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THE
LOST BREED
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NICOLE YORK

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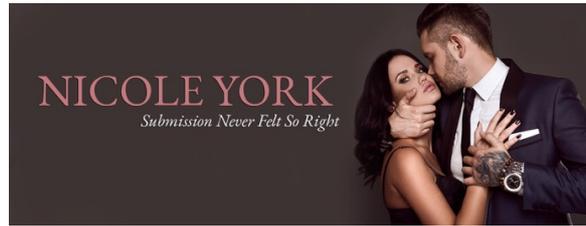
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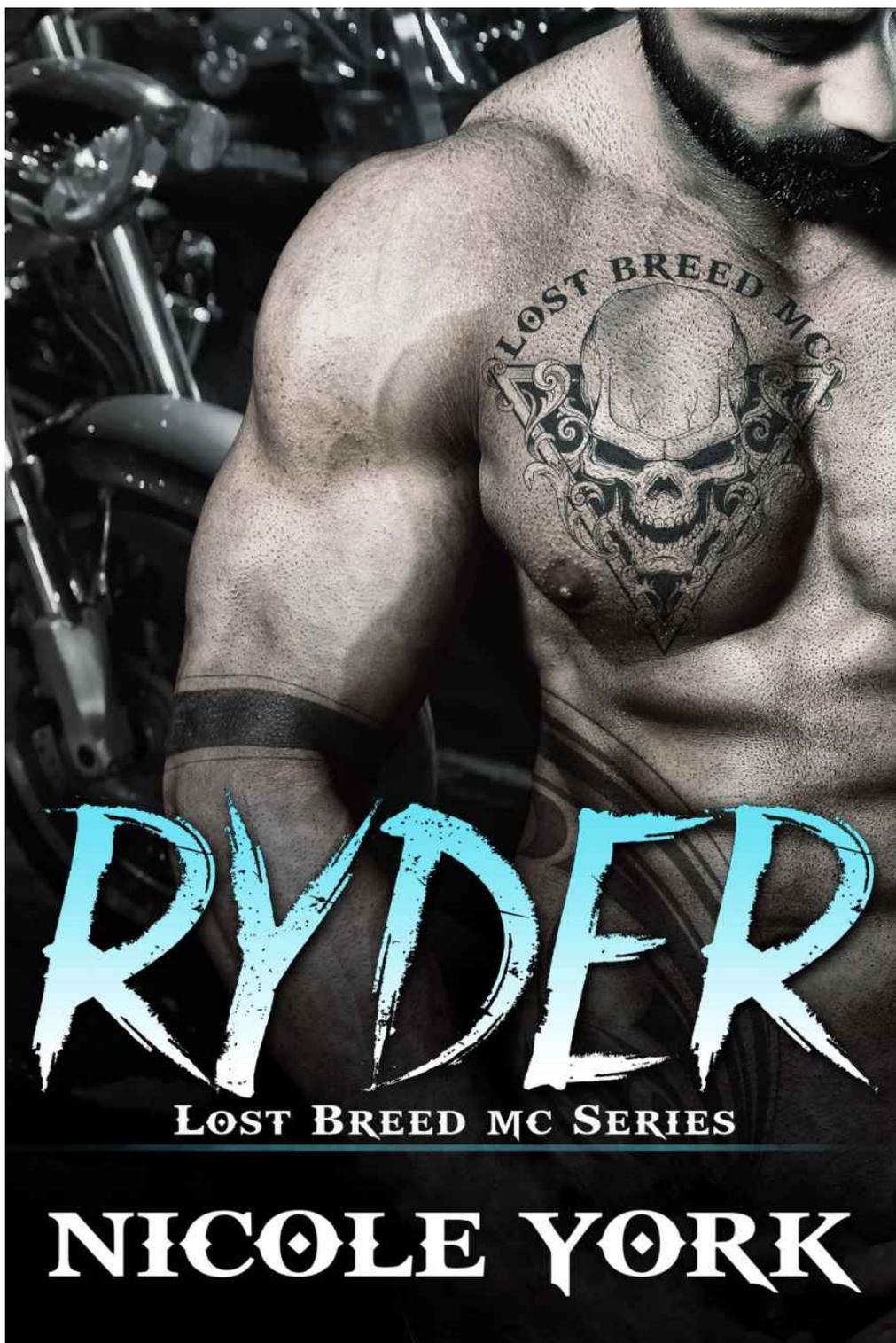
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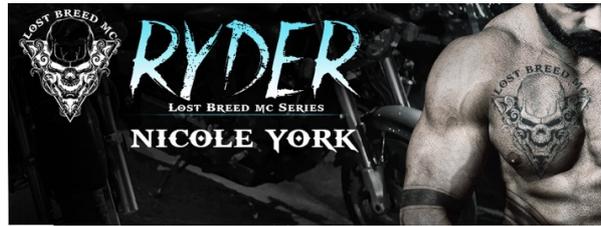


RYDER

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I'm not a good man. Not worthy of redemption.

As President of the Lost Breed MC, I fight, fuck and take what's mine.

But everything changed in the blink of an eye, and now I got a kid, my brother's kid. The teenage bastard is just like me.

And he's gone missing.

My only hope is that the hot piece of ass that's been assigned as my nephew's parole officer is willing to help out a criminal like me.

She's got something to prove to the world after losing her sister, and I plan on taking full advantage of her willingness.

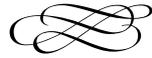
She's innocent, good hearted and sexy as fuck. The kind of girl I like to break in the bedroom.

I'm driven mad with the desire to gain her affection, to be the one that wakes her up in the dead of night to take advantage of her softness and remind her who's King.

Why? Because she's not buying my shit.

And I love it.

CHAPTER 1



RYDER

“One more round.” I lifted my beer and glanced around at my fellow club members as a smile played at the edge of my lips. I knew they wouldn’t pass up beer. Especially not if I were paying.

“Fuck, why not.” Hyde raised his glass and smirked. “These women in here tonight aren’t exactly the prime target of my affections usually.”

“Keep drinking. You’ll get there.” Our Vice President, Axel raised his glass. “Besides, last I checked, you didn’t give a shit where you stuck your dick. As long as it was a live, you were in.”

I laughed. “He’s right, my man. You’re a whore.”

“Never said I wasn’t.” Hyde shrugged and downed his beer with several large gulps. He growled and slammed the mug against the wooden table before standing up. “Alright. Time to fuck.”

“Turn toward the dance floor. You creep me the fuck out when you say that and you’re looking at us.” Jax ran his hand over his smoothly shaved face and gave Hyde a look while pointing toward the dance floor. “Turn your big ass around and head that way.”

We all shared a laugh as Hyde walked off in search of someone to spend the night with.

“You staying much longer?” Axel glanced my way.

“What are you, his mother?” Darek stood up and popped Caleb in the back of the head. “Let’s go throw some darts. Winner buys the next round.”

I ignored them as they started to fuck with each other.

“Why you asking?” I turned my attention to Axel.

“Cause I think I’m headed home. I have a few meetings in the morning at the shop and honestly, I’m getting old. I don’t wanna feel like shit tomorrow.”

“Pussy.” I smiled and picked my beer up.

A pretty blonde waitress stopped beside our table and put her hand on her hip. “You boys need anything else?”

“Sex.” I glanced up at her, happy to find her pretty cheeks burning pink. “But only if you’re a screamer.”

“You do love to hear a woman sing your praises. Fucking weirdo.” Axel stood, downed his beer and patted my shoulder before moving around the girl. “See you in the morning at the shop. Don’t be late.”

“You’re thinking of Hyde.” I kept my eyes on her though my comments were for Axel as he walked off. “I’m always right on time.”

Her eyes widened a little. “Did you need anything else?”

I chuckled. “You’re new around here, hm?”

“Yeah.” She turned as someone walked up behind her.

Candace King. The bitch that fucked my life up.

“Hi. You’re needed back at the bar. They’re searching for a wench and you look like you might fit the bill.” Her smile was tight, her glare ugly as she attacked the pretty blonde.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah. Sure.” The girl glanced back at me, embarrassment all over her face.

I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

“Well, well. Look what life vomited up today.” I winked at her and turned back to my beer, ignoring the burning desire in the core of my stomach to bend the bitch over the table in front

of me. She was by far the best lay I'd ever had, but then again, she was a whore of sorts. A beautiful whore, but a whore nevertheless.

"You know you're happy to see me." She sat down beside me and slid her hand up my thigh, gripping my dick tightly and cupping my balls. "Don't act like you don't jerk off to images of us fucking."

"Those days are long gone." I glanced down at her grip on me as my cock grew thick and hard. "While you're down there, can you scratch right under my left nut."

She laughed, patted my sack again and pulled back. "Come dance with me."

"Not a chance in hell." I licked my lips and took another drink of my beer as I scanned the old bar where my MC spent far too many nights.

"Scared of where it might lead?" She leaned a little closer, her dark hair draping over my shoulder, her heavy tits pressing against my arm.

"Oh no. I know where it would lead." I turned toward her, our noses almost touching. "My dick buried eight inches deep in your tight little ass."

Her breath caught in her chest and I could smell her perfume mixed with the sweet musk of her pussy. She was everything a man would want... in a black widow.

"I want you." She reached up and ran her fingers through the back of my hair, scraping at my scalp.

A million images burned through my mind. She'd been my first. My only for a long time.

"You want a lot of things, Candace, but I'm not one of them." I reached up and pulled at her arm. "Find someone else. I'm not interested in your shit tonight."

"Ryder. It's been six months."

"Ten." I finished my beer and stood up, ignoring the tent my dick made in my pants. She had a way of making me burn for carnality. The things she'd let me do to her. Fuck. The

things she'd done to me in our ten-year relationship. I was just a boy when she found me, but she grew me up as fast as she could.

She pressed herself against my side and reached over to stroke my cock again. Her lips were so goddamn soft on my neck. A fury burned deep in my chest. I couldn't let her affect me anymore, but it seemed impossible when my body betrayed me.

"There's a room in the back."

"I know what the fuck is in the back," I barked and turned toward her, reaching up and gripping her beautiful face roughly. "You play too many games. Get out of here before I take full advantage of what you're offering."

"I'm not going anywhere." She leaned in and pressed her lips to mine.

The hunger boiling inside of me exploded. I hadn't been with anyone that I had an emotional connection to in fucking forever. The need to belong, the feel of love, even if the shit was fake, overwhelmed me.

I picked her up and walked to the back as the little bitch wrapped her legs around me and sucked at my tongue.

"Ryder. Dude. No fucking-" Caleb stepped in the way.

"Back off," Candace pulled from the kiss and hissed at him.

The position had her left tit in the perfect place for me to do some damage. I leaned down and sucked her nipple deep into my mouth as I walked to the back, ignoring the voice of reason. Poor Caleb. He was always the one trying to talk sense into us. It was an impossible fucking feat.

"Johnny," Candace moaned and turned back, running her hands down my back as she pressed her breast further into my mouth. I flicked my tongue over her budded nipple roughly and slid a hand down the back of her skirt. My fingers pressed against the rim of her opening and I found her sopping wet.

I pulled back and licked my lips. “Ryder. Don’t call me anything else. Period.”

“Got it.” She leaned down and pressed her lips to mine, arching her back and pressing down on my fingers to fuck herself as I made it to the door. “I’ll call you anything. Just don’t stop.”

“You’ll be lucky to get me to stop when you ask me to.” I pulled the door open and nipped at her lips as she bounced on my hand, her pussy pulling at my fingers as she contracted tightly. My cock pulsed with the need to sink deep inside of her. She knew how to milk me and every other fucker back in the bar.

Why am I doing this? Drop her on her ass and walk out.

Lust had taken over, and I wasn’t going anywhere.

I closed the door behind us and pulled my hand from her skirt as she slid down the front of my body and worked my jeans to my knees. She had her ruby red lips around my cock before I could reach out and steady myself. I slid my hands into her black hair and gripped it tightly, stilling her.

I rolled my hips, fucking her at a pace that felt less frantic. I’d come otherwise, and there wouldn’t be much fun in that. Prolonging the fuck was the name of the game and for that, I needed control.

She glanced up at me, her black eyes filled with animalistic hunger as she moaned and took my dick like a good girl.

“You’re right where you should be. On your knees in front of me.” I pressed deeper, forcing my cock into her throat. Her eyes widened a little, but she exhaled through her nose and relaxed. She was a goddess and I was going to find myself lost to her if I wasn’t careful.

The same bitch that stole my youth and turned me into the monster I was would be more than happy to snatch away my freedom and trap me once again.

The guys were going to be fucking furious that I’d let her near me.

Fuck ‘em. I needed this. I needed her.

Her nails dug into my thighs and she pressed against my hold, sucking my shaft as her tongue whirled around the tip of my dick.

I moaned as pleasure shot through my stomach. I wanted to hear her call my name, to scream for me to slow down, to stop. I wanted to be too much for her.

The sound of disappointment that left her as I pulled back, kicked off my jeans and walked to the stack of boxes in front of me was almost cute. There had been a time not too far in the past that I would have chuckled at her for being precious. That time was long gone.

I turned and sat down, stroking myself. She stood and turned, putting a hand on her luscious hip.

“I was enjoying that.”

“Good for you. Come over here and fuck me. Do what you came to do.” I turned and pulled a condom from my pants pocket as lay on the floor behind me. She watched me like a hawk as I opened it and rolled it down my thick shaft. I was a big guy, and I used it to my advantage with women - all the time.

“God, you’re hot.” She pulled her shirt off and worked on her bra.

I leaned back and watched her. “Shut up talking and get over here. I’m still debating on getting you naked, tying you up and walking out.”

“My brother would kill you.” She threw her bra behind her and slid her skirt down her legs. No panties. Why was I not surprised? She knew what she came for, and fuck her for knowing that she would get it too.

“Your brother’s going to kill me anyway.” I reached up and grabbed her hips, spinning her. “Lower yourself on me. Give me a little bit of ass and a little bit of that sloppy wet pussy, Candace.”

“You always make me wet.” She gripped my thighs and leaned down, sliding her ass down my cock.

I closed my eyes and bit my tongue. There was no way in hell I was letting her know how good she felt.

“Fast.” I popped her ass and blinked a few times as the room went dim around me. How long had it been since I’d fucked someone? A few days? Why did this bitch have to matter so goddamn much?

She jerked up and arched her back, pressing down again. The tension was loosened, but the soft wetness of her pussy was enough to make me tense up in pleasure.

I reached up and grabbed a thick handful of her hair as she worked both of her delicious holes over my dick over and over again. She cried out in orgasm several times, but I forced her to keep moving, to keep fucking, to not forget why she was there.

She wanted to service me one more time? I wasn’t going to deny her or myself.

“Come Ryder. My legs hurt.”

I laughed. “I’ll come when you fuck me good enough to make me come.”

The angry expression on her face lit me up as she turned a little and narrowed her eyes at me. “I hate you sometimes.”

“I hate you all the time, bitch.” I pulled at her hair, forcing her back to bend until I pressed my lips to her ear. “Maybe you’re not the woman I thought you were, the one I remembered. Maybe this is a waste of my time.”

She growled loudly and jerked from me, bouncing her ass and fucking me with a fury that left me buckled over in orgasm.

I cried out and lifted my hips, fucking her deep and fast as she met me stroke for stroke.

Dropping back on the boxes, I let out a long, contented sigh as she got up and turned, pulling the condom off and tossing it behind her.

“More.”

“No.” I reached up to stop her as she climbed in my lap and worked herself back down on my dick. The intensity of her skin pressed to mine was too much. “Yeah. More.” I pulled my shirt off and stood up to walk to the nearest wall. I pressed her to it and spent the next two hours filling every opening of her body with my seed. It wasn’t right. I should have used a condom, but the sexy bitch hadn’t gotten pregnant in all the years of us fucking bareback. She wouldn’t now either.

We dropped to the floor together when it was over. I held up my hand as she moved closer to me.

“No. It was a fuck. Get your clothes and get out. Now.” I ran my fingers through my hair and watched her. She wasn’t a good woman, but then again, I wasn’t a good man either.

Fuck. Maybe we deserved each other.

“So it’s like that, hm?” She stood up and gathered her stuff, getting dressed as she moved around on wobbly legs.

“Yeah, and don’t be a slut and tell your brother about this. It’s been quiet for a while. I’d like to keep it that way.”

She got dressed and walked to the door. “I won’t say a thing.”

“Why don’t I believe that?” I watched her go and sat down on a box nearby, my body spent and my heart aching. Candace was the only woman I’d ever loved, and some part of me still did.

CHAPTER 2



DANI

“I don’t like this.” My partner, Thomas glanced over at me as I adjusted my thigh-highs one more time.

I snorted. “At least you’re not having to wear tights. I can’t remember the last time I had to wear something so ridiculous. You know a man made these, right?”

He glanced out the window of the car closest to him and shook his head. “Dani, I’m serious.”

“Stop.” I reached for the door handle. “We’ve done a million of these operations. Don’t go soft on me now.”

“I don’t like it.” He turned to face me and reached out. The tight grip on my arm was a little uncomfortable, but I paused in respect. “It’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. Especially for the little girls that get sold for sex. I’m going in to help. Be ready to bust this party up the minute you hear our code word.” I tugged my arm free, got out of the cop car and walked toward a dark, damp alleyway. Excitement burned in my chest. I was made for this. For saving lives and freeing victims.

Memories blurred past my mind’s eye as I smoothed down the slutty dress I wore. There was no way the bouncer wouldn’t let me into the club. I looked younger than I was, and with a few winks and a slurred speech pattern, he’d think I was easy pickings.

“Hiya, handsome.” I turned the corner and slipped my hand into the top of my dress, pulling a fake I.D. from my bra. “What time do you get off tonight?”

The big burly guy gave me the once-over and chuckled. “For you? Now.”

I offered a toothy grin and pressed myself to the front of him. “I heard it was lady’s night.”

“You heard right. Have fun, princess.” He reached around and squeezed the top of my ass. “Downstairs and to the left. You take another stairway down and find what you’re looking for. I’ll come find you when I get off.”

“Of course.” I moved past him and walked down the stairs to the entrance to the club. The grumbles from the patrons waiting in line to enter were almost comical. If the nice party goers waiting in the chilled night’s air had a clue as to the nefarious purpose of the dance club, they’d run away screaming.

“Or so you assume,” I mumbled, talking to myself under my breath. All of my detective work had pointed to *The Jade Walk Nightclub* as the headquarters for the largest sex trafficking organization in all of New York. Some part of me hoped like hell I was wrong. Thomas’ concern washed over me again. He had a right to be worried.

I was going in solo. There were hordes of cops waiting around the bar and on the outskirts of the building, but I would walk into the belly of the beast all by myself.

It was as it should be.

I reached for the door as my favorite memory of my older sister swept by my vision. Seventeen and laughing as she danced around with her hair in pigtails. It was the last time I saw her until she turned up dead in an alley much like the one I’d walked down moments before. Her innocence had faded at a young age, and she had always looked for trouble in the form of a bad boy. Unfortunately, her last boyfriend sold her for a profit.

“This one is for you, Sis.” I reached the bottom of the second set of stairs, my heels clicking loudly.

“Say something, beauty?” The dark-skinned guy at the bottom of the stairs gave me a crooked smile.

“Nope.” I smiled brightly and stumbled a little. “My boyfriend, Tanner said you guys met up here sometimes.”

“We sure do.” He opened the door and moved back. “Mr. King isn’t in right now, but I’m sure you’ll find someone else that fits your needs for the night.”

“Needs?” I laughed playfully and walked past the guy as I stifled a shiver that ran down my back.

Girls. Everywhere. All ages, races, sizes. All dressed up like sluts.

And so many men.

I made my way through the sea of people and had almost reached the bar when someone grabbed my wrist roughly.

“Dani. What are you doing here?”

No one should have known my name in that shit hole. I was under cover.

“Wrong person.” I turned to stare into the face of a young girl I’d rescued a few months back. Fuck. “Caroline.” I pulled her close like we were best friends and wrapped my arms around her tightly. “What are you doing back here?”

“I don’t know. You can’t be here. They’re going to know you’re a cop. Get out.” She pulled back, her pretty blue eyes faded. My soul ached at what she’d been through, at what might have been done to her.

“Come with me. We’ll get out and then I’ll come back.”

“No way. They’re not going to let you out of here. Not now.” She shook her head as her eyes grew wide. “Tanner.” She turned and walked away as I stiffened.

I’d never met Tanner King, but I’d heard a lot about him. President of the Black Hearts MC gang and the meanest mother fucker in the city. He made the mafia look like fruit flies - annoyances at best.

“What do we have here?” His voice was smooth like glass and deep. So deep.

I turned slowly and ran my hands over my hips and down the outside of my thighs. I'd done a lot of police work in the short number of years I'd been on the force, and dealt with some bastards, but never anyone like him.

"Wow," I breathed out softly. "It's you."

A hint of a smile played along the side of his mouth. "You look a little too old to be in my program. How do we know each other, Dani?"

"Sandy, but close enough." I took a bold step toward him. His dark eyes moved around my face as he reached out and gripped my arms tightly where they bent. "I'm not too old."

"Have you been in here before?" He leaned down and brushed his nose by mine. "You smell like flowers and sugar. I wonder how you taste."

I stiffened. There would never come a day where I'd get used to how violent men affected me in a way they shouldn't. It felt wrong. Vile. Off.

"You should find out," I breathed out and leaned in, pressing my lips to his in a hard kiss.

He slid his hands up my arms and pulled me in closer, deepening the kiss and turning us around the room like we were trapped in a never-ending dance.

I got a hand free and pressed a panic button on my right hip, hidden under my dress. The kiss was strong, powerful and his tongue tasted like peppermint. He was deplorable, but if put in any other situation, he'd have been every woman's wet fantasy. Big and strong, sexy and aggressive.

"Boss. The alarm!" Someone yelled.

He pulled back and smiled at me. "Dani. You bad girl, you."

"Fuck you, Tanner." I stepped back and reached for my gun.

"Not tonight, love. But I'll find you. Soon enough." He turned and jogged toward a door hidden behind a large

painting. I got my gun out and followed him only to find the door locked from the other side.

Pure panic ensued around me as guys worked to drag girls out of the windows and back up the original entrance. A flood of cops joined me seconds later and took out every male in the vicinity, knocking them out and cuffing them.

I worked with a few other female cops to huddle the girls together. The sound of crying and sniffing filled the air. I had to imagine that my sister had cried a lot of tears when she was sold into slavery. The thought fueled me forward and kept me strong as we worked to process all the girls and got them into cars to send them down to the police station and then onto a protected, private shelter.

“Good work, Markum.” Cop after cop stopped to pat me on the back and shake my hand. They didn’t understand that finding these fuckers was a passion because the same men took away my sister, my only sibling. The fight was personal, and because it was, it made all the difference.

“Dani.” Thomas, my partner, stopped in front of me. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, not feeling too steady on my feet.

“Great job. Captain wants to see you.”

“Tonight?” I put my hands on my hips and gave him a look.

“Yes. He’s outside near the entrance.”

“Alright.” I patted his chest as I walked back up the entrance and toward the front door. I ignored the glares I received from both Tanner’s men and some of the girls. It was scary to think that we’d lost the king pin himself. He would be my next target, my focus until we took his ass down too.

“Dani.” Captain Nelson nodded as I walked up. His salt and pepper hair was disheveled and his eyes blood shot. “Are you alright?”

“Absolutely. I’m sorry about King.” I glanced to the ground and forced myself to look back up. Being a woman on

the force was hard as hell. I had to make them respect me, and I did, but going head to head with them every time.

No one knew how exhausted I was.

“About King.” Captain glanced around and I knew immediately that things were changing.

“Hey.” I reached out and gripped his arm. “Jack. I’m fine. I’m right here. Nothing happened. This is what I do. I’m one of the detectives for sexual crimes.”

“I get that.” He patted my hand and pulled my fingers from his forearm. “Your father is a good friend of mine.”

“No. He’s your pastor. There’s a difference.” I forced a smile. “Don’t do this.”

“I have to, kiddo. He knows you. He called you by name.”

“No. He doesn’t know me, Jack. He heard one of the girls down there call me by name.”

“Dani.” He gave me a stern look. “It’s not forever. It’s just until things settle down. Take a few days off and then we’ll move you to probation duty.”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “That’s fucked up and you know it.”

“He knows you.” He reached out and gripped the side of my face. “He’s a fucking monster and he’s got your card. You’re damn lucky I’m not putting you in protective custody. Watch out for yourself and do what I say, or I will ship you off and have you watched twenty-four-seven. You understand me?”

I bit my tongue and forced the tears burning my eyes not to fall.

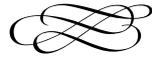
“Fine,” I bit out and pulled from him. My only passion in life was fucking up criminals and saving innocent girls from the horrors my sister had faced before her death. Turning, I ignored everyone that spoke to me as I walked toward my cop car. Thomas could find another ride home.

Me being pulled off sex crimes was likely his fault. He cared about me and worried too much.

It was unforgivable and done for one reason.

Because I was a woman.

CHAPTER 3



RYDER

“Johnny. There you are. I thought you weren’t here.” My sister, Maria stopped by the last pew in the church and patted my arm. “You okay? You look tired.”

“I’m good.” I reached up and squeezed her hand. She looked like daddy, whereas my other sister, Sicily looked like momma. Both of them brought me comfort seeing that my folks were gone. “I had a meeting this morning with Axel at the shop before heading this way. Just an early morning after a late night.”

Her eyebrow lifts as her husband, Neiman walked up beside her. “A long night like you need to go to confessional?”

“Doesn’t Johnny always need to go to confessional?” Neiman smiled and let out a soft chuckle.

I stood up and stretched. “Throw the first stone, brother.”

Maria laughed and reached out to tug the front of my shirt down. “I’m headed to momma’s, or your place I guess. I’ll get some lunch started.”

“Sounds good.” I let my eyes move along the front of the church until I found Father Hernandez. He was locked on me with a look of concern on his face. “I’ll be at the house in a little bit. Let me go check in with the Priest.”

“See you there.” My sister and her husband turned to leave as the rest of my large Sicilian family blew past all of us.

“Hi, Uncle Johnny!” Several of the kids yelled.

“You look rough.” My brother commented.

“Fuck you too.” I moved past them and walked toward Paul. “Morning, Father.”

“Johnny.” He clasped my hands and pulled me into a tight hug. “I thought maybe something had happened to you.”

“Because I wasn’t early?” I patted his back and enjoyed the warmth of his hug. He was my father’s oldest friend and the only one that knew the depths of my soul.

“Yes.” He moved back and gave me the once-over. “You’re always early.”

“Business meeting.” I slipped my hands into my pockets.

He lifted his eyebrow. “You need some time in confessional?”

I chuckled. “No, but thank you. It was about a custom car. Nothing else.”

“Something tells me that’s not the only thing you’ve been up to.”

I nodded. “Have a good week, Father. Say an extra prayer for me if you have one.”

“I have lots for you. Be safe, son. Get on the right path.”

I let his voice follow me out to the parking lot. Was there really a right path? My father had been a hellion. An evil bastard that died of a heart attack, not in a gun fight or in a robbery.

My mother was a saint. Beautiful and loving. She died of a heart attack too.

It would seem to me that there was no real right way to live if you were going to keel over either way.

“Might as well have a little bit of fun until then.” I got on my bike and pulled out of the parking lot, ignoring the stares from the older folks. It was part of the routine of Sunday morning.



The house was full of people by the time I pulled up in the driveway. My brothers had set up a table in the front room to play domino's, and Maria was alone in the kitchen working on lunch for everyone.

“Johnny. Come on, man. We’ll make room for one more.”

“Just a minute.” I lifted my hand and walked into the kitchen. “You need to get those bastards up and helping you.”

“It’s okay. I like it in here by myself. Let’s me think about momma doing this for all those years.” She smiled over at me, her pudgy cheeks not detracting at all from her beauty.

I moved up behind her and wrapped my arm around her shoulders before leaning down and kissing her cheek. “You need to talk Sicily into moving back from Maine.”

“No way.” She worked to chop up lettuce and tomatoes. “She loves it there and she has her bakery.”

“So, we can open her one here.” I gave Maria another squeeze before releasing her and walking to the stove. “You need me to grill these burgers?”

“Neiman was going to, but I think he got caught up in playing with the guys.” She shrugged and handed me a slice of tomato like momma used to do every time she cut them.

“Thanks.” I grabbed it and tossed it in my mouth before working to gather everything we needed to grill the burgers. “Have you talked to Sis lately? How is she doing? That fucker she’s dating behaving at all?”

Maria laughed. “They’re getting married. Stop acting like he’s just a fling.”

“I wish he was.” I grabbed the burgers and headed out of the kitchen. “How we let her end up with a Mafia warlord is beyond me.”

“Someone call my name?” My brother, Paulo glanced up and gave a goofy grin.

“Yeah. I said Maria needs a few bitches in the kitchen.” I winked. “That would mean all of you.”

They slung insults as I walked out in the chilly late spring afternoon to the grill. We lived on the shitty side of town, or I did at least. Mom and Dad hadn't built or bought another house my entire childhood, and I didn't plan on giving up the one we grew up in anytime soon. It was functional and held a lot of memories, and it was safe.

I could relax and simply be myself there. There was no reason to toughen up or present a front to my family. They knew me in all my many personas, and they loved me.

For that, I was blessed.

The sound of hogs on the road down the street got my attention and pulled me from my thoughts. I finished putting the burgers on the grill and walked around the house to find the guys pulling up.

"Well damn," I mumbled and walked toward Axel as he parked his bike and pulled his helmet off. "What the fuck are you guys doing here? Sundays are for family."

Hyde laughed and got off his bike. "We are your family, bitch."

"True." I extended my hand and pulled him into a quick hug before doing that to the rest of them. "I don't have enough food for you big bitches. You should have told someone-"

Maria cut me off as she walked down the stairs behind me with another tray of hamburgers. "I knew they were coming. Caleb called to make sure it was okay."

I glanced over at Caleb, the responsible one and rolled my eyes. "Pansy."

"At your service." He winked and walked past me toward the house. "I hear bones being thrown."

"I'm in." Derek followed him and Hyde half-danced up the stairs.

"You guys are fucking weird." I turned back to Axel, his face a mask of worry. He waited until the door was shut behind me to speak.

“What were you doing with Candace King last night, Johnny? What the fuck is the matter with you, man? You could have any woman in the whole damn city, and yet you’re shaking up with our greatest enemy’s little sister? You trying to start something?”

“No,” I barked and gave him a warning look before turning back to the grill. I was the president of our MC, but it wasn’t traditional at all. It was a brotherhood that had banded together more than the gang it had originally been.

“Then what were you doing?”

“Busting a nut, Axel.” I glanced his way and pursed my lips as we stood in silence for a second. “It’s none of your goddamn business, and you know it.”

“No. It is my goddamn business. Tanner King hates your ass for leaving them and dropping his sister in a puddle of grief.”

“She used me,” I spit out through clenched teeth. “We’ve been through this a million times. The bitch used me to get what they wanted and fucked up my life forever. You think rotting in jail for five years was fun while they enjoyed the spoils of my adventures? She didn’t miss me then. She’s a fucking viper.”

“Okay. I’m aware of this.” He dropped down on a broken cooler on the ground next to the grill. “Why would you sleep with her?”

“I didn’t sleep with her. I fucked her like a whore and kicked her out.” I shrugged and turned to flip the burgers.

Axel let out a long, exhausted sigh. “But why?”

“Because I still love her.” I turned to him and glared down at him. “Shut the fuck up about it, or I’ll treat you like a whore too.”

He held up his hands and nodded. “Alright. I know when to back off. Just know that when Tanner comes after your stupid ass that I’ll be there for you. We all will.”

I bit my tongue and kept after the burgers, hoping that he'd go inside and leave things be. I was a grown ass man. I didn't need anyone screening my bedmates. Least of all Axel.

He fought more demons from his past than all of us put together. Being a part of the Cooper clan from the west coast left him no choice but to fight. He had mafia in his blood. He was lucky those bastards hadn't come to collect him - yet.

"Johnny." Axel's tone had changed.

I glanced back to see the concern on his face. "What?"

"Jason's high again." He turned to walk to the front yard.

"Fuck." I turned down the heat on the grill and followed Axel to the front yard. My nephew, Jason was getting out of his car, giggling like a school girl and falling all over himself.

"Hey!" I walked up to him and gripped the front of his shirt. The kid was the spitting image of my brother Roberto. His grave was right next to my mom and dad's in the cemetery down the street. "What are you hyped up on now?"

"Uncle J." He laughed and reached up to grab my forearms as he slumped against me. He smelled like sex and burnt hair. "Good to see you, man. Men. Mans?" He laughed again as his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Stupid little shit." I gripped the front of his shirt and half-dragged him in the house. He stumbled behind me, singing something in a high-pitched voice.

"Oh no." Maria stepped out from the kitchen as I walked back with the idiot in tow. Her eyes filled with tears as she pressed her fingers to her lips. "Jon. Don't-"

"Don't tell me what to do," I barked angrily and pulled the kid to his bedroom in the back. I jerked him inside and chucked him across the room. "I told you to stay the fuck away from drugs."

"Sorry, Uncle J. Drugs and me... we'z friends." He smiled and chuckled as he dropped down on his bed and curled up on his side. "Don't be mad at me. I'm just like my daddy. You know. The one you let die."

“Bastard.” I came across the room and jerked him up.

“Hit me. Hit me hard and knock me out of my misery, Uncle J. Let loose on me. Fuck me up good.” His eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t leave this fucking house again until I say you can. Got it?” I dropped him on the bed and turned, slamming the door behind me. My brother’s only son was mine now, and I was doing about as good of a job with him as I had with Roberto when our parents died.

Jason would end up in jail, someone’s bitch or dead.

And once again... it would be my fault.

CHAPTER 4



DANI

Two Weeks Later

It seemed impossible to find any joy in getting out of the bed in the mornings. Two weeks on probation duty, and I wanted to turn in my badge and find a different way to make my mark on humanity. Surely there were organizations that I'd worked with in the sex crimes area that needed someone like me. Someone who was fearless and willing to go into the darkest places to bring young girls and women out of the bowels of hell.

I fixed myself a cup of coffee and padded around the kitchen while it cooled. A new group of delinquents would be mine later that day.

"Oh joy," I mumbled and leaned over, pressing my forearms to the cabinet. I blew on my coffee and tried *not* to think about how good it would feel to put Tanner King out of his misery. It'd been a long time since I had to use my gun, but I wouldn't hesitate next time I saw him. He'd ruined more lives and desecrated more women than any of the villains I knew of.

I picked up my cup and walked to the kitchen table where I had files laid out and my laptop set up. Captain had been good enough to let me make the transition to this new division at home instead of at the station. It was probably better for all of us seeing that I kept losing my shit every time I turned around.

This new job wasn't me. Not in the slightest.

Babysitting fucked up dope heads that flipped off society and their parents weren't exactly my cup of tea.

"Or coffee," I mumbled and opened my laptop to find a new file for review. Most of the kids I had to deal with were following their probation just fine, keeping themselves in line and hoping to get out from under the stern eye of the law.

"But this little fucker." I reached up and pressed the screen, opening the file. "Jason Moretti. What a piece of work."

After reading through his profile a couple of times, I flipped over to his family information. It was always so damn interesting to see who was raising the little shits. Usually their grandmothers, as if life should have allowed such a travesty.

Not only were most of these women dealing with losing their own kids in some manner, but now they were being taxed by their grandkids and their horrible choices. It hurt my heart, but then again, most things did.

My phone rang, pulling me from my thoughts. "Markum."

"Danielle. It's your father."

I sat back and smiled. "Dad. How are you?"

"I'd be better if you were in one of these pews in front of me." He cleared his throat. "Is there a reason you're not at church again this week?"

"Yeah. I'm hiding from a bad guy right now, dad. I'm not sure Jesus would appreciate me bringing him and his guns into the middle of your beautiful church."

"I think you underestimate the power of God to protect you."

"Right." I stood and let a breath go that I didn't know I was holding. "Seth was here today. He was looking for you."

"What?" I moved to the window just above my kitchen sink and reached up to jerk it open. It felt incredibly stuffy all of a sudden. "Why didn't he just call?"

“He was hoping to catch you. I think you need to pay him a visit. He has some paperwork he needs signed.”

“I’m not interested in giving him all of our assets. He’s not playing fair because he has the money to bend me over.”

“Danielle. Jeez.” The disgust in my father’s voice was palatable. It always was. “You have to finish this. You can’t just leave the man hanging. Sign the papers and move on.”

I closed my eyes and tried to hold back the scream building in my chest. “Okay. Thanks for calling dad. Enjoy your afternoon.” I dropped the call before he could say another word. There was once a time not too far in the past that we’d been close and taken care of each other.

Everything changed the day my sister’s body was found. It destroyed both of us.

I walked back to the table and sat down. My hand shook as I clicked through the rest of Jason’s file and tried to block the memories of me and Seth making love. Of us walking in the park and buying a puppy and sharing a life. A life he’d destroyed with his infidelities. I wasn’t *adventurous* enough. So, he found someone who was.

The bastard just forget that his ring meant more than a financial commitment.

“I hate you,” I whispered roughly as I moved through Jason’s file. I wasn’t talking to the kid, but to Seth, or maybe even to myself. I stopped on the information about Jason’s guardian. It wasn’t an older woman, but a blistering hot bad boy.

“Shit.” I leaned forward and let my eyes run across the man’s face. Deep blue eyes framed by long black eyelashes looked back at me. The depths of them forcing me to lean in. High cheekbones, a Sicilian structured nose, full pink lips and a thick black beard that was cut close to his face. My nipples hardened and I grew warm as lust swelled in my stomach.

My eyes moved down to his thick neck and the tanned, flawless skin there. I wanted to see under his tight black shirt.

He was ripped no doubt. The swell of muscle was more than obvious.

“Wow.” I leaned back and sucked my bottom lip into my mouth. “Maybe I need to pay Mister-” I leaned forward again to search for his name. “Mister Johnny Moretti a visit.”

A knock at my door surprised me.

Fear raced through the center of my chest, and I bolted up and jogged to the bedroom. After grabbing my gun, I walked to the door and slid the gun into the back of my pants. I’d been trained to survive in any situation, but that didn’t make me any more willing to run toward danger than any other woman on the planet.

“Who’s there?” I leaned forward and tried to make out the face on the other side through my peephole. Useless.

“It’s me, Dani. Seth. I need to talk to you for a minute.”

I groaned and opened the door. “What do you want? Make it quick.”

“Can I come in?” He stood at the door wearing his Sunday best. The thick file in his left hand let me know pretty quickly what he wanted.

Without giving him a second glance, I turned and walked to the kitchen. “Do whatever you want. That fits your style best.”

My heart ached in my chest. The life I thought was mine was a faded memory, and all I had to show for it was a career that I had to fight for every inch of the way. No family. No kids. No house on the hill. No fucking dog.

“I’m sorry to come over without calling.”

I turned to face him and extended my hand. “Give me that and get out. I’ll read it when I have time and then I’ll sign if it’s fair.”

He tilted his head a little to the side and lifted his eyebrow. “You won’t read it. I know you. Just sign the papers and let’s be done with this.”

“Am I getting on Cindy’s nerves?” I took the packet from him and walked around him back into the dining room. “Or is it Candy? Randy? Mandy? Sandy?”

“It’s Cynthia, and you know it.” He followed me.

I breathed in the scent of his cologne and tried not to let my emotions get the best of me. He was the only man I’d been with, and the only one I wanted to be with. But I wasn’t enough. He’d turned me in for a slut from the bar he met on a business trip. And now she lived in my house and slept in my bed. I bet she petted my damn dog too.

“Nope. I don’t know. Nor do I care.” I sat down at the table and glanced up at Johnny again. I couldn’t help but wonder what his story was. Had life dealt him a shitty hand, or was he a taker like Seth? Everyone walking around on the streets in their business suits were just one deal away from being homeless. All the happy couples at the park were one mistake away from being single, alone, destroyed.

“Just sign the papers, Dani.”

“I will.” I glanced up at him and forced a facade of indifference on my face. “I’ll get them to you by the middle of the week.”

“Promise?” His expression softened a little.

So many questions pressed against the back of my front teeth as I clenched my jaw. Was she worth it? Did she make him happy? Was he really the boy that took me to prom and promised to be mine forever when we were just in fifth grade?

Where did that guy go? Did he leave first, or had my sister’s death changed me to the point of pushing him away?

Was it my fault?

“Yes.” I nodded and turned back to the packet of papers as my eyes filled with tears.

“Dani.”

“Go. Please.” I lifted my hand as he reached for me. Fuck me if my voice didn’t break. “Get out.”

“I’m sorry that-”

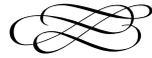
“Get! Out!” I screamed from deep inside my chest as my body clenched. He had too much power over me, but he wouldn’t for much longer. I turned my attention to Johnny Moretti’s picture and reached up to wipe at my eyes. I’d find a way to break Seth’s spell.

Even if it meant falling for the wrong guy for a little while.

Relationships never lasted too long anyway.

At least not in my world.

CHAPTER 5



RYDER

“You’re almost late.” Axel glanced up from his bent over position beside a new car we were working on.

“Almost isn’t late.” I walked past him toward the office. “Move before you fuck the project up. Your part is done. It’s my turn to do the touch ups and such.”

“You’re right.”

“On both accounts.” I ran my fingers through my hair and winked at Ellie, one of the girls that worked in the shop. She was a better grease monkey than most of the boys. If Axel weren’t hiding a hard-on for the pretty thing, I’d have already laid her out and made her scream my name a few times.

“What shit are you already starting this morning, Moretti?” She glanced up from the pile of paperwork Axel had scattered across his desk.

“Just making sure everyone knows their place.” I reached for the schedule and ran my finger down the long list of jobs we had to get through. “Who’s coming in today for pick up.”

“Nancy Morgan is due in around nine this morning for her Cadi.” She gave me a quirky smile.

“What?” I stood up straight and lifted my eyebrow. “Got something to say?”

“Yeah, but maybe I should moan it, so you’d understand it better.” She laughed and turned her back to me. “You know Axel would be pissed if he knew you were fucking the customers.”

“Would he?” I dropped the schedule back on the desk and walked to the door. “Let Miss Morgan know that she needs to see me to get her keys.” I grabbed her keys off the rack by the door and walked out. She was a rich bitch with a horrible laugh, but she could suck a dick like nobody’s business. I was more than happy to give her a little bit of practice.

“Fuck.” Axel walked around a Mustang we had jacked up four feet into the air.

“What’s up?” I slipped the keys in my pocket and gave my closest friend my attention.

“Ellie keeps leaving her tools all over the fucking place. I almost busted my ass thanks to her wrench being on the ground. The damn thing is covered in motor oil.”

“She’s trying to kill you.” I nodded. “It’s the way women tell you they’re interested nowadays. Used to be a little light flirting, maybe a room key, or a subtle foot in your lap to play with your dick, but things *have* progressed.”

“Fuck you too.” He rolled his eyes and walked around me. “She’s not interested, and even if she were... I’m not.”

“Okay.” I followed him, wanting to push a little harder just for the fun of it. “Then if you’re not into her, then move outta the way. She’s beautiful. I’d love to spread her taut little thighs and-”

The quickness of his attack threw me off guard. He popped me in the throat two times in quick succession and the pain of it stole my breath. “Shut the fuck up about her, Johnny. Now.”

I lifted my hands as I gasped for air. “Got it. Damn it, man.”

“Sorry.” He ran his fingers through his hair and let out a long sigh. “I can’t stop thinking about her. I tried to take a girl out last night and I barely got the rubber on before I called out Ellie’s name.”

I rubbed at my throat and tried hard not to return pop him in the mouth for hitting me. I’d deserved that shit, but I was the upper dog in the fight, and would easily win should it come to something like that.

“Stop fucking around and tell her.” I popped him in the gut. “And don’t hit me again. I’ll fuck you up.”

“You wanna go, old man?”

“Old man?” I reached for him as someone cleared their throat behind us.

“I heard you had my keys, Johnny.” Her voice was sweet like sugar.

“That I do.” I winked at Axel and spun on my heel. “Damn, Miss Morgan. And I thought your car looked good all dressed up and pimped out.”

She smiled and bit at her lip as she eye-fucked me. Oh yeah. She was going on her knees.

“I have a little bit of time before I have to get back to work. Maybe you could show me a few things about the car. It’s new to me, you know.”

I nodded. “Your daddy buy it for you?”

“Something like that.” She walked closer to me and pressed her hands to my chest. “I always forget how sexy you are in your uniform.”

“I look better with it laying in a pile on the floor.” I slid my hands over her hips and gripped her ass tightly as I leaned down toward her. I paused just before pressing my lips to hers. “Axel?”

“He’s gone.” She pressed her big, fake tits to my chest and smiled. “Where can we go?”

I licked at her mouth before moving back and grabbing her hand. “Come on, kitten. You look thirsty.”

She purred softly, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. The woman was too much for a regular guy like me, but she was more than willing to let me have a few moments of hope. It was all I needed to make the day better than the one before.

“Why don’t you get cleaned up and come to one of our events? You’d look so fine in a suit and tie, Johnny.” She pressed herself to my back as I worked on the door to the

supply closet. Long red nails pressed into the bulge at the front of my black dickies before stroking my budding erection in a slow, sensual way.

“That’s not at all the kind of man I am.” I walked in and turned, pulling her in and wrapping my arms around her. The creamy white dress she had on would be smudged with the oil on my fingers, but something told me that she didn’t give a damn.

“I’m so glad you’re not.” She pulled me close and leaned in to consume my mouth.

I slid my hand into her curly blonde hair and pulled her down into my lap as I fell onto an old office chair someone must have put out there for inventory. “Suck me off, Nancy.”

“God yeah.” She kissed me a few more times and moved to her knees, tugging at her skirt as I worked myself out of my pants. It was one thing to have a slut like Candace on her knees, but an entirely different experience to have a woman like Nancy Morgan willing to service my needs. She was money. Old money.

I touched the side of her face and gave her a wicked smile. “I know you’re a good girl, but try and expand your horizons for me this morning? Make sure your lips touch my balls, hm?”

She growled and moved in, sucking and licking at my shaft until I was covered in the wetness of her mouth. Her hands worked me in long tight strokes, and within a few minutes, she had me panting hard. The idea of pulling up her skirt and fucking her tight slit for the next hour was all I could think of, but I knew better.

Oral sex was about as far as I’d let things go with a woman like her. She’d get possessive and shit. Or worse... want a relationship. There was no damn way. Not after the shit with Candace. Besides, the guys were my focus when I wasn’t worried sick over my fucked up nephew.

Nancy gagged a little, bringing my concentration back to her attack.

I moaned and lifted my hips, fucking her mouth until the world exploded around me. I came hard and fast, wishing I had more to give her as she drank me down and licked greedily at my cock.

“I love how you taste.” She smiled up at me. “Fuck me today.”

“Not a chance, Angel. Come on. Your car is ready.” I gripped her arms and stood up, taking her back up with me. “You couldn’t stand a dick this big anyway. Not for your first time.”

“It’s not my first time.” She gave me a sexy pout.

“Yeah, it is.” I pulled my pants up and worked to zip and buckle them as I moved around her. I pulled her keys from my pocket and handed them back to her. “It’s in the lot and it’s cleaned up and ready to go. See you next time you come in.”

“Wait. That’s it?” She sounded hurt.

Damn. She was my favorite toy and here she was fucking things up for us.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for Johnny Moretti?” A feminine voice caught my attention. I couldn’t see her face, but something in the tone of her voice worried me.

“Johnny!” Nancy yelled behind me.

I turned to face her. “What? You know how this works. Don’t get things mixed up, kitten. Just go about your business and when you need your car serviced again, you know where to come.” I winked and turned as Axel walked toward me with someone in tow. The woman was too small to see around Axel’s big ass frame.

“But you didn’t even taste me,” Nancy whined as I walked away. I ignored her. She’d disappear and come back for more eventually. They all did.

“Taste her?” Axel gave me a look and moved back, letting the woman in tow walk around him. “Do I even wanna know?”

“Mr. Moretti?” A petite brunette with a cute button nose, full lips, and thoughtful brown eyes extended her hand. “I’m Detective Markum from NYPD.”

It took me a minute to hear what she said. She had to be the prettiest woman I’d seen in a long time. Naturally pretty. The kind of woman that made men stop what they were doing to grab one more glimpse of her. The khaki’s and button-down shirt were all wrong on her and hid what I assume was a soft, curvy figure.

Fuck me. Maybe I was still turned on by Nancy sucking me off so well, but something about the cop had my pulse spiking. Maybe it was because she was so small. She barely came up to my chin.

“NYPD, hm?” I nodded and walked past her. “Not sure what you’re doing here, but make it fast. I got shit to do.”

“Shit or random women that stop by the shop?” She followed me, as did the sound of Axel’s voice.

“Ha! I like her already. Detective Markum is it? Please. Stay as long as you like.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Make it quick. I don’t have time for your bullshit, cop.”

“Wow. Now I see where Jason gets it from.” She shrugged. “Never mind. Forgive the intrusion. I’ll just find him on my own.”

“Find him?” I reached out and grabbed her wrist. My fingers could wrap around it twice. My cock twitched at the thought of pressing her into a bed and letting her feel the full weight of my body against hers. Would she be scared? Thrilled? “Talk, and fast.”

“I stopped by your house. He’s not there.” She glanced down at her wrist but didn’t pull from me. The light dusting of pink on her pretty cheeks told me that I wasn’t the only one having naughty thoughts.

“He’s a teenager. I’m sure he’s out fucking a pretty girl or hanging out with his friends.”

“Well, that’s great, but he’s out of range for his ankle bracelet. We can find him and bring him back in range together, or I can find him by myself and arrest his ass.” She tugged her hand free and turned, walking toward the parking lot.

My eyes moved down her back to the swell of her ass. Her pants had a hard time hiding that. I smiled and followed after her.

“We’ll take my bike.”

“I’ll follow you in my car.”

“Nope. You gotta flat.” I motioned toward the car and pulled out a switchblade, popping it into a tire as I passed.

“What the fuck was that for?” she barked, her voice growing dark fast.

I picked up a helmet and tossed it to her. “On the bike, or find your own ride. Your choice, cop.”

“Fine. You’re fixing that.” She put the helmet on and got on the bike behind me.

As she wrapped her arms around me, she seemed to have trouble trying to figure out where to put her hands.

It wouldn’t happen in a million years, but some part of me wanted her to reach down and see just how big my cock was as she cupped me.

I wanted her thinking about what I was thinking about.

Fitting it inside of her.

CHAPTER 6



DANI

My body was tight and aching as we drove across town with me wrapped around the back of Johnny. My mind raced with the idea of what it would feel like to belong to a guy like him. Was he violent in bed, or loving and giving? I smiled and balled my fist tighter as I held onto him. The bastard had slashed the back tire on my cop car, making life a little more difficult than it had to be.

Funny enough, if it were Tani he was looking for, I'd have done the same thing. My heart ached as I let myself say her name a few more times. It was easier to refer to her as 'my sister' to everyone, hell, even to myself.

Something about her name brought back too many memories, too much longing.

Johnny pulled the bike in the driveway of his house and parked.

I pulled the helmet off and swatted his hand away as I got off. "I told you he wasn't here." I pulled my phone from my back pocket. "You're wasting my time."

He ignored me and walked to the house, leaving me holding the helmet. I dropped it on the ground and followed after him.

"Johnny. This isn't a joke. Jason's messed up too many times on his-"

"I'm aware, cop," he barked over his shoulder. The anger in his voice stopped me cold in my tracks. There was nothing loving or gentle about him. I needed to remember that not

everyone had a good story for why they were who they were, or why they were where they were. Some people just sunk to the bottom of their own perdition. Johnny Moretti could simply be that type of guy.

The handsome president of the Lost Breed Biker club had been a hit man for the mob and had connections directly to the Cooper syndicate out on the West Coast via Jeremiah “Axel” Cooper. If he were close to Jeremiah, then he couldn’t have a redeeming quality inside of him.

“Maria?” Johnny called out as he walked into the house.

I reached out and stopped the door from slamming on me. Maria? His wife? Girlfriend?

My curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to know how he got into a life of crime. I kept romanticizing it in my head, making him a bad guy with a good heart.

“Stop it. Shit,” I mumbled as I walked into the kitchen and looked around. The small dilapidated kitchen was clean and smelled like bacon and maple syrup.

“Fuck.” Johnny walked through the kitchen and stopped in front of me. “My sister isn’t here. She must have gone to look for the kid.”

“The kid? Jason?”

He sneered. “What other kid do you think I’m talking about, lady? Did you sniff glue as a kid? Shit.” He moved past me and barreled out of the house.

“Wait.” I turned and forced the need to defend myself back. He was an asshole. I had nothing to say to him. Period. “Johnny. I’m coming with you.”

“Not without a helmet you aren’t.” He got on the bike and put his helmet on and held up three fingers, pulling one down at a time as he watched me through the tinted glass around his eyes.

“I don’t like you very much.” I scooped up the helmet and got on the bike.

He popped up his face visor and glanced back. “Hold on tight. We’re gonna break a few laws, cop.”

“I’m fine.” I reached behind me and gripped the handlebar at my ass. A scream ripped from my lips as he backed up and hit the gas, skidding out and almost throwing me off the bike. I reached up and wrapped myself around him like we were lovers. “Asshole.”

His chest and stomach muscles contracted. The dick was laughing. I hated him even more.

Sort of.



We drove through town until Johnny took a sharp left turn and headed toward the countryside. The cold wind blew around me, whipping at my skin. It should have been uncomfortable, but for the first time in a long time, I felt alive.

Closing my eyes, I pressed my chest tightly to his back. His back muscles tightened as if my closeness surprised him a little. I’d blame it on being scared, though I was far from it.

Some part of me that never experienced happiness anymore woke up. I wanted freedom. Lust. Love. Adventure. I wanted to be the woman he put on the back of his bike because I’d captivated his heart.

And maybe it wasn’t just about him. I didn’t know him from Adam. He was hot as fucking sin, but so were a lot of other men. I just wanted one of them to fall over themselves to be with me.

It was Seth’s fault, or maybe my father’s.

Or hell. Maybe it was my fault. I didn’t know, but I wanted affection and attention more in that moment than I could remember wanting it before. It was horrible timing.

It always was.

Johnny pulled the bike over to the side of the road by a school, and I glanced to my right to see a bunch of teenage

kids sitting around on a playground. He turned the bike off and extended his hand to me.

I ignored it and got off, pulling off my helmet and handing it back to him. He stood up, pulled his helmet off and gave me a stern look.

“You one of those feminist chicks that won’t let a man hold the fucking door for you?”

“No, but I’m not sucking you off after you fix my tire either if that’s what you’re asking.” I smirked and walked past him toward the kids.

He chuckled, but stayed behind me. I was grateful to have a minute with the kid by myself.

“Hey. It’s our lucky day.” One of the guys sitting near Jason smiled at me and wagged his eyebrows. “You come to service us, pretty lady?”

“Not quite.” I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my badge, flashing it. “Detective Markum. NYPD.”

“Oh fuck.” One of the other boys rolled backward off the swing he was sitting in and ran toward the school.

“Fuck is right.” I smiled and nodded to Jason. “I’m your new Parole officer. You’re in violation of your Parole. Looks like you have a night of snuggling up to whoever else is in the county jail cell.”

“No way.” He lifted his hand as his friends ran this way and that.

“Yes way, you little fuck.” Johnny walked past me and grabbed the kid by his hair, lifting him up like he weighed nothing. “You think you’re going to keep dicking with the law and they’re just going to let you slide by each time.”

“Ouch. Fuck you, Uncle J. You did. Dad did.” Jason kicked and screamed.

I should have stepped up to help him, but maybe Johnny being a little rough with him was a good thing.

“No, bitch. Your dad didn’t make it.” He dropped the kid and knelt in front of him, grabbing the front of his shirt and growling down at him. “You’re going to end up dead and in a hole in the ground. These bastards you’re playing with aren’t kids, Jason. They’re monsters.”

“Fuck you, Uncle-”

Johnny slapped the kid hard across the face and stood up, taking the boy with him.

“Johnny.” I moved up only to have him turn over his shoulder and glare at me.

“Don’t,” he barked. “You have no idea of the life we’ve lived. Back the fuck up. Now.”

I took a step back, scared for the first time in a long time. Johnny Moretti would be a great weapon to have against Tanner King and his crew. It was a funny thought, but I was too lost in how to handle the situation next to enjoy the thought.

He turned away from me and lit into his nephew, slinging the kid around here and there.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and called for back-up, quickly giving them the address and asking for a patrol car to be sent over. I’d barely put the call in when a car pulled up behind me with the lights on.

Thomas got out of the car, followed by Detective Oliver Hill. I groaned internally at the sight of him. The guy drove me up the fucking wall with his condescending attitude.

“Need some help with a teenager, Markum?” He snorted and walked past me.

“Yeah. That’s what’s up.” I shook my head and walked over to Thomas. “Hey. How are you?”

He smiled wearily. “Good. We miss you in Sex Crimes. They assigned a new female cop, but she’s just not you. She lacks finesse and fearlessness.”

I smiled and glanced over my shoulder. “I’m not sure I’m going to do much good in this new position. It’s just not me at

all.”

“I doubt that.” He closed the door and walked toward Johnny, who was dragging Jason by his hair again.

The poor kid was an idiot for messing with someone like Johnny, but that much was obvious by the boy’s rap sheet. He’d fucked up a million times, and should have been in juvey.

“Hey. We’ll take it from here.” Oliver moved in front of Johnny.

“Move, pig.” Johnny walked toward Oliver, who moved out his way and looked almost offended that someone would talk to him in such a manner. “Take his fucking ass to jail for the night, cop.”

“That was the plan.” I moved back to the car and opened the back door. “Jason, you understand why we’re taking you in.”

I reached for him as Johnny released him and shoved him toward me. The kid reached out and caught himself by grabbing me, almost pulling us both down.

“Yeah. I fucked up. I get it. So what?” He kept his head down.

I read him his rights and put him in the car as Oliver and Thomas talked over on the other side of the car.

The sound of a motorcycle roaring to life caught my attention. I glanced back to see Johnny’s tail lights and a cloud of smoke.

“Hey. How did you get here?” Thomas asked from across the top of the car.

“Don’t ask. I need a ride over to the station to get my car.”

Oliver gave me a funny look until I held up my hand. “Don’t. Ask. Seriously.”

He lifted his hands and smiled. “Not sure how you get yourself into these situations, but maybe if you didn’t, you would be further along in your career.”

“Fuck you too.” I got in the front seat and buckled up. I was pissed that Johnny left me standing there. That he fucked up my car. That I looked like an idiot in front of Thomas and Oliver.

But most of all, I was pissed that Oliver was right.

My flailing career was nobody’s fault but my own.

I was obsessed with justice, and that came at a price.

A big one.

CHAPTER 7



RYDER

I stared at the dark amber liquid in my glass as my thoughts ran all over the fucking place. The pretty little cop from the station took her turn in the rotation, which was both disturbing and entertaining. The last thing I needed to do was get involved with one of the good guys. It never worked out well for me, like I was deemed to be a hellion from the start.

“You know, you keep thinking that hard and you’re going to stop breathing.” Hyde dropped down on the wooden bench across the table from me.

“Why’s that, wise ass?” I glanced up to find him watching me.

“Cause guys like us only got so many brain cells left, man. If one of them is busy helping you breathe and the other is assisting you in swirling your finger around that glass, you’re pretty much standing on one leg.”

I snorted and shook my head. “You thinking we only got two brain cells left after all the dope we smoked as kids?”

“I’d say that’s about right.” Axel walked up behind Hyde and sat down beside him, his attention all for me. “The cop came by last night late and got her car.”

“Good. Glad to hear she’s out of our lives.” I picked up my beer as the other guys in our MC joined us.

“Who’s out of our lives and why is this a good thing?” Jax moved in to sit beside me, his three-piece suit making him and us look bad.

“A cute cop that Ryder has the hots for.” Axel reached around the table and pushed my beer toward me. “Drink up. Next one is on me.”

“I hate it when you come in here dressed up. You’re killing our image.” I smirked as I eyed Jax.

“We call him Hollywood for a reason, boss.” Sabian Delgado spoke up, his dark eyes filled with mischief. He was one of the younger members of our crew and the little brother of one of my best friends from childhood. I spent more time watching out for Sabian than riding beside him. Something about stepping in where his older brother should have been kept me with a watchful eye on the guy.

Jax smiled. “You guys don’t like the suit, but I sure as fuck bet you like the money that comes along with me wearing it day in and day out.”

“Yep. Here, here to Mister Moneybags.” Axel raised his glass and held it to the middle of the table.

“He’s like our own fucking Daddy Warbucks.” Hyde smiled and wagged his eyebrows.

I hit my glass against theirs and finished my beer, not at all in the mood for the jovial spirit they all seemed to be flaunting. Jason had sat in jail the night before, and some part of me wanted the little shit to rot there. Life was hard as it were. Having to keep up with him when he was a total fuck up like the rest of us were was damn near impossible.

“I’m gonna have some dough after this coming weekend.” Hyde wagged his eyebrows. “I’m hitting up a bank on Friday night.”

“Did you want us to announce that to the whole bar for you?” Axel gave him a look of disgust. “Why you always gotta brag on that shit? None of us are impressed that you’re still robbing people and places.”

“I am.” Jax raised his hand and smiled. “Fastest way to wealth is to take it from someone.”

“Like you did with all those old guys who you bought their stock at the perfect time?” Axel turned his attention to

Hollywood.

“A man has to do what a man has to do.” Jax winked and picked up his beer. “Don’t be bitchy cause you haven’t fucked that little hot piece of ass down at your shop.”

“Hey.” Axel pointed his finger at Jax. “Watch it. Ellie is a good woman and a hard worker.”

“And sexy as fuck.” Sabian said and lifted his hands as Axel started to get up. “Just making an observation. Seriously. Damn, man.”

Time to change the subject.

“Where is Flex?” I glanced around, looking for Caleb.

“He’s with his girl.” Sabian rolled his eyes. “I swear he lives in two worlds. One where he’s a bad ass with us and the other where he’s picking out the perfect color combination for carnations for his girl. It’s weird.”

“We all live in two worlds.” Jax glanced down at his suit and back up at us. “It’s part of our charm.”

“Not so sure I’d call it charm, but it’s something for sure.” I got up from the table and walked toward the bar, needing a break from the company, even as good as it was.

“Hi, handsome.” Jessie, the bartender, walked up and gave me a sweet smile.

“Hey. You still working in this dump?” I lifted an eyebrow and slid into the seat in front of me.

The sound of yelling broke out behind me. I glanced back to find Sabian and Axel beating up on each other.

“Still here.” Jessie brought me back from watching the fight. “Why are those two always at each other’s throats?”

“Because Sabian has a thing for Angela, Jax’s little sister.” I smiled and offered her my empty mug. “It’s always about a woman, right?”

“Seems like a worthy cause to get bloody over.” She turned and filled up my glass. “What’s been going on with you? I saw you with Candace King the other night.”

“Speaking of.” Jax moved onto the seat next to me, and Jessie turned and walked away without another word.

I glanced over at Hollywood and smirked. “You sure know how to make a pretty girl run away. That one of your many talents?”

He smiled as he followed Jessie with his eyes. “She’s embarrassed.”

“Why is that?” I turned and let my eyes run over her. She was alright, but not someone I’d take in the back without a few beers in me.

“She came about eight times the last time we fucked.” He had a shit-eating grin on his face when I turned around to see if he was dicking with me. Apparently not.

“Why would that be embarrassing?” I picked up my beer and turned away from him.

“No clue. She won’t talk to me anymore, which is whatever. We were just friends anyway.”

“Yeah. Sounds like it.” I took a long drink from my beer.

“Speaking of friends...”

“If this is about Candace, lay off. It was a fuck. Nothing else.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not that simple with her, and you know that. We’re worried about you, man.”

“Don’t be.” I stood up and turned to face him. “The day I’m scared of Tanner King is the day we all need to tuck tail and run the fuck outta here fast. He’s a bastard and a bully, and if he brings his nasty ass around here, I’ll make sure he limps back home.”

“Can we just bury him in the back by that old oak tree you use to fuck girls against?” Jax chuckled as I gave him a warning glare. “Alright. I’m just saying. The world would be a better place without him. He’s fucking trash.”

“I agree, and his little sister is too.” I rolled my shoulders, and I thought back to how good it felt to fuck her hard and

fast. It wasn't passion, but anger. She was a whore and one that had ripped my heart from my chest. I'd repaid the favor a few times too. We were no good for each other. Never had been.

"What's up with the cop comment earlier? You into Jason's new parole officer?"

"No." I finished the beer and walked toward the door. "I'm headed back home to sleep. See you guys later."

"Ryder," he called after me, but I ignored him.

My love life, or lack thereof, wasn't something I was discussing with anyone, and they all knew that. We were grown ass men for shit's sake. The fact that we were all sitting at a bar together on Wednesday afternoon was more than enough to know we were bachelors. Sadly enough, some of us didn't have to be.

CHAPTER 8



DANI

“D ani.” Margie’s voice made me jump the next morning as I sat at my desk, studying a new file.

“Sorry.” I smiled and stood. “I must have zoned out there for a second.”

“I have no clue how.” She smirked and glanced around. “It’s loud as shit in here right now.”

I glanced around, noticing all the busyness for the first time that day. I had a way of diving into my own world when I was working.

“What’s up?” I turned back to her and started to point out that her thick blue eyeshadow was smeared, but maybe she meant to do it in that fashion? You never could tell with Margie.

“Someone is here to pick up the kid you brought in last night.”

“Oh good.” I grabbed my wallet off the desk and slipped it into my back pocket as I followed her to the front. My pulse spiked at the idea of seeing Johnny again, though it was so far beyond wrong.

The walk to the front took a little while due to them wrestling a toked up asshole in the main lobby. I stepped back and crossed my arms over my chest and scanned the room for Johnny.

My dream the night before left me breathing a little off kilter. We had been back at the auto shop, but it was just him

and me.

“What are you thinking about Danielle?” He moved around the old refurbished Mustang in front of me, the game of cat and mouse we were playing leaving me more than excited. I love the way he whispered my name. Seductively. Reverently.

“You,” I mumbled and slid my hands up the hood of the car. “And all the things I want you to do to me.”

“List them out.” He moved closer, and I stiffened, my skin covered in goose bumps at the mere anticipation of him touching me. I wanted him to grip my hips, to lick my neck, to spread my legs and see how badly he turned me on.

It was his power. His edge of danger.

“I want you to taste me.” I arched my back and pressed my breasts to the hood. The white cotton dress I had on wasn’t me at all, and yet, it left me feeling pretty, girlie, beautiful.

“Dani? You fade out again?” Margie stood in front of me, a concerned look on her face. “You’re a little pale, and you’re panting. Let’s get you to sit down for a minute sweetheart.”

“No. I’m good.” I pulled out of her hold and walked toward the receptionist desk. “Who checked in to pick up Jason Moretti?”

“I did.” A big guy that had to be almost seven feet moved toward me.

I lifted my eyebrow and took his file from one of the ladies at the desk. “And you are?”

“A good friend of his. I’m Cade.” He extended his hand and offered me a smile.

“Right, and he’s a minor.” I closed the file. “You’re not his guardian, so try again.”

“I have a note from Ryder. He’s dealing with some other shit right now. He’s not going to be able to come up here.” The

guy handed me a note.

“Who’s Ryder?” I glanced down at it. Oddly enough, it was made out to me, but he used my full name. Why not just call?

“That’s Jason’s Uncle Johnny.” He smiled. “I’m taking Jason right back to his house. Seriously.”

I read through the note and shook my head. “Alright. Fine.” I glanced back. “Bring Jason up.”

“Sure, Markum. No problem.” One of the girls got up and walked over to talk to a group of cops eating something near the back of the room together.

“Who are you again?” I turned to the guy, not sure I felt comfortable with the exchange we were about to make, but Jason was almost eighteen. He wasn’t a child.

“A family friend. I have been for years.” He slipped his hands in his pocket. “Here, you wanna call Ryder. Give him a buzz and talk to him.”

“Yeah. I do.” I reached out and took the guy’s phone. It was already ringing by the time I held it up to my ear.

“Ryder.” The voice was gruff, and I realized I didn’t know Johnny’s voice nearly as well as I’d thought I did. Hell, I had only met the guy once.

“It’s Dani Markum, NYPD.”

“Danielle. You letting Jason go with Cade?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I can do that. Everything okay?”

“Yep. Thanks so much.” The phone clicked, surprising me a little.

“All good?” Cade asked as they brought Jason around to the front.

“I guess so.” I turned to face the kid. He looked a little like Johnny, which was enough to have me worried for him. “Don’t fuck up again. You understand me? You’re running out of options, and I know you don’t want to live behind bars for the entirety of your twenties, right? Or do you?”

“I don’t.” He rolled his eyes and walked to the door.
“Thanks, Danielle.”

“Dani, and it’s Officer Markum to you, Jason,” I yelled after him, but it was no use. He was already half way out the door and headed back to his bad choices. Some part of me wanted to care, but it was hard to give a shit about kids that were *making* horrible choices. There were plenty of young girls being sold into sex slavery that weren’t give any choices, and here I was trying to help kids that were. It was fucked up on far too many levels to let myself think about it.

So, I didn’t.



After visiting another parole family, I returned to the station and walked the long hallway to the cafeteria. Oliver moved up beside me and pressed his shoulder to mine.

“You grabbing something to eat?”

“How did you figure that out?” I smirked and glanced over at him. He was handsome, but not at all the kind of guy I wanted in my life. I’d gone from Seth who was a rich prick to a painful divorce. The last thing I wanted to do was date a cop who could quite possibly be a little crazy and who owned a bunch of guns. I’d seen it happen too many times.

Not only that, but I wasn’t at all attracted to him.

I wanted a touch of danger in my life. I yearned for it, and yet the starched blue uniform I wore said that it would never happen. Not without completely throwing caution to the wind and becoming a different person, one I wouldn’t recognize.

What do you have to lose?

“Hey. You alright?” Oliver stopped at the opening to the cafeteria and moved in front of me.

“Yeah. Just a long day. I’m good.” Something dark caught my eye near the door. Johnny. His black leather jacket looked good on him, and his dark sunglasses fit his persona perfectly.

Thick muscles lined his arms under his jacket, and they pressed against the material as he moved. His jeans hung low on his hips, and the bulge at the front of his pants had me imagining all the wrong things by the time he made it to me.

“Where’s my nephew, cop? I came to pick him up, and he’s fucking gone,” he barked in my face.

“Hey. Back the fuck up.” Oliver put his hand on Johnny’s chest and pushed him back a little.

Johnny reared out and popped Oliver in the face. “Don’t.”

“Johnny. Stop. Come on. Let’s go talk, and we’ll figure this out. You’re going to get your ass in trouble assaulting officers.” I glanced over at Oliver. “Sorry. It’s okay. He’s just upset.”

“Yeah. I am.” He growled and moved toward me.

Every cell in my body lit on fire. It was disturbing how badly I wanted a night with him. What the fuck was wrong with me? I was a cop. He was a bad guy. Or was he?

“Come on.” I turned and walked out of the cafeteria, assuming he would follow.

“Dani. Where is Jason? I asked about him up front, and they said you released him this morning.” He gripped my arm and pulled me back, forcing me to turn.

“Markum?” One of the other cops nearby turned and gave me a look of support. “You alright?”

I lifted my hand. “Yeah. I’m good. Just a friend.”

A friend? Why would I grant Johnny that title? I growled and swatted him again.

“Back the fuck off,” I bit out through clenched teeth. I turned and walked toward the back door. I pushed the door open and walked into the darkening parking lot before whirling around. “I let him go with Cade. You gave him a note, and I fucking called you, and you okayed it.”

His brow drew tight, and his eyes darkened. “I didn’t send a note, and you didn’t call me. Where is he, Dani.”

“It’s officer Markum.”

“No. It’s Dani for now, and be lucky of that.” He gripped my arms and turned us, pressing me to the back wall of the precinct. The hard press of his strong body against mine left my mind spinning. I had to get my shit together. I’d obviously released the kid to the wrong person. Fuck.

“I have a tracker on him.” I glanced up at Johnny. He didn’t look anything like the man I’d met the day before. He was emotional and unruly. Fear fluttered through my chest for the first time in a long time. “We’ll find him. Okay?”

“You’re coming with me, Danielle.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to my ear. My eyes fluttered shut. I was in deep shit.

“How do you know my name?” I whispered and pushed at his hips to keep us as far apart as we could be. The intimacy of him pressed against me made me weak.

“It’s not hard to find out.” He breathed in, and I moaned.

“Don’t.”

“You want me to as bad as I want to.” He brushed his lips by my ear, and fuck me if I didn’t moan again. “You’re lucky you’re a cop.”

“Why is that?” I hated how hard my heart beat against my chest, how wet my panties were because of him. I needed to get Captain to reassign Jason’s case. I couldn’t fall for a man like Johnny, and yet my body already had.

“Cause I’d turn you around and fuck you right here in front of all your boy toys if you weren’t.” He nipped at my ear again and pressed his hips forward. “Help me find Jason. This is your fucking fault.”

“Move and I will.” I pushed again as the air whooshed from my lungs. He moved, and I sagged against the building for a second before getting my legs beneath me. I walked past him toward my cop car. “I’m driving this time.”

“I’m not riding in a cop car. Period.” He moved toward his bike and glanced over at me. “And you aren’t either. Get on.”

Now.”

I looked around. What the fuck was I doing? I unbuttoned my shirt and pulled it off, leaving the white one beneath it. “I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“I’m sure there are lots of things you want to do that you shouldn’t be doing. Just make this the first of many.” He extended his hand to me as his eyes moved down my chest.

Where I’d normally want to cover myself, I didn’t this time. I wanted to pull the t-shirt off and let him see me, really see me. It had been too long since anyone had seen me.

No. I couldn’t do it. “I’ll drive in front of you. I’ll get the tracker on my phone.”

He smiled, and my stomach tightened. “You sure about that?” He took off and left me running for my car.

“Dammit, Johnny,” I mumbled as I got in the car and took off after him.

A soft voice inside of me chanted the same two things over and over as I finally caught up with him.

This is so fucking wrong.

But it feels so right.

CHAPTER 9



RYDER

I was sick with worry as I drove out to Jason's normal spots. I'd played it off in front of the cop, but knowing that Cade had Jason was enough to make me want to puke. He was Tanner King's right-hand man and a big motherfucker. He'd do anything Tanner wanted. Why the hell did they have my nephew? What did they want?

Was Dani that ignorant that she would let the kid go with a stranger? Or were they that good in pulling one over on her?

I knew the answer. Maybe it was a bit of both.

She wasn't a parole officer. She didn't fit the bill. Most of those guys actually cared about saving the kids they were paired up with or seemed to. It was a mixture of a social worker and a cop, Danielle Markum wasn't either. She was a bleeding heart from what I could tell.

What drove her to become a cop? Was her father one? Did he get killed on the force?

I pulled up to the playground where Jason usually was and paused for a second to check his usual spot one more time.

Dani pulled up beside me with her window down. "If you would have let me go first, we would be there. Follow me and stop being a dick."

"I like the way you bare your teeth when you say dick." I winked at her and turned back to the field. "If you know where he is, then lead the way, Princess."

“Oh, now I’m a princess?” She laughed sardonically and drove off, leaving me in a cloud of dust.

“Bitch,” I growled and moved in behind her, riding her ass. It was her fault we were in the middle of the shit we were in. I was supposed to be at home drinking beer, eating tacos and then jacking off to the thought of her fucking me reverse cowboy, but instead, I was looking for my fucking nephew — again. And with a cop.

The guys would lose their shit if they knew I involved the law. Unfortunately, there was no other way to find the fucking kid so quickly. She had the tracking device, I didn’t, and Jax’s contact had turned up useless.

We pulled up to a warehouse near the city, and I parked the bike. I put my helmet up and got off before pulling my gun from my back pocket.

“Johnny.”

“It’s Ryder, cop.” I glanced over at her and nodded. “Don’t play the good guy tonight. If you want to do that, then leave and come back in about ten minutes. I live in a world where good and evil don’t exist. Good got its ass whooped a long time ago.”

The look on her pretty face almost caused me to chuckle. She was torn between two worlds, which was a little odd. Did the good guys struggle with wanting a taste of the dark side from time to time? Were some of them less than straight laced?

Seemed like she was.

She pulled out her gun and moved up toward the building, ignoring me and my comments.

There was something insanely hot about her courage, her confidence that she was going in to take care of whatever was happening with Jason with or without me. Without backup.

My cock thickened in my jeans, but I forced myself back into the moment.

Jason was in danger, and as much as I couldn't stand the little prick, he was still mine.

"Just take one hit, you dumb fucker." Jason's voice was faint, but I could hear it from under the door of the warehouse where we stood in silence.

"I've got this." She glanced over her shoulder.

"No. I do." I pulled her back and lifted my gun before walking into the warehouse. "Hey, bitch. Party time is over."

Cade glanced over his shoulder and scrambled to his feet. "Ryder."

"Get up," I barked down at Jason. "Now."

"Fine. Shit. I was just having some fun." He scrambled to his feet and fell back over. "Cade is a friend of mine. You know him, Uncle J?" He chuckled. The little shit was teasing me.

"Yeah. I fucked his mom a few times when I was a kid." I smiled over at Cade.

"No, you didn't. Take that shit back." He moved toward me.

I lowered the gun and fired. It skimmed his thigh like I wanted it to and he screamed and knelt down.

"Fuck you, Johnny. I'm going to get you back for this. You can't run forever, you bitch."

"I'm not running anywhere." I pointed my gun at Jason. "Get on the fucking bike, now. You and me are going to have a talk when we get home. You're not hanging out with these assholes. You have no clue who you're getting involved with."

Jason crawled toward the door, sniffing. The little shit was crying. Excellent.

I glanced over to see Dani help him up and walk back outside with him.

"Tanner's going to fuck you up, Johnny." Cade laughed loudly and dropped on his ass before rolling on his back.

I walked over and dropped my knee against his chest as I leaned down. Pressing the barrel of the gun to the bastard's head, I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes. Fury raged through me. Tanner King was a sickness that our city had endured for far too long. Where there were mafia, drug Lords and every other kind of villain in the world walking the streets, Tanner took the cake.

Selling women on the black market was unforgivable.

“You tell Tanner that I'm coming for him, Cade. He's been playing with the wrong people for far too long. Tell him his time is up and I got his fucking number.”

“Tell him yourself.” He spit at me and laughed.

I reared back and smacked him in the face with my gun, knocking him out. The ugly bastard slumped on the floor in front of me. I wiped off my face and found his phone, dialing Tanner's number from Cade's contacts.

“You got the boy?” Tanner's voice filled my ear.

“No, mother fucker. I got the boy.”

A soft laugh. “Ryder. Of course. I was hoping that you'd come out to play soon. It gets so dull without you.”

“I'm done with your shit. We'll be coming for you soon. Just a fair warning from an old friend.”

“You were my best friend. Not just any friend. You were supposed to be my brother.”

I snorted and stood up. “Enjoy your last few days, Tan. I'm going to finish this thing between us.”

“Yeah, I get it.” He cleared his throat. “Don't delay, okay? I've got plans for Jason to bring him into the fold as one of our kidnapppers, but even better, that hot little piece of ass standing out by the cop car with him?” He laughed as he paused and my stomach grew sick. “Danielle Markum. Oh yeah. I know her well too. She's cost me a lot of money and time. I'm going to take it out on her myself. I need a new toy.”

“See you soon, Tanner.” I dropped the call and walked out of the warehouse. Of course, he had eyes on us. Of course, he

had someone trying to woo Jason into their organization.

Dani glanced around as Jason lay in the dirt by the car. Her lip was busted pretty bad. “I had to knock him out. He went a little crazy.”

“Did he hit you?” Fury raged from the bottom of my stomach as I growled and moved closer to her.

“Yeah, but it’s fine.” She moved back as I grabbed both sides of her face to examine her. Fuck me she was beautiful up close. I wanted to feel her hair wrapped around my fingers. It was long and chestnut brown from what I could tell. She had it in a tight bun like she had every time I’d gotten close to her.

“Sorry punk ass kid.” I moved back and picked up him. “Put him in the car and follow me back to my place.”

She gave me a leery look. “Alright.”

“Hey. I can’t help that you wanted to be a parole officer and helped fucked up kids with their choices. This is one of those moments. Help or get the fuck out of the way.”

The indecision on her face made me feel a little bit better funny enough. She wasn’t an idiot at all, simply placed in the wrong division for some reason. I wanted to know why.

“Fine. I’ll follow you back to your place.” She opened the door, and I loaded the kid in the backseat. He was out cold. I snorted and moved out of the backseat before turning to her.

“You got him good.”

“I am a cop, Johnny or Ryder, or whatever the fuck your name is.”

“Daddy.” I pressed my hands to the top of the car and watched her as she walked around to the driver’s side. “You can call me Daddy if you want.”

She laughed, and the sound was beautiful. “I hate you.”

“No, you don’t, but I wish you did.” I turned and walked back to my bike as her headlights filled up the night.

I gave the warehouse one more look before getting on my bike and following closely behind her.

We pulled up to the house a little while later and were greeted by darkness.

“Let me get him.” I parked the bike and walked to the car as Dani tried to lug Jason out of the back seat.

“Gladly.” She moved back, and the smell of her shampoo or maybe it was the scent of her skin, filled my senses, and set my blood on fire. Fuck me, I was going to fall for this woman. I didn’t even know who the hell she was or what her tie up with Tanner was, but she was in trouble. Big fucking trouble.

I couldn’t let anything happen to her. Her or Jason.

“God, Jason. What have you been eating, you fat ass.” I dragged him up the stairs, and she ran in front of me to get the door. “Dani, go open his bedroom door and pull down the covers. Last one on the left.”

She moved around me without a word, filling the air around me with the same sweet vanilla flavoring. I had to reposition Jason and carry him like I would a drunk woman instead just to make sure my damn erection didn’t get bent in half.

I got him into the bed and moved back.

She leaned over and covered him up, putting her back and ass to me.

I reached out and ran my hand down her lower back carefully. “Thank you. You don’t have to help us. I can do this shit on my own. I always have.”

She tensed and moved back, turning to face me. “I need to go, and it’s my job to help you.”

I nodded. “Yeah. You do.”

Walking toward the hallway, she stopped and glanced back. “You need to close that window. He’s just going to leave again.”

“I know. I will.” I walked up behind her and followed her down the hallway. “How do you know Tanner, Dani?”

She froze and turned to face me. There was almost a palatable need in her expression. What was her story? When was the last time a man made her feel like a queen?

“Tanner who?” She took an unsteady step back.

“Tanner King.” I reached out and wrapped my fingers around her upper arm, pulling her back toward me. Her breath caught in her chest, and she reached out, pressing her hand to my chest.

I flexed unable to help myself. My cock was pulsing between us, begging for her attention. What the fuck was it with this woman? She was tough enough to protect herself and not at all my type, and yet I found myself wanting to ravage every inch of her, to explore her and for the first time in my long life, to be soft about it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She pushed against my chest. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t stop me. Let me fuck you the way you need to be fucked.” I leaned down and wrapped her in a tight hug before consuming her mouth. She was stiff and unyielding at first. I pulled back and ran my nose by hers. “Give me your tongue. Now.”

CHAPTER 10



DANI

“L*et me fuck you the way you need to be fucked.”*

I cried out as Johnny leaned down and pressed his lips back against mine. I opened up to him and turned my face a little as the strong press of his hands took my breath away. The soft wetness of his tongue brushing by mine was almost too much. Seth had me feeling like I wasn't good enough, like no man would want what I had to offer... especially not in the bedroom.

I slid my hands up his chest and cupped his neck, pulling him down further as I pulled his tongue into my mouth and licked at it seductively. Everything about what we were doing was wrong, and yet I'd rather have lost my job, my home, everything than back down. I needed him above me, behind me, inside of me.

Ignoring the little voice in my head about Tanner King was hard to do, but I managed it somehow.

“That's it. Give into me, Danielle.” Johnny licked at my mouth and stared down into my eyes. The depths of his soul was somewhere in there, and I wanted access to it.

“I can't. Please don't do this.” I brushed my thumbs over his cheeks, enjoying the way his beard tickled my fingers.

“You like your pussy eaten from the front or the back, Kitten?” He gripped the back of my legs and forced me to wrap them around him as he picked me up and walked us back toward what I assumed was the bedroom.

I closed my eyes and barely held back a groan. My heart was beating too fast, and the blood was rushing past my ears made it almost impossible to think.

“Johnny.”

“Front or back, Dani? You’re almost out of time to make the call.” He laid me down on his bed and ran his hands over my stomach up to my breasts. I barely filled his palms, which made me want to scramble backward. What if I wasn’t enough?

“You’re so fucking hot.” He brushed his thumbs over my nipples and growled before tugging my shirt up and leaned down to run his tongue over the swell of my breasts. He pulled my bra down angrily and sucked my nipple deep into his mouth.

“Fuck,” I moaned and arched my back as I spread my legs. “I want to feel you between my legs.”

“There’s the girl I wanna see.” He carefully pinched my nipple between his teeth and flicked his tongue over the tip of it roughly.

I cried out and shook beneath him as I tried to get his shirt over his head. I wanted to see his chest, to feel his skin, to know what he looked like naked. “Stop. Please.”

He released my sensitive skin and moved up to press himself between my thighs. After several soft kisses around my chest, he cupped my breasts and pulled them together. “You don’t at all sound like a woman that wants me to stop.” Leaning down, he brushed his face through my cleavage and breathed in deeply.

The firm press of his cock against my sloppy wetness was more than enough to drive me over the edge.

“We can’t do this.” I ran my fingers through his hair, hating the sound of my voice. Lie after lie spilled from my lips in an effort to save myself. If I wasn’t enough for Seth, how could I ever be enough for a man like Johnny?

“We already are.” He moved up and kissed my lips several times before straddling my chest. He moved up, extending his

arms to the ceiling as he stripped out of his black t-shirt. Thick, roped muscles tensed under his tight, tanned skin. A dark skull tattoo stained his right pectoral muscle with “Lost Breed MC” stamped across the top of it.

I reached up and ran my hands down his sides, tracing the tribal tattoos and falling in love with how beautiful he was.

“Like what you see, Kitten?” He unbuttoned his pants and moved off the bed to pull them down. He wasn’t wearing underwear, and I almost had a fucking heart attack as he reached down and stroked his cock.

“Johnny.” I moved to my knees and pulled my bra into place before tugging my shirt back over my chest. “There’s no way that’s going to-”

“Come here.” He reached for me and wrapped his fingers around the side of my neck. His other hand gripped my upper arm, and I found myself on all fours on the side of the bed. “Take as much as you can. Enjoy it, Dani. He’s fucking rock hard all because of you.”

I felt like a girl again. Like an idiot. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d put my mouth on a man. Or Seth really. Were we in high school? Ten years ago?

He reached up and undid my hair, causing it to cascade all around us. My shirt was pulled roughly over my head, and he worked my bra off of me, forcing me to move as he took care of everything.

“There.” He slid his hand into my hair, winding my long silky strands around his fingers and pulling me up to face him. “It’s just me and you right now. Suck my cock like a whore, kitten. I see it in your eyes. You want it so bad it hurts, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“I know. It’s all yours. No one to impress, Dani. And there’s no one who’s going to condemn you.” He tugged me back down and gripped the back of his dick with his free hand.

My stomach contracted, flooding my panties with more lubrication. I couldn’t let him know how wet I was. It was

insane. Embarrassing.

No one to condemn you? Did he know my story?

My eyes fluttered closed, and I gripped the sheet beneath me as he ran the thick head of his cock by my lips, pressing in a little. The salty delicious flavor of his pre-come had me moving forward and forcing him deep into my mouth.

“There you go, baby. Take all of it.” He ran his hand over my back and pressed into my sore muscles. I moaned around the girth of his shaft and let myself go, working him for all I was worth. It wasn’t about pleasing him or impressing him, but about opening up and letting myself breathe sexually in a way I never thought I would.

“Fuck, Dani. That’s so damn hot, Kitten.” His fingers brushed over my ass as he cupped my sex, rolling his fingers around the entrance to my slit. “You’re such a naughty thing. Here you are acting like a good girl, but you are wet as fuck, and your little pussy is contracting in hopes of grabbing my attention.” He pressed his dick farther into my mouth as he rolled his hips. “Well, you got it now.”

I cried out as three thick fingers opened me wide, forcing me to spread my legs and give him whatever he wanted. Pleasure like nothing I’d ever experienced burst through the center of my stomach, and I whimpered and rode the high.

“Come again.” He pulled his cock from my mouth, and I collapsed on the bed, my voice broken as I sucked in ragged breaths. He leaned over the top of me, his slick shaft pressed to the back of my shoulder as he worked his fingers deeper and deeper inside of me. “It’s been so fucking long, baby. Your tight little slit is barely giving way. Breath and relax. Let me fuck you in every way I know how.”

“Please?” I whispered against the sheet as another orgasm bore down on me. I screamed my release and jerked against his hand, wishing my lower half were bare.

“Enough,” he barked and pulled his hand from my body before roughly pulling my hips to the left, forcing me to turn

onto my back. He moved around the bed, his eyes were dark, his face a mask of lust. "Where's your man, Dani?"

"Gone." I reached down to undo my pants when I saw where he was headed. He pulled them down my legs and tossed them behind me. Leaning down, he pressed his mouth to my mound and sucked hard against my sloppy wet panties.

I groaned in need and opened my legs wide. "Please take them off. Take them off!"

He moved back and licked his lips as he pulled my panties down my legs. "Ride my face. Let yourself go tonight."

"What? No." I reached for him, but he gripped my arms and forced me to sit up. "Johnny. I'm not that type of girl."

He crawled on the bed around me, dropping down to his back. His thick cock bounced against his stomach as he reached out and half-dragged me up his body.

"Yeah. You are." He gripped my thighs and pulled, forcing me to spread my legs around his handsome face. My heart almost stopped in my chest as he lifted his head and licked from my entrance to my clit.

"No." I moved back and he growled and reached for me.

"Yes."

"Let me turn around," I yelled at him and swatted his hands away.

"Get up here." He grabbed me roughly as I turned and pressed my breasts to his lower stomach. His strong arms wrapped around the top of my ass as he buried his face back against my pussy.

I cried out and reached for his dick, needing something to fill my mouth with. There was no way I was going to moan and whimper through the entire experience. Seth had never once put his mouth on me. It was almost too much pleasure to imagine.

"I want in your ass," Johnny mumbled against my clit before flicking his tongue over it.

“No,” I said as I pulled back and slid my hand down his shaft, pumping the thick flesh and once again worrying if a man as big as him would fit inside of me.

“It wasn’t a request, Kitten.” He pressed his mouth to my wet skin once against and gripped my ass, pulling it open and running his fingers past my sensitive opening. His middle finger would press in a little more each time he brushed by, forcing me to take him inside every opening I had.

His tongue pressed deep into the entrance of my body, and his beard scraped against my clit roughly.

He lifted his hips and groaned loudly as hot come squirted from the tip of his cock. I moved up and took him into my mouth, fucking him as best I could while he lost his load.

The deep burn in my stomach ignited as his fingers sunk into my ass together, and I cried out around his cock and pressed back, taking as much as I could handle as my body wept with release. It was the first time I’d ever had one with a man’s mouth on me, and not just any man was forcing it on me. I’d had three with him working my body, and I wanted more.

I wanted him.

“Uncle J?” Jason’s voice at the door shocked me.

“Close the fucking door.” Johnny sat up, causing me to tumble on the bed beside him. I grabbed the cover and pulled them over my head. “Shit kid. Get out.”

“Alright. I just wanted to talk. Sorry.” He closed the door behind him.

“Come here.” Johnny reached for me, but the moment was broken.

“No. I need to go.” I scrambled off the bed in search of my clothes.

“Dani. I’m not done with you yet.”

“Yeah. You are.” I found my stuff and dressed quickly before moving to the door. I opened it and glanced out to find

Jason's door closed and light under it. "Fuck. I'm sure he saw my car. What was I thinking?"

"You weren't. Get over here. I'm serious, woman."

"I am too." I glanced over my shoulders as my voice broke. "Thank you for tonight. It was healing in a way. I needed it. I needed you."

He nodded and pursed his lips. The fight was lost and as much as I wanted to feel him pressed to the hilt inside of me, it wasn't right. He was a bad guy, and I hoped that somehow, I was still a good one.

And therefore, it wasn't happening.

It couldn't. No matter how fucking bad I wanted it to.

CHAPTER 11



RYDER

I woke the next morning with the taste of Danielle still on my tongue. I rolled over and ran my hand down my stomach to stroke my cock. I'd stayed naked after she left and laid in the bed for what felt like forever. For the first time in a long time, I'd thought about someone other than myself or my problems.

She needed to run hard and fast from me. I'd get addicted to her soft body, her innocent moans, her goodness. It pulsed all over her like a light in a dark night.

My body tensed as I pulled on the head of my cock roughly. I should have gotten out of the bed and muscled her underneath me the night before. She needed a fuck as bad as I did, and not just any fuck - the kind of fuck I could give her.

She'd been hurt by someone. That much was obvious. But who?

And did any of her past have to do with Tanner King? Obviously so. Why was he after her? What the fuck did the prick want?

Anger burned through my stomach as I rolled over and pressed my face to the bed. I cupped my hands around my shaft and rolled my hips, diving deep into the scent and sounds of the night before. I worked myself over the edge twice before finally getting up for a shower.

Dani was in trouble, which meant I needed to stick close to her. The guys wouldn't approve and it was probably more dangerous for me to be anywhere around her as much as Tanner loved to throw daggers my way, but it was what it was.

I wasn't going anywhere.

After drying off, I gathered my sheets and tossed them in the washing machine. A long day at the shop would do me some good. I'd dive into working on a beat up old car and forget about everything for a little while. The guys would help me with Tanner. They always had. It's what we did for each other.

"Uncle J?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see Jason looking like beat up shit. "Did you hit that cop in the face last night?"

He glanced down at his hands. "I didn't mean to. Something inside of me broke open. I was scared, like someone was going to kill me or something. I just reacted."

I turned and grabbed the front of his shirt like I always did. "You hit a cop in the face, and not just any cop, a fucking woman. Who raised you boy? You don't hit women. I don't give a flying fuck who was after you or what you were up against. Unless she has a gun to your head or a knife in your chest, you don't strike her."

"I'm sorry." He glanced up, his deep blue eyes a mirror to mine. The sorrow in them stilled me from my rant.

"What were you doing with Cade King, Jason? You know those mother fuckers are evil pieces of shit. Is that what you want to be? You want to grow up to sell little girls into their worst nightmares? You have no clue of the shit those people do to women. What the fuck is wrong with you?" I tightened my grip on his shirt as anger birthed deep inside of me again.

"What? No. I was interested in pledging to their MC. Nothing else." He held his hands up.

Some part of me understood why he would pledge to their gang. It was the only one that would take him. Mine sure as fuck wouldn't. He was too young and inexperienced.

"You don't pledge to the Black Hearts and hang around getting high and drinking beers, son. You step into a role of kidnapping women, breaking them and putting them out on the streets to make a dollar for your President." I patted the side of

his face and turned away from him to work on my laundry again. “You’re going to end up dead.”

“Like my dad, right?” His voice broke a little.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Don’t push me away, Jason. I’m all that you got.”

“Weren’t you and Tanner like brothers at one time, Uncle J? Weren’t you his right-hand man?”

“That was before he turned into a monster. At one time, Tanner King was just a pothead with a bike. Fuck, we all were.” I closed the lid and walked past Jason back toward the living room.

“Ryder.” The tone of his voice stopped me. He sounded so much like Roberto that I had to turn around. He’d never called me anything but Uncle before.

“Do you love me?” He glanced back down at his hands as his shoulders rolled in and he started to cry.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath and marched back down the hall, pulling him into my arms. I cradled him against my chest and pressed my chin to the top of his head while he cried.

“Yeah. I love you. I’m scared as fuck for you too. You’re doing everything Robby did. You’re following his path and I don’t know how to stop you, Jason. I’ve tried helping, yelling, beating the shit out of you, ignoring you.” I moved back and cupped his face. His pained expression drove nails into my heart. “I’m not a father. I don’t know how to be one, but I’m trying here. I need you to stay away from Tanner King, boy. He’s going to be the end of you.”

He nodded and moved back in to hug me again. “I’ll try. I promise. I’ll try.”

“That’s better than nothing.” I hugged him until he calmed down, then turned and grabbed my keys. I had to get the fuck outta there before I broke down too.

Nothing was going the way I had planned, but then again, life never asked my opinion.



“There you are. Almost late.” Axel glanced up and smiled. “Hand me that wrench over there. The one wrapped up in my rag.”

I walked over to the table and grabbed the tool for him. “Almost isn’t late.” I handed it down to him and slipped my hands into my pockets. “I slept with the cop last night.”

“What?” Axel pushed up from the position he was in on the floor. “Have you lost your goddamn mind?”

“Maybe.” I reached up and brushed my fingers by my lips. “There’s something about her, Axel.”

“Yeah, she’s a good girl. Men like us always hope to find a good girl to settle down with.” He popped me with the rag. “Don’t be stupid, Jon. You know as well as I do that you would never work with a good woman. You’re a whore and you’ll never give up Candace King fully.”

“Sure I will.” I turned and walked toward an old Chevy truck we’d been working on for a week or more. “I wouldn’t have fucked her the last time I saw her if I had already met Danielle.”

“Sounds like love.” Ellie popped up from the other side of the truck, half-scaring me to death.

“Shit, El.” I smiled and reached out to tug on one of her pigtails. She was too cute for her own good.

“Love?” Axel walked up and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “No way. He just met this broad two days ago.”

“Three.” I pulled away from him and started tinkering with the truck. “She’s wrapped up with Tanner, man. So is Jason.”

“What?” Axel moved around the front of the truck and put himself in my line of sight.

Ellie moved in beside him. “Not Tanner King again, right?”

“The one and only.” I shrugged and stood at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Where’s my ride, guys? Anyone home?”

“Nathaniel Hayes.” I smiled and walked over, extending my hand. “It’s been a while. You still frisking girls and busting potheads outside Kadia?”

He chuckled, his bright blue eyes filled with excitement. “Oh yeah. Your boy Caleb is working up there now too, but I’m sure you know that.”

“Flex?” Axel moved up and offered his hand to Nate. “Hey, brother. Long time no see.”

“I thought Flex said he had a new job as a bouncer.” I smirked. “I had no clue it was at Kadia. Small fucking world.”

“Or just a really slutty club with great drugs.” Nate turned and pointed to the dark blue Mustang we had sitting in the corner. “She done?”

“Oh yeah. Just finished up the paint job last week.” I turned and walked toward the car. “How did I miss seeing your name on the paperwork?”

“It’s for my girlfriend. I had another guy drop it off because we’ve been so damn busy.”

“What’s the word on the street?” I reached down and brushed my hand over the hood of the car. It looked good. Damn good.

“Erik’s put a hit out on Fredrick Carrington’s daughter. You didn’t hear that shit from me.” He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair before glancing down at the car. “How about you guys? Anything new?”

“No. Tanner King is fucking with my personal space again, but what else is new. I’m going to have to put that fucker in the ground just to get some peace around here.”

“Yep.” He pulled out his wallet. “You should have done that shit forever ago.”

“It’s way overdue. I know.” I glanced over my shoulder as Axel walked back toward us.

“Hey, Nate. You ever talk to old Mason Thomas?” Axel handed Nate the keys and an invoice.

A smile haunted Nate’s lips. “He’s married now. He’s out of the game, man. No more racing for him.”

“No, I knew he’d been married for a while, but I’d really like to get in touch with his guys. We’d love to work on some illegal soup-ups here at the shop. Any of his guys still street racing?” Axel glanced over at me.

I chuckled. “I thought you were just giving me grief about being a better person.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not a chance. I like you guys how you are.”

Nate took the keys. “I’ll get one of them to stop by over here. I know he has a few friends from his original crew still racing. I don’t think he’s doing it though.”

“That’ll work.” Axel stuck out his hand and Nate shook it. “Don’t be a stranger man.”

“Not at all.” He turned back to me. “What’s up with Hyde? Erik needs an outside job done in the next few weeks. You think he might-”

I held up my hand. “I don’t get involved in that crazy shit Hyde does, and I don’t want to know any-fucking-thing that Erik Bertinelli is involved in. I’m trying not to die anytime soon.”

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

“I’m interested in hearing how you’re doing with your boss wanting to take out Fredrick. You’re still working for him too, right? So... where’s your loyalty at?” Fredrick Carrington owned the nightclub, Kadia, where Nate and Flex worked, but Nate was part of Erik’s mafia syndicate.

“Tough times, man.” He ran his fingers back through his hair again. “I’ll always protect Erik.” He glanced back toward

where Axel was and back at me. “Just like you and Jeremiah will always stand beside each other.”

“Unless the mafia comes, then it’s all Axel at that point.” I stuck my hand out. “Take care man.”

“You too. I’ll see you around. Let us know if you need help. I still owe you one.” He pulled me into a quick hug and left as quickly as he showed up.

“Nate gone?”

I turned to face Axel. “Yeah. You alright?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t claim any part of my family out in Cali, Jon. You know that. Those bastards are as sick as Tanner is.”

“Yeah, but Tanner is fucking with us, and your kin has fucked with the Castalettas in Chicago and now the Bertinellis here in New York. Stupid if you ask me.”

“I agree. Let’s just keep my last name hidden, and everything should be fine. I don’t want any part of what my cousin Adam is doing with his syndicate. I’d rather forget they all existed altogether.”

“I know the feeling all too well.” I got back to the truck I was working on and tried to ignore the feeling of trepidation filling my insides. We lived in a fucking powder keg.

Something was going to blow soon.

I just hoped it wasn’t me or anyone I cared about.

CHAPTER 12



DANI

I drove to see my best friend, Natalie the next morning seeing that I had the day off. Staying around the house and thinking about Johnny would have driven me crazy. Every touch, every naughty word, everything he did to me the night before played through my mind over and over again.

There was no way I would keep my job at the police station if they knew about my indiscretions. Johnny's file was as long as Jason's, and I wanted to go through it but hadn't found the time.

Or maybe I was trying to save myself from the truth.

My phone buzzed as I pulled through the drive thru at my favorite coffee shop. I picked up the phone and smiled.

"Right on time. I was headed your way. You want a coffee?"

"Hey, you." Natalie sounded chipper like she always did. A single mom who was barely making ends meet working in her family's flower shop, but somehow, she was always in a good mood.

Glass half full kinda person.

"Can I take your order?" The guy from the coffee shop asked.

"Hey, Nat. I'm getting coffee. You want something?"

"Yeah. I'll take a tall coffee for Doug and a latte with something fun in it for me."

“Doug’s there?” I crinkled my nose. Nat’s older brother Doug always gave me the creeps, but he was part of the package deal when it came to having Natalie as my best friend.

“Be nice,” she warned.

“Alright. Be there shortly.” I got off the phone, ordered and paid at the window. The clouds above my head refused to let the sun shine through, which left me a little more uneasy than I usually was.

Something about the night before at the warehouse had my stomach in knots. Not stepping up to do my job was most likely the top reason I felt like I might puke, but there was more to it. The guy in the warehouse was Cade King, Tanner’s little brother. Why did Johnny stay behind to talk to him?

Did he know him personally or was he just warning him about staying away from Jason?

I was fucking myself over for not figuring out what Johnny’s story was. He had a connection to Tanner. I felt it in my bones, but I rejected the thought the minute it sprung up.

Some part of me needed him to be free of Tanner King. That would leave the door wide open for something to become of us, for me to at least dream a little about us getting together.

If he were wrapped up with Tanner, that idea was gone before it was fully birthed. Anyone mixed up with the King family had no soul, no morals, no heart at all.

My thoughts kept me busy as I drove over to Nat’s flower shop. Traffic wasn’t too bad, but it was midday on a Friday. Most people were working. Mostly everyone but Doug, or Dougie as Nat called him.

I got out of the car and walked around to get the tray of coffee when Doug walked out of the shop. The dark mop of hair on his head was pulled back into a man-bun. Just the sight of him made my stomach ache a little.

“Dani. Don’t you look sexy in your tight little yoga pants.” He gave me a crooked smile and reached for the coffee. “Let me help.”

“Thanks.” I handed the drinks to him and ignored the rest as I made a beeline for the door. I wouldn’t be staying too long if he was there. I had enough in my life to jack up my nerves. I didn’t need to add time with him to the list.

“Hi. Long time no see.” Natalie walked around from the back counter and pulled me into a quick hug. “How are you? Still pissed about them putting you on probation duty?”

I snorted. “I hate it. I keep thinking maybe I’ll leave and go work for a private organization.”

“Still trying to save the world, hm?” Doug walked around me and set the coffees down on the counter. “You know you’re just one person, right?”

“She’s a good person though, Dougie. Leave her be.” Nat glanced over her shoulder at her brother. “There’s another box of roses in the back. Grab it for me?”

“Of course.” He turned and disappeared into the back room.

“Is he still running dope?” I lifted my eyebrow and turned back to my best friend. There had been many times where I’d almost busted Doug only to have Nat get in my way. I wasn’t a good person, not in the slightest.

“No. He got out of it.” She leaned against the counter and smiled. “You look different. Something you did with your hair?”

“I got laid. Sort of.” I smiled and reached out to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “And it wasn’t Seth.”

“Oh no? Who then?”

“His name is Ryder.” Something felt off about telling Nat Johnny’s name. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I felt like I was stuck in the middle of a murder mystery.

“I know Ryder.” Doug walked back in carrying a big box of roses.

“Stop snooping!” Nat turned to him and helped him set the box on the ground.

Doug turned to me. “Johnny Moretti.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and forced a facade of indifference. “You know Johnny?”

“You do?” He laughed and walked over to the coffee, handing them out to us.

“Sort of.” I took my coffee and shrugged.

“You just said you fucked him.” Nat put her coffee to her lips. “Same guy or-”

“Nat. Shit.” I rolled my eyes and let out a long sigh.

“Oh. Wow. Johnny is fucking someone besides Candace King? Interesting.” Doug took a drink of his coffee and yelped.

I was a little more excited about him getting hurt than I should have been. “Candace King? Who’s that?”

“His ex-girlfriend.” He sucked in air and waved his hand around his face as if any of the following would cool his tongue. “She’s Tanner King’s little sister.”

“How do you know all of this?” Natalie turned and put her hand on her hip. “I thought you were done with those thugs.”

“I am. Fuck.” He rolled his eyes and walked to the back. “The minute they started pimping out girls, I was out. You know that.”

“Johnny was with Tanner’s little sister? How long?” I turned my attention back to Natalie as shock rolled through me. The world seemed far too small all of a sudden.

“I don’t know. I don’t know any of these people.” She shrugged and blew on her coffee.

“For years,” Doug called from the back.

“Stop listening to our conversation, Doug. Shit!” Natalie gave me a look and nodded to the front door. “I want details on the sex. Come on. Let’s go out front.”

Sickness rolled through my stomach. If Johnny was with Candace King, then definitely he knew Tanner well.

How *well* was the question?

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Captain Nelson.

“This is officer Markum.” I pressed the phone to my ear as I followed Nat out.

“It’s Captain. We had a call about thirty minutes ago from the judge down in Juvi. Your boy’s parole is being denied. We need to bring him in. He’s going to be pulled from his home and put in Juvi for the next six months and then reassessed once released.”

“Jason Moretti?” It could have been any of the thugs I was working with. There were plenty of them to choose from.

“Yes. I know it’s your day off, but I wanted to give you the opportunity to pick him up.”

“Do we know where he is?”

“I’d assume at home. You want to do it, or want one of us-”

Johnny. I took a shallow breath. “No. I’m on it.”

“Alright. Good luck. The kid is a runner.”

“Thanks, Captain.” I dropped the call and gave Natalie an apologetic look. “I gotta go. Duty calls.”

“Awww, seriously? We were just going to get to the good stuff.” Natalie pouted.

I smiled. “Yeah. How is Brent?”

“He’s good.” Her face lit up like it always did when we talked about her little guy. “Growing up too fast, I’m sure.”

“Oh yeah.” She reached out and took my hand. “Let’s get together soon. I miss you.”

“We will, and tell Dougie not to say anything to anyone about me and Ryder? Please?”

“Of course not, but I expect details.” She wagged her eyebrows and gave me a sexy smirk.

“You need to be making some details of your own.” I walked to the car and opened the door.

“Tell me about it. It’s getting old being single.”

“Change it.” I got in the car to the sound of her cackling. She was the most beautiful woman I knew, single, open, friendly... there was no reason why someone hadn’t come into her life. Well, maybe one reason. Her pushing them away.

I dialed Johnny’s number, surprised how fate was going to throw us together again.

“Ryder.” His voice was gruff.

“It’s Officer Markum from NYPD.” I felt stupid giving him my spiel considering what we’d done with each other the night before.

“Dani.”

“Look, Jason’s parole is being revoked. Is he at the house with you?”

“No. He’s with his mother today for the first time in a long time. Come to the lodge and after a few beers, we’ll go find him.”

“Johnny. I can’t do-”

“Are you on shift today?” The sound of his voice alone had my heart palpitating, my mind wandering.

“No.” I held my breath, knowing what he was going to ask.

“When did they give you until.”

“Tomorrow.” I closed my eyes and let my head drop back.

“Good. Come spend the afternoon with me at the lodge and I’ll help you find him in the morning. I promise. Let him have tonight with his mom. It’s been a long time for him.”

I nodded. “Text me the address.”

“Grab condoms on your way over.”

I choked on my spit. “What?”

“Don’t play coy. Stop and get some.” He chuckled. “I’ll see you shortly, Kitten.”

He dropped the call and I sat there in shock. I was headed into the viper's nest with a box of rubbers and my gun. What was I thinking? What had my life become?

Who was Johnny and how intimate was he with Tanner? He was Candace's lover, but what else was he?

I should have listened to reason as I drove down the street thinking about the only thing I couldn't deny.

I was falling for him, which was stupid and dangerous.

Both of which weren't me at all, or they used to not be.

The promise of pleasure and the hope of love, even tainted love, changed everything.

In the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER 13



RYDER

“Fuck,” I mumbled and glanced over at Axel who was watching me closely. “Jason’s fucked up for the last time. They’re revoking his parole.”

“Good. That little bitch needs to be in Juvi. It’ll do him some damn good. His dad was a fuck up, and now he is too. You’ve been blaming yourself for the both of them for too long.” He leaned toward me and locked his jaw.

He was the only person in the world that could say that shit to me and not find himself on his back with a knife at his mother fucking throat.

“Watch it,” I mumbled before standing up and dialing Jason’s number.

“What’s up?” His voice was slurred.

“You’re gonna need to get some clothes and run kid. They’re done with your shit.” I closed my eyes and ran my hand down my face. “I’m keeping the cop with me for the night, but we’re coming to look for you in the morning.”

“Wow. You’d do that shit for me?” His voice softened.

“Yeah. I would.” I walked toward the door at the end of the bar, ignoring the stares I got. The place was too fucking busy, but it was Friday afternoon.

“Alright. Thanks.” He dropped the call.

I walked outside in time to see Dani drive up. Her beat up blue Honda put a smile on my face. Was I really going to fuck her over and help Jason out? Yeah. Love could suck a dick. It

never worked out for me anyway, if love was what we were headed toward. Something told me that it wouldn't be too hard to try with her.

“Hey.” A smile haunted my lips as I moved toward her.

She got out wearing a white cotton dress that fit her beautifully. My eyes moved down her sweet figure to her feet. White dainty sandals and her toenails were painted pink.

“Hi.” She smiled as I glanced up. “You know I'm going to lose my job over you.”

“It's not your job I'm worried about you losing.” I reached out and cupped her cheek before brushing my thumb over her lips. “It's your innocence. Your decency.”

“I lost my innocence a long time ago.” She pulled my hand down, saving us both from a moment we wanted more than our next breath. She melted me. I wasn't sure how, but I didn't fucking care. I wanted to warm myself by her fire that night. At least one more time, but deeper, longer, more intense this time around.

I winked. “Could have fooled me. Come on in. I'll buy you a beer.”

“Are you friends going to be pissed that you're hanging out with a cop?” She moved up beside me.

“I don't give a shit what anyone thinks. I'm the meanest mother fucker in this place and President of the club. Nobody will say shit unless I've given them permission to.” I growled softly as she moved past me, her hand brushing by my dick seductively. “Tease.”

She laughed and walked into the bar. Every head in the place turned. It was her hair. No, her legs. Fuck me. It was just her. I reached out and ran my hand down the back of her head as we walked toward the bar. Silky chestnut hair tickled my fingers.

I gripped the back of her neck and stopped beside her as we reached the bar. “Don't do anything stupid tonight, alright?”

“Like sleep with you?” She glanced over at me and smiled. “Where’s Jason, Johnny?”

“He’s at the house. He’ll be there all night. My sister is with him. We had a good talk this morning.”

“Your sister and you or Jason and you?” She turned as the bartender walked up. “Can I get a Bud Light.”

“Sure. You Ryder?” The guy glanced over at me.

“Yeah. I’ll take another beer.” I turned to face Dani. “Me and Jason. He’s a kid, Dani. He’s had a fucked up life, and it’s not getting any better.”

Her expression softened a little. “Let me talk to him in the morning. Maybe I can do something.”

“I’d appreciate that.” I let my eyes move around her face, taking her in. My heart contracted at the sight of her and my cock pulsed with need as it grew thick and hard down the inside of my thigh. “You look good.”

“Like a girl today?” She pushed her long hair over her shoulder and turned back to the bartender. “Thanks.”

I ran my hand down her lower back over her ass and patted it softly as I reached for my beer with my free hand. Giving her my attention again, I licked the side of my mouth. “You look like a woman all the time to me.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Moretti.” She turned and walked toward the table we usually sat at.

Axel glanced up and smiled. “You must be Dani.” He stood and offered his hand. “I’m Jeremiah. The guys call me Axel.”

“Nice to meet you.” She shook his hand and sat down across from him. “You guys aren’t going to frisk me or anything right? I have a gun along my left thigh on the outside.”

I sat beside her, straddling the bench so I could keep my eyes on her. “No one is going to touch you.”

“That’s hot.” Axel chuckled.

“Watch it. Again.” I lifted my eyebrow at my best friend.

“Yeah, yeah.” He stood. “I’m out. Enjoy your evening. I have a meeting with Mason tonight. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Dani turned her face toward me as Axel left. “Is he in your MC?”

“Yeah, but stop asking questions. You’re going to get a spanking if you dig too much into my life. There’s not much to find that will impress you.” I reached out and brushed her hair back before moving in for a kiss. “Why are you here?” I paused before pulling her to me and kissing her.

Her sweet little tongue worked along mine, and the taste of her beer filled my mouth. I groaned and reached across her lap to pull her even closer. Her hip pressed against my erection as I forced her to lean her head back a little and take my tongue real good. The soft sound of her panting had me aching for dark depravity in the wetness of her body.

“What you are doing to me?” She broke the kiss and put her beer to her lips.

“I could ask the same.” I blinked a few times and moved back a little.

“Wow. Where in the world did you find this beautiful creature?” Hyde walked up and pressed his hands to the other side of the table. “He’s a horrible dancer, Miss. I’m much more of what you’re looking for.”

Dani’s laugh had me smiling. “That so?”

“Not a chance, buddy. Keep moving, or you’re going to lose a finger, a toe or some teeth.” I turned the full weight of my attention on him.

He lifted his hands and backed up. “All good. I was just leaving.”

“Later.” I turned back to Dani. “I’m sure I’m going to catch hell bringing you here, but I wanted to see you.”

“Let’s go back to your place.” She took another sip of her beer. The way she tilted her head back had my pulse spiking. I

wanted my cock back in her mouth, to see her taking good care of it and forcing herself beyond her limits for me.

“No. Let’s stay here.” I ran my hand down her back, rubbing at the tension I felt in slow circles. “Tell me your story, Danielle.”

I shouldn’t have asked. It would only tie me tighter to her, and I already felt a pull that wasn’t healthy or right.

“Which part of it?” She turned to face me and half-curled up in my lap in her new position. It was nice to have her affection though nothing was really happening between us.

“All of it. Why are you a cop? What did you do before parole duty because I can tell it’s not your cup of tea. Who hurt you, baby? Who made you timid in bed?”

She flinched at my last question and turned away from me. “So many questions, Ryder. Where’s the one from the other night?”

“Do you know Tanner King and if so... how?” I pursed my lips, trying hard not to say anything else. The woman was a loaded gun, and I wanted to play Russian Roulette with her before the night was over.

She nodded and drank the rest of her beer, impressing me a little. “I became a cop so I could have backup when I went into brothels and underground clubs. I wanted to help free women from sex slavery.”

“And? Did you?” My heart dropped. Of course, she knew Tanner. Disgust welled inside of me. She’d better not fucking know him from anything he’d done to her or had done to her.

“Yeah. My little sister got caught up in it, and she was dead before I could save her.” She set her beer down on the table and let out a painful sounding sigh. “Tanner King was the one that reeled her into that life.”

I nodded. “Who hurt you, Danielle. Tanner?”

“What? No.” She jerked back like I’d slapped her. “I’ve only seen Tanner King one time in my life.”

“When?” I tried hard not to let the anger burning inside of me explode out. It wouldn’t be good for anyone involved.

“About three weeks ago. I was at *The Jade Walk Club* and was the one that went in after him.”

“Really?” I lifted my eyebrow and picked up my beer. “Wow. That’s fucking ballsy. He’s a bastard and doesn’t mind killing anyone for any reason at all.”

“So, you *do* know him?”

“I never said I didn’t.” I took a long drink from my beer before turning back to her. “You need to steer clear of him, Dani. He’s looking for you.”

“I’m not scared of him.” Her shoulders stiffened.

“I’m sure your sister wasn’t at first either.” I stood and offered her my hand. “Come dance with me.”

“You dance?” Her eyes widened a little, but she stood and took my hand.

“Not really, but I do love this song.” I walked with her out to the dance floor where a good handful of people had already gathered. “You haven’t answered my question.”

I pulled her tightly against me and ran my hands down her back and over her ass before coming back up for another round. I wanted to feel her skin under my fingers, to hear her moan and whimper, to taste her come again.

“Seth.” She glanced down and pressed her forehead to my chest. “He was my husband. We were together forever.”

“Since school?” I forced her to look back up at me and leaned down to stare into her face.

“Yeah. He was my first. My only.” She shrugged and glanced around as if she were preparing to run.

It would have been best for both of us if she would have.

“Not anymore.” I smiled and nipped at her perfect lips before walking off the dance floor toward the back room. “Got anywhere to be for the next few hours?”

“No.” She half-jogged behind me trying to keep up. “Is there a room back here?”

“Yeah. A quiet stock room. You’ll love it.” I opened the door and moved back.

She stopped. “Johnny.”

I laughed. “Get in there and tell me you brought more than one rubber. I wanna make sure you’re limping before you walk back out of here.”

“I’m not fucking you for the first time in a store room.” Her eyes grew wide. Her innocence drew me in deep.

“Oh yeah, you are.” I walked in and pulled her with me as the door slammed behind us.

I had her chest pressed against the closest wall, her skirt up and panties down to her knees before she could utter a word. She arched her back and moaned softly as I unzipped my pants.

“What if someone-”

“Hush. Now.” I gripped my dick tightly and ran it down the curve of her pretty, pert, little ass before sliding the thick head into her tight slit. “Fuck. I’m going to have to work you open, Dani. Relax against me.”

“Don’t hurt me,” she mumbled and pressed back, forcing a good inch of my cock inside of her silky heat.

“Never, baby,” I whispered against the side of her neck and reached around to play with the tight bundle of nerve at the junction of her sweet spot.

Her panting had me wanting to bend her over and reign hell on her tight body, but the scent of her skin, the grip of her fingers on my thighs, the sweet way she arched into my touch as I gripped her tit... it was too much. She deserved better than a fast fuck, and I planned on giving it to her. One thick inch at a time.

CHAPTER 14



DANI

“More,” I whined, not sounding anything like myself. What the hell was I doing? Was I really in a store room with Johnny? Were we fucking?

Pressure built in my stomach as he brushed his rough fingers back and forth over my clit as he fucked me nice and slow. There was no way he’d gotten more than a few inches inside of me. He was too big. Way too big.

“Let it go for me. Use my fingers, Dani.” He licked the side of my throat as I screamed and bucked against him.

Every ounce of passion I had in me unleashed. Life was short and fucked up. I didn’t want to question my motives or if what we were doing was okay. It wasn’t, and I didn’t fucking care.

“Turn me,” I mumbled as I tried to keep my legs from giving out.

He moved back and helped me turn around, reaching for me as I slid my hands up his chest. “That feel good, Kitten?”

“Yes. I want more.” I clasped my hands behind his neck and lifted to my toes. “Pick me up.”

“Let’s get a rubber.” He extended his hand, taking one from me as I moved down and pulled one out from the holster on my thigh. He smiled. “You know how hot that is?”

“This isn’t me.”

“No, baby. It is you. The girl you were a week ago wasn’t you.” He pulled me closer and picked me up. “Ride my dick

real good for me, hm?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Just don’t stop.”

“I don’t plan to.” Johnny pressed me to the wall and gripped my bare ass, pulling hard on it as he thrust and filled me up. “There’s home.”

“Johnny!” I tightened my grip on him as pleasure mixed with pain raged through me. “Too much.”

“No. Not enough.” He leaned down and kissed the tops of my breasts above my dress, biting and sucking at my skin as I lifted up and worked us both into a frenzy.

“Harder.” I dug my nails into the top of his back.

He glanced up, and evil filled his beautiful face. “Like this?” He slammed into me, forcing my legs to open wider. I jolted at the impact and moaned at the pleasure. Something about having him barely control his violence set me on edge.

I nodded. “Yeah. Again.”

He didn’t let up until I was sagging against him, my body having orgasmed three times since he slid inside of me. He kissed the side of my mouth and massaged my ass with his strong hands, slowing down.

“My turn.” He buried his face against the side of my neck. “Hold me, Danielle.”

I mumbled my yes and wrapped my arms around him. It was easy to focus on the power of his muscles as they contracted, on the deep sound of his breathing, on the way his thighs shook as he rocked himself in and out of me slowly.

He needed a little more than I was giving. Something extra.

“I love the way you feel pressed against me.” I kissed his ear as he shuttered and moaned. “So powerful and big. You’d protect me if I needed you to, wouldn’t you, Johnny.”

“Yes, baby. I would.” He shuttered again and moved back, pressing his forehead against mine. “Forgive me, okay?”

I nodded, not understanding, but it was irrelevant. I just wanted to feel him let go. “Come for me. Come in me.”

“Shit.” He pressed his lips to mine and groaned his orgasm against my mouth as he bucked against me, slamming me into the wall a few more times.

I ignored the pain and held on tightly.

“Goddamn woman.” He moved us over to a pile of boxes and sat down, forcing me to stay in his lap as his cock pulsed deep inside of me. “Why didn’t you make me take you back home with me? We could pass out in the bed together.”

I ran my fingers through his hair and around to his beard as I leaned in to kiss him several times. “I’m not the snuggling type.”

He gave me a look. “Lies.”

“No, I get too hot to sleep.” I smiled and kissed him once more before getting up. “Did you tell Jason to run?”

“Yeah. I did.” He stood up and pulled the condom off. “He’s my flesh and blood, Dani.”

“Do you think he will?” I found my panties and put them on as I watched him.

“I don’t know. It’s the moment of truth for him, you know?” He moved toward me still fully dressed with his cock hanging out.

I reached over and tucked it back in his jeans before zipping and buttoning them for him. “Well, if he doesn’t run, then I’ll fight for him.”

“You’re not pissed?” He cupped my face and looked down at me that way I had wanted a man to look at me since I realized I had raging-ass hormones pumping through me.

“No. I understand what you did. I’d have done the same for my sister.”

“What was her name, Danielle?” He brushed his thumbs over my cheeks and leaned in to kiss me softly. “Tell me.”

“No. It hurts too much to think about her. Please, don’t make me.” My eyes filled with tears. How the hell was he capable of tugging at my heart strings. “I need to go.”

“Come to the house and let’s see what Jason is up to. Let’s get this over with tonight.”

“Alright, but I can’t stay with you.” I moved out of his hold, realizing how badly I needed it. My flight or fight kicked in, and the room suddenly felt so damn small.

“Why not?” He followed me to the door as I jerked it open and walked back out into the bar. I breathed in deeply and turned to face him. He looked like a god standing there with his chest puffed out and his lips a little swollen from the roughness of our kisses.

“Because. You know as well as I do that we’re playing with fire.”

“I don’t mind.” He winked and took my hand. “Come on. Let’s take my bike.”

“No. I’m taking my car if we’re going.”

“Then I’m driving. I have a few more cars at the house, and my bike will be fine here.” He walked to the door and paused before opening it. “Give me the keys.”

“I’m not drunk, Johnny. I can drive my own car.”

“Stop fighting me. You’re shaking.” He smiled down at me as I pulled the key from the pocket on the side of my thigh and handed it to him.

“Stop smiling. You’re shaking too.”

“Of course, I am.” He opened the door, and we walked out into the chilly night air. “I just got fucked within an inch of my life. Why wouldn’t I be shaking?”

He was so confident and bold. I wanted to be more like him and yet I understood all too well the type of life that helped to forge a persona like his.

“Can I ask you something.” I pursed my lips, hoping like hell he would deny me. The last thing I wanted to do was to

throw cold water in the middle of the lust that burned between us, but I had to know where he stood with Tanner.

“Yeah.” He released my hand and nodded to the passenger side. “Get in the car and then ask.”

I got in and buckled up before glancing over at him. “I told you how I knew Tanner King. Tell me how you do.”

Some part of me expected him to lie, to save face, but he didn't.

“His sister was my high school girlfriend.” He started the car and turned, backing up and burning rubber as we left the bar.

“Be careful. This car is old.”

“And still in great shape.” He nodded and turned back around, settling into the seat. “She was my first kiss, my first fuck, my first everything. I thought we'd be married and have kids, but it didn't work out like that.”

“And what about you being involved with Tanner?”

“I don't talk about that shit. It's part of the past.” He glanced over and his expression darkened. “Leave it there.”

Leave it there? Was that possible? Even considering that Johnny was a part of Tanner's treatment of women had my stomach hurting. There was no way to leave it there, but I found myself sitting in silence, not asking another question.

We pulled up to the house a few minutes later, and Johnny turned the car off and looked over at me. “If he's here, you're going to try and help get him one more chance, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I promise.”

“Alright. Come on, Kitten. Let's see if any part of what I've taught him as sunk in.” He got out of the car, and I could tell he was nervous as hell.

I would have been too. He moved up to the door and opened it quietly. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the kid was most likely gone. There's no way if Johnny tipped him off

that Jason would stay there for the night. Who wanted to go to jail?

“His light is on.” Johnny walked to the back bedroom in a hurry.

I stayed in the living room. He needed a minute with the kid, and I wasn't family or anything near it. I was some wayward ass cop who was falling for a thug and giving myself over every time he even looked my way.

What would Seth and his band of lawyers say now?

I dropped down on the couch and listened. Johnny and Jason's voice filled my ears.

Glancing over, I noticed that Johnny was looking back down the hall at me. “He's here. He's not going anywhere. He knows that he fucked up.”

I smiled. “Good. I'll talk to the Captain tomorrow to see what I can do about another chance.”

Johnny closed the bedroom door and walked back toward me. “Stay with me.”

“I can't.” I stood and extended my hand. “Can I have my key back?”

“Danielle. It's late and you know you want to stay here.”

“Yeah. That's why I should go.” I took the key as he offered it. “I'll let you guys know what I find out tomorrow.”

He didn't say another word, but walked me to the door and stepped out on the porch as I walked down toward the car. “Dani. Please be careful. Tanner isn't someone to fuck with.”

“No?” I wrapped my arms around myself. “Want to explain how you know that?”

“Sweet dreams tonight, Kitten.” He turned and walked back into the house.

“Right.” I got into the car and pulled out, feeling rather shitty about my decisions to sleep with him. The carnality of it only left me wanting more, but I knew better.

Johnny wanted to know my past and wanted to press against my hurts and disappointments, but he wasn't willing to share any of his. Why had I expected him to anyway?

I should have felt lucky that he was even willing to let me come to the clubhouse. I snorted at the thought.

He wasn't worried about me being a cop because somewhere along the way, I'd fucked up my morals. I wasn't a real cop anymore.

Headlights filled up the backseat of my car and caused me to stiffen. The truck behind me was riding my ass way closer than it should have been.

I slowed down and tapped my breaks. "Back the fuck up, asshole."

The truck bumped into the back of me, and I screamed and hit the gas. The truck revved its engine and caught up to me pretty quickly. I pulled my gun from my outer thigh and got ready for the bastard to pull up beside me, but he never did.

I screamed again as the car jerked across the road. The bastard had hit the back wheel of my car and sent me into a tailspin. The last thing I remember was hitting the curb and flipping over the edge of the small bridge in front of me into the creek.

I blinked a few times as cold water filled the car around me.

My last thoughts before blacking out were of my sister and the funny way she laughed when she was being silly. It was warm, loving, innocent.

Everything about it was right.

CHAPTER 15



RYDER

“**W**hat are you doing here, man? You know your family expects you at church.” Ellie glanced my way as I walked into the shop on Sunday morning. It had been a quiet Saturday, and where I’d wanted to reach out to Dani, I felt like maybe she needed a little bit of time to herself.

“I’m going in for a little while. It’s been a dicked up week. I wanted to try and get in a little more time on the clock to make up for some of it.” I walked over to the work bench and grabbed a bandanna to put on my head. “Where’s Axel?”

“No clue.” She shrugged her shoulders and glanced down toward the wheelbase of the car she was working on. “He’s not been in yet. At least I don’t think he is.”

“Like you don’t notice.” I chuckled and walked past her.

“Wait. What?” She followed me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You guys should just fuck and get it over with, El. It’s getting old alright.” I picked up a handful of supplies to work on the paint job on my current project.

“Fuck and get it over with?” She put her hand in the middle of my chest as I turned to face her. “Jeremiah is my boss and my friend. That’s it.”

“Is it?” I smirked. “When is the last time you went on a date?”

“None of your goddamn business.” She pushed at my chest, causing her tits to bounce. She had no idea how fine she

was. Funny enough, my body didn't react in the slightest. All I wanted underneath me was a petite cop with a chip on her shoulder and something to prove in the bedroom. I still didn't have the full story on what her fucking ex-husband did to her. I wanted to know. It would be good ammo if I ever ran into the bastard while we were together.

Not that we were together.

"Right." I shrugged and moved around her. "Must get tired lying to yourself all the time, El."

"He's not interested, Jon. I tried a few years back and he pushed me off."

"Like literally." I put my stuff down and glanced over my shoulder, giving her a look. "Cause, I'll whoop his ass."

"No." She reached up and pulled her long, black hair into a bun. "I came onto him in the office, and he shut me down. Said he wasn't interested in messing up our friendship. Not over a fuck."

"Really? This is news to me." I wrapped an apron around my waist and knelt in front of the truck in front of me. "And what did you say?"

"Nothing. What could I say? I was trying for a fuck." She sniffled and turned away from me. "Asshole. As if all I was worth was a fuck."

"El," I called after her as she walked off. "That's not what he meant."

"Still trying to help everyone's relationships but your own, hm? So noble of you, Ryder." Tanner King walked around the car to my far left.

I stood as my muscles locked into place. "What the fuck you want, Tan? You know us being in the same room isn't good for your health."

"No?" He smiled and reached up to run his fingers through his hair. The gleam of challenge in his eyes had me on edge. If I had a gun on me, I would put a bullet in his skull without asking questions, consequences be damned.

“No.” I turned to face him, not trusting the bastard for a minute. “What are doing here?”

“I wanted to tell you the good news. Face to face.” His smile faded as he took a few more steps toward me.

I knelt and picked up a tire iron one of the guys had left lying around. Normally, I would bitch at them about it, but it seemed like their sloppiness was in my favor that day. “Tell me what, mother fucker.”

“That you’re going to be a daddy.” He glanced to his right hand motioned for someone to join him.

Candace stumbled toward him, obviously pushed. “Johnny.”

“What the fuck is going on?” My blood ran cold at Tanner’s words. “You pregnant.”

“Why would you care, Ryder?” Tanner’s voice boomed through the room.

“Ain’t nobody talking to you, bitch,” I barked loudly and turned back to Candace. Where I didn’t want the woman in my life anymore, there was still a part of me that cared about her. Especially if she had my baby in her belly.

“Tell him, Whore. Tell him what you told me.” Tanner reached out and popped her in the face.

“Hey!” I walked toward him as he pulled a gun from his belt and lifted it toward me.

“Back the fuck off, Ryder.”

“Johnny. Stop calling me that, you cock.” I stopped short and turned my attention back to Candace. “Is he telling the truth?”

She nodded and pressed her hands to her face. “I’m sorry. We should have used protection.”

“You fucked with me again, Jon. You did it when you promised you wouldn’t.”

“I’ve loved your sister most of my life, Tanner. You know this. It’s not easy to walk away from her.” I lifted my hands.

“Just leave her here. I’ll take care of her and the kid. Get the fuck outta here and let them be my problem.”

He laughed. “And not have anything over you? No way you want this slut around when you’re banging the local law enforcement.”

I growled and gripped the tire iron tighter. “Fuck you. You don’t get to monitor my life.”

He reached over and patted Candace’s stomach - hard. She yelped. “I do.”

“Mother fucker, you better shoot me, cause if you give me the chance, I’m going to kill you.”

“Get the information from the police station about my latest raid. It’s on lock down. Get it and destroy it.”

“No. Get it your fucking self.”

He put the gun to Candace’s head and she cried out. “I’ll blow her fucking head off and kill the kid inside of her as well. Do what the fuck I told you to do. Now.”

I started to tell the bastard that he didn’t scare me, which he didn’t, but I held my tongue. Knowing his crazy ass, he’d kill his sister right in front of me.

“Is the baby mine?” I turned my attention to Candace.

“Who else’s would it be?” Tanner yelled at me before he pushed his sister out of the way and flipped the safety off the gun. “Get the cop to help you.”

“I destroy the evidence and you’re going to let Candace go? Yes?”

“You have my word, Jon.” He nodded and turned, walking out of the room as quickly as he’d walked right in.

“What the fuck was that?” Ellie walked out, her eyes wide, her skin pale.

“That was my past. It haunts me a little too often.” I pulled my apron and the bandanna on my head off and tossed them into a pile as I walked into the office and dropped down into Axel’s chair.

Fuck me. I was going to have to get Danielle to help me destroy the info on Tanner. And she hated him more than anyone else in the world. Would she help me? Shit, could she?

I had no clue, but I had to try. Even if Candace was lying about the baby. I had to try just in case.



“Hey. What’s going on with you, man?” My brother, Paulo walked out of the house later that afternoon and stopped beside my bike.

I was on my knees, working on the back tire, sweating my ass off though it was cold as shit outside. I glanced up. “What are you mumbling about?”

“You. You’re being a dick today. You hurt Maria’s feelings and now you’re ignoring everyone.” He put his hands on his hips and gave me a look our mother would have been proud of.

“You have no idea the shit I’m going through. Back the fuck up,” I barked and went back to dealing with the bike.

He walked away, talking trash, which I ignored. A few minutes later he was back, his shadow blocking the sun and making it hard to see.

“Move goddamnit.” I glanced up to see Jason standing beside me with his hands in his pockets.

“Uncle J. They got your girl, man.”

“What?” I stood up, not quite sure who he was talking about. “Candace?”

He shrugged. “Look man. I owe you one for taking care of me. I’m just saying that they got your girl.”

I reached out and wrapped my hand around his throat as fury burned through me. I lifted him off his feet as he screamed for help. “Be more clear. Now. Who the fuck do they have, and who the fuck is they?”

“Johnny. Shit!” Maria ran toward us and got in between us, smacking me in the chest. “Put. Him. Down. Now!”

I dropped him and growled at her. The minute her eyes widened and she backed up, I came to my senses. What the fuck was I doing? Tanner King was the only one that could force me back into being a monster, and I was headed there fast.

“Jason!” Nieman ran past us down the street after the boy as he hauled ass out of there.

“What’s gotten into you?” Maria’s eyes filled with tears. “You look just like daddy. We’re going home. Get yourself together. Jason will be with us until you’re safe to be around again.”

“Maria.” I reached for her, but Paulo moved in the way.

“Back off. Now.” His fat face was full of fear.

I lifted my hands. The last thing in the world I wanted was for my family to be afraid of me. I’d just gotten them to trust me again in the last few years.

“Alright. I’m sorry. I snapped. I got a lot of shit going on.” I moved back another step.

“Everyone does. Asshole.” Paulo flipped me off and turned, pulling Maria to him and walked back to the house. “Stay out until we’re all in our cars safe. Momma wouldn’t want you hurting one of us.”

“Paulo. Come on, man. I wouldn’t hurt any of you. I love you guys.”

“Stay out.” He turned and gave me a scathing glare.

“Alright. Fine.” I dropped down on a cooler next to the bike and went back to work on it. Fuck everyone if they were going to treat me like a disease. They had no fucking clue what I’d been through with Roberto and now his son, Jason. Everyone else lived their fat and happy lives while I put up with the demons from the past and the bastards from the present.

“But you know what?” I mumbled to myself. “It’s just me. Like it always has been. I have myself and my MC, and that’s fucking it.” I forced myself to focus on the bike though I felt like my chest was going to explode.

They got your girl.

Pulling out my phone, I fumbled with Dani’s number but finally got it. I put the phone to my ear as it went to voicemail. I hung up without leaving a message. How needy would I sound if Jason meant Candace and I was panicking over nothing?

There was no way Tanner had her. He would have mentioned it. Just to watch me squirm or even explode.

He didn’t have her. It wasn’t a possibility.

CHAPTER 16



DANI

The taste of blood coated my tongue, the dull metallic flavor making me gag as I came to. My mouth hurt around the edges from the gag wrapped around my face, and my shoulders throbbed painfully.

I tugged at my hands, finding them tied behind my back. I laid on my side with a solid steel table below me.

“No,” I mumbled around the rope and jerked up. The room spun, and I dropped back down, hitting my face on the table below. “Help?” My voice was nothing more than a whisper. I couldn’t get my eyes to focus, but someone was standing just a few feet from the table watching me. Or so I assumed.

A sob rose up in my chest as realization dawned on me. I’d been run off the road and my car sunk down into the creek just outside of Johnny’s neighborhood. Where was I now?

“Nothing to get upset about.” Tanner’s voice rang out like a bell. “Now that you’re up, we’ll have a quick conversation and let you go on your way.”

Tears burned my eyes as I gagged on the cloth. My tongue was swollen and ached on the side. From the taste of blood, I reckoned that I bit it during impact.

“Your hands are bound, and yes, you have a gag, but you’re not tied down. If you want to try and sit up, I’ll help you, Danielle.”

“No,” I groaned around the gag and tried to sit up again. My stomach lurched and I gagged again.

“She’s going to hurl, boss. She had a pretty nasty gash on her head.” An unknown voice rose up.

“Take the gag off.” Tanner moved closer and reached for me as I started to fall back toward the table. “There. It’s alright. You got in a pretty nasty accident. We were only trying to scare you a little, but you’re not very talented behind the wheel of a car, are you?”

“Don’t,” I screamed as loudly as I could, but the sound was nothing more than a mumble.

“Take the gag off?” The guy behind me gripped my shoulders.

I thrashed a little, but ran out of steam quickly.

“Yeah. Take it off.” Tanner reached out and cupped my face as someone worked on the gag from behind me. He glanced at whoever the guy was. “Get her some water. Room temperature.”

“Don’t. Touch. Me.” I ground my teeth as tears dripped down my face.

“Hey. I’m not the enemy here.” He bent down a little and got in my face. “I’m going to make things better, but I’ll need your help with that.”

“I’m not doing anything for you.”

“Yeah. You are.” He smiled and brushed his thumbs over my cheeks as his eyes got a little glossy. “I’m not the kind of guy that asks for anything, Danielle. I get what I want, when I want it.”

“Not from me. I’d rather die.”

“Die?” He laughed and kissed the tip of my nose before releasing me. “I remember that kiss we shared a few weeks back. There’s not much you wouldn’t have done to take me down, is there?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I licked at the side of my lips and coughed. My mouth was so fucking dry. “Can I have some water?”

“Yeah.” He motioned for the guy to bring it over. I’d never seen him before, but it didn’t matter. If I survived the hell I was stuck in, I’d take them all to federal prison for life sentences. It would be my life’s mission.

I took a sip of the water with the guy’s help and thought about spitting it back in his face, but I was too thirsty to waste a drop of it. “Where are we?”

“At one of my warehouses.” Tanner walked over and smiled. “I have a few things for you. Gifts that might help inspire you to help me out a little.”

“Fuck you,” I spat my words at him as fury raced through me.

“No, not yet.” He winked and squeezed my knee. “Though the thought of taking you like a whore against the wall in a storage room does sound pretty appetizing.”

Horror raced through me. Had Ryder said something to Tanner? Were they still working together? No. I couldn’t let myself believe something so vile.

“Tell me what you want and let me go, or kill me. No one deserves to be toyed with or have to listen to the sound of your voice for more than a few minutes.” I glanced down and let my chin drop as exhaustion tugged at me.

“You know what I imagined happening when we dragged you out of the river?” He paused.

I kept silent.

“I thought maybe Ryder would be on his way to find you, to stop you from leaving his place, but he didn’t come.” He moved closer. “Why is that, Dani? Did you guys have your fill of each other? Was he done with you like he is everyone he fucks a couple of times?”

I jerked my head up and paid dearly for the quick movement. “Does he work for you, Tanner? Is this what you’re getting at?”

“Ryder? Johnny Moretti?” He laughed and knelt in front of me. “He’s my best friend. He has been for all of my life.”

“Maybe once a long time ago, but not now.” I closed my eyes and tried to focus. I had to get the fuck out of there. “He’s with my sister, Candace. She’s carrying his child, Dani. You didn’t know all of this?”

“Stop it.” I glanced up as he laughed.

“Paul. Grab the phone recording from our last visit with Johnny. Danielle doesn’t believe the impossible to be possible. Let’s help her a little, shall we?” He motioned for someone to come in. “Bring in the video. The TV. She’s up. I think she should know the truth. It’ll help her with the little extra push she needs to assist us.”

“Fuck you, Tanner. I’m not doing anything for you.”

He reached out and grabbed my throat. Pressing his finger under my chin, I had no choice but to lift my chin and stare him in the face. “This can be a pleasant visit where I really open your eyes to the world you’re playing in, cop, or it can be real fucking painful. Don’t fuck with me. Period.”

I jerked back from him as another guy rolled in a TV and video equipment. “Which one, boss?”

“Let’s start with her and Johnny.” Tanner clasped his hands behind his back as the video started to play.

I recognized the dark store room the minute my vision cleared. My voice filled the room along with Ryder’s.

“No.” I turned to Tanner. “I’m not watching this.”

“Oh yeah. You are.” He walked over and gripped my face again, forcing me to turn toward it. “He fucks you real good up against the wall. I just wanna know one thing.”

“Stop.” I closed my eyes as tears dripped down my face.

“No, seriously. Tell me. Was he in your pussy or your ass? I love the sound of your moans. I want to get it right should we end up having a night together.”

I jerked from him. “Let me go. Tell me what you want and let me go.”

“One more video?” He released me and walked to the TV, kneeling down and changing something. The black screen cleared and it was the same room, but this time, it was Johnny and another woman fucking against the wall. Her dark hair and beautiful body made me look like a young girl with no experience and very few curves.

I turned away as another sob rose in my chest.

“Hate him?” Tanner moved over and sat down on the table next to me. “That’s my little sister he’s fucking. That wasn’t but a day before he met you. He got her pregnant that night, Dani. How would you feel if someone did that to Tani?”

I screamed and turned, jerking toward him and trying to bite him. They had me on my back and Tanner was on top of me, straddling my chest before I could figure out what the fuck was happening.

“I didn’t take her, bitch. She came to me.” He pressed his hand to my chest as I cried. “You think you know every fucking thing, well you don’t.”

“Get off of me. You’re a monster than steals little girls.” I jerked beneath him, wishing for death if it meant relief from the nightmare. “Get off!”

He moved off of me and jerked me back up. “You’re going to deliver Johnny Moretti to me when I tell you to do it.”

“Not happening.” I sat up and rolled my head, trying to stretch out my neck a little.

“No? Ask him about your sister, Dani. Ask him who brought her in. Who seduced her?” He tilted his head to the side and laughed as I leaned over and vomited everything in my stomach. My body clenched as pain and sorrow raged through me.

There was no way Johnny was involved with Tani, and yet it made sense. Why else wouldn’t he explain himself or his past? How had he taken such a quick liking to me? Because I looked just like my sister.

“I thought he was your best friend.” I glanced to the side as I spit acid from my mouth.

“He was, until he fucked Candace over. Family comes first, no?” He reached out and brushed my hair over my shoulder as I jerked from him. “I’m going to let you go. You say a word to anyone or don’t do as I ask, and I’ll kill him, Jason, your father and you’ll be my pet until you’re so worn out from being fucked by a million men that you will wish yourself dead.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’ll be the greatest pleasure you get, little girl. Do what I tell you to do.” He glanced up as he moved back. “Tracker.”

“What?” I moved around the table as two of Tanner’s guys moved toward me. “No. I don’t want a tracker.”

“If I trusted you at all, you wouldn’t get one, but I don’t.” He laughed as he walked toward the door. “Hold her down. Make it painful.”

“No.” I kicked as they pressed me to the table and shoved a pill down my throat. I gagged as the taste of iron filled my mouth and burned my throat.

A black bag was wrapped around my head as I thrashed about. The hit to the side of my head was more than enough to knock me out, and crazy enough, I was grateful for it. Darkness was better than the hell I’d woken up in.

CHAPTER 17



RYDER

“Hey man. We need some help. A pretty lady has a flat out back and you’re the best one with cars.” Jax tapped the table in front of me the next afternoon as I sat in the clubhouse and drank my worries away.

“Where the fuck is Axel?” I growled and stared at my friend.

“Dude, come on. He’s still at the shop. Get your mean ass up and come on.” He moved back and pulled his suit jacket off before laying it across the table. “It’s starting to rain out there. I’m going to bring her inside and get her something warm to drink. Go fix the fucking tire.”

“Fine,” I barked and stood up. The sound of the rain pounding against the roof gave me no hope on getting the flat tire off fast and the new one on. I moved out into the storm as Hyde jogged up the stairs with his arm around a young woman with a toddler on her hip. “It’s the blue one.”

“Oh, the one with a flat tire?” I mumbled and walked down the stairs as the rain soaked my shirt. I reached down and pulled it off, not needing the extra weight. I felt entirely too heavy as it were. I hadn’t seen or heard from Danielle in two days and the shit with Candace was weighing heavy on me. Was she really pregnant with my kid, and what did that mean for me and Dani? Would she be alright with me helping raise the little guy?

“Thanks for your help.” One of the bartenders patted me on the back and jogged up to the lodge. I glance back to find

everyone inside. It felt fitting considering where I was in my life.

Everyone was gone. Disappeared without a word.

Jason was with Maria and Neiman, or so I hoped. The guys were keeping their distance which was smart, but it hurt nevertheless. Danielle had fallen off the fucking map and wasn't returning my calls no matter what I did.

I grabbed the jack and worked to get the tire off for much longer than it should have taken. Someone patted my shoulder a little while later, and I glanced up to see Axel standing over me.

“Need some help, brother?”

“Yeah.” I got up and pulled at the tire before chucking it over my shoulder. “I’ll fix the tire and you deal with my fucked up life.”

“How about I help with both?” He walked to the trunk and got the spare out. Both of us were soaked to the bone with water dripping down our faces and beards.

“Give me that.” I reached out and took the tire before bending over and getting it to fit back on the car. I worked the thing back into place and finished up the job with Axel standing next to me. I finished and he offered me a hand. I took it and got up with his help.

We walked to the lodge in silence. When we reached the stairs, I dropped down on the top one and ran my hands down my face.

He sat down beside me. “What’s going on, Ryder? You’re not yourself right now.”

“Yeah. I guess not.” I shrugged and let my eyes move along the road. “Tanner King has my dick in a vise yet again.”

“How so, man? Let me help.”

“I’d rather you just stay out of it. I don’t want you getting wrapped up in his shit again.”

“You’re my best friend, Jon. I’m not going anywhere.” He reached over and patted my back. “Tell me what old Tan-Man is up to now. It can’t be worse than killing your brother, Jon.”

“No. It’s not that bad, at least not yet.” I let out a long sigh. It was rare that a sense of hopelessness settled on top of me, but it was one of those times. Every angle I looked at seemed bent. Every option was fucked up and failed. “Candace is pregnant.”

“Oh, God.” He pulled his hand back and cupped his face. “It cannot be yours. There’s no way.”

“Dude. I fucked her a week ago.”

“Yeah. A week. It’s not even been that long. It’s not your baby, Jon. Get a paternity test.”

“He was slapping her around in the fucking shop yesterday, Axel. I’m not asking for a paternity test. He put a fucking gun to her head as she started to cry and shake. What’s wrong with this mother fucker? He wasn’t like this when we were kids. It’s almost like he sold his fucking soul to the devil, and now the piper has come to collect.”

“Tanner has never been right, and you know that.” Axel pressed his hands to his knees and lifted his face toward the heavens. “What does he want from you, Jon?”

“I’m not saying. I don’t want you involved in this shit.”

“Is it something you can do pretty easily?”

“Yeah.” I brushed my hand down my face again, trying to wipe some of the rainwater off of me. “I’ll just ruin any chances of a relationship with Danielle, but fuck it. We weren’t going to become anything anyway. I don’t need a woman in my life. I have enough shit to deal with.”

“Dude. You met her a week ago.”

“What’s your fucking point,” I barked and turned to face him. “When you know, you know, okay? It’s like you and El, but I’m not dicking around. I’m pushing her to give me a chance, I’m making love to her and touching her and tasting her every goddamn chance I get. I don’t know why she feels

so right.” I patted my chest hard. “But she does. I don’t want to give up what we have, but if it’ll save Tanner from taking out his wrath on me and Candace, then fuck it.”

“No. We take him out. There’s six of us, Jon. We’ll take out his whole fucking MC. It’s time to put them down anyway. They’re a disease on this city. The things we’ve let them get away with for the last few years are deplorable. We’ll be punished because of letting that shit happen.”

“You don’t know how powerful he is, Axel. You think you do, but you don’t know shit.” I stood up and rolled my shoulders. “I gotta get back in Dani’s good graces to get this plan moving. The sooner I do what he’s asked me to do, the quicker I can move on from this fucked up situation and try to live what’s left of my life.”

“Dude. You don’t have to go at this alone.” Axel stood and turned to face me.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out as my heart skipped a beat. I wanted it to be Dani so fucking bad. “It’s my sister. I gotta take this. She’s got Jason with her.”

He nodded and looked like he wanted to say something else, but let it go and walked off.

I waited until the door closed behind me to move under the roof and answered the phone. “It’s Johnny.”

“It’s Maria. We couldn’t find Jason, so we went over to your place, Johnny and he’s not there either.” She was frantic, and her crying was making it hard to understand her.

I wanted to bark into the phone that he was her fucking problem and remind her how much of a pain in the ass the kid had been his whole life, but my timing was off. She was beside herself.

“I’m headed to the house.”

“I’m scared to go into the bedroom, Johnny. He’s not in there, but there’s blood all over the sheets.” Her voice broke.

“It’s alright. I’ll be there and I’ll find him. Just go back to your place and lock the doors, okay? That fucking kid is into

all kinds of things that would make my childhood look like a day in the park.”

“Please be careful.”

“Right. I’ll see if I can find him, if I can save him.”

“He’s not yours to save, Jon. Roberto wasn’t either.” Her voice was soft, compassionate, which was something I didn’t deserve.

“I’m the oldest brother in the Moretti family, Maria. Everyone is mine to save.”

I dropped the call. Who knew where Jason was, but if I had one guess, I’d have pointed right to Tanner King’s house. The fucker was after me, and what better way to get to me than using my family and friends? He knew how I felt about Jason namely because of the suffering he enjoyed when I broke down at Roberto’s funeral.

Fury boiled in my stomach as I walked back into the lodge to grab my keys and my shirt.

“Hey. You alright?” Hyde moved up beside me, walking fast and keeping stride with me.

“No. Jason’s missing again. I’m headed to the house to find him. If he shows up here or you guys hear anything-”

“We’ll call right away.” Axel tossed me my keys and my shirt. “We got your back, Ryder. It’s what we’re here for. Stop pushing us away mother fucker. You set the tone for this club. Only you.”

I nodded. “Thank you for the reminder. I’ll be in touch.”

“Good.” Axel gave me a single nod before I turned on my heel and jogged back out of the lodge. The rain had let up a little, but not enough to make the ride home safe at all. At least not at the speed I went.



By the time I made it home, I had imagined the worst possible scenario. As mad as I was at the kid, he didn't deserve the life I'd lived. Neither mine nor Roberto's. Someone had to save his ass, and it seemed like it was going to be me.

I parked the bike, locked it up quickly and jogged up the stairs. Darkness greeted me when I walked into the house, which wasn't at all unusual.

"Jason? You here, man?" I walked to the back and turned into his bedroom. The smell of weed slapped me in the face, but I ignored it. I'd toked up as a kid too. His drug problem was the least of my worries as of late.

I pulled the cover back to find the sheets bloody. "Fuck."

The tracker. Either he or someone else had tried to get the damn thing off of him. There wasn't an easy way to do it without taking off some skin. After searching the house and coming up empty, I got on my bike and drove back up to the playground where the little bastard usually hung out. Nothing.

The warehouse was empty too. I parked outside of it and got out, walking into the dilapidated building and moving around the room. There was no reason to call out to him, he wasn't there.

My phone rang while I was looking in one of the closets, filling up the place with an annoyingly loud sound. I pulled my phone out and relief flooded my chest.

"Dani," I whispered into the phone. "There you are."

"Sorry." She sounded a little hoarse. "I just got back home, but realized that Jason's tracker has been deactivated. Is he okay? Did he run?"

"I don't know where he is, but I'll find him." I paused, not liking the weariness in her voice. Something was off. "You alright? You need me to come over?"

"No," she bit out a little too quickly.

"Alright, well, I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks. I'll be in touch." She dropped the call without another word.

I stood there in the darkness and turned in a circle as something inside of me broke. The deep screams that welled up inside of me were terrifying. I was trapped in my old life and there was nowhere to run. I could help Tanner King once again, or he'd take everything I loved.

My only other option was to get the guys to band together with me and blow him and his boys to hell. Getting blood on our hands was something I'd promised myself as President that I'd never allow. Death seemed like the easy answer, but there was a price to pay for taking a life.

Freedom.

The law would come and take away our freedom, a sentence worse than death.

But wasn't a part of my freedom already gone? I was without a choice and being forced to hand over my nephew to Tanner's MC and give up the only girl who'd helped me want a different future.

Fuck. Maybe prison wasn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER 18



DANI

It was harder to move the next morning than it had been any other day in my life. My body hurt from all the shit the day before, but my heart was destroyed.

Johnny and I weren't much of anything - yet.

It was the yet that had me choking back tears and trying to come up with a new solution. Maybe he had fucked Candace in the same storeroom as me, but it was before me. Not after. It would be like me showing him a video of me and Seth together in a similar situation. My past only had the power to ruin my future if I let it. And I couldn't.

"But the shit with Tani." I sat up and groaned loudly as pain laced the back of my head. "I need to know what's going on there."

After a few minutes on the side of the bed, trying to decide what the fuck to do, I finally got to my feet. Tanner King was a much bigger bastard than I'd given him credit for. He wasn't only involved in sex trafficking and drugs, but in turning ordinary, good people into puppets.

He would do it to me, and from what I could tell, he'd do it to Johnny too.

I took a long shower and got dressed before leaving the house. A bagel and a cup of coffee on the way to the station were as good as it got. Even though I was forced to work for King until he was satisfied, I still had bills to pay and a life to live.

“A pathetic one.” I got in the cop car outside of my apartment, grateful I had one sitting there. My Honda was at the bottom of the river on the other side of town.

My mind worked in overdrive as I made my way down to the station. I had to make it look like I was wooing Johnny back to me only to turn him into King. There were lives at stake, and I wouldn't doubt for a moment that all of the vile promises Tanner spewed from his lips were truth to him.

He had no problem getting more girls off the street or stealing them from their beds. He was perfectly fine killing my father, Johnny, and Jason. Nothing mattered to a man like him except power.



“How can we take his power away?” I asked the captain as I sat in front of his desk.

His eyes were wide with surprise. “He kidnapped you?”

“Yes.” I leaned toward him. “Jack. I have to figure out how to take him down. We have to figure this out.”

“Fuck.” He bolted up and paced the floor behind his desk. “We have to catch him. That's part of the fucking problem. Every time we get close to him, he up and disappears. That or we can't link the act to him specifically.”

“I have a tracker inside of me. I would assume it's iodine based.” I stood and crossed my arms over my chest as my phone buzzed in my pocket. “And I'm telling you now that I'm going to do what King is forcing me to do. His promise to kill everyone I love if I don't is more than enough to force me to.”

Captain nodded and turned my way. “What's he asking of you, Dani?”

“I have to get Johnny Moretti to him in a few days or so.” I reached up and ran my hands over the top of my head. “He's Jason Moretti's guardian.”

“Your parolee who’s been acting up?”

“Yeah.” I turned and walked to the door. “We’ll figure this out, right?”

“Of course we will. You’re not handing over another human being to Tanner King. We’ll get a group on it now. Hang tight and make it look like you’re doing what you need to be doing.”

“For him or you?” I forced a smile and walked out without an answer.

My phone buzzed again. Jason. His tracker was removed and inactive.

“Shit.” I jogged toward my desk and dropped down, pulling up the program on my computer that would help me locate him. The tracker was still on the move, which was weird. Was the kid keeping it as a souvenir? Or was he playing bait for me to follow?

No. Tanner had his time with me. There was no way he was luring me out of the city to follow after Jason. That would make no sense.

“Dani.” Johnny’s voice surprised me, and I bolted up to my feet. How the fuck had he gotten past Margie at the front desk?

“Fuck. You scared me.” I pressed my hands to the desk and stared up into his handsome face. “Jason is on the move. I have to go after him.”

“You’re not going without me.” His deep blue eyes narrowed. He wasn’t asking.

“Fine, but this is police business. You’re going to ruin your reputation being seen with me all the time.” I grabbed my keys and walked toward the door with him in tow.

“I’ll take my chances.” His voice was nothing more than a whisper. Maybe I wasn’t the only one that Tanner had by the throat.

I glanced back as he held the front door for me. “We’re taking my car.”

“Not a chance. We’re taking mine.” He reached up and snagged my keys from my hand. “There’s no way we’re driving a cop car into purgatory. You realize how ridiculous that would be, right?”

I paused and glanced around as he jogged down the stairs to the parking lot. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Someone was watching me. Watching us.

“Danielle. Let’s go.” He turned to face me.

“Right.” I moved down the stairs and walked beside him until he stopped at a sleek, black Mustang. “This yours? Where’s the bike?”

“I have a lot of toys.” He got in the car and started it as I glanced around one more time.

I bet he had a lot of toys. Candace King was one of them. Was I?

“We need to head toward Jersey from what I can tell.” I got into the car and yelped as he reached out and half-dragged me into his seat. His fingers sunk into my hair and his lips pressed tightly against mine.

I fought against the kiss for a moment before relaxing against him and opening up. I hated myself for letting him have me the minute he wanted to. Nothing good was going to become of us, and the minute we finally had Tanner King in the ground, Johnny would most likely be back to his old life of loving and leaving.

And where would that leave me? Right. Left.

Ignoring the sadness building in my chest, I pressed into the kiss and reached up to slide my fingers down the side of his face. The moment felt so right, so damn good. Like we were meant to be together somehow even though the odds were completely stacked against us. There was no way we would survive intact and willing to build something together. Not after I had to use him as bait to get to King.

“Where have you been the last few days?” He kissed me again and brushed his nose by mine.

I flinched as his fingers tightened around one of the many bruises on the back of my head. “My car flipped off the bridge by your house. I’ve been at the hospital.”

“What?” He jerked back and studied my face as he cupped it. “Fuck, Dani. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because I didn’t want to bother you.” I pulled back and got into my seat. I missed his warmth immediately. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on between us, but maybe-”

“Don’t.” His tone was mean. Angry. “Let’s find Jason, and we’ll figure it out, but don’t minimize how good it feels when we’re together. Period.”

I nodded and sunk down into my seat. I didn’t know how to be a liar, how to trick someone or pull them into a web. I was one of the good guys. All I knew was how to infiltrate the madness and bring light to the darkness. It’s all I ever wanted to do.

“When is the last time you were with Candace?” I turned my face toward him as my heart ached. I couldn’t let him know that Tanner got to me or all would be lost. I had to figure things out on my own, and I would.

He glanced my way as he pulled out of the parking lot. “A few days before you and I met. She’s the one woman I couldn’t refuse.”

“Couldn’t or can’t?”

“There’s no way in hell I’d touch her again now that I’ve met you.” He reached up and pulled down the visor. A pair of dark sunglasses fell into his hand. “She’s my past, Dani. The only woman I’ve ever loved.”

“And do you still love her?” I tugged at the seatbelt, feeling quite uncomfortable with the conversation.

“I love the memory of her.” A smile played at the edge of his mouth, which pissed me off. “She was innocent when we met, and I was too. Tanner was my best friend in school. I’ve known that fucker all my life.”

“What happened to him? Has he always been a horrible person?” I let out a quiet breath I didn’t realize I was holding and tried to relax. We had a little bit of a drive from what I could tell.

“No.” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “He took a turn for the worst our senior year. His mother was caught up in a sex scandal. She was fucking ten guys on a regular basis and taking money from it.”

“Prostitution?” I pressed my hand to my stomach as it turned over.

“Yeah.” He glanced over at me, his stare a little prolonged.

“Look at the road, please. I don’t want to die today.”

“It’s hard when you’re next to me.” He reached out and took my hand, pulling it into his lap. “The worst part was that his father was in an accident a few years before and paralyzed from the waist down, so he wasn’t able to get it up. The bitch was running around on him while he sat there alone at night and waited for her.”

I squeeze his hand as sadness raced through me. Not for Tanner, but for his dad. How could people be so fucking vile?

“Shit,” I mumbled and shook my head. “Did Tanner find her with the guys or something?”

“No. His father found everything and wrote Tan a long note. I was there the night he read it. I’ve never seen someone so destroyed before. He was enraged beyond words.”

“Where’s his dad now?”

“Dead.” Johnny glanced over again. “He killed himself that night and left the note on the table.”

“Oh, God.” I turned to look out the window. Not that Tanner King deserved an ounce of pity, but monsters were often created out of the need to survive past their own soul-shredding moments. It was no different with King. “And his mom?” I whispered softly as the air around me felt too hard to breathe.

“She’s a sex slave in his organization last I heard.” Johnny released my hand. “I knew he was a monster the day I found that out. Death wasn’t enough for her, so he’s making sure that she gets what she deserves every day for as long as she lives.”

“That’s horrible.” I turned toward Johnny. “Please tell me you didn’t get involved in that.”

He jerked the car over to the side of the road and narrowed his eyes. “Are you really asking me that right now? I know you don’t know me and shit, but really? Do I seem like the kind of man that would subjugate a women to anything?”

I turned and looked him in the face, studying the hurt in his eyes. He was a beautiful mystery, and one I wanted to belong to almost more than I wanted anything else in that moment.

“I don’t know you at all.” I reached out and touched his face. “Tell me your story. Help me understand. Let me in.”

CHAPTER 19



RYDER

“**L**et me in.”

I wanted to. Something about Danielle made me want to pull back layers and layers of a fucked up life and let her see all of it. Candace had seen it all. She’d been beside me through most of it and held my hand, loving me as best she could while the world burned around me.

Some part of me knew that Danielle would be the same type of woman, only with morals.

“Can you see where he is now?” I nodded toward her phone. The disappointment on her face was barely hidden as she nodded and turned away from me.

Whatever moment we almost had was gone. Maybe it was for the better.

“He’s at a hotel in Jersey. With this traffic, we’ll probably get there by afternoon. Let me call someone from that local precinct to go after him.”

“No. We do this ourselves. No cops.”

“I am a cop, Johnny.”

“No, you’re just playing a part right now.” I glanced over at her and forced myself not to reach for her hand. She wanted me to share my past, and I would, but until then, it was unfair for me to expect her to share her body freely with me. “You’re on the force to save women from predators like Tanner, but you don’t belong in that fucked up bureaucracy.”

“No? Then where do I belong?”

I'd obviously hit a pain-point by the tightness in her voice.

"I have no clue, but my mother used to always tell me that when you found your place, it would fit just right." I smiled as the image of my mother cooking in the kitchen moved through my mind. "And she was right. I belong as President of the Lost Breed. I belong at the shop with Axel, fixing cars and helping people change tires. I don't need a big office or a gang of badasses to feel like me." I reached for her hand, ignoring the warning bells going off in my head. "And whether it makes sense or not, I belong with you. It feels fucking good. I don't want to act like it doesn't."

She wound her fingers around mine and leaned her head back against the seat as her eyes closed. I could tell she was fighting back the tears. "I just need to know, you know?"

"Need to know what, baby?" I pulled her hand toward my mouth and kissed each of her knuckles softly as my cock twitched in my pants. We had a million things against us, but sitting in the car next to her made it fade for a little while. That's how I knew it was where I belonged. Nothing mattered for a few minutes because she was beside me. Everyone in my life would have laughed their asses off if I told them about her only after a week or so of knowing her, but not my mother.

She believed in fate and love and crazy shit like that. I wanted to as well.

"If you had anything to do with my little sister getting kidnapped." She turned her face a little and opened her eyes. Tears dripped down her pretty face.

"Who's your sister, Dani? You wouldn't tell me her name, remember?" I put her hand on my thigh and reached over to brush the tears off her cheeks. "Tell me her name."

"Tani." She gripped my hand and pressed it to her lips. "I can't be with you or even around you if you were involved."

"I had nothing to do with any of Tanner's fucked up madness. He and I split ways a few months after his dad died. I might be a bastard, and I might have done some pretty

messed up shit in my life, but I've never hurt a woman or helped Tanner King hurt one. Not ever."

She pulled away from me and bent down, pulling something out of a pocket in her uniform pants. "This is her. Just look at her and make sure, okay? I don't want to close this down until we know for sure."

I took the picture and took a quick glance. Tani. Fuck.

"I knew her." I handed the picture back to Dani. "She was a dancer at the bar we went to right out of high school. The old guy there would let us buy beer, but we weren't legal by any means. She was beautiful and so damn sad all the time."

Dani let out a soft sob. "We had a hard life after mom left."

I swallowed hard and handed the picture back. "Tanner took a liking to her and all I knew was that they went out a couple of times. I didn't get involved, and shortly after that, I walked away from him for good."

"And did you get involved with her?"

"No." I turned my attention back to the road. "I had my own problems to deal with."

"Like?" She turned in the seat. She wasn't going to let it go.

Crazy enough, I knew we'd end up spending the night in a hotel somewhere along this fucked up trip we were on. I wanted her body pressed to me, her soft lips against my neck, her sweet pussy pulling at my dick. There was no way I'd get time with her if I didn't hand over a little bit of information.

"My dad was a bastard when we were growing up. He beat all of us every chance he got and yet he was a drunk, so we made excuses." I chuckled sardonically. "Well, he beat us boys. My sisters don't know much about that shit. They were too little, or we kept them hidden from him."

"Did your mom know?"

"No, not really. I mean, if she did, she didn't do anything about it." I shrugged, trying not to let the memories take over. "He was a good guy, but the liquor made him a monster."

“I don’t think anyone comes out of the womb a monster. I think that happens over time, Johnny.” She reached over and ran her fingers down my thigh, squeezing softly just above my knee.

“Maybe, but we loved the old bastard anyway you looked at it.” I shrugged. “He got into some stupid shit when we first got here, drugs, mafia, you name it.”

“First got here?”

“My parents were from Sicily. They were poor as fuck, and we all immigrated over here. They only had me and my brother Roberto at the time, but quickly filled the house with more kids than they could feed. I got my first job at twelve delivering papers and then running dope. It was a faster buck for sure.”

“Twelve?” Her voice held a note of sympathy in it.

I started to bite her fucking head off but forced myself to pause. There was no way I wanted to lash out at her. It wouldn’t help anything. Least of all our relationship.

“Yeah.” I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. “Tanner was a clean-cut boy from the upper side of New York. His father was a lawyer, his mother a stay at home mom that didn’t care about anyone else but herself. I saved his life one day on the streets when we were kids, and he stuck beside me from then on.”

“At twelve?”

I turned my attention to her for a moment, giving her a look. “Twelve in my world is eighteen in yours, Dani. It’s time to grow the fuck up and do what you gotta do. It’s the only way to survive. For me, that was twelve. Stop repeating me.”

Fuck. I’d done the thing I didn’t want to do. So fucking typical of me.

“No, I understand. Sorry. I just keep thinking about how young that is, but I get it. I’m sorry.” She shifted enough to lean over and press a kiss to the side of my shoulder. “Keep going. Please?”

“Tanner was getting his ass beat in a back alley because the thugs wanted his shoes, his clothes, and his backpack. They got most of it, but I fucked them up as best I could. Having a gun helped.” I shrugged, trying hard not to lay too much emphasis on me being tough. I wasn’t. Scared shitless was more like it.

“Why did you help him?”

“I wanted to feel good about something.” I pursed my lips and nodded toward the road. “We getting on another freeway soon?”

“Yeah. Damn. It’s this one. I’m glad you said something.” She moved back into her seat and pulled up her phone. “The tracker has stopped at Lucky’s One Night Club.”

I rolled my eyes. “This fucking kid. He’d better be with Tanner. If not, I’m going to tear his stupid ass up.”

“Are you violent with him because your dad was so rough with you guys?”

“Ballsy, Dani.” I chuckled sardonically and gave her a warning look. “Watch yourself, okay?”

She nodded. “I thought I could be ballsy with you. No?”

“How much farther to the hotel?” I reached up and turned the air on as my skin prickled with heat. Anger danced in the pit of my stomach, and I had to watch myself. My emotions weren’t related to her or the truth of what happened or would happen, but rather about the man I could become if I weren’t careful.

“Thirty minutes.” She turned and looked back out the window. “My mom left when we were kids. My father got called into the ministry, and my mother couldn’t handle it.”

“Handle what exactly? Seems like a good notable profession.”

She looked over her shoulder at me, her pretty face stealing my heart. “Being poor.”

“That was common place in my neck of the woods.” I winked at her. “So she just up and left you guys?”

“Yep. One morning I got up to find my father crying on the couch. Tani and I worked to rebuild a life for the three of us, but one day she disappeared too.” Dani shrugged and gave me a sad smile as she shifted again in her seat. “Life doesn’t seem too fair.”

“Cause it’s not, baby.” I ran my hand down her arm and gripped the top of her hand. “Let’s find Jason and get back home. I want you in my bed tonight.”

“Do you?”

“I just said I did, didn’t I?” I slid my fingers over hers and pressed down, locking our hands together. “I haven’t stopped thinking about the last time you were there.”

“Me either,” she whispered softly and leaned back, closing her eyes. “I just keep waiting for the other shoe to fall.”

“What shoe would that be?”

“The one where you’re not who you say you are.”

“I’m a criminal. A bad boy. A piece of shit that’s figured out how to turn his life around. Is that the guy you thought I was?”

She laughed and smiled over at me. “Don’t make me fall in love with you, Johnny Moretti.”

“It’s a dangerous place to be, Kitten.”

“It’s the only place I want to be.” She ran her hand up my arm and dragged her nails back down, pressing into my skin and lighting me up.

“I need to tell you something, Dani.” I took a quick breath, making a decision to be a good guy for the first time in my life. “Candace is saying she’s pregnant.”

“With your baby?” She held onto me, surprising me a little.

“Yeah. I need to have the paternity tests run as I know good and damn well that it’s probably not my kid, but I wanna be open with you. It could be.”

She nodded, surprising me a little. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled and pressed the gas. The sooner we got to the hotel and found my bastard of a nephew, the sooner I could get my girl back home and remind her why I was the man she needed in her life.

CHAPTER 20



DANI

“Hey, we’re here.” Johnny’s voice brought me from my thoughts.

The messed up situation we were in wasn’t one I would have chosen, but it was nice to find out more about the man I was quickly falling for.

“Great.” I got out of the car the minute he parked it. “Let’s check in with the front desk first just so they know what’s going on and then we’ll locate the room where Jason’s tracker is.”

“Something tells me that the little prick or the assholes that he’s with took the thing off. I doubt he’s here, Dani. He’s a smart kid, street smart.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” I walked into the lobby of the rundown motel and stopped short. The older man in front of us had on a cheap suit, and his voice was low, ominous. His right hand was wrapped around the back of woman’s neck, holding her tightly as he spoke with the receptionist.

“We’ll take a room for three hours. You sell them by the hour, right?” He coughed loudly, the wet sound sickening me.

I glanced over at Johnny. “Something isn’t right,” I whispered.

The girl leaned away from him, and her legs were shaking from what I could see. Johnny moved up and tapped the guy on the shoulder. He spun around, and the girl did too. She couldn’t have been much over seventeen or eighteen.

“What?” The man barked, his dark eyes telling the truth of the situation.

“Is he paying you for that three hours?” Johnny kept his eyes on the girl.

The receptionist spoke up. “Hey. I’m not looking for any trouble.”

“Answer me.” Johnny moved toward her.

She flinched and held up her hands, letting out a soft cry.

“Jon.” I moved around him and pulled her away from the guy, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and walking toward the hallway to the bathroom. “Hey. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m a cop from New York.”

“Thank God,” she murmured and curled up against my side. “My parents have to be looking for me. I’m from Maine, but I’m not sure if I can leave. Won’t he just come back and get me again?”

She was full-body shaking at that point.

“No. We’ll call into the local department and get someone to come pick you up. It’s going to be okay.” I pulled her into a hug as she cried. The sound of Johnny and the pervert fighting in the other room was short lived. The door to the bathroom opened, and Johnny’s voice filled the small room.

“You girls okay?”

“Yeah. Did you knock him out?” I moved out of the bathroom with the girl.

“Yes. He’s tied up with a phone cord on his face in there.” He reached out and squeezed the girl’s shoulder. “Come here and let me stay with you until Danielle gets the cops over here for us.”

“Are you a cop?” The girl glanced up as Johnny took her from me.

“Something like that.” He wrapped a strong arm around the girl’s shoulders and nodded at me. “Call whoever you need to. Make it quick and let’s get on with this.”

With all the shit he'd seen in his life, he still seemed to be a little bit shaken up by the situation we were faced with. I nodded and walked toward the front door, giving the receptionist the evil eye. Bastard. I'd have the cops run him for anything they could as well.

"New Jersey Police Department. What's your emergency?" The voice on the other end sounded alert.

I gave the woman my badge information and explained who I was and what we were dealing with. Five minutes later, Johnny and I met two cop cars out front.

An older gentleman stepped out of one followed by a younger female cop from the other. The male cop stopped in front of me and offered his hand. "Thank you for your help. You could have been hurt."

"No, we couldn't." Johnny shook his hand too before helping the girl in the car.

"Please make sure you call her parents as soon as possible and treat her with care. You have no idea what she's been through." I turned to the female cop. "Try and only have females around her until she's back home and safe."

The woman nodded. "Of course. Thank you, both." She turned to the older man. "Frank, you get the guy. I'll get the woman."

He nodded. "Rodger that."

We waited until they pulled away to turn to each other. Johnny reached out and pulled me tightly against him. "Let's go see what the fuck is happening with my nephew."

"You don't seem to be in much of a hurry. Why?" I moved back but kept my arms around him.

"I know him. He's too much like me. He's not letting these bastards pull his chains. He's pulling theirs. He doesn't feel like he belongs anywhere. He'll keep searching until he finds that place, even if it's in hell, working for the devil himself. It's an unrest that won't let up."

“I understand it all too well.” I moved out of his arms and pulled my phone from my pocket. “Room twelve-twenty.”

“Got it.” Johnny turned and jogged toward the motel, circling around back as I walked toward him. Some part of me feared that we might find Jason mutilated or hurt, but Johnny seemed pretty assured of himself that the boy was okay.

I could only hope that was the case.

“In here, Dani.” Johnny leaned out of a room on the backside of the motel before disappearing back into as I walked quickly toward him. “He’s not here.”

Moving into the room, I felt the overwhelming need to grab my gun, but I forced myself not to. There was blood all over the bed near the bottom again, but this time, the tracker was laying in the puddle of crimson liquid.

“Shit. It takes a lot to get those fucking things off.” I covered my mouth and turned as bile rose in my throat.

“Yeah. He’s gotta be limping.” He moved up behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “There’s no way to find him until I go after Tanner.”

“Are you going after Tanner?” I turned in his arms and lifted my face toward his. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well, good thing you aren’t in charge of me.” He leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose as he pushed my hair back. “We might not have found Jason tonight, but I’ll get him back. I know just the guys to help me do it too.”

“Do I know these guys?” I touched the side of his face as desire swam through me. I wanted a life with him. I wanted to know how it felt to be loved deeply by a man like Johnny Moretti. Surely not many people knew the depths of his dark soul, but I wanted to.

“Maybe.” He took a deep breath. “Let’s get back to New York. We were here for a reason tonight, even if Jason’s bullshit brought us here.”

“You’re really not worried about him?”

“No. I realized on the way up here that he was in on it.”

“How?”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “Just something I figured out.”

“Something you want to share?”

“It’s not mine to share.” He turned and walked out of the motel room. “Come on. Let’s go.”



The ride home was a little awkward between us, but we were both emotionally and physically beat. I was battling with myself on whether to tell him about Tanner taking me, but I knew it would only add gasoline to an already volatile situation. And it was over, or was it?

I was still supposed to deliver the man next to me to Tanner, which wasn’t happening. Even if I wanted to, there was no way I could get Johnny to go willingly.

“Where’s your apartment, Dani?” Johnny’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“Near the station. Just off of Walker and Tenth.” I sat up and cleared my throat. “Stay with me tonight?”

“I plan to.” He reached over and took my hand into his. “I think we both need the warmth.”

He was right. I wanted every ounce of warmth he could offer me and then some. We pulled up to the apartment, and he turned the car off but didn’t move.

“Tell me something.” He turned to face me. “Jason warned me that Tanner had my girl.”

I stiffened. “When was this?”

“What ‘girl’ did he have, Dani? Do you know what the kid was telling me?”

“Why would Jason help you if he belongs to Tanner?”

“Because there’s still a thread of decency in him, and I’ve done a lot for him. Even the blackest hearts want to repay the kindness given to them.” He reached out and ran his hand down the back of my head, pressing in.

I yelped and jerked from him. “That fucking hurt!”

He got out of the car and came around to my side, opening the door and pulling me out. “Why didn’t you tell me that Tanner took you?”

“Because I didn’t want to add fuel to the fucking fire.” I popped him in the chest after slamming my door. Tears blurred my eyes. “That hurt.”

“I had to know.” He pulled me close and pressed me against the car. “When did he take you, Dani?”

“Get off of me. I don’t feel safe out here.” I pushed at his chest. Luckily he moved, and I slipped past him and walked up to my apartment. I got inside and left the door open as I angrily wiped at tears.

“Don’t run from me. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.” He closed the door behind us and flipped on the kitchen light. “Come here.”

“No.” I pressed my hands to my face and let out a soft cry. “I didn’t want you to know.”

“Why? Are you working for him too?” He was so close I could feel the heat rolling off of him. It was insane how things had gone from good to bad so quickly. It was the time he had to think in the car. Now he thought I was a liar. Not that I blamed him. I was to some degree.

“Get out.” I pulled my hands down and turned to walk down the hall. I kicked off my shoes and unbuttoned my shirt, dropping it by the door before working on my undershirt, my bra, pants, and panties. “I would never work for a monster like Tanner. I’m one of the good guys, remember?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I turned and let my head drop. “Because I don’t need saving, and you would try.”

“Damn right I would.” He lifted me off the ground and pressed me to the bed beneath us before I could even realize what was happening.

CHAPTER 21



RYDER

Anger boiled deep in my stomach over her not telling me about Tanner King taking her. How had it happened? Did he touch her? Threaten her? And how had she gotten free? The thought of what he made her do or promise to do made my stomach turn.

The soft sound of her crying shut down my incessant need to know anything. She needed comfort, and I wanted to be her man. There was no way I was pushing her any further.

“Shhh... it’s okay. We’ll figure it out, baby.” I kissed her lips and rolled us over on the bed, forcing her to sit up. My eyes moved along her perfect body as I assessed for bruises or cuts. The sunlight bathed her perfectly. “God, you’re beautiful, Dani. Did you know how much you turn me on?”

“I don’t feel so beautiful.” She slid her hands up my chest as tears dripped down her nose and onto my t-shirt.

“Feelings can’t be trusted sometimes.” I leaned up and pulled my shirt over my head. “Make love to me. Let’s forget everything, and we’ll figure it out in the morning, okay? I know you didn’t tell me about Tanner because you care about me.”

“You trust me?” Her voice filled with hope as she moved up, pressing her soft center to the bottom of my stomach.

I groaned in lust and reached up to cup her tits. “Yes. Until you give me a reason not to, I trust you.”

She didn’t say another word, but moved off of me and scooted down the bed to help me out of my jeans and shit-

kickers. Her movements were slow, lethargic. My girl was tired.

“Where do you want me?” She glanced up from the bottom of the bed.

I smiled and moved to my knees, taking her by the arms and helping her back on the bed. “Underneath me where you belong.” I turned and laid her down before pressing myself to the top of her. Lust burned through me at the tenderness of her touch, the softness of her voice.

Very few women had taken the time to let me feel something besides carnality. It was addictive.

She moaned loudly as I spread her legs and rolled my hips, dragging my cock down her lips and flattening her breasts against my chest. “God, I need you.”

“You’re gonna get me, angel.” I moved up to my knees and forced her legs open a little further as I pulled at her thighs, forcing her to move down further on the bed. I gripped my cock and lowered it to press against her soft, wet entrance. I fucked her in shallow thrusts and pulled out to rub the thick head of my dick over her clit. Back and forth, over and over before pumping a little more into her.

I ran one hand up over her tight stomach to the space between her breasts and gripped both of them as I continued to tease her.

“You should see the way your pussy sucks at me, Dani. She’s begging me for a lot more than I’m giving her.”

“Please?” She whimpered and gripped my wrist tight. She used the leverage to press down on my cock, taking half of it inside of her. “More. Please. Just give me more.”

“In a minute.” I increased the pressure between her breasts, forcing her to give me control once again. She let out a sound of frustration and fell back to the bed. “That’s a good girl.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. Just don’t call me that.”

“Oh yeah. You’re definitely a good girl, but you’re mine.” I pulled out and tapped her clit roughly as she moaned and jerked beneath me. “Let’s get our minds off all this shit around us and just enough of each other for the next few hours.”

“I want that.” She gripped the sheets and arched her back as I rimmed her again.

I smiled. “You got a vibrator?”

“What?” Her eyes opened, and surprise filled her pretty face.

“A vibrator. Get yours for me.”

“Johnny. Really?” She moved back and sat up.

“Now.” I leaned forward and kissed her roughly. She pushed into it, so fucking hungry for whatever I wanted to give to her.

“Fine.” She got off the bed and walked back seconds later with a thick pink vibrator. “Here.”

“Wow. This fucker is big.” I smiled as she got on the bed and kicked at me. “I’m teasing. This ain’t shit.”

“I’m so embarrassed right now.”

“No. Don’t do that.” I set the thing down on the bed beside us and moved over the top of her, pressing my cock deep inside her heat as I laid down and made love to her mouth. She wrapped her arms around me and lifted her legs as soft moans lifted from her. “Come for me, Kitten.”

She opened her eyes and pressed her forehead to mine as she groaned her release. It was beautiful, sensual, perfect. Everything about her had me wanting to be a better man, a different man.

“God, that’s so good.” She reached for me as I moved back and rested my ass on my heels. “Where are you going?”

“Right here.” I gripped her thighs and pulled her back halfway up on my bent legs. I licked my thumb and reached down to roll the rough pad of my finger over her clit in slow, hard strokes.

“Too much,” she whispered and reached for me.

I swatted her away and positioned my cock at the entrance of her ass. “Not nearly enough. Trust me.”

“Johnny. I haven’t-”

“I know, baby. Relax.” I pressed the tip of my dick into her ass before reaching for the vibrator. I flipped it on and ran it down her pussy lips before sliding a few inches into her body.

“God,” she cried out and arched her back. The minute she came down, half my cock slipped into her tightness.

I moaned loudly as pleasure raced down my legs and pooled in my sack. “You feel so fucking good. I wanna release inside of you, Dani. Let me do it the safe way, baby.”

“I want you to.” She lifted her hips as I pumped the vibrator in and out of her sweet slit. She worked herself down farther and farther on my cock, taking more of me each time she pressed back down.

We were dripping with sweat and groaning in tandem by the time my orgasm started. “I’m gonna come, angel.”

“Me too.” She pulled at my dick with her ass, squeezing me so good as she lifted her hips. I worked her hard and fast, enjoying the deep vibration that raged through her thanks to the toy she let me use on her.

“Johnny!” she screamed my name and thrashed about, but I kept us sturdy, fucking her over the edge twice as I lost my load in her perfect ass. She collapsed on the bed as I leaned back and panted loudly.

“Fuck. I needed that.” I reached up and wiped sweat from my head.

“Come here.” She reached for me and pulled me down on top of her. “Please stay here tonight.”

“I thought you weren’t a cuddler?” I yelped as the vibrator rolled to us and tickled the shit out of my side. We shared a good laugh, turned the damn thing off and snuggled up close.

I wrapped myself around the back of her and cupped her tit as I kissed at the soft skin under her neck. “I’m still upset with you. You should have told me about Tanner.”

She snuggled her back in tighter to my chest. “I know. Forgive me.”

“How did you get out of there, Dani?”

“I promised to turn you into him.” She let out a contented sigh as I stiffened.

“How the fuck did you plan on doing that?”

“I didn’t plan on doing anything to hurt you. I’d rather he kill me.”

She passed out, but I laid there for what felt like forever. She was willing to give up her life for mine? What the fuck did that mean? Was she falling in love with me too?

No. I wasn’t a good man. I didn’t deserve redemption.

Especially not from a woman like her.



I had to fix things. Now. There was no way I could let my girl take the hit for me. No fucking way.

After lying awake all night fighting against the panic attack tearing up my insides, I decided to take Tanner on myself. I knew what to do and he was my nemesis. Not Jason. Not Dani. Not anyone else. He was mine.

I dressed quickly and left Dani a note on the kitchen counter to call me after a while, but to be careful until then. Period.

Axel’s number was already on my phone as a missed call from the night before. A smirk played along my lips as I dialed his number. It was like he knew I was going to need him.

“Talk to me, Jon. What’s going on?”

“Tanner’s got Jason, but I’m pretty sure the little shit went on his own.”

“Which is understandable. You and I fucked up a lot around that age. What do we need to do?”

“The mother fucker kidnapped my girl too. We’re going to take him out.” I pulled out of the parking lot as my tires left their mark on the asphalt.

“Finally. I’ll call everyone. Meet us at the lodge.”

“Headed there now.” I dropped the call and found Candace’s number in my phone. She answered on the first ring.

“Johnny?”

“I need to see you.”

“I can be at the club house in twenty minutes.”

“Good. Make it fifteen.” I dropped the call and drove like a bat out of hell to get there. Everyone’s bikes were out front, and Candace’s souped up Viper was in the background like it belonged there.

I got out of the car and jogged up the stairs. The sky looked like it was ready to burst open and flood the earth any minute. I needed it to hold off a little bit longer.

“Johnny.” She walked up to me the minute I pushed through the door.

“In here.” I gripped her wrist and pulled her into a small room at the front of the lodge that was used to hold private meetings. “I need to know if that’s my kid you’re carrying.”

Her eyes widened as she reached up and tossed her dark hair over her shoulder. She was as much of a mess as I was. It was one of the reasons we did so well together.

“I don’t know. I can’t go back to Tanner’s place. He hates you, and he hates me too.”

There was no way I could trust this bitch, and yet, I wasn’t handing her back over to Tanner. Not after what he did to his own mother. “For sleeping with me?”

“For everything. He says I look too much like momma.” She shrugged and let out a long sigh. “I’ve fucked ten different guys this month. It’s the only way to get my mind off of things. It’s my release. You know that.”

I nodded, not wanting to feel some of the bull shit I was feeling over the idea of her sleeping around. She wasn’t mine anymore, nor did I want her to be.

“I’ll get Axel to take you with him back to the shop, alright? You’ll be safe there.” I glanced down toward her stomach. “I want a paternity test.”

She nodded. “Okay. Sure.”

I turned and reached for the door as she stepped closer and slid her hands around my waist. “Can I stay with you after today?”

“No.” I pulled her hands off of me. “I’m falling in love with someone, and there’s no way I’m fucking it up. Not a chance.”

“Who is she?”

I walked out of the room. It was better if Candace King didn’t know a fucking thing about Dani. I had enough to deal with.

“What’s the plan, Ryder?” Jax stood up and for the first time in a long time, he wasn’t wearing a suit.

“We’re heading out to King’s place.” I glanced around at the faces of my club members. “Everyone in?”

“No one would deny you help, brother.” Axel walked up and patted me on the chest before lifting his fist in the air. “We ride for the lost.”

“The left behind.” Sabian lifted his fist in the air.

“The abused.” Jax lifted his fist.

“The abandoned.” Flex lifted his fist.

“The forgotten.” Hyde lifted his as well.

“We ride for each other.” I lifted my hand and made a loud noise that echoed as my friends joined me. “Let’s go. No mercy tonight for Tanner.”

“No prisoners.” Axel walked past me as we moved out into the darkened night.

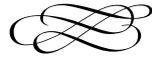
“Stay here, and Axel will get you later.” I glanced back as Candace jogged out after me calling my name.

“You promise?”

“I do.” I turned and jogged down the stairs as excitement mixed with purpose deep inside of me.

Taking down Tanner King was long overdue.

CHAPTER 22



DANI

Johnny wasn't in bed next to me the next morning, which wasn't too surprising. Life wasn't ready to allow something as comforting as that just yet.

I rolled out of bed, my body sore but in a good way. Lust swelled deep in my stomach as I thought about the night before. I'd never let Seth touch me the way I let Johnny. Maybe that was part of the problem, but something told me that Seth would never ask, and Johnny wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Hot," I mumbled and pulled my robe over my shoulders. I tied the belt on the way down the hall to get a cup of coffee.

"You look radiant."

I screamed and jumped back at the sound of Tanner's voice. "What the fuck are you doing here?" I looked around for my gun.

"It's right here." He picked it up and twirled it around his finger as he smiled at me. "I just wanted to check in on you. It looks like you're snuggling back up to Ryder, which is a good thing."

"How did you get into here?"

"Oh, come on, Dani. Don't play stupid. You're a cop. You know these apartments offer no protection at all." He stood and lifted his hands high above his head, stretching. "Tell me how it's going with my boy."

“I’m working on it. He’s not exactly the type of guy you give a sleeping pill to and haul down the stairs,” I barked.

“No, but fucking him late into the night and having him fall in love with you only to crush him is pretty cruel, no? Even I wouldn’t do something sick like that.” He dropped his hands by his side as his eyes ran down my body. “Anything under that robe? I do like the idea of sharing something with old Johnny boy.”

“Fuck you. Don’t come near me.” I took a step back as horror raced through my stomach.

“It takes a pretty strong woman to sleep with a man that she knows is a whore.” He laughed and walked to the door before turning around to face me. He was having far too much fun. “Did he tell you about the baby.”

“Yes.” I ground my teeth.

“Such a tricky mother fucker.” He opened the door behind him without turning around. “You’re playing the fool with this man.” He tilted his head to the side and smiled again. “He’s going to ask for my records.”

“What records?” I barked.

“The ones at the police station. The last time I saw him, he asked what he could do for me.” Tanner shrugged. “I said he could destroy my file at the precinct if he wanted to.”

“That’s impossible. Everything is electronic.”

“Oh, all that shit is gone. I have a few friends at the station.” He stepped out of the apartment into the hallway but didn’t move. “It’s the physical copy that I need, Dani.”

“Why not just have me destroy that, and you go after Johnny yourself?”

“There’s no fun in that.” He laughed. “If you betray him first, I win. If he betrays you by threatening your career and livelihood for me, I win.”

“You’re going to win no matter how this turns out, aren’t you?” Sickness danced in my stomach.

“That is the name of the game, *Kitten*.” He winked. “That’s what Ryder calls you, right?” He laughed sardonically. “I’ll be in touch, and you’re welcome.”

“For what?” I called after him as he turned and walked away.

“For preparing you for his betrayal.”

I grabbed my gun and raced outside to find him gone. A car skidded out of the parking lot about the time I reached the end of the walkway. “Bastard.”

There was no way in hell Johnny would ask me to destroy evidence that proved Tanner ran a sex trafficking operation, the same operation that killed my sister.

He wouldn’t do it. Right?



“Dani. My office please.” The Captain walked out and motioned for me to join him as I sat at my desk, staring at a picture of Jason and Johnny from Jason’s file.

“Sure.” I got up and walked behind the older man until he closed the door behind me.

I dropped down into a chair that sat in front of his desk and crossed my hands over my stomach. “What’s up?”

“Just need to share a few things with you.” Jack looked ten years older than he should, but with the stress of his job, it was no surprise.

“Alright. Go for it, Cap.”

“Someone hacked into our system last night and destroyed the electronic files on the last ten raids you’ve done. I hate to say this kiddo, but you’ll be under investigation for a little while as all of us will.” He gave me an apologetic look. “We will figure out who did it, but with all of that evidence gone, we’re going to need to pull you back to sex crimes.”

Delight mixed with horror inside of me. “Wait. I’m under investigation for hacking into the system, but you’re moving me back over to the division I might have worked to destroy? Where are the paper copies?”

“It’s complicated, but yes on the investigation and the transfer. There’s no evidence against you or any of us right now, so the investigation will sit in the background and be more of a thorn in our sides until it’s over. I know, you know, and everyone else on this force knows how passionate you are about helping with the sex crimes. We need help over there, and Thomas brought your name up so many times, we finally had to listen.”

“I thought you were worried about my safety, Jack.”

“I am, but Thomas thinks you’d be safer in the eye of the storm than sitting idly on the outside of it like a pawn of some sort.”

“At least someone is making sense finally.” I reached up and pulled my hair down only to put it back up. “When do I get to move back?”

“Later this week. We’re processing the paperwork now. I need you to grab Oliver and see what physical paperwork you can find on Tanner. You’ll be guarding it. Got it?”

“Oh yeah. Not a problem.” I leaned back as a foreign emotion rolled up my spine. Skepticism. Doubt. Worry.

Who did Tanner have working for him on the force? Why would Captain want me to hold the only proof we had that Tanner was a villain? Why not keep the evidence in the safe or our library like we normally did?

Was Jack in it with Tanner? No. There was no way.

“Anything else?” I stood.

“Last thing.” He stood and pressed his hands on the desk between us. “Oliver mentioned that you might be involved with Jason Moretti’s uncle, Johnny. I was going to explain to you how inappropriate that would be, but now that you’re transferring, I suppose your private life is your own where Johnny is concerned.”

“We lost the boy by the way.” I let out a long sigh, ignoring Captain’s comments about Johnny. My objectivity didn’t matter where Jason was concerned anymore. I could date Johnny if I wanted to.

“So I heard.” He shrugged. “I don’t think ‘lost’ is the right word, but I get what you’re saying. Do me a favor and type up the paperwork that needs to be filed with Jason’s file. His new probation officer will need it.”

I nodded, holding my tongue. I wanted to comment and let Captain know that there was no saving the boy where he was headed, but I didn’t honestly believe that. If anyone could save him, it would be Johnny.

Something told me that he would try to no matter what the cost.



After a long afternoon of sorting through files with Oliver, we finally had what we needed. I locked the over-stuffed binder on Tanner King in my desk drawer and waved goodbye to a few people as I left the precinct for the day. I wanted to see Johnny, but I knew he had a few things to deal with.

I decided to stop by to see my dad at the church, though it was the last thing I really wanted to do.

The parking lot had only his car sitting out all by itself as I drove up. My sister’s grave sat in the distance in the cemetery just beyond the church playground. It was peaceful knowing that dad was only a few steps from Tani’s grave at all times. I didn’t know why the thought offered me some rest, but it did.

“Hey.”

I turned to see my father walking up with a basket in his hands. “I was grabbing some wild flowers from the field for Tani’s grave.”

“Let me help.” I reached out and took the basket from him. “How are you?”

“Worried.” He reached out and squeezed my shoulder as we walked toward the cemetery.

“About?” I forced a smile. Our relationship had gone to pot a while back, and now that Seth and I weren’t together, my father rarely said two words to me.

“You.” He shrugged. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better.” I reached into the basket and pulled out a few wild flowers. “Remember when Tani talked me into throwing wild flower seeds into the yard, and you got really mad at us?”

He chuckled and moved to his knees in front of her grave. “Yeah. I remember that. I couldn’t mow the lawn for months because I might hurt your flowers.”

I smiled. “And you didn’t do it.”

“Because I loved you girls.” He reached out and took a few of the flowers. “I still love you.”

“Do you?” I moved to my knees beside him. “Cause I feel like you love me when I’m good enough. When Seth loves me or when my jobs not dangerous or when I’m doing all the right things.”

He glanced over at me. “Is that how you feel?”

“Absolutely.” I set the basket down and finished putting the flowers in the vase in front of us. “Tani left because she wanted more love than you and I could provide for her. Now, it’s just us.”

“And now you’re the one running.” He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ears.

“Do I have a choice?” I took his hand into mine and turned my attention back to the gravestone. “My job’s dangerous and my husband decided to love someone other than me.”

“And I’m sorry for that.” He dropped his head to his chest and took a shaky breath. “How do we fix it, Dani?”

“This is a start I think.” I leaned toward him and rested my head against his strong shoulder. “I’m dating a criminal who

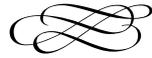
has more tats than one person should be allowed to have. He drives a big, loud bike and cusses a lot.”

“And you love this hoodlum?” There was no condemnation in my father’s voice. It was a bit shocking.

“I think I do.” I turned a little and glanced up at my dad. “And I think he loves me.”

My dad turned and smiled. “Then I guess that’s enough.”

CHAPTER 23



RYDER

Axel pulled up beside me and pulled off his helmet before speaking. “He’s going to know we’re here.”

I turned my bike off and motioned for the other guys in the MC to do the same. “He already knows we’re here, Axel. He’s been goading me to do this for years.”

“That’s true, boss.” Sabian moved up beside me, the bastard never wearing a helmet. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re just going in both barrels blaring. Try hard not to get your ass shot. Got it?” I turned and looked at everyone as they crowded as closely around me as they could.

“Let’s do this shit.” Hyde started his hog again and swerved around all of us.

“Well damn.” I pulled my helmet back on and took off after him. The bastard was crazy as all get out no matter what we did. Scary enough, time wasn’t going to change that, or it didn’t seem like it was.

I half-expected shots to be fired at us from the windows, but the house sat quietly as we drove up. I motioned for two of the guys to move around to the back and one on each side just in case anyone made a run for it.

After parking my bike, I walked up to the front door with my gun drawn. Axel stood just to the left of me.

“Let me kill him, Jon. You got Jason you need to raise and a family that depends on you. I ain’t got anyone. Let me do this for you. For all of us.”

“Not a chance.” I stopped in front of the door and glanced over at him. “Besides, there’s a pretty girl back at the shop that’s just waiting patiently for you to stop being a pussy and ask her out.”

“Ellie?” He almost sounded surprised.

I snorted. “I hate you sometimes.”

“Ditto.”

We turned and kicked the door down before pulling back. Nothing. I knelt and leaned around the opening to see if anyone was waiting for us. No one.

“Weird. Where are these mother fuckers?”

“Not in here.” Hyde walked through the lobby of the mansion toward us.

I rolled my eyes and got up. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Taking one for the team. Hello?” He waved his gun around.

“Put that up.” Axel nodded toward the gun. “Check all the rooms and see where these mother fuckers are.”

“They knew we were coming.” I walked in and tucked my gun in the back of my pants. “How though.”

“Fucking Tanner King has eyes everywhere, man. You know as well as I do that his little sister probably told him. She plays whatever part he gives her. We all know that.” Sabian walked in through the side door near the study. “She told him.”

“And he ran?” Jax asked. “No way. That’s not King’s style at all.”

“Jax is right.” I turned in a full circle before catching the scent of gas. “Get the fuck outta here. The place has a gas leak.”

Everyone ran for the front of the house and bounded down the stairs. We barely made it to the yard before the house exploded, which sent us flying. Fire lit up the night behind us, and the sound of groans filled the air.

I lifted up in time to see a bike cut across the field with two people on it. One had to be Cade and the other? A woman with long hair. I couldn't make out her figure as my ears rang and my face burned.

"There." I lifted my hand to point to them before I dropped back down on my side. I blinked a few times and growled as someone pulled me by my arms back away from the house.

"He alright?" Flex dropped down beside me.

"Yeah. Give him some fucking room." Axel growled.

"I'm good." I rolled onto my stomach and tried to get up. The world spun a little, but I reached out and grabbed Axel's arm. "Fuck. Did the-

"Yeah. The goddamn house exploded." Jax walked up. "Unbelievable. You know how much money that fucking house was probably worth?"

"King doesn't care." Sabian reached out and patted the side of my face. "Ryder. You alright, boss?"

"Yeah. Someone lit that fucker on us." I pointed again. "I know I saw Cade drive off, but there was a woman with him."

"Candace?" Axel asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so." My head throbbed painfully as worry danced deep inside of me. Had Dani been on the back of that bike? Was that her promise to Tanner? She'd told me straight up that she was to deliver me to him. What better way to do it than piss me off with the idea that Tan was fucking with my girl. That he had somehow hurt her or kidnapped her?

Was Jason in on it too? He'd been the one to plant the seed.

"Hey. Stay with us, buddy." Axel was in my face. "You alright."

"Yeah. Get the hell outta my personal space." I pushed at his chest and walked away from them as the fire burned bright behind me. I had to get myself together. I was getting

paranoid. We'd come to take Tanner out, and the bastard had almost single handedly taken all of us out - together.

He couldn't have pulled that off alone.

Not without the help of someone close to me.

Or several someones.



It took a while to get back to the lodge, but when we did, Candace was still there. The bartender confirmed that she'd been there the whole time, and hadn't used her phone once. She was pretty pissed when I insinuated that she was in with Tanner.

"Axel. Take her to your place, man." I pointed at her and narrowed my eyes. "I find out that you were involved in this shit and you're gonna wish you never showed up here for help."

"Jon. Seriously?" She locked her jaw.

"Yeah. I'm dead serious right now." I nodded at Axel, who gave me a look of understanding. He had my back, even if it meant taking my pregnant ex-girlfriend to his place until things could calm down. "I'm going home to sleep for a few hours. I'll touch base later. Thanks for tonight."

"Anything for you, boss. Sorry, it got fucked up." Sabian's voice followed me out of the lodge as he and the other guys tried to figure things out.

Frustration and fury burned deep in my stomach as I reached my bike and got on it. If Candace hadn't left the lodge, then who the fuck was on the back of Cade's bike? There were only a few choices, and really only one that made sense.

Danielle.

"No," I mumbled and started the bike, deciding to forgo the helmet. Death was coming for me sooner rather than later. I might as well enjoy living on the edge until it showed up.

The ride home helped to calm me down a little, but not nearly as much as I needed it to. The sound of someone in my dining room when I walked in had me on edge.

“Don’t pull out that gun.” Tanner walked out from the kitchen with his gun in his hand. Cade sat at my kitchen table with his gun pointed right at me.

“I can’t believe we mattered enough tonight for you to blow up your daddy’s old mansion.” I put my gun on the table and walked to the kitchen, moving around them like they were guests in my house. I grabbed a beer and popped the top, drinking half of it before walking back out and sitting down at the kitchen table. “Your mom would be heartbroken if she knew that house was trashed. She sold a lot of pussy for that place.”

“Fuck you, Jon.” Tanner hit me in the back of the head - hard.

I took another sip of my beer and leaned back, letting out a sigh. “What can I do for you boys tonight?”

“You know why I’m here.” He moved around me and pulled a chair right up to mine before dropping into it.

I reached out and gripped his head, smacking mine into it and busting his nose.

“Boss?” Cade stood and moved closer, his gun pointed right at my face.

“You fucker. I shouldn’t have fallen for that.” Tanner gripped his nose and smiled as blood dripped down his white shirt. “How many times have you broken my goddamn nose?”

“Too many to count.” I finished my beer and let out a growl before shifting my attention to Tanner’s boy. “So tell me something, you big fucker.”

“What?” Cade barked out as he reached over to get a towel off the kitchen table. He tossed it at Tanner.

“Who was on the back of your bike tonight? Out at Tanner’s momma’s house?”

“Dani.” Cade tilted his head to the side and smiled. “Who did you think it was? Your baby momma?”

“What do you want from me, Tan?” I leaned back in my chair as if I was more than relaxed having them both in my house. It wasn’t a surprise. Tanner King was predictable at best. He didn’t want to fight. He wanted loyalty. He wanted to feel like I belonged to him like I was still in his camp.

“I need that file. Dani has it in her desk drawer, brother. Ask for it.”

“I’m not your brother, mother fucker. You were dead to me a long time ago. You know this.”

Tanner chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “Axel never made it home with Candace.”

“What are you talking about?” I tried to keep my voice steady even though my nerves were on edge.

“One of my guys put a bullet in her head about a mile from the lodge.” He shrugged. “And you’re welcome.”

“What?” I moved to grab him, but Cade pushed me back.

I stumbled over my chair and fell on my ass, hitting my already-sore head on the wall behind me. “You killed your own fucking sister?”

“Yeah. For you.” He shrugged and stood up. “That wasn’t your baby, man. She was a whore like mom was.”

He was a sick motherfucker when we were younger, but he’d gone off the deep end now.

I reached for my phone, searching for it. “Fuck.”

“Candace slipped it out of your pocket at the lodge for me.” He pulled the rag from his face and moved closer to me. “Women can’t be trusted, Jon. You know this. All of them are sick bitches, and they deserve what they get. Candace didn’t care about you, neither does this cop.”

“Get out or shoot me, bitch. I’m too tired for this shit.” I turned to get up, and he kicked the hell out of my ribs. Blood

dripped from my mouth as I groaned and still forced myself to stand. “Get out.”

“Get the file.”

“Or?”

“Don’t ask, man. I have no soul. I’ll take anyone and everyone out.” He patted my back.

I swatted his hand away. “Whose baby was it, Tanner?”

“Jason’s.” He laughed and walked to the door. “Get the file, and the cop can go free. Otherwise, we’ll dope her ass up and send her off to the next orgy as a free-for-all. Just like I did her sister, Tani. Super horny slut. I wonder if Dani is any better.”

A scream of rage erupted from me as I forced myself toward him. “I fucking hate you.”

“I know.” He backed up and motioned for Cade to join him. “I hate you too.”

CHAPTER 24



DANI

I didn't sleep a wink the night before. I couldn't. Too many worries kept me up. For some reason, it felt like I had so much more to lose than I already had.

After the sun filled my living room with light, I texted Johnny. I had to see him. It was time to clear things up between us. He was more than happy to meet me at a small coffee shop I loved near NYU. DeLuca. The coffee was fresh, and the people were nice.

I needed some normalcy in my life for a few minutes. Maybe being around other people in a crowded place with the man I was falling in love with would do the trick.

Doubtful, but maybe.

After getting dressed, I walked down to the parking lot to find Johnny standing beside his black Mustang. "Hey, beautiful."

"Hi." I walked up to him and slid my hands up his chest. "We need to talk. I want all this shit between us cleaned up."

"Even if Tanner King kills us both for doing it?" He slid his hands over my hips and rested his fingers on the top curve of my ass. "Cause all he wants is to take you from me, Dani."

"Do I belong to you?" I pressed my chest against his and breathed in deeply. The scent of his cologne lit my body on fire. There wasn't another man in my life or from my past that I remembered being able to do that with.

“Do you want to?” He brushed my hair back and leaned down to kiss me.

The softness of his lips against mine lifted my spirit. He wasn't involved in the situation at the precinct or with Tani. He wasn't the bastard that Tanner had tried to make him out to be. He couldn't be.

And if he was... I was going to take my chances and find out for myself.

“Coffee?” He touched his forehead to mine and smiled. “You want to go have a cup of coffee like a bunch of yuppies while the world is burning down around us?”

“With you? Yeah. I do.” I kissed him and moved back. “Let's figure all of this out and put Tanner King in the ground if we can.”

“I tried that last night.” He walked around the car and got in as I got into my side. “He blew up the building around me. I was lucky to get the guys out of there before we all lost our fucking lives.”

“Shit.” I buckled and reached over, wanting to touch him. “He ran me off the road last weekend and I sunk to the bottom of the river near your house.”

“Danielle! Fuck, baby.” He turned and moved toward me, grabbing me roughly. The worry in his eyes was enough to melt me completely. “Why didn't you tell me that shit?”

“Because I wanted to try and do my part by myself. I don't need to be saved, Johnny.”

“What if I do?” He kissed me passionately, forcing his tongue deep into my mouth. I gave into him and closed my eyes as the world melted around me. Nothing mattered but the feeling of his fingers in my hair, his warm palm pressed against my cheek, his passion filling up the car. He broke the kiss and smiled. “I might have to drag you back upstairs and give you a good fucking before coffee.”

I laughed and leaned back in my seat. “After we get this figured out, let's rent a room in a nice hotel and not leave for a week.”

“I’m down with that.” He licked his lips and put his hands on the steering wheel. “Tell me everything that happened with Tanner, baby. I need to know.”

I took a deep breath and let it spill out. All of it. The sex traffic busts, saving Caroline, her telling Tanner my name, our shared kiss, getting driven off the bridge, kidnapped and the fucker being in my house. There wasn’t a moment I left out just in case he knew anything about what I’d been through already.

“Dani.” He pulled up in front of DeLuca and faced me. “I would never cheat on a woman. Not ever. I wasn’t with anyone when I fucked Candace.”

“Tell me what happened with you.”

“I will. Let’s grab a cup of coffee, and I’ll spill.” He leaned over and kissed me once more before getting out of the car. I met him at the front of the Mustang, and he took my hand and lifted my fingers to his lips, kissing them as we walked toward the cafe.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled my nose as I walked in and let the place calm my soul.

“Hey, guys. I’m Jenna. What can I get started for you today?” A pretty girl at the counter smiled at us.

“Hazelnut latte and whatever this big guy is having.” I moved up and pressed my hands to the counter.

“Big?” Johnny walked up and smiled down at me. “That a hint?”

“She just called you fat, brother.”

We turned as a good looking blond guy walked up and offered his hand to Johnny.

“Nate. Good to see again man. Sorry it’s so soon.” Johnny pulled the guy in for a hug before turning to me. “This is my girl, Dani.”

“Good to meet you, Dani. This is my girl, Jenna. The one I came by the shop for the other day.” Nate nodded to the cute girl behind the counter.

I turned around and extended my hand. “Small world?”

“I guess.” Jenna turned her attention back to Nate. “How do you and Johnny know each other?”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t even remember the first time our paths crossed.”

“Me either, but I feel sorry for you knowing they did.” Johnny chuckled and reached for me. “Alright. It’s private time with my lady. Get lost, Nate. You’re too much of a pretty boy to have you hanging around us.”

Nate rolled his eyes. “See you later, my man.”

“Later.” Johnny turned back to Jenna. “Sorry you ended up with that guy.”

She laughed. “I’m not. He’s my everything.”

“I like that.” I snuggled against Johnny and glanced up at him. “I’ll grab a table.”

“I’ll get the drinks.” He released me and walked over to the end of the bar.

I made my way to a private table near the window, sitting down and lifting my eyes to study him. His jeans were low on his hips like they always were. His ass looked damn good in them, but they were nothing compared to the thick muscles of his arms and back as they pressed against his shirt. I wanted that week in a hotel with him. I needed to touch every part of him, to taste his skin and hear his moan for me.

“What are you thinking about?” Johnny sat down and handed me a cup of coffee.

“Tasting you.” I glanced down at my cup and back up at him. Embarrassment raged through me.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t let me stop you, pretty girl.”

“Let’s get all this shit over with.” I reached across the table and touched his arm. “Real quick. Tanner made me swallow a tracker.”

Fury covered Johnny’s handsome face. “He did what? Forced something in your mouth?”

I nodded. “Your turn. I just want you to know that wherever I am for the next few weeks, he’ll be able to find me.”

“No, he won’t. I’m going to put a bullet in his head tonight.” He leaned back. “He told me that he’d kill you, my brothers, my sisters, and Jason if I didn’t get the physical file on him from the police station.”

“Did you have anything to do with someone hacking the system at the police station and wiping out all the electronic files?”

“Nope, but I will tell you that someone on the force had to do that. It’s not something an outside hacker could do.” He shook his head as he watched me closely. “Someone high up.”

“My Captain?” I lowered my voice. “He’s the one that handed me the fucking file and told me to keep it in my desk. It was too much honestly. As if he knew you would be asking for it.”

“I doubt it was that well communicated, but if he gave you the file, then he’s the one. No one hands over a file on a man like Tanner King without knowing what he’s doing.” He picked up his cup. “We need to get the file and make it look like we’re following along just like he told us to.”

I nodded. “Tell me what to do.”

“Go get the file and meet me at the playground where Jason smoked dope. I’ll tell Tanner that we have the file and to meet us out there.” He paused and sat back, his mood shifting way too fast. “Dani. Where were you last night?”

“With my dad. I met him at the church, put flowers on Tani’s grave and then we had dinner at his house. Why?”

“There was a woman out at the mansion. Tanner’s mansion. I didn’t get to make out who she was, but it wasn’t Candace.”

“Have you asked her? It very well could have been-”

“She’s dead, baby. Tanner shot her in the head.”

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hands. “His own sister?”

“His own pregnant sister.” Johnny glanced down as sorry filled his voice. “She was pregnant with Jason’s baby.”

“She slept with you and your nephew?” The horror kept rolling over me in thicker and thicker waves.

“Oh yeah. She was a slut and a half, but Tanner was the cause of that. He used her up every chance he got for his business.”

“I thought you were dating her.”

“I was when I was a kid. We ended it and just saw each other off and on.” He shrugged. “I have no clue if she ever really cared about me.” His dark blue eyes locked on mine as he glanced up. “And I don’t care anymore. Let’s fix this shit and try to see where we can go.”

“I’m moving back into sex crimes. It’s my calling in life.”

“Then I’ll help.”

“You want to join the police force?”

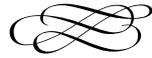
“Be realistic, woman. I’m not joining the good guy crew, but if you’re going into a hotspot, I’m going in with you.” He leaned back and lifted his cup to his lips. “Tanner didn’t touch you did he, Danielle?”

“No. Not at all.” I stared my man in the face and held my chin up. “And I hope you know that I never would have ever handed you over to him. No matter what.”

He smiled. “I believe that with all my heart, baby girl. It’s gonna get fucking ugly before it gets better. You ready to make this shit happen.”

I nodded. “If it means we get to live free of Tanner King when it’s all said and done? Yeah, I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 25



RYDER

I took Dani back to her place and dropped her off, kissing the hell out of her several times before I let her get out of the car. Every cell in my body screamed for me to go upstairs and make love to her before the night fell. Things would never be the same after that night. One way or another, we were going to find freedom. And not just for ourselves, but for all the women that Tanner enslaved in his fucked up sex trafficking business.

After watching my girl walk up to her apartment, I pulled out and headed to the shop. A sense of calm had settled over me by the time I pulled up to the garage. The sound of several tools running mixed with the smell of gasoline and tires made it feel like home.

“Hey. Anyone here?” I stopped at the opening to the garage and looked around.

“Johnny. I tried to call last night, brother.” Axel walked out and extended his hand to me. “Candace got hit in the back of the head on the ride home last night. I tried to get to her as fast as I could, but she swerved off the road and into the gorge. It was fucking ugly man.”

“I know. Tanner told me.” I took his hand and pulled him in for a quick hug.

“The baby, dude.”

“Wasn’t mine, but it’s still horrible.” I released him and ran my hands down my face. “Tanner’s a sick mother fucker. Killing his own sister and her child.”

“His kind of evil knows no end.” Axel reached out and patted my chest. “I’m glad to see you up and moving. You scared the shit out of us last night after that explosion. I think you were the one closest to it.”

“Probably.” I glanced around. “Where’s El?”

“She’s around here somewhere.” He rolled his eyes. “She’s wearing shorts for fuck’s sake.”

“And?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“And she looks like sex on a goddamn platter. I’m going to put her on the hood of a car and eat her sweet ass around the shorts if she doesn’t stop flaunting her ass around me.” He growled and gave me a look that I understood all too well. It’s the same way I felt around Dani.

“Got it.” I slipped my hands in my pocket. “You gonna be alright if I skip out for a few days.”

“You running, man?”

“Not a chance. I’m taking Tanner out tonight.” I shrugged. “I just need a few days to myself when it’s over.”

“Let us come with you. We’re a brotherhood, Johnny. It’s what we do.”

“I know, but I’m not planning on taking out all the bastards in the Black Heart MC. Just their leader.”

“Then you bring a war to our doors.”

“One that we’re happy to have, right?” I tilted my head and studied him.

“Hell, yes. Let me at least go with you.”

“No. I do this on my own tonight. Tanner was once part of our MC, and he took a turn toward the darkness. I couldn’t save him, man. I couldn’t save him or Roberto or Jason.”

“You’re not the savior, brother. It don’t work like that.”

“Maybe so.” I smiled and patted his shoulder. “I’ll be back in a few days. Text or call if you need me, okay?”

“Will do, but you check in later tonight? Somehow. Just get a word to me that you’re alright and let me know if Mr. King’s body needs to be disposed of.”

“I will.” I turned and walked out of the shop, hoping like hell that I’d live long enough to see it again.

I enjoyed my life, but I enjoyed knowing that the risk I was taking would maybe provide some much needed freedom for the people I loved even more.

It made it all worth it.



I got off my bike at the playground and called Tanner.

“Talk to me.”

“I’m at the old playground we use to light up at. Dani is bringing the file over. Come get it and get the fuck out of my life.”

“No trick? No jokes? No guns?”

“Just a file and a tired old man, you bitch.” I glanced up at the stars and said a silent prayer. My mother always believed in God. Maybe her God would hear me and grant me a little bit of grace in what I was about to do.

“I’ll be right there, Jon.”

I dropped the call and slipped my phone in my back pocket as a cop car pulled up. Dani.

She got out as I walked toward her with a serious look on my face. “You got the file?”

“I did.” She shut the door and walked around the car, extending her hand to me. “Is he on his way to get it?”

“Yes. Get in your car and get out of here.” I pulled her close and leaned down, kissing her a couple of times. “I don’t want you anywhere near Tanner when he gets here.”

“No. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“Yeah. You are.” I nipped at her mouth. “Go get our hotel and wait for me. I’ll be there before you can blink twice. I’m not able to protect me and you. Don’t put me in danger by staying here. Go.”

“Johnny.” She shook her head as her eyes filled with tears. “What if something happens?”

“Something is going to happen. I’m going to clean up the mess I helped make. Tanner was my best friend, and if I’d done things a little differently back then, I maybe could have saved him. He’s mine to put out of his misery. He’s not happy. He’s not human anymore. Get out of here, and I’ll find you as soon as it’s done, baby. Now.” I patted her ass and kissed her again, taking a lot longer than I should have.

“Fine. Call the minute it’s done.” She jogged towards the car, her long brown hair dancing behind her as she left. “Promise?”

“Yes. Get outta here, you needy bitch.” I winked and turned away from the car. I needed a few minutes to think.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get more than a minute.

“Where do you think she’s going?” Tanner smiled and walked out of the forest at the edge of the property with something in his hand.

“Hopefully far away from here.” I pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I hadn’t smoked in ages, but my nerves were completely fried. I lit up a cig and offered it to him. “Want one?”

“No. I smoked a joint before coming up here.” He glanced around and lifted the item in his hand. “I knew you would win the girl over. I tried, you know, to get her to bend a little. To come to the dark side.”

I snorted. “I live on the dark side, Tan. She’s already here. She’s the worst cop I know. Well, maybe outside of some of those bastards you have working for you.”

“Maybe.” He ran his thumb over a bright blue button on the panel. “You know it’s not your fault that things turned out like this, right? It was my mother’s fault.”

“I should have been there for you, but I was lost in the grief over losing my brother and my father so close together.” I took a deep drag from the cigarette as I watched him.

He nodded. “Your father I had nothing to do with, but your brother... he was my fault.”

“I’m sorry?” I tossed the cigarette toward a puddle of water on the ground. “You couldn’t have had anything to do with Roberto. He OD’d. You know this.”

“Yeah. I know real well.” He looked up, his dark eyes filled with hate. “Did you sleep with my mother, Jon? Was that you I saw between her legs, fucking her the day my dad shot himself?”

And there it was.

I nodded. “I was a kid, Tanner. Your mom was a whore and a beautiful one. I got toked up and came to see you. I had no idea what I was doing.”

“Right.” He was far too calm. “I had no clue what I was doing either the day I sat on Roberto’s chest and fed him pills until he convulsed and threw up blood all over me.” He shook his head, his eyes dead. “I was high just like you were.”

“You didn’t do that. You wouldn’t.” I gripped my hands into fists. I wasn’t going to shoot him. I was going to strangle him until he died under the pressure of my fingers.

“You fucked my mother!”

“I thought she was Candace, you bitch!” I moved toward him aggressively as he held up the device.

“Well, the score isn’t settled, asshole. You made me kill my sister. I’m one down.”

“You did that shit because you’re a sick mother fucker.” I glanced down to the device. “What is that?”

“Let me show you.” He lifted it and hit the button.

I charged at him as something exploded from behind me. The sound and smell left me with one conclusion. Dani’s car. He had to have set a bomb on Dani’s car.

“You sorry bastard.” I took him down and straddled him as I wrapped my hands around his throat. “You’re a disease that has spread all over my life, taking everything I love and destroying it.”

He flipped us around and pulled out a blade, jamming it in my chest before I could get to him. “No, you’re the one destroying it. You saved my life only to change the entire course of it in one afternoon.” He twisted the knife and pulled it out, preparing to stab me again. “Did you read the goddamn note that my dad left?”

“Tan. Stop it. You know I didn’t do that shit on purpose.”

“He put your fucking name in there.” He pressed down harder, and my arms shook as I tried to hold him away. “He put in the note for me to tell you that he fucking loved you like a son. You sorry son of a bitch. You were the one he found her with.” He laughed maniacally. “He just didn’t know it was you, Jon. He killed himself over you and then left a note reminding me to tell you that he loved you.”

“I loved him too, and I loved you, bastard.” I pushed back up, but the explosion the day before had me weary, and the thought of Dani being dead down the road gave me very little to fight for.

I saw the faces of my family. My friends and the MC. I heard the sound of Dani’s voice, but I couldn’t tell where it was from so I didn’t try to.

A gunshot rang out, and the pressure of Tanner subsided as he dropped to the ground beside me.

“Tan?” I whispered and rolled on my side as blood covered my fingers from the stab wound. It was too close to my heart. Maybe it was time to go. My mom and dad would be waiting anyway. Roberto. Candace.

“Johnny.” Dani dropped down beside me and got into my face, her tears coating my skin as she cried uncontrollably. “Hold on, baby. The ambulance is coming.”

“But your car,” I took a painful breath and groaned. “He blew it up.”

“I’d already gotten out of it, Johnny. I was running back to hide in the bushes and shoot him. He’s dead. Please don’t leave okay? Just hang in there. Please. For me.”

“For you,” I whispered and reached up to touch her silky hair one more time before the darkness took me under.

Peace. For the first time in my life... I knew peace.

EPILOGUE



DANI

Two Weeks Later

I finished up making three fluffy pancakes and put two strips of bacon on the plate before I loaded it up on the tray I'd bought a few weeks back.

"Perfect," I mumbled and reached down to pull my breasts up a little. My tiny pink bra and panties were new and itched in all the wrong places, but they looked good. That's all that mattered. If things went the way I wanted them to, I wouldn't have them on very long anyway.

"Dani?" Johnny's voice met me in the hallway as I turned the corner to walk into the bedroom of our large hotel suite. A quick call to Johnny's friend Jax and we were in the penthouse suite in downtown New York the minute the hospital let him go.

"Right here, baby." I smiled and let my eyes wander down the length of his sexy body. Tattoos raced down his stomach and wrapped around his hips. Thick black tats wrapped around his arms and legs down to his ankles. It was the first time I'd gotten a chance to really see him fully naked in the sunlight. Or maybe that was when I got him home from the hospital. Either way, he was something beautiful to behold.

"What's that smell?" He pushed up with his arms behind him and flinched a little. "Fuck. When is this thing going to heal?"

"It's your heart, Jon. It's not just your skin." I put the tray down and turned to face him. "You want breakfast then me, or

me then breakfast.”

“Hm?” He turned his face toward me as his eyes widened a little. “Fuck. Where did you get that?”

“From the lingerie store in the mall under the hotel. This place is crazy. Jax outdid himself.”

He motioned for me to come to him. “He always does. Turn around for me. I wanna see the full picture before I rip it off of you.”

I stopped beside the bed and turned around slowly, feeling like a princess on display for my king. “You like it?”

“I love it.” He gripped my wrist and tugged me toward the bed before leaning down and sliding his hands over my bare ass cheeks. He squeezed and pressed his mouth to the side of my neck. “Get up here and fuck me. It’s been two weeks since this damn doctor fixed my chest. I need you.”

Two weeks were what we were told to wait if we didn’t want to break the stitches in his chest. Two fucking long weeks to the day.

I got up on the bed and straddled him, and he ran his hands over my breasts and up to my hair. He tugged my bun loose as he licked and kissed my breasts.

“God that feels good.” I rocked my hips, needing to feel the length of his cock against my wetness. “I want you inside of me.”

“Patience, Kitten.” He leaned back and smiled. “You look incredible. By far the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Take your bra off for me, Dani.”

“Your flattery-”

“Will get me everywhere I want to be.” He reached up and tugged at the front of my bra. “Off. Now.”

I reached behind and worked it off before tossing it behind me. “Tell me if your chest hurts.”

“Not a chance.” He tugged at my nipples and licked his lips. “Panties next, you bad girl.”

“No condom.” I moved to my knees and then stood up with his help. I slid my panties down my legs and started to move back into his lap.

“No. Let me taste you. Come ride my face.” He leaned his head back and pulled at my hand.

“Like this?” I walked to the top of the bed and put my knee on his pillow. He lifted up and pressed his mouth to my pussy as I gasped at the sudden contact.

“Just like that,” he mumbled as he forced my other leg up. I gripped the headboard and pressed back, forcing more of his tongue inside of me.

Pleasure rolled through me and over me in delicious waves as he worked me with his hands and tongue, his teeth and lips. When I couldn't take another second, I bucked against him and came long and hard.

“Mmmhmmm.” His moans vibrated against my clit, sending me into over drive.

“Shit.” I found my footing and stepped back before lowering myself onto his lap.

“Turn around. I wanna see your ass while you work me.” He pulled me close and kissed me deeply, leaving the taste of my lust on my tongue. I licked at his mouth before turning and straddling his thighs.

“Don't do anything, Johnny. Let me do everything.”

“Hush and get to it.” He held onto his cock as I lowered myself onto him. The pressure was delicious, and I wanted to take my time, but I was so fucking wet that he slid in deep the first time I pushed back on him.

We shared a deep groan, and I sat there, pulsing my hips forward in short fast movements as he gripped my ass and lifted me off and back down on him.

“You have no idea how fucking hot you are.” He pressed his thumb against my ass and squeezed my cheek with the other. “Take your time and fuck yourself real good, Dani. I know you've been wanting this.”

“More than you can imagine.” I gripped the sheets between our legs and rode him slow and steady. The pressure building up inside of me forced me to pick up my speed. I reached down and pressed my fingers to my clit, unashamed of the desire to explode in a way that left me whimpering and shaking.

“Fuck, woman. I’m gonna come if you’re not careful.” He popped my ass hard, and I lost it, my body buckling and forcing me to lean over further.

“Dani,” he cried out and lifted his hips, driving himself into me as he found his own release.

I pushed back, meeting him stroke for stroke as he lost himself in the wetness of my body. I pulled off the minute he collapsed against the sheets and turned to check on him.

“You okay?”

“Hush and get up here.” He pulled me up to lay on top of him. I moved over a little to make sure I wasn’t touching the small bandages that remained across his chest. I kissed the side of his upper body and moved down to snuggle into his side.

“Do we really have to leave here today?” I asked, wishing we didn’t.

“Yeah, but I’m ready to go home. We need to get back to life.” He leaned over and kissed the top of my head. “I know it’s only been a few weeks, but I’m not sleeping without you. You living with me or am I living with you?”

“You love that old house, right?”

He nodded. “I do. It was my mom’s, but I love you more.”

“You do?” I moved up to my elbow. I’d figured that it would be months or maybe even years before he told me that he loved me. Maybe death softened him up a little bit.

“Yeah, but only if you love me too.” His smirk was beyond cute.

“I love you with all of my heart.”

“And your pussy?” He pulled me down for a long kiss as I squirmed against him and called him several less than pleasant names.

He did love me, and I knew by far more than his words.



The phone rang as we got into the car to head home. I tensed up, scared for a minute that it was Tanner. He was the only one that seemed to know where we were or what we were doing, but no. Tanner King was dead. I'd shot him in the forehead myself.

I had the nightmares to prove it.

“This is Ryder.” Johnny answered the phone.

I got in the car and buckled up. He did the same and put the phone between us.

“What's up?” I asked.

“That was Axel. Something happened at the shop. I'm going to swing by there and see what's up before we head over to your place.”

“I thought we were staying at your house.”

“We gotta get your stuff, sexy girl.” He took my hand and pulled it into his lap.

“Did he say what happened?”

“No, which means it isn't good.” He let out a long breath and pulled out of the parking lot of our fancy hotel. It was back to life, which was a good and bad thing. At least we were doing it together.

I rested my head back against the seat and closed my eyes as weariness tugged at me. We'd been through a lot in the last month, and I was tired. I knew Johnny was too. Whatever was going on at the shop, I prayed it was something small and easily manageable.

We pulled up to see Axel and several of the other guys standing around with a pretty dark-haired girl. The building behind them was nothing more than ashes. A firetruck sat to the side of the damage, and a huge group of firemen were cleaning up the mess.

“Holy shit.” Johnny threw the car in park and got out, groaning as he did.

“Hey. Look who finally got sleeping beauty to wake the fuck up.” One of the guys walked toward him and lifted his hand.

Johnny hugged him before walking over and standing in front of another guy. “What happened, Axel?”

“Looks like it is what I said it would be.” He glanced over his shoulder and back. “Us killing King brought a war to our door.”

“There’s only like four or five Black Hearts, guys. What’s the big fucking deal?” The first guy walked up and shook his head, acting like it was a joke.

“There are thousands of them around the world.” Johnny glanced back at me and offered his hand.

I took it, and he pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me. “Who did it?”

“Jason.” The big guy responded and turned his attention to me. “I’m Axel.”

“We met at the lodge.” I offered him a smile.

“I know. I wasn’t sure you remembered.”

“How do you know it was Jason?” Johnny took the conversation back.

“He left a note man. It was his good deed to show his pledge to the Black Hearts. He got initiated and received his first patch from those bastards for doing this.”

“He’s no longer family.” Johnny let out a painful sounding sigh. “He’s an enemy.”

“Yeah, and one with a reason for vengeance.” Axel handed Johnny the note. “He thinks you killed his dad, man. Tanner must have convinced him of that shit before he died.”

“Tanner killed my brother.” Johnny’s arm tightened around me.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that shit at all, but vengeance over a lost loved one is the strongest type there is. Just like Tanner wanted to watch you suffer for his dad’s suicide, now Jason’s taken his place.”

Johnny released me and glanced around. “His vengeance is built on lies, but if the Black Hearts want a war... then they’ll fucking get one. Who’s in?”

Axel nodded. “We ride for the lost.”

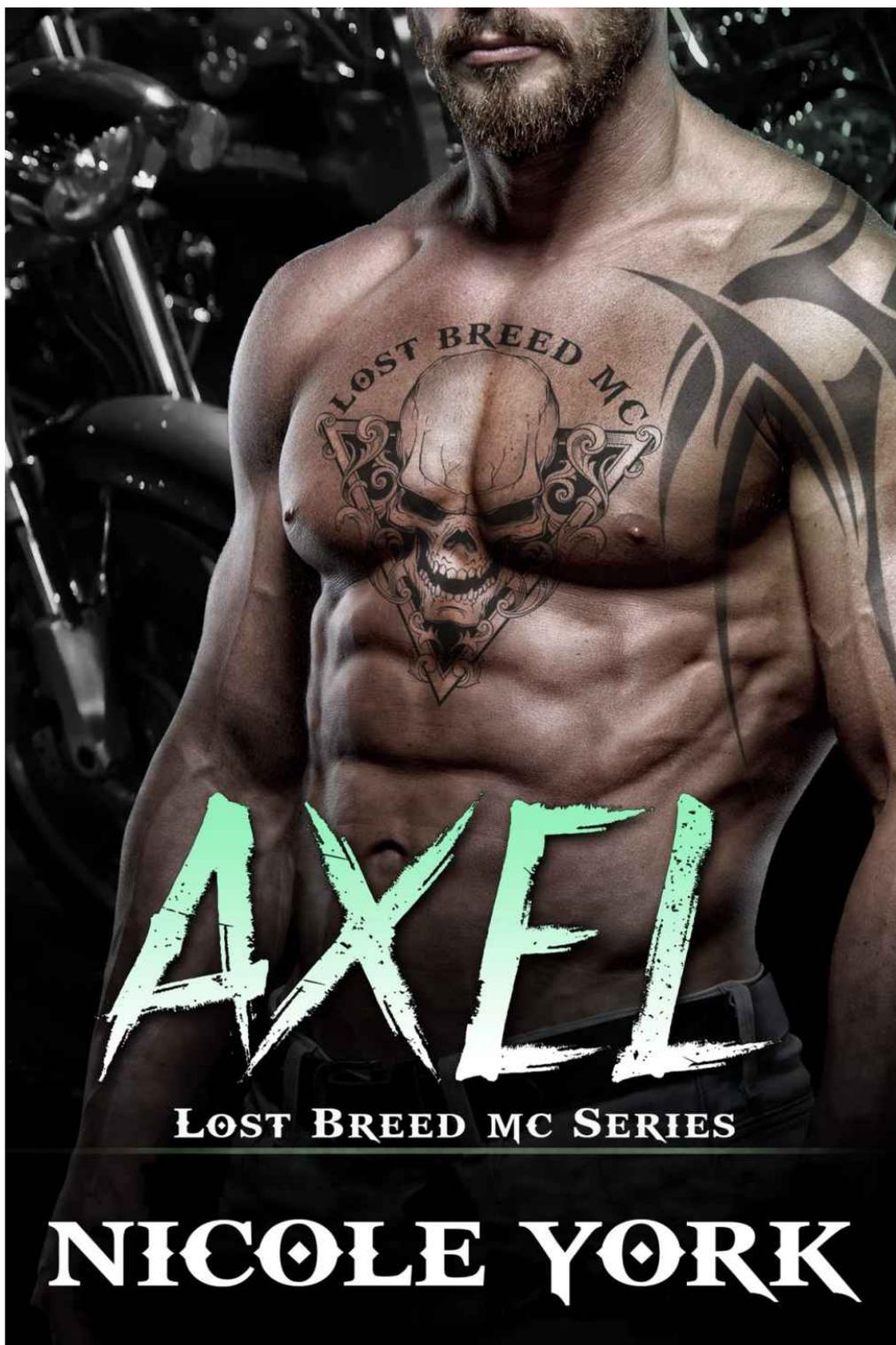
“The left behind.” A dark-haired guy lifted his fist in the air.

“The abused.” A handsome guy with a suit lifted his fist.

“The abandoned.” A young guy with a great smile and big muscles lifted his fist.

“The forgotten.” Hyde lifted his as well and glanced over at me and Johnny.

“We ride for each other.” Ryder lifted his hand in the air and made a loud noise that everyone echoed. “No mercy tonight for Jason, and no mercy for his MC.”



AXEL

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



They wanted to attack my house. My family. My MC.

And for that, I brought hell to their doorstep.

An eye for an eye.

Little did I know that the favor would be returned in full.

Everything I hold dear is threatened, including the beautiful girl who holds my heart and doesn't know it yet.

Shit gets serious when the cops show up with a little one that's supposedly mine?

My MC has always been the only family I've ever had, but times are changing.

There's nothing I won't do to protect what's mine from The Black Hearts.

Even kill – every last one of them.

CHAPTER 1



AXEL

The only recognizable thing from the aftermath of the fire that destroyed our shop was the metal frame of an old Chevy Impala I had been working on for the last couple weeks. The interior had been replaced just weeks ago, and now it had burned away, leaving nothing but rusty floorboards behind. The dash was melted and deformed and the bright blue paint that had coated the outside of the car was gone.

I kicked the bumper, which groaned and creaked before falling to the ashes of the shop floor.

“All this fucking work down the drain,” I growled as soot puffed into the air beneath my boots and the fallen bumper. Something silver glinted up at me amongst the rubble. I dropped to a crouch and discovered one of my wrenches. I tossed it end over end as I got to my feet.

Someone’s boots crunched as they approached. I looked over my shoulder to see the President of the MC, Johnny, stepping over the debris. His face was set in a stern expression that revealed no emotion. If he was as angry as I was, I couldn’t tell.

“What do you want to do about this shit?” I gestured at the remnants of our shop.

Johnny looked up at me and then surveyed the destroyed mechanic shop. This was where he and I spent most of our time, and it was how we made our livelihood. He had family to worry about, and I knew thoughts of his younger sister were probably racing through his mind.

“Nothing yet,” Johnny said, meeting my gaze. “The boys are pissed. We have to keep our heads down for a bit before any of them get any bad ideas. Got it?”

I nodded.

Moments later, other members of the MC joined us and began looking for anything that might have survived the blaze. There wasn't much.

“Those Black Hearts fuckers are declaring war,” Jax muttered to my left. His light green eyes surveyed the damage and then swept up to Johnny. “What's the plan, Ryder?”

Johnny glanced at me. I held my tongue.

“No plan. Not yet,” Johnny said sternly, fixing Jax with a hard stare. “Tell the others to keep their cocks in their pants for the time being. Our first priority is rebuilding.”

“Rebuilding will take months,” I said.

Johnny shot me a look that shut me up. He was in no mood to be questioned. I crammed my hands into my pockets and waited as Johnny dismissed Jax to go tell the others to keep their heads down.

A female voice caught my attention.

“Axel?”

I looked to where the bay doors used to be. Ellie was approaching. She was wearing a pair of denim overalls. She had cut the legs off, and the hem sat at the top of her muscular thighs. The edges were frayed, and strands of it hung over her tanned skin as she stepped over debris. Her hair was slicked back in a long ponytail and looped through the hole in the back of her black baseball cap. She was makeup free, as per usual, and freckles speckled her nose and cheekbones. When she got close, she drew up short and looked between me and Johnny.

“Was anyone hurt?”

I shook my head.

She deflated like a balloon and pressed a hand to her chest. “Thank God. I was so worried. What the hell happened? Did someone fuck up while they were working or—”

“Black Hearts,” Johnny said.

Ellie looked at me. There were words tumbling around in her mouth, and I could see she was sorting through the best way to say them. Johnny had a temper, that much was true, but he would never direct his fury at her.

“What is it, Ellie?” I tried to encourage her to speak. There was tension in her shoulders now. She was worried. Perhaps she was more than worried.

“What does this mean?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“It’s nothing you need to concern yourself with, Ellie.” Johnny stepped over the bumper I had kicked off the front of the Chevy. “You can take a few days off now.”

“I don’t want time off,” Ellie said defensively.

“Well, you have it. We aren’t gonna pay you to fix shitboxes when we have no shop.”

Ellie bit her bottom lip and crossed her arms over her chest. The stance made her breasts swell over her arms, and her cleavage whispered sweet nothings at me at the neckline of her white T-shirt. I imagined ripping the straps of her denim overalls from her shoulders and bending her over the charred remains of the Chevy. I wanted to feel her breasts in my hands as I fucked her from behind, staining her shirt in soot and ash as I blew my load in her pussy.

This wasn’t the first time I had thought such things of Ellie. I shook my head to chase away the vision of her ass in the air and turned to Johnny. “A word?”

Johnny followed me out the back—or out through where the back wall used to be—and I took advantage of the time alone with him without the other guys around.

“I know you said you want to lay low,” I started, “but that feels like a mistake to me. These bastards burned our place to the ground. We can’t let them off the hook thinking there

aren't consequences for making a move like that against us. We'll look like a bunch of pussies."

Johnny arched an eyebrow and looked past me and back at the rubble of the shop. Ellie was crouched down sifting through the debris, and some of the other guys had stepped in to help. If there was something to be salvaged, they would find it. This place was important to all of us.

"I want it to be controlled."

"What?" I looked back at Johnny. "Controlled?"

"You and me. No one else."

"When?"

"Now. Let's not give those pricks any extra time laughing at our misfortune."

"I have everything we need in the trunk of my car," I said.

Johnny was already moving forward. I followed him back out through the shop. We drew stares, but no one spoke a word. They knew better. Johnny Moretti was not the kind of man you fucked with. None of us were. He'd been through hell and back and was still recovering from a stab wound to the heart, but he was formidable as ever. I would have his back tonight, no matter what.

The eyes of the other members of the MC were on us as we passed Ellie and the Impala. She looked up, her ponytail swishing across her back. "Where are you two going?"

"Out," Johnny said.

She stood and narrowed her eyes at me. "I thought we were lying low."

"We?" I asked, turning to face her. I took a step closer, taking up some of her space. She retreated a step. Then, her eyes hardened, and she never looked away from me. "What 'we'?"

She lifted her chin. The muscles of her jaw flexed.

I didn't want to hear whatever it was she was about to say.

I held up my hand and shook my head. “Forget it. You have work to do here. Salvage what you can. We’re going to need it.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but I was already turning away from her. Her fingers caught the sleeve of my shirt, and she hurried around in front of me, looking up at me with those sharp blue eyes of hers. “Johnny shouldn’t be doing anything ... physical,” she said after finding the right word. “He was stabbed just two weeks ago. You need to be careful. I don’t think you guys should—”

“I don’t care what you think we should or shouldn’t do. You have a job to do here. Focus your energy on that, not on me and Johnny. Got it?”

The anger in her eyes had me thinking she might fight me on this one. But she didn’t. She looked at her feet, blew out an exasperated breath, and then turned back to the Impala. “Just be careful, okay?”

I ignored her request and followed Johnny out to my car. Careful wasn’t a word that properly applied to what Johnny and I were about to do.

We pulled up in front of the dilapidated, single-story house around the time families would be tucking children into their beds. The front porch was bare of furniture but full of discarded beer cans. The lawn was mostly dirt with patches of brown grass. The house itself used to be yellow but had turned brown with moss and mold and years of disregard.

This was a Black Hearts clubhouse.

I parked the car across the street and tightened my grip on the steering wheel. “How many of those fuckers do you think are in there?”

“Hopefully, enough to make it a party,” Johnny grated beside me.

I felt my cheeks stretch into a grin I couldn’t control. “You ready, bitch?”

“Of course, I am,” Johnny Moretti said.

We both got out of the car and walked to the trunk. I popped it open, reached inside, and tossed a baseball bat to Johnny. His knuckles turned white as he gripped it tightly in his right hand. I grabbed one for myself and then reached for two black ski masks. I left the trunk open—we wouldn’t be gone long. Then, we marched across the street while pulling the masks down over our faces. Subtlety was for bitches.

We crossed the front yard, hopped up the four steps to the porch, and then exchanged a look. Johnny and I had been doing this shit for ages. He and I worked well together. Each of us always knew where the other would be, and when we lost complete control and gave into the rage, we could count on one another to reel it back in.

We were brothers.

I let out a furious shout and kicked the door in.

Johnny rushed in ahead of me with the baseball bat high over his shoulder. He was knocking shit off tables before I even made it inside.

The first room was the living room. It smelled of tobacco, booze, and weed, and there were white lines of powder on a piece of plywood resting across two milk crates—a classy coffee table. The couches were dark brown from years of use, and they hosted three men who were fucked out of their minds.

They were so out of it, they hadn’t even gotten to their feet by the time I made it into the house behind Johnny.

When they realized what was happening, they all let out furious yells and charged us.

Fighting men who were drunk and high was never a good time. They never felt a thing when you hit them, so you had to make sure you hit them hard enough to knock them out or at least knock them down.

Which was never usually a problem for Johnny and me.

The biggest man in the room went for Johnny. I resisted the urge to help my friend and trusted he could handle himself as another one of the Black Hearts launched himself over the back of the sofa and charged me.

The man was tall, taller than me by a good couple inches, and I wasn't considered short at my height of six foot three. He was bellowing with rage and screaming a stream of profanities at me as he dropped his head to come in low and take out my center of gravity.

It would have been a smart move if I didn't have a baseball bat.

I slammed my weapon over his back, and the man fell in a heap at my feet. He groaned in agony and writhed around as I stepped over him, ignoring his fingers as he grabbed at my pant legs.

I was moving in on guy number two, who was trying to get to Johnny as my friend used his elbows and fists on the guy in front of him. Johnny had always preferred to feel the toll of a fight with his own body. The baseball bat would be used only if completely necessary.

I, however, saw it for what it was, a tool to inflict more pain than my body could.

My baseball bat swung into the side of the third man's knee. He howled in pain and dropped to all fours. I used my knee to his jaw to knock him out cold.

At the same time, Johnny took down his man with a furious blow to the side of the head with his fist. Johnny turned back to me, shaking out his hand, and looked at the two I had brought down.

The one still conscious was still rolling around on his back while spitting curses at us.

"You fucking goofs," he slurred, high as a kite. "You don't know what you've just gone and did. We're Black Hearts, you fucks. Black Hearts!" His voice rose in pitch as he screamed those last words at us.

I dropped to a crouch in front of him and extended the baseball bat out to rest it under his chin. I forced his head up so that he was looking down the length of the bat and into my eyes. “We know exactly who you are, you piece of shit.”

The man swallowed, and the bat rolled against his Adam’s apple. I grabbed the edge of my mask under my jaw and pulled it off. The Black Hearts member’s eyes widened.

“You tell your boss that Axel Cooper is coming for him.”

The man nodded furiously.

Johnny shifted behind me. “He doesn’t get off that easy, Coop.”

I grinned. “You bet your ass he doesn’t.”

The man tried to shuffle backward. Fear passed over his face as I got to my feet and wound back with the bat. Anger roiled in my gut, and Johnny egged me on. These bastards had burned down my shop. My home. My livelihood.

Time to send a message of our own.

CHAPTER 2



ELLIE

I had managed to find most of Axel's tools amongst the rubble. I had piled it all in the place where his toolbox used to be on top of a tarp Jax had fetched from his car. Together, we sifted through everything, and after a couple hours, we were both grimy and smelled like smoke.

I wiped sweat from my forehead, and Jax chuckled.

"You look like Simba," he said.

"What?"

"Never mind," he shook his head and stooped to pull a deformed license plate from beneath what used to be a workbench. He shook ash and charred remains of something off it before tossing it over his shoulder with an irritated grunt. "Where'd Axel run off to? I thought he'd be insisting on being the only one to go through this mess."

I put my back to Jax so he couldn't see my face. I was a poor liar, but I wasn't about to sell out Axel and Johnny. They had been clear that no one was to know what they were up to. "Not sure. But his name was on the title, so I imagine there are some things he has to see to."

"Fuck," Jax breathed, kicking his way through the junk. "What happens now? You worked here too. What are we going to do without a shop?"

I shrugged and turned back to him, sensing that the moment to lie had passed, and better yet, I'd gotten away with it. "I don't know. Axel and Johnny will think of something. They're reliable like that. Once the smoke clears, they'll put

their heads together and figure it out. They know how much we all need this place.” I especially needed this place, or I’d be evicted from my apartment. With no family around, I’d be forced to crash on a friend’s sofa until I could find a new place to live.

“You weren’t here when shit hit the fan, were you?”

I looked up at Jax. His eyebrows were drawn together in an expression of concern that I had seen on his face many times before. We had known each other for a long time, and we cared for one another the way a brother and sister might. He was the closest thing I had to family besides my pit bull, Cade, and I cherished him for it. “I wasn’t here. Don’t worry.”

“Good,” Jax said, the concern slipping away from the tightness in his jaw. “If you were, Ryder would have had to chain me up to stop me from going after those fuckers.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I said, planting my fists on my hips.

“Yeah, I know. You’re a tough chick,” Jax said with a small smile and deep chuckle. “I wouldn’t pick a fight with you. But this is different, Ellie. This is war. Those Black Hearts aren’t the kind of guys you want to get caught up with. You would get the hell out of here if they ever showed up, right?”

His question threw me off a bit. I’d been working at this shop for Axel for a while now, and I knew each and every MC member well. I respected them, and they respected me. I was probably as close as I would ever get to being one of them, which in my opinion, wasn’t quite close enough. I ached to be part of their club. I had brought it up with Axel and Johnny before, and both had shot me down before I finished asking the question. The MC was no place for a woman.

“I’m under no delusion that I could hold my own against a Black Heart,” I admitted. “I wouldn’t hang around if they showed up again, Jax. You don’t have to give it another second’s thought.”

Jax nodded more to himself than to me. “Happy to hear that.”

We continued going through the remnants of the shop for the next couple of hours until, eventually, my body ached and my eyelids grew heavy. Jax offered to drive me home, and I accepted, sliding into the passenger side of his Challenger. He drove much more carefully than I knew he would have if I wasn’t in the car. I hated that they all treated me like I was delicate. They thought I would break at the first hint of danger.

I liked going fast. I liked adventure.

Jax parked at the curb outside of my apartment and turned the engine off. He glanced over at me and smirked. “Make sure you shower before you get into bed.”

“Pardon me?”

“You’ll thank me later. You’re a mess.”

I scowled at him as I got out of the car and slammed the door behind me. He rolled down the window as I walked down the path to the front door of the apartment building. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ellie. You’re welcome by the way!”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder at him.

“For the ride!” He called, before turning the car on and peeling away in a scream of screeching tires and a toxic black plume of smoke.

I rolled my eyes and climbed the stairs to the front door. After buzzing myself in, I walked down the hall to the back of the building where my door was. I liked having a ground level unit. It made things like grocery shopping easier. I let myself in and was greeted by the chaotic sound of dog claws on the vinyl floors as Cade came barreling around the kitchen corner to greet me.

I dropped to my knees as he rushed around my legs. I cupped his dopey face in my hands and kissed his snout and then rubbed him behind the ears—his favorite.

“Aren’t you a good boy?” I cooed, kissing him on his wet nose again.

Cade's tongue rolled out of his mouth in a happy response, and he licked the side of my face. I laughed, wiped his slobber away, and stood to make my way to the bathroom.

I saw what Jax had been talking about when I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

I was a soot-covered mess. I understood what Jax had meant by the Simba comment he made back at the shop. I had smeared a straight black line across my forehead of ash. My white T-shirt was now gray, and my overalls were covered in splotches of dark, greasy, ashy stains. I groaned and wondered if they would all come out. I loved my overalls.

I had caught Axel checking me out each and every time I wore them.

I sighed and slipped out of them while Cade still trotted happily around my legs. When he finally settled down and sat in front of my bathtub, I gave him a longing look. "It must be so easy being a dog. You don't have to worry about things like your place of work being burned to the ground by a group of criminals. Must be nice."

I pulled my T-shirt off over my head and threw it out into the hallway. I wasn't even going to try to save that lost cause. It was destined for the trash bin. Then, I filled the bathroom sink with hot, soapy water and plunged my overalls into it. I began furiously scrubbing.

It took almost twenty minutes, but I was able to get most of the stains out. Once I was satisfied I had done as much as I could, I threw them in with a load of laundry and then went to the patio doors to let Cade out. I shielded my mostly naked body by leaving the door half closed as Cade did his business.

When he came back inside, I hopped in the shower and scrubbed myself as vigorously as I had scrubbed my overalls.

Afterward, wearing a tank top and booty shorts and smelling like lavender and eucalyptus, I made myself a late-night snack of vanilla ice cream, chocolate drizzle, and crushed peanuts. It had been a long day, and I had earned myself a reward of some sort. I put food in Cade's bowl as

well but knew he wouldn't touch it with the temptation of my human food so close by. He would probably eat once I had fallen asleep and he realized there would be no more tasty morsels coming his way.

I sat down on the couch, put my heels up on the coffee table, and placed the bowl of ice cream on a pillow on my lap to protect my bare legs from the cold. Cade hopped up on the sofa beside me and rested his chin on the corner of the pillow. His big blue eyes followed my spoon from the bowl to my mouth.

"This isn't for dogs," I said.

Cade's ears drew back, and he stared up at me.

"I'm serious. There's chocolate in here. I don't know if it's myth or fact, but this stuff isn't good for you. I guess it's not good for me, either. But I earned it, okay?"

Cade heaved a great sigh.

"Stop it. You're making me feel bad."

I gave into Cade's longing stare after I had finished most of what was in the bowl. I left three spoonfuls in the bottom and placed the bowl on the floor. I told Cade to wait, and he did, eyes flicking from me to the bowl as he waited for my command.

He was a good boy. I had worked tirelessly to train him well. There was nothing worse than a poorly trained animal.

"Okay," I said, and Cade leaped off the sofa to bury his snout in the bowl. The ice cream was gone in three licks, but he proceeded to lick the sides of the bowl for a steady two minutes. I knew he would have gone longer, so I took the bowl from him and filled it with soap and water. I left it in the sink to be dealt with another time and headed for my bedroom.

I turned on the lamp beside my bed and pulled the covers down. I climbed in, relishing in the feeling of the soft sheets against my bare legs. Cade hopped up on the end of the bed and curled himself into a ball at my feet.

I grabbed a book from my nightstand and began reading.

I put it back down when I realized I had read the same paragraph five times and hadn't retained any of it. I was distracted.

Sighing and closing the book, I let it sit on my lap. Cade lifted his head from his paws and stared at me.

"I can't stop thinking about him," I told my companion.

Cade cocked his head to the side.

I smiled. "I know. It's silly. He's not interested in me in that way. But it's so confusing. Sometimes, I catch him staring at me, and I swear he looks at me the same way I look at him. And then there are other days, like today, where he wants nothing to do with me. And he just walks away to do who knows what, and it never even occurs to him that if something were to happen to him I would ..." I trailed off, unsure of what I would do if something ever happened to Axel. He wasn't mine to worry about. He wasn't mine at all.

If he belonged to anyone, it was Johnny.

"Forget it," I said, tossing the book over to my nightstand and punching my pillow to fluff it. Or to get out some of my pent-up frustration. "You're the only love I need in my life, Cade. You never let me down, do you, boy?"

Cade's tail thumped happily on the bed as I turned off my lamp.

I patted the open space beside me, calling my furry friend to my side. He padded across the mattress to curl up beside me, and I wrapped my arms around him. He was warm and soft and familiar.

I knew sleep wouldn't come easy. My thoughts were of Axel and Johnny and where they had gone. I knew it wasn't good. I knew they were out seeking revenge for what had been done to the shop. I didn't blame them. Part of me wanted to level the playing field and get even for what the Black Hearts had done to our shop.

But I was just a girl mechanic, and that was the only way any of the others would ever see me. I was someone for them to protect.

“I don’t need protecting,” I muttered against Cade’s neck as sleep began to approach.

CHAPTER 3



AXEL

I received the call from Johnny about the MC meeting the morning after the fire, the morning after he and I had beat the holy hell out of those Black Hearts boys in the middle of their living room. I told him I'd be there, and half an hour later, I was strolling into the bar, the first one to arrive.

As usual.

I ordered a beer and took up a seat at one of the corner tables, putting my back to the corner. This way, I could see every soul in the place, and I gave no one the chance to surprise me. Not that I thought they would. This was safe territory for us, and it had been for over a decade.

Shortly after taking up my seat, Johnny arrived. He stopped briefly at the bar to order himself a drink and then wove through the scattered tables until he reached me. He dropped down into the open chair beside me and kicked his heels up on the table. The impact made the amber liquid in my glass dance and slosh over the sides.

"Hey, you fuck," I growled, snatching my glass from the table. "Don't spill the good stuff."

Johnny waved my concerns away with one hand as he tipped his head back to take a swig of his drink. "Did you tell Ellie to come?"

"Yes, as you said."

"And the others?"

“Are all on their way.” I took a sip of my beer and enjoyed the way it bubbled down my throat. “Nobody knows about last night, right?”

Johnny shook his head. “No one needs to know. It stays between us for now.” He looked at me like he was accusing me of spilling the goods.

“I won’t say anything.” I didn’t like being eyed up. “You know me, Johnny. Your word is law in my books. Point that glare somewhere else.”

Johnny gave me a wide smile then. It reminded me of how things used to be before his brother had been killed. And his father. Back when things were simpler for MC members.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said as I leaned back in my chair and folded my hands in my lap.

“Yes?”

“I’m not opposed to the idea of using my shop to get our jobs done. Until the insurance money comes through and we can rebuild, that is.”

Johnny’s eyebrows crept toward his hairline. “You’d be willing to let us on your property? That’s a first.”

“That’s not what I said. We can use my shop to get our current jobs done. I don’t want any of these fucks using my tools. The only person I’m willing to share the space with is Ellie. Unless you have a problem with that.”

Johnny didn’t answer me right away. He took a giant mouthful of beer and swished it around his mouth, ballooning his cheeks and looking at me out of the corner of his eye. There were several things he wanted to say. I could feel it in the air between us. After he swallowed, his lips curled into a small smile. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Why the fuck are you smiling then, you prick?”

“Nothing. I just can’t help but picture the two of you working alone so close to your house ... and your bed. It’s easy for one thing to lead to another. One minute you’re

asking Ellie to pass you a wrench, and the next, you're three knuckles deep in her—"

"Ellie and I aren't like that, and you know it. She's my employee. That's it."

"If you say so." Johnny shrugged.

"Besides, she'd murder me if I asked her to pass me a wrench. She's just as capable under the hood of a car as I am. She's not a broom pusher."

"Never said she was."

I scowled at Johnny and let the conversation die. I didn't want to keep discussing Ellie with him. It was a topic he had drawn up out of the well several times before, and I knew this wouldn't be the last time.

We sat in comfortable silence as the rest of the MC members began to slowly trickle into the bar. Each stopped and ordered a drink, or two, and with no sense of urgency, everyone took their seats and chatted amongst themselves. As we filled the bar, conversation grew louder, and non-MC members naturally vacated the area, giving us the space to speak freely without worrying about who might overhear us.

When everyone had arrived and everyone had a drink, Johnny motioned for me to get to my feet and tell everyone about the shop situation. I did.

"My shop has all the necessary space and equipment for me to finish all our current jobs. If you have a customer who needs a rush order, run it by me first. We'll have to be a bit restrictive on jobs for the time being. Just until the insurance money comes through and we have our space back again. Got it?"

All the heads in the room bobbed up and down.

Johnny got to his feet beside me and addressed the crowd. "Axel is doing us all a favor. His shop will allow us to still pull in some profit. But for now, we aren't going to do any work on members' vehicles. You all hear that? No side jobs. Only paying jobs."

The heads all nodded again. Then, someone hollered something about getting payback for what had been done to our shop.

Sabian Delgado, the lean, dark-featured Mexican in the seat closest to the front, lowered his beer from his lips. “Those Black Hearts deserve to be ripped a new asshole, if you ask me.”

“We didn’t ask you,” I growled, holding his gaze.

Sabian shrugged one shoulder and stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing one ankle over the other and hooking his thumbs in his belt. “I’m just sayin’. Sure seems like we’re pussyng out by standing by with our cocks in hands, doing nothing about their hit on our shop. You’re okay with this shit, Ryder?”

I looked over at Johnny, who tore his dark gaze from Sabian to regard the whole room. “We’re not standing around with our cocks in our hands. We’re waiting for the right opportunity to come our way.”

Sabian rolled his eyes and uncrossed his ankles. He sat up straighter and scowled up at me.

“You heard the boss,” I said. “Deal with it.”

Derek Baxter, who we all called Money because he was our treasurer, stood from his seat at the back of the bar. His beard seemed even denser than usual and gave way to a wild mane of thick, brown hair. There was a hint of amusement in his dark eyes as he looked from me to Johnny. “I heard someone hit a Black Hearts clubhouse last night around nine.”

“Oh?” Johnny asked innocently, eyebrows arching like he was inviting Money to spill more details.

Money did. “Yeah. Word is three boys had their asses handed to them by two guys with baseball bats. A few broken bones. A concussion. They did some serious damage in a matter of minutes.”

Johnny crossed his arms over his chest. “I suppose no one has any clue who these guys were?”

I tried my best to keep my expression neutral.

Money shrugged before dropping back down into his seat. “No one seems willing to come out with any names. But, if I were to point any fingers, I’d say an MC member had all the right motivations to do it. Wouldn’t you think, Ryder?”

Johnny stroked his chin and then shot me a look. “You hear anything about this?”

“No,” I said evenly. “But I’ll keep my ears open.”

“Sounds to me like someone disobeyed your direct order, Ryder,” Sabian piped up from the front row. He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and shook his head once, slowly. “Playing with fire.”

“I find it hard to believe someone in this room would go behind my back,” Johnny said. Then his dark gaze swept across the room. Tension settled in as his stare landed on each man and held him in place for several agonizing seconds.

Johnny was not the sort of man you disobeyed unless you were willing to expose yourself to his brutality. I had seen Johnny in action, and I would never make a mistake that would put me in his line of fire. I was a big man. I was tough. But Johnny was ruthless, and as the President of the MC, he sometimes had to do things that I knew I could never follow through with.

Like punishing someone who was your friend.

Or banishing someone who was family.

The swinging doors at the front of the door opened, and someone stepped inside. It was a woman, and her shape was framed by the sunlight streaming in behind her. When the doors closed, it became easier to see her, and I realized it was Ellie. She took up a spot near the back wall and met my eyes for the briefest second. She gave me a tight-lipped smile and then turned her attention to Johnny, who began speaking once more after staring each MC member in the eye.

“We lay low until I say otherwise. Run all customer inquiries by Axel before committing to any work. And take

care of your own vehicles because we won't be fixing them up until the shop is rebuilt. Now get the fuck out of here."

Everyone got to their feet and slowly began saying farewells. Soon, they were filing out of the bar and heading back to their cars or bikes out in the gravel parking lot.

Ellie was still leaning against the back wall. She hadn't moved an inch.

I went to join her and stood across from her. "You missed half the meeting."

Ellie shrugged and brushed her long, blond hair from her shoulder. "I'm not an MC member. The rules don't apply the same to me. Johnny said so himself."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. You heard the part about using my shop as a temporary replacement?"

"No, but I gathered that was what's happening."

"I'll need your help getting it in order. I've been working on a lot of my own projects. There's no room to bring in any other vehicles. I'll pay you, of course. You shouldn't lose work because of this."

"Because of a gang hit?" Ellie asked, pushing her hip out to the side and cocking her head in the same direction. I couldn't help but notice the curve of her hip and waist as she stood like that.

"Yes," I said.

"All right, I'll help."

"Follow me there?"

Ellie nodded and pushed herself off the wall. "I'll be right behind you."

I didn't doubt it. Not only did Ellie know what she was doing under the hood, but she was also pretty good behind the wheel. Better than some of the MC members even. Not that I'd ever admit that to her out loud.

CHAPTER 4



ELLIE

I pulled into the driveway behind Axel and waited as his electric gate opened. I was a little shocked to see that he had a gate. I hadn't pictured Axel as the kind of man who would go to such lengths to keep his property so private and protected.

Then again, I had no idea what the personal lives of the MC members were like. I knew Johnny hopped from place to place but spent most of his time at his old family home with his sister. Things were a bit different now that he was with Dani, the petite but badass cop who had helped him defeat Tanner. Or, in more accurate terms, had saved Johnny from being murdered by Tanner.

Things like that were probably the reason Axel had such high hedges. Self-preservation.

On the inside of the gate was a high line of hedges that hid the entire property from view to those passing by on the street. Once I drove through the gate, I was stunned. His home was a rancher with a wraparound deck that looked to have been remodeled within the last few summers. The stain looked fresh and warm against the bright white siding. Axel clearly cared for his home. It was immaculate. The grass was healthy and trimmed, and fresh soil peaked out at the edges of the driveway.

It was definitely not what I had been expecting. I figured he'd live in an older home, possibly with an old porch full of recycling boxes and maybe a few mismatching lawn chairs.

The sprawling and clean-cut property was the polar opposite of what my mind had conjured up.

Axel pulled into the garage, and I parked in the driveway behind him. I got out of my car as he slipped out of his and ducked under the now slowly closing garage door.

“The shop’s ‘round back,” he said with a lazy wave of his hand.

I followed him down the side of the garage. It was a wide, paved area that led off the driveway to yet another gate. Axel popped open a latch at the bottom of the metal gate with his foot and pushed it open. It swung inward, and we stepped onto a loose gravel area that took up a significant portion of the backyard.

Then I saw the shop.

It was nearly the same size as the MC’s.

I turned back to Axel as he closed the gate to the backyard. “This is a bit more impressive than I was expecting,” I told him as he walked around me, his boots crunching over the loose rocks.

He didn’t look back at me as he answered. “I get that a lot.” He unlocked a side door and disappeared into the shop. Seconds later, he was pushing open the two big bay doors and revealing the belly of a working shop.

It was a mechanic’s wet dream.

“Holy shit,” I said, stepping under one of the doors and peering around at all the equipment. “This is awesome. Why would you even bother making the drive to the shop when you have this in your backyard?”

Axel shrugged and slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans. The tension at the front of his pants drew my gaze down. As soon as I did it, I felt my cheeks burn. I looked hastily back up at him, but he wasn’t looking at me. His eyes were sweeping into the corners of the shop as if he was seeing things he hadn’t paid attention to lately.

“This place is just for me,” he said finally. “I don’t have to share anything here. Or answer to anyone.”

“Fair,” I said. “Not that you answer to anyone anyway.”

“Besides Johnny,” Axel said, finally looking over at me. Then he grinned.

His face changed so much when he smiled like that. It made my knees feel like rubber. His stern, sharp expression was instantly gone as the smile pressed dimples into his cheeks and crow’s-feet to the corners of his eyes. He was so handsome when he smiled, when he was happy.

The smile lasted seconds, as I knew it would.

“I don’t think you necessarily answer to Johnny, either,” I said, performing a slow lap of the shop. I was choosing the best place to start cleaning. In my experience, getting everything out and then putting it all back in seemed to work best.

Axel was watching me.

I stopped my circuit and spun to face him, planting my left fist on my hip. I pointed dramatically at the pileup of clutter in the far corner of the shop. “I suggest we start there.” I gave him my best smile, inviting him to try to have a good time with me. There was a time when he and I could laugh for hours while we worked on a motor together. Those times felt fewer and farther between now.

A lot had happened, but as I saw it, there was nothing stopping us from enjoying each other’s company as we worked.

“You want a pair of gloves?” Axel offered.

“What do you take me for? A damsel?” I teased.

He rewarded me with a laugh, and I basked in the sound of it as it echoed off the walls. I took my hair tie from my wrist and used it to sweep my hair up into a ponytail. Then, we set to work.

Cleaning Axel’s shop was tedious work. He was quite particular about where everything went. I couldn’t blame him.

If the space was mine, I would have been the same way. I was more than happy to help him get it exactly how he wanted it.

Besides, it would benefit me in the long run too. I was going to be working with him, just the two of us, in this space with hardly any interruptions. It would be almost how it had been before the shop became crazy busy and things with the MC had become more intense.

More real.

I was eager for a more relaxed workspace. It was somewhere I could come and not worry about what was going to happen. I could learn a lot here too. When it was primarily me and Axel working on cars in the shop, I had been able to learn a lot from him. He even learned some things from me. Growing up with a father who was a mechanic had molded me into the engine, speed, machine-loving girl that I was.

And I had found my home with the MC.

I just ached for them to let me be a part of them. Officially. Not just an employee. But neither Axel nor Johnny would hear a word of it.

“You’re smart not to let the others around your place,” I said as I sorted the wrenches in one of his toolbox drawers.

“Oh, yeah?” Axel was over at one of his counters going through his drawers. We’d been at it for hours already, and now we were down to the nitty-gritty, drawers and tools and all the little things at the end of a big clean.

I nodded, even though I knew his back was to me. “They’d never leave. This place is much nicer than all the hangouts they frequent.”

“Those hedges are to keep them from seeing me. No other reason.”

I burst out laughing and covered my mouth hurriedly. “Was that a joke?” I peered over at Axel. He had stopped sifting through the drawer. He was still, but he turned his face to the side. I saw his profile, and I could tell he was grinning too.

“A small joke,” he said.

I laughed again and closed the top drawer of the toolbox to move to the second. “Seriously, they’d never leave. All that’s missing is a flat-screen TV on that wall there and a mini fridge full of beers. It would be a paradise. Pop up some lawn chairs, throw on a football game, tear open a bag of Doritos.”

Axel arched an eyebrow at me. “Are you trying to make me more sociable?”

“No, never. The thought of you putting lawn chairs and beers in this magnificent place makes me want to hurl. This is no man cave. I can tell it took you a while to get this shop exactly how you wanted it. My dad’s was similar.”

“It’s only just how you like it for a week, maybe two. Then it all goes to shit, and you have to put the place back together. A never-ending cycle.”

“Like a girl’s purse,” I said.

“What?” Axel closed a drawer and turned to face me.

“It’s the same thing. A man’s shop and a girl’s purse. I mean the mess gets out of control quickly.” I was blubbing like a fool. He didn’t care about my purse analogies. Neither did I. I didn’t even carry a purse. What the hell was I saying? “Never mind,” I said, feeling my cheeks growing warm once more. I put my back to him so he couldn’t see me blushing. I needed to change the subject. “What was Sabian’s deal at the end of the meeting this morning? He seemed pissed about something.”

“He was just doing what he always does.” Axel turned to face me and crossed his arms over his chest. He leaned up against the cupboards behind him and gave a lazy one-shoulder shrug. “He was stirring the pot. He caught word of what happened to those Black Hearts boys, and I’d bet money he was just throwing it out there. A crumb to lure out the ones who did it. Sometimes it works. Not with Johnny, though. He’ll see right through that kind of bullshit.”

“Maybe it’s easier to see through you and Johnny than you think, sometimes.”

I hadn't really meant to say those words. They sort of tumbled out of me like a sigh, like a torrent of words that held a lot more weight than I intended them to. I blinked at Axel, and he stared calmly back at me.

"What I mean is ..." I scrambled to find the right words. I didn't want him to misunderstand me. "Look. It's not a secret that you and Johnny went off somewhere together last night. When the two of you set your minds to something big, things tend to happen."

Axel surprised me by cracking another smile. "Big things like Black Hearts getting their skulls cracked?"

"Yes," I said, matching his smile with my own. Although, I wasn't sure I should be smiling. There was a nervousness swirling in my gut at the thought of Axel and Johnny taking on Black Hearts members without any backup. It seemed foolish, reckless. It was the kind of thing men in the MC got killed over.

"Was it you and Johnny who beat those guys at their clubhouse?" I asked, facing him square on. I could hold my own here. Axel had never made me fear him before. I trusted him more than I trusted myself.

"There are some things you should keep your nose out of, Ellie. For your own good."

"I'm not going to accept that answer." Hold firm, girl. Hold firm. He'll come clean. He always does.

Axel gave me a quick up and down. He wasn't checking me out. No. He was looking me over. Assessing me. Deciding whether he should bring me in on his and Johnny's actions.

"We did," he said finally.

"So, all Johnny's talk about lying low?"

"Was just talk. Yeah."

I bit my bottom lip. "What does this mean?"

"For you? Nothing. You'll be safe here."

I wanted to tell him that's not what I had been asking. I wanted to know what sort of danger he and Johnny had exposed themselves to. What were the stakes with something like this? Was this the kind of thing one of them could be killed over? Was it that big of a deal? A little voice was screaming in the back of my head that it was.

But his words were calming: *You'll be safe here.*

"No one comes through that gate except for you, me, or Johnny," Axel continued. "No one knows I live here. I wouldn't have asked you to come work with me if I knew it would put you in jeopardy. If you don't want to be here right now, I understand. I can ask someone else—"

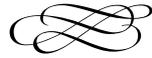
"No," I said quickly. Then I shook my head, and my ponytail swished across my back. "I want to be here. I need the work." And the company.

He nodded and gave me another smile that chased away some of the tightness in my gut. "I hoped you would feel that way. Come on, let's finish with this. You probably have better places to be on a Sunday night."

I didn't say anything as I finished the last half hour of cleaning. I had no better place to be on a Sunday evening. I was happy here, with him. I felt like I was among family here. I had always felt like that when I was with the MC. They gave me something I hadn't felt in a long time. It was a place I knew I belonged, and I didn't plan on ever letting go of something so good. Not even if things got dangerous.

Really dangerous.

CHAPTER 5



AXEL

It was just past eight in the morning when the wall phone buzzed, announcing that someone had pulled up to my gate. I saw Ellie's car on the security camera and buzzed her in. I watched as she parked in the same place she had yesterday and got out of the car.

She was wearing a pair of ripped blue jeans that were rolled up her calves. Big boots that made her feet look a little too large swam around her ankles, and she was wearing a white beater with a plaid shirt tied around her waist. This was her usual shop attire, and it suited her. She had her usual black baseball cap on, but her long, blond hair was down. I knew this would be temporary. She always started the day with her hair down. As soon as work started, it would be tied in a tight knot or ponytail on top of her head. I had watched the routine for years now.

I started a pot of coffee before going to the front door to let her in. I pulled it open as she raised her fist to knock, and she smiled brightly at me.

"Good morning," she said.

"Morning," I dipped my head in greeting and held the door open for her. "I'm waiting on a couple of bikes for us to work on today. Should only be another twenty minutes or so. Want a cup of coffee?"

Ellie nodded and pushed her boots off with her toes. She nudged them into the corner, tucking them neatly out of the way, and then followed me down the hall to my kitchen.

“Your place is really nice,” she said behind me when we emerged in the kitchen.

I grunted out a thank you as I poured her a mug of coffee. “Do you put anything in it?”

She shook her head, and I slid the mug across the counter into her hands. She wrapped her fingers around it and breathed in the rich aroma of the stuff. I poured one for myself and stood on the other side of the kitchen island from her as she took her first sip.

“Don’t get used to the pampering,” I said. “We’ll be working pretty steady today once the bikes show up.”

“You call this pampering?” She arched a dark blond eyebrow. The corner of her lips lifted with it. She was teasing me.

“It’s pampering compared to how we’re about to spend our day.”

She shrugged in a way that suggested she didn’t mind the idea of working hard in the shop for the day. She had never shied away from it before. I didn’t know why I expected her to now.

She put her mug down. “So, when are these bikes showing up? In twenty, you said? Should we head out to the shop?”

“Sure.” Ellie and I went out through the back door with our coffees in hand, and I opened the bay doors to the shop. The sun streamed in, casting light into all the now-clean corners of the shop.

Ellie stood in the middle and looked around, admiring our hard work from the night before. “There’s nothing more satisfying than this. I can’t wait to get grease and shit all over your pristine floors.” She winked at me.

Then, like clockwork, she pulled the hair tie from her wrist and swept her hair up into a ponytail. I watched the way her blond curls danced across her shoulders until it was all neatly slicked back in a long rope down the middle of her back.

It was hard for me to look away from her. Something felt different about her now, but I couldn't put a finger on what it was. She looked the same but better somehow. It was like I was noticing all the small details about her for the first time, the freckles across her nose and shoulders, her dimples, her stray hairs around her hairline that were always falling in her eyes because they were too short to be held back in her hair tie.

I was grateful when I heard the sound of a tow truck pulling up out front of the gate. "I'm going to let him in. Wait here, all right?"

Ellie nodded, and I left her standing in the shop as I crossed the gravel pit and marched down the driveway to the gate. I opened it up, and a tow truck came through. The driver, Dan, was a short and stocky forty-year-old man with a thick brown beard. He always wore the same knitted beanie of orange and brown thread. He hopped down, his steel toe boots landing heavily on the pavement, and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"Morning, Ax," he called to me. He was the only person I didn't correct when he shortened my name. "I have all four of them for you. Need me to come back and get them when you're done? I'll deliver them to your customers for you if need be. I was sorry to hear about your shop. Messy business, that was."

"Morning, Dan," I said, shaking his hand and walking to the back of the truck to peer up at the motorcycles on the trailer. They were all hogs. There were black leather and chrome and little else. "I'll keep you posted. Thanks for bringing them over." I fished a wad of rolled up twenty-dollar bills from my back pocket and slapped them into his palm.

"You don't need to—" Dan started to say, but I talked over him.

"It's not for the bikes. It's to thank you for keeping my home a private place. I appreciate you not telling anyone where I live, Dan. Makes things a lot easier for me."

"Happy to do it, Ax."

“If you bring ‘em straight into the shop, my partner and I can take it from there.”

“Sure thing,” Dan said, before hopping back up into the driver’s seat and expertly maneuvering the tow truck into my backyard to unload the bikes into the shop. Ellie helped us roll them down the ramp by taking one of the bikes. Dan went to go help her, but I assured him she would be fine.

I couldn’t help but watch her as she kicked out the kickstand and stood back to admire the paint job on the hog. It was a glittering black that was quite dazzling in the sunlight. Blue flames, barely lighter than the black paint itself, had been painted all up the gas tank.

After Dan left, Ellie was still checking out the bikes. “They all look like they’re in perfect shape. What the hell are we supposed to be doing to them?”

I grinned at her. “Those two over there,” I nodded to the two I had brought in, “are switching engines with these two over here.”

Ellie nodded knowingly. “I don’t know why I thought we’d be doing anything that wasn’t still illegal.”

“Who said anything about it being illegal?”

Ellie gave me a flat look. “People don’t switch their engines just for shits and giggles. Two of these are stolen, right?”

“That’s not information we need to know. As far as we’re concerned, we’re just the people hired to get the job done. That all right with you?”

Ellie smirked. “I get to get up close and personal with these bad boys. Of course, it’s all right with me.”

Yet again, she impressed me with her tenacity. She wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty, whether that was literally or figuratively. Ellie was a strong woman. I had always thought so. And she was a dear friend. I couldn’t deny that I cared for her.

I had even gone to the lengths to ask Johnny to have her back as if she were one of us. Johnny had instantly agreed. She was part of the MC. She just didn't know that. As far as she was concerned, she was still on the outside. That way, if the law or someone worse like the Black Hearts ever came knocking, Ellie would be safe on the sidelines.

We set to work right away removing the engine from the first bike.

After five hours, we took a lunch break. Ellie had packed her own food, which surprised me a little. I grabbed us each a beer and joined her outside on the grass with a sandwich in hand for myself. She was sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her as she let the sun warm her face.

“So, tell me. How did you get so good at being a grease monkey? I don't think I've ever really asked. And I'm not trying to be a sexist asshole here, but you don't see many girls with a mechanic interest these days.” Especially girls like Ellie.

Ellie popped the tab of the beer I handed her and took a sip. A little bead of it formed at the corner of her mouth, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. “My dad.”

I smiled. So, she was a daddy's girl.

“He taught you everything you know?”

“Everything I knew before you hired me, yeah. He always had me around motorcycles when I was growing up. Drove my mom crazy. She wanted me to go shopping with her or to nail appointments. You know? But I only ever wanted to be in the garage with my dad. I wanted to understand how so many tiny parts could make something so powerful. I dedicated myself to learning it all, and it made my dad really happy. I think that's probably how it all started. I wanted to be the son he never had.” Ellie shrugged and drank more beer. “Once I started, I never wanted to stop.”

“Did your dad ride too?”

“Oh, absolutely. Not the kind of stuff you guys ride, though. He was a speed man. He had a few bikes. A Ducati

and a VMAX. Once he got older, he traded in for something a little more practical. A V-Strom, if I remember correctly.”

“Never was a Harley man?”

Ellie giggled and shook her head. Then, she plucked a blade of grass and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger before peeling it apart into thin strips. “No. Dad never liked Harleys.” She looked at me as if she was worried she would offend me. “He thought they were all noise and little else. Just for show, in other words. And he could never justify spending the kind of money a Harley costs, especially because it couldn’t buy him the speed he was after.”

“And do you agree with your old man?” I sipped my beer. “Do you think hogs are a waste of money?”

“Yes and no.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“I think Harleys are more of a work of art than other bikes. Every piece is assembled with the intent of making a masterpiece. Other bikes are built to conquer the roads and ride fast and hard. They don’t have the same beauty a hog can have.” She looked over her shoulder to the bikes standing in a row in the shop. She pressed her chin to her bare, tanned shoulder, and smiled. “Dad never saw that part of them, I don’t think.”

“But you do.”

“Yeah. I do.”

The girl was making it hard to think of anything but her lips. I wanted to know how they would feel against mine and around my cock. What would she taste like?

After finishing our lunches, we got back to work. Ellie had her back to me as she crouched beside her bike. I could see the muscles in her back and shoulders as she worked. Her arms were strong, and the muscles down her spine were tight as she moved.

She stood and wiped sweat from her forehead. She blew out a breath, and my eyes fell to the swell of her breasts at the

neckline of her muscle shirt. She was sexy as hell. Johnny's words started echoing in my brain. Thoughts of throwing her down on my bed and ripping her clothes off ran rampant. I wanted to taste her. I wanted to fuck her so good, she couldn't remember her own goddamn name.

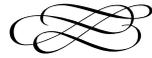
My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I tore my eyes away from Ellie to answer it. It was Jax.

"Hey, man," I said into the receiver.

Jax needed a lift so I left to go get him. Ellie said she wanted to stay and work a bit later. I agreed and felt completely comfortable leaving her at my place. I gave her the code to the gate so she could get out and let herself back in when she needed. For some reason, she smiled as I passed her a crumpled piece of paper with the code scribbled on it.

She tucked it into her back pocket and turned away from me to continue working on the bike.

CHAPTER 6



ELLIE

At six thirty in the morning, Cade dragged his tongue up the side of my face. The smell of dog kibble and general doggy breath was overpowering. I wiped the slobber away and sat up in a state of still being half-asleep.

Cade leaped off the bed and whined. He needed to go outside.

I rolled off the mattress and followed Cade down the hall to the sliding glass doors. I let him out into the backyard, where he ran a few frantic laps before doing his business. As he frolicked, I filled his water and food dish.

After letting him back inside, I got ready for the day. I was heading back to Axel's shop, and he had told me he wanted to get an early start. I wasn't an early riser. I needed coffee, and lots of it, before I was able to concentrate on my work.

So, I brewed a pot of coffee and sipped on it while I got dressed and washed my face. I had a few minutes to spare before I had to leave the house, so I spent them with Cade on the sofa. I scratched his ears and patted his belly when he rolled on to his back.

"I gotta go, buddy," I said as I got to my feet and made for the front door. Cade followed me, his claws clicking on the hardwood. "I'll be back tonight, though. Don't worry. We'll watch a movie, and we'll go for a you-know-what." Saying the word "walk" around Cade was bad news. He would get too excited for his own good, and I would feel too guilty not

taking him out. So I didn't say the word, and I mentally promised him I would take him for a walk later that night.

"Bye, and be good," I called through the crack in the door before closing it and locking up behind me.

On the way to Axel's house, I stopped to grab us coffee and breakfast. I knew what he liked. I'd been picking up food in the mornings for us for years. I didn't do it all the time, maybe once a week, but I knew Axel always appreciated it. He was the sort of man who never seemed to notice when he was hungry. If he had a lot on his plate, I hated to think how long he would go without taking care of himself.

I had worked an overtime shift with him one time where he didn't stop to take a single break over the course of eighteen hours. When I asked how long he'd been working, he blew me off. I waited another hour or so before asking again. That time, I noticed the purple bags under his eyes. I had accused him of pushing himself too hard. We argued about it. I didn't back down.

Johnny had been there and thought it was hilarious. He had found it especially humorous when I won the battle and sent Axel home to sleep and eat. He had returned the next morning and given me a sullen thank you. After that, we never brought it up again. That was one thing I really liked about Axel. He was a proud man, but he wasn't ever too proud to thank me or tell me he was wrong.

Axel was at the gate when I pulled into his driveway. He let me in and waved as I parked in my usual spot. I got out of the car and passed him a cup of piping hot black coffee. Then, I grabbed the fast food bag full of hash browns and breakfast sandwiches.

"Do we have time for a quick bite first?" I asked.

Axel snatched the bag out of my hand and peered into it. "Fuck yeah, we do."

We dug into the sandwiches and hash browns and ate standing up. It didn't matter to either of us.

When we were done eating and had been working for a half an hour or so, Axel tugged a rag in his back pocket and wiped his hands on his jeans. “Forgot to mention, I talked with a guy last night who’s selling a shop. It has everything we need. I’m buying it. Then, I won’t have to worry about people coming to my house. You and I will go in on Monday and get everything in order.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding as I digested what he’d said. “So, no more need to come here to work?”

“Nope,” he said.

For some reason, my heart sank. I was enjoying working with Axel at his home. I liked having time with just us. It had been easy for us to talk and laugh without the constant distraction of other MC members or the endless stream of customers. I would miss this.

After working a little while longer in silence, I began wondering how Axel could even afford any of this in the first place. His house and his property were massive. The shop itself was worth more than my apartment doubled, maybe even tripled. This was not the sort of income I had been led to believe an MC member had. Mind you, I knew a lot of things they let me believe were probably lies.

It was for my own good, of course, but they were lies nonetheless.

“Hey,” I asked as I crouched in front of one of the bikes. “How can you afford a place like this? I just, I don’t know, I never thought this was the kind of place you came home to at night.”

I knew my question was forward. It was really forward. But Axel never seemed to be bothered by how direct I was.

“I made some good investments over the years. I didn’t mess around with money when I was young. Never had any debt. I got lucky, I guess.”

I looked over my shoulder at him. He had never looked up from his work while he answered me. He was lying. I was used to it by now.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It shouldn't matter that he was lying. He didn't owe me anything. He never had. But for some reason, I wished he would be honest with me. I wished he would come clean about how he and the others of the MC made their money. Like Johnny. It was a strange, wild, vicious way to live, and I wanted to learn everything about their lifestyle that I could. It was the same curiosity I had felt when my dad first introduced me to motorcycles. I had to know how everything worked.

He still had his back to me. He was wearing a white T-shirt and dark blue jeans today. The shirt was rather formfitting, casting aside all imagined thoughts of what might lie beneath the layer of fabric.

I could see the outline of what lay beneath. Abs. Broad shoulders. Muscled biceps. He was powerful. I had always known that. I had seen him dressed similarly before, too, but for some reason, it felt different today.

The muscles of his back were particularly hard to look away from.

His forearms were covered in grease and dark splotches from where he had brushed up against the exhaust. I watched him stand, and the hem of his shirt was rolled up ever so slightly. I could see tanned skin along his midriff, and below his belly button was a dark line of hair that vanished beneath the waistband of his jeans.

I swallowed as my gaze followed that down to the fly of his pants.

There had been a time where Axel's presence made my panties wet and my mind race. He was a good-looking man. No, more than that, he was hot as hell and always had been. His dark and ever-present smolder had done things to my body that astounded me. I was always ready to go when he was around.

Which sometimes made things awkward.

But after years of rejection, that physical response to his presence had faded away. I thought of it as self-preservation.

There was no way I could endure being so aroused by him every single day with no follow-through. There was only so much a girl could do with a vibrator.

Johnny had tried to push us together, but Axel withdrew and became closed off to me for a while. Now, it felt like we were finally back on the same page as friends, and I was more than willing to accept that.

But now, after spending so much time together just the two of us, my body was digressing back to how it used to respond to Axel's presence.

My lips felt swollen. My mouth was wet. My fingertips were tingling with a fierceness that matched the heat between my legs as I thought about what mystery lay at the end of that trail of dark hair.

The way he moved was almost predatory as he leaned over the bike. The leather of the seat creaked, and his hand gripped the handlebars. I looked at his fingers. Strong, calloused, and probably warm. The compulsion to feel his hands on my bare skin was almost unbearable.

“You all right over there, Ellie?”

Shit, he was looking at me. There was no way in hell he hadn't seen my checking him out. I was terrified that the rest of my body was giving me away. I could feel my nipples pressing up against the inside of my bra. There wasn't much fabric between them and the air, and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Axel was privy to a good look at them.

“Yeah, sorry, I got a little distracted, I guess.”

If he doubted me, he didn't show it. Axel simply nodded his head, as if this was something I did often—which it most definitely was not—and scratched the back of his neck. “Isn't there something else you'd rather be doing, Ellie?”

I blinked at him. What did that mean?

“S-sorry?” I stammered.

“You know. Have you ever given any thought to getting away from the MC? Away from all the bullshit and the life.”

“No.” I shook my head sternly. “No. I haven’t.”

He looked surprised. “Really? You’ve never been tempted to try something else? Or to work at a shop that operates a little differently?”

“You mean operates within the boundaries of the law?” I asked.

Axel nodded.

“I may have thought about it a little, a few years ago. Then the longer I stayed at the shop with you and the others, the more I came to see that working there wasn’t just a job. I always felt like I was amongst family. Everyone in the MC is my friend. You’re my friend. Johnny is my friend.” I wanted to tell him how much I felt like I belonged with them, but the words caught in my throat and I fell silent.

“Well, we like having you around.”

I looked up. Had he just said something kind to me? “You do?”

Axel threw his head back and laughed. I loved how it echoed off the walls in the shop and danced around my ears. “Yeah, we do. You’re all right, Ellie. You fit right in.”

I blushed for the hundredth time since working alone with Axel and dropped my eyes back to the task at hand. But I kept smiling for five minutes straight.

CHAPTER 7



AXEL

Dan backed the tow truck up in the driveway and across the gravel lot. Once it was in park, he hopped out and shook my hand as he always did and fixed the orange and brown beanie on his head. It came past the tops of his ears, pushing his earlobes out in a cartoonish sort of way. He gave me a broad smile and nodded at the four bikes standing in a line out front of the closed shop doors.

“Just the four?” Dan asked.

“Yeah. For now. Thanks for coming to pick them up. You’re saving me a real fucking headache, man.”

“Whatever I can do to help. You and your boys have had my back plenty of times. I’m happy to repay the favor. Speaking of which,” he dropped his voice and shot Ellie a suspicious look. I suppose he wasn’t sure if I trusted her or not. “A couple of guys stopped by my place two nights ago asking if I had been doing any business with some local boys. They specifically mentioned old bikes like these. Didn’t like the looks of them, Ax. They gave me a bad feeling.”

“And what did you tell them?” I asked. I didn’t like that someone had gone out of their way to ask Dan about me and my crew. It unsettled me. And it reminded me that we weren’t any closer to being out of the fire.

“I told them business was slow, and I’d be lucky to have anyone who needed my truck.” Dan patted the side of the trailer. “They fucked off after that. Didn’t seem too interested in a tow truck driver who was down on his luck.”

“Thanks for covering for me, Dan.”

Dan smiled, and I knew he didn't see it as a burden. He liked having one toe in the deep end. I had promised myself a long time ago that was as far in as he would ever get, just one toe.

“You'd better hit the road.” I nodded to Ellie who got on one of the bikes and started it up. The engine roared as she played with the throttle and then rode the monster up the ramp onto the back of the truck. I couldn't take my eyes off her the whole way.

Dan was suffering alongside me.

“Damn,” he breathed.

“I know,” I said.

“How the fuck did you get any work done?”

“Leave it alone.”

Dan instantly retreated from the conversation and put his back to Ellie. He was a man who never needed to be warned twice. I liked that about him.

I helped Ellie with the remaining three bikes, and twenty minutes after he arrived, Dan was pulling out of the driveway and I was closing the gate behind him. Ellie was standing behind me, and she gave me a bright smile when I began making my way back up the driveway.

“Now what?” she asked cheerfully.

“Now, we have a lot of cleaning on our hands.”

Her smile fell, and she scrunched her nose. “I miss the old shop. We never cleaned as much then as we do now.”

I chuckled. “Well, it wasn't entirely mine, so I didn't care as much. Now, get your ass back in that shop and hop to it.”

Ellie hurried up the driveway ahead of me, her hips swaying with every step. I watched her back and her ass, despite my best efforts not to, until she spun around and clasped her hands in front of her. The stance pushed her tits closer together, and her cleavage had me biting down hard.

“I noticed the speakers you have in there,” Ellie said slowly. “Can we put on some music while we clean?”

We both stepped through the side door, and I flicked on the lights. “Sure. Whatever you want to listen to is fine with me.”

“Really?” Her eyes went wide, and I sensed the joke coming before it left her lips. “So, you won’t object to some preppy boy band stuff?”

She was the only person who could take teasing jabs at me that didn’t get on my nerves. “Maybe I should pick the tunes.”

Ellie giggled, and I opened the garage doors. Cool evening air drifted in, and Ellie plucked a broom from its place against the wall. She set to pushing it across the shop floor until she had built a pile of dust and dirt and debris in the corner by the open doors.

I began putting stray tools away. After placing each one in its rightful place in one of my numerous tool boxes, I found my gaze drawn to Ellie, regardless of what she was doing. She was captivating. She had no fucking clue what she was doing to me.

At least, I didn’t think she did.

Working at the old shop with her hadn’t been so tricky. With the constant presence of customers or other MC members, I was able to always have a buffer between us. But now things were different. Now, it was just the two of us, and she was pulling me closer and closer to her like an undertow.

I was aware of the smallest things she did, the way she crinkled her nose before she sneezed or how she bit her bottom lip when she was nervous. She also had an infuriating habit of tucking loose strands of hair behind her ear, which only drew my attention to her neck. I wanted to kiss her throat and nibble her earlobes.

I wanted to bend her over my workbench and show her the way a real man could make her feel.

There was a reason I hadn’t already done it. I wasn’t the sort of man who didn’t go after what I wanted. I had wanted Ellie for a while. The only person who knew was Johnny. He

could read me like an open book, and he loved pointing out how I should just fuck Ellie and get it over with. But I didn't want to.

I didn't want to bring her into our mess any further. Keeping her an arm's length away seemed like the right thing to do, despite how many times it had given me blue balls.

But now, after working so closely with her, all those old stirrings had come back with a vengeance. She had told me that she thought of us, the MC, as her family. If that was true, then she was already deep in our shit. We already considered her family. We were all on the same page.

She was one of us regardless whether or not it was something I wanted.

So maybe it was time that I felt her around my cock.

I reached for the handle of a flex-head ratchet and found my fingers wrapped around something warm and soft. Ellie's hand.

She had the ratchet in her grip, and her eyes were slowly following the line of my arm upward until, finally, she was looking up into my eyes. Her lips were slightly parted, and if music hadn't been playing, I would have heard the soft breath that escaped from between her teeth.

Her cheeks and nose were pink, and I saw freckles over the bridge of her nose that I hadn't noticed in a long time. Maybe because it had been a while since I was this close to her.

A breeze blew in through the open bay doors, and her perfume filled my nose. She smelled like flowers after rain.

"S-sorry," she said quietly, trying to pull her hand out from mine. "I guess we both had the same thing in mind. Great minds." She laughed nervously and managed to pull her hand free. She clasped it to her chest and bit her bottom lip. "You know, I guess we're almost done here. I should probably get going soon. Unless, of course, you need my help with anything else. Do you? Need my help I mean?"

She was rambling. She was nervous.

So, I wasn't the only one whose blood was rushing to their crotch.

Then she pushed me over the edge by tucking a loose strand of blond hair behind her ear. She fell back a step and giggled nervously.

I grabbed her wrist and, with a sharp tug, pulled her to me. She fell forward into my arms. Her hands braced herself against my chest, and she lifted her chin to look back up at me.

Fuck. She would be my undoing. I rested a hand at the base of her neck and traced a thumb over her collarbone. She trembled in my arms, but I knew she wasn't scared. Not of me, anyway.

"Why haven't we ever done anything about this?" she whispered. Her eyes left mine and settled on my lips. I felt her swallow beneath my hand.

I wasn't going to tell her why. She didn't need to know. She'd be mad at me for keeping her at arm's length.

So instead, I lifted her chin with one hand and dropped my face to meet hers.

I crushed my lips against hers, and she sighed into me. Her hands tightened into fists in my shirt as she took a sharp breath and somehow managed to press her body more firmly to mine. Her breasts were flat against my chest, and I became irritated with the fact that she was still wearing clothes.

So, I pushed her away and pulled her shirt over her head. She let out a surprised gasp that sounded like lust to me, and I pulled my own shirt off. She fell silent, and I let her eyes take in the sight of me. I knew there were scars there that she didn't know about. She saw them, but she didn't ask any questions. Instead, she undid her jeans and shimmied them down her strong thighs.

"Come here," I said.

Ellie gave me an innocent look and cocked her head to the side. Then her hand went to her hair, and she let her hair down. It fell in thick curls around her shoulders. I heard myself growl.

“I said come here, woman. Now.”

She stayed where she was.

So I went and got her.

CHAPTER 8



ELLIE

Axel's hands were on my hips, and he was lifting me up off the floor. I was still wearing my boots, thong, and bra but nothing else. His hands were calloused but warm as I knew they would be, and his touch set my skin on fire.

Was I really going to let this happen?

He put me on his workbench and crushed his mouth against mine once more. He tasted sweet and minty, and his hands wove up my hips and to my back where he snapped my bra off with a quick flick. Before I knew what was happening, he had already pulled it off my shoulders and arms and tossed it over his shoulder.

I dimly thought how glad I was that we had just cleaned the whole place from top to bottom.

He gripped my ass hard enough for his fingers to bury into muscle. His lips went to my throat, and he kissed steadily downward until his face was buried between my tits. The stubble on his jaw tickled, and I dug my fingers in his hair to hold him to me.

Then he suckled my nipples, and the room became infinitely hotter.

I fumbled to undo his jeans. They fell off his hips to the floor, where they remained around his ankles. Axel seemed oblivious to them. He was too absorbed in kissing my breasts and licking my skin to notice anything until I tugged his boxers down.

His cock sprang free and a rush of excitement went through me.

Then fear.

He was huge.

I swallowed and tightened my grip in his hair. “I haven’t ever ... um.” I lost my train of thought as his kisses found my ear. He pinched my earlobe between his teeth, and I gasped.

“You haven’t ever what?” He purred deeply in my ear.

I shivered.

“You’re really big,” I said, the words feeling clumsy and awkward in my mouth.

He chuckled in my ear. The vibration of his voice sent a thrill through me, and I found myself inching toward the edge of the table I was perched on to get closer to his cock.

His hand on my hip slipped between my legs. He tugged my panties aside and swept two fingers up my pulsing slit. He held them up between us, showing me my own wetness. “I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

I thought I might come right then and there.

But I didn’t.

Instead, I spread my legs, bracing myself with the heels of my boots hooked over the lip at the bottom of his workbench. I leaned back on my elbows and begged him with my eyes to fuck me. It had been a long time, and I wanted to know what it would feel like to have him inside me. I needed him, and I was sure he needed me just as badly. There was a hunger in his eyes that I had never seen before. It was restrained like he had to keep a sliver of himself in check at all times.

Perhaps violent men like him always had that look.

He pulled my panties aside so forcefully, they tore off my right hip. He didn’t apologize. He didn’t even spare a look up at me. He dipped a finger inside me, then another, and then he began fucking me hard and fast. He reached a pace where his knuckles were hitting my pelvis and the insides of my thighs

with enough force to leave a bruise, but I didn't care. It felt so fucking good.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes as my body gave in, and I came. I held on to my scream but moaned and sighed with contentment as he pulled his fingers out of me. He tapped my clit none too lightly, sending fiery jolts of pleasure through my entire body. I giggled as I spasmed at his touch.

Then he pushed my legs further apart and came to stand between them. I sucked in a breath, and my gaze instantly went back to his massive swollen cock. He took his shaft in one hand and stroked himself. Then, he leaned over and plucked a condom from a drawer. There were questions that went off in my head about this, but at the moment, they didn't seem important. Had he just put them there? Had they been there a long time? Was this something he did with other women frequently?

