’m not missing out on this. Let’s go,” Livi states before walking briskly toward the entrance.

I approach the huge raised desk and the police sergeant sitting behind it. When she looks up, I explain why I’m there.

“I’m supposed to be picking up Axel Taylor. He’s a bald, tall —” I start saying when I get interrupted by a loud voice coming from around the corner.

“Beautiful, tatted, muscle-bound biker dude who has been unlawfully detained! I know my rights!”

“Yes, I know exactly who you mean,” the sergeant states, then leans forward and continues in a quiet, amused voice. “He’s not actually been arrested, but we’ve failed to mention that fact to him. He’s loud but amusing as hell. We all need a little laughter in our day. Is he really a biker?”

“Yes, and the VP at that.”

“Didn’t know bikers were such little princesses,” the sergeant mutters while giving James a side-eye look.

“I’m not a princess! Axel owns that title. I’m just a cop and a biker with the gay factor thrown in, but my mama raised no princesses,” James insists indignantly.

“Why is he here and not still in his hospital room?” I ask politely.

“We received a 911 call about a suspicious male walking down the street barefoot and in a hospital gown. The gown wasn’t tied properly, so his backside was clearly visible, even more parts showing when the breeze would blow. The caller was concerned that he may have escaped from the psychiatric wing, so they called it in,” the sergeant explains with a wide smile. “When he refused to identify himself, the responding officers told him they would charge him with indecent exposure if he didn’t cooperate. The officers brought him here until they could find where he came from. Because he isn’t under arrest, he still has his cell phone with him. I’m assuming he contacted you for help.”

“If we told you he did escape from a mental ward, would you find one to put him back in?” I ask.

“You did NOT just say that, Lucy! Pay the woman the bail money so I can get out of here while I still have some dignity left!” Axel shouts.

“Can I speak with him, please?” I question, and the sergeant nods her head toward Livi and James.

“They can take you to him. Just for curiosity’s sake, do you know if they’ve been medicating him?”

“He’s been on pain meds, but I’m thinking they should have increased the dosage,” I mutter before thanking the sergeant and following James around the corner.

We find Axel sitting in a plastic chair, one wrist cuffed to an I-bolt in the wall. His hospital gown is tucked primly between his legs, which are positioned in a way that would make a royal family member proud, and he’s in full-on pout mode. I don’t even question why he’s cuffed if he’s not under arrest. Most likely, it was to help contain his brand of crazy.

“Explain,” I order while waving my hand in a “this” motion in front of him.

“That man-hater at the front desk told me that if my parts made another appearance, accidentally or not, she was going to tuck Big Al between my legs and then super glue my thighs together. Said I’d have to face away from the urinal to piss, and that’s just fucked up. As in, fuuuuckkkkked up!” Axel exclaims and then quickly looks down at said parts and readjusts his gown.

Candy and James both snort then laugh, but Livi goes right into hysterical giggling. Axel tosses an outraged glare at her, but that only makes her brace her hands on her knees and laugh harder.

“I meant, explain why you and your parts aren’t laying in a bed in room #308 at the hospital?” I ask in exasperation.

“I decided I was well enough to leave, so I did.”

“Barefoot, in a hospital gown with no drawers on. Where were you going?” I ask out loud. But silently, I’m seriously questioning his mental stability.

“Drawers? Who calls them drawers?” Axel asks distractedly while again adjusting his gown.

“Boxers, underwear, tightie whities, thong—whatever you would normally wear under a hospital gown! Talking to you is like herding cats, Axel! Focus!” I nearly shout at him.

“No imagination needed to know exactly which of those he wears,” Candy murmurs.

At this point, Livi’s leaning against James for support, and both have tears in their eyes.

“Your opinion is not necessary, Candy, and you’ve become a hostile little person, Lucy,” Axel states without heat.

“I’m going to try this one more time. Then I’m leaving your ass here. Where were you going with your ass flapping in the wind for all to see, Axel?” I ask while leaning close enough that we’re almost nose to nose.

“Just a few blocks away from the hospital before Nurse Ratched could find me. Then I was going to call you for a ride,” Axel replies calmly like his actions were completely normal.

“Can you unlock him so we can leave, please?” I ask James.

“I need to ditch this gown. Where can I get dressed?” Axel asks as the handcuff opens, releasing him.

“There’s a restroom up front, but I’d be mindful of keeping that gown closed. Sarge doesn’t make false promises,” Livi suggests.

“She went at it with a stapler like she was Machine Gun Kelly. It’s doubtful it’ll ever open again. I might have to chew my way out of it,” Axel grumbles while standing, but he does check to be sure all is covered. As soon as he walks past, the four of us start howling in laughter at the sight.

The gown is pulled tight between his legs, front to back, with the end of it reaching slightly higher than his waist region. There, it’s stapled in place with at least thirty staples, and he may be right about chewing it off. The overall picture is reminiscent of a poorly tailored leotard currently being modeled by a 6’4” well-defined, muscular biker.

Placing a hand over his incision, Axel struts around the corner and follows James, who’s now carrying his duffle bag, to the restroom. On the way, he reaches back and tugs the hem a little to dislodge the wedgie his leotard is causing, then tosses an evil glare at the front desk sergeant. When the door closes behind him, the sergeant’s stern look disappears, and she laughs loudly.

A few minutes later, the men return, and Axel walks up to the front desk. As soon as he opens his mouth, visions of needing real bail money float through my mind, but he surprises me.

“I’d like to thank you and your officers for your service and for giving a guy a ride today when he needed one.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Taylor. Also, I’m sorry about your concerns of having caught hepatitis while riding in our cruiser.

We get all types back there, and you never know what a bare ass can contract,” the sergeant answers solemnly. “I’ll make sure to have the seat disinfected and steam cleaned, so the next occupant needn’t worry that your bits left a present behind.”

Axel stares at the sergeant for a few beats, then taps the desk and walks out. Candy and I say a quick goodbye to Livi and James and then follow him to my car. Axel carefully fits his large body into the front passenger seat, slides it back as far as it’ll go, then lowers the backrest until he’s reclined. Candy hops in the back seat behind me, and we’re off. Within minutes, Axel’s snoring softly.

I’m guessing the threat of having to piss backward has worn our little escape artist out.



“I need a shower immediately. I’m positive something crawled up into no man’s land when I was sitting in the back of that cop car,” Axel mutters, then disappears down the hall.

“Don’t get your incision wet,” I holler after him.

Candy and I each grab a bottled water and make our way to the front deck. Taking seats, I relax, determined to enjoy the last rays of sunshine today. When I hear the sound of bikes coming up the road, I look to see who’s riding. Craig and Luke are side by side but slow, then come to a stop when they see us. Dismounting and removing their helmets, the boys join us on the deck.

“How’s school going, Craig?” Candy asks and attempts to sign at the same time.

Candy’s just started learning ASL, but she’s doing very well so far, and I love that she wants to learn so she can include Luke more.

“Waste of time. They placed me a few grades ahead of where other kids my age are, but it’s still boring,” he responds.

Luke’s hands start moving, and I watch him carefully.

“Where’s Uncle Axel? Is he feeling better?” Luke signs.

“Taking a shower. Yes, he’s doing much better. He should be done soon,” I sign in response.

Luke nods in understanding and patiently waits for one of his favorite people. For unknown reasons, Luke attached himself to Axel as soon as Ava and Gunner adopted him. Axel’s great with him and the other kids as well, even if he and Craig battle occasionally.

“Hey!” Pooh shouts from his deck. “Did I just see Axel come home?”

“Yeah, he’s inside taking a shower,” Candy shouts back.

Pooh leaps over his deck railing and walks over to join our group.

“Thought he wasn’t being released until tomorrow,” he states.

“He decided to go against doctor’s orders and leave early,” I reply while trying to keep a straight face.

Candy makes no such attempt and laughs loudly, causing Pooh to look at her suspiciously. He’s obviously pondering her response and must come to some conclusion rapidly because he grins hugely.

“Video?” he asks hopefully while holding out his hand.

Candy pulls her cell phone out and flips through it while Pooh almost dances in anticipation. Handing it to him, I watch as his eyes go wide before he starts crowing in laughter. Handing the phone to Craig, the boys do the same.

“I’m going to guess that phone contains my rather unfortunate incident today,” Axel says as he exits the house and carefully takes a seat next to me.

“Just a small part of it. Unfortunately, I wasn’t there to film the actual escape,” Candy replies.

“I don’t care what it shows. I’ve done worst things than walk away from a hospital. Where’s my daughter?” Axel asks.

“Dance class. She should be home soon,” I answer.

“Prissy?”

“She’s at Ava’s. You’ll want her around when Mac finds out you’re home now,” Craig replies, then laughs. “Mac’s been plotting your death.”

“I was set up. I never touched his cashews. You know anything about that, Craig?” Axel questions.

“No, I don’t, but you’re going to need a better defense than that. Mac is pissed off!” Craig advises.

“How’s Bella doing with her riding lessons?” I ask, looking at Pooh.

“Like a duck taking to water. She’s been the easiest person ever to teach,” he answers with a small cringe, eyes darting to Axel.

“I can’t believe she asked you and not me. I’m her big brother, and she’s apparently forgotten that,” Axel says with disdain dripping in his voice.

At that moment, I hear another bike coming down the street. Unfortunately for Bella, her timing couldn’t have been worse. Stopping next to Craig and Luke’s bikes, she dismounts and bounds up the lawn, excitement painting her face as she removes her helmet.

“You’re home!” Bella exclaims as she throws her arms around Axel’s neck and squeezes tight.

“Do you even care that I am?” Axel says with a pout.

“Of course! I’ve missed you,” Bella answers while standing upright, frown now in place.

“Thought maybe you’d only care if it was Pooh,” Axel states while slightly turning his face away from his little sister.

“Ah, the riding lessons. Okay, big brother, pout if you want, but Pooh’s been a great teacher,” Bella answers with a knowing smile.

“Yes, I have been. Not to rub salt in a wound, but we’re leaving now for another shooting lesson on the range too,”

Pooh informs us while his smirk proves he definitely meant to rub salt in that wound.

“I can do that!” Axel exclaims, tossing his arms in the air.

“Sorry, brother, but I’ve seen Ava shoot, and I know you were her teacher. I want to be able to hit a barn if that’s what I’m aiming for,” Bella taunts while flicking Axel’s ear.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Lucy and Trudy. You’ve grown a mile-wide mean streak because of that. Go! Go practice your shooting with Pooh Bear, and I’ll sit here recuperating from my near-death experience. You know, the one that nobody believed me about, including you! Go!” Axel hollers while the rest of us laugh at his outrage.

Bella attempts to give Axel a kiss on the cheek, but he moves his head away and glares at her. She hesitates a moment until he relaxes again, then locks him in a headlock and lays a loud, wet kiss on his cheek. Letting go, she jumps out of reach and laughs all the way back to her bike. Axel wipes the kiss off in disgust, then flips her the bird.

“Love you,” Bella shouts before firing up her bike.

“You’re not my favorite sister anymore!” he shouts as she rides off.

“On that very mature note, I’ve got to go. By the way, Axel—nice ass!” Pooh says with a chuckle, flips Axel off, and walks back to his house. A moment later, he rides out of his drive, following the direction Bella rode.



Candy is asked to run some supplies to the ranch, so I ignore Gunner’s rule about having someone with me and drive to the security shop. I’ve been meaning to chat with Rex about installing a better security system at Lisa’s condo, and now’s as good of time as any.

Walking in, I find Rex sound asleep at his desk. The office is trashed with energy drink cans, fast food wrappers, and bags tossed everywhere. I wrinkle my nose in disgust but then feel a

pang of guilt, knowing why he's let it get to this condition. I locate a garbage bag and start filling it. Reeves sticks his head into the office and laughs loudly, startling Rex into an upright position. Reeves flips him off and walks away.

"What are you doing?" Rex asks with a wide yawn.

I look closely at him, and it's plain to see he's running on empty. His hair is disheveled, clothing wrinkled, and he's lost weight. A surge of anger rises, and I don't try to stop it. I let it spew.

"Why are you working so hard to find someone who doesn't want to be found? He left the club without an explanation, without notice, and yet you're looking for him non-stop! You're tearing yourself apart, working like a dog, and for what? A man who doesn't care enough to at least check in and let you know he's alive? Let it go, Rex! Let him go! He doesn't deserve your loyalty when he gave us none back! Just stop! He wants to be gone, so let him be!"

Rex listens to my rant then slowly nods his head.

"Ask yourself that same question, Lucy. Why are you giving him loyalty when he didn't give you any?"

"What? I'm not," I say, taken aback by his comment.

"You know more than you've said because of your own sense of loyalty to him. I'll let it go when you do the same," Rex offers in a quiet tone.

I hesitate for a moment before taking a seat across the desk from Rex.

"I don't know how," I admit softly.

"Me neither. I have this gut feeling that he's in over his head into something dangerous, and I can't make myself stop trying to find a way to help or intervene. I know Chubs. He would never have done what he did unless he felt he had no other choice. He would die alone in the street before he'd willingly put you or a club member at risk. I can't sit back, doing nothing, and worrying about loyalty, and let that happen. I

can't, Lucy. If you love him like I know you do, then help me stop that from happening. Please, don't let him die alone because he loves you enough to protect you."

My shoulders slump, and the rage leaves my body. Instead, I'm filled with the knowledge that Rex is right. Chubs is going it alone, possibly going to die, all because he loves too hard. He's too protective, and that'll be his downfall.

"My laptop has info that can help you find him," I mutter, but I'm surprised at the weight that's lifted off my shoulders immediately.

I no longer have to lie to the people I love, and I can share my worries with them. The club will help carry that load with me, and the relief coursing through my body tells me I'm making the best choice. I also know it will end any possibility of Chubs forgiving me if they can bring him home safely. He'll see it as a betrayal, but I'm not sure I care about that anymore. I'd rather live a life alone, without him, than carry the burden of knowing he died when I could have helped in some way.

"He's going to hate me."

"But he'll be alive to do it," Rex answers softly before following me to Lisa's condo.



"I'm glad you told them about Chubs," Craig says as he slides onto the stool next to me.

"You are? I thought you might be mad about it," I answer in a weary voice.

"No, not mad. I should have told them in the beginning but didn't because he made me promise not to," Craig states. "I didn't want to break my promise, but it's the kind of promise that I should have broken anyway. I overheard some things and asked Chubs about them. Everyone forgets that my superpower is my hearing. You'd think by now you adults would remember that."

Having overheard this, Tammy shouts, “Why didn’t you tell one of us?”

“Nobody asked,” Craig answers and laughs when Tammy throws up her hands and storms off.

“What else have you overheard that you shouldn’t have?” I ask.

“Well, lots of good stuff that I can use for leverage someday. I can’t give up all my secrets, but I’ll tell you this one. You know how Rex wants to get even with Pigeon and Reeves for tasing his boy parts? I know how he can do it. I’ve been wanting to tell him, but I haven’t come up with a price for that info yet,” Craig informs me with a wide, toothless grin.

“If your info is good enough, I think Rex would pay a lot for it,” I add conspiratorially.

“Reeves is absolutely terrified of snakes, and Pigeon loses his shit over clowns. Yeah, you heard that right—clowns. What a wuss,” Craig says in disgust before swigging back a huge amount of his root beer. “What should I charge him for that? It’s good stuff and should bring in a premium price.”

I have no idea what fears of snakes and clowns are worth, but I’m positive Craig and Rex will agree on something.

“If I’m not here when Rex gets his revenge, please, please, get a video for me!” I beg, and Craig nods in agreement.

The men walk out of the room they use for Church meetings, and I watch in trepidation as Gunner stops in front of me on the other side of the bar. He stares long and hard at me before dropping his head to view the floor.

“I get it, Lucy. I do, but I’m glad as fuck you finally told someone what you knew. Rex is already working on filling in the blanks, and the rest of us are going home to pack. I’d like you to stay on club property while we’re gone, though. Or at least stick close to Axel or Candy.”

Lifting his head, Gunner sighs then reaches across the bar to run a gentle finger over my cheek. I smile a little and nod my

head, agreeing to his ask.

“We’ll keep her close,” Craig states in his adult way.

“As soon as Rex has more information, several of the members and I will travel to Chicago. One of us will keep you updated on what we find,” Gunner says before walking away to speak with Petey.

I can’t take it back, so now my job is to wait and see if I helped or hurt Chubs’ cause.



Within two days, the men left for Chicago. Several on bikes, a few driving the two vans, while Axel, who’s still recovering, stayed behind. Unsure of what Chubs is protecting us from, the men insisted on taking precautions. Vex temporarily moved Taja, Tessie, and baby Kalea to Petey and Trudy’s house, so they’d be closer to the other wives. Tammy moved into Pippa and Pooh’s for the same reason.

Cash made the attempt to get his Aunts to stay with Livi at his house, but they were having none of it. His dad, Lars, and Terry happily moved into rooms at the clubhouse, though. Lisa said she’d stay with our parents but didn’t think it was necessary, and I moved to Bailey and Axel’s home. Candy refused to leave the bakery, claiming she could do security on Ava and Trudy while they were working. With the guys being gone and Axel taking care of everything in Denver, the decision was made to close the gym.