It didn't matter.

He rolled the condom on and stepped in closer to me. The tip of his cock grazed me, and every muscle in my body tightened in anticipation.

Axel put a hand on either side of me. I found myself looking up into his eyes as he braced himself against the table. He leaned his hips toward mine, and his cock slipped inside me. He gave me a couple of inches at first and then a couple more. I was so wet, and my pussy was ready for him. I could feel my walls tightening around his hard shaft and pulling him in deeper.

I moaned. He thrust deep into me. I had never been so full before.

“Do you like that, baby?” Axel grated.

I nodded.

“Answer me,” he said, his hand going to my hair. He pulled my head back and looked down into my eyes. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” I said, my voice a plea more than a response. I gripped his shoulders and pressed my nails into his muscles.

“Please, don’t stop.”

The words had barely left my mouth when he pulled out and plunged back in. I cried out, my toes curling, as he continued bucking against me until, all at once, I was overcome with ecstasy. I came for him, and he rubbed my clit until I was so sensitive, I thought I might crumble.

But he held me in place, and as I came again, so did he. He held me to him as he blew his load, and I felt his cock instantly swell and pulse inside me.

We fell apart moments after. I leaned back on the workbench and watched him run both hands through his hair. His muscles flexed with every breath he took, and I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off him.

“That was a surprise,” I said after I caught my breath.

“Was it?” Axel asked, his tone suggesting he disagreed. “I’ve wanted to have you for years. You didn’t disappoint. Your pussy is so fucking tight and perfect.”

I blushed and hopped down from the table. He watched me, his gaze pausing at the places on my body he was seeing for the first time. I wasn’t experiencing something negative—I liked the way he looked at me. I had wanted him to see me like this for ages. I had truly believed that it would never happen.

Now, I was struck with a wild realization.

What happened now?

Were things going to change between us? Was it going to be easy to keep working together?

I watched Axel stoop to collect his clothes from the shop floor. He stepped into his jeans, taking his time about it as he tucked himself in before doing the zipper back up. Then, he shrugged into his shirt, and once his head poked through the hole, he met my eyes.

“What?”

“Is this going to change anything between us? We can still keep working together, right?”

“I don’t see why we couldn’t.”

Maybe he wasn’t understanding where I was coming from. Or, maybe this was a one-time thing. Maybe he just had to bang one out of his system. My stomach did a backflip.

I should have put a stop to things before we were in too deep. But everything he had done felt so good, and my body had been aching for him to touch me like that for so long that I just couldn’t fathom not letting him have me. It was like every single moment leading up to this had been destiny.

I shook my head. The thought sounded idiotic in my own head.

Then, I hurried to grab my clothes and got dressed. Axel leaned up against the shop wall and crossed his arms as he watched me. His body language certainly didn’t suggest that he was uncomfortable. If anything, he seemed more at ease now than before we had fucked. How was that possible?

My brain was racing a mile a minute with a torrent of anxious thoughts. The most predominant one being that I had just royally fucked one of the most important relationships in my life.

No. Not one of the most important. *The* most important.

“Well, I’m going to get out of here,” I said as I pulled my jeans on and did them up.

Axel’s brows drew together, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he shifted his weight around a bit and narrowed his eyes.

“Sorry to leave so quickly. I just ... have somewhere I need to be. I’ll see you later?”

Axel nodded and remained silent. I felt his eyes on me as I left the shop. My boots crunched on the gravel as I crossed the yard. Then, I went through his gate to the front of the house where I practically leaped into my car. I started the engine and pulled back to the gate. I punched in the code and reversed out of the drive as soon as the gates were wide enough for me to squeeze through without ripping my mirrors off.

Fuck, Ellie. Why did you let that happen?

CHAPTER 9



AXEL

Jax was already sitting at one of the corner tables in the bar when I arrived. There was a pitcher of beer on the table and a basket of fries, which he was picking at absentmindedly as he watched the two waitresses mill around the tables. They were both hot young women, and they shot Jax flirty glances frequently, especially when they had to lean across a table to grab a just-out-of-reach glass.

I dropped into the chair across from him and poured myself a glass of beer from his pitcher. He greeted me with a small nod but never took his eyes off the brunette waitress as she bent over to grab a fork that had, by some miracle, ended up on the floor. As she straightened up, she looked back at him over her shoulder, gave her hips a seductive little wiggle, and then made her way around the bar to disappear into the belly of the kitchens.

“I swear the chicks in this place get sexier every damn day.” Jax finally looked over at me. He was draped lazily in his chair with his legs spread open so he could take up as much space as humanly possible.

I took a sip of beer and wiped foam from my upper lip. “Maybe your standards are just getting lower and lower.”

“What a shitty thing to say.” Jax leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. “Don’t let them hear you talking like that.”

“I’m pulling your leg.”

“Fuck off,” Jax said with a small chuckle. He leaned away from me again and repositioned his limbs over the arms of the chair. “How are things going with the shop?”

“I got us a new joint, actually. Bigger than what we were working with before. Johnny hasn’t seen it yet, but I know his taste. He’ll like it.”

“Glad to hear it. It’s been fucking weird not dropping by the place almost every damn day. I hadn’t noticed how big of a habit it had become. I caught myself driving by the rubble out of routine three times last week. Pissed me off every time too.”

“Well, you are a dumb bastard. Takes you a bit longer to learn.”

Jax laughed more loudly this time and then filled up his glass with more beer. “With some things, perhaps. My strengths lie in other areas. Like behind the wheel. Or between the legs of a beautiful woman.”

“I have yet to be told by any of your ladies in waiting about your skills in the bedroom. Maybe you’re not as talented as you think you are. Women are talkers. They like to share information. If you were that good, I think word would have reached me by now. Or Johnny.”

“Go ask that babe over there,” Jax pointed across the bar to a table with three young women at it. One, the one I assumed he was referring to, was a lean, elegant-looking woman. Her dark hair was cut to the length of her jaw, framing her pretty face. Her lips were full and looked wet with gloss. She moved with the sort of grace that a dancer would possess. “I fucked her so good, she had stars swirling around her pretty head.”

Growing tired of the conversation, I shrugged a shoulder. “All right, Jax. You’re an animal. Happy?”

He grinned. “Yes.” He took a massive swig of beer before slamming the glass down on the table. His gaze still lingered on the group of women. “Say, that blond there, she sure looks like the kind of girl you’d be into, Axel.”

Knowing I was going to say no, I looked back at her anyway. She was pretty. That was undoubtedly true. But I

found that it didn't stir anything inside me.

"You should go introduce yourself." Jax nudged my shin with his boot.

"Not interested."

Jax arched an eyebrow. "Not interested? She's a fucking babe, you jackass. What do you mean you're not interested?" When I didn't answer, his eyebrows shot upward. He leaned in close once more, straining across the table. "Wait a minute. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

Jax pointed a crooked finger at me. Like most of the members in the MC, we had all broken several fingers several times. Jax's index finger on his right hand wasn't in the best shape. "You do have a girlfriend. No need to keep it a secret. Unless, of course, you don't want to bring her around us. Is she a good girl, Axel?" He winked. "Does she ask you to wash your hands first?"

"Leave it alone."

Jax laughed and rubbed his hands together. "I like this. I like this a lot. Been a long time since you were—"

"I said leave it alone." My voice dropped a couple decibels, and I fixed Jax with a stare that took the smile from his lips.

He slumped back in his chair, put off by my unwillingness to engage in his games, and sighed. "Fine. You're no fucking fun, you know that?"

I drank my beer. "I've been told."

We sat for a while, and I sensed Jax was trying to think of something else to say to change the subject. Finally, he piped up again, and this time, he had my full attention.

"So, word on the street is the Black Hearts have a new leader."

"Oh?"

Jax nodded. “Don’t know how he came to take the seat, but the guy’s name is new to me. They call him Watson. Supposed to be a big dude with a mean attitude. I was thinking I might try to get close to him. Get a look at what all the gossip is about, you know?”

“Johnny told everyone to lay low.”

“What Johnny doesn’t know won’t kill him. I know you’re his best buddy and all, Axel, but you’re kind of his bitch, you know? Sometimes you have to break the rules a little bit.”

“I hear you,” I said, “but Watson is not the guy to go breaking rules with. He’s bad news, Jax. I’m asking you to stay away from him. Me. Not Johnny.”

“You know the guy?”

“Yeah. Sort of.” I drank the rest of my beer. Then, I topped up the glass. Jax waived down a waitress to fill up the pitcher.

“How?”

I shook my head. Now was not the time for such stories. “We ran in the same circles a long time ago. It was bad for everyone. Just stay away from him, all right? And if you hear anything else, let me know.”

“All right,” Jax obliged, clasping his hands in his lap. “Could we be in serious shit here, Axel?”

Yes.

“Not if we do as Johnny says. He’ll play this smart. He has the well-being of the MC in mind.”

“But we haven’t been doing what Johnny asked.” Jax looked around like he was worried about a spy being present. I suppose his paranoia wasn’t a bad thing, not with a name like Watson returning to everyone’s tongues. “Two of us went out and beat up some of those Black Hearts fuckers. It happened right under Johnny’s nose.”

“Don’t worry about them,” I said. “The Black Hearts have more enemies than just us, Jax. Just do as I say. Keep an eye on yourself and your people, and everything will be fine.” I didn’t really believe the words even as they left my mouth.

Nothing was ever fine when Watson got involved.

Jax sighed and ate a cold french fry. Then he grimaced and pushed the basket away from himself. “So. This new shop. Got any space for a new hire?”

“Who you thinking about?”

“My niece,” Jax said. “She needs a job. She’s a quick learner. Likes cars and shit well enough. She won’t just be a paperweight is what I’m saying, I guess.”

“Tell her to be at the shop at nine o’clock on Monday morning. I need someone at the front desk. I’m pulling Ellie off and putting her on the floor full-time. She’s too good to keep her behind the desk all day. She’ll increase our productivity tenfold.”

“She’s always been a grease monkey, that girl,” Jax nodded. “Has a bit of a thing for you, too, I think.” The way he looked at me told me he was sizing me up. Calculating my reaction.

“Johnny says so too.”

This took the wind out of his sails. Jax’s suspicious look melted away, and he settled back into the chair. “She’s a tough chick, our Ellie, but I’d hate to see her caught up in our shit, you know?”

I looked at my hands. “Yeah. I know. I’ve thought the same thing for a long time.”

“You pulling her in to work full-time on the floor won’t jeopardize her, will it? She won’t be a member?”

“No. Only Johnny can make that call. And I don’t think it’s one he’d ever make. Ellie is like a sister to him. She’s safe where she is. Close but not close enough. I’ll watch out for her, Jax.”

“Good. If she got hurt ...” Jax trailed off.

I knew how good of friends Ellie and Jax had become over the years. He had been the first one Ellie opened up to after Johnny and me. She didn’t have to work to make anyone like her. She was already a joy to be around, but something

between her and Jax just clicked. It was like they had known each other for ages. I trusted him and always had. I was glad he was in Ellie's corner.

Although, now that I had fucked her, a little tickle of jealousy rose up in me. I shook it off as soon as I sensed it.

Jax clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back. The chair beneath him creaked as the brunette waitress went by. She stopped beside Jax, and he looked up at her. He flashed her his most charming white smile, and I saw her become lost in his light green eyes.

The man was kryptonite to women. I had seen him in action many times before.

“What time are you off, sweet cheeks?” Jax asked the waitress.

“An hour.” She shot a look up at the clock on the wall. “Maybe forty-five minutes. You'll wait for me, won't you?”

“Course I will. I'm not going to leave you hanging, darling. I'm going to give you a taste of all this.” He gestured at himself, and she giggled. Then he took her wrist and pulled her gently toward him, forcing her to bend over. He pressed his lips to her ear and whispered something I assumed was naughty.

She blushed a deep shade of red, but when he let her wrist go, she stayed where she was, slightly leaning over his lap.

He grabbed her ass and squeezed.

She let out a surprised but delighted yelp before hurrying off to attend to the other tables.

Jax raised his beer glass. “Cheers to that.”

CHAPTER 10



ELLIE

Axel's car was parked outside the shop when I arrived. I got out of my car and stood in front of it, soaking in the sight of our new workplace.

It was big. Much bigger than our original shop. The roof was new, and I assumed it had been replaced within the last year or two. It was aluminum, so low maintenance and clean. The grounds were also relatively tidy with a gravel lot hosting ten parking spaces marked with yellow concrete barriers. It had an industrial look, which would be new for us.

The bay doors suddenly began opening. As they crawled upward, a pair of boots were revealed and then jeans. As the door crept steadily upward, more of the man inside was revealed, and I savored the opportunity to be able to check Axel out without him seeing me.

I was shameless about it.

I even let my mouth hang open a little bit.

But as soon as the door passed his collarbone, I collected myself and began marching forward. He said our "encounter" wouldn't change anything in regards to us working together. I intended to see his words come to fruition. Axel seeing me checking him out after the first time seeing him since he had his cock buried inside me wouldn't help things.

"Hey," I said as I stepped into the shop. I looked around. "This place is great. I can't believe how quickly you were able to find something so perfect for what we need."

“It’s not bad. Still some work to do to get it in working shape, but that’s why you’re here. You know how I like it.”

He didn’t wink. There was no sexual innuendo in his words. So I let it be and smiled at him.

I was about to ask him where we should start when a quiet female voice spoke from behind me. “Hello? Are you Axel?”

I turned around to find myself staring at a petite young woman with platinum blond hair and bright blue eyes. She was wearing a pair of aviators on her head that pulled her lightly curled hair back from her face. She was quite pretty with unblemished skin and full pink lips. Her attention was on Axel.

“Yes, that’s me.” He stepped forward and shook her hand. Then he stepped aside and motioned at me. “And this is Ellie. She’s one of the mechanics, but she spent a lot of time behind the desk when she first started. She’ll be able to help you as you go.”

“Hi,” the young woman chimed. Her voice reminded me of a Disney character.

“Hi,” I said.

“I’m Jamie,” she said, stepping forward to shake my hand.

“Nice to meet you,” I lied. It wasn’t *nice* to meet her. In fact, it was pretty damn unnerving. Why was there a hot blond bombshell in the shop all of a sudden? Panicky thoughts raced through my mind. I realized how insane I was being when my brain concocted the idea that Axel had hired her to replace me.

Now that he had gotten in my pants, maybe he was over me. Maybe he wanted someone newer, fresher. Someone who he hadn’t screwed.

“Jax is my uncle,” Jamie said. “I hope he didn’t have to pull too many strings to get me a job here.”

“No, none at all,” Axel said. “He’ll just owe me some favors down the road if you end up sucking at your job.”

Jamie’s eyes widened. Axel didn’t seem to notice the pressure he had just put on her with his innocent joke.

Taking pity on her, I stepped in. “He’s kidding,” I said, wondering why I was bothering to make things easier for her. “The job is fun, and once you get the hang of it, everything will feel like second nature. Okay?”

Jamie nodded. “Okay. Thanks. Do I need to wear a uniform?”

Axel and I both laughed. It felt good to laugh around him. Some of the tension in my muscles evaporated.

“No,” Axel shook his head. “We aren’t that kind of business. Just wear something you can work in. What you have on now is fine.”

She was wearing tight dark jeans that hugged her legs from hip to ankle. On her feet were black flats with gold studs along the toe. She had on a hot pink blouse which was tucked into the jeans, and a long necklace grazed the middle button of the blouse. She looked like a paralegal.

“Well,” I said. “In my experience, wearing dangly jewelry can get you into trouble. If you’re behind the desk, it’s fine, but if you ever have to come out into the shop, I’d remove it. And, for future shifts, wear better shoes. Something closed-toed with a bit of ankle support and good soles. Sometimes, there are spills and stuff in here. Wouldn’t want you ruining an expensive pair of shoes.”

I hoped she ruined her shoes.

I smiled sweetly at her.

“Ellie knows more about this kind of shit than I do,” Axel said. “She can be your mentor. If you need anything, go to her.”

I wanted to punch him in the throat.

But I reeled in the surge of anger and kept my smile plastered on my face. “Yes. Don’t hesitate to ask questions. They’re better than avoidable mistakes.”

“Thanks,” Jamie said with a movement that I could only explain as a half-curtsy. “I’m really grateful to have this opportunity. My bills are tight, and employment is hard to

come by these days. Especially when you're like me and don't have any skills. I can write a good essay, but that doesn't pay you the big bucks, you know?"

Axel had run out of things to say, and I knew he wasn't the sort of man to stand around engaging in small talk. So I took the reins. "Axel and I are going to start tidying this place up. If you want to help out where you can, that would be great. But feel free to check out the computer systems. We have to install our operations software on them still, and once we do that and I have a spare moment, I'll run you through everything. It's pretty straightforward."

"Thank you," Jamie said, giving me another feminine bow.

Axel clapped his hands together, and Jamie let out a little surprised squeak. "All right. Time to get this shit done. Enough standing around."

So we got to work. Axel and I started with the tools. We went through everything in the shop, and I started an inventory list. Then, from there, I was able to pin down what items were missing. I transferred my list to another sheet of paper where I only wrote down the things we needed to acquire before we started accepting work. Then, I handed it to Axel and told him not to lose it.

"I won't lose it," he said defensively.

"You said the same thing when I gave you our old customer records. Good thing I kept a spare copy."

"You're a lifesaver. I know. Stop reminding me."

I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't manage it. My thoughts were still wrapped up in Jamie and wondering why a girl like her suddenly had a job at a place like this.

As soon as I thought it, Axel wiped his hands on his jeans. "I'm going to go check on the new girl and make sure she hasn't blown up any of the computers. Keep at it, will you? We're making good progress."

I let him leave without saying anything. The door to the office closed, and I wished it had a glass window on it like our

old shop did. Then, I could see what they were doing inside there.

I was losing my mind. How had one frisky afternoon in his shop led me to this? I wasn't the kind of girl who got jealous. I was secure in my own skin. I knew what I had to offer.

But maybe Axel wasn't interested in what I had to offer. Maybe he was tired of me. I'd been around for a long time, after all, and I knew the men of the MC liked to keep things fresh and interesting. I'd been privy to the endless rotation of women coming through the shop doors with no intention of having any work done on their vehicles. They were there for one of the men.

I couldn't blame them. There was something exciting about being around men like the MC men. They were tough. They were the kind of guys you didn't fuck around with. When you were with them, you felt confident and sexy and wanted. You felt safe despite the knowledge that they were walking a very fine line with the law.

And by very fine line, I meant they operated outside of the law with no apparent repercussion. Johnny was dating a cop now, for fuck's sake.

Rules didn't apply here.

Just because Axel and I had finally given into the sexual tension between us didn't mean he owed me anything. He was free to do what or whoever he wanted. If that was Jamie, there wasn't anything I could do to stop him.

He could fuck the receptionist who looked like she belonged on the set of a low-budget crime film if he really wanted to.

Just then, he returned from the office. The door closed behind him, and he nodded at me. I looked away and back down at my inventory list.

"She catches on quick. Good thing, too. Neither of us is going to have much time to show her the ropes."

I didn't answer him.

He stood still for a moment, watching me until he concluded I clearly wasn't in the mood to chat. He opened his mouth, and I felt the tension in the air. Was he going to put me in my place? Part of me wanted him to. I wanted him to remind me where I stood with him.

I needed to know.

But he closed his mouth again and walked off, his boots echoing on the smooth pavement of our new shop floor.

At least he didn't go back into the office to talk to Jamie.

CHAPTER 11



AXEL

Ellie was pissed about something. I had no fucking clue what it could be, and I wasn't going to waste too much time wracking my brain to try to figure it out. Women were complicated creatures, after all, and I had never been able to make sense of them.

I pulled the list out of my pocket that Ellie had given me. It was a rundown of all the tools and equipment we would need before we took on any customer jobs. Her writing was neat and slightly slanted.

I folded the paper up and crammed it back in my pocket. Why the fuck was she suddenly giving me the silent treatment? And why was it setting my teeth on edge? This wasn't how Ellie typically behaved.

I turned back around and headed back into the shop. Ellie was pulling old calendars of half-naked women off the walls and dropping them into a garbage bag. She looked up when she heard me coming and then went back to pulling tacks out of the wall. The calendars, I noticed, were from four years ago. Clearly, the old employees had left them up on the pictures they liked the most.

I crossed my arms and cleared my throat. She didn't so much as look at me.

Now, I was mad.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. My tone demanded an answer.

She looked over at me, finally, and I saw anger in her eyes for the first time in years. Maybe my approach had been a bit too forceful. I should have gone about it with a bit more ... sensitivity. Even if I had tried, I probably wouldn't have pulled it off. I always came out of the gate strong.

Luckily, Ellie knew that about me.

“Nothing. Sorry. I've been in a bad mood all morning.”

That was more unusual than seeing the anger in her eyes. “Come clean,” I said. “If I did something, you'd best tell me. I won't ask twice.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don't know what to tell you.”

I rubbed the stubble on my chin with my thumb and forefinger. Suddenly, a thought clicked into place. Was she bothered about Jamie being around?

“Jax asked me to hire his cousin, Ellie. For the record. I'd never met her before today. Do you think she'll fit in?” The question I posed was an attempt to get her approval. If she really didn't want Jamie around, I would consider hiring someone else for the front desk.

The tension in Ellie's shoulders evaporated. “No. It's nice that you were able to help her out so quickly. I'm sure Jax appreciates it too.”

“Yeah.” My tongue felt thick in my mouth. “Listen, Ellie. You should come over tonight. I'll make you dinner.”

At first, I was certain she was going to say no. Her eyes flicked back and forth between mine as she chewed the inside of her lip. “What time?”

“Seven.”

She nodded but didn't smile. “Okay.”

We didn't say anything to each other for the rest of the day. She didn't seem angry, by any stretch, but she wasn't her normal self either. I hoped she had heard what I told her about Jamie. There weren't any expectations about her being around.

I was just doing Jax a favor. The same way he would for me if the tables were turned.

I heard Ellie buzz herself through the gate at about five to seven. She was always punctual. I went to the front door and left it open for her to come in once she had parked her car.

She came in a few minutes later. I heard her taking off her shoes and then listened to her pad quietly down the hall to join me in the kitchen.

“Hey,” she said, pausing in the archway like she was waiting for instructions.

She looked fine as hell. I didn’t know if she had done it on purpose or not. Her hair was down, as it always was when we weren’t working. It was loosely curled, and a few strands hung around her bright eyes. She was wearing a tight black T-shirt beneath a leather jacket. Her jeans were snug and formfitting and full of rips and tears that revealed patches of smooth, tanned legs.

In her right hand was a bottle of red wine.

“Hey,” I said. It felt like too much time had passed between our greetings. “You didn’t have to bring wine.”

She blushed. “I didn’t know what kind of conversation you wanted to have. I wanted to be prepared.”

I walked around the counter between us and took the bottle from her hand. “Then, I’ll pour us each a glass.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

She was nervous. Really nervous. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and she was fiddling with her fingers and spinning the silver ring on her right pinky round and round. I uncorked the wine and filled a glass for her. Then I handed it to her, and my fingers grazed hers. She pulled back quickly, holding the glass to her chest for a moment before taking a sip. She never met my eyes.

“Dinner is already on the table. Come on. Let’s sit.” I made for the table outside on the patio. The weather was

comfortable. The sun was just setting, and I found it peaceful out in my backyard. The view might not have been the nicest—it was just my shop and a decent patch of grass—but it would do.

I pulled out Ellie's chair for her, and she thanked me before settling into it. She put down her wine glass and tucked herself into the table. "You cooked all this?" She looked up at me as I took the seat across from her.

"Yes. Try not to sound so surprised."

The corner of her mouth twitched, and she shook her head. "Not terribly surprised. Pleasantly surprised. There's a difference."

"Sure," I said as I plucked my steak knife from its napkin and set to cutting into the steak on my plate. Ellie followed suit. We were quiet for the first couple of bites.

"This is delicious," she said, pointing at the meat with her fork. "Thank you."

"In your world, would this constitute as pampering?" I arched an eyebrow.

She smiled despite having a mouthful of potatoes. She kept her lips firmly sealed and blushed. Then she covered her mouth and looked at her lap as she hurried to chew. When she had swallowed, she beamed up at me. "It would."

Feeling quite pleased with myself, I took a sip of wine.

Eating the rest of the meal was enjoyable. We talked about how pleased we both were with the new shop. Ellie seemed thrilled about having extra space, although at one point, she mentioned how it meant we would be working farther apart.

"I mean there'll be more space between us. Physical space." She took a large sip of wine. "We just won't be able to talk as easily."

I did my best not to laugh at her. "More space for a new employee to make you jealous?"

Her eyes went wide, and she went completely still. "Was I really that obvious?" She whispered.

I nodded.

“Oh my god.” She shrank in her chair, drawing into herself, and covered her face with her hands. “I don’t know what came over me. She showed up and I just-I just—”

“It’s all right, Ellie.”

“I’m not that kind of girl, I swear. I don’t know why it made me so upset that she was there. She seems nice enough. I know she wasn’t trying to like, swoop in and—” Ellie stopped talking and loaded a bite of steak into her mouth to shut herself up.

It was hard to keep my composure. I was equally as bemused as I was turned on by her rambling. It was way too fucking cute, and she had no clue.

“Did it occur to you that maybe Jamie isn’t even my type?” I asked, leaning back in my chair and swirling my wine around in my glass. I waited for her answer. I liked putting her on the spot like this.

She shook her head and gave me an apologetic smile. “No. I don’t know what you’re into. For all I knew, you liked the whole preppy lawyer’s assistant thing she had going on.”

I laughed. “That’s exactly how I would have put it too.”

“I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions and blowing you off today.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

She shook her head. “It’s embarrassing. It’s not like I have any right to be upset about who you’re hiring or working with. I can’t believe I acted so silly. It won’t happen again. And I’m sorry for assuming she was the kind of girl you wanted.”

Ellie was rambling again. I let her.

“I mean, who am I to know who you’d be into and who you wouldn’t?” she asked. Then she began answering her own question, words spilling out of her in an endless fountain of nonsense.

I chuckled, more to myself than to her, and leaned across the table. I cupped her cheek in my hand. She fell silent, and her eyes fell on my lips as I closed the space between us. When I kissed her, she melted into me.

She tasted like raspberries and wine.

The table became an instant nuisance. I stood and pushed it aside. The legs scraped on the concrete, and the dishes danced. One crashed on the ground. It didn't matter.

I pulled Ellie to her feet and held her to me. Our kiss became wilder, more intense. Her hands held my face as she explored my mouth with her tongue. Her fingers slipped into my hair and tightened into fists as my grip went to her ass. I gave it a good squeeze, and she giggled into our kiss.

I lifted her up, holding her ass in my hands, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. I carried her like that through the patio doors and kitchen. We went down the hall, bumping into things and catching our shoulders on doorframes as we went. Somehow, Ellie managed to shrug out of her leather jacket and T-shirt by the time we reached my bedroom.

I tossed her down on the bed. She landed with another outburst of giggling and popped the button of her jeans open.

I descended upon her and worked her jeans down her hips and thighs. I kissed new skin as it appeared from beneath the denim. She sighed as I went, and in a flourish, I pulled her jeans off and let them fall to the floor.

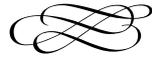
Now, she was in nothing but a thin, lacy red bra and a pair of black panties. The bra was see-through and lacked padding. Her nipples peeked through the lace, whispering sweet hellos to me as I kissed her flat stomach and took her panties off.

Fuck, she was sexy, and she was strong. Every muscle served a purpose. Their current purpose to tremble with all-consuming orgasms.

"I'm going to take care of you, baby," I said against the warm skin on her belly.

She sighed and relaxed deeper into the mattress.

CHAPTER 12



ELLIE

“I ’m going to take care of you, baby.”

Those words sounded like music to my ears as they passed between his lips. I sank deeper into the mattress as Axel grazed my skin with his fingertips and worked his way down my body until he settled between my legs.

He hooked his thumbs in my panties and pulled them slowly off my legs. At the ankles, I kicked them off hurriedly. I wanted his face between my thighs again.

But he didn’t go back there right away. He came up to meet me and kissed me. His hands wandered over my neck and chest. He traced my shoulders. His touch was so light, it almost tickled. Goosebumps erupted all over my skin, and I moaned into our kiss. I was helpless against him.

Axel dropped his head and kissed the tops of my breasts peeking out from under the lace. I was wearing a thin bralette that had no padding, and it also didn’t have a clasp. Axel didn’t seem too keen on taking it off. Instead, he pushed the cups aside, letting my breasts out over the fabric.

He pulled my nipples between his lips and suckled them. He pinched them gently between his teeth and pushed my tits together with his hands. He licked and nibbled, kissed and caressed, until I was writhing beneath him in desperation. I needed more. I needed his mouth on me.

He kissed my throat and jaw and then held my face in one hand as he kissed my mouth. His breath mingled with mine for

a brief moment. Then he began descending, lips trailing down my belly and over my hip.

He put his hands under each of my thighs and pushed my legs back. He held them open as he dropped his head, and his tongue licked me up and down in gentle strokes that made my insides tighten into a taut coil.

Then, the gentle touches gave way to a more primal experience. Axel sucked at my clit, pulling it hard into his mouth and brushing his tongue over the most sensitive part of me. I whimpered and clutched at the sheets.

“Fuck,” I breathed, unable to catch the word as it slipped between my lips.

He groaned against my wetness and dipped his tongue inside me. He explored my entrance, and I rocked my hips against his face. His stubble tickled my soft skin, but I didn’t care. His mouth on me made me feel like I was breaking rules that didn’t exist. The thrill turned me on more, and I felt myself grow wetter.

“How badly do you want me to fuck you?” His voice sounded far away.

“Let me show you,” I whispered.

Axel got to his feet at the edge of the bed and stripped out of his clothes. His body was all muscle under tanned skin. His cock was already waiting for me, pointing at the ceiling. He pulled me to the edge of the bed and took my elbow to guide me up on to my hands and knees in front of him. He took his time to tuck my hair behind my ears. He delicately gathered my hair in his hands until he had all of it in his left fist. He gathered it tightly to hold my head in place.

“Open your mouth and suck it like the good girl you are.” He leaned his hips toward my face. “You know you want it.”

Saliva flooded my mouth. I wet my lips and looked up at him. He held me in place, and I opened my mouth for him. I stared into his eyes as the tip of his cock slipped between my wet lips. His jaw flexed, and his eyes hardened as I took him deep into my throat. I let him fuck my throat. I trusted him.

He used me like that until all at once he released my hair. I held his cock between my lips, pressing my tongue against his length, as he leaned forward and slapped my ass. I whimpered and took more of his cock in my mouth.

His hand wandered between my legs, and he stretched me open with three fingers. I moaned as the tightness coiled inside me burst apart, and I came around his fingers.

Then he pulled out of me, and his wet fingers traced the sensitive skin of my ass. I flinched and tried to wriggle away from him. I had never let a man play around there before.

Axel pressed his cock deeper into my throat. "Relax. I told you I would take care of you. Trust me, baby. I'll make you feel so fucking good."

I relaxed against his touch. He sensed my submission and pressed his thumb against the opening to my body. The pressure had me moaning around his cock once more.

As his thumb slipped into my ass, he eased a finger into my pussy. I came again.

"Please," I pleaded as his fingers moved inside me.

"Please what?" he demanded.

"I need your cock."

He smiled down at me, looking like the devil himself. "Turn around then."

I turned on my hands and knees so that my ass was in the air in front of him. I looked back over my shoulder at him and licked my lips. I tasted salty residue from his pre-come, and my stomach flipped over. I wanted him so fucking bad.

I wiggled my ass in the air for him as he grabbed a condom from his nightstand and slipped it on. "Hurry up," I begged.

He faced me and lined his cock up with my pulsing slit. "I want to watch you first."

I bit my bottom lip. I knew what he was asking for. I dropped my shoulder to lower one hand between my legs. Then, I reached up to trace my wet pussy with one finger. I

teased my own clit, sending little jolts of pleasure through my body, and then slipped a finger inside myself.

Axel worked himself over as he watched. His hand sliding up and down his shaft did cruel things to my insides. I knew I was going to come as soon as he put it inside me. He was so big and thick. He was everything my body needed and more.

I admired the thick veins of his arms and on his lower stomach, leading down to the swell of his cock. He was straining against his own pleasure as he watched me finger myself. I liked the way he was looking at me. I saw the same desire in his eyes that I felt in my gut.

I spread myself open with two fingers.

This seemed to be enough invitation for Axel to step forward and slip his cock inside me. I moaned and bit down on my own shoulder as he gave me all of him. As soon as his shaft was buried up to the hilt, I came. I shook and shuddered around him, and he fucked me hard until I screamed his name.

Then his thumb was in my ass again.

I threw my head back to the ceiling as another orgasm rushed over me. I heard my name on Axel's lips at the same time, and he grabbed my hips in each hand, pulling me harder against him as he came.

I rocked against him, riding him for all I was worth as he grunted behind me.

When he was done, he pulled out of me and fell down on the bed beside me. His hand traced the line of my spine up my back to my shoulder blades. Then, he held the nape of my neck in one hand and leaned in to kiss me.

I tasted myself on his lips.

The kiss was soft and sweet, and when he pulled away, I wanted to reach out and draw him back to me. I resisted and let him get to his feet. He went into the bathroom, and I listened to the tap running as he cleaned himself up.

When he returned, he was still naked. I sat up as I tucked my tits back into my bralette. I got to my feet and reached for

my panties, which were lying across his jeans on the floor.

He caught my wrist, and I froze in his grasp. “Are you going somewhere?” He asked.

“I was going to go home. I didn’t know if you’d want me to stay or not.”

He wrapped his arm around my lower back and pulled me close to him. His skin was hot against mine. “You should stay.”

“You’re sure?”

Axel nodded, and his eyes never left mine. “Yes. You don’t think I’m done with you yet, do you?”

“Um, I don’t know—”

“Come on,” he said as he spun me around, putting my back to the bed. “We still have that bottle of wine to polish off. When we’re done with that, I’m going to have your pussy for dessert.”

I swallowed. His skin against mine felt somehow hotter. “That sounds like a good way to spend the night.”

“First things first,” he said. “Take that off.” He pointed at my bralette.

I giggled and pulled it over my head. Axel let go of my wrist and squeezed my breasts in each hand. He ran his thumbs over my nipples, which went hard at his touch. “I’m going to grab us that bottle of wine from outside. When I come back, I expect to see you lying on my bed waiting for me.”

“I won’t disappoint you.”

“You never have.” He winked.

Then he turned away and left me in his bedroom to go get the wine. I went to his bed and threw myself down on the left-hand side, the side I had assumed he didn’t use. The nightstand was empty, and the sheets were still neatly tucked into the bed frame on this side. Within the next couple hours, I suspected the blankets would be lying on the floor, and we would be tangled around each other fucking until the sun came up.

I thought about his cock inside me as I waited for him to return. I was still a sloppy wet mess between my legs. It would be nice to have a man who was able to meet my sex drive. Usually, it was all over after one round. I didn't know how many rounds Axel had in him, but I had a feeling things were just getting started.

I realized I was smiling up at his ceiling like an idiot.

And I was rubbing myself.

I heard the patio door close. "Hurry the fuck up!" I called down the hallway.

Axel chuckled down the hallway. "Stay where you are, baby. I'm coming."

CHAPTER 13



AXEL

I wasn't used to waking up because someone else was moving around in my bed. When I brought a woman home, she never stayed the night. Ever. It was a rule of mine. I wouldn't stay at their place, either. Not if I could avoid it.

But the idea of Ellie leaving last night had unsettled me. I wanted her in my bed with me. First off, because I wasn't done ravaging her yet. Secondly, I wanted to feel the warmth of her body beside mine as we slept.

After spending hours fucking and licking and kissing, we had fallen asleep. I didn't know what time it was now, but sunshine was streaming in through the cracks of the blinds, and Ellie was sitting on the edge of the bed pulling her black T-shirt on over her head. She pulled her blond hair out from under the collar, and I caught a whiff of her shampoo.

"Leaving so early? And without saying goodbye?" I asked.

Ellie looked back at me. "I have to feed Cade and let him out."

"Cade?"

"My dog."

"Right. Well, I'll go with you. We can head to the shop together afterward."

She nodded, a smile touching the corners of her lips. "Okay. But hurry up. Cade's bladder is probably really full. Or he already peed on my floor." She shrugged and stood. "Hopefully not. My lease agreement states I'm not even

allowed to have a pet. If he pees on any carpet ... Yeah. I have to go.”

She was naked from the waist down. I rolled across the bed and slapped her ass. She batted my hand away but didn't move away from me. So I traced the curve of her ass with my palm. Her skin was warm to the touch and softer than silk. I wondered how she kept it that way. Did she even have to try, or was she always this soft? I eased my hand down under her ass cheek and dragged a single finger down the back of her thigh. I drew it back up, tracing swirling patterns on her skin until my hand settled on the inside of her thigh.

Her eyes were heavy as she watched me. She didn't move or say a word as I pressed forward, letting my hand cup her warm pussy.

Her legs drifted apart, and she stared down at me, her gaze unwavering. “I have to go. And if you do what you did to me last night again, I know I'll never leave.”

That was kind of the idea. I wanted to bend her over and spread her open again. I wanted to slip my cock inside her. I was rock hard at the thought. “I can't have just a little bit of fun?”

Ellie shook her head. “Not right now.”

I eased a finger between her lips and felt her wetness against me. I arched an eyebrow, daring her to tell me no again. She sucked in a breath. I eased my finger inside her and moved it slowly in and out. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, and her eyebrows pulled together. The face she made when I was stretching her open was so fucking sexy. I wanted to make her come again. I wanted to hear her moan.

“You can't spare fifteen minutes? That's all I need.”

She shook her head. Her eyes fell closed when I pressed deeper inside her.

Suddenly, she stepped away, and I was left with a wet finger. She grabbed her panties, stepped into them, and then hopped in place a couple times as she pulled her jeans on.

I sucked her juices off my finger before getting out of bed and dressing. The taste of her on my tongue was maddening, but I told myself I would have her again soon.

We opted to take one car to her place. I drove because then it gave her a reason to have to come back to my place to get her car. She spent the entire drive with her hand on my cock. I was thick and hard beneath the denim, and she knew what she was doing to me. Maybe it was payback for what I had done to her this morning.

If it was, I hoped it was the kind of thing she would do all the time. Having her hand on me while I gripped the wheel was a fine way to drive.

I parked in front of her apartment and then followed her up the steps and through the front door of the building. We went straight to the back of the building, and she let me into her suite.

A dog came barrelling down the hall toward us right away.

Cade was a happy-go-lucky pit bull with a grinning face and massive tongue. He dragged that tongue up Ellie's cheek when she crouched down to greet him.

"Oh, gross," she muttered, dragging the back of her hand across her cheek to wipe away the slobber. She stood up. "Come on, let's go outside. I know, I know. You've been cooped up a while. You can say hi to Axel after you've done your business."

Ellie opened her patio door and practically chased the dog out. Cade ran a few frantic laps of the backyard and then dropped into a squat to, as Ellie had said, "do his business."

After she let him back in, I dropped to my knees and scratched him behind the ears. Then, I grabbed his snout, shook his head playfully, and wrestled with him for a couple minutes. Ellie watched the entire exchange with a smile.

I played with the dog a bit more while she changed into clothes more appropriate for spending the day at the shop. She

emerged from her bedroom wearing a looser pair of jeans, her typical shop boots, and a white T-shirt with several grease stains.

“Ready?” she asked as she filled Cade’s dog bowls with water and dog food.

I nodded.

We got back in my car and drove over to the shop. Without a word, her hand was back on my crotch. I put mine on her thigh. She shifted lower in her seat and took my hand in hers. Then she interlaced her fingers with mine as her hand on my groin started rubbing me absentmindedly. I could get used to this shit, that was for damn sure.

At a stoplight, I had to put my hand on hers to stop her. “You’re going to give me blue balls for the rest of the day, woman. Keep your hands off me.”

Ellie gave me a coy but innocent smile. “Okay,” she shrugged. “You just tell me when you change your mind.”

I grunted out a laugh as she put her hand back in her lap and looked out the window as we drove the rest of the way to the shop. When we arrived, she stepped out and stretched. I got a nice peek at her lean stomach as she reached her arms over her head. I was sad to see it disappear when she began making her way toward the shop.

I told myself I wouldn’t have to wait long until she was under me again, until I could taste her and drink from her. My thoughts were of her naked body on the bed before me as I entered the shop.

Jamie was there. She was on the phone with whom I could only assume was a customer. Her voice was chipper and polite as she asked for their information and told them she would call them as soon as we were accepting work. She assured them they would be our first priority, and she would keep them posted if there were going to be any delays.

“Good stuff, Jamie,” I said as she hung up the phone.

“Thanks.” She grinned. “Looks like things will be pretty busy for you guys once you’re up and running. You’ve had a

lot of your old customers calling in and asking if this was your new permanent location.”

“Means it’s been easy to find us. That’s good. Word of mouth is working.” We didn’t advertise. Advertising only invited attention, and we didn’t need any of that.

Ellie said hello to Jamie as my phone went off in my pocket. I excused myself and slipped back outside. The sun was hot on my shoulders, and I shielded my eyes from the glare as I answered the phone.

It was Jax calling to check in on his little cousin.

“How’s Jamie doing? She picking things up quickly?”

“Yeah. She’s pretty sharp. Fits right in.”

“Good,” Jax said. Then he paused. “I don’t think this needs to be said between us, but you understand she’s not available, right?”

I barked out a laugh into the phone. “You’re right. It didn’t need to be said. Besides, she’s not my type.”

“I thought anything with tits and a pussy was your type.”

“Well, you can’t blame a guy for that, can you?”

It was Jax’s turn to laugh into the phone. “Suppose not. But you keep your eyes and your hands off my baby cousin. She’s too good for you. She’s too good for any of us MC bastards.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more.” That was how I had felt about Ellie for all those years, so I knew exactly where Jax was coming from. His words reminded me that I had brought Ellie closer to the MC life. I didn’t like the way that sat in my gut. “I have to get back to work, Jax.”

“All right. Tell Jamie not to flirt with any of the guys who come in.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“Fuck you, then,” Jax said, and he hung up the phone.

I laughed to myself as I slid my phone back into my pocket. Then, out of habit, I looked up and across the street before starting to turn back to the shop.

As I did, I stopped.

A black Lincoln was driving down the street and was cruising at a speed that was at least ten miles under the speed limit. I could hear the tires peeling across the pavement. The engine was silent as it approached, and I noticed it had tinted windows.

Then, when the car was directly across from me, the driver's side window rolled down.

A man I didn't know was sitting behind the wheel. His seat was reclined back, and his left hand rested lazily across the top of the steering wheel. His fingers were marked with tattoos and each one hosted a thick, gold ring adorned with several different jewels.

There was a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He was clean-shaven and bald—perfectly bald like he just shaved his head with a straight razor that morning. He gave me a crooked grin, but I didn't sense any kindness from him.

He was wearing sunglasses that were as dark as the car itself. As he passed, I stared into the depths of the lenses where I knew his eyes would be. Then, his hand emerged against the windowsill in the form of a gun.

He mimicked the motion of firing two rounds at me and then lifted his fingers and blew on them like he was blowing smoke from the end of a pistol.

He returned his attention to the road and drove on. The window rolled slowly back up, hiding him from view.

I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. A pounding had begun behind my eyes. My hands ached because they were clenched into fists so tight that my nails were biting into my palms.

I couldn't go back into the shop right now. The anger was straining to break free, and I didn't dare bring myself

anywhere near Ellie right now.

So I stayed out on the gravel drive, mind racing, fury burning, as I came to a conclusion that made my skin cold. A name kept running through my mind, over and over, and I knew things were about to change.

Watson was waving the starting flag.

CHAPTER 14



ELLIE

Axel returned from his phone call fifteen minutes after leaving the shop. He met my gaze and hooked a thumb over his shoulder to point at his parked car outside. “I have to run out to meet up with Jax for a bit. Are you okay to hold things down here?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll start placing orders for equipment. You good with that?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Axel sounded distracted, but I wasn’t going to say anything about it. He left in a hurry, and I watched him fumble with his keys at his car door. Seconds later, he was peeling out on the road in a screech of tires. He left behind the stench of burned rubber.

I got comfortable at the shop computer. It was nice to have one inside the shop. At our old location, we’d had to go into the office anytime we needed to access the internet, which was a fair amount. Now, we would be able to walk ten feet to the shop computer and find whatever information we were looking for.

I logged onto our most commonly used supplier’s site and began adding to the shopping cart tools that I had written down on the list of things we needed to buy. After I had been at it for ten or fifteen minutes, I heard the shop door open.

Jamie slipped in and closed the door gently behind her. She walked around the shop peering at the tools I was sure she couldn’t name until, eventually, she stood on the other side of the computer from me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I looked up and smiled at her before looking back at my computer screen to continue shopping.

“Do you mind if I hang out in here for a bit? I’m getting a little lonely in there. I forwarded the shop calls to my cell phone, so don’t worry. I won’t miss any customers trying to get a hold of us.”

I liked her resourcefulness. I especially liked that she had taken the initiative to solve the problem before it happened. “Sure. Grab one of those rolling stools over there and have a seat.”

She grabbed the stool that read “Ford” across the seat and sat down across from me. She was quiet for a while, but I could feel a question burning inside her. I leaned back from the computer and rested my hands on my knees.

“So. Is this your first time working in a place like this?”

Jamie nodded. “Yeah. It’s a lot different than what I’m used to. My last job was at a coffee shop pouring lattes and cleaning espresso machines. This feels really intimidating compared to that.”

“You’ll be fine here. Everyone is really nice. That’s why I stayed. I couldn’t imagine ever working anywhere else now. Maybe you’ll start to feel the same way after you put in your time here.”

“Speaking of putting in your time, how did you learn so much about all this stuff? Cars and bikes, I mean. I wouldn’t have a clue where to start.”

“I learned from my dad while I was growing up. It made the transition to work as a mechanic pretty easy for me. You don’t have any experience with cars?”

Jamie shook her head. “No. None.”

“Have you ever changed a tire?”

She shook her head again. “The only work I’ve ever done on a car was filling it with gas. No joke.”

I tried not to laugh but couldn't help it. I was relieved when she let out a little chuckle, too, and blushed.

"I know," she said. "Kind of embarrassing, but I want to learn more. I'd love to know how to change my own tire. Or my oil. I know that's important. Right?"

"Yes." I nodded. "I would say it is."

Jamie reminded me of how I had been when I was really young, asking my dad to teach me everything he knew about cars. He had jumped at the opportunity despite the flack he'd gotten from my mom about it. I remember him saying to her that if I ever lost interest in mechanics, he wouldn't push me to keep learning. He would let me follow whatever passion I chose.

There had never been anything I wanted to do more than work on cars and motorcycles. I was living my dream job. I knew it wasn't what most girls wanted. The early mornings and the late shifts made it hard to date. The grease and the grime and the inevitability of having coarse hands and chipped fingernails was unavoidable.

I glanced at Jamie's hands. Her nails were bright pink and perfectly shaped. She caught me looking and tried to hide them under her legs. "I know I don't really fit in with the whole 'vibe' of this place."

"We don't care about that. But if you start helping out in the shop, you'll probably break those. I hope you don't spend a lot of money on them."

"My nails?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Oh, I don't care about that. I mean it's nice to have them done all nice and whatnot, but I'll stop going to my appointments if I start working with you in here."

"Yeah. I miss having pretty things." I frowned down at my own hands. My nails were naked and incredibly short. They had to be that way. Otherwise, I would constantly catch them on things while I worked under the hood. They weren't worth the effort, the money, or the pain.

I started to wonder if Axel might appreciate a softer side of me. Our time together last night had proven to me that I was more than just a onetime fuck for him. He had been tender with me, soft, almost vulnerable. Almost.

He had been kind and gracious. The meal he had prepared for me spoke volumes. It had taken him time, and he had gone about it with care, making sure everything was just right. I had always known he was a little obsessive about things—working so often in the shop with him had brought that to light pretty quickly—but I never expected him to be so meticulous where I was concerned.

It felt nice to have him doting on me. Maybe I could do something sweet for him to return the favor.

“Hey,” I said, and Jamie looked up at me. “Would you be open to the idea of giving me a makeover this weekend? I want to surprise someone.”

“Someone?” Jamie asked, tilting her head to the side curiously.

“Yes. Someone. I would like for him to see me all dolled up. It’s never happened before. It might be nice.”

“I think that would be so much fun,” Jamie said. “It will be so easy. You’re already beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I blushed.

“I can bring my makeup and curling iron and give you the full treatment. I can even bring some nail polishes if you like. But, may I be honest with you?”

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

“I think Axel likes you just the way you are.”

I stared at her with my mouth hanging open. She had only been around for a couple days, and somehow, she already knew about me and Axel. “How did you know?”

Jamie giggled. “Oh, please. I knew the moment I met you two that there was something between you. I wasn’t sure if it was something that happened in the past, or if you guys were

currently an item. But everything fell into place. You're seeing each other, right?"

"Sort of. I'm not really sure. We haven't said anything out loud to each other. Things have been mostly ... physical."

"Sounds fun." Jamie winked.

I laughed and nodded. "It has been. He did something really special for me last night, so I was thinking a big makeover might get his blood racing, you know?"

Jamie nodded. "Absolutely. I already have a couple ideas for a look we could create. A dark, smoky eye and a wet, glossy lip. I think he'd like it. We'll do you up like a vixen, a badass biker babe with a chip on her shoulder. I think he'd be more into that than you putting on a cute dress and heels. Am I wrong?"

"No, I think you're spot-on."

Jamie clapped her hands together excitedly. "I'm so excited! Thank you for asking me to help you. It means a lot. I moved here over half a year ago now and meeting nice people hasn't been easy. It's been kind of lonely, to tell you the truth."

I felt for her. Feeling like you were alone in a city as big as New York wasn't a good feeling. "Well. You're among family now. Everyone at the shop is your friend. That's just how it is around here. We stick together, and we have each other's backs. Always. If you ever need anything, *ever*, don't be afraid to speak up and ask for it, okay? Axel will make sure you have what you need, whether it's work-related or not."

"Work-related or not?"

I didn't want to spill too much information so early. I had no clue how much she knew about Axel and her cousin Jax. Did she have any clue about the MC at all? Did she know what they were all about? Did she even know that about fifty percent of the jobs our shop took were under the table gigs?

She would learn in due time, but that time was not right now.

“Yeah. Like I said, we’re a family. We help each other out, no matter what.” I gave her my best smile, and she seemed to take comfort in it.

“That sounds really nice. Like what I’ve been looking for.”

“We can be a bit rowdy, and sometimes, it gets pretty intense around here, but it’s all worth it. And that’s kind of what you get for working in a macho man’s world.”

“I had wondered about that,” Jamie said. “Lots of testosterone all in one place. It was such a relief to see you on my first day. I was so worried I would be the only girl around.”

“I was the only girl around for a while,” I said. “It had its perks. They all treated me like a princess until they realized I was more like them. Then they started treating me like one of the boys. Minus the roughhousing. Thank God.”

“Roughhousing?” Jamie asked, tilting her head to the side again.

I nodded. “Yep. Sometimes you’ll be lucky enough to have a show on your lunch break. Like you said, testosterone. One thing leads to another and all of a sudden, there’s a brawl. Just stand back and watch. They’ll get it out of their systems.”

Jamie swallowed and laughed nervously. “What have I gotten myself into?”

I wanted to tell her she had lucked out. Somehow, she had fallen into the best job she could ever get, in my opinion. In time, she would learn how fortunate she was. Once she got past Johnny’s abrasiveness and Axel’s sour attitude, she would see the shop for what it was.

Our home.

CHAPTER 15



AXEL

The incident of the black car driving by the shop had me rattled. I needed to tell someone about what had happened. This wasn't the kind of thing an MC member should carry around by himself. This was knowledge that needed to be shared because, first and foremost, it had been a threat.

A very bold, public threat.

I knew it wasn't a coincidence the mock drive-by had happened after Watson's name started coming up in conversation. If he was the new leader of the Black Hearts, like Jax had said, then I had bigger things to worry about than setting up the new shop.

I was sitting at the same table I always sat at in our usual joint. I had my back to the corner, and when Derek showed up, he headed straight for me. He didn't stop at the bar to order a drink.

I had called him after the driver passed by the shop and told him I needed to see him immediately. Whatever he was doing had been dropped, and he met me at the bar half an hour later. I had also called Jax and Johnny. I knew Johnny would be late, but that didn't matter. I wanted to speak privately with him anyway.

Derek pulled out the chair across from me and fell heavily into it.

"I'm surprised you made it on time," I said.

"Fuck off. I'm never late."

“You’re always late. Get lost on your way over again?”

“No.”

A waitress came by, the same brunette Jax had been flirting with the other afternoon. We ordered beers, and she returned with them shortly. “Enjoy boys,” she said before continuing her rounds of the other tables.

Derek watched her leave and then turned his attention back to me. “All right. What’s the deal? It’s not like you to want to meet up in the middle of the day like this.”

“I need to talk to you about some shit that’s going down. I have a bad feeling.”

Derek disguised his reaction smoothly. He leaned back in his chair, took a mouthful of beer, and then gestured for me to proceed.

“This morning, a car drove by the new shop. Tinted out windows. Never seen it around before. No plates.”

“Black Hearts,” a new voice said.

Derek and I both looked up to see Jax standing behind one of the other chairs. “May I?” he asked, nodding toward the open chair in front of him. Derek and I both nodded, and Jax took a seat. “The car you saw this morning. I saw it, too, outside the old shop a few days ago. Flashy thing, right?”

I nodded. “Custom chrome grill. Blacked out windows.”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, the bastard did more than just drive by this morning. He rolled the window down and had the nerve to look me in the fucking eyes as he pretended to pop one off.” I copied the gun gesture the man in the car had made with his hand. “Two fake shots, right at me.”

“If that’s not a warning, I don’t know what is,” Jax muttered. “Where the fuck is that tight little brunette? I need a damn beer.”

“Tight?” Derek asked, wrapping his lips around the neck of his beer as if to point out that he had what Jax wanted. “You

fuck her already? She's only been here a couple weeks."

"Damn straight, I already got in there. She's a biter." Jax winked. "I didn't expect that. Thought she would just be a sweet, innocent little thing. Not the case. She sucks cock like a ___"

"Can I get you a drink?" The brunette waitress had appeared over Jax's shoulder. She looked pleased with herself and not upset Jax had been discussing their fuck session so shamelessly.

Jax ordered a beer. She patted his shoulder and then slipped away. Jax leaned in close. "She sucks cock like a goddess."

"Just had to get the last word in, hey?" Derek asked.

Jax shrugged.

"Can we get back to the issue?" I asked, looking from one of them to the other. "We have more important things to talk about than Jax getting his dick wet."

"We do?" Jax laughed.

Derek rolled his eyes.

I sighed and rested my elbows on the table. "There's more I want you to know. Those Black Hearts who were beaten up at their clubhouse last week? That was me and Johnny. We went in with baseball bats after the shop burned down. We were pissed. We gave them what they deserved and nothing more. We lied because Johnny didn't want the MC to act rashly. There's more going on than we think, and Johnny wants to play it smart."

Derek and Jax exchanged a look.

"You're sure Johnny would be okay with you telling us this?" Derek asked.

"He won't give a fuck. He might run his mouth about it a bit, but it'll pass. I'm making the right call." I was making the only call there was to make. "I'm telling you because this changes things. I want you guys to keep your heads up. Jax, have you heard anything else about Watson?"

Jax shook his head. “No. Not a peep.”

“Right.”

“Listen, Axel. You should tell the others. If this is as big of a deal as you’re making it seem, the boys need to be united on this. The MC has to stick together.”

Derek nodded along to what Jax was saying.

“I’ll tell them. As soon as I tell Johnny, we’ll tell the others. All right?”

Both men nodded.

Then Jax’s beer arrived. He wrapped his fingers around the bottle but didn’t take a sip. “Things are starting to feel like old times.” He lifted the bottle to his lips. “I always think I want a fight until I have one. Then, I just want things to go back to normal.”

Derek and I didn’t say anything. All I could think about was Ellie and how different I felt about the danger looming over us. If she wasn’t in the picture, and if I wasn’t starting to have real feelings about her, I might be looking forward to a bit of action.

It had been a while since I broke a knuckle on some poor bastard’s jaw. It had been even longer since I tasted my own blood on my lips.

I called Johnny on my way back to the shop and told him to meet me there. He agreed, and I pulled up in front of the new shop. The doors were open, and Ellie was chatting with Jamie. I stayed in my car for a moment, enjoying watching her in a brief moment of solitude.

Then, I got out of the car and marched forward.

When Ellie heard me coming, she spun around and gave me a cheerful smile. It chased away some of the storm clouds in my mind.

“Hey,” she said, hopping up from her seat and rushing toward me. She stopped with her hands resting on my chest. “I

think I'm going to take off early with Jamie? Is that okay? We really hit it off, and it's been a long time since I got along with another girl." Her eyes were bright, and her smile was big. She wanted this.

"Yeah, sure thing." It might be best to have her out of the way when Johnny showed up. Then, she wouldn't ask questions she shouldn't be asking.

"Great. Also, I'd love to have dinner with you tomorrow. Are you free?"

I knew that now was not the time to make dating commitments. I had a lot on my plate. Things with the MC were about to get serious as we considered what our move should be to handle the conflict with the Black Hearts. But I couldn't say no to her. The prospect of a date with her was like a bright light at the end of a very long, narrow, dark tunnel.

"Dinner sounds good to me. I'll call you tomorrow?"

"Yes!" she said happily. Then she spun around and waved Jamie over. "He said we can go. Come on!"

Jamie leaped up from the Ford stool she was sitting on. She rushed by me, and the two women hurried off the property. I could hear them giggling as they made their way down the street. I remembered that Ellie's car was at my house and wondered how they were going to get there.

She was a grown woman. She could handle it. Worst case scenario was she'd call a cab.

I still sent her a text to offer her a ride, just in case.

She replied that they were fine and told me she was excited to see me tomorrow.

Just then Johnny pulled up on his motorcycle. He cut the engine and stepped off the bike as he undid his helmet. He hung it on the right handlebar and raked his fingers through his thick, dark hair.

"All right, Axel. What's got your panties in a bunch?"

I invited Johnny into the shop, and we went into the office. We each sat down, and Johnny sized me up. "What the fuck is

the matter with you?”

“Some guys drove by the shop this morning,” I said, and then I gave him the same details I had given Jax and Derek. I told him about the gun gesture. “It wasn’t a joke, man. They mean business. Serious business.”

“Fucking Black Hearts pieces of shit,” Johnny growled.

“I’ve already told Jax and Derek. They think the whole MC should be brought in on it, Johnny, and I agree. We can’t keep people in the dark on this one. It’s bigger than other things we’ve had to deal with. We need everyone to keep their eyes peeled. I wouldn’t be surprised if another attack hit us sometime soon.”

“I’ll call a meeting and tell the others.”

“Tell them about what we did too.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Secrets don’t do anyone any favors at a time like this. Don’t leave any opportunities open for the Black Hearts to get the upper hand. Tell the boys everything. It’s better in the long run.”

Johnny leaned back in his seat and kicked his heels up on the office table. “Something tells me you’re not giving me all the details, Axel. Come on. What’s getting under your skin?”

I scratched the back of my neck. I had to tell him. At least, I had to tell him something. “Rumor has it the Black Hearts have a new leader.”

“I’ve heard the same thing,” Johnny said. “I think I should arrange a meeting with him. See what he’s all about.”

“No,” I said a little too quickly. I tried to recover by talking more slowly. I didn’t want Johnny to think anything of it. “No, let me do it. I know the new guy. They call him Watson.”

“You know him? How?”

I gave Johnny the same answer I gave everyone. “We ran in the same circles for a while. Our paths split, and I never

looked back. He wasn't the kind of guy I wanted to be associated with anymore. I think it would be best if I was the one to talk to him. Maybe I can make him see reason where the MC is concerned, and he'll back off." My words sounded unconvincing to my own ears.

"Whatever you think is best, Axel." Johnny held his hands up and then let them fall to his thighs. "I have your back, brother. You know that. If you need anything, just say the word."

"You worry about telling the MC what's going on. I'll worry about Watson."

"Deal," Johnny said.

And so, it was beginning.

CHAPTER 16



ELLIE

I had spotted the dress in the shop window from across the street but held my tongue as we ducked into a nail salon. Jamie had booked us each a manicure and pedicure appointment, claiming that if we were going to do this, we were really going to commit. She wanted to show me what it felt like to bask in the lap of luxury for just one day, and I was more than open to it.

I had never had my nails done by a stranger before.

It was a little awkward and more than a little uncomfortable, but we left the shop an hour and a half later smiling. My toes and fingernails were ruby red, and the way the sunlight caught them had me admiring my own hands.

“I can’t believe how much of a difference nail polish makes,” I said. My hands looked like the hands of a woman for the first time in my life. My nail tech had scrubbed out the grime and grease from my nail beds and exfoliated my calluses.

“My palms are smoother than a baby’s ass.” I laughed.

Jamie giggled and admired her own glittery pink polish. “Right? Nothing better than a mini spa day.”

My eyes roamed back over to the shop window across the street. It was a cozy, little boutique, and it certainly was not the kind of place I would ever set foot in of my own volition. I could see small chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and twinkle lights were wrapped around the window display. It made the dress look even more magical.

It was a deep navy blue with long, formfitting sleeves. The collar was wide, reaching the end of each shoulder, and the neckline plunged downward in a dramatic V-cut. At the waist, the dress flared outward and ended at the knee. Little bits of black crinoline peeked out, giving the dress an almost gothic, elegant sort of feel.

I took Jamie's elbow and pointed across the street at the window. "What do you think of that little dress in the shop window?"

Jamie's eyes widened, and she looked up at me. "I think you'd look like a total hottie in it."

"You're sure? I don't want Axel to think I'm, I don't know, trying too hard?"

Jamie rolled her eyes and rushed toward the sidewalk. "Oh, please," she said over her shoulder. "You think a man ever has a thought like that? If you showed up in that, he wouldn't even remember where his own cock was, let alone have the presence of mind to think you were *trying too hard*."

Her bluntness surprised me. "He'd better be able to find his cock. What other reason would I have to get all dressed up?"

We hopped up onto the sidewalk and made it to the shop front. Jamie took the door and pulled it open for me. "I'm sure you have other reasons besides sex. You've known each other for a while, right?"

I blushed.

Jamie didn't comment on my bright shade of red when she stepped into the store behind me. Her eyes swept the place until she found a sales associate. Then, she asked to have the dress from the window found in my size and brought to a fitting room.

At the back wall of the store was a massive shelving unit of shoes. They were all high heels.

"When was the last time you wore heels?" Jamie asked as she plucked a black pair with a hot pink sole from the shelf. Definitely not my cup of tea.

“Probably senior prom.”

Jamie spun around to face me with her mouth hanging open. “Are you serious?”

I nodded and tucked my hands into the front pocket of my jeans. “I don’t dress up, Jamie. That’s why I asked for your help. I literally have no clue what I’m doing.”

Jamie put the black heel back on the shelf and then scanned it with her forefinger resting on her chin. She reached for a red pair. They weren’t as high as the black ones she had just been inspecting, and the heel was a little bit wider. She held it up in front of my eyes. “What do you think of something like this? The heel height is a bit more practical. We shouldn’t put you in a six-inch pair if you don’t wear heels. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

I took the red shoe from her. “It’s pretty.”

Jamie asked the sales associate to grab the shoes in my size and bring them to the fitting room. “Okay,” she said, taking my elbow and guiding me through racks of glittery dresses and sleek jackets. She pushed me into the fitting room where the dress was. “Let me know if you need help zipping it up. I’ll be right outside your room.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling nervous for some bizarre reason. I was trying on a dress, for crying out loud. There were no stakes involved with this. It was shopping. It was supposed to be fun.

I stripped out of my jeans and gray sweater and took the dress off the hanger. The fabric was incredibly soft, but the dress weighed more than I had expected. I unzipped the silver zipper down the back and stepped into it. I fed my arms through the sleeves, which were so tight, it looked like my arms had been painted with navy ink, and then reached for the zipper resting at my lower back. I was able to get it halfway done up before calling Jamie into the room to finish the job.

After pulling the curtain open, both of Jamie’s eyebrows lifted with enthusiasm. “Holy shit, Ellie. You’re such a babe.”

I still hadn't seen myself. The damn fitting rooms had no mirrors. What sort of establishment sold clothes without a mirror in their fitting rooms?

Jamie opened the curtain once she had zipped up the dress. She stopped me before I could follow her out and bent down to fetch the red pair of heels that had been placed outside the fitting room. She put them down in front of my feet, and I stepped into them.

"Wow," Jamie said. "This is stunning. I think you're going to like it." She motioned for me to come out so I could see my reflection.

The girl looking back at me looked like a stranger. She had a small waist and long, graceful legs. The neckline cut gave the illusion that my breasts were a bit bigger than they actually were, and the heels made my calves look sharp with muscle.

"Holy shit," I said.

Jamie giggled. "Yeah. Holy shit is right. Axel is going to lose his fucking mind."

My stomach fluttered with butterflies. He was going to lose his mind.

"It's not too much?" I asked, nervously flattening out the skirt of the dress.

Jamie shook her head. "No. It's perfect for a nice dinner. It just feels like too much to you because you never wear things like this. Trust me. It's perfect. We can keep it simple with only a pair of earrings or something. I can't wait to do your makeup."

I licked my bare lips. Seeing myself in makeup would be strange too.

"Thanks for helping me with all this, Jamie. I appreciate it. It's been a long time since I was able to do something like this."

"Something like what? Shopping?"

"A girl's day," I said.

I had been a daddy's girl. I had worked in the shop with my father for as long as I could remember and had leaned toward more boyish activities. In school, I played rugby and soccer. I wasn't allowed to play hockey because I was the only girl and slap shots were allowed. How that justified my exclusion from the team, I still didn't know.

My childhood had been wonderful, though. I was lucky.

But I missed out on other things that, at the time, didn't seem to matter. But now, looking back, I wished I had put in the effort to make friends who were girls. After losing my mom when I was in my early teens, my ability to build relationships with other females became worse.

Jamie was the first girl I had hung around with since before I graduated high school, and it felt really good.

"Well, I'm glad you asked. It's nice to have a friend at work who you can hang out with on the weekends too." Jamie gave me a bright smile and then looked at the dress. "So, what's the verdict? You going to buy it?"

I looked back at myself in the mirror. I tried to imagine what I was going to look like with lipstick and mascara but failed. "Yeah. I'm going to buy it."

Jamie clapped her hands together. "And the shoes too?"

"Definitely the shoes," I said.

"Excellent. They'll go with pretty much everything, you know. A nice pair of jeans. A skirt. Probably any of the other dresses in your closet."

"Other dresses?" I laughed. "You think I have other dresses? This is the first piece of clothing I've put on that doesn't have a sewn-in crotch in at least a decade. I almost wore pants to my own prom."

Jamie looked like she might fall over from shock before she stepped around me to undo my zipper. "What? Girl, you have to let me come over one time to look at your wardrobe. I'm so curious what it's like."

I slipped behind the curtain of the fitting room and raised my voice so she could still hear me. “It’s mostly what you’ve seen me wear to work. Jeans. T-shirts. Denim shorts. Overalls. That kind of thing.”

“You realize that just because you’re a mechanic doesn’t mean you always have to dress like one, right?”

I shrugged to myself and slipped out of the dress. I put it back on the hanger and stepped back into my jeans. I missed the glamour of the dress instantly. When I came out of the fitting room, I answered Jamie’s question.

“I’ve never had any reason to buy any nice clothes. I’m always at the shop or just hanging around with the guys. There’s never any occasion to wear something like this.”

“First of all, you don’t need an occasion to look nice. And secondly, there are much more casual things you can wear that look as sexy as a nice dress. You should borrow some of my jeans and tops for a while. We’re the same size, give or take your extra few inches of height. But you could see what you like without having to fork out any money for it.”

“Thanks, Jamie. I’ll think about it.”

We went to the counter, and I paid for the dress and shoes. The three-hundred-dollar bill reminded me why I didn’t buy nice things.

We made our way back down the sidewalk, our faces turned to the sun.

“You look fabulous in that dress, Ellie.”

“I hope Axel thinks so.”

“He will,” Jamie said confidently. “You up for coming to my place so I can do your hair and makeup? I’m thinking we’ll do a tousled updo and—”

“What’s a tousled updo?” I asked curiously.

Jamie shook her head in wonderment at my naiveté. “I’ll pin your hair up, and it will look messy but soft. Romantic. How brides have their hair in movies and stuff.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course, I can. It’s easy. Nothing a few dozen bobby pins can’t handle. Then we’ll give your eyes a smoky shade and some bold lips, and you’ll be good to go.” She gave me a smug look and lifted her chin. “Personally, I think Axel is going to fall right on his ass when he sees how beautiful you are.”

“I hope so,” I admitted.

I had expected Jamie to laugh at me. If I had said that out loud in front of Jax or Johnny or any one of the other MC members, I never would have heard the end of it. But Jamie simply hooked her arm around mine, and we continued down the sidewalk toward her apartment.

My stomach was becoming a tighter knot of nerves as evening approached. I couldn’t wait to see Axel, but I was terrified of what he would think when he saw me.

CHAPTER 17



AXEL

I tightened the knot of my tie at my throat and looked at my reflection. The black suit was a stark contrast to the usual blue jeans and oil-stained T-shirt I always wore. My scruff had been trimmed and tamed. I looked like a gentleman.

I wasn't sure if I liked it.

More than that, I wasn't sure if Ellie would like it.

I scoffed at myself and shook my head. A thought like that would never have occurred to me a few years ago. I also wouldn't be caught dead in a suit a few years ago. This was a night of firsts for me, apparently.

After I stepped into my shoes, the buzzer at the front door went off, and I hurried to let Ellie through the gate. She had arrived at exactly seven o'clock. I peered out the window beside the front door to watch a car drive up.

When Ellie got out of the car, my heart stopped.

She stepped out, one long leg after another, and then closed the door behind her. She was wearing a dark dress that revealed a lot of chest with a wide neckline. The sleeves were long and tight, and the dress sort of puffed out at her waist. Not only was Ellie wearing a dress, but she was also wearing heels.

When my tongue finally came unstuck from the roof of my mouth, I opened my front door. Ellie continued walking up the drive, her heels clicking in a steady rhythm as she walked toward me.

Dangly earrings glittered in her ears and winked behind loose strands of blond curls that tumbled around her face. The rest of her hair was drawn up in a soft tumble of curls, and I was overwhelmed with the urge to bury my hand in her hair and pull it all loose.

That urge led to other urges.

Like fucking her while she wore that damn dress.

When she was close enough to me, she stopped. She looked up at me in the doorway and smiled. She was wearing red lipstick, and her eyes looked somehow bluer. I realized I had never seen her in makeup before. Her gaze was intense and framed with black shadow and liner. She looked like she belonged on a movie set.

She did not look like my Ellie.

“You clean up nice,” she said, moving her hand up and down as she gestured at the suit. “I always wondered if you owned anything besides jeans and old T-shirts.”

“I often wondered the same thing about you,” I said, closing the front door and locking it behind me. Then, I turned back to her and joined her on the driveway. “You look beautiful.”

She smiled and looked down at our feet. “Thank you.”

“Come on, I’ll drive.” I took her hand without thinking about it, and the two of us went to my car. I opened her door for her and couldn’t take my eyes off her legs as she climbed in. I walked around the hood and slid into the driver’s seat, started up the engine, and reversed out of the driveway through the still-open gate. I waited for it to close behind me before pulling out onto the street and taking off for the restaurant.

I handed my keys to the valet driver outside Dino’s fifteen minutes later. I had booked us a reservation and was aware of how out of my element I was. I was a burgers and fries kind of man. A beer man. I had no clue what I was getting myself into once I stepped through those doors.

Based on the subtle resistance I felt in Ellie's hand on my elbow, I suspected she felt the same way. The two of us would have been much more comfortable at a pub. Or a diner.

But I couldn't deny how much I wanted this.

The hostess took us to a table in the middle of the restaurant. Ellie took her seat and crossed her legs while the waitress rattled off their list of specials for the evening. There were some seafood options, lamb, and steak. Ellie ordered a glass of red wine, and I opted for a rye and ginger ale to keep it simple.

After the waitress left, Ellie and I sat staring at one another. I couldn't take my eyes off the little things about her that I had never noticed. She had a pair of freckles beneath her right collarbone. Her cupid's bow was dramatic and perfect. I wanted to kiss and suckle her perfect lips and taste the wine on her tongue. I also noticed her eyes were tilted slightly upward, or perhaps that was the eyeshadow. I wasn't sure, but it made her look kind of catlike. It was sexy, I had to admit.

I also knew how sexy she would look face down on my bed with that makeup smeared all over the fucking place.

"So," she said after the waitress arrived with our drinks. "This is a little weird."

"I was afraid I was the only one who thought so. It's a good weird, though. Right? A change of scenery is nice."

"Do you mean the restaurant?" Ellie asked, her head tilting to the side.

I blinked. "Yes." I realized she thought I meant her. That a change of scenery in her looks had been nice. In other words, she thought I had just told her it was nice to see her looking all dolled up.

"I did this for you," she said, running her palms over her thighs. I could hear the rustle of the dress against her skin and wondered if it would make the same sound when I pushed it up her thighs later. "Jamie helped me. I never would have pulled it off without her help. I thought you would think it was

too much.” She looked up at me, cheeks slightly pink, as if she were asking my permission.

“Ellie, you look sexy as hell. But I think you look just as hot when you’re covered in grease from being under a car all day.”

Her smile grew, and her blush deepened.

“I like you for who you are, not what you wear.”

She bit her bottom lip and reached for her wine. “That’s good to know.”

“So, tell me. What do you think about Jamie? Should we keep her around? Since you’re the one who spends the most time with her in the shop, I figured you should have a say. If you don’t like her, I’ll find someone else.”

“What? No, that’s okay. I like her. I spent the whole day with her and had a really good time, actually.”

“You’re sure? You don’t need to say that just to—”

Ellie shook her head. “I’m not just saying it, Axel. I mean it. I want her to stay. I think I can have a real friendship with her. And, no offense, but it’ll be nice to have another girl around to balance out all the testosterone. You know?”

I laughed and sipped my drink. “Hadn’t thought of that. Fair enough.”

Our meals arrived, and I was happy to see that the formal clothes and fancy makeup didn’t impede Ellie’s ability to enjoy her meal. For some reason, I was associating her appearance with her behavior. Any other time I went out with a woman dressed like this, she ordered a salad and picked at it daintily. Usually, they would leave a portion of their meal untouched.

Ellie, thankfully, was not that kind of girl regardless what she was wearing. She had ordered a pasta topped with prawns and was making short work of it. I was used to this. Usually, when she picked up breakfasts or subs for lunch, she would finish eating around the same time as me and the other guys. I figured it had become habit. She didn’t want to miss out on

any of the big jobs in the shop, so she made sure she could keep up with us.

“This is amazing,” Ellie said, closing her eyes as she savored her meal. “How’s yours?”

“Good.” I nodded. And it was. But I hadn’t even been thinking about the meal. I was so wrapped up in watching her every movement that nothing else seemed all that important right now.

“You know, I haven’t gone on a date in a long time.” Ellie tucked a loose strand of blond hair behind her ear, revealing the line of her jaw and her slender neck. I wanted to put my hands there and feel her soft skin under my palm. “It’s kind of nice. And I’m really glad I’m here with you.” Her big blue eyes swept up from the table to meet mine. There was a question there.

“Me too,” I said. And, without thinking, I reached across the table and put my hand over hers. She smiled. “I don’t know when I went so soft. You’re going to destroy my hard-earned reputation, you know.”

“I won’t tell a soul.” Ellie held her finger vertically in front of her red lips. The strand of hair she had just tucked away fell loose as she looked back down at her plate and continued eating.

I realized my hand was still resting on hers and withdrew. The girl was going to ruin me. And I wasn’t going to stop her.

Even if I wanted to, I knew how powerless I was to her now. She had me wrapped around her finger, and I prayed she didn’t know it yet.

After dinner, I invited Ellie back to my house to share a bottle of wine on my patio. After finishing up at the restaurant, we drove back to my place. Old soft rock was playing on the stereo, and I spent the drive with my hand on Ellie’s thigh. She wrapped her fingers around mine, and we talked about the new shop, a bit about Jamie, and Johnny and Dani.

Our conversation wandered all over the place until I pulled through my front gate and parked the car outside my garage. We got out of the car and met in front of the hood. Then, I took her hand in mine, and we went up the driveway to the front door.

I slid the key in the lock while Ellie waited on the step below me. There was a chill in the air, and I suspected she was regretting having bare legs. I pushed the door open wide and turned back to her.

She was looking up at me with those intense blue eyes of hers that made me feel like I was losing myself. Her red lipstick had faded to a bright pink, and her lips were curved upward in a soft smile. A smile I needed to kiss. To undo. To slip between. She was so close, I could see goosebumps across her cleavage and shoulders.

“Come here,” I said.

She joined me on the top step. I wrapped a hand around her waist and drew her into me. With my other hand, I did what I had been aching to do since I saw her. I drew her hair back, held on to it against the side of her head, and then kissed her hard enough to feel her teeth press into my bottom lip.

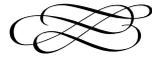
It was like kissing summertime. The wine had left the taste of berries on her tongue, and her lipstick was somehow sweet too. Like vanilla. She suckled and pulled at my bottom lip as her hands slipped inside my jacket and wandered up my chest.

Her touch was kryptonite to me. I devoured her kisses, leaning into her and forcing her back a step. Her shoulder blades hit the window at her back, and she didn't stop me when I lifted her leg under the knee. She hooked her leg around mine and held herself there as her hands slipped between the buttons of my shirt.

I eased my hand up her smooth thigh to her hip, where I discovered she wasn't wearing any panties. My surprise halted our kiss, and she smiled against my lips.

“I did that for you too,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 18



ELLIE

After telling Axel I had deliberately not worn panties for his sake, things became infinitely steamier between us—something I didn't think was possible. I had no idea just how wrong he was about to prove me.

He leaned away from me, but I went with him, using my leg hooked around his as leverage. He turned me around so my back was to the door and then began slowly walking me backward. It was like we were performing a slow waltz with no audience and a lot of face sucking.

Once we were through the threshold, he kicked the door closed with such force that the wall shook. This turned me on even more, and I moaned into his mouth as his lips parted to slip his tongue between my teeth. He was consuming me, little by little, and soon, there would be nothing left of me.

Axel's hip bumped into his sofa when we reached the living room. He cursed under his breath, and I giggled as we came unattached. He shrugged out of his jacket and threw it over the back of the sofa before he reached for me again and guided me around the sofa. We carried on through the living room, past the kitchen, and down the hall toward his bedroom.

We paused several times to press one another against the hallway walls. He pinned me by my wrists and ravaged my neck with kisses and nibbles. When the pressure he was applying loosened, I slipped out of his grip and dropped to a crouch in front of him with my back still pressed up against the drywall.

He braced himself above me and watched as I undid his belt and his pants. Then, I pulled them down his legs and worked his boxers off too. His cock was hard and ready for me. My mouth flooded with saliva at the sight, and I took the tip of him gently between my lips before swirling my tongue over his tip. His salty pre-come sent a rush of excitement through me. I wanted to drink all of him tonight.

Axel groaned above me as I took more of him in my mouth. I used my lips as a seal as I sucked him off, sliding up and down the length of him until he was buried in my throat. I moaned around his girth, and the vibration in my throat got him excited. He began thrusting his hips, and I held still for him.

Looking up at him while he fucked my mouth sent a ripple of heat through my body. It settled between my legs as a slippery wetness, and my pussy began to ache for Axel's cock. His arms were thick with muscle and decorated in snaking veins that disappeared beneath the rolled-up cuff of his dress shirt at his elbows. The top buttons were undone, exposing just enough chest. His hair was disheveled from me running my fingers through it, and his eyes were hard as his stare never wavered from me.

Then, suddenly, with a growl that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck, Axel pulled me to my feet, spun me around, and held me face-first against the wall with his forearm resting across my upper back. He leaned in to kiss my bare shoulders and the back of my neck. His stubble-covered jaw grazed my skin, and I trembled at his touch.

My cheek was crushed against the wall as Axel worked the skirt of my dress upward. He pinned the hem of it beneath his forearm across my back to expose my bare lower half. That growl rumbled through his chest again as his eyes fell upon my nakedness.

He slapped my ass, and I flinched. He slapped me again, and I found myself smiling against the wall. "Are you just going to play with me, or are you going to fuck me, Axel?" The words came out in a breathless tumble. I was excited, and

the weight of him pressing me against the wall was making it a little hard to breathe.

Which I liked.

Axel pressed his cheek to mine. “I’m going to do what I want, and you’re going to stay on your feet. You hear me?”

I nodded. “I hear you.” I spread my legs for him, the heels of my new pumps clicking on the hardwood. I stuck my ass out until I felt his cock against my lower back. “But I know you better than that. You won’t outlast me. You’re going to want to put your cock in my pussy—”

I was cut short by two of his fingers slipping inside me. I gasped as he stretched me while he slid in with ease. I was so wet. I clutched at the wall, wishing there was something for me to hold onto to brace myself as he began flicking his fingers inside me. I could hear how wet I was as I dragged my nails across the wall.

“You think?” Axel grated in my ear.

His voice, the heat of his skin, and the strength of him at my back mixed with his fingers inside me was a perfect combination. I screamed as I came, and I could feel Axel smiling into the groove of my shoulder as my legs began to quiver.

“Still think you’ll be able to stay on your feet?” he asked.

I didn’t dare answer him. His fingers were still inside me, and I knew if I tried to speak, he would do everything in his power to silence me with pleasure. I was competitive by nature. Even now, being fucked against the wall, I refused to submit.

So I wiggled my hips back and forth, encouraging him to do his worst.

He liked the taunting. It was a challenge. He plunged his fingers in and out of me until I came again, and then, he took all my hair in his fist and pulled my head back to kiss my throat while his fingers swirled over my clit.

One of my knees buckled, and Axel chuckled deeply in my ear.

I whimpered and desperately tried to steady myself against the wall. His touch was making it nearly impossible to stay on my feet. I was so sensitive that every time his finger grazed my swollen clit, little jolts of pleasure raced through my body, and after my two orgasms, my legs felt like pudding.

Suddenly, Axel scooped me up in his arms and carried me to his bedroom. I hooked my arms behind his neck and kissed him as we went.

He tossed me on the middle of the bed, and I giggled as I bounced on the mattress. The skirt of my dress danced around me until it finally settled. I got to my knees and waited for Axel to take his shirt off.

Now, he was completely naked before me. I licked my lips and beckoned him closer with the curl of one finger.

Before joining me on the bed, Axel grabbed a condom from his nightstand. He tore the wrapper with his teeth and rolled the rubber on. I watched, the excitement tightening in my belly, as his fingers worked the condom down the length of his shaft.

He got on his hands and knees on the bed beside me. His lips were curled up in a devilish smile as he approached me like a predator on all fours. I giggled a high-pitched sound when he reached for me and pinned me beneath him.

I struggled weakly for a moment, before relaxing into the bed beneath him. I blew a strand of hair out of my face and stared up at him as he looked down at me. I strained to lift my head to his lips. Our kiss was soft and sweet at first. Then, it grew into something more ravenous. As we kissed, I grew wetter. I needed him inside me. I couldn't wait any longer.

So I reached out and began stroking his cock and fondling his balls.

Axel worked my dress upward over my thighs and hips before pulling it off, exposing me once more. He patted my

pussy lightly and then a little more firmly until I was jerking beneath his touch. He grinned and dropped his hips to mine.

His cock slid into me, and I gripped his forearms as his first thrust pushed a moan out of me. He smiled down at me, clearly pleased with himself. He took it slow for the first little while. It was nice to be so close to him, to have him inside me, and to be able to breathe together. Our breaths were in unison as he moved above me.

Soon, I was aching for him to get deeper. I lifted my legs and wrapped them around his hips. My ass was off the mattress now, and it was easier for him to give me all of his length. I gasped as I took all of him and never looked away from his piercing stare.

“You’re so fucking tight,” Axel said through clenched teeth before hanging his head. I tightened my grip on his forearms, my nails biting into flesh and muscle, as he fucked me so deeply, I imagined he was bulging in my stomach.

Then, his hand was on my clit, and he was edging me closer to another orgasm. Right when I was about to come, he would slow down. How he possessed the self-control to torment me in such a way, I had no idea. All I knew was that I loved the way he was making me feel. My body had never been treated this way, and every touch, every kiss, sent me into oblivion.

“Do you want to come, baby?” Axel dropped his head beside my ear to whisper his question to me.

“Please,” I whispered back.

Axel rocked back to rest on his heels and pulled me with him. His cock was so huge that it stayed inside me the whole time. I found myself sitting atop his powerful thighs. His hands held me up by my ass. I draped my arms over his shoulders and began rocking my hips back and forth atop him. Then I let my fingers wander up into his thick hair. I tightened my hands into fists as I leaned in to kiss him. All the while, his cock was shifting inside me, and my clit was brushing against his pelvis.

He squeezed my ass as his tongue wandered into my mouth. He groaned and breathed into me. I reciprocated.

I became obsessed with feeling all of him as I rode him. I traced his jaw, letting his stubble tickle my fingertips. I let my touch wander down his throat, over his Adam's apple, and down his strong chest. I traced his shoulders and biceps, taking note of the raised skin of a couple scars he had earned during his time in the MC, scars that I had never really seen but always suspected were there. Maybe one day, when the time was right, he would tell me about some of them.

For now, I let them be art on the canvas that was his body, and I began bouncing feverishly atop him.

Axel leaned in to close his lips over my nipple. I held his head against my chest as I worked toward my orgasm. His tightened grip on my ass told me he was about to lose control, too. His tongue danced over my nipple, and then he drew it between his lips to suckle it. Then, he pulled away and cupped my breasts in both his hands. He pushed them together and squeezed.

I moaned and let my head fall back. Axel kissed my neck and chest and dragged his thumbs over my nipples.

As I came, his cock felt bigger inside of me. It pulsed, and he grabbed hold of me, holding me against him like he might never let go. We climaxed together, our skin hot and sticky and our throats ragged from gasping for breath.

When we were done, Axel stayed on his knees. I didn't want to part from him. So, to buy myself some more time, I pressed my forehead to his and closed my eyes. We stayed like that until we had both caught our breath. Then, Axel collapsed on the bed and took me with him.

I snuggled into him and rested my cheek on his chest. I listened to the steady beat of his heart and his deep breaths. As I lay there, I wondered why it had taken me so long to realize what had been right in front of me.

Axel was a tough man. He wasn't the sort of man I ever would have pictured myself with—not until I met him that is.

His soul was kind, and he cared for all the people in his life, and he would protect them no matter what the cost. I knew that went for me too. I knew he would do anything for me. And I would do anything for him.

As Axel's breathing slowed and he drifted off to sleep, I knew I was falling in love with him.

I was falling fast.

CHAPTER 19



AXEL

The girl curled into my side in the bed was ruining everything. The smile I woke with at remembering she was with me was telling of one very simple fact: I was falling for her.

I hadn't experienced feelings like this for a woman in years. And Ellie, of all people, was a surprise. Johnny had always told me he thought we would be a good fit together. He knew I was attracted to the shop girl and had encouraged me to try to fuck her—as Johnny would have if he were in my shoes. But that didn't sit right with me. Ellie wasn't the one-night-stand kind of girl. And I didn't want to make her do that for me, either.

Of course, I made sure Johnny knew she was off limits, regardless of whether or not I was having sex with her. He respected that.

Ellie shifted beside me, pulling the blankets tighter around herself as she nuzzled closer to my side and let out a content little sigh.

I smiled at the ceiling like a damn fool.

There was no reason for me to leave the bed, so I stayed where I was until Ellie woke about a half an hour after me. She stirred awake slowly and stretched her body out alongside mine like a cat. Sunshine was streaming in through the windows, and she squinted against the brightness of it after opening her eyes for the first time.

Her green gaze fell on me, and she gave me a sleepy smile. “Good morning. What time is it? I feel like I’ve been asleep for ages.”

I rubbed her shoulder with my thumb. “I haven’t checked. Probably close to nine.”

Ellie yawned and rested her chin on my shoulder. She lay there blinking up at me. Her smile was still lingering in the corners of her lips. “Did you have a good sleep?”

I nodded and slid my hand under my head to prop myself up to better see her. “Like a baby.”

“Do you have plans for the day? I was thinking we could do breakfast. I have a craving for pancakes. But if you don’t have maple syrup, it’s not an option.”

“So, you’re a diva about your syrup, hey?” I chuckled and kissed her forehead.

“Yes.” She nodded matter-of-factly.

“Well, lucky for you, I have some.”

“Great. I know a good recipe. Let me cook for you to thank you for a great night last night. Seriously. I had an amazing time.”

“Me too. I’d really like if we could do it again soon.”

Ellie rewarded my honesty with a bright smile. “The sooner the better.”

She leaned into me to plant a kiss on my lips. Her lips were warm and soft, and when she settled back into her place at my side, I hugged her to me. Her naked body felt good against mine. The intimacy of being so close and vulnerable with one another had my heart fluttering in my chest.

Ellie’s stomach growled.

“Let’s make the pancakes together. You can teach me this recipe of yours. You don’t have any other clothes here besides that dress, do you?”

Ellie shook her head. “No. I guess I didn’t really think that all the way through.” She pursed her lips.

“That’s an easy problem to fix,” I said as I pulled the covers down and swung my legs off the bed. Ellie’s hand traced my spine gently before I stood, naked, and padded to my dresser. I fished out a gray T-shirt and tossed it to her. “Here, put this on. I probably have an extra pair of sweats, if you want.”

Ellie shook her head as she let the blankets settle around her waist. I withdrew a pair of sweats for myself and stepped into them as I admired her breasts before they disappeared beneath the shirt I had passed her. She pulled it down as she got out of bed, and I was a little disappointed to see how long it was on her. It reached her upper thigh, hiding her ass and pussy from me.

I tied the drawstring of my pants while Ellie stretched again. As she stretched her arms over her head, I was granted a brief glimpse of her naked lower half.

Then she hop-skipped over to me. “Do you have any fruit? I like fruit with my pancakes.”

I rolled my eyes to mock her. “So demanding. So, you want fresh fruit and maple syrup? I don’t know if I’m going to be able to put up with how high maintenance you are.”

Ellie arched an eyebrow as we slipped out of the bedroom. She faced me and walked backward down the hall. “If you think I’m high maintenance, you have another thing coming. Before I forget, I’m going to have to go home after we eat to let Cade out and feed him.”

“Sure thing. I’ll drive you. Maybe we can take him for a walk together after?”

“Sure.” Ellie nodded. “That would be great. He’ll be your best friend if you walk him.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Definitely.”

Once we made it into the kitchen, I started a pot of coffee. The rich smell flooded the room, and we both hunched over our mugs once I had poured us each a glass. Ellie sipped it gratefully as I got out the ingredients for pancakes.

Then, the buzzer for my front gate went off.

Ellie looked up at me. “Do you need to get that?”

I groaned. “It’s probably one of the MC boys or a fucking solicitor. Hang on.” I put my coffee down and went to the TV mounted on my wall above the fireplace in my living room. I turned it on and flicked to the channel that showed the security footage of my front gate.

The video was black and white, but it was easy to see what was parked outside of my gate.

A fucking cop car.

“Great,” I muttered as the buzzer went again.

Ellie padded over to me, and her eyes narrowed as she saw the cruiser. “I think I should go put some pants on.”

“All right,” I said. “Just hang back, okay? I don’t know what this is about.”

Ellie nodded. I could see she was nervous. Her eyebrows were drawn together, and there was a tightness in her expression that hadn’t been there moments ago. “Be careful, okay?”

I laughed.

“Seriously, Axel. Don’t do anything stupid.” Her green eyes flicked back and forth between mine, and she put her hand flat on my chest. “We have pancakes to make and a dog to walk.”

I nodded and closed my hand over hers. “I’ll answer their questions and send them on their way. It’s probably about something to do with the MC.” I wondered dimly if they had traced something back to me or Johnny. Maybe the cops knew about our part in beating up the Black Hearts members the other week.

No. It couldn’t be that. Dani, Johnny’s woman, would have given us a heads-up if there was a target on our backs. This visit might be about anything. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if I jumped to conclusions.

Ellie patted my chest before turning away from me and hurrying down the hall to put pants on. When the bedroom door closed behind her, I pressed the button to the buzzer and spoke into the speaker.

“Sorry, was in the middle of cooking. I’ll buzz you through in a second.”

I opened the gates and looked over my shoulder at the TV in my living room. I watched the cruiser drive through the gate, and I promptly closed it behind them. Then, I stepped into a pair of boots at my front door and stepped outside, shirtless, to confront the officers who were stepping out of the car.

They met me halfway up the driveway. I noticed a third cop get out of the back seat and stand with the door open. She rested her elbows on the window of the open door. Everyone seemed calm. This didn’t feel like my normal interaction with officers of the law.

The two cops who had come to meet me were both middle-aged. One was a woman who looked stronger than her male partner. She had a head of short, bright blond hair, and her brown eyes were so wide and calculating that it was impossible for her to conceal the way she was sizing me up.

I suppose meeting officers in my driveway, shirtless, showing all my scars and tattoos, might not have been the smartest move to make.

The male officer, a stocky man with graying hair and a black goatee nodded in greeting as he hooked his thumbs on his belt. The action drew my eye to the gun at his hip. The cop cleared his throat to get my attention.

“Are you Jeremiah Cooper?”

I nodded.

The cop nodded in return. I knew instantly that this was not about the MC. This was about something else. It had been a long time since someone used my real name.

“What are you here for?” I asked, unsure if I really wanted the answer.

The cop looked back at the cruiser. He squinted against the sun and shielded his eyes as he turned back to me. “We have your daughter in our cruiser, Mr. Cooper.”

My mouth went dry. “I don’t have a daughter.”

“Your name is on the birth certificate,” the female cop said. There wasn’t an ounce of sympathy in her voice. “You’re her father. Her mother is deceased.”

“Who was her mother?” I asked. My voice didn’t sound like my own. It sounded very, very far away.

“Evelyn Nortenburgh.” The blond cop tried to give me a smile. “It was a car accident. No foul play.”

“How long ago?”

“Two weeks.”

“How the fuck am I just hearing about this now? I didn’t even know she existed. This doesn’t make any sense. You’re sure she’s—?”

“Mr. Cooper, you’re about to meet your little girl. I suggest you get your act together so as not to scare her. She’s three years old. Her name is Hanna. If you think it’s rough finding out you have a child, try being a three-year-old who just lost her mother. She’s going to need you. I suggest you do whatever you need to do to get your act together and become a father.”

She waved her hand to the other cop back at the car, who crouched down in front of the open back door of the cruiser.

When the officer leaned back from the door and closed it with her hip, she had a young girl in her arms. She couldn’t have been more than three, and as I watched them come up the driveway toward me, my eyes were drawn to her strawberry blond curls and bright blue eyes.

I swallowed. She looked just like me.

CHAPTER 20



ELLIE

I jumped up and down to pull Axel's sweatpants on and then frantically worked to tie the drawstring. I didn't bother putting on a bra. I hurried down the hall back to the front door and paused at the threshold.

Axel had asked me to hang back. He didn't know what this police visit was all about, and I suppose it made sense for him to want me to stay out of it. If this was MC business, it would be smart to keep my distance.

I watched his back as he spoke with the two officers before him. There was tension in his shoulders. All his muscles were taut, and his skin almost seemed to shine in the early morning sunshine.

His ass looked pretty good in the sweats hanging off his hips too.

I leaned against the doorframe and crossed my arms over my chest to disguise my lack of a bra. The cops hadn't even bothered to look at me, so I suspected things weren't all that serious.

As I watched Axel's back, my imagination started running wild. I was excited for him to come back to me so we could slip back inside together. I was looking forward to the morning we had planned. Thoughts of kissing him raced through my mind, and they led to other images that had my skin feeling hot.

I bit my bottom lip and stepped out onto the front step. The sun kissed my cheeks. As I considered joining them all in the

driveway, motion beside the cop car caught my attention. There was another officer by the back door that I hadn't even noticed. She was brunette. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and she had a pleasant smile as she crouched down in front of the open door.

Then, she stood and pulled something out with her.

It was a little strawberry blonde girl.

The cop closed the cruiser door with her hip and began marching up the driveway toward Axel with the child in her arms.

My hot skin suddenly went cold. Sweat broke out at the nape of my neck, and my stomach swirled with nerves.

I looked at Axel. If this was what I thought it was, he was going to need support. I darted back in the house and slid my feet into a pair of Axel's massive shoes. The heels clunked against the ground as I went back outside and hustled down the steps to the driveway.

The cop and the little girl were in front of Axel now. The cop was holding the girl out to Axel, but his arms were hanging limply at his sides. I knew him better than almost anyone. I knew that he wouldn't be able to digest this that quickly.

He needed me.

I arrived at his side and touched his bare shoulder to let him know I was there.

"Hi," I said, stepping in front of him to insert myself in front of the little girl. I was struck by how beautiful she was. Her eyes were bright blue, just like Axel's, and her gaze fell on me. I gave her a bright smile. "Hi there." I wiggled my fingers in front of her face.

The little girl smiled but didn't laugh.

I opened my arms, and the cop gratefully handed her over to me. I balanced her on my hip and turned back to Axel. "Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded without looking at me.

“Okay. It’s all right. We can figure this out.” I looked back at the officer, who seemed a little more at ease now that I was there. “Thank you. Is there anything we need to know?”

“We’ve already given all the information we have to Mr. Cooper, but if you need anything, you can call us at this extension.” She handed me a business card from her pocket, and I passed it to Axel.

“Okay. Thank you.” I looked at the little girl on my hip. “Hi, sweetheart. My name is Ellie. What’s your name?”

She buried her face in my shoulder. I couldn’t blame her. I wouldn’t want to talk to a bunch of strangers either.

“You don’t have to tell me right now. There’s plenty of time for that.” I made sure my voice had a happy, sing-song element to it as I spoke to her. “We were just about to make pancakes. Do you like pancakes?”

She nodded into my shoulder.

“Great. So do I. Maybe you can help me?”

She nodded again.

I turned to Axel. “I’m going to be in the kitchen. You come meet us in there when you’re ready, okay? I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” I touched his wrist to remind him how close I was. Then, with a nod to the cops, I turned on my heel and marched back to the front door with Axel’s daughter in my arms.

When we were inside, I kicked off Axel’s shoes and went into the kitchen. I put her down and grabbed a spatula from the container on the counter. “Could you hold onto that for me? I’m going to need it in a little bit.”

The little girl took the spatula and nodded as she hugged it close to her body.

I went about starting to prepare pancakes. All the while, I talked to her. I mostly rambled about nothing, but I made sure I held her attention and kept things light. I didn’t know what had happened, but there was a reason she had suddenly shown

up on Axel's doorstep. Something had happened, and I wanted her to feel as comfortable and safe as possible.

"Pancakes are my absolute favorite," I said as I cracked an egg against the side of the bowl. "But I'm no good at stirring it all together. Do you think you could help me with that?"

She nodded, and I asked her permission before picking her up. She nodded to me that it was okay, so I picked her up and sat her on the edge of the counter. I used my body to box her in so that she couldn't fall.

She still held the spatula against her small body, and she was looking up at me for more instructions.

"Okay," I said, "All you have to do is put this end of the spatula in the bowl and stir. Nice and slow. You just let me know when your arm gets tired, and I can help you. Sound fun?"

She nodded and plunged the spatula into the bowl.

"Nicely done!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together. "I'm so happy you're here to help me. Are you having fun?"

The little girl nodded, looking from me to the bowl. She was smiling now, which made me happy in turn. Maybe she would be willing to speak to me now.

"Do you remember my name?" I asked, placing my hand on my chest.

She nodded.

"What's my name?"

"Ellie."

I grinned and clapped my hands together again. She seemed to like the noise because she smiled even bigger and stopped stirring the pancake mix.

"What's your name?"

"Hanna." Her voice was nasally and quiet—and adorable.

"Hanna. What a beautiful name. It suits you." I encouraged her to keep stirring, and she did. "Thank you for helping me

with the pancakes. This is a lot of work to do by myself.”

Just then I heard the front door close. Butterflies erupted in my stomach. I had no idea how Axel was going to process this. Fifteen minutes ago, his biggest concern was catering to my demands of maple syrup and fresh fruit.

Now, he had a child.

I looked over my shoulder and watched him walk into the living room. He paused at the threshold to the kitchen and braced himself on the island. His eyes swept up to meet mine, and I saw all the terror in the gaze that was as blue as his daughter’s.

I wanted to go to him and hold him and tell him everything would be okay. But I knew better. I knew that wouldn’t serve him well. Axel wasn’t the kind of man who liked to be vulnerable.

He was going to need time to swallow and make sense of all this new information. I could give him that.

“Hanna and I are going to finish making the pancakes. If you want to go lie down for a bit or take a shower, you have plenty of time. No rush.”

For a mortifying moment, I thought he might cry. He bowed his head, and his hands clenched into fists atop the counter. I stepped to the side to hide him from Hanna’s view and waited as the wave of emotion rolled over him.

“Axel?”

He looked up at me after a moment. His eyes were dry, but his jaw was clenched. He was not going to be able to answer me. He needed time.

“Go take a shower. I’ve got this.”

He nodded, and I watched him walk slowly down the hall to his bedroom.

All at once, my heart broke for him, and I had to gather all the pieces and put them back into place before I turned back to Hanna, who was now happily tapping the spatula against the rim of the bowl.

“Wow, this looks perfect!” I said, before asking if I could use the spatula for a moment. “One more quick stir and it should be ready for cooking.”

I swirled the mixture around until all the lumps were gone. Then I set to cooking the pancakes.

I forgot all about the fruit and served the pancakes with butter and syrup. I cut Hanna’s pieces for her and sat with the little girl to eat. It was hard for me to keep conversation going, but somehow, I managed, and by the time we were cleaning up the dishes, Hanna was no longer shy about talking to me.

I got her chatting about the drive in the police car. I asked her all kinds of questions to find out more about her. But I soon found that all I wanted to do was go check on Axel.

Somehow, I managed to get Hanna to nap on the sofa in the living room. As soon as she was asleep, I rushed down the hall and knocked on his bedroom door. Axel quietly called for me to come in.

I pushed the door open a crack. Axel was lying on his bed. His hands were clasped behind his head, and he was staring up at the ceiling with a slack, empty expression. I went and sat on the edge of the bed beside him.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so.” He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. The eyes Hanna had.

“Do you need anything?” I reached out and touched his chest. “Seriously, Axel, anything. Just name it. I want to help you. This is a lot.”

He looked back up at the ceiling. “I’m no good at asking for help.”

“I know. Neither am I. But this is different.”

He blinked slowly. I could practically hear the thoughts racing in his mind. He cleared his throat and took my hand. “Can you stay with me to help? I have no clue what I’m doing, and you’re a natural with her.”

“Of course, I can,” I whispered. Something inside me took flight. I was thrilled that he was able to tell me what he needed. This was a big step for him and for us.

“What do I do to make her trust me? Get her a puppy?”

I tried not to laugh at him. “I think you have enough on your plate. You don’t need to throw a puppy into the mix. How about I bring Cade here? He’s really good with kids. And the best part is that he’s house trained.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good.”

I gave Axel’s hand a squeeze. “I’ll stay until you’re comfortable. We can do this.”

CHAPTER 21



AXEL

It was six in the morning. I had been lying awake all night long going over troubling thoughts in my mind. The one in the foreground: I was not the kind of man who should have a child. The life I led was not the kind of life a little girl like Hanna should ever be exposed to. I knew what happened to those kids.

They went rogue like Johnny's nephew.

They slipped through the cracks.

I closed my eyes to rest my eyelids. I was exhausted, but sleep felt like a foreign and completely unattainable luxury right now.

When I wasn't thinking of how unfit to be a parent I was, I was thinking about Evelyn, Hanna's mother.

We had met at a bar. We dated for a few weeks. Evelyn was a nice girl, but our lives didn't match. She had just started working at a dentist's office after completing all her schooling. She was a beautiful woman with a charming smile, but the smile hadn't been enough to keep me around. We went our separate ways. It was mutual.

But I couldn't figure out why she had never told me about Hanna. It was my right to know I had a daughter, regardless of whether or not her mother and I were still an item.

Wasn't it?

I groaned and opened my eyes to stare at the ceiling some more. There were no answers up there. The spackling wasn't

making me feel any better.

I ran over the previous day in my head. Ellie had eaten pancakes with Hanna. After she came into my bedroom and promised she would stay by my side for as long as I needed her, the initial fear I had felt had vanished. I was still terrified, of course, but the task of raising a child seemed a lot less daunting with Ellie as my copilot.

I spent the rest of the day watching Ellie with Hanna. She was a natural. I found it impossible to string a sentence together in front of the girl. She was wary of me, and I was wary of her. Things felt like they were starting on the wrong foot.

I was eager for time to pass. Ellie had called and made an appointment for this morning to get a paternity test done. Neither of us doubted that Hanna was mine, but it would be a good idea to know for sure.

The appointment was for nine o'clock, and time was passing slower than I ever remembered.

Ellie rolled over in bed to look up at me just past seven thirty. If she was worried about the new turn of events, I couldn't tell by looking at her. She gave me the same smile she always did and leaned in to kiss me. Her palm against my cheek was warm and soft, just like her lips on mine.

"You ready to do this thing?" She asked after sitting up. She had slept in my T-shirt, and it looked like she was going to have to wear my clothes to the doctor's appointment too.

"Ready as I can be," I muttered as I got to my feet and headed to the bathroom to shower.

Once I was ready, I went into the kitchen to find Ellie eating a bowl of cereal with Hanna. The little girl looked sleepy as she pushed her spoon around the bowl of milk, collecting Cheerios. She looked up at me when I entered and then immediately looked down at her bowl.

Ellie sat up straighter. "We're going to go for a car ride this morning and see someone who can tell us how you and Axel are related. That's kind of cool, right?"

Hanna looked unconvinced.

Ellie chuckled. "I think it's pretty cool."

"Me too," Hanna said, surprising me.

Ellie looked expectantly at me. "Me too," I said, trying to sound more excited than I felt. Ellie nodded approvingly.

The doctor's office was stressful. After meeting with the doctor and having the tests done, we were sent to wait in a personal waiting room, just the three of us. Ellie sat with Hanna on her lap while I tried not to panic.

When the doctor came back in and took a seat across from me, I already knew the answer.

He pushed his silver-framed glasses down his nose and peered up at me over the top of them. "So, Mr. Cooper, the test has come back positive."

I was not expecting such a forward answer. I thought that maybe he would meander around the results until he knew I was good and ready, and then he'd hit me with it.

Positive.

I was Hanna's father.

Ellie grabbed my hand and squeezed tightly. "Thank you, doctor," she said, hugging Hanna to her body and resting her chin on the little girl's head.

After that, our doctor pulled up Hanna's medical records to make sure I was informed. She had no history of any diseases from Evelyn's side of the family. There were no allergies I needed to be made aware of. Hanna was a healthy little girl. My healthy little girl.

After the doctor sent us on our way, we piled back into my car. I started the engine but stayed parked in the stall with my hands on the steering wheel.

Ellie looked over at me. "It's going to be all right. You can handle this. I know you can. You're not alone. You have me and Johnny and the whole MC behind you."

“I don’t want them to be part of this.”

Ellie shook her head at me. “They’re part of you. I don’t think you have a choice. They’re good men, Axel, despite what you all tell yourselves. She’ll be safe with you.” Ellie looked out the windshield. Her expression hardened, and I knew she had decided what our next move should be. “Let’s go shopping. You have a spare guestroom that will work for Hanna’s bedroom. She can pick out a bed and some furniture. We’ll need to get her some clothes too. And toys. I know this is overwhelming, but don’t worry, I can do this part. You just play the part of driver today. And you can carry all the heavy stuff.” She shot me a bright smile that eased my mind a bit.

Ellie wasn’t scared off by me having a daughter. She had complete faith in me. Maybe I should give myself a bit more credit. “I can do that.”

“Good,” Ellie said confidently. “Then let’s do it. What do you think about that Hanna? We’re going to get you a new bed to sleep in tonight! And maybe we can even find some new clothes and some fun toys. How do you feel about that?”

Hanna giggled in the back seat and nodded. She still wasn’t comfortable talking too much in front of me. That was all right. I wasn’t too keen on talking in front of her, either. I cursed like a sailor. It was going to be strange trying to police my own vocabulary.

“Okay, let’s go.” Ellie put her hand on my knee. “After shopping, we have to stop at my place. I’ll get some of my things to keep at your place for now. And Cade. I need to bring Cade with me.”

“I won’t argue with that,” I said before pulling slowly out of the parking stall. As we drove to our first destination, I kept an eye on the speedometer. It was the first time in my life that I had ever driven the speed limit.

I guess that’s what having a daughter does to a man.

Shopping went well. In fact, it was surprisingly fun. Ellie guided Hanna through the store and started with the necessary

purchases and used the toys as a reward at the end. We picked up a new bed, a mattress, a pink net to hang around the bed, some cute owl wall decals, and fun colorful accents like lamps, nightlights, and a piggy bank.

After we had the necessities, we bought clothes, dresses, pants, leggings, sweaters, shoes, T-shirts, jeans, shoes—it was unreal how many things they sold for tiny humans. I was astounded all day long.

Finally, we picked out some toys. By the time we walked out of the last store, Hanna was more comfortable with me, so much so that she took my hand when we walked across the parking lot to the car.

I caught Ellie smiling at us as we walked.

We stopped at Ellie's apartment after grabbing lunch. There was no way in hell I was going to wait in the car with my new daughter, so we all went into the apartment.

Cade greeted us with a lot of whining and tail wagging. He gave Hanna a big, sloppy kiss before hightailing it to the back door to be let out. Ellie took him outside, and Hanna went with her to watch the dog run around the backyard like a psycho. I watched Hanna and Ellie and the dog and noticed the feeling in my gut had shifted from anxiety to something else. Something I couldn't quite put a finger on.

All I knew was it wasn't a bad feeling, standing there watching them all play together. In fact, it was a good feeling.

I helped Ellie pack her bags and load them into the trunk. There wasn't much space, what with all of Hanna's things being in the car as well, but somehow, we made it all fit after playing a real-life version of Tetris with Ellie's bags.

Cade got into the back seat with Hanna and curled up in his seat, resting his chin on his paws.

We pulled through the gate at close to six in the evening. I was hungry, and I was tired. Everyone else in the car seemed to feel the same way. Hanna had fallen asleep and napped on the drive from Ellie's apartment to my house. Ellie woke her

and carried her into the house with Cade trotting happily behind.

I began unloading everything and making the trek to the spare bedroom.

Ellie ordered pizza and put on cartoons in the living room for Hanna. Every now and then, she checked in on me in the spare room to see what kind of progress I was making. I had to disassemble and remove the old bed that was in there before moving in all the new furniture. Once that was done, I set to work putting together the single bed we had bought for Hanna.

Pizza arrived when I was halfway done. I took a break to eat and joined the girls in the living room. Hanna loved the pizza, and I was shocked when she ate two pieces, crust and all. Soon after, Ellie put her to bed on the sofa and joined me in the bedroom.

I had made a decent amount of progress, but Ellie helped with all the finishing touches. She hung the pink netting at the head of the bed and made sure it was draped perfectly around the frame. She plugged in the night-lights and filled the dresser with Hanna's clothes. She made sure the room looked like a place a little girl would want to be.

Then, we went and got Hanna and carried her to her new bed. We tucked her in, and she never woke.

I stood in the doorway with Ellie, looking in on my sleeping daughter. I wrapped my arm around Ellie's shoulders. "Thank you for all of this. I don't know what I would do without you."

"You'd call Johnny." Ellie chuckled. "And the two of you would have done the best you could."

"I hate to think what that would be like."

Ellie shrugged. "Probably not as bad as you think. Ye have little faith." She rested her head on my shoulder. "Day one was a success. Let's get some rest. We'll be back at it early tomorrow morning."

She turned away from me, and I watched her go down the hall. She paused in the doorframe of my bedroom and looked

back at me. “You’re going to be a great dad, Axel. Don’t even waste any thoughts on the opposite.” She cocked her head to the side. “You coming to bed?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I said.

Ellie smiled and nodded and disappeared into the room. I stayed where I was, arms crossed over my chest, shoulder against the doorframe, and looked in on my sleeping daughter.

I waited for the anxiety to come rushing back to me, but it never did.

CHAPTER 22



ELLIE

I glanced at the tack on the dash. Axel was driving the speed limit to the exact number. I smiled to myself and looked out the window as we drew closer to the new shop. Trees passed by at a much slower rate than what I was used to.

Hanna was in the back seat, her legs swinging happily as she listened to the music on the radio. Every now and then, I caught her humming along to one she recognized, and my thoughts were drawn to her mother.

I wondered what Evelyn had been like. Had she and her daughter gone for car rides and sung along to all the ones they knew, at the top of their lungs, the way I had with my friends when I was growing up?

The thought made my throat tighten, and I had to push it away to repel those emotions. Hanna didn't have her mother anymore, but she had Axel, and I knew he would be an excellent father to her. He cared, and that was all that mattered. I could teach him all the other stuff, but I couldn't teach him how to care. He had to bring that to the table himself.

Based on how slow he was currently driving, he had that part down already.

We parked in front of the shop, and I got out of the car. I unbuckled Ellie from her booster seat. She shuffled along the back seat and hopped out. I took her hand and turned her to face the shop. "This is where your daddy and I work."

Hanna had still yet to call Axel “Daddy.” I was using the term as casually as I could in conversation. When I had first started doing it, Axel would go stiff and stare wide-eyed at me. I assured him this was best. Hanna had to know that she still had family here. She knew what the word daddy meant. She just had to get to know him, and the only way that would happen was if she had the time to spend with him.

“It’s big,” Hanna said, her eyes big as she looked through the open bay doors of the shop. There was a lot for a little girl to see in there, from car parts to tools to the people who would be working. I knew they wouldn’t be like what she was used to being around.

“It is big,” I said, and we started walking forward with Axel beside us. “It’s new too. We’ve only been working here for a few days. So, we’re new here, just like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yep,” I said, giving her a big smile. “This is new for all of us. That makes it fun.”

“Fun?”

I nodded. “Oh, yes. We have lots of fun here. You’ll see.” I winked, and she giggled.

Axel paused and took my hand. He pulled me to a stop. “I just remembered, I have some things to take care of. Will you be okay here by yourself for the day?”

I nodded. “Of course. Hanna can stay with me. I’m sure she’ll be a good little helper. Won’t you, Hanna?”

Hanna nodded up at me. Then, she looked at Axel. Her lips were pursed like she was in thought. She was a wise little three-year-old. That was for sure. “You’ll come back?” she asked.

Axel looked at me before returning his gaze to his daughter. He dropped to a crouch in front of her before answering. “Of course, I’ll be back. Don’t worry. Ellie will take care of you. You guys will have a fun day. Okay?”

“Okay.” Hanna nodded.

Axel rose to his full height, wrapped an arm around my waist, and pulled me into him for a kiss. It startled me. I hadn't expected him to be so willing to kiss me in front of anyone who might be watching. The kiss was short but sweet, and before he pulled away, he kissed the tip of my nose.

I caught a smile playing in the corners of his mouth as he turned away and headed back to the car. I stared after him until he got into the car. I waved as he pulled away and then looked back down at Hanna, who was staring after the taillights as Axel pulled out onto the street. "You ready to get our hands dirty?"

Hanna nodded, and the two of us walked up into the shop.

We were lucky in the sense that no one was there except for Jamie. She was in the office on the phone booking a customer's car in for some sort of service. When she saw me, she mouthed "hello," and then her eyes darted down to Hanna, who had both arms wrapped around my right leg. I shrugged as if to say it was a long story, even though it wasn't. It was a pretty short story.

When Jamie got off the phone, I gave her the rundown. Jamie was a sucker for kids, and she introduced herself to Hanna with a big smile. The little girl took an instant liking to my friend, and soon, the three of us were sitting on the couch in the office chatting about random things. Mostly, we talked about Hanna's favorite TV shows and toys.

Eventually, I had to get to work. Jamie brought the cordless phone into the shop with her and sat on one of the stools in the shop with Hanna in her lap. She teased the little girl by pretending to steal her nose and then put it back. It reminded me of the games my dad used to play with me when I was Hanna's age.

It was difficult to get any work done with Hanna around. I found that she held all my attention, and all I wanted to do was get to know her better. She was a sweet little girl with a charming and sweet personality. Evelyn had done a good job raising her in the three years she had with her daughter. She was well-behaved, at least, had been so far, and she was smart.

She understood what people were saying to her, and if she wasn't too shy, she had no problem answering them.

"Hanna," I said as I leaned under a motorcycle, "do you see that silver thing right there? With the C shape on the end?"

Hanna looked at where I was pointing and nodded. "If Jamie flies you over there, can you pass it to me?"

Hanna nodded again.

"Okay," Jamie said. "Prepare for takeoff!"

Hanna giggled as Jamie bounced her knees beneath the little girl. Her giggles increased in volume as Jamie scooped her up and held her up in the air, pretending like she was an airplane. Jamie made flying noises, and Hanna squealed with delight as she was swooped over the wrench I had asked her to pick up.

She missed on the first attempt to grab it. Jamie dropped her down low to have another go at it, and she managed to get a hold of it.

Jamie flew her toward me, and Hanna gave me the wrench.

"You're such a good little helper!" I cried. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Hanna said politely after Jamie sat back down with her on her lap again.

"You have such nice manners, Hanna," Jamie said.

Hanna nodded. "Mama says manners are important. You don't get anything if you have bad manners."

"My mom taught me the same thing," I said, nodding. "And she was right. Manners are very important."

Hanna nodded.

Jamie bit her bottom lip as she stared at me. I had told her in private about Hanna's mother. Jamie had gone into the bathroom to cry it out before returning bright-eyed and smiling. Now, at the word "mama" coming out of Hanna's mouth, it looked like Jamie might cry again. I had to make sure I stopped that from happening. I was afraid of how Hanna would react. I had yet to broach the subject of her mom or her

mom's death, and it was something I wanted to do with Axel present. I had to wait until we were all ready to have a conversation of that magnitude.

So, I changed the subject.

“What’s your favorite thing to eat for dinner, Hanna?”

Hanna gave me a sloppy shrug. She looked so cute, it was hard not to laugh. “Um. I don’t know. I like spaghetti.”

“Spaghetti? Me too! It’s actually one of my all-time favorites. Would you like if we had spaghetti for dinner tonight?”

Hanna smiled. “Okay.”

“Great. I think your daddy likes spaghetti too.”

“Who doesn’t like spaghetti?” Jamie chimed in, leaning in to tickle Hanna’s ribs.

The little girl shrieked and giggled and squirmed in a desperate attempt to get away. We all laughed, and soon, it all began to feel natural.

And then a thought struck me. Having a daughter wouldn’t be so bad. In fact, it was kind of nice to have a little person hanging around all the time. She made everything feel lighter and less important because she was the only thing that mattered now.

After a couple hours of work, we put Hanna down for a nap on the couch in the office. We locked the front door and posted a sign for customers to come in through the shop doors, so no one would scare Hanna by accident. The only way anyone could get into the office was through the office door in the shop, and we’d locked that. Hanna could get out from the inside, but only Jamie and I had a key to get in.

I wiped my brow after finishing up with the motorcycle I was working on and took a seat on an overturned crate that had been holding spare parts.

Jamie gave me a skeptical look. “This is a bit more than what you signed up for, isn’t it?”

“You mean Hanna?”

“Obviously.”

I nodded and wiped my hands on my thighs. “Yeah, it is. But it’s not bad, either. And it’s Axel. I don’t think there’s anything that could scare me away. I’ve wanted this for so long, and she makes everything better, in a strange way.”

Jamie lifted her eyebrows. “Interesting. But no more hot date nights.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone I know who’s ever had kids.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, well, if you want it bad enough, you can make it happen. Besides, I don’t need to go on nice dates with Axel. I just want to be with him. If that’s in the form of eating spaghetti in our PJs while watching cartoons, that’s fine with me.”

Jamie grinned. “You’re going to be a great mom, you know.”

I blinked at my friend. “Sorry?”

“Well, you’re basically filling that role right now. And you’re really good at it. You can tell by the way Hanna looks at you. She trusts you.”

“Yeah.” I looked at my hands. I liked Hanna too.

Potentially, she might be part of my life forever. This might be the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 23



AXEL

Jax answered the phone on the second ring. His voice was thick, and I knew I had woken him from a deep sleep.

“Hey. Get your lazy ass out of bed. Meet me at the old shop.”

“What the fuck? Dude, how early is it?”

“It’s past nine.”

“Nine?” Jax exclaimed. I had to hold the phone away from my ear, he was so loud. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing calling me so early? You know I need my beauty sleep.”

“You’re already pretty enough, you fuck. Now get up. I need you.”

“All right,” Jax groaned, and I heard him getting out of bed. Then I heard the mutterings of a female companion who I imagined was lying naked beside him in bed. “I’ll be right there, Axel. Don’t get your fucking panties in a bunch. I just have to eat something.” I heard him mutter something to the girl he was with. She giggled, and I shook my head.

“If that something is pussy, it can wait. Seriously.”

There was a short silence on the other end. “Fine. I’ll see you in ten.”

Jax hung up the phone, and I put my car in drive and headed toward the old shop.

The property was barren save for a pile of charred lumber set to the northeast corner. I stood there to wait for Jax.

He arrived exactly ten minutes after hanging up the phone. He parked his truck in front of the lumber and hopped out after turning off the engine. He fixed me with a dark glare as he walked around the hood of the car.

“This had better be important. You have no idea how good the tits were on the babe I was with. Hollywood kind of tits, you know? So perky and—”

“I just found out I have a daughter, man.” The words spilled out of me and hung in the air between us like a heavy fog.

Jax’s eyebrows crept upward. “What?”

“Yeah. I have a daughter.”

“Fuck.” The word was quiet, and it summed up everything I was feeling at that moment.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Jax scratched the back of his neck as he sorted through this new piece of information. Finally, the questions came to the surface. “Who’s the mother?”

“Evelyn. She was the one—”

“With the Camaro. Yeah. I remember. What the fuck happened? Did you meet up with her recently to fuck?”

I shook my head. I suppose his questions made sense. “No. She died, man. Car accident. Her daughter—my daughter—is three already. I never knew about her until the cops showed up at my place and told me she was mine.”

“Shit.”

I nodded.

“She’s three? And Evelyn ... poor Evelyn. She was a good girl, that one. Way too good for you or the likes of us.”

“I know.”

Jax sighed. “What are you gonna do?”

“Well, she’s mine, and I’m going to raise her. Ellie has stepped in and is really helping out. I don’t know what I’d do

without her. But this changes everything.”

“Well, no shit, it does,” Jax scoffed. “All of a sudden, you have a toddler. From motors and pistons to diapers and soothers. Cool man, real cool.”

“She doesn’t wear diapers anymore.” I scowled.

Jax chuckled. “Well, there’s one win for you.”

It didn’t feel like a win. None of this felt like a win. It felt like I needed to prepare for the worst, and it was because of how terrible the timing was of Hanna’s arrival. Evelyn would be furious with me. She never would have wanted her little girl to end up with me. I knew that for certain, and she certainly wouldn’t have wanted her coming into my life when someone like Watson was back in town.

I didn’t want that, either.

I had been pushing away an ominous feeling that things were about to change for days now. Ever since the shop had burned down, I knew the lives we were living were going to shift. They had to. After Johnny and I went after the Black Hearts with our bats, that much was solidified.

Then, Jax had told me Watson had taken over the Black Hearts. Had I known that beforehand, I probably never would have bothered talking Johnny into making a move. I would have listened to his advice and stayed low, keeping my opinions to myself so I could handle Watson on my own.

I still had to handle him on my own. It was my responsibility. Only I knew how ruthless he was, and I refused to let the others get tangled up in his web of cruelty. I had to put a stop to this before everything got out of hand, and having Hanna in my life made that even clearer to me.

“Well,” Jax said, pulling my thoughts from the darkest corners of my mind. “If you need any help, you know I’ve got your back, right? I may not know shit about kids, but I can try. And the other boys will be there for you too. Have you talked to Ryder?”

“Not yet.”

“You should. He should know. Hanna will have a place with all of us.”

“I don’t know if I want that.”

“The only way to get her out of it is if you leave, man. And we both know that option isn’t on the table anymore. Besides, the MC isn’t that bad. We can help give her a good life. Keep her safe. Scare off future boyfriends.” Jax winked.

“Not with Watson around,” I blurted out.

Jax arched an eyebrow and tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he rocked back on his heels. “Oh?”

I shook my head and blew out an exasperated breath. “That’s the main reason I wanted you to meet me here. I had to tell someone about Hanna because I’m going to make a move soon. I’m going to have to. Otherwise, people are going to start getting hurt, and I don’t want that on my conscience. I have enough shit to deal with right now.”

“What do you mean by make a move? What are you planning, Axel?”

Jax didn’t need to know all the details. I wanted to keep him as far away from all this as possible because I had another, more important job for him. One with even higher stakes than handling Watson and his goons.

“I need you to promise me something.” I held Jax’s gaze.

“Anything.” Jax’s hands came out of his pockets, and he crossed his arms.

“If something happens to me—”

“Come on, man, don’t fuck with me like this. I don’t want to have one of these heart-to-hearts where you think something bad is going to happen.”

“I don’t care what you want,” I growled. “You need to promise me that no matter what happens, you’ll watch out for Ellie and Hanna. I trust you. I’ve always trusted you. And so does Ellie.”

Jax's forehead was creased as his eyebrows drew so close together, they were almost touching. "I don't like this."

"You don't have to like it. You just have to promise."

"Why don't I come with you for whatever this thing is you're planning? You're gonna need another guy to make sure it all goes down the way you want. Fuck, man, you can't seriously be considering taking on Watson by yourself. You must be mental."

"I have to do this one alone. I can't afford to make any mistakes. More people means more collateral where Watson is concerned. I know what I'm doing, Jax. If anyone has a chance of knocking him off his seat, it's me."

Jax rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "All right, fine. I promise."

"Thank you."

"You'd better not make me fucking regret this, man. I don't want to be the one to have to explain this shit to Ryder if things go sideways. You hear me?"

I nodded. "I hear you. Loud and clear."

"He'd knock my fucking teeth out and wear them as a necklace."

I nodded. I could picture the image quite easily. "It won't come to that. Everything will be fine." *It has to be.*

"I sure as hell hope so because if Ryder doesn't kill me, Ellie sure as hell will. And to be honest, I think I'm more afraid of her than I am of the President. You know? I've seen that spark of crazy in her eye before. She'd beat my skull in with a tire iron."

"Nothing's going to happen to me, Jax. But you know how it is. In the MC, you always have to prepare for the worst. You never know what tomorrow might bring. And I can't leave people behind without knowing there's someone there looking out for them. You've always been a good friend to me, man. I'm grateful for it."

Jax scrunched up his nose like he had just caught a whiff of a horrendous smell. He waved me away and took a step back. “Keep your feelings to yourself, you pussy. I don’t need to hear them. I don’t want this to turn into a moment.”

I laughed and so did Jax, and the reprieve from the serious conversation was welcomed. I had said everything I needed to, and Jax, in typical Jax fashion, had received it well. He was making jokes, but I knew he understood how serious this all was and how much it meant to me. Ellie was the most important thing in my life now, and so was Hanna. I would do whatever it took to ensure their safety, and I trusted Jax would do the same.

He had just promised me he would, and a promise in the MC was never broken.

I extended my hand, and Jax took it. We shook on it firmly, holding each other’s gaze for a brief moment.

“Thanks.” I nodded.

Jax let go of my hand and turned back to his truck. As he opened the door, he paused and twisted back around to me. “Don’t do anything stupid, all right?”

“When have I ever done anything stupid?”

Jax threw his head back and laughed at the sky before sliding into the driver’s seat and starting the engine. He pulled away, leaving me alone with the charred rubble before me.

It was a reminder of the damage that had already been done.

A call to the fight.

And my answer was at the tip of my tongue.

“I’m coming for you,” I muttered, before looking up at the clouds that were heavy with rain, ready to let loose and let the water fall down on us.

CHAPTER 24



ELLIE

Axel returned to the shop later in the afternoon, after Hanna had already woken up from her nap. He greeted me with a kiss and bent down to talk to Hanna about what she'd been doing during the morning. It was the first time I saw him really interact with his daughter of his own free will. I found myself smiling as I watched the two of them, realizing that even though this had been thrust on him, Axel was taking fatherhood in stride and not running from the responsibility. He was rising to the occasion like I knew he would.

Suddenly, he was even more attractive to me, and I could barely stand to look at him when he was talking to Hanna. So, I turned away to focus on my work.

Throughout the afternoon, I caught Axel watching me work. It was a little unsettling to realize the looks he was giving me were different from the ones I was used to receiving from him. Normally, if he was looking at me for a prolonged period of time, it was because he was checking me out. He was never concerned about others seeing him do it. He was the master of the shop, after all, and everyone knew he and I had been kind of a thing even before we made it more official.

But the looks he was giving me now were deeper somehow. They were thoughtful, concerned, and almost sad. It was unnerving. Every time I caught his eye, he would look away and get back to work on whatever he was busying himself with. All work efforts seemed half-hearted on his part, and when the day ended as the sun set, I began to think something might be seriously wrong.

As we locked up the shop and said goodbye to Jamie, I considered pulling him aside to talk to him. Maybe he was having doubts about me being around now that he had a daughter to worry about. Or, maybe, he was worried I might up and leave now that he and Hanna were a package deal. He hadn't asked to become a father, so maybe he was concerned I wasn't interested in his new life.

That couldn't be farther from the truth.

I was in love with Axel. I wanted to be with him. Hanna was icing on the cake in a way. She was a sweet little girl, and she was part of the man I loved. How could I not want to be part of her life?

As I strapped Hanna into her booster seat in the back seat of Axel's car, I decided I would talk to him once we got home. Hanna was half asleep two minutes later when we pulled out of the parking lot, so I knew I'd be able to put her down to sleep in her bedroom when we got home, and Axel and I would be granted some one-on-one time that I knew we desperately needed. Both of us had sat alone with our thoughts for too long. We needed to put everything out on the table so we could meet one another's needs and expectations.

At the very least, he needed to know I wasn't going to run.

I had butterflies in my stomach when the gate closed behind us in Axel's driveway. I took the sleeping Hanna out of her seat, and Axel unlocked the front door of the house. Cade jumped all over both of us, and I had to stifle a soft giggle that bubbled up in my throat. He was such a joy.

I went to Hanna's room, and Axel grabbed us each an ice-cold beer from the fridge, which he handed to me when I met him in the living room.

"Dinner?" He asked.

"I'm not hungry." I took a sip of the beer and smiled.

We both sank down on his sofa. Axel draped one arm over the back of it while he lifted his beer to his lips and took a few mouthfuls. I watched his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallowed, and I shifted in my corner of the sofa. He was so

fucking sexy all the goddamn time. It made things like normal conversation rather difficult sometimes.

“So,” I said slowly, trying to get the conversation started. “Where did you run off to this morning? You seemed a bit, I don’t know, off when you came back to the shop.”

Axel shrugged one shoulder and dropped his gaze so he wasn’t looking at me when he answered. “I had to talk to Jax. I wanted to tell him about everything that’s happened over the last couple of days. About Hanna.”

I nodded. That made sense. Of course, that’s all he had been doing. No one in the MC knew about his daughter, and they were a big family. It was normal for him to want to share the news with the others, and Jax was probably the perfect one to start with.

“Does Johnny know yet?” I asked.

Axel shook his head. “Not yet. There are some things I want to get done before I bring him in on it.”

“Bring him in on it?” I teased, sipping my beer. “You talk about her like she’s one of your jobs.”

Axel frowned and still wouldn’t look up at me. Maybe I had said the wrong thing. I backpedaled in an attempt to redirect the conversation.

“What did Jax say?”

“He was shocked. But he came around after a bit. He’s glad you’re around to help me out. He knows I wouldn’t be able to do it on my own. He offered his help too.”

“That was nice of him,” I said as my heart soared in my chest. The worry of Axel thinking I was going to leave him was slipping away. Although, something still seemed wrong. Very wrong. Axel was quiet and subdued, and he only ever got like this when he was lost in his own thoughts. Usually, the thoughts were dark, or they were on their way to turning dark. Either way, I knew I only had a small window of time to get him to open up to me.

“It sounds like the two of you had a good chat. How come you seem upset?”

Finally, he looked up at me. His blue eyes were hard, almost angry, but I didn't get the feeling he was angry with me. “I have to tell you something, Ellie, and I don't think you're going to like it very much.”

My heart sank immediately. “Okay. What is it?” I put on my brave, neutral face. He was about to be honest with me, and I wasn't going to do anything to fuck that up. He needed to get whatever this was off his chest. I could see how much it was weighing him down. It was a burden. And a big one.

Axel began absently picking at a thread at the knee of his jeans as he swirled his beer around. “The Black Hearts have a new leader. His name is Watson. He's the one who called the hit to burn down the shop, I'm sure of it. And he's had scouts out and about to keep tabs on us. On me.”

I blinked away my surprise. Scouts? Seriously? “Do they know where you live?”

“I doubt it. But they know where the new shop is. They've done a couple passes by it. I was content to ride it out a bit longer before, well, before Hanna. A bit more time would have helped me confirm a few things before I took action. But now I can't wait any longer.”

“Wait any longer?” I asked. My fingers were tingling with nerves, and a cold sweat had broken out on the back of my neck. I didn't like how any of this sounded. “What are you planning on doing? Why is any of this your responsibility? Isn't Johnny the one who should be dealing with these guys?”

“Under other circumstances, yeah, the ball would be in Johnny's court.”

Other circumstances? What did that mean? I had to ask the question even though I didn't want the answer, not anymore. This conversation had taken a turn for the worst very quickly. My heart was hammering in my chest so hard that I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. “Okay. Why are you taking responsibility for all of this, then? Axel,” I reached out and put

a hand on his knee. “Please, tell me everything. I don’t want to be kept in the dark.”

His blue eyes flicked back and forth between mine. Then he tilted his chin back to finish his beer, and when he looked back at me, I could see the decision on his features. He was going to tell me everything.

I finished my beer too.

“I should start by telling you I’ve already made some moves. One of which being that Johnny and I went to that clubhouse to beat the living hell out of those Black Hearts boys.”

“I know,” I said quietly.

Axel nodded. “That was before I heard the rumor of them having a new leader. But Jax confirmed it. A man by the name of Watson has taken over for Tanner.”

“Okay,” I said to fill the pause Axel took. I licked my lips nervously. “And?”

“And I used to know him. I knew him pretty well.”

I waited for Axel to keep talking. I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. It was obvious he was trying to pick a place to start. I nestled deeper into the corner of the sofa and brought my feet off the floor to rest my ankles in his lap. He looked over at me, and I gave him the softest smile I could manage. “Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Axel put his hands on my ankles and started talking while his fingers traced patterns on my skin. “I ran with Watson when we were younger. I knew him growing up, but we never really clicked until just out of high school. Watson brought me into his fold. He and his boys welcomed me in with open arms and gave me a home when mine fell apart. Had I known what I was getting myself into, I never would have joined up with him. I would have stayed very far away.

“But, I made my mistake. We became friends. We trusted each other. I helped him pull off jobs for years before I realized what everyone already knew. Watson was unstable.

Mentally. He'd completely lose his temper and explode. I still have never seen anything like it."

"Johnny loses his temper," I said. "It happens all the time."

"When Johnny loses his temper, he has a reason. And you can talk him off the ledge. At least, people who he cares about can. But Watson was insane. He'd kill his own boys, Ellie. No mercy. If you fucked up and let him down, you had no idea what he was going to do to you."

"So I left him. It wasn't easy. He didn't want me to leave. He put up a good fight. Sent a couple of his boys to bring me back. Let's just say they made it back to him empty-handed. He knew not to come after me. It was a fight neither of us wanted. And then I met Johnny. And everything changed."

"You asked me how I had the money to afford this place." Axel gestured around the living room. "I made it all when I worked with Watson. We stole from people, Ellie. I didn't earn any of this. I took it. I took it by force, and I never looked back."

I swallowed. This truth made my heart ache for him. I could feel the guilt and the shame radiating from him. "You're not that man anymore." I hoped those words would reassure him that I didn't see him in that light. I saw him as the man he was today. The honest, hardworking, sometimes violent, strong, caring man that he was.

"No. I'm not. But I'm the reason Watson is rearing his head and coming after the MC. Things are only getting started. He's toying with his food." Axel's hands fell still on my ankles, and his jaw clenched, the muscles near his ears catching my eye. "So, I'm going to meet him, and I'm going to make him leave us the hell alone."

Nausea rolled in my gut. "Alone?"

Axel nodded.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea? Shouldn't you take Johnny or Jax with you? Even Hyde. Anyone would be better than going alone."

“No.” Axel shook his head. “Watson isn’t like most men. I’ll have a better shot at convincing him to see reason if I go alone. I’m the one he has the issue with, not Johnny or the rest of the MC.”

“You’re sure? What if this is just a territorial thing?”

“It’s not.” Axel’s tone was unquestionable. He was completely certain Watson was here for him. And I believed him.

“Okay. But, Axel, have you thought this all the way through? You have Hanna now. I know you don’t want to think about that right now, but it’s important. What if—” I stopped talking. Emotion swelled inside me and tried to escape as a sob. I looked away from him as my eyes grew wet and got myself under control. Without meeting his eyes, I finished what I was trying to say. “What if you don’t make it back? Hanna already lost her mom. She can’t lose her dad too.”

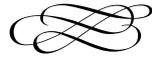
Axel slid across the sofa so he was pressed up against me. He took my chin in his hand and turned my face to him. “I’m coming back. I swear to you, I am. But I have to handle this. What kind of man would I be if I knew I could stop him and never even tried?”

I had a hundred answers to that question. He’d be alive and home with me every night, safe and sound, tucking his daughter into bed. He’d be mine.

Instead of answering, I pressed my lips to his. His mind was made up, and I knew there wasn’t a damn thing I could say to get him to change it. So, I kissed him until he gathered me in his lap and held me like he never had before.

I hated that it almost felt like a goodbye.

CHAPTER 25



AXEL

I shrugged into my leather jacket and was very aware of Ellie's eyes on me as she sat in her usual corner on the sofa. Hanna was on the ground in front of her, surrounded by a cluster of brightly-colored toys of varying sizes and purposes.

"All right." I nodded affirmatively. "I'm out of here."

Ellie stood from the sofa and brought Hanna to meet me at the front door. Ellie pulled me in for a quick hug, and when she withdrew, I held her to me for another moment to plant a kiss on her lips. When I let her go, she was smiling at me, but I could see the nervousness in her eyes.

"It'll be fine." I tried to assure her, as I had been trying almost all night long. Nothing I said had worked. Of course, she wasn't wrong to worry. Watson was the kind of man who had a track record of making sure things ended badly for everyone but him.

Hanna tugged on my pant leg. I crouched down in front of her, and for once, she didn't shy away from me. "When you wake up tomorrow morning, the three of us will have breakfast and do something fun, okay? Whatever you like."

Hanna's smile reminded me of Evelyn. When she lurched forward and threw her arms around me, I was shocked. This was the first time she had hugged me since the cops dropped her off in my driveway. I glanced up at Ellie, who was smiling brightly and had tears lingering in the corners of her eyes.

When I stood, Hanna fell back a step to wrap her tiny fingers around Ellie's red painted ones. I opened the front

door, and the two girls followed me out onto the threshold.

“Be careful,” Ellie called as I made my way down the driveway to my car. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

I waved over my shoulder and gave her the most convincing smile I could manage. Then I got in the car and drove away without looking back.

It was time to do business.

I knew Watson like the back of my hand, so I had a good feeling which clubhouse he would be holing up in. He liked grandeur and money and luxury, so the mansion on the east side of the city was my first stop. It was an old Victorian-style home set on a sprawling, lush green property adorned with fountains, statues, and clusters of furniture for enjoying the outdoors. It looked like no one ever bothered to walk the grounds. A grand waste of money, in my opinion.

I parked my car outside the front door in the roundabout driveway, and two men in black suits came out to meet me. They patted me down for weapons, which I had known they would, and when they found me unarmed, they asked me what my business was.

“I’m here to see Watson.”

The two men, who looked so alike they must have been brothers, exchanged a look. The one with the beard turned back to me. “You’re with Moretti. What the fuck makes you think we’re gonna let you walk in there without putting a bullet between your eyes?”

I was in no mood for this horseshit. “You tell Watson that Jeremiah Cooper is here to see him. Let him decide if you shoot me or not.”

The two brothers shifted uncomfortably. Then the one with the beard dismissed the other with a flick of his chin toward the house. The clean-shaven brother slipped inside, leaving me standing alone with one of the guards.

He was tall, almost as tall as me. His thick hair gave him some extra height, and his bushy eyebrows made him look like he was permanently scowling. Or he was just a grumpy guy. I would be if I was still working for Watson.

“So how long have you worked for him?” I asked.

The guard rolled his eyes. “Shut the fuck up.”

I shrugged. “All right. Just trying to make conversation. I worked for him, too, back in the day. Mind you, he gave me more important jobs than greeting guests. Little embarrassing, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to ruffle this asshole’s feathers. Just as he was about to retort, the front door of the house swung back open, and the clean-shaven brother motioned me inside.

I gave the guard I had been harassing a big grin and winked at him. “As you were.”

He stiffened but let me pass, and soon, I was stepping into the massive house. All the curtains were drawn over the windows, and it took some time for my eyes to adjust to the dimness that contrasted with the bright sunshine outside. The guard who had opened the door for me prodded me roughly between the shoulder blades, encouraging me to step ahead of him down a long corridor lined with a red carpet with gold trim.

The walls hosted sconces holding candles with flickering flames. It smelled like sandalwood and cinnamon. The door at the end of the hall was dark cherry oak and had an iron knocker on it.

Everything was lavish and overkill, and none of it surprised me.

I drew to a stop outside the door with the iron knocker. The guard behind me reached around me to use the iron knocker. His three raps on the door echoed in the corridor, and then a deep voice from the other side of the door beckoned us inside.

The guard pushed the door open and shoved me through.

The office was massive. It was dimly lit like the rest of the house, and a fire burned in the wall to my right. Surrounding the stone fireplace was a wall of bookcases filled with dark-colored hardcovers with gold writing on the spines. Two green chairs sat in front of the fire. Both were empty.

I looked toward the far corner and found what I was looking for. Him.

Watson had his back to me. He was wearing a navy suit and shiny black dress shoes. His hair was as black as I remembered and slicked back. He spoke to me before turning around.

“I didn’t think to see you so soon, Jeremiah.”

His voice had that same darkness to it. It brought a rush of nostalgia to the foreground of my mind. I remembered when that voice commanded me. Every order it gave me, I followed.

Watson turned slowly in place until he was facing me.

In his right hand was a glass of liquor. The hand clutching the crystal glass was covered in gold rings and jewels. I recognized only one, the plain, thick gold band sitting above the knuckle of his middle finger. It was decoration, sure, but it was also a weapon. I’d seen him strike men while wearing that ring, and it did more damage than one would expect.

He was bigger than he used to be, and he had already been a massive man. He was nearly six foot six. He was one of the only men I knew that I had to look up at. His neck was thick with muscle and decorated in thick veins that vanished under the collar of his shirt and tie. His black beard was short and clean, showing off his square jaw and high cheekbones. His nose was the same, crooked and flat from being broken probably a dozen or so times.

Watson looked like a businessman, not the leader of a deranged motorcycle gang.

“Can I get you a drink?” Watson offered, turning slightly to gesture to the bar beside him.

“No. I’m not staying long.”

“I believe that’s what you said last time, and then you stayed with me for half a decade.” Watson cracked a smile that held no humor. It was a practiced smile, a smile he had learned from others to use in social settings where appropriate. “Take a seat then, old friend.”

We went to the chairs by the fire. Watson sat first, and I followed, the leather of my jacket creaking around me as I moved.

“You haven’t changed at all.” Watson’s eyes looked me up and down. He was calculating and analyzing like he always used to do. Guessing my weight, my strength, my agility. He was prepared for everything, always.

“Can’t say the same about you.” I didn’t look him up and down. I waited for his eyes to meet mine, and I held his dark stare. “Can we skip the niceties?”

Watson chuckled and leaned back in his seat. He crossed one leg over the other and watched me over the rim of his glass as he took a sip of his drink. He swirled the liquid in his mouth and then, after swallowing, nodded slightly to me. “Go on then. Tell me why you’re here, Jeremiah.”

“Why the Black Hearts? Aren’t they a bit too simple for your tastes?”

Watson shrugged. “When the opportunity came my way, I figured it could be a lot of fun. New people. New jobs. You know how it is. Besides, President has a nice ring to it, wouldn’t you say?”

I ignored his question. “What do you want with the MC?”

Watson tapped his finger on the side of his glass. His eyes never left mine. “Nothing yet. I’m just poking them to see what they’ll do. Moretti has a bit of a temper, I hear. I’m surprised he hasn’t done anything more than beat up a couple of my boys.” A smile touched the corners of his thin lips. “Unless, of course, Moretti wasn’t the mastermind behind that little attack.”

“You burned our shop down, and we hit one of your clubhouses. Let’s leave it at that. We don’t need a turf war.”

Watson let out a great rush of deep laughter and shook his head at me. “Just like that? Jeremiah, please tell me you don’t believe that proposition is enough for me to back off. Do you know me at all?”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

Watson grinned and tilted his head to the side. “I’ll tell you what. I need a man like you. You do a job with me, and I’ll leave Moretti and your precious little MC alone.”

“I’m not getting involved with your shit again, Watson. I’m out. I’ve been out for a long time.”

“And you can stay out,” Watson said, his voice hardening with anger. “Don’t confuse things. I don’t want you back in. You made me look like a fucking fool when you left, Jeremiah. Gave people the wrong idea, making them think they could walk away from me.” Watson let out a primal snarl that reminded me of how things had been when I ran with him. “You owe me. One job. One bank hit. Then, we’ll be square.”

One bank hit. One robbery and Watson would be in my rearview mirror. He would never cross paths with Ellie, Hanna, Johnny, or any of the people in the MC that I cared about. I had the opportunity right now to make sure they were all safe from a man whose insanity and depravity could destroy us all.

“Fine.”

Watson put his glass down on the table beside his armchair and then pressed his fingertips together. “It’s good to see you, old friend.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual.” I got to my feet. “When is this bank run?”

“Monday.”

“I’ll meet you here.”

Watson nodded slowly and didn’t move from his position.

I turned and made for the door. Watson cleared his throat, and I paused with my hand on the handle but didn’t look back at him. I could feel his eyes burning into my back.

“I can’t wait to work together again, Jeremiah. Just like old times. We’ll see if you’ve still got what it takes.”

I wrenched the door open, startling the guard who had remained on the other side in the hallway during my chat with his boss. I gave him a cold stare as I walked around him and went to the front door.

The walk down the hallway was tense. For some reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling that if Watson was smart, he would just shoot me in the back and discard my body in a river or something. I’m sure the thought crossed his mind.

But I made it to the door and then to my car, and I pulled out of the driveway with a pounding heart and racing mind.

I took a long route home to make sure no one tailed me. The last thing I wanted to do was lead Watson straight to Ellie and Hanna. Then, I would have to kill him.

Or he’d kill me.

When I got home, Ellie met me at the door. She was dressed in a pair of light gray sweatpants and a loose white T-shirt. Her feet were bare, showing off her red-painted toenails. She threw her arms around my shoulders when I came up the steps to the door, and she buried her face into the side of my neck.

“I was so worried,” she whispered.

I hugged her back, wrapping my arms around her and holding her to me. “It’s all right. I have it all under control. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

She pulled away to look up at me. Her eyes were wet, and her nose was pink. She’d been crying for a while. I brushed the tears from the corners of her eyes and rested my forehead on hers. “I’m a big boy, Ellie. I can handle myself.”

“I know,” she said softly, cupping my face in her hands so she could press her lips to mine. Her kiss was sweet from her cherry Chapstick, and I detected hints of wine on her tongue as she pushed it between my teeth.

Soon, she was pulling me into the house, and her hands were hurrying to pull my leather jacket from my shoulders.

CHAPTER 26



ELLIE

Axel's jacket fell to the welcome mat below our feet, the zippers jingling lightly as he kicked it out of the way. I set to work at pulling his shirt over his head and tossed it aside to join his discarded jacket.

I ran my hands all over him, tracing the ridges and grooves of his stomach, his chest, his shoulders, and arms. All the while, he was walking me backward, lips pressing sweet kisses to my lips and neck, as he worked to untie the drawstring of my sweatpants.

I giggled as we both nearly toppled backward. He caught me in his strong arms and balanced us out and then pulled me back up to him like we had just ended some sort of magnificent dance. I blew my hair out of my face and covered my mouth with one vertical finger.

"Shh," I whispered. Hanna had been in bed for almost an hour now, and I didn't want to wake her. All she had talked about all night was Axel coming home. She needed a good night of rest, and then in the morning, she would be ready to join me and her daddy.

Axel and I hurried by her bedroom door on the balls of our feet so as not to make any noise. When we slipped into his bedroom, I pushed the door slowly closed behind me, and it softly clicked when it closed. Then, I turned to face him.

As always, the sight of him stole my breath from my lungs.

His muscles shifted under his skin as he came back to me. I stayed where I was pressed up against the door until he was

so close, I could feel the heat radiating from him. My tongue darted out between my lips, tasting the remnants of my cherry Chapstick as Axel reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. From there, his hand traced the line of my neck down to my collarbone. His touch lingered there, the rough skin of his palm tickling my skin and giving me goosebumps. I sensed that perhaps there was something he wanted to say. Maybe he wanted to tell me how his talk with Watson had gone.

I waited, giving him an open moment to speak, but he never seized it. Instead, he found the tie of my pants again, pulled the bow apart, and pushed the waistband over my hips. The pants were too big for me, and they slid to the ground. I stepped out of them.

Then, Axel pulled my shirt over my head. I was wearing a matching sport set, a gray bra with a white band and matching panties. Axel made a sound in the back of his throat to express his pleasure at the sight of my nearly naked body before leaning in to kiss my neck and bare shoulders.

I held him to me as he did, and I wanted to keep him there forever. I wanted to keep him with me where he would be safe and far away from the powerful men who might want to hurt him. I wanted him to stay where he was loved.

I drew his face back up to mine and kissed him deeply. I urged him away from the stress of the day and the burden on his shoulders with my tongue. I suckled his bottom lip and explored his mouth with a sort of desperation that frightened me a little bit.

He returned my kiss with wandering hands. He found the clip of my bra in the middle of my back and snapped it open effortlessly. It loosened around my shoulders, and Axel slipped it off my arms.

In nothing but my panties, I began walking him backward to the bed.

I pushed him down roughly with my hands in the middle of his chest. He fell heavily onto the bed and propped himself up on his elbows to watch me as I spun away from him and

hooked my fingers in the waistband of my panties at my hips. Slowly, I began working them down, wiggling my hips back and forth as I did so, giving him a show he deserved.

When the underwear was around my thighs, Axel smacked my ass. I resisted the urge to cry out, knowing we needed to be quieter than usual, and backed up into him. He surprised me by slipping a finger in my pussy.

I moaned softly and arched my back for him. His free hand grabbed and squeezed my ass as he fucked me with his finger. Soon he was stretching me with two fingers, and I gave in to the pleasure that was swelling inside me and looked up at the ceiling as I came.

Axel turned me around and pulled my hips down, guiding me to my knees on the floor in front of him. He was still in his jeans, but I hurried to undo his fly and pull him free. He was hard and ready, and I wasted little time taking him into my mouth and tasting his salty sweetness. I used my tongue to follow the vein along his shaft and then suckled his balls. He rewarded me with a breathless groan as he gathered my hair out of my face and held it in one hand.

My lips formed a seal around him, and I bobbed up and down, my mouth growing slippery by the second. Axel's fist tightened in my hair, and he tensed beneath me. I ran my hands up his thighs, the denim soft and worn under my palms, and cupped his balls to roll them gently in my fingers.

He bucked and spasmed in my mouth, and I held all of him as he shot his load into my throat. His breath was ragged and sharp as I sucked him clean, and I leaned back on my heels to wipe my lower lip with one finger. Then I sucked it clean, too, and gave him a smile.

Axel stood and pulled me up with him by my wrists. His grip was firm but not too tight as he put my back to the bed and pushed me down this time. I giggled as I fell. Axel shimmied out of his jeans and kept his eyes on me the whole while. I arched my back and lifted my arms above my head, giving him a show of my body as I slowly wriggled atop the sheets while I waited for him.

Then, when I was good and ready, I spread my legs for him and rested my heels on the edge of the mattress. Axel's gaze darkened with heat, and he went to his knees at the edge of the bed.

The swirling tension below my belly tightened even more as I anticipated his first lick. My pussy was swollen, pulsing, and begging for attention as Axel ran his fingers up and down the insides of my thighs. He teased me, his touch grazing the lips of my pussy and then darting away up and over my hips, only to return once more to barely graze my clit.

I moaned his name in hopes it would be enough encouragement for him to finally unravel me. His head dropped between my legs, and I froze, my breath clenched in my lungs as I waited for the divine sensation of his mouth pressed up against me.

He started slowly, his tongue darting out to touch my clit and then lazily tracing over it in a slow circle until the breath I held shuddered out of me. All my muscles tightened, and I clutched at the sheets as Axel's tongue dipped into me. He pulled slowly from me, gliding up and down my opening until my climax rolled over me like an insatiable beast.

Axel leaned over and grabbed a condom from his nightstand. He came back between my legs and tore open the wrapper. He rolled it on in seconds, just as my body was recovering.

I was a quivering mess, and all I wanted was his body moving against mine. I tried to tell him that, but his lips sucked on my clit as his fingers pressed into me. My voice was lost to another thigh-shaking orgasm.

Axel's lips shifted to my thighs, and then he started working his way up the length of my body. My belly and ribs were incredibly sensitive, and every kiss and nibble seemed to set my skin ablaze. I shifted beneath him eagerly. I lifted my hips from the bed as he positioned himself above me so I could feel the tip of him rest against my pelvis.

I smiled up at him, and he stared steadily down at me as he dropped his hips to mine to rest the tip of his cock against my

opening. Before we joined, he lowered his face to mine, and his tongue slipped between my lips. His cock did the same between my legs, demanding all of me right then and there.

My legs fell open wider as his hips pressed down on me so he could bury himself to the hilt. I gasped at the pressure and gripped his shoulders, pressing the tips of my fingers into his firm muscle. He held himself deep inside me until I relaxed, and then, he began a slow and steady rhythm of thrusting.

As he moved in me, I strained upward to kiss his throat and chest. I kissed his tattoo and his scars and traced them with my fingertips like I could imprint the sensation of them on my own skin. I wanted to feel like this for eternity.

Our foreheads were together now. His name came out between my lips again as I wrapped my legs around his hips in a desperate attempt to somehow be able to hold on to more of him.

He granted me one last moan before crushing his lips to mine. His hips bucked against mine, and I sighed into his mouth as I drew closer and closer to finishing. He groaned into our kiss, and together, we finally gave control over to our bodies and gave in to our orgasms.

Axel kissed me playfully as he held himself above me. Then he kissed the tip of my nose a couple times before stopping to just stare down at me. There was a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

I poked him in the chest. “What?” It was impossible not to smile up at him the way he was looking at me.

He ran his fingers through my hair and watched my blond curls fall back to the mattress after leaving his fingertips. “I just need you to know something.”

I studied him. “What is it?”

His eyes finally met mine. He was still a little breathless from our lovemaking, but he looked calm too. Relaxed, even. Then he smiled. It was unlike all the other smiles I had seen before on his lips. This one showed true joy.

“I’m in love with you, Ellie. I have been for a long time.”

My soul sang, and I became acutely aware of each individual heartbeat. “I love you too.”

We stared at each other a moment longer before erupting into giddy laughter. He fell to his side beside me on the mattress, and I rolled over to face him, cupping my hands under my cheek. He put a hand on my hip, and I watched as suddenly, the happiness in his smile ebbed away and was replaced with his usual broody expression.

“If something happens to me, I needed you to know how I felt.”

I tried to ignore the fear that rose up in me at those words. “If something happens?”

Axel nodded and looked at his hand on my hip. “Watson and I have made an arrangement. If I do a job with him, he’ll leave me and the MC alone for good. Please, don’t ask me to tell you what it is. I can’t tell you. It’s better this way, for everyone. You trust me, don’t you?”

I searched his face and wished he would look at me. Of course, I trusted him. I trusted him more than I trusted myself.

I placed a finger under his chin and forced him to look up at me. “I trust you. I know you’ll do what you know is right. But I can’t help but be scared. For the first time in a long time, I have something I really, really don’t want to lose. Two things all of a sudden.”

Axel laughed, but it was a short-lived expression of emotion. “I’ll take care of myself. I want to get back to the two of you. But no matter what, just know how much you mean to me. You’re everything, Ellie. Absolutely everything.”

He was speaking the words I had been aching to hear for years, but they didn’t give me the rush of joy I always imagined they would.

Instead, they left me cold with fear. Now that I had him, I was terrified a psychopath from Axel’s past was going to swoop in and destroy everything and leave me to pick up the pieces of the life I should have had.

CHAPTER 27



AXEL

When I pulled up out front of the Victorian mansion, Watson and his mob squad—for lack of a better word—were all standing in a neat row in front of two black sedans. There were six including Watson, leaving me as the seventh man involved in the robbery.

I already didn't like how big this was going to be.

I parked my car and stepped out, shielding my eyes against the bright sun cresting over the roof of the house. I moved into the shade to better see the six men.

They were dressed casually like me, mostly in jeans and long-sleeve shirts. Watson was standing at the end of the line, and his dark eyes were fixed on me.

“Had a feeling you might bail on me, Jeremiah.”

I shrugged him off. “Let's just get this over with. I'm looking forward to putting you in my past for good.”

Watson chuckled and gestured at the black sedan at the front of the driveway. “Your chariot awaits.”

I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. He was still the same as he had always been. Cocky, obnoxious, and altogether too infatuated with himself. One of Watson's boys opened the back door, and I slid inside.

Watson took the front passenger seat, and the same man who had given me a hard time when I first showed up at the mansion the other day slid into the back seat beside me. He shot me a look that clearly expressed how unhappy he was to

have to be sitting in the back with me, and I gave him a nice, big smile back.

“Morning sunshine,” I said. “Bet you didn’t think you’d ever be on the same team as me, hey?”

Watson looked over his shoulder at me in the back seat. “Don’t go stirring any shit. You’re lucky I’m willing to give you a shot at this. Otherwise, your precious little MC would be on my radar.”

“Yeah, whatever.” I leaned back casually in the seat. I didn’t miss the looks the driver and the asshole beside me gave me. It was obvious they weren’t used to being around someone who wasn’t afraid of Watson. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Driver’s wait by the cars with the trunks popped. The remaining five of us go in and fan out. I’m doing the talking. No one else says a fucking word. First person to reach for the emergency button gets a bullet in the stomach. Straightforward enough?”

“You don’t need to shoot anyone. We can get in and out of there before the cops even get halfway there.” I leaned forward. “No need to kill someone just so you can maintain your reputation with your new buddies. There’s no honor in murdering a fucking bank teller.”

Watson gave me a devilish grin. “It’s not to maintain my reputation. I just like blowing people apart. You can’t have already forgotten that. It hasn’t been that long.”

“If someone dies in there, the deal is off.” My voice was a low growl. I barely recognized it in my own ears.

“Whatever you say, Jeremiah,” Watson chuckled, adjusting his jacket as he turned to face back out the windshield.

That’s when I spotted the pistol on his hip.

I was suddenly incredibly grateful I had told Ellie I loved her.

We parked outside the bank along the curb, and all of us piled out of the cars. The drivers immediately popped open the trunks and went to stand at the back of the cars.

The sidewalks were busy with pedestrians rushing to work. It was Monday morning, and everyone had somewhere they needed to be.

Peering through the bank windows, I could see that there were roughly forty to fifty people inside. The teller windows were all busy, and there was a winding line through the middle of the bank. There were too many targets in there, too many people a stray bullet could easily find.

Or an intentional bullet.

I was in over my head.

Watson and three of his friends began moving down the sidewalk. I stayed where I was, mind racing, heart pounding, until all at once the rage at what was about to happen came tumbling out of me.

“No.”

The word was sharp and angry like a whip, and all four men walking away from me turned back. Watson was smiling like he knew this was what was going to happen. Like this was the real plan all along.

“Don’t have the balls for it anymore, old boy?” Watson teased, his face a mask of pure insanity now. This was the look I remembered, the wide eyes riddled with tiny red veins, the purpling cheeks, the pulsing neck, the deranged and crooked smile.

Watson was going to crack. I had to channel his fury on me, or a lot of other people were going to find themselves bathing in a puddle of their own blood.

“The balls?” I asked, forcing myself to scoff. “I had the balls to walk away from you, you sick bastard. And you never had the nerve to come after me because you knew you were no match for me. Never were. And I know how much it gets to you. I was never afraid of you, Watson. You were afraid of me.”

Watson’s goons looked from him to me. The unease was heavy in the silence between us. I just had to push him a little farther. The implosion was coming.

“Look at you, Watson. You’re still doing the same old shit. You’re irrelevant. You always will be. Nobody will ever give a damn about you—”

Then it happened. Watson let out a furious bellow and charged me.

I bent my knees to brace for the impact and lower my center of gravity. Watson slammed into me, and we both stumbled back. My back collided with the sedan we had just gotten out of, and I heard the metal crumple beneath me.

I buried my knee in Watson’s gut as his hands reached for my throat. He grunted with the impact but didn’t double over as I had hoped he would. Instead, he caught himself on my shirt, hauled himself up, and then lifted me forward and drove me back down against the car again.

The wind was knocked from my lungs, and just as I was almost able to take a breath, Watson sealed off my windpipe with his massive, meaty fingers.

His lips peeled off his teeth, and his gold cap glittered in the sun as he smiled at me. “Bet this isn’t how you saw your day going,” Watson wheezed.

I grimaced against the burning in my lungs and the pain in my throat but didn’t give him the satisfaction of watching me struggle.

In fact, I only let him pin me down for another second before I reached out and pressed my thumbs into his eyeballs.

Watson let out a high-pitched wail and tore himself away from me. I pushed myself out of the crumpled groove my body had made in the sedan. I was only dimly aware of the crowd that had gathered at a distance to watch the scene unfold. I wanted to scream at them to get the fuck away from us, but my voice was gone from having my throat squeezed closed.

Watson clutched his hands over his eyes and started screaming at me.

“You fucking piece of shit! I gave you everything you could have asked for, and you repay me by fucking running. Running like a little bitch! You might think you’re too good

for us, Jeremiah, but let me let you in on a little secret. You're just like me. Always have been. Always will be. You and me? We're two peas in a pod." Somehow, he managed to open his eyes. They were bloodshot and already starting to swell. I wanted to bury my fingers in his eyeballs up to my knuckles. He swayed where he stood and finally managed to steady himself. He looked me straight in the eyes. "I've always known it would come to this."

I froze as Watson pulled the gun free from his hip. The crowd scattered and screams assaulted my ears as the hundreds of fleeing feet made the ground beneath mine vibrate. I straightened, and the gun followed my chest as I moved.

"I've been waiting a long fucking time for this," Watson snarled.

I braced myself to receive the bullet. My mind was full of flashes of Ellie.

Ellie cooking dinner in nothing but one of my T-shirts and a pair of gray knee-high socks. Ellie sipping a glass of wine while reading a book on my sofa. Ellie playing with Cade in my backyard and chasing him around the outside of the shop. Ellie lying naked on my bed, ready for me to join her.

Then, there were other flashes.

Ellie and Hanna singing in the car on the way to work. Ellie and Hanna dancing in the living room to terrible cartoon music. Ellie and Hanna waiting for me at my front door to come home.

I gritted my teeth.

I had done all I could.

Then someone was shouting. It took me a moment to process what it was that they were actually saying.

"Drop the gun!"

I looked to my left to see four police cruisers all pulled up in a line. Officers were hiding behind the cars, nearly a dozen of them, and all had their weapons drawn and aimed at

Watson, who was looking at them with a slack-jawed expression.

His eyes swung back to me.

“Drop the gun!”

I wasn't sure if he would listen. I could see the hatred burning in his stare, and if the shoe were on the other foot and I was a psychopath with a deranged thought process, I would have shot me.

“Drop the gun! Last chance! Drop the gun and put your hands on your head, all of you!”

I slowly raised my hands to rest them on top of my head. I never took my eyes off Watson.

Then, much to my surprise, the gun slipped from Watson's fingers, and he put his hands on his head. He turned away from me to look at the cops who were now rushing forward. Most kept their guns drawn while a couple others pulled handcuffs from their belts and approached us with caution.

I let the male cop who came to me take my hands off my head and pin my hands behind my back. As he did that, another cop pushed Watson to the ground and pressed a knee into his back. Watson's cheek was flat against the pavement, and he was staring up at me.

“Should have taken the shot,” I said.

“Next time,” Watson snarled.

The cops loaded us into the backs of their cars and took us to the station, where we were unloaded separately. I was forced to wait in the back of my car while all the others were escorted into the station to be processed. The two cops in the front seat never said a word as I waited, and I held my tongue as I considered what this was going to do to the rest of my life.

How long was I going to go to prison for? Twenty-five years, at the least? Hanna would be twenty-eight by the time I was released or older, and there was no way in hell I would ask Ellie to wait for me.

She was going to kill me for this.

As that thought crossed my mind, I was taken out of the car and brought through the station to a small office at the back. Most of the cops ignored me, which I was thankful for.

When I arrived in the office, the two cops who had escorted me put their hands on my shoulders and pushed me down into a chair across from a desk.

Then, to my surprise, they undid my cuffs and left the room without saying a word. I was pretty sure they didn't even lock the door behind them.

Confused, I sat there and waited.

I didn't have to wait long. The door opened, and I kept my back to it. I listened to the soft footsteps of someone who couldn't have weighed very much. A woman, possibly.

My guess was confirmed when a short brunette cop crouched down in front of me and gave me a charming dimpled smile that erased all the panic in my gut.

"Dani," I blurted out.

She nodded and patted my knee. "Yep. Johnny caught wind of your little shindig with Watson. He played it cool. Instead of exploding on going on a rampage, he recruited yours truly to deal with the city's biggest player. Which makes you my informant. Good job out there. Without you, we never would have been able to catch bad boy numero uno."

"Wait, Johnny knew about all of this?"

Dani nodded. "Yep. A few people knew about this."

I arched an eyebrow. All the tension of the day had vanished. I felt lighter, somehow. That was probably because I no longer thought I was going to prison. "Define a few people."

Dani shrugged. "Why don't you go find out? They're your ride home."

CHAPTER 28



ELLIE

Dani hadn't taken any of my shit when I asked her if Hanna and I could meet Axel at the police station. She had refused and given me a deadpan stare before saying, "You want to risk these assholes seeing you? Axel would be livid."

There was reason to her words. I hadn't thought it all the way through. I just wanted to see Axel and make sure he wasn't hurt.

Dani had called me in the afternoon, a couple hours after Axel left to go meet up with Watson, and gave me a rundown of the plan she had concocted with Johnny and, in turn, the police department. She told me not to worry and promised she had it all under control. I trusted her. I had seen the woman in action before, and she was someone I never would have messed with. Johnny also had complete faith in her, and he was a good judge of character.

Dani had me wait at Axel's place until I received a phone call that it was safe to head down to the station. The cop who called me also told me Axel was fine and that he would be happy to see me. Everything had been taken care of. No fatalities. No serious injuries. Watson was going to prison for a long time.

My hands had been shaking as I buckled Hanna into her booster seat. She was in a good mood, kicking her feet playfully as I drove down to the station white-knuckled. I tried to keep my tone cheerful, but the anxiety in my chest made it nearly impossible.

I needed to see him and make sure he was all right with my own two eyes. Then, I could relax.

I parked the car outside of the station and hurried to unbuckle Hanna.

“We’re going to see Axel now, okay? Are you excited?”

Hanna nodded and smiled up at me as I helped her out of the car. Her feet hit the sidewalk, and she took my hand. The two of us turned to begin making our way up the cement stairs to the front doors of the precinct.

I looked up as my foot hit the bottom stair, and just as I did, the doors swung open, and out strode Axel. His eyes fell on me, and then he was hurrying down the steps, a smile plastered on his face.

I let out a joyful squeal as he met us at the bottom of the stairs. He swept me up into his arms and spun in a circle. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him hard until he put me down. Then I stood back to look him over as he crouched down to hug Hanna.

The little girl threw her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. He held her to him and looked up at me. There was something different in those eyes of his now. Something happy. At ease. He pressed his lips to the side of Hanna’s head and looked back down as his eyes turned glassy.

Axel Cooper wasn’t about to get emotional, was he? Surely not.

Axel got to his feet, but Hanna ran around his legs before tugging on his jeans. She stared up at him as he peered down at her, and then she stretched her arms over her head, her fingers flexing as she reached for him.

“She wants you to hold her,” I leaned in to tell him.

His surprise was obvious in the widening of his eyes. Then, his expression softened, and he bent at the knees to scoop the little girl up in his arms. He looked like a natural as we made our way back to the car.

Hanna was leaning away from him so she could look at his face. Her fingers reached out and traced his features like she was really seeing him for the first time. I stopped walking, frozen by the intimacy of the moment, and held my breath as Hanna chewed on her bottom lip. She was about to say something.

“Are you okay, Daddy?” she asked in that soft little voice of hers.

Axel blinked.

And then he looked at me.

I was a mess. Tears were streaming down my face as soon as the word left her lips, but I was smiling too. This was what I had been waiting for. I knew it wouldn't take long for Hanna to warm up to Axel, but I suspected it might be a while before Axel was willing to hear his new title on his daughter's lips.

Instead of freaking out, Axel bounced Hanna in his arms. “I'm okay, you don't need to worry about me. But you know what I do need?”

Hanna waited for his answer. “What?”

“Food,” Axel groaned, poking her in the ribs and earning himself some high-pitched giggles. “What do you say? Stop and grab some lunch?” He turned back to me as he asked the question.

I nodded. “I haven't been able to eat in over a day and a half. Yes please.” At that, my stomach growled.

Axel chuckled. “All right. Let's get you in the car, and we'll fill our bellies.”

Axel buckled Hanna into her car seat, and the two of them chatted as he did so. I slid into the passenger seat and listened to Hanna tell Axel all about the princess in one of her favorite cartoons. Axel was attentive and sweet as he listened, and when the story was done, he bopped her on the nose. “You're a good little storyteller, you know.”

“I know.”

Axel and I laughed, and he got into the driver's seat beside me. His hand found mine after he turned the engine on, and we pulled away from the curb, heading out down the street to find the right place to stop for food.

Axel didn't let go of my hand until we had parked the car at a family restaurant not far from his house. It definitely wasn't the sort of place Axel would have ever gone to before Hanna was in his life.

He beat me to the back seat once more to unbuckle Hanna, and he picked her up and met me at the front of the car. He took my hand, and we entered the restaurant together.

As a family.

My heart had never felt so big.

Eating at the restaurant was pleasant. Axel played with Hanna and me, grabbing my knee and squeezing to get a rise out of me. I slapped his hand away as he went to try it again, and he laughed and returned his hand to his lap.

As Hanna's attention drifted to the coloring mat and crayons in front of her, I wrapped my hands around Axel's arm and pressed myself against him. I rested my chin on his shoulder so that when I spoke, my words were only for him.

"I'm so glad you're okay. I was worried."

Axel turned to kiss my forehead. "Did you ever doubt me?"

"Never. But I didn't doubt Watson, either. It could have gone down any number of ways. It was scary. You're sure you're not hurt?"

Axel shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing I can't handle. A couple bumps and bruises." His hand went absently to his throat, which was discolored. I knew what that meant. Someone had gotten their hands around his neck and given him a good squeeze. I leaned in and kissed the purpling skin. He smiled and patted my hand on his arm. "I'll be fine."

"You still seem tense." I wanted him to open up. He didn't need to carry anything by himself anymore. I was here to help,

and I planned to be here forever if he would let me.

“Watson puts me on edge. He’s weaseled his way out of situations like this before.”

“But before, Dani wasn’t calling the shots. This time, you have someone personally invested working on the inside. That has to count for something, right?”

Axel nodded. “You’re right.”

“Everything’s okay now.” I kissed his cheek. “I promise. It’s just the three of us you have to worry about. No more psychos with guns.”

“No more psychos with guns,” he agreed with a grin and then reached for his glass of ice water. I grabbed mine, and we tapped our glasses together in the strangest toast of my life.

After lunch, Axel took us to the park. The sun was shining, and the day was warm, and it was the perfect day to squeeze in some play time. Hanna loved the winding plastic slide from the top platform of the playground. I walked her up, and Axel would catch her at the end as per her request. If Axel wasn’t at the bottom waiting for her, she wasn’t sliding.

I knew this request was the highlight of Axel’s day. I stood on the top platform, watching as Hanna slid into his arms. I had never seen him look so happy.

After the park, we went home. We curled up on the couch, all three of us, to watch Disney movies. I fell asleep after a while. I was exhausted, after all. I had barely slept at all the night before because of how worried I was for Axel. But now, sleep washed over me and hugged me tightly as I lay against Axel’s right side.

Hanna was on his left, and both of us were tucked under his arms. His girls.

Axel woke me up late in the evening by gently shaking my shoulder. I sat up, rubbing sleep out of my eyes with the heels of my palms.

“What time is it?” I mumbled.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me gently to my feet. “Almost midnight.”

“What? Aren’t you tired?”

He shrugged as we walked down the hall to the bedroom. “I didn’t want to wake either of you up. It was nice just having you both with me. Hanna’s in bed already.”

We brushed our teeth, gazing contently at one another’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. After flossing and swishing some mouthwash around my mouth, I padded into the bedroom and slipped under the blankets.

Axel joined me and rolled on to his side. He drew me into him, curling himself around me. I fit perfectly in the groove of his body. I reveled in his warmth and the feeling of his skin on mine. I had been so terrified I might not ever have another moment like this with him. I had been so afraid Watson was going to steal that from me.

But I had him back. He was mine. And he was Hanna’s. Everyone was safe.

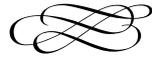
I snuggled deeper into him, and he rested his chin in the groove of my shoulder and neck. I listened to his even breaths and felt his heartbeat on my back. I sighed, pushing away all the stress of the day with the slow exhale of breath.

Then, I sank deeper into the mattress, feeling nothing but gratitude.

Axel was alive and well.

If I had lost him today, I had no idea what I would have done.

CHAPTER 29



AXEL

I arrived at the bar at five o'clock on the dot, as agreed. Hanna and Ellie were with me, but I asked them to hang back for a bit. Once we were done discussing business, the girls could come join us, but for now, it was best if they waited outside.

Ellie didn't protest. She nodded and kissed me before I slipped through the doors and paused to let my eyes adjust to the dimness of the place.

All of the MC was already there.

They were taking up almost the entire place. Beer pitchers sat in the middle of nearly every table, and as the doors closed behind me, all heads turned in my direction.

Johnny, dressed a plaid shirt and old blue jeans, got to his feet and picked up his glass of beer from the table. He held it up high and then without saying a word, took a sip. The others all followed suit in saluting me.

I didn't like the attention, but I had been expecting it.

I walked through the tables to where Johnny sat and dropped down into an open chair beside him. Across from me sat Jax. He was grinning like a fool as he picked at French fries in front of him in a red basket. Also at the table was Hyde and Derek, both of whom looked pleased to see me.

"So, Dani is pleased with how shit went down yesterday." Johnny took another swig of his beer, and a little bit of foam lingered in his dark facial hair. "Says you had a bit of a fight on your hands when she showed up."

“Had to make a call. Shit was going to go sideways real quick if we went into that bank.”

Johnny nodded almost sympathetically. “The bastard didn’t do any real damage, did he?”

Jax chuckled and popped a fry into his mouth. “You all worried about the well-being of our Axel?”

Johnny scowled over at Jax. “Shut up.”

Jax shrugged. “Just saying. The concern is sweet. I hope you’d feel the same about me if I was ever—”

“Shut the fuck up, Jax. Nobody’s talking to you.” Johnny’s glare was darker now, and Jax obeyed by clamping his mouth shut and swallowing his French fry.

I started laughing. Everyone looked over at me with surprised expressions. I suppose it made sense. Laughing wasn’t something I did very often.

“Let’s just get this meeting over with,” I said, and I got to my feet.

As soon as I stood, all the chatting, deep voices around us fell silent, and all eyes fell on me. I had the attention of everyone in the room without having to speak a word.

“So, I’ve called a meeting today to give you all an update on everything that went down yesterday concerning the Black Hearts new leader. Watson Young is going to be looking at the inside of a prison cell for a very, very long time.”

The men in the bar roared and cheered as they clapped in celebration.

I raised my hand to silence them once more, and they fell quiet. “Of course, this doesn’t mean his crew won’t still be out on the streets looking to start a fight. I don’t know where this leaves us with them.”

Jax cleared his throat, and I glanced down at him. “I’d like to say something about that, if I could.”

I nodded and Jax got to his feet so that the room could hear him. “I ran into a Black Hearts boy on the street this morning.”

Mumbling broke out in the room at those words.

“Shut up, you bastards. You gossip like high school girls at a dance.” Jax said, and then waited for silence again. When he had it, he lifted his chin and continued speaking. “He approached me. And then he thanked the MC for taking care of Watson. Apparently, the guy put a bad taste in a lot of their mouths, but they weren’t exactly in the position to do anything about it. Axel, you’re kind of a household name over there now.”

I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t been expecting that.

“So,” Jax continued, “As it stands right now, there’s no bad blood between the MC and the Black Hearts. I, for one, am happy to keep it that way. Peace sounds like something we should all try, you know?”

I was nodding before I even realized it.

I had bigger problems now than petty gang disputes. I had Hanna and Ellie to worry about. When I wasn’t working in the shop, those two girls would have all of my time and energy. Plain and simple. They deserved at least that.

Johnny stood once more. “A state of peace between us and the Black Hearts?” He shrugged and then grinned. “Crazier things have happened, right?”

“Right,” Jax and I said in unison.

Then the whole bar was toasting to peace, and all of us were settling down into our seats to enjoy the company of our brothers.

Jax nudged my shoulder with his. “Crazier things like finding out you have a daughter.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. Well. Doesn’t feel so crazy anymore.”

Jax’s eyebrows crept up his forehead, and he and Johnny exchanged a look. “No?”

“No.” I shook my head. “She’s mine, and I love her. And now that Watson is out of the picture, I finally feel like I have the space to let her into my life. I know that probably doesn’t make sense, but—”

“Makes sense.” Johnny patted my back. “You’re a thick-headed fucker, you know that? But we’ve got your back. Always got your back.”

“I know.” I sipped my beer.

Daylight illuminated the bar for a brief second as the doors opened again. I turned in my seat to see Ellie standing with Hanna. The little girl was hiding behind Ellie’s legs, and Ellie was doing her best to coax her out. I suppose it might be daunting for a three-year-old to walk into a dimly lit bar surrounded by obnoxious men.

I got up and wasn’t oblivious to the stares I received as I went to meet my two girls. Ellie smiled at me as I dropped down to Hanna’s height and peered at her from between Ellie’s knees.

“It’s all right. These people are all my friends. Which means they’re your friends, too. I know they’re really loud, but this is a good place to be.”

Hanna still looked nervous, but she let me grab her hand. I pulled her to me and picked her up. Then, I took Ellie’s hand and the three of us went back to the table I shared with the guys.

Jax pulled up a chair for Ellie, and she thanked him before dropping down into it. Then, he poured her a beer and slid the glass across the table. She caught it, lifted it to her lips, and drank thankfully.

I sat down with Hanna on my lap and bounced my knees.

“This is my daughter, Hanna, everyone. Hanna, these are my friends. This is your Uncle Jax. And this ugly guy right here is your Uncle Johnny.”

Johnny scrunched up his nose. “Who are you calling ugly?”

Hanna giggled, and all the men at the table became softer at the sound.

“Fuck, she’s cute,” Johnny muttered.

“Language,” Ellie snapped.

“Sorry,” Johnny said, holding his hands up apologetically and leaning back in his seat. “Just sayin’. Didn’t think Axel had it in him to make something so sweet. Which reminds me,” Johnny reached under the table and withdrew a brown paper bag with twine handles. Then he pulled something out that was wrapped in pink tissue. He pulled his chair closer to me and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, so that he was eye level with Hanna.

She didn’t try to press herself against me to get away from him. Instead, she watched him as he started speaking to her.

“You know, Hanna, your daddy is a cool guy. He’s part of our ... Kingdom. And do you know what every Kingdom needs?”

Hanna shook her head, her strawberry blond curls dancing around her pink cheeks.

“A princess, of course,” Johnny said, and then he handed the wrapped object to her. “And a princess needs to wear the colors of her Kingdom.”

Hanna stared down at the package in her lap and then looked up at me. “Go ahead. Open it,” I encouraged.

Her little fingers dug into the tissue, and she worked to unwrap it. I knew what it was as soon as the first piece of pink tissue was stripped away. Black leather emerged, and when all the tissue was gone I couldn’t help but laugh.

Johnny had got Hanna a leather jacket to match the ones we all wore.

“I want one,” Ellie scowled beside me, crossing her arms under her breasts.

“Sorry, beautiful, there’s only one princess in the Kingdom, and that goes to Hanna.” Johnny leaned back, pleased with himself, and crossed his hands behind his head.

Hanna smiled up at me. “It’s just like yours, Daddy.”

“Yeah, it is. Now we match. Want to put it on?”

Hanna nodded gleefully.

I slid her off my knees, and she stood in front of me as I held out the jacket. I had to guide her little arms through the sleeves, and then I straightened out the jacket for her.

“Show everyone how awesome it looks,” I said.

Hanna turned around, and Johnny and Jax started clapping. Derek joined in, watching with a humorous expression as my daughter performed a curtsy that contrasted the edgy leather jacket she was wearing.

Johnny slid off his chair and dropped to one knee. He bowed his head to Hanna. “Welcome to the Kingdom, Princess Hanna. We are all here to keep you safe.”

Hanna giggled and raced back to my chair. She grabbed on to my leg and peered up at me. “I’m a princess, Daddy.”

I put my hand on her head and looked at Ellie, who was watching both of us with a giant smile. “Yeah, you are.”

EPILOGUE



ELLIE

I rolled over to roll into him but found Axel's side of the bed empty. Still half asleep, I searched his side of the bed with my hands before finally managing to open my eyes.

I found a note sitting neatly on top of his pillow. My name was written across the front of it, and it was folded in half to hide the contents.

My stomach now a tight knot of nerves, I grabbed the note and sat up, pulling the blankets with me to ward off the chill of the morning.

Ellie,

Get dressed. Meet me at the shop. Hanna is with me. Don't rush.

I frowned. There wasn't any information in that note that eased my mind. I needed to know more. So I called him.

"Where are you?" he asked before anything else.

"I'm at home. In bed. Where are you?"

"The shop. Didn't you read the note I left you?"

"Yeah, but I was worried. It's early. Why did you leave so early? Is everything okay?"

I had definitely assumed the worst. It had been six months since Watson was arrested, but every now and then, or when things like this happened, I couldn't fight down the thought that he might get out and come after Axel. Maybe the shop had burned down again. Maybe there was another hit out on the MC.

"Everything is fine, Ellie. Don't worry. Just get dressed and come down to the shop. Hanna and I are waiting for you."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay. Fine. Just give me fifteen minutes, and I'll be there. I need to grab a coffee on the way."

Axel chuckled. "Okay, baby. I'll see you soon. I love you."

"Love you too," I said before hanging up the phone and collapsing back into the soft mattress and cozy pillows.

Why must he make me get up so early all the time? He was a morning person, and I was sometimes. But today was Saturday. I had wanted to sleep in and spend a lazy day at home with him and Hanna. I was even going to make them French toast.

I sighed again and rolled out of bed. They were waiting for me.

I got dressed in a hurry, slipping into a pair of tight jeans and a loose black T-shirt. I stepped into a pair of red flats, hoping that if I dressed in clothes that weren't suitable to work in, Axel wouldn't put me to work on one of the side jobs we had for six motorcycles. It was my weekend, damn it, and I wasn't going to spend it working.

I grabbed my sunglasses and car keys and rushed out the front door. The sun was shining, but the air was chilly, and I regretted not grabbing a coat as I slid into the driver's seat of my car. I started it up and cranked the heat and turned on my seat warmers, which didn't kick in until I was going through the drive-through to grab a cappuccino.

I sipped on it slowly as I drove the rest of the way to the shop, savoring the simple sweetness of the foam and espresso.

When I parked outside the shop, I began to wonder what the hell was going on. There were no other cars parked on the lot, and the two bay doors were closed. If Axel was working on something, I would be surprised. He always made sure the doors were open so the air flow was clean.

“What the hell is he trying to pull?” I muttered as I got out of the car and closed the door with my hip. I clicked the alarm on my fob to arm it, and the car beeped behind me as I walked across the gravel to the side door.

I was instantly cold again, and I hurried the last couple of steps to the door. I turned the handle, and as soon as the door opened, I was greeted with the smell of grease and, much to my surprise, lavender and rose and something else. Something very floral.

I stepped over the threshold, and my mouth fell open as I saw what had been done to the shop.

There were flowers *everywhere*.

The cement floor was hidden from view by red rose petals. Every single surface was filled with extravagant bouquets of carnations, roses, lilacs, lilies, daisies, lavender, and even orchids. I froze in place and stared in wonder.

Candles were burning, too, and they were the only source of light in the place. It looked beautiful, which was a strange thing to say about a mechanic shop.

Then, I spotted Hanna in the corner. She was bending down to gather handfuls of rose petals, and then she would toss them in the air over her head and twirl in a circle as they cascaded down around her.

“What’s all this?” I whispered.

Axel stepped out from behind a 1969 fastback we were painting. He held yet more flowers, which he handed to me when he was close enough. His eyes were fixed on mine, and they seemed to dance in the flickering light of the candle flames.

“Axel?”

He smiled, took my hand in his, and descended to one knee.

I thought I might pass out right then and there.

“Took you long enough to get here,” Axel said, giving me a crooked smile.

I stuttered and stammered like a fool. Words were completely out of my grasp right now. Axel was on his knee in front of me, and his hand was disappearing into the pocket of his leather jacket.

“Ellie Kinkade. I have a very important question to ask you.”

I nodded.

“But first, there are some things I want to say to you.”

My eyes were growing wet with tears. My heart was hammering, and my skin felt white hot all over. My hand shook in his grasp, and I clutched the flowers he had just handed me to my chest.

“I never had faith in myself that I could ever be a good man, Ellie. I never thought I could deserve the love of a woman like you. That’s why I held you at arm’s length for so long. You were too good for me. You still are. But I’m ready to be selfish. I love you more than anything, and I can’t imagine being without you. You make it easy to get out of bed in the morning. You make it easy to smile, to laugh, and to let go of all the anger and resentment I’ve carried around with me for a long, long time. You make it easy to fight for what I want. I want you—I’ve always wanted you. I want to spend the rest of my life doing everything in my power to make you happy and give you the life you deserve. You, me, and Hanna. A family. What do you say?” He paused and withdrew a blue velvet box from his pocket. He extended it out to me and popped it open.

A ring more dazzling than anything I could have imagined winked at me as it caught the light of the flames from the candles.

“Ellie, will you marry me?”

I took a shaky breath and nodded. I still couldn't speak. All I could do was succumb to the wave of emotion that washed over me. I let out a sob as Axel took my left hand and slid the ring onto my finger.

"Mrs. Cooper has a nice ring to it," he said as he got to his feet.

I threw my arms around his shoulders and wept with joy against him. He hugged me back, his strong arms squeezing my back.

"I hope these are happy tears," he said, finally stepping back to wipe my cheeks.

I nodded again and struggled to finally find my voice. "These are very happy tears. I love you, too, Axel. So fucking much."

"Language," he teased, shooting a look over at Hanna, who was still enjoying playing in the flower petals.

I clapped a hand over my mouth. "Oops."

Axel shrugged. "Fuck it, we just got engaged."

Then he wrapped his arms around me again and swept me up off my feet. He spun me in a circle and both my shoes fell off. When he put me down, my bare feet kissed the silky petals on the shop floor.

"I can't believe you did all of this for me," I whispered, turning in a slow circle to soak in the sight of all the flowers and candles again. It was truly magnificent.

"I might have had a little bit of help."

I laughed. "Let me guess. The entire MC knows?"

"Yep, they've known for weeks."

"How on earth did you all keep it a secret for so long?"

"I threatened to kill anyone who ruined the surprise."

I giggled and then kicked up a bunch of red petals. They soared into the air and floated gently down. Then Axel called Hanna over.

He and his daughter stood before me as I put the bouquet down on one of the already flower-covered workbenches. Hanna stood with her hands clasped in front of her, and she rocked her shoulders from side to side. She only ever did this when she was nervous.

She pursed her lips and looked up at me. Then she took a deep breath like Axel and I had taught her to do when her nerves were getting to her.

“After you marry my daddy, you’ll be my mommy.” As Hanna spoke the words, Axel pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket. “Will you adopt me?”

Axel handed me the paper. I unfolded it, blinded by my own tears, and was barely able to read the title of the adoption form. I nodded frantically, tears spilling freely down my cheeks now.

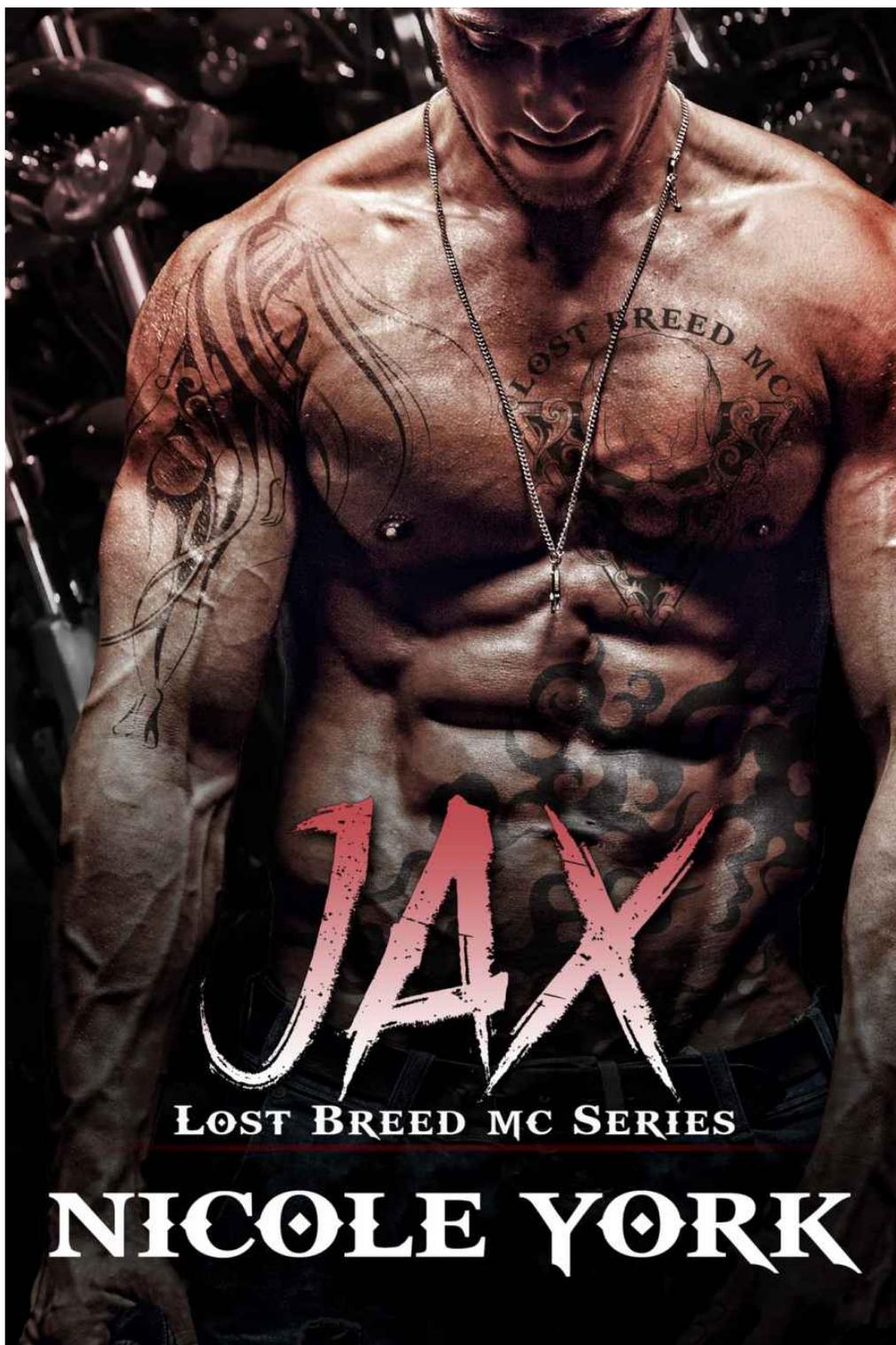
“Of course, I will, Hanna.” I dropped down to my knees and held out my arms. Hanna ran into them, and I hugged her fiercely. “I love you, baby girl.”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

Axel joined us on the shop floor and embraced both of us, resting his chin on Hanna’s head. I stared into his blue eyes and tried to lock this feeling into my brain forever. This was the happiest I had ever been.

“Mrs. Jeremiah Cooper, hey?” I asked.

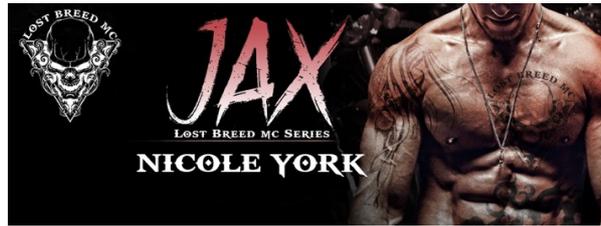
Axel gave me a sheepish grin. “Hell, yeah.”



LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



Seven men were killed last night.

Their bodies were sliced and diced by a psycho with a machete, and no matter what angle I look at it from, I know it's only a matter of time before I have to get my hands dirty.

Real dirty.

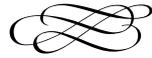
Things gets even more complicated when Holly Whitton, the girl who captured my heart a decade ago, moves back to New York City. She has secrets, that much is clear, but I can't help but be drawn to her warmth. She's a haven from the chaos that lingers at my doorstep, and she's my responsibility to protect.

But my life with my MC is a threat to her—and so is the man with the machete and the hunger for blood. Maybe I'm the one I need to protect her from.

Maybe I'm the reason it will all fall apart.

Or maybe I'm the only one who can hold it all together.

CHAPTER 1



JAX

New York summer weather was ideal for taking to the road on my Harley. When I was going fast enough, which was any time I wasn't stuck in traffic or behind a station wagon hovering half a mile under the speed limit, the breeze against my bare arms and face was almost cool enough to be considered refreshing. Air conditioning was overrated and no comparison to the open road on the seat of a Harley, engine purring between your legs, throttle itching to be opened up on every straightaway.

Of course, the way I rode earned me a few speeding tickets and some warnings from the police. I was almost on a first-name basis with some of them.

I liked the adrenaline rush of being on my bike, but I also liked the time to clear my head. Being part of an MC was a fast-paced lifestyle, and I was still acclimating to the intensity of it all.

Just weeks ago, my buddy Axel almost landed himself behind bars going after the leader of our rival gang, the Black Hearts. Watson, a true and total sociopath, had nearly brought all of us down with him. If it hadn't been for Axel risking his neck, I hated to think where we would all be.

Axel had the most to lose too. He'd just started seeing Ellie when it all went down, the girl he'd fantasized about for half a fucking decade. Then, out of the blue, he learned he had a three-year-old daughter.

I took a right at a red light, the tires squealing as I accelerated. I smirked as the car behind me honked. The asshole hadn't even had to tap his brakes. People were so damn sensitive these days. I looked over my shoulder, gave the guy behind the wheel of the silver sedan a wide grin, and opened the throttle, leaving him and his mom-car behind until they were nothing but a tiny speck in my mirrors.

I didn't envy the car, that was for sure, but I found myself wondering if he had a wife and kids at home like Axel did. It must be nice to return to a place with a bright smile there to greet you. That and a warm body to share a bed with.

Something unsettling coursed through my body, and when I realized it was jealousy, I shook my head in shame.

"Pull yourself together, you pussy," I muttered, the wind drying my teeth.

The roar of the engine calmed to a steady rumble as I pulled off the road and rode up to the open bay doors of the new shop. I killed the ignition and swung off the bike as Ellie, the beautiful blond mechanic who was now engaged to Axel, spotted me and waved.

"Morning," she called cheerfully as I approached, wiping her hands on a rag and then tucking it into the back pocket of her jeans. She put her hands on her hips, like she always did, and cocked her head to one side. "You eat yet?"

I shook my head. "What do you think?"

She rolled her eyes at me and waved for me to follow her. I tailed her around the hood of the old Impala she was working on, and we ducked into the office along the side of the shop.

Jamie, my cousin, looked up from her computer and smiled at me. "Hey, cuz." Her eyes returned to the computer screen, but she maintained the conversation. "How's it going?"

"As good as Mondays go."

Ellie stepped behind the desk, pulled a coffee from a drink tray, and handed it to me. Ellie was good like that. For as long as I could remember, she had always made sure to have a

coffee for me when she came to work. Sometimes, she even picked up breakfast.

My heart swooned over her when she tossed me a small paper bag sealed with a green sticker. “And your bagel. Don’t say I never do anything for you.” Ellie folded her arms and rested her hip on the desk.

“I’d never say something so untrue.” I grinned as I opened the bag. I was greeted by the smell of herbs and butter and cheese, and I impulsively licked my lips. “You’re the best, Ellie.”

“I know I am. But,” she shot me a cocky smile before turning and making for the door, “I’ll never get tired of hearing it.”

“So modest.” I chuckled as the door closed and turned back to Jamie, who was still scowling at the computer screen as I rested my forearms on the counter and sipped my coffee. “You trying to ignore me, or are you actually busy?”

“It’s Monday morning. What do you think?”

I scratched my chin to feign thoughtfulness. “Maybe a little bit of both?”

Jamie rewarded me with a quick glance up from her computer. “You’re smarter than you look.” She let out a long sigh. “We have a lot of work coming in the next couple of weeks, and at the rate we’re going, there’ll be some unhappy customers banging on our door.”

“How far behind schedule are we?”

“At least a week.”

“Fuck me.”

“I don’t know how you guys are going to make up for extra time. Axel’s still only on part-time hours, and I’m not going to be the one to ask him to come back. We all know how happy he is to be spending time with Hanna.”

I shook my head. “Don’t look at me. I’m not asking him. He’d have my head faster than I could blink.”

“Then we need a different solution. Think one of the other guys might be willing to step in for a little bit? Just a couple of weeks, three at most. At least until we’re caught up. I’ve already had to turn a couple of guys away. It’s not good for business.”

I took a big gulp of coffee and flinched as it burned my throat. “Yeah. I’ll see what I can do.” I turned away from her and opened the door to the shop. “Hey, cuz? You’re doing great, you know. You’re a good fit for this job.”

Jamie beamed at me. “Thanks.”

I put my coffee down and joined Ellie at the hood of the Impala. She was currently bent over with her upper half buried in the open space where the engine used to be.

“So,” I said, startling her, “how’s engaged life?”

Ellie scowled as she straightened up, emerging from under the hood like a mechanical goddess of sorts. I would never say so to Axel, but his woman was something else, and watching her around cars was torture for any man.

She tightened her ponytail before answering me. “It’s good. Really good. Neither of us is too keen on wedding planning, though, so that’s been a bit of a roadblock. We don’t really give a shit about how it looks or where it is. We just want a big party, you know?”

“Sure.” I shrugged, pretending I did.

“As long as you guys are all there and Hanna gets to be the flower girl, it will be great. Honestly, we might just do it in our backyard. Low key. Simple.”

“You gonna wear a dress or walk down the aisle in your coveralls?”

Ellie took a swipe at me, and I laughed, backing away from her.

“I’ll be wearing a dress. In fact, I already bought it.”

I lifted both eyebrows. “I’m impressed. I figured you’d leave it to the last second. What’s it look like?”

For some reason, picturing Ellie in a wedding dress was a bit odd. I'd only ever seen her in jeans, tank tops, and coveralls. Occasionally, she would be a bit more dressed up, but that only meant she wore jeans that actually fit and shirts that didn't have holes or grease stains. Ellie in a white wedding gown would be ... different.

"You'll just have to wait and see." Ellie lifted her nose, but the corner of her mouth curled upward in a smile. She was excited.

"I'm happy for you."

All of her fake arrogance slipped away, and she gave me a sidelong look. "Thank you."

I straightened and cleared my throat. "For the record, though, I'm not happy for Axel. He doesn't deserve you. You're too good for him."

"You should tell him that one time. See how it goes."

"I'm not suicidal, Ellie. Jesus." I grunted and shook my head.

She smiled before plunging herself back under the hood of the Impala.

"You know I'm kidding, right?" I called.

"Yeah, yeah. Now, get to work. We have shit to do."

I polished off my coffee, tossed it across the shop into the garbage can, and sauntered over to a Harley that was in for an exhaust replacement. By the end of the day, I knew I'd have her purring like a dream. I patted the leather seat like the bike was a dog. "You ready for your makeover?"

My phone rang.

Ellie looked over at me and shook her head as I pulled it from my pocket and peered down at the screen. It was Sabian Delgado calling, one of my buddies in the MC. As I put it to my ear, Ellie yelled at me to make it quick. I put my back to her and leaned against the Harley.

“Hey, man, surprised you’re calling this early. Aren’t you usually face down in bed until noon?”

Sabian growled into the receiver of his phone. “If I’m face down in anything, it’s pussy or ass. Don’t waste my time. This is important.”

I chose to let his attitude slide. “All right. What is it, then?”

“Have you seen the news?”

I scoffed. “I don’t watch the fucking news.”

“Some serious shit went down at the mansion, bro. The one Watson was holed up in. What’s it been? A few weeks since Axel trapped his ass and got him locked up? This shit isn’t sitting right.”

I could hear the tension in his voice. Sabian was certainly spooked, and like most of us in the MC, he wasn’t the kind of guy to spook easily. “Define ‘shit went down.’”

“I don’t have all the details yet. I called Ryder, but he’s not answering his fucking phone.”

“Probably because he’s fucking Dani.”

“I don’t think this is the time for jokes,” Sabian grated.

“I’m not making any jokes.”

There was a brief pause on the other end. I liked ruffling feathers. It was what I did best. Finally, Sabian pushed aside my inability to be serious and continued speaking. “The news coverage says the cops pulled seven bodies out of the house this morning around five. They’re not releasing any identities yet, not that I expected them to. But they’re saying it might be a gang hit.”

“A gang hit? The only other gang with enough balls to make a move that big is us, Sabian.”

“I know.”

I tried to process what he was saying. Then I shook my head. “It wasn’t us. No one would go behind Ryder’s back like that. He’d fuck them up. Besides, things have been calm since

Watson went down. We have a truce for the first time in ages. I can't think of any one of us wanting to fuck that up."

"Me neither," Sabian admitted, "but it's probably something we shouldn't rule out. People have their own intentions, man. We can't assume to know what's going on in everyone's heads." Sabian was quiet for a minute. I waited for him to continue. My mind was spinning a mile a minute. "The other explanation is that someone else had a bone to pick with the Black Hearts. But that means there's another player on the board. Wouldn't Ryder know if someone else had moved in on our turf?"

"I would expect he would, yes."

"Then I doubt its new blood."

"Maybe it was internal?" I suggested.

"Maybe."

"I don't like this," I grumbled. "I don't like this one fucking bit."

CHAPTER 2



HOLLY

I hurried to tie the strings of my apron behind my back as my manager, Talon, shouted down the hall for me to move my ass and get on the floor. The restaurant was busy, and we were short-staffed, so I had to step in and cover two sections. It was my second week on the job, and I wasn't at all prepared for the party of ten waiting for me to collect their drink orders.

I strapped on my not-so-flattering-but-mandatory fanny pack and tucked my notepad and pen into it, along with some spare change from my previous shift to split bills from tip money. Then, I paused in front of the door leading from the break room to the kitchens and took three slow, deep breaths.

“You've got this, Holly. It's just temporary. Very temporary.”

Not at all convinced by my own mini pep talk, I pushed through the door and shimmied behind the line of prep cooks to escape out into the front house, which was just as noisy as the kitchens.

The Roost was a family-friendly establishment that had been serving relatively decent hearty meals for nearly three decades. The manager, Talon, was the son of the original founder, Gary Cross, who had combined his love of farm life with that of his restaurant. Walking into The Roost was like walking into an impractical hay barn.

Old fans spun lazily in the rafter-style ceiling, pushing cooler air down on the patrons who sat around picnic-style tables decorated in mismatching floral centerpieces. On

numerous occasions, the restaurant had been used for wedding receptions, and I figured with the right amount of décor, it could look pretty good.

But at the present moment, the place was alive with screaming children, overwhelmed parents, and irritated couples who'd chosen the wrong place to come for dinner.

Talon patted my shoulder as he handed me a tray. "You can handle this, new girl?"

I stared up into his brown eyes, which were hard with stress, and nodded. "I think so."

"Okay. No pressure but don't fuck it up. You know what happens when your till doesn't balance at the end of the night, and I don't want you to be in that situation."

I nodded. If my till was short when I closed at the end of my shift, I would have to make up the difference with my own tip money. That simply wasn't an option for me. I had a six-year-old son back home, and every cent counted with this job.

Especially because "back home" wasn't quite accurate for my situation.

"I won't fuck it up." I nodded confidently.

"Good answer. Now, let's hustle."

I started making my rounds around my section, making sure to introduce myself, to smile, and to tell each table the specials of the evening. From there, I took their drink orders, and, like a madwoman with her head cut off, made half a dozen trips to and from the bar with trays full of cocktails, sodas, iced teas, and swirly sodas for the kids.

All the while, my mind was on my son, Luke.

It was just past six, and he would have just finished eating dinner with my sister, Kimberly, whose apartment we were currently crashing at.

I had called her three weeks ago from the road. Luke had been asleep in the back, his forehead pressed against the side of his car seat as I cruised down the highway, and I'd taken advantage of the sliver of privacy.

“Holly?”

I hadn't talked to Kim in months. Maybe more. She was probably so fucking confused to see my name flash across her phone screen. I cleared my throat as I kept an eye on a white SUV in my side mirror.

“Hey, Kim. Yeah, it's me. How are you?”

A short moment of silence punctuated how awkward things were. “I'm good. Are you okay? Has something happened?”

I hated how transparent a random call to my sister was now. But her words stirred something in me that brought forth a swell of sharp grief that stabbed at my throat. I swallowed to try to force it down so I could find my voice. Kim, ever knowing, waited patiently until I had myself under control.

“I left him.”

“Did he hit you?”

“No,” I said quickly, “but things were getting worse. A lot worse. I had to get Luke out of there. I'm sorry Kim. I'm so sorry. I let him pull me away, and now I just feel like there's so much distance between me and the rest of the world, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do.”

“Do you remember how to get to my place?”

My bottom lip quivered, and I nodded, forgetting she couldn't see me. “Yes. I remember.”

“Okay. Come straight to my place. Only stop to pee and get food. I'll make the spare room up for Luke, and you guys can stay as long as you need to. Seriously, Holly. As long as you need to.”

I couldn't hold on to the tears, and I let them stream down my cheeks as I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. “Thank you.”

“How far away are you?”

“Another two hours, maybe.”

“Okay. I’ll be home when you get here. And Holly?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t be sorry. Turn on your radio, and listen to the music. Sing along with Luke. I know it’s hard, but trust me, everything is about to get better for you guys. I promise.”

I nodded again to nobody, and the tears stopped. “I know.”

My idea of “better” on that drive from Philadelphia to New York hadn’t been waiting tables at The Roost. But, it was the only place willing to hire me with my complete lack of work experience.

I had been with my ex, Kent, since we were in high school together. Our relationship had always been rocky, and I’d known all along there were things about him that didn’t align with the things I wanted for myself, but somehow, I’d ended up staying with him anyway. Then, after barely turning twenty, I became pregnant with Luke, and I shifted my mentality to accept that Kent was going to be my forever. My always.

I’d pushed down, buried, and repressed all thoughts and memories that would have opposed that. Memories and people. Well, one person.

And it had all ended up going down in flames anyway, despite my best efforts to maintain a happy household. Kent just wasn’t that man. He was angry and irresponsible. He didn’t want to be a father or a partner. He wanted to be single, and he wanted to spend his time at the bars. When he did come home, which was rare, it was with a bad attitude and a knack for breaking things in the house that were special to me, not to him.

Like my mother’s old china set.

Or my jewelry box from my great aunt.

When Kent had come home that night and gone into Luke’s room and broke his lamp, toy chest, dresser, and Lego castle, I knew I had to get us the hell out of there. It was only a

matter of time before one of those fists was coming for my face or worse, my son's.

I wasn't going to let that happen.

No fucking way.

So I was crashing on Kim's couch while Luke slept in her spare bedroom, which she had taken the initiative to paint bright green and fill with some toys and other comforts. She told me we could stay as long as we needed and promised that she was thankful for the company.

I ached to be back at her apartment with the two of them. Right now, they were probably cleaning up their dinner dishes and getting ready to settle down for the night. I wouldn't be home for hours yet.

Snapping fingers at one of my tables distracted me, and I spent the rest of my shift racing around the restaurant. At one point, Talon gave me a thumbs-up, which was reassuring. Even though I didn't like the job, I needed it, so a reminder that I was doing well helped take some of the stress off.

When my shift ended, my feet were pulsing and swollen, and my shoulders and arms hurt from carrying such heavy trays. The restaurant slowly emptied, and the four servers on shift began cashing out. Like always, my count balanced.

I saved my favorite part of closing for last. I took all my tips out of my fanny pack and placed them next to a debit printout of all my plastic tips, in other words, tips from clients who paid with a credit or debit card. Then, I added the two totals and paid my tip outs to the kitchen staff and hostesses.

After that, I had earned almost three hundred dollars in one evening. I could pay for some groceries for Kim and maybe give her a little bit towards her utilities. I wasn't willing to freeload off my sister. She was doing enough by letting us be in her space and intrude so much in her life, the least I could do was try to cover some of her expenses while I saved up to get Luke and me our own place.

I tucked my change into my back pocket and made for the kitchens, only to be distracted by Talon's raised voice at one of

the back registers.

He was letting one of the other servers have it. Her name was Claire. She was a couple years older than me and sweeter than maple syrup, which made her an easy target for Talon's anger. She kept her eyes on the floor as he yelled at her, and I saw the glistening of a tear in the corner of one eye from where I stood.

I waited for Talon to leave before going to her and asking if she was all right.

Claire nodded at me but was unwilling to meet my eyes. She sniffled a little and ran shaking fingers beneath her eyes to wipe away the wetness of her tears.

"I'm all right. I made a mistake is all. I have to pay out fifty dollars to cover my register."

"Fifty dollars?" I asked. That was a lot of money for one error. It was hard to think that she would make a mistake so big. "What happened?"

"One of my tables dined and dashed." She threw her hands in the air in exasperation. "But when we're this busy and overstaffed, how am I supposed to catch that? I only have two eyes!"

I bit my bottom lip. Claire had three sons at home and was a single mom. Her mother went to her place to babysit while she worked in the evenings, and her ex's mom came during the day when she went to work selling insurance. She was stretched thin, and she was barely making ends meet.

"Here," I said, pulling out a fifty dollar bill from my fanny pack, "I had a really good night in tips. It's not your fault those assholes walked out on you. Please let me help."

More tears sprang to life in Claire's blue eyes, and she shook her head frantically. "I couldn't accept that."

"How much did you make tonight, Claire? Talon had you in the smallest section. I know you couldn't have cleared two hundred."

She shook her head and sniffled some more. “One hundred and sixty-four.”

“You can’t bring home a hundred and fourteen dollars. That won’t go anywhere for your boys. I can help and still be okay myself. Please, just take it.”

After another moment of hesitation, Claire reached out and took the bill. “Thank you, Holly. Maybe one day, I’ll be able to return the favor.”

“I’m sure you will,” I said cheerfully, “and if not for me, for someone else. Us girls have to stick together, right?”

“Right.” She gave me a smile that looked like relief and gratitude before tucking the bill in her pocket. “I have to go find Talon to get him to sign off on me covering the loss. Thanks again. You’re a lifesaver.”

I watched Claire go and tried to tell myself that I still had enough cash to help Kim out with the groceries and utilities. There was always tomorrow night to earn more.

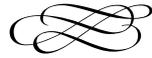
After a forty-five minute commute back to Kim’s apartment on the bus, I found myself slipping into Luke’s bedroom. A night-light on his nightstand cast twinkling stars on the ceiling, and I went to his side and sat down on the bed.

I stroked his blond curls and watched his eyelids dance as he dreamed. I wondered what sorts of things he dreamt about. Superheroes, adventures, games?

Or did he dream about his angry father?

If he did, I hoped they were the kinds of dreams he couldn’t remember in his waking hours.

CHAPTER 3



JAX

“It just doesn’t make any fucking sense, man,” Sabian muttered after polishing off the last three mouthfuls of his beer. “I’m telling you, there’s another club at play. It’s the only explanation. And it makes sense they’d move in on the Black Hearts when they’re leaderless. Easy prey. You know?”

I shrugged as a waitress swung by and planted another pitcher of beer between us. She had big brown eyes and soft brown curls that framed her pretty face. She had a nice ass, too, and I kept my eyes on the sway of her hips as she walked back behind the bar.

“Mhm.”

Sabian kicked my shin under the table.

“What the fuck?” I growled, my gaze swinging from the pretty waitress to my not-as-pretty friend.

His dark eyes were hard, and his eyebrows were drawn together. He looked almost menacing, at least, he would if he had another fifty pounds of meat on his bones.

“Did you hear a word I just said?” Sabian asked.

“Yes. Black Hearts are leaderless. Easy prey. Blah blah blah.” I waved my hand to punctuate each blah. “I can listen and admire at the same time, you know. It’s a skill.”

“Do you ever lead with your brain? Or is it always cock first?”

“What do you think?” I wagged my eyebrows.

Sabian shook his head as he filled both our glasses with fresh beer. I reached for mine and sipped the foam off the top before drawing the cool amber liquid into my mouth and letting it sit on my tongue. The first sip of a cool beer was always the best.

“Listen. I asked you here because I have more details of what actually went down at the mansion. But if you’d rather check out Katie’s rack—”

“Fuck off and quit playing games. I’m listening, and you know it. Just spill.” I wasn’t in the mood for Sabian’s attitude.

Sabian crossed his arms, knowing he’d been called out, and began telling me what he knew. “Seven bodies were confirmed. All male. All Black Hearts members. They were killed in the living room, apparently, and all the walls and furniture were full of bullets.”

“Tends to happen when two gangs go at it.”

Sabian shook his head. “That’s not the weird part, though. None of the guys were killed by bullets. All of them were killed with a machete. A fucking machete, bro. Dani said she got a look at the autopsy reports. Some of them had been shot, sure, but none of their injuries were life-threatening. Based on the crime scene, she says it looks as if they were shot to make them compliant. Most of them had blown out kneecaps. She thinks they were all subdued, lined up, and then hacked apart with the machete. One after another.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“Tell me about it. I would not want to be the last guy in line.”

I grimaced at the thought of being on my knees waiting for death as I watched someone hack apart my buddies. Ryder, Axel, Sabian. The list could go on forever.

“Do the cops have any suspects?”

“Not yet, as far as Dani knows. Besides it being gang-related, of course. They still don’t know how many guys were

responsible for the mess, but Dani is guessing around ten. She thinks they must have had the upper hand in numbers and firepower.”

“So all the cops have are suspicions and no actual leads?”

“That’s what it sounds like, yeah.” Sabian picked at a splinter of wood on the edge of the table. Both of us took a large mouthful of beer at the same time.

“Do we need to start carrying again?”

“Ryder doesn’t want us to. Not yet. Not until we have more information.”

I ran my hand over my face. “This fucking blows.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. I keep looking over my shoulder like the devil himself is coming for my ass.”

I had to agree with him. Ever since Sabian called me the previous morning, I’d been feeling the same way. The ride home on my bike hadn’t been pleasant at all. I felt exposed and ripe for the picking. If someone wanted me dead, it would be easy for them to take me out while I was on the back of a bike in nothing but a T-shirt and jeans. My skin had prickled with the sensation of being watched, but I knew it was only my paranoia.

If another gang was involved, the chances were, they had a personal vendetta against the Black Hearts. No one came out of the gate swinging with that much violence if it wasn’t personal. Going through past conflicts in my mind, I couldn’t think of a single person, sane or insane, who might want to come out of my MC with as much viciousness. It just didn’t make sense.

“What are you thinking about?” Sabian asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“All of it.” I scratched the back of my neck and resisted the urge to look around the bar for potential threats. There were none. This was a safe place for us and all of the MC. It always had been. “I keep getting hung up on the motive, and I can’t tie it back to anyone who would make sense. Why would another group want to draw this much attention to themselves?”

No one does something this fucked up unless they're trying to prove a point. So what's the point, and who's trying to prove it?"

Sabian blinked at me. "I don't have a fucking clue."

"Then, let's talk through it."

Sabian rolled his eyes but leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table anyway. "Okay. Talk me through it. I've never understood how that brain of yours works."

"Well, let's say you're the leader of a rival group. You have history with the Black Hearts. You're back in town, you want to let them know you're not fucking around this time, and you know they're weak because they're leaderless. Is that what you would do? You'd go into their clubhouse and hack them to pieces? One by one? It's overkill, man. It doesn't add up. Why waste so much time and energy when you could have just blown a bunch of holes in them?"

"They're a bunch of sociopaths?"

"Sure." I shrugged. "But that's a cop-out. Someone was trying to send a message. It wasn't us. I don't think it was another group, either."

"Then, you think it was an inside job?"

"It's the only thing I can wrap my head around, yeah. With all that firepower, and all those men, how did the Black Hearts not manage to take down at least one guy with them?"

"They have shitty aim?" Sabian joked.

I shook my head. "No. They never saw it coming. Those Black Hearts boys were on their knees begging for mercy before they even knew they were being attacked."

"And all the bullet holes Dani mentioned? Who fired all those rounds?"

"The ones left standing," I said simply.

"So they shot up their own clubhouse to make it look like another rival gang came in and tore shit up?" Sabian asked.

"That's my best guess."

Sabian nodded as if he was impressed by my assessment. “Makes sense, bro. Maybe you should have been a cop like Dani. You should run some of this by her and see what she thinks. Maybe it will help their investigation.”

“Or it will draw attention to the MC.”

Sabian shrugged one shoulder and finished his beer. “The double-edged sword of being in a biker gang, I guess.”

“Cheers to that.” I polished off my beer too. “Have you talked to Ryder about this at all?”

“Only a bit, mostly to see what Dani knew. Ryder wasn’t too keen on me calling his girl for info so he told me to call him first and he’d be the messenger. Fine by me. I’m more afraid of Dani than I am of Ryder.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that.”

“Yeah, yeah. You talked to him about it yet?”

I shook my head. “No. But I’m going to call him. I think all of us should get together and get everything out on the table. I have a bad feeling.”

“Call him now. I want to know what he says.”

I did as Sabian suggested and called Ryder, who answered on the third ring.

“What do you want?” Johnny Moretti barked at me through the phone.

I smiled involuntarily. “Nice to hear your voice, too, Ryder. You sound pretty today.”

“Eat my nuts,” Ryder hissed. “Seriously. What do you need? I’m kind of busy dealing with this Black Hearts bullshit.”

“That’s why I was calling.”

“You know something?”

“No,” I said evenly. “But I think we should all get together and hash this thing out. Make sure everyone is on the same

page and has all the same info. Things could get messy, Ryder, and no one should be in the dark. You get me?”

There was a brief pause on the other end as Ryder mulled over my words. “Yeah. I suppose there’s sense in that. Meet me at my place tomorrow night at nine. I’ll give Axel the heads up. You tell Sabian. He’s been on Dani’s ass about this whole thing, and I think it’s time I set him straight and get him off her back.”

“Will do.”

“All right. Nine. Don’t be late. And keep this between us for now, will you? We still don’t know who actually did it, and I don’t want word getting out to the wrong ears.”

“Got it, Ryder. See you tomorrow.”

Ryder hung up, and I slipped my phone back in my pocket. “Tomorrow at nine. Ryder’s place. If Dani’s there, avoid making eye contact. You’re right about him being miffed over all your calls to her.”

Sabian rolled his eyes. “I’m not trying to steal his woman. I’m trying to get information about a fucking mass murder for Christ’s sake.”

“I know. But you know Ryder. What’s his is his.”

“Don’t I know it. Insecure bastard.”

I widened my eyes. “Watch yourself.”

Ryder could be a royal asshole, but I’d follow him anywhere. He had my loyalty to the end, and I wasn’t foolish enough to risk speaking ill of the man, especially not out in public. Things had a way of always getting back to Ryder. He had connections, being the leader of the MC, and Sabian was a fool if he thought he was safe just because he was with me.

“So, this bad feeling of yours,” Sabian said in an effort to change the subject. “What exactly do you think is going to happen?”

I sighed and caught myself looking up at Katie, who was wiping down the bar while chatting happily with the other bartender. I envied her a bit. The way she was able to live

carefree and separate from all the madness we contended with in the MC was something I would never have, something I could never deserve.

“When something this big happens, it’s always just the tip of the iceberg, Sabian. The more we learn, the messier it’s going to get. It’s only a matter of time before we get involved. The question is simply whether it will be of our own free will or not.”

“Fuck that shit. I don’t want to get involved with crazy fuckers hacking people apart with machetes. I’m not Chuck Norris.”

I chuckled despite feeling anything but amused. “You’re one of us, brother. If Ryder throws himself into this, so do we.” I met his eye. “Right?”

Sabian slumped back in his chair and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. He let out a long, aggravated breath and let his hands fall to his lap. “Flag down that waitress you like so much. I need another goddamn beer.”

CHAPTER 4



HOLLY

My fingers were ice cold as my grip on my phone tightened. The text message glaring up at me was filling my brain with wild, terrified thoughts, and my stomach was clenching with nerves. It was the first message I had received from Kent since fleeing with Luke, and it was just as angry and menacing as I had expected it to be:

“You selfish bitch. How dare you take my son away from me. You know how bad this

is going to make you look to the lawyers when I come after your ass for custody?

That’s right. You’re going to look like a terrible mother. Luke needs me. He’s mine.

You’re both mine.”

I put the phone down face-first on Kim’s sofa and chewed the inside of my cheek until my mouth was filled with the taste of copper. Was Kent right? Did me running away from him compromise my case?

The thought of Kent having full custody of Luke made me instantly nauseous. He was not fit to be a father. He never had been. His anger always got the best of him, and his inability to refuse a drink only made things worse.

Luke deserved so much more than the life Kent would ever be able to give him.

Surely, the lawyers would see that?

I covered my eyes with one hand as I leaned forward, pressing my elbows to my thighs as I sat cross-legged in the corner of the sofa. Just as I thought I was going to lose control, the sound of tiny feet thumping down the hallway alerted me to Luke's arrival before he came hurtling around the corner and threw himself down on the couch beside me in a fit of giggles.

"Oh, hey there, little man!" I cried, reaching out and tickling his ribs as he twisted around to sit with his back against the sofa cushions. "Did you have a good nap?"

Luke shrieked with laughter and shimmied away from my tickling fingers. When he caught his breath, he nodded. "Yep. I like my new bedroom."

"Me too. Your Auntie Kim sure did a good job."

"Someone talking about me?" Kim called as she poked her head out of the doorway to the kitchen.

"Mommy says you did a good job."

Kim's eyebrows wiggled. "I sure did. Had to make sure it was perfect for my favorite nephew."

"Only nephew," Luke corrected, sliding off the couch and landing heavily on the rug covering Kim's hardwood floors. He reached for one of his G.I. Joes and began playing.

I stood and kissed the top of his head. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me, okay? Make sure Joe goes on a fun mission today!"

Luke grinned and nodded, but I didn't hold his attention for long. Before I even ducked into the kitchen, he was already stooped over his toy and making explosion sounds with his lips. I heard poor Joe go flying across the carpet.

Kim looked up from stirring her cup of coffee when I walked into the kitchen. "Want a cup? I brewed extra."

“Sure,” I said, going to the coffee machine and filling up a mug. I sipped it black, just how I liked it, and leaned on the counter. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course.” Kim stood across from me and matched my stance as she leaned on the opposite counter. She crossed one ankle over the other and wrapped both hands around her mug as she inhaled the aroma of her coffee. She’d been drinking the stuff for as long as I could remember, since she was thirteen, I thought.

“I got a text from Kent a few minutes ago.”

“Oh.” Kim’s mouth twitched. “Shit.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t pleasant, and he mentioned lawyers and custody.” I dropped my voice so Luke couldn’t overhear our conversation. “Which scares me a lot. What if he has a point? I mean, I did up and leave with his son without a word. That will look bad in court, won’t it?”

“So will the trashed bedroom of a six-year-old kid.”

“Fair.”

Kim sighed and uncrossed her ankles. “He’s just trying to scare you, Holly. You know he’s used this tactic before. He’s manipulative, and he’ll say whatever he thinks is going to trick you into going back to him. But not this time. This time was a clean break. You’re done for good.” I sensed a bit of hesitation from my sister. “Right?”

“Yes. For good. I promise. I can’t go back to him now.”

“He’s not going to get lawyers involved. He’s a bounty hunter. He’ll want to steer clear of them for his own good. Eventually, he’ll realize you aren’t coming back, and he’ll have to cope with that. It’s not your problem. Don’t even answer him.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good.” Kim smiled. “Because I’m really enjoying having you and Luke here. This place was pretty lonely. And I have plenty of lost time to make up for with my nephew, which

makes me happy to babysit him while you work. Which reminds me, don't you have to leave soon?"

I glanced at the clock. "Yeah. Shit. Thanks for the pep talk. I needed it."

I grabbed my bag and made sure my uniform was inside before ducking into the living room to kiss the top of Luke's head and say goodbye. He wrapped his arms around my waist and clung to me for a good thirty seconds.

"I'll be home soon, kiddo. You and Auntie Kim will have a fun night. I hear you might even be having macaroni for dinner."

Luke looked up at me, eyes a little wet, and smiled. I knew he hated when I had to leave. He wasn't used to it. I had been a stay-at-home mom with him back in Philadelphia, and there had never been any real reason for us to ever have to be apart. But life was different now, and even though Luke understood enough of why I had to go to work, I knew it still hurt him.

"I love you," I told him as I kissed his head one more time. He let me go, and I hurried down the hall. Kim passed me a to-go thermos filled with my leftover coffee and wished me a good day. Sipping the coffee on the forty minute bus ride made me incredibly thankful to have a sister like Kim. In all the years I'd been with Kent, he'd never done something as simple and thoughtful as that.

The Roost was busy but not intolerably so. I had enough tables where I knew I would make enough in tips to justify being away from Luke.

It was hard serving tables of young families. I wanted to be one of those mothers who was able to take her son out to a fun dinner and not have to worry about where the money was coming from or where I would have to make it up. I wanted those carefree family moments. I would do anything for them.

I had to consciously remind myself that I was working toward having those moments of my own as I approached my newest table.

I could see the back of the father. He was broad shouldered and powerful looking, not the sort of man I was used to seeing at The Roost. He had a head of thick, dark red hair, and when he turned his face to the side a bit, I could see that his beard was as dense and rich. The woman across from him was beautiful with long blond hair that hung in effortless curls around her tanned shoulders. She wore a white T-shirt and blue jeans, and in the booster seat beside her was a little girl no older than three, playing with her place mat and crayons.

I drew up at the edge of the table with my notebook open and ran through my opening lines as I always did.

“Good evening and welcome to The Roost. My name is—”

“Holly?”

I blinked and looked at the man who had spoken my name.

At first, I didn’t recognize him. Then, the blue eyes and the intense stare triggered something in my memory, a flashback of a young man with a wild smile trying to convince me to do another shot with him.

“Jeremiah?” I asked, letting my hands fall to my sides as my face stretched in a wide smile. “How long has it been?”

Jeremiah chuckled deeply in his chest and rubbed the back of his head. “It’s Axel now, and it’s been a while. What, six years?”

“Six, I think.”

“Six. Damn.” He looked me up and down. “You look great. You haven’t changed a bit.”

I blushed and hated myself for it. Jeremiah—or Axel, as he had corrected me— was a good-looking man with a presence unlike any I had ever felt. Well, almost.

I shook my head and turned to the woman he was sitting with. “Sorry,” I said, “I’m being rude. My name is Holly. Jere—Axel and I went to high school together.”

The blond woman smiled, and I was struck by how gorgeous she was. She held her hand out and shook mine. Her grip was strong, a lot stronger than I had expected. “I’m Ellie,

Axel's fiancée. And you weren't being rude. He was the one who should have introduced you." Ellie shot Axel a scowl that made me laugh. She was his match that was for certain.

Axel rolled his shoulders and blew off the comment. Then he pointed his chin to the little girl beside Ellie. "And believe it or not, Holly, that's my daughter. Hanna, this is Holly, one of daddy's old friends."

Hanna looked up, and I was paralyzed by her bright green stare. "Hi, Hanna," I said, "Nice to meet you."

Hanna smiled shyly before returning to her coloring.

I crossed my arms and looked at Axel. "You know, if someone had told me six years ago that you'd be a father, I'd have told them to get stuffed. But it suits you."

Axel chuckled and almost looked embarrassed. "Thank you, Holly. But forget about me. How are you?"

I opened my mouth to tell him I was good. That was my go-to. Regardless of how I felt, I always blew off my feelings by telling everyone that I was "good." But Axel had been part of my life before things really fell apart, and he had always been someone I trusted.

I looked around the restaurant. "I'm working at The Roost and wearing a shirt that says 'Ask me about our specials.' How do you think?"

Ellie snorted and covered her mouth. "Sorry. But I think I like you."

I found myself laughing and rolled my eyes at my own predicament. "It pays the bills for now, though. I just moved back here, and it wasn't easy finding a new job."

"You move back alone, or did Kent come with you?" Axel asked. He had always been forward, so I ignored my surprise at his question. He hadn't changed at all. I had.

"Nope. Just me. He's back in Philadelphia."

Axel nodded as if he approved. "In that case, you know what you should do? You should reach out to Jax. I bet he'd be

pretty stoked to hear from you. You kids have a lot of catching up to do.”

My cheeks burned as my brain was flooded with thoughts of Jax.

“Um, yeah, maybe. Listen, my boss is going to rip me a new asshole if I don’t take your orders and move on to my other tables. What do you want for dinner?”

I took their orders and was glad I had my notepad and pen because I forgot every damn thing they said. I was consumed with thoughts of Jax.

Jax convincing me to get on the back of his motorcycle when we graduated high school. Jax telling me Kent could go eat a bag of dicks when I told him my boyfriend wouldn’t want me on the back of another guy’s bike.

Jax parking under a shady tree and turning around to plant a fierce kiss on my lips that, if I thought too long on it, still made my panties wet.

I shook my head to get rid of the heat between my legs as I ran my orders. That had been a long time ago when we were just kids. Things had changed too much. Jax was in a biker gang, and I was a mother. Our lives were opposites in every way, and I wasn’t willing to expose my son to more violence than what he already knew.

Which was already too much for his six years.

CHAPTER 5



JAX

Being at Ryder's house was a bit odd. I'd been around his place before, sure, but that was usually for a family barbecue or something like that. Being in his place for business purposes gave the small ranch a different vibe.

It was almost intimidating.

We were gathered in Ryder's living room. Dani had just passed out a can of Bud to everyone and was taking a seat on Ryder's knee. He promptly cracked open his can, lifted it to his lips, and grabbed hold of Dani's ass with his other hand. Some might call it crude. I saw a man living the dream.

Ryder gave Dani's ass a small pat and cleared his throat. "All right. You all know why we're here. Dani has the floor. Questions after."

Sabian, Axel, and I all nodded our understanding. Darek and Hyde were off somewhere fucking around. We respected Dani enough to let her speak without us interrupting, but Ryder always seemed to think he needed to put us in our places just to be safe. I caught the corner of Dani's lips curl into a smile that she worked to disguise quickly by slapping on her serious cop face.

I wondered if she ever used it in bed with Ryder.

"As you all know, there were seven corpses found at the mansion early Monday morning. The murder weapon, a machete, was not a rumor. The place was an absolute mess, and many of my peers now have to go to therapy to sort their shit out. It was a bloodbath."

She paused for dramatic effect, and the three of us kept our mouths firmly shut and our eyes on her.

“A lot of my coworkers suspect that it was simply another gang hit, a rivalry gone badly or something. But we haven’t seen violence of this magnitude in ages. This isn’t something another gang does to each other, especially without there being a long history of previous relations that the police would most definitely be aware of. I think this was incredibly personal.”

Dani stood up and squared her shoulders like she was addressing a room full of crew cut cops. I contained my smirk with more effort than it should have taken and listened as she continued.

“I personally interviewed the Black Hearts staff who arrived at the mansion to trade shifts with the boys on the clock. None were overly surprised to learn that seven of their buddies had been maliciously slaughtered. In fact, they seemed rather nonchalant about the whole thing. So, gentlemen, in your opinion, who’s behind all this fuckery?”

Accepting her invitation to speak, I cleared my throat. “I’ve had an itch that it might have been an inside job.”

“Same,” Dani nodded.

Ryder leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. “No one’s surprised that seven of their boys were hacked up with a fucking machete? I call bullshit.”

“But even if we think it’s an inside job, nothing really changes, right?” Sabian asked, his eyes flicking back and forth between all of us. “I mean, that’s still only a few people out of a crew of nearly a hundred guys.”

“Ninety-three,” Axel said, sipping his beer.

I snorted.

Ryder scowled.

I shrugged a shoulder and tried to blow off the ill-landed joke. “There’s a lot of motive within a gang if there’s a power struggle. They just lost their leader. Maybe someone is making a mad dash to the throne. And I mean mad quite literally.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Dani said, pointing at me like I was the smartest kid in class. Coaxing myself out of asking for a gold star was difficult.

“Fuck the Black Hearts.” Sabian leaned back in the corner of the sofa and draped his arm across the back cushions. Axel, sitting in the opposite corner, shot him a look that demanded space. “If they want to kill each other over who is boss, let them. I mean, it works in our favor in the end, right?”

“Not necessarily.” Ryder got to his feet and stood beside Dani. “Dani says she hasn’t seen something of this magnitude take place within a gang like the Black Hearts in her entire career. It’s rattled her whole department. We’d be fools not to take this seriously.”

“Not to mention,” I said, “what if the person who arranged this hit is the guy who ends up being in charge? What if they let him take over? You seriously think he’s going to be okay with our operation? A guy who uses a machete doesn’t strike me as the kind of man who’d be willing to share his sandbox, and I doubt a truce will mean jack shit to him either.”

Sabian rubbed his temple. “Fuck.”

“Yup,” Axel agreed.

“And what if this new leader wants to rebuild the Black Hearts?” Dani proposed, looking around the room at all of us. “This could be bad news for all of us. MC and cops alike.”

“So what’s our game plan, then, boss?” Axel asked, getting to his feet and tucking his hands into his pockets. “We gonna lie in wait or make a move?”

I swung my head around to look at Ryder, who was wrapping an arm around Dani’s waist. A couple of years ago, I would have known what Ryder’s answer was going to be, maybe even before the president himself knew it.

He’d have told us to get our shit together, and we would have gotten on our bikes and rode for the mansion with a thirst for blood.

But now, with Dani on his arm, I was sure we would do the exact opposite.

“For now, I want to wait. We need more information. This event could have settled their internal debate, and things might calm down over there. As of this moment, we still have a truce with the Black Hearts, and we sure as shit won’t be the ones to break it. But, if they go back on their word, we’ll bring them hell.”

Feeling like I was out of the party still sitting on the sofa, I stood and nodded. Sabian rose as well, and all of us agreed to keep it low to the belt.

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” Ryder directed. “If they do come for us, I don’t want anyone caught with their dicks hanging out. You see something weird, you pass it along to me. Got it?”

We all nodded again, and the topic of the Black Hearts was pushed aside for the rest of the night as we fell into camaraderie and sat around drinking beer in Ryder’s living room.

It was pleasant, which was more unnerving than it was enjoyable. I feared I was losing my edge as I found myself laughing easily with my friends and doing everything in my power to think of anything but the mess the Black Hearts were in.

I was going to have nightmares about this shit show, I was certain of it. Images like a movie reel of walking into Ryder’s living room to find my friends murdered was playing on a loop in the back of my mind while my consciousness focused on the conversations at hand.

“I hear Jamie is working out well in the shop.” Ryder nudged me in the shoulder and offered me another beer.

I shook my head to decline his offer, and Ryder popped the can and drank it for himself. “I’m glad she’s fitting in. It’s always a bit of a worry bringing someone into the fold. But she holds her own, and she’s a quick learner.”

“She’s cute too.” Sabian grinned at me from his spot on the sofa.

“Watch it,” I growled.

Sabian chuckled, and to my surprise, so did Dani as she slipped herself under Ryder's arm. She fixed me with her bright gaze and gave me a pretty lopsided smile. "You men and your women. She might be your cousin, Jax, but you don't own her. She's a big girl. And she's clever. She wouldn't be caught dead with Sabian, so don't let it get to you."

Ryder burst out laughing and applauded Dani for her jab at Sabian. Axel whistled from his spot on the sofa to show his agreement in the matter. I imagined he felt similar to me because we all knew Sabian had always had a thing for Axel's baby sister.

Having the hots for a family member of one of the MC was always dangerous territory.

Axel slapped his knee and got to his feet. "You know, all this talk reminds me. I ran into someone I think you'd be happy to see again, Jax."

"Oh?" I arched my eyebrows.

Axel nodded as he pressed his hands to his lower back and stretched. "Yeah. Holly Whitton."

"Holly?" Fuck. I hadn't seen or heard from Holly in ages. Six years, to be exact. "Where did you see her?"

"I went to dinner at The Roost with Ellie and Hanna before meeting you bastards here. She's working there as a waitress. It's a new gig, at least that's what she said. She just moved back from Philadelphia. She looks good, man."

Sabian was looking back and forth between the two of us. "Who the hell is Holly?"

"Doesn't matter," I said quickly.

Ryder chuckled and shook his head. He wasn't going to let me get away with it. "Holly was Jax's crush back in his youth. Did a number on him. And, if you ask me, he did a number on her too."

"No," I said. "It was pretty one-sided. She went off with Kent, remember? She never looked back."

“She left his ass, bro,” Axel said, tilting his face to the ceiling as he drained the remnants of his beer. “And we all know what a waste of space that loser was. When I brought up your name, Holly went bright red. Ellie gave me shit for it after, but it was worth it to see her look just as flustered as she used to when we were kids.”

“Did she now?” I rocked back on my heels, unable to help but feel bemused by what Axel was saying.

Holly had always held a special place in my heart, but when she made her choice to leave New York City with Kent, her high school sweetheart, I did everything I could to put her behind me. It didn't do well to dwell on a girl who wasn't ever going to choose you.

Besides, I had been part of the MC even then, and she wasn't interested in that sort of lifestyle. I also was never keen on bringing her into it.

But six years had passed, and a lot had changed. Maybe it would be worth popping into her restaurant to see what all that time had done to her. She would be a woman now. It was impossible not to wonder what womanhood would look like on her.

“You going to go see her or what?” Axel asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Probably.”

Axel slapped my shoulder. “That's a good man. Throw yourself to the wolves again. The only woman who ever made your head spin is back and single. This is almost more exciting than the Black Hearts drama. Almost.” He winked.

“All right, all right. Enough of this shit. I'm out of here. Thanks for sharing the intel, Dani. And Ryder, if I see or hear anything, I'll be in touch. Stay safe, boys.”

As I left, they all called after me to ride safely because they knew I never did. I was powerless to the horsepower and the winding roads, and as soon as my ass hit the seat, I was tearing out of Ryder's driveway and hitting the pavement

going twenty miles over the speed limit. It was late. No one was around to bust me.

As I rode, I thought of Holly.

The last time I'd seen her had been the day she told me she was moving to Philadelphia with Kent. The fucking asshole. I could still feel the tingle on my lips from where she had kissed me goodbye. It had been a risky move. If Kent ever knew about the kiss—or kisses—we had shared, I was sure he would have let his anger loose on her.

I had done everything I could to change her mind, but she had been unshakeable in her resolve to leave the city with her boyfriend. I knew there had been some unspoken reason she wasn't willing to tell me.

Maybe if I asked her now, she would finally come clean with me, and I could stop asking myself why she ever left in the first place.

CHAPTER 6



HOLLY

“Find anything interesting yet?” Kim dropped down onto the sofa beside her computer desk in her living room.

“No. Nothing.” I had been looking at job postings online for the last hour until Kim came home from work. Luke was watching cartoons as I mindlessly clicked through posting after posting, coming up with nothing but needed baristas, retail workers, and house cleaners.

None of them offered the flexible hours I currently had at The Roost. I would never be able to make it work at any of those other jobs unless I was willing to pay for daycare for Luke, which I just couldn’t afford. Things might be easier in the fall when Luke started elementary school, but for now, The Roost was my only option.

I closed the internet browser with a defeated sigh and leaned back in the computer chair, which squeaked obnoxiously beneath me. “I’ll just have to keep checking every day in case something better comes up.”

“And it will,” Kim said, reaching out and resting her hand over mine on the armrest. “I promise. There’s no pressure to make any changes right away. You’ve already taken some huge steps in the last month. You don’t have to push yourself so hard, you know.”

I glanced over at Luke. He was sitting on the sofa, crookedly draped across three of Kim’s throw pillows. His eyes were heavy, and I knew he’d be falling asleep soon. Probably right after I left for work.

“I know.” I stood and stretched before glancing at the clock on the wall. “I have to head out and catch the bus. I’ll be home probably just after midnight. Do you need me to stop and get anything on my way home? I pass that twenty-four-hour market on the walk from the station to here.”

Kim shook her head. “Don’t be silly. Just come straight home.”

I gave my sister a tight-lipped smile. “I think I’m going to stop anyway and buy a bucket of ice cream to drown my sorrows in. If you decide you want something, just text me.”

“Make it chocolate, and I’ll guarantee there’ll be a bottle of wine here waiting for you. We can share. Watch a chick flick like old times.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you have to work early in the morning?”

“Yeah, but who cares? One late night won’t kill me.”

“Okay.”

I said goodbye to my sister and my son. Luke endured several kisses and a long hug before I managed to make it out the door. I was running a bit behind schedule and had to jog three blocks to make it to my bus stop on time.

I was able to grab a window seat, and I stuck in my headphones and watched the pedestrians on the sidewalks for most of the ride. With nothing but my own thoughts to distract me, I found myself feeling pretty bummed out by the time I got to work. I was resentful of my job, my manager, and my living situation. Despite loving being with my sister, I wanted some sort of independence for me and Luke.

I tied my apron on and had to fight back tears of frustration. I longed to be sitting back in Kim’s living room scooping a spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. I deserved at least that.

Talon popped his head into the break room and told me to hurry up. “You have a seated table already, girl. What’s taking you so long?”

“My shift hasn’t even started yet,” I snapped, clipping on my fanny pack. “Lay off, will you? Or hire more servers. It’s not my fault you’re constantly understaffed.”

Talon blinked in surprise and shook his head. “I’m your manager. You won’t speak to me like that again. You hear me?”

I put my back to him so he couldn’t see me roll my eyes. “I just need another minute.”

“One minute,” Talon said, and I heard the door close behind him.

I sighed and closed my eyes. “It’s going to be fine, Holly. It’s just a six-hour shift. Get out there, make some money, and pretend Talon doesn’t exist.” I flattened out my apron, opened my eyes, and gritted my teeth. “Go.”

I left the backroom and wove through the bodies in the kitchen to get to the front of the restaurant. The hostess, Marie, gave me a cheery smile and called hello as I grabbed my tray and hopped up the stairs to my section.

I rounded a corner to a private booth, tucked between a window and an artificial barn door barrier, and stopped dead in my tracks.

The man sitting at the table was grinning at me.

“Heya, Holly,” he said, his voice deep, alluring, and oh so familiar.

I nearly dropped my tray. In a mad scramble, I managed to prevent it from hitting the floor and was somehow able to sweep it back up to perch it across my forearm. Jax’s expression never faltered as he watched me make an ass of myself.

His light green eyes were as intense and mysterious as I remembered. The way he was looking at me made me feel like the same high school girl I used to be. My nipples were straining against the fabric of my bra, and my breath was caught in my throat as I took in more of him.

He was bigger now. Much bigger. Probably because he was a grown ass man who had filled out his height and long limbs. He was powerful, muscular, and lean. His crew cut, brown hair was a stark contrast to the shaggy mop he used to rock when we were teenagers. He had even managed to grow in a bit of a beard or at least a few days of growth.

He was hot as hell, and my whole body was attesting to that.

“You all right?” Jax asked, his eyebrows drawing together with concern.

I nodded frantically and tried to find my voice. “Yes. Sorry. I’m just really surprised to see you. I mean ... wow. You look different.”

His eyebrows returned to their normal position, and he leaned back, resting one hand on the table, which he drummed his fingers on. Then, he smiled again, lips peeling up to reveal straight white teeth and a smile that made my knees tremble. “Different in a good way?”

“I suppose.”

He chuckled and tilted his chin back, making it quite obvious he was checking me out. Blushing, I stayed where I was, letting his green gaze wander up the length of my body.

He was the only man who could admire me in such an intense way and not make me feel uncomfortable. He never made me feel uncomfortable. In fact, he had been the only man I ever felt safe with, and he hadn’t even been a man yet. He had been teetering on the edge of adulthood.

“Listen, my manager is kind of a dick, can you order something, please?”

Jax instantly looked around.

“Stop it,” I said, “You’re going to get me in trouble. Just order a drink or something. I’ll bring it back, and we can talk some more.”

Jax rolled his shoulders and nodded. “All right. What are these swirly sodas?” He pointed at one of the pictures on the

menu in front of him.

I giggled. “It’s a kids’ drink. Strawberry ice cream and lemon-lime soda. It’s like a float.”

“One of those, then.”

“Oh. Seriously?”

Jax nodded. “Seriously.”

“Okay.” I gave him a grateful smile. “I’ll be right back.”

Jax nodded, and I could feel his eyes on me as I left and hurried to take the orders of my two other tables. Then, I rushed to the bar, ordered, grabbed his drink, and made my way back to his table.

When I returned, he was gazing out the window and didn’t notice me until I put the drink down. He leaned over it and looked back up at me, his expression impossible to read. “It’s a bit small, isn’t it?”

“I told you it was a kids’ drink.”

He grunted. “Might have to find your manager myself and put in a complaint about my server.”

“Try it,” I dared, unable to stop myself from smiling at him.

It felt like nothing had changed. The same silliness was still there, and it was so easy to look him in the eyes and talk to him.

It was a strange feeling.

Looking into Kent’s eyes had always frightened me.

“I have a confession to make.” Jax leaned back again and turned himself to face me. “I didn’t come here for the swirly soda.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

He was going to make me work for it. He may have changed physically, but he was still the same guy on the

inside. Goofy, charming, easygoing. I wondered if that violent streak was still buried somewhere beneath the smiling facade.

“What did you come here for, then?”

Pleased that I was playing along, Jax continued. “I wanted to see you. Axel mentioned that he saw you here and that you had moved back to town. I must admit, I was surprised to hear it. Last time I saw you, I distinctly recall you saying you’d never set foot in New York City again.”

I swallowed. I had said that. But it was because I had to say those words out loud for my own sake. I had to convince myself that I couldn’t come back to this place—to him.

Jax didn’t know it, but I had told him I was moving two weeks after I found out I was pregnant with Luke. Kent told me he was moving to Philadelphia with or without me, and that it was my choice. At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing by making sure Luke grew up with his father around.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

I had followed Kent to another city, built a new life, and hated every second of it.

“I honestly didn’t think I would ever come back.”

“Why did you?” Jax asked.

There had never been any room for bullshit in the past between us. We were open and honest with each other, but right now, I didn’t have the nerve to tell him everything. I didn’t have the nerve to tell him I was a mother.

“Things ended really badly with Kent, and I needed a fresh start. I needed some support so I came home. I’m staying with Kimberly right now.”

“Kim.” Jax smiled fondly. “How is she?”

“She’s good. She’s a pharmaceutical rep now.”

“Shit. That’s awesome.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “It is.”

Jax's eyes flicked over my shoulder. "Your manager a stocky guy in a red polo shirt?"

I bit my bottom lip. "Yeah. Is he looking over here?"

"Yup. I can give him the stink eye for you when you leave. Bet he won't say a word to you about lingering. Or you could tell him I was a terribly inappropriate jackass who kept hitting on you."

"No, that's okay. You don't have to—"

Jax leaned sideways and rearranged his features into the most terrifying scowl I had ever seen. I stepped back and covered my mouth as a giggle escaped me. I so badly wanted to turn around and see Talon's reaction. I was sure he had never been on the receiving end of such a look, and it was a look that would rattle most men.

Jax relaxed back into his chair. "Done."

"Thank you."

Jax got to his feet and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. He tossed a twenty down on the table and then turned back to me. We were so close, I could feel the heat radiating off his body, and I had to tilt my head back to look up at him. He towered over me as he always had.

"Listen," he said, "like I said, I didn't come for the swirly thing."

"Swirly soda."

"Yeah. Whatever. I wanted to see you. And now that I have seen you, I want to again. Do you want to go for drinks with me tomorrow night? We could go to Roy's place. The bar on ___"

"I remember where it is. And yes. I'd love to."

"Great," Jax beamed. "Eight?"

I nodded. "Sounds good to me."

He surprised me by leaning in and pressing his lips to my cheek. His stubble tickled my skin as he pulled away, leaving me reeling in the scent of his cologne. "I'll see you tomorrow

night then, Holly. And if that manager of yours gives you any trouble, just remind him about me.”

“Okay.”

Jax gave me a crooked, almost devious smile as he cocked his head to the side. “I assume your number isn’t the same as it used to be?”

I shook my head.

“Can I have it so I can reach you?”

“Oh,” I blinked, “Yes of course.” How had I been so daft as to not realize he had just asked me for his number?

I gave Jax my number, which he committed to memory rather than put in his phone. He rewarded me with another brilliant smile before nodding absently at the other tables around us. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

I stood in front of the window like an idiot and watched Jax make his way from the entrance of the restaurant to a black Harley parked in the lot. He swung his leg over the seat and started the engine. I watched him tear out of the parking lot like hell on wheels and found my stomach fluttering with butterflies.

Had I just agreed to go on a date with Bryan Roberts; otherwise known as Jax?

I groaned and covered my face with my serving tray. “You stupid girl.” I tapped the tray against my forehead a little harder than necessary. “He’s dangerous, Holly. You can’t go running off with a guy like him.”

I was a mother now. Things were different. I had to be responsible at all times. And Jax, or as I remembered him from ages ago, Bryan, always made me impulsive and reckless. He used to say he just brought out the real me.

Whatever that meant.

But everything was different now. I had a son. Would Jax even be interested in me if he knew? And I had the baggage of a crazy ex who was sending me threatening texts. Now was certainly not the time to throw caution to the wind and indulge

in a date with the man I had been thinking about for years but had told myself was strictly off limits.

“It’s just drinks,” I told myself. “You can handle drinks.”

CHAPTER 7



JAX

“So, Holly’s pretty,” Ellie said as she swept into the shop on Thursday afternoon with a blended drink in one hand and her sunglasses in the other.

I looked up from tightening a bolt on one of the Harleys. “Oh, great. This is just what I need right now.”

“What?” Ellie asked with a frown, cocking her head to the side. “I’m just here for moral support. And I mean it. She’s really pretty. Never thought a girl like that would ever be interested in the likes of you, though.”

I wiped my hands on my jeans and chuckled. “Yeah, yeah. I know. Maybe she’s only taking pity on me.”

Ellie sipped her blended coffee and plopped down on a stool beside me. She pushed her hair back on her head with her sunglasses and stretched her long legs out in front of her. “Where are you taking her?”

“Roy’s.”

“Nice. Perfect place for a first date.”

“I guess.”

“You’re usually such a chatty Kathy when you’re about to take a girl out. What’s the deal? You nervous or something?”

“Me? Nervous?” I scoffed. “Please.”

“Oh my god. You are nervous!” Ellie shrieked delightedly and pointed an accusing finger at my chest. “Holly must be

something special. Tell me about her. Axel says the two of you go way back to your high school days?”

“She was in high school.”

“You had a thing for the younger ladies?”

I shrugged. “I had a thing for Holly Whitton.”

Ellie’s lips were wrapped around her straw, but I could still tell she was smiling by the way her cheeks puckered. “You’re bordering on sounding like a romantic, Jax. How unexpected.”

“Nah. But now that she’s back, I’d be an idiot not to take a chance with her. I have to admit, I spent a lot of time believing she and I would end up together one day. Even back then, when she was committed to her idiot boyfriend, she still made time for me.”

I thought back to the time she had her legs wrapped around my waist as I fucked her for the first time. It didn’t last long. She was so fucking sexy, so feminine, that I had lost complete control of myself with her. I was shocked when she let it happen a couple more times before she left for Philadelphia.

“Did you love her?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer Ellie’s question. I’d asked myself the same thing over and over, especially in the weeks and months after Holly had first moved away. “I think I did.”

Ellie paused with her mouth halfway open as she was about to take another sip of her coffee. She squared her shoulders and pulled her knees up with her feet flat on the floor, bringing the stool closer to me. “Damn. All right. I was just messing around. I didn’t think you actually might really like this chick. She didn’t seem your type.”

“My type?”

“Yeah. You know. Crop tops and yoga pants and belly button rings. The more skin, the better. That’s what you’re into, right?”

“You really think so little of me, hey?”

“Not anymore. Holly is respectable as fuck. She gives off, like, elementary school teacher vibes, and she probably doesn’t owe anything on her credit cards. She’s a catch. Don’t screw it up.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Ellie got to her feet and patted my back as she skirted around me and made for the nearly finished Impala. “No more of this mushy stuff. Get back to work.”

“I’ve been working the whole damn time!”

Ellie laughed loudly and gave me the middle finger over her shoulder.

I arrived at Roy’s fifteen minutes before eight and picked a spot at one end of the bar. We would be close enough to order drinks as we saw fit without having to be surrounded by too many people. I wanted to catch up with Holly and didn’t want the distractions of other patrons getting in my way.

The bartender, a woman with sleeves of tattoos and a head of short, fire engine red hair, rested her forearms on her side of the bar, pushing her tits up to the very edge of her black tank top. “What can I get for you, handsome?”

“Just a whiskey on the rocks.”

“Sure thing.” She gave me a sultry smile before dropping three ice cubes in the bottom of a glass. She topped it off with three ounces of whiskey and slid it toward me as she leaned over the bar again. “What’s a guy like you doing all alone in a place like this?”

On a different night, when I wasn’t expecting the exquisite company of Holly Whitton, I would have indulged the bartender in the little game she was playing. Hell, I would have enjoyed it. But tonight wasn’t one of those nights.

“I’m waiting for my date, actually.”

“Pity.” She frowned. “Lucky girl. Or guy.” She winked, spun away from me, and set to asking other customers lined up down the bar what they wanted to drink. I caught her eyeing

me up several times as I sipped my whiskey and waited for Holly.

She arrived two minutes past eight and paused in the doorway to the bar to look for me.

Her shoulder length blond hair was slightly curled, and strands were pulled back from her face. Her skin was glowing and bright, and her lips were full and pink. Her green eyes landed on me, and I waved her over.

It was impossible not to notice the other men in the place looking at her as she wove through tables to get to me. She was stunning, by far the most beautiful woman in the room.

She was dressed simply in a pair of dark, tight-fitting jeans and strappy black heels that weren't as high as the ones most women I dated wore. The effect of the hip-hugging denim and heels made her legs look lean and elegant. I itched to peel the pants off her and see what mysteries lay beneath the jeans. The floral print blouse she wore was loose but fitted enough to show her hourglass shape. Gold earrings winked at me as she drew closer, and I slid off my stool to greet her with a hug.

She smelled like lavender and mint.

Bloody fucking hell.

“Hey,” she said, nervously tugging at the sleeves of her blouse as she slid onto the stool beside me. “Sorry I’m late. Had a bit of a delay in getting here.”

“You should be sorry. Making me wait a whole extra two minutes. How important do you think you are?”

She gave me a sideways look and smiled. “Bite me.”

I laughed and caught the bartender’s eye. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Oh. Um. What are you drinking?”

“Whiskey.”

Holly pursed her lips and scanned the shelves of liquor behind the bar. “A gimlet, please.”

The bartender stopped in front of us, and I was thankful she didn't put her tits on display again. She kept it professional, respecting Holly, and took the drink order. "Shall I keep them coming?"

I glanced at Holly. She nodded. "Sure."

When Holly had her drink, we finally had some time to ourselves. There was no hovering manager, no nosy bartender, just us and our drinks.

"This is a first," I said.

"Yeah. A little strange. A good strange, though." Holly swirled her straw around in her drink and the ice danced along the sides of the glass. "How have you been?"

A vague answer felt weak, but it was all I could offer. "Good. Keeping busy. I work in Axel's shop now. Keeping my head down as best I can."

The smile that pushed dimples into her cheeks made me suspect she didn't quite believe me. Holly leaned forward to purse her lips around her straw. The sweet puckering of her mouth had my imagination running wild.

"Keeping your head down, huh? You're still running with the same guys, I assume?"

Lying was tempting but pointless. I might as well lay it all out on the table now. "Yeah. They're my family."

Holly nodded like she understood. "I know."

"What about you?" I spun my stool so I could lean one elbow on the bar while I faced Holly more directly. "How have you been?"

Her eyes flicked back and forth between mine for a moment before she finally answered. "All right. Trying to adjust back to the hustle of New York City has felt like a bit of a slap in the face, but it gets easier every day. And I have Kim to help me out."

"You have me, too, if you need me."

Holly peered into her drink like there was something there that could distract her from my comment. I let her pretend I hadn't said anything and changed the subject. I was being a bit self-serving, but I needed answers from her if I was going to let myself go any further with the girl.

I didn't want to be left in her rear-view mirror like last time. She had driven away with my battered heart in her hands and never looked back. She had Kent there to erase me from her memory.

“So, let's address the elephant in the room. You and Kent are finished?”

She finally looked back up at me. At first, I thought she might tell me to get stuffed. She'd always had a bit of an attitude, which I liked about her, but it stayed under the surface for now.

“Yes. I left him. It's almost been a month now.”

“Finally realized he could never make you happy?” I scolded myself internally as soon as the words spilled out of my mouth. It wasn't my place to make assumptions about her relationship. I was projecting my own issues on to her.

Holly chuckled and stirred her drink some more before taking a long sip. “I knew how unhappy I was for a long time before I finally decided to walk away. Kind of embarrassing, to be honest.”

“Embarrassing?”

“Yeah. Everyone always told me he was no good for me, but I was never willing to listen. I looked past what people said simply because I was pissed that they had the nerve to say it. I didn't like that they didn't trust my judgment. Which is ridiculous, but I didn't trust my own damn judgment.” She sighed and rested her chin in her hand. “It doesn't matter anymore, though. Kent is a part of my past, and I'm never looking back. He can go fuck himself.”

More questions exploded at the back of my mind. Had he hurt her? How bad had she let things get before she was finally willing to walk away from him?

I couldn't go there with her right now. She didn't need to see my temper. I'd managed to always keep it under control around her in the past, for the most part, at least.

"Don't be embarrassed. We all put ourselves in situations we know we shouldn't. Sometimes that's all part of the fun."

"Fun," she mused. "What's that feel like again?"

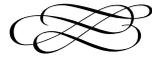
"Oh, sweet cheeks, be careful. You know I'd be more than willing to remind you."

Holly blushed, and the giggle that came out of her had me suffering from flashbacks of kissing her in the back of my old Mustang 5.0. There hadn't been much space back there, and the memory of the heat of her skin on mine had the hairs on my arms prickling and blood rushing to my cock, which swelled inside my jeans.

Holly Whitton still had the same effect on me that she'd had when she was a bright-eyed teenager with wild dreams and a desperate ache for adventure.

All of which I would have given her if she'd chosen me over Kent.

CHAPTER 8



HOLLY

Fun. Was that what I was having right now? Was this light, bubbly feeling in my chest and the ache in my cheeks from smiling for two straight hours because I was having fun?

Jax was literally knocking my socks off.

I hadn't spent much time around men besides Kent over the last six years because of his insane jealousy issues. It was just easier to stay home with Luke and not have to deal with the torrent of questions about where I went for the day, who I saw, what time I came home, and who the missed call on my phone was from.

Basking in the company of an attractive man like Jax who made me laugh like I used to was refreshing. The ever-present pit of nerves in my belly was gone, and so was the tightness in my chest from anxiety. I felt like myself again for the first time in over half a decade.

This realization made me feel a twinge of guilt because the time I was spending with Jax could also have been given to Luke, who needed it desperately. He wasn't used to being apart from me for so long.

But I reminded myself that having a happy mother was good for him too.

However, it was probably getting close to leaving time.

"One more drink," I said, leaning on my stool to yell it at Jax over all the background noise. Roy's got pretty busy after eleven, and the music was thumping, and tables of people were roaring with drunken laughter.

“Just one?” He pouted.

I nodded. “I have to get home. Besides, this is more than I’ve had to drink in a long time.” It wasn’t a lie. The four drinks I’d already had were making my brain buzz with giddiness. Or that was also a side effect of Jax’s company.

“All right, all right. One more.” Jax flagged down the bartender, who had our drinks to us within a few minutes.

The first sip was always the best. I savored it as I swallowed and closed my eyes. It was difficult reopening them. “I think I’m drunk.”

“I think you are too.” Jax gave me a cocky grin and shrugged one shoulder. “Nothing wrong with having a good time. Letting loose.”

Letting loose. Another unfamiliar way of being for me.

“Okay, maybe one more drink.”

Jax rocked back on his stool with laughter. “You’re out of control, woman.”

Sitting with him and laughing with him felt exactly the way it used to when we were kids and nothing in the world was tainted yet. My old self was rushing toward the surface with every bout of laughter with such force that I was shocked by how content I was.

I wasn’t consumed with thoughts about Kent. I didn’t wonder where he was or what he was doing or whether or not he was drinking. I was so used to being plagued by those worries because I was so accustomed to them being my reality.

Now, in the warm light of Roy’s and the jovial company of a man I used to love, I was basking in sunlight when it was nearly midnight.

“Thank you for asking me to come out. I needed a night like this. It’s been a really, really long time.”

“Kent never used to take you out for dates?”

I scoffed. “You remember Kent, right? Tall, brooding, angry all the time? No. He never took me on dates unless it

was Valentine's Day, and even then, we both knew it was out of obligation. He never wanted to."

"Did you want to?"

Painfully so, but I didn't dare speak those words out loud. He would think I was weak. I shrugged. "I liked the idea of him taking me out for more dates. The question is whether or not they would be good dates or not. It was always better to stay home and read. No disappointment that way."

I noticed the way Jax's jaw tightened. He looked down at his drink, lifted it to his lips, and tossed it back. I watched his throat as he swallowed and remembered how I used to press my lips to the skin under his jawline. I could still recall the lingering scent of his aftershave even now.

I found myself draining the bottom of my glass to avoid meeting his steely gaze.

"You didn't have to leave with him, you know."

As soon as the words left Jax's mouth, I wished he had never spoken them. But now that they were out there, floating in the open space between us like dust, there was no pretending anymore. I had chosen Kent all those years ago, and I had always known how much I hurt Jax in doing so. "I'm sorry."

All the tension in his shoulders evaporated as he shrugged one shoulder and tilted his head to look at me out of the corner of his eyes. "It was a long time ago. We were young and stupid. Now, not so much."

He was letting me off the hook. Something tugged at my heart and urged me to slide off my stool and wrap my arms around his shoulders, to press my chest against his and remember what that closeness felt like.

"Come on. Let's get out of here." Jax stood and offered me his hand, which I took. "Do you need a ride back to Kimberly's place?"

"No, there's a bus stop two blocks from here. Her apartment is only a fifteen-minute ride or so. I'll be all right."

“Don’t be crazy. I’ll drive you.”

“No really, I don’t mind the bus. I brought a book.”

“A book?” Jax shook his head as we wove through the bodies in the bar. He guided me effortlessly, his wide shoulders creating an open path for me to walk through. “You haven’t changed a bit. But I insist. You’re not getting on a bus by yourself at this time of night.”

Back in Philadelphia, Kent had never expressed concern over me taking public transit by myself regardless of the time. I wasn’t used to the concern, but I reminded myself that I shouldn’t be this surprised. This was Jax, after all. He was a man who could be held to a much different standard than Kent.

A much different standard.

We emerged out on the sidewalk in the warm night air with our hands still wrapped tightly together. There were other people outside, strolling down the sidewalk in front of the other open bars, which were pumping happy music out onto the street. Jax pulled me gently along beside him, and I peered up at him as discretely as I could.

His profile was sharp and angled and rugged. A fluttering in my stomach set off warning bells in my brain.

I couldn’t let myself fall for him again. It had hurt too much to walk away the first time, and the stakes were so much higher now. My number one priority was Luke. My needs, and my desires, and my ache to be filled did not outweigh the recklessness of inviting Jax back into my life.

He was in a biker gang, for crying out loud.

As we stopped in front of a sleek, black sports car, I had the suspicion he was doing pretty well for himself in said biker gang.

He opened my door for me, and I slid across the leather seat and watched him walk around the hood. He got in beside me and started the car up. The engine purred until he stepped on the gas, after which, it roared with power as we tore off

down the street, the force pushing my shoulder blades flat against the back of my seat.

I let out a startled laugh.

Jax laughed right along beside me in the wild way he used to.

I should have told him to slow down. I was a mother. I had to make sure I was safe.

But the speed was like a drug to my veins that sucked out all my practical thinking and replaced it with white-hot desire.

I gnawed at my bottom lip. I needed to get out of this car before I did something I might regret.

Luckily, the speed at which Jax drove put us in front of Kim's apartment building six minutes later. Jax pulled up to the curb, switched off the ignition, and looked lazily over at me. "Well, here we are."

I smiled tightly and opened the door. I stepped out and nearly stumbled over the curb. I recovered as gracefully as I could manage, and when I looked up, Jax was out of the car as well. He was watching me with a smirk and had his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"Maybe you need some help to the front door?"

Unwilling to tell him no, I took the elbow he offered me and wrapped my arm around it. He walked me up the path and to the front door, where I struggled to find my keys lost somewhere at the bottom of my purse.

"I don't know how this always happens." I shook my bag, hearing the telltale jingle of the keys somewhere in its depths. "It's not even a big purse, but somehow my keys just end up ___"

Jax grabbed a hold of my waist and yanked me to him.

I lost my footing and tumbled into him. His powerful arms wrapped around me and held me up as he tilted his face down to mine. Time seemed to slow down as his nose grazed mine. His lips parted just before they met mine, and all of a sudden,

our mouths were pressed together, and he was kissing me with a fire that seemed to match the burning in my gut.

His hands moved up my back, his knuckles pressing gently into my spine until one hand held the back of my neck, and his fingers were tightening in my hair.

There was a soft sound between us, and I realized it had come from me. A whimper. How pathetic.

But I was powerless to it. I hadn't been held or kissed like this in ...

Since the last time Jax had me in his arms.

I grabbed hold of the front of his shirt as my knees trembled. Jax's tongue pressed between my teeth, and he began the eager exploration of my mouth.

The hand he had on the back of my neck wandered down to my shoulder where he nudged the sleeve of my blouse down. It slipped easily, revealing a lacy white bra strap. His fingers slipped beneath it and ran over the sensitive skin there, chasing away the pressure of the bra straps.

I stretched up to my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his shoulders in the way I had been dreaming about doing since I first saw him at the bar.

His hand on my shoulder lifted to cup my cheek as our kiss became deeper. I could barely get a breath, but I didn't feel like I needed air. All I could feel was the immense need for him. For more.

I was doing exactly what I knew I shouldn't.

I pushed gently on his chest, and his hand fell from my cheek. Our lips parted, and as space formed between us, his eyes flicked back and forth between mine, searching for an answer as to why I made him stop.

I didn't have an explanation for him. I wasn't about to tell him that my son was also staying at Kim's place.

Kent's son.

So I looked away from him and tucked my hair behind my ears. “I should really get inside. Kim said she would wait up for me.”

Jax nodded.

I waited for him to say something, but no words came.

Reaching into my purse, I somehow found my keys on the first try. I slid them in the door and pushed it open. I turned back to him once I was inside.

“Thank you for tonight. I had a great time. Really.”

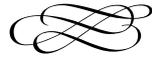
“Me too.”

Closing the front glass door was like pulling teeth. But I managed, and I watched Jax walk back to his car with his hands back in his pockets.

Before pulling away from the curb, he waved at me, and I waved back, the burning in my stomach morphing into something less pleasant. Regret.

I went to the elevator and pulled my blouse back up on my shoulder as I waited for it to arrive.

CHAPTER 9



JAX

The following morning brought with it the torture of a hard-on and thoughts of kissing Holly on the threshold of Kim's apartment building.

I ran my hands over my face and groaned as I remembered the way her hands had tightened on my shirt. I could still taste the lime on her tongue from her drinks and hear that soft little whimper she had made in my mouth.

The drive home after dropping her off had been confusing. I wasn't sure why she had sent me away. Everything had been moving along nicely, and the way the air seemed to buzz with electricity when I kissed her had me convinced that she wanted me as badly as I wanted her.

Maybe I'd misread the situation.

"You never misread a woman," I muttered to myself. Maybe she was the one who didn't know what she wanted. She had just started a new life, after all, and had been with the same man for a long time. I couldn't even begin to understand her side of things.

But I could understand mine. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anyone.

I wanted to lay her down and fuck her right then. I wanted her legs to tremble as she screamed my name while I drank from her and reminded her what it was like to be with me.

She was delusional if she thought I wasn't going to keep trying. It had taken me a long time to get over her the first time

I let her get away. There was no fucking way in hell I was going to put myself through that shit again.

I'd fucked enough girls. I'd had my fun. And truth be told, it had stopped being fun a long time ago. I was envious of Ryder and Dani and Axel and Ellie. I wanted that, and the only person I could ever see myself coming home to every single day was Holly. It had always been Holly.

I lay in bed staring at my ceiling for another couple of minutes, hoping my erection would go away of its own accord and I could get on with my day without tempting my fate with a case of blue balls.

It wasn't going to happen.

"Fuck it," I grumbled, ripping the covers off and swinging my legs over the bed. I had time before I needed to be at the shop. I started the shower, and when the water was piping hot, I got in.

As the water rained over my shoulder and back, I wrapped my fingers around my cock and closed my eyes to think of Holly.

At first, all I pictured was her in the jeans she was wearing last night. Then, I imagined undoing them, nice and slow, and shimmying them down her hips and thighs before finally pulling them off her ankles.

The vision of her naked body had me hunched over and breathing hard as I worked myself over. The steam and the hot water had my mind conjuring up flashes of fucking Holly in the shower. I wanted to bend her over, spread her open, and slide my length deep inside her until she moaned and came all over me. If she was still the same girl I had ravaged six years ago, she would want the same things.

I came hard and fast, and my body sang with the release of it.

I finished my shower, skipped breakfast with hopes that Ellie would have some food at the shop, and dressed in my usual jeans and T-shirt. Then, I hopped on my bike and rode to

work with my mind still a jumbled-up mess over how last night had ended.

“You are an absolute goddess,” I said, taking a bag from Ellie. I tore it open and peered inside to find a bagel with cream cheese. Ellie handed me a cup of coffee and smiled smugly as I took a mouthful. “An absolute fucking goddess. I’m starved.”

“Starved why? Your date go well last night?” Ellie thrust her hips back and forth and laughed as I widened my eyes. “What?”

“Don’t do that. It’s unsettling in so many ways.”

“What, this?” Ellie teased, thrusting her hips again.

“Yeah. That. Quit it.”

“Only if you tell me how it went last night.” Ellie leaned against the shop wall, sipped on her own coffee and waited patiently for my answer.

As I was about to tell her, the door to the office burst open and Jamie emerged, a coffee of her own in one hand and a half-eaten bagel in the other. Her mouth was full, but she gave me a smile anyway, which showcased white teeth covered in poppy seeds from her meal. I rolled my eyes at her as she joined Ellie against the wall.

“Come on, Hollywood. Spill the details.”

Ellie, like a lot of the other guys in the MC, still liked to occasionally call me Hollywood. It was a nickname I had earned due to my old business in New York City, which I had sold when Axel needed more help in the shop after deciding to take more time off to spend with his family. I’d traded in my suits and ties for denim and leather and hadn’t looked back.

Jamie swallowed and waggled her eyebrows. “Yeah. Spill.”

“It’s not all that exciting.” I took a bite of my bagel and shrugged my shoulders. “Just two old friends catching up over drinks. Not sure what the two of you gossips were expecting.”

Ellie smiled coyly. “Huh. Sounds to me like somebody didn’t get laid. That’s a first for you.”

“Ever think maybe I didn’t try to have sex with her?”

Ellie barked out a sharp laugh. “Oh, please. You? Not try to have sex? That’s just ridiculous. Neither of us is buying it.” She pointed her thumb at her chest and then at Jamie. “Did you say something that pissed her off?”

“What? No.” I crammed more of the bagel in my mouth, swallowed, and looked Ellie in the eye. “She blew me off, okay?”

“Really?” Ellie asked.

I hated how impressed she sounded.

“Really. I drove her home and made my move at the end of the night. At first, it was well received. Things were going really well, and right before we had a chance to get serious, she stopped. Said she had to go.” I sipped more coffee. “I think I pushed her too fast. She’s always been the kind of girl who needs to think things through. Not crazy impulsive.”

“So the opposite of the girls you usually hang around with?”

“Exactly.” I grinned.

“I always liked Holly.” Jamie pushed herself off the wall and dropped her now empty coffee cup into the garbage can. “She was nice.”

“You were what, ten the last time you saw her?” I teased.

“So?”

“Nothing.”

“Point is she’s nice. Maybe she’s intimidated by you.”

“Shut up.” I laughed. “She wouldn’t be. She knows me. We’re friends.”

“Jamie might have a point,” Ellie agreed.

“Oh, come off it. Holly isn’t intimidated by me. Trust me. That would be like you being afraid of me, Ellie.”

“You’re right. It sounds stupid when you put it like that.” Ellie crossed her arms under her breasts. “I could never be afraid of a pussy like you.”

“Why do I keep coming here?” I asked.

“You like the abuse. You know it.” Ellie nodded at the other half of my bagel still in the bag in my hand. “Hurry up and eat. We have a lot of work to do today. We’re still playing catch up, remember?”

“How could I forget?” I groaned as I hurried to finish my food and join Ellie as she started working on a new shipment of motorcycles.

After we’d worked half the day away, Axel arrived at the shop. He had Hanna with him, and the little girl came racing through the shop to leap into Ellie’s arms. Ellie made a big deal of seeing the little girl, tickling and teasing her, and then putting her down in front of one of the Harleys we had just finished.

Axel came and stood beside me as Ellie told Hanna about the first time she rode a motorcycle. Hanna, being barely four, listened in awe despite probably only understanding half of what was being said.

“So.” Axel shot me a look, and I already knew what he was going to ask. “How’d it go with Holly last night?”

“Why is everyone so damn curious about my dating life all of a sudden?”

“That bad, hey?”

“Get bent.”

Axel chuckled and crossed his arms. “So sensitive this morning.” I muttered under my breath about how I needed to get a new job and get the fuck away from these losers, but Axel pretended not to hear. Instead, he kept prying. “I was sure you’d both have a great time.”

“We did have a great time. It was like nothing had changed between us.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“There isn’t a problem.”

“She didn’t put out, huh?”

I threw my hands in the air. “Is it written on my fucking forehead or something?”

Axel looked confused.

“Ellie and Jamie—whatever. Never mind.” I rested my hip against the workbench and hooked my thumbs in the belt loops of my jeans. “It doesn’t matter that we didn’t have sex. That wasn’t the whole point of taking her out. I just wanted to spend time with her. See if she’d changed.”

“And?”

“She’s still the same old Holly. Sweet as honey. Hot as hell. Still too good for my ass.”

Axel slapped my shoulder. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. She’s not too good for you. She was too good for Kent. But you?” He clicked his tongue. “I don’t know, man. I’ve thought the two of you would make a perfect pair for a long time.”

I wanted to say “me, too,” but held my tongue.

Axel grabbed a rag from the workbench at our backs and flicked it over his shoulder. “I’m going to get to work.”

“Yeah, yeah, me too.”

As I went to return to my work, Jamie called me into the office. I stepped in, and she pointed at a manila envelope on the counter in front of her computer. “It was here when I came back in from having coffee with you guys. I don’t know who it’s for, so I thought I’d see if you knew about it?”

“No, I haven’t.” I grabbed the envelope and tore it open.

Inside were black and white printed photographs. I pulled them free, wondering if they were shots of a potential project for our shop. A lot of our customers had custom requests and would submit images of what they wanted their car or bike to look like. It was especially helpful for paint jobs or custom bodywork.

But these photos weren’t of vehicles.

I found myself scowling down at a black and white picture of Axel with Hanna and Ellie in Cliff Park, a small park not even ten minutes away from where we stood now. Hanna was wearing her hair in pigtails and was on the swing. Ellie was pushing her while Axel watched on. The picture had been taken from behind him.

The next shot was of Dani in her cruiser laughing while she talked on her cell phone.

My heart was hammering in my chest now, and my blood was rushing in my ears. Jamie was silent as she peered over my shoulder down at the photos. I could feel the nervousness coming from her as I turned to the next image.

Sabian smoking a cigarette outside the bar.

Next.

A gathering of a few guys all wearing our MC colors.

Next.

Jamie and Ellie sitting on a patio at a coffee shop, leaning across the table probably deep in gossip.

Jamie looked up at me. “Jax?” she whispered tentatively. “What is this?”

Next.

Me walking from my bike to the open bay doors of the shop.

“Fuck.” The growl came out of me, and Jamie took a step back.

The last thing in the envelope was a folded up piece of lined paper. Neatly written smack in the middle of the page in thick, black felt, was a simple message:

“Let’s get personal,

-TJ”

“Jax?” Jamie whispered, her hand closing on my elbow.
“What’s this about? Who sent this? Are you in trouble?”

I shrugged her off. “No. Don’t say anything about this, all right? It stays between us for now. Give me a minute. I have to call Ryder.”

“Okay,” she said before retreating back into the shop.

I called Ryder. He didn’t answer. It was midday, and I didn’t give a damn if I had to call him a hundred times before he picked up.

He needed to know the truce was over and that the Black Hearts had made their first move.

The only good news?

We had the initials of the new Black Hearts leader, TJ.

CHAPTER 10



HOLLY

I sighed as I dropped the spaghetti noodles into the pot of boiling water. I stirred it to make sure all the noodles were submerged and then lifted the lid on the other pot that held the sauce. The whole kitchen was filled with the rich smell of tomatoes and meat. I gave it a quick stir and covered it to let it simmer longer.

My attention was only partially held by cooking. Every second thought was of Jax and our date. To be more specific, every second thought was of our steamy make-out session at the end of our date. My whole shift at The Roost yesterday had been spent thinking of Jax and resenting it because I had to work with wet panties and an ache below my belly that just wouldn't go away.

My coworkers noticed how distracted I was. Claire made a point to warn me that Talon had noticed, too, and was keeping a sharp eye on me for the rest of my shift. This only made me more tense, and I had shot him dirty looks every time I caught him staring at me.

Resenting Talon had worked to keep my mind off Jax for a time, but eventually, the memory of our kiss came rushing back, and I let it wash over me.

Now, I was trying to bury the thoughts in cooking and cleaning. Kimberly was on her way home from a work conference, and I wanted to treat her to a nice home-cooked meal. Spaghetti was also Luke's favorite, and preparing it was taking away some of the guilt I felt at not being able to spend as much time with him as we were used to.

Kim came home ten minutes before seven. I heard her drop all of her things in a huff at the front door, and then her high heels were clicking on the hardwood as she made her way into the apartment.

She paused in the archway to the kitchen and leaned her shoulder on the frame. “It smells so good in here. What are you making?”

“Spaghetti.”

“Yum. I haven’t had pasta in ages. Where’s Luke?”

“Playing Nintendo in his room. We were making crafts earlier.” I nodded to a cluster of magnets on Kim’s fridge. They were made of glued together Popsicle sticks and were painted in obnoxious green, yellow, and blue. “Sorry.”

Kim laughed. “Don’t be sorry. It adds a pop of color to an otherwise dreary kitchen.”

“Your kitchen isn’t dreary.”

“Okay fine. Sparse. I’m not much of a cook.”

“Well, I am, and tonight we’re having a feast. Garlic bread is in the oven, and I’m going to throw together a Caesar salad too.”

Kim rubbed her tummy. “Wonderful. I’m famished.” She strode to the kitchen island and took a seat at one of the stools. Then, she shrugged out of her tapered blazer, kicked off her heels, and undid the top buttons at the collar of her blouse. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in days. Tell me. How did it go with Jax the other night?”

I put my back to her and smiled down at the pot of spaghetti sauce as I stirred it mindlessly. “It was ... wonderful, actually.”

“Wonderful, huh?”

“Yeah. I know that sounds so cheesy, but it’s true. It was so nice to sit with him. It was the same as it always was. We laughed like a couple of idiots, and he made me open up about a few things.”

“He was always able to do that, somehow. I used to resent him for it.”

I stopped stirring and looked over my shoulder at my older sister. “Really?”

She half nodded and half shrugged. “Well, yeah. I’m your sister. I wanted to be the one you came to. But hey, I’m not complaining. Jax is a good guy, and he always took good care of you.”

“He did, didn’t he?”

Kim chuckled and rested her elbows on the counter. “Was there any, you know, funny business?”

I blushed and turned back to the pot.

“Oh my god, there was! What did the two of you do? Please tell me you fu—”

“Shh!” I spun around, holding a finger vertically across my lips. “I don’t want Luke to hear us. And no, I didn’t sleep with him. But, I have to confess, I really, really wanted to.”

“Tell me everything.” Kim cupped her chin in her hands and looked at me the way Luke looked at me on his birthday as he anticipated his present.

Unable to stop myself from smiling, I told her all about my time with Jax. I gave her the details of what he was wearing, what we talked about, and how good he smelled.

“He refused to let me take the bus. It was so strange to me. Kent was always fine with me taking public transit, but Jax seemed genuinely offended that I would even consider it.”

“Well, for a biker, he’s a gentleman.”

“Right? Anyway, he drove me home and dropped me off here. I had a few too many to drink so he walked me to the front door. I think he just wanted an excuse to follow me in. I couldn’t find my stupid keys in my purse, and as I was searching for them, he suddenly just sweeps me up and starts kissing me.”

“Ugh, I hate you,” Kim whined, covering her eyes with her hands. She dragged her fingers down her cheeks in exasperation. “I want a man to do that to me.”

“I’m not done. I was a little surprised at first, but then his hands were all over me and in my hair and—”

“I’m melting,” Kim fake-sobbed.

“I almost lost it, Kim. Seriously. I forgot all about Luke and you being home. It took everything I had to break away from him and tell him I had to go. His face ... he didn’t get it. I felt bad.”

“Wait. Hang on.” Kim straightened in her chair. “Did you not tell him about Luke?”

“Erm. No.”

“Holly! What the hell?” She leaned forward, lowering her voice so Luke couldn’t overhear her. “Jax deserves to know.”

“I know.” I bit my bottom lip as guilt gnawed at my insides. “I just didn’t want to spoil anything. I was having such a good time. Kim, it’s been such a long time since I felt like that. I was me again.”

Kim sighed. “You should see him again.”

“I want to. God, do I want to. But I don’t think it’s a good idea. He’s involved with the MC. I think he’s in deeper than he ever used to be. And I have Luke to worry about. I don’t want to mix the two worlds.”

Kim shook her head and waved her hand like my concerns were nothing. “Don’t be silly. Jax might be part of the MC, but he’s not some cold-hearted, cutthroat criminal. You know him. He’d never do anything to hurt you or Luke or anyone who didn’t deserve it. None of the MC are bad guys. They just make their living in a kind of unconventional way.”

“Unconventional? That’s what you’re going to go with?”

“Yup.”

I checked the tenderness of the spaghetti noodles and began searching for Kim’s strainer. She pointed it out, and I

drained the noodles before checking on the garlic bread in the oven. I pulled it out to cool and began throwing together the salad.

All the while, Kim's eyes were burning holes in my back.

"So," she said after I had sprinkled the salad with parmesan and croutons "Are you going to call him or what?"

"I want to think about it."

"Oh, come off it. All you ever do is think about it. Jax is good for you. And you're good for him. You even him out. Keep him on Earth, you know? He needs that."

I caught myself smiling again and mentally slapped myself. "Maybe."

"No maybe. You're calling him after dinner."

Kim slid off the stool and helped me bring the bowls of spaghetti and sides of salad to the table. I popped a piece of garlic bread on the rim of each bowl and then called Luke to dinner.

He came careening down the hall in a burst of giggles and climbed up in his chair to seat himself before his meal.

I took the seat beside him, and Kim sat across from him.

"Hungry, buddy?" I asked.

Luke nodded, gripping his fork. I had already cut up his noodles for him, so he dug in, splattering his cheeks with spaghetti sauce.

"Is it good?" Kim asked him, restraining herself from laughing at how messy he was.

Luke nodded. "Good. Spaghetti is my favorite."

"So your mom tells me. Want to know something crazy?"

Luke looked up at his aunt and paused in his chewing. "Yeah."

In the most conspiratorial of whispers, Kim said, "Spaghetti is my favorite too."

Luke's eyes went wide like he had just heard the juiciest secret in the world. He looked over at me, and I chuckled. "The two of you are peas in a pod, I guess."

The rest of dinner was enjoyable, despite the nerves growing in my chest as it drew closer and closer to the time for me to call Jax.

I found myself wondering if he even wanted to hear from me. What if he had only asked me out on the date to be nice? Or, more likely, what if all he wanted was a one-night fling?

I wasn't stupid enough to believe he wasn't that kind of guy.

When we were done eating, Luke helped us clear the table and fill the dishwasher before he was rewarded with one episode of his favorite cartoon before bed.

While he sat on the couch, eyes drooping as tiredness wrapped around him, Kim grabbed my cell phone from the kitchen counter and handed it to me. "Time to put on your big girl panties, Holly. Call him."

I stared at the phone in her hands.

Kim pushed it into my palm and leaned back to rest her hip against the counter. "Go on then."

"What do I say?"

"Oh my god, it's not rocket science. Just tell him you had fun and you want to see him again. This is Jax we're talking about, not some random guy. He's going to say yes."

If he said yes, there was no going back. I knew I wouldn't be able to pull myself away from him if I found myself wrapped up in his arms again. I'd give in, and that could only lead to one thing.

I pulled his number up on my phone and stared down at it.

"You've got this," Kim encouraged. "Like a Band-Aid. You can do it. Go!"

I shook my head as my nerves got the better of me. "Maybe I should wait for him to call me first?"

“No.” Kim pushed herself off the counter and stood in front of me. Her voice was firm but kind. “I know this is hard, and you haven’t done anything like this. But Kent is a thing of the past. It’s time to start doing things that make you happy, Holly. That’s what Luke deserves.”

She reached out, and before I could stop her, she pressed the dial button on my phone.

I let out a startled yelp and slapped a hand over my mouth as I heard the faint sound of the phone ring.

I lifted it to my ear, and Kim retreated, leaving me in privacy in the kitchen.

Jax answered on the fourth ring.

“Damn woman. What took you so long?”

CHAPTER 11



JAX

Even before she spoke, I could tell Holly was frazzled. Maybe I shouldn't have answered so abruptly.

"Sorry. I've been ... it doesn't matter. I was hoping I could see you again."

"I'm not going to say no." Holly asking me out on another date was a first. I was the one used to pursuing her. "When were you thinking?"

"Sooner is better than later. There are some things I want to talk to you about, that I want you to know. About me. I'm sorry, I'm rambling."

"Sooner is better than later, hey? All right. How about tomorrow night then?"

"That would be perfect." The relief in Holly's voice was crystal clear, and something about it pricked my curiosity. What was it that she wanted to talk to me so badly about, and why so soon?

Shrugging off the desire to ask her more questions, I cut to the chase. "I'll pick you up at seven? Dinner this time?"

"Yeah. Dinner sounds good. I'll see you at seven."

Holly hung up the phone first, leaving me staring down at the screen wondering what I had just signed myself up for.

I was most definitely glad she had called and even happier I had scored a second date. However, there was a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach akin to an itch I couldn't

scratch. There was something amiss. The tension in her voice had been enough to tip me off.

What could she possibly want to talk to me about so urgently?

I sighed and leaned back in Jamie's office chair. She had gone off on her lunch break, leaving me to take over and manage any customer calls or inquiries while she was away from her desk. So far, no one had called, and I was alone with my thoughts.

They quickly led down a darker road that had me considering if I should call Holly back and tell her I couldn't see her again.

The Black Hearts had made it very clear with their warning message that they had eyes on us, and they were planning something. The envelope hadn't only contained images of Ryder and Axel but me too. Taking Holly out on another date would be exposing her to a potentially dangerous situation.

Not potentially. It already was dangerous. Lines had been crossed and a truce had been broken. There was going to be blood at one point or another, and having Holly on the sidelines was a selfish move for me to make.

The office door swung open, and Ellie came inside, brushing loose strands of hair from her forehead and leaving smears of grease along her hairline. She analyzed me as I sat in Jamie's chair with the heels of my boots up on the desk.

"This doesn't look all that professional," she noted, gesturing at all of me lazily draped over the furniture. "Ryder would have your head if he walked in here right now and caught you."

"Ryder has more important things on his mind than what his receptionist looks like."

"You underestimate his high business standards."

I rolled my eyes and put my feet down, winning an appreciative nod from Ellie, who leaned forward on the desk and cocked her head to the side. "What's up? You seem off."

“I’m not off.”

“Fuck off, Jax. I’ve known you long enough to know when something is wrong. What is it?”

Lying to her and making something up would be so much easier than telling her the truth. But Ellie was a good friend and always had been. I needed her advice.

“Holly just called me and wanted to set up another date. She said there were some things she wanted me to know and that it would be better if we met up sooner rather than later. So we made plans to go out tomorrow night.”

“Okay.” Ellie shrugged. “I’m not seeing a problem here. This is good, isn’t it? You wanted to keep seeing her.”

“Yeah, I did. I still do. But everything with the MC is making it hard to justify putting her at risk just because I like her.”

“Oh, please. You’re just like Axel. Sitting here thinking you know what’s best without giving her a chance to make any decisions for herself. That’s bullshit, Jax, and you’re better than that.”

“I’m really not.”

Ellie gave me a dark stare and rested her chin on her knuckles. “Jax. Don’t pull this with me. I know you’re a good guy. Holly does too. And she’s a grown ass woman. You don’t get to monopolize the situation and choose what you think is best for her. I mean, you can tell her what you think, but at the end of the day, this is her call to make. And who knows? Maybe this is what she wants to talk to you about.”

“I guess you have a point.”

“You guess?” Ellie smirked as she turned away and headed back into the shop. “I’ll take that as a ‘you’re right, Ellie.’”

“Don’t you have work to be doing?”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

Ellie disappeared back into the shop, leaving me alone once more with nagging thoughts that left me filled with guilt.

I knew Ellie was right. It wasn't my place to make Holly's choices for her. But things were bigger now than they ever used to be. It wasn't the normal MC stuff. This was the real deal biker gang turf battle about to explode in all our faces, and Holly shouldn't be anywhere near it.

I could always tell her the timing was off, and once everything settled down, maybe she and I could try again.

"Fuck." I groaned, dragging my hands down my face.

Turning Holly away would be impossible. I had let her go once before. I would hate to have to do it again. After all the time that had passed, I still wasn't over her. I never would be.

The office door opened again, and Sabian strode in. He was wearing black jeans and his black leather jacket. He pulled off his aviators, hooked them in the collar of his shirt, and drew up in front of the desk.

"This whole receptionist thing suits you, man."

"Fuck off."

Sabian held up his hands and chuckled. "All right, all right. Ellie warned me you might be tense. She said you had a bit of a predicament."

"No. No predicament. Carry on."

Sabian scratched at the black stubble along his jaw and under his chin. "Listen, man, I know I'm not the best advice giver around, but I don't think you should make any decisions until you hear the girl out."

I sighed and clasped my hands over my stomach as I leaned back in the chair. "So Ellie told you everything, then?"

"More or less."

"Of course, she did. Can't keep her mouth closed, that one."

"She just doesn't want you to fuck up the first good thing to cross your path in a long time. And not that I'm one for all this mushy love bullshit, but I gotta say I agree with Ellie on this one. Don't be a dumbass, Jax."

“You know, I seem to recall there being a certain someone you’ve always held back from going after. Pretty girl. Name starts with an A or something.”

Sabian’s eyes narrowed. “That’s different.”

“Really? Enlighten me. How is she so different?”

“Because if I went for her, Axel would paint his whole house in my fucking blood, you prick, and you know it. She’s his little sister, and I’m not foolish enough to test the waters. She’s far removed from all of this because that’s what Axel wants for her. It’s not the same decision I would make.”

“And you never followed your own advice and thought about what she might want?” I asked, steepling my fingers.

“I’m not having this conversation with you.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Fine. But don’t think your situation is all that different from mine. We both keep them at bay because of our lifestyle. It always comes down to that.”

Sabian scratched at his stubble again. “Maybe it doesn’t have to with Holly.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “But the timing couldn’t get any worse. Isn’t there some sense in riding this thing out with the Black Hearts and seeing where we come out on the other side before I invite Holly into all this? It’s fucked up. We both know it. Guys were killed with machetes. I mean, who fucking does that? I can wait until this passes.”

“In my experience, the timing is never right.”

“What a philosophical thing to say. That doesn’t help at all. Answer my question. Doesn’t it make more sense to get ourselves out of this Black Hearts mess first?”

“Sure. It makes more sense.”

I waited for a moment. I had been hoping hearing my friend say it would make it more convincing in my own head. It hadn’t worked.

Sabian seemed to know that’s what I had been after, reassurance that leaving things with Holly alone for now was

the right move to make. He plucked his aviators free from his collar and slid them back on his nose. “Go on the date. Talk to her. Then make your decision. No harm can come from one little date.”

“Right.” Clearly, Sabian didn’t know Holly or the power she held over me.

Sabian turned to the door and looked back over his shoulder at me once he had pushed through. “And it goes without saying. Think without your cock for once, all right?”

“Get out.”

I could hear Sabian chuckling as he made his way through the shop until the door closed. Then I was left alone to bask in the aftermath of the conversation.

Sabian and Ellie were right. There was no sense in ending this thing with Holly, whatever it was, until I had more information. I needed to see what it was that she wanted to talk to me about. Maybe she and I were both on the same page, and this whole thing would be easy to figure out together.

Together. I liked the ring of that.

“You’re being a fucking girl,” I hissed to myself as I got to my feet and stretched my spine.

There was something nostalgic about the tightness in my chest. It was exactly as it had been when we were kids, when I’d thought I would be able to hold on to Holly Whitton, make her mine, and save her from a future where she was tethered to Kent. There hadn’t been a doubt in my mind that when it really came down to it, she would choose me.

I was the better option, no matter which way I or anyone else looked at it.

Yet, somehow, she had ended up with him of her own choosing, packed up, and left before I even had time to process that I was losing her.

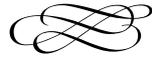
If Holly wanted me after all this time, I would be hers.

And if the Black Hearts stood in the way of that, I would just have to meet them head-on, machete or not, and fight for

what was mine.

I'd done it before. I could do it again.

CHAPTER 12



HOLLY

Luke was sitting in the middle of the rug in the living room constructing a colorful Lego masterpiece. I had been staring at it for at least five minutes to try to figure out what the somewhat crooked, multilevel piece was but had come to no conclusions.

He was humming a familiar country tune, or at least, he was humming the part he knew, which was the upbeat chorus. I got up from where I sat at the dining table reading the paper and joined him on the carpet. I crossed my legs and leaned forward to peer at his creation.

“What are you making here? It looks big enough for a lot of Lego men to live inside.”

“It’s a firehouse.” Luke’s tone suggested I should already know just by looking at it.

“Well, of course it is,” I smiled. “How many firemen work there?”

He cocked his head to the side as he regarded his “firehouse.” “Seventy-two, but a lot of them never show up to work. They just like being called firemen.”

“Wow. Seventy-three, huh? They must be really good at fighting fires.”

Luke nodded vigorously and looked up at me. His eyes were bright green like mine, and I would forever be thankful I couldn’t see Kent in him when my son looked at me. “They can stop any fire, mama. No matter what.”

“Very cool,” I stretched out to lie on my side and laid my head on my elbow. “Do you have enough extra pieces for me to make something?”

“Sure.” Luke pushed the Rubbermaid container full of loose Lego pieces toward me. “What are you going to make?”

“Well, I was thinking I could build a house that the firemen could save when it catches on fire.”

“Okay.” Luke grinned before bowing his head and setting back to work on his so-called fire station. “Make sure it’s a big house.”

“Big. Got it.” I began assembling the lower level of what would soon turn into a very mediocre Lego house. As I worked, I continuously looked up at Luke to make sure he was still having fun.

Ever since moving back to New York City, I had been plagued with guilt over taking Luke away from his father. Even though Kent had never been good to me, and in my mind was never a good father, Luke loved him unconditionally. And the poor kid had nothing to do with the mistakes his parents made. Yet here he was, hundreds of miles from his father, probably missing him dearly.

I snapped a yellow block on to a corner and sighed. “Luke, can Mommy ask you something?”

“Yep.” He never looked up at me as he continued working. There was something to be appreciated in that. Kids were simple. Easy. Straightforward.

“No matter what you answer, Mommy will be happy, okay? I promise.”

Now he looked up at me, his curiosity piqued. This was not how our usual conversations began. “Okay.”

“Do you miss your dad, Luke?”

My stomach clenched as I awaited his answer. I had promised I would be happy no matter what his answer was, but I wasn’t so sure I could keep a straight face if he admitted to missing Kent terribly. I forced myself to look calmly at my

son as he put down his Lego pieces and shuffled around so he was facing me directly.

“Sometimes,” he said.

“Yeah? How about right now? Do you miss your daddy right now?”

Luke shrugged. “No.”

“When are the times you do miss him?”

Luke chewed the inside of his cheek, a terrible habit Kent had repeatedly told me I had taught him. There was no denying it. I chewed the insides of my lips and cheeks until the skin was raw and my mouth tasted like copper. It was an anxiety thing or a way of coping with the anxiety.

“I miss going to the park.” Luke nodded to himself. “Yeah. I miss the park and the yellow slide. And the tire swings. Daddy always spun the swing real good.”

“Your dad definitely was a good spinner.” I thought back to the days where Kent and I would walk down the street to the park in our old community. It wasn’t an impressive playground by any means, but it was close by and Luke enjoyed the visits we made there.

Although, of course, Kent only came once in a blue moon. For the most part, Luke and I went alone, and the two of us would play on the seesaw or the regular swings. I was never able to spin the tire swing as well as him, and Luke, wiser than his mere six years, never asked me to.

Feeling a surge of emotion building inside me, I hurried to complete my Lego house to offer both me and my son a distraction. I snapped on the last piece and pushed it toward Luke.

“Ta-da! All done! What do you think? Is it worthy of your seventy-three firemen?”

Luke’s eyes widened, and he clapped his hands together. “Awesome! I’m going to make more. I’m going to make a whole town!”

The front door opened, and Kim hollered a loud hello as she kicked off her shoes. Luke and I called back, and soon, she was emerging in the living room with bags of new trial medications. She dropped them on the sofa with a huff and planted her hands on her hips as she surveyed the mess we had made of her carpet.

“So, are we playing with Legos tonight, kiddo?” Kim asked.

Luke pointed at the house I had just finished. “Yeah! Mommy already made a house, and I have a fire station. I want to build a whole town!”