Pigeon decided he was going to go to Chicago too, and the two women that showed up at the ranch will be staying put for now. They still haven’t explained who they are to Chubs, so nothing is discussed in front of them. Ivy is staying at the ranch because the animals need to be fed, so Freddy closed the strip club and is staying with her to help. Other than Axel’s whining about being left at home, everything went smoothly and quickly.

I sat my parents down and explained what I knew. Neither said anything negative about Chubs or me for staying silent, but

they were worried, of course. Dad got that look on his face that said he was going into full-on dad-mode, and I've noticed the tail I've recently acquired. With so many things up in the air, I decided to let him have this play. If it makes him feel better, I'm fine with it as well.

Today, I've found myself at the club's garage, working the counter in Petey's place. I've filled in a few times before, so it's not a complete mystery, and it keeps me close to Tessie, who's working for Trigger. She should've been in school today but chose to skip instead, even though Taja argued against it. With the other employees, non-club members, that work here, we're fairly protected if something happens.

Pippa: Tammy and I are doing an intake, a bad one. The school sent out an alert that it's being evacuated. Can you or Tessie pick up the kids? If not, Bailey might be able to.

Me: I'll go there now. Evacuated for what?

Pippa: No idea.

Me: Did Craig go to school today?

Pippa: Oh shit! Yes! Please don't let Craig be the cause of this!

Me: I'll keep you posted. Leaving now.

Walking into the garage area, I find Tessie under a hood. Tapping her on the shoulder to get her attention, I cringe when she jumps, startled, and bangs her head hard. She rubs at her head while turning to glare at me.

"Not funny," she states with a wince.

"Sorry! It's so loud in here I didn't think you'd hear me if I spoke."

"I'll survive. What's up?" Tessie asks.

"School has been evacuated, and I have to go pick up the kids."

"Craig go to school today?" she questions with a grin.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll take my lunch break and go with you. You’re probably going to need backup then.”

When we arrive at the school, I park my car, and Tessie and I start looking for the kids. Kids are milling around the school grounds, and the teachers are frantically trying to keep them contained. It’s not long, and we find the twins and Luke, but no Craig. I show the teachers my ID because I know I’m on the kid’s list as an approved person and ask where I might find Craig.

Mrs. Howe, Luke’s teacher, answers.

“Principal’s office would be my guess. Good luck.”

“Did he have anything to do with the evacuation?” Tessie asks with a grin.

Mrs. Howe, probably not seeing the humor that Tessie does, nods. Of course, he did, and I have a gut feeling I know how.

With Tessie and the kids in tow, I make my way to the principal’s office. I knock on the closed door and wait. The kids take seats in the hall with Tessie entertaining them. When I hear someone say enter, I do.

The principal is standing in the furthest corner of the office, with Craig sitting in a chair in front of the desk. In his lap, of course, is Bart. The principal looks relieved to see me, but he doesn’t step forward to shake my hand when I introduce myself. I attempt to cover my smile, but I’m not sure I am successful.

“So, as I was saying, he’s de-scented and friendly. He’s not as much of a threat as those weird kids in room 4 are. Now those kids are whacked,” Craig says after giving me a grin.

“School is not the place for a skunk. Period. End of story,” the principal states in a firm tone.

“I disagree with you on that. Blind kids have seeing-eye dogs, and they’re allowed in school,” Craig argues while stroking a sleeping Bart.

“You’re not blind!” the principal insists. “And that isn’t a dog! It’s a skunk which is an inappropriate pet, something your parents should have thought of when you wanted one.”

“According to who? Do you make the rules and laws as to what’s an appropriate or inappropriate pet? I don’t think so. You’re just scared of him, so you’re being a bit of a dick about this,” Craig answers calmly.

“Language! And a skunk is never allowed in school, regardless of your parents’ lack of common sense!”

“Careful, Principal Jones. Be very careful what you say about my parents’. Before you talk yourself into an ass-kicking by my dad, let me say this, and then we’ll leave. Schools are putting kitty litters into bathrooms for kids who think they’re cats, and yet you’re concerned about me bringing my emotional support animal to school? Where I need emotional support the most? School is very traumatizing for a child like me, and you’re probably going to give me PTSD with your handling of this situation,” Craig advises. “I won’t bring Bart to school again, but I will find ways to deal with this trauma you’ve caused him and I. Not sure you’re going to like me getting creative, though. What is it my teacher always says? Oh, yeah. Actions have consequences. You’d do well to remember that.”

“I’ve caused you trauma? Really? You set your skunk on the cafeteria table, and it started a stampede!” Principal Jones says in dismay.

“He had to eat too. What, now you want to starve animals along with traumatizing young children? You’re a sick man that might want to spend some time with the school counselor. Let’s go, Lucy. I can’t reason with a madman,” Craig says as he stands, picks up his backpack, and cuddles Bart close as if shielding him from the crazy man in the room.

“Tessie and the other kids are in the hallway. Please, wait there for me,” I instruct Craig and ignore the wink he gives me as he walks out the door.

“What’s his punishment?” I ask the principal as soon as the door closes.

“I’ll have to think about it. I’ve never had something like this happen before. I don’t know if we even have a policy covering it,” he states wearily as he takes a seat behind his desk.

“Craig is too smart for his own good, and it causes problems when he’s bored. He needs a purpose, like helping the kids that are struggling. Something that keeps his mind busy and lets him feel useful. Punishment isn’t the answer. Not with him. His classes are too simple for him, and he’s not being challenged. He absolutely loves learning, but he has no patience when he feels he’s being talked down to. His teacher needs to adapt to his style of learning and find ways to engage his thinking side instead of his reaction side,” I advise in a soft voice.

“Are you a teacher? An educator? If not, then maybe you shouldn’t hand out advice on a subject you know nothing about. Mr. Craig will learn to adapt to our way of teaching or not. That will be his choice, I guess,” Principal Jones states in a hard, cold voice. “I’m sure his dad being a biker has something to do with his behavior.”

“Craig was being homeschooled prior to this and was doing great. He’s way ahead of his classmates, and he looked forward to his lessons each day. Before you make any further comments about bikers, know that the person who fed Craig his knowledge is a biker. The problem here is that you’re trying to fit a square peg in a round hole,” I reply with a bite to my tone.

“And I’ll repeat, you have no training to give out advice. He’ll learn our way, or he won’t. Some kids fall through the cracks, and that may end up being his path in life,” Principal Jones says dismissively.

“I’ll say goodbye then and wish you luck with your decision. You’re going to need it,” I respond, then walk out.

“Let’s go,” I tell my group as I walk past.



“It’s my fault. With everything going on, I forgot to do a pat-down this morning,” Pippa says with a moan.

“Things happen, Pips. Craig saw an opening and took it. Can I say something that’s probably not my concern?”

At her nod, I speak my mind.

“I don’t think that particular school is a good fit for Craig. The principal’s attitude wasn’t one of wanting to see each kid succeed but just the easy ones. I’m not trying to throw shade at the teachers. I know they have a difficult job, and most do the best they can. But if the principal had that type of attitude with me about Craig, who’s to say he’s not that way with kids with challenges, or are from poor families, or any number of things that make them stand out or not be the best student? I didn’t like that he was ready to give up on Craig the first time he’s had an issue with him,” I explain.

“I don’t like that either. You can’t just give up on a kid that age because he acted out once. Craig’s teacher has said all along that he’s good in class, especially with the other kids, but he gets bored easily. She suggested he be moved up a few more classes, but the principal wouldn’t sign off on it,” Pippa responds.

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

“For now, Craig will have to continue going there. When Pooh and I get a chance to discuss options, maybe we can find a better fit for Craig.”

“What’s his punishment?” I question.

“Three-day suspension from school, and he’s grounded from riding his bike for a week. He knew he wasn’t supposed to take Bart, so he forfeited his bike riding for it. Did he really call Bart his emotional support animal?” Pippa asks with a small laugh.

“Yeah, he schooled the principal on mental health issues and how he might be causing him PTSD. Your kid’s a savage,” I

answer with my own grin.

“I’ve been told that before. You know, I go to bed each night and worry that I don’t know how to be his mom. That I’m going to mess it up so bad that I’m going to ruin his life. Being a mom, yes, I can figure that out like every other parent does, but his mom? No. He’s such a sweet and caring little boy, and then something happens, and out comes his ornery side. I want him to succeed in life, but am I making mistakes now that will stop that from happening? I honestly don’t know. Pooh says I worry too much and that all we need to do is set a good example and love him,” Pippa admits quietly.

“You two are the exact parents he needed when he got you. He’s just Craig. He needs the same things all kids need. He just makes you work harder at it. Pooh’s right, though, and you both do those things already,” I reply sincerely.

“I got suspended from school all the damn time. I had cops bringing me home so often Pops was on a first-name basis with most of Denver P.D. I didn’t even bother to apply for colleges because I hated school so much. And look at me—I’m living a good life, and I’m out here killing it. Craig’s a lot like me, and he will too,” Axel says as he stops next to our table.

“Oh God. I’m doomed,” Pippa states in a horrified whisper while staring at Axel.

“No, Pips. I just explained that—” Axel says before I cut him off.

“You’re not helping, Axel.”

“I’m pretty sure I am! Pippa doesn’t need to worry because Craig—” Axel insists when I interrupt him again.

“Telling a mom that her son is just like you is not helping! Sorry, Axel, you know I love you, but that’s a horrifying thing to tell a mom.”

Axel stares at me like we’ve never met before, then aims a finger at my face.

“You’re a little spicy today. I liked you better when you were shy and quiet,” he states before stalking off.

“The look on his face!” Pippa says, laughing hard.

I pull out my phone and do what Axel would do if he offended Bailey. I order flowers.

Chapter 21

Chubs

Les and I lay low for a few days and give it time for his headaches to disappear. My hands still shake slightly when I think back to how close I came to losing my only blood brother. I never wanted to risk any of my family, but when I bring that up to Les, he refuses to listen. My only option is to minimize the risk to him the best I can and to maybe settle for less than I was hoping for in results.

Returning to our room, I drop into a chair in exhaustion. Les looks up from his laptop and studies me carefully. After a moment, he sets it aside and speaks.

“We can only do so much, Drew. There’re only two of us, and we’re up against a literal army of killers. Do you really think any of the Vero family is going to be concerned about Mom, Aria, and my whereabouts after all of this has happened? I think we could move away from here, and they’d not even care. They’re going to be busy rebuilding for a long time.”

“They’ll care because the Feds might eventually let it out that I’m still alive. They found me, so can Vero. They’ll come after any and all of us at that point. Keep in mind, it was me that was with Dad when he killed Dario Bianchi, and I was there when he was ordered to do it. He was the boss of the Bianchi family, and the Vero family wanted him dead. They knew I could put them away for life, and that’s why they came after me. Thinking I was dead is the only thing that kept them from using you, Mom, and Aria for leverage. We either have to kill them all, get the Bianchis to do it, or set them up for very long prison sentences,” I wearily answer.

“Which are we going to do? Killing them would be a permanent solution, but neither of us are straight-up killers. Depending on the situation, that is. The Bianchis have been doing a good job from their end so far, but it’s taking longer

than I'd like. We have the information needed to set them up, so is that our game plan?"

"I think so. The biggest worry is that we get the information to law enforcement that's not on the Vero payroll," I reply.

"Let's do it then."

The next evening, we place all the items we've taken off our prisoners into a tote, and Les writes a letter explaining the contents. I leave the room long enough to procure us a vehicle, as in borrow one illegally. Stowing the tote in the trunk, we drive to the warehouse where our prisoners are living.

Entering, I set the tote near the door in plain sight. Moving rapidly, we toss wrapped sandwiches and bottles of water to our cuffed captives and ignore their comments. Keeping the lights low and our faces covered, their taunting knows no bounds. The most common insult thrown our way is being called cowardly Bianchis.

As I'm sliding a sandwich across the floor to a captive, I hear Leonardo running his mouth at Les. He's taken his comments from threats of killing us to now threatening rape and death to our females.

"I get out of here, and your mom is going to be with a real man for the first time in her life! I'll do her every way a... what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Turning, my mouth drops open at my brother's response to Leonardo's taunt. My calm, respected banker brother is beyond pissed, and his angry eyes tell me that. That isn't what shocked me, though. It's his actions that leave me speechless.

Les is staring hard at Leonardo while pissing into a water bottle. Finished, he caps it and tosses it within reach of our mouthy prisoner. Next, he drops his pants, opens the sandwich wrapper, and proceeds to rub his ass cheeks and then cock with the sandwich. Neatly rewrapping it, he slides it across the floor to a shocked Leonardo. Calmly wiping his hands off on his pants, he pulls them up, fastens them, and moves to the next prisoner. The next prisoner keeps his mouth shut.

I choke out a cough but restrain my laughter for the time being. Finished, we shut off the lights and relock the door on our way out. We get into the borrowed car and drive away. I make it about three blocks before pulling over and putting it in park. Turning, I look at my brother's profile while he stares straight ahead.

"He pissed me off," Les says with a shrug.

"I pissed you off plenty when we were kids! Please tell me you didn't perfect your technique back then!" I nearly shout before I start laughing.

Still not looking at me, Les replies, "You'll never know."

I continue laughing, sometimes hysterically, on the way back to our room. Once there, I finally get control of it, and then Les speaks again.

"I'm taking a shower. I have a tomato stuck in my ass cheeks. Thank fucking God we didn't ask for jalapenos to be added to those sandwiches."

I lose it and roll on the bed, laughing as my brother shuts the bathroom door behind him. After I get it together, I return the car to where I found it and stop at a late-night deli on the walk back. I don't order jalapenos on our sandwiches, but I do ask for extra tomatoes.

We wait a few hours, then Les makes the call as an anonymous tipster. With patience, he refuses to tell the person who answered anything until they put on a supervisor. When a captain comes on the line, Les explains what's on the electronics, where to find them, and what prisoners are there. When he disconnects the call, he grins.

"The captain got a little excited when I explained they're from the Vero crime family, and if he uses the information correctly, his department will get credit for the arrests and not the FBI. The city departments get tired of state and federal ones letting them do the dirty work, and then they step in for the credit and photo ops. I did warn him that I have duplicates of everything,

so if nothing's done, I'll then contact the Feds instead. He couldn't get off the phone fast enough. Turn on the TV."

I flip it on, but instead of waiting for a news report, I walk outside the room for some fresh air. I'm sick of living out of hotel rooms, and the walls are starting to close in on me. Pulling a bag of licorice out of my back pocket, I chew slowly on a stick while thinking about Lucy.

I physically hurt when I think of never having her in my life again. There has to be a way to end this shit in Chicago and still have a life that's worth living, even if she never speaks to me again. Maybe I could have a little luck, and she'd be willing to give me another chance. I can't see it, though. I hurt, lied to, and abandoned her, and I don't deserve her forgiveness, but that won't stop me from begging. Sighing in frustration, I return to the room and wait to find out if our plan worked.

The next morning the news reports are filled with images of our former captives being led from the warehouse and placed in police vans. Les whoops, but I know we're not done yet. There's still the matter of the remaining federal agent from when I was a kid and the ones from Denver. I need more intel on them and to make a solid plan.

We spend the day scouring the internet for anything we can find on the original federal agent, Leo Fey. We find several things of interest and work together, piecing together what we can. Years earlier, Fey was fired but not charged with any crimes. That's not surprising in the least. State and federal agencies hate letting the public know they have a problem employee, so they will often transfer or fire them but not charge them. It's bad publicity, and they avoid it at all costs.

Digging deeper, we find an obituary for Leo Fey, stating he died of an apparent suicide. Whether it was or not, I don't care. He's no longer a worry for us. My main concern now is the two agents that harassed me in Denver. Are they legitimate about building a case, or are they dirty? If so, who do they work for?

What we find is that Jim Ruzzo and Dan Vetter are currently FBI agents assigned to the Chicago office. At least they didn't lie about that. Eventually, we determine that Dan Vetter is the agent I shot at the safe house. There's precious little information to be found about either. We're going to have to go old school.

"We have to tail them," I inform Les.

"And then what? If they're legit, we're looking at prison time if we snatch them up. If they're not, what do we do with them?"

"I have no idea, but the only way to finish this up is to question one of them and find out what's going on. We have a phone number. What are we out by calling them?" I question.

"Nothing, I guess. If they really are building a case against the Vero family, they don't need you anymore. We just handed over all the evidence needed. If they still want you for some reason, I'd say they have other intentions, and those might determine how we proceed."

"We need a car. I'm not a fan of riding bitch on that bike with you. How about renting one?" Les asks.

"Easily tracked. They ask for too much information nowadays."

"Steal one, or borrow it like you prefer to call it?" Les queries with a grin.

"It's risky but could be done again. I just hate taking something from someone that needs it, you know?"

"I have a friend that I can borrow one from. She's not one to ask a lot of questions, but I'd have to tell her something."

"Girlfriend?" I ask, surprised because Les hasn't mentioned anyone like that.

"Not really. We hook up, but neither of us is looking for anything permanent. She works at a land title business, and we met through our companies working together. I can call her and ask," Les suggests.

“I don’t like it, but we don’t have a lot of options, I guess. Even with the Vero family in chaos, I’d like to keep my identity hidden. You call her, and I’ll call the Feds,” I state and walk out of the room.

Leaning against the building, I dial the number and wait.

“Ruzzo.”

“Agent Ruzzo, how the fuck are you doing this fine Chicago day?” I ask in a sarcastic tone.

“Who’s this?” he barks.

“A man of many names, but you usually called me Brock.”

There’s silence for a few beats, then a sigh.

“What the fuck were you thinking? You came back here to where everyone you know wants to put your head on a stake, then shoot my partner, and I’m going to guess you’re behind the big bust for Chicago P.D. Do you have a fucking death wish, you dumbass? Fucking bikers. Not a brain amongst you all.”

“Wow. You’re a regular little Miss Mary Poppins, aren’t you? How did I not notice your sunny disposition before?” I say in a snarky voice.

“You shot a fucking FBI agent, you fucking psycho!” he shouts into the phone.

“You kidnapped my brother. Then your partner shot him in the head, and you think I’m going to just stand by and be okay with that?” I bark.

Another long silence before he breaks it, this time in a quieter tone.

“He shot your brother in the head? Holy fuck. Is he dead?”

“Would it matter to either of you if he were?” I fire back.

“Yeah, Brock, it would. He never said a word about shooting anyone. I just left his fucking house, and he never said a thing

about that. Just said you snuck in, attacked, and shot him, then ran with your brother. Jesus Christ. Is your brother alive?"

"Yes, he is, and it's the only reason you two are still breathing. Tell me now why you two wanted me so bad," I demand.

"It's a long story, but it's all legit. Let's meet up somewhere, and we can talk. No tricks, I promise. Vetter's going to be laid up for a while, so it would only be me. I'm now working with C.P.D. on the Vero investigation that you got rolling. Helping fill in some gaps for them. Where and when can we meet? At this point, I'm not even sure we need your testimony," Ruzzo states in a tired tone.

"Then why meet?" I ask suspiciously.

"So I can fill in the gaps for you too. You've earned it if what I've heard so far is true. You turned in a shit ton of evidence against the family."

"I'll call you back if I decide to take you up on your offer," I say as I disconnect the call.

Explaining to Les what Ruzzo had to say, he thinks it over for a moment before shrugging his shoulders.

"I'd like to have the rest of the puzzle pieces."

"Me too, but not if it's another set-up," I say.

"We have a car to use. Melanie said I can borrow it whenever I want."

Uneasy about it but wanting to finish this up, I nod.

"I'll drop you a block away and meet you back here."



Les in his friend's car and me on the bike locate and surveil Ruzzo. We located him leaving work and followed him to his home. With us rotating, I don't think he realized he was being followed, but I'm not positive. That makes me nervous, but Les was sure he didn't.

Sitting on him for over a day, I find nothing suspicious about his routine. While Les keeps an eye on Ruzzo's movements, I

find Vetter's home and watch it for hours. A woman comes and goes, but the only sighting of Vetter was through a window. He was reclined in a chair and didn't leave it. I was too far away to tell how injured he was, but I did watch the woman bring him food and drinks. If he's home and not in a hospital still, I must not have done too much damage.

Meeting back up with Les, we come to the agreement to meet with Ruzzo. Making the call, he gives me an address and a time to meet him. I immediately race to the location, thinking it would be a restaurant or bar, but it's not. It's an abandoned lot in the middle of an old industrial district. The buildings surrounding the area have all gone to hell, and none are in use for anything other than shady business. The homes in the nearby neighborhood appear to be vacant or crack houses. I instantly know that Ruzzo has no intentions of Les or me leaving here alive. Riding back to the hotel, I know what I have to do.

"I'm going, but you're not," I inform my angry brother.

"That's just suicide, Drew! With two of us, we have a chance to finish this thing and lead normal lives! This isn't just about you. We have Aria and Mom's futures to think about too," Les argues.

"Exactly! One of us needs to be breathing for their sake, and that falls on you."

I hadn't told my brother about the layout of the meeting place or my suspicions, but he must have read between the lines. As soon as I told him I was going it alone, he lost his shit. Finally, I gave up pretending it was just a meeting and tried the truth instead. Since then, we've been battling it out, and I'm not sure I'll win against his stubbornness.

"I'm not letting you do this alone," Les states firmly, hands landing on his hips.

"Ruzzo isn't going to show up alone, Les! He's going to bring whoever he's working with or for, and I'm not going to be the cause of your death!" I shout in frustration.

I didn't realize how loud we'd gotten until someone in the room next to ours bangs on the wall. Taking a deep breath, I fight to rein in my temper. Les glances at the wall and then rubs his hands over his face in an angry motion.

"I got this. You need to head to Denver and take care of the women. They need you, Les, and there's a good chance I'll walk away from this. Maybe it is just a meeting, and I'm jumping to the wrong conclusion."

"Fuck you, and stop patronizing me!" Les barks loudly.

"I'm not! I'm trying to be positive, you twit!" I holler back.

The knock on the door startles both of us, and we each reach for our handguns. Taking up opposite sides of the door, Les says, "Yeah?"

"Quit your fucking shouting before the LEOs are called, you simple fucks. Open the damn door, or I'm kicking it in," a familiar voice growls.

In shock, I lean back, move the curtain, and look outside the window. There stands several members of The Devil's Angels, and not one looks happy. Well, fuck, this has taken an ugly turn. I may not even live long enough to meet with Ruzzo.

I indicate for Les to step back and to lower his weapon.

Turning, I take a deep breath and unlock the door. The second I do, it's shoved open, and Gunner, followed by the others, storms into the room. Last inside is Vex, and he shuts the door then leans his back against it, crossing his arms over his chest.

The punch lands on the left side of my jaw, and I stumble back into Les, who keeps me standing. When he moves to shove me to the side, I put my arm out in front of him and shake my head no.

"Nice punch, old man," I say to a fuming Trigger while rubbing my jaw with one hand.

"It's going to be the first of many, Chubs," he warns while shaking out his hand.

“Chubs? Who the fuck are you to bust in—” Les bellows but is cut off when Gunner places a hand in front of Trigger and speaks in a quiet, deadly voice.

“Stop. Time for that later, Trigger. We’ll make sure there’s plenty of time for that later, in fact. Right now, we have somewhere to be. You two will be riding in the van. The rest of us will follow and get set up. We need to hurry so we’re there before they are. Let’s go.”

We’re herded outside to a waiting van with Horse as the driver. My brother and I are assisted, that being a polite term for shoved, inside with the door slamming shut instantly. I take a seat and lean against the side wall, watching Les do the same.

“Address?” Horse asks, and I give it to him.

“Please tell me these assholes aren’t your club brothers. I saw their vests, but they’re not acting like you’re one of them,” Les says angrily. “You sent our women to them! What the fuck, Drew!”

“Cuts, not vests, and yes, they are,” I answer, then shrug. “I broke club rules. Their behavior is expected. Don’t antagonize them, Les, because even though I’m out bad, they’ve protected the women, and they’re here now to help.”

“When you say ‘our women’ you best mean your brother’s wife and mother-in-law or something close to that. If you’ve been leading Lucy on, things are going to get painful for you,” Rex states calmly from the passenger seat.

“Hey, Rex. No need to ask if you’re the one who found me. But how the fuck did you do it? I’ve been so careful,” I ask, curious about the answer and where I fucked up.

“I tracked the buffet lines and food shortages across the U.S.,” Rex says.

“Fuck you!” Les barks in outrage, but I chuckle.

“Where did I mess up?” I question again.

“I taught you only a tiny portion of what I know about computers, tracking, finding people, and all that other good

stuff. I am the master, and you are but a student. The women? Let's talk about them now."

"Our sister and mother. Thank you for keeping them safe," I answer softly.

"They are safe, aren't they? That big fucker didn't beat our whereabouts out of them, did he?" Les asks with concern.

I kick him in the leg and return his glare.

"The big guy, I'm assuming you mean Gunner, or it could be Cash. Either way, the answer is yes. Of course, they're safe. We may wear cuts and ride bikes, but we're not into abusing women. Are you sure he's your brother, Chubs? He seems a little angry," Rex says with a small laugh.

"Second time I've been kidnapped, and it grates on my nerves, okay?" Les says sarcastically. I kick him a second time and a little harder than before.

"We haven't kidnapped you. We're here as your backup to hopefully increase your survival chances. We hauled ass from Denver to do that, closing businesses, and leaving our families behind just so we could help you out of a tough spot. You're welcome," Rex replies, still in a calm, unruffled voice.

"Shit. Sorry," Les mumbles.

"Park here, Horse. We'll go the rest of the way on foot," Rex orders, then closes his laptop and bails out the door.

I climb out of the van, followed by my brother, and wait for the others to join us. As soon as they do, Gunner starts barking orders. Everyone jumps to comply, with Les and I trailing behind Gunner and Cash.

"You both armed?" Cash questions quietly.

"Yeah, we're good," I reply.

Rex catches up and hands Les and me each a bulletproof vest. We put them on and cover them with our hoodies. I take a moment to double-check my handgun, waiting for Les to do the same. Once we're set, Gunner lays out the plan that we're

to follow. When Cash receives a text, he tells us it's time to get into place.

Horse passes us with the empty van, pulls it into the vacant lot, removes the license plate, and climbs inside. Les and I walk to it and climb into the front seats. Since we got here so early to prepare, we have a long wait, and that's the hard part.

A few hours pass before I hear a ding from the phone Horse set near me. Picking it up, I read the message and reply.

"Cars are coming. Three of them in a line. Remember our job, Les. Stay calm and duck for cover if shit goes sideways."

"I'm ready. Be careful, brother. Don't want to attend another of your funerals."

Horse chokes out a laugh but quiets when headlights flash across the windshield. Only one car pulls into the vacant lot, and it parks a few spaces over from the van, slightly forward of us. I open my door partway and wait to see who exits the car. When the driver's door opens, I watch Ruzzo step out. I do the same, with Les following suit.

Ruzzo approaches and holds his hand out. I grasp it and shake hands with the man who turned my world upside down when he appeared in Denver. When he turns to shake hands with Les, I see movement in the passenger side of his car.

"Who's your friend?" I ask casually.

"Vetter. He wanted to come tonight and explain his side of things. I hope that's alright?" Ruzzo questions in the same casual tone I used.

I watch as Vetter slowly, carefully climbs from the car. He briefly leans against the side of it before skirting the hood and walking in our direction. I can't help the grin I flash him at his obvious discomfort. He instantly scowls and gives a small grunt.

"Everyone's here. Explain," Les orders in a gruff voice.

"Right to the point. I like that," Ruzzo says with a smile. "We are FBI agents, and we were building a case against the Vero

family. During our research, we came across your case file. How the U.S. Marshalls took possession of you and how you were killed in a car accident that resulted in an explosion. The report was sketchy, so we decided to dig a little deeper. Your father had been no help whatsoever, but the report indicated that you had been a willing witness. It was too coincidental that you died when you did. Nothing was adding up, especially after looking into the two Marshalls and what became of them.”

When Ruzzo stops speaking and glances around, I tense. Then Vetter speaks up for the first time.

“The Marshalls were working on the side of the Vero family. Making a shit load of money doing it too. They had to do very little for that money except to make you disappear, and they fucked that up. Of course, no one knew they did for several years. They reaped their rewards from the Veros and started living a good life. Then the agency decided to try for another case against the mafia controlling Chicago. We were assigned to it and got busy. Nothing came of it for quite some time, and then by accident, we knew the Veros had been played.”

“How?” Les asks impatiently.

Vetter ignores Les and types into his phone instead. Ruzzo speaks, and his words finally explain how they found me.

“I came across a picture of a charity event that had nothing to do with our investigation. Some political charity event that included several governors, including the Illinois governor. Hence, why the article was in the Chicago papers. I don’t even know why I was reading the article in the first place, but I saw a guy in the picture that looked very familiar. It took me a few days to figure out why. It was you, and I had just been reading your case file. Pictures of you at various ages growing up were included.”

Thinking back, I know the event he’s talking about. Usually at those things, I kept a low profile and away from the spotlight easily enough. But the photographer at that one was after candid shots instead of the usual staged ones and was popping

up with her camera everywhere. I even left the event early because of her. I should have left even earlier.

“On a hunch, we flew to Denver and located the man that was dating the governor’s daughter,” Ruzzo explains with a smirk.

I see the headlights of two cars turn into the lot, and I know our conversation is at its end. Stepping closer to Les, I look at Vetter as an evil smile crosses his face. I’m surprised when Vetter continues to explain.

“We weren’t dirty in the beginning, but when we realized what you’d be worth to the Veros, we decided we needed to cash in on that. Our goal was to get you back to Chicago and let them know we had you, but you wouldn’t work with us on that. You made things very difficult for us. Luckily, we hadn’t told Emilio Vero about you because they’d have taken care of it themselves, and our lives would have been worth nothing. But, as you can now see, we did contact him today, and he insisted on seeing you himself.”

As Vetter was talking, I watch six men, all in suits, step out of the cars. Scanning their faces, I recognize most. Emilio Vero, his only living son, Rocky, two of his capos, and the two drivers whose names I don’t know.

“You are looking well for a dead man, Adriano Zanetti,” Emilio says with a flash of white teeth. “Is it you I should thank for all the troubles the families have been having lately?”

“Emilio. Rocky. It’s been a while,” I reply with my own grin. “Your troubles are your own doing, not mine.”

“Your father would not be happy with your choices,” Emilio states, and the warning in his voice is clear to all.

“My father made his choices, is still making them, and that’s loyalty to you above all others. He took the oath and has held it all these years.”

“Yes, he has, but he always had a blind spot for his two sons. He never saw what the rest of us did. Neither of you were

going to be a part of the family as he was hoping,” Emilio replies.

“No, we weren’t. I need to ask this out of morbid curiosity. What is my life worth these days? More than it was before when you hired the first two to end me? Has inflation hit the mob too? Or do you feel you paid once and shouldn’t have to a second time? Because I gotta say, I’d be pissed at having to pay these two jackasses after already shelling out the first time. And why pay them when you’re here and can do it yourself?” I ask brazenly.

“Seems like a waste to pay them, and then always wonder if they’ll double-cross you somewhere down the road. Another thing to consider is that they’ve known about Adriano for a long time and only now told you. They were building a case to take you down, trying to use my brother, but he refused to help them,” Les adds.

“Shut the fuck up!” growls Ruzzo, making a quick move toward us to most likely try to force our silence.

Emilio chuckles carelessly, but his drivers take a step forward, hands hovering under their suit coats, stopping Ruzzo’s advance.

“We think alike, young Zanettis. Maybe you would have made good capos. You certainly had us chasing our tails for a while there. Unfortunately, by doing that, we’ve made even bigger enemies of the Bianchis, and our numbers are now reduced. You’ve made a mess of things for us, and that can’t be forgiven,” Emilio says in a chilling voice.

“You ordered Dario Bianchi’s death, so I’m thinking that’s why they’re your enemy and not something you think I may have done,” I respond.

“Then you understand how I deal with people who cross me. They aren’t left alive to do it twice,” Emilio says.

“We took out several of their men lately, and now I’m pissed that it was you we should have eliminated. We need to cut our losses and get busy rebuilding. You won’t be the only ones to

pay for your crimes, though. You've made a deadly mistake in thinking you could take us on and win. Everyone you love will pay," Rocky states while staring at me with dead eyes.

With a slight flick of his hand, Emilio signals his men. The first shot rings out, and Ruzzo hits the ground, round hole in the middle of his forehead. Second shot takes down Vetter, but he's alive long enough to scream before the third shot stops the noise.

When I see the handguns being raised, I shove Les toward the side of the van. He scrambles behind it as I follow on his heels. At this point, all hell breaks loose. Bullets are tinging off the van and ground around my brother and me. Forcing Les behind the engine block the best I can, I lean out enough to see all six Vero men advancing.

A barrage of bullets comes from all directions around us, and yet none hit the men. It stops their approach, though, and has them spinning in every direction, looking for where the shots came from. Several more shots ring out, striking the ground near their feet, and the men start to retreat toward their cars.

I'm stunned because several of my club brothers are great shots, especially Pooh, but my surprise ends quickly enough. Blue and red flashing lights descend on the vacant lot from three directions. My brother and I, along with the Veros, are quickly surrounded by SWAT vehicles. I instantly drop my handgun and order Les to do so too, then we raise our hands high, still keeping the van between us and the Vero men.

Emilio and Rocky race toward their car, firing at the police vehicles as they go. They make it inside, start the car, and spin in a half-circle before speeding toward the exit. The other four men try to make the same move but get cut off by a SWAT vehicle. Police, rifles lifted, bail out of the vehicle, and quickly have the four men subdued.

A rifle barks, making each of the cops dive for cover, but it's Emilio's car tire that's the intended target. A second round is immediately fired, and the car swerves then crashes into an electric pole, bringing it to a harsh halt. When no more

gunshots ring out, several cops converge on the wrecked car. Within moments, Emilio and Rocky are cuffed and being led away. The other cops scan the area while fanning out, searching for the shooter.