“A whole town?” Kim exclaimed, joining us on the carpet. She shot me a mischievous look. “So, what can I make? We’ll need more houses, that’s for sure. And maybe a church, and a bar, and a grocery store.”

My phone vibrated on the coffee table. My stomach did a backflip. I reached for the phone and peered down at the text message. “He’s here,” I whispered more to myself than Luke and Kim.

Kim chuckled as she began rummaging through the container of Legos. “Better not keep him waiting. Poor guy has been waiting long enough. Tell him I say hello.”

I got to my feet and flattened out my skirt. “How do I look?”

“You look pretty, Mama.” Luke beamed.

I smiled and bent down to kiss the top of his head. “You’re so sweet. I love you, baby. I’ll be home late, but I’ll see you in the morning, okay? Be good for Auntie Kim.”

“He’s always good,” Kim said.

“Yep,” Luke agreed.

Kim looked me up and down. “You look great, sis. Knock him dead. And then talk to him.”

I crossed my fingers over my heart in an X and nodded. “Promise.”

Then I grabbed my purse and made for the door.

Jax was parked at the curb in his black pickup truck. The paint was shiny and spotless, and I assumed it had been recently waxed. When Jax spotted me coming, he hopped out of the truck and made his way to my door, which he opened and held for me as I approached.

He executed a short wolf whistle and made it obvious he was checking me out; his eyes swept up the length of me, from the toes of my gold sandals to the pink lace neckline of my shirt.

I paused and gave him a little twirl, sending the ends of my white skirt fanning out around me, and in so doing, I probably gave him a good view of my bare legs.

“You look ravishing,” Jax said, taking my hand and helping me up into the passenger seat of his truck.

As I passed him, I caught the scent of his cologne and inhaled deeply. It lingered in the air around me after he closed the door, and I basked in it as I watched him walk around the hood.

He was dressed in a black collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black pants, and black boots. A silver watch caught the sun at his wrist, drawing my eyes to his bare forearms and the veins that rippled under his tanned skin. I wanted to trace them with my fingertips and follow them all over his body like a maze I never wanted to escape from.

But first, we needed to talk.

He slid up into the seat beside me and shot me a cocky grin as he started the engine. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” I gave him my best smile to try to set him and myself at ease. Everything was going to be fine. This was Jax, not Kent. I had to keep reminding myself that he wouldn’t react with rage the way Kent always did when he heard something he didn’t like. “I’ve been excited to see you.”

“Likewise,” Jax said, glancing in his mirror before pulling away from the curb and striking a course out to the restaurant.

His hand wandered over to me, and he rested it on my bare knee. The warmth of his calloused palm had my mind daring him to move his hand upward, under the skirt, up the inside of my thighs, and closer to the heat between my legs that was practically screaming for his touch.

But my knee would do.

“So where are we going?” I asked in an effort to distract myself from his scent and his closeness.

“Well, I had a couple of ideas, but it depends what you’re in the mood for. I remember how much you liked that Greek place. What’s it called? The little one with the plants on the ceiling?”

“Socrates Taverna.”

“That’s the one. I was thinking we could go there and gorge ourselves on spanakopita and dolmades. Or there’s a new Italian place close by that is supposed to have unreal lasagna. You pick.”

How Jax had remembered how much I loved spanakopita was beyond me, and as soon as the word left his mouth, my stomach grumbled. “Greek. Definitely Greek.”

“I hoped you’d say that.”

We took a left, and I watched the traffic pass us by as we drew closer.

At the restaurant, the hostess brought us to a table for two outside on the patio. Music was playing softly, and a candle burned between us as the sun set. The street was busy but not busy enough to be too loud to hear one another. I swept my napkin off the table and folded it on my lap as the waitress brought me a glass of red wine and a whiskey for Jax.

“Cheers,” he said, lifting his glass.

“Cheers.” I smiled.

We both took the first sip of our drinks, and then the anticipated awkwardness set in. We both fell quiet and took more interest in our menus than each other, regardless of the fact that we both knew what we wanted to order.

I looked up at him over the top of my menu.

His eyes were cast down, but not moving side to side. He wasn't reading. He was simply waiting me out.

I didn't want to make him push me to talk. I needed to come out with this on my own. It was me who had taken the first step to make this conversation happen, anyway. There was no point in dillydallying around it. I just needed to throw it out there and see what came of it.

I closed my menu, grabbed my wine, and drank it in four big mouthfuls.

I caught Jax staring at me with an arched eyebrow. "Do we have a quota we need to meet or something?"

I shook my head and crossed my arms to rest my elbows on the table. "No. I just want to tell you everything now so we can enjoy the rest of the night. Is that okay?"

Jax closed his menu and set it down on top of mine. "More than okay."

I had no clue where to start. Luke? Kent? I found myself chewing my cheek and forced myself to stop. I took a deep breath and looked into Jax's deep green eyes.

"Okay. Let's start with the most important thing." Spit it out, girl, spit it out.

Jax nodded, encouraging me to keep going. His expression was calm, almost serene, and the way he was looking at me was enough of a reminder that this was not my ex. This was a man who had never done anything to make me think I should ever be afraid of telling him something.

"I have a son." The words tumbled out of me, and as soon as they were out there, I let out a relieved giggle and drank the rest of my water. "I'm a mom."

CHAPTER 13



JAX

A son.

“Damn.”

Holly was looking everywhere but at me. Her eyes flicked from her empty wine glass to her now empty water glass, and then to her lap, where I suspected she was wringing her hands.

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Six.”

Six. “So that means?”

Holly nodded. “I found out I was pregnant shortly after I moved to Philadelphia with Kent. At the time, I figured having a baby would fix things between us. I thought that maybe it would bring us closer together. I was going to build my family.” She looked up at the cloudless evening sky and sighed. “I was so stupid.”

“Hey,” I said shortly, “you’re not stupid. I get it.”

Holly rubbed her lips together and finally met my eyes. “Thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right away. I just—” She broke off and laughed as her cheeks turned pink. “I just really liked the way you looked at me. It was like nothing had changed, and you still saw the girl that life hadn’t fucked up yet.”

“You’re not fucked up, Holly.”

She gave me a deadpan stare. “Oh, no?”

“No.”

“I moved away with a man I wasn’t in love with because I thought it was the best thing, and then I let him dictate my entire life for over six years. And my son’s life. I let him take me away from everything I knew and loved, and I let him keep me there. Under him. Like a thing instead of a person.”

My pulse was hammering in my ears as I listened to her. Kent was a dick. Always had been. But was he the kind of man who would ever hurt Holly? God fucking help him if he had laid a hand on her.

I mustered the courage to ask the question I needed the answer to. “Did he ever hit you?”

Holly shook her head. “No. Never. I swear it.”

Relief washed over me, leaving me feeling temporarily light-headed. I reached for my own water and took a couple of refreshing mouthfuls before giving her my full attention again. “But it was bad enough that you left?”

She nodded. “He drank a lot, and he was angry all the time. It went from foul moods to violent outbursts where he would put his fist through the wall. Breaking things was as bad as it ever got, but I didn’t want to stick around to see how long it would take before he got bored of that. I couldn’t expose Luke to that any longer than I already had.”

“Luke.” The name felt strange on my tongue. The name of a boy who had been fathered by the woman I loved and another man. “That’s your son’s name?”

Holly nodded and the strict way she was holding herself melted away a little bit. “Yes. Luke.”

“How’s he doing? He adjusting to all this okay?”

Holly stared at me for a moment before answering. “He’s a tough kid. He misses his dad, but he missed him when we all lived in the same house too. Kent wasn’t around much. After work, he’d go to the bar, and if he came home before midnight, it was a rare exception. He’d sleep in on the weekends, and maybe once a month, the three of us would do something together. But it never entertained Kent long. He would get bored and start itching for a beer, and that would be

the end of it. Luke knew as well as I did that as soon as his father had a sip of beer, the day was done.”

“I’m sorry, Holly. You deserve better than that piece of shit.”

“I know.”

“Leaving must have been really hard. You’re a badass mom. Luke is lucky to have you looking out for him. Fighting the good fight. Not all kids have a parent who is willing to do what it takes to protect them from their own family.”

I was horrified to see tears clinging to Holly’s bottom lashes. “Hey,” I said, trying to think of all the things not to say when a woman was crying. “It’s all right. I didn’t mean to make you upset. I’m sorry.”

“No, no. You didn’t make me upset.”

I sat there blinking like an idiot as she dabbed at her eyes and chuckled at my shell-shocked expression.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that. The badass mom part, mostly.”

Sensing that the waterworks were over, I called over the waitress and ordered us both another drink and put in our food order. Five minutes later, a plate of piping hot spanakopita were placed in front of us with a cup of tzatziki sauce.

“So tell me,” I said, “What’s Luke like?”

Holly was chewing with her hand in front of her mouth. When she swallowed, she met my eyes and held my gaze. I could feel the joy radiating off her as she spoke about her son.

“He’s sweet and attentive. He likes taking care of me, funny enough. I think he likes my birthday more than his own. Last year, he somehow got himself up and out of bed before me and brought me breakfast in bed.”

Laughing, I leaned back in my seat. “What did he make you?”

Holly giggled. “He was five at the time. He poured cereal into a bowl and took a flower out of one of my vases and put it

on top. And a glass of orange juice.”

“Fuck, that’s cute.”

“He’s incredible. He’s a really logical thinker, and I don’t know where he gets it from. He likes building things and taking them apart. I bet he’ll be an architect or a mechanic or something. Maybe an engineer. Right now, he’s back at the apartment with Kim building a Lego town.”

I thought back to the days that I used to love Legos. The days where my biggest concern was walking home from school without the older kids catching up with me to shove snow down the back of my shirt in the winter or dirt in the summer.

“He’ll be starting school in September?”

Holly nodded. “Yep. He’s enrolled at an elementary school a couple of blocks from Kim’s, so if I’m still living there, I can just walk him.”

“Practical.”

“Yeah, I guess. But it would be nice to have a place of my own before then. We’ll see how things go. It’s kind of difficult to make any real sort of money at The Roost. Especially when you have a shitty manager.”

“I can solve your manager problem. You just need to say the word.”

“I’m not going to sick you on my boss like a rabid dog,” Holly said flatly.

“Who said anything about behaving like a rabid dog?”

“I know you, Jax. You’d hold his hand over the deep fryer or something until he swore to be nice to me.”

I took a sip of whiskey. “I didn’t know you had such a low opinion of me.”

“Oh, please,” she said dramatically. “You and I both know exactly how it would go down. Talon would shit himself, and I’d be too embarrassed to ever show my face there again. Thanks, but no thanks. I can take care of myself.”

“Never said you couldn’t.”

Holly drank some of her wine and ran her tongue across her lips. I knew she hadn’t intended for it to be seductive, but holy hell, did it light my veins on fire with need.

“If I need you, I’ll ask,” Holly said.

“Will you?”

She held my gaze. “Yes.”

The rest of our meals arrived, and we dined while having pleasant conversations about Luke and Holly adjusting back to life in New York City. She told me about wishing he had friends over the summer, and we both joked about how great it would be if Luke and Hanna, Axel’s daughter, were closer in age.

“When they’re a bit older, it might work,” Holly said as she sipped her fourth glass of merlot.

“Define a bit older.”

“I don’t know, teenagers? Three years isn’t as big a deal.”

“Axel won’t like it,” I chuckled, my chair creaking as I adjusted myself.

“He doesn’t have to.” Holly winked.

“Playing with fire. I like that. Kind of a turn on.”

Holly blushed and put her wine down. When she looked back up at me, something was different. There was a seriousness to the way she composed herself. Her shoulders were pulling inward once more, and I could tell she was nervous again.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Nothing. I’m having a really nice time with you, but I want you to know I don’t expect you to want to keep doing this. I know things are different now. And now that you know I have a son, I completely understand if you want to just be friends.”

“Are you crazy?”

Holly bit her lip, and I remembered the way it felt when I used to push my thumb to her bottom lip right before I kissed her, warm and soft and mine for the taking.

“Of course, I want to see you again. Holly, for fuck’s sake, I feel like I’ve been waiting all these years for you to come back. I just didn’t know it until I saw you at The Roost. You looked fine as hell in that little apron, by the way.”

Holly blushed a fierce shade of red and buried her face in her hands. “Stop it.”

“No. I mean it.” I reached for her hands and pulled them away from her face. I wrapped my fingers around hers and gave them a gentle squeeze. “I’m glad you’re here, and I’m glad you’re with me.” *Finally.*

Holly gave me a wide smile. “Me too.”

I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and dropped more than enough cash on the table to cover the bill. I got to my feet and offered Holly my hand. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

She slapped her hand into my palm, and I helped her to her feet. She made for the doors to go back inside, but I steered her to the right and lifted her over the little fence separating the restaurant patio from the sidewalk. She giggled with embarrassment and held her skirt down when I placed her on the other side of the fence.

Then, I stepped over it and took her hand once more. We walked maybe twenty feet down the sidewalk before I stopped short. Holly stopped beside me and turned to look up at me. As her lips parted to ask me what I was doing, I dropped my head, cupped her cheek with one hand, and kissed her like I was kissing her for the first time.

She tasted like wine and smelled like vanilla. Her lips were soft and full, and the way her tongue traced mine filled my brain with thoughts of her sealing her lips over my cock. I didn’t care that people were watching, and she didn’t seem to either, as she lifted herself to her tiptoes and pressed her lips

more firmly against mine until our teeth were practically grinding together.

With a surprising amount of effort, I managed to pull away from her. “Come on.”

I opened my truck door and helped her up and then hurried around to my side. I climbed up, started the engine, and gave her a devilish smile as I pulled out onto the street.

Holly reached out and turned the radio up. The cab of the truck filled with the bass of the rock song, and Holly’s hand found my thigh. She ran her palm up and down, the warmth of her touch coming dangerously close to my swollen cock straining against the fly of my pants.

I glanced over at her to find her smiling coyly back at me. The woman knew what she was doing, that was for damn sure. She was playing with me, just like she used to, and if she started it, she always finished it.

Lucky for me.

I turned down the first dark, empty street I could find and parked at the very end. My headlights illuminated a cement barrier before I turned the engine off and the lights died. I tossed my keys into the cup holder and unclipped my seatbelt.

“If you want to throw down right now I’m more than—” I stopped talking when my eyes fell on Holly.

She was still in her seat, but she was facing me now. Somehow, she had already unclipped her seatbelt. Her cheeks and nose were pink. She grabbed the hem of her pink shirt and slowly pulled it over her head. The belly button ring I remembered was gone. In its place was a pale white scar beneath a pair of freckles she used to hate.

The bra she wore was pale pink lace and transparent. I could see her nipples through the thin fabric, and the metal clasp between her breasts was whispering to be undone.

Holly left her skirt on but hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her panties and shimmied them down her legs.

I was alone with Holly Whitton, who was half naked and sweeping her hair up into a ponytail, which could only mean one thing.

At least, it only meant one thing back then.

“Holy hell,” I breathed, and Holly grinned at me the same way she used to.

She looked like sunshine and sex as she reached across the console to undo my belt and pop open the button of my pants.

CHAPTER 14



HOLLY

I was distinctly aware of how easy things felt with Jax. I wasn't thinking about what I looked like or what he thought of me or if there were consequences after we did this. All I was thinking about was how badly I wanted to taste him, ride him, and be as close to him as I possibly could.

Pulling open the fly of his pants, I held in my gasp at the size of his swollen cock bulging beneath his briefs. I had nearly forgotten the size of him in the years we had been apart. A tremor of excitement went through me, and I pulled him free of his boxers as I leaned over the console.

Jax gathered my hair from my face and held it back as I hovered over his hips, his cock standing to attention like a well-behaved soldier awaiting praise from my lips and tongue.

I knew how he liked it back then and wondered if the same techniques would still make him see stars. I wanted him to look at me the way he used to when he lost all sense of who he was and took control. I craved his strong hands and his body pressing into me.

I grazed my lips over the tip of him. He was velvety soft, and at the touch, a soft sigh whispered out of him. When I took his head in my mouth, Jax melted deeper into the seat. The console between us dug into my hip, but I didn't care, and I worked my mouth farther down his shaft until I had as much of him resting along my tongue as I could hold.

My cheeks puckered as I used a light amount of suction before moving up and down, sucking him off how I knew he

liked.

Jax's grip in my hair tightened, pulling strands of it tight across my scalp. I didn't care. In fact, I kind of liked the heat of the pain as need gathered tightly below my tummy, aching for a release.

Soon.

Jax shifted beneath me, his hips lifting as his hand pushed my head down. He held me there, hips rolling as he fucked my mouth, breath becoming labored with pleasure.

When he pulled me off him, I was breathless too. His eyes were heavy, and his jaw was tight as he pulled his pants lower down his muscular thighs. Then he looked over at me.

“Get your ass over here.” His voice was thick.

I managed to climb over the console as gracefully as possible and somehow didn't make a fool of myself. I had been known to be rather clumsy, and this mini obstacle posed the perfect opportunity for me to face-plant in Jax's crotch. Not that he'd care if I did.

I managed to get one leg on either side of him as Jax pushed the seat back so I wasn't pinned between his body and the steering wheel. When we had a bit of extra space, I shifted forward, letting my hips float above his, and began lowering myself until I felt the tip of his cock graze my clit.

“Oh, I don't think so, sweetheart.” Jax grabbed hold of my hips and held me in place. “That's not how this works.”

His voice and his hands commanded me to fall still. He slipped under my skirt and ran his fingers up my thighs, and I closed my eyes to focus on the sensation. I had wanted to be touched like this for so long.

This feeling of being needed, of being adored, unlocked something within me that I hadn't felt in over half a decade. Power. I felt powerful in Jax's strong arms. I felt free. My blood was electric, and as his hands grabbed my ass and spread me apart, I found myself smiling.

When I opened my eyes, Jax was watching me, the corner of his lips curled up into a curious smile of his own. “What’s with the smile?” he asked.

I hooked my arms around his neck and leaned in to give him a tender kiss. “I’m just really happy to be here with you.”

When Jax chuckled deep in his chest and slipped a finger in my pussy, I kissed his jaw and throat. He was showing me that he was happy to be with me too. I was swollen and wet, and his finger gliding in and out of me was unraveling all the little bits of self-control I had left.

He eased a second finger into me, and I clung to him as he maintained a steady rhythm. Soon, the tightness below my belly was almost too much to bear. I needed more. I needed to feel more of him.

So I crushed my mouth against his and unwittingly began gyrating my hips on his fingers, pushing his touch against all my walls until the tightness inside me blew apart, and I gave in to the first orgasm I had felt in years.

Well, first orgasm given to me by someone else.

Jax was smiling at me now and running his fingers up and down the length of my pulsing pussy. “You’re so fucking sexy,” he muttered, pressing his lips to my chest and throat.

I whimpered as his thumb pressed down on my clit.

Jax’s teeth pinched the skin on my shoulder. “Come for me again. Give in to it.”

As his thumb pressed down on my clit, he pushed his fingers back inside me, stretching me, filling me, and began wiggling them in a come-hither motion until my body was torn apart by pleasure once more.

My thighs were quivering, and I was short of breath when he pulled out of me. He was smiling at me in that same devilish way he always did as he pulled a condom from his pocket and tore it open with his teeth. He rolled it on, gripped his shaft, and then pushed me down with his other hand on my hip.

I felt him graze my wetness again and bit my bottom lip.

I had been dreaming about this for ages.

Back in Philadelphia, after Kent had come home from a binge at the bar and fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room, I would lie in bed, staring up at my ceiling, thinking about Jax. I thought of his body. His eyes. The way he looked at me and the way he threw his head back when he laughed genuinely. I imagined the curve of his lips and the way they made my own tingle after we kissed.

I thought of his hands and what he used to do with them.

I would come thinking about him as I lay alone, aching to be touched by someone—anyone—who loved me.

Now I had him again. His cock was slipping between my wet folds and stretching me with his thickness. There was pressure as he eased inside, but he took his time. He never caved to the desire to thrust deep inside me. He waited until I was ready, his eyes fixed on me.

My hands were still hooked behind his neck when all of him was buried inside me. I sat on his cock, waiting for the pressure to give way to pleasure.

Jax's fingers trailed up my arm, over my shoulder, and down my chest to the silver clasp on my bra between my breasts. He unclipped it with a snap of his fingers and pulled it off me.

He cupped both my breasts in his hands and gently massaged them, rolling his palms over the soft tissue and then tantalizing my nipples with his thumbs. I giggled, and he smiled at me before leaning in to pull my nipple into his mouth. He sucked gently and then pinched with his teeth before rolling his tongue over my skin.

I buried my fingers in his hair and held him to me like I might never let him go.

“Fuck me,” I whispered, my voice hoarse and quiet from the desire. “Please.”

“Please?” Jax looked up at me, that smile lingering on his lips, his eyes sparkling with need that matched my own.

I nodded. “Please. I need you.”

He pinched my nipple teasingly, and then his hands were on my waist as he began rolling his hips beneath me.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, my head falling back as my eyes closed.

Jax gripped my ass and held me down on him as he began thrusting. I grabbed hold of him as each thrust pushed a moan from me that I couldn’t hold on to no matter how hard I tried. And I didn’t want to try.

I was free to be nothing but myself with this man. That was all he wanted from me, and it was all I was capable of giving.

He pulled me closer to him, crushing my breasts against his chest and holding me there with a hand on my lower back. He kissed me fiercely and then nudged my face to the side to kiss my face, my jaw, and my neck, all before gliding his tongue up my throat to my ear, which he pinched between his teeth as he thrust his cock deep inside me.

I came hard and fast and completely let myself go.

I started bouncing on top of him. I didn’t have much leverage in the truck, but I didn’t care. His cock slid in and out of me as I moved up and down, and I watched him grit his teeth as he tried to hold on to his own orgasm.

“Come on,” I whispered, pausing to roll my hips in a slow circle on top of him. I pushed my tits together as I fucked him, and he hungrily soaked in the sight of me.

I felt sexy as hell.

I started bouncing again. Jax groaned as his muscles tightened. The seat beneath him creaked as he pressed his back deeper into the leather. I could feel the muscles of his thighs under mine as his entire body prepared for his release.

I wanted to feel as much of him as I could when he came, so I kissed him as I bounced, my ass slapping against his

thighs, his fingers wandering into my hair. I pressed my tongue between his teeth, and he moaned into our kiss as he came. He was barely able to keep kissing me, but I forced him to, wanting to breathe in his moans and feel as connected to him as I possibly could.

When he was done, his chest rose and fell with labored breaths, and I sat on his lap, his cock still swollen inside me, my body still thrumming with pleasure.

“That was better than I remember,” Jax muttered, his eyes falling closed.

I giggled and lifted myself off him before climbing back into my own seat. “I agree.”

When he opened his eyes, he rolled his head to look over at me. “I wish I could take you back to my place and fuck you like that all night.”

I pulled the hair tie out of my hair that had been holding it in what used to be a ponytail. Our fucking had loosened it to the point where it was just clinging to some of my ends. “That would be nice, but I have to get back to Kim’s. I promised Luke I would be there in the morning, and Kim has been helping out enough. She deserves to have a day to herself.”

“I get it.”

Jax tucked himself back into his pants and did them up. He passed me my bra, which was on the floor at his feet, and started the truck as I put it and my shirt back on. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I couldn’t have asked for more than this.” Jax took his eyes off the road for a moment to give me a reassuring nod. “You have bigger things to worry about than me wanting to steal you away.”

The rest of the drive went by too quickly. Before I knew it, we were parked outside Kim’s apartment, and Jax was helping me out of the truck. He walked me to the front door and then turned me to face him.

“Do you think there will come a time where you’re comfortable letting me meet Luke?”

I couldn't stop myself from smiling at his words. I nodded. "Yes. I'll let you know when the time is right. When I think he's ready."

Jax looked at his feet and then back up at me sheepishly. "Perfect. Good night, Holly." He leaned in and kissed me, soft and sweet, with his finger under my chin. Then he tapped me lightly on the nose like he used to when we were kids and left me staring after him on the top step of the apartment building.

I opened the door, and he didn't drive away until I was safely inside.

My heart was thumping in my chest, and my whole body felt like it was glowing. I smiled the whole way up the elevator and down the hall to Kim's unit, and I didn't stop smiling until I was asleep.

Even then, my dreams were about Jax, and if someone were to watch me sleep, I'm sure they would discover that the smile never faltered.

CHAPTER 15



JAX

Holly Whitton.

She had quite literally rocked my world last night, and I had been incapable of thinking of anything but her. My mind was trapped by thoughts of her body pressed against mine, and the way she took my cock. She was a goddess with a heart of gold and a body for fucking. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get her pussy or tits out of my head. Or her smile.

I needed to lay her down on her back and show her how good I could make her feel. We both needed more space than the cab of the truck permitted.

"Next time," I told myself as I rolled out of bed. "Next time."

Wanting to have sex with the same woman again was new for me. Normally, with all my other hook-ups, it was a 'one-time thing' kind of deal. Fuck them and leave them. The girls knew that's what it was. I wasn't the kind of man to lie to them and trick them into thinking it had the potential to be more than it was. And for the most part, they were fine with it.

Of course, there had been the occasional woman who wanted more with me and fought me on it, but in time, they saw I was too damaged to be worth their time and energy. That, and they concluded that I was still in love with another woman they couldn't hold a candle to.

It wasn't their fault. I was never cruel to them.

I just left them.

But Holly was different and always had been. She was the girl who kept me up at night even when I hadn't seen her in years. And now that I had seen her and felt what it was like to be inside her again, my brain was a jumbled mess.

All I wanted was to be back with her. I wanted to taste her. I wanted to explore her body in a way I hadn't been able to last night.

All in due time, I assured myself. I would get another chance. There was no doubt in my mind that she wanted me the same way I wanted her. It had been written all over her face when she rode me. She was desperate for what I could give her.

I stepped into a pair of jeans and found a clean T-shirt. Ten minutes later, I was outside slipping my arms into my leather jacket and swinging a leg over the seat of my Harley. I had to find a way to think of other things, and the only solution I had was to go for a ride.

The sun was shining, and I had plenty of time before the day hit its hottest point. I'd go for a cruise and find a nice spot to sit and have a beer. Then, depending on my mood, I might stop by the shop to pay whoever was working a visit.

Maybe there would be someone there who could remind me what it felt like to have my sanity back and keep my thoughts off Holly for just a little while longer.

I revved the bike and tore out onto the street. The morning air had a chill to it at high speeds that would be gone in an hour or so when the day warmed up. For now, I enjoyed the way it passed through my clothes.

I took back roads out of the city to find winding streets with less traffic where I could open up the throttle and really cut loose. I had specific routes I tended to favor, and today, I was in the mood for some sharp turns where I could push myself.

It was on one of these turns that I was passed by a slick looking flat black sports car. I checked my mirrors to see the brake lights turn on and admired the sleek lines of the car. It

was a beast that was for sure, but an elegant one. A Zenvo if I was correct.

It disappeared from view as I took another winding S-bend.

My thoughts wandered inevitably back to Holly. I started wondering what she was doing today with her son Luke. The weather was spectacular. Perhaps they were at the park. It was the kind of day suited to walking to get ice cream. I could see Holly walking hand in hand with her little boy to the closest ice cream parlor and realized I was also picturing myself holding her other hand.

“Pull yourself together, man,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re no father figure, that’s for damn sure.”

I swung around another corner.

An engine roared in my ears. I checked my mirrors.

The black Zenvo was racing up to my back tire like a fucking psychopath.

I opened up the throttle to create more space and watched my mirrors as I took another turn. The bike hummed beneath me as I pushed it to its limits. The Zenvo was right on my ass, closing in and then falling back over and over as if showing me it had more power than my bike.

That much was obvious. Harleys weren’t the fastest thing on the road, that was for damn sure, but I didn’t like the way this asshole was fucking with me.

Either he knew exactly what the insignia on the back of my leather jacket stood for, or he had no fucking clue. Either way, he was playing with fire.

There was no license plate on the front of the car, and all the windows were blacked out. I couldn’t see a damn thing through the glass, and keeping my eye on the mirror and the road was proving to be difficult. I had to get away from this maniac sooner rather than later. I wasn’t wearing a helmet, and the only thing between me and the pavement if I crashed was denim and leather. I didn’t want to know what sort of hell that would feel like.

The car raced up behind me again, and this time, I could have sworn it touched my back tire. My bike wobbled, and I did the only thing I could do. I slowed down.

I hated that I didn't have the upper hand, but I wasn't about to try to keep going at a crazy speed. I lost too much control of the bike when I was going fast, and all it would take was a bump in the right place and I'd be a goner.

I clenched my teeth and hit the brakes, waiting for the car to come crashing into me.

Much to my surprise, it didn't.

It swerved around, tires screeching on the asphalt, and drove up beside me.

I stared straight into the passenger window despite not being able to see anyone inside. If they wanted to fuck with me, I was going to fuck back.

I pulled the bike to the left and sped up. The car accelerated. I had only seconds.

The anger was in control now, and I didn't give a damn what the consequences might be. I pulled my pocket knife free, flipped it open, and somehow managed to drag it along the side panel of the Zenvo.

Then I grinned like an idiot, veered to the right, and hit the brakes. The car slowed down too, but not before I was able to get in behind it and read the license plate.

Being behind the prick was safer. I half expected him to hit the brakes, but he didn't. Instead, he maintained his speed for about ten seconds, then sped away, engine roaring, and disappeared around a bend.

I didn't want to stick around to find out if he had other plans for me, so I turned around and headed back into the city.

My heart didn't stop racing until fifteen minutes later when the adrenaline from the encounter ebbed away. My hands were cramped and sore from gripping the handlebars so hard. My jaw ached from the tension of clenching my teeth.

I told myself it could have been a hell of a lot worse as I took the long way to Ryder's house. I didn't want anyone following me there, so I took a couple of detours and side streets, working my way farther away from the president's house before returning to it.

When I parked in the driveway, I spotted Axel's truck. It was Sunday. They were probably inside sharing a beer as usual while Ellie and Dani chatted about girl stuff.

I climbed up onto the porch and knocked twice before letting myself in.

"Ryder?" I called, leaving my boots on and making my way to the back of the house.

Ryder and Axel were outside on the patio. I had been correct in assuming they were drinking beers. Both had nearly full bottles and looked up at me curiously when I walked in.

"Did you just let yourself into my house?" Ryder scowled.

"I'm not in the mood for a power trip from you," I spat.

Axel's eyebrows lifted to his hairline, and he looked back and forth between Ryder and me. Ryder was still glaring at me like I'd just spit in his cereal.

Axel cleared his throat. "Something happen, Jax?"

"Yeah, something fucking happened. Some sociopath in a Zenvo just tried to run me off the road."

"A Zenvo?" Ryder asked. "That's an expensive fucking car. Why would someone want to risk damaging it to—"

"I didn't get a chance to ask them. I was too busy trying not to get killed. Where's Dani?"

"At work," Ryder said flatly as he got to his feet.

"I got the plate number and did some damage to the passenger door. Will you call her for me? She needs to know about this."

Ryder scratched the back of his neck. "You know, maybe you're overreacting a little bit here. Dani is busy working on the Black Hearts murder."

“Don’t be fucking daft, Johnny,” I said, using the president’s first name for the first time in ages. He blinked in surprise but didn’t correct me. “This is all part of her case. We receive a bunch of photographs of all of us, and then this happens? It’s all related. I’d bet my life it was a Black Hearts member in that fucking car.”

Axel stood as well. “You said you did some damage?”

I nodded. “They’ll be parking the car now. If they know we’re looking for it, they won’t be able to bring it to any shops.”

“That car is worth, what, almost two million dollars?”

I shrugged. “Around there. Probably.”

Axel gave me a satisfied grin. “How much do you think it would cost them to fix what you did to it?”

I considered the long, deep scratch I had put in the side of the car. “A few hundred thousand, at the very least.”

“Bet they feel like idiots now,” Ryder muttered. Then he grabbed his phone and called Dani. She answered almost right away, which was why I’d wanted him to call her. If I’d called, I’d have to wait for her to get back to me, which could take hours or days. I wasn’t waiting for this.

“Hey, babe,” Ryder said, “We have a situation over here. You have a moment?”

I assumed she said yes because seconds later Ryder passed me the phone. “Tell her what you told us. Give her the plate number. She’ll find his sorry ass.”

I relayed everything that had happened to Dani, who listened silently to every word I said. She was a good cop. There was no doubt about it. She encouraged me to give her more details once I was done and read the plate number back to me.

“Yeah, that’s it,” I confirmed.

“Okay. I’ll run it now and call you back. Sit tight.” Dani hung up the phone, and I handed it back to Ryder, who was looking at me expectantly.

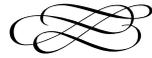
“Sorry for being a dick.” I scratched the stubble along my jaw mindlessly. “Just a bit on edge.”

“Forget about it. Some asshole tried to kill you. You’re allowed to be pissed. This keeps getting more and more personal. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” Axel admitted, sipping his beer. Then he went to a cooler at the side of the house and passed me one.

I drank thankfully, not caring that it wasn’t even noon.

CHAPTER 16



HOLLY

My last table of customers left The Roost just after eleven o'clock, and I hurried to tell the shift leader to lock the front doors. Afterward, I went to my till to manage my tips.

I was happy to find that I had made almost four hundred dollars in tips. It had been a busy night. Summer evenings always ended up being profitable for me. Families came to sit on our patio and enjoy our summer drink and dessert specials, and the extra outdoor space meant the servers had more tables to serve.

If most of my summer shifts went like this, I would have a decent little nest egg of savings tucked aside for the fall, and maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to find an apartment to rent for Luke and me.

It was a comforting thought. I loved living with my sister, but she needed her space back. If she met a guy she wanted to start dating, I didn't want to get in the way. Not only that, but I wanted my independence back. I wanted to create my own little home and make it just how I liked.

I always dreamed about having a yellow kitchen. Maybe if I found an older building my landlord would let me spruce the place up, and over time, I could create the perfect little home to come back to every day.

Maybe I could land a place with other young families in the building so Luke could be close to some friends. There were tons of places in New York City that had courtyards in the middle of the building with a playground.

I liked to dream that my kitchen window would overlook the playground, and I could cook dinner while keeping an eye on Luke while he played with the other kids.

I tucked my tip money into the back pocket of my jeans and headed for the break room. I opened my locker, grabbed my clothes, and hurried to change before rushing out of the restaurant with a goodbye wave to Claire.

The bus picked me up at my stop shortly after I arrived, and I spent the ride with my nose in my book. The walk back to Kim's apartment was pleasant. There were a few people still out and about enjoying the warm night, but everyone kept to themselves. In a city like New York, everyone had somewhere to be.

I let myself into the apartment around midnight. The lights were off, as per usual, and the only sound was the soft hum of the fridge from the kitchen as I shrugged out of my jacket and hung it on the hook by the door. I hung my keys on the miniature hook beside the ones for coats and slid my shoes off my aching feet. I wiggled my toes and headed for the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

After setting the kettle on the stove and leaving the lid off so it wouldn't whistle and wake my sister or Luke, I went to my room to change into a pair of loose sweats and an old T-shirt. I washed my face and tied my hair up before returning to the kitchen to find the kettle boiling. I dropped a chamomile tea bag into one of Kim's mugs and poured the water over it.

The kitchen filled with the citrus aroma, and I wrapped my hands around the mug, lifted it under my nose, and inhaled deeply.

I liked my routine of coming home after a long shift to sit with a cup of tea and my book. It was a nice way to wind down and have some time to myself. It had taken a little while for me to enjoy it, to be honest, and I chalked that up to always being with Luke when I lived with Kent because he was so uninvolved in our family.

Now, with my own job and a sister who helped me with my son, I was able to come home and take a breather every

now and then and just sit with my thoughts.

And my thoughts were so much different than they used to be.

Where I used to sit and worry, I now dreamed. Back in Philadelphia being alone made me anxious because I was always waiting for something to go wrong. I was waiting for Kent to come home drunk. I was waiting for him to yell at me, to get angry, to break things.

Now, all I was confronted with was contentment and ease. I left the kitchen and walked around the dining room table toward the living room. I noticed two of the chairs from the table set were missing. I wondered what kinds of shenanigans Kim and Luke had gotten up to together. Chances were there was a poorly constructed fort somewhere in the house—Luke liked to drape a sheet over the backs of the chairs and then pile pillows underneath. He'd tuck himself away with his GI Joe action figure for hours before he emerged with a growling belly.

As I sat down in my favorite corner of the couch with my tea, I opted not to read my book. Instead, I sat cross-legged and contemplated how much my life had changed.

My son was happy and healthy and would be starting school in less than two months. My sister was back in my life, and I was infinitely grateful for her help, her love, and her advice.

Advice that had granted me a chance to be with Jax again.

I smiled into my cup of tea as I took a sip.

My thoughts always ended up back with him. I liked to close my eyes and picture that wicked smile of his, the smile that made my stomach flutter and my panties wet. He was kryptonite to me. Ever since our moment together in his truck, I'd been having a hard time focusing on anything else. If I really committed to the memory, I could still feel his lips on mine, lingering like the tingle of a plumping lip gloss.

I would call him in the morning and see when he was free next. Maybe it was time to let him meet Luke. Jax was a smart

man. He wouldn't come in and disrupt things. He would just meet Luke, and the two of them could get to know each other as friends first.

I caught myself smiling again.

When I finished my tea, I washed my mug and left it on the counter to dry. I tiptoed carefully down the hall to see Luke. His door was open just a crack, and I could see his nightlight sending dancing stars up against the ceiling.

I pushed the door open gently and slipped inside. Closing it behind me to block the light from the hallway, I turned back around, resting my shoulder blades on the door.

Luke was wide-awake and sitting up in bed. He was propped up on the headboard and had his hands in his lap. He was looking at me, and as soon as we locked eyes, I knew something was wrong.

Luke looked to the far corner of the room.

I followed his gaze to find two people sitting in chairs.

The missing dining room chairs.

My heart started hammering in my chest. My mouth went dry.

Kim was sitting beside a broad-shouldered man with a head of thick blond hair. He was looking at me with eyes that I knew were piercing blue. His arms were crossed over his burly chest. Kent.

“Look who decided to show up.” Kent’s voice was as dark and mean as I remembered. A chill wove down my spine, and I could taste my own fear in the back of my throat. “Mother of the fucking year.”

“What are you doing here?” I wanted my voice to sound strong and assertive. Instead, it came out in a weak whisper.

Kent laughed at me. “I’m here to get my son, you bitch. What do you think I’m here for?”

“Leave.”

He laughed again. “I don’t think so. Kim and I are just catching up. And Luke has been telling me all about the time he and his auntie have been spending together. Imagine my relief at finding out my son is being raised by your self-absorbed sister instead of you.”

“I’m not self-absorbed,” Kim said venomously.

Kent’s head swung to her. “All the fancy shit in this place and your thick face of makeup would suggest otherwise.”

Kim rolled her eyes. “That’s called successful. Do you need a definition?”

“Kim, stop it,” I said, sensing the anger radiating off Luke’s father as he glared daggers at my sister.

“Mommy,” Luke said nervously from his bed.

“It’s all right, Luke.” I lifted my chin but never took my eyes off Kent. He was unpredictable, and if history was any indication, he was drunk. “The adults are just talking. Everything is okay.”

Kent got to his feet. I had almost forgotten how big he was. With thick arms and a wide frame, he towered over me as he approached. When he was in front of me, he peered down the length of his crooked nose, broken from several altercations in bars and at work as a bounty hunter, and sneered at me. “We’re just talking, huh?”

“Back up,” I said stiffly.

Kent snorted, and I smelled the booze on him. “Give me a fucking break, Holly. You think you can tell me what to do? Get your shit. We’re going back to Philadelphia.”

Fuck that. And fuck him. I wasn’t going anywhere with him ever again. I was home finally, and I was going to fight to stay here.

Slowly, I clasped my hands behind my back. I found my phone jutting out of the top of my back pocket and worked at sliding it out without Kent noticing.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. Neither is Luke.”

“Like hell you’re not.”

“I mean it,” I said, retreating a step back from him. “I’m sorry I left without saying anything, but I knew you would never let me go if I tried to talk it out with you. I was miserable, Kent. We both were. And that’s not fair to our son. He deserves more than parents who fight all the time and a father who comes home drunk every day. Please tell me you understand where I’m coming from.”

I knew he wouldn’t understand. I knew it was like talking to a wall. But that didn’t matter. My words had bought me enough time to try to send a message to the only person who could help me and my family right now.

I had no clue if what I had typed out made sense. I didn’t even know if I had successfully sent it. But I needed to get word to Jax somehow that I was in trouble, and I hoped he would see it sooner rather than later.

“Luke is my boy, and you’re my woman,” Kent said, jabbing his thumb into his chest. “You don’t get to just up and walk away from me and come live here.” He spun around, gesturing at the extravagance of Luke’s new bedroom. “Your sister was always trying to get between us and break us up. You know that as much as I do. She doesn’t want what’s best for you, baby. She’s just jealous. Come home with me. I can take care of you both. You know I can. Just give me another chance.”

I internally pleaded with Kim not to say anything. She would only make it worse. I had to handle this on my own. I was the only person in the room who had any chance of keeping him calm.

“This isn’t about Kim. I made the decision to leave all on my own. She didn’t even know I left until I called her when I was already in New York City.”

Kent’s upper lip peeled away from his yellowed, liquor-stained teeth. “Oh?”

His anger pulsed in the air around us like a ticking time bomb.

“Listen to me,” I said calmly, “I want to work this out with you. Luke still needs his father in his life, and I don’t want to exile you. Why don’t you go and get a hotel for the night and sleep this off? We can go for coffee in the morning or something and make some arrangements for you to spend time with Luke. This doesn’t have to be a battle, Kent. We can stop this right now from getting out of hand. Meet me halfway here. Please?”

“Halfway?” Kent hissed. “You missed your chance for that bullshit, sweetheart. You shouldn’t have run from me. You shouldn’t have taken my son from me. And no, we won’t talk this out over coffee. Fuck that.”

“Kent, please.”

“No!” He roared, my imagination making the floors and walls vibrate around me.

I hated that I screamed and covered my ears. I hated that I cowered from him and pressed myself against the wall.

I hated that everything felt exactly as it had in Philadelphia.

CHAPTER 17



JAX

I had been pacing for almost an hour. Ryder was watching me from his spot on his sofa, and the television in the corner was playing the early morning news.

“How has she not come back with anything yet?” I growled. “It’s six in the fucking morning.”

“The department is busy.” Ryder shrugged. “She has her hands full with all this Black Hearts nonsense. Not to mention she’s trying to keep this as under the radar as she can. You want a bunch of cops knocking on your door asking you for information about the Zenvo?”

“No,” I said, and I heard how whiny I sounded. “No,” I said more firmly.

“Then we wait.”

We only had to wait another fifteen minutes before Dani finally called. Ryder tossed his phone to me without answering, understanding how impatient I was. “Dani, hey, it’s Jax.”

“Hey Jax,” Dani said, sounding a bit out of breath. “Sorry it took me so long to call you back. I had to get away from everyone for a second. I don’t have much time, but I got the report back on the plate. The car that went after you belongs to a guy named Spencer McKay. You know him?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Nobody at the precinct has, either. Does the name sound familiar to Johnny?”

I asked Ryder if he'd ever heard the name before, and he shook his head. "No, he doesn't know him either."

"Shoot. Okay. That's fine. I was just hoping we could have a bit more leverage if one of us knew him. You were right, Jax, Spencer is a Black Hearts member. Has been for at least seven years. We have teams out looking for him now to bring him in for trying to kill you with his damn car. If I can get some time alone with him in an interrogation room, I can ask him about what went down at the mansion the other week."

"All right. Just tell your guys not to get too close to him. The guy is fucking crazy."

"I know. Don't worry. We'll be safe."

I tossed the phone back to Ryder, who chatted with his woman for only a couple of minutes before hanging up and giving me his attention. "She'll do her best, man. And her best usually works."

"Yeah. I trust her. She's a good cop." I made for his front door. "I'm going to head home. Pass this shit on to the others, all right? Tell them to keep their eyes peeled for a matte black Zenvo and to call me if they see it."

"Consider it done."

I nodded and opened the front door.

"Hey, Jax?"

I paused and looked back at Johnny, whose expression was serious. "You're good at this whole giving orders thing."

"Sorry, Boss."

"Don't be."

I closed Ryder's front door behind me and hopped down his front porch steps. As I crossed the driveway and got to my bike, I checked my phone.

I had nearly a dozen text messages from Holly, all sent around one in the morning.

I opened them up, a sense of unease unfurling inside my gut, and stared down at the thread of incoherent messages. All

of them were nothing but jumbled letters and spaces and symbols but had all been sent within the same one minute window.

Either she was plastered last night and had drunk texted me, or something was seriously wrong.

I wasn't going to waste any time figuring out which was the case. I got on my bike and tore out of Ryder's driveway. The engine roared and the tires squealed, and I knew Ryder would give me a piece of his mind for leaving in such a raucous and disturbing his neighbors in the early morning hours.

But his neighbors be damned.

Holly needed me.

I pulled up out front of her apartment fifteen minutes later. I left the bike on the street and ran up to the front doors, which I pounded on mercilessly until a middle-aged man in a bathrobe emerged from one of the bottom floor units.

He squinted against the sunlight streaming through the glass door as he approached, using his hand as a visor. He looked me up and down and decided I was not the sort of man he would be letting into his building.

"I'm not letting you in," he said somewhat timidly.

I pressed my forefinger against the glass, pointing at his chest. "If you don't open this fucking door, I'm going to break it. My girl is in trouble, and if you stand between me getting to her, I'm going to use your face as a fucking punching bag. You hear me?"

The man's eyes widened briefly, and he shuffled closer to the door. "I could get in a lot of trouble for letting you in. I'm not supposed to—"

"No one will know you let me in if you open this door in five seconds."

"I don't think—"

"Five."

“Sir, please. Can’t you just wait for her to come down?”

“Four.”

The man stomped his foot in distress. A grown ass man actually stomped his foot.

“Three.”

“All right, all right! Fine.” He threw up his hands before unlocking and opening the door.

I blew past him, my shoulder clipping his, and sent him reeling sideways. “Sorry,” I called over my shoulder as I raced to the door to the stairs.

“Don’t make me regret this!” I heard him yell after me as I took the stairs two at a time.

I emerged on the third floor and pounded on the first door I came to. I had no clue which unit was Kim’s, and I wasn’t going to go around breaking everyone’s door down.

At least, I wasn’t going to start like that. As a last resort, I knew I would do whatever it took.

No one answered the first door, so I moved to the second and pounded on it like a madman. A woman yelled that she was coming, and I gave her maybe fifteen seconds before knocking again.

When she tore open the door, she stared up at me furiously, frizzy strands of red hair sticking up in every direction. She was an attractive middle-aged woman with sharp eyes and a square jaw. “What the fuck do you want?” she asked, her eyes giving me a sweeping up down. She looked back up at my face and narrowed her eyes. “I suggest you get the hell out of here before I call the police.”

“I’m looking for Kimberly Whitton’s apartment. She’s in trouble. I know you have no reason to believe me, but please. I’m begging you. Do you know which unit she’s in?” I wasn’t above begging. Not right now.

One of her red eyebrows arched. “Kimberly is in trouble?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“What sort of trouble?”

I bit back a smart-ass remark along the lines of, “*the same kind of trouble you’ll be in if you make me stand here any longer,*” and took a deep breath. “I don’t know yet. That’s why I’m here.”

“Young man, I’m going to call the police as soon as you leave my doorstep.”

“That’s fine.” I told myself that this was the kind of neighbor Kim should have. She was looking out for her own.

“She’s in unit three eleven. Around that corner there, third door on the right.”

“Thank you,” I said, already jogging away from her and down the hall.

“Don’t you dare hurt those girls!” she shouted after me.

I needed to work on my appearance, apparently. It definitely wasn’t doing me any favors right now.

I rounded the corner and found unit three eleven. I pressed my ear to the door first and forced myself to steady my breathing so I could listen for any potential danger on the other side.

Silence.

I knocked—or rather, I pounded—on the door hard enough for it to rattle on its hinges. “Holly? Open the damn door!”

Nothing. Silence hung around me like a thick fog. I tried the handle and wasn’t surprised to find it locked.

“I’m coming in!” I shouted, taking a step back.

“If you break that door down, boy, you’ll be paying for it!”

I looked down the hall to find the red-headed woman watching me. She had her cell phone in her right hand and was gripping it tightly.

I rammed my shoulder into the door. I ignored the neighbor as she took a picture of me. On the second hit, the padlock broke and the door shifted inward a couple inches. By

the time I hit it a third time, it burst open, and I had an audience out in the hallway. All the other neighbors were peeking around their doorframes to get a slice of the drama.

I stepped over the rubble of the door and found myself in a neat little entranceway. Holly's jacket hung on the hook and so did her work bag. So, she was home.

At least, I hoped she was.

"Holly?" I called as I walked down the hallway.

I emerged in a kitchen, and then the rest of the apartment.

I didn't like what I saw.

Holly was sitting on the sofa. Beside her, in the middle seat, was a blond-haired, green-eyed boy. He was staring at me over the back of the couch, and he was only visible from the nose up. His little fingers were wrapped around the top of the sofa cushions, and his grip on them tightened when I met his eyes.

On the other side of the boy was Kim. She looked older than I remembered but still quite pretty. The mascara smudged under her eyes was a telltale sign that she had been crying. Holly's eyes were red, and her nose was pink. It would appear she had also been crying.

Across from them, sitting at the dining room table, was Kent.

Seeing him made my blood boil.

He had his muddy boots up on the dining table, which was littered with more than a dozen empty beer cans. The whole place reeked of the stuff, and Kent belched loudly as he clasped his hands behind his head and regarded me with a cool, drunken gaze.

"Well, hello there, Bryan Roberts. I hear you've got a thing for my woman?" Kent's words were slurred and thick, but his eyes were focused. He was staring right at me, and the rage in my gut matched the fury in his eyes.

I looked away from the drunk asshole and met Holly's eye. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head as her bottom lip trembled.

Kent got to his feet. “You think I’d hurt my own woman?” He pointed an accusing finger at me. “She’s mine, you fucking criminal. Get the fuck out of here.”

I ignored her. “Kim, you all right?”

Kim nodded but never took her eyes off Kent, who was becoming more and more furious by the second.

“Hey, I’m talking to you, asshole!”

I turned slowly back to Kent and considered how I should handle the situation. If Luke wasn’t watching, I would have already broken several of Kent’s bones and had him on the floor. But the boy *was* watching, and regardless of how big an ass his father was, I wasn’t going to let him see such violence.

I was better than that.

Wasn’t I?

Kent tempted fate by stepping up close to me and prodding me in the chest. He was nearly of equal height to me, and I could smell his foul breath when he spoke.

“Get the hell out. You’re no good for my Holly. She’s coming home with me, whether she wants to or not, and you’re gonna forget all about her. You hear me?”

My fists tightened at my sides. It would feel so good to crack my knuckles against the side of his skull. It would be over before he even knew what was happening.

“I said, do you hear me?” Kent hissed, spittle spraying my jaw.

I wiped it away with the back of my hand. “Oh, I hear you all right. Get the fuck out.”

CHAPTER 18



HOLLY

Jax was nose to nose with Kent, who was so furious he was practically foaming at the mouth. I pulled Luke up against me and wrapped my arms around him as he started to cry.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, trying to sound brave for him, “It’s okay. I promise.”

Kim slid across the couch to hold on to both of us, and we all stared at the two men, waiting for the inevitable violence to begin.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kent spat, turning away from Jax and falling back down into the dining room chair. He kicked his feet up on the table, and the beer cans bounced upon the wood. “I’m staying right here with my woman and my son. You’re the one who’s gonna get the fuck out.”

“She’s not your woman,” Jax said.

“You bet your fucking ass she is, Bryan. She’s always been mine. I know the shit the two of you used to pull behind my back. I’m not a moron. But she chose me. She followed me to Philadelphia. She left your sorry ass here to rot with your fucking MC buddies. She didn’t want to get caught up with a bunch of criminals. She’s always been better than you.”

I wanted to tell Kent how wrong he was, but my voice was caught in my throat. His words, however, seemed to have no impact on Jax, who remained where he was, expression unchanged.

“Get up,” Jax said.

“No.”

Jax moved faster than I'd ever seen anyone move. Before any of us had any idea what was happening, Jax had the front of Kent's shirt in his fist and was hauling him to his feet. Kent was a drunken, stumbling mess, and Jax used it to his advantage as he dragged Kent out of the dining room and into the hall.

“Holly,” Jax called, “Stay where you are. I won't be long.”

I listened to something break in the hall as Jax shoved Kent out the front door. A woman somewhere out in the hall yelled in surprise.

I bit my bottom lip and looked at my sister. “Stay here with Luke. I have to go with them and make sure neither of them does something stupid. Okay? Promise you'll stay here?”

Kim nodded. “Promise.”

“No, Momma,” Luke whimpered, clinging to the front of my shirt. “Don't go.”

“I have to, Luke. I'll be okay. Don't worry about me. Neither of them will hurt me.”

“Don't go.” Luke started to cry.

My heart broke as I pried his fingers loose from my shirt and left him and my sister on the couch. I rushed out into the hall to find one of Kim's neighbors, a red-headed woman, standing with her hand on her chest as she stared around the corner and down the hall.

I ran by her, and she caught my elbow. “You best stay here, dear. I'm going to call the police. Is anyone in the apartment hurt?”

“No,” I said hurriedly. “Everyone is fine. Don't call the police. My friend is handling it.”

“The one in the plaid?”

“The leather,” I said.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Don’t be so judgmental,” I said, brushing by her and jabbing the elevator button. “Did they take the stairs?”

The red-headed woman nodded. “I don’t think ‘take’ is the right word. Your friend sort of dragged the other down them.”

“Good,” I muttered as the elevator door chimed and slid open. “Don’t call the cops. Everything is under control.” The doors closed as the woman nodded at me.

Even though the ride to the first floor was only seconds, it felt like forever. I wrung my hands as I waited for the doors to open, and once they started to, I squeezed through. I ran across the foyer, slipping between a man in his bathrobe and a woman I assumed was his wife. They both yelled at me to stay inside.

I could see Jax out on the lawn. He was looming over Kent, who was on his ass in the grass, staring defiantly up into Jax’s face. They were yelling at each other, that was for sure, and I was shocked to see that there was no blood.

Yet.

I made for the door and the man in the robe stopped me. “Stay inside. Those two came through here like bulls in a china shop. It’s not safe.”

“One of them is my friend.”

The man blinked. “The one in the leather?”

I nodded. “I was in trouble. He came to help me. Please make sure no one calls the police? We can handle this on our own. I know it’s not conventional, but it’s what works. Okay?”

The man’s eyes flicked back and forth between mine, but eventually, he conceded. “I’ll hold off for now. But if it starts to get bad ...”

“Whatever,” I said, “That’s fine.” Then, I raced outside and down the steps to the lawn.

Jax looked over at me and raised a hand. “Stay where you are.”

I stayed. My bare feet were on the edge of the concrete path and the grass and it separated me from them like crime scene tape. Despite the distance, I still wanted to say my piece. I had confidence now and the comfort of safety. Jax would never let something happen to me. I finally had an opportunity to speak my mind and my truth without fear of setting Kent off. If he lost it, Jax would handle it.

“Kent,” I started, my voice more commanding than I had ever heard it. “You are going to leave and never come back here. You can see Luke once a month in a public place, and I have to be present. If you ever pull anything like this again—”

“Me and my entire MC are coming after your ass,” Jax finished for me. “And if I see your face around here again, I’m not going to take it easy on you.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Kent growled, getting to his feet and brushing dirt and grass from his jeans. “I’m not going to be kept away from my son.”

“You kept yourself away from him!” I yelled.

Both men turned to stare at me. Fury was building inside my chest, and I needed to get it out. “You had your chances, Kent. I gave you hundreds of them. I pleaded with you to stop drinking, and I told you what would happen if you didn’t. I warned you for years before I finally had the nerve to get the hell away from you. You’re an angry drunk. You’re a mean father. And you never, ever treated me right. I deserve better than you and so does Luke, and I’m done lying to myself to keep you happy. You will never get me back. Not ever.”

Kent and Jax were both staring at me. Jax had a weird smirk on his lips, almost like he was impressed by me finally standing up for myself. His confidence in me felt really fucking good. I put my hands on my hips and straightened. “Go home, Kent. And try not to drink yourself to death. Luke is still going to need you in his life.”

I thought I was being more than fair. I thought Kent would see the reason and the mercy in what I was offering him.

But when his hands balled into fists and his sneer shifted from me to Jax, I knew how wrong I had been.

“Kent, don’t!” I shrieked.

But it was too late.

Kent had snapped. His rage gave him tunnel vision, and at the end of that tunnel was Jax.

Kent buried one fist in Jax’s side, who grunted with the impact and staggered back a step. I took a step out onto the grass. Jax held his ribs and let out a fierce snarl that froze me in place. I retreated back to the pavement and watched, body shaking with nerves, as Kent wound back to strike again.

Jax was too fast and too angry to be caught unaware again. He slipped by Kent’s fist, which had been barrelling toward his face, and dealt my ex three quick punches to the gut that dropped him to his knees. Once he was down, Jax knocked him flat on his back with a strike to the jaw and pressed a boot to Kent’s chest.

He leaned over and the two of them exchanged words I couldn’t hear. A few seconds later, Jax lifted his foot and Kent rolled to the side. He scrambled a few feet across the grass, staggered to his feet, and then jogged over to the sidewalk where his Dodge Charger was parked. He shot me a dark look before getting into the car and driving away.

I ran across the grass to Jax and threw my arms around his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me to him as I cried against him. “Thank you,” I sobbed.

He kissed the side of my head and then released me to cup my cheeks in both hands. He looked me straight in the eyes. “You swear he didn’t lay a hand on you? Or Luke or Kim?”

“I swear. He didn’t hurt us. He just terrorized us all night while he got piss drunk. I don’t know what would have happened if you didn’t come. I was so scared.”

“I’ve got you,” Jax said, his voice soothing and soft. “You’re all right. Everything is all right. Come on, let’s get you inside away from all these assholes who wanted a show.”

I nodded as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and held me to his side as we walked back up the path and steps. A crowd had gathered in the foyer, and the man in the robe opened the door for us. Jax thanked him with a nod and steered me through the throng of apartment residents toward the elevator. We got on, and I started sobbing again as soon as the doors closed and we were alone.

Jax let me cry. He hugged me close as I sobbed and rested his chin on my head. He didn't say anything. He just let me grieve until the doors opened, and then I was able to pull myself back together.

Still tucked under his arm, we returned to Kim's apartment to find her and Luke still curled up in the corner of the sofa. When they saw me come in through the kitchen archway, both of them launched off the sofa and ran to me. Luke wrapped his arms around my legs, and my sister raced by me to hug Jax, who stood awkwardly in place for a moment before Kim apologized and stepped back, wiping the tears from under her eyes.

"It's okay," Jax said.

I crouched down in front of Luke and hugged him tightly. "Everything is fine now. We're all safe. Are you okay?" I held his face in my hands.

Luke's bottom lip trembled, but he nodded.

I hugged him again and kissed his cheek. "You're such a good boy."

There were a dozen things I felt I needed to do in that moment. I needed to feed my son. He needed to eat. He also needed to sleep. So did I, and so did Kim. Now that the danger was gone, I was acutely aware of how hungry and exhausted I was. I had been up all night long, sitting in fear, worrying for hours that Kent was going to hurt my family.

Now that the threat was gone, I was afraid I wouldn't have the strength to even stand up.

But there were other things I needed to do. Primarily, I had to introduce Luke to Jax. I didn't want to wait and do it later. I

wanted to get it over with and show Luke that Jax wasn't someone he had to be afraid of. He was a friend. Someone to be trusted.

I looked up over my shoulder at Jax and saw his hand resting on his ribs.

Somehow, I stood. "Are you hurt?"

Jax shook his head, and his hand fell from his side. "No. I'm fine."

"You're sure?" I didn't believe him. I had seen it when Kent hit him.

But Jax smiled, and the softness of his eyes put my mind at ease. "You and I both know I've seen worse.

I couldn't argue with that. Jax's lifestyle put him right smack dab in the middle of fights that were much worse than anything Kent could deliver.

Much worse.

CHAPTER 19



JAX

Holly and her sister looked exhausted. They'd had a hellish night, and so had Luke, who was hiding behind Holly's legs and peering up at me with wide green eyes. He looked just like her. It was unreal.

Holly reached around behind her and rested a hand on Luke's head. "Luke, you don't have to be shy. This is my friend, Jax. I've known him since I was really young."

Luke shrank back further. I couldn't blame the kid. I'd just dragged his father out of the house in a not so friendly manner and then kicked his ass out on the front lawn. It wasn't the way I had been hoping to meet him.

I crouched down, ignoring the tightness in my side from where Kent's knuckles had hammered into my ribs. I didn't get any closer, and I was mostly speaking to Holly's thighs, but that didn't matter. Luke needed time to feel comfortable. All I needed to do right now was make the introductions.

"Hey, Luke," I said, "you don't have to come out, but I just wanted to say hello. Your mom told me you really like Legos, and you're pretty good at building stuff. Maybe one time you and I could build something together?"

Luke peered at me, and his fingers tightened in Holly's jeans.

"You just let me know when you want to play," I said, rising back to my feet. Holly was smiling at me.

"Can you give me a minute?" she asked. "I want to get him something to eat and see if he might be able to get some

sleep.”

“Yeah, no problem,” I said and watched her and Luke disappear into the kitchen.

Kim nudged me with her elbow. “Want to sit for a minute?” She pointed her chin to the sofa.

I followed her to the couch and took a seat at the opposite end from her. She pulled her legs up under herself and held her ankles as she regarded me with an unreadable expression. “This would have been a disaster if you hadn’t shown up, you know.”

I had no idea how to respond to her statement, so I shrugged slightly and broke eye contact.

“No, seriously Jax. Kent scares the hell out of Holly. He always has. Thanks for coming and making sure she was safe.”

I still couldn’t think of a damn thing to say, so I sat there like an idiot waiting for her to say something besides thank you. I wasn’t good with thank-yous.

“How do you feel about her?”

I met Kim’s eyes. That was a question I could answer. “The same way I’ve always felt. I care more than is good for me. Holly is and always has been my Achilles’ heel. You know that as well as everyone else.”

Kim smiled and pulled at a loose thread at the hem of her shirt. “Yeah. I think I just wanted to hear you say it out loud. You’re a lot different than the young guy who was always following my sister like a lost puppy dog.”

“I did not—”

She arched an eyebrow.

“All right. Fine.” I conceded.

Kim chuckled. “She feels the same way about you, you know. Are you free tomorrow night?”

“Sorry?”

“Tomorrow night. Are you free?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, wondering where the hell this was going.

“Take Holly out again. Don’t bring her home this time. Luke and I will hold down the fort, and if you two decide, you can go back to your place. You both deserve some quality alone time I think. Yes?”

“If you let me fix your door, it’s a deal.”

Kim blinked. “Right. I don’t have a front door.”

“No. Sorry about that.”

She surprised me by laughing. She laughed so hard she was holding her ribs and blinking tears from the corners of her eyes. She dabbed the wetness away with her thumbs and got herself under control. “Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry. No, I’m tired. I’m really, really tired. I think I’m losing it a bit.”

“It’s all good. You should go to bed. I’ll call some guys and have them fix your door.”

“Some MC guys?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not even a little bit,” Kim said as she stood and walked around the sofa. She stopped behind me and put her hand on my shoulder. “Thanks again and not just for the whole Kent thing.” She gave my shoulder a squeeze and then slipped away, vanishing behind the door to her bedroom.

I was left alone in the living room with an aching side and made a quick call to Sabian. He answered almost right away, his voice thick with sleep. “Dude. What do you want? It’s not even eight.”

“I know. Sorry. Had a bit of an altercation at Holly’s apartment, and I was hoping you could swing by with a new door. I can text you the dimensions.”

There was a brief pause on the other end. “An altercation, hey?”

“I can give you the details when you get here, all right?”

“Fine. Fuck, man, it’s so fucking early.”

“Just get your ass out of bed. I’ll text you the dimensions and give you the cash when you get here. By the way, did Ryder call you yet?”

“No, was he supposed to?”

“Yeah, but he knows you like your beauty sleep. I’ll fill you in on more Black Hearts developments when you get here. Dani has new information.”

“All right. I’ll head out after I shower. Send me her address too.”

I hung up the phone just as Holly came out of the kitchen. She was wiping what appeared to be peanut butter from the corners of Luke’s mouth as he padded along beside her wiping sleep from his eyes.

She caught my gaze and smiled. “Luke is just going to get into bed, and then I’ll be right back, okay?”

I nodded. “See ya around, Luke.”

He waved at me. Progress was progress.

I got up and searched through the kitchen drawers for a measuring tape. I found one, measured the door, and then sent a text to Sabian.

I returned to the living room at the same time as Holly. “What were you doing?” She asked, dropping down on the couch and curling up into a ball, similar to how her sister had been sitting.

“Measuring the door. I have a buddy on the way with a new one that we’ll put in for your sister.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” I said, sliding closer to her. “It’s nothing. Besides, Kim and I made a deal.”

“Oh?”

“I replace the door, and she babysits Luke all night long tomorrow. If you’re comfortable with it, of course. Dinner and

then my place? It was her idea.”

Holly beamed at me. “I would love that. As long as Luke is okay, count me in.”

“Great,” I said, running my fingers over her shoulder.

We sat quietly together for a moment.

“Jax?” she said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Is something bothering you?”

She could read me like a fucking book. She’d always been able to for as long as I could remember. I don’t know how she did it, but she could see things in me that I didn’t even know were there.

“No, I’m good.”

“I don’t believe you. Tell me what’s wrong.”

I scratched the back of my neck and sighed. “I just didn’t want you to have to see me like that. I’m sorry. That part of me, the angry part, that’s not who I am anymore. That’s just —”

“Jax,” she said sternly, “stop it. I’m not afraid of you. You did what you had to do, and I’m grateful for it. Don’t convince yourself that you’re the bad guy. Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Good,” she said, stifling a yawn and reaching her arms over her head in a dramatic stretch. “How long until your friend is here?”

“I don’t know. An hour or so. He’s kind of a flake, so he might make a couple of stops on the way.”

“Have a nap with me?”

I hadn’t slept all night either, and I was beat. I nodded, and Holly slid across the sofa cushions to cuddle up beside me.

The warmth of her body was comforting, and her cheek on my chest reminded me of the good old days.

Then a strange thought struck me. I had everything that I'd had in the "good old days" back again. I didn't need to keep thinking of Holly as someone I was going to inevitably lose. Maybe our time had finally come, and I could stop believing that I was only going to have her for a moment.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and we both stretched out on the couch and promptly fell asleep.

I woke to someone shaking me with their hand on my shoulder. I blinked a couple times, adjusting to the bright sunlight streaming in through all the windows, and found myself staring up at Sabian.

His mouth was twisted in a smile, and he looked at Holly. "Well, don't you look cozy?"

"Shut up," I groaned, struggling to extract myself from behind Holly, who was still fast asleep.

I ended up having to climb over the back of the sofa so as not to wake her. Then, Sabian and I went down the hall to the front door.

"She's gonna wake up when we start putting the new one in," Sabian noted.

"I know, just give her another half hour or so. I'll fill you in on everything that happened."

"Start with this shit first," Sabian said, gesturing at the door lying across Kim's entryway. "I definitely want to know what the fuck went down here."

I told him everything. Sabian listened intently, eyes widening at the most dramatic parts of the story. When I was done telling him everything about Kent, I shifted gears and told him about the Zenvo trying to run me off the road the previous afternoon.

"You're lucky the bastard didn't kill you," Sabian snarled. "What's his name? Spencer?"

"Spencer McKay. Sound familiar?"

"No." Sabian shook his head.

“Dani is working on finding him and bringing him in. She thinks she’ll be able to get some information out of him about the murders at the Black Hearts clubhouse.”

“Knowing Dani, she won’t have a problem making him talk.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Sabian looked back down at the busted door at our feet. “I’d hate to be the other guy.”

“Yeah.” I chuckled. “You would.”

After shooting the shit for another twenty minutes or so, I went back into the living room to wake Holly up. I told her we were going to make some noise with the door, and she said that was fine and promptly fell back asleep. Then Sabian and I went to work, and within twenty minutes or so Kim’s apartment was private again.

As we worked, some of the neighbors came back out into the hall and asked me all about what happened earlier in the morning. I didn’t give them many details but told them enough to get rid of them. The red-headed woman who had given me a hard time when I was trying to find Kim’s apartment showed up with iced teas for both Sabian and me and apologized for judging me.

I sipped the tea and shook my head at her. “You were protecting your neighbors. I can appreciate that.”

“And you stood up to this ugly bastard.” Sabian chuckled as he leaned against the new door. “I’m impressed.”

“Shut up,” I scowled.

The woman laughed. “Those are good girls in there. I’ll keep my eye out for any trouble. If that man shows his face again, should I call you?”

I nodded and gave her my phone number. “Thanks. I doubt he’ll come back, but you never know.”

She grinned. “Oh, I doubt he’ll come back too. You cleaned the grass with him.” She winked and turned on her heel to head back to her apartment.

Sabian nudged me in the ribs. I winced as he got me in the same spot Kent's fist had landed. Sabian shook his head. "Dude. You let him land one on you? That's a rookie mistake."

"I got distracted," I said defensively.

"Excuses."

"Hey. You weren't there. Fuck off."

"Well, if I was there, I would have told you to pay attention to the big angry drunk guy, and stop staring at the pretty blonde."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. Thanks for your help." I fished enough cash out of my wallet to cover the price of the door and then some. "I'll see you around."

Sabian nodded and turned to go down the hall. "Keep your wits about you, Jax. If someone blatantly just tried to kill you by running you off the road, you can't risk being distracted by a pretty girl with nice eyes. She'll be the death of you."

I ignored my friend and slipped back inside Kim's apartment with the intention of curling up beside Holly to sleep for just a little while longer.

CHAPTER 20



HOLLY

Kim had her back to me as she peered into the depths of her closet while I sat on her bed. She began sorting through all her shirts, pushing them deep into the left side of the closet as she sorted through them.

“You need something just right.” Kim paused and pulled out a silk turquoise top with thin straps. “I bet this would look hot as hell on you.” She spun around and held it out to me.

“I don’t know,” I said, getting to my feet and reaching out to pinch the silk between my thumb and forefinger. “This feels expensive.”

Kim arched an eyebrow. “Are you worried *you* might destroy one of my expensive pieces, or are you concerned that Jax might?”

I fell back on to the edge of the bed and looked at my hands in my lap to try to disguise how fiercely I was blushing. “I would be more comfortable in something less flashy is all.”

Kim snorted. “Oh, please. You’re wearing it, and that’s final. Now we just need something for your bottom half, not that I expect it to stay on very long.” She winked at me over her shoulder as she returned to the closet and began sorting through her skirts and pants.

“No skirts,” I said, “I wore a skirt last time.”

“Yeah, and if I recall correctly, you liked the easy access. I bet Jax did too.”

I tried to stop myself from smiling but failed.

Kim giggled. “No need to be modest. You and I both know what tonight is all about. I also know how impossible it’s going to be for you to keep your hands to yourself.”

Her words couldn’t have been more true. My body was already pulsing with excitement at the thought of having the whole night alone with Jax.

Not only that, but I was eager to see more of who he was now. He was going to take me back to his place after dinner, and I would be privy to how he lived. I would be exposed to all the things he had fought for so long to keep me away from.

Now that wall between us felt like it was gone.

At least, I hoped it was.

“Perfect,” I heard Kim mutter as she pulled something from the very back of her closet. She twisted back around to face me and threw the dark bundle in her hands into my lap.

I stared down at a pair of black denim pants with gold zippers at the ankles. They still had the tag on them, and the price was obscene. “Kim, you can’t be serious. These pants were three hundred dollars, and you haven’t even worn them yet. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can, and you will. They’ve been sitting in my closet for months waiting for the right occasion, and this is definitely it. Here, pair this belt with it. And these shoes.”

Soon, I had all the workings of a perfect outfit sitting in my lap, and Kim was slipping out of the bedroom to give me privacy while I got ready.

She had already done my hair and makeup for me, and I felt like we were back in high school prepping for prom night.

I sighed as I stood in front of her floor-length mirror and stripped out of my sweatpants and tank top. I traded in my scrubs for Kim’s lavish clothes and found myself staring at a girl I hardly recognized but liked.

The heels made my legs look longer, and the way the dark denim hugged my curves had me admiring my shape for the first time in a long time. Kim had dusted bronze powder over

my collarbones and shoulders so I looked sun-kissed, and I made a mental note to purchase some for myself when I was making more money.

I tied the strings of the black strappy heels on my feet and straightened to finish tucking in the green blouse. I turned around, checking out my own perky butt in the new jeans. Jax would most definitely approve.

I emerged from the bedroom, and Luke looked up at me from where he sat on the couch, his mouth full of his last bite of the grilled cheese sandwich I had whipped up fifteen minutes earlier.

“You look pretty, Momma.” He smiled.

Kim swung around the doorway to the kitchen and let out a slow wolf whistle.

I waved both of them away and giggled. There was no denying how good I felt.

There was a knock at the front door. My stomach fluttered with nerves as Kim rushed down the hall to answer it. She hollered at me that Jax was here like I didn’t know that already, and then I listened to her invite him in and tell him I was almost ready.

I went over to Luke and ruffled his hair. “You going to have fun tonight with Auntie Kim?”

Luke nodded, and I wiped crumbs out of the corners of his mouth.

“You be good. I’ll be home tomorrow morning, okay? And we’ll make pancakes.”

“Animal pancakes?”

“Are there any other kind?” I asked.

I kissed the top of my son’s head and turned to find Jax standing beside Kim in the hallway next to the kitchen. I swallowed.

He had shaved—well, sort of shaved. His stubble was tame and controlled now, shaped in sharp angles along his jaw that

made him look more like a wealthy businessman than a member of a biker gang. His hair was slicked back, but the odd strand still managed to escape the confines of the hair product and hung over his forehead. The sheepish smile on his perfect lips was contagious.

“You ready to go?” he asked.

I could almost feel the rumble of his voice inside me. He looked like sex as he stood beside Kim, who made his size look rather daunting.

Kim looked back and forth between us before widening her eyes at me. “Get out of here, you two. Luke and I can’t start having fun until you leave.”

“Shall we?” Jax offered, taking a step forward and offering me his elbow.

I nodded. I was incapable of speech. My nerves had rendered me mute, and so had Jax, coming in here looking fine as hell in his dark suit.

I took his elbow, and he guided me down the hall. Kim hollered goodbye to us as we closed the door behind us, but I was too engrossed in Jax to answer her.

We stepped onto the elevator, and as soon as the doors closed behind us, Jax grabbed my wrist and pulled me to him. His kiss was aggressive, and I sensed he had been struggling to keep his act together while in front of my son and sister.

I kissed him back, hungrier for him than I’d ever been, and wondered if I would even be able to make it to dinner without needing to fuck him.

I doubted it.

We stopped for cocktails at a new bar down the street from Jax’s place. He claimed that he had been meaning to try it out for the last two months but hadn’t found the time or the company worth sharing it with.

It was a trendy place with brick walls and an industrial ceiling hosting hanging Mason jar lamps. We were sitting

beside each other at the bar, and as I crossed my legs, I rested my foot against Jax's shin. His hand wandered down to my knee, where he began tracing slow circles as we chatted. I suspected he didn't realize he was doing it, which, for some reason, turned me on even more.

"Where are you planning on taking me next?" I asked as I sipped my fruity cocktail through a straw.

"Well, I hadn't decided yet. I figured maybe we could walk down the street and pick a place that catches our eye."

"Sounds fun," I mused, unable to stop myself from picturing him naked.

I wasn't blind to the stares other women in the bar were casting our way. Jax was not the kind of man who could go into a place like this and not draw attention. Their gazes were drawn to him with inevitability, but he didn't seem aware of the attention. Two women at the other end of the corner had their heads bowed together and were deep in discussion, and their eyes kept flicking upward to fall on him.

It didn't bother me. He was sitting with me, and if I had been in their shoes, I would have been checking him out too. It was impossible not to.

"How's Luke after yesterday's shit storm?" Jax asked, pulling my thoughts from the envious women around.

"He seems fine. It's all mostly just confusing to him. He doesn't understand why his dad was so angry or why he wanted to scare us. It sucks trying to explain it to him without totally destroying the image he has of Kent in his head. When he gets older, he'll figure it out for himself."

"It goes without saying that if he ever needs anything, I'll be there for him, right?"

I stared into Jax's bright green eyes.

"I mean it, Holly."

"I know," I whispered.

He gave me a warm smile that relieved the tight knot of emotion that had gathered in my throat. What had I done to

ever deserve him?

I finished the rest of my cocktail in three big gulps and set my glass down. “Can we get out of here?”

“Hungry already?”

“No,” I said, “I just want to be alone with you.”

Jax’s smile morphed into a full-blown cocky grin, and he grabbed my hand as I slid off the barstool. “I don’t need to be asked twice,” he said, and we hurried through the bar, shimmying behind people’s chairs and weaving through tables until we tumbled out onto the sidewalk to breathe in the summer air.

Jax still had my hand in his, and he pulled me along down the sidewalk beside him, leaving his truck parked at the curb.

“I’ve had a couple too many,” he admitted, “I’ll come back for it in the morning. My place isn’t far. Five-minute walk, tops. You gonna make it in those ridiculous shoes?”

“Ridiculous?” I exclaimed. “I love these shoes.”

“I never said I didn’t like them. They just can’t be comfortable.”

I frowned down at my feet. “Sometimes comfortable isn’t what a girl wants to be.”

He shot me another wicked grin. “Oh?”

“Don’t get any ideas, now, I was just—”

He chuckled deep in his chest, and before I knew what was happening, he had stooped down and gathered me in his arms. I yelped as he literally swept me off my feet, and I lay in his grasp, paralyzed by embarrassment as other people on the sidewalk giggled as they passed us.

“Put me down,” I pleaded.

“Nah.”

“Oh come on, Jax. I can walk perfectly fine in these shoes. Five minutes isn’t going to kill me.”

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to carry you.”

I scowled at him, but couldn't hold my features together long enough for it to have any effect. Instead, he laughed at me some more, and when I broke out into a smile of my own, he kissed me. His lips tasted like whiskey, and his cologne smelled of pine trees after a healthy rainfall.

Without even trying, he was making me unravel.

"Can't you walk any faster?" I asked, running my tongue along my upper lip.

"Woman, keep that tongue of yours in your mouth, or I'll put you down and lay you out right here and now. Is that what you want?"

I locked my hands behind his head and shrugged coyly. "I want a lot of things right now."

"Tell me."

I leaned in close, pressing my cheek to his, and whispered seductively in his ear. "I want to be on my knees in front of you. I want to taste you. I want you to fuck me until I forget my own name."

Jax let out a husky laugh that danced along my cheek. "And all this time I thought you were a good girl."

"Oh, please," I said, "You never believed that."

Jax didn't put me down until we were on the front steps of his house. I hovered around him, running my hands over his shoulders and down his back as he shoved the key in the deadlock and pushed the door open. My touch made him flustered, and I liked watching him struggle to control himself as he held the door open for me, and I stepped over the threshold.

He didn't give me time to take my shoes off or to look around his place.

All I knew was that the walls were a pale gray. Every other one of my senses was consumed by the man who was pulling my shirt free from my pants and undoing my belt.

I held my arms over my head as he pulled the blouse off. He tossed it over his shoulder before he worked at undoing my

jeans. Once the fly was down, he slid his hands down my back and under the waistband to cup my ass beneath the denim.

All the while, his tongue was exploring my mouth, and I was fighting to catch my breath.

He walked me backward until I was wedged between his body and the back of what I assumed was a sofa. Our kiss was interrupted as he stripped me out of my jeans and then effortlessly lifted me up and placed me on the back of the couch. He pushed my knees apart and stood between my legs to kiss me once more before descending to his knees in front of me.

He pulled my panties to the side.

I moaned before his tongue even touched my clit. I couldn't help myself. My whole body quivered as he licked me up and down, pausing to swirl his tongue around my clit and then draw it between his lips to suckle it gently.

I gripped the back of the sofa as my breathing quickened.

As Jax rolled his tongue over my clit, he slipped a finger inside me and then another and began thrusting them in and out in a delicious rhythm that made me scream his name when I came. He watched me as my body gave in to the pleasure, and I knew he was smiling against my pussy.

Before I knew what was happening, I was being carried deeper into the house. My bare ass was placed on a cool countertop in the kitchen, and Jax pulled me to the edge. I leaned back on my elbows as he dropped his pants and stroked himself before pressing into me.

"Fuck," I breathed, turning my face to the ceiling and closing my eyes.

Jax rocked against me, his hips grinding in circular motions as he thrust himself deep inside my pussy. I gripped his forearms as another orgasm rolled through me, and again, his name fell from my lips.

CHAPTER 21



JAX

“**J**ax,” Holly moaned.

Her eyes were closed, and she was holding on to my wrists for dear life as I buried my cock deep inside her. Her nails pinched my skin, but I didn’t give a damn. In fact, I liked how hard she was clinging to me.

I held myself inside her, forcing her to take all of me. Her eyes fluttered open as another moan escaped her. She lifted her legs in the air for me, encouraging me to press deeper, farther, until there was no more of me left. Somehow, her grip on me tightened even more.

Her pussy was pulsing around my cock, practically begging me to fuck her harder. But I stayed still, teasing her with soft kisses along the tops of her breasts and across her chest. I nibbled her neck and her ears and then kissed her deeply, still tasting the lingering coconut on her tongue from the cocktails at the bar.

“Please,” she whispered into my mouth as her grip on my wrists loosened, and she traced my veins from my forearms all the way up to my shoulders. She ran her fingers up the back of my neck and into my hair. She crushed her mouth against mine like the aggression of the kiss could convince me to give her what she wanted.

I liked making her wait. I liked the way she looked at me, eyebrows drawn together, lips parted as she tried to catch her breath.

“Not yet, baby,” I managed through gritted teeth. Not blowing my load right away was a struggle with Holly. She was way too sexy, way too wet, and my body was aching for the release. “Not yet.”

She groaned. It was a frustrated, uncontrolled sound, and it was almost enough for me to give her what she so desperately wanted. But I knew if I waited just a little longer, it would be worth it.

Holly began rolling her hips as she pulled me closer to her for more kisses. She bit my bottom lip and slipped her tongue between my teeth. Her hips grinding beneath mine had me gripping the edges of the countertop she lay on.

Knowing I couldn't hold out any longer, I pulled out and plunged myself back into her over and over. Her juices coated my cock when she came, and she was reduced to a quivering puddle under me.

I wanted to take her somewhere more comfortable.

I wrapped my hands around her lower back and lifted her from the counter with my cock still in her pussy. I carried her that way up the stairs to my bedroom. I walked her to the bed and laid her down. Kneeling between her legs, I grabbed her ankles to spread her wide.

She ran her hand down my stomach as I fucked her. When she reached my lower stomach, she let her hand fall to her pussy and began rubbing her clit. The sight of her touching herself had me seeing stars.

I slowed down and released her ankles, letting her legs fall to my sides. I reached for the clasp of her bra between her breasts and flicked it apart. It popped open, exposing her full, perky breasts, and descended upon them ravenously.

Holly's hands were in my hair again as I worshipped her breasts with my lips.

When I had my fill, we came apart, and I flipped her over. She got to her knees, but I put a hand in the small of her back and pushed her back down on the mattress. Holly looked over her shoulder at me and wiggled her ass.

I slapped it, and she let out a surprised but delighted yelp and lifted her ass off the bed.

She was such a good girl, but she liked it rough.

I ran my cock up and down her wet pussy, and she held herself in the air for me. She reached back and spread herself open with a hand on either ass cheek.

She was a wonderful sight.

I dipped a finger inside her pussy and one in her ass. She sighed and pressed her forehead to the bed as I banged her, and right when she was about to come again, I replaced my finger in her pussy with my cock.

“Oh my god,” she whimpered, her voice muffled by the blanket.

When she came again, she could barely keep her ass in the air, so I leaned over her, forcing her to lie flat beneath me as I plunged in and out of her. Holly was a breathless vixen, and her sighs pulled me to the brink of my climax.

I froze, her pussy clenching around my shaft. I wasn't done with her yet.

She peered up at me out of the corner of her eye, and I kissed her shoulder blade and then her neck. I traced my free hand up her spine to settle at the base of her neck. I massaged her gently and began slowly fucking her. Her eyes closed and she craned her head back to the ceiling. I gathered her hair in my fist and held her in place as I quickened my thrusts.

Her ass jiggled every time my thighs smacked into her. Her breaths were ragged and short now, and her eyes were closed as I held her in place and buried my cock in her over and over until we both succumbed to our orgasms.

Holly's hair tumbled over her shoulders and in front of her face when I released it, and she pressed her hands to her face.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. Her voice was hoarse from screaming.

I smacked her ass again as I pulled out, and she giggled when I collapsed beside her and rested my hand on my

stomach. “I’d say.”

Holly laid her cheek on the bed and peered up at me out of the corner of the eye that wasn’t hidden by blankets. “Maybe skipping dinner wasn’t the best idea we’ve ever had.”

I chuckled and rested a hand on her thigh. Her skin was silky soft, and I couldn’t keep my hand still. I needed to feel her, even when she lifted that leg and hooked it over mine. “You’re hungry?”

Holly nodded and stifled a yawn. “Starved.”

I twisted around to peer at the clock on my nightstand. It was only ten o’clock. “You want to run out and get something? There should still be plenty of places open to choose from.”

Holly propped herself up and rested her chin on her knuckles. Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lips. “You know, I don’t need anything fancy. I’d kill for a real greasy pizza and a can of soda. Just you and me.”

That sounded like paradise.

My stomach growled, selling me out, and Holly patted my chest. “Come on, big boy. Let’s order. Let me guess, you’re a meat lovers kind of guy?”

I arched an eyebrow. “We both know you’re a meat lover’s kind of gal.”

She popped me in the chest as she got to her knees on the bed and gathered her hair into a ponytail. I couldn’t help myself as I admired her tits, lean stomach, and pale, silvery tiger stripes along her lower belly.

“I *am* a meat lovers fan,” Holly chimed, noticing me staring at her body. She squeezed her boobs together playfully and bit her bottom lip.

“Fuck, woman, cut that shit out. I’m going to lose my damn mind.”

I sat up as Holly hopped off the bed and went to my dresser. She paused to look back at me. “Can I borrow a shirt?”

“Yeah. Top right drawer.”

Holly dressed in one of my navy T-shirts, which hung around the middle of her thighs. She looked hot as sin in it, and I made sure she knew I thought so as I passed her. I grabbed her ass, spun her around, and set her on the dresser while I grabbed sweats and a shirt for myself.

When I was dressed, I stepped between her legs and kissed the very tip of her nose. “After we eat, you’d better be ready for some more of that.”

“You’d better order then. I’m bad at waiting.”

I chuckled deeply and ordered the pizza as Holly slipped into the washroom. I gave her some privacy and waited for her in my living with two glasses of water. When Holly joined me, she drank thankfully, downing the entire glass in a less than thirty seconds. Her stomach rumbling had me feeling guilty that I hadn’t taken her to dinner first.

When the doorbell chimed, I got up from the sofa and paid the delivery guy. I brought the box of cheesy goodness back to the living room, where Holly was waiting for me with her legs neatly crossed underneath herself. I set the pizza down and flipped the lid open as I found myself wishing my shirt was a bit shorter on her.

We set to work on the pizza, both of us burning our mouths and cursing ourselves for being impatient. Our hunger seemed to win out because we did it a couple more times before we were able to enjoy our meal without scalding our tongues.

Holly licked grease from her thumb and nestled comfortably into the corner of the sofa. She stifled a yawn as I packed up the rest of the pizza and got comfortable beside her.

“Tired?” I asked, tilting my head.

She shrugged and indulged in a short stretch. She cracked her spine as she lifted arms over her head. At the same time, the hemline of the T-shirt she wore crept upward, flashing me a brief view of her perfect, shaved pussy. I resisted the urge to lick my lips. If my woman needed rest, then rest was what she would have.

“I’m okay,” she said contently. “I don’t want to waste any alone time I have with you.”

“And sleeping together would be wasting that time?”

“I guess not,” she admitted. “But I like this.”

“Me too.”

We chatted well into the early morning hours until Holly could barely keep her eyes open. Around four o’clock, I gathered her up into my arms and carried her upstairs to the bedroom. I tucked her under the blankets and slid in beside her, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her into me.

She fit perfectly.

The scent of her shampoo flooded my nose as I tucked my chin into the groove of her shoulder. I listened to her deep, even breaths as she grew more and more relaxed.

“I thought you were going to show me a wild time again before bed.” Her voice was the softest whisper.

I nuzzled my cheek against hers. “Hush. There’s always more time for that. You need to sleep.”

She sighed softly and shimmied her hips back to mine, pressing the curve of her ass into my groin. “There’s nothing I could do to change your mind?”

I planted a few soft kisses on her neck. “No, baby girl. Get some sleep.”

Holly mumbled a quiet “good night” and, within a couple of minutes, was fast asleep in my arms.

Which felt fucking amazing.

This moment, right here, was the most intimate I had ever been with a woman, and I was overcome with peace as I breathed in the smell of her. It didn’t get any better than this.

And when it got this good, it usually meant things were about to take a bad turn.

CHAPTER 22



HOLLY

“Holly! Let’s go, toots. Chop, chop!”

I glared up at Talon as I passed through the kitchen to change into a new apron. My whole afternoon had been an absolute shit show at work, and one of the kids at one of my tables had just managed to spill his entire soda all over the front of my jeans.

“I’m covered in sticky soda,” I grated, “I need two minutes to try to dry off and change into a new apron.”

“Make it one. The lunch rush has barely gotten started.”

I rolled my eyes as I blew through the swinging doors from the kitchen to the staff room.

“I saw that!” Talon called after me.

I ignored him and went to my locker, where I desperately searched through my bag in hopes that I had, by some miracle, packed an extra pair of jeans. I knew I hadn’t, but I looked anyway.

I submitted to patting the front of my jeans dry with a paper towel. Then I grabbed a new apron and fastened it around my waist.

As I was about to turn and head back out to the floor, Claire came in. She sighed and pressed her back to the wall. “I hate afternoon shifts.”

“I hear you, sister.” I made for the door and stopped to rest a hand on her shoulder. “But they’re usually decent money, right? Helps make up for it.” I winked to try to cheer her up.

She was exhausted, I could tell. Being a single mom to three boys and then having to come to work at a zoo like The Roost was taking its toll.

“Decent money. Right.” Claire nodded as if she were attempting to convince herself the shift wouldn’t be that bad.

I, for one, was certain it would be bad.

I squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “Just let me know if you need extra hands out there. We can help each other out and cover our sections if one of us needs five minutes to decompress.”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Thank you, Holly. I don’t know how I’d survive this place without you.”

“That’s how I feel about you too. You keep me sane when Talon is having a temper tantrum.”

Claire giggled, and the two of us returned to the front to resume our serving shifts.

I greeted my first table with a smile and the best attitude I could slap on.

The man sitting closest to me looked up, his eyes narrowing slightly as he stared at my face. I wondered if he usually wore glasses, and the squinting made his vision better.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” I said before diving headlong into the list of daily specials.

As I went through them, I noticed how out of place all four men at the table were. They were all dressed in suits that probably cost more than my brain could fathom. Rings winked on some of their fingers, and I spotted a tattoo on an odd knuckle. They would have looked more at ease in an underground illegal club playing poker while smoking big, fat cigars out of the corner of their mouths.

One of them, a man with a shiny bald head and the broadest shoulders I had ever seen on a man, turned slightly to face me. He looked me up and down, starting at my feet, and then gave me a crooked smile that never showed his teeth. My chest tightened and the hairs on my arms stood up.

Danger.

He ran his thumb along his jaw before stroking his chin. “Well, hello there,” his eyes flicked to my name tag, “Holly.”

“Hi.”

“You don’t look like the sort of girl who should be waiting tables in a place like this,” he purred.

I internally rolled my eyes but kept my expression neutral as I anticipated a job offer at a sleazy bar where I would probably be expected to wear six-inch heels and lingerie to work.

“You don’t look like the sort of man to be having lunch at a place like this, either, but here we are.” I delivered the words with a smile and a teasing kind of attitude. I knew how to navigate my way around this kind of customer.

He chuckled and so did his buddies. “All right, Holly. I hear you. Just a pitcher of beer for me and my boys here.”

“Anything to eat?”

“What I want isn’t on the menu, sweet cheeks.”

This time I couldn’t keep myself from rolling my eyes. “Listen, I have a job to do here, nothing else. I’m not going to indulge in this type of conversation every time I come by your table this afternoon, all right?” My tone was sharp and demanding, and I was a little proud of myself for having the nerve to tell him to, in nicer terms, shut the fuck up.

He chuckled again. “I apologize.”

I nodded and ran my palms over my apron. “Thank you. I’ll be right back with your beer.”

I left their table and found myself dreading going back to serve them. I considered seeing if another server would switch sections with me, but as I looked around at the others I could ask, I quickly decided against it. Talon would never step in to help, and the guys at the table would probably scare the shit out of him anyway. And besides Talon, the only others I could ask were younger female servers. I wasn’t going to offer them up like pigs for slaughter to those business goons.

I held my chin high when I returned to their table with a pitcher of beer and four glasses. I set it all down and didn't bother filling their glasses for them. Instead, I asked again if they wanted to order food, and they surprised me by all putting in orders.

Twenty minutes later, when I returned with plates of burgers and fries, the same bald man who had hit on me drummed his fingers on the table.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, the impulse to pop my hip out like an irritated diva rippling through me. Instead, I put my hand on my hip.

"No, nothing at all. I just wanted to ask. Do you know Jax?"

I was hit with a dozen thoughts all at once. The dire ones pressed to the foreground of my mind as I studied the man in front of me.

These assholes wouldn't come into The Roost to ask me if I knew Jax unless they already knew I did. Lying would be foolish and could land me in hot water quickly. I wasn't up for playing any games with men like these. They'd walk circles around me before I knew they had me in their jaws.

"Yeah. He's an old friend from high school."

"Is he now?"

I nodded, nervousness fluttering in my belly. "We used to be close, but I moved away and just came back about a month ago. It's been nice to have at least one person in this crazy city while I find a normal routine again."

"You were gone a long time?"

"Six or so years, yeah."

He lifted his eyebrows and took a mouthful of beer. When he swallowed, I noticed a scar bobbing along his Adam's apple.

"A piece of advice from someone who has spent a lot of time around men like Jax. You should keep your distance from

him, sweetheart. Keep that pretty head of yours down here with all these normal folk.”

I wanted to tell him to get stuffed. I wanted to tell him I could handle my damn self. I also wanted to defend Jax, who had never done anything to make me consider him not normal. I pushed down all the urges to spit the words at him and resolved to the less confrontational response instead.

“I appreciate your concern on my behalf, but trust me, I can take care of myself.”

“I have no doubt you can, little lady. But this life has a way of eating you up and spitting you out as someone different—*something* different. Jax should know better than to get you involved in this shit.”

What shit? I wondered as I bit down hard on my tongue to keep myself from speaking the question aloud. I forced a smile on my lips and shrugged off the conversation. “Can I get you gentlemen anything else or just the bill?”

“Just the bill, sweets,” the bald one said with a grin.

When I turned and walked to my register, I half expected him to slap my ass, but he didn’t. I could feel all their eyes burning holes in my back as I went, though, and that was uncomfortable enough.

I brought the bill back to their table and placed it between them all. “Take your time.” I turned on my heel and didn’t give them the opportunity to strike up another conversation. I wanted these men out of the restaurant as soon as possible, and then I wanted to warn Jax what had happened.

In all my years knowing him, I had never been questioned by men who certainly didn’t work nine to five jobs. These guys were thugs, criminals, crime lords—who the fuck knew? All I was sure of was that they were dangerous, and now they knew where I worked.

This left my heart fluttering nervously. If they had come in here to find me, what else did they know about me?

Did they know I had a son?

Fuck.

Did they know where I was living at Kim's place? Did they know about Kim?

I untied my apron and hurried into the break room to catch my breath as panic started clawing at my throat.

I grabbed a bottle of water from my bag and sipped on it as I paced back and forth. I was overreacting. I had to be. If those men really wanted to send a message, it would have been clearer, more direct, and probably violent.

They wouldn't just come in and have burgers and ask a few questions about the guy I was seeing.

Or would they?

"Pull it together, Holly," I mumbled to myself. "You're getting worked up over something that might be nothing. Jax will know what to do."

Just then the door to the break room flew open, and Talon marched in. "You're still on the clock. Get your ass back out there and finish with your tables. I didn't say you could take a break."

I took another greedy gulp from my water bottle. "I had a table that frightened me, Talon. You can afford to give me a minute to get my bearings and have some water."

He scowled at me and crossed his arms. "Get on the floor, now."

I paused with the cap half screwed on my water bottle. "Fine." I took the top off and marched forward, my lips peeling off my teeth in an angry snarl as I lifted the water bottle and shook it violently at Talon.

The water splashed out, soaking his entire front. He yelped and looked up at me, horrified. I tossed the now empty bottle over my shoulder.

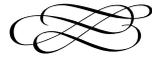
"Stop treating your staff like we're less than you, Talon. Or mark my words, I'm bringing some of my friends here to set you straight. I'm tired of your bullshit. You own a family restaurant, not a high-class hotel."

Talon coughed and sputtered as I headed out the door back to the floor.

The table of four goons was now empty, and when I went to collect their dishes, I found a tip waiting for me. Two fresh hundred-dollar bills had been tucked under one of the plates, and wrapped around it was a sticky note with slanted handwriting scribbled across it.

*“Thanks for the service, doll face. You’re a real charmer. Jax
doesn’t
deserve you.
-TJ”*

CHAPTER 23



JAX

It was early when my phone started ringing. I mumbled under my breath as I rolled over on to my stomach, reaching across the bed to my vibrating phone on the nightstand. I knocked over a glass half full of water, swore under my breath, and finally grabbed hold of the phone.

“Hello?” I said, my voice hoarse and dry.

“Hey,” Holly said into the phone. “I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Yes, but don’t be sorry. It’s a nice way to wake up. Everything all right?”

“Oh, yes.” She was quiet for a minute, and I could hear her fidgeting with something. “Actually, no. No, it’s not.”

I sat up, my blankets falling down around my waist. “What’s the matter?”

I listened to her breathing into the phone and waited for her to speak. She was nervous, anxious, and I didn’t want to push her. Finally, she started speaking. “Four guys came into my restaurant yesterday. They asked about you, Jax. They didn’t look like the kind of guys I would want to mess around with. Big. One was bald. They all wore rings and had tattoos. The bald one had a scar on his throat. They gave me the creeps.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Fuck. Some of the Black Hearts members had tracked my girl down. “Did they threaten you?”

“No. I don’t think so. But they told me I should stay away from you.”

“Did you tell them you knew me?”

“Yes. I thought about lying, but then, I decided they wouldn’t have come into the restaurant to see me if they didn’t already know. I told the truth. At least, I told them enough that I thought they would believe. I told them we’re friends from high school, and you’ve been helping me settle back into living in New York City.”

“Good. That’s good, Holly. Quick thinking.”

“Thanks,” she said, and her voice sounded weak.

“Do you have to work today?”

“I’m supposed to start at four.”

“Call your boss and tell him you’re not coming in. Tell him you won’t be there for the next few days. I want you to stay at Kim’s place until I tell you otherwise. Can you do that?” I knew I was asking for a lot. I knew this could cost her job, and I also knew how much she depended on the income from the restaurant and her plans to get her and Luke an apartment of their own as soon as possible. What I was asking could compromise all of that.

“I don’t think Talon will like that.”

“Talon can go fuck himself. If he gives you a hard time, I’ll handle him too.”

“What are you going to do, Jax? I don’t want you getting yourself into trouble because these guys tried to scare me. It was probably nothing, right? Just some assholes getting their kicks?”

I wanted to tell her she was probably right, but I knew better. The message hadn’t been for her. It had been for me. The Black Hearts were letting me know they could get to my girl, and they could do it easily.

“Maybe. But I want to be sure. No harm in being safe, baby.”

Holly sighed on the other end. “Okay. I’ll call Talon and tell him.”

“I don’t want to alarm you, but I think Kim should try to stay in with you too.”

“Her job isn’t going to let her take a big chunk of time off, Jax. I don’t see how—”

“She needs to lie, then,” I said simply. “She has food poisoning or the flu. I don’t care what she says, but she needs to be home with you.”

“Okay. I’ll tell her. And Jax?”

“Yeah?”

“There was a note too. Signed from TJ. I think he was the bald one.”

I raked my fingers through my hair and checked the time on the phone before lifting it back to my ear. “Okay. Thanks for calling and telling me, baby girl. I have to handle this, but I’ll call you back as soon as I can, okay? You promise you’ll stay in with Luke today?”

“I promise.”

“Good. Lock the door. Don’t open it for anyone, you hear me?”

“I hear you,” she said, her voice trembling.

Guilt tore at my insides. This was the exact fucking reason I had been so hesitant to pursue Holly since she moved back from Philadelphia. My lifestyle always had a way of getting in the middle of shit and fucking it royally.

“Holly. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Just be careful, all right?”

“Careful?” I chuckled, hoping her hearing me laugh might ease her mind a bit. “Honey. Those fuckers who scared you are the ones who should be careful. I’ll call you later today.”

“Okay,” she said softly, and it took all the willpower I had to end the call.

I sat in my bed staring at the wall for a couple of minutes and let the rage course through my veins.

How dare those bastards frighten my woman? She didn't deserve that. She had a boy to watch out for. Her mind was probably reeling, and all I wanted was to be able to go to her and comfort her and tell her everything would be okay—like how a man might in a normal relationship.

But I wasn't so lucky. It was on me to fix this.

I called Ryder and told him to meet me at the shop. Then, I called Sabian and Axel, both of whom cursed me out for calling so early. I assured them it was important, and they agreed to meet up with Ryder and me at the shop.

I didn't bother with breakfast. I had more important things to do.

I was on my bike shortly after getting out of bed and speeding to the shop, anger pulsing at the back of my skull, mind racing with thoughts of what I would do to TJ when I got my hands on him.

I hopped off my bike at the shop to find Ryder, Axel, and Sabian already there, as well as Derek and Hyde. We went into the office and sat down on the couches. They all turned to face me, and I told them what had happened to Holly at The Roost.

“These bastards are getting bolder with every move they make. How long are we going to keep sitting around and waiting for them to get closer, Ryder? I'm sick of this shit. They need to be reminded who the fuck we are.”

Ryder stroked his chin and considered what I was saying. “I suppose the truce has already been broken.”

“Suppose?” I barked. “It's been broken for weeks, and we're still sitting around with our dicks in our hands, acting like a bunch of pussies, while those fuckers run all over the city doing whatever the fuck they please.”

“Chill, man,” Sabian warned, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. “We'll handle it. We just have to be smart about it.”

“Being smart about it wouldn’t have landed us here,” I growled.

Ryder shot me a dark look. “Better watch yourself, Jax. You’re pissed. I get it. They dragged Holly into this. If it were Dani ...” He shook his head. “You’re right. It’s time to take action. I’ll set up a meeting with the Black Hearts leader as soon as possible, and we’ll remind him who we are.”

“Call me when you have a time and place,” I said.

“Same here.” Sabian nodded.

“I’m in, too,” Axel said.

Ryder shook his head. “No, you have Hanna to worry about, Axel. No more running into the wolf’s den for you, my friend.”

Axel’s eyebrows drew together in a scowl. “I can help.”

“I know,” Ryder said, clapping his friend on the back, “but family comes first. Always has, always will. That little girl needs her dad to be there for her. I won’t be the reason she ever loses that.” Ryder turned to the rest of us. “Keep your phones with you. I’ll call as soon as the meeting is set up and pass on the information. Jax, if I were you, I’d keep Holly at a distance for now.”

I nodded. “I will.”

“It’s for her own good, brother,” Sabian said.

“Believe me,” I said, “I know it is.”

“You have us too,” Derek piped up. He nodded at Hyde. “We can step in for Axel.”

Ryder looked back and forth between them. “I’ll consider it. But if things go south with the Black Hearts I have to make sure we still have members to fill vacant positions.”

Hyde frowned. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Doesn’t matter if you do,” Ryder said. “If I need you I’ll call you. Otherwise keep your head down. Let the others know to do the same. Let’s keep this between us for the time being. No need to rattle the cages.”

We locked up the shop and went out to our bikes on the gravel driveway. The others all drove away, and I took my phone out of my pocket and called Holly.

When she answered, she sounded distressed like she'd been crying. My heart ached for her, and I wished more than anything else that I could go to her and hold her and promise everything would be just fine.

"Hey," I said softly, "How are you holding up over there?"

"I'm okay," she said, her voice nasally. She'd been crying. Fuck.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. But I ..." She paused and took a deep breath. "I really need to see you, Jax."

"I know, baby girl. I want to see you too. But we need to give it some time. I have to keep my distance from you until everything with these guys is settled. The price of being in the MC, I'm afraid."

"How much time?"

"As long as it takes. Ryder doesn't want to fuck around, so hopefully only a few days. You can do a few days, can't you?"

"I don't know," she whispered, and her voice cracked.

"Holly. I'm sorry. This isn't how I wanted any of this to go down, but for right now, it's out of our hands. I'm going to do everything I can to get back to you as soon as possible. I swear it."

"Okay. But you can't come by just for a bit? Please?"

I hung my head and kicked at the loose gravel of the driveway in frustration. "No, baby girl. I can't."

She sighed into the phone and sniffled. "Okay."

"I'll call you when I can."

She didn't answer, and she didn't need to. She was breaking down, and I suspected if she tried to speak, she would only cry. Guilt clawed at my gut again, and I lowered

the phone from my ear and ended the call. It hurt my soul to do so.

I should never have gotten her involved in this mess in the first place. I knew this was the kind of thing that would happen. It always did. It was never sunshine and daisies and happy endings, not for men like me.

I singlehandedly dragged the woman I loved into the middle of a turf war between two motorcycle gangs.

I paused with my key in the ignition of my bike.

The woman I loved.

All the guilt and the anger was replaced, fleetingly, with an overwhelming warmth. I was in love with Holly Whitton.

“Fuck me fucking sideways,” I growled, starting the bike up and pulling out onto the street, the engine roaring furiously.

CHAPTER 24



HOLLY

I just needed to see him for fifteen minutes. I needed to tell him what had happened. We had both fucked up, and now, we were going to have to atone for our mistakes.

Something I thought would be a blessing was quickly turning into a burden.

I stared down at the plastic stick in my hands. The screen with two red lines practically screamed the results in my head.

Pregnant. I was fucking pregnant.

I sighed and tossed the pregnancy test in the garbage can before leaning forward with my elbows on my knees.

How could I have been so reckless? We should have been more careful. I should have seen this coming.

I took a shaky breath and looked at the door.

Kim and Luke were in the living room. Kim had knocked on the bathroom door several times to check in on me, and I had lied and said I wasn't feeling well. She wouldn't give me much time before she forced herself in and demanded I tell her what was going on. That was a conversation I was definitely not ready for.

I had to find the energy to stand up and slap on a happy face. I had to act normal. For now.

I found myself wondering if things would feel different if everything with the guys at The Roost hadn't happened yesterday. Would I be excited? Would Jax be?

There was a big part of me that was certain he would be. But right now he was tied up in MC business, which made my heart clench with fear. I wasn't stupid. He would be going after the men who had come to see me at work. He and Ryder and whoever else they could gather would be preparing for a confrontation while I sat holed up in my sister's apartment like someone in witness protection.

I dragged my hands down my face and counted to three in my head. Then, I stood up and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

My eyes were pink and glassy from crying. My cheeks were flushed, my hair was a mess, and my lips were dry. I splashed some cold water on my face and applied some Chapstick. Feeling a little more human but still just as tired and weak and sad, I emerged from the bathroom and made my way into the living room to find Kim and Luke curled up on the sofa watching cartoons.

I could do this. I had to do this.

I took a seat on the sofa and ignored the way Kim's eyes fell on me. She was worried. She had to be. I was acting out of sorts, and she knew me better than anyone. Almost anyone.

She didn't wait long before she reached over and tapped my hand that was draped over the back of the sofa. "You okay?" she mouthed silently, her eyes flicking to Luke.

I shook my head.

Kim got up and adjusted her sweater before nodding to the kitchen. "Luke, your mom and I are going to make popcorn. Want some?"

"Sure," Luke said, his eyes never leaving the television screen.

Kim pulled me into the kitchen, and as soon as I was out of view of my son, I buried my face in my hands and started crying.

Kim grabbed my wrists and tried to pull my hands away from my face. "Holly? Holly, what's the matter? Please talk to me. You're scaring me."

I shook my head and worked to get a hold of myself.

“Is this about Jax?”

“No—kind of.”

Kim rubbed my shoulders. “You can tell me. Get it out. You’ll feel better. I can help you.”

I rubbed my eyes and blew out an exasperated breath. “I messed up, Kim.”

“What did you do?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Kim froze. I was afraid to look up into her face. I didn’t want to see the thoughts etched on her face. Judgment. Confusion. Disappointment.

“Holly, this isn’t something to be so upset about. Isn’t this a good thing?”

“How is this a good thing?” I said, forcing myself not to scream. I didn’t want Luke to hear. He couldn’t see me breaking down like this. He needed me to be strong.

“You and Jax having a baby? I don’t know, but it’s not as bad as it feels right now. I know you’re scared, and you’re worried about him, but you have to remember he does this kind of thing all the time. He knows what he’s doing. You have to trust him.”

“I do trust him,” I said. “I just don’t trust the men he’s up against.”

“You can’t control that, Holly. No one can.”

“I know,” I said, my words sharp as I tried to hold in a sob. “I know I can’t, but this,” I gestured around the kitchen, “Just sitting here waiting for him is killing me. How long do I wait? How long does he expect me to wait?”

Kim shook my shoulders. “Holly. I know you don’t want to hear this right now but you have to get a hold of yourself. Jax is out there doing his job. Now you need to do yours here. You need to keep it together. This won’t help anyone, and I

hate to say it, but you should try to stay calm for, you know,” she glanced down at my stomach.

I groaned and looked up at the ceiling. “How could I have been so reckless?”

“You’re in love,” Kim shrugged. “Shit happens.”

“I—” I stared at her.

“What?” she asked. “Was I wrong? Do you not love him?”

“No. I do. I do love him.”

“Exactly,” Kim said. “Listen to me. This is a good thing. This could help Jax in the long run. Calm him down. Tether him to reality and maybe get him to take half a step back from the MC so he doesn’t get himself into such crazy situations.”

“You think?” I could hear the desperation in my voice.

Kim nodded. “Maybe. It’s worth considering.”

I swallowed and took several deep breaths to calm the anxious fluttering in my stomach. “You’re right. I need to get a handle on this and relax.”

“Okay,” Kim said, turning and opening one of the cupboards to her right. She pulled down a large blue bowl and a bag of popcorn. “Popcorn and a movie should do the trick. A good distraction is all you need right now, and then before you know it, Jax will call you and everything will be back to normal. Well, sort of normal. You’ll still be pregnant.”

“Yeah. Fuck.”

“I, for one, am excited,” Kim shrugged as she laid the popcorn bag flat in the microwave. She closed the door and pressed the button on the side labeled for popcorn. “A new niece or nephew to terrorize and train.”

“Train?”

“Yeah. You know. I have Luke trained to put all the remotes back in the caddy after he watches TV. Don’t tell me that’s not impressive.”

“I don’t think training is the right word,” I said with a small smile.

She shrugged. “Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“I think you were looking for the word ‘teach’.”

The popcorn started popping in the bag as Kim waved me away. “Meh.”

“Thanks for this,” I said.

“For what?”

“For calming me down and talking some sense into me. I just need to hear his voice and know he’s okay, and I can deal with everything else as it comes. I think.”

Kim smiled and peeked into the microwave as the bag expanded. “You’re a badass, Holly. You dealt with Kent and his shit for years. You can deal with this. Besides, there won’t even be anything to ‘deal’ with. Jax is a stand-up guy, and I think he’s in love with you too. You wait and see. This will be a good thing for you both. I’m sure of it.”

The microwave went off, and she pulled the bag out and ripped it open. The kitchen was filled with the salty smell of butter. She popped a piece in her mouth before pouring it into the blue bowl.

“I hope you’re right,” I muttered.

“Let’s be real. I’m always right.” She held out the bowl to me, and I took a few pieces before following her back out into the living room.

Kim dropped down in the middle of the couch beside Luke, and I sat on her other side. She held the bowl out for Luke, and he took as many as his tiny hand could hold before promptly cramming them into his mouth.

“Eat slowly,” I said, “Or you’ll choke.”

He doubled down and started eating two pieces at a time, shooting me dirty looks as he did so.

“No one’s trying to steal your food, Luke,” I said, “No need to be greedy.”

“Yeah, Luke, don’t be so greedy,” Kim said. Then she threw a piece of popcorn at him.

His mouth fell open in shock, and he leaned forward to look at me. He didn’t know what to do, so I helped him out by grabbing a piece of popcorn and throwing it at the back of Kim’s head.

She let out a delighted squeal before grabbing a handful of popcorn and leaping up off the couch. She hurried around the coffee table and placed the bowl in the middle. Then, like a child on a sugar rush, she began throwing the popcorn at me and Luke, who were clearly way too slow on the uptake.

Luke leaped off the couch, grabbed more popcorn, and began throwing it at his aunt.

The sounds of their laughter filling the living room helped alleviate the stress in my chest and pulled my thoughts somewhat away from Jax. I was able to focus on my son’s smile and his giggles as he chased his aunt in circles around the room.

This was the kind of joy he had rarely known when we lived in Philadelphia. His father would never have played so freely with him. Not even on Christmas day.

Luke deserved better than that. He always had. He deserved this relationship with his aunt, and he deserved the type of father figure I knew Jax could be. I wondered if I was dreaming.

Would Jax be willing to change his whole life for me? Would he be willing to raise another man’s son? Only a small part of me doubted him, and that part was my inner cynic. He loved me, I was sure of it, and in loving me, he would love Luke too. Because Luke was mine. He was of me.

A piece of popcorn bounced off my forehead, and Luke let out a terrified shriek before racing away from me.

I grabbed a fistful of popcorn and tore off after him, chasing him around the dining room table until I grabbed hold of his shirt. He laughed and squealed as I grabbed his chin and forced him to open his mouth. I crammed the piece of popcorn

into his mouth, hearing myself laughing like a psycho, and forced him to eat it.

“That’s what you get, troublemaker!” I yelled victoriously.

Luke wiped butter from his lips and paused to catch his breath.

Kim dropped down on the sofa. “Okay. You two make another bag of popcorn, and we’ll actually eat it this time. I’m going to catch my breath.”

Luke took my hand, and we made our way into the kitchen, where we made another bag of popcorn and helped ourselves to a special treat, the soda at the back of Kim’s fridge.

When we sat back down on the couch, I told myself everything would be okay. It would all work out in the end. It always did.

Right?

CHAPTER 25



JAX

Fresh air was hitting my face through the open window as I sat in the passenger seat of Ryder's truck. Sabian was in the back, and none of us were speaking a word. There was thick tension in the air as we anticipated how the rest of the evening was going to unfold.

Ryder had secured a meeting with TJ, the new Black Hearts leader. We had been invited to the mansion to discuss business, but all three of us knew the likelihood of the exchange being restricted to just conversation.

That's why I had a set of brass knuckles in my jacket pocket.

I shifted in my seat as we turned right and began making our way up the winding driveway to the mansion. Trees loomed over us as we approached, and a tight knot formed in my gut. I was ready for whatever might happen within the confines of that hell house.

We came to a stop in front of the massive house. Ryder put the truck in park, and the three of us peered up at the unguarded front door.

"No security?" Sabian muttered in the back seat. "I don't like it."

"Me neither," I agreed.

Ryder unclipped his seatbelt and opened his door. "They're expecting us."

“You’d think they’d want to search us for weapons,” Sabian said, hopping out of the back seat.

I got out of the truck and slammed my door closed. “They’re playing games.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure they lose,” Ryder muttered, taking long strides to the front door. If he was worried, he didn’t show it. His demeanor proved he wasn’t afraid of anyone or anything, and I’d seen the man in action more than enough times to know I wanted him on my side.

I followed him to the front door.

Ryder knocked and, when no one answered, let himself in. Sabian and I followed, and we found ourselves standing in the grand foyer of the place. The only light in the place was that of the moon coming in through the windows.

I shifted my weight and peered down the hallways to our left and right. Another one led straight ahead in front of us and appeared to open into a study of sorts. I could see bookshelves along one wall, and warm light filled the room.

A fireplace, perhaps.

I pointed my chin down the hall, and Ryder nodded. We walked forward, and I drew to a stop behind Ryder when we arrived at the end of the hall.

We stood on the threshold of what appeared to be a library. Each wall was filled with bookcases, all with weathered spines chaotically tucked into the shelves. There was a fire crackling in the open fireplace, and in front of it were two green velvet chairs.

In one of the chairs sat a broad-shouldered bald man in a white suit sipping a dark liquor out of a crystal glass. If he knew we were standing there, he didn’t show it. He stared ominously into the flames as he sipped his drink.

When he spoke, his voice was low. “Gentlemen. Come on in.”

He never looked up at us as we came into the room. We drew to a stop ten or so feet from his chair, and he turned his

head to finally look at us.

“Mr. Moretti,” he tilted his head in Ryder’s direction. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. And who have you brought along with you?” He craned his neck to peer around Ryder. “Ah. Jax and Sabian, am I correct?” His gaze lingered on Sabian.

Sabian nodded.

The bald man, who I assumed was TJ, adjusted his white jacket and let his gaze wander over the three of us. “Would you like to have a seat, Mr. Moretti?” He gestured to the open chair across from him.

Ryder sat down, and Sabian and I moved to stand behind his chair.

TJ chuckled. “You have loyal lapdogs, it would appear.”

Ryder ignored the comment. “We’re here to discuss your incessant harassment of my people. What are you playing at?”

TJ’s eyes widened slightly, but he regained his composure quickly. Apparently, he hadn’t expected us to come out of the gate so strong. I figured he was the kind of man who was used to scaring other men into submission.

He had no fucking clue who he was messing with.

“Well,” TJ started, “I don’t know if I would call it harassment. I would say I’ve been actively familiarizing myself with your MC. That, unfortunately, includes meeting your women. I can’t deny you have some pretty ladies hanging off your cocks—”

“Enough,” I hissed.

TJ looked up at me, the slightest smile curling his lips but not reaching his eyes. “Don’t take it so personally, Jax. I’m just saying it how I see it. That Holly.” He closed his eyes and let out a soft groan. “I’d like to see how she would navigate my bed.”

Sabian stiffened beside me.

Ryder leaned forward. “We’re not here to shoot the shit with you. We’re here to see what your intentions are and if

there's any possibility of a compromise."

TJ chuckled. "I don't do compromises."

"All right, fuck this," I said, stepping around Ryder's chair so I was face to face with TJ. "No more fucking around. What are you up to?"

TJ leaned back in his chair and swirled the last few mouthfuls of liquor around his glass before polishing it off. He placed the now empty glass on the table to his right and turned back to face me, clasping his hands in his lap. If he felt threatened, he didn't show it.

Which made me wonder where his other goons were hiding.

"A man who likes to cut right to the chase. I respect that." TJ nodded at me. "The Black Hearts had a decent foundation when I arrived, but there was much room for growth. After eliminating a few odds and ends that threatened to hold us back, we are moving forward to merge all the MCs into one organization. My organization."

Ryder chuckled behind me, and I stepped aside. "You think we're going to work for you?"

"I don't make assumptions. The offer stands. What you choose to do with it is up to you."

"And if we don't merge with you?" Ryder asked. "Then what?"

TJ shrugged. "Then I take your members by force. Cut the head off the snake and let your boys speak for themselves. They may not be too interested in joining you in hell, Mr. Moretti. In my experience, a leaderless organization is ripe for the picking."

The threat was crystal clear. I swallowed and resisted the urge to glance down at Ryder. The mood had shifted, and all of us were on high alert now. Sabian was stiff as a board and had his hand on the back of Ryder's chair. His grip was so tight, his knuckles had turned red.

Ryder surprised me by laughing. It wasn't a chuckle or a humorous grunt but a full-blown burst of laughter. He leaned back in his chair and mimicked the way TJ was sitting. "For a man who's been keeping eyes on my MC, you sure seem to have missed some crucial details. My boys won't bend over and take it up the ass, no matter what you do. Loyalty actually means something to them, you see."

TJ stared coldly back. "Then they will meet the same fate as you, Moretti."

Ryder leaned forward, gripping the armrests. "You have no idea who you're fucking with."

TJ shrugged one shoulder. I realized they were somewhat lopsided. This was a man who had been through many battles. His collarbones had most certainly been broken several times. "An ominous threat won't make me back down. I have you right where I want you, Moretti. I'll confess, I'm impressed with your complete disregard for self-preservation."

TJ got to his feet. Ryder followed.

The standoff was tense. My hands balled into fists at my sides as I waited for something—anything—to happen. I didn't know who was going to make the first move, but as soon as someone swung, all bets were off.

"I'll ask you one more time," TJ said. "Join me, or find your heads separated from your shoulders. This is an every man for himself offer. I'll take whoever has the wits to see that siding with me is the right choice."

I didn't even need to look at my friends to know that none of us would be accepting his offer. We were family. Brothers. We stood together in the face of any threat, no matter how powerful.

"Suck my nuts," I grated, slipping my hand into my jacket pocket and sliding my brass knuckles on.

TJ threw his head back and laughed. "I was hoping you'd say something like that. Things have been a bit dull around here. Time to crack some skulls." He cracked his knuckles as footsteps sounded in the hallway.

I didn't need to look to know his backup had arrived.

Five goons, dressed in tailored suits, filed into the room and faced us. Brass winked on their knuckles, too, and I accepted the fact that I was, at the very least, about to lose some teeth. At the worst ... I didn't want to think about it. There was no room for such thoughts in my brain right now.

I had to worry about this fight. This moment. If I didn't stop this from spreading, Holly would be in danger. TJ had taken a liking to her, not that I could blame him, and I had to do whatever possible to make sure she never had to see his ugly face again.

Then there was Dani, Ellie, Jamie, and Hanna. All the girls who had hitched their wagons to ours would be paying for our sins if TJ got out of this room alive.

"No," I growled, not caring that I looked like a fool talking to myself before a fight. Holly was mine to protect. I would not let her down.

TJ ran his hands over his bald head before cracking his neck. "You boys ready to put your money where your mouth is?"

"Let's find out," Ryder spat.

TJ laughed darkly. "It's a shame you all hate me so much. I could have made a special place for each of you among my ranks. There's no telling the kind of success we could have had together."

"No more talking," Ryder said.

I fell into step beside my President. "Come on TJ, stop waving your dick around and actually do something. We're getting bored."

TJ cracked his knuckles, the audible popping dancing around in my brain like a call to action. He flashed me a smile filled with gold caps. "I sure hope you're not all talk, Jax. All this bravado of yours gets me hard as a fucking rock."

TJ glanced at the men awaiting his order on the other side of the room. Their eyes were fixed on us, and their matching

buzz cuts made them look more like military men or professional bodyguards than anything else.

This was probably going to be the worst ass kicking of my entire life.

TJ nodded toward us. “Kill them.”

The entire room blew apart as the five men sprang toward us. As Sabian and I turned to meet them head-on, Ryder let out a furious yell and went for TJ.

If he could handle the bald fucker, Sabian and I could take down the others. We had to.

CHAPTER 26



HOLLY

“Son of a bitch,” I said, ending my thirteenth call to Jax that night. I had been trying to get a hold of him for hours, but he wasn’t answering, and fear was starting to make me feel sick.

Something was wrong. I could feel it in my bones.

I was sitting in my car, hands tight on the steering wheel, headlights illuminating the double doors of the shop Jax worked at with Axel. I had been sitting in the car, considering going and knocking to see if anyone was there.

I knew I was disobeying Jax, and I knew he would be furious if he knew this is where I had come. He wanted me away from everything related to the MC right now, but try as I might, I couldn’t stay at home waiting for him.

What if he never called? What if he needed help?

I turned off the ignition and got out of the car. I took quick strides to the door along the side of the shop and knocked before giving myself the time to second-guess my decision.

I was surprised when the door opened to reveal a pretty blond woman in denim coveralls. She seemed equally surprised to see me.

“Holly?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Uh, yeah.”

She opened the door and invited me in. I stepped over the threshold and turned back to her as she plucked a rag from a

workbench and wiped her hands clean. "I'm Ellie. I was with Axel that afternoon at The Roost. Remember?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, embarrassed for having forgotten her. "Yes, I remember. I'm sorry. Lots on my mind right now."

She gave me a knowing smile. "You looking for Jax?"

I wrung my hands together. "Yeah. You wouldn't happen to know where he is, do you?"

She put her hand on her hip. "He never told you where he was going?"

I shook my head.

Ellie threw her hands in the air with a big sigh. "Men. Such idiots." She reached out and took my hand and began pulling me through the shop toward a back door. It opened up into a comfortable office with sofas and a mini fridge. She grabbed me a bottle of water and handed it to me before taking a seat on one of the sofas. She patted the empty spot beside her. Once I was sitting down, she twisted herself to face me. "The boys went on a run tonight."

"A run?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. They had some business with another club. They call themselves the Black Hearts. They've been causing a lot of trouble for Ryder and the guys, so they set up a meeting. I wouldn't expect them to be back soon. A couple more hours, tops."

I bit my bottom lip and stared at the water bottle in my hands. "I have a really bad feeling about this."

Ellie gave me a sad smile. "Get used to it, honey. That never goes away. Peace of mind is something you sacrifice if you love one of the MC guys. Take it from me."

"Who are the Black Hearts? I've never heard of them."

"Really?" Ellie asked, eyes widening a bit. "They've been all over the news for the murders last month."

"Murders?"

Ellie nodded. “Yeah. The seven guys who were diced up with machetes.”

“That’s where Jax is right now?” My stomach did a backflip.

Ellie blinked. “Um.”

“Oh, God.” I covered my mouth with one hand and clutched at my gut with the other. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Shit,” Ellie said, rushing to her feet and grabbing a garbage can from under the reception desk. She pulled out the bag and brought it to me. I held it between my legs, hunched over, and promptly vomited up bile. I hadn’t been able to eat since talking to Jax on the phone the day before.

“Sorry,” I said, dragging my hand across my mouth.

“Don’t be,” Ellie said, “That was insensitive of me. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, it’s okay, really. I appreciate someone being honest with me. I hate being kept in the dark like this. It’s so much worse than knowing what he’s up to.”

Ellie sighed and leaned back on the sofa. “Jax is a good guy, but he’s a bit thick-headed at times. We’ve been good friends for ages, and I can tell you his biggest fault is his need to protect everyone. If he thinks keeping you in the dark is the right move, you won’t be able to change his mind. He’s an ass, but his intentions are good.”

I tucked my hair behind my ears. “I know. But it’s not just about what he thinks is best. I have a voice too. What I want matters. Doesn’t it?”

“Sure does. You just have to get him to see that.”

“How?”

Ellie laughed. “Girl, if you figure it out, you’ll have to tell me.”

“Does Axel pull the same shit with you?”

Ellie shrugged. “Not as much as he used to. He wouldn’t date me for years because he was so against me being part of the MC life. I know there are still days when it hangs over him like a dark cloud. The guilt. You know? But I do my best to assure him that by his side is where I want to be, no matter what. It helps him, I think. I hope.”

I swallowed as the urge to vomit coursed through me. “What did they say they were going to do when they met with this Black Hearts leader?”

Ellie’s eyes flicked back and forth between mine as she decided whether she should tell me. I wasn’t going to force her. I just hoped she would be honest on her own.

“They went to hopefully resolve the conflict. The Black Hearts have been playing a risky game. They tried to run Jax off the road when he was on his bike a week or two ago. They could have killed him.”

“What? He never told me that.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to. He thinks keeping you in the dark is the safest place for you, remember?”

“Jerk.”

Ellie smiled and rested her cheek in her hand. “Ryder was hoping they could settle things without violence. Three of them went up to talk. Usually, Ryder can get what he wants without shit blowing up.”

“Usually?”

Ellie nodded.

“For some reason, that doesn’t make me feel better at all. Did Axel go?”

Ellie shook her head. “Ryder wouldn’t let him.”

“Why?”

Ellie looked at her hands in her lap. “Because he has a little girl back home. Hanna already lost her mother. Ryder won’t be the reason she ever loses Axel.”

I hunched over the bucket between my knees and vomited more stomach acid.

Ellie shimmied closer beside me and put her hand on my back. “Why do I keep saying so many stupid things?”

I sobbed into the bucket and hated myself for it. Exhaustion gave way to grief, and before I could stop myself, I was crying harder than I had in ages.

Ellie rubbed my back. “Holly, oh my god, I’m so sorry. Please, don’t cry. They’ll be okay. They always are, I promise. They know how to handle themselves out there.”

I shook my head as I tried desperately to get a breath between the sobs and the dry heaving.

“There, there,” Ellie soothed. “What can I do? What do you need? There’s nothing in your stomach, girl. You should try to eat something.”

“Can’t,” I managed with a shaky breath.

“I know it’s hard.”

“I love him,” I whispered. “I’ve always loved him. And now that we’re finally together, and things are finally starting to feel right, I might lose him. God, I don’t know what I would do without him. I need him, Ellie. I need him more than anything.”

Ellie pulled me to her chest and wrapped her arms around me as I cried. “I know you do. This life isn’t easy, Holly, but if it’s love, it’s worth it. He’ll come back. He’ll come back, and you’ll have the chance to yell at him and set him straight. For now, your only job is to take care of yourself, okay? That’s all you can do.”

I shook my head as my tears stained the front of her coveralls. “I can’t just keep waiting. It’s killing me.”

“Shh. Yes, you can. You have to.”

I pulled away from her and was sick two more times. Ellie got up and went behind the reception desk. When she came back, she had a box of saltine crackers. She opened it up, grabbed an unopened package, and passed it to me. “I know

you don't have an appetite, but you need to eat something. And drink more water. You'll feel better."

I shook my head.

"I'm not really asking here, Holly. Eat."

I stared at the package before grudgingly accepting it. I pulled out a cracker and began nibbling on it. Ellie watched before dropping back into the spot beside me.

"Thank you," I whispered.

She nudged my calf with the toe of her boot. "Us girls have to stick together. It's a rough life, but everything is better when we have each other's backs. Jax cares for you, Holly. I think you might be around for the long haul. Which would be great. We need more estrogen in this place."

I found myself smiling.

She nudged me with her shoulder. "We're not going to talk about this anymore, but I'll tell you one more thing. Jax is with Sabian and Ryder. The three of them together are hell on wheels. They'll have each other's backs no matter what kind of shit storm they've gotten themselves into. Somehow, they always come out the other side in one piece. This time won't be any different."

"I hope you're right," I muttered, grabbing my phone. My chest swelled with hope as I checked to see if Jax had called or messaged me.

He hadn't.

I sighed and sipped on my water.

"So, Ellie. Distract me. Tell me something about Jax that I don't know."

Ellie pursed her lips and crossed her legs. "Something you don't know, huh?" She tapped her chin with one finger.

I sat and listened as Ellie told me several funny stories from times of her and Jax working together. The distraction only sort of helped. I managed to eat some crackers and finish my water, which pleased Ellie and eased some of my nausea.

But I couldn't shake the worry in my gut about Jax. I knew he was in trouble. I was certain of it. Otherwise, he would have returned my calls by now.

I checked my phone several times as Ellie recounted her stories, and she never once called me on it. She let me do what I had to, and I was incredibly grateful to her for it.

For all of it.

CHAPTER 27



JAX

Things weren't playing out in our favor.

In fact, it was going the exact opposite.

My mouth was full of blood from having one of my molars knocked out when one of TJ's goons managed to land a punch to my jaw. My teeth had gone through my cheek, and the bleeding hadn't stopped. I was also certain I had one or more broken ribs judging by the sharp pain in my side every time I took a breath.

I was on my knees beside Sabian, who was flanked by Ryder. The fight had lasted a good fifteen minutes or so, but now we were done for.

TJ was in front of us brandishing his machete. It had a red handle that he gripped tightly as he spun it end over end.

The man was a fucking psychopath.

His goons—well, the two of them left standing—were behind us and making sure none of us got any bright ideas to keep fighting. The other three were face down on the floor, bloodied and in need of medical attention thanks to Sabian and me.

I leaned over and spat a mouthful of blood on the Turkish carpet beneath us.

TJ pointed his machete at me. "That was rude."

I let my mouth fill with more blood before promptly leaning over and spitting again. TJ's upper lip curled off his teeth in a snarl. I grinned up at him. "Sorry."

TJ spun the machete again and dragged his eyes across the three of us on our knees in front of him. “Which one of you volunteers to go first, huh?”

“I do,” Ryder said, his voice hoarse from a hit he had taken to the throat.

I looked across Sabian at him.

My president was in rough shape. His lip was split and so was his eyebrow and cheekbone. His whole face was a bloodied mess, and his left eye was almost entirely swollen shut.

TJ had done a number on him that was for sure, but not before Ryder got in some damage of his own.

TJ was a bloodied mess as well. His nose was broken, and he had made us wait while he stood with a kerchief over his nose until the bleeding stopped. He walked with a slight limp, no doubt from the kick Ryder had delivered to the Black Hearts leader’s right knee, and his left ear was bloodied from a hit to the side of the head.

I wanted to hurt him even more.

TJ chuckled and stopped pacing in front of Ryder. “How noble of you, boss man.” He held out the machete like it was an extension of his arm, and the very point of it hovered just in front of Ryder’s face. “Any last words?”

I swallowed. This was not how it ended for us. There was no fucking way. We’d all been through hell and back together, and now some dickhead with a machete thought he was going to take all of that away from us?

Not on my watch.

“So, the machete,” I said as my mouth filled with more blood, “Why’d you choose that?”

TJ’s eyes slid over to me. I could see the bloodlust there in the pinpoint pupils. He didn’t say a word.

“You were such a chatterbox a few minutes ago. What happened to that? Lost your sparkle?”

“Shut up,” TJ growled.

“Make me.”

Ryder glanced over at me. For the first time since knowing him, I saw fear dancing in his eyes. The sight only made the rage burn brighter inside me.

TJ stepped toward me, a small smile now coming out to play. “You’re such an attention whore, Jax. Really. You couldn’t let someone else steal the show, just for a minute or two? That’s all it was going to take, you know. A couple chops and your friend goes from alive to, well, not alive.”

“Poetic,” I said.

TJ narrowed his eyes. “Normally, a man in your position has more sense than to poke the bear right before he’s about to die. Do you know how much power you’re going to leave me with? It could have ended with me killing you. Now, I’m starting to crave something else. Something pretty and blond.”

I bit my tongue.

TJ dropped to a crouch in front of me and rested the machete across his right shoulder. “You know, Holly sure would make a nice addition to this place.” His eyes scanned the room. “I’d like to keep her here, put her in a corner like a lamp so I could look at her all fucking day.” His eyes slid back to me. “And then at night, well, I think you and I both know what that would bring.”

White hot fury burned my insides.

“Don’t you think she’d look good in a place like this? She’s too sophisticated for a man like you anyway, Jax. Her body would be served much better here, and then, when I get bored of her ...” He winked and fingered the machete over his shoulder.

My vision went red, and I exploded.

Before I knew what was happening, I had my hands wrapped around TJ’s throat, and he was pinned underneath me. The sounds of a fight raged in my ears, and I hoped Ryder

and Sabian were in good enough shape to take care of the other two goons while I pummelled TJ into goo.

His machete had been knocked out of his hand and lay somewhere out of reach. I pinned him down and raised my fist, which I buried right in the middle of his face. His already broken nose crunched under my knuckles, and he let out a high pitched pitiful wail of pain.

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and lifted him off the ground, only to slam him back down. His head smacked against the hardwood floor.

“Think you’re really something, don’t you?” I snarled, lifting him up and slamming him back down once more. “You think you have the right to treat women like property?” I slammed him again. “You fucking piece of shit!” My voice was almost a scream.

Someone’s hand closed on my shoulder. I tore away from them, hell-bent on making TJ suffer.

“Jax!” someone yelled. “Jax! Come on, man, he’s had enough. Let the cops deal with his ass.”

It was Sabian. A small part of my brain told me I should listen to my friend and back down. I should let the police take this asshole away and lock him up for his crimes.

But another part of me wanted to hurt him some more.

So I did.

“Pass me his machete,” I growled.

“No man, come on, get off him. He’s not going to fight us anymore. He’s done.”

“I just want to take a finger or two,” I said, smiling down at TJ, whose eyes were wide with surprise. The look on his face filled me with satisfaction.

Ryder appeared and slapped the machete into my open palm. “Dani’s on her way with backup. Make it quick.”

“Sure thing,” I said, my jaw hurting as I smiled.

“No,” TJ barked, jerking beneath me like a fish out of water. “Get the fuck off me!”

“What?” I asked. “You don’t like it when the tables are turned? Come on TJ, I’m taking it easy on you. I just want a few fingers. I’ll even take ones you won’t need in prison. Like your pinkies. What’s that called? Oh. Yeah. A compromise.” I gave him my most wicked grin. “Sabian, hold his fucking hand down.”

Sabian dropped to his knees beside me and struggled to pin down TJ’s hand. When he succeeded, I wasted no time on laying the blade flat on the floor and pushing it down like a cleaver. I took his pinky and ring finger of his left hand. TJ screamed.

“Oops,” I said, “Looks like I took one too many.”

“Get off!” TJ roared.

“Not so fast. I’m not done. Sabian, other hand.”

Sabian followed my orders and had TJ’s hand flattened out on the hardwood. I took off his other pinky and held it in front of his face. “Don’t fuck with us. You hear me? This is what you get.”

TJ nearly went cross-eyed staring at his severed finger in my hand. He trembled, and then, to my surprise, he started laughing.

“What the fuck man?” Sabian said, his eyes flicking to me.

“Get a hold of yourself,” I said, dropping the finger and grabbing the front of TJ’s shirt. I lifted him off the floor.

TJ continued laughing maniacally. “There’s nothing you can do now. Even with me gone, it won’t matter. Everything has already been set in motion.” His eyes slid to Sabian, and he smiled. “You’re too late.”

“Fuck this shit,” I hissed before raising the hilt of the machete and striking TJ in the head, rendering him unconscious.

The room settled into thick silence, save for the sounds of our heavy breathing.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Sabian spat, stumbling to his feet and stepping away from me. “What the hell was that, Jax?”

“He deserved it.”

“Agreed,” said Ryder.

I stood on wobbly knees and wiped the blood from my hands onto my jeans. “Dani is coming you said?”

Ryder nodded.

“Should we be here when she does?”

“As far as I see it, we didn’t do anything wrong. The police will want statements. We came for a meeting. They had been planning to attack the whole time. Leave your brass knuckles with one of them.” Ryder pointed his chin at the unconscious goons.

I wiped them off with my shirt and dropped them on TJ’s chest. “I could really use a fucking beer.”

“Soon,” Ryder said.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly midnight.

I needed to get to Holly. I needed to make sure she was okay, and I had to tell her how I felt about her.

I was more than aware that I had come very close to dying. Death by machete. At least it was a pretty badass end.

I shook my head. It wouldn’t have mattered. I would have left the woman I loved behind, and she would never have known how I truly felt about her, how I’d always felt about her.

Tonight, she would know everything.

“You boys all right?” I asked, looking between Ryder and Sabian.

Both nodded. Sabian clutched his side. “A few broken bones. Could have been worse. You?”

“Yeah. It could have been worse.”

“Dani has paramedics coming too. They’ll want to take a look at us,” Ryder said.

I shook my head. “No. I have to get out of here as soon as I can. I need to get back to Holly. She has no clue where I’ve been, and she’s probably worried.”

“She can wait, man. You need to have yourself looked at. You’re a fucking mess.” Ryder lowered himself into the same chair TJ had been in not half an hour earlier. “Does that fuck have any liquor over in that cabinet?”

I went to the cabinet Ryder had pointed to and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. I passed it around, and the three of us drank from it. It burned the hole in my jaw where my tooth was missing and the deep cut in my cheek, but it warmed my belly and eased the pains of my battered body.

“Sorry, Ryder. I won’t stay. I have to go see her.”

Ryder sighed. “Then get the fuck out of here. Take the truck. Keys are in the ignition. We’ll cover for you.”

“You’re sure? What if these assholes start waking up?”

Sabian peered over one of them. “They won’t. And a swift kick to the head will keep them down if they stir.”

“Thanks, Ryder. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me shit, Jax. You saved my neck with that reckless attitude of yours. Go get your girl.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

CHAPTER 28



HOLLY

My tea was long since cold, and I had only taken a few sips. Kim was sitting on the opposite end of the sofa as me, and I knew she was shooting me concerned glances every few minutes.

I had told her my concerns about Jax, and she refused to go to bed despite me telling her she needed her sleep.

“Thank you for staying up with me,” I said. “Being alone sucks right now. I just get so caught up in thinking about the worst and—”

“Hey,” Kim said, leaning over and resting her hand on mine. “Don’t worry about it. That’s what sisters are for. I’m sure everything is fine. He told you that you guys needed to put some distance between you, right? Maybe that’s all he’s doing while this mess cools down.”

I shrugged, hearing her, but not really believing her. “He would have seen that I’ve called him nearly twenty times. I doubt he wouldn’t call me back.”

Kim sighed. “I know.”

We sat together in silence for a while longer. I knew I should have gone to bed, but as soon as I closed my eyes, all I could think about was Jax being in trouble.

After leaving the shop earlier that night, Ellie had promised to call me if she heard anything. I appreciated her kindness and her willingness to be so honest with me. If not for her, I would have had absolutely no idea where Jax was and what he was up to. The not knowing had been worse than

knowing, although right now, I kind of wished I didn't know he had gone to another clubhouse to settle a conflict.

I put my cup of tea down on the coffee table and stifled a yawn.

Then the doorbell rang.

Kim and I looked at each other.

"Jax said not to answer the door," I whispered.

Kim's face paled. "Do you think ... do you think it could be someone bad?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

The bell rang again, and both of us flinched.

Kim stood up. "I'm just going to check the peephole and see who it is."

"Okay. Be careful," I whispered, watching her back as she slipped down the hall, walking on the balls of her feet so she was moving as quietly as possible.

She disappeared around the corner, and I strained my ears to catch the slightest sound. My heart pounded, my breathing quickened, and all my skin felt tingly with anticipation and nerves.

"Holly!" Kim called, sounding stressed rather than scared. "You'd better come here."

I heard her open the front door as I climbed out of the couch and hurried down the hall.

When I rounded the corner, I stopped dead.

Jax was standing out in the hallway, and he was a mess. His hair was matted and thick with blood. His lip was split, his jaw was bruised, and one of his eyes was swollen. He gave me a sheepish grin. "Hey."

"Hey?" I exclaimed, looking him up and down.

He was standing with a slight hunch. He was hurt pretty badly, and that was the only thing stopping me from giving

him a piece of my mind. I held my tongue and told myself I could yell at him later.

Kim looked back and forth between us and then turned to me sharply. “Can you help me bring him inside?”

She maneuvered herself under his left arm. I stared stupidly at them for a minute before rushing to help, slipping under his right arm. He didn’t put much weight on my shoulders, but I could tell he was using our shoulders for balance as we steered him down the hall and into the living room.

He eased himself down onto the sofa, grunting softly with the effort of it.

“Kim, can you grab me some water and washcloths?” I asked.

My sister nodded and slipped away to grab supplies.

I dropped down to my knees in front of Jax, grabbed his legs, and rested my forehead on his thighs. “Thank God you’re okay.”

He reached out and stroked my hair. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, unwilling to look up at his bruised face just yet. My eyes were burning with tears of relief. “I was so worried I might never see you again. What the hell happened?” I lifted my face to his, not caring anymore that he saw my tears.

He wiped my cheeks with his thumb, and I saw sorrow in him. “I had to go on a work call with Ryder. Don’t worry. Everything is taken care of. We’re safe.”

“You’re sure?”

Jax smiled softly. “I’m sure.”

I got to my feet and sat down beside him. I held his face in my hands, careful not to hurt him, and pressed my lips to his. I had been aching to kiss him for ages, and it felt so good to feel the warmth of his lips on mine.

Kim returned with water and towels and antiseptic. “Do you guys need anything? Jax, are you hungry?”

“No,” he said, waving his hand. “I’m all right. Thanks, though.”

She nodded and looked at me. “Are you okay if I go to bed? Give you guys some time together?”

I nodded and gave her a smile I hoped conveyed everything I wanted to say to her, thank you, above all else.

She slipped away into her bedroom, and I set to work cleaning Jax’s wounds and making sure he drank water. “What the hell happened to you?”

He shifted and grimaced. I reached out to him, wanting to ease his pain for him. He caught my wrist and lifted my hand to his lips, where he kissed each of my knuckles. “I had my wits scared out of me, that’s what.”

“What?” I breathed. Jax wasn’t the kind of man who scared easy. “Who did this to you? Do the police have them? Are they dead?”

“No, baby girl. He’s not dead. I got him good, but I didn’t kill him.”

I bit my bottom lip.

He ran his thumb over my cheek. “I was scared because for a minute there, I thought I was a goner, and there were so many things I needed to say to you.”

I blinked at him.

He looked down, sorting through his thoughts, and then met my eyes again. I could see resolve in him, determination. “I needed to make sure I got back to you so you knew exactly how I feel. How I’ve always felt.”

“Okay,” I whispered, my blood rushing in my ears.

He pulled himself closer to me even though it clearly caused him pain to do so. He held my hand and cupped my cheek with his other hand. “Holly, I’m fucking crazy about you. I have been since we were kids. And I was a fool to let

you go back then. I should have fought harder to keep you. I should have proven what I was willing to do for you. Then, maybe we wouldn't have lost all our time together."

Tears burned in the corners of my eyes.

"But everything happens for a reason," he continued. "Now we're back together, and I'll do whatever it takes—whatever it fucking takes—to keep you safe and to make you happy. I swear it. I love you, Holly. I've always fucking loved you."

I let my tears fall and pressed my forehead to his. "I love you, too, you big idiot."

He chuckled and then wrapped his arms around me, holding me to him with a fierceness that made me forget he was hurt.

The coppery smell reminded me.

I pulled away and looked him over again. "What's broken?"

"A rib or two. Some knuckles. Everything else is just bruising, baby. It'll go away."

I wet one of the cloths Kim had brought out and used it to wipe the blood out of his hairline and from his face. Getting it off of him made him look a bit more human and put me at ease. I kissed his nose and smiled when he smiled.

"Crazy how life got in the way for so long, huh?" he asked. "So many curveballs. And yet, here we are."

I put the cloth down and picked at a loose thread. "Speaking of curveballs, there's something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." *Just spit it out, girl. He's not going to freak out. Maybe this will be good news. Maybe this will make him feel better.* I lifted my chin and met his gaze. *Maybe it would scare the shit out of him.* "Jax, I'm-I'm—" I took a deep breath.

“Hey,” he said, taking both my hands and squeezing gently. “Whatever it is, it’s all right. We’re all right.”

“Promise?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

I bit my bottom lip. “I’m pregnant.”

Jax’s eyes widened, and he leaned slightly away from me. “Are you serious?”

I nodded.

A laugh so joyful burst out of him, and for a moment, he moved the same way he did before he had his ass beaten. “Holy shit. You’re not pulling my leg, are you?”

I shook my head as my vision blurred with tears. “Not pulling your leg. It’s real. We’re having a baby.”

“Oh,” he breathed, pressing both hands to his temples. “Wow.”

“Good wow?”

“Great wow,” he said softly. “Come here.”

I climbed into his lap as he asked and perched gingerly on top of him so as not to hurt him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and stared down into his eyes as he looked up at me. I was shocked to see tears in the corners of his eyes as he pushed a strand of hair out my face.

Then he was kissing me. It was a tender kiss, the sort of kiss that made a girl feel like she was the only woman in the world. It made me feel safe, secure, loved. It was blissful, and I let him carry me away from all the heartache and stress of the last couple days to a place where all I was aware of was his hands running up my thighs and his tongue slipping between my teeth.

“Okay, you two, take it back to Jax’s place.”

Jax and I both pulled ourselves apart to look at Kim, who was watching us with her arms crossed.

My cheeks burned. “I thought you were going to bed.”

“I was. Then I decided I wanted a glass of water. I didn’t think you and John McClane over here would be sucking face so soon after he got his ass kicked.”

“John McClane?” I asked, not catching the reference.

“*Die Hard*,” Jax and Kim said in unison.

I still had no idea what they were talking about.

Jax patted my knee. “Okay, that’s our cue. Let’s get out of here.”

I slipped off his lap and offered him my hand to help him up. I was surprised when he took it, but didn’t say anything. I grabbed my purse and a jacket and kissed my sister on the cheek before slipping out the door with Jax in the lead.

We got on the elevator, and he leaned against the wall, arms hanging at his sides.

“You should probably just go to sleep when you get home,” I said softly. I already knew he wouldn’t listen to me. I could see the swell at the front of his jeans and knew he was just as turned on as I was.

“Don’t try to be funny,” he said, the look he gave me daring me to suggest he sleep one more time.

“You’re sure? There’s always the morning. You need rest.”

“I need a lot of things,” he said, pushing off the wall and wrapping his arms around my waist. “And they all come second to you. I’m happy to report that my dick still works like a charm.”

I giggled. “That’s good to hear. I would’ve had to leave you if that wasn’t the case.”

Jax tapped my nose with his finger. “Don’t try to be funny.”

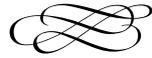
“I don’t have to try. I am funny.”

“So you think.” He reached down to my ass and squeezed. “I can’t wait to get you naked.”

I wiggled my ass in his hands and stared up at him. “I can’t wait to have you inside me.”

“Fuck, woman,” he growled before sealing my mouth with his. I melted into his arms, and we didn’t even notice that the elevator had come to the ground level and the doors were open.

CHAPTER 29



JAX

Holly tasted like heaven and sin all mixed together to create a wondrous masterpiece. Her tongue in my mouth chased away all the pain in my body and replaced it with bliss. Sweet, beautiful, unabashed bliss.

I loved the woman. I loved her more than I loved anything, and I had her back in my arms, right where she belonged.

We had barely managed to get out of the elevator and make our way out to the curb where I had parked Ryder's truck. The drive back to my place was torture. All I wanted was to rip her cute little pajama pants off and feel how wet she was. I wanted to taste her, to drink her, and to worship her in every way I knew how.

I wanted to make love to her.

When we pulled up at my house, we hurried to the front door. The aches and pains in my body were, for the moment, gone, and I thanked my lucky stars for that. I knew I would suffer in the morning, but it would all be worth it.

Holly took me by the hand and led me upstairs to my bedroom. Then, slowly, she began undoing my pants.

I pressed my thumb under her chin and tilted her face up to mine to kiss her. As we kissed, she managed to unbutton my pants, and she tugged them down. When they fell around my feet, I stepped out of them.

Then she looked down to take my boxers off. She let out a little gasp and ran her fingers over the bruise on my right hip. I couldn't remember how I'd acquired it. At some point in the

fight, someone must have managed to hit me with something heavy.

“You sure?” she whispered, her eyelids heavy with lust, her lips slightly parted.

Saying no to her would be harder than restraining myself from killing TJ. “I’m sure, baby girl. Stop treating me like a damsel.”

She smiled like an angel and helped me out of my shirt. She ran her hands down my chest and gingerly over my sore ribs. “Sit,” she said softly, walking me slowly backward to the bed until it rested against the back of my knees. She pressed her hands down on my shoulders, forcing me down to the bed. I obliged and reached for her when she stepped back from me.

She shook her head. “You just watch.”

I opened my mouth to tell her to get her ass over here but promptly shut it when she turned away from me and pulled her shirt off over her head. When she tossed it on the floor, she looked over her shoulder at me, and I heard the hum of the sash coming open at the front of her pajama pants.

Desire licked my insides and settled in my groin.

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her pajamas and started slowly working them down until they sat beneath her perky little ass cheeks. Teasing me, she held them there as she swayed her hips from side to side.

When the pajamas fell to the floor, she still kept her back to me. Holly was wearing nothing but a pink bra and a purple G-string that was calling to be snapped against her flesh.

I sat in rapture as she began a slow seductive dance for me. Her hips rolled, and she arched her back, creating a graceful line down her spine that I wanted to trace with my tongue.

She played with her hair and finally turned to face me before reaching behind her back to undo her bra. She tossed it over her shoulder and squeezed both of her full breasts. For a moment, I found myself wondering what she would look like when she was pregnant. Excitement fluttered inside me. I was going to be a dad.

She traced the line down her stomach, slipping her hand down the front of her panties. She began rubbing herself, and I thought my head might explode at the sight.

“What do you want to do to me tonight?” she whispered seductively.

“Everything.”

She arched a blond eyebrow. “Everything?”

I nodded, my tongue feeling thick and heavy in my mouth. I was fucking tired as hell, but it didn't matter. I had a goddess in front of me, and I needed to show her how much I cared about her. Words could do one thing, but touch could achieve something else entirely.

“I want to feel your pussy around my cock. I want to fill you up until all you are is sex, baby. I want all of you.”

She licked her bottom lip.

“Come here.”

She smiled and shook her head.

“Woman, don't make me ask you again. Come here.”

Her smile never faltered as she walked toward me, lithe like a cat and sexy as hell. She paused in front of me, daring me to reach for her. I did.

I pulled her to me, my hand resting on the small of her back. She straddled my knee, and I snapped her panties playfully as I pressed my lips to the tops of her breasts and moved down to suckle her nipples. Her breathing quickened, and she held my head to her chest as my free hand wandered between her legs to cup her pussy and massage her in slow circles. I could feel her wetness soaking through her panties against my palm.

“I love you,” she said softly.

“I love you too.”

I tugged her panties to the side. She stared into my eyes as I eased a finger inside her and stretched her open. Her breath caught in her throat, and I slipped another finger inside her.

She moaned and arched her back and then began rolling her hips as I finger fucked her. The smell of her sex and the sounds of her wet pussy had me rock hard.

“Yes,” she moaned, craning her face to the ceiling as she came hard and fast on my fingers.

She stepped away when she was done and got to her knees between my legs. She looked up at me seductively as she took the head of my cock into her mouth and worked herself down the length of me. I felt my cock press against the back of her throat. She gagged but held herself there as her mouth filled with slick saliva, coating my cock.

She began sucking me off, her lips working like a suction along me as she moved up and down, pausing only to lick at the top of my dick.

“Take all of it, baby,” I whispered, and she listened, pushing herself down on my cock until her nose touched my belly. I groaned and gathered her hair in my fist, holding her there until the pressure was too much. I guided her up and down a few more times and then had her get to her feet and spin around.

I smacked her ass, and she yelped and giggled before bending over. I smacked her again, grabbed her hips, and pulled her down on top of me. “Ride me like a good girl.”

She grabbed my cock and sat down on it. I slipped into her wetness and felt her walls tighten around me as I plunged deeper and deeper inside her.

Then she began bouncing her ass, and I thought it might push me over the edge. She rode me hard and fast, taking all of me with each thrust until my name came out of her in a scream of pleasure, and she came again, her juices coating my cock.

“Oh hell, yeah,” I said, grabbing her hips and lifting her off me.

I stood with her, turned her around, and then forced her to bend over the bed. Her ass was in the air for me, and I gave her another quick smack. Her ass jiggled, and she arched her back, begging me to fill her up.

I stood behind her and eased the tip of my dick into her pussy.

“More,” she pleaded, her hands balling into fists in the blankets. “Please, fuck me.”

“You want me to fuck you, baby?”

“Mhm,” she moaned, looking back at me over her shoulder.

I pushed deeper inside her. “Fuck, you’re so wet.”

She moaned when I was buried to the hilt inside her. I leaned over her, planting my hands on either side of her waist, and dropped low to kiss her shoulders and neck. As I tickled her skin with the softest kisses, I began thrusting my hips, working her until she was a breathless mess beneath me.

Her climax shook her entire body. Her thighs quivered and so did her ass, and it sent me into overdrive. I pulled her to the edge of the bed and fucked her hard and fast, reveling in the sound of her cries of pleasure until I blew my load inside her.

We came apart but only for a moment. I got on the bed beside her, and she curled up along my side, hooking her leg over mine and resting her cheek on my chest. We lay together until we caught our breath, and then I kissed the top of her head.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said.

“Oh?” She looked up at me.

I nodded. “I think you should move in with me. You and Luke. I have plenty of space. I can clear out the rooms down the hall, one for Luke and one for the nursery. What do you think?”

Even though it was dark, I could see the reflection of tears in her eyes. She nodded. “I would like that very much. But are you sure? It’s a big sacrifice, giving up your place and letting kids take over. It changes everything.”

“I’m ready for it. And it will be you and me. A team.”

“A team,” she smiled, propping her head up so she could look up at me.

“And I want to get to know Luke. I want him to know he can trust me. I’ll treat him like he’s my own, Holly. He deserves at least that.”

Holly kissed the tip of my nose. “He does deserve that.”

I grinned. “We can paint before you move in. The rooms will be perfect. What does Luke like? Green, right?”

Holly nodded.

“Excellent. And the nursery. What do you want to do? Yellow? Gray?”

“Slow down, Jax, slow down.” She laughed, resting a hand on my chest. “We have time for all of this, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I just want you to have everything you want.”

“I already do,” she cooed.

I ran my fingers through her hair. “Stop trying to woo me. You already got me.”

“I’m not trying to woo you.” She giggled. “And you got me, for the record.”

“So ... yellow?”

Holly threw her head back and laughed. “If you’re dead set on yellow, we can do yellow.”

“Fuck, yeah.” I ran my thumb along her bottom lip. “Another thing. Let’s you and me drive down to the Roost tomorrow morning and tell that asshole manager of yours that you quit. What do you say?”

Holly’s tongue swept across the tip of my thumb. “Hell yes.”

I chuckled and slipped my thumb between her lips. She bit down on my knuckle playfully.

“One more thing,” she said, resting a finger across my lips. “With kids around, you’re going to have to watch that mouth

of yours. I don't want my son to start cursing like a sailor."

"You'll have to help me with that one."

"Of course," Holly said. "I'll reward you when you're good." She hovered over me and kissed me. Her hair fell from behind her ears and tickled my cheeks and chest as she climbed on top of me. "And I'll punish you when you're bad."

"Both options sound like a reward to me."

She ran her fingers through my hair and turned my head to the side to kiss my jaw and nibble my earlobe. Her tongue grazed my neck and sent a shiver of need down my spine. I ran my hands over her shoulder and down her back to grab her ass. "Don't tell me you still want more," I said.

"Of you? I'll always want more."

EPILOGUE



HOLLY

12 Months Later

I woke up to our bedroom basked in sunlight and had to cover my eyes with one hand as they adjusted to the brightness. I rolled over, reaching out one arm to wrap around Jax but found his side of the bed empty.

Blinking in the brightness, I peered around the room.

The alarm clock on his side of the bed read that it was already nine in the morning.

“What the hell?” I breathed, rolling back over and swinging my legs off the side of the bed. I rubbed sleep from my eyes and hurried to dress in my pajamas. I tied up my hair and relieved my bladder before slipping out of the bedroom and padding down the hall.

I checked Angelie’s nursery first, finding it empty. The yellow walls made the room appear to glow. I smiled and basked in the simplicity of looking into my daughter’s bedroom. My favorite rocking chair sat in the corner, covered in pink pillows and blankets. Her dresser was decorated with dozens of photos, my favorite of which was one of Jax holding her in the hospital for the first time.

I sighed and went to Luke’s bedroom. It was empty, too, and a bit messy. I reminded myself to have him clean it later.

Frowning, I went downstairs and found Jax working frantically in the kitchen. I hovered just out of sight in the doorway and watched the scene unfold with a smile and a full heart.

Jax was holding Angelie in one arm and had her balanced on his hip. She was sucking a soother and seemed content to be working in the kitchen with daddy. He was wearing his sweats and a loose, gray T-shirt. His hair was disheveled, and it was clear he hadn't had a chance to shower yet this morning. His jaw was covered in dark stubble, and he looked handsome as ever, despite the fatigue in his eyes.

My mind raced with dirty thoughts. I still hungered for him the same way I used to, and it always surprised me. With Kent, I had lost the attraction soon after moving to Philadelphia. I knew that was probably because the resentment had started around then, but I never truly believed I could love someone as much as I loved Jax and still be so attracted to them.

He was a god, and he made me feel like a queen with his constant compliments and sweet kisses. How he treated me in the bedroom helped, too, of course.

I was the luckiest woman alive.

Everything that had happened last year only made me more grateful for what I had now. I had almost lost Jax to the hell he endured at TJ's hands. We had peace of mind knowing he was locked up in a prison out of state, and Dani was keeping her eye on his case to make sure there was no funny business involved. She was keen on keeping him behind bars for as long as possible. She had let us know that he had already had some missteps in prison, so likely wouldn't be up for early parole. This had been music to our ears.

Since then everything with the Black Hearts had been calm. They kept to themselves like they used to, and the MC was able to get back to the simple life. Ryder still ruled over all of them with the same gruff attitude, but he had a soft spot now for Jax, who had saved their necks back at the mansion.

I had heard the story dozens of times now- enough so that it felt like I had been there myself.

I was glad that I wasn't, and so was Jax. He never wanted me to see that side of him. Although even if I did it wouldn't change how I felt. He was mine, and I loved every bit of him.

Ruthless fighter included.

Luke was sitting at the kitchen island sipping on some orange juice as he watched Jax make a total mess of the kitchen. “She’s not going to be happy you messed it all up,” Luke said.

“Yeah, yeah. She won’t care,” Jax said over his shoulder. “I’m not good in the kitchen like your mother. I don’t know where everything is.”

Luke shrugged his small shoulders. “She hates a messy kitchen.”

“So you’ve said. Many times,” Jax muttered.

He adjusted Angelie on his hip before attempting to break an egg on the edge of a bowl. The entire egg shattered, sending pieces of shell straight into whatever it was he was attempting to make. Based on the pan on the counter and the spatula and whisk, I was assuming it was pancakes.

“Bloody fucking hell,” he growled, looking up at the ceiling like there was something up there that could help him.

“She would also be mad if she heard you swear,” Luke said.

I held in my giggle. He was such a good boy and had been keeping Jax in check all year.

“Yeah, well, she’s not here, is she?” Jax said.

Luke finished his orange juice. “Yeah, but she’s a mom. She knows stuff.”

“You gonna be a narc?” Jax asked.

“A narc?” Luke repeated.

“Yeah. A tattletale.”

Luke shifted in his seat. “Maybe.”

Jax laughed.

I cleared my throat.

Jax spun around, eyes wide, and I noticed the wet stain down the front of his shirt and the thigh of his pants. I covered

my mouth and tried not to laugh. “What on earth is happening in here?”

Jax shot Luke a scathing look as the little boy began laughing. “Nothing,” Jax said hurriedly. “I just wanted to do something nice and make you breakfast in bed this morning.” He turned back to the counter, and I saw his shoulders slump. “It would appear I need more practice in the kitchen before that dream can come to fruition.”

I padded into the kitchen and stopped beside Luke at the counter. “Morning,” I said, ruffling my son’s hair before planting a kiss on the top of his head. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good, Mama.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” I told Jax as I slipped onto the stool beside Luke.

“Sometimes. I had grand plans,” Jax said with a frown.

“Grand plans, huh?” I asked, tilting my head to the side. “It’s already nine. What kind of grand plans did you have?”

Luke answered before Jax had the chance. “He was going to give you a present.”

“A present?” I asked, looking from Luke to Jax, who looked like he was a balloon who had just been maliciously popped by my seven-year-old. I laughed at him. “What sort of present?”

Jax shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

He was distressed, I could tell. I got up from my stool and took Angelie out of his arms. I kissed her cheeks and cooed at her before looking back up at Jax. “You all right? You seem a bit flustered.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m all right.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, not believing him at all.

Jax wiped the flour from his hands on the dishrag draped over the handle of our oven and turned to face me. “This mess doesn’t factor into my grand plans. You’ll have to meet me

halfway and picture a plate of hot pancakes and a mug of hot coffee on a tray that I would be bringing up to the bedroom.”

“Okay,” I said with a laugh. “Jax, what’s this about?”

He came and stood in front of me, rubbing his hands nervously on his thighs. Then, his hand slipped into his pocket, and he dropped to one knee.

I took a step back and covered my mouth. Angelie giggled in my arms.

“Holly Whitton,” Jax said, looking up at me, “I love you more than I ever thought I could love someone. You give me purpose. You make me a better man. And if you’ll have me, I promise to spend the rest of my life making you happy. Will you marry me?”

I squealed. Angelie cried. Luke looked at us like we were insane.

“Yes!” I cried, and Jax popped open the ring box.

I was floored by the beauty of the jewel concealed inside. It sparkled and danced in the box like a living thing, catching all the light in the room and reflecting it outward. I covered my mouth.

“It’s beautiful.”

Jax plucked it out of the box and told me to hold out my left hand. He slid the ring onto my ring finger, and I found myself staring down at it, happier than I had ever felt.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t more romantic,” Jax said. “Maybe next time when I plan something, I shouldn’t shoot for grand.”

I laughed as tears welled in my eyes. “This is perfect. Honestly.”

“You’re getting married?” Luke asked, looking back and forth between Jax and me.

I nodded. “Yeah, baby, we’re getting married.”

He slid off the stool and came and hugged my legs. Then he hugged Jax, and I thought, for a moment, my heart might explode out of my chest with love.

“Come on,” I said, “Someone better make you boys breakfast before your stomachs try to eat themselves.”

“Jax made a mess, Mom,” Luke said.

Jax threw his hands in the air. “So quick to throw me under the bus, huh?”

Luke got back up on his stool and grinned as I grabbed a rag and began cleaning, still balancing Angelie on my hip. There was no way I would be able to make pancakes in the disastrous state the kitchen was in. I looked over at Jax after peering into the bowl full of eggs, flour, milk, and eggshells. “At least you tried.”

He groaned.

“Go shower. I can handle this. It’s the least I can do to repay you,” I said, flashing the ring on my hand.

Jax chuckled and shook his head. “You can’t get rid of me that easily. How about I put Angelie down for her nap. Then I’m coming back, and you can teach me how you do what you do. I want to learn. Maybe one of these days, I’ll actually be able to bring my wife breakfast in bed.”

“Wife.” I smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

He took Angelie out of my arms, who reached for him and played with his scruff as he cradled her. “Okay, time to go have a nap. You going to be a good girl and fall asleep nice and fast for Daddy?”

“Good luck!” I called as he made his way upstairs.

I could hear him humming to her as I began washing dishes.

“Momma?”

I turned to Luke who was still sitting at the kitchen island and turned off the kitchen tap. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Does this mean there’s going to be a wedding?”

I grinned. “Yes. We’ll have a wedding.”

“When?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Soon, I hope. Maybe when the weather gets nice and warm again. We could do it outside. What do you think?”

“Outside would be nice. Do I get to be part of the wedding?”

I dried my hands and went to my son. “Of course, you do. You know, in a way, Jax is kind of marrying you too. He picked us to be his family. Cool, right?”

Luke nodded. “Cool.”

“There’s one job I bet would be perfect for you on the wedding day. Do you know what a ring bearer is?”

Luke shook his head.

“You would be the one who brought the rings to Jax and me right before we say ‘I do’ and make it official. You would get to wear a nice suit and carry a fancy pillow that the rings would be on. Does that sound like something you would want to do?”

Luke nodded. “Yeah.”

“Then it’s done. You’ll be our ring bearer.”

“Ring bearer, huh?” Jax asked as he returned to the kitchen. He came to stand behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist before pressing his lips to my cheek. He nuzzled his face into my shoulder, his stubble tickling my skin, and I giggled and tried to pull away. He pulled me closer to him, and I could smell his lingering cologne.

“Get a room,” Luke hollered at us.

We both turned and looked at him.

“Where did you learn that?” I asked.

“Auntie Kim.” Luke shrugged.

“Of course.” Jax chuckled.

I rolled my eyes and resumed wiping down the counters. “Your aunt is going to get you in a lot of trouble one day, little

man. Better watch it. Speaking of Auntie Kim, I should call her and tell her we're engaged!"

"She may have already known I had this morning planned," Jax confessed.

"Oh really? So the two of you have been plotting behind my back?"

"Not plotting," Jax said. "Planning. There's a difference. And she was a lot of help with the ring selection. I had no clue what I was doing. She gave me the green light when I picked this one out."

"She knows my taste," I smiled.

"She's also coming over tonight for a surprise engagement dinner that you're not supposed to know anything about." Jax checked that Luke wasn't looking before squeezing my ass. "So when people arrive you'll act surprised, right?"

"I can try," I giggled. "Who else is coming?"

"Not telling."

"Axel? Ellie? Hanna?"

Jax scowled at me.

"Ryder and Dani?"

"Nose down," Jax said.

I smiled and shook my head. "I'll make sure they have no idea you told me. Pay attention now," I said as I reached for a clean bowl. I grabbed the eggs from the counter and pulled two out of the carton. Then, gently, I rapped it on the side of the bowl. The shell split down the middle, and I flicked the yolk into the bowl.

"How the hell—"

"Heck," I corrected.

"How the heck did you do that?" Jax asked. "You're a witch."

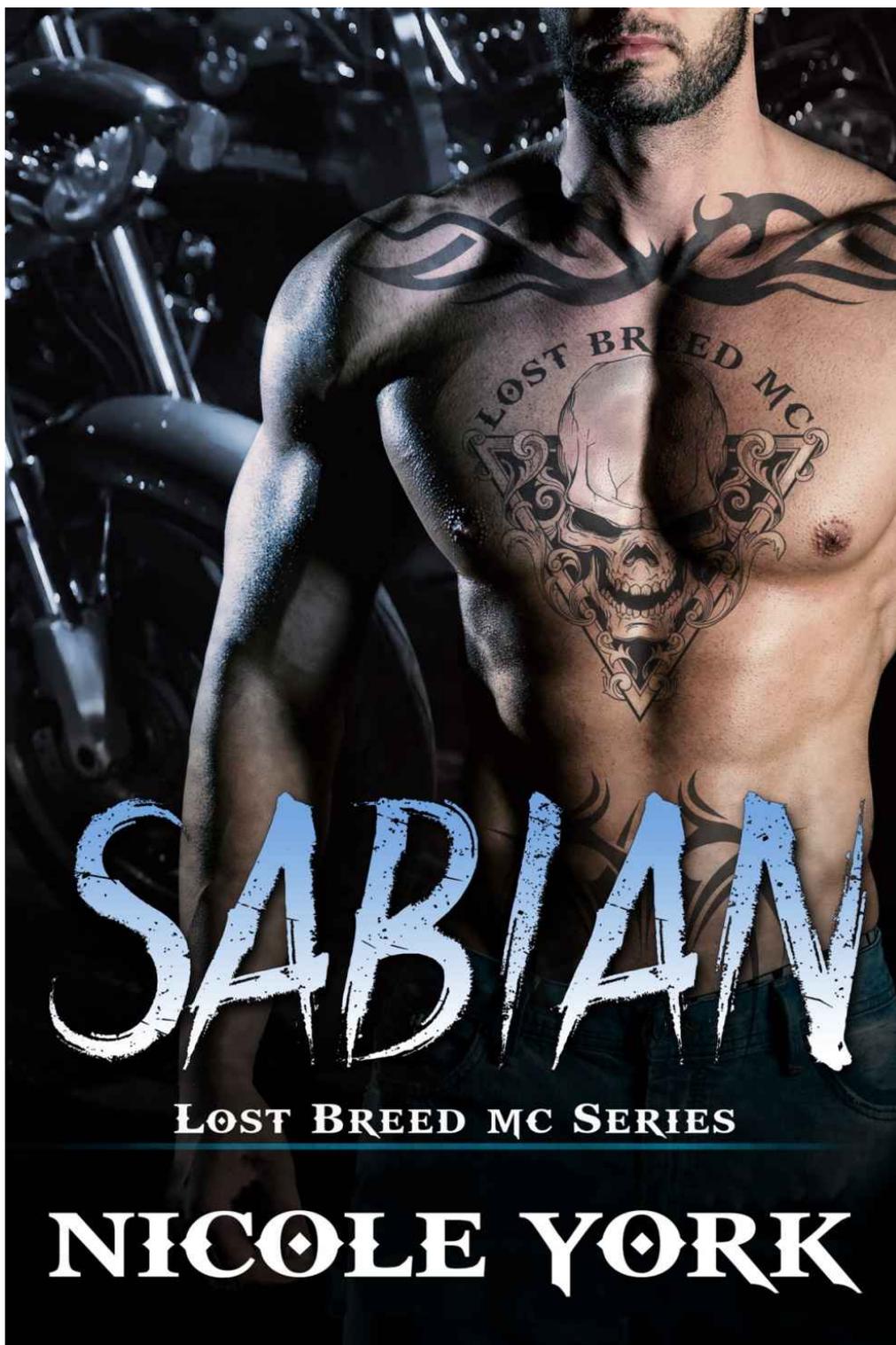
I laughed. "Practice. Lots of practice. Pass me the salt?"

"Sure thing, fiancée."

He kept his hand on my hip as he reached for the salt, and I told him how much to pour in. I wanted to capture the moment in my memory forever. It was sweet and simple and everything I had ever wanted with Jax since I was just a teenager.

I sighed and closed my hand over his on my hip.

All that time and all that waiting had been completely worth it.

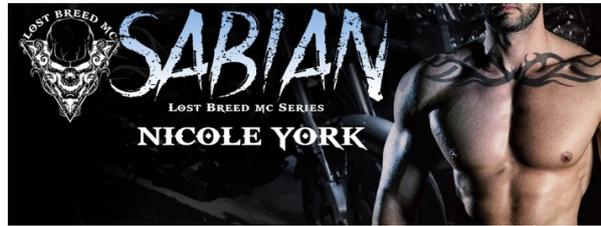


SABIAN

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I'm an unlucky guy.

Shit just has a way of kicking me when I'm down. When the girl of my dreams comes back to New York City and doesn't refrain from seeking me out, I know it's only a matter of time before the other shoe drops and shit hits the fan.

Someone is hunting Lost Breed members and they're not being shy about it.

A man with a violent past has thrown his lot in with the Black hearts and their new leader is keen on our destruction. Our death.

It's my responsibility to keep my girl safe - no matter the cost- no matter the risk.

But I could never have foreseen how everything would go down.

I never could have known that the Lost Breed was about to face a villain who doesn't know the meaning of mercy.

CHAPTER 1



SABIAN

I hung my helmet over the handlebars of my motorcycle and swung my leg over the seat. My boots crunched on the gravel as I took the walk up the drive to the shop, where I could see Ellie hunched over the back end of a crotch rocket of some sort. She was dressed in a white tank top and jeans and had a long-sleeved shirt tied around her waist. She was hard at work, as always, and I was sure she would be giving me shit for coming in late when we were the only two full-time mechanics currently on payroll.

Summertime in New York City was the busiest time of year at the Lost Breed's mechanic shop. Long-term customers travelled from other states to bring in their motorcycles, primarily Harley's, to Ryder Moretti's shop for the best service and prices. Usually it would be full-staffed with four full-time mechanics and two part-time. But this summer, things were different. They were slow.

The usual crews who rode in from out of state had not arrived by the first week of July, which was strange, but understandable. All the drama the Lost Breed had suffered over the last couple of years might have been enough to scare business away.

The damn Black Hearts had managed to land a hit on our wallets. That was for sure.

So for now, it was just Ellie and me holding down the fort. Jax and Axel had both taken a step back and only came in a couple days a week when we were stretched thin. For the most part, they stayed home with their kids. Ellie had received the

same offer from Ryder, who suggested she take advantage of the downtime to be at home with her family. She had flat out refused and told him that someone had to make some money in her household. It was all jokes, of course. We all knew the truth: Ellie's identity was her mechanic skills. She lived and breathed motor oil and grease, and talking her out of the shop would be like talking Ryder himself out of his own MC.

It just wasn't going to happen.

Ellie looked up from her work when I stepped from the gravel to the cement floor of the shop. She braced one hand on her knee as she peered up at me over her shoulder. Her brow was furrowed and sweaty, and loose strands of bright blonde hair hung around her cheeks. Maybe *hung* was the wrong word. They were plastered to her cheeks from sweat, and she had grease stains on her chin.

"It's about fucking time," she spat as she leaned down and plucked a shop rag from the floor. She wiped the grease from her hands and stood, tucking the rag into the back pocket of her jeans. "What took you so long?"

I shrugged as I escaped the heat of the sun and swapped it for the cool shade of the shop. "I overslept."

Ellie's eyes narrowed, and she blew out a frustrated breath. "You know this bike has to go out today, right?"

"I do. And I also know that it only has a couple more hours of work left on it." I stepped in closer to the bike to get a look at the work she was doing. The customer had asked for a custom order, and Ellie had crafted a rear fairing of her own design over the week. "That looks sick."

Ellie's serious expression shattered, and she gave me a bright grin. "Right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he'll be impressed. You'll be doing custom designs for all of New York City soon. Maybe you'll get scouted by Harley or Yamaha or something and make it big time."

Ellie chuckled and shook her head as she returned to her work. "You and I both know I'd turn them down."

“Yeah, because you’re afraid of change.”

“No,” she said simply. “I just don’t want to mess with a good thing. I’m happy here. Besides, I don’t think I’d ever want to work for anyone else besides Ryder.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Ryder and I had history. He and my older brother, Rafael, had been best friends all throughout their childhood. Our *madre* hadn’t liked Rafael hanging around with Johnny. He was rowdy, and loud, and white, as my *madre* had put it. Being just a young boy, five years their junior, I hadn’t really understood what she meant. Later, I learned that she didn’t like how Johnny pulled Rafael away from his Mexican heritage.

Then, when I was nineteen, I had to choose between Ryder and my *madre*. A middle aged wealthy businessman had run over my brother in his Cadillac after snorting an obscene amount of cocaine. He hadn’t stopped. Just kept on driving.

He dragged Rafael under his car for two blocks before my brother’s corpse became dislodged from the undercarriage.

I hadn’t been there, but Ryder had, and he had been the one to come to my front door and break the news to me and my *madre*.

That had been the worst night of my life, and hers. And it was burned into my memory for eternity.

Ryder took us to the funeral and paid for everything. My family wasn’t well off by any means, and Rafael had been our only hope of achieving financial stability. He was running with Ryder at the time, who created the Lost Breed, and making strides that were putting thick bundles of cash in his pocket every week.

A week after I put my brother in the ground, Ryder came to me with a proposal. He’d hunted down the piece of shit that killed Rafael, and he was giving me the chance to go with him to deliver justice.

I went without even thinking about it.

We found the driver in a bar. He was drunk and high as a kite, and when the night ended, Ryder and I watched him walk to his car parked in the lane behind the bar. It wasn't his Cadillac. It was a Mercedes this time. His Cadillac was probably still parked in his garage in his suburban home with chunks of my brother's flesh lodged in the differential.

I lost my fucking mind when the guy went to get into his Mercedes. Ryder didn't hold me back when I went after him and beat the shit out of him. He didn't stand a chance of escaping me. I pummelled him while he sat in his driver's seat. He tried to close the door on me, and I used it to break his arm. I can still hear the series of cracks before the loud crunch of breaking bones made him scream.

Ryder only intervened when I tried to strangle the asshole with his seatbelt. He got me the hell out of there, and we left my brother's killer dripping blood all over his expensive interior. Then, two days later, Ryder called in with an anonymous tip about who committed the hit and run that killed Rafael Delgado, and the guilty party did not deny it. He went to prison. My *madre* had peace of mind and justice for her son.

And I had a thirst for violence that permeated my existence for nearly three years before Ryder got me stable.

I owed him more than my life.

I would never leave him. He and the Lost Breed MC were my family now, and it was better for my *madre* this way. The three-year bender I had gone on after Rafael died had nearly broken her; it had certainly broken our relationship. Now things were better, but we were still estranged. She knew where I was and what I was up to with the MC, and I sent her money and made sure she was safe and healthy. But that was the extent of our communication.

It was better that way. I was only following in my brother's footsteps, and if the past was any indication, my life might be cut short just like his. I didn't want to do that to her.

"Will you pass me that piece there?" Ellie asked, pointing to a shiny black piece of fibreglass on the work table beside me.

I passed it to her as a bright yellow Volkswagen convertible parked out on the gravel beside my bike. Jamie, our receptionist, got out of her car and waved at me. I waved back as she ducked back into her car and came back out with a tray of blended iced coffees.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” I muttered, kicking the crate Ellie was sitting on as I walked by. “Take a break. Jamie has cold drinks.”

Ellie swept her hair off her forehead and got to her feet. Jamie met us at the bay doors and handed us both our coffees.

“Morning,” she said cheerfully before sealing her lips over her straw and sipping her drink.

“Morning,” Ellie and I said together.

Jamie looked up at me with bright eyes and an eager smile. “So?”

I felt my eyebrows come together. “So? What?”

Jamie rolled her eyes and giggled. “Oh, come on! Your date on Saturday. You promised to tell us how it went. Let’s hear it.”

Ellie turned to me. “I completely forgot. What was her name again?”

I sipped my coffee and wished both women had forgotten I even had a date that weekend. I wasn’t keen on suffering any humiliation at their hands, and by the glint in their eyes, I knew they were dying for an opportunity to lay into me.

“Her name was Mia,” I said.

“Mia as in *Mia Salvega*?” Jamie asked with an arched eyebrow.

I nodded.

Jamie chuckled and shook her head. “I thought you’d learned not to pick up women from work. It’s unprofessional. Not only that, but it’ll be weird now when she picks up her car.”

I shrugged. “Weird for her, I guess.”

Both women stared at me expectantly. Jamie had her straw in her mouth, and Ellie was absently stirring hers to mix the whip cream in with the blended coffee. Ellie glanced at Jamie then back at me. “Are we going to have to pry the information out of you? Or are you just going to tell us? Because you know we won’t leave you alone until you do.”

I wasn’t sure when or how it had happened, but over the course of the last year, I had become good friends with both Ellie and Jamie. It had been a surprise to all of us when I started working full time in the shop to cover for Axel and Jax, and it couldn’t have worked out better. All three of us enjoyed each other’s company.

Except for on days like today, where I knew I was about to be ripped a new asshole because, as everyone in the MC now knew, I was terrible at dating.

More specifically, I was terrible with women.

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll tell you. But this stays within our little circle, all right?”

“All right.” Jamie nodded eagerly.

I groaned, ran my hand down my face, thought dimly that I should probably shave, and then came clean with how the date went down.

“I met her at the restaurant the two of you suggested. She looked pretty hot. I won’t lie. She had on this tight little red dress and heels longer than my fingers—”

“Did you tell her?” Jamie asked.

“Tell her what?”

She looked at me like I was a moron. “Did you tell her you thought she looked nice?”

“Uh, I don’t remember.”

“So that’s a no,” Ellie said dryly. “Smooth, Sabian. Real smooth.”

“Seriously? It matters that much to you women to be told you look nice?”

“Yes,” Ellie and Jamie said in unison.

I scratched the back of my neck. “All right. Noted. Anyways, after we met up, we took our seats and ordered drinks. She had this fruity thing that sounded like something you would order off a kid’s menu. And then ordered a salad.”

Ellie laughed. “Date over. Sabian Delgado can’t date a woman who likes her greens.”

“Not true,” I said, holding up one finger. “I *can*, but if I’m taking you out on my dime, I want a woman who will order real food.”

“A salad is real food,” Jamie muttered.

“Debatable,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” Jamie said under her breath.

I ignored her. “Whatever. It was just a salad. I didn’t say anything.”

“What did she do that *did* make you say something, then?” Ellie asked knowingly as she shifted her weight to her right foot and popped her hip out.

She knew me too well. I looked down at my feet. “She asked me to carry her purse.”

Ellie snorted loudly and covered her mouth as she burst into a fit of giggles. Jamie was quick to follow suit, and soon they were both swaying on the spot as they laughed their asses off.

“I’m glad you find it amusing,” I said, sighing.

“What did you say to her?” Ellie managed to ask through wheezing breaths as she struggled to recover.

“I made it from our table to the sidewalk outside the restaurant before passing it back to her and telling her I wasn’t that kind of guy.”

Ellie arched an eyebrow, silently prodding me to continue.

“And she ripped it out of my hands and asked me what kind of guy I was.” I finished off my blended coffee, fought

off the wave of brain freeze that rolled over me, and tossed the empty cup into the garbage can in the corner of the shop. “So, naturally, I was honest with her, and I told her exactly what kind of guy I was.”

Jamie covered her mouth and shook her head. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I did.” I grinned sheepishly.

“And it didn’t make her panties all wet?” Ellie asked.

“No, she slapped me in front of the doorman and walked off.”

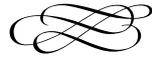
Ellie and Jamie roared with more laughter, and after Ellie finished slapping her thigh with amusement, she met my eye. “All right, I have to know what you said to her. Come on, what did you say that made poor little Mia run off in such a hurry?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose before looking at the two of them. “I told her I was the kind of guy who would eat her better than she ate her salad and fuck her like she deserved for asking me to hold her purse. Hard and rough. And up the ass.”

Jamie choked on her coffee, and Ellie laughed at the ceiling. It was going to be a long day with the two of them taking jabs at me for my ruthless come-on and less than impressive dating skills.

Mondays were the worst around here.

CHAPTER 2



ANGELA

My new penthouse was on the top floor of the Kent in the Upper East Side of New York City. It had a spectacular view, with windows wrapping almost all the way around. I was standing in the living room, basking in the mid-afternoon sunlight streaming in when the movers came through the front door with the last piece of furniture: my dining room table.

“Where do you want this, Miss Cooper?” The burly one with the curly red hair asked. His face was awash in freckles, and he had a white smile that nearly glowed through his bushy beard.

“Just there,” I said, pointing to the open space where I planned on setting up my dining area.

The two men, the second a middle-aged graying gentleman with dark brown eyes, brought the table to where I pointed and set it down.

“Thank you,” I said, going and running a finger down the length of the white table. Only a little bit of dust came away. I wiped it on my black pants. “Would either of you like a beer? You’ve worked hard. I’d like to thank you for that.”

The redhead began to nod, but he was interrupted by his older partner. “No thank you, Miss. We’re still on the clock. Thank you, though.”

“That’s all right,” I said, padding across the dining room to the open concept kitchen. I opened my fridge, which at the present time only had a case of beer and a bottle of champagne, and grabbed myself a beer. I popped the cap off,

using the lip of the marble counter. I caught both men watching me as I lifted it to my lips. “My parents have paid you already, right?”

They both nodded.

I grabbed my purse on the counter and pulled out my wallet. I handed them each a crisp hundred-dollar bill. “They’re bad tippers. I don’t like to be associated with that.”

The redhead’s eyebrows shot upwards. “Thanks, this is generous of you.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t really, not in contrast to the money sitting in my bank account or my parents’. I came from a long line of wealthy Coopers, who had been passing down their millions through seven generations. The family business was mafia on the down-low, but another part of the family ran Cooper Industries and kept it clean. The good side of the business had existed for over one hundred years. I still had no clue what exactly the business was. I doubted any of the women in the family did. It was run by the men and the men only. Us Cooper ladies were primarily trophies or home keepers. Our lives were lavish yet unfulfilling.

I had spent my teenage years basking in money. I enjoyed all the luxuries my father bestowed upon me: a new car every summer, a credit card with no limit, vacations whenever I so desired an escape from all the hard work of being a rich female Cooper.

But shortly into my twenties, all the glitz and glam lost its appeal for me. I wanted something more. I wanted something that was mine and mine alone. My passion for writing was where it started, and I studied journalism at California State University. I had worked as a temp at the Los Angeles Times for two years before I was able to write and publish my own pieces.

After three years of working in the journalism industry, I landed my dream gig. I received a call from the New York Times, and a week later, they gave me a job offer.

I hadn't needed to think about it, but I told them I needed time. They gave me a week to sort through my thoughts. They knew I'd be moving across the country if I accepted the job. All I really needed with that time was a way to convince my parents to let me go.

I was twenty-three and still needed approval from Mom and Dad.

It had taken a lot of convincing and, unfortunately, a fair amount of lying. I wanted this more than anything, and I would be damned if I let my Cooper name hold me back from seizing the opportunity to live in New York City and work as a journalist.

I told my parents that I had been keeping a secret from them. I wove an intricate web of lies and confessed that I had been seeing a man who lived in New York City for six months. After they wrapped their heads around that doozy, I hit them with the real jackpot lie: he was actually my fiancé. After they believed me, and after a lot more persuasion and whining and pleading, they agreed to let me go with a few conditions.

I would stay at the penthouse they purchased for me. I would talk with them on the phone once a week to fill them in on how things were going. And, lastly, I would have to introduce them to this new boyfriend of mine at my cousin's wedding in a week.

Now, as I stood with the movers my parents had hired for me, I felt extremely lucky. I was the first Cooper woman in seven generations to pursue a career. There was stress and pressure associated with that, of course, but I had never been the kind to crumble when the going got tough. I excelled. The New York Times wouldn't be any different.

The movers interrupted my thoughts and asked if there was anything else I needed help with. They offered to arrange my furniture for me, but I told them it would be fine.

"I'm quite picky," I said, polishing off the rest of my beer. I put it down on the dining room table and realized it was the first time I didn't have to use a coaster. Freedom. "I'll arrange things on my own. I'm stronger than I look."

“All right,” the older mover said. “Your mother has our number if you need us to come back.”

“Thank you, but I won’t need you.”

The two men shared a quick glance, then nodded and made for the door. I walked them out, wished them a good day, and closed and locked the door behind them.

Then I spun to soak in the sight of my apartment.

My apartment.

“Hell-fucking-yeah,” I breathed before going back to the fridge for another beer. There was no one to tell me no. There was no one to tell me beer wasn’t a lady’s drink. I didn’t have to sit in the corner sipping lemon water anymore. I didn’t have to wear pastel colored dresses and pink lipstick and wide-brimmed hats. I didn’t have to wear makeup if I didn’t want to.

I could just *be*.

I popped the top off my second beer the same way I did the first, and then I kicked off my heels and left them sitting on the kitchen floor. I walked away from them and ignored the tug at my stomach that I was breaking a rule. I went to the living room, where my sofas and chairs and coffee table were all wrapped in plastic, and cut into them. I tore everything open, creating a massive pile of garbage in the corner by the windows.

Moving boxes were piled up beside the fireplace, and I cut into those, pulling out items as I went and placing them on surfaces as I had space. I found my speaker and set up my music and blasted it as loud as I could as I danced around the apartment and unpacked and drank beer.

I made it through one pack in four hours and decided to order pizza.

I continued setting my place up. I unpacked my makeup vanity and found my two makeup boxes. I unloaded them and filled the drawers of the vanity. I found all my beauty and styling tools and placed them where they should be, deciding right then and there that I would not even use half of them.

I paused to look at myself in the mirror.

My long blonde hair was pulled back in a high ponytail. The diamonds in my right ear winked at me all the way from my lobe to the top of my cartilage. My parents had been furious when I came home with an ear full of piercings. They had become even more livid when they saw the one in my navel. They didn't know about the one through my clit, and they never would. That was for my enjoyment only. And the enjoyment of my partners.

I pulled the elastic out of my hair and let it tumble around my shoulders.

I needed a change. I wasn't just the tanned, blonde, beautiful daughter of Weston and Leslie Cooper anymore. I was a journalist for the New York Times. I was an independent woman. I was finally *me*.

I went on the hunt for my phone and had to stop looking when the pizza guy arrived. I padded barefoot down the hall—something I never would have been allowed to do back at the Cooper Estate—and opened the door.

The pizza guy was young, probably no more than eighteen. He was tall and gangly, like many teen boys were, and when he saw me, he began stuttering over his own words.

I took the pizza out of his hand and placed it on the still-wrapped table in my entranceway. “Hey,” I said, giving him my best smile. “How much?”

“Uh.” His eyes flicked back and forth between mine before doing a not so subtle up down of my body. I was wearing practical clothes for moving, so I wasn't sure what he was getting so worked up about. My black pants were tight, sure, and my tank top showed a bit of midriff and a whole lot of arm, but my tits weren't hanging out on display.

“Will twenty dollars cover it?” I asked, trying to help him out.

He nodded.

I passed him a twenty-dollar bill, which crumpled in his clammy hand as he tucked it into his pocket.

“Okay, well, thank you.” I began closing the door. “I order a lot of pizza, so I’ll probably see you around.”

“S-see you around,” he called as I closed the door.

I grabbed my pizza and took it into the living room. I turned off my music and searched for my phone. I found it near some of the moving boxes by the fireplace. I left the pizza on the dining room table as I went and grabbed the bottle of champagne from the fridge. I popped it—something I had never done before—and poured myself a fizzing glass before bringing it to the table with me.

The champagne and pizza didn’t necessarily complement each other, but the fact that I was alone in my own place eating whatever the fuck I wanted overrode what my taste buds were telling me.

Not only that, but I was feeling a bit tipsy, so I didn’t care.

I began making a To Do list on my phone. I needed to stay organized.

Chop hair off

Get groceries

Finish unpacking

Find the pool in the building

Satisfied with my list of mundane priorities, I cranked the music back up and ate the entire pizza myself. Then I spent the rest of the evening walking around and unpacking and drinking my champagne straight out of the bottle.

Around midnight, I ran myself a bath and filled it with lemongrass oils and bubble bars. I stepped in, and the hot water danced around my knees. I sank deeply into it and leaned back against the cushioned side. My champagne was beside me. It wasn’t cold anymore, but I didn’t care. I sipped it as the water warmed my body and eased the ache in my back and hips from all the moving I had done during the day.

As I lay in the water, I thought about my brother. He was here in New York and had been for a long time now. He and my parents had cut ties when I was still in high school when he moved out here. The lifestyle he chose was a stark contrast to what my father had expected from his only son. He had wanted my brother to take over for him at Cooper Industries when he retired. My brother had other plans. He wanted his own life where he could live by his own rules.

As soon as I turned twenty, I finally understood that desire of his.

I leaned over to grab my phone from where it rested on the ledge of the table. I should visit him. I knew where he worked. He had told me last time we spoke on the phone a few months ago. My parents didn't know we were still in touch. There was no sense in telling them. Just because they cut him from their lives didn't mean I wanted to lose my brother. He had kept me sane in that house when I was a young girl.

I opened my To Do list.

Surprise Axel at work

CHAPTER 3



SABIAN

Mia Salvega had caught my eye primarily because of what she drove. Her custom purple Lotus Elise was parked in our shop, and Jax had his head under the hood. He was checking the oil and transmission fluids after we had done a full service to the vehicle, while I was crammed in the passenger seat vacuuming the interior.

It smelled like sunscreen and cigarettes.

“So, she’s picking this beast up today?” Jax called from where he stood at the front of the car.

I switched the handheld vacuum off and leaned out the door. “As far as I know, yeah. Jamie says she’ll be here sometime after noon.”

“Well, it’s noon now,” Jax said as he wiped the dipstick on a rag and plunged it back into place. “Can’t wait to get a good look at her for myself. Figure out what all the hype is about. I hear she slapped you at the end of your date?”

“Those girls can’t keep their fucking mouths closed,” I grumbled.

“Are you talking shit about me?” a familiar feminine voice said from outside the car.

I peered behind me to see Ellie stepping in through the door at the side of the shop. She pushed her aviators up off her nose and into her hair.

“No, he wouldn’t ever say a bad thing about you, Ellie,” Jax said slyly.

Ellie stomped over to where I was tucked in the passenger seat and bent down. She wore a cocky grin, and there were beads of sweat on her upper lip. The day must be a scorcher. “Is the lovely Mia picking this beast up today?” She rapped her knuckles on the roof.

“As far as I know,” I said.

Jax closed the hood and shared an amused look with Ellie. “I think Sabian should be the one to give her the keys back and take the rest of her payment,” Jax suggested innocently.

“Hell no,” I said as I turned the vacuum back on and proceeded with cleaning the already immaculate interior. I would give Mia credit for one thing: she kept a clean car.

“Oh, come on,” Jax said loudly over the hum of the vacuum. “You’re taking all the fun out of it.”

“Ryder would be pissed if she sent in a complaint. I’m not playing with fire like that.”

“Fair,” Jax said as he wiped his hands on the rag again. He nodded to Ellie. “How was your morning off?”

“Lovely,” she said as she swept her hair up into a ponytail. “I slept in. Axel drove Ava to school then came back with coffees and breakfast. I couldn’t ask for much more than that. Besides getting to see Mia deal with Sabian again.” She winked at me.

Jax laughed and gave her a high five as he walked by. He went to the bay doors and rolled them open, letting in bright sunlight and warm, fresh air. The shop was stuffy and hot, and in the summer, there was no escaping it. One had to simply endure the heat and keep working.

I finished vacuuming out Mia’s car and got out. I closed the door behind me as Jamie came out of the reception office. “Hey,” she called. “Ms. Salvega is on her way over. Fifteen more minutes she says.” She tossed Ellie a pair of keys. “You meet her out front and bring her to me to process her payment. When she gets here, I suggest you hide out in the bathroom, Sabian.”

Jax snorted and looked at me. “Damn, she really hates your guts, hey?”

I ignored Jax and turned to Jamie. “Did she say something about me?”

“Oh yeah, she said a few things,” Jamie said, trying to stop herself from smiling. The dimples pressing into her cheeks gave her away.

Jax laughed harder and clapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, man. Rich girls like her aren’t made for wild ones like you and me.”

“Pfft.” Ellie shook her head at us. “Wild ones? Please. You’re more domesticated than all of us, Jax.”

Jax slipped his hands into his pockets and leaned against the side of the Lotus. If I had actually liked Mia, I would have told him to move his ass. But I didn’t, so I kept my mouth shut. “Domestication is the essence of life,” Jax teased.

“I’m not disagreeing,” Ellie said. “Breakfast in bed this morning, remember? Who could turn their nose up at that?”

“You want to come over and make me breakfast tomorrow morning, Jax?” I asked, crossing my arms across my chest.

“Fuck off,” Jax said. “Take another shot at Mia. Maybe she’ll fall for it.”

“Yeah, right.” I shook my head. “Besides, if that girl made me breakfast, it would be tofu and gluten-free bread. We just weren’t a match.”

“Don’t fuck with Sabian and his meat.” Ellie chuckled.

I waved her off and faced Jax. “Enough about me and my pathetic love life. How are you and Holly? And the kids?”

The smile that crept across Jax’s face made me happy for him. It also sent off a flare of jealousy in my gut. He shifted around and crossed his ankles, still leaning against the Lotus. “They’re great. Everyone’s great. I mean, fuck, man. You know when things are going too good, and you’re just sitting around waiting for the other shoe to drop?”

No, I did not know. But I nodded like I did anyways.

“It’s like that,” Jax continued. “I keep bracing myself for things to change. Nothing this good ever lasts as long as you want it to. At least, it doesn’t in my experience. Except for Holly. And Luke is so gentle and protective with Austin.”

I caught Ellie watching me. When we made eye contact, she looked back to Jax. “Good things do last,” she said. “You’re just not used to it because of the life you lead in the MC. All it takes is two people who want to make it work.”

“Yeah,” Jax said. “I know. We’re lucky.”

Ellie nodded.

It got a little quiet and uncomfortable after that. They both realized they were discussing how happy they were in love while I was there and very clearly not in love. I’d never felt it, or wanted it, or *not* wanted it. It seemed to be this elusive thing that in my mind may or may not actually exist. It wasn’t tangible. Not for me anyways.

My mother had loved my father, and he went to prison for assault and theft.

I had loved my brother, and he was killed by an asshole who used his car as a weapon.

Love didn’t seem to work out for my family.

Maybe that was why I kept going for girls like Mia. They were guaranteed to shoot me down at the end of the night because I was guaranteed to push them away and be an asshole.

Just then, my ears pricked to the sound of tires rolling across gravel. I looked up to see a shiny silver sedan come to a stop about twenty feet from our bay doors. The passenger door opened and a tanned goddess with long black hair stepped out.

“That’s my cue to leave,” I said as Jax pushed himself upright and off the Lotus. “Come knock on the bathroom door once she leaves.”

“*That’s her?*” Jax asked incredulously.

“Yeah, try not to sound so surprised.” I scowled as I hurried to the back of the shop. As I closed the bathroom door behind me, I caught Jax looking the Latina bombshell up and down as she walked across the gravel in strappy gold heels, a skin-tight skirt, and a flowing copper top. Her lips were full and red, and designer sunglasses covered her dark eyes. She was beautiful, that was for sure, but she was also a good hitter.

I wasn't going to give her another opportunity to slap me.

I was waiting in the bathroom for just over fifteen minutes. Finally, Ellie came to get me, and I emerged tentatively. I didn't believe them when they told me Mia was gone. They were the sort of people who would see this as the perfect opportunity for a practical joke.

“Oh, don't be such a pansy,” Ellie said as she grabbed my elbow and pulled me forward. “She's gone. Like you said, Ryder would chew us all out if he got wind of bad customer service. And she was definitely the sort to call and complain.”

“Did she mention anything?”

Ellie shook her head. “No, but she's a real princess. Looked the car over and tried to haggle us on the price. With those shoes and that car, she wasn't convincing anyone that she couldn't pay full price for the service. I'm glad you two didn't hit it off. She would have annoyed the shit out of me.”

I laughed. “You and me both.”

“Now come on, let's make the most out of Jax being here today. We need to get started on that engine swap for Ryder's customer. Three sets of hands are better than two.”

I followed Ellie's lead as she talked Jax into staying and helping out. He agreed, begrudgingly, on the condition that Jamie ran out to get us beers and sandwiches. Jamie leapt at the offer because she was roasting hot and eager to sit in her car for twenty minutes just to enjoy the air conditioning.

She left the three of us sweating our balls off (I suppose Ellie was sweating her tits off) and pulled out of the drive. By

the time she came back, we had made decent headway. The project would take us another few days, especially if it was just Ellie and me, but it was enjoyable work. I'd done engine swaps dozens of times and knew the ins and outs of the job like I knew the back of my hand. The time passed quickly, and in this heat, that was the best I could hope for.

The four of us spent the next hour sitting around, drinking beers, and eating our sandwiches. If Ryder had shown up for an impromptu visit, he would have given us an earful, but with work being so slow, we didn't see the harm in taking some time to ourselves to enjoy one another's company.

It was the best part of the job and the Lost Breed.

At least, it was in my opinion. I didn't know how the others felt. They had real families to go home to at the end of the day. I had an empty house.

Mind you, it was a house, so that was better than nothing. Working with Ryder and being part of the MC had filled my wallet more than I could have dreamed it would. I was on my feet, but I was alone.

That was why moments like these among friends were worth risking a chewing out by Ryder.

CHAPTER 4



ANGELA

I took a step back and planted my hands on my hips as I regarded my newly color-coded walk-in closet. My shoes were on the back wall, tucked into white cubbies and facing outward. My purses sat above them on an open shelf lit by pot lighting in the ceiling above. Jewelry and accessories were in drawers in an island in the middle, and the east and west walls were filled with rows of clothing.

The right side was all business. I had gone out and purchased new clothes for starting at the New York Times. I wanted to start fresh and go in representing myself—my new, not-tied-to-Daddy’s-credit-card self.

My haircut had taken a more drastic turn than I had first intended it to. While sitting in the chair at the salon, the hairdresser asked me if I wanted a trim. My hair was long and healthy and thick, and he suggested he could do a bit of color to brighten it up, throw in some layers for movement, and give me a few shorter pieces around my face to accentuate my high cheekbones.

Instead, I asked him to dye it dark and chop it all off into a pixie cut.

I looked fierce as fuck. At least, I thought I did. The short hair made it impossible to cover all the piercings in my right ear; I’d never wanted to hide them in the first place. I liked how light it felt. I wasn’t carrying this heavy weight of hair in a ponytail anymore. I felt free and weightless and ready to conquer the world.

I walked along the outer edge of my closet and ran my hands over the shoulders of my shirts as I passed them. I was about to head out to surprise Axel, so I didn't want to dress up too much. He worked at a mechanic shop, and I had no interest in showing up in a flashy outfit. I wanted to blend in and not represent the family he had fled from ages ago by showing up dressed to the nines.

I opted for a pair of black jeans that were ripped up the thighs. They hugged my hips and legs like they were painted on, and getting them over my ass was a bit of a process. Once they were on, I selected a cropped loose tank top. I slid my feet into a pair of black sandals and threw on some gold bracelets and hoop earrings. I stood back to look at my reflection one more time before deciding that this would do just fine.

I grabbed my car keys and left my apartment. I rode the elevator down to the underground parking lot and got into my black convertible Alfa Romeo. I took the top down and turned up the stereo loud enough to feel the bass in the seat under my ass. I pulled out of my stall and hit the New York City streets.

The sun shone down on my shoulders, and I kicked myself for not wearing sunscreen. I was glad that Axel's shop was only twelve or so miles from my apartment. I hopefully wouldn't burn to a crisp before then. I followed my GPS and groaned loudly every time I had to stop at a red light—which was roughly every five hundred feet. New York City. Land of traffic lights and taxi cabs.

At one of the stop lights, a car with a rumbling engine pulled up beside me. I could feel the eyes of men on me without having to look over. It was a Spidey sense, I supposed, but one that most, if not all, women possessed. There were men in that car watching me. I was certain of it.

I didn't look over until one of them stuck his arm out the passenger window and banged it on the outside of his door to get my attention.

I pulled my sunglasses down my nose and looked lazily over at them. They were driving in a mustang. It was silver

and not particularly eye catching.

“Hey, there,” the passenger called over the roar of his engine and muffler. “Nice car.”

I slid my sunglasses back up my nose and adjusted my grip on my steering wheel. “I know,” I called back, turning my head back to the road.

“Is it yours?”

I turned my music off. “Are you fucking serious, buddy?”

The man was probably in his early thirties. He was handsome in a common sort of way, with a smile that could have been sweet had he not just been an asshole.

“Of course it’s mine,” I said. Did it matter that it was a gift from my parents for landing my job at the New York Times? Kind of, but he didn’t need to know that. Just because I was a woman didn’t mean I couldn’t drive an expensive sports car.

“Sorry, I was just wondering,” he said defensively.

I rolled my eyes and cranked the volume on my stereo up again. Both men in the mustang tried to get my attention, but I kept my eyes fixed on the traffic light, and when it turned green, I made a point to escape them and weave through traffic like I used to in Los Angeles. I managed to get a traffic light ahead of them before being stopped once more and boxed in by what felt like hundreds of yellow taxi cabs.

“And this is why I want to live in the country someday,” I muttered under my breath.

I arrived at Axel’s shop over an hour after leaving my apartment, which was insane considering the fact that they weren’t that far away from each other. I pulled into a gravel lot, turned down my music, and found a parking spot that faced the shop.

There were two motorcycles in the parking lot, as well as a little Volkswagen and a silver coupe of some sort. I peered around, getting a feel for where my brother had been building his empire for the last decade.

It was smaller than I had expected, but that was probably because the shops I was used to were sprawling buildings that catered to the elites. Axel had always said they weren't real mechanic shops when we had to go there to get my parents' vehicles serviced. He said they were too clean. Too nice. Too shiny.

This place was none of those things.

The outside of the building was concrete, and the bay doors were a very pale shade of blue. I wondered if they had been painted that color, or if the summer sun had slowly caused it to fade each year. In any case, it needed a paint job.

There was a large white tent pitched on the left side of the shop, and underneath it were four motorcycles and a pickup truck. Each looked to be in some state of disrepair, and I assumed they were future projects.

A drill whirred from inside the shop as I grabbed my purse from the passenger seat. I set it on my lap and rifled through it, on the hunt for my lipstick. I found it at the very bottom of my bag and then flipped down my visor.

I used the tiny mirror on the back of the visor to paint my lips red and smacked them together. I flipped the visor back up and found myself looking at a new sight. The bay doors had just been rolled open, revealing the inside of the shop.

There were two women and two men inside. One of the women was blonde and tall. She was wearing blue jeans, a white tank top, sneakers, and a long-sleeved shirt tied around her waist. The other girl, a petite brunette, was dressed in more presentable attire: dark red jeans and a loose white top. She must be their office worker.

One of the men had his back to me. I assumed he was the one who had just opened the shop doors. There was a red rag in the back pocket of his jeans, which were all frayed and ruined at the ends. He was broad shouldered and tall and more than likely a friend of my brother's.

My eyes went to the fourth person in the shop. He was standing beside the blonde woman and had his arms crossed

over his chest. He was lean, but I could see the definition of muscle in his forearms. His skin was dark, and his hair was black. All four of them were chatting amongst themselves, and when one of them said something funny, he threw his head back with joyful, genuine laughter.

Sabian Delgado.

I shook my head in disbelief. It had been a long time since I'd seen him.

In fact, the last time I saw him was the last time I was in New York three years ago. I had lied to my parents about coming to New York City to see an old friend from high school, who wanted to take me to some Broadway shows and tour me around the city. After much persuading, my parents had agreed. I'd been twenty years old, and they knew they couldn't keep me under their roof forever.

There had been no friend who wanted to take me to Broadway shows. I had simply missed my older brother and wanted to see him.

I had stayed with him for a week and met many of his friends. One of which had been Sabian. As soon as I saw him, I was attracted to him. There was something about his brooding stare, full lips, and lazy gait that gave me butterflies. He was a rebel of sorts, and he was the polar opposite of what my parents would have wanted for me. I was smart enough to know that was the main reason I was drawn to him.

At first, he had avoided me like the plague. Then, when he realized that I didn't bite and that Axel wouldn't kill him for talking to me, we started chatting. And we hit it off. We spent more time together than we should have that week, and after I went home to Los Angeles, I thought about him for months. I even told some of my friends about the sexy Mexican I had met in New York City.

They all told me that I should just forget about him and find a white man who liked to play tennis on the weekends with my father. There was no way in hell I was going to do that.

I shifted in my seat and thrummed my fingers on my steering wheel.

Sabian was somehow hotter now.

He still moved with that laziness that was unique to him, like time couldn't touch him. I watched as he stretched his hands over his head, revealing a dark trail of hair from his belly button to the prize hidden beneath his jeans. There was taut muscle there, and the cut of his hips had my brain thinking all kinds of dirty thoughts.

It had been a long time since I was with a man. That was probably why my parents were so willing to believe that I was seeing a guy in New York City.

“Okay, Angela,” I whispered to myself. “Just go up to them and say hi.”

I squared my shoulders as I gathered the nerve to approach a group of people who were my opposite in nearly every way. They were Axel's friends. They had to be good people, right?

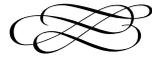
“Don't be such a bitch,” I scolded myself.

Without another moment of delay, I opened my car door and stepped out. My sandals crunched on the gravel as I twisted and slammed my door shut. All four of them turned and looked at me as I began walking up to the shop.

Just smile. Sabian will remember you. It's only been three years. I lifted my chin up.

He'll remember you.

CHAPTER 5



SABIAN

“Whoa,” Jamie said under her breath “Rich bimbo alert. Rich bimbo alert. Coming in hot.”

I looked up and out to the drive where I spotted a young woman walking toward us. Her car, an Alfa Romeo, was parked by Jamie’s Volkswagen.

She was dressed in a way that flattered her shape and drew my eyes to the curve of her hips and swell of her breasts. I couldn’t look away. Her hair was dark and short, and the sun glinted off metal and diamonds in her right ear. She had a fierce look to her, like she only drank absinthe and raw eggs. She was also sexy as hell, and I could see that her thighs were muscled through the rips in her jeans.

She lifted her sunglasses off her nose and pushed them up into her short hair.

“Holy fuck,” I breathed.

“Yeah, she’s fine as hell,” Jax said, stepping up beside me. “You gonna ask her out?”

“Fuck off man, that’s Axel’s sister.”

“What?” Jax asked, looking from me to the woman who was now nearly upon us. “Are you kidding me? He never told me his sister was a smoke show!”

“Why the hell would he?” I grumbled.

“Good point. Let me rephrase. *You* never told me his sister was a fucking smoke show.”

Ellie waved for us to shut up. “You’re sure that’s her?” she asked. “I haven’t met her, but Axel has talked about her, and they speak on the phone every now and then. It’s Angela, right?”

I nodded as Angela ducked under the bay doors needlessly. She turned to face me, flashed me a bright white smile, and cocked her head to the side. “Hey, Sabian,” she said with a voice that sounded like honey. “It’s been a while.”

“Sure has,” I said, forcing myself to look at her eyes rather than her cleavage. She had changed a lot in three years, and in my opinion, they were all good changes.

Her long blonde hair was gone. She’d traded it in for an edgy pixie cut that suited her. Her makeup was smoked out around her eyes, and her full, pillowy lips were painted a vibrant shade of red. She was not the rich pageant girl I remembered.

Angela put her hand on her hip and looked me up and down. “You look good.”

“So do you,” I said.

“And you’re still a man of few words.” She smiled. “I always liked that.”

Jax snorted and clapped me on the back. “We all like that about our Sabian here. Always keeps it close to the belt. Doesn’t use any unnecessary words, you know?” He stepped forward and held out his hand to Angela. “I’m Brian, but everyone around here calls me Jax. It’s nice to meet you.”

Angela shook Jax’s hand, and her eyes swept up to him. “I’m Angela. It’s nice to meet you too. Is Axel around?”

Jax shook his head. “Nope, lazy bastard is back home with his kids.”

Ellie rolled her eyes and piped up. “He’s not lazy. I’m Ellie, by the way. I’ve been really looking forward to meeting you.”

Angela grinned enthusiastically. “Ellie! My sister-in-law!” She threw her arms around Ellie’s shoulders, who stood frozen

in her embrace for a brief moment before hugging her back.

“Be careful,” Ellie warned. “I’m covered in grease and—”

“Oh, I don’t care,” Angela said as she stepped back. There was grease on her biceps from where she had hugged Ellie. “A little bit of dirt never hurt anyone. Hi,” she added, waving to Jamie.

Jamie waved back, and I introduced her to Angela. Once the four of us were all acquainted, Angela turned to me and gave me a coy smile. “So, how have you been?”

“Good. Your brother keeps me busy here, and his wife kicks my ass all the time to make sure I’m not slacking. How about you? What brings you to our neck of the woods? Tired of all the avocados and hipsters back in LA?”

Everyone chuckled as Angela crossed her arms and the bracelets at her wrists jingled. “Actually, I just moved here. I got a job at the New York Times.”

“Shit,” I said. “For journalism?”

She blinked at me and her lips parted. She looked surprised.

“Didn’t think I’d remember that, did you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t. But yes. I start on Monday.”

“Congratulations.” I nodded.

“Thanks.”

There was a short moment of quiet awkwardness as everyone waited for someone to offer up another subject. Ellie was the one who got the ball rolling again.

“So, Angela,” she started, “does Axel know you’re in town? He never mentioned it to me.”

“Actually, no.” Angela uncrossed her arms and fidgeted with her bracelets. “I wanted to surprise him, and I didn’t want him to try to talk me out of it. My whole family already spent the last two months trying to convince me to stay at home. I couldn’t hear it from him, too.”

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled that you’re here,” Ellie said cheerfully.

Angela shrugged. “Maybe.”

Ellie frowned. “Why maybe?”

Angela bit her bottom lip and looked from Ellie to me, like she was expecting me to step in and help her explain this one. “He’s kind of always wanted to keep me away from this place.”

“I don’t understand,” Ellie said.

“The MC,” I offered, stepping in so Angela didn’t have to feel uncomfortable discussing the Lost Breed. “Axel didn’t want her getting tied up in it all. You know how it is, Ellie. Once you get too close, you end up being one of us.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess.” Ellie smiled at Angela. “Well. You’re a grown-ass woman. He’ll accept your choice to move here. And if he doesn’t, he’ll have me to answer to.”

Angela giggled.

“She means it,” I said. “And Axel won’t screw with her. He knows what’s best for him.”

Angela clapped her hands together. “Do you think I should surprise him, then? I was thinking it could be fun. We haven’t seen each other face to face in three years, and I would love to pull off a good surprise.”

“Yes!” Ellie cried. “You can come up to the house tonight. I’ll tell him I’m inviting some of the guys over for dinner so he won’t ask questions while I prepare everything. Then you can swing by and surprise him.”

“I don’t know about this,” I said tentatively.

Both women ignored me and launched into a discussion to start making plans for the evening. I shared an exasperated look with Jax, who shrugged.

I scratched the back of my neck. “Ladies,” I said, trying to get their attention.

Ellie and Angela talked over me. Their voices grew louder the more excited they got, and soon, they were both giggling like schoolgirls as they made plans to pull off the surprise.

“Hey,” I said, a little more firmly. “I don’t think a surprise is a good idea. Maybe give him a call first. You know Axel doesn’t like anything unexpected.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “Well, sometimes we don’t always get what we want.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “You mean he doesn’t get what he wants, but you do.” Maybe she was still the same rich girl after all.

“I don’t think that’s what I said,” she said simply.

“It was implied.”

Angela shrugged. “Whatever. You’re just being a poor sport. Axel will love it. Want to know why? Because he loves me.”

I ran my hand over my face and sighed. “You’re right. Give it a go, then. See what happens.”

“You’re driving me,” she said.

“Uh.” I blinked. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh, yes you are. I’m not showing up bitch.”

“What?”

“I’m not going by myself. I have to arrive fashionably late. I’m the surprise. Come on Sabian, haven’t you ever been to a surprise party?”

“Yeah, for a nine-year-old.”

Angela shook her head at me and turned to Ellie. “He doesn’t understand.”

“He never does,” Ellie teased.

“I’m right here,” I mumbled, knowing neither of them were going to care.

Angela shrugged, winning herself an agreeable nod and grin from Ellie, who was always more than happy to enjoy a

joke at my expense. My discomfort over surprising Axel seemed to entertain her as much as it did Angela, and I sensed an alliance forming between the two sisters-in-law.

An alliance that would bite me in the ass.

Jax nudged me in the ribs with his elbow. “You see what’s happening here, right man?”

“Oh, I see it. I can fucking feel it too. Like the calm before the storm.”

“A big fucking storm.” Jax nodded.

“Don’t be such a stress case,” Jamie said as she nodded toward Ellie and Angela, who now had their heads bowed together like they were discussing plans to open an underground speakeasy during the prohibition. “I’m sure it will be fine. Axel is a level-headed guy, right? Shouldn’t he be excited that his sister is here?”

“He will be,” I said. “But he’ll also have a shit ton of questions for her, which is probably why she wants it to be a surprise with a lot of people there. He won’t be able to ask her anything.”

“Questions?” Jamie asked, turning to face me and cocking her head the way a curious cocker spaniel would.

“Yeah. Family stuff. Personal stuff.”

She nodded her understanding and didn’t ask me anything else. Instead, she turned back to the two women and chuckled. “I hope they invite me. I want to see this all go down in person.”

“I’m sure they’ll invite you.”

Not five minutes later, both Ellie and Angela told Jax and Jamie that they should be at Axel’s place at seven. I was to pick Angela up just before eight, and Ellie would convince Axel that I had prior engagements to justify my tardiness.

I knew Axel pretty well, and I doubted he would believe his wife was throwing an impromptu dinner party. She’d never hosted one before, and Axel wasn’t a fool. He’d smell a trick a mile away.

I wasn't a fool either, and I was well aware that if he was put off at all, I'd be the one paying the price for it.

Angela turned her big brown eyes on me and took a step forward. The smell of grease was replaced with the floral aroma of her perfume. "Give me your phone, and I'll put my number in it." She held out her hand to me. Her nails were short and painted in clear polish, which was a lot more subdued than I had been expecting.

Knowing the power was out of my hands, I took my phone out of my pocket and slapped it into her palm. She punched in her number and passed it back.

"Now remember, pick me up just before eight. And don't say anything to Axel. If he knows I'm coming, I'll know it was you who spilled the beans." The smile she gave me was quite possibly the most extraordinary thing I had ever seen. She closed the distance between us and gave me a tight hug. I hugged her back and was mindful of where I put my hands. Not too high, not too low. Then she released me, said goodbye to Jax, and hugged Ellie and Jamie. "I'll see you all tonight!"

She turned and walked back out to her car, her hips swaying from side to side with every step. I didn't bother trying to look away. I was mesmerized by her every move. She was like a gypsy walking away with all my common sense and dignity, and I wasn't going to fight her for it back.

Jax whistled low when she was in her car and driving away. "Bro, you're fucked."

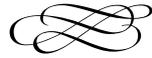
"Shut up," I grated as I turned back to what we had been working on.

Jax chuckled and followed my retreat. "Axel is not going to want you anywhere near his baby sister. He's warned you before. I was there. You better keep your head above water."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I don't plan on getting caught up in her again."

Jax spat with laughter and shook his head. "Sabian, you sorry bastard. You already are."

CHAPTER 6



ANGELA

I glanced down at my glitzy blue wrist watch and blew out an exasperated breath. It was ten to eight, and Sabian had still not arrived to pick me up.

My stomach was squirming with nerves.

I was excited to see my brother, but I was also a little nervous. As I had gotten myself ready for the evening, I had paused to wrack my brains to try to remember how long it had been since we spoke last. I was pretty sure at least five months had passed. A lot could happen in five months. I had changed a hell of a lot, and I was sure he had, too.

We had always been too alike, my parents said. We were both stubborn and loyal to one another to a fault. We hadn't had a choice. We were each other's saving grace in a world where money and reputation were more important than family values.

Axel had been smart to get out when he had the chance.

Now I was doing the same thing. I hoped he would be proud of me. I hoped he would congratulate me on my success and my bravery to leave the Cooper Estate. I was following my own journey now, just like he had.

The only difference was I wasn't choosing a life with a band of criminals.

An old Chevy Challenger came around the corner and cut through traffic to pull up tight to the curb in front of me. Sabian leaned over across the passenger seat and popped the door open for me. I slid in and gave him a sideways glare.

“You’re late,” I said.

“You said before eight.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s before eight.”

He never had been the best when it came to courting a woman. Not that we were courting one another. He was just giving me a lift.

As he put the car back into drive and returned to the flow of traffic, I watched the tendons flex in his forearm. There was something about a working man’s arms that always made me hot and heavy.

I forced myself to look away and out my window. “So, how far away is Axel’s house?”

“Not far. At this time of night, probably only fifteen minutes or so. We just have to get out of the city.”

“Okay,” I said. I waited a few minutes before speaking again. “It’s nice to see you, Sabian. Really.”

He looked over at me. The hardness in his jaw and forehead evaporated and kindness touched his dark eyes. “It’s nice to see you, too. The real you. Not the bleached-out spoiled white girl version of you. The hair and the earrings... it suits you.”

I smiled and felt my cheeks start to burn. “Thanks. I figured it was about time I started making some choices of my own where my looks were concerned. Couldn’t let my mother rule over me from an entirely different state. You know?”

“Girl problems.”

I giggled. “Definitely.” I shifted in my seat so I could face him. “I’m surprised you didn’t pick me up on your bike. It’s perfect weather for it. I even wore pants.”

“Axel would kill me if I showed up at his house with his baby sister on the back of my bike.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But it would have been worth it for the look on his face.”

“You’re such a shit disturber,” Sabian said, but I caught him smiling, and that was all I had really been after.

When we arrived at Axel’s house and finally got through the gate, I was shocked to see how nice it was. It was nicely landscaped, and the house itself was a decent-sized rancher with plenty of windows and a massive garage on one side. That, at least, wasn’t a surprise. Axel would always need a place to store his precious cars and motorcycles.

I didn’t wait for Sabian to walk around the car to let me out. I got out myself, and the two of us walked up the drive, my heels clicking all the way. At the front door, Sabian paused and looked at me.

“How do you want to do this?” he asked.

I lifted my hand and rapped my knuckles on the door. “Let’s wing it.”

Sabian fell back to stand behind me and clasped his hands in front of himself. I listened as footsteps approached on the other side of the door, and then suddenly, it was wrenched open.

A thick-armed, burly chested, tattooed beast of a man stood before me.

“Hi,” I said, holding my hand out. “You must be Ryder.”

Sabian cleared his throat behind me. “This is Angela, Axel’s sister.”

Ryder’s dark stare flicked back and forth from Sabian to me. Then his scowl rearranged itself into a sunny grin. “Oh, fuck yeah you are. And you drove her, Sabian? Axel’s going to blow his top.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” I muttered as Ryder shook my hand.

He stepped aside and invited us in. I took off my shoes and followed Ryder from the foyer to the living area. The kitchen and living room were an open-concept design, and there were ten or so people milling about with drinks in their hands. It smelled like home cooking; something sweet and spicy.

I drew up short when I spotted Axel talking with another man. I had played the moment over and over in my head nearly a dozen times, and now that it was upon me, I had stage fright.

Sabian prodded me gently in the back. I stepped forward and cleared my throat. “Hi, big brother.”

I could see Axel stiffen when he heard my voice. He turned slowly, looking over his shoulder as he came around to face me. He looked utterly shocked for a solid three seconds before the surprise gave way to a smile.

“Angela,” he said, passing his drink to the man he was talking to. He approached me, and his eyes flicked behind me to Sabian. He quickly turned his attention back to me and swept me up in a big bear hug. “I knew there was something shady going on here.”

“Told you,” Sabian muttered behind me.

“I wanted to surprise you,” I said, noticing how much wider my brother was. I could barely get my arms all the way around him now. “Ellie helped me pull it off.”

He pulled away and held me by both shoulders as he looked me over. He soaked in the sight of the piercings, the short hair, and the dark red lipstick. “What are you doing here?”

“I moved here,” I said.

“Moved here?” His eyebrows crept up to his hairline. “When?”

“Beginning of the week. I have a penthouse in the Kent building in the Upper East Side. I was hired on by the New York Times.”

He reeled under all the information I had just unloaded on him. “Okay, hang on. You moved here, for real? And Mom and Dad didn’t throw a fit?”

I shrugged. “It took some convincing. But you know me. I can usually get what I want from them. I just had to be extra persuasive.”

He nodded knowingly and stroked his chin. “Persuasive. Right.” He pulled me in for another hug. “Congratulations, Ang. The New York Times? That’s fucking huge! I’m proud of you.”

I smiled into his shoulder as he hugged me. Then he pulled away again and turned to the rest of the room. He introduced me to everyone; they were mostly all men, save for me Ellie and Jamie. Both women waved to me from the kitchen.

The men were all part of the MC. It was obvious. They had that look about them, like they’d seen and maybe done terrible things, but they weren’t terrible people. My brother wouldn’t associate with them if they were, and I trusted his judge of character more than anyone else’s. He’d never steered me wrong before, and he had saved me from numerous boyfriends who were, on more than one occasion, only with me to either get in my pants or my wallet. Or both.

I met a lumberjack-sized man named Derek, who had a dark brown beard and a thick head of hair that was begging to have a woman run her fingers through it. He had warm brown eyes and a deep voice that gave me goosebumps. He was nothing short of polite as he shook my hand and offered to get me a drink.

“Just a glass of red wine would be great,” I told him as his warm grip released my fingers.

“You got it,” he said as he turned and went to the kitchen.

Axel turned me to another man. He was shorter than Derek, but not by much. His hair was dark, and his eyes were outrageously blue.

“Caleb,” he said, nodding politely. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said, forcing myself to look away from his eyes as Axel steered me to the kitchen.

“And you already know Ryder and Sabian, and Ellie obviously,” Axel said. “Have you met Jamie?”

“Yeah, we met today.”

“Great,” Axel said. “Then I’ll leave you girls to it. I have to talk a little business with Sabian, and then you’ll have my full attention.” He kissed the side of my head before retreating out of the kitchen. He beckoned Sabian to follow with a curl of his index and middle finger. Sabian followed.

When I turned back to the girls, Derek was there with my glass of wine. He handed it to me and tapped his own glass of beer to the side of my wine glass. “To family reunions.”

I smiled and took a sip.

Derek left the kitchen, giving me a chance to pull Ellie and Jamie into the corner. “Is Axel really talking business, or is he giving Sabian shit?”

“What do you think?” Ellie smirked.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Sabian and Axel were standing in the hall, and I could see by their body language that this was not the friendliest conversation. Axel was leaning in and punctuating his sentences with aggressive finger-pointing at Sabian’s chest. Sabian was rigid and staring blankly into my brother’s face. If he was intimidated, it didn’t show.

“I feel bad,” I whispered.

Ellie bumped her hip into mine. “Don’t. These boys all manage to work their shit out one way or another. Axel just has to say what he needs to say. Sabian knows that.”

I took a large mouthful of wine, and then another. “Why does he think he can control everything and everyone around me?” I asked. I hated that Axel became my parents when they weren’t around.

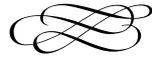
“Because he cares about you, and he wants to make sure you’re safe. And he probably doesn’t think Sabian is good enough for you. Mind you, he won’t think anyone is ever good enough for you.” Ellie lifted her wine glass. “Forget about them. They’ll join us later, and everything will be fine.”

The front door opened, and a friendly male voice called out a hello. I turned to the door to see a new man coming in.

He was blonde and ruggedly good looking. His hair was dishevelled and fairly long, and he had tattoos on one arm.

“That’s Hyde,” Ellie said. “Now the party can really get started.” She winked at me and opened her fridge. She found a can of beer and pushed it into Jamie’s hands. “Drink up. The kids are with their aunt for the night, and I plan on taking full advantage of it.”

CHAPTER 7



SABIAN

It was nearly eight in the evening, and I was still at the shop. Ryder had called all of us in for a business meeting to discuss profits and workflow. With the shop being so much slower, he wanted to make sure we were utilizing our time well. I also suspected he wanted to make sure there weren't too many people working. Paying more staff than necessary was a poor way for the MC to increase revenue.

Derek had brought over all of his accounting information. He was our treasurer mostly because he was the most organized one out of all of us. He had spreadsheets and records and forms tucked neatly into a black binder, which now sat in Ryder's hands as he flipped through page after page, leading us through every meticulous detail of money coming in and money going out.

It was tedious, but it was important. We were running a business, and a lot of families counted on us to run it effectively.

The rest of the guys were there as well: Axel, Jax, Caleb, and Hyde. We were all draped lazily over the furniture in the office as the meeting wound down. I was sure that as soon as Ryder told us we were done, everyone would be up on their feet and out the door faster than they could blink. It had been a long day in the heat at the shop, and I was ready for a cold shower, an iced beer, and my sofa.

"I think that pretty much wraps things up here, boys," Ryder said, slapping the binder closed and passing it back to

Derek. “I know none of you wanted to be here, but I appreciate it. Work isn’t all fun and games.”

I ran my hand down my face and scratched at the stubble along my jaw as some of the others got to their feet and stretched out their kinks.

Jax paused beside Ryder. “You heard anything back from Dani yet about the missing person’s report?”

Ryder looked up at Jax and frowned.

We’d all been on the lookout for Ryder’s little nephew for two years now. He’d up and vanished when Dani first came into the picture as his parole officer, and it had devastated Ryder when he found out Jason had hitched his wagon to the Black Hearts. After everything that went down with their ever-cycling roster of treacherous leaders, Ryder had all but lost hope of finding his nephew again.

Then Dani had received an anonymous tip on Jason’s whereabouts. Apparently, he was still in New York City.

I was more than aware of the fact that this might all be hearsay. There was a good chance that whoever gave Dani the tip was lying. Or, perhaps, the person they had seen had only looked like Jason. But saying that to Ryder would be like kicking a bull in the balls and then waving a red flag in front of its face.

“She’s still digging,” Ryder was saying to Jax. “She thinks there’s still a chance she’ll be able to track him down. His picture is posted all over the precinct, and most of the cops know he’s Dani’s family now, too.”

Axel caught my eye. I could see the same thing written on his face that I was thinking: the kid wasn’t turning up. There was just no fucking way. Not after two years.

And if he did turn up, it wouldn’t be in a good way.

Ryder wasn’t stupid. He had to have run through all these thoughts already—probably before any of them occurred to me. But he loved Jason despite all his flaws. He had to do everything he could to find him. And after everything Ryder

had done for me, I was going to stick by him. It was the least I could do.

“New York is a big place,” I said as I stood with the others. “And Jason’s not a stupid kid. He’ll know you won’t stop looking for him. If he doesn’t want to be found, he’ll be giving the cops a run for their money.”

Ryder nodded. “I know. The little shit.”

I chuckled, but only once. “Yeah, well, he took after you. Let’s hope that’s doing him favors out there. Maybe he managed to set out on his own.”

“Maybe,” Ryder said. “And maybe he’s still with those assholes.”

“If the Black Hearts had him in their ranks, you’d know about it,” Jax said. “They’d want to rub it in like dirt in a wound. They’d know full well how much it would piss you off.”

“He’s got a point,” I said.

Ryder nodded. “True. But things are calming down. Since TJ, we haven’t had any issues. I haven’t even seen any of them out on the streets. It’s like they disbanded.”

“I fucking doubt that,” Axel said. “I think they’re waiting.”

“Waiting?” Ryder asked quizzically.

“Same,” Jax agreed. “I don’t know if it’s just me, but things haven’t felt right for the last couple months. It feels like shit is about to turn south. You know? Like the way the air gets before a lightning storm. Thick with electricity and moisture and—”

“Danger,” I said without thinking.

“Yeah.” Jax nodded. “Danger.”

Everyone was quiet. We had spoken what everyone must have been thinking for weeks now. Something felt off, but none of us could put a finger on it. We had no reason to worry; no reason to think things were about to change. Besides business being slow, things were great for us and the MC.

Money wasn't coming in as heavily as it usually did, but we were still generating a healthy profit while being able to afford our most valuable members plenty of family time. Things had never been better for us.

Which was, in my opinion, exactly why we all thought things were about to take a turn for the worst. We were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Ryder ran his hands along his thighs and sighed. "There's not much we can do about it right now, boys. I hear you, though. Loud and clear. Let's keep our eyes open out there and make sure we communicate anything we see that might seem out of the ordinary. All right?"

We all agreed solemnly. Communication was key when it came to looking out for one another. We were family. We had each other's backs.

Ryder nodded again and pushed himself to his feet. "Good. You fuckers head home. It's been a long day for everyone."

"Before we go," Jax said slowly, "let's end on a lighter note. I want to discuss the little surprise last night."

"No," Axel hissed from where he stood near the reception desk. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and the scowl he was giving Jax was enough to freeze running water.

Jax held both hands up and shrugged his shoulders. "All right, all right. I'm just saying. Angela held her own around us, and we're a rowdy bunch."

"That she did," Derek agreed. "She fit right in. Like a glove. It's a shame we're only meeting her now."

"But not a surprise," Caleb added, leaning into Derek jokingly.

"I like her," Ryder agreed, lifting his chin and looking down his nose at Axel, who was still stewing. "She's all spit and fire, like you. Not that I'm surprised."

"She matched me in drinks," Hyde chimed in. "And handled her liquor like a champ. You Coopers are made of grit and stubbornness."

I kept my mouth shut and my eyes downcast. I was not going to play these games with Axel. I was already in hot water. He had pulled me aside at his house that night to warn me to stay away from his baby sister. I had tried to assure him that I was staying away. Nothing I said seemed to convince him. He told me to keep my distance and to keep my cock in my pants.

“She’s my baby sister, and she’s not cannon fodder for our discussions.”

Ryder rolled his eyes. “You’re such a fucking drama queen, Axel. She’s not a baby anything anymore. Not that I was looking,” he added quickly and with a chuckle. “But she had eyes for *someone*. That much I noticed.”

“I think we all noticed,” Hyde mused. I could feel his eyes on me as everyone but Axel giggled like fourteen-year-old girls on the first day of gym class.

I didn’t look up. I prayed to the God I didn’t believe in to spare me being called out by Ryder.

I had never been that lucky.

“Sabian,” Ryder said. “She had her eyes on you all night long.”

“I didn’t notice,” I said a little too quickly.

Ryder barked with laughter, and the others joined in—everyone except Axel, that is. “You were too scared to notice, hiding in the corner with your tail between your legs.”

“Enough,” Axel hissed.

“Please,” I said.

Axel looked at me out of the corner of his eye, and we shared an unspoken agreement. I wouldn’t talk about his baby sister like this. I respected her too much. She was a hellion and the kind of girl who could handle herself. She commanded the attention of any room she was in, and she didn’t shrink away from conflict. I’d seen her in action more than once, and she knocked my socks off. Her wrath was infinitely worse than Axel’s.

Another thing I would never speak aloud to him.

“Come on, you pricks.” I nodded towards the door. “Get the hell out of here. I still have to lock up and close down the system.”

“Fine.” Ryder shouldered his way out of the office and led the others through the shop. He turned to me over his shoulder as he paused in the doorway that opened up to the gravel driveway. “Hey, Sabian, don’t let Axel scare you. You’re my man. He isn’t allowed to fuck with that.”

Axel paused and looked back at me too. The warning was loud and clear, but it didn’t convince me that Axel wouldn’t shove his boot up my ass if I touched his sister. Some things were just too much for a man to take. Me dating Axel’s sister was too much for him. His boot up my ass was too much for me.

I would just have to keep my distance and find a way to let her know that the flirty thing we had going on had to stop. This was life now, and if she was living in New York City, we had to find a way to make it work that didn’t end with me being impaled by her brother’s shoe.

The engines of the trucks and cars and bikes out front hummed as I logged out of all our computer systems and shut everything down. Then I walked my nightly route around the shop to make sure all the side doors were locked. I checked for any potential funny business along the perimeter. When I found nothing, I went back inside and turned off all the inside lights. Then I let myself out and locked up.

When I turned to the driveway, I drew up short.

Angela was there, leaning up against her Alfa Romeo, looking like sin incarnate.

Somehow, in the dusk of the New York summer evening, she looked like her skin was reflecting sunlight. She was dressed in spiky black heels, high-waisted denim shorts, a black leather vest, and a crop top that showed a lean stomach and pierced navel.

She pushed herself off the car as I approached and dragged her heel through the gravel. “Hey,” she said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d still be here.”

“We had a meeting,” I said as I gestured back to the shop. “It ran later than expected.”

“Ah.” She nodded like what I was saying was interesting.

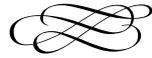
“What are you doing here?” I tried to make the question sound as polite as possible. I had to keep my head. The woman was a vixen, and everything about her was sending the blood rushing straight to my cock. The sensual curve of her lips as she smiled at me, the glint in her eyes, the way she popped her hip to the side as she shifted her weight. Everything was kryptonite to me.

“Well,” she said slowly, tracing her bottom lip with her index finger. “I actually needed to ask you a favor.”

“A favor?”

I prayed for a second time that night for a God that didn’t exist to save me.

CHAPTER 8



ANGELA

S abian was looking at me with that cool, disinterested look he always had. He was smug, and cocky, and ridiculously attractive. Convincing him to go along with the ploy I had devised over the afternoon was going to be tricky. He wasn't the kind of guy who liked to play games, so I was going to have to be straightforward and honest with him if there was any chance of him helping me.

I took a deep breath and met his dark, steely gaze. "I'm going to explain it all, but you have to bear with me, okay?"

I noticed his jaw clench, but he nodded.

I took that as permission to continue. "Okay, so, I have this wedding coming up that I'm supposed to go to. And by 'supposed to go to,' I mean I have to go. Originally, I was going to bail because it's my cousin, and she didn't know I moved here. But her mom spoke to my mom, and now the cat's out of the bag." I took a deep breath before continuing. "And my parents will be there, of course. It's a Cooper family wedding, so everyone will be there. And I kind of, sort of, really, really need you to come with me as my date." I blinked up at him and batted my eyelashes twice for dramatic effect.

He stared at me blankly before a big grin washed over his face. He laughed, shook his head, and kicked at the loose gravel between us. "Angela, I think we both know that's a terrible idea. Me? At a Cooper wedding? Are you crazy?"

"No," I said. "Hear me out. There is reason to my madness."

“Okay then,” he said. The note of disbelief in his voice told me I needed to try harder. He wasn’t biting. And I *needed* him to bite.

“You know how I said it took a lot of persuading for me to get my parents to let me move here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, by persuading, I kind of mean lying. At first when I told them about the New York Times, they shot it down. You know how my folks are. They want me to stay home with them until a rich guy proposes to me, and then I can move into his mansion and keep doing the same boring old shit day in and day out until I die. Of course, I’d be expected to pop out a few babies and maintain my figure and sit quietly by his side at the dinner table—” I stopped talking. “I’m getting sidetracked. The point is, they said that I couldn’t move to New York. So, I told the one lie that I knew would convince them to change their minds.”

Sabian tucked his hands in his pockets. “You told them you were seeing someone in New York City.”

“Yeah, pretty much. And it worked. They agreed to let me move here. But I hadn’t planned it all the way through because I never intended on going to this stupid wedding. But now my cousin knows I’m here, and the whole family is expecting for me to show up with the guy I’ve been seeing for six months.”

“Six months, hey?”

“Yeah. I know. At the time, it felt like the only move I had left, and I needed to get the hell out of there. You get that, right?”

“Yeah. I get it. You and Axel both.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Yeah.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t know, Angela. This seems like dangerous territory for me. You really think the Cooper family is going to look highly on me?” He gestured down at himself. His jeans were stained with grease and torn in several places. His T-shirt had once been white, and now it was varying shades of brown and gray after being used as a

rag as well as a shirt. “I’m going to stick out like a sore thumb.”

“No, you won’t,” I countered. “Let me handle your tux and —”

“Tux?”

“Yeah. Cooper wedding, remember? You can’t just show up in dress pants and a button down. You wouldn’t get in. I’ll get you a tux and shoes and everything else you’ll need. You just have to pick me up and get me to the wedding and pretend to be my boyfriend while we’re there.”

“Listen, Ang, in theory it sounds good, but in reality? Not so much. Not only will everyone there see right through me, but your brother would be pissed. I’d be—” He cut off abruptly and shook his head. “I don’t think this is a smart move for either of us. Isn’t there someone else you can ask?”

“Like who?” I lifted my hands and let them fall back to my sides in exasperation. “Sabian, I’m in a new city. I don’t know anyone. And I realize that I singlehandedly put myself in this position. I get it. But I had to do what was best for me, and getting out from under my parents was right for me. If I don’t have someone on my arm at that wedding, they’ll kick me out of the penthouse, and I’ll have to go back to Los Angeles.”

He was looking me in the eyes and shaking his head. I was not used to a man saying no to me like this, and it was throwing me for a loop. He really respected Axel. That was for damn sure. Screw my meddling brother for scaring away the one guy I trusted to not fuck this up for me.

“I can’t,” Sabian said finally. “I’m sorry.”

I groaned and resisted the urge of stomping my foot. It was a compulsion that sickened me and a reminder of who I was. A spoiled rich girl. “It’s okay. I get it.” I blew out a breath and ran my fingers through my short hair. “I can always find a last-minute Tinder date or something. Someone out there will be down to go to a free wedding I’m sure. They just might fuck it up.”

“Why don’t you just tell them this fake boyfriend of yours couldn’t make it?”

“You don’t know my family.” I sighed.

“No, I don’t, but I know you. You convinced them to believe in a boyfriend that wasn’t real. How hard could it be to persuade them that he had to work or something?”

“I see where you’re coming from, but it wouldn’t fly. There’s already quite a few doubters in my family who I know are just waiting for all this to blow up in my face. There’s a lot of resentment pointed my way for leaving the Estate and pursuing what the Coopers see as an unconventional path.”

“Becoming a journalist is unconventional in their minds?” Sabian scoffed. “Ang, if they found out who I really was, you’d be in a worse spot than you are now.”

I grinned up at him and shrugged one shoulder. A cool evening breeze danced over my bare skin. It felt nice after a day of sweltering heat. “They wouldn’t find out. We’d make a good team. I know you wouldn’t throw me under the bus.”

Sabian’s jaw flexed once more as he looked away from me. His eyes settled on my car and I held my tongue. He was thinking; musing over the potential outcomes of the wedding, I was sure. He was weighing the options to decide whether or not accompanying me was a risk he was willing to take. Just the fact that he was considering it told me he cared enough to not want my family breathing down my neck all night, asking where my boyfriend was.

“All right,” he said heavily. “Fine. I’ll go.”

“Yes!” I squealed and threw my arms around his neck.

He chuckled and wrapped one arm around my waist. The smell of his cologne and sweat and grease filled my nose. His laughter rumbling in his chest against my breasts made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It had been a long time since I was this close to a man I was actually attracted to. For the most part, I was always surrounded by blond preppy frat boys being pushed through university by their parents’ wallets. Sabian was everything they weren’t. He was a man who

worked for everything he had. He had gone through rough times in his past that made him who he was now, and everything about him was alluring.

I leaned back, afraid that I might do something both of us would regret if I stayed close for too long. I peered up at him, imagining what it would be like to trace the line of his jaw with my fingertips while I kissed him. I wondered what it would feel like to touch the hot, taut muscles beneath his shirt.

The smell of him and the closeness of our bodies reminded me of that night three years ago when I had come to visit Axel for the week. I was lost, confused, and looking for something that could be mine. Something that wasn't tainted by my parents' wealth and privilege. I had started throwing the idea around of journalism, but it hadn't become a plan just yet. But Sabian had been there, and he had been kind to me and saw me for who I was, not the rich girl everyone thought I was.

Sabian's lips danced across my cheek, and then he kissed my eyelids, one at a time. His forehead pressed to mine, and I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his even breathing as I lay in his arms, wrapped up in him like we were a human pretzel.

"I don't want to go," I whispered.

"Then don't go."

He didn't understand. He knew nothing of the Cooper family and what their expectations were. He had no clue how hard it would be to start out on my own without their support. I had no work experience. My life had been sheltered while living at the Cooper Estate. My strengths and skills consisted of tanning at the side of our pool, fine dining, and self-pampering. I was ill equipped to abandon that lifestyle and choose the rugged existence of the girlfriend of a Lost Breed member.

"I have to. Axel won't let me stay. He'd call Mom and Dad if it came to that."

"He hasn't spoken to them in years."

“I know. But he would for me. He doesn’t want this life for me, Sabian. He wants the same thing they all want. For me to be taken care of.”

“And that’s not what you want?”

I shook my head and nuzzled in tighter to his chest. He cradled me to him, wrapping his arms around my shoulders as he pressed his lips to my forehead.

“I want to take care of myself. I want to stand on my own two feet and build my own life. I don’t want to be a Cooper anymore.”

Sabian lifted my chin, forcing me to look up at him. We were lying on Axel’s sofa. He didn’t know we were both out in his living room. Had he walked in and discovered us, all hell would have broken loose. But we got lucky, and we had the room to ourselves.

“You can be whatever you want,” Sabian said. “You just have to have the nerve to make it happen. But if you want to stand on your own two feet, then that’s where you need to start. You need to get out on your own.”

He wasn’t rejecting me. Not completely. He was telling me what I so desperately needed to hear. He was pushing me toward dreams that I hadn’t even fully realized yet.

Sabian smiled softly, and then his lips were on mine, soft and gentle, and I was coiling around him with desperation. I craved his touch more than anything. It chased away all my fear and all my doubts. His kiss grew fiercer. His tongue slipped between my teeth, and we tasted each other as our breathing quickened and our hands began to wander.

“We can’t,” Sabian said suddenly, ending the kiss.

“Please.”

He shook his head. “We’re only making it harder on ourselves.”

“You all right?” Sabian asked, his head cocking to one side as he studied me.

“Yes, sorry, I just got a little excited.” My cheeks burned, and I hoped he didn’t catch the double meaning of my statement. “This is great. Thank you so, so much. Seriously. You’re a life saver.”

“Don’t mention it. Seriously. The last thing I need is for the boys to catch wind of this.”

“Axel won’t be there so we can keep it between us.”

“Great,” Sabian said, a hint of relief in his voice.

“I’d better get going,” I said, even though I wanted to stay. “You have my number. Call me if you need anything. Otherwise, I’ll see you on Saturday. Okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded.

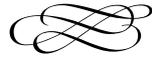
I grabbed his sleeve and hopped up to my tip toes to plant a kiss on his rough, stubble-covered cheek. “Thanks again,” I said softly.

He didn’t say anything as I turned from him and went back to my car. I got in, started the engine, and admired Sabian as I backed out of the drive. He was basked in the brightness of my headlights, and he walked forward, following the light, until I was out on the main street. He waved and continued to stare after me as I drove away. I kept looking back at him in my rear-view mirror until I took a turn, leaving him behind.

“What are you getting yourself into?” I muttered to myself as I shifted in my seat. My panties were wet, my heart was racing, and the blood in my veins felt like it was on fire. His touch had sent me over the edge, and now all I needed was a nice cold shower and a session in bed with my vibrator.

Sometimes a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.

CHAPTER 9



SABIAN

I rapped my knuckles on the steering wheel as I waited for Angela to come down from her penthouse. I was early, as per her request, and dressed in the tux she had sent over to my place the previous afternoon. It fit me perfectly, which was equally as unnerving as it was impressive. It was navy blue, and she had paired it with a black shirt and black tie. It was sleek and simple, and I felt good in it.

I leaned down to peer out the passenger window at the front doors of the Kent building. As I did, they swung open and Angela stepped out.

My jaw nearly bounced off the gear shifter.

She looked absolutely stunning.

As I watched her walk down the path from the door to my car, I tried to collect my thoughts. Staring at her all night like a horndog wouldn't convince any of her family that I was the guy she had been seeing for half a year. So I got it out of my system now without shame. I checked her out from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, which swished out from beneath the gown she wore with every step.

Her short dark hair was slicked back rather than tousled as it had been the last couple times I had seen her. Glittering tear drop earrings hung from her ears; they were so massive they nearly touched her shoulders. The gown she wore was strapless and navy blue to match my suit. It was tight around the bodice and then flowed gently to the floor at her hips, creating a silhouette of long legs and a slim waist. The fabric

had a subtle sheen to it, but it wasn't decked out in anything flashy. It was classy and elegant.

I hurried out of the car and rushed to open her door for her.

She flashed me a brilliant smile as she slid into the passenger seat. I walked around the hood and got back inside, started the car up, and pulled away from the curb before I did something stupid, like try to kiss her.

"You look incredible," I said after a couple of awkward silent minutes.

"Thank you," she said. "You look pretty fantastic yourself. I knew the suit would look good on you." Her earrings caught the sunlight as she turned to look at me. Her dark purple lips stretched in a pretty smile. "You nervous?"

I shrugged and tried to act cool. She didn't need to know that my cock was trying to spring free from my pants. "Not really. It's just a wedding, right?"

Angela's laugh made me second guess myself. "It's a Cooper wedding, Sabian. Brace yourself for a whole lot of crazy and a whole lot of glitz and glamour."

"Bring it on."

The venue was on the top floor of a hotel in downtown New York. A valet was there to take the car, and he drove away, leaving Angela and me to follow gold-plated signs surrounded by white flowers through the lobby to the elevators, directing us to the top floor to the "Cooper & Smithe Ceremony and Reception".

In the elevator, Angela popped open a small silver clutch she had tucked under her arm. She dug around for a moment and then withdrew something small and sparkly. She slipped it on her left ring finger.

"Wait a second," I said as her hand fell to her side. I stared down at the massive diamond ring she had just put on. "Is that what I think it is?"

She smiled nervously. “I may have told my family that the guy in New York was my fiancé, not my boyfriend.”

“What the fuck, Angela? Are you serious?”

“Yes,” she said hurriedly. “But this doesn’t change anything. Okay? Just play it cool. No one will think anything of it. We don’t even have to stay late. We can—”

“This is not what I agreed to.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I just knew that if I told you—”

“I wouldn’t come? Yeah. You’re right. I wouldn’t have.”

She clasped her hands and looked down. “I’m sorry. But I needed you.” She looked back up at me and smiled sweetly. “I knew you were the only one who cared enough to help me.” She stepped toward me and lifted her hand to my face.

I caught her wrist and shoved her hand down. “Don’t you dare try to manipulate me.”

“I’m not trying to—”

“Yes, you are. The girl I was with three years ago would never have pulled a stunt like this. That girl was sweet, and kind, and wouldn’t ever dare use her body and her looks to get what she wanted out of me.”

Angela’s cheeks flushed a bright shade of red, and she pulled back from me to retreat to the far corner of the elevator. “It was either this, or I lose everything I’ve worked so hard for,” she said quietly. “I didn’t know what to do. I can’t go back to Los Angeles. Please, Sabian. Do this for me? I won’t lie to you again, I promise.”

Her promise did not reassure me at all. It was easy to forget who she was and where she came from. Her life had been the polar opposite of mine, and she had to do what she needed to do to get away from that. But I didn’t accept lying. It never did anyone any favors.

“I’ll do this for you,” I said as the elevator chimed at the top floor. “But if I catch wind of any more bullshit, I’m leaving. I don’t care what position it puts you in. Understood?”

She nodded once. “Yes.”

“All right.” I turned to face the doors and held my elbow out for her. She looked down at it, then back up at me. “Take it,” I said. “I don’t half ass anything. If I’m going to be your fake fiancé for the night, we’re going to sell the shit out of it.”

She wrapped her arm around mine and pressed herself into my side as the doors opened. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Thank me when this is over.” It sounded dramatic, but it was genuine. I was walking into a wedding of two wealthy, important, influential people, and I was doing so under a false identity. This was the extreme opposite end of the life I had known growing up. I was out of place and out of sorts. I was used to food stamps and sloppy joes (on the good days).

This was going to be a ride and a half.

We walked from the elevator to a set of glass doors, where a final, massive gold sign announced the details of the wedding ceremony. The Cooper family was to sit on the right, and the Smithe’s would be on the left. The reception would take place on the rooftop patio immediately afterward, while the couple went and had their photos taken.

We paused as a man dressed in a white suit opened the doors for us.

The ceremony hall was beautifully decorated. My mind spun as I tried to fathom how much money had been spent on the decor alone. It had to have been over a hundred thousand dollars. Easily. Flowers hung at the end of dense vines on the ceiling, giving the room the illusion of being in a fairy-tale garden. The carpet between the aisles was white and lined with candles and more flowers. The seats had white covers on them and pale pink sashes tied around the backs. More flowers were tucked in the middle of the bows on the sashes.

“Come on,” Angela whispered in my ear as she guided me to the right side. We took two seats about three quarters of the way back.

After sitting down, I looked around at the guests.

Everyone was well dressed and dripping in expensive jewelry. There were plenty of wide-brimmed hats, lace dresses, flashy suits, and bedazzled shoes.

“This is insane,” I muttered to Angela.

She crossed one leg over the other and adjusted her dress. “I know.”

I was aware of all eyes shifting over to us. I could feel the heat of their stares on my back as they sized me up. Despite the suit, fresh shave, and slicked back hair, I felt that I stuck out like a sore thumb. I was by no means all that dark skinned, but my Mexican blood stuck out like a sore thumb. I was the darkest one in the room by a lot.

“Maybe you should have asked Hyde to come to this with you,” I said. “He looks more the part.”

Angela shook her head and leaned into my shoulder. “I don’t know him. Besides, I’ve always liked giving these snobs something to talk about.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. Angela had been born into this cuckoo’s nest, but she didn’t fit the part. She would have been better suited living a normal life where she had to work hard for what she wanted. I had no doubt she would be extremely successful. Her bite was bigger than her bark, her determination was impressive, and her sheer defiance to being held down was her best quality.

As I continued to look around, I noticed that a lot of the people were casting their sour looks at Angela and not at me.

What a bunch of fucking trash.

I sat up straighter in my seat and adjusted my jacket. I put my hand on Angela’s thigh and gave it a squeeze. “Let’s show these morons a good time tonight, shall we?”

Angela grinned up at me. “Really?”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Sometimes, under the right circumstances, games could be a lot of fun. And, truth be told, I was wickedly good at them. Growing up on the streets and spending so much time in the Lost Breed MC would do that to a man. A room of

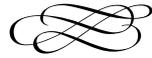
two hundred social elites was nothing compared to the shit I'd seen in the slums as a teen.

“Come here,” I said, lifting my arm up so Angela could tuck herself into my side. “Put your hand on your knee so everyone can see that ring I bought you.”

Angela giggled and did as I said. “I like this side of you.”

“Baby, you haven't seen anything yet.”

CHAPTER 10



ANGELA

The ceremony was a grueling hour and fifteen minutes long. Sabian had sat with his arm around my shoulders the whole time, and when the vows were read (not personally written ones, I might add), he tugged me in close and kissed my cheek. Then, just to put on a good show, he nuzzled his nose up close to my ear and whispered, “This had better be an open bar wedding.”

I giggled, and from the outside looking in, I hoped it looked like we were two sweethearts in love.

When the ceremony ended, everyone took their time leaving the room. Sabian took my hand in his and guided me through throngs of family members who had stopped in little clusters in the aisle to talk about how beautiful the ceremony was.

“Beautifully boring,” I muttered close to Sabian’s shoulder as we slipped through the doors. He chuckled, pulled me up beside him, and guided me out to the balcony with him where the rest of the guests were gathered to wait for the newly married couple to return.

As we waited, we were spoiled with trays of champagne and appetizers that were on a never-ending circuit of waiters’ arms. Sabian plucked two glasses from a gold tray for us and passed me mine. We clinked our glasses together and both tossed them back in three mouthfuls. As another waiter passed, I put our empty cups on his tray and switched them out for fresh ones.

“Your family is going to think we’re alcoholics,” Sabian murmured.

“They can think whatever they want,” I said, sipping my drink. “We’d be silly to turn down free champagne, right?”

“Right.”

We milled around for a good hour and a half as we waited for the bride and groom to return. I took Sabian around the patio and introduced him to family members I didn’t absolutely loathe, which weren’t many. People looked him up and down without shame, then looked back to me. They would always ask how we met. I told them all we met online on a dating site. It was the most believable lie.

The mother of the bride, my Aunt Josephine, pulled Sabian in for a hug when I introduced him as my fiancé. The many rings and diamond bracelets she wore flashed in the sun as she squeezed his shoulders.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” she said as she leaned back to give him the same sweeping up down that everyone else had given him. “I must admit, you are not what I was expecting when our Angela said she had a fiancé finally.”

“He was worth the wait,” I said, addressing her passive aggressive stab at me.

Sabian ran a hand over my bare back. “I’m a lucky man,” he said. “And I have a confession of my own. You all weren’t what I was expecting, either.”

I glanced up at him, worried at what he might say next.

“Oh?” Josephine inquired, her overly plucked eyebrows creeping millimeters up her forehead. If she hadn’t indulged in so much Botox, they would have been able to go higher. “And what were you expecting?”

“Well, you know? Sometimes extravagant weddings such as these can come off kind of tacky.” Sabian gestured around at the overflowing bouquets, water fountains, ice sculptures, and waiters milling around the patio. “But this is a tasteful affair. You are all a beautiful family. Although it is quite easy to spot the Coopers amongst the Smithe’s.” He winked at her.

Josephine bubbled over with laughter. “Oh my,” she cooed, putting a hand to her tanned chest. “You are a charmer, aren’t you?”

Sabian shrugged and let his hand fall from my shoulders. He reached for her hand and lifted it to his lips, where he placed a soft kiss on her knuckles. “Good company brings it out of me.”

Josephine turned to me, her eyes glittering with sheer joy. “My dear, you must bring him around more often. He is a delight. Such smooth words from a man of such... flavor.”

I knew as well as Sabian that the word “flavor” had not been her first choice. “I will,” I said. “I’m sorry, Aunt Josephine, but we must be going. There are more introductions for us to see to. The ceremony was lovely. Jessica and Brandon make a beautiful couple.”

“They are, aren’t they?” Josephine sighed.

We left her fawning over her own daughter and slipped away to meet more aunts, uncles, cousins, and extended family members. Sabian was equally as charming with all of them, and his commitment to our lie was sparing me from suffering the doubting looks of family.

I was exceptionally grateful for that.

“Come on.” I took his hand and tugged him toward a couple sitting at one of the tables. “I want you to meet my mom and dad.”

“Can’t wait,” Sabian said dryly.

We stopped behind my parents at their table, and I cleared my throat. “Mom, Dad,” I said.

They both spun to face me. My mother leapt from her chair and threw her arms around me. “We’ve been waiting for you to get to us,” she said. “I’ve missed you so much!”

“It’s only been a week,” I said into her hair.

She pulled away and cupped my cheeks. “What have you done to your beautiful hair?”

“I chopped it. I wanted something fresh. It’s more New York, don’t you think?”

My mom made an unsure sound in the back of her throat as my father got to his feet beside her. He gave me a warm hug, kissed the top of my head, and looked me over. “I like the short hair. It suits you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I smiled. Then I gestured to Sabian, who stepped forward. “This is Sabian, my fiancé.”

“Finally, we get to meet the mystery man in the flesh,” my father said, extending his hand to shake Sabian’s. “It’s nice to meet you, Sabian...”

“Delgado,” Sabian said.

“Delgado,” my mother said, her tone suggesting she did not like the way his last name sounded on her tongue.

“Leave it, Hera,” my dad said to her without glancing over at her. I’d have to thank him for that later. “What did you two think of the ceremony?”

I shrugged and opened my mouth to speak, but Sabian beat me to it.

“It was lovely, if not a little impersonal.”

“Impersonal?” My dad inquired, assuming a casual stance with a hand in one pocket. “How so?”

“For that long of a ceremony, I was hoping to at least hear some personally written vows. That’s the best part, wouldn’t you say? Hearing the commitments and testaments of love right from the mouths of the bride and groom. A shame they missed the opportunity.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” my mother gushed.

Sabian was clever. Too clever. He had the ins and outs of our family figured out already. The Coopers, though a tightknit group, loved to throw dirt at one another. Anything they could use to hold over one another’s heads, they would. Sometimes they’d hold on to it for years, just waiting for the right opportunity to throw it in someone’s face.

The vows were a nice touch.

“You would write your own vows for your wedding then?” my mom asked Sabian.

“Well of course,” he said. “There’s so much to say about your daughter. I will proclaim it to everyone willing to listen.”

“Stop it,” I blushed, nudging him with my shoulder.

“Never.” He grinned.

I owed him. I owed him big time.

“Come on, we’d better get to our seats,” I said. “People are starting to take theirs. The bride and groom must be close.”

“All right,” Sabian said, before offering my parents a courteous little bow. “We’ll catch up with one another later? We have plenty to discuss.”

“Yes,” my mother nodded, “we shall.”

Sabian offered me his arm again, and we went to find our seats. We ended up at a table with a few of my cousins and their girlfriends and wives. It could have been worse, but it also could have been better. My cousins were all male, save for the bride, Jessica, and one of her bridesmaids, Claire. Thank God she hadn’t asked me to be part of the wedding. I would have had to fake an illness or injury.

“That went well,” Sabian said as he tucked my chair in for me and sat down beside me.

“It did,” I said. “You could do this for a living.”

Sabian chuckled and shook his head before sipping the last of his champagne. “I think I have to have something personally invested in my date.”

“I see,” I said coyly. Then I turned my attention to the others at the table. My cousin, Ross, was two chairs down from me, and down from him were my other cousins, Dale and Elijah. Dale and Elijah were twin brothers and looked almost identical, with long noses, light blond hair, and weak chins. Ross shared their pale skin and hair but had a more prominent

jaw and a beefier appearance. I suspected he was on steroids of some sort.

Each of them had a woman on their arm, and I did not really care what their names were. They were likely to be switched out for younger versions of themselves within the next year, maybe less.

“Sabian,” I began. “These are my cousins, Ross, Dale, and Elijah. Guys, this is my fiancé Sabian.”

“Pleasure,” Sabian said with a polite nod of his chin.

Ross reached for his beer on the table. “Where are you from, Sabian?”

I stiffened. This was exactly the kind of thing I wanted to avoid.

“New York City, born and raised,” Sabian said. If he was annoyed by how direct the question was, he didn’t show it. He smiled a friendly smile and draped his arm over the back of my chair. “What about you?”

“Well, New York of course,” Ross scoffed. “I should rephrase my question. Where are your parents from?”

“Ross,” I said sharply, narrowing my eyes on him.

“What?” he asked innocently. “Can’t a guy make friendly conversation? I’m just trying to get to know your fiancé, cuz.”

“Mexico,” Sabian said before I had a chance to retort to my asshole cousin.

“Ah, that explains things. You two gonna be the first to make some beige Cooper babies?”

“Shut up, Ross,” I spat. “Or so help me I will rip your tongue from your throat. This is Jessica’s wedding. Get your shit together.”

Sabian leaned over and pressed his lips to my ear. “By the looks of these cousins of yours, throwing a bit of color in the mix might help things. Can you say inbreeding?”

I snorted and covered my face with my hands as Sabian slouched lazily back into his chair.

“Something funny?” Dale piped up, his eyes fixed on Sabian.

“Not at all,” Sabian said. “I was just telling her how cute our little Mexican Coopers would be. Blond haired, dark skin cuties, I imagine.”

Nobody said much throughout the following proceedings. Jessica and Brandon arrived and took their seats. Speeches were made as dinner was served, and our table ate quietly. We all kept to ourselves, and Sabian teased me and forced me to eat off his fork a couple times.

“Do it for the people,” he said playfully as I took a bite of salmon from his fork.

“You’re bad,” I said.

“I know.”

When the music started and the dance floor opened up, Sabian offered me his hand. He guided me out onto the dance floor. The sun had set only minutes ago, and fairy lights above the dance floor came to life. Sabian led me through an intricate salsa routine to an upbeat song that had my heart racing with every dip, spin, and grind.

All eyes were on us, and for once, I liked the attention.

CHAPTER 11



SABIAN

Angela was breathless and flushed when the dance ended. I pulled her into me, and she hooked her right leg around my hip. And suddenly, before I knew what I was doing, I was kissing her. I was aware of the eyes on us. Hell, I was more than aware of it. Each stare bored into me like I was committing a first-degree crime.

But Angela's lips parted, and she kissed me back as her hands wandered up my back and into my hair.

When we parted, another song had started. Couples were milling around us on the dance floor, and I saw some of the yearning stares the women were giving us.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go somewhere less crowded for a minute."

"Okay," Angela said.

We made our way off the main patio and wandered around inside until we found another door that opened up onto a smaller patio for smokers. We half stumbled, half jogged to the railing where we both braced ourselves and proceeded to giggle breathlessly.

"I didn't know you could dance," Angela said. "Where did that come from?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I teased.

She rolled her eyes at me and peered down at the busy New York City streets below. The noise of traffic and car horns barely reached us up here. It was calm and peaceful, and

a cool breeze blew across the patio. Angela's shoulders drew inward.

"You cold?" I asked.

"Just a bit. I'll be warm when we go back."

I slipped my jacket off and draped it over her shoulders. I also loosened my tie. It was that point in the evening.

"Thank you," she said, looking up at me with a look I couldn't quite pinpoint.

The patio doors swung open, and three men came stumbling out. They were laughing obnoxiously and falling into one another as one of them passed around a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. They all lit up their smokes, and as they took their first draws, they spotted Angela and me.

It was the same three we had been sitting with during dinner. Angela's cousins. The three stooges.

Ross, the most unsavory of the three, shook his head and scoffed. "Well, what do we have here, boys?"

"Leave us alone, Ross," Angela said, crossing her arms and turning to face them. I noticed how she took a step forward to place herself between me and the three men.

"Don't get your panties in a knot," Ross slurred. He was piss drunk. The way the other two swayed with laughter suggested they were equally as intoxicated. "This is the perfect opportunity for us to get to know your boy better."

"Too bad," Angela said. "We're heading back to the party." She stepped forward, and I followed. When we were close to Ross, he cut her off, blocking her with his size.

He stared down his nose at her. She didn't back up. Instead, she took another step. She was so close to him that their chests were almost touching. "*Move*," she growled.

He leaned in close so that his nose was inches from hers. "Sorry, princess. But I don't have to listen to you."

"Why do you always have to be such an ass?" Angela hissed, shoving him in the chest. "If Axel was—"

“Yeah, yeah, if Axel was here, he’d kick our ass. I know. I’ve heard it before. But guess what? Axel ditched you ages ago. Maybe you should have thought of that before you brought this piece of trash to a family event.”

“He’s not—”

“Stop talking, Angela. No one likes listening to the sound of your voice.”

I’d heard enough. I cleared my throat, drawing the attention of the three stooges, and stood with my shoulders squared and my hands clasped in front of my waist. “I’m sorry that the three of you are threatened by someone like me being here, but that’s no reason to treat your cousin this way. I suggest you apologize to her. Now.”

Ross snorted with laughter, and Elijah and Dale joined in.

“Really?” I asked, more than a little surprised. Pretty boys like this didn’t come after me often, and when they did, they were walking into a world of hurt. They had no idea what I was capable of, and for the first time all night, we didn’t have an audience. That benefitted me more than they realized.

“Get out of the way, Angela,” Ross hissed. “So we can teach this fiancé of yours how it’s gonna be for him if he goes through with marrying you.”

Angela blew her lid. She went after him, fists flying, and landed a hit to his jaw with her knuckles. She yelped in pain, shook out her hand, and went after him again, cursing up a storm. I reached out to pull her back to me, but Ross caught her arm first and yanked her sideways, sending her off kilter.

She fell to the stone patio in a heap in her dress.

“Big mistake,” I growled.

“Oh yeah, tough guy?” Ross puffed out his chest as his two idiot cousins moved in around me. Angela started yelling at them as she tried to untangle herself from her dress and get to her feet. Ross closed in with a manic glint in his eye and a cruel edge to his smile. “What are you gonna do about—”

I decked him once, right in the middle of his face. His nose crunched beneath my knuckles, and the cartilage crumpled. He let out a pitiful wail as blood started spewing from his nose and into his mouth. He stumbled back, clutching his bloodied face, and screamed for Elijah and Dale to get me.

Elijah and Dale were a little unsure of themselves, so I made their decision for them.

I grabbed the front of Dale's shirt and pulled him toward me. With the momentum I created, the punch I dealt to his gut had nearly double the force behind it. A great whoosh of breath left him as I released him, and he crumpled to the stone patio at my feet.

I stepped over him as Elijah retreated back a step.

"Come here, dipshit," I growled. "You don't get to get out of this scot-free."

"I'm sorry, man," Elijah sputtered. "I was just going along with them. I didn't want to fight you, man, seriously. I tried to talk them out of it. I swear!"

"I'm not buying it, hot shot."

Elijah turned to run. I got a hold of the back of his jacket and yanked him off his feet. He screamed. It was a pitiful sound to come out of a grown man, and I dragged him backward. He squirmed and struggled and started calling for Ross to come help him.

"Ross is a little worried about his pretty face," I said as I spun Elijah around, wound back, and drove my fist into his jaw.

He went down like a bag of stones and lay perfectly still.

I looked back up at the other two. Ross was still cupping his profusely bleeding nose, and Dale was down on one knee, hunched over and clutching his gut.

"Apologize to her," I said, pointing my chin at Angela, who had finally gotten to her feet. She was smoothing out the skirt of her dress and glaring daggers at Ross.

Ross snarled an incoherent stream of curses.

“Really?” I asked, moving toward him. He backed up, his eyes darting up to meet mine. There was a frantic look to him now. None of this had been what he expected. “Last chance. Apologize. Or I swear to God I’ll paint this patio red.”

Ross groaned and looked at Angela. “Sorry,” he said.

Angela stepped over Elijah’s unconscious body, grabbed me by the wrist, and pulled me toward the doors to go back inside. “Fuck you, Ross,” she called over her shoulder.

I didn’t say anything as she dragged me through the doors and to the elevator. She stood with her arms crossed, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for it to get to the top floor. “I can’t believe those assholes. How dare they pull something like this? Narrowminded, ignorant, waste of space, fuck boys.”

“We don’t have to go,” I offered. “If you’d like to stay, we can.”

“No, we’re going. I hate these people anyway. Well, most of them. And his parents can suffer the shame of having their son start a fight with you. Maybe I’ll use it to explain why we’re not getting married.”

“Sorry?”

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes. “Well at some point, I’ll have to call off our fake wedding, won’t I? I can’t run with the lie forever. I can say you didn’t want to marry into a family with people like Ross in it.”

“His ego is probably damaged enough.”

“Not nearly,” she said.

The elevator arrived and we got on. Neither of us said a word as we rode it down, or as we waited for the valet to pull my car around. When he parked it at the curb, we got in, and I wasted no time in pulling out of the hotel parking lot and hitting the streets.

When we had been driving for a few minutes I reached over and rested a hand on her knee. “Are you all right? You went down pretty hard there.”

“I’m fine,” Angela said. “Just a scraped knee. Thanks for beating them up. It was extremely satisfying.”

I chuckled. “Anytime.”

She glanced over at my hands on the steering wheel and for the first time noticed that I had two split knuckles. “We should do something about that,” she said, nodding at my hands.

“Nah, it’s all good. Believe me, I’ve had worse.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry?”

Angela nodded. “I’m sorry I put you in that position. That isn’t at all how I saw the night going. I just wanted everyone off my back, and I was so sure that this was the solution. Instead, you had to fight three drunk idiots after you were so wonderful all night. I feel like a fool.”

I took a turn down a quiet residential street and stopped the car. “Ang, don’t be sorry. It’s fine. Really. I’m a big boy. I can handle myself. Besides, you didn’t make those buffoons into racist assholes. Their parents did. They were itching for a fight, and if it hadn’t been me, I’m sure it would have been someone else.”

“Maybe.”

“Not maybe,” I said, reaching out and cupping her cheek. “They would have found some other guy to wail on. It’s good that it was me for everyone’s sake.”

Angela bit her bottom lip. “Not for mine.”

Before I realized what I was doing, I traced her lip with my thumb. Her eyes widened, and she stared back at me.

The air around us buzzed. I knew what was about to happen, and I was powerless to stop it; I didn’t want to stop it.

She was so close and filling my car with the smell of her perfume. Her lips were full, and the lipstick she had painted on earlier had almost entirely worn off. She had never looked so damn beautiful to me.

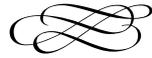
I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned across the console. She sucked in a sharp breath as I closed the space between us and sealed my mouth over hers. She tasted like champagne and strawberries.

Axel would be furious.

For the first time, I didn't care what Axel wanted for his sister. I cared what I wanted. And she was sitting right beside me with her tongue in my mouth.

Fuck the consequences.

CHAPTER 12



ANGELA

“Wait,” I whispered as Sabian’s kiss wandered from my lips and down my neck. “We shouldn’t. Should we?” I wanted to. Oh God, did I want to. His kiss had me vibrating on a frequency so high that my knees felt weak, and I wasn’t even standing up.

“I want to,” he breathed. His breath tickled my skin as he continued planting kisses down the side of my neck and along my collarbone.

“But Axel—”

“I don’t care. Let him be pissed.”

“You’re sure?” I whispered. His lips were dancing over the tops of my breasts now, which were being pushed up due to the bodice of my gown.

Sabian chuckled and looked up at me. His deep brown eyes drew me in as he gave me a devilish smile. “Are you really asking *me* if I’m sure? Shouldn’t I be asking you that question?”

“Don’t be sexist,” I said, giving him a coy smile of my own. “I’m not the one who will have to suffer Axel’s fury when he finds out what we did.”

“I can handle it. Do you believe me?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said huskily. Then he was kissing me again.

I didn't resist him this time. This time, I let his hands wander all over me. I let him find the zipper at the back of my dress. He tugged it down slowly, and I leaned forward so he could pull it open. I lifted my ass off the seat, and both of us pulled the dress off. He crammed it in the back seat and turned back to me.

His eyes looked me over. I was only wearing a strapless bra. No panties.

"Damn," he breathed, reaching out and running his fingers lightly up my stomach. "You're so fucking fine."

"Yeah?" I asked as I reached behind my back and unclipped my bra. I threw it over my shoulder to the back seat and let him soak in my nakedness. I had never been shy about my body. I worked hard for it, and I wanted the kind of man who could appreciate that. Sabian's eyes roamed over me like he was looking at a piece of art.

"Yeah."

"What do you want to do to me, Sabian?"

He glanced up at me, and his lips curled in a delicious smile. "A lot of things."

"Like?" I asked as I cupped my breasts in each hand. I pushed them together for him and arched my spine to create a dramatic curve with my body.

Sabian licked his lips and traced a wandering line from my knee to my hip. "The last time I told a woman what I wanted to do to her body, she slapped me across the face."

I giggled, and his fingers fell from my hip to between my thighs. He urged my legs apart gently and rested his palm on the inside of my left thigh. He lifted his index finger just enough to graze the sensitive flesh along the outside of my pussy. It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to beg him to touch me.

"We both know I'm not that kind of girl, Sabian. The only type of slapping we'll be doing is your balls against my ass."

“Fuck yeah, it is,” he grated as he inched closer to my wetness.

“Don’t be a tease.”

“I don’t want to spoil it too quickly. I want to take my time. Is that not going to work for you?”

Every guy I’d ever been with had only wanted me to suck his dick and then let him fuck me. It was rare to ever get the kind of attention I wanted.

“No, it will work,” I managed to say through the heat blooming below my belly.

“Good,” he said, leaning in close again to kiss me.

When his lips touched mine, his finger finally found my opening. I was dripping wet, and he dragged his finger from the bottom to the top of my opening, where he traced slow circles around my clit.

This routine continued until I was swollen and aching for him to press a finger inside me. I gripped the seat beneath me as he pinched my clit playfully and chuckled into my mouth. His kiss became fiercer as I shifted and spread my legs apart farther so that one knee rested against his chest and the other against the door panel.

For a brief moment, I found myself hoping no one would walk by and see me spread out like a little slut. Then I decided that if someone did see me, I didn’t care. I had wanted this for too long to be ashamed of how turned on I was. Sabian Delgado was a god in my eyes and always had been. He took care of me, watched out for me, and fought for my honor. He was gentle with me but firm when he called out my bullshit.

I needed a man like that.

I also needed a man who could fill the dark hole inside me that had been getting bigger since Axel left and I was alone at the Cooper Estate. I needed a man who made me feel whole.

And what he was doing with his hands was just the icing on the cake.

I moaned into his mouth as he released my clit and ran two fingers down my opening. He suckled on my bottom lip and pinched it between his teeth as he slipped both fingers inside me—but only a little. He stopped at his first knuckle and released my bottom lip.

I lifted my hips in a silent plea for him to go deeper.

He leaned down and kissed my breasts and my stomach, pausing occasionally to pull my nipples into his mouth and roll his tongue over them.

“Oh God,” I whispered, unable to fight my eyelids from fluttering closed.

He pulled his fingers out of me and played with my clit again. I was so sensitive that his touch made me flinch. He chuckled, and the deep sound sent a rush of need straight through me. My thighs clenched, my breathing stopped, and the first orgasm I’d ever received from a man coursed through my body.

“Yes, baby,” Sabian growled as he pinched my nipple between his teeth. “Just like that. You’re so fucking wet.”

I moaned and ground myself against his hand. He cupped me and pressed the heel of his palm to my clit. Right when I thought I would scream with need, he eased a finger inside me. I purred and lifted my right arm to grip the headrest behind me. “More,” I whispered.

He obliged and stretched me open with another finger. He slowly began fucking me, and the sloppy sounds of his fingers moving in and out of my pussy had me working quickly toward another orgasm.

“I’m going to come,” I whispered as I released the headrest and reached for him. I grabbed the front of his shirt and clung to him as my body took over. My climax hit me hard and fast, and I was sure I was creating a puddle on his leather seat. “Yes!”

When I was a quivering mess of pleasure, Sabian pulled his fingers out of me and licked them clean. Had he been anyone else, I would have been repulsed rather than turned on.

He reached under his seat and pulled the lever there, sliding his chair back. Then he reclined the back rest and undid his belt.

I watched in fascination, my blood rushing in my ears, as he pulled his pants and boxers down his hips. His cock sprang free and rested against his stomach as he rummaged in his pants pocket. He withdrew a condom, tore it open, and rolled it on.

“Were you hoping this would happen tonight or something?” I teased once he had the condom over his massive cock.

He raised an eyebrow at me. “It’s better to be prepared, no?”

Instead of answering him, I climbed over the console and straddled him. I draped my arms over his shoulders and pressed my pussy to the length of his shaft. I began rocking back and forth, dragging my wetness along him, teasing him the same way he had teased me.

He grabbed my hips to still me and stared into my eyes. “This doesn’t work like that. Not with me.” He lifted me up, grabbed his cock, and found my opening with his tip. “When I’m ready to fuck you, I’m going to fuck you.”

His words made my desire burn brighter. “Fuck me then.”

He pushed down on my hips, forcing me to sit on his dick. His length was absurd, and his girth stretched me more than I’d ever been before. I moaned, and he let me sit on him for a while as my body adjusted to his size.

Then he slapped my ass—hard.

I yelped, and his hands shot up my back to grab a fistful of my hair. “The first thing I thought when I saw this short hair was that there was still just enough to grab on to,” he grated. He pulled my head back, baring my throat to his kisses. I shivered in his grip as he began to slowly thrust his hips beneath me. “Holy fuck, you’re tight.”

I wanted to feel him fucking me in earnest. I didn’t want him to be gentle. So I started bouncing up and down, riding

him for all he was worth, desperate for him to see that I could handle whatever he was willing to throw down.

He gripped my ass and squeezed hard as I rode him. I leaned back and braced myself on his thighs as he caressed my tits. I moaned as he began bucking beneath me. Every thrust brought me closer and closer to another orgasm. I had no clue a man could make me feel this good.

He wrapped his arms around my lower back and pulled me back up to him. My breasts were crushed against his chest as he pressed his mouth to mine. Our teeth crashed together in the heat of the moment, and then our tongues were sliding against each other.

“Oh God,” I moaned into his mouth. “Please don’t stop.”

He held on to me tighter and kissed me deeper.

I lost all sense of who I was when he quickened the pace. The promised sound of slapping filled the car as his thighs pounded against the back of mine.

“Yes!” I screamed when I came. I dug my nails into his shoulders as his thrusts became more wild and uncontrolled. I knew he was on the brink too.

So I leaned in and kissed the side of his neck. I followed the line of his jaw with my lips until I reached his right ear. I pinched his earlobe between my teeth and bounced on his cock until he shuddered, groaned, and gave in to his own climax.

When we were both done, I stayed in his lap just so I could feel him inside me a little longer.

Then my phone buzzed.

Sabian lifted me off him, and I climbed back into my seat. He pulled his pants back on and waited as I leaned down to grab my clutch from the floor. I grabbed my phone and opened it up.

I had dozens of messages from family members.

“Looks like word about the fight broke out,” I mumbled.

“It was bound to eventually,” Sabian said, his voice a little huskier than usual.

“I guess. Hang on, one of these is from Ellie.”

“Oh?”

I opened the message and read through it. “Shit. Axel knows you came to the wedding with me.”

Sabian sighed and turned the car on. He put it in drive, and we began making our way back to my apartment. “Let me deal with Axel. I’ll go see him now.”

“Maybe you should wait a bit. Give him some time to cool down.”

Sabian chuckled. “Time won’t help him cool down. He’ll just keep stewing. I can handle him. Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“You don’t have to.”

I found myself wishing I had someone to talk to about all this. I didn’t have any friends in New York City, and with everything going on, I wished there was someone I could have in my corner that I wasn’t also sleeping with. I texted Ellie back and asked if she wanted to go for coffee the next day.

Then, after I hit send, I remembered that I was still completely naked.

I leaned into the back seat and grabbed my dress.

“What are you doing?” Sabian asked, giving me a skeptical look.

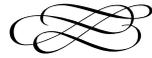
“I was going to cover up so that if anyone saw us—”

“Hell no.” He shook his head. “I’ve been dreaming of getting you naked for years. Leave that dress where it is. And spread your legs. I’m not done with you yet.”

I opened my mouth to retort but realized I was happy to open wide for him. I opened my legs and smiled as he reached down and began rubbing my pussy. I grabbed his hand and guided his fingers inside me.

I didn't want the ride to ever end.

CHAPTER 13



SABIAN

My phone started ringing about five minutes after walking Angela to the front door of her apartment building. I had helped her get back into her dress, which had been a chore and a half to pull off without her getting out of the car in fear of revealing her nakedness to one of the poshest neighborhoods in all of New York City. After seeing her safely inside and returning to my car, I noticed I had two missed calls from Axel.

It wasn't a mystery as to why he had called. I was sure he knew I had accompanied Angela to the wedding, and he had probably caught wind of the fight as well.

On the third call, I answered, and Axel's voice filled the speaker. He was pissed. His voice was low, grating, and each word was spoken slowly. He was trying to control his rage.

"You took my sister to that God damned fucking wedding?"

A small part of me considered lying. "Yes."

"And you beat the shit out of Ross and—"

"Dale and Elijah. Yeah."

"Come over. Now."

Then he hung up on me.

Running away like a coward with my tail tucked between my legs was not an option. I wasn't the sort to run away from confrontation, even if it was with someone I respected; and

who was more than capable of knocking me on my ass. I would atone for my deception one way or another.

If he needed to beat me within an inch of my life, I would let him. In a way, I had betrayed him. This wasn't the kind of thing Lost Breed members did to one another. Not only that, but I was fully aware that I was not worthy of his baby sister. She was too good for me, and Axel and I both knew it.

The drive to Axel's house was more than nerve wracking. But when I pulled up to his gate, the nerves gave way to a sense of calm. After getting through security, I got out of the car and went to his front door, which was yanked open as I raised my fist to knock.

Axel stood there dressed in a black muscle shirt and gray sweats. He looked me over, soaking in the sight of the navy tux that was clearly out of my price range, and his lip curled up in a snarl.

Then he stepped out onto the threshold with me and slammed the front door closed behind him.

Neither of us said anything for a while. I noted all the signs that suggested I was in fact about to get shit kicked: his fists were balled at his sides, a vein was pumping furiously on his forehead, and his jaw was locked.

"Axel, listen," I started. "None of this started the way you think it did. She needed a favor and I—"

His fist slammed into my jaw like a fucking sledgehammer. It sent me backward, and I fell off the three steps behind me to land on my ass on his driveway. Sharp shooting pain wove up my spine as I lifted a hand to nurse my now throbbing jaw.

"All right," I muttered. "I deserved that."

Axel came down the steps after me. One of his knuckles was split from the impact, and he was shaking his hand out. "My baby sister is not an option for you, you bastard. You keep your dick away from her, and point it at those usual sluts you go for." Axel straightened to his full height and puffed out

his chest. “She’s too good for you. Too good for any of us and this fucking life. You hear me?”

I pushed myself up to one knee and fought the ringing in my ears as I got slowly to my feet. “I hear you. I never thought she was. But she’s a grown woman now. She can make her own choices.”

He moved to strike me again, and I didn’t retreat. If this is what he needed to do, I would not stop him.

Axel stopped when his nose was inches from mine. “You will stay the fuck away from her. You spent one evening with her, and it went to shit. An ambulance showed up at my cousin’s wedding because of you. How do you think that made Angela look? What do you think those rich assholes are all talking about now?”

“Since when do you give a damn what they’re talking about?”

He hit me again. This time, his fist drove up into my ribcage, knocking the air out of my lungs. I doubled over and clutched my side as I fought to catch a breath. My lungs burned, my head spun, and an anger I knew I couldn’t release sparked in my chest.

“I don’t care what they talk about,” Axel hissed. “But I care about Angela. I care about how this makes her look.”

“But she doesn’t,” I said. “She sees them all for what they are.”

I shouldn’t have been saying these things. I knew that as much as Axel did. It wasn’t my place. My place was to apologize and swear on my life that this would never happen again.

As much as I knew that was the right thing to do, I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“You made her look—”

“I didn’t make her look like anything,” I snarled as the spark of anger began a slow burn inside me. “Those asshole cousins of yours are the ones who looked like fools. Anyone

who believes otherwise is an ignorant jackass. Are you really trying to defend Ross right now? He started it, man. Don't try to tell me you believe otherwise."

"You should have walked away."

"Would you have?"

Axel's lips peeled off his teeth in a guttural snarl. He wasn't a liar. He would have handled the three stooges the same way I did: with violence and efficiency.

"Don't hold me to a higher standard than you hold yourself," I said, finally managing to straighten up and gritting my teeth against the pain in my ribs. "You and I both know you would have done worse to them if they came at you the way they did at me. Racist pricks."

"You should have exercised control."

I met Axel's hard glare with one of my own. My blood was pumping in my ears, and the anger had bloomed into fury. "Ross laid a hand on her, Axel. I wasn't going to stand by. He deserved what he got, and he's lucky I didn't do worse."

The tension in Axel's stare evaporated. "He what?"

"You heard me. She went after him before I did anything. She hit him square in the face. He beat me to her and knocked her to the ground, man. His fate was sealed after that. And if you had been there in my place, you would have thrown him over the fucking balcony."

The front door swung open, and both Axel and I spun around to look up the steps.

Ellie was silhouetted by the light behind her in the foyer. She was wrapped up in a robe, and her feet were tucked into powder-blue slippers. She slipped outside and pulled the door closed behind her. Then she came down the steps, her heels hitting each one heavily, closed the eight feet between her and Axel, and jabbed him roughly in the chest.

"What the hell do you think you're doing out here? You woke both the kids, and I just had to calm them down. Are the two of you seriously going at it over *this*?"

Axel caught her wrists and held her to him. “Wait for me inside. Sabian and I are settling this.”

“You don’t get to dismiss me,” Ellie retorted. Then her head snapped to the side, and she looked at me. Her eyes widened and then narrowed as she returned her fierce stare to her husband. “Did you hit him?”

“It’s fine Ellie,” I offered. “I deserved it.”

“I wasn’t asking you,” she hissed.

The fucking Coopers were going to be the death of me one way or another. I was sure of it. I tucked my hands into the pockets of my new swanky pants and pretended to mind my own business.

“Why are you mad, Axel?” Ellie asked. “Because Angela likes him? God forbid she does the same thing you did and branches out of the family to choose someone who might actually be good for her.”

“That’s not the problem,” Axel muttered. His anger was evaporating. Ellie was his woman, and she possessed all the power to calm his fury.

Ellie reached up, and he let go of her wrists. She touched his cheek, ever so gently, and her expression softened. “Do you really think one of the rich snobs your parents would have chosen for Angela would be better for your sister than Sabian? A man who has your back, who you trust, and who would protect her the same way you protect me?” She stretched upward and kissed him gently. “Don’t be like this. You know him. I know him. He won’t hurt her.”

“You don’t know that,” Axel said, his eyes swinging back to me.

“But I do,” Ellie insisted. “You fought so hard for so long to keep me at arm’s length. And that hurt me. Don’t do the same thing to your sister. Let her live her life the way she wants to. Let her choose who she wants to.”

“Can I go?” I asked, hooking a thumb over my shoulder to point at my car. This was terribly uncomfortable and intimate, and I would have rather been anywhere but there.

“No,” Axel said sharply.

I groaned and let my hand fall back to my side.

Ellie patted his cheek once more, gave me a weak smile, and then turned and headed back inside. Before she closed the door, she turned back to us. “If you hit him again, you can sleep on the couch.”

Then she closed the door, and I was left alone with her husband once more.

We both stood quietly for a while. It felt like a long time, but in reality, probably only two minutes or so passed. I was the one to finally break the silence.

“I’d be pissed too if this were the other way around.”

Axel snorted and shook his head.

“Seriously. I get it. I should have told you straight out before I went with her to the wedding. Things kind of just spiralled, and before I knew it, I was agreeing to things I didn’t want to do.”

“Sounds like Angela.”

“Yeah.”

Another heavy moment of quiet settled around us. I shrugged out of my jacket and draped it over one arm as Axel ran both hands through his hair and blew out a long, exasperated breath.

When he spoke, he no longer sounded angry. He sounded tired and drained. “Watch out for her, will you?”

Taken aback by his change of attitude, I merely nodded.

“She’s a wild one, and she’ll give you a run for your money. If you make her happy, I won’t stop it. But mark my words, if you do wrong by my baby sister, I will kill you.”

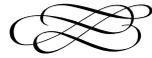
I found myself grinning like a fool. “I wouldn’t expect anything less of you.”

Axel shook his head at me and climbed the steps to his front door. “Now get the fuck out of here, and put some ice on

that ugly mug of yours.”

The pain in my ribs and jaw didn't bother me at all as I went back to my car and slid into the driver's seat. In fact, they felt like I had earned them for the sake of the woman who had taken my heart out of my chest and carried it into her apartment with her.

CHAPTER 14



ANGELA

Standing across the street from the high-rise New York Times building was surreal. My eyes roamed over the Old English Text lettering a dozen times before I gathered the nerve to follow all the other people in business suits across the crosswalk to the front doors.

I had my ID badge, which I showed to security before making my way to the elevators. I sucked in a sharp breath as I stepped on with nearly twenty other people, all heading to different departments, and waited anxiously to arrive at the eighteenth floor.

When the doors opened, me and two other women stepped out. I followed them across the hall and through a set of glass doors. A receptionist with purple-framed glasses and curly blonde hair greeted me with a warm smile. When I told her who I was, she got up from her chair and led me around the wall partition behind her desk.

What laid before me was what I had been dreaming of for years: my new office.

She brought me to my desk, which was basically a glorified cubicle with two walls instead of three, and told me that my boss would call me in shortly for a mandatory meeting where I'd be assigned my first article and get a rundown of how the office ran.

I sat in my chair, full of anxious excitement, and waited.

I didn't have any logins for my computer, so there was nothing else for me to do. I wanted to pull my phone out of my

briefcase (which had nothing in it besides my phone, a new leather notebook, and three rose gold Swarovski pens) and text Sabian, but I didn't want to be the new girl who was caught on her phone within the first fifteen minutes of starting her job.

But the temptation to reach out to Sabian was strong.

I hadn't heard from him since Saturday night. I had, however, gone to coffee in the early afternoon on Sunday with Ellie, who told me that Sabian and Axel had a confrontation outside of her house in the early hours of the morning. I assumed it was right after he dropped me off at my apartment.

I had asked Ellie nearly a dozen questions in a span of two minutes:

“Did Axel hurt him?”

“How much does he know?”

“Did you see Sabian?”

“Is he okay?”

Ellie had grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eye. She assured me that Sabian had walked away on his own and driven home safely. She also told me that it was not her place to disclose what had happened between my brother and Sabian. She told me that I would have to take it up with one of them.

I had been too nervous to reach out to either of them yesterday, and now I regretted it. I was starting my dream job, but all my thoughts were of the man who had gotten me naked in his car and introduced me to a whole new world of pleasure.

I bit my bottom lip and reached down to my suitcase to try to subtly pull my phone out.

“Miss Cooper?” a male voice asked from behind me.

I spun around in my chair to find myself staring up at a man who I had seen in pictures but never in person. John Hudson, the deputy publisher of the New York Times.

I sprang to my feet and held out my hand. “Hello, Mr. Hudson. It's so nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said with a friendly smile.

He wasn't tall, by any means, but an average height. His hair was brown and thinning just at the top, and he had friendly brown eyes and thick eyebrows. He was dressed in a gray suit, was in decent physical shape, and had a good handshake.

“Follow me,” he said. “Let's go to my office and discuss your first assignment, as well as your hobbies and interests. I like to know the people working for me.”

Full of giddy excitement, terror, and glee, I followed him hot on his heels around the other cubicles and desks, where other journalists were fervently tapping away at their keyboards. His office was at the very back of the floor, and the blinds were drawn down on all the windows. He opened the door for me and closed it behind us.

His office was spacious, with luxurious furniture made of cherry wood. The walls were emerald green, as were all the accents, and there were framed pictures of New York Times front pages everywhere.

“I can't believe I'm here,” I said under my breath.

“Sorry?” John asked as he moved behind his desk and took a seat.

“Oh,” I said, not realizing I had spoken aloud. “Sorry. Nothing. I'm just a little bit in awe over being here. It's been a long road, and I'm so happy to be here.”

“Glad to hear it,” John said, gesturing at the chair across the desk from him for me to have a seat. I did, crossing my legs neatly and giving him a warm smile. “I've heard good things from your professors and mentors from your internship, Miss Cooper. The New York Times is lucky to have you on board.”

“Please, call me Angela.”

“Very well,” John said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk. “Tell me about yourself, Angela. And then I'll give you your first assignment.”

I wasn't sure where to start, but once I opened up, the conversation flowed easily. Everything was finally falling into place.

“Online Dating and how it Enforces Dishonesty in Profile Presentation,” I growled as I read my first article title aloud. I was sitting at a booth in a fancy restaurant I had already forgotten the name of, waiting for my parents to arrive. They had called while I was on my lunch break and asked if I had time to celebrate my first day on the new job over dinner—their treat. I was thankful I kept my fake engagement ring in my purse at all times. It was currently glittering on my left hand, catching the light of the candle in the middle of the table.

Celebrating seemed a little lackluster now. After sitting with John for almost forty-five minutes, he had given me this article to write and told me I would be the perfect fit. I wasn't sure where he got that idea from, seeing as how I had stated several times that I was passionate about finding hidden truths and believed in transparency between the media and the public. Nevertheless, here I was with my first assignment in my hand.

After seething for a couple hours, I concluded that this was probably how all new hires started at the paper. It was unlikely that I would just show up and be handed real, hard-hitting news stories. I needed to prove myself.

And if that was what John was looking for, then that was what I would give him. I was not going to be labelled as a journalist who could only produce fluff pieces because my last name was Cooper and I had a pretty face. If he was profiling me and intended on making this a long-term situation, he had another thing coming.

Just as steam was about to start blowing out of my ears, my parents arrived. My mom slid into the opposite side of the booth from me and complained rather loudly that there were no lemon waters on the table. As she began asking me how

long I'd been waiting, my dad came over, gave me a quick hug, kissed both my cheeks, and then took his seat.

“Relax, Hera.” My dad rubbed her shoulder. “I'm sure we will have our drinks in no time. Angela, my dear, how was your first day? As riveting as you dreamed?”

I nodded. “Yes, it was great. A little overwhelming, but in a good way. I have my own desk.” I left out the part that it was more like a cubicle. “And the people I sit with all seem really friendly. I had a meeting with my boss this morning which went really well. I'm eager to start writing.”

“How wonderful!” my mom exclaimed as she clasped her hands together in front of her. “I'm so happy for you darling.” The rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds of the many rings of her fingers winked at me as she reached across the table and clasped my hands. “We are so proud of you.”

I didn't really believe her, but I smiled anyway. “Thanks, Mom. I appreciate it.”

Our server arrived and performed the typical introductions that took place at fine dining restaurants. She went over the specials, the pricing, and offered a bottle of chilled champagne for the table, which my dad accepted. We put in our orders for our meals, and once we were left in privacy again, my parents exchanged a glance.

I knew right then and there that this dinner was not about celebrating my new job—not that I had been under any delusion that it was in the first place.

“What?” I asked, leaning back in the booth and bringing my glass of champagne with me. I sipped on it and willed the booze to hit me hard and fast. I was going to need it.

My mom turned back to me and smiled sweetly. “Well, your father and I were hoping the three of us could have a calm and rational discussion with you.”

I arched an eyebrow and looked at my dad. “Oh?”

He nodded, showing his support for what my mom was saying. “Yes. Just hear us out, Angela, all right?”

“Fine.” I sipped more champagne.

My mother started by flipping her long blonde hair over her shoulder and placing her elbows delicately on the table. She rested her chin upon her knuckles and fixed me with a look of restrained disapproval. “We wanted to talk to you about this fiancé of yours.”

Of course. I should have known this was what they would want to talk about. Sabian had been the light of the party at the wedding. Not only did he stick out like a sore thumb because of his Mexican heritage, but his dancing, genuine charm, and good looks had caught the attention of everyone in attendance.

Oh, and the fight had made him the topic of all family discussion, of course. All the messages and missed phone calls on my cell proved it.

“You liked him when you met him,” I pointed out.

“Yes,” my mom said slowly. “But that was before he sent Ross and Elijah out of the reception in the back of an ambulance. You can’t tell me I don’t have a right to be skeptical, at the very least.”

“Skeptical of what?”

“Your father and I think he’s dangerous, Angela.”

I rolled my eyes and put my champagne down.

“Don’t do that,” my dad said. “We are not overreacting. He resorted to extreme violence at a white-tie affair. We don’t want you tied up with a man like that. Who knows what else he is capable of? I don’t want my daughter getting caught in the cross hairs of someone like him.”

“Has anyone talked to Ross about it yet?” I asked lazily. “Actually, let me rephrase. Who hasn’t Ross told?”

“The entire Smithe and Cooper families know what transpired on the smoking patio,” my mother said.

“Really? Do they know that Ross pushed me to the ground? Do they know that I swung first?” I lifted my right hand, showing them my bruised knuckles.

My father sputtered into his glass of water and coughed loudly. He covered his mouth with his napkin as he regained his composure, and his eyes remained fixed on my hand. “What on earth, Angela? You struck him?”

“Hell yes, I did. And if given the chance, I’d do it again.”