During this, Horse climbed from the van and is standing in the same position as I am, hands raised. Two SWAT members approach cautiously, bright lights in our eyes, rendering it hard to see. None of us resist when they push us up against the van and cuff us.

While the numerous cops secure the scene, I hear Harleys fired up and riding away in the distance. I stay leaning against the van, silent, until an officer pulls me around to face him.

“I’m Lt. Peters. I’m in charge of the Chicago Police Department SWAT Team. Your name?”

“Adriano Zanetti.”

“What happened here tonight?” he asks.

“I can show you everything. It’s all on the dash camera,” Horse informs the SWAT leader.

The Lieutenant nods at another officer who listens to Horse for a moment, enters the van, and returns with the small camera.

“You’ll be transported to the station until we can view this and sort through the crime scene,” Lieutenant Peters informs us before calling over another officer to help.

Hours later, Horse, Les, and myself are released after answering some questions and handing over our phone numbers. The van has been released back to us, so we load up and head back to our hotel. Exhausted, I enter my room and find Cash and Rex sitting at the small table.

“Where’s everyone else?” I ask as Les brushes past on his way to the bathroom.

“Next room over, catching up on sleep,” Rex answers, looking up from his laptop for a moment.

“You look like shit, Chubs,” Cash states without looking up from his meal.

“Yeah, I feel it too. Not sure I understand what happened earlier. Lots of flying bullets, and yet none hit their targets.”

“Our shots were to keep them guessing about a larger attack and to keep them looking for us, not killing you and your brother. Keeps us out of the police investigation and off everyone’s radar. Cops ask you about that?” Cash asks.

“Yeah. They’re fucking confused as hell about that. They’re assuming the Bianchis caught wind of the meeting and decided to join the party,” I answer.

“You need to dye that fucking ginger out of your hair. It’s kind of freaking me the fuck out,” Rex mutters.

“What happens now?” I ask, tired of making small talk.

“We return to Denver with you, and the club votes on your punishment,” Cash says with a touch of anger.

“What about my family?” I ask curiously.

“What about them? They’re not our problem. They’re yours. Are they going to be in danger here now, or has that been taken care of?” Cash questions, finally looking up and making eye contact.

“The police are rounding up what’s left of the Vero crime family members, and my family shouldn’t be in danger from the other mafia families. They should be safe here now,” I reply while taking a seat on the end of my bed.

“Then that answers your question. They’re not our prisoners, Chu... Adriano. They can leave anytime they want. Call them and let them know,” Cash suggests.

“Maybe they should stay there until we get back and can talk with them,” Les says as he walks out of the bathroom, wiping his face with a towel.

“You’re going to Denver too?” I ask, surprised.

“Of course I am. I want to meet Lucy and help explain why you did what you did,” Les says in a quiet voice. “Maybe if she meets your family, she’ll understand better.”

I feel a little hope flutter in my chest region, but I don’t let it grow.

“Has she met my mom and sister yet?” I ask Cash.

“No. Didn’t know who they were to you, and we didn’t want to cause Lucy more pain if one of them was your wife or fiancé or what the fuck ever,” Cash barks in irritation.

I cringe then laugh at the thought of one of them being my wife but sober quickly enough when Cash goes into full-on Viking glower mode.

“Don’t piss off the big blond guy, brother. I don’t like you enough to risk it all to go up against him,” Les advises as he flops on his back on his bed.

The door opens and in file my club brothers. I brace when Trigger walks past, expecting another punch, but he ignores me, taking a place against the wall. Looking at each, I note that some meet my eyes, some don’t. Pooh gives me a small grin while Pigeon shoots a wink in my direction. Petey stops in front of me and waits until my eyes find his before speaking.

“Happy as fuck to see you’re whole. Was worried about you but pissed as fuck too. Love you as my club brother, always will, but you don’t deserve Lucy.”

With that, he moves past and leans against the wall near Trigger.

“Where’s Axel?” I ask, suddenly realizing he’s not here.

“He stayed home to keep an eye on things since we didn’t know if trouble was coming that direction or not. He also just got out of the hospital—appendicitis—and not healed enough for the ride. Lots has happened since you deserted your club and woman. All of which we’ll discuss when we get home. Grab your shit, and let’s hit the road,” Gunner orders.

I do as I'm told, as does Les, and we're in the van, Horse driving, within half an hour. I salute the sign indicating that we're leaving the Chicago city limits and, soon after, fall asleep.

Chapter 22

Lucy

Lisa and I view a few more properties together, but again, nothing calls to me. As we're pulling into the drive of the last house on the list for today, I perk up. It's a two-story beautiful old all-stone cottage with a winding sidewalk that leads to the front door. It's set back off the street further than the other houses, and it's surrounded by large trees and bushes. It's completely isolated from view of the other homes and the street, with a two-car garage off to the right of it.

Walking along the side of the house, I give a surprised gasp when I see the backyard. It's about double the normal size of a backyard for a home in this neighborhood and has a privacy fence along the property lines. It has a large deck coming off the back of the house with plenty of room for deck furniture and a grill. Private, with lush flowers sprinkled throughout the yard, it's the perfect place to start your day with a cup of coffee or end one with friends.

"With the yard completely fenced in, you could get a dog," Lisa suggests.

"Or a couple of goats," I reply with a grin.

"Only if you hate the flowers, deck, and wood fencing," she advises.

"True. Let's go inside, but I love it already."

It's not large, but it's laid out beautifully. One bedroom with a master bath downstairs, two more bedrooms and another bathroom upstairs. It's large enough. I love how big and how many windows it has throughout, and the gleaming hardwood floors are a huge selling point for me. The basement is spotless but unfinished. Turning to Lisa, I grin.

"Is it a sound investment?"

"Yes, absolutely is. The owner has to sell, and it's listed well below the value. No known problems, and it's structurally

sound. It's perfect for you, even though I wish you'd stay with me. It's been nice having my little sister around again."

"Love you, but I think I need this for me. I've been living in limbo long enough, and I want something that's just mine. How soon could I move in?" I ask.

"As soon as we get the paperwork completed. Let's go get started on it and call Mom and Dad."

My phone rings, and I answer it.

"What's up, Axel?"

"The guys are on their way home. Chubs is with them, and so is his brother."

"Everyone's safe?" I ask in a near whisper. "He has a brother?"

"Yes. They should be here late tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you for letting me know."

"The women at the ranch are his mom and sister. They've asked if they could meet with you. It's completely your choice. If you want to, I can ride out with you, or they can meet you at the clubhouse. Whatever you decide, I can be there."

"I'll meet with them at the clubhouse tomorrow morning, say at 10am. That work?" I ask with trepidation.

"Perfect. See you then, little one."

"What was that about?" Lisa asks.

"The women are his mom and sister, and they want to meet me. I don't know why, and I'm not sure I should have agreed to it," I answer honestly.

"You can always cancel or go and see what they want. If you don't like the feeling of the meeting, leave. You don't have to stay, and you don't owe them anything. Remember that," Lisa advises.

I nod in agreement, but my stomach is doing slow flips at the thought of the meeting.



Walking into the clubhouse the next morning, I'm tempted to have a few drinks, regardless of the time. I don't, but my shaking hands are begging me to rethink that decision. Instead, I start a pot of coffee brewing and tap my fingers on the bar top while waiting.

The door opens, and my eyes shoot in that direction, but only Bella walks inside. Coming to a stop on the opposite side of the bar, she eyes me carefully.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yeah. No. I'm not sure. It doesn't matter. What are you doing here? Don't you have school today?"

"No, it's a teacher in-service day, so we got it off. I was looking for Gee. Ava said she let him out this morning, and he hasn't returned yet. I thought maybe he came here and somehow got locked inside. Have you seen him?" she asks.

"No, I haven't. Did you check Pooh's house? Gee goes there a lot knowing Craig will give him treats."

The door opens again, and Axel walks in with Gee on his heels, Prissy on his shoulder, and Alex holding his hand. Bella sighs in relief and bends low to give Gee some love. His bright blue t-shirt today reads, "Go Pig or Go Home."

Holding up the coffee pot, Axel nods, so I pour two cups and push one toward him.

"Hi, Priscilla. How are you today?" I ask while booping Alex on the nose.

"I's good and you?" Prissy coos in her beautiful southern accent.

"Good, thank you. Have you plucked any more of Mac's feathers?"

"Yes, she has, and that's why she's not allowed back at my house for a while," Ava says as she comes out of the kitchen to join our group.

Duffy, Ava's temperamental cat trails behind her, then drops to his side on the floor and closes his eyes. I'm guessing the walk to the clubhouse exhausted his overfed self.

"Plucking Mac," Prissy says with a cackle.

"Self-defense, Ava. You know Mac's been stalking her," Axel admonishes. "And he's plotting my death, and Prissy's protective of me."

"Prissy's been as evil as Mac lately," Ava says. "They both need a bird timeout."

"Change your mouth!" Prissy screeches and stands her bright yellow mohawk crest on end.

"You can tuck those feathers away, Miss Priscilla. I've owned Mac for many years, and you can't intimidate me after that," Ava says dismissively.

The door opens again, and in walks the two women I saw at the ranch. Taking a deep breath, I step forward and look them over carefully. Both are beautiful with dark brown wavy hair. Taller than me, like most everyone is, the older lady has curves, dark brown eyes, and a tentative smile. She doesn't look old enough to be Chubs' mother, but I can see the resemblance in the eyes.

The younger woman looks a few years older than me, much taller, and curvy in all the places men like them to be. Stunning, she has flawless skin, very long bordering on curly hair that gleams. Eyes a dark rich chocolate color, they assess me critically. Then, she smiles broadly, and it reminds me so much of Chubs I feel a stab of pain.

Walking forward, she holds her hand out and says, "You must be Lucy. I'm Aria. It's so nice to finally meet you."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you too," I murmur while shaking her hand.

"I'm Giana, and you're even more beautiful than Adriano said you were," the older woman says quietly before stepping forward and giving me a brief hug and a kiss on each cheek.

“Thank you. Would you like a cup of coffee or a water?” I ask politely while guiding them to a table.

“Yes, please. Coffee sounds great. Black, please, for both of us,” answers Aria.

“I got them,” Ava offers, and I realize I forgot to introduce everyone.

“Aria, Giana, that’s Bella, Axel, and Ava. Aria and Giana are Chubs’ sister and mother,” I say, correcting my omission.

“Chubs?” Aria asks, clearly confused and possibly a little angry.

“Who’s Adriano?” Bella questions, just as confused.

“Chubs is your brother’s road name. Adriano is Chubs’ real name,” Axel answers, clearing the confusion from Bella’s face but not the slight anger on Aria’s.

“You call him Chubs? That’s incredibly insulting. He’s always been an eater, but he’s never been chubby,” Aria says in defense of her brother.

“It’s not meant as an insult. When he came to the club, he was very thin, having been living on the streets. Road names are often given as a joke. He was thin, so someone tagged him as Chubs. Names stick, and that one did,” Axel explains patiently.

“He was thin? How thin? Living on the streets? Oh God,” Giana moans in horror.

“Not for long. Our club president at the time brought him home and shoveled food in his direction until he gained weight,” Axel hurries to explain.

“Do you know anything about his life after he left Chicago?” Ava asks as she sets cups in front of the three of us.

“Is that a pig?” Aria asks suddenly, pointing at a snoring Gee, cuddled up to a snoring fat-assed cat.

“Yes, that’s Gee. Magnum P.I.G. is his full name, and he’s very friendly. Duffy’s the chubby cat next to him. Avoid eye

contact and steer clear, especially if you're a bleeder," Bella answers with a grin. "And that's Priscilla. She's a southern belle, so if you hear an accent, that's why."

"Oh, sorry. I got distracted by the pig. We know a little bit. Just what he's had time to tell us before we left to come here, though," Aria answers while still looking at Gee.

"Did you know about us, Lucy?" Giana asks.

"No. I knew a little bit about him as far as the name changes and WITSEC but little else. He never mentioned what family he had left, just that his dad was in prison. I don't mean to be blunt, but why did you want to meet with me?" I ask flatly.

"Mostly just curious about the woman he loves," Giana says in a near whisper and a searching look.

Keeping my face blank, I reply curtly, "Woman he loved, but lied to, deceived, and misled with promises of a future together. Meeting you and having learned recently that he has a brother too, I get why he wanted to keep you safe. You're his family, and he obviously misses and loves you all very much. I'm not holding that against him."

"Yet, you're angry with him anyway," Aria surmises correctly.

"Very. Instead of telling me what he needed to do, which I would have understood and supported, he decided to leave without a word," I answer.

"He was trying to protect you," Aria insists.

"I trusted him, and he destroyed that. I gave him my love, my complete trust, and he gave me lies in return. I'm sorry if that seems harsh to you, but I had no choice in how anything went down. I was just left to pick up the pieces alone and doubting myself. I wish you only the best for your future, and I'm glad you're reunited with your son and brother. But I have nothing else to say on the subject of him. I'm done, and I'm out. Have a good day."

Standing, I walk on steady legs out the door and to my car. Driving away, I fight back the tears threatening to fall. I make

it to Lisa's condo, into my room, and face down on the bed before I give in to them. The sobs wrack my body for a long time before they lessen. When I've cried all my tears, I get up and wash my face. It's blotchy, and my eyes are swollen, but there's a part of me that feels more settled than I have in a long time.



It's been several days since my meeting with Aria and Giana, and I know the men have returned, along with Chubs. I haven't gone back to the clubhouse, and I'm not sure if I ever can. Instead, I focus on buying the house I plan on making my home.

One of the hardest things I did was to call Pippa and let her know I'd no longer be working at New Horizons. I offered my help with grants and other paperwork, but I will not be doing it from there. She'll need to email me whatever she needs done, and I'll work from home. Pippa was grateful for the offer to help but sad that we will no longer be working together. The decision was painful.

I've stayed in contact with Bailey, of course, but I no longer go to the gym to work out or hang with her. We'll meet for lunches and shopping regularly, I'm sure, but I'm worried it won't be the same. I don't think anything in my life will ever be the same again.

I haven't asked about Chubs, and no one has mentioned him. Every single day, I feel the void he's left in my life, but every single day, I get up and push forward. I've applied for a few jobs to help fill my time, but my dad is trying to recruit me to work at his office. Thanks to New Horizons, I've become very adept at dealing with government agencies, and that's a skill he'd like to put to use. I'm not sure it's a good fit for me, so I haven't given him an answer yet.

Pippa: Craig here. Are you ever going to come see me again?

Me: Of course I will. Maybe we can have lunch together soon.

Pippa: How about tomorrow?

Me: You have school tomorrow, don't you?

Pippa: I'm pretty sure I'll be free by noon. Don't ask how I know that.

Me: Craig! What are you up to?

Pippa: School is crushing my soul. Chubs isn't doing our learning things anymore and I've got to find a way to change that.

Me: By getting expelled again?

Pippa: Desperate times and all that stuff.

Me: Do I want to know what your plan is?

Pippa: No. You can claim plausible deniability if I don't tell you.

Me: How do you even know that phrase, the meaning of it and how to spell it?????

Pippa: Disappointed in you, Lucy. You never used to underestimate me. I learn things fast. I'm smart. Genius level according to my teacher. Tomorrow noon? You can just pick me up from the school and save mom a trip. Okay?

Me: This isn't the way to do things, Craig. Talk with your mom and dad. I'm sure you three can come up with a good solution.

Pippa: You could be my teacher instead.

Me: I'm not a teacher, Craig. Helping you with projects is one thing but I can't teach you all the things you need to learn. School can.

Pippa: I like my teacher. Don't like Principal Jones. I heard him making fun of Luke and the sounds he makes when he tries to talk. Not cool. I should let Trigger know. He'd mop the floor with Jones.

Me: That's something you need to tell Pippa and Ava. Does Luke know about it?

Pippa: No and he never will. He loves it here and everyone else treats him great. BTW, Bella's going to talk to the club

about joining when she's 18. She wanted you to be there for her when she does but you've abandoned us. Sunday, before Church, she's talking to them.

Me: I didn't do that and you know it.

Pippa: I know but you're letting Chubs keep you away. Church this week is going to be about his punishment. I hope they don't kill him.

Me: They won't do that, Craig. He will get punished though. And I'm sorry, you're right and I've let him keep me away and that's not fair to you or Bella. I'll be at the clubhouse for Sunday brunch, before their meeting. Please let Bella know.

Pippa: Ok, cool.

Me: I'll pick you up at school tomorrow at noon. Please rethink whatever it is you're going to do.

Pippa: KK bye

I set my phone down and groan in frustration. Do I let Pippa know that Craig's planning something or not? Can I see Chubs at the clubhouse and not lose my shit?

"What's got you frowning so bad it's going to cause wrinkles?" Lisa asks as she takes a seat on the couch.

"Craig's up to something, and Bella needs me to come to the clubhouse Sunday morning before they have Church," I answer.

"Craig's always up to something. Going to the clubhouse is something you need to do. You need to face him and decide if it's really over or not. What can it hurt to hear him out?"