“Don’t swear, Angela, it’s not—”

“Mom, don’t. Seriously. I’m too old for you to micro manage my vocabulary.” I turned my attention back to my dad, who was staring at me in shock. “Sabian and I went to that patio to get away from everything. We were hot, and I wanted space. Then Ross, Dale, and Elijah came out. They were wasted. Ross started picking a fight with Sabian. When I tried to leave, he blocked my path and told me he was going to teach my fiancé a lesson. Then I hit him. Then he knocked me to the ground.” I shrugged. “And Sabian kicked their asses like any self-respecting man would. Had I not been manhandled, he would have left without there being any physical altercation, but leave it to Ross to make a complete buffoon of himself.”

My dad blew out an angry breath. “Ross will have some explaining to do when I—”

“Forget about him,” I said. “He won’t give me a hard time anymore. Sabian did that to them in less than a minute and then forced him to apologize to me.”

My father reached out to straighten the cutlery in front of him. He was flustered. “Well then. I don’t see any reason not to give Sabian another shot. Hera? Thoughts?”

My mother was looking at me with pursed lips. Finally, she looked to her husband and nodded. “Yes. I would very much like to get to know him better.”

“Then it is settled,” my dad said. He lifted his champagne glass. “You and Sabian will join your mother and me for dinner on Wednesday evening. Does this suit you, dear?”

I nodded.

“I’ll have a driver sent to your apartment then.” My father sipped his champagne and smiled. “And I will be having a

discussion with Ross's family and will make sure everyone is aware of the real transpirations of the wedding night. I never much cared for that boy."

"Neither did I," I said, giving my dad a grim smile. "He's an ass."

"Angela!" my mother scolded.

But my father grinned back.

CHAPTER 15



SABIAN

“Let me get this straight,” I said into the phone. “You want me to come to dinner with you and your folks? How far are you going to run with this thing, Angela? Am I going to have to fake marry you too?”

Angela laughed into the phone line. “No. Don’t be such a drama queen.”

“I’m not being—”

“It’s just dinner. They just want to make sure you’re not a hooligan who is taking advantage of their daughter.”

I chuckled and ran my hand over my head. I was hot and sweaty from working in the shop all afternoon and was itching for a cool shower. “But I *am* a hooligan who’s taking advantage of their daughter.”

“Stop it,” Angela said, but I could hear the amusement in her voice. “Be at my place at six thirty tomorrow. They’re sending a car for us. Don’t be late.”

“All right. You gonna dress sexy for your fiancé?”

“Don’t push your luck,” she said before hanging up the phone.

I was smiling to myself when I went back into the shop. I tucked my phone in my back pocket and caught Ellie watching me as she emerged from the office.

“You look chipper,” she said.

I shrugged and went to the mini fridge at the back of the shop to grab a water bottle. I offered her one, which she accepted, and tossed it to her. Then I cracked mine open and drank greedily. It was a sweltering hot day out, and all the manual labor had drained my energy. I needed to hydrate.

“So,” Ellie said as she braced herself against the workbench. “I think Axel has cooled down a bit. He’s coming to terms with you and Angela having a thing. Which is good. He was a moody pain in my ass all day Sunday thanks to you.”

“Sorry.”

“How are you holding up? He didn’t do too much damage, did he?”

I shook my head. There was a bruise on my jaw, which Ellie had not been happy to see when she came to work that morning. There was also some purple bruising around my ribs, but she didn’t need to know about that. “I’m fine. Axel hits like a girl.”

Ellie busted out laughing and rolled her eyes at me. “Okay then.” She drank several mouthfuls of water and screwed the cap back on the bottle. “I know the two of you fucked, by the way.”

I coughed and spewed water everywhere. As I looked up at her, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “What?”

“I know you and Angela got down and dirty in your car.”

“Down and dirty? Who are you?”

“Don’t change the subject. I’m happy for you in a weird way. Angela is a nice girl with a brain, which is a refreshing change from the women you always go for. Axel doesn’t know, but if he asks me, I won’t lie to him.”

“I hear you. Thanks, Ellie.”

“Don’t thank me. If he finds out soon, he’s not going to be happy. What he did to you will be a walk in the park compared to—”

“I know.”

Ellie smiled apologetically. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, don’t you?”

I grinned and drained the rest of my water bottle.

The door to the office popped open, and Jamie rolled into the shop. Her dark hair was up in a cute little bun, and she was wearing a red bandana as a headband. “Hey, mind if I run out and grab some lunch? I’m starving.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “I’ll cover the phones for you.”

“Want anything you two?”

“Nah,” I shook my head and so did Ellie as she went back to work. “Take your time. It’s a slow day.”

As Jamie went out through the bay doors, I slipped into the office and closed the door behind me. The hum of a power tool echoed through the walls as Ellie started working away, and I busied myself with tidying up the office.

I hadn’t been in there for more than three minutes when the phone rang. I went to answer it, and the line was dead. I hung up and went back to sorting through the loose papers on the desk. Then the phone rang again.

“Hello?”

There was no answer, but I could hear someone moving around on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” I asked again, pausing what I was doing to strain my ears and listen. “Anybody there?”

When there was still no answer, I hung up, frowning to myself. Either some kids were prank calling us, or someone had pocket dialed us.

I resumed gathering loose papers and sliding them into their respective folders. Most were payment receipts of job descriptions of what was being done to our customers’ vehicles in the shop. As I bent and dropped one into the bottom drawer of the filing folder under the desk, the front door swung open.

Hyde swaggered in, dressed in his usual frayed jeans and white T-shirt. He had a pair of aviators on, and he pulled them off his nose as the brightness of the sun vanished when the door closed behind him. He hooked them in the V-neck of his shirt and gave me a goofy grin.

“You’re the cutest damn receptionist Ryder’s ever hired.” He winked.

I straightened and kicked the bottom drawer of the filing folder closed. “Oh yeah? Bend over. You tell me if you still think I’m cute.”

Hyde chuckled, and I broke into a wide grin.

“What brings you in?” I asked.

Hyde shrugged and came to stand in front of the raised counter between us. He rested his forearms on it and peered down at the desk before me. “I was just passing by and thought I’d pop in. See who was working. I was hoping Jamie would be here.”

“She just stepped out to grab lunch actually. You only missed her by about five minutes.”

“Balls,” Hyde muttered.

I arched an eyebrow. “Has this become a thing I didn’t know about?”

Hyde shook his head. “No. Not yet at least. But she’s a sweet little thing, and I spent some time with her at Axel’s place the other night. Wouldn’t mind getting to know her a bit better.”

“And Jax knows this?” I asked teasingly, knowing that Jax might take issue with Hyde having the hots for his little cousin.

“Jax doesn’t need to know shit. There might be nothing there. Why worry a brother unless absolutely necessary?”

“Want me to let her know you stopped by?” I asked.

Hyde nodded as he plucked his sunglasses from the collar of his shirt and slid them back on. “Yeah, sure. I’ll try to swing

by again on Friday. It had better be her behind this desk and not your gangly ass.”

“Gangly?” I asked with a smirk.

“You’re a tall motherfucker.” Hyde stepped backward to the door and pushed it open with his boot. “See you around, Sabian.”

“See you,” I said, getting back to organizing the files as the door slammed closed behind him. As I worked, the phone rang two more times. Each time I answered, I was greeted by heavy breathing and a crackling connection.

The phone rang again. Feeling more than a little irritated, I lifted the receiver to my ear. “All right. Listen, buddy. If you’re pulling my leg—”

“Sabian Delgado?”

The voice that spoke my name sent a chill down my spine. It was disguised and almost robotic sounding, but it was a human being on the other end. I didn’t say another word.

“I hear Johnny Moretti is looking for a kid named Jason?”

I kept my mouth firmly shut as a wave of panic rolled through me. I knew one thing in that moment, and I knew it for a fact. Jason was in trouble.

Or he was dead.

“The boy should have known better than to try to escape us.”

“Who the hell is this?” I hissed into the phone. My teeth gritted, and the hair on the back of my neck stood at attention.

The call went dead, and I was left standing alone in the office. The air felt cold, and my skin gave way to goosebumps.

“What the fuck?” I breathed, slamming the phone down with a shaking hand. I stood there, my heart hammering in my chest, my mouth going dry, and considered what I should do. I was tempted to go to Ellie but thought better of it. Bringing in more people than necessary was unwise.

Not to mention Axel would strangle me with my own tongue if I got Ellie involved in this shit.

I picked up the phone and called the only person who needed to know: Johnny Moretti himself.

“This is Ryder,” he said on the second ring.

I was still frazzled and couldn’t think of something to say. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, and the adrenaline rush was crashing down around me.

“Hello?” Ryder asked. I picked up a note of nervousness in his voice.

“It’s Sabian.”

“Oh. What do you want?”

“I just got a strange call.”

Ryder was quiet for a moment. “From who?”

“From someone who took the time to disguise their voice. They were calling about Jason, man. I’ve got a bad fucking feeling. They said—”

“You’re not the first one they’ve called.”

This news sent me reeling. “What do you mean? Who else have they called?”

“Derek. Last night. And Hyde this morning. Both times, they said the same shit. Something about hearing that I’m looking for Jason and that he shouldn’t have tried to escape.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They said the same thing to me. Why the hell haven’t you told anyone about this? This isn’t a joke, Ryder. This is serious.”

“He’s my nephew, and it’s my business. If they have him, I don’t want anyone shooting off their loads trying to play hero. We need to play this close to the vest. I have Dani working on it. That’s all you need to know.”

He can’t be fucking serious, I thought as I ran a hand down my face. “Ryder, I don’t like it. I’m not trying to question you or anything, but we shouldn’t keep this from the others. If

Jason is out from under whoever the hell these people are, he might be trying to get to us.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I amended, flinching under the anger in Ryder’s tone.

“Then what are you saying, Sabian? You want to call the shots?”

“No.”

“Then do what I say. Act normal. Dani and I have this under control.”

“Like you had TJ under control?” I shouldn’t have said it. The words hung between us like a bomb ready to go off. “Listen. Shit feels *wrong*. You and I both know there’s something waiting for us around the corner, and it has some sharp fucking teeth. Do you disagree?”

Ryder hissed angrily into the phone. “No,” he said finally.

“Then tell the others.”

Ryder didn’t say anything.

“Whoever this is, Ryder, they have our numbers. Home numbers, work numbers. Our names. They’re not fucking around. We shouldn’t either.”

“I’ll tell them. But no one makes any moves until Dani has more information. This is my nephew’s life on the line, Sabian. Respect that.”

“I do. I get it. But—”

Ryder hung up the phone.

There was a pounding in the back of my head that had my knees feeling weak. This was the storm we had been talking about at our business meeting. The time of truce and calm was behind us. Everything was going to change. The air felt thicker, heavier; like the sky itself was about to come crashing down upon us.

“Fuck!” I yelled, driving the toe of my boot into the bottom of the desk. The wood shattered and splintered, and everything upon the desk leapt an inch into the air before falling back down. The computer became unplugged, and the screen went black.

I sank down into the chair and buried my face in my hands.

Why did Angela have to be in town now? Why couldn't she have been back in Los Angeles, where she would be safe and sound and far away from me and all this bullshit?

“Because that's your luck, you dumb bastard,” I muttered into my hands.

Ryder wanted me to act normal. That meant coming to work, getting shit done, and going to dinner with Angela and her parents the following night.

I didn't want to. I'd rather sit at the front door to her apartment building and wait for the riff raff to reveal itself. Sitting back and playing it off like nothing was wrong felt like a recipe for disaster. I could feel it in my bones.

But I wasn't in charge. And Jason was not my nephew. This was Ryder's call, as it should be, and I knew my place. It was by his side, following his lead, and staying loyal to the man who had done more for me than anyone on this earth.

If he needed me to go about my day like nothing was wrong, then that was exactly what I was going to do. And if given the opportunity, I would do my best to try to change his mind and spur him into action.

I wanted to escape the storm before it swallowed us whole.

CHAPTER 16



ANGELA

I had Ellie on speaker phone as I walked through my closet in search of the perfect outfit to wear to dinner with my parents and Sabian. She was currently a little distracted with preparing dinner and managing two children, who I could hear playing gleefully in the background.

“Hang on a sec, Angela,” she said, sounding a little flustered.

“No problem.” I plucked a knee-length purple sundress from the wall and held it against myself as I turned to face the mirror. “This will do,” I muttered to myself before stripping out of my work clothes.

I left them draped across the island in the middle of my closet and then stepped into the dress. As I adjusted the spaghetti straps on my shoulders, Ellie returned to the phone.

“Okay, sorry. I have a good five minutes or so before I get interrupted again. Did you figure out what you wanted to wear?”

“I settled on a purple sundress. Not too fancy. Nice and lightweight. Knowing my parents, we’ll be sitting outside so I don’t want to dress too warm.”

“Smart. Have you talked to Sabian yet?”

“Not as much as I’d like to. I called him to invite him to dinner. I didn’t really want to talk about everything over the phone. Have you seen him?”

“Yeah, yesterday and today at work.”

I paused and slipped my feet into a pair of gold sandals. “How is he?”

Ellie chuckled on the other end. “He’s fine. Don’t worry about him.”

“And Axel?”

“Not as fine, but he’ll get over it. He’s just being a big baby, and I’ve told him so. He’s taking some time to sort through how he feels about all this, but he’ll come around. I’m sure of it. He wants what’s best for you, that’s all.”

“Funny how everyone says that, and then their idea of a good follow through is controlling who I’m with.”

Ellie sighed into the phone. “You’re preaching to the choir, sister.”

Having Ellie to talk to was helping more than I was expecting. She was a down to earth girl, and we shared a lot of common ground. She and Axel’s relationship had started out rocky because of his angst about bringing her into the MC life. He was making decisions on her behalf, much like he was trying to do for me, and after time, she was able to set him straight and get him to see that she could make her own choices. Not only that, but she showed him that she was the only one who knew how to make herself happy. It wasn’t up to him.

She was helping plead my case to her husband, too, and I was grateful for it.

“Thanks for everything by the way,” I said. “I don’t have anyone to turn to. All my friends back in L.A. aren’t really friends, you know what I mean?”

“Sadly yes. And don’t worry. We’re family now. I have your back.”

I grinned as I painted a shimmering gloss on my lips. “You’re a pretty awesome sister-in-law.”

“Ditto.” I heard Axel call hello in the background of the call. Ellie called back to him. “Sorry, Angela, I have to go. Dinner time. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Okay, say hi to everyone for me.”

“Will do. Have fun tonight.”

We both hung up the phone, and I was left twiddling my thumbs until Sabian sent me a text message letting me know he was waiting outside.

My stomach fluttered with nerves that surprised me. I wasn't the sort to get nervous about things like this, but Sabian had a way of bringing such emotions out of me. I grabbed a cardigan just in case the night got chilly and hurried out the door and down the elevator.

When I made my way outside the building, Sabian was waiting for me on one of the benches. He had his arm draped over the back and was staring down at his phone. His brows were drawn together, his jaw was tight, and his expression most certainly did not match his relaxed posture.

“Hey,” I said. He hadn't even noticed me walking up to him.

He looked up quickly and dropped his phone in his pocket as he got to his feet. “Hey.” He smiled, and all the lines of tension in his face disappeared. “Nice dress.”

“Thank you,” I said, doing a little twirl for him. I caught myself mid spin and narrowed my eyes at the purple bruising on the right side of his jaw. “Did Axel do that to you?”

Sabian lifted a hand to mindlessly rub the bruise. “It's not a big deal, Ang, really.”

“When I see him, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind,” I growled.

Sabian chuckled and shook his head. “No, you won't. He and I have sorted it out between ourselves. This is the aftermath of me going behind his back.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don't like it.”

“I hate to break it to you, but it doesn't matter if you like it or not.”

I held my tongue and looked the rest of him over. He was dressed nicely as well in a plain white button-up shirt and dark jeans. His brown belt matched his shoes, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, exposing muscled forearms that made my heart pitter patter in my chest. The bruise on his jaw certainly had me feeling a bit excited, too.

“You ready?” I asked, pointing my chin toward the black Lincoln parked at the curb. The driver stepped out and opened the back door for us.

“When you are,” Sabian replied, offering me his elbow.

I took it and we went to the car. We slipped in, and the driver returned to his seat. We drove away from the Kent building and headed deeper into the city to the condo my parents were staying at. Like me, they had rented themselves the penthouse suite on the top floor.

It was only a fifteen-minute drive. When we arrived, we made our way inside and took the elevator to their floor. Sabian stood stiffly beside me. His hands were in his pockets, and his eyes were fixed on the closed doors before him. The air around him seemed to buzz with something I couldn't see.

“Is everything all right?” I asked, tipping my head to one side curiously.

His eyes darted over to me, and he nodded quickly. “Yes. Sorry. Distracted with work is all.”

I wasn't buying it, but I let it go and leaned over to give him a sweet kiss on the cheek. “Thank you again for doing this for me. I really do appreciate it.”

The doors chimed softly when they opened, and we walked to one of two doors on the floor and knocked.

A butler opened the door, gave us a very courteous bow, and moved aside for us to come in.

“Welcome, Miss Cooper and Mister Delgado. Your parents are seated on the patio. May I fetch either of you a drink?” The butler was probably in his late sixties, with a white moustache and a delicate manner of speech. His eyes were warm and friendly and the palest shade of blue I had ever seen.

“A gin and tonic for me, thank you,” I said as Sabian and I tread across the foyer toward the open French doors on the far side of the living room. “Sabian?”

“Uh, just a rum and coke would be fine.”

“Right away.” The butler bowed again and took a right turn toward the kitchen as we passed through the French doors and emerged on a massive terrace swimming with flowers, candles, and elegant furniture.

My parents were seated at a glass table. Both were sipping their red wine when Sabian and I drew up beside them. They got to their feet and hugged us both, and then we all took our seats. I reached out and closed my hand over Sabian’s. I gave his hand a quick squeeze as my father began leading the conversation.

“I believe a thank you is in order,” he said as the butler arrived with our drinks. He placed them in front of us, checked the levels of my parents’ drinks, and departed when he concluded they were still working on their glasses of wine. My father lifted his glass in a toast. “A thank you to you, Sabian, for not letting Ross get away with his crude behavior and aggression toward our daughter.”

Sabian sat like a deer in the headlights for a brief moment before hurrying to collect his glass to meet my father’s in his toast. “A thank you is entirely unnecessary,” he said.

“For protecting my baby girl? Nonsense. I am indebted to you.”

“We both are,” my mother added with a genuine smile; the type of smile I didn’t see grace her lips all that often.

Sabian took a sip of his drink and shrugged one shoulder. “If I’m being completely honest, the pleasure was all mine.”

My father surprised me by laughing. “Ross is a complete ass. I agree.”

“Another toast to Ross, then.” Sabian grinned.

The two men toasted again, and I rolled my eyes. “Enough, you two. Let’s move on from this. It’s literally all anyone

wants to talk to me about. I can't believe how many calls I've gotten from family who I haven't spoken to since my high school graduation."

"As is the Cooper way," my father said.

Dinner went more smoothly than I would have ever dreamed. Sabian wowed my parents with his good manners, sarcastic humor, and wise commentaries on love and life. I was proud to be sitting beside him, to say the least. He held himself with confidence, despite being thrust into such a foreign situation to him. My parents seemed not to intimidate him at all—not that I thought they would. I suspected Sabian was a man who was not intimidated by anyone.

I liked that about him.

In fact, I was quickly realizing that I liked (or more than liked, if I was being honest with myself) *everything* about him. All throughout our meal and the drinks we shared afterward, I found myself getting caught up in him; in watching the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he took a drink, or how only the right corner of his mouth curled upwards when he was faking amusement. I found myself aching for him to look at me.

Just look at me.

And when he did look, he saw all of me. He would hold my gaze in a way I couldn't define with words, but I understood with my soul. It was strange, and thrilling, and all together everything I had ever wanted to feel with a man.

He was the kind of man I wanted as my fiancé—my *real* fiancé.

Maybe he would be willing to keep playing along for a while. Maybe there would be no reason for us to have to put a stop to this. I wasn't ready to. Spending this kind of time with him was too enjoyable to walk away from. I needed him as badly as I needed air, and I hated how corny the thought sounded in my own mind.

Not to mention there was the added bonus of my parents loving him.

Of course, they thought he was a businessman. They knew nothing of his true nature and that of the people he surrounded himself with. If my mother ever came face to face with Ryder, there was no doubt in my mind she would faint.

The night wound down just after ten o'clock, and my parents walked us to their door. They gave me a hug, and my father shook Sabian's hand before we left with a wave and stepped onto the elevator.

I shot Sabian an approving look as we began descending. "A stellar performance yet again. Oscar worthy, in my opinion."

Sabian chuckled as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and rolled them up to his elbows again. Then he popped open the top two buttons at his throat. I nearly jumped his bones right then and there in the swankiest condo elevator in New York City.

I resisted, but only by a hair.

The drive back to my place was strenuous on my body. An ache that I knew all too well had formed below my belly and was screaming at me to make a move. Sabian was sitting beside me with one hand resting on my knee. He was being polite, I assumed, and his eyes scanned the busy streets as we rode along until we pulled up at my apartment building.

The driver opened the door for us, and we slid out.

Sabian walked me to the front door of the building.

I turned on my heel, nearly careening into him. He caught me by the elbow as I braced myself with both hands flat against his chest. I looked up at him and breathed in the musky scent of his cologne. My knees threatened to give out on me.

"Would you like to come up?" I asked.

The smirk that touched his lips did me in. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed myself tightly against him as I sealed my lips over his. His hands wandered down to grip my waist. He held me in his strong hands and pulled me into him before reaching down to cup my ass. A low sound in the back of his throat told me that yes, he would like to come up.

As we continued to kiss, I fumbled to try to get my keys out of my purse.

Then his cell phone rang.

Sabian let out an irritated growl as he broke away from our kiss and checked his phone.

“What?” he barked.

The deepness and the irritation in his voice turned me on more. He was pissed to be taken away from our moment.

Good God, what had I done to deserve him?

I watched as his eyes narrowed and his eyebrows drew together. I was instantly reminded of the way he had looked earlier in the evening when he was waiting for me on the bench.

Something was wrong.

CHAPTER 17



SABIAN

“Slow down,” I said as Jax’s panicked voice filled the phone. “Where are you?”

He told me he was at Ryder’s. His voice shook, and I heard him swallow.

“I’ll be right there,” I said, and I hung up the phone.

I met Angela’s eyes. They were wide and worried and flicking back and forth between mine as she clutched her purse anxiously to her chest. “You have to go?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’m sorry. I do.”

“You’re sure you can’t stay just for a drink or two?”

“I’m sure.” I cupped her cheek and gave her a quick kiss. Her lips tried to follow me as I backed away. “I’m sorry, Ang. I’ll catch up with you later.”

I turned and didn’t look back. I jogged across the garden to my car parked at the curb. I didn’t bother with my seatbelt. I didn’t bother with anything that delayed my departure from the Upper East Side or the rest of the drive to Ryder’s house.

That included red lights. I blew through three of them in the course of five minutes. I had a close call with a white minivan that had me white-knuckling the steering wheel and muttering a stream of curses out the window.

I felt sick. Really sick. Jax had sounded unlike himself, and I knew something serious had happened. My imagination was running wild, and all I could think about was whether or not everyone was alive.

And if they weren't, who drew the short straw?

Nausea and panic rolled through me, and sweat beaded on my forehead. The feeling was terribly familiar, and I wracked my brain trying to remember the last time I had felt so fucking awful.

It didn't take long to recall the anxiety, terror, and crippling grief I suffered the night my brother was killed.

I stepped on the gas pedal and raced through another red light. Car horns blared around me. Fuck them all. They could carry on with their vanilla lives, driving to and from the office, worrying about their mundane problems. I had a real crisis unfolding before me. I needed to get to my MC.

When I pulled up to Ryder's house, I left my car parked half in the driveway and half on the sidewalk. I didn't care if I got a ticket. There was no other place to leave the car as the drive was filled with other vehicles. I spotted Jax's truck, as well as Axel's. A sense of relief flooded through me.

At least I wouldn't have to tell Angela her brother had been killed.

I strode through the front door and drew up short in the living room.

Everyone was sitting down. Ryder was in his seat beside the TV, which was on mute but playing a re-run of a cage fight from earlier in the week. To my right was Jax, who was sitting in the corner of the sofa. His knee was bouncing furiously, and he didn't even look up at me as I locked eyes with Ryder.

He held my gaze, and I felt everyone else in the room turn to look at me.

Axel, Caleb, Derek, Jax, me, and Ryder. There was only one of us missing.

I leaned sideways against the back of the sofa. Jax was still staring straight ahead, and I could feel the sofa shaking from his persistent knee bouncing.

Ryder was still staring at me. My mouth had gone dry, and my fingertips were tingling. The room was full of a sense of

heaviness, and I knew it for what it was.

Confusion. Loss. Grief.

Anger.

I finally found my voice, and when I spoke, Jax flinched, apparently completely unaware that I had arrived.

“Where’s Hyde?” I asked.

They all turned to me, but no one spoke a word. Ryder’s eyes remained fixed on me as I took another step into the room. For the first time in a long time, Ryder didn’t say anything about me standing on his carpet in my dirty boots. When his mother owned the house, she used to go after us with a temper that scared the holy hell out of me if we didn’t take our shoes off at the door.

“Where the hell is he?” I asked. I hated how weak my voice sounded, how scared I sounded. I forced myself to swallow and took a slow, deep breath. As I exhaled, I closed my eyes. The darkness behind my eyelids offered a brief reprieve from the reality that had just befallen me; the reality that one of my friends was probably gone. One of my brothers.

“Somebody fucking answer me,” I breathed, opening my eyes to look hard at Ryder. “Now.”

Ryder got to his feet, and the already silent room somehow became even quieter. My hands balled into fists at my sides, and my nails bit into my palms as I braced myself for whatever words were about to come out of his mouth.

But when his lips parted, no words came out. Ryder’s face contorted into a snarl of rage, and he put his back to me. He lifted a hand to his brow, and I noticed that he was shaking.

When Axel stood from his place on the sofa beside Jax, he commanded the attention of all of us. I faced him, and we locked eyes. His expression was calm, neutral, and impossible to read. He was compartmentalizing, I realized, and as he started speaking I wondered how he was able to keep it together so well. It was as if he were reading the ingredients on the back of a pasta sauce label.

“Dani got a call earlier tonight about a homicide. She called Ryder from the crime scene and let him know that it was Hyde.”

Even though I had been expecting this revelation, the words still hit me like a kick to the gut.

“Where?” I asked, my voice only an octave above a whisper.

“About a hundred feet into the trees behind the old shop,” he said evenly.

My teeth were clenched so hard my jaw ached. “Don’t make me ask any more questions. Just tell me the whole of it.”

Axel nodded his understanding. “It took a while to get any of the details. Dani called just after Jax called you. It’s still fresh for all of us, so keep your head on, all right?”

I nodded once. It was all I could manage.

“Hyde was beaten to death with a blunt object. It looks like he was killed there in the woods. His body hadn’t been moved. Dani said there are signs that he fought back. There were also signs that he was brought there and did not arrive of his own free will. They’re going to do an autopsy, but Dani doubts we will get any answers from it. She thinks he was killed with a baseball bat, and she suspects there were at least four attackers.”

Jax moved over as I swayed on my feet, and I sank down into the corner spot he had just vacated. I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees, then buried my face in my hands. “When does she think it happened?”

“Not long ago. Maybe two hours, tops.”

I glanced at the clock ticking away on the wall above the television. If Dani’s estimation was correct, which it probably was given her expertise, Hyde had been murdered while I was charading around as Angela’s fiancé and sipping wine with her parents.

“There’s more,” Axel said.

“Of course there is,” I growled.

“There was a note left beside his body. Here.” Axel handed me his phone. There was a picture on the screen. “Dani read it aloud to us. It’s evidence now so she knew we wouldn’t be able to get our hands on it.”

I found myself looking down at a snapshot of a crumpled piece of paper. It was speckled in blood, and the writing was neat and slanted:

It has not been fun watching you all run around like free men while TJ rots in a prison cell. Be warned, Lost Breed. I am coming for you, and I will swallow you up, one by one, until all that remains of you is your legacy of violence, crime, and death. Mark my words, Johnny Moretti. This is the end of all of you.

I handed the phone back to Axel. “So the cops are going to come knocking,” I said.

Axel nodded and sat back down on the sofa. “I would expect so.”

I looked around at the others. Caleb and Derek were on the opposite sofa, and neither of them would look up to meet my eye. Grief was written clear as day on their faces, and I doubted they would be able to speak a word if they tried. Jax was stiff beside me, still bouncing his knee. Axel was calm and watching Ryder, who still had his back to us.

“Ryder,” I said, my voice firm now.

He didn’t respond to me. Instead, he rubbed his forehead furiously.

“Ryder,” I said again, and this time, my tone was not so friendly.

He turned over his shoulder. “What?”

“Are we not going to talk about the fact that this note mentions TJ?” I asked. “This is the fucking Black Hearts all over again. I warned you. I warned all of you that this shit

wasn't done with. In that house, when it was all over, TJ told us that everything had already been set in motion, and we brushed it under the rug because it was easier to ignore it and carry on with our fucking bullshit routine rather than bring the fight to them. Now Hyde is dead."

Ryder let out a low growl and took a step toward me. "You have an issue with my leadership?"

I got to my feet as well and heard Jax suck in a warning breath beside me. Damn them all. Damn myself. I didn't care about any of it. "*What leadership?*"

Ryder took a menacing step forward, and I matched it with one of my own. He pointed an accusing finger at my chest, and I could see the fire burning in his eyes. He was holding onto his rage, but only barely. "After everything I've done for you, you have the balls to—"

"Yeah," I bit back. "I do. I'm indebted to you, Ryder. We all are. But that doesn't mean I can't call a spade a spade. We fucked up. And this time, it cost one of our lives. What are you going to do about it?"

All heads in the room turned to our leader. He was motionless under our gazes and my scrutiny. "You think I've done a shit job?"

I didn't answer him.

Ryder shook his head and laughed. There was no hint of amusement in the sound. It was cold. "What was I supposed to do, Sabian? Things are changing. There was more at stake than just our necks. Things are changing in the MC. I couldn't risk the lives of Dani or Ellie. Or Holly or Jamie. I'm making decisions that impact families now. Children."

"We should have finished them when we had them on their knees," I growled.

Jax stood behind me and clasped a hand on my shoulder. "This isn't helping anyone."

I yanked myself out of his grip. "Answer me, Ryder. What the fuck are we going to do?"

Ryder drew himself to his full height and pushed his shoulders back. He lifted his chin and looked me in the eye. The anger was still burning fiercely, but I knew the rage wasn't directed at me. "We let the police find the guilty party," Ryder said. "And then when we have their names and we know their faces, we kill them."

I nodded. "I'll be ready."

"This stays between us six," Ryder said. It was strange to hear him say *six* instead of *seven*. "Do what is best for your families and your loved ones to keep them out of this. It's going to get messier before it gets better."

Axel and I shared a look.

"I won't see her," I said, and I meant it. If I had to push Angela away to keep her safe, I wouldn't hesitate. Things with the Black Hearts needed to get sorted before I even considered seeing Axel's sister again. I had to keep her away from this at all costs.

"Good." Axel nodded.

Caleb and Derek both stood and engaged in the conversation for the first time since I arrived. Derek ran his hands down the front of his jeans. "I'm going to go to Hyde's folks' place. They'll have heard from the cops by now, but I want to make sure they're all right. Offer them the support of the Lost Breed."

Ryder nodded his approval. "Send our condolences. Tell them we will cover all funeral expenses."

"I'll come with you," Caleb offered.

Derek accepted, and the two of them headed to the door.

"Hey," Ryder called after them. They both paused and turned back. "Keep your heads on a fucking swivel. It's not safe for any of us right now. Tell the others what happened. But remember, the six of us are handling this. No one else."

Derek and Caleb left the four of us standing in Ryder's living room. Ryder was glaring daggers at me.

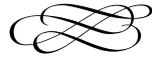
"Get the fuck out of my house," he spat.

I didn't have to be told twice. I turned and left, and as I made my way down the driveway to my car, I could hear Ryder arguing with Jax, who was no doubt trying to defend me and my big mouth. I'd been in hot water with Ryder before. I could get away with saying things to him that the others couldn't simply because of our history. To him, I was my brother, and I filled those shoes now. I would never shy away from speaking my mind.

I ripped open my car door and paused with my other hand resting on the hood. I let out a furious yell as I wound back and drove my fist through the rear window. The glass shattered, and a couple shards imbedded themselves between my knuckles.

I slid into the driver's seat and reversed out of the driveway like a madman, tires squealing, and peeled off down the street, the bloody pieces of glass in my hand catching the light of the streetlights above.

CHAPTER 18



ANGELA

I had been gnawing the inside of my bottom lip for the last fifteen minutes so intently that my mouth now tasted of blood.

Sabian had ignored my last three calls. After he left my house in such a hurry on Wednesday, I figured it would be wise to give him some time to sort through whatever had happened. I was worried, naturally, but I didn't want to overstep and inject myself into a situation that was none of my business. Sabian could handle himself.

I hoped.

But after two days of hearing nothing from him and not being able to get through to him, my worry had changed into genuine concern.

Working on my article was difficult. I didn't give a damn about online dating, but I did give a damn about the man who had swept me off my feet so unexpectedly. I needed to make sure that he was okay, regardless of whether that meant I had to stick my nose in his business.

I watched the clock on my desk at work creep closer to five o'clock. The last fifteen minutes of my work day passed terribly slowly, and when there were still four more minutes left, I caved. I stood up, collected my purse and my jacket from the back of my chair, and hurried out of the office, hoping that no one noticed me leaving early.

Even if they did notice, it didn't matter. Sabian meant more to me than this job.

My dream job.

That realization hit me like a ton of bricks as I got onto the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor.

I continued chewing the inside of my lip as I drove to Axel's shop. I prayed Sabian was working. If he wasn't... I stopped that train of thought and concluded that I would jump that hurdle if I got to it.

I was relieved to see Sabian's car parked along the gravel drive when I pulled up in front of the shop. The bay doors were open, as per usual, and Ellie was inside. She had her back to me and was standing relatively still, which was strange for her. Usually, she was busy at work. But from what I could tell as I got out of my car, she was merely staring at the wall.

Maybe she was daydreaming.

I cut across the gravel. She didn't even turn to the sound of my shoes crunching over the rocks.

"Ellie?" I asked as I stepped into the shop.

She spun around, eyes wide, and blinked at me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I put my hands on my hips. "Excuse me? I'm allowed to be here, you know?"

"You should go," Ellie said, looking around like she was afraid someone might see us. She hurried over to me and took me by the shoulders before turning me around and pointing me out the shop doors.

"Ellie, what the hell is the matter with you?" I asked, spinning back to her and slapping her hands down from my shoulders. "I haven't heard from anyone in days, and I'm starting to get worried. Sabian isn't answering his phone and —" I stopped talking. Ellie let her hands fall to her sides, and she looked away from me. "Have you been crying?"

"Just go," Ellie whispered. "Please. I can explain later."

"Tell me what's wrong," I said gently, moving to put an arm around her.

She pulled away and shook her head. “No. Please, just leave. It’s better for everyone.”

“I’m not leaving until I see Sabian and make sure he’s all right. Is he in the office?”

Ellie looked up sharply. “He is, but I wouldn’t go in there. He... he needs some time alone. It has nothing to do with you, though, I promise. He just—”

I walked away from her and marched toward the door to the office. Ellie called after me but didn’t follow, and I continued forward until I was pushing through the office door.

Sabian was sitting behind the counter. His heels were up on the computer desk, and he was on his cell phone. He was pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, and his eyes were squeezed closed. When the office door closed behind me, he opened his eyes and looked up.

He ended his call without a word and put his phone down face first on the desk. He took his feet down and stood.

“Angela. What are you doing here?”

I swallowed. Why was I suddenly so nervous? “I came to make sure you were okay.” I glanced around the office. Everything looked the same as it did the last time I was there. Then I looked back at Sabian. He did not look the same. There were dark purple bags under his eyes. He hadn’t shaved probably since before our dinner with my mom and dad on Wednesday. His jaw was dark with stubble, and his eyes were red. His appearance answered my question.

He was not okay.

“What happened?” I asked, letting my purse slip off my shoulder.

“Nothing, Ang. You shouldn’t be here. I have a lot on my plate right now.” He moved around the counter and put his hand on my upper back. He steered me back to the door. “You should go. I need to focus on work right now.”

I slipped out from under his touch and spun back to him, fixing him with a glare. “Why are you trying to get rid of me?”

“I’m not trying to—”

“Yes, you are. Don’t lie to me, Sabian Delgado. I can see right through you and your bullshit. Spit it out. Why are you pushing me away?”

I suddenly noticed how hollow he looked, like someone had ripped his soul out of his chest and run away with it. Sabian hung his head, then ran both his hands through his dishevelled dark hair. “Things are tense with the MC right now,” he said, his voice low. “I don’t want you around when the fire starts to burn. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I’m not afraid of fire,” I scoffed. The words sounded lame in my own ears, but I didn’t care. I meant them. “I’m not afraid to be by your side.”

“But I am,” he whispered.

I was overwhelmed with the impulse to hug him; to wrap my arms around his waist, rest my cheek on his chest, and swear on my life that everything would be all right. But I didn’t know if that was a promise I could make. How could I swear it would be all right when I didn’t know the scope of what was wrong? I stepped toward him to hug him, but he retreated.

“I can’t, Angela. Not right now.”

“Then when?” I sounded so fucking desperate.

He looked down at his feet and shrugged weakly. “I can’t answer that yet. But when things cool down, I’ll call you. I promise.”

I hated that I didn’t know what was wrong. I hated it even more that he wouldn’t tell me. The pain in his eyes and the way he stood, with slumped shoulders and slack hands, was a foreign sight to me. This was not the tall and proud Sabian that I knew and cared for.

I reached out and grabbed his wrist. He surprised me by not pulling away. I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand and glanced down when I felt bandages. His knuckles were wrapped. My brow furrowed, but I kept my mouth shut. He didn’t want me to pry, so I wouldn’t.

“Don’t take too long, okay?” I asked. “I miss you.”

The smallest smile touched the corners of his mouth. “I miss you, too.”

“Okay,” I said lamely. Then I pushed the strap of my purse back up my shoulder and turned to leave.

Sabian hurried forward and opened the office door for me. “I’ll walk you to your car,” he offered.

“It’s all right. I can remember where I parked.”

“I’ll walk you.”

I detected the order in the words. He wasn’t asking. He held the door open for me, and we cut through the shop. Ellie didn’t look up from her work as we passed by. She was in on whatever was bothering Sabian, and it infuriated me that neither of them were willing to share what was wrong with me. It was obvious that it was something within the MC, so I understood in a way why I wasn’t privy to the scoop, but it was unsettling nevertheless.

We went through the bay doors, and the sun kissed my skin. The weather was much cheerier than the mood in the shop. Our shoes crunched on the gravel until we arrived at my car. I opened my door and turned back to Sabian, who had his hands in his pockets as his eyes scanned the property from side to side.

“What are you looking for?” I asked curiously.

His gaze snapped back to me. “Nothing.”

I arched an eyebrow in disbelief. He was lying through his teeth.

I decided to let it go and slid into the driver’s seat. I slammed my door closed, and once the car was on, I rolled the window down.

“Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Sabian nodded once, and then he was peering around the property again. Clearly, I wasn’t enough to hold his attention. I rolled my eyes and put my car in reverse. I backed out of the

drive and out onto the street. He watched me go, but neither of us waved.

I drove home in silence as I seethed.

After how close we had become over the last couple weeks, I was surprised to be dismissed in such a direct way. Sabian had never given me the impression that he was capable of behaving in such a way. I had a right to be concerned.

Something serious had to be going on.

He looked sad, I thought to myself as I took a right turn onto my street. I pulled the memory of his face to the foreground of my mind. His eyes had been empty, and I was sure he hadn't slept in at least a day.

I ran my tongue along the raw skin on the inside of my bottom lip. "What are you hiding, Sabian?" I whispered to myself.

If there truly was something big going on, I wanted to find out. The journalist in me was beginning to get that all too familiar itch to seek out the truth and find the story.

Maybe there was something bigger and better there than my online dating article.

As I pulled into the underground lot beneath the Kent building, I concluded that I was going to find out, one way or another.

CHAPTER 19



SABIAN

As I swung my leg over the seat of my bike, I turned to look across the field, dotted with headstones, to the place where we had just lowered Hyde's casket into the ground. The groundskeepers were tossing soil into the hole as his two sisters stood with their shoulders pressed together. They were dressed in form-fitting black dresses and had black lace kerchiefs clutched in hand to wipe away their tears.

The rest of the MC were gathering on the lane and getting onto their bikes to ride our route back to Ryder's house, where we would all disperse after the tribute ride was finished. All of us were in our leather jackets with our Lost Breed crest on the back. We were hot, uncomfortable, and in mourning.

Ryder drew up short in front of my bike. We hadn't spoken since our altercation in his living room the night I found out Hyde had been murdered. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he contemplated his words.

"Beers at my place in his memory," was all Ryder managed to say before weaving through the other MC members and getting on his own bike at the front of the pack.

I flexed my fingers and revved the throttle as I kickstarted my Harley. All the other engines roared to life around me and hummed in my ears like a swarm of menacing bees. Axel was up ahead, his bike slightly behind Ryder's. Slightly behind him and to the left side was Jax. I was just behind him. Caleb and Derek were on my tail as Ryder pulled away and we all followed.

I cast one last glance back across the field. Hyde's sisters had turned to watch us leave. Even though I knew I couldn't over the roar of the bikes, I thought I could still hear them sobbing.

After the tribute ride, I continued past Ryder's place. Axel, Jax, Caleb, and Derek all pulled into his drive, but I headed home first to scrub the sweat and misery from my body. I slipped into a pair of fresh jeans and a white T-shirt. I left my jacket draped over the back of my sofa and grabbed my car keys.

I left the house feeling clean but exhausted. I'd barely slept since learning about what happened to Hyde. Part of me wanted to blame it on the grief and anger, but I knew it was because I was frightened. I was on permanent alert for the next attack. If they didn't come after me, they'd be coming after one of the others, and I wasn't keen on getting another call like the one I received from Jax. One death was more than enough to drive a point home.

The Black Hearts were coming for us.

I needed a coffee to chase away the fatigue that made it nearly impossible to keep my eyes open as I drove to Ryder's place. I stopped at a small shop a few blocks from his place and left my car at the curb. It was a no parking zone, but I'd only be inside for a few minutes.

I ducked under the door, and a bell chimed above my head.

I got in line behind a man in a business suit that was a light shade of gray and looked like he'd owned it for at least twenty years. His eyes were glued to his phone screen, and he was scrolling through some sort of news website as we inched closer and closer to the register.

The bell above the door dinged again, and the clicking of high heels on the tile floors grew ever closer as the new patron took her place behind me in line. After a few moments, she tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned around to find myself staring into a pair of frosty blue eyes framed by dramatic black lashes. She gave me a coy red smile and gestured at the display case in front of me.

“Excuse me,” she said, and I took a step back so she could lean in front of me to grab a bottle of water from the lower shelf. “Thanks. It’s a hot one out there.”

“Sure is,” I said, facing forward again.

She tapped my shoulder again.

I half turned back to her. That same coy smile was still playing on her lips, and she swayed her shoulders a little before clasping both hands in front of her to hold the water bottle. This caused her breasts to push together, and the low cut of her white blouse made it hard to not look down.

She was a beautiful woman. Her eyes were captivating, her lips were full, and she was dressed entirely in white from head to toe. Her white blouse was tucked into a skin-tight knee-length white skirt, and her white pumps were a good six inches tall. In the shoes, she was the same height as me, which meant she was roughly five foot ten, give or take a few inches.

“You look familiar,” she said, her voice dripping with sex. “Where have I seen you before?”

I shrugged. “Not sure. I think I’d remember a woman like you.”

Her smile broadened, revealing perfect white teeth. “Would you now?”

I nodded. “You kind of stand out.”

“As do you.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not,” I said, trying to force a smile. This stranger didn’t know the kind of day I was having, and it wasn’t her problem that one of my best friends had just been used as a piñata and bludgeoned to death.

“Oh, I assure you it’s a compliment of the highest regard.” She ran her tongue over her top teeth and shifted her weight to her right foot. The posture she assumed created an alluring curve of her body, and she tossed her mane of long, straight

black hair over her shoulder. Then she looked me up and down like she was preparing to eat me. “Do you have plans for the rest of your evening, good lookin’?”

A little thrown off by her forwardness, I hesitated for a brief second. Then I collected my thoughts. “I do.”

She arched a black eyebrow and bit her bottom lip. “Not with another woman, I hope.”

“No, much less interesting than that.”

She chuckled and looked me over once more. “A shame. I would have liked to have gotten to know you better. Go somewhere a little more private. Maybe get a look at what’s going on under that shirt of yours. And those pants...” She trailed off and lifted her eyes to meet mine.

“Uh,” I stammered like an idiot, “Sorry.”

“So am I.”

It was my turn to order a coffee. I ordered a black Americano and paid the cashier, who blushed furiously when I dropped my change in her tip jar. Then I moved to the end of the bar to wait for my drink. It was only thirty seconds before the vixen sidled up beside me once more and ran her red-painted fingernail over the back of my shoulders.

“I bet you know how to show a woman a good time,” she cooed.

For the first time in my life, I was intimidated by a woman. She moved around me like a wolf circling its prey, all the while running her fingers over my shoulders. She paused on my other side and looked up at me with imploring eyes.

“You’re sure you can’t cancel these plans of yours to find a quiet place with me? It’s not often that I let a man get me naked without having to put in any work, but I’ll make an exception for you, sugar.”

The barista called my drink and slid it across the counter. I stepped forward and grabbed it before turning back to the raven-haired woman who was, despite my best efforts, managing to make the blood rush to my cock.

“You’ll have to find another guy,” I said.

Her drink was called just after mine, and she plucked it from the counter. She turned on her heel and slipped between me and the counter. As she passed, she ran her free hand over the front of my pants. She gave me a wink and then went to the door.

When she was halfway through, she paused and looked back at me. “I’ll see you around, Sabian. I’m sure of it.”

And then she was gone.

I stood like a fool with my coffee in my hand before shaking my head and going to grab a lid from the counter. As I snapped it on, I froze and ran through the last few minutes.

At no point during our exchange had I told her my name.

I bolted for the door, clipping shoulders with a middle-aged man who swore loudly at me as I stumbled out onto the sidewalk. I looked up and down the street both ways, eyes peeled for a black-haired temptress, heart hammering in my chest.

She was gone.

“Fuck,” I growled, looking both ways one more time for good measure. At some point in my mad dash to the door, I had managed to spill my boiling hot coffee on my hand and was only now becoming aware of the pain. I hissed under my breath as I got in my car and slammed the door behind me. “Fucking deceitful bitch.”

I didn’t realize I had also spilled coffee all over my white shirt until I parked in Ryder’s driveway behind the others’ bikes and got out of my car. I grumbled under my breath as I walked through the front door. I kicked it closed and left my boots on and made my way out to the back of the house, following the sounds of my friends’ voices to the back deck.

I found them all sitting around Ryder’s old wooden patio set. Dani was there, sitting in his lap with her ankles crossed and her arms wrapped behind his neck. She was resting her

chin on top of his head, and when I stepped through the sliding patio doors, she shot me a protective glare.

So, she had heard about my confrontation with Ryder.

I ignored the daggers she was throwing at me with her eyes and dropped down into a seat beside Jax, who was nursing a can of beer. He looked over when I sat down and nodded his greeting. Then he saw the mess of my shirt and raised an eyebrow.

“Someone had an accident,” he commented.

The others were looking at me as I leaned forward and put my coffee down on the table. “It wasn’t an accident,” I said. I looked down the table at Ryder, who was watching me with a passive expression. I cleared my throat. “Dani, I’m glad you’re here. I think I have information you could use in finding Hyde’s killer.”

This caught her attention. She dropped the protective wall she had up and uncrossed her ankles to lean forward. Ryder’s hand slid down her back to rest on her ass. “Tell us,” he said.

“I stopped at that coffee shop down the street. When I was in line, this smoke show of a woman came in behind me and started chatting me up—”

“I don’t see how you getting hit on by a hot chick is going to help get justice for Hyde,” Derek drawled from his seat across from me. He lifted his beer to his lips. By the glazed look in his eyes, I could tell he was already drunk. “You’ve been enough of an ass already. No need to go above and beyond with stories of your most recent slut.”

“Enough,” I growled. “Just listen to me. She tried to get me to leave with her. I shot her down. She was persistent. Eventually, she caved and left, but she called me by name when she left the coffee shop. I ran after her when I realized that at no point during the conversation had I told her my name.”

Dani was the only one looking at me like she understood. The others all had blank expressions on their faces and were

waiting for me to clarify. Dani did for me. “You think she tried to lure you out of there?”

“Yes,” I said.

Axel leaned down and plucked a beer from a cooler beside his chair that I hadn’t noticed. He tossed it to me across the table. I popped the tab and drank thankfully. I needed the booze more than the coffee after my altercation with the black-haired vixen.

“And I’d bet she did the same thing to Hyde, which is how he ended up in those woods.”

Dani got off Ryder’s lap and stood. “I’ve been trying to piece that part of it together myself. At first, I assumed he was taken there by force. But there were no signs he had been subdued. He was tricked into following someone there. Your new coffee shop admirer, I would assume.”

“A woman working with the Black Hearts?” Caleb chimed in. “Now that’s unheard of.”

“But not impossible,” Ryder said. “Maybe they’re paying her off to help them.”

I shook my head. “No way. She’s under no man’s thumb. If I had to take a guess, I would say she’s the one behind this. I felt like she was boxing me in the whole time.”

Jax clapped me on the back. “It’s been a rough day, man. A rough fucking day. You’re sure you’re remembering it right? I mean, what could a woman have said that would—”

“Every word out of her mouth felt like a threat. She had me right where she wanted me. If I had gone with her, you would be finding my body next. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

CHAPTER 20



ANGELA

John opened his office door for me and invited me in. He closed it behind me and motioned for me to take the seat in front of his desk. I sank down into it and found myself staring at the article I had handed in the previous day on online dating. There were red editing marks all over it, and I couldn't help but feel a rush of anxiety as John moved around the desk and sat down across from me.

"I must admit," he said, "I'm impressed with your first piece. I know it looks a little rough with all the red, but this was a great step in the right direction for you. We'll be publishing it in tomorrow's paper."

"That's great," I said, feeling my cheeks ache as I forced a fake smile.

"I have your next assignment if you're ready to hear it."

"Of course," I said hopefully. I inched closer to the edge of my chair and clasped my hands together on my knee.

Please be something real, I thought.

"Love your attitude," John complimented. "Let's keep it nice and light still. I like your writing voice, and we've had a few people write in about how excited they are to read work from our beautiful new columnist."

I blinked. "Columnist?"

"Yes."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm here as a journalist."

“Why yes, of course, you are, Angela. But like I’ve said, we all have to start somewhere. This is your somewhere. Your readers are eager for more from you.”

“My readers?” I asked.

“It would seem your Cooper name has already earned you some fans.”

I didn’t want fans, and I didn’t want a column. I wanted to report the news. The facts. The things that were happening right now in real life.

“I’m sorry,” I said, uncrossing my legs and leaning forward to rest my elbows on his desk. I saw his eyes dart to the collar of my blouse, which had the top two buttons open. The dick was checking out my cleavage. I cleared my throat, and his eyes snapped up to mine. “I’m really not interested in writing fluff pieces. This kind of content was not in the terms I was hired under.”

John sighed. “I was hoping we wouldn’t have any issues like this, Angela. You’re a beautiful woman, and the paper doesn’t have many of those. At least, not any that look quite like you do. Your name and your history bring a certain readership to our pages that we have been missing out on. What sort of businessman would I be to miss an opportunity like that?”

“A less shallow one,” I retorted.

John chuckled. “I like your spirit, Angela. Let that shine through on your next piece: *Dating in the Modern Day and the Impact of Online ‘Hook Up’ Apps.*” He slid me a piece of paper with the working title written upon it and some bullet point notes.

“Are you serious?”

“Quite,” John said. “Now hop to it. I want to see those fingers of yours dancing over the keyboard. Chop chop!”

I swept out of his office, whispering very unladylike things under my breath. I slumped down in my chair and opened up a document to begin writing my new fluff piece.

I resented the fact that my name would be associated with such garbage.

At the end of the work day, I found myself feeling absolutely terrible. My gut ached with repulsion over the lackluster article I had pounded out. My heart was sore from missing Sabian. I was angry, embarrassed, and lonely.

I needed Sabian.

I decided to head straight to the mechanic shop on my way home from work. When I parked in the drive, the bay doors were closed, but Sabian's car was there. It was the only one in the lot, and I hurried from my car to the office door. I pushed it open and was surprised that it wasn't locked.

I thought that the office was empty until I looked to my right. There, on the couch tucked against the front window, was Sabian. He had his head resting on the back of the sofa, which was basically cradling his neck because he was so tall, and his eyes were closed. His left foot was resting atop his right knee, and his hands were resting across his stomach.

I realized that he was sleeping.

I peered around, wondering why he would let himself fall asleep when the front door was still unlocked. I closed it behind me and locked it, then went and sat down beside him. I reached out and rested a hand on his knee.

He woke with a primal snarl and went for me.

I let out a terrified shriek and pushed myself quickly to the far corner of the sofa.

Sabian's eyes widened with surprise, and then his features contorted with guilt.

"Ang," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—what are you doing here? What time is it?"

My heart was racing in my chest, and I was out of breath from the scare he had given me. "It's just after six," I said. "I wanted to see you."

"You shouldn't be here." He raked his fingers through his hair. I could see the tension in him; in his shoulders, jaw, and

the way he sat tensely perched on the edge of the sofa. “I told you I didn’t want you around me right now.”

“And I told you I didn’t care.”

He ran one hand down his face and sighed. He closed his eyes and rested his elbows on his knees. I shimmied back beside him until our hips were touching. Then I gathered the nerve to reach out and cup his face in my hands. He opened his eyes and stared into my soul. There was so much agony there that I almost looked away.

“You need to tell me what’s happening,” I whispered.

He went to shake his head, but I held him still.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “Tell me. Let me help you. Whatever this is, you don’t have to carry it by yourself. I’m not as fragile as you think I am. I can handle it.”

“Hyde’s dead.”

“What?”

“Hyde’s dead,” Sabian said again, and his chin trembled. He looked down at his own hands in his lap. “He died on Wednesday, and we buried him on Sunday.”

Every part of me was screaming inside. Sabian’s friend had died almost a whole week ago, and I hadn’t been there for him. I let go of his face and reached out to him. I pulled him to me, and he buried his face in the groove of my shoulder. His arms slipped around my waist, and I could feel the warmth of his breath on the side of my neck.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, burying my left hand in his hair. “Can you tell me what happened?”

He nodded against me, and when he was ready, pulled away and straightened up. His eyes were dry, but his forehead was creased, and the anguish on his face was evident.

“He was murdered. Beaten to death. I’m not going to give you all the details. But we know it was a hit from the Black Hearts. He was targeted and probably lured into the place he was killed. We all have targets on our backs now, Ang. That’s why I didn’t want you around. It’s not because I didn’t want to

see you. I just... I couldn't be responsible for you getting hurt."

"It's all right. I understand."

He ran his hands over his face again, and his almost fully-formed beard whispered against his palms. "It's all a fucking mess right now."

"That's okay. I'm here for you. What can I do?"

He shook his head.

"Stop keeping me at bay." I pushed his hands down and climbed into his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck as I straddled him and tried to hug his whole body. I hugged him with my arms and squeezed him with my thighs. "I'm here."

He leaned back against the sofa and pulled me with him so I was resting upon his chest. "Thank fucking God for you," he whispered.

I melted into him, crumpling like a wet piece of paper. His hands pressed into the small of my back as his lips met mine in the softest, sweetest kiss I had ever shared with anyone before. It was so gentle, like he was afraid I was going to break; or rather, maybe he was afraid *he* might shatter.

I clung to his shoulders as our lips parted, and we began kissing in earnest. His tongue caressed mine, and I hurried to find the hem of his shirt with trembling fingers. I rolled it up his stomach and chest, and we broke apart to get the shirt over his shoulders. Once it was off of him, our mouths crashed together once more, and I began working at his belt.

Sabian ran his hands up the back of my shirt and unclipped my bra. His touch wandered across my ribs, and he slipped his fingers beneath the underwire to cup my breasts. I moaned softly as he flicked his thumbs over my nipples. His hands were calloused and warmed and everything my body had been so desperately pining for.

After he ripped my shirt off, I leaned in to devour his neck with kisses and nibbles. He groaned, and the sound sent me over the edge. I kissed his collar bones, his chest, and his shoulders. I let my hands trace every ridge and dip of his

muscled body. The heat of his skin beneath my fingers urged me to slip my hands into the waistband of his jeans.

I felt him hard and stiff and ready for me.

I unzipped his jeans and pulled him free. Sabian shifted on the sofa, and the leather creaked beneath us. I slid off his lap and went to my knees in front of him. I pushed his legs apart and slipped between them. The inside of his thighs pressed against my shoulders as I took his cock in my hand and swirled my tongue over the tip of him. His stomach pulled inwards at the sensation, and I smiled to myself before sealing my lips around him and easing him into my mouth.

I used my tongue along his shaft as I swallowed him to the hilt. He pressed into the back of my throat, and I watched him as his head fell back against the sofa and his eyes closed.

I worshipped him in a way I had never done. I fondled his testicles and bobbed up and down on his cock like a woman possessed by a need she couldn't define.

Soon, he was reaching for me. "Enough of that," he growled. "I'm going to lose it."

I tried to mumble *good* through my mouthful of his cock. He laughed at me, and it was the first time I had seen him smile a genuine smile in a week.

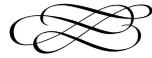
I kept sucking until he gripped the sides of the sofa beside him and tensed as warm lashes of salty semen gushed into the back of my throat.

I leaned back and wiped the corners of my mouth with my fingers.

Sabian leaned forward and grabbed my wrists to pull me up to my feet. Then he undid my jeans and shimmied them down my hips, over my knees, and down my calves. I stepped out of them and stood before him in my silky purple panties, embellished with a single rhinestone and a pretty bow. Sabian took my hips in his hands and guided me back onto his lap.

"Your turn," he said, his voice deep and husky and dripping with sex.

CHAPTER 21



SABIAN

Angela's body was a sight for sore eyes. Her skin was bronzed from the summer sun, and gold jewelry glittered around her throat, wrists, and at her ears. After pulling her onto my lap, I gripped her ass, which had just the right amount of squish for a man like me.

She giggled and dipped her head down to me to kiss me as I continued massaging her ass cheeks and making my way closer to her pussy with wandering fingers. I stretched her open and slipped a finger under the silk of her panties.

Her kiss became needier, and her tongue darted into my mouth as she rocked back in my lap, urging me to fill her. "I need you," she whispered as she arched her back.

I ran a finger over her slit and was shocked and delighted by how wet she was. Her cheeks flushed pink as I traced her wetness up over her clit and circled it in quick flourishes. She turned her head away like she was ashamed of how aroused she was and tried to hide her face from me.

"Don't play coy with me," I teased. I eased a finger inside her, earning myself a sweet gasp as her fingers clutched at my shoulders. "There's no shame in wanting it."

She turned back to me. Her bottom lip was pinched between her teeth, and her cheeks were still flushed. Angela looked absolutely stunning, and for the first time all week, I was able to focus all of my attention on her and let all the other noise and bullshit fall to the side.

I pressed another finger into her pussy and went in deep. She sighed with pleasure. When I started fucking her with my fingers, she unravelled and ravaged me with kisses up the side of my neck. She kissed my jaw, which was well on its way to becoming thick with black hair. She devoured my mouth, and I fucked her harder, until she was moaning into my mouth as she came all over my fingers.

I held her up by her ass as I slowly got to my feet. I turned around with her as she hooked her legs around my waist and then lowered her down on her back on the sofa.

“There’s nobody here, right?” she asked as she stared up at me, while I kicked my jeans off.

“Everyone went home. It’s just you and me, baby girl.”

She pressed her ankles together and lifted her legs in the air to pull her panties down. I helped her pull them off her ankles and then wrapped my fingers around them. I pulled her legs apart and found her to be ridiculously flexible. She grinned up at me as I stared down at her, revelling in her beauty and the lean lines of her body. Her breasts were full and pointing in opposite directions as she lifted her arms above her head to grip the back of the sofa behind her.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked, shimmying her ass to the edge of the sofa. Her pussy was bright pink and swollen and ready to be doted on.

I went to my knees in front of her. She kept her legs in the air and held my gaze as I sank lower and pressed my mouth to her opening, dipping my tongue in and out before swirling it over her clit and repeating the motion again.

She fought to keep her eyes open, but within moments, her head was back, her eyes were closed, and her breasts were heaving with every sharp breath of pleasure she breathed.

I sucked her clit between my lips and pulled as I pushed my two fingers back into her. Her back arched, her toes curled, and a cry of sheer delight escaped her lips. I continued suckling, even as her thighs quivered on either side of my head as she rode the waves of her orgasm.

When she settled, I shifted my fingers inside her to press up against her G-spot. Her eyes flew open, and she stared down at me as I massaged that sweet spot inside her. All the while, I sucked her clit and ran my tongue over her.

When she came again, I lapped up her fluids with my tongue.

She was a trembling mess when I straightened and moved in close to her to rest my cock against her. She wiggled her hips and coated my shaft in her wetness. Then she dropped her hips to try to take the tip of me.

“Hang on,” I said, leaning to the side to grab my jeans from the floor. I pulled a condom out of one of my pockets and tore it open with my teeth. Angela watched as I rolled it on, and then when I moved to position myself, she proved how eager she was by grabbing my cock and guiding it into her pussy.

She was slick and wet and tight and everything I needed.

“Holy hell,” I breathed as her walls tightened around me. I pressed in deeper until my thighs rested against hers.

She gasped sharply, and I froze, not wanting to hurt her.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered.

I heeded her plea and began thrusting in and out. She reached out to grab my forearms and held on tightly as I fucked her, hard and deep, nice and slow. Her whimpers of pleasure had me coming apart at the seams as she looked up at me with big, beautiful eyes.

I cupped her breasts in my hands and bent over her to suckle her nipples. She clung to me and buried her fingers in my hair. Her hands balled into fists as I slammed into her over and over. She released my hair to cup my face and guide me up to meet her mouth for more kisses. Her mouth was as warm and wet as her pussy, and the way she lifted her ass off the couch so I could push in deeper left me powerless to her.

I moaned into her mouth when she pinched my bottom lip between her teeth. Then she nibbled her way down my neck and back up to my ear. Her breath on the side of my neck, her

perfume filling my nose, and her euphoric sighs every time I filled her sent a white-hot shock of need straight to my cock.

I was going to come, but I wanted her to orgasm one more time.

I gripped the back of her neck in one hand and pressed a thumb under her jaw to lift her face upward. She obliged, giving me space to kiss her throat. I felt her swallow under my thumb and turned her face to the side to kiss and nibble her ear.

She hooked her legs around my waist and used her heels to encourage me to fuck her deeper.

Somehow, I managed to bury myself farther inside her. She let out a cry of pleasure, which I muffled by sealing my mouth over hers. I kissed her until she couldn't kiss me back. Her whole body tensed, and she moaned into my mouth as she came once again.

The fresh wetness inside her made it impossible for me to hold on to my own orgasm. I followed her lead and let go, giving in to the lust and letting it roll over me with my climax.

When we were done, I pulled out and climbed up on the couch beside her. She pushed herself up and curled under my arm as I leaned against the back of the sofa. Our bodies were warm and sweaty, but it didn't keep us from cuddling up to one another. I pulled her closer with a hand on her shoulder and trailed a finger over her shoulder.

"I'm here for you, no matter what you need," Angela said after a while. She turned her head to look up at me. "No matter what."

I appreciated the offer, and I wanted to take advantage of it, but I knew I couldn't. "I don't want you getting too close. This was probably already a bad decision."

"I'm already close. We've been pretending to be engaged, Sabian. How do you think that looks from the outside looking in?"

"Like we're actually engaged," I muttered. I hadn't really considered that side of things. I had been trying to push her

away while she and I were working to convince people that we were planning on getting married. If the Black Hearts caught wind of that—if they hadn't already—Angela was already in the exact spot I wanted to avoid. “Fuck.”

“It’s all right. We’ll figure it out.”

“I never should have let you talk me into this nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” she asked, sitting up straight and looking back at me as I remained draped over the back of the sofa. “It hasn’t been nonsense to me. It started off as a goofy lie, but I don’t know. I’ve found myself wishing it wasn’t a lie at all.”

I blinked at her. “You deserve better than a fake engagement, Ang. I should have said no. I shouldn’t have taken that moment from you.”

“You didn’t take it from me,” she said defensively. “I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. Have you not?”

I contemplated lying to her and telling her the whole thing had meant nothing to me; that it was just for shits and giggles. But I was no liar. Not to her, anyway. “I’ve enjoyed it.”

Her expression softened with a warm smile. “This whole thing may have started as a lie,” she said. “But this? You and me? We are good together. It feels right being with you. I want —” she broke off and looked away. “I want to say we’re together out loud, and I want it to be the truth. I want you in my life, Sabian. I really do.”

Angela Cooper was telling me she wanted things between us to be official. She didn’t want to play games, and she didn’t want to tell lies. She wanted us to be together, and I knew that I wanted the same thing. I had wanted it since she first set foot in the shop when she moved to New York City.

“Do you want to be with me?” she asked, resting a hand on my chest.

I closed my hand over hers and nodded. “More than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

She smiled, and it was like the office was suddenly filled with sunshine. She nuzzled back into my side and rested her

head on my shoulder. “I can’t believe I’m dating a guy in a motorcycle gang. What would my parents think?”

“Club,” I amended.

“Sure. Club. It’ll mean the same thing to them. They’ll freak out.”

“They don’t need to know those details. Not yet at least. And you have to promise me something, Ang.”

She looked back up at me. That same sunny smile was still playing in the corners of her mouth. “Anything.”

“If Axel or I tell you to do something, or *not* to do something, you have to listen to us. I won’t be the one responsible for pulling you into this mess and getting you caught up in something that’s over your head. Because if I’m being honest, this whole mess is over all our heads. Even Ryder’s.”

Her eyes flicked back and forth between mine, and she pursed her lips. After only a moment of hesitation, she nodded. “I promise.”

“Good,” I said, kissing her forehead.

“But you can’t keep me in the dark. I can handle the truth.”

“Deal.”

“Then let’s start by you telling me everything that happened this week. Don’t leave anything out. If we’re going to do this thing, we’re going to do it on equal terms. Okay?”

Telling her everything would be difficult. Talking about Hyde and the woman who I suspected had tricked him into following her to his death would make my blood boil. But Angela was right. We had to be a united front.

“All right.” I nodded. “Let’s get dressed and go back to my place. I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

It was just my luck that things would go well for me when a psychopath murderer was hunting us down and threatening us in broad daylight.

CHAPTER 22



ANGELA

When I got to work the following morning, my mind was reeling from the information Sabian had dumped on me the night before. We had stayed up well into the morning hours talking everything through. As soon as the words started coming out of him, he was unable to stop, and there was no way in Hell I was going to tell him to save it for another time so I could get some sleep. He needed to talk. He needed to have someone to listen to everything he had suffered through over the last week and offer him some support.

I couldn't help but feel that the MC was also supposed to do that for him, and I was angry that they hadn't.

Then again, they were all grieving as he was.

I sat down at my desk with my large coffee in hand and sighed. I had only managed to get about three hours of sleep at Sabian's house, and I was wearing the same thing I had worn to work the previous day. I hoped nobody would take notice as I opened my internet browser and started doing some research.

Sabian didn't want me getting involved, but I was a journalist. Getting involved was what I did. And there was a huge story just waiting to be blown open under everything he told me. The Black Hearts were making bold news, and no one was talking about it in the media. This could be my chance to be taken seriously in my field, and maybe blowing it wide open would help Sabian and the other Lost Breed members somehow.

Or it would make everything worse.

After spending the first three hours of my day scrolling through old online articles about motorcycle gang activity in the city, I came up with nothing. More than a little frustrated, I made my way to the break room to brew my fourth cup of coffee of the day and eat a biscotti. As I stood leaning against the counter, dipping my vanilla glazed biscotti in my black coffee, one of the other journalists in my office came in and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

She was a middle-aged woman, and I knew her name was Amber. Her last name was lost on me. She had curly red hair and was dressed in a black business skirt and white blouse. She gave me a friendly smile as she leaned up against the counter and unscrewed the cap on her water bottle.

“You’re the new columnist, right?” she asked. She tipped the bottle back and took a sip. “Angela Cooper?”

“Yes,” I said, forcing myself not to roll my eyes. It wasn’t her fault my position was being tainted by John. “I’m actually a journalist, but John has me starting on fluff pieces.”

Amber gave me a knowing smile. “He did the same to me. When you come in here and you’re young and pretty, he can’t see past the visual presentation. If you can, just keep grinding. A story will come across your desk one day, and you’ll have a chance to prove yourself. Trust me. I know firsthand.”

“Really?” I asked before popping the last bite of my biscotti in my mouth. It was nice to have found someone who could potentially be an ally in this place.

Amber nodded. “Yep. I was writing an opinions column for thirteen months before I got my big break. I was at a club when a drug deal was busted. The facility managed to keep it hush-hush, but they didn’t know I had been there for the whole exchange. I exposed them three days later in the paper, tipped off the cops, and then moved from writing opinion pieces to front page news reports. Just don’t give up, new girl. You’ll get your shot.”

“What if I might already have that shot, but I just don’t have any resources yet?”

Amber cocked her head to the side curiously. “Oh?”

I nodded. “I can’t say too much, but let’s just say I caught wind of some details about the murder that happened last Wednesday. The man who was beaten to death.”

“The cops are keeping that one close to the vest, that’s for sure. The person you heard this from is reliable?”

“More reliable than anyone I know.”

Amber pursed her lips. “Then, if you want professional advice, pursue it until you have enough material to write a story. Then bring it to John. He’s a shallow prick, but he knows how to spot good journalism.”

“That’s the problem,” I said. “I don’t know anything about this city. I’m new here, and it’s working against me. History that other people might be familiar with is lost on me.”

Amber popped out her hip. “I’m New York City born and raised. I’ll help you, if you like. Us girls have to stick together in this place.”

I considered her offer. There was always the chance that she was manipulating me. But I needed answers, and if she knew anything about MC activity in the city that wasn’t online, it was a risk I was willing to take.

“What do you know about the Black Hearts motorcycle club?” I asked.

Amber’s eyes widened a little with surprise. The direction I was leading her was clearly not what she was expecting, based on the homicide from last week. She shrugged a shoulder and took another sip of water. “They’ve been active in the city for as long as I can remember. The last few years have been pretty rough. Lots of tension between them and other clubs. After everything went down with their last leader —”

“TJ?”

Amber smiled. “Yes, Timothy Johnson.”

That was the first time I’d heard his name, and I doubted even Sabian knew the name of the deranged man who had

wreaked havoc with a machete as his weapon of choice.

“Johnson was brought down by another club. If memory serves me correctly, they go by the name of the Lost Breed.” Amber looked at me like she was watching to see if I reacted to the name of Sabian’s club.

I didn’t confirm or deny her words.

“Things have been quiet for the last year or so, but I’ve heard from a few of my sources on the street that the Black Hearts’ time of lying dormant is over. Apparently, the club is being run by a woman now. Naturally, there are a lot of naysayers out there about this who refuse to believe such a notorious club could be run by a woman.”

“I think it’s true,” I said quietly.

“As do I,” Amber agreed.

“What do these sources of yours say she’s up to?”

Amber smiled. “You ask the right questions, new girl. Apparently, she’s been focused on expanding the size of the Black Hearts organization and has been absorbing other motorcycle clubs and other criminal groups into her ranks.”

“She’s building an army,” I whispered.

“Sorry?”

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “She’s been up to this for a while?”

“Not sure.”

“Did any of these sources of yours happen to know the name of this woman?”

Amber shook her head. “No. I did a little digging of my own out of sheer curiosity and came up dry as well. She’s either fictional, or she’s really good at hiding her tracks. Regardless, there’s no doubt that the scene is getting dangerous. If you don’t figure out what’s going on, there’s no doubt in my mind that within a month or so, there’ll be a front page story about MC member deaths. The question will just be

which members. Lost Breed or Black Hearts.” She shrugged. “It’s messy. That’s for sure.”

My tongue was dry as sandpaper. I swallowed. “I can’t let that happen.”

Amber chuckled. “Maybe you should have joined the police force instead of the New York Times.”

“If I can get to the truth, I can stop it.”

Amber pushed herself off the counter and faced me straight on. “You be careful, new girl. It’s a rough place out in the city, and these MC goons won’t hesitate to do what needs to be done to keep you quiet. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Also,” Amber dropped her voice and looked around. “Don’t say anything about this to anyone else on this floor. They’re wolves, and they’ll steal a story out from under you if they get a whiff that you’re working on something big.”

“But you won’t?”

Amber gave me a bright smile. “Like I said, we have to stick together. Let me know if you need anything, new girl. I’m rooting for you.”

Amber left me in the break room, and I listened to her heels clicking on the floor as she walked back to her desk.

I put my now-empty coffee mug in the sink and slipped out through the back door of the break room, out onto the smoking patio. I was happy to find it empty. Eighteen floors below, the sounds of traffic rose up to meet me as I went to the railing and pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket. I called the police precinct and asked for Dani.

The person who answered my call was hesitant to patch me through to the detective. He put up a fight, and I told him I worked for the New York Times and needed to talk to Dani. “It’s urgent police business,” I said.

“Well, if you leave your name and number, I’ll have her call you back,” the guy on the phone said.

“Listen,” I snarled. “If she finds out you didn’t patch me through and she doesn’t get the information I am trying to give her, she’ll mount your head on a pike in front of the station for everyone to see. Patch. Me. Through.” I paused for dramatic effect. “Now.”

The line went dead, and for a second, I thought he hung up on me. Then a woman’s voice filled the phone. “You’ve reached Dani at the New York City Police—”

“Dani,” I said hurriedly. “It’s Angela.”

“Angela?” She sounded confused at first. Then she remembered who I was. “Is everything okay? Has something happened?”

“No, nothing’s happened. But I have some information for you that pertains to Hyde’s murder. I think it will help your investigation.”

“Hang on a minute,” Dani said. I heard her move around her office and then heard a door click closed. “All right. What have you learned?”

I told Dani everything Amber had just told me about the woman taking over the Black Hearts and expanding her MC. Dani listened attentively and never interrupted me. I could hear her scribbling on a notepad as I went through all the details. When I was done, I was a little out of breath, and my hands were shaking. Why the hell did this whole thing make me so nervous?

Dani sighed into the phone. “Thank you for calling me with all this right away. It’s more than we’ve had to go on since this whole thing went down. It’s nice to have someone who still has some objectivity in the matter. Ryder is...” She broke off, and I sensed her emotion through the phone. She was struggling. “Ryder is a little lost right now. I don’t know how I’m going to tell him this.”

I began chewing the inside of my cheek. “You tell him we have something that might help avenge Hyde.”

Dani chuckled into the phone, but there was no humor in the sound. “You catch on to the MC ways quick.”

“I just know how to get the best response out of people. I don’t want to tell Sabian because I don’t want him to put himself in danger, but I know how the Lost Breed works. If I want to be in his life, I have to come clean with everything I know. And telling them now is better than them finding out when this bitch makes her next move.”

“You’re right,” Dani said, and now there was conviction in her voice. “I’m going to call Ryder right now. You call Sabian.”

“All right.”

“And hey, Angela?”

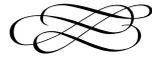
I paused. “Yes?”

“Be careful. The Black Hearts won’t hesitate to eliminate anyone who poses a threat to them, and I mean anyone. Watch your back.”

“I will.”

I got off the call and dialed Sabian. Time to tell my story one more time.

CHAPTER 23



SABIAN

“Angela,” I said firmly into the phone. “I said I didn’t want you getting too close to this.”

“It sort of fell into my lap,” she said. “Besides, this helps, right? You have an idea now of what the Black Hearts are up to. And this confirms your suspicion that the psycho woman you ran into in that coffee shop was involved in Hyde’s death. So what if the information is coming from me? It’s no different than if Dani—”

“Dani is a trained cop who carries a gun,” I growled. “You’re a journalist.”

“I could use my heels as a weapon.”

“Now is not the time for jokes.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

I blew out an exasperated breath and rubbed at my forehead. “All right. All right. I just pulled into Ryder’s driveway, and I’m going to go in and talk to him about this mess. You said Dani was going to call him?”

“She’s probably on the phone with him right now.”

“Okay. Quit digging for now, all right? Let us sort this mess out before you get yourself caught up with the wrong people.”

Angela didn’t answer me.

“Ang?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to stop. I have access to a lot of information, and I might be able to find something on this bitch now that I know a little more about her. I’ll stay in the office, and I’ll call you when I’m on my way home. How about that?”

“Make sure you walk down to your car with someone, okay?”

“Okay. I will. And you be safe, too.”

I chuckled. “You’re worried about me?”

“Of course, I am. Women are scary. If she comes for you, just don’t do anything stupid. I’ll talk to you soon.”

After the phone call, I dropped my phone in my pocket and made my way up to Ryder’s front door. I let myself in and found Ryder in the living room. He was nursing a beer and chatting amongst the others who were all present: Jax, Axel, Derek and Caleb. They all looked up and greeted me with nods.

“Did Dani call you?” I asked as I took a seat across from Ryder. Things between us were still tense, but with all this new information from the girls, I figured we could both look past our own bullshit to focus on the matter at hand.

Ryder nodded. “She did. Angela has outdone herself.”

Axel shifted in his seat in the corner of the sofa beside Jax, who shot him a nervous glance. Axel looked up at me. “This is why I didn’t want you involved with her. I knew she wouldn’t be able to keep her nose out of it.”

The others were all silent. I sighed and leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees. “Let’s not pretend your sister doesn’t make her own decisions. I tried to get rid of her, man. I kept my distance, and I told her to stay away until things cooled off. It only made her push back harder.”

“No shit,” Axel muttered. “She’s a Cooper.”

“I don’t want her involved, either,” I said.

“Enough,” Ryder interjected. “She’s been a lot of help and got us more information than we’ve been able to find

ourselves. I'm grateful for that. She's also seeking redemption for Hyde. So in my eyes, she's as much one of us as the two of you are. Now get your heads out of your asses and stop treating her like a weak girl. She's a grown-ass woman who can clearly handle herself. Just like Dani. We'd still be standing around with our dicks in our hands if it weren't for them."

"Agreed," Derek said, rubbing his hands on his thighs. "So what are we going to do with this new information?"

"This is enough evidence for me to decide that we can't sit around and wait anymore. Let's not give these assholes a chance to make the first move. We'll catch them off guard and strike first. We'll need all hands on deck for this one, though."

I nodded, and Ryder met my gaze. "When do you want to do this?" I asked.

Ryder took a mouthful off beer. He swished it around his mouth before swallowing. "As soon as we can get the boys together. Tomorrow would be ideal. This woman took one of our own, and she tried to get you too, Sabian. Enough is enough. We'll show her she's fucking with the wrong MC."

"Fuck yeah," Caleb said. "The boys are probably all down at the bar. Want me to go recruit them? Spread the word?"

Ryder nodded. "You and Derek both go. Call me when you've contacted everyone. Tell them to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Tell them to be prepared for a fight."

Caleb and Derek both stood and went to the door. Caleb paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Hey, boss?" Ryder looked up at him. "We're gonna fuck those bastards up."

Ryder nodded, and the two departed. We heard them start their bikes out on the driveway and drive away. When it was just the four of us left in the room, an awkward quiet settled in around us. It seemed that none of us were willing to break it because we sat in silence for a good five or so minutes before Jax finally spoke up.

"So, you said she called you by name?"

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the woman in the coffee shop. “Yeah. I think it would be safe to assume she knows who all of us are.”

“Do you think she knows who our loved ones are?” Axel asked.

I didn’t want to answer him, but I had to. “I think we would be fools to pretend she didn’t.”

“So Ellie, Angela, my kids—”

“Yeah,” I said. “She probably knows about everyone. But her beef is with us, right? Not with them. Her first move was to take one of us out. Her second was to try to get to me. So far, she hasn’t made a move for anyone else.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t try,” Jax muttered.

“No, it doesn’t,” I admitted.

Ryder got to his feet and tossed his now-empty beer can on the carpet. The whole living room was a disaster. There were beer cans, used plates, and clothes strewn all over the place. It was clear that Ryder was grieving.

He moved around the coffee table and went to stand in front of the living room window with his back to us. “We knew what we were getting all of them into when we chose a life with them. This is the cost of those decisions. And it’s why we need to put a stop to this now. I should have acted sooner.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “I should have heard you.”

I looked down at my feet and sighed. “Hindsight won’t help us now.”

“No,” Ryder said. “It won’t. But I needed to say it nonetheless. You were right. And if I had just fucking listened, maybe Hyde wouldn’t be—”

“If it hadn’t been him, it would have been one of us instead,” I said. “There’s no doubt in my mind about that.”

“Same here,” Jax piped up. “This was a premeditated hit, Ryder. This bitch was coming for us one way or another, and she’s been playing games. She warned us because she wanted to make us squirm, not because she was giving us a chance to

save ourselves. Hyde didn't deserve what he got, but he'd take it again if he knew it would have been one of us in his place. We all know that."

Axel nodded when Ryder didn't speak. "Now we have the information we need to get justice for him."

"And we know her face," I said.

Ryder slid his hands in his pockets and turned to face us. "This could get real messy, boys. We might not all make it back from this. I will understand if you don't want to follow me into the fray. You all have families now. Loved ones. People who depend—"

"Shut the hell up, Ryder," I said, getting to my feet. "Our loyalty is to you. It always has been. I'm with you until the end. No matter what that end looks like."

Jax stood beside me. "What he said."

Axel stood as well. "The Lost Breed isn't going down without a fight, Johnny." Ryder's real name on Axel's tongue made the moment feel even more real. "And if I'm being perfectly honest, I want my fists to do the damage to the fuckers that killed our friend."

"Too bad there isn't some epic background music playing right now," Jax joked.

The mood lightened as we all cracked knowing grins and began to laugh. Things had quite literally never been as bad as they were right now, but we had each other's backs, and that was enough to see us through.

Then Ryder's phone rang.

He pulled it out of his pocket and answered the call. As he lifted it to his ear, Dani's voice was already spilling out of the speaker and echoing around the room.

"*Johnny,*" she practically screamed. "*Where the hell are you?*"

Ryder looked around at all of us. "At home. Baby, what's wrong? Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

I exchanged a worried glance with Jax and Axel, both of whom had shifted their attention to Ryder and had their ears pricked to Dani's anxious voice.

"What the hell is going on?" Jax asked.

Ryder waved him away and put his back to us. He covered his other ear to better hear Dani as the three of us converged around him.

"Listen to me carefully," Dani said. Her voice was crackly, and I could hear plenty of background noise. She was on the move, and it sounded like she was in a hurry. *"I'm on my way to you right now. But you need to get out of the fucking house. Ruby Johnson has a hit on you, and she sent men after you."*

"Ruby Johnson?" I asked.

Both Jax and Axel looked over at me. Axel shrugged. "Never heard of her."

"Sounds like a porn star," Jax commented.

"She's the woman in white," I realized aloud. All three of them stood staring at me. The woman who had lured Hyde out to his death—who had tried to do the same to me just days ago—was making an obvious hit on us. So obvious that Dani and the whole police department had caught wind of it before it even happened.

"Ryder," I began, but he shook his head at me and narrowed his eyes.

"Let them come," he hissed. "Keep your distance, Dani. I'm with Jax, Axel, and Sabian. We can handle whatever she throws at us. Is this the bitch that—"

"Yes. And you can't handle them. Please." Dani sobbed into the phone. Actually sobbed. I had never seen her get emotional—not since the last time she thought Ryder's life was on the line. Now she was losing control of herself over the phone, and the sound of her panic had my body reacting strongly.

My palms were sweaty. My heart was beating a mile a minute. My jaw ached from clenching it so hard, and a little

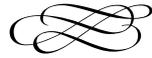
voice in the back of my mind was screaming that this was the moment I had been dreading.

This was what it was all coming down to.

The storm.

“Get the fuck out now!” Dani’s voice rose to a full-blown scream that rang in my ears long after she fell quiet. *“Please!”*

CHAPTER 24



ANGELA

When I called Dani and told her that I had discovered the name of the woman I thought had taken over the Black Hearts MC, she had told me she would call me back when she managed to gather more information. That was over an hour ago.

Unsettled and anxious, I decided to do more research on the woman to see what I could find that might help Dani build her case—and also help me put together an article worthy of slapping my name on it.

As it turned out, Ruby Johnson's name first popped up in New York City just shy of six years ago. Based on everything I read online, I pieced together a realistic timeline of her rise to leadership over the Black Hearts.

She had started as a prostitute. She worked independently, and there were reports of a young hooker beating up on men who tried to pimp her out. She was said to be quite tall and extremely beautiful. Her looks opened a lot of doors for her, and her vicious nature helped her climb the ladder from hooker to high-paid escort, who selectively chose her clients through online applications to a website platform called Reserving Ruby.

I went to the web domain but found that the page no longer existed.

After working as an escort for a couple of years, Ruby's movements slowed down, and she latched on to a man named Timothy Johnson: aka, TJ, the ex-leader of the Black Hearts.

She was by his side during his short-lived rule of the club, and after he was sent off to prison, thanks to the Lost Breed, she took over.

At least, that was what I suspected had happened.

Since her assumption of the leader's role, the club had expanded to nearly double its size. I was able to find new members' names by cross referencing other articles from other newspapers and online news sources and found that Ruby was deliberately recruiting men with violent criminal histories.

Extremely violent men.

One such man was nicknamed The Devil's Hand and had incurred the title through repeated assaults and, in one instance, murder.

I opened the link on my computer to the article that was titled, *Death at the Devil's Hand*. As I read, a wave of uneasiness washed over me and threatened to push my lunch from my stomach and all over my keyboard.

The body of a man (whose name will not be released at this time) was found early this morning under an overpass off the interstate. The police are not disclosing all the details of the death, which is being ruled as a homicide. Gang activity is suspected, and it is likely that this was a planned attack or, likely, an assassination.

Richard Bryer, an ex-member of the association referred to as The Black Hearts, spoke to us about the circumstances of the murder. He admits to knowing the deceased and claims he knows who his killer was.

"The Devil's Hand did it," Bryer stated in an interview the afternoon after the body was discovered. "He's a man you don't want to cross. An evil man." When asked to come forward with a name besides The Devil's Hand, Bryer cut the interview short and left the room.

At this time, the police are asking anyone with information on this case to come forward. Any piece of information helps.

I was absolutely positive that the man the article spoke of was the one who had murdered Hyde. I was also certain that Ruby Johnson and The Devil's Hand had joined forces and were working together. Her beauty and his savagery made for an epic concoction of brutality that Ryder could not possibly conceive without any prior knowledge of who they were.

Which meant Sabian and Axel were both in the crosshairs of a fight that would curl their hair; and they weren't the sort of men to flinch over blood and gore.

My research left me with only one final, unanswered question: was Ruby looking to recruit Ryder and his MC, or was she planning their inevitable and painful demise?

One thing that was clear was that Ruby wasn't above killing anyone. She'd killed Hyde, or arranged to have him killed, and if what Sabian said was true, I would bet money she had stood by and watched as Hyde was beaten to oblivion. Maybe she enjoyed it. Maybe she participated. Maybe she delivered the final blow.

Maybe Ruby Johnson and The Devil's Hand took turns swinging the bat.

I glanced up at the time on my computer monitor. I couldn't sit around and wait for Dani to call anymore. The waiting and not knowing was killing me.

So, I called Sabian.

He didn't answer.

I called him again, and again, and again, until my pulse was racing and every nerve in my body was screaming at me to do something. *Anything.*

If Ruby decided to make her move on Ryder and the other Lost Breed members, I knew they wouldn't get out of it alive. The best-case scenario was that she would offer to merge the Black Hearts with the Lost Breed, and if I knew anything about Ryder, he would refuse. His rejection would get him

killed, surely, and Sabian's life—and my brother's—would be quick to follow.

Flashes of their corpses burned the backs of my eyelids as I stood up and grabbed my purse. I darted out from behind my desk and hurried down the path between all the other cubicles to the office doors. I had to get to him. I had to make sure he was okay.

John stepped out in front of me, and I drew to an abrupt stop.

“Where are you off to, Miss Cooper?”

“I'm sorry, I have to go. Someone I care about is—”

“Go back to your desk, please. There are still two more hours left in the day, and I know you have not been entirely productive on this new article you're supposed to be working on.” John pointed his chin and looked down his nose at me. “Now, Miss Cooper.”

The eyes of the other journalists were slowly turning in my direction. I didn't give a damn that I was becoming the subject of their attention. I had bigger things on my plate than an arrogant boss on a power trip.

I took a step forward to show him that I was not intimidated. “I need to leave. It's an emergency.”

“An emergency?” John smirked.

“Yes. Now get out of my way.”

John shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. His suit strained around his shoulders. “Skipping out early when you've only been here for a few weeks makes a poor first impression, my dear. Keep your head down, and do your work like everyone else. It's the only way to survive in this newsroom. Chop chop. Let's see you skip back to your—”

“Don't call me dear,” I snarled. Then I moved in close again. “Now get out of my way. You're my boss, but it doesn't give you the right to force me to stay.” I shouldered by him and intentionally jabbed my elbow into his ribs. I kept walking, and he hollered after me. I didn't look over my

shoulder. I kept marching forward. All eyes were on me. I lifted my voice so the whole office could hear me. “You’re an asshole, John. And a bully. I’ll be back tomorrow morning, and I won’t be touching that bullshit dating piece you assigned me. I’ll be working on a real story.”

A story that might get me or my boyfriend killed if things went badly.

John yelled at me not to bother coming back in the morning.

I gave him the middle finger over my shoulder, and the whole office erupted in cheers. As I blew through the doors and rushed to the elevator, I could hear John screaming at them all to pipe down, but their enthusiasm over my rebellious exit could not be stopped.

The elevator ride to the underground parking was the longest minute of my life. On the ride down, I called Sabian another couple times and then tried Dani as well. No one was answering their phones. I called Axel, hoping against all odds that somehow, he would be removed from all this nonsense. He didn’t answer either.

I considered calling Ellie. My thumb was hovering above the green call button under her name, and my thoughts went to her and Axel’s children. If something happened to my brother, I couldn’t be the reason their mother got involved too. Axel would never forgive me, and I would never forgive myself.

I decided not to call her.

She might hate me for it, but it was better than her rushing into the fray.

I did, however, call the mechanic shop. A young woman’s voice answered. “Hello, this is Jamie. How can I help you?”

“Hey,” I said as I reversed out of my stall. The call transferred to the car stereo via Bluetooth as I raced up the ramp to street level. “This is Angela, Sabian’s—” I paused. Was I telling people I was his girlfriend now? “It’s Axel’s sister.”

“Hey,” the girl said. She sniffed into the phone. “If you’re looking for Sabian, he’s not here.”

Damn it, I thought as I slammed the heel of my hand into the steering wheel. I pulled out into traffic, not caring that I cut off a lifted pickup truck. The guy laid on his horn as I put my foot down on the gas and wove in and out of taxis and sedans. “When did you see him last?” I asked.

“Yesterday, I think. Everything’s been a blur since... since...” She broke off. I could hear that she was distressed.

“Listen. Lock up the shop. Whoever is working there with you, don’t let them leave. Stay there together. Is Ellie there? Or Axel?”

“It’s just me and Ellie right now. What’s going on?”

I took a sharp right turn. “Something is about to happen, Jamie. I don’t know what it is, but please stay where you are. I’m going to make sure everyone is safe. And I’ll call you as soon as I find them.”

There was a long pause on the phone. For a moment, I thought she hung up. Then she spoke again. “Is this about what happened to Hyde?” She sniffled again.

“Yes.”

Another long pause. “Angela you shouldn’t get involved. Ryder and the others know how to handle this kind of thing.”

“I wish that was true,” I muttered. “Lock the shop. Stay where you are. I’ll call.”

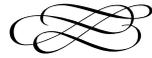
“And if you don’t?”

“I will.”

I hung up the phone and placed one more call. I called the only people I knew would get there in time. The only people who might be able to end this thing once and for all:

Reporters.

CHAPTER 25



SABIAN

“Ryder, let’s get the fuck out of here!” Axel yelled as he rushed to the front door.

Ryder had just gotten off the phone with Dani and was standing in front of the living room window.

“Ryder!” Axel yelled again.

“They’re already here,” Ryder said. His voice was so low, I had to strain my ears to hear him. “Fists up, boys. Things are about to get real messy in here.”

Axel stopped with his hand on the door handle. He looked back at me like there was something I could say or do that would change our current predicament. There wasn’t. We were up to our necks in shit, and from where I was standing, there was only one way out.

We had to fight.

Axel retreated back from the door and came to fall into line beside me and Jax.

“How many?” Jax asked beside me.

Ryder never turned from the window. “A dozen. Maybe more.”

“Fucking Hell,” Jax grated.

“We’ve been a step behind at every turn,” Axel said. His hands were tightening into fists, and his eyes never left the front door.

Ryder finally turned to face us. “There’s no going back from here. They’re coming in here to end us. We’re going to be fighting for our lives. Protect yourself first. You’re no good to anybody once you’re dead. Let’s give them hell. For Hyde.”

“For Hyde,” I said.

Jax and Axel stood their ground beside me as Ryder fell into line beside us. My phone started vibrating in my pocket. I knew instinctively that it was Angela. Every vibration against my thigh made me thankful that she wasn’t anywhere near this mess.

It also reminded me that I might never see her again.

Ryder’s front door suddenly blew inward and slammed into the wall. The drywall crumpled beneath the impact and sent a cloud of dust into the air as men started streaming into the house. They all looked like identical duplicates of one another, with bald heads and sunglasses. They were dressed all in black, and their boots thudded on the floor as they filed in, one after another. All twelve of them hung back in the entrance to the living room.

For a moment, my brain was overrun with comical thoughts. These bastards looked like they belonged in a low-budget mafia film. All that was missing was a ring leader puffing on a cigar who, when he spoke, would be impossible to understand due to his thick Italian accent.

When I realized why they were all waiting in the entranceway with the toes of their boots lined up with the line between the carpet and the tiles, everything became less comical.

They were waiting on *her*.

Another man stepped through the front door. He was barrel-chested, and the thickness of his arms put Ryder’s size to shame. There was a manic grin contorting his severe features as he stopped and drew to his full height. He stared each of us down, and I felt Jax tense beside me. He was ready for a fight.

Then she came in.

Ruby Johnson stepped around the massive man who had entered last. He offered her his hand, which she accepted as he guided her to stand in front of him. She was dressed much the same as she had been when I saw her in the coffee shop. Her skirt was skin tight, white, and down to her knees. Her white shirt was sleeveless and slightly transparent. Her heels were also white, as were the toenails that peaked out of the tip. She looked pristine as she folded her arms under her breasts and wrapped her fingers around her bare forearms. Her eyes and her smile passed over me before she let out a low chuckle.

“My my,” she said sensually, “I’ve been waiting a long time to get you all alone like this. You have no idea how horny this makes me.”

Ryder let out a bark of laughter, drawing her attention to him. “You and me both, sweetheart. I’ve been thinking about getting my hands around your pretty throat for days.”

The big man beside Ruby growled an ominous sound, low in his throat. Ruby rested a hand on his chest and patted gently. “It’s all right, my sweet. They won’t get their grubby hands on me.” Her blue eyes sparkled as she squared her shoulders and faced Ryder. “You and your pathetic Lost Breed mutts have seen their last days, Johnny Moretti. It was easy snuffing out your last member. I doubt the four of you will pose any more of a challenge than he did. What did he say his name was again?”

She wasn’t asking us. She was asking the big man beside her, the one she called “my sweet”. He grumbled with laughter that didn’t touch his face. “His name was Hyde if I recall correctly.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Ruby pressed her forefinger to her chin. Then her red lips peeled off her white teeth in a sharp smile. “It feels good to be using past tense. His name *was* Hyde.”

Ryder exploded.

It was like I was standing next to a firecracker when he went off. A yell burst out of him as he sprang into action. He propelled himself forward, swiping a lamp off one of the side

tables next to the couch on his way, and slammed its ceramic base into the side of one of Ruby's goons' head.

He was lying in a crumpled heap when the rest of us followed our fearless leader into battle.

It only took seconds for me to forget about everything else going on around me and narrow in on keeping my head on my shoulders. All I knew was that Ryder had gone for the big guy, and the rest of us had scattered to take on the others who had tried to get to Ryder when he made his move.

As I met my first man, I tuned out the sounds of the fight around me. I let the yelling, the growls of pain, and the laughter from Ruby Johnson fade away as I buried my fist into the gut of a man who tried to use my face as a punching bag. He doubled over in front of me, and I drove my knee into his nose. As he made to move up, his hands already clutching his face, I let my elbow descend upon the back of his neck.

He fell in front of me, and I stepped over him to take on the next in line.

Goon number two was bigger and somehow faster. He ducked in low when I moved to strike, and my swing sent me off balance. I staggered forward as he went for my knees and tackled me to the ground.

I fell backward with his arms wrapped around my thighs. Something slammed into the back of my head and little white lights danced behind my eyelids, which felt suddenly heavy.

I couldn't give in to the temptation to black out. The pain was intensifying in my skull, and I knew I had hit my head on something when I fell. Probably the corner of the coffee table. I lifted a hand to the back of my head, and my fingers came away bloody.

Then goon number two was climbing on top of me, and his knuckles collided with my jaw.

My teeth bit into my cheek, and blood coated my tongue. I spat a mouthful out on Ryder's carpet and thought dimly that when this was over, I would have to scrub that out.

Then he hit me again, and all thoughts were temporarily lost to me. My ears rushed with the sounds of the brawl around me, but it sounded far away, like I was under water. Then I was swallowed by silence.

When I came to, someone was pushing me up to my knees and holding me in place. I swayed on the spot, and a pair of hands on my shoulders stilled me.

“Sabian?” I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was Axel’s voice beside me.

I managed to open my eyes, which felt like someone had tried to glue them together. Blood coated my lashes and framed my vision in red. But I found my friend’s face. He was on his knees beside me. He looked to be in rough shape too, with a split eyebrow and an already-forming black eye.

“You all right?” Axel asked.

I nodded and looked past him. Jax and Ryder were also on their knees. The four of us were lined up on the living room floor with the window at our backs. I swallowed, still tasting copper, and turned to look in front of us.

Ruby was standing about five feet in front of us with her hands on her hips. She wore a smug smile, and I noticed that red blood stained the side of her white skirt. I also noticed she was wearing a pair of brass knuckles, which, of course, had been painted white.

She pulled them off her fingers and spun them around in a loop as she regarded us coolly. “This did not take nearly as long as I expected it to. I’m a little disappointed, to be honest. I thought I’d get more of a pre-show before we got the real entertainment underway.”

“Come a little closer,” I heard Ryder say. “I’ll give you some real entertainment.”

Ruby threw her head back and laughed mirthlessly. “You are cute, Johnny. I’ll give you that. But there’s something about tall dark and handsome that makes my knees weak.” She

moved in on me like a viper. She came close enough to lift her foot and rest the heel of her shoe on my thigh. Then she leaned over, the heel digging into my muscle, and stroked my chin with the brass knuckles. “You shouldn’t have turned me down, Sabian. I would have granted you a sweeter end than this.”

I jerked my chin away from her, and she followed my retreat. “Come now, don’t play hard to get. You’ve already been... gotten.” She grabbed my chin and turned my face back to her. I was so close that when she smiled, I could see red lipstick staining her front teeth. “I can play so much better than that little rich bitch you’ve been running around with. What’s her name? Angela?”

Axel went wild beside me. Ruby laughed as two of her men moved in and subdued him by restraining his arms behind his back and pushing him forward so his cheek was almost touching the carpet. Then she turned her icy stare back to me. She never broke eye contact as she addressed her personal goon.

“Kill them, my sweet. Start with this one. Save Johnny for me.” She released her grip on my chin and stood back as someone grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back. I let out an involuntary snarl against the pain as I found myself staring up at Ryder’s ceiling. His brown ceiling fan, straight out of a nineteen seventies interior decorating magazine, was spinning lazily in the middle of the ceiling.

Something cool and sharp was pressed to my throat as a stern, evil face filled my vision. The biggest goon was leaning over me, and he had his knife pressed to my neck. He applied more pressure and smiled a truly joyous smile as I felt blood leak out of the fresh cut and pool in the divot between my collar bones.

I heard Ryder yell for them to leave me alone. Ruby laughed harder. Then all three of the other Lost Breed members were writhing and shouting and doing everything they could to get to me.

It was no use.

I swallowed against the blade, and it cut deeper. The goon above me looked up at Ruby. He was nothing more than an obedient dog, awaiting the command of his master.

“Do it,” I heard her say.

I closed my eyes and waited for him to slit my throat. I waited for the pain, the burn, the sputtering—but it never came.

Instead, my ears were assaulted with a surprised shout and the sound of something—or someone—falling to the floor.

My eyes snapped open, and I found myself staring at another brawl. Confused, I snapped my head to the right. The others were still on their knees. The big goon behind me let me go and rushed around me to get to Ruby, who was hurrying away from the new fight that had just begun.

I spotted a flash of two familiar faces.

Derek and Caleb.

Dizzy and disoriented, I got to my feet. Axel yelled out a warning, and I ducked, narrowly missing a swing to the back of my head from one of the men that had been subduing Angela’s brother. I took him down with a punch to the jaw, and Axel was able to handle the other one.

Then we moved to free Ryder and Jax as Caleb and Derek worked on bringing down the others.

Ruby’s manic laughter told me they were not on the winning side of things.

A blade flashed in the corner of my vision. I tried to get out of the way but didn’t move fast enough. The knife sliced across my chest, and as I retreated, a big hand gathered the front of my shirt and yanked me forward.

I found myself face to face with the man who had nearly managed to kill me seconds earlier. He had a bloody nose now, which appeared to have only made him angry. He lifted the knife high above his head. His grip was so tight on the hilt that his knuckles were white.

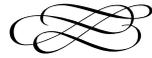
I tried to pry his fingers open that clutched the front of my shirt. His hand with the knife came down so fast I thought I heard it whistling through the air.

He sank it into the right side of my chest just below my collar bone. The pain stripped the air from my lungs as he wrenched me off my feet and tossed me over the coffee table. I rolled onto my side and gripped the hilt of the knife imbedded in my chest.

The big man stepped over the coffee table.

“Stop trying to fight me,” the big man bellowed. “I am your death.”

CHAPTER 26



ANGELA

Ryder's house was surrounded with reporters and news crews when I parked in the street. I launched myself out of my car and didn't bother to close the door. I ran full speed across the street, up the driveway, and plowed through the throngs of people who were setting up cameras and getting sound equipment out of their van.

Police sirens were whirring in the distance, but I already feared we were too late. As I tried to get through the reporters, I could hear some of their reports as they spoke into the cameras.

"Sounds of a fight broke out about fifteen minutes ago according to neighbors who came to check on the residence."

"This house is known to be a home of a gang member."

"No gunshots have been fired, but there has been violence inside the house of a known gang member on this residential street."

"Neighbors speak of seeing a woman in white entering the residence before sounds of a brawl were heard."

A woman in white. I swallowed. Ruby Johnson was here, and by the sounds of things, had been for at least fifteen minutes.

Did Sabian and my brother have it in them to hold her off for fifteen minutes?

"Move!" I yelled as I continued pushing my way through. Some people tried to hold me back when I reached the end of

people and burst free of the confines of the crowd. Someone caught the back of my shirt, which tore as I kept running toward the front door.

They needed me. I couldn't be scared now. I had to act.

Angela Cooper was not a snobby rich girl who lived with her head in the sand anymore. I was the woman who loved Sabian Delgado. I was the sister of Axel. I was a Lost Breed at heart now, and they needed me.

I rushed up the porch steps and blew through the front door.

The scene before me made me freeze in my tracks. I gripped the corner of the wall as I stood at the cusp of Ryder's living room, soaking in the disastrous sight.

Ruby had her back to me. She was dressed in all white and was not aware of my presence. Several men dressed in black lay across the floor. Some were on their sides, others were face first. All were unmoving.

I ran my eyes over more familiar faces.

Jax was on his back. A man stood over him with a boot under his chin. He was pressing down. Jax's face was turning red.

Ryder was still on his feet, throwing punches at a massive man who was grinning like a fool. His hands were coated in blood.

Axel was on his feet, too. His fists were up, and he was fending off three men. He was snarling and swiping at whichever one of them tried to get too close.

Then I realized he was standing in front of someone.

Someone who was on their hands and knees on the ground, clutching their chest.

Sabian.

I had to do something. *Anything.*

"Hey!"

The word exploded out of me in a shrill scream. I got the attention of everyone in the room. My brother looked over at me, and his eyes widened with horror. He moved to come toward me, but the three men he had been fighting off went to try to slip behind him to get to Sabian. Axel fell back a step, swung a right hook, and decked one of them in the jaw.

Sabian looked up at me from where he was on the ground. His hairline was soaked in blood. There was a cut on his throat, and blood coated his neck.

A rush of dizziness swept over me when I saw the handle of a knife sticking out of him.

I tore my gaze away from them and fixed my stare on Ruby, who had turned to face me and was staring at me with something I couldn't place. Either she was pissed or impressed. Maybe it was a bit of both.

"Why, hello there," Ruby drawled. "Come to see the final act?"

I wanted to curl up in a ball on the floor and apologize for interrupting her madness. I wanted to pretend that none of this was happening.

But Sabian had a knife in him, and my brother was barely staying on his feet. Jax couldn't get any air into his lungs, and Ryder was looking at me with a desperation I could feel in my own heart. They needed me.

I had to stand my ground.

"I'm here to tell you to get the hell out," I said coldly.

Ruby blinked at me and then burst out into unconvincing laughter. "Sweet girl, you have no fucking clue who you're messing with."

"I know who you are," I said. "And I know who he is." I pointed my chin at the big man who had been facing off with Ryder moments before. "There's a bunch of news crews outside. This is over, Ruby. You've all been caught red-handed, and the cops know you were behind Hyde's murder."

"Impossible," Ruby scoffed.

“No, it’s not. You’re guilty. But don’t worry, there’s a silver lining to all this.”

Ruby arched an eyebrow and waited for me to let her in on what that silver lining was. I wasn’t going to hand it over to her. I was going to make her ask. I was going to prove that I was the one in control right now, not her.

“What?” Ruby hissed.

I found myself smiling. “At least you get to pass the years the same way as TJ now. In a prison cell. Too bad you can’t bring The Devil’s Hand with you. Poor Ruby Johnson won’t have any men to leech off of in a women’s prison. How will you get ahead?”

Ruby narrowed her eyes on me. “Watch yourself, you little whore.”

“Me?” I pressed my hands to my chest. “I didn’t get paid to fuck men for two years. I also never used them to climb the ladder all the way up to MC leader. You did that all on your own. Well, you and your well used lady bits, of course.”

Ruby took a step toward me.

“I wouldn’t come any closer if I was you,” I said, standing my ground and lifting my chin. “Unless you want to make a statement for me to publish in the New York Times tomorrow morning. Don’t worry. I won’t mention the prostitution thing.” I gave her a wide smile. “Just kidding.”

Ruby let out a furious yell and came for me. Axel and Sabian both yelled my name. I moved back out onto the porch, and Ruby followed me out into the afternoon sun. As she raised her fist to strike me, the audible clicking of cameras sounded, and the voices of reporters converged around us.

I grinned at Ruby, knowing that the media was at my back.

“Anything you want to say to the people, Miss Johnson?”

Ruby stiffened and stood like a deer in the headlights.

“Smile pretty,” I said. “This is your debut appearance.”

Then, possessed by something I didn't know I was capable of, I struck her across the face with the back of my hand.

The reporters went mental. Ruby clutched at her bright red cheek and started yelling profanities at me. She moved to hit me back, and I was ready for her. My fists were up, and I was ready to show her the fight of her life.

I never got the chance.

“NYPD!” someone yelled from behind me.

I darted to the side as footsteps sounded on the porch steps.

A woman with brown hair slipped past me and grabbed Ruby's wrists. I recognized Dani instantly.

“Ruby Johnson, you're under arrest for homicide and conspiracy to commit murder,” Dani said. She read Ruby her rights and then pinned her against the side of the house as she cuffed her. When she was secured, Dani looked over at me. “Please tell me everyone is okay.”

“I think so,” I said. “Can I go inside?”

Dani nodded.

I didn't wait for her to say anything else. I slipped by her and wove through the other police officers who had made their way inside and were confronting Ruby's men. Arrests were happening all around me as I slipped between two cops.

I spotted Ryder helping Jax to his feet, who was rubbing his already-bruising neck.

I kept going. I made my way straight to the back of the living room where I found my brother and Sabian.

Sabian was hunched over on all fours, and Axel was at his side, bent over, talking to him in hushed tones.

I dropped to my knees in front of them.

“Are you okay?” I breathed. As soon as the words left my lips, all the emotions I had been holding at bay came rushing out of me. My breathing quickened, and I felt lightheaded from the adrenaline. My hands started to shake, and I pressed them down flat on the carpet to stop it. A shuddering breath

gave way to a panicked sob as I reached out and cupped Sabian's face. "Please tell me you're okay."

There was so much blood. It was warm on my palms, but I didn't care.

Sabian nodded with his face still in my hands. "I'll be all right."

My eyes flicked to Axel. He looked as concerned as I felt.

Dani came barrelling into the room and raced to Ryder, who caught her in his arms and buried his face in her shoulder. She stroked his hair and sobbed into his embrace. When they parted, they exchanged some quick but sweet words, and she assumed the part of working detective and cast her eyes around the room. When she spotted the three of us on the floor, she came to our aid.

Jax, Ryder, and two others whose names were lost on me joined us. Each and every one of them was injured somewhere. A split eyebrow or lip, a bruised jaw, a broken nose, a sagging shoulder. The fight had been vicious, and it seemed that no one held back.

And somehow, Sabian was the only one who'd managed to get stuck with something sharp.

Ryder was on his knees beside me. He glanced up at Dani. "Where are the paramedics?"

"They should be here any minute. They were only four minutes behind us."

Sabian surprised all of us by leaning back to rest on his heels. He wiped a bloody hand over his even bloodier brow. "You saved our asses, Angela."

Ryder clapped me on the back with enough force to knock me forward a bit. Perhaps the adrenaline was still coursing through his veins, and he had forgotten his strength. "We're lucky you did what you did, coming in like that. You frightened me a bit. Like a protective mama bear."

I wasn't sure I liked being referred to as a "mama" or a "bear," but I let it slide. I shuffled forward so that my knees

rested against Sabian's. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner. I came as fast as I could and—"

"Shut up," Sabian said. Then he chuckled. He actually chuckled while he had a knife sticking out of him. He reached out and grabbed my wrists and pulled me to him with strength I was sure he shouldn't still have. He wrapped his arms around me and held me to him as his lips sealed over mine and he kissed me deeply. He tasted like copper and smelled of iron, but I didn't care.

When we parted, I stayed pressed in tight to him. I looked up at Ryder as Sabian wrapped an arm around my shoulders. I didn't acknowledge that I noticed how he was leaning on me for support. I could hear the ambulance sirens. They were close.

"Ryder," I said. "Let me print the story of what happened here. Let me take off this mask the Black Hearts have been wearing all these years and expose them."

Ryder shared a look with Dani, who nodded once. Ryder looked back to me. "Knock yourself out, Angela Cooper. You've earned more than just a story."

CHAPTER 27



SABIAN

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered as I stirred awake and pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead. My head was pounding so furiously that I dreaded opening my eyes. I kept them closed for a while, trying to remember everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Memories of what had transpired at Ryder’s house came back to me and left my chest feeling tight. I let my hand fall from my forehead to massage the aching spot where the big bastard had buried his knife in me. It was tender to the touch and covered in bandages.

I opened my eyes and found myself staring up at a white ceiling I didn’t recognize. I blinked away my confusion and looked around. I was in a hospital bed.

The door to my room was closed, but I could hear people moving about and talking in the halls. Sunlight was streaming in through partially open blinds, and a machine was beeping somewhere behind my head.

There was also a source of heat pressed up against my left side.

Angela was lying beside me on the hospital bed. She had herself neatly tucked into my side, and she was half off the bed. Somehow, she was sleeping without falling off the edge, and her breathing was slow and peaceful.

I smiled to myself and kissed her forehead.

Her makeup was smudged, no doubt from the tears she had cried when she found me in Ryder’s living room in such a

bloodied state. I thought back to everything that had gone down and wondered how everyone else was. I remembered the others all coming to see me when the press showed up—and when Dani showed up.

Gently, I nudged Angela awake. I wanted to let her sleep, but I had to know if everyone else was all right.

She came to quickly, snapping her head up to look into my eyes. “Hey,” she said, a smile touching the corners of her mouth as she blinked away fatigue. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” I said.

“You scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Things sort of—”

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t control any of that.” Angela leaned in and kissed me. Then she kissed my nose and my forehead and ran her fingers through my hair. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Is everyone else all right?”

She nodded, and relief flooded through me. “Everyone is home. You were in the worst shape out of all of them. You’re lucky Derek and Caleb came back to Ryder’s. If they hadn’t gotten there, I think I would have been too late.”

I had completely forgotten that they came back to the house and participated in the second fight. “Is anyone still here?”

“In the hospital? No. Everyone is home safe and sound. It’s just you who needed some extra attention.”

I pressed absently at the wound in my chest, and Angela took my hand in hers and took it away from my chest.

“Don’t do that,” she said sternly. “You’re healing. The wound wasn’t as deep as we thought. The blade was short. Only a two-inch pocket knife. The doctors say you’ll heal up nicely.”

“Good to know,” I muttered as I shifted around to try to get comfortable. “Why the hell does it feel worse than that?”

“Well, there’s more damage than just that. You have three bruised ribs and a minor concussion. The worst of that has probably passed. Your fingers,” she added as she looked at my hand, “are broken.”

I lifted my left hand and found my index and ring finger in a splint. My wrist was also in a metal brace.

“And you have a fracture in your wrist,” Angela said, sighing. “Besides that, you just have some bruising. The doctors say you’ll be out of here either tomorrow afternoon or the following day.”

“Tomorrow?” I exclaimed. I had no interest in lying in a hospital bed that long.

“Yes, or the next day,” Angela repeated.

“Oh, come on. I don’t need to hang around here that long. We can free up this bed for someone else, and I can just go home.”

“Sabian,” Angela said flatly. “You’re hurt. Just give yourself some time to heal. There’s nothing wrong with that. Besides, there are nurses here to help. If you go home, I’ll be taking care of you myself, and that scares me. You had a knife in your chest for crying out loud. Let’s take advantage of having professionals looking after you.”

I lifted my good hand and cupped her cheek. “You don’t need to worry anymore. Everything is going to be fine.”

“I know,” she said. “But I still don’t like that you’re hurt. I should have gotten there sooner.”

“Angela, no. Enough of that. You saved my life. You saved all our lives.” I kissed the tip of her nose again and earned myself a smile. A radiant, beautiful, wonderful smile that somehow made some of the pain in my chest and head go away. “You were a straight up badass the way you came in there and faced off with Ruby. I think I actually found you more frightening.”

“I don’t think your head was in the game at that point, but I’ll take it as a compliment anyway,” Angela said slyly.

“It *is* a compliment.”

Angela clasped her hand over mine on her cheek and closed her eyes. I could have lain there and counted her eyelashes if she'd let me. But she opened her eyes when I'd only made it to fifteen. “Ruby is in jail. She's being charged with Hyde's murder. They have The Devil's Hand in custody, but there's no evidence to pin Hyde's death on him since he never actually admitted to anything while at Ryder's place.”

“Who?” I asked curiously.

“The big guy. The one who stabbed you.” Angela sat up and tucked one leg under the other. “It took three cops to get him in the back of the cruiser. He was wild. Insane. I swear he was foaming at the mouth.”

“He was a piece of work. That's for sure. Do they really call him that? The Devil's Hand?”

Angela nodded. “Yeah. He has a long and violent history of these kinds of things happening around him. He's spent a lot of time in prison but always manages to find a nice soft landing amongst an organization of criminals once he's released. This time, it happened to be Ruby who found him, and his particular set of skills matched her intentions well.”

“What's going to happen to Ruby?”

“There aren't any court dates yet, but Dani says she'll keep us in the loop. Obviously. This was a big bust for her.”

“Do Hyde's sisters know?”

Angela nodded. “Ryder called them after you were loaded into the ambulance. He wouldn't let anyone make the call for him, and he wouldn't let any paramedics have a look at him until it was done.”

“Good. They needed to know.”

Angela looked down at her hands in her lap and twiddled her thumbs. She was thinking about something. I waited and hoped she would speak on her own, but her gaze didn't come back up to me.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked finally.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Ryder still feels a tremendous amount of guilt over all of this. I spoke with Dani early this morning, and she says nothing she can do will pull him out of it. He thinks he’s to blame for Hyde’s death.”

I fought the urge to change the subject. “I may have had a hand in that.”

“I think you need to talk to him.”

“I will,” I said. “When I’m out of here, I will. I know Ryder. Having some time alone with his thoughts isn’t a bad thing. It’ll be hard on Dani because he’s an isolated griever, but he’ll come back around.”

Angela studied me curiously. “How is it you know this about him? Have you lost someone before?”

“My brother. A long time ago. Ryder took me under his wing after Rafael was killed, and I never looked back. The Lost Breed became my family, and Ryder filled the role of my older brother. But he struggled for a long time. We both did. It will be the same now.”

“I’m sorry,” Angela whispered.

“Don’t be. It’s in the past now.” I pushed myself up a little higher on the bed and grimaced at the tightness in my chest and the ache in my ribs. Angela watched me with concern as I pressed a hand to my side. “Tell Dani I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you,” Angela said quietly.

“Now, how can I repay you for saving my neck?”

Angela’s eyes flicked back and forth between mine. “Repay me? I don’t need you to repay me. I only did what I would do for anyone else I love—” She blinked and her cheeks turned the brightest shade of pink I had ever seen.

I felt my eyebrows climb up my forehead.

Angela licked her lips nervously and refused to look at me. “I did what any good person would do. You were in trouble and needed help, and I was the only one with the means to do something about it.”

“Because you love me?” I asked.

She swallowed. When her gaze finally came back to mine, her cheeks were still pink, but the horrified look that had been plastered on her face seconds ago was gone. “Yes.”

I felt myself grinning like an idiot. “I love you, too, Angela Cooper. My foul-mouthed, stubborn, smoking hot guardian angel.”

Angela giggled before leaning over to kiss me. “Always the sweet talker, hm?”

“How else should a man talk to his fake fiancé?”

Angela pursed her lips. “On second thought, maybe there is something you can do to repay me.”

“Anything.”

Angela kissed me again. Her lips were warm and soft, and I didn’t want her to pull away. My heart was full, and my body was tingling with something I hadn’t felt in a really, really long time: sheer joy and elation. The girl I loved felt the same way about me. I considered pinching myself. Maybe I was in a coma and dreaming all this.

No. She was as real as the pain still lingering in my body.

“I want to come clean to my parents about this whole fake engagement,” Angela said. “It’s time I stop lying and start telling them what I really want. And not letting them stand in the way of my dreams. And you and I deserve the chance to start on the right foot. No lies. Just you and me, together, how it should be.”

“When do you want to tell them?”

“Saturday night? Depending on how you’re feeling. Two days may not be enough time—”

“It’ll be enough,” I said confidently. “Make the plans. I’ll go with you.”

Angela smiled brightly and kissed me one last time. She tasted like strawberry chapstick and mint. When she pulled away, I heard her stomach growl. She pressed a hand to her

tummy and giggled bashfully. “I haven’t eaten all day. I’m going to run down to the cafeteria and grab a sandwich or something. Do you want anything?”

“Surprise me,” I said.

She slipped off the bed and graced me with one more smile before slipping out of the room.

I spotted my phone on the table beside my bed. I reached for it, stretching the stitches in my wounded chest, and grunted with the effort. I managed to grab the phone and had to give myself a minute to catch my breath from the effort.

When I was recovered, I punched in a number.

“Hey,” I said when the call was answered. “This is Sabian. Do you have a few minutes?”

CHAPTER 28



ANGELA

I wrung my hands in the skirt of my powder-blue sundress. My palms were sweaty, and all I could think about was how terribly this night could potentially go. I was about to unveil the thickest web of lies I had ever told to my parents; I was going to confess that I was actually in love with a member of a motorcycle gang.

I was risking everything.

Sabian was sitting beside me in the back of the limo my parents had sent to my apartment to pick us up. He was dressed in a white linen shirt and blue jeans. He looked handsome as ever with a clean-shaven jaw and his hair styled back off his forehead.

The visible signs of his altercation with the Black Hearts were still there. He had a black eye, but the swelling had thankfully gone down. His jaw was still bruised on the righthand side, and there was a bandage over the cut on his throat. He looked far worse under his shirt, but my parents of course would not see the damage there. The purpling around his bruised ribs and the bandage over his chest were for my eyes only.

He reached over and rested his hand over both of mine, stilling my endless fidgeting. “Stop stressing,” he said. “Everything is going to be okay. I’ll be right beside you the whole time.”

I let out a shaky sigh and stared out the window as we passed luxury high rises on my parents’ street. “I know. I can’t

help it. I don't want them to hate me."

"I promise they won't hate you. They're your parents. They'll understand."

"You don't know them," I whispered. "They might think I'm soiling the Cooper name. I'm supposed to marry a rich businessman who plays tennis on the weekends. I'm supposed to want to stay home and raise babies and bake cookies. I'm supposed to want to hire a house staff and—"

"Angela," Sabian said. His voice was deep and calming as he shifted in his seat to face me. His movements were still slower than usual, due to his injuries. "They will understand."

I blinked as hot tears started to burn the corners of my eyes.

Sabian reached out and wiped them away with his thumb. "And if they don't understand, I can always take up tennis."

I laughed involuntarily. "Shut up."

Sabian shrugged. "I'm being serious. If your father needs someone to play tennis, I'm more than willing to learn how to kick his ass. Besides, you could watch courtside. You'd look so damn cute in one of those little skirts and a polo shirt."

I rolled my eyes. Despite his inability to take this seriously, I knew he cared about how I felt. "I wouldn't be caught dead in a polo shirt."

"Oh, come on," he said playfully.

I shook my head adamantly. "No way in hell."

Sabian slid closer to me so that his hip and leg were pressed to mine. He tilted my chin up with his thumb and arched a dark eyebrow. "You're sure you want this enough? Is it worth it?"

"You are more than enough," I said softly. "I promise."

I hadn't even noticed that the car had stopped, and we were parked outside the building my parents were staying in. My stomach flipped over, and I swallowed back my nervousness. Sabian lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed my knuckles.

“Good,” he said. “Then you have nothing to lose.”

He slid out of the car when the driver opened the door for him. I watched him reach instinctively for his bruised side. He offered me his hand as I got out of the car, but I didn't take it. I knew I wouldn't hurt him, but part of me worried he was already pushing himself too much by coming to dinner with me. I was being selfish, making him do this so soon after everything went down.

I had tried to change my mind earlier that morning and bail on dinner. Sabian had grabbed me by my shoulders and sternly told me that we were going and there was no backing out of it now.

I don't know where the day went, but somehow, we were already slipping inside and getting on the elevator.

I stared at our reflection in the mirrored doors as we rode up. I was tanned but could tell that a lot of the color had drained from my face due to the nerves. Sabian stood beside me, straight and still, with his hands clasped in front of him. He was watching me in the reflection and cracked a crooked smile.

“Stop stressing,” he said.

“I can't.”

“We'll do it quick. Rip it off like a Band-Aid. Okay?”

I nodded.

The doors slid open, and we stepped out. The same butler who had welcomed us in last time opened the door to the suite and invited us inside. He brought us to the living room where my parents were sitting on plush white sofas.

They both got to their feet when we entered and came to greet us. My mother hugged me and kissed my cheeks as my father shook Sabian's hand. Then we switched. My dad gave me a tight squeeze as my mom hugged Sabian.

When the greeting was done, we all sat down. Sabian sat close to me and took my hand in his.

“We are so happy you both managed to visit before we head back to Los Angeles,” my mother said.

“Me too.” I smiled. Sabian squeezed my hand. “But, to be honest, I came because I need to tell you both something. And you might not like what I have to say, but it’s time I start being honest.”

My parents exchanged a glance. My father called for the butler to bring us out a glass of red wine each. Then he leaned back in the couch and waved his hand in a gesture for me to speak.

You can do this. You’re a grown woman. You can handle this. You stared down Ruby Johnson for fuck’s sake. You can tell your parents the truth.

I sucked in a sharp breath and began.

“Sabian and I are not engaged. We never were. In fact, when I moved out here, I barely knew him. We met through Axel. He’s a member of the Lost Breed motorcycle club.” I spilled the beans and told them everything. Every word made me feel lighter. Once I got going, it was hard for me to stop. I explained everything that had happened within the last few weeks, including everything with Ruby. When I was done, I ran my palms down my thighs. “I guess I wanted you to know because I *do* actually care about Sabian. I care about him a lot.” I shot him a smile, and he smiled back. “I’m in love with him.”

“In love?” my mother asked. Her question suggested she doubted me, but her tone was not accusing as I expected it to be.

I nodded. “Yes. And I think I’ve known it for a while now. I just... I just couldn’t see my way out of this stupid lie I crafted. I wanted to move here so badly, and I knew you would stop me if I didn’t convince you that there was more here for me than a job.”

“A career,” Sabian corrected beside me.

“A career,” I amended sheepishly before trying to hide behind the rim of my wineglass as I took a sip.

My father's eyes slid from me to Sabian. He stared at him for a moment, and I tightened my grip on Sabian's hand. I didn't want him to be the subject of my father's anger. It wasn't his fault. I had chosen this life. I had chosen him.

And I knew I would continue to choose him over everything else, no matter what life threw at me.

My father cleared his throat. "And what do you have to say for yourself, Sabian?"

Sabian glanced at me. His expression was not nearly as serious as I would have expected. His eyes were soft, gentle, and his lips were pursed in a kind smile as he ran his thumb over the back of my hand. "I have a lot to say," he said.

"Then let's hear it," my father urged.

Sabian never took his eyes off of me as he spoke. "I'm in love with your daughter. I have been for a long time now. I tried to trick myself into thinking that life would be fine without her. Surely, there were other pretty girls out there who could make my heart race the way she did. Who could make me feel the way she did. When she was in Los Angeles, it was easier to forget about her. Easier to spend my time and energy working on cars and bikes to keep myself distracted. But when she came back here, I knew all bets were off."

Sabian chuckled and looked down at our hands. Then he slid off the couch and sank to one knee in front of me.

"Angela Cooper, you've saved me from damnation more than once. You've been a very bright light in a dark world, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy. You are everything to me, and I would be honored if you would become my wife." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small box. He held it out to me and popped it open.

I gasped as the rose gold ring inside caught the light of the chandelier above the coffee table. It was a beautiful piece of work, with a halo cut and a winding band encrusted with diamonds.

I looked from the ring into Sabian's eyes.

He was still smiling at me. The moment felt so surreal. I glanced up at my parents. My father had his phone out and was snapping pictures. My mother was dabbing at tears in the corners of her eyes. This confused me.

“What?” I asked slowly, looking back down at Sabian.

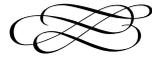
“I called your dad. He already knew everything. I told him the whole thing. And I got his permission to propose. And Axel’s.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. The first sob escaped, and I covered my mouth.

Sabian nodded. “Dead serious. Will you marry me?”

I nodded furiously as the tears ran freely down my cheeks. Sabian plucked the ring from the box and took my left hand. He slid it onto my ring finger and looked up at me, a grin stretching across his handsome face. “Welcome to the family, Angela Delgado.”

CHAPTER 29



SABIAN

Angela was staring at the ring on her finger when I pulled up in front of the New York Times building. She didn't realize that we had arrived, and I let her stare at the diamond for a solid two minutes before leaning over and kissing her cheek. She looked up at me, her eyelashes fluttering, and smiled.

"Sorry, I can't stop staring at it. I still can't believe this is real."

I grinned. "It's real, baby. And today is a big day. So get that perfect ass of yours out of my car and get in there. You don't want to be late for your first day as a real journalist."

Angela grabbed her briefcase from the floor between her feet and gave me a joking scowl. "I've been a real journalist the whole time. But now, my boss knows it."

Angela's article had been published in the paper on Friday morning, and today was her first day back at work since everything went down—and that included our engagement. I knew she was both nervous and excited to confront all her coworkers. She was especially eager to see her boss and tell him that she would be choosing her own stories from here on out.

We'd done a bit of role playing in the morning while we sipped coffees on her terrace, and she somehow managed to use the phrase, "and stick it up your ass", in each and every scenario. So I was certain she'd be saying that to John at some

point over the course of the day, and I looked forward to hearing how it all went.

“I’ll pick you up at five?”

“Four,” Angela said as she popped her door open.

“Aren’t you supposed to be off at five?”

“Yeah, but John won’t make me stay. I’m going to milk the shit out of this while I can.” She leaned over the console to give me a goodbye kiss. Then she hopped out of the car and closed the door. She bent over and rested her elbows in the open window. “Have a good first day back at work. Don’t do anything too strenuous.”

“Strenuous?” I laughed. “I’m going to lounge around the shop all day. I got stabbed. I don’t need to work.”

Angela rolled her eyes and gave me a wide grin before straightening up and making her way into the building. I watched her go and indulged by staring at her ass the whole way.

I was a lucky man.

The shop lot was packed full of cars, and I recognized each and every one of them. I got out of my car and made my way to the open bay doors. I could hear voices as I approached, and when I stepped out from behind Jax’s black pickup truck, I was greeted with shouts and applause from a crowd of faces that made me smile.

Ellie and Jamie came to me first and gave me gentle hugs so as not to hurt me. I didn’t like how fragile they seemed to think I was, based on the very light pressure they embraced me with, but I forwent my pride as Dani greeted me next. Her hug was a little firmer, and she patted my cheek in a way my mother used to when I was just a boy.

“It’s good to see you on your feet,” she said. Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Thanks for talking to him this weekend. It helped big time.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “No problem, Dani. Sometimes that man of yours just can’t get out of his own head.”

I had spoken to Ryder on Saturday morning. I stopped by his house and found him on the sofa, cracking open his third beer of the day. It was only nine o’clock. I’d swiped it out of his hand and scolded him before sitting down and enduring the most torturous conversation of my life.

I forced him to talk to me about his guilt over what happened to Hyde. I also expressed shame of my own. I should have spoken up sooner. I should have pressed Ryder harder that something was wrong. But everything was hindsight, and neither of us ever could have known how crazy Ruby actually was. After talking for hours, Ryder seemed to adjust back to his old self. We were able to think back on fond memories of Hyde and share a couple of laughs before Dani got home from work and let me go home to rest. She and Ryder both knew I had plans to propose that night, and Dani suggested I get some sleep in the afternoon. Apparently, I had looked like shit.

A stab wound would do that to a guy apparently.

Ryder stepped around Dani and clapped me on the shoulder. “Good to see you. And as an engaged man. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” I grinned.

Soon, I was being swarmed by the others. Axel pulled me in for a hug and told me not to be a pussy when I groaned about my ribs. Jax slapped me on the back and congratulated me on selling my soul and hitching my wagon to Axel’s crazy family.

Caleb and Derek were there, too.

I shook their hands. “Thanks for coming back for our dumb asses.”

Derek gave me a broad smile as he crossed his arms over his thick chest. “We should have left you lot for dead. We would have inherited a whole MC. And this shop. And Ryder’s car.”

“Watch it,” Ryder scoffed.

“For the record,” Dani piped up, “I’d get his car.”

We all laughed, and I basked in the sound of it. Even though we had suffered a great loss, we were still *us*. We were still a brotherhood capable of laughing together. If we didn’t have that, we didn’t have anything.

Axel cleared his throat and called for our attention. He met my eye briefly before speaking. “I want to invite you all over for a barbeque this evening at my place. Kids are welcome, but let’s try to get them to bed early. Let’s celebrate Sabian and Angela’s engagement right. And we’ll have a drink for Hyde.”

“Or ten,” Caleb suggested.

We all chuckled.

“Ten sounds better,” Axel agreed. He looked over at Jamie, who was tucked under Ellie’s arm. Her eyes were a little glossy. I knew losing Hyde had been hard on her. Unbeknownst to the rest of the MC, they had been getting close. Axel nodded at her. “Make sure you come tonight, Jamie. We all want you there.”

She smiled and nodded once. She had a long road ahead of her, but we’d all be there to hold her up if she needed someone to lean on. That was what we did for one another. That was what Hyde would have wanted us to do.

The rest of the day was spent much like the first twenty minutes. We all stood around shooting the shit and talking about things that didn’t matter. Every now and then, conversation would drift back to Hyde, and someone would share a funny story or memory of him. It felt good to be able to talk about him without having to swallow a lump in my throat. It felt good to remember him.

I picked Angela up at four from her work as she requested. On the drive home, she told me about how her boss had avoided her all day. The other journalists flocked to her, and she was

now on a first name basis with almost everyone she worked with.

She also got a call from a local news station and was asked to go on live TV for an interview about what happened between the two motorcycle clubs.

“What did you say?” I asked as I pulled into my newly designated stall in the underground parking lot of the Kent building.

“I said no,” Angela said as she took off her seatbelt and got out of the car. I got out too, and we looked at each other over the roof of the car. “I’m not interested in reliving that day over and over. I wrote my story. I shared what happened. And that’s all there is to it. It’s time to move on.”

“Fucking hell, I love you,” I breathed.

She giggled and met me in front of the car. We got into the elevator and made our way into her apartment.

“Get changed,” I told her. “I think your brother is throwing an impromptu engagement party for us tonight.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” I went to her massive closet and began rifling through her dresses. I loved how she looked in summer dresses. “He invited everyone over to celebrate and have a barbeque. Ellie always brings her camera out at these things, so I figured you’d want the chance to wear one of your summer dresses.”

“I’d want the chance, or you want me to wear one?” Angela teased as she swung around in front of me. She took the front of my shirt in her hands and held on to me. “I know how much you like it when I wear a dress.”

“Easy access.” I shrugged.

Angela giggled and shook her head at me. “So bad.”

“Am I?” I rested my hands on her hips.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“We have a bit of time before we have to go. I can think of a couple ways to pass the time.”

“Can you now?” Angela asked, arching an eyebrow.

I nodded. “Let me show you how bad I can be.”

She pushed gently at my chest. “You shouldn’t. The doctors said you still need time to fully—”

“Fuck the doctors. What do they know?”

“Uh. Literally all of the things that we don’t know. They’re the professionals. If they think you should take it easy, then you should take it easy.”

I shook my head. “Taking it easy doesn’t sound fun at all.”

“It’s not always about fun, Sabian. Sometimes you have to just—”

I silenced her by sealing my lips over hers. She went stiff in my arms, and I thought for a moment she might actually hold her ground and make me wait until the doctors gave me the go ahead for physical activity. Instead, she sighed into our kiss, and all the tense muscles in her softened. I pulled her hips to me and found the zipper at the back of her skirt. I guided it down until the fabric fell off her and gathered around her ankles.

I pulled her shirt over her head and walked backward with her until we reached the bed. Then I picked her up and dropped her onto the mattress. She giggled and rolled onto her stomach.

Angela looked over her shoulder and licked her lips. She was still wearing her black heels, which complimented her red and black panties and black bra. I ran my hands up the back of her thighs and squeezed her ass. Then I gave her right ass cheek a firm slap.

She yelped playfully and wiggled her butt in the air.

I unzipped my fly and stripped out of my jeans and shirt. “Get ready, sweetheart. I’m about to show you just how bad I can be.”

EPILOGUE



ANGELA

I was certain there would be a red handprint on my ass after Sabian smacked me again. I liked the sting more than I thought I would as I arched my back and looked imploringly at him over my shoulder. He was naked and had put a condom on while he teased me mirthlessly by slapping my ass and massaging the backs of my thighs.

A rush of excitement shot straight through my core as Sabian hooked his thumbs in my panties and pulled them down my thighs. His fingers grazed the backs of my knees and my calves as he worked them down and let them fall to the ground. Then he climbed on top of me, planting his knees on either side of my thighs and using his body weight to keep me in place.

He pressed his hands into my lower back and worked at my tight muscles with the knuckles of his good hand. I moaned into the comforter. He made his way up my spine to the base of my neck and my shoulders, which he massaged diligently. Within minutes, I could feel his cock pressing against the inside of my thigh. It made me tremble with desire.

He ran his fingers back down my spine with a feather-light touch that gave me goosebumps. He traced his fingers over my ass and let them fall between my legs, where he cupped my pussy with one hand as he leaned over me.

I looked up at him, and he bent his head to kiss me. He tasted like mint and smelled like sex. I lifted my hips off the bed and moaned softly into his mouth when he slipped a finger inside me.

I was pinned beneath him as he fucked me with his finger. I didn't mind. In fact, I liked not having any control. I gave in to him when he pushed another finger inside me. I let my head fall forward until my face was resting back in the comforter. I sighed with contentment as he stretched me open, filling me up to his knuckles.

He leaned forward more to kiss my cheek and my shoulders. He pulled his fingers out of me and rubbed my clit in slow circles. I moaned, unable to contain the sound, as I became more and more sensitive. He sensed my increasing need and pressed down harder. The tightness below my belly eased as pleasure tore through me. I came with a shriek of delight that I muffled in the blankets.

Sabian was chuckling above me when the rush of my orgasm passed. "Should I stop? Maybe we are pushing it a bit too far."

"Oh, fuck you," I said, trying to sound serious. My laughter sold me out.

Sabian rocked back on his heels. His muscular thighs were still squeezing my legs and holding me in place. I stared back at him as he stared at my pussy.

"I like the view from here," he said as he reached out and ran his fingers up and down my opening. I could hear the wetness between my legs. He dipped his fingers back inside me, wiggled them back and forth until I was gripping the sheets in lust, and then pulled out of me. I let out a frustrated sigh, and he chuckled some more. "Somebody's ready to get fucked."

"And somebody's being a tease," I growled.

"Who? Me?" Sabian pressed his hand to his chest. His two fingers glistened with my juices. "I'm just savoring the moment. I could have died last week. Now I get to have sex with my beautiful fiancée. Can you blame me for prolonging the moment?"

"Yes," I said.

He grinned devilishly and shifted forward, inching up my thighs until his cock was hovering an inch from my swollen pussy. I pressed back until the tip of him was resting against me. He grabbed his shaft and moved his cock up and down my opening, coating himself in my slickness.

Then he was pushing into me. Inch by inch, he forced me open, and I took all of him. I arched my back and lifted my face to the ceiling. Sabian grabbed the base of my neck with one hand and held on as he began thrusting slowly.

My breaths became sharp and ragged, and soon, I was gasping every time he buried himself deep inside me. I moaned as his grip on the back of my neck tightened and he bucked wildly against me.

He leaned over me when I came and nibbled on my neck and ear. I lifted myself up to kiss him desperately as his hips thrust forward and backward in a rhythm bound to make us both climax in seconds. I bit down on my bottom lip in an effort to keep quiet, but when Sabian tightened his fingers in my hair and forced my head back to trail kisses down my throat, I lost the battle.

I screamed his name, and he groaned into my ear. The sound was pure primal need, and it did me in for good. My thighs quivered, and my toes curled as we both cascaded into bliss together.

When we were done, Sabian climbed off of me and padded across my bedroom floor to the bathroom. I heard him running the water and cleaning up as I rolled onto my back and stared at my ceiling.

He returned minutes later and rested one shoulder against the doorframe to my closet. "People are waiting on us, you know? It's our party."

"I know." I sighed. "But can you blame me for prolonging the moment?" I shot him a clever look, impressed with being able to use his own words against him.

Sabian shoulders shook with laughter as he shook his head at me. "Come on. Get dressed before I decide to ravage you

again.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I said, arching my back and cupping my breasts together. I let one hand fall between my legs. “But then again, there’s always later.”

Sabian let out a growl. “Woman. Last chance. Either get dressed or get fucked. Your choice.”

I giggled. “Those are my only options?”

Sabian nodded.

“Fine,” I said, and I let my legs fall apart. “Come fuck me then, fiancé.”

We arrived at my brother’s house a good hour later than we were supposed to. Everyone welcomed us warmly, and some of the men were not shy about asking what we had been up to. Caleb draped an arm over Sabian’s shoulders and guided him through the house and out to the backyard where Axel was flipping burgers on the barbeque. The kids were running around the yard, playing a very pathetic game of tag. None of them were old enough to play in earnest, so there was a lot of standing around in confusion while trying to figure out who was “it.”

On more than one occasion, one of the adults stepped in and wreaked havoc on the game, chasing the kids through the yard until they got tuckered out. Ryder was guilty of doing this several times as we all sat around the table eating our burgers and sipping on beers.

As the night wound down, the kids were put to bed to watch a movie. They were exhausted from all the playing, and Ellie and Holly came down within fifteen minutes to rejoin us. They took up their drinks as Axel started a fire.

We sat around it, content amongst the company of each other, and told funny stories about Hyde. I listened quietly as everyone recounted their favorite memories and looked to Sabian. He smiled wistfully as Derek told all of us about a time that Hyde dropped his motorcycle. He had been too

embarrassed to tell anyone, so Derek had kept it a secret for nearly two years.

I caught Jamie tearing up across the flames of the fire. She met my eye, and I offered her a small smile. She managed to smile back but didn't hold my gaze for long.

I felt for the poor girl. I'd have to reach out and see what there was I could do to help her through this time. Distractions were good.

As I listened to more stories, I heard Derek start talking to Sabian beside me. I played it off like I couldn't hear them, but I caught every word.

"You talk to Dani yet tonight?"

"No," Sabian said.

"Well, she probably didn't want to ruin your evening, but I think you should know. Ruby is sure as hell going to prison, but that big bastard that shanked you might not get that much time. Six months. Maybe less."

I shifted in my seat. Six months or less? I didn't want that monster back on the street. What if he came back to finish what he started?

"We can handle him," Sabian said.

"I just wanted you to know. We thought things ended when we took TJ out. I don't want to make the same mistakes this time."

"You're our treasurer, Derek," Sabian said quietly. "You don't have to worry about this kind of shit anymore. You got away from all this nonsense years ago. This is Ryder's job. I assume Dani's told him?"

"Yeah."

"Then forget it for now. Ryder won't forget what happened. He'll play this smart. Trust me."

"Ryder has enough on his plate already," Derek grumbled. "He's busy looking for that little shit, Jason."

"He'll find him."

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Derek sighed.

“Table this for now.” Sabian straightened in his chair and glanced over at Ryder, who was too busy admiring Dani’s perfect lips to pay any attention to the two men talking about him across the fire. “We can handle whatever comes as long as we stand together.”

Derek seemed to relax when he heard Sabian’s words. I, however, did not relax. I reached out and grabbed Sabian’s hand and pulled it into my lap. I held it there, mindlessly running my thumb over his knuckles as the others around the fire laughed and sipped their drinks.

Sabian leaned over to me. “Everything all right?” he asked under his breath.

“No.”

He moved his chair closer to mine. “You overheard all that?”

I nodded.

Sabian wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Hey,” he said. “Look at me.”

I looked.

“He’s going to jail no matter what. If it’s not as long as we thought, that’s okay. It will still give us time to get ahead of him. That way, when he gets out, we’ll be ready for him. This is what we do, Ang. Trust me. Now that we know who’s gunning for us, we can handle it.”

I swallowed and played with the hem of my dress. “How can you be so sure?”

He smiled. It was a soft and reassuring smile that eased the doubt that had crept into my heart. “They gave us their best shot, and we came out on top. We can do it again.”

I blew out an anxious breath. “I’m not convinced it will be that easy.”

“Easy?” He chuckled. “I never said it would be easy. I said we can handle it. We can handle whatever anyone throws at

us. Look around.” He gestured around the fire, and I soaked in the sight of all the men and women who were quickly becoming my family. “We’re not going to let anyone take this from us. There’s no way in Hell.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek.

“Hey, love birds,” Ryder piped up from across the fire. Both Sabian and I looked over at him. “You two bored of us already?”

I blushed and shook my head. Sabian kissed my cheek but kept his arm wrapped around me. “Bored of you, Ryder? Never.”

Ryder chuckled and tossed more wood onto the fire. “Tell us a story, Sabian.”

Sabian’s eyebrows crept upward. “I assume there’s one you have in mind?”

Ryder nodded. “I never got all the details of what happened at that wedding. Tell us how you beat up your fiancée’s cousins.”

Everyone around the fire chuckled and fixed their attention on Sabian. He looked over at me, and I realized he was asking permission.

“Go ahead,” I said, forcing myself to smile.

“We can go,” he suggested. “Go back to your place. Just you and me. Talk about everything?”

I shook my head. “No. You’re right. Whatever comes, we can handle it.”

I looked around at the eager faces watching Sabian as he started telling the tale of how he pummelled Ross, Dale, and Elijah. I watched their gleeful expressions as they laughed like they didn’t have a care in the world.

This was the life I had chosen. Risk. Danger. Violence.

Laughter.

Love.

Brotherhood.

Family.

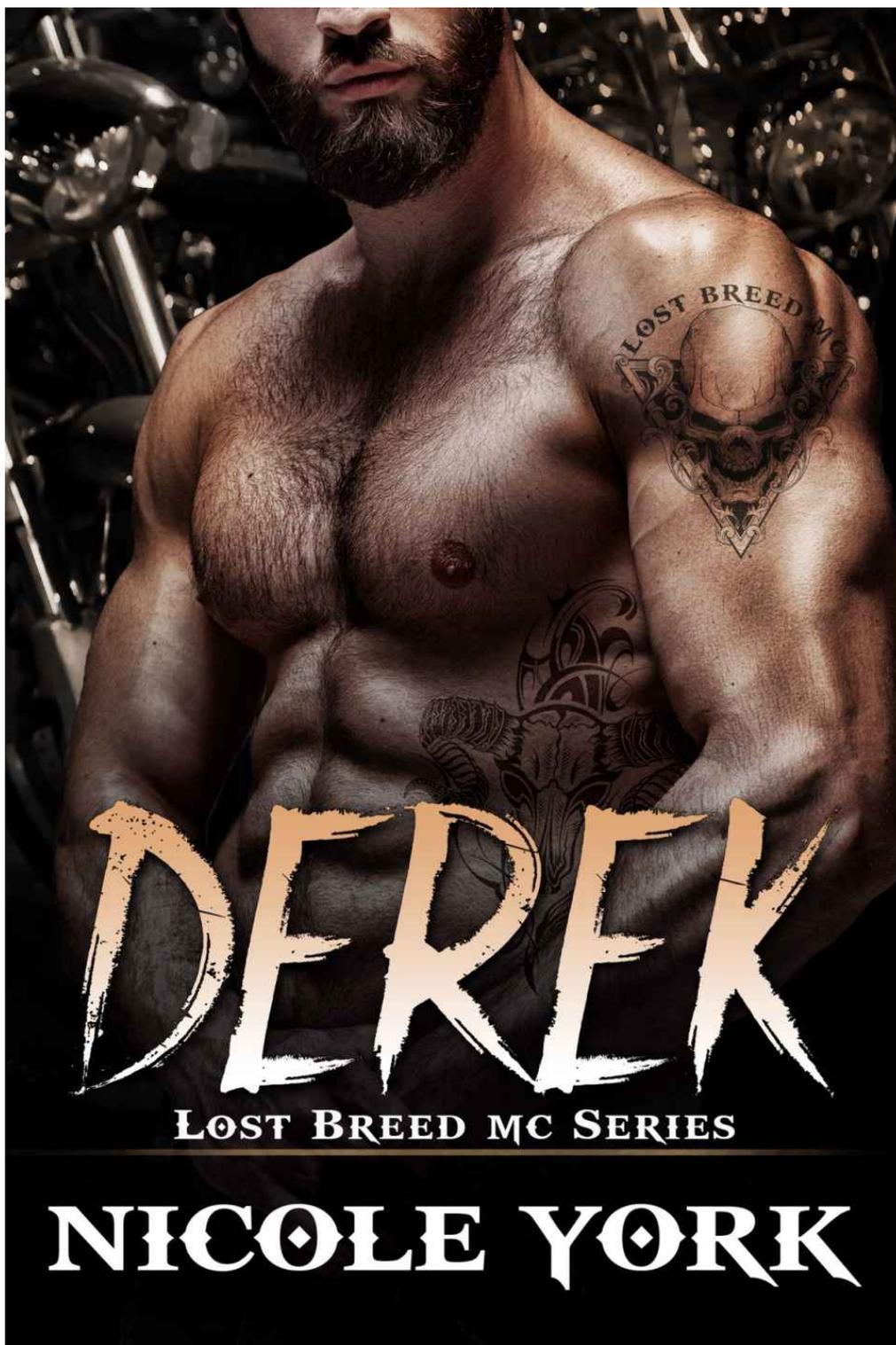
I had known all along what I was getting myself into, and none of the negatives had been enough to keep me at bay. Sabian made up for all the scary things that wanted to ruin the Lost Breed MC. He was my rock. He was the brightest light in my life, and if I could go back, I knew I would make all the same choices.

I turned my attention to Sabian. He spoke with enthusiasm and moved his hands as he threw fake punches to imitate the fight at the wedding. His wrist and fingers were still splinted. His jaw was still bruised; the purpling had faded to an unsightly yellowish brown. The bandage that had been on his throat was gone, and a dark red line was visible in the firelight.

I smiled to myself and rested a hand on his knee as he recounted the final moments of the small battle with Ross.

If the Lost Breed had to fight again, I would be by his side, defending him for all I was worth. And I knew he would do the same for me. They all would. Because that was who they were.

It was who *we* were.

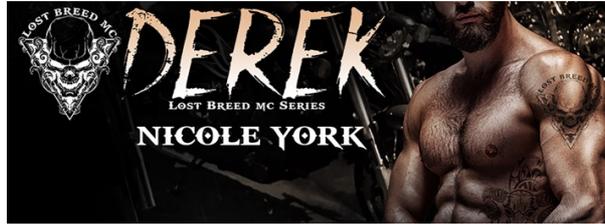


DEREK

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I've never been the sort of man who needed a woman. I've never needed anyone, in fact.

The Lost Breed MC gives me all that I could ever ask for.

They're family, and now they're in danger.

The Hand is inching closer and closer to our inner circle, and he's never been more of a threat than he is right now.

Jason, Ryder's nephew, conveniently reappears while The Hand is making power moves. I'm not blind to coincidence.

Something is amiss.

Not only do I have my hands full dealing with a killer, but there's a beautiful brown-haired girl drawing circles around my heart and making things more complicated.

Love has never been on my radar, but this woman won't give up.

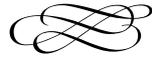
She's in as much danger as I am, if not more.

I might not be enough to stand between her and the man who has been making the last year of my life a living hell, but I'm damn sure going to try.

She's worth it. My MC is worth it.

Together, they're all I have left in the world.

CHAPTER 1



DEREK

When I opened my eyes the morning after the engagement party for Sabian and Angela, my ceiling looked like it was alive. It spun and danced in a sickening way that forced me to close my eyes again to fight off the dizziness. Pressing my fingers to my temples, I groaned at my own self-destructive ways.

Perhaps I'd celebrated a little too hard. Perhaps I'd been pounding back the beers to forget that there was one Lost Breed member missing from around the fire.

With a disgruntled sigh, I dragged my hand over my face and my beard and forced my eyes open again. I stared stubbornly at the ceiling until it ceased swimming and then swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. More spinning greeted me, and I waited yet again until it was safe to march into the bathroom to shower.

The hot water and steam cleared some of the fogginess in my head. As I massaged shampoo into my scalp, my stomach grumbled. A little bit of food would cure this hangover, surely, and I suspected there was a certain someone frying up bacon in Ryder's kitchen right about now.

Dani was a godsend for me and always had been. There was always a spot open for me at her and Ryder's table, and this morning was feeling like it was that kind of morning. A bacon and friends kind of morning.

I toweled off, brushed my teeth, slapped on some deodorant and cologne, and headed out through the door to my

garage where my bike was parked. The chrome pipes and forks winked at me when I clicked the door opener and the fluorescent light stuttered on. I tugged my helmet on over my still wet hair, stepped over the leather seat, and turned the bike on. The engine roared, and I backed her out of the garage and turned her around in the driveway.

My neighbors hated me.

I revved her until I was satisfied, closed the garage door behind me, and peeled out of the driveway and down my street like the devil himself was riding my smoke.

It was the beginning of September in New York City, which meant a few things: the best riding weather was around the corner, I'd be able to wear my leather jacket in the day again, and my beard wouldn't be so damn uncomfortable. It also meant the women of the city would be covering up their bare legs and arms and wouldn't be wearing dresses anymore. They'd trade them in for full-length pants and high-neck sweaters.

It was a damn shame.

Knowing the summer was coming to an end, I took a route to Ryder's that I knew would provide me with the best view of tanned legs and low-cut dresses. I cut through a café and boutique district, and the roar of my engine drew the attention of most people wandering up and down the sidewalks—including a trio of beautiful young women sipping cold coffees at an outdoor patio table.

I parked my bike on the curb, pulled my helmet off, and raked my fingers through my hair. I knew they were watching as I swung my leg over the seat and hooked my helmet on the handlebars. I strode over to them and took in their pretty pink lips, painted toes, and summer tans. They were the perfect ménage trio, a redhead, a blonde, and a brunette. And they were all smiling coyly at me.

“Ladies,” I said with a curt nod as I stepped up onto the sidewalk in front of them.

They giggled as I'd expected them to and offered me flirty hellos in return.

I wasn't a shy man by any standards, and I wasn't blind to the fact that the female species found me attractive. I also wasn't enough of a fool to think "attractive" was the right word to describe myself. I dropped into the open seat at their table and looked at each one of them in the eye. "I couldn't just ride by such sexy ladies without stopping to ... investigate."

More giggles.

The redhead pursed her full lips around her straw and sucked back on it. The way her cheeks puckered in had my mind creating fantasies of her in my bed sucking my cock rather than that tiny straw. Her skin was decorated with freckles, and she had the nicest pair of tits I'd seen on a woman in a long time. Her low-cut green dress complimented her shape.

The blonde was a real treat. She was wearing a pink dress, and her hair was pushed back off her forehead by her thick-framed sunglasses. Her legs were crossed, and she was bouncing one foot, perhaps a little nervously, up and down. I caught her eyes roaming from the toe of my boot to my eyes, and she blushed.

"Like what you see, sweetheart?"

She shrugged a tanned shoulder and didn't say anything. But her eyes did. Her eyes said a lot of things, most prominently yes.

The brunette had a bright yellow sundress on. She seemed the most reserved, and her outfit bore the least amount of skin, which promised me a simple truth that I'd learned in all my time with women—she would be the real wild one in bed.

I pulled a receipt for brake pads out of my jeans pocket and asked if any of them had a pen. The redhead pulled a bright pink one out of her bag. It had a jewel at the end, but I didn't give a damn. I scrawled my number on the back of the receipt and slid it into the middle of the table before getting

back to my feet. I handed her the pen back and winked. “If the three of you are looking for something to do tonight, it would be my pleasure to take care of you. But it’s an all or nothing kind of situation. You catch my drift?”

All three of them nodded. Wonderful.

I didn’t say anything else as I turned away from them and got back on my bike. The engine roared to life again, and I shot them a devious look before putting my helmet on and tearing away from the curb to head to Johnny Moretti’s house for bacon.

And to talk. There was a lot of shit we needed to deal with. I couldn’t let it sit like an elephant in the room any longer. Hyde was dead. The Devil’s Hand was going to be out of prison soon. And we didn’t have a course of action.

Talk now. Fuck later.

When I got off my bike in Ryder’s driveway, the smell of bacon assaulted my nose. Dani was as predictable as the rising sun with her cooking habits.

I marched up to the front door, knocked twice, and let myself in. Dani yelled hello from the kitchen and then giggled after a predominant slapping sound echoed down the hall. Ryder had no doubt gave her ass a firm slap.

He emerged in the doorway to the kitchen as I closed the front door behind me. His white button-up was open, and he wore loose, low riding jeans.

“What the hell, Ryder,” I grunted. “Cover up, will you? This is too much for my eyes on an empty stomach.”

Ryder rubbed his abs teasingly and flashed me a grin. “You like it, you big bastard.”

“Is that Derek?” Dani called from the kitchen.

“Who else has the nerve to disturb us on a Tuesday morning?” Ryder asked, still smirking as I brushed by him and went into the kitchen.

Dani was pouring pancake batter on a flat pan. She was dressed in loose sweats and a tight tank top. She'd pulled her hair up in a messy knot on top of her head and held it in place with a kerchief. She looked fine as hell—a thought I would forever keep locked in the deep recesses of my mind and never say aloud for fear of Ryder finding out.

Dani shot me a warm smile and turned her back on the pan. “I’d say I’m surprised to see you, but this has become a routine.”

I dropped lazily into one of their kitchen chairs and draped my arm over the back. “I just can’t stay away from your cooking, Dani.”

She clicked her tongue. “So long as it’s just you. I’m not keen on this becoming a thing and before I know it, I’m cooking for the lot of you. I can’t imagine how many pancakes that would be.”

“Hundreds,” Ryder said.

“At least,” I agreed.

Dani returned to her cooking, and Ryder asked if I wanted coffee. I shook my head and asked for water instead, which he placed in front of me before taking up the seat across from me. As he stretched his hands over his head and cracked his back, Dani bustled over to the table with plates of pancakes. She set them down in front of us and went back for hers. Then, she brought out the bacon on a plate, a bowl of fresh fruit, maple syrup, and butter.

“I don’t know what you ever did to deserve her, Ryder, but you hit the motherload. This looks amazing, Dani. Thank you,” I said before stuffing my face with a bite of fluffy pancake.

Dani smiled, pleased with my flattery, and cut into her own. She was a much more proper eater than me and Ryder. She cut each stacked bite into the perfect size, dragged it through her syrup, and popped it into her mouth. Then, she would take a bite of a berry and chew delicately as Ryder and I

sucked everything off our plates and washed it down with coffee or water.

When I was done, I leaned back and patted my stomach. “You treat us right, Dani.”

She leaned back, too, and jokingly pushed her gut out. There wasn’t much of one, but she ran her hands over it like she was an expectant mother and flashed Ryder a bright smile. “What do you think of my food baby?”

Ryder smirked. “I can make it a real one if you like.”

Dani laughed and sucked her gut back in. “Maybe when things calm down.”

I was glad she’d made the comment. It had opened up a natural segue for me to say what I’d held my tongue about the night before for Angela and Sabian’s sake. They didn’t deserve some asshole ruining their special night with talk of murder and prison and impending doom.

Not that Dani deserved it after cooking a five-star breakfast, either.

I stroked my beard and cleared my throat. “I was actually hoping to talk to the two of you about this whole ... mess.”

Dani arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

I had Ryder’s attention too. “Spit it out, then.”

“I think now would be a very easy time to sit back and enjoy the tail end of summer. I think it would be easy to get distracted by responsibilities at the shop and enjoying mornings like this. I think—”

“Out with it,” Ryder growled.

I sighed. “I’m worried that when The Devil’s Hand gets out of prison, we’re going to be caught with our dicks in our hands again, and it will cost someone else their life.”

Dani shot a look at Ryder, who was scowling at me from across the table. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. “You think I’m just going to fuck around?”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. That bastard almost cost us Sabian too. You and I were both there. Had I not brought Caleb with me back here, things would have gone a whole lot differently.”

Dani was nodding. “Hear him out, Johnny.”

“I hear him,” Ryder said flatly. “And I agree with you, Derek. The fact that you felt you needed to say any of this shit to me is fucking annoying. You really think I would prefer to work on my tan than figure out a way to stop this piece of shit in his tracks as soon as he’s out of the block?”

I shrugged. “No. But I had to be sure.”

Ryder was an intimidating man. More than intimidating. I’d seen him do some scary shit—*helped* him do some scary shit—and I was not in a hurry to plant myself in his line of fire. Ryder leaned back again and knitted his hands behind his head. “We’re going to take action, Derek. Rest assured.”

“What do you need me to do?”

Ryder smiled. “I want you to put the word out with any of your old contacts from your life before the Lost Breed. See if anyone knows anything about The Devil’s Hand. This prick is going down for what he did to Hyde. Mark my words.”

I marked them in the back of my mind like a giant fucking neon sign.

All it said was *death*.

CHAPTER 2



EVELYN

Every single job posting I scrolled by was another blow to my confidence. I wasn't qualified for anything, not even most serving jobs.

I readjusted myself on Penny's couch, tucking my legs under my body to sit cross-legged and pulling the laptop over my knees. As I read through the description of a posting for a barista position, I pulled my dark hair over one shoulder and began aimlessly braiding my curls.

"Must be a self-starter. Must have reliable transportation. Must like working early shifts. Must have a minimum of two years experience in a restaurant environment." I groaned and tossed my braid back over my shoulder. "Two years? To make coffee and put a scone on a plate? Give a girl a chance, for crying out loud!"

I heard the shower turn off down the hall off the living room. Penny's voice carried down the hall as she sang a familiar Disney parody while she dried off.

I wished I had my shit figured out like she did. She was working at a bank as a teller, but everything was in place for her to work toward moving into being a financial advisor. She was wicked smart when it came to money, and her advice had been extremely helpful over the last month and a half. She was beautiful and charming, and I felt like dead weight sleeping on her couch every night.

I reminded myself every day that it was only temporary. Just until I could land a job and get enough money to find my

own apartment and set out on my own. This was simply the price I had to pay for wasting too much time going down a path I didn't want.

My parents, bless their souls, had pushed me into law school two years ago after they couldn't handle my *dillydallying*—their words, not mine—any longer. At the time, I'd just finished up my first year working for a family in Honolulu as their nanny. They had two little girls who I adored, and I'd loved my time there with them. I cooked and cleaned, took the kids to and from school and their recreational activities, and attended all family events. Had my parents not forced me into law school, I would probably still be there living in the garden shed the father had converted into a charming little bedroom in the backyard.

But I didn't stand my ground. I let my parents bulldoze me, and I was in law school that September. I lasted two years before dropping out due to misery and self-loathing. I was being untrue to myself. The corporate and business life was not what my soul craved. I needed freedom and fun and energy. I needed passion and love and fierce commitment to what set my soul on fire.

That was not law school.

My parents didn't take the news well. My mother, a newly retired orthodontist, nearly had a brain aneurysm when I sat across the dining room table from her and told her I'd dropped out. My father tried to appease her to no avail.

The next morning, they kicked me out. I packed up what I could and called Penny, sobbing, and she told me to bring my shit over to her house. When I arrived, she had a buffet of snacks set out on the living room table, a bottle of wine, nearly a dozen blankets, and a rom-com ready to start on her big flat-screen TV. She'd hugged me while I cried and asked me to stay with her until I was on my feet.

I hadn't been able to say no, and there was nowhere else for me to go.

That was a month and a half ago.

I clicked on another job opening at a cigar lounge not far from Penny's apartment as she came out of the bathroom. She padded down the hall and plopped down on the couch across from me. She was wearing booty shorts and a loose tank top, and her blond hair was tied up in her floral-patterned towel. Penny was a hopeless romantic and the definition of femininity. If it was pink or had flowers on it, she needed it. Simple as that.

"Any luck?" Penny asked, cocking her head to the side.

I glanced up at her over the top of my laptop and shook my head. "Nothing yet. Although this one sounds more promising than all the others. It's a cigar lounge. The Stokes. Have you heard of it?"

Penny nodded. "Yeah, it's pretty classy. I bet you'd make killer tips with that body of yours."

I bit my lip. "I don't think that's the direction I want to go."

"Oh, please." Penny rolled her eyes. "Just send an application. The worst that can happen is you go down there and don't like it. So what? You can walk away at any time. You don't owe employers anything. You're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you. You gotta change your mindset, girl."

As with everything, Penny was right. "All right. I'll apply. I have a couple others I'm going to shoot my resumé to as well."

"Awesome." Penny grinned, hopping off the couch. "I'm going to finish getting ready for work. Good luck!"

Penny left for the bank at nine o'clock. After two hours passed, I was still sending in applications. I'd applied to the cigar lounge, two coffee shops, three restaurants, and a couple of retail stores. The pay was minimum, but I had to start somewhere. I'd been unemployed for too long, and my emergency fund I'd started putting money in while I lived in Honolulu was beginning to dwindle.

Later that afternoon, as I sat down to dig into a tuna sandwich, my cell phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, so I answered the phone cheerfully, hoping it was one of the employers calling back about an application. "Hello?"

A male voice answered. "Hi there, is this Evelyn East?"

"Speaking."

"Evelyn. Hi. My name is Bruce, and I'm a comanager at The Stokes. I just received your resumé, and we're looking to fill the position pretty quickly. Is there any chance I could get you in here tomorrow for an interview?"

My heart started hammering, and my palms grew sweaty. "Yes, tomorrow works perfectly. I live close by and can be there at whatever time works best for you, Bruce."

"Great. How about three o'clock?"

"I'll be there," I said, grinning like a fool by myself in Penny's living room. "Would you like me to bring a copy of my resumé along for reference?"

"Nah, it's all right. We have the electronic file. And I have a good feeling about you."

My smile stretched my face even more, and my cheeks started aching. "I can't wait to come in and chat with you. Thank you for calling back so quickly."

"Thanks, Evelyn. Have a good rest of your day."

I hung up the phone feeling giddy. I had a good feeling about Bruce too. I slapped my laptop closed, hopped up off the couch, and then proceeded to clean Penny's entire apartment. - I'd been keeping it spick-and-span since I moved in, feeling like it was my duty to go above and beyond to show her how grateful I was for having a free place to stay while I sorted my life out.

I did the dishes and scrubbed the floors. I vacuumed while blasting music and dancing like an idiot and dusted every surface in the place.

Then around four o'clock, I started dinner.

Penny got home from work at exactly six o'clock. She came in through the front door as I pulled the lasagna out of the oven. She stopped, beamed at me, and inhaled deeply. "That smells heavenly."

"It's celebration lasagna," I said as I put it down on top of the oven.

Penny shrugged her purse off her shoulder and narrowed her eyes at me. "Are we celebrating a potential new job opportunity?"

I grinned and nodded. "Yes. The cigar lounge called me in for an interview tomorrow afternoon. He said he had a good feeling about me. And to be honest, I felt pretty good about him too. He seems nice and professional."

Penny clapped her hands together. "Fantastic! What are you going to wear?"

I blinked at her. "Uh. I hadn't thought about that. I don't really have any interview appropriate clothing with me." I glanced at the three giant suitcases lined up behind her sofa. I was living out of those. It had gotten old after the first week.

"That doesn't matter." Penny waved her hand at me. "We can raid my closet. I have plenty of business casual and sexy items."

"Sexy?"

Penny nodded and walked over to the lasagna. She smelled it again and sighed contently. "Yeah. It's a cigar lounge, Evie. They're going to want you to show a little leg. Or boob. Or both."

I winced.

Penny rubbed my shoulder. "Don't worry. It can be done tastefully. Trust me. Let's eat the shit out of this lasagna, and then I'll help you throw an outfit together. I already have a couple ideas."

"Oh, dear," I mumbled.

"I'll take care of you. Trust me." Penny grabbed plates from the cupboard and cut into the lasagna. Then, we both sat

down at the kitchen table and pigged out. I wasn't the sort of girl to toot her own horn, but I was gifted in the kitchen. Penny seemed to think so too. She closed her eyes as she chewed and pointed at the pasta on her plate with her fork. "There is no one in the world who makes lasagna as good as you do."

"Thank you." I grinned.

After dinner, Penny raided her closet and made me strip down to my bra and panties. We went through countless outfits, and each time, she said it needed "just a little bit more." I had no clue what that meant, so I let her keep going, pulling more skirts and tops and shoes from the depths of her closet.

Everything she had me try on was out of my comfort zone. I was the sort of girl who liked flat shoes, preferably sandals, loose tops, and jeans. I favored comfort over fashion and practicality over sexy. Penny was the opposite. The outfits she wore to the bank were always far too tight for my tastes and finished off with a heel made for stabbing someone in the throat. She looked like a goddess, though, and she assured me that combining my more laid-back style with a bit of her sexy tastes would be perfect for this job.

At the end of the process, I found myself standing in front of the full-length mirror on the back of her bedroom door admiring myself. She'd put me in a skintight black skirt that cut off at the middle of my thighs. My legs looked long and lean with the heels she had paired with it. They were black and strappy and not something I would have ever picked up off a shelf to try on, let alone buy. But they weren't as uncomfortable as I thought, and I liked the effect they had on my legs. The shirt was black and tight too. The collar went up to my jaw, but it was see-through lace, revealing skin in a more tasteful way.

I ran my hands down my thighs. "I really like this, Penny. Thank you."

Penny was sitting on her bed, leaning back on her hands. "You look hot as fuck, girl. Seriously. If he doesn't hire you, he's going to want to fuck you."

“Penny,” I said, scowling at her. “That’s not going to make me any less nervous. I don’t want that sort of attention when I’m trying to get a job.”

“Don’t worry about it. You said he sounded professional. Chances are it will be fine. But you’ll definitely make an impression. A good one.”

“Awesome,” I said, smiling again.

“There’s only one thing missing.” Penny pushed herself up and went to the shelving unit in her attached bathroom. She came back with a basket full of nail polishes. “If your toes are showing, we’re going to have to do something about that old polish. It’s ghastly.”

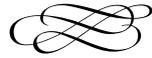
“Hey,” I said defensively as I looked down at my toes. I hadn’t had a pedicure since I was still in law school, and even then, it hadn’t been all that recent. Four months or so, probably. All my toes were naked except for my big toe, which was sporting a stripe of dark blue at the halfway mark. I looked up at Penny. “You’re right.”

“Of course, I am. Come on, let’s throw on a movie, have some wine, and paint our toes. I think you should go with a Ferrari red. What do you think?”

I groaned. If left up to me, I would go with something a little more unassuming. Like a soft pink or another shade of blue. Penny was always trying to stand out where I wanted to blend in. But this was her rodeo, and she was already shaking the red polish in one hand as we walked down the hall.

The decision, it seemed, was already made.

CHAPTER 3



DEREK

The air conditioning in my truck hadn't been enough to cool me down on the drive home from the gym early Wednesday morning. I was still sweating like a mule when I grabbed my gym bag from the back seat and headed inside, where I stood in the kitchen to drink two full glasses of water.

I went to my bedroom to find my bed still occupied by the sexy brunette I'd hit up on the patio the day before on my way to Ryder's. She'd been, as I suspected, wild between the sheets. Her girlfriends hadn't been all that bad either. But I'd kicked the blonde and the redhead out after midnight and invited the brunette to stay.

I might have been mistaken, but I was pretty sure her name was Emily. Or Julie. Or something along those lines.

She was tangled up under my gray sheets and had one bare leg and hip exposed. The curve of her body was delicious, and I grinned to myself as I passed by and went to shower.

When I came back out to the bedroom, she was just starting to wake up. Her hair was a chaotic mess from fucking straight through until morning, and her lips were swollen. She looked cute as hell, but I didn't dare tell her that. This was a one time, hit it and quit it kind of situation. I wasn't looking for anything long-term, especially not right now. The Lost Breed MC was knee deep in shit, and women had a way of fucking with my head and jumbling my priorities. I had to maintain focus and discipline. Ryder was counting on me.

Emily—or Julie—propped herself up on her elbows and watched me dress with a sleepy smile. “Where did you go off to so early this morning?”

“The gym,” I said as I stepped into my jeans and buttoned them up. “I didn’t want to wake you. Hope you don’t mind.”

She shrugged. “Nope. I was surprised to wake up and find you gone. Pretty trusting to leave a strange girl alone in your place with so much shit lying around.” She pointed her chin at my nightstand where one of my watches sat on a tray. She looked back at me. “A Montblanc, no less.”

“A girl who knows her watches,” I said, one of my eyebrows arching with approval.

Emily—or Julie—swung her legs over the bed and stood. She was a sight to behold with strong thighs and the poise of a ballerina. She brushed her fingers over my bare chest as she passed to gather her clothes from the floor behind me. She pulled her shirt over her head without bothering to put her bra on. “My dad was a collector. I can spot a luxury watch a mile away. You have good taste.” She glanced at the rest of my collection on top of my dresser.

My work before joining the Lost Breed had afforded me a lifestyle that did not match my rugged reputation. I was a collector of fine things, including women, and I enjoyed pieces of art like watches. I was also guilty for spending what some might consider a little too much money on suits, shoes, and cologne.

Sue me.

Once Emily—or Julie—was dressed, she tossed her hair over her shoulder. “This was fun. You have my number should you ever want to, you know, fool around. I’m not looking for anything more than that right now.”

“You’re speaking my language, kitten,” I said, giving her perky ass a nice little pat. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

I said goodbye to her at the front door and watched her hips sway as she went out to her car. I might call her. I might

not. I probably should have double-checked what her name was.

I was in the middle of washing my bike in the driveway when a familiar name flashed across my phone screen as a call came in. I dried my hands on my pants and picked up the call. “Warren,” I said.

Warren was my old boss. He ran an underground enforcement crew that worked for a particularly dangerous mafia family in New York City. Had it not been for Ryder, I would still be in that life. Or I’d be dead and six feet under. Warren’s voice was as crackly and dry as I remembered. He was probably still smoking a pack a day to deal with his stress. “Derek,” he drawled. “I was surprised to catch wind that you were putting feelers out there about a certain prisoner eligible for early release.”

“It’s good to hear from you too.”

Warren chuckled. At least, that’s what I interpreted the breathless wheezing through the speaker to be. “Meet me at the old hand-off spot. I have information for you. Come alone.”

“See you in twenty.”

When I approached the old bench in the park I used to meet Warren, I had flashbacks of being a lot younger and a lot dumber. I used to saunter up to this bench on a weekly basis, where Warren would hand me a manila envelope with my cash and the information for that week’s job. Sometimes it was theft or blackmail or a show of force assignment. It was always illegal.

This time felt strange. Warren looked a little worse for wear. He was probably close to his fifties now, and wrinkles were starting to appear on his face. He was dressed in a light gray suit with a blue tie and pointed black shoes. His blond hairline was receding, and his jaw was looking a little softer when he turned to look up at me with a cigarette hanging out of one side of his mouth.

The first thing I did as I sat down was look to see if he had an envelope. Nope.

“You’re looking fit,” Warren observed.

“You’re looking like you have a bad case of smoker’s lung.”

Warren’s green eyes twinkled, and he chuckled. He put the cigarette out on the bench beside him and tossed the butt in the grass at his feet. “I’ve missed that. All my boys do now is kiss my ass and try to win my favor. It’s a damn shame I lost you. That mouth of yours was annoying at the time, but money can’t buy an honest man these days.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure one will come along one of these days.”

“One of these days could always be today, and one could always be you,” Warren offered.

“Thanks, but no. I’ve got a soft spot to land, and I’m not fucking that up.”

“Still running with Moretti, hey?”

I nodded. “Until I die, Warren.”

Warren held up his hands to admit defeat. “I hear you. I hear you. But should the tables ever turn, you know you have a spot as my right-hand man. Any time you want it. It’s yours.”

“Thank you, Warren,” I said, knowing I just had to make him feel heard in order to move on. “So, what did you call me here for? You know about this bastard, The Devil’s Hand?”

Warren nodded slowly. “Anyone who’s anyone knows who he is. A damn plague upon this earth, if you ask me. He’s cost me many men and my associates’ men. I hope you’re not treading too close to him, Derek. I’d hate to read your obituary in the paper one morning while having my cigarette on the balcony.”

“Your cigarettes will kill you before he kills me.”

Warren chuckled. “You do not know him as well as I do, then. You are aware that he’s insane, right? No remorse. No shame. No honor code. He is a merciless killer who abides by no rules. He does as he wants when he wants.”

“He killed one of my brothers.”

“Only one?” Warren asked.

I clenched my jaw. “That’s all he’s going to get. We’re going to bring him down.”

“You and Moretti?”

“Me and whoever else has the balls to go after him.”

Warren nodded, but it wasn’t genuine. Then, he blew out a long sigh and reached in his pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes. He sparked another one up. “I have inside information that he will be released early, Derek. All he’s getting is a slap on the wrist. He has connections. People pulling strings for him.”

“When are they releasing him?”

“Don’t overreact. I don’t want to draw any attention to us. And I know this will piss you off. He’ll be out Friday afternoon.”

“Fuck,” I growled.

Warren nodded. “Fuck. Yes. If you’re hoping to catch up with him, I also have been told that he’ll be at Kadia nightclub on Saturday with some of his boys to celebrate his freedom. If I were you, I’d find someone who has exceptional aim, and I’d kill him from a distance. It’s the only way to ensure you don’t incur any more fatalities.”

I rolled my shoulders. Out on Friday? That was fucking bullshit. He’d killed a man. My fellow Lost Breed brother. Damn the system for its corruption. A gang member was less a life than another citizen, and the law used that to their advantage to let him off easy.

I got to my feet. “Thank you for meeting me.”

“You keep this shit between us, Derek. I don’t want my name on your tongue until you’re clear of this, you hear me? I could get myself killed talking to you about this shit.”

“I hear you. I won’t say a word.”

“Good,” Warren said, taking a long draw from his smoke. “Now get the fuck out of here. I’m meeting someone else in five.”

I left without saying anything else. At first, I wasn’t sure where I should go, and then I decided I needed to find Caleb and give him the head’s up. Caleb was a bouncer at Kadia, the trendiest club in New York City that played host to partygoers of all levels between wild and tame.

If The Devil’s Hand walked into the club on Saturday and caught Caleb off guard, shit could get bad real fast.

I waited for Caleb in the gym parking lot by his car. He came out, his bag slung over his shoulder, and gave me a sheepish grin. “You look good draped up against my car like that.”

“Fuck off,” I growled, nudging his shoulder and jostling him around playfully.

Caleb chuckled and opened his back door to toss his bag in. Then, he slammed it shut and faced me with his arms crossed. “So. What’s wrong? You never show up out of the blue unless it’s bad news.”

“Not true.”

“Name a time.”

“Uh—”

“Don’t bother. There aren’t any.” Caleb leaned one hip against the car. “So what’s up?”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “The Devil’s Hand is getting out of prison on Friday. He’ll be at Kadia on Saturday night. Will you be working the door?”

Caleb stuttered as he tried to process all the shit I’d just thrown at him. “Out on Friday? What the fuck? It’s only been

a few weeks!”

“I know.”

“That’s so fucked up. Ryder is gonna be—”

“Are you working Saturday or not, Caleb?”

He clapped his mouth shut and nodded. “Yeah. Fuck. I’ll let the other boys know something might go down that night. Are you planning something?”

“I’m going to run it by Ryder before I discuss it.”

“Fair.” Caleb nodded. Then he groaned and slumped over. “I had plans with a girl on Saturday. Fucking tits. Now I’ll have to think of a stupid excuse to keep her from showing up.”

“A girl, hey?” I asked, wagging my eyebrows at him.

“Yeah. She’s fine as hell, man. And something special.”

“Special?” I teased.

“Fuck off.”

“Is she super duper special, bro? Does she make you all tingly inside?”

“Fuck off,” Caleb said again, taking a playful swipe at me.

I laughed and backed away toward my truck. “All right, all right. You keep your girl away from the club. I’ll be in touch.”

“Where are you heading now?”

“Ryder’s.”

CHAPTER 4



EVELYN

Penny had her hands on her hips, and she was giving me the same look my mother used to give me when I tried to wear jeans that were too low and too tight to my first day of tenth grade. “I don’t understand why you won’t just borrow my clothes to start. There’s no need to go out and blow a bunch of your cash on new stuff when I have plenty of things you can use. We’re the same size!”

“I know, I know,” I said, trying to appease her. “But I already feel bad enough for freeloading off you. You won’t take any money for rent, so the least I can do is this.”

“The least you can do? I haven’t had to cook for myself in a month and a half.”

“Yeah, but that’s because I like cooking.”

“Is it?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

I sighed. “Are you really going to turn down a shopping trip, Penny?”

Penny groaned and threw her hands in the air in defeat. She marched over to the kitchen counter where her phone was sitting and called in sick to work. She even threw in a dainty fake cough, and I heard her boss tell her to take it easy today. Penny hung up and gave me a smile. “Okay. Two conditions. One, we stop and get cappuccinos on the way to the mall. And two, you have to try on everything I tell you to, because I know you, and you’re going to gravitate to the same long-sleeved, skirt to the knees shit.”

“But—”

“Nope,” Penny said sharply, shaking her head. “Those are my conditions. Take it or leave it.”

I found myself grinning and then giggling. “What would I do without you?”

We hit the mall after stopping for coffees. It was decently busy being a Friday morning. People bustled by and around us as we plunged into store after store. It took me awhile to loosen up and find my groove, and by the time we reached the third store, I was finally willing to start trying things on.

Penny draped clothes over her arm that she wanted me to try and picked up a couple things for herself. I collected a small number of modest blouses that Penny scrunched her nose at. She pointed at a yellow one hanging off my finger. “What is *that*?”

I glanced at the blouse. “It’s a blouse.”

Penny shook her head. “For work?”

“Well, yeah.” I liked it. The buttons were sparkly, and it had a low-ish neckline. The sleeves could be rolled up, and I figured it would look cute tucked into a skirt or a high waisted pair of shorts.

“Put that back. Who are you? Miss Daisy? You’re going to be catering to men who are going to a cigar lounge to relax and sip on whiskey. It’s sophisticated, Evie. Not cutesy.”

I hung the blouse back up and frowned. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Well, that’s all right because you have me, and I know exactly what I’m doing. Come on.” She hooked her arm in mine and led me around the store. She pulled thin-strapped flowy tops and tight little dresses from their racks. Everything she chose was in dark colors or reds. She found skirts and tiny black shorts with buttons up the front. When her arms were overflowing with clothes, she marched me to the back of the store and shoved me into a fitting room. She unloaded everything in her arms into mine. “Okay. Here. I’m going to

be in the next changing room trying this on,” she said, showing me a tiny little dress with cutouts on the side. Then, she closed the door in my face, leaving me to my fate in the fitting room with a thousand clothes that threatened to swallow me up.

The first outfit I tried on was simple, a little black dress that was skintight all over. It had thick straps and a sweetheart neckline that emphasized my busty chest.

“Do you have something on yet?” Penny called from the other side of the door.

“Yes. But it’s a bit ... much.”

“No such thing. Come out here and show me.”

I did as I was told and emerged from the fitting room feeling like a freshly cased sausage.

Penny gasped when she saw me. “Oh my goodness, Evie, this is stunning. Are you sucking in? Why the hell are you sucking in? Stop that. You look like a troll.” She clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

“I don’t think I’ll get tips looking like a troll,” I said, a little nervous and more than plenty uncomfortable. This was completely out of my element.

“No, silly. I said you looked like a troll because you were all hunched up to suck in. Just relax and be natural. You’re gorgeous. Do you like this one? It’s not too revealing.”

“It’s a little revealing.”

Penny gestured at the royal blue dress she had on. Chunks of fabric were missing exposing her sides and ribs and most of her back. “This is revealing. Yours is just a cute little cocktail dress. It’s perfectly appropriate for the work you’ll be doing. And you want to make money, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then you’re getting this one. Okay?”

I grumbled and returned to the fitting room. There was no arguing with Penny once she’d made up her mind about

something. I stripped out of the black bodycon and swapped it out for a miniskirt and flashy gold top. When I showed it to Penny, she shook her head sternly. “No. Too trashy.”

Trashy was not what I was going for, so I went in and changed again. And again. And again. I kept going until I’d whittled it down to only a few items. Penny separated the no from the yes pile for me and gave me all the things she thought I should buy. She let me veto one top that was just too low-cut for me after I told her there was no way in hell I would ever wear it. I reminded her I was a bit strapped for cash, and she let it go.

After paying for the black dress, a blue dress, two skirts, and three tops, we moved on to the next store.

We spent the better half of the afternoon at the mall. It became more fun the longer I went and the more I got used to seeing myself dressed in clothes I would never have imagined wearing. I went from pantsuits and law school to cocktail dresses and serving. What a leap.

My parents would have blown their tops if they could see me now.

At the end of the trip, I had six massive bags of new clothes and one bag with three pairs of shoes. Penny had purchased a couple things, including the blue dress with cutouts from the first store and a pair of silver sparkly shoes to go with it.

On the way home, she pulled into a parking lot and stated that we were grabbing wine. We got out and went into the store where we proceeded to hem and haw over which bottle to buy.

“You know, all these new clothes of yours have given me an idea.” Penny ran her fingertips over the labels of the wine in the aisle we were walking down.

“I’m nervous already. What’s this idea of yours?”

Penny shot me a look over her shoulder. “I was thinking we should try them out in the real world and go out for a night

of dancing. What do you say? It's been a long time since the two of us went out and just had fun."

I blinked at her and then looked away. I picked up the closest bottle of red wine to me and pretended to find the label interesting. "I don't know. The club isn't really my scene."

"Oh, please. The club is everyone's scene once they have a few drinks in them."

I put the wine back. "Penny I just ... I'm not good with big crowds. Or people looking at me. Or wearing strappy little dresses and heels and wearing a full face of makeup."

"You don't have to wear heels. Or put on a full face. You can do whatever you want. But I miss dancing with my friend. You and I could do with a night like this. It'll be fun. I promise. I know this club we can go that always has cute guys." She trailed off and winked at me.

I laughed. "I think a guy is literally the last thing I need right now. If you haven't noticed, my life is kind of in shambles."

"It is not. And maybe I need a guy."

"You always think you need a guy, Penny. You've been boy crazy since fourth grade."

"Yeah. Because boys are great, especially the ones at Kadia. Trust me. You just have to see for yourself. And I never said you needed to date them or fuck them, for that matter. I just think a dance or two with a sexy guy would do you some good. You know, to remind you that you're a badass chick with a hella fine body."

I sighed. "How about I just dance with you?"

Penny pushed out her bottom lip in a pout. "I'll accept that, but don't get mad at me if I get drunk and want to dance with someone."

"I won't. Promise."

"So," she said slowly. "Does this mean you're down?"

I picked up another bottle of wine. The label was pretty and floral and just the kind of thing Penny would gravitate to. I wagged it, and she nodded. Then, we started to walk to the register. “I guess I’ll come. It will take the pressure off my first day on Monday to get back into that scene and just see what it’s like these days.”

“These days?” Penny giggled.

“Yeah. I haven’t been out since before I went to Hawaii.”

“Oh, shit. Seriously? That’s like, three years.”

“Three and a half,” I corrected.

“Oh, I’m going to make sure you have the time of your life. Grab another bottle of that. We’ll drink it before we hit the club tomorrow night.”

We paid for the wine and got back in the car to head back to Penny’s apartment. She talked my ear off the whole way there about the kind of guys she’d had run-ins with at Kadia. She explained how they were above average when it came to attractiveness. She also said she never paid for a drink there, which was a nice bonus for my very sad wallet and bank account.

“You’ve already talked me into going, Penny. There’s no need to keep trying to convince me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m just really excited. There’s this one bouncer there—oh my goodness, he is so freaking cute. He always lets me get in for free. So, fingers crossed he’s working.”

“Right. Fingers crossed.”

I already regretted agreeing to go to the club, but I was painfully aware that I still owed Penny for everything she was doing for me. If going out for a night would make her happy, then I was more than willing to do it.

Besides, what did I really have to lose from one night of dancing?

CHAPTER 5



Sabian joined me, Ryder, Jax, and Axel at the table on Ryder's back deck. He pulled out his seat and dropped into it before raking his fingers through his black hair and lifting his gaze to meet Ryder's. "Sorry, I'm late."

Ryder dismissed his apology with a shake of his head and looked around at the rest of us. He'd called the meeting that afternoon after I got him all the information about The Devil's Hand getting out of prison on Friday. He'd wanted to throw together a plan of action, and when I told him I already had an idea, he arranged for all of us to meet.

It was still weird that there was an empty chair at one end of the table that should have been occupied by Hyde.

I tried to ignore it as Ryder cleared his throat. "You all know why you're here. That bastard is free as of yesterday afternoon, and we have a plan to eliminate him."

Axel leaned forward on his elbows. "Eliminate?"

"You heard me right." Ryder nodded.

Sabian crossed his arms and slumped back in his chair. "Are you going to share the details of this little plan of yours?"

Ryder glanced at me. "It wasn't my plan, actually. This one is all Derek."

The others all looked at me. I assumed this was my time to talk. "You all know I have connections from before I joined up with you guys. I decided to put them to use and ask some

questions about our big bald problem. Word is The Devil's Hand will be at Kadia tonight.”

“Can we stop calling this bastard The Devil's Hand?” Jax hissed. “Let's simplify it. Can we just stick with The Hand?”

Everyone nodded in agreement and then attention turned back to me. I shrugged one shoulder. “Well, word is The Hand will be at Kadia tonight. I've already spoken with Caleb. He knows what to expect, and he's made arrangements to better accommodate us and our needs. It's going to be tricky working with so many people around, but it's going to be the best shot we have at him. And I, for one, am not going to miss that opportunity.”

Sabian glanced between me and Ryder. “So the plan is to kill him, then?”

We both nodded.

Sabian shrugged. “All right. You won't hear any objections from me.”

“Or me,” Axel grated.

We all looked at Jax, who met our hard stares. “I'm in. What's the plan, then?”

I looked at Ryder, who stared right back at me. He gestured for me to go ahead. I met the eyes of all the men gathered around me. This felt like we were preparing for war. Five generals all gathered around to bring down a common enemy. A personal threat.

I started talking. “The plan is to separate him from his boys. Caleb has switched his shift and won't be working the front door. Instead, he's covering the emergency exit, which opens up onto a back lane where partygoers never venture because it's pretty shady. Once we get him out there, he's ours. The trick will just be moving him out there without him getting suspicious of it being a setup.”

Axel was nodding along to my words. “I'm guessing you have an idea of how to lure him out?”

I nodded. “Yes. He responds to action. Violence. If we can start a brawl in the club, Caleb has directed his guys to get The Hand out of there and into that back lane.”

“Really?” Sabian asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Those boys all know what this bastard is capable of, and they don’t want him hanging around their club any more than we want him hanging around our city. This is our best shot. We have backup and the element of surprise. So long as we can get him outside, we can end him.”

There was a buzz of anticipation in the air. It had been a long time since I did anything this real, and I was itching for a fight. I was itching for blood and payback. It had been a long time since I did anything like this, and I hated myself for craving it. I also told myself it was for a good cause. It was for Hyde. It was to protect my brothers and their families.

But I’d be a liar if I denied I just wanted to feel the rush of a good fight again.

The last time I’d been in a brawl was when Ruby and The Hand had the upper hand in this very house. Caleb and I had shown up and let our fists fly, but the odds were so stacked against us that I never had the chance to really let loose. This time would be different.

“Derek?” Ryder asked.

I blinked. I hadn’t even noticed that I’d zoned out. I shook my head. “Sorry. Did someone ask a question?”

“Who’s going to be the one to off him?” Jax asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ryder said.

“So long as he’s dead when we leave,” I added.

The men all nodded. Then, Axel piped up again. “So, we’re doing this. What time are we leaving?”

“Just before midnight,” I said. “We have to get there late and do it right away. We can’t risk him seeing any of us beforehand.”

“What about civilians?” Sabian asked.

“What about them?” I asked.

Sabian scratched his chin. “There’s a high risk of someone getting pulled into the fray. I’m not interested in jeopardizing innocent people. Kids, probably, knowing fucking Kadia. Just a bunch of people out to enjoy their night and have a good time. I’m only doing this thing if we’re all on the same page. Nobody else gets hurt.”

It was a small request, and something I should have been on board with right away. All the others were. They nodded their agreement and slowly turned to look at me.

What was I willing to risk to put this fucker in the ground? Myself, easily. My brothers, no. Strangers?

Maybe.

That was a bone-chilling thought.

I looked down at the table. “Agreed. Nobody gets hurt.”

The silence around us was thick. Tense. Everyone had caught on to my hesitation, and I wished I could have taken it back. I was hardened from my years working with Warren. He’d made me into a monster to do his bidding. I’d killed men before. I knew for a fact that not all my brothers around the table had done such a deed. They’d come close, sure, and they had blood on their hands, but it wasn’t the same.

I’d done things. Seen things and never said anything. Said things I couldn’t take back.

Ryder clapped his hands together. “Well. We know what’s expected of all of us tonight then, right? We take care of this and spare a lot of people a lot of shit down the road. This bastard deserves nothing less than what we’re going to give him.”

Sabian nodded. “For Hyde.”

“For Hyde,” we all said in unison.

The waiting would be the worst. It was eight o’clock at night now. That was four hours from the time we were scheduled to arrive at Kadia. Four hours to sit and think about what we were about to do.

Kill a man.

I could swallow it easily. I worried that some of the others might not find it as easy.

Ryder, being the wisest of all of us, quickly changed the subject from the impending deed to lighter things. “So Sabian, is Angela consumed with wedding planning yet?”

Sabian chuckled. “You have no idea. She shows me pictures online daily of napkins and tablecloths and curtains. And table runners. And seat covers. Who the fuck knew so many different kinds of linens existed?”

We all laughed. It was a nervous sort of laugh, an obligated laugh.

“And with her damn family, they’re pulling out all the stops. You should see the venues they want us to use. It’s ridiculous. High-scale golf courses and hotels and shit. Angela and I just want to get hitched in a backyard and have an awesome party. That’s our speed.”

Ryder gestured at his backyard. “She’s all yours.”

Sabian arched an eyebrow. “I think Angela would have something to say about all the old cars and pulled motors lying around. And the yellow grass.”

Ryder chuckled. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.” Sabian grinned.

While the rest of them engaged in thin banter, I tried to keep my mind off the fight around the corner. It was impossible. No matter how hard I tried, all I could think about was The Hand’s face and his wicked smile. I could see him jeering at us, standing over Hyde’s corpse, proud of himself.

I’d never wanted to hurt someone so badly before. It scared me.

“You got any beers in your fridge, Ryder?” I asked, getting to my feet.

He looked up at me. “Yeah. Bring some out for us. Take the edge off.”

“That’s exactly my plan,” I said.

I went into the kitchen. On the fridge, secured by a plain silver magnet, was a picture of Dani and Ryder on his living room sofa. Neither of them was looking at the camera. Dani was in his lap and had her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Her head was thrown back in genuine laughter, and he was looking at her like she was the most magnificent thing he had ever seen.

And she probably was.

He looked happier in that photo than I’d ever seen him.

Fighting down the bitterness rising in my throat, I wrenched open the door and grabbed the box of beer. I lifted it out and closed the door with my hip to avoid looking at the photo again.

It must be nice to have someone there when you got home every day. Someone you could unload all your troubles on. Someone who would wrap their arms around you after some terrible shit went down and tell you over and over that it would all be okay until you believed them.

Dealing with grief and the loss of a friend alone was not easy.

I knew I had the MC, and they were there for me. But the love of a woman was more healing than anything else in this world. I craved it as much as I craved the blood of the man who killed my friend on my knuckles.

Maybe, when all this shit was behind me, I could find a woman who would put all my broken pieces back together. Maybe I could find someone who would make me feel worthy again.

CHAPTER 6



EVELYN

“It’s so loud!” I called to Penny over the roar of the music in my ears.

Penny threw me a look over her shoulder as she pulled me into the depths of Kadia nightclub. It was hard to keep up with her in the heels she’d forced me to wear. She moved like a graceful cat through the crowd toward the bar at the back of the club. “You’ll get used to it!”

I wasn’t sure if that was true or not. Each beat of the music pounded in my eardrums and set my teeth on edge. I wobbled on my heels as Penny drew me up beside her when we reached the bar. She braced herself on the edge and peered up at the wall of liquor behind the bartender. He was a young guy with short black hair and muscled arms decorated in tattoos. A real heartbreaker and just Penny’s type.

She leaned in closer when he came over to take our order. Over the music, I couldn’t tell what she asked for, and he shook his head when she pulled cash out of her clutch. It paid to be pretty in a place like this. I waited with my hip pressed to Penny’s for reassurance.

This was so not my scene.

I preferred quiet corners with warm lighting to curl up and read a book. I would choose the smell of a candle over that of sweaty bodies, perfume, and alcohol. And I sure as hell would take a cup of tea over a glass of whatever the hell Penny handed me with a sheepish smile.

I peered down into my glass. It was nearly fluorescent yellow with a shot glass full of dark liquid sitting in the middle. “What is this?” I asked.

Penny tapped the side of her glass against mine. “A drop shot. They’re good. And it will help you loosen up. Promise!”

I stared down at the concoction, already wincing. “Penny ... can’t I just have a vodka cran or something?”

Penny placed her fingers on the bottom of my glass and tilted it up. “Drink it. We used to party all the time. Don’t tell me you’ve completely lost your edge.”

I had. A long time ago. Matter of fact, I didn’t think there was ever a point where I did have this “edge” Penny was referring to. I sighed and admitted defeat, though. Penny would never make me do something dangerous, and she would know when I was really drawing the line.

“Okay,” I said.

We both chugged the shot together. When I was done, I slammed my glass down on the bar and dragged the back of my hand across my mouth. The shot had been sweet but potent.

“Not bad, right?” Penny smiled as she put her empty cup and shot glass down. Her hips were swaying to the music.

I shrugged. “Not terrible.”

“Good! Because I ordered us each two.”

The bartender placed two fresh drinks on the bar. I looked imploringly at my friend, pleading with my eyes for her to take it easy on me, but it was no use. She pushed the second drink into my hands, and we drank up.

I was going to be buzzed in no time. It had been ages since I’d had a drink and even longer since said drink had consisted of hard liquor and whatever the hell the shot was dropped in.

Penny collected our glasses and thanked the bartender with a flirty smile. Then, she took my hand and led me away from the bar, through the throngs of clustered tables surrounded by other clubbers, and onto the middle of the dance floor. She

spun around to face me, some of her hair getting caught in her lip gloss, and called, “I love this song!”

When she started dancing, I couldn’t resist the call of the music either. We danced around and against each other like we used to when we were first legal and hit the club scene. I’d tired of that game as soon as it started and moved to Hawaii for my nanny job—and to get away from my overbearing parents who seemed to think twenty-one was the new twelve. They held onto me as tightly as humanly possible, and I’d done the only thing I thought I could do, run away to another state.

The rhythm of the music and the beat in the soles of my feet had me loosening up. It felt good to dance and let go, and Penny and I were having a blast in no time.

We were also drawing in the attention of several guys around us, which was a little unnerving for me. Penny loved it. She lived for this kind of thing. She came alive when a man’s eyes were on her, and soon she was flipping her hair, shooting them flirty glances with big pouty lips, and pressing her ass into mine.

A young kid who was probably just legal came up to us. He had dark hair, bloodshot eyes, and looked like the sort to pull drugs out of his pocket and try to sell it to us.

Which he did.

He extended his palm which held two tiny capsules in it and grinned up at us. “Ladies. Try a sample. See what you think. This is the best shit you can get if you’re looking to really feel the music and your body.”

I shook my head.

He was persistent and tried to push the pills into my hand.

Penny slapped his hand away. “Get lost, man. We’re not interested. We can have fun without your mystery pills.”

Penny’s attitude sent him packing, and it only took a few more minutes for a couple guys to come up to us and offer drinks. Drinks were at least better than drugs.

I opened my mouth to say no, but Penny insisted. I had no interest in letting a stranger bring me over a cocktail. Sure, it could be just vodka and orange juice, but it could also have hidden ingredients, and I wasn't keen on waking up on a stranger's couch in the morning. I grabbed Penny's wrist and shook my head.

She rolled her eyes at me and flashed one of the guys, a blond with a surfer vibe, an apologetic smile. Then, she pulled me close. "We go to the bar with them and order, silly. It goes from the bartender's hand to my hand. I'm not going to just accept something from a stranger. Who do you think I am?"

"Oh," I said rather lamely.

Next, she was pulling me off the dance floor and tailing after the surfer and his friend, who looked more like a lawyer. Gross. Lawyers.

Penny ordered us each a glass of water and a fancy purple drink I didn't know the name of. She had me drink the water before sipping on the purple concoction, which was surprisingly delicious. While we drank, we went to one of the standing tables and crowded around it with the guys.

The surfer ran his fingers through his shaggy blond hair. "You ladies are new around here, huh?"

I resisted rolling my eyes again. What a smooth come-on, admitting that you come to this place frequently enough to recognize new "meat."

Penny missed the very obvious red flag. "Yep. My friend here just got a new job, so we are out to celebrate in style."

His blue eyes slid to me. "A new job?"

I nodded. I had no plans on telling him where I'd be working. "Yeah, a position in software development."

Penny blinked at me but didn't out me for lying. The surfer and his lawyer buddy exchanged a look. The lawyer-type guy had slicked back brown hair and deep eyes. He was clean-shaven, which I realized upon closer inspection was because he couldn't quite grow any hair on his face. He smiled at me. "So, you're a smarty pants, hm?"

I shrugged. *I'm smarter than you. But nobody will fucking hire me.*

“Well, drink up ladies. Let’s hit that dance floor again. I want to see that body of yours in action,” the surfer purred at Penny.

She sucked her drink back and encouraged me to do the same. I wasn’t at all interested in either of these guys, but if Penny was enjoying their company, I didn’t want to spoil it for her. There was no harm in dancing with some strangers if that’s all it was. Dancing. If she wanted to bring one of them home with her, that was just fine, but I wasn’t picking up the one left behind to ride him on the couch. No way in hell. He could saunter on home or pick another girl.

Both guys were surprisingly smooth on the dance floor. They were also polite. Neither of them crossed any boundaries, and soon I was laughing along with Penny as the lawyer spun me around tightly and then pulled me into his side to rest his hand on my lower back.

“You’re really beautiful, you know that?” he called over the music.

Compliments from men were new to me. I stammered under his flattery and felt my cheeks growing hot. “Oh. Uh. Erm. Thank you?”

He chuckled. “I’m having fun with you, but I hope you know I don’t expect anything. Sometimes, it’s nice to just dance. You know?”

I was astounded by his kindness. This was not the sort of experience I’d been expecting when I came to Kadia. I was sure I’d have to beat them off with a stick. I smiled and tucked my hair behind my ears. “It is nice.”

Penny came over to us and tapped my shoulder. “Hey, it’s almost midnight, and this place is about to get even wilder. Can we grab some fresh air first?”

The lawyer let me go. “I’ll be waiting here for you, pretty girl.”

I smiled over my shoulder at him as Penny and I slipped through the other dancers and made for a glowing red exit sign. The door read “Emergency Exit Only,” and I tugged on Penny’s elbow. “Maybe we should go out through the front?”

“No, it’s all right. I come out this way all the time when I come here. There’s a little lane in the back. It’s always empty, and this door is never locked, so we can come right back in. Nobody will be out here to heckle us.”

Penny pushed her way out through the door, and the cool night air washed over me.

It was incredibly refreshing, and I realized I was actually pretty drunk. I giggled and leaned up against the club wall. “Thanks for getting me out of the house tonight, Penny. You were right. I needed this.”

“I know. I’m always right.” Penny raked her fingers through her blond locks and shook her curls out. Like me, she was probably sweating, and the hair at the nape of her neck was more than likely damp.

I did the same and shook my hair out. I flipped my head over to let the night air kiss the back of my neck. “Oh, man. That feels so good.”

Penny did the same, and we stood there like hunched over idiots airing out our sweaty necks in a dingy alley that smelled like wet cardboard and cigarette butts.

Then, the side door we had come through blew open and slammed against the wall.

I yelped and stumbled back as a big bald man came stumbling out. His eyes were wild, and when he looked up and saw us, his lips curled in a smile, revealing teeth that were outlined in red. Blood. Was there a fight inside? Had someone hit him?

The bald man rushed us. Penny screamed. I screamed.

I tried to get out of the way, but his massive hand caught my elbow, and he hauled me toward him. I kicked and fought him as he backed up to put his back against the wall of the

building on the other side of the alley so that we were facing the door.

More panic welled up inside me when I saw six men come out into the lane with us. They were big and mean looking. One of them had a bloody lip. Another held a long, curved pocket knife. The biggest of them stepped forward. He had a thick brown beard and hard, angry eyes, and he was looking right through me.

Penny let out a furious howl and went after the man holding me. He grunted and kicked her off, and she fell to the pavement with a grunt.

“Stay there, Penny!” I yelled.

She stayed. Her eyes were wide and angry, and her palms were cut up from her fall. “Let her go, you ugly bastard!” she screamed.

Then, something sharp was pressed to my throat, and the whole alley fell silent. All eyes were on me—and the way the man with the beard was staring at me made him more afraid of him than the man holding the knife to my jugular.

CHAPTER 7



DEREK

How the fuck was it possible that our plans had been blown to bits by two drunken party girls? After hours of running through it all with the guys, and more hours of agonizing over whether or not it would go our way, I was livid to be thrown off track by two bimbos who were in the wrong place at the wrong fucking time.

The Hand, of course, was thrilled. He had a scapegoat. And he had her at knifepoint.

Son of a bitch.

Regardless of how furious I was at the girl for letting herself be caught, I was more pissed at the goon holding her hostage. He had no morals. None.

“Let her go,” I snarled.

The Hand smiled wickedly at me and jerked his head in a sharp “no.”

I took a menacing step forward, and he tightened his grip on the pretty brunette. She sucked in a sharp breath, and Sabian moved up beside me, planting a hand in my chest. He pushed me back into line with the others and planted himself between us and The Hand.

I could feel the air vibrating with tension all around us.

“She has nothing to do with this,” Sabian said slowly. He was known for being the smoothest talker in the MC, and he knew it. “Just let her go, and we can sort this out like adults.”

The Hand chuckled deep in his chest. The sound made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The girl in his arms thrashed around and whimpered. He tightened his grip on her and whispered something in her ear. She fell still, and he lifted his eyes to Sabian. “You and I both know your little posse will slice and dice me if I let her go. And I don’t plan on dying here tonight. I’m a free man. Didn’t you hear?”

“We heard.” Sabian nodded. “If you let her go, we’ll give you a head start.”

The Hand seemed to consider the offer. Then, his eyes flicked back to me, Ryder, Caleb, Axel, and Jax. He shook his head. “Something tells me you don’t speak for all your boys. They have murder in their eyes.”

Sabian didn’t look back at us. “They’ll honor my word.”

“Will they now?” The Hand chuckled again. “Well, I hate to disappoint, but I’m not biting. You lot go back inside. Then, I’ll let her go.” He pressed his nose against the girl’s neck and inhaled deeply. “You smell like roses and sunshine, sweetheart. I’m sorry we had to meet under such uncomfortable circumstances. On any other night, I could have shown you a real good time.”

The blond girl on the pavement let out a furious string of curses. “Evelyn! It’s going to be okay. Let her go, you piece of shit!” This only made The Hand laugh harder, and the blonde became more and more furious. Her wide eyes swung over to us. “Help her! Please!”

The brunette, who now had a name, Evelyn, shook her head at her friend. “Leave it, Penny. It’s all right.”

The Hand nodded approvingly. “Someone with smarts. How sexy.”

Evelyn bit down on her bottom lip and closed her eyes.

Fuck him for taunting her. Fuck him for thinking he had any right to use innocent women as a shield against us. I moved up beside Sabian. “You’re a coward, you know that? A fucking coward.”

The Hand shrugged. “If you say so. I’m just proactive regarding my self-preservation. I will do whatever it takes to stay alive. Maybe if your buddy had the same will, you wouldn’t have had to bury him.”

White hot lances of fury shot through my veins. I heard my brothers shift uncomfortably behind me as my hands balled into fists at my sides. “Shut the fuck up.”

The Hand rested his chin in the groove of Evelyn’s shoulder. “What are you going to do about it, tough guy? You willing to sacrifice her to get to me? Huh? You gonna waste a pretty thing like this on me? On revenge?”

I forced myself to relax. I loosened my hands and fought down the tension in my shoulders. “No.”

“Good,” The Hand mused. Then, he moved his back off the wall and started creeping backward to the mouth of the alley. He didn’t loosen his grip on the girl. He pulled her back with him, and she stumbled more than once in her high shoes. He shook her roughly, and she whimpered. “Don’t try any shit with me, girl.”

The blond girl was getting to her feet. Her knees were bloody from when she’d fallen, and her palms were scraped up. But she was fierce as hell. She yelled her friend’s name and moved to go after him again. I caught her wrist and yanked her back. She screamed at me and drove her fist into my chest.

It didn’t hurt.

But she kept pounding desperately, so I caught both of her hands and looked her in the eye. “Enough. He’ll let her go. We have to trust that he’ll let her go.”

The girl’s eyes were swimming with tears, but she nodded once and looked down the alley to her friend, who was inching slowly backward with The Hand. He was whispering in her ear again.

They arrived at the mouth of the alley. The Hand stared us down. “I’ll see you boys again, I’m sure. Especially you, Moretti.”

Then, he threw Evelyn down on the pavement and spun to run around the corner. Sabian took off at a dead sprint after him. The others followed, blowing by me in a rush of wind. All except Caleb, who stayed behind with me as I rushed to Evelyn.

She was on her hands and knees on the pavement. She wasn't crying like I thought she would be, but she was breathing quickly. I reached out tentatively to touch her shoulders and push her upright.

Her brilliant green eyes locked with mine, and for a moment, I forgot about everything that had just happened. I saw a lot in those green eyes: courage, anger, fear, intelligence. She blinked at me and broke the spell.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Then the blonde was there, her words coming out in a jumbled rush. She sobbed loudly and reached out to Evelyn, who was still in shock. She shook her shoulders and tried to pull her up.

“Slow down,” I said, pushing the blonde's hands down. What had Evelyn called her? Penny? “Penny, she needs a minute. So do you. Take some deep breaths, both of you. With me. All right?” Both of them stared blankly at me as I guided them through some deep breathing. They followed along, and soon the panic in their eyes was being replaced with exhaustion.

That was a good sign. They were coming down from the fear.

“Evelyn, are you all right?” I asked again.

She had looked up sharply when I spoke her name. She ran her hands up and down her bare thighs anxiously. “I think so. He didn't hurt me.”

Penny threw her arms around Evelyn's shoulders. The two girls stayed on their knees holding each other as I got to my feet and faced Caleb.

Caleb was frowning. “This is bad, man. Real bad.”

“I know.”

“If they don’t catch up with him—”

“I know,” I said again a little more harshly. We’d revealed our hand and lost the element of surprise. Any chance we had of catching the big bald bastard by surprise was spoiled. He knew we were coming for him, and he knew we meant business. If he got away, he would have time to prepare himself or worse, strike back. And we all knew the damage he was capable of inflicting. “Fuck,” I spat.

“What do we do?” Caleb asked.

I had no fucking clue. Ryder was off chasing the psychopath down. He was the one who would keep a level head in a situation like this and give orders, not me. All I wanted to do was go back inside and pound back shot after shot until I forgot how badly our plans had been ruined. But that wasn’t the answer.

I looked down at the girls. “I’ll get them out of here.”

Caleb nodded. “I’ll go inside and keep an eye out for his boys. Maybe he’ll come back. I doubt it, but you never know.”

“Be careful,” I warned.

Caleb smiled sheepishly as he made for the emergency door. “I can take care of myself.”

I wanted to say, “*That’s probably what Hyde thought*” but thought better of it. Saying something like that would only make matters worse, and they were already pretty bad.

Caleb disappeared inside, and I turned back to the two girls, Penny and Evelyn. “Do you two want to go home?”

They both nodded, but I could see that they were afraid of me. I didn’t blame them. The whole shit show from their perspective would have made us all look like villains. And maybe we were.

“Come on,” I said, tipping my head to the mouth of the alley. “I’ll drive you both home, and then you’ll never have to lay eyes on any of us ugly fuckers again.”

Penny shook her head. “We can call a cab.”

“All right,” I said. “Let me wait with you then.” I extended my hand to help them up. Penny stood on her own, but Evelyn accepted my help. She was unsteady on her feet and swayed on the spot. I grabbed her by the elbow to steady her, and she stumbled into my chest. I supported her until she was fine to stand on her own.

She looked up at me with pink cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You just went through a lot. I’m the one who’s sorry.”

Her brow furrowed. She looked like she was deep in thought. Then she glanced at her friend. “I think I’d like him to take us home, Penny.”

“Are you mental?” Penny whispered redundantly. I could hear her perfectly fine.

Evelyn shook her head. “No. He helped us. Come on. I just want to go home, and we’ll have to wait for a cab. I need to sleep.”

Penny shot me a dark, overprotective look, the kind of look a worried best friend gives to an enemy. I respected her for that. “Fine,” she said. Then she pointed a finger at me. “But if you try any shit—”

I held up my hands. “No shit. I just want to make sure you get home safe.”

She narrowed her eyes but nodded, and then the three of us walked down the alley and took a right to get to my truck parked at the curb two blocks away.

CHAPTER 8



EVELYN

The truck was big and black and mean, and it smelled like pine air fresheners inside. It was brand new with leather interior and not the sort of vehicle I'd been expecting the big guy with the beard to be driving. Penny and I climbed up into the back seat and buckled ourselves in as he slid into the driver's seat and slammed his door closed. He started the truck up and glanced back at us. "You two cold? I can turn the heat on."

Penny and I both shook our heads and remained mute.

He gave us what I think he thought was a reassuring smile, but it was more than a little unnerving. He didn't seem like the sort who smiled often, and it looked unnatural on his face.

When he put the truck in drive, his phone started ringing. He groaned and fished it out of his pocket. "I have to get this. Just give me a minute." He answered the call, and I could hear the tinny voice of a man through the speaker. He was talking fast.

I looked in the rearview mirror. I could see the man's furrowed brow and angry brown eyes. When the voice fell silent on the other end, he started talking. "We couldn't have foreseen it going down this way. What the hell were we supposed to do?"

The voice went off again.

"Listen. I can't talk right now. They're in my truck." A moment of quiet as he listened to the other person again. "No.

I know. But I have to make sure they get home okay. I'll meet you at your place after. Just give me half an hour."

He hung up the phone and tossed it into the passenger seat. Then, he pulled away from the curb and asked where we were driving to.

Penny gave him her address reluctantly. He said he knew the area.

We all sat in awkward silence as he drove. I continuously glanced up to look at his eyes in the rearview mirror. I was painfully aware of the horrifying fact that I was attracted to him. *Very* attracted to him. He was sexy as hell with his thick brown beard and mane of even thicker dark hair. His shoulders were broad, his arms were thick, and the way he'd held me up in the alley was ... intoxicating. I could still smell him. And feel the taut muscle of his chest beneath my hands.

I had to get my shit together. He was exactly the sort of man any girl with a brain should steer clear from. He was bad news all over. And dangerous. Not the typical dangerous "vibe" some guys gave off as part of their persona but real danger. I was pretty sure he'd been out in that alley to kill the man who had grabbed hold of me.

In fact, I was positive he and his friends were there to kill him. And I'd foiled their plans.

I made eye contact with him in his mirror and looked away out through my window. I willed him not to say anything. And he didn't for a couple more minutes. When he did finally speak, his voice was warm and reassuring. "The two of you handled yourselves well out there."

Penny shifted uncomfortably beside me. I didn't feel uncomfortable at all. I forced myself to meet his eyes in the mirror again. Good lord, that stare of his was incredible. It was like he was looking right into my soul, like he was laying me bare and analyzing all the dark crevices of my mind. "I thought Penny was the most frightening one out there."

Penny nudged my foot with hers. "Hey. Now is not the time for jokes."

But our driver was chuckling, and he was the one I was hoping to make laugh. The sound was like melted butter and steam. Warm and smooth. There was something seriously wrong with me. He took a right turn and said, “Your friend is right. There’s nothing funny about what happened, and I’m sorry you were both caught in the thick of it. That was not supposed to happen.”

I wanted to ask him what was supposed to happen but thought better of it. I didn’t know him, and just being attracted to someone wasn’t enough reason to start prying.

We pulled up in front of Penny’s apartment. When she reached to open the door, he twisted around in the driver’s seat to face us. “I know you probably won’t take me up on this because you hate my guts, but if either of you ever needs help, you can call me.” He handed me a card with his number scrawled on the back. “My name is Derek. And I mean it. If you need *anything*, just call that number, and I’ll come running.”

“I bet you would,” Penny seethed.

“I’m sorry about my friend,” I said as Penny hopped out of the truck and waited for me on the sidewalk with her arms crossed. “I think she’s just freaked out. She’s usually not this rude.”

“She’s not rude,” he said.

“Oh, she’s rude as hell.” I smiled.

Derek gave me a long look. “She’s a good friend. She’s protecting you. As she should.” He looked like he wanted to say more. There was something on the tip of his tongue, but he let it go. “But really. Call me. For anything.”

I opened my door. “I will. Thank you, Derek.”

Derek rolled down his window as I walked around the hood of his truck. “Yo, Penny. Make sure the two of you drink a lot of water and have something to eat. You’ll feel better.”

Penny scowled at him. “We’re perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves. You can go now.”

Derek flashed me a white smile before driving away, and I knew as his taillights faded around the corner that I'd be seeing that smile in my dreams for weeks. Maybe longer.

After slipping inside Penny's apartment, we both showered and dressed in our coziest clothes. I opted for a pair of sweatpants and a loose pullover while Penny got cozy in her pink plush robe and slippers. Then, she made tea, and I whipped us up a couple sandwiches. We took our plates and our mugs out to the living room and cuddled under blankets while we ate. We barely said a word the entire time.

When Penny was done eating, she pulled her knees to her chest and sipped her tea. "Should we call the cops and tell them what happened?"

I'd already had this thought. "I don't think I want to."

"What? Why?"

I shrugged. My explanation wasn't going to help convince her. "I think there was something bigger going on than what we were a part of. Getting involved would be a bad idea."

"Getting involved? We already got involved! That asshole held you at knifepoint, and those six meatheads just let it happen. Do you seriously not want to do anything about it?"

I swallowed my last bite of sandwich. "I think something is already being done about it. Just not by the law. I can't explain it properly, but I just know we should leave it alone. Trust me on this?"

Penny groaned into her mug. "Fine."

"Thanks, Penny. I'm sorry."

She sighed. "No. I'm sorry. I should never have forced you to go out with me tonight. Look what happened. You almost got ..." she trailed off and shook her head, unable to say it. "Never mind. You know what I mean. I just never thought it could have gone so wrong so fast, you know?"

"It was fun while it lasted. Honestly. I had a good time."

Penny shook her head at me. “How can you say that after what happened?”

I shrugged.

“What the fuck, Evie? I nearly shit myself out there, and you-you held it together like it wasn’t the first time a big scary man had threatened to kill you. I thought things were going to end really badly. I thought I was going to have to call your parents and tell them you were dead, for fuck’s sake.”

“I get it, Penny. I’m sorry, but I’m all right. See?” I put my hands on my chest. “I’m right here. And so are you. And we’re both fine. And I was scared, too, for the record.”

Penny extracted herself from the couch one long leg at a time. “I’m going to make more tea. Do you want some?”

“Sure,” I said.

I sat on the couch and waited as she puttered in the kitchen. Try as I might, I couldn’t think of anything else besides Derek and that crippling smile of his. And, of course, the way his big, strong hands had effortlessly guided me to my feet, and how he had held me up, and how he had taken the time to make sure we got home safely. And his eyes. And his body—

“Evie?”

I glanced up at Penny who was extending a mug of steaming tea to me. “Oh. Sorry. I was lost in thought.”

“About what?” she asked as she sat back down.

I bit my bottom lip. Should I tell her? Would she think I was crazy? Probably. Would she judge me? Probably not. Penny had a good way of speaking her mind but never making me feel like she thought I was less than. I took a deep breath. “I’m thinking about *him*.”

Penny burned her tongue on her tea and swore into the mug. Then, she looked incredulously up at me and shook her head sternly. “You need to nip those thoughts in the bud right now, girl. They’ll be your undoing. He’s not just a bad boy.

He's a grown ass dangerous man who will eat you for breakfast."

"I never said I wanted to date him." I scowled.

"I know. But I also know where these thoughts lead. Curiosity killed the cat, Evie."

I rolled my eyes. "I can't help that I think he's hot."

"They were all hot!" Penny said a little loudly. "Each and every one of them was fine as hell, but you don't see me fawning all over them. They're criminals, Evie. Hardened criminals. They were going to off that bald guy in the alley, for crying out loud!"

I scowled at her. "Like I said, I didn't say I wanted to date him. All I said was I'm attracted to him, and I can't control that."

She sighed. "I'm sorry I freaked out. I'm just stressed."

"It's okay."

"I mean it, though. Stay away from him. Throw his number out. Don't leave it around to tempt you. He's nothing but bad news, and you're too smart not to know that."

I stared down into my tea. She was right. Again. Like always.

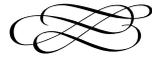
Derek spelled nothing but danger and drama. He was everything I should be avoiding in my life right now. But he was everything I wanted. A little bit of risk. A little bit of something different.

I knew why I was drawn to him. There was something in his eyes that screamed freedom. He was owned by no one. He owed this world nothing, and he did as he pleased. I craved that. I longed to be free in my own way. To not be pinned down by a boss whose pockets I filled, to not be exiled from my family because of my decision to quit law school, to not be bound to my best friend's couch because I was dirt poor and had nowhere else to go.

He was everything I wanted and also everything I should run from.

But I'd told myself when I quit law school that I wasn't going to run anymore.

CHAPTER 9



DEREK

The mood around the table on Ryder's back deck was a lot more somber than it had been the night before when we were preparing to go after The Hand at Kadia. Now, after our failure, we were all brooding and angry.

We were also worried and frightened, but none of us had the stones to admit it.

The men surrounding me all had women to protect. Some had children. Caleb and I were the only ones without someone, but this wasn't about him. Me not having someone made things easier in a normal situation, and even I was having a hard time processing the shit storm we'd just created.

I'd just created. I was the one who'd pushed Ryder to act, and I was the one who'd made the plans for the Kadia takedown. Had they not all listened to me, we wouldn't be in this position.

Ryder's knee was bouncing anxiously. "We're going to have to spread the word to the rest of the members to once again be vigilant and be aware. The Hand is easy to spot, but we all know he's worked with others before. I wouldn't put it past him to team up to take us down."

"Maybe we should be considering the same thing," Caleb muttered.

Ryder glanced up at him. There was fury in his dark stare. "We can handle this on our own."

Caleb shrugged. "I was just saying."

“Well, don’t,” Ryder growled.

We all shut up about it after that. Clearly, the boss was in no mood for this shit. Then, he looked at me after a few minutes of tense silence and asked, “Have any of your old contacts reached out yet?”

I shook my head. Ryder had asked me to apply more pressure to my old contacts about The Hand and where we might be able to find him now that he knew we were after him. If we were going to make another move, we would have to do it quickly. The more time we gave him to plan was detrimental to us. We had to act quickly.

“Nobody is willing to share any information about him,” I told Ryder.

“Push them harder.”

“I’ll try.”

Sabian cleared his throat. “Don’t give me shit for saying this, Ryder, but this is the time where we have to stick together. Any cracks in the foundations and everything will come falling down around us.”

Ryder pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “I know.”

“We want him as bad as you, boss,” Jax added.

Axel got to his feet. “We need to put him down. My babies and Ellie are at risk because of this asshole. We’d be fools to think he won’t try to use our families against us. He saw how riled up we got over Hyde. He knows our weaknesses. We need to find his.”

“If he has any,” Sabian muttered.

Ryder blew out a sigh. “He’ll have them. He’s only human.”

“He’s insane,” Sabian said. “He’s totally off his rocker. The only thing that matters to him is keeping his own head on his shoulders. He doesn’t give a fuck about anybody else because he doesn’t have the capacity to care about anyone but himself. He’s a psychopath.”

“Maybe,” Ryder said.

Jax shook his head. “Not maybe. He is. I’m sure of it.”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Great. We’re after a killer who’s hell-bent on putting us in the ground, and there’s not a damn thing that will slow him down.”

The sliding patio door opened, and we all looked up as Dani stepped out. She was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved black button-up. She had her belt on with her detective’s badge pinned to it, and her gun was on her hip. She turned to face us and stopped when she realized we were all staring at her. “Oh. Hello, everyone.”

We all muttered weak greetings in return.

Dani walked over to where Ryder was sitting at the head of the table and stood behind his chair. She placed her hands on his shoulders and began rubbing gently. It was as she looked down at him without his knowing that I realized something was wrong.

“Dani?”

She looked up at me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Ryder twisted around in his chair to look at her. She chewed the inside of her cheek. “There’s something I have to tell you, and you’re not going to like it.”

Ryder took her by the hand and guided her around him. He nodded for her to take the open seat beside him. She sank slowly into it, and the way she moved with such care had me nervous. Ryder rested his hand on her knee. “What is it, baby?”

Dani looked around at all of us.

I put my hands on the armrests of my chair and made to stand up. “Maybe we should go.”

Dani shook her head. “No. Sit. This will concern all of you. It will just be hard for Ryder to hear.”

Ryder’s jaw was tight. “Tell me.”

She looked him in the eyes. “I pulled video surveillance on the club while I was at work today and ran some facial recognition. I was hoping to get more information or a name on The Hand. But the scans pulled up someone else’s information who was at the club that night.”

“Whose?” Ryder pressed.

Dani sighed. “Jason’s.”

This tidbit of information was like the pin being pulled from the grenade. I looked around at the others at the table, and they all looked back at me. Jason? At Kadia? What the fuck was going on?

Ryder hadn’t said anything or moved an inch. “So he’s alive. This should be good news, shouldn’t it?”

Dani nodded. “It is good news that we know he’s alive after months of not knowing where he was. But ...” She trailed off. Then, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, gathering her detective persona around herself like a protective shield. “He was selling Zandra, Johnny. He was getting his supply from The Hand. It’s all on the tapes.”

“That little fucker,” Ryder hissed.

I leaned back in my chair, reeling under this new information. “You’re sure about this, Dani? Jason hasn’t shown his face in nearly five months, and all of a sudden, he pops up at Kadia the same night The Hand is out of prison? And he’s selling? This just doesn’t add up.”

“I know,” Dani said weakly. “But I know what I saw. It was him. I know this is shitty news and not what you wanted to hear, but I have a lead.”

Ryder perked up at this. “Who?”

“Jason was on the dance floor trying to chat up two girls. By the looks of things, he tried to get them to take some pills from him. They shooed him away, and he went back to The Hand. I watched the tapes to see what went down when you all went outside. The same girls in the alley are the ones he tried to sell the drugs to. They might be able to tell you more about him. What state he was in if nothing else.”

Ryder looked instantly at me.

I held my hands up. “Don’t look at me, man.”

“You drove them home,” he said simply.

“Yeah. So?”

Ryder tipped his head to the side. “So you know where they live.”

“Don’t get shit confused, Ryder. Those girls don’t want to see my face ever again.”

Ryder shook his head. “I don’t give a fuck what they want or don’t want. You drive over there and ask them about Jason.”

I turned to Dani and gave her an imploring look. “Dani, can’t you go talk to them? They’ll respond better to a female detective.”

“Sorry, Derek, but no. I don’t think they would. Me showing up would only involve the law, and I know you guys don’t want that. If you want to handle this on your own, you’re going to have to do as Ryder says and go talk to these girls. Do you think there’s any chance they’ll open up to you?”

I frowned. Penny would rip a strip off me as soon as she saw me standing at her front door. But Evelyn might be willing to cooperate. I sighed. “There’s a chance. Yeah.”

Ryder nodded at the patio door. “Then, get the hell out of here and go talk to them. And don’t come back until you know more about my nephew.”

I groaned and stood. Dani gave me an apologetic smile as I walked to the patio door. None of the others said a word. The mood was too tense for any smart-ass remarks on my behalf.

I got in my truck in Ryder’s driveway and pulled out onto the street.

There was no way these girls were going to be okay with me showing up at their place after I had explicitly told them they never had to see me again. I was going back on my word, and it hadn’t even been twenty-four hours yet.

My apprehension was jumbled with eagerness.

I couldn't deny I was glad to have an excuse to see Evelyn again. She'd been on my mind all day, which was incredibly frustrating because I should have been focusing all my thoughts on The Hand and how to bring him down. But I couldn't. I wanted to daydream about her long brown hair and bright green eyes. I wanted to wonder what her lips would feel like on mine or wrapped around my cock.

I shook my head at myself. "You have more important things to think about than getting sucked off by a pretty girl."

A really pretty girl with nerves of steel.

The drive to the apartment flew by, and I found myself standing at the front doors of the building with my hands in my pockets. I read the plaque outside the building with unit numbers and names and found one labeled "P. Gardener." I buzzed, and an elderly woman answered. I apologized for ringing the wrong unit and continued scrolling the list until I found another initial that might stand for Penny. It read "P Fields." I buzzed that one, and a familiar female voice said, "Hello?"

I hadn't thought this through. I had no idea what to say to get them to let me up. There was probably nothing I could say. If they were smart, which I suspected they were, they would be on high alert from the night before and would not be letting anyone up to their apartment. So I kept my mouth shut and didn't say a damn thing.

"Hello?" Penny asked again. She sounded a little annoyed this time. "Hello? Oh, fuck this. Stupid kids playing—" She cut off midsentence, and I assumed she had hung up.

Then, I stood around like an idiot waiting for someone to let me in.

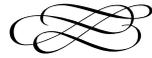
Which I knew was going to take a long ass time because I wasn't the sort of guy anyone wanted to let into a building based on how I looked. I looked mean. It helped me on the streets but not so much in situations like this.

If I was patient enough, some dumb asshole was bound to let me in. Then, I would knock on unit 312 and scare the hell

out of two girls who had already been dragged through enough
shit and try to convince them to talk to me about the stupid kid
who had tried to sell them drugs.

Damn it all straight to hell.

CHAPTER 10



EVELYN

Penny and I had plans to spend Sunday night doing the absolute opposite of what we had done Saturday night, sit in our PJs with a rom-com and chocolate mint ice cream.

I was feeling a bit nervous about my first day at my new job the next afternoon. Penny had tried to talk me out of being such a worrywart but to no avail. I was a stress case in all new situations, and I had accepted my fate a long time ago. I was bound for a restless night of tossing and turning on her couch and a case of the runs in the morning.

It happened when I was nervous. It happens to a lot of people. It's not weird. I swear.

Penny reached for the remote to turn the volume down on the television. "I don't want my nosy neighbors asking me how we enjoyed the film. I swear they intentionally eavesdrop on me. No good, meddling middle-aged couple. They have to find something better to do with their time."

I chuckled as I savored a mouthful of ice cream. "Maybe they just think you're super interesting."

"I work at a bank and live by myself. Well, sort of by myself. There is literally nothing interesting about me."

"Maybe they want to add a third to their bedroom activities."

"Ew! Gross!" Penny cried, but she slapped my knee playfully and gave me a wry grin as she started laughing.

I snorted as I laughed, which only made us laugh harder. Soon, we were wheezing and clutching our sides as we tried to catch our breath. It felt good to laugh this hard after the events of the previous night.

When I'd woken up in the morning, I'd been relieved. My dreams had been of the bald man who'd held the knife to my throat, and Derek hadn't been there to put an end to it. I'd been alone and terrified, and he'd whispered the same things in my ear that he did in the alley.

Those lips of yours are begging to be used.

You'd look so good bent over my knee.

I like a good girl like you.

You smell like flowers and sex.

The morning had been welcomed, and I wasn't a morning person. Penny and I had spent the afternoon doing everything we could to keep ourselves distracted. We went grocery shopping, which was more nerve-racking than it should have been, and hurried back home to lock ourselves in the apartment where we were safe and alone.

I was thankful to be staying with Penny. I couldn't fathom what it would be like to have to be alone after everything that went down at Kadia. It was inconceivable. Terrifying.

"Pass the ice cream, will you?" Penny asked, nudging me in the shin with her toes.

I passed her the carton and pulled my blanket up under my chin as I sank deeper into the sofa cushions. We watched the movie quietly for another fifteen minutes or so and continued to pass the carton back and forth.

Penny was passing it back to me for the hundredth time when there was a knock on her door.

We both froze, one of each of our hands on the ice cream carton, and looked at each other.

"Are you expecting someone?" I whispered.

Penny shook her head and mouthed the word "no."

“Do any of your neighbors like to randomly stop by?”

Again, she shook her head.

I swallowed. “Should we check through the peephole?”

That, apparently, was the right suggestion. We both untangled ourselves from our blankets and padded silently on bare feet through the living room and kitchen and down the short hall to the front door.

“You look,” Penny whispered.

“It’s your house,” I said defensively. I didn’t want to look. I was scared shitless. What if it was the big bald guy? What if he somehow found out where we lived, and he had come back for more, to fulfill some of the things he’d whispered to me. I shivered.

Penny wrung her hands anxiously. “I don’t want to.”

“Ugh.” I groaned, shoving her aside and moving in front of the door. “Fine.” I pressed my eye to the little glass hole in the middle of the door and looked.

And there he was. The bearded guy from the night before who’d driven us home. Derek.

“Well?” Penny hissed beside me, making me jump.

“It’s Derek,” I whispered.

“What the fuck? I thought he said we never had to see him again? What’s he playing at?”

“I don’t know, Penny. I have the same information as you. Should we open the door?”

“No!”

“But what if—?”

“No!” she spat again. “I don’t want to confirm that I live here. I don’t want him thinking he can show up whenever he damn well pleases and just be let in. Hell, no! I want him as far away from us as possible. And you,” she jabbed a finger at me, “should want the same things, you lunatic!”

We both leaped back from the door when Derek's voice came from the hallway. "Uh. I can hear you guys."

"Sorry," I called.

Penny shot me a dark look. "Shh."

Derek spoke up again. "I know I shouldn't be here, but I have to ask you some questions. I swear I'll be out of your hair in five minutes. We can talk through the door if you want."

"See?" I said.

"See what?" Penny growled.

"He's being polite and respectful of our boundaries."

Penny blinked at me. "Respectful of our boundaries? The man is standing in the hallway outside my front door uninvited. And it begs the question, how the hell did he get in the building?"

"An old guy with an argyle sweater let me in," Derek called.

I reached for the door handle. Penny beat me to it and shook her head. "No. Evie. Please. This is insane!"

"Go wait in your room, then."

Penny let out a loud groan and closed her eyes. Then, she unlocked the handle and the deadbolt and yanked the door open with enough force that it created a small gale of wind that blew our hair back. She planted both hands on her hips and glared daggers at Derek, who looked very unassuming and nonthreatening in my opinion. "Okay. You have five minutes, buddy. Start talking."

Derek looked from Penny to me. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes. "I wanted to talk to you both about a guy who approached you while you were dancing."

"A lot of guys approached us," Penny said hotly.

Derek nodded. "Naturally. You were the best-looking girls in the club. But I'm talking about one guy specifically. Brown hair. Kind of wiry. Rough around the edges."

“Not ringing any bells,” Penny said.

Derek sighed. “He offered you both Zandra.”

I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “Zandra?”

Derek nodded. “Yes. It’s a pill and a sex drug. Dangerous shit.”

I bit my bottom lip and felt Penny’s stare wander over to me. Derek was watching me too. “Yeah. I remember him. He was young.”

“Yeah, he is.” Derek tucked his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “He’s a stupid kid who’s in over his head, and I’ve been trying to find him for months. This is the first we’ve seen of him, and I need to know what he said to the pair of you.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry. He didn’t say anything. He asked us if we wanted to have a good time and tried to get us to take the pill. Penny, with all her charms as you’ve witnessed firsthand, told him off. And he left. That was it.”

Penny crossed her arms and nodded in affirmation. “That’s right. Tucked his tail between his legs and left like a good boy. Unlike some people.”

Derek flashed her a wicked smile. “Careful, Penny. I’m starting to like you.”

Penny threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “You’re on your own, Evie. I’m going to finish watching the movie. Scream if he tries anything.”

“He won’t,” I said.

Penny marched off, and I heard her drop down onto the sofa with a huff. I leaned against the open door with one shoulder and crossed my arms. I was suddenly aware of the fact that he was seeing me in my PJs, my oversized, bright pink, mermaid patterned PJs. The horror.

Derek hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “You know, I should probably get going. Thanks for opening the door, Evelyn. I appreciate it.”

As he turned to leave, I called him back. “Since you asked me questions and I was honest, do I get to ask a question?”

His smile was sheepish and curious. He shrugged. “Knock yourself out.”

I felt a smile of my own tugging at my lips. I hated that he was making me feel this way. Like a young flirty high school girl who had the attention of a jock who was way out of her league. “Who are you? Like, who are you *really*?”

Derek arched an eyebrow.

“You’re not just some normal guy,” I clarified. “Right?”

“I think I’m pretty normal.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “All right. My name is Derek Baxter, and I’m the treasurer of the Lost Breed Motorcycle Club.”

I blinked. I hadn’t really expected him to come clean that easy. I thought he’d put up a bit of a fight or maybe even tell me a lie. This story very well could be a lie, but I believed him for some reason I couldn’t explain. “I’ve heard of Lost Breed. You guys were in the paper and the news a couple weeks ago, right? You were involved in the arrest of the gangster Ruby Johnson?”

“We were.”

“Then, the man in the alley,” I said slowly, putting two and two together.

“Was one of the men there that day when we took her down. Yeah. And he didn’t get any time for murder. None. We thought at first that he’d get at least a few years. Then, it went down to months. Then weeks. The bastard was out in weeks.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

I could see the frustration in him. It sat on his shoulders like the weight of the world, and I felt his pain. “I’m sorry,” I said.

His expression was unreadable as his warm brown eyes flicked back and forth between mine. “Why?”

“For the friend you lost. The one he took from you. I’m sorry.”

Derek rubbed his chest absently. “Thanks.”

I shrugged and gave him a smile. “For the record, I’m not afraid of you. I know I should be, as Penny keeps telling me, but I’m not. So ... don’t be a stranger. All right?”

The look he gave me was bewilderment. And curiosity. And something else. Joy, perhaps. He nodded but didn’t say anything as he turned and went to the elevators. When the doors slid open with a chime, he gave me a long up and down. “Nice pajamas by the way. Mermaids. Sexy.”

I blushed fiercely as he stepped onto the elevators and disappeared from view. Then, I hurried to close and lock the front door.

How mortifying.

I rested my back against it and looked into the living room where Penny was scowling at me from the sofa. She shook her head at me and grabbed the ice cream carton. After spooning a massive bite into her mouth, she said, “You’re not getting any more of this ice cream. You know why? Because I need it to deal with the amount of stress you’re putting me through. When I told you to loosen up, I didn’t mean develop a crush on a biker and suddenly turn into a fearless rebel.”

I laughed. “I am so *not* a fearless rebel.”

“Oh? What would you call all this then? It’s fearless rebel or reckless idiot. You choose.”

I rolled my eyes and joined her on the couch again. “I love you, Penny. You know that?”

“Yes,” she grumbled.

“I’m sorry for stressing you out, but you don’t need to worry so much about me. I can take care of myself. Besides, Derek isn’t what you think he is.”

“You don’t know him,” she reminded me.

It was true. I didn’t know him. Not really. But I felt like I knew who he was. What he was. It didn’t scare me off. It drew me in.

Maybe reckless idiot was more appropriate in this situation.

CHAPTER 11



DEREK

Gemma was a twenty-one-year-old psychology student at the university up the road, and she was the one who worked the late shifts at my gym on Wednesday nights. She was shutting everything down as I finished up my workout, and I watched her try to move some of the heavier dumbbells from the floor back to their racks.

I put mine down and stepped in to help her. “Let me get these for you, Gem. Some guys are assholes just leaving them lying around like this.”

“Thanks,” Gemma said as she straightened and tightened her ponytail. She was a cute girl who got a lot of attention from the guys who frequented this place, and she always shot them down.

“I’ll grab my stuff and get out of your hair.”

Gemma nodded and left me in the weight room while she went and did her rounds of the rest of the gym. I collected my stuff from my locker and slung my bag over my shoulder as I made my way out. Gemma came back to the front desk when I was leaving and locked up behind me with a wave and a smile.

Her smile reminded me of Evelyn’s.

Damn, she’d looked cute as hell when she opened the door in her pajamas. She’d been barefoot and her toes were painted a vibrant shade of red. Her dark hair was a curly mess piled on top of her head, and loose strands had framed her pretty, makeup-free face. The way her cheeks had gone all rosy was adorable, and so was her coy attitude.

Had Penny not been there, I wondered if things would have gone differently.

Probably not. Evelyn was a smart girl from what I could tell and she would know I was bad news for her in all possible scenarios, especially now that she knew I was a Lost Breed member. She'd been relatively knowledgeable about who we were. It wouldn't surprise me to know she kept tabs on the news and our movements as an informed New York City citizen. She'd probably pay even closer attention now to the stories that were breaking, especially the ones written by Sabian's girl, Angela. She had a way with words and an open hatred for The Hand. She'd be running stories about his dealings as we worked to snuff him out.

I got to my truck and opened the back door to toss my gym bag inside. My water bottle fell out of the open zipper and rolled under my front seat. I groaned and reached underneath to grab it and then dropped it back in the bag and zipped it back up.

I closed the door and nearly jumped out of my skin when I realized someone was standing behind it not three feet from me.

Someone familiar.

He was skinny and young. The features of his face were drawn and screwed up with anxiety. I turned to face him and blinked as he lifted his right hand up between us, leveling it out with his shoulder. His knuckles whitened as he tightened his fingers around the pistol he was holding.

Jason.

“What the fuck?” The words came out of me in an angry snarl. Fuck being confused. Fuck trying to play it cool. I was pissed.

Jason's hand trembled, and his bottom lip quivered. “Don't move,” he said. His voice was thin and crackly, and I noticed for the first time how pale he was. He looked sickly.

“What's your deal, Jason? The Hand send you to off me? It's like that?”

Jason jerked his head. I couldn't tell if it was a nervous twitch or an intentional shake.

"Johnny will have your—"

"Shut up!" Jason shouted.

I clenched my jaw shut and glared at him from beneath my brows. So I'd hit a nerve, apparently. He still cared what Ryder thought. Which was bad news for the kid, because if Ryder caught wind of this, Jason would have hell to pay when Ryder got his hands on his nephew. Hopefully when that happened, I wouldn't be a corpse in the ground.

"Put the gun down, kid. Let's be rational about this. If you're in over your head, we can get you out. He hasn't given up on you. He's been looking for months. Since the day you disappeared. So has Dani."

Jason shook his head and whimpered. He actually whimpered. He was scared shitless, and he was the one who *didn't* have the gun pointed at his chest by an unstable little shit. "They have to stop looking," he said.

"Why?"

"Because!" he roared.

"Jason. If you kill me, there's no going back from this. But you're gonna do what you've gotta do. So let's stop fucking around. *Do something*. Or fuck off. I'm fucking bored of this." I wasn't bowing down to the little prick. No way in hell. If this is how shit was going down, then so be it. You couldn't fight fate, and you couldn't fight a kid who was pointing a gun at your throat. Chances were that if he didn't kill me, The Hand would kill him. And that might scare him more than Ryder did. If that was the case, I was doomed, and there was no sense fighting it.

I just hoped he got it done with one bullet.

I wasn't keen on bleeding out after he put a few rounds in me in the parking lot to be found by poor Gemma.

Damn it to hell.

Jason was almost crying. His gun hand was wavering around all over the place. His finger flexed on the trigger.

For some reason, I found myself thinking about fucking mermaids.

The gun went off. I waited to feel weak, to fall to my knees, to clutch at a bloody wound, but I didn't. I stayed on my feet feeling exactly the same as I had before the gun went off.

Then, the burning in my shoulder started. He'd shot me all right. But he'd missed on purpose. I was sure of it. The bullet had grazed the meat of my shoulder. Blood was spilling out and racing down my arm in snaking vines of red.

I clamped a hand over it as Jason took several unsteady steps back. He lowered the gun and stared at the blood leaking through my fingers with horrified eyes. "I-I—" he stammered.

"You chose," I said.

Jason shook his head. "Don't tell Ryder."

"You bet your skinny ass I'm gonna tell Ryder, you little punk. Or you could get in my truck and come with me and tell him yourself. You can still fix this, kid. Trust me. He'll take you back, and we'll keep you safe."

Jason met my stare for the first time since he'd shown up behind my door. His eyes were hollow. There was nothing in his gaze that was the same as I remembered. The youthful pothead who just wanted to have fun and hang out in the yard with us was long gone. He was a scared child. "I can't," he whispered.

"Yes, you can."

"He'll kill me."

"He can try. But we'll protect you. Just get in the fucking truck!"

Jason blinked and then looked around in a panic. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, and he had the look of a prey animal that had just caught the scent of its predator. He shook

his head again and started backing farther away. “No. No. Just don’t tell Ryder. Please? Don’t tell him.”

He took off running. For a sickly looking guy, he was pretty quick. He darted out around my truck and raced across the parking lot to the lane on the other side, which he turned right down and disappeared into the darkness.

“Little fucker,” I growled as I glanced at my bleeding shoulder.

The door to the gym opened.

Gemma came out in a hurry. She was looking off in the direction that Jason had run, and when she concluded he was gone, she broke into a full run and only slowed when she reached me. She looked at my shoulder and unzipped her purse. “I brought some bandages from behind the counter. I didn’t know ... I didn’t think ... I don’t know. Here.” She handed me a rolled up piece of white bandaging.

“Thanks.” I pressed it to the wound.

“Do you want me to call the cops? I saw the whole thing. I can give my statement.”

“No,” I said, a little too sharply. She flinched, and I felt guilty instantly. “Sorry, Gem. I can handle this one on my own. It’s MC business. You know how it is.”

Gemma was aware of the Lost Breed MC. Caleb and I and some of the others came to this gym all the time, and I’d stepped in on more than one occasion when a guy was giving her or any of the other girls a hard time.

I held up the bandage she gave me. “Thanks for this. I have to get out of here. Get in your car and drive away. I’m not leaving until you’re out of here.”

Gemma nodded but hesitated to leave. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. Just a flesh wound. He only grazed me.”

“Okay,” she said nervously. Then, she walked over to the little silver coupe a few stalls away and got in. I kept my word

and stayed where I was until she pulled out of the parking lot and drove away.

Then, I got in my truck, cursing like a madman, and headed for Ryder's place.

He was going to be pissed. No, he'd be more than pissed. This changed everything. Not only was Jason helping The Hand push Zandra, but he was working as a hitman for him, too, apparently. The Hand was scaring him into going after his own uncle's crew. We'd been right. The man had no honor code whatsoever. He was sadistic. Cruel. He was clearly getting off on twisting Jason's tiny little brain in his hands.

My blood leaked out onto my leather interior. I grumbled to myself as I took a sharp turn onto Ryder's street. "Little bastard. Thinks he can come at me and put a gun in my face. Thinks he can shoot me dead, just like that. He's got another thing coming."

I was glad it had been me Jason was sent after. Had it been one of the others, maybe someone he hadn't known as long, he might not have hesitated. He might have actually gone through with it. His fate would have been sealed. He'd never get back in with Ryder, and he'd have proved to The Hand that he was capable of murder. He would become more useful to the big bald bastard, and that only spelled one thing: chaos.

I parked the truck in Ryder's driveway and glanced at the clock in the dash. It was a half hour past midnight. Ryder and Dani were probably in bed. Right now, they had no idea how bad things had gotten. I didn't want to go in there and tell him what had happened. I didn't want to be the one to soil his image of his nephew even further.

But it had to be me.

I reached over and yanked my glove box open. I grabbed a wad of napkins and clamped them over my shoulder. The bandage Gemma had given me had soaked all the way through with blood and was only making more of a mess than necessary. I rolled it up and put it in my cup holder to deal with later.

Then, I slid out of the truck, walked up to the front door, and knocked.

The lights inside flicked on, and I could hear Ryder telling Dani to stay where she was. He was on high alert like the rest of us. I knocked again. “Ryder, it’s Derek.”

“Hold the fuck on. I’m not wearing any fucking pants. It’s nearly one in the morning. What the hell are you doing here?” Ryder yanked the front door open. He was only wearing sweats that were riding low on his hips. He was angry until he saw I was bleeding on his front step. Then, he stepped aside, invited me in, and called Dani to come help.

She emerged from the bedroom wrapped up in a gray robe. She went to the kitchen and hurried to grab antiseptic, towels, and the kettle to boil some water. When she looked nervously over her shoulder at me as I sank down into a chair at their kitchen table, I noticed the dark circles under her eyes and the slow way she moved. She looked like she wasn’t feeling well. I knew better than to ask a woman if she was under the weather. Maybe I’d just woke her up from a dead sleep.

Ryder sat too. “Who did this to you?”

“You’re not going to like it,” I said.

Ryder exchanged a look with Dani. Then, he turned back to me. “There’s been a lot of shit going on lately that I haven’t liked. I can handle a bit more.”

So I told him.

And he was just as furious as I’d expected him to be.

CHAPTER 12



EVELYN

The Stokes was a much nicer place than I imagined it being. It was dimly lit and smelled like cigar smoke twenty-four seven, but that was to be expected from a cigar lounge.

The space had an edgy feel that drew in a younger clientele. The walls were a deep shade of red that was accented nicely with black crown molding and baseboards. Gothic wall sconces boasted modern lamps that washed the space in a warm orange glow. Booths with black leather seats lined the outer walls, and plush leather chairs were scattered around mismatching tables on the floor. Each table played host to a single candle and an ashtray as well as a drink specials and appetizer menu.

The kitchen was not outfitted for a full-service restaurant, but the two line cooks and the chef kept up with the orders of wings, crab and artichoke baked dip, mini sirloin sliders, garden salads with goat cheese, and pulled pork flatbreads. It was only my third day on the job, and I'd hit it off with all the kitchen staff, my manager Bruce, and the other servers I worked with.

Tonight was my first night shift, and Wednesdays were apparently busy due to their highball specials. I was a little nervous as I crammed my purse into my storage locker in the back room.

Bruce was sitting at his computer desk working on the upcoming schedules. He was a friendly young guy with a receding hairline and warm smile. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "You look a little

worried, Evelyn. Don't stress. Your last two shifts have gone so smoothly, I can guarantee tonight will be a breeze for you. You've taken to this gig better than anyone ever has."

I smiled under his flattery. "Thanks, Bruce. I'm just worried about messing up people's orders."

"With a pretty face like that, they won't mind." He winked at me. From someone else, it might have been creepy. But it wasn't. Bruce was a brotherly sort of presence for all the female staff. He made sure everyone was feeling good through their shifts and ran frequent check-ins. On my first day, he'd told me I didn't need to wear heels. He also made me stop for water and food breaks frequently. It was not uncommon to have a table in the back room filled with some of our appetizers specifically for the servers on staff to grab bites between tables.

It was a good place to work. And the tips, so far, had been excellent.

I glanced at the clock on the wall above the storage lockers and tucked my hair behind my ears. It was showtime. As I left the back room, Bruce called after me, "Knock 'em dead, killer."

The place filled up fast. I went from waiting on only two tables for the first half hour to trying to manage eight of them. Every customer was a man, which didn't bother me as much as I thought it would, and they were all friendly. The Stokes had a reputation for being an upscale place with professional service. It also had a reputation for expecting the same consideration from its patrons.

Like I said. It was a good place to work.

One of the girls' shift ended, and she walked over to me as I waited at the bar for the bartender, Justin, to mix my cocktails for my newest table. She rested a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Evelyn. I'm off for the night, but I still have a table left. They just sat down. Do you mind taking over for me? You can keep all the tips."

I nodded. "Sure thing, Britt."

Brittany beamed at me. “You’re the best. I’m glad Bruce hired you. The girl he fired was a really poor sport. She never wanted to help anyone out. I think you’re a great fit for the team. They ordered two whiskeys, by the way, and they’re at table seventeen.”

I smiled and waved as she hurried off to the back room. I’d heard her talking earlier in the night about meeting up with her boyfriend for a midnight showing of some new movie that was out. She seemed really excited, and I wasn’t going to make her miss her date night all for one lousy table.

Justin handed me the two highballs I’d ordered for one of my tables, and I asked him for the whiskeys. I delivered the highballs to a table of two gentlemen dressed in business suits, and they slid me a twenty as a tip. The customers in this place had money, and they were lining my pockets well.

I went back to the bar and put the whiskeys on my tray. Justin flashed me a bright white smile as I bustled off to table seventeen.

I didn’t realize who the two men were until it was too late, and I was standing at their table lowering one glass of whiskey down, followed by another.

They had both been at Kadia that night. The boy who offered me and Penny Zandra ... and the big bald man who had held me at knifepoint. Neither of them glanced up at me as I put the drinks down, and when I straightened, I hurried to untuck my hair from behind my ears. I let it fall down around my shoulders and over my face. I hoped it worked well enough to disguise my identity from them both.

The bigger man was dressed plainly in a white button-up and navy pants. The first few buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a powerful chest and a gold chain that hung off his neck. One leg was crossed over the other as he leaned back in the chair, a thick cigar pursed between his lips. He glanced up at me and a smile curled his wide mouth. “Why hello there, pretty young thing.”

“H-hello,” I said. Then, I reprimanded myself for sounding so damn weak. I lifted my chin and willed him not to

recognize me. “Can I get either of you anything else?”

He chuckled. The sound brought me back to that night. I could feel his hot breath on my neck, I could smell his breath, feel the press of his hard body all over me. “No thanks, sugar. We’re fine for now. Isn’t that right, Jason?”

Both the bald man and I looked over at the young man sitting across from him. Jason, the one who had tried to offer Penny and me Zandra, was picking at a loose thread in the knee of his jeans. He looked up at me and shook his head curtly.

The bald man growled. “Use your words, Jason. Be polite. The girl asked you a question.”

Jason stopped picking at his jeans and met my eyes. “No, thank you.”

I forced myself to smile at them. “All right. Well, you just let me know if you change your mind. I’ll be around.” I turned to leave.

Then thick fingers wrapped around my wrist. I froze and swallowed hard. I looked down at the big bald man who was holding onto me. He was smiling that same wicked smile he always wore, and I felt like I was looking right into the depths of his dark, mangled soul. “When does your shift end, baby?” he asked.

It took everything I had not to shiver with repulsion. I kept my smile plastered on my face and shrugged one shoulder. “Whenever this place dies down.”

“Well, I don’t have anywhere to be. I’ll stay here ‘til the end. Then maybe the two of us could, I don’t know, take that dress off you.”

“I have a boyfriend.” I don’t know what compelled me to say this. I also don’t know why I thought it would make a sliver of a difference to a man like him,

He laughed and put a hand on his chest. He still had his other hand on my wrist. “Well, I don’t see him. Is he here, sugar?”

I shook my head.

“Then, I don’t see what the problem is. I could show you what it feels like to be with a real man. I’d rock your world, kitten.”

I looked at Jason like he might help me. He looked down at his feet as soon as our gazes locked.

The big man tugged on my wrist. “Don’t tell me the scrawny ones are more your type?”

“No,” I said hurriedly. The big ones with beards and warm eyes were my type, apparently. “I’m sorry. But this is my workplace, and I just started here. I don’t want my boss getting the wrong idea about me. I really need this job.”

He let me go. I was shocked.

Jason got to his feet. The bald man watched him turn and leave without saying a word. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he shook his head. “Some boys just don’t understand the consequences of doing business. Go get me another drink, sugar. I’ll be here awhile.”

“Okay,” I said. I sounded as meek and terrified as I felt. All my insides had curled up into tiny balls of terror, and they only started unfurling as I rushed to the back room. I passed Justin, who arched an eyebrow at me. I didn’t say anything. I just kept going.

Bruce was still at his computer. He looked up when I flew past him and went to my locker. “Everything all right, Evelyn? Is it busy out there?”

“Yes, everything is fine. Sorry, I just need to make a quick call. It’s important.”

“Don’t worry about it. Take your time,” he said, turning back to his computer.

As Bruce clicked away on his keyboard, I rifled through my purse for the card I knew I’d dropped in it the night Derek drove me and Penny home from Kadia. When I couldn’t find it, I dumped everything out on the table. Bruce minded his own business.

I snatched up the card and called the number written neatly on the back. It rang and rang and rang. No answer.

“Damn it,” I breathed.

“You sure you’re all right?” Bruce asked, spinning around in his chair.

“Yes. Fine.” I dialed the number again. This time it only rang twice.

A deep voice answered and eased the fear that was steadily growing inside me. “Hello? This is Derek.”

“Derek. Hi. It’s Evelyn.”

“Evelyn? Are you okay? Where are you?”

My hands had started shaking. I swallowed and closed my eyes. I had to keep my cool just a little while longer. “I’m at work. At The Stokes, the cigar lounge. He’s here, Derek. The guy from the alley. He was with the younger one you were asking about, but he took off.”

“Where are you right now?” His voice was thick with menace.

“The break room.”

“Good. Don’t go out on the floor again. Is your boss there?”

“Yes.” I nodded even though he couldn’t see me and looked over at Bruce, who was watching me with a worried expression. He mouthed the words, “What’s going on?”

“Tell him you can’t go back out on the floor. Stay in the back. I’m only a ten-minute drive away. Think you can keep it together until then?”

I nodded again more to myself than to him. “I think so.”

“Evelyn, you have to. I’m sorry. You can do this.”

“Okay,” I breathed. “Just get here. Please.”

He hung up the phone.

Bruce stood up. “What the hell was that all about? Are you in some kind of trouble I should know about, Evelyn?”

I bit my bottom lip. “I’m sorry, Bruce. I couldn’t explain before. I had to make that call. There’s a man out there who is really dangerous, and I can’t let him recognize me.”

Bruce blinked. “Who is he?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not telling you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll go out there and try to get him to leave. I know I’ve only known you for a few days but I know you. The best thing we can do is wait until my friend gets here. He can handle this. If we let on that we know who he is, your entire staff could be in danger.”

Bruce’s eyes flicked back and forth between mine. He was unsure if he should trust me or not. He was a good manager, and I knew his first concern was going to be his people. But if he tried to go out there and get The Hand to leave, things would go from bad to worse faster than Bruce could ever imagine.

And I couldn’t let that happen.

CHAPTER 13



DEREK

“**A**nd just where the hell are you going?” Ryder asked.

He’d been pacing his kitchen floor for the last fifteen minutes while Dani sat beside me cleaning out the wound and stitching me up. She cut the thread and patted my shoulder. “You’re good to go.”

“Thanks, Dani,” I said as I got to my feet. Ryder was still glaring at me, waiting for my answer. “I told the girls from the alley that if they ever needed anything, they should call me. That was one of them. The Hand is at The Stokes Cigar Lounge where she works. Jason was with him, but she says he took off in a hurry.”

“Does she know which way he went?”

I shook my head. “You should go look for him. I’m going to the bar to deal with The Hand.”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Dani said.

She was probably right. It was reckless and dangerous, but there was no way in hell I was going to ask any of my brothers to come with me. They had wives and children. They had people who depended on them. I had myself, and that had to be enough. I could take one for the team. “I’ll call them on the way,” I lied. “You just worry about finding Jason. He needs us right now.”

Ryder nodded. “Get the hell out of here. Call us when it’s done.”

I nodded and rushed to the door. Dani was following along behind me. “I don’t like this,” she said over and over. “Let me call it in.”

“Give me a fifteen-minute head start.”

“Ten,” she said flatly.

“Fine. Ten.” I wrenched open the front door.

Dani put her hand on my forearm. “Be careful, okay? Ryder can’t bear to lose anyone else. You’re important to us. To all of us. I know that sometimes you might think differently, but I want you to keep coming for pancake breakfasts.” She gave me a lopsided smile and let go of my arm.

I flashed her a grin. “If you weren’t already his, Dani, I’d —”

Dani burst out laughing and held her hand up. “Don’t even say it out loud, you dog. Go get that piece of shit. You’re cutting into your ten minutes.”

I hurried off to my truck, the pain in my arm a distant memory now, and got in. Dani stood in the doorway as I pulled out of the driveway. She looked scared. I couldn’t blame her.

I drove as fast as I could. There was hardly any traffic on the roads at this hour, and I knew I’d make good time. I just hoped it would be enough. When I was three minutes away, my phone rang, and Caleb’s name flashed across the display screen on my stereo. I jabbed the green phone button in the dash to answer the call.

“Hey,” Caleb’s voice filled the truck.

“What?”

“Dani just called me.”

Of course, she did. Sneaky woman. She knew all of us better than we knew ourselves. I often wondered where Ryder would be without her. She was as much our boss as he was these days. I didn’t know which one of them frightened me

more. “What did she say?” I asked as I took a sharp left, cutting through traffic.

“That you’re planning on taking on The Hand alone.”

“I was gonna call you.”

“Then, why haven’t you? I’ve been waiting for said call.”

I clenched my teeth. No point in telling him the truth, that I wasn’t as valuable as them. “I can handle this on my own.”

“No, you can’t. How far away from the lounge are you?”

“Five minutes,” I said, which wasn’t true. I was two minutes away. Tops.

“Don’t go in until we get there. I’m en route now. So is Sabian and Jax. I haven’t gotten ahold of Axel yet, but I’m going to keep trying. We have to take this guy on together, man. There’s no point in throwing yourself to the wolves like this.”

“I have to go in there, Caleb. Evelyn is in there.”

“Evelyn?”

“One of the girls from the alley. She’s the one who called and gave me the tip. If he recognizes her, she’s going to be in over her head. I have to get her the hell out of there.”

“She’s tough. She can wait another ten minutes for the rest of us to get there.”

Ten minutes was too long. A lot of shit could go down in ten minutes. Sabian had almost died in ten minutes. Hyde probably had died in ten minutes. When The Hand was involved, I wasn’t going to work under assumptions. I was going to take action now to spare myself regret and guilt later. If he took a chunk out of me or worse, then so be it.

“I’ll see you when you get here,” I said.

“Don’t fucking go in there, Derek. I mean—”

I dropped the call as I pulled into the parking lot. Caleb called me back, but I let it keep ringing as I drove right up to the front doors and got out of my truck in a hurry. I left the

door wide open with the phone still ringing inside and hurried up the front steps two at a time until I reached the front door.

I pushed inside and was engulfed by the calming sounds of jazz music, pleasant chitchat, and laughter. The place was a smoky haze, and women in black dresses and skirts flitted between tables with trays of drinks.

I went to the bar first.

The guy working it was young and had a name tag that read “Justin.” He was chatting with a blonde server, and I slapped my hand on the counter to get his attention. He gave me a sour look, but it was nothing compared to the dirty glare the server gave me.

“What’s your problem, man?” the bartender asked.

“There’s a guy in here that’s going to cause trouble, and I need you to spot him for me,” I said. I had my back to the room so I couldn’t be recognized if The Hand was still there.

The blonde server at the end of the bar turned to look around.

“Hey,” I hissed, and she snapped back to face me. “Don’t let on that you’re looking for anyone. Just keep looking at us like we’re having a nice conversation. Justin, I’m going to look down at a menu, and you’re going to casually look around for a big bald guy. Then, start making a drink and tell me where he is.”

Justin was a good boy. He did exactly as I said. “He’s in the middle of the bar. He’s alone. I think he already knows you’re here, man. He’s looking right at us.”

“Fuck,” I growled. Again, I had lost the element of surprise. “You need to round up the staff and get them the fuck out of here. You hear me? Shit is going to get messy real fast. Where’s Evelyn?”

“She’s in the back. Hasn’t been on the floor for ten minutes or so—”

“Don’t tell him anything, Justin,” the blonde server snapped. I liked her. She had a brain and was protecting

Evelyn.

“Evelyn is my friend. She called me to come. Now, do as I say. Get the staff out of here and any customers you can.” I stared expectantly at Justin who just blinked back at me. Dumbass. “Do I need to repeat myself? Get your ass moving, kid!”

Justin snapped into action and so did the server. I turned slowly to put my back to the bar.

The Hand was where Justin said he was, right smack in the middle of the bar. He was on his feet and had a cigar hanging out one side of his mouth. He was smiling like he always seemed to do whenever danger was lurking overhead, and he was slowly rolling up the sleeves of his white button-up.

He chuckled and shook his head once his forearms were exposed. “Well, well, well. I must say. You Lost Breeds just keep making my job easier and easier. You fell right into my lap like a stray mutt.”

“Where’s Jason?”

The Hand shrugged. “The kid is a little bitch. He ran off with his tail between his legs. Looks like he failed to do the job I gave him.” The Hand glanced at my shoulder and clicked his tongue like a disapproving mother. “He’ll have to make up for that somehow.”

“He’s just a kid,” I growled.

“Sure he is and an important one at that. A Moretti. I’ll let him go when I’m done with him. If I feel like it. And in whatever state I choose.”

“Fuck you,” I spat.

The Hand laughed and took his cigar out of his mouth. He tossed it in the ashtray on the table and slipped his hands in his pockets. “You’re a bitter motherfucker, aren’t you?”

“Enough talking.”

“Suits me.” The Hand shrugged.

And that was it. The gloves were off. The people in the lounge had become aware of the tension in the room and had gotten up from their tables to leave. By the time the conversation ended, the entire lounge was empty save for Justin the fool, who was still standing behind the bar like a dope.

The Hand leaned over and plucked his whiskey from the table beside the ashtray. He polished it off in three mouthfuls and then smashed the glass on the edge of the table. He picked up the broken shards and slipped them between his fingers as he made a fist. Then he flashed me a smile and wiggled his glass knuckles beside his face. "Come on Lost Breed. Let's dance."

It was going to hurt. It was going to hurt a hell of a lot.

But I could fight dirty too.

I charged him. He stayed where he was, his feet planted, bracing for impact. All the while he smiled like a lunatic as he anticipated the brawl.

I remained focused. I couldn't afford to fuck up. I had to play this smart if I stood a chance of beating him. He had a good fifty pounds on me, all of which was hard muscle, and I doubted he was the sort to slow down after getting hit hard a few times. If anything, it would probably only spur him on more.

He raised his fist.

Right before he swung, I ducked out of the way. His fist barreled by my face, and I lunged sideways. I picked up a discarded serving tray from one of the tables and spun back around with it. The Hand's fist came at me again, but this time, it slammed into the tray. The glass shards broke apart with the impact. Blood erupted from between his fingers, and he let out a furious growl as I wound back and swung the tray viciously.

I struck him across the jaw, and he staggered back.

Then, he started laughing. It was wild, manic, uncontrollable laughter. His wild eyes swept up to me, and he dragged his bloody hand down his face, staining his skin red.

“I like your style, Lost Breed. You’re going to be more fun than I thought.”

CHAPTER 14



EVELYN

My palms were sweaty, and my heart was fluttering like a bird in a cage. Bruce was trying to calm me down, but he seemed equally stressed out. “It’ll be all right, Evelyn. Don’t worry. Just let me go out there and check it out. I’ll make sure ___”

“No!” I said, panicked.

“Evelyn, please, these are my people.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. But we have to stay here. My friend is coming, and he’ll know what to do. He’ll take care of them. He doesn’t want anyone to get hurt any more than you do.”

“Who the hell is this friend of yours?” Bruce asked.

“He’s—well, um.” I had no idea how to answer that question. Was Derek even technically my friend? No. Not even close. He was still a stranger to me. But there was no doubt in my mind he would come and would fiercely protect all of us. He’d made me a promise.

Bruce shook his head at me. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Anxiety shot through me as he made to go around me. He went to the back door and right before he opened it, it burst open with such force, it slammed into the back wall. The doorknob punched a hole in the drywall, and a bunch of the stuff came rushing back.

Their voices were panicked, and I caught the words “fight,” “bald guy,” and “mean guy” come out of several

mouths. Justin came back last, and he slammed the door closed behind him. He looked frazzled as he peered around wildly and started doing a headcount. “Is anybody missing?” he called.

Bruce did a quick head count too. “That’s everyone.”

One of the girls, Alicia, looked like she’d seen a ghost as she hurried away from the door and bumped into me.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Bruce asked, grabbing her by the shoulders.

Her blue eyes were wide. “There are two guys out there, and it looks like it’s going to get pretty bad.”

I rushed up to them. “The big bald guy and another? What did he look like?”

Alicia pursed her lips as she tried to process my question. “Um. He was big. And kind of rude. He had brown hair and a beard.”

Derek.

Why didn’t I feel relieved?

I’d called him. I’d wanted him to come, but knowing he was out there was horrifying. I interrupted Bruce as he tried to talk to Alicia and make sure she was okay. “Is he alone?” I asked. “The guy with the beard, did he come in alone?”

Alicia nodded.

My panicked heart fluttered more desperately.

What was this feeling? Why did I care so much about him being out there on his own? I barely knew the man. Collectively, I’d probably only spent forty-five minutes with him in total. But there was something about him that made me feel connected to him.

“I already called the police,” Bruce was saying. “They said they already received a tip, and they have cars en route to us now. They said we just need to stay out of the fray.”

I pointed at the emergency exit door. “We should get everyone out of here.”

“We should be safe back here,” Bruce said.

I shook my head. “Don’t make assumptions with this guy. If he gets his hands on one of us, he’ll use us as a hostage, and Derek won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“Hostage?” Alicia whispered.

I nodded. “Yes. Now, let’s get moving. Bruce, get everyone out through the back.”

Bruce only hesitated for a second longer before he took up my instructions and started hurrying the staff to the back door. Just as he pushed it open, I heard the brawl begin in the front of the house of the cigar lounge. For a moment, my heart stopped completely.

Breaking glass. Something striking something solid. An angry yell. More breaking glass. Soft thuds like a fist pummeling a body.

I shook my head to clear the images that sprang to life in the back of my mind. I had to keep it together a little longer.

Then, I spotted the fire extinguisher beside Bruce’s desk.

I acted without thinking. I raced forward and grabbed the extinguisher. Nobody was paying attention. They were focused on Bruce, who was focused on getting them the hell out. Good.

I rushed out through the door and down the hallway, emerging behind the bar to see the destruction the two men were causing.

There was blood. Enough of it for me to be concerned.

Derek had The Hand down on the ground and was wailing on him. The Hand had his arms up to protect his face and was laughing. Legitimately laughing. It was almost like he liked being struck, like he got off on it. Knowing how insane he was, I suspected he was enjoying it.

Derek let out a furious yell as he buried his fist in The Hand’s ribs.

The big man seized the opportunity to turn the tables. He struck with a punch of his own, and I heard it connect with Derek's jaw, who slumped backward in a temporary state of confusion.

As The Hand stood above him, I tried to scream, but my voice was caught in my throat like in a nightmare. I was powerless as The Hand bent down and grabbed ahold of the front of Derek's muscle shirt. As he yanked him forward, I spotted a deep gash on Derek's shoulder. It was pumping out blood that stained the carpet beneath him.

Derek came back to his senses as The Hand drew him in close. I watched as the big bastard wound back and struck Derek again. He didn't let his shirt go. He hauled him back upright as the punch muddled Derek's mind and prepared to strike him again.

If I didn't do something, Derek was going to be killed. I knew it like I knew The Hand wouldn't refrain from hurting a woman.

I grit my teeth and rushed forward with the fire extinguisher.

The Hand was oblivious to my approach as I came up behind Derek. The Hand was hunched over him. He had landed another hit while I ran over, but that was all he was going to get. I'd decided.

I pulled the nozzle and the fire extinguisher shot white spray and foam out of it in an explosive burst. I aimed it straight into the bald man's face, and he staggered backward in surprise. I followed his retreat, and a horrible high-pitched sound hurt my ears.

I realized it was my own scream.

I stepped over Derek, who was pushing himself up to his elbows on the floor, and continued to scream bloody murder as I went after the man who had terrified me in the alley. There was something empowering about having him back away from me. I found myself wanting to hurt him. I wanted to make him suffer.

Something was wrong with me.

The fire extinguisher ran out of steam, and the bursts of foam and spray subsided to nothing. I stood between The Hand and Derek as the big man wiped foam from his face and shook it off his hands. He looked up at me, fury burning in his eyes.

“Hello, kitten.”

I took a step back.

Derek called my name. “Get the fuck out of here!”

I was frozen to the spot. Staring at the big man before me brought back all the fear I’d felt that night in the alley. This time was a hundred times worse. He was moving toward me, one slow, agonizing step at a time. He was smiling once more like he’d just happened upon a new plaything. Me.

I tightened my grip on the fire extinguisher. “Stay away from me.” I tried to sound as commanding as possible, but I sounded terrified and pathetic.

He laughed at me.

“I mean it. Stay back!”

He kept coming. I could hear Derek trying to push himself to his feet behind me. He’d had his senses knocked clean out of him. I’d be blown away if he managed to stand up so quickly after the hits he’d just taken. I needed to buy him some time. That’s why I came out here in the first place, wasn’t it? To help him? He needed me.

I couldn’t let him down.

I moved to the right and slipped between two tables. My shoes crunched over broken shards of glass as I backed slowly away, keeping my eyes trained on The Hand, who followed me, pushing tables and chairs out of his way as he came.

“Come here, girlie. Let me show you what I do to women who think they can tell me what to do. Come on,” he hissed, taking a swipe at me.

I stumbled back, rolling an ankle, and winced. But I kept backing up, weaving between tables without having to look back where I was going. I was glad Britt had told me to memorize the floor plan on my first day to make my serving routes easier.

I knew I was going to run out of space soon. It was only a matter of time before he was on me. I had to delay him. I gathered my courage. “Why do you like hurting people?”

He hesitated but only for a second. It was enough for me to put an extra two feet between us. “It’s a good thrill, kitten. You want me to show you? Are you curious?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m curious why you’re like this. What happened to you to make you so evil?”

He chuckled. “Nothing happened to me.”

“Liar.”

He lunged for me, and I screamed. Then, out of sheer instinct, I darted to my right and wound back with the fire extinguisher. I swung it through the air, and it slammed into the side of his head hard. I yelped in surprise as I struck him, and he staggered back. I hurried farther away too.

I’d been hoping I’d have enough strength to knock him out cold, but that would have been too easy. He rubbed his bald head with one hand and looked at me. Now, he was really pissed. Now, he wanted to really hurt me. “Get your ass over here,” he hissed.

Then, Derek was there standing between us. He was in rough shape. I could tell by the way he was slightly bent over that he was hurting. Blood was still leaking out of his shoulder.

“Derek,” I whispered. It was a plea. He didn’t need to save me again.

He didn’t say anything. Shoulders heaving with every breath he took, he just stood there and stared The Hand down. I was sure the brawl was about to begin again, and this time, it wouldn’t end until one of them was dead.

Fear so raw hit me, and I grew dizzy.

The thick silence around us was cut by the whir of sirens not far off.

The Hand flinched. His gaze flicked to Derek. “Catch you around, Lost Breed.” He turned and ran through the back door. I was glad I’d sent Bruce and everyone outside.

Derek made to go after him, but I bolted out in front of him, dropped the fire extinguisher, and put my hands on his chest.

Derek reached out to press a hand to one of the tables to brace himself. I peered up into his face. His cheek was turning purple, and he had a split lip. “Oh, no,” I breathed, reaching up to cup his face. “I’m sorry. Are you okay? Oh. I’m so sorry.”

He closed a hand over mine. “Don’t be sorry. I’m fine.”

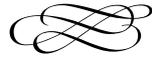
“Fine?” I asked incredulously.

He straightened to his full height and grimaced. “Yeah. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Do me a favor,” Derek said as he sank down into the nearest chair. “Bring me a glass of whiskey?”

CHAPTER 15



DEREK

My mind was buzzing with several jumbled thoughts as Evelyn looked me over with concerned green eyes. First, what the hell had she been thinking trying to take on The Hand on her own like that? Second, how much of an ass had I made of myself letting that bastard kick me around like a piñata in front of her? And third ... I couldn't remember. There were probably other things I should be thinking about, but the hits I'd taken were still making me a little confused.

It wasn't as bad as Evelyn seemed to think it was though. I just needed a couple minutes to get my wits together. Her hovering around me like a helicopter parent wasn't doing my head any favors.

I caught her wrist as she reached out to touch my cheek. "Will you sit for a moment?" I asked as politely as I could. I had a tendency to let my anger seep into my voice, and I didn't want her to think I was mad at her. At least not right now. Because I wasn't sure if I was mad at her yet or not. "You're making me dizzy."

I was definitely pissed, though. That was for damn sure. The Hand had escaped. Again. This time, it was on no one's head but mine.

Evelyn sank into the chair across from me and rested her hands on her knees, which were bouncing. She then ran her hands up and down her bare thighs while she watched me sip the whiskey she had brought over. It wasn't any good by my standards, but I didn't care. I just wanted to take the edge off.

“You’re looking at me like I’m a dog that got hit by a truck,” I said pointedly.

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“Sorry. I mean ... you know what I mean.”

I smiled at her, which stung the cut on my lip. “You’re a strange woman, Evelyn. You know that? Real fucking strange.”

Her hands went still in her lap, and she arched a delicate brown eyebrow at me. “Of the two of us, you think *I’m* the strange one? Me?” She put her hand on her chest.

“You just tried to fight a guy off with a fire extinguisher.”

“You’re welcome,” she quipped back.

It was impossible not to be amused by her. She was full of fire and wit, and she wouldn’t back down from anyone. I liked her. I liked her maybe a little too much.

I finished off my glass of whiskey and set it down on the table as I got to my feet. Evelyn stood with me and continued to look at me like a busted up puppy. I nodded toward the back entrance. “I have to get out of here. The cops will be here any minute, and it’s probably best if I’m gone when they show up and start asking questions.”

“I’ll go with you,” she offered.

“You don’t have to,” I said.

“I want to. Who’s going to clean you up?”

I looked down my nose at her. What did she think I was? A toddler incapable of patching up my own booboos? “I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and took my hand. “Come on. You shouldn’t drive, anyway. You were hit in the head a couple times.”

I smirked. “And are you going to drive my truck, then?”

“Why not?” she asked as she led me out the front door instead of the back. She stopped when we got to my truck, which was only six feet away. The driver’s door was still wide open, and the chime was dinging incessantly.

As we were about to climb up into the truck, a black mustang came tearing through the parking lot. Evelyn sucked in a nervous breath, and I told her to relax. “He’s a buddy of mine.”

She decompressed like a balloon beside me and clung to my side as Caleb parked and got out of his muscle car. He strode over, full of purpose and anger, and poked me in the chest roughly. “You should have waited for us,” he snarled.

I batted his hand away. “Chill out, Caleb. It’s done.”

“And he’s gone. Again.” I could see anger in his eyes. He was as pissed as me, but he was thinking more clearly. He hadn’t just had his head used for target practice. “This was our second chance to take him out, and we fucked it up again.”

Evelyn tightened her grip around me as Caleb’s eyes flicked to her. She flinched under his cold gaze. “H-hi. I’m Evelyn.”

“I remember you,” he said before putting his hands on his hips and hanging his head back to look at the sky. He blew out an exasperated sigh. “You two need to get the hell out of here. I’ll deal with the cops. Dani said she’s on her way, and she’ll cover for us.”

“Thanks, Caleb, I appreciate it.”

He waved me away. “Whatever. Go lie down or something. You look like shit.”

I chuckled, and Evelyn steered me to the passenger side of my truck. She tried to help me up, which was incredibly emasculating, and I gently pushed her an arm’s length away. “I’ve got this. Stop mothering me. Go get in the driver’s side.”

“Okay,” she said. She watched me step into the truck before doing as I said. She had to use the handlebar in the ceiling to hoist herself up into my truck. Then, she spent a good two minutes adjusting the seat and all the mirrors, which

was agonizing to watch because I was going to have to set everything back the next day. When she was ready, I handed her the keys. She started the truck up and started backing up.

I was surprised she could handle the massive vehicle. She drove it like a pro, and when I asked her how she learned to drive it, she said simply, “My dad had a truck like this.”

That was enough of an answer for me to sit back and relax as she took us to Penny’s apartment. She parked expertly at the curb, parallel parking between two small sedans. She put it in park and unbuckled her seat belt. We both got out and walked to the front door of the building. She held a little black fob on her key ring to the door, and it buzzed us in.

As we stood and waited for the elevator, I glanced down at her. “Your friend is going to be pissed I’m back at her apartment.”

Evelyn shrugged. “What Penny doesn’t know won’t hurt her. I just want to get you cleaned up and maybe let you sleep for a bit. Then, you can leave before she gets up.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.”

The doors slid open, and we stepped on the elevator. We rode it up in silence, and I wondered what she was thinking. There was a good chance she might be a little scared to bring me into her apartment. I had to keep reminding myself that she didn’t actually know me that well, and I didn’t know her either. It just *felt* like I’d known her forever. Which was very, very odd.

The doors opened, and we spilled out down the hall and went to Penny’s front door. Evelyn unlocked it quietly and poked her head in. When she established that the coast was clear, she motioned me to follow with a wave of her hand. Once I was inside, she pressed the door closed and locked it.

“Come have a seat over here,” she whispered as she patted a chair at the kitchen island. “Do you want anything? Water? Tea?”

“Tea?” I asked. What kind of man did she think I was? The sort to sip English breakfast out of a floral patterned china cup

with a popped pinky? Not a chance.

“Yeah. Or coffee. Or—”

“Water is fine.”

“Okay,” she said. She filled me up a glass and set it down in front of me. Then, she shuffled off down the hall to what I assumed was the bathroom. She returned a minute later with a red first aid kit in her hand.

I found this entertaining. “She actually has one of those under her bathroom sink?”

Evelyn unzipped it and frowned at me. “Of course. All normal people do. You never know what could happen.” She pulled out gauze and bandages and Polysporin and several other things that lost my interest rather quickly. Then, she began dabbing gently at my bruises and cuts until she was satisfied I wasn’t going to get any infections.

Little did she know, this was a cakewalk compared to some of the beatings I’d taken when I used to work for Warren. I’d be right as rain in the morning.

When she was done, she packed up the kit, zipped it up, and returned it to its rightful place under the bathroom sink. By the time she came back, I’d finished my glass of water. She offered me another one, which I declined, so she put the glass in the kitchen sink.

It became clear there were no more distractions left. No cuts to clean. No bruises to scrutinize. No water glasses to fill. It was just the two of us.

Evelyn bit her bottom lip and looked at me. “Do you want to sit down for awhile?” She nodded to the living room behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. The plush cream-colored sofa looked comfortable, and the idea of sitting down on it cuddled up next to Evelyn wasn’t so bad. I spotted a pillow beneath the window and a folded up blanket. It seemed a little odd, but I didn’t say anything as I got up and followed Evelyn into the living room. She dropped down on the couch, and I followed suit.

“I’m not going to get any blood on this thing, right? Penny hates me enough as it is.”

Evelyn smiled. “You’re not bleeding anymore, and you’re all cleaned up. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

My head was feeling a lot less fat now and my body a lot less achy. So I figured it was a good time to let her know how stupid I thought she had been back at The Stokes. “You know. That stunt you pulled back there was pretty foolish.”

She blinked at me. “Sorry?”

“You shouldn’t have intervened. He could have hurt you. Or worse.”

“Excuse me? I intervened because he was going to kill you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No. You might not have known that because you were the one who was being bludgeoned in the face. I was the one watching it happen. I think I was a better judge of who needed saving and who needed to step up. Besides. It all worked out in the end.”

“Because the cops were coming,” I said.

“So what? I should have just let him keep going? What if he killed you? Or knocked you unconscious? Then, I would have been left to fend for myself anyway.”

I rubbed my beard. “You were supposed to get the hell out of there.”

Evelyn crossed her arms under her breasts. I noticed for the first time how sexy she looked tonight. I’d been too preoccupied with everything else to pay attention to her skintight black dress with a revealing neckline. She heaved a sigh, and her breasts swelled. “You’re kind of an ass, Derek. You know that?”

“People make a habit of reminding me often enough.”

“Maybe you should take a hint then,” she said sourly.

No woman had ever looked hotter to me. She was fierce as hell. Fiercer than me, even. Her fire was red hot, and it was clear to me that she would not back down. I looked her over and didn't bother trying to hide that I was checking her out. "That mouth of yours is going to get you into trouble one of these days, Evelyn."

She shifted so that she was leaning a little closer. "Is it?"

I nodded and reached out to brush her hair back off her shoulder. It was silky smooth between my fingers. "Yes. It may already have."

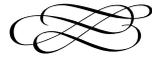
"How so?" she whispered.

I didn't tell her with words. Instead, I closed the space between us and cupped the back of her neck in one hand. I pulled her to me and sealed my lips over hers. She melted into me instantly, and I was overwhelmed with everything that was her.

The taste of berries. The smell of roses and soap. Skin softer than velvet and lips so plush, they felt like pillows against mine.

It had been a long time since I'd kissed a woman like this, and I was incapable of stopping myself. I had to have her. Right here and now. And the way she was breathing and clinging to my shirt told me she wanted the same things.

CHAPTER 16



EVELYN

Derek's kiss wasn't what I'd been expecting. I didn't think tenderness was a quality a man like him would possess, but the way he cradled my head and grazed my lips with his was so soft, so sweet, that I worried I might turn to putty in his hands. I was worried I would give everything to him.

There were little alarm bells going off in my head.

Push him away.

Tell him to leave.

You're on Penny's couch, girl, what are you thinking?

He's going to hurt you.

You're already damaged enough.

What. Are. You. Thinking.

None of those thoughts won the battle raging between my mind and my body. It felt like every single neuron was firing and sending little white-hot jolts of desire to every part of my body, specifically the places he was touching. My lips, my neck, my waist. It felt so fucking good to have his hands on me.

It had been far too long since a man had touched me like this. Since law school. And even then, it had been nothing compared to this. It had been routine. Expected. Pressured.

This was different. This was real passion and fire, and it had all come to a head right now. Every passing look we'd

shared and every dirty thought that had raced through either of our minds was rushing to the foreground and calling the shots.

I had only been with three men my entire life, and calling them “men” was generous. The first had been the boy, Ralphie Kennedy, who took me to my high school prom. He’d been a nice kid with a cute smile and dimples, and I’d had a crush on him since my junior year. Being his date had been a dream come true. Losing my virginity to him had been an anticlimactic thirty-four-second pump fest that made me swear off sex altogether. Until law school.

I had sex with two guys there. One was named Jerry and the other Lou. The sex had been vanilla and gentle. Nothing special. I never craved it or missed it or found myself in the mood to have it. They always initiated, and I always reciprocated like a good girlfriend should. Desire was foreign to me.

But Derek was a whole new world.

I wanted him more than I’d wanted anyone or anything in my entire life. Just his presence had me itching to rip my clothes off for him. I wanted to peel his shirt off with my teeth. I wanted to be whatever he needed me to be.

Derek pinched my bottom lip gently between his teeth before pulling away to look deeply into my eyes. “Maybe I should leave.”

No.

My gut swirled with panic at the thought of him getting up and walking away from me right now. My body was on fire, and there was a wetness in my panties that I’d never experienced before.

“Stay,” I whispered as I rested my hands on his chest. His muscles were firm beneath my palms, and I loved the way they rolled and shifted as he reached out to wrap his arms around my lower back. “Please.”

A smile crept across his perfect lips. “Please, you say?”

I nodded. Could he see my desperation? Smell it? I didn’t care. I was so turned on, I’d shout it to the world how badly I

wanted him inside me.

Derek didn't make me shout it to the world. He sealed his mouth over mine in another mind-blowing kiss and pushed me down until I was lying on my back beneath him. He held himself above me as his lips moved from mine down my jaw, my throat, and to my chest, where my breasts were swelling with each breath at the neck of my very low and very tight black dress.

He kissed the top of my cleavage, and I giggled.

Derek glanced up at me, bemusement twinkling in his eyes as I tried to silence my breathless giggles. Now was not the time to act like a schoolgirl. He'd want a woman. I could be that, but then he whispered, "You have the best laugh."

I blushed, and he worked his way down the length of my body. I reached behind my back to find my zipper, but he wasn't waiting on me. He took the hem of my dress and rolled it up my thighs.

This was happening. There was no stopping it now. The member of a motorcycle gang was about to see my pussy.

Holy fuck.

I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying something that might make him stop and watched as he pushed my dress up over my waist. I thanked my lucky stars that I'd worn cute panties, a thick-banded black lace thong with a jewel dangling from the top.

Derek pushed my knees apart. I bit down harder on my tongue.

He watched me as he ran his hand up the inside of my thigh and stopped with two fingers resting against the fabric of my panties. He began rubbing in slow circles, spreading my juices everywhere. I'd probably seeped right through the thin cotton.

Derek nudged the fabric aside and ran one finger through my juices. He smirked. "Does a little bit of danger turn you on?"

I shook my head.

“Are you sure?” he asked, tipping his head to the side. The look he was giving me was the sort of look the devil himself might give his mistress. And I loved it. Then, he eased a thick finger inside me.

I sucked in a breath of surprise. A tight knot built somewhere below my stomach like a thirst that needed to be quenched. He curled his finger and pressed upward. I gripped the sofa cushions beneath me as Derek leaned over me. He lowered himself down so that our noses were practically touching.

“I’d ask you to scream for me, baby, but we don’t want to wake up your roomie.”

And then his finger was doing something magical inside me. I moaned and arched my back when he slid another digit inside me. It was almost too much. There was no way I would be able to keep it together and not wake Penny up. The last thing I needed was to have her walk in and find me half-naked with a gang member finger fucking me for all I was worth.

Which is exactly what he was doing.

My breaths grew quick as he worked me harder and faster. Nothing had ever felt so good. That tight little knot below my belly was tightening and tightening, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it unraveled and I was blessed with waves of pleasure.

I moaned again.

Derek clamped his free hand down over my mouth. At first, I was a little surprised. I widened my eyes at him, and he kissed my cheek as he worked harder between my legs. My moans became whines of pleasure until it was all too much, and then I fell silent, willing the orgasm to hit.

It struck with force. I came violently. The tight knot blew apart and ecstasy raced through my veins. Derek kept his hand over my mouth, and my breathing became more labored.

When he pulled his fingers out of me, he lifted his hand from my mouth and then slithered down the length of my body

to settle between my legs. He pushed my thighs back and dipped his head low so he could run his tongue over my opening and lap at my juices.

I had never let a man do such a thing before.

It was exquisite.

His tongue rolled over me with expertise. He knew all the places to hit and to linger. He knew when to suckle and when to flick. I had to hold my breath and then bite down on my wrist when I came for a second time to avoid screaming his name at the ceiling.

He moved back up my body to kiss me some more. I could taste myself on his lips. I was even more aroused.

He straightened and slid off the couch like a man who had not just been in a brawl. He moved effortlessly. He stripped out of his pants and pulled his muscle shirt over his head. His body was a work of art. When he was half naked like this, I could appreciate the broadness of his shoulders and the narrow cut of his hips. He had sexy indents that pointed to his groin like an arrow telling me where I needed to go.

And I wanted to go there.

His boxers were black and skintight. The bulge beneath them was intimidating. He hooked his thumbs in the band and worked them down. As he stepped out of them, I could look nowhere else but at his cock. His meaty head glistened with a drop of pre-come, and his shaft curved upward to his belly button, where a trail of dark hair crept up to his chest and spread outward.

I swallowed. He was magnificent.

I sat up and shimmied to the edge of the couch. Derek gripped his shaft and stared down at me. “Do you have a condom?”

I blinked. I did not. “No.”

“Does Penny?”

“Uh—”

“Go get one.”

I bolted up from the couch like a good girl and hurried down the hall. Derek whistled behind me as he watched me go, and I felt my cheeks burn as I ducked into the bathroom. I yanked open the top right drawer to look down at Penny’s condom collection. She had them organized into four little Tupperware containers. To my relief, there was a magnum condom tucked against the side of the drawer. I plucked it out and hurried back to Derek, who I handed the condom to.

He didn’t say anything about the size I’d chosen.

As he went to tear it open, I dropped to my knees in front of him.

“No,” he said, ripping the wrapper open and pulling the condom free. He rolled it over his thick cock.

“I want to,” I said. My voice was thick with need. I didn’t even sound like myself.

He shook his head and grabbed my arm to pull me to my feet. Then he took me by the hips and spun me around. “You can suck my cock when I want you to. Right now, I just want that sweet wet pussy of yours. Get on your knees on the sofa.”

I obeyed. I planted each knee on a sofa cushioned and leaned forward to rest my elbows on the back of the sofa. I looked back at him over my shoulder as he stepped up between my legs. I pushed down and arched my back for him. He pressed the tip of his cock against the opening of my pussy. I was so swollen and wet. He held himself there, teasing me.

I pressed back.

He groaned as I took him. The sound was delicious. I wanted to hear it again. I bounced slowly on his dick, feeling him press into every part of me.

“Oh god,” I whispered.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair. “How do you like to be fucked, baby?”

I didn’t know how to answer his question. I’d never been fucked good enough to know. But I knew what I liked in my

fantasies.

Derek tugged on my hair harder and leaned over me as he drove into me hard. I moaned as he kissed and nibbled my shoulder. “I asked you a question.”

“Hard,” I whispered. “Fuck me hard.”

Derek pushed my face down into the back of the sofa cushions. Then, he thrust hard against me, his thighs slapping against the backs of mine as he rode me. His grip tightened in my hair, and the control he demanded was everything I had been craving. I wanted him to call the shots.

I screamed into the pillows when I came. Derek groaned behind me again. He bucked, and I trembled, my knees weakening with every thrust until he was done.

When he pulled out, he squeezed my ass and gave me a nice little slap. I yelped into the sofa, and he pulled me back, where he rained kisses down my cheek and on my lips. “You’re so fucking sexy, you know that?”

I was out of breath. I didn’t know that. I’d never considered myself sexy before.

But I believed him when he said it, and I wanted to hear it over and over. I wanted to fuck him over and over.

Next time, he’d let me suck him off. Next time, he’d let me show him how good I could make him feel.

CHAPTER 17



DEREK

Evelyn's cheek rested on my bare chest, and she was running her fingers through the hair on my chest. Her hair was stuck to the side of my face, but I didn't mind. She smelled like flowers.

She'd fetched the blanket and pillow under the window and brought it over to the sofa and set up a little bed for us. Both items also smelled like her. The blanket was pulled up to her waist, and she'd changed into a silky nightgown that had me thinking all kinds of thoughts about her. Her pussy had been so fucking tight and slippery wet that all I wanted to do was be back inside her. But she was tired, and truth be told, so was I. It had been one hell of a night.

Evelyn let out a soft sigh and snuggled in tighter to my side. It was a miracle we both fit on the sofa somehow. Evelyn was small, and she had tucked herself between me and the back of the sofa. Most of her weight was on me, but I didn't mind. I liked having her this close.

"So the pillow and blanket were convenient," I said after we'd been lying in silence for a good ten minutes.

I felt her cheek move against my chest and knew she was smiling. "Yeah. I'm sort of between homes right now. Penny is letting me crash here while I get my shit in order."

That was news to me. I figured they were roommates. "What's to get in order?"

Evelyn sighed. "Everything."

I chuckled and rubbed her shoulder. "So dramatic."

She looked up at me, and her hand on my chest fell still as she rested her chin on her knuckles. “Not dramatic. Realistic. I jumped ship on a career path that would have given me the financial freedom to be a homeowner and to start my life. To really start it. Now, I’m back at square one. It sucks.”

“What was the job?”

“Lawyer.”

I couldn’t stop my eyebrows from creeping up my forehead. “You? A lawyer?”

“Prosecuting.”

“I figured.”

Evelyn shrugged. “My parents made all the decisions for me. They thought I was throwing my life away. At the time, I thought it was my only option. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents, and I wanted to find something that would fulfill me. I think I just wanted to believe law school was the right choice. It would have been so much easier if I liked it. And I tried. For two years. I tried.”

“I can’t see you doing that. The stuffy suits and the uptight courtrooms? Not to mention there’s no fun in it. So serious. You’re a free spirit.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, but it was a sad smile.

“How did your parents react when you dropped out?”

Evelyn looked down at my chest and started playing with my hair again. She bit her bottom lip, and it was easy to see that this question bothered her. I waited to see if she would answer. When she did, her voice was quiet. “They kicked me out of the house and told me not to come back unless I was going back to school.”

Assholes. That’s not what parents were supposed to do. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s water under the bridge now. I’m lucky to have Penny. She took me in right away and helped me find a job. I don’t know where I’d be without her.”

“I’m sure you’d have figured it out. You’re a tough girl. You tried to kill a man with a fire extinguisher tonight.”

Her bubbly laughter surprised me. She met my eyes with a warm smile and nodded. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Hell, yeah, you did. It was something else.”

“Yeah?”

“Definitely. I’m not going to lie. It was kind of a turn-on.”

“Stop.” She laughed, burying her face in my chest. She looked up at me when I tucked a strand of hair between her ear. “Derek?”

“Mm?”

“Are you really just a Treasurer of your club?”

This question gave me pause. It was not like me to come clean with a woman and bare my soul to her. Keeping everything locked away was usually my strategy. People could hurt you with knowledge, and I’d never been good at laying down boundaries with women.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Evelyn said hurriedly.

“No,” I said. “I can tell you.”

She watched me expectantly as I considered how much I wanted to tell her. Even a little bit would be more than I’d told anyone in ... ever.

I put one hand behind my head to prop myself up to better look down at her. Evelyn’s green eyes were sparkling in the moonlight coming in through the window behind me. She was stunning. Too good for me. Being honest might make her realize that. It would be for her own good. “I am the Treasurer. But it’s only because of my history dealing with accounts and finances. I used to... move money for some pretty bad guys.”

“Move money?”

“I’m not going to tell you any more than that. Details make shit complicated. But yeah. I moved money for people.

Sometimes, people didn't want their money moved. So I would take it by force."

Evelyn blinked. "Oh."

"I've hurt people, Evelyn. You should know that about me. A lot of people. It's not who I am anymore, but it's who I was. I was really fucking good at it. And sometimes," I paused, unsure if I should say what was on the tip of my tongue.

"Yes?" Evelyn encouraged.

I sighed. "Sometimes, I miss it."

Evelyn propped herself up. There was a frown on her full lips, and her brow was creased. "What part of it do you miss?"

I shrugged and wished she wasn't looking at me. "I don't know. All of it. The adrenaline rush. The moment right before the fight. Winning."

"Everything you're saying should make me want to run," she whispered.

"Then, why aren't you?"

Evelyn searched my eyes. She licked her lips and rested her cheek in one hand. "I don't know. I just feel safe with you, I guess. I feel like I'm just me, and I feel like that's enough."

I pulled her up to me and kissed her. She smiled into the kiss and, when we parted, she nuzzled her face under my chin. This feeling right here was the kind of shit that always got me into trouble.



"What the fuck is going on here?"

I blinked my eyes open and squinted under the blinding sunlight coming in through the window behind me. I lifted a hand to shield my eyes and looked up to where a blond-haired young woman was standing behind the sofa, staring down at me like I was a dog who'd just rolled in rotten fish and slept on her sofa.

Evelyn was pushing herself upright with her hands on my chest. Her hair was a wild mess with curls plastered to one cheek and strands sticking up all over the place. Her lips were swollen, and her eyes were heavy with fatigue. She looked cute as hell. If Penny hadn't been standing over me like a pissed off lioness, I would have told her so.

"Penny," Evelyn said thickly, using her whole arm to push her thick mane of hair back. "What time is it? I'm sorry. I planned on waking up earlier and—"

"And sneaking him out before I noticed?" Penny snapped.

"No. Well, yes, I guess so. But—"

"Nice, Evie. Really nice." Penny narrowed her eyes at me.

I tried to sit up, but Evelyn was still resting against my chest. I took her by the wrists and pushed her back so I could sit up. I had never been so thankful to be wearing boxers in my life.

Evelyn got to her feet, and I rolled off the couch to collect my clothes from the floor. I could feel Penny's eyes burning holes in my back as I stepped into my pants and pulled my shirt over my head.

Then, she growled. The girl literally growled. "Is that blood on his shirt?"

"Erm," Evelyn started.

"It is, isn't it? For fuck sakes, Evie, are you out of your mind? You brought a criminal home and fucked him on my couch!"

"I did not," Evelyn said defensively.

I turned around, and Penny shot me an ominous look. "Is she telling the truth?"

I held my hands up and started backing away. "This conversation is over my head, I think, so I'm just going to duck out if that's all right with you."

"Tell me," Penny said.

“I’m a criminal, remember? Even if I told you, why would you believe me?”

Penny rolled her eyes at me. Evelyn giggled. Praise her.

I backed away to the front door, and Evelyn followed me out as Penny paced angrily behind the sofa. I knew she was going to lay into Evelyn after I left. Evelyn unlocked the front door for me, and I stepped out into the hall. She joined me and closed the door behind her. “Sorry about that,” she apologized. Her hair was still a disaster, and I wanted to run my fingers through it and kiss her.

“I can’t say she’s wrong. She’s just looking out for you.”

“I can take care of myself, remember? I tried to kill a guy with a fire extinguisher.”

We both shared a laugh after that one, and I scratched the back of my neck. “Yeah. Well, I’d better get out of here anyway. I have shit to do after that fiasco last night. People will be looking for me.”

“Your friends?”

“Lost Breed members. Yeah.”

Evelyn nodded and rubbed her arm nervously. “Well. Thanks for coming to help me last night. I’m sorry you got your ass handed to you.”

“I did not get my ass handed to me.”

Evelyn grinned. “A matter of perspective, I guess. Regardless, I’m thankful, and I’m glad you spent the night last night. Really glad.” She reached out and touched my wrist. Then, she stretched up to the balls of her feet and kissed me.

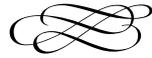
I wanted to stay with her. Oh god, did I want to stay. She was soft and lovely and everything my life was not right now. Her warmth had reminded me of all I was missing, and I wanted to claim her as my own and declare it to the world.

Not yet.

There were barriers I had to knock down first. Then, when the battle was behind me, she would be mine.

If I could wait that long.

CHAPTER 18



EVELYN

After Derek got on the elevator and the doors closed, I stood out in the hallway for a couple minutes processing everything that had happened.

I'd had sex with a man who should have sent me running scared in the other direction. I'd let him in and been vulnerable with him. And he'd shared some deep, dark secrets of his own that should have frightened me even more, but they hadn't. They'd only drawn me to him even more like a moth to the light, intrigued by the brightness and oblivious to the burn.

I pressed my back to the door and sighed.

I was in big trouble.

I was also in for a serious scolding when I went back inside, and I needed to get myself in the right frame of mind to face Penny's wrath. She was going to lay into me for this one for sure, and I couldn't blame her for it. Because she was right. Just like every other time. She was right. There was nothing I could say to defend my actions.

Well. There was one thing I could say, but it was completely insane.

I heard Penny's footsteps pounding down the hall on the other side of the door, and I pushed myself off it right before she yanked it open. She was wearing her blue pajamas, and her hair was up in a bun. She gave me a wild look and peered behind me down the hall, looking for Derek.

I slipped by her and went inside. "He's gone, Penny."

She whirled around and slammed the door.

I went to the stove and filled the kettle with hot water. As it filled, I glanced over my shoulder at her. “I know everything you’re thinking. Trust me. I know. I thought all the same things.”

“And yet you still fucked him.”

“Can you please stop saying that?” I pleaded as I put the kettle on the stove and turned on the gas element. The blue flame licked the bottom of the kettle, and I put my back against the counter and crossed my arms. “You might not believe me, but there was more than just sex last night. We talked.”

“Oh, you did? How romantic!” Her sarcasm was thick.

I sighed and hung my head. “Is there anything I can say to get you off my back about this? I know how it looks from your side of things, okay? I get it. But there’s more to him than just his gang ties, and if you spent a little time with him without attacking him, you might be able to see that.”

Penny blew a strand of hair off her face. “I highly doubt that. I’m a good judge of character, and he’s easy to pin down. He’s mean. And dangerous. And everything you don’t need in your life right now. Wouldn’t you rather have a nice guy with a reliable job and, you know, fewer scars?”

“Derek is a nice guy.”

Penny snorted.

“He is. You don’t know him. Remember how you hated that everyone used to judge you in high school because you wore all black and buckled boots and had purple hair?”

“That’s different,” Penny said.

“It’s really not.”

“I wasn’t fighting criminals in back alleys, Evie.”

She had me there. The kettle started boiling. I grabbed a paisley patterned mug from Penny’s cupboard and grabbed a tea bag. “Do you want tea?” I offered. Penny shook her head,

so I dropped the tea bag into the mug and then poured the hot water over it. I turned off the stove and set the kettle down on a cool element before turning back to my friend. “I care about him.”

“*What?*”

“I do. I can’t explain, but I do. I think he cares about me too.”

“Evie—”

“I know,” I said sharply, cutting her off. “I know, okay? To be honest, I’m getting pretty sick and tired of everyone thinking they know what’s best for me. I know you have good intentions, and you just don’t want me to get hurt. But I can make my own decisions. This is something I’m choosing on my own. I care about him. I trust him, and I know he wouldn’t ever hurt me. I’m done justifying my decision, okay?”

Penny looked at her feet. I wondered if she was ashamed. Then, she met my eye again and nodded solemnly. “Okay. It just scares me. I can’t help it.”

“I know, Pen.” I went to her and held her shoulders. “But you trust me, don’t you?”

Penny nodded. “Of course, I do.”

I smiled and pulled her in for a hug. “I’m sorry for getting upset. I love you. You just have to leave this one alone. I’ll be safe. I promise.”

Penny hugged me back and buried her face in my shoulder. “I love you too. Just be careful, okay? Even if he’s a good one, he might be surrounded by guys who are bad. You hear what I’m saying?”

“I do,” I whispered.



I hated to admit it, but it had never occurred to me that I was putting myself at risk by being close to Derek simply because of the crowds he hung around with. Sure, The Hand was

probably a rare exception, but I would be a fool to overlook the glaring fact that somehow, Derek and his MC had gotten tangled up with a guy like him. There had been crossover at one point, and that sort of thing probably happened more often than not to Derek and men like him.

It sucked to realize that, and it was all I could think about as I headed to work later that afternoon. I dreaded seeing Bruce again after everything that had happened at The Stokes the night before.

When I walked in, I stopped short. The place was still in disarray. A clean-up crew had been called in, and Bruce himself was wandering around, moving tables an inch to the left and then back to the right to try to make it look like two men hadn't tried to kill each other in here twelve hours ago. It wasn't really working.

I bit my bottom lip and walked up to him. I held my hands tightly together in front of myself when he looked up at me. He didn't look angry. If anything, he looked relieved to see me. "Hey, Evelyn. How are you holding up?"

"Good. Better than expected. How are you?"

He nodded and scratched the back of his neck as he looked around his lounge. "I've been better. It's going to take a lot of work to get this place back in shape to be open to the public again."

"We're closed?"

He nodded once more but didn't look at me. He only had eyes for the destruction. "Yeah. Just for a night or two. I was going to call you and tell you to take the night off, but there are two cops over at the bar. They want to speak to you." He pointed his chin to the bar behind me.

I turned around.

There were a man and a woman sitting at the bar, sipping lemon waters. They were dressed in navy blazers and black suit pants. I saw the flash of a gold badge on the hip of the female cop, and as I stared at her, she looked back over her

shoulder like she knew I was staring. She had dark hair and a smile that was much warmer than I'd expected to see on a cop.

She slid off her barstool and approached. When she extended her hand for me to shake, her grip was firm. "Hello, you must be Evelyn East?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's me."

"I'm a detective with the NYPD. You can call me Dani. This is my partner, Tom."

Tom, a tall sandy blond-haired cop, shook my hand as well. "Hey, Evelyn."

"Hi," I said nervously. I'd never spoken to cops before. Not unless you counted the time an officer came to my elementary school and let kids sit shotgun while he flicked on the lights and the sirens.

Dani clasped her hands in front of her. "We don't want to take up much of your time, Evelyn. This is just routine stuff. Do you have a minute for us to ask you some questions?"

"Yes, of course," I said hurriedly. Nobody said no to a detective, right? At least no goody-goodies like me did.

Dani motioned for me to walk forward to an empty table and chairs. She followed me, and the three of us took a seat. Dani crossed one leg over the other and fixed me with another one of her warm smiles before the interview started. "Could you tell us what happened last night in your own words, Miss East?"

I recounted the events of the evening as thoroughly as I was able. I had to pause a lot to collect my words, but the police were incredibly patient with me. I said "um" at least a hundred times, and my lips were dry from licking them anxiously as I told the story by the time I came to the end. Which was not the true end.

"Then, I hit him with the fire extinguisher," I said.

Dani blinked at me and glanced at Tom. They both looked amused. "You hit him?" Dani asked.

I nodded. “I felt like I didn’t really have a choice. Derek was in trouble, and there was no one else around to help him. So ... I did.”

Dani’s eyebrows crept upward, and I had the impression she was impressed. It felt good to have a woman like her appreciate what I did. I couldn’t explain it, but I wanted her to like me. I wanted her to see me as someone who was strong and could handle herself. Maybe because I was finally starting to feel that way myself.

Tom cleared his throat. “I trust you realize the danger you were putting yourself in by doing that, Miss East. This man is no petty criminal. He’s killed people.”

I grimaced. “Yeah. I only thought about that part of things after I hit him. It was more of a reflex than anything.”

“A fighter, not a flighter,” Dani mused.

“Apparently,” I said, feeling the heat in my cheeks.

“And after you hit him,” Tom said, “then what happened?”

“Um,” I stammered for the hundred and first time. I raked my fingers through my hair. Nervous sweat had broken out on the base of my neck. “Derek left. And so did I. I went home to my roommate and showered and went to bed. I was exhausted after everything that had happened. I probably shouldn’t have driven myself home, in hindsight.” I had no clue how I managed to lie through my teeth to a detective who was looking at me like she knew I was full of shit.

Dani got to her feet, and Tom followed. It was obvious she was the one calling the shots in their duo. She smiled down at me. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. If we need anything else from you, will it be all right if we reach out?”

“Yeah. Of course. That’s fine.”

“Very good. Have a good rest of your evening, Miss East. Try not to attack anyone with a fire extinguisher.” Dani winked, and then the two of them left.

I must have been the only person who did not find the whole fire extinguisher situation humorous. I suppose if I’d

told Penny, she wouldn't have thought it was funny either, but telling her would be admitting I'd been part of a battle for someone's life. I wasn't going to worry her with that. She was already stressed out enough about the whole Derek situation without me piling more shit on her.

After Dani and Tom left, Bruce came over and sat down across from me. "Did that go okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It was fine. They just wanted to know what happened out here from my perspective."

Bruce nodded. Then, he took a big breath. "What the hell did happen out here, Evelyn? It looks like two gorillas tried to kill each other."

He wasn't far off. "Yeah. It was messy."

"I have to hire someone to clean blood out of the carpet."

"Sorry."

Bruce rubbed his hands down his thighs but chuckled. "It's not your fault. I was really worried about you when I came in and saw this fucking mess. I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks, Bruce. I'm good. I can help you get this place back in order. Whatever you need."

"Nah." He waved me off. "You go on home. I can handle all this. I have some guys coming in who helped me when I first bought this place and did the renovations. They'll have her looking spick-and-span in no time. I wanted new carpet anyway."

"Can I give you some advice?" I asked as I stood and adjusted the shoulder strap of my purse.

Bruce looked up at me. "Sure."

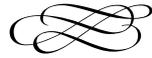
"Ditch the carpet altogether? Go with hardwood or something. Something easy to clean up spills and other ... messes. Besides, carpet is outdated. It's the only thing keeping this place from looking like a really modern establishment."

Bruce grinned and got to his feet. "You know. I might just do that. Now, get out of here before I put you to work."

I smiled and left, but I didn't go home. Penny was at work, and I had no interest in being there alone. Instead, I went to the mall where I sat with a cup of coffee and compulsively checked my phone for messages or a call from Derek. One never came. So I treated myself to a new set of pajamas. A silky, lacy, pretty set with no mermaids on them.

Just in case.

CHAPTER 19



DEREK

“So you had an interesting night,” Jax said as he tipped his chair on its rear legs at Ryder’s back patio table. He was running his thumb along his jaw, and what I first mistook for amusement was actually irritation.

Which was the general mood of all the men sitting around me.

I sighed. “Yeah. Interesting is one word.”

Jax snorted.

Ryder was sitting at the head of the table as per every meeting we’d ever had, and his expression was unreadable. If he was pissed, he was playing it close to the belt. He also didn’t have all the information yet. So far all I’d told them about was the fight with The Hand and how he’d gotten away. I also told them about Evelyn hitting him in the head with a fire extinguisher, which brought a wave of snarky comments.

“She put up a better fight than you did, man.”

“Maybe you should have let her handle things for you, and The Hand wouldn’t have gotten away.”

“What’s her number? We should see if she’s free to help us catch the bastard.”

“Sounds like my kind of woman.”

“Noses down,” I growled.

Sabian arched an eyebrow. “Did we hit a nerve?”

I rolled my shoulders to shake off the annoyance settling in my muscles. “No. Just leave it alone. We have more important things to talk about than just a girl.”

“Is she *just a girl*, though?” Sabian asked with a cocky grin.

The others chuckled until Ryder leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. “I agree with Derek. Enough chitchat about this woman. Dani went in to interview her at The Stokes. She seems trustworthy enough. Minus the fact that she lied about how the night ended.”

I didn’t say anything.

But Sabian, ever the curious bastard, said, “Oh?” It was innocent enough, but it was all Ryder needed to continue.

“She said she and Derek parted ways after the fight and both went home separately. Which, I’m pretty sure, was a lie. Wasn’t it, Derek?”

“Perhaps.”

“You sly dog,” Jax said.

“Fuck off,” I growled.

But then even Ryder got in on it. “Did you go back to your place or hers?”

I glared at all of them from beneath my eyebrows as they gave me sheepish looks. “Hers.”

Sabian rocked back like he’d been punched in the chest. “You went to another woman’s house for the night? That’s a fucking first. What happened to the whole ‘I like to have the control, and you can’t have that unless you’re in your domain’ shit?”

“I wanted her to feel safe.”

“Uh-huh,” Sabian snickered. “And just how did you make her feel safe? Did you bend her over to help her forget?”

“Enough,” I said. This time I wasn’t fucking around. I was done with this. “You’ve all had your laughs. Leave it.”

Sabian shrugged, and his smile was gone. He leaned forward to rest all four legs of his chair back on the ground. “Fine.”

I looked to Ryder. “I haven’t told you everything yet.”

Ryder’s eyebrows lifted. “Don’t keep me waiting. Let’s hear it.”

“Jason was there before I showed up. When Evelyn called, she said he was there with The Hand. He seemed agitated. At least, that’s what she said. He grew uncomfortable when The Hand hit on her, and he got up and left. When I was alone with the bald bastard later, I asked about Jason.”

Ryder was watching me closely. He was hanging on every word. I didn’t want to tell him the rest of it, but he needed to know.

“He’s working for him, Ryder. There’s no doubt about it now. I’m sure The Hand has something on him, but I offered to get him out of it when he shot me in the parking lot. That was his chance, and he didn’t take it. That scares the hell out of me.”

Ryder ran his hand down his face and then rested his forehead in his hand. He didn’t say anything.

Jax piped up. “Why does that scare the hell out of you?”

I glanced from Ryder to Jax. “That was the best chance Jason was going to have to get away from The Hand. I gave him a handout. A peace offering. All he had to do was get in my truck with me, and I’d take him back here. I gave him my word we would protect him. Instead, he shot me and took off running.”

“So ...?” Axel said slowly from the other end of the table.

“So,” Ryder growled, “Jason is more afraid of The Hand than he is of us. He doesn’t believe we could keep him safe from the bastard. He thinks we’ll lose. I know the boy. He’s a damn coward. He’ll choose whatever side he knows is going to win. And it’s not us.”

Silence settled around us. It was heavy and thick, and not a single one of the Lost Breeds at the table dared to break it.

Ryder slammed his fist down on the table. I hated myself for jumping. “Fuck!” he roared.

Axel grimaced and shifted in his seat. “Jason has always been a terrible judge of character, Ryder. And he’s young. This means nothing. He’s the one who chose wrong. We can still get him out of this.”

I intervened before Ryder blew his lid. “I want to take the lead on tracking him down again. I can apply more heat to my old boss. He’s a weasel. He’ll break if I use the right force.”

“I’ll help,” Caleb offered.

I glanced up at him. “I’d rather do this solo.”

“Why?” Caleb asked, his eyebrows drawing together.

I looked around the table at my brothers. “Because you all have someone depending on you to come home at the end of the day. I don’t and I can’t fucking speak for Caleb. If anyone’s going to—”

“No,” Ryder said. His voice cut through my words like acid. “Nobody is going to die. I’m done losing people. You hear me? I’m done. You can track him down, but you do not move on your own. Not again. It didn’t work last time, and it won’t work if you try again. You find him, and you call me. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Good. The same goes for the rest of you. Derek got lucky last night. Lucky that the cops showed up. Lucky that the girl had the balls to step in and keep The Hand from killing him when he had the chance. She’s lucky too. She had no idea who she was pissing off. Derek, don’t let her near this shit again. She’s an innocent in all of this.”

I nodded again. “I know.”

“And the rest of you,” Ryder said, “tell your women what you’re involved in. If anything happens, they can’t be caught

unprepared. You should all have plans in place of what to do if shit should take a wrong turn.”

“Ryder, is this necessary?” Axel asked. “This fucker isn’t going to take us down. We’re the fucking Lost Breed.”

Ryder looked down the length of the table to meet Axel’s eye. “This man has surprised me more than once. I’m not getting caught again. And you’ll do as I say. Tell Ellie what we’re walking into. If it scares her, good. She should be scared.”

Axel didn’t seem to like that answer very much, but he didn’t say anything. It was an order. We all knew that truth. I was thankful for the first time in a long time that I didn’t have a woman like they did. Caleb was single too, but this one was on me. I wanted it to be.

Then, my mind was assaulted with a flash of Evelyn’s smile, followed by flickering images of her naked body. The way she’d arched her back while I licked her pussy had driven me over the edge with need. She was a masterpiece, and try as I might to think of her as just a girl, I couldn’t. She was my girl.

So I did have things to lose like they did for the first time in a long time.

Fuck me.

Ryder got to his feet and told us to get the fuck out. Everyone cleared out pretty quickly. Caleb paused to tell me to keep him posted on how things went after I harassed Warren again. I assured him I would.

I was the last one at the door after everyone left. I nodded at Ryder, who was leaning one shoulder against the wall with his arms crossed. I wasn’t sure if he realized it, but he was scowling at the ground like it had offended him. He was more pissed than I thought. “Is Dani having any luck finding more information on this asshole?” I asked.

We’d been after The Hand for too long not to know his damn name. He’d been arrested, and he had a criminal record, but everything was sealed. Dani had been pushing to get

access to it so we could at least know his name. I, for one, was sick of referring to him as “The Hand.” It made him seem like he was more than just a man.

“She’s trying. She’s been feeling under the weather since you were here for breakfast the other day. I’m starting to get worried about her.”

I blinked. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Ryder ran his hand over his head. “We have enough shit to worry about without me unloading on you guys about my personal life. She keeps telling me she’s fine. But I can see it in her. She’s tired all the time. Something’s up.”

“Have you taken her to see a doctor?”

Ryder shook his head. “She’s stubborn as a mule. Like me. She really believes it’s nothing. A flu that just won’t leave her alone or something. She says I’m worrying over nothing.”

“Maybe you are.”

“Probably,” he said, forcing a thin smile. “Watching your woman suffer is worse than anything else, man.”

I wouldn’t know, I thought bitterly.

“You have your hands full already, Derek, but watch out for this Evelyn girl. She’s something special, throwing herself into a fight like that to protect you. It’s not something to overlook. And you need a woman like that in your life. Someone like my Dani.”

I opened his front door. Shit was getting too personal for me too quickly. This was new territory for Ryder and me. “Yeah. We’ll see.”

Ryder smirked. “Don’t be a pussy. You like her. So don’t fuck it up.”

“But the timing—”

“Is never good,” Ryder said simply.

“But it could be better.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But if you wait, she could be gone. With this life of ours, there’s always going to be something. If it’s not The Hand, it will be somebody else who wants to take what’s ours. And we will forever fight to protect it. *So*, claim what’s yours and fight for it. It’s what we do.”

There was a flame that suddenly lit in my chest. I couldn’t explain it, but it felt really fucking good. It felt like hope.

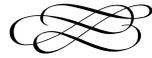
I shook my head, wondering what the hell was happening to me, and stepped out through the open door. “Go check on Dani, man. And make her go to the fucking doctor. She’s one of us. Don’t give her a fucking choice.”

Ryder nodded and chuckled. “Get the fuck out of here.”

I grinned, and he closed the door on me. I marched out to my truck and got in. My blood was still dried to the leather seats. I would have to get it detailed. Maybe I could take it to the shop and see if they’d clean her up for me. Or I could just do it myself.

Something told me I should wait. The chances of getting more blood in my baby seemed higher than normal.

CHAPTER 20



EVELYN

Penny joined me in the kitchen on Friday morning after she got out of her shower. Her hair was wrapped up in a pink towel, and she'd already put on her makeup. I nodded at the counter. "There's fresh coffee in the pot if you want some."

"Hell yes, I want some," Penny said, grabbing a mug and filling it to the brim with dark, steaming coffee. She brought it over to where I was sitting at the kitchen island and sat down on the stool beside me. She leaned her elbows on the granite surface and peered over at what I was doing on my laptop. "What are you looking at?"

"Apartments," I said, turning the screen to her so she could see the one I was looking at. It was a small studio suite. The living room was also the bedroom and the kitchen. The bathroom was tiny with a stand-up shower and no bathtub. I loved baths, but I was going to have to make certain sacrifices if I wanted to make it on my own in this city.

Penny arched an eyebrow. "I think you can do better than that. And look how far away it is from me!"

"I know. But it's within my budget, which is hard to find, and it has a cute little patio. And it's not too far from my work."

"It would take you an extra twenty minutes to get to work from there than it does from here," Penny said flatly.

"Yeah. I know. Compromises, Penny. Compromises."

"You've made enough of those. I'm telling you. Just stay here until you find the place that meets all your needs. I like

having you here. I'm in no rush to get rid of you. And if that ever changes, I'll tell you. I'm honest. You know that."

I laughed. "That you are."

"So forget that place. Don't stress about having to find something right away. You've only been here for a month and a half. You have plenty of time."

"Two months," I said.

"Huh?"

"I've been here for two months now."

"Oh. It doesn't feel like it. It feels like it's only been a week."

"I appreciate that, but it feels like two months for me. I miss having a bedroom. And a bed. I want to have a place that's mine."

"I know, babe," Penny said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. "You'll find one in time. Waiting sucks, but soon something will pop up that checks all your boxes and you'll be able to have everything you need. Hopefully, it will be close to me."

I smiled. "Hopefully."

I sighed and closed the laptop. "Well, I have to get ready for work. Are you done in the bathroom?"

"Yep. Knock yourself out. I'm going to make some eggs. Want me to whip some up for you, too, for when you're done in the shower?"

"Sure," I said as I slid off the stool and padded down the hall to the bathroom. I started the shower and stripped out of my new silk pajamas. I stepped under the hot water and let it kiss my skin, wishing the water droplets were Derek's lips.

I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. He followed me around in my dreams and my waking hours like a sexy ghost. When I woke up, I'd feel the lingering press of his hands on my hips, my ass, and the heat of his tongue on my clit.

Waking up horny every single damn day had been a big change of pace for me. So had being forced to take care of myself before getting out of bed. If I didn't, I was cursed with dirty thoughts, wet panties, and tingly skin until I took care of things.

The shower was refreshing. When I got out, I slapped on all my favorite moisturizers and went back out to the kitchen to sit with Penny and eat our eggs. She'd thrown in cheese and peppers and onions and sprinkled the top with raw cherry tomatoes. They were delicious. I wolfed the whole thing down in less than five minutes and then went to my bag to get my makeup out.

Penny let me sit at her vanity in her room to put my face on while she dressed for work. She hated having to dress reserved for the bank, but she did it with tasteful style. I slapped on some red lipstick, did winged eyeliner, and finished it off with some mascara.

"You look hot," Penny told me as she buttoned up her pastel blue blouse. The color looked amazing on her with her blond hair and tanned skin.

"Thank you," I said, getting up from the vanity to check myself out. "I need to make more money if I'm going to take this whole moving out thing seriously. And if you're willing to let me stay longer, I'll take advantage of it and build up a nice little savings account for emergencies."

"Good idea," Penny nodded. She stooped down and grabbed a pair of black pumps from the back of her closet. She slid them on and glanced up at me. "So, have you heard from him recently?"

"Derek?"

"No. The other guys I could be talking about," she said dryly.

"Sorry. No. I haven't. It's really annoying. I keep thinking my phone is vibrating, but it's just my imagination playing tricks on me. That's how badly I want to talk to him."

"Why don't you just call him, then?"

I was surprised by her question. “You actually want me to reach out to him? As in you think it’s a good idea that I’m talking to him.”

Penny went to her dresser and opened up the old wooden jewelry box on top. She grabbed her bracelet, clipped it on, and slipped a pair of dangly silver earrings in her lobes. “I never said that. But if you’re agonizing over it, you should just call. It’s not the nineteen fifties anymore, babe.”

That was true. I could call him and take the initiative. But I was also afraid to hear from him. What if things had changed? What if he’d lost interest?

“You won’t know until you call,” Penny said in a singsong voice as she went out the door and down the hall to douse her hair in hairspray one last time.



It felt good to be back on the job. I’d asked to slow things down a bit and take some afternoon shifts. I was a little worried about jumping back into the busy nights and had ridiculous paranoia about The Hand sitting and waiting for me at one of my tables. It was better to start early and leave at five.

At the end of the workday, I grabbed my purse and cardigan from my locker. Then, I went out through the back door to the parking lot. The sun was shining. It was a beautiful evening.

It got even more beautiful when I got to my car to find Derek leaning up against it like a fallen angel.

“Hey there, good lookin’,” he said, looking me up and down.

I couldn’t contain the smile that stretched my cheeks. “Hi.”

Derek pushed himself off the car and walked over to me. He put his hand under my chin to tilt my face up and kissed me. I giggled when his lips touched mine, and he smiled too. It

felt really nice to smile with him. His kiss felt better than the warmth of the sun on my cheeks.

“What are you doing here?” I asked a little breathlessly when we parted.

“I wanted to take you out.”

“Out? Like on a date.”

“Exactly like a date.”

My smile stretched my cheeks even more. I knew I was probably bright red. But I didn't care. I nodded and looked down at myself, wishing I'd brought a change of clothes. “I would love that,” I said as I looked up at him. Damn the dress. I would have a good time regardless.

“Good. Because I wasn't going to take no for an answer.” He took my hand and led me a few stalls over to his truck. He opened the door for me.

I peered up at him. “What would you have done if I did say no?”

“I knew you wouldn't.”

“But if I did?”

He pursed his lips. “I'd throw you over my shoulder and steal you away and force you to drink margaritas with me.”

I giggled as I climbed up into the truck. He reached across my body and buckled me in. His fingers grazed my hip and heat shot straight to my pussy. He patted my bare thigh before closing the door and walking around the hood of the truck.

Good lord, he was too sexy. His brow was furrowed against the brightness of the sun, and his muscles shifted under his tanned skin. He was wearing dark jeans and a white T-shirt, and all I wanted to do was peel it all off him as he got into the driver's seat and started the truck.

“So. Margaritas?” I asked.

He grinned. “I hope you like them.”

“There are people out there who don’t like margaritas? They can’t be trusted.”

He threw his head back and laughed as he pulled out of the parking stall. The sound of it made me come undone. I started giggling and couldn’t take my eyes off him as he grinned. How was it possible that a man like him could ever be a danger to me? It was simply ludicrous.

Derek brought me to a little Mexican restaurant with a patio full of picnic tables and yellow umbrellas. He ordered us chicken and fish tacos to share, and we both ordered a margarita. When they arrived, I was astounded at the size of the glasses they came in, but I didn’t hold back from pulling it toward me and sipping it back through the neon orange straw.

Derek arched an eyebrow. “You look even hotter with that in your mouth.”

I giggled. “Stop it.”

“I don’t want to. I mean it. You’re fucking with my head, Evelyn. Big time.”

I paused. Was that his way of telling me he cared about me too? It sure felt like it. “There’s a chance you might be on my mind a lot,” I said carefully.

“Oh, yeah? What am I doing while I’m on your mind? Are you picturing me naked?”

Heat rushed up my neck to my cheeks. I distracted myself by taking a big gulp of my drink. He was laughing at me as I tried to collect myself. “Maybe you are. Maybe you aren’t. You’ll never know.”

“I feel like I know,” he said coyly.

I rolled my eyes. “Penny was right. You are trouble, aren’t you?”

Derek leaned in close. “You have no idea.”

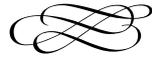
More fire below my belly. Damn it. He was such a tease. He had to know what he was doing to me. He just had to. He was too good-looking for his own good, and I was only more

attracted to him as his playful personality started to reveal itself.

We sat and laughed and sipped our drinks until the sun went down and all the other tables emptied out. The lights strung above from a lamppost to the roof of the tiny Mexican restaurant flickered on, and the vibe shifted from summertime casual to romantic evening really quickly.

I knew I was done for when he ordered us another round of margaritas and a sexy Spanish song started playing through the outdoor speakers.

CHAPTER 21



DEREK

Evelyn had her cheek in her hand and was looking at me over the multicolored umbrella attached to the side of her martini. Her eyes had never looked greener and her lips more kissable. She was smiling softly as I told her about Dani and Ryder. I explained that Dani was the detective who had interviewed her. I wanted her to know she could trust Dani.

“She’s a friend to me, so she’s a friend to you,” I said once I’d given her the whole story of how Dani and Ryder ended up together.

“So that same nephew she was a parole officer for is this Jason kid? The one who was at my work the other night with the big bald guy?”

“Same kid. Yeah. He was always a troublemaker from a young age. It’s common when you grow up the way a lot of us Lost Breeds did. But we found strength in the brotherhood, and it made us better. Jason fucked it all up somehow. There’s nothing more disappointing for Ryder than that.”

Evelyn sighed and sipped at the remnants of her drink. It had turned to liquid at the bottom of her glass, but she didn’t seem to mind. “I can kind of relate to Jason in a way. What with my parents kicking me out and all. Mind you, all I did was drop out of law school. I didn’t hitch my wagon to a murderer.”

“Exactly.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Do you think Ryder would forgive him if he came back to you guys?”

“Without hesitation. Ryder values family above all else. If Jason came back, he’d take him in without even thinking about it.”

Evelyn finished her drink. “And here I thought he was a hardened gang leader all this time.”

I chuckled. “If you met him, you might still think that, but Ryder’s a big softie on the inside. Don’t ever tell him I said that if you do meet him.”

Evelyn flashed me a wide smile. “It’ll be the first thing I say after I tell him, ‘I’ve heard so much about you.’ ”

I laughed. She had a way of bringing happiness out of me. It was crazy to think that just weeks ago, I’d been so sure I’d be alone forever; doomed to have meaningless sex with beautiful women. I thought, at the time, that was what I wanted, but sitting across from Evelyn on a perfect night like this had me questioning everything I thought I knew about myself.

“What are you thinking about?” Evelyn asked as she tucked her hair behind her ears. A cool breeze picked up and blew it loose again. It whipped across her face and got caught in her eyelashes.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Mhm,” she said, not believing me. Her eyes darted across the parking lot to my truck. “Do you want to know what I was thinking about?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I was thinking we should get out of here.”

“You’re full of surprises, Evelyn.”

“Is that a yes?”

I stood up, dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the table, and took her hand. I guided her to her feet, and the two of us walked hand in hand to my truck. She climbed in, and after I was in the cab, she looked over at me. “So, I hate to be forward like this, but I think it would be a bad idea to go back to Penny’s.”

I smirked. “You think?”

I drove to my place. Evelyn reached out to crank up the radio and rolled her window down. The wind blew her hair all over the place, and every time I looked over at her, she was smiling.

How was someone so innocent and pure interested in being with me?

I couldn't understand it, and trying to make sense of it all only confused me more. I wasn't going to ask questions. I wasn't going to spoil the first truly good thing to happen to me since Ryder accepted me into his crew.

When I pulled into my driveway, Evelyn leaned forward to peer up at the house. It wasn't big by any means since I lived alone, but it was modern, and I knew the impression it gave: that I had money. It was all dark concrete and big windows with a grand frosted glass front door and matching garage.

We drove under the garage door, and I parked the truck as I looked over at her. “Not what you expected, right?”

She shook her head. “This is from all of that ‘moving money around’ business you told me about?”

I nodded and got out of the truck. I walked around and opened her door. She turned to me, and I took her by the waist and lifted her down. She followed along behind me as I went in through the side door to the house. We kicked off our shoes in the entryway, and I led her by the hand down the hall into the kitchen and living room area.

It was encased by nothing but windows. My property was private and fenced in with tall, dense hedges. The backyard was lit, trimmed planter boxes and a couple standing lamp posts at the corners of the patio.

The living room itself was modern and minimalist. I liked things sleek and simple. The furniture was dark and smooth lines. The kitchen was much the same with black cabinets and white countertops.

“Your place is beautiful,” Evelyn said.

“Thanks.” I liked my house, sure, but it was pretty lonely most of the time. I never had any of the MC over because of how different my lifestyle was to theirs. The only company I had was women I planned on banging and ditching.

But not Evelyn. She was the first girl I’d brought home who I wanted spending the night. Or a few. Or perhaps, even more than that.

She dropped her purse on the sofa and turned to face me. Her dress was so tight, it looked like it had been painted onto her body. The dark blue fabric had a slight shimmer to it that I could only see when she moved. It showed off her long, sexy legs and her perky tits. All I wanted to do was kiss her skin and put her on her back. I wanted to feel her legs wrapped around me as I fucked her hard and deep until she coated me in her juices.

“Where’s your bedroom?” she asked, pulling me from my reverie.

I nodded my head down the hall.

She walked ahead of me. Each step was graceful, and I watched the steady sway of her hips and the curve of her spine in the open-back cut of her dress. She was the most magnificent creature I’d ever laid eyes on.

When she arrived at my bedroom door, she nudged it open and stepped inside. The room was large and much the same style as the living room. Except the walls were black. The bedding was navy blue, and all the furniture was dark. It was my solace, and the place I could turn off all thoughts about my life.

It was the place I would worship her.

She put her back to the bed and faced me as she nudged the straps of her dress off her shoulders. I watched, transfixed, and she began shimmying it down her body. Her breasts sprang free first. She hadn’t been wearing a bra underneath that skintight fabric. Her nipples were hard and dark pink and begging to be suckled.

She pulled the dress down farther over her hips and then her thighs, and it fell at her feet. As she stepped out of it, she worked her panties off. Then, she stood before me naked and proud.

Evelyn put her back to me and arched her spine. Her ass was full and on display, and I couldn't resist moving forward to squeeze her cheeks. She was a good handful, and she leaned back to rest her head on my chest. Looking up at me, green eyes sparkling, she whispered, "This is all I've thought about for days."

I reached around to cup her throat and held her there. "And all I've thought about is that tight, juicy pussy of yours."

She smiled and stretched up to her tiptoes to kiss my jaw. "What are you going to do to me, Derek?"

I nipped at her lips and gave her ass a sharp little smack. She yelped and then giggled as I released her throat and let my hand trail down the length of her body. I stopped to massage her breasts and flick my thumb over her nipples. I followed the line down the middle of her stomach to her navel, where I continued lower until I met her wet center. I pressed a finger to her clit. "I'm going to make you scream. I wanted to hear you the other night."

She trembled in my grasp and reached down to grip my wrist. Her nails pressed gently into my skin. "Will you let me suck your cock tonight?"

I eased my finger lower, spreading her pussy open as I traced her opening. "You don't have a choice, baby. I'm going to fuck you in all your holes."

She whimpered as I slid a finger inside her. I'd almost forgotten how tight she was. I worked her nice and slow. This go-around, I was going to take my time. Before had felt too rushed. The need to be quiet and hide our passion had taken some of the fun out of it. Tonight would be different. There was no holding back this time.

Evelyn's grip on my wrist tightened as I pushed her closer to her orgasm. She pushed down on my hand, pleading silently

with me to go deeper. I did. I pushed inside her, and she sighed breathlessly and melted against me. I ran my other hand up her back and around her shoulders. I wrapped my arm around her and held her to me as I stretched her with another finger.

“Oh god,” she breathed.

I kissed the side of her neck and looked down the front of her body. Her tits rose and fell with each breath. I was eager to put them in my mouth and to taste her skin. I could see my hand moving in and out of her down below. She spread her legs a little farther. I held her up as her knees almost gave out.

“That’s it, baby. Just let it go. Come for me.”

Evelyn reached up to grab the arm I had wrapped around her shoulders. She clung desperately to me as I fucked her hard and fast. She was sloppy wet, and the sounds mixed with the scent of her arousal had my cock twitching in my pants.

She pressed her ass against me, against the thickness of my erection beneath my jeans. She let one hand fall from my arm, and she massaged my cock through the fabric.

Then, she trembled and quivered and moaned as she came all over my fingers. I rubbed her clit, spreading her juices around, and lifted my hand to her mouth. “Open,” I said huskily.

She did as I asked and sucked my fingers clean.

“That’s a good girl.”

CHAPTER 22



EVELYN

Derek was everywhere.

His tongue was in my mouth, and his fingers were in my pussy. His cock was pressed between my ass cheeks and was stretching his jeans tight. His breath was my breath.

I found his zipper and pulled it down. He chuckled into my mouth, and I purred as I rolled my hips in his groin. “I want more,” I whispered greedily.

Derek walked me forward until my knees hit the bed. Then, he pushed me down so I was bent over it in front of him. I was starting to get the idea he really liked to look at me from behind.

I lifted my hips off the bed to give him a good show.

He growled low in his chest and slapped my ass. I wiggled it for him, and he grabbed both my hips to hold me still. The bed creaked as he planted his hand on the mattress at my side and leaned over me so that his lips were beside my ear. “Just tell me if it’s too much, baby.”

“It won’t be,” I said. The words left me before I’d even thought them through.

He gathered my hair in his fist and pulled my head gently back, forcing me to look at the ceiling. “Tough girl, huh?”

I grinned and tried to nod, already forgetting his hold on me. I licked my lips instead and looked over at him out of the corner of my eye. “Are you just going to talk about fucking me, or are you actually going to do it?”

His laugh was deep and sexy as hell. He planted a kiss on my cheek and straightened above me, never letting go of my hair. He stood behind me and pushed my knees apart.

It was strange to be lying on my stomach like this. My legs were spread, and my toes were on the floor. The bed was so high that all my muscles were flexed in my legs as I struggled to keep myself in place for him. My spine was curved as he pulled me up until my tits were off the bed. I never knew I was this flexible.

Derek put his hand between my legs and started rubbing my pussy in slow circles. I moaned to show my appreciation of the touch. I would have lifted my ass even higher for him, but I was stretched to max capacity. His finger slipped inside me and performed a nice little swirl that had me closing my eyes with pleasure.

Then, my pussy was empty, and his wet fingers were tracing the opening of my ass. I flinched, and he tightened his hold on my hair. "Relax, baby."

I blew out a breath. I'd never done this before. I was sure he knew that about me without me having to say it. He applied pressure with his thumb, which was more than pleasant, and then his digit slipped inside me. I let out a surprised yelp and heard him chuckle behind me. Then, he reached down with his other fingers and massaged my pussy and my clit.

That was delightful.

I moaned and bit down on my bottom lip. Derek kept going, nice and slow, as his thumb moved gently in and out of me. It was almost too much. Almost, but not quite.

Then, his finger was in my pussy, and his thrusts became quicker. I gripped the sheets beneath me in desperation as my climax crept closer, building and building beneath my belly like a pilot light ready to ignite.

Derek pulled me back harder by my hair, and I came undone.

Being handled like this was exhilarating. My orgasm burst apart inside me, and I did as Derek wanted me to do without

having to think about it. I screamed his name at his ceiling and trembled in the wake of my ecstasy.

“That’s right, baby. Fuck, yeah. You’re so fucking wet now,” he said, pulling out of me and giving my pussy a nice little slap that made me tingle all over.

He released my hair, and I collapsed forward on the bed. He chuckled, pleased with himself and his work, and flipped me over. He planted his fists on either side of my shoulders and stared down at me as I caught my breath.

“That was,” I started, trying to find the right word but coming up empty.

“I know.”

I smiled and swept my hair out of my face. It was bound to be a wild mess after this. I sat up, and he leaned back with me to stand in front of me as I sat on the edge of the bed. I pushed myself off and slid to my knees in front of him. “Now?” I asked, reaching out to rest a hand on each of his muscular thighs.

His cock was right in front of my face. Just inches away. I might even have been able to lick it from where I sat, but one night with him had taught me a lesson. He decided when things happened and what things they were. I needed permission if I wanted to suck his dick.

“Now,” he nodded.

He reached out and gathered my hair up again. This time, it was a more tender approach. He gathered it up out of my face to hold it back for me, and then guided me closer until I had to open my mouth to take his length.

He started off nice and slow and eased his way into my mouth just a couple of inches. I pressed my tongue to his meaty head and suckled at the salty drop at his tip. He pulled me off him, and I looked up. He was staring down at me.

I opened up wide, inviting him to fill me with all of him. I was sure I could take him. He obliged, pushing me down over his cock, inch after inch, until I held him in my throat. I

gagged once around his size and relaxed. I opened wider, and he began fucking my mouth in earnest.

His groans were maddening. I gripped his thighs as he thrust in and out of me until he paused to let me catch my breath. I sucked in a couple of sharp gasps before opening up for him again.

This continued for a good five minutes or so. At that mark, I was too horny to resist reaching down and touching myself. Derek seemed to like this because his groans turned into breathless sighs, which didn't last long. He pulled me to my feet and devoured my mouth with a savage kiss as he lifted me up.

I hooked my legs around his waist as he went to his knees on the bed. He crawled forward with me clinging to his front. He was a powerful man, and his strength would continuously shock me. I loved how small he made me feel, small but empowered.

He moved me back to the top of the bed so I could rest my head on his pillows. Then, he reached over to his nightstand and withdrew a condom from his drawer. He placed it between my breasts and told me not to move.

I stayed perfectly still as he worked his way down the length of my body, leaving a trail of wet kisses in his wake. In the moonlight shining in from the windows, I could see the little damp imprints of his kisses on my skin as he set himself up between my legs.

“My turn,” he growled before his tongue darted out to taste me.

“Yes,” I sighed as his tongue swirled around my clit. “Fuck, yes. More. Please.”

His fingers eased inside me as his tongue continued its relentless suckling of my clit. I moaned and pressed myself deep into the pillows at my back. He thrust his fingers slowly and then curled them upward and wiggled them back and forth. All the while, his tongue was still tantalizing me.

I thought I was going to lose control when he lowered a third finger and eased it into my ass. Nothing had ever felt so good as that wicked combination. I became something other than myself. I was something primal that was driven only by the lust and the need for more.

My back arched, and I came wildly. My whole body gave over to the pleasure, and I quivered at his touch as Derek lapped at my come.

He seemed more than satisfied with his deed as he covered me in more wet kisses. I was breathless and weak beneath him when he plucked the condom off my tits and tore it open with his teeth. The wrapper was discarded over the side of the bed, and he rolled the rubber on. Then, he took his shaft in his hand and moved between my legs.

I spread them wide for him. He pressed the tip of his cock into my pussy and held himself there. As he eased slowly inside me, he put a hand on my knees to hold my legs back. I moaned desperately as he filled me up, demanding I give everything to him. I didn't have a choice. I took all of him. I'd never felt so full before.

He waited for my body to relax, and then he began thrusting nice and slow. He cupped my breasts in his hands and bent over me to suckle my nipples, which were incredibly sensitive. I wrapped my legs around his waist and clung to him for dear life as he quickened his pace.

I reached out and held his bearded face in my hands, and then guided him up to me. I kissed him deeply, sliding my tongue along his to taste the remnants of his margarita. I pinched his bottom lip between my teeth and wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

He moaned into my mouth.

I knew he was close. So was I. I wanted to know the rush of finishing together, so I broke our kiss and looked him in the eyes. "Come for me, Derek. Fuck me hard."

His teeth clashed against mine as he went in for another kiss. His brow was furrowed, and his breathing was sharp. I

pressed my nails into his back and dragged them down to his ass. And he went wild.

He straightened, pushed my legs back, and fucked me how I'd always been fucked in my fantasies. I came in seconds. I could feel myself leaking all over his sheets. My wetness turned him on even more, and he came seconds later, bucking wildly against me as I rode out the smaller waves of my passing climax.

When he was done, he fell to his side beside me and reached out to push my hair off my face. "You can't say things like that to me. You push me over the edge."

I smiled and said breathlessly, "That's what I was trying to do."

He chuckled and patted my thigh. "Somebody just didn't want a dick in their ass."

He rolled off the bed, and I sat up to watch him pad around the bed and go to the bathroom. "For your information, I was completely open to being fucked in the ass, but I like to think we'll have time for that later."

He paused in the doorway to the bathroom and smirked at me. "Oh, don't worry, baby, we will."

I waited for him to come back. When he did, he sprawled out naked beside me, and I curled myself into his side. Derek clasped his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. I played aimlessly with his chest hair for a couple of minutes as his breathing evened out. I listened to his heartbeat, slow and steady, and closed my eyes.

I wanted to capture this moment in my memory forever. Something told me things would not always be this easy. Times would come that would prevent us from having peace like this. And they may not be all that far away.

I nuzzled in closer to him, and in his sleep, he wrapped an arm around me. I breathed in the smell of him and relished his closeness.

CHAPTER 23



DEREK

My phone went off early in the morning. When I rolled over and looked at my alarm clock, it flashed the time, six fifteen, in blue light. I groaned and dragged my hand down my face as I fumbled around for my phone on my nightstand.

I remembered it wasn't there. It was in the pocket of my jeans somewhere on the floor. I pulled the covers off slowly and slipped out of bed so as not to disturb Evelyn. She'd rolled over at some point in the night and was curled up facing the other way. She took up such a small portion of the bed, I hadn't even felt her when I first woke up.

I found my jeans and rummaged through the pockets for my phone. I pulled it out and saw that I had four missed calls from Warren. "Damn it."

I padded out down the hall into the living room and called him back. "Sorry, I was—"

"I don't have time," Warren said. "Can you meet me in an hour? Our spot? I have shit you need to know. Come alone."

"I'll be there. Are you safe?"

Warren hung up the phone.

The call left me wide awake. I had an hour to get prepared to meet up with him. I padded back into the bedroom and past the bed into the bathroom, where I pissed and took a quick shower. When I came out of the bathroom, Evelyn was rolling over and rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Is everything okay?" she asked. Her voice was thick with fatigue.

“Yes. Go back to sleep, baby.” I stepped into a clean pair of jeans and did a little jump to pull them up. I could feel her eyes on me as I zipped up the fly and did up the button.

“Are you sure? Where are you going?”

“I have to meet someone. MC business. I won’t be gone long.”

She pushed herself up and didn’t bother to pull the blankets with her. They fell around her waist. I wanted to go to her and bury my face between her perfect tits, but I couldn’t. She watched me go to the closet and throw on a shirt. “Derek ... I can tell something is wrong. If this is going to keep happening between us, I need to know what’s going on. I can’t be in the dark. It’s scarier than knowing.”

This gave me pause. I opened my mouth and closed it again.

“Derek,” she said a little more firmly. “I mean it. It’s all in or not in at all with me.”

Damn. She could play hardball. I sighed and went to the edge of the bed. I sat down and took her hand in mine. “This is my life, all right? Early mornings and dangerous calls. I have to go meet up with my old employer. He has information about The Hand, and at this point, I’ll take anything I can get. Jason is depending on it.”

“You’re going alone?”

“I was told specifically to.”

“So?”

“This isn’t a movie, baby. This is real life. Sometimes, you have to obey the orders. If you don’t, you could end up dead. For the first time, I care about staying alive. I’ll come back to you. I promise.”

“You’d better. Because I’m really starting to care about you, Derek.”

I gave her a sweet kiss. “Go back to sleep. I’ll be back up with hot coffees and breakfast before you wake. Deal?”

She gave me one of her trademark smiles. “Deal.”



Warren was sitting at our usual park bench when I arrived just after seven o'clock in the morning. The park was empty except for a few pigeons pecking at the ground beneath an old tree. I crossed the open field to join Warren at the bench.

He didn't look over at me. “You're late.”

“I'm not,” I said smoothly.

“I said an hour.”

“It's been fifty-six minutes,” I snapped. I was in no mood for games. “You better have called me here for a good reason, Warren. My plate is full enough without you yanking my chain. Do you have information for me or not?”

He looked at me. There was something in his eyes that set me on edge. “Jason Moretti is working for him.”

“That's not news to me,” I said slowly. Why was my gut clenched like this? Why did I feel so uneasy all of a sudden?

I turned sharply and looked over my shoulder.

Four men had appeared from what felt like thin air. They were dressed in simple black suits and all had the same buzz cut. I nodded knowingly and looked slowly back to Warren, who was looking down at his hands. “So, that's how it's gonna be?” I asked.

Warren didn't answer me.

“You cowardly piece of fucking shit,” I snarled.

He leaned away from me. “There are people in this life who you don't say no to, Derek. I'm sorry it has to end this way.”

End this way? “Fuck you, too, Warren.”

The men behind me moved in. I stood from the bench and spun to face them. This wasn't how I was going to go out. Not

after everything. I'd been through hell and back and lived to tell the tale. Four goons and a crime boss were not going to get the credit for killing Derek Baxter.

I clenched my fists. "Come on, you bastards. Let's see what you're made of."

None of them said a damn thing as they moved around the bench. Warren never moved a muscle. He just sat there, hands fidgeting in his lap, watching me with cold eyes. I detected a hint of regret in him. He didn't *want* to do this, but like Jason, he was backed into a corner. Why did everyone fear The Hand so much? Was I that blind to how big of a threat he was?

Sure, he was a powerful guy, but he was just a man. He had weaknesses. He'd die if he was poked with something sharp just like the rest of us.

The first man came for me in a succession of rapid punches. They came, one after the other, and he never lost momentum as he pushed me back, step after step, as I tried to catch a break in his defenses.

I spotted one and went for it. I struck out and landed a punch to his shoulder. He, unfortunately, connected a hit with my jaw.

I growled and stumbled back. He was pushed back a couple of paces, too, but he had the advantage of reinforcements. The other three closed in on me. Fuckers.

One drove his knee up to my ribs. I blocked him with my forearms and pushed his leg down before driving my elbow into his gut. He doubled over, and I slammed my elbow into the back of his neck. He fell face-first on the grass at my feet as one of the others attacked me from behind.

He landed three quick hits to my ribs. I grimaced and leaned over to protect my side and then kicked out at him. I connected with something solid that cracked. He let out a wail and crumpled sideways. I assumed by the way he was kneeling with one leg stretched outward that I'd kicked him in the knee.

"That's a bitch," I snarled before decking him right in the nose.

Apparently, I'd used up all of my luck by that point. The first guy who'd attacked had circled around behind me. He managed to get me in a chokehold and kicked my legs out from under me. He didn't loosen his grip when I fell to my knees. He tightened it, cutting off my air supply.

The last man stood over me, watching, expressionless, as little stars burst behind my eyelids.

It couldn't end this way. It just couldn't. I had Evelyn sleeping in my bed at home. I'd promised I'd get to her. Now that I finally had something worth living for, everything was going to be taken away.

I squeezed my eyes closed against the burning in my lungs. I tried to shake the guy off me, but his hold was precise. There were no weaknesses in it. I had only one move left, which was to fall to my back and try to force him to let go.

As I prepared to do so, the man in front of me toppled sideways.

I thought, for a moment, that I was just seeing things due to a lack of air to my brain. But then, someone appeared before me who was not dressed in a black suit. He wore blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He looked incredibly familiar, someone I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

"Rhys?" I asked. My voice was barely more than a whisper, and it crackled.

Then, the man behind me let go and the man in plaid went after him. I pitched forward and braced myself with my hands. I clutched at my burning throat and stumbled clumsily to my feet to watch as my savior unleashed his fury on the men who had tried to kill me.

Warren, in all his useless glory, remained motionless on the bench. He knew running was futile. I'd have caught up with him.

I rushed over to him and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "You think you can betray me like that and get away with it?" I snarled.

Rhys came up beside me and grabbed my shoulder.

“What?” I yelled, spinning to face him.

He retreated a step and held up his hands. “Derek, it’s me. Calm down.”

“I know it’s you,” I seethed.

Rhys had grown up with me in this city, and we’d gone our separate ways when things got a little too dicey for him working for Warren. He’d up and left in the middle of a job and slipped away, leaving me to clean up his mess. Rhys grimaced.

“I know you’re probably still pissed at me—”

“Probably?”

“Hear me out,” Rhys said. “I came back because I heard Isaac Reed had a hit out on you.”

“And who the fuck is Isaac Reed?” I hissed. Warren’s shirt was still wrapped up in my fist, and he was looking back and forth between me and Rhys.

Rhys sighed. “The Hand, you dumbass.”

“You know his name?” I asked, straightening and letting go of Warren.

“Yeah. Among other things. He and I have had dealings in the past. Similar to what you and your boys are going through right now. I thought I could come back and help,” Rhys said.

This was too much information for me to process all at once. I glared down at Warren, who shrank away from my stare. He held up his hands, and I could see that they were shaking. “I’m sorry, Derek. I’m sorry. I had to. Otherwise, he was going to hurt someone I cared about. You understand. I couldn’t let that happen. It had to be someone else.”

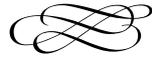
“Someone else?” I asked.

Warren’s eyes widened. He’d said too much.

I grabbed hold of his shirt again and yanked him to his feet. He whimpered as he dangled uselessly in my grasp. “What do you mean, someone else?” I roared.

Warren stammered. “A-a girl. He said he had a score to settle with a girl.”

CHAPTER 24



EVELYN

Derek's kitchen was designed for convenience. His coffee maker was a fancy espresso machine that took me ages to figure out. All I wanted was a simple black coffee. After about eight minutes of trying to make sense of all the chrome pieces and flush buttons, I figured out how to make it work. The beans were already inside, and it was good to go. As it started to heat up, I opened the cupboard above the coffee maker to find his display of all matching mugs. They were all dark blue, simple, and trimmed in silver. I shook my head at his expensive tastes and grabbed one of them. I slid it under the spout and picked up my phone from where it sat on the counter to call Penny.

Her alarm would have just gone off two minutes ago, and she'd be walking out of her room to hit the shower in about five minutes. I didn't want her to walk into the living room to find me gone and panic, but I also hadn't wanted to wake her. She was a light sleeper, and once she was awake, it took her forever to fall back asleep.

She answered on the second ring with a sluggish voice. "Evie? Hi. Why are you calling me? Where are you?"

"Morning, sunshine." The coffee started dripping slowly into the bottom of my mug, letting loose the rich aroma of coffee. I inhaled deeply, savoring it, and sighed. "I wanted to let you know I'm not at home. I spent the night somewhere else."

I could hear Penny moving around in bed. Her blankets rustled as she sat up. "Somewhere else as in Derek's place?"

I giggled. “Yep.”

If Penny was annoyed, she did a good job of hiding it. There was only a moment of hesitation where I thought she might get upset with me again for being reckless, but it passed quickly. Instead, she said, “What’s his place like? I’m curious.”

So she’d heard me loud and clear when I’d told her I could take care of myself and I wanted her to trust me. That warmed my heart. I wouldn’t have to defend myself anymore. “It’s really modern. And Penny, he has a lot of money, like, *a lot*. I didn’t expect his place to be so ... chic.”

“Chic?” Penny snorted. “The man looks like a lumberjack. How could he possibly be chic?”

“Want to video call me, and I’ll show you around?”

“Heck yes, I do. Just let me put some clothes on. I’m naked.”

“Okay. Call me when you’re done.”

Penny was apparently taking her time getting dressed this morning because by the time she called me back, my whole coffee had poured, and I was sipping it gingerly from the edge of the mug. When my phone opened, I was greeted with my best friend’s morning face. Her hair was a mess, and her eyes were puffy. “You look gorgeous,” she said.

Apparently, I had the same wild look going for me. I fluffed my hair. “You like it?”

Penny snickered. “Come on, show me his kitchen. You know I’m a sucker for kitchens.”

I switched the camera around so Penny could get a look at his kitchen. It was all black and white with stainless steel appliances. Everything was minimal. His coffee machine was the only thing on any surface. I moved from the kitchen to the living room and then to the bedroom.

Penny gave my walk-through live commentary the whole time, and when I showed her the master bedroom, she gasped.

“It’s absolutely gorgeous. I can only imagine waking up there. And going to sleep there, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean.”

“How was it?” Penny asked.

I dropped down on his bed and turned the camera back to myself as I fell on my back. “It was amazing. He surprised me at work and took me out on a date. He brought me to this little Mexican restaurant, and we sat outside on the patio for almost four hours sipping margaritas and eating tacos. It was like ...” I paused and draped my arm over my forehead.

“A damn movie,” Penny finished for me.

“Yeah. Exactly like that. I kept feeling like everything was too good to be true, and I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it never did. After dinner, he took me here, and he spoiled me even more. Like, in bed kind of spoiled me.”

“I’m following, Evie. My goodness. I don’t need a detailed walk-through.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“But I do want to know what he was like in bed.”

“Penny!”

“What?” she asked innocently, cocking her head to the side. “Neither of us have ever fucked a guy like that. I want to live vicariously through you. Was he rough? Does he have a big dick? Come on, don’t be a prude. If you’re ready to date a guy in a motorcycle club, you should be ready to talk about these things.” She gave me a cocky look that said, “I’m right and you’re wrong, and you know it.”

I sighed. “He’s amazing in bed. I’ve never, you know, had an orgasm during sex before. I came at least four times last night.”

“Good for him.” Penny nodded approvingly.

“And yes, it is big. Really big.”

Penny giggled. “Well, I’m glad he takes care of you. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Penny. I do, don’t I?”

She snorted and shook her head at me. Her heels thudded on the floor, and she put her phone down on the kitchen counter, giving me a view of the ceiling as she rummaged through her fridge and started whipping up breakfast. I could hear her voice calling across the kitchen to her phone. “You know, maybe this whole biker thing isn’t as big a deal as I thought it was.”

I didn’t like where this comment was leading. I held my breath and waited for her to continue.

“Do you think he has any single friends? You know, preferably someone who’s as ruggedly good-looking as he is with a killer body and lots of expensive things?”

I chuckled. She was so predictable. “I don’t think that’s how it works, Penny.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t think I could ask him if any of the other members want to date my best friend. They don’t strike me as the kind of men who would be up for a blind date. You know?”

“Then, you should plan something and invite all of them so I can meet them. I’ll pretend it’s speed dating. They don’t have to know I’m scouting them for relationship material.”

I groaned. “Penny, you’re about as subtle as a bull in a china shop. They’d figure it out in minutes.”

“I can be charming. Maybe they’d like me?”

I laughed, and her face appeared, hovering over her phone. She peered down at me with all her double chins on display. I shook my head. “How about we table this for now and wait until Derek and I are a little more advanced in our relationship?”

Penny arched an eyebrow. “Relationship, hmm?”

“Oh, shut up,” I huffed.

“You walked right into that one, girl. I didn’t even have to try. But I’m going to hold you to it. Once you guys have more time under your belts, I want to meet these sexy bikers. At least one of them has to be into blond bank tellers, right?”

“I’m sure there’d be more than one.”

Penny shrugged. “Well. Thanks for calling me, Evie. But I gotta go get ready for work. You know. Living the dream. Are you going to be home tonight, or are you staying at Romeo’s?”

I blushed. “I don’t know yet. I’ll know when he gets back, and I’ll text you.”

“Okay, babe. Don’t have too much fun, okay?” Penny winked, and I blew her a kiss before we ended the call.

As soon as I dropped my phone in my pocket, I heard a noise at the front door. It was a soft thud, not like a knock, really, but more like someone had leaned heavily on the door. I opened my mouth to call hello to Derek, but something tugging at my gut stopped me. I clamped my mouth shut and stood perfectly still.

The sound came again and was followed by a soft creaking sound.

The front door was open.

I waited, praying that Derek would call out to me. If it was him, he’d let me know he was home. He wouldn’t just sneak in, not with everything going on. He’d know I’d be easily put on edge.

Something glass smashed at the front door. I remembered seeing a picture frame on a small table on the other side of the door to the garage when we came in last night. It must have been knocked over.

I raced out of the kitchen, through the living room, and down the hall to the bedroom. I looked around wildly for a place to hide. There was someone in Derek’s house who was not supposed to be there, and I had a feeling I’d be in big trouble if they happened upon me.

I didn't have time to put anything on besides the T-shirt of Derek's I'd found in his dresser. I had my panties on, too, but that was it.

I rushed from each side of his room, desperately trying to find somewhere I could hide that wasn't obvious. There was nowhere to go but under the bed.

The most predictable fucking hiding spot on the planet.

I heard footsteps down the hall.

I didn't have a choice. I dropped to all fours, went flat to my stomach, and shimmied under the bed. I fit easily with a good couple of inches above me. I faced the foot of the bed so I could watch the open doorway to the bedroom.

I had seconds before whoever was in the house came in. I took as many slow deep breaths as I could to get my breathing under control.

Then, two black boots appeared at the door.

I evened out my breathing and took tiny, shallow breaths to avoid being overheard. And I waited. There was nothing else I could do.

Whoever the man was at the door was waiting too. He was completely motionless. Was he listening?

Panic spread across my chest, threatening to push a scream from my throat.

I wanted to reach for my phone, but I didn't dare. He might see the flash of light from the screen, hear my nail click on the case, or hear the vibration when I sent a message. I couldn't risk it, no matter how badly I wanted to send Derek a message.

Help me.

The man walked into the room. I held my breath and waited as he came to stand at the foot of the bed. All I could hear was my pounding heart and the rush of blood in my ears. I'd never been so frightened. I wished I was anywhere but here, under this man's nose.

He went to his knees.

No.

A wicked smile greeted me. It was him.

“Why hello there, sugar. I thought I smelled that perfume of yours.”

CHAPTER 25



DEREK

I slammed Warren against the back of the bench and struck him across the jaw. He yelped and clutched at his already reddening face as I wound back to hit him again. Rhys caught my arm and yanked it down.

I spun on him, far past furious and ready to strike out at anything that got in my way.

“Derek!” Rhys yelled at me. “Leave me with him. I’ll take care of it. Go get your girl. You can’t leave her with him.”

His words cut through my fury and forced me to see reason. I pointed a finger at him. “Don’t think your convenient appearance is going to make me trust you again. I know you’re playing a game. I know you fucking want something.”

“Now is not the time to talk about it.”

I took a menacing step toward him. Rhys didn’t back down. I jabbed him in the chest. “Don’t let him go. I’m coming back for his ass.”

“All right. Now, get the hell out of here,” Rhys said, tipping his head toward the parking lot.

I went. I went as fast as I could, legs pumping as I dashed across the park to my truck. I leaped inside and started it up to reverse out of my stall with squealing tires.

How could I have let this happen? What part of my brain had thought this was a good idea? I was set up. Plain and simple. The big bastard knew exactly what strings to pull to

get the better of me, and he'd done it expertly. This was why people feared him. He always came out on top.

Not this fucking time. He'd fucked with the wrong guy.

My place was a fifteen-minute drive on a good day. I was halfway there in four minutes. My knuckles were white as I gripped the steering wheel and jerked from right to left between traffic. I had to get to her.

I fumbled to get my phone out of my pocket and called Caleb, praying he would answer. He did, and his voice brought me a flickering moment of relief. Just a flicker. "Caleb! Fuck. I need you to meet me at my place. Call everyone. He's at my fucking house. And so is Evelyn."

"Wait. Hold on. He as in—" Caleb asked.

"The Hand. Yeah. And in case I don't make it out, I have his name. Isaac Reed."

"How did you get that information?"

"It's a long story, but it's reliable enough. I wanted to pass it to you just in case."

"Where are you right now?" Caleb asked. His voice was as tight as my heart felt. I could hear his boots striking the floor. He was either at home or the shop. I couldn't be sure. I heard keys jingling.

"I'm on my way back to my place now. Five minutes away, tops."

Caleb paused. "I'm not going to ask you not to go in because you have to help her, but you have to be careful, man."

"You think I don't fucking know that?" I growled, taking a right turn and driving over the curb. A few pedestrians shouted at me.

"You know what I meant. I'm leaving my place now. I'm at least fifteen minutes away, Derek. I'll call the others, but you might be on your own for awhile. See if you can get her the fuck out of the house. Stay alive. That's priority number

one.” I didn’t say anything. I just listened to him start up his car. “I’m on my way. Watch your fucking back, Derek.”

I hung up the phone.

The following five-minute drive was the most excruciating five minutes of my life. All I could think about was how Evelyn had looked in my bed when I’d left her. Sleepy and happy and far too good for me. Too good for this fucking life. She was innocent and pure, and I’d tainted her with my body and brought her into this dirty, messy, violent life. I was like a ship anchor.

Now, she was at his mercy.

If he had any mercy in his blood.

This was why I never got attached to women. It was why I let them go after one night, never to see them again. It was to protect them and my heart. It was self-preservation, plain and simple.

My thoughts turned darker than they’d ever been. There was only one way I was going to get to her in time, and that was if he was taking his time. I hated myself for wishing it, but I did. I prayed that whatever he was doing, she was alive and that I would be able to get there in time for her. Thinking it sickened me.

A middle-aged man in a silver luxury sedan cut me off. I didn’t slow down for him. I drove right into his backend, crumpling his bumper, and jerked my steering wheel to rush by him in the oncoming traffic lane. He rolled his window down and screamed bloody murder at me. I didn’t even waste time giving him the finger. I kept going, pulling back in front of him. He could take my license down, and I’d pay him later.

If I was lucky enough to have a later. Maybe I’d be dead, and he’d have to pay it on his own. Served him right.

My phone rang, and I answered the call through my truck. It was Ryder. “Caleb just called me. I’m on my way to your place right now. Dani is bringing her team. Derek, if you go in there alone—”

“I know what might happen,” I said. My whole body was tense. I was not in the right state of mind to have this conversation. Nothing was going to keep me out of that house.

“I’m worried he might already be gone,” Ryder said. His voice was thin. He knew the weight of what he’d just said to me, what he’d just inferred.

He was warning me that I might be walking in to find Evelyn’s corpse.

“It’s not going to happen,” I said, more to convince myself than him.

Ryder didn’t say anything. I could hear the roar of the engine of his car as he wove through traffic like I’d been. He was dead set on getting to me as quickly as possible. I knew all the boys would be. But I’d beat them all there, and I’d be the one who had to go in.

“We’ll get him,” Ryder finally said.

“Yeah.”

“Are you there yet?”

I turned into my driveway and raced up it. My front door was wide open. My heart caught in my throat, and my stomach twisted itself into a thousand tiny knots. “Yeah. So is he. I’m going in. I’ll see you when you get here, Ryder.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he said.

But I was already out my truck and racing to the door. Each step felt too short and not fast enough. When I burst through it, my boots crunched over broken glass of a picture frame of when the MC opened our first bike shop. Hyde was in the middle, smiling like a high school kid who’d just had his first beer.

I ran into the kitchen and living room. Nothing was disturbed there. It was exactly how I left it. There was the faint smell of coffee in the air. Evelyn had gotten up at some point and made herself a cup. Then where did she go? Had she left? Maybe The Hand—Isaac—had already come and gone, and she was safe back at Penny’s house.

I wasn't dumb enough to believe the lie my brain was desperately trying to weave. She was here, and so was he.

My ears pricked to the sound of running water from my bathroom. Lots of it.

I sprinted down the hall, ducked into my bedroom, and rushed to the bathroom where I caught myself in the doorway.

Rage unlike anything I'd ever felt surged through my veins. My vision went dark and tunneled in on the man who was holding Evelyn beneath the surface of the water in my filled bathtub.

She was thrashing around wildly trying to get free of him. There was no telling how long he'd had her under and how much longer she would last. Water was spilling over the side as it overflowed over the edge. Evelyn's limbs pushed more of it out in sloshing waves as she panicked and fought for her life.

Isaac hadn't even heard me come in. He was staring down into the tub. His arms were in the water up to his elbows. He must have been pinning her down by her shoulders. There was a smile curling his lips, and I was filled with a single purpose, to beat that smile off his face.

Evelyn's feet kicked out above the tub and one connected with Isaac's chest. He let out a low growl and used his big size to lean over the tub and force her leg back down. She planted her foot in his chest, and all the muscles strained, but she wasn't as strong as him. The view she must have had lying on the bottom of the tub would have been terrifying. She'd be staring up through the sloshing water into his smiling face.

She had no idea I was there.

I had to play this smart. If I fucked this up, he was going to kill her after he killed me. There was no room for error here. Even if I got her out of the tub, she would be in just as much danger as when she was under water.

She'd stay in danger until he stopped breathing.

I grabbed the first thing I knew I could use as a weapon. I yanked the porcelain cover off the back of the toilet and

charged full speed ahead, holding it over my shoulder like a fucking baseball bat.

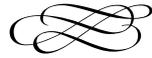
He heard my boots slapping across the wet tiles and looked up just in time to duck right. The porcelain slammed into his shoulder, and he let out an angry shout of pain. He stumbled back and released Evelyn, who burst up out of the tub in a spray of water and desperate breathing.

I didn't have time to look to her and see if she was okay. Isaac dropped his head and charged low, taking me out around the legs.

I fell back against the wet tiles with him on top of me.

The fight for my and Evelyn's lives was on.

CHAPTER 26



EVELYN

Suddenly, his hands were no longer pinning me down. My back lifted off the bottom of the tub, and I reached up to grab the edges. I yanked myself up, my lungs screaming for air, and burst out of the top of the water. I sucked in a ragged breath of air. It burned like nothing I'd ever felt before.

I clung to the edge of the tub and tried to lift a leg over to climb out, but I was too weak. So, I draped myself over the edge, breathing heavily, trying to make sense of what the hell had just happened.

I lifted my head to peer up where there was movement on the bathroom floor. My head was so heavy.

Before me was The Hand and Derek, who was on his back.

They were locked in a deadly battle, both of them rolling around on the wet ground. Derek's shirt had already darkened with water as he covered his face with his forearms. The Hand struck him several times before Derek managed to flip himself over.

Both men broke apart and stumbled to their feet.

I forced myself to climb out of the tub. I wasn't getting caught in there again. That had been the most terrifying moments of my life. I had thought—really, truly believed—that I was going to die in that tub, and Derek was going to come home from his meeting to find my lifeless body in his bathroom.

I collapsed on the tiles at the edge of the tub. Derek had his back to me, and The Hand peered around him and chuckled

when he saw me trying to gather my strength. I probably looked like a drowned rat.

I reached over the edge of the tub and pulled the drain and turned off the tap. The sound of draining water echoed in my ears.

The Hand turned his attention back to Derek. “You’re lucky you got here in time. Your woman was almost shark food.”

I pressed my back against the tub. I didn’t dare get any closer to either of them. I knew where this was headed. This was going to be a full out war between the two of them, and my getting in the middle of it would only make things worse. There was nothing I could do to defend myself against this monster. I hated that I needed Derek, but I did. He was my only hope of getting out of there alive.

I was sure we both knew that.

Derek didn’t look at me, but he spoke to me over his shoulder. “Are you all right, Evelyn.”

I nodded and then realized he couldn’t see me. “Y-yeah. I’m fine.”

“She’s a fish,” The Hand mused.

“Shut the fuck up,” Derek snarled. “Isaac.”

The Hand blinked at him. I looked from one of them to the other and watched as the balance of power shifted. The big bald man straightened up a little bit, and the smile he’d been wearing like a mask faltered. “What did you call me?”

“You heard me, Isaac Reed.”

The Hand, or Isaac, I presumed, glared daggers at Derek. “Who told you my name? Was it Cornwell?”

“Who the fuck is Cornwell?” Derek spat.

Isaac’s eyes widened with realization. “Warren. It was Warren, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know why you’d trust a sniveling little worm like him with something as precious as your real name. My entire

MC knows it already. It doesn't end with me. We're coming for you, Isaac, and we're not going to stop until you're where you belong. In the fucking ground."

Isaac's dark expression changed to something even more evil. He was amused. He threw his head back with wild laughter. It bounced off the walls and the wet floor and scattered my brain. The sound was horrifying. If I didn't know better, I would have said it sounded inhuman. He leveled his glare with Derek once more. "I think it's cute that you actually believe your MC stands a chance against me."

"I think it's cute that you don't," Derek quipped back.

I looked back and forth between the two of them and tried to figure out why Derek was indulging him in this childish banter. Why waste time throwing words when you could throw punches?

Then, it dawned on me. He was stalling.

Help was coming.

I pushed myself to my feet. My knees were so weak and wobbly, I thought they might be clashing together. They held me up, regardless, and I straightened. The Hand glanced over Derek's shoulder at me and clicked his tongue. "You should just stay where you are, girl. No sense in fighting it any longer. You're just wasting your strength."

I shook my head. "No. You're the one wasting strength. You're the one who's going to lose."

Isaac laughed, and Derek glanced over his shoulder at me. I'd never seen him look so furious before. I almost flinched away from him. But when he spoke to me, his voice was soft. "Evelyn, stay out of this."

"Listen to your handler, bitch," Isaac spat.

Derek lost it. He exploded and launched himself forward. Apparently, the time for talking and postponing was done.

I yelped and pressed myself against the shower door as the brawl started. They slammed into each other with enough force to knock themselves down. Derek gained the upper hand

quickly, spurred on by rage no doubt, and pinned Isaac beneath him.

I watched, transfixed by the violence coming out of the man I was falling in love with, as he gathered the front of Isaac's shirt in both fists and used his momentum to slam him back down on the tiles. Isaac's head crashed against the ground.

What I thought was going to be a victory was not. Isaac started laughing. Even as Derek struck him, over and over, he kept laughing.

He really did get off on this. Pain. Whether he was inflicting or receiving, he lived for it. Which made me start to wonder if beating him was even possible.

I was about to go to Derek when a figure filled up the bathroom doorway. I looked up, thinking for a hopeful second that it might be one of Derek's friends come to help us.

But it wasn't.

It was a young, frail, frightened young man. The man I knew Derek was looking for. The one who'd shot him, who was working for Isaac.

Jason.

He was dressed in black cargo pants that were too big for him and a loose black shirt. His eyes were sunken and framed with purple skin. His gaze locked with me, and we both stood, paralyzed, for an agonizing minute.

Then, he lifted his right arm and pointed a gun at me.

"No," I said. I hadn't meant to speak. It just sort of came out of me like a reflex, and the word caught Derek's attention.

He looked up, one fist raised to strike Isaac beneath him, and spotted Jason. Derek froze and followed the line of the barrel to me, and to where it was pointed at my chest. "Jason," he warned, "Put that fucking thing down."

Jason's eyes slid from me to Derek, who was slowly getting to his feet and standing above Isaac, who was still flat

on his back on the wet floor. He raised the gun a few inches. I swallowed. “Step away from him, Derek.”

“Just shoot him,” Derek said. It was almost a plea. He gestured at Isaac at his feet, who was at his mercy and not a threat at all. Derek took a step toward Jason. “Just kill him, and we can be done with this. Or better yet. Give me the gun, and I’ll do it. Let me help you.” He held out his hand for the gun.

I don’t know how I knew, but I knew he wouldn’t give over the gun. Jason was scared shitless. I also knew there was no possible way this could end well.

A whimper left my throat. I hadn’t meant for it to, but it did. It slipped out of me, and I closed my eyes, willing myself to have courage. I couldn’t be weak now. I had to keep it together. We had to keep fighting.

Jason was just a kid. I could see the fear in his eyes. It practically radiated off him. He needed help more than any of us did, but he was so torn. He felt owned by Isaac and rejected by the Lost Breed. He had no place to call home and no people to call his. All he needed was someone to take him in their arms, to hold him, and to promise him everything would be all right.

These men did not know how to offer such things to him.

I opened my eyes. “Jason,” I said. My voice was soft and gentle and controlled. I was surprised at my own ability to keep it together. The gun was still pointed at me. I tried to ignore the fact that it was pointed at my head.

He looked at me like a deer in the headlights.

I took a deep breath. “Everyone gets another chance. Everyone. You don’t have to do anything here. You can put it down and walk away. Nobody can make your decision for you. You have the power in your hand, and only you can decide what to do with it. Just ... ignore all of us and do what you have to do.”

Derek twisted around to face me. His eyes were wide and panicked.

Jason flicked the gun. “Move aside, Derek.”

Derek did as he was commanded and stepped away from Isaac. He moved slowly back, one foot behind the other, until he had positioned himself between me and Jason. He’d strategically placed himself in the line of fire, which I hated but could do nothing about. So, I took his hand in mine and pulled it behind his back, entwining my fingers in his and squeezing tightly. He squeezed back.

Isaac got slowly to his feet while rubbing his head. I was sure he had a fierce headache from the pounding Derek had given him. He looked back and forth between me and Derek and Jason.

And then, like clockwork, he smiled.

CHAPTER 27



DEREK

My mind was spinning a mile a minute. Everything had happened much too fast for me to process and make sense of. I couldn't think of a damn thing to say or do that would change the course of this shit show. I tried to reason out how long I'd been here.

At most, it had been five minutes. At the least, maybe three. Then again, I'd been preoccupied, and my sense of time might be completely warped. There was no telling how long it would take for any of my brothers to show up. I suspected Caleb would be first or maybe Ryder, but the others could be anywhere. They could be pulling in the driveway for all I knew.

Please, God, let them be pulling in the driveway.

Evelyn's fingers were trembling in my hand. I wished I could get her the hell out of here and far away from this mess. But I couldn't. She was bound to this as tightly as me.

Jason was still standing in the doorway, and he had the gun trained on my chest. That was the only thing giving me some sense of relief. The gun wasn't pointed at my girl anymore. But it wasn't good enough. If they shot me, Evelyn wouldn't get out of here alive.

First of all, she'd be a witness.

Second of all, Isaac had a personal score to settle with her. At least, he seemed to think he did. The rage and cruelty he'd have had to possess to hold her underwater with the intention

of killing her were mind-boggling. He was evil. Pure, unabashed evil.

And I hated him.

I wanted to make him suffer and make him hurt. I wanted him to feel all the pain and destruction he'd caused me. More than anything, I wanted to avenge Hyde and Evelyn. She didn't deserve what he'd done to her. Chances were, she'd never lie in a bathtub again with a glass of wine and a good book. He'd stolen peace from her. Calm. He'd tarnished something forever for her.

But of course, none of that would matter if Jason shot us both dead right here on my bathroom floor.

Isaac moved to stand a little closer to Jason and turned to face me and Evelyn. He crossed his arms over his massive chest and smiled at us. Then, he spoke to Jason. "Well? What the fuck are you waiting for? Shoot them."

Evelyn's fingers tightened around mine.

I looked Jason in the eye and tried to pretend the gun wasn't there, trembling in his grasp. He was so scared, he might pull the trigger by accident. Wouldn't that be an epic way to go out? Because a kid was scared, and he shot me accidentally. "Jason. Evelyn is right. You don't have to do anything right now. Nobody has to die."

Jason whimpered. "Shut up!"

"No," I said. "I won't. I haven't spent the last couple years busting my ass looking for you under every damn rock for you to shoot me like this. You and I both deserve better."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "I'm tired of the chitchat, Jason. On with it. That's an order."

"Stop telling him what to do," I said.

Isaac splayed his hands open. "Or what? You going to make me stop, tough guy?"

"He's just a kid."

Isaac rolled his shoulders and flexed his muscles. “He gave up that innocence a long time ago, Derek. You know that as well as I do. He walked away from you and his dear Uncle Johnny. Isn’t that right, Jason? You wanted to carve out your own name. Strike your own path. You were tired of living under Moretti’s shadow.”

“That’s not true,” I growled.

Isaac looked from me to Jason. “Isn’t that the truth, kid? Am I making shit up? By all means, correct me if I am.”

Jason’s bottom lip was trembling. He jerked his head. No.

“See?” Isaac said simply. “I’m not forcing him to do anything. I’m handing him the power to do *something*.”

I shook my head. “You’re trying to destroy him. I understand you. You thrive off chaos and pain and destruction. You get off watching him unravel. All this turmoil and betrayal, it’s all you’ve wanted from the beginning. This was your end game, wasn’t it? In the end, you’d have Jason point the gun in Johnny’s face. You’d make him pull the trigger. Jason would never recover, and you wouldn’t pity him.”

Isaac arched an eyebrow. “I think you’ve put a little too much thought into this.”

“So, you don’t plan on having Jason kill his own uncle?”

“Never said that.” Isaac chuckled.

I turned my attention to Jason. “Can’t you see what he’s doing to you? He’s playing you against us. He’s *using* you, and you’re fucking letting him!”

Jason flinched when my voice rose to a yell.

I prayed I was getting through to him and kept pushing. “If you can kill me, kid, then fucking do it already. But don’t be a fool. He’ll have you pick us off one at a time until your uncle is a hollow shell of grief, and then he’ll make you put a bullet between his eyes. And I know you, Jason, like the back of my fucking hand. You won’t be able to do it. And then, in the end, it’ll just be you and Johnny.”

Jason shook his head. A whimper left his lips, and his chin trembled.

“You’ll have taken everything from him. *Everything*. You think this fucker is only going to have you target Lost Breed members? He just tried to drown my woman in a fucking bathtub! He’ll do the same to all of them. All of them! And if you shoot me, it will be on your head. You hear me?”

“No,” Jason muttered.

“Yes! Now, for once in your fucking life, Jason, don’t be a damn coward!” I yelled. My voice was so loud, my throat hurt.

Jason was inching backward, and Isaac was watching him retreat with narrowed eyes. “Stand your ground, boy. Shoot him.”

Jason lifted his gaze to meet my angry stare. For the first time since seeing him at that parking lot, I saw life in them again. Fire. Courage.

I had hope. There was a chance, a very small chance, that Evelyn and I might get out of this alive. He’d heard me. I had to believe that he’d heard me, and he finally understood what was at risk here.

Everything.

Ryder would lose all of us and Dani. And we’d lose our women too. Isaac wouldn’t hold back. He was only getting started. Every single one of us would be brought down like flies until only our leader remained.

“Jason,” I said, softer this time. “Put the gun down.”

“Shoot them!” Isaac roared.

“No!” Jason cried back. He covered his ears with his hands, pressing his palms flat to the side of his head like a child. The gun was still in his right hand and pointed at the ceiling. “I can’t! I won’t! This is my family. Derek is my family. They’re all my family. I can’t k-kill them. I can’t do this to my uncle.”

“Jason,” I warned, stepping forward. He was still too close to the threat, and he didn’t have the common sense to point the

gun at Isaac instead of me. He'd pointed it at the fucking ceiling. There was no danger up there.

He looked at me. I saw in him the same young kid who used to hang around on the back deck at Ryder's house when we were grilling burgers, desperately trying to be part of the conversations. None were suitable for his young ears, of course, and Ryder's sister Maria would always catch him and drag him back inside by the ear.

He'd somehow find a way back out to us. He was a sneaky one. And sometimes I wouldn't say anything when I knew he was listening in. I'd let him hover around, a silent guest, listening to us talk about the boring shit. Crunching numbers and discussing plans of bringing in new members when we were a smaller club. I'd always thought he'd join us one day and be Ryder's right-hand man.

Maria would have killed him, of course, but this was just the way of life for us.

We were family. We stuck together.

All of that flashed in my mind over the seconds it took for Isaac to reach out and pluck the gun from Jason's shaking fingers.

Jason looked startled, and he opened his mouth and looked to me to say something. Maybe "I'm sorry," but the words never made it out.

Isaac pulled the trigger. The shot rang out and hurt my ears.

And Jason crumpled to the floor.

He landed face-first in the inch of water at his feet. His blood leaked out of him, turning a bright pink as it diluted in the water.

Alarm bells went off in my brain.

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. It simply couldn't. Ryder's nephew was dead at my feet, and there wasn't a single fucking thing I could do about it.

It was then I realized Evelyn was screaming. She'd let go of my hand to press herself up against my back. Her fingers were tightening in my shirt as she hid her face between my shoulders and sobbed against me.

There wasn't a single thing I could say to offer her any comfort. Nothing. My tongue was weak and useless in my mouth, and all I could think was "*how the hell am I going to tell Ryder?*"

It was a useless thing to think, really, because I wasn't going to get the chance to tell him anything. Ryder would show up minutes after his nephew had been shot dead, and he'd find my and Evelyn's bodies splayed out on the ground beside Jason's.

I hoped Caleb got here first to spare Ryder the sight.

I swallowed and lifted my gaze to Isaac. He was looking down at Jason, and there was a smirk playing on his lips. He spat on him. Actually spat on him. Rage boiled inside me.

He looked up at me. "Well. This didn't go as I expected. I didn't think the kid would ever grow balls big enough to say no to me. Good pep talk, Derek. Real smooth. Look what it did." He pointed the gun at Jason's lifeless body.

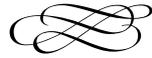
"I didn't do that. You did that," I said. My voice was shaking.

Isaac shrugged. "Sure, I pulled the trigger, but if you hadn't given him your Independence Day speech, things would have gone a little differently. Jason would still be alive, and you and your sweet little thing would be dead. Now, all three of you have to pay the price. A pity. I had big plans for the kid."

"Go to hell," I snarled.

Isaac laughed and raised the gun to point it at my chest. "Why does everyone always say that to me?"

CHAPTER 28



EVELYN

My throat was raw from screaming, my head was pounding, and my entire body from head to toe felt completely numb. All I could feel was cold. I was so terribly cold.

I looked down at my feet where little tendrils of pink had drifted through the water like reaching hands to settle around my ankles. Jason's blood. I stepped backward, trying to escape it, but almost all the water was turning a deep shade of pink. I wondered, dimly, how long it would take until it was as red.

The shirt I'd taken from Derek's dresser was still soaking wet and clinging to my body like a second skin. I wrapped my arms around myself, still inching backward until my calves hit the side of the tub, and looked up at the rest of the scene.

Isaac and Derek had been yelling at each other. I hadn't caught a single word they'd said since the gun went off. My mind was reeling, spinning end over end like some sickening amusement ride hell-bent on tearing me apart from the inside out.

There was a body on the floor.

A real dead body.

The body of a boy I'd spoken to. Pleaded with. Tried to save.

Not only had I connected with him, but I knew he was precious to Derek and his family. I wasn't sure if that was the right word for this club of his, but I had the sense that it was. The way he'd fought to try to save the kid spoke volumes.

This was probably what they did for each other. They put it all out on the line.

And it hadn't been enough to save Jason.

Was this Ryder character going to punish Derek for losing his nephew? Would he punish me?

I shook my head fiercely. "Stop it," I muttered to myself. *You're losing it, Evie. You know Derek is good. Why would his people be anything different? You won't be in trouble with them. You're in trouble now. Here. With this asshole still pointing a gun at you.*

Except, he wasn't pointing the gun at me.

Derek had moved back with me, following my retreat with equal steps of his own to keep himself planted firmly between me and Isaac. The gun was trained on his chest and hadn't moved since Jason pitched to the floor.

White hot fear shot straight through me. My knees buckled, and I went down in a crumpled heap.

I hated how weak I was. I wanted to stand up and be strong for Derek. But I couldn't. I was about to lose everything. I should have listened to Penny. Penny always knew wrong from right, danger from safety, insanity from sanity. She'd warned me about all of this over and over, and every time I'd shut her down. I'd begged her to trust me, and she'd finally caved.

Now, she was going to have to go to my funeral.

Fuck, she'd probably have to plan it, knowing my fucking parents. They'd abandoned me. Chances were, they'd have no part in the service after they found out how I died and who I died with. They'd forget they even had a daughter.

I started sobbing.

My shoulders shook, and I buried my face in my hands as I cried. I cried for myself and for Penny and for my parents who I still loved but hated all at once. I cried for Derek. And Jason. And Ryder—whoever he was. He'd lost someone seconds ago and didn't even know it yet.

Derek took a slow step back so that his calf was pressed against my shoulder. I willed myself not to wrap my arms around his leg and cling to him like a desperate child. Instead, I leaned against him and fought with myself to get the crying under control. He needed me right now, and I was falling to pieces. This was not the time.

There may not be a time left to cry. Or for anything. So, I should seize control of the situation and handle it like a grown woman. I wrapped my fingers in Derek's jeans and pulled myself up, wobbling like my legs were made of spaghetti. I clung to his shirt and managed to stay on my feet. I had to stand by him. I'd chosen him. I'd chosen *this*.

I lifted my gaze to Isaac, who was shaking his head at me. "You are more than just a pretty face. I'll give you that."

I ducked behind Derek's shoulder. I was incapable of speaking. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, all that would come out of me were more sobs or a scream. Then, I would lose control again, so I kept my lips sealed.

Derek was stiff in front of me. Every muscle was straining for release. The gun held him in place. I knew if I wasn't there, things would have gone differently. Derek probably would have been able to fight his way out if he didn't feel the need to protect me.

The guilt and fear made my stomach toss over.

"Do you have any last words, Lost Breed?" Isaac asked. His lips were drawn upward in that terrible smile of his, revealing yellowed teeth with rotting gums. I'd never seen his smile so broad before. He cocked his head to the side, his finger feathering the trigger. His hand, unlike Jason's, was completely steady. He would not miss, and he would take the shot.

"You've fucked up here tonight," Derek said. His voice was surprisingly steady for a man who was staring death in the eye. He was calm and poised. It was like he'd known all along this was how it was going to end. "Everything will change after this."

Isaac shrugged one shoulder. “I suppose it will, but that’s not your concern anymore.”

I pressed myself flat against Derek’s back. Maybe the bullet would go through him and me all at once, and we could die together. If I was lucky enough, that’s how it would happen. Then, I wouldn’t have to watch him die, and I wouldn’t have to wait for Isaac to end me too. It could just be over as fast as blinking.

I squeezed my eyes closed.

Then there was a sound—a voice from somewhere else in the house. I opened my eyes and looked up. Isaac had heard it too. That smile of his had contorted into a furious snarl, and the gun was lowering.

“Derek!” someone was yelling for us.

Isaac kicked the water with the toe of his boot. A splash of blood and tub water rained down on us before he took off out the bathroom door.

I reeled in place.

Was I still alive? How was that possible? I’d accepted my fate. I’d known it was over.

“Derek!”

“In here!” Derek called back. His voice startled me. He spun around and grabbed my shoulders. He lowered me down to sit on the edge of the bathtub and kissed my forehead. “I’ll be right back. Stay right here. Caleb is coming for you.”

“Wait. No. Stay—”

“I can’t. I’ll be back. I promise.”

And then he was gone. He tore out of the bathroom and stepped over Jason’s corpse, leaving me alone with him.

I could look nowhere else but at the body. More blood was seeping out. I was thankful he wasn’t facing me.

Suddenly, the nausea in my stomach doubled tenfold, and I pitched forward to cling to the side of the toilet, where I expelled the contents of my stomach in violent heaves. When I

was done, I flushed the toilet and sat back on my heels. I dragged my hand across the back of my mouth as someone burst in through the door frame.

I knew without looking that it wasn't Derek. But it wasn't Isaac, either.

“Holy fuck,” the man breathed.

I looked over at him. Caleb. His sweaty brown hair was plastered to his forehead and his blue eyes looked rather wind.

He looked from the body to me. “Evelyn?”

I nodded, surprised that he recognized me. We'd only met once.

“Where's Derek?”

I nodded out the door. “He took off after him. Twenty seconds ago.”

He stepped over Jason and made to come to me.

I shook my head. “No. I'm all right. Please go after him? He might need help. Isaac has a-a—he has a gun.” Tears sprang to life in my eyes again, and I shook my head furiously to try to clear them. “Just leave me here.”

Caleb didn't need to be told twice, and I appreciated that because I'd hit my maximum capacity for words and sentences. He sprinted out the door and left me alone, just as I'd asked.

I desperately wanted to get the hell out of that bathroom. But moving somewhere else meant I had to step over the body, and I was not capable of that. There was simply no way.

So I pushed myself into the corner between the toilet and the wall and drew my knees up to my chest. I did my best to ignore the reddening water all around me. I was sitting in it. I pulled down Derek's T-shirt over my thighs so my bare ass and thighs weren't in the water. I knew it didn't matter. It was just fabric, but it made me feel a little bit better.

Then, I pressed my forehead to my knees and took slow, deep breaths.

I told myself over and over that I was alive. Derek was alive.

Jason was dead, but I was alive.

It was only sort of comforting. I wished I had my phone on me. I needed Penny. I needed her desperately. But if she saw me like this, she might have a heart attack. I had to get it together. I had to wait for Derek to come back. He would know what to do. He'd know what I needed.

I hoped.

I didn't have to wait long. After a few minutes, I heard them come back into the house. Derek and Caleb's voices spoke in hushed tones as they came down the hall. When they got to the bathroom, Derek didn't hesitate to step over Jason. He came to me, and Caleb hung back in the doorway. Derek crouched down in front of me and rested his hands on my shins.

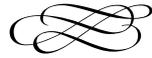
"Evelyn?"

I looked up at him and felt the tears leaking down my cheeks. His brow was furrowed. He looked terribly distraught. But he wasn't hurt. Thank God.

"Evelyn. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you. Fuck. I'm so sorry."

My bottom lip trembled. I couldn't tell him it was okay, so I reached for him. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tightly. I cried into his shoulder, not caring that Caleb was there to see me come apart.

CHAPTER 29



DEREK

I inched slowly backward, pulling Evelyn out from the corner she'd squeezed herself into. I wrapped my arms tightly around her and scooped her up off the floor. She was soaking wet and shivering. As I moved across the bathroom, I rested my chin on the top of her head.

Evelyn clung to me and held her breath as I stepped over Jason.

I hated that I'd put her in this position.

She was terrified and rightly so. Everything she had just seen was simply too much. A man, more like a kid, had died before her eyes. I was still trying to process the consequences of Jason's death, but Evelyn's safety was still my top priority. I moved slowly into the bedroom and sat her down on the edge of the bed.

"Your sheets," she mumbled, looking aimlessly around at my bed.

I knelt in front of her. "Don't worry about the sheets. I'll get new ones." I looked over my shoulder at Caleb, who was watching us from the doorframe of the bathroom. "Can you go get her a glass of water from my kitchen?"

Caleb nodded and left.

I put my hands on her shoulders. She was still trembling. "Let's get this wet shirt off of you." She let me peel it off over her head. I tossed it into the corner and grabbed a dry towel from my linen closet. I rubbed her down, making sure there were no little droplets of pink left on her skin. She sat with it

wrapped around her shoulders as I went and grabbed a sweater and a pair of jogging pants from my dresser.

I helped her get dressed. She swam in all of it, but she wasn't shivering anymore. Caleb arrived shortly after, and I had her sitting propped up against the pillows on my bed. He handed me the water, and I pushed it into her hands. "Drink."

She did as I asked and sipped at the water delicately.

Caleb was lingering off to the side of the bed with his hands in his pockets. "Ryder and the others are going to be here any minute. I feel like we should, I don't know, cover him up or something."

I nodded. It was a good suggestion. I stood from the edge of the bed. Evelyn watched me and gave me a small nod. "I'm all right. Do what you have to do."

I kissed her cheek and followed Caleb into the bathroom. I gathered nearly six towels and laid them out all over the floor. They soaked through right away and didn't do a good enough job, but they were all dark colors. At least this way, Ryder wouldn't see all the blood. Caleb went to my linen cupboard and found a navy sheet, which he brought over and delicately draped over the body.

Then, we stood and stared at each other.

Caleb raked his fingers through his hair. "This is going to change things. It's going to be a manhunt."

"I know," I said.

"Are we ready for that? Can we fucking handle it? The destruction this guy leaves in his wake is—"

"We can handle it," I said flatly. And for the first time, I believed it. "He's just a man like us. And we have more information this go-around. We have his name. Dani's a damn good detective. With her on the job, we'll find out everything we need to know about him to bring him down."

"I fucking hope so. I'm getting tired of this shit."

I looked down at the navy sheet. "Yeah. I hear you."

My muscles tightened with dread when I heard footsteps down the hall. Several voices were talking loudly, and Caleb leaned out the bathroom door to call them over.

Sabian emerged first and drew to a dead stop. He looked at the sheet and then up at me. Jax and Axel appeared behind him. “Is this him? You fucking killed him?” Sabian asked.

I shook my head.

Sabian and the others looked back and forth between me and Caleb, who sighed. “It’s Jason.”

“Oh,” Jax muttered. “Fuck.”

Axel weaved between them and crouched down beside the sheet. He lifted up the corner to peer at Jason’s body and let it quickly fall. “This isn’t going to be good.”

“You should leave, Derek,” Jax suggested. “We can handle this shit. Ryder’s going to be pissed, and you know how he gets. Tunnel vision. He’s going to want someone to pummel.”

“Let him,” I said. “This is my fault. I fucked it up.”

Axel shook his head and got to his feet. “No. Ryder will regret it once it’s done. We’ll keep him off you if that’s what it comes to.”

“It will come to that,” Sabian muttered, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously.

Then, we heard Ryder yelling for us. We all exchanged an uneasy glance. My stomach rolled. Then I called out, “We’re in here!” This was going to go down, one way or another, and no matter what, it was going to be brutal. I clenched my jaw and squared my shoulders. “Let’s get this shit over with.”

The men in the doorway parted and came all the way into the bathroom, stepping over Jason’s body—all except Axel, who remained outside to greet Ryder when he came into the bedroom. Axel caught him by the arm before he turned to come in. “Johnny. It’s not good in there. All right?” Axel was one of the closest of all of us to Ryder, and I’d never heard him call our president by his first name before. He was letting him know that shit was about to get real.

Ryder narrowed his eyes. “Who’s dead?”

Axel stepped aside and let Ryder come in. He looked at all of us first, no doubt doing a tally in his head. Then, he looked down at the body. He didn’t ask the same question that Sabian did. He knew right away from Axel’s warning that the corpse did not belong to Isaac. It was someone he cared about.

I stared down at the navy sheet. “I’m sorry, Ryder. I tried to do everything I could to save him, but it wasn’t enough.”

Ryder dropped into a crouch.

Axel put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “It’s Jason, man.”

Ryder flinched. I could see the wheels turning in his head as he decided whether he wanted to lift the sheet.

I swallowed. “You should know he chose us in the end, boss. He was a Lost Breed when he died.” I wasn’t sure if the words were comforting or not, but I had to say them. Ryder had to know, and Jason deserved them.

Ryder sighed and hung his head. Then, he lifted the sheet to stare into his nephew’s lifeless face. He let the sheet fall after only a couple seconds, put his hands on his knees, and pushed himself to his feet, where he looked over at me. “This was Isaac’s doing?”

“Yes.”

“And Jason didn’t hurt you or the woman?”

“No.”

Ryder nodded slowly.

Then, Dani blew in through the open door behind him. Axel caught her as she nearly slipped and fell on a patch of still exposed white tiles. Ryder turned to look at her, and as soon as he did, she must have seen the grief in his eyes. She went to him and wrapped her arms around his big shoulders. She pulled his head down to her, to rest his face in the groove of her neck, and hugged him tightly.

The rest of us stood around like idiots, none of us daring to look at them until they broke apart.

Dani stroked his cheek and offered him a sad smile. “We tried, baby. All of us did. And he knew that.”

Ryder nodded. His expression was stiff as he forced himself to keep it together. “The punches just keep coming,” he growled. “One after another. Hyde. And then this. What’s next? How much are we going to let this fucker take from us? And when the hell are we going to get a break?” His voice shifted from calm to angry in a split second. He was almost yelling.

None of us dared answer. There was nothing to say.

Dani took his arm and gave it a tug. “We still have a lot. All of us. The rest of the MC. It’s not all lost yet. We’ll take him down. Derek got us his name.”

Ryder shot me a dark look. “How did you come by that information, by the way?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We have time,” the President said. He wasn’t asking. He was demanding I explain it all now.

So I did. I told them all about how Warren had set me up in the park so that Isaac would be free to break into my house and go after Evelyn. I knew she could probably hear every word I was saying as she sat on my bed, waiting for this shit to be done, so I glossed over what happened to her in the tub as much as I could. But they all understood the gravity of what had been done to her. She was almost drowned. I then explained that Rhys, an old buddy of mine, had shown up to save my neck when Warren’s thugs almost had the best of me.

“Rhys? As in the guy who ditched you on a job, and you had to take the heat for it?” Ryder growled.

“Yeah. That’s the guy.”

“Do you think he wants something from you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. And at this point, I’d be prepared to give it to him. If he hadn’t shown up, this would be a much

different scene.”

“Yeah,” Ryder said, “Jason might not be dead.”

The room went quiet. Axel shifted nervously. “You’re right. He might not be. But Derek would be and so would Evelyn. If I’m being perfectly honest, Jason made the choices that put him in the situation. Derek tried to save him on more than one occasion. He passed up his chances to walk away from this shit.”

Ryder never took his eyes off me, but after a few seconds, he sighed. “I know.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

Ryder closed his eyes and dragged his hands down his face. “I know that too. You did what you could. I’m glad you and Evelyn are okay. If she needs anything after all this shit, you only have to ask. Dani can help too.”

Dani piped up from behind him. “Yes. Of course. We can debrief her and set her up with a trauma counselor. I know the best in the city.”

“I’ll talk to her,” I said.

Ryder leaned back against the doorframe. “It would be nice to get some good fucking news for once.”

I noticed Dani biting her bottom lip and watching him. She lifted her gaze to me, blushed a bright shade of pink, and then looked back at Ryder. “Um. I might be able to help with that.”

He looked at her, as we all did. Good news was getting harder and harder to come by these days, and if she had a sliver of something positive, we were all more than willing to eat it up.

Ryder nodded. “Go on then, baby. Don’t keep us all waiting.”

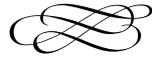
Her smile surprised all of us. Maybe it was a bit bigger than just a sliver. “This isn’t at all how I pictured having this conversation with you,” she said slowly, “but I’m pregnant, Johnny.”

It was like the clouds parted over our heads for a few minutes, and sunlight beamed down on us and the angels started singing. Ryder let out a short bark of laughter before clamping his hand over his mouth as he processed what she'd just told him.

Our President was going to be a father.

He engulfed Dani in a big bear hug as she cried tears of happiness. He stroked her hair, and for a moment, we were all able to forget about all the death under the promise of new life.

EPILOGUE



EVELYN

Two Weeks Later

I opened the top drawer of Derek's dresser and pulled out my sweatpants and a tank top as he started up the shower in the bathroom. I'd been slowly bringing some of my things over from Penny's house, and he'd graciously offered me any drawers or closet space I needed. I didn't have many things since I was still just starting out, so I wouldn't take up much space.

I stepped into my sweats one leg at a time and listened to the water running in the bathroom.

It had been hard to get used to using that bathroom after everything that happened in there two weeks ago. For the most part, I avoided it altogether and used the guest one down the hall. Derek didn't say anything about it, and he even closed the door when we went to bed. He understood.

The last two weeks had been an absolute blur. After Jason was killed, I met everyone. It wasn't the best of circumstances to be introduced to the Lost Breed MC, but it was the circumstance we had. I was there to help Derek with his parts of planning the funeral and helping Ryder. Dani and I chatted a lot, and she set me up with a trauma counselor who I visited at least two times a week. I saw the counselor four days in a row after Jason died.

It had helped immensely.

I was able to sort through my feelings and deal with the fear. I learned healthy coping habits and not to shut down. If I

needed to cry, I cried. If I needed to talk, I talked to Derek. And he was there for me at every turn, even though I knew he was grieving too.

The funeral had been a lot more upbeat than I'd expected. Since it was for a young person, I thought it would be somber and sad, but Ryder was committed to making it more about celebrating his nephew than just mourning him. After all the destruction and trauma, it was a welcomed relief.

Jason was buried in a Lost Breed leather jacket that had apparently been set aside for him years ago. Watching his casket get lowered into the ground had been a chilling experience for me only because it could have easily been me and Derek being buried that day.

Maria, Jason's mother, never came to the funeral.

Derek asked Ryder about it, but he wouldn't speak of it. Derek explained to me that there was bound to be tension between Ryder and his sister now. She never wanted this life for her son, and it would take her some time to come around and realize it really had nothing to do with Ryder. Jason was a kid who'd made consistently bad choices. He never learned from his mistakes, and he got in too deep with the wrong people. Had he been a Lost Breed through and through, he never would have ended up working for a man as sick and twisted as Isaac Reed.

Dani was looking for Isaac with steadfast determination. She wanted justice for Jason, and I think she wanted Isaac either behind bars or dead even more now that she and Ryder were expecting a baby in six months. She'd even told Ryder that they weren't going to set up the nursery or make any baby-related purchases until they got him.

Ryder, of course, thought this was insane, and begged her to change her mind.

But Dani was a stubborn woman who feared nobody. She insisted they would catch Isaac soon, and their reward would be preparing for the arrival of their baby girl or boy.

There was lots of talk among the MC about what gender the baby would be. Derek suspected it would be a girl. The others, all except for Caleb, were expecting a boy. When Derek asked me what I thought, I shrugged. I didn't feel like I knew any of these people well enough to make a call like that.

I didn't feel like I knew them at all.

Once I was dressed, I went into Derek's living room, where I sat in one corner of his couch, curled my legs under myself, and called Penny.

It was nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. She might very well have been sleeping, but I hoped she'd answer.

She did. "Evelyn? Morning. What time is it? Good lord, you know I don't wake up until at least eleven on Sundays. Some friend you are."

"I'm sorry," I said, biting my nail.

I heard her covers rustling as she shifted around in bed. Her springs creaked, and she yawned. "Is something wrong? What's up?"

I stopped biting my nail and sighed. I'd told Penny everything that happened at Derek's house with Jason and Isaac the day after it all went down. I'd have told her sooner, but she was busy as hell and kept letting my calls go to voicemail. I wanted to be pissed, but I choose patience instead.

When I finally did unload on her, she was horrified and asked me what I needed from her. Truth was, I didn't know. All I had wanted was comfort and to feel safe, and it was Derek who gave me that. Penny understood and had sat patiently on the phone with me while I told her everything that was going on, and all my fears for the steps ahead. These phone calls had been more frequent than I would have liked, but they were necessary for my healing process.

"I can't stop thinking about it," I said quietly.

"About Jason?"

"Yeah," I said.

Penny yawned again. “I don’t blame you. I think there’d be something wrong with you if you could just put it behind you and never think about it again. Are you still having the dreams?”

“No, not for the last couple of nights.”

“That’s a good sign.”

She was right. It was probably a good thing. I’d had nightmares about what happened in the bathroom every night for the week and a half following the murder. Sometimes, Jason died in my dreams, and sometimes, Derek did—and those nights were the worst ones. “I just can’t help but wonder if I’m making the right choice.”

“What do you mean?” Penny asked.

“Being with him.”

“You’re doubting Derek?”

I bit my bottom lip. “No. I’m doubting if this life is the right one for me. I’m afraid things are going to get worse. They still haven’t caught Isaac, and there’s no telling where he is right now. Even if they do catch him like they say they will, what then? Is this what it will always be like? Is there always going to be an enemy lurking in the shadows?”

Penny voice grew tight. “Are you calling me and asking me this because you want me to make you feel better, or because you want me to be honest with you?”

I swallowed. Penny was good for this kind of thing. If I wanted comfort at a time of crisis like this, that’s what she would give me. But that wasn’t what I was looking for. I was looking for someone I trusted to tell me what to do. I was lost. “Honest. Please.”

“Honesty it is. Derek is a good guy. I know I didn’t think so at first, but I’m starting to change my mind. He cares about you, Evie. I’d go as far to say he loves you. I’m sure of it. I’m also positive you love him too. But I know love isn’t always enough to make it work. Sometimes it is. He makes you happier than I’ve ever seen you. Not only that, he protects you. Yes, this is a dangerous life. Yes, it may be that way forever.

All you have to decide is if he's worth it. Nothing more, nothing less. If he's not, you need to walk away now before it gets harder to do so. And if he is worth it, then you'll have to roll with the punches."

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. "I knew that's what you'd say."

Penny chuckled. "I'm sorry, babe, but I can't tell you what to do on this one. All I know is if I was in your shoes and I had a man who risked his life for me, I'd stay by him. If I loved him, of course."

"Of course," I mumbled.

"And do you love him?"

"I've loved him since he took me for margaritas."

I could hear Penny's smile in her voice. "Then, I think you have your answer."

I heard Derek come out of the bedroom after his shower. "I have to go, Penny. Thanks for this. I needed it."

"Call me later?"

"Okay," I said, and I hung up the phone as Derek came into the living room. He had his towel wrapped around his waist, and he stopped with his hands on his hips

He looked down at me with an arched eyebrow as I admired his half-naked body. Little droplets of water on his shoulders caught the sunlight streaming in through the windows. "Who were you talking to?" he asked.

"Penny."

He came and dropped down on the couch beside me. "How's she doing?"

"She's good. She got mad at me for waking her up."

"It's past nine."

"I know. She guards her Sunday mornings with her life."

Derek chuckled and put his hand on my knee. "I'm going to make coffee and start some breakfast. You hungry?"

“No thanks.”

Derek cocked his head to the side. “What’s wrong?”

He could read me like an open book. I didn’t understand how that was possible. It was like we’d been together for ages and he knew every little thing about me, just like I felt like I knew every little thing about him. “Nothing,” I said.

He turned to face me more directly. “Evelyn. I can tell when something is wrong. You and I work so well together because we tell each other everything. Please let me in. Tell me what’s wrong.”

I searched his brilliant green eyes. I could get lost in them. They were so beautiful. So was he. I swallowed. “I’m in love with you.”

He blinked. “And that’s what’s wrong?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry. I’m confused.”

I sighed. “I’m scared all the time, and I’m only scared because I love you. I keep thinking our time is limited. That scares the hell out of me. All I want is this forever. Us. But how long is our forever going to be?”

Derek gathered me in his arms and pulled me in tight against his big chest. “I have the same fears, baby. You know why?”

“Why?” I whispered, my tears starting together in the corners of my eyes.

“Because I love you too.”

I looked up at him.

“If you need to get away from this, I won’t blame you for it, Evelyn. I swear I won’t. But I also swear I’ll protect you. This life isn’t conventional by any means, but it’s usually a lot better than this. Isaac is an anomaly. And Dani and Ryder are on the warpath looking for him. His days are numbered. We’re going to get him. Then, it can be me and you, doing normal couple shit, and not worrying about anything besides building

our life together. The MC will always be a part of me and, in time, a part of you too.”

“They’ll accept me?”

Derek smiled and ran his thumb along my cheek. “They already have, baby.”

I pressed my cheek into his hand and savored the warmth of his touch. This was all I needed. Him. “Normal couple shit, huh?”

He smirked and nodded. “Yeah.”

“What does that look like?”

“I have no fucking clue,” he laughed, “but I want to do it with you.”

My cheeks stretched in a smile. “Keep saying sweet things to me.”

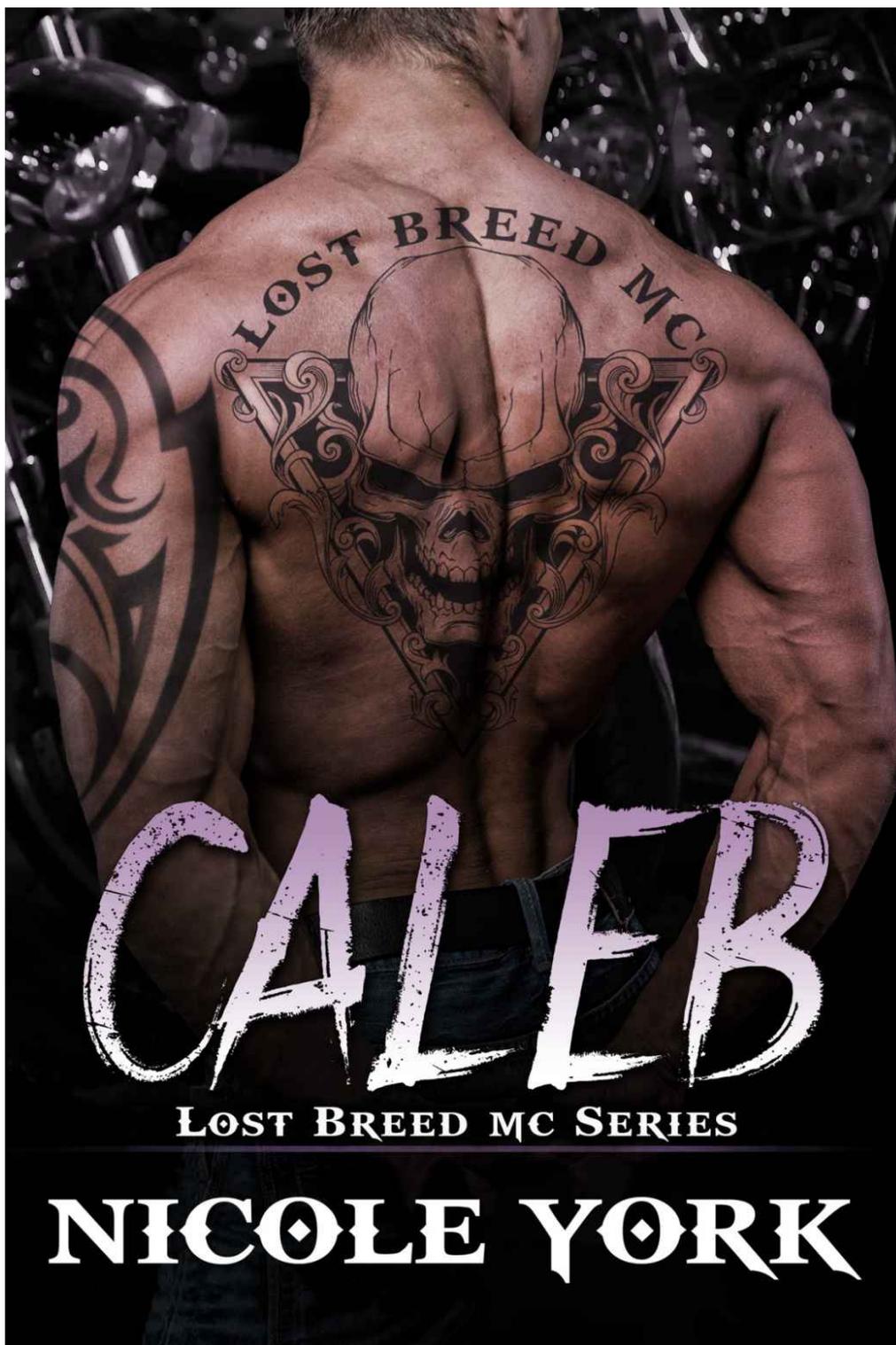
“You’ve got a great ass.”

I snickered and slapped him playfully in the chest. Then, he cupped my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. I melted into him. This was my life now. Passionate love, wild nights, and yes, a little bit of danger. But I could handle it. I’d hit a man with a fire extinguisher, for crying out loud. I wasn’t a shaky little leaf like I sometimes thought I was. I could be fierce just like the Lost Breed members.

I would need to be if I was going to get through this brewing storm in one piece.

When I came out the other side stronger, Derek and I would be able to settle into our life together. And it would all be worth it.

So long as we both survived.

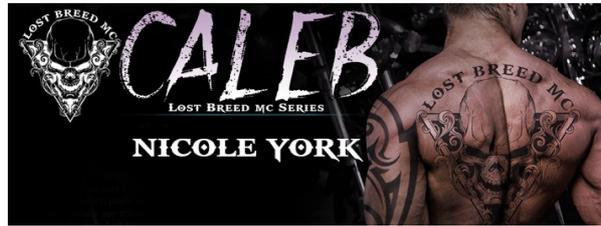


CALEB

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I'm a loner, and it seems I always will be.

It's safer that way. My last girl up and left because things got too dangerous. Not that I blame her.

It'd be better if I could stay away from love for good, but the pretty single mom who dances at my club has my attention, then my body, and now my heart.

The world is crumbling around me, with villains gunning for my MC left and right, and the only thing that saves me is her.

Scarily enough, she's trying to save herself. An abusive relationship and a little one to deal with have her struggling to keep her head above water.

Time to step in and save her. I have to. No matter what.

Why? She's the one that pulls my black soul up from the darkness and forces me to breathe again with her warmth.

I just can't help but wonder how she'll feel when she realizes that I'm no different from the evil that's after us. I'm more of what she doesn't need.

I wish I was a good guy and could walk away, but I'm in too deep. I've gone too far.

No matter what or who comes our way, I'll be ready to protect what is mine.

Cause that's what bad boys do.

CHAPTER 1



CALEB

Autumn had arrived in New York City the same day we put Jason in the ground.

The leaves had begun the slow shift from green to burnt orange, the children were all back in school, and dry heat that had lingered for the last couple of months had been extinguished almost overnight. There was a chill in the air, a sort of cold that made you want to draw inward as if there was something out there worse than the cool breeze against your throat.

Something like a man who wanted you all to join the youngest Moretti in death.

When Jason's casket was lowered into the earth, I was standing at the end of the coffin. His uncle, Johnny "Ryder" stood at the opposite end, his eyes downcast as he followed the slow descent of his nephew's black and gold coffin six feet under. Dani had her head resting on his shoulder, and both her hands were wrapped around his upper arm. All of us were dressed in black, and Dani looked like a goddess of death. Her lips were painted dark red, and her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. She looked up at Ryder and whispered something to him.

I wondered what words were on her lips. Whatever they were, they offered him comfort because he tipped his head to her and she pressed a kiss to his cheek. Then, he closed a hand over hers and rubbed her knuckles gently.

At least he had her to see him through this. And their unborn child.

I knew the baby felt more like a burden right now than a gift to both of them. With Isaac Reed, known as The Devil's Hand or until recently, The Hand, still roaming around free, neither of them felt like they could truly celebrate their next step in life. None of us could blame them. This was a time when everything could change in a heartbeat. Everything was uncertain, and there was no telling who would all be left standing when this was done.

Three tombstones over was Hyde's resting place, and that was a somber enough reminder that we were all just flesh and bone.

I shifted when the casket was set, and my shoulder bumped Derek's. He was at my right side and had his arm wrapped around Evelyn, who'd looked like a deer in the headlights throughout the entire service. She was out of her element among this many bikers, and the fact that we were all there wearing our leathers and gear was probably more than intimidating. Derek had done what he could to reassure her, and I'd pulled her aside to let her know this was a safe space to be, but she'd been unable to shake the shell-shocked expression.

I supposed it would take a month or two before she settled into her new role as the partner of a Lost Breed member.

Words were said for Jason, and then we took turns scattering handfuls of dirt over the coffin. Ryder took the lead, followed by Dani, and then we followed suit, one by one, and as I released my handful, I muttered, "You're forgiven, kid." I wasn't sure where the words had come from or why those were the ones I'd chosen to say, but that's how they came out.

We got on our bikes when it started raining and rode to Ryder's. He was in the lead with Dani on the back of his motorcycle. Had it been a long drive back to his place, she probably would have driven herself due to her "condition," but she'd firmly insisted it was perfectly safe for her to sit on the

back of his bike. It was a memorial ride. We never exceeded ten miles per hour.

I was a few bikes behind them and could see how tightly she was clinging to him. Her cheek was pressed to his back, right in the middle of the Lost Breed crest, and every now and then, she would close her eyes.

I doubted there was anyone who loved a man as much as she loved Ryder.

Everyone around me had their women wrapped around them. Axel rode behind Ryder with Ellie on the back of his bike. Jax had Holly. Sabian had Angela. Derek had Evelyn.

And I was solo.

It bothered me that there was no girl clinging to my waist, thighs pressed to mine, hair blowing in the wind behind us. It also bothered me that I was bothered to not have a woman of my own.

The girl I'd been seeing a few weeks ago had left when shit got rough, and I couldn't blame her for it. This life wasn't for everyone, and as all us Lost Breeds knew, it was going to get worse before it got better. But it had been nice to have someone to go home to. Someone to share a bed with. Someone to help me forget about all the bullshit and the blood if even just for a couple hours.

The sex had been fun too.

When she'd told me she couldn't hack it and asked me not to call her again, I'd played it cool and pretended it was as easy for me to walk away from her as it was for her to leave me in her dust. She could probably see right through me, but at the time, I'd been incapable of vulnerability. I feared I might be like that permanently now.

People died in my life. I didn't want to bring someone into this shit if it was going to fuck their life up.

We pulled into Ryder's driveway around six o'clock in the evening. The rain hadn't been heavy enough to soak through all my leathers, but I was definitely damp, so when I got inside his and Dani's place, I shrugged out of my jacket and hung it

to dry over the door to their laundry room. My white T-shirt was dry, and only the thighs of my black jeans were wet and sticking to my skin. A few beers would help me forget the discomfort.

I found the others in the kitchen. Sabian had his head in the fridge when I walked in, and he tossed me a can of beer. I popped the tab and foam leaked out. I sucked it off before taking a greedy mouthful.

Dani and Ryder had their backs to the counter. Dani had a bottle of water and Ryder a beer. Their arms were wrapped around each other's waists as Ryder looked around at all of us. "Thanks for coming. All of you."

If you were a Lost Breed, it wasn't an option to pass on attending a member's funeral—not that Jason had been a member. Not really. But we all knew Ryder wished he was, and that was enough for us.

Axel opened his beer. "We did right by him."

"We did," Ryder agreed with a nod.

Sabian and Angela had taken up seats at the kitchen table. She had her chair pulled up close to him and was leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table. Her nose was pink from the cold, and she'd kept her jacket on. Sabian nodded over at Dani. "Have you found anything else out about Isaac Reed?"

As Dani started to shake her head, Ryder held up his hand. "No work talk. Tonight, we honor my nephew and celebrate his life. Tomorrow, we plan for war."

Jax lifted his beer. "Cheers to that."

I followed suit as Derek stepped up beside me. Evelyn was clinging to his side, but they both raised their drinks along with the rest of us and added their voices to the mix. Ellie and Jamie were in the far corner, and they came over too.

It still felt weird to me that Hyde wasn't there. I doubted I'd ever get used to it.

After the toast, everyone went their separate ways and started mingling as people do after they get a few drinks in their system. All except Evelyn, who followed Derek around the house like a lost puppy dog. When they came back into the kitchen after doing a lap around the living room chatting with Axel and Angela and Jamie, I grabbed another beer for Evelyn from the fridge and pressed it into her hands.

She blinked up at me and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Uh. Thank you.”

“It’ll take the edge off a bit. I know we can be a bit much all at once.”

Her smile was nervous but genuine. She nodded as she cracked open the can and tucked her hair back again, even though it was still in place. “Yeah. It’s a little overwhelming. Derek keeps telling me it’s all in my head, but I can’t help feeling like I’m not wanted here. I don’t fit in. You know?”

I chuckled. “None of us fit in. That’s sort of the idea.”

She arched a skeptical eyebrow at me. “I know you’re only saying that to make me feel better.”

“So what if I am?”

She bit her bottom lip. “Thanks.”

Not long after talking to her, we were interrupted by Dani, who pulled her aside for a chat. I suspected she was checking in on her after everything that had gone down at Derek’s house last week when Jason was murdered right in front of her.

I knew Evelyn had been struggling, and Dani had set her up with a trauma counselor. She was already a lot better than the last time I’d seen her, so it was clear the counseling was working, but there would be a lot she would have to sift through with a professional before she was able to feel normal again. Once that happened, she might find the Lost Breed a more welcoming environment. I liked to think we were all easy to get along with.

Minus Ryder. Sometimes, he could come off like a real asshole.

Somebody nudged my shoulder. I glanced over at Sabian, who had braced himself up against the kitchen doorframe with one shoulder. He nodded over at Dani and Evelyn. “You think Derek’s girl is all right?”

“I do.”

“Just a timid little bird, though, isn’t she?”

I shrugged. “This is all new to her. She came from the complete opposite side of the tracks as most of us. She was in law school, for fuck sakes. And worked as a nanny.”

“A nanny?” Sabian snorted.

“Yeah. She’s used to a much tamer crowd.”

“Kids aren’t tame. They’re hellions that can’t be trusted. Worse than us by a long shot.”

“Don’t tell Ryder that.” I smirked.

Sabian chuckled and looked around for Ryder. He was in a deep discussion with Axel and Ellie at the kitchen table. Jamie was sitting with them and so were Jax and Holly. Jax was watching with a bemused expression.

Sabian shook his head. “Ryder has no clue the shit storm that’s going to rain down on him when that kid pops out. He’ll be wrapped around their little finger faster than he can blink.”

“He’s already like that with Dani.”

Sabian sighed. “I guess we’re all like that with our women. Speaking of which,” he nudged me again with his elbow, “There any special ladies in your life? Anybody your cock is twitching for?”

I polished off the rest of my beer and shook my head. “Not right now.”

“Oh come on. Their ripe for the picking at Kadia. Even just one or two to, you know, fuck around with every now and then? Blow off steam?”

He was right. Kadia was full of beautiful women, and I was surrounded by them four nights a week when I worked my security shift. “Haven’t been in the mood lately.”

“Still bent out of shape over that Hillary chick?”

Hillary was the girl who'd left a couple weeks ago. In fact, she left right before Jason died. “Bent out of shape isn't exactly how I'd put it.”

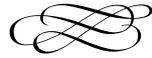
Sabian nodded knowingly. “But you miss her.”

“You want another beer?” I asked, wagging my empty beer can. I wanted to change the subject.

Sabian knew what I was doing, but he didn't question me. He nodded, and I moved around him to go to the fridge. Once I cracked it open, all heads turned to me as if on a swivel, and I found myself grabbing nearly a dozen beers and handing them out to everyone around the house before I was able to sit back with mine and find someone to talk to who wouldn't ask me about Hillary.

And that someone was Ryder. He knew an off-limits topic a mile away, just like I did. So we talked about everything except my ex, his unborn child, and Jason.

CHAPTER 2



LAURYN

I pounded on the bathroom door and yelled, “Is my sequin top in there, Cliff?”

I couldn’t hear if he answered me or not. The shower was running and probably drowning out my voice. I jiggled the handle, annoyed that he always locked the door when he showered, and pounded again, this time using my flat palm.

The water turned off.

“What?” Cliff yelled.

“My sequin top! Is it in there?”

“I don’t fucking know, Lauryn. Stop leaving your shit everywhere!” Then, he turned the shower back on.

I threw my hands in the air and groaned. This was just my luck. I was running behind for work, and I was going to miss my bus. Then, I’d be half an hour late for my shift, which would cost me at least a hundred dollars in tips.

I hurried down the hall to the living room where my seven-year-old son, Jayden, was curled up in the corner of my navy blue sofa. He had a blanket over his shoulders and was watching some cartoon on the television. I sat down on the edge of the sofa and brushed his light brown curly hair off his forehead. “Hey, kiddo, could you do Mommy a favor?”

He looked up at me, his eyes heavy. He was so sleepy.

“Could you help me with that lock?”

Jayden nodded and took my hand. We went back into the bedroom, and I handed him a bobby pin. Some people might call me a bad mother, but I hadn't taught him to pick a lock. He'd simply done it himself when he needed into the bathroom to pee. We only had one in the apartment, and Cliff took especially long showers after work.

The door unlocked, and Jayden smiled proudly up at me. I ruffled his hair and kissed him on the forehead. "Thanks. You're the best, did you know that?"

He nodded sheepishly. "Yes. You tell me all the time."

"You go finish up your show. I'll come and say goodbye before I have to leave for work."

I watched Jayden leave, the hem of his jeans dragging along the carpet, before I opened the bathroom door and let myself in. Cliff didn't notice me right away. I hoped I could get in and out before he did because he guarded his shower time like no one I'd ever met. He hated when I interrupted him.

My sequin top was sitting on the counter beside the sink. I rolled my eyes. All Cliff would have had to do was look out through the shower door and see that yes, it was in fact in the bathroom.

I padded over to it. He saw me, as I knew he would, when I plucked it up.

"You couldn't just wait until I was done, could you?" Cliff mumbled.

I turned to him and held up the shirt. "And you couldn't just open your eyes and see this was in here?"

"I told you to stop leaving your shit all over the fucking place. You're always giving me hell for leaving my shoes all over—"

"Yeah. Because they're covered in dirt, and you like to put them on the coffee table."

"Whatever. Do you need anything else in here? If not, get out so I can shower in peace."

I marched over to the door. “I’ll be home around two in the morning. Don’t wait up.”

“I won’t.”

I closed the door behind me and pressed my back to it. Before hurrying to finish getting ready, I took a moment to pull myself together. This sort of behavior from Cliff was nothing new, but it rattled me nonetheless.

We’d been together for ten months or so. After we’d been dating for three months, he moved in with me and Jayden. He’d been evicted from his apartment by his landlady, who was definitely a nutter, and had nowhere to go. At the time, we’d been deliriously in love with each other, and I’d thought it made perfect sense for him to move in with me and Jayden. I’d foolishly believed he could help me; that we would be a happy little family and things would finally be how I wanted them to be.

But at the six-month mark, things had shifted, and I felt more alone now than I ever had before.

I squared my shoulders and went to the bedroom, where I packed my bag. I threw in the sequin top as well as my dancing stilettos, makeup, G-string, stockings, and sweater for the bus ride home.

Then, I threw the bag over my shoulder and pulled on my sneakers. I rushed down the hall to hug Jayden goodbye. “There’s a bowl of chili in the fridge for you, kiddo. Bottom shelf. You just have to warm it up. Cliff has a sandwich on the top shelf. Okay?”

Jayden nodded. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, baby. I’ll see you in the morning. You still feeling up to making muffins together?”

Jayden grinned at me. “Yes.”

“Okay. Good. Me too. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I hated leaving him every night, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do. I had no qualifications to land me a real job that

would pull in a fraction of what I was making now. As a dancer at Kadia, I'd been making between four and six hundred dollars in tips per night over the last half a year. Some of that money had to go to my costumes and whatnot, but the bulk of it went to paying rent, Jayden's clothes, and his school supplies. He also wanted to join hockey next month, and I was scrambling to try to get the funds together to buy him a spot on the team. It was an expensive sport, and the money I was making now wasn't cutting it.

I'd had to up my game.



The bus ride to Kadia was thirty-seven minutes long, but the stop was only a block away. I rushed down the sidewalk as the sun set and was let in through the front by the bouncer on shift. He was a new addition to the team, and I was pretty sure his name was Jack, but I couldn't be sure. He gave me a friendly nod as he opened the door for me, and I made my way through the empty club to the back room, where I went to my mirror and prep station.

Some of the other girls were already there. The bleach blond bombshell who sat beside me, Sadie, shot me a brilliant white smile. "Hey there, sugar," she said. Then she lifted up a little Ziploc bag with two pale blue pills floating around inside. "I saved you a hit. Want half of one?"

I thought of Cliff and how much of an ass he'd been lately. And I thought of how I needed to make more money to get Jayden on the hockey team. "Hell, yes. How much?"

"Oh, don't worry about it, sugar. I didn't pay for it. I have a good hookup. He takes care of me."

"It's clean?" I asked.

Sadie nodded vigorously. "Yep. As a whistle. It's the same shit we've been using for weeks now." She poured out the contents and cut the two pills in half. "Ladies, come and get your cut."

Two of the other girls, Milly and Cassidy, hop-stepped over, wobbling in their heels, and plucked half a tablet from the table. I took mine, and all four of us popped them into our mouths at once.

Usually, I would use from a source I knew a little better—Cliff was my dealer on most days. But he'd come home from work without anything for me the last couple of nights, and I made more money when I had a bit of Zandra running through my system. I was able to turn my mind off and feel the music. I actually had a good time most nights if I was a little high. Reality felt farther away, and for just a little while, I could be nothing but the music and sex. I was desired and wanted when I danced.

I didn't have that in my real life. I craved it more than I craved Zandra, but I would settle for what I could get.

Sadie tucked the bag into her makeup kit, and all of us settled back into our seats in front of our vanity mirrors. I unzipped my pink makeup bag and started pulling out everything I would need, red lipstick, silver sparkly eye shadow, black liquid liner, foundation, powder, concealer, contour, highlighter, mascara—I had it all.

By the time I'd finished painting my face, the Zandra had kicked in. My skin was warm and tingly, and there was a smile on my lips I couldn't shake.

“Shit,” I said, grinning at Sadie. “This stuff is strong.”

Sadie fluffed her big blond Victoria Secret curls and glanced over at me. Her makeup was as overdone as mine. “You know I don't fuck around with my Zandra. I want the pure cuts that make you feel like you're floating.” She ran her fingers up her arm and sighed contently.

There was something about skin on skin contact when you were high on Zandra that could push you over the edge. It was a good thing Kadia had a “No Touching The Dancers” policy in place because if we were able to come into contact with our male customers, I would have spent many a night in their bed instead of onstage.

I got to my feet, feeling lighter than a feather, and went over to my bag. I pulled out my outfit and stripped right there. None of us girls cared much about nudity. We had quick costume changes some nights, so we'd seen each other's everything. I put on my black sequin top and pushed my boobs up. Sadie gave me the nod of approval after I slapped on my black G-string and thigh-high stockings with garters around the middle of my thighs. The stockings were covered in black pieces of crystal that glittered magnificently when they caught the right light. They'd been an investment and a half, but they were gorgeous, and my legs looked like absolute sin in them.

"I have to get me a pair of those." Cassidy drooled over at her vanity. She stared enviously at my stockings. "They're fabulous. How much did you pay?"

"They were three hundred dollars. Pricey, but worth it in my opinion," I said, facing the mirror to brush out my hair.

Cassidy groaned. "I'll never be able to get a pair. Only in my dreams."

Milly finished doing her hot pink lipstick and sighed. "Me, too, Cass. Me too. Maybe if we danced like Lauryn, we'd have a shot of making enough money a night to afford them. Got any tips for us, babe?"

I shrugged and adjusted my tits one last time. "It's an art form," I said simply.

"That doesn't help." Sadie giggled as she uncrossed her legs and stood. She looked me up and down and planted her hands on her hips. She was sexy as hell with an hourglass figure and thick thighs. She was dressed in a red, lacy one-piece lingerie.

I smiled and ran my hands subconsciously down my body. I was feeling so damn good. "I don't have any magical secrets. Just treat it like art. Men love to watch, so give them a show. Use your body to pull their eyes to what you want them to see. Make eye contact. Tell them a story. Let them imagine what it would be like to have you in their bed with them."

The girls started giggling.

I tried to scowl, but I was laughing too. We were all feeling good apparently. I shook my head at them and looked back at myself. My stockings and my top were glittering. My thighs were taut and tanned, and my ass was perky. I liked the way I looked, and I wasn't afraid to admit it. I worked hard for my figure. It was my income. "On second thought, forget what I said. Just let the Zandra do the work. She'll never lead you astray."

CHAPTER 3



CALEB

Dani was far from showing, but she had her hands resting on her tummy anyway. She already sensed the little life that was growing inside her, and she cradled it protectively, lovingly, knowing there were things on the outside that would want to harm the child.

She was sitting at one end of the table on Ryder's back deck. He was on the other. The rest of us, Sabian, Jax, Axel, Derek, and I, were each sitting on either side, looking back and forth between our President and his partner. These days, it felt like we had two Presidents.

Nobody had said a word in at least two full minutes. We'd talked about everything except what we'd been called here to talk about. Isaac Reed. It seemed as though everyone would rather push it to the side and pretend that for now, it didn't exist. Maybe if we shut our eyes tightly enough, it would be true.

"So," Ryder said, looking around at all of us expectantly. "You know why you're here. We have shit to discuss about Isaac. Dani's been doing some digging and has come up with more than what we've had since this mess started. You have the floor, baby."

Dani leaned forward to rest on her elbow. One hand remained on her stomach. "Well, for starters, we know that the information Derek was given is true. The Hand's legal name is Isaac Reed. He was born here in New York City in '82. He was taken from his parents by social services when he was six

because the home was unfit and he was abused. Turns out, he has a younger brother who also got lost in the system.”

Sabian scoffed. “Fuck. There could be two of these fuckers out there?”

Dani shrugged. “The likelihood of two psychopaths coming from one family is incredibly slim. He may have behavioral problems and has likely been caught up in the system, but his name wasn’t flagged for any of the sort of shit Isaac’s was.”

“And what sort of shit might that have been?” I asked. Everyone looked over at me.

Dani nodded appreciatively at my question like this was exactly the direction she wanted to go. “It started off with typical stuff. He was a bully in school—”

“And adulthood,” Jax grumbled.

Dani talked over his interruption. “He was expelled in the tenth grade for attacking another boy in the hall with a pencil. He used it as a shiv of sorts. He went to juvie. More fights and more violence ensued there. Afterward, after he was out, there are a couple cases of animal abuse.”

“Motherfucker,” Sabian hissed.

“As you know, it got worse. His crimes really got underway with petty theft, then armed robbery, then a robbery that went bad, and he ended up killing a gas attendant. Including Jason and Hyde, he has six deaths under his belt with no indication of stopping anytime soon. Unless, of course, someone stops him. From where I’m sitting, it looks like you guys and the NYPD are the only ones who stand a chance of doing the job. And I’m only saying NYPD because I feel obligated. I think it would be best if we handle this on our own. As Lost Breeds.” When she finished talking, she looked up at Ryder, who winked at her.

I raked my fingers through my hair. “So, in summary, his whole life has basically been training camp for the big leagues? Us?”

Dani sat back in her seat and clasped her hands over her tummy once more. She nodded. “In short? Yes.”

“What are we going to do about it?” I asked.

All heads turned to Ryder. He looked calmly back at us. “We find him. We kill him. We bury him. Simple as that.”

Nobody said anything, so I piped up again. “That sounds clear, Ryder, but how do we actually put it into action? We’ve tried to take this guy down before. More than once. Each time, we’ve given him our all, and he’s still managed to slip through our fingers. After we find him—and that’s *if* we even can—how are we going to ensure we’re the ones who come out on top?”

Ryder stared evenly back at me. “*When* we find him, we’re going to do things the way I say. No one goes after him alone. For any reason. We don’t take any bait. We don’t make any mistakes. Dani is working with her team to get a lead on him, and once we have his location, we all go in on him at once. He’s only managed to escape us by a hair. Every damn time. And it’s because we’ve been going in only half-cocked.”

Derek looked down at the table. “I’ll take some accountability for that.”

Ryder shook his head. “What’s done is done. Every mistake we’ve made has given us more information. We know his moves. We know he’s a sick motherfucker who won’t refrain from doing whatever possible to survive. We can beat him if we do it together.”

I nodded. “All right. So you’re telling me if he has Dani and you get to him first, you’re not going after him alone?” I was asking a tough question, one that could get me into a lot of shit with my President. But it needed to be asked. There was no sense in making a plan you were incapable of sticking to.

Ryder lifted his chin. “She knows what’s at stake. We’ve talked it through.”

I blinked at him. “So she’d be on her own with him until all of us showed?”

Dani answered for Ryder. “I would be. I could handle it. But we also expect everyone to know he’s out there and make sure they’re making smart decisions. No one should go out alone. Everyone should keep an eye out for him. We cannot, under any circumstance, give him the upper hand again. Make sense?”

I nodded. “Sure, but—”

Axel was shaking his head. “We have kids. If Isaac ever came anywhere near my family, I would not be able to wait for backup. There’s no way.”

“So you stay with your family, and you wait for us to call you with his whereabouts,” Dani said simply.

Axel opened his mouth to retort and promptly shut it again.

Dani looked around at everyone at the table. “That goes for all of you. Ryder and I would never ask you to sacrifice your family. On that note, we suggest you stay home with them until this is resolved.”

“Just stay home?” Sabian asked, sounding a little incredulous. “As in do nothing until you pin him down?”

“Yes,” Dani said.

Sabian looked around at the others but didn’t say anything.

Derek was rubbing the back of his neck. Then, he shrugged and said, “It makes sense. It’s not our usual style, but clearly, our usual style isn’t working. This eliminates the opportunity for him to get his hands on people we care about for leverage.”

“Exactly,” Dani nodded. “And at this point, we need to play defense. He’s a monster. He wants to hit us where it hurts. Let’s make it impossible for him to do so. Ryder and I are asking you to trust us to handle this. We’re not fucking around. We’re going to bring him down no matter what it takes.”

I nodded. “I’m in. And if you need anything, I’m your guy.”

“Thanks, Caleb,” Ryder said. Then, he clasped his hands and rested his chin on his knuckles. His eyes drifted over to

Derek, and he cleared his throat. “Moving on to the next matter of business. Derek, the information your friend Rhys gave us about Isaac’s name was accurate. How do you feel about him being back in town? I know we talked about it a little, but now that things have cooled down a bit, I want you to feel him out a bit more.”

“Feel him out?” Derek asked.

Ryder scratched his jaw. “Yes. Find out why he’s here. What does he want? A guy like that doesn’t just appear out of the blue at the most convenient time for you with the information we need to take the next step. He wants something. Find out what it is. Pressure him. Then, bring what you find out back to me. Got it?”

Derek nodded. “Yes.”

Ryder slumped back in his seat and deflated like a balloon. Now that all the Isaac-related shit was out in the open, and we all knew what was expected of us, it was clear he was done with the subject. I felt the same way. Isaac’s dark cloud had been looming over us for months. I was sick of having to look over my shoulder all the time. I was even more exasperated with being worried every time my phone rang—worried someone was calling to tell me we’d lost another friend.

Dani rose from her chair and shimmied behind me to the sliding door. She tugged it open and turned back to us. “Anyone want anything while I’m inside?”

We all shook our heads. We would not be asking Ryder’s pregnant woman to get us anything. We were too smart for that. He’d hang us on the back of his door and use us for target practice.

Dani slipped inside, and we heard her moving around in the kitchen. When she returned, she had a glass of lemon water in one hand and a bag of soda crackers in the other. She sat back down beside me and started nibbling on them. When she caught me watching her skeptically, she sipped her water and smiled at me. “This is about the only thing I can keep down at the moment.”

“Oh,” I said rather lamely.

She nodded. “It sucks. I’m craving burgers and fries and all things greasy, but it just comes right back up like clockwork.”

“Sexy,” Ryder winked at her.

Dani stuck her tongue out at him and continued eating her dry crackers.

Sabian stood up. “Well. All this has got me worried. I’m going home to Angela. I’m not trying to be a helicopter parent, but you lot should probably do the same.”

Ryder nodded around at all of us. “Sabian’s right. Get the hell out of here. Dani and I will keep you posted if there are any new developments. For the time being, keep your heads down. I’ll be letting the rest of the boys know the scoop.”

Over the next five minutes, everyone got up and left. All except for me. I stayed at the table with Dani, who gave me a supportive half smile and offered me some of her crackers. I laughed and shook my head. “I don’t need your pity crackers.”

Dani laughed and shrugged. “Carbs fix everything. At least, I thought they did.”

I got to my feet and cracked my back. Dani scrunched up her nose at that. “I don’t need fixing, Dani. But I appreciate the concern.”

She gave me a knowing smile, and I stole a cracker before leaving, just because. She didn’t say anything, but I knew she was sympathizing with me. I was the only one with no one to go home to protect.

As I let myself out, I tried to convince myself that was a good thing.

CHAPTER 4



LAURYN

The music was so loud, I could feel the base in the soles of my heels. It traveled up the length of my legs and pounded through my body like little electric jolts. It was probably the Zandra that helped me feel every vibration and cadence, and I let my body move to the rhythm without having to think about it.

My hips swayed from side to side as I turned in a slow circle on my platform. I dropped low and arched my spine as I crept back up, throwing my head back and sending my hair down my back.

Nearly twenty men were gathered around my platform looking up at me with adoration in their eyes. I met their gazes and batted my eyelashes. I spun and twirled and touched my body, playing with all the places I knew they ached to see. I ran my hands up my thighs and let one rest between my legs on top of the thin fabric of my G-string as I ran my other hand through my hair, shaking it out. The strobe lights winked all around me, and I knew how good I looked.

I had no sense of how long I'd been dancing. For all I knew, it had been hours. It only felt like minutes. Zandra had a funny way of doing that to me. When I was high, my shifts blew by because of how much fun I had. My glittery black money box was sitting on the ledge, and men were cramming bills inside it for me. A few women did, too, and I blew them all kisses every time.

I wondered how much I'd pulled in so far. It was hard to keep track when my mind was all fuzzy like this, but I was

guessing I was sitting around four hundred dollars or so. If I could get a couple hundred more before the end of the night, I would consider this shift a win, and I would have enough to at least get Jayden on the hockey team. I could worry about purchasing all his gear over the next couple weeks leading up to his first practice.

A handsome guy in a gray suit stopped at the front of my platform and looked up at me. He had short blond hair and was clean-shaven. The way he was dressed suggested he was in business of some sort, and he looked like he was dripping in money. A snazzy watch flashed on his left wrist, and he had diamond earrings in both earlobes. His smile was pure sex as he pulled out his wallet and tucked a hundred-dollar bill in my box.

I went down to my knees and moved toward him.

I was a smart girl, and I wasn't too proud to show my gratitude with my body. I couldn't touch him, but I could give him a small personal show to say thank you for his generosity. When I was right in front of him, I flipped my hair over and lifted myself up. I used my knees to grind against the floor and arched my back, flexing my core muscles. I knew his eyes were on me—as were those of everyone else in the vicinity—and I laid it all out on the platform for him.

When I was done, he flashed me a very wide smile and mouthed the words, "I'll be back for you."

It was common that most men thought I was single. My job probably confused them. Why would a girl like me, who does what I do, ever go home to another man at night?

Sometimes, I wondered the same thing. But Cliff paid half our rent, and he was a big, strong guy who helped keep the riffraff out. I didn't live in the nicest part of the city, and I felt safer having him around for me and Jayden. Cliff knew how I felt, and he did protect us. He'd had to scare off some unsavory looking folks before, and it would have been an entirely different story if he hadn't been there. It would have been just me and Jayden. I didn't like to think about how badly it could have gone.

When Kadia started winding down, I had collected at least another two hundred dollars. My muscles were sore, and I was tired when the house lights flickered on. I straightened and waved goodbye to the men who had still been hanging around my platform. They waved back, some of them looking stupid drunk, and I collected my cashbox and hurried down the stairs off the back of my platform. My knees felt a little wobbly from all the dancing and strain I'd put on them, and the Zandra had worn off over the last hour, making my whole body feel like lead.

I pushed in through the saloon doors to the back room where the other girls were.

Sadie was dragging a makeup wipe over her face, pulling pink lipstick and black mascara all down her cheek. She folded the sheet up and wiped again as she looked over at me. "Hey, girl. How'd you do? I was watching you whenever I had the chance. Looks like you killed it tonight."

I dropped down into my chair at my vanity station and set my cashbox in front of me. I was trembling with anticipation. This was the best part of the night: counting the cash. I flipped the lid open and stared down at all the bills.

"Holy shit," Cassidy breathed as she walked up behind me. "That's a lot of cash."

I started counting it out. When I was done, I folded it all up and set aside a hundred dollars. That was the cost of renting a dance platform at Kadia. We were given the option to pay monthly, but I preferred to just do it after every night. It was easier this way. And it guaranteed my position. With the hundred dollars removed, I had still earned over seven hundred. A good night for sure. I bundled it up and tucked it in my purse.

Milly was stripping out of her outfit and swapping it for a pair of jeans and a pullover. As she zipped up her fly, she said, "You should know, Lauryn, Cliff was calling for you tonight. I came back here on my smoke break, and he was on the line with Jack."

I groaned. "Did you hear what he was saying?"

Milly shrugged. “Not really. But Jack didn’t sound too thrilled to be having the conversation. Sounded to me like he was checking in on you to make sure you weren’t, you know, getting too intimate with the clientele.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I growled as I fished out a hair tie from my makeup bag and gathered my hair into a ponytail. “He’s such a fucking ass. He always does this. And I’ve never cheated on him. I don’t know where he gets off being such a jealous prick.”

“Men,” Sadie shrugged.

Cassidy frowned. “Not all men. My Leo doesn’t call to check in on me like Cliff does. He knows this is my job, and he treats it as such. He’s a restaurant manager. He works with super hot women all day, and I don’t check in on him either. You need to evaluate if he’s worth it, Lauryn. Everything I know about him doesn’t paint a pretty picture.”

I opened my bag and got out my change of clothes, leggings, a knit blue sweater, and my sneakers. I started changing. “You don’t actually know him, though.”

“No, I don’t,” Cassidy said.

“So you can’t really judge me for being with him,” I said. I knew I was being defensive, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t like people criticizing my decisions. They didn’t know what my life was like, and I didn’t need their approval.

Cassidy blinked at me. “I wasn’t judging you. I’m sorry. I should never have said anything. It’s none of my business.”

I sighed after tying up my sneakers. “It’s all right. You’re just trying to help.”

Cassidy slung her bag over her shoulder and put her hand on my arm on her way out. “You know we only care about you. See you tomorrow night, girl. Text me when you get home to let me know you’re safe.”

“I will.” I smiled.

Then, I finished packing up my things. I chatted with Milly and Sadie as we all headed out of the back room and left the

club. We stepped out into the chilly night air and all went our separate ways. I walked down the block to the bus stop and waited ten minutes for my bus. Then, I got on and sat in the back with my headphones on and rode home.

Cliff would never let me take his truck to work because he didn't want it parked downtown. He was worried someone might key it or something. But he wasn't worried about me traveling at two in the morning on transit.

The bus dropped me off, and I walked another five minutes to my apartment building. I went in and rode the elevator up to the sixth floor. My eyes were heavy as I unlocked the door and slipped inside.

I could smell the chili Jayden would have warmed up for dinner. I inhaled deeply, and my stomach grumbled. I was too tired to eat.

I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth and took off my makeup. Then, I braided my hair so it wouldn't get all tangled while I slept and padded down the hall to Jayden's bedroom. I pushed his door open and went to sit on the edge of his bed under the twinkling lamp that cast slowly turning stars on his ceiling.

I ran my fingers through his hair and just sat with him for five minutes or so before leaning over to plant a kiss on his forehead. Then, I got up, the bed creaking softly as I left, and went back down the hall to my bedroom.

Cliff was snoring in bed. He was lying right smack in the middle with his arms wrapped around my pillow. I sighed and stripped out of my leggings and sweater. I changed into an oversized T-shirt and some cotton shorts and climbed under the covers.

The nights were definitely getting colder. I had to tug the blanket out from under Cliff and curled myself up in it. I claimed the corner of my pillow he wasn't hogging and nuzzled my cheek into its softness.

I lay there perfectly still until a sense of calm set in.

This life was not the one I'd dreamed of having when I was a little girl. Hell, it wasn't the one I dreamed of having now. I never saw myself as an erotic dancer and a mother at the same time. I thought one would follow the other and the child would have come after the dancing. I imagined being able to stay home with Jayden during his young years. I dreamed of being able to give him a sibling so he would always have someone to play with in the cul-de-sac of the house I could never afford.

I bit down on my bottom lip as emotions started swirling within me.

Cliff's snoring only made me more frustrated and reminded me every ten seconds that I was with the wrong man. I was with someone I didn't love, and I knew he didn't love me either. We were together simply because it was easier than being alone. When we craved sex, we had each other. But for everything else we were distant. It was killing me. I needed tenderness and someone to hold me like they never wanted to let me go.

I wanted someone to take care of me the way I took care of Cliff and Jayden.

I'd been alone too long, and it was eating me up from the inside out.

I fell asleep wishing I had Zandra in my nightstand. Maybe I could give Cliff some cash so he could pick some up for me tomorrow.

CHAPTER 5



CALEB

Saturdays at Kadia were always a shit show. It was the one night of the week that all security staff was on shift, and we had two bouncers on each door. Since the nightmare in the alley with Isaac and Evelyn and her friend Penny last month, I'd even put a guy at that back door. Ryder wasn't taking any risks, and neither was I. Not that I expected Isaac to show up at Kadia ever again, but he'd surprised me before.

And I was done with surprises. The only surprise I wanted in my future was the gender of Ryder and Dani's child. Even that was too much to wrap my head around right now.

A couple of the dancers arrived and went straight toward the bar. I knew both of them. Their names were Sadie and Milly, and they did everything together. The bartender, Samuel, mixed them each a drink and passed it over the bar to them. They thanked him and sipped on their cocktails as they made their way to the back room to start getting ready for their show.

Lauryn came in shortly after that. I was standing near the back door and watched as she walked from the front doors to the back room. She didn't stop for a drink. She had a water bottle in one hand and her bag in the other. Her headphones were in, and she walked with purpose, never looking away from her destination.

She had long legs and thick, voluminous auburn hair. Her hazel eyes were almost gold under the brightness of the house lights, and I could see her freckles decorating her skin. She

was a total bombshell, and I'd always thought so. It was no wonder she made a killing dancing for us on weekends.

When she disappeared through the saloon door to the back room, I sighed and started walking around to make sure everything was in order for the night. Saturdays were the most dreaded day of the week for me.

It was a half hour to opening, and I was making my rounds to talk to my team about what to be on the lookout for when a couple of cops showed up. I walked over to them and introduced myself, trying to nip in the bud whatever the fuck was going on.

"Hey, I'm Caleb, head of security here. Something I can help you with, officers?" I asked, extending my hand to the big, bald guy first.

The guy shook it and looked me up and down. "We're looking for Mr. Carrington. Can you grab him for us? We're just following up on an investigation of private matters."

Fredrick Carrington was the previous owner of Kadia. After a long few weeks of losing his fucking mind, he decided he was finally done with the nightclub business. His daughter had been kidnapped, taken by the mafia in town.

Damn Bertinelli's. Someone should have put them in their place, but it wasn't my fight. My MC getting wrapped up in the underbelly of New York was out. That was one thing we *all* agreed upon.

I was sad to see Fredrick go. He was laid back and hands off. The new owner was a guy from Chicago. DeMarco something or other. We hadn't met him or his lead man, Marcus Blaine, but we would be when the time was right.

"He retired boys." I shrugged and tried to relax. Cops always put me on edge.

"Did he now." The other cop glanced at his friend and back at me. "Who's in management right now?"

"I'm the highest you're going to get on the totem pole at the moment. What can I do for you?" I slipped my hands into my pockets and kept my eyes locked on the guys.

The cops glanced over at each other, both of them too damn young to be partners. What was the force thinking? That needed an older guy in one of the positions. Dumb asses.

“Alright,” the first one murmured and pulled a pad out of his back pocket. “A while back, there was a death in the basement.”

“Several.” I nodded. “It was a drug that was laced with something. Not much we can do about that, guys.” I pointed to the metal detector hidden in the top of the entrance door. “I can tell if you’re packing heat quietly, but that thing doesn’t scan for drugs. Most of the bad guys in this city don’t go to the library to do their business.”

“What are you doing to stop this from happening again?” The other cop spoke up, his voice wavering a little.

I would have given them an E for effort.

“This is the most popular club in New York City, you can see why it’s a pain in the ass to eliminate it altogether. But we’re better now than we used to be. There’s not much we can do, honestly. We have upped our security in the club, and we watch the patrons pretty damn close, but Zandra is the latest rave, which I know you know. It keeps popping up. People love the shit.”

The first cop chuckled, surprising me a little. “Can you blame them?”

“No. I can see why the effects would be desirable.”

“You’ve never tried it?” the other cop asked.

I shook my head. “Not interested.”

“Good,” the first cop said and nodded approvingly. “We’re just going to look around. We’ll be as conspicuous as possible.”

“Those uniforms aren’t going to allow for that.” I smirked. Idiots. “But, do what you need to do.”

“Hey. Who’s the new owner?” the first cop asked.

“Some big wig up in Chicago. We’re supposed to have the final turn over later this month.”

“You know his name?”

“Nope, and until I have to? I don’t want to.” I smiled and turned, ready to move away from them and deeper into my night. No fucking way I was spilling anything to the boys in blue. They wanted information, they’d have to figure it out on their own.

I turned and walked over to the bar once they’d left. Samuel was wiping everything down and prepping his pouring mats for the night. He had made sure all his liquor bottles were full and his limes were all prepped. He had his straws stocked, his glassware ready to go, and the rest of his garnishes looked to be filled to the brim as well.

He grabbed me a glass of water and placed it in front of me. “What the hell are those cops doing in here?”

I took a sip of water. “You know Fredrick had some trouble a few months back with Kadia, then the shit with Aria.”

“Aria? His kid?”

I snorted. “She’s not a kid anymore, but yeah. Everything is cool now, but I’m sure these guys are snooping around due to him getting caught up in a bit too much lately.” I shrugged. It wasn’t my business, and I was grateful for that shit.

“Is that why he retired?” Samuel leaned against the bar and watched me.

“No clue. Don’t know and I don’t care to know.”

“Easy enough I guess.” He smiled. “How is the Zandra problem going?”

“Problem? There’s really not a problem. The drug is powerful and fun, a lot like ecstasy.” I crossed my arms over my chest and glanced around. “It’s always going to be part of the night club scene. Drugs that is. This one is just in the spotlight right now.”

Samuel chuckled and shook his head. “Good luck with that, man. Those chicks pop half a capsule every night these days. They claim it makes it easier for them to get into their dance and not think about how many people are watching them.”

“I believe that.”

Samuel moved back and rolled his shoulders. “I suppose I do, too, but that shit will fuck you up. And every damn night? I don’t know. You might be coming up against a brick wall if you go back there, bro.”

I scratched my jaw. Stubble whispered against my fingertips. I needed to shave. “Maybe. But the alternative is they go dance somewhere else, and they won’t make the sort of cash they do here. They’re smart girls. They’ll see reason. If they want to use, they can, just not while they’re here.”

Samuel chuckled. “All right. You see how that goes.”

I sipped more of my water, and Samuel wiped the bar down mindlessly again. Then, he glanced up at me. “How’s that Hillary chick doing that you were seeing? I haven’t seen her around lately, and she was popping by every weekend.”

I sighed. I wished I’d never brought her around. Everyone was always asking about her, and I was sick and tired of having to tell people we were over. “That sort of fizzled out and died a couple weeks ago.”

“Oh sorry, man. She was fine as hell. That ass—” he stopped talking and blinked, realizing he’d just overstepped. “My bad.”

I smirked. “It’s fine.”

Samuel and a lot of the guys on my security team knew I was a Lost Breed member. They also knew I wasn’t to be fucked with, and talking about how hot my ex was fell under the “fucking with” category. Lucky for Samuel, I had the patience of a saint, and it took a lot to get me angry.

Which was a very good thing because when I was angry, shit got real too fast, and things happened that I couldn’t control.

Samuel smiled sheepishly and flipped his rag onto his shoulder. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on the bar. “So you’re heading back there now to talk to them?”

I nodded. “No better time than the present. Right?”

Samuel chuckled. “By now, they’ve all probably popped their half a tab, man.”

“Fuck.”

“You know, if I’m being honest, I’d do the same thing. There’s no way I could get up and do what those girls do without a little help from a certain inhibition freeing substance.”

“Nobody would want you to get up there in a thong and bralette, Samuel. It would be bad for business.”

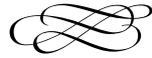
Samuel laughed. “Yeah, fuck you, too, Caleb.”

I chuckled and finished the rest of my water before sliding him the empty glass. Then, I walked around the bar and headed for the saloon door. The girls may not want to hear what I had to say, but it had to be said anyway. Truth be told, I kind of wished I’d taken initiative and handled this before now.

At least then, it might have been easier to get them to stop using.

Maybe.

CHAPTER 6



LAURYN

I dropped my bag beside my vanity and fell into the chair with a huff.

Milly and Cassidy were already there getting ready, and they both shot me a nervous look as they shrugged into their outfits. Cassidy was stepping into a skin-tight bodysuit that was a brilliant shade of royal blue. It was covered in sparkling rhinestones along the collar and hips. She put her hand on her waist. “Is everything okay, Lauryn?”

I nodded and then shook my head. “No. I got in another fight with Cliff. I know you guys are sick of listening to me go on about him. He can just be such an ass sometimes.”

Cassidy pulled up a chair beside me. “What has he done this time?”

“Where do I start?” I groaned as I ran my hands down my face.

Milly pulled up the chair on my other side. “You don’t have to get into it right now if you’re not feeling up to it, sweetheart. But we’re here to listen if you need us.”

I leaned down and rummaged through my bag just as Sadie came through the door. She came up behind us, and both Milly and Cassidy gave her a look that warned her something was up. She put her stuff down at her vanity and turned back to us as I found what I was looking for, a small aspirin container. I pulled it out and popped the top off.

“What’s going on, you guys?” Sadie asked.

I peered down into the bottle. I'd taken it from Cliff when I was getting ready to leave for work. He'd been in a pissy mood about it and said he needed the Zandra for some of his other clients because he was short on cash. I told him I'd cover the price, which he said was a whopping hundred bucks. I'd promised him the money when I got back from work. I needed the high. Simple as that.

There were six blue pills rattling around in the bottom.

I poured two out and put them on my vanity counter. Sadie fished a small blade out of her bag and handed it to me. I cut the pills down the middle and passed out a half to all the girls, who thanked me.

"How much do we owe you, Lauryn?" Milly asked. She knew Zandra from Cliff never came free.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. You girls have hooked me up enough times. I can return the favor. This is a new supply. He says it's a little stronger than what we've done before, but he says we'll all be fine with half a tablet each."

Cassidy stared down at the little powder blue tablet. "You're sure?"

I nodded. "Positive." I popped the pill in my mouth and washed it down with a sip of water. "As long as you stay hydrated throughout the night, you'll be good. Bring a bottle of water up to your platform if you have to."

The girls took their tablets as well.

"So," Cassidy said slowly, "what's going on with Cliff?"

The Zandra hadn't hit me yet, but I already felt better knowing it was about to. "He's just a piece of shit, you know? Before I left for work yesterday, I whipped up some chili for Jayden. It's his favorite, and now that it's fall, I figured I'd make him a batch to warm up out of the freezer when I'm working. Turns out Cliff ate his dinner and Jayden was left with the sandwich I'd made for Cliff. He's just such a selfish bastard. When I confronted him—" I stopped talking and shook my head. The girls didn't need to know quite how bad

things could get sometimes between me and Cliff. “When I confronted him, he got angry, and we had a screaming match.”

I stood up and rifled through my bag. I pulled out my outfit. Today, I was wearing one of my favorites. It was technically a swimsuit, but nobody could ever tell the difference. The top tied behind my neck and was semi-sheer except for the nipples, which had padding over them. Sometimes, if I was feeling up to it, I would take the padding out. I made a lot of money those nights. The bottoms were Brazilian-style, so they showed my ass and almost all my lady bits. I had decorated the suit with gold gems and fixed matching gold chains to the string between my breasts. I’d attached those to my hips, so the chains hung down my belly and over my waist. The effect was sexy, and I always felt like a million bucks in this outfit.

I got naked and pulled the suit on.

Sadie was stripping as well and putting on her outfit. She tossed her blond hair over her shoulder. “I’m sorry you have to deal with him, Lauryn. He really doesn’t seem to understand that Jayden is your number one priority.”

“Nope. And he never will,” I grumbled.

“You’re willing to put up with that?” Milly asked.

I shrugged. “For now. Yeah. I don’t have any other options. You know how shitty the area is that I live. I need Cliff around, plain and simple.”

“You could stay with Cassidy and me until you’re on your feet,” Milly offered. She was smiling sweetly as she plugged in her curling iron. “We don’t have a ton of space, but we could make it work for a little while. We’re family. You know?”

Had the Zandra not started working its magic, I would have started crying about her offer. I shook my head. “No. But thank you. I can do this on my own.”

“If things change, the offer still stands,” Cassidy said. Milly nodded her agreement.

“What on earth would I do without friends like you?” I said.

“You’d probably do less Zandra,” Sadie snickered.

I rolled my eyes. That was probably true. Sometimes, they could be a bad influence. And other times, like tonight, I was the bad influence. In the end, we probably all evened each other out.

I sat back down in front of my mirror and rummaged through my makeup bag. I started applying my foundation. “Zandra is fun.”

“No arguments there,” Sadie grinned.

“Feeling good?” I asked.

“I feel like there’s a really sexy guy rubbing his hands all over me.” Sadie giggled.

I laughed and so did the others. This shit was potent, and I was feeling great. My body was singing sweet praises, and my mind was taking a back seat. Soon, I’d be out there doing my thing, all this shit with Cliff would be way in the background, and I could deal with it later. Or never.

I borrowed Sadie’s curling iron and did my hair. I doused it in hairspray and let the curls sit as I painted my lips a dark shade of purple. I liked to change up my look every night. People didn’t give me money to show up wearing the same outfit as the previous night. The other girls had their go-to looks, and I’d tried to talk them into changing it up, but they liked what they liked. There was no sense arguing with them.

I did a dark smoky eyeshadow and put purple stick-on crystals along my cheekbones. When I was done, I leaned back and admired myself.

The music was starting to play out front when the saloon doors swung open. All of us looked over our shoulders to see Caleb, the head of security and a total stud, walk into our prep room.

He was dressed in his usual black pants and T-shirt. He had a black watch on and an earpiece in his right ear. He looked

around at all of us and said, in his deep, buttery voice, “Ladies.”

We all giggled. Damn the Zandra.

He knew what was up and sighed. He shook his head as he walked deeper into the room. Then, he took an open chair and dragged it between our vanities. Sadie and I were on one side, and Milly and Cassidy were on the other. He sat facing the back of his chair with his legs on either side. His forearms were on display when he draped them over the back of the chair. It took all the willpower I possessed to keep from drooling over the veins in his muscled arms.

Caleb looked at all of us. “We need to have a conversation.”

“Oh?” Sadie asked innocently. I noticed how she pushed up her tits and cocked her head to one side. She also batted her eyelashes at him. I couldn’t blame her. Caleb was one of—no, correction—he was *the* hottest man I’d ever laid eyes on. But he was so out of my league. Sadie crossed one leg over the other. “What conversation would that be, handsome?”

Caleb offered her a panty-soaking smile. “All this Zandra the four of you are taking every night. It needs to stop. The cops are all over this shit right now.”

I blinked and hoped he didn’t notice my shell-shocked expression. He wanted us to stop using? How the hell was I going to pull that off? Zandra was the only thing that made all the shit in my life okay. Except for Jayden. But he wasn’t here right now. He was far, far away, and I was so alone.

Luckily, Cassidy spoke up for me. “Has someone said something?”

Caleb nodded. “Yes. Cops have girls. I want you all clean. It’s fucking dangerous. I worry about you four.” His gaze drifted over to me when he said that last part, and I blushed.

I looked down at my lap as Sadie moaned. “We can’t just keep it our little secret, Caleb? You know that half a tablet does wonders for us girls. It helps us loosen up, and the looser we are, the more money we make. You know?”

Caleb nodded. "I know. I get it. But the four of you don't need a drug to look sexy up there. Besides, this isn't really a conversation. This is me telling you the rules going forward. I want you off of it. Period. Are we on the same page or not?"

Sadie pouted but nodded anyway. "Yes."

Milly and Cassidy nodded as well.

Caleb turned his attention to me. "Lauryn? Is this going to be a problem?"

I shook my head. "No. I have it under control."

"Good," he said. Then, he tipped his head to the door. "Now, get your asses out there. There are some impatient motherfuckers hovering around your platforms."

We all got to our feet, and I went to my bag to get my shoes. The other girls hurried out, leaving me alone with Caleb. He stayed where he was, his arms still draped over the back of the chair, and watched me as I stepped into my strappy purple heels and did up the buckles.

"How the fuck do you walk in those things?" he muttered.

I glanced over at him as I straightened up. "Practice, I guess."

God, the way he was looking at me was criminal. His brown hair hung just over his eyebrows and dangled above his dark lashes that framed his baby blue eyes. He was the sort of guy who looked like he belonged in movies, not kicking assholes out of Kadia for feeling up women or causing a scene.

The fact that I'd seen him in action during a fight also contributed to how flustered he made me. He fought like an animal, and he was well-trained. Every person who worked at Kadia knew Caleb was not the guy to pick a fight with because he'd have you flat on your back faster than you could process you were even in a fight.

I'd let him put me on my back any time.

I blinked and shook my head. He was staring at me. "Sorry," I said hurriedly. "I zoned out."

I made to go by him, and he stood. His fingers wrapped around my elbow, and he stopped me from leaving. “Lauryn. I’m going to keep my eyes on you. I don’t want you getting on the bad side of the new management. I know you need this job. Truth be told, it wouldn’t be the same if you weren’t here. So don’t make my job any harder than it already is, all right?”

I nodded. “I hear you loud and clear.” That was when I noticed I’d put my hand on his chest. His pec was taut and firm beneath my palm, and the air around us was suddenly sizzling and popping with chemistry. I let my hand fall to my side and gave him a tight-lipped smile. “See you out there, boss.”

Caleb let go of my elbow, and I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked away. Or he was looking at my ass. I’d never know.

Part of me hoped he’d been checking me out, and I also hoped he didn’t know how high I was right now. What he didn’t know wouldn’t kill him, and if I could play it cool and keep my shit together, I could have the best of both worlds.

CHAPTER 7



CALEB

I waited until the sound of Lauryn's heels clicking on the tiles faded away, and I was left alone in the back room. I looked around at all the makeup and girly shit surrounding me and wondered how much Zandra I might find if I was the sort of guy to go rummaging through their things.

I shook my head. I was not that sort of guy.

Lauryn had been high as a kite throughout our entire conversation, and I knew I was going to have to talk to her again when she was of rational mind. Samuel had been right. The girls had popped their tablets before I made it to them, and they'd all been staring at me like I was a piece of meat.

I knew what Zandra did to a person. I wasn't stupid. The whole thing bothered me. I couldn't help but think it was a way for women like our dancers to make bad decisions and end up with bad men who would take advantage of their irrational state of mind. Zandra made you crave the touch of another person like you craved water after walking for days through a desert. It wasn't safe.

I raked my fingers through my hair and turned back to head out to the floor.

When I pushed through the saloon doors, the music met my ears. The club was filling up fast, and people were already crowding the bars. A few tables had been claimed, and a server was leading a VIP party to the private section up the stairs and to the back. She gave me a sweet smile as she

passed, and I nodded my head to her as I wove through tables and cut across the dance floor.

Nobody was dancing yet, but it was only a matter of time.

I avoided looking at Lauryn until I knew she wouldn't be able to see me. I stopped when I was by the emergency exit door and put my back to it. I sought her out and found her standing on her platform. She'd pulled on a pair of black gloves that went up to her elbows, and she was playfully snapping the waistband of her bottoms at a guy who was staring up at her like a drooling puppy dog. I knew how he felt.

Lauryn was the sort of girl who turned heads no matter what room she walked into. Her tanned skin and auburn hair gave her a golden look, and her hazel eyes only emphasized that. She was a combination of parts you didn't see in one woman. The freckles and the upturned nose and full lips made a man question everything. She was perfection.

And the way she moved.

God.

It was pure madness.

I'd never met a woman who could move her body the way Lauryn did. She was a siren, hell-bent on bringing men to their knees all around her. How I'd managed not to fall for her song, I had no idea.

Then again, maybe I'd fallen a little.

When she was working, she was constantly on my mind. My gaze managed to drift over in her direction every couple of minutes, and she was the one I felt most concerned about protecting, which was strange because our girls were always very safe. Our patrons knew the rules and never broke them. Kadia was too upscale, and if you were kicked out once, you were kicked out for life. Lauryn was safe here, yet if a fight was to ever occur, I sought her out first to make sure she was far from the fray.

I was losing my edge.

Someone cleared their throat next to me, and I glanced over to find Jack, one of the newer guys on my security team, standing beside me. He nodded over at Lauryn, who was doing a slow sensual dance on her platform. “She’s hard to look away from, huh?” he asked.

I nodded. Jack and I had worked a few shifts together already, and we’d become fast friends. He was friendly enough and vigilant. He never missed a red flag and had already caught a couple guys trying to smuggle coke into the bathrooms. “She’s something else, that’s for sure. Don’t tell her I said that. I’d never live it down.”

Jack chuckled. “Your secret is safe with me.”

I surveyed the room, keeping my eyes peeled for any funny business. Luckily enough, we were able to put down anything that rose up too high or too quickly, but it took effort.

“You’re here for the rest of the night. Let me know when you want to take your break, and I’ll relieve you,” I said, tapping my earpiece.

I walked over to the bar where Samuel was pouring drinks. He had a second bartender helping him now, so he was able to look up at me when I planted myself at the mouth of the bar where people could slip in behind it.

“How’s it going boss?” he called over the music.

I shrugged.

Samuel grinned. “That good?”

“Nose down,” I said.

Samuel sniggered and went about mixing drinks as I surveyed the bar. From here, I could see everything. Including Lauryn.

She had her back to me. She was swinging her hips from side to side as the music quickened in pace, and the gold chains hanging down her thighs danced across her perfect skin. There had been many times where I caught myself thinking about what it would feel like to run my hand up those legs of hers.

I wanted to know what she smelled like, what she tasted like. I wanted to pull her close against me and feel the heat of her body against mine. I ached to kiss those full lips of hers and suckle on her tongue.

I shook my head and forced myself to look elsewhere. I'd never been this caught up in thoughts about her before. It must have been because my breakup with Hillary was still kind of fresh, and I was feeling particularly lonely in the aftermath. The shit with the Lost Breed wasn't helping, and I was probably lusting for human connection more than just sex.

Although some sex would be a nice release.

I growled at myself. Now, I was thinking about fucking Lauryn, and my cock was twitching in my pants. This was just what I fucking needed. A hard-on when I was at work. I wished at times she *didn't* fucking work there, but no...Lauryn needed this job more than most.

I knew she had a little boy to care for. I also knew she had a deadbeat boyfriend who was weighing her down. I'd tried on more than one occasion to have the conversation with her, but she shot me down every time. I understood why. Talking about personal shit was never pleasant, especially when it was with a guy who was technically your boss for the time being.

But I thought we were more than that.

We'd always had a connection I couldn't quite put a finger on ever since she'd started dancing at Kadia two or three years ago. We'd hit it off right away and used to spend our breaks together. Then, she got together with Cliff, and something about her changed. A bit of her confidence slipped away, and before I had a chance to stop it, I found out she was using Zandra.

I hated that I couldn't get her to stop.

I knew it wasn't my responsibility. She was free to make her own choices, but I couldn't help that it bothered me. I couldn't understand it. Couldn't rationalize it. If she was unhappy with Cliff, she should leave him. I could help her. She knew I would.

Didn't she?

I sighed and slipped out from behind the bar to move to my next station. I stood at the opening to the hallway that led to the bathrooms. I nodded at guests who slipped by me. I was more of a deterrent than anything else. No shit had gone down at Kadia since that night in the alley with Isaac and poor Evelyn.

I'd dropped the ball that night. Luckily, I still had my job.

Nothing like that would ever happen here again. That motherfucker wouldn't set foot in my club without me knowing about it.

This DeMarco guy might be the new owner of Kadia, but the place was mine to protect. She had been for as long as I'd been working here, and all her patrons and employees were my responsibility as well. I made a difference in this place. I kept out the riffraff and protected the good people from the bad people.

And if I had to protect Lauryn from herself, then so fucking be it.

CHAPTER 8



LAURYN

The alarm on my phone went off at six thirty in the morning on Monday. I groaned and reached for my nightstand, feeling around for my phone with my fingers until I found it and shut off the alarm. I left my phone there and rubbed at my eyes. I was so tired, it felt impossible to open them.

When I did manage to open my eyes, my ceiling was spinning. I was sore from the weekend of work at Kadia and a little from coming down off Zandra. The stuff I'd taken last night had most definitely been stronger than what I was used to.

I sighed and slowly sat up. The room tipped and spun some more, and I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for it to pass. Cliff was sleeping on his side of the bed, snoring as usual. He was flat on his back with one hand dangling off the side of the bed.

I watched him sleep for a couple of minutes as I waited for my fat head to feel a little more normal. He had a few days growth of a beard on his jaw and neck, and his hair was an oily mess. I wondered how long it had been since he'd showered. He was wearing the same shirt he'd had on when I left for work the night before—when we got into our argument. Chances were high that he'd lain around on the sofa all night watching television while Jayden played in his room. My son probably put himself to bed.

I pushed myself up and got my robe off the back of my bedroom door. I wrapped it around myself and padded quietly down the hall to the bathroom where I went about my morning

routine. I relieved my bladder, showered, and brushed my teeth. Then, I went back to the bedroom and dressed in my favorite pair of worn, ripped up jeans, and a gray T-shirt. I left my hair wrapped up in my towel as I went to wake Jayden up.

He was much more of a morning person than me. When I knocked on his door, he called for me to come in. He was lying in bed but wide awake as I suspected he'd be. He gave me a bright smile. "Good morning, Mom."

"Morning, kiddo," I said, going to his window and cranking open the blinds. It was a gray day outside, but the light still shined in and brightened the room up.

Jayden shielded his eyes and propped himself up on his elbows.

"Time to get up, kiddo. Come on. Let's get you dressed."

Jayden slid out of bed and landed heavily on his heels. He came over to me as I opened drawers in his dresser and started holding up clothing options. I picked up a pair of jeans and held them out to him. He shook his head. "Not today."

"Okay," I said, and I rummaged through more pants until I found a pair of khakis I knew he loved. "How about these? The perfect Monday pants."

Jayden nodded. "Okay."

I handed them to him, and he started getting dressed as I picked out his polo shirt. He had preppy tastes, which I thought was adorable. I had no clue where he got it from. It definitely wasn't from me. I gravitated to bright colors and obnoxious prints.

Once he was dressed, we went into the kitchen. I started a pot of coffee for myself and poured Jayden a cup of orange juice. He brought it to the kitchen table and sat down as I put some bread in the toaster. I grabbed us each a plate and put peanut butter and jam on the table. There was never any knowing what mood Jayden would be in, so I liked to give him options in the morning.

When the toast popped, I brought over his plate. He went for the peanut butter and spread it over his toast before taking

a bite. He smeared it on his cheeks as I put jam on mine and waited impatiently for my coffee.

“Are you looking forward to school today?” I asked.

Jayden nodded. “Yep. We have career day today.”

“Career day?”

Jayden took another bite of toast and chewed and swallowed before answering. I’d taught him well. “Yeah. Mrs. Brown said she has a presentation for us about careers.”

“You’re seven,” I said flatly. How on earth was he supposed to know what career he wanted? And why was the school system trying to push it on him that such a big decision was in his future?

“I know,” Jayden said with a crooked smile. He finished his toast as I got up and poured myself my coffee. I stirred in my cream and sugar as he started talking. “But I think it will be fun. I hope we talk about astronauts and firemen. I don’t know which one I want to be, and it would help me decide.”

“Oooh. I see.” I hid my smirk from him by ducking down to put the cream back in the fridge. When I popped back up, my expression was a mask of seriousness. “Well, I hope Mrs. Brown features both options. I could see you doing either and being excellent at it. But I think I’d rather you be a fireman.”

“Why?”

“Because if you’re an astronaut, you have to leave earth. You know I’d miss you so much, and you’d be so far away.”

“I’d come back.” Jayden giggled.

“You’d better,” I teased.

Jayden snorted into his orange juice, and we both giggled. Sometimes, I didn’t know who was the bigger child, me or my son. I liked it that way. He made me laugh a lot, more than anyone else I knew. He was the light of my life.

Even though he’d been a bit of a surprise and his father had skipped out when he found out I was pregnant, I had no regrets. There was nothing on this planet more precious to me

than Jayden, and he'd taught me what it really meant to love someone. He took care of me, and I took care of him. We made a great team. Sometimes too great.

I knew he wasn't supposed to be taking care of me.

"Well, kiddo, should we get your teeth brushed? If you go do that, I'll throw your lunch together, and we'll hit the road."

Jayden slid off his chair. "Thanks for breakfast, Mom!"

"You're welcome!" I called after him as he ran down the hall. He was such a heavy walker. He went heel first everywhere he went. That boy would never be able to sneak up on anyone. Not ever.

I set to packing his lunch. I made him a turkey sandwich and cut up some vegetables for him to have at first break. I also tossed two cookies and a water bottle in his lunch kit. When he came back into the kitchen, I was putting it in his backpack.

He beamed up at me. "I'm ready to go."

"Okay, go put your shoes on. I'm going to let Cliff know we're taking the truck."

I listened to Jayden go down the hall as I slipped back into my bedroom. Cliff was still sound asleep, snoring like a caveman, and I had to shake him roughly to wake him. When he came to, he shrugged me off and tried to roll over.

"Cliff, I'm sorry. I just wanted to let you know I'm taking the truck to bring Jayden to school. I know you wanted me to tell you when I—"

"Yeah, yeah," Cliff grumbled, rolling away from me. "Whatever. Just let me sleep, woman. And don't make any other stops on your way back. Don't need you putting a dent in my baby."

"I'm a better driver than you are," I said.

"Leave me alone, will you? I'm trying to fucking sleep. Close the door on your way out."

I marched out, ignoring the sting of his words. He never spoke to me in a kind or gentle way. He was forever annoyed with me for one thing or another, and no matter what I did, it wasn't enough. He once got mad at me for having dinner made for him when he came home from work one night because he felt obligated to sit and eat with me. Which apparently, he did not want to do. He'd wanted to sit alone on the sofa with a beer while I played with Jayden in his room so he could have "some damn peace and quiet for once."

Eventually, I'd stopped trying. There was no point in fighting him with everything anymore. I couldn't make him happy, so why waste energy I could spend on Jayden instead?

My son was waiting for me at the front door. He had his backpack on and was smiling patiently as I took the truck keys from the hook behind the door. "Let's go, kiddo."

We left the apartment and rode the elevator down to the underground parking. I helped Jayden up into the truck. It was lifted too high for him to manage on his own. He had to sit in the back seat due to the airbags, but he didn't seem to mind.

I started the truck up and pulled out of the underground.

The drive to school was less than ten minutes. When I pulled into a parking space, Jayden unclipped his seat belt and slid across the back seat to the door. I got out and went around to let him out. I set him down on the pavement and handed him his backpack before crouching down in front of him and fixing his hair and the collar of his shirt. "Now, you have a good day, okay? I'll be back to pick you up after school. I can't wait to hear about career day."

Jayden nodded and gave me the brightest smile ever. He threw his arms around my shoulders. "I will, Mom. I love you."

I hugged him back fiercely. "I love you, too, kiddo." Before he broke away, I planted a kiss on his cheek and then rose to my feet as he walked up the steps to the front door of the school. He turned back and waved, and I leaned up against the truck.

Sometimes, on the bad days, I didn't leave right away. Today was one of those days. I stayed there, leaning up against Cliff's precious truck, and wished I didn't have to go home. Anywhere was better than there when Jayden wasn't home.

Cliff would be lying in bed waiting for me to come home so he knew I wasn't out driving his truck around the city. Then, he'd sleep for a few more hours while I busied myself with cleaning. Then, around noon, he'd come out of our bedroom and make something to eat. Or he'd ask me to make it. I was in no mood to make him a sandwich today.

I just wanted to be alone.

Because even when I was alone, I didn't feel as lonely as I did when I was with Cliff.

CHAPTER 9



CALEB

I'd only been at the gym for about ten minutes when Derek showed up. I'd been helping Gemma, one of the girls who worked at the check-in desk, with her car. Her check engine light had come on, and after a quick look under the hood, I'd established that she was low on coolant. I warned her that driving could be dangerous because the car could overheat, and she'd had a friend deliver coolant to her. I topped it up for her at the same time Derek showed up for our workout.

Gemma thanked me, and Derek and I headed inside.

"You flirting with the gym girls now?" Derek asked as we put our shit away and headed to the weight rack.

"No. We all know that girl only has eyes for you, anyway. Ever since the whole shit show with Jason in the parking lot, she can't keep her eyes off you. She thinks you're James fucking Bond."

Derek chuckled. "Jealous?"

"Of you? Don't make me laugh," I said.

We pumped out a few sets to break a sweat and get ourselves warmed up. Then, we worked out for a good half hour without any breaks, each of us pushing the other to work harder and to suffer through the pain.

Before moving along to do some leg workouts, we stopped to have some water. "You talked to this Rhys guy yet like Ryder wanted?" I asked.

Derek nodded. "Yeah. I caught up with him on Sunday."

“And?” I asked.

Derek shrugged. “And it’s as I thought. He wants to join the Lost Breed. He and some of his guys from his old crew out in Chicago.”

“Why?”

“Because Isaac and his brother killed off half their club.”

“Fuck. Seriously?”

Derek nodded. “Yeah. At first, I thought he was just saying whatever he thought it would take for me to introduce him to Ryder. But I told Dani, and she ran the information through the NYPD database. The names Rhys gave me matched the ones she pulled up. And low and behold, they were members of his crew. Now, there are only him and three guys left.”

“And he wants to bring them all in with him?”

“Yes.”

“What did Ryder say? With everything going on, I can’t see him wanting to let strangers in, especially with Dani being pregnant and all.”

“I haven’t told Ryder everything yet. He wants me to keep in touch with Rhys and try to feel him out to see if I can catch him in any lies. I’m not opposed. At the same time, I’ve of the mind that we could use all the help we can get. I said that to Ryder, but he still wants to play it safe.”

“Fair enough. But you should tell him Rhys’s endgame is to join us. Otherwise, Ryder will figure it out on his own, and he’ll be pissed you didn’t tell him sooner.”

“I know.”

We worked our legs for the next half hour and didn’t talk more about Rhys. My mind was running a mile a minute with thoughts about him, and none of them were good. I had an itch I couldn’t scratch. It all seemed too convenient for Rhys to show up right now offering to help. This was the kind of shit that snuck up on people and got them in trouble. We were in enough trouble as it was.

We finished up at the gym and gathered our things. We said goodbye to Gemma, who gave Derek a flirty look when we passed her reception desk, and then pushed out through the doors and crossed the parking lot. Dimly, I speculated whether Derek still thought about the night Jason had shot him here.

We stopped at his truck, and he tossed his shit in the back. Then, he leaned against it and crossed his arms. “What do you think?” he asked. His brows were drawn together.

“About what?”

“About all of this.”

“All of this as in?”

“As in Isaac and Ryder’s plan to take him out. Well. Half a plan.”

I shrugged. “I think he’s right not to take any more risks. I think he and Dani know what they’re doing. I think you’re really asking me if I think it’s going to work or not.”

Derek shifted uncomfortably and nodded. “I am.”

I sighed and raked my fingers through my sweaty hair. “To be honest? I have no fucking clue, but I’m willing to give this my best shot. I’m sick of this shit, man. I’m sick of constantly fighting the impulse to call everyone and make sure you’re still breathing. It’s got to stop for the sake of my sanity.”

Derek nodded. “I get that.”

“Then, get home to your girl.”

Derek smiled faintly and pushed himself off his truck. “She’s at work right now.”

“How’s she doing, by the way?” I asked. Poor Evelyn. She’d been given quite the fright that night Isaac Reed broke into Derek’s house and tried to drown her in his bathtub. Derek had almost been too late to save her. Luckily, he’d arrived in the nick of time, and she was spared. Isaac had ended up shooting Jason instead, and the whole thing could have gone worse if I hadn’t shown up and spooked him.

I had a very vivid picture in my mind of how Evelyn had looked when I came to find her alone in the bathroom. Derek had taken off after Isaac, and in her state of fear, she'd pressed herself between the wall and the toilet. She was soaking wet, and her skin was spotted in watered down blood from Jason's body. I'd never seen a woman look so terrified.

Derek fished his keys out of his pocket. "She's better and better every day. There are still some mountains to climb, but she'll get there. I've been considering selling the house and moving somewhere else. Somewhere that doesn't have those memories. They haunt her all the time. She hates going into that fucking bathroom."

"I don't blame her. She almost died in there."

Derek nodded. "Yeah."

I chuckled and shook my head. "You'd buy a new house for this girl? She must be pretty special."

Derek smirked. "I'd marry her right now if I knew that's what she wanted."

I blinked. "Well shit. That's a big deal. How do you know it's not what she wants?"

"Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. But she's not ready. She needs to sort through all this shit with Jason and see how she feels about us when she comes out the other side. I don't want her to say yes because she feels obligated. I want her to be in a healthy state of mind when I pop the question too."

"Makes sense. I doubt she'd say no. I've seen how she looks at you. I don't understand it because you're a big, dumb, ugly bastard, but I've seen it."

Derek laughed and rolled his eyes at me. "You just wait until you find your woman, Caleb. She'll have your mind running in circles. Evelyn is all I can think about. It's infuriating in the best way."

I wanted that. I wanted to find the woman who drove me up the wall and consumed my thoughts at all times. But try as I might, I couldn't find her.

Derek got on his bike. “I’m going to talk to Ryder. You should go back inside and ask Gemma out.”

“I’m not going to ask her out,” I said sourly.

“Why not? She’s cute. She’s fun. And just your type, right?”

“My type?” I asked.

“Sure. Fit and sexy. She’s got a good sense of humor. Why not?”

“Leave it alone, Derek.”

Derek rolled his shoulders as he started the hog. He slowly pulled out of his parking space. “If you’re not going to date someone, at least find a girl who’ll fuck you, mate. You’re tense as shit. You need to get laid.”

I gave him the finger, and he drove off, cackling like a madman.

I got on my bike and followed suit. Minus the cackling. I was in no mood for laughter. I wasn’t even in the mood for music. I drove home in silence, the wind in my hair, mulling over what he’d said.

I was pining over my ex, who I hadn’t even really cared for all that much. I’d just enjoyed the closeness and having someone there. She wasn’t who I missed. I only missed that routine and the comfort of her soft body.

Maybe Derek was right. Maybe I just needed to find someone who would be down for a good, hard fuck, and then I could move on and shake off some of this angst. That seemed to work for Derek in the past before he found Evelyn. Why not me?

I parked my car in my designated space on the outside of my apartment complex and walked across the courtyard to the south building. After buzzing myself in, I rode the elevator up to the tenth floor and let myself into my apartment.

Cool air greeted me. I threw my gym bag on the kitchen counter to deal with later and headed straight down the hall to

my shower. I stripped out of my sweaty clothes and got under the hot water.

I put my back to it, letting the water bounce off my shoulders. As I stood there, the steam filled up the stall and cleared my head. The clarity brought memories of Lauryn dancing on her platform that weekend. I thought of her long hair flowing down her back and the way that black suit had shown off all her curves.

My cock was stiff in seconds.

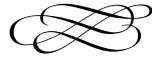
I craved a release. Maybe it would take some of the weight off that I was carrying around on my shoulders. I gripped my shaft and worked myself over. I thought of her the whole time. Her legs and the way the muscles in her thighs flexed when she rocked back and forth. I thought of having her ride me the way she rode that platform some nights.

I pictured her on top of me, bouncing, tits squished in her own hands, screaming my name at my ceiling as I brought her to her climax.

I grit my teeth as hot lashes of my own come shot up my stomach. The relief it brought lasted only a couple of minutes, which confirmed one thing. I desired companionship, not a quick fuck.

“Fuck me,” I growled as I opened the shower door and reached for my towel.

CHAPTER 10



LAURYN

It was Wednesday, and I was exhausted. I hadn't had a chance to catch up on my sleep since work that weekend, so around eleven o'clock, I'd gone into the bedroom to lie down under the condition that I would only shut my eyes for forty-five minutes.

I slept through the alarm I'd set and didn't wake up until shortly before I had to pick Jayden up from school. I sat up and rubbed my eyes to peer blurrily at the time on my phone.

"Shit," I mumbled before I stumbled across the room to my dresser. I grabbed the first pair of pants I laid hands on, which was a pair of leggings with the hole in the inside of the thigh. I pulled them on and left the white T-shirt on that I'd slept in. It was a little dingy and a little beige under the armpits, but it didn't matter. I wouldn't get out of the truck. I'd spare the poor parents and children of my son's school the sight of me on a bad afternoon.

I did, however, take a moment to brush out my tangled curls and tied them up in a bun. I slapped on some Chapstick and lip gloss and a quick layer of mascara. Looking a little more fresh-faced and bright-eyed, I went out into the kitchen to grab myself a bottle of water.

Cliff was sitting at the table on his phone.

"Hey," I said, opening up the fridge. "Did you have a good sleep?"

Cliff had been in bed when I came to lie down for a nap. He hadn't stirred when I slowly rolled into bed and stole some

of the covers. He'd always been a heavy sleeper. I envied him for that.

"Yeah. Not bad." Cliff didn't look up from his phone. He kept scrolling through whatever app he was on and sipped from his bottle of beer. It wasn't even two in the afternoon, and he'd already started in on the booze.

I sighed and closed the fridge.

That made him look up. "What? You in a foul mood already?"

I unscrewed the cap of my water bottle. "I didn't say anything."

"Nah. You didn't need to, did you? You just did that little sigh. I know you. I know what that means."

"It didn't mean anything," I said, trying to change the subject. I wasn't in the mood to argue. Not today. I had to leave soon to go pick Jayden up, and I didn't want Cliff to be a grumpy asshole when we came back. "I'm sorry, Cliff. I think I'm still just tired. It's been a long week."

He shifted in his seat and muttered something under his breath. I was sure he'd said something offensive about me, but I left it alone. It wasn't worth it.

I drank some of the water and felt more refreshed. "I have to head out to pick up Jayden. I won't be gone long."

Cliff's eyes rose to meet me over the top of his phone. "You're going now?"

I looked at the clock. "It's two. I'm going at the same time I go every day."

"Don't be smart with me."

I put the cap back on my water bottle. "I'm not being smart. You're trying to pick a fight, and I'm not falling for it. I have to pick up Jayden. He'll be outside waiting for me in ten minutes. Then, if you want to yell at me when I get back, by all means, have at it. You can sit here and plan everything you want to say while I'm gone, all right?"

Cliff put his phone down. That wasn't a good sign. "How do you plan on getting to the school?"

I wanted to retort with "*the same way I always do, you dumb fuck,*" but instead, I said, "I'm taking the truck."

"Like hell you are."

I stared stupidly at him. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm sick of you driving my truck around and never putting gas in it. Find another way to pick up your kid."

"I don't have another way to pick him up. If you didn't want me taking the truck, you should have said something earlier and I would have taken the bus to go get him. Let me take it this one time, and then I won't from now on, okay?"

"No. You have two good legs. You can walk your ass down to the bus stop and meet him at school."

"Cliff, I—"

"I thought you weren't in the mood to argue?" He growled.

I bit the inside of my cheek and rationalized if I wanted to keep pushing this or if it was worth it. I could just leave now and walk to the bus. If I did, I'd only be ten or so minutes late to pick up Jayden. If I stayed and fought with Cliff, I'd for sure be at least thirty minutes late, even if he did cave in the end and let me have the truck.

I decided to stand my ground. "I'm not trying to argue, Cliff. But this punishes Jayden, not me. If you let me pick him up, I'll fill up your tank on my way home. No problem."

"Woman, do you not know what 'no' means?"

"Stop calling me *woman*."

"I'll call you whatever I damn well please," Cliff said. And then he got to his feet.

I took an uneasy step back. I had no clue why he was so easily provoked today, but things felt a lot more dangerous than usual. I wondered if this time, it wouldn't just end with an argument. There was something in his eyes, something dark

and mean that I hadn't seen in a long time. Something I'd tricked myself into thinking was dead.

"Cliff," I said slowly, holding up my hands, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"You don't have any respect for me, do you?"

What did he want from me? Did he want me to lie and tell him I respected him? Did he want me to put on a good show and be the dutiful girlfriend we both knew I wasn't? Or did he want me to be honest? Was he looking to have a full-blown war, right here, right now?

Because deep down, I'd been itching for this for months.

I'd hated him for months.

"No, I don't," I said. I stood up straighter and let him come closer. "I lost respect for you a long time ago."

Cliff snorted. "Big words coming from such a little girl."

"Just give me your damn truck keys, Cliff. I don't want to do this right now."

"I don't give a fuck what you want, Lauryn. I'm the man of this house, and I want to do this. So sit your ass down at that table so we can talk this through and set some new ground rules for you."

"No," I spat.

Then, he grabbed my wrist and hauled me over to the table. He threw me down in one of the chairs and took the one beside it. He straddled it the same way Caleb had sat the other night in Kadia. I had a flashback to that warm, kind smile he'd given me and the other girls. It was such a stark contrast to the menacing grin Cliff was giving me now. Where Caleb had warmed my heart, Cliff was filling it with ice.

"I don't want any more fucking lip from you, you got it?" Cliff said, holding a menacing finger in front of my face.

"Do I get to make any special requests too? Because I don't want any of your bullshit either. All you do is sleep all

day and get drunk at night. You're a waste of fucking space in this apartment. Why don't you just leave?"

Cliff grabbed my chin. "Because, sugar, this is my home. You're my woman. And you ain't got nobody else but me."

I stared into his eyes. They were dark and hooded by thick brows. He was looking at me in a way he never had before. Like he hated me. I swallowed, and he jerked my chin to the side.

"You got something you want to say now, Lauryn, baby?"

I tried to pull my chin out of his hand, but he held me fast. "No," I whimpered. I hated myself for caving. I didn't want to fold. I wanted to be strong and hold my ground and scream at him for hours and hours over all the things I hated him for.

I hated him for treating me like shit. I hated him for scaring me and being a bad role model for Jayden. I hated his mean attitude, his condescending words, his violent drunk streak, his willingness to hurt me, his cruel smile—how he got off on scaring me.

But mostly, I hated myself for letting him get this close.

"That's what I thought, baby. Now. You'd better catch that bus. That kid of yours isn't going to walk himself home."

He let me go, and I retreated back to press myself against the back of the chair. I watched him nervously as he picked up his phone again and looked back down at the screen. I thought this was a trick. Surely, he wasn't through with me yet. In the past, these spats had lasted a lot longer, and sometimes, they'd gotten violent.

I was waiting for the other shoe to drop when I stood up. Nothing happened, so I turned to hurry down the hallway.

"Oh, and baby?" he called after me.

I froze and didn't turn around. I could hear him moving behind me as he came to stand in the entrance to the hallway.

"Don't you ever talk back to me again. I mean it. That pretty mouth is made for only a few things, and I'll leave it to you to figure out."

I rubbed my lips together.

This mouth? This mouth was made for more than saying “yes” to a man I hated. It was made for screaming to the world that I was better than this—that I deserved more. It was made for telling men like Cliff that he did not own me.

I turned around. My hands were balled into fists at my sides. Cliff was standing at the end of the hall with his arms folded over his chest. He was smirking at me. He knew what he’d said would boil my blood, and that’s why he’d said it.

If he wanted a fight, so be it. I could handle pain. I’d given birth. I’d danced in front of men half naked for ten years. I’d broken ribs, dislocated my shoulder, and broken my nose when I fell onstage. I could handle this asshole.

I met his stare. “Why don’t you shove your own dick up your ass, you worthless, good for nothing, piece of shit? I fucking hate you! And you don’t own me. You never will. You’re nothing! All you own is your broken ego, and I feel sorry for you. You’re a weak man, Cliff. The weakest man I’ve ever met. You get off picking on someone who can’t physically beat you. You can hit me if you want, but you’ll never beat the strength out of me. I’ve already won.”

I’d said all the right things to make him explode.

I braced myself for the aftermath.

CHAPTER 11



CALEB

I glanced at my watch and frowned. It was nearly nine thirty. All of our dancers were in the back room getting ready to hit the stage—all except Lauryn. She hadn't shown up yet, and she was usually very punctual.

Maybe she didn't need to come so early because I'd told her not to use Zandra anymore.

I shook that thought away. Lauryn liked working here. I knew that for a fact. And all the girls had said on numerous occasions that the best part of every night was hanging out in the back and getting ready to go onstage. Women and makeup. I would never understand it.

Samuel was behind the bar, as per usual, sorting through his glassware and stacking his short and tall glasses. I wandered over and took a seat on one of the barstools, resting my forearms on the bar.

Samuel watched me skeptically for a minute before asking, "What's bothering you, boss?"

I had no clue why everyone in this damn place called me "boss." I wasn't the boss—not by any stretch. I was just the guy who made sure everyone made it through the night safely. I shrugged. "Just a little concerned. Lauryn's late for her shift. And that girl is never late."

Samuel frowned. "She transits to and from. Maybe her bus got held up or something?"

That was a perfectly reasonable explanation, but for some reason, it didn't ring true. "Maybe."

“Dude. Don’t stress about it too much. Shit happens. Lauryn’s a straight shooter. She’ll be here.”

I gave him a half-hearted smile and slid off the stool to do my last round of the place before we opened the doors. We had about half an hour left. If Lauryn wasn’t here in fifteen minutes, I’d start trying to track her down. This city was a big place, and bad things happened to good people all the time.

I tried to keep myself distracted by talking to all the staff. I greeted the girls who worked at coat check and chatted them up for a few minutes before moving on to check in with my security team. I assigned them their stations for the night, placing Jack at the front door, and reminded them of all the things to look for even though I’d already drilled it into their brains. After, I paced across the dance floor and went to the back room.

Sadie, Milly, and Cassidy were all there. I knocked before going in, and they called for me that it was safe to enter. I pushed through the doors to find them dressed to the nines in their skimpy outfits. Their hair was done, and their makeup was dark and sensual.

Sadie cocked her head to the side. “What’s up, Caleb? Come to make sure none of us are on the good stuff?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “No. I was coming to see if any of you had heard from Lauryn tonight.”

The three girls exchanged a look. Milly piped up first. “She’ll be here.”

“So you have heard from her?” I asked.

Milly bit her bottom lip and clasped her hands in front of herself. “She gave me a heads up that she was running a little late, but she’ll be here. She said her makeup is already on.”

I clenched my teeth. I didn’t like it. There was something Milly wasn’t telling me. “Did she say why she was so late?”

Milly shook her head without looking me in the eye. She was lying to my face.

I decided pushing her wasn't the solution, so I let it go. I raked my fingers through my hair and looked around at all three of them. I checked the way they were standing, the look in their eyes, the movement of their lips.

"We're not high, Caleb," Cassidy said flatly.

"I'm just doing my job."

Cassidy rolled her eyes at me before stepping forward and gliding past me. She smelled like she had layers of rose-scented perfume on. Perhaps it was the half a can of hairspray she must have used to get each and every curl to stay in place on her head. When she passed by, she dragged her fingers down my arm from shoulder to wrist. Her nails were long and painted bright yellow. She paused and licked her bottom lip. "You know, you're too serious all the time. You should loosen up, baby."

I tugged my arm away from her. "No, thanks."

Sadie giggled. "I wasn't propositioning you, Caleb."

Milly came and took Sadie by the hand. She pulled her away from me and shot me an apologetic look. Then, I heard her mutter to Sadie under her breath, "Don't do that. You're making everyone uncomfortable. He's not ... you know, like *that*."

"*Like what?*" Sadie whispered back.

Milly pursed her lips and shook her head. Then she pulled Sadie out behind her, and they left me alone with Cassidy, who was now leaning over the back of her chair and peering into her vanity mirror as she filled her lips in with red. "Sorry about Sadie. She can be sort of inappropriate at times."

"It's fine."

Cassidy looked at me in the mirror. Her smile was kind, sweet, and a little sad. "What she said is kind of true, though, Caleb. You could benefit from loosening up a bit. Having a good time. Not everything in life is watching out for other people. Live a little."

Live a little? I didn't even know how the fuck I would start doing that again.

"Thanks, Cassidy. Now get out there. The music is on, and the doors are opening."

She nodded. "Yes, boss."

I shook my head at her as she passed me. Again with the "boss" thing.

I stood alone in the back room for a few minutes considering what my next course of action should be. Lauryn should be here by now. The fact that she still hadn't come back here had me stressing out. She'd told the girls she would be late, but for some reason, that didn't give me any piece of mind.

If anything, it made me worry a little bit more. They'd been unwilling to tell me the whole truth. Had something happened? Were they deliberately keeping it a secret from me?

"Fuck this," I growled. I marched over to the back wall where I used a key to open the top drawer of a filing cabinet that held employee information—including personal phone numbers and addresses. If Lauryn was in trouble and needed help, I had to get to her.

I pulled out her file and peered down at it, running my finger along the top line to find her emergency contact. She didn't have one.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

How had the girl gotten away with not putting that information in? It was a required field for good reason. Kadia was a safe place for the most part, but shit could happen. And if it went down, we'd need to know who to call.

Or there was no one to call.

I frowned. The only name on my emergency contact was "Johnny Moretti," and he had no idea I'd used him for it.

The door behind me burst open. I turned around and dropped the file back in the drawer as I did so.

Lauryn came in, out of breath and looking frazzled. She didn't even notice me at first. She went to her chair and looked at herself in the mirror. Then, I saw her bottom lip tremble.

“Lauryn?”

She spun around wide-eyed and stared at me.

“Sorry,” I said, holding up a hand in an apology. “I didn't mean to scare you. Are you all right?”

She blinked and then nodded furiously. She put her back to me and started rummaging around in her bag. She pulled out the sparkly tights she always wore. “Yes. I'm okay. Sorry I'm late. It won't happen again.”

“It's fine. Things happen.” I closed and locked the filing cabinet. Lauryn continued to frantically get ready. “Lauryn. Relax. Take a breath for fuck sakes. You don't have to be on the floor right away.”

She looked up at me. Her eyes were wet. “I can go on.”

I walked toward her, and she stiffened. She dropped her head, letting her hair fall like a curtain over her face, and sifted through her bag some more. I stopped when I was right in front of her and put my hand on the back of her chair. “Lauryn?”

She wouldn't look at me. “What?”

“What happened?”

She shook her head again. I could hear her breath tremble. Then, she slowly looked up, and I saw what she'd been trying to hide from me. Along her right cheekbone, under the layers of makeup, was a twinge of purple.

A bruise.

I sucked in a sharp breath, and she recoiled from me. She retreated, and I followed her. “Who did that to you?”

“It doesn't matter,” she said hurriedly. “It's fine. I've handled it.”

“Handled it?” I asked incredulously. “What the fuck do you mean, you've handled it?”

Lauryn lifted her hand to hide her bruised cheek from me. “It’s fine. It happened. I’ve moved on, and it won’t happen again.”

It was almost impossible to not yell at her. She wasn’t the one I was mad at. Whoever laid hands on her was the one I was mad at. I took a deep breath as she watched me nervously. Her eyes darted back and forth between mine. I tried to soften my stare. “Lauryn. I care about you. Tell me who hurt you.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. You have to. Let me help you.”

“This isn’t your problem to fix!” She was nearly screaming at me. It took me aback for a second. Then, I realized this was all coming from a place of fear, and the fury that raged within me was hotter and fiercer than anything I’d ever felt before.

I reached out and took her hand. She resisted but only for a second as I drew her to me. She was so close, I could smell her citrus shampoo. I looked down into her eyes and said with as much calmness as I could muster, “You have a son. If you’re in trouble, he’s in trouble. Tell me who did this to you.”

She blinked. A tear trickled down her cheek, and she didn’t bother to wipe it away. “He wouldn’t hurt Jayden.”

“You probably said he wouldn’t hurt you before too. And believed it. A man who lays hands on a woman has no boundaries, Lauryn. You can’t guarantee your son’s safety. I won’t let you do this. Let me help you.” I could hear in my voice that I was basically pleading with her to see reason.

The look in her eyes told me she heard me. She looked horrified. Her eyes were wide and empty, and her lips were slightly parted. For a moment, I thought she might crumple in my arms and break apart. Instead, she strengthened her resolve. She closed her mouth and clenched her jaw. Then she nodded once, sharply. “It was Cliff. My boyfriend.”

Cliff.

That no good piece of shit had no idea what was about to befall him.

CHAPTER 12



LAURYN

Cliff was scary when he was angry. His control went out the window, and a big vein grew to twice its normal size across his forehead. His face turned bright red, and his voice would become so loud and angry that within a few minutes, he'd be hoarse from yelling at me. His fists would be clenched tightly at his sides, and for the first time since getting with him, I knew the pain he could inflict with those knuckles.

But Cliff's anger was not nearly as terrifying as Caleb's.

Caleb remained mute in front of me after I told him it was Cliff who hit me and left the deep purple bruise beneath my right eye. I could see the tightening of the muscles of his jaw, and his eyes seemed to darken by two or three shades—which I knew was physically impossible. But I was sure that they had. There was a dark fury burning there that made my blood run cold.

"Caleb?" I asked. My voice was barely more than a whisper.

He didn't say anything. Instead, he moved around me and walked out the doors. I stood there like a stick in the mud for a couple heartbeats. My head was spinning, and my skin was tingling. I'd broken out in a cold sweat the minute Caleb had seen the bruise because I knew without a doubt that things were going to change now.

They had to.

Caleb wasn't the sort of man to find out this information and let the abuse continue. He was the sort of man who would

go through fire to make things right. I was sure that's what he was about to do right now.

"Get it together, Lauryn," I whispered to myself. I ran my sweaty palms down my thighs and turned and followed him out. I was still wearing my jeans and a pullover. I cut through the crowd that was forming in front of the bar and found Caleb near the front doors talking to Jack, one of the other security guards.

I came up behind him as Jack nodded and said, "No worries, man. I can handle this for a couple hours."

Then, Caleb turned and grabbed my hand. I wasn't sure how he'd known I was there, but he had. He pulled me out through the front doors.

"Where are we going?" I asked nervously. The question was a pointless one to ask. I already knew exactly where we were going.

"Your apartment. I'm going to show this piece of shit boyfriend of yours that he can't get away with laying his hands on you. And we're going to evict his ass. You hear me?" He drew me up in front of him and held me by the shoulders. "You can't keep him around, Lauryn. You get that, right? This will only get worse from here on out."

"I can do it myself. I don't need you to fight my battles for me."

"Yeah?" he asked sharply.

"Yeah," I snapped back.

Caleb shook his head. "You think you can walk in there and kick his ass out and he's not going to come after you again? Lauryn. Come on. I get that you're a fighter and all, but this guy could do a real number on you. I'm not going to let that happen, not when I'm capable of fixing this."

"Please."

"No," he said, shaking his head again. "If you don't fix this now, you never will. And you'll never forgive yourself if

Jayden gets tangled up in it. Neither will I. You have to be brave tonight, and then it's over. All right?"

I searched his eyes and found genuine concern there. This scared me more than anything. I hadn't had someone show me they cared about me like this in years. He was looking at me in a way that suggested he knew my pain, and he knew he could take it away, and he wanted to. He wanted to make things better for me and my son. He wanted to protect me from a monster I couldn't defeat on my own.

"Okay," I whispered.

Then, he kissed my forehead. It was the strangest, most comforting thing a man had ever done to me. I stood in his arms and felt the warmth of his kiss against my skin. It was over as soon as it had begun, and he led me down the sidewalk to his car. He opened the door for me, and I slid into the inky black sports car.

He walked around the hood, got into the driver's seat, turned the ignition, and pulled away from the curb.

I swallowed and rubbed my hands up and down my thighs.

"Don't be scared," Caleb said.

"I can't help it."

He reached over and took my hand. His fingers intertwined with mine, and he gave them a reassuring squeeze. "This guy will be nothing but a memory for you in a couple hours. Trust me."

"Jayden is at the house."

"Is there anywhere he can go? Someone you can call?"

I shook my head. "No one. I don't have anyone."

I could feel Caleb's eyes on me. My cheeks were burning with shame, and I looked down at our hands wrapped together. Caleb sighed. "Me neither."

We spent the rest of the drive in silence except for the couple directions I gave Caleb to lead him to my apartment

building. When we arrived, I was sure I wouldn't have the strength to get out of the car.

I'd wanted to escape Cliff for months now, but I didn't have the tools to do it myself. I was too afraid of change. I didn't want to confront this world alone, but I also didn't want to give Jayden a bad example of the sort of treatment a woman should accept. I'd promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't ever let that happen.

And I'd broken that promise to myself.

Caleb parked the car and came around to my door. He opened it for me and offered me his hand. I stared at it, and he curled his fingers in a come-hither motion. I took his hand, and he helped me up. Then, we walked silently up the path to the front doors. I buzzed us in, and we got in the elevator.

"Oh god," I breathed as we rode up. I watched the illuminated number above the doors creep upward until it hit six. The doors chimed when they slid open.

Caleb handed me his car keys when we stepped out. "Don't be scared. You don't have to do anything. You just go and get Jayden, and I'll deal with Cliff. Take him down to the car and go for a drive. I won't need more than half an hour, tops. By the time you get back, your home will be yours again."

I reached out and grabbed his sleeve. "Caleb?"

"Yes?"

I frowned and bit my bottom lip. "Please, be careful. Cliff is a strong man."

Caleb's mouth twitched in a smirk. "Are you worried about me?"

"Maybe."

Caleb chuckled. "Don't be. I can handle guys like this in my sleep. You know who I am."

He was reminding me that he was a Lost Breed member. I knew he'd been through hell and back these last few months. He'd seen things that had changed him. He didn't laugh as

easily as he used to, and I caught him staring off into space more now than he ever used to. He'd lost a friend, and I knew it weighed heavily on him.

We stopped in front of my front door. I unlocked it and took a steady breath.

“Just go get Jayden,” Caleb said, reminding me that my role in this was minor. All I had to do was get in and get out. Then by the time I got back, I would finally have a peaceful home.

“Right,” I said. And I marched in.

I walked straight past the living room where Cliff was draped over the sofa. The television was on, but he wasn't paying any attention to it. He was on his phone as he always was, and he didn't say anything as I blew past the door.

I went into Jayden's room.

I felt bad for waking him, but I gently shook his shoulder until he blinked his eyes open. He looked up at me, confused, and looked around. “Mom?”

“Hey, kiddo. I'm sorry to wake you up. Everything is fine. Could you get out of bed for me?”

Jayden yawned but got out of bed. He was in his pajamas, which was good enough. I grabbed his sweater from the hook on the back of his door and helped him into it. Then, I took his slippers and put them on his feet. I held his hand, and we left his room.

Caleb was standing at the entrance to the living room. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and he gave Jayden a warm smile when we approached.

That was when Cliff looked up. “What the fuck are you doing in my house?”

Caleb didn't answer him. Instead, he looked at me and then nodded at the door. “I'll see you in a bit.”

I nodded.

“Lauryn? Get your ass back here. Who the fuck is this clown? You bringing home clients now, you little who—”

I closed the front door behind me and walked to the elevator. Jayden was watching me, but he didn't say anything until we stepped in and started riding it to the ground level. “Mom? Who was that man in there? Why's Cliff so mad? Are you okay?”

I crouched in front of him and gently cupped his perfect little face in my hands. I stared into his hazel eyes—eyes that matched mine—and gave him the most convincing smile I could muster. “That man is named Caleb. He's my friend, and he came over tonight to help me.”

“Help you?”

I nodded. “I think it's time that Cliff left and we had our home to ourselves again. I should have talked to you about it, baby, and warned you. But sometimes things just happen, and you have to go with it. You know?”

Jayden frowned but nodded after a minute. “Like if it's raining, you spend lunch inside at school.”

It wasn't the same thing, but it was close enough. “Exactly,” I said.

“So Cliff won't be there when we get home?”

I shook my head. “No. He won't. We might not ever see him again. I'm sorry you didn't get to say goodbye.”

Jayden stepped forward as the elevator doors opened. We were on the ground level. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and hugged me tightly in his little arms. “It's okay, Mom.”

I rubbed his back. “How did I get so lucky with a kid like you?”

Jayden giggled into my shoulder. I scooped him up in my arms when I stood and walked out to Caleb's car.

I put him in the back seat and buckled him in before getting into the driver's side. It took me a good couple minutes to get the seat and mirrors adjusted. Caleb was a lot taller than

me. I hoped he wasn't bothered by me messing with all his presets. I almost laughed at myself for thinking he would be. Caleb was in my apartment to save me from my abusive boyfriend. He wouldn't give a damn if he had to adjust his seat when he got back in his car.

I pulled away from the curb. It was nearly ten thirty at night, and I had no idea where we could go that would still be open. The only place I could think of was a convenience store, and there was one that sold a huge variety of candy about fifteen minutes away. If Caleb really only needed twenty minutes, that should be plenty of time. Candy was a rare treat in our house, so I knew Jayden would be on board.

“How about we stop and grab some candy, Jayden?”

Jayden clapped his hands together in the back seat with excitement. I turned on the radio and flicked through the stations until a song came on that Jayden liked. Then, we both sang along, and I did everything I possibly could to not think about what was happening back at my apartment.

I wasn't worried about Cliff. I was worried about Caleb, the man who'd held me and kissed me like I was as fragile as glass. Right now, I felt like I was.

CHAPTER 13



CALEB

Cliff, the smug bastard, was exactly what I expected him to be.

He was standing now, the back of his knees pressed to the edge of the sofa cushions, and he was swaying on the spot as he pointed an accusatory finger at me. “The fuck you doing in my house?” he slurred.

He’d been drinking, that much was obvious, and the smattering of empty beer cans all over the living room suggested he’d been drinking to excess. I remained where I was, standing in the doorway with my hands in my pockets as he nodded at the door and told me to get the fuck out.

“I’m not going anywhere. It’s time you packed up your shit and left. You got somewhere you can stay?” I asked. I was trying to keep this as civil as possible. I wouldn’t be the one to start the fight, but if he swung first, I’d match him, and I’d put him down. If I was being honest with myself, I hoped he would try to hit me. Then, I could give him the beating he deserved.

“Somewhere to stay?” Cliff barked. He turned in a circle with his arms outspread. His head wobbled like a bobblehead as he peered incredulously at me. “The fuck you mean, somewhere to stay? I live here. I’m gonna stay in my fucking bedroom with my fucking woman, you piece of shit.”

“No, you’re not. Lauryn wants you out. You’ve got about,” I glanced at my watch, “twenty minutes to pack your bags and hit the road. I suggest you get started. Otherwise, you’ll be

able to get your things out of the dumpster tomorrow morning.”

Cliff’s eyes narrowed, and he puffed up his chest. “Get out of my house.”

I shook my head once. “I don’t think you’ve been listening. This isn’t your house anymore. You’re done here, and you’re done with Lauryn. I’ll wait for you to pack your shit. Let’s go.”

Cliff took three stumbling steps forward and stopped to steady himself. “I don’t know who that little bitch thinks she is, but if she thinks she can send her errand boy to solve all her problems for her, she’s got another thing coming.”

“The only thing she has coming is freedom from you.”

Cliff smirked. “You think it’ll be that easy? You think you can just show up here and scare me off with your *words*?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “I was hoping you’d need a little more persuading than that.”

“Tough guy, huh?”

I shrugged.

Cliff threw his head back and laughed at the ceiling. “I knew she was fucking around on me. I knew it. I told her she’d cheat if she kept working at that hole. All those half naked women all over the fucking place. And assholes like you. She suck your cock, too, man? She get down on her knees and—”

“I didn’t come here to chat with you about your relationship and whether or not Lauryn is faithful. I came to get you out of her apartment because you hit her. A man like you shouldn’t be around a child. I’ve asked nicely. I’m done asking.”

Cliff roared with more obnoxious laughter and bent over to slap his knee. “You crack me up, man. She’s got you wrapped around her pretty little finger. I get it. She did the same to me. Then, after a while, they get carried away. You need to teach them their place. Yeah. I knocked her around a bit. You would too if you—”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Cliff fell silent, but he was still smirking.

That was it. Fuck him. I wasn't going to wait for him to make the first move. I'd given him all the chances I could, and he'd spat in my face every time. Clearly, he had no respect for Lauryn. He deserved to be smacked around, and I was more than capable of giving him that beat down.

I rolled up my sleeves.

Cliff continued laughing. “You don't know who you're messing with, motherfucker. I've got friends who would scare the piss out of you.”

“Likewise.”

Cliff's expression hardened as he realized I wasn't planning on back down. This was happening, here and now. “Fine. You want to do this thing? Let's fucking do it.”

My body thrummed with anticipation. I hadn't had a fight like this in a long time—the one with Isaac Reed at Ryder's house when Ruby was still running the scene had been the last time I really got my hands dirty, and that one had been cut short.

This go around, I had ample time, and there was nobody around to cut it short or intervene. He was all mine.

Cliff let out a drunken bellow before dropping his head and charging me. His attack was totally transparent. I had to decide whether or not I wanted to toy with him or end it quickly. I opted for the former.

When he was about to plow into me to try to bring me to the ground, I sidestepped and brought my elbow down between his shoulder blades. Cliff grunted in pain and tried to wrap his arms around my waist. I drove my knee up, connecting with his chest, and sent him reeling backward.

He caught himself on the corner of the sofa and tried to straighten up. I'd knocked the wind from his lungs, and he clutched at his chest as he tried to get his breath back. I waited for him to recover.

When he sucked in a ragged breath, he glared up at me from beneath his brows. “Fucker.”

I shrugged. He was the one who’d made a rookie mistake, not me.

“Come on, then,” Cliff said, motioning me forward with the curl of his fingers. He bent at the knees and shook his head, no doubt to clear the drunken fog muddling his mind. “I’m gonna knock your fucking teeth out.”

All of Cliff’s tough talk amused me. He seemed to be completely unaware of himself and how drunk he was. He had also miscalculated his odds against me. He stood no chance. I was a trained fighter. Cliff was sloppy and fought like a high school football player.

I responded to his invitation by moving in close. I kept my hands up to protect my face, and Cliff lunged forward, swinging his right fist out in a wide arc toward the right side of my head. I ducked, and he swung again with his left. I avoided that, too, and he let out a furious yell as he tried to get me again.

I drove up with the heel of my hand into his jaw. He yelped—actually yelped—and stumbled back, clutching his chin in one hand.

I stepped back and straightened as I waited for him to yet again sort his shit out.

“Are you done?” I asked.

“Fuck you,” Cliff spat.

“Good. I wasn’t either.”

This time, I went after him. His eyes widened at the last moment when he realized he stood no chance of stopping me. His right hand blocked my first swing, but then I was driving my knee up into his gut. It doubled him over, and I used his own forward momentum against him, bringing my other knee right into his nose. He wailed, and I slammed my elbow into the back of his neck.

He pitched forward and landed flat on his stomach at my feet.

I dropped to a crouch beside him and gathered a fistful of his hair to yank his head back. He was out of breath and whimpering, and his nose was a bloodied mess. There was no doubt I'd broken it. I leaned in close so he could hear every word I said. "You and Lauryn are through. You hear me? Never come around here again. She's moving on with her life. I suggest you do the same. If you come back around, I'll be here waiting for you. Got it?"

Cliff tried to nod but wasn't able to.

"Answer me," I growled.

"I understand," he said through gritted teeth.

I'd humiliated him. He was weak, and he knew it. Releasing his hair, I stood up straight and nudged him with the toe of my boot. "Now, get the fuck up and pack your shit."

Cliff groaned and grunted about it, but eventually, he managed to stand up. The first thing he grabbed to throw in a duffel bag was his six-pack of beer from the fridge. I waited by the front door, listening to him rummage through his dressers until he emerged five minutes later with two packed bags.

"That's everything?" I asked.

He nodded. "Fuck you, man. Sticking your nose in my shit. You'll get what's coming to you. Mark my words."

"Forgive me if I don't seem concerned," I said dryly. Being threatened by a man who you'd just used to wipe the floors with was never that intimidating.

"I know people," he growled.

"Good. Maybe one of them has a couch they'll let you sleep on." I reached out and grabbed one of his bags. I tore open the zipper and peered inside to make sure he wasn't stealing any of Lauryn's shit. I zipped it back up and checked the other one. When I established that he hadn't, I stepped aside, and we went out into the hallway.

I walked to the elevator with him. Cliff punched the button to call the elevator and glared over at me. “I can see myself out.”

“I’m going to make sure you leave.”

Cliff said something under his breath but didn’t challenge me. At least he’d learned from his mistake and knew he couldn’t play my game.

The doors opened, and we got on. For a moment, I wondered if he would try to catch me off guard in the small confines of the elevator. If he stood any chance of getting the jump on me, now was his opportunity. But we arrived on the ground level in one piece, and he slung his bag over his shoulder.

I watched him walk out the front doors and called after him, “Don’t show your fucking face around here again. I’ll make this beating look like child’s play if I catch word of you trying to see Lauryn.”

Cliff gave me the finger over his shoulder. “The bitch is all yours.”

He got in his truck and drove off. I watched, satisfaction rushing through me, as his taillights disappeared around the corner.

Then, I turned and went back inside. I hadn’t noticed at the time, but we probably made a bit of a mess of Lauryn’s living room, and I felt somewhat obligated to make sure she and her son wouldn’t be returning to a home that looked like two bulls had run free in the place. That wouldn’t be fair.

It already wasn’t fair what had happened to her.

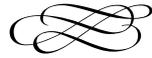
I rode the elevator back up and went back to her apartment. The living room wasn’t bad, but the furniture had been moved around during the scuffle. I pulled the sofa back to its spot, making sure the legs rested in the same indents in the carpet, and collected all the empty beer cans littered all around the place.

I went to the kitchen and rinsed them out with water before tucking them in one corner of the kitchen counter.

My knuckles and wrists throbbed from the fight, but it was worth it. It was a reminder that an asshole had gotten what he deserved. I was impressed by how much I'd managed to hold back. Cliff deserved worse than what he'd gotten, but it was better to just get rid of him rather than leave a bloody mess in Lauryn's living room.

Even though that might have felt better at the time.

CHAPTER 14



LAURYN

I looked up at Jayden in the reflection of the rearview mirror of Caleb’s car. He was sitting in the back seat popping pieces of sugar-coated sour candies into his mouth. His cheeks puckered, and his eyes watered with every bite, but he sucked on them and chewed them up anyway. I was sure his tongue would be raw by now, but like me, he couldn’t say no to the sourness. I loved sour candies.

I’d have stolen a couple from him, but my stomach was spinning end over end with nerves. The thought of putting anything in it right now made me nauseous.

We’d been sitting at the curb in the car for at least ten whole minutes now. My palms were sweaty, and I’d tried to busy myself by tidying Caleb’s truck—but it was already immaculate. This did not surprise me at all. Caleb was an organized person, and he cared about everything. His health, his career, his coworkers at Kadia ... me.

I took a deep breath and twisted around to look at my son. “Well. I think it’s about time we go back inside. You ready?”

Jayden nodded.

“Have you eaten almost that entire bag already?”

Jayden gave me a bright smile and nodded again.

I got out of the car and walked around to his passenger door. “He’s going to be up all night now. I did not think that through,” I grumbled to myself. When I opened the door, Jayden sprang out and hopped up on the curb to run across the grass on the front gardens of the apartment building. It was

dewy from the cold, and I could see little droplets of water springing up from his heels as he went.

I took the path. We buzzed in through the front door, and by the time we stepped on the elevator, my stomach was doing somersaults. I needed a carbonated drink. Or some Pepto. Either would work at this point.

Zandra would have been better, but now that Cliff was gone, so was my supplier. I hadn't thought about that until this moment. A little hand of panic squeezed my heart.

I shook my head at my own foolishness. *No. This is for the best. You know that. Cliff had to go. You're a mother, and Jayden deserves better than to have a guy like that around. If that means there's no guy around, then there's no guy around.*

"You okay, Mom?" Jayden asked, reaching over and taking my hand.

I squeezed his little fingers. "Yeah, baby. I'm great. I'm just a little sleepy."

Jayden was content with my answer. After the elevator doors opened, we stepped off and then walked down the hall to our unit. I stood in front of it. Everything would be different when we went inside.

You needed a fresh start. Caleb saved you from yourself. Consider this a clean slate. No Cliff, no Zandra, just you and Jayden and better choices from here on out.

I nodded as if giving myself permission to go inside and finally opened the door.

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting. A mess of some sort, I supposed. But the house was exactly how I'd left it—minus the beer cans Cliff had left all over the living room.

Water was running in the kitchen.

I was suddenly struck with a terrible thought. What if Cliff was in the kitchen? What if Caleb was the one who'd gotten his ass kicked, and he was lying face down somewhere, beaten and bloodied?

If that was the case, I was in a hell of a lot of trouble. The hit I'd taken from Cliff earlier that week would be nothing compared to what he'd do to me for trying to kick him out. He'd be furious.irate. Uncontrollable.

I held onto Jayden's hand, and we walked down the hall toward the kitchen. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. If I'd fucked up by bringing Caleb here, then I needed to face the music.

I stopped in the doorway to the kitchen.

Caleb was standing at the kitchen sink with his back to us. He was rinsing out beer cans, one by one, and setting them on the counter in neat little rows. When he was done, he turned off the tap and leaned toward the stove, where he dried his hands on my floral printed kitchen towel.

When he turned around and saw us, he smiled. "Hey."

"H-hey," I stammered. What was this feeling? It felt like my whole body had suddenly become weightless like it was filled with nothing but air, and every negative thought had vanished like it never existed in the first place. It had been a long time since I'd felt like this, and I was pretty sure it could only be one thing: relief.

Jayden was hovering behind my legs and peering out from behind my back at Caleb, who was now hanging the floral towel back on the handle of the stove. "The place is all yours. It's a nice apartment. Exactly what I expected."

"How so?" I asked.

Caleb shrugged. "Flowery towels. Bright colors. And more pillows on a sofa than any normal person could ever need."

I tried to laugh but couldn't.

Caleb nodded at Jayden. "Hey there, kid. Sorry I kicked you guys out of your house for a bit. Did you guys go somewhere fun?"

Jayden nodded but didn't say anything. He was and always had been a shy kid. It had taken him over a month to become

comfortable enough with Cliff to talk to him on his own, rather than through me.

Caleb seemed to understand Jayden's shyness. He didn't look at him when he talked. In fact, he sort of ignored him. He went to the kitchen table, and as he pulled out a chair, he said, "I got kind of bored, so I poked my head in your room. Coolest place in the whole house if you ask me."

Jayden looked up at me. His eyes were bright. I smiled at him. "Caleb is a friend."

Jayden bit his lip.

Caleb shrugged and leaned back in the chair. He still didn't look at either of us. "I know I'm sorta weird looking. So if you don't want to come and talk to me, that's fine."

Jayden moved around me and went to the kitchen table. I watched, heart fluttering, as he took the seat across from Caleb and sat on his knees. He leaned forward on his elbows and looked up at Caleb, who now met my son's gaze. Jayden smiled. "We got candy."

"Candy?" Caleb said enthusiastically. Then he looked over at me. "Did you bring me anything?"

I shook my head.

Jayden held up his bag of sour sugary candies. "You can have some of mine." He put the bag down between them and opened it up. "The red ones are my favorite, but the blue ones are the sourest."

I caught the way Caleb's brow furrowed. I suspected he wasn't a big fan of sour candies. He reached out anyway, took a blue one, and popped it into his mouth. His face puckered, and he recoiled like the bag was a vicious cobra on the table. "How on earth do you eat these things? These are terrible!"

Jayden was giggling. Caleb started laughing too.

I cleared my throat. "Are the two of you good here if I just step out for a second?"

Caleb glanced at me and then nodded. "Take your time." He looked back at Jayden. "You cool to hang out with me for a

few minutes?”

Jayden nodded shyly.

I didn't wait for any more permission before I slipped away and went into my bedroom. The dresser drawers were all open—the ones that Cliff used—and empty. It looked like he'd gone through the room in a panic to collect all his things. I wondered what had transpired when Jayden and I were gone. Had it been a vicious fight? Had it lasted long?

I went to the bed and sat down on the edge. I drew my knees up and wrapped my arms around my legs. By the time I pressed my cheek to my knee, the tears had already started flowing.

I'd wasted ten months of my life with that loser. Not only that, but I'd exposed my son to a man with a violent streak for that length of time, and I felt like a terrible mother. How could I have been so selfish, so desperate? I'd kept him around so I didn't feel lonely, but Cliff had only made me feel more isolated and more unlovable. He'd destroyed any ounce of confidence I had left, and I was only the shell of the woman I'd used to be.

I hadn't even been capable of fixing my own mess. I'd needed Caleb to come in and do it for me.

I was embarrassed. At the root of it all, I was incredibly embarrassed by how far I'd let this whole thing go. All because I wanted a man in my bed when I came home, a man I never loved, never trusted, and never really wanted to be intimate with. The sex had been quick and raw. There had been nothing tender about it. Cliff just fucked until he was done and then rolled over like I was some late-night random hookup. To him, that's probably all I was. I also happened to prepare all his meals for him and provide a clean and free place for him to rest his head.

I sighed and sat up straight to wipe the tears away. I had to pull it together. Jayden wouldn't be comfortable sitting with a stranger too long, and I'd already asked too much of Caleb. I couldn't expect him to babysit, too, especially after what he'd just done for me and my son.

I needed a hit. Good lord, did I ever need a hit. It would help take away the sting of the humiliation. I could start fresh tomorrow. It would be easier. I would be in a better headspace. Maybe, just maybe, Cliff had left a couple behind.

I searched all the drawers but came up empty. I groaned and rubbed at my eyes with the heels of my hands.

“You can do this,” I whispered to myself. “You don’t have a choice. Just get your shit together and go out there.”

I slapped my cheeks, fluffed my hair, and checked my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were a little pink and so was my nose, but Jayden would never know I’d been crying. Hopefully, Caleb couldn’t tell either.

When I went back out into the kitchen, Caleb and Jayden were still sitting at the kitchen table. Caleb was telling a funny story, and Jayden was giggling in a way I’d never heard him do unless it was with me. Somehow, he was instantly comfortable with the head security guard at Kadia. Caleb was not a man you looked at and felt at ease with. He was the sort of man you passed on the sidewalk and thought, *damn, this guy has seen and done some shit*. The fact that my son seemed perfectly comfortable was a testament to Caleb’s complete self-awareness and desire to help people feel safe.

Caleb looked up at me when I came in. His smile faded as we locked eyes.

I instantly looked away and crossed my arms over my stomach. “Are you hungry? I can whip up some sandwiches or something. I feel like I owe you a lot more than that but—”

Caleb got to his feet and shook his head. “No. I’m good. Thank you, though.” He nodded at Jayden, who was watching him with eager eyes. “I have to head back to work. But maybe I’ll see you around, kid?”

Jayden nodded. “That would be cool.”

“Cool,” Caleb smirked. He walked toward me, and as he passed me by he grazed my upper arm with his hand. “You mind walking me to the door?”

I blinked stupidly but nodded. “Jayden, go brush your teeth. I’ll come to tuck you in after Caleb leaves.”

“Okay,” Jayden grumbled. His chair creaked as he slid off, and I listened to him walk, heel first and heavy like always, down the hall to the bathroom as Caleb and I went to the front door.

Caleb was watching me the same way he had when we were in the back room earlier that night and he’d seen my bruise. He watched me like I was a delicate flower in desperate need of watering. I would have thought seeing that look in a man’s eyes would annoy me, but with him, it didn’t. He put his hands on both my elbows. “Are you all right?”

I looked at my feet and shook my head. “I can’t have this conversation right now.” All it would take was for him to ask me that same question again, and I would fall apart in his arms. I couldn’t do that. I needed to wait until I was alone before I came undone.

He nodded in understanding. “Okay. Well, listen. It wasn’t a big deal. And he won’t come back. For the record, he walked himself out on his own. I didn’t mangle him.”

I let out a nervous laugh.

Caleb let his hands fall to his sides. “Don’t worry about coming to work tomorrow. I know it might be hard to find a babysitter—unless you already have one.”

“I don’t. I don’t have anyone to watch him.” I pressed my hand to my forehead. I hadn’t even thought about that. How the hell was I going to work to pay the bills with no one at home to watch my son?

“Don’t stress about it. Let me see what I can do, okay? I know someone who might be able to help. She’s great with kids.”

“You’ve already done so much,” I whispered, looking up into his handsome, youthful face. “I don’t deserve—”

“Hush. I’ll always be here to protect you, Lauryn. No matter where you need me to be, I’ll be there.” He handed me

his cell phone. “Put your number in there for me. I’ll talk to my friend and have her call you to arrange babysitting.”

I licked my lips and took his phone. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 15



CALEB

Not kissing Lauryn at her door when I went to leave was the most impressive battle of will I'd ever won. She'd looked beautiful and terribly sad and oh so vulnerable. Kissing her would have been taking advantage. I knew that, but the temptation had been there regardless. I'd wanted to kiss the girl for a long time, and now that she'd finally let me in, it was all I could think about.

My knuckles were still sore when I got into my car and turned the ignition. The engine roared to life, and I pulled out onto the street. It was late, nearly midnight, and I wondered if Jamie would even still be up. She'd been the first person who popped into my mind when I found out Lauryn would need someone to take care of Jayden if she still wanted to work at Kadia. She thought I was arranging it for her, but selfishly, it was for me too. I couldn't imagine working at Kadia if Lauryn wasn't there. She was the highlight of my weekend shifts and the only thing I really looked forward to during the week.

I drove straight to Kadia from Lauryn's apartment. The night at the club would just be getting underway, and there was still a good four hours left of my shift. I wouldn't blow off work.

When I arrived, there was a lineup down the sidewalk and around the block. Smokers were clustered around the front doors. The women were shivering in their tiny dresses, and some men—the gentlemen—were draping their jackets over their shoulders.

I parked my car in my reserved spot and got out. I walked up to the doors and nodded at Jack, who opened the red rope and let me through. “You good, man?” Jack asked as I climbed the six steps up to the front doors.

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “I am now.”

Jack couldn’t have known what I was talking about, but he gave me a thumbs-up anyway and turned back to a throng of girls who were drunkenly flirting with him to try to get into the club. If I knew Jack, he’d play their games for a while, but he wouldn’t let them in. He followed the rules as all my staff did.

When I ducked inside, I was met by a wall of music, perfume, cologne, and sweat. The air was humid as ever, and I cut around the bar and went to the back room, where I shot a text to Jamie asking if she was still awake. She replied back almost right away, so I called her.

“What’s up, Caleb? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine. Sorry to bother you so late. I was wondering if you’d be willing to do me a favor.”

“Anything,” Jamie said. I could hear her smile in her voice.

“I have a friend through work who’s having a bit of a rough go of things right now. She has a seven-year-old son and has no one to watch him when she works night shifts at Kadia. Do you think you could babysit on Friday and Saturday nights for her? Maybe the occasional weeknight, too, just until she gets a better option?”

Jamie didn’t even hesitate. “Sure. Let me rearrange my schedule for tomorrow night. I can be at her house whenever she needs.”

“Jamie. Has anyone ever told you how fucking awesome you are?”

Jamie’s cheerful giggle filled my phone speaker. “I’ve heard it once or twice from a few of you Lost Breeds, the ones who are good judges of character, of course.”

“Of course.” I chuckled.

“This friend of yours. Did you by any chance just get her out of some trouble?”

“Maybe.”

“Anything I should know before I spend time with her kid?”

I shrugged even though she couldn't see me. “She was dating an asshole. The kid is nice. Funny. Pretty easygoing. He's shy, but I think he'll come around to you quickly.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Are you okay?”

I snorted. “Course I am.”

“Just checking. I know you, Caleb. Had to make sure you didn't get yourself hurt tonight. That's all.”

“You're a sweetheart.”

“Sometimes.”

I smiled to myself. “Well, I'll text you her number. Her name is Lauryn.”

“Lauryn?” Jamie's voice was filled with eager suspicion. “Like, the Lauryn the guys have been talking about? The one they all think you have the hots for?”

I rolled my eyes. “Really? This is what they talk about when I'm not around?”

“Sometimes.”

“Fuck.”

“So it is her?”

“Leave it alone, Jamie.”

Jamie snickered. “You don't scare me, Caleb Jones. And you're totally transparent. You like the girl. You should ask her out.”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Nobody can just mind their own damn business, can they?”

“Nope. You’re part of an MC. What did you expect? Besides. What harm could come from one little date?”

“She just got out of a shitty relationship. I want to give her some space. Let her recuperate in whatever way she needs.”

“Oh my god. Sometimes, you’re too nice, Caleb. Maybe she wants you to go over there and sweep her off her feet. Maybe she needs it.”

“Maybe she wants to be on her own for a while.”

“Maybe,” Jamie admitted. “Is that what you want?”

I sighed. Jamie was wise for her age, and she was always pointing out things about myself that I knew were true. Like this. I liked Lauryn, and I had for ages. I wanted to go on a date with her, but she’d always been off-limits. Now, she was in closer reach than ever before, and I was being a wuss. “I’ll pass along her information to you. And mind your own business. I’ll ask her out when the time is right.”

“Okay,” Jamie said in a singsong voice, and then I hung up on her. She was, no doubt, cackling with laughter at this moment, proud of herself for her own detective skills and cunning insight. Although, I suppose I wasn’t a very hard egg to crack. Apparently, the whole MC knew I liked Lauryn, and they’d known it before I had.

Now scowling and moody, I tucked my phone in my back pocket and turned to head back out on the floor to check in with all my usual posts. I started at the bar and chatted with Samuel, who asked where I’d been all night. I gave him a runaround answer, which did not satisfy him, but he knew better than to keep pushing.

I was asked the same sorts of questions from everyone I stood and chatted with.

“Where’d you go tonight?”

“What were you up to?”

“You got a girl on the side you’re not telling us about?”

That last one rubbed me the wrong way, and the security guard who’d asked it was warned to leave my personal life

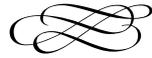
alone. He'd blinked nervously and immediately apologized. There was no harm done, so I continued my rounds as the night progressed.

I kept a wary eye on Cassidy, Sadie, and Milly as they danced on their platforms. They didn't seem high, and I made a mental note to go in and chat with them after their shifts ended. It was hard to tell by looking at someone under the flashing strobe lights. I'd know for sure if they were using by talking to them one on one and looking them in the eye.

The empty platform that was Lauryn's still drew my attention even though she wasn't there, and I kicked myself every time I glanced over at it. The night crawled by, and I couldn't deny that it was most likely because the beautiful auburn-haired, freckled vixen was not there.

She was at home trying to fit all her broken pieces together.

CHAPTER 16



LAURYN

The plastic wrap was causing me grief as I tried to wrap it around the pan of lasagna I'd prepared that afternoon for Jayden and his new babysitter, Jamie, to have for dinner while I was at work. I didn't want her coming over and having to do everything for herself, so I'd spent the afternoon cleaning the house and making sure they would have everything they needed.

Jayden was nervous. He'd been keeping a wary eye on the clock waiting for it to change to eight o'clock.

I'd been doing the same thing. I knew I shouldn't be nervous, but I couldn't help it. I'd never left my son alone with anybody besides Cliff, and it was a little unnerving. Although I knew I shouldn't be nervous. I trusted Caleb, and he would never put me or my son at risk by sending over someone he didn't trust wholeheartedly.

This girl Jamie was someone I could trust by default.

Jayden came and sat at the foot of my bed as I finished packing my work bag. He was running his hands on his knees and chewing his bottom lip.

"Try not to be nervous, Jayden. I bet you and Jamie will have fun tonight. Besides, your bedtime is an hour after she gets here. You'll be sleeping most of the time."

Jayden nodded but didn't look convinced. "I don't like strangers."

I went and crouched down in front of him. I put my hands on top of his to still them on his knees. "I know, baby. Neither

do I. But if we're brave, strangers can become our friends."

Jayden stopped chewing his lip. "I guess."

The buzzer went off. Jamie must be down at the front doors to the building. I patted Jayden's knee. "I'm going to let Jamie up. Are we going to be brave together and say hi to her?"

Jayden slid off the bed and came with me to the kitchen, where I pressed the button and spoke into the speaker. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lauryn? This is Jamie. Could you buzz me up?"

"Sure thing. There's a bit of a delay once the bell chimes, so just give it a second." I let Jamie in and turned to Jayden. "You ready, kiddo?"

"I think so."

I offered him my hand, and we both went down the hall to the front door. I unlocked it and opened it up wide so when Jamie got off the elevator, she would see us poking our heads out.

She arrived shortly, and I waved her over.

She was a petite young woman with short dark hair and the longest dark eyelashes I'd ever seen. She had freckles over her cheeks and nose and a cheerful, welcoming smile. She came right over and held out her hand for me to shake. "Nice to meet you, Lauryn. I've heard such good things from Caleb. I think you're very important to him."

I blinked. "Oh, um. Really? I guess. I don't know." I could feel my cheeks getting hot as she continued smiling at me. I gestured down at Jayden, and he smiled anxiously up at her. "This is my son, Jayden. Jayden, say hello to Jamie."

"Hello," Jayden said in a small, timid voice.

Jamie beamed at him. "Hi, Jayden. Caleb told me all about you. He said you have the coolest room ever, and maybe when we get to know each other a bit, you'd be willing to show me? Caleb and I are really good friends."

Jamie was smart. She knew Caleb and Jayden had taken to each other quickly, and she was showing my son that she was an ally of Caleb's—someone he could trust.

Jayden smiled back, and this time, it was earnest. "Okay."

"Great!" Jamie clapped her hands together. "I can't wait to hang out tonight."

I stepped aside and invited her in. She followed me and Jayden down the hall and put her stuff down on the kitchen table. I pointed at the fridge. "There are drinks in there, and I made a lasagna as well. It's already baked, but you'll probably want to pop it in the oven for fifteen minutes or so to warm it back up. Jayden goes to bed at nine and has a terrible habit of not brushing his teeth," I scowled at my son, "so please make sure he does. Also, there are movies you can order online up on the television screen. Jayden knows how to use it, and he can show you. Please, make yourself at home. You have my number, right?"

Jamie nodded. "Yes. Don't worry. I can handle this. Caleb wouldn't have sent me if he didn't think it was a good idea."

She knew exactly what to say to give me peace of mind. She was reading me like I was a book with my pages wide open. "Thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure."

I glanced at the clock. "Well, I'm going to head to work." I grabbed my bag from my bedroom and went to my son. I gave him a tight hug and kissed the top of his head. "You be good, okay? Don't give Jamie a hard time. And have fun. I can't wait to hear all about your night together when you wake up tomorrow."

"Bye, Mom," Jayden said as I got to my feet.

I could still tell he was nervous. I hated leaving him like this, but I knew it was for his own good. He had to learn how to trust other people just like I did.

Walking away and closing the front door behind me still hurt my heart.



My bus ride felt longer than usual. I couldn't stop thinking about Jayden and worrying if he was scared or not. I hoped he was having a good time. Jamie seemed like the sort of girl who would be able to get him laughing in no time. If they had dinner and watched part of a movie, the night would be over faster than he could blink.

I also couldn't stop thinking about Caleb. I hadn't seen him since last night, and I was anxious about seeing him tonight. I wondered if he was going to say anything. Would he play it off like it had never happened?

When I arrived at Kadia, I pushed through the doors and kept my head down.

Caleb was standing near the bar chatting with Samuel and the two new managers who'd been hanging around a lot lately. Caleb spotted me, looked up, and gave me a small nod. There was the slightest hint of a smile lingering on his lips, and I couldn't help but smile back.

Then, I ducked into the back room and let out the breath I'd been holding.

It's all going to be fine. He's still your friend. Nothing has changed. Just get changed and put your face on.

I was alone in the back room for the first fifteen minutes as I started getting ready. Then, the other girls showed up and wanted to know everything about what had happened last night.

"Why did Caleb drag you out of here?" Sadie asked.

"Is everything okay?" Milly wondered.

"Does this have to do with that bruise?" Cassidy questioned.

I held up my hands to get them to stop asking me questions all at once. "It was a rough night, okay? And I don't really want to get into it right now. But ... yeah. It had to do with the

bruise. Caleb didn't like it one bit, and he took me home and kicked Cliff out of my apartment. He and I are through."

"Oh, shit," Sadie breathed.

Milly's eyes widened. "That's good. Right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It was scary but good. I needed the push. I wasn't strong enough to kick him out on my own, and Caleb took the bullet for me."

Cassidy cocked her head to the side. "Are you okay?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It was a lot to process. Most of all, I was just so embarrassed."

"Why?" Cassidy asked.

"Because of how far I let things go with Cliff. I never walked away from him, and I knew what he was capable of. I knew he was bad news, but I kept him around because I would rather be with an asshole than be alone. And, well, having access to Zandra all the time was a nice perk."

"The only perk," Sadie muttered.

I smiled. "Yeah. You're right."

Sadie opened the front zipper of her bag and pulled out a Ziploc baggie. There was one blue pill sitting in one corner. "I can help with that. You sound stressed. You've had an ordeal. Let's loosen up with a bit of the good stuff. What do you say?"

I stared at the blue pill. I should say no. I should be strong. Caleb wouldn't want me doing this. He'd specifically told all of us that we had to stop using the stuff. But the temptation was so good. The promise of calm, of desire, whispered to me from that little baggie, and I couldn't say no.

I held out my hand.

Sadie cut the pill into four parts and put a quarter of the tablet in my palm as well as in the other girls' palms. We all took our quarter tablet and continued getting ready.

As I leaned toward my mirror to paint my lips red, Sadie wrapped strands of blond hair around her curling iron. "So, Lauryn. Did you fuck Caleb last night?"

Milly and Cassidy both giggled as my eyes widened. I almost smeared my lipstick. I shot Sadie a reproachful look. “No. I had other things on my mind. Besides. He and I are just friends.”

Sadie clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “That’s what you think. I’ve seen the way that man looks at you. Like you’re a mermaid out of water. If you wanted him, he’d be yours.”

“Well, I don’t want him,” I said.

Was that true? Or was I just saying it to protect myself? I’d never been good at opening up or being honest about what I wanted, and if I sat and thought about it long enough, I knew there had always been something between Caleb and me. It was as intense and as hot as a raging fire, and both of us had been skirting around it for years since we started working together. We’d never been available at the same time.

For once, we both were now.

Sadie finished curling her hair. “I bet he fucks like an animal. I’d let him do whatever he wanted to me.”

“Same,” Cassidy chimed in.

Milly blushed bashfully and shook her head. “He’s fine as hell, but he’s still a co-worker. I don’t know if I could cross that line.”

Would I be crossing a line if I slept with him? I wasn’t sure. The Zandra was rushing wildly through my body, and there was a heat forming in my center, something wild and naughty that I hadn’t felt before.

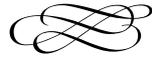
Now, the idea of being beneath Caleb was in my mind, and I couldn’t shake it. I thought of him filling me up, leaning over me, so close I could smell him, taste him.

Sadie giggled and plucked my red lip color from my vanity. She swiped it on her own lips. “Somebody is daydreaming about our sexy Caleb Jones, isn’t she?”

“It’s just the Zandra,” I said. But all four of us knew that was a lie. I’d barely taken enough to feel more than the buzz

of lust in my blood, and that would wear off in an hour or so. But my dirty thoughts about Caleb had been lingering for days. Weeks. Months.

CHAPTER 17



CALEB

I'd known Lauryn was high on Zandra when she first came out of the back room and made her way up to her platform. She'd locked eyes with me instantly, and her gaze was hooded as she looked me up and down from head to toe. When she stood up on the platform, she ran her hands up her stomach, over her breasts, and into her hair and then began her routine.

She was wearing her usual black glittery stockings and a garter that held them up. The straps on her thighs looked perfect for snapping against her skin. The black bodysuit she wore was so tight, it looked like it was painted on. The fabric shimmered as if wet when she moved, and the plunging neckline reached all the way to her navel, revealing plenty of full breast and bare chest.

Lauryn looked like sex onstage. The way she moved sent all kinds of signals straight to my cock, and I hated how turned on I was. She was high. Fucked up. After I'd asked her not to.

It pissed me off.

And I didn't like that it pissed me off. She wasn't my woman. She was free to do what she wanted, even if what she wanted to do was an illegal substance that erased your self-control and changed your state of mind.

"Fuck," I growled. "Just leave it the fuck alone."

I spent the better half of my shift pacing around Kadia trying to ignore Lauryn. It was damn near impossible. She was too sexy and too alluring for me to look anywhere but at her. At the halfway point through the night, it was clear to see the

drug had worn off. I watched as her movements became a little less fluid—still sexy but less languid—and her eyes become brighter. She was more alert now that she had sobered up.

I wondered who gave her the shit. One of the girls, probably. I also found myself wondering if maybe she was the one who kept bringing it in. I sure as hell hoped not. Then, we'd have a whole other mess of problems to deal with.

By midnight, I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to confront her about it.

She got off her platform to take a water break. I met her near the door to the back room and grabbed her by the elbow. She blinked at me, confused, as I led her down the corridor to the main offices, including my own.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. She came in behind me, and I closed the door before putting my back to it. I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to keep my eyes locked on hers. The temptation to soak in the sight of her nearly naked body was crippling. "Lauryn. I thought I was clear when I talked to you and the other girls about Zandra."

Lauryn matched my stance and crossed her arms too. This only pushed her tits up higher. I couldn't help it. I looked. Good god, she was magnificent. Her chest was covered in sparkles, and her breasts winked at me. "You were clear."

"Then, why the hell are you still using that shit before you go onstage?"

"I'm not using anything."

"Don't lie to me. Please."

Lauryn frowned. "I'm not—"

"You are. I know you are. I can tell when you're using and when you're not. It's not as subtle as you seem to think it is. Who's bringing that shit in here?"

She shook her head. "I'm not saying."

"Fuck," I hissed. "Why do you insist on playing these fucking games with me, woman? I'm trying to help you!"

“Help me? I don’t need your help, Caleb! I never asked you to insert yourself in my life and start picking at all my fucking issues and trying to make them right.” Her cheeks were red. She was pissed and maybe a little embarrassed for being called out for being high earlier. “I just want to be left alone.”

“Do you?”

She flinched.

I let my hands fall to my side and sighed. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to bulldoze you. But I also can’t let you keep doing this shit. It’s fucking dangerous. If the cops who are snooping around this place find you doing this shit, then what?”

Lauryn looked away from me and scowled at the wall. “I can figure it out on my own.”

“But you don’t have to. We all need friends, Lauryn. Why are you so hell-bent on pushing me away? All I want is to—”

“All *you* want!” she practically screamed at me.

I slapped my mouth closed. I’d hit a nerve, clearly, and I’d never seen her look so furious before.

Lauryn’s eyes were wet with tears. She jabbed a finger at my chest and came in close. “Nobody ever thinks about what I want, Caleb. It’s always their vendetta. Always what they think is best for me. I’m so fucking sick of it. All I want is to stand on my own two feet. I want to make choices for myself. I want to-to-” she broke off and shook her head and then wiped at her eyes. “Forget it.”

The air around us was tense. We were tense. “What do you want, Lauryn?”

Her hazel eyes lifted to meet my gaze. She was so close to me and so beautiful. Her lips were parted, and there was a speck of glitter on her cheek. Her eyes were painted with deep purples and blues, and her lashes were incredibly long. Lauryn licked her lips. “I want to not feel so alone anymore,” she whispered. “I don’t know how to do that. The Zandra helps. It’s the only thing that helps.”

“You’re not alone.”

She put both her hands flat on my chest and pushed me backward. I found myself with my shoulder blades against the door as she shoved me again. With nowhere left to go, she ended up pushing herself back a step. “Fuck you! Fuck everyone who thinks they know a damn thing about me and how I feel. I am alone. I have no one. No one! The only person who could tolerate me is gone now. Thanks to you. I should never have let you intervene. Cliff is gone and—”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she fell silent. “Why on earth would you want to spend your time with someone who just tolerates you?”

“Because it’s better than there being nobody there,” she whispered.

“No. It’s not. He hurt you. You deserve so much more than that, Lauryn. You’re a good woman and a strong one too. You raised your son alone. He’s a good fucking kid. You did that. But listen to me. You’re better off without Cliff, and you’re not alone. I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

“Stop saying that,” she whispered.

“No.”

Her eyes searched mine. I stared back, willing her to believe I wouldn’t leave her. I’d stand by her and protect her fiercely for as long as she’d let me.

My body took over and started doing things before I was able to stop myself.

I lifted a hand and rested a finger under her chin. I heard her soft intake of breath as I tipped her face up to mine. I leaned in, and when I was just inches away, her eyes fluttered closed. Her lashes cast long shadows on her cheekbones, and I closed my eyes when my lips touched hers.

She tasted like cherries and oranges. Her lips were full and soft, and they parted for my tongue when I pushed her for more. She moaned softly, and I trailed my hand under her chin

to the back of her neck, where I cupped her head and drew her to me with more force.

Her hands rested on my chest. This time, she didn't push me away. She melted against me and pressed her body against mine. I plunged my fingers into her hair and kissed her with more need. It felt so good to have her tongue in my mouth and mine in hers. She was a collection of tastes and smells, and I couldn't get enough of her.

Her skin was silky smooth, and her hair was falling all around us in a curtain of auburn. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and held herself to me as I tightened my fingers in her hair. I gently pulled her hair back so she was looking at the ceiling.

Lauryn's eyes were still closed as I pulled my lips from hers and rained kisses down her jaw and neck. Her breath was quick and needy, and her breasts rose and fell against my chest. I ran my free hand up her waist and traced a thumb along the exposed skin from her belly button to chest.

Then, daringly, I pulled one strap of her jumpsuit aside.

She didn't stop me.

Instead, she helped me by shrugging out of the other strap. Her tits sprang free, perky and wild, and I soaked in the sight of her. She was an exquisite masterpiece. I'd never laid eyes on a woman with a body like hers.

I ran my thumb over her nipples and pinched them playfully between my thumb and forefinger. She drew a sharp breath, and her nipples hardened.

Then, she reached around me and locked my office door.

That was all the permission I needed. I walked her backward until her back was against the far wall of my office. She crushed her lips to mine and hooked her arms around my neck again. I wrapped my arms around her waist, cupped her ass in my hands, and squeezed. She giggled into my mouth.

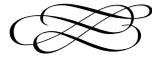
I found myself smiling into our kiss. This had been a long time coming.

She hooked a leg around mine as I trailed my hand down her stomach. I slipped my fingers beneath the thin fabric of her jumpsuit and kept going until my fingers found her wet pussy.

Lauryn rested her head against the wall and ground her hips against my hand. She bit her bottom lip and whispered, “Are you going to fuck me, Caleb Jones?”

I rubbed her in slow circles, and she moaned. The sound rippled through me, and my cock strained against the inside of my jeans. “I’m going to make you forget your own name, kitten,” I said, and then I pressed a finger inside her slippery wetness while she sighed and let her eyes close once more.

CHAPTER 18



LAURYN

For the first time in years, I was glad I wasn't high.

I was pressed up tight between Caleb and the wall at my back, and he had his finger in my pussy, pressing right against my G-spot, his tongue in my mouth. I was completely at his mercy, and I loved it.

His kiss set my soul on fire. I had never felt so alive, so wanted, in my entire life. The way he caressed my tongue with his own was intoxicating, and when he flexed his fingers inside me, I was powerless to the moans of pleasure that escaped my lips.

"Are you going to come for me?" Caleb muttered against my ear.

I trembled before him and nodded. I couldn't formulate the simple word "yes." I was too far gone, too lost to the lust, to say a three-letter word.

Caleb gave me a cocky, sexy grin and nibbled on my earlobe. "Only when I say you can, all right?"

I whimpered.

"I can't hear you, kitten."

"All right," I said. My voice hitched in my throat, but I was pretty sure he understood what I was trying to say.

He pressed another finger inside me. I moaned and clung to him, wrapping my fingers in the fabric of his shirt on his shoulders. "Yes," I breathed, arching my hips toward him.

“I haven’t given you permission yet,” Caleb scolded.

I writhed between him and the wall. I needed the release so fucking badly. I hadn’t felt this good in forever. Cliff had never given me an orgasm. In fact, once he fell asleep, I’d inch to the very edge of the bed as far as I could get from him and put my own fingers between my legs to get myself off. It worked every time. I’d be able to fall asleep and feel the same endorphins Cliff did, but they had to be self-induced. Always.

I was hovering seconds away from my climax, and my body was tight with anticipation. It felt so much better at the hands of someone else, and Caleb sure knew what the fuck he was doing with my pussy. His fingers curled and uncurled, and he pressed in deep, not worried about hurting me.

“Fuck, yes,” I moaned as my thighs started to quiver.

“Not yet,” he grated, dipping his head and pinching the skin between my shoulder and neck with his teeth.

“Please,” I said breathlessly.

He chuckled against my throat. The sound sent shivers of desire down my spine. I pressed my hips toward him. I could feel the bulge of his cock against the inside of my left thigh. I wanted him inside me so fucking bad.

“You can’t hold it anymore?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“You’re sure?”

I bit down on my bottom lip, and he pushed in deeper, forcing me to take the length of his fingers. I moaned. And so did he. Then, I knew I was done for.

“Come for me baby,” he growled in my ear.

It was like nothing I had ever felt before. My body bucked wildly as it took over. I felt my own juices leak down the inside of my thigh as my orgasm rocked me senseless. Caleb never stopped thrusting with his fingers. He groaned against my ear as I came, and once I was done, he pulled out to rub my clit with his thumb. I was so sensitive, I came again, hard and fast.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he muttered.

I reached up to kiss him. I was out of breath and didn’t care. He’d already done more for me than any man, and I wanted to show my gratitude. When our lips parted, I worked my way down the length of his body until I was on my knees between him and the wall. I started undoing his pants.

He helped and hooked his thumbs in the waistband. He dropped his pants and boxers and his cock sprang free in front of my face. He was more than blessed in that department. His meaty head was thick and smooth, and I wasted no time putting it in my mouth. He was sweet and salty, thick and long, and I thrummed with anticipation. I wanted his length in my pussy.

I pushed myself down on his cock, taking as much of him as I could. When his tip was pressed against the back of my throat, I held him there, waiting as my mouth became coated with saliva. Then, I bobbed up and down, sucking him off for all he was worth until he leaned forward and braced himself with one hand on the wall behind me.

I looked up at him as I worshipped his cock with my mouth. His brow was furrowed, his jaw was tight, and the muscles in his extended arm were flexed. He was so damn hot, and looking up at him from the ground only made him sexier to me.

When he pulled his shirt off over his head, I knew I was done for. I’d always known there would be a ripped body under there, but what he revealed was so much more than I ever could have imagined. He was powerful and looked like he’d been carved from stone. Every muscle was defined and bulging, and a thin trail of brown hair led from the middle of his chest down to his navel and then lower to his groin. His hips cut inward and pointed down in a V to the beast in my mouth.

I moaned around his girth when he took my hair in his free hand and guided me along his shaft. He liked it deep and slow. Calm and steady. When he held me down over his dick, I held

his gaze. I pressed my tongue up against him, and he groaned with pleasure.

Then, he pulled me off of him and yanked me to my feet.

He pinned me against the wall. “Do you know how long I’ve been thinking about this?”

I wrapped my fingers around his rock hard cock and massaged him. “Tell me.”

“Since the first night I saw you dance.”

“And what did you think about?”

Caleb pushed my hair off my face. “Devouring you.”

He lifted me off my feet like I weighed nothing and carried me over to his desk. He put me down and stripped me out of my jumpsuit. Then he picked me back up and set me down on the desk, right on the edge. He undid the straps of my shoes around my ankles and took my shoes off for me. They fell to the ground, and he grabbed me beneath the knees before dropping to a crouch between my legs. He spread them open wide, his hands still under my knees, and dipped his head down to run his tongue up and down my pulsing pussy. He swirled around my clit as he ran one hand down my leg and up to my center. He pulled my clit between his lips as he eased a finger inside me. He pressed up, found that spot that drove me wild, and made me come within seconds.

He lapped at my juices and fucked me harder. I fell back on my elbows on the desk and lifted my face to the ceiling. I gasped and cried out when I came again, and that seemed to satisfy his insatiable appetite.

He stood up between my legs and forced them farther apart. His lips glistened with my juices, and he leaned in to kiss me. I wrapped my legs around his waist to feel his cock pressed against my pussy. I pushed down with my hips, inviting him in.

He put his hand on my chest. “Wait.” Then he reached over, opened a drawer, and pulled out a condom.

I arched an eyebrow. “That’s convenient.”

“You never know when the girl you’ve been fantasizing about is going to let you fuck her,” he growled as he tore the condom wrapper open with his teeth.

I wiggled my ass on the desk, and his meaty tip brushed against my clit. “You’re a smooth talker. You know that?”

“I try,” he said. He rolled the condom on and gripped his shaft, pointing it down to push it inside me.

I moaned as he entered me and gripped the edge of his desk. I whimpered as he filled me up, stretching me, and my body welcomed him. His size caused some pressure, and he waited for me to adjust to him.

“You’re fucking tight,” he said hoarsely.

“Does it feel good?” I asked, running a hand up his naked torso. I traced his abs, wandered over the ridge of his chest, and then let my fingers follow the veins in his arm down to the wrist of the hand planted beside me on the desk.

He nodded and hung his head as he began to thrust slowly in and out of me.

I arched my back. He drove in deeper with every thrust. A tightness unlike anything I’d ever felt before formed below my belly. It hardened with each and every pump he gave me until I thought I couldn’t bear it anymore.

I gripped his wrists and held myself up as he leaned over me. I nipped at his bottom lip, and he kissed me with a hunger that had me trembling beneath him. “Fuck me harder,” I pleaded.

Caleb rose to the occasion. His thrusts quickened, and he buried himself in me over and over until that tight knot blew apart. I threw my head back and screamed his name. He bowed his head to my chest and kissed my breasts before drawing my nipple into his mouth and rolling his tongue over it.

I tightened my grip on his wrists and rolled my hips, grinding against him. “Fuck, yes. Harder, baby. Harder.”

Caleb grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back, forcing me down on my elbows beneath him. I cried out in surprise, and he fucked me for all I was worth. His breathing became as ragged as mine, and he kissed and nibbled at my throat until I climaxed again. The fresh wetness of my orgasm sent him over the edge, and Caleb released my hair as he came hard, pumping until he'd expelled every last drop of semen.

We stayed where we were, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He kissed me, and I kissed him back, holding his face in my hands. I tried to show him with my tongue how grateful I was. My body had never felt so light before, and I'd never felt so desired. Wanted.

When we came apart, I hated how empty I felt. The condom was still on as Caleb pulled his boxers and pants up his legs. He buckled them up and stooped to grab his shirt. He passed me my bodysuit from where it lay on the floor.

I ran my fingers through my hair. "I'm sorry."

He looked up at me with a furrowed brow. "For what?"

"For using Zandra when I told you I wouldn't. It just makes things easier, you know?"

He nodded and came to me, putting a hand on my waist. "I know. I get it. But you do see where I'm coming from, right? You have a son. I know from experience that bad things happen to good people. Using Zandra is inviting those bad things in. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you. Or what Jayden would do."

I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my cheek to his bare chest. "I'll stop. I swear."

He put his finger under my chin and lifted my face to his. He kissed the tip of my nose, and then my lips. It was the softest, sweetest kiss. "I'm glad."

CHAPTER 19



CALEB

Lauryn pulled her jumpsuit up her long legs and tucked her arms under the straps. She adjusted her tits, pushing them up and tucking them under the fabric. I watched with fascination and a little bit of disappointment. I didn't want the moment between us to end. It had been so good to be inside her.

She smiled up at me as she went and got her shoes from where they lay near the desk. She stepped into them and bent over to do up the straps. "I better get back out there before someone comes looking for us."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You want me to stay?"

"Can you blame me?"

She straightened and fluffed her hair. "Not at all." Then, she walked around me and planted a kiss on my cheek. "I'll see you out there."

After she left, I stood in my office for a couple of minutes. Then, when I figured she was most likely back on her platform, I left and made my way to the staff washroom to take the condom off and wash up. I locked the door behind me and splashed cold water on my face once I was done.

Fucking Lauryn had been a hundred times better than I ever imagined it being. She was tight and wet as hell, and we fit together like puzzle pieces. I wanted to bury myself inside her again. I wanted to lick her and feel her muscles tighten

around my fingers when she came. I wanted to bend her over and fuck her in her ass too.

“You have a job to do,” I told myself in the mirror. “Get your head in the game.”

I went back out on the floor and did my job. At least, I tried to. My eyes were, as usual, drawn to Lauryn constantly. She consumed my thoughts more than ever, and every time I looked at her, she was looking back.

I caught up with Jack later in the evening at the front door. Nobody was allowed in anymore, as the club was at max capacity, and he was turning people away. Groups of younger, barely legal kids made big fusses about it, and Jack told them all to take a hike and suggested they try other establishments up and down the street. He was a big guy, so nobody fucked with him, and once the line was gone, he turned his attention to me.

“What’s going on, boss? How’s your night going?”

“Good,” I said. It was better than good. It was going great. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Anything.”

“This Zandra thing is something we need to watch out for. I don’t mind users in the club seeing that the girls use that shit all the time, but the cops have been snooping around and shit. Let’s just make sure we’re watching. Close.”

Jack nodded. “Not a problem. Is there anything I should be wary of in particular?”

“No,” I said, maybe a little too quickly. “I’m just concerned that the girls might get busted.”

“Got it. Loud and clear.”

“Thanks, man. No drama tonight?”

Jack shook his head. “Been smooth sailing from the get-go. Everyone seems to be in a good mood. People just want to have a good time.”

“Good,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I’ll catch you inside at the end of the night.”

I slipped back inside and did my usual route. I checked in with Samuel, who was busy pouring dozens of shots for a bachelorette party gone wild. He was raking in the tip money, and I shook my head at him when he nodded at the tip jar. He chuckled and turned his attention back to the ladies who were crowding his bar and begging him to make them more drinks. I heard him say, “Your wish is my command,” and all the girls burst into fits of giggling. The guy knew how to play to his audience.

At the end of the night, things wound down calmly. All the guests left, and we were cleaning up and getting ready to leave by three in the morning. I’d be the last one out since it was my job to lock up the doors. When almost everyone was gone, Lauryn emerged from the back room. She was back in her usual street clothes, tight jeans, white sneakers, and a gray sweater. She looked cute as hell.

She came over to me and nudged me with her elbow. “I’m sorry again that I lied to you.”

“It’s all right,” I said, nudging her back.

She chuckled softly and leaned up against the wall beside me off to the side of the front doors. I was waiting for everyone to clear out before I locked up. She crossed her ankles. “And I wanted to thank you as well. A real thank you.”

I glanced down at her and felt my eyebrows creep up my forehead.

She smiled at my expression. “For kicking Cliff out and doing what I didn’t have the nerve to do. I shouldn’t have let him into my life in the first place, let alone let him stay for ten months. That was wrong of me. Especially since I have Jayden. So thank you for getting me out of a really shitty situation. I don’t know how to show you how much I appreciate it.”

“You already did.” I winked.

Lauryn rolled her eyes and gave me a playful shove. I chuckled, too, and she licked her lips. “I mean it. Is there any way I can make it up to you?”

“I can think of something,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t be a horndog now that you’ve, you know, got what you wanted.”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, that’s not what I meant. I was thinking of something better. You could make it up to me by letting me take you out tomorrow night.”

“Like on a date?”

“Yeah. A date.”

Lauryn turned a fluorescent shade of pink. “Um. Yes. I would love to, actually. But I don’t have anyone to watch Jayden and—”

“Let me talk to Jamie. I’m sure she’d be willing to watch him again tomorrow night. Just for a few hours. Then, you and I can finally get to know each other outside of this place,” I gestured around at Kadia.

Lauryn adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. “That would be really nice.”

“Good. It’s decided then. I’ll pick you up at seven?”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Well, I’d better go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She went to leave, and I caught her wrist. “How are you getting home?”

“The bus.”

I shook my head. “Not anymore. Let me drive you?”

The pink of her cheeks darkened to a red shade, but she nodded.

“Great. Can you wait a few minutes? I can’t leave until everyone else is gone. Then, I’ll lock up and get you home.”

“I can wait,” she said.

We stood and waited until everyone had gone. The last to leave was Sadie, who came out of the back room loaded down with bags of stuff. She looked back and forth between us and made a curious sound in the back of her throat. “What are the two of you doing?”

Lauryn glanced at me then back at Sadie. “Caleb is going to drive me home tonight so I don’t have to take the bus.”

“How sweet,” Sadie said. Her voice was anything but sweet. It said, “I know what you guys did in your office.” I grimaced. Sadie was the last person I wanted poking her nose in my business. I was a private person by nature, and Sadie was not.

“Can I help you carry your stuff out to your car, Sadie?” I offered.

“Sure.” She grinned, letting two of her bags fall off her shoulder and handing them to me. I took them, and she looked me up and down. “Sure is nice having a big, strong man around to help out.” She winked at Lauryn.

“Stop it,” Lauryn said. There was a hint of playfulness to her voice, but there was also a sharp edge to it. Like me, she didn’t want Sadie injecting herself where she wasn’t welcome.

Once everyone had left, I locked up the club and walked with Sadie and Lauryn down the block to where Sadie was parked. I loaded her shit in her trunk, and she hugged Lauryn and said goodnight. Then, she planted a kiss on my cheek and got in her car and drove off.

Lauryn gave me a smug look. “She thinks you’re hot. And she’s jealous.”

“She’s not jealous. She’s crazy. Always has been.”

Lauryn giggled, and we walked back to my car. “She’s not that crazy. She’s just had a hard go of things, and her sense of humor is a little ... strange.”

“I don’t like how she looks at me.”

Lauryn burst out laughing and slapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, you mean you don’t like being looked at the way

men look at women?”

“I regret saying that. I take it back.”

Lauryn snickered and shook her head at me. I’d never heard her laugh so much before. It was music to my ears, and I wanted to do everything possible to keep her laughing.

So, on the drive home, we goofed off. I told lame jokes that surprisingly made her laugh, and she bantered with me all the way to her apartment. It was like we’d been longtime friends. Which I guess we had. All that had changed was that the miles of space between us had suddenly disappeared. We’d been vulnerable with each other, and the walls were down.

We had a fresh start, which was something I knew we both needed more than anything else.

When I parked the car in front of Lauryn’s building, she unbuckled her seatbelt and looked out the passenger window.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s better than all right. It’s just weird knowing that Cliff isn’t in there. It’s weird not being scared to go home.”

Her words made me hurt for her. “I wish I could have gotten rid of him sooner.”

She shrugged and looked back at me. “Me too. But what’s done is done. He’s gone now.”

“True.”

She smiled and grabbed her bag at her feet. When she opened the car door and started to get out, I took her arm and pulled her back to me. Lauryn opened her mouth to protest, but I sealed her lips with mine, cutting her off as she began speaking. She yielded instantly, opening her mouth as I slid my tongue along hers. As the kiss deepened, she let go of her bags and wrapped one hand around the back of my neck. Her fingers wandered up into my hair.

I cupped her cheek in one hand and kissed her until we were both breathless. We broke apart, and she was smiling.

And blushing. How could she be so cute and sexy all at the same time?

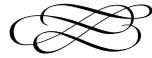
“I’d better go in and relieve Jamie of her duties,” she said. Her voice trembled.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Laurnyn got out of the car and bent over to look at me as she rested one hand on top of the passenger door. “I’ll be impatiently waiting.” She closed the door, turned, and walked to the apartment doors. I watched to make sure she was safely inside, and she waved before she got on the elevator.

I drove off, feeling better than I’d felt in months. Maybe longer.

CHAPTER 20



LAURYN

It had been exactly ten months since I'd been on a real date, the sort of date where you actually put effort into your outfit, your makeup, and your hair. The sort of date where you have butterflies all day long and you can't eat and you have to make frequent trips to the washroom all day long because of your damn nerves.

It was infuriating and exciting all at the same time.

I thought I had everything under control until about six thirty, half an hour before Caleb was due to arrive. My hair was in big foam curlers on top of my head, and my makeup was mostly done. All that was left was to do my lipstick, but I wanted to brush my teeth first like a respectable woman.

As I was looking around trying to find my dress, I started to panic. I couldn't find the damn thing anywhere.

Given my job and the grade of man I'd been in a relationship with for almost an entire year, my wardrobe had taken several steps back from being "classy." It was mostly a mixture of jeans, leggings, and dresses that were too short. Nothing was suitable for a real date with a nice guy who I actually really liked.

"Fuck me," I mumbled as I dropped to my knees beside the bed and pressed my cheek to the floor to peer beneath it. All that was under there was some dust bunnies and a shallow box full of things I hadn't looked at in years. Typical shit you'd find under a young woman's bed.

I sat back on my heels and scratched my forehead. Where would I have put it?

The dress was a stunner, and I'd purchased it a long time ago with the full intent of wearing it, but the right occasion never came. Tonight was the right occasion. The dress was black and simple. It had long sleeves made of lace and a wide collar that showed off my collar bones. It was form fitting to the waist, where it flared out and came to just above my knees. It was the definition of classy, and just the sort of thing I wanted to wear on my first date with Caleb Jones.

"Mom?" I looked up to see Jayden standing in the doorway of my bedroom. He was looking at me curiously with his head cocked to the side. "What are you doing on the floor?"

I rubbed my hands down my thighs. "I'm looking for a dress."

"Under the bed?"

I groaned and looked at the ceiling. "I know it doesn't make sense, kiddo. But I've looked everywhere else, and I can't find it."

"It's not in the closet?"

Sometimes, having a seven-year-old who had no concept of sarcasm was maddening. I got to my feet unable to stop myself from smiling. "Yes. I checked the closet."

"What about the hallway closet?"

"Yes, that one too."

Jayden pursed his lips. "Let me look."

Had he been anyone else besides my son, I would have rolled my eyes at him. He stomped in his typical heel first fashion to the closet and wrenched the doors open with a dramatic flair. Then, he began flipping through all the clothes on the hangers, one after another, analyzing each one with care. "What does it look like, Mom?"

I sat at the chair in front of my vanity and started taking my hair out of its curlers. "It's black with long sleeves. It's

lacy.” I pulled the last roller out and sprayed all my curls with hairspray. Then, I turned in my seat to watch Jayden flip through the clothes.

He paused when he hit the back of the closet and pulled out a piece of black fabric. It was still attached to the hanger, so all he had pinched between his fingers was the hem. “Is this it?”

I stood up as my jaw fell open. “Seriously? I looked right at it like four times?”

Jayden giggled as I leaned over him and plucked it from the hanger. It was just as beautiful as I remembered. I held it up in front of me. “What do you think, kiddo?”

“It’s pretty,” he said.

I chuckled. He sounded about as interested as any boy I’d ever known when I asked them what they thought about a dress. “I’m going to get changed. I’ll meet you in the living room, okay?”

“Okay,” Jayden said. He hurried out of the bedroom and closed the door for me.

I undid the zipper along the side seam of the dress and stripped out of my leggings and hoodie. I slipped into the dress and zipped it up. Thankfully, it was still the perfect fit. I flattened the skirt down as I looked at myself in the mirror.

It was lovely. I felt like a lady in it, and it was the polar opposite of what Caleb was used to seeing me in. I hurried to my closet, running on the balls of my feet, and sifted through my collection of heels on the closet floor. I opted for a pair of patent leather black pumps with red soles. They were sexy as hell and paired nicely with the dress. A little bit of flair—just as I liked.

Once I was satisfied with the outfit, I broke up my curls, shaking them loose and letting them tumble down over my shoulders. I went to my dresser and plucked a pair of dangly gold earrings from my jewelry box. I slid them into my earlobes and nodded at myself. “You’re ready. Bring on this date, Caleb Jones.”

The door buzzer went off, and I rushed out into the kitchen to buzz Jamie up. What a saint. She'd arrived fifteen minutes early.

She came up shortly after I buzzed her in and held up a brown bakery baggie. Jayden came over, and she popped open the top of the bag, bending over to show him what was inside. She'd brought over cupcakes, and Jayden was already sticking his hand in the bag to grab one.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," I said. "I really appreciate it."

"Anything for Caleb." Jamie smiled. "You look gorgeous, by the way. You're going to knock his socks off."

"What does knock his socks off mean?" Jayden asked. His head was on a swivel as he looked back and forth between me and Jamie.

Jamie blushed, and I laughed. "It just means to surprise someone in a good way, kiddo."

"Oh."

Jamie ruffled his hair as he started devouring his cupcake. She rolled up the top of the bag. "Are you excited for tonight?"

I wrung my hands anxiously and nodded. "Yes. But it's been a long time since I went out on a first date. Or a date in general. I'm kind of nervous."

"Oh, don't be nervous." Jamie smiled sweetly. "Caleb is so laid-back. You guys are going to have the best time. Trust me."

For some reason I couldn't explain, I did trust her. Her words put me at ease, and I took a nice deep breath. I blew out through my mouth and nodded assertively. "Well, if you guys are all set here, I think I'll head downstairs and wait outside for him."

"We're good, right Jayden?" Jamie asked.

Jayden had chocolate icing on his cheek. He nodded with his mouth full. "Good."

Jamie and I both laughed, and I kissed Jayden on the forehead before slipping out the front door. “Thanks again, Jamie. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Take your time,” she called after me.

I was nervous as hell all the way down in the elevator. When I stepped outside, the night air kissed my skin and calmed me down. When I spotted Caleb’s black car on the curb, my stomach leaped into my throat. I crossed the grass as he stepped out of his car, looking like the devil himself and in the best possible way.

Caleb was dressed from head to toe in black. His black jeans fit him perfectly and so did the button-up black shirt he wore beneath his leather jacket. He stepped up onto the curb to meet me. “You look beautiful,” he said, looking me up and down.

“You clean up pretty nice yourself,” I said, noting the way he’d slicked his hair back off his forehead. He’d also had a fresh shave, it seemed. Damn, he didn’t fuck around.

He opened the passenger door for me, and I slid inside. He walked around the hood, long legs making short work of the distance, and got in the car.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“Buckle up, and you’ll find out.”

I put my seat belt on, and Caleb drove away from the curb. I found myself unable to look anywhere but at him. The sharp line of his jaw drew me in, and the way his hand was draped over the top of the steering wheel had me pinching my knees together to keep the lust at bay.

I hadn’t slept a wink all night. I’d been consumed by thoughts of Caleb fucking me in his security office.

Now that I was this close to him again, all those feelings were rushing back. His cologne tickled my nose, and I wanted to reach over and tease him. But it was too early in the night for such things. I could be a good girl, the sort of girl a man wanted to take on dates.

Caleb parked the car outside a restaurant called Bruno's. It was a standalone brick building with big windows and a patio lined with an iron fence. It was lit by lights strung up above and floating candles in mason jars on the tables. None of the furniture matched, which lent it a charming, casual sort of feel.

Caleb got out of the car and opened my door for me. He offered me his hand, which I took, and guided me out onto the curb beside him. Then, he wrapped his arm around my waist, and we walked up to the front door. We were greeted by a young woman with a bright smile, dressed all in black. She plucked two menus from beneath her podium and took us out to the patio. Once we were at our table, she pointed to a basket at our feet. "There are blankets there if you get chilly. We've just turned on the outside heaters, so it should be pretty cozy out here pretty soon. Can I start you guys with something to drink?"

Caleb looked at me. "A bottle of red?"

I nodded. "Sure."

This was way nicer than what I'd expected. I told Caleb so.

He chuckled and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, you know, I wanted to do this thing right. I heard this was a nice place."

"You heard right," I said.

We looked through the menu and decided on an appetizer to share and chose our meals. The server brought our wine and filled up our glasses before taking our orders, and then we were left in peace.

"I'm glad you asked me out," I said.

"Me too." Caleb lifted his wine glass in a toast. I tapped my glass to his and couldn't stop smiling as I pressed my lips to the rim and took my first rich sip.

CHAPTER 21



CALEB

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make sense of how I'd gotten lucky enough to be on a date with a woman like Lauryn. Her laugh was infectious, her smile radiant, and the conversation stimulating. We had more in common than the primal lust we felt toward one another.

When our meals were placed in front of us, the sun was just dipping below the tree line of the park across the street. The sky was bright orange with streaks of purple and deepening by the minute. While we ate, little stars began popping up in the sky like pinholes. Lauryn was somehow even more beautiful under the pale light of dusk.

The dress she had on complimented her shape. Her décolletage had my imagination running wild, and the way she had her hair pulled over one shoulder, baring her neck, was pure torture for me. I wanted to kiss and nibble at her soft skin until she moaned my name.

"So," Lauryn said, pulling me from my seductive thoughts, "I don't know much about this Lost Breed club you're a part of."

I paused with a bite of steak raised halfway to my mouth. I put the fork down. "Not many people do."

"Will you tell me about it?" Lauryn asked. She sipped her wine and rested her hands in her lap.

"Uh." I wasn't sure how to proceed here. What did she want to know? *Why* did she want to know?

Lauryn smiled. “You don’t have to talk about it. It’s all right. It’s sheer curiosity on my part. I don’t know as much about you as I’d like to. I just know the version of you that you present at work. The stiff, serious Caleb. You know?”

“That makes sense,” I said. Then, I took a mouthful of wine like it would give me the courage to spill my guts. “I’ve been with the Lost Breed for a long time. They’re my family. It’s usually a pretty relaxed club, but things have been a bit tense lately. Lots of shit going on that we have to deal with.”

Lauryn leaned forward and rested her chin in her hands. Her eyes twinkled, and the reflection of the candle flame danced in her pupils. “What kind of shit?”

“We lost people.”

Lauryn blinked and leaned away. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay. Shit happens. Now we’re just doing what we can to make it right again.”

Lauryn pursed her lips. “By make it right, do you mean get even?”

I felt my lips curl in a smile. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Right now? Yes.”

“And usually?”

I shrugged. “Still dangerous enough. It’s not the sort of lifestyle for everyone. People get hurt. Shit changes fast. You never really know what’s going to happen. But there’s also nothing like having a family as close as the MC. We’ve got each other’s backs.”

“Sounds nice to have that many people who care about you.”

I searched her eyes. I knew Lauryn was battling with loneliness, just like I was. She’d told me so herself. That’s why she’d stayed with Cliff all that time. He made her feel less

alone, or she tricked herself into thinking that for as long as she could.

I still felt alone even though I had my MC.

I shifted in my seat and took the bite of steak that was still sitting on my fork. After I swallowed, I said, “What about you? Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Something you don’t know? I have no idea. I’m not very interesting.”

I waved her off. “That’s not true. You’re plenty interesting. What did you do before you came to work at Kadia?”

Lauryn blushed and giggled a bit. “Don’t judge me, okay?”

“Okay.” I smiled sheepishly.

“I was a dancer at another club. A less upscale club. The sort of place where keeping your clothes on wasn’t an option.”

“Oh,” I said. She’d been a stripper.

She shrugged, and the neckline of her dress shifted. Her cleavage drew my eye as she tucked her hair behind her ears. “I know. But it paid the bills, and it was just me and Jayden at the time. I had to pay for daycare and our rent, and I did that and worked at a diner in the mornings. It was rough. Then, a guy spotted me dancing one night and told me about Kadia, and I make the same amount there that I did working two jobs. And I have my whole week so I didn’t have to worry about Jayden. That’s different now, of course, but with Jamie, it helps. I just need to find a more permanent solution.”

“I’m not judging you, for the record,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re a badass for doing what you had to for you and your son.”

Lauryn blushed. “I appreciate you saying that.”

The rest of dinner went extremely well. We talked about our lives and our dreams. She told me she was saving up to put Jayden on a hockey team. Apparently, he had talked about it all summer. After I’d paid the bill, I stood up and took her

hand. We left the restaurant and walked across the street to the park.

Lauryn took off her heels after we'd been walking for a few minutes and held them in one hand. She wrapped her other arm through mine, and we walked like that for a while. We didn't say anything as we moved deeper into the park. We didn't need to.

It was peaceful and calm and being together was reassuring. A gentle wind rustled the leaves in the trees, and when we reached the middle of the park, the fountain added a soft gurgling to the background.

Lauryn walked over to it and sat on the ledge. She looked around mischievously and turned herself around so that she was facing the fountain. Then, she dipped her feet into the water as coins glinted beneath the surface from wishers who were probably at home cuddled up on their sofas.

She sighed. "That feels nice. I don't know why I wear the most uncomfortable shoes."

"You have no problem dancing in them," I said as I sat down beside her.

She gave me a wry grin. "That's different."

"How so?"

She looked down into the water. "Zandra takes the pain away. I can't feel my feet when I'm high. I can't feel anything, really. Besides the music, I guess. And the ... you know, desire."

She wouldn't look at me. I wondered if she felt ashamed. I reached out and closed my hand over hers on the fountain ledge. "I get it."

"Have you ever tried it?" She asked.

I shook my head.

"Then, you don't get it. Not really."

I sighed. "I guess you're right. But I used to drink to take the edge off. I can't see the two things being all that different."

Lauryn smiled a tight-lipped, pitying kind of smile. “They aren’t.”

I patted her hand. “Tell me more about Jayden.”

Her smile became one of genuine joy. “I have no idea where to start. He’s such a good kid. I have no clue how I got so lucky with him, but I did.”

That’s how I felt about her. “What happened with his father?”

Lauryn shrugged. “Jayden never knew him. I was seeing the guy for about half a year. We fit well together. He was nice and all. My friends all liked him. Then, I got pregnant, and he bailed. My friends chose him.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“I know, but I don’t miss them. If anything, I feel like they spared me a worse fate by cutting the ties before they ever knew Jayden. It would have been heartbreaking if he’d known them and lost them. This way, it spares him some heartache.”

“But it didn’t spare you any,” I said.

Lauryn met my gaze. Her eyes sparkled. She was tearful, but she smiled anyway. “Where did you come from, Caleb Jones?”

I blinked.

Lauryn giggled and dabbed the corners of her eyes with her thumbs. She shook her head and sniffled a bit. “I don’t know why I’m so vulnerable with you. I hate crying. I absolutely hate it. Yet here I am, blubbering like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.”

She shot me a sideways look. “I know. I was just saying. You make me open up. It’s weird. Kind of unsettling, you know? I’m so used to keeping it all inside. This is nice. Talking to you, I mean.”

“Talking to you is nice too.” I reached out and brushed her hair over her shoulder. “I came from a single mother. I know the struggle from the other side. I’ve never admired anyone as

much as I admired my mom. I see her strength in you. There's nothing more beautiful than that."

Lauryn sucked in a sharp breath as I leaned in and kissed her. She stayed perfectly still until I slipped my tongue between her lips. Then, she twisted toward me, her legs pushing gently through the water beneath us, and held my face in her hands.

I could taste the lingering flavor of the wine on her tongue.

Lauryn lifted her left leg out of the water so she was straddling the ledge and facing me. She let her hands fall from my face to my shoulders, and then they wandered down the length of my chest and stomach. She tugged at my belt and smiled into our kiss.

"What are you trying to do, woman?" I asked, putting my hands on her bare knees.

She gave me a flirty smile. "When you kiss me, I can't keep my hands to myself."

I chuckled and began running my hands up her smooth legs. "Me neither."

Lauryn bit her bottom lip. She stayed where she was as my fingers met the groove of her hips and followed the lacy line of her panties to her pussy. She had soaked right through the fabric. I rubbed her gently, and she hooked her arms around my neck.

"We shouldn't do this here," she whispered.

I nipped at her lips. "You don't want me to put you on your back and fuck you right here?"

She shook her head. "No. But I know I won't stop you either."

Her answer sent shivers down my spine. She was giving me all the power. She wanted me to have it. If I wanted, I could bend her over the fountain and fuck her right in the middle of the park.

But I didn't want that. She was for my eyes only.

I pulled my hand out from between her legs. “We should get out of here then. My place?”

“What about Jamie? I should call her and let her know I’ll be a bit later than I expected.”

“You don’t need to,” I said as I got to my feet, offering her my hand. She took it. I helped her stand, and we walked across the cobblestone path. Her wet feet left little footprints the first twenty or so feet. “I already told her we might be a bit late.”

Lauryn nudged my ribs with her elbow when I winked at her.

“You horndog,” she said, laughing.

I grabbed her ass. “You’ll be thanking me soon enough.”

CHAPTER 22



LAURYN

I was acutely aware of the wetness in my panties when we slid into Caleb's car and he drove off down the street toward his apartment. All that kissing and touching in the park had me hot and heavy really quick, and every nerve ending in my body was screaming to be pinched, kissed, licked, and fucked—in whatever order they came.

Caleb looked over at me. He had one hand on the steering wheel and one on the shifter. It was dark out now, and a bit of a shadow had formed on his jaw. He looked hotter than sin.

I let my knees fall apart.

Caleb made a sound in the back of his throat when I reached down to rub myself. I was too horny not to be touched, and he deserved a show. I pushed my panties to the side and was surprised when Caleb reached over and pushed my hand away.

He wasted no time. As we took a right turn, he rubbed my clit. I gripped the handle in the door and watched him as he drove and played with my pussy. I didn't care if anyone saw.

When we stopped at a red light, he eased a finger inside me. Nice and slow. I sighed with pleasure and melted into the seat as he began finger fucking me. I was oblivious to whether there were other cars around. All I could see, feel, and smell was Caleb.

His fingers were still plunging in and out of me after he parked in the underground parking lot of his apartment building. He somehow managed to put the car in park with his

other hand, and he unclipped his seat belt and leaned across me. He ravaged me with kisses, and I gripped his shoulders as he fucked me in the car until I came.

Then, temporarily satisfied, he got out of the car and came to help me. I was a little unsteady on my feet after my orgasm, and the crooked smile he wore had my knees trembling. We walked to the elevator and rode up to his floor.

It was impossible to keep myself from him as we rode the elevator up. I practically threw myself at him and climbed him like a tree. I hooked one leg around his to hold myself against him as we kissed, and I managed to get three or four of his shirt buttons undone by the time the doors opened.

We stumbled out and hurried down the hall to his unit. Caleb unlocked the door, and he let me go in first. He closed it behind him, locked the handle, and faced me.

He tugged his shirt off over his head.

I admired the lean lines of muscle that I'd already seen but was still enchanted by. He was so damn sexy. When he started working to take off his belt, I kicked my heels off. They scattered across his hardwood floors and thudded against the baseboards.

Caleb's belt hummed against his belt loops as he pulled it off. He tossed it aside and closed the distance between us in three quick strides, where he scooped me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He cupped my ass in his large hands as he walked me backward. We swayed with every step he took, and I could feel the swell of his cock between my legs growing steadily bigger.

I kissed his lips and then his jaw and then his neck toward his ear. I nibbled his earlobe as he walked me down a long hallway to the back of the apartment.

At some point, we must have entered his bedroom. I hadn't been paying attention, so I was a little surprised when I found myself being thrown down on a mattress on my back. He'd left the lights off, and the room was dimly lit by the streetlights down below outside the window.

He straightened above me and unzipped his pants. He stripped out of them and threw them across the floor.

I propped myself up on my elbows. "I'm going to need your help getting out of this dress."

"Who says you're getting out of it?" he asked, one dark eyebrow deviously arched. Then, he moved to the edge of the bed, reached up the hem of my dress, and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of my thong. He whipped it off my legs and tossed it over his shoulder before pushing my knees apart. "Maybe I want you to keep it on."

"Don't play games with me, Caleb," I whispered seductively.

He grinned and motioned for me to stand up. I slid to the edge of the bed and put my back to him. He drew my hair out of the way. It whispered across the nape of my neck, and my skin became littered with goose bumps. When he pressed his lips to my neck and drew the zipper down, I shivered.

His fingers slid the shoulders of the dress off me, and it fell down to gather around my waist. It was so tight fitting up top that I hadn't needed to wear a bra, so when he shimmied it over my hips and it fell to my feet, I was completely naked before him.

Caleb continued kissing my neck. I had my back to him, and all he was wearing were his skintight black boxers. I reached behind to massage his bulging cock through the thin fabric.

He nibbled my neck and breathed close to my ear. "Get your ass back on that bed."

"Make me."

Caleb's hands on my waist were powerful. He lifted me up and moved me effortlessly to the bed and then threw me down face-first. I giggled when I got a face full of blankets, and he leaned over me, planting one fist on either side of my shoulders. He dropped his hips and let his cock rest in the groove of my ass. I lifted my hips off the bed and wiggled them back and forth.

“Don’t be a tease,” he scolded.

“Why?” I looked up at him over my shoulder.

He cupped my chin in one hand. “Because I said so.” Then, he was kissing me. Hot lances of desire swept through me from the tip of his tongue to the aching knot of need below my belly. His dick against my ass was maddening, and the press of his body behind me had me all but coming undone.

“I need you,” I cooed.

He sealed his lips over mine once more, silencing my pleas. When he pulled away, he straightened and gave my ass a good slap. I yelped and heard him chuckle behind me.

“Turn over, woman,” he growled.

I rolled over.

“Now, come to the edge of the bed,” he said as he walked around to the right side of the bed. I did as I was told and stayed on my back as I pushed myself to the edge. He had me turn around so that my head was at the end. I was face to face with the bulge beneath his sleek black boxers. He gathered my hair off my face and let it fall below my head. “Spread your legs.”

I relaxed my body and let my legs fall apart. He squeezed my tits together and then ran his hands down my stomach to rub my clit. I reached up and rolled his boxers down. His cock sprang free, and I stretched to take the tip of him in my mouth. I puckered my cheeks and drew him in, nice and slow, suctioning around him.

He groaned as he pushed into my throat and rubbed my clit harder.

I held him for as long as he wanted me to, and then he pulled out, giving me air. He dropped his hips when I was ready, and we continued this for a while. I loved worshipping him with my tongue, and he returned the favor as he slipped two thick fingers inside me and reached up to my G-spot.

I came fast, and after that, Caleb seemed unwilling to let me continue sucking him off. The man wanted pussy, and I

wasn't going to deny him that.

He turned me around and flipped me over so I was back on my stomach. I heard him rummage through a nightstand drawer and tear open a wrapper. He put one hand in the small of my back as he rolled the condom on with the other. Then, he climbed on top of me, forcing me to keep my thighs pinched together as I lay face down on his bed.

He arched his hips forward, and his dick slipped between my thighs and then inside me.

I moaned, and so did he.

He held my hips as he worked his way deep inside me. My toes curled, and I buried my face in his bedding to muffle the sounds I was making.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and lifted my head up. "No, kitten. I want to hear you." He bent over me and kissed my shoulders, neck, and back. All the while, he was quickening his rhythm. I was unable to do anything but let him have his way with me. He rode me, and I gripped the sheets as I inched closer and closer to my climax. My breath hitched in my throat when the moment finally came, and the tight knot inside me shattered into a million pieces and scattered through my body in one euphoric, uncontrollable wave.

I screamed with pleasure, and he let my hair go.

Then, he pulled out, flipped me back around, and yanked me to the edge of the bed. He pushed my legs apart and stood between them. He pressed his cock inside me once again and fucked me on my back as he rubbed my clit.

My view was incredible. Caleb fucked like an animal, and every thrust promised me another orgasm. I held the back of my knees and spread my legs further apart for him. I moaned his name. I bit my lip. Everything was all coming to a head.

"I'm going to come," I whispered.

"Not yet, baby," he growled. "Hold it."

"Oh god."

He fucked me harder. His thrusts became more and more wild, and I was clenching my fists in the sheets to keep control of myself. I was fighting a losing battle. I couldn't control my body anymore. I shuddered beneath him.

Caleb planted a hand on my chest and held me down as he buried himself deep inside me. "Come for me," he grated.

When I came, I saw stars behind my eyelids. Caleb climaxed with me, and we both slowed down to ride out our orgasms together.

Afterward, he pulled out and collapsed beside me. Neither of us said anything right away. It was nice to just be. I listened to his breath, hard and fast until it eventually evened out, and then I rolled into him to rest my cheek on his chest and do something I'd wanted to do for a long time. I listened to his heartbeat.

He wrapped an arm around me and rested his cheek on my head. "It's a good thing I warned Jamie we might be a while."

I looked up at him and chuckled. "A very good thing."

He rubbed my shoulder with his thumb. "Do you have to go home tonight?"

I sighed. "I should. I've never spent a full night away from Jayden, and I don't want him waking up in the morning with me not being there. You understand, right?"

"Of course, I do." He smiled. Then, he kissed my forehead. "Let me go clean up first, and I'll drive you home. Do you want some water or anything?" He sat up and got off the bed.

"Water would be amazing," I said.

When he came back from the bathroom, he had a glass of water in one hand. He extended it to me, and I sipped it gratefully and then passed it back. He finished off the rest, and we walked down the hall to collect his clothes. He zipped my dress back up for me, and before I knew it, I was back in his car heading home.

I'd never wanted to spend the night with a man more than I did with him.

“I wish I could have stayed,” I whispered when he parked at the curb in front of my apartment building.

He put a hand on my bare knee. “Me too. But there will be more nights for that. I hope?”

“I hope so too,” I whispered. Then, I gave him a sweet kiss goodbye and got out of the car. He waited for me to get inside before driving away, and I rode the elevator feeling better than I ever remembered. I even felt better than I did when I had Zandra in my system.

For the first time in over a year, I didn't crave that little blue pill. Not even a little bit.

CHAPTER 23



CALEB

I hadn't seen Lauryn since our date on Sunday. It was now Wednesday. I was itching for it to be the weekend, so I could see her at work. We'd tried to get together on Tuesday, but Jayden hadn't been feeling well, and Lauryn wanted to stay home with him. I respected that and told her to call if she needed anything.

She'd only called once, and it was to say good night because she said she needed to, and she was just following my orders. I'd told her to stop being so cute. Then, we'd talked on the phone for almost forty-five minutes before I made her hang up because she was yawning so much and clearly needed to sleep.

The girl was gunning for my heart, that was for damn sure, and I felt like I was in quicksand. The best kind of quicksand that I wanted to sink into and never climb out of.

She consumed my thoughts on the drive to Ryder's house that evening. I thought about how she'd looked sitting across from me at the table on our date. I could picture that glint in her eye perfectly and that smile resting on the corners of her full, kissable lips. I conjured up an image of her sitting with her feet in the fountain. She'd had red polish on her toes. I remembered kissing her at the fountain and touching her and being seriously tempted to take her right then and there.

She'd have let me.

Instead, we'd exercised restraint, and it had been worth it. The sex at my house was all I'd been able to think about all

week. Her body. Her taste. The way she sucked me off and the slickness of her tight, wet pussy. I wanted more.