"I understand why he did what he did. I'm past that, but I can't get past how he led me to think everything was okay with us while planning on leaving. I don't think I could ever trust him again, and what's a relationship look like without trust?"

"Like shit, to be honest. Maybe you two could start fresh as if you just met. You fell together so fast before. You never really went through all the dating, getting to know each other things.

If he fucks up, you're no worse off than you are now," Lisa suggests.

"I feel like I'm finally starting to get a grip on myself again. Not sure I want to open myself up for another round of hurt, you know? Besides, I don't even know if he's interested in a relationship with me or not. He's been back for almost a week now and hasn't reached out. Maybe I'm worrying for nothing, and he meant for us to be ended when he left."

"Deep inside, which do you want? Him to be okay with moving on without you, or him still wanting you with him?" Lisa questions quietly.

I think about that for a minute before shrugging my shoulders.

"I honestly don't know. Either way, it's going to hurt. I'm not over him, hating him, wanting to move on without him, yet I don't feel like I can trust anything he tells me anymore."

"Understandable. Want me to come with you on Sunday? It's not like it's punishment to have to eat Ava's brunch. I'd love to see Chubs again too. I may nut-punch him, but it'll be nice to see his smiling face," Lisa says with a cheeky grin.

"Yeah, I'd like it if you'd come too. That way, you can drag me out of there if I start doing anything stupid like crying or begging."

"Ew. Don't beg. That's just sad. Only sad, pathetic women beg a man to stay with them when the man clearly wants out. No man is worth that," Lisa states with a shudder.

"Don't let me drink alcohol either. I say things I normally wouldn't, and I'd probably say too much."

"I got your back, little sister."



The following day at noon, I'm parked outside the school. Nothing out of the ordinary seems to be happening, so my hopes raised a bit that maybe Craig rethought his decision to wreak havoc. I breathe a sigh of relief and start to exit my car.

I soon realize I was premature in my relief when a fire truck pulls to a stop in front of the main entrance to the school.

Sitting back down inside my car, I wait. Soon after, several firemen enter the school, carrying large tools and a toolbox. I hear loud banging noises. Not able to contain my curiosity, I hustle to the school entrance and walk in. Stopping in the lobby, I find a large crowd of teachers peering in the direction of the principal's office. Several students are standing around too, and most are laughing amongst themselves.

I push my way through the crowd and spot Craig sitting in a chair in the hallway, wide grin on his face. Making it to his side, he grins up at me then laughs that evil laugh I've heard too many times. Holding out Pippa's phone to me, I take it and see there's a video ready to play. Oh God, what has he done?

"There's not much to see. It's a listen-to-me-type video, and it's enlightening, to say the least," he says before laughing so hard he nearly falls off the chair.

I hit play and hold the phone close to my ear to hear it over the noise of the crowd. It only takes a few "oh baby" and "harder" to know what I'm listening to. Shocked, I look at the office door the firemen are trying to open, then down to Craig. I quickly hit the stop button and raise my brows at the little demon sitting in front of me.

"Explain," I state with trepidation.

"Jones and his secretary like to get it on during their lunch period. Don't ask how I know that because I'm traumatized enough as it is. Anyway, I knew I had to meet with Principal Jones today because of some bullshit he wanted to punish me for. Instead of returning to class after, I waited in the doorway of the restroom until the secretary entered his office and they locked the door. I then set the phone to record while I superglued his door shut. I learned that trick from Chubs. Works so much better than you'd think it would. I had to use a few tubes, but it was worth the cost. Even the lock and hinges are glued shut," Craig explains between fits of laughter.

“Okay, maybe we should get out of here before he gets freed and sees you. He might assume you had something to do with this,” I advise.

“Oh, hell to the no! I’m not missing out on this. Besides, I’m not done yet.”

“What more is there, Craig? You taped him doing his secretary and locked them in his office!”

“I texted his wife and her husband the video of her entering his office and then the audio of them doing the nasty. We had a nice chat. They’re on their way here. Shit’s about to hit the fan!” he exclaims excitedly.

At the same time, the door finally gives way, a man shouts, “Where the fuck is he?” and then roughly shoves through the crowd. In a burst of speed, he shoves the unsuspecting firemen out of the way and pounces on the principal.

Craig jumps up to stand on the chair and holds the phone high, recording everything. I step up to stand behind him because I don’t want to miss out on this either. The secretary rushes to pull on her husband’s arm when an irate woman spins her around and lands a well-trained blow to her face. The secretary is knocked flat on the ground, but that doesn’t stop the other woman from delivering a few more blows. While that battle is raging, the man has Principal Jones pinned against a wall doing the same. Oddly enough, no one tries to stop him.

Eventually, the firemen break up the fight, but all the school staff just stand in place, most with huge smiles. I’m going to take a guess and say that Principal Jones wasn’t liked by his employees. When his wife steps up to him, I laugh out loud at the look of sheer terror on his face.

“I hope you enjoyed your time with Heels Up Carrie because it’s going to cost you big time!” she screams, knees him in the groin, then storms out of the school.

“Heels Up Carrie?” I mutter, confused.

“Slang for hookers. On their backs a lot with heels up in the air. For their job, you know,” Craig clarifies while still filming.

“I don’t even want to know how you’d know such a thing,” I say firmly.

“Principal Jones’ pool thermometer isn’t going to work properly for a few days, I bet,” Craig states with an evil laugh, clearly enjoying himself.

“Pool... never mind. I get it,” I say hurriedly before he explains again.

“Hey, Jones!” Craig shouts, still aiming the camera at the beaten, hurting, disgraced principal. “Actions have consequences! Enjoy yours, fuckface!”

I grab Craig around the waist, jump off the chair, and make a run for the exit. I don’t slow until we’re at my car. I ignore Craig’s gleeful laughter as I put the school in my rear-view mirror. I drive straight to New Horizons and rush Craig inside with me. He’s still laughing from time to time and, without a care, takes a seat in Pippa’s office.

Tammy and Pippa both look from Craig to me then back to Craig. Tammy closes her eyes and audibly takes a deep breath. Pippa places her pen on her desk, eyes Craig, and says, “Just tell me if you have an arrest warrant coming your direction?”

“No, I’m pretty sure they don’t arrest kids my age for handing out lessons,” Craig answers immediately.

“How bad is it?” Pippa asks in a calm voice when her eyes meet mine.

I have no idea why, but I bust out laughing instead of answering. I make my way to the nearest chair and howl, which makes Craig join in, and Tammy to throw her hands in the air and stomp out of the room. On the way out, she shouts over her shoulder, “I don’t know any of you, and they can’t make me admit that I do!”

Tammy’s words and attitude cause another round of laughter. When I finally get control of myself, I wipe tears away and face a still-calm Pippa.

“It could be worse. No one that didn’t deserve it got hurt, but there’s no way Craig can go back to that school. Pretty sure that he doesn’t have arrest warrants, but there could be a hit taken out on him by now.”

The first sign of nervousness hits Pippa’s face when Craig hands her the phone. Holding it away from herself like it’s poisonous, she raises an eyebrow.

“Am I going to regret hitting play? Because I don’t mind living with my head in the sand if that’ll save my sanity,” she declares.

“Let Pooh listen to it while you enjoy a glass of wine. Or a bottle. Or two,” I advise.

“Who’s having wine?”

I hear the voice, but my brain locks instantly. I don’t move, look toward the door, or acknowledge that Chubs is standing less than five feet from me. All laughter is wiped from me as I stand, still facing Pippa.

“Call me later, and I can explain if you still need an explanation,” I murmur to Pippa. “See you later, Craig. Let Bella know that I’ll be there for her.”

Turning, I keep my eyes locked on the doorway and not the man standing next to it. I walk past and don’t slow my steps until I’m out the back door.

“Lucy. Can we talk for a minute?” asks the voice that belongs to the man I thought I’d marry.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Adriano. You had a tough choice to make, and I wasn’t on the winning side of it,” I respond with a rasp in my voice.

I don’t turn to face him, and I continue walking through the yard when he speaks again.

“I don’t regret doing what I could to save my family, but—” he starts, then stops when I speak over him.

“No buts, then. You did what you had to do for them, and I get that. Take care of yourself, Adriano,” I say as I slide into my car.

“Chubs. I’m still Chubs, Lucy. Adriano died years ago,” Chubs says before I shut my car door, start my car, and drive off.

I remain dry-eyed through sheer force of will and drive carefully until I pull to a stop in the FurEver Homes lot. Entering the building, I nod to Dale, then head for the dog barn. Candy’s head snaps up when she sees me, but she doesn’t speak. Stopping in front of the same kennel I did with James, I open the door, sit and hug the brown fur missile when he leaps into my lap.

Burying my face in his neck, I force my mind to go blank and simply enjoy being with someone who wants to be with me. I sit until my ass goes numb before standing, grabbing a leash, and heading out the back door.

“Let’s take a walk, Greer,” I murmur to my companion, not realizing I just gave him a name.

We walk for a long time, stopping several times so Greer can sniff new smells and mark his territory. When we return to the kennel, Candy is still in the barn and walks over to our side.

“He’s a good boy,” she says. “But he’s going to be a big boy when he grows up.”

Looking closely at Greer, I suddenly realize he’s not a dog but a very large puppy. I make my decision immediately and turn to Candy.

“I’m adopting him.”

“Lucy, this dog will eventually weigh more than you by a lot. Are you sure? We have lots of smaller dogs that might be a better fit,” Candy advises.

“Do you know if they’ve DNA’d him yet?” I ask belatedly.

“Just got it back today. He’s mostly an Anatolian Shepherd, a livestock guardian breed. Not a purebred, but enough that he’s

going to be protective and not tolerate other dogs or people well if you don't socialize him well. He could get as big as 150 pounds, and his back will end up taller than your waist. Have you thought this through?"

"Kind of. I visited him before, and today, when I got upset and anxious, I came here to see him. I didn't even think about it. I just drove here. I think it's a sign that we need each other. Don't you?" I ask.

"Maybe. Is Lisa going to be okay with him in her condo?" Candy asks with a smirk.

"I'm moving into my house soon, so I don't think she'll mind."

"I'm getting off work now, so let's go do your paperwork. I'd like to help with him later on if you need it too. I'm still learning, but I love training the dogs. Reno has worked with me several times now," Candy offers.

"I'd love it if you would."

Two hours and several hundred dollars later, I enter Lisa's condo with Greer and everything I think he might need someday. Candy helps carry things, and I invite her to stay for dinner.

"You just want back up if Lisa loses her shit," she accuses with a grin.

"If Lisa loses her shit about what?" Lisa asks from the door where she's hanging her keys on the hook.

When she turns around and sees all the bags and dog paraphernalia, her mouth drops open. When Greer comes trotting around the corner, her eyebrows hit her hairline. I hold my breath, praying that she gives him a chance.

"Who's a pretty puppy? Who? You are! You are! Oh, honey, come here! Let me hug your furry self!" Lisa coos as she drops to her knees on the kitchen floor, totally ignoring the expensive business suit she's wearing.

Greer bounds over to her then parks himself in her lap. Lisa drops flat to her ass and hugs him to her, dropping kisses on his head. Looking up, Lisa grins.

“You bought me a puppy! Best sister ever!” she shouts to my dismay.

Candy laughs loudly but doesn’t correct Lisa’s assumption.

“Uh, well, you see, I am a great sister, but that’s not your dog. That’s Greer, and he’s mine,” I explain.

“Shut your face! He’s mine! Aren’t you, you little bundle of love?” Lisa responds before lavishing more kisses on Greer’s head.

“Lisa, stop. I’m glad you like him, but he’s moving to my house when I do,” I insist.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“You totally suck as a sister! I begged Mom and Dad for a puppy, but instead, they brought you home! Joke was on me!” Lisa hollers as she stands, lifts Greer, and runs out of the room. A few seconds later, and her bedroom door slams shut.

“Your sister and Axel aren’t related, are they?” Candy asks.

“No!”

“She’s as dramatic as him.”

“I know,” I answer with a sigh.

I spend the next day shopping and making delivery arrangements for my new home. I need everything from dishes to furniture to everyday essentials. It’s exhausting but exciting too, and my mom makes it easier than I thought it would be. Having run two households, our family home and the Governor’s Mansion, for years, she knows what’s a necessity and what can wait until later.

I put off going to bed for as long as I can tonight because I’m dreading tomorrow so much. I need to be at the clubhouse by

10:30am, and the thought is already making me nauseous. I break Candy's rule about not letting Greer in bed with me, and I cuddle him close. Eventually, I fall asleep. When I wake, I get moving immediately. If I stay in bed and think, I'll find a way to back out of today, and I can't do that to Bella.

Lisa, Greer, and I walk into the clubhouse and find most everyone there already. I look for Bailey, and only Bailey, and when I spot her, we walk to her table. Taking seats, I can see the strain on her face. Even little Alex seems quieter than usual today but does give me a little wave.

"Who's puppy?" Craig asks from beside me.

"Mine. His name is Greer," I answer.

"Where did you get him?" he questions.

"FurEver Homes."

"You went there without me? Really, Lucy? You're dead to me," he spits out, then walks away in a huff.

"I would have taken Craig!" Lisa says loud enough for the retreating kid to hear.

"Lisa!"

"The kid scares me a little, and I just want to make sure my name doesn't appear on his blacklist," Lisa explains with a grin.

"You okay, Bailey?" I ask while ignoring Lisa.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Everyone's a little uptight about what the club is going to decide today," she responds.

"Any idea how their leaning?" Lisa questions her.

"None. The guys haven't said a word to anyone about it."

"Gunner, can I address the club before we eat and you start Church?" Bella asks boldly while stepping close to my chair.

"Yeah, of course you can. Quiet down, everyone! Go ahead, Bells," Gunner says.

Glancing down at me, Bella smiles nervously before searching the room for Pooh. He gives her a nod, and she starts laying out her plans for her future. I watch people's faces as she talks, and I see pride, concern, surprise, and a whole range of other reactions. No one interrupts her, though.

“Everyone's always asking why I want to earn my own money when I have everything I need already. I'll tell you why I've been saving my money, and it's for one reason only. I want to buy a bike. A Harley, of course. Per club rules, I have to work for and pay for my own bike if I want to become a prospect and then a member when I turn 18 years old. I'm asking the club members to consider me as a prospect and future member. I have my reasons for wanting to join this club, and I'm willing to explain them if you are interested. I don't expect special treatment, and I don't want it. I'll prospect like others have, doing the grunt work and learning everything I can. I'm only asking for your vote so I'm allowed that chance,” Bella states in a clear, firm voice.

“I'm your sponsor!” Axel shouts as he jumps to his feet in such a rush he knocks over his chair and startles Prissy into a screech. “I called it first, so go screw yourself, Pooh!”

There's stunned silence in the room before Gunner speaks up as the club president.

“Sit down and shut up, VP. We will discuss this in Church since it's a club decision and not one that's open to everyone. Thank you, Bella, for your interest in becoming a prospect, but you should have approached one of us privately. If you're voted in as a prospect, you'll need to learn what's not to be discussed with non-members.”

“She did, Prez. She came to me and explained her intentions. That's when I started her riding lessons,” Pooh states. “She decided to wait for a while before approaching the club. Bella speaking up today was her following my advice.”

Gunner nods in acknowledgment of Pooh's words. Then he offers Bella a small grin.

“Let’s eat so we can discuss this and the other matter that’s up for discussion today. Looks like it’s going to be a long and interesting Church,” Gunner says.

I stand and pull Bella in for a tight hug.

“I’m so proud of you. You did great,” I whisper.

“Thank you for coming. It helps knowing you and Pooh are here,” Bella whispers back before she’s jerked out of my arms.

Unceremoniously, Trudy tugs Bella against her and squeezes her tight. I watch with a warm heart as tears roll down Trudy’s face as she holds her girl.

“Proud, scared, happy, terrified. I’m all over the place about this, but you’ll always have my support, my beautiful girl,” Trudy says in a rush.

“I know I do, Mom, and thank you,” Bella answers in a soft voice.

“Cash won’t dare vote against you, young Bella. I’d cut him out of my will and kick him in the ass,” Lola says when she moves in for her own hug.

“I’d just cut him,” Lottie insists as she crowds in close.

“Bloodthirsty bitches,” Terry mutters from next to me.

I glance up and smile when I see the soft look in his eyes while he looks at the two aunts. I step back out of the way, then take my seat again as others approach Bella with words of support. I notice not a single club member does, though, and that gives me cause for concern for Bella’s dream.

“Hey, Lucy!” Mac screeches as he lands in the center of our table.

“Hey, Mac. How’ve you been?” I ask as I give him a fist bump to a wing.

“Mac’s good. A dog?” he asks with his adorable head tilt.

“Yeah. His name is Greer.”

“Better name than Mac,” Axel says from beside Lisa.

“Suck my birdy balls, Assman!” Mac screams in an angry voice.

“Mac, my God, dude. How many times do I have to tell you I didn’t steal your cashews?! Really, birdman, I didn’t!” Axel asks in an exasperated voice.

“Rotten vagina!” Mac continues with his snit while Bailey calmly reaches over and covers Alex’s ears.

“Nothing’s rotten about vaginas, Mac, but you wouldn’t know since you’ve never been laid,” Axel taunts, then instantly regrets it.

Mac launches off the table, claws outstretched for Axel’s face, hurting my ears with his war cry. Axel ducks, but Mac is determined to do damage. After a few swipes and near misses of his face, Axel decides that running is his best option. He bolts across the room, vaulting over a couch before screaming for Ava.

Prissy lifts off and joins the fray by trying to take Mac out of the air. Man and two birds sail around the room, and I don’t know who to put money on for the win. While people shout either warnings or encouragement, depending on the side they’ve chosen, the pets start joining in by raising the noise factor.

Greer barks, as do Loki and Cain. Duffy snarls and takes a swipe at Prissy as she flies past. Gee starts racing around the room, snorting loudly. Bart stands on the bar top and stomps his front paws, and Snots runs behind a couch. The clubhouse is in total chaos, and not surprising anyone, it’s because of Mac and Axel again.

Ava storms out of the kitchen and stares in dismay at the mayhem. Speaking to Craig, he nods, and they move in unison. Ava waits and, when the time is right, snatches Mac by his feet from the air. Holding him upside down and at arm’s reach, she waits for Prissy to come after him. When she does, Craig jumps off the stool he’d climbed on and wraps his arms

around Prissy, taking her to the floor with him. Axel comes to a stop, breathing hard, and slowly the other animals quiet.

Turning to Axel, Ava orders, “Just fucking apologize to him and replace the cashews!”

“I’m innocent! I was framed!” Axel shouts back.

“He didn’t take them. He was set up,” Craig informs Ava, grin on his face, cockatoo tucked tight to his chest.

“I knew it was you! You demented little fucker! Pooh? Pooh! Get over here and beat this kid!” Axel shouts.

“I didn’t do it, you asswipe! I saw someone else do it! I just saved your useless ass from a bird beatdown, and that’s how you thank me?” Craig sputters in disgust.

“Craig’s telling the truth. I did it. I thought it would be funny to piss Mac off because I knew he’d blame you. It was for entertainment purposes only,” Chubs admits from a place close behind me.

I don’t turn around. I instead keep my eyes on the drama playing out in front of me. I watch Axel’s face turn incredulous before he narrows his eyes.

“You’re just digging holes left and right these days,” Axel says with a glare before turning to Craig.

“Sorry, kid. I was wrong, and I’m sorry for that.”

“My feelings are very hurt. It may cause me trust issues for years to come. I’m not sure how I’ll overcome it, but money may help ease my suffering,” Craig responds with an evil glint in his eyes.

“Nice try,” Axel responds with a laugh. “You know, Craig, if we worked together, we could rule the world.”

“I’ll be doing that anyway. Who needs to share the glory?” Craig states while handing Prissy over to Axel.

“This place is just too much fucking fun! Can I be invited each Sunday from now on? I’ll pay for a ticket if need be!” Lisa says in a loud voice.

“It’s why we’re holding on even at our ages,” Lottie states.
“Who wants to miss whatever the hell one of these guys is going to do next? We’ll pick you up on our way next week.”

I leave them planning their next adventure and walk to the kitchen. Stepping inside, I find Ava, Tammy, Taja, and Tessie placing food into large serving bowls, and I start helping them. Mac is sitting on a perch in the corner, facing the wall. I ignore the stream of swear words he’s muttering as I stir the large bowl of fruit salad.

“You doing okay?” Ava asks from beside me.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I wish I knew what the club was going to do with him. Gunner hasn’t given me even a hint, and I’ve tried everything I know to get him to talk,” she admits with a small laugh.

The kitchen door swings open, and Craig strolls in with a large handful of bills in his hand. Taking a seat off to the side, he continues counting the money before he stands and walks into the pantry. A moment later, he returns empty-handed and with a satisfied smile on his face. Looking around, he sees several of us staring at him, curious.

“All I’m saying is that the club drama is nowhere near over for the day. Prepare yourselves, ladies. Shit’s about to get real,” he warns, then walks out laughing.

“What else could happen today?” Tessie asks in confusion and instantly jinxes the whole damn place.

I pick up the large bowl filled with fruit and this awesome lemon dressing Ava makes and walk for the swinging door. I freeze in place when there’s a terrified scream and running footsteps from the main room, and I shouldn’t have. The door flies open, slamming into the bowl and me, knocking me flat on my ass. Fruit and dressing cover me and all the nearby areas of the kitchen as Reeves first slips, then falls on top of me.

Scrambling to his feet, stomping on me in the process, he again attempts to run and wipes out a second time. This time

it's Tessie's turn to be taken down by him, and she screams until the impact with the floor shocks her into silence. Still not giving up, Reeves makes it to his feet, and all I see is his jean-covered ass busting through the screen door and running across the backyard. He'll be repairing that door tomorrow since he didn't take the time to open it first.

"What the hell?" Tammy shouts while rushing to help me to my feet.

She gets me upright when the door crashes open again, and James attempts to vault over us and instead takes all three of us back to the floor. We're sliding around the tile flooring in fruit and lemon-scented dressing and still have no idea why. Using my head this time, I crawl instead of trying to stand. I pull Tammy with me, and we cower behind a worktable while James thrashes around until he gets to the back door and crawls through it.

Every one of us in the kitchen stays in place, including Tessie, who's on her hands and knees, and now howling in anger. The sounds coming from the main room alert us to the fact that things have not settled yet. Shouts, curses, and threats of imminent death fill the air as we look at each other in confusion.

The swinging door suddenly flies open, and this time it's Pigeon who's on the run. His long strides hit the wet floor, and he literally slides through the kitchen, arms flailing before he collides with the worktable Ava's standing behind. The impact sends him airborne and over the table in a tangle of arms and legs. Every bowl and plate on the table goes sailing as Pigeon's progress is slowed when Ava's too slow to get out of the way. The two of them disappear behind the table, and grunts of pain can be heard by all. Daring to peek my head around my hiding spot enough to check on Ava's well-being, I meet eyes with Pigeon, who appears to be using Ava as a shield of sorts.

"Ha! It's about fucking time the bullshit evil stuff you always cause bit you in your own damn ass!" shouts Toes from the

doorway while pointing at me.

“Shut your face, Toes!” Taja orders while advancing on him.

Toes is pushed out of the doorway, and a new face appears, bringing Taja to an abrupt halt. I have no idea who the hell it is because his face is painted up as a scary-ass clown, orange wig and all. Around his neck is, I’m hoping, a very realistic fake six-foot-long snake. Pigeon squeaks in alarm, tosses Ava in one direction, and makes a move for the door. Clown man does a flying tackle, taking Pigeon painfully back to the floor.

We all watch in shocked surprise as the clown grinds himself all over Pigeon’s squirming body and then lays a loud, wet, smacking kiss on his face. Pushing himself off, the clown stands and starts laughing uncontrollably. While Pigeon lies stunned, the clown performs a victory dance over his prone body. Hips gyrating, snake held over his head, the clown displays some impressive moves.

When the dance ends with the clown grabbing his groin, Pigeon simply buries his face in his arms and lays still. Whatever this was about, the clown just won, and Pigeon has surrendered. Looking toward the back door, I see no sign of James and Reeves and briefly wonder if they’re still running to parts unknown.

The swinging door opens again, and several people push inside and stand, open-mouthed at the destruction. The clown is still standing over Pigeon, gloating, when Ava explodes.

“I am done! I’m so fucking done! Eat your food from the floor for all I care! I’m fucking done with the lot of you!”

With that, she picks up the baby carrier with Chasin, miraculously still sleeping, and storms through the broken back door, giving it a kick on her way. No one says a word, and no one is dumb enough to tell her she’s covered head to toe in the remains of the food she’d worked so hard to prepare.

The clown is looking around the room, probably just now noticing the destruction he was a part of, and groans loudly. Shoulders slumping, victory dance a thing of the past, he

sticks a hand down to Pigeon to help him to his feet. Pigeon emits a squeal, reminiscent of a three-year-old girl seeing her first spider, and uses his feet to push his way to the back door. Standing slowly, he adjusts his food-covered clothing, then steps through the door with the most dignity I've ever seen him have. As casual as if nothing had just happened, he strolls across the backyard and disappears down the street.

"Looks like Rex, our very own version of John Wayne Gacy, has one hell of a mess to clean up and a fuck ton of explaining to do," Lola calmly states.

Glancing at the clown, it finally dawns on me that it is Rex and why he's swinging a snake while wearing a clown outfit. Revenge, pure and simple. Craig and Rex must have come to an agreement, and Craig got his payday. When I hear an evil giggle, I turn my head to see Craig standing in the middle of the mess. He holds his fist up to Rex, waiting for a fist bump, but Rex is too busy taking in the state of the kitchen and our meal.

"Who knew James was scared of snakes, too? I'm not going to charge you for him, though, Rex. You got a threefer for the price of a twofer. Well done, buddy," Craig praises.

"I'm going to take the rest of my kids home and see if I can work a life-saving miracle on my wife's temper. If not, it's been nice knowing you, Rex. I'm sure she won't forget the part the others played in this bullshit either. In the meantime, clean this up, and put this clubhouse back in the condition it was in before you fucktards destroyed it. Church is canceled. We'll meet in one week," Gunner orders in a calm, controlled voice, then walks away.

"Toes, I've warned you before, and you know what the consequences are. After Church, you and I, in the ring," Axel states before slipping and sliding his way to where Tammy and I are still sitting.

Reaching down, Axel carefully gets Tammy on her feet and hands her over to Trigger, who's battling his laughter but not completely winning.

“Not one word, Trigger, or you’ll be looking for a new bed to sleep in,” Tammy warns as Trigger picks a few strawberries and a blueberry from her hair.

Axel then reaches down and lifts me to my feet. Holding my arm, he helps me exit the kitchen and hands me over to Lisa and Bailey. Lisa makes zero attempt at curbing her laughter, but I choose to ignore it. Bailey covers her mouth, and for a moment, I think she’s trying not to laugh before she takes off at a run for the nearest bathroom, horrible retching sounds emitting from her. Axel takes off behind her, and I get my first look at the main room.

Furniture is upside down, glasses and beer bottles scattered and broken. The room is destroyed. Lars is in his wheelchair and is parked in the far corner with Terry still standing behind it, prepared to run for safety.

My eyes finally find the kids, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Livi, with Loki and Cain’s help, has the remaining kids cornered near Gunner’s office door, safe and sound. I note the chunk of cloth in Loki’s mouth but don’t bother worrying about who it belongs to because, obviously, they got too close to the kids and paid for that mistake.

Mac and Prissy are perched on the railing of the stairs, side by side, and are surprisingly quiet. Greer, having made friends with the other pets, is laying under our table with Bart and Gee. When I feel someone tugging on my jeans, I look under the table and find Gee helping himself to a snack that’s attached to my leg.

“You still have clothes in my room if you want to go change,” Chubs says from beside me.

Looking up, I get my first look at him, and I’m shocked into silence. He’s much thinner than I’ve ever seen him. His face is drawn with dark circles under his tired eyes, and he appears to have aged several years. The red hair is a shock, and being clean-shaven isn’t something I remember ever seeing before. I stare at him until the man I remember starts to peek past the

changes. When he gives me a lopsided half-smile, my heart starts to thump painfully.

Standing and pulling my eyes off of him, I nod. I take the key he holds out and walk away. I open the door and enter a room that I have only great memories of, and I take in a deep, steadying breath.

The room looks exactly the same, and his smell rushes at me. Man, leather, soap, motor oil, and because it's Chubs' smell, potato chips. I can't stop the smile that creases my face, and I allow myself a moment to soak it in.

Chapter 23

Chubs

After returning to Denver, Les and I are taken to the clubhouse. Mom and Aria are waiting, and we're allowed some time together. Other than for official club business, and only on Gunner's orders, I'm to stay on club property. I agree, and my family makes sure to stock me up on supplies before they move to a hotel. They decided not to leave Denver until the club makes their decision about my future as a Devil's Angel.

I know my future is uncertain, but I feel like the entire world has been lifted from my shoulders. I'm home, and other than visiting my family, I have no plans on ever leaving again. It hurts knowing that after years of not being with them, that my time with my family is going to be brief. They have lives back in Chicago, and I belong here in Denver. Hopefully, we can find ways to still spend time together.

My mom has mentioned that she'd like to find a small home to buy here so she can spend part of the year near me and the other part near Les and Aria. I'm all for that idea, and I quickly gave her Lisa's work number in hopes she'll help. Lisa would probably like to claw my eyes out for what I did to Lucy, but she's not so spiteful she wouldn't help my mom.

Since being back at the clubhouse, I've spent a lot of time catching up on everything that happened while I was gone. I missed out on a lot and will have to live with those regrets. Pigeon, Pooh, and Vex have all spent time with me, asking questions and trying to understand why I did what I did. The biggest hurdle for them is not getting why I wouldn't let the club have my back. They're club members through and through, and I went rogue according to club rules. My only hope is that they someday understand it wasn't because I didn't trust them or their abilities but only because I didn't want to bring trouble in their direction.

Gunner speaks to me but is very reserved. I can't get a read on him when it comes to what he thinks of my decisions. He's the President, so I understand that he has to remain neutral to a certain extent.

Petey is friendly when he sees me but asks no questions and offers no advice. Trigger is pure anger on legs, but he's decided to mostly ignore me. Cash is quiet as usual, but I can taste the disappointment in him. Axel hasn't said more than a few words to me, and they weren't encouraging at all. He's angry and not hiding it, but he mostly pretends I don't exist. Several of the others have been friendly, but not much else.

I have no idea where I sit with the club or what their decision will be in the end. Either way it goes, I'm grateful for their help in keeping my family safe, and I'll understand and accept my fate as a Devil's Angel.

What has surprised me is how the kids and women have reacted to me. Bella and Tessie gave me hugs but said nothing. The smaller kids are friendly, but I'm not treated as their uncle like before. That has left me heartbroken and sick.

Craig's been one of the few who's treated me as if I were only gone for a few days instead of many months. He's filled me in on everything that's happened and how Lucy was the one who finally broke down and told Rex where to find me. He made it clear that she didn't want to rat me out but finally did out of fear of me dying. Instead of being upset with her, I found myself feeling hope that she still cared about me. Knowing Craig, that's the only reason he told me the truth. He's always been a little matchmaker, so I'm not surprised he is still trying to manipulate everyone.

When I first walked into the clubhouse, Ava was there. She walked slowly across the room, tears streaming down her face. I can't even explain the pain I felt knowing I caused those tears. She's always been so strong, has survived so much, and yet me disappearing brought her low. I'll never be able to mend the hole that must have ripped through her.

I reached out and pulled her tight, and we hugged silently for a few minutes while my family looked on. Leaning back, I used my thumbs to wipe the tears off her face and let the pain I deserve settle in my gut. Giving her a brief kiss on the forehead, I released my best friend and waited, knowing what was coming.

Ava stared at me for a moment before slapping me hard across the face. Then, just as quickly, she pulled me in for another hug, sobbed once, then released me.

“I can’t believe I just slapped you!” she says, horrified, hands covering her mouth.

“I had it coming,” I answer with a shrug and a grin.

“Glad it was you that pissed her off,” Les mutters from beside me.

“I’ve missed you so much! I had Chasin, and you weren’t here to greet him to his new world! I didn’t have my best friend or favorite taste tester! Oh my God, Chubs, I made everyone’s life hell because of you! You deserted me without even a simple goodbye! I’m so pissed at you for being such a dumbass! I met my birth mother, and you weren’t here for me to cry on your shoulder! I’m so glad you’re home now!” Ava shouts, rambling through several topics before she hugs me again.

This time, I’m not sure she’s ever going to let go. I hold her through several more of her rambling thoughts, thinking how lucky I am to be this loved by these people. I place my hand on the back of her head and push her face into my shoulder. Holding her tight, I apologize.

“There are no words to fix this, Ava. I’m so sorry, but also, I’m not. Nobody got seriously hurt, the kids are all safe, and my family is alive and well. My plan hurt a lot of people but kept them alive too. I hope you can understand and start to forgive me.”

“Of course, I understand, Chubs! Your family is lovely, and I’m so happy you have them back in your life. I just really

missed you, and I was scared to death you'd get hurt. You're back, and I've already forgiven you. My emotions have been all over the place because of worry and post-natal hormones, but you're home now," she replies when she steps back and then gifts me with a beautiful smile.

"I'm so happy to know that my son has had people like you in his life," my mother says quietly but with relief in her voice.

"Things haven't been normal around here for a while now, but stick around, and you'll see just how much your son is loved," Ava replies, smiling softly, one mother to another. "I made food. Let's get you fed, Chubs."

Now I find myself standing outside of my room at the clubhouse, hoping the woman inside can forgive me like Ava did. When I hear the shower running, I step into my room and sit on the chair by the door. I wait patiently for Lucy to emerge from the bathroom.

When the door opens, the woman who means everything to me walks out. Combing her wet hair, she stops in place when she sees me.

"I was wrong, very wrong, to lead you on. I made plans for our future while knowing I wasn't going to be here to live them out with you. That was cruel and thoughtless and not the person I really am. I couldn't tell you what I was up to because I was terrified you'd get involved. I couldn't live with it if the Veros found out about you and my past got you killed.