But there were things to attend to. Ryder had called a meeting at his place, and when I parked in the driveway, I was the last to arrive. I got out of my car, walked up to the front door, and let myself in.

The night was chilly, so everyone was gathered in Ryder's living room. They all looked up and nodded at me.

"Hey, fucker." Sabian grinned.

"About time you showed up," Jax grumbled.

The others, Derek, Axel, Ryder, and Dani all said "hey" and called it a day.

I took the open seat at the end of the sofa beside Derek. He nudged me with his elbow. "How've you been, brother? Haven't heard from you in a while."

"Good enough. You?"

Derek shrugged. "About the same."

Ryder clapped his hands together. He was sitting across from me in his usual seat. Dani was perched on the back and had her hands resting on both of his shoulders. Every time I saw her, I found myself looking involuntarily at her belly. I kept expecting to see something there, something to visually prove that she and Ryder were parents in the making. But every time, I had to remind myself that it hadn't been long enough.

And thank God for that. Isaac Reed was still at large. The last thing we needed was him finding out Ryder was expecting a child.

"Derek," Ryder said, nodding at him. Derek glanced up as Ryder continued. "I want to address this shit with Rhys before we move ahead. Where does shit stand with him?"

Derek sighed. "He wants in."

"In?" Sabian asked.

Derek nodded. “He wants to be a Lost Breed. He lost his crew, and he knows what we’re up against with Isaac. He says he can help. He’s been through this shit before, and he knows all the things not to do.”

Ryder looked skeptical. “Do you trust him?”

I glanced at Derek. That question had a lot of pressure associated with it. Derek stared calmly back at our President and nodded. “I do. It took me a while to get there, but I do. He’s lost a lot, Ryder. I truly think he’s just looking for a new place to call home.”

“You think he’d be fine with answering to a new boss?” Axel piped up.

Derek scratched the back of his neck. “Yes. He knows what he’s asking for. He knows he won’t be accepted right away. Not to mention he has three of his guys with him that he wants to keep.”

“So we’d be taking on four new members?” Jax asked.

“Yes,” Derek said.

Ryder didn’t say anything. Dani was watching Derek with an unreadable expression. After a minute, she said, “If Derek trusts him, so do I.”

“Likewise,” I said.

There were grumbles around the room. Clearly, not everyone was on board just yet.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think any of us are in a position to refuse help at this point. Look at the mess we’re in here. Isaac’s been dancing circles around us for months. He’s fucked us sideways on more than one occasion. We have a chance to add four more members to our ranks who’ve fought this fucker, and you want to turn them away?”

Ryder was watching me beneath hooded brows. His gaze fell on the others.

Axel shrugged. “I’m not saying we should turn them away. But we should be wary. We’ve been conned before. Now is not

the time to let our guard down. We know what happens when we look away for one minute.”

Dani got to her feet and crossed her arms. “Nobody is letting their guard down this go-around. Isaac Reed is in the wind. He could pop up at any moment. We need to be prepared for that moment, whenever it might come. I find it hard to believe it’s a coincidence. I think he’s playing at something. Gathering support. Who knows?”

“Have you found anything else out on him, Dani?” I asked.

She nodded. “I have enough to put him in prison for the rest of his life. If we take him alive, that is.”

I chuckled. “I, for one, intend on ending him next time I see him.”

“Amen.” Derek nodded.

The others chimed in as well. At least we were on the same page with that.

I sighed. “So, we’re still just waiting, then? We don’t have anything concrete to go on?”

Dani shook her head. “Unfortunately, no. He must know we’re all looking for him. He’s playing it smart and keeping his head down. Who knows if he’s even in the city anymore?”

“Rhys is sure he is,” Derek said.

Dani arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Derek nodded. “He says the same shit happened to him and his boys back in Chicago. They had their run-in with him, and he and his brother fucked them up pretty good. Then, when shit got real rough, he dropped off the radar. They thought he’d left the city too. Then, he struck three months later and killed a bunch of Rhys’s boys. Walked away without a scratch. Went after them when they least expected it.”

Dani’s hand fell to her stomach protectively. “He won’t get the jump on us.”

Ryder stood behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. “No, he won’t. The next time that fucker shows his face, we

put him down. As a team. You boys know the rules. No solo acts. You call me if you see him, and you wait for backup.”

All of us nodded.

“For now, keep Rhys close, Derek. We might need him down the line. Maybe he’ll have a chance to prove who he really is. Actions reveal a man’s true character. Words are nothing to me.”

“Yes, boss.” Derek nodded.

“Now, we wait,” Ryder said before collapsing down in his chair. Dani went and sat on his lap. She curled herself up and wrapped her arms behind his neck, resting her cheek on his shoulder. She looked tired. Damn. She looked really tired.

She must have been terrified. Suddenly, she has this little life to protect, and it came at the worst possible time for her. The MC was in danger, and in turn, so was she. She knew the risks of this job—she had since day one. She also knew how violent and ruthless Isaac Reed was. Her pregnancy would be nothing but ammunition he could use against Ryder if he ever got his hands on her.

Rage raced through me just thinking about it. We had to put that fucker down. It wasn’t an option.

“I fucking hate waiting,” Sabian growled on Derek’s other side.

“We all do,” Axel said dryly.

I was suddenly filled with the urge to see Lauryn. I couldn’t explain it. I was just compelled to see her or talk to her. It was like something inside me shifted. I needed to see her in case I didn’t get the chance. Maybe things were about to get really bad. Maybe everything that had already happened to us had just been the prologue to a much bigger, meaner, bloodier story.

Maybe it was all going to get so much worse.

I swallowed.

“You all right, Caleb?” Dani asking, lifting her head from Ryder’s shoulder.

“What?” I’d forgotten where I was for a second. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” Derek said beside me. “You look like you saw a fucking ghost.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

Everyone continued to stare at me skeptically.

I rolled my eyes. “I just got a bad feeling, all right? Something I can’t explain. I could almost fucking taste it. I know it makes no sense.”

“Sure, it does,” Dani said. She put her cheek back down on Ryder’s shoulder. “Everything is about to change. One way or another, for better or worse, it won’t be the same as it is now. You’re someone who wants to control all the variables, Caleb. This time, you can’t. That’s why it all feels so wrong.”

“How the hell do you know that?” I asked.

She smiled. “Because I’m the same way.”

I sighed. She was right. Not having any sort of control in this situation was eating me up. That’s why I liked working at Kadia so much. I controlled every aspect of the environment in that place. If I didn’t like the feeling I got from a guest, I could kick them out. Hell, I could shut the place down if I really wanted to. I could send people home, call people in, lock the doors, cut people off from drinking any more alcohol—I could call all the shots.

But this. I felt like I was floating in the ocean without a lifejacket. I felt like I was going to lose everything.

Now, I had someone in my life I couldn’t bear to lose.

I wondered if Lauryn had any idea how much I cared about her. Did she know it was eating me up inside? That it was making it absolutely terrifying to deal with anything that had to do with Isaac Reed?

Derek leaned into me. “I don’t know if it’s a control issue.”

Dani perked up at that. “What do you mean?”

“Fuck off,” I growled. “And both of you, butt out.”

Derek chuckled. “I think our Caleb has girl problems.”

“I don’t,” I said hurriedly. But it was too late. The whole room was focused on me. There were smiles on faces that hadn’t smiled in a while—including Ryder.

The President patted Dani’s ass. “Our youngest member has a crush, is it?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Liar.” Dani snorted.

“She works at Kadia with him,” Derek told everyone.

“Will you mind your own fucking business?” I hissed.

This only made everyone laugh. I realized they were latching onto this tidbit of information quite fiercely. Probably because it took their minds off the dark storm cloud looming over our heads. Maybe they needed something like this to alleviate the tension for an hour or two.

I could give them that, couldn’t I?

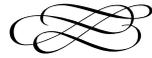
“What’s her name?” Dani asked.

“Fuck her name. What does she look like?” Jax wagged his eyebrows.

“Have you fucked her yet?” Sabian asked.

I looked around at all of them and shook my head. I couldn’t stop the smile that tugged at my lips.

CHAPTER 24



I stifled a yawn as I pulled up my sparkly stockings and fixed them to the garter around my waist. They caught the light in the back room of Kadia, and the little flakes of glitter in the black sheer fabric glittered radiantly. I slipped my feet into my killer black pumps and did up the ankle strap. Shoes with straps to hold them in place were important for a dancer like myself.

Sadie, Milly, and Cassidy were all getting ready with me, and none of them had pulled any Zandra out of their bags. Had Caleb and I not had this thing going on between us, I would have asked them if they had any on them. I'd be desperate to pop half a capsule, maybe even more.

I was exhausted. The week had been a long one, and I wasn't sleeping well because every time I closed my eyes, I thought of Caleb. Then, my stomach would dance with butterflies, and I would lie awake staring at my ceiling for hours, daydreaming about him and our next date. I sure hoped we'd have another chance soon. It had almost been a full week since we went out last.

"So, girl, spill the beans," Sadie said as she pulled on a pair of thigh-high black leather boots.

"The beans?" I asked innocently. I knew she was asking about Caleb.

"Oh, come on. Don't play coy. Tell us about Caleb. Everyone here knows there's something going on between you two."

I smiled. “Well. Yeah. Maybe there is.”

Milly beamed. “Tell us!”

I shook my head and chuckled. “It’s nothing yet. We just went on one date. One little date. I don’t know where he stands on the whole thing, and we didn’t have time to see each other this week.”

“Where do *you* stand?” Cassidy asked while she covered her lips in shimmering gloss.

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. “He’s ... different from anyone I’ve ever been with. He’s kind and gentle, and he makes me feel safe. Really safe. And he’s great with Jayden.”

“Girl, you’re gushing.” Sadie winked.

“Am I?”

All three of them nodded.

Maybe I was. Maybe I’d fallen for Caleb a little harder than I expected.

But who could blame me? He was all those things and more. He was responsible and clever, two qualities that had never been possessed by a man I dated. Not only that, he was a hard worker. He valued family and friendships, and he was always looking out for good people. He had a protective streak in him that rivaled any I’d ever seen.

The back door opened, and all of us spun on our heels to see Caleb stride through the door. The girls giggled as he approached me, and he ignored them. He came right to me, wrapped an arm around my waist, and tugged me against him. “Five days without seeing you is unacceptable,” he said. I could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said.

He cupped my cheek with one hand and gave me a soft, minty kiss. Had he not been holding me up with his other arm, I might have collapsed due to a terrible case of weak knees. He did something to my body that I couldn’t explain. My stomach was alight with nerves once more, but they were the best sort of nerves, fluttery and uncontrollable, wild and excited.

“Hey, lovebirds, quit making us jealous over here,” Sadie called.

Caleb ignored her. He kissed me deeper, and I gripped the front of his shirt. The girls chuckled and made a couple more comments.

When we broke apart, he patted my ass. “You look sexy as hell tonight.”

“Thank you,” I said, batting my eyelashes at him. Besides my usual stockings, I was wearing a strappy leather bustier, gloves up past my elbows, and high-waisted, skin-tight black shorts. I looked a little bit like a dominatrix according to Sadie, but I liked the tough look. It was a nice change of pace, and I knew my regular clientele would appreciate a different outfit. I always made good money on nights where I really changed up my looks.

“I’ll see you out there. I’m two guys short on security tonight. Must be something in the water. Have fun, all right?” Caleb squeezed my ass before letting me go.

“Okay. Don’t work too hard!” I called after him as he slipped out to the front of Kadia.

I could feel the eyes of all the girls on me. I turned slowly back to them. Sadie had her hands on her hips, and one eyebrow was dramatically arched. “Don’t work too hard? You know who you’re talking to, right? All Caleb does is work too hard.”

“He’s like that in bed too.” I winked.

All three of them burst into giggling fits, and I joined in. It felt good to laugh with friends, to genuinely laugh with them. I wasn’t high. I didn’t need to be. I was just enjoying the moment, and the moment was pretty fucking great.

“Come on, ladies. Let’s get out there and make some money,” I announced.

The four of us walked out as the house lights dimmed, and we took our places on our platforms.

This was one of my favorite parts of the night. There was no light on my platform, and in the darkness of Kadia, it would be almost impossible for any of the guests to properly see me. The music had faded out to prepare for a song change, and everyone was brimming with anticipation. This was the start of the night. When the dancers came out and the music got really loud and the strobe lights started, everyone knew it was time to let loose and have a good time. The song started. The lights came up. I could feel the bass in the soles of my shoes as I moved languidly, rolling my hips and arching my back to create appealing lines and curves with my body for the onlookers down below. Men and women alike were sucked in by my performance, and within the first hour, my cashbox was well past half full.

At the first break, I climbed down the stairs off the back of my platform and went to retrieve my cashbox. I was desperately thirsty, something I knew I was only aware of because I wasn't high, and as I reached for my cashbox, someone stepped in front of me.

I'd seen him watching me dance earlier in the night, and then he'd slipped away. He was a big dude. He was tall, at least six foot five, with broad shoulders and thick, muscled arms. There was a smile on his lips that felt a little devious, and he had a shaved head and rather large ears. They had the swollen look that men get who spend a lot of their lives fighting in a ring and taking hits to the ear. Broken cartilage and whatnot.

I gave him the sweetest smile I could muster. "Excuse me, handsome. I just have to go get some water and take a break. But I'll be back out in fifteen minutes."

He cocked his head to the side. "I have something for you."

Ugh. Great. A creep. I'd had this happen before. Men had approached me off stage and done a variety of unpleasant things. They'd flashed their junk at me, tried to kiss me, tried to convince me to flash them—the list goes on and on.

I put a hand on my hip and sighed. "What is it?"

He held out his big meaty hand to me. Sitting in his palm were four blue capsules. Zandra. I took a step back.

He looked from me to the pills in his hand. “Come on, doll. You know you want some. This shit is good. Real clean. It’ll fuck you up just how you like. No charge. Consider it a tip for all that sexy dancing you were doing.”

My mouth was suddenly dry. “No, thank you.” Caleb had done so much to help get me clean. I wouldn’t repay him by going back to my old ways. I also wasn’t too keen on accepting a very potent drug from a complete stranger. That was the sort of shit stupid people did that got them killed.

His brow furrowed. “Don’t play hard to get, baby. You and I both know you want this. So take it. Go on, take it.” He held his hand out closer to me.

Out of reflex, I stumbled back and shook my head. “No. I don’t want it. And don’t call me baby.”

He grabbed my wrist. I tried to jerk away from him. Then, he yanked me to him. I could smell the liquor on his stale breath. “Come on, doll face. I have another surprise for you.”

He yanked me forward and cut a straight line over to the emergency exit. I tried to pull away from him, but he was too strong. I peered over the heads of dancers, desperately trying to find Caleb. I yelled his name. There was no way he’d hear me over the music and the partiers.

We were at the emergency exit door before I had a chance to process what was happening. The bald man kicked the door open and tossed me outside ahead of him.

I tripped over someone lying on the asphalt and stumbled into another man’s arms.

I looked up slowly.

Cliff.

Fuck.

He was smiling down at me nefariously. His grip tightened on my upper arms, and I winced. “Hey there, Lauryn. Didn’t think you’d see me again, did you?”

I tried to look behind me to see who I'd stumbled over. My heart hammered wildly in my chest. Was it Caleb? Please God, don't let it be Caleb.

Cliff didn't let me turn around. He shook me roughly and forced me to look back at him. "It took me a while to decide what I wanted to do to you, baby. But when my brother here suggested we just surprise you at work and give you a taste of your own medicine, I couldn't say no." He chuckled.

I glanced over at the bald man. Brother? I never knew Cliff had a brother. "Please," I whimpered, "let me go."

Cliff and the bald man both laughed at me. Cliff shook his head. "Why would I let you go after what you did to me? You sent your little mutt to kick me out. Couldn't do it yourself, could you? You had to get someone else to fight your battle for you."

"You would have killed me," I said.

Cliff's eyebrows crept upward. "Kill you? Baby. If I killed you, who would take care of me?"

I tried to wriggle out of his grasp as he laughed at me again. "Let me go!" This time, I screamed. And I kicked. The toe of my shoe connected with his shin, and he growled before throwing me backward.

I stumbled and fell over the same person who'd tangled me up the first time.

I scurried back until my back was pressed against the wall of Kadia, and then, sick with panic, I looked to the motionless body of the man I'd tripped over.

It wasn't Caleb. I breathed out a sigh of relief as I looked into the face of one of his unconscious security guards. He'd drawn the short straw on this shift that was for sure.

"What do you want to do with her?" the big bald man asked.

Cliff rubbed his hands together. "Let's see where the night takes us. We have privacy back here. Nobody's getting through that door."

I looked up and over my shoulder as the bald man slid a two by four through the door handle.

I swallowed and desperately tried to stop myself from shaking. I had to keep it together. If I broke, Cliff would only have more fun. And I would not break.

Not for anything.

I grit my teeth.

Cliff chuckled and pointed at me. “Look at that fire in those eyes. Oh, baby, you’re so fucking fine. And you’re mine. You hear me? You’ll always be mine.”

“Fuck you,” I spat.

CHAPTER 25



CALEB

I saac Reed was here.

And he had Lauryn out in the alley with him.

I saw his bald head disappear through the emergency exit door, and then I spotted Lauryn with him. The door had closed behind them, and by the time I'd raced through the crowd and got to them, I'd slammed shoulder first into the door. They'd barricaded it shut.

"Fuck!" I roared. My shoulder pulsed with pain, but I ignored it as I rushed out to the front. I already had my phone in my hand and was dialing Ryder.

His voice was thick with fatigue when he answered. "Caleb? What the fuck? It's almost one in the morning."

"He's here! He's at Kadia! Get the fuck out of my way!" I bellowed as I blew through a crowd of people clustered in front of the coat check. A few people shot me dirty looks, but I didn't give a damn.

"Don't go after him," Ryder said, suddenly sounding completely alert. "You know the rules. Don't go after him alone. Wait until we're there. We just need ten minutes. Tops."

"If I don't go, people are going to get hurt."

Ryder paused. I could hear the wheels turning in his head through the phone. "Can you take some of your security guys with you?"

Ryder asked the question at the same time I was passing Jack and Rick at the front doors. They were checking IDs. I

nodded. “Yeah. I can take two guys. But this isn’t the sort of fight they should be—”

“They’re working the same job as you, Caleb. They signed up for this. Is he on the property still?”

“Back alley. Same place we tried to corner him before.”

“Then, it’s perfectly legal for you and your guys to go get him and keep him there. I’m on my way.”

“All right,” I said. I went to hang up, but Ryder yelled my name through the speaker. I lifted it back to my ear. “What?”

“Don’t get yourself fucking killed, kid. You hear me? If you can’t take the fucker down, get the hell out of there.”

“I hear you,” I said, and then I hung up.

Jack and Rick were both staring at me. I pointed at both of them. “You two. With me. Now.” They dropped what they were doing as I stuck my head back in the club and yelled at one of the coat check girls to find a guy to put on the door. Until there was someone there, nobody was allowed in the club.

I took off at a dead sprint down the sidewalk. Jack and Rick were hot on my heels.

I forked left and skirted around some dumpsters as I plunged into the alley. I came upon the scene quickly and slid to a stop on the asphalt. Jack and Rick drew up behind me, and Jack muttered, “What the fuck is this shit?”

Isaac Reed and Cliff were standing in the alley. Lauryn was on the ground with her back pressed against the wall, right beside the emergency exit. One of my guys was unconscious at her feet. She looked terrified as her eyes swung to me.

“Lauryn,” I said, “You all right?”

She nodded, and her bottom lip trembled. No words came out of her. She was probably too scared to speak.

I glared at Isaac and Cliff. “You picked the wrong place to do this shit, Isaac. This is the end of the line. You’re not getting out of here.”

Isaac smirked and exchanged a look with Cliff, who looked confused. He looked back and forth between me and Isaac. “You know this fucker, Isaac?”

Isaac nodded. “I know him all right.”

I nodded at them. “Let me guess. Brothers? You both have that ‘too stupid to have a real job so I turned to a life of crime’ look about you. Maybe that’s just all the drugs and murder talking. Who knows? I’m no expert.”

Cliff’s mouth twisted in a snarl. “The fuck did you say?”

“Sorry, did I use too many words for you to understand?”

Jack shifted behind me. “What the hell is going on here, Caleb?”

“I can explain later,” I said over my shoulder. “All you need to know is the bald fucker is a murderer. He’ll gut you if he gets the chance. The other is just his weaker shadow.”

Isaac Reed clapped his hands together. Lauryn yelped and flinched at the sound. “No more talking. I’m sick and tired of you Lost Breed bastards popping up at the worst times. Looks like our night just got a little more fun, Cliff. We get to kill a man tonight.”

“No!” Lauryn shrieked and stumbled to her feet. She launched herself forward so she was standing between me and the Reed brothers. She shook her head fiercely as I took a step toward her. “Don’t hurt him.”

Isaac and Cliff looked at each other and started laughing.

“Lauryn,” I growled, “get your ass inside. Now.”

Lauryn shook her head. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Do as I say!”

My order was lost in the deafening roars of Cliff and Isaac, who suddenly leaped into action and charged toward us. Lauryn screamed.

I rushed forward and grabbed her by the elbow as the two men came at us. I had seconds before they would reach us. I

shoved Lauryn aside. She stumbled over her own feet and fell hard on her knees. It didn't matter. She was out of the fray.

Isaac's fist slammed into my jaw and sent me reeling backward. I almost had to take a knee, but I stayed on my feet, lifting my arms to protect my face with my forearms as he struck me again and again, never seeming to tire.

I could hear a battle happening behind me. Cliff was on Jack and Rick. I had to trust they could handle themselves against him. I'd kicked his ass with no problem, but I was a trained fighter. I had no clue what sort of fight they could offer the younger Reed brother.

Isaac was smiling as he dealt a solid punch to my ribs. I grunted with the impact but kept my arms up. He rallied again, his knuckles pummeling my forearms, never ceasing.

I needed a break in his attacks—just a sliver of time to get a hit of my own in. If I could land a hard enough punch, I could buy myself some space. That was all I needed. Space.

But he wouldn't give it to me. He just kept coming, one hit after another. Soon, he was laughing, and the sound of it rang in my ears and haunted me.

Had this been what Hyde heard when he was beaten to death?

A fire was lit inside me.

I let out a furious yell and dropped my arms. I wound back and drove forward. My knuckles collided with Isaac's jaw, and he stumbled back.

I didn't give him time to recover. I went in on him hard.

I used my knees and my boots, driving into all his soft spots, hell-bent on delivering the worst beatdown I could give him.

I didn't realize I was cursing him as I kicked him to the pavement. It felt good to hear him grunt with pain beneath me. It felt even better to see his bloodied nose. He protected his head as I wound back and gave him a good kick to the gut.

Then, Lauryn was screaming my name.

I looked over at her, and it cost me all the traction I had gained.

Something hit the back of my head, and I pitched forward onto my hands and knees. Little pieces of stone embedded themselves in my palms. I lifted a shaking hand to the back of my head. My fingers came away bloody. What the fuck had I just been hit with?

My vision swam, and dizziness washed over me.

Isaac Reed was getting to his feet.

I could hear them chuckling to one another. I tried to look up, but the world tipped and spun furiously. My vision darkened around the edges.

No. I couldn't blackout. Not right now. Lauryn needed me. Ryder and the others needed me to keep this fucker here. I couldn't let him get away.

Pain bloomed in my side, and I toppled over.

They were still laughing. Lauryn was somewhere nearby. She was crying.

Where the hell were Jack and Rick? I hoped they weren't dead. Prayed they weren't. But they'd lost their fight, clearly, and now I was on my own.

Someone stepped toward me, and all I could see were muddy work boots and blue jeans. Cliff crouched down. He grabbed a fistful of my hair like I'd done to him back in Lauryn's apartment the night I kicked him up and wrenched my head up to force me to look at him. I grit my teeth against the dizziness and the pain.

"You don't look so good, champ," Cliff drawled.

My tongue was thick and useless in my mouth. Even if I was coherent enough to think of some smart-ass remark to make, I knew I'd be incapable of speaking. So I just glared at him.

Cliff snickered. "You dumb bastard. All of this for *her*? She's nothing, mate. Nothing! Just the dumb broad that got you killed in an alley. Like a chump."

“Leave him alone!” Lauryn shrieked from somewhere close by.

I willed her to stay away. I wished she would get up and run while she still could. Get to the end of the alley. Find someone to help her. Just get the hell away from here. From me.

“Just do him already,” I heard Isaac say.

Cliff shook his head slowly. “Nah. I don’t want it to be over that fast.”

The last thing I saw before I blacked out was Cliff’s fist hurtling toward my face. Then, there was just darkness. Cool, calm, silent darkness.

Everyone was there. Ryder, Derek, Sabian, Jax, Axel, and all their women. Dani’s belly was round. She was wearing a black dress and rubbing her stomach, whispering something sweet to her unborn child. A tear trickled down her cheek.

Then, I noticed that they were all wearing black. The MC boys had their leather jackets on, and everyone was standing in a circle looking down at me.

What the fuck was going on?

I tried to look around but found that I couldn’t move. Speaking was impossible too. A bit of panic swelled inside me. What was this?

Ryder stepped forward and leaned to the side, disappearing from view for a moment. I was much lower than him and lying on my back. He returned and extended his hand over me. He released a handful of dirt, which rained down on top of me. I tried to spit it out of my mouth and failed. I tried to call out to him. No words came.

The others stepped forward, one by one, and began covering me in dirt.

This was my funeral.

My mind raced. Did I die in that alley? Fuck. When they came and found my body, did they manage to kill Isaac Reed? Were they still plagued by him? Had I failed completely?

No.

I couldn't be dead. They still needed me. Lauryn needed me.

My head started to ache. More dirt was piled on. It darkened my vision, and the last person I saw was Jamie, eyes full of tears. She cried for me, and she cried hard, and Ellie had to step forward and take her by the shoulders to lead her away.

I'm still here, I thought. Please. I'm still here.

CHAPTER 26



LAURYN

I had no idea how long Caleb had been unconscious. Two minutes? Five? Maybe more. All I knew was he hadn't moved in too long, and I was alone with two men who scared the hell out of me.

Cliff was pacing back and forth beside Caleb, while Isaac was crouched behind him, watching his brother walk. Back and forth. Back and forth. Isaac padded Caleb down in search of weapons. When he found nothing, he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "You want me to wake him up?"

Cliff stopped pacing. "Give it a couple more minutes."

Isaac looked annoyed. "We don't have all night. His Lost Breed boys will be coming for him. We need to be long gone before they get here."

Cliff ran his hands through his hair. "You're right."

"And what about her?" Isaac tipped his head to me.

I was on the ground where Caleb had thrown me down. I'd been incapable of moving once the fight broke out. I was terrified. I needed to protect myself. All I could think about was Jayden. I was all he had.

I'd wanted to go to Caleb when he needed help but couldn't. If something happened to me, Jayden would be alone in this world, and I knew how bad that felt. He was my baby. He was my top priority.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and looked back at Caleb. He was facing the other way from me, but I could see his back

rising and falling with each slow breath he took. He needed to be all right. Please let him be all right.

Cliff came and stood in front of me. I looked up the length of his legs and into his cold, mean eyes. He smirked. “We don’t need to do anything to her. Killing him will be enough.”

I shook my head as more tears started to fall. “Please don’t. He only got involved because of me. He never—”

Isaac cut me off and got to his feet. “He was always involved, doll face. Your boy and his Lost Breed pieces of shit and I go way back. He had this coming whether or not you were around. Beating up my brother just added more wood to the fire.”

Isaac dealt Caleb another kick to the ribs. He didn’t move. I yelped for him and covered my mouth. Isaac and Cliff chuckled. When Isaac wound his leg back to strike again, I sprang forward and threw myself on top of Caleb. I buried my face between his shoulder blades and screamed at them to stop.

Surprisingly, they did.

I wrapped my fingers in the back of Caleb’s thin jacket. He was in his security uniform and jeans. I squeezed my legs around his hips and clung to him. I knew they might try to pull me off. I had to protect him from them. If they hurt me, then so be it. They wanted to do worse to the man I loved.

“Get off him,” Cliff growled.

I shook my head, and my cheek whispered against Caleb’s back. I could smell the coppery note of his blood in the air. His hair was matted with it. It was staining the back of his neck. I whimpered and held him tighter. “Please.”

Cliff grabbed the back of my bralette in his fist and tried to haul me up. I screamed and held on for all I was worth. Caleb groaned beneath me. Terror rose up my throat. Suddenly, I didn’t want him to wake up. I wanted him to sleep through this whole fucking mess. Maybe, just maybe, it would take the fun out of it for Isaac and Cliff, and they would leave.

I knew how idealistic that train of thought was.

Isaac dropped down beside me and began prying my fingers open. I fought back. I squeezed Caleb tighter with my legs as he started coming to. I had to stay with him. No matter what it took. I couldn't let them at him.

"Get off me!" I yelled.

"Let go," Cliff hissed in my ear.

"No!"

"Let go, woman, for fuck sakes!"

"No!"

Caleb was moving around beneath me. He slid his arms under himself and tried to push himself up. The weight of me on his back must have been disorienting for him. It didn't matter.

Cliff let me go. Isaac got my hands free of Caleb's jacket, and I lurched forward to cover his head with my arms as the two men straightened. I didn't dare look at them. I didn't want to know what was coming.

Caleb muttered my name.

"I'm here," I said. There was nothing else to say.

How had all of this happened so fast? If only I'd stayed on my platform, Caleb wouldn't be a bloody mess beneath me. He'd be inside, safe, and so would I. These men wouldn't have been able to get to me without being seen by the rest of the security staff, and all of this would never have happened.

I swallowed back the urge to cry. I'd done this to him. He was here because he tried to save me. I knew he had history with Isaac, but I also knew he wouldn't have come into this so unprepared had I not been dragged outside.

I needed to stall.

I looked up over my shoulder at Cliff and Isaac who were sneering down at me. I gathered my nerve. "Just leave us here."

Isaac's shoulders shook with laughter. "Why the fuck would we do that? This is the perfect opportunity for me to

take another Lost Breed out. I'm not passing that shit up. I've been picking them off like flies for months. I've earned another notch on my belt."

"He's a good man," I whispered.

"There's no such thing as good men. Not in this life," Isaac retorted.

"That's not true."

Isaac crouched down beside me once more. I sucked in a breath and instinctively flattened myself more firmly on top of Caleb, who was still coming to. Isaac reached out and traced my jawline and then tucked my hair behind my ear. "You have no idea what you're talking about, sweetheart. Guys like him? All they do is put pretty girls like you at risk. They destroy everything they touch. They're like a fucking plague. Just like me."

"Liar," Caleb mumbled beneath me.

Isaac grinned. "The bastard wakes. Cliff, get her off him. It's time to end this shit and get the hell out of here."

"Stay away from us!" I cried.

"Lauryn," Caleb said beneath me. I clung to him tighter. "Get out of here. You've done what you can. Jayden—"

"Don't talk to me about Jayden right now," I hissed at him. I knew perfectly well what I was risking. I couldn't just get off him and leave him there for them to destroy. I knew it wouldn't be quick and painless. Cliff had been waiting for this moment of revenge. So had Isaac. I also knew they were evil men. Mercy was not in their blood.

"Listen to him, sweetheart. Get lost," Isaac said. His tone was amused. He was entertained by this whole thing.

"No more games," Cliff said. And he reached down and grabbed me by the hair.

Then, another voice rang out through the alley. It was clear and deep and angry. "Isaac Reed."

Cliff released my hair.

I dared to lift my head and peer over my arm between Cliff's legs and down the alley.

A group of men had arrived. They were hard, mean looking guys, all dressed in leather jackets. I knew who they were instantly, and the knowledge brought relief to all my tense muscles. I still covered Caleb, just in case, but the fear I'd been plagued with seconds earlier was ebbing away.

This was the Lost Breed MC.

The man at the front, the one who had spoken, must have been Ryder, their President. He was dark-haired and dark featured with a strong jaw and thick chest. His hands were balled into fists at his sides, and I was quite sure I'd never seen a more menacing looking man in my life.

His gaze flicked to me. I wasn't sure, but I thought he nodded. It was just the slightest tip of his head like he was recognizing that I was protecting his man. It didn't matter. I didn't need approval. I just needed to make sure Caleb was safe.

Cliff stepped over me and Caleb to stand behind us and beside his brother Isaac. The Lost Breeds started walking toward us.

I sat up a little straighter and slid off Caleb's back when I had enough space not to worry about the Reed brothers. He looked up at me, brow furrowed with pain and confusion and stained with blood. "What the hell happened?" he grated.

I brushed his hair off his forehead. "It's all right. We're okay. Can you stand?"

He nodded. I was surprised by this. I'd expected him to be a wreck. But he draped his arm over my shoulder, and we stood as the Lost Breed came and joined us.

There were more than a handful of them. Ryder was at their head and flanked by eight other men. I peered behind them to see the other two security guards, Jack and Rick, still lying face down on the pavement.

Caleb's arm fell from my shoulders. "Go stand over there," he said, nodding at the wall.

“I don’t want to—”

“Lauryn,” he said sternly as he took my face in his hands, “We’ve got this. We’ve been waiting for this for a long fucking time. *I’ve* been waiting for this. Please stay out of the way so I can end it.”

I licked my lips. Then, I kissed him hard, tasted the blood on his lips, and pulled away. I retreated back to the wall and stood against it as the men all faced each other.

Caleb went and stood by Ryder. Ryder glanced at him. “You all right?”

“I’m alive,” Caleb said hoarsely.

One of the men, a tall, burly, brown-haired guy with a thick beard, stepped up and clamped a hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “Well done, brother. I thought you were dead when I saw you.”

“If you’d been a minute later, I would be,” Caleb said.

Then, the conversation ended, and all the Lost Breeds looked down the alley at the two Reed brothers, who were standing shoulder to shoulder, staring boldly back. It was a tense standoff, and I had no idea how it was about to play out. All I knew was, it was going to be explosive, and anything could happen.

Although ten against two made me feel pretty hopeful.

Then, Isaac Reed started laughing.

CHAPTER 27



CALEB

There were four men with us that I didn't know. I assumed these guys were Rhys and the three others he'd brought with him. I was glad to have the extra numbers. My head was pounding, my ribs were burning, and all I wanted was a nice, soft place to lie down and close my eyes.

Derek's hand was still clamped on my shoulder when two of Rhys's guys broke away from us and went to the emergency door back into the club. There was a two by four slid through the handle, and they left it there as they stood in front of it with their arms crossed to block the only other exit from the alley.

The Reed brothers were ours.

Finally.

Isaac was still laughing. Cliff seemed a little on edge beside him like he'd found himself in a little over his head. Which he was.

Isaac got himself under control and slapped his knee. "Look at our luck, little brother. All the remaining Lost Breeds all in one place. Ripe for the picking."

His confidence astounded me.

Ryder rolled his shoulders. "You fucked up, Isaac, showing your face around here again. We've been waiting for you to make a mistake. And here you are. You made it nice and easy for us."

"Maybe this is what I wanted." Isaac winked.

My stomach rolled as my head spun with another dizzying wave. I was sure I had a concussion. Fuck. I must have swayed on the spot because Derek tightened his grip on my shoulder. I took a few deep breaths to get my wits together. For a brief moment, I thought I might throw up, which confirmed in my mind that I did, indeed, have a concussion. But I kept it together and stared straight ahead at Isaac, who lifted a hand and pointed a finger at me.

“I’m not through with you, boy,” he hissed.

Ryder glanced over his shoulder at me.

I lifted my chin. “Come and get me, then. Nobody will stop you.”

Isaac smirked, and nobody said a word.

“Come on, bitch,” I stepped forward and away from my crew. Derek’s hand fell from my shoulder. I spat a mouthful of bloody spit on the pavement. “Or are you just all talk?”

“Jason and Hyde didn’t think I was all talk, did they?” Isaac taunted.

I felt the tension thicken in the alley. I lifted one hand and beckoned Isaac closer with the curl of my fingers. “You’re not getting out of this. Say what you want. We know you’re desperate. The walls are closing in, Isaac. How are you going to go out? Shit talking or fighting?”

I knew all the things to say to get him riled up. It was easy.

Isaac’s lips curled, and he looked at his brother. “This is it, Cliff. You ready to fuck their shit up?”

Cliff looked anything but ready. He looked worried. As he should be. But he nodded anyway. Then Isaac let out a furious yell, and the two of them charged forward.

I braced myself for the impact. I was in no state to fight, but it didn’t matter. I had backup this time.

It turned out that Ryder was too pissed to let me take the lead on this one. He grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back, sending me stumbling into the others. Derek pushed me upright and moved in front of me as Ryder met Isaac head on.

The impact was intense and loud, and both men were locked in an intense battle for control.

Cliff went after me but soon found his way blocked by both Derek and Sabian, who got a hold of him and pummeled him until he was on his knees on the ground and protecting his head. Axel and Jax rushed to Ryder and so did Rhys.

The fight was on.

Once Cliff was down, the rest of us converged on the fight between Ryder and Isaac. I pushed my way toward them. Isaac was a mean fighter. He landed two kicks to Ryder's right leg, but the impact didn't seem to bother our President in the least. He went after Isaac with a flurry of punches, landing one to his jaw and another to the side of his head.

Isaac stumbled back with a hand clasped to his reddening ear. He was out of breath but smiling. I looked over my shoulder. Two of Rhys's other guys were on Cliff, making sure he didn't get away.

I looked back at Isaac.

Then, there was a scurry of movement and panic. Isaac reached behind his back and pulled something from beneath his shirt.

My heart leaped into my throat.

The faith I'd had seconds ago that none of us were going to die tonight evaporated when I saw the gun in his hand. He lifted it straight out. The barrel pointed right at Ryder's chest.

Axel sprang forward, arm outstretched, reaching for Ryder to yank him out of the way. We all knew he'd be too late. He was too far away. We all were.

I had to do something. I was closest to Isaac. I moved as fast as I could, willing the gun to jam, willing something to go wrong. Anything. We needed a fucking miracle.

Isaac's smile grew wicked. His finger tightened on the trigger. A cry escaped my throat. No way it could down like this. No fucking way. Not after everything we'd been through.

Not after Ryder was about to become a father.

Ryder froze.

The gun went off.

The sound ricocheted around the alley, bouncing off the walls. Lauryn screamed, and I slammed into Isaac and took him down to the ground before he had a chance to fire again.

I decked him across the jaw as hard as I could. Derek got to me and kicked the gun out of Isaac's hand. Then, we hauled him up to his knees, pinned his hands behind his back, and forced him to stay there.

I didn't want to look up. I was terrified I would see Ryder lying facedown in a puddle of his own blood much like Jason had the night I'd found him dead in Derek's bathroom.

But I looked anyway.

Ryder was standing in the same spot. No blood leaked out of him. He was perfectly fine. At his feet, lying on his side and gripping his shoulder, was Rhys. Blood leaked out between his fingers, and Ryder stared down at him in shock.

Had he jumped in front of the bullet?

"Holy fuck," I breathed.

Isaac growled and twisted in our grip. I wrenched him up and back on his heels and Derek tightened his grip on his arms. "Don't fucking move," I grated.

"Rhys, you all right?" Derek called out to his old friend.

Ryder bent down and helped Rhys to his feet. He still had his hand clamped over the bullet wound in his shoulder, but he nodded. "I'm good. Motherfucker missed his shot."

I was not the only one who was aware that Rhys had just saved Ryder's life. Ryder was staring at him, still processing what had just transpired when Axel walked over to me and Derek. He stooped down and picked up Isaac's gun that had danced across the pavement and lay a couple feet from my boot.

He walked slowly back to Rhys and put the gun in his hand. "I think you deserve the honors. After what he did to

you and your crew. You should be the one to put him down.”

Rhys stared at the gun in his hand. Then, he lifted his gaze up to stare at Isaac, who was practically foaming at the mouth with rage as he tried to break free from Derek and me. Neither of us was letting him go. He'd had his chance. Had he gotten his way, our President would have been dead. But Rhys was there, and he had proven himself to be a badass motherfucker.

“Take the shot,” I said as Isaac fought us harder.

Rhys turned to Ryder. Then, he held out the gun. “This is all you, man. I had my chance to take this bastard out back in Chicago, and he got away. You boys caught him. The Lost Breed deserves the win. Besides, it was your nephew he killed. Just a kid. My boys were all grown men. They knew what this life could cost them.” He pushed the gun into Ryder's hand.

Isaac started cursing up a storm. “Fuck you. Fuck you all! You no good pieces of shit!”

I grated my teeth. “You're done. Go out like a man.”

Isaac spat furiously at me. Derek held him in place. I lifted my gaze to Ryder.

The President tipped his head to the right, motioning me and Derek to step aside.

I let Isaac's right arm go, and Derek let go of his left. We both stepped away. Isaac stayed on his knees as Ryder lifted the gun. Cliff yelled for his brother. It would do no good. He was next. Fuck the Isaac brothers. They deserved what was coming to them.

I spotted Lauryn through the crowd of my brothers. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks were streaked with tears. I mouthed the words “don't look” to her.

She closed her eyes and turned herself around so her left shoulder was pressed to the wall. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her forehead atop them as she covered her ears with her palms.

She did not deserve this memory. It was too rough. Too bloody.

But we were already here. The deed had to be done.

Isaac ran the back of his hand across his mouth. “Fucking do it! What are you waiting for?”

Ryder clenched his jaw. “For Hyde and Jason.”

The second shot rang through the alley. Isaac collapsed backward. Ryder’s shot had been true and hit him right between the eyes. There would be no suffering, only instant retribution. Cliff started screaming and didn’t stop until he was silenced by another shot. He pitched sideways on the pavement, where his blood leaked out of him.

Rhys hurried over to Ryder. He pulled a kerchief from his back pocket and held it out. Ryder put the gun in the fabric, and Rhys rubbed it clean. “I’ll deal with this. You get your men the hell out of here. I’ve done this shit a hundred times.”

Derek nodded his approval when Ryder looked to him for advice. “He’s good for it. He and I used to do this shit back in the day.”

“Good,” Ryder said. His voice sounded hollow. Killing wasn’t something any of us Lost Breed did lightly. In fact, most of us had never killed a man before. It took a toll regardless of whose life you took.

I went to Lauryn. She still had her hands over her ears, and I lowered them slowly from her head. She looked up at me, tears clinging to her lashes, and started sobbing when I gathered her up in my arms.

“It’s all right,” I said, rubbing her back and holding her like I’d never let go. “You’re all right.”

Derek came over to us. “Caleb. We gotta get the hell out of here. Won’t be long before this place is crawling with cops. Your security boys are coming to. What are we going to tell them?”

“The truth,” I said.

Derek nodded. “I’ll see to it. Get her out of here and get yourself to a hospital. You look awful.”

“The hospital will ask questions,” Sabian interjected as he approached. “Come back to my place with me. Angela will patch you up.”

I pulled Lauryn to her feet beside me. We both swayed, and I braced us against the wall. “Sounds good. Lead the way, Sabian. We’re right behind you.”

Sabian took us out of the alley and to his truck. Lauryn sat in the back with me, and as soon as he pulled away from the curb, I passed out with my head on her shoulder. The last thing I remembered was her asking Sabian if Cliff was dead.

“Oh,” Sabian said, a note of pride in his voice, “that fucker is dead as shit.”

I lost consciousness feeling more at peace than I had in a long, long time.

CHAPTER 28



LAURYN

Caleb zipped up the back of my red dress and ran his fingers over my bare shoulders. I let my hair down, and it fell down my back as he turned me slowly around to face him.

“Are you still nervous?” he asked.

I nodded. “A little bit. Excited too.”

This afternoon was Rhys’s initiation into the Lost Breed as well as that of his three men, Aiden, Owen, and Liam. I was curious to see what it would be like and was only able to attend because Jamie had offered to watch Jayden for me. It would not be a suitable event for children, I’d been warned. Not that I would have brought him anyway. I didn’t want him seeing Caleb until he was healed.

It had been a week since the events in the alley outside of Kadia. Caleb was still a walking talking giant bruise, but it didn’t seem to get him down at all. He had three bruised ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and a face full of cuts and purple skin. Some of it was fading to a very unattractive yellow color, which made me happy because it meant the bruises were on the way out. Before too long, he’d be back to normal.

I cupped his cheek and stroked his face with my thumb. “Are you sore today?”

He closed his hand over mine. “Not bad, actually. A couple aches and pains when I got out of bed but now, I feel good as new.”

I looked at the sling Angela had set him up with. He’d tried to take it off several times over the course of the

morning, and I'd reprimanded him for it. The only way he was going to heal was if he took care of himself. And the faster he healed, the faster things would start to feel normal again.

"I'm better than I look," he said, kissing the tip of my nose.

I sighed, not believing him. He was a strong man. He wouldn't admit if he was sore. He also wouldn't let his injuries keep him from doing certain activities.

Sex was still on the table. I'd tried to keep him from me, but that only lasted three days. Once the concussion pain was gone, he was all over me, and he still fucked with the same vigor as he did before.

"I have something for you," he said.

I arched an eyebrow as he slipped out of his bedroom. He returned with a white box. Little tufts of powder blue tissue were sticking out of the sides. He placed it on the bed and motioned for me to open it.

I walked over to the bed and stared down at the box skeptically. "You bought me a present?"

He nodded and grinned like a schoolboy.

I laughed and lifted the lid.

Folded up inside was a beautiful leather jacket. It was inky black with silver zippers and embellishments. It was absolutely stunning. I blinked at it in surprise. "Caleb. You didn't have to do this."

"I wanted to. Take it out. Try it on."

I lifted the jacket from the box. It smelled heavenly. Then, I slid my arms through it and faced him. "What do you think? Does it suit me?"

"You're wearing that today." He nodded.

"What? No, it doesn't go with my dress."

"Yeah, it does. It's a leather jacket. They go with everything." He put his hands on my shoulders and walked me

to the mirror hanging on the back of his bedroom door. “Look at that sexy girl right there.”

I looked. The jacket was a perfect fit. It cut in at my waist and made me feel like a total badass biker. Maybe that’s why he’d bought it for me. He wanted me to feel the part of a biker’s girlfriend. “I love it, Caleb. Thank you.”

“I’m glad,” he said, wrapping his good arm around my waist and planting a kiss on my cheek. He nuzzled his chin into my shoulder as I stared at our reflection. My eyes were continuously drawn to his bruised jaw and cheek. He arched an eyebrow at me. “Stop worrying about me. I’m fine. It’s over.”

“I can’t help it.”

He smirked. “Let me show you how good I am.”

“No,” I said sternly.

“Oh, come on. We have time. Plenty of it. I’m just a little banged up, but my dick still works fine. So does my tongue.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

I threw my head back and laughed. Caleb slapped my ass, and I wiggled away from him to tiptoe across the bedroom and out of his reach. “You’re supposed to be taking it easy,” I said.

“How about I just lie on my back and you ride me? I won’t even lift a finger. Come on,” he said as he went to the bed and sat on the edge.

I put my hands on my hips. “You and I both know you’re incapable of that.”

“Of what?”

“Of just lying there. Get real.”

Caleb patted the bed. “Come over here, then.”

I lifted my chin. “We’re going to be late.”

“We have plenty of time. If you don’t come here, I’m going to come and get you, and that’s going to cause way more strain on my poor weak body than if you’d just do what you’re told.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He fought with himself not to smile.

How was he so fucking charming all the time?

I went to him. He stood up and slipped his sling off as I let my jacket fall from my shoulders. He folded it neatly in half and placed it on the corner of the bed before he unzipped the dress I'd just put on. His fingers were cold against my bare skin as he slipped his hands inside my dress to caress my waist and hips.

I arched my back and pressed my ass against his crotch. He chuckled deep in his chest as he began working my dress up over my hips. Soon I was pulling it off over my head. All I had on was a pair of red panties. He snapped the straps on my hips playfully until I pulled them down.

I turned to face him. He was watching me with heavy eyes. The air around us felt thick and heavy with sex. I needed him. As soon as he'd hinted at wanting to fuck, I'd known it was going to happen. I was powerless to him. Saying no was simply not an option.

I untucked his shirt from his black jeans and slowly pulled it over his head, being careful of his shoulder and sore ribs. He was tightly wrapped around his midsection to help the bruises heal, and I ran my fingers lightly over the white wrapping, trailing them down to his belt, which I undid before unzipping his fly.

He stepped out of his pants, and I worked his boxers down as I went to my knees.

I ran my tongue along his shaft, and he watched me work. When I was ready, I took him in my mouth and slowly drew him into the back of my throat. He groaned with pleasure, and I reached up to caress his balls. He gathered my hair up off my face for me as I sucked him off, nice and slow.

I didn't plan on stopping. I hoped he wouldn't catch on, and before he figured it out, he would blow his load in my mouth and we'd be able to leave. I'd still be horny as hell, but

I'd have won. He'd take it easy and not hurt himself, and he'd have his release.

He caught on quickly and pulled me off him by the hair. He tilted my face up to him. "I know what you're playing at, kitten. I can see right through you."

I gave him a tight-lipped coy smile. "Can you?"

He pulled me up to my feet and pushed me down on the bed on my knees. He grabbed a condom from the nightstand as I turned over. "Don't move," he said.

"You said you were going to lie down and do nothing. Did you lie?"

Caleb winked. "I just want to fuck you from behind. Just for a bit. Come on, kitten. You know I like bending you over and seeing that ass."

Again, saying no to him was impossible.

I went to my knees, arched my back, and put my ass on display for him as he rolled the condom on.

He rubbed my pussy and slipped two fingers inside me. He fucked me good and hard, making me come fast. Then, he rubbed my juices everywhere and eased his cock deep inside. "Fuck, yeah," he groaned.

I looked back at him as he thrust in and out of me. I bit down on my bottom lip and gripped the sheets beneath me. Then, I started moving back and forth, trying to do more of the work so he would relax.

He did. He hung his head and closed his eyes, turning his face to the ceiling as I fucked him. I dropped down low and bounced my ass, riding his dick for all I was worth. I reached between my legs and rubbed my clit. I could see by the strain on his face that he was about to come.

A devilish feeling rose up in me, and I slowed down. He opened his eyes and looked at me and caught me smiling. "You can't come yet, baby," I cooed. "Not until I say so."

Caleb smiled and grabbed my ass. He drove his cock deep inside me and held himself there. I gasped with pleasure as

pressure built up inside me. “You’re making the rules now, kitten?”

I nodded.

Caleb smirked and ground his hips against me. I closed my eyes and sighed deeply as he pressed into all the right places. “Yes,” I moaned.

Then, I started rolling my hips, and the momentum we found was pure bliss. Both of us were out of breath and moaning within a minute, and my legs started to quiver. Caleb tightened his grip on my ass and then let his thumb press inside my tight little hole.

I came right away and screamed his name into the sheets.

I kept riding him until he came too. Then, we both fell apart, hot and sticky, and lay on our backs on his bed staring at the ceiling.

“Good call,” I said. “I feel a lot less nervous now.”

He propped himself up on his elbow. “Really?”

“No.” I laughed.

He laughed, too, and put his other hand on my stomach. “It’ll be fine. I promise. You won Ryder and the others over the minute they walked into the alley. I don’t think any of them had ever seen anything like it.”

I felt my cheeks start burning. “How do you mean?”

Caleb cocked his head to the side and rolled his eyes at me. “You were protecting me from some scary dudes, Lauryn. You were fearless.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think about it. There was no other option for me.”

He kissed my nose and then my forehead. “There were plenty of options. You just chose not to see them. You were my hero.” He chuckled.

“You’re not a very pretty damsel,” I said as he rolled off the bed and got to his feet.

He pointed a finger at me. “Don’t you dare make any jokes like that tonight. I’ll never hear the end of it if the guys catch wind of you thinking you’re my knight in shining armor.”

“But I am your knight in shining armor,” I teased.

Caleb walked by me to collect his clothes and slapped my ass. “That joke is for the bedroom only. Now, come on. Get your sexy ass back in that dress. We have to go.”

I got dressed as he went to the bathroom and cleaned himself up. When he came back out, he got dressed, and I helped him put his sling back on. He was smiling smugly to himself the whole while. “What are you smiling about?” I asked as I finished tying the sling.

He shrugged and winced. This was a habit of his. He forgot he was injured and continued to do the things that hurt him. I resisted the urge to scold him. He handed me my leather jacket. “Things are just good for once. You know? Good things lay ahead for us. We couldn’t have found better timing to fall for each other.”

“Fall for each other?” I blinked.

He wrapped his good arm around me and pulled me close. His smile was devilish and sexy. “Come on, kitten. You can’t tell me you don’t love me. You used your body as a human shield to protect me.”

I bit my bottom lip and grinned up at him. “You’re right.”

He sealed his lips over mine with a kiss. He didn’t have to say anything. I knew he loved me just as fiercely as I loved him.

And that, without a doubt, was the best high I’d ever had in my life.

CHAPTER 29



CALEB

I hopped up onto Ryder's back deck and went to the cooler beside the barbecue. I flipped it open and grabbed a beer for both me and Lauryn. When I turned around, Sabian was standing behind me with his arms crossed and a smirk playing on his mouth.

"Hey there, Casanova," he said.

I drew up short and rolled my eyes at him. "What do you want?"

Sabian chuckled. "Just seeing how you were doing before we get this thing started. How's the shoulder?"

"Fine."

"And the ribs?"

"Also fine," I said.

Then Derek popped up and draped an arm over Sabian's shoulder. "Hey, hotshot, how's your night going so far? Lauryn seems to be fitting in well."

I looked around Ryder's backyard. Lauryn was standing in a cluster with the other women. She must have said something funny, because Ellie, Holly, and Angela were all doubled over laughing. Evelyn was giggling too. She was much more reserved than the other women, so she covered her mouth when she laughed.

I smiled. "Yeah, she is."

"How sweet," Sabian snickered.

“Will you fucking lay off?”

Sabian held up his hands innocently. “What? I’m just having a bit of fun. Poking the bear and all that shit. You just make it so easy, man.”

“You do make it easy.” Derek laughed.

“And here I thought I’d catch a break after almost dying last week,” I grumbled.

Sabian shook his head. “No such luck. Want me to open that beer for you?”

“Fuck off.”

I shouldered past them and heard them snickering to themselves as I crossed the yard and went to Lauryn. I handed her one of the beers, and we both popped the cans open. Evelyn gave me a shy smile. “Hi, Caleb. How are you feeling?”

“I’d be better if Derek would get off my ass,” I seethed.

Evelyn blinked. “Is he giving you a hard time?”

“Yes,” I sighed.

Lauryn chuckled and put her hand on my good shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Evelyn. Caleb is just sour because he can’t fight back right now.” She ran her fingers through my hair to appease me. It kind of worked.

Evelyn looked over her shoulder at Derek. He’d been watching her, and she must have mouthed something to him because he straightened up and stopped giggling. I gave him the finger, and he barked with more laughter.

Lauryn pushed my hand down. “You’re just as big of a child as he is.”

“It’s endearing though, right?” I asked.

Lauryn ran her thumb along my jaw. “Sometimes. Other times, it’s annoying.”

I shrugged, winced, and cursed myself for forgetting my sore shoulder and ribs. It was a constant struggle trying to

break habits like shrugging and cracking my back. Movements like that were still quite painful. “It’s all part of my charm.”



Everyone milled around the backyard in high spirits until the sun had set. Rhys and his boys showed up around nine o’clock. By then, almost the entire MC was packed into the yard. All of our members had shown up for the initiation, and it was a sight I hadn’t seen in quite some time. With things being so tense, we’d all sort of drifted apart. It was intentional on Ryder’s part, I suspected, because he knew everyone was at risk with Isaac out on the loose.

Now that Isaac was dead, a night like this was more than in order.

We began the ritual at Ryder’s order. Everyone put their jackets on, and I caught Lauryn shrugging into hers out of the corner of my eye as I took up my spot at the top of the line. All the members were there now. We fell into our positions, creating neat rows of five men on each side with a path cut down our middle. Rhys, Aiden, Owen, and Liam all stood at the far end as Ryder and Axel stacked pallets and poured gasoline on them.

Ryder struck the match that lit the fire.

Once it was ablaze and crackling ten or fifteen feet in the air, the ritual began.

Derek stepped forward from where he stood beside me in the front line. He had four leather jackets with our emblem on the back. He stood beside Ryder as the new members made their way through our midst. Lost Breeds reached out and clapped their shoulders as they passed. This was all part of the welcome party.

When they reached the front, Ryder presented them with their jackets. They put them on and shook hands before tossing something that symbolized their old life into the fire.

Rhys threw his old jacket. I was surprised by this, but I guess the guy was desperate for a clean start. If my whole crew was killed and I was welcomed into a new one, I wondered if I'd have the nerve to burn my jacket. It symbolized a lot for us. Brotherhood. Loyalty. Respect.

Aiden tugged a chain off his neck. There was a pendant hanging from the silver chain, and he tossed the whole thing into the flames.

Owen gave a picture.

Liam threw in a small piece of fabric. I wondered if it belonged to someone he'd lost—perhaps to someone he'd loved.

I sought out Lauryn through the crowd as the men faced the rest of the MC to be presented as members of the Lost Breed.

She was watching me.

We locked eyes. She smiled softly.

I didn't know what I would have done if I'd lost her in this whole mess. These men came from another life. There was no telling what they'd been through, what they'd lost, and who they used to be. For all I knew, they had women that they'd had to leave behind.

That hurt my soul to think about.

Lauryn was the best thing that had ever happened to me. She filled a piece of me that had been empty and cold for a long time. She brought sunlight to all my dark places. And she'd saved my life. To be so loved by someone was mind-boggling.

Ryder grabbed Rhys's hand and lifted his arm in the air. The others followed suit, and the entire MC burst into cheers and applause. I clapped, but I never looked away from Lauryn.

As soon as it was acceptable to do so, I cut through the lines of men and went to her. She waited for me, hands clasped in front of her, as I wove and ducked out of the way as the men went to congratulate our new members.

“What are you—?” she started to ask, but I took her up in my arms and kissed her deeply.

She held onto me and kissed me back.

When we broke apart, she was breathless. “What was that for?”

“I just ...” I paused and shook my head. “I love you. I realize I never said it before. But I do. I never want to lose you.”

She held my face in her hands. “You won’t ever lose me, Caleb. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. You’ll have me and Jayden until you don’t want us anymore.”

“Don’t be crazy. I’m always going to want you.”

“Where did all this come from?” she asked. Her eyes sparkled in the firelight. Her body was warm against mine. I could smell her floral shampoo and still taste her cherry Chapstick on my lips.

“Those guys lost a lot, and they just committed to a new start with the Lost Breed. It got me thinking about how I’d handle something like that. Before, I could have done it. Now that you’re in the picture, I don’t think I could ever start over.”

“Me neither,” she whispered. She rested her hands on my chest. “Now, you’d better get back to your boys. They keep looking over here.”

I kissed her one more time. “You’re good?”

“Babe, I’m great,” she said.

I left her to talk with the rest of the women as I joined my brothers. They drew me in, and Ryder thumped me on the back. It hurt my shoulder, but I didn’t say a fucking word. I was right where I wanted to be.

Rhys held his hand out, and I shook it. “You’re a champ,” he called over the loud voices and laughter surrounding us.

“I could say the same for you. If not for your quick thinking, this night would be a lot different.”

Rhys grinned. “My moment was over in seconds. You stayed alive against Isaac Reed for fifteen minutes basically on your own. That’s some serious shit, man.”

I shrugged. Again. Damn it. “I wasn’t alone.”

“The security guys said they went down pretty fast.”

“Yeah, they were kind of useless.” I laughed. “But my woman kept me alive. I wouldn’t be here if not for her.”

Derek showed up and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. He was gentle enough, but the pressure and weight weren’t all that comfortable. He hugged me to him. I could tell he was a little drunk and enjoying himself. “Our boy Caleb isn’t to be fucked with. But that Lauryn. I’d rather fight you than her, man.”

I snorted. “Don’t let her hear you say that.”

“Why not?” Derek smirked.

“She’ll never forget it. Her ego is big enough.”

“I like her,” Derek nodded.

I smiled. “Yeah, so do I.”

Derek ruffled my hair. Sometimes, being the youngest member was a real pain in the ass. He let me go. “You think she’s the one for you?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind.”

Derek threw his head back with laughter. “You need another drink, come on. Let’s get more beers. You coming along, Rhys?” We went up onto Ryder’s deck and each grabbed a beer.

I collapsed in one of the patio chairs and cracked my beer. I took a few greedy gulps and wiped foam from my upper lip.

Rhys sighed contently beside me. “Feels good to be here.”

I looked over at him. “Do you miss Chicago?”

He shrugged. “No. Not anymore. All that’s back there are bad memories. It’s time to make New York City my home. Now that I have an MC, I’m finally heading in the right

direction. Isaac Reed fucked my life up for a while. I'm ready to get back on track."

"So are we," I said.

Derek nodded. "It's been a long battle. Having that bastard in the ground sure feels fucking good. We can finally move on and stop looking over our shoulders."

Rhys stared out at the bonfire. He watched everyone mill around for a minute before he said, almost too quietly for me or Derek to hear, "As long as none of my skeletons creep out of the closet, everything will be fine."

"What?" I asked.

He never looked at me. He continued staring out at the fire. "Sometimes, what's buried doesn't stay dead."

EPILOGUE



LAURYN

Six Weeks Later

I turned off the shower and popped open the glass door to reach for my towel. It was hanging beside Caleb's, which was still damp. I pulled it off the rack and dried myself off. Then, I wrapped my hair up in it and went about my morning routine.

I brushed my teeth, soaked my skin with moisturizer, put oil in my hair, blow dried it, and slapped on some mascara and Chapstick. I padded into our bedroom and sifted through the drawers of the dresser for my favorite jeans. I yanked them up my hips and did them up before grabbing an oversized white knit sweater. I put it on, rolled up the sleeves, and pulled my hair out of the collar. I tied a plaid scarf around my neck and headed out into the kitchen, where Caleb was pushing some scrambled eggs from a pan and onto the plate in front of Jayden.

Both of them looked up at me and smiled as I went straight for the coffee pot and poured myself a mug. "Good morning, boys."

"Morning," they said in unison.

"Your plate is here. You hungry?" Caleb asked.

I sipped my coffee and took my seat at one end of the table. Caleb spooned eggs onto my plate beside the bacon and hash browns he'd already dished out.

"This looks and smells fantastic," I said appreciatively.

Caleb returned the pan to the stove and sat down across from me. “Well, with the day we have, I figured we should fuel up. You excited, sport?”

Jayden nodded eagerly.

We had plans to spend the entire day together. After breakfast, we were heading out to the park to meet up with another family that lived in Caleb’s apartment building. They had a little boy about Jayden’s age, and the two of them had taken a liking to each other. Then, we were heading to the skating rink so Jayden could practice with Caleb.

As it turned out, Caleb used to play hockey as a kid, and he was a spectacular skater. Jayden was falling a bit behind on the team, and when I’d told Caleb about it, he had immediately volunteered to step up and help. I was looking forward to seeing them on the ice together.

After that, we would be grabbing lunch and coming home to get ready for a dinner at Axel’s house. He had the biggest property by far, and everyone was going. It was a kid-friendly event, and nobody had met Jayden yet. I was a bit nervous about it, but everyone had assured me it would be fine. Especially Jamie, who promised Jayden would fit right in.

Jayden finished his breakfast in record time. Once he was done, I sent him off to brush his teeth and get dressed. I reminded him to dress warmly. He promised he would, and Caleb and I were left alone at the table together.

“Thank you for breakfast,” I said as I bit into my piece of extra crispy bacon. Just how I liked it.

Caleb grinned. “Anything for you and Jayden. It’s a big day. He’s meeting the whole clan.”

“I know. I’m still nervous. I know it’s silly, but I can’t help it.”

“He’ll love it. There will be a bunch of kids there. Axel and Jax both have kids. Axel’s oldest daughter is probably close to around Jayden’s age. I bet they’ll hit it off.”

“I hope so.”

“Lauryn,” Caleb leaned forward and rested his hand over mine. “Everything will be just fine. Trust me.”

I nodded. He was right. I was worrying over nothing. I’d faced much more difficult things than bringing my son to a family-friendly house party. I’d been in an abusive relationship, raised my son alone, and survived a brutal attack in an alley from a gang member who wanted to kill my boyfriend.

I could handle this. It was just another change was all, and there had been a lot of those lately.

Jayden and I had moved into Caleb’s apartment two weeks ago. He didn’t like that my son and I lived alone in such a seedy part of the city, so he’d offered up his place to us. It was a two-bedroom apartment, and we would have to find something with a bit more space sooner rather than later, but for now, it did the trick. Caleb had been using the second bedroom for storage, and he moved everything into a storage locker and painted it with a fresh bright green for Jayden.

He’d helped us move all our stuff and as soon as everything was unpacked, I felt at home in the apartment. Probably because that’s all that Caleb wanted.

We spent most of our nights inside, cozied up under blankets on the sofa watching movies while the gas fireplace burned. On weekends, Jayden would stay up with us and fall asleep with his head in either mine or Caleb’s lap. On weeknights, he was in bed by eight, and Caleb and I had time to ourselves.

My life had never been better.

I had stopped dancing and was looking for a new job that I could do during the day when Jayden was in school. Ever since the whole mess with Isaac in the alley, I hadn’t wanted to go back to the club. I hadn’t wanted to go back to that scene at all. I’d given all my dancing clothes to Sadie, Milly, and Cassidy. They had loudly complained when the bag of goods I gave them did not contain my sparkly stockings. Those I had kept. Caleb said he liked them, and I adored them, so they were neatly folded up in my panty drawer for future use.

I'd applied for a few jobs. Nothing made me all that excited, and Caleb told me not to worry too much about it. The Lost Breed MC supported their own, and I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to do anymore.

It was strange having someone who looked out for me so fiercely.

Strange but wonderful.

After years of wandering around lost, I had finally found my home.

The skating rink was the highlight of the day for all of us. Jayden only fell once, and Caleb made it easy for him to skate it off. He learned how to stop and how best to use his skates to get forward momentum. I lingered by the boards in my women's skates for as long as I could before Caleb came and grabbed my hand and pulled me out into the middle of the ice with them.

I hadn't laughed so hard before.

When we were done, my feet sang my praises as the skates came off. We put our shoes back on and headed out to the car to get lunch. We sipped hot coffees and ate paninis at a cute bakery not far from Caleb's apartment and, when we were good and full, went home to get ready for dinner.

I prepared a homemade macaroni dish that Caleb drooled over once it was done. I slapped his hand away when he tried to steal a piece and then wrapped it up in tinfoil. "You can't eat it. Wait until the party."

Caleb whined and sulked. Jayden laughed at him.

Then, before we knew it, it was time to go.

We piled into the car and headed to Axel's house. The property was sprawling and beautifully landscaped. His driveway curved upward to his house, which was all one level

and boasted floor to ceiling pristine windows. It very modern and not at all what I expected from a Lost Breed member.

Everyone else was already there when we arrived, so we parked at the bottom of the driveway. I held Jayden's hand as we walked up to the front door. I stopped to knock, but Caleb walked right in.

"Hello?" he called. I lingered on the threshold with Jayden. Caleb looked back at us and offered me his hand. He pulled me gently into the house, and I peered around, admiring the modern architecture and clean lines of the place.

It was absolutely beautiful.

Ellie hurried over from the living room to greet us. Everyone else was there, milling around with drinks in their hands, and they waved at us as we shrugged out of our coats. Ellie hung them up in the closet behind the front door and then bent down to say hello to Jayden, who was hiding behind my legs.

"Hey there, you must be Jayden. Your friend, Jamie, told me all about you. She's excited to see you," Ellie said cheerfully.

Jayden looked up at me. "Jamie is here?"

I nodded. "Yep, come on. Let's go in and say hi."

Ellie gave Caleb a hug and patted his cheek. "You look good."

He winked at her. "Thanks."

She rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant. Your bruises are gone. You look like yourself."

"Oh," Caleb said.

I snickered at him as we walked into the living room.

We were greeted by everyone with loud hellos and waves, and I smiled brightly back. Ellie walked over to Jamie taking Jayden with her. She immediately dropped to a crouch and started talking to Jayden, which put him at ease. Then, she

called over a little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl. “This is Hannah.”

Hannah clasped her hands behind her back and swayed her shoulders back and forth. She was very shy, but she smiled. “Hi.”

Jamie introduced Jayden to her. “Hannah, this is Jayden. You guys will probably see a lot of each other from now on.”

“Hi,” Jayden said.

I looked up at Caleb, who was grinning from ear to ear. He poked Hannah in the shoulder. “You should show him your playroom.”

Hannah blinked up at Caleb.

He nodded at her. “Go ahead. The adults are going to be boring and just talking for a while. Go play.”

Hannah’s shyness disappeared. She grabbed Jayden’s hand and pulled him along behind her down the hall and through an open doorway.

“She has a playroom?” I asked.

Jamie stood back up and nodded. “It’s amazing. Axel spared no expense. Come on. Let me get you a drink. Wine? Champagne? Beer?”

“So many options,” I said, tucking my hair behind my ears.

Jamie ended up pouring us each a glass of champagne, and she passed a beer to Caleb. Then, the three of us joined the others in the living room. Everyone made comments about how good Caleb looked, and he joked around with them about how he’d always been handsome. I’d never seen him in such high spirits before, which I said to Derek when I found myself standing alone with him toward the end of the night. The kids had all gone to bed in Hannah’s bedroom. Axel and Ellie had set up mattresses for everyone. It was well past midnight, and Derek nodded at Caleb as he joked around with Dani and Ryder.

“I’ve never seen him like this either,” he said. Then he tapped his beer can against my champagne glass in a toast.

“Good work, Lauryn.”

“Sorry?”

He grinned at me. “This is all you. Caleb’s a pretty serious dude. Never cracks a smile or tells a joke unless he’s really happy. Now look at the bastard. Happy as a little clam.”

I felt a smile tugging at my cheeks.

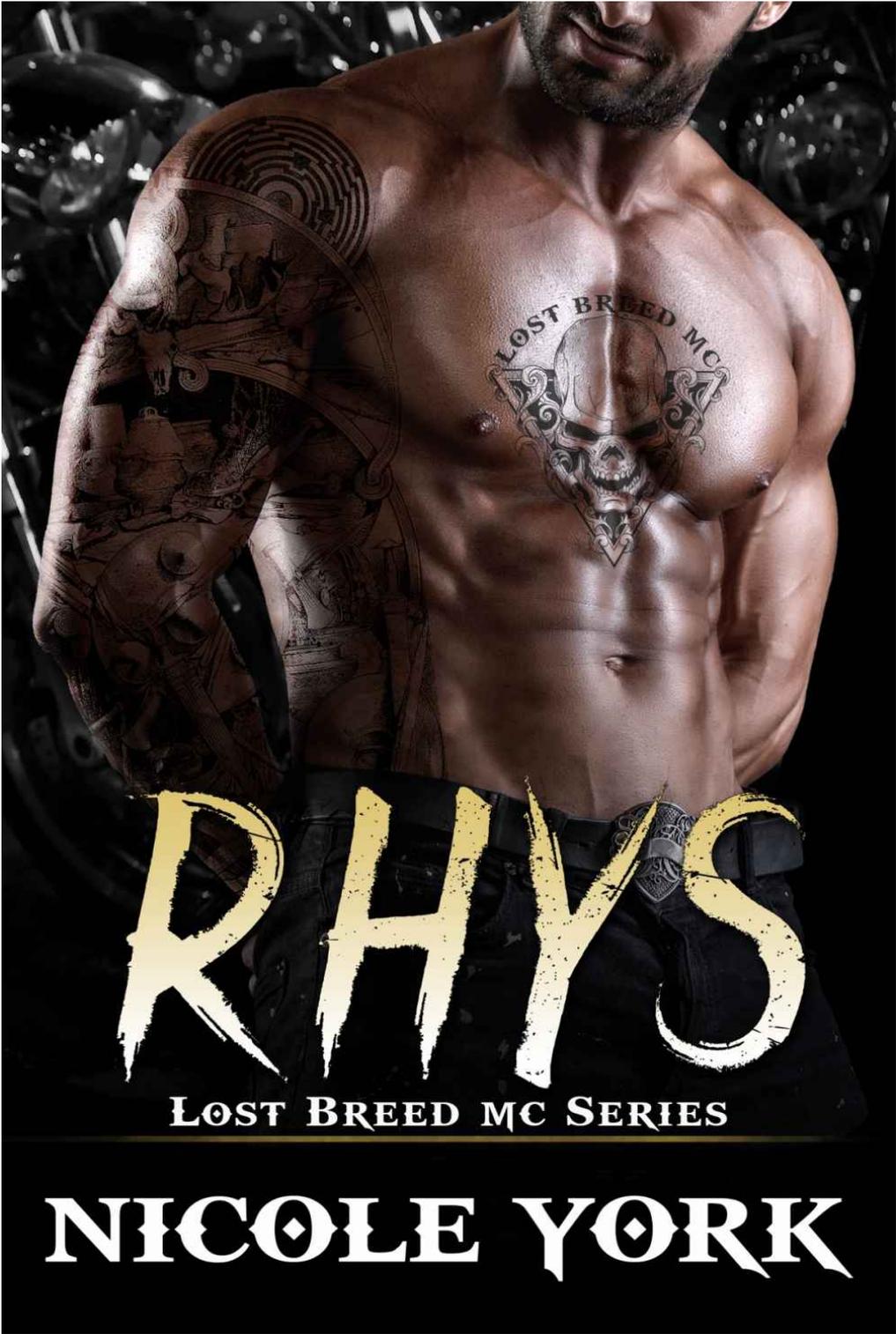
I was just as happy, and looking around the room at my new family made me feel like there was a warm light glowing in my chest. These people were everything I had been looking for all these years, and they had welcomed me and my son with open arms.

“Are you crying?” Derek asked, sounding appalled.

I laughed and dabbed at my eyes, and I nodded. “Yes.”

“Get your shit together, woman. This is a party!”

I took a sip of champagne and smiled up at him. “Damn straight, it is.”

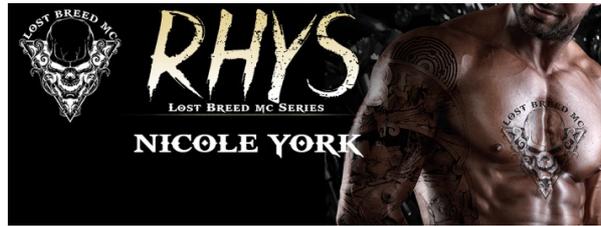


RAYNS

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I've been running too damn long.

Eight months of lonely nights and wasted days, looking, trying to find my place.

And I thought it boiled down to hooking up with a new MC. But it was so much more.

And now, the only girl I've ever loved shows up and needs my help.

She's asking too much.

Her brother's death years before was my fault, and that loss haunts us both.

Just being around her breaks me.

No fucking way I can tell her no, but once it's done, I'm walking away.

She deserves better, and this world I live in is too dangerous for her.

I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her, and my happiness ain't worth all that.

And yet, I can't let her go.

No matter how right it is to do it.

CHAPTER 1



RHYS

New York City was still relatively cold in March. The snow had finally stopped, although there were still massive dirty piles of the stuff tucked up against sidewalks, waiting to melt in the afternoon sun that only hit them for roughly two hours a day. The belly of New York City was often in shadow this time of year due to the shorter days and the height of the buildings, but the snow piles would melt eventually.

For now, they weren't enough to keep me off my bike.

I'd been craving a ride for weeks—months even. My 2018 Indian Scout Bobber had sat in my garage, lonesome and cold, waiting for me to get back in the saddle as soon as winter passed.

And it finally had.

Now I was weaving through traffic, leaning side to side as I swerved between cars and wove between the painted lines on the road. Cars honked their horns at me, and I ignored them. They were just jealous that they had to endure the bumper to bumper Saturday afternoon traffic in the Big Apple.

Chicago had been home to me for the last eight years, and coming back to New York City just over six months ago had been an adjustment. The life I built for myself in Chicago had been torn to shreds by the Reed brothers, who killed more than half of my crew and pushed me out of my city.

I'd left many things behind. And people.

I took a sharp right turn and glanced over my shoulder. My three old crew members who had come with me from Chicago

were doing their best to keep up with me, but they had nothing on my riding skills. It infuriated them and entertained me to no end. The only man I'd ever met who was an equal rider to me was my best friend Max Connolly.

He was one of the people I'd left behind in Chicago.

In a casket six feet under.

I opened up on the throttle. The engine roared between my legs, and the front tire left the pavement for a good couple of seconds. For a three-block stretch, there were no cars in front of me. Nothing to slow me down. I rode hard and fast until I came upon tail lights at a busy intersection. I geared down, cut between two taxis, and rode the line to the front of the red light where I put one foot down to keep the bike up.

The car on my right was a sleek little Mazda R8. The windows were blacked out, so when the driver's side one rolled down, I looked over.

A young kid, probably no more than twenty, nodded at me and revved his engine. He had friends in the car. I could hear them egging him on, encouraging him to wipe the pavement with my ass.

I leaned down over the handlebars and fixed my gaze on the opposite street light. I watched as it turned yellow and then red.

As soon as our light turned green, I opened my Indian Scout up all the way. The back tire slid sideways, burned a bit of rubber, and then caught traction and launched me forward. The Mazda was peeling through the intersection, and as soon as the kid shifted gears, I blew past him, cut in front of him, and left him far behind in my mirrors as I headed out of the downtown core to the bar me and my crew had been frequenting recently.

It was a cozy place called Angie's, and it was run by a plump woman with curly brown hair named, unsurprisingly, Angie. Her cheeks were always flushed from being a busybody all the time. She went from mixing drinks to serving tables to taking payments, and then she'd be lending a hand to

any of her staff who needed her. It was a family-run business. Her three daughters worked as waitresses, and her husband was the head chef. The food was amazing, the atmosphere was friendly, if not a little low class, and sitting by the massive stone fireplace was perfect after a chilly afternoon ride.

I was the first to arrive, which didn't surprise me, seeing as how I'd left the others far behind. I swung a leg over my bike and brought my helmet inside with me. The hostess greeted me with a friendly smile and shivered when the cool air from outside hit her.

"You've been out riding in this weather?" she asked, her brows drawn together as she grabbed a menu from under her little podium.

I grinned. "You bet. As long as it's not snowing, it's riding weather. And there'll be four of us actually. Thanks."

She took three more menus and brought me over to the fireplace. She set the menus down, returned a couple minutes later with four glasses of water, and told me the waitress would come for our orders once my companions arrived.

Companions. A strange word.

Aiden, Liam, and Owen showed up a good seven or eight minutes after me, which made me grin like a prideful idiot as they made their way between the tables to come sit down with me. They pulled out their chairs and did their best to ignore my smug look.

Aiden opened his menu and peered down at it. After a minute, he looked up at me and scowled. "Stop gloating."

"He can't," Owen said dryly. "He's a smug bastard by nature."

I shrugged and mindlessly began playing with the pepper shaker on the table. "You're just jealous that you don't have the balls to ride like you mean it."

Liam nodded. "I won't lie. I wish I could ride like that. We caught up with that kid you raced in the Mazda. His buddies were ripping him a new one."

“He shouldn’t be racing on busy streets like that anyway,” I said.

“Hypocrite,” Aiden said.

“Maybe. But I have the skill to back it up. That kid still had pimples and hadn’t grown into his own nose yet.”

“I still get pimples,” Liam muttered. He was the youngest of the four of us, and back in Chicago, he’d been the youngest member in my MC, the Red Rogues. He was only twenty-four and, as he said, was still victim to the occasional pimple.

Our waitress came and took our orders as promised. We all ordered different burgers with assortments of delicious toppings, including eggs, fried onions, coleslaw, pickles, spiced relish, mushrooms, bacon, and of course, cheese. It would be a feast fit for kings. We also ordered a pitcher of beer to the table which arrived quickly.

I leaned forward and poured us all a glass. My first sip was chilled to perfection. Nothing beat a nice cold beer after a ride, regardless of the weather.

Aiden put his beer down and leaned back in his chair, which creaked beneath his weight. The guy was built like an ox, much like his older cousin, Max Connolly, was. The one in the grave back in Chicago. “Have you spoken to Ryder recently?” Aiden asked.

His question was pointed at me, so I shook my head. “Not in a week or so. Last I heard, he was pretty overwhelmed. Dani has him putting the finishing touches on the nursery.”

Owen snorted. “Now that’s a sight I’d pay to see. Our president hanging shelves and putting up curtains. You think she’ll get him to paint an animal wall mural, too?”

We all snickered at that, but I shook my head. “I meant finishing touches as in furniture. All the hard stuff has been done for months. It’s just the crib and a few odds and ends left, I think.”

“How was Dani last time you talked to Ryder?” Liam asked.

“She’s good. Very pregnant, naturally.”

Liam nodded. “Naturally.”

“I think she’s ready for the whole pregnancy thing to be over.” I tapped my finger against the side of my beer glass and shook my head. Dani’s belly had been swollen to the size of a basketball last time I saw her. She was smiling and happy, but she walked with a serious waddle, and I could tell she was more than a little uncomfortable. Ryder had catered to her every need. “Women are incredible creatures.”

Owen’s eyebrows lifted dramatically. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

He still looked skeptical as he sipped his beer.

Aiden chimed in to move the conversation along. “You know, Owen, this is the sort of place that back in the day, you would have found some asshole to pick a fight with.”

Owen chuckled. “You could say that again.”

“Thank God that shit is behind us,” I said.

Owen shrugged. “It was fun while it lasted.”

“Not for me,” I grumbled.

“Or me,” Aiden agreed. “It was either me or Rhys or Max who’d have to talk you down and spare some poor bastard from getting all his teeth knocked out.”

I flinched when Max’s name came out of his little cousin’s mouth. I thought I’d be used to him not being here by now. He’d been dead for eight months. But I wasn’t. I was far from it. There was still so much guilt eating at me that every time we spoke of him, all I could think was that he should still be here, sitting across from me, giving all of us shit for hitching our wagons to another MC.

Owen scratched at the stubble on his chin and nodded. “Sometimes, Max would get in on the action with me.”

“Only if he’d had a few too many beers,” Aiden said.

“True,” Owen said. “But he’d get a few punches off nonetheless. He was one hell of a fighter.”

And then the same silence that always followed a brief conversation like this about Max or any of the other guys we’d lost settled in around us. The air was thick with it.

I stared at my beer and turned my glass around in a slow circle, tracing it through the condensation that had gathered on the table top.

I lifted my beer up. “To Max.”

Nobody else said anything as they lifted their beers as well and drank.

A minute passed and was followed by a couple more. When our food arrived, we were all grateful for the distraction, and soon, conversation started to flow again. The burgers were messy and dripped sauce all over the place. We had to lick our fingers clean afterward.

The meal was delicious.

I covered our tab and thanked Angie before we all headed back out to the parking lot. The cold afternoon air nipped at my skin as I pulled on my riding gloves.

Aiden stopped beside me as I made to put my helmet on. “Do you still, you know, talk to Quinn?”

“Quinn?” I asked dumbly.

“Yeah, I just, I don’t know,” Aiden said a little sheepishly before he scratched the back of his neck. “I just wonder how she’s doing back in Chicago. She was pissed when we left. And Max hadn’t been gone long. I worry about her is all, I guess.”

“Then you should call her, Aiden. She’s your cousin, after all. Not mine.”

Aiden nodded. “Yeah. Maybe I will.”

I pulled my helmet on and got on my bike.

Quinn Connolly. The only girl I’d ever loved. The only girl who made me feel like I was more than just a criminal walking

a fine line with the law.

And Max's baby sister.

CHAPTER 2



QUINN

“You sure you don’t want me to hang back and help you close up shop?” Diana, my co-worker at the tattoo parlor, asked as she paused at the front door.

She was illuminated by the bright pink neon sign outside our window that read “Raven Ink and Piercings”, and it made her look rather witchlike with her black hair and dark eyes.

“I’m good, I promise.” I smiled as I popped open the cash drawer to count the cash. “You have that handsome man of yours at home waiting for you. This will only take me fifteen minutes.”

Diana smiled. “I owe you coffee.”

“I’m off tomorrow, but I’ll be here Monday. You know what I like?”

Diana nodded as she unlocked the door and pushed it open. She gathered her black fleece jacket up tighter around her neck to ward off the cold night air. “Yep. An Americano with a pump of vanilla, right?”

I winked. “You got it.”

“Goodnight, Quinn. Thanks again!”

I walked around the counter and locked the front door behind her. I stayed where I was and watched out the windows until she got in her car and drove away. Sometimes, this place attracted some folks who were a little rough around the edges, and a woman alone in a parking lot invited unwanted attention. Diana looked tough on the outside, with her broad shoulders

and arms inked up with tattoos in royal blues, blacks, and purples, but she was really just a sweet young woman who hated confrontation.

I, on the other hand, had a streak for rising to the occasion and holding my own in a fight. I didn't back down. It was a blessing and a curse.

I went back to counting the money and locked up the deposit in our safe in the break room to bring to the bank the following morning. Then I gave the shop a quick onceover to make sure everything was as it should be.

It was basically immaculate. It was a female-run tattoo parlor with an edgy but modern vibe. The chairs were black leather, and the brick walls had been painted black when the place was purchased by our owner, Katrina. Industrial-style lighting had been installed in the ceiling, and various prints of all the artists at Raven Ink had their sketches plastered on the walls.

This place was my second home.

I grabbed the keys to my bike and my leather jacket from the hook inside my locker. I shrugged it on and flicked off the lights on my way out. After locking up behind me, I crossed the parking lot to my bike.

"Hello, gorgeous." I grinned as I pulled my helmet on. I rode a glossy black 2016 Triumph, and I had called her Victoria—inspired from the word "victory," another word for "triumph." I'd named every vehicle I ever owned, but none of them were as precious to me as Victoria. I'd wanted her for a long time.

I swung my leg over the seat and went to turn the bike on when I felt my phone vibrating in the back pocket of my jeans. I put my feet down to balance the bike, grabbed my phone, and saw the name "Nancy" flash across my screen.

Nancy was my best friend and possibly the only thing in this world that I cared more about than my bike.

Give or take a few others.

Well, *one* other.

I pulled my helmet off and hung it on my handlebars before answering the phone. “Hey, girl,” I said.

“Hey,” Nancy said, but I could barely hear her. She was somewhere incredibly loud, like a bar or a concert or something.

“I can barely hear you, Nancy.”

“Sorry. I’m at the Witch. Are you off work?”

“Yes.”

“Can you come pick me up?” Nancy asked.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I just... I’m here with Kyle, and he’s wasted. He wants to drive home after he and his buddies finish this last drink, and I don’t want to get in a car with him.”

“Stay where you are. I’m on my way, okay? I just need ten minutes, tops. Do not get in that car with him, Nancy. No matter what. Okay?”

“Okay. Just hurry. Please.”

I hung up, slid my phone in my back pocket, and put my helmet back on. I was peeling out of the parking lot and racing down the street before I realized I hadn’t even done my helmet up.

This guy that Nancy had been seeing, Kyle, was a real piece of work. He’d put a bad taste in my mouth the very first time I met him, and try as I might, I couldn’t seem to get Nancy to see what I saw in him. She was enamored with his smile and bright blue eyes. I understood that. But when a person showed you their true colors, it didn’t matter how pretty their eyes were or how cut their body was. He was an asshole, plain and simple, and my girl deserved better than that.

I got to the Witch in eight minutes and went inside as I took off my helmet. I tucked it under my arm and peered around. The place was packed. Saturdays were their busy nights, and after ten o’clock, they moved some of their tables aside to make room for a dance floor. That space was currently

occupied by at least fifty people who were all swaying to the loud music in the bar.

I cut around the edge of the dance floor and spotted Kyle at the bar. He was with two other guys, and they were tossing back shots of what I could only assume was tequila. Fuck him for thinking he could drink himself stupid and then drive Nancy home. Fuck him for being the sort of person who was willing to endanger everyone else on the road.

Had Nancy not been there and in need of my help, I would have marched right up to him and given him a piece of my mind. But she was there. And she did need my help.

So I kept walking through the bar until I found her sitting in one of the corners at a booth by herself.

She looked up when I stood beside her and tapped her on the shoulder.

She deflated like a balloon with relief. “Oh, thank God you’re here. I was starting to think you wouldn’t make it in time.”

“He’s still doing shots at the bar,” I said.

“Oh.”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come on. Let’s get out of here before he sees you leaving.”

Nancy hurried along behind me. She was dressed inappropriately to be on the back of my motorcycle, but we were shit out of luck. I had on the proper attire: black jeans, a black tee, leather jacket, and black combat boots. Nancy had on nude pumps and a skin-tight coral-colored dress.

We pushed between people who were crowded in front of the front doors, smoking cigarettes. I hollered at the stubborn ones to get the hell out of the way.

“Where are you two off to in such a hurry?” one guy called after us.

“Nice ass!” another one yelled at me.

I rolled my eyes and kept marching, tugging Nancy along behind me across the parking lot.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw the bike. “You don’t have your car?”

I held up the helmet I’d had tucked under my arm the whole time. “Did you not notice I was holding this?”

“I—I did. I just didn’t put two and two together until now.” She looked down at her dress and pulled it a little lower down her thighs. It inched right back up. “I don’t think this is suitable for riding on the back of a motorcycle.”

“Oh, it’s definitely not,” I told her. I was unable to stop myself from smiling. “But you’re shit out of options, sweetheart. Here, put this on.” I held the helmet out to her.

“What are you going to wear?”

“I have thick hair.”

Nancy rolled her eyes at me. “This isn’t safe.”

“No, it’s not. But we need to get you out of here. And it’s a short ride. I’ll drive safely. I promise. Now put it on so we can get the hell out of here.”

Nancy bit her bottom lip but eventually conceded. She pulled my helmet down over her perfectly styled chin-length black hair and flipped the visor open. I helped her do up the chin strap, and then I got on the bike.

“Okay, get on,” I told her.

She climbed up behind me.

And then someone was screaming her name.

I looked back over my shoulder as Kyle and his two buddies exploded out of the bar. He knocked over two smokers as he barrelled across the patio and then hit the pavement of the parking lot.

“Get your fucking ass back here!” he bellowed.

I revved the engine. She purred like a kitten.

Nancy threw her arms around my waist and screamed at me to drive.

There was no need to tell me twice. I revved the engine one last time—just to taunt Kyle the dickhead—and then launched forward. Nancy shrieked in my ear out of surprise and pressed herself as firmly against my back as she could.

I watched Kyle run after us in my mirror as I drove out of the parking lot and hit the road. I drove fast until we were out of sight and then slowed right down to the speed limit.

It was agonizingly slow.

I didn't want to scare Nancy. She'd already had a rough night as it was, and me showing off and riding how I usually did wouldn't make her feel at ease. So, I took it easy and drove back to my place, which I realized I was probably going to be sharing with my best friend tonight.

Yay for going back to having a roommate again at twenty-seven years old.

CHAPTER 3



RHYS

Her hair was braided. She knew how much I liked it when it was plaited like that down her back, right to the middle of her spine. As I followed her into her bedroom, it swished gently across her back, and I could smell her shampoo lingering in her wake; roses and cucumber and mint.

She was wearing a thin silk camisole and a pair of black panties that said “Spank Me” on the ass—which was firm and perky as she went straight to the bed, got on her knees, and bent over for me.

The blonde braid down her back fell over her shoulder, and the end of it grazed the top of her white bedding. She looked back at me, fixed me with her hazel eyes, and ran her tongue along her upper lip.

“Are you coming?” she asked. Her voice sounded far away. Or like it was underwater.

But I nodded and went to her. I ran one finger up the back of her calf and then her thigh. She giggled as goose bumps bloomed on her milky soft skin.

“Always such a tease, Rhys,” she whispered. Her voice was breathy now. Needy.

Quinn.

My Quinn. The girl who drove me wild just by looking at me. She’d had me wrapped around her finger since the first time I laid eyes on her, and here she was, bent over in front of me, ass up, ready to be fucked within an inch of her life.

That was how she always liked to be fucked.

I grabbed her ass in both hands and squeezed. She was mostly muscle and a bit of fat. The perfect handful. She wiggled her hips and pressed back until her ass met my crotch. Another soft giggle left her as she hung her head and rolled her hips in my lap, grinding against my stiffening cock beneath my boxers.

“Fuck me, baby,” she pleaded.

I slapped her ass.

Quinn yelped and jerked forward. I grabbed her by the hips and yanked her back. She proceeded to roll her hips against me until her panties had soaked through with her wetness. Quinn was down to fuck anytime, anywhere.

I hooked my thumbs in her panties and pulled them down. I left them around her knees and soaked in the sight of her bare pussy. So perfect. So juicy.

As I was staring, she reached back between her legs to rub herself. Watching her fingers roll across her dripping wet opening and then massage her own clit had me panting. I pulled my boxers off and gripped my shaft to slowly start working myself over as I watched her.

She eased a finger inside her pussy. A sigh left her lips as she pulled it back out and spread her lips for me. An invitation.

I stepped toward her and planted my legs on either side of hers. Her knees were pinched together from her panties, and she tried to look back at me as I slid the meaty head of my cock up her slit.

I held her head in place by grabbing onto the top of her braid, right at the base of her neck. She let out a startled yelp, which morphed into a contented sigh as I pushed her down on the bed.

I held her there as I eased myself inside her.

Her moan was sharp. I didn't stop. I pushed in. She gripped the bedding on either side of herself. I kept going until

I had my entire length buried deep inside her, and then I held it, waiting for her to adjust to me.

Her fingers loosened their hold on the sheets.

“That’s it, baby,” I growled. “Take it.”

“Holy fuck,” I breathed as I sat bolt upright in bed.

My body was sticky with sweat. My blankets clung to my skin as I struggled to extract myself from the sweaty mess.

My cock was rock hard, and my balls were aching.

“Son of a bitch,” I hissed.

It had been a few weeks since I’d had a dream that intense about Quinn. Aiden bringing her up the other day at the bar had probably triggered this one. It had felt so incredibly real—so visceral—that I almost believed it was real.

Almost.

I padded from my bed to the bathroom and turned on the shower. I gave it about twenty seconds to warm up, tore open the shower curtain, and stepped over the edge of the tub. The water wasn’t quite hot yet, but I didn’t give a damn. I needed to take care of business before my balls burst.

I gripped my aching cock and braced myself against the back wall of the shower. My shoulder blades bit into the tiles, but it didn’t matter. I ran my hand up and down, applying just the right amount of pressure, and closed my eyes.

I pictured Quinn.

I pictured her just how she had been in my dream: in that little silky camisole and those panties that made her ass look so good. Then I pictured her out of the panties. I thought of her tight little pussy and how she was always the good girl for me. She had no limits. She’d let me do whatever I wanted, and every time, she came back for more. She was a wild one in the bedroom, there was no denying it, and I’d never been with a girl who could ride dick the way she did.

She was a marvel.

I gritted my teeth when my balls clenched. I trained my thoughts back to the curve of her legs. Her ass. Those damn lips of hers and how they puckered when she used to suck me off. Those eyes. How she would watch me when my dick was in her throat and her own fingers were swirling over her clit and—

I came hard and fast. I grunted with the force of it and relished in the relief after I was done. No blue balls for me. Hell fucking no.

After my shower, I dressed in a pair of jeans, a black Henley, my Blundstones, and my Lost Breed leather jacket. I pulled my dark gray beanie over my still damp brown hair. I'd need something to ward off the chill.

Then I got on my bike and drove out to the little diner not far down the road from Axel's auto shop. Derek was already there, leaning up against his truck, watching me as I parked my bike and got off. I took off my helmet, pulled my beanie out of my back jeans pocket, and pulled it on.

"Hey there, pretty boy," Derek said as he pushed himself off the side of his truck to fall into step beside me as we walked up to the front doors of the diner.

"Morning," I said as I tugged the door open. Derek went in ahead of me, and we moved to the back to pick out our usual booth. The waitress came over and filled up our coffee mugs for us. She gave me a flirty smile before leaving.

Derek waggled his eyebrows at me. "You know, I'm pretty sure she's got the hots for you. You should ask for her number. How long has it been since you, you know, went to pound town?"

"How old are you? Sixteen? Who the hell says, 'pound town'?"

"This guy." Derek grinned, pointing at his own chest with both thumbs.

I shook my head at him. "Poor Evelyn."

Derek shrugged. "She knows my foul mouth is all part of my charm."

“Right. Just like your humble attitude?”

“You know it,” Derek said before sipping his coffee. He burned his tongue.

I snorted. “Serves you right.”

“Somebody’s moody today,” Derek said as he crossed his arms and leaned his elbows on the table. “What’s got your panties in a bunch? Maybe you really *should* ask the waitress to let you—”

“Stop,” I said, cutting him off. He was right. I wasn’t in the best mood, and sitting around talking about fucking the poor waitress wasn’t helping things. She was pretty, and if my heart wasn’t still so damaged from the last girl I’d been with, I might have taken his suggestion and asked for her number.

But my heart was fucked up. It had been pulverized over the last eight months. I didn’t want to backslide.

Derek stirred some creamer into his coffee while scowling into it like he blamed it for burning him. “I was only throwing it out there. You need someone to take care of you, man. I want you to find your Evelyn.”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Relax, Casanova. I’m doing fine on my own. If I wanted a woman, I’d be looking for one, all right? But I don’t. There’s been enough change in my life over the last little while. Now that things are finally settling into a calm rhythm, I’m not interested in throwing a wrench into the mix. Women are complicated.”

“You could say that again,” Derek said.

The waitress came back and took our breakfast orders. My mouth was watering after putting in my request for hash browns, eggs, toast, and sausage. She left us to our conversation, and Derek was the first to speak.

“Do you think you’d ever go back to Chicago?”

I blinked at him. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just wonder if you're happy here sometimes. I know it's a big change of pace for you. I mean, you went from running your own MC in Chicago to coming here, where you answer to Ryder. It must be strange."

"Not really."

Derek eyed me over his coffee mug. "Liar."

"Sure, it was strange at first, but now? I don't know. It's kind of nice not being the one to call the shots, you know? There's a sort of freedom in it. Besides, there's nothing in Chicago for me except for bad memories."

Derek nodded. "I hear you. I just wanted to make sure, I guess. For the record, you and your boys fit in well. Everyone likes you guys. Ryder especially. Mind you, he never would have lived to meet his own child had it not been for you."

I still had a scar from the bullet that went through my bicep to remind me of that night in the alley with Isaac Reed and his brother. I still had the memory of blowing a hole through his forehead, too.

I shifted in my seat. "Well, it worked out well for everyone."

"Everyone except Isaac."

I smirked. "Yeah, well, fuck that guy."

Derek snickered. "Amen."

CHAPTER 4



QUINN

I yawned and cracked my back when I woke up on Sunday morning. Then I nearly jumped out of my skin when someone said my name.

My eyes shot open, and I found myself staring at Nancy, who was curled up on her side, facing me with one arm tucked under her pillow. Well, *my* pillow, to be specific.

“Sorry,” Nancy said.

“It’s okay,” I mumbled as I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes to try to rub the sleep out of them. “What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“How long have you been awake?” I asked.

“Since around five.”

I blinked my eyes open and stared at her. “What? You should have woken me up. I could have kept you company or something. Or made you breakfast. Or—”

“It’s okay, Quinn. Really. It was nice to just lay here and feel safe. Thanks again for coming to get me last night. I appreciate it.”

I nodded. “You know you can call on me for anything. I’ll always be here for you.”

“I know. And I’ll always be here for you, too.”

I patted her knee before sitting up and indulging in one last stretch. “Come on. Let’s get up and make some coffee. I think

I have stuff in the fridge to whip up a good breakfast.”

“Can I borrow some clothes? All I have is my dress from last night.”

“Of course. Sweats and pajama pants are in the top drawer of the dresser. Tanks and tees in the middle. Pullovers beneath that.” I rolled out of bed and padded to the bathroom, where I went about my lady business, washed my face, and tucked the loose strands of my braid back into place.

I went back into my bedroom and changed into a pair of gray sweats and an oversized tee, and then I made my way into the kitchen where Nancy was already scooping ground coffee beans into my French press. The kettle was on the stove, and the element beneath it was already turning bright red as it warmed up.

“I can either make us protein pancakes or eggs and toast,” I said. “Do you have a preference?”

“Pancakes,” Nancy said. There was no hesitation there. “Is it the chocolate protein you buy?”

I winked. “It can be.”

Nancy smiled. It was a sad sort of smile. I knew this was going to be rough on her. She’d been optimistic about Kyle, despite my many warnings, and after I’d resolved to letting her figure it out on her own, I think she actually started to believe that she and him might really work long term.

It was a ludicrous thought to me because the guy was such a dick head, but hey, no one could help who they fell in love with.

I knew that better than almost anyone.

I started whipping up the pancakes as Nancy hovered around the stove, waiting for the kettle to boil. When it did, she poured the water over the beans in the press, gave the concoction a good stir, and put the lid and plunger on top.

She braced herself on the counter and sighed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

“Well, I have an idea.”

“Please tell me.”

“When you’re ready, the two of us will go back to yours and Kyle’s place. We’ll pack up your shit one day while he’s at work, and we’ll bring it back here. You can stay here as long as you like. We’ve lived together before. Why not do it again?”

Nancy bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Thank you, Quinn.”

“You’d do the same for me.”

“I know, but it’s not you who keeps making shitty choices. It’s me. Why do I do this over and over? Why am I drawn to these God-awful people?”

I stopped mixing my protein packed pancake batter and went over to her. “You have a good heart, Nancy. You believe that people are better than what they are. That’s all. You’re an optimist. The world needs more people like you.”

“And less people like Kyle.”

“Yes, Kyle’s are the worst.”

Nancy chuckled, and my heart grew lighter. I went about finishing up the pancakes as she plunged the coffee. After a minute, she poured us each a mug and fixed mine just how I liked it: with a splash of vanilla almond milk.

Then we took our plates, coffees, and the maple syrup from the fridge to the kitchen table and gorged ourselves on the chocolatey goodness I had prepared.

“I swear, these taste better every time you make them,” Nancy said through a mouthful of food.

“I try something new every time.”

She nodded. “And this time?”

“I added a bit of cinnamon.”

“It’s yummy,” Nancy said, taking another bite. I’d earned her stamp of approval.

“What do you want to do today?”

Nancy shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Is Kyle working?”

Nancy shook her head.

“Damn. We could have gone and gotten your stuff the hell out of there. Like ripping a band aid off. All in one shot, done.”

“It’s okay.” Nancy smiled as she dragged a bite of pancake through the syrup on her plate. “There’s plenty of time to go get my things. I’d like to go grocery shopping and stock up on some food for the week. And maybe we could go see a movie or something tonight? I’d like a good distraction.”

“Consider it done,” I said.

After we finished eating, we took our dishes and put them in the sink. The only thing I didn’t like about my apartment was that it didn’t have a damn dishwasher. Well, that and it also had a teeny, tiny little balcony, which was good for absolutely nothing. I couldn’t even fit a grill out there, let alone a chair or two. I had some herbs and a couple flower pots out there in the summertime, but in the winter, it was never used.

Nancy turned on the sink and started filling up one side with hot soapy water. “I’ll do the dishes. You shower. Then we’ll switch.”

“Deal,” I said.

I could hear her humming to herself as she washed the dishes, and I walked to the back of my apartment where my bedroom was. I picked out the clothes I would change into after my shower: a pair of black jeans, a bralette, and my favorite band tee. I was pulling my oversized shirt off over my head when someone knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it!” Nancy called down the hall at me.

The water turned off. Nancy’s heels struck the laminate as she crossed the kitchen and went to the door. I heard it open. And then I heard her scream.

I tugged my shirt back down and raced to the kitchen, where I found Nancy retreating behind the island as Kyle, red

faced and furious, followed her inside.

He shot a dark look at me as I stopped at the mouth of the hallway.

Kyle was a big dude. He was at least six feet tall, maybe even a couple inches taller than that, with broad shoulders, thick legs, and equally thick arms. The slow way he blinked suggested he might still be intoxicated, and so did the redness lining his brown eyes.

His gaze slid from me to Nancy. “Fucking bitches.”

I stood up as straight as I could manage and forced myself to relax. “Kyle, you need to leave. Right now.”

He snarled at me like a rabid dog. “I’ll leave once I get what’s mine.”

“Nancy isn’t yours.” My mind was spinning a mile a minute. How were we going to get out of this one? Kyle was the definition of unreasonable. He’d lay hands on a woman without batting an eyelash; I was sure of it. There was no doubt in my mind that he’d done it numerous times before.

There was also no doubt in my mind that if he got Nancy alone, he’d beat the shit out of her.

And that wasn’t fucking happening.

“Kyle,” I said again. This time, my voice sounded venomous. He looked up at me, and I pointed at the door. “*Leave.*”

He started laughing. The bastard actually started laughing at me. “You think you can tell me what to do, tough girl? Do you? You may ride a motorcycle, and you may talk a big game, but we both know deep down, you’re just a scared little girl. What are you overcompensating for, princess? Daddy issues?”

I didn’t indulge him. Instead, I moved and planted myself between him and Nancy.

Nancy whimpered behind me. “Quinn...”

I didn't look back at her. I wasn't going to take my eyes off the threat.

Kyle swayed on the spot. He was drunk as a skunk. Then he pointed a thick finger at me. "Get the hell out of my way, or I'll go through you to get to her. Don't think I won't do it."

"I know you'll do it, you piece of shit," I said. *But Quinn Connolly takes shit from no one.*

He went after me. Nancy screamed my name.

Kyle grabbed my wrist and yanked me roughly toward him. Dumb ass. I used my elbow and drove it right into his gut. He grunted, doubled over, and clutched at his stomach as I drove my elbow down into his back.

Then he punched me in the hip and knocked me right on my ass. I landed heavily and slammed my shoulder into the corner of the kitchen island. That really fucking hurt.

He was hissing and spitting at me as he straightened up. I was snarling back, full of fury, as he loomed over me. The fucker was going to kick me.

Then someone was yelling down the hall that they had called the police.

Kyle froze with his right leg wound back. His lips peeled back off his teeth when he looked back down at me. "You got lucky."

And then he bolted out the door.

Nancy scrambled out from behind the island to slam the door closed. She locked the handle and deadbolt before pressing her back against it and glancing over at me. "Quinn. Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I can't believe—"

"I'm fine," I said a little breathlessly. I held my aching hip as I got to my feet. I had to use the edge of the counter for support.

Then the waterworks started. Nancy started sobbing as I went over to her. I gently nudged her out of the way of the door and then held her by the shoulders. "Listen. I'm fine. Go

have a hot shower. I'm going to talk to the neighbor and find out if he actually did call the police."

"Then what?" Nancy sniffled as she dragged the back of her hand across her nose.

"Then we figure out what our next move is. Kyle isn't going to throw in the towel that easy. He's going to try again."

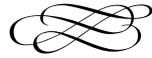
Nancy covered her face with her hands. I wasn't sure if she was hiding from the guilt, shame, or embarrassment. Maybe all three.

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tightly. "It's going to be fine. I promise. I've dealt with guys like this before."

That was only sort of true. The last time I'd had dealings with men as violent and cruel as Kyle, I'd had men who were equally as fierce to back me up. But they all left. Or were killed. I'd been on my own for six months.

Six long months of wondering what I did wrong. Of wondering why, after losing my brother, I had to lose everyone else, too.

CHAPTER 5



RHYS

Liam rolled the end of his pool cue in the blue chalk before bending down and lining up his shot to sink a solid. He and Owen were playing against Aiden and me, who were in the lead by only a couple points.

Liam took his shot and sank the red solid in a corner pocket. He straightened up, gave Aiden and me a smug smile, and walked around the table to scout out his next shot.

I went to the table we'd claimed near the pool table and took a few mouthfuls of beer. Aiden joined me and ate a cold French fry from the basket that had been sitting on the table for at least an hour. He made a face at it and then went back in for a couple more.

"Are you gonna eat any of these?" he asked as he popped another fry in his mouth.

I shook my head.

"Are you sure?"

"Have at 'em, man. They're all yours."

Liam finished his turn, and I stepped up to take my shot. I sank my first one but missed my second, and Owen took my place at the edge of the table. He missed.

Aiden shoveled a few more fries into his mouth before he lined up his own shot. He sank the last four balls we had on the table, and then he sank the eight ball and used his pool cue as a staff and leaned upon it. He gave a dramatic bow with a flourish of his hand. "That's how it's done, gentlemen."

Owen scowled. “All right, all right.”

We all went back to our table and ordered another round of beers and some baskets of food. Angie’s bar had cheap appetizer nights on Tuesdays, so we ordered another basket of fries, some wings, salt and pepper dry ribs, and potato skins.

Angie delivered the grub to our table in person. “You boys are going to keep me in business if this damn economy crashes, you know.”

“We’ve got your back, Angie.” Liam smiled. Liam had other interests at stake. He had a thing for Angie’s oldest daughter, Brooklyn, a sweet, shy, cute blonde girl with big lips and wide-set eyes. She reminded me of a deer. “We’ll keep coming back if you keep serving this delicious stuff.”

Angie beamed at all of us and told us she’d bring over a pitcher of beer on the house.

“She wouldn’t be giving us free shit all the time if she knew you and her sweet innocent Brooklyn had been sucking face in the storage closet,” Owen muttered.

“Dude!” Liam hissed. “Shut the fuck up. I don’t want anyone hearing you.”

Owen rolled his eyes and slumped back in his chair. “Dude? I’ve walked by that door while the two of you were in there and heard plenty. Me saying it out loud is the least of your worries.”

Liam turned bright pink. “We haven’t had—”

Owen held up his hand. “Don’t care. All I’m saying is I’ve heard that girl in there, and she sure sounds like she’s having a good time with you. There’s no way her momma hasn’t caught on to what’s going on between the two of you.”

Liam turned to look at me with wide eyes. “Is he fucking with me or not?”

I shrugged. “Next time you bring Brooklyn into the storage closet, I’ll make sure to walk by. Nice and slow.”

Liam swatted at me. “Fuck you too, asshole.”

I laughed and so did Owen. Aiden just shook his head at all of us.

When Liam's face returned to its normal color, he nodded at the pool table. "You guys up for another round after we eat?"

"Hell yeah," I said.

Owen nodded. "Yeah, I can't leave without kicking Rhys's ass at least once."

"Good luck," I said, draining the last of my beer.

As soon as I'd put it down, Angie came back with our new pitcher. She topped up my glass and put it down in the middle of the table. "Your food will be out in just a minute. Anything else I can get you boys?"

Owen nodded and leaned forward. "Is Brooklyn working today?"

Liam turned pink again and shot Owen a menacing look.

"No, not today," Angie said. "She has one of her night classes today. She doesn't work Tuesday or Thursday nights."

Owen sighed. "Shame."

Angie smiled. "I'll tell her you all say hello."

"Do that," Owen said.

Angie waddled off, and all of us looked at Liam, who was trying his best not to make eye contact with any of us. I nudged him with my boot. "Cat got your tongue, Romeo?"

He buried his face in his hands. "I never should have hooked up with her."

"Oh, come on, you don't mean that," Owen said.

"Oh. I mean it."

Owen clicked his tongue. "I'm sure she's glad you did. I mean, just on the sounds alone, I'd say—"

"All right!" Liam cried. We all cracked up, and he scowled at us as he finished the last quarter of his beer and filled his glass again with the fresh stuff. "Sometimes, I wonder why the

hell I even hang around with you clowns. Brooklyn's a nice girl. I don't like you talking about her like that. She's—she's a lady.”

Owen looked at me over the rim of his beer glass as he tilted it back to drain the last few mouthfuls. When he put it down, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You're a strange kid, Liam.”

“Why?” Liam asked.

Owen shrugged. “You don't belong with our sort. You should have gone into business. Or medicine. I don't know. Something other than this life would have suited you better.”

“But I like this life,” Liam said.

I clapped him on the back. “And we like having you. Ignore Owen. He's just sour that he wasn't the one with his tongue in Brooklyn's mouth.”

Owen topped up his beer glass. “I won't deny that. She's cute as hell.”

After hazing poor Liam for another five minutes or so, our food arrived. The kid was grateful that we could all stuff our faces, rather than make him suffer through more conversation about Brooklyn.

When we were done eating, we went back to playing pool. We set up another game, and Owen started us off with a good wide break. Then it went from there.

I was standing with my back to the bar when Aiden, who was standing on the opposite side of the pool table, looked over my shoulder and narrowed his eyes as if in recognition. Then they widened, and he said, “Holy shit. Quinn's here.”

“What?” I asked sharply as I turned around.

It didn't take me long to spot her. In fact, my eyes were drawn to her like she was a magnet and I was a compass needle.

She was sitting on one of the barstools and had her back to us. I didn't need to see her face to know it was her. Her hair was pulled up in a long, high, sleek ponytail. She was wearing

dark black jeans, black ankle boots covered in silver studs, and a studded black leather jacket. She looked like sin sitting at that bar, sipping on a bottle of beer.

Then she looked over her shoulder to stare right at me.

Her perfect full lips curled in a smile, and she slid off the stool.

“Fuck,” I breathed, and then I was moving toward her.

We wove through bodies in the bar until we reached each other, and once I was in front of her, I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

She took over and hugged me. She hugged me the same way she used to. She lifted onto the balls of her feet and then wrapped her arms around my shoulders to bury her face in the groove of my neck.

I could smell her perfume. Clean and crisp and floral. And her shampoo. Roses, cucumber, and mint. Just like my dream.

When she pulled away, her cheeks were a little pink, but the flush disappeared rather quickly. She straightened out her leather jacket and shifted her weight to her right foot. “Well, I’ll be damned. Rhys Davies in the flesh. It’s been a while.”

“Sure has,” I said. It sounded stupid in my ears. I tried to think of something smart to say. Something that wouldn’t make me look like the blubbering idiot I felt like whenever I was in her presence. She was still smiling at me. “You look good, Quinn.”

“I always look good.”

That couldn’t have been truer. Quinn was the most beautiful woman I’d ever met. She wasn’t your typical beauty, either. She was rough around the edges. The most feminine thing about her were those lips of hers—so full and perfect, especially the dramatic dip of her cupid’s bow. The rest of her was hard. Her eyebrows were sharp and thick, her nose thin and pointed, her cheekbones high. She was all sharp angles, and shadows always made her look a little mysterious. Almost magical. Like she didn’t belong here on this earth with us.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Quinn opened her mouth to speak, but she was cut off when Aiden sidled over and grabbed my shoulder. He tugged me back a step and then went to his little cousin, gathered her up in his arms, and turned in a full circle with her feet dangling off the floor.

She laughed, but I could tell it was forced. It didn't bubble freely out of her like her genuine laugh did.

He set her down. “Quinn! It's great to see you! You look...”

“Good?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I was gonna say like a biker.”

“That's probably 'cause I have a bike now,” she said.

“What?” Aiden and I both asked in unison.

The leather of her jacket groaned as she folded her arms. “You heard me.”

“Well shit,” Aiden said. “All right then. What the hell are you doing in New York City? You always said this was the place for narcissists and businessmen.”

“I still think that,” Quinn said. Then her hazel eyes shifted to me. They looked almost gold in the dim lighting of the bar. “I came here because I need your help, Rhys.”

CHAPTER 6



QUINN

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting when I left Chicago to come find Rhys in New York. Did I think he'd look different? Did I think he'd sweep me off my feet and kiss me right there on the spot?

Did I think things would have changed?

Standing this close to him brought back a whirlwind of steamy memories: Kissing him outside Max's front door before going inside to have dinner. Fucking him in the backseat of the Impala I sold after Max died. Fooling around in empty movie theatres.

Telling him I loved him.

Now here he was, looking hotter than ever, staring at me. He was wearing the same gray beanie he used to wear in the winter months back in Chicago. His brown hair poked out from underneath it and framed his bright green eyes. Eyes that had seen my soul.

There was nothing in this world I wanted more than Rhys Davies. He knew me better than anyone, and we trusted each other more than we should. I would do anything for him—and I had. I had let him leave when he told me he couldn't bear to see me anymore. He couldn't do it to Max.

So, after my brother died, I lost the only man I had ever loved because of the guilt he struggled with every day over Max's murder.

I could still remember the night Max died like it happened yesterday. I'd been at my apartment folding laundry. It was

nine o'clock at night on a Sunday. I had to work the next day, so I'd gone about my normal routine of making my lunch and getting ready for the week.

I'd just changed into my pajamas when someone knocked on my door.

I unlocked the deadbolt and pulled the door open. I was pleasantly surprised to find Rhys standing there. He was looking down at his feet. I couldn't see his face.

"Hello, handsome," I said softly as I reached out to him.

Then I noticed the blood on his shirt. In his hair. On his hands.

I frantically rolled up the hem of his shirt to inspect his stomach for an injury. I found nothing—nothing besides muscle and tanned skin. I rolled it up farther to make sure there were no wounds on his chest.

"It's not mine," he said. His voice was hoarse. He barely sounded like himself.

"What happened?" I whispered.

And then he looked up at me, and I could see that he was barely keeping it together. His eyes were glassy but hard, like he was willing himself to stay in one piece. His jaw was clenched, and the muscle flexed repeatedly. He swallowed and looked down again.

"Rhys. Please. Talk to me."

He shook his head once.

Nausea washed over me, and I grabbed at the doorframe to keep my balance. Rhys caught me as my knees buckled. I didn't care that he was covered in blood. I let him hold me up, and I clung to him as he clung to me. The room continued to spin as my brain started to put the pieces together.

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck and gathered the back of his shirt up in my fists. It was hard to breathe. "Where's Max?"

He shook his head. He shook his head, and I knew the answer right away.

“No,” I said.

He held me tighter, so tightly that his fingers pressed into my ribs. “I’m sorry, Quinn. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I released his shirt as sobs overtook me. He gathered me up in his arms and let me cry as he brought me to the couch in my living room. He sat down, with me still in his arms, and I curled up against his chest.

Rhys rubbed my back in slow circular motions. I sucked in great heaving breaths and tried to calm myself down enough to get answers. I needed to know what had happened. All this blood... Max hadn’t died peacefully. Someone had stolen him from me. From us.

“What happened?” I finally managed to ask.

Rhys’s hand fell still on my back. I leaned away and peered up into his face. His brow was furrowed. He wouldn’t look me in the eye.

I reached out and held his face in my hands. “You have to tell me. I need to know.”

He closed his eyes. “You’ll never forgive me.”

“You need my help?” he asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I nodded. “Yeah. Well, not just me. Nancy too.”

“Nancy Vickers?” Aiden piped up.

I nodded. “She got in too deep with this guy—”

“Same old shit she’s always been doing,” Aiden grumbled.

I glared at him to shut him up. “That’s not the point. The point is she was seeing this guy, and things took a bad turn. I had to go pick her up the other night to get him away from her, and the next day, he showed up at my apartment and tried to drag her out of there. He might have succeeded if I hadn’t—” I stopped talking when I remembered who I was speaking to.

“If you hadn’t what?” Rhys asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Never mind.”

His eyes roamed all over me. Then they stopped when he glanced upon my hip. I looked down. My tee was just short enough to show a thin line of skin between my shirt and the top of my jeans. He was looking at the purple bruise on my hip from where Kyle had punched me.

I looked up sharply and tried to take a step back as I clapped one hand over my hip.

Rhys caught me by the elbow and pulled me close. He lifted the hem of my shirt and pushed my hand away. Then he saw the bruise in all its glory. It was dark purple at the center and faded to a puke-yellow color at the edges.

“Did he do this to you?” Rhys asked. His gaze slowly lifted from my hip to my eyes. “This guy of Nancy’s?”

I swallowed. “Yes. But only because I intervened. It would have been Nancy who took the brunt of it if I let him get to her.”

“You’re a psychopath, cuz,” Aiden said, whistling. “You know that? Not many chicks would take on a dude who was willing to hit a woman. Who the fuck is this guy?”

“Kyle something or other. I don’t know his last name. He’s a piece of work.”

Rhys was looking at my hip again. “Did you land a hit of your own?”

He knew me so well. I grinned. “You bet your ass I did. Two, for the record.” I held up two fingers.

Aiden shook his head at me. “I’m telling you. Psychopath.”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Rhys pulled his beanie off and raked his fingers through his thick brown hair. I wanted to do the same thing. I wanted to ride him and sink my fingers in those locks and feel him—

“I’ll come to Chicago,” Rhys said.

“Just like that? It’s that easy?”

He nodded. “It’s that easy. I just have to talk to Ryder first and make sure he’s good with me stepping away for a couple days. I’m sure it won’t be a problem, but I don’t want to go MIA on him.”

“Who’s Ryder?” I asked.

Rhys opened his mouth to answer, but Aiden beat him to the punch. “He’s the president of the Lost Breed MC here in New York. Our president.”

I glanced at Rhys. He had a president? He wasn’t running his own crew? “Are all four of you with him?”

Rhys nodded. “Yeah. We were initiated six months ago.”

“That didn’t take long,” I said. I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. I hadn’t meant for them to cut him, but I could see that they did.

Rhys looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. Well. Some shit went down here shortly after we showed up. Derek was caught up in a situation with Isaac Reed.”

I blinked. “Isaac Reed? Did you know he’d come to New York?” I was thinking several things at once. Firstly, I was realizing that Rhys hadn’t necessarily left Chicago to get away from me. Maybe he had left to track down Isaac. Secondly, he’d potentially gone after my brother’s killer without telling me. And thirdly, how the hell had he not told me about this sooner?

“Yeah, I knew he was here,” Rhys said.

Aiden looked back and forth between us. “Uh, I’m gonna go take my shot. You kids catch up.” And then he was gone.

I stared at Rhys. “You came here for him?”

“I came here to warn Derek about how dangerous he was and the damage he could do. Derek is an old friend. I couldn’t let him lose his crew the way I lost mine. Not when I knew there was something I could do to help.”

“And did you?” I asked sharply.

“Did I what?”

“Did you help?” I asked.

Rhys licked his lips and put his beanie back on. “If you’d consider putting a bullet between Reed’s eyes helping, then yeah, I helped.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “He’s dead?”

Rhys nodded.

“And you—” I broke off and lowered my voice. Then I leaned in close so I could whisper and not be overheard. “And you killed him? When? How?”

Rhys shrugged one shoulder. “Six months ago. The details don’t really matter. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time, and someone put a gun in my hand. And I took the shot. I didn’t even hesitate.”

“Rhys,” I whispered. I knew him better than anyone. He was no killer. Even when shit had gotten really hard for him back in Chicago, he’d stood by his morals, and he’d never killed anybody. Beat them up pretty bad? Sure. But never killed them.

He reached out and gently took my elbow. “Don’t worry. It’s not a burden. I’d do it again if I had the chance. Someone needed to make him atone for what he did, and I’m glad it was me. For Max.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. “I can’t think of a better excuse to have a drink, can you?”

Rhys smiled a little. “No.”

“Buy me a beer for old time’s sake? I’ll tell you everything I know about Kyle.”

“All right,” he said, and then he followed me up to the bar, and we both took a seat. He ordered us two beers, and as we sat and drank them, he asked, “So where are you and Nancy staying?”

I chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

CHAPTER 7



RHYS

Quinn tipped her bottle of beer back and took her first long slow sip. I watched, transfixed by the way her lips pressed to the bottle, and even more in awe of the little bead of condensation that trickled from the base of the bottle all the way up to cling to her lower lip. When she put the bottle down, she wiped it away with her thumb, dragged her now wet fingertip down her thigh, and looked over at me with a crooked smile. “Quit staring. You’ll make a girl blush.”

I averted my eyes to my own beer. “Sorry. It’s just been a while.”

“Yeah.”

Quinn was as much of a knockout as she used to be—maybe even more so with this new edgy way of dressing. Max would have lost his mind if he saw her looking like this. And riding a motorcycle? I was sure he was rolling over in his grave right this minute.

“So, you ride now, huh?” I asked.

Quinn nodded. “Yep. A Triumph”

She was going to make me press her for more answers. She’d always been like that. A bit mysterious, not super forthcoming, and very private. We both knew it was her defense mechanism. If she didn’t let anybody in, there was no risk of her getting hurt. But she’d let me in. I guessed, in the end, she got hurt anyway when I bailed.

“I hope you don’t ride like your brother,” I said.

Quinn surprised me with a wide grin. “I ride better than him.”

“Those are big words. Max could match me in a race, you know?”

“I know,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “I see you’re just as humble as ever.”

“The same could be said for you.”

“Touché.”

Quinn crossed her arms and rested them on the bar. “So, how do you like it here? What’s this new MC like? What did you say they called themselves?”

“The Lost Breed,” I said.

“And your president?”

“Is a good guy. Well, good enough. He took me in when he didn’t have to. He took all of us in.” I took another long swig of beer.

Quinn nodded slowly. “Must be nice to have someone let you join them.”

She was taking a dig at me. I winced. “Quinn, you know I couldn’t—”

She held up her hand. “Yeah, I know.”

After Max died, Quinn had hardened into a woman who wanted vengeance. I couldn’t blame her. I wanted the same thing. But it was more complicated than that. I blamed Isaac Reed for killing Max, but had it not been for me, Max would have never gotten caught in the crosshairs. He’d still be alive, and Quinn would still have her brother.

About two weeks after he died, Quinn came to me and told me she wanted in. At the time, I hadn’t understood that she was asking to be a Red Rogue. She wanted the initiation, to wear our colors, and to ride with us. She knew the responsibility that would be on her shoulders, and she was more than aware of the risks, dangers, and costs. She didn’t care. She was all in.

And I told her no.

Max would have never forgiven me if I brought his sister into the fold. He'd spent the last couple of years of his life trying to keep her as far away from it as possible. Of course, I was undoing half the work he put into his cause by sleeping with her and falling in love with her, but he never knew any of that. He only thought she wanted in because she wanted to be by his side.

He had no idea she wanted to ride alongside both of us.

I sighed and ordered us both a shot of tequila and another round of beers. Quinn gave me a sad smile as a thank you when the shots arrived, and we both took them the way we used to back in Chicago when we used to go to bars together: no lime, no salt. Just the liquor and a beer chaser.

Quinn licked her lips. "The others are good? Aiden seems happy."

"They're good. They've gotten settled here. The clean slate has been good for all of us, I think."

"Liam said the same thing."

"You've been in touch with Liam?" I asked.

Quinn nodded. "He's how I tracked you down. I called him the other night and told him I needed to find you. He gave me this address and told me you'd be here tonight."

"Little fucker," I growled.

"He was just helping me."

"I know. But he could have at least given me a heads-up you were coming. Then I wouldn't have—"

"Been caught standing there with your mouth open when you saw me?" Quinn asked. That devilish smile of hers emerged. It was the same one she used to give me before stripping naked and going to her knees in front of me.

It made my cock twitch, and I shifted on my bar stool. "Yeah, pretty much."

Quinn giggled, and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed that sound until it graced my ears. "Don't worry. I thought it was cute."

"Cute isn't what I was going for," I said a little sourly.

Quinn drew her ponytail over her shoulder and ran her fingers through it. "I like that I can still make you look at me like that," she whispered.

Good lord. Was she trying to give me blue balls on purpose? I needed to change the subject before I carried her out of here and found a place to lay her down and fuck her right. I went with the obvious. Nancy. "So, this guy that came after Nancy. What else do you know about him?"

Quinn shrugged. "Not much unfortunately. I've met him a couple times. He'd come into the parlor to pick her up after work or sometimes bring her lunch. Like all things that end bad, it started really good for the two of them. Nancy fell for this guy. That's why it pisses me off so much. He drew her in, made her care, and then showed her who he really was. A manipulative, abusive, drunken bastard."

"Is this the first time he's been violent with her?"

"I don't know. Nancy never told me it had gotten this bad. I mean, based on my impression of the guy, I wasn't surprised, but as far as I know, this is the first time he lost his cool. Maybe he's been rough with her but never struck her."

"Instead, he struck you."

Quinn slapped her right fist into her left palm. "Only after I got him."

I shook my head at her. "You're going to get yourself in over your head."

"Nothing I haven't done before."

"Are you willing to tell me where you and Nancy are staying?"

Quinn chewed the inside of her cheek and considered my question. "Another shot. Then I'll tell you."

I waved down the bartender, and within two minutes, we had two more tequila shots sitting before us on the bar. They had been filled to the brim and were leaving little puddles on the wooden surface. We picked up the shot glasses, spilled tequila over our fingers, and tossed them back.

Quinn licked her fingers clean, which drove me completely insane as I watched her and tried to keep myself from getting a raging hard on right then and there. Then she licked her lips. “We’re staying at that little motel down the road. With the blue neon light and the cute little cafe attached to the lobby.”

“I know the one. Do you think Nancy’s okay there by herself?”

“Sure. She was picking a movie on the on-demand channels when I left and had grand plans of spoiling herself with room service. I fully expect there to be a shit ton of dishes on my bed when I get back there.”

I smiled. “You’re a good woman, Quinn. Nancy is lucky to have you as a friend.”

Quinn’s expression was unreadable. “I’m lucky to have her, too. She’s the only one— She stopped talking and shook her head.

I knew what she was going to say. Nancy was the only one who hadn’t left Quinn in Chicago. She’d lost her brother, her cousin, and me all within a two-month period. She and Max’s parents died in a car crash when Quinn was only sixteen. Max had stepped in to take care of her. To make sure she had everything she needed and keep her in school. Mostly, he kept her on the straight and narrow. She had the same nature as him: a craving for adventure and excitement. But Max wanted better for her than the MC life. He wanted her to go to college, to earn scholarships, and choose a path she would be proud of when she was older.

And then he died.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. “Quinn, I’m ___”

“Sorry. I know.”

I drank the rest of my three-quarters full beer. “Yeah. Fuck.”

She reached out and put her hand over mine. “It’s okay, Rhys. I understand.” She ran her thumb over my knuckles. The heat of her skin on mine was almost unbearable, even though it was just her hand. Our bodies were still separated by almost a foot of space.

I swallowed. “Do you have to get back to Nancy tonight?”

Quinn’s thumb fell still. She looked up at me. Her golden-flaked hazel eyes burned with something that matched the fire in my belly. “Come on, Rhys. You know me better than that. I don’t *have* to do anything.”

“Call her,” I said.

Quinn giggled. I slid off my stool and put my hand on her hip. I hooked a thumb in her belt loop and used it to spin her around so her back was to the bar, a neat trick if the top of the stool is on a swivel. She leaned back and rested her elbows on the bar behind her. “Are you telling me what to do?”

“You bet your ass I am,” I said. “Call her. Tell her you’ll see her in the morning.”

“And your boys?” she asked, tipping her chin to where Liam, Owen, and Aiden were still crowded around the pool table.

“Fuck ‘em.”

Quinn giggled. “I’ll call her from the cab, then.”

I offered her my hand, and she took it and then slid off the stool. Her boots thudded on the hardwood floors, and we turned away from the bar and made our way out of Angie’s place.

It was later than I thought. Probably close to ten or eleven o’clock at night. It was cold as hell out, and both Quinn and I drew our jackets closed. I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into my side.

She fit against me perfectly. Like always.

Our steps fell in sync as we crossed the parking lot and went out to the street where I perched on the edge of the curb and waved to hail down a cab. The third one that passed pulled over for us, and I opened the back door for Quinn. She slid all the way to the opposite side of the car, and I ducked in after her.

The driver looked back at us. She was a plump woman in her mid-fifties, with dyed black hair, pencilled-on eyebrows, and purple lipstick. She gave us a bright smile. “Hey, kids. Where to this evening?”

I gave her my address, and she pulled away from the curb. Quinn pulled out her phone and lifted it to her ear as it started ringing. I heard Nancy’s tinny voice through the speakers. “Hey. Where are you?”

Quinn glanced at me as I put my hand on her thigh. “I met up with Rhys. I just wanted to let you know I won’t be back at the hotel for a couple hours yet. Are you alright on your own?”

“I have three plates of room service in front of me and I’m watching a movie. I’ll be fine,” Nancy said. She paused. “Don’t have too much fun.”

Quinn bit her bottom lip and smiled at me. “No promises.”

After Quinn hung up the phone our driver told us her name was Margaret, but she preferred Maggie. She then proceeded to tell us her life story, which was unfortunate because all I wanted to do was turn to the woman beside me and devour her.

Quinn’s hand on my crotch was evidence that she wanted the same thing.

CHAPTER 8



QUINN

Margaret, also known as Maggie, pulled over in front of a row of narrow homes separated by about four feet on either side. They were red brick, with white trim around the windows, and had a set of stairs that led up the side of the house from the sidewalk to the front doors. The garage was on the bottom level and the entrance on the second.

Rhys's house was on the end. It was well kept on the outside, which didn't surprise me because Rhys had always been a good home keeper. He took my hand, and we walked up the stairs. I swayed at the top and realized I was a little intoxicated.

Going inside might be a big mistake. It might make everything harder. It had been a little over eight months since I knew his touch, and letting myself fall victim to him again was just going to make it hurt more when I went back to my life in Chicago and he stayed here.

But damn it, I wanted him. My whole body seemed to ache with every heartbeat. I could feel my pulse in my fingertips and at my throat. I was thrumming with excitement, and there was an ache below my belly that I hadn't felt in some time.

I needed him.

Rhys unlocked the front door and went inside. I followed him and closed the door behind me. "Nice place," I muttered as I kicked off my boots.

Rhys shrugged out of his leather jacket, and I took mine off, too. He took it from me and hung it in the closet in his

entranceway.

There were no lights on, but I could see that the place was just like his old house in Chicago: clean, simple, and not cluttered with stuff. Rhys wasn't a wasteful consumer and only bought things he really needed. He didn't have shelves because he never bought junk to put on them. He had the basics, and that was enough for him.

“Do you want a drink?” he asked as we walked down the hall and emerged in the living area. Half of the room was his living room and the other half the kitchen. The walls were a cool gray and so were the floors. They were separated by crisp white baseboards that matched the white cupboards in the kitchen.

“Uh, sure,” I said as I turned to face him. He went into the kitchen and opened the freezer. He withdrew a bottle of spiced rum, poured it over two glasses filled with ice, and then threw in a splash of cola.

He brought mine over to me where I stood on the other side of his kitchen island. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I said.

We watched each other over the rim of our glasses as we took our first sip. It was strong. Just how I liked it—how I liked most things.

I put my glass down. So did he.

Then I licked my lips.

Rhys's eyes followed my tongue and then moved up to meet my gaze.

I practically threw myself at him. He caught me, engulfed me with his thick arms, and held me to him as I practically climbed him like a tree to kiss him. He tasted like rum and beer and smelled like rainwater and pine. I drew in a deep breath as our mouths crashed together. His teeth nipped at my bottom lip, and I whimpered into his mouth as he gathered me up in his arms and lifted me off the floor. I hooked my legs around his waist, and he set me down on the kitchen island.

All thoughts of what was good for me and what wasn't went out the window as he pulled my black tee over my head and tossed it on the floor. His shirt came off next, and I traced every line of his body out of memory as we kissed with our eyes closed. I followed the cut of his hips up to his navel and then worked my way outward, trailing every ridge of his abs up to his chest. Then I worked my way over his shoulders and down his arms until I found something new. Something unfamiliar.

I paused and ran my thumb over hardened skin. I broke our kiss. "What's this?" I asked.

Rhys planted his hands on either side of me against the counter and kissed the side of my neck up to my ear. "Nothing, baby."

I narrowed my eyes to try to see better in the darkness and ran my thumb over it again. "A scar?"

He pinched my earlobe between his teeth.

"Rhys," I half moaned, half sighed.

He kissed my earlobe as if in apology and then moved to look me in the eyes. His hands were still on either side of me. His shoulders and arms were taut. Every muscle was outlined in the darkness. "Yes, baby. It's a scar."

"It's new," I said.

He nodded.

I frowned. It was almost perfectly circular. "Did you get shot?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he nodded again.

"Who?"

"Reed."

"Oh," I breathed.

He closed his hand over mine to make me stop tracing the scar. "It was six months ago."

"I should have been there," I whispered.

He shook his head. “No.”

“I could have helped. I could have—”

“Quinn,” he said roughly as he took my chin in one hand. His grip was firm. Hard enough to make it impossible to seal my lips. “Enough. I’m glad you weren’t there. I never wanted you anywhere near that animal. And now he’s gone. We never have to worry about him again.”

Then why haven’t you come back to me?

I wanted to ask him so badly, but I just nodded and whispered, “Okay.”

“Okay.” He released my chin.

I grabbed his belt, pulled him to me, and kissed him as I undid the buckle. He found the hair tie in my ponytail and pulled it out. It cascaded down my back as I popped open the button of his fly and then tugged the zipper down. I pushed his jeans down his hips, and he worked them down the rest of the way.

Rhys’s tongue plunged into my mouth while he undid my jeans. I pushed myself up on my hands, lifting my ass off the counter so he could pull my pants off, and then he settled me back down. I gasped. The counter was cold on my bare ass.

Rhys chuckled and ran his thumb beneath the waistband of my black thong. It matched my black lace bralette. I flinched when he grazed the sensitive spot on my lower stomach by my right hip. “You’re so damn beautiful, Quinn.”

I took my panties off, and he watched as I spread my legs. He ran his hands down my thighs to my hips and then went down to his knees.

It had been some time since I saw him between my legs, and it sent a jolt of desire through me. He licked his lips before he ran his tongue along my pussy. He took his time, tasting me in slow laps and rolling his tongue over my swollen clit, then pausing to draw it between his lips and suck it until I was a breathless, moaning mess above him.

Then, right before I came, he would stop and repeat the process.

It was maddening. And delicious. And everything I'd been craving for eight fucking months.

I arched my back and leaned back on my hands as I lifted my face to the ceiling. Rhys plunged his tongue inside me, came back out, and lapped at my juices. I bit down hard on my bottom lip when he slipped a finger in me.

“Yes,” I breathed. I looked back down at him.

He was smiling as he ate me out. He enjoyed it almost more than I did. Almost.

When he slipped another finger inside me and sucked hard on my clit, I let out a shriek of ecstasy and threw my head back. I came, coating his fingers with my slick juices, and rolled my hips and ass on the counter as he continued flicking his fingers inside me.

He pulled them out and licked them clean. “Good girl,” he purred.

I was breathless, sitting on his counter, and all I wanted was more. I didn't want to wait.

Rhys took his boxers off. His cock sprang free. I hadn't forgotten how big he was. I licked at my lips as he rummaged through pockets of his jeans for a condom. When he found one, he wasted little time tearing it open with his teeth, and then he rolled the rubber over his shaft, massaged his balls, and stepped between my legs.

I inched to the edge of the counter and lined my pussy up with his cock. Then I looked up at him. “I hope you still know how to use that thing.”

Rhys smirked. “Baby, my neighbors are gonna hear how good I can fuck your tight little pussy.”

I moaned at his words and stared down as he leaned into me, sliding his first two inches into my soaking wet pussy. I took him in desperately and closed my eyes as he worked his

way slowly, deeper and deeper, until we were at six inches. Then he stopped.

I opened my eyes. I was already panting, and there was still plenty of him left. “What are you waiting for?” I asked.

Rhys clenched his teeth and gave me all of him in one deep thrust.

I gasped and clutched the edge of the counter. Rhys groaned and began working himself in and out of me. My muscles were tight and my whole body went rigid as I adjusted to his length and girth. When I managed to relax, the pleasure was incredible.

I sighed and watched him dip in and out. His shaft was coated in my juices, and the sloppy wet sounds it made when he buried himself all the way inside me made that ache below my belly begin to pulse.

He held himself deep inside and cupped the back of my neck to nip at my lips. I whimpered as he pinched my lower lip, and then he gave me sweet kisses. I moaned into his mouth, and he tightened his grip on the back of my neck. His tongue explored my mouth, and I opened up to him as he continued fucking me nice and slow.

I was getting wetter by the second.

“Fuck, I’ve missed this,” I whispered.

Rhys tightened his grip on my neck further still. “Me too.”

“Fuck me harder, baby. Please. I want to come all over your cock.”

Rhys’s whole body shuddered. He loved when I talked dirty.

I moved closer to the edge of the counter so he could get even deeper. “Come on, baby. You won’t hurt me. I promise.”

Rhys silenced me with a rough kiss and then started fucking me hard and fast. He had to hold me in place on the counter. Otherwise, I would have been forced backward. I moaned until I couldn’t contain my screams of pleasure as my second orgasm slammed into me. I was even wetter now, and I

knew it was driving him crazy because his forehead was furrowed and he was watching my tightening pussy as he fucked me.

He started rubbing my clit. I lifted up to him. His other hand held me in place by the back of my neck, and I let my head fall back, giving him complete control of my body.

He groaned.

I told him to come.

“Fuck,” he growled.

And then he was holding on to me with such fierceness as he came that I could barely breathe. Air wasn't important right then. As he blew his load, he bucked wildly against me, and I came again.

He released my neck, and I sucked in a breath of air and grabbed at him to pull him in for more kisses. It felt so damn good to be this close to him again, to have him inside me. I didn't want to be empty again. I wanted to stay in this moment, with him inside me, sitting on his counter for as long as I could.

But after our kiss, he stepped away and went to clean himself up.

I hopped down off the counter, and my legs trembled. I had to hold myself up and wait for the feeling to return to them. Then I picked up my discarded clothes and started getting dressed.

I was jumping in place to get my jeans up over my ass when he came back into the kitchen and started getting dressed, too. He looked as disappointed as I felt.

“I'm sorry I have to go,” I said. “But Nancy...”

“She needs you. It's all right. I'm just being greedy, and I want to keep you all to myself.” He moved to me and cupped my cheek in one hand. Then he realized the sudden intimacy of what he was doing and let his hand fall to his side.

“For what it's worth, I wish I could stay.”

He smiled. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

I nodded. "I'd like that. My number is the same."

"I'll call you a cab."

CHAPTER 9



RHYS

I woke up on Wednesday morning feeling more rested than I had since moving out to New York. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was because of my night with Quinn.

Quinn.

She'd shown up, and like always, I'd fallen victim to her. I couldn't help it. She was everything I wanted and needed but couldn't have, all packed into a beautiful body with a wickedly smart brain. Her telling me she needed help was like someone holding a gun to my head. Of course I'd help her.

It would be a cold day in Hell if I ever said no to Quinn Connolly when she needed me.

I rolled out of bed, showered, and got dressed in a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt. I didn't bother with breakfast and, instead, went straight down to the garage after putting on my jacket and suited up to ride over to Ryder and Dani's place.

Being a Lost Breed meant I couldn't just pack up and leave if I had to. I needed to ask permission first.

It was a strange thought. Back in Chicago, I'd been the top dog. I was the person my boys had to run things by. Now that I was on the other side of things, it felt a little weird. I didn't like it.

I took a cab back to the bar where I'd left my bike. Normally I'd never leave my bike parked in a lot over night, but Quinn was well worth the exception. I swung my leg over the seat and headed to Ryder and Dani's place.

The driveway was empty except for his car and Dani's black cruiser. Nobody had been hanging around their house much now that Dani was deep into her pregnancy and they were about to welcome their little one into the world. We were respecting their space.

I felt a bit guilty when I knocked on their front door.

It was opened about ten seconds later by a very round Dani, who opened the door up all the way and smiled at me as she leaned against the doorframe. "Morning, Rhys. How are you?"

"Morning, Dani. I'm all right. I hate to bother you, but I was wondering if Ryder was home?"

She nodded. "He's in the nursery. Come on in. Can I get you anything? Coffee? I was just in the middle of whipping up some breakfast, and there's plenty of food if you're hungry."

"You're going to be a great mom." I chuckled as I closed the front door behind me and followed her down the hall and into the kitchen.

She smiled over her shoulder at me and went to the stove where she was scrambling eggs. She pushed them around in the pan with a spatula. "Thanks."

"Rhys," Ryder's voice came from behind me.

I turned around to find him in the doorway to the kitchen. He was sweaty and wearing dark jeans and a muscle shirt. I arched an eyebrow. "What does she have you working on in there?"

Ryder smiled. "Oh, you know. A little of this and a little of that."

Dani clicked her tongue. "I suggested he call someone for help, but he's a stubborn bastard."

"I've got two hands," I said.

Dani pointed her chin at the kitchen table. "You two sit, and once you've had some breakfast, you can help him. Deal?"

I walked through the kitchen and sat down at the table. “Deal.”

Ryder came and sat down across from me. He leaned on his elbows and clasped his hands together. “You good at putting together shitty furniture?”

I shrugged.

“It’s not shitty” Dani said defensively.

Ryder laughed. “Well, you’re not the one putting it together, kitten. I am. And I can assure you of one thing: it’s shitty.”

I watched and listened to them bicker for a minute before Ryder conceded and leaned back in his chair. Dani was smiling at the eggs as she slid them onto a plate, smug with her victory. I was sure this was how every argument went down in this house. Try as he might, the president couldn’t win against his first lady. No way in hell.

Dani waddled over to the table and set our plates down for us. I stood up to help her with the rest of the food, and she shook her head at me and pointed at my chair. “Sit. I’m pregnant, not dying. Moving around is good for me.”

Ryder hooked his thumb at her. “I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have let Axel step in for me. It’s been harder dealing with her the last two months than it was dealing with all you fuckers.”

I chuckled, and Dani planted her hands on her hips. “You want to say that again, honey?”

Ryder shook his head. “Nope. You’ve got that crazy pregnant lady hearing. You heard every word, I’m sure.”

“You bet your ass I did.”

Dani came and sat down, and we dug into our food. It was delicious, as Dani’s cooking always was, and I was the first to clean my plate. When I got up and walked it to the sink, I heard the front door open. “Are you two expecting someone else?” I asked Ryder and Dani.

Ryder nodded. “Derek is stopping by to talk business.”

Seconds later, Derek emerged in the kitchen. He sniffed the air, rubbed his stomach, and went to the pan on the stove full of eggs. The plate on the counter held slices of bacon, and there was bread beside the toaster.

“Help yourself,” Dani said.

Derek did just that. As he put the bread down in the toaster, he glanced at me. “What are you doing here, man?”

Ryder piped in. “Good question. What *are* you doing here?”

Dani scolded him in hushed tones for being rude. I put my back to the counter and faced my president. “I came to run something by you.”

“Oh?”

“I have to run to Chicago for a couple days.”

“Is everything all right?” Ryder asked.

“Yes,” I said. Then I realized that I was lying, and I backtracked. “Well. No, not really, I guess. A girl I used to know showed up at Angie’s last night, asking for my help. She and one of my other good friends from back in the day had a run in with a guy. He knocked this girl I know around a bit. Put a big bruise on her hip. I have to go... handle it.”

Ryder nodded. “Go. Take your time. Things here are under control.”

Dani was watching us with concern. “Is she hurt? This friend of yours?”

“She’s tough,” I said. “She landed a few hits on the guy herself before he hit her.”

“I like her,” Ryder said wryly.

“You’d like her even more if you met her,” I said a little wistfully.

Dani smiled at me. Could she see right through me? Could she tell that I was in love with this girl?

For fuck’s sake. Could they all see that?

Derek thumped me on the shoulder. “You need backup, man? I can go with you to the windy city.”

“Thanks, but I can take care of this on my own. I want to keep it quiet.”

Derek nodded. “All right. Well, call me if that changes. You know I’m always up for an old-fashioned beat down. That is the game plan, I’m assuming?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Derek’s toast popped, and he plucked it out, swearing under his breath as he burned his fingertips. He started smothering the bread in strawberry jam and then looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. “This girl who came looking for you wouldn’t happen to be Quinn, would it?”

“Maybe.”

“Who’s Quinn?” Dani asked. She pushed herself up awkwardly out of her chair and waddled over with both hands on her belly. She leaned on the kitchen counter and watched me with curious eyes.

“Uh,” I stammered, “she’s just a girl I used to know.”

Derek shook his head. “Don’t lie to our Dani now, Rhys. Come on. Give it to her straight.”

Dani smiled and shook her head. “It’s all right. If you don’t want to talk about her, I understand. This pregnancy has just made me into more of a romantic than I ever used to be.”

“You could say that again,” Ryder said from where he still sat at the kitchen table.

“Ignore him,” Dani said, waving her hand dismissively.

Derek took a bite of his toast and, with a very full mouth, said, “Quinn is the only girl our Rhys has ever loved. If you’re looking for a happy love story, Dani, you’d best look somewhere else.”

“Oh,” she said softly, straightening up and giving me a sad look. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “It’s not as bad as he makes it sound. Yes, I care a lot about her, and we have a lot of history, but we could never work.”

“Why?” Dani asked.

I scratched the back of my neck and considered lying. But that would do no good. So, I took a deep breath. “You know how Isaac Reed killed a bunch of guys from my old crew?” Dani and Ryder both nodded. He had stood up and was walking over to where we all stood. Derek’s toast crunched as he took another bite. “Well, one of those guys who was killed was my best friend, Max. Quinn is his little sister.”

“Fuck,” Ryder breathed.

Dani looked back and forth between us. “I don’t understand what the problem is.”

Ryder shrugged. “Well, if it were me, I’d be torn, too. I imagine this brother of hers didn’t want the two of you together?”

“I don’t know. If I’m being honest, I never let on to the fact that I was into his sister. We kept it a secret from him. But he hated the thought of her ever being part of the way we lived. He wanted something better for her. Something safer. And I wanted the same things. Then, well, you know what all went down.”

Dani bit her bottom lip. I didn’t like the way she was looking at me, with pity. Derek took his breakfast to the kitchen table and started eating.

Ryder sighed. “That’s shitty, man. I feel for you.”

Dani was frowning. “I don’t think you should let who this girl’s brother was stand in the way of you two being together.”

I blinked at her.

Dani rubbed her belly. “Honestly. I mean, I knew that when I met Ryder, I was in way over my head, and everything in my life would change if I chose to be with him. And it did. But I’m still me. I’m still good. And so is he. The way we live is just a bit unconventional is all.”

“And dangerous,” I said.

“Yes. But if history has taught me one thing, it’s this: a man thinking he can make a woman’s choices for her is more dangerous than letting her make them on her own.”

“My woman, the prophet.” Ryder chuckled as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

She smiled up at him. “Joke all you want, but it’s true. The only thing keeping you two apart is you. The reasons you’ve made up in your head for why you can’t be together? They’re just lies, Rhys. That’s all I’m saying.”

Ryder cracked his back and nodded at me. “Enough of this mushy shit. You ready to build some shitty furniture?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Derek?”

“When I’m done eating,” Derek said, pointing at his still half full plate of food.

I followed Ryder out of the kitchen and told him I needed a minute to call Quinn. He nodded and went down the hall, and I stepped into the living room to call her.

She answered right away. “Morning.”

“Morning.”

“What’s up?”

“I’ll meet you in Chicago tomorrow night.”

“How are you getting there?” she asked.

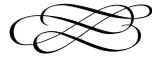
“I’ll ride.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end. “Okay. I’ll book mine and Nancy’s flights right now. Come to my apartment when you get to the city. I’m still in the same place. You can stay in my guest room for as long as you like.”

I closed my eyes and ran my hand down my face. “I’ll only need to stay for one night. I have responsibilities here in New York now, Quinn.”

Another moment of silence. “Right.”

CHAPTER 10



QUINN

Nancy covered her mouth as she yawned. Then she rested her forehead against the back window of the cab and stared out at the passing cars as raindrops rolled down the other side of the glass.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She glanced over at me and sat up a little straighter. “Yeah. Sorry. I’m just really tired. I haven’t been sleeping much with everything going on.”

“Well after tonight, you will. Rhys will take care of everything, and you’ll go back to sleeping like a baby and snoring your face off.”

Nancy smiled. “You’re sure he’s all right with this? I feel like he’s already done enough for me in the past, and I hate using him like this.”

“He wants to help.”

“Of course he does. But that’s the catch, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, of course he wants to help when he knows the shit Kyle is doing to us. I guess I just feel like we’re taking advantage of him.”

“We’re not,” I said.

Nancy looked back out the window. “Okay.”

I considered what she had said as I watched the cars pass. We were still fifteen minutes away from the apartment, and I

was itching to make a cup of tea and have a sandwich. I needed comfort food after this cold, wet, terrible weather and being cooped up in an airplane.

The cab pulled up outside of my apartment, and we paid the driver. We covered our heads and ran to the front door as the cold rain hit our skin like tiny angry daggers.

Once we were inside, I was uncomfortable and eager to strip out of my now damp clothes.

“All I want is a hot shower, a cup of tea, and a tomato sandwich,” I muttered as we rode the elevator up to my floor. “And to watch a movie or something.”

“Sounds like a good way to spend the night to me,” Nancy said.

The elevator doors opened, and we went down the hall to my apartment door. I stuck my key in the lock to find it already unlocked. Frowning, I turned the handle and pushed it open. Had I forgotten to lock it when we left? No. I wouldn't have made a mistake like that. Especially since we were going out of town. My stomach rolled over.

We went inside, and I dropped my purse on the floor.

The whole place had been torn apart.

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

Nancy stepped up beside me. “Oh no.”

Every piece of dishware I owned had been taken out of the cupboards and smashed on the kitchen floor. My kitchen appliances, like my microwave and Crockpot which I always left on the counter, looked like they'd been beaten with a baseball bat.

My fridge was dented. My kitchen cabinets were smashed and scratched.

I walked deeper into the apartment. The pillows on my sofa had been gutted and were puking out stuffing all over the place. My television was shattered. Everything was destroyed.

“That fucker,” I said.

I could hear Nancy crying behind me. “Quinn, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Nancy.”

“I never should have come here,” she said. “I never should have asked you to come pick me up. Now you’re on his radar and—”

“Nancy.”

“He’s not going to stop until he gets what he wants. Oh my God. How could I have been so stupid?”

I turned around and marched over to her. She was still standing in the entryway with her bags in her hands. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and leaving mascara tracks in their wake. I took her by the shoulders and shook her. I wasn’t gentle about it, either. “Nancy. Now is the time to come clean, all right? Who the fuck is this guy?”

She shook her head. “I—he—”

I shook her again. “Now is not the time to withhold information. Look what he did to my place! Look how he came after us! He wants to hurt us, Nancy. I’m not fucking around. There’s something you’re not telling me. Kyle is worse than I thought he was, isn’t he?”

She started nodding, and my stomach rolled over. I pressed a hand to my forehead and staggered back from her. Nancy’s bottom lip trembled as she watched me. “He’s not a good person, Quinn.”

“No shit.”

She flinched.

“I’m sorry. I’m just... frustrated.”

Nancy nodded.

I turned in a slow circle to soak in the sight of my mangled apartment. I didn’t even want to know what he had done to my bedroom. I felt violated. He saw everything I owned. Everything. My intimates. My vibrator.

I shook my head. There was no sense in dwelling on that. I couldn't change it.

"He sells drugs," Nancy said.

I nodded. I wasn't surprised. "And?"

"And... he runs with some pretty scary dudes. Men that I know have their hands in some pretty dirty pockets."

"How dirty are we talking here, Nancy?"

"One of them is a hired hand."

"Meaning?"

Nancy looked down at the floor. "He's killed people."

"Of course," I said grimly. "And I have Rhys coming out here to deal with this shit. This is great, Nancy. Just great. No wonder you feel like shit about getting him involved. Are these guys too much for him to handle? Because we're not going to be able to talk him down now, and if I send him off to get killed by your piece of shit boyfriend, I'm going to—" I slapped my mouth shut.

Nancy crumpled to the floor and buried her face in her hands as she started sobbing. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

But it did happen. And I warned you about him. I knew he was a bad guy. I knew he'd hurt you. But you wouldn't fucking listen to me. Why do you never fucking listen to me?

I crouched down in front of her and pulled her hands away from her face. "I'm sorry, Nancy. This is just a lot for me to process all at once. And you know how I feel about Rhys. I don't want him getting hurt."

She sniffled. "I know."

"So, tell me if you think he has a chance against these guys or not. And tell me the truth."

She didn't have time to answer me. Suddenly, the doorway was filled with a dark shadow. I looked up, and my eyes widened as Rhys stepped into the entranceway and looked around. His green eyes looked darker than I'd ever seen them.

I stood up, and his gaze locked on to me. “What the fuck happened?”

“He came and trashed it while we were in New York,” I said.

Rhys walked around Nancy who was still on her knees on the floor, crying. He didn’t even look at her. Instead, he walked slowly through my apartment, inspecting the damage that had been done. “This is thousands of dollars of damage,” he said.

“I know.”

He stopped in my living room and bent down to pick something out of the carpet. He pulled a photo out of a shattered frame and shook glass off of it. I knew without having to look which picture it was. It was of me, him, and Max a few months before Max died. It had been taken in the summer during one of the MC’s baseball games. We were all playing for the red team, and they’d let me paint red stripes on their cheeks with my lipstick. War paint, they called it.

All three of us were a little drunk in the photo, but it was the best one I had of the three of us.

Rhys ran his thumb over it and then put it down on the edge of my coffee table. It had a metal frame, and that was the only part of it that wasn’t broken. Then he came back over to us and looked down at Nancy. “Where would I find this bastard on a Thursday night?”

Nancy looked up at him slowly. Then she looked at me. I nodded at her to tell him. We didn’t have a choice now. Nancy took a deep breath. “They usually hang out in one of their garages off Rockmore Avenue. The garage faces out onto a back lane. It’s a shady neighborhood. Plenty of foreclosures and no people around who are likely to ever call the cops if something goes down. Like a fight. If you go, Rhys, and you’re in trouble, nobody is going to come bail you out.”

“Do you want my help or not?”

Nancy winced at the anger in his voice and nodded. “I’ll text you the address.”

He turned to me. “Do you have rental insurance?” I nodded. “Good. I’m going to pay this asshole a visit, and then I’ll be back to help you clean.”

“Rhys,” I started to say, but then I realized I didn’t know what I could say. Would he stay if I asked him to? Would he be able to walk away from a fight like this? I knew him better than anyone. He was going to serve his justice one way or another. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go alone. Kyle hangs around with some scary guys. Murderers. I don’t like this.”

“Well, I’m here now,” he said. “And I’m not leaving until this fucker gets what’s coming to him for laying a hand on you. I can take care of myself. Besides, the chance to ask for backup has passed.”

Nancy hid her face in her hands again. Had she been more honest about who we were dealing with, maybe Rhys would have made the effort to bring Owen with him; anyone was better than no one.

“I can come with you,” I said.

“Absolutely not.”

“I’ll wait in the car.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” he asked, grabbing my upper arm. “You won’t go anywhere near this guy, Quinn. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

He let me go and nodded. “Good. I’ll be back when it’s done. Make sure you lock the door behind me.”

“I will.”

Rhys turned and left without saying another word to either of us. I stood beside Nancy for a solid thirty seconds before my brain started working again, and I went and closed and locked the front door. I rested my back against it and sank down it to bring my knees to my chest.

Nancy took her phone shakily out of her bag, and I watched her text what I assumed was Kyle’s address to Rhys.

“Will he be okay?” I whispered.

Nancy slipped her phone back in her purse and looked over her shoulder at me. “I hope so.”

CHAPTER 11



RHYS

I turned down Rockwood Avenue and knew instantly which garage was the one I was looking for. It was located five houses down the little lane, and the door was open. Four men were sitting under cover of the garage while a fire burned in a gas fire pit in front of them. The pavement was littered with beer bottles and food wrappers, and the whole lane smelled like booze, wet asphalt, and weed.

The four of them were passing a joint around. They took long draws and held the smoke in their lungs for a while before exhaling little puffs of smoke, which rose up and floated above them in the garage.

I parked my bike and got off. I left my helmet on the handlebars and started walking over.

If they heard or saw me coming, they chose not to acknowledge me.

One of them lit up a cigarette, which prompted the others to follow suit. By the time I reached them and stood on the other side of the fire, the air was thick with cigarette smoke.

All four of them looked up at me. The chairs they were sitting in were all lawn chairs in varying states of disrepair. Duct tape was present on almost all of them, holding them together by some sort of miracle.

The man closest to me on the far right shifted in his chair, which creaked beneath his weight. He had a blue ball cap on, and when he smiled, I saw that his teeth were starting to rot. “What can we do for you, man?”

“I’m not a buyer,” I said.

He took his cap off and ran his fingers through his wet hair. No. Not wet. Oily. “Then get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m looking for Kyle.”

The four of them all exchanged looks I couldn’t read. Then they all got to their feet.

They were big boys. All of them cleared six feet easily. But so did I. The one I’d already spoken with looked past me at my bike parked a couple shops away. I wasn’t stupid enough to bring it within close proximity of these clowns. “That your bike?”

“Yes.”

He put his ball cap back on and nodded. “Nice wheels.”

“Stop wasting my time,” I said none too nicely. “Which one of you is Kyle?”

“I am,” the guy on the left said. Naturally. He was the biggest of the bunch with a big build and massive hands that were curled into fists at his sides. He wasn’t dumb enough not to realize what this was. “Who sent you?”

“Nobody sent me,” I said.

“What the fuck do you want then?”

“I came to tell you that you’re done with Nancy Vickers.”

Kyle snorted and looked around at his dimwitted buddies. They chuckled too. He ran his hand over his buzzed head as his shoulders shook with mirth. “You crack me up, man. She got you running her errands for her? What did she do to talk you into coming down here?”

“She didn’t do anything.”

His eyes narrowed. “What about that bitch friend of hers? The blonde one.”

I refrained from leaping across the fire and decking him across the jaw. I swallowed and kept my expression still. “It

doesn't matter. What matters is that you do as I say, and you cut Nancy loose. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Hell yeah, it's going to be a fucking problem, you punk," Kyle spat, stepping around the fire and closing the distance between us. He was a mere three feet away from me now. He pointed a finger at my chest. "I don't know who you think you are, but nobody shows up at my fucking house and tells me what to do. There're rules against that sort of shit. Rudy, get me my damn baseball bat." He held out his hand as the one called Rudy, the oldest of the bunch, walked into the shop and plucked a baseball bat from where it hung on the back wall. He walked back over and placed it in Kyle's hand.

I never moved.

Kyle gripped the handle of his weapon. "Who the fuck are you, man?"

"Not important."

Rudy cracked the can of another beer. "Kick his ass, Kyle."

Kyle's lips peeled off his teeth in a wicked grin. He swung the bat lazily in an arch to slap it into his palm. "Yeah. Buckle up, boys. You're gonna get a show tonight."

I took a step back to create a bit more space between us. I wasn't worried about him having a bat—quite the opposite, really. The fact that he wanted to bring a weapon into this suggested he might not be a very good fighter.

But even if that was the case, I knew I'd have to deal with his three buddies if I kicked his ass. Then I'd really have my hands full.

But if I kicked his ass, there'd be a baseball bat lying on the pavement just waiting for someone to pick it up and use it.

In theory.

"What is Nancy Vickers to you?" I asked. "Why not just leave her alone?" There was no possible way this scumbag cared about her. Not in a million years.

He chuckled. "She's a good lay."

His buddies hooted and hollered from their seats around the fire. They sipped their beers and puffed on their joint and cigarettes as Kyle took a menacing step forward.

The fire cast half of him into shadow. He was still grinning at me like a madman. Clearly, the man had bloodlust. If they got me down, I might not ever get back up. I noted his scarred knuckles and patchy eyebrow. He'd been in many fights before. This was nothing new for him. Then why the need for the baseball bat?

Maybe because he was drunk as a skunk and stood a better chance of landing a hit on me with some extra reach.

I rolled my shoulders.

Kyle snickered and pointed his bat at me. "Getting all warmed up, pretty boy? That's cute."

The others had another good laugh at that.

"It's just been a while," I said. I wasn't lying. The last time I'd been in any real sort of brawl was six months ago when I saved Derek from being strangled to death by some of Warren's thugs. Shortly after that, I'd had my fight with Isaac Reed and his brother in the alley. But that hadn't been much more than getting shot in the arm and pulling the trigger myself.

This was something else entirely.

I couldn't afford to make any mistakes. These guys were serious. They wanted to fuck me up good. And if I didn't walk away from this, Quinn and Nancy would be in even more trouble than they already were. Kyle knew they were the reason I was here, and there was no way in hell I was going to let him walk away to wreak more havoc on my woman.

I shook my head. She wasn't mine. Not anymore.

I flexed my fingers and tucked my thumbs into my fists. Kyle didn't notice. Good. He didn't need to know how many times I'd done this. Being underestimated was an advantage in a situation like this.

Kyle let out a furious bellow and charged forward with the bat wound back over his right shoulder.

So, he was righthanded.

As he swung, I dodged to my left, far out of the path of the arcing bat. I came back in at his side as the bat angled down, drawing with it his momentum. I hammered my fists twice into his ribs and then dealt him a swift kick to the side of the knee. He yelped and went down to the pavement before any of his buddies even had time to get to their feet.

Then I kicked him right in the teeth, took the bat from his hands, and turned around to face them with his unconscious body behind me.

“Next?” I asked.

Rudy practically leapt over the fire and came at me with a rabid snarl. He went for my face, which was foolish because I was able to stop him by driving the bat into his right hip.

He wouldn't be walking for a day or two. Maybe more.

Then the other two were up and rushing forward. The bat became more cumbersome than useful, but I didn't want to toss it aside for either of them to get their hands on. If they did, all it would take was for one of them to get me down while the other one wailed on me. There was too much risk involved to make a stupid mistake like that.

So, I held on to it and tried to use it to my advantage as Rudy somehow managed to get back up on his feet. Maybe the bastard was so damn drunk he couldn't feel the damage I'd more than likely done to his hip. I'd heard the bat connect with bone. It sure as shit was not going to feel good when he sobered up.

“Get that fucker,” Rudy hissed.

The other two guys were big, but not nearly the same size as Kyle. They were also clearly better fighters. They gave me a wide berth, and one moved behind my back as the other stayed in front of me, forcing me to look back and forth to keep my eyes on both of them. I turned sideways to save myself from craning my neck.

“You piece of shit,” one of them spat at me. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“I think I’m the guy who’s gonna kick your ass,” I growled. I’d shifted into fight mode the second the baseball bat came into play. Adrenaline was starting to pump through my veins as the two guys started circling me.

Rudy dropped to one knee to check on Kyle. He looked up at me. “You knocked his damn teeth out.”

“He was ugly anyway.”

Rudy staggered back up to his feet. “We’re gonna kill you, you smug fucker. You hear me?” He was yelling at me. Nancy’s warning had been true. There was nobody in this neighborhood who would call the cops to report any funny business. It was safer to keep their blinds closed and ignore what was happening behind their house, rather than get involved.

“From where I’m standing, there’s a lot of talking going on,” I said. “And I’m getting bored. He should have done what I said and stayed away from Nancy.”

“Kill him,” Rudy said.

The two guys came at me at once, and the fight was on. Kyle had only been an appetizer. These two knew what they were doing. One of them went for my upper body while the other went for my legs. I couldn’t fend them both off at once, so I took a swipe with the bat at the guy in front of me, and it connected with his shoulder. He grunted and stumbled sideways as the guy who came at me from behind wrapped his arms around my waist and knocked me to the pavement.

I rolled onto my back before he had a chance to pin me down. He stayed on top of me and wrapped both hands around my throat as I saw the other guy coming for me out of the corner of my vision—which was darkening around the edges due to how hard he was squeezing my neck. No oxygen was getting to my brain.

I’d pass out if I didn’t get out of this.

Stars burst in my vision.

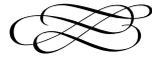
Pain erupted in my right side.

I drove my knee up into the guy's stomach who was on top of me, trying to choke me out. The impact rocked him forward, and he was close enough for me to reach up and press my thumbs into his eyeballs. He screamed, released me, and stumbled back clutching his face.

I sucked in a ragged breath, and dizziness broke over me. I needed five seconds to recover, but I wasn't going to get it because the other guy was right in front of me, and he had the baseball bat in his hand.

He grinned down at me. "You made a big mistake, asshole."

CHAPTER 12



QUINN

Nancy took the hair elastic off her wrist and used it to tie up her short black hair in a messy bun at the back of her head. Her hair was too short to get it all in the elastic, so a good chunk of it lay against the back of her neck as she crammed more cushion stuffing in the black garbage bag that was on the floor beside her in my living room.

She glanced up at me as I walked from one side of the kitchen to the other and then back again. After rocking back on her heels and sighing, she said, “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“He should be back by now.”

Nancy squinted her eyes at the clock on my stove. “He’s only been gone an hour.”

“Yeah. I know. How far away is this place?”

Nancy shrugged. “I don’t know. A fifteen-minute drive?”

“So, he would have been there in ten,” I stated.

Nancy nodded. “Okay. Yes, but an hour still isn’t—”

“That means he’s been with them for forty minutes at the least, Nancy. You know Rhys. A fight should not last that long. It should be a five-minute ordeal. Tops. Something doesn’t feel right.”

Nancy rolled up to her feet and nudged the garbage bag aside.

In the hour that Rhys has been gone, we had committed ourselves to trying to clean up some of the mess. I’d managed

to sweep all my broken dishes into one corner of the kitchen and then swept them into a garbage bin. I had also opened my fridge to find that every liquid had been opened and poured all over the inside of the fridge. I packed everything up, washed what could be saved, and was forced to throw away what could not.

I had also managed to work up the nerve to go into my bedroom. It hadn't even been touched, which made me think that Kyle hadn't had much time when he came in here. Or he knew he couldn't stay long because one of my neighbors would catch him in the act. He'd only ransacked the living room and kitchen.

I was relieved that I hadn't lost everything in my bedroom. I had precious memory boxes up in my closet, along with some of Max's sweaters and some of my parents' clothes, too. Nobody knew I'd kept that stuff, but I hadn't been able to let it all go. I needed to keep something that still felt like them.

I needed to keep something to sit with and hold that made me remember my family.

I pressed my hands to my forehead and blew out a shaky breath. "I think we should go after him."

"No," Nancy said nervously. "He told you to stay away from there. We have to trust him."

"I do trust him," I snapped. "It's not about trust. It's about whether or not he's lying face down in a ditch somewhere because of us."

Nancy wrung her hands together. "Let's give him twenty more minutes. If he's not back by then, we'll go to Rockwood."

Twenty minutes felt like a long, long time. "Ten."

"Fifteen," Nancy countered.

I threw my hands up. "Fine! Fifteen."

Nancy went back to stuffing the garbage bag with couch stuffing, and I dragged the garbage bags I'd already filled into the entranceway to be taken down to the garbage in the

morning. I wiped sweat from my forehead before joining her in the living room and collecting all the broken picture frames, candle jars, vases, and destroyed books from my shelves. After tossing them into yet another garbage bag, I sat down cross-legged on the floor and rested my elbows on my knees and my forehead in my hands.

Nancy didn't say anything for a while. What was there for her to say? She'd already apologized a thousand times, and that didn't make me feel any better. If I was being honest, it just annoyed me. Saying sorry didn't fix anything.

And it wasn't really her fault. It was Kyle's fault. Nancy had just fallen victim to him and let him manipulate and control her, and when it spiralled, Rhys and I got caught up in the fray. I knew the guilt she was carrying and wanted to make it go away for her, but right now, with Rhys being who the hell knew where and my apartment in shambles, I just didn't have it in me to try to make her feel better.

If only Rhys would walk through the front door, then everything would be better. I'd be able to breathe, and the nausea swirling in my gut would pass.

I stared at the door and willed him to walk through it.

He didn't.

I put my head back down in my hands and stared at my own feet. I needed to repaint my toes. The black polish had started chipping.

I heard Nancy stand up. "Maybe you're right, Quinn. Maybe we should go look for him. If something happened..." She trailed off, unwilling to finish the sentence.

"If something happened, what?"

"Then it's on me." She shook her head. "I can't handle that. Not on top of everything else. If he needs us, we'd better show up for him."

Now she was starting to talk sense. I stood up and stepped over the many garbage bags that had filled up my living room. "Get your shoes on."

Nancy and I both put on our boots. I grabbed my leather jacket, my car keys, and my purse off the kitchen island and went to the front door as Nancy scrambled around trying to find her purse, which was likely buried somewhere under all the debris.

“You don’t need it,” I said impatiently.

“Do you have your phone with you in case we need to call someone?”

“Yes,” I said, tapping the toe of my boot on the floor. “Let’s go.”

“All right, all right,” Nancy said.

And then something thumped into my front door. I let out a startled yelp and leapt backward into Nancy, who grabbed my upper arm and pulled me a good three feet backward when someone started knocking. “What if it’s Kyle?” she whispered in my ear.

“That’s what a peephole is for,” I muttered.

The knock came again. “Quinn?”

I dropped all my shit on the floor and rushed forward to unlock the door. I yanked it open, and my breath caught in my throat as Rhys looked up at me.

He was leaning against the doorframe hunched over. His face was bloody and so was his right hand, which he had cradled in front of him. His shirt was torn and so were his jeans, and there were red marks around his neck.

From somebody’s hands.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

“Can I come in?” he asked. I couldn’t tell if he was smiling or not. Maybe it was a grimace. It didn’t matter.

I stepped aside and offered him my hand. He didn’t take it. Instead, he stumbled in and made it to the kitchen island before he had to grab onto it for support.

Nancy hurried around him and peered up into his face. “Where is all the blood coming from?”

“What?” he asked.

Was he that disoriented? Had they knocked him around that badly that he didn't know how much blood was smeared over his face?

Nancy blinked at him. “The blood. Where is it coming from? Did they cut you?”

He frowned and looked down at himself. Then he shook his head. “No.”

Nancy looked nervously at me. Her eyes were wide with panic.

I marched around him and grabbed his face to make him look me in the eyes. “Rhys. You're covered in blood. We need to know if it's yours so we can help you.”

He shook his head again. “It's not mine. Well, most of it isn't. I think one of them might have split my lip or something.”

I peered closer through the bloody mess. Yes. He did have a split lip. And a gash in his eyebrow. “How did you get so much blood on you? Is it Kyle's? What the fuck happened out there?”

Nancy went to the sink and slapped her hand on the counter when she realized I had no cups.

“In the bathroom,” I told her. “There's one by the sink. Just take my toothbrush and shit out of it. Aspirin is under the sink.”

“Okay,” she said, and then she took off down the hall.

“Rhys,” I whispered.

He closed his hands over mine. “Stop worrying. I'm sure it looks worse than it feels.”

“Oh really? Because it looks really fucking bad. Like you got hit by a truck or something. Why is there so much blood?”

He narrowed his eyes in thought. “One of them had a knife.”

“And?”

“And I got it from him and used it.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek hard. “Did you kill him?”

“What? No. I stabbed him in the leg. He’ll be fine.”

“Thank God,” I said. Then I shook my head. “Wait. If you stabbed him in the leg, how do you have this shit all over your face? This doesn’t make sense.”

He shrugged. “I may have taken a hit to the head at some point.”

“What?” I practically yelled at him.

He grimaced. “Too loud.”

“Sorry.” I walked around him and went to my tip toes. The hair on the back of his head was matted with blood. I reached up and gently touched it with two fingertips. “Does this hurt?”

“It doesn’t feel good,” he said dryly.

“You might have a concussion. We should go to the hospital. If all this blood is from your head—”

“Quinn,” he said softly and turned to me. He put his hands on my shoulders. “I’m all right. I just need to lay down.”

Nancy came back from the bathroom with two aspirins in her palm. She held them out to Rhys and then gave him a glass of water. We both watched him toss them back and then drain the whole glass. She went and refilled it and brought it back to him, and he drank more.

“Did you ride your bike home?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I was going to give him a piece of my mind in the morning. I sighed and took his hand. “Come on. I’ll get you cleaned up, and then you can lie down in the guest room. I don’t need you getting blood all over my sheets. The rest of my stuff has already been ruined enough.”

He followed me into the bathroom where I cleaned him up and inspected the back of his head, looking for a gash or some evidence of where all the blood came from. I never found it.

Maybe it wasn't his. Maybe he wasn't telling me the whole truth of what went down. Maybe he didn't stab that guy in the leg.

I had him take his shirt off and made sure there weren't any wounds hiding beneath his clothes. He also took his pants off. He wasn't leaking from anywhere. Once I was satisfied that he wasn't going to bleed out in my guest room overnight, I took a look at the hand he'd been cradling when he first showed up at the door. His knuckles were bruised and split and in need of cleaning. He let me clean them and wrap them for him. I also wrapped his wrist tightly in case it was fractured or sprained.

Once he was blood free, he looked a lot more like himself. He had a split lip and the beginnings of a black eye, but he looked healthier than I expected.

We went down the hall to the guest room, and I pulled the blankets down. I sat down at the head of the bed with my back against the headboard and told him to come. He didn't hesitate to lay down on his back and rest his head in my lap.

I stroked his hair, running my fingers through it gently as he looked up at me. "Thank you," he said softly. He could barely keep his eyes open.

"For what? If it wasn't for me, you never would have had to do this tonight."

"Someone needed to teach him a lesson, right?"

I sighed and leaned down to kiss his forehead. "I wish it didn't have to be you."

He smiled, and his eyes closed. I continued stroking his hair and watched as his breathing evened out and he fell asleep. It didn't take long at all. Seconds, probably.

But time seemed to stand still as I sat there with him, suspended in a reality I could never have.

CHAPTER 13



RHYS

My head wasn't pounding as furiously as I thought it would be when I first opened my eyes. The room was dark, so I knew it wasn't morning yet. There was a pressure against my shoulder blades, and I remembered that I'd fallen asleep with my head in Quinn's lap.

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

After a minute or so, she came into focus. She was just a pale outline above me. I could hear her soft and steady breathing, and her breath danced across my forehead. Her hand was still in my hair.

I smiled to myself and winced as the cut on my lip burned. It didn't matter. It had all been worth it to lie like this with her.

I had to fight myself to keep my eyes open. I wanted to linger here in this quiet place with her for just a couple more minutes. I wanted to commit it to memory so that after I went back to New York, I had something to pull out and think about. Something that wasn't just sex but a quiet moment between the two of us. Tenderness.

Love.



I woke again when the bedroom was basked in sunlight. I had a bit of a headache but nothing too serious, and by the time I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stretched, I felt refreshed. My knuckles still hurt, and my wrist ached, but

besides that, I was in decent enough shape. Not bad for taking on four guys on my own.

I stood up and gave myself a minute before I left the bedroom. I wanted to make sure no dizzy spells were going to jump up on me. When none came, I looked around the room and found my clothes, washed and folded, sitting on top of Quinn's old dresser that she'd moved into the guest room years ago.

I pulled on my jeans, which smelled like her lavender detergent, and then my shirt, and I left the bedroom to walk down the hall. I lingered in the entrance to the kitchen and watched Quinn.

She must have just gotten out of the shower within the last ten minutes or so. Her hair was wet and hanging straight down her back. She'd probably start braiding it soon. She was wearing sweatpants which were rolled halfway up her calves and a black crop top that showed off her lean midsection. She really had no clue how goddamn sexy she was.

I whistled.

Quinn turned around and smiled at me. She'd been chopping up cantaloupe and throwing the little squares into a bowl along with some green grapes. "Morning," she said.

"Morning."

"You look much better than you did last night."

"All thanks to you."

She shrugged. "It was the least I could do."

I joined her at the counter, and she popped a piece of cantaloupe in her mouth. I watched her lips as she chewed. Her marvelous, splendid, voluptuous lips. Then she picked up another piece and held it up to my mouth. I opened up, and she placed it on my tongue.

It was fucking cold.

She giggled as I chewed and wiped her hands on the towel hanging off the oven handle. Then she went back to chopping.

“Where’s Nancy?”

“She had to go into the parlor this morning. She’s been working there with me for the last six months as our receptionist. You just missed her by about twenty minutes. She was hoping you’d get up so she could see you.”

“Why?”

“Seriously?” Quinn asked.

I stared blankly at her. “Yeah. What am I missing here?”

“She feels terrible, Rhys. You were in pretty rough shape last night, and she had no idea what condition you’d be in this morning. And whatever condition it was, you wouldn’t be in it if she hadn’t started dating that asshole.”

“But she didn’t know he was an asshole when she started seeing him.”

“No,” Quinn said slowly. “But a certain someone who is a pretty good judge of character *did* warn her a handful of times, and she chose to disregard the warnings and the numerous red flags.”

I chuckled. “Nancy doesn’t like being told what to do. And neither do you. Didn’t Max tell you that I was bad news and that you should stay away from me?”

Quinn opened her mouth to reply and then closed it. She cocked her head, thinking. “Well shit. You just poked a giant hole in my logic.”

I tapped the side of my head. “Perspective, baby.”

Quinn rolled her hazel eyes at me. “She’ll be glad to hear that side of things. This has been hard on her. All of it. The messed-up apartment. You getting your ass kicked—”

“I did *not* get my ass kicked.”

She blinked innocently at me. “Oh? Then what would you call all of this?” She gestured at all of me but focused her attention on my back eye, split lip, bruised throat, and fucked up right hand. She put her hand on her hip and arched her eyebrow. “You look like you were used as a piñata.”

I laughed. She didn't.

"Rhys," she said. There was no playfulness to her tone. "What happened last night?"

I moved around her and grabbed another piece of melon. After popping it in my mouth, I met her gaze. "I found Kyle, and I told him to leave Nancy alone. He wasn't having it. He said she was his. He was unreasonable, so one thing led to another."

"How many of them were there?"

"Four."

"Jesus."

I shrugged. "I handled it."

"Nancy is scared that Kyle is going to come after her again. Does she need to worry about him?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What did you do?"

"Why do you assume I've done something terrible?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think that. But I need to know what happened. So does Nancy. She deserves the peace of mind. Tell me."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Fine. He came at me with a baseball bat. I busted up his knee, broke a rib or two, and kicked in a few teeth."

Her eyebrows inched up her forehead with surprise. "Oh."

"And then I had to contend with the other three. I'm sorry that I scared you last night. And Nancy. I didn't really realize how rough I looked, I guess."

"You looked like you were in a freak accident and your parachute didn't open after jumping out of an airplane and you landed on something hard and sharp."

I grinned. "Like the good old days, huh, baby?"

Quinn took the bowl of melon and grapes and started eating them. “You’re impossible. You know that?”

“You make a point to remind me whenever you get the chance.”

“So, these other three guys. What sort of condition were they in when you rode away? The same as Kyle?”

“Give or take.”

She paused with a grape in her mouth. It was cute the way her lips were puckered. “Define ‘give or take’.”

I stole a couple grapes. “Well, instead of broken ribs, they had other broken things. Like a broken nose and wrist. But I’m no doctor.”

“No. You’re just the guy who sends people to doctors.”

I grinned. “You like that about me.”

Quinn drew her wet hair over her shoulder and ran her fingers through it. Then mindlessly, she began weaving it into a braid. “I don’t *not* like that about you.” Her tone was playful. It sounded to me like she’d forgiven me for being a total barbarian last night.

I took the hem of her shirt and pulled her to me. “I know.”

Quinn tugged her shirt out of my hand and walked around the kitchen island. Confused, I watched her go and sit on one of the barstools on the other side. She continued eating her bowl of fruit without looking up at me.

“Uh, did I do something wrong?” She shook her head. “Then why does it feel like I suddenly did something wrong?”

She heaved a dramatic sigh. It was a signature move, and one that guaranteed that she was right and I was wrong. I braced myself. “You’re leaving today, right?”

“I was planning on it.”

“And you think that you can just come here, fight my battles for me, and then fuck me and leave?”

“Wait, what? No. Quinn—”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to go down that road. Saying goodbye to you the first time was hard enough. I don’t want to live it again. Seriously, Rhys. I’m all alone here. Except for Nancy. And if we do this again, I’m afraid I’m going to feel the exact same way I did last time, and it almost killed me.”

Her words hit me right in the gut. I leaned on the other side of the island and hung my head. “I get it.”

“Do you?”

I looked up at her. “Yeah.”

“Really? Because from where I’m standing, it doesn’t seem like you do. It was so easy for you to pack up and move to another fucking state, Rhys. And you never looked back. You just left.”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“You never even called me. I waited weeks, thinking that you would. Just to check in. Just to make sure I was all right. It had only been two months since Max and—and—” She shook her head sharply. “It doesn’t matter anymore. It’s in the past. And that’s where it should stay. If you have to go back to New York, then that’s fine. But you can’t have both. You can’t have your new life and me. It’s not fair.”

I ran my tongue along my teeth. Every word was true, and that made it hurt even more. “You’re right.” Quinn stiffened. “I should have called. I should have made sure you were all right. I just couldn’t hear your voice without thinking of him. I couldn’t bear it, Quinn. I needed to do something to make it better, and the only fucking thing I could wrap my head around was killing Reed.”

“And did that make it better?” she whispered.

I swallowed. “No. Nothing has.”

“Then why didn’t you come back?” Her voice cracked, and I didn’t dare look at her. I didn’t want to see the tears that were there because of hurt I’d caused.

“Because this city only reminds me of what I’ve lost and what I’ve done.”

“And what have you done, Rhys?”

“Enough. I’ve done enough.”

CHAPTER 14



QUINN

I'd spent the last eight months thinking I was the one who'd been damaged the most, the one who'd suffered the worst.

As I stood across from the only man I'd ever loved, I realized how wrong I'd been.

Rhys was equally, if not more, fucked up than I was. It had been no secret how hard he took Max's death, but the details were never divulged, and nobody ever worked up the nerve to ask him about it—except for me. And I'd been unable to get anything out of him other than a vague answer that guaranteed he was withholding something from me—from all of the crew.

I knew he didn't have bad intentions, and he was likely keeping these details from me to spare me from more hurt. Unfortunately, that meant he was carrying a heavy burden all by himself.

I licked my lips. He was still standing across the island from me. He had his forearms resting on the counter, and his head was hung. I wasn't sure if his eyes were open or closed.

I walked around the island and stopped when I was just a couple inches away. Then I leaned into his side and rested my cheek on his back, right against his shoulder blade. I wrapped one arm around his back and put my other hand on top of his on the counter. "I'm sorry," I said gently.

"It's all right."

I shook my head, and my cheek whispered against the soft fabric of his shirt. "No, it's not. I understand why you have to

go back to New York. That's your home now. I was acting like a spoiled child."

He finally looked at me and peered over his shoulder. I couldn't see his mouth, but his eyes were warm and kind. "No, Quinn. You were just saying the things I didn't want to hear but needed to. It's all right. We're all right."

I kissed his shoulder and hugged him tighter. All I wanted to do was tell him I loved him. But I couldn't. So I just said, "Yeah. We are."

He straightened up and turned to me, letting his arms slide off the counter to hang at his sides. I stared up at him as he reached out and put a hand on both of my hips.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"Just because I have to go doesn't mean I want to."

"I know."

"Give me something to think about on my ride home?"

"Distracted driving is dangerous," I said as I took the hem of his shirt and pinched it between two fingers. I inched it upward to run my fingers along the warm skin of his lower stomach. "I want to make sure you get back in one piece."

He caught my hand and held it still. "Are you playing games with me, Quinn?"

I drew my bottom lip between my teeth and gave him my best sultry gaze. "Maybe."

Rhys ran his thumb over my knuckles. "You know what happens when you play games, baby girl."

I *did* know. I knew from experience the sorts of things he would do to me for teasing him. Delicious things. Mouth-watering, panty-soaking, naughty things.

I slid my hand out of his and gave him a coy smile as I undid his jeans. He watched me, a smile playing in the corners of his mouth, as I pulled down his fly and went to my knees in front of him. I didn't bother taking his pants or boxers off. I

didn't want to waste time. I simply pulled down the waistband of his boxers and freed his cock.

I wet my lips with my tongue before planting wet kisses on his meaty tip and trailing them down his shaft. Then I ran my tongue up the base and back to the tip, swirling around his shaft, and finally taking him in my mouth.

Rhys moaned as I gripped the back of his legs to pull him closer to me. His eyes were hungry as he stared down at me while I took inch after inch, keeping my tongue pressed to the underside of his dick.

I could take almost all of him. Feeling him in the back of my throat made my clit ache, and I reached down and rubbed myself over the fabric of my sweatpants. Rhys growled above me and reached out to plant his hands on the counter behind me, bracing himself as he worked himself in and out of my throat.

I slipped my hand under the waistband of my sweats. I needed more. I went under the panties, too, and found slick wetness there. My body was telling me I was ready as I slid a finger around in my juices and swirled it over my clit.

I moaned over his dick in my mouth. The vibration made him shudder, and he gripped the counter tighter. The muscles in his forearms strained, and his veins appeared like snaking lines on the insides of his arms.

“Deeper, baby. You can do it.”

I took him out of my mouth and caught my breath while I ran my tongue up and down his shaft. Then, when I was ready, I took him between my lips and held his gaze as I kept my throat relaxed and took every inch of him.

“Fuck,” he grated. He couldn't help himself. He gathered my hair up in one fist and held me down on his cock as he fucked my mouth. Thick saliva gathered around his dick as he worked himself over, and I stayed where I was for him, worshipping his cock the way he deserved. My swollen pussy ached for him to fuck it the same way he was fucking my mouth.

His grip tightened in my hair, and he pulled me off him and lifted me up to my feet. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and gave him a pouty smile. “I wasn’t done.”

“You are now.” His voice was deep and husky. Rhys took my hand and guided me out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom.

I stopped when I reached the end of the bed and turned back to him. He was watching me with hooded eyes, so I gathered the hem of my shirt, rolled it up a few inches, and then tugged it over my head.

With deliberate slowness, I hooked my thumbs in the rolled-up waistband of my sweats and then shimmied my hips back and forth as I pulled them down my legs. I bent all the way down, stepped out of the pants, and then straightened up and let Rhys have a nice long look at me.

He licked his lips.

Apparently, he liked what he saw. The bra I had on pushed my tits up to my chin, and the red lace screamed, “Fuck me.” My panties didn’t match, but that didn’t seem to matter to him. Had I let him stare any longer, he might have started drooling.

I stepped out of my sheer black panties one leg at a time and shot them like a rubber band at Rhys. He caught them in his left hand and then tucked them into the pocket of his jeans, which were still riding low around the top of his thighs.

“A little keepsake of our afternoon,” he said as he took off his pants and then his boxers.

“What do I get to remember the afternoon?”

Rhys flashed a devilish smile at me, and my stomach flipped over. “You’ll be sore for days, and every time you sit down, you’ll remember what we did.”

I ran my tongue along my teeth. “Sounds like fun.”

He smirked. “Turn around.”

I turned.

Then he was there, right behind me, pushing me forward with a hand between my shoulder blades. I bent over the bed, and he pinned me there. Then he spanked my ass, hard enough to make me yelp, and I started giggling. I couldn't help it. Whenever he got really serious, it made me laugh.

I heard him chuckle too.

He ran his hand up the back of my right thigh and cupped me between the legs. My laughter dissolved as I sighed with pleasure. He rolled his fingers over my clit and pressed hard with the heel of his hand. He still had his other hand between my shoulder blades, which made it impossible for me to move, and he used his position to torture me a little.

I didn't know how long he made me wait like that. It might have been minutes or seconds. Regardless, it was too long for my taste, and all I wanted was for him to stretch me. I whimpered into the bedding and tried to wiggle free from him.

"Do you want it, baby?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, but my voice was muffled by sheets.

"I can't hear you."

I lifted my head. "I want it."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me."

Rhys eased a finger inside of me, and I moaned. I let my head fall back to the bed and rolled my forehead against the blankets as he flicked his finger against all my sensitive spots.

"More," I pleaded.

"Greedy girl."

"Shut the fuck up."

Rhys laughed, but he did what I wanted. He slid another finger into my pussy and started fucking me harder. I could barely keep my eyes open while he worked, and soon, I was trembling beneath him as he worked me closer to my orgasm. I craved the release more now than I ever had, and I knew that

when it broke over me, I would lose all control. I would be his to do with what he wanted.

And he knew it.

He fucked me hard and fast, and right when I started to come, he pulled his fingers out and rubbed them quickly and incessantly over my clit until I came hard and fast. I screamed into the bedding as my hips bucked and my body was overrun by muscle spasms.

Rhys didn't wait for me to finish. Instead, I felt him roll his meaty tip through my juices. He moaned behind me, eased the tip of his cock in, and then pulled out. I heard him tear open a condom wrapper. Where he'd got it from, I had no idea. I didn't care. He was taking too damn long.

I looked back at him over my shoulder as he rolled the rubber on. When he was ready, he came back to me. I spread my legs farther apart, and he took hold of my hips.

His first two inches slid inside me with no resistance. I was so fucking wet.

I moaned as I took another inch. I pressed back into him to take another, and then another, and soon, I was grimacing as I held his full length inside of me. He waited only a couple of seconds before he pulled out and drove himself back in.

He fucked me like that until I couldn't stay on my feet anymore. My knees trembled and then gave out, and Rhys wrapped his arm around my waist and lifted me up to put me on the bed on my knees. He slapped my ass and slid his cock back in.

I balled my fists in the sheets and hung my head. I rolled my shoulders and hips and ground against him as he fucked me. He reached around and rubbed my clit as his hips slowed, and he let me ride him like that. I liked the control.

The couple of seconds he let me have, anyway.

He pushed me back down face first. I felt him lift one leg and put it on the bed beside me so he could get in deeper. I moaned into the sheets and then cried out when the pleasure became almost too much. I bit down on the bedding and held it

between my teeth as he bucked against me. The sound of his quickening breathing tipped me off that he was about to find his own release.

I reached between my legs and cupped his balls as he fucked me.

He lost it right away. His thrusts became wilder, and as he thrust up into me, I came undone too. I cried into the bed as I came, and he kept going until I had ridden out my orgasm.

Then he was lying beside me on the bed. His eyes were closed as he lay on his back. I watched his chest rise and fall and admired the way his skin shined from exertion.

I reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder. “You should stay just one more night. For old time’s sake.”

He didn’t open his eyes. “I have to go back.”

“I know that. And I’m not asking for forever. I’m asking for one night.” If he offered me forever, I knew I would say yes.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. His gaze was hard. “One night. That’s it.”

“One night.”

He propped himself up on one elbow. “All right. Just the one.”

I smiled and sat up. “Good. There’s still plenty of daylight left. What do you say we hop on our bikes and ride out to one of our old hangouts?”

He nodded. “Sounds good. There’s just something I have to do first.”

CHAPTER 15



RHYS

The grass had grown back over Max's grave. The last time I'd been here had been just a few days after his death, and I'd stood at the edge of freshly turned soil. The groundskeeper had long since planted new grass, and it blended in seamlessly with the rest of the grounds.

I drew my jacket tighter around myself and sighed as I stared down at Max's tombstone. It was a simple one, really. Cool gray stone carved with a few nice words: *Max Connolly, loving brother and friend, 1986-2018.*

"You deserved better, old friend," I muttered. My voice was lost on the cool breeze blowing through the cemetery. I sighed and shoved my hands into my pockets. "You're probably wishing you hadn't died for me now that you know about me and Quinn. Sorry, brother. But she's..." I trailed off and pinched the bridge of my nose. "She's different. And she's the only good thing I've got left. That's selfish. I know. Fuck."

My throat ached. I needed to yell. I needed to let it all out. But I didn't dare because if I just gave it an inch, I'd never be able to stop. All the anger and pain and grief that I'd kept pent up inside me for so long would just spill out of me in an uncontrollable fit of rage.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

I knew that every choice I was making was betraying him. Max had given his life for me, and I was repaying him by doing the one thing I knew he would hate me for: letting his sister love me.

All he had wanted for her was something different than this dangerous life. And here I was, baiting her, letting her continue to think that she and I might somehow, one day, make this thing between us work.

When in reality, we just couldn't. I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

I let my hand fall from my face and looked around the old cemetery. The trees along the paths were turning into bright shades of green. The dead browns of winter were being eaten away by life as spring arrived. Soon, flowers would bloom, and this place would be a lot less barren. People would be able to leave roses and daisies and tulips for their loved ones buried here. Maybe, every now and then, Quinn would drop by and leave something at Max's tombstone.

Did she come here often? And if she did, did she come alone? Was that the fate I'd left her to?

"I'll leave tonight," I said more to myself than to my dead friend. The breeze picked up and blew my jacket open. I tugged it closed and buried my chin in the collar. "Rest easy, Max."



Quinn was waiting for me when I got back to her apartment. She was out at the curb, looking like a hell-raising sex goddess on the back of her glossy black Triumph. Her helmet was sitting in front of her on the gas tank as she finished braiding her hair.

Damn her for looking so good and making this way harder than it needed to be. She was an expert in torture and warfare against me. She must have known it, too.

"Where'd you go?" Quinn asked as she flicked her braid over her shoulder.

"Just rode by some old places."

"The garage?" she asked.

“Yeah.” It was a harmless lie. Back in the day, we all used to spend a lot of time at the garage, shooting the shit and working on our bikes. Quinn had been the only girl who ever stopped by, and she’d only ever leave if Max didn’t want her around when we were talking business. It bothered her even then.

Quinn put her helmet on and fastened the strap under her chin. She flipped her visor up and lifted one foot up onto the peg after putting up the kickstand with her heel. “Where do you want to go tonight? Your choice.”

“Is the Well still open?”

“Sure is.”

I nodded and revved up my Indian. “Let’s go there, then. I haven’t had a good basket of nachos since the last time I was there.”

Quinn slapped her visor down and revved her engine to match mine. Her visor was tinted black, so I couldn’t see her face, but I would have bet money that she was smiling at me.

Then she pulled away from the curb, her back tire squealing, and opened the throttle. She wasn’t fucking around. I tore off after her and found myself having to weave through cars to catch up with her.

It took me a good six or seven blocks to come up on her ass, make my way around her, and take the lead.

And I never lost her. I couldn’t wait to get back to New York City and tell the boys that she was a better rider than them. She maneuvered with effortless ease and wasn’t afraid to lean through her corners. At one point, I could have sworn her knee grazed pavement. As soon as she was upright again, she was giving it all she had and racing to catch up with me. I played with her a bit and let her think once or twice that she was going to overtake me. Then I’d pull the rug out from under her and pull away to continue playing the same games.

I caught myself laughing as we pulled into the gravel parking lot of the Well.

I parked my bike, took my helmet off, and looked up at the old log cabin-style motorcycle bar. It was a good hour and a half ride out of the city limits of Chicago and catered to bikers for the most part. It had a massive wraparound deck that hosted mismatched tables and chairs for smokers. There were a couple people sitting outside under the heat lamps above, dressed in their full leathers or denim, puffing on cigarettes and flicking them into ashtrays on the table.

Quinn pulled up beside me and killed her engine. Her hair was a bit of a mess when she pulled her helmet off and tucked it under her arm. “You still ride like a complete ass. You know that?”

“The boys make a point to tell me on a daily basis.”

“Good.” She put her kickstand down, swung her leg over her bike, and walked off, her boots crunching on the gravel, hips swinging, ass beckoning for me to follow.

I swallowed. No. I would not stay another night.

I got off my bike and followed her up the steps onto the deck. She opened the front door and let it fall closed behind her. I caught it and slipped in after her, and we seated ourselves at the table we always used to sit at back when I still lived here. It was in the very back corner by large bay windows. A little candle flickered in a mason jar in the middle of the table.

Quinn slid into her seat and put her leather jacket and helmet on an empty chair. I did the same, and she passed me a menu.

The place was just as I remembered inside, too. The ceiling was high, at least twenty feet, and supported by rafters. One big wrought-iron chandelier hung in the middle with little light bulbs glowing on long black arms. It was almost gothic looking.

The bar was dimly lit by the chandelier and the candles. A dance floor in front of the bar would likely become busy in the next hour or so, and everyone’s boots would scuff up the original hardwood floors even more than they already were.

It still smelled like grease and beer and motor oil.

Quinn closed her menu and crossed her arms on the table. “Share a pitcher?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Nah. Not if we’re riding back.”

She blinked at me. “You and Max would always share a pitcher whenever we came here. Or two.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not Max.”

She rolled her eyes.

The waitress came over and greeted us with a friendly smile. Her cheeks were bright pink and dimpled, and she had shocking red hair tied up in a messy bun on top of her head. “Hi, I’m Alicia. I’ll be your server today. What can I get started for you?”

She was much more polite than the service I was used to getting here. Quinn and I ordered a basket of nachos to share and each asked for one glass of beer. I nodded approvingly at Quinn after the server left. “Thank you.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Don’t call me dad.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, why not? Because it’s weird.”

She shrugged. “Then don’t act like my dad.”

“I wasn’t acting like your dad a couple hours ago, was I?”

Quinn blushed. “Okay. *Now* you made it weird.”

“Oh, I made it weird?”

She giggled and shook her head at me. “Okay, okay. I take it back. Just forget it.”

Our beers arrived, and our first sips were heavenly. Foam clung to Quinn’s upper lip, and I didn’t tell her. She looked too cute, and I was trying to commit the image to memory. When she caught on, she licked it off with her tongue, and my cock twitched in my jeans. Our nachos were brought over shortly

after, and we both gorged ourselves on the cheesy, onion, pepper, and jalapeno-adorned chips. Quinn loaded each bite up with salsa, sour cream, and a heaping amount of guacamole while I enjoyed them condiment free. She told me I was crazy.

After stuffing myself to max capacity, I leaned back in my chair. “So *you* ride like a hellion,” I said.

Quinn smiled proudly. “I’d say I learned from the best, but I didn’t. Self-taught, baby.”

I wanted to tell her it was sexy—because it was. But instead, I said, “Just watch out that you don’t get yourself on the cops’ radar.”

She arched an eyebrow. “I thought you’d be telling me to slow down, or I’d get myself killed.”

I shrugged. “You ride well. Based on what I saw, you have the skill to know your own limit. It’s not you I’d be worried about fucking up. It’s other drivers. They’re blind to bikes.”

“Oh, I know. I had no idea just how bad it was until I started riding. I’ve been cut off and nearly driven over several times.”

“Please don’t tell me shit like that. You’ll give me a heart attack.”

Quinn smiled and rested her chin in her hand. “You *do* care.”

Of course I cared.

The sun was setting outside, and the bar had grown even darker by the time the music started to play and people began making their way over to the dance floor. Quinn stood up and nodded down at the open space in front of the bar. “Want to dance?”

I looked over my shoulder at the dance floor. Couples were swaying from side to side. Women had their cheeks resting on their men’s shoulder. “Nah,” I said.

Quinn pouted. “Come on. Just one dance. Or two. We can show those clowns how it’s done.”

“Quinn.”

“Rhys,” she said sternly. “I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m asking to dance. You’re leaving tomorrow. Don’t be such a jackass.”

I drained my beer and stood up. She took my hand and dragged me out to the dance floor, where the couples made room for us as the music started to speed up.

Quinn and I were well versed in swing dancing. We’d picked it up years ago when we first started seeing each other. I’d been able to dance a bit, but she was incredible on the dance floor. Her body moved in ways I’d never seen a woman move before, and I forced myself to learn to dance the way she liked just so I could put my hands on her while she moved her hips like that. It was one of the best decisions I’d ever made.

But right now, as she spun circles around me and threw her head back with joyful laughter, it felt like a cruel punishment.

By the second song, people were watching us—no, not *us*—they were watching her. She was a sight to behold as I twirled her and dipped her and pulled her up tight against me. As the second song wound down, she pressed her hands flat to my chest and smiled up at me. “Thank you,” she said breathlessly. Then she went to the tips of her toes and kissed me.

Her lips were warm. She tasted like beer and jalapenos and smelled like flowers and sunshine.

I pulled away and held her at arm’s length. “We shouldn’t be doing this, Quinn.”

“What do you mean?”

I shook my head. “I mean, I can’t do this. Today was great, and I miss you like hell. But when I have you, all I can think about is Max and what this would do to him. And I just can’t, Quinn. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything as I let her go and started walking away. But I heard her heels striking the floor as she hurried after me and caught my wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Back to New York.”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s cold. And dark. It’s a twelve-hour ride, Rhys! Just stay and leave in the morning.”

I shook my head. “No.”

She let my wrist go. “Did I do something wrong?”

I looked back at her over my shoulder. “No, Quinn.”

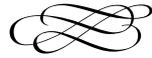
She bit her bottom lip. “You’re not just saying that?”

I went back to her and put my hands on her shoulders. “You’ve never done anything wrong. I’m the one who’s done wrong. And you’ll be all right.”

I wasn’t sure, but I thought I felt her tremble beneath my palms. She looked down at her feet. “Call me when you get there safely?”

“I will,” I said, and then I kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 16



QUINN

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and stared down at it. I let out a frustrated sigh and hovered my thumb over Rhys's phone number.

Nancy looked up from behind the reception desk at the parlor. "What's up, Quinn?"

"He still hasn't messaged me."

"Rhys?"

"Yeah, who else?"

"Sorry," Nancy said. Then she lifted her pen and tapped it against her chin. "Maybe he ended up stopping at a motel on his way home or something? Like you said, it would have been a long, cold ride."

I scratched the back of my neck. "Yeah. Maybe."

Nancy stood up and walked around the desk to plop down on the tattoo bench in front of me. Her feet dangled off the floor, and she swung her legs. The shop was empty, and we didn't have any appointments for the last half hour of the day. "Just call him."

"I don't want to. It was so awkward how he left. I don't want him to think I'm some crazy girl who's obsessed with him or something."

Nancy cocked her head to the side. "But you are a crazy girl who's obsessed with him."

I slapped her knee. "Shut up, Nancy."

Nancy smiled, but she didn't laugh at me. "You'll drive yourself crazy just wondering where he is. Call him. And then you can at least go to bed tonight and not be worried."

She was right, of course. I'd already twirled strands of my hair so tightly that I pulled them out of my head. I pressed dial and lifted the phone to my ear. He didn't answer, so I left him a voicemail. I kept it simple. "Hey, it's me. Just wanted to make sure you got back to New York in one piece. Let me know."

Nancy nodded approvingly as I tucked the phone back in my pocket. "See? That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No. But it wasn't so easy, either."

Nancy put her hand on my shoulder. "I know, babe." She slid off the seat and went to the storage closet where she grabbed a broom and a Swiffer mop. She held them both up, and I pointed at the Swiffer. She tossed it to me and started sweeping in the north corner, working her way out through the rest of the shop. I followed behind her with the mop.

"I just wished he'd stayed another night," I said once we were halfway done. I needed to talk about this. Carrying it around in my head wasn't doing me any favors.

"I know."

"And I don't understand why he couldn't. Would one night really make that much of a difference to him? I mean, it's not like sleeping at my place would solidify anything. It wouldn't change anything between us either."

Nancy rested her chin on the end of her broom. "Have you stopped to seriously consider what it's like from his perspective?"

"Of course I have."

"Quinn, I mean it. Be objective, and really think about it."

I stared blankly at her.

Nancy laughed, shook her head, and continued sweeping. But she didn't leave me hanging. She was good like that. "Well, let's think about it right now then. He spent his whole

life by Max's side. They were everything to each other. And you were everything to Max. Right?"

"Right," I said slowly.

"And it was no secret how Max felt about you and that he didn't want you involved in the MC life. He kept you at arm's length for a reason. Rhys understood that. It's why he never wanted Max to know about the two of you."

"I know."

"So when Max was killed, did you really think any of that would just magically change?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But nothing," Nancy said. "Rhys was the only one who was there when your brother died, Quinn. He's the only one who knows what happened. That's a lot for one person to carry."

"I've tried to help him. I've tried to get him to open up to me."

Nancy stopped sweeping again and put her hand on her hip. "Can't you see how insane that is?"

"What do you mean?" I asked defensively. I'd stopped mopping.

Nancy tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "How could he confide in *you*, Max's sister? We both know your brother didn't have a pleasant death. He was murdered. Quinn, come on. Rhys is trying to spare you from knowing the details."

I licked my lips. "I know that."

"Then how is he supposed to just confide in you?"

"I don't know. But he has to let someone in at some point, right?"

Nancy nodded. "I couldn't agree more. But he's not going to do it on his own. There's no way in hell. For as long as I've known him, he's always been private. And he's determined to protect you until the day he dies. This is all just part of that."

“Well, fuck that!” I said angrily.

Nancy shrugged.

I growled and kicked the end of one of the tattoo chairs. Pain laced up my leg, but I didn’t care. “He has to stop thinking that he has any right to make my choices for me.”

“I agree.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do, Quinn!” Nancy threw her hands up in the air. “For fuck’s sakes! The two of you are just a massive fucking migraine. You make it so much harder than it needs to be.”

“I make it harder?” I asked incredulously. “He’s the one —”

“No,” Nancy said, cutting me off. “It takes two. Rhys needs help. And he needs you. And you need him. Somehow, the two of you need to figure that out.”

“How do I help him?”

Nancy gave me a sad smile. “You need to forgive him.”

“For what?”

“For Max. For everything. He needs someone to tell him that none of what happened was his fault, and he needs to believe it. And I think you’re the only one who has any chance of doing that.”

“I *do* forgive him.”

“I know, but maybe he doesn’t. Or he doesn’t believe it. Quinn, you’re the toughest chick I know. If you want him, you have to fight for him. And it might feel like you’re just slamming your head against a wall for a while, but it will get better. For both of you.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Why are men so complicated?”

Nancy chuckled. “I don’t know, but if you ever figure it out, please share the secret.”

We spent the last twenty minutes of our shift cleaning the shop. By the time we closed up and flicked off all the lights, it smelled like citrus cleaner, and every surface was clean and ready for the next morning.

We walked across the dark parking lot to Nancy's car. She started it up and looked over at me as I stared out the passenger window with my cheek in my hand. "Do you want to pick up gelato on the way home?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

She put the car in drive. "Okay, gelato it is. Anything else?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm okay. Thanks, Nancy."

She pulled out of the parking lot. "I've got you, babe. Everything will work out. Don't worry. Let's just have a nice night in tonight. We can watch a movie. I think we have a bottle of wine at the apartment, too."

"That sounds nice."

"Right?" Nancy turned on the radio, and an upbeat song filled the car. She cranked it a bit louder and started singing along. She flashed me a crazy smile when I looked over at her, and soon, the two of us were rocking out as we drove the three miles down the street to our favorite gelato shop.

We parked the car, went inside, and ordered the largest sizes we could, piling the cups with all different flavors. The staff knew us by name, and we stood around and chatted for a while. By the time we got back in the car, I was already feeling better. Lighter.

"Thanks, Nancy," I said.

"Anytime."

My apartment greeted us with open arms. We both went into our bedrooms and changed into our lounging clothes. I came out of my room in a pair of galaxy-printed leggings and an oversized black sweater. Nancy emerged wearing a thigh-length hoodie and socks that went up to her knees. She padded into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of white wine from the

fridge. She fetched two glasses and came to join me on the sofa as I looked through all our movie options.

“What are you in the mood for?” I asked. “Comedy? Horror? Drama?”

“No to drama,” she said, shaking her head. “You know I love a good horror flick, but I think tonight might be a good time to stick with a comedy.”

That was probably a good move. A comedy was always a good little pick-me-up. I tried to find one that wasn't based on a love story. It was hard, but we pulled it off and sat back in the sofa cushions with our gelato and wine. Soon, I was immersed in the movie, and my thoughts weren't as dark and frustrated as they had been an hour earlier.

Then my phone lit up on the coffee table. I felt Nancy's eyes on me as I leaned forward and picked it up.

“What does it say?” Nancy asked. She already knew it was from Rhys.

I sighed and read it aloud. “Made it back. Stay safe Quinn.”

“That's it?” she asked.

I nodded and flipped my phone over. “That's it.”

CHAPTER 17



RHYS

The first thing I did on Sunday morning when I woke up was roll over and look at my phone. I wasn't entirely sure if I'd expected Quinn to message me back or not. She hadn't.

Had I wanted her to?

Maybe.

But it was also a good sign that she hadn't. Maybe she was mad at me. Maybe this time, things would finally end between us, and she could carry on with her normal life back in Chicago. Maybe she'd meet someone.

Fuck. That thought hit me right in the gut.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and rested my elbows on my knees. Thinking of Quinn with another man made my teeth hurt. But if I was lucky, my time with her had given her some closure, and we were finally on the same page: this couldn't go on. We were done. And that meant I would have to stomach the fact that she would find someone else.

Someone else who would take her dancing. Who would care for her, protect her, fuck her...

I shook my head. "God damn it."

After standing up, I cracked my back. The twelve-hour ride back from Chicago had left me a little sore, so I indulged in some morning stretches before hitting the shower. The hot water chased away the fatigue, and I felt better by the time I dried off and got dressed.

There were things to attend to now that I was back in the big city.

I started by calling Ryder. He answered on the third ring. “Rhys.”

“Hey, just wanted to give you the heads-up that I’m back in town.”

“In one piece, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ryder said stiffly. I heard him yawn. “Aiden is here with me. He says he’s on his way to your place.”

“Tell him to bring coffee.”

I heard the first half of Ryder’s sentence, telling Aiden to bring coffee before he hung up on me.

I slid my phone in my back pocket and walked through my place to do a quick clean up. Once everything was in order, I went out into the garage. I opened the doors and let the chilly spring morning air in as I set to work on my bike. There were a few maintenance things to be done to it. I wanted to change the oil and the brake pads, and I didn’t see a better time than now.

I needed the distraction.

I heard Aiden coming when he was probably two or three blocks away. His car, a new Challenger, was loud as shit, and by the time he pulled into my driveway, I was sure my neighbors were annoyed. It didn’t matter. It was ten in the morning on a Sunday. They should be up by now. If not, they were lazy fuckers who deserved the rude wakeup call.

Or they were teenagers.

Aiden got out of his sleek black muscle car and slammed the door behind him. He had a drink tray in his hand with two coffees on it and a bag of food. He stepped into the garage and put it down on my workbench. “Morning,” he said.

I wiped my hand on a rag—an old T-shirt, to be precise—and walked over to the bench. He handed me my coffee. “Thanks, man. I ran out.”

“Holy shit, man,” Aiden said, flinching when he saw my face. I’d already forgotten about the bruises around my neck and the split lip and eyebrow. “What the fuck happened to you out there?”

I shrugged. “Turns out, there was more than one guy to contend with.”

“How many is more than one?”

“Four.”

Aiden shook his head. “I knew some of us should have gone with you.”

I laughed. “I’m all right.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes at my throat. “Did one of them try to fucking strangle you?”

“Key word there is ‘try,’” I said. “I’m fine. No serious harm done. And those fuckers will leave Quinn and Nancy alone now.”

“Jesus.”

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said, holding up the cup of steaming rich goodness.

“No worries. Black, right?”

“You got it.”

Aiden nodded at the bag. “I picked up a couple breakfast sandwiches and hash browns too. I figured you probably wouldn’t have eaten this morning.”

“What made you figure that?” I asked as I opened up the bag and pulled out one of the sandwiches. Egg and sausage. Excellent choice. I took my first bite and nodded approvingly.

“Well, you just got back from seeing Quinn. So, naturally, you’ll neglect yourself for the next week or two.”

I swallowed my food and narrowed my eyes at him.
“What?”

“Don’t give me that look. You know it’s true.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “I’m fine.”

“Yeah, sure you are.” Aiden grabbed his sandwich and leaned against the bench, crossing his ankles. “How was Chicago?”

“The same as it was when we were there.”

“Right, and did you hook up with my cousin or what?”

I sputtered into my coffee, burned my tongue, and scowled at him as I dragged the back of my hand across my mouth.

Aiden chuckled. “Dude, come on. You know I won’t get bent out of shape about it. I know you and Quinn are good for each other.”

“I’m not talking to you about this.”

“So, you *did* hook up?” He nodded knowingly. “Good. Where do things stand between you two, then? You going to go back out there soon?”

“No.”

“No?”

“You heard me.”

Aiden frowned but said nothing.

“Listen,” I said, tossing my empty sandwich wrapper back into the bag and grabbing my hash brown. “Quinn and I are over. We had one more fling, but that was it. I can’t keep doing it anymore. It’s not fair to her. And the space between us makes it too hard.”

Aiden arched an eyebrow. “Sounds like a lot of excuses if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t ask you.”

Aiden finished his sandwich and sipped his coffee. We stood in silence for a little while, and he looked over my bike. He asked me what I was working on, and I told him, glad for

the subject change. He asked about the ride and how long it took and how cold it was. He asked about Nancy and how she was doing with all of this.

“She seems all right.” I shrugged. “I mean, I didn’t spend too much time with her—”

“Because you were boning my cousin.”

“Shut the fuck up, man.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

“Anyway, Nancy is fine. Everyone is fine.”

“Except for the guys you fucked up, right?”

I smirked. “Right. How is Ryder? And Dani?”

Aiden uncrossed his ankles and walked around my garage as he sipped his coffee. “They’re good. Dani is ready to pop any second. I had no idea how big she’d gotten. Don’t tell her I said that.”

“Never.”

“Anyway, you can tell they’re both ready to just get on with the damn thing. The nursery is ready, and Dani has her hospital bag packed and sitting by the front door.”

I smiled. “She’s always prepared.”

“Always.”

Aiden stopped pacing around my garage and looked at me. I could tell there was something he wanted to say, but he was debating whether or not it was something he should keep to himself.

“What?” I asked.

He ran his hand over his head. “Are you sure that you and Quinn are really done? For good?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. Not that it’s any of your business.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Something else you want to say?”

He looked up at me. “Yeah. You’re a fucking idiot, man.”

“What did you just say to me?” I asked.

Aiden laughed—but it wasn’t a happy laugh. It was a frustrated one. “I just can’t make sense of why you won’t let yourself be happy. You and Quinn are perfect for each other. You know it. She knows it. We all fucking know it, Rhys. But for some damn reason, you’re hellbent on making sure you’re miserable for the rest of your goddamn life. You can hate me for saying the truth if you want. I don’t give a shit. But it has to be said.”

I glared at him. “It’s not as easy as you think.”

“No?”

“No,” I growled. “You know I love her. I’ve loved her from the first second I laid eyes on her, and from that moment, I knew I could never have her. Max made me promise. And after everything, I can’t go back on my word. If something ever happened to her, I’d never forgive myself.”

“And what if nothing ever happened? What if the two of you are denying yourselves happiness because you’re living in fear of something that might never happen?”

I shook my head. “It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Does she get a say?”

“No. Because I know what she’d choose.” *Me. She would choose me.*

Aiden put his coffee down and walked out of the garage. He stopped when he was out on the driveway and looked back at me. “You know, Rhys, you can’t live the rest of your life trying to please a dead man.”

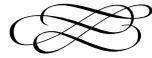
I watched him get in his car and leave. And then I stood there, arms slack at my sides, hating myself more than I ever had. Would the endless assaults never end? No matter what I chose, it was wrong.

I marched over to my bike and got on. *Fuck the brake change.* I could do it later. I needed to clear my head.

I pulled out of the drive, not bothering to put my helmet on, and sped off down the street. I just needed to clear my head. The cold wind on my face silenced my thoughts, and I was able to ride and think about nothing but the resistance against my chest and the tug at my jeans from the wind as I picked up speed.

That was the only way I could ever feel peace.

CHAPTER 18



QUINN

A week had passed since Rhys had left Chicago.

I still woke up every morning with a body that ached for him, and he was all I thought about in my waking hours. He was all I thought about in my dreams, too. Everything reminded me of him, and try as I might, I just couldn't focus on my normal everyday tasks the way I used to.

Our eight months apart had almost made not seeing him feel normal. Almost. But now that I had seen him again, and kissed him, and held him, and made love to him, all those same feelings were back, and they were more powerful than they'd been all those months ago.

It sucked.

The only good distraction I had was Nancy. If not for her, I knew I would have lost my mind. She knew it, too, because she kept me entertained, distracted, and busy. All of those things were better than sad and empty.

"Don't let me forget that we have to take the garbage out tonight before we go," Nancy said as she popped open the register and started counting out all the cash we'd accumulated over the day at the tattoo parlor.

I peered out into the dark parking lot as I locked the door. It was nine o'clock at night, and we were finally ready to close up shop and start preparing to leave for the night. "Looks like there's space in the garbage can for once."

We shared the little strip mall with a few other tenants who had an uncanny knack for filling up the communal garbage

dumpster before we ever got to it. Tonight, it looked like the lid was closed, which was promising. We'd be able to tuck our two large bags in there no problem.

"That's a first," Nancy muttered as she stacked bills in front of her.

I went behind the counter and grabbed a black garbage bag. I emptied all the trash cans in the parlor, including the one in the break room and staff bathroom, and tied off the big bag and left it by the front door to take with us when we left. I also put the other bag we'd filled up over the last two days beside the first.

"Almost done?" I asked as I walked past the front desk.

Nancy didn't answer me as she was mid-count, but she nodded. Then she bent over and wrote down the totals, slipped the earnings of the day in an envelope to deposit at the bank in the morning, and brought it and our two hundred dollar float to the safe in the back room.

I followed her, and after she closed and locked the safe, we put our jackets on. I peered around. "I feel like we're forgetting something."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. You got the garbage. Cash is done. All our clients were called to confirm their appointments for tomorrow. We just have to set the alarm and take out the garbage."

"Yeah. Okay."

I flicked off the lights on our way back out to the front of the parlor, and Nancy went to the front door. She picked up both garbage bags, and I flipped open the cover on the alarm beside the light switch. I was about to punch in my code and arm it for the night when the shop was suddenly filled with bright lights.

A car had pulled into a space facing our shop and was aiming its headlights in at us. Nancy shielded her eyes against the glare. I could only see her outline in the bright light, and I saw her reach for the lock.

“Don’t,” I said. I wasn’t sure what compelled me to warn her, but the word came out of me.

Her hand fell to her side, and she looked back at me. “What?”

“Just don’t unlock it.”

She turned back toward the car.

“Move away from the door, Nancy,” I said.

She did as I told her and retreated back to fall in line with me. She stood beside me, her shoulder pressed to mine, and we watched, unable to see anything due to the glare of the headlights. My heart pounded in my chest. My fingertips tingled. Something was wrong.

“What the hell?” Nancy whispered.

I swallowed.

Then the front and passenger door opened and were slammed closed. The headlights flicked off. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, but once they did, my frantically beating heart quickened in speed, and my stomach flipped over.

“Kyle,” Nancy whispered. She took a step back.

Fuck.

Kyle was with three other guys. One of them walked with a limp. They were all bruised and damaged, and I knew without hesitation that these were the guys Rhys had fought.

“What do we do, Quinn?” Nancy whispered.

I didn’t know when it happened, but I’d pulled my phone out of my back pocket. I didn’t even think about it. I just called him.

Rhys answered on the fourth ring. There were people in the background talking and laughing. Music was playing. He yelled at someone to shut the fuck up.

“Rhys?” I asked. I sounded panicked and breathless.

“Quinn? Is something wrong?”

“I’m at the shop with Nancy. Kyle is here.”

“What?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “I don’t know what to do. He’s outside with three other guys. He parked his car and aimed his headlights in on us for a good couple of minutes, and now they’re just pacing in the parking lot, watching us. What the fuck do I do?”

Rhys took one short breath. Then I heard him moving. Someone barked out his name, wherever he was, and he ignored them. A door closed, and all the background noise disappeared. He had locked himself in a room somewhere. “Listen to me, Quinn. Nancy needs to call the cops right now. Okay? Right fucking now. Tell her.”

“Nancy, where’s your phone?”

“My purse.”

“Call the police.”

Nancy did as I told her. She dialed 911 and held the phone to her ear. I looked back outside at Kyle and the other three men. They popped open the trunk.

“What the hell are they doing?” Nancy whimpered.

“I don’t know. I can’t see.”

“What’s happening, Quinn?” Rhys asked. His voice was thin.

“They’re getting something from their trunk.”

I heard Rhys exhale. I could picture him, locked up in a bathroom somewhere, pinching the bridge of his nose the way he did when he was frustrated. His eyes would be closed. His shoulders would be hunched. He’d be doing everything in his power to keep his cool. “Can you see what they have yet?”

“No,” I whispered.

“It’s all right, Quinn. You’re going to be all right. Has Nancy gotten through to the cops yet?” As soon as he asked the question, Nancy started to speak and tell the dispatcher what was happening. Rhys must have been able to hear her

because he went quiet, and he and I both listened to Nancy as she explained the situation.

“No,” Nancy said. “They haven’t tried to come in yet. Yes, I know him. He’s come after us before and is very violent. Oh God. Quinn. He has a baseball bat.”

I looked outside. She was right. Kyle had grabbed a baseball bat from his trunk. He had it slung over his shoulder, and he was laughing and walking back and forth in front of the shop windows. He stopped at the door and leaned forward to press his face against the glass as he knocked. His voice was muffled when he spoke, but I could make out the words well enough. “Hello, pretties. Come unlock the door, will you? We have some catching up to do.”

Nancy whimpered. I gritted my teeth.

“Quinn?” Rhys’s voice filled the phone.

“He’s taunting us,” I hissed.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Rhys warned.

Nancy was nodding. “Yes. Raven Ink and Piercings. He can get in. The storefront is all windows. Please hurry. Okay. Okay. Five minutes?”

“We don’t have five minutes,” I said.

Nancy repeated this information to the dispatcher.

“Rhys?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“What do we do? The cops aren’t here for another five minutes. If Kyle comes through that door, five minutes is going to feel like a hell of a long time. Tell me what to do.”

“Fuck,” he spat. “Okay. Okay. Your door to your back room locks, right?”

“Yes. But it’s a weak door.”

“It’ll slow him down. Lock it. Empty out your safe. If he’s going to get through that door before the cops show, you and Nancy have to get in the safe. What’s the code?”

“I’m not getting in the fucking safe. Are you serious?”

“You may not have a choice, Quinn! Do you understand? You have to. Otherwise, he’s going to drag you and Nancy out of there, and I don’t know where to look for you.”

I licked my lips. “Okay.” I grabbed Nancy’s arm and dragged her through the doorway into the backroom. I slammed the door closed and locked it. Glass shattered. He was coming in. Nancy screamed.

“What’s happening?” Rhys asked. His voice was not calm. Not anymore.

“He’s in the shop,” I said as I punched in the safe code and pulled the lever to open the door. Our safe was the size of a fridge but full of shit. We stored all our cash boxes inside it, as well as some of our artists’ personal belongings, their ink and tattooing tools, and some confidential designs. I tore it all out and left it on the floor. Then I pulled out the shelves as someone slammed their shoulder into the door to the back room. Nancy was screaming again. The poor dispatcher was probably trying to keep her calm.

I grabbed Nancy’s forearm and yelled at her to give the dispatcher the safe code. She did. And I told Rhys. “The safe code is 339672. We’re getting in now.”

“You’re going to lose service. But he can’t get you in there, okay? Keep calm. The cops will get to you in time. I’m on my way. I’m getting the two of you out of that fucking city until we deal with this, all right?”

I stared into the dark abyss that was the safe. I’d always had a problem with confined spaces. I swallowed. “All right.” I pushed Nancy in. Kyle slammed into the door again. Wood splintered.

“Quinn?” Rhys sounded scared, and that scared the shit out of me.

“Yes?” I stepped into the safe and put my hand on the door to pull it closed.

“You’ll be all right in there. Deep breaths. The cops will get you out. And I’m coming for you.”

“Okay,” I whispered. And then I pulled the door closed, and the line went dead.

We were swallowed up by darkness and blanketed in silence. Nancy clung to me, and we both sank down to the floor of the safe. It was cramped, and our breathing echoed in my ears.

“Are you okay?” Nancy whispered.

“No.”

Nancy put her arm around me. “We’ll be out soon. Deep breaths, okay? Together.” She guided me through my breathing. Panic was waiting to devour me. I closed my eyes and willed myself to remain calm.

Then the men outside started banging on the safe. I was sure Kyle was wailing on it with his baseball bat. I could hear them yelling but couldn’t make out what they were saying. Nancy tightened her hold on me, and we curled into each other.

Time passed agonizingly slowly. Those were the longest five minutes of my life, and when the door finally opened, I spilled out onto the floor, gasping for breath. Nancy came out behind me, her hand rubbing slow circles on my back, and she pulled herself together well enough to tell the police what happened while taking breaks to tell me I was all right.

With shaking hands, I texted Rhys that the cops got us out and Kyle was gone.

Then I bolted to the bathroom and fell to my knees in front of the toilet to puke my guts out.

CHAPTER 19



RHYS

Nobody noticed I'd left Ryder's place until I'd been gone for about twenty-five minutes. I got a call from Owen when I was leaving the city limits, asking where the hell I went. I told him what happened with Quinn and Nancy, and he almost drove out after me to head to Chicago. I told him to stay put but to let the others know where I'd gone. I might be calling on them for a favor or two within the next couple of days. He assured me he would spread the word and told me to be safe.

Staying safe was the last thing on my mind. All I cared about was getting to Quinn.

I drove all through the night and hit Chicago around seven in the morning. I was tired as hell but unwilling to stop. I went straight to Quinn's apartment, parked my car at the curb, and rushed into the building to her floor. I knocked and waited impatiently for her to answer.

When she opened the door, relief sang in my bones. I wasn't sure why, but I'd been terrified that she'd been hurt, despite her texting me to give me a heads-up that everything was fine. They'd escaped Kyle, and the cops had gotten them out of the safe before they ran out of air.

Quinn kept her composure for a good ten seconds before she crumbled and covered her face with her hands. I stepped through the door and wrapped my arms around her, letting her cry into my shoulder. She didn't hug me back. She just stood there sobbing and let me run my fingers through her hair.

Nancy emerged from down the hall, carrying two duffel bags. Her expression was grim, her face pale, and her movements slow.

They'd both been scared out of their minds last night.

And I was livid.

Nancy came over to us and put her bags down. "Do you have everything you need packed, Quinn?" she asked. Her voice was soft, and her eyes were sad. She looked at me and gave me a weak smile. "Hey, Rhys."

"Hey, Nancy."

Quinn nodded into my shoulder and then pulled away from me. She wiped her tears away with her middle fingers and sniffed. "Yeah. I have everything. Let's get out of here."

I picked up the bags and carried them down to the car. I put them in the trunk and the two women got in the back seat. Nobody said anything for the first fifteen minutes.

"Thanks for driving all the way back out here for us," Nancy said eventually.

I met her eye in the rear-view mirror. "Don't mention it."

She glanced at Quinn, who was slumped sideways in her seat. Her sweater was balled up to form a pillow, and she had it tucked between her head and the door panel. Her eyes were closed.

Nancy sighed. "I've never seen her scared before," she whispered. Her eyes were glassy.

I pulled over and twisted around to look at Nancy in the back. Quinn's breathing was soft and slow. She was out cold. "Come sit up front. Let's catch up."

Nancy got out of the back seat and climbed in the passenger seat. Once she had her seatbelt on, I pulled back out into traffic, and we hit the road. Soon, we were on the interstate and heading for New York.

"I knew the safe was going to be rough on her," I said after a couple minutes.

“She didn’t panic,” Nancy said.

“Good.”

“She was sick after, though.”

“Oh. I guess I can’t fault her for that.”

“We didn’t have a choice, Rhys. It was good thinking on your part. If you hadn’t suggested it, I don’t know what Kyle would have done if he got his hands on us. It would have been worse than being locked in a safe. Quinn knows that too. You just know how she is with tight spaces.”

“Yeah.”

Quinn had been claustrophobic for as long as I’d known her. She had some bad experiences as a kid with being bullied and having her sleeves tied so tightly around her body that she couldn’t move. It had led to panic, which led to her throwing up, which led to triggering memories. She was locked in her locker once in her first year of high school, and when Max discovered her banging away at the inside in near hysterics, he’d lost his mind and left me behind to get her out while he went after the kids who locked her in.

She’d been so panicked she could barely tell me her lock combination, and when she finally got out, she’d collapsed into me and clung to me for dear life until Max came back with split knuckles and messed up hair. Then she’d gone to him, and he took her home.

Telling her to lock herself in the safe hadn’t felt good at all.

I could feel Nancy’s eyes on me. I glanced over at her. “What is it?”

She shrugged and looked out the windshield. “I shouldn’t meddle.”

I chuckled. “Nancy, be real. All you do is meddle. What’s up?”

She smiled and looked down at her lap before looking at me again. “I don’t want to speak on Quinn’s behalf, but I just have to ask. You know she’s in love with you, right?”

My breath caught in my throat, and my grip tightened on the steering wheel. I couldn't respond.

"She's been in love with you for years. And I'm pretty sure you love her too. You don't need to say anything to me. Really. I just needed you to know. If you're going to leave her behind again after all this, then it needs to be the last time. Okay? She can't keep doing this. It's going to destroy her."

It will destroy me too.

Nancy sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"Not about you and Quinn. About this mess. It's my fault. Well, I guess I'm sorry about you and Quinn, too. It sucks."

"Yeah, it really fucking does. And this isn't your fault. Stop thinking that."

"I can't just stop thinking it because someone tells me to."

"Why not?"

She gave me a wry smile. "How many times has Quinn told you that Max's death wasn't your fault?"

I stared at her.

Nancy shrugged and looked back out at the open road before us. It was lined with tall pines, all casting dark shadows across the pavement in the early morning. "It's not as easy as that, is it?"

I looked at Quinn in the rear-view mirror. Her cheek was crushed against her sweater, and her mouth was open. She probably hadn't slept all night. "No, it's not."

After driving for an hour or so, it became impossible to stop myself from yawning. Nancy caught on and asked if I wanted a break from driving. I assured her that I was fine and drove another fifteen minutes or so. My eyes were getting heavier. I hadn't slept a wink the night before. I'd spent the whole night driving, rushing to get to my girl.

Not my girl. Quinn.

I covered my mouth and tried to stifle my thousandth yawn.

Nancy rolled her eyes at me. “Pull over. Let me drive just for a couple hours so you can get some sleep. You need it.”

“I’m fine.”

“Rhys, I mean it. I don’t want to get in an accident because you were too proud to take a damn nap.”

“Fair enough,” I muttered. I pulled over to the side of the road and switched places with Nancy. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Sure do,” she said. “Sleep. I’ll wake you up when we stop for gas, and we’ll grab a bite to eat. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said as I leaned my chair back. I watched Nancy drive for a couple of minutes before it became impossible to fight my eyes from closing on me. The darkness behind my eyelids was inviting, and sleep wrapped me up in a cozy cocoon.



Someone shook me gently awake with their hand on my right shoulder. I blinked my eyes open and peered down at Quinn, who was crouched down outside the car beside me, looking at me through the open passenger door. Her long blonde hair was down and catching in the breeze. She shifted her weight on the balls of her feet and smiled at me. “Hey, Nancy is filling up the car. There’s a cafe here. You hungry?”

My stomach growled. “Yes.”

“Come on then. Let’s get something to eat.”

I pulled my seat back upright and got out of the car. A twist to the right and then to the left relieved some of the stiffness in my back with a couple of cracks. Nancy made a disgusted face at me over the roof of the car as she stood by the gas pump to fill the tank. When she was done, she parked the car in an open spot beside the café, and Quinn and I waited

for her outside the front door. Then we all went in together and were seated in a booth by the window where we could watch the cars fly by.

We all ordered a hearty breakfast of eggs, toast, sausages, bacon, and hash browns. Nancy had orange juice while Quinn and I slurped down three cups of coffee each. I paid the tab, much to the annoyance of both women, and we lingered in the booth for a good fifteen minutes after we were done.

I leaned forward on my elbows and looked at both of them sitting across from me. “I’m sorry about what you both had to go through last night. I thought Kyle would leave you well enough alone. I should have made sure.”

Quinn shook her head. “It’s okay. You kept us safe anyway.”

Nancy nodded.

It didn’t feel like I’d kept them safe. It felt like I’d done the opposite. Like I’d poked the bear and made the whole situation worse than it needed to be. I sighed and raked my fingers through my hair. “Well, the good news is this time, I’ll have backup. I know Ryder will have my back on this. If I need help, he’ll give it. We’ll figure this out.”

“No more hiding in safes?” Quinn asked. Her smile was genuine.

I shook my head. “No more hiding in safes.”

We left the cafe and got back in my car. I was ready to drive, feeling refreshed from the three hours of sleep Nancy indulged me in, and feeling even better with a full belly and three cups of coffee in my system. We hit the road and Quinn rode shotgun this time. She turned on the radio, and she and Nancy sang like they always used to when I drove them around the city.

God damn, the nostalgia.

After listening to them sing three songs back to back, I noticed a car in my mirrors that had been parked at the cafe. It was an old Lincoln with tinted windows and chipped black

paint. Back in the day, it was probably a nice car, but now it was worn and not well taken care of.

It still lingered in the trail of cars behind us after another three hours of driving. I decided not to tell the girls. There was no need to frighten them over something that might turn out to be nothing.

But when I was half an hour from New York, the car was still there. We were being tailed.

I called Aiden. “Where are you right now?”

“Yo, man, what the fuck happened last night? Are you in Chicago?”

“No, I’m back. I’m half an hour away from home. But I need a favor. Are you close by?”

“Yeah, I’m at Angie’s with Liam and Owen.”

“Meet me at my place?”

“Why?” Aiden asked.

“Just do as I say, will you?”

“All right, chill out, man. We’ll be there.”

I ended the call and gripped the steering wheel.

“What’s going on?” Quinn asked from the back seat.

I met her eyes in the mirror. “Someone has been following us.”

“What?” she asked and started to turn around.

“Don’t look back there. It’s fine. I want them to follow us.”

“Why?” she and Nancy asked in unison.

I grinned. “Because we’re on my turf now. And these bastards have no clue who they’re fucking with.”

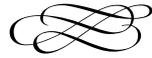
Nancy and Quinn sat in tense silence for the rest of the drive to my house. When we pulled up, three hogs and their riders stood in my driveway. I pulled in behind them, and Aiden came to my window. “What’s the deal?”

I watched my mirrors as the black Lincoln cruised by slowly. “Follow the Lincoln. Hang back. I don’t want him knowing I’m onto him. Find out where they’re holeing up for the night and come straight back here, okay?”

Aiden nodded and went to get on his bike. He was good like that. He knew the right and wrong time to ask questions. This was time sensitive. He pulled out of the driveway on his bike as I got out of the car and popped the trunk. The girls came out too and hugged Liam and Owen in greeting. It had been a while since we were all together like this.

Max’s funeral had been the last time.

CHAPTER 20



QUINN

I woke up roasting hot. My body was sticky with sweat. I groaned in discomfort, peeled the top sheet off my body, and looked around.

I was in Rhys's guest room. Nancy slept beside me. She had her back to me, and one arm dangled off the edge of her side of the bed. She snored softly, and I was sure there was drool on her pillow. Based on history, it was a high probability.

Moving with care not to wake her, I got out of the bed. It creaked when my weight was off it, and I froze with my toes curled in the soft plush carpet. She didn't stir.

My bag was on the floor at the end of the bed. Softly and silently, I padded over to it and crouched down. I drew the zipper open and rummaged gently around in the bag for something warmer to put on. My cotton shorts and tank top weren't doing it. I tugged the tank top off, rolled it up tight, and tucked it into the side of my bag before pulling my off the shoulder gray sweater on over my head. I cast a glance at Nancy, who was still out cold, and then pulled off my shorts and swapped them for my trusty loose gray sweats. I tightened the draw string of my pants, raked my fingers through my mane of bedhead, and went to the door. I let myself out into the hallway and closed it quietly behind me.

"Morning," a deep male voice said when the door clicked closed.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I spun around to see both Aiden and Rhys sitting in the living room. They were bowed

conspiratorially together, but they leaned away from each other, trying to act casually.

I rubbed the back of my head nervously. “Morning.”

Aiden nodded his head at the opposite sofa. “Come sit. Want a cup of coffee?”

“Um, sure. Just let me take care of some lady business.”

I didn’t look at Rhys as I made my way down the hall to his bathroom. I splashed cold water on my face and patted it dry with a towel. Then I drank a cup of water, took care of business, and washed my hands.

I stared at my reflection. I looked haggard. Like I’d been through a shitstorm. I guessed I had. The last couple of weeks had been hell, and the wear and tear was finally starting to show.

I sighed and braced myself against the counter. “Pull yourself together, Quinn. You’re fine. You’re safe now.”

My stomach rolled. I’d been out of sorts since locking myself in that damn safe. It had brought back a torrent of old fears that I thought I had long since put to bed. Apparently, I was wrong.

I hated that confined spaces still scared me. I didn’t scare easily. In fact, I hardly scared at all. I was tougher than nails, and I knew that about myself. I’d never backed down from anyone in my entire life—except for fucking Kyle. He’d done a number on me.

I patted my cheeks to bring some color into them. Now that I didn’t look so pale and weak, I left the bathroom. Aiden was coming back into the living room at the same time with a cup of coffee in a dark blue mug. He wrapped one arm around me in a great big bear hug and then pressed the mug into my hands.

“Thank you,” I said, curling my fingers around it and trying to soak up the warmth. I sat down on the sofa opposite them and crossed my legs under myself as I took my first sip of coffee.

“How are you feeling?” Rhys asked. His eyes flicked back and forth between mine. He was analyzing me, like he always did whenever I “went through something”. He was worried for me. I appreciated that, but I didn’t want it. I could handle this on my own.

“I’m fine,” I said, forcing a smile.

He didn’t buy it. I could tell by the dark look in his eyes. But he let it go.

“What were you guys talking about?” I asked.

Aiden and Rhys exchanged a look. “Nothing,” Rhys said.

“Oh? And that’s why you were crowded together like gossiping school girls? You were talking about nothing?”

“Yep,” Rhys said flatly.

I leaned forward and put my mug down on his glass coffee table. Then I pressed a hand down on each of my knees and glared at both of them, putting on my best mean girl face. I’d locked myself in a safe for five minutes. I could do anything now. “You’re lying to me.”

“It’s nothing you have to worry about, Quinn,” Rhys said. I might have been mistaken, but his voice seemed to have a pleading tone to it.

I didn’t give a damn. “Cut the shit, Rhys. I’m not stupid. You two are planning something, aren’t you?”

Aiden looked at Rhys, who stared evenly back at me.

I held his gaze. “Aren’t you?” I repeated. This time, my tone was harsh. Angry.

Rhys sighed and scratched his jaw. He looked tired—more tired than I’d ever seen him. His brow and lip were scabbing over. The bruising around his throat looked better than it did yesterday, which was good, but he still wasn’t firing on all cylinders. He still didn’t say anything.

“I’m done playing games with you,” I said. “I’m done sitting back and being kept in the dark. My brother is dead. His hold over me died with him. I can make my own

decisions, and I'm really fucking sick and tired of you guys thinking differently. It's time you start treating me as my own person, rather than just as Max's little sister."

Aiden lifted his gaze to meet mine. "I'm with her, Rhys. She's right."

Rhys clenched his jaw.

I looked at the ceiling, searching for restraint. I was frustrated and tired of having the same conversation over and over and getting the same results. It was like talking to a brick wall. I met Rhys's gaze. "What do I have to do to get you to see *me*? To really see me?"

Rhys looked away.

"Well," Aiden said, putting his hands on his knees and pushing himself to his feet. "I'm out. I think you two kids can handle this one on your own, right?" He closed his hand over Rhys's shoulder, gave it a squeeze, and walked out of the living room to disappear through the door to the garage.

I stared at Rhys, but he refused to look at me. In fact, he looked everywhere but at me.

"Rhys," I said.

"What?"

"Can we not just have a normal conversation?"

He opened his mouth to speak but slapped it back closed when the bedroom door opened again and Nancy came out. I straightened up and grabbed my coffee, trying to regain my composure. I took a drink as she came and sat beside me. She had her pajamas on and looked half asleep.

"Morning, guys," she said thickly.

"Morning," Rhys and I said at the same time.

Apparently, Nancy was too tired to pick up on the thick layer of tension hovering in the air. "How'd you sleep, Quinn? Rhys, that bed is pretty comfy. Better than the one I have at home."

"Thanks," he said lamely.

She inched closer to the edge of the sofa. “I meant to ask you about this new crew of yours while we were on the road. You mentioned a guy named Ryder?”

Rhys blinked at her. “Yeah.”

“What’s he like?”

I groaned. “Nancy.”

“What?” she asked, looking back and forth between us. A pleasant smile curved her lips. Nancy was always the sort to try to make everyone feel comfortable and get conversation going. She was bad with silence.

Rhys rubbed his forehead. “Ryder’s a good guy. You’d probably like him.”

The front door opened. I thanked my lucky stars when Owen walked in. He smiled broadly when he saw the three of us. “Well, hello there, ladies.”

“Hi, Owen,” Nancy said cheerfully.

I lifted my coffee mug in way of greeting.

He folded his arms across his thick chest and smirked. “You look like you slept well.”

“Is that a compliment?” I asked.

Owen grinned. “Of course it is, Quinny.”

I scowled at him. He’d always called me Quinny. I hated it when I was young, and I hated it now.

Owen waggled his eyebrows at Nancy. “Hey, you want to get out of here and grab a bite to eat? I’m sure these two have things to talk about.”

“Oh,” Nancy said innocently. She looked at me. “Were you guys in the middle of something?”

“No,” Rhys said.

“Yes,” I amended, shooting him a dark look. “We were.”

Nancy stood up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even notice. Yeah, food sounds good, Owen. Just let me get changed into something a little more appropriate. Give me a minute?”

“Sure thing.” He nodded as she slipped back into the guest room. Then he looked down at me and Rhys and cleared his throat. “Awkward.”

“Fuck off,” Rhys growled.

I sipped my coffee as Owen came and plopped down on the sofa beside me. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders in a brotherly sort of way. “How you been, Quinny? I know things have been shitty the last couple of weeks. It’s going to get better.”

“Thank you for your eternal optimism, Owen.”

He chuckled. “Come on, don’t be like that. I thought we were cool, you and me?”

I sighed. “We are cool. I’m sorry. I’m just in a mood.” I directed my last few words at Rhys, who rolled his eyes at me.

Owen let his hand fall from my shoulders. “Well, I don’t envy you, man. She’s going to chew you up and spit you out. Don’t be too hard on him, Quinny. We want to keep him around a bit longer.”

“Stop calling me Quinny.”

“All right, shit, my bad,” Owen said, holding his hands up defensively as he backed away from the two of us.

Nancy emerged from the guest room in a pair of jeans and a yellow sweater. “Ready?”

Owen nodded and took her hand. Then he hurried to the front door, and they left without saying anything, leaving me and Rhys glaring at each other across the coffee table.

CHAPTER 21



RHYS

Quinn crossed one leg over the other and leaned back into the sofa cushions. She folded her arms beneath her breasts, and all her criss-crossed limbs made her look like a folded-up human pretzel.

A seriously pissed-off human pretzel.

If she were able, I was sure she would have crossed her eyes to match the rest of her body language.

I had no clue where to start. Was I supposed to apologize? If so, what exactly did I need to apologize for? For caring enough about her to keep her out of harm's way? I knew her better than she knew herself. Revealing my plan to go after Kyle and his three blubbering idiots tonight would put her at risk. She'd want to come along. She'd want to get in on the beatdown that was coming their way.

And that sure as shit was not happening.

Quinn widened her eyes at me to urge me to talk.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I started off, which was true.

"How about you start by telling me what you four are planning for tonight?"

"Quinn."

"I mean it. I want to know. I *need* to."

I ran my fingers through my hair and slumped back against the sofa cushions. "Why?"

“Why?” she asked incredulously. Then she was on her feet and stabbing her finger toward my chest. “Because I’m sick of feeling like I have no control. I’m sick of being treated like a child. I’m fully capable of taking care of myself. I’ve been doing just fine for eight whole fucking months without you policing my entire life.” Her voice was almost a scream. Quinn swallowed. Tears clung to her bottom lashes.

I licked my lips. “I didn’t want you to feel like I abandoned you.”

“But you did,” she whispered.

I stood up too. “It wasn’t my intention, though.”

“Your intention was to run away.”

I shook my head and reached for her, but she pulled away. “No, it wasn’t. I went after Isaac. You know that. And I put him in the ground where he fucking belongs.”

“Months ago!”

I flinched.

Quinn pressed the heels of her hands to her temples in frustration. “You can skirt around it however much you like, Rhys, but the fact of the matter is, you could have come back. You could have chosen me. Max is fucking dead! He can’t stop you anymore. The only thing standing in the way of us being together is you. Do you know how much that hurts me?” A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

I couldn’t even look at her. Her grief made my insides hurt. “I know, Quinn.”

She let out a deep sigh and turned her back toward me. I gave her time to gather herself, and when she turned back, her tears had stopped. She walked around the coffee table, took my hands in hers, and made me sit down on the sofa with her. She licked her lips and met my eye. “You need to let me help you.”

“What? How?”

Quinn didn’t blink. She just stared at me with those bright hazel eyes of hers. “You need to tell me how Max died.”

I suddenly felt like I was being squeezed on all sides by invisible walls that inched closer and closer together. Soon, I wouldn't be able to breathe.

“Rhys,” Quinn whispered. “Please talk to me. You can't keep carrying this around by yourself, and I can't be in the dark anymore. We both need to take this step. It's been a long time coming. We can both handle it. Together.”

Her fingers grazed my still-healing knuckles. Was this it? Had I gone as far as I could keeping this to myself? Did I have any other choice but to come clean?

I could lie. I could keep doing what I'd been doing, but it clearly wasn't working. Not for either of us.

I took a deep breath. “All right.”

“Yeah?” Quinn asked, her voice a little high pitched. Hopeful.

I nodded. “Yeah. Fuck, I don't even know where to start.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “I know you trailed Reed to the parking lot at Lincoln Park, right?”

“Yeah, at midnight. He had already killed Joseph and Dean three days earlier. I'd been looking for him for almost twenty-four hours straight. I was alone, but Max knew what I was up to. He tried to talk me out of it. I wouldn't listen.”

Quinn's fingers continued to roll gently over my knuckles. “Right. So you trailed him to the park. And you both got out of your cars?”

“Not right away. He sat in his truck for a good five minutes. I waited. I didn't know what was taking him so long. Maybe he wanted me to make the first move. Maybe he was taunting me. I still don't know. Your brother called me and asked where I was. I didn't tell him.”

“But he found you anyway?”

I nodded. “He'd turned on the GPS on my phone. He wanted to keep tabs on me. Smart bastard.”

Quinn almost smiled. “He was protective like that. I would know.”

“Yeah, I guess you would. Anyway, Reed got out of his truck and so did I. I wasn’t thinking straight that night. I was so fucking mad. He’d killed seven of my boys by the time I caught up with him, and I knew if I didn’t stop him, more would follow. I couldn’t deal with that, Quinn. I needed to put him down. And if he came out on top, then so be it. At least I wouldn’t be around to watch more of my friends die.”

Quinn nodded. “I understand.”

“He taunted me. He was unarmed. So was I. I mean, I had a knife in my dashboard, but I didn’t plan on using it.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “How were you going to kill him?”

“With my hands,” I said flatly.

Quinn didn’t say anything.

“I was too far gone with rage. I hadn’t even noticed there was a guy in his passenger seat. He had his brother with him. But I never knew about it until he and I got into it. I landed some hits, and as soon as I had the upper hand, his little brother jumped in, wailing on me. He knocked me out. I don’t know how long I was unconscious for.”

Quinn’s eyebrows were drawn together. She was clearly having a difficult time listening to all this, and I hadn’t even made it to the bad part yet. We were still on the prologue. Her fingers had fallen still as she sat in rapture and listened.

“When I came to, they’d propped me up against the wheel of his truck. Isaac had a knife. He put on a show with it, like he got off on the anticipation. I was disoriented, but I’d accepted my fate. I thought about you, actually.”

“What? Really?”

I shrugged. It was true. Quinn had been the only thing on my mind when I thought I was about to meet my end. I had thought about her so intensely I could smell her perfume. Telling her that hadn’t been part of the plan, but the words

were out now, and there was no taking them back. “Yeah. I thought about you. I wished I’d spent more time with you. Said goodbye. Told you how I felt. Fuck.” I ran my hand down my face and shook my head.

Quinn pressed herself closer to me. Her knees rested against the outside of my leg, and she wrapped one arm around mine. “Keep going,” she whispered.

“They were about to gut me when headlights lit us up. Your brother pulled into the parking lot. I remember him walking over. He was fucking fearless. He walked toward us like he was walking through an aisle in a grocery store. Like it was something he did every fucking day. And he told them that he was going to kill them.”

Quinn’s hands started shaking. I closed mine overtop of hers on my arm. She closed her eyes and put her forehead against my shoulder.

“Turns out Isaac had a gun in the back of his jeans. He’d grabbed it from his truck while I was out, I guess. By the time I saw it, it was too late. I tried to warn Max, but I’d barely gotten a word out when Isaac pulled the gun on him and pointed it at his chest.”

Remembering the night in such vivid detail made my head ache. I’d spent the last eight months doing everything in my power to push these memories away, but it was impossible to forget something as horrific as watching my best friend get murdered.

I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and rubbed them with my fingertips. “Your brother never even flinched. He held his ground. He knew he was going to die. He looked right at me when I yelled for him. Then the gun went off, and Reed put a bullet right between his eyes. I watched him fall. It was like—like it all happened in slow motion. When his body hit the gravel, the brothers rushed back into their truck. Isaac was laughing. I think I was screaming. And then they drove off.”

Quinn wiped her eyes and didn’t look up at me. I didn’t expect her to.

“I sat there with him until the police arrived. They arrested me. I was taken away before your brother was moved, which made me sick. And then, well, you know the rest.”

Quinn sniffled. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“That you had to go through that.”

“Go through it?” I asked, stunned. “Quinn, I was a fucking fool. I thought I could take on Reed all by myself. Your brother knew otherwise. And if I’d only fucking listened to him, he wouldn’t be dead right now. If I’d killed Reed when I had the chance—”

Quinn straightened and grabbed my face in her hands. She stared into my eyes and shook her head firmly. “No, this wasn’t your fault. None of it was. My brother died because Isaac Reed shot him. It could have easily been the other way around. I don’t blame you, Rhys. Nobody does.”

“I do.”

Her chin trembled, and she hung her head. “Then I forgive you.”

“How can you?”

She lifted her head. “I forgive you, Rhys. And it’s time to forgive yourself. The past is behind us. Max is gone. And if he could have done it over again, he would have made the same decisions. I know him. He wouldn’t have had any regrets. And he would think you were insane for blaming yourself for all of this. Do you believe me?”

“Quinn, it’s not that simple.”

“Do you believe me?” she asked again. Her eyes flicked back and forth between mine. “Do you really think I could love a man I believed was responsible for my brother’s death?”

I studied her. “No.”

“No. Exactly. So pay close attention, Rhys, because this next part is very important. I love you. I loved you then, and I

loved you when you left, and I love you now.”

My body felt a thousand pounds lighter. I’d been carrying around tension in my shoulders and back that I hadn’t even noticed, and it completely evaporated when she said those three little words. The guilt morphed into something new, something manageable: acceptance. I couldn’t change what happened, but I could change how I handled it.

“I love you too,” I said.

Quinn smiled. Then she leaned in and kissed me. The kiss was wetter than usual from all the crying, but it was also sweet and tender and soft.

Her hands fell to her lap when our lips parted, and she tucked a couple loose strands of hair behind her ears. “I don’t know about you, but I definitely feel better.”

“Me too,” I said.

She nodded. “Good.”

“Kyle and his three asshole friends followed us from Chicago to here yesterday. When we got back, I sent Aiden after them to find where they were holed up. They’re in a motel not far from here. We’re going after them tonight.”

Quinn giggled. “Are we on an honesty streak now?”

“Why the fuck not?” I asked.

“I’m not complaining,” she said.

“I don’t want you or Nancy to have to worry about these guys anymore. They’re on my turf now. Well, Ryder’s turf. And the Lost Breed doesn’t tolerate scumbags like them.”

Quinn placed her finger against my lips. “Just shut up, and kiss me.”

CHAPTER 22



QUINN

Rhys's honesty had made up for eight months of isolation. There would be more to work through—one conversation couldn't fix all our issues—but that was definitely a good start. He'd shown that he trusted me, and he had finally let down the walls that he'd put up after Max was killed.

Based on everything he had just told me, I couldn't blame him for not wanting to talk to anyone about it.

It had taken every ounce of willpower I possessed not to break down and cry while he told me what happened to Max.

I knew all along that he had been shot, of course. And I knew it happened at Lincoln Park in the parking lot just after midnight. But all the details were new. Learning that Max had gone there of his own free will seemed to make me feel better, too. He hadn't been forced or even asked to go. He just went as per Max's usual style.

All he ever wanted to do was help and protect his friends. And he'd achieved that. He saved Rhys's life that night. I had no doubt in my mind about that. And that was something I would be eternally grateful to him for.

The man I loved was still alive because of my brother's sacrifice. It didn't make the grief any better, but it made choosing to be with Rhys an easy choice. It was like Max had saved him for me. Like he knew the sort of destruction Rhys's death would have wreaked upon my heart.

Having everything out in the open made the kiss between me and Rhys feel even better than usual. I swung one leg over

his waist and straddled him as our kiss deepened. Our tongues explored each other's mouths with familiarity. He tasted like coffee.

Rhys trailed his hands up the inside of my sweater. I wasn't wearing a bra. He cupped my breasts, and I sighed into his mouth.

This was a new kind of passion between us. What used to be wild, crazed, desperate fucking had slowed down. We were taking our time, as if we were feeling each other for the first time.

I rotated my hips in his lap, grinding against his crotch. He chuckled into my mouth as I felt his cock hardening through his jeans. I smiled as he pulled the bow of my drawstring apart.

"Owen and Nancy could come back any minute," he said.

"They could."

"And you don't care?"

"Do you?" I asked, pulling my lips away from his to rain kisses down the side of his neck and back up to his ear. I pinched his earlobe gently between my teeth. "We can move to the bedroom. Or you can have me right here. I don't care."

"You're for my eyes only," he said.

And there it was. That ever-present alpha overprotectiveness of his. Why the fuck did it turn me on so much? I bit down harder on his earlobe. "You're damn right I am."

He rolled his hips beneath me and slid a hand inside my sweats. He rubbed me over my panties, and I continued rocking gently in his lap, feeling him growing harder and harder between my legs by the second. Somehow, I was always surprised at his size. I probably always would be.

My mind was still trying to make sense of everything he had told me, and I was desperately trying to silence it as he nudged my panties aside and drew one finger up and down my aching pussy.

Was everything going to change now? Would this conversation be the tipping point? Would we be able to really take a stab at this thing for real and stop trying to pretend we weren't made for each other, all for my brother's sake?

I didn't know. And right now, it didn't matter. Feeling his body against mine was the only thing I cared about.

I moaned as he slipped a finger inside of me. I continued to rock back and forth, grinding against his fingers, as he used his other hand to roll up my sweater and expose my tits. He plunged his face between them, his stubbled jaw tickling my skin, and then went from nipple to nipple. He swirled his tongue around them and pinched them gently before suckling on them. Then he moved to the other and showed it equal attention as I continued riding his finger.

I was getting wetter by the second.

Rhys eased another finger inside me.

I groaned and clung to his shoulders. My hips rocked and rotated of their own volition as my body took over and called all the shots. Pleasure rippled through me, pushing a contented sigh from my lips.

He was looking up at me and watching as I lifted my face toward the ceiling. It felt so fucking good. I never wanted the moment to end. I wanted to take our time, to indulge and spoil each other.

Then we heard a car door slam.

I froze. His fingers were still inside me, and my arms were wrapped around his shoulders. We both turned and looked at the front door. We heard voices.

"Hold on to me, baby," Rhys said.

I hooked my legs around his waist as he stood. My pussy ached for him as he tightened his arms around me and carried me down the hall to his bedroom. He put me down on the bed as we heard the front door open, and then he hurried back to his bedroom door and closed it softly.

We heard Owen and Nancy's voices out in the living room. They were laughing about something.

Rhys turned back to me with a cocky grin.

"What?" I asked, propping myself up on the bed on my elbows.

He licked his fingers clean. "Take those pants off."

I bit down hard on my bottom lip as white-hot need burst apart inside me. *Oh, fuck yes.* I inched my sweats down my legs, little by little, and then took off my panties. Rhys watched and walked toward me like a hungry lion.

I slid closer to the edge of the bed and spread my legs for him. He went down to his knees at the end of the bed and stared up at me as I gazed back at him. Then he ran his tongue along my opening, and my eyes fluttered closed.

I let my head fall back to the bed. I marveled in the darkness behind my eyelids and focused on the delicious sensations between my legs. Rhys licked and flicked his tongue in all the right places. Long strokes were broken up by slow swirls around my clit, and then he would draw it between his lips and suck.

Hard.

I moaned and arched my back as he sucked and rolled his tongue over my swollen clit. I was going to come. I was seconds away.

He released me, and I sank back onto the bed. He chuckled and pressed his lips in soft kisses to the inside of my thighs. "Not yet, baby. Not yet."

"I need to come."

"You will. When my cock is inside you. I want to fuck that pretty pussy of yours and feel your juices as you come."

I whimpered. He continued kissing my legs. He knew if he went back to eating me out, I would come right away. Once he brought me to that point, I hovered around it for minutes. Sometimes longer. My body ached, and every muscle was taut and ready for a release.

But he was going to make me wait.

I reached down to rub my clit. He caught my wrist and clicked his tongue. “Bad girl.”

“Please.”

“No.”

He stood up. I writhed on the bed as he undid his jeans and took them off. His shirt followed. I ravished him with my eyes as he stood there in nothing but his black boxers, looking like sin and sex. Then the boxers came off too. His cock reached upward to his navel, where dark hair swirled up his stomach and spread outward at his chest. He was one hell of a man.

My man.

He took hold of his shaft and began working himself over. I moaned in frustration and tried to touch myself again. He arched an eyebrow and gave me a stern look. So I cupped my tits instead.

I needed a distraction. I spun myself around to let my head hang off the edge of the bed. I opened my mouth and watched Rhys upside down. He was still stroking himself, but he was smiling at me.

“What are you doing down there, baby?”

I ran my tongue along my upper lip. “Come fuck my mouth.”

He smirked.

I squeezed my tits together harder and spread my legs. “Please?”

He stepped toward me. I reached for him as he leaned over me and braced himself on the bed with a hand on either side of me. His cock hovered in front of my face for a split second before I took it in my mouth and drew him all the way into the back of my throat. His breathing immediately sharpened.

Good.

I worked him over, keeping my mouth opened wide so my teeth didn't graze him. I only paused to catch my breath. That

was when he reached down between my legs and started rubbing me again.

My clit was so swollen and sensitive that his touch had my eyes rolling back in my head. I let out a moan that I was sure Owen and Nancy heard in the living room. Rhys silenced me by putting his dick back in my mouth. I moaned around it when he put his fingers inside me.

Then he fucked my mouth. I gripped the sheets and relaxed my throat. He plunged in and out, and my body strained against the pleasure. He decided when I needed air, and he made me work for it.

When I was about to come, he stopped rubbing me. He massaged my tits and worked himself slowly in and out of my mouth. I held him for one long draw, and when he pulled out, I gasped for air.

He turned me around and slapped my ass.

I wiggled it in the air for him and went down on all fours.

“No, baby,” he said, pushing me down on my side. He grabbed my hips and pulled me over to him before rolling me onto my back. “I want to see you.”

Rhys walked around the bed and opened his nightstand. He climbed up between my legs once he’d grabbed the condom, tore open the wrapper, and eased it on.

He leaned over me and pushed my legs back, practically folding me in half. Then he dipped his hips down to mine, and his cock slid into me.

“Oh fuck,” I breathed. The pressure was incredible. And wonderful. I closed my eyes and took all of him on the first thrust. He held himself there, and I opened my eyes, gritting my teeth as the first burst of spasms raced through me.

“Don’t come until I say you can,” Rhys said.

“I can’t hold back,” I whispered.

He pulled out and slid back in. I gripped his wrists and held on for dear life. “Yes you can, baby. We’ll take it slow. Then we come together.”

I bit my bottom lip and nodded. I would always do what he said.

He maintained a slow, perfect, torturous rhythm. My pussy grew wetter and wetter, and I knew he could feel it. He was having a hard time keeping it together, too.

I let out a shaky moan, and my back arched. My climax was right there. One more pump and I would come.

He stopped.

I was paralyzed with need. I couldn't move. I whimpered, and Rhys bent over me to kiss me. It was hot and needy, and no words were necessary. We were both so close. He made me wait and distracted me with more kisses.

Then he stroked my hair off my forehead. "Let it go."

"They're going to hear us," I said shakily.

"Let them," he grated out, and then he buried his cock inside me.

I screamed. He clamped his hand over my mouth to silence me as he fucked me hard and fast. My whole body shook with spasms as I lost control and gave in to the pleasure. It was the most intense orgasm I had ever had.

Rhys kept his hand sealed firmly over my mouth as he fucked me until the sound of my juices became too much for him. Then he shuddered and came too. His hand fell from my mouth, and he crushed his lips against mine. I clung to him as he fucked me until we were both spent and dazed from the rush of pleasure.

He collapsed beside me.

I stared up at the ceiling. My whole body was still singing with delight. "Holy shit."

He chuckled and wiped his brow. "Yeah."

"Do you think they heard me?"

He glanced over at me, smiling. He looked so fucking handsome. And happy. Almost like his old self. "If they didn't, they need to get their ears checked."

I covered my face with my hands in embarrassment. But then I started to laugh. He pulled my hands away from my face and pulled me up against his chest. We stayed there, nestled together, until our breathing slowed and our heart rates returned to normal.

I kissed his chest, and he held me tighter. “Be careful tonight,” I whispered.

His voice was a deep rumble in his chest. “I’ll make it back here to you, Quinn. I promise.”

CHAPTER 23



RHYS

Aiden and Liam were on either side of me as we walked up the driveway to Ryder's front door. Aiden put his hand on my shoulder, and we all stopped walking a couple feet before the motion sensor light would turn on above the garage door and cast us all into bright white light. It was eight thirty at night, and it was time to handle Kyle. Properly.

"You sure this is how you want to handle this?" Aiden asked.

I nodded. "I'm sure. Things are different now. We can't just go off doing whatever we damn well please. I'm not your president anymore."

Aiden looked up at the house. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Did it bother him that I had to ask permission to go after Kyle and his three stooges?

Liam shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Can we just go and get this over with? He's not going to say no."

"And if he does?" Aiden asked.

"He won't," Liam said simply.

They both looked expectantly at me. I ran my hand over my head and scratched the back of my neck. "He won't say no, but if he does, we have other options."

"We can't go behind Ryder's back and kick their asses," Liam warned.

"That wasn't what I was talking about."

“What were you talking about then?” Liam asked, sounding worried.

I shrugged. “We call the police.”

Aiden scoffed. “You? Call the police instead of delivering the beatdown yourself? Yeah, right.”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter because it’s not going to be an issue. Come on. Let’s get moving.”

“In a hurry to get back to my cousin?” Aiden teased.

I looked him straight in the eyes. “Absolutely.”

Aiden blinked in surprise, and I walked away from them. They jogged up the drive to catch up with me as I raised my fist to the door and knocked.

Derek opened the door. He smirked as he crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. “What are you fuckers doing here?”

“We could ask you the same thing,” I said.

Derek shrugged. “Dani’s been cooking up a storm to distract herself from the pregnancy, and they invited me over.” He stepped aside and waved us in. “Yo, Ryder! Rhys is here for you.”

Derek brought the three of us into Ryder and Dani’s living room. Ryder was sitting in his usual recliner by the window, and Dani was sitting on the sofa. She had her feet up on the coffee table. Her belly was somehow bigger than the last time I’d seen her.

She gave us all a strained smile as she ran her hand over her swollen tummy. “Have more of you caught wind of my cooking spree?”

I shook my head. “Uh, no. We came to talk to Ryder about business.”

Dani shot Ryder a look before she said, “Go ahead and talk. It took me forever to get comfortable. I’m not moving.”

Ryder nodded for us to sit down. We took up spots on the sofas, and Derek stayed on his feet, standing behind Dani’s

sofa.

“What’s going on?” Ryder asked me.

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. “You know about the guys I went after in Chicago last week? They were the reason I had to bail the other night and drive back there.”

Ryder nodded and then pointed at his neck. “I assume they’re the ones who gave you those?”

I kept forgetting about the bruising around my throat, my busted lip, and split eyebrow. “Yeah.”

“What about those guys?” Ryder asked.

“They tailed me all the way from Chicago.”

Ryder didn’t react. His expression remained neutral. “And?”

“And I’m here to ask your permission to go beat the shit out of them.”

Ryder looked at Derek, who shrugged. “Don’t look at me, boss.”

Ryder cocked his head to the side. “You understand that I’m not interested in starting another war, don’t you? Things have been quiet for us. They’ve been good. And with my child coming along in the next few weeks, I don’t want there to be someone else gunning for the Lost Breed.”

“This isn’t like Isaac Reed,” I assured him.

“How do I know that?”

I scratched my jaw. “You just have to trust me.”

Ryder looked at Dani. She was gazing at me with her brows furrowed.

I sighed. “I don’t want to start anything either, Ryder. Seriously. But these pieces of shit? They’re hellbent on hurting my girl. They’ve already attacked her more than once. It’s just a matter of time before they make another move, and I want to

beat them to it and make sure they know that this city is off limits for them.”

“And where is this girl of yours?” Ryder asked.

“Back at my house. Owen is with her.”

“Good,” Ryder said.

“Is that a yes?”

Ryder studied me. “Yes, it is. So long as you’re not starting something we can’t finish in one night, I don’t give a damn. Kick their fucking teeth in.”

I stood up, and Aiden and Liam followed suit. “Thank you, Ryder.”

Ryder nodded his head to the door. “Now get the hell out of here. Dani needs some peace and quiet, and you clowns keep disrupting her.”

“I’m fine, really,” Dani said, lifting her hand up.

“Get out,” Ryder said. “You too, Derek.”

We didn’t need to be told again. We said goodbye to Dani, who was giving the president a knowing smile. I caught her mouthing the words “thank you” to him as I slipped out the front door. She was probably exhausted, and having us dropping by all the time was more than likely starting to wear her down. She needed some downtime, and she was more than entitled to that. She was nine months pregnant, and it was her own damn house.

Derek slid his hands in his jacket pockets as he fell into step beside me. “Need a fourth?”

“We can handle it.”

“Come on, man. I’m itching for a fight. I haven’t seen any real action since, well, Isaac Reed. I’m going a little stir crazy.”

I stopped walking and arched an eyebrow at him. “Is your woman going to allow that?”

He popped me roughly in the shoulder. “Fuck off, man. She’s not the boss of me.”

“Liar.”

Derek chuckled. “Okay, fine. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. I just need a little taste of action, you know? And these guys fucked with Quinn. Your Quinn. Cut me in on this, and I’ll make them fucking regret it. You know I’m good for it.”

I shrugged. “Another set of fists couldn’t hurt.”

He grinned. “Like the old days.”

“Yeah, like the old days.”

“So what’s the plan?” he asked.

Liam and Aiden had gathered around. Our bikes were just behind us, and they were all looking expectantly at me. It really felt like the old days, like the days when I called the shots. When the boys called me President.

“Aiden tracked them down,” I said. “They’re holed up in a shitty motel not too far from here. A twenty-minute ride, tops. He’ll take the lead and get us there. Then we go in and mess them up. We’ll teach them who they’re fucking with.”



It was nearly ten o’clock when we parked our bikes across the street from Kyle’s motel. It was an old run-down place. The neon sign that read “Motel” hummed so loudly we could hear it from where we sat on our bikes. There was a sign beneath it that said “Vacancy”.

The building was falling apart. The puke green-colored siding needed a good power wash, and the pavement in the parking lot was cracked and patchy. The lines marking the parking spaces were faded to the point of being nonexistent. The pool out front was as green as the building itself.

“Well, this is a nice place,” Derek muttered. “Remind me to bring Evelyn here for a date some time.”

“I bet even their cockroaches are moldy,” I said.

Aiden’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “I can practically smell it from here. We’re all gonna end up with fucking fleas.”

Derek laughed. “They can keep your crabs company.”

Aiden shoved him. “Asshole.”

We all laughed, but when the humor faded, Liam looked down the line at the rest of us. We were all perched on our bikes, watching. “When are we going in?” he asked.

I scanned the building. “It’s too early. I want to wait until they’re in bed. Keep your eyes peeled. Maybe we’ll catch them coming out of their room, and we’ll know which one to go into.”

We only had to wait fifteen minutes before one of the guys came out of the room at the far-left end of the building on the ground floor. He walked down the cracked sidewalk to the ice machine, filled it up, and fished for change in his pocket to put into the vending machine. He purchased a soda and walked back to the room.

“That one of them?” Derek asked.

He must have known based on the way my eyes narrowed and my fingers tightened on the handlebars of my bike. “Yeah. That’s the fucker who tried to strangle me.”

Derek grinned. “Well, karma is about to bite him in the ass.”

We waited until midnight. Then we crossed the street and made our way quietly across the parking lot. The only sound was the steady hum of the neon sign and the occasional passing car.

Liam crouched down in front of me to pick the lock. We were lucky it was such an old building, rather than one that used key cards for entry.

I heard the bolt slide into the door. Liam turned the handle, and it gave way. He pushed the door gently inward.

The motel room stank like dirty feet and beer. The smell wafted out and slammed into us like a thick wall. Derek buried his mouth and nose into the crook of his elbow as we filed in, one by one, to be swallowed up by the dark belly of the old, musty room.

CHAPTER 24



QUINN

Owen had his back to me and Nancy as we sat on the sofa, sipping our tea. It was midnight, later than I wanted it to be. But Owen didn't seem bothered. He was in high spirits as he stared out the back window of Rhys's living room at the little yard outside and the line of trees.

"You know, I never thought this is where we'd end up," he said.

"What do you mean?" Nancy asked, tucking her legs neatly beneath her as she held her mug in both hands. Her cheeks puffed out as she blew on it, and a little puff of steam wafted upward.

He shrugged. "Think of how things were just a year ago. So different than this. Different city. Different club. Different president. Now everything has changed. All because of one asshole."

I glanced at Nancy. She shrugged.

"You're talking about Reed?" I asked.

He nodded and looked over his shoulder at me. "'Course I am. Did Rhys finally talk to you about everything?"

I stared into my tea. "He did."

"Good," Owen said. "It's about damn time. I've been trying to get the bastard to talk to someone forever. So has Aiden. But he's as private as they come. I knew there was one good thing that could come from the whole mess with this

Kyle guy. It gave him a chance to talk to you. To come clean. I'm glad he took it."

"There was nothing to come clean about," I said. "None of it was his fault. I think he finally sees that now."

Owen left the window and went to a cabinet against the far wall of the living room. He tugged it open, grabbed a bottle of whiskey and three glasses, and brought them over. He filled them up and passed them around. I continued sipping my tea as he said, "If you've made him realize that he's not to blame, then you're a miracle worker, Quinn. And you deserve a real fucking drink."

I stared at the dark liquid in the glass. Fuck it. I *did* deserve a drink. I plucked it off the table and replaced it with my tea mug before lifting it in the air. "To a fresh start."

Owen grinned. "Hear, hear."

Nancy picked up her glass too. "Oh, what the hell. I'm in."

We sipped the whiskey, and Owen sat down on the floor beside the coffee table. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and braced himself on his hands planted behind him. "So what's the plan after this?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know. Are you going back to Chicago or what?"

I hesitated. "I haven't really thought about it yet."

He nodded. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," I said.

Nancy reached out and put her hand on my knee. "You should stay here. With Rhys. You're happier when he's around. And he's better when you're around too. If you guys really were able to have that talk, then maybe it's time to stop being so distant from each other. Maybe it's time to make it work."

I blushed. "It *does* sound like a lovely idea."

"But?" Nancy asked.

“But I have obligations back in Chicago.”

“Obligations?” Nancy laughed. “The only thing you have there is your job. This is New York! You can get a gig here no problem, Quinn. You’re crazy talented.”

I frowned. “But you’re in Chicago.”

Nancy shrugged. “I don’t have to be.”

I stared at her. “You’d seriously move all the way out here just because I did?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I would. Don’t make it sound like it’s such an insane idea. You’re the best part about Chicago. If you leave, I leave. Besides, we’d be reunited with old friends here. I’m not opposed to a fresh start.”

“Someone who finally talks sense,” Owen said appreciatively. Nancy beamed at him, and he winked at her. She turned a furious shade of pink and sipped her whiskey.

I adjusted myself on the couch and re-crossed my legs. Owen glanced over at me as I held my whiskey in two hands and sipped it. I raised an eyebrow at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You don’t have to sit with us all night, you know? You can go do whatever you want. Or go to bed.”

Owen shook his head. “Pass. I’m up and with you two until Rhys gets back here.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t care if you crashed for a bit,” I said.

Owen fixed me with a hard stare. “Not happening, Quinny.”

His tone had changed. It was harsher. I frowned. “What’s your deal?”

He looked over to the window he’d been standing in front of earlier. It was pitch black outside, and all I could see was our reflections in the glass. His expression was dark. “I’ve dropped my guard before, and it got people killed. I’m not getting caught up in that mess again. Once was enough.”

Nancy and I glanced at each other. He continued staring at the darkness outside.

Nancy slid off the sofa to sit on the floor. She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and then topped up Owen's glass. She slid it across the table closer to him and cleared her throat.

He looked back at it, picked it up, and took more than a big mouthful. He winced and swallowed and then put the glass down.

"I'm sorry for what happened to the Red Rogues," I whispered.

He shrugged one shoulder. "Nothing for you to be sorry about, Quinny. Shit went south. There wasn't a damn thing any of us could do about it once that fucking ball started rolling."

"Why did Isaac Reed go after you?" I asked. "Your MC, I mean?"

Nancy shot me a look that said "are you sure you want to have this conversation?". I was sure.

Owen chuckled and looked up at the ceiling. "You know, I often wonder the same thing myself? I don't think I can even give you a solid answer. The guy was fucking nuts. Truly. Once we crossed paths, he decided he was going to take us out, one after another. And he didn't hold back."

"When did you cross paths?" I asked.

Owen sighed and turned around to face both me and Nancy. He took another swig of whiskey, and then another. Nancy leaned over and topped up the glass. He thanked her with a nod. "We met him in a bar."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "Yep. We were doing our usual shit. You know how it was. Hitting on chicks. Drinking beers. Throwing darts and playing pool. I was in the middle of telling Rhys some story or another—I don't recall what it was about now—when Reed walked by. He slammed into my shoulder. And, well, you know how I used to be."

“You fought him,” I said. It wasn’t a question. Owen was a much different man now than he used to be. He used to be the sort of guy who was always looking for a fight. The fact that he was the one here watching us rather than off with Rhys to crack skulls was more than a little surprising.

“Yeah, I fought him. At least, I tried to fight him. He had me on my back pretty fast. Rhys and Max were there and stopped him from beating my skull in. But of course, he didn’t like that.”

Nancy made a nervous sound in the back of her throat.

Owen smiled at her. “I’ll spare you the gory details.”

“Too late,” she said.

He chuckled and scratched his jaw. “Sorry. But yeah, that fight sort of kickstarted the whole thing. From there, we started to notice little things. We were being followed when we were alone. He popped up in random places we always frequented. Soon, he was making plays at us. He jumped a few guys and beat the living shit out of them. And it escalated from there. It went from beatings to murders in a matter of weeks. It was... hellish.”

“I’m glad he’s dead,” I said bitterly.

Owen took another big drink. “Me too, Quinny. Me fucking too.”

“I thought I told you to stop calling me Quinny,” I said teasingly.

“I can’t help myself. It suits you. And it reminds me of better days.”

I smiled. “Me too.”

Owen rolled to his feet. “You think that boy of yours has anything worth eating in his fridge?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

Apparently “maybe” was good enough for him because Owen walked off into the kitchen, and Nancy and I listened to him rummage around in the fridge. I met her eye, and she gave

me a sad smile. “Maybe Rhys wasn’t the only one who needed to talk about all this.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think you’re right.”

I took another sip of whiskey and so did Nancy. We sat quietly and waited for Owen to come back, and when he did, he had a jar of salsa in one hand and a bag of chips in the other. He tore open the bag, unscrewed the jar, and put them on the table. “It’s not much, but it’s the best he’s got. You’ll have to take care of that shit, Quinny.”

“Why are the contents of his fridge my responsibility?” I asked sourly.

He blinked at me.

“I’m not his maid,” I said.

“I never said you were.”

“No. You just implied that it was my job to fill his fridge up with better food.”

Owen chuckled nervously. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I should hope not,” I said.

“I meant you need to teach him how to shop like an adult.” He held the bag out to me in a peace offering. “Chip?”

CHAPTER 25



RHYS

The motel room door clicked closed softly behind Liam, and we crept farther inside.

One of the lamps on the wall between the two beds flicked on.

“What the fuck?” Rudy, the one who I’d hit with the baseball bat that night outside Kyle’s garage, sat bolt upright. He and the others were all lying on top of the blankets, fully dressed. “Kyle!”

Derek rushed between the beds, gathered the front of Rudy’s shirt in his hand, and clocked him right in the face with his fist.

Rudy wailed with pain and cupped his hands over his nose, which was now gushing blood. His friends came to at the noise

I loomed over Kyle, who woke with such a start that he scrambled right off the bed and fell heavily on the floor. “Hey there, sunshine.” I grinned. “Remember me?”

Kyle glared at me, and his friends found themselves in equally unpleasant situations. Aiden and Liam were watching the other two, while Derek smirked at Rudy, whose shirt was turning red with blood.

“Which one of these assholes tried to strangle you?” Aiden asked.

“The ugly one,” I said.

Aiden chuckled. “They’re all pretty fucking ugly, boss.”

I glanced up at him and the two men he was forcing to stand up. I looked them over. They were both decorated in bruises, courtesy of yours truly, and they were staring daggers at me. Liam and Aiden shoved them roughly up against the wall and told them to stay where they were.

“The one with the beard,” I said.

Aiden nodded. “Good to know.”

I stared down at Kyle and lifted my leg to plant a boot on the bed frame. I leaned forward and rested my elbow on my raised knee. “You and I need to have a little chat, man.”

“Fuck you,” he spat.

“I don’t give a shit if you want to cooperate or not. I’m going to say what I have to say, and then me and my boys are going to give you a taste of what will happen to you if you keep coming around. I won’t ask you if you understand. I don’t really give a fuck if you do or not. Because I’m going to enjoy this.” I reached down and gathered the front of his shirt in my fist. I yanked him forward. “You will never go near Nancy or Quinn again. If you do, I swear to God, I’ll kill you. And something tells me nobody will miss you, Kyle. Not a damn person.”

He clenched his jaw.

“Why did you follow us here?” I asked.

Kyle’s lips peeled off his teeth—well, what was left of them since I’d kicked some of them out—and he sneered at me. “To teach those bitches a lesson.”

Rudy started laughing despite his bloody nose. Soon, the other two joined in on it. Kyle chuckled too and leaned forward, closing the distance between us. “Nancy can’t just walk away from me. Not after everything. She’s mine. You hear me? *She’s mine.*”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think you’re getting it.”

“I think we need to show them what we mean,” Derek said.

I released Kyle's shirt and stepped back to let him get up. He gripped the side of the bed and pulled himself to his feet. Then he spat at me. "Come on, hot shot. Let's do this."

Aiden, Liam, and Derek were all giving their guys space too. I didn't always fight fair, but tonight, I would. Mostly because I wanted to show them how poorly matched they were against us. I'd seen them in action before, and that was enough. Sure, I'd taken some hits, but that was because there were four of them.

And a baseball bat.

Now it was four on four, and there was no baseball bat on the scene. They didn't stand a chance.

Kyle let out a furious yell and charged me. The others followed suit, and I blocked out everything else in the room, focusing all of my attention on Kyle.

He slammed into me, and I buried my fist in his gut. He grunted and doubled over, but his momentum pushed me backward into the wall. My head hit the drywall, cracking it. Kyle drove his fist up into my ribs once, and then again. Then he tried to back away. I grabbed him by the neck and drove my knee up into his chest.

Air whooshed out of his lungs. He staggered back and tried to catch his breath as I shook my hands out and prepared myself for the next round. My head already hurt from being slammed into the wall, and my ribs were protesting. I wanted this to end quickly. I was in no mood for more bruised ribs, and I sure as hell did not want any broken bones on account of this asshole. "You can do better than that, Kyle. Come on."

He rushed me again. It went worse for him than the first time. He was a poor fighter—something I had already established the first time I fought him in Chicago. His timing was off, and he threw his weight around like a drunk teenager in his first fight. How he managed to maintain his current lifestyle, I had no idea.

After delivering another couple of blows to his ribs, I turned him around and slammed him into the wall. Then I

grabbed him by the throat and pinned him there. “You will leave Nancy and Quinn alone. If I see you in my city again, you know what I’ll do to you. You’re an annoying fly buzzing around my head, Kyle. I’ve dealt with meaner dudes than you. And you know where they are? In the fucking ground.”

Kyle grimaced and tried to break free, but I held him fast and slammed him into the wall again. The back of his head punched a hole in the drywall.

“Are you going to make more trouble for me, Kyle?” I asked.

He gritted his teeth. His broken, ugly, sharp teeth.

“I asked you a question,” I spat, tightening my grip on his throat.

The fight that had been raging around me was dying down. We didn’t have much time left before we’d have to hightail it out of here. Someone had most likely called the cops by now, and there would be a short response time. We probably had four minutes. Maybe less.

“Rhys,” Derek warned.

“I know,” I growled. I tightened my grip again. “I’m not leaving until you answer me.”

Kyle tried to swallow, but my grip was too tight. He reached out and tried to pry my hand away. His nails dug into the back of my hand, but I didn’t let up. He squirmed and tried to kick me. I drove my knee into his stomach.

“Last chance,” I said. “Leave the girls alone. Don’t come back here. Or you will mysteriously disappear, along with your three buddies.”

Kyle glanced over my shoulder at the others. I couldn’t see what he saw, but I assumed his friends were on the floor unconscious or in similar situations to Kyle. His eyes slid back to me. “All right,” he said, his voice a raspy whisper.

I let his throat go, and he sucked in a desperate breath. “I hope you’re not lying to me, Kyle.”

He rubbed his throat and slipped away from me to retreat into the corner. “You’re fucking crazy, man. If those bitches mean that much to you, fuck it. They’re yours.”

“Rhys,” Derek said a little more firmly. “It’s time to go.”

“All right,” I said. Then I pointed at Kyle. “I suggest you don’t tell the cops that we were here and you let them think the four of you did this to yourselves.”

Kyle was still massaging his throat.

“At least it’ll look like you won a fight for once, you weasel,” I said. Then I turned and marched out. The cool fresh air of the night hit me, and I took a deep breath and shook out my hands. My wrists ached from having my hands clenched so tightly into fists.

The others followed me out. “Anybody hurt?” I asked.

I was answered with a unanimous, “No.”

“Good. Let’s get the hell out of here. Good work.”

We jogged across the street. Before we got on our bikes, Derek put his hand on my shoulder. “What?” I asked.

“You said ‘my city’ back there.”

“What?”

Derek clenched his jaw. “When you were threatening Kyle, you referred to New York as yours. I just wanted to clear that up. This isn’t your city, man. It’s Ryder’s. I’m not threatening you. I’m just giving you a heads-up. You have to watch yourself.”

“I hear you,” I said. I hadn’t said it because I meant I was in charge. I’d said it because it would hold more weight in the moment. I wasn’t going to tell the guy that this was Ryder’s city. He didn’t know who the hell Ryder was. I’d rather let him think I was the enemy. And it was a better tool to keep him the hell away from Quinn. And Nancy.

We all got on our bikes. Liam and Aiden pulled away first and were followed shortly after by Derek. They were all heading back to my place.

I sat on my bike and stared at the motel in front of me. Sirens whirred in the distance.

The door to Kyle's room was still open, and I could see movement inside. He was probably trying to rouse his friends. Then I saw him run out of the room, look both ways, and take off at a sprint down the sidewalk with a duffel bag over his shoulder.

The coward was running.

I laughed to myself. Nancy and Quinn would definitely be safe. If he didn't have the balls to hang back with his friends and face the heat, he sure as hell didn't have the nerve to go after my girl again.

Because he knew what sort of hurt would be waiting for him if he did.

I revved my bike and tore out of the parking lot. The bright glow of the neon sign faded away in my side mirrors, and I opened up on the throttle. I wove through cars, rode the line, and kept my eyes dead ahead on the taillights of my friends' bikes until I caught up and overtook them.

Then I left them behind and smiled as the engine of my Indian roared in my ears and the wind tugged at my jacket.

CHAPTER 26



QUINN

The bag of chips was empty. Owen was on one sofa with his feet up on the armrest. His arms were clasped beneath his head as he lay on his back with his eyes closed. He'd fallen asleep a short fifteen minutes ago, and I didn't have the heart to wake him. It was one thirty in the morning.

Nancy had fallen asleep too. Her head was in my lap, and she was curled up on her side. I watched her sleep, and then watched Owen, doing everything in my power not to worry about how long Rhys and the others had been gone.

I wasn't doing a very good job.

My gut was twisting with nerves, and my heart raced with every passing minute. It had been too long, hadn't it? He should have been back an hour ago if everything went well. Maybe there had been complications. Maybe Kyle had more than just four guys with him.

Maybe Rhys and the others were in trouble.

Stop it, Quinn. You're working yourself up for no reason. He's fine. He's always fine.

I ran my fingers through my hair and tried to focus on how peaceful both Nancy and Owen looked. He had started to snore softly, and I watched his chest rise and fall with each breath. I could hear Nancy's breathing too.

Panic still swelled inside me.

I considered calling him but doubted he would answer. And if he was sneaking up on Kyle, I didn't want to risk

compromising him. I just had to wait. That was what he wanted me to do, and it was what I was used to. I could do this.

I had to.

Another few minutes passed. I was about to wake Nancy up when I heard something familiar: the distant roar of a motorcycle engine. Not too long after, I heard the mechanical groan of Rhys's garage door opening.

I tapped Nancy's shoulder. "They're back," I said as her eyes fluttered open.

She pushed herself up and rubbed sleep out of her eyes. "How long was I out?"

"Not long. Twenty minutes or so."

She nodded and peered around. Then she spotted Owen and smiled. "He finally fell asleep too?"

"Yeah, once you passed out, he was quick to follow," I said as I got to my feet.

The motorcycles were out on the driveway now. Owen's eyes opened, and he sat up. He looked around at us and then blinked at the clock on the wall. "It's almost two. What were those clowns doing all damn night?"

"I was wondering the same thing," I said.

He rolled to his feet and cracked his back.

The door to the garage opened, and I spun to see Rhys emerge in the hallway. Liam, Aiden, and Derek all followed behind him, and they made their way into the living room.

Rhys greeted me with a hug. I threw my arms around his shoulders and clung to him. "I'm glad you're okay," I said.

He rubbed my back. "Of course I'm okay."

"You were gone a long time."

"We had to take the long way home. There were cops all over the place, and we weren't sure if they knew it was us who'd messed up the guys at the motel."

Rhys pulled away and stroked my cheek. Then he seemed to remember that we had company, and his hand fell to his side. He glanced at the coffee table. “I see you got into my liquor cabinet.”

“Owen did, to be more specific,” I said.

“Hey, you drank it too,” Owen said.

Rhys chuckled. “I don’t mind.”

Owen rubbed his hands together. “So? Give us the details. How’d it go?”

Rhys smiled and looked at me and Nancy. “You two don’t have to worry about them bothering you ever again. They got the message. They’ll be on their way back to Chicago, and they won’t show their ugly faces around you again. And if they do, you know who to call.”

“Thank you,” Nancy said. “Seriously, thank you. All of you. This was my screw up, and I don’t know what would have happened if we didn’t have your help.”

“You would have figured something out,” Owen said confidently.

Nancy shook her head. “I don’t think so. We were in big trouble. I put my best friend in danger. I’m sorry, Quinn. Now that this is behind us, I just want you to know I’ll never put you in a position like that again.”

I went to my friend and gave her a hug. “It’s okay, Nancy. I promise. We’re all okay.”

Rhys smirked. “Except for Kyle.”

The guys all started laughing.

Liam nodded at Owen. “You missed out, man. These guys would have given you a laugh. They thought they were a pretty big deal.”

“Maybe in some circles they were,” Aiden said.

“Maybe,” Rhys said. “But here? In Ryder’s city? They’re no one.”

I didn't know what that meant, but I caught Rhys and Derek sharing a knowing look between one another. I didn't say anything about it. It wasn't my business.

"So when are you ladies going back to Chicago?" Liam asked.

I glanced at Nancy. "Uh, we're not sure yet actually. We have a lot to talk about. I know Kyle is taken care of, but I think I want to get out of my apartment. Start fresh somewhere."

"The guest room is yours for as long as you need it," Rhys said.

I smiled. "Thank you."

Nancy thanked him too.

"No problem," Rhys said. Then he looked around at all of us. "Well, I don't know if I speak for everyone, but I'm pretty tired, and my head is pounding. I'll see some of you in the morning."

He didn't wait for anyone to answer him. He just walked off down the hall, slipped into his bedroom, and closed the door behind him. I stared after him as the others all gathered in the living room and sat down. I shook my head and asked if anyone wanted water. They all nodded, and I went to the kitchen to find glasses and fill them with cold water. I brought everyone's drinks out and sat down between Nancy and Owen on the sofa across from Liam, Aiden, and Derek.

The room was thick with silence for a good couple of minutes.

"Are you actually going back to Chicago?" Aiden asked.

I blinked at him. "I don't know yet, Aiden. There's a lot I need to think about. And talk about with Rhys and Nancy. A lot of things are sort of up in the air right now."

Aiden rolled his eyes at me.

"What?" I asked, a little annoyed.

He shrugged. “Nothing. It’s your call, cuz. I just think you’d have to be a special sort of idiot to go all the way back to Chicago and let this thing go.”

“This thing?” I asked, challenging him.

“You know what I’m saying. You and Rhys.”

“I don’t want to talk about this with all of you,” I said.

The others were staying out of it. At least, they were trying to. Their eyes were down, and nobody said a word.

Aiden licked his lips. “You should go get him.”

“Sorry?”

Aiden nodded. “Rhys. Go get him.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Aiden?”

“*Go get him.* The two of you are made for each other. You know it. He knows it. For fuck’s sakes, we all know it. Rhys doesn’t want you to leave, and you want to stay. So why make things harder on yourselves than they need to be? Put an end to this damn charade, and walk your ass in there.”

“Aiden—”

“Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you’re not in love with him.”

I stared at him. All eyes were on me. My cheeks were growing hotter by the second as I sat there, completely paralyzed by the words that had just come out of his mouth. “I—I can’t tell you that,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I stood up and shot him a dirty look as I walked down the hall to Rhys’s bedroom door. I padded softly across the hardwood. I didn’t want to wake him if he’d somehow managed to fall asleep that quickly. I knew he was probably pretty sore, and if he had miraculously fallen asleep, I would let him rest.

But if he was awake...

I paused outside his bedroom door and pressed my ear flat against it to listen for sounds of life inside. Was he getting

ready for bed? Was he in bed already? Was he lying awake thinking about me?

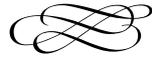
I hoped he was. Of course, I hoped he was. All I wanted was for him to want me the same way I wanted him. Based on the conversation we'd had earlier, I was positive that we were both on the same page.

He'd be happy if I decided to stay in New York City with him. At least, I hoped he would. It would be a big step, but it would be for the best. We needed to be closer to each other. Not seeing him for eight months had nearly killed me. I wanted to live in the same city as him again.

I wanted a lot of things. Not many of them were things I could have right now, give or take a couple.

I ran my finger up the door and tapped lightly. There was no response. So I reached down for the handle and gently turned it until it clicked and the door gave way.

CHAPTER 27



RHYS

The ceiling fan above my bed was perfectly still. In the summer, it would turn lazily, arms reaching out to the edges of the ceiling as it went in a never-ending circle. Round and round and round.

I closed my eyes, and darkness swallowed me.

My head hurt. So did my ribs. Kyle had managed to get a couple hits on me, and my body was now aching in protest. I was getting too old for this shit.

The days of living for the fight and liking the pain were behind me. I didn't have bloodlust the way I used to. That fire was dying. I didn't mind. It all seemed to be happening according to plan. I was following Ryder's lead now, and there wasn't as much need for me to get my hands dirty.

Except for tonight, of course. And the other night. Kyle was an exception, not the norm.

He'd gone after Quinn, and I couldn't let that slide.

The bruises and the pain were worth it. I'd have taken a hundred times worse to guarantee that he would never bother Quinn again. She had enough on her plate already. She didn't need an asshole like him making things even more difficult for her. It wasn't fair.

No woman deserved a man like that making things hell for them. All the Kyles of the world deserved to have their teeth kicked in.

It had been satisfying. That was for damn sure. The way he'd looked at me as I loomed over him made me feel powerful. I'd missed that a bit.

But only a bit.

That momentary high of scaring the shit out of someone and feeling like a formidable badass evaporated and was replaced with pain. And I was so fucking done with pain.

I wanted to roll onto my side to try to get some sleep, but I knew my ribs would throb, and it just wasn't worth it.

I tried to distract myself with other thoughts. They all went back to Quinn.

They always went back to Quinn.

I thought back to the good old days when we were younger and stupid and life hadn't kicked us in the balls yet. I thought of our first date.

It had felt a bit like an undercover mission. We didn't want Max to find out that we were seeing each other, especially not so early on. There was no telling how he would react, and the drama wouldn't be worth it if it turned out we weren't really all that into each other. Of course, we knew well enough that we already were.

I'd driven us far out of the city limits. She rode on the back of my bike. I could still recall how good it felt to have her arms wrapped around me. She was no stranger to being on a bike, even back then. She had ridden on the back of Max's several times; she'd almost grown up doing it. She was fearless and had begged me to go faster.

And I did.

Even over the roar of the engine and the wind in my ears, I could hear her elated laughter as we sped down the interstate.

We'd gone to a little place called Romeo's. It was a small cafe by day and a bar by night. It was summer time.

The outside of the place was filled with people when I parked the bike. Quinn and I walked inside hand and hand like a couple. It was the first time I'd felt like she and I actually

had a shot. I had no idea then how much harder things would get for us over the passing years.

We'd picked a table and ordered drinks and food. The entire night was spent laughing our asses off and kissing. She'd done a number on me, and there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted this girl. I *needed* her.

I smiled to myself and opened my eyes to stare up at the bedroom ceiling fan. We'd been just kids back then.

Now we were far from it. Life had hardened us. Well, sort of.

I sure felt soft when she was around. I felt like she'd ruined me. I hated how soft she made me. My heart ached right now, just thinking about her going back to Chicago soon. I wanted her to stay. I wanted her here with me.

But I couldn't ask her to sacrifice her whole life in Chicago to move here. It was unreasonable and unfair. I was the one who had up and left. I had no right to ask her to do the same.

I picked at a loose thread at the top of my blanket.

Then I lifted my head as my bedroom door opened. Light streamed in from the hallway and illuminated Quinn from the back.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yeah," I said. "Come in."

She came in and closed the door behind her. I heard the lock click softly. Then she padded across my bedroom floor and came to sit on the edge of the bed beside me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I just wanted to come and check on you. You left in a hurry."

"Yeah, sorry. My head hurts and I was tired."

"Did you take an aspirin or anything?"

"No."

She sighed. She patted my hand before standing up and going into my bathroom. She flicked the light on, and I shielded my eyes as I watched her crouch in front of my cabinets and rummage through everything. She withdrew a bottle of painkillers and filled my cup on the counter with water. Then she came back to me and held out the pills. I popped them in my mouth and took the water from her to chase them down. “Thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” She paused. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“I’m all right, Quinn. Nothing I can’t handle. Just a couple bruises here and there.” She looked at her hands. I could barely make out her features in the darkness, but I could tell she was thinking. I reached out and closed my hand over both of hers. “What are you thinking about?”

She didn’t answer me right away, like she was arranging the words in her head before she actually spoke. “I was thinking about everything you’ve done for me. And how grateful I am. And how lucky I am to have you. And how much I don’t want to be apart from you again.”

I propped myself up on my elbows and studied her. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. *Yet*. I just, I don’t know. Doesn’t it feel different this time? Like we’re both finally on the same page? I think it would be a mistake to put distance between us again, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

Quinn let out a soft giggle, and I put my hand on her knee. I listened to her breathing and smelled her perfume. Roses. Citrus. Something else familiar and fresh, like rainwater.

“We can figure everything out in the morning,” I told her.

“Okay, and until then?”

“Until then, you should sleep in here with me.”

“Sleep?” she asked teasingly.

I chuckled. “Did you have something else in mind?”

“How else would I thank you for going and beating up Kyle? I want to show my appreciation. And I want to celebrate *us*.”

“Celebrate, huh?” I asked.

She let out another breathless giggle and then swung her leg over me to straddle my hips. “You heard me. I love you, Rhys Davies, and I’m going to ride that cock of yours to prove it.”

I put my hands on her hips, and she rocked on top of me. The pain in my ribs subsided to a dull ache. She was just the distraction I needed.

Quinn pulled her shirt off over her head. Even in the dark, I could make out the lean lines of her stomach, the groove of her navel, and the outline of her waist and hips. She was wearing a lace bra with no padding. Her tits were perky and spilling out the top of the cups. She reached behind her back and undid the clasp, then dangled the bra over the edge of the bed and let it go, where it fell soundlessly to the floor.

She leaned over me. Her body was hot against mine, and her breasts grazed my chest as she devoured my mouth with sweet kisses. She tasted like whiskey and salsa. I cupped the back of her neck and held her to me as our kiss deepened.

It felt so fucking good to hold her like this. Especially because for the first time since I fell for her, I didn’t feel like I couldn’t have her.

Because I *did* have her. And she had me. And we were going to make this damn thing work one way or another.

Quinn’s hips rolled, and my cock strained against my boxers. She must have been able to feel it through the blankets between us because she smiled into our kiss and slowed her hips. She nipped at my bottom lip. “Somebody’s eager.”

“You’re too sexy, baby,” I told her. “I get hard just looking at you.”

“Well, lucky you. You’ll get to do more than just look at me tonight. You can do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” I mused.

She nipped at my lip again and then kissed me softly. “Whatever you want.”

“And what if I want to tease you like this afternoon?”

“Then you can tease me.”

“And if I want to fuck you in your ass?”

Quinn paused and stared down at me. “I’m all yours, Rhys.”

CHAPTER 28



QUINN

He wrapped his arms around me and crushed his mouth to mine. I knew telling him he could fuck me in my ass would be the thing that pushed him over the edge. I'd told him to do it once while we were fucking, and he blew his load right then and there.

This time, I had given him plenty of warning.

He held me down on top of him and kissed me deeply. I kissed him back and held his face in my hands. Then I traced his shoulders and pulled the blankets down. I wanted more skin on skin.

I still had my sweats on, and they were more than getting in the way.

Rhys suddenly rolled over and pinned me down beneath him. I let out a surprised giggle as he planted kisses down my chest and stomach. When he reached the waistband of my sweatpants, he slowly rolled them down my legs and took them off. He dropped down over me, and I lifted my hips up. He grinned into our kiss and reached down between my legs to rub me in slow circles.

Our kiss became more desperate. I hooked my leg around his and rolled, using our momentum to bring us up so that I was straddling him again. I put my hands on his chest and braced myself as I ground against his cock. He was hard and ready beneath his boxers, and I liked the way the thin bit of fabric felt between us.

Soon, the teasing became too much for me. I slid down the length of his body to settle between his legs, and I pulled him free from the confines of his tight black boxers. I took him in my hands and stroked him gently before sealing my lips over his tip and taking him deep in my mouth.

Rhys sucked in his breath through his teeth. Knowing how much he like it, I continued sucking him off. His hand plunged into my hair, and he guided me down on his dick. I followed his lead as he held me down on him. I pressed my tongue to the base of his shaft and took more of him.

He groaned, and the sound of his pleasure turned me on even more. I moaned around his cock, and soon, he was pulling me off as he started straining. He was going to come soon, and he didn't want things to be over too quickly.

With his hand still in my hair, he guided me to my knees on the bed. Then he put his hand on the small of my back and gently pushed me flat on my belly.

I looked over my shoulder at him as he went to his knees behind me. I lifted my hips off the bed and wiggled my ass in the air for him.

Rhys ran his hands up the backs of my thighs and squeezed my ass. I giggled softly as his hands trailed to the inside of my thighs. I kept my hips off the bed. He cupped my pussy and rubbed his thumb against my clit. He had me sighing within seconds and aching for more.

Then I yelped when he bit my ass. I burst into a fit of giggles, and he smiled as I buried my face in the sheets. He kissed my ass where he bit me and slipped a finger in my pussy.

I moaned.

He worked his finger in and out of me and then kept it out. He drew it back to my tight ass and applied a bit of pressure. Then he slid his finger in.

I bit down on my bottom lip and sucked in a breath.

“Relax, baby,” he whispered.

I did as he said. I took a slow, deep breath and exhaled through my nose. I melted into the mattress. He worked slowly, gently, and I relaxed even more. The moment of pain was brief, and now it was pleasant.

More than pleasant.

“Yes,” I breathed.

Rhys worked me over until I was a breathless mess upon the bed. I wanted all of him everywhere, and when I begged him to fuck me, he chuckled and told me to wait.

“Waiting is torture,” I moaned.

He rolled me over onto my back and ran his hand down my stomach. He circled my nipples, which grew hard at his touch, and then trailed his fingers down the middle of my stomach, straight to my pussy. “Waiting is half the fun.”

“For you,” I groaned.

“Perhaps.”

He inched his way down until he was between my legs. He pushed them apart so that the outside of my knees rested on the bed. Then he licked me. I flinched as he grazed my clit. I was terribly sensitive.

I rolled my hips against his mouth as he started lapping at my juices. He rolled his tongue over my clit and drank from me as I sank my fingers into his hair.

Then I was moaning with delight as he pressed his finger back into my ass.

“Oh God,” I breathed.

His tongue flicked, and his finger worked. The pressure and the soft caress of his tongue were too much. I came undone. My body bucked beneath him. He kept licking and fucking me through my entire orgasm. My legs shook, and my knees felt like putty.

I stretched my arms over my head and smiled into my forearm when he kissed my hips. He trailed his way up, his lips against my skin softer than velvet. His kisses danced up

my throat to my ear, which he pinched between his teeth. “Are you ready, baby?”

“Yes,” I sighed.

“Are you sure?”

I smiled. I’d been ready for a long time. Not just for this moment right now, but for everything we were going to share together. Our lives. Everything. Finally.

“Yes,” I said.

He grabbed a condom from his nightstand and slipped it on.

Then he picked me up and tossed me down on the bed on my back. I laughed as he climbed up behind me, pushed my legs apart, and stood between them.

He dropped his hips to mine. I lifted upward. His meaty tip pressed into me, and I opened up for him. I spread my legs a little farther, and he pressed in a little harder. Then he slid the rest of the way inside me.

I moaned and collapsed down on the bed.

Rhys rocked his hips against me, moving them in a fluid motion like a wave. I reached up and ran my hands over his shoulders. I followed the lines of muscle and traced the pattern of his veins in his arms. I could barely make out his face in the dark, but I knew he was smiling at me. I was smiling at him, too.

Soon, it became impossible to smile. I was reduced to nothing but mush as he drove deep inside me with slow strokes. The way he ground his hips had his cock hitting all the right places. I reached my hands above my head, and he grabbed my wrists and pinned them in place.

I playfully tried to lift them, but he held fast. His grip was tight but delicious. He was so strong, and I loved it. He tortured me with kisses and suckled on my nipples as he fucked me. Soon, I was grinding my hips too, desperate for more as he maintained his slow and practiced rhythm.

He gently pinched my nipple between his teeth, and I gasped.

Then he slid out of me, took me by the hips, and turned me over.

I wiggled my ass in the air, and he grabbed on to me to hold me in place. I hung my head and waited. He cupped my pussy in one hand and dragged his finger through my juices. He swirled it around and then went up to my ass.

I held my breath as he rubbed his cock between my ass cheeks, and I remembered what he'd told me. I had to relax.

I exhaled slowly and closed my eyes as he started to enter me.

“Fuck,” he growled. “You’re tight.”

I whimpered and gritted my teeth.

“You can do it, baby,” he said.

I knew I could. I pushed back, taking more of him inside me. He drew in a short breath of surprise, and I rolled my hips. Then he put his hands on the small of my back and guided me the rest of the way down.

“Oh God,” I groaned.

“You’re all right. You feel so fucking good.”

He slid in and out of me. The first few strokes hurt, but the pain was temporary. I looked over my shoulder at him. “Fuck me harder.”

He obliged. I gripped the sheets and arched my back as he fucked me for all I was worth. Soon, I was unravelling, and I reached between my legs to rub my clit as he fucked me from behind like a madman. His breathing quickened, and he groaned with pleasure behind me. I pressed my face into the sheets and cried out his name as I came, and he blew his load right after me.

His thrusts slowed, and we broke apart. He fell to his side on the bed and wrapped an arm around me to pull me into him. His body was hot. It felt good.

He kissed the side of my neck. "I love you, Quinn."

"I love you too," I whispered as my eyes closed of their own volition.

My heart was full. My body was light.

I had never felt so happy, and I owed it all to him.

CHAPTER 29



RHYS

2 Weeks Later

Liam was up inside the moving truck. He pressed his shoulder to the side of the sofa and then pushed, walking it right to the back of the truck so Aiden and I could grab it. We balanced it, got our grip, and were guided across the strip of grass between the road and the apartment building by Owen. He propped open the lobby door for us and told us to wait for him. Then he hurried in behind us and pushed open the door to the stairwell.

Thank God Quinn and Nancy's new apartment was on the second floor.

Getting it up the stairwell was a big job, but after some precise maneuvering, we made it to the apartment.

Nancy was waiting at the door for us. She clapped her hands together enthusiastically as we went in and deposited the couch in the living room.

The apartment was big by New York standards. The floors were dark-stained wood, and the whole place was an open concept. When you first walked in, the apartment greeted you with open space as you made your way into the kitchen, which overlooked the living room, a flex room, and a dining area. New light fixtures hung from the ceiling and gave the place a modern feel.

Quinn would be happy here. When she initially decided that she was for sure going to move to New York, we had

considered moving in together. It would be so easy for her to just move into my house with me.

But that would be moving pretty quickly. We would have gone from not speaking for eight months to suddenly living together. Things were good with us, but we still had some shit to work through.

Well, I did. I would forever be a work in progress.

Aiden wiped his hands on his jeans. “Is this the last of it?”

Quinn emerged from the bedroom down the hall and smiled at the sofa. “It looks so good in here. I knew it would.”

Nancy walked over to her and hooked her arm around Quinn’s. “I think we’d better order pizza to celebrate. I’ll run out and grab beers.”

“I’ll drive,” Owen offered.

“Perfect,” Nancy said, grinning. “Does anyone else need anything?” We all shook our heads. Pizza and beer would suffice for us. We weren’t hard to please. Nancy grabbed her purse off the kitchen counter, and she and Owen headed out the door. “Call me if you change your minds!”

They closed the door behind them, leaving me, Quinn, Liam, and Aiden standing in the middle of her new living room.

I looked around. “What else can we help with, Quinn?”

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Um, I think it’s all good. All the heavy lifting is done.”

“Do you want us to try to get the living room arranged how you like it?” I offered. “That way, you and Nancy don’t have to fight over it. I remember how much of a headache it was setting up the last place you two shared together.”

Quinn giggled. “Sure. Now that you mention it, that’s a good idea.”

“And I suppose you know exactly how you want everything?”

“I knew how I wanted everything as soon as we saw this place for the first time,” Quinn admitted.

She directed us on where she wanted all the furniture. We followed her orders and moved everything. Then we made some adjustments as she found herself unsatisfied with the vision she had in her head of how the living room should look.

By the time we were done, we’d broken a sweat, but the place looked good.

We had angled the sofa toward the fireplace, where we would be installing their TV on the wall mount above. We arranged the coffee table and the dining room table. We ended up unpacking some of her office supplies and setting them up in the little den area.

By the time Nancy and Owen got back from picking up beer and pizza, the apartment looked much different than when they left.

Nancy was thrilled.

Quinn came over to me as I sat down on the sofa. She sat on my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck. “Thank you for helping. And for suggesting we get the living room set up. That was some quick thinking on your part.”

“I have my moments,” I said.

She grinned. “You sure do.”

She got up and grabbed us each a beer. She came back and went to sit beside me, but I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her back onto my lap. She giggled, and we cracked open our beers and drank greedily.

As we sipped our drinks, the others dug into the pizza. We waited our turn before grabbing a slice each, and all of us sat around the coffee table stuffing our faces. It had been a long day. There was nothing more vigorous or tiring than moving.

But it was worth it. My girl was close to me, just a ten-minute drive away. She and Nancy both had interviews set up at tattoo parlors over the next couple of weeks, and Quinn was

excited to get the ball rolling. She was ready for change. So was I.

Quinn leaned back to whisper in my ear. “I can’t stop thinking about later tonight.”

I squeezed her ass. “Don’t tempt me, woman. I’ll carry you down the hall right now.”

She giggled softly and pressed her beer to her lips. Then she kissed my neck and moved up to my mouth.

We both heard Nancy sigh and broke apart. She was sitting on the sofa, watching us with her chin in her hand. “I need to find myself a man,” she muttered.

Everyone chuckled, except for Nancy. She was being serious. She scowled around at all of us and took a massive bite of pizza. A bit of marinara sauce clung to her cheek, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. “Laugh all you want, you jerks. Just wait. I’ll find my prince charming one of these days.”

“We don’t doubt it, Nancy,” Liam said.

“As soon as I have a new job and I’m settled in here, I’m going to throw myself back into the dating world. And this time, I’ll find someone a bit better for me than the last guy.”

“A bit better?” I asked. “Please aim higher than that. I don’t want to have to break any more noses.”

“Or kneecaps.” Owen winked.

She rolled her eyes at us. “You know what I mean. Maybe I can meet a guy who, you know, isn’t into the sort of things we used to do. Someone straight and narrow. A good guy.”

“You deserve that, Nancy,” Quinn said, smiling. Then she lifted her beer. “To Nancy.”

“To Nancy,” we all said and sipped our beers.

Nancy shook her head at all of us. “To a fresh start, more like,” she said.

So we toasted to that too.

We all spent the next hour goofing around. Quinn was on our asses to keep the noise down. She didn't want her neighbors to hate her on the first night that she moved in. We did our best to keep our voices down, but every now and then, we'd get excited about something, and we'd make a bunch of noise. Then Quinn would be furiously shushing us all over again. It almost became entertaining.

Soon, the beers were all gone, and the pizza boxes were empty. I was sitting on the floor, leaning against the sofa and between Quinn's legs as she ran her fingers through my hair. Liam had passed out on the other sofa and was sleeping at a crooked, haphazard angle with his neck bent over the back of the sofa. The kid could sleep almost anywhere. It was a talent. Owen was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa Liam was sleeping on. His long legs were stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He too was sleeping soundly.

Aiden yawned and stretched, and his movement prompted Nancy to do the same. Her eyes were heavy with fatigue, and she blinked around at the rest of us. "I think I'm going to call it a night, guys. Aiden, you can crash on the other sofa once Rhys and Quinn move. Do you need a pillow or blanket or anything?"

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks, though."

She nodded and got to her feet. "I'll see you guys in the morning?"

"Yep," Quinn said behind me. "Good night, Nancy." Nancy headed down the hall and disappeared into her bedroom. I craned my neck to look back at Quinn. She smiled down at me. "Yes?"

"What do you think? Is it time to call it a night?"

She gave me a sleepy little smile. Damn, she was cute. "Yeah, I could sleep."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" I asked.

Aiden groaned. "All right, you two. Get the hell out of here. You're on my bed. And the last thing I want to do is

listen to the two of you fawning over each other. Beat it.” He shoed us away with one hand.

I stood up and offered Quinn my hand. She giggled as Aiden slid across the sofa to take up the space she had just been occupying. He let out a contented sigh and closed his eyes. “That’s better. Now scram, love birds.”

We scrambled. We scrambled all the way down the hall to the master bedroom, which Nancy had insisted Quinn take. It was her way of making amends for the whole Kyle disaster.

The bedroom was beautiful, with gray walls, dark wood floors, and a chandelier that hung above Quinn’s bed. All of her stuff was still in boxes, but I knew she’d have the place looking like something out of an interior design magazine in a matter of weeks. She was good at making a house a home.

I flashed her a smile when she turned to face me. “What do you say we break this new room in?” I asked as I followed her around the bed.

She giggled. “I like the sound of that plan.”

“Get your ass over here then.”

She let out a delighted shriek as I took a swipe at her. She hopped up on the bed and scurried across it. I followed and bounded over it. I caught her around the waist, and she bubbled over with laughter. I kissed the side of her neck and nuzzled her hair out of my way. I breathed in the smell of her, and we both fell still as I kept my arms wrapped around her.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said.

“Me too,” she whispered, pressing her cheek to mine. “It feels really good. It feels right.”

“Yeah. Definitely. And maybe when Nancy gets this man of hers she keeps talking about, you and I will take the next step and move in together.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

“You don’t think it’s moving too fast?”

She leaned away from me. “Not at all. Do you?”

I shook my head. “Hell no, baby. Hell no.”

EPILOGUE



QUINN

2 Months Later

“I ’m nervous,” I muttered.

Dani, Ryder’s girl, was sitting beside me in her bedroom. I had just finished applying my red lipstick, and she had just finished changing her baby’s diaper. He was a beautiful baby boy named Jason. He had shockingly thick black hair for a six-week-old baby, and his eyes were almost as dark. He was currently being swaddled in a dark blue blanket. Once he was wrapped up like a burrito, Dani scooped him up in her arms and rocked him.

“Trust me, Quinn. You’ve got this. It’s not a big deal at all. It’s just a ritual of sorts.”

“A ritual?” I asked. A big ugly knot formed in my gut.

She nodded and laughed at my pale expression. “Yes. Don’t worry. You don’t have to drink blood from a chalice or anything.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

Dani stared down at the now sleeping baby. His little breaths were the softest coos in my ears. “It’s all right, Quinn. Ryder isn’t as scary as he seems. He’s a big softie on the inside.”

“But this is different. *I’m* different.”

“Yes, you are. And that’s what makes this so exciting. You’re making history tonight.”

I swallowed. “Okay. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Dani called for them to come in.

The door opened a crack, and Rhys flashed me a wide smile. “You ready, Quinn?”

I stood up. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Dani grabbed my hand. “You’ll do great. Trust me. Just keep your chin up, and walk straight through, and it will be over before you know it. We’ll catch up after, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Dani.”

Rhys held out his hand to me, and I took it. Our walk through the Moretti house couldn’t have taken longer than twenty seconds, but it felt like it lasted an eternity. We stopped at the sliding glass doors to the backyard.

Rhys squeezed my hand. “I have to go first, and I’ll meet you at the front. Wait about fifteen seconds, and then you come out, okay?”

I licked my lips and nodded.

He turned me to face him and held my face in his hands. “Quinn, you can handle this in your sleep. I promise you. You locked yourself in a safe, even though tight spaces are your biggest fear. You can walk through a bunch of dudes to get a new jacket.”

“It sounds a lot less frightening when you put it like that,” I said. My voice was thin with anxiety.

He kissed me. “Because it shouldn’t be scary. This is a big deal. But not scary.”

I wrapped my arms around him and hung on tight for a couple of seconds. Then I let him go. My arms fell to my sides, and he put his finger under my chin. “Chin up. It’ll be over before you know it.”

“Okay,” I breathed.

Then he opened the door and vanished on the other side.

I took a deep breath and mentally started counting to fifteen. My palms were sweaty. Really sweaty. My stomach was flipflopping around, and I was glad I hadn't eaten anything all day. If I had, I was sure I'd be bent over a toilet right now, puking my guts out. Thankfully, I'd had the foresight not to put myself through that.

I looked down at myself. I was wearing black jeans and my black combat boots. The toes were looking pretty scuffed. I was going to have to get a new pair one of these days. I also had on a black tee.

Five more seconds to go.

I closed my eyes.

I wanted this. It was all I had ever wanted. And the moment was finally here. I thought of Max. I wondered what he would think of this. Would he be angry? Sad? Disappointed?

Scared?

Maybe he'd be a mix of all those things. I hoped that he'd be a bit proud, too. In the end, this was my decision. Nobody else's. Not Rhys's or my brother's. Mine.

And it felt really fucking good.

I lifted my chin as both Rhys and Dani had told me to do and squared my shoulders. Then I drew open the sliding door and stepped outside into the dark night.

Ryder's backyard was full of men. Lost Breed men. They were standing in two groups. Some to the right and some to the left. They were all facing forward, so they had their backs to me. The yard was illuminated with warm amber light from the bonfire burning at the front of the pack of men.

I put one foot in front of the other and stepped onto the grass. It had rained a lot this spring. The ground was wet. It squished under my feet.

I kept walking to the back of the yard. As I went down the aisle between the Lost Breed men, those on the inside reached out and patted my shoulders. I smiled at them. I didn't know

what else to do. They gave me nods of encouragement. It kept me going.

I spotted Ryder standing in front of the fire. He looked menacing as hell with his bare arms and dark tattoos. I couldn't see his eyes as his face was cast into shadow by the fire burning at his back. He looked like a movie villain, but I knew his heart. I knew he was good. He'd shown me many times over the last couple of months who he was.

All of the Lost Breed had.

They were my home.

I made it to the front. Rhys was there, standing off to the side. He gave me a thumbs-up and winked. He was standing beside Owen, who was with Aiden and Liam. On the opposite side, to my left, was another line of men that I'd been introduced to but didn't know well yet. They were the other members and ran in Ryder's close inner circle. I recognized Derek, whose teeth were bright white amongst his beard as he grinned at me. Beside him was a younger man named Caleb. Rhys had told me all about him being the one who was caught alone in the alley outside Kadia with Isaac Reed and his brother. Then there were the others: Axel, Jax, and Sabian. These men had all become Rhys' family. And soon they would be mine, too.

They all beamed at me as I stepped up and stood in front of Ryder. Silence wrapped itself around me as I waited. The fire crackled and spit sparks into the sky.

Rhys stepped forward when Ryder gestured at him. He had a leather jacket over his arm, and he held it out to Ryder before falling back into place beside Owen. I licked my lips and stood tall as Ryder's eyes slid to me.

"You have something to give to the fire?" he asked.

It was part of the Lost Breed initiation ritual to give something to the fire that represented your old life. It had taken me a long time to find something I thought was fitting. I'd asked Rhys what he gave. I was surprised to learn he'd

burned his old Red Rogue jacket. But it made sense. He'd been starting fresh.

I nodded to Ryder and pulled my old apartment keys out of my back pocket. I knew it was a weird thing to give. And if my old landlords had known I'd kept a copy of their key, they would have been pissed. But it didn't matter. It meant something to me, and Rhys said that was the important thing. The keys symbolized my life in Chicago. My apartment. My home. The place I lived when I fell in love with Rhys. The place I made homecooked meals for my brother and Rhys and sometimes even Owen, Aiden, and Liam on Sundays.

I was going to create new memories here in my new place.

Ryder gestured for me to toss the keys. I did.

Then he unfolded the jacket Rhys had handed him. It was a woman's size. It had been cut and tailored to fit me. The black leather was rich, and the Lost Breed emblem on the back was crisp and fresh. He held it out to me, and I slid my arms through the sleeves.

It fit me perfectly.

Ryder put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face the men who were all watching us. Their eyes caught the amber glow of the fire behind me. Ryder's voice cut through the crackle of flame with power and I almost flinched. "We ride for the lost. The left behind. The abused. The abandoned. The forgotten. We ride for each other."

Then Ryder grabbed my hand and lifted my arm up. All the men burst into cheers and applause. I found myself smiling so hard, my cheeks hurt.

Rhys rushed forward to gather me up in his arms. He spun me in a circle and kissed me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. When he put me down, Ryder prodded him roughly in the shoulder before announcing loud enough for everyone to hear, "Let's drink!"

More cheers and applause ensued.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Rhys asked.

I shook my head and tucked my hair behind my ears. “No, not so bad. Still super nerve wracking, though. Holy shit.”

Rhys threw his head back and laughed. “Don’t be overdramatic.”

“I am not being overdramatic!”

“Children, children,” Owen said as he came up behind us and wrapped an arm over each of our shoulders. “Do the two of you ever just, you know, let things go? It’s a party, after all. No arguing tonight!”

“We weren’t arguing,” we both said in unison.

He looked from me, to Rhys, and then back at me. “You are two of the most stubborn people I’ve ever met. I’m gonna go get a beer. You want one?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Likewise,” Rhys agreed.

Owen stalked off through the crowd, stopping to talk to some of the guys, and I knew it would be a while before we got those beers.

Rhys grabbed the front of my jacket and tugged me close to him. “This jacket looks so fucking hot on you.”

I grinned. “You think so?”

“Hell yeah, I do. And you’re the first woman to ever wear one. It’s an honor.”

“I know,” I said, looking down at my jacket and running my fingers down the leather.

“How do you feel?”

“Invincible,” I said. My tone was light, but I meant it. I really did feel like I could take on the world. Maybe that was because I finally felt like I had a family again—something I’d been yearning for since Max died.

Rhys slid his hand inside my jacket and rested it on my waist. “Max would be proud of you, Quinn. I mean it. He’d be proud, and he’d be happy for you.”

“For *us*,” I whispered, cupping his cheek with one hand.

He kissed my palm.

“Are you happy, Rhys?”

He smiled at me. It was that genuine smile of his—the one that made the corners of his eyes crinkle. The one I loved so much. He nodded. “Hell yeah, I’m happy. I’ve got everything I need right here. In these two hands. And she’s part of my MC now. A guy couldn’t ask for more than that.”

“How about a girl who could ride circles around him?”

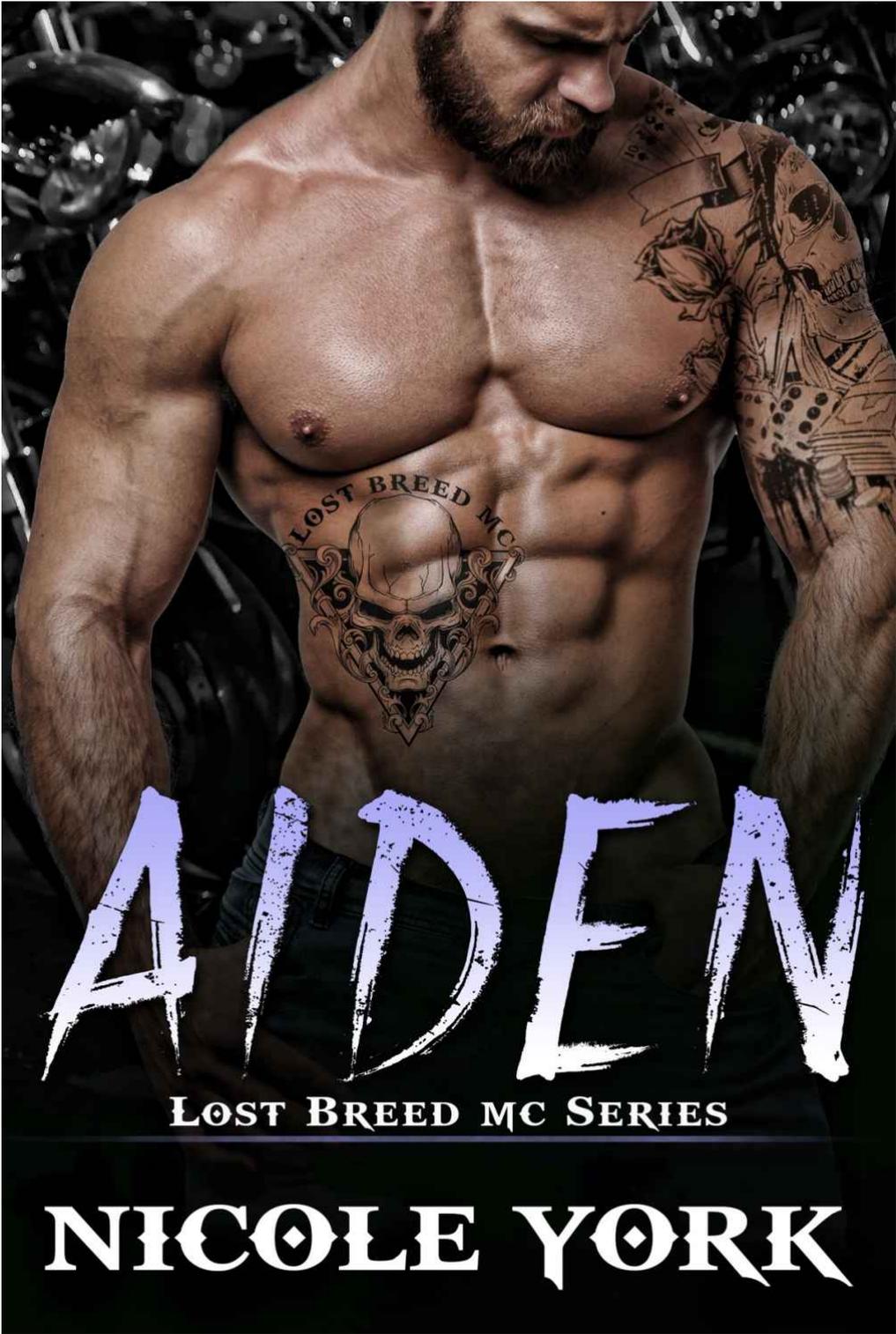
He chuckled. “Don’t push your luck.” He kissed me. It was soft and tender. It was the sort of kiss you wouldn’t expect a man to give you while you were both surrounded by about fifteen or so other men. But he didn’t give a damn. “Are you happy, Quinn?”

He blurred in my vision as tears bloomed in my eyes. I nodded and wiped them away. “Yes, I am.”

Rhys pressed his forehead to mine. “That’s all I care about, baby.”

I sighed. We’d made it. We were here. Home.

And we were together at last.

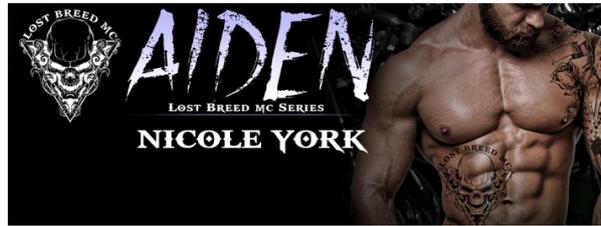


AIDEN

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I've never been that great with women.

Wait. Hold up. That's not necessarily true. I've always been good with them physically. But at a certain point, that's not enough.

And that point is now.

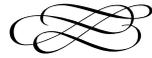
I never thought I would want more, but here I am. Single and living alone, and still missing my dead cousin who, if he were still alive, would give me shit for still being single and living alone.

But when I saw her singing along to a song I didn't know and drumming her fingers on the wheel of her Mercedes, I knew I needed to know more about her. I needed to know her name. How she walked. How her lips looked when she said my name.

I never imagined that one conversation with her would change my entire life. And put me in the crosshairs of a man who has been making her life a living Hell for the last few years.

Unfortunately for him, he doesn't know who the fuck I am and what I'm willing to do for the girl who stole my heart the first second I saw her.

CHAPTER 1



AIDEN

The sun beat down on my shoulders, heating up the leather of my jacket and practically cooking me alive as we sat at a red light in the middle of town in Patchogue. I flexed my fingers on the handle bars, spreading them wide to try to air them out. I should have worn gloves. My grip was sweaty.

The opposite traffic light switched to yellow. I lifted one foot off the pavement, played with the throttle, and sat back a little farther in my seat as the light finally turned red.

I took off over the line and through the intersection before our light went green.

The heat was intolerable.

I needed air blowing into my open jacket and over my face and knuckles before I passed out from heat stroke. When we got to our destination, Mastic Beach, I was going to have to pull over and drink some water. Long rides in the middle of July never went as smoothly as a guy wanted them to.

The engine of my Iron 883 rumbled and then roared as I opened up on the throttle and ate up the pavement. I gently swerved to the right, riding the center line down the middle of the road and threading traffic.

Everyone and their mother honked their horns at me.

My laughter was lost in the sound of my engine as I dove back into the middle of the lane, pulling in front of an old Cadillac with a middle aged female driver who flipped me the bird. She must have thought I wouldn't catch her in my mirrors, but I did, and I was in the mood for some games.

Liam and Owen, two of my buddies, were a few cars back. Neither of them had taken interest in riding down the middle of the road with me, but they were slowly weaving their way around vehicles, showing better road manners than me.

I slowed down to ride right beside the Cadillac's driver's window.

She shot me a dark look, her already pinched features becoming even more squished with anger, and I flipped up the black visor on my helmet to wink at her before I gave the bike all she had, nearly lifting my front tire off the pavement, and peeled away, leaving her horn blaring behind me as I slid around a corner to head out of town and carry on our route to Mastic Beach.

The rest of the ride went smoothly once we were out of the populated areas and out on the back roads where we could push the bikes hard and avoid having to stop for red lights. We hit some four way stops but treated them like suggestions rather than rules, and found ourselves passing the *Welcome to Mastic Beach* sign at around one in the afternoon.

My stomach rumbled.

Within another eight minutes we arrived at our destination—a quaint little pub at the docks. It's very unoriginal name, The Dock Pub, was written in faded blue paint upon a sign made of old two-by-fours mounted above the double saloon-style doors, which swung open and closed behind every patron as they came in and out.

After I pulled into the parking lot, I swung a leg off my bike while pulling off my helmet and setting it on the seat. I stripped out of my jacket, dragged my forearm over the sweat on my brow, and fanned my shirt away from my chest to desperately try to cool off to no avail.

Liam and Owen came rolling in behind me and took up the two spaces on either side of my Iron. They got off their bikes and seemed just as perturbed by the heat as I was.

“Let's get the fuck outta this heat,” Owen grumbled, tucking his helmet under his arm and nodding up at the pub.

Liam seconded Owen's motion with a short nod. "Yeah. It's a fucking desert out here today. Why did we agree to go with you?"

I shrugged and we walked across the lot. "Nobody forced you. I just wanted to get out of the city. And this place has the best draft beer. It's totally worth it."

"I'm not going to feel that way until I get home and take a cold shower," Owen said.

I pushed through the saloon doors and found myself blinking in the dim light as my eyes adjusted. The glare of the sun was still imprinted on the back of my eyelids and the three of us had to make our way carefully to the bar.

We each found a stool and the bartender, Jim Bradley, sauntered over to our end of the bar. Jim had a beer belly half the size of a keg of beer, and jowls to match. His nose was big and red, his cheeks covered in a patchy gray scruff. Despite his appearance, he was a cool guy with a small town attitude and a good business approach to guys like us who weren't always welcomed so warmly in places like this.

Bikers—we got a bad rap a lot of the time.

Jim grinned broadly at us as he threw his bar rag over his shoulder and planted both hands on the bar. "Hello boys. Been a while."

"Jim," Liam said. "You're looking as well fed as ever."

Jim patted his gut. "Sign of a successful business if you ask me."

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"Water for you boys? You're dripping on my floors."

The three of us nodded in unison as Jim got started filling giant glasses of ice water for us. As soon as mine was set in front of me I lifted it to my lips and drank like a man who'd been lost in the wilderness for days.

Jim refilled my glass and then without any of us having to ask brought us three draft beers. We had a tradition and came to this place a handful of times every summer. Usually Rhys

was with us, but now that he and Quinn were officially together he'd pulled away from some of our rides. It made sense. The two of them had been hot and cold for years and now they'd finally thrown caution to the wind and decided to go for it.

I didn't mind that he hadn't tagged along. Honestly, I was growing a little tired of hearing how wonderful Quinn was—not that I didn't agree. There's only so much a guy can take, though. And I wasn't alone with this thought. Liam and Owen felt the same way.

We ordered lunch while we sat at Jim's bar. By the time it arrived I'd polished off my beer and another full glass of water. We dug into our meals—thick, greasy burgers with the works, plus a plate of fries that no man could ever get through but Jim himself. He had earned the hell out of that gut of his.

The pub quieted over the course of the hour and we sat there in the lull between the lunch and dinner rush, catching up with Jim.

“How's the Mrs. doing?” I asked.

Jim had been married for three decades. He and his wife moved to Mastic Beach after eloping to escape their rigid overbearing families and never looked back. They built this business together and made a life for themselves in the quiet beach town. “She's good, thanks for asking. Retired from teaching in May and spent the summer out in the garden pruning her flowers and planting vegetables. She's happy.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said.

“And the grandkids?” Liam asked.

“Starting kindergarten in September.”

Liam whistled. “Time flies, hey?”

Jim nodded. “You can say that again. But those little hellions keep me young. Be right back, boys. I have to do some payroll work. My staff is giving me dirty looks.”

Jim shuffled off into the back and the three of us continued picking at our plates.

My body temperature had finally dropped to a more normal range and I no longer felt like I would throw up or pass out. The water had probably helped with that. The others seemed relaxed and comfortable too, and the sweat stains on our shirts were slowly drying.

Owen, who was sitting between Liam and I, crossed his arms and rested his elbows on the bar. “I stopped by and saw Ryder the other day.”

“How are they?” Liam asked. “How’s Dani? And the baby?”

Owen shrugged, “Good I think.”

“You think?” Liam said, cocking his head to the side.

“I didn’t really ask. Dani wasn’t there and neither was the kid. They were out visiting her Aunt or some shit. I don’t know. I was there to see Ryder anyway. You’re the only one of the three of us who likes kids, Liam.”

Liam looked at me. “Is that true?”

I delayed my answer to the question by taking a sip of water. “It’s not that I don’t like them. I just, I don’t know, can’t see myself ever wanting any of my own. They make me nervous. So fucking small and fragile. Like flower petals.”

Liam scoffed. “Who are you? Hemingway?”

Owen snorted into his glass of water.

I ignored them both.

Liam changed the subject. “Are you still covering shifts at Axel’s shop, Aiden?”

With a nod I said, “Yeah. Not many days. Once or twice a week. It’s a good place to be. The extra cash is nice.”

“I don’t know why you’d want to be in that guy’s shop,” Owen said.

“He’s cool when you get to know him,” I said.

Owen shook his head. “He’s too standoffish. Any time I’ve ever tried to talk to him he blows me off and switches gears to

talk to someone else. And he's not subtle about it."

"Maybe he just doesn't like you," Liam said simply.

"What's not to like?"

"Should we make a list on a napkin?" I asked.

Owen scowled.

I chuckled and carried on. "Quick tempered. Moody. Ugly. Needy. Whiny. Impatient—"

"Don't forget bad rider," Liam interrupted.

"Yeah, can't forget that," I mused.

Owen looked back and forth between us with a scowl. "Fuck you guys."

"See?" I said, chuckling as I fished my wallet out of my pocket to pay our bill. "Moody."

Owen kept his mouth shut after that, brooding in silence as I paid the tab and we said goodbye to Jim. He waved us off and told us to come back before the summer ended. We assured him we would—but on a cooler day. This heat was too much to bear.

We left the pub shortly after three. Owen grumbled about it being even hotter out than it had been when we arrived, and Liam reminded him about how whiny he was being. This led to a shoving match in the parking lot while I put my helmet on and got back on my bike.

"See you clowns back in the city," I said. Then I tore out of the lot, letting my back tire slide across the cracked pavement as I swung out onto the road.

I had no intention of letting them keep up this time.

CHAPTER 2



CHERYL

I ran the tip of my finger along the inside of the page, following it all the way down the length of the recipe to the part where I had to add the last bits of spice to the simmering sauce on my stove.

“Basil, salt, and cayenne pepper,” I muttered, tapping the page before straightening up to face the daunting sight of all my new cupboards.

Trying to cook in a brand new house with a kitchen three times bigger than what you were used to was no easy feat. I couldn’t remember for the life of me where I’d put the spices.

They might even still be in a box somewhere stacked up in the dining room.

I sighed and began walking the whole kitchen, opening cupboards as I went and peering into their pristine white depths in search of my spice rack. With everything going on with the move, I couldn’t even remember if I’d unpacked my spice rack or not.

I found it in the most obvious place—the corner cupboard with the rotating wheel inside. Upon it sat the three pieces of my stackable spice rack. I spun them around, pulled out the ones I needed, and added them to the sauce. As soon as I lifted the lid off the pot the kitchen was flooded with the smell of the rich tomato sauce.

Vince loved spaghetti.

Today was his first full day at his new company since moving from Georgia to New York City. He’d been so stressed

this morning and confessed about his anxiety while I straightened his tie. I promised him that he was going to kill it today, and when he came home I would have dinner on the table.

Then he left with a kiss and I waved from the front door as he pulled out of the driveway in his new Range Rover.

My life had changed a lot over the last couple of years.

Vince and I started dating in my last year of college. He was in finance and business, and I was taking a little of everything trying to find my path: sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even poetry just for kicks. I'd enjoyed most of my classes, save for that one semester I made the terrible decision to take algebra, but none of them called out to me as my destiny, so I was still lost.

But Vince solved all of that for me.

He wanted a girl to come home to, and when I first looked into those deep brown eyes of his, I knew I would do whatever he wanted to make him happy. We'd been together since meeting at a dorm party and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Vince was by my side when I lost both my parents over the course of a year and a half. My father passed away first of a sudden heart attack that nobody expected, and my mother, bless her soul, followed him in death within eighteen months. People thought I was crazy, or simply reaching for an answer where there wasn't one, but I swear she couldn't continue living without him. He was her everything, literally. They'd been together since they were fourteen and he passed at seventy-two. How could someone carry on after that?

I didn't blame her for wanting to go with him, but holy hell I missed them. My life was hollow for a long time, and it was Vince that took care of me. He made sure I ate—though I ate a bit too much out of sheer misery and grief, and had packed on a good twenty-five or thirty extra pounds that I still hadn't managed to drop. He also saw that I showered and went out at least once every few days, even if it was just to the grocery store.

I wouldn't say I was healed yet, but I was on my way, and I owed it all to him.

That didn't mean our relationship had been perfect. We'd had our struggles. There were things and people we'd left behind in Georgia that I had decided to do my best to forget. If our relationship stood a chance out here in this new home and new city, I simply had to let go. Carrying around the bitterness and the resentment of what had happened over the last few months back home would not serve either of us. We had agreed to give this thing one more shot, and so far everything was going great.

I loved my new home, an elegant two story colonial with black shutters, white siding, and a long driveway down the middle of a very green lawn. There was even a pool in the backyard, something I had only dreamed of having. We each had our own sinks in the bathroom, a walk-in closet, and a rain shower.

We had two new cars, Vince's Range Rover and my Mercedes, a pearl white convertible. So long as things went well with his new job, our income was only going to grow, and Vince, true to his word, would continue to spoil me.

I loved this lavish lifestyle. With everything I could ever need and more, plus living in New York City to top it all off—what girl didn't dream of this life?

Of course, there were still some things I needed to fix. At the top of the list? Lose the weight I'd put on after losing my mom and dad. I knew this wasn't the body Vince desired, and it wasn't the one that made me smile in the morning when I saw it in all its glory before getting in the shower. I still had a line up the middle of my stomach, but it didn't go all the way down to my navel like it used to. Excess fatty tissue adorned my hips and thighs, and things jiggled now that never used to. My face was rounder and my arms thicker and—

Shaking my head, I put the lid back on the pasta sauce.

I was taking steps to get leaner. I'd only eat half a serving of spaghetti tonight. And tomorrow would be a carb free day. That's what it was all about—small and manageable steps to

get to where I wanted to be, and where Vince would desire me like he used to. With everything he'd done for me, I owed him this.

The diamond bracelet on my left wrist caught the light above the stove as I stirred the pasta sauce one last time before filling a pot with water to cook the noodles. Vince would be home within the next fifteen minutes or so and he was sure to be hungry.

Pulling the salad out of the fridge that I'd already chopped, I set it on the island in the kitchen. The water started to boil within minutes and I tossed the noodles in, gave them a quick stir, and opened a bottle of red wine. I set it back against the shimmering white tile backsplash to breathe alongside two crystal wine glasses.

I heard the front door open and the sound as Vince dropped his keys in the bowl by the door. He took his shoes off. Hung his jacket in the entranceway closet. Started walking down the hall to the back of the house where all the living space was.

"Hi baby," I called, as I poured the noodles and boiling water into my strainer. Steam rose into the air and I waved it away from my face, not wanting it to mess up my makeup. I'd taken my time on my face this morning. My contouring was just right, showing off the angles I wished my face still had.

Vince came into the kitchen and breathed in. "Hey. Smells good in here, Cher."

"We're having your favorite," I smiled.

He came over to where I stood over the sink, put his hands on my hips, and kept them there as I shuffled down the counter back to the stove, giggling when he pressed his lips to the side of my neck. "I'm starving."

"I knew you would be. It's just how you like it. Not too spicy. Plenty of Italian seasoning. No onions."

"You're the best, babe," he said, giving my cheek a quick peck before reaching for the open bottle of wine and pouring us each a glass.

“How was your day?” I asked, as I spooned noodles onto our crystal plates. I paused, studying the amount I put on my plate—half the amount I’d given Vince. Then I took about a quarter of it away and put it back in the pot with the other noodles. “I was thinking about you all day. It took everything I had not to call you at lunch and check in, but I knew you wouldn’t want to be the new guy with the wife who called to check up on him.”

Vince chuckled and watched as I scooped sauce over the pasta. I put a small amount on mine. There was a lot of sugar and salt in that sauce. Then he patted my ass. “I’m proud of you, babe. You’re really committed to this thing.”

I pursed my lips together in a sweet smile. “I know I’m not at my best and I want to be, for you.”

Vince picked up our plates and carried them over to the counter where the salad was. I served that as well and we sat down to enjoy our meals and wine. Vince told me all about his day and his new colleagues. Everything sounded very positive. He got along well with his new boss and was invited out for drinks in the late afternoon with a few of the guys—the ‘in’ crowd as he called them. The top dogs. The guys everyone wanted to be friends with and the kind of men who were good to have in your pocket if you needed a favor.

“It sounds like it couldn’t have gone any better,” I said, hope spreading through my chest. Everything was falling into place for us. “It feels so good here, Vinny. I’m happy.”

“Sounds like a toast to me,” he said, lifting his glass of wine.

We tapped our glasses together and drank.

Vince cleared his plate and I left a few bites of salad and pasta on mine, despite wanting to devour it all more than anything. I told myself I wasn’t hungry, but just impulsive, and pushed the rest of the food into the compost before cleaning up the dishes and packing the leftovers up to tuck in the freezer.

Vince topped up our wine glasses and waited for me in the living room where he put a football game on.

I padded past him after loading and starting the dishwasher. “I’m just going to get changed. I’ll be right out.”

“Alright,” he said, his gaze fixed on the TV.

I went upstairs into our bedroom. The soothing powder blue walls, plush white carpets, and pristine sheets made me feel like I was walking into a spa. It also smelled like eucalyptus and cucumber in here—I’d purchased a room spray to really make this space feel like a sanctuary.

I went into the walk in closet and opened my loungewear drawer. I pulled out my silk set; a pair of shimmery pale pink shorts and a lace trimmed matching tank. It was perfect for the summer and it made me feel cute when I wore it in spite of the extra weight.

Once I had it on I checked my reflection. Thick but still cute. At least, that’s the thought I carried with me when I went back downstairs and joined Vince on the sofa. I got comfy in my corner and lifted my legs up to drape them over his thighs.

He put his hands on my ankles.

I’d shaved this afternoon. I wanted him to run his hand up my shin, over my knee, and up my thigh—and then maybe a little higher. We’d only had sex twice since moving here three weeks ago. I wanted him to want me again.

I’d only been sitting beside him for about fifteen minutes when the game ended. He patted my ankle with one hand and then lifted my legs off his. “I have to run out, babe.”

I glanced at the clock on one of the bookshelves flanking the fireplace. “It’s nine-thirty.”

“I know what time it is.”

I licked my lips. Should I ask him where he was going? Would he be upset? Was I being paranoid?

I found my voice when he was halfway down the hall to the front door. “Where are you going?”

Vince turned as I stood up from the sofa and followed him. He opened the hallway closet and grabbed his jacket. He still

had his suit on from work. “We said we were going to give this another shot, Cher.”

“I know. And we are.”

“Then you have to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

He frowned and gave me an ‘are you sure’ sort of look. “You don’t have to worry, babe. I won’t be gone long. Take a bath and pamper yourself or something.” He leaned in, put a hand on my hip, and gave me a kiss that wasn’t nearly as long as I wanted. “Dinner was delicious.”

CHAPTER 3



AIDEN

The weather on Tuesday was still hot, but not nearly as muggy as the weekend had been. So when I discovered that I didn't have enough coffee to brew a cup, I hopped on my bike and struck out for a nearby coffee shop to satisfy my coffee craving.

I was a useless human being without my caffeine fix.

The closest coffee shop was a hole in the wall place with no legible sign anywhere in sight, and I only learned it was called 'Groundz' because it said so on their paper cups. They sold a mean cup of dark, strong, piping hot coffee, and in all the times I'd been there, I'd yet to be disappointed.

There also happened to be some pretty cute baristas on the other side of the counter.

That Tuesday morning I parked my bike on the curb on the opposite side of the street from Groundz. The line was out the door, which made sense for a morning in the middle of summer, and people were hurrying across the crosswalk at the corner and making their way to the back of the ever growing line.

I groaned inwardly as I hung my helmet on my handlebars. With the Lost Breed crest stamped on the gas tank of my bike, no fool would have the nerve to swipe it while I was gone. I kept my leather jacket on in spite of the heat and glanced down the road, still on my bike.

Then I saw her.

She was driving a brand new pearl white Mercedes. The rims were spectacularly clean, the top was down, and her music was blaring as she came to a stop at the red light while the pedestrians crossed the crosswalk. I didn't recognize the song blaring from the speakers, but it was loud and wild, most definitely rock. She drummed her fingers to the beat on the steering wheel, and her lips—full and glorious—moved as she sang.

I wished I could hear her over the crash of the drums and the strum of the guitar as I folded my arms over my chest and leaned back to watch. I chuckled as she really got into the music, swaying her head like she was at a concert and three beers into the evening.

The girl was young. Probably a few years younger than my thirty years. Her hair was so blonde it almost seemed white in the sun. Her sunglasses were huge, covering most of her face, but those lips of hers were enough to capture my attention.

She had incredible tits, too.

Her top, a loose white button up, was undone at the top due to said tits being too big.

I pushed myself off my bike and was about to jog across the street to ask what her name was and lay some charm on her when the squeal of tires on asphalt split the air.

A big navy blue F150 came sliding down the road, having braked too late, and rear ended the white Mercedes.

The girl let out a surprised yelp as she was pushed forward two feet. She hammered on her brakes right away and narrowly missed bumping the SUV in front of her. Even from where I stood across the road I could see how hard she gripped the steering wheel.

The truck backed up, pulled out into the oncoming lane of traffic, and sped around her to blow through the red light.

“What the fuck!” The blonde cried out, slamming her hand on the middle of the steering wheel. Her horn let out a sharp honk.

I jogged across the road and came up to her driver's side door. "Hey, are you okay?"

She looked up at me. Lord, she was stunning. Up close like this I could see the freckles across her nose and on her chest. She kept her sunglasses on as she stared up at me.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I-I don't think so."

I pointed to an open spot a few car lengths up the road. "When the light goes green why don't you pull over right there? I got the guys plate number and can give you my information if you need a witness."

"Seriously?" She asked, sounding a little breathless.

Fuck, she was sexy. Sexy in the kind of way that made a man clench his teeth. Her voice was sweeter than honey, and unless I was mistaken, I detected a southern accent on her tongue.

I nodded. "Yeah. Seriously. I'll meet you up there and we'll take a look at the damage."

"Okay. Thank you."

I patted the window frame and walked behind the Mercedes before she pulled away to follow traffic. I took a quick glance down at her bumper as she pulled into the open spot at the curb. It didn't look too bad.

I hopped up onto the sidewalk and met her at her car as she got out and slammed her door closed. "I can't believe my stupid luck," she muttered. This part of the street was covered in shade as the sun was hidden behind the building the coffee shop was in. So she pushed her sunglasses up on her head before coming to the back of the car to join me in looking at the damage.

Her eyes were like those of a cat—almond shaped and startlingly bright. They were a dazzling blue and enough to make me feel a little flustered. And I didn't fluster easy.

She crouched down in front of the bumper and ran her fingers over the damage. That's when I noticed her hands were

shaking. “Asshole. I can’t believe he just drove off!”

“Welcome to the big city,” I said.

She looked up at me. “You said you got his plate?”

I nodded. “Do you have an app for notes in your phone? I can put it in for you.”

“Um. Yes. I think so. Hang on, it’s in the car.”

I tried to be a gentleman but it was impossible to look anywhere but at her ass as she walked away, opened her car door, and leaned across the front seat to grab her phone from the console. The jeans she had on hugged her curves, showing off her delicious shape. She was thick, with actual hips and thighs, and an ass you could hold on to.

Just my type.

She came back and handed me her phone with the note app open. I punched in the truck’s license, make, model, and color, just in case she forgot. I could tell she was still rattled as she ran her hands down her thighs.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I’ve never been in an accident before. It just scared me, is all. I’m not hurt.”

“I’m glad. It would be a shame to damage a body like that.”

She blinked at me. “Excuse me?”

I handed her phone back to her. “I put everything in there for you. Including my buddy’s number. He has an auto body shop not far from here and he can buff this damage out for you real quick. Cheap too.”

She let me get away with the comment about her body and slid her phone into the back pocket of her jeans. Oh how I wished I could put my hand into one of those pockets. “Thank you for your help.”

“Not a problem. Somebody has to help out the fresh blood, right?”

“How can you tell I’m new to New York City?”

I shrugged. “There are a couple of giveaways.”

She narrowed her blue eyes at me and pursed her lips. “Like what?”

I chuckled and scratched the back of my neck. “Well, the music for one. Those shoes. The sunglasses. Big hair. The accent.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts. Either she didn’t know how sexy that was, or she didn’t care. “I beg your pardon, but what is it about my shoes that makes you think I’m not from around here?” She pointed down at her strappy pink heels.

I laughed and held up my hands innocently. “I’m just messing with you.” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder. “I saw ‘State of Georgia’ on your license plate.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh. I’m sorry. How humiliating.” She covered her face with both hands. I took note of the very real diamond bracelet on her left wrist and the ring on the middle finger of her right hand—just a band of diamonds. Interesting. No girl bought that sort of jewelry for herself. There were also diamonds winking in her earlobes.

“Don’t be embarrassed. I was the one being an ass.”

She let out a nervous little laugh and uncrossed her arms. “Right. Well. Thanks again. I’d better get going. My boyfriend is going to be pissed when he finds out I damaged the brand new car.”

Boyfriend. Fuck.

She removed her sunglasses from her head and put them back on. Then she raked the fingers of both hands through her thick blonde hair. I liked the way it cascaded down her back like a silky curtain.

She let out a defeated sigh before walking back to her door. She slid into the car and I walked up the sidewalk to stand on the passenger side. I leaned over and rested my forearms on the frame. “What’s your name?”

She gave me a sweet smile. “Cheryl.”

“Cheryl. It was a pleasure meeting you. Well, a pleasure for me. Maybe not for you given the circumstances.”

She let out another little laugh that tickled my insides. Then she pushed her sunglasses back up on her head to look me in the eye. “I’d say it was a pleasure meeting you too, but, if I’m being perfectly honest, I’m not sure it was.”

I laughed.

Her smile turned into something cheeky and secretive as she put the sunglasses on one more time, checked her mirrors, and pulled out onto the road without looking back.

I watched her drive off wishing I’d had just a few more minutes with her. That’s all I would have needed. I should have asked her to come inside and get a coffee with me. I could have suggested it was a bad idea to drive right away since she seemed shaken.

It would have been worth a try to get some time alone with a girl like that.

CHAPTER 4



CHERYL

I'd had the day from Hell, and it all started last night, when I fell asleep in bed alone.

Vince had been there when I woke up in the morning. He was sitting up in bed on his phone. As soon as I rolled over and muttered 'Good morning,' he'd locked the phone, put it aside, and lay back down beside me to give me some morning kisses.

Then he got up and showered and told me he was grabbing coffee with some of his coworkers before work.

Since moving into the new house I'd spent the majority of my days at home getting everything in order. There were still things to unpack like the guest room, dining room, and home office, but I would get to it in due time.

After a light breakfast and a half hour cardio session in our in home gym I showered, got dressed, did my makeup, and headed out for a drive in the Mercedes to enjoy the sunshine and get a feel for what was nearby.

And then, naturally, some asshole rear ended me and drove off like a coward, leaving me to be only sort of rescued by a tall, buzzed headed, dangerously cute biker with no manners, who, like any well to do biker with no manners, left his damn phone number in my note application on my phone along with the number of the auto body shop and the information on the navy blue truck.

Assholes. Both of them. The biker and the driver.

And my day was only bound to get worse. Vince would be home any minute and I was going to have to figure out a way to tell him about the damage on our two week old brand spanking new hundred and thirty thousand dollar car.

All I wanted to do was stress eat the leftover spaghetti but I knew I'd only hate myself afterward.

So I busied myself with making dinner. I took my time, put on some chill music, and poured a glass of wine. It was a before dinner glass of wine evening for sure.

Once the chicken and vegetable casserole was in the oven I did a quick clean of the kitchen and living room, and then started going through the boxes in the dining room. We had a dinner party coming up this weekend to mingle with all of Vince's new colleagues and we would need every inch of space we had. These boxes would have to be unpacked by then.

Most of them were filled with plates and other dishes I'd inherited from my mom and dad and couldn't bring myself to part with. The plates we ate Christmas and Thanksgiving dinner on every year, the cups I used when I brought a glass of water to bed every night when I was a young girl, the salt and pepper shakers that always sat in the middle of the kitchen table in our old country home. They were nothing more than boxes of memories.

Vince got home just after six. He called a cheery hello down the hall and I hurried out of the dining room and into the kitchen, where I pulled the casserole out of the oven and set it on the island on a cooling rack.

Vince came around the corner as I tucked the oven mitts back in the drawer. He leaned over the casserole and nodded. "Looks good, babe. Smells good too. New recipe?"

I nodded. "I found it online and thought we could give it a try. If you don't like it we'll scratch it from the record."

"Alright," he nodded. "If you get our plates ready I'll meet you back down here. I want to get out of this suit and get comfortable."

“But I like the suit,” I winked.

He didn’t laugh, but he gave me a small smile that revealed his dimples. “Did you want to change too, babe? That shirt—I don’t know if it’s doing you any favors.”

I looked down at the sheer white button up I had on over a white tank. “Oh.”

“I mean, its fine, I guess. Maybe it’s just me. Forget I said anything.”

“I’ll change after.”

Vince nodded and left to go upstairs and change. “Alright. Can’t wait to dig in!”

I stood in front of the kitchen island and stared down at my white button up shirt. For some reason all I could think about was the biker from that afternoon and what he’d said. What had his words been again?

‘It would be a shame to damage a body like that.’

What had he even meant? At the time I’d thought it was a sexual comment. But that had been foolish thinking on my part. There was too much squish—too much flesh in general—for a man like him to look at me and feel anything even remotely close to desire.

Vince struggled with it all the time, so I would know. And I knew how I felt about my own reflection.

I must have misunderstood the bad boy biker in all his leather and buckles and riding boots and—

I shook my head. *Stop thinking about him, Cheryl. He was an ass. And he didn’t think you were cute. You just wish he did.*

I ran my fingers through my hair and did what was expected of me. I prepared our plates, making sure mine had half the amount of food on it, and set them on the kitchen island in front of our stools along with a glass of wine for him and water for me. I’d had my wine before dinner and two glasses was far too many calories. I had to maintain control over my intake if I wanted to see any progress, and this new

life in New York City was the best chance I was going to get for a new start and fresh habits.

I sat down and waited for Vince. He took his time and the casserole dish sat there, begging me to grab my fork and steal a couple extra bites from the pan.

I ran my hands down my thighs and strained my ears to listen for Vince coming down the stairs.

I heard nothing, so I plucked my fork from where it rested beside my half full plate and skewered a couple pieces of chicken and potato and broccoli from the pan before popping it in my mouth and hurrying to chew like a six year old girl stealing cookies from the jar.

I swallowed, made sure my fork was inconspicuously licked clean, and set it back down beside my plate just before Vince's footsteps came down the stairs.

He returned in a pair of jeans and a black T shirt. He'd run his hands through his thick auburn hair, making it look a little tousled. He looked handsome in a suit, but I liked him best like this, a little undone and disheveled after a hard work day.

He slid onto the stool beside me, picked up his wine, and took a long sip. Then he smacked his lips and set it down before inspecting his plate. "Looks good, babe."

We dug in. He nodded in appreciation or pleasure, I couldn't tell, and I ignored the way his utensils scraped on the dishes—something he did every meal despite how it made my teeth itch.

I finished first and drank my water while he cleaned his plate. I had to tell him about the car, and there was no good way for me to bring it up. I'd spent the better half of the afternoon playing the conversation over in my head, trying to figure out the best approach, and came up empty. I was just going to have to put it out there and hope for the best.

I started slow.

"How was your day, baby?"

Vince nodded as he chewed and swallowed his last bite of casserole. After washing it down with a sip of wine he said, “Good. Went for drinks with the guys again. They’re all coming for dinner this Saturday. That’s another six or so people.”

I bit my bottom lip. “No problem. I’ll make it work. We want to make a good impression with our home.”

He smiled. “I love that I don’t have to tell you these things. You just know.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I said, leaning in and taking his empty plate away and walking our dishes over to the sink. I rinsed them off before loading them in the dishwasher, and after closing the door put my back to the counter and leaned against it. “But there is something that happened today I have to tell you about. First of all, I’m fine, and it wasn’t a big deal, it just scared me a bit.”

Vince put his wine down before taking his last sip. “What happened?”

He hated when I chewed the inside of my cheek when I was nervous, so I deliberately forced myself not to. I played with a loose thread on the back pocket of my jeans instead. “I took the Mercedes out to sort of get the lay of the land in the neighborhood and some guy in a truck rear ended me.”

Vince stood up. “What the fuck, Cheryl? Why didn’t you tell me right when I got home?”

“I didn’t see what difference it would make and I wanted you to have a chance to relax after work-”

“Jesus Christ. Do you know how much that car fucking cost?”

“Yes. I was there when you bought it.”

“Are you getting smart with me?”

I pursed my lips and shook my head.

Vince let out a frustrated sigh, turned around, and marched out of the kitchen and down the hall to the entranceway. I heard him open and promptly slam the garage door.

I followed.

When I stepped into the garage he was bent over running his hand along the bumper of my car. His face was pinched in a scowl and he was shaking his head while muttering, “This is just my fucking luck. Brand new fucking car and she goes and gets it banged up. Should have bought a used Civic or some shit.”

I stayed up near the front of the car. “I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

He looked up at me. “Do you not look in your rear view when you’re driving?”

“Of course I do. But I was stopped at a light and—”

“And let me guess. You had your music blaring?”

“No,” I snapped, a little too quickly.

He arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

I resumed playing with the loose thread on my pocket. “Okay. Fine. I had my music on. But I was in the middle lane. Even if I saw him coming there was nowhere I could go. I would have had to let him hit me. And it wasn’t a hard hit. It was more of a love tap.” There were other words running through my mind, but I didn’t dare say them. *Shouldn’t your first thought have been to ask if I was hurt? That’s what the sexy biker wanted to know first. And he’s a schmuck.* But those words remained sealed in the back of my throat.

Vince straightened up and scratched his jaw. “Well. It’s done now. I’ll call around tomorrow and find a shop to fix this. Do you have the driver’s insurance information?”

I shook my head, and before Vince could raise his voice to me, which was seconds from happening, I blurted out, “I had a witness who knows an auto body guy. He gave me a reference and said they would give us a discount and he would fill out an accident report if need be.”

Vince nodded. “Alright. Well at least someone was paying attention.”

Yeah. Thank God for the hot biker, I thought sourly.

Vince didn't look at me as he walked back to the garage door. "Leave me a note on the kitchen counter in the morning with the guy's information and the number for the auto shop. I'll call and book an appointment to take this in."

"Okay."

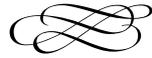
"I'm going out. Don't wait up."

Vince opened the garage door and let it close behind him. I heard him leave through the front door seconds later and stood there, wishing that jerk had never hit me, wishing I never had to have this talk with Vince, and wishing he wasn't going to go blow off steam in a pub or strip club or someone else's pussy.

It was a vulgar thought, but it was a thought nonetheless.

I unbuttoned my white shirt and threw it in the garbage beside the garage door on my way out.

CHAPTER 5



AIDEN

I popped by Axel's body shop on Wednesday and was surprised to find him running a waxing cloth over the back end of the pearl white Mercedes owned by none other than the very sexy Cheryl from yesterday morning.

He looked up when I ducked under the open bay door and plunged into the shade and cool air in the shop. Fans were blowing outward to keep the hot air out and the AC unit was running.

"Why don't you just close the doors?" I asked, nodding up at the open bays.

Axel inspected his shine job on the rear end of the Mercedes. Satisfied with the immaculate level of shine, he tucked the rag in the back pocket of his coveralls and folded his arms over his chest. "The customer is coming by and I'm going to pull this baby out into the sun. He's a real piece of work, this guy, and I want this thing out of my shop. Thanks for the referral, you dick."

"How was I supposed to know the guy would be a jerk?"

Axel smirked. "Mercedes. Hot wife. Do the math, Aiden."

"Girlfriend," I corrected.

Axel rolled his eyes. "Right. Girlfriend."

"When is he coming to pick it up?"

"Should be here within the next fifteen or so. Want to stick around and get a preview for yourself?"

“Naturally,” I mused.

I couldn't deny that I was curious. Cheryl had captured my interest right away and I wanted to meet the man she went home to every day. Or who came home to her.

Axel and I moved to the back of the shop where the air was the coolest and leaned up against the workbenches. To our right was the office door, behind which I could hear Ellie, Axel's woman, and Jamie the receptionist, giggling away. I nodded at the door. “Sounds like they're having a good time.”

“Planning a beach day, I believe,” Axel said.

“How are the kids?”

Axel's smile broadened. “Good. Things are a bit chaotic with the renovations at the house, but we're making it work. Every night is like a sleepover because they have to sleep on the sofa in the living room while the extension is being added. Their bedrooms are all torn apart.”

What cruel punishment. A slumber party in your living room every night. “Sounds fun.”

“It was for the first week. But now? I'm over it.”

I chuckled. The truth always came out where Axel was concerned. He pushed himself off the workbench and took his coveralls off to get in the Mercedes and pull it out into the sunshine in the parking lot. It lit up brilliantly as the sun caught the gold and blue flakes of the pearlescent paint. He stepped out, closed the door, and joined me in the shop.

I was about to wander into the office to say hello to Jamie and Ellie when a black Range Rover pulled into the parking lot and came to a short stop beside the Mercedes.

Axel caught my eye. “Here we go.”

“Be nice,” I said as I hung back by the workbench, still leaned up against it. I watched from the shade as a tall, broad shouldered man with auburn hair stepped out of the SUV. He had on a pair of gold aviators, a gray fitted suit, and brown dress shoes that made his feet look a little too large for his body.

The man adjusted his suit jacket as he walked around the Mercedes and came to a stop at the back bumper. He nodded, crouched down, and ran his hand over Axel's wax job.

"Looks good to me," he said in a clipped, deep voice.

Axel stood beside him and nodded as he slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Good. It was shallow damage. The truck didn't hit her that hard."

My eye was drawn from them to the passenger door of the Range Rover as Cheryl stepped out in all her glory.

I wasn't sure how it was possible, but somehow she looked even better today than she had yesterday. Her blonde hair was drawn up in a messy bun. Loose slightly curly strands hung around her face and I watched in fascination as she pulled a piece free from where it had stuck to her pink lip gloss.

The summer dress she had on was pastel yellow, showing off her tan and her legs and her pink painted toes. Gold sandals caught the sun with every step she took as she walked over to Axel and her boyfriend.

I lacked the will to hang back now that she was on the scene.

Pushing off the workbench, I went and joined them at the back of the Mercedes.

Even though Cheryl had on a pair of black sunglasses and I couldn't see her eyes, I knew she was glaring at me—and it titillated me.

The boyfriend rocked back on his heels. "So you couldn't have detailed the interior while you were at it, huh?"

Axel flashed him his standard 'I work in customer service and hate pricks like you' smile. "If you threw in another hundred bucks I'd be happy to get one of my boys to give her a once over for you, Mr. Price."

Mr. Price. The name suited him. I was sure Cheryl paid a high price spending every day with him.

Mr. Price's smile was smug as he glanced at Cheryl. "Nah. It's all good. Right babe?"

Cheryl gave a weak nod and avoided making eye contact with both me and Axel. “Right. Thank you for the work you did. It looks brand new.”

“Not a problem, miss. That’s what we do here,” Axel said.

Mr. Price put an arm around Cheryl’s waist. “Why don’t you head home, babe?”

“I thought we were going to stop and grab a coffee or something. I can wait—”

“No. Go home. I’m going to talk shop with these boys for a bit.”

I didn’t like how he referred to us as boys, and I *really* didn’t like the tone he used when he spoke to Cheryl. She looked at her feet, nodded, and walked around the front end of her car. Axel handed her the keys and she thanked him meekly.

Then she got in the car, started it up, and backed into the parking lot before turning out onto the road. Part of me hoped she’d give me one last look before she pulled away. But a girl like her didn’t have eyes for a guy like me. Not in this reality anyway. She had eyes for assholes like Mr. Price who dazzled her with fancy cars, bracelets and shoes—all for show, and to make up for his shitty behavior.

After she was gone Mr. Price pulled his wallet out of his pocket and pulled out three hundred in cash. He slapped it into Axel’s hand. “Here you are, boys. Three hundred bucks. Gotta say, I’m glad I was referred to you. This would have cost a lot more if I’d gone somewhere else.”

“You’re correct,” Axel said.

“I just have to take it out of Cheryl’s allowance,” Mr. Price chuckled.

I avoided looking at Axel for fear of our expressions giving our thoughts away. He was a paying customer after all, and it wasn’t my place to go making enemies with him. I wasn’t going to be the guy who created trouble and damaged Axel’s business.

Mr. Price shrugged and pulled another fifty bucks out of his wallet. “For your troubles. I’ll let people know about you, man. You have a good business here and I know people in high places who could really line your pockets.”

“I’ve got plenty of clients,” Axel said.

“I’m sure you do. But who doesn’t want more?”

Axel kept his mouth shut.

Mr. Price, however, just kept talking. “You know, they shouldn’t let women behind the wheel. You give ‘em an inch and they take a damn mile. I get Cheryl her dream car and she fucks it up within a week. Unbelievable.”

I cleared my throat. “It wasn’t her fault.”

Mr. Price turned his brown eyes to me. “And who are you?”

“I’m the guy who saw the accident and referred you to this shop. I’m Cheryl’s witness.”

“Of course you are,” Mr. Price said under his breath. He shook his head. “Look man, I appreciate you stepping up. We would have been fucked without you. I don’t know what she was thinking not getting the guy’s information. She wouldn’t have even got his plate number if you weren’t looking out.”

“She was rattled,” I said.

“He didn’t hit her very hard.”

“It still shook her up,” I said.

Axel nudged me in the ribs to shut me up.

My tone and obvious displeasure with the words he was saying went right over Mr. Price’s head and he chuckled. “Can I confess something to you boys? I almost wish the bastard had hit her a bit harder. Whiplash can be a pretty big payday.”

Mr. Price was the only one laughing. His lack of self-awareness would have been amusing if he hadn’t just joked about wishing his girl had been hurt so he could line his already very deep pockets with more cash.

“Thanks for your service, Axel. Hopefully Cheryl doesn’t crash again and I don’t need to come back here any time soon.”

He walked back to his Range Rover, got in, and drove off—in the opposite direction Cheryl had gone.

Axel looked over at me. “Thoughts?”

“What a fucking dick.”

Axel threw his head back and laughed. “Yeah. I knew you’d think so. I won’t be accepting his business again I can tell you that.”

“What about all his rich friends? Don’t you want more pompous misogynistic ass hats like that coming around your place hitting on Ellie and Jamie?”

“Watch it,” he warned.

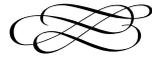
“Are you telling me you wouldn’t love to watch that happen? Ellie would eat guys like that for breakfast.”

Axel nodded with a little chuckle. “You’re not wrong there.”

Poor Cheryl. What was she doing wasting her time with an arrogant waste of space like Price?

As I stood there watching his SUV disappear down the road I knew one thing for certain. I would see her again and when I did, I’d be trying to figure out what she was doing with that loser.

CHAPTER 6



CHERYL

With enthusiasm I didn't feel, I spritzed the kitchen counter with lemon scented disinfectant spray and ran my cloth over it. I'd cleaned the same patch three times over and I would keep cleaning until I sorted through the tumble of emotions scattered through my head.

'It would be a shame to damage a body like that.'

Those words danced around in my brain like intolerable ballerinas all morning after Vince left for work. Every time another thought came in, it inevitably returned with an even fiercer vengeance, leaving me feeling a little hot and bothered. And terribly confused.

I loved Vince. I wasn't supposed to blush and suffer from a rush of butterflies in my stomach when I thought about another man.

This couldn't possibly mean I was attracted to the biker, could it?

I hadn't expected to see him outside the auto body shop yesterday. His appearance was dramatic in my eyes. He stepped out from the shadow of the shop where I hadn't even noticed him standing and sauntered over to us without a care in the world. I had no idea what to say to him or how to act, so I clammed up, looked at my feet, and silently pleaded that Vince would want to leave right away.

Then he'd sent me off without him and hadn't come home for another two hours.

I wasn't stupid. I knew something was afoot.

This was how it all started last time.

At first I excused his late returns from work in the evening as him assuming a bigger workload to better our future. I denied any chance that it could be something akin to betrayal, and told myself lies night after night until I genuinely believed them.

And then I found proof that he was sleeping around on me.

It was so cliché, too.

Panties under the bed. A bright red lace thong with a jewel hanging from the straps on the back—right above the ass crack. They were cute, two sizes smaller than mine and unlike anything in my panty drawer.

These were panties you wore to fuck a guy. And this chick wore them to fuck *my* guy in *my* bedroom on *my* sheets.

When I confronted him about it he walked out on me. He told me I was full of shit and just insecure because of my weight gain. The catch was that part of it was true. I was insecure. And in the three hours he was gone I let those words sink into my head and I rolled them over and over until I agreed with him. So when he walked back through the front door to find me halfway through a bottle of wine, draped over the sofa and choking on my own snot, I apologized for my behavior.

For the weight, for my insecurity, for doubting him, and for the way I had obviously pushed him into looking for what he needed in someone else—literally.

We talked for hours and agreed to put it behind us and move on.

And in the morning when I woke up he was in the kitchen. He prepared breakfast and coffee and was sweet to me. There was a blue velvet box on the kitchen counter beside the coffee pot, so when I poured myself a cup he pushed it toward me. I opened it to find the diamond bracelet I'd worn every day since.

A token of regret, love, and second chances.

At least that's what I wanted it to be.

Things were good for a few months. Hell, they were great. It was the way it used to be when we were young and desperately in love. We had a lot of sex, we kissed a lot and he complimented me. He held my hand in public, we went on dates and we shared desserts.

But soon after our move here I started to notice that he was withdrawing from me again. We'd fallen back into our old routines and he was snappy with me rather than patient, kind and gentle. We didn't go to bed at the same time and no matter how sexy I dressed he didn't notice.

He'd found another woman.

I wondered who she was.

Was she blonde like me? Or did he prefer a girl who was my polar opposite?

Tall, lean like a supermodel, brunette, dark eyed, dark skinned, confident, intelligent. Was she a high power executive who spent most of her day in her own office wearing three thousand dollar power suits? Was she young, naive and innocent? A barista or university student or dental assistant?

Either way she was real. She was out there.

Who knows? He might very well be between her thighs right now, pulling her panties aside with his teeth and tasting her—

I shook my head and threw my cloth down. "Fuck Cheryl. Enough."

This wasn't helping. It was just making me feel angrier.

Leaving all my cleaning products out on the kitchen counter, I stomped upstairs to change into my jogging leggings and oversized gray sweatshirt. I strapped on my arm band and slid my phone into it before popping in my wireless earphones. Then I selected an upbeat music playlist, put on my running shoes, and marched back out of the bedroom without looking at my reflection in the mirror.

I knew what there was to see there.

Absolutely nothing.

This was why Vince was tempted by other women. Their bodies, all tight and firm—and what mine was before I lost my parents—were all around him and he had to return to me. His plump, squishy, soft girlfriend.

I needed to seize control of this situation. Just cutting back on my food wasn't working. Sure, I'd lost a bit of fat around my stomach and dropped a cup size, but it wasn't enough and the change wasn't happening as fast as it needed to.

I was running as soon as my feet hit the driveway.

This was my future. My dream. I'd be damned if I let some tramp roll in and take everything that was mine out from under me.

Over my dead body.

The sweatshirt had been a bad choice. It was hot as sin outside and within five minutes I felt like I was literally going to melt into a puddle on the sidewalk, then drip off the curb into the street and then the storm drain, only to be swept away and never seen or heard from again. Maybe that would make Vince happy.

I ran faster to run away from thoughts such as that one.

By the time I'd gone two miles my lungs were on fire, my thighs burned, and I was covered in sweat. I came across a coffee shop with a sidewalk sign out for iced drinks and decided I could get an iced coffee without any sweetener or milk for my walk home.

If I could keep up with habits like this I'd be slim and trim in no time.

I pushed in through the front door. A bell chimed above my head and one of the employees looked up from where she was wiping tables and smiled at me as I joined the back of the line.

We inched forward slowly.

I wished I could call my mom.

She'd know how to handle a situation like this. She'd know what to say, what to do, and whether or not I needed her just to listen or if I needed her advice. If I lived back in Georgia she'd come over with a basket of her famous cinnamon apple muffins and we'd make tea and eat at least two each while we talked about everything going on.

The only version of Vince my mom and dad ever knew was the faithful and trustworthy Vince. The Vince who made me laugh harder than anyone I'd ever met and who never let me pour my own glass of wine.

My dad wanted me to marry him. Mom wanted me to make babies with him.

And I still wanted those things, too.

But at what cost? Was I fighting for a relationship that would never fulfill me? Would I always be second rate to some other younger, prettier, thinner girl?

The line inched ahead a bit more. I was dreadfully thirsty.

If I could lose the weight and keep it off, Vince would be happy to come to bed to me every night. And if he was happy to come to me in our bed, he wouldn't be looking to hop into that of another woman. He would be mine, as he used to be, and we could focus on us and our future. Maybe then a proposal would be soon to follow.

We loved each other. I knew that in my soul.

This was just a rough patch. Every couple had them now and then. They made people stronger.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

Pulling out an ear bud, I turned around.

And there he was.

The biker.

He stood behind me with a smug smile playing on his lips, then he lifted a hand and scratched at the dark blond stubble along his jaw. "Fancy seeing you here, Benz."

It took a moment for me to make my tongue work. It sat heavy and thick in my mouth until I managed to say, “Benz?”

“You know? Mercedes Benz? Benz, for short,” he shrugged.

“It’s Cheryl.”

His smug smile stretched into a positively devilish grin. “I know.”

I rolled my eyes and put my ear bud back in.

What were the chances that he’d end up here in this coffee shop right behind me in line? This had to be my third streak of bad luck—car crash, boyfriend cheating on me, ruggedly handsome bad boy biker stalker follows me into a cafe. I’d checked all the boxes. It could only go up from here.

I made it to the front of the line and ordered an iced coffee. I was about to pay when the biker pushed me aside, ordered himself a hot coffee and two scones, and covered my bill for me.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“You’re welcome,” he said as we moved down the line to collect our drinks from the barista.

“Thank you,” I muttered, even though I didn’t feel very grateful at all.

He lifted his chin. “You looked like you needed a win today.”

I blinked at him.

He chuckled. “Am I wrong?”

“No. No you’re not wrong at all.”

“Didn’t think so. Come. We can sit and have a drink together. What do you say?”

“I really should be going—”

The barista handed off our coffees and he picked up both. “Just fifteen minutes. I was supposed to bring some iced

coffees back to the shop but they can wait. I'd rather spend a bit of time getting to know you, Cheryl. You intrigue me."

I licked my lips and glanced at the door. We were in a public place. He was a bad boy, sure, but I didn't get genuinely bad vibes from him—just rebellious vibes. I shrugged. "Fifteen minutes couldn't hurt."

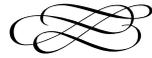
"That's the spirit. Let's grab that window seat before some cafe elitist with their laptop claims it as their own for the next three hours."

I giggled and instantly wished I hadn't.

I didn't need this guy thinking I liked him. And I certainly didn't need him thinking I was attracted to him.

Because that simply wasn't true.

CHAPTER 7



AIDEN

Cheryl pulled out the seat opposite mine, adjusted her sweatshirt, and sat down with her knees pressed together and her fingertips pressed to them. She stared out the window as I slid her coffee and scone toward her.

She glanced down at the paper bag the cashier had given me the scones in. “What’s this?”

“It’s for you,” I said flatly.

“Oh. Thank you.”

I pulled my scone out of the second bag along with the plastic knife and little container of butter and began spreading it on the scone.

Cheryl pulled the scone out of her bag and nudged the butter container to me. “Use mine if you need more. I don’t eat butter.”

“Allergy?”

“No.”

“Oh,” I said. I left the second butter on the table between us and watched as she broke her scone apart into small pieces on top of the empty paper bag. Then she ate them, picking it apart like a little bird.

I buttered mine and took big bites which I washed down with gulps of black piping hot coffee.

“So how long have you lived in New York City?” I asked.

Cheryl covered her mouth as she chewed and swallowed. Then she pushed the half eaten scone away and crossed one leg over the other. “Only a few weeks.”

“What do you think so far?”

“It’s busy.”

I laughed. “Yes. It is. But aside from that. Do you like it?”

She nodded slowly. “I do. I haven’t had much time to leave the house. Vince is working full time and I’ve been working on unpacking the house. I only have a few more boxes to go. But the last ones are always the hardest to unpack.”

I leaned back in my chair and brought my coffee with me. I ran my eyes over her.

She looked uncomfortable. Her shoulders were drawn inward, her knees still pressed together, and her gaze fell everywhere but upon me. I worried that I intimidated her.

“Did you ever find out who drove the truck that hit you the other day?” I asked.

Cheryl nodded. “Vince reported him and the cops called us last night to let us know they tracked the driver down. Vince is walking me through pressing charges for the hit and run and we’ll be reimbursed the money for the repair job your friend did for us. He did a great job, by the way. I can’t believe it’s the same bumper.”

“Axel’s good at what he does.”

“Do you work there too?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “When the mood calls for it.”

“Then what do you do for work?”

I considered lying. For the most part telling a girl like Cheryl that you were in a biker club didn’t go well. But she was taken anyway so I had nothing to lose. Not really.

“I’m in a club.”

“A club?” Cheryl asked with an arched eyebrow.

I nodded and sipped my coffee.

“What sort of club?”

“Have you heard of the Lost Breeds?”

Cheryl narrowed her eyes. “The motorcycle gang?”

“Club,” I corrected.

“Bullshit.”

I snorted. “What? Do I contradict what you think of when you hear biker?”

“No.”

“Then why the disbelief?”

Cheryl pursed her lips over her straw and sipped her coffee. It was impossible for me to look anywhere but at those pillowy lips as she sucked the dark liquid up the straw. Damn her and what she was unwittingly doing to my cock.

“A biker is one thing, but you hardly seem like the type to be in a gang.”

“Club.”

“Sorry, club.”

“What makes you say that?”

She shrugged one shoulder and the collar of her wide neck gray sweatshirt slid off to the side, exposing a bright pink sports bra strap. “I don’t know. You helped me after the accident. You offered a referral to save us money. And you bought a scone for crying out loud.”

I snorted. “So, let me get this straight. No self-respecting biker should ever be caught dead buying a scone?”

“Pretty much.”

“You amuse me,” I chuckled.

She studied me. Her body language suggested she was relaxing a little bit. Maybe that was because she thought I was lying, and whatever I was into, it couldn’t possibly be as bad as me being in a gang.

“Can I ask you something?” She cocked her head to the side when she spoke.

“You can ask me anything.”

She gave me a coy smile before leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table. “What’s your name?”

She knew she’d tricked me, and here I was thinking she was about to ask me something naughty.

“Aiden.”

“Aiden,” she said, like she was rolling my name around and over her tongue. I had other things she could roll her tongue over if she wanted. But I sensed she was a loyal girl. The sort of girl who had your back in a crowd even when she knew you were wrong. Then she said, “Vinny wouldn’t like me being here with you right now.”

“Is he your boss or your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend.”

“Uh huh.”

“He’s a nice man,” she said a little defensively.

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. And I would know. I spend the most time with him.”

I shrugged and drank more of my coffee. “I suppose you would know. I found him intolerable in the five minutes I spent with him outside the shop yesterday. But hey. Whatever floats your boat, right?”

“You don’t even know him.”

“You’re right.”

Cheryl sighed and looked out the window again. Her eyes flicked back and forth as she watched pedestrians go to and fro. I watched her watch them and found my gaze exploring features I hadn’t noticed during the other two occasions we’d met.

There was a small corner in her right eyebrow. You could only notice when you looked quite closely. The sliver of skin where no hair grew was in the shape of a crescent moon. She also had two dark freckles under her right eye. There were shorter hairs around her hairline that were curling from sweat from her workout.

As she stared outside one thing became very clear to me. The girl was lost. She gazed outside like she was searching for answers. Little did she know, she was looking in all the wrong places. I'd already searched everywhere out there to answer my own yearnings for more and come up empty time and time again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She tore her gaze from the world passing by outside and looked me right in the eyes for the first time since we'd met. Her stare sparked a flame in my chest. "Sorry for what?"

"I can come off a little abrasive."

"You think?"

I smiled. "Yes. And I didn't mean to offend you or overstep. It seems that everything I say is the wrong thing. And there's only reason why I can think I'm floundering like this."

Her stare dared me to confess.

So I did. "There's something about you, Cheryl. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the other day. Do you think me a bad man for lusting after someone who is committed to another?"

Her cheeks turned a brilliant shade of pink. She shook her head, swallowed, and closed her eyes. When she opened them again she stared at the table. "I don't think you're a bad man."

"No?"

"No."

"Then what do you think?"

She bit her bottom lip. Sexy little vixen. Did she have any idea how fucking cute that was? How hard it was for me to sit across from her like this with my cock straining to escape my jeans? It was sheer torture. “I think you’ll be disappointed if you keep saying things like that to me. I’m with Vinny. I’ll always be with Vinny.”

“A shame.”

“For you.”

I shrugged. “Not just for me.”

She licked her lips and tucked loose strands of hair behind her ears. “Look. I appreciate the coffee and the scone and all your help the other day. But I think it would be best if we don’t see each other anymore. If you run into me again, just—let me walk away, will you?”

“That’s what you want?” I asked, before draining the last couple mouthfuls of coffee left in my cup.

“It’s what needs to happen.”

“Why?”

She didn’t like that I was pushing. She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter why. But I’m asking you to forget about this, okay? I won’t tell Vinny. He’ll still refer friends to the auto shop you sent us to.”

“I don’t give a damn about that.”

She stood up and so did I. Disheartened, I watched her put her ear buds back in. She gave me a polite smile before sliding past me and making her way to the door. “Thanks again for the coffee, Aiden. I needed it.”

“Be seeing you,” I said, as she walked to the door.

She paused, as she pushed it open the bell chimed overhead. Then she shook her head. “Probably not.”

CHAPTER 8



CHERYL

I intended on walking home from the coffee shop to cool my muscles down and do some light stretching afterward, but I ended up running anyway. I wasn't sure if it was because I had a second wind of energy and wanted to work off the half a scone I ate, or if it was because I wanted to put as much distance between me and Aiden as possible.

I'd jogged past his motorcycle when I left the cafe.

It was matte black and mean looking, everything one would expect a guy like him to ride.

He screamed danger and trouble.

But why was I so fascinated by him? Why had I been so hung up on the way his lips formed his words and the way his Adam's apple slid up and down his throat whenever he laughed? Why was I so absorbed in the whispering sound his fingertips made when he scratched his stubble?

Why did I like the way he looked at me?

I definitely needed to run as far as I possibly could from him. He spelled disaster in big capital letters, and my plate was full enough focusing on the move, my body, and Vinny's new girl toy. I could only handle so much at once and I needed to push Aiden from my mind.

I was surprised to find Vinny's Range Rover in the drive when I got home.

My first thought was dread. I didn't want him to see me in my leggings and all covered in sweat. I wished I'd had a

chance to shower and get ready for him to come home—I still had some things to do and I had to get dinner in the oven. If he was still in a sour mood from the damage to the Mercedes, which he hadn't snapped out of since I told him about it two days ago, I was likely to get an earful for not upholding my responsibilities at home.

I came through the front door and stumbled over his work shoes.

I tucked them aside, took off my sneakers, and walked deeper into the house to find him in the living room with a glass of whiskey in one hand while he read a magazine.

“Hey babe,” I said, still a little out of breath.

He didn't look up from the Forbes magazine in his lap. “Where were you, Cheryl?”

“I went for a run.”

“What time did you leave?”

“I don't know—”

“Think.”

I glanced at the clock on the bookshelf and did a quick calculation. “Probably around eleven.”

“So you went on a two hour run? Please. Like you could run for two hours. Tell me the truth, Cheryl. Where were you?” He finally looked up and closed the magazine. Then he swirled the whiskey around in his glass and took a long steady sip.

“On a run.”

“You're so full of shit.”

“It was a long run,” I said, lifting my chin a little. Where did he get off criticizing where I spent my time? He was the one fucking other women.

“Don't give me attitude.” Vince stood up and tossed the magazine down on the sofa cushion. He took a few steps toward me and pointed an accusing finger at my chest. “Did you go to meet someone?”

“No, Vinny. I swear. I went for a run and I stopped at a coffee shop to get out of the heat. I had a cold coffee and came back home once I was cooled down.”

He crossed his arms. His features screwed up with anger and he shook his head.

I stepped forward and reached for him, but he pulled away. “Vinny. Baby. Aren’t you the one who said we need to trust each other if we’re going to make this thing work? I’m telling you the truth. Cross my heart. It was only coffee and a chance to get out of the sun. I dressed too warm, is all.”

“You covered up like you should have,” he said, running his hand down his face.

“What does that mean?” I shouldn’t have asked. But the words were out there, hanging between us, inviting him to answer—inviting him to say something I knew would hurt me.

“Nobody needs to see you running down the street in a sports bra and short shorts, Cheryl. Come on. Fuck. You really had to make me say it?”

The burn in the back of my throat caught me off guard. I shook my head and squeezed my eyes closed to hold my tears at bay.

Vince threw his hands in the air. “Great. Now you’re gonna fucking cry. Like it’s my goddamn fault you put the weight on. How many times are we going to do this before you get your ass in gear and fix your problem? You know what you have to do—”

“And I did it!” I cried. I hadn’t raised my voice like this before, but this was too much. He’d never questioned my loyalty and my faithfulness. He’d never accused me of lying to him. And he’d never used my weight as a way to evade the current subject. “I’m doing everything I can, Vinny! I’ve cut my food intake in half. I don’t eat sugar. I don’t eat hardly any carbs. No soda, barely any alcohol. I eat salads for lunch every day and I’ve tried intermittent fasting and diets and cleanses and green detox teas and—”

“I don’t want to do this with you right now.”

“I don’t want to do this either! But here we are, Vinny. Fucking doing it. Do you know how bad it makes me feel when you say shit like that?”

“Shit like what, Cheryl?”

“That nobody needs to see this,” I gestured at myself, “running down the sidewalk?”

He sneered at me. “I’m just doing a public service.”

I recoiled like he’d slapped me. “Do you not care how much that hurts me?”

His groan was more of a growl as he hung his head back in exasperation. “Of course I care. But how many times are we going to keep coming back to this conversation? You’re miserable. You keep trying to lose the weight but nothing changes. What do you want me to do? Tell you you’re beautiful as is when you and I both know you have it in you to be better?”

My bottom lip started to tremble. I hung my head. “I’m trying.”

“Try harder.”

A sob escaped me. I covered my face with my hands and wished I could keep it together. I wished I could stand tall in front of him and keep my emotions in check just long enough to tell him how I felt and what I wanted and needed from him. Support. That was all I wanted. Understanding. Sympathy. Trust.

Why was that so hard for him to give me?

“Stop crying, Cheryl.”

I shook my head.

“I said, stop crying.”

I sniffled and dragged the back of my hand under my nose. Then I licked my lips, swallowed back the burn in my throat a few more times, and lifted my gaze. A couple more tears fell but I didn’t let a sound escape. “My daddy would be so ashamed if he knew the things you said to me.”

Vince's stare was blank. Then he barked with laughter and slapped his leg. "Really Cheryl? You wish your daddy was still alive so he could see what's become of you? You're right. He would be fucking ashamed. He'd be ashamed that his beautiful country girl let herself go because she couldn't move on. He'd want more for you than this. I want more for you than this."

"You want more from me," I whispered.

"How do you manage to make me the bad guy in every fucking argument we ever have?"

"I'm not the one asking you to change."

"Because I'm not fucking complacent, Cheryl!" He bellowed.

I flinched.

The vein on the left side of his forehead bulged and his face started turning red. Now I'd done it. I pushed too far and too hard. I should have dropped it. I knew better than to continue pushing. It would have been smarter to let this lie for now and talk about it another time after we'd both had a chance to cool off and process this. But no. I'd gone and continued poking at him.

This was my fault.

It was always my fault.

"I'm sorry, Vinny. I didn't mean to—"

He marched around me, clipping me with his shoulder as he went into the dining room. I followed in a hurry as he tore open one of the boxes sitting on one of the chairs. He pulled out a set of my mother's china; floral patterned plates that we used to eat dinner on in the spring and summer. There were little blue hummingbirds painted on them with gold beaks and streaks of silver in their wings.

Vince held one of the plates up and glared at me. "These boxes have been here for weeks! What do you do while I'm at work all day? You have this whole beautiful house to yourself and you're too lazy to find a place for all this shit!"

“It’s not shit,” I said, my eyes glued to the plate. “Please put the plate down, Vinny. You know those are my mother’s.”

“Of course I know they’re hers! Every time I walk by these boxes I think about your parents and the fact that they’re gone and it makes me want to rip my hair out. I’ve tried to fill that void for you. I really have. I bought you this house, new clothes when your old ones didn’t fit—hell, I even bought you shoes when you couldn’t fit into your old ones. I bought you a fucking Mercedes and I pay for your haircuts and nail appointments. And these boxes just sit here taunting me. Every. Fucking. Day.”

“I’ll unpack them all tomorrow.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“I promise. I’ll do it all tomorrow. The boxes will be gone when you get home from work.”

Vince studied the plate. The smile that washed over his face made his features almost unrecognizable to me. “Why do you care so much about a plate?”

“It reminds me of my childhood.”

“You have to let go sometime, Cheryl.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

My tears came more freely. My chin started to tremble. “I don’t want to, Vinny. I need more time. I miss them every day.”

“Stop crying.”

I hid my face behind my fingers.

“Stop fucking crying!” He roared.

I yelped and fell back a step. And then a crash rang in my ears.

Opening my fingers, I peered through the cracks to see the plate shattered at Vince’s feet. He pointed his finger at me. “If

this shit isn't out of my face when I get home tomorrow I'm going to break every single one of them. You hear me?"

I wrapped my arms around myself and nodded.

"I need to hear you say it."

"I heard you," I whispered.

"Good," he growled.

He left.

I stayed where I was, cradling myself because there was no one in my life who would hold me the way I needed to be held, then flinched when he slammed the front door behind him.

Then I sank to my knees, pulled all the sharp pieces of china toward myself, and cried over them like the china was my mother's soul.

CHAPTER 9



AIDEN

The weather on Saturday was perfect for a ride. It was overcast so the sun didn't beat down on you when you had to stop, and the air wasn't sweltering with heat like it was when me and the boys rode down to Mastic.

Me, Owen and Rhys left my place around nine in the morning and found ourselves pulling off the road at a small biker pub off the interstate. It was attached to a seedy looking motel, but they sold cheap beer and loaded nachos, so we bit the bullet and gave it a shot.

We didn't regret it.

The food was delicious, the beer refreshing, and the staff friendly.

The three of us picked at our nachos and talked shit for a while. Then, when we moved on to our second beers, Rhys leaned back in his chair and said, "Axel tells me there's a girl who caught your eye earlier this week. A rich bimbo or something?"

"She's not a bimbo," I said, perhaps a little too quickly.

Owen snickered and licked cheese from his fingers. "So, you are into her."

"Never said I wasn't."

Rhys and Owen exchanged a look.

"What?"

They shrugged. Rhys took the lead. “Nothing, man. I guess neither of us expected you to be attracted to a girl who had an appreciation for the finer things in life.”

“If you saw her you’d get it,” I grumbled.

“Axel did say she was pretty cute,” Rhys said.

“He’s not lying,” I said, before I drained the rest of my beer.

“So make a move,” Owen suggested.

I stared at him. “Did you miss the part where she has a boyfriend?”

“So?”

“So,” I said, looking back and forth between them. “I’m not a home wrecker.”

Owen snorted and shook his head at me. “Boyfriend isn’t the same thing as husband. And what’s the harm in giving it a shot? What if she’s, you know, special?”

“Who are you? Rhys?” I asked.

Rhys sat up a little straighter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re gone soft since you and Quinn got over all your ‘should we or shouldn’t we’ bullshit.”

Rhys grinned. “I won’t deny that. It feels good.”

“I bet,” I said.

“Take it from a guy who never fought for what he wanted for years. Just take a shot, man. You never know how things could play out. Find out if there’s anything there.”

I rubbed my jaw. “I suppose one more attempt couldn’t hurt.”

“Go big or go home, man,” Owen said.

I fished my phone out of my pocket and called Axel. He answered on the third ring. “Talk. I’m busy.”

I could hear power tools humming in the background and assumed he was in the middle of a job. “I want the number you have on file for that Price guy. The one who brought in the Mercedes.”

“Why?”

“Just get me the number.”

Axel grumbled and I listened as he plodded across the shop and into the office. Jamie’s voice was in the background as she talked on the phone to a customer. Papers rustled and he cleared his throat. “Alright. Price—let’s see.” He trailed off and then read me the phone number.

I committed it to memory. “Thanks man.”

“What are you calling that prick about?”

“I’m not calling to talk to him.”

“Oh,” Axel chuckled. “You’re calling to talk to his girl. Smooth move, Aiden. Real smooth. He’s not going to like that if he finds out.”

“Lucky for me he won’t find out.”

“Why so confident?” Axel asked.

“Just a hunch. I know how this girl thinks. And I know he won’t be home at one o’clock on a Saturday afternoon. He’s probably golfing with a bunch of his corporate buddies or sitting in front of a stage watching a strip show.”

Axel laughed. “You’re probably right. Good luck.”

I hung up the phone and instantly punched in the number Axel had given me, just in case I forgot. Then I stared at it and started to reconsider if this was the right decision to make.

I could be putting Cheryl in a bad spot if Vince Price answered the phone.

I had the distinct impression that he wasn’t a nice guy and didn’t treat her well, but there was no way of knowing what someone’s home life was really like from the outside looking in. All I knew was that he wasn’t good to her. After all, he’d openly admitted that he wished they’d got a payday from the

car accident, blatantly inferring that it would have been worth Cheryl having whiplash.

He was a total dick.

“Are you going to call her or what?” Owen said.

I nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll call her.”

There were other variables at play here besides Vince. The last time I saw her she’d explicitly told me that she didn’t want to see or hear from me again. She wanted to strike me from the record.

Her reasons were her reasons, and she had every right to want it that way. I knew I was crossing a line—another one, specifically—by reaching out like this and ignoring her request. The chances of it going well were slim to none, and even if it did go well, there was a part of me that screamed about how disrespectful this move would be.

But if I didn’t try I would regret it. I knew that for a fact. And she’d carry on with that total waste of space.

What if something could come of us?

What if us meeting by happenstance was the universe throwing us together because we both needed a change?

I hit dial. I wasn’t the sort of man to deal in with ‘what if’ scenarios.

After three rings Cheryl’s sexy southern accent filled the line. “Hello?”

I cleared my throat. “Hey.”

She was quiet for a minute. “Vince isn’t home right now. Can I take a message?”

“I’m not calling for Vince. I’m calling for you.”

“Who is this?”

I looked up at Rhys and Owen who both gave me nods of encouragement. It reminded me of my time in foster care, sitting in my attic bedroom with three other boys as they encouraged me to prank call our teachers. “It’s Aiden.”

Her sigh was heavy. “Of course it is. You can’t call me at home like this.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have. But I had your number and I couldn’t not use it. I’ve been thinking about you.”

“Well, I haven’t been thinking about you. If Vince ever found out you called here—no. I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Excuse me?”

I swallowed. Yet again, I’d crossed a line. It was none of my business. I knew that. But I couldn’t stop the next words from falling from my lips. “I just get a bad feeling about him. And you don’t deserve that, Cheryl.”

“Wow. You really think highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“I’m done. Don’t call here again. I mean it. I have other shit to worry about besides some jerk harassing me. I have two hours to prepare food for fifty-five people, plus finish unpacking boxes. So you are the absolute last person I want to talk to right now. Good bye.”

She hung up.

She must have been talking loud because based on the looks on Rhys and Owen’s faces they had heard every word she said.

Owen sighed. “Sorry man. Worth a shot, right?”

Rhys nodded. “At least you know.”

I frowned. “Who says I’m throwing in the towel?”

Owen made a nervous sound in the back of his throat. “What terrible idea is rolling around in that head of yours, Aiden?”

“She said she was having a party tonight.”

“And?”

“And there are fifty-five people going. If I show up in a suit, who’s going to be the wiser? I can get a minute alone with her. Just need to get the address and I already know where to find that information.”

“Terrible idea,” Rhys said, vigorously shaking his head.

Owen pointed at Rhys. “I second that. That sounds like fifty-five people available to hold you down until the cops show up after she reports your stalker ass.”

“I have Dani in my corner,” I said.

“I don’t think that’s how this works,” Rhys said. “Let me paint a picture for you. You show up at the party. Nobody notices you’re not supposed to be there. You find this girl and try to talk to her. She kicks you in the balls for doing the exact opposite of what she told you while screaming for help. This Vince guy beats the shit out of you and drags you into the bathroom to give you a swirly. Or six. Then your lungs fill with water and you drown on this rich assholes bathroom floor.”

“That took a turn,” I mused.

Rhys rolled his eyes. “You’re going anyway, aren’t you?”

“You said to take a shot. So I’m taking it. And I don’t think I have to worry about a swirly, man. This isn’t junior high. She’s a classy chick and he’s a rich asshole. This is gonna be a corporate thing. Business people most likely. They just moved here so there’s no way they have that many friends. I’ll blend right in.”

Owen arched an eyebrow. “Yeah? What the fuck are you going to wear?”

“I have a suit.”

“Yeah? Does it actually fit you? You’ve put on like twenty pounds of muscle since we left Chicago.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” I said.

Owen and Rhys laughed at me.

I shrugged. “But I have two hours to figure it out. What do you say, boys? Want to go suit shopping?”

They shook their heads and in unison said, “No.”

CHAPTER 10



CHERYL

I opened the oven and heat spilled out along with the rich smell of my homemade brie and baguette platter. The cheese was perfectly melted and the crushed pecans on top perfectly roasted. I set it down on a cooling tray and hurried to pull out the other platters of quiche, baked oysters, and yams that I would sprinkle with cinnamon, goat cheese and more pecans.

I straightened up and wiped sweat from my upper lip.

I'd been running around all night making sure everything was in order.

The guests had started to arrive just before eight o'clock. Every time the doorbell rang I hurried down the hall with Vince to greet them in the foyer, take their jackets, and hang them in the closet. Then we invited them in, showed them around, and I poured them a glass of wine and brought it to them wherever they settled.

Most people were out in the backyard, milling around the pool. It had cooled off somewhat since the sun dipped down and our backyard was plunged into shade, becoming the perfect place for people to mingle.

Those that were still inside congregated in the dining room and living room, meaning I had to make sure there were appetizers spread out in three areas.

I also made sure everyone's drinks were topped off and nobody had an empty glass in their hand. I checked on the bathrooms regularly to make sure the toilet paper was fully stocked and the toilet bowl was free of urine—since men had

an uncanny knack for spraying the sides and leaving a mess in their wake, and I didn't want the guests enduring that.

Aside from me there were only six other women out of fifty-five guests at the party, and one of them had already left because she had kids to get home to. I could tell the other women wished they had a good reason to leave as well. It seemed to me that they felt they spent enough time with their male colleagues and weren't too keen on spending their Saturday evening the same way they spent their work weeks, which was listening to total buffoons talk about things they knew nothing about.

I fanned my face to try to cool down before putting the oven mitts back on and delivering one appetizer to every area. As I went I checked other platters and took note of what needed to be refilled. The meat and cheese platter in the living room was getting low. The crystal bowl of sangria in the dining room also needed to be refilled. And the vegetable and sushi spread would need to be rearranged to look a little less picked over.

I started there and made it a little more presentable before fetching the giant sangria bowl and carrying it into the kitchen to mix another batch. I added ice and some fresh fruit, specifically slices of orange and some strawberries, and then returned it to the table. As soon as I walked away the remaining women flocked to it and refilled their glasses.

I couldn't blame them.

Honestly, I wished I could indulge a bit myself. Just enough to get a bit of a buzz to endure the rest of this night.

"How's it going in here babe?"

I turned around to find Vince leaning on the doorframe. His arms were crossed and he wore a pleasant smile.

We'd put our argument to bed when we both woke up this morning. He apologized and so did I, and we reconciled. At least, I was pretty sure that's what we'd done. He gave me a kiss and told me he was looking forward to tonight, and then went and got in the shower.

I made my way downstairs and got breakfast ready and we sat and ate like he hadn't destroyed one of the most precious things to me in the whole house.

I hadn't been able to bring myself to throw away the broken pieces. I'd packed them into a Tupperware container and tucked it in the back of one of our closets upstairs. A closet I knew Vince would never open.

"It's going," I said, running my hands down my thighs. The dress I had on was a bit tight. Unfortunately I hadn't had the foresight to pick my outfit for tonight in advance and discovered this afternoon after my shower that all my dresses were too tight. This one was the least offensive of them all and revealed the least amount of cleavage. Since this was a business event I didn't want to go around with them spilling out of my dress.

"Is there any more of that cheese thing you made? It's disappearing pretty quickly out there," Vince said.

"Um," I said, brushing strands of hair off my forehead and turning in a circle in the middle of the kitchen. I was so overwhelmed. My feet hurt. The heels I had on pinched my toes. "Yes. I think I have another brie wheel in the fridge. Just give me fifteen minutes and I can put it out there. Has anybody complained that the jelly I used was too spicy?"

Vince shook his head. "It's a real crowd pleaser. Just like my girl."

I smiled. "Fifteen minutes."

Vince pushed himself off the doorframe and came over to me as I opened the fridge and searched for the brie. He put his hands on my hips, his chin on my shoulder, and held me to him. My ass pressed against his crotch.

A year ago I might have wiggled my hips to tease him. I might have even pulled the classic reach around move to stroke his cock through his pants and whispered something sexy and daring in his ear like, *I'm going to show you the best time when all your work friends are gone and it's just the two*

of us'. But that was then and this was now, and the thought of rubbing my ass against his crotch gave me anxiety.

A year ago he would have got a hard on.

Now all I'd feel was his flaccid dick, and no girl wanted that. It was a biological reminder that he was no longer attracted to me.

I tugged the hemline of my dress down and found the brie tucked behind a head of lettuce. I shimmied out from between Vince and the fridge and began preparing the appetizer.

Vince gave me a kiss on the cheek. "You're a hell of a host, babe."

Then he left me alone in the kitchen.

I scrambled to finish the third brie platter of the evening in the fifteen minutes I promised. Somehow I pulled it off and replaced the old platter as the last piece of bread was plucked from it. I brought it back in, scrubbed it clean in the sink, and put it back in the cupboard from which it came.

Then I did one more lap through the house to see if anyone needed anything.

I topped off a couple glasses of wine. Two white. One red. One sangria.

A couple men with empty cocktail glasses asked me for whiskey, so I saw to that too, and before I knew it I was popping champagne and pouring bubbly and bringing people appetizers on napkins.

When I had a moment to myself I decided to check on the two bathrooms on the main level one more time.

I closed the door behind me, braced myself on the counter, and just breathed.

In and out. In and out. Nice and slow. Calm and steady.

"Only two more hours," I whispered to myself. "Two more hours and you can take this horrible fucking dress off, wipe off the stupid lipstick, then go to bed and forget about how much your feet hurt."

I stared down at my swollen feet, strapped into the patent leather torture devices that had cost Vince three hundred and fifty dollars. They were beautiful black pumps, but they hurt like a bitch.

They looked great with my dress though; a long sleeve black body-con covered in lace with capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline.

When I was a good fifteen pounds lighter the dress looked spectacular on me. Now my eyes were drawn to how big my hips looked and how much my waist shape had changed. From the side my tummy showed even in the body shaper I had underneath that made it impossible for me to drink anything carbonated.

I didn't dare look up at my own reflection. I was already struggling to keep my chin up out there with the other women who looked marvelous in their dresses and formal wear. I was sure everyone was talking about me behind my back and I hated how out of place I felt in my own home.

"Two more hours," I muttered.

Then I straightened up and faced the door. I took three deep breaths, nodded assertively at nothing, and walked out to carry on with my duties.

I found Vince talking to three other men in the living room. They were talking about something work related, and when I walked past to go check the sangria one of the men called, "Excuse me?"

I turned with a pleasant smile. "Yes? What can I get you, sir?"

Vince nodded approvingly.

The man, probably in his late forties, a silver fox if I ever did see one, frowned and shook his head. "Oh. Nothing dear. I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Gavin. I had no idea Vince was such a lucky guy and had such a lovely wife."

I didn't look at Vince, but I did say, "Oh. Thank you, that's very kind. But I'm not his wife actually."

“My apologies. That was assumptive of me,” Gavin said.

I maintained my pleasant smile. “Nothing to apologize for. It was nice meeting you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I see the ladies flocking to the sangria, which usually means it’s time to top it off if you know what I mean.”

Gavin chuckled as did the other men talking to Vince. I turned and left, a smooth exit I was sure, and heard the men saying words like ‘sweet’ and ‘charming’ and ‘lovely’ to Vince. I wasn’t sure what surprised me more—having those adjectives used to describe me or hearing Vince agreeing with them.

Five minutes later I was replacing the refilled sangria bowl on the table. Then the doorbell rang. I made eye contact with Vince who was still deep in conversation with the three men, and then I gestured for him to stay where he was and that I would get the door. He nodded his understanding and I hurried to greet our newest guest.

Quickly fluffing my hair, I fanned my cheeks before pulling the door open and fixing my best smile on my lips. “Good evening. Come on in and—” I stopped talking and clamped my mouth shut.

Aiden stood on the threshold. In one hand he held a bottle of red wine. In the other a bouquet of exquisite white roses dusted in glitter that reminded me of the paint job on my Mercedes.

He was dressed in a perfectly fitted all black suit, save for his tie and pocket square, which were black but covered in a swirling subtle pattern of pinks and turquoise.

He looked like a real gentleman. The sort of gentleman who, if he approached you at a club, would stand a very good chance of making your panties drop.

My panties didn’t drop at the sight of him, but I did become suddenly very aware of them. Where they sat on my legs. How they rested against the soft skin between my legs.

The smile he gave me was the smile of the devil himself. “Cheryl. Good to see you. Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

CHAPTER 11



AIDEN

I couldn't explain why, but Cheryl's slack jawed, wide eyed expression made me want to do naughty things to her.

She stood in her foyer with the front door only halfway open. Her mouth started working but no words came out, and she looked me up and down several times before muttering something completely incoherent. Then she shook her head, sending her long blonde curls dancing across her shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She finally managed to hiss.

I shrugged one shoulder—the one in which hand I held the roses—and glitter rained down from the petals onto the welcome mat upon which I stood. It read 'Home Sweet Home.'

How predictable.

I nodded past her where, down a long wide hallway that led from the grand foyer in which she stood to the rest of the house where the party goers were mingling. "Sounds like a good time in there."

"It's not."

"No? Then you should definitely invite me in. I'm a charmer at parties. Trust me."

"I don't trust you. Not even a little bit. Get out of here, Aiden. If Vince—"

I waved my hand dismissively before pushing the flowers into her arms. She let out an annoyed moan as I shouldered my

way by her and stood in the foyer looking up at the crystal chandelier above. “Damn,” I whistled. “How much did that set your boy toy back?”

“He’s not my boy toy.”

There were two sets of stairs against the walls of the oval foyer that led up to the second level of the house, because apparently one staircase wasn’t good enough for Vince Price and his lavish taste. I should have expected something so extravagant.

I fixed my jacket. “Do you actually like this, Cheryl?”

She stared blankly at me.

“All of this,” I clarified, waving one hand around the foyer to gesture at all the grandeur around us.

She licked her crimson lips. “I like it when you’re not standing in the middle of my foyer trying to make me feel like I shouldn’t.”

I chuckled. “I like you.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual.”

I held up the bottle of wine and gave it a little shake. “What do you say? Should we crack this bad boy open? I’d like to mingle with some of Vince’s douche bag work friends and—”

“You will *not* be doing any mingling,” Cheryl snapped.

I frowned. “Why do you want to keep all of this from the people, Cheryl?” I asked, looking down at myself. “I dressed up just for you and Mr. Price. You can’t tell me I won’t fit in. No leather. No t-shirts. Just good old fashioned class.”

Cheryl snorted. “I don’t think you know what the word means.”

“Sure I do,” I said, turning my back to her and heading down the hall to the back of the house where the voices of Cheryl’s guests grew louder with every step. I heard her slam the front door behind me. Then her hurried steps, short and clipped due to the obscenely high shoes she was wearing,

came up behind me as she rushed to catch up. She grabbed at my arm but it was too late. I'd stepped out of the hall and into a high ceiling living space. The whole back wall of the house was floor to ceiling glass that gave a spectacular view of the backyard, complete with an in ground swimming pool, cabanas, and twinkle lights strung up all over the place.

Vince and Cheryl had likely spent more money on this party than I had on my last six months of mortgage payments.

I turned to the kitchen. Nobody was in there, which was a lucky thing, because Cheryl came in after me, seething like a rabid dog. She jabbed me between the shoulder blades from behind as I started opening drawers looking for a corkscrew.

"You need to leave," she demanded.

I found the one in the fourth drawer I opened, which was a lucky thing, because this was the biggest kitchen I'd ever stood in, and there were a good sixteen or so drawers left to check.

I twisted the spiral of the corkscrew into the cork and popped it out. "You need to relax, Cheryl. I won't stay long. I just wanted to get a glimpse of how the other half lived."

"We live very nicely, when guys like you don't pop by and ruin everything," she spat.

"I won't ruin anything. I have excellent self-control. Which is lucky for you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I shrugged, found us two wine glasses, and filled them up. "If Vince wasn't in the picture you and I would—"

"Finish that sentence," she growled, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. "I dare you."

I flashed her a grin. "Are you trying to turn me on?"

She continued to glare at me as I extended one of the wine glasses to her. Her eyes flicked to the glass and then back to me as I took a sip of my own. "No thank you."

"Give me a tour then?"

She opened her mouth to offer some snarky retort, but I already started walking away. I didn't go right for the area where all the people were. To be honest, I wasn't all that interested in bumping into Vince. Even though I doubted he would recognize me, I didn't want to put Cheryl in a tight spot with him. He already struck me as the kind of guy who would fly off the handle at the smallest of things—like the scraped bumper of her Mercedes—and she was the one who had to stay home alone with him when the others and myself cleared out of the mansion.

“How many bathrooms does this fucking house have?” I asked, as I wandered down a hallway off the kitchen. Doors opened up into a study that I assumed was Vince's due to the dark furniture, walls, and masculine aroma that wafted out of the room.

Cheryl hurried to catch up with my long strides. “Five.”

“Five?” I asked, incredulously. “Who on this planet needs five bathrooms?”

“I don't think ‘need’ is the right word.”

“Right you are. What about bedrooms?”

“Seven, plus the den and media room.”

“Jesus Christ.”

I carried on past Vince's study and peered into another room that also happened to be an office. It had soothing light gray walls and bright furniture with pops of color; teal, yellow, purple. I leaned on the doorframe and sipped my wine. “This is your office, I presume?”

Cheryl nodded.

“What do you do in here?” I asked, stepping into her office. It smelled good in here. Like lemons and mint.

Cheryl stayed in the hallway and watched me walk around. “I don't spend much time in here.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “I don’t work. I told Vince it was pointless, but he insisted I have my own office. Maybe he was giving me the hint to start a job from home or something.”

“Seems likely. A guy like him wouldn’t want his woman off working in the public eye.”

Cheryl flinched.

I paused. Had I said something wrong? “I meant that as a compliment. You’re a beautiful girl Cheryl, and Vince is a predictable guy. He screams jealousy issues from leagues away.”

“You hardly know him.”

“I don’t need to. I know his type.”

She looked down at her feet. The shoes she had on were sky high black pumps. How long had she been walking around in those things? And in her own damn house. How peculiar.

I rubbed my stomach. “I couldn’t help but notice how good it smelled when I came inside. Let’s go get us a snack, shall we?”

“No,” she said, but I was already slipping by her and heading back down the hall.

I found myself slipping between the bodies of people in the living room talking among themselves. Nobody bothered with me. I felt rather invisible, which was nice, because I was able to saunter right up to a delicious looking cheese platter. I helped myself to a crystal plate, grabbed a couple pieces of baguette, and cut some brie cheese to spread on the bread.

Then I walked a lap and collected a few other things—California rolls, some vegetables, odd little slices of yams with goat cheese on them. Cheryl followed along behind me, keeping a wary eye out for Vince who I’d already spotted out by the pool.

For now I had free reign of the house.

“Let your hair down,” I told Cheryl, after I found a good place to put my wine glass down—in the dining room so I could enjoy my food. “I don’t want Vince to catch me here

anymore than you do. And I said I wouldn't stay long. I'm not a liar."

She rolled her eyes. "Forgive me for not finding you trustworthy."

I bit into the yam appetizer and closed my eyes as the sweet and savory flavors exploded on my tongue. "Shit. You're an incredible cook."

She ran her hands down the front of her dress, smoothing out the fabric that didn't need to be smoothed at all. A nervous tick, perhaps?

I devoured every morsel on my plate before bringing it into the kitchen. I was about to put it in the sink when a man walked in from the opposite entrance from me. Cheryl, hot on my heels, let out a nervous squeak as the man studied me. He had a full head of silver hair, a thick beard, and a very expensive watch on his wrist.

He probably had a nicer house than this one. And that was saying something.

"Gavin," Cheryl said, her voice as weak as it was polite.

The man, Gavin, gave Cheryl a warm smile. "I was looking for you my dear. My wife and I are heading home. We have an early start in the morning to catch a flight to Los Angeles. I just wanted to thank you for the evening. We had a pleasant time and are looking forward to seeing more of you and Vince over the year."

Cheryl clasped her hands together, walked around me, and stood deliberately between me and Gavin. "It was so nice meeting you. Maybe at our next get together there will be less people and we can really have time get to know each other."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "We would love that. Take care of yourself." His eyes darted over her shoulder to me. "You alright in here, Cheryl?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. He's just helping me with some clean up."

Gavin nodded, "Very well. Good night."

“Good night,” Cheryl practically whimpered.

Then Gavin took his leave.

We stood in the kitchen for a moment. Cheryl had her back to me, giving me a nice view of her ass and the back of her legs.

I cleared my throat. “Gavin thinks you’re hot, too. For the record.”

She rounded on me, grabbed my wrist, and hauled me out of the kitchen behind her. She took me back down the hall I’d wandered through earlier, turned into the third door on the right, and pulled me in behind her. I found myself standing in a bathroom the size of my bedroom as she slammed and locked the door behind her.

She spun to face me and a strand of hair got caught in her lipstick as she pointed an accusing finger at my chest. “I will not let you ruin this night for us! Vince has worked hard to get where he is and this company is our big shot. Our future depends on this and no foul mouthed, rude, pig-headed biker is going to march in here and screw it all up!”

Her chest rose and fell with each labored breath.

Damn. I’d really pissed her off.

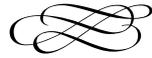
She closed her eyes as if to collect her sanity as she pulled the strand of hair off her lips. “Now, when I open this door, you’re going to walk straight to the front door and leave. Is that clear?”

I nodded. “Fine.”

She sighed. “Good. Vince has enough on his plate. He doesn’t need to deal with my bullshit tonight.”

“Fuck Vince.”

CHAPTER 12



CHERYL

“Excuse me?” I asked.

Aiden, looking hot as hell in his black suit, slid his hands into his pants pockets and shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “You heard me. Fuck Vince. He’s an asshole. You and I both know it.”

“I most certainly do not,” I snapped.

Aiden threw his head back and laughed at the ceiling. I stood up a little taller, trying to look like I wasn’t shaking in my dress being in such close proximity to him behind a locked door while my boyfriend mingled with his associates out by the pool.

When he had his laughter under control he fixed his blue eyes on me. “Don’t make me laugh, Cheryl. I’m sure everyone in this whole fucking house knows how much of a prick your Prince Charming is.”

“I assure you he’s not—”

“You can’t assure me of anything. Either you just have really bad taste in men, or you’re lying to yourself. Which is it?”

I licked my lips. “I’m not going to answer that. It’s a trap.”

“You’re just afraid to admit that you know he’s a total piece of shit. But he buys you nice things. Let’s you live in this big ass house. But at what cost?”

I swallowed.

Aiden didn't know what he was talking about. He had no clue what Vince and I had been through together. All the love, history, turmoil, grief, anger, fights, make ups, memories, holidays, break ups, sexual escapades and adventures back in college. He had no clue.

Aiden ran a hand over his buzzed head. "I can't make sense of you, Cheryl. You're a smart girl. Beautiful. Charming. Fierce. Yet you're with a guy who treats you like you're less than all of that. Can you explain it to me? I want to understand."

"Explain it to you?" I asked dubiously. "I don't need to explain anything to you. This is my life. Mine! I don't owe you anything."

Aiden adjusted his cufflinks. Every move he made had me on edge.

He gave me a smug smile. "I think you can't explain it. Simple as that. You don't know why you're still with him either."

Anger rose up inside me.

"Fuck you," I seethed before lifting my hand to strike him—something I had never been compelled to do in my life. But he infuriated me. He pushed me over the edge.

And I needed somewhere to put all this fury.

His smug face was the perfect target.

When my palm was inches from his face he caught my wrist and held it in place like he was stopping a weak child from hitting him. His fingers tightened around my wrist, completely engulfing me, and he jerked me toward him, sending me stumbling forward.

"Enough," he growled.

The sound was primal and just as angry as I was inside. His blue stare had darkened and he glared at me from beneath his thick, hooded brows.

"Don't you ever try to strike me, woman. You hear me?"

I glared back.

Could he feel my panicked heartbeat in my wrist? Did he know what this was doing to me? Did he think it was fear?

At first I'd been afraid—but only for a half a second or so. Then I realized that this feeling was something else. Something wilder and unfamiliar.

Lust. Desire. An all-consuming need for him.

It repulsed me.

I should be afraid of him. He was a stranger. All I knew of him was that he rode a bike, a Harley of all things, and he had the hots for me. Both pieces of information were enough to suggest he was a little bit off his rocker. Oh, and the other special tidbit of information I was leaving out was the fact that he was in a biker gang.

The Lost Breeds.

But I knew that fear was unnecessary. Somehow I just knew it. There was nothing to fear from him despite his strength, size and appearance. He wasn't cruel.

Vince was cruel. Vince liked to make me hurt.

But Aiden was different somehow, and I hated that I knew that.

I tried to wrench my wrist out of his grasp but he held fast. His dark expression never broke and he kept me fixed under his stare. "Do you hear me?" He repeated.

"Let me go."

"No."

I stopped trying to fight him. We were inches from each other. My nose was flooded with the smell of him; sandalwood, cedar and musk. I wanted to reach out and touch his face. I wanted to follow the sharp line of his jaw with my finger. I wanted to press myself firmly up against him and see what it was like to have a man hold me like he wouldn't let go.

I hadn't felt that in a long time.

Not since before I put the weight on and Vince still thought I was worthy of him.

Aiden lifted his other hand and pressed two fingers under my chin. He lifted my face and forced me to look at him. “Are you going to try to hit me again if I let you go?”

I shook my head.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

He released me.

I wrenched my hand back and clutched it to my chest like he’d burned me. Then I took three steps back until my shoulder blades were pressed to the back of the bathroom door.

We stood in silence for at least a minute. Him looking at me. Me looking at him while I massaged my wrist.

Him frowning when he realized how tight his grip had been. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” I said, as I forced myself to stop massaging my wrist. It didn’t hurt. But I could still feel the imprints of his fingers upon my skin.

“Do you still want me to go?”

Yes. No. Oh God. I don’t know anymore.

I nodded. “You have to.”

Aiden stepped toward me. When I stayed where I was he took another step, and then another, until we were inches from each other and I had to tip my head back to look up at him. He reached out and gently drew some of my hair off my shoulder to let it fall down my back. “I’ll leave on one condition.”

I almost said ‘*anything*’ but managed to hold my tongue. Was this what it felt like for Vince when he was with another woman? Did he get this same rush of excitement? This same complete and utter inability to function like a normal adult?

Did he get this turned on, too?

My cheeks began to burn.

“What’s the condition?” I asked.

His hand moved from my shoulder to the base of my neck. His fingertips were hot and his touch was gentle as his fingers inched up my throat to my jaw. “A kiss.”

“But Vince—” I whispered and then trailed off.

“Vince never needs to know. And you and I can get this out of our system. Don’t tell me you haven’t been thinking about it.”

Since the first minute I saw you, I thought.

I swallowed nervously and a storm began raging inside of me.

Oh God, I wanted to. He was so close. All I would have to do was close my eyes and he would take care of the rest.

But Vince was on the other side of the door at my back. He was doing what he had to in order to move up in the company. We were a team. A unit. We had to have each other’s backs and fight the things like this that threatened to tear us apart.

But I was the only one fighting. I was the only one remaining loyal. I was the only one who had his back.

He’d cheated on me more than once, just since moving to New York City. And I couldn’t fathom how many women he’d had his way with back in Georgia.

What harm was one little kiss in comparison to Vince’s adultery?

One harmless, little, doesn’t-mean-anything kiss.

Aiden’s hand slipped around the back of my neck and he started lowering his head to mine. He stared into my eyes until, when he was just a couple inches away, he closed them.

And I succumbed.

I melted into his hold on me, wrapped my fists in the front of his shirt, and held on for dear life as his lips grazed mine with the softest touch I could ever have imagined.

He pressed his lips to mine like I was made of the world's thinnest glass. Then, when I followed his retreat, he wrapped his other arm around my lower back, pulled me into him, and kissed me like his life depended on it.

He tasted like wine and cranberries. His lips were soft and smooth and his hold on me was firm.

When his tongue slipped between my teeth to explore my mouth I let out a soft little moan. My cheeks burned when I realized the sound had come from me, and he smiled into our kiss before pushing me more firmly up against the bathroom door.

He plunged the hand on the back of my neck up into my hair.

I hooked a leg around his as he used his free hand to grab and hold onto my hip, pulling me roughly against his thigh and in turn pushing my dress up so high that my panties might have been showing.

I didn't give a damn. His tongue in my mouth was too distracting; too glorious to care what my dress was doing and what view he would have when he opened his eyes.

We both broke apart out of breath.

He backed up and watched me as I pressed my fingertips to my lips and gasped for air.

Then he adjusted his suit jacket, lifted his chin, and nodded at the door. He cleared his throat before saying, "Wait a few minutes before following me out."

He reached around me, unlocked and opened the door, and rolled out, pulling the door closed behind him. I promptly locked it again before spinning to face the mirror.

"Oh God," I breathed. "Oh God. Oh God. *Oh God.*"

What had I done?

And why did it feel so good?

No.

So right?

I pressed my hand to my forehead as I tried to catch my breath. Then, in a bit of a panic, I fanned my face in an attempt to get rid of the flush in my cheeks. My red lipstick was a bit smeared, so I had to fix that up with a piece of toilet paper before straightening out the hemline of my dress.

Aiden had certainly got a good look at my thighs, but he hadn't seen my panties, thank God.

I never should have let this happen. I should have told Vince right away that Aiden had shown up at the party. Sure, he might have been a bit pissed and probably jealous, but he would have handled it and I never would have gotten stuck alone in the bathroom with him.

I never would have found myself wanting him to kiss me.

And liking it.

I touched my lips which were still tingling.

I'd definitely liked it.

I hadn't been kissed like that by Vince since we were in college, and even then it hadn't been like the kiss I'd just had with Aiden.

Aiden's kiss was greedy. Indulgent.

Vince kissed me like we were two kids in high school who didn't know how to kiss.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Just a minute!" I called, hoping they couldn't hear how shaky my voice was.

"Are you okay in there, babe?"

It was Vince. Of course it was.

I flushed the toilet and ran the sink. "I'm good. Just doing some lady business. I'll be right out, Vinny."

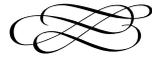
"Alright babe. Looks like the sangria is getting low again."

"I'm on it."

Fucking sangria. Fucking house parties with fifty people. Fucking hot bikers who show up unannounced and get away

with leaving you with wet panties and red cheeks and a racing heart.

CHAPTER 13



AIDEN

“I ’m getting a bit tired of seeing your ugly mug around here, Aiden,” Axel said, with a wry grin as I walked up the drive to the front of the shop on Monday morning. He was wiping his grease covered hands off on a rag, which he stuffed into his back pocket once they were as clean as they were going to get.

“Good morning to you too,” I said, as I ducked under the open bay door into the shop.

The morning was a bit cooler than the stretch of heat we’d had for the last week or so. It had rained overnight and the pavement was still a bit wet. Axel seemed content in the cooler weather and had taken the opportunity to work with every door and window open.

Axel knuckled me in the shoulder as a greeting. “You here to do some work?”

“If you have any,” I said. I hadn’t really come looking to be put to work, but I could do with a bit of extra cash. I wasn’t strapped tight or anything like that, but my night at Cheryl’s place had reminded me of where I stood in the pecking order of things in this city.

And I was pretty darn close to the bottom.

“Want a coffee first? I was about to head into the office and sit down for a bit,” Axel said.

I nodded and then he and I cut through the shop and into the office where I was surprised to find Ellie and Jamie.

Both women looked up and greeted me with big, cheerful smiles.

Jamie threw her arms around my shoulders in a big hug while Ellie crossed her arms and shook her head. Jamie seemed to greet all Lost Breed members this way.

When we broke apart Ellie nodded at me. “How’ve you been?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Oh, you know. Same old. Trying to stay busy and stay out of trouble.”

“Uh huh.”

Axel wrapped an arm around Ellie’s shoulders. “We know about the party you planned on crashing over the weekend.”

“Damn Owen and his big mouth,” I muttered.

Ellie laughed. “It was Rhys, actually. He and Quinn popped by day before last to say hello and he told us about your pursuit of the girl in the Mercedes.”

“Cheryl,” I said.

“Whatever,” Ellie said.

Axel seemed amused by the exchange. He looked back and forth between me and his girl before saying, “So? How was it?”

“How was what?” I asked.

He stared at me flatly. “The party, you half-wit.”

I knew what he’d been asking. I just wanted to make him work a little harder for it. I stepped around them and went to the coffee machine set up in the waiting area. I started brewing myself a cup and then turned back to them. Ellie, Jamie, and Axel all stared at me expectantly.

I shrugged. “It was a house party. There’s not much to tell.”

“Liar,” Axel said.

Ellie nodded in his support. “Yeah. This guy sounds like a total dick based on what Axel was telling me and his house

party was ‘just a house party?’ I call bullshit.”

Jamie moved around behind the desk and leaned her elbows on it before batting her lashes at me. “Come on Aiden. Spill the beans. I need some good gossip to get me through the rest of the day.”

I sighed dramatically and dropped down onto the couch beside the coffee machine as it began to spit the first bits of brew into the mug. “Well, I had to invite myself in for starters.”

“Not surprising since you were never invited in the first place,” Ellie noted.

I ignored her sassy remark. “And then I gave myself a tour. Pretty nice house, I gotta admit. Five bathrooms, seven bedrooms, plus a den and media room. Plus a couple offices. What kind of lunatics need that much space, anyway? There’s only the two of them who live there for fuck sake.”

“You’re avoiding telling us the goods,” Ellie said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Must you always be one step ahead, woman?”

She grinned. “Always.”

“There aren’t many goods to tell. I think it’s the opposite, actually.”

“What do you mean?” Jamie asked.

I ran my hand over my knee. “I was an ass. I never should have gone.”

“Is that self-awareness I smell?” Axel said, giving the air a sniff.

“Shut up,” I growled.

He chuckled. “I’m just saying. It’s not like you to spot the error of your ways without them being pointed out to you.”

“Or beaten forcefully into your skull,” Ellie muttered under her breath.

“I heard that,” I scowled.

She smiled and slid her hands into the pockets of her coveralls. “I’m sure whatever you did couldn’t have been that bad. You’re a good guy. You don’t do shitty things. Come on. What happened?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. “I kissed her.”

“Oh,” Ellie said.

At the same time Axel said, “Right on,” which earned him a slap to the gut from Ellie.

The coffee finished brewing. I picked up the mug and took a sip, scalding my tongue. I deserved it. “Yeah. The whole thing was sort of messy. I mean, the kiss wasn’t messy, but the night was. And I put her in a tight spot, which wasn’t what I wanted to do. Not really. I just—fuck. I don’t know what I was trying to do showing up like that.”

Ellie left Axel’s side and came and sat on the couch beside me. “You got carried away.”

“You could say that again.”

She gave me a sympathetic smile before patting my knee in that way a friend does when they feel for you but know you were the one who fucked up. “Do you think you should go and apologize to her?”

I shook my head. “Can’t. If her boyfriend caught on that I was at their place he’d pop a blood vessel. The guy’s a loose cannon.”

“Agreed,” Axel said.

Ellie looked back and forth between us before settling her gaze on me. “So that means she doesn’t deserve an apology?”

“That’s not what I said,” I amended. “I mean I can’t just show up or call the house. If he ever found out I was at that party she might be in trouble.”

Ellie sat up a little straighter. “I don’t think you’re telling us the whole story, Aiden. What sort of kiss was this? A little *‘I’m-kind-of-into-you’* kiss, or more of a *‘I-want-to-fuck-you-right-here-and-now’* sort of kiss?”

I winced. “It wasn’t the first one.”

“Fuck yeah, buddy,” Axel said.

Ellie scowled at him and then at me. Then she shook her head. “You’re right. You messed up.”

“Believe me. I know.”

“Was it at least worth it?” Axel asked, earning himself another ominous glare from Ellie.

I shrugged. “Oh hell yeah. Sure it was. For me at least. But I’m not the one who has consequences. She has a boyfriend. He’s a piece of shit, sure, but that doesn’t change the fact that she is faithful to him and I walked in and changed that.”

“You’re sure she didn’t want it, too?” Jamie piped up from behind the desk.

I couldn’t contain my grin. “Oh. She wanted it. There was no doubt about that. But that doesn’t mean we should have done it.” I rose from the couch and walked to the window where I stared out at the yard behind the shop. “She asked me to leave and I didn’t. I overstepped. Now I can’t take it back.”

Axel came over and clamped a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up too hard over it, man. I’m sure she’s moving on. A girl like that must be used to—”

I shrugged out from under his hand. “That’s just the thing. She’s not just some girl. She doesn’t do the kind of shit I put her up to the other night. She’s a good girl. Loyal to a fucking fault. She stood by Vince despite how much of a fucking ass he was and she never bent once when I called him a prick. She knows he’s a waste of space but she still has his back. It’s almost admirable in a really weird, confusing way.”

“Too bad the guy she’s defending is such a dick,” Axel muttered.

“You can say that again,” I agreed.

Ellie stood up and came over to the window. “Does she have anyone to talk to about all of this?”

“How would I know?” I asked.

Ellie narrowed her eyes at me. “Well, do you think she has any friends here? Axel told me they just moved here from Georgia. For all you know she’s holed up in that big house all alone going over the whole thing in her head, wishing she could change it. Beating herself up with guilt. She should talk to someone.”

“I have no idea if she has someone to talk to, Ellie,” I said.

“What’s her address?”

“What?” I blinked at her.

Ellie put her hand on her hip and stared at me impatiently. “What’s her address, Aiden?”

I gave it to her.

Ellie nodded and then stripped out of her coveralls, revealing a white tank top and a pair of blue jeans underneath. “I’m going to go check on her.”

“What?” Axel and I asked in unison.

She nodded. “You heard me. If she’s as sweet as you say she needs someone to talk to and help her through this. If she wants to tell her boyfriend what happened I’ll support her. If she just needs to talk about it with someone, I can do that too. But you,” she said, pointing at me, “will stay right here and give the poor girl some space. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Ellie gave Axel a kiss before marching out of the office and out into the shop. Seconds later we heard Axel’s truck start up as she pulled out of the parking lot.

Axel gave me a sideways glance. “Now you’ve done it.”

“Done what?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” he sighed, plucking the dirty rag out of his back pocket. He nodded toward the shop. “Come on. Let’s get to work. Those cars aren’t going to fix themselves.”

CHAPTER 14



CHERYL

I'd been cleaning since Vince left for work at eight o'clock Monday morning. It was now close to noon and it seemed as if I hadn't even made a dent.

Half empty wine and cocktail glasses were still littered over almost every surface. Crumpled up napkins hid under the furniture and on the pool deck. The kitchen counters were piled high with dishes and serving platters, and I'd spent the last half hour bringing out food waste bags to the green waste bin in the garage. My shoulders and arms hurt, and so did my legs and even my ass from bending down to wipe up spills off the floor.

I was so over this and I still had hours to go.

If I could at least get the kitchen clean first then I would have open counter space to prepare dinner for tonight. Vince would expect a full meal regardless of the state of disarray the house was in when he left this morning. From his perspective he was going and doing a full day of work, so when he got home the very least I could do was make sure dinner was on the table for him.

But I still had to go to the grocery store.

I wiped my brow as I stared around at all the dishes in the kitchen. Hours. This was going to take me hours.

Especially since I kept zoning out and staring off into space thinking about the kiss I shared with Aiden in the bathroom.

I was powerless to it.

The thought would come up, and my skin would start to burn, then the place below my belly would tighten and my panties would get wet. It would take all of my self-control and will power not to just go into the bedroom and take care of myself.

The kiss had been too much.

I could still feel his tongue wandering around inside my mouth. I could feel the firm press of his hand on the back of my neck and the other on my hip. I could feel his thigh between my legs and smell his rich musk when I closed my eyes and envisioned myself back in the bathroom with him.

It was infuriating.

And the guilt was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

As soon as Vince left for work this morning I went back to bed and spent the first fifteen minutes sobbing into my pillow. Then, when I knew I could waste no more time feeling sorry for myself, I started cleaning. But the tears didn't stop. They kept on flowing and I did my best to hold them at bay while I cleaned.

I had no idea until now that I could feel equally guilty and aroused all at once.

Every time the shame and the guilt became too much I reminded myself of all the times Vince had slept around on me. He'd had sex with a handful of girls over the course of our relationship and I hadn't so much as looked at another man. Not ever. Well, not counting the ones on the movie screen.

I'd never been tempted to do anything with another man.

But with Aiden things were different. Had he stripped me naked at the party and bent me over I wouldn't have stopped him. Hell, I probably would have begged him to fuck me. I'd even dreamed about it that night. About his cock inside me, one fist coiled tight around my hair and the other hand holding my hip so I couldn't go anywhere.

I gave my head a shake.

It was starting again. The arousal.

The dishes taunted me with their caked on cheese and dip. It was so much more tempting to hurry to the bedroom, diddle myself for five minutes just to get the job done, and then come back and get all this cleaned up.

I nodded decisively.

Yes. That's what I would do. Five minutes was all it would take to get Aiden out of my system and get my head on straight once more. Then I could put him out of my mind forever and pretend nothing ever happened between us.

Vinny would have all of my attention when he came home tonight.

Maybe we could even have sex so that I could feel his mark upon me instead of Aiden's.

I left the kitchen and marched out into the foyer to the bottom of the stairs. I ran my hand along the railing as I ascended, and right when my foot hit the top step the doorbell rang.

I paused and hung my head.

Seriously?

Now?

With a great sigh I hurried back down to the front door. I fixed my hair, smoothed out my t-shirt, and unlocked the door while fixing my practiced smile on my lips.

When I opened it to find a pretty young blonde woman standing on the other side I hesitated. "Um. Hi?"

She smiled. "Hi. Are you Cheryl?"

I looked back and forth outside to see if anyone was with her. She was alone. "I am," I said.

She held out her hand to me. "I'm Ellie. Nice to meet you."

I shook her hand. "I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting anyone. Are you—are you selling something?"

Her smile broadened and she shook her head. She was quite beautiful. She was fit and lean beneath the white tank she had on, and her jeans fit her perfectly, showing off legs I wished I had. “No. I’m not selling anything. I’m a friend of Aiden’s.”

I felt my confusion slip away. It was replaced with irritation. “Oh.”

Ellie held up both hands. “I know what you’re thinking. But please, give me a minute to explain. I just heard about what happened the other night between the two of you.”

“Oh God,” I breathed, hanging my head in shame. “Of course you have.”

“It’s not like that. He’s not spreading it around. He’s a really good friend of mine. But when he told me what happened I—I wanted to come and apologize for the position he put you in. He’s a good guy, honestly. He just gets carried away sometimes and doesn’t think about potential repercussions. He’s a bit reckless.”

“I noticed.”

Ellie wrung her hands together. “He feels terrible.”

“I don’t care.”

“I understand. Can we, I don’t know, grab a coffee and talk about it?”

I looked over my shoulder back inside the house and to the mess that waited for me there. “I can’t. I have a lot of cleaning up to do after the party. The weekend got away from me and I can’t leave it any longer. It has to be clean for when my boyfriend comes home from work tonight.”

“Can I help?”

I blinked at her. “Pardon?”

Ellie nodded. “Let me help. It’s the least I can do.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, I didn’t, but I’m here and nobody else is. Let me help you. I have two kids. I know how to clean the hell out of a

house in no time.”

I stared at the woman on my threshold.

She was a complete stranger and was offering to help me clean my house. Was there a catch? If there was I couldn't think of what it might be.

“You can put me on dish duty,” Ellie said.

She knew just the thing to say to win my favor. I opened the door the rest of the way and invited her in, telling her to keep her shoes on.

Ellie stepped inside and cast her gaze around the foyer and at the stairs. Her expression was similar to the one Aiden had worn when he came inside for the parry. Shock and awe.

“Your home is lovely,” Ellie said.

“Thanks. Just wait until you see the mess. You won't think it's so lovely anymore.”

I led Ellie into the kitchen. She whistled when she saw the dishes, but then she went right over to the sink and started moving things around to clear one side so she could start scrubbing. “I'll wash, you dry and put away?”

“Sounds fair,” I said.

She started scrubbing. She passed me every clean dish and I dried it before putting it back in its home in one of the kitchen cupboards. She hadn't been lying. She was wicked fast-much faster than me. We made a good team and cut through half the dishes in no time.

“So you haven't been in New York City very long?” Ellie asked as she handed me a freshly cleaned serving platter.

I ran my towel over it before sliding it into one of the bottom cupboards near the stove. “No. Only a few weeks. Vinny and I moved from Georgia for a fresh start and better business opportunities.”

“What do you think so far?”

I shrugged. “Besides Aiden it's been smooth sailing.”

Ellie chuckled and pursed her lips together. “Yes. That man has a way of getting himself into trouble.”

“Him? How about me? I’m the one who’s in trouble.”

Ellie didn’t say anything. She just carried on cleaning with a knowing smile on her lips. “Do you have any friends or family living out here?”

“No.”

Ellie frowned and stopped scrubbing to look over at me. “That must be hard.”

I didn’t deny it. “It’s lonely. But I’m sure within time I’ll make some friends. Maybe take some yoga classes or something to meet new people.” Vinny would be thrilled if I got back into yoga. I’d been wanting to try hot yoga. I heard it melted the fat right off your bones. It was terribly uncomfortable, of course, and I didn’t do well in the heat, but it would be worth it if it helped with the weight loss.

“Does Vince know people out here?”

I shook my head. “Not really. But he gets along with everyone and it seems like he’s already connected with a few guys from work. I’m hopeful they’ll have nice wives I can spend time with at the next work function.”

“You could always hang out with me,” Ellie offered. “I spend a lot of time with dudes. Trust me. Some more estrogen in my life sounds glorious.”

“More dudes as in Lost Breeds?”

Ellie passed me another freshly washed platter. “He told you about that?”

I nodded.

Ellie picked up a pot and started scrubbing. “I’m surprised. But yes. I spend most of my time with the Lost Breed MC.”

“Are they, you know, dangerous?”

Ellie snorted. “Dangerous? You mean are they the sort of guys you should be worried about breaking into your house at night? No. They’re not dangerous. Only when provoked.”

I rubbed my lips together. “How would one provoke a gang member?”

“Club,” Ellie corrected. She was just as diligent about the right terminology as Aiden had been. “It’s hard to do. You’d have to be a threat to them. Or hurt one of them. Or have plans to hurt them. Otherwise shit just rolls off their backs. If you’re worried about Aiden holding a grudge against you don’t be. He’s not like that. You’re perfectly safe when it comes to him.”

I was starting to get the sense that Ellie was here to learn more about me rather than just help me clean. But for some reason I trusted her. What kind of person, other than a good one, would offer up their afternoon to help a complete stranger clean their house?

I sure as hell wasn’t that nice and I didn’t know anyone else who was either.

Besides my mom. She might have done something like this in her day.

“Can I ask you something? And will you promise to tell me the truth?” I asked.

Ellie nodded. “I promise. Ask me anything.”

“Did Aiden send you here to do recon on me?”

Ellie shook her head. “No. I asked for your address. I wanted to come here on my own.”

“Why?”

Ellie dropped the dish sponge in the sink and turned off the tap. Then she turned, looked me in the eye, and said, “Because I think you’re with a man who hurts you and I wanted to make sure you were safe. And if you weren’t, I wanted to see what sort of mess Aiden was going to get himself into with you. Because he’s not going to be able to walk away from this. Or from you. Not yet, anyway.”

CHAPTER 15



AIDEN

Ellie had already been gone for three hours, and in that time Axel and I managed to move three cars out of the shop for pick up, polish the front end of an old corvette in need of new paint, and give the shop a quick sweep.

It was close to three in the afternoon when Ellie returned.

She parked Axel's big black truck in front of the bay doors and hopped out. Her boots crunched on the gravel as she walked up the drive and ducked into the shop. Axel greeted her with a kiss, and then she turned her attention to me. "Do you have a minute to talk, Aiden?"

That didn't sound good. "Sure."

Axel nodded at the office. "Jamie went home for the day if you want to sit in the office."

Ellie motioned for me to follow her. So I did.

I paused in the doorway to the office and looked back at Axel, who gave me a shrug and a look that said 'good luck'. I closed the door behind us and turned to find Ellie sinking down into the couch. She patted the open space beside her. "Sit."

"I think I'd rather stand."

"Don't be a pussy, Aiden. Just sit down."

Frowning, I took up the open seat beside her and turned so I could face her directly. "Alright. I'm sitting. What do you want to talk to me about?"

“I don’t really know where to start.”

She looked nervous. Quite nervous. Like she had a lot she needed to say and knew none of it was going to go very well.

“Was she mad when she found out who you were?” I asked, hoping I could help guide the conversation a bit.

Ellie shook her head. “No. Confused maybe, but not mad. I helped her clean the house. It was still a mess from the party on the weekend.”

“Naturally. I wouldn’t expect Vince to help her.”

“No. He wouldn’t.”

“You’ve been gone for hours, Ellie. What did the two of you talk about?”

“You.”

“Just me? That whole time.”

She pursed her lips together and shook her head. Then she looked down at her lap. “No. Not the whole time.”

“Spit it out then.”

“She told me a lot about him.”

“Vince?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And?” Clearly I was going to have to keep pushing, which made me wary. Ellie wasn’t the sort of person to hold something back. She was the sort of girl to put it all out there for you to do what you wanted with it. This was different. There was something bothering her.

And that made me nervous.

Ellie chewed the inside of her cheek before saying, “He’s not a good guy, Aiden. Not at all.”

“I already knew that.”

“You knew he was an ass, sure. That he was a misogynist. And a bully.”

“Yeah. And?”

“He cheats on her all the time. He was sleeping around behind her back in Georgia even after her parents died. He isolated her. Set up ground rules for when she could and couldn’t leave the house. And if she broke the rules—” Ellie sighed and shook her head. When she looked up at me I could see determination in her eyes. She was going to spit it out. “He’s knocked her around a few times, Aiden. Maybe more than a handful.”

I didn’t say anything.

But the anger started to boil.

Ellie ran her hands up and down her thighs. When she spoke it seemed like every word tasted foul on her tongue. “And the worst part is, Cheryl thinks she deserves it. She thinks this is balance because of ‘everything he does for her’.”

“Which is what, exactly?” I growled.

“Making the money. That’s all, Aiden. Literally. He makes a good living and he keeps them comfortable. But he cheats on her. Lies to her. Hurts her. Manipulates her. Undermines her. Makes her think she is unworthy of anyone else’s affection or energy but his. He’s a controller. He wants to keep her under his thumb for the sheer joy of it.”

“Bastard.”

“When I tried to explain that this wasn’t healthy—that she should get away from him—she told me she couldn’t blame him. She said she knows she makes him angry. She says she pushes when she shouldn’t. And she says he’s upset more often now because she’s let herself go since she lost her parents.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Ellie ran her fingers through her hair. “It means he’s picking her apart on the inside and the outside. And her weight seems to be his area of focus.”

“What fucking weight?”

“I know,” Ellie sighed. “She’s beautiful and has no idea. But he knows how gorgeous she is. He knows how easily she

could replace him. Which is why he reminds her every day that she's not worthy. That she already got someone out of her league."

"Out of her league?" I scoffed. "That arrogant bastard knows she's too good for him. He knows he'd never stand a chance with her if—"

"Aiden," Ellie said, none too gently. "I know. I'm on your side. And I agree with you. I'm just giving you the information. Relax."

I collapsed against the back of the sofa and blew out a long exasperated breath. "And just what am I supposed to do with this information? I don't suppose you're suggesting I drive over there and beat the shit out of his pompous ass?"

Ellie shook her head. "No. I'm most definitely not."

"So?"

"So nothing. Just because you know this now doesn't mean you are entitled to take action and break down their door like a barbarian. You need to step back. Cheryl is smarter than the people in her life have given her credit for."

Of course she was smart. I'd thought she was smart from the moment we first started talking. I knew she was smart the minute she tried to decline my invitation for coffee. She'd known I was bad news right from the start and she hadn't given in.

But I'd kept pushing.

I hated the idea of her being home alone in that big house waiting for Vince Price to come home at the end of a long work day. Did she anticipate his mood swings? Was he as unpredictable as a hormonal teenager? Or did he have patterns? Were Mondays the worst days of the week or the best?

Did she spend all day making sure everything was perfect so he had fewer reasons to strike her when he lost his temper?

"Aiden," Ellie said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

My jaw had been clenched so hard that my teeth were starting to ache. I forced myself to relax and gave my head a shake. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I get it.”

I rubbed my forehead. “How could you leave her alone in that house, Ellie?”

Ellie looked me in the eyes. She was wearing that stern motherly expression that prepared me for the wisdom I was sure was about to come out of her mouth. I needed it. I desperately needed her to convince me that things would be alright and that I shouldn’t ride over to that big ass house and wait for Vince to get home from work.

I’d show him what it was like to get knocked around.

“It’s not my decision to make, Aiden. Or yours. She needs to be the one to call it and walk away from that jerk. If she’s forced into it by someone else it won’t be her victory. She won’t have grown from it. It will just become this traumatic thing from her past that she never dealt with. I think—no, I know she’s strong enough to do this on her own. She just needs to come to that realization.”

“And if he beats her to shit before that happens?” I asked.

“It won’t come to that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she has me now. She has someone she can call.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at her but didn’t. Instead I managed to say, “Are the two of you best friends now or something? Are you going to braid each other’s hair and make pinky promises to always have each other’s back and tell each other if you have something in your teeth?”

Ellie narrowed her eyes at me. “I hardly think this is the time for jokes.”

“Who’s joking here? I’m not,” I said, pressing one hand to my chest. “I’m simply pointing out how incredibly ludicrous that sounds. A ‘BFF’ won’t stand in the way of an abuser, Ellie. Give me a break.”

“Have you not been listening to a word I’ve said?”

I held my tongue.

Ellie rolled her eyes at me. “We can’t fix this for her, Aiden. She needs to come to terms with things on her own. She needs to be the one to tell him to take a hike. She needs to choose her safety and her happiness over the nice cars and the big house and the—”

“Expensive jewelry.”

“Exactly. And I can be her sounding board in the meantime. And, naturally, I can keep my ears peeled to make sure things don’t get worse over there.”

“And if they do?”

Ellie sighed. “Then I’ll tell you and we’ll handle things your way. But only if they get worse. Got it?”

I hesitated. This was probably a better solution for everyone involved. I knew she was right despite how maddening it was to have to sit back and do nothing. I also knew that it wasn’t my place to step in; it wasn’t my place to make Cheryl’s decisions for her.

I nodded. “Got it.”

Ellie stood up. “Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page. Now, I’m going to go give Axel a kiss and remind him how grateful I am for him. I can’t imagine being Cheryl.”

“Me neither,” I muttered as Ellie slipped out of the office.

The door fell closed behind her sealing me in the quiet little room with elevator music playing.

It did nothing to calm me down. In fact, it made me all the more irritated.

I got up and marched out into the shop. Ellie and Axel were sucking face in the corner and they pulled apart to watch me go.

“Where the hell are you off to?” Axel called after me.

“To blow off some steam,” I said.

“Don’t you go to that house, Aiden. I mean it!” Ellie yelled.

I got to my bike parked out in the lot. “I don’t plan to. I just need to clear my head.”

In other words, I just needed to find a way to stop thinking about Cheryl all alone in that big house and Vince coming home to give her a hard time. To hurt her.

It was going to be a full throttle ride. I knew that much before I even lifted the kick stand.

CHAPTER 16



CHERYL

“Ouch,” I hissed. Pain swelled up on my right index finger after accidentally pressing it to the piping hot ceramic of my curling iron. I let my hair fall from the rod and shook my finger out, which did no good, so I turned on the cold water and ran my finger under the bathroom sink for a good thirty seconds to dull the burn.

I still had about half of my head to go and this was the second time I’d scalded myself.

“This is what you get for trying to look cute,” I muttered.

Once the burn in my finger subsided to a dull pulsing I resumed the curling, wrapping each strand of blonde hair around the barrel and holding it in place for fifteen seconds before letting it fall free, and then coating it with hairspray.

I wanted to look my best for dinner tonight. Vince had to work a bit later than usual, which gave me a bit of extra time to prepare a rather over the top meal and get myself dolled up. He had a meeting with some of the guys in his department and had told me this morning before he left that he’d be home around eight.

I didn’t mind eating late.

It gave me an extra hour and a half to have the house to myself and in that time I’d indulged in two glasses of wine that, on every other night, I never would have gone for. But it had been a hard week and now that a bit of normalcy was returning to my life I needed a reward in the form of a rich merlot.

Soul searching was how I'd spent most of my week, and the desperation to forget everything that had happened the weekend of the party had almost been paralyzing.

Ellie coming over here on Monday and offering me a shoulder to lean on was another thing I didn't want to think about. I especially didn't want to think of how I'd taken advantage of it and spilled the beans like a three year old with no self-control.

I wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about her that made her really easy to talk to. I'd told her things I hadn't said to anyone—ever—and she'd stood there, washing dishes, nodding along, making me feel like she wasn't placing any judgement on me at all. Just understanding.

She'd told me that if I ever needed someone to talk to I could call her. We could talk on the phone or go for coffee, or I could go to her house if I needed a quiet place to escape to.

Well, sort of quiet. She'd warned me that she had two children and they could get rather rambunctious, especially when their father came home from work at the end of the day.

But, after spending the rest of the week on my own in this house, I'd realized that I'd just been spewing nonsense to her. Sure, Vince and I had our problems, but every couple did, and the pros far outweighed the cons.

He made me feel safe and secure. He gave me a beautiful home. He took care of my financial and physical needs. Not the sexual needs, but the self-love sort of needs like my weekly manicures and biweekly hair appointments.

Without Vince the lifestyle I'd coveted and enjoyed for years would be very, very far out of my reach.

I had no skills of any sort to land a job that would pay a decent salary. If I ever found myself out on my ass and single I'd have no idea where to start. There was no safe place to land. With my mom and dad gone I would have to completely fend for myself. Nobody back in Georgia would take me in. I'd successfully isolated myself after losing my parents, and the only friend I had on this planet was Vince himself.

Why on earth would I want to give that up?

The answer was simple. I wouldn't.

The reason all of this doubt even surfaced was all because of *him*. Aiden. If he hadn't come along with his smug smile and good looks I never would have questioned how much I loved Vinny. I never would have been tempted to look at another man the way I looked at Aiden, and I sure as hell never would have kissed him.

And wanted more.

I gave my hair one last good spray before leaving the curls to set. I turned off my curling iron and walked, high heels clicking all the way, to the kitchen to check the full chicken that was roasting in the oven. I'd smothered it with an apple sauce and cinnamon and cloves, so the sweet scent poured out of the oven.

Vince was going to love this meal.

I checked the time on the stove. Dinner would be ready in twenty and Vince should be home in fifteen. My timing had worked out perfectly.

Popping up to the bedroom, I changed into the dress I'd laid out on the bed. I'd gone and bought it for myself yesterday after being cooped up in the house all week. It was black with a sash around the waist. The low cross over neckline showed off my cleavage, which I knew was Vince's favorite body part of mine, and the knee length hemline hid the parts of my thighs I wanted to disguise and made my legs look a little longer than they were.

I checked my reflection in the full length mirror beside my dresser and pulled my curls apart to soften the ringlets. Satisfied with my appearance—well, as satisfied as I could be at least—I went back downstairs to sit and wait for my man's return.

Tonight, I would show him an especially good evening. I would remind him how good we could be together. How good we both wanted to be.

And I could put everything that happened last weekend to bed.

Permanently.

No more dreams about the sexy biker. No more wondering what might have happened if we'd stayed in the bathroom a little longer. No more wishing he'd lifted the hemline of my dress a little higher and slid his hand into my panties.

I gave my head a shake.

"Pull yourself together, Cheryl," I muttered. Then I slid off my bar stool and poured myself half a glass of wine. Just a splash.

And I waited.

Dinner was ready before Vince came home. I pulled the chicken out of the oven, glazed it one last time as the recipe said to do, and finished all the other odds and ends like mixing the salad, tossing the veggies, and adding a sprinkle of salt to the baked potatoes.

And still Vince did not come home.

I waited another fifteen minutes before putting the meal back in the oven to keep it warm.

More time passed. Half an hour. Forty five minutes.

I drank another glass of wine and discovered my teeth were stained purple. I went upstairs and gave them a scrub and stared at my reflection. My cheeks were rosy. I'd indulged a bit too much. Hopefully Vince wouldn't notice.

When I went back downstairs I cleaned my wine glass and poured myself a glass of water. Then I continued to wait.

My stomach was growling an hour and a half later when I heard the front door open. I'd moved into the living room where I was sitting in my favorite corner of the sofa reading a book. My heels were off and tucked up against the edge of the plush area rug, and when I heard the door close I swung my legs over the side of the sofa, slipped my feet back into my shoes, and got to my feet, smoothing out the skirt of my dress. I tousled my hair a bit just to give it a bit more volume and

turned to find Vince standing in the hall between the entrance foyer and the living room.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said. His suit jacket was open, his tie loose, and the top two buttons of his white shirt undone.

“How was your meeting?”

Vince turned back to the foyer and made for the stairs. I followed. “Good. Had a couple drinks with the boys. Sorry I’m later than I expected.”

“That’s alright. I kept dinner warm for you in the oven.” I wasn’t going to spoil this. Not after I’d worked so hard and how badly I wanted things to feel right between us again.

“Oh,” he paused with his foot on the bottom step. “I already ate.”

I swallowed and nodded. He started to ascend. “Okay. Well, we have leftovers then I guess. Nothing wrong with that. I suppose it’s too late to eat anyway,” I said, following him up the stairs. “I shouldn’t eat so soon before bed. You know. The calories won’t burn off if I’m just sleeping. Right?”

“Right,” he said. But he didn’t seem all that interested or like he was really listening.

Then I spotted it. On the back of the collar of his white shirt. The pristine, perfect imprint of a pair of red lips.

“Vince,” I said.

He reached the top step and turned back to me, casting his eyes to the ceiling in annoyance. “What, Cheryl? I just want to get in the shower. Then you can tell me about whatever it is you did or didn’t do today, or whatever you ate or didn’t eat. Okay?”

“You didn’t have a business meeting tonight, did you?”

His exasperated stare darkened.

I bit my bottom lip.

My toes hurt in my heels. My pulse fluttered in my two burned fingertips. The shaper I had on under my dress pressed

into my gut. Dinner was probably going to be thrown away.

All this work for nothing.

“Why do you keep doing this to me?” I whispered.

Vince turned and walked into the bedroom.

My first reaction was to go back downstairs and let him cool off. I could pack up dinner and freeze it for another time. I could clean the kitchen. I could pour myself another fucking glass of wine to deal with the fact that no matter how hard I tried, Vince was always going to screw other women behind my back.

And he was going to make me feel like it was my fault.

“Is this really better than the alternative?” I asked myself. I could hear Vince opening the closet in our bedroom.

Were the nice house and the shiny car really worth how terrible I felt?

I finished climbing the stairs, stomped into the bedroom, and kicked off my high heels. Then I rounded on Vince who was standing in our walk in closet hanging up his suit jacket. I jabbed a finger in his direction. “I asked you a question. Why do you keep doing this to me, Vince? Tell me.”

“I’m not doing anything to you.”

“You’re cheating on me! You’ve been cheating on me for years! And I’ve sat around racking my brain trying to figure out why the hell nothing I do is ever good enough for you. Why I can’t be the girl you seem to want. Why the dinner parties and full course meals and clean house and—”

“You’re rambling, Cheryl.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You like hurting me.”

He scoffed and began unbuttoning his shirt. “Don’t make me out to be the bad guy. You’re the one who stopped trying. You’re the one who let yourself go. You’re not the same girl I fell in love with. I don’t want to have sex with this,” he gestured at all of me.

It was like being punched in the gut by a UFC fighter wearing brass knuckles.

“Fuck you,” I whispered.

“What did you say to me?”

I lifted my chin as he came out of the closet to stand in front of me, staring down the length of his sharp nose, his lips curling in an angry snarl. I didn’t blink and said it again. “Fuck you.”

Vince grabbed my shoulders and gave me a rough shove backwards. I stumbled over my own feet, lost my balance, and tumbled into the dresser at my back. The corner jabbed into my shoulder as I fell and I landed on my ass as the contents sitting on top of the dresser, mostly pieces of my jewelry, some perfumes, and a picture frame, rained down on my head.

Vince bent down and pointed his finger at me. “You will never speak to me like that again. Do you hear me? After everything I do for you, you have the fucking nerve to—”

“Everything you do for me?” I asked, my own anger boiling over now. I hadn’t felt like this before. Not ever. This fury was unbridled, furious and burning hot. I grabbed the handle of the dresser and pulled myself to my feet. “You don’t do anything *for* me, Vince. You do things *to* me. You hurt me. Belittle me. Make me think I’m going fucking crazy for thinking you’re off fucking some other girl, when you and I both know that’s exactly what you’re doing! Screw you for making me the villain. For making me the one who sounds crazy. This has been you from the very start and I—”

“You *what*, Cheryl?” He hissed, stepping in close. I could smell her perfume on him. Whoever she was. It smelled like cotton candy and honey. She must be young. Very young.

I glared up at him.

“*You what?*” His snarl was pure hatred. If I said something he didn’t like he’d do worse to me than push me into the dresser. I knew it as clearly as I knew what I had to do next.

I hung my head. “Nothing.”

“That’s what I fucking thought,” Vince said, shoving me aside and walking into the bathroom. He slammed the door closed and locked the handle. I heard the water in the shower turn on. The door opened and closed.

And then I scrambled to find the biggest bag in my closet that I could and filled it with everything I could put my hands on. A pair of sneakers. Sweats. Jeans. Shirts. My phone. My wallet. My passport. The picture of me and my parents on my nightstand.

I threw on a jacket and raced downstairs to bolt out the front door. When I hit the end of the driveway I turned right, not knowing where I was going as I fished my phone out of the bag to call Ellie.

CHAPTER 17



AIDEN

My phone was ringing. It cut through the dream I was having about a pretty blonde in a pearl white car, leaving me disoriented when I woke up and rolled over to look at it lighting up on my nightstand.

A quick glance at the clock made my stomach roll with nerves. It was just past midnight. The only calls I ever got at this time of the night were to give me bad news, and bad news when you were part of a motorcycle club usually meant some real bad shit went down.

Someone was in trouble.

Or worse, someone was dead.

I swiped the phone up and lifted it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Aiden, it’s Ellie.”

“Ellie. What the hell? Why are you calling me? Are you okay? Is Axel alright? What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. I could tell by the hum in the background that she was in a car. “Nothing. I’m sorry Aiden, I didn’t mean to scare you. Everyone is fine.”

I let out a relieved sigh and slumped against my headboard, dragging my hand across my brow. “Fuck.”

Ellie let out a nervous laugh unlike anything I’d ever heard come out of her. “I’m with Cheryl.”

“Cheryl?”

“That’s what I said.”

I licked my lips. “Alright. And?”

“And she left Vince tonight and has nowhere to go. We’ve been driving around for almost two hours talking, but we’re tired. I would take her back to my place but with the reno project going on I don’t have anywhere for her to sleep. The kids are in the living room already. She said she would be comfortable staying at your place, if you’ll have her.”

“What?”

“Aiden, wake up. Seriously.”

I rubbed at my eyes vigorously. “Fuck. Okay. Yeah, she can stay. I’ll make up a bed for her on the sofa. How far away are you guys?”

“About ten minutes.”

“Jesus. Alright. The front door will be unlocked just come on in.”

“See you soon,” Ellie said, and then she hung up.

I stared at the wall at the opposite end of my bed and took a deep breath. Alright. This was definitely better news than finding out someone was dead. But it was overwhelming nonetheless.

Cheryl had left Vince.

And she was coming to stay with me.

Apparently she’d forgiven me for the little stunt I pulled showing up unannounced at her party. Or she just had nowhere else to go. The latter was more likely.

I ripped the blankets off, pulled on a pair of sweats and a T shirt, and hurried out into the living room where I made up a bed out of my spare blankets and pillows. Luckily my sofa was a pull out so it would be more comfortable for her than just crashing on the couch.

By the time the bed was made and I’d managed to pick up the few empty beer cans that were lying around the place, the front door opened. I hurried into the hall to greet Ellie who

came inside first and held the door open for Cheryl, who lingered outside.

“Come on in,” I said, hoping I sounded more inviting and less like my usual patronizing self.

Cheryl licked her lips and came inside. She never looked up at me.

I held out a hand to take her bag, but she didn’t hand it to me, so I reached out and took it from her. She let it go and finally lifted her eyes to meet mine. “Thank you,” she said. Her voice was weak. Her eyes were puffy and pink. So was the tip of her nose. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips a little swollen.

She’d been crying.

Really crying.

I showed her and Ellie down the hall. Ellie had been here two times before with Axel and a few of the other guys, so she knew her way to the kitchen, where she poured Cheryl a glass of water. She brought it to us where we settled in the living room and handed it to Cheryl, who drank thankfully. I noticed that her hands were shaking as she lowered herself down on to the edge of the sofa bed. “Thank you.”

Ellie gave her a reassuring smile. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay here? I can stay if you like. All I’d need to do is call Axel and give him a head’s up.”

Cheryl glanced at me and then back to Ellie. “No. It’s alright.”

“I understand if you’d like her to stay,” I said.

Cheryl looked back at me. Her bottom lip trembled and I watched, terrified that she might start crying again, as she distracted herself by drinking the rest of her water. She shook her head once. “No. I’m fine. Ellie you can go whenever you need to. Thank you for coming to get me. And for driving around with me while I—well. You know.”

Ellie put her hand on Cheryl’s shoulder. “You did the right thing tonight, Cheryl. The hard thing, for sure. But the right

thing. You'll thank yourself for it later."

Cheryl nodded but didn't say anything.

Ellie gave me a sad smile before heading to the door. I followed her to lock up and she paused in the doorway. "I'll check in with you in the morning. Don't pressure her to talk to you, Aiden. Just make her comfortable and maybe give her some space. Unless she asks for something else. Yeah?"

I nodded. "Got it. I'll keep my hands and my opinions to myself."

"Good man," she said, patting my cheek. Then she turned and headed out to Axel's truck that was parked in the driveway. I made sure she got in and drove off safely before closing and locking the front door.

I slid my hands into my sweat pant pockets and went back down the hall to join Cheryl in the living room.

She hadn't moved an inch. She was still perched on the very edge of the bed. She had both hands wrapped around the glass of water and one of her feet was bouncing anxiously. Had there been any water left in the glass it would have sloshed all over the place.

I nodded at the cup. "Can I get you another glass?"

She shook her head. "No thanks."

I took it from her and set it down on the table beside the sofa before sitting down on the arm chair across from her. "The bathroom is the third door on the left down the hall there. Clean towels are in the closet on the right hand side. If you need anything just ask. If you wake up before me help yourself to coffee in the morning and whatever looks good to you in the fridge."

"Thank you," she whispered.

I studied her. The way her shoulders were drawn inward. The way her eyes continuously glassed over as she held her tears at bay. The way she tried to disguise her sniffles by holding the sleeve of her shirt to her nose.

She was devastated.

“I’m sorry, Cheryl.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. You have nothing to be sorry for. I should have—I should have left a long time ago. I should have left before we moved here. I was such a fool.”

“You’re not a fool.”

She laughed. It was a harsh and bitter sound that contrasted against her sad beauty. “Oh, believe me. I am. I ignored all the red flags just because I wanted a fresh start. Because I wanted to forget.” She shook her head at herself and raked her fingers through her hair. “I should have known I could never forget.”

I frowned. “What were you trying to forget?”

Cheryl rubbed her eyes, smearing makeup across the tops of her cheeks and into her hairline. “Everything. My home. The life I had in Georgia. My mom and dad.”

“Did you lose them?”

She nodded. Her bottom lip trembled. Then she looked up at the ceiling and a tear escaped, tricking down the line her makeup had made from the corner of her eye toward her ear. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. They’d be so disappointed,” she leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees, and then she buried her face in her hands and a sob escaped her.

I stood up and moved to sit beside her on the edge of the bed. I put my hand on her back and tried to stay a safe distance away. I didn’t want her getting the wrong idea, but it was impossible for me to just sit there and watch her cry without trying to offer some sort of comfort. “I know what it’s like to want a fresh start, Cheryl. I know what it’s like to chase it like hell itself is nipping at your heels.”

She lifted her head and sniffled. “You do?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I haven’t lived in New York City for long either. I moved here from Chicago after my cousin was murdered. He—”

“Murdered?” She blinked.

“His name was Max. He was older than me. More like a brother than a cousin. And he gave his life protecting someone else who was important to both of us. It took me a long time to come to terms with that and to understand why he’d be willing to throw it all away for someone else. And having this city and the Lost Breed gave me a second chance. A clean slate. I still miss him but the pain is duller now. More bearable.”

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and sat up a little straighter. “You must think I’m such an idiot. Crying about a stupid boyfriend when you lost someone. Like, really lost them.” She sucked in a breath. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

I chuckled softly. “No it wasn’t. Not at all. You know who is rude though?”

She gave me a tiny smile—one so small I might have missed it if I wasn’t looking. “Vince?” She asked.

I laughed in earnest this time. “Yeah. Vince. Fuck that guy. Fuck that guy and his house and his cars and his pool.”

She giggled. There were still tears escaping but she swept them away a bit more defiantly now. “Yeah. Fuck that guy.”

“There you go. Feels good, right?”

She nodded. “It feels great.”

“Fuck that guy!” I bellowed.

She laughed again, and the sound was music to my ears; a chorus of bubbles and bells with sweet little symphonies in between.

I shot her a wide grin before rolling to my feet. “I’ll give you some space. If you need me I’m just down the hall.”

“Okay,” she said softly. She was looking at me like she didn’t want me to leave.

Maybe I was reading too much into it.

I turned and then paused, looking back at her as she stood up to fix the blankets on the bed.

“Cheryl?”

“Mm?” She turned to me. Blinked slowly. Her lips were slightly parted.

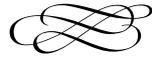
God damn.

“I know it’s not my place, but you should know that leaving Georgia and coming to New York wasn’t your second chance. Leaving Vince was.”

Cheryl stared at me for a moment. I couldn’t read what she was thinking. Then she moved toward me, her bare feet whispering across the hardwood floors.

I stood still as stone when she went to her tiptoes, cupped the side of my face with one hand, and kissed me.

CHAPTER 18



CHERYL

Aiden's lips were hot and soft. The stubble on his cheek tickled my palm as I ran my hand down; down the side of his neck to his chest, which was firm with muscle.

Then he caught my wrist and pulled away.

He was a little out of breath and a little wide eyed. "Cheryl. Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Well, you've had a rough night. And you've been crying. And I feel—"

"I've wanted this since the first time I saw you," I whispered.

Aiden blinked.

God, he was beautiful. And kind. He'd shown me his heart tonight at a time where I needed kindness the most. He'd let down his walls—his cocky, arrogant, infuriating walls—and shown me who he really was. And I liked it.

The fact that he was checking in and not pushing me down on the bed to fuck me was even more of a turn on.

His grip on my wrist was firm but not painful. He gazed down at me with lust burning in his eyes that matched the fire in my belly. "Are you sure?" He whispered.

I bit my bottom lip. "Yes."

Aiden's green eyes flicked back and forth between mine. Was he trying to detect a hint of insecurity in my answer? Was

he looking for a crack in the wall that might suggest I was unsure?

He wouldn't find one.

I wanted him. And I knew he wanted me. And there was no sense in fighting it. Not anymore.

I hadn't had sex in four months. I needed this.

Aiden tightened his grip on my wrist and then jerked me forward. I fell into him and he put his other hand under my chin, forcing me to look up at him so he could press his lips to mine. The kiss was desperate. Needy. He pushed his tongue between my teeth and explored my mouth with that same devilish curiosity I'd felt from him last weekend in the bathroom.

I whimpered into his mouth shamelessly, and felt his lips curl in a smile as the kiss deepened, and then he was wrapping an arm around me and lowering me down to the sofa bed.

It creaked and groaned beneath us. The metal springs squeaked in protest but we didn't stop. Aiden pushed my hair away from my face, stroked my cheeks, and then worked his hand down the front of my body; over my breasts, stomach, to the place between my legs where the burning desire had gathered and intensified.

My new black dress fell down my thighs when I bent my knees and spread my legs. Aiden responded by pushing it up higher and over my belly, and then he stopped with his palm resting on my navel.

He looked down.

"What is it?" I asked, suddenly very self-aware and terrified that he was about to see me naked. The only person who had seen my naked body was Vince, and he knew there was nothing special to see there. Just some loose skin, rolls, fat, and a lot of hip.

Aiden ran his hand over the skin colored body shaper. "What the hell is this thing?"

I tried to pull my dress down but he didn't move his hand. He kept it firmly upon my navel and peered up at me from beneath his furrowed brow.

"It's a shaper."

"A what?"

"A shaper," I said again.

"I need another word besides 'shaper' to make sense of this."

My cheeks started to burn. "It—um. It holds everything in place. Like sucks it all in. To create a more appealing shape."

Aiden's right eyebrow arched dramatically. "That sounds terribly uncomfortable."

"It is. It's like a corset made of spandex."

"Who on earth would spend money on something like that?"

Someone with a lot to suck in, I thought bitterly. "Someone who needs one."

Aiden frowned as he inched his hand up to the top of the shaper which rested right beneath the underwire of my bra. He ran the tips of his fingers along the half inch of bare skin exposed there before slipping them under the shaper and pulling it down.

My breathing quickened.

He was going to see me. All of me. Was I ready for that? The last time Vince and I had sex I'd left my bra and shirt on for this exact reason. I had big boobs which weren't nearly as perky as they used to be and I didn't want him to see all the jiggling that was bound to happen if we were going to have sex.

Aiden continued pulling the shaper down.

"Wait," I said, right when he had it down around my ribs.

He paused. "Is something wrong?"

I shimmied out from under him and stood up. “I’ll take it off.” This way I could control what he saw and felt. I pulled the shaper off the rest of the way, letting my dress hide my body as I stepped out of it. This was better. Much better.

Maybe we could fuck with the dress on.

I tossed the shaper aside.

Aiden was laying on his side with his head propped up in his hand, his elbow on the mattress. He gave me a quizzical look. “I hope you didn’t spend a lot of money on that thing. You look the same.”

I looked down at myself. “No I don’t. You can see—”

“You.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

Aiden sat up. Then he got to his feet and stood in front of me. He was tall. About as tall as Vince and easily over six foot by a good couple inches. He put a hand on my hip. “You have no fucking clue how beautiful you are, do you Cheryl?”

My mouth went dry. “I’m not—”

He put a finger on my lips, silencing me. “Enough. I won’t hear it. And I wouldn’t lie to you. You’re spectacular. And that shaper belongs in the trash.”

The only times Vince had complimented me over the last six months or so was when I had that shaper on.

He moved his finger from my lips and distracted my self-loathing thoughts with a tender kiss. Aiden used his own cheek to nudge my face to the side so he could trail his kisses along my jaw and then down the side of my neck. When he pinched my skin gently with his teeth and ran a hand over my hip, moving the fabric of my dress to the side, I grabbed hold of his shoulders.

All thoughts about the shaper slipped from my mind.

He continued lifting the dress, rolling it out of his way against my skin until it was completely over my hip, exposing my black lace panties and bare legs.

Aiden dragged his thumb over the top of the panties. Then his lips moved back to my mouth and his tongue slipped between my teeth as his hand dove into the front of my panties.

I moaned into his mouth when his fingertips grazed my clit.

Honestly, I hadn't been touched like this in so long. Years. When Vince and I had sex it was never about me. Hell, I didn't want it to be. I couldn't relax around him. I couldn't let him make me feel good. And he never wanted to bother. It was always me on my knees in front of him and then me on my back while he fucked me until he came.

And then it was over.

This was a nice change of pace.

Aiden rolled the pads of his fingers over my swollen clit, pulling my juices over it until the softest touch had my insides straining for a release.

Then, right when I thought I couldn't take any more, he pulled my panties down and pushed me backward, sending me down on the sofa bed.

He came down on top of me and showered me in kisses. Sweet ones. Aggressive ones. Ear lobe pinching ones. I trembled beneath him when he undid the sash on my dress. When it came apart the wrap dress came undone and he pushed it open, revealing my bare belly and black bra in the process.

I felt two seconds of utter terror as he gazed at me.

Then he smiled, shook his head, and looked me in the eyes. "Don't you ever put that shaper back on. You hear me? Or I'll punish you."

"P-punish me?"

"You heard me, kitten. I'll rip it off you with my bare hands and bend you over my knee. Is that what you want?"

He was toying with me. Surely.

Aiden grabbed the front of my bra and pulled down. My breasts spilled out of the cups and he descended upon them, swirling his tongue over my nipples and biting down gently on the fullness of my breasts.

I moaned and closed my eyes. If he wanted to bend me over his knee and slap my ass I'd let him. Hell. I'd probably like it.

Aiden propped himself up on his elbows and worked his way down the length of my body, planting kisses upon my skin as he went. On my breasts, ribs, stomach, and hips. Then he nudged my legs apart and settled between them.

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Wait."

He looked up at me, his face framed by my thighs.

"That's too much," I said. "I'm not ready for you to—you know."

"Taste you?"

It sounded strange. I nodded.

Aiden smiled and came back up. "Then we can save that for another time."

I was fairly certain I would feel the same way another time. I'd never had a man go down on me before and it scared the hell out of me to think about letting Aiden do it. I was sure I wouldn't like it. I'd be too in my own head to enjoy how it felt—and even then, how could that feel good? It just sounded messy.

Really messy.

Aiden leaned over me. His right hand moving down to rest on the inside of my left thigh. "You know what you need, Cheryl?"

"What?" I asked, my voice pinched. He was so close. I could feel his cock pressing down on my thigh as he held himself above me. He was rock hard. And large. Very large. "What do I need?"

"An orgasm."

“I—”

Aiden ran a finger along the side of my pussy. I yelped in surprise and he smiled down at me as he traced my opening.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he growled.

I wanted to say something sexy back to him, but words were lost on me, and by the time I’d made sense of my muddled thoughts they were blown to smithereens once more when he eased a finger inside me.

“Oh God,” I breathed, clutching at the sheets on either side of me.

He pressed in deeper, filling me, curling his finger and flicking it inside me until that ball of tension that had formed suddenly exploded, ricocheting through my body and pushing a cry of pleasure from my lips that Aiden sealed with his own mouth. He swallowed my cry as I came, and then he slid another finger inside me, stretching me to take his thick digits while pressing the pad of his thumb down on my clit.

I nearly screamed his name at the ceiling.

I came a second time and he ceased what he was doing between my legs to smile sheepishly at me. “See? Do you feel better?”

I nodded as I gasped for breath.

He rose to his feet. “Stay where you are.”

He left me there, lying on my back with my legs apart like a starfish. I did as he asked and didn’t move. When he returned he had a condom in his hand. He pinched it between his teeth and pulled his shirt over his head.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

He paused with his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his sweatpants. He mumbled, “What?” The condom was still pinched in his teeth.

“Your body. That’s—”

“All yours,” he grinned.

“A lot,” I finished. He was ripped. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. He was all lean muscle, right down to the deep cut V of his hips. I swallowed and watched him pull his pants down. Was I ready for this? Could I handle this?

He pulled his skin tight black boxers off and his cock sprang free.

I shook my head. Nope. Not ready.

Aiden rolled the condom on. I couldn’t look away from his cock as he gave his length two strokes and then came toward me on the bed. He must have seen my nervous expression because he stopped. “Is something wrong?”

I licked my lips. “It’s been a long time for me. And you—you’re a lot bigger than any man I’ve been with.” Than Vince. He was a lot bigger than Vince. The only man I’d ever been with.

Aiden smirked before kneeling on the bed. He pushed my legs apart and settled between them to place his length on my pussy. He rocked his hips back and forth, sliding his length up and over my clit, teasing me.

It was delicious.

“Are you ready, kitten?”

I nodded. I was as ready as I was going to be. And I wanted this. I’d wanted this for weeks now. Aiden was all I’d been able to think about and our kiss in the bathroom at the party had set that in stone. Try as I might, all I could think about was him. And this moment. And now it was here.

“Please,” I whispered.

Aiden took hold of his cock and eased his first couple inches inside of me.

The pressure was intense, but he went slow, pushing himself in and then pulling out to let me relax. He did this a couple of times before finally pushing all of his length inside of me. I grit my teeth as the pressure gave way to a brief flash of pain; and then euphoria.

Aiden slid his cock in and out of me. I could hear how wet I was. Feel how slick my pussy was with every stroke.

“You’re so fucking tight,” Aiden groaned.

His arousal only turned me on more.

My toes curled. My eyes rolled back in my head and my back arched. Aiden slid a hand under my lower back, holding me up, and squeezed my hip with his other hand. I moaned and so did he, and then he held both of my hips and fucked me hard and deep.

“Yes!” I screamed, grabbing onto the sheets as he unleashed himself and let go.

I came instantly. It left me feeling weak with trembling muscles, but Aiden didn’t seem to notice as he bowed his head and grit his teeth. The muscle in his jaw flexed.

I put my hand in the middle of his chest and felt the power beneath my palm. “Fuck me until you come,” I whispered. “Fuck me how you’ve thought of fucking me all this time.”

He leaned over me and planted a hand on the bed beside my head. He stared down at me. “You’re not ready for that, kitten. But you will be,” he cooed. “You will be.”

Then he kissed me. I hooked my legs around his waist. He rolled his hips, driving into places inside of me that had never been touched, and I clung to him with desperation.

Another climax was on the horizon, and so was his. I could feel him holding back. Every muscle was strained against his release as I ran my hands over his shoulders and arms. I traced the veins in his forearms and closed my eyes when he closed a hand over my breast.

How could he possibly give me more than this? How could there be more I wasn’t ready for?

This in itself was glorious.

CHAPTER 19



AIDEN

When I stirred awake on Saturday morning I had no idea what time it was. I didn't even know *where* I was until I lifted my head from the pillow to peer around at my living room awash in sunlight.

Then I realized my arm was asleep and wrapped beneath Cheryl, who was sleeping curled up against my side with her head on my bicep and one leg draped over my hip.

Jesus.

Fucking.

Christ.

If Ellie knew I'd slept with Cheryl last night she would cleave my head from my shoulders and mount it on a stake outside Ryder's house to warn all other Lost Breed members how not to behave when a woman seeks refuge in your home.

And I'd deserve it.

I rubbed my eyes with the heel of my free hand before blinking away some of my fatigue so I could better see Cheryl. Her makeup was still smeared from crying.

Right. The crying.

I never should have slept with her. I should have made her comfortable and left her to sleep on her own in privacy. I should have walked away when she told me she wanted it.

But I was too weak for that. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted a woman in my life and it had been worth the

wait. She was a wonder. Her body, all curves and soft supple skin, had felt so good beneath mine. The way she wrapped her legs around my waist made me come undone and lose myself.

She was glorious in every sense of the word. Heaven sent. And so God damn sexy.

I tucked a strand of Cheryl's blonde hair behind her ear. She moaned softly in her sleep and snuggled up more closely against my chest.

I kissed her forehead.

I would protect her. I decided right then and there that if anything or anyone ever tried to harm a hair on her head, they would have me to contend with. And I wasn't as nice as I looked.

Cheryl would have the protection of the entire Lost Breed MC if she needed it.

I couldn't help myself from running my fingers through her hair one more time.

She stirred awake.

"Sorry," I muttered, my voice still thick from sleep.

Her eyes fluttered open and she blinked at me, squinting against the brightness of the morning. "That's alright." She smiled and leaned away a little bit. She moved her leg off my hip.

She buried her face in her pillow as she yawned and then she rubbed at her eyes. "I haven't slept that soundly in weeks."

"You earned it," I chuckled.

She blushed.

She was so fucking cute in the morning. Even with the mascara tracks on her cheeks and the bed head, she was after my heart. "How do you feel?"

She shrugged. "Better than last night. Still a bit foggy and confused and—scared," she admitted. "There are a lot of changes coming that I don't know how I'm going to tackle."

“I’m here to help you. And so is Ellie. We’ve got your back.”

Her smile broadened. “I appreciate that.” She propped herself up on her elbow, releasing my arm from beneath her head. Pins and needles set in and I tried to disguise how uncomfortable I was as blood flowed back to my hand. “I haven’t felt this light in ages.”

“Light?” I asked.

She nodded. “Like I’m not carrying a thousand pounds of weight on my shoulders. Like I’m myself again.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She rubbed her eyes again and then realized she still had makeup on. Her eyes widened a bit as she blinked at the dark smudges on her fingertips. “Oh. I must look absolutely insane right now.” Her cheeks turned an even darker shade of red and she gathered the blankets around herself, as if to hide her nakedness, which I’d already seen and committed to memory.

“I think you look sexy.”

“Stop it,” she said, giving in to a little bit of laughter.

“I mean it. You do.” She looked happy and content and relaxed. A well fucked woman was a beautiful woman. And she’d been well fucked last night that was for damn sure.

Cheryl let out a soft giggle and sat up, holding the blankets across her chest as she did so. She looked around until her gaze fell on her clothes, then she swung her legs over the side of the sofa bed and got up in a hurry, padding over to her dress and wrapping it around herself, tying the sash around her waist.

“You should wear that with no bra more often,” I winked.

“I would never.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody wants to—” she paused and shook her head. “Never mind. I just wouldn’t be comfortable.”

I shrugged. “Suit yourself. Can I interest you in a cup of coffee?”

Cheryl nodded. “That would be lovely.”

I got out of bed stark naked and went into the kitchen. Cheryl watched me go, looking back and forth between me and my pile of clothes on the floor where I’d discarded them last night. “Are you going to get dressed?”

“After the coffee is brewing.”

She nodded. Her cheeks were bright pink again. I loved how shy and bashful she was. “I’m just going to use your bathroom.”

Cheryl padded off down the hall leaving me to finish brewing the coffee and get dressed. Once the coffee started to drip I grabbed my sweats and pulled them on. I didn’t bother with the boxers or the T shirt, opting for comfort instead—besides, she’d already seen me nude. There was nothing to hide anymore.

The coffee finished brewing when she came out of the bathroom. I poured us each a mug and fetched the milk from the fridge, setting it down on the kitchen counter. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Black,” she said.

I put the milk away and brought the two piping hot mugs of coffee into the living room. We both sat on the sofa opposite the bed, tucked ourselves into the corners, and sipped our coffee.

“Thank you again for letting me stay here last night,” Cheryl said.

“You’re welcome.” Thanks were definitely not needed. Especially not after how we’d spent the night.

“I’ll get out of your hair today and find a hotel.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Well, I can’t just stay here. This is your home. Do you know of any places around that are relatively cheap? I don’t

have much cash on me and I'm sure Vinny has frozen all my cards by now."

"Cheryl. You're not staying in a hotel. You can stay here until you're on your feet and have a safe place to stay. The only affordable hotels in this city are the ones that aren't suitable for a girl like you."

"A girl like me?" She mused with a crooked smile.

"You'll stick out like a sore thumb. Besides, I wouldn't be able to sleep knowing you were crashing in some dumpster dive of a motel sharing walls with addicts and domestic abusers. It's not happening. If you'd rather stay with Ellie I'm sure she and I can arrange something so that—"

Cheryl shook her head. "No. I'll stay here. If you'll have me."

"Of course I will."

She smiled down at her coffee mug. "I owe you."

"Nah. I was an ass before. I'm the one who owes you."

"You were an ass."

I snorted into my coffee. We sat quietly for a minute and took a few more sips of our coffee as the sun continued to brighten the living room. I hadn't even looked at a clock yet. It must be around seven thirty or eight o'clock. There were cars going by outside pretty frequently which suggested people were out and about starting their day. I'd be surprised if it was any earlier.

"Do you want to go to the house to get any of your things today?" I asked.

Cheryl paused with her lips pressed to the side of her mug. Then she lowered her coffee to rest the bottom of the mug on her knee. She pursed her lips. "I think I'd rather let the dust settle before I go back there. Vinny will be—he'll be really mad. And I don't want to be around when he's like that. I think I'd like to wait a bit and go on a day where I know he'll be at the office. Then I can get in and get out and take only what I need. And my mother's china."

“I’ll go with you when you’re ready.”

“You will?”

I nodded. “Sure. I’ll borrow my buddy’s truck and we’ll pack up a load and bring it back here. We’ll take as much as we can fit.”

“That would really help me out. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I watched as she played with a loose string at the hem of her dress. Her nails were bright pink and perfectly shaped. Her tan was even and the ends of her hair perfectly cut. Cheryl had enjoyed the luxuries of her lifestyle, that was for sure, and I wondered if she knew how drastically everything was about to change for her.

Maybe I could show her that life on a budget wasn’t as bad as the elite seemed to think.

“Do you have plans for the day?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“How about I show you around the city? I can show you the best local spots to go. Places to eat. To go dancing. To get the best cup of java,” I held up my mug.

“That sounds lovely.”

“The weather is supposed to be good too. What do you say we go out on my bike?”

“I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

“Second chances are for things you’ve never done,” I said.

Cheryl grinned, and her smile lit up the living room more than the sun. “I’m in. I just need to shower first.”

“And we need to find you something to wear that isn’t that dress.”

“I have jeans in my bag.”

“Perfect.”

She stood up and brought her now empty coffee mug to the kitchen, where she loaded it in the dishwasher. Then she padded past me to go to the bathroom. “Do you mind if I hop in your shower?”

“Not at all. But I have a condition.”

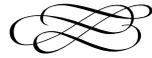
“Oh?”

I stood up. “I’m coming in with you.”

She let out a delighted giggle when I stripped off my pants, and then she hurried down the hall to the bathroom, where I ran after her to find her standing in front of the shower door undoing her dress. It fell to her feet and I looked at her in the light of day.

“Damn,” I breathed.

CHAPTER 20



CHERYL

I stared into Aiden's bright green eyes as he leaned in close to inspect the strap under my chin of the helmet he'd found for me on a top shelf in his garage. It was glossy black with a tinted visor and a thin lime green stripe down the middle.

"Very good," he said, giving the chin strap a gentle tug. "Now turn your head back and forth quickly. The helmet shouldn't move."

I did as he said. The helmet was snug and didn't jostle around at all.

He laughed and put his hand on top of my head to stop me from shaking anymore. "That's good. That's good. You're all set. I'll get on the bike first and then you after me, okay?"

"Okay," I called, raising my voice so he could hear me through the helmet.

I must have been yelling because he chuckled as he pulled his own helmet on and did up the chin strap. Then he turned, putting his back to me, and swung one leg over the bike to settle down on the seat. He started the bike up.

The roar that came out of it practically made me jump out of my skin. I took a couple steps back and waited as he turned it around in the driveway to face the street. Then he nodded for me to get on the back.

I had no idea how to get on a bike like this.

He'd told me to put one foot on the back peg, so I did that, resting the ball of my foot on the middle of it. Then I put my

hands on his shoulders and hoisted myself up and over before lowering my butt down on the seat and shimmying forward so that the inside of my thighs rested against the sides of his ass.

I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Ready?” He called over his shoulder.

I nodded. “Ready!”

He reached back and put a hand on my knee. Then he gave me a good squeeze before lifting his feet off the driveway, giving it some gas, and pulling out onto the street.

I squeezed his waist tight, pressing the side of my helmet to his back.

I’d never done anything like this before. The riskiest thing I’d ever done was get in Vince’s old Porsche back in Georgia one night after a Christmas party when he’d had one too many drinks. That stupid decision had proved to be a lot more dangerous than being on the back of Aiden’s bike.

We drove down his residential street and I got a feel for the bike. How it took corners. How, at his instruction, I wasn’t supposed to fight it if we had to lean. I just had to stay in line with his body. It was a bit foreign and strange at first, but by the time we hit roads with a higher speed limit I was ready, and we were travelling at a good sixty miles per hour within twenty minutes or so.

If I was a daredevil I might have thrown my hands above my head for a few seconds, just to feel the rush of the wind and the thrill of the ride.

But I was not a daredevil.

I was a good girl.

If my dad was still alive he would have been horrified to find out that I rode on the back of a motorcycle with a guy I barely knew—especially since the guy was in a gang. Or club. Or whatever term Aiden deemed most appropriate.

The leather jacket he wore had the Lost Breed stamped across his shoulder blades in red letters. It was the same jacket he’d been wearing the day I was rear ended in the Mercedes.

My mom would think this was all an experience. Good or bad, she believed in collecting as many as you could in the time you had on earth. She would say it was worth taking the chance to get on the back of his motorcycle for the experience alone. If I didn't like it I never had to do it again.

But I did like it. I liked it a lot.

I liked how close we were. I liked how it felt to wrap my arms around his waist and hold on tight when we took corners. I liked the feeling of his muscles tightening as he held the bike in the corners.

I liked how if I squeezed my thighs I was squeezing him.

And I especially liked the way the bike vibrated beneath me.

It was a tease and a reminder of the fun he and I had the previous night.

I'd never had an orgasm during sex before. Not once. Aiden had made me come several times over the course of the evening—and again this morning in the shower. Thinking of it now made me sweat.

He'd pushed me under the water and pinned me against the glass wall, holding me there as he lifted my leg and stroked my pussy relentlessly. I came three times before he decided he was ready to have sex, and then he rewarded me with even more orgasms.

I had no idea what I'd done to deserve it. But I was glad. I hadn't felt this good in ages. This strong. This secure in my own body.

When Aiden had looked at me this morning, stark naked in the middle of his bathroom, I hadn't felt that paralyzing anxiety over my body and how it looked. I hadn't wanted to manipulate my angles by contorting my position or leaning into the shadows. I just let myself be. And he worshipped all of me with patience and selflessness.

We took a sharp right turn and I squeezed him with my thighs. When we came out of the corner he opened up on the throttle. I let out a delighted laugh and held on tight as he

continued to accelerate. The bike ate up the pavement and my joyful cry was lost on the wind as we reached high speeds.

I'd never laughed like that with Vince. Not even once.

We'd been riding through the city for about an hour or so when we took a few less populated roads and ended up outside the auto body shop Aiden had recommended for the Mercedes.

He pulled up into the gravel lot and parked the bike alongside the shop. He got off first, took his helmet off, and hooked it on the handles. Then he offered me his hand and helped me slide off the bike. My sneakers crunched on the gravel when I landed, and then I worked to get the strap undone under my chin.

It was really hot outside and standing still with a giant padded helmet on was not helping my case. My boobs were sweating.

I pulled the helmet off and sighed with relief. My hair, all filled with sweat around the nape, cascaded down my back, and I hurried to pull my elastic off my wrist to bundle it up into a messy bun.

Aiden patted my ass and guided me toward the front of the shop where Ellie had come to stand in the shade near the bay doors. When she spotted me she gave me a bright smile and stepped into the sun to give me a hug.

"Cheryl!" She let me go and looked me over. "You look good. Aiden didn't kidnap you and force you to ride on the back of his hog, did he?"

"Hog?" I blinked.

"The bike," Aiden said, nodding toward his motorcycle.

"Oh," I said shaking my head. "No. He invited me to go for a ride and I'd never been on a bike. So I thought, why not?"

"Mm hmm," Ellie said, shooting a dark look at Aiden.

He held his hands up. "What? She's telling the truth."

The same tall, ruggedly handsome guy who'd worked on my Mercedes emerged from the shade in the shop and draped an arm around Ellie's shoulders. "Aiden," he nodded in greeting. "And Cheryl, right?"

I nodded. "Nice to meet you."

"Axel," he said, pointing his thumb at his chest. "I hear you left that prick. Good for you."

Ellie slapped him in the stomach. Hard. "*Axel*. Shut up."

"It's alright," I smiled. "He is a prick."

Axel squeezed Ellie's shoulders. "See babe? She agrees with me. I was just stating the obvious." Then he turned his attention back to me. "I was glad to hear you walked out on him. Aiden and I said some shit behind his back."

I looked at Aiden who rocked back on his heels and gave me an innocent shrug. "I can't deny it."

Ellie rolled her eyes at the two men and gave me a what-can-you-do sort of look. Then she crossed her arms under her chest, revealing the muscles in her forearms and upper arms that I hadn't noticed up until this point. I guess you'd get jacked from working around cars and bikes like this every day. "Do you two have plans for tonight? Axel and I are going to a concert in Central Park. You guys should come."

Aiden feigned surprise. "You two? Getting out of the house? No way. Who's watching the hellions?"

"Jamie," Ellie said crossly.

"No shit?" Aiden said. Then he looked at me. "What do you think? You up for a concert in the park?"

A concert in the park? It sounded like the most wonderful thing to my ears. The most excitement I'd had since moving to New York City was the day I was rear ended. And then the night of Vince's work party. I was only realizing now that both events involved Aiden, and it made me smile.

"Yes. I'd like to go," I said.

Ellie clapped her hands together. “Excellent! It will be fun. I haven’t had a night out in ages, and if I’m being honest, I could really use a cocktail. Or four.”

Axel ran his hand down his face and sighed. “I’m designated driver I guess.”

“Yes you are babe,” Ellie said, patting his side. “You’ll be rewarded for it. Don’t fret.”

His glum expression shifted and he waggled his eyebrows at Aiden, who rolled his eyes. “Come on you two. I don’t need to know that.”

“You’re welcome,” Axel grinned.

I giggled and Aiden turned to me. “Want to go grab some lunch? Then we’ll meet these clowns at the park later?”

I nodded. “Sounds good. I’m starving.”

“I know a good little sandwich place. They grill the best Panini’s and—”

“Here he goes about his damn Panini’s,” Axel grumbled.

“Bite me,” Aiden snapped.

“Your obsession with grilled sandwiches is weird, man. I’m telling you,” Axel said.

“It’s not an obsession,” Aiden said defensively.

The two of them proceeded to go back and forth like this for several minutes while Ellie and I watched and exchanged amused looks. Then she hooked her arm through Axel’s and tugged him back toward the shop. “Come on, tough guy. We have work to do. Don’t let him get under your skin. You make it too easy sometimes.”

Axel mumbled something inaudible under his breath as Aiden squared his shoulders and looked at me. “Feels good to come out on top.”

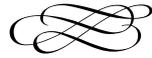
“Oh my God,” I laughed, rolling my eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing. Take me to these glorious Panini’s of which you speak.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

CHAPTER 21



AIDEN

The outdoor concert was a lot more organized than I'd initially expected.

Tents and pop up fences marked the beer gardens; the perfect place to sit with a beer or cider while the music swelled in the background. There were food trucks stationed not far from the beer gardens, and pop up bathrooms built into industrial trailers set at the back of the open space of Central park being used for the show.

The music wasn't really my cup of tea, but that didn't matter.

Cheryl was having a glorious time.

She and Ellie stood a good fifteen feet or so ahead of me and Axel, who were lingering at the back of the crowd of people engulfing the stage. The two women had their hands in the air as they obnoxiously sang the lyrics to each other over the roar of the guitar and steady beat of the drums. I had no clue what song this was, but they seemed to like it, and watching Cheryl bounce her arms like some sort of gangster was too entertaining.

Axel nudged me in the ribs. "She needed this."

I nodded.

Cheryl definitely deserved a night off. A night where she could let her hair down and not spend all of her time worrying. Worrying about serving the right pairing of wine with that meal, about what outfit she was going to wear, about her

lipstick, nails, cheating ex-boyfriend douche bag of the year, or her damn fucking shaper.

I watched, transfixed by the way her hips swung from side to side, as Cheryl spun Ellie around on the grass and then threw her head back with laughter.

“It’s like her spirit came back to life,” I said, still transfixed by every move she made. “She’s a totally different girl than she was just a few days ago.”

Axel snorted. “I never knew I was in the company of a poet.”

“Shut up.”

Axel’s response was interrupted by Ellie and Cheryl, who, hand in hand, came tumbling away from the crowd to join us.

Ellie hooked her arm through Axel’s. “I think I’m going to treat myself to one more cider. Any takers?”

“I’ll join you,” Cheryl beamed. Then she looked over at me. Her smile lit her face, which was flushed from dancing. Her hair was a bit damp around her face where sweat matted it down and I thought it made her look sexy as hell. “Want to have a drink?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I’m driving after. But I’ll sit with you.”

The four of us made our way across a patch of dry grass to the beer garden, where we showed the security guard at the entrance the stamps on our wrists from the last time we came in for a drink. He waved us through, his perfect scowl never breaking, and we made our way to a table near the edge of the fence that still had a view of the stage.

After securing our seats Axel went up and ordered me and him a bottle of water and two ciders for the girls.

Ellie ran her fingers through her hair, shaking it out and airing out her scalp. “I haven’t danced this much in ages. My legs are going to be so sore tomorrow.”

“Me neither,” Cheryl said.

“You’ve got moves,” I told her.

“Stop,” Cheryl giggled.

Ellie leaned forward while fanning her face with one hand. “He’s not just trying to blow smoke up your ass, Cheryl. You can move that body of yours. I caught a couple guys checking you out. Thought for a minute I was going to have to pretend you were my girlfriend.”

“That would have been hot,” Axel said upon getting back to our table with the drinks. He set them down before dropping into the open chair between me and Ellie.

Cheryl immediately reached for her cider and tipped her head back to take a sip. A bit escaped the lip of the can to trickle down her chin and onto her neck. She hurried to wipe it away but it wasn’t before my cock twitched in my pants.

Everything the girl did was sexy to me.

I’d been paying attention to the way her lips formed her words. How she sometimes walked toe first, like a ballerina who forgot she wasn’t in class anymore. How she blinked more than most people and chewed her bottom lip when she thought nobody was watching.

Ellie stole a moment to message Jamie and check on everything back home. Jamie reported back that all was well and that she and the kids were watching the last half hour of a movie before bed time. With peace of mind that her kids were comfortable and having fun, Ellie set down her phone, downed the rest of her cider, and got to her feet.

She turned wide eyed with excitement to Cheryl. “We only have about forty-five minutes left before the bands are done for the night. What do you say we make the most of it and dance our asses off?”

Cheryl drained her cider, slammed it victoriously down on the table, and then sprang to her feet with a triumphant cry. “Let’s do it!”

Axel and I exchanged a wary look.

Then Cheryl turned her big blue eyes on me and held out her hand. “Are you coming, Aiden?”

“Uh-”

“Please?”

I looked from her to her hand. Then I took it and stood, giving Axel an apologetic glance as I rose. “Sorry man. I’m going out there with the girls.”

“No need to be sorry,” Ellie interjected, clapping a hand on Axel’s shoulder. “He’s coming too.”

A few minutes later Axel and I found ourselves immersed in the crowd around the stage. Bodies swayed and bounced to the music, and although I wasn’t much of a dancer, I couldn’t complain with where I’d ended up. Cheryl had her arms draped over my shoulders. Her hands, which were currently hanging limp over my back, would occasionally wrap around my neck so she could sink her fingers into my hair.

I held her waist and lower back and enjoyed how it felt to have her moving like this beneath my touch. Her hips moved from side to side, her stomach rolled, and she got her arms into the movement, which made her look very fluid yet controlled.

She was beautiful.

When she closed her eyes in the middle of a song and faced her head down to roll her hips in a wide circle I put a finger under her chin and lifted her face. She never opened her eyes, but her lips puckered for the kiss she knew was coming, and I pressed my mouth to hers and tasted her apple cider.

She giggled and I kissed her more deeply, silencing her with my tongue.

Her fingers plunged into my hair and she pressed her whole body to mine, crushing her breasts against my chest.

I was aware of strangers bumping into my back. Axel and Ellie were dancing behind Cheryl. But I didn’t care about any of it. For a moment, just a brief moment, it was just me and her dancing to a song I didn’t know, feeling the pressure of

each other's bodies, kissing like we were kids without a care in the world.

When we parted she held onto me. We were still swaying to the music, but we were offbeat and a little too slow. She smiled.

We spent the rest of the concert like that.

Dancing like fools and kissing and laughing. Ellie and Axel seemed to have a good time as well—especially Ellie, who flitted from dancing with us to dancing with strangers like a moth. By the time the concert wound down and the encore ended we were standing with a group of people whose names we didn't know, saying goodnight and wishing everyone a safe drive home.

Cheryl entwined her fingers with mine and rested her head on my shoulder as we joined the crowd of music lovers on the way out of the park. "I'm so tired."

"We'll get back to my place and get you to bed."

She nodded sleepily and indulged in a yawn.

Axel and Ellie were up ahead of us, also walking hand in hand.

It felt nice to have what they had. Sure, it wasn't as deep as what they had, not even close, but I had a girl nonetheless, and she made me feel alive. Happy. Like myself.

It was the first time since Max died that I'd felt good and not felt guilty for it.

Love helped heal Rhys. Why not me?

We escaped the park and said goodnight to Axel and Ellie, who took a right when we reached the parking lot and we took a left. Cheryl and I walked down the rows of cars until we found my bike. I helped her put her helmet on, checked the strap, and got on the bike before letting her climb on behind me.

She gave my shoulders a quick little massage before leaning in close, squeezing my hips with her thighs, and wrapping her arms around my waist.

I closed a hand over hers before pushing the kickstand up with the heel of my boot, starting up the bike, and lifting both feet off the pavement to pull out of the lot and out into traffic. We inched our way to the exit, clogged up by all the other concert goers trying to leave in their cars.

When we reached the street I pulled out and opened up on the throttle. Cheryl held me tighter, which was exactly what I'd been hoping she'd do, and I wove gently between cars until we came out at the front of the pack and led the way through several empty intersections.

We hadn't been riding for more than fifteen minutes when I caught the bright flash of blue LED headlights in my side mirror.

A luxury car of some sort was weaving through traffic the same way I just had. Not too aggressively, but insistently, and intentionally. The car came up on the right hand side but hung back for a few blocks before pulling in behind me in our lane. He couldn't have been farther than three feet from my back tire.

I didn't like that.

I really didn't like that.

Three feet was not enough space if I had to make a panic stop or if they fucked up—and the first person they'd come into contact with was Cheryl. There was no way I was going to put her in danger like this.

Before jumping to conclusions I switched into the right lane to go around a yellow cab. I cut in front of him and then moved back into the right lane to speed up a bit in an effort to put some distance between me and the tailgater.

But he followed me.

When we passed under a lit overpass I realized what was happening. The car was a pearl white Mercedes.

It was Vince.

I tightened my grip on the throttle and then reached back to put a hand on Cheryl's knee. She leaned into my touch and I

said, over my shoulder, “Hold on tight. We’re going to do some intense riding. Can you handle it?”

Cheryl, completely clueless as to the threat riding our ass, nodded. Her helmet bumped my shoulder. “Punch it!” She cried joyfully.

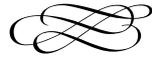
She let out a cheerful shriek as I opened up the throttle. The engine roared and rumbled and I swerved between cars, earning us more than a few annoyed honks from other drivers.

And still the Mercedes followed.

So I swerved right, drove over the sidewalk, and cut through a narrow lane between two tall business towers. We came spitting out the other side and I doubled back in the opposite direction to put as much space between us and Vince as possible before rerouting to head back to my place.

The motherfucker was asking for a whole world of hurt pulling a stunt like that.

CHAPTER 22



CHERYL

I was a little surprised when Aiden drove down his street at nearly triple the speed he'd gone when we left earlier in the afternoon. He pulled up onto his driveway and my ass lifted off the seat with how hard we hit the lip between the street and his drive.

He rolled up to the garage door which was opening slowly. I assumed he had an automatic door opener somewhere on the bike or in his pocket. He looked back and forth as he waited, his fingers drumming the throttle, as if he was impatient. Or waiting for something.

I looked back and forth too but saw nothing besides a neighbor pulling into their driveway and laughing with their passenger as they got out and walked up to the front door.

The garage opened enough for Aiden to pull in. He parked the bike, eased his way off, and then turned to help me off. He practically lifted me right up and set me back down. Then his hand plunged into his pocket and I heard a click.

The garage door opener.

The door began to descend. Then it paused.

"Fuck," Aiden growled. He clicked the button again. The door rolled all the way up and stayed there. "Fuck!"

"Aiden," I said, confused by his impatience.

He clicked the button again and the door began creeping down to the ground. When it got to about eye level Aiden bent

with it, peering out beneath it to the street. As he bent he pulled off his helmet.

I took mine off too, set it down on his bench, and swept my hair off my face. “What are you looking for?”

“Someone was following us.”

“What?”

He straightened up and looked over at me. “Someone was ___”

Headlights lit up his legs as someone pulled into the driveway.

Aiden snapped into action when a splintering crash split my ears. I clamped my hands over them as Aiden leapt toward me and tackled me down to the cement floor, knocking me aside as something came barreling through the garage door and slammed into Aiden’s bike, pushing it right to the back wall of the garage.

Then everything went still.

Aiden was over the top of me. He had his arms over my head and I could hear his rapid breathing.

“What’s happening?” I breathed, disoriented.

“Are you hurt?”

“No,” I said. Besides my aching ass from where I fell, I was perfectly fine.

The garage was filled with the sound of a running engine. A high end, quiet, sophisticated purr of sorts. It was very familiar.

Aiden looked over his shoulder and I was able to look past him at the Mercedes he’d just spared me from being struck by.

My Mercedes.

“What the hell?” I mumbled.

Aiden got to his hands and knees and then pulled me up to my feet with him. He pushed me back a few paces toward the door into his house. “Go inside, Cheryl.”

I shook my head.

“Go inside!”

“No!”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Hard. “I’m not fucking asking you, woman. Go inside and lock the door behind you. I don’t have time to argue.”

The sound of groaning metal reached my ears as Vince emerged from the driver’s side door. He had a gash on his forehead and he stumbled a couple steps forward before bracing himself on the crumpled, steaming hood. He pointed an angry finger at us.

“*You,*” he spat.

He began making his way around the car, keeping a hand on it to steady himself.

“Vince,” I said. His name fell from my lips before I knew what I was doing. It drew his attention to me, and his angry sneer morphed into a terrifying smile.

“Hi baby,” he said.

My skin crawled. “What are you doing?”

“I’m here to get what’s fucking mine.”

“I’m not leaving with you,” I said, as firmly as I could manage. I was sure my voice sounded as weak and terrified as I felt.

Aiden stepped in front of me. “You don’t want to do this man.”

“Oh, believe me,” Vince balked, “I do. I really want to do this. You stole my woman. Bastard. And you’re going to pay for it.”

“He’s so drunk,” I breathed.

Just as I spoke Vince swayed on the spot and pressed a hand to his head. He mumbled something incoherent as Aiden spun to me and began forcing me backward toward the door. “Cheryl. Please. Don’t fight me on this. He’s dangerous. He’s

hurt you before and you and I both know he'll do it again if he gets the chance. Go inside." His last words were a desperate plea for me to do as he asked. His brows were drawn together and I knew the expression on his face was fear.

But not fear for himself.

Fear for me.

"I can talk him down," I said, grabbing his wrists as he wrenched open the door and tried to push me inside his house. Vince had made it almost all the way around the car. His eyes roamed the shop looking for something.

A weapon, most likely.

"No you can't. He's fucked out of his mind. Go inside. Lock the door. Don't open it unless I tell you to. Got it?" He shoved me over the threshold into the house.

My chin trembled. My stomach flipped over. My fingertips tingled and my palms started to sweat, and my eyes darted over his shoulder as Vince stooped and picked up a piece of Aiden's destroyed motorcycle from the floor. I swallowed. "But he'll try to kill you, Aiden. Please—"

"I can handle myself," he said, and then he grabbed the door handle and pulled it closed. He yelled at me from the other side to lock it.

I stared at the deadbolt. It stared back.

Could I really do it? Could I twist that lock and trap Aiden in there with Vince when he was like this?

I reached out with a trembling hand and locked the deadbolt.

Then I backed away, staring at it like I'd sentenced Aiden to a terrible fate on the other side.

I can handle myself, he'd said.

I had to trust him. I had to have faith that he knew what he was up against and he could take care of it. There were other things I could do to help.

Like call in reinforcements.

I fished my phone out of my pocket. My hands were still shaking so badly and were so sweaty that I nearly dropped it on the floor. I let out a nervous squeak as it nearly slipped from my fingertips, and then scrolled through to find Ellie's number. I lifted the phone to my ear and it rang.

And rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Until her voice filled the phone.

"Ellie! Please, I need—" I stopped talking. I'd gotten her voicemail. "Shit!"

I didn't have any other numbers I could call. I knew nobody who could come to help us because I'd spent all my time in New York City agonizing over what I looked like and how good dinner was going to taste—a dinner I would restrict myself from even being able to enjoy. I'd been so consumed with creating a perfect life within the confines of my prison that I'd completely forgotten to look outside my tiny shoebox for fulfillment.

Now somebody needed my help and there wasn't a damn thing I could do for them.

And this wasn't just somebody. It was Aiden. The only person who really made me feel safe and who had changed how I thought I deserved to be treated by men. He was sweet to me, and not because he wanted something from me. He was protective, but not in a controlling or manipulative way.

And he made me feel good.

And he was stuck on the other side of the door with a shit faced Vinny—a monster.

My phone rang in my hand.

I gasped and stared down at the screen as Ellie's name flashed across it. I had to punch the green phone icon three times with my finger before it answered the call.

“Hey,” Ellie said. I heard a door close in the background. “Sorry I missed your call. My phone was on vibrate. We just got home. Did you have a good time? I haven’t had fun like that in ages and—”

“Ellie. We’re in trouble.”

“What?”

“Aiden needs help.”

“What’s happening?” Ellie asked. I could hear Axel asking her questions now.

“Vince followed us back to his place and crashed his car into Aiden’s garage. He nearly ran us over. And now Aiden is locked in there with him and I don’t know what to do and I don’t trust Vince not to try something crazy and—”

“Take a breath, Cheryl. Axel is on his way.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Please tell him to hurry.”

“He’s already out the door.”

“I didn’t know who to call,” I whispered. “I didn’t know if I could call the cops what with the whole, well, motorcycle gang thing—”

“Club,” Ellie said.

“Whatever. I’m scared for him. Vince is mean when he’s drunk.”

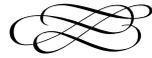
“You made the right call, Cheryl. Stay calm. Aiden is tough. He knows how to handle himself in a fight. And he won’t be alone for long. You just stay where you are and do as he says, okay?”

I swallowed.

“Okay?” Ellie repeated.

I nodded frantically and forced my thick tongue to work. “Okay.”

CHAPTER 23



AIDEN

Vince let out an angry yell and took a swipe at me with the broken piece of my exhaust he clutched in his hand. He must have been piss drunk not to be bothered by how hot that metal must have been.

I jumped back out of the way and skirted around him to draw him away from the door into the house.

He followed my retreat, waving the piece of chrome exhaust in my general direction while slurring a string of curses at me. “Fuck you, you fucking miserable pathetic excuse of a man. She could never want you. What could you give her that I can’t?”

A dozen answers raced through my head, but I knew they were the sort of things you didn’t say out loud to an irate moron.

I could give her a safe home, a happy place, a trustworthy partner, laughter, fun, relaxation, a sense of adventure, and a family. The Lost Breed.

“Answer me!” Vince bellowed, stumbling forward and knocking a bunch of my tools off the top shelf of my tool box.

Jackass.

I held up both hands. “Vince. You’re drunk. And you’re in a lot deeper than you think. You just drove your car through my garage, man.”

“I wanted to drive it through you,” he snarled.

“Well you gave it your best shot, sport.”

“Don’t patronize me,” he slurred.

“Don’t come into my home and threaten me then.”

Vince narrowed his eyes and swayed on the spot. Truth be told, I wasn’t too interested in fighting him. Guys as drunk as Vince were hard to beat in a fist fight. They didn’t feel any hits you landed on them, and they usually didn’t quit until they were unconscious.

And Vince looked like the sort of guy who could take a punch.

His nostrils flared and he leaned sideways into the Mercedes. “You stole her from me. Everything was fine before you showed up.”

“If by fine you mean you were getting away with sleeping around with other women, then yeah. Sure. Things were fine.”

“Fuck you, man.”

I shrugged. “Listen. You can blame me for this falling apart. But it wasn’t me who made you cheat. And it wasn’t me who made you treat Cheryl like shit for years. And it wasn’t me who talked her into leaving your ass. She walked out on you by her choice. And it was the right choice. Look at you,” I gestured at all of him. “You’re a joke. And she deserves better. If you can’t see that, you’re thicker than I thought.”

He snarled and lunged forward. I sidestepped his swipe effortlessly. That was the good thing about drunk guys. They had no coordination. I would at least have that advantage over him. But it was only a matter of time before I got tired or he got lucky.

“Vince,” I said sternly. “The two of you are through. It sucks, but you have to accept it. Pulling a stunt like this won’t get her back, and even if it could, you’re missing the point. She’s free to walk away from you. You don’t own her.”

Vince’s lips peeled off his teeth in a wicked sneer. “Yes I fucking do.”

My hands tightened into fists at my sides. “You know, guys like you give the rest of us a bad rap.”

“You think I give you a bad rap?” Vince scoffed. “It’s the degenerate, dirty pricks like you bringing down the gene pool. We need less of you uneducated losers and more driven, determined working men like me who know how to provide for their family.”

“Provide? Let me guess, a perk for providing is being able to knock your woman around when you have a shitty day at the office? Sounds fair. And very educated.”

Vince rolled his shoulders. “I’m going to mess up that face of yours. Give Cheryl something real fucking ugly to look at. If she wants you she can stare at your ugly mug for the rest of her life. Fuck that fat, stupid, free loading—”

I charged him.

The yell that came out of me was pure fury and my attack caught him off guard. He didn’t have a chance to defend himself with the part of my exhaust, which I knocked from his hand before dealing him a blow right to the gut. The air rushed out of his lungs with a grunt and he cradled his stomach.

I didn’t give him time to recover. No fucking way. This asshole deserved everything he was about to get.

I backed up a bit, just to give myself some space in case he decided to come for me, and then drove my knee up into his chest.

He stumbled back into the Mercedes, which creaked and groaned under the impact. Then he leaned forward and braced himself on his knees to catch his breath. He glared up at me from beneath his dark brows and shook his head. Then he started laughing.

“It’s been awhile since someone hit me,” he said.

“That’s surprising. I’m sure a lot of people you come across in your daily life would love the chance to break your fucking nose.”

“They’re beneath me,” Vince said, wiping sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand.

I laughed. His ego was mind boggling. He genuinely thought he was a God among men, above all consequence, punishment and repercussions. “Well,” I said, clenching my fists and preparing to take him on again, “you’d better prepare yourself to get your ass kicked by one of the schmucks you hate so much.”

Vince, still all cocky arrogance, grinned before springing forward and taking a swing at my jaw.

I ducked out of the way of his barreling fist, came up the length of his arm to drive two punches into his right hip, and then rolled past his shoulder to step in behind him, where I kicked him in the back of his right knee, sending him to the cement floor of my garage.

Vince let out an angry bellow and spun on his knees, lashing out with a kick that connected with my shin. It hurt—like a motherfucker—but it didn’t knock me down.

I backed away as he stumbled back to his feet.

He didn’t seem at all bothered by the hits I’d dealt him and I knew the two punches to his hip would have rattled him had he been sober. It wasn’t a place that felt good to get hit and it would, at the very least, hinder his movement for at least a couple minutes.

But Vince didn’t give a damn.

He advanced on me again, this time holding his fists up in front of his face like a trained fighter might, and began walking in slow circles.

I didn’t put my back to him. I kept my eyes trained on him and didn’t flinch when he made a couple fake jabs in my direction.

Vince chuckled, apparently amused by the whole situation. I wasn’t laughing.

“I’m gonna wipe the pavement with you,” Vince taunted.

“I’m sick of talking.”

“Then fight me. Coward.”

How Cheryl had put up with this clown for so long I had no idea. But this was my chance to make him hurt for all the shit he put her through. I'd have to be a fool to pass up on an opportunity like that.

The law would even be on my side.

This was classic self-defense. A break and enter with a vehicle as a weapon. I had all the right. All the power.

And all Vince had was an impending drunk driving charge and, with any luck, a broken nose.

Maybe worse if I was lucky.

Vince dropped his head and sprinted for me.

I didn't get out of the way this time. He wasn't getting through me. I was going to take whatever hits I had to in order to bring him down.

He tackled me to the ground. I landed hard, the cement biting into my shoulder blades as Vince struggled to gain the upper hand.

I drove my knuckles into his gut.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

And then he struck me across the jaw.

The hit scattered my brain inside my skull. Stars exploded behind my eyes and I shook my head, desperate to clear the blurring vision and fight off the ringing ears.

The guy could land a hit.

Vince was laughing. It sounded like I was under water. The cackle was muffled as Vince gathered the front of my shirt in his fist and lifted me off the ground before slamming me back down.

I groaned with pain as the back of my head slapped against the cement.

"How does that feel, asshole?" Vince jeered.

Vince tightened his grip on the front of my shirt. My jacket had slid off one shoulder and I had the bizarre thought that if he put a hole in my leather I'd rip his throat out with my bare hands.

And then I'd crush his fucking Adam's apple with the heel of my boot and smile while he bled out on my garage floor.

Instead of trying to murder him, I twisted out of his grasp and drove my knee up between his legs.

I never claimed to be a fair fighter.

Vince wheezed in agony as I shimmied out from under him. He braced himself on all fours before pushing himself up to sit on his knees, clutching his family jewels with one hand.

I dragged the back of my hand across my bleeding lip. Then I stumbled to my feet and shook out my right hand. My knuckles were starting to hurt and I hadn't even landed a hit on the guy's face yet.

Vince got to his feet too, still groaning with pain as he nursed his balls. "You bastard."

"That was for my bike," I said.

Vince licked his lips. Then he smiled, and I knew by the look in his eyes that he wasn't playing around anymore. He wanted to take me down so he could get into my house and get to Cheryl.

She'd better have locked the damn door like I told her to.

Vince charged.

I braced myself.

We slammed into each other but neither of us was willing to give up any ground.

He drove his knee into my thigh. I elbowed him in the nose. Then I got a good hit in to his ribs, but he managed to do the same to me, and when I went to take him out by going low he drove his elbow into the back of my neck, sending me sprawling on the ground beneath him.

His boots blurred in and out of my vision as I pushed myself up to my hands and knees.

Then he drove his boot into my stomach and I went down again.

“Stay down, bitch,” Vince spat above me.

Then he moved toward the door.

I spat a mouthful of blood on the cement.

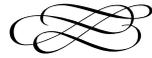
Got back up to my hands and knees.

Stumbled to my feet and managed to take a few steps.

“Stay away from her, Vince,” I said.

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. His smile was pure insanity. Unbridled fury, jealousy and rage. And he'd just found his punching bag.

CHAPTER 24



CHERYL

I stared at the door handle to the garage.

Vince and Aiden had been in there for a good five minutes.

At first I hadn't heard anything. Then their voices grew louder until Vince's angry yell punched through the door. I heard him bellow, and then I heard the sounds of a fight start on the other side.

It was taking every ounce of self-control I possessed not to go in there and try to make them stop.

I knew firsthand what sort of damage Vince was capable of. He'd never struck me hard. He hadn't ever even punched me. But he'd slapped me once or twice and pushed me into things more to scare me than to hurt me.

It had been enough.

I worried what he would do to Aiden—someone just as big and tough as Vince was himself. He wouldn't hold back. He'd be there to do as much damage as he possibly could. And he'd enjoy every second of it.

He used to smile when he hit me.

I knew he got off on pain.

Sadistic bastard.

I hated that Aiden was the one suffering his wrath right now. All of this was my fault. I was the reason Vince had come all the way here and driven right through Aiden's garage

door. I was the reason his bike was destroyed and the reason why he might be bruised and bloodied on the other side of the door.

I swallowed.

How drunk was Vince? Would he stop if things got too far? Was he even self-aware enough to know what constituted as too far?

With the damage that had already been done, there was no way we were getting out of this without the police getting involved. It was only about ten o'clock at night, so I assumed the neighbors had already gotten on the phone with the emergency lines and reported that some lunatic had just driven his Mercedes through their neighbor's garage. I hoped someone had called.

God. I hoped they'd all called.

A loud crash sounded from the other side of the door. I flinched and jumped back like there were sparks flying off the door.

An angry yell followed the crash.

My stomach turned over as fear sunk its teeth into me. Real, icy, cruel fear. My breathing quickened.

It had never been this bad before. I never imagined a situation where Vince would become unhinged like this. I should have seen this coming. I should have—

My mind suddenly stopped like a car running out of gas. Then it slowly started turning again, but all the clouds of doubt that Vince had planted there were suddenly gone. Just like that.

None of this was on me. Not really. Sure, I should have left him a long time ago, but I wasn't the one who'd made him do this. I didn't make him cheat. I didn't make him drink himself stupid until he decided to take matters into his own hands in the worst way possible.

He was the one who was guilty for always making me think everything was my fault.

Fuck Vince Price.

Fuck him and everything he stood for and everything he'd made me believe about myself over the last few years of our time together. Fuck him for taking advantage of me when I was weak and hollow after losing my mom and dad.

And fuck him for thinking he could strut over here and take me back like I was a lost puppy that had wandered out of the backyard after someone accidentally left the gate open.

None of this was an accident. I'd chosen this. And damn it all to hell I was going to stand strong in my convictions.

Even if facing him scared the shit out of me.

No.

Especially because facing him scared the shit out of me.

My hands were no longer shaking when I unlocked the deadbolt and then the door handle. Then I pulled it open. A wave of warm summer night air washed over me and I stepped into the garage, sucking in a deep breath of humid air through my mouth and looking around at the mess the two men had made.

My gaze landed on Vince and Aiden.

They were at the rear end of the Mercedes. They were both on their feet, although it became quickly clear to me that Vince was supporting Aiden with his fist wrapped in the front of his shirt. Aiden was a bloodied mess. He had a cut in his right eyebrow, his bottom lip was split, and there was dark bruising forming beneath his right eye.

Vince wound back his free hand to deliver a blow to Aiden's face.

"Vince!" I yelled.

It wasn't a scream. And it wasn't weak. The power that lined my voice surprised even me, and it did the trick, gaining me Vince's attention. He turned to look over his shoulder but did not loosen his grip on Aiden, who's eyes, the right one very swollen, flicked to me.

“Cheryl,” Aiden started.

I held up my hand and took three steps closer to them, still maintaining a good ten feet between us. I wasn’t going to get within reaching distance of Vince if I didn’t have to. I could stand up to him, but if things got physical I knew I stood no chance against his strength. And with him this drunk he wouldn’t just push me around. Not this time.

He’d want to hurt me.

“Vince,” I said, forcing myself to remain calm as my insides squirmed at the sight of Aiden’s busted face. “Let him go.”

Vince sneered at me and I spotted his chipped front tooth. He had a bruised jaw and was favoring his right side. He wasn’t in the best shape either. His face was bright red with fury and the vein in his forehead seemed to pulse. I knew it was my imagination but I couldn’t take my eyes off of it.

“Vince. Let him go. He’s had enough. You both have. You made your point. We get it, okay?”

Vince shook his head. “No. You don’t fucking get it, Cheryl. The only way I’m stopping is if you leave with me right now.”

Aiden growled and tried to pry himself free from Vince’s grasp. It was futile. Aiden looked exhausted.

I shook my head. “We can’t leave together, Vince. You’re too drunk to drive.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes. You are,” I said. “Let Aiden go. You need to leave. We can talk all about this after everyone has calmed down and you’re sober.”

I wasn’t going to tell him that he was likely going to be arrested. If he knew that he’d fly even further off the handle. He’d have nothing to lose.

Vince shook his head. “I don’t want to talk.”

“Then why did you come here?” I asked.

“To bring you home!” He roared.

“No,” I said softly. “I can’t go back to that place, Vince. Not with you. You trapped me there. You isolated me. I lost all my friends because of you.”

“Typical Cheryl. Blaming me for all your problems.”

I shrugged. “I don’t care if you agree, Vince. You and I are through. We should have ended things ages ago. But I was weak. And scared. And desperately afraid to be alone. But being alone is so much better than being with you.”

Vince’s face contorted with rage. “I’m glad we’re finally being honest with each other.”

Then, before I could even scream at him to stop, he wound back and drove his fist right into Aiden’s nose.

Vince released the front of Aiden’s shirt and he went down in a heap at my ex’s feet.

Vince turned his back on Aiden and faced me. “Someone has to teach you a fucking lesson, Cheryl. You miserable, entitled, insufferable woman. I’m the one who wasted my time with you. I could have had any woman I wanted—”

“You did have them, Vince,” I hissed. “Don’t pretend we were something we weren’t.”

Vince took a step toward me. Aiden stirred on the ground behind him.

I backed up. “The cops are going to be here any minute.”

“I don’t give a damn,” Vince said.

I needed to buy some time. Aiden had managed to get himself up onto his hands and knees. Blood dripped from his nose to pool on the cement beneath him. He wiped it away but it kept on coming as he lifted one knee and tried to push himself to his feet. He was unsteady. The blow had been hard and I was pretty sure his nose was broken.

Vince caught me looking past him at Aiden. He started chuckling and then turned around slowly as Aiden stood, using the side of the Mercedes to keep himself upright.

Vince's chuckle morphed into laughter. "I'm so glad you're not done yet, shit stain. I was just starting to enjoy myself."

Vince went after Aiden.

I yelled out a warning but it was too late.

He slammed Aiden up against the car. Aiden let out a pained grunt before his face screwed up with anger. He reached over Vince's head, gathered the back of his jacket in his hands, and pulled him forward, sliding out of the way to pull Vince's head into the side of the car.

But Vince was too angry and too drunk to be slowed. He tackled Aiden to the ground and they both went down, writhing and kicking and trying to make the other suffer as much as possible with each hit they landed.

Then Vince landed a blow to Aiden's ear.

I could see it disoriented him, and he let his defenses down for a split second, allowing Vince the chance to strike him across the jaw.

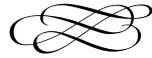
"Stop!" I screamed, rushing forward.

Vince was on top of Aiden now. He wound back. I grabbed his arm and pulled back, trying to pry him off of Aiden, but it was no use. Vince shrugged me off like I was a rag doll.

I tried again, this time driving my knee into the space between his shoulder blades as I pulled back on his arm.

Vince let out a furious bellow and twisted around to take a swipe at me. He missed, and I scurried out of the way as he cursed at me and got to his feet, leaving Aiden on the ground beneath him clutching his ear.

CHAPTER 25



AIDEN

My vision was blurred, but not badly enough that I couldn't make out Vince taking slow steps toward Cheryl, who had herself pinned between him and my work bench. She had no exit available to her, and if I didn't get to my feet soon, she was going to be in big trouble.

And if he laid a hand on her I'd have to kill him, and I was pretty sure that wasn't the ending either me or Cheryl wanted for our relationship.

Not that it was officially a relationship. But I wanted it to be. And that wouldn't be possible if I was in prison for murder.

I grimaced as I planted my foot and raised my knee. I pushed myself up with my hand on top of my knee, steadied myself with the Mercedes, and watched as the garage tilted and tipped and spun all around me.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

I didn't have much steam left in me. If I was going to take him down I would have to do it quickly. Another blow to my head and I might not be able to get back up, and then Cheryl would be royally fucked.

The cops were coming. There was no doubt about that. But there was no telling how many more minutes we would have to wait and one minute alone with Vince was too many seconds for Cheryl. If he decided to hurt her, which he very well might, based on his insane behavior so far, he could do a lot of damage in sixty seconds.

I spat a mouthful of blood on the pavement and dragged the sleeve of my jacket across my mouth. "I'm not fucking finished," I said. My voice sounded far away in my own ears; probably because my right ear was still ringing from when he hit me.

Vince stopped walking toward Cheryl.

Her eyes widened and she leaned to the side to look past Vince's massive frame and at me. She shook her head in warning.

I forced myself to stand up straight. "Come on Princess. Is that all you've got?"

Vince's shoulders hunched up like the hackles of a wolf. "This time you're not getting up."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have the energy for it. Instead I braced myself for whatever it was that was about to come. Either he'd come in hard and low, or he'd go for the head again. Either way I would have to avoid a hit and land one of my own, followed by as many as it took to knock him out.

Or, if I was lucky, I could hit him once. Hard and fast. And take him down.

That was my best option.

Then I could get Cheryl the hell away from here and get somewhere safe. Then I could have a drink. A real stiff drink.

Vince rushed me. Cheryl yelled my name.

And I sidestepped, grabbed him from behind, and used his own momentum to throw him into the Mercedes. He left another dent in the side of it and righted himself, shaking his head in either anger or confusion, and I took advantage of having the upper hand.

I kicked him in the side of the leg. He collapsed to his knees.

Cheryl rushed forward.

Vince opened his mouth to speak. I didn't want to hear it, whatever it was.

So I wound back and slammed my knuckles into the side of his head.

He toppled sideways where he stayed, lying on the cement, completely motionless.

Cheryl skidded to a stop and stared down at him with her hands over her mouth.

I straightened and shook out my aching hand. If I didn't have at least one broken knuckle I would be shocked.

Cheryl looked up at me. She still had her hands over her mouth. Her eyes were brimming with tears and one of them escaped as she stared at me shaking out my hand and clutching my aching side with my other hand.

"I'm alright," I said.

She shook her head. "You are so not alright."

I wiped my hand under my nose, which seemed to have finally stopped bleeding. "It could be worse."

"Yeah. He could have killed you," she breathed.

"Nah. I wouldn't have let it come to that." I tried to smile but it stretched the split on my lip.

Cheryl's bottom lip trembled.

I held open my arms and stepped over Vince who was breathing loudly through his mouth in his unconscious stupor. "Come here."

She dropped her head and stepped into my embrace. Her arms wrapped around my waist and held on tight as she pressed her cheek to my chest and held on for dear life.

I stroked her hair and her back and planted a kiss on top of her head. "Everything is fine. I'm fine. You're fine."

She nodded but didn't say anything. Her breathing was shaky and her grip didn't loosen. I didn't tell her my ribs were

aching. It was worth the pain to hold her like this. For a while there I thought things might have gone sideways.

“I’m so sorry,” Cheryl whispered.

“Sorry?”

She nodded and held me tighter. “If I’d handled things better he never would have come after you like this. I should have seen it coming. I shouldn’t have gotten you involved. And I—”

“Cheryl,” I said firmly, taking her by the shoulders and holding her at arm’s length so I could look her in the eyes. “I got myself involved. Not the other way around. I was the one who showed up uninvited to your party, remember? I was the one who asked you to have coffee even though I knew you were with Vince. I was the one who pushed. Not the other way around. Don’t get it twisted now that Vince has gone and done something stupid. It’s all on him.”

She sniffled and wiped her nose. “I still feel bad. I think—I think he broke your nose.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, I think he did too.”

She blinked. “Oh God.”

“Cheryl. I’ve broken my nose before. Twice, actually. It sort of comes with the job of running in the circles that I do. You know?”

She gave me a weak nod and looked down at her feet. “I don’t know how to make it up to you.”

“You can make it up to me by believing me. This is not your fault.”

“If things were the other way around you’d feel the same as me.”

I laughed. “You mean if I had a crazy ex-girlfriend who came after you? I don’t know. Might be a bit kinky—”

“Watch it,” she warned, but I’d gotten what I was after. A smile. It was a small one, but it was a smile nonetheless. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah. Too bad I can’t say the same thing for my garage door,” I said. The door had been bent all the way up and dragged off its tracks by the Mercedes. Part of it had fallen off to rest on the floor while the other corner remained in place, creating an opening to step under to go out onto the driveway.

“Or your bike,” Cheryl winced.

I looked to my bike which was crushed between the front end of car and the back wall of the garage. I sighed. “Yeah. Poor girl.”

Cheryl took my hand. “Come on. Let’s go wait outside. I’m sure the cops are on their way.”

I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. We were about to head to the opening in the side of the garage door when the space was filled with the tall frame of a familiar man. Axel.

He ducked under the door and looked around wide eyed. Then his gaze fell on us and he whistled. “Damn. Looks like we missed all the fun, babe,” he called over his shoulder.

Ellie came in behind him. “Holy shit. Are you guys okay? Aiden, your face! You need to get some ice on that.”

I waved her off. “In a bit. I want to get out of here.”

Axel walked around and stopped in front of Vince. “You think it’s wise to leave this jackass here?”

“He won’t be moving for a while,” I said.

“Should we rough him up a bit more? Give him some bruises for all the shit he’s pulled?”

I shook my head. “Nah. He’s had enough. Besides I don’t want any bad karma on my record.”

We made our way out of the garage. Axel brought up the rear and paused. When he ducked out under the garage to join us on the driveway he had a wary expression on his face. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Looks like you’re going to need a new ride, brother.”

“Looks like it,” I said.

“You can’t fix it in the shop?” Ellie asked hopefully.

Axel scoffed. Then he shot me an apologetic look. “Did you see the thing babe? It’s a mangled mess. Ain’t nobody gonna take her for any spins anymore. I don’t think we could even use much of it for scrap parts. Sorry man. That hurts.”

“It’s just a bike,” I said.

Ellie went over to Cheryl who was staring at my garage door. “Are you okay, Cheryl? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“I’m alright.”

“You’re sure?” Ellie pressed.

Cheryl nodded. “I’m sure. Aiden didn’t let him get anywhere near me.”

“Thatta boy,” Axel grinned, slapping me gently in the ribs with the back of his hand.

“Ouch,” I scowled, massaging the spot he’d hit.

“Sorry,” Axel apologized. “He did a number on you, huh?”

“He was hammered.”

“And he still managed to land some good hits.” Axel clicked his tongue. “Better shape up, kid.”

I rolled my eyes as Axel laughed at my expense, then I went over and wrapped an arm around Cheryl’s shoulders. “It’ll be a fun story to tell in a few weeks.”

“Weeks?” She asked incredulously. “No. This won’t be fun to me ever. Do you hear me, Aiden? *Ever.*”

“Don’t be like that. It’s not every day you narrowly miss being run over in your own garage. And we came out on top. What about that won’t make for a good story?”

Cheryl bit her bottom lip. “Alright. Well. Maybe just wait until your face isn’t so—”

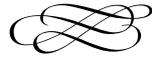
“Fucked up,” Axel finished for her.

I gave him a deadpan look. “Thanks.”

Ellie nodded. “It is pretty bad, Aiden. You should get some ice on it right away. Should I go grab some and—”

I held up a hand. “No need to mother me, Ellie. I’m a big boy. I can take care of this. But first things first. Let’s deal with the cops. Pretty sure I hear the sirens now.”

CHAPTER 26



CHERYL

I couldn't help wringing my sweaty hands together when two police cruisers turned down Aiden's street and started coming toward the house. They had turned their sirens off as soon as they took the corner, but their lights still flashed, casting red and blue washes of color across the front of the houses along the street.

Some of his neighbors had come to stand in their driveways or in their front doorways to watch the commotion.

The neighbor right next door had wandered to the edge of his property and asked if we were all good here.

I wanted to tell him he was a little too late.

Had he not heard me screaming?

Aiden just nodded. "We're fine, Sam. Thanks. Nothing more to see here."

"What the hell happened?" The nosy neighbor, Sam, asked.

I rolled my eyes. Ellie chuckled at me.

But Aiden was nothing but polite. "Some drunk driver drove into my garage. Almost got me and Cheryl here, but we got out of the way in time."

Sam blinked and looked back and forth between all of us. "But—but what happened to your face?"

Ellie nodded vigorously. "See? I told you it was bad, Aiden."

He waved her off. “It’s nothing Sam. Don’t worry yourself about it. We’ve got it covered now.”

“Alright,” Sam mumbled, and then he turned and walked back up to his house, pausing once in the doorway to look back at us suspiciously.

“I don’t like him,” I said.

Aiden laughed. “Nobody likes him. He’s too nosy for his own good, but never at the right time.”

“Everyone’s favorite kind of neighbor,” Axel said.

The cops parked against the curb at the end of the driveway. There were four officers who got out of the cars and made their way up the drive to meet us.

One of them was a woman. She looked very young and unsure, and I assumed she was a rookie.

The tallest of the three men, a guy with a graying buzz cut, nodded around at the four of us. “Are you folks all alright here?” When he spoke his gaze settled on Aiden, who by looking at him was most certainly not alright.

Aiden did the talking. “Yes, officer. But the guy in my garage is out of commission for the moment.”

“One of the neighbors reported that someone drove through your garage after you pulled in on your motorcycle. You are Aiden Jennings, I presume?”

Aiden nodded. “Yeah. That’s me. And the neighbor was right. Cheryl and I were out for a ride. I noticed Vince—the guy who drove through my garage—was following us when we left a concert tonight. He tailed us home, but I thought I’d managed to lose him.”

“It would seem you did not,” the cop stated.

“No. Guess I didn’t.”

“We’ll need a statement from you both,” the cop said, before waving two of the officers into the garage.

“Careful,” Aiden warned. “There’s a lot of broken glass on the ground.”

The cops slipped into the garage and one of them called over the radio for an ambulance for an unconscious male. The buzz cut cop, whose name tag read 'Daniels,' fetched a notepad out of the pocket of his shirt and flipped it open. He grabbed a pen from the same pocket and poised it over the paper before looking back and forth between Aiden and I. "Tell me what happened. From the beginning, please."

Aiden told the cop everything he could remember. He didn't miss anything. When Daniels looked to me for confirmation I nodded every time. By the time Aiden had gone through everything Daniels only had a couple questions, and once they were asked he tucked his notepad back into his pocket. "The ambulance will be here shortly and we'll get Mr. Price off your garage floor."

"That sounds great," Aiden said.

But it seemed that the paramedics wouldn't have to roll the stretcher in to collect Vince's unconscious body off the floor. He came out on his own with his hands cuffed behind his back. The two officers who'd gone in after him had him by each arm and they walked him out onto the driveway.

The young female cop nodded at one of the cruisers. "We've got a nice comfortable spot for you in the back, Mr. Price."

Vince tried to wrench his arm away from her but she held fast. Then he spotted me and practically started foaming at the mouth. "I wish I'd never met you," he growled as the cops walked him past us.

I stepped closer to Aiden and wrapped my arms around his bicep.

Daniels folded his arms over his chest. "I'm sure Ms. Sommers feels the same way about you. You're an absolute delight."

"Fuck you, man," Vince spat, stumbling over his own feet when the female cop gave him a good shove forward.

"To the car," she said.

Maybe she wasn't as much of a rookie as I'd first thought. She didn't seem intimidated by him in the least.

Daniels turned back to us. "Do you plan on pressing charges?"

Aiden nodded. "Yes."

"Good. I hate guys like this. They get away with everything because of the size of their check books. But not this time. And not this guy. We'll hit him with the book for this stunt. The fact that he's drunk as a skunk will favor the two of you. Make sure to call your insurance company tomorrow about the door."

"Will do officer. Thank you," Aiden said.

"You should let the medics take a look at you. Looks like your nose is broken."

"I don't need—" Aiden started to say.

I tugged on his arm to shut him up. "He will, thank you."

Daniels gave us the first smile of the night and nodded. "Alright then. We'll keep you updated on how things move along from here. Have a good evening, folks."

He and the other officers got into their cruisers as the ambulance showed up and pulled halfway into the driveway. I walked Aiden down toward them, and while the two medics milled about him, setting and splinting his nose—which was much too terrible for me to watch happen—Ellie and Axel distracted me.

Ellie tapped her chin with her forefinger. "You know, if Vince goes to jail for this, which, let's be real, he probably will, that big house of his is going to be empty. Just sitting there."

Axel peered down at her. "What are you trying to say woman? Out with it."

Ellie shrugged. "I'm not trying to say anything. Just that the house with the in ground pool in the backyard will be empty for the rest of the summer. And with everything Vince

put Cheryl through it might be nice for her to enjoy the house and take her time moving out. You know?”

Axel grinned. “Ah. I see. Yes. A good idea.”

Ellie beamed at me.

I shook my head at them. “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Oh come on,” Ellie said, whispering like she was a teenager telling me a secret. “It would be fun. You could have the whole place to yourself for the rest of the summer. You could actually enjoy it before you move on to the next thing.”

“The next thing,” I breathed. “I have no idea where to go from here.”

Ellie draped an arm over my shoulders. “Don’t worry, babe. We’ve got you. You’re family now.”

Axel winked. “Better run while you still can.”

I couldn’t fight the smile that stretched my cheeks. “Family, huh?”

“You know it,” Ellie said. “Be warned. There are a lot of us. And we don’t do small introductions. In fact we don’t do small anything. But you’ll fit right in. Trust me. And if you ever need anything you’ll have a whole crew of people there to help you. Always.”

I liked the sound of that. And I really liked the sound of family.

It had been three years since I felt like I had people of my own to call mine. I missed my mom and dad terribly. I missed the comfort of having people who loved and trusted you and knew you better than you knew yourself. This new family might not know me, but if they accepted me, that would be better than anything I had with Vince.

Hell. Anything would be better than what I had with Vince.

We were interrupted by Aiden when the paramedics finished with him. They closed the back doors of the

ambulance as he came over to us and patted my ass. “You guys gossiping about me?”

“You wish,” Ellie said. “No. We were just welcoming Cheryl to the family. Officially.”

Aiden held me to his side. “Look at that. All it took was your psycho ex trying to kill me and you got the stamp of approval.”

I buried my face in my hands as the three of them laughed at me.

“Better get used to it,” Axel warned.

“It never ends,” Ellie added.

“Sure it does,” Aiden said. Then he waved his hand in a ‘go away’ motion. “You two need to scram. I’m going to go lie down, put my feet up and put some ice on my face.”

He had a white bandage over the bridge of his nose that stretched beneath his eye as well, covering his cheek bones. There were two strips in lieu of stitches holding the gash in his eyebrow closed and the medics had cleaned up the split lip and wiped the blood off of him.

Axel nodded toward his truck which was parked on the other side of the street. “We should head home again, babe? Poor Jamie is probably ready to go home.”

“She’s probably asleep on the couch. Let’s be honest,” Ellie said.

Axel nodded. “Probably. But we’ll get out of your hair, man. Let me know if you need anything. Or help putting in a new garage door,” he snickered.

“Yeah, yeah. Beat it,” Aiden said.

Axel and Ellie headed to their truck and Aiden looked down at me. “Ready to go inside?”

I nodded. “Please.”

Following him through the hole in the garage, we went inside. He locked the door behind us and then we went into the kitchen, where I fetched a bunch of ice cubes from the trays. I

put them in a plastic bag, wrapped it in a thin dish towel, and brought it to Aiden where he was getting comfortable on the sofa.

He thanked me and held the ice to his nose. He winced until he found the right spot. “Better,” he sighed.

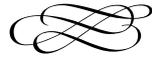
We sat quietly together for a minute. I curled my legs up under myself and leaned into his side, resting my head on his shoulder. “Thank you for protecting me.”

He rested his cheek on top of my head. “I’ll always fight for you, Cheryl. Always.”

My heart swelled.

“Unless you cost me another bike. Then we might have some problems.”

CHAPTER 27



AIDEN

Everything ached when I woke up the morning after the whole shit show with Vince.

There was a lot of grunting and groaning as I tried to roll over to face Cheryl, who'd come to bed with me last night. Neither she nor I wanted her sleeping alone on my sofa, so we'd cuddled up together in my bed. I'd passed out pretty quick. The pounding headache and sore body demanded rest.

When I finally managed to flip myself over, I found Cheryl's side of the bed empty.

Frowning, I rubbed at my eyes and peered around the room. I listened to see if I could hear her in the shower, but no sounds of running water reached my ears.

Then, after about thirty seconds of listening, I picked up on sounds in the kitchen.

Dishes. Something frying.

That's when I picked up on the smell.

Bacon. Most definitely bacon.

My mouth started watering right away. I sat up slowly, being mindful of my ribs and all my bruised body parts as I rose to my feet and indulged in a quick, gentle stretch. My muscles protested at first, but once I rolled my shoulders a bit and twisted my torso, I was much more nimble.

Nimble wasn't the right word.

I was less stiff. That was more fitting.

Padding over to my dresser, I found and put on a pair of sweat pants and a loose gray t-shirt. Then I made my way out of the bedroom to the bathroom, where I took care of business, slapped on some deodorant, and sprayed myself with a bit of body spray just for good measure. I didn't want to go out there smelling like sweat and blood on top of looking as rough as I did.

When I walked into the kitchen the sight that greeted me was a marvelous one.

Cheryl was wearing one of my shirts. It was much too big on her and came halfway down her milky thighs. She had no bra on and I could see her nipples through the thin fabric of my shirt as she hurried from the opposite side of the kitchen to the stove with a bunch of chopped veggies on her cutting board. She poured them into a sizzling pan and mixed the contents around with a spatula.

I wandered into the kitchen. "Good morning good looking."

Cheryl shot a smile over her shoulder as she continued cooking the concoction in the pan. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. Still a bit stiff and sore, but nothing I haven't dealt with before. How about you?"

"I didn't get used as a punching bag last night so I feel just fine. You slept okay?"

"Didn't wake up once."

"Good," she said. Then she nodded toward my coffee pot. "Can I pour you a cup?"

"Sure," I said, sitting down at my kitchen island to watch her work. "You didn't need to go to all this trouble. Cereal would have been fine."

She stopped halfway to the coffee pot. "Um. No. Cereal would not be fine."

"Alright," I chuckled, a little thrown. "And why not?"

“Because I owe you. And one way I like to express gratitude is to cook for people.”

“You don’t need to express any gratitude.”

“I know I don’t *need* to. But I want to. And I like cooking for people who are special to me.”

I wagged my eyebrows at her. “Lucky for you. I like eating food made by people who are special to me.”

She laughed as she poured me my cup of coffee. She remembered that I liked it black and brought it over to where I sat, turning the handle to me when she placed it down. “There you go. I hope you like eggs and bacon.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Vince hated it.”

“Yeah, well, fuck that guy.”

She smiled as she returned to the stove to resume cooking. It smelled amazing. Like bacon and cheese and cooking onions. “Yeah. Fuck that guy.”

I stood up and brought my coffee with me. She had her back to me when I went up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist, leaning in to nuzzle my chin into the groove of her shoulder. “You know, it’s going to be hard for me to get through breakfast with you looking so damn sexy in my shirt.”

She giggled bashfully and pressed her cheek to mine as she stirred the contents of the pan. “You’re hurt. So you’re going to sit and enjoy your meal and get better. No funny business.”

I pushed my hips forward so she could feel my erection through my sweats.

“Aiden!” She said, twisting playfully in my arms.

“What?” I asked innocently, grinding my hips against her ass.

“You’re bad,” she scolded.

“Lady, you have no idea,” I purred in her ear.

She squirmed away from me with bright pink cheeks. Her blue eyes were wild with playfulness as she pointed her spatula at me. “Down boy.”

“Fine,” I said, shrugging one shoulder and leaning against the counter. “I can wait until we’re done eating.”

“Until you’re better,” she clarified.

“I can’t think of a better cure for my ailments than a nice fuck. If you have other options by all means, share them.”

Her cheeks were no longer pink but dark red.

I went to her. She didn’t fight me off with her spatula. I cupped her cheek, stroked a strand of hair off her face, and smiled at her. “You saved my ass, too, Cheryl. So I want to show you how thankful I am. But I’m a terrible cook. So I’d rather we do something that caters to my strengths.”

“Your strengths?” She whispered, her skin flushing from head to toe.

I nodded and looked down the length of her. “You’ll see.”

“Oh. I’ve already seen,” she said.

I grinned. “That was nothing, kitten. Just foreplay.”

Her mouth worked but no words came out of her. Then her eyes widened. “The eggs!” She hurried around me to the stove where she removed the pan from the element and gave it a quick stir. Luckily, she had saved it from burning and set it back down after turning down the heat.

Then she wiped her brow and looked at me. “You’re going to spoil breakfast.”

I held up both hands. “I’ll keep my hands to myself until we’re done eating. I swear.”

“You’d better.”

“I swear,” I said again, unable to stop the smile from creeping across my lips.

She shook her head at me. But she was smiling too.

“Can I help you with anything?” I asked.

“What?”

I nodded at the pan in front of her. “With breakfast. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She blinked. “Um. No. I’ve got it. Thank you, though.”

“Alright,” I said, then I settled back on my stool to sip my coffee. “Maybe next time I’ll make you breakfast.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t cook?”

“I’m not exceptional at it, but I can whip up a few things. I make a pretty mean french toast.”

“I’ve actually never had a man cook for me before.”

I watched her open the oven and check the bacon which was laid out in strips on a baking pan I didn’t even know I owned. “Seriously?”

She nodded and closed the oven door. “Seriously. But I guess it makes sense. I mean, I was only ever serious with Vince. The other guys I dated before him were first year college relationships and high school boyfriends.”

“It does not make sense. You were with Vince for years.”

“Yep.”

“And he never cooked for you? Not once?”

“Not once,” she said, putting her back to the stove. “But that’s okay. Because all of that is in the past and I’m only looking forward now. I gave him as much time as he’s going to get and I refuse to waste another minute regretting how I spent my years with him.”

“Sounds wise.”

She shrugged.

After a few minutes she pulled the bacon out of the oven. Once it cooled a bit she set the crispy strips down on a paper towel and wrapped them up to absorb the grease—a hack I had never seen before. As the bacon, degreased for lack of a better word, she plated our eggs and topped off our coffees. Then she

set the bacon on our plates and she came and sat beside me at the kitchen island.

“Bon appétit,” she said.

I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I took a first bite of the eggs. Then I devoured them, shoveling the good food into my mouth one forkful after the other while Cheryl watched me, trying to keep her opinions to herself.

“Someone was hungry,” she said, after I cleared the eggs off my plate and started picking at my bacon. “I should have made more.”

“No, this was perfect. I just didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“You worked up an appetite last night.”

“And I’m going to work one up again in a few minutes,” I winked.

She rolled her eyes and giggled. “You’re impossible, do you know that?”

“I’ve been told once or twice. Mostly by Ellie when she’s sick of my shit.”

“I can see that.”

We finished eating and I cleared our plates. Cheryl sat and watched while she finished her coffee, and then I came back to sit with her and put a hand on her knee. “Do you know what you want to do next?”

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“Have you thought about what Ellie said about the house?”

“Yes. A little. I can’t make any decisions until I know what’s going to happen with Vince, but I would like to have my own space I think. I went from living with my mom and dad to living with Vince. Two dependent households. I want to know what it’s like to stand on my own two feet.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

She smiled. “You do?”

“Hell yeah. Living on your own is pretty awesome. Nobody to tell you what to do and when to do it. Nobody expecting anything from you. Nobody judging or criticizing or micromanaging. It’s a game changer.”

“Sounds like you’re happy flying solo.”

I shrugged. “Well, I don’t know if I’d say happy. I’m good at it, but there’s a difference.”

“Oh?”

I nodded. “There are pros and cons to everything. It would be nice to have someone to share all this space with. Someone to share my bed with. Someone to kiss in the morning when I wake up or at night before I go to sleep. Someone to shower with.”

Her cheeks started to burn again. Then she slid off her stool and held out her hand. “Come with me.”

CHAPTER 28



CHERYL

I pulled Aiden along behind me through the living room. Past the front door. Down the hall and past the bathroom and linen closet. And then finally into his bedroom. The bed sheets were still messed up from sleeping in them and there was a bit of dried blood on his pillow but none of that mattered.

What mattered is that he was here and so was I.

And he made me feel some kind of way.

I let go of his hand and turned to face him. I placed my hand in the center of his chest. “Stay,” I said softly.

He stopped and watched me back up toward the bed. When the back of my legs touched the mattress I stopped and swallowed hard.

I’d never done something like this before. I’d never wanted to.

My body had always been something I wanted to hide. Even back when I was thin and fit, I was still insecure. But now, with Aiden, all of those anxieties had melted away. I was me. And I knew that was why he liked me.

I rolled up the hem of his shirt, working it up my thighs and pausing when I reached my hips, flashing him a peak of my red panties. I moved my hips back and forth, teasing him with a slow seductive dance.

I’d seen the way he watched me at the concert last night. I knew he liked how I moved and I wanted to give him his own private show.

Aiden's eyes roamed up my legs. As I pushed the shirt up my stomach his gaze followed, all the way up to my breasts, which weren't confined in the bra I always insisted on wearing. I teased him by showing him only the underside of my boobs, and then I let the shirt go. It fell back down around my thighs and Aiden took a step forward.

I held up a hand. "I said stay."

He paused and a frown drew his features down. "I don't want to stay."

I smiled. He made me feel beautiful. Desired. Sexy.

It was a glorious and strange feeling for a girl who hadn't felt such things since she was in her freshman year of college.

"Take it off," Aiden whispered.

"I don't know if I should. You should rest."

"Fuck rest."

I giggled. "You're sure?"

"More sure than I've ever been."

I licked my lips. "Well, in that case," I trailed off and lifted the shirt back up. Over my hips, tummy, ribs, breasts, and then up over my head.

Aiden's eyes soaked in the sight of me and I basked under the warmth of his gaze. "Fuck," he breathed.

I turned slowly on the spot letting him see me from all angles. Then, when my back was to him, I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of my panties and began wiggling my hips side to side, inching the panties down bit by bit. When I got them down over the swell of my ass I left them at the top of my thighs, rolling my hips and arching my back as I lifted my arms up to run my fingers through my hair and shake it out down my back.

Then I went back to pulling my panties down. I took them all the way off and stepped out of them, making sure I bent all the way over as I went to give Aiden a good view of my pussy. I was already so wet and he hadn't even laid a finger on me.

I got on the bed on my hands and knees.

He watched all the while as I stopped in the middle of the bed and faced him, sitting up straight with my legs apart. “What are you going to do to me?” I asked, cocking my head to the side innocently and pressing my finger to my bottom lip.

Aiden swallowed. “Whatever you’ll let me do.”

“And if I tell you that you can do whatever you want?”

A devilish smile cracked across his face. “Then you’re going to have a really, really good time, kitten.”

“Hmm,” I purred, spreading my legs a little further apart and letting my hand fall from my bottom lip to trace a line between my breasts and down my stomach all the way to my pussy.

“You’re a tease.”

“You like it,” I said.

He shook his head. “I love it.”

“Then come here and get it.”

Aiden’s smile broadened and he leapt onto the bed with me. I shrieked with surprise when he hooked an arm around my waist and pulled me down beside him on the bed. Then he propped himself up on one elbow and stared down at me. “I don’t know what made me lucky enough to be there when that asshole in the truck drove into you, but am I ever glad he did.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

He kissed me. The first kiss was just a feather light touch of his lips to mine. The second was more insistent. And on the third he slid his tongue into my mouth and cupped my cheek. He lowered his hand to hold the back of my neck and cradle me in his arms before he released me to trail his fingers down my side and over my hip.

Then he lifted my leg.

I smiled into the kiss when he rolled his thumb over my clit.

He rubbed me and forced me to keep my leg up while he worked, taking his time to hit all the sensitive places that were aching to be touched.

I wrapped an arm behind his neck and drew him down to me to kiss him more deeply. At the same time he eased a finger inside me. I sucked in a sharp breath and moaned softly on my exhale as he slowly worked his finger in and out. Between every dozen or so thrusts he would move back up to my clit, worship it in an impossibly wonderful way, and then slide back inside me.

When he started flicking his finger up toward my G spot, my whole body tensed.

He kissed my cheek and then my neck and pressed his mouth to my ear. “Does that feel good, kitten?”

I whimpered and nodded.

“I can’t hear you,” he said.

My back arched. Tension and pressure gathered in my center, right where his fingers were, and a hot fire suddenly raged to life.

Aiden dragged his lips across my throat and stopped flicking his fingers. “I’m not going to ask again. Does that feel good?”

I gasped for breath. “Y-yes.”

He chuckled in my ear and my skin erupted with goose bumps. “I couldn’t tell.”

“Please,” I breathed.

“Please what?”

I bit down hard on my bottom lip. “Please don’t stop.”

“Thatta girl,” Aiden cooed, nibbling on my earlobe. “I love when you tell me what you want.”

He did, did he? I could do that.

“Then make me come,” I said.

Aiden growled with lust and sealed his lips over mine. Then he began flicking his fingers in that way I loved so much, and within seconds he brought me right back to that euphoric brink of climax. This time he didn't stop. My insides clenched and he groaned softly into my mouth as my toes curled and a cry of pleasure escaped me as I came.

My orgasm left me trembling.

Aiden slid down my side and rolled between my legs. He pushed them apart to settle between my thighs. He was right back where he'd wanted to be just the other night.

"Are you going to stop me this time?" He asked, looking up at me.

I stared down at him between the swell of my breasts and shook my head. "No."

He ran his finger up my pulsing slit. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Good girl," he said, before dropping his head and flicking my clit with his tongue.

"Oh God," I breathed, letting my head fall back to the mattress. I stared up at his white ceiling as he ran his tongue in circles over my clit, and then down, tracing the opening of my pussy with deliberate slowness.

How had I never let a man do this before? I'd been missing out.

When he slid a finger inside me while he drew my clit between his lips and suckled I let out a shrill cry and gripped the sheets. He chuckled between my legs, pleased with himself and the response he'd earned from me, and slid another finger inside me.

And within seconds I came again.

Aiden kissed his way up my stomach and leaned over me to reach for the drawer in his night stand. He tugged it open and rummaged around, unable to see the contents. He knocked a bunch of things around before withdrawing a condom with a victorious smile. He held it up between our faces.

“Good job,” I giggled.

“Hold this,” he said, placing the condom on my right nipple.

Then he rolled off the bed like a man who hadn’t been half beat to shit last night and stripped out of his clothes.

Even though I’d seen him naked before I was still struck by how incredible his body was. Muscles rippled beneath his skin as he climbed back up on the bed and knelt between my legs. He plucked the condom from my breast, tore it open, and discarded the wrapper over his shoulder.

I watched as he rolled the condom on. My skin burned with need as he pushed my legs back and inched closer to me until the tip of his cock pressed against my slit.

When he pushed himself inside me there was no pain like last time. My body was ready for him. I let out a contented sigh as he filled me up and leaned over me to share a kiss as he thrust slowly in and out, forcing my legs back so that my knees were almost in line with my breasts.

I had no idea I was so flexible.

He put one hand on my collar bone and held me down while he used his other hand to lift my hands above my head. He only needed one hand to pin my arms overhead by my wrists. I struggled, but not in earnest, as he fucked me and held me down.

He rolled his hips, grinding against me, filling all the places inside me that burned for him.

Aiden pulled out and flipped me over onto my stomach. Then he slid a pillow under my hips and slapped my ass—hard.

I yelped. He chuckled.

And then he slid his cock into my pussy again and put a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me down into the mattress as I gasped with pleasure.

I reached for the top of the blanket and drew it down to me, using it to muffle my moans and cries as Aiden dropped

low over me, trailing kisses across my shoulders and down my spine as he fucked me. I could feel his hot breath on my skin and hear the soft sounds he made in the back of his throat.

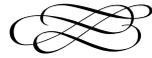
I bowed my head down to the sheets to stifle a cry as I drew close to another climax, but Aiden wrapped a fist in my hair and pulled my head back. He pulled so hard he forced me to look up at him as he leaned over me. His other hand moved under my chin and he kept me like that and stared into my eyes for as long as I could keep them open.

When I came he groaned above me and pressed his forehead to mine. His climax was just as fierce as mine, and it left both of us gasping for breath when we came apart and he fell onto the bed beside me.

I started laughing and hid my red cheeks in the blankets.

He pulled them down again. “Stop hiding from me. I want to see you.”

CHAPTER 29



AIDEN

“You sure this is the one you want?” Rhys asked, folding his arms across his chest and looking at me skeptically from beneath one dark eyebrow.

I ran my fingers through my hair and stared at the bike before me. All of the exposed engine parts were matt black. The black leather seat was dark, like ink, and the black gloss paint shone like light was shining on it at all times.

The Triumph Rocket III was a sexy bike.

And she was coming home with me.

I nodded decisively. “Positive. She’s my new baby.”

Rhys chuckled. “I thought Cheryl was your new baby?”

I waved the salesman over who had retreated to the sales counter with his two other employees after he discovered Rhys and I were more knowledgeable about the products he was selling than he was.

“Cheryl is my new baby. But this one is for riding.”

His grin was pure sin. “Oh?”

I blinked. “That’s not what I meant.”

He slapped his leg and burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell Cheryl.”

The salesman, a thin guy in black jeans, Blundstones, and a button up gray shirt, came and stood beside the bike. “Do you have any questions, sir?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll take it.”

The guy looked from me to the bike and then back to me. “Oh. Um. Yes. Of course.”

“Try not to sound so surprised,” Rhys glowered.

“Apologies. I meant no offense. This model has just been sitting here and nobody has come around with the cash to buy it.”

“Well, ring her up,” I said. “I’m riding her out of here.”

The salesman nodded. “Alright. Follow me. We’ll sign all the paperwork. You’ll be out of here with your new bike in no time.”

The sale went off without a hitch. The salesman didn’t give me any trouble and within half an hour I had the keys in my pocket and was rolling the bike out the front doors to pull her up alongside Rhys’ bike in the parking lot.

Riding bitch to get here had not been one of my best moments.

Rhys handed me my helmet and put his own on. I pulled mine on and tightened the chin straps. “Lunch?”

Rhys nodded and pulled on his riding gloves. “Want to put some miles on the new wheels? We could make Mastic Beach in less than two hours.”

I glanced at my watch. “Race you there.”

Swinging a leg over the bike, I gripped the handlebars. The leather hand grips felt good under my palms. Rhys got on his bike and started it up. I started mine too and lifted the kickstand.

Rhys pointed down the long stretch of road toward Mastic. “Loser buys the beer.”

Rhys peeled out of the parking lot ahead of me. I was aware of the three salesmen inside the bike shop watching through the window as I revved the engine. Then, when I had their attention, I turned in a wide circle, dragging the back tire across the asphalt to leave a black streak in the middle of their

lot before launching forward out onto the street to high tail it after Rhys, who was without a doubt the best person to ride with in the whole MC.

He was the only one who was a challenge.

He wasn't messing around today, either. He was giving his bike all it had, opening up on the throttle and screaming down the straightaway ahead of me. I did the same thing and ate up the pavement as I gained on him. I had the faster bike as of five minutes ago, and I was going to make every mile count.

Rhys and I wove in and out of traffic on our ride from the city to Mastic Beach. It was a weekday, so I doubted the pub would be busy, and it would be nice to see old Jim back at The Dock Pub before summer came to an end.

The weather was perfect for riding. It wasn't as hot as the stretch of weather we'd had for the last two weeks and the wind travelling so fast cut through my jeans and kept me cool.

It was just after one in the afternoon when we pulled into the gravel lot of The Dock Pub and parked our bikes. Neither of us left our helmets with our bikes this time. We tucked them under our arms and made our way to the front door and stepped into the dimly lit pub.

I was right.

There was barely a soul inside.

Rhys and I picked our spots at the bar where we always sat and waited until Jim came out of the kitchen. His face lit up when he saw us. "Gentlemen! I didn't expect to see you back so soon."

"Back?" Rhys asked.

I shot him an apologetic look. "I came here a couple weeks back with Owen and Liam."

"Thanks for the invite," Rhys grumbled.

"We knew you had plans with Quinn."

"Ah. Fair enough. Then yeah, I wouldn't have come."

“Exactly,” I said, as Jim set a draft beer down in front of each of us. We drank thankfully and I wiped foam from my upper lip. “How’ve you been, Jim? Same old?”

Jim nodded. “Same old, minus some good news.”

“Oh?” I asked.

Jim’s smile broadened. I hadn’t seen him smile that big in years. “We’re expecting another grandbaby.”

“Congratulations!” I exclaimed. Rhys had a mouthful of beer, but he nodded his sentiments. I lifted my glass and made a toast to the new little guy or gal who would join the world. “They’re a lucky little squirt to have you as their granddad, Jim.”

“Better quit sweet talking me every time you come into this place, boy. You’re just fishing for free food and beer. I ain’t gonna give you anymore handouts, not with another grandkid on the way.”

I laughed. “I’m not fishing for anything. Just your company.”

Jim shook his head and sighed, looking at Rhys. “See? Sweet-talker?”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Rhys grumbled.

Jim went about collecting our orders, the usual cheeseburgers, and excused himself to do some general housekeeping stuff at the back of the restaurant. When our meals arrived, Rhys and I were the only people sitting in the bar, which was kind of nice.

“So things between you and Cheryl are good?” Rhys asked, after drowning a fry in ketchup and tossing it into his mouth.

I nodded. “Better than good. I can’t explain it. She’s something special, man. She really is. I finally get what was going on with you and Quinn. I mean, it’s different, because you two have known each other for so long, but—”

“Time doesn’t matter,” Rhys said. “I can tell this girl is good for you.”

“You can?”

Rhys chuckled. “Definitely. I think everyone can. You’re happy, Aiden. Genuinely happy. Better than I’ve seen you since Chicago. Since it all went to shit. You know?”

I looked down at the bar. “Yeah.”

I thought about Max and felt a bit guilty. Since meeting Cheryl I hadn’t spent as much time thinking about him and missing him. She’d consumed my thoughts and every waking minute of my life. She was the first thing I thought about when I woke up, and the last thing I thought about before I fell asleep—and those thoughts used to be about Max.

Always about Max.

And the night I found out he was dead.

“What are you thinking about?” Rhys asked.

I looked back up and took a sip of beer. “Nothing.”

“Lies.”

I frowned. “I just—I haven’t thought much about Max since you just brought him up. And I feel bad. It hasn’t been long since we lost him and—I don’t know. It feels wrong not to think of him as much as I used to.”

“Why?”

“He was my cousin.”

“No shit. I know that. But why does it feel bad? You don’t owe him your thoughts. He’d want you to move on. Hell, he’d want you to find a girl like Cheryl who makes moving on easier. Like Quinn does for me.”

“I guess.”

“No. Seriously, Aiden. You don’t need to carry any guilt around with you. Not anymore. We’ve moved on. That place and those memories don’t own us. We’re Lost Breed now. Through and through. To our cores. Max is part of our past and part of us. That will never change. And just because you’ve lost someone doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to find happiness.”

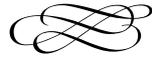
I scratched the back of my neck. “I didn’t realize I just walked into a self-help session.”

Rhys jabbed me in the ribs—which were still a bit tender from Vince’s angry fists. “Don’t be an ass. Just accept what I’m saying to you. Cheryl is heaven sent. So is Quinn. So is every woman who helps damaged goods like us.”

I licked my lips.

He clapped a hand over my shoulder. “We all miss people differently, Aiden. Just because the loss isn’t weighing you down anymore doesn’t mean you’ve forgotten him. Let Cheryl put you back together. You’ll be a better man for it. I know I am. Without a doubt, I am.”

EPILOGUE



CHERYL

The sun kissed my skin as I lay draped over one of the lawn chairs in my backyard.

Well, Vince's backyard.

But he was locked up for his DUI and assault, which meant this house would be empty for at least six more months, maybe longer if I was lucky, and I was staying here until I found my own place.

And so far I loved it.

Aiden had been right. I needed some space to myself. And some time.

Waking up in the bed alone had been weird at first. But I got used to it after the first week or so, and now that I was a full three weeks in, it was starting to feel normal.

It was bizarre to not spend every waking minute walking on eggshells. Or to be consumed with the thought of trying to make everything perfect. The house, the meals, myself—all of it. Instead, I spent my time doing things that made me happy.

When I cooked, I cooked what I wanted to, and I ate every scrap, completely free of guilt. I cooked for Aiden, who raved about how skilled I was in the kitchen and made me feel cherished. I'd even had Ellie and Axel over for dinner last week and that had been one of the highlights of my time in New York City.

A night with friends.

I knew my mom and dad would be happy for me. And proud.

This is the life they wanted for me. Independence. Happiness. Self-love.

I'd shed my old identity like a second skin and was now holding my chin high, owning every curve, every stretch mark, and every blemish.

I sighed with contentment and lifted my face to the sun. I kept my eyes closed beneath my sunglasses as it warmed my cheeks. I crossed one leg over the other and bounced my foot as I heard the sliding glass door open behind me.

"What a vision," Aiden said, as he came around to sit on the chair beside mine.

I sat up a bit straighter as he handed me a drink. It was bright red with a little umbrella sticking out of it. I flicked the umbrella and laughed. "Where on earth did you find these?"

"In one of your many drawers. I thought it was summery. And fun. And that it would make you smile."

"I love it."

"Cheers to the last week of summer," Aiden said, tapping his glass to mine.

"Cheers to that," I said, before taking a sip. It was delicious. The tropical flavors danced along my tongue. "This is so good."

"I'm calling it the Bomb-Cheryl."

I giggled. "Very creative. What's in it?"

"I'm not telling."

"Why not?" I pouted.

"Because I want to be the only man who can make it for you."

I rolled my eyes. "Diva."

"You know it," Aiden said, settling into the back of his chair and using the lever to recline it to the same position as

mine. He pursed his lips over the straw and sucked the concoction back. “It’s like summer in a cup.”

“Indeed it is,” I agreed.

We sat together quietly, both of us bouncing our feet to the beat of the music flowing out of the speakers Vince had mounted outside on the walls when we first moved in. They’d been put there specifically for his work party. And now I was actually able to enjoy them.

It was especially satisfying that it was my playlist playing through them. Vince had never let me play my own tunes.

“This is the life,” I said, gazing out across the blue pool.

“I couldn’t ask for a better way to spend the day. Well, I mean, it could get a little better. But beggars can’t be choosers.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “It could be better, could it?”

He flashed me a white smile and nodded.

“I’m listening.”

Aiden sat up a little straighter. “Let’s me and you christen that pool, shall we?”

I looked at the pool out of the corner of my eye.

Aiden put a hand on my knee and inched closer. “Come on. Let’s do it. Vince will never know. And if he finds out—well, that’s even better.”

“So vindictive,” I smiled.

“Listen. My nose is finally healed and my black eye is gone. I want to celebrate having my face back. You know how many people avoided walking by me on the street when I looked like that?”

“Only the silly ones,” I said.

Aiden snorted. “Then everyone is silly.” He got to his feet and brought his drink with him. “Get up. I want to see that body of yours all wet. And I want to see those tits float.”

“Aiden—”

He offered me his hand and wiggled his fingers in a come hither motion—the same motion he used when he fucked me with his fingers.

I licked my lips, put my hand in his, and let him pull me to my feet. I sipped my drink as we walked to the edge of the pool. Aiden set his glass down on the ledge before sitting down and then sliding into the pool. “Oh, shit, it’s a bit colder than I thought.”

“It’s not heated,” I said.

“Vince is a cheap bastard.”

I laughed as I sat down on the ledge of the pool. I slipped my legs into the water and tried to play it off like I didn’t think it was cold. I knew Aiden. He’d splash me or pull me in if I let on that I thought it was chilly.

To further protect myself from being submerged in the pool against my will, I held my drink and continuously took dainty sips through the straw.

Aiden swam across the pool and then back to me, where he wrapped his arms around my calves, rested his chin on my knee, and looked up at me with big puppy dog eyes. “Are you coming in, kitten?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t want to get your hair wet?”

“I don’t care about that,” I said, defensively.

“Uh huh. Sure you don’t. Every girl cares about that.”

I shook my head. “Not me. Besides, I have to wash it anyway. I want to put my best foot forward for tonight.”

Aiden kissed my knee. “Baby, you could show up in a paper bag with Kleenex boxes on your feet and they’d still love you.”

I smiled, trying to not let him see how nervous I was to meet all the other Lost Breed members tonight.

It was a big step to take. At least it felt that way to me.

Aiden had wanted me to meet them sooner, but I resisted. I was sorting through a lot what with the whole Vince break up and then him going to prison. I was also trying to sort out my feelings toward Aiden, which were very, very strong, and equally scary.

The thought of walking into a biker's house to meet a ton of dudes in leather and their women, was daunting.

I'd nearly had a panic attack the first time he brought it up.

But now, a month after meeting Aiden, I was confident in meeting his family. He was special to me and if he was a part of the Lost Breed then I wanted to be a part of it too. Aiden wanted the same thing. We were on the same page.

"I know I don't have to dress up. But I want to."

"Yeah? What are you going to wear?"

I gave him a coy smile. "It's a surprise."

He grinned and ran his hands up my thighs to rest them on my hips. "I like surprises."

I'd gone shopping the other day and bought my very first black leather jacket. It was covered in gold zippers and buckles, and it screamed 'bad ass.' I planned on wearing that with a little black dress, sheer black nylons, and a pair of thigh high black suede boots that had been sitting in the back of my closet for nearly a year.

This seemed like the perfect occasion to wear them.

I knew Aiden would think I was the sexiest thing in the room no matter what I wore. But I wanted him to see that I could fit in. That I could be a chick in leather just as easily as I could be the girl in a floral dress with a cute ponytail.

I was also sure he would appreciate that I wasn't going to wear any underwear—a fun fact I planned on whispering in his ear right before we walked through the front door. Just to keep him on his toes.

It felt good to be a bit of a bad girl and to have a bit of the control.

Really good.

I finished off the last few sips of my drink and set the glass down on the ledge. Then I slid into the water and right into Aiden's arms.

"It is cold," I said, through clenched teeth.

He held me tighter. "Share my body warmth."

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he walked us out to the middle of the pool. The sun beat down on our shoulders as the cold water lapped at my skin.

Aiden turned us in a slow circle as I pushed my sunglasses up onto my head. "I'm glad you're here with me."

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," he said, before leaning in for a kiss.

He tasted like the Cheryl-Bomb. Cherries and rum and something else I couldn't put a finger on.

As our kiss deepened I ran my fingers up the back of his neck, massaging the tight muscles there. He reached around and pulled at the string of my bikini around my neck. I giggled as it came undone, and then he undid the second string, and as we kissed in the pool my top came off and floated out of reach.

Then he did the same to my bottoms. He tugged the bows apart on the hips and within seconds I was naked and wrapping my legs around his waist. I pulled myself close to him and felt his hard cock through his bathing suit.

He stared down at my tits floating in the water. "I'm never gonna get tired of those."

"I should hope not," I said, running a finger along his jaw.

He looked up at me and fixed me with his bright green stare. "I think I'm about to say something crazy."

I bit my bottom lip. "Yes?"

His eyes flicked back and forth between mine, and then he smiled. "I love you, Cheryl Sommers."

My heart fluttered in my chest. “You love me?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I think I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you in your car singing to the song on the stereo. But I never thought in that moment that I’d actually—” he broke off and shook his head. “I didn’t think I’d get this lucky.”

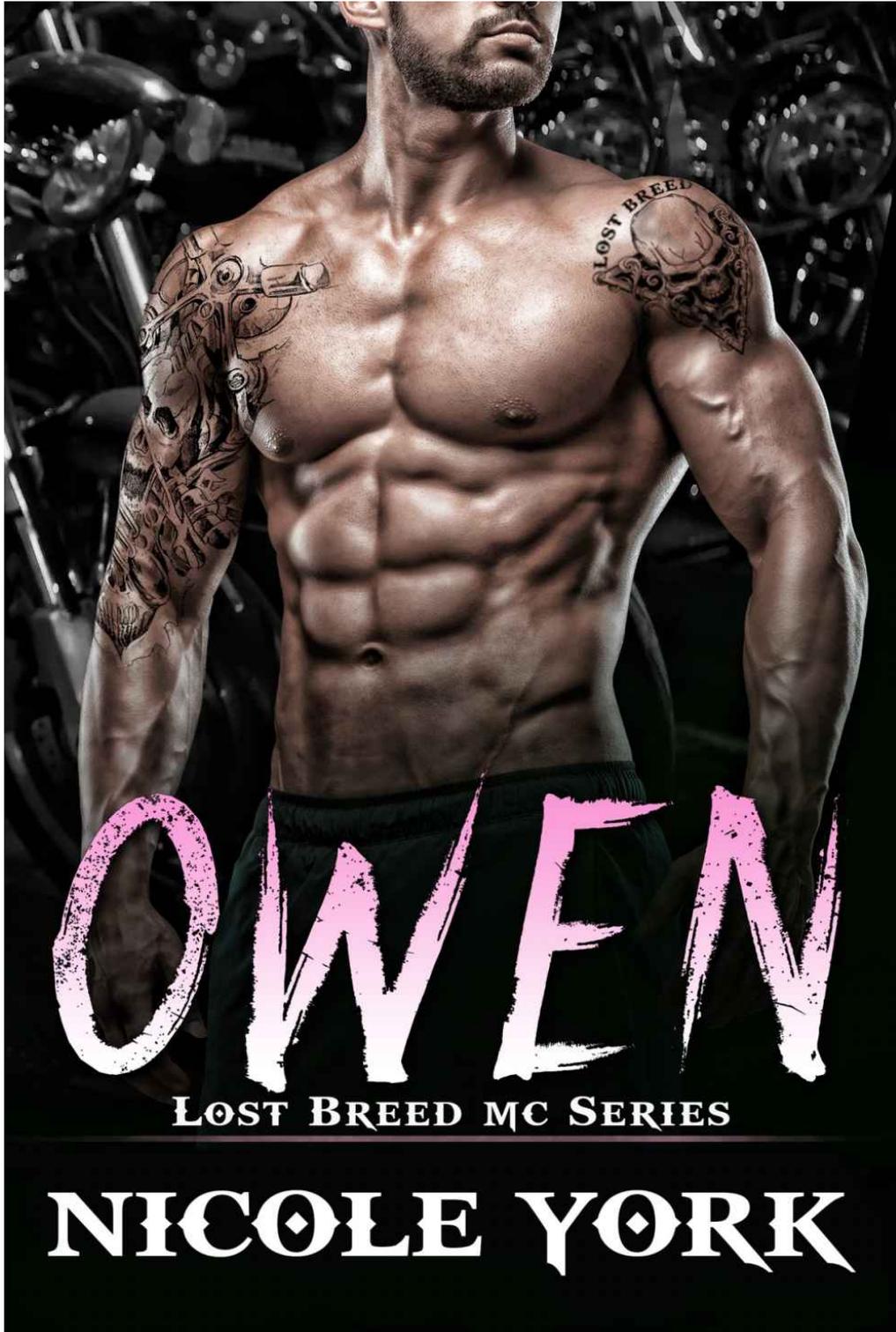
I smiled as my eyes started to cloud over with tears. I hadn’t cried with joy since my parents were alive.

“I love you, too, Aiden Jennings. And I’m the one who got lucky. You saved me.”

He shook his head. “You never needed saving, kitten. You just needed to be reminded that you’re a force to be reckoned with. And I’ll never take you for granted.”

I ran my tongue along my upper lip. He followed it with utter fascination until it disappeared behind my lips. “That’s good,” I cooed, leaning in close and pinching his earlobe between my teeth. “Because I could really use another drink.”

Aiden threw his head back and laughed. I joined in on his laughter until he silenced me with a deep kiss. When we broke apart he kissed the tip of my nose. “Another Cheryl-Bomb coming right up.”



OWEN

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



I'm done with my old ways.

No more bar fights, making enemies, or saying goodbye to friends who got caught in the crossfire of our dangerous lifestyle.

Things are better.

But it's impossible for it to stay that way for long.

I'm not that lucky.

Evangeline Snow is the girl from my past who I didn't deserve. Her father made sure I knew that. But now, seven years later, after running into each other by happenstance, it's like no time has passed. We're both stronger people and we know what we want.

Nothing has changed for me. I want her.

The question is whether or not she's willing to stand her ground and stay by me or choose her father and her own reputation over what we have.

I won't blame her if she chooses the safe route.

I am the road less travelled.

And trouble will inevitably find its way back to me one way or another.

It always does.

CHAPTER 1



OWEN

Rhys was draped carelessly across his chair with one arm over Quinn's shoulder. The pub was loud. He had to lean forward a bit, moving closer to the table we shared between us and Liam and raising his voice to call to me over the racket of the music and the obnoxious drunks scattered around the place.

"Want to rack up a game of pool?" He nodded across the pub toward the far corner, where there was a bunch of old-school arcade games like Pinball and Pac-man and four felt-lined pool tables. One of them had just opened up.

I smirked. "Why? You looking to get your ass kicked in front of your girl?"

Quinn giggled into her beer as she took a sip. "He won't lose with me on his team."

"Tough words." I chuckled.

Quinn shrugged a shoulder and looked up at Rhys. Her cheeks were rosy from a couple of beers she'd had over the course of the hour. "What do you say, babe? Want to help me embarrass these two?"

"For the record," Liam said beside me, "I have not done any trash talking, and I would rather you didn't make an ass out of me in front of all these pretty and very single chicks."

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "They're not paying any mind to you, Liam. You're too young."

"Am not," he said defensively.

I reached for his chin. “Is that the beginnings of a chin strap? Can you even grow a full beard?”

“Fuck off,” he said, slapping my hand away.

Rhys and Quinn laughed at his expense, and then Rhys got to his feet smoothly. “You guys set the table up. I’m going to use the bathroom, and then I’ll order us another round. Want another beer, babe?”

Quinn shook her head. “Just ice water, please.”

He bent down and kissed her forehead. “You got it.”

Rhys strode away, leaving the three of us sitting around the table to quickly polish off our beers.

Quinn finished hers first. “I’ll go get the table set up before someone steals it out from under us. Hurry up, boys. Drink those beers.”

She swept away from the table, hips swaying as she went, and I did a noble job of keeping my gaze on my drink. Liam, however, did not fare as well.

I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow. “If Rhys caught you looking at her like that, he’d have your head. Or your dick.”

Liam let out a nervous little laugh as he nursed his ribs. “I wasn’t looking.”

“Right. That line won’t work on Rhys, brother. I’m just saying. Nose down.”

Liam tilted his head back to polish off the last couple mouthfuls of his beer. “I just need to get laid, man. It’s getting a little dire in that area of my life. I’m desperate.”

“Maybe you should start looking at more attainable options. You know, women who aren’t spoken for?”

“Ha. Ha.”

“I’m serious. Here.” I took the back of his chair and dragged him sideways to drape an arm over his shoulders. I nodded at a blonde girl at the bar. She was wearing blue jeans and a white crop top that showed off about an inch and a half

of midriff. She was thick, curvy, and cute as hell. She crossed her ankles and leaned on the bar as she ordered herself a drink. “What about her?”

“She’s out of my league.” Liam sighed.

“Says who?”

“Me.”

I shook my head. “Give yourself a little credit. You just have to have the right approach.”

“Which is what?”

“Well, for starters, introduce yourself,” I said before slumping back in my chair and sipping my beer. “You’re not gonna get a woman when you’re sitting here and she’s standing all the way over there. Say hello. Talk to her about something generic. Something happening around you.”

“Like?”

I shrugged and looked around the pub. “Like the drunk clowns at the table beside Quinn.”

Liam twisted around in his chair to look across the pub at the pool table area. Quinn was bent over and stretching across the table to rack up the pool balls inside the triangle. She was blissfully unaware of the drunk buffoons behind her checking out her ass.

Liam’s eyes narrowed. “Should we do something about that?”

I watched the men carefully. There were four of them. They had put their game on hold and were leaning against their pool cues and staring unabashedly at Quinn as she straightened up and planted her hands on her hips. Then she walked around the table and pulled a cue from its place on the wall. She chalked the end of it.

The men nudged each other and whispered what I was sure were objectionable remarks about Rhys’s girl, and then they descended into childish snickering.

That seemed to get Quinn’s attention.

She turned to them with her eyes narrowed.

Then they started chatting her up.

Right from the get-go, it was going terribly. It was clear to me that Quinn was telling them to leave her alone. Her body language suggested that she was annoyed, not threatened, and the scowl she wore told me they had already said more than a couple of things that rubbed her the wrong way.

I sighed. “You can’t go anywhere these days without running into assholes.”

When I stood up, Liam was quick to follow.

I marched across the bar. If Rhys hadn’t been in the bathroom, he would have done the same, but we were Lost Breeds, and if he wasn’t around to come to Quinn’s aid, then I was the next best thing she had for backup.

Not that she needed it.

Quinn was in one of the guys’ face. She jabbed a finger at him, and her voice was raised. I couldn’t make out what she was saying, but her face was getting red—and it wasn’t from the beer.

I jogged the rest of the way across the pub and came up beside her, taking her elbow and pulling her back toward me as she practically spit on the tall, preppy-looking guy who had approached her.

“Is there a problem here?” I asked as Liam stepped up on Quinn’s other side.

The preppy guy, who had thick black hair and a long mouth that was twisted in a cocky smirk, shook his head. “No, no problem, man. I just said hello to your friend here, and she started blowing smoke out her ears.”

Quinn scoffed. “Yeah. That’s exactly how it went, you misogynistic, ignorant prick.”

His eyebrows lifted.

I kept a firm hand on Quinn, who was vibrating with anger. Whatever Mr. Preppy had said had most definitely rubbed her

the wrong way, and she was a hard woman to anger.

“You should leave,” I told him, nodding at his buddies. “Go back to your game, and we’ll go to ours.”

“I think your little friend owes me an apology,” Mr. Preppy said.

Quinn’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “I owe *you* an apology? I don’t think so.”

The smirk he wore stretched into a smile that reminded me of the smug look a salesman would give you if you said, “Yes please, I’d like to take the warranty package.” He slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans and swayed on the spot. He was drunk. “Listen, baby girl, you’re making me look bad in front of my boys. And you don’t want that, do you?”

“Fuck you,” Quinn hissed.

He leaned forward. “Say you’re sorry, bitch.”

Quinn yanked her arm out of my grip and moved forward.

But she was too slow.

I closed the gap between me and Mr. Preppy in one short step, and I used that momentum as I wound back with my right fist. I swung, twisting at the hip to gather as much power as I could in the short amount of time I had, and my knuckles landed right across his jaw with a loud crack.

He hit the floor and stayed there.

His buddies all stared at me, dumbfounded by how quickly things had taken a turn as I shook out my fist.

“Well, shit,” I growled, staring down at the unconscious jerk sprawled out at my feet.

Quinn clapped her hands over her mouth. Then she giggled.

Liam put his arm in front of her and pushed her back a couple of steps. “You’d better let us take it from here, Quinn.”

She fell back behind us.

The whole pub had gone quiet. The live band up on stage had ended their song with an unsynchronized wheeze of noise as their instruments stopped. Security guards were making their way through the crowd.

And the three friends of Mr. Preppy had finally collected their jaws from the floor to make a decision. They wanted to fight.

They charged Liam and me with battle cries and raised fists.

I grinned.

We slammed into each other with force, and I brought one to the floor in seconds, breaking his nose under my fist and leaving him in the fetal position on the floor, cupping his bloody face. I stepped over him as the second man blew past me and made for Liam, while the third put his fists up in front of his face to protect himself.

Finally, someone who had a clue.

He let out an angry yell and came in low, wrapping his arms around my waist and spreading me out flat on my back. The fall knocked the air from my lungs, and as I tried to catch my breath, he gathered the front of my shirt in his fist and wound back with his other hand. His eyes were wide, his nostrils flared, and his shaggy brown hair was sticking out in every direction.

He landed a hit to my jaw, and I tasted blood. I shielded my face with my forearms as he let out a flurry of punches. Those were definitely going to bruise.

While he wailed on me, I waited for my chance to strike. He tired after only about fifteen seconds, and then I took my opportunity to drive a fist up into his ribs. He yelped, and I rolled him off of me. As I rolled, I decked him in the face, and he rolled onto his back, where he stared up at the ceiling, dazed.

I made to strike him again, but Quinn grabbed the wrist of my raised arm. “We have to go. Now!”

She pulled me away from the pool tables. Liam was already making a mad dash for the door, and as he went, he caught Rhys coming down the hall from the bathrooms. Rhys saw us running toward him and took the hint, falling into line behind Liam and running after him.

I was laughing wildly when we burst out into the parking lot. Security yelled after us never to come back, and Quinn flipped them the bird over her shoulder as she ran up ahead of us, calling for us to move our dumb asses.

Liam shook his head at me as we jogged across the parking lot. “You’re a fucking madman, Owen.”

I grinned. “Don’t tell me you didn’t have a blast in there.”

“I think I broke my thumb,” he grumbled as we slowed to a walk.

I dragged the back of my hand across my bloody lip and looked back over my shoulder. “I wish there’d been more of them. Then we really could have had some fun.”

CHAPTER 2



EVANGELINE

The modern open-concept mansion was beautiful—I would give it that—but it had nothing on the manor I’d grown up in back home in Chicago. It lacked the character my manor had. Where my home was finished with dark cherry-oak features and stained-glass windows, this home was stark and white and bright, with floor-to-ceiling windows and glass partitions separating the kitchen from the living room and other living areas. No matter where you stood in the house, you could see through to other areas.

For a party like this, it made sense.

I could easily see which rooms had a bar, which rooms were full of people I wanted to avoid, and which rooms had a nice private spot to sit down and take a breather from all the eager socialites who wanted to steal a minute to talk to me privately about my father’s success and how proud I must be.

I moved through the rooms toward the backyard.

The air was fresh and crisp, as fall had just arrived a couple of weeks ago in New York City. The rich aroma of the turning leaves filled the air and was punctuated with the chemical smell of chlorine wafting up in the steam from the in-ground swimming pool. Nobody was in it, but as the night wore on and went into the late hours and people were a bit more intoxicated, I imagined they would have looser inhibitions, and some of them might get in the pool.

Or be thrown in.

House parties like this tended to escalate in that direction.

The outdoor bar was crowded with people, but they made way for me as I stepped up and ordered myself a Manhattan. The bartender showed off a bit, probably looking for praise or just my attention, but I put my back to the bar and scanned the crowd, searching for my father.

I knew he was here somewhere. Several people had told me they'd already spoken to him. But with so many people around, it was hard to spot him. All the men were well dressed in perfect bespoke suits. The women dazzled the rooms with their floor-length gowns and glittering jewelry. My dress, a floor-length silk black gown, stood out from the crowd. It was a bit edgy, with a slit up the right leg that nearly went to my hip. Each step I took showed a good amount of leg and a flash of my strappy black cage heels.

The only jewelry I wore was a pair of teardrop-shaped diamond earrings that were long enough to graze the sides of my neck while I walked.

The bartender handed me my Manhattan, and as I took a sip, a familiar face cut through the crowd and came toward me.

Emory Cage.

Great, I thought, thankful for my Manhattan that washed the sudden bad taste out of my mouth.

Emory sauntered over and flashed me his most offensive womanizer smile. "Evangeline," he purred, taking my hand and pressing my knuckles to his lips. "A pleasure to see you here. I didn't think you were coming."

The event was for my father, and I wasn't going to be rude to one of his biggest donors. "For a while there, I didn't think I'd be able to make it either. But here I am."

"Here you are," he said. His tone dripped with sex, and I had the sense he wished he was in a socially appropriate setting where he could lick his lips and give me a very obvious up and down.

Thank God he didn't.

"You look good," he said.

“You too.”

I wasn't lying. He was a good-looking man. Most of the men at parties like these were. They had money spilling out their ears to afford the best forms of self-care, as did I, and it showed. Emory had almost black hair, peppered with the first appearances of gray. It suited him. He was cleanly shaven with square, bold features, and he looked more like an athlete than a marketing tycoon.

“What's new with you?” he asked, sliding between a couple of people at the bar to stand beside me and flag down the bartender. He ordered himself a whiskey on the rocks.

“Not much,” I said, still casting my eyes around the place in search of my father.

“How are you liking living in the Big Apple so far?”

“It's good. Busy, but good.”

“Do you think you'll stay, or do you plan on going back to Chicago?”

“Not sure yet,” I said. “I have a lot of time to decide.”

“Well, if you ever want someone to take you out to some of the hot and up and coming places, you just give me a ring. I'll show you a great time.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I would not be calling.

I spotted my father at the opposite end of the pool. *Praise the Lords. An escape.*

I slipped out of Emory's reach. “I'm sorry, but I have to excuse myself. I'd like to speak to my father before his speech and wish him luck.”

“Ah yes, go ahead. I'll find you later.”

“Wonderful,” I said, trying to disguise the sarcasm coloring my voice.

“Oh, and Evangeline?”

I turned back toward him and waited expectantly.

“That dress,” he said, pressing his thumb and forefinger together to complete the gesture for ‘perfect’. “Magnificent.”

I smiled but didn’t say anything before slipping through the throngs of people gathered around the pool. I made my way to the other end, apologizing as people were forced to get out of my way.

The party was packed to max capacity. That was for sure.

When I caught up to my father, he was entrenched in a conversation with two other men around his age. Standing in the circle but not saying a word was a handsome younger man, maybe four or five years my senior, who nodded at all the right times and was doing an exceptional job of looking interested.

I put a hand on my father’s shoulder.

He turned toward me and smiled wide when he saw me. “Eva.”

His embrace was warm and firm, and he held on to me for a good ten seconds or so, making the other men in the circle wait on him. He stood back and cupped my cheek. “You look beautiful, my girl. When did you get here?”

“About half an hour ago,” I said.

“I’ve missed you terribly. The manor does not feel the same without you.”

“I miss you too,” I said.

He let his warm hand fall from my cheek and turned to the side to invite me into the circle. “Gentlemen, this is my daughter Evangeline. Eva, this is Wallace and his brother John. They have been big contributors to my Clear Ocean program.”

I held out my hand, and they shook it. “Nice to meet you both.”

Then my father turned toward the younger man who stood patiently beside me.

“And this,” my father said, “is one of my partners at the company. Matthew Aero.”

Matthew was the sort of man who stood out in a crowd. He had black hair, big dark brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and a strong jaw. His shoulders were broad, and his waist narrowed down, creating a dramatic V shape that would make most women swoon.

He stood back a bit and held out his hand. His shake was firm and confident.

“Evangeline,” he said in a deep, confident voice. “It’s very nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you from your father over the last six months since you moved to New York. To say he misses you is a grand understatement.”

“My father never stops missing me,” I said, shooting a look at my dad.

My father laughed. “It’s true. I don’t. I wish you would live with me in the manor for forever. But at a certain point, a man needs to learn how to let go. You have a life to live, my dear. And you have a lot to offer. And there’s nobody I trust more than you to make sure things are running smoothly here in New York.”

Matthew nodded at my drink. “Shall you and I go for a walk while these old timers talk business?”

My father chuckled and waved us off. “Yes. Go. I only need a half hour or so, and then I’ll give my speech. And Eva, afterward, can we sit down and catch up somewhere? Please?”

I put my hand on my father’s forearm. “Yes. I’ll find you.”

He leaned in and kissed both of my cheeks before letting Matthew guide me away and around the outer edge of the pool. He walked slowly, mindful of the height of the shoes I had on, and then he nodded toward the bar as we walked past. “Are the drinks any good?”

“My Manhattan isn’t bad,” I offered.

“I might have to wander over later and treat myself. Once all the business talk is out of the way, of course.”

“Of course. How long have you worked with my father?”

“About four years? Yeah. That sounds right. He’s been a great mentor to me. I’ve learned a lot about myself in working for him, and I owe him a lot, if not all, of my success. He’s a great man. You’re lucky to have him as a father.”

I agreed. I’d always had a good relationship with my dad. My mother died during childbirth, and he had a rough go of things for the first couple of years of my life. Like all expecting parents, he never dreamed he’d suddenly be widowed and a father all on one day.