"So, I lied to keep you distracted and looking forward. Hope is the one thing we all need for survival, but it's also a cruel thing to give someone falsely. There's no apology that can fix what I did to you. All I can ask for is a new beginning. For us to start fresh like we've just met. Put the past where it belongs and leave it there.

"I love you more today than I did yesterday or the day before that. My feelings for you have never changed except to grow stronger. All I have ever wanted was you and me, a life together without ghosts from my past interfering. I had to

make that a possibility by burying them, but I hurt you in the process. Please try to forgive me enough to give us a chance. I'm begging for a new start to a life with you, Lucy."

Lucy stands still, listening to every word, but she stays silent for a moment when I'm done pleading my case. I refuse to look away, so I hold her eyes and hope she can see the truth in mine.

"I can forgive you because you had others you cared about. You had good reason for doing what you felt you needed to do. I have forgiven you for it, in fact. In some respects, I admire and respect you for doing what you felt was the right thing. My feelings for you haven't dimmed or gone away. I love you as much as I always have, and I know that will never change. You're my person, and I know that to the depths of my soul," Lucy quietly responds.

"But?" I ask, hearing the unspoken word at the end of her sentence.

"I have to trust you to be with you, and I'm not sure I ever can again. It's easier for me to love than to trust. I'm flawed that way, and I don't know how to get past it."

"You have every right to think I'm untrustworthy with all that's happened," I agree instantly. "But I'm begging you to give me another chance to prove that I'm worthy of your trust. That I would never break it again. That I love you enough to never hurt you again and to honor the promises I made before and to give you a beautiful life."

"I need time to think about all of this. You broke every promise you ever made to me, and a few words can't fix that kind of damage. I picked up the pieces you left me in, and I've met each day trying to do better than the day before. I'm finally getting myself put back together again and moving forward with this new life I was forced into. I'm not willing, at this point, to just go back to the life that was taken from me. I'm not opening myself up to that kind of pain again. Give me some time to think," Lucy states before walking out the door.

Thinking over her words, I'm left reeling with the pain of what I did to her and our relationship, but not without hope. She didn't say no to me. She just asked for time, and I can give her that.



One week later, I'm sitting in the corner of the room we use for Church and listening intently with pride as Bella states her reasons for wanting to join the club. At the moment, until a decision has been made about my status, I'm not allowed to sit at the table, but I'm hoping they'll allow me to vote on this matter.

"I completely understand that this club has always been a male members only club. Until James, it was also a minimally melanated club," Bella says with a small smile sent James' direction. "Times have changed, and so has this club. It's went from being a 1% club that dealt in drugs, guns, and women to a club that fights for kids, animals, and women's rights and safety. With Gunner as President and all of you as the members backing him, you've turned this club into one that I'd be very proud to be a member of, especially if I were the first woman allowed to join. I'm not asking for special treatment, just an equal chance to earn my cut."

"Thank you, Bella, for explaining your reasons. I'll ask you to leave the room now so we can discuss this and vote," Gunner says with a nod to the door.

Bella leaves the room and silently shuts the door behind her. No one speaks for well over a minute, putting serious thought into Bella's words. Gunner bangs the gavel and states, "The matter before us about allowing Bella to prospect and possibly be patched in as a member of The Devil's Angels is now open for discussion."

"Absolutely yes!" Petey rumbles loudly while smacking his hand on the table.

"Of course, we should vote her in as a prospect. She's nearly as much of a member as any of us already," Vex adds in support.

“Anyone have any reasons why we shouldn’t?” Pooh asks while looking each man around the table in the eye.

“She didn’t ask me to sponsor her,” Axel says with a pout, then smiles broadly. “She’s already earned her spot, in my opinion, even if she has piss-poor taste.”

“My only concern is that I know I can’t treat her as a prospect like I have Toes. Horse, he was easy to abuse and misuse, but I can’t do that to Bella. So, in a way, she would be receiving special treatment. But my answer is to definitely allow her the opportunity,” Pigeon says, and then ducks the elbow Horse aims at his throat.

“There’s no rule stating we have to treat prospects like shit. That’s just for fun and our amusement. One thing to keep in mind, though, is that she needs to learn how to be a member while still prospecting. Everyone does if they want to be patched in. We can’t go so easy on her that it becomes dangerous at some point for her. Pooh, as her sponsor, it’s your responsibility to make sure she knows everything she needs to know, and I, for one, will be keeping a close eye on you and her to be sure that’s happening,” Trigger warns in a voice that promises retribution if Pooh fucks up Bella’s training.

Everyone nods in agreement with Trigger, including myself.

“She means the world to me, so please know I’ll do everything in my power to prepare her the best I can,” Pooh says solemnly.

“What’s your thoughts on this, Prez?” Cash asks.

“We’ll catch shit from the other clubs for allowing in a woman. I look forward to the beatdowns we’ll give those stupid enough to talk shit about The Devil’s Angels or any of our members. She’s loyal to the club. She’s one of ours, and she has solid reasons for wanting to join. I say yes 100%,” Gunner replies with a wicked grin.

Cash nods, then asks, “Do we even need to vote on this?”

“Let’s make it official and do the vote,” Axel adds.

Gunner acknowledges each member's vote then turns to me. I'm surprised by this but answer quickly and clearly, "Hell yes."

"Matter is settled. Starting today, Bella Taylor is our newest prospect," Gunner announces, and the men cheer.

When the room quiets, Gunner continues.

"That settles part of our problem but not all of it. We need more prospects, and we need to discuss Toes. We either patch him in or cut him loose, and that shit needs to be decided on today. He's said before that he didn't mind prospecting for so long, way longer than any others have, but it's way past time to make a decision. Thoughts?"

"I'll never vote to patch him in," Axel immediately announces while several heads swing in his direction in surprise.

"The vote to patch in must be unanimous. Care to explain why you're against him?" Gunner asks.

"I don't trust him, and I don't like how he talks about one of our women. Besides that, he's dumb as fuck."

"Which woman?" Trigger says while sitting up straight and zeroing in on Axel intently.

"Lucy."

I'm the one sitting up straight now and wondering what's been said to turn the always happy, always goofing around V.P. into this serious, determined man.

"I've heard him make comments too that were uncalled for. I personally have warned him twice about it. I agree with Axel. I won't vote for his patch, either. Might as well let him go," Horse adds.

"No point in further discussion then. I'll tell him after Church," Gunner states, and everyone nods in agreement.

"I'm meeting Toes in the ring after Church. I'd warned him and he knew the consequences. He ignored that warning. Tell

him after our ring time instead because I'm not missing out on kicking his ass first," Axel states with a wicked grin.

Gunner nods in agreement as several of the men chuckle.

Looking briefly in my direction, Gunner again taps the gavel down.

"Last matter to settle today. Brother Chubs and the club rules he broke. Who wants to start?" Gunner asks in a firm voice.

"He deliberately lied to his brothers, to their faces, and deserted his club for months. That has to be punished," Trigger says with heat in his voice.

"Agreed," Petey says in support.

"He had solid reasons for why, and each of us would have done the same to save our loved ones," Pigeon argues.

"I know I would have done that and worse if Pippa or Craig were in danger. I fucking respect the man for risking his life for his family," Pooh states firmly with just as much heat as Trigger spoke with.

"I'm with Pooh on this. All the fucking way. I'd kill anyone in my path to protect my girls," Vex states.

"He didn't have to do it alone, though. That's what your club brothers are for. Help. We help each other. We defend each other, and we back each other up. Why be in a club if you're fine going it alone? Leave the club and do everything your own way. No need to get approval or listen to other options or ideas. Don't trust that your brothers would be able to help or how much they'd want to be there for you. Go it the fuck alone."

This came from a very angry Axel. Angry isn't quite a strong enough word for the emotion in his voice. Rage might be more accurate, and while I knew he'd be mad, I didn't expect the level he's reached. I'm not the only one he's surprised because there's a shocked silence in the room.

Axel falls silent, but I can read the agitation in his body movements. I wait, knowing he's not done. Everyone else

must read it too because no one speaks.

“He could have died, and we’d never have known. We would be the ones left telling the kids and our women that he’s never coming back. We were the ones having to watch the kids and women worry and trying to explain that it wasn’t because of them that he left. We had no fucking idea what to tell them! I watched Lucy shatter then fight each day to keep her head above water. Fuck, she even started to drink so much I thought it was going to become a problem for her. The hardest, most painful thing you did to this club, Chubs, was not leave us with options. We had nothing, and I know I wasn’t the only one who didn’t sleep because I didn’t know if you were lying dead somewhere, alone and without us. I had nothing to say to Lucy that could ease her mind about the same damn thing. I’m at a loss as to what punishment fits that crime.”

“I don’t either, Axel. I was wrong in what I did, but my intentions weren’t to hurt anyone but to keep you alive and raising your daughter,” I admit quietly.

Axel doesn’t respond, but he drops his face into his hands and sighs.

“I agree with everyone that’s spoken so far. There has to be a punishment, but I don’t know what it should be. Chubs made hard decisions, and to be honest, I might have made the same ones. I’d level Denver if that’s what it took to keep Livi, Liam, and the rest of my family safe,” Cash offers.

“Let’s first vote on whether Brother Chubs is allowed to stay in the club or not. Then we’ll vote on if there should be punishment and what it should be,” Gunner states to nods of agreement.

Gunner asks each person and nods at their vote as to whether I can keep my patch or not. The vote goes in my favor, and I’m still a member. At that point, Gunner points to my chair at the table, and I change seats.

The only person who hesitated to keep me was Axel, but it was a short hesitation. I’ve known all along how much I

wanted to keep my patch, but I didn't realize how important it was to me until Axel didn't speak right away. A rush of relief washed over me when he voted my way. I know I have a lot to make up for with him, but I look forward to doing it.

When Church ends, we walk out of the room to find everyone, including my family, waiting silently. I smile softly at Lucy's anxious face before walking to my mother and embracing her.

"I'm still a member, and I'll be staying in Denver. Would love to have you here as much as possible," I tell her, then smile at her tears.

"I will make that happen," she replies.

"Just effing wonderful! I just got my office up and running, and now I'm going to have to sell out and move to the mountains. Not sure this city girl will adapt well to rural living, so do you think Lucy's sister could help me find a condo within city limits? And an office space for my practice?" Aria states before hugging the hell out of me.

"You'd move here?" I ask, shocked.

"We've all decided to move, Drew. Chicago isn't where we want to raise our families, and we just got you back. Sounds like you're going to be stuck with us again," Les says with a big smile.

"Who the fuck is Drew?" Craig asks from beside me. "Oh, sorry, ladies! I meant to say, who is this Drew guy you're talking about?"

"They call me Drew. My real name is Adriano, but Aria couldn't say it when she was young, so she called me Drew instead. But here, I'm just Chubs. That work for you, buddy?"

"Whatever. You adults are weird," Craig says before walking away.

"Is he allergic to soap and water?" Aria whispers, and I laugh loudly.

I leave my family with Horse and walk to where Lucy is sitting. Crouching down in front of her, I reach for her hand,

and she lets me hold it.

“Would you go on a date with me? A normal, everyday kind of date. A first date, if you will. Dinner, a movie, and then I’ll drive you home and expect a kiss goodnight but won’t be mad if I don’t get one,” I ask, heart in my throat.

“Yes, I will, but there will be no kiss. Also, Lisa wants a pound of your flesh first since she blames you for me living with her,” Lucy responds in a quiet voice.

“You owe me big time, Chubs, and I’m going to make you wish you hadn’t hurt my little sister. Word of warning—I’ve been training with Cash,” Lisa threatens, then gives me an evil grin.

The payment for my sins is racking up, and I know Cash didn’t scrimp on Lisa’s training. Looks like there are more bruises in my future.

“Can I ask what your punishment is?” Lucy asks.

I move to the chair next to her and explain what the club came up with.

“I’m on probation for a year. Any serious mistakes and I lose my patch. I’ll go back to work at the garage, but now I work for Trigger and not just with him. He’ll be my direct supervisor instead of Petey, and we both know he’ll make it rough. He’s a very angry little man.”

“Heard that, asshole, and you’ll regret it come Monday morning,” Trigger says as he walks past.

I’m already regretting it, but I continue telling Lucy about the next year of my life.

“I’m not allowed on the next two club rides and have to tend bar the day of them. I’m not allowed to go to Ava’s bakery for three months, and she’s not allowed to bring me treats from there. That condition was added by Axel and is especially evil, and he knows it. Also, I’m Craig’s teacher again, and I was told to ask you why that order relieved Pooh so much. I’m

basically a prospect with a patch, and I'm grateful to them for that."

"I'll explain about Craig's public school experiences while you're buying me dinner. Any other punishment?"

"I have to get in the ring with a few of the guys. One at a time, but it'll be a painful day for me. Axel, Gunner, and Trigger but thankfully not Cash. He declined, stating he would if the club ordered it since he's our enforcer, but it was left up to choice. They won't leave me with any lasting injuries, but they will make it hurt," I reply with a grimace. "You have a lot of supporters, Lucy. Petey also declined the opportunity to kick my ass, but he gave it a good chewing out, as did the others.



With Gunner's permission, I ride off club property on a mission. I'm planning on spending the day making amends. I stop at Axel's flower lady's shop and have a beautiful bouquet sent to Lucy, another one to her sister, and her mom.

Leaving there, I ride to my meeting with Lucy's dad, Governor Douglas. We sip our coffees as I explain everything. I leave very little out and answer all the questions he has. His opinion matters to me and to Lucy, and I have all the respect in the world for this man. Before I left Denver, he had become almost like a father to me, and I'd like the chance to earn that back.

I'm open and honest with him, and he must sense the truth behind my words because, at the end of our meeting, I get a brief manly hug and some fatherly advice.

"Don't break my daughter's heart again because you're not the only one here that personally knows hitmen."

With that, he left me standing alone, stupid grin in place.

Riding to the Aunts' house, I feel freer than I've felt in nearly a year. My only worry now is winning Lucy back, and I'm hoping my friends and family will help with that. I park my bike, knock once, and enter the familiar home.

Lola is stirring something that smells delicious while Lottie's setting the table. I nearly dance on the spot, knowing I'm about to get fed. Greeting each lady with a quick kiss on the cheek, I seat myself at the table.

"It's so good to have you back home, Chubs. We've thought about you and said prayers every day," Lottie says.

"We knew you'd be okay and would return when you could. Still hard waiting, though. How's Lucy doing? She starting to thaw yet?" Lola asks.

"I'm not sure, but I refuse to be anything but hopeful. I can't imagine having to face the future without her in it," I answer.

"She'll come around. She's a smart girl and knows a good thing when she sees one," Lola responds.

"She won't be able to resist your charms forever. She loves you too much. She just needs to work it out in her brain," Lottie states knowingly.

"I know you two risked a lot for me, and I'm very grateful to you both," I say as I pull an envelope from the inside pocket of my cut. "Here's money for the extra things you left in the car for me. It helped a lot."

"Put your money away. We did what we did because we wanted to. Because we believed in what you were doing and wanted to help," Lola says in a no-nonsense tone.

"I don't want your money, but a thanks would be nice," a voice from the living room doorway says.

Spinning around, I spot Bella leaning against the doorway, smiling at me.

"Damn. Forgot she was still here," Lottie mutters before reaching for another plate.

"You knew?" I ask in a loud, shocked voice.

"Yeah. I guess Craig's rubbing off on me because I overheard a conversation when you were talking on the phone with Lottie. I asked her about it, and she admitted their part in your

plan. They filled the cooler with food and drinks while I came up with the duffle bag of items I thought might help.”

“There was cash in that bag. I insist you take this,” I state, holding the envelope out to her.

“Take it, Bella, and put it toward the bike you want,” Lola orders as she sets a platter of pork chops on the table.

Bella hugs me first, then reluctantly takes the envelope before shooing the Aunts toward their chairs. Bella places the rest of the food on the table, then takes the seat across from me.

“Tell me about the bike you’re buying,” I request, and start filling my plate.



I knock on the door of Lisa’s condo and enter when Lisa opens the door. She looks me over from head to toe and nods approvingly. I’m wearing new jeans, a dark wine-colored button-up shirt that I left untucked, my cut, and un-scuffed boots. The most notable thing I’ve done since she last saw me is that I dyed my hair and eyebrows back to a shade close to my real color. I’m letting my hair grow back out again, and my curls are now making an appearance, and I have a face of scruff. I feel like my old self again.

“Take a seat while Lucy finishes up getting ready. She just got home, so she’s running a little late,” Lisa says.

I do as I’m told, then notice a dog kennel in the corner.

“You got a dog? The one you had at the clubhouse?”

“Greer, and yes, I kind of got a dog. Lucy thinks he’s hers, but I disagree and will be filing custody papers in the morning,” Lisa says with a smirk.

“So, Lucy got a dog?” I ask, somewhat confused by Lisa’s words.

“So she says. She also bought a house.”

Shocked, I raise my eyes to meet Lisa’s.

“She was moving on, Chubs. She honestly believed you made the choices you did because she wasn’t important to you anymore. My little sister picked herself up and started making plans for her future. A pet, a new home, looking for a new job. Anything she could think of to continue living a life, even if it was going to be a hollow one.”

I nod, knowing I did that to her and that she had every right to think the way she did.

“I want to fill that life with children, make that house a home, and spend each day grateful that I got to spend another one with her,” I answer truthfully.

“Let’s just have dinner and a movie, and then we’ll see where that takes us. Thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful,” Lucy says as she enters the room.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to thank you for mine too. I love getting flowers, but it won’t save you the ass-kicking I’ve been planning for you,” Lisa states with a wicked grin.

“I look forward to it, Lisa. We might want to be on our way before she decides tonight’s the night for that,” I mutter to Lucy.

“Actually, instead of a movie, I have somewhere to be tonight. We’re going to a dance recital instead. You okay with that?” Lucy asks as we walk out the door.

“Sounds good. Whose recital is it?” I ask as I hand Lucy her helmet and strap mine on.

“Axel’s.”

Seated in the dark dance hall next to Lucy, I look to my right and see my fellow club members and their families. I’m proud to be sitting with this group of remarkable people, especially since my blood family is sitting on the other side of us. Lucy’s hand finds its way into mine, and I grip it tight. I almost have it all, and I’m not taking any of it for granted ever again.

When the stage is lit by a single spotlight, my attention is drawn to the tiny blond girl. Dressed in a pink sparkly

ballerina costume paired with a black tutu, she walks to center stage and stops. Looking over her shoulder, she grins and waves.

Axel, dressed immaculately in a black suit, black tie, and a pink dress shirt, joins little Alex in the spotlight. Bending, he speaks to her for a moment and then gives her a kiss before standing upright. Both father and daughter are beaming, holding hands, and waiting for their moment to shine.

Soon, there are several other father and daughter pairs spread out on the stage. The last to walk out are Mia, Zoe, and Gunner. With a daughter's hand in each of his, Gunner guides them to their designated spot. The twins, dressed in identical purple dresses, look adorable as they smile up at their father, towering over them. Gunner, unlike Axel, is simply wearing a dark gray button-down shirt paired with black dress slacks. He still looks intimidating as hell, but the love he has for his daughters is clearly visible on his face.

“Wait for it,” Lucy whispers and squeezes my hand.

The music starts, a slow instrumental-type song, and a moment later, the spotlight goes out, leaving the stage in complete darkness. When the stage is suddenly completely lit back up, I hear several laughs.

During the time the stage was dark, Axel added a bright pink blinged-out tutu to his outfit. I laugh out loud at Bailey's gasp but lean a little forward to make sure I don't miss what's about to happen.

The music cuts out and then starts again, only it's a way different sound. It's clear from the confusion on the other daddy and daughter's faces that it's not the song they expected. Many attempt to start their slow waltzes, the obviously expected dance, but it's hard to waltz to party music. Axel and Alex, however, go right into doing the Cha Cha Slide with practiced ease and enthusiasm.

While the crowd laughs loudly, Gunner tosses Axel a disgusted look, but it bounces off of Axel's wide grin. Little

Alex performs the moves pretty well for her age, even tossing in a little of her dad's attitude. Axel is clearly in his element.

After sliding, taking it back, and stomps, the father/ daughter team stands side by side and do the cha cha moves. When the music changes again, they seamlessly begin The Chicken Dance. Little Alex's giggles could be heard even over the music, and it draws the twins to her side. Obviously, Uncle Axel taught them the moves too because they join in the dance, laughing the entire time.

Gunner tosses his hands in the air, then joins his daughters, niece, and VP at center stage. Surprising me to hell and back, he knows the moves and performs them well, much to the delight of his daughters and club members. The other fathers follow suit, and their daughters laugh in delight.

When the music ends, everyone takes a bow and exits the stage, still laughing over their hijacked performance. I look to my right and see several club brothers tucking away their phones and laughing their asses off.

Afterward, we're all standing around in the parking lot, waiting to congratulate the girls and rib their dads, when they walk out of the building together. Gunner stops in front of our group and speaks.

"If I see one second of video evidence of that dance, I'll personally remove that person's head from their body. Let's go home. I need an entire fucking bottle of tequila."

Dipping my head to hide my grin, I wait until he loads his family into Ava's SUV and drives off before looking up. When I do, I see money exchanging hands and a shit ton of smiles.

"Thank fucking hell I had a son," Cash mutters as he hands over a wad of green bills to a beaming Craig.

"I want daughters and lots of them. I want to watch you try to top Axel's dance moves," Lucy says suddenly from beside me, and my heart stops beating in my chest.

"You do?" I ask, fearing I'd heard her wrong.

“Yes, I do. You know, after I’ve forgiven you and don’t feel the urge to smother you instead,” she states, then walks to my bike as if she didn’t just give me a glimpse of our future together.

“Quit standing here like an idiot. Go make her forget the smothering part,” Aria orders with a laugh.

“I need grandbabies, Adriano. Go be a good son and earn that woman’s trust back,” my mom urges.

The End

Epilogue

It takes time and effort, but eventually, I start earning Lucy's trust again. It's worth every second of it, though. We start slow, going on dates and not rushing into anything. We spend a lot of time talking about our hopes and dreams. I spend time with her and her family, and she does the same with mine. Aria is thrilled to have a little sister, and Les claims he's happy to have one that's nice to him.

Lisa is amazing and quickly finds homes for my family and even sets up a meeting for Aria with her dentist. He's looking to add a partner, and Aria is looking to be one. Les is meeting with Lucy's dad tomorrow about an opening he has in the finance department. Life is good, and I'm hoping it only gets better with time.

I wave as I meet Bella, who's riding Pooh's old bike, on the street by the clubhouse. Her riding skills have improved, and I've noticed a new confidence about her. Stepping off my bike, I turn when I hear a vehicle coming up the road. When it comes into view, and it's an orange Jeep, I bolt for the safety of the clubhouse.

I rush through the back door but don't stop until I hit the main room. I'm thinking two cement walls should give me some semblance of safety, but I'm contemplating heading up to the second floor. Noticing Horse sitting at the bar, I warn my club brother.

"Tessie's driving toward the clubhouse!"

"And?" he asks.

"And? It's Tessie!" I shout.

"And Tessie hasn't put a single dent or scratch on her Jeep in months," Tessie barks from the kitchen door.

Turning, I scan her for injuries but find none.

"Did someone drive you here?" I ask in confusion.

“No, Chubs. God, don’t be such an ass,” she complains before explaining. “After you left, Lucy took over my driving lessons. She was a very effective teacher, and I’m now an excellent driver.”

“It’s true,” Gunner agrees as he enters the room from his office. “Not a single accident report has needed to be filed, and Denver P.D. had to lay off several officers due to the lack of work.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Tessie grumbles.

“I’m planning on hiring Lucy when it’s time for my girls to learn to drive,” Gunner states as he musses up Tessie’s hair on his way past her. “Wouldn’t you agree that’s a good idea, Tessie?”

“Only if you hate them,” Tessie mumbles, then mysteriously rubs at her arm and temple before walking off.

“What was that about?” I ask.

“Don’t think Tessie was thrilled with Lucy’s methods, but I am fucking elated that Trigger can now work on other people’s vehicles again,” Gunner answers before taking a seat next to Horse.

“Club charity ride tomorrow, Chubs, and you get to go on this one. Bike tuned up and ready?” Horse asks.

“It’s been ready, and I can’t wait. Lucy’s coming with, and it’ll be like old times,” I state while rubbing my hands together in excitement.

“When are you moving into her house?” Gunner questions.

“Day after tomorrow if I’m allowed to leave club property,” I say while taking the stool next to Gunner’s.

“Lucy has agreed to become your new jailor and to make sure you complete your probationary rules. That tiny redheaded spitfire promised she’d keep you in check, and I believe she can and will. You should know that she’s working closely with Trigger on that, so behave or be buried. Pretty sure those were his exact words too,” Gunner says with a laugh.

“Speaking of him, I should get a move on. I have to mow his lawn and wash the outside of all his damn fucking windows,” I grumble, but the other men seem to find it funny.

“None of that is a part of your punishment, you know,” Gunner reminds me, still grinning.

“I know, but it’s easier to just do as he orders than argue that point with him,” I say with a sigh.

“Giving in will only lead to more Trigger-style bullshit,” Horse advises and probably from past experience.

“I need to make amends, and if this helps with him, then I don’t mind,” I say before standing and leaving the clubhouse.

Lawn is mowed and looks great. I’m now standing on scaffolding, many feet in the air, and preparing to wash the first of the many windows Trigger’s house has when I hear Harleys coming up the street. Turning to look, I see several members of my club on their bikes, with cars, trucks, and SUVs following.

I watch in surprise as coolers and food platters are removed from the vehicles and arranged on the picnic table. Lucy stops below me and cranes her neck to look up, then barks an order at me that I’m happy to obey.

“Get your ass down here and eat. Ava decided to skirt the probationary crap and made all your favorites at home instead of the bakery. After we eat, everyone’s going to help wash windows with you.”

“Why would they do that?” I ask, confused but not hesitating to get down from these heights.

“Because we love your dumbass curly-headed self. Doesn’t mean I won’t drag you back into the ring, though, if you fuck up again,” Axel states before yanking me off the last step of the scaffolding.

Lucy steps beside me and wraps her arms around my waist, leaning her slight weight against my side.

“I think you being punished has been harder on them than you. We’re here to help you through it. We just want you to know that you’re still the heart of the club and the person I plan on spending my life with. Will you still marry me?” Lucy asks in a soft voice.

“I’m the best man! I call dibs on it! I said it first!” Axel bellows across the yard, having overheard Lucy’s question. “Sounds like you’re getting lucky tonight, Chubs!”

“Not for a long time yet. At least for as many days as he was gone,” Lucy promises. “Chubs has to regain my complete trust but I’m planning our future now because I know he will.”

“When? Any day, any time, and I’ll be there to officially link our lives together, Lucy, my love,” I reply while ignoring the wetness in my eyes.

Placing a hand on the back of my neck, Lucy pulls my face to hers. Expecting a soft, gentle kiss, I receive that and so much more.

My life is mine now. No need to hide anymore. I have a future with the woman who makes it worth living, and I have both my families with me. What more could a biker guy like me want? Food, of course, and lots of it. You didn’t think I’d forget food, did you?

About the Author

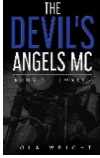


Lola Wright currently lives in the great state of Michigan with her husband. She has enjoyed living in several different areas of her home state and the USA, but Michigan is home. Her kids are grown now, and between them, her grandchildren, and numerous furry family members, Lola keeps busy. When Lola has free time, she will most likely be found outside riding her horses or being entertained by her rescued minis, her dogs, and cats. Lola has a passion for feeding the wildlife and enjoys watching them come and go on her property. If indoors, Lola is usually cooking up new recipes, reading, or is in front of her computer dreaming up who she hopes is the perfect couple.

Also by Lola Wright

The Devil's Angels MC Series

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 1 - Gunner



Ava

Left to die as an infant, Ava Beaumont has not had an easy life. Being raised by the system has taught her to be independent, hardworking, and cautious. When Ava becomes a victim, she uses her inner strength to put it behind her and move forward. Now she lives a good life with the family she's created through adopting pets that were also throwaways, including a smart-mouthed parrot and a skateboarding pig. When Ava meets Gunner, she realizes what her life is lacking but does she have the courage to trust a big, rough biker enough to let him into her safe little life?

Gunner

Being the President of The Devil's Angels MC was not something Gunner asked to become, but through the loss of his dad, the job was thrust upon him. While he loves his club and club brothers wholeheartedly, Gunner wants his club to move in a better direction. And when Gunner spots bakery owner, Ava, he realizes that's not the only change he wants to make in his life.

Nothing worth having is easy to acquire.

This is an MC story with a heart. Come meet the crazy pets and even crazier club members of The Devil's Angels MC.

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 2 - Axel



Bailey

I'm the sensible, independent, quiet, and hardworking accountant girl next door. My life is safe, sane, predictable, and boring. My biggest concern is dealing with my free-spirited, wild-child parent.

Until it's not.

The day I see something I shouldn't have and crash into the crazy lives of The Devil's Angels MC is the day my life changes forever. That's the day I looked into the bluest eyes I have ever seen and knew nothing would ever be the same.

Axel

My life is perfect. I'm the Vice President of my club, The Devil's Angels MC, and we've moved the club in the right direction. I manage the club's gym, own my own home, and have women around that are always up for a night of fun. I have my club brothers, the world's best dad and a new sister. Family is everything in my world, and I have a great one. What more could a guy want or need?

That question is answered when a tiny, little woman slams her way into my life. I never saw her coming, but I'm not letting her leave.

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 3 - Pooh



Pippa

Owning and operating a home for victims of domestic violence doesn't leave a woman wanting a man in her life. Not a permanent one anyway. Having been a victim myself, I chose to open this refuge to help others that are in a similar situation that I had been. I was one of the lucky ones because my foster mom was always my rock, my safe haven. It was never me alone against the world. We decided, together, that we wanted to be just that for others. New Horizons is born, and we are on a mission to save all that we can.

Pooh

I'm restless, bored, and I want more. I want what some of my club brothers have found. I want that one woman that is meant to be mine.

The problem is I don't know any women that qualify. Being in a motorcycle club brings women around in flocks, but they're not meant to be mine when they're clearly everyone's girls.

Then I meet her. The One.

Now the problem is that she is not interested in me or a relationship and not a big fan of men in general. She's a strong, independent woman, and a little spitfire when it comes to protecting those she's sworn to keep safe.

She will be mine, and I'll prove to her that men like me and my club brothers from The Devil's Angels MC are nothing like the men she's known before.

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 4 - Vex



Vex

I've lived my life free and easy. No attachments, no entanglements. I easily move on after an evening with a woman. For a night, they get all I have to give. After that, it's time to go. They're warned ahead of time, so tears and ploys have no effect on me. I love my MC family, The Devil's Angels, and my bikes. Not much else. Certainly, none of the various women I've known.

Then I meet someone who changes all my rules, thoughts, and beliefs. But as luck would have it, she's the unattainable one. She seems immune to my charm, and that tweaks my ego. After being warned away from her, I try to push her to the back of my mind. She doesn't stay there for long, though. Now I'm determined to have my night with her, consequences be damned.

Taja

Trying to raise my sister, working any job I can while fighting to keep a roof over our heads, I don't live the life of a normal woman my age. I don't have time for dating, sex, or men. Especially a member of an MC. My father's an MC President, and I want nothing to do with that lifestyle. Not even for the gorgeous biker whose nearly golden eyes follow my every move. Common sense tells me he's in it for a night, and that's not my style. Best to keep my head on straight and ignore what my body's craving.

Actions have consequences, and fate has a way of messing up the best-laid plans.

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 5 - Cash



Livi

Being a female in a male-dominated career can be daunting, but I refuse to allow others' attitudes to deter me. I always try to be professional, compassionate, and non-judgmental.

Through hard work, I have earned respect within my department. Wearing a badge and uniform, I've seen the best and worst of humanity. Heartbreaking, dangerous, hectic, or hilarious, I approach each shift and person with an open mind.

As all cops know, the partner you're teamed up with makes all the difference in the world, and I struck gold. Work partners and best friends, James and I have a tight, unshakable bond. We're each other's support system when things get rough and defend each other's right to wear the uniform against anyone who believes otherwise.

Cash

Muscled, tall, tatted, and The Devil's Angels MC Sergeant at Arms, some see me as an intimidating man. Others see me as quiet, thoughtful, and dedicated to my blood and MC families. I'm the first call everyone makes when things are going sideways. Whether it's bullets or fists flying, I'm the man you want at your back. Highly respected within my club, I live by a strict biker code.

When a life-altering event occurs in my life, I will not waver in doing what's right. With the love and support of my two families, I'll face my new circumstances with determination.

The Devil's Angels MC: Book 6 – Pigeon



Ivy

When my mother, who suffers from mental illness, leaves my brother and me in the care of our grandparents, my life changes dramatically. Being raised on a large ranch, loved and cared for, I had a great childhood with them. With my grandparents passing, though, things changed. My brother and I have always had a difficult relationship, but it only gets worse now that he's in control of my life.

Working at an animal rescue, FurEver Homes, I have become friends with a few of The Devil's Angels members and their families. When a member of their club steps up to help me get free of my brother's control and abuse, I accept it gratefully, but I want much more than that from the tatted biker with kind eyes.

Pigeon

Watching Ivy on the security cameras at FurEver Homes, I'm intrigued and amused by her. She's young, too young for a jaded, somewhat older biker, but that doesn't change the fact that watching her with the forgotten animals calms my soul. When I spot obvious signs of abuse, I step in.

Spending time with Ivy, her strength and resilience only impresses me more. This young woman is fighting alone for her future and her dreams of starting a therapeutic riding center for kids. Her dream to help others shouldn't have to come at such a high cost to herself. I make a promise to her that I'll do whatever I can to help her succeed, but none of us saw the road that promise would lead us down.

More books to follow in this series!