He had to adjust to his new reality alone. His sister Francine, my aunt, had stepped up to help and moved into the manor a week after I was born. Without her, both he and I would have been lost. She held his hand as he navigated his new role of fatherhood, and I ended up being his saving grace. At least, that was what he told me.

“I owe him all of my success, too,” I said.

“Then we are two peas in a pod.” Matthew grinned.

He had a great smile.

“Indeed,” I said, sipping my Manhattan.

We completed a lap around the pool and then wandered off across the path that led through the gardens.

“Forgive me for overstepping, but I have to ask,” Matthew said. “Do you enjoy events like this?”

“Sometimes.”

“All the stares you get. Does it get old?”

“Very,” I said firmly.

He chuckled. “I can imagine. I couldn’t help but notice that every pair of eyes was on you as we walked by the pool. These people are borderline obsessive, aren’t they?”

“They are consumed with gossip, is what they are. They want to catch me making a mistake. And they want to be the one to tell all their friends about my misstep.”

Matthew shook his head. “Snakes. So concerned with their social media feeds. Look at them. Selfies. Pictures of their

food. Sheep. The lot of them.”

I laughed, and he grinned at me, apparently pleased with his ability to make me laugh.

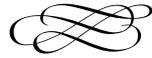
“May I be forward with you, Evangeline?”

“Please,” I said, enjoying his honest approach.

“I haven’t spent much time in this city, and it looks like your father has plenty of work for me to do out here. I was wondering if I could take you for a drink and you could share some of your knowledge of New York City with me.”

I finished my Manhattan. “Drinks sound lovely, Matthew.”

CHAPTER 3



OWEN

“Fucking hell,” I grumbled when the sunlight streaming through my windows woke me up on Saturday morning.

The day after a tussle like the one I had at the pub last night was always the worst. My split lip was swollen and tender to the touch, and my forearms ached something fierce from protecting my face from Mr. Preppy’s friend’s fists.

It was better my arms than my face though, and truth be told, this was the best kind of pain.

I chuckled as I remembered the events of last night and the satisfaction of knocking those assholes flat on their asses. Quinn had left laughing as well. Like me, she was a bit of a daredevil, and she’d been more than happy to watch Liam and I teach those clowns a lesson.

I rolled out of bed and checked the time on my phone. It was nearly nine o’clock. Damn. I’d slept late.

With a groan followed by a yawn, I got to my feet and arched my spine as I stretched, reaching my arms over my head. My back cracked in several places, and I rolled my shoulders, shrugging away the tightness in my muscles as I made my way to the bathroom to have a hot shower.

The steam and the hot water burned my lip.

After I dried off, I brushed my teeth, which also burned my damn lip, and then went into the kitchen to have a quick bite to eat.

By the time I headed into my garage, it was already twenty to ten.

With fall upon us, I only had so many good riding days left, and I'd wanted to get out of here a little earlier to make the most of the day.

I opened the garage door and rolled my bike out onto the driveway. She was an army-green Harley-Davidson Roadster XL1200CX Sportster with brass accents. We'd been through hell and back together, and when I considered selling her last year to buy something with a bit more speed, Rhys talked me out of it, telling me I would regret parting with a bike like this.

He was right.

She'd been with me through all the shit back in Chicago with Isaac Reed and our MC and their complete annihilation. Hell, I'd ridden her away from Max's funeral and used the speed and sharp corners to take my mind off the fact that I'd just lost all my brothers.

Just like that. Everything had changed.

If it weren't for Rhys, I wouldn't have come out the other end alive. I'd have died in an alley somewhere after having the shit kicked out of me by a bunch of strangers in a fight I'd have undoubtedly started over something stupid.

I called it recreational activity. Liam called it a suicide mission.

And Rhys, wiser than the rest of us, told me it was my coping mechanism. And then he asked me to stop because he wouldn't be able to bare losing another one of his brothers.

I swung my leg over the seat and pulled my helmet on. I flipped the visor down, kicked up the kickstand with my heel, and played with the throttle. The engine rumbled and roared as if to tell the neighbors we were leaving, and I peeled out of the driveway, dragging the back tire across the asphalt as I skidded into the middle of the street, straightened out, and opened up on the throttle as I headed for busier streets with higher speed limits.

It would take a good half hour to get out of the dense city and onto less busy, windy roads that were ideal for riding. I liked tight corners and long winding roads, and those were nonexistent in New York City. So I rode, and I rode hard.

And while the wind roared over my shoulders and around my knees, I thought. As I always did when I rode.

There was nobody in my life I was more grateful for than Rhys. He'd saved me when everyone else had practically thrown in the towel, and by that point, I believed myself to be a lost cause. I started shit everywhere I went, and I had a chip on my shoulder the size of the iceberg that sank that Titanic, and it was everyone else's fault that my life had imploded so miserably.

I'd been the same when I was young. In my early twenties, before Rhys ever found me and took me in, I'd been a hellion with a bad attitude and a thirst for danger. I'd spent some time in prison for petty theft and an armed robbery with a weapon that I did not use and did not intend to use. But I'd brought it with me nonetheless, and the two other kids I was with did not have the same plans. They brought crowbars and used them to destroy the store, scaring the shit out of the owner, who was on his hands and knees pleading for us to leave by the time we emptied his cash register.

I still carried a lot of shame around with me for the decisions I made when I was young and stupid.

Maybe it was guilt over what I'd done to other people. The fears I might have given them that they still had today. But I was also ashamed of what it cost myself.

Life had been looking up for a while. I had a girl. I had Evangeline.

I had the girl every man dreamed of, and I had all of her. Her heart and her body and her mind. She was quick as a whip, funny as hell, and a fighter inside and out. She was everything I ever dreamed of having in my life and everything I knew I was not good enough to have.

But she loved me anyway. Until things went sideways.

Then, understandably, she had to walk away from me and all my bullshit. As it was, she probably had no idea what had gone down with my MC and Isaac Reed. Maybe it was better if she didn't know.

I rode hard and fast for the entirety of the afternoon, soaking in the crisp sun and fresh air and dry, open roads. Soon, they would be slick with rain, which in turn would make the leaves that had fallen across the asphalt soggy as they began to rot, and those were terrible conditions for a motorcycle.

I made my way back into the city around five in the evening. My stomach was growling, my ass was asleep, and my knees ached something terrible. It was all worth it.

Without intending to, I ended up on Rhys and Quinn's street, and I decided to pull into their driveway and pop in to say hello.

I got off the bike, hung my helmet on the handlebars, and waddled up to the front door, nursing my right ass cheek as it came to life with sharp pins and needles that made me wince with every second step.

What they said was right. Eventually, you got old enough to start noticing the strain riding put on your body.

My ass was coming back to life when I knocked on Rhys and Quinn's front door, and Quinn pulled it open within thirty seconds or so. She folded her arms over her chest and popped out her right hip to lean it against the doorframe.

"Why hello there, troublemaker."

"Hey, Quinn." I grinned, stretching the cut on my bottom lip. "I was out for a ride and passing through. Thought I'd pop in and say hello."

She pulled the door open the rest of the way and straightened out. "Come on in. Rhys is in the kitchen. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, haven't had a bite since breakfast."

"It's five-thirty," she said, clearly unimpressed with me.

I shrugged. “Yeah. I didn’t want to waste time on a day like this. I wanted to be out on the road.”

She rolled her eyes, and I followed her down the hallway to the kitchen, where Rhys was leaning over the stove, stirring the contents of something in a large pot on a backburner. He had his back to me and was wearing a plaid shirt, black jeans, and slippers.

Quinn sure had domesticated his ass.

I whistled. “Lookin’ good, boss. All that’s missing is a frilly little apron.”

Quinn giggled at Rhys’s expense and went to her man, rubbing his back as she winked at me. “There’s nothing sexier than a man in the kitchen, Owen.”

“Really? That’s good news for me then. I make a mean bowl of ramen noodles.”

She arched an eyebrow. “From scratch?”

“Is that what they call it when it comes in those little plastic bags?” I asked.

Quinn laughed and shook her head at me. Rhys put the lid back on the pot he’d been stirring. He turned toward me with a lopsided grin. “Hey, man. There’s plenty of food. Want to crash for dinner? It’ll be better than noodles in a bag. I swear.”

“I have nowhere to be.”

“No bar fights to get to?” Quinn asked, a hint of judgment coloring her tone.

I waved my hand, aware of both of their steady gazes on me. “Nah. Don’t get your panties in a bunch, lovebirds. I’m not going back to my old ways. It was just one little skirmish. Besides, those boys were asking for it, weren’t they Quinn?”

“Most definitely,” she agreed.

“Thanks for stepping in Owen,” Rhys said. “I wish I’d been there to even the odds. But I suppose you and Liam didn’t really need a third man. You handled yourselves.”

“Let’s be real.” I smirked. “I didn’t even need Liam’s help.”

“Ever so modest,” Quinn said, shaking her head at me as she went to the fridge and opened it with a tug. She grabbed a beer and held it up. “Owen?”

“Sure.” I nodded.

Quinn grabbed two more beers, popped the tops off them, and handed one to me and Rhys before lifting her own to her lips and taking a sip.

Rhys went about finishing off dinner, and within another fifteen minutes, everything was ready, and we were all gathered in front of the stove with bowls in our hands, waiting to get our serving.

Rhys had prepared rice as well as some sort of stew. It looked good and smelled even better, like onions, ginger, pepper, and spices. My mouth was watering as I carried my bowl and my beer to the table in the kitchen and sat down across from Quinn, who had a spoonful of stew held in front of her to blow on it.

Steam wavered up into the air in front of her face. Rhys sat down at the head of the table and told us to dig in.

My first bite was scalding hot, and I fanned my mouth while the two of them chuckled unabashedly at my misery. I soothed my burning tongue with my beer and waited for my food to cool—which took some effort because I was absolutely famished.

“Have you talked to Ryder recently?” I asked, trying to distract myself while I waited for my stew to be eating temperature.

Rhys shrugged. “A week ago, or so. He and Dani are doing well. She’s back to work, and the little one is home with Ryder most days, and they’re looking into possible daycare options.”

“Never thought Ryder would trust strangers with his child,” I mused.

Rhys nodded his agreement. “Me neither. But at a certain point, you gotta lean on others for help. I think he’s found some solace in Axel and Ellie. They’ve been there to help him, and Dani navigate this whole parenting business.”

“Sounds like a fucking nightmare,” I said.

Quinn sipped her beer. “That’s because you don’t like kids. You’re biased.”

“Biased? No. Smart. The word you’re looking for is smart, Quinn.”

She tried to hide her smile. “You’d be great with kids, Owen.”

“Or he’d beat the shit out of them when they spoke out of turn,” Rhys said.

CHAPTER 4



EVANGELINE

The silk of my shimmery white robe was soft against my freshly moisturized skin as I tied it around my waist. My bathroom mirrors were still fogged from my shower, but I could tell my hair was a wild mess when I took it out of its shower cap.

My hairdresser was coming over later this morning to give me a fresh cut and a blowout, so I didn't see any sense in taking the time to wash and condition my locks in the shower. I pinned it all up on top of my head, getting annoyed with the shorter layered strands that fell out of the clip and pinning them back with a couple of bobby pins.

Then I wandered down the long hall from my bathroom into my kitchen and made myself a coffee, which I carried out to my balcony overlooking Manhattan. I padded barefoot to the railing, a good forty feet from my balcony doors, and leaned on it, cupping my coffee mug in my hands and enjoying the rich, earthy aroma as the steam carried it up to my nose.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. There was no better way to start the day than this.

The sounds of the busy city were drowned out by the immense space between me and the ground some fifty stories below. I could see everyone bustling around down there, small pinpricks dancing along the sidewalk and hurrying across the street on their daily commutes to work.

I loved my solitude up here.

There was nobody here to stare at me, to whisper behind my back and wonder aloud why I hadn't married yet. Why a girl like me, with a father like Frank Snow, had not yet hitched her wagon to another billionaire socialite to start her life off on the right foot.

It was exhausting.

Luckily, my father did not share the same sentiments as the rest of our wealthy community. He was happy that I was working for him and still striking out on my own, starting my life by planting my roots in the city I loved on my own terms.

Yes, his money had paid for this penthouse, and yes, my trust fund was bursting at the seams, but I was fairly certain I could survive without his money. I was capable. I was smart.

And I was not as spoiled as others, looking from the outside in, might assume.

That was not to say I wasn't spoiled at all, of course. My father overcompensated for me not having a mother by making sure I lacked for nothing from the moment I took my first breath to now. And what was more, I never asked for anything. I just received it.

I knew I'd developed a bit of an entitled complex, and I knew his dotting hadn't done me any favors in the long run, but I was also aware of the fact that I was hundreds of leaps and bounds ahead of the other young women in the circles I hung around in. They would be trust-fund babies for the duration of their single years, and once they were married off to some well to do, pompous, yacht-club membership owning rich snob, they would use his money to fund their shopaholism.

At least I was not one of those.

I turned my back on the city as it came to life that morning and headed back inside just in time to hear the knock at my front door. I padded over, my silk robe swishing around my ankles, and opened the door to find my best friend Victoria on the other side with a jug of OJ in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. She flashed me a bright white smile and held both up in height with her shoulders.

“Hey, bitch,” she chimed. “What does your afternoon look like?”

“Wide open,” I said, stepping aside for her to brush past me into my penthouse. Her heels clicked on my white marble floors, and she set everything down on the island in my kitchen. Victoria made herself at home and helped herself to two champagne flutes, which she dropped two ice cubes into before mixing our mimosas.

She handed me mine, and I took a sip. “My hairstylist is coming by this afternoon. Should I call and see if another girl is free? A blowout and cut on me, if you’d like?”

Victoria, whose family was wealthy but not of the same caliber as mine, beamed at me. “That would be lovely.”

So I made the arrangements, and by the time we’d moved on to our second drink, both of the stylists had arrived, and we were sitting in the middle of my living room with them bustling around us as they cut and styled our hair.

“After this, I have a mani-pedi,” I told Victoria. “I called and asked them to send another girl for you, too.”

“How did I get so lucky to have you as a best friend?”

“You had a hot older brother,” I teased.

It was true. Her older brother, Sammy, who now lived in Dubai overseeing the family real-estate business there, had been the first thing that drew me into her life, and when the two of us met, we were instantly bonded to each other. She was my anchor that kept me grounded, and I was the wind beneath her wings, for lack of a better expression.

Sammy and I weren’t together long, just a few months, and things ended mutually between us. I came out on top because through our relationship, I gained a best friend.

He gained a couple of headlines in magazines for being my boytoy of the season.

It had been a completely unfounded article. They played me out to be some high-rolling, man-eating shark when in

reality, I'd only had three boyfriends after high school, one of them being Sammy.

The other two had been even less thrilling than our two-month romp and led to unemotional breakups that were easy to walk away from.

They didn't matter. They were in the past.

"Sammy still asks about you when we talk on the phone," Victoria said as her stylist pulled her head back, rolling the round brush through her silky blonde hair while fanning it with her blow dryer. "He was happy to hear you'd struck out on your own in New York like you wanted."

I smiled. Sammy had been more of a friend than a boyfriend, and he had always supported my dream of breaking away from my sheltered upbringing. "How's he doing?"

Victoria closed her eyes and rested her head back while her stylist continued working around her. "He's really good I think. I very well could be wrong, but I think he met a girl."

"Oh?" I asked, arching an eyebrow and then wincing as my stylist tugged at my hair a little too hard.

She apologized instantly.

"It's all right," I assured her. "No pain, no gain, right?"

My stylist smiled and worked more gently.

"Yeah," Victoria said, cracking open one eye to peer over at me. "I asked him about it, but he says it was nothing serious. I think he just doesn't want Mom and Dad to find out. Buy himself some more peace and quiet before Mom starts talking about wedding rings and venues and babies."

"She's still riding that grandma bandwagon hard, huh?"

Victoria nodded. "Yep. Sammy is naturally her first target because he's almost thirty, but if he doesn't get a move on, I know the heat is going to turn to me."

"Even though you're not seeing anyone right now?"

"Do you seriously think my mom cares if I'm seeing anyone? I'm sure she's done her research and has a list of

suitors a mile long, all with great genes. Over six foot, coming from big families with a good slice of inheritance coming their way at some point or another. Oh, and likely all sexist dicks who would be more than happy to leave me at home all day, every day with their spawn.”

I snorted before descending into a fit of laughter. Our two stylists, young women around mine and Victoria’s ages, couldn’t help themselves and started giggling too.

Victoria looked around at all three of us. “You laugh, but I’m not joking. That’s my nightmare right there, and my mother would be more than happy to marry me off to one of those vermin if it meant she was half a step closer to having her first grandbaby.”

“I feel for you Victoria,” I offered sympathetically. “I’m lucky in that regard. Daddy would freak if he caught wind of me considering parenthood.”

“Lucky,” she grumbled.

My phone lit up on the kitchen island, just out of my reach. My stylist, who had been coming to my penthouse every two weeks since I moved to New York City, reached for my phone and handed it to me.

“Thank you, Brittney,” I said as I peered down at the screen. It was a number I did not recognize, and I considered letting it go to voicemail so I could enjoy my much-needed gal-pal time with Victoria.

“You should get that,” Victoria said.

I pursed my lips and decided she was right. It might be a business call. I lifted the phone to my ear. “Evangeline Snow.”

“Evangeline,” a deep, familiar male voice said through my speakers. “Hey. It’s Matthew Aero. From the party.”

“Hello, Matthew Aero from the party.” I smiled, leaning back against my chair and rolling my shoulders. “I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“I didn’t expect to call so soon. But I must confess, I’ve been thinking about you since the last moment I saw you, and

even though I tried to talk myself out of calling so soon for fear of giving the wrong impression, here I am, calling.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Really?”

He was charming, I’d give him that much. “Really. If you hadn’t called, I was going to have to find someone else to take me for a drink tonight.”

“Then I am most definitely glad I called, too. I will send a car for you at eight. Will that suffice?”

Charming and proper. A gentleman.

“I’ll be waiting.”

“See you tonight, Evangeline.”

I hung up the phone and put it facedown in my lap. I could feel Victoria’s eyes on me, and I peered over at her. She lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Who the hell is Matthew Aero?” she asked, her foot bouncing anxiously in anticipation.

My stylist giggled. “He sounds like a superhero.”

I smiled. “He does, doesn’t he? His name has a ring to it.”

Victoria snapped her fingers. “Don’t evade the question. Who is he? Why is he calling you? Spill the beans, woman.”

I pressed the tips of my fingers together and smiled at my friend. “I met him at the party last night. He works with my father. He’s handsome and witty, and he thought the whole affair was as overdone as I did.”

Victoria looked impressed. “So is this just a drink with a friend, or is this a date?”

I shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“What do you want it to be?”

I studied my friend and considered her question.

Did I want to dip my toe in the dating pond again? It wasn’t that I didn’t like dating or didn’t like men. It was more

or less that I had never met someone who gave me that rush of giddiness, of nerves, of white-hot and unquenchable passion.

Well, I'd met one person, but he was off limits.

Dangerous.

And he was buried deep in my past, where he would stay.

"A date would be nice," I said, leaning back and closing my eyes as Brittney ran her curling wand through my hair to polish off the final touches of my blowout.

CHAPTER 5



OWEN

“Are you sure you don’t want a coffee or a cup of tea?” Quinn offered when I told her and Rhys that I should probably hit the road and head home.

I shook my head. “Nah. Caffeine this late will keep me up all night.”

“You’re getting old, man,” Rhys said.

We had moved from the kitchen table to the living room after finishing dinner. Quinn had the kettle on the stove, and I could hear it starting to bubble away. Soon, it would be shrieking, and she could pour her and Rhys their evening cup of tea.

He might look tough, but he was a softie on the inside, and watching Rhys and Quinn together reminded me that there was no one way to be a Lost Breed.

For a long time, I thought love and romance did not belong in the lives of me and my brothers. Our lifestyle was too fast-paced, too hardcore, too rough. There wasn’t any room for women who either couldn’t fight for themselves, which was a category Quinn certainly did not fall into, or women who wanted us to change. There was no room for damsels or girls who were afraid to break a nail.

If you were with a Lost Breed, you were a fighter. Plain and simple.

And you were someone who knew the risks and the danger you were exposing yourself to.

Men like Isaac Reed liked to make things personal. He'd gone for anyone and everyone, and some families had been hit hard by his cruelty. The thought of having someone I loved be put in danger because of the life I led was simply not an option for me.

Although that did not eliminate the appeal of having a woman like Quinn waiting for me at home.

After the end of a long day, it would be nice to have a girl to come home to. Someone who was happy to see me, who greeted me with a kiss and a smile and a soft body and, if I was lucky, open legs in the mornings and evenings.

Yes. I could see myself enjoying that part of a relationship very much.

The kettle started whistling away in the kitchen. Quinn made to get up, but Rhys went for her, leaving the two of us alone in the living room.

Quinn ran her forefinger along her jaw. "How have you been, Owen? Really?"

"Good," I said.

Her eyes narrowed a bit, and I got the impression she was fishing for something. "You're sure? You seem a bit—I don't know—quiet lately."

I shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about, Quinn. All is good. New York finally feels like home. We still have a couple of weeks of good riding weather left. What else could a guy ask for?"

She studied me, her expression unreadable, and then relented. "All right. And the fight last night was what? Purely circumstantial? There wasn't a part of you that was itching for it?"

She knew me too well.

"Of course there was," I admitted.

She nodded knowingly. "I hope you're not going to start looking for a fight everywhere you go, Owen."

“I won’t,” I said defensively. “Last night only happened because those guys were dicks and they outnumbered you. Had there been only one of them, I would have let you handle it yourself. Hell, I’d have gone around the place collecting bets and given you the pot once you kicked his sorry ass.”

Quinn smiled but didn’t say anything.

I picked absentmindedly at a loose thread on my sleeve. “You don’t need to worry about me, Quinn. I’m not that guy anymore. I won’t go looking for trouble.”

She nodded. “Good. Because things have finally settled down. Rhys is happy. Untroubled. I haven’t seen him so at ease in years. It’s like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders, and he’s finally managed to move on after Chicago. I’m not trying to put any shit on you, Owen. I just worry about him slipping into his old ways and his old negative thoughts again if things start to unravel here.”

I leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees and clasp my hands together. “Quinn. Don’t worry. I’m not going to fuck this up for anyone. I want the same things you do. I swear it.”

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and chewed it. “Thank you. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to assume the worst. I just still get scared sometimes, you know?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

It was another reason why relationships in this life were hard. Quinn had her guard up. She always did. She was forever canvassing for potential threats, forever looking for the pin that might come loose that might blow everything up in her face and destroy what she had wanted for so long.

Rhys.

I pushed myself to my feet, and she stood with me. “I should hit the road. Thanks for dinner.”

Quinn followed me to the door with her hand on my back. “There are no hard feelings over this, right? I’m only looking out for you boys because you’re all so incapable of doing it for yourselves.”

I chuckled and pulled her in for a one-arm hug. “No hard feelings. Someone has to keep us in line, right?”

She grinned. “Right.”

Quinn called down the hall into the kitchen to Rhys to tell him I was leaving, and he joined us at the front door to wish me a good night. I thanked them both again for dinner before hitting the driveway and getting back on my bike to head home.

They stood in the doorway with the light from the hall illuminating them from behind, and as I rode away, the image of them waving was burned onto the back of my eyes, a picture of domestic bliss.

A picture of something I could never have. And didn't want. At least, I was fairly certain I didn't want it.

The night was cool but not intolerably so, so I took a long way home and found myself on busy streets packed with cars heading to their Saturday night destinations. I wove through taxis and luxury sedans, limos, and sports cars. I ran more than a handful of yellow lights and two reds.

When I came to a somewhat less busy street lined with swanky restaurants, I spotted a woman with long dark brown hair stepping out of a limo on the curb on the opposite side of the street. I had to stop at a red light behind two taxis, and it gave me the chance to really get a good look at her.

There was something familiar in the way she moved.

She was like a dancer, completely in control of every elegant movement she made, almost like she was a woman who was used to being watched at all times. It would make sense. All I could see was the back of her, and the view was spectacular.

She was wearing all black. Her top was all lace, with long sleeves, and it ended right at the narrowest part of her waist, highlighting her hourglass shape. Her pants were skin tight from hip to ankle and blacker than sin, and she'd paired the look with a pair of sky-high black pumps with red soles that screamed sex and class.

“Damn,” I breathed, watching as she stepped up onto the curb and flipped her mane of luscious brown hair over one shoulder. She looked both ways down the sidewalk, and I got a glimpse of shimmery cheekbones and red lips.

I was not satisfied. I needed to see more.

So I wove out and around the two cabs in front of me, both of whom honked their horns in annoyance, and pulled up to the stop line at the red light. I leaned over my gas tank and kept my right foot planted on the pavement to keep myself steady as I admired every curve of her body.

Then she turned to face the road, and my breath hitched in my throat.

Evangeline Snow.

“No fucking way,” I muttered.

It took me all of three seconds to assess the intersection, pull out in front of traffic, and pull a U-turn which earned me a hell of a lot of honks and curses through open windows. I accelerated around a couple of cars and pulled into the open spot behind the limo as Evangeline turned toward a man in a black suit. She held out her hand, and he lifted it to his lips to place a kiss upon her knuckles.

Tool, I thought as I swung my leg over the seat and tucked my helmet under my arm.

I hopped up onto the sidewalk as the man in the suit offered Evangeline his arm. She threaded hers through the crook of his elbow and smiled up at him as he began leading her to the wide double doors of a very lavish-looking two-story restaurant with a glass front.

I jogged over to them and called her name.

Evangeline turned, her brow furrowed in confusion, her red lips slightly parted, and memories flooded over me.

Me and Evangeline making out on my bike in her driveway at the manor in Chicago.

Me and Evangeline fooling around by the edge of the pool on a hot summer day when her father was out of town.

Me and Evangeline telling each other we loved each other when we were both a little drunk and a little high on endorphins after a night of lovemaking.

I swallowed as a smile touched her lips and recognition lit up her bright green eyes, which were just as dazzling and wild and clear as I remembered.

Like tropical oceans. A sea of green and wonder.

CHAPTER 6



EVANGELINE

Matthew pulled me in a little closer to his side when we turned toward the man who had called my name.

At first, I'd expected to turn around and see one of my father's friends. Or perhaps someone from the party who had tried to get my phone number. Or even worse, someone from the media.

But he was none of those things.

I smiled and my cheeks hurt. "Owen McCully."

He'd changed. A lot.

For starters, he was much bigger than I remembered. Back when we were young and dumb and under the impression that we were in love, he'd been tall and lean with a lot of filling out to do. He had very clearly done it. His shoulders were broader, his arms thick with muscle. His chest was full, and his posture was powerful. He was a man who owned the space around him and commanded respect—or fear, depending on who you were.

His auburn hair was thicker and untamed, probably due to the fact that he'd just been wearing a helmet. That did not surprise me. Owen almost always had his helmet with him because he rode everywhere he went. His jaw was more square and covered in dark stubble that dared me to reach out and stroke his cheek like I used to.

I swallowed.

There were also some things about him that were new and not necessarily positive things. His nose had been broken. Again. It was more crooked than it used to be. And there was a scar through his right eyebrow where no hair grew.

But damn him, he was still a handsome devil.

Devil being the key word there.

He looked me up and down in that same way he always used to, like a lion who had found what he wanted after months of searching. “I never thought I’d see you in this neck of the woods, Angel,” he purred.

Angel.

He’d called me Angel for as long as I’d known him. When we’d first met and he found out my name was Evangeline, he’d cocked his head to the side and said he was going to call me Eva. But then he frowned, shook his head, and said I was no Eva. So he went with Angel.

He was the only person who had ever called me that, and I liked it that way. It had become our special thing.

“I live here now,” I told him.

His dark, thick eyebrows lifted. “Oh yeah? Likewise.”

“Really? I never thought you’d leave Rhys back in Chicago.”

“I didn’t,” he said.

I cocked my head to the side curiously.

He waved his hand dismissively. “Doesn’t matter. You look good, Angel. Really good.”

I wished my cheeks weren’t burning so furiously, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. There were some men who just made you feel a certain way, and Owen was and always had been Kryptonite to me. He was a bad boy. Rugged. Mean. Tough.

But he also had a soft and gooey center that I knew not many people were privy to. I was one of the lucky ones who’d gotten a glimpse of it before our time together ended.

“And you’ve been staying in trouble, I see.” I nodded at his face, referencing his new scar and newly shaped nose.

He grinned and slid a hand in his jean pocket. “Me? Trouble? Never.”

I giggled.

Matthew suddenly stepped forward and let my arm fall as he offered his hand to Owen. “Hey, man. I’m Matthew. Nice to meet you.”

Owen looked from Matthew’s hand to his face, then accepted the gesture and closed his fingers around Matthew’s. “Owen McCully.”

Matthew stood back and put his hand on my lower back. “How do you two know each other?”

Owen looked to me to answer.

“Oh,” I said, trying not to smile as I recalled the memories of our times together. “We used to date. About seven years ago.”

Matthew nodded knowingly. “So you’re from Chicago, then?”

“Born and raised,” Owen said.

“Why did you move to the Big Apple? I just found myself living here after a transfer at work. I work for Evangeline’s father, actually.” Matthew flashed a cocky smile and glanced at me. I smiled politely back up at him.

Owen cleared his throat. “I needed a change. Chicago was getting a bit too small.”

“Small?” Matthew asked.

I interjected, sparing Owen from having to explain his involvement with his MC. “Owen was always meant for someplace other than Chicago. At least, that’s what I always thought.”

“You did?” Owen asked.

I nodded and dropped my gaze to the sidewalk. “I did.”

Matthew's hand pressed more firmly into my lower back and wrapped slightly around my waist. He pulled me gently toward him and nodded at the restaurant doors. "Sorry, man, but we'd better head in. This place books up weeks in advance, and I had to do some serious schmoozing to get us a table tonight. You understand, don't you?"

Owen took his helmet out from under his arm and let it hang by his side. "Of course. You can't let a schmoozed-for table go to waste. Have a good night."

I offered Owen the best smile I could and hoped he understood the feeling behind it. I wished I could stay out there and talk with him longer. But that wouldn't be fair to Matthew, who had very clearly gone through a lot of work to make tonight happen. I appreciated his efforts, and I wanted him to know that.

But Owen McCully was a hard man for me to turn my back on.

When I did, he caught my wrist and pulled me to him, right out from under Matthew's arm. He gazed down at me with his deep brown eyes. "Sorry, Matthew, one second?"

Matthew sighed behind me. "Of course."

Owen smiled at me. "Can we meet for coffee sometime and catch up? I want to know what the last seven years have looked like for you."

"I'd like that."

"Yeah?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes. Now, you'll have to let go of my hand so I can get back to my date."

Owen released me and let my hand fall to my side. "I don't have your number."

I stepped back toward Matthew. "I guess you'll just have to find me again. Have a good night, Owen."

I let Matthew lead me through the doors and into the restaurant, and I didn't look back to see if Owen was staring after me, even though I desperately wanted to.

Matthew greeted the host, who immediately brought us to a table by the window. It was a romantic little spot at a small table that was so intimate, our knees touched when we sat down. He proceeded to order us a bottle of red wine and told the host that we were going to keep the drinks menu.

Just in case.

While he spoke to the host, I rested my chin on my hand and gazed out the window to watch Owen get back on his bike.

It was the same one he'd had all those years ago.

The army-green paint looked a little faded from the sun, but everything else about it was the same. The brass accents, the matte-black motor, and exposed pieces.

When he pulled away, I frowned.

Across the back of his leather jacket were the words "Lost Breed."

"What's the matter?" Matthew asked.

I shook my head and tore my gaze off of Owen, who was peeling off down the street. "Nothing. Sorry."

Matthew studied me. "The two of you have history, huh?"

I licked my lips. "Yes. That was rude of me, wasn't it? Indulging him like that?"

Matthew shook his head. "No. Not at all. The two of you very clearly went way back. I was the one who was rude, pulling you away like that. I was being selfish. I didn't want to miss my chance to sit down with a woman like you in a place like this. Do you think me a bad person?"

Matthew had stolen all of my attention back with his charm. I smiled. "You aren't a bad person, Matthew. I'm happy to be here with you. I've been looking forward to this all day."

"Likewise," he said, twisting around in his chair and craning his neck to peer over the heads of other customers in

the restaurant. “Now, where’s that wine so I can perfectly time my toast to our evening and getting to know each other?”

Matthew was smooth. He’d addressed the run-in with Owen and effortlessly moved past it like a gentleman, and I appreciated that in a man.

When he spotted our server coming, he turned back toward me with a crooked grin that in turn made me smile. He had a boyish charm to him that was endearing, but also another edgier, sexier, more mysterious side.

The server poured us our wine, and he lifted his glass in a toast. “To a good evening with a new friend.”

“Cheers,” I said, and we both took a sip of the merlot. It went down as smoothly as Matthew’s lines.

I crossed one leg over the other. “So, Matthew. How long have you worked with my father? I believe you told me at the party, but I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten since then.”

“About four years now.”

“Do you like working with him?”

Matthew nodded. “I do now. At first, it was a bit overwhelming. Your father, as I’m sure you know, is a very headstrong man, and he’s ruthless when it comes to business. He has a vision for his company and his brand, and he shoots for the moon. Which I’ve learned over the last two years is the only way to have any sort of success in this day and age, especially when your project is environmental. It’s easy for the world to turn a blind eye and forget about you if you’re not making sure you’re right in their face at every turn.”

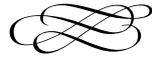
I laughed. “You’ve definitely sat in many meetings with my father. You sound just like him.”

He raised his wine glass. “I will take that as a high compliment.”

“It is.” I smiled, taking another sip of wine and watching Matthew Aero over the rim of my wine glass.

Charming indeed.

CHAPTER 7



OWEN

She took my hand in hers and pulled me away from the crowd as the music vibrated the earth under our feet. Her laughter was lost in the air, drowned out by the screams of the crowd, the music blaring on stage, the chorus of voices, the beat of the drums, and the chords of the electric guitar.

But I knew she was laughing nevertheless.

Evangeline was always laughing when we were together.

I cast a glance over my shoulder as she stole me away, around behind the stage where nobody was allowed to enter except security and VIP personnel. Evangeline's wealth and her last name let her get away with a lot of shit I never would have dreamed of attempting. A guy like me would go to jail for attempting the shit she got away with.

She spun me around and pushed me up against the side of the platform used for the stage. There weren't many people back here, and now that we were out of range of the speakers, I could hear her when she whispered, "I want you right now."

"Here?" I breathed. My cock twitched in my pants in response, and the breathless giggle that came out of her only made it worse. I swallowed. "Angel, someone will see us."

"Since when were you the goody-good in this duo?" she asked, cocking her head to the side to give me a quizzical stare.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Since you started saying crazy shit like that."

She tossed her head back and closed her eyes as she faced the night sky.

Good God, she was beautiful.

Too beautiful and too sweet and too clever for the likes of me.

But she turned her sights back on me, her lips curling in a naughty smile that threatened to take my legs out from under me, and she pressed her hands flat to my chest. "Then why don't we find somewhere a little more private?"

Her hands fell to my crotch, and she rubbed my cock through my jeans.

I grabbed her wrist and pushed her away, but she refused to relent, and if I didn't answer her soon, I knew she'd have a hand down my pants, and then I'd be done for. Seconds would pass, and she'd be on her knees, pulling my pants down.

And then all bets were off.

I'd fuck her right here and now and wouldn't give a damn who saw us.

"Come on, baby," she purred, hooking her thumb in my waistband and pulling me to her. "Let's go."

"Lead the way."

Evangeline took my hand again and led me away from the outdoor concert at Jay Pritzker Pavilion. I hurried along behind her and cast wary looks over my shoulder to make sure no security was watching as my girl dragged me to the treeline on the outskirts of the concert property. We plunged into the darkness, and once we were shielded from view by the leaves and branches and shadow, she spun to me, gathered the front of my shirt in her hands, and pulled me in for a kiss.

She tasted like spiced rum.

I cupped her cheek in my hand and plunged my fingers into her thick dark hair to hold her in place as I walked her backward until her shoulder blades were pressed against the trunk of a tree. She smiled into our kiss and fumbled with my fly to get my jeans undone.

When she succeeded, she let out a needy little moan into my mouth and plunged her hand into my boxers to stroke my cock.

Evangeline was wearing a short black skirt and a button-up white blouse that she'd tied in a knot to shorten it and expose her flat belly and the sparkly piece of jewelry in her navel. She took my free hand and pressed it to her stomach. Then, holding my wrist, she encouraged me to run my palm down her stomach and under her skirt, where I discovered she wasn't wearing any panties.

I broke our kiss and pressed my forehead to hers. Her eyes were closed.

"You were counting on this, weren't you, Angel?"

She nodded.

I teased her, running my hand along the inside of her thighs and tracing the groove between her pussy and hip. Her skin was soft and smooth and firm, and she bit her bottom lip and pushed her hips toward me, silently pleading for me to give her what she wanted.

Her blue eyes fluttered open, and she stared right into my soul. "If you make me wait any longer, Owen McCully, I'm going to have to take care of myself."

"Sounds sexy," I purred.

She cracked a wicked smile. "Sounds like blue balls for you."

"Fuck me," I growled when my alarm clock started blaring obnoxiously on my nightstand.

I glared at my ceiling, full of anger and spite that morning had come at the exact moment that things were heating up in my dream.

I rolled over, slammed my hand on my alarm clock to silence it, and then went back to lay on my back and gaze at the ceiling. I was out of breath. My cock was hard as hell, and

the soft graze of the blanket on top of me was enough to make me flinch.

Of course, I was already dreaming about *her*.

Evangeline had always had a hold on me that was incomparable to any other woman's draw. In fact, all other women paled in comparison to her. I'd said that to Rhys once, who told me I was probably missing out on plenty of great women because I was constantly holding them up against Evangeline and what we'd had.

He was right. He always was. But it didn't change a damn thing.

I still pined for her soul and her heart and her lips and her tits and her pussy. I pined for all of her. She filled something in me that nobody else would ever be able to fill, and until I saw her last night, I had resigned myself to my fate that she and I were nothing but a memory. Something to look back on with fondness and to dream about from time to time.

But, damn it all to hell, I could have sworn there was still something there when she looked at me last night. Her gaze had been full of fire, just like it used to be, and she didn't try to hide it, even though she was clearly out on a date with another man.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed. "You're being a fool."

Seven years was a long time. A lot had changed for both of us.

I was a different man than I used to be. I could only assume she was different too. She looked like she'd moved on with her life and followed in her father's footsteps. They were making a difference, and the man she'd had on her arm last night probably had goals more aligned with hers.

It didn't matter how many times I told myself she and I didn't make sense, and I should leave it alone.

I needed to see her again. The dream only reaffirmed that.

It hadn't been a fantasy, but rather a memory of one of my favorite nights with the girl of my dreams.

Evangeline had shown me a wild time that night at the concert. She'd sucked me off in the trees and let me fuck her against the trunk. She didn't keep quiet, either. Anyone walking past would have known there were two lovers going at it in the trees.

I could still recall her cries when she came.

I ripped my blankets off and padded to my bathroom, where I cranked the cold water in my shower and stepped under the spray. The cold instantly made my skin prickle with goosebumps, but it chased away the lingering arousal that sat heavily in my limbs.

By the time I got dressed and had a cup of coffee, I felt almost normal, but my mind was still occupied with thoughts of Evangeline and the man she was with last night.

She'd told me she was up for coffee, but I had to find her first.

I was sure her address would be impossible to find online, but I gave it a go anyway. Nothing came up. So I used the resources I had and called Dani, who was conveniently at work at the police department.

She scolded me for using her for such frivolous matters, and I assured her it was not frivolous at all. Evangeline was important. She put up a bit of a fight, and I pleaded with her until she finally caved and told me to sit tight while she got the information I was after.

Within another six minutes, I had Evangeline's address at a posh fifty-story apartment building in downtown Manhattan.

I was there just before noon.

The place was luxurious and a hell of a lot fancier than I'd expected. I left my bike parked out on the street a couple of blocks away after seeing the valet service at the roundabout driveway outside the building. I wasn't trusting someone with my baby, and I also didn't feel like paying an arm and a leg for something I could do on my own.

I took the stairs up to the front doors of the lobby two at a time, and a doorman opened the door for me and greeted me with a polite nod and a very formal, “How do you do, sir?”

I nodded at him before stepping inside and feeling immediately out of place.

The floors were glistening white marble and were probably polished every night. The ceiling was two-stories high, so every step I took echoed, and the people mingling around in the lounge off to the right cast uneasy glances in my direction.

I was not dressed in a suit or a business dress like them, but rather jeans and a black T-shirt with my leather Lost Breed jacket on top. In retrospect, that might not have been the best decision. I probably looked like I was here on unsavory business in their eyes.

I strode right up to the concierge desk. It, too, was white marble, and above hung a dazzling crystal chandelier that caught the sunlight streaming in through the two-story floor-to-ceiling windows all around the lobby.

Behind the desk was a wiry young man in a gray suit with thick-framed black glasses. He had a stylish haircut that was slicked back, and not a strand of his light blond hair was out of place. When I stopped at the desk, he looked up from his computer screen and blinked at me.

“Oh, good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Evangeline Snow.”

The concierge, whose nametag read “Barry”, narrowed his eyes at me. “Apologies, sir, but I am not authorized to give you any personal information on residents at this property unless specifically directed to by the resident themselves.”

I shrugged, leaned forward, and crossed my arms on the counter of his fancy desk. “I’ve got all day, Barry. If you don’t call up to her, you and I can hang out. What do you say?”

Barry became clearly frazzled. He straightened out several items on his desk compulsively: keyboard, mouse, notepad, pen, cell phone. Then he pushed his glasses farther up his nose

and stammered, “I’m very busy, sir. Perhaps you can come back later?”

“Nah. I’ll wait.”

Barry frowned. “Sir. Please. I’m not permitted to—”

“She’ll want to hear from me. She and I go way back.”

Barry licked his lips and looked at my jacket and then my hands. My knuckles were a bit bruised from my fight back at the bar the other night. “This feels like a mistake,” he said nervously.

“Why don’t you just call her and tell her Owen is here to see her? She won’t be pissed. I swear.”

Barry made a nervous sound in the back of his throat.

I leaned forward, and he recoiled. “Come on, Barry. Do a guy a favor. Call her up and pass me the phone. I’ll talk to her.”

Barry, bless his little soul, hung his head in defeat, picked up the phone, and dialed Evangeline’s number. He looked from me to my knuckles while the phone rang, and when she answered, he said, “Hello, Ms. Snow. Sorry to bother you. But there is a gentleman down in the lobby asking for you. He says his name is Owen. Would you like to speak to him?” He paused as she answered. Then his shoulders slumped. “Yes. Yes of course. Here he is.”

He handed me the phone.

I took it from him with a smug smile. “Hey, Angel. Barry here runs a tight ship. He put me through the wringer.”

Her soft laughter filled the phone. “He takes his job very seriously.”

“Listen, I just busted my ass tracking you down. Please tell me you’re free for lunch.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll come up there and get you myself.”

Barry shook his head frantically. “No, sir. You are not permitted up—”

I held up my hand. “Shut up, Barry.”

Barry hung his head.

Evangeline giggled into the line. “Give me fifteen minutes. I’ll meet you down there.”

“Wear pants,” I said.

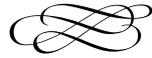
“Why?”

“Because I brought my hog.”

Barry, who probably didn’t know the term “hog” for motorcycles and thought I was saying something completely inappropriate to one of his residents, looked like he was going to pass out.

I flashed him a grin and waggled my eyebrows.

CHAPTER 8



EVANGELINE

I got ready in a whirlwind, spurred on by anxiety and excitement and giddiness.

Owen McCully was downstairs waiting on me.

It had been a long time since I'd felt this sort of rush about spending time with someone. My cheeks were hot, and my hands were shaky, and there were butterflies fluttering around in my stomach, hellbent on freedom.

Owen's warning to wear pants was appreciated because I'd almost gone down in a maxi dress and a loose cardigan. I swapped it out for a pair of high-rise jeans—which I rolled up at the ankles—booties, a crop tee, and a black leather jacket. My hair was already in a long braid down the middle of my back, which would do, and I hurried out of my penthouse to get on the elevator and ride it down to the lobby.

As promised, Owen was waiting for me.

He had his back toward me, and the Lost Breed emblem was on display on his jacket while he spoke to Barry, who was pale and expressionless and a little wide-eyed.

The poor thing was terrified.

I would have to fix that.

Owen's ass looked pretty good in his jeans, and I checked him out from behind before tapping him on the shoulder. He turned around and smiled. It was the best thing I'd seen today.

"That's criminal," Owen said, looking me over.

“But bike appropriate,” I said.

He shrugged one shoulder. “I suppose so. Are you ready? I think Barry is going to shit himself if I don’t clear out of here soon.”

I giggled and shook my head before moving around Owen to put my hands on the concierge desk. “Barry, I’m sorry you had to deal with him. But thank you for keeping him entertained while he waited for me. He’s just a goof, okay? He won’t hurt you or anyone in here. His bark is worse than his bite.”

Barry laughed nervously. “Yes, Ms. Snow. Thank you.”

I gave him a reassuring smile. “I appreciate you breaking protocol and phoning me. Owen is a dear friend. Whenever he comes by, you have my permission to let him up, okay?”

Barry nodded, despite looking horrified that I would be comfortable letting a man like Owen up to my penthouse. “Yes, Ms. Snow.”

I flipped my braid over my shoulder and turned back toward Owen. “I’m famished. Where are we going to eat?”

“I’m craving something greasy.”

“Burger and fries?” I suggested.

Owen flashed me a smile. “You always know the right things to say to a man, Angel.”

I followed him out the front doors, down the steps, and across the looping driveway and valet service. We walked two blocks down the road to where his bike was parked, and as soon as I saw it, my heart fluttered in my chest.

“You still have her,” I said softly, reaching out and resting a hand on the worn leather seat. I’d spent hundreds of hours on the back of this bike with my arms wrapped around Owen.

“Of course I do,” he said, plucking two helmets off the handlebars. He handed me the smaller of the two. “Do you still know how to put these on?”

I scoffed at him. “How much do you think I’ve changed in seven years?”

“I don’t know. I’m a bit worried to find out.”

I shook my head at him. “You have nothing to be worried about. I’m the same girl.” I pulled the helmet on and threaded the strap through the metal rings, working the end of it back through and then tugging down to tighten it. I made sure the helmet wasn’t too loose before flipping the tinted visor up. “If you ride like a pussy just because I’m on the back, I’ll kick your ass, Owen.”

He threw his head back with laughter before putting his own helmet on. Then he swung a long leg over the seat of the bike, put the key in the ignition, and revved the engine.

The sound made my knees ache.

It had been so fucking long since I’d been on the back of a bike.

There was something about the rush of wind over my knees and the way a bike leaned in the corners that made you feel like you were invincible. Having a strong man calling all the shots and keeping you safe all the while wasn’t so bad, either.

Owen nodded for me to get on.

I kicked down one of the metal spokes behind his heel, planted the ball of my foot on it, and then stepped up, bracing myself with a hand on each of Owen’s shoulders as I swung my other leg over the seat and sat down. I kicked the other peg down, found a comfortable position, and leaned forward to wrap my arms around Owen.

He was thicker than he used to be.

I wondered what sort of masterpiece lay beneath his T-shirt now.

Owen kicked up the kickstand and pulled away from the curb. The engine roared as he opened up the throttle, and I quickly flipped my visor back down as the wind hit my face and we wove through traffic.

When we stopped at a red light, Owen put his hand on my knee and turned his head to the side. “You all right back there, Angel?”

I nodded and squeezed him with my arms. “I’m great! See that red awning up ahead? They serve great burgers. Let’s stop in there.”

He nodded.

We pulled into the parking lot of the burger shack and parked the bike. I got off first, then Owen did, and we took off our helmets and brought them into the restaurant with us.

The place was busy, with only two open tables. The waitress, a short, curvy little thing, brought us to a booth by the window. We placed our helmets on the seats beside us before ordering a glass of water each. She bustled off and left us to scan the menus.

I already knew I was getting the Tropical Hawaiian Burger. A concoction of barbeque sauce, grilled pineapple, sweet relish, hot peppers, and chipotle mayo.

Owen was still poring over his menu, long after I’d closed mine and tucked it off to the side.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “What’s taking you so long? You and I both know you’re going to order the one with the most bacon on it.”

“It’s been seven years, Angel,” he said without looking up at me. “Maybe I’ve changed.”

“Oh please. No amount of time could ever disenchant you from your love of bacon.”

With a chuckle, he closed the menu. “Who am I kidding? You’re right.”

“Aren’t I always?”

“Not always,” he said.

“Oh? Name a time?”

He pursed his lips, lips I had kissed a thousand times and dreamt of kissing again in the past seven years, and he gazed

out the window thoughtfully. Then his brows drew together.

“Can’t think of anything, can you?” I teased.

He shook his head. “No. Not off the cuff like that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Excuses. Excuses.”

He grinned. “It’s really fucking good to see you, Angel. Seriously. It’s like...”

“Nothing has changed?”

“Yeah.”

“I feel that way too.”

Our moment was interrupted when our waitress came back with two glasses of iced water. She set them down in front of us and plucked a small notebook from her belt. She flipped it open, clicked her pen, and poised it over the page. Then she looked up at us. “What can I get you?”

Owen ordered his bacon burger. “Add extra bacon.”

She scribbled it down and turned toward me.

“I’ll have the Tropical Hawaiian Burger.” I folded up my menu, took Owen’s, and stacked them together before passing them to her.

She read our orders off to us to make sure they were right. “Are both of those with fries?”

Owen and I nodded.

“All right. Anything else to drink, or are you good with your waters?”

We told her we were fine with our waters, and she took her leave, taking orders from a couple of other tables around us before reporting back to the kitchen.

I turned to Owen, whose eyes I could feel on me as I watched her. I smiled and sipped my water. “So. What’s new with you?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know where to start. A lot of shit has changed since I saw you last, Angel. A lot of shit.”

I leaned forward to rest my arms on the table. From here I could get a couple of whiffs of his cologne, bergamot and cedar wood. I inhaled and hoped he didn't catch me smelling the air around us. "How about you start by telling me how you ended up here in New York City?" I suggested.

His expression fell.

I sat up a little straighter. "Owen? Did I say something wrong?"

He shook his head. "No. No, not at all. It's just... well, it's not a very good story."

"I'm not looking for a good story."

He met my gaze and nodded. "Right."

I licked my lips. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

For a minute, I thought he might take me up on that offer, and I tried to think of something else to ask him that didn't elicit such a reaction. I'd never seen him go all stiff like this. It was clearly something he didn't want to talk about.

But there had never been any secrets between us.

"Where's your old jacket?" I whispered.

He looked down at his leather jacket, his Lost Breed jacket. "Yeah. That's the thing, Angel. The Red Rogues are no more."

I swallowed past the sudden tightness in my throat. "What happened?"

He sighed and slumped back against his seat. "Your father was right. I got us in trouble. And most of us didn't make it out alive."

"Owen," I said, reaching for his hand resting on the edge of the table. He let me graze his knuckles, which I noticed were bruised but I didn't say anything, and then he pulled away and let his hand fall to his lap.

He met my eye. "We met a bad guy. A real bad guy. In a bar. He was there looking for a fight, and he picked me out of

the crowd, and when he made a point to knock my shoulder, I pushed back. You know how I used to be.”

I nodded. I did. He was a fighter. No, a scrapper. He was the guy you wanted on your team when shit went sideways.

“He nearly killed me.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

“Isaac Reed.”

I’d never heard of him, so I stayed quiet.

“Rhys and Max were there to save my ass. If they hadn’t, my skull would have been crushed by that angry bastard. I’m sure of it.”

This explained his scarred eyebrow and busted nose. I licked my lips. “What happened after?” I knew there was an after. I could see it in his eyes. He’d lost something.

“Reed came after the whole club. He was a psychopath, Angel. He wrought havoc on us. Tailed us when we were alone. Made sure we knew someone was after us. And then he started picking us off one by one. There are only four of us left. Me, Rhys, Liam, and Aiden.”

“What?” I breathed.

He nodded. “He killed eight of us. Max included.”

“Jesus. Owen. I’m so sorry. You could have called me. You could have—”

He shook his head sharply. “No. It was best that you and I were done before Reed came along.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek to stop myself from crying.

Seven years ago, there had been two things in this world that made Owen happy. One of those things had been his club. The other had been me, and I’d had to walk away from him when the fighting wouldn’t stop, and my father’s stress was going to give him a heart attack.

He’d lost us both.

Just like that.

I looked down at the table and willed the tears not to come.

“Angel,” Owen said softly, reaching for me. “It’s all right. Things are better now. We came out the other side in one piece.”

“Not all of you,” I whispered.

“No. Not all of us. But we put the bastard in the ground who slaughtered our brothers and we’re doing their memory justice. Please. Don’t cry.”

I sniffled and shook my head. “I should have been there for you.”

“No offense,” Owen said, chuckling softly. “But I’m glad you weren’t. It was really fucking messy. And had you seen me when it all went down, you might have hated me.”

“I could never hate you,” I said, lifting my gaze back to him.

He smiled, but it was a sad, twisted, broken sort of smile.

It was clear to me that he still hadn’t managed to put himself back together in the aftermath of his loss and grief.

Owen McCully could fight himself out of any situation. He was the guy who would come to your rescue no matter what the odds were. He’d stand by your side with his fists raised until the bitter end.

But he’d never been very good at the healing part.

CHAPTER 9



OWEN

Evangeline dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her thumbs when the waitress came back with our plates of food. She set them down on the table, spun them toward us, and then stood back with her hands on her hips.

“Anything else?”

There was ketchup on the table and plenty of napkins, so I shook my head. “We’re good. Thanks.”

“Holler if you need anything,” she said as she was already walking away.

I set to work on my food and popped two fries in my mouth. Evangeline was still getting herself settled and was sniffing softly.

I pulled a napkin out of the chrome box beside the ketchup and passed it to her. “Here.”

She took the napkin, dabbed under her eyes and her nose, and then crumpled it into a small ball. I didn’t see where it went, but it disappeared. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry, Angel. I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I could have given you a heads-up that things were going to get dark real quick.”

She shook her head. “No. That’s not what I meant. It’s not your fault what happened to the Rogues.”

I hesitated with my burger halfway to my mouth.

She licked her lips and stared at me. “I know you, Owen. I might know you better than almost anyone. And I also know you probably wake up every morning wishing you hadn’t swung at Reed. But it’s not your fault.”

I put my burger down.

Damn her for being so intuitive.

“I wouldn’t say every morning,” I said.

Evangeline ran her finger under her lashes, wiping away bits of wet mascara. “I can only imagine how angry you were.”

I nodded. “Things were pretty bad for a long time.”

I thought back to all the fights I’d gotten into after Reed wiped most of us out. At the time, I was hellbent on convincing myself and the remaining Red Rogues that the fights were just a distraction. That I was only looking for something to take the pain and the guilt away for just a few minutes.

But each fight had a higher and higher cost.

When my bar battles started landing me in the hospital, Rhys put his foot down. He was just as broken as I was, maybe even worse off after Max was killed, but he was still there and able to put me in my place.

He told me I was looking for the easy way out.

I was looking for someone to end my misery for me.

And then he’d become so furious, I thought he might kill me himself.

“So New York was a fresh start?” Evangeline asked, guiding me away from those unsettling memories.

“Yes. In a sense. When we came here, it wasn’t for a clean slate. We tracked Reed here. He was doing the same thing to another crew that he did to us, and he’d only just got started. So we tossed our hats in the ring and offered to help them put him down.”

“I thought clubs didn’t work together like that?”

“They don’t,” I said. “Not usually. But they were in a bad spot. Reed had already killed two of them, and I think their boss was realizing that Reed wouldn’t stop until he was surrounded by the corpses of his brothers.” I shifted in my seat and reached for the ketchup, which I squirted on my plate. I handed it to Evangeline, and she did the same. “At first, they wanted nothing to do with us. But Rhys was stubborn as hell, and we ended up getting our way in. And we were there when they cornered Reed. And Rhys put him down.”

“He killed him?” she breathed.

I nodded. “Shot him.”

She bit her bottom lip.

“Don’t feel bad, Angel. The guy deserved the bullet he got. And it doesn’t weigh heavy on Rhys, either. Hell, I think it set him free. That’s why Ryder gave him the gun.”

“Ryder?”

“Our new boss.”

She reeled under this new information. “New boss? Rhys isn’t—”

“Nope. Ryder is the President of the Lost Breed MC here in New York City. He took us in. Gave us a new home. Set us up for success. He’s a good man, Angel. As good as they come. Rhys is more than happy working for him. And, you should know, he and Quinn are together now.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyebrows lifting and her lips curling up in a smile. I was happy to lead the conversation in a lighter direction.

“Really. Shit isn’t all bad. Not anymore. We’re back on our feet, and this feels like home now.”

“I’m glad.”

I nodded at her plate. “Eat up. You said you were famished. I’d hate for my sob story to steal your appetite.”

Evangeline looked at her plate and ran her hands down her thighs.

Damn it. I had spoiled it for her.

I should have kept my fucking mouth shut. Everything that happened in Chicago was not her problem. It was my burden to bear.

I took a bite of my burger and hoped it would spur her into eating as well. “What about you?”

She picked up a fry and took a bite. “What about me?”

“Any mass murders happen in your last seven years?” I joked.

She didn’t see the humor in it and shook her head. “No. Thank God. I’ve been luckier than you. Then again, I think I always have been.”

I wouldn’t argue that point.

She finished her fry and moved on to her burger. After a few bites, she dabbed her lips on her napkin, leaving a perfect pink imprint of her mouth on the paper. “Things in my neck of the woods have been pretty good. Uneventful compared to your seven years. Daddy is still kicking ass, and his Clear Ocean program has taken off. He’s touring the country and giving speeches and even some lectures at universities now. It’s making a difference.”

“That’s great. You must be proud.”

“I am. I’m holding down the fort here if things come up. They don’t that often. But if a client needs to meet with my father and he can’t get to New York, I step in.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

She studied me. Her blue eyes, bright and clear as the sky, danced back and forth between mine. “Sometimes.”

“Just sometimes?”

Evangeline drew her long braid over her shoulder and ran her fingers over it. “I mean, yes. It’s a good job. And I’m proud of what I’m contributing to and the fact that I’m part of the family business. But I don’t really like a lot of the clients. They look down on me, and I think they try to get away with

things they would never try to pull if it was my father in the room instead of me.”

“So, sexist pricks?”

She smiled. “Yes. Sexist pricks.”

“Do you think they don’t take you seriously?”

She laughed. “Oh, I *know* they don’t take me seriously. I can’t tell you how many of them have asked for my personal number at the end of business meetings. It’s appalling.”

I shrugged. “Can you blame them? I mean, look at you.”

She arched an eyebrow, and I immediately got the sense I was walking on thin ice. “So that means it’s okay for them to behave like pigs in the workplace? Because I’m attractive?”

I swallowed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I hope not,” she said, and then she cracked a smile to let me know all was forgiven. “Besides working for my father and moving to New York, not much is new with me. Auntie Francine is doing well. She’s back at the manor in Chicago, keeping everything in working order for my father. He’d be lost without her, and I probably never would have moved here if she wasn’t still living at the house.”

“Well, I’ll have to thank her sometime then.”

Evangeline blushed.

We finished our meals, and I paid the tab. Evangeline, always respectful of our financial differences, did not insist on covering the bill herself because she had more money. She graciously accepted, picked up her helmet, and winked at me. “Take me back to my penthouse? I’ll show you my digs.”

“Is that a proposition?”

“I don’t know. Depends how fast you’re willing to ride to get me home.”

I parked in the underground of Evangeline’s swanky apartment building about ten minutes later. We were lucky to not have passed any cops because I was definitely breaking a hell of a lot of traffic laws to get her home as soon as I could.

She assured me it would be perfectly fine to leave the helmets with the bike unattended, and we headed to the elevator. She pressed the button for the top floor, and we rode up quietly.

She stood with her hands clasped in front of her and glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. “It’s kind of weird to be inviting you to my place. Like old times, huh?”

If this was going to be like old times, I was about to become one very lucky bastard.

“Just like old times,” I said. The elevator doors opened, and I found myself standing in a grand foyer. The ceiling above was glass, and sunlight streamed in, lighting up the space between the elevator and Evangeline’s front door. She slid her key into the lock and pushed it open.

I stepped into a bright, beautiful, spacious penthouse suite. The floors were the same shimmering white marble as those downstairs in the lobby. The ceilings were high and arched with white support beams. Her ceiling was littered with skylights and pot lights, giving the place an even bigger, grander feel.

Her kitchen was the shit out of magazines, with white cupboards and counters that glittered. The chandelier above the table in the dining room must have cost upwards of twenty-thousand dollars. The whole place was surrounded in windows, and straight ahead were balcony doors opening up onto a massive balcony overlooking the city.

And, naturally, there was a swimming pool out there.

“Well shit,” I breathed, turning in a circle and soaking in the sight of it all. “This is *exactly* like old times.”

CHAPTER 10



EVANGELINE

Owen's mouth was hanging open as he looked around at my penthouse in awe and shock.

"Not bad, huh?" I asked, popping out a hip and resting it against the kitchen island as I folded my arms under my breasts.

He turned toward me while rubbing the back of his neck. "Not bad? I'd hate to imagine what you would fawn over."

I chuckled softly. "I'll admit. I was a bit awestruck by this place too when I first saw it."

"So, naturally, you bought it."

"Naturally." I smiled.

"I'm proud of you, Angel. You've done really well for yourself. At least one of us was of sound enough mind to move past our bullshit and get their head on straight."

I hated how he did that. How he lumped himself in with a category he seemed to deem less worthy of happiness. Of love. "One of us had a hell of a lot more shit to go through, Owen. And it wasn't me. I got lucky with all of this. I didn't work for it. It fell into my lap."

"That's not true."

"Of course it is!" I said, throwing my hands in the air. "My father made sure I had one of the nicest suites in New York City. In fact, it was one of his terms in even letting me move out here in the first place."

“Letting?”

I rolled my eyes. “You heard me. I love him dearly but sometimes...” I shook my head and trailed off, not willing to speak ill of my father out loud.

It was just that sometimes, he treated me like a child. Or like his most prized possession that he needed to put on a pedestal for the rest of the world to see.

Or instead of a pedestal, a very high-rise luxury condo in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the United States.

Same thing, right?

Owen shrugged out of his leather jacket and draped it over the back of a bar stool before leaning on the other side of the kitchen island. He peered up at me from under his hooded brow. “He just wants you to be safe.”

“He underestimates me.”

“Yes, he does,” Owen said simply.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. “I’m so glad I ran into you last night. It feels so good to talk to someone I don’t have to—I don’t know—put on a show for. Does that make sense? I can just be me.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Owen said softly. And then he was moving toward me. He came around the island, stopped in front of me, and lifted a hand to my cheek. “Because I feel the same way. I’ve missed you, Angel. I’ve really fucking missed you.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek into his warm, callused palm. It felt so right; so safe and familiar. I took a slow and steady breath and tried to capture this feeling of calm in my heart so I could replicate it later.

But it was interrupted by a soft kiss upon my lips.

Owen’s fingers slipped from my cheek to cup the nape of my neck as his tongue slipped between my lips. I didn’t resist.

How could I?

This was Owen McCully.

This was the man who, despite all my best efforts, still carried a piece of me around with him everywhere he went since we'd parted seven years ago.

His kiss was hot and needy and just as intense as it was all those years ago. I let out a soft moan as I let my defenses fall.

Being intimate with a man was not a luxury of mine. Not with my life. Men always wanted something from me. If it wasn't a business opportunity, it was sex, and if it was sex, it wasn't the sort of sex to write home about. It was them planting their flag in the sand to declare that they had conquered Evangeline Snow, and then they would move on to another target. Or, in worse cases, they might try to get me under their thumb so they could get a taste of my father's wealth and influence for themselves.

That was why it was easier to avoid men in general.

But Owen wasn't like those others. He was good to his core. Even though he ran in bad circles and he'd broken a lot of bones and shed a lot of blood, I knew that he was good. Strong. Brave. He had a core set of values and morals that he would never compromise, and he would do anything to keep me safe.

That was why he'd left in the first place.

To keep me safe. To keep me away from his hell or high-water lifestyle.

But now he was back. And he was kissing me. And his fingers were sinking into my hair, and all I could think about was going to my knees and reminding him how good I could be to him.

Reminding him how good we could be to each other.

I pulled away just far enough to stare into his eyes when I opened mine. "Are we doing this?" I whispered.

"Are you asking my permission?" He chuckled. I shook my head. "Do you want me to ask for yours?"

I shook my head again.

Owen nipped at my bottom lip, and I smiled. Then he pressed his cheek to mine and slid forward so that his mouth was right by my ear. When he spoke, his hot breath tickled my neck, and my knees ached something terrible. “Then tell me what you want me to do, Angel.”

I wet my lips and shivered as he ran his hand up my hip to the waistband of my jeans. He slid his finger along the top, pausing at my navel. Then he pushed his hand flat to my stomach and inched it down so that his fingers slid under my panties.

I sighed.

“I want to suck your cock,” I whispered as my legs trembled.

His fingers moved farther down until they hovered on the place above my clit. He rubbed the sensitive skin there, knowing how delirious his teasing could make me. Then, like the devil he was, he pinched my earlobe between his teeth. “And then what?”

My eyes nearly rolled back in my head as my veins caught fire with lust. “And then... and then...”

“Yes?” Owen purred, finally indulging me and running his fingers over my clit. I sucked in a sharp breath, and he held me in place, using his body to pin me between him and the counter. He pressed down a bit harder and traced circles over my clit. “And then what, baby?”

“Then I want you to fuck me.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded, and my breath shuddered out between my lips. “Yeah.”

He pulled his hands out of my jeans and, with a flick of his wrist, popped the button open. Then, wasting no time, he yanked them down my hips, spun me around, and grabbed a handful of my ass.

His growl was primal, and my panties were instantly soaked.

“These seven years were good to you, Angel. Fuck.”

He bent me over the counter and pulled my panties down. I knew from the times I’d been with him in the past that it was best to stay where he put me—unless I was in the mood to be punished. It could be fun to be a little pain in his ass. I liked how his jaw used to get tight and how he’d look at me like he was going to fuck me within an inch of my life.

But today, I would be good. Today, I would follow the rules.

Owen ran his fingers up the inside of my thigh and then over my pussy. I was dripping wet, and the sound he made when he touched my wetness was pure desire. He swirled his fingers along my slit, and then he pushed them inside me.

“Yes,” I breathed, leaning forward and pressing my cheek to the cool countertop.

Owen gave me deep thrusts with his fingers. I wiggled my hips, unable to stay still, and he rewarded me with another thick digit.

I gripped the edges of the counter and dared myself to keep it together. I couldn’t come right away. I had to make him work for it.

That was his favorite part.

“Please,” I whispered, my breathing heavy and sharp as he fucked me with his fingers.

“Please what, Angel?”

“Let me suck your cock.”

He stood back, turned me around, and let me crouch down before him to slowly undo his jeans. I gazed up at him and held his stare as I pulled his cock free of his pants and then pushed them down around his thighs.

I’d nearly forgotten how well endowed he was.

Nearly.

I started by running my tongue up the base of his shaft to the tip, where I swirled around his head and then slowly took

him between my lips. He watched me the whole time, and I continued staring up at him as I drew him deep into my mouth until he was pressed against the back of my throat.

And I went farther still.

“Fuck,” he breathed, his voice thick and strained.

I sucked him off until he was close to bursting. I could see the strain in his jaw and in his hard stare, and I didn’t stop until he pulled away.

I licked my lips. “Come back here.”

He shook his head and pulled me to my feet. Without a word, he pulled my crop top off over my head and tossed it on the floor. Then he took off my bra, and I pressed my tits together for him, putting on a show as he fumbled to get his jeans off the rest of the way. He stepped out of them, fished a condom out of his pocket, and slapped it on the counter before pulling his shirt off over his head.

“Damn,” I breathed, raking my eyes over his body.

It was just as I thought. Owen was a hell of a lot more man than he’d been seven years ago. And even then, I’d thought he was man enough.

His shoulders were broad and swollen. His arms were thick and chiseled with defined muscle. Veins stood to attention along the inside of his forearms and wrapped around to the back of his hands. He had the same tattoo I remembered: the half sleeve on his left bicep and tricep. But there was also a new one on his right shoulder. A skull and the words “Lost Breed”.

He was hot as hell, and my body couldn’t wait anymore.

“Turn around,” he said hoarsely.

I did as I was told and turned. I arched my back for him as I leaned on the counter and went to the tips of my toes to give him the best view of my pussy and my ass.

He tore the condom wrapper open, and I looked back at him over my shoulder as he rolled it on. “I still like it hard, baby,” I told him.

He took me by the hips, stepped in close, and eased his cock inside me. “Some things never change,” he growled.

From there, I tossed conscious thought to the wind, and I let him carry me away on an adventure of pleasure. He filled me up with each deep thrust, and his pace quickened steadily, building up to a rhythm that had me biting down on my tongue to stop myself from screaming.

But that trick had a shelf life.

I let out a muffled cry of pleasure when he slapped my ass.

Things intensified when he lifted my left leg and held it up on the counter, forcing me to bend it at the knee. He managed to drive his cock even deeper into my pussy, and I reached for something I could grab onto.

There was nothing but smooth countertops.

Owen grabbed the base of my braid in one hand and pulled me up. I moaned, loving how much control he craved, and found myself staring up at him as he leaned over me. I gazed into his eyes, and he stared back while he fucked me until I couldn't keep it together anymore.

I screamed his name.

Owen bucked wildly against me as I came. My legs trembled so fiercely that he had to hold me up to stop me from toppling over. He kept driving into me, hard and deep, and I descended into sinful madness as he pushed me down flat on the counter and rode me until he found his own release.

Then he pressed kisses to my back and squeezed my ass gently.

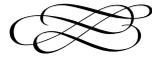
I stayed where I was. The cool counter felt good against my cheek, breasts, and stomach.

“You're still the best I've ever had,” I said, my voice thin from screaming.

Owen's deep chuckle vibrated through me as he cupped my pussy in one hand. “That's what I like to hear. I hope you're not done with me already, Angel. This was just a warm up to remind you what you've been missing.”

I almost came a second time just from his words.

CHAPTER 11



OWEN

Waking up in Evangeline's penthouse was like waking up in a guest suite at the Queen's palace in England.

Well, maybe it wasn't that lavish, but it was close enough in my mind.

It smelled like fresh lavender and sage when I opened my eyes and found myself staring up at Evangeline's bedroom ceiling. The lights were off, but sunshine streamed in through the sheer white curtains on the massive windows on the south wall of the bedroom. I squinted against the brightness and raised my hand to shield my eyes as I turned toward the sun and Evangeline's side of the bed.

She wasn't there.

I strained my ears, listening to see if she might be in the bathroom having a shower. But there was only silence.

So I rolled out of bed with a sleepy groan, rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands, and peered around in search of my clothes, which were nowhere to be seen. I did find a white bathrobe draped over the chair on the other side of my nightstand, however, and it seemed as if it had been intentionally placed there for me to find.

I chuckled to myself and shook my head.

This reminded me of how things used to be with me and Evangeline.

She loved to share her wealth and the luxuries it afforded her. She'd probably tucked my clothes away to force me into

putting the robe on.

I shrugged it over my shoulders and tied it around my waist before heading to the bathroom to take a leak. Then I made my way down the long hall from the sleeping quarters of the penthouse to the living area. I crossed the living room, and then the dining room, and then found myself coming around the corner to the kitchen to see Evangeline standing at the island pouring mimosas.

“What on earth are you up to?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

She let out a startled yelp when she heard me and nearly spilled orange juice all over the place. She set the jug and the bottle of champagne down. “I thought I would fix us a little morning beverage. Do you have plans for the rest of your day? Anywhere you need to be?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “No. Why?”

She shrugged one slender shoulder.

She, too, was wearing a white robe that matched mine. She had it loosely tied, and the collar had fallen open, exposing her chest and her cleavage and a bit of her rib cage. She looked beautiful as always. Her hair was down and wavy, and she had very clearly brushed it this morning. It hadn't looked that smooth when I was done with her around three in the morning. It had been a chaotic tangled mess with pieces jutting out all over the place.

Evangeline finished pouring the drinks into slim champagne flutes made of what I assumed was crystal, and then she walked around the island to hand me my glass. She was barefoot and had no makeup on.

This was my favorite state of Evangeline Snow. Natural. Pure. And smiling at me.

“Can we spend the day together?” she asked.

“On one condition.”

“Name it.” She smiled.

I tugged at the collar of my robe. “I don’t have to take this off and put real clothes on.”

She giggled. “An easy condition to abide by. Cheers.”

I sipped my mimosa and enjoyed the citrus flavor combined with the dry bubbles of the champagne. Evangeline took my hand and led me back around the kitchen island to the counter by the sink, where she had cut up a plate of fresh fruit: watermelon, cantaloupe, strawberries, apples, kiwi. She picked up the plate. “Let’s sit outside. It’s a nice morning. We can put our feet in the pool.”

I followed her out onto the balcony and pulled the doors closed behind us before joining her at the edge of the pool. She sat with her feet in the water and her robe slightly open, exposing a hell of a lot of bare thighs. Then she leaned over the plate she’d set down between us and plucked a strawberry from the assortment to pop it in her mouth. Evangeline chewed gracefully, nodding her approval of the sweet berry.

I helped myself to some fruit too before leaning back on my hands. “You realize you’re wasting all this shit on me, right?”

She smiled. “No, I’m not. You could use it. Let me rephrase. You *deserve* it. You’ve had a rough go over the last while, and I wanted to do something nice for you.”

I studied her as she gazed out across the pool.

Her lashes were long and cast shadows over her high cheekbones as the sun started creeping higher in the sky. She looked down at the water around her ankles, and the shadows lengthened.

Somehow, she had gotten even more beautiful over the years.

“Thank you,” I said.

She turned toward me and flashed a white smile. “You’re welcome.”

I sighed and turned my face up to the sun, closing my eyes. “Tell me something, Angel.”

“Anything.”

“What made you throw in the towel with us?”

She hesitated.

I chuckled. “I’m not trying to put you on the spot. And I’m not looking for an answer that will make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I just want to know. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it over the years, and I figure we’re in a place now where we don’t need to pretend anymore. Aren’t we?”

She licked her lips and then nodded. “I suppose you’re right. I... I never wanted to end things with you, Owen. But it became about more than just you and me, and I had to make a choice. You or my father.”

It was the answer I’d been expecting. “It makes sense.”

Evangeline gazed back out at the pool and gently swung her legs in the water. It lapped at the edges and fanned outward. “I think it made sense at the time. But now? Now, I feel like it was a mistake. I showed weakness. I compromised what I wanted to make things easier for someone else.”

“Someone you love. Your dad only wanted—”

“What was best for me. Yeah. I know. But who is he to determine what’s best for me?” Her blue eyes swept up to me, and her intense stare held me in place. “Who is he to tell me that you were the wrong choice? That you would hurt me? You’ve never hurt me, Owen. Never. The only hurt I ever experienced in your regard was when things ended between us.”

I waited a beat before speaking. “Did your dad know how we felt about each other?”

She shrugged. “To be honest? I have no idea. And even if he had, I don’t think it would have made much of a difference.” She laughed and shook her head. “If he’d have known I was in love with a bad boy biker like you, he would have had a heart attack.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my skin tingled. “In love?”

Evangeline's eyes widened, and her cheeks turned a furious shade of pink. Her mouth opened and closed as she worked to try to find something to say. No words were coming.

I grinned. "Damn. Who'd have thought the sophisticated Evangeline Snow could ever love a schmuck like me, hey?"

"You're not a schmuck," she said hurriedly. "Besides, I was young. I didn't know what love was. But at the time, that's what it felt like."

"Have you felt that way again since?"

Evangeline looked right at me. Her eyes reflected the still surface of the pool and appeared even bluer than usual. "No. No, I haven't."

"Me neither."

We stared at each other for what felt like a very long minute. Then she dropped her gaze to the plate between us and picked up a piece of cantaloupe. She popped it in her mouth, chewed, and went back for another piece.

I wasn't sure if she was doing it for a distraction or if she actually wanted to eat.

"Can I ask you something else, Angel?"

She nodded. "Sure. Why not? This is going swimmingly for me so far."

I chuckled softly and rubbed the back of my neck. "Forgive me. These are things I have wondered for a very long time."

"I understand. Ask your question."

"Do you still care what your daddy thinks about the men you choose to spend your time with?"

Evangeline chewed the inside of her cheek. "I know what answer you're after, Owen."

I didn't say anything.

She sighed. “And I don’t think it’s as simple as a yes or no answer. I’d like to tell you I don’t care. I really would. But I don’t know if that’s true. My father is a good man. And I am so grateful for him. And I want him to be proud of me and happy for me. But most of all, I want him to know I am safe, so he doesn’t have to worry himself over me. Does that make sense?”

Of course it did.

If Frank Snow found out she was in love with me and that she’d chosen me, he would fear the worst for his daughter on all fronts. Her reputation would be at stake and, in his mind, so would her safety and her character. I could compromise her. Soil her.

Ruin her.

“It makes sense, Angel,” I said.

Suddenly, the bathrobe over my shoulders didn’t feel so luxurious. It felt like a wall between me and Evangeline. All this swanky shit was what was keeping us apart, and it was just a reminder of all the obstacles in our way.

I untied the robe, shrugged it off, and slipped off the edge of the pool to plunge under the surface. When I emerged, Evangeline was laughing at me and had inched closer to the edge. “What are you doing?”

“It seemed a shame to let a perfectly good pool go to waste like this. Especially on such a nice morning. The good weather will be gone soon. Join me.”

Evangeline gave me a crooked smile and shook her head. Then she spread her legs a bit, tucking one flap of her robe over her thigh for modesty’s sake, and beckoned me to come closer.

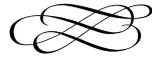
I stood between her knees, and she picked up a strawberry and put it in my mouth. Then she took my face in her hands and leaned over to kiss me.

I pulled the sash of her robe apart, pushed it open, and pulled it down her shoulders. She slipped out of it and into my

arms, and I lowered her into the water, where I pinned her against the edge of the pool and ravished her with kisses.

Kisses that would make her old man keel over with rage and terror.

CHAPTER 12



EVANGELINE

I met Victoria for lunch at a posh salad bar only a few blocks from my apartment building. She was already there when I arrived, sitting at a table by the window and sipping on an ice water with a lemon wedge on the rim. She waved me over when she spotted me at the door.

I wove through the tables, and she popped up to her feet to give me a hug.

“You look great,” she said, standing back and nodding at my shoes. They were new royal-blue suede pumps with a thin gold heel, and they went well with my all-white ensemble. “Those shoes are killer.”

“Thank you,” I said, shrugging out of my thin white coat. I draped it over the back of my chair, along with my purse, before taking a seat and tucking into the table. “You look good, too. New lip color?”

Victoria nodded. “You like? I thought you might. It’s not released yet, but the company sent me a box of their samples. I can bring some for you next time we see each other.”

“Sure,” I said, not one to ever turn down free makeup samples. I flipped open my menu and scanned the options, even though I knew every dish they offered. Victoria and I came here on an almost weekly basis and, for the most part, we always ordered the same thing. “Do you know what you’re getting?”

“Of course I do,” Victoria chimed.

“Let me guess,” I said, running my finger down the page until it landed on the salad she always ordered. “The Mexican mix. Add chicken, grilled not breaded, extra avocado, no tomatoes?”

She giggled. “You know me too well.”

“You’re predictable.”

“Oh, like you aren’t?”

I shrugged. “I think I might order something new today. I’m feeling adventurous.”

“Really? What brought that on?”

“Nothing,” I said innocently. “I just want to dabble in some new flavors.”

Victoria watched me suspiciously as I read the menu and opted for a salad with beets, goat cheese, vinaigrette dressing, and red onions. The selling feature was the candied pecans. Then I closed the menu, folded my arms on the table, and gave Victoria all of my attention.

“So what’s new with you?” I asked.

Victoria pursed her lips in thought. “Not much, to be honest. Same old stuff, although I did get a chance to talk to Sammy on the phone last night, and he told me all about this new girl he’s been seeing in Dubai. And I must say, she sounds pretty fantastic.”

“Yeah? Where is she from?”

“She’s an Emirate. Born and raised in Dubai. She works as a tour guide and loves her job and has been doing it for ten years.”

Victoria had to cease telling me all about Sammy’s new lover when the waitress came to our table to take our orders. Once she left, Victoria went right back into telling me all about this woman Sammy was obsessed with.

Within about three minutes, my mind started to wander.

At first, I thought about how badly I wanted my salad because I was hungry as hell. Then, after I drank some water,

the hunger pains subsided, and I started thinking about other things.

Things like my morning in the pool with Owen yesterday.

Or the night we'd had leading up to said morning in the pool.

Or the afternoon we had *after* the pool.

When I really thought about it, I could almost feel the warm press of his lips on mine. I could feel his hands on my hips, strong and demanding and putting me where he wanted me. I could feel his breath on my neck, feel the swell of his—

“Eva?”

I looked up at Victoria. “Yes?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Erm.”

Victoria narrowed her eyes. “I’ve been talking for like fifteen minutes, and you haven’t said a word. Are you okay? You look like you were totally zoned out.”

“Sorry, Victoria. I was just a little distracted.”

“By what?”

“Nothing,” I said a little too quickly. “Just stuff.”

“Boy stuff?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Oooh,” she said, clapping her hands together and leaning closer to me over the table. “It *is* boy stuff, isn’t it? Is this about that Matthew guy from the party? Has something happened between you two? *Oh my God.*” She gasped. “Did you two hook up?”

I shook my head. “No. No, I did not hook up with Matthew.”

Victoria studied me like I was a bundle of Christmas lights she had to untangle. Then she pressed her index finger to her chin. “Hmm. But you *are* glowing. And that blank expression

suggests you were fantasizing about something. Something yummy. Spill the beans, woman.”

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I leaned forward too. “Do you remember me telling you about the boy I used to date when I was younger? Owen McCully?”

Victoria still had her finger resting on her chin when she narrowed her eyes at me in consideration. “The guy in the biker gang?”

“Biker *club*, but yes.”

My friend shifted somewhat uncomfortably in her chair. “Hold up. He's the guy you're daydreaming about? The broke guy with the obnoxiously loud motorcycle? Wasn't he always getting in fights?”

Growing up the way Victoria and I had meant it was easy for us to pass judgment on others who came from other backgrounds. People like Owen. She saw the parts of him that my father saw, but she had never seen his whole person and who he actually was.

“Yes, that's him,” I said, trying to keep the irritation out of my tone.

“What brought this on? It's been forever since you guys saw each other last.”

“I know. But when Matthew and I—”

“So dreamy. So handsome. So rich.”

“Shush,” I snapped, scolding her. “When Matthew and I went for dinner, I ran into Owen. Turns out he moved here a year and a half ago or so.”

“Seriously? I thought he was one of those born and raised in Chicago boys who would never leave his neck of the woods.”

“Well, he sort of got pushed out.”

Victoria frowned. “What do you mean?”

I wasn't sure if telling her everything that had happened to the Red Rogues was the best idea. I knew she wouldn't tell me

not to see him. Victoria never told me what to do in general. She trusted my judgment—as she should because I had better judgement than she did.

But what Owen had gone through was rough and dirty and bloody, and it was a part of him that I wasn't sure I had a right to tell.

But I also knew it might help her see him in a different light.

So, I came clean and told her everything about what happened to the Red Rogues and how Rhys took Owen, Liam, and Aiden out here to track down Isaac Reed and put him in the ground.

Victoria breathed out a shaky breath. “So he’s a murderer?”

“No.”

“Sorry, he just hangs out with murderers? That’s cool. Your father definitely had no right to worry about you back then. I can’t believe he’d overreact like that.” Her eyes widened as she pursed her lips around her straw and sucked back a couple of gulps of water.

I stared blankly at her. “He’s not like that. And they were in a bad spot. What were they supposed to do?”

“Um, I don’t know. Maybe let the police handle it?”

“The police were doing what they could. This guy killed over ten people, Victoria. And he wasn’t going to stop. It was them or him. I, for one, am glad he was the one who was killed.”

Victoria shifted again and ran her hands down her thighs. “Well, I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

Our waitress came back to the table with our salads in hand. She set them down, asked if we needed anything else, and took her leave when we assured her we were fine.

Victoria and I ate the first half of our salads in silence.

I never should have told her what happened to Owen. Now she saw him in an even worse light than she already did.

I put my fork down and dabbed my lips with my napkin. “Look, I know this makes you uneasy. It would make any sane person uneasy. But you trust me, right? You know I would never put myself in a position that jeopardized my safety or the safety of the people I care about?”

She searched my eyes, and after a moment of hesitation, she nodded.

“Good,” I said as relief trickled through me. “I’m sorry if I scared you. But if you knew him like I knew him, you would understand that all those fears are completely unfounded. Owen is a good man. Like, to his core *good*. He went through some rough patches in life that set him on this path, but that doesn’t compromise his integrity or his heart. He would never let anything happen to me.”

Victoria tucked her hair behind her ears and fixed me under her calm stare. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

I nodded. “I always have.”

“But you ended things with him. You threw in the towel.”

“Not because I wanted to,” I said.

She nodded slowly. “You did it for your dad?”

“Yes. I had no other option. At least, I didn’t feel like I did at the time. But this time, things feel different. I feel like I have power. Like I’m the one who can make the right choices for me. Does that sound silly?”

Victoria smiled and shook her head. “No, babe. It doesn’t sound silly at all. It sounds like you know what you want. And it also sounds like I might have to drop my delicate sensibilities and come around to the fact that my best friend is in love with a criminal.”

I grinned. “He’s not a criminal.”

“*That’s* what you’re going to deny?” she asked sharply, her smile growing. “So you do love him?”

“Wait. What?”

She pointed an accusing finger at me. “Ah hah! I caught you! You *do* love him, don’t you?”

I was spared from having to answer her when my phone rang. Victoria groaned, clearly dismayed that her well-planned attack had been thwarted.

Then I groaned alongside her when Matthew’s name flashed across my phone screen.

Victoria craned her neck to look at my phone screen and winced. “Are you going to answer it?”

I had to answer. He was an associate of my father’s, and I wasn’t going to ghost him. I had more class than that.

He was also a nice guy.

I answered the call. “Hi, Matthew.”

“Evangeline,” he said, his voice full of that classic charm of his. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Just sitting and having lunch with a friend.”

“Oh, then I won’t keep you. I just wanted to tell you I had a wonderful time with you the other night. And I haven’t stopped thinking about it since. Are you free for a drink this evening?”

“I’m sorry, Matthew. But tonight isn’t good for me. Can I take a rain check for some other time when my schedule opens up a bit more?”

Matthew was quiet for a minute. “Yes. Yes of course. No worries at all. We’ll talk soon, yes?”

“Sure.”

I ended the call, put my phone facedown on the table, and lifted my gaze to Victoria, who was analyzing me closely. “What?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Nothing. I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Thinking that I never really saw you with a guy like Matthew anyway. You know, the whole corporate suit thing just doesn’t seem like your jam. But leather jackets and dirty boots and fast motorcycles? It makes a little more sense.”

I giggled and blushed. “Stop it.”

Victoria reached across the table and put her hand on mine. “I’m sorry I was so judgy. I do trust you. And I want you to be with someone who makes you happy. So, on that note, tell me all about Owen. I want to know everything.”

CHAPTER 13



OWEN

Thursday afternoon was sunny and warm, so I brought my bike out onto the driveway, along with a bucket of soapy water and a soft-bristled brush. I spent the better half of two hours scrubbing her down to the point where she was all shiny and new again. Then I went through my garage looking for wax while she dried out in the sun.

Liam pulled into my driveway on his hog shortly after I put the hose away. He parked on the opposite side of the driveway, swung off his bike, and pulled off his helmet to run his fingers through his hair and tame it down a bit. Then he tucked his helmet under his arm and came over to meet me in the garage.

I opened my mini fridge and tossed him a can of beer.

Liam caught it and, in one flourish, popped the tab open and took a sip. “Thanks, man.”

“Out for a ride?”

“You know it. The sun won’t last much longer.”

“I know. It’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

Liam nodded and took another few gulps of his beer before setting it, as well as his helmet, down on my workbench. Then he reached his arms over his head and indulged in a long stretch. I heard several popping sounds from his spine as he twisted from side to side.

Gross.

“What’s new?” I asked, leaning up against the workbench and crossing my ankles. “Haven’t seen you since the bar fight. Sorry about that, by the way. You know how it is. I got ahead of myself a bit there. Dragged you into it.”

Liam shrugged. “You were right to do so. They deserved it. And Quinn was outnumbered.”

“If we hadn’t stepped in, she would have killed them with her bare hands. Let’s not get it confused.”

Liam laughed and nodded. “You’re right. She’s scarier than all of us combined.”

“And she knows it.”

“What have you been up to, man? Getting into any more fights? Stirring up trouble?”

“You know I’m done with that shit.”

Liam chuckled. “I know you want to be done with that shit. But let’s not fuck around here, man. It’s in your blood. You were itching for that fight back at the bar. I could see it in your eyes. It’s like you were happy we’d run into a bunch of assholes.”

He wasn’t wrong. Unfortunately.

“Nah, it was coincidence,” I said, almost like I was trying to convince myself.

Liam gave me a skeptical look over the rim of his beer can as he lifted it to his lips. “Sure it was. You had fun. So what? What’s the harm?”

I licked my lips.

Liam’s eyes narrowed. “Unless there’s another reason why you’re trying to pretend you didn’t get off on kicking their asses.”

“No reason.”

“Bullshit.”

I smirked and shook my head at him. “Leave it alone, Liam.”

“No. Tell me. What’s up?”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “Fine. There’s a girl, all right?”

Liam’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “A girl, huh? What’s her name? What’s she like? Do we get to meet her? Does she know you’re a Lost Breed?”

“Slow down.” I laughed, holding up a hand and leaning away from him and his eagerness. He had too much energy for me at times like this. “I know her from back home. Evangeline Snow? Ring any bells?”

“Evangeline Snow? Who the fuck is that? She sounds like a royal princess or some shit.”

“You’re not far off,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Her father is Frank Snow. You know the guy with the cleaner oceans program? His face is on a shit ton of billboards all over the place and—”

“Oh yeah!” Liam smacked himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand. “I remember you telling me about her one time. Rhys, too. You guys had a serious thing going on for a while, didn’t you?”

“About a year.”

“And why did it end again?”

“Her daddy didn’t want her hanging around a guy like me.”

Liam shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“Hey,” I warned.

“What? It’s true. You and I aren’t exactly the sort of dudes fathers are hoping will show up to court their daughters, you know? It’s nothing personal. It just is what it is. We invoke a certain... expectation.”

“Which is what?”

“I don’t know. That we’re dangerous uneducated risk takers?”

I snorted.

“Am I wrong?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

I sighed. “No. No, you’re not wrong.”

My phone started buzzing in my back pocket. I put my beer down to pull it out and grinned when Evangeline’s name flashed across the screen. I held up a finger to Liam, who gave me a knowing grin and nodded for me to go ahead and take the call.

“Hey, Angel,” I said, putting my back to Liam. “I was going to call you in a little bit. What perfect timing.”

“Oh, you were, were you?”

“Yes, ma’am. What are you doing tomorrow night? I want to take you out.”

She hesitated. “I have an event to go to tomorrow night. I’m standing in for my father. He had to head out of town for work, and he had a speech planned at a fundraiser gala downtown.”

“Sounds like a shitty way to spend a Friday night.”

She laughed softly. “Well, on that note, would you like to accompany me?”

I felt my eyebrows drawing toward each other on my forehead. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Because I don’t exactly fit in with that sort of crowd.”

“So?”

“So. Are you sure you want to do this? Your father will catch wind and—”

“I don’t care. I’d like to have you on my arm tomorrow night, Owen. If you’re comfortable coming along, that is. I understand if you’d rather stay away from events like this. I would if I could.”

“No,” I said hurriedly. “No. I’ll come.”

I could hear the smile in her voice when she sighed on the other end. “That’s fantastic. I’ll have something sent to your house for you to wear. Text me your address and your sizes after we get off the phone? Your shoe size, too.”

“You don’t trust me to dress myself?”

“Absolutely not.”

I laughed. “So my leather jacket won’t blend in?”

“With all the silk and wool and velvet? No, it most definitely will not blend in. You will wear what I send over to you. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said.

I turned back toward Liam and looked out at the bike in the sunshine. “Are you sure you’re okay with me tagging along? You’re not worried about me making a fool out of the pair of us?”

“No, Owen. Not even a little bit. I trust you to respect that this is important to me and my father and his business. I expect that you’ll be able to handle yourself just fine at the event. If you don’t think you can, just tell me now and I’ll fly solo. I totally understand if you’d rather not tag along.”

“You can’t get rid of me that quickly, Angel.”

“Darn.” She giggled. “Worth a try, right?”

I dropped my voice so Liam couldn’t hear me as he wandered onto the driveway to inspect our bikes. “So, what are you going to wear then?”

“Tomorrow night?” she asked, her voice going as low as mine.

“Yeah. Something sexy?”

“Not too sexy. This is a formal event.”

“Come on,” I purred.

She giggled. “Owen.”

“What, baby? All I’m asking for is a bit of skin. Something to get me through the evening in one piece. Help a guy out.”

She was still giggling into the phone and becoming more and more breathless with each passing second. “How about I make you a deal instead?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’m going to wear the dress I had made for me for this event. It doesn’t show a lot of skin. But if you ask nicely, I could accidentally forget to put panties on while I’m getting ready.”

My cock twitched in my pants.

God damn her.

“That sounds like a reasonable compromise,” I said.

“I expect you to make the most of it, Owen McCully. It’s not every day a girl wears a dress and no panties.”

“Woman,” I growled. “I asked for skin. Not for you to torture me like this.”

“Oh, sugar,” she cooed into the phone. “You have no idea what I’m capable of. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

She hung up before I had a chance to say anything else, leaving me staring down at my phone like a lost man staring at a broken compass.

“All good?” Liam asked, joining me back in the garage.

“All good.” I nodded, my mind still consumed with thoughts of my girl walking around a gala, looking hot as sin without any panties on. I swallowed. “All good.”

Liam arched an eyebrow. “Okay then.”

I drained the rest of my beer. “She’s taking me to a gala tomorrow night. Apparently, it’s very fancy.”

“You’d better be on your best behavior then.”

“I will be,” I said defensively.

“I hope so,” Liam said. “Evangeline was the one that got away in your books, right? Don’t fuck it up. Those rich pricks

might try to fuck with you. Let them. Keep your eye on the prize.”

I nodded.

He was right.

He knew me too well.

“I will,” I said.

CHAPTER 14



EVANGELINE

Brittney stood behind me and wrapped a strand of my hair around the barrel of her curling iron. She held it in place for about seven seconds before letting it fall and spraying it with a shit ton of hairspray. Then she coiled it around her finger and pinned it to my head for the curl to set.

“Are you looking forward to your evening?” she asked as she gathered the next strand and brushed it through with a fine-toothed comb.

I stared at my reflection in my vanity mirror as my hairstylist worked her magic behind me. She was focused on her work, and I watched her bustle around in the mirror behind me. “Yes. A little nervous too. I have to make a speech, and public speaking is *so* not my cup of tea.”

“A speech on your father’s behalf?” she asked.

Brittney had been working with me since I moved to New York, and she knew most of the ins and outs of me covering for my father.

“You know it.” I smiled.

Brittney glanced up at the mirror and grinned at me. “You’ll kill it. You always do. Remember last time? You were telling me about how nervous you were, and then some magazine wrote an article about how you were the new up and comer in environmental something or other?”

I giggled. “Yes. I remember.”

She put a hand on my shoulder. “Just think of that when you start to get nervous again. You’re going to be fine. More than fine. You’ll capture the attention of the room as soon as you take the stage. I mean, look at you. Who couldn’t sit in rapture listening to someone with your presence?”

“I owe it all to my hairstylist,” I said, winking at her.

Brittney smiled and continued working around me in a circle, curling, spraying, and pinning.

Once she had every strand of my hair pinned in place, she doused my head with another full circle spray of hairspray. Then she planted her hands on her hips and nodded confidently. “All right. We’ll let that set for about fifteen minutes, and then I’ll take the pins out. Once it rests for another fifteen, I’ll brush it out, and you’ll be all set. Should I send your makeup girl in now?”

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Brittney.”

Brittney slipped out of my bedroom and sent in my makeup artist. She was a young slip of a girl with long, thick blonde hair nearly down to her ass. She rolled her makeup kit into my room behind her and began opening it up. As she unveiled her products, she smiled up at me and swept her mane of hair over her shoulder. “How are you this evening, Ms. Snow?”

I waved my hand at her. “No need to be so polite, Sage. We’re all friends here.”

She popped up to her feet and smiled. “Thank you. I’m sorry. You make me nervous.”

“Why?”

She shrugged a dainty shoulder. “You’re very influential. And very powerful. And rich. And beautiful.” She giggled nervously and shook her head. “Sorry. I’m gushing.”

“I’m just like you,” I told her. “Now. Show me what you brought.”

I spent the next half hour with both Sage and Brittney bustling around me, doing their work. They were both

completely committed to making sure my look was seamless. My curls fell perfectly down my back, and Brittney pinned one side up, securing the hair behind my ear to show off the chandelier earrings I was going to pair with my gown.

Sage gave me a flawless complexion with a deep smoky eye color and winged eyeliner. I was feeling myself when they finished up and left me in privacy to put my gown and shoes on.

I had to be at Owen's place in half an hour.

My nerves were starting to get to me a little bit. I was worried about how Owen was going to feel at the gala. He was going to be out of his element. That was for sure. And I had no idea how he would behave in a setting so foreign to him.

I found it hard to believe that he would behave poorly. He knew how important this was to me, and he wouldn't put me in a tight spot. So long as he played the part, nobody would be suspicious. And if nobody was suspicious, they wouldn't feel the need to call my father and give him the heads-up that I was seeing a man with a scarred eyebrow and a mean streak.

Time would tell.

My gown hung on the back of my closet door. It was a sleek, tight, midnight-blue dress with criss-crossing straps down the open back. The sleeves sat off the shoulders, exposing my décolletage, which was dusted by the ends of the extremely long diamonds earrings I put in. The final piece was my shoes, strappy diamond-studded nude pumps.

I stood back to look at myself in the mirror and smoothed out the silky fabric of the gown.

Yes. This would do.

It was a bit sexier than what I would normally wear to an event like this.

To deny it had anything to do with Owen would be a lie.

I wanted to look good for him. Correction, I wanted to look my ultimate best for him.

And I had to admit. This dress was pretty much as good as it was going to get.

I fidgeted with the strap of my clutch in the back of the limo on the ride from my apartment building to Owen's house.

I hadn't been this nervous in ages.

The limo pulled up to the curb outside his house and double honked the horn. I didn't like how impersonal that was, so I got out of the back and began making my way up the drive to go knock on his door. But when I was halfway there, the door opened, and he stepped outside.

The suit I'd picked out for him looked incredible on his frame. It accented his broad shoulders and narrow waist and the midnight-blue shirt complemented my dress perfectly.

He turned from the door as he adjusted his cufflinks and stopped in his tracks when his eyes fell upon me.

"Damn," he breathed, letting his gaze rake me up and down, down and back up, and then up and down once more. "You look... wow."

It was impossible not to smile and blush under his flattery. "Stop it."

He came toward me and rested a hand on my hip as he leaned in to give me a sweet kiss. Then he ran his hand along my hip, and a wicked smile stretched his cheeks. "I don't feel anything under this very thin fabric."

I lifted my chin. "I'm true to my word, McCully. No panties."

He chuckled and put his hand in the small of my back to guide me back to the limo. We slid inside, and he pulled the door closed behind him. The driver pulled away, and we headed to the hotel, which was about a forty-minute drive from Owen's place in New York City traffic.

Owen shifted closer to me on the back seat and put his hand on my thigh. "You know, I think I'm going to need some visual proof about this whole no panty business."

“Do you not trust me?”

Owen gave my thigh a squeeze. “I trust you to deliberately fuck with me.”

“Oh, poor sweet Owen,” I whispered, reaching up to caress his cheek as I drew my dress up my leg with my other hand. I drew it up my shin, over my knee, and up my thigh, pausing where his hand rested. “If I wanted to fuck with you, you wouldn’t even see it coming. Now, move your damn hand.”

Owen didn’t need to be told twice. He moved his hand, which allowed me to draw my dress up the rest of the way, exposing the top of my thigh and the groove of my hip.

He ran his hand along the top of my leg to rest it between my thighs. “You are too sexy for your own good.”

I leaned into him. “The same could be said about you.”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “There isn’t a soul on this planet that can compare to you. And somehow, I’m the guy on your arm. How the fuck did I get this lucky?”

I smiled and bit my bottom lip. “You fought for me.”

“I’ll always fight for you.”

“Just not tonight,” I said.

He chuckled. “No. Not tonight.”

I gave him a kiss. And then another. And then one more.

Before I knew what was happening, his tongue was in my mouth, and his hand was inching up my thigh to cup my pussy. He moaned softly into my mouth, and I grabbed his wrist, holding his hand away as he tried to push me for more.

“I can’t do an evening like this if I’m turned on,” I whispered.

“I can make you come right here. Get it out of your system.”

I shook my head and pushed his hand away before pinching my knees together. “Down, boy.”

Owen backed off but gave me a devilish grin. “The ride home, then. You’d better prepare yourself, Angel.”

“You’d better make sure the prize is worth the hype.”

Owen roared with laughter and slapped his knee.

Then, in classic Owen fashion, he proceeded to harass me for the duration of the drive to the hotel. When we pulled up to the valet, he shrugged off his boyish humor, got out of the limo, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

There were people milling around outside in their best evening wear. Most of them were smokers. Some were photographers. The cameras started flashing when Owen offered me his arm and I got out of the car behind him. I made sure my dress fell to the floor perfectly, and then I let him lead me up the stairs to the front doors.

We slipped inside, and he put his hand over mine on the crook of his elbow. “So this is normal? The photos? The stares?”

I was aware of the looks we were getting from everyone we passed. I was used to them. Owen, however, was not. He already must have felt totally out of place, and the curious stares we received from everyone we passed weren’t helping.

“Just ignore them,” I told him. “They can’t help themselves.”

Owen held his chin up as we made our way into the ballroom of the hotel where the gala was being held. He kept his cool and didn’t fall victim to the typical slack-jawed admiration newcomers always portrayed when they came to an event of this caliber for the first time. Instead, he acted like he belonged there, and he kept his poise as I introduced him to a few friendly faces.

After picking up some drinks at the bar and wandering through the cluster of tables to find our seats, Owen leaned toward me to whisper in my ear. “These people have no idea they’re talking to a Lost Breed.”

I smiled. “No. But they know you are not one of them.”

“How so?”

“Your scars. The way you hold yourself. Your hands.”

“My hands?” he asked curiously.

I nodded. “Calluses. Bruises. Scrapes. You have the hands of a man who knows what it is to work hard for a living. It is curious to them.”

“And to you?” he asked.

“I think it’s sexy as hell.” I winked.

CHAPTER 15



OWEN

I shouldn't have been surprised to discover that our table was at the very front of the room, center stage. Evangeline's name was scrawled in cursive on an elegant name card upon her plate and on the spot beside her. Clearly, she'd had a plus one but had not called ahead to give them a name.

I wondered if she had confirmed these plans before she and I ran into each other the other day. Or perhaps shortly after. Maybe she expected to be sitting beside the guy in the suit she'd been on a date with the evening I ran into her on the sidewalk.

Lucky her.

Instead, she was here with me. The guy in the room who was at least half a head taller than everyone else with a crooked nose, un-botoxed wrinkles around his eyes, and busted-up hands—something I had not been self-conscious about until she pointed it out to me.

Then again, she thought it was sexy.

I considered taking my jacket off and rolling up my sleeves when we took our seats. The room was warm. Very warm. But every other man in the place still had their jacket on, and I didn't know what sort of expectations I had to adhere to. Since I already stood out like a sore thumb, I figured I'd play it safe and keep my jacket on.

Evangeline swept her napkin off the table and draped it over her right thigh. I followed suit, and she nodded at me as if to say I was doing well.

I felt like a boy on his first day at a new school after being homeschooled.

I reached for the rum and coke I'd ordered from the bar to calm my nerves.

“What do you think so far?” Evangeline asked.

“I can't form an educated opinion until I've tasted the food.”

She giggled and shook her head at me. “Of course. I should have known better. Every man's judgment starts at his stomach.”

“Right you are, Angel.”

The ballroom of the hotel was an exquisite space. It was the sort of room one would expect to see in the background of bridal magazines, with its Greek-style columns in the corners, massive ballroom chandeliers, and warm-toned cream walls that offered a blank canvas for all events with varying decor.

The decor for this evening was simple and clean. The centerpieces were low vases full of greenery so that each person at the table could see across to the other side to encourage discussion. The tables were draped in white linens that matched the covers over the chairs, which were finished off with an olive-green satin ribbon on every second chair.

The most beautiful thing in the room by a landslide was Evangeline herself.

As she sat beside me and lifted her glass of white wine to her lips, I spared a glance at the other tables around us. Women peered over their shoulders and bowed their heads together to whisper quietly to one another while their eyes remained on the pretty girl beside me. Men stared just the same, practically drooling in the presence of her beauty.

Was Evangeline aware of all these glances? Of the whispering behind her back? And if she was, did it bother her?

Evangeline put her hand on mine. “I'm going to get up there and make my speech while dinner is being served so I can get this over with. You're all right to wait here for me?”

“Break a leg, Angel.”

She smiled, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and swept gracefully from her chair to the stage, where she took the microphone and faced the crowd of nearly one hundred and fifty people milling around down below.

Her eyes flicked to me, and I gave her an encouraging nod.

Evangeline’s smooth, rich voice filled the ballroom. “Hello, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you are all having a wonderful evening. For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Evangeline Snow. I’m Frank’s daughter, and I’m here on his behalf to welcome you to this special event and say thank you for your presence, your support, and your generosity to my father’s Clear Ocean program.”

A smattering of applause followed her words, and I followed suit, clapping loudly as she smiled down at all of us.

Evangeline continued, and I was caught up in her words as someone pulled out a chair on my other side and took a seat. I was aware of other people sitting down across from me. Three in total, including the one who’d sat down beside me.

“My father wishes he could be here himself to speak to each and every one of you this evening so he could thank you personally, and he apologizes for not being able to make it here. But as most of you know, duty calls. He is a very busy man, and he’s working hard to make a difference in our oceans. Something that would not be possible without all of you.”

Evangeline’s voice faded into the background when someone tapped my shoulder.

I turned to the side, thinking I might be blocking their view, and found myself sitting beside the man Evangeline had been on a date with the evening I caught up to her on the sidewalk.

What was his name again?

Mason?

Marvin?

Mark?

He was dressed in a dark blue suit with a white shirt underneath. He didn't smile when I gave him a curt nod in greeting. Instead, he lifted his chin and leaned forward on the table. The men across the table from me did the same and rested their elbows on the surface.

And everything in my mind clicked. They were here to try to intimidate me.

I dared myself not to laugh.

"Gentlemen," I said, leaning back in my chair and draping an arm over Evangeline's temporarily empty seat. "Can I help you with something?"

The two across the table from me looked similar to one another. They were probably brothers. Their hair was sandy blond, slicked back, and shiny with heaps of product holding it in place. They had tanned skin, which I wondered if they'd earned in the great outdoors or a tanning bed, and the buttons of their shirts were popped open at the top, revealing perfectly smooth, most likely waxed skin.

I raised my eyebrows when none of them spoke and turned to the dark-haired guy beside me. The one in the blue suit with the dark eyes. "What was your name again, man?"

His eyes narrowed into slits. "Matthew."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes like I should have remembered. "Apologies. How've you been? Enjoying the party?"

"I'm not here for small talk, Hot Shot."

Hot Shot? What was this, sixth grade?

I fought the smile that tugged at the corners of my mouth and shrugged one shoulder. "What are you here for then?"

Matthew leaned in a little closer. So close I could see the pores on the bridge of his nose. "You don't belong in a place like this, man. And you sure as hell don't deserve to be here with a woman like Evangeline."

I chuckled. “I know. I still can’t quite make sense of it myself.”

This caught him off guard a bit, and Matthew exchanged a look with his buddies across the table. Then he set his glare back on me. “She has class. And a guy like you is only going to take advantage of her. All you want is to get in her bed and have your way with her. But let me make something perfectly clear. I’m not going to let you tarnish her. So you’d best clear off if you know what’s good for you.”

“Tarnish her?” I snorted and let my arm fall from the back of Evangeline’s chair. I sat up a little straighter and didn’t lean away from him as he tried to encroach further on my space. “She’s not a piece of jewelry, you ass. And she can make her own decisions.”

“Sometimes, a woman can’t spot a bad seed, even if it’s right in front of her.”

Anger rolled in my gut. Hot and ravenous and enough to make my fists clench. I forced myself to relax. “I’d say I’m surprised to learn that you’re a sexist pig, but here I am, completely unsurprised.”

“You arrogant piece of—”

I waved him off dismissively. “You’re just butthurt because she prefers a man who’s a bit rough around the edges over a dude who gets a manicure once a week.”

“How dare you speak to me like that?” Matthew seethed.

I shrugged. “Hey. You’re the one who came over here and started this shit. You’re the one who got personal. I’m just pointing out the obvious. I mean, look at those cuticles. They’re beautiful.”

Matthew tucked his fingers into his palms and glared at me. “I suggest you shut the hell up before you find yourself in over your head.”

Chuckling, I nodded at the two men across the table. “What? Are you and your little Power Puff Girls gonna take me outside and teach me a lesson?”

The three of them shifted restlessly.

I undid my jacket buttons. “Listen. I suggest the three of you go back to your seats. I’m here to support Evangeline, not get in a five-second fight with a bunch of sniveling rich boys with inferiority complexes. Scram.”

Matthew pointed a finger at my chest. “I gave you a chance to walk away. If you had her best interests in mind, you would take the opportunity I’m offering and leave. She can do better.”

I leaned back in my chair once more, spreading out like I was in my own damn living room. “You’re absolutely right. She *can* do better. I’m a lucky man.”

Matthew opened his mouth to speak but was cut off as another round of applause washed over the ballroom. Then, just seconds later, Evangeline was taking the seat beside me and looking around the table at the three men.

She smiled tight-lipped at Matthew. “Hi, Matthew. It’s good to see you.”

His eyes flicked past me to her, but his hard expression never wavered. “Evangeline. Nice speech.”

“I would say thank you, but I doubt you caught a word of what I said, since the two of you were talking through the whole thing.”

Matthew blinked.

Evangeline put a hand on my shoulder. “Owen, would you mind running to the bar and topping off my wine for me? I need to wet my lips after that speech.”

I got to my feet and re-buttoned my jacket. “Of course. Anything for you gentlemen?” I looked around the table.

All three of the men stared daggers at me.

“Suit yourselves.” I shrugged before turning my back on them and weaving through the tables to make my way to the bar.

I didn't mind being dismissed by Evangeline. Like Matthew said, she had class, and she knew how to handle clowns like him in her sleep.

I just wished I could have hung back to watch her in action.

CHAPTER 16



EVANGELINE

I crossed one leg over the other and studied Matthew as he slapped on the same charming smile he'd worn the night we went out for drinks.

"I was listening to your speech," he said, abandoning the rigid way he'd been sitting when Owen was still at the table. He rolled his shoulders ever so slightly and leaned away from the table, assuming a more comfortable position and pulling his drink off the table with him.

"Yes. It sure looked like you were. Owen too."

"I tried to tell him we could talk later."

I almost rolled my eyes at him. Almost. Instead, I maintained a neutral expression and turned toward the two men on the other side of the table. I was fairly certain they were the Wright brothers, wealthy, shallow, easy to look at, but impossible to have an intelligent conversation with.

I gave them the politest smile I could manage. "Would you two excuse us for a minute? I need to speak to Matthew about something private."

The two brothers looked at each other and then at Matthew.

As if they were asking permission.

As if my asking for a private moment meant nothing to them unless Matthew gave them the go ahead.

How insufferable.

Matthew nodded at them. “Go on, then.”

The two men stood up and wandered off through the crowd as more and more tables started having their meals delivered to them. I took note of the fact that they headed in the same direction as Owen.

Then I set my attention to the task at hand and turned my chair toward Matthew.

“I should have been more honest with you when you called me the other day, Matthew.”

He studied me calmly and didn’t say a word.

So I continued. “When you asked me out for drinks, I told you it wasn’t a good time. But that wasn’t the truth. The truth is, I’ve known Owen for a very long time. And he’s special to me. We have a lot of history, and our run-in with him the other day kind of... rekindled an old spark we used to have.”

“He’s a middle-class nobody,” Matthew said, his voice tainted with disbelief.

I sat up straighter. “That is only how you see him. It’s not who he is.”

“He’s the guy who wants to get in the bed of the most beautiful woman in New York City,” Matthew said. “You have to open your eyes, Evangeline. Men like him are dangerous. He’s a shark. He’ll do whatever it takes to get you on your back and—”

“Excuse me?”

Matthew froze. Then he bowed his head. “I’m sorry. I crossed a line. I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“But you *did* mean to say it?”

He licked his lips. “I don’t want you getting in over your head with someone who is going to hurt you. Someone who doesn’t see you for who you are. Someone who only wants something from you.”

“And you?” I asked, cocking my head to the side. “You don’t want something from me?”

“Just your time,” Matthew said.

I laughed softly. “You know, had you not said all that other shit leading up to this, that might have been a good line.”

“Eva—”

“I’m sorry. This isn’t how I wanted this to go. I had a good time with you. And something might have happened between us had I not run into Owen. But I did. And I care about him. And nothing is going to change that. Least of all a selfish warning from a guy I hardly know who seems to think he has Owen all figured out after knowing him for less than half an hour.” I got to my feet and smoothed out the skirt of my dress. “And for the record, Owen and I already had sex. And he’s still around. And he’s behaving himself better than you and your dynamic duo of meatheads.”

Matthew stood up beside me. “Evangeline, please. Hear me out. I never wanted to offend you. I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“You know what I’m getting really tired of?”

He stared blankly at me.

I laughed without humor. “I’m sick of men telling me that they want me to be safe. It’s all bullshit. All they want is for me to conform to their idea of what I should be. How I should talk. Who I should spend my time with. What my opinions should be. Owen doesn’t make me feel like that. Owen takes me for who I am. Unlike you.”

“I never intended—”

“I’m glad we had this conversation, Matthew. Now I have no regrets blowing you off. Have a good rest of your night.”

I turned on my heel and headed toward the bar. Thankfully, Matthew didn’t get up to follow me. I wove through the crowd, leaning from side to side to try to steal a glance at the bar where I suspected Owen was still in line.

I couldn’t see him or the Wright brothers.

Anxiety blossomed in my chest, and I moved quicker, apologizing as I shouldered my way through tight throngs of

people chatting and between chairs that were pressed up tightly against each other.

I was within thirty or so feet of the bar when a man with a receding white hairline cut me off and held out his hand.

“Miss Snow!” he said excitedly, grabbing my hand and shaking it vigorously. “Great speech, my dear. Your father better watch his back. He has competition in his own daughter.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Galway. I appreciate that, and I’m glad you enjoyed my speech. I was very nervous.”

“You didn’t look it. Not one bit.” Mr. Galway patted the back of my hand. He and my father had been friends for nearly four decades, and I had memories of stealing caramel candies out of his pockets whenever he came to visit my father at the manor in Chicago. As I got older, I started to suspect he was intentionally leaving his jacket at the door with his pockets weighed down with caramels specifically for me to steal away to my bedroom to savor over the duration of the day.

“How have you been?” I asked, trying to make my search for Owen out of the corner of my eye as subtle as possible.

“Oh, excellent, my dear. Excellent! I bought a new property in Belize. My goodness. I have never seen such a beautiful place before. Have you been?”

“Not yet. But I do hope to visit one day.”

“Well, consider yourself more than welcome at my property. You just let me know if you ever want to go, and I will arrange for you to have the whole place to yourself.”

I smiled. “Your generosity has always been exceptional, Mr. Galway.”

“You deserve it, my dear. You’re one of the good ones.” He paused and peered around suspiciously. “Now, I suspect you should go find that man you arrived with. He had the Wright brothers on his heels when I saw him over at the bar a couple of minutes ago. And those two? Well, I can confidently tell you that they are not some of the good ones.”

I gave him a one-armed hug. “Thank you, Mr. Galway. I hope to see you soon. Take care.”

I left my father’s old friend behind and moved toward the bar once more. Other people tried to pull me aside to talk to me, but none of them had a special place in my heart like Mr. Galway did, so I politely excused myself and explained I was in a rush.

Some understood. Others seemed genuinely put off and turned to talk behind my back to those in their company.

I didn’t give a damn.

When I spotted Owen turning away from the bar with a glass of white wine in his hand, relief washed over me. I hurried up to him, plucked the wine from his hands, and tossed it back in three massive gulps.

His eyes widened a bit. “Slow down there, boozy. What’s the rush?”

“I want to get out of here.”

He looked over the top of my head back to our table. “Did something happen?”

I shook my head. “Nothing worth worrying about. I just don’t want to be here right now.”

I wasn’t sure what words had been exchanged between Owen and Matthew while I was giving my speech, but I didn’t see a point in telling Owen the shit Matthew was saying to me. It served no purpose. And none of it was true.

Owen frowned. “You’re sure? You look upset.”

“I’m sure. I just want to spend the rest of the night with you. Just you.”

Owen’s green eyes fixed on me. He looked like there was something he wanted to say. But he held his tongue, nodded, and pointed at my glass. “You don’t have to finish that just because you made me stand in line to get it so you could put Matthew in his place.”

I laughed and shook my head at him. “Nothing gets by you, does it?”

He shrugged. “Some things.”

I lifted the wine to my lips and drained the rest of the glass. Then I set it down on the tray of a passing waiter and dabbed my lips with the back of my hand. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Owen offered me his arm.

We left the ballroom under the same relentless stares from the guests that we’d received when we arrived. They were easy to ignore as we hurried down the steps and crossed the sidewalk to stand on the edge of the curb.

I peered both ways down the street, looking for my limo. “There he is,” I said. “Let me just call him and tell him to come around for us.”

I fished my phone out of my clutch and called the driver while Owen stood close to my side and wrapped an arm around my waist. I leaned into him, glad to be in his company and not leaving the event with a man like Matthew.

CHAPTER 17



OWEN

“He’s such a pompous dick,” Evangeline said, scowling out the window of the limo as we pulled away from the curb. “An arrogant, entitled, nosy, man-splaining dick.”

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” I said as I shrugged out of my jacket and relished in the freedom of not having something so restricting on. I unbuttoned the cuffs of my dark blue shirt and rolled the sleeves up to my elbows.

Evangeline was still glaring out the window. “You’d have to do a lot to get on my bad side, Owen. But Matthew? Screw that guy.”

I chuckled. “He’s just behaving the way he knows how to.”

“That’s not an excuse,” she snapped, spinning around to face me. Then she bit her bottom lip and slumped back in the seat. “Sorry. It’s not your fault. I’m just pissed off.”

“Fair.”

“I saw this night going differently.”

“Me too. But I’m still happy with this outcome. I mean, it checked off all my expectation boxes.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, for starters, I got to see you in a dress like this, and that alone made everything worth it.”

She rewarded me with a smile.

I kept going. “And I got to see you in action, which was pretty cool. You were just as badass and smooth as I thought

you'd be. And the icing on the cake? You told Matthew off and swept me off my feet and whisked me away in a limo. I mean, what more can a guy ask for?"

She bubbled over with laughter. "Stop it."

"I'm being serious. I've never felt like a princess before. It was kind of kinky."

"Kinky?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah. I liked it. I especially liked the part where you pounded back your glass of wine like it was a shot of whiskey. It made me tingly all over."

"Really? That's what turns you on?"

"Oh, God no," I said, shaking my head. "I've been turned on since you walked up my driveway. Everything else was just a bonus."

Evangeline sighed. "Well, I'm glad one of us had a good night."

"You didn't enjoy yourself at all?"

She shrugged. "No. Not really. I usually don't. It's just a bunch of people soaking in as much information as they can in a short amount of time so they can go and spread the gossip to those who weren't able to attend. Or they're snapping pictures for their social media feeds or complaining about the food or the decor. It's just so artificial."

"At least it's people who have plenty of money to give, coming together to help a good cause, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. True. Very true. I guess I just wished they didn't need such a lavish affair in order to justify spending their money."

"Everyone likes a party, right?"

"Right."

Evangeline rested her hands in her lap and her head against the seat rest. "I'm sorry, Owen."

"For what?"

“For Matthew and how he treated you. I should have expected someone to pull something like that. I could have warned you.”

“Angel, I can take care of myself. You don’t have to protect me.”

A smile curled the corner of her mouth. “I thought you liked being the damsel for a change?”

I shrugged. “I lied.”

She laughed.

“In all honesty though, you don’t need to worry about me,” I said. “I can handle whatever bullshit guys like Matthew want to dish out. Hell, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy watching him squirm like a worm in a puddle.”

“Charming.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m glad you were there with me. It could have been worse.” She sighed. “A lot worse.”

“Yeah. We could have stayed and had dinner.”

Her eyes widened. “I completely forgot we never ate.”

I chuckled. “It doesn’t matter. I’m pulling your leg.”

Evangeline slid off the back seat to sit on the longer seat along the side of the limo. She made her way up to the front where she pressed the button to roll down the black partition between us and the driver. “Sir? Hi. Would you mind taking a bit of a detour so we could grab some food?”

“Where would you like to go, Ms. Snow?”

She looked back at me for suggestions.

“I’m up for anything,” I said.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Is there a burger takeout place nearby?”

“I’ll pull into the first one I see, Miss.”

Satisfied, Evangeline rolled the partition back up and slid along the seat to come and sit beside me once more. She gave me a bright smile. “It’s not a three-course gourmet meal, but it will do.”

“Fries, burgers, and a sundae after? Sounds like three courses to me.”

“The eternal optimist,” she said softly.

The limo slowed down and took a right turn. Then, within a couple of minutes, we were driving over the lip in a sidewalk and pulling into a burger joint parking lot. The driver parked, and we spilled out of the back seat. We paused to ask if the driver wanted anything, but he told us he was fine and shoed us along to go inside and order.

We got a couple of stares from teenagers hanging out in the restaurant area while we ordered our meals at the counter. Once we had our burgers and fries and sundaes in hand, we went out to the parking lot, sat down on the curb like we used to do when we were young and in love, and unpacked the bags.

Evangeline took her first bite of her burger and nodded with satisfaction. “Oh my God. Yes. I didn’t even realize how hungry I was.”

I filled the cardboard lid of my burger box with ketchup and dipped a couple of fries in it. “You look good eating a burger, Angel.”

She rolled her eyes at me and licked sauce from the corner of her mouth. “Come on, Owen. You think I look good doing everything.”

“That’s true.”

I unwrapped my burger and dug in. I hadn’t quite realized how hungry I was either. I’d been too distracted by the fancy ballroom and the douche bags who’d tried to pry me out of Evangeline’s life.

They were going to have to try harder than that to get me to stay away from her.

A lot harder.

“So how often do you do events like this?” I asked.

“Once a month at the very least. Sometimes more.”

“Damn.”

“I know. It gets old pretty quick. If it wasn’t for Clear Ocean, I would have thrown in the towel by now. But I believe in my father’s vision, and I’ve seen the difference he’s made with this campaign, and I’m proud to be part of it. Even if that means I have to spend a night or two a month kissing rich people’s asses.”

I snorted. “I didn’t see any ass kissing tonight.”

“We left early. Believe me. The last two hours are always the worst part. And the time in the evening where I get hit on the most. Which is always great fun.” She popped a fry in her mouth and shook her head. “Men.”

“Not all of us though, right? There are some diamonds in the rough.”

“Did you just call yourself a diamond?” she asked with a sly smile.

“Maybe.”

She giggled. “Yes. You’re one of the good ones, Owen. Now eat up. Our poor driver looks bored out of his mind.”

She was right. The driver had his head resting against his window, and his eyes were closed. If we put off going home any longer, he’d fall asleep, and we’d have to wake him up. Which would be awkward as hell.

We finished eating, collected our garbage, and dropped it in the can near the door of the restaurant before hurrying back to the limo and piling in. The driver roused from his near slumber, started the limo up, and pulled out of the parking lot, striking out in the direction of Evangeline’s apartment building.

She leaned over and tugged the hem of her dress up, exposing her ankles and shins so she could undo the straps of

her heels that wrapped around her ankles. Then she slid her feet out and let out a sigh of relief. “The best part of the night.”

“I have a couple of ideas of things we could do that might feel better.”

Evangeline looked up at me as she massaged her feet and arched an eyebrow. “I’m surprised it took you so long.”

I patted my lap as I leaned back against my seat. She made to sit on me, but I shook my head. “Sit back. Get comfy. And put your feet up.”

She eyed me suspiciously but did as I said, kicking her feet up to rest her heels on my thigh as she rested in the corner of the back of the seat and the side of the limo.

Evangeline had cute feet. I massaged them one at a time, applying pressure to the arch and the balls of her feet and then pinching her ankles between my thumb and forefinger and gentle rolling over the tendon there.

She smiled at me. “I should bring you everywhere with me just for this.”

“I’d go anywhere with you for this.”

Evangeline ran her fingers through her hair, shaking out her curls, and let them fall over her shoulder. “You’ve always been too sweet to me, Owen.”

“You deserve it,” I said softly, running a hand up her calf and under her dress as I worked it along the side of her thigh and climbed on top of her. I had to plant one foot on the floor of the limo and rest my knee on the seat to maintain my balance as I leaned over her.

She stared up at me with a sexy little smile playing on her lips.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“You.”

“Stop thinking,” I purred, leaning in to kiss her cheek and working my way to her neck. I pressed my lips to the soft skin

by her ear. “Let me take care of you.”

She quivered beneath me and ran her hands up my chest and over the lapel of my jacket. Then she pulled me down to her and sealed her lips over mine with a kiss that was warm and soft and tasted faintly of white wine.

I worked my hand higher up inside her dress and gripped her thigh tightly. Her supple flesh melted into my palm, and I let out a hungry growl that was muffled by our kiss.

CHAPTER 18



EVANGELINE

My senses were overwhelmed by all things Owen.

His cedar and bergamot cologne.

His hands on my bare legs.

His hot breath on my neck as he nudged my cheek to the side to press soft kisses to my throat.

The sounds of his stubble whispering against my cheek.

The lingering taste of rum on his tongue.

All the troubles of the evening faded to the background. The anger in the pit of my stomach toward Matthew dissolved and morphed into something warm and eager as Owen's strong and hungry hand slid under my thigh and cupped my ass.

I giggled, remembering how obsessed he'd been with my ass when we were young. Whenever we were alone, he used to put a hand on my rear end. Sometimes, he'd slide it in the back pocket of my jeans if I'd let him.

I almost always did.

Owen ran his hand over the groove of my hip. I hooked an arm around his shoulders and wove my fingers up into his hair, curling them into a fist and holding on as his touches grew closer and closer to my aching pussy.

I'd been thinking about this all night.

Sure, I'd kept my eye on the prize, which was the speech I had to deliver on my father's behalf, but in the back of my mind, all I'd been mulling over was how badly I wanted him

to touch me. How badly I *needed* him to touch me. Once a man like Owen teased you, there was no turning off the arousal until you were satisfied.

And I trusted him to satisfy me.

All damn night long.

He grazed my clit with his fingers, and I sucked in a breath.

He chuckled softly into our kiss and pulled away a couple of inches. "Have you been wet all night, Angel?"

I nodded and tried to speak, but no words came. I was caught up in the glint of his green eyes and the way they glowed every time we passed under a street light. He was gorgeous. There was no other word for it.

Sure, Owen wasn't the typical sort of handsome most girls went for. He didn't have the symmetrical face or the straight nose or the perfectly groomed facial hair.

But what he had to offer was so much more than that. He had a strong jawline. A jawline a girl like me dreams about running her fingers over night after night. And his nose, despite its crooked little zig-zag from being broken so many times, spoke of his rough life and how willing he was to put it all on the line and fight for what he believed in. What he wanted.

And right now, what he wanted was me.

There was no bigger turn on in the world than that.

His eyes were hooded by a heavy brow that made him look like he was in a constant state of brooding, and his lips, soft and curled up in that classic devilish smile of his, were the most kissable lips I'd ever laid eyes on.

Owen stroked my cheek with his free hand while he rubbed my clit in slow circles with the other. He held my gaze and eased a finger inside me.

I closed my eyes, clenched my jaw, and let out a moan that I desperately wished I could have held on to.

Poor driver. I hoped he couldn't hear us back here. He'd had a long enough night as it was.

"Don't fight it, baby," Owen purred.

"The driver," I whispered, barely able to get the words out as he slid his finger in and out of my wet, swollen pussy.

"Who cares about the driver? I've been waiting all night for this. He only has to endure us for another five minutes. Then you're all mine."

His words set my veins on fire.

He slid another thick digit inside me.

"Owen," I whimpered, gripping his shoulder and rolling my hips involuntarily.

"Yes, Angel?"

I bit my bottom lip and stared into his eyes. "Make me come."

Owen's eyes darkened with lust. And there was no going back from there. The driver be damned.

Hell, the cars parked beside us every time we stopped at a red light probably knew what was going on in the back of the limo as Owen braced himself on the door panel above my head and fucked me hard and deep with his fingers. He pressed his thumb to my clit and watched me as I gasped and moaned beneath him, writhing powerlessly under his touch.

He growled above me when my legs started to tremble.

Then I gripped the wrist of the hand above me against the door and let out a short cry as my body gave in to the orgasm that had been just out of reach. It broke over me with force, and I clung to him as Owen bowed over me, worshipping my neck with sweet kisses and nibbles as I came.

When we turned onto my street, Owen sat up and pulled me up with him. I hurried to straighten out my dress and tugged it down to fall back down my legs, covering my nakedness as the limo slowed and pulled over to the curb.

I struggled with the straps of my shoes, so Owen bent over and did them up for me while I fanned my cheeks and tried to catch my breath.

“I’m so embarrassed,” I muttered.

“You look sexy.”

“I probably have bedhead. And my cheeks are on fire.”

“Exactly. Sexy.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “He’s going to think we had sex back here.”

“Yeah, probably.”

I gave him a deadpan stare as the limo slowed to a stop. “You’re supposed to reassure me.”

“You mean lie?”

“No, just tell me my face isn’t red, and I don’t look like a floozy.”

Owen laughed. “Your cheeks aren’t that red. You don’t look like a floozy. Better?”

I pouted. “No.”

He finished doing up my shoes and squeezed my knee. “It doesn’t matter. He probably heard you back here anyway.”

“Oh God,” I mumbled, burying my face in my hand as I heard the driver open his door and get out.

Owen slid across the seat and popped open the back door. “I’ll take care of it.” He got smoothly to his feet outside the limo and stood outside the door to speak to the driver. “I’ve got it from here, man. Thanks.”

The driver said something I couldn’t understand, and Owen waited a beat, and then the driver got back in the front seat. Owen bent over and offered me his hand. “Come on, Angel.”

I smiled, took his hand, and got out of the car. He guided me up onto the sidewalk, mindful of the long skirt of my dress and the perilous height of my shoes, and then he offered me

his elbow, and we walked up the stairs to the front doors and then across the lobby.

The night shift concierge was standing behind the desk near the elevators. He nodded in greeting before returning his eyes to the computer in front of him.

Owen and I went to the elevators and rode them up to my floor.

“Thanks for sparing me the embarrassment back there,” I whispered.

“Anytime.”

The doors slid open with a soft chime, and we spilled out and hurried to my front door. I slid my key in the lock, and by the time I managed to push the door open, Owen was already gathering me up in his arms.

I giggled hysterically as he kicked the door closed behind him and carried me across my suite like my weight was nothing to him.

It probably wasn't. I'd seen all the muscle he hid under his shirts. He was a powerhouse.

My powerhouse.

He turned sideways to step through the doorframe to my bedroom, so as not to decapitate me and set me down on the floor near the edge of my bed. He turned me around so that my back was toward him, drew my hair over one shoulder, and gently pulled the zipper down the back of my gown before sliding the sleeves off my shoulders.

The silky fabric fell to gather around my hips. With a soft tug, he sent it to the floor, and I stepped out of my gown completely naked. It was the sort of dress that didn't have any room for a bra.

I began undressing Owen. I started by pulling his jacket off and then undoing the buttons of his midnight-blue shirt, exposing more and more swollen chest and abs with every button. When I reached the bottom, I untucked his shirt, popped open his belt, and then undid his fly.

He shrugged out of his shirt. It joined my dress on the floor. Then he jerked his pants and boxers down and stepped out of those, too, and we both faced each other, our chests rising and falling with each rapid breath.

Then he moved in on me like a predatory animal, sweeping me up in his arms and moving us around the side of the bed to where my nightstand was. He pinned me to the wall between the nightstand and the window, using his body as a barricade, and began planting little kisses along my neck and breasts.

“Don’t move,” he said, his voice hoarse, and then he leaned over and opened my nightstand drawer to pluck a condom from the small box in the right corner. He tore the wrapper open with his teeth and rolled the condom on.

His cock was hard and pressed to my hip when he closed in on me again. I waited impatiently, my breath hitching in my throat as he grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head against the wall with one hand.

He silenced my protest with a kiss. His tongue slipped between my teeth and explored my mouth ravenously as I was forced to the tips of my toes.

I whimpered into his mouth, and he leaned his hips toward me to slide his cock between my thighs. He teased me, and I rolled my hips, trying to lean into him, but it was impossible. He held me in place until he was ready to succumb to his own needs.

He took his cock in one hand and guided his length up, sliding it into my wet pussy.

Pleasure rippled through me, and my toes curled in the plush white rug that covered the space under and around my bed.

Owen rocked his hips slowly.

My breath whispered out between my parted lips as he cupped my face with his free hand and rested his forehead against mine.

He quickened his pace just a bit.

I licked my lips, closed my eyes, and reveled in the sound of his breathing in my ears. Of the pressure of his hands gripping my wrists. Of every thrust sliding in and out of me.

I tightened my fingers into fists, and my nails bit into my palms.

Owen ran his thumb along my bottom lip. I let him trace my teeth before taking his thumb into my mouth and sucking gently. He pressed down on my tongue as he quickened his speed, and my eyes fluttered open as he groaned in ecstasy.

His head was bowed. His hair was a mess from me running my fingers through it, and it hung in front of his eyes. He was cast in shadow, but the moonlight danced over his muscles, and the sight of him pushed me over the edge.

“Yes,” I pleaded. But my words were muffled by his thumb in my mouth.

His hold on my wrists tightened, and I strained against him as my climax grew inside me like a filling well about to brim over.

My moans were louder, and my breathing was ragged, and I could barely keep it together. I shifted my weight on my toes as my knees buckled and my legs quivered, but he held me in place and fucked me harder until I lost all sense of who I was and gave in to the desire to scream his name at the ceiling as I came.

It sent him spiraling, too.

We came together, and when he was done, he released my wrists but held me up, knowing how unsteady I was on my feet after an orgasm like that. He guided me to my bed, and we both toppled onto it, rolling onto our backs and breathing heavily at the ceiling.

Neither of us said anything. There was nothing to say.

But I was full of a sense of peace.

And gratitude.

If Owen hadn't caught up to us on the sidewalk that night, I would have gone home with Matthew tonight. And I would

have been none the wiser to his true self.

I closed my eyes as a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

Yes. I was a lucky girl.

CHAPTER 19



OWEN

It had been a long week.

Not a bad one. Just a long one.

I chalked it up to the fact that I hadn't seen Evangeline since the blissful morning after the gala last weekend. Her schedule for the last six days was jampacked with commitments she couldn't break for her father's company, and to her best friend Victoria, and I wasn't going to be the needy guy who expected her to change her plans just to spend more time with me.

Although selfishly, I wished she would.

We'd made time to call each other every second day just to catch up. It was a bit odd, and it sort of made me feel like I was back in high school. Back then, I used to call the girl I liked every damn night, and we'd talk for hours.

Or until her father caught her holding up the line and got angry and made her hang up.

There were actually quite a few things about being with Evangeline that reminded me of being in high school.

The anxious butterflies in my gut that I had before I saw her. One would think the feeling would go away after a couple of dates, but it wasn't. It was still there, relentlessly reminding me of how flustered she made me.

And then there were the physical things. Hard-ons every time I saw her or thought of her. Sweaty palms. Prickling skin. Shortness of breath.

If she knew what she did to me, she would think me a horndog. Hell, I thought that myself.

But I was powerless to how she made me feel. And what was more, I didn't really want it to stop. The adrenaline felt good, and the payoff of being with her was always satisfying.

I'd been hopeful that we would be able to get together for a little while at some point today, but she'd called me this morning to apologize and give me the heads-up that she wasn't going to be able to step away from her work.

So I was flying solo.

But I didn't want to be alone because all I would do was think of her, and time would pass by at an agonizingly slow rate. So I called Liam up and asked if he was up for a ride and stopping someplace new for lunch outside the city. If we could put a couple of hours of pavement behind us, we had a good track record of finding cool local bars to grab a cold beer and a burger at.

He agreed and was on his way over.

I also gave Rhys a ring. He answered on the second ring. "What's up, Owen?"

"You got plans today? Liam and I are hitting the road. You and Quinn want to join?"

Rhys groaned. "I wish. Today doesn't work for us, man."

"You have better things to do?"

"I don't know if 'better' is the right word."

I chuckled. "What does she have you working on now?"

"We're painting my living room."

Quinn had wanted to paint the living room ever since she moved in with Rhys almost a year ago. She hated the terracotta color that it was now, and I couldn't blame her. It looked outdated, and it clashed with all the new soft-gray furniture she'd brought with her when she moved in. She had good taste and style, where Rhys was content to use whatever he had. Like most men.

“She deserves a room that makes her happy to be in,” I said.

“Oh, believe me. I know,” Rhys said. “And she’ll get off my back about it.”

I laughed. “All right. Well, I’d offer to come help, but fuck that. Painting is a bitch. Have fun. Liam and I will have a beer on your behalf.”

“Fuck you too, man.”

We were both still laughing when I hung up the phone.

The rest of the late morning was spent aimlessly waiting for Liam to show up. I heard his bike pull into the drive just after ten-thirty, and I went into the garage, opened the door, and plucked my leather jacket from the hook beside the workbench.

Liam ducked under the still opening garage door. “Ready to go, man? It’s a perfect day out there. A bit cold, but hell, I like a bit of bite in the air when I ride.”

I fished my leather riding gloves out of the pocket of my jacket and pulled them on. “I’m ready. Where are we heading?”

“Doesn’t matter to me. North?”

“Sure.” I shrugged.

Then I got on my bike, and he went back out onto the drive to get on his. I rolled out onto the driveway, closed the garage door behind me, and tightened the chin strap under my helmet before turning the bike on and revving the engine.

Liam gave me a thumbs-up, and when I returned it, he opened up on the throttle of his bike and swung out onto the street. I followed, and the rumble of our bikes was music to my ears as we cruised down the residential street toward the interstate to take us out of the city limits so we could hit some real speeds.

It only took us a half hour or so to hit open roads where we could open up on the throttle and really move. We passed cars, wove through traffic, and broke free of congestion that was

slowing us down so we could make the most of our afternoon. There was nothing worse than a perfect riding day but having drivers get in the way. All they had to do was move to the right lane, but they were oblivious.

Liam and I took turns leading. Every fifteen minutes or so, the guy in the rear would speed up to pass, and then he would lead for a while and set the speed. Liam hadn't been riding as long as me, so I knew I was pushing him pretty hard when I took some corners and checked my mirrors to find him falling behind.

He was a smart rider though. He didn't push himself past his skill level, despite his desire to kick my ass, and I admired that about him. Especially since he was only twenty-four. The young guys were usually the ones taking the unnecessary risks, all because of their testosterone. But not Liam. He had common sense and appreciated self-preservation.

I couldn't say the same thing about myself when I'd been his age.

Hell, I couldn't say the same thing about myself now.

Liam had been leading for about ten minutes when I followed him into the parking lot of a biker bar off the interstate about two and a half hours out. The parking lot was loose gravel, so we had to slow down a fair bit, and there were a good twenty or so other bikes parked in the lot.

There were a few Harley's, some cruisers, some crotch rockets. A little bit of everything.

I expected it would be a good crowd inside.

I parked my bike in the same space as Liam's, and we took our helmets off as we walked across the lot, the gravel crunching under our boots, and took the stairs up onto the porch where a few men were outside smoking. They nodded in greeting, and we nodded back. Judging by their leather vests, I assumed some of the hogs in the lot were theirs.

When we pushed through the doors, we were greeted with the smell of grease, frying onions, beer, and man smell.

It was a biker bar, after all.

Liam struck out ahead and sought out a table with a view of the parking lot through the window so we could keep an eye on our bikes. He and I had too many experiences with drunken assholes hanging around in the parking lot, smoking their cigarettes or weed, and going over to look at our bikes.

Looking was fine. Touching was not.

And for some reason, drunken bikers always wanted to touch shit.

Our waitress was a middle-aged woman with a tough exterior. Her bare arms were covered in tattoos of swirling roses, vines, and quotes in cursive that I couldn't read. She stopped at our table and looked back and forth between us with one hand on her hip. "What can I get you boys?" Her voice was raspy and deep, a smoker to be sure.

We ordered whatever ale they had on tap and then asked for a couple more minutes with the menu.

She nodded. "Take your time. Give me a holler when you need anything. My name is Stacy. Don't be shy, sugars."

When she walked away, Liam arched an eyebrow at me. "Sugars?"

I shrugged. "I think she was talking to you."

He snorted. "Please."

"Maybe she likes the young ones."

"Piss off."

"Do you want a kids' menu? Crayons?"

Liam gave me a deadpan stare before flipping open his menu and scanning the options. I did the same, snickering to myself at my own jokes.

Stacy swung by our table again, and we placed our orders. Within fifteen or so minutes, our beers were half empty, and we had our plates in front of us, a bacon cheeseburger for me and a basket of fish and chips for Liam.

As we ate, we caught up on our previous week.

“So how have things been with you, man?” Liam asked as he smothered a piece of cod in tartar sauce. “You and Evangeline still hanging out?”

“Yeah. We haven’t seen much of each other this week because of her work, but I’m hoping to be able to see her tomorrow night.”

“How was that fancy thing you went to with her last weekend?”

“About as terrible as one would expect.”

Liam laughed. “How so? What happened? Please tell me you didn’t get into a fight with some billionaire.”

“Do you seriously think so low of me?”

“No, not at all.” Liam shook his head. “I think so low of the sort of people who were probably there.”

He wasn’t far off. “I might have exchanged words with one of them who tried to get me to clear off and stay away from Evangeline.”

Liam froze with a piece of fish on his fork halfway to his mouth and frowned. “What?”

“Yeah. I don’t recall if I told you, but when I ran into Evangeline the other week, she was actually on a date. With some prick named Matthew Aero. And he—”

“He sounds like a tool. Matthew Aero?” He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Tell me about it. Anyway. He seems to have it in his head that he’s entitled to her, and he tried to get me to leave, telling me I didn’t deserve a girl as classy as her. Like I didn’t know that already.” I shook my head and laughed.

“If you make her happy you deserve her, man. Simple as that.”

“Yeah? Got a lot of experience in the love department, kid?”

Liam’s brow furrowed. “No. But I’m on your side. And I know you. She’s lucky if you ask me. What are her other

options? Douche bags like Matthew Aero?”

I appreciated his support, even if I thought he was bullshitting me a bit. “Yeah. Well. I told him off, took a couple stabs at him for shits and giggles, and then Evangeline came back to the table and asked me to go get her a drink so she could put him in his place on her own.”

His eyebrows crept up to his hairline. “Oh. You didn’t tell me she was a badass.”

“You have no idea, man. She can handle her shit. She’s a boss.”

“Sounds like it. What happened after that?”

I shrugged. “She and I left. Well, first she chugged her wine like it was water, and then we left.”

“And then?”

I gave him a lopsided grin. “And then we went back to her place, and the rest of it is for my memory. And hers.”

Liam chuckled and held up his hands. “All right. All right. I’ll lay off. I’m happy for you, man. She sounds like the sort of woman you need in your life. You know? A girl who can keep you out of trouble.”

He was right.

Evangeline had a way of handling the riff-raff without using her fists. She also had a way of reminding me to avoid violence without saying a word. With her around, I didn’t want to fight. I didn’t want things to escalate. Because that was when shit got messy, and I would never want to expose her to that side of me.

Not again.

“You know. Three weeks ago, had you asked me if I ever wanted a relationship, I would have sworn up and down they weren’t for me.” I lifted my beer to my lips.

Liam gave me a knowing grin. “And now?”

“Now it sounds pretty fucking great with a girl like Angel.”

“Angel?”

CHAPTER 20



EVANGELINE

“What do you think?” I asked as I shuffled the notecards of my upcoming speech back into chronological order. I was kneeling in front of my coffee table, frowning.

Victoria was sitting across from me on the sofa. Her legs were crossed and neatly tucked under herself, and she had her elbows resting on her knees with her fingertips pressed together. She gazed at me intently over the tops of them. “I think it was pretty good.”

“Pretty good? That’s it?”

“Well, it’s a bit dry.”

“Of course it is. It’s a speech about cleaning the oceans. It’s not supposed to be an adventure of highs and lows. It’s informative. And gracious. And just the sort of thing people at these events expect to have to listen to.”

Victoria frowned and swept her long blonde hair to one side, letting it tumble down her shoulder. “But do they *have to* listen to that sort of thing? Is there no room for you to mix it up? Surprise them? Keep them on their toes? There’s something to be said about a more non-traditional approach. You’ll stick out in their minds at the very least. Not that you don’t already. Especially with that new dress you’re going to wear.”

I sighed. This wasn’t helping.

A lot was riding on this speech. I was going to have to address a room full of my father’s biggest donors, and for some bizarre reason, the more money people had, the tighter

they tended to hold on to their wallets. I had to win them over. I had to show them why this was the right cause for them to throw some of their wealth at.

Ocean health and the condition of the ecosystem was crucial to human survival, not to mention a basic responsibility that we'd been neglecting for far too long. Someone had to do something. And that someone was my father.

I had to convince them to open their damn wallets and stop being greedy bastards.

It was easier said than done.

I stared down at my index cards. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should try something fresh. Do you have any suggestions?"

Victoria winced. "I'm good at giving constructive criticism. Not solutions."

"Typical." I huffed, putting the cards down on the coffee table and leaning back on my hands.

She uncrossed her legs and stretched them out to rest her heels on my table. "Can we talk about something else for a bit?"

I nodded. "Please. My brain feels like it's about to implode."

"Have you seen Owen lately?"

I shook my head. "No. Not all week. I've been so busy with this stupid speech, and I had to go to private meetings with several of my father's clients here in the city. I'm hoping I get some time to see him tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, early in the week. I miss him."

"I bet you do. A whole week without any toe-curling nookie? How horrible."

"Victoria!"

"What?" she asked innocently.

Blushing, I shook my head at her. "I can live without sex for a week. And for crying out loud, please don't ever call it

‘nookie’ again?”

“I like that word.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Diva.”

“You know it,” I said, grinning at her. “Want a glass of water?”

“Sure,” Victoria said, leaning across the table to grab my index cards. I popped up to my feet and padded into the kitchen to pour us each a glass of sparkling water.

“Do you want lemon?” I called.

“No thanks,” Victoria said, somewhat distracted by the cards in her hands. “Hey, what if you opened with a joke?”

“That doesn’t seem cliché?” I asked as I pulled two glasses down from my cupboard.

“It depends on the joke.”

“Any suggestions?”

“No.”

I poured us each a glass. “Of course not. Criticism, not solutions. I have to remember that.”

“You’ll get there,” she teased.

I was walking through the kitchen to bring our waters into the living room when there was a knock on my door. I set the glasses down on the counter while Victoria continued to study my speech and opened my front door.

My father was on the other side.

He gave me a warm smile and pulled me in for a hug. “Hello, darling.”

“Hi, Daddy,” I said, giving him a good squeeze before stepping back to hold the door open for him. “Come on in. Victoria and I were just going over my speech for the next event.”

Victoria smiled and waved at my father. “Hi, Mr. Snow.”

“Please, Victoria. We’re all family here. Call me Frank.”

Victoria scrunched up her nose. “Yeah. You know. You’ve been asking me to call you that since I was thirteen, and I just can’t get used to it. You’ll always be Mr. Snow to me.”

“It makes me feel so old,” my father muttered as he popped open the buttons of his gray suit jacket.

“Would you like a glass of water? Sparkling? I also have wine, soda, whiskey—”

“I’m all right, sweetheart,” my father said. “I was just hoping to have a moment to speak to you about something... sensitive.”

Victoria, always one to catch the undertones of any conversation, rolled to her feet, set the index cards down, and clasped her hands together. “That’s my cue to get out of here. Call me later, Eva. Anytime after six. I have a yoga class at five.”

“Have fun.” I smiled as she collected her purse from the kitchen counter, gave me and my father one last wave, and ducked out the door.

My father and I stood quietly for a moment, and then I gestured at the sofa. “Should we sit?”

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it over the back of my sofa before he took a seat. He let out a sigh, which in my experience was a sure sign that the conversation we were about to have wasn’t going to be a fun, light, enjoyable one.

“Are you sure you don’t want something to drink, Daddy?”

My father rubbed the side of his head. “No, I’m all right. Come. Sit.” He patted the sofa beside him and waited for me to come join him.

I made myself comfortable and crossed one leg over the other as I waited for him to start talking. But it seemed as if he wasn’t sure where to start.

“Is something bothering you?” I asked, hoping to prompt him to spit it out.

“Yes. Yes, it is. I got a call this morning from Matthew Aero.”

“Oh.”

My father studied me. “He said you were quite rude to him last weekend at the gala.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh please. He was asking for it.”

“He is my business associate.”

“He’s an ass.”

“Evangeline,” my father said sternly.

I ran my hands down my thighs. “I’m sorry that I had to tell off your associate. But he was treating my date poorly and spouting nonsense. I wasn’t going to let him walk all over me or—”

“I would also like to speak with you about this date.”

“What about him?”

My father narrowed his eyes at me, and a pit formed in my stomach.

He already knew.

Fucking Matthew had spilled the beans like the kiss ass he was.

“I don’t want you seeing that man, Evangeline.”

“Daddy, Owen isn’t what you think he is. He’s good. He’s one hell of a better man than Matthew. I can guarantee that.”

My father shook his head at me. “Enough. You have your reputation to worry about. And you’re representing me and my campaign. I can’t have you rolling into these events with a guy like Owen McCully on your arm. What will people think?”

“I don’t care what they think,” I said sharply.

My father sighed with frustration and pressed his palm to his forehead. He looked older. There were more wrinkles

around the corners of his eyes. He also looked terribly tired.

“There are things in this life that will be infinitely more difficult if you’re with someone like Owen. He’s not good for you. You’re my daughter, and I want what is best for you. Don’t you understand that? I’m trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me.”

“Apparently, you do because you’re off spending your time with a criminal.”

“He’s not—”

“I know exactly who Owen McCully is,” my father said. “He’s a rule breaker. A criminal. A deviant. He needs to stay on his side of the tracks and leave you to yours. You have more important things to do with your life. You must leave him behind. He’s only going to hold you back. And put you at risk.”

“He would never hurt me,” I said.

“Maybe not intentionally,” my father said, moving closer to put a hand over mine on my knee. “I trust that he would never hurt you on purpose. I know him well enough to know that. But sometimes, men are powerless to the life we know. He knows how to solve problems one way, Evangeline. And that is through violence. Do you deny it?”

I bit my bottom lip.

My father hung his head and patted my hand. “I know you don’t want to hear this. And I know it’s not my place to tell you what to do. But I would not come to you with these concerns unless I absolutely had to. Owen will put you in dangerous positions that Matthew can keep you out of. He’s trouble.”

None of what my father was saying was a surprise to me.

I knew Owen was trouble. But he was trouble for other people—bad people. He wasn’t trouble for me.

For me, he was a safe place to land.

“You must consider your priorities,” my father continued. “You must look at the bigger picture. Owen has no place there. You two had your fun when you were young. But now you have responsibilities, and I’m sure he does as well. It is time to own up to that and put him in your rearview mirror for good. Please.”

My throat was tight. My hands were clammy. And I could feel my own pulse fluttering frantically at my throat like a panicked bird trying to escape the confines of its cage.

“But, Daddy—”

“I’m not going to speak any more of it. You know what you must do. And I trust you to do it and to do it in a timely manner. You’re a grown woman now, Evangeline. The time for flings with a biker is behind you. It is time to look forward to bigger and better things.”

CHAPTER 21



OWEN

Barry was working the concierge desk when I crossed the lobby of Evangeline’s apartment building on Saturday evening.

He didn’t see me until I was basically right on top of him, and when he looked up, he sputtered and stammered over his words until his mouth caught up with his brain.

“Uh. Hi there, Mr....”

“McCully,” I said flatly.

“Right. Apologies. Mr. McCully. How may I help you?”

I rapped my knuckles on the desk. “I’d like to go up and see Evangeline Snow if you would?”

Barry narrowed his eyes at me. “Of course, sir. You may proceed to the elevators. Shall I buzz her and let her know to expect you?”

“Nah.” I waved a hand. “I’d like to surprise her. Keep those sneaky fingers of yours away from that phone.”

Barry had been reaching for his phone to dial up to Evangeline’s suite. He let his arm fall to his side. “Of course, sir. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

I leaned on the desk. “You could at least pretend to not despise my coming here so much. You know. A smile here and there really wins people’s favor.”

Barry stared at me blankly.

I laughed. “I’m fucking with you, man. Lighten up.”

His mouth twitched in what I could only assume was an attempt at a smile. “Very funny, sir.”

“I thought so.” I shrugged.

Barry stared at me, and I stared back.

“All right,” I said, slapping my hand flat on the counter. Poor Barry nearly jumped out of his skin. He must not have had much experience with men like me. He was used to the suits and the polished shoes and the flashy watches. I was a whole new breed of trouble and menace in his eyes. “Catch you around, Barry.”

“Good evening, Mr. McCully.”

I sauntered over to the elevators, jabbed the button, and waited for one of them to open up for me. I didn’t have to wait long. The building was massive and had four elevators. I stepped on after a young couple stepped off, and I pressed the button for the fiftieth floor once I was inside.

On the ride up, my phone started ringing. It was Rhys. I answered the call, surprised I still had service in an elevator shaft. “Hey, man. What’s going on?”

“Hey, brother,” Rhys said. “You got plans tonight? Quinn and I are having a couple of folks over for drinks and dinner.”

“Let me get back to you. I’m on my way to see Evangeline right now. If I’m not with her tonight, I’ll swing by.”

“Oh, no worries. We’ll be your last resort. I see how it is.”

I snorted. “Like you wouldn’t do the same with Quinn?”

Rhys chuckled. “Yeah. You got me there. See you when I see you, brother.”

I rode the elevator up to the top of the building and found myself standing in front of Evangeline’s door.

I chastised myself for not bringing flowers or something.

I had to step up my game at some point. She was probably used to being waited on by men with a lot of money to spend, and there was no doubt in my mind that they would spend it on her. If I was in their shoes, I most certainly would.

Flowerless, I knocked on her door and waited.

I waited a long time. A whole minute and a half maybe. Then I knocked again.

The door opened a crack, and Evangeline peered around the edge of the door with one eye. “Hi, Owen.”

“Hey,” I said, leaning to the side to try to get a better look at her. “How are you?”

“I’m all right,” she said. Her voice was thinner than usual, almost hoarse. Her nose was pink, and her cheeks were flushed, and her lips looked a little swollen.

I almost asked if she’d been crying but thought better of it.

Instead, I asked, “What are your plans for tonight? I’ve missed you all week, and I was thinking it might be nice if the two of us could grab dinner together.”

Evangeline wrapped her fingers around the edge of the door and looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry, Owen. I’m not feeling well. I think I’m just going to stay in tonight.”

“Is it the flu?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Your stomach?”

“I don’t know,” she said a little more firmly, meeting my stare. “I kind of just want to be alone tonight. You understand, don’t you?”

I nodded and rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah. Yeah, of course I do. Can I run out and grab you something? Soup? Ginger ale? Crackers? Whatever you need, I can bring it back for you and—”

“I’m fine, Owen. Thank you. I just want to sleep this off.”

I was still nodding like an idiot. “Okay. I’ll call and check in on you in the morning. I hope you feel better.”

“Thanks,” she said, and then she pushed the door closed and left me standing there like a fool staring at it, wondering what the hell just happened.

She didn't look or sound sick. And she'd had a full face of makeup on. And she was dressed nicely.

Something wasn't adding up. I'd seen Evangeline sick, and she wasn't one of those women who just trooped her way through it like a boss. She liked to get cozy in her favorite pair of PJs and matching slippers, and she'd drink cups and cups of green tea while watching movies on her sofa cuddled under a blanket.

She was certainly not sick.

So what the hell was that all about?

As I walked back to the elevator, I racked my brain trying to recall if I'd done something wrong. Was she upset about something?

We hadn't seen each other all week, and we'd only talked over the phone. What could I have said that would make her suddenly want to put up a wall like this?

I jabbed the elevator button and slid my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket.

No, I was fairly certain there was nothing I'd said to elicit this cold response from her. Perhaps it had nothing to do with me. Perhaps something else was going on.

If someone else had hurt her, they had better hope I never found out about it.

I grimaced.

My old tendencies were bubbling to the surface at the first sign of trouble. That wasn't a good reaction. I had to keep my cool. Play it off nice and easy.

It might be nothing.

Maybe she had only just suddenly started to feel unwell, and she was planning on getting cozy right after I left her doorstep.

The nagging voice in the back of my head screamed bullshit.

When the elevator door opened, so did Evangeline's front door.

I looked over toward her, and she pressed her head to the side of the door and gave me a sad smile. "I'm not sick, Owen. I'm sorry. Would you like to come inside?"

Confused but grateful she didn't want to shoo me away, I nodded and crossed the little lobby to step into her place. She closed and locked the door behind me and then went to the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of wine. She sighed before taking a sip.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She pressed her lips together. "Yes and no. Mostly no. Although..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "It's stupid. But I need to talk to you about it."

"All right," I said.

"My father stopped by earlier today to talk to me."

"Okay."

"And it turns out Matthew told him that I was with you at the gala last weekend. And he didn't like that very much."

Typical Frank.

"Well, that's not really a surprise, is it?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "We both figured he wouldn't be happy to know I was there with you."

Evangeline nodded and took another sip of wine. "No. You're right. But I also didn't expect him to show up at my place demanding I break things off with you and pursue a guy like Matthew instead." She laughed, but there was no humor there. Instead, I heard only bitterness. "I can't believe he still thinks you're dangerous."

She was saying all the right things, but just beneath the surface, I could detect notes of insecurity. She wouldn't meet my eye, and her shoulders were drawn inward. She seemed so unsure, so unsteady in her own resolve, and it made me start to think of things differently.

Maybe I was the one who should offer her an out.

Instead of her father having to come down hard on her, maybe it was my turn to offer her another option, a chance to bow out of this relationship before we both got too invested and we couldn't turn our backs on it.

Before I fell too hard and she stomped on my heart when I felt safe.

"Angel," I said, moving around the kitchen island to stand beside her. I placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face toward mine. "Your father isn't entirely wrong."

"But—"

"Wait. Let me finish. He loves you. You are the most important thing in the world to him, and he doesn't want to lose you. And he doesn't know me. Not really."

"I know he doesn't. But he should trust me. I'm his daughter. I don't make stupid choices. And I'm a grown-ass woman. This is my choice to make."

"It is," I agreed. "And if you choose something else or someone else, I want you to know that I understand, and I won't hold it against you. I promise."

Her eyes searched mine, and her lips parted in surprise. "Owen, don't say that."

"I have to. I care about you. And I want you to be happy. That's all I want. And if I'm not what makes you happy and it's not worth all the shit you're going to get for being with me, then don't feel bad if you have to walk away."

Evangeline shook her head ever so slightly before cupping my face in both hands and running her thumbs over the stubble on my jaw. "You're talking crazy."

"I didn't want to say it. But I had to."

Evangeline's eyes grew glassy. I willed her not to cry. I could take anything but that.

Then she smiled and sniffled and pressed her lips to the palm of the hand I still had resting under her chin. "And that's

what makes you such a good man, Owen. I just wish my father could see this part of you. He would change his mind in a heartbeat. I know he would.”

CHAPTER 22



EVANGELINE

I couldn't believe I'd even considered ending things with Owen.

And all because my father couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that Owen was not the risk-taking young man he knew from all those years ago.

He was so much more than that.

Sure, he still had a bit of a wild side, but that was part of what I loved so much about him. That, combined with his sense of humor, his compassion, and his willingness to help anyone in need made him a well-rounded man who was worthy of so much love.

And I had so much to give.

My father was clueless. And narrow-minded.

Part of what made this so hard was that I really wanted my father to come around and see Owen for the man I knew he was. But he wouldn't meet me in the middle. He wouldn't soften his narrowminded views of the bad-boy biker he knew seven years ago.

Even then, Owen had been a good person.

He was lost, like a lot of young people were. And he fought his way out of the darkness and the confusion of youth. All those years of struggle had made him into the man he was now.

There wasn't a bone in my body that didn't trust Owen fully.

He would never put me in a bad position that would jeopardize my safety. Hell, he'd be the first thing standing between me and danger if something ever did happen. But there was no need to think like that because nothing would happen.

Because this was now. Not seven years ago.

I felt ashamed for what I'd put him through. That was where the tears were coming from. I could tell my emotions were making him uneasy.

I dabbed at my eyes and willed myself to stop crying. "I guess I'm not as independent as I thought. I still care too much what my father thinks."

Owen rubbed my shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"If it's interfering with my personal life and what makes me happy, there is."

Owen didn't have anything to say to that. He looked down at his feet. "I wish I could make it better for you."

His words warmed my heart, and I put my hand on his chest. "You are making it better. Trust me."

"I'm also half the problem."

I pursed my lips. "That's not true."

He arched his eyebrow.

I cracked a smile. "You're about ninety-nine percent of the problem."

Owen tossed his head back and laughed. The sound was radiant and comforting, and I stepped in close to wrap my arms around his waist. He gathered me in and rested his chin on top of my head. It felt good to be nestled into his chest like this. I fit perfectly, and his embrace set my mind at ease.

This was where I wanted to be.

Nobody else's opinion was going to dictate my choices.

I was stronger than that. And Owen was something I was willing to put it all on the line and fight for.

He was rubbing off on me.

Owen stroked my back. “So...” He trailed off.

I looked up at him. “So?”

He chewed the inside of his cheek. “Is it too soon for me to ask you out for dinner again tonight?”

He was so sweet. I giggled. “I would love to spend tonight with you. But maybe we could change things up a bit?”

“How so? Name your price. I’m up for anything.”

“Well,” I said slowly, clasping my hands together behind his back and craning my neck back. “I was thinking it might be nice if you showed me some of your spots here in the city.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Uh. You want to go hang out at some biker bars? I’m not saying no, but I don’t think you’ll be much of a fan of the cheap beer and obnoxious crowds.”

I snickered and shook my head. “No, not a biker bar. But maybe you could introduce me to some of your friends?”

He searched my eyes.

I frowned. “You do have friends, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone scolding. “Plenty of them. I just don’t know if they’ll be your cup of tea.”

“Well, are they anything like you?”

“Ruggedly handsome? Clever? Funny as hell? Yeah.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Then why wouldn’t they be my cup of tea?”

Owen grinned. “All right. You win. We’ll go meet some of my crew.”

“Really?” I asked excitedly. Owen’s new MC was his whole life, and I wanted to know as much about that life as possible. Meeting them seemed like the right place to start.

He nodded, and as he talked, his eyes lit up, and his grin stretched his cheeks. “Really. Rhys is having a few of the guys and their women over for drinks and dinner tonight. If we leave soon, we’ll be there right on time.”

“Just let me grab my purse and a jacket, and we can go,” I said as butterflies took flight in my stomach.

This felt like a big step in the right direction for us.

Owen caught my hand as I spun away from him to grab my jacket from the hook by the door. He looked me over. “You should probably change altogether.”

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, looking down at my outfit. I had on a pair of white pants and a long-sleeved pastel-pink blouse that went well with the gold jewelry at my throat and in my ears. “I like this outfit, thank you very much.”

“Slow your roll, princess. You’re going to meet a bunch of bikers who don’t wear anything besides denim and leather. It’s your call.”

I frowned. He was right.

“Damn it,” I muttered. “Okay. Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

“I suggest wearing flat shoes,” he called to me as I hurried down the hall to my bedroom.

When I reached my bedroom, I threw my closet door open and stared at everything I owned. Most of it was for business functions or dinners, and a good portion was for formal events.

What the hell was I supposed to wear to a casual evening at a biker’s house?

My mouth went suddenly dry.

What had I gotten myself into?

I didn’t know how to behave around men and women like this. I had no idea what we were going to talk about. Was I going to be that girl sitting in the corner, all uptight and worried about what everyone was thinking about her?

Because surely, they would all be thinking *something*.

Wouldn't they?

What a rich snob.

She's a prude.

What is Owen doing with a woman like that?

How much do you think she spent on her nails?

Why is she here?

Owen can do so much better.

I shook my head furiously.

“No,” I muttered to myself. “These people are his family. And Owen would not have family as mean as that.”

Owen's voice called back down to me from the kitchen. “Who are you talking to in there?”

“Myself,” I called back as my cheeks started to burn.

I could hear him chuckling to himself.

I had to move my ass. He was waiting on me.

After staring aimlessly into my closet for another minute or so, I abandoned it and went to my dresser, where I sorted through a bunch of jeans until I found a plain dark pair with no embellishments. I stripped out of my elegant outfit and pulled the jeans on. Then I found a plain black shirt, which I tucked into the jeans.

I scoured my shoe racks for something casual and, more importantly, flat.

Like Owen had said, heels were probably a bad idea. For the first time in my life, I regretted that my shoe collection was comprised of about eighty-five percent heels or wedges.

The clouds parted, and a solution presented itself when I found an old pair of over the knee black boots. I pulled them on, discovering they were a little higher than over the knee. The pitch-black suede fabric hit me mid-thigh, covering most of my jeans, but it looked cute.

Really cute actually.

And kind of badass.

I finished the look by brushing out my curls and pinning one side back. I wore gold hoop earrings that matched the gold zippers on the dark green leather jacket I shrugged over my shoulder. I flipped my hair out from under the jacket and went back out to meet Owen in the kitchen.

His jaw nearly hit the floor when he saw me.

“Hot damn,” he breathed.

I spun in a little circle for him. “Is this more suitable?”

“Much more,” he said, coming to me to rest a hand on my hip. “You look great, Angel. And you’ll fit in just fine.”

I studied him. “I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. They’re good, easygoing people. And they’ll be excited to meet you finally.”

“Finally?” I cocked my head to the side.

Owen, for the first time since I’d known him, blushed.

I gasped. “Have you been talking to your friends about me, Owen McCully?”

“Maybe,” he mumbled bashfully.

I giggled and draped my arms over his shoulders. “I think that’s sweet.”

“Not too soft?”

I shrugged. “It’s a little soft. But let’s be honest. I’ve always known you were soft and squishy on the inside.”

He laughed and kissed the tip of my nose. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t go telling people. I don’t want it to ruin my reputation.”

“Never,” I promised.

CHAPTER 23



OWEN

Pulling into Rhys's driveway that night with Evangeline on the back of my bike was a surreal feeling. Her thighs squeezed my hips, and her helmet rested between my shoulder blades as I slowed down and parked behind Liam's bike.

She got off first, hopping off and landing gracefully on the pavement to pull her helmet off. Her hair tumbled down her back, and she shook her head to loosen the tangles as she ran her fingers through the roots.

I swung my leg over the bike and took my helmet off too. I hung both our helmets on the handlebars and nodded up at the house. "You ready for this?"

She glanced up to Rhys's front door. "Not really."

I nudged her in the ribs with my elbow. "Just think. You walk into galas with a bunch of rich assholes who are for sure judging you. This is just a chill dinner with people who don't give a damn where you come from. Trust me. You'll win them over in minutes. They're pretty easy to please."

"Any tips? Topics to avoid?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe avoid asking about family?"

"What? Why?"

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the house and began putting one foot in front of the other. "Because a lot of these folks have lost people in

unpleasant ways, and I want to spare you from the awkwardness of those conversations.”

“Oh,” she breathed, reaching up to entwine her fingers with mine on the hand draped over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Aside from that, everything is fair game. Just prepare yourself for a lot of razzing and good old-fashioned horsing around.”

“I can handle that,” she said.

“Of course you can. You told off Mr. Fancy Matthew Aero like a champ. These guys would love to hear that story if you’re looking for an icebreaker.”

Evangeline flashed me a white smile. “Good idea.”

We stepped up onto the front porch, and I let my arm fall from her shoulders to rap my knuckles on the front door. Then I shouldered it open and bellowed down the hallway that I had arrived.

Liam was the first to greet us.

He popped his head out from around the corner in the kitchen, and his eyes flicked from me to Evangeline. He grinned like a little kid. “Hey, come on in. Leave your shoes on. Everyone is out back. Burgers and chicken are on the barbeque, and the fridge is full of beer and cider.”

I took Evangeline’s hand and led her down the hall into the kitchen.

Liam held out his hand to her, and she shook it.

“You must be Evangeline,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you. I didn’t think Owen would have the balls to bring you around these parts any time soon. I’m pleasantly surprised.” He chuckled and looked at me. “I don’t know what a girl like her is doing with your sorry ass, man.”

I chuckled. “I’m still trying to figure that out for myself.”

Evangeline adjusted her jacket and rolled her shoulders before smiling up at me. “He has his charms.”

Liam laughed. “Yeah. Sure, he does. Come on out back. We’ll introduce you to everyone.”

I saw her swallow and gave her hand a squeeze as we fell into step behind Liam, who cut through the kitchen and the dining room and then ducked out through the screen on the back patio doors.

We passed through them after him and emerged on Rhys’s back deck.

Evangeline was lucky. It wasn’t too big of a turnout.

Sitting around the patio table were Rhys and Quinn, who looked up and smiled when they spotted Evangeline by my side. At least there were some familiar faces around the table for her. She knew Rhys a bit from back in Chicago.

He got to his feet and greeted her with a big hug. “Nice to see you again, Evangeline. How’ve you been?”

When they parted, she gave him her best smile. “Good. Really good. It’s nice to see you too. You have a lovely home.”

“This shithole?” Rhys barked, gesturing at the house.

Quinn popped to her feet and scowled. “It’s not a shithole. Well, not since I moved in anyway.” She moved smoothly around the table and introduced herself to Evangeline. She hugged her just like Rhys had and then put her hands on Evangeline’s shoulders. “I hope this isn’t inappropriate, but I just have to say, you’re gorgeous.”

Evangeline turned bright pink.

I pulled her into my side. “Beat it, Quinn. She’s mine.”

Quinn giggled and went back to her seat. Rhys sat down beside her, and she pulled out the empty chair on her other side, motioning for Evangeline to take a seat. I sat down on her other side and kept my hand on her knee for reassurance as she was introduced to the others who had been patiently awaiting their turn around the table.

Next up were Aiden and his girl, Cheryl. They said their friendly hellos, and we moved on to introduce Evangeline to

the last couple, Jax and Holly.

Jax was the pretty boy of the group, and he winked at Evangeline when he shook her hand. She sank back into her seat and smiled back at him, not intimidated at all.

Sitting beside her was a turn on all on its own.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked.

Jax lifted his beer to his lips. “Axel and Ellie are at a preschool play.”

“How sweet,” Evangeline said beside me.

Jax chuckled. “Have you ever been to one of those? It’s nothing but a bunch of kids staring out at the audience, about to burst into tears.”

“Sounds like you experienced some personal trauma with that,” Rhys teased.

Jax shot him a look. “Bite me.”

The rest of us laughed at Jax’s expense.

“I think Ryder and Dani wanted to stop by at some point,” Quinn said. “They were considering seeing if Jamie could babysit for them. But I haven’t heard from them since yesterday afternoon.”

“Ryder? Leave his baby?” Aiden scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“And Sabian?” I asked.

Rhys shrugged. “Who knows with that guy? Whoever shows up, shows up. Are we not good enough for you now? Is your high-rolling life making us look less appealing?”

I laughed. “No. The opposite actually.”

All eyes darted to Evangeline, who seemed to notice they were all staring at her. She blinked under the attention like a doe caught in the headlights, then lifted her chin. “Oh. Don’t worry. You can talk shit about the high rollers. They’re a bunch of pompous assholes.”

The table was quiet for a minute.

Then they all started laughing.

“I like her,” Rhys said.

“She can stay,” Aiden agreed.

Liam, who was standing near the patio door and leaning against the side of the house, lifted his beer in a toast. “To new friends.”

“New friends,” they said unanimously. Everyone drank.

I leaned over to Evangeline. “See? Told you you’d be a hit.”

She smiled. “I knew my good looks would get me somewhere one day.”

I laughed and squeezed her shoulder as I got to my feet. “Want a beer? Cider? Water?”

“Beer please,” she said.

Quinn nudged her in the other shoulder. “Thatta girl. Scram, Owen. Let us pick her brain and get some dirt on you.”

“Knock yourself out,” I said. “Just don’t ask her about my cock. Ya’ll know how sensitive I am about how massive it is.”

They all booted me off the porch, and I ducked inside chuckling to myself, trusting that Evangeline would be able to handle herself just fine in their obnoxious company.

I went to the fridge and grabbed two cans of beer. When I closed it, I looked up to find that Liam had followed me inside.

He waggled his eyebrows at me. “She’s a hit. A real crowd pleaser.”

“I figured she would be,” I said.

“So are things serious with you two then?”

I shrugged. “We haven’t put a label on anything. But we’re enjoying our time together, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want it to become something more than that.” I tossed one of the beers in my hand. “She’s special, man. Always has been. And I’ll be damned if I let her slip through my fingers again.”

Liam beamed and bumped my shoulder with his. “I don’t think you have to worry about that, brother. She lights up like a Christmas tree when she talks about you. I just saw it myself.”

His words made my stomach feel like there were hundreds of warm fluffy butterflies flying around.

My girl *was* making me soft.

We went back out onto the back deck as Rhys opened the lid on the barbeque. The smell that wafted out made my mouth water. He plated several patties, oozing with cheese, and called everyone to prepare their burgers. All the condiments and toppings were laid out on the dining-room table inside, and we made a neat line, one behind the other, so we could go through and create our masterpieces.

Evangeline loaded hers with bell peppers and barbeque sauce. That earned her some approving nods from several of the men.

Everyone took their seats outside at the table. Some of us had to pull up chairs and eat with our paper plates on our laps. Evangeline licked barbeque sauce off her thumb, and it reminded me of the other night when she had my thumb in her mouth while I fucked her up against her bedroom wall.

My cock twitched in my pants.

God damn it.

“You all right there, brother?” Liam asked, nodding at me from the other side of the table.

I nodded. “Mind your own business.”

Evangeline dabbed her lips with her napkin and turned toward Rhys. “I’m not trying to kiss your ass, I swear, but this is the best burger I’ve ever had.”

“Kiss ass,” Jax teased.

She was unflustered by his hazing.

“It’s an old family recipe,” Rhys said.

“That he refuses to share with the rest of us,” Aiden added bitterly.

“Family recipes are legacies,” Evangeline said.

“See? Someone understands.” Rhys nodded at Evangeline. “Help yourself to more. There’s plenty left.”

Evangeline glanced at me. “I think I will.”

This earned her a smattering of applause from the crew. She blushed under the attention but waved them off.

“What?” she asked. “Just because I’m a girl, I can’t have two?”

“We’re just surprised that a girl with your background is willing to eat shit like this,” Jax said, always the one to say what everyone was thinking but unwilling to say it.

Evangeline helped herself to another burger and bun off the barbeque. “That’s fair actually. Most of the women at the events I go to eat like birds. Or they don’t eat at all. I’m telling you, if they had burgers like this at those events, I’d be fatter than Owen.”

The laughter that filled the yard was well earned, and I winked at my girl before she ducked into the house to no doubt bury her burger in more bell peppers.

Rhys nodded at me. “It’s good to see you two back together again. It makes sense, you know?”

“She’s a boss.” Quinn grinned. “And she fits in with the rest of us misfits.”

“Yeah,” I said. “She does, doesn’t she?”

CHAPTER 24



EVANGELINE

It was well past midnight when Owen moved to stand behind my chair on the back porch of Rhys's home. He rubbed my shoulders, leaned over, and nudged my cheek with his.

"You ready to head home, Angel?"

I stifled a yawn and nodded.

"Let's go," he said, straightening up and looking around at the only others remaining: Rhys, Quinn, and Liam. "We're going to call it a night, guys. Thanks for having us over. And for the beers and the burgers."

Everyone got to their feet and walked us to the front door.

Their manners would have knocked my father's socks off.

At the door, Quinn pulled me in for a hug. "Don't be a stranger, okay? Maybe one of these days, you and I could go grab a coffee and get to know each other better? You know, have some girl time?"

"That would be lovely," I said. And I meant it.

Even though I still hardly knew these people, I felt like they had embraced all of me. My history, my reputation, my wealth.

All of it.

And they didn't feel the need to put me in a box and slap a label on me. They were happy to just enjoy my company, and I was thrilled to enjoy theirs.

Yes, they were a rowdy bunch. And yes, it was a lot for me to process all at once.

But Owen had been right. I liked them all. I didn't feel out of place, either. I felt like I belonged there, and I was already looking forward to coming back and spending more time with them.

"Goodnight, lovebirds," Liam called after us as Owen and I jogged down the steps and struck out across the drive to go to his bike.

Owen waved over his shoulder and wrapped an arm around my waist. "So, what did you think?"

I leaned into him. "I had a really good night. Seriously. They're all so wonderful."

"I don't think anyone has ever told Jax he was wonderful before," Owen said, scratching his chin.

I laughed. "He's all talk."

"That is true," he said as he handed me my helmet from the handlebars. I pulled it on, did up the strap, and tilted my head back to let him inspect it and make sure I'd done it properly. He was protective like that.

I didn't mind. In fact, I kind of liked it. He was looking out for me.

He got on the bike first, as per usual, and I put my hands on his shoulders to get on behind him. Then I nestled against his back, wrapped my arms around him, and got myself situated on the foot pegs.

He pulled out of the driveway and out onto the street and opened up on the throttle.

The cool wind was refreshing, and it stirred me from my near-slumbering state. It had been a night jampacked with intense conversations and even more intense people, and the three or four beers I'd had were making me sleepy.

When Owen arrived at my building, I had him park in the underground again. I didn't want him leaving the bike on the

road overnight, and I had no intention of letting him leave my apartment tonight.

Tonight, he was all mine.

We rode the elevator up to my floor, and once we got into my penthouse, I was happy to get out of my boots.

But they were impossible to get off.

“Damn it,” I muttered, perching myself on the edge of my sofa as I tried to pry the boots off.

Owen was shrugging out of his leather jacket in the kitchen. He smirked. “Do you need a hand?”

I pouted at him. “Yes please.”

He came over and crouched down in front of me. I gave him my foot, and he rested one hand under my ankle before twisting the boot gently and working it loose until he could pull it off my leg.

My foot sang sweet hallelujahs as it tasted freedom, and then he did the same with the other foot.

“Thank you,” I said as I wiggled my toes. “Those things were way too damn tight.”

“Do you ever wear comfortable shoes?”

“They make comfortable shoes?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes at me. “You’re impossible.”

“You love it.”

“Of course I do,” he said.

I stared at him, and he stared back at me. Then he swallowed, and his gaze darkened, and the air around us was suddenly hotter. It buzzed as if there were electricity flickering and snapping all around us, and the hair on my arms stood up as my breath grew shaky.

A familiar tight knot formed below my belly, and an ache for something, for *him*, began to burn within my veins. It started out slow and subtle, almost undetectable. But when he got to his feet and undid his jeans, the fire intensified tenfold,

and I wet my lips as I looked up at him, ready for whatever it was he wanted from me.

I slid off the edge of the sofa and went to my knees on the marble floor.

Owen pulled his jeans down around his thighs. His cock was straining against his boxers, and I traced the outline with my hand, relishing in the thickness of it under my touch. He was rock hard.

I pulled his boxers down, and his cock sprang free.

I stared up at him and leaned in to run my tongue along his shaft. He watched, his gaze darkening by the second, and when I took him between my lips, he let out a soft moan that made it feel like someone had just yanked very hard on the two ends of the knot below my stomach.

I let out a moan of my own as I took him deep into my throat. So deep that I couldn't breathe.

But air was not important.

I wanted to make him feel good.

There was no need to rush. We had all the time in the world, and there was nothing more important than this moment right here. I worked him over slowly, drawing him in and out of my mouth, pressing in a little deeper each time. It was like a game and a challenge to myself to see if I could ever succeed at taking the full length of his cock in my throat.

The chances of winning that game were very slim.

Owen gathered my hair up off my face and held it back for me as I quickened my pace. His grip tightened, and I liked the tension as he guided me in a rhythm he liked the best.

Then he pulled me up to my feet and pulled my shirt off over my head. I unclipped my bra and tossed it aside before undoing my jeans and shimmying them down my legs. Owen stepped out of his jeans too and nearly toppled over, and we both descended into a fit of giggles as he regained his balance.

Then he grabbed me by the hips and spun me around to bend me over the sofa.

He hooked his thumbs in the waistband of my thong and worked it down my legs to leave it around my ankles. I put on a bit of a show for him, rolling and wiggling my hips and arching my back to stick my ass up in the air while kicking my panties to the side.

Owen went to his knees behind me and pushed my knees apart.

I kept my back arched and planted my hands on the armrest of the sofa for balance. Then I looked over my shoulder down at him as he ran his tongue up my slit.

“Oh, fuck yes,” I whispered as my eyes rolled back in my head and little tremors of pleasure danced through my body.

There was nothing sexier than the man you loved worshipping you like this. Owen took his time, giving me long strokes with his tongue and then pausing to swirl it around my clit. Each lick and flick had me whimpering and trembling, and soon, my head was bowed, and I was gripping the arm of the sofa as he brought me closer and closer to an orgasm.

“Right there,” I moaned as he swirled his tongue in a particularly delicious way around my clit.

Owen gripped the back of my thighs as he worked his magic between my legs, and I caved to the buildup of pressure. It rocked me to my core, and I bit down on my bottom lip as I came. Owen let out a sound from the back of his throat that turned my knees to pudding.

Then he was standing behind me, gathering my hair in his fist to pull my head back and sliding his fingers in my pussy.

I whimpered against the pleasure and the strain on my scalp.

Owen pulled my head back farther, forcing me to look up at him as he fucked me with his fingers.

It became impossible to keep my eyes open. I moaned and twisted in his grip, but he held fast, and before I knew it, he had me quivering and shaking again as I came. He released my hair, and I slumped forward to brace myself on the armrest of

the sofa. I was well past the point of being able to hold myself up.

Owen went to his jeans on the floor. He rummaged through his pockets, pulled a condom out, and waggled his eyebrows at me.

I giggled breathlessly and leaned more of my weight against the sofa as he tore the wrapper open and rolled the condom on. Then he stepped in close, gripped my hips, and held me in place as he leaned toward me and slid his cock inside me.

He rocked forward, pushing my thighs against the side of the sofa.

He planted his hand in the middle of my back between my shoulder blades and pushed me forward. I didn't resist. I found myself draped over the arm, ass in the air, breath catching in my lungs with every thrust he gave me.

I gripped the sofa cushion and dragged it closer to me to muffle my moans.

His thighs slapped against mine as he quickened his pace.

How I had almost given up on him, I would never understand. Owen took care of me in every sense of the word. He was my protector, my friend, and my lover. He was everything I needed and everything I tried so hard to convince myself I didn't want to appease my father.

No more.

He was mine.

And I was his.

“Harder,” I breathed, looking over my shoulder at him.

Owen obliged.

His thrusts grew wild, and he bucked against me as he came unhinged. I reached back between my thighs, lifting my hips off the armrest to make room, and cupped his balls in one hand.

It pushed him over the edge.

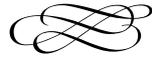
I smiled to myself as he came and growled behind me, and he held my hips more firmly, pulling me against him as he drove in deep and earned himself one last cry of pleasure from me.

Then we broke apart, and I struggled to stand up. He steadied me by the elbow, and then we both collapsed on the sofa.

I cuddled into his side and rested my cheek on his chest to gaze up at him. "I think I'm in big trouble."

Owen smiled down at me and stroked my cheek before tucking my hair behind my ear. "We're in it together, Angel."

CHAPTER 25



OWEN

I stroked my chin as I studied the assortment of sparkling wine in the cooler at the liquor store that was halfway between my house and Evangeline's apartment.

I had to make the right choice. I wanted tonight to be the perfect evening for us. I'd called her up this morning and asked if I could come over and prepare her dinner. She deserved to be doted on. And I was going to pull out all the stops.

My bike was sitting out in the parking lot. My helmet hung off the handlebars, as per usual, and I'd brought an old backpack with me which had the groceries I'd just stopped to pick up tucked inside it.

I was going to sear some steaks on the stove and make a peppercorn sauce to smother them in. For sides, I had broccoli, carrots, and zucchini, which I would also fry shortly before the steaks were served. Lastly, I was going to make her my famous garlic mashed potatoes.

They were a crowd pleaser each and every time.

Now I just needed to make the right choice in terms of wine.

I'd never seen her drink a rose, so I'd eliminated that option right off the bat, but I hadn't expected there to be so many sparkling options to choose from.

Did I want sweet? Dry? Fruity?

A salesman wearing a black apron and a pinstriped button-up shirt sauntered over to me and looked from my pained expression to the cooler. "Need a hand there, sir?"

I nodded. "I'm looking for something special to have before dinner."

"For a lady?" he asked, winking at me.

I nodded again. "Yes. And she knows a lot about wine, so I don't want to show up looking like the clueless schmuck I am."

The salesman was a young guy, probably close in age to me, with a warm smile and a thick brown beard. He popped open the cooler door, crouched down, and grabbed a slender bottle with a gold label. "Bring her this. She'll like it."

"You're sure?"

He nodded. "I mean, I can't make you any promises, but I've never sent a man off on a date with this and received any backlash, so I think it's a pretty safe bet. And it's rare. She may not have even tried it before, which will probably win you brownie points."

"Sold," I said.

I followed him to the cash register, and he rang me up. The bottle cost nearly a hundred dollars, which didn't surprise me in the slightest but made my insides squirm.

"She's a lucky lady," the salesman told me. "We don't get many men coming in who are willing to buy something as nice as this."

"She's special," I said.

"Are you taking her out somewhere after?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm cooking her dinner. We'll see how it goes. I might be playing with fire and overestimating my abilities. It's been a while since I prepared something that wasn't as simple as chicken and rice."

He chuckled. "She'll appreciate it nonetheless. I'm sure."

"I hope so," I muttered.

Not only was I looking forward to cooking for Evangeline, but I was also looking forward to getting my hands on her as soon as I arrived.

Since I told her I was coming over to cook her dinner, she'd been hellbent on torturing me.

I spent my day working on my bike. She needed fresh oil and some maintenance, and every hour, on the hour, Evangeline sent me a sexy text message that made my balls ache something terrible.

The woman was going to be the end of me.

Each text was more merciless than the last, and I spent half the damn day with a hard-on, trying to get shit done, which was damn near impossible when she started sending me pictures along with her text messages.

Half-naked pictures.

Pictures of her lying on her bed in nothing but a strappy bra that left little mystery to the tits I adored. She was a babe, and I still had no idea what she was doing with a guy like me.

But I wasn't going to question her. I was going to run with it and enjoy every second I had with her.

I paid for the wine and took it out to my bike as the sun dipped down behind the skyline, plunging the nearly abandoned liquor store parking lot into shadow.

I tucked the wine into the backpack and made sure everything was stacked neatly and not at risk of being crushed or spilled or broken.

The last thing I needed was to show up with my back soaked in wine and steak juice. That wasn't a good look for anyone, and it might put a damper on the sexy mood Evangeline was in. That just wouldn't do.

I put my helmet on and shrugged the backpack over my shoulders before swinging a leg over the seat and starting the bike. The engine roared and rumbled, and a child sitting in the backseat of a car pressed his face to the glass to watch me pull out of the parking space. I gave him a small wave, and he

grinned at me as I drove off around the back corner of the liquor store and turned my headlight on.

I drove along the side of the building to leave through the back entrance, which would take me down a back way to Evangeline's place.

I wanted to drive faster and not get held up by traffic on the more populated routes.

When I rounded the corner at the back of the shop, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye.

I should have sped up. I shouldn't have let up on the throttle.

But it was a reflex, and it bit me in the ass.

Someone standing around the corner stepped out and swung a baseball bat toward me. I swerved to the left, but I wasn't going fast enough to get out of the way, and the bat clipped me on the shoulder, rocking the handlebars back to the right and sending the bike wobbling.

I let out a furious growl as I lost my balance and toppled sideways. The bike landed with a clash of metal on the pavement and pinched my leg underneath it.

Wetness seeped through my back.

Just like that, my hundred-dollar bottle of bubbly was broken.

I didn't have time to worry about that right now. I had to focus on the three men that had pushed themselves off the back wall of the liquor store. They made their way over to me as I strained to push the bike off my leg and shimmied out from under it. Small pebbles stuck to my palms as I glared up at a familiar dark-haired man who put his foot on the back tire of my bike.

Matthew Aero crossed his arms over his chest and peered down at me with an arched eyebrow and a wicked smirk playing on his lips. "What are you doing down there, man?"

The two other men who were with him were the same two from the gala dinner the other week. The blond jack asses

Matthew clearly toted around everywhere with him and used as his personal attack dogs.

Fuckers.

The taller of the two brothers had the baseball bat he'd just hit me with resting along his shoulder. He drummed his fingers along it and gave me a cocky smile.

I gritted my teeth against the pain in my shoulder. "I didn't think pricks like you would want to show your faces in a part of town as rough as this."

The area wasn't exactly rough, but I was sure it looked pretty seedy in Matthew's eyes. The liquor store parking lot was all cracked and uneven, and the old yellow-painted speedbumps were half broken away from years of harsh winters that split the concrete. The liquor store itself had bars on all the windows, and it was located in a part of the city that wasn't all that congested.

I supposed it made the perfect place to get the jump on someone.

Especially right here.

Nobody could see us from the road or the parking lot. There were no windows out the back of the liquor store, but there was a back door, presumably for staff to use to bring the garbage out to the dumpster about fifty feet away from where I was on the pavement.

"We were willing to compromise. Just for you." Matthew grinned.

"Lucky me," I muttered, resisting the urge to clutch my aching shoulder. I had a feeling things were going to get a hell of a lot worse before they got any better, and I didn't want to remind them that I already had a massive vulnerability with this injury.

If they were smart, they'd use it to their advantage.

Hell, I would have.

But then again, this wasn't a fair fight. It was three against one, and they already had the upper hand.

Matthew gave my bike a kick. “What a piece of junk. I thought you boys were supposed to ride real bikes?”

I wasn't going to rise to a petty line about my bike. I really didn't give a fuck what he thought about it.

What I *did* give a fuck about was the fact that he'd just caused at least five-thousand dollars in damage and possibly dislocated my fucking shoulder.

My blood was starting to boil.

“How do you want to do this, Hot Shot?” Matthew asked, uncrossing his arms and clapping his hands together. He rubbed them together manically, and his eyes got wild with excitement. “Are you going to get up, or are you going to make us beat you while you're already down?”

I snorted. “Us? Like you have the balls to get your hands dirty. You have to protect those pretty nails of yours.”

His eyes narrowed.

I had a tendency to open my big mouth at the most inopportune times. Had I held my tongue, I might have spared myself some trouble. Or at least been in a better position to defend myself.

But I hadn't. I'd taken the opportunity to take a jab at him, and now I had to pay the price.

“Get him,” Matthew growled.

The brothers moved in on me.

The taller let the bat fall from his shoulder and slapped it in his open palm as the shorter of the two stepped over my bike and marched toward me.

If they thought I was going to let them have their way with me without putting up a hell of a fight, they were about to get a very rude wakeup call.

They had no idea who they were fucking with.

Sure, my odds were slim, especially with one of them bringing a weapon to the fight, but I was still going to do my

damndest to inflict as much damage on these assholes as I possibly could.

Starting with shorty.

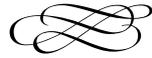
I pushed myself to my feet as he closed in on me. My shoulder protested, but I curled my hands into fists regardless, ignoring the pain and welcoming the promise that there was more to come.

Much more.

“Let’s dance, boys,” I grated.

And then I saw red.

CHAPTER 26



EVANGELINE

“He’s coming over to make dinner for you?” Victoria asked, a hint of jealousy in her voice.

I nodded and put my phone down to put her on speaker phone so I could open my cupboard and grab a glass. I filled it with water from the fridge. “Yeah. He won’t tell me what he’s cooking either. He just said that I’ll like it.”

“A man who cooks,” Victoria said. “I wonder what that’s like.”

“I’ll report back when I find out.” I giggled.

Victoria sighed into the phone. “So, things are good with you two?”

“Yeah. Things are better than good actually. He’s so sweet. And I met some of his friends last week. It went better than I thought it would.”

“Some of his biker friends?” Victoria asked incredulously.

I laughed. “Yes.”

“What? Seriously? What was that like?”

“Fun.”

“*Fun?*”

“Yeah,” I said simply. “We had a lot of laughs. I didn’t meet them all at once. Apparently, there are a good fifty or so people who are missing. But Owen said he’ll make sure I meet all the guys from the inner circle. And Ryder.”

“Which one is Ryder again?”

“He’s the president,” I said. It felt a little weird using that word for the leader of a motorcycle club. But that was what he was. He was the big cheese. The ringleader.

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t curious to know what he was like. I had this image of him built up in my head. I pictured him as this massive man with dark hair and features and tattoos and scars. Somewhat like Owen, I supposed. Chances were, he’d lived just as rough of a life to get to where he was now.

But when I found out he was a father, the image softened a little, and now I had no idea what to expect.

“The president?” Victoria asked. I could picture her dubious expression now. Big eyes, lips parted as her mouth hung open in surprise.

“Yep.”

“Did it occur to you while you were there that you might be sitting amongst some seriously dangerous dudes?”

“Victoria. Stop it. They’re not like that.”

“How would you know? You just met them.”

I sighed and rested an elbow on the counter. How could I explain this to her? And should I even bother? I was going to get pushback like this from tons of people when they found out I was with a man who was part of the Lost Breeds motorcycle club.

“They’re good people, Victoria. They just live a different life than us. A harder life. The things they have aren’t given to them like they are to us.”

“I just worry about you.”

I rubbed my forehead. Was it better to lie and tell her none of these men had done anything too bad in their lifetime? I’d told her about Isaac Reed and what he did to the Red Rogues, and that was the extent of my knowledge.

“None of them are going to get me in trouble, Victoria,” I said.

“Good,” Victoria said. “I’d hate to think you were hanging out with dangerous people. Are they just drug pushers or—”

“Victoria!” I snapped into the phone. She fell quiet. I sighed in exasperation and closed my eyes. “Listen. I know you’re not familiar with men who aren’t...” I trailed off. What was the right word? “Suit wearing rule followers. But just because they don’t fit into the category you have personal experience with doesn’t mean they automatically fall into the stereotype you see in the movies. You’re being ignorant. And I’m going to be real with you. I don’t like it. You’re sounding as narrowminded as my father.”

Victoria was quiet on the other end.

We had the sort of friendship where we could call each other on our bullshit. That didn’t mean it wasn’t uncomfortable. It just meant we were strong enough together to check one another when we needed to.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “That’s the second time I’ve done that.”

“Yes, it is. And you know how I feel about Owen. And you know he’s one of the good ones. So I don’t want this to happen again, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

There was awkward tension on the line now. I licked my lips. “I love you, dummy.”

Her voice lightened up a bit. “I love you too. Let me know if any of those bikers are cute and single, will you? Maybe I need a change of pace. They could help me broaden my horizons.”

I laughed almost hysterically.

“What?” Victoria asked innocently. “What’s so funny?”

“You think you could date one of them? Oh God, now I’ve heard it all.” I could barely contain my laughter as I snorted into the phone.

“You don’t think I could handle it?”

“Nope. I do not. In fact, I know you couldn’t.”

“And why the hell not? You can!”

“Yeah, I can. But I also don’t have a problem with riding on the back of motorcycles or eating leftovers or—”

“Leftovers?” She balked.

“Yeah. Or burgers fresh off the barbeque. Or pizza and beer. I love that shit. You on the other hand... you’re more of a lady than I am, Victoria. Always have been. And there’s nothing wrong with that. You’ll find a perfectly nice gentleman one day who knows how lucky he is to have a girl like you. Trust me.”

Victoria sighed dreamily into the phone. “Yeah. And he’ll probably wear Armani. And have a *really* nice car. And be so handsome I can’t keep my hands off him.”

I chuckled. “See? You know exactly what you want. And it’s not a biker.”

“I suppose you’re right. But maybe one day, I can meet these friends of Owen’s? I could see firsthand what you’re talking about. Maybe it will help with my... privilege.”

I smiled. “I think that would be nice. I also think you’d broaden their perspective, too.”

“How so?” she asked.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and sipped my water. “Well, for starters, I don’t think they’ve ever met anyone who wears as much jewelry as you. Or who looks like a real, talking Barbie doll.”

She giggled. “I’d love to grace them with my presence.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t say shit like that if you ever do meet them.”

“I wouldn’t.”

I didn’t believe her.

I glanced at the clock on my stove and frowned. I'd been talking the time away with Victoria and hadn't even noticed that Owen was over half an hour late.

"Odd," I muttered.

"What's up?"

"Owen was supposed to be here half an hour ago."

"He's probably stuck in traffic."

I pursed my lips. Owen didn't get stuck in traffic. He sped through traffic on his bike like a madman. "I don't think so," I muttered. "Sorry, Victoria. I'm going to let you go and give him a call. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Okay, have fun on your date night, you lucky bitch. Tell Owen he can cook for me anytime."

We ended the call, and I dialed Owen. I called him three times, and it went straight to voicemail each time.

My stomach began rolling with uneasiness. Something felt off.

I couldn't explain it, but I couldn't pretend I didn't feel it either. Owen was never late. And if he was, I knew he would call me to give me the heads-up, especially if he knew I was waiting on him. This was totally out of character and made me nervous.

Had he crashed his bike?

Unlikely. He was a skilled rider. But other drivers were unpredictable assholes on the road, and sometimes, you had no escape route, especially when you were on a bike. If he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, something bad might have happened.

My mind started reeling, and my thoughts spun out of control.

What if he was lying in the middle of the road somewhere?

What if he was in a hospital bed unconscious? They wouldn't know to call me. How would I find him? How would I get to him? How would—

My phone rang.

I snatched it up off the counter without even looking at the name that flashed across the screen.

“Owen?” I asked breathlessly, pressing a hand to my chest.

It wasn't Owen's voice that flooded my speaker. “Evangeline. Where are you?”

“Matthew?” I asked, recognizing his smooth drawl almost immediately. Why the hell was he calling me? And was it just a coincidence that he happened to be calling when Owen was half an hour late?

I doubted it.

Red flags started popping up, and a warning rang in my ears.

“Yes, it's me,” Matthew said. He was out of breath. His voice sound strained. “Where are you?”

“I'm at home,” I said, my sense of uneasiness growing.

“Are you alone?”

I considered telling him I was not. But instead, I walked to my front door and bolted the locks. “Yes. I'm alone.”

“Thank God,” he muttered.

“Matthew. What the fuck is going on? Why are you calling me? What do you want?”

“You need to be careful, Evangeline. Owen's a fucking madman.”

My pulse fluttered at my throat.

Matthew continued. “I ran into him at a liquor store, and he came after me like a fucking psychopath. I told him I was butting out and minding my own business, but he wouldn't leave it alone. I told him you and I were through Evangeline, but he was enraged. I didn't even recognize him. It was like he turned into a fucking animal, and he just lost it. And now I'm waiting in the emergency room. I think he broke my fucking arm.”

“What?” I breathed.

I heard him swallow, and I couldn't deny that it sounded like he was in pain. “Please. Lock your door, okay? The bastard came unhinged, and I wouldn't put it past him to show up at your place looking for more trouble.”

“Matthew, I—”

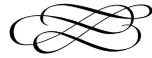
“Just lock your door. Do you hear me?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered.

“I have to go. The doctor's here. Watch your back, okay?”

He hung up on me. I stared at the phone, and my heart raced in my chest like a frightened little rodent trying to escape a bloodthirsty predator.

CHAPTER 27



OWEN

The ride from the liquor store to Evangeline's apartment building was one of the most uncomfortable of my life. My shoulder ached fiercely, and the rest of my body screamed for me to get the hell off the bike and get horizontal.

Matthew and his fucking posse had done a number on me.

But not before I managed to mess them up pretty good.

I parked my bike at the curb, left the champagne-soaked backpack on the seat, and walked the rest of the way down the block to her building clutching my aching ribs with one hand. I couldn't straighten up all the way without my side flaring with pain, so I hunched over, took shorter steps than normal, and eventually made it to her building and up the front steps to the doors.

The doorman did not want to open the door for me.

I couldn't blame him. I was a fucking mess. There was blood in my right eye and in my mouth and down the front of my shirt. My knuckles were split open and raw, and I had no idea what the extent of damage was to my face.

It must have been bad because he recoiled from me like I'd pulled a gun on him.

"I was jumped," I said, hoping he'd believe me.

The doorman, a wispy guy in his late forties, looked me up and down. "Shouldn't you go to a hospital?"

I shrugged, and it hurt. *Damn it.* "Shouldn't you mind your own business?"

He shrank in on himself.

I shook my head and grimaced. Staying on my feet was a chore. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m here to see Evangeline Snow on the top floor. You can call up and ask her if you need to.”

He pursed his lips and studied me for a good thirty seconds. Then he opened the door. “No. Go ahead. I’ve seen you around here plenty. Are you sure you shouldn’t call an ambulance?”

“I’m sure,” I said. I’d had much worse than this.

Much, much worse.

I crossed the marble floor of the lobby to make my way to the elevators.

But lo and behold, I was stopped by Barry. Insufferable, irritating, ass-kissing fucking Barry.

He scampered out from behind his concierge desk and waved his hands in my face to stop me. “Sir! Sir! You cannot come in here like this. You need to leave. Now.”

I was aware of the people sitting in the lounge on the other side of the lobby. I’d stolen all of their attention, and a hush had fallen over the place. I narrowed my eyes at Barry. “*Move.*”

He swallowed and shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

For a brief second, I admired his resolve.

Brief.

Then I moved forward and closed a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, Barry. I just had a really shitty go of things, in case you haven’t noticed. And all I want is to get upstairs and see my girl and make sure the assholes that did this to me aren’t going to show up at her place. So you know what you’re going to do?”

Barry’s mouth hung open, and he shook his head slowly.

I leaned in close, my lips peeling off my teeth in a snarl as my side flared with more pain. “You’re going to get the fuck

out of my way. *Now.*”

Barry stood there with his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

I tightened my grip on his shoulder.

Barry let out a little yelp and shrugged away from me before stepping aside and motioning for me to carry on toward the elevators. “I didn’t realize it was you,” he said.

“Get bent,” I growled, blowing past him and heading for the elevators.

“Should I call an ambulance?” he hollered after me.

“No,” I said over my shoulder.

I stood at the elevators and jabbed the button furiously. I had to wait for what felt like ages before one arrived on the first floor, and I had to wait more as six people piled off it and cast wary glances in my direction. I scowled right back at them.

My patience was wearing thin.

Once I stepped on the elevator and I was heading for Evangeline’s floor, I slumped against the wall and breathed a sigh of relief.

My reflection caught my eye on the mirrored wall on the far side of the elevator.

“Jesus,” I muttered as I looked myself over.

I was a mess.

My hair was matted with sweat and blood from a gash at my hairline on the right side. At some point, I must have run my fingers through my hair because there were streaks of red running through it. My jaw was already bruised, and I’d earned myself another gash in my right eyebrow which had stopped bleeding but was the culprit for the blood blurring my vision.

My jacket was ruined.

That stung a bit.

I wasn't sure of the extent of the damage under my clothes, and I didn't have time to check it out before the elevator doors slid open and I stumbled out into the little lobby to make my way to Evangeline's front door.

She was going to freak out when she saw me.

I rested my forehead on her door and closed my eyes. I'd have to warn her first.

I knocked softly.

There was no answer.

I waited. A minute passed. Thirty more seconds. And then I knocked again.

"Angel?"

Ten seconds.

"Owen?"

"Yeah, it's me. Are you all right in there?"

She didn't answer right away, and when she did, her voice was shaky. "Yes. What's happened? Why are you so late?"

I sighed. "I ran into Matthew and his goons." Well, I hadn't run into them. They'd been lying in wait for me. They must have tailed me to the liquor store without me noticing. "They ambushed me at the liquor store and came after me with a baseball bat. Angel, before you open the door, I need to warn you. There's a lot of blood."

"*What?*" Her voice was sharp.

Seconds later, the lock was sliding out of place, and she wrenched the door open with so much force that it caused a gust of air to blow her hair back over her shoulders.

When she saw me, her eyes went wide, and she covered her open mouth with one hand. "Oh my God, Owen. What did they do to you?"

I tried to smile and failed. "Nothing I didn't do right back to them."

Evangeline snapped into action and came to me, slipping under my arm and offering her support. I leaned on her, but not too heavily, and she helped me into the living room. She started lowering me onto the couch.

“You should put sheets down or something. I don’t want to stain your—”

“Shut up,” she said bossily. “It’s just a sofa. Sit.”

I sat.

Evangeline helped me out of my leather jacket and frowned at it as she held it up, pinched between her fingers. She gave it a sniff. “Champagne?”

I nodded. “I had grand plans for our date tonight.”

“Fucking Matthew.” She scowled as she rested my jacket on the coffee table.

My muscles sighed with relief as I leaned back on the sofa and closed my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Owen. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I cracked open one eye. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Yes, but—”

“No.” I shook my head. “No ‘but’.”

She pressed her hand to her forehead. “He called me fifteen minutes ago.”

“Who did?” I asked, my head fuzzy from the pain.

“Matthew.”

“What?”

She nodded. “He called me and told me you attacked him and put him in the hospital. Did you break his arm?”

I swallowed. “Maybe.”

She rubbed her eyes and left dark smudges of mascara on her skin. “He’s such an ass. I shouldn’t have put it past him to pull something like this. Men like him will do whatever it takes to get what they want, and he must have thought if he

could trick me into thinking you were dangerous, I'd go running back to him." She scoffed and shook her head before lifting her eyes toward the ceiling. "What a dick. I'm going to kill him."

"He'll be easy to find. He's not getting out of the hospital anytime soon."

"Good."

I arched an eyebrow at her.

Evangeline crossed her arms under her breasts. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm rubbing off on you," I said.

She shrugged. "Yeah, a little."

I grinned.

Evangeline cracked a smile of her own too. Then she shook her head. "Now is not the time for jokes. What do I do?"

My stomach growled.

Evangeline covered her mouth when she started to giggle.

I scratched my jaw and tried to play it cool. "Well, I had grand plans of cooking you a nice steak and serving you nice champagne. But it's all blown to pieces in my bag with my bike."

"I'll order us pizza," she said.

"You're a fucking mind reader."

Evangeline laughed and grabbed her phone from the counter. As the phone rang, she nodded at me. "Take your shirt off. I want to make sure everything is in the right place under there."

"You just want to get me naked," I said through gritted teeth as I pulled my shirt off over my head.

Evangeline let out a little gasp, and I looked down at myself.

Yep. It was bad.

But not as bad as I was expecting. I'd been to hell and back when it came to recovering from injuries like this, and in comparison to some of the really bad ones I'd had, this was nothing. I'd be back to tiptop shape in no time.

Well, a couple of weeks, more like.

But that was still decent.

"It's not that bad," I told her.

She couldn't answer me. The pizza place had answered her call, and she gave them our order while she went to the freezer and grabbed some icepacks from the shelf on the door. Then she rummaged through some cupboards for hand towels, which she wrapped around the icepacks. She gathered a couple of other things: extra hand towels, a bowl of hot water, and rubbing alcohol.

Damn it. She wasn't going to let this slide.

When she hung up the phone, she came and sat down beside me. She held her hand out for mine and started by patting my busted knuckles with a hot towel. Then she dabbed them with a splash of rubbing alcohol, which burned like hell, and then handed me an icepack wrapped in a thin towel. "Hold it on your knuckles to stop the swelling."

"You could have been a nurse," I said.

"I don't like people enough to be a nurse."

I chuckled.

Evangeline proceeded to take care of my injuries. She gently poked at my ribs, which made me flinch, and her brow creased with concern.

"They're not broken," I assured her. "Just bruised. They'll heal on their own."

When all my cuts and scrapes and gashes were taken care of, she tucked her legs under herself and stared at me. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Owen. Who would have thought my social circles would be the one getting you in trouble?"

“You never know what people have up their sleeves,” I said.

“Apparently,” she muttered.

“You know what would speed up my healing tenfold?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What?”

I gave her a cocky smile.

Evangeline threw her head back and laughed.

And I knew I was going to get what I wanted when she set her gaze back on me and her eyes twinkled deviously.

CHAPTER 28



EVANGELINE

O wen looked rough.

But that charming smile was as handsome as ever.

“Down, boy,” I said, swatting at his hand as he reached for me. “You need to take it easy.”

“Screw that. Are you really going to turn me down? After everything I went through?” He pouted and gave me big puppy dog eyes.

“Oh no. That’s not going to work on me.”

“But, babe.”

“No,” I said firmly, holding up a finger and pointing it at his chest. It was like I was scolding a toddler.

“We have what? Half an hour before the pizza is here?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Plenty of time for you to relax, put your feet up, and ice your bruises.”

“We both know I can get the job done right and still have time left for icing.”

I laughed and shook my head at him. “I’m not questioning your skills. I’m questioning if that sort of rigorous activity is going to make your injuries worse.”

“I’m fine.”

I looked him over skeptically. “Right. You look totally fine.”

“See? What’s the problem?”

“Owen, I—”

He leaned into me and pressed a kiss to my lips. “You’re overthinking, Angel. I’m going to be fine. I promise. This shit? It’s just surface level. It’ll go away in a couple of days.”

I studied him.

He’d taken this beating because of me exposing him to Matthew. The least I could do was ease his aches and pains, right?

“I have one condition,” I said.

“Name it.”

“You sit back and let me take the lead.”

His eyebrows crept up to his hairline.

“It’s non-negotiable,” I warned.

Owen wrapped his arm around my waist and grabbed my hip. “Non-negotiable, huh? Should we lay down some ground rules?”

“Ground rules? Weren’t you listening? You sit back. I lead.”

“This sounds like a win-win for me.”

“It is,” I assured him.

“And if I break these terms?”

“Then we stop.”

He threw his head back and laughed.

I scowled at him. “Why is that so funny?”

Owen clutched at his bruised ribs as he tried to get his laughter under control, and I tried valiantly to continue scowling.

But damn him, he was cute when he laughed like this.

He shot me a look and broke eye contact when he started snickering again. “You think you could stop right in the middle? Just like that? Please. I know you, Angel. When I get your legs trembling like they do, there’s no stopping.”

I licked my lips as my cheeks burned. “I think I have a little more willpower than that.”

Owen leaned back on the sofa and hid his grimace as best he could as he undid his jeans. Then he shimmied them down his legs, gave me a daring glance, and patted his bare thighs. “Come here then. Show me what you’ve got.”

A challenge. I liked that.

I swung my leg over him and settled in his lap. I was wearing a skirt, so I shimmied it up to my waist so he could feel the bare skin of my thighs against his as I rocked gently back and forth, rubbing myself on his cock.

He was already hard. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Owen was always hard by the time things got to this point. I loved that. It made me feel so desired and sexy.

As I rolled my hips in his lap, I ran my hands down his bare chest, gingerly tracing the bruises forming on his flesh. He’d been beaten up pretty good, but nothing seemed to bother him as badly as his ribs, so I gave them a wide berth.

Owen cupped my cheeks in his hands and pulled me into him for some sweet kisses. I was glad I’d cleaned the blood from the gash in his brow and his knuckles because he raked his fingers through my hair as he slipped his tongue between my teeth, and I sighed softly into his mouth as need began to burn inside me.

He was right. Once things got started between us, I was incapable of stopping them.

He did something to me that I couldn’t explain. While he made me feel safe, he also made me feel like I was walking on the edge of a very high cliff and I could fall at any second. Maybe that was what kept things so interesting. Maybe it was what made me so obsessed with him.

He was an adventure.

A wild ride with twists and turns and corners I couldn’t see around but couldn’t wait to explore with him.

He was mine.

Our kiss deepened, and I rocked myself forward as he gripped my bare ass under my skirt and squeezed. I giggled, and he smiled into our kiss, and then he ran his hand along my hip to tug my panties to the side so he could rub my pussy.

A little bit of foreplay wasn't going to hurt him.

Right?

I let him swirl his finger around my clit. And I still didn't stop him when he traced my opening and eased a finger inside me.

I reached down and ran my finger along the waistband of his boxers. Then I pulled him free and stroked his cock while he fucked me with his finger. We kissed the whole time, both of our heartbeats quickening and our breathing growing shorter.

"Do you have a condom with you?" I whispered as I broke our kiss. I pressed my lips to his jaw and worked my way to his ear.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "Front left pocket."

"Good," I cooed before pinching his earlobe gently between my teeth.

He sucked in a sharp breath and eased another finger inside me.

I moaned and rocked my hips, riding his fingers as I trailed more kisses down his throat and across his chest. Then I slid off of him, pushed his knees apart, and knelt before him, still stroking his cock with one hand.

I rested my elbows on his thighs and leaned in to swirl my tongue around the head of his cock.

He draped his arms over the back of my sofa. I saw him grimace, but I didn't say anything. He was a big boy. If he was in too much pain for me to suck him off, he could stop me.

But I knew he wouldn't.

He wouldn't stop me unless he was close to death.

I smiled and ran my tongue down his length before slowly working my way back to the sensitive tip. He watched, his eyes glued to me as I put on a show for him and teased him. I was going to make him wait for it. It was half the fun.

When I was good and ready, I took him in my mouth and eased the first few inches in along my tongue. I sealed my lips around his thickness and kept going, drawing him in deep and relishing in the feeling of his cock hitting the back of my throat.

He let out a soft moan that encouraged me to take more of him.

I worked him over slow and steady. Each long stroke turned me on more and more, and as I watched, Owen became more relaxed. He hung his head back, facing the ceiling, and closed his eyes as I worshipped his cock.

I would have been content to suck him off until he was finished and called it a night.

But he would have punished me for it.

So I straightened up, got to my feet, and began putting on a show for him.

I started by pulling my shirt off over my head and letting it dangle from the tips of my fingers before letting it fall to the floor. Owen watched me like it was the first time he'd ever seen a woman get naked.

I loved it.

I worked my skirt down my legs, popping my hips out from one side to the other to create dramatic curves with my body. As I stepped out of the skirt, I turned around and put my back to him.

When I unclipped my bra, I looked over my shoulder at him and gave him a seductive smile before tossing the bra aside to join the rest of my clothes on the floor. I was left standing in my white lace thong, which I began slowly drawing down my hips and the length of my thighs.

When I reached my knees, I was bent over in front of him.

My ass was in the air, and my pussy was on display, and I showed him just how flexible I was as I took the panties to the floor.

“Get your ass over here,” he growled.

I clicked my tongue at him as I straightened up. “You’re not in charge tonight. I am.”

He let out a strained moan as I continued displaying my body for him. I arched my spine, reached my hands over my head, and sank my fingers into my hair. Then I rolled my hips from side to side and turned toward him, cupping my breasts and pushing them together as I stood just out of his reach.

“You’re cruel,” he grated.

“Am I?”

Owen nodded. His jaw was tight, his gaze was dark, and his cock was hard and ready for me to ride him.

I bent down and went through his pants pockets until I found a condom. Then I opened it, stepped in close, and rolled it on for him.

Owen reached for me, and I turned around, put a hand on each of his knees, and sat down on his cock.

I took him one slow inch at a time. I knew he’d appreciate the view, so I kept my back arched as I took all of him and then started bouncing on his cock. Owen didn’t know what to do with himself. He wasn’t used to being the one sitting back. And I enjoyed having the control.

I enjoyed having him in the palm of my hand.

I quickened my speed and rode him like that until my thighs started to burn, and then I turned around and straddled him. I slid him back inside me and rocked my hips slowly, grinding and rocking and relishing in the pressure of his cock pressing against the walls of my pussy.

Owen, always the rule breaker, reached down and rubbed my clit as I fucked him.

I didn't have it in me to tell him to stop. It felt way too fucking good.

I rode him for all he was worth and leaned back so I could grind my hips with my hands resting atop his knees. He pressed down on my clit with his thumb, and I closed my eyes as the pressure built and my climax mounted until I was at my breaking point.

Then Owen rocked his hips upward, driving deep inside me, and I let out a surprised yelp as his cock hit that perfect spot. He held my hips and continued bucking beneath me until I descended into delirious pleasure and fought to catch my breath through my desperate moans and sighs as I climaxed.

Owen pulled me in close when I was done.

My breasts were crushed against his chest as he rocked his hips slowly. I clung to him and pressed my cheek to his, closing my eyes as he gripped my ass and spread my cheeks to push deeper inside me.

I tried to whisper to him that he was breaking the rules.

But the words wouldn't come.

It all felt too good.

I smothered him with kisses instead, working my way along his cheek and jaw, down his neck, across his collarbone, and along the swell of his chest. When I returned to kiss his lips, his breath shook, and I knew it was taking all the self-control he possessed not to give in.

I plunged my fingers into his hair. "Come for me, baby."

He gritted his teeth.

"Don't fight it," I whispered, stroking his cheek and then planting soft kisses upon his lips.

He finally gave in, and he held me while his climax broke over him.

Then we made out until there was a knock on my door.

I leapt off of him and pressed my hands to my forehead. "Shit! I forgot we ordered pizza! Just a minute!" I hollered

toward the front door. Then I scrambled to pull my skirt and shirt back on and ran my fingers through my hair to try to smooth the wild flyaways. “Do I look like a floozy?”

Owen shrugged.

“You’re supposed to say no!”

He chuckled. “You look sexy. That’s all I can say. And if I wasn’t in this state, I’d get the door on your behalf. But,” he gestured down at himself, bruised and naked and still hot as hell, “I’m a mess.”

I bit my bottom lip.

A perfect mess.

CHAPTER 29



OWEN

Two Weeks Later

Evangeline was half buried in her closet as she tried to find the right shoes to go with her evening gown for the gala we were already twenty minutes late for. When she stumbled out, she had them dangling from her fingertips, and she hurried over to where I stood, holding her dress so that it wasn't dragging on the floor.

She sat on the edge of her bed, wearing nothing but a pair of black lace panties and a strapless black bra, and put her shoes on. Then she popped back up to her feet and had me hold the dress up over her head so she could slip into it.

Then I set to work zipping her up.

She looked over her shoulder at me as I drew the zipper up the middle of her back and secured the little clasp at the top. "Nobody is going to say anything about the bruises."

I'd been a bit worried all day about the fact that the bruises on my face from my run-in two weeks ago with Matthew and the Wright brothers hadn't fully healed yet. My jaw was still a disgusting shade of yellow, and the cut in my eyebrow had scabbed over.

It looked pretty horrifying.

And the people at the gala event tonight were definitely going to notice.

“They may not say anything, but they’ll think it,” I muttered. “Are you sure you want me coming with you?”

She turned to me. “Of course I am. I promise. I want you there with me.”

I nodded. “All right.”

She gave me a kiss and stood back. “So? How do I look?”

The shoes she’d been hellbent on wearing, which took her almost ten minutes to find, couldn’t even be seen under the long skirt of her sea-green gown. When she moved and it caught the light, it shimmered and turned dazzling shades of turquoise and royal blue. It was a magnificent gown, but it had nothing on the beauty of the girl wearing it.

Her hair was curled and pinned up, secured with pins and clips that were no longer visible. She wore long crystal earrings but no necklace. Her makeup was elegant and striking with shades of champagne and gold, thin eyeliner, and fuchsia lips.

“You look incredible,” I told her.

“So do you.” She grabbed my tie and pulled me in for one last kiss. “Now let’s get the hell out of here. The limo has been waiting on us.”

“Us? You’re the one holding us back, gorgeous, not me.”

“Get used to it.” She winked.

We arrived at the gala forty-five minutes late, which wasn’t as bad as I expected it to be. We got lucky with traffic, and when we stepped out of the limo and onto the curb, Evangeline and I hooked our elbows together to walk across the red carpet that had been laid down across the path that led to the front doors of the swanky hotel.

The lobby was decorated with gold embellishments, and a harpist played in the corner.

“This is going to be even fancier than the last one I went to, isn’t it?” I muttered in Evangeline’s ear.

She nodded and smiled at those who turned to look at us.
“Yes. It most certainly is.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.”

“I thought the black and white suit would tip you off.”

“Nope. Not even a little bit.”

She flashed me a radiant smile that made my knees weak.
“You still have so much to learn.”

I didn’t doubt it.

Evangeline’s lifestyle was a hell of a lot different than mine, and we had both decided that we weren’t going to let that stand in our way. We completed each other, and we got to have our toes in the best of both worlds: fast bikes and cars and high-society fundraisers.

I could have done without the glamorous nights like this, but it was well worth it to have Evangeline on my arm.

We passed under the archway of a grand entrance and stepped into the ballroom where the event was being held. Had Evangeline not been leading the way, I would have stopped in my tracks to admire the splendor of it all.

This place was unreal.

It was at least ten times swankier than the last gala I’d been to.

Sheer white drapes were strewn across the ceiling, and from the middle hung a massive, twinkling, elegant chandelier that must have had a price tag that would make my eyes pop out of my skull. It cast shimmering light on the dozens upon dozens of round tables down below, which were covered in sparkly gold tablecloths.

“Is it fucking New Years in here or something?” I whispered in Evangeline’s ear.

“No. This gala is put on by Anne Patton. She loves glitz and glam and spares no expense when she hosts. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s something,” I said, not sure if the word “beautiful” encompassed how I felt about the extravagant decor.

The centerpieces were massive towers of gold, topped with white and blush-pink roses. Each table was set with gold plates and matching cutlery resting upon white napkins. Champagne buckets sat on each table, ready to be poured into the crystal wine glasses at each place setting.

In the middle of the room beneath the chandelier was a stage with a microphone. The skirt around the stage was the same fluttering gold as the tablecloths, and the whole place had a cohesive vibe. It was overdone, yes, but I couldn’t deny that whoever had styled it knew what the hell they were doing.

Evangeline pointed across the room toward the bar. “Do you see that girl there? The blonde in the blue dress? That’s my best friend.”

Victoria. I’d heard a lot about her. I’d especially heard that she had no filter and said whatever was on her mind. I’d been warned that she might say some inappropriate things about me or my MC, and I assured Evangeline I would be on my best behavior and her opinions would not ruffle my feathers.

“I’m going to go grab a glass of wine and bring her over. Would you like a drink?” Evangeline gazed up at me with those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

“I’m all right for now. I’ll have a glass of wine with dinner.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I said.

She gave me a kiss, not caring who was looking—which was everyone within our general vicinity—and then she picked up the hem of her gown and hurried along between the tables to meet Victoria at the bar.

I tried to look cool standing there by myself, but I was woefully aware of how much I did not blend in.

People were talking. Well, not talking. They were whispering. No doubt about my bruises.

I didn't have to stand by myself for long. A man stepped up beside me and cleared his throat. "Good evening, Owen."

I glanced to my right and balked at Frank Snow, Evangeline's father. "Frank." I nodded. I had never, and would never, call him Mr. Snow. If he'd shown me some respect back in the day, I might have considered it, but the time for niceties had passed.

He didn't say anything for a while. I slid my hands in my pockets and waited as he sipped his champagne. Then he nodded at Evangeline across the room by the bar. "She's radiant tonight."

"She is," I agreed.

Frank sighed. "I owe you an apology, Owen."

I turned toward him and tried to hide my bewilderment. An apology? From old man Snow? Was I in an alternate universe? I knew the chances of getting a girl like Evangeline were slim to none for a guy like me, but to have her father say he owed me an apology was totally out of left field.

"Sir?" I asked, confused.

He gave me a tight-lipped smile. "You make her happy, Owen. And that's all a father wants for his baby girl. And when I cleared the mud out of my ears and started paying attention, I realized something very important. My daughter hasn't been this effervescent in years. I think I tried to convince myself it had nothing to do with you. But I was in denial. It has everything to do with you."

I wasn't sure what to say. This was uncharted territory for me. So I kept my mouth shut and watched Evangeline with Victoria as they inched forward in line toward the bar. People stopped to talk to her frequently, and she greeted them with her dazzling smile, clasped their hands, and hugged some of them.

She was in her element.

"Just so you know, I've fired that lunatic Aero," Frank said.

That made my eyebrows creep upward. “Really?”

Frank nodded. “Yeah. When I found out what he’d done —” Frank paused, clicked his tongue, and shook his head. “Well, that’s not the sort of person I want to be associated with my company. And it’s definitely not the sort of person I want anywhere near my Evangeline. Thank you for breaking his arm.”

I laughed.

The sound seemed to catch Frank off guard, and I held a hand up to apologize. “I’m sorry. I just never expected words like that to come out of your mouth, sir.”

“Me neither,” Evangeline’s father said. Then he smiled slyly. “But it felt kind of good to say them.”

I chuckled and nodded. “It felt good to break his arm, too.”

“I bet.”

Then he did something that really surprised me. He put a hand on my shoulder. “Are we good, Owen?”

“We’re good, sir.”

He nodded. “May I speak my piece one last time before leaving it to rest?”

“Say what you must.”

“Please take care of her. I know where you come from. And I know what you’re capable of. The fact that Matthew Aero was in the hospital for four days after his run-in with you can attest to that. I don’t want my baby girl going down a dark path. If things ever start to spiral, you’ll cut her loose. Right?”

I studied the hard lines of his brow, the tightness in his jaw, and the desperation in his eyes. “I will, sir. I’d let her go before I ever put her in danger. You have my word.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “Very well. Let this be the last we ever speak of it. Come find me later. We’ll have a drink.”

And just like that, the conversation was over. Frank slipped away into the crowd and left me reeling in the aftermath of words I never thought we would exchange.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said to myself. That was going to take some time to process.

Evangeline popped up by my side and grabbed the sleeve of my suit jacket. “Owen, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said, grinning sheepishly as I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah. I’m good.”

I was better than good.

Evangeline stepped aside and revealed Victoria, a beautiful blonde with pink cheeks and a nervous smile. “This is Victoria. Victoria, this is Owen.”

I offered her my hand. She held hers out, and wanting to make a good impression, I pressed my lips to her knuckles. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Victoria. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, and I’m glad we finally have the chance to meet.”

She giggled like a high-school girl and turned an even brighter shade of pink. Then she leaned over to Evangeline. “You weren’t lying. He *is* cute.”

EPILOGUE



EVANGELINE

I closed my eyes as I breathed in the crisp fall air.

It smelled like maple and soil and rain.

Owen held me tighter, and I nuzzled my chin under the plaid blanket Quinn had draped over me a few minutes ago when I started to get chilly.

We were sitting around a firepit in Axel's backyard.

I'd met a ton of people tonight, many whose names I'd already forgotten, and I was more than a little overwhelmed.

But I was also incredibly content as I sat in Owen's lap and listened to the conversations transpiring around the fire.

"Least likely to win a fight?" Quinn asked, pursing her lips and pressing her forefinger to her chin thoughtfully.

Everyone had been playing a game around the fire of "least" and "most likely to", and I hadn't participated much since I didn't really know everyone. The game started many arguments, but everything was all in good fun, and I was soaking up as much as I could.

"Liam," Jax said, pointing his chin toward Liam who sat in the chair beside me and Owen.

Liam scoffed. "Why does everyone always vote for me for that one? Just because I'm the youngest doesn't mean I can't fight. Fuckers."

"Yeah, it does," Jax said confidently.

The man beside him, a brooding devil with dark skin and thick black eyebrows, cracked a grin in Liam's direction. "Don't fight it, little one. You'll get tougher with age."

Snickers moved around the fire.

"Who's that again?" I asked, leaning back to whisper in Owen's ear so the others didn't hear me. I didn't want them knowing I was already forgetting their names.

"Sabian," Owen said. "He's nicer than he looks. Trust me."

I nodded. Sabian was definitely a menacing-looking man. Then again, most of them were.

Especially Ryder Moretti, who sat a few chairs down from Sabian. He had his woman, Dani, sitting beside him, and their fingers were entwined as their hands hung between their chairs. They looked like the king and queen sitting there like that, like this was their domain, and we were their subjects.

Which I supposed we were in some sense.

Rhys, sitting on the other side of Liam, knuckled the young man in the shoulder. "You're a champ, Liam. I've seen you in action. I know what you can do with those fists of yours. Right, Owen? Back me up here?"

"A new Jet Li in the making," Owen mused.

"Don't inflate his ego," Jax muttered.

"I'm telling the truth," Owen said. "I've fought side by side with him. I'd trust him to have my back."

Jax nodded at Owen. "Who gets your vote? Least likely to win in a fight. Go."

Owen grinned like the devil. "Ryder. He's all soft after becoming a daddy."

The men and women around the fire burst out laughing. Even Ryder laughed at his own expense, and I got the sense that the polar opposite of Owen's statement was true.

I'd bet money that Ryder could fuck them all up with one hand tied behind his back. He was the president, after all.

“Most likely to *win* in a fight, then,” Jax said.

Owen tipped his chin down the circle. “Quinn. Hands down.”

Quinn beamed and sat up a little straighter. “That’s the smartest thing you’ve ever said.”

I loved the camaraderie around the circle. These men were brothers, and the women were as much a part of the crew as they were. It was obvious.

Everyone was welcome here. I felt perfectly at ease in Owen’s lap. Even though I was a bit shy, it had nothing to do with who I was with. It was simply due to the fact that I didn’t really know any of them.

Not yet, at least.

I suspected many of these people were going to become close friends in no time.

Another man piped up, whose name I’d forgotten, and I looked to Owen as he spoke, who told me his name was Aiden. Aiden asked, “Most likely to get caught jerking off.”

I laughed, and Owen squeezed my thigh before declaring, “Derek!”

Everyone nodded their agreement and burst out laughing, except for a man with a thick auburn beard and a head of hair slicked back. “Bullshit. I might beat it more than you fuckers, but I’m not dumb enough to get caught.”

They all booed him, and Derek waved them off, his scowl morphing into a smile as the group grew louder and more obnoxious at his denial.

“All right, all right,” he said, holding his hands up. “Let me lay one on you. Most likely to suffer from premature ejacu—”

“Owen,” I said.

I hadn’t even thought before I spoke. I just saw the humor in it, knew Owen would laugh, and his name tumbled from my lips.

I was right.

My vote was a hit.

The men slapped their knees and laughed, and the women giggled until their sides hurt. I joined in on the laughter as Owen tried to defend himself but was drowned out by the sounds of our hilarity.

“I’m sorry,” I said, gripping his shoulder. “I didn’t mean it. I just had to.”

“She meant it,” Liam said beside us.

“Butt out,” Owen barked, but he smiled.

More laughter ensued around the circle.

I cupped his cheek. “I didn’t mean it like that. You know how much I like your—” I stopped talking as I remembered everyone else around us and swallowed. “Erm.”

“How much you like his what?” Liam waggled his eyebrows at me.

I licked my lips. “Never mind.”

Owen gave my ass a squeeze, and I leaned against his chest and pulled the blanket up to hide my face.

“Well,” Ryder said, his deep booming voice demanding silence. He got to his feet, and I peered over the edge of the blanket at him as he looked around the circle. His gaze settled on me. “I think that settles it. You’re one of the family, Evangeline Snow. Welcome to the club.”

Everyone lifted their drinks to me.

I blushed and stammered under the attention and was grateful it didn’t last long. When conversation resumed, I pressed my mouth close to Owen’s ear. “Did I just become an MC member?”

Owen chuckled and shook his head. “No, Angel. There’s a lot more involved than that. But you got the stamp of approval from the president. He trusts you. And you’ll be welcome at all events. Business related or not.”

“Really?”

Owen nodded and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Really.”

The laughter and the sounds of everyone chatting around us faded away, and all I could see was Owen. All I could feel was his warmth that we shared under the blanket. The scent of his bergamot and cedar cologne mingled well with the crisp fall air, and I breathed in a deep breath of him and nature.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” I said. “Something I’ve wanted to tell you for over seven years now.”

Owen ran his fingers through my hair. I had all of his attention, and I had to stay focused on what I wanted to say so I didn’t get lost in his green eyes. “What is it, Angel?”

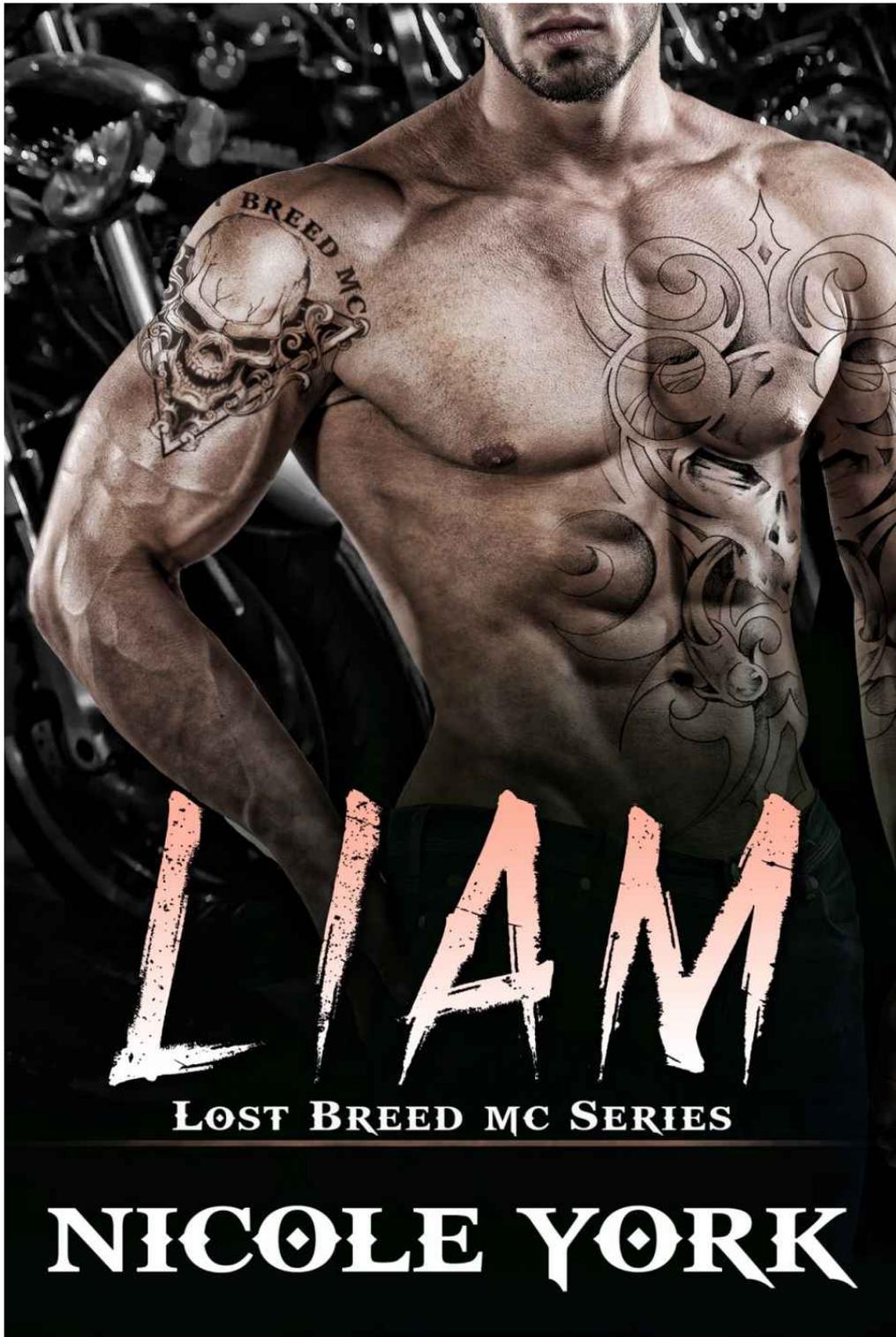
The smile that stretched my cheeks was impossible to stop. “I love you, Owen McCully. I love you so much it hurts.”

Owen’s grin matched mine, and he cupped my cheek. “I love you too, Angel. Until the day I die.”

He gave me a soft kiss, and then another, and then his tongue was in my mouth.

The others gave us our moment. Nobody interrupted. Nobody made jokes. And I had the feeling that everyone else’s hearts were just as full as mine.

And it was glorious.

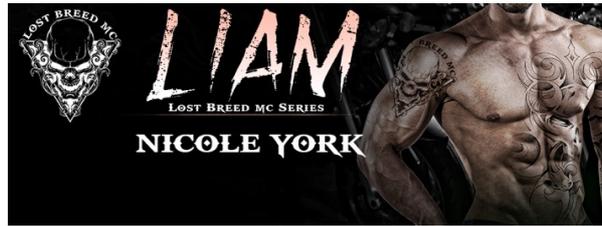


LIAM

LOST BREED MC SERIES

NICOLE YORK

DESCRIPTION



We're finally waking up from the nightmare.

The Lost Breeds have been through Hell and back, and finally, life is slowing the fuck down.

In the stillness, I realize that something is missing.

All the other guys in the MC have women in their corner to kiss their wounds and help them heal.

It's my damn turn.

I see *her* on a busy New York City street and know without a doubt—she's the one.

She's everything a man like me dreams of.

But she's out of my league. Wayyyy out of it. A billionaire by birth.

Lucky for her, I'm willing to be whatever she needs, what keeps her up late at night and drags her from sleep with yearning.

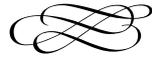
This girl has no clue what's about to hit her.

Me. Full force with the desire to be deeply connected and fully devoted for the first time ever.

Things are changing too fast to keep up. She'll be my rock when it all falls apart.

And she doesn't even know me yet.

CHAPTER 1



LIAM

Owen flinched as a shrieking toddler blew past us in Axel's living room. The beer in his red solo cup sloshed dangerously close to the edge, threatening to spill over onto the hardwood floors.

"Watch it," I warned, shooting a cautious glance around the jam-packed house in search of Axel's other half. "Ellie will have your head if she catches you spilling on her new floors."

Owen grumbled and resumed his position of leaning casually against the arm of the sofa. "Ugh. Kids. Must they all have started popping them out? Insufferable little—"

"Watch it," I cautioned again as Dani passed us, with her and Ryder's little one passed out against her shoulder.

Dani smiled at us as she passed. "Gentlemen, need anything from the kitchen after I put Jason to sleep?"

Owen shook his head, holding up his nearly full beer. "All good here. Thanks though, Dani."

"I'm all right," I said.

Dani looked at my drink-free hands and arched an eyebrow. "Not partaking in the celebrations this evening, Liam?"

"Gotta drive."

"I'm sure Axel wouldn't mind if you crashed on the sofa."

I grimaced. "Nah, I'm good. I'd wake up with Hanna's finger up my nose or some shit."

Dani threw her head back and laughed, then remembered she had a sleeping eight-month-old cradled against her chest. She fell quiet and scowled at me. “Don’t make me laugh. Jason’s been in a terrible sleeping pattern. Awake at five in the morning every day and waking up every hour. It’s exhausting. Between all the wakeup calls, and the diapers, and the formula, and the pumping, and—”

“I get it, Dani,” I said, trying to sound compassionate but firm.

Owen was right. These kids were taking over every aspect of our lives.

It was hard to feel like a badass biker when I was constantly surrounded by dirty diapers and soggy animal crackers.

I couldn’t count how many times one of their well-intentioned children tricked me into eating a deceptively mushy snack.

I could hurl just thinking about it.

Dani gave me an understanding nod as she tucked a loose strand of brown hair behind her ear. “Sorry. Sometimes, I forget who I’m talking to.”

Owen chuckled beside me. “You mean, you forget we’re not all parents yet?”

“Keyword is *yet*.” Dani winked.

Owen waved her off. “Get out of here with that talk. There are no babies in my future.”

“And Evangeline is on the same page?” Dani cocked her head to the side.

I knuckled Owen’s shoulder. “Yeah, come on, man. We both know you’re not the decision maker anymore. Owen the Great is no longer the captain of his ship, am I right?”

Dani snickered.

Owen rolled his eyes and tilted his head back to polish off the half a beer in his red solo cup. “Laugh all you want,

fuckers. I do what I want, when I want. So does my Angel.”

“And when she decides she wants babies?” Dani asked, while absently rubbing Jason’s back. Her little man was dressed in a striped onesie, which, knowing her, likely said something offensive but hilarious on the front. Something along the lines of, *I’m cute enough to shit myself and get away with it*, or *I love boobs*.

Owen sighed. “You just want to hear me say it.”

“Of course, I do.” Dani grinned.

Owen looked back and forth between Dani and me. “If she wants babies, then fucking hell, we’ll have babies.”

“See?” I asked, waggling my eyebrows at Dani. “Evangeline is the captain of that ship now.”

“Fuck off, pipsqueak.” Owen pushed at my chest, sending me back a step.

Baby Jason nuzzled himself in closer to the groove of Dani’s shoulder. She excused herself quietly and slipped away to put him down in one of the cribs in the kids’ rooms, leaving Owen and me to wander into the kitchen together so he could get another beer.

The place was pretty packed for Hanna’s birthday. She was turning five. I hadn’t been around for her very early days, but I found Axel’s daughter to be quite the charmer—and the troublemaker. She was constantly getting in over her head and taking risks. She was going to be an adrenaline seeker through and through.

Every time I warned Axel about it, he’d tell me to sit down and shut up. He had enough to worry about without obsessing over thoughts of her wanting a motorcycle or a really fast car one day. He was lucky he and Ellie had come together when they did and his little girl took to his woman like white on rice. Ellie was the apple of Hanna’s eye—and Axel’s.

I never left it alone, of course. Watching him squirm about how much harder it was going to get as his children grew up was too much fun.

While Owen helped himself to another beer out of the cooler on the kitchen island, I topped off a red solo cup with water from the dispenser in the fridge. Then I turned to stand shoulder to shoulder with him while we surveyed the child-infested house.

“When the hell did this happen?” Owen asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“Beats me. Shit is changing too fast around here.”

“You can say that again.”

“Shit is changing too fast around here.”

Owen put his beer down and eyed me menacingly. “You’re a smartass, you know that?”

“I’m reminded every day, yes.”

The man who was like a big brother to me chuckled and shook his head. “Change is a good thing, right? At least, that’s what Evangeline keeps telling me. Still, I’m no good at it. Especially when it comes to family.”

I sighed. “I know where you’re coming from. It feels like the change of a season.”

“Well, it is mid-October, so—”

“I didn’t mean literally,” I retorted.

Owen shrugged and sipped more beer. “Relax, pipsqueak.”

“All I meant was it feels like change is in the air. Like this is the end of something that lasted a lot longer than just a season, you know?”

Owen stared at me blankly and then shook his head.

How could I explain this to him without sounding like I was trying to be a philosophical poet? He’d just poke fun at me for weeks if I gave him more ammo than he already had, and I was in no mood for that kind of torture.

Regardless, my words were true.

Everything felt like it was coming to a neat close. All the other members in the Lost Breed MC were finding their

soulmates and settling down—and creating offsprings. I was too young for that level of responsibility, if not in numbers but by sheer lack of maturity, and it blew my mind that I was already like an uncle to some of these little ones.

It wasn't a problem—kids were my jam—but I didn't think they'd be part of the picture for years. I thought we still had time.

Time to be rebels without a cause. Time to fuck around, shoot the shit, and ride our bikes without having to worry about being home in time to tuck the kids in, help with dinner, or whatever other responsibilities constantly seemed to spring up at the most inopportune times.

Maybe I only felt that way because I was the only one still riding solo.

All the other guys had their women. Half of them had their families, too. They were settling into a new life with new routines while I was still half-cocked, trying to get my jollies ripping around the city on my bike, looking for trouble.

Just because they'd slowed down didn't mean I had to.

At least, I hoped it didn't.

At this rate, it seemed like I wasn't going to have much of a choice. The fast lane was getting more and more narrow with every passing month, and soon, there wouldn't be enough room for me to stay in it. I'd have to make a move. A change.

And like Owen said. Change sucked.

Owen leaned back against the kitchen counter and crossed one ankle over the other. His dark gaze slid around the living and dining room and out onto the outdoor patio, where a cool autumn breeze blew in, carrying with it the laughter of the kids racing around in the yard.

“Change, brother,” Owen muttered. “It's here. Right under our noses.”

I swallowed. “Yeah. I can practically taste it. I miss going to bars. And shooting pool. And—”

“Fighting?” Owen practically groaned.

I blinked at him. “Well, I mean a good brawl here and there keeps the spark alive, but I don’t miss it quite *that* much, you horndog.”

“What?” Owen asked innocently. “Can’t a guy miss the old ways that used to get him off?”

“Gross.”

“It’s a good thing Evangeline came along. Otherwise, I’d have to—”

“Stop,” I said, shaking my head in distaste. “I don’t want to know where that train of thought ends.”

“But—”

“I’m good,” I said, holding my hands up as I retreated from Owen, who watched me go with a snarky grin on his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but I slipped between the shoulders of Sabian and his girl, Angela, both of whom turned to look over their shoulders at Owen.

“What’s he done now?” Sabian asked, arching a thick, dark eyebrow in my direction.

“You don’t want to know,” I said.

Angela giggled and shook her head before sipping a fruity cocktail. “Boys, we’re at a children’s party. Can’t you behave just for a few more hours? Then it’ll be adult hour.”

Adult hour.

That was the kind of shit that was getting to me. A couple of years ago, I still had enough baby fat in my cheeks to earn me a spot at the kids’ table, but now at twenty-four, I was suddenly being migrated to adult hour. Once the kids were in bed, we’d all catch up and have more mature conversations.

But I didn’t want that shit.

I wanted every hour to be adult hour. I didn’t want to watch my mouth and worry about what I said and when. I wasn’t the most vulgar of the group by any means, but things had shifted so drastically that I could hardly find my footing.

I knew what the answer was.

I knew what was missing.

A girl.

All my brothers had their women who kept them grounded and who made them complete. They didn't have something to prove like I did. They weren't caught up in the fast bikes and cars anymore. They were caught up in love.

Barf.

And yet I wanted it too. I wanted that solace of having someone who would always have my back. Who'd stand their ground by my side through the darkest days and fight fiercely for me.

Sure, my brothers were that, but they couldn't fulfill every part of me.

That'd be weird.

I shuddered at the thought and scanned the room. The women rested their heads on the shoulders of their partners and watched the children play. The Lost Breed men were all at ease here in Axel's house. Our darkest days were far behind us.

Ever since Isaac Reed went into the ground, everything had slowed down. I'd come from a faster pace in Chicago with Rhys, Owen, and Aiden, and this slow regression into a comfortable lifestyle had me feeling displaced. But a woman would fix that. I knew it in my bones.

Besides, it would be nice to have someone warm to share a bed with. Someone who could chase my worries away with pretty lips and—

“Liam!”

I looked up, spotting Ellie standing in the kitchen. She waved me over. “Help me light the candles and bring out the cake, will you?”

I groaned and hung my head as I made my way back into the kitchen.

Yeah, things sure had changed. I was lighting birthday candles instead of pavement.

I needed to get my mojo back.

CHAPTER 2



GENEVIEVE

The cider was a rich amber color, and little bubbles danced upward from the bottom of the glass to swirl around the surface before unceremoniously popping. I took a dainty sip, loving the way the carbonation nipped at my tongue, and savored it as it moved to the back of my throat.

I held up my glass to my Uncle Tom, who had just turned toward me from where he stood at the BBQ. “This is delicious,” I told him earnestly before smacking my lips together. “Is that pear?”

“You got it,” Uncle Tom praised me.

Marley, my best friend, confidant, partner in crime, and part-time unpaid therapist, snatched my glass from my hand to help herself to a sip. She puckered at the tangy taste. “Holy crap, Tom. This shit is potent!”

Uncle Tom chuckled as he turned his attention back to the food on the grill: beef burgers for him and Marley, and a vegan patty for me. The covered back deck was filled with the aroma of cooking meat, hickory, and fried onions. On the glass patio table in front of me and Marley was a spread worthy of the gods, with all kinds of toppings for our burgers. There were sides of coleslaw for Marley and my uncle and a broccoli and carrot stir-fry type thing for me.

Uncle Tom always looked out for me.

Just like he had after my parents had been killed.

If not for him, my life would have turned out much differently. I was lucky to have him in my corner—lucky he

wanted to assume the role of my father when I was twelve and a hellion to boot, and he was only thirty, still enjoying his single glory days.

Looking back, he and I wouldn't change a thing though. Of course, I'd spare my parents, but we wouldn't change that he was the one to raise me. I owed him everything. And my very plush bank account with my deceased parents' wealth was going to help me repay him.

As soon as he let me share my billions with him.

“Do you girls want your buns toasted on the grill?” Uncle Tom asked, shooting us a look over his shoulder. His dark eyes flicked back and forth between me and Marley, and we both nodded. “Good call. I'd have to kick your asses out if you said no.”

Marley snickered beside me and sipped the drink she'd brought with her. She wasn't a big fan of Uncle Tom's home-brewed ciders and ales, so she made a point to come prepared. “Yeah right. You'd never kick us out. You love us too much.”

“You know me too well, Marley.”

These were my favorite kinds of evenings. Slow, lazy, and filled with laughter and the company of the two people I adored more than life itself. They were my rocks, my everything. Sure, they were weird, kooky, goofy, serious, overbearing, opinionated, and sometimes pains in my ass, but they were my family.

“All right, grab your plates,” he said. “Let's make these babies.”

Marley swept up her paper plate from the table and shouldered her way past me as I got to my feet. She shot me a playful smile before stepping up beside Uncle Tom, who placed an open-faced toasted bun on her plate before sliding a still sizzling patty onto it. The white cheese on top bubbled, and barbeque sauce leaked out from underneath.

When I stood beside him, he did the same for me but placed my vegan patty on my bun. Uncle Tom scrunched up his nose and shook his head at me. “You're sure you don't

want any sauce on that thing, Genevieve? It's drier than the Sahara."

"Don't shame my food choices."

Uncle Tom chuckled. "Not shaming. Not shaming. I approve. You're stronger than I am. I just think you could stand to—I don't know—put a little pep in its step. I mean, look at it."

I looked at my patty. "It looks like it won't give me stomach problems in forty-five minutes."

Uncle Tom snorted with laughter as he plated his own burger. "Smart ass."

"It's true," I said in a sing-song voice as I made my way back to the table, where I piled my patty high with all the veggies I could get my hands on and a dash of mustard. Then I dropped down into my seat, rested each elbow on the edge of the table, and stared down at my creation. My mouth started watering.

Uncle Tom and Marley whipped their burgers into shape and took up their own seats. Then we dug in together, breaking up bites of burger with sips of frosty drinks, pausing to share a couple of words in between stuffing our gullets.

"It's so good," I managed after washing down a bite with my cider. The contents of my stomach were already pushing at my insides, but I didn't care. There were still at least four bites left, and I wasn't letting any of it go to waste.

Uncle Tom leaned back in his chair and sucked his thumbs clean. The plate in front of him was empty, save for a couple of droplets of barbeque sauce and mustard. "It hit the spot. That's for sure."

"Thanks for cooking," Marley said.

"For you girls? Any time."

The best thing about Uncle Tom was that he meant it. He loved having us over as much as we loved being here. This was a weekly affair for the three of us.

“So how are things going with you and this new guy of yours, Genevieve?” Uncle Tom asked, absentmindedly rubbing his stomach. He wasn’t a big man by any means, but he’d put on a couple of inches around his middle over the past five or so years. He said it was a well-earned body. Not quite a dad bod, but not a fit bod either.

He always believed in balance, so it suited him and the plaid shirts he wore year-round. Plaid flannel and denim were his go to. A good old cowboy in New York City.

“Yeah.” Marley leaned forward and turned to the side so she could face me. Her short blonde pixie cut was wildly styled today with pieces shooting out in all directions, showing off the lowlights and darker hair near her roots. Her glittery gold hoops were not nearly as blinding as they had been in the sunshine earlier today. “How is Shane doing? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

I shrugged. “I broke up with him.”

Marley blinked before exchanging a look with my uncle. “What? Just like that?”

“Yeah,” I said simply.

“Did something happen?” Uncle Tom asked, his warm features drawing together in a mask of concern.

“No, not really. He was just kind of an ass, you know? He was way too comfortable spending my money. Which would be fine if we’d been together longer than four weeks.”

Uncle Tom nodded knowingly. “Sorry, Genie. I know you were optimistic about this one.”

“Optimism shmoptimism.” Marley snorted. “She just keeps going for the wrong type.”

“I do not,” I said defensively.

“Oh?” Marley asked, arching a perfectly shaped dark blonde eyebrow. “You don’t? Really? Who was the guy you were so into before Shane? Chad? Or some other douchebag name like Chet or something.”

“Corey,” I said, shifting in my seat to cross one leg over the other. “And he wasn’t that bad.”

“He asked you to buy him a car,” Marley said flatly.

“Yes. Well. He knew what kind of money I had access to.”

“He was a prick,” Marley said.

“And I broke up with him. Just like Shane. What more do you want from me?”

Marley rolled her eyes and looked to Uncle Tom for support. My uncle shook his head vigorously. “Oh no. Don’t look at me. I’m not getting involved in this.”

“Smart,” I told him. “It doesn’t matter. Just drop it, Marley. I’m done with men for a while. They’re nothing but headaches and bullshit and—”

“Hey,” Uncle Tom said, giving me big puppy-dog eyes.

“Not you, Uncle Tom,” I assured him with a smile. “You’re a huge catch.”

“Definitely.” Marley winked at him. “If you weren’t Genevieve’s uncle, I’d—”

“Whoa,” I said, throwing out a hand and clamping it over Marley’s mouth. “No. *No*. We are not going there.”

Uncle Tom, bless his heart, had turned a bright shade of red. He spared himself further embarrassment by making himself busy. As he collected the plates and food off the table, he changed the subject. “And how are things going with the Women’s Shelter plans?”

The Women’s Shelter. The bane and passion of my existence.

“It’s going,” I said. “I finally have an appointment to present my blueprints and pitch my plan to some city officials in a few weeks. And I’m taking a tour with a city worker on Tuesday to scout out some of the current shelters. I want to know where the biggest opportunities for improvement lie. Everyone I talk to about this seems to think my plans are to build what already exists. But they couldn’t be more wrong.

This was my mother's vision years ago. And I'm going to follow it through. But better."

Uncle Tom put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Your folks would be very proud of you, Genie. Very proud."

"Besides the whole, boy-crazy fiasco," Marley muttered.

Uncle Tom started chuckling before he sought refuge in the house as I turned my glare on my friend. "Can you not?"

"Why?"

"Because," I said.

"Because why?"

I groaned. "You're intolerable, Marley. You know that?"

"Wanna buy me a car?" she teased.

I couldn't help but laugh. Our friendship was like this. Constant bickering, peppered with moments of genuine humor, love, and silliness.

I shook my head at her. "I already bought you a car."

"You're right. A boat, then?"

"Well, I was thinking a yacht might be nice."

"A yacht?" She gasped, clapping her hands on her cheeks dramatically. "Are you being serious, or are you fucking with me?"

"I'm being serious. But don't get too excited. This isn't something I want to do this year. Maybe next summer, once things with the shelter are well underway. I can't afford to have my focus divided. And let's be real. If I have a yacht, I'm not going to want to set foot on land for weeks at a time."

"We could take it to the Caribbean."

"We could take it everywhere," I said, lifting my cider to her drink so we could toast to a future of lounging top deck in our bikinis.

Or naked.

That was what besties were for, right?

Fuck the tan lines. I'd just make sure to buy a yacht big enough that no other sailors-by could steal a peek at our goodies.

CHAPTER 3



LIAM

Jamie Walters hooked her arm through mine as we walked side by side down the New York City sidewalk. We had a destination. The Crow. It was a trendy, moody, central coffee shop in the city that we'd discovered a few months ago in the middle of summer trying to seek refuge from the sweltering heat. Their iced coffees were as good as their hot brews, and they made the best grilled sandwiches in a twenty-mile radius.

Jamie let out a contented sigh as she gazed at the trees inset in the sidewalk, spread out about ten feet apart each so they lined the streets with their red and copper leaves. "It's beautiful, isn't it? The fall is my favorite time of the year. Nothing beats the colors. Especially here."

"Yeah, I guess."

She looked up at me. "What has you in such a gloomy mood, Liam?"

"Nothing."

"You've been off for weeks," she said skeptically.

Jamie had been able to see right through me within weeks of us meeting. She was a spunky, fun, creative young woman, and she was irreplaceable in Axel's shop. I liked hanging around there to spend time with her and whoever else was on shift, and as the months passed after joining the MC, Jamie and I became fast friends. We had a lot in common, not to mention similar temperaments and age, that made it easy for us to click.

But it also made it easy for her to see when something was on my mind.

“I can’t really put my finger on it,” I told her.

She nodded knowingly. “I see. A seasonal thing, perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

She nudged my hip with hers. “You can tell me, you know? I don’t judge.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“So... nothing. There’s nothing to tell.”

“Bullshit,” she said.

I chuckled. “Fine. You want to know?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.”

I sighed and recalled how Owen hadn’t really understood what I was saying this past weekend at the birthday party. It might go right over her head, too. “I guess I’m a bit overwhelmed. Things are changing.”

“Change is good.”

“Maybe change isn’t the right word.”

Jamie stayed quiet and waited for me to carry on.

I looked down at the sidewalk. “It feels like things are ending.”

“Ending?” She cocked her head to the side and let out a soft giggle. “What do you mean, ‘ending’?”

“Like I said. I can’t put my finger on it. It’s just a feeling. This winter feels daunting. Like nothing will be the same once it’s passed, and spring will look different than it ever has.”

Jamie tightened her hold on my arm. “You might be right.”

I glanced sharply at her. “I thought you were supposed to make me feel better?”

She giggled and stopped when we arrived at the door to The Crow. I tugged it open for her, and she ducked inside ahead of me, turning to face me and walk backward toward the counter. “I’m validating your feelings. Doesn’t that make you feel a little better?”

“No. Not even a little bit.”

Jamie snickered and turned to face the cashier, who greeted us with a friendly smile. She knew Jamie by name, and the two girls chatted before we placed our order. Then we were handed a plastic number “12” which we stood up on our table by the window so they would know which people to bring the food and drinks to.

Jamie rested her chin in her palm as she eyed me. I tried to look distractedly out the window, but her stare drew me in. “What?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I might be feeling some of what you’re feeling. On a small scale.”

“Yeah?” I asked, shimmying closer.

Jamie nodded. “Yeah. I mean, everything is different than it used to be. People are growing. Changing. Becoming parents and stuff. Everyone is just, I don’t know, tired?”

I frowned and let her words sink in.

“Tired” pretty much summed it up. That spark—the wild, fierce, take-no-prisoners way of life of the MC—wasn’t as hot as it used to be. Or as bright. The shift had been subtle and probably much needed, but I wasn’t ready for it. I was still woefully young and wanted more time in the sun before I threw in the towel and submitted to mundane life.

Not that there was anything wrong with that.

I just didn’t want it yet.

“Do you think it’s because of, well, you know...” I trailed off.

Jamie arched an eyebrow. “No, I don’t know. You’ll have to use your words.”

I didn't want to hurt her, but I had to ask. "Do you think it all started when people got killed?"

"What started? The change?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Jason. Hyde. Reed. All of it. Do you think that played a part in it?"

Jamie broke eye contact and looked down at the table. I hated bringing it up like this. She and Hyde had been a thing. I didn't know how serious of a thing they'd been, but when he was killed, Jamie was heartbroken, and it was obvious that she'd developed real feelings for him. Even now, I wasn't quite convinced she was over him.

She lifted her gaze back to meet mine. "It might have played a small part, yeah. But so has new life."

"Huh?"

"Kids," she said like she was talking to a wall. "Kids, Liam. They shift priorities and goals and lifestyles. As they should."

"I guess."

"So does love."

I was about to ask her what the hell she was talking about, but one of the baristas arrived with a silver tray of sandwiches and iced coffees. We took our food off the tray and set it aside, and before I dug in, I leaned in close, like I was telling a secret. "What do you mean?"

She stared at me blankly. "Love. It changes people. Especially men."

"Why?"

"Oh my God," she groaned as she raked her fingers through her dark hair. "You're so dense sometimes. Forget it. I'm not explaining it to you. You'll understand when you meet the right girl. You're still young."

"I'm the same age as you."

"Yeah. Young."

“Fair enough.”

She took a bite of her sandwich. A little dollop of mustard collected in the corner of her mouth, and I chuckled as she licked at it with the tip of her tongue, gave up, and wiped it away with her napkin.

“Shut up,” she mumbled.

My mouth opened to offer a snarky comment, but I clamped it shut as my eyes were drawn to a beautiful young woman walking by the cafe window.

“Damn,” I whispered without realizing it.

Jamie followed my gaze and watched the woman pass. “You’re dreaming, dude.”

Hell yeah, I am.

The girl was movie-star sexy.

She had a mane of long, shimmery blonde hair that dazzled my eyes in the autumn sun. I couldn’t see her eyes behind her big-framed sunglasses, but I imagined they were lovely and bright. Her cheeks were rosy, her skin tanned, her lips full, pink, and glossy.

The clothes she wore spoke of wealth and a lot of it. She had on flowing white pants that were tight at her waist and flowed out, billowing around her ankles as she walked. Each step revealed the point of a dazzling gold shoe and red-painted toes. Her white blouse was tucked into the pants and broken up with a thin gold belt. Gold accessories pulled everything together, including the buckles on her white handbag which she had draped over the crook of her shoulder.

“Is this what love feels like?” I asked as I turned to watch her cross the street. She wasn’t alone. She was with another woman dressed in a black skirt and matching blazer.

Jamie snorted. “No. That’s called infatuation. Or lust.”

“Feels like love.”

“Shut up, Liam.”

My eyes were glued to the woman's ass as her hips swayed with every step she took. She hopped up onto the sidewalk and turned toward the plainer woman she was with, who she offered a radiant smile to.

I clutched at my heart. "Holy Hell."

"Liam," Jamie said in her most impressive scolding tone. "You realize she's way out of your league, right? Like, galaxies out of your league?"

"Maybe she likes bikers."

Jamie shot a look across the street, where the two women had stopped in front of a hotel or something with a "No Vacancy" sign outside. "I doubt it. The handbag she's carrying alone is worth over ten grand."

I blinked at her. "For a *purse*?"

"Yep."

"That's fucked up."

"Yep."

"I have to meet her."

Jamie pinched the bridge of her nose. "Girls like that don't fall for boys like you, Liam. Spare yourself the embarrassment and let her go."

"I don't have to be a boy like me."

"This isn't Aladdin, Liam. You can't make a wish and magically be someone else to woo your princess."

I grinned. "Sure, I can. Watch my jacket, will you?"

CHAPTER 4



GENEVIEVE

Tracey Watkins was your standard city worker. She dressed like a city worker. Talked like one. Even walked like one. Professional, clean cut, straight lines, rule follower. I respected her, and she, in turn, respected me, and by the time we arrived at the front doors of the first women's shelter on our list of places to visit today, she and I had bonded.

Over what?

Shitty ex-boyfriends, of course.

Tracey glanced at the flashy watch on her wrist and shook it out to cover it with her sleeve when she let her hand fall back to her side. "I do apologize, Miss London. Daniel is usually never late."

Daniel, her assistant, was the one bringing the reports on the shelters. He had all the documents with the information I needed, and I didn't want to start without him.

I smiled. "That's perfectly all right. I'm sure he got caught up in the traffic. I'm not under a time crunch."

Tracey compulsively checked her phone for the next few minutes we were standing outside.

In an effort to distract her and hopefully spare poor Daniel her wrath of frustration, I tried to get her talking. "Is this a common pursuit for people right now?"

"Wanting to open a shelter?" Tracey asked, cocking her head to the side. Her short black bob swished until falling immaculately into place.

“Yes. Women’s shelters, specifically.”

Tracey pursed her lips. “Not as common as it should be. As soon as I caught word of a woman with her own financial backing looking at opening her own shelter, I jumped on it. I had to shuffle some things around at my office, of course, to make it happen, but I just knew I needed to meet you. There aren’t enough safe places in this city to accommodate the population size. And it’s only getting worse.”

“So in your opinion, there is a need for this?”

“Oh God, yes,” Tracey said. “Why? Have others told you there’s not?”

I shrugged as I gazed up at the three-story shelter before us with the “No Vacancies” sign above the front door. “I’ve run into the odd person who has told me there are more important things I could put my money toward.”

“You mean ran into the odd *man*?”

I flashed her a grin. “Tracey, you and I are a lot more alike than you know.”

She turned pink and giggled. “Oh, you flatter me, Miss London.”

“I’m not flattering you. I mean it. We’re quite alike. And please, call me Genevieve.”

“Genevieve.” She said my name like it was the most foreign word she’d ever heard. I smiled to myself as she and I studied the shelter. “The fact that there aren’t any beds right now is proof that we need more shelters. No woman should have to flee her home, usually with her children in tow, only to show up on a doorstep that turns her away. It’s shameful.”

“Humiliating,” I said.

“On the business,” Tracey clarified.

“I knew what you meant.”

She smiled at me. It was a warm, confident sort of smile, and it was the first one I saw from her that wasn’t etched with nervousness. Then her eyes flicked over my shoulder.

“Daniel!” she cried. “Over here. Move your ass, will you? We’ve been waiting for you.”

Daniel, a tall, gangly, tanned-suit wearing young man with thick black glasses lumbered over to us. He had a folder in one hand that was vomiting out loose-leaf paper, and in his other was a silver coffee tumbler leaking black coffee down one side of his suit.

Poor kid. He was the definition of frazzled.

“Sorry, Tracey. Couldn’t get out of the office. Robert was on my ass about one of our other files.”

“It’s fine.” Tracey sighed, holding out her hand for the folder.

He slid it into her hand, and she opened it up to straighten the papers with a disapproving scowl. Her young assistant seemed to add more work to her docket than he did to alleviate it.

Daniel offered me his hand in a quick but firm shake. “Hello, Miss London. It’s nice to meet you. I really am so sorry I’m late. I know it’s a bad look. But you’re in good hands with Tracey.”

“I have full confidence in both of you.” I grinned, setting him more at ease. I caught the appreciative glance Tracey sent his way before she marched forward to the double glass front doors of the shelter and tugged one open. I walked through first.

The first thing that hit me was the smell.

It was akin to what a real wool coat might smell like if it was left out in the rain for four weeks and then dried slowly, locked away in a humid closet somewhere, collecting dust and the lingering smells of everything else in the room.

Cigarettes, weed, chemicals.

It wasn’t as pungent the farther into the lobby we got, but it was still there, tickling my nose.

Tracey marched right up to the front desk, where a rotund woman with purple glasses and an eighties perm received us

with a crooked smile. “Who are you here to visit?”

Tracey shook her head. “We’re not visiting anyone. I called in advance and spoke to a Laurie Clearbrook to let her know I was coming in with Miss London here. She wants to look at the place and see what’s what. She’s funding her own project to build another shelter.”

The woman behind the desk looked at me. Then looked me up and down. “Is that right, young lady?”

“It is.”

The receptionist grinned. “What a lovely thing to hear. And a good start to my shift. We need more good people like yourself looking out for these ladies. Nobody else is.”

“You are,” I said.

“Well, I do what I can, when I can. These old knees aren’t what they used to be, so it’s front-desk duty for me now. I don’t mind. Best seat in the house to see all the new faces and meet the little ones. Because there are so many little ones. More than ever, to be sure.”

I lifted my chin. “I want to build a place that they can feel at home at. Somewhere safe. And warm.”

The receptionist handed Tracey a pale pink lanyard with a laminated tag on it that said, “Visitor.” She passed two more out, one for me and one for Daniel, and then told us to take our time on our tour. “There’s a note that approves you from Laurie. So you just go right ahead.”

And right ahead was where we went.

Tracey led the way, and as we walked down narrow halls with mint-colored walls and fluorescent lighting, I found myself feeling anything but welcome.

This place felt like a hospital. Or a prison.

Or a healthy mix of both.

“Is this standard?” I asked, running a finger along the wall.

Tracey frowned at me. “What? Their terrible color palette?”

“And the lights. And the dankness. And the smell.”

Tracey shrugged. “No. Well, yes. But usually not in threes like that. Each building we visit today has its own set of issues, but they rarely compile into such a level of... unpleasantness.”

That was good to hear. I hated to think that every place a woman could run to in search of refuge would be this uninviting. At the end of the day, all they really needed was a bed, food, and water, and the rest was just luxury. But that was the problem, wasn't it?

These women were running from places that were like Hell. Some of them with their babies in tow. I wanted to create a place that made them sigh with relief as soon as they walked through my front doors. I wanted them to be able to look down at their children and promise them without a shadow of a doubt that things were going to be better for them. That they had somewhere they could stay to get their bearings and plan out their next step.

The tour dragged on, leaving me feeling hollow inside yet even more inspired by my mother's vision of opening her own shelter. Of course, this was a dream of hers from when she was young. My age. And back then, her vision wasn't as lavish as mine had become.

She'd always said I had a bit more dramatic flair than her and an affinity for all things sparkly.

And expensive.

“So what's the turnover like here?” I asked when the tour brought us back down to the lobby. We'd just passed the recreation room—a half-sized school gymnasium with exercise mats and little else—and the cafeteria. It was a sad, depleted-looking place, and women had been sitting at communal tables eating the lunch special: chicken noodle soup, baked bread, and cookies.

There was no way in Hell I'd be serving shit like that. Good for high schools? Sure. Grown-ass women who were already having a shitty run of things? No.

Tracey flipped through the documents in the folder Daniel had brought, and he peered over her shoulder. “After checking in, the women have seven to ten days in a bed, depending on volume and demand, of course. Children make it more complicated, too, because they won’t separate them from their mothers.”

“Of course,” I muttered, looking around at the chipped floors and the children’s toys piled high in one corner of the lobby. They reminded me of some of the sets at doctors’ offices to distract the little minions while their parents waited for their appointments. “And showers? Bathrooms?”

Tracey nodded and scanned the page. “Communal. All of it. No private bathrooms or showers.”

“We can do better,” I said confidently.

“I hope you don’t think this is overstepping, but yes, with your financial backing, you can definitely do better.” Tracey held her back straight and her chin high as she spoke.

I definitely respected her.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” I smiled.

Tracey turned toward the doors, and we waved over our shoulder at the receptionist, who returned our enthusiasm with a wave of her own. Tracey looked over her shoulder at me as she leaned on the wooden door panel and pushed. “Shall we head to our next shelter? Daniel, hail a cab for us—”

“*Move,*” the man on the other side of the door said.

Tracey stopped dead in her tracks, and I walked right into her back, letting out a startled little yelp of surprise. Daniel squeezed out from behind me as the door fell closed with a quiet whoosh.

“P—pardon me,” Tracey stammered, sidestepping to the right to get out of the way of the man.

But he sidestepped too, and she bumped right into his chest.

He wasn’t the sort of man a girl like Tracey, or me for that matter, wanted to bump into on the street.

He was mean looking.

I knew that was called profiling, but it was true.

He had a thick nose that was ridged in several places, sure signs of numerous breaks over the years. His ears were swollen and misshapen, another sign of a fighter if I ever saw one. He wore a tight shirt that I suspected used to be white. It was faded and gray now, boasting ketchup and mustard stains along the chest. His arms were as thick as his neck, and his eyes, narrowed and wicked, were fixed upon Tracey, who had now retreated a step back into me with both her hands up.

“Sorry,” she said.

I closed my hands on her shoulders and pushed her to the right so she was out of his path.

His nostrils flared, and had I not been so intimidated by him, I might have found it funny how much he looked like a bull in that moment. A big, hairy, mean, stupid bull.

But I *was* intimidated.

He leaned forward and got in Tracey’s face. “Watch where you’re walking, you little bitch.”

Daniel looked like he was going to spring a leak. I opened my mouth to tell him where he could stick his attitude, but he wasn’t done with Tracey.

“You work here?” he barked. She started shaking her head, but he wasn’t listening. “Where’s Annie?”

“I don’t work here,” Tracey finally managed to say.

“I said, *where the fuck is Annie?*”

He was high on something. I was sure of it. His hands were balled into fists at his sides, and reality slammed into me. He was here for his girl.

His girl who had clearly run from him. Why she’d want to run from a charmer like him, I had no idea.

Not.

“Excuse me,” I said, pulling Tracey farther away from the stranger, who I had no doubt was dangerous as hell. “She doesn’t work here. But I do.”

Tracey’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull. “Genevieve, I—”

I held up a hand to shut her up. It worked. Then I planted my hands on my hips, channeled all the bad-assery I could muster, and squared off with the asshole in front of me. “There’s no one named Annie at this establishment. I suggest you look for her elsewhere before the police arrive and take you away for trespassing and, if you don’t cool your jets, assault.”

He blinked at me.

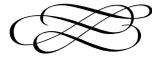
Stupid bull.

Then he lifted a hand to jab a finger in my chest.

But he never got the chance.

His index finger was inches from grazing the white chiffon of my blouse when he suddenly toppled sideways, slammed into the pavement, and let out a furious bellow as his assailant came in for round two.

CHAPTER 5



LIAM

“**B**astard,” I spat as my nails dug into my palms. “You were going to lay hands on a woman?”

The man at my feet was struggling to right himself. He was drunk, high, or had busted inner eardrums. Either way, he was unsteady on his feet.

“I’m here for Annie,” the man growled as his vision tunneled onto me.

I was familiar with guys like this. Big bruisers too stupid to walk away from a fight they sure as shit knew they weren’t going to win.

Like this one.

“I suggest you piss off,” I said, jaw clenching and unclenching in anger.

“Or what?” he challenged, finally straightening up to his full height.

He towered over me by a good three or so inches. He was wider, too, in shoulders and hips and general girth. His legs were solid as trees, his bare arms rippling in muscle, chest swollen.

Steroids, most likely.

But I was definitely stronger than a roid-monkey.

I stepped closer to him. “Or I’m going to make a mess out of you right here, right now, and keep you here until security gets their fat asses down here to handle their shit.”

He laughed.

It made me grin. To a passersby, I probably looked like a maniac. Hell, to the pretty girl in white behind me, I probably looked like an absolute madman, sweeping in out of nowhere to pummel this no good piece of garbage into the pavement.

But I craved this.

I needed it.

There was no walking away now. Even if security did finally get down here—if there even was any at this shelter—I probably wouldn't let him off the hook without breaking his nose.

Again.

It had definitely been broken a half-dozen times or more.

At least I couldn't make him uglier. Someone else had already done that job for me.

“You're picking the wrong fight, kid,” the man said, lifting his fists in front of his face and assuming a fighting position.

I remained relaxed, with my arms at my sides. No need to show my cards this early on. He could learn as he went. Or not. Didn't matter at all to me. Slow learners were always more fun.

I rolled my shoulders. “Let's see how you feel in a couple of minutes. Now, no more chit chat. I'm getting bored already.”

He bellowed and charged like a rabid animal just sprung from a cage. I sidestepped his attack and gave him a good smack with my open palm on the back of his head as he went barreling past me. He reeled back around, eyes wide, nostrils flared, teeth bared, and growled at me.

Actually growled at me.

I beckoned him to come at me again with a come-hither motion. He dropped his head and charged again.

Seeing no advantage in letting him bulldoze me over with his very large, hard head, I spun out of his way, rolling in

along his side to deliver two quick jabs to his ribs and another strike right between his shoulder blades.

He roared with anger. And to my delight, he charged again.

Like I said, the slow learners were always more fun.

This time, he switched tactics, coming to a halt and taking a wide swing with his right arm. Had he kept it tight and succinct, he might have landed a hit. But his arcing swing made it easy for me to anticipate, and even easier to avoid and turn against him. I went in at his side with three more rapid jabs and came up with a hook under his jaw, sending him sprawling onto the pavement with a grunt and a prolonged moan as he lay on his back clutching his chest.

I had knocked the air out of him.

Moving forward, I poked him in the ribs with the toe of my boot. “You done?”

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah. Well, fuck you too, asshole.” The sounds of heavy footfalls drew my attention, and I looked up to see two security guards in navy outfits coming out of the shelter. I clapped my hands together in applause. “Hey! Look at that! They *do* have security here. It’s your lucky day, pal. You’re their problem now. Not mine. Tell Annie I say hello.”

“Why you little—” He squirmed but it was futile. The guards were thunderous men, wide and thick and round and heavy. They held him down, strapped handcuffs on his wrists, and offered me breathless thank yous.

I had already turned toward the lady in white. My lady in white. Well, my dream lady in white. Whatever.

There she was, staring at me. Her sunglasses were off, and I finally got a glimpse of her eyes. They were exactly as I’d pictured them. Bright. Green. Ringed in gold and flecked with gray. Her skin seemed to shimmer with gold flakes the longer I looked at her, and for a brief moment, I was convinced this was all in my head and the asshat on the ground had actually knocked me unconscious.

And then she spoke.

“Well,” her voice was like silk. “That was reckless.”

“Me, reckless?” I asked, a little short of breath and very much unnerved by talking to such a beautiful woman. “You’re the one who lied to him and told him you were an employee here.”

She arched a blonde eyebrow, and her lips parted slightly.

God damn, she was beauty and sex incarnate.

I swallowed. “And about Annie not being here.”

She shrugged. “Well, I can honestly say I have no clue where poor Annie is. Or who she is, for that matter. But you’re right. I don’t work here.”

No shit. “You stuck up for a girl you didn’t know?”

She cocked her head to the side, and her long blonde hair slipped over her shoulder, beckoning for me to reach out and run my fingers through it. I wondered what it smelled like. Something elegant, probably. Like lavender or—

I stopped myself. *Too creepy, man. Too creepy. Reel it in.*

“I said whatever I thought would keep him out of there and away from Annie and the other women. And the employees. And Tracey here.” She nodded at the dark-haired woman beside her, who still hadn’t managed to comprehend what just happened. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water as she looked from me, to the man being hauled to his feet by security, to the lady in white, and then back to me.

The lady in white opened her purse and pulled out the sunglasses she’d been wearing when she first walked by the cafe. She slid them onto her nose and shifted her weight to her right foot, creating a dramatic wave of curves with her body for my eyes to follow. I willed them not to look, but damn it all, they did, and I liked what I saw.

If she saw me checking her out, she didn’t care. “Where did you learn how to fight like that?”

A woman like this would think poorly of me being in a motorcycle club, so I lied. “That? That was nothing. Just some stuff I picked up from boxing classes.”

“Just some stuff?” she asked, giving me a wicked little smile.

I gulped. Actually gulped.

The power she had over me was undeniable.

“Well, that stuff was impressive,” she said.

“Impressive?” I asked. “You were the impressive one. You didn’t even flinch when he came at you.”

She flicked her hair over her shoulder. “It’s not in my nature.”

Fuck me. She was hot. And fierce. And so far out of my reach it hurt.

She licked her lips. “Would you ever consider working security detail?”

My mouth worked before my brain fully processed her question. “Yes.”

“Good,” she said before letting her bag slide off her shoulder so she could rummage through it. She pulled out a sleek gold-plated container, popped it open like a little book, and pulled out a business card, which she handed to me.

I flipped it over and read the name printed on the front in classy slanted text. “Genevieve London.”

“That’s me.” She smiled.

The name suited her. Elegance and sex, all poured into one tall drink of water.

I watched as she dropped the business-card holder back into her purse and then took out her phone. She asked for my number, which she plugged into her contacts. Then she pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head to look me in the eyes. “I’ll call you and discuss possibilities of working together in the future when I have a bit more time on my hands. I’m

running around all day with Tracey and Daniel here, viewing other shelters.”

“How about I tag along?” I offered. “Consider it a working interview.”

“Initiative,” she purred. “I like it.”

How the stars were aligning to make me the luckiest son of a bitch in the whole damn city, I had no idea. But I wasn’t going to screw it up.

“I have no plans. I’m all yours.”

Genevieve nodded appreciatively. “Very well. We were about to catch a cab to the next site.”

“Let me,” I said before turning and stepping out toward the street, where I pressed two fingers to the corners of my mouth and whistled bloody murder.

We had a yellow cab in less than ten seconds, and as soon as it pulled to the curb, I opened the back door and gestured for her to get in.

She brushed past me and trailed her fingers over mine, resting on top of the doorframe. “I said security. You don’t have to open doors for me and hail cabs.”

“I want to.” *Do I ever want to.*

“Very well,” she said before ducking down into the seat. The others joined her, and I looked over the hood across the street to The Crow, where Jamie was still sitting at our table by the window.

We locked eyes, and she gave me a grin while shaking her head.

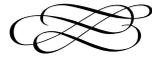
I shrugged apologetically.

Jamie waved me off and mouthed the word “Go.”

I grinned, hopped in the front seat, and swore to myself I would repay Jamie for this as soon as I had the chance.

Because this could potentially be the best thing that ever happened to me.

CHAPTER 6



GENEVIEVE

Tracey had her folder of documents open in her lap while she sat in the middle seat in the back of the cab. She was a thin woman with narrow shoulders, so I didn't feel cramped sharing the back of the cab with two other people. Daniel was pretty small too, but he had the self-awareness to cram himself tightly up against the door panel to avoid any potential scarring of his ego at his boss's hands.

Tracey was a no-nonsense woman. I appreciated that. But she still seemed a little out of sorts after our run-in with Annie's dumbass bull of a partner.

I put a hand lightly on Tracey's forearm. "Are you okay? You can take a minute, you know? You don't need to go through all this right now."

Tracey let the folder flop open in her lap as she looked over at me. "I'm sorry. I'm still a little rattled. I've never..." She shook her head.

"Me neither," I said, understanding what she was getting at.

Being in that position back there had been a first for me too. With my lifestyle, it was rare that I was ever exposed to a man like that. A beast. There was no other word for him.

It was also rare that I was rescued by a dashing young man with roguish good looks and a panty-dropping smile.

And dimples. The guy had dimples, for fuck's sake. My absolute kryptonite.

I spared a quick glance toward the front seat of the cab where my potential security guard sat facing out the windshield. I'd already caught him stealing a couple of looks back at us, but I hadn't said anything, and he'd spent the first ten minutes of the drive chatting pleasantly with the driver.

I bit my bottom lip. "So, what's your name, anyway?"

He looked back over his shoulder at me and fixed me with his bright blue gaze. His dark black hair was an untamed mess atop his head, but it suited him in a devil may care sort of way. He had sharp features, a strong jaw, broad shoulders, and arms made for pummeling bad guys. The muscle was decorated in dark, swirling, menacing tattoos that seemed a little out of place on him. His eyes were kinder than his appearance. That was for sure.

"Liam."

I nodded. "This is Tracey and Daniel."

Everyone exchanged polite hellos, and then Daniel got to asking Liam about his boxing skills. Liam indulged him in conversation until we arrived at our next shelter in a nicer part of the city. The street was thrumming with pedestrians and street performers alike. Music and laughter floated around my head as I stepped out of the cab and fixed my purse on the crook of my elbow as I got my bearings.

Tracey stepped out behind me. "To your right and two doors down, Miss London."

"Genevieve," I reminded her.

Tracey nodded apologetically before gracefully sweeping around me to take the lead. She clicked her tongue at Daniel, who fell into hurried steps at her side, and they bowed their heads to discuss something I, the client, was apparently not privy to. I assumed she was giving him shit about something or other. That was how their dynamic seemed to go.

I didn't realize Liam was right beside me until he spoke.

"So what exactly is it that you're doing?"

The sun dipped behind the buildings on the other side of the street, so I took my sunglasses off, secured them in the case in my purse, and nodded up at the shelter where Tracey and Daniel had both stopped. “I’m spending the afternoon canvassing women’s shelters in the city so I know where the opportunities are.”

“Opportunities for what?”

I flashed him a smile. “I’m going to build one of my own. A better one. A bigger one. One that doesn’t make women leave right away or run out of beds or get served shitty food because it’s all they are funded for. I’m going to create a haven.”

“Damn,” Liam breathed. “That’s a big project, isn’t it?”

“I have the funds and the resources to see it through.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

We stopped at the front doors, which Daniel pulled and held open for us. Then we stepped inside, me in the lead and Liam hot on my heels with the others following suit.

This shelter was somewhat more pleasant than the last. There was music playing in the lobby, a nice touch I thought, and it didn’t have such a strong odor. Yes, there was still a smell, but it was a mild one, and it more or less just smelled like musk, a place where a lot of bodies congregated.

I stopped in the middle of the lobby and looked up. There was a skylight straight above my head, but it was about six stories up. Balconies wrapped along the sides where doors to rooms, which I assumed were sleeping quarters, could just be seen from where I stood. I liked the open concept and the bright natural light, but I wasn’t so sure I liked the lack of privacy.

We were not permitted to walk through this shelter ourselves, so we were assigned a guide. Her name was Blaire. She was twenty. She’d just started working there last summer.

Blaire took us on a tour of the ground floor first. We walked across the open lobby, our shadows dancing along

beside us from the light of the skylight above, and we stepped through a double-wide archway into the cafeteria.

It was nearly noon, so employees were getting food ready, and there were a few women taking up seats at tables. A couple sat together talking softly, while others sat alone with their children.

I wished I could spare all of them this and reminded myself that in time, I would.

Blaire walked us along the cafeteria line, where I saw firsthand the selection of food being provided: mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, potato salad, rice, fruit salad, fresh veggies and dip, and soup.

“How does the shelter come by the food?” I asked.

Blaire turned toward me. “We receive it in donations.”

That made sense. Their money was being spent elsewhere. Luckily for me, I had money galore to offer better meals than this, and if all went according to plan, I’d be able to eliminate the whole cafeteria environment entirely, swapping it out for a more hotel-styled service.

Uncle Tom thought I was a bit delusional in my vision of my shelter and had told me at the beginning of last year that I might want to lower my expectations of what I was going to be able to pull off. Ordering a five-star meal to their room like hotel room service might not be in the cards.

But damn it, I was going to try my best.

After the cafeteria, we went to the rec room. It was a decent-sized room with a kids’ section set up in one corner boasting old toys and an even older television set upon which cartoons with no sound played. A couple of real-life kids were playing contently on one of the blue mats on the gym-style floor.

The rest of the room was for the women. Craft tables, books, places to sit near the window, three computers that were all turned off, board games, cards, and another television set.

Blaire clapped her hands together. “And that’s pretty much it in here. I can take you up to see one of the rooms now.”

“Is this the only common room-type area in the shelter?” I asked.

Blaire shrugged. “Sort of. On each floor, there is a small sitting area with a couple of sofas. In the morning, one of the employees rolls a trolley down the halls and stops at those spots to serve coffee, tea, juice, and pastries. It’s one of the women’s favorite parts about being here.”

I liked the sound of that. A nice personal little treat to kickstart the day.

The room Blaire showed us to was quite small and had four single beds in it. The floor was a gray linoleum and was peeling up in the corners. There were no baseboards. None of the bedding matched, and when I ran my hand over it, I found it to be a little too coarse for my liking, like a shitty motel comforter. Not that I knew firsthand what they felt like.

But I imagined this was it.

Liam hung back in the doorway and watched as I walked around, pausing to run my finger through the dust on the windowsill.

There was nothing else in the room besides the beds.

“How long are women able to stay here?” I asked.

Blaire clasped her hands together and gazed around at the empty beds. “It always changes. Sometimes, a week if the shelter is really busy. Sometimes, two or three if we can get away with it. We focus on rehabilitation as best as we can.”

“How do you mean?”

Blaire continued. “We want women to come here, and our goal is to help them get back on their feet and stop them from going back to the place they ran from in the first place. You won’t believe how many women end up going back. It’s—it’s devastating. You meet someone, and you connect with them, and you hear what they escaped from, some of them barely

with their lives, and then you come into work two days later and they've left. Gone back to him." Blaire shook her head.

"So, rehabilitation?" I pressed.

Blaire nodded. "Yes. The idea is to give them the tools to see that going home isn't an option. They've already taken the hardest step, which was leaving in the first place, and we are here to help them during the times where their resolve wanes. We're here to remind them how strong they are. We have classes and group therapy which seems to be making a difference, and we do our best to set them up with affordable housing when we can so they have a place to go. It's tricky because we don't want their husbands or partners to find out where they've gone, so it can take a long time to pull off. Lots of red tape."

For such a young woman and a new employee, Blaire was very knowledgeable, not to mention professional. When the time came, I wanted to have an employee like her in my ranks. She clearly cared about the women at this shelter. I could tell by the way her eyes had gone glassy when she talked about them going home.

"You have been extremely helpful, Blaire." I smiled, shaking her hand. "Thank you so much for taking the time to go through everything with me. You have no idea how much I've learned from you."

Blaire smiled. "I'm glad I could help. I think it's so cool what you're doing. You're filling a very big need in this city. The women who you're going to impact? It's unimaginable."

I fished a business card out of my purse. "Call me in a few months, okay?"

Blaire blinked down at it.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not trying to poach you. Well, that's not necessarily true. Just call me, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay. Thank you."

We said goodbye to Blaire and made our way back outside, where Tracey had to take a call from the next shelter we were going to see. It would be the last one of the day. She wasn't on

the phone long before she hung up and stomped over to me. “Sorry, Genevieve. We can’t see the last one today. They had an incident of some sort.”

“An incident?”

Tracey nodded. “They wouldn’t tell me about it. It had to do with one of their clients, I believe. Personal.”

“Oh, no worries. I feel like I’ve already soaked up a ton of information. Thank you, Tracey. And Daniel. You two have been expert guides for me today. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” they said in unison, smiling at me like schoolgirls.

I knew I had a certain effect on people. Marley said it was the money. Uncle Tom said it was a combination of the money and my regal, assertive, classy personality.

Uncle Tom was always trying to boost my ego.

After saying goodbye to Tracey and Daniel, I turned toward Liam.

“Well, looks like we’re calling it a day. Thank you for chaperoning us through the second shelter. I felt very safe.”

Liam grinned, and his dimples winked at me. I almost melted. “My pleasure, Genevieve.”

“I don’t know what else I can tell you about the job. It wouldn’t start until my shelter was up and running of course, which could be months to even a year away, depending on permits and licensing and insurance and all the other shit I need to sort out still.”

“You’re sure you don’t have a position for me now?” Liam asked, cocking his head to the side.

I gnawed the inside of my cheek. How bad could it be to have a guy like Liam on my speed dial?

“I could offer you an on-call position,” I blurted out.

He slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans and nodded approvingly. “I’d accept that. Call me any time. I’ll be there.”

His words made my knees tremble, and I realized I might be biting off more than I could chew. A man like Liam was a very large, very handsome, and sexy distraction. And distractions weren't what I needed right then.

But he and his body might also offer a great stress reliever.

I flinched at my own dirty thoughts.

I needed to get my boy-crazy mind under control before it ruined me.

CHAPTER 7



LIAM

The sun was shining, and the air was crisp when I pulled my bike up the drive to Axel's shop. One of the bay doors was open halfway, letting out the sounds of power tools and grinders to the street. There were several unrecognizable cars parked in the lot that told me Axel had his hands full, business wise. No wonder it had been so long since I saw him, up until the birthday party.

I swung a leg off my bike, hooked my helmet on the handlebars, and slid my hands into my jean pockets as I made my way up the drive to the bay door. I ducked under it and was plunged into darkness. I stood half blind, blinking until my vision adjusted, and then looked around the shop to wave at Ellie, Axel, Sabian, and Jamie.

Jamie was sitting on a stool at the back of the shop, sipping a soda while the rest of them worked on various tasks; priming a Corvette for paint, sanding a bike, pulling a motor. The usual things that went down at Axel's shop on a daily basis.

She wiggled her fingers at me and then patted the empty stool beside her.

Watching where I stepped, I made my way across the shop to sit beside my friend. I leaned over and shouldered her gently. "Sorry about Tuesday morning."

"About abandoning me for a hot piece of ass, you mean?" Jamie asked innocently.

Sabian looked up from where he was half buried under the hood of a black sedan. "Say what now?"

The others were stopping their work now too, except for Axel, who wiped his hands on a rag and nodded at Jamie. “You all take a break. I have to make a call in the office.”

After the door closed behind him, Sabian and Ellie joined us, and I found myself wishing I had somewhere to hide as they all fixed me with curious stares.

“Who’s the chick?” Sabian asked, his dark eyebrows lifted in curiosity.

Ellie crossed her arms over her chest. She was wearing a white tank top that was covered in oil and dirt. “Yeah. Spill the beans, Liam.”

I looked to Jamie for help. That was a mistake. She grinned broadly and turned toward the others. “Well, Liam and I had plans to go for coffee and sandwiches on Tuesday, you see. And everything was going smoothly until this woman dressed in white passed the window. He started drooling on the spot.”

“I was not drooling,” I said sharply.

“Your mouth might not have been,” Jamie retorted.

Sabian snickered. “So you ditched your lunch date in favor of another woman? That’s cold, man. Real cold.”

“Hey—” I tried to defend myself.

Ellie cut me off. “Did you at least score a date with her or something to make it worth it?”

I lifted my chin proudly. “As a matter of fact, I scored something better.”

“My man.” Sabian grinned, lifting his hand for a high five.

“Erm. That’s not what I meant. I, uh, scored a job.”

The three of them stared at me blankly.

Then Sabian burst into a fit of laughter so fierce, he was clutching his ribs and slapping his knee. The two women descended into giggles, and I sat staring coldly at the three of them, wishing I’d kept my good news to myself.

“You guys are jerks,” I mumbled.

Ellie dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her thumbs as she tried to rein in her laughter. She was having a hard go of it because every time she tried to talk, she had to stop to catch her breath. Finally, she recovered, took a few deep breaths, and met my eye. “Tell us about this job.”

So, I told them.

I told them about the guy who got in Genevieve’s face and how she’d handled it, and how I was there to save the day when he tried to get a little too hands on. I told them about the fight and the city workers and the tour and the cab ride. I told them about the shelters and her plans to open her own, and her interest in me working for her as security detail.

Sabian looked at Ellie and Jamie before turning his attention to me. “Security detail? What the fuck kind of experience do you have in security detail?”

I bristled under his skepticism. “I don’t need experience. I’m a natural.”

“A natural egomaniac,” Jamie mumbled under her breath.

I ignored her. “Listen. I showed that guy what was up, and she liked what she saw, okay? Things could have gotten very dicey if I wasn’t there, and she knows it. So what if I don’t have experience? Are you really telling me that if the girl of your dreams offered you a chance like this, to be at her beck and call at all times, that you’d seriously pass it up?”

Sabian shrugged. “I suppose not. I’d do anything for Angela.”

“Exactly,” I said, leaning back and folding my arms. “So, you three can just piss off and put your negative attitudes away. I’m stoked about this.”

“But you lied,” Ellie said.

“What?”

She sighed and rubbed at the back of her neck. “You lied to her. Did you not mention at all in there that you’re a Lost Breed?”

I frowned. “It didn’t seem like necessary information at the time.”

Sabian slapped his knee again. “Ha! Job my ass. As soon as she finds out who you are, she’s going to withdraw her offer so fucking fast, you—”

I scowled. “Shut up. No she won’t.”

“Won’t withdraw her proposal?” Ellie asked, looking at me the same way she looked at her kids when they did something wrong. “Or find out you’re a Lost Breed?”

I shrugged. “Both?”

Jamie groaned in exasperation beside me. “Bad idea, Liam.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, her tone all matter of fact. “She’s a lady.”

“Come again?” I asked.

Sabian knuckled my shoulder. “This is gonna bite you in the ass, pipsqueak. Mark my words. Chicks like this don’t want to hitch their wagons to guys like us.”

“I’m not asking her to hitch her wagon to anything.”

Sabian gave me a sly look. “But you want her to, right?”

“Well, I mean, if it happened, I wouldn’t have any complaints about it.”

“It won’t happen,” Sabian and Ellie both said at once.

They bumped fists proudly afterward, and then Ellie took over. “At some point or another, she’s going to see through you. Or you’re going to get yourself in over your head as her security detail. I mean, we all know you’re a good fighter. But so is Sabian. And if he’s saying this is a bad idea? Well, then it’s probably a bad idea.”

Sabian nodded his agreement. “If she’s as posh as you make her sound, she won’t want her reputation tied up with you anyway.”

My heart sank. This was bullshit. Absolute bullshit.

Fuck it.

I wasn't throwing this away just because my friends were seeing warning signs. I'd taken bigger risks than this before. What was the worst that could happen?

She finds out who I am, fires me, and I never see her again?

It was worth it.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," I said. "I'm going for this."

Sabian scratched the back of his head. "All right. But if this blows up in your face, don't say we didn't warn you."

"And if it doesn't?"

He shrugged and flashed me a smile. "Then you can tell me to eat my fucking words, pipsqueak."

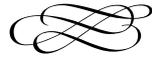
I grinned. "Sounds fair."

"Just don't bail on me again, okay?" Jamie piped up beside me. "I had to eat my sandwich by myself. And you know how I feel about sitting in places alone. It sucks. So awkward."

I turned to her. "It won't happen again. I promise. I'm sorry, Jamie. But really. You're the best wing woman ever, giving me the go ahead."

She tilted her head back to polish off the last few mouthfuls of her soda. "You bet your ass I am."

CHAPTER 8



GENEVIEVE

I poured the stagnant water out of the glass vase and set it aside to trim the ends of the bouquet of fresh white roses I liked to keep in the middle of my kitchen island. The rich floral scent filled my nose, and I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes as I ran the water and reveled in the moment of solitude standing at my kitchen sink.

My home was nothing short of extravagant.

It was an open concept, a non-negotiable for me, with a white theme. The walls were white, the floors were the softest shade of gray laminate that looked like wood but was a hell of a lot more durable, and all my countertops were sparkly white. Each room gave way to the next from the entrance, to the kitchen, to the dining room, to the formal sitting room, to the glassed-in outdoor area off the back sliding door where Marley was presently sipping a mimosa.

I'd be out to join her soon, once I finished my flowers. Originally, I'd come into the kitchen to pour myself a drink but had gotten distracted when I noticed a couple of wilting petals.

Ever since I moved out of Uncle Tom's house, I'd been obsessed with having fresh flowers in several rooms of my house. I absolutely had to have them in the kitchen and the bedroom, and if they popped up anywhere else, that was a bonus. I liked the feel they brought to a room and the fresh scent of nature. I liked their delicate beauty and would always choose flowers as decor over anything else.

My women's shelter would have fresh flowers, too.

Undoubtedly.

"What on earth is taking you so long in here?" Marley called as she padded through my living room and then through the dining room to join me in the kitchen. "I thought you were pouring us more mimosas. And mine is gone. Slacker."

I filled the vase with fresh water, dropped the flowers back in, and arranged them just so before putting them back in their silver mirrored tray upon the kitchen island. "Sorry. I got caught up."

"Pruning?"

"Yes. Pruning."

Marley giggled and opened my fridge door to help herself to the freshly squeezed orange juice and an already-opened bottle of champagne. *Real* Champagne. From Champagne, France. She poured me a glass as well and pushed it into my hands. "Drink."

I sipped the mimosa and relished the bubbly and citrus flavors before licking fresh pulp from my lips. "Thanks."

"Come on. Let's sit. If you don't come join me, that charcuterie plate is going to be completely gone and in my belly and we don't need that. You know this body of mine can hardly handle dairy anymore."

"You remind me on a daily basis."

"Well, it's bullshit, and I need a sympathizer," Marley said over her shoulder as I followed her out to my solarium. When we arrived, we plopped down into my lounge chairs with plush cream cushions and set our drinks down on the table between them.

"It could be worse. It could be chocolate."

Marley gasped. "You are so right. Or wine. I don't know what I'd do."

"You'd complain a lot more."

Marley swatted at me, and we both giggled. “Shut up. Now. Tell me how the tours of the shelters went on Tuesday. I feel like I haven’t talked to you in ages.”

“It’s been a week, hasn’t it?”

Marley nodded. “I’ve been working on a new logo for the business. I should have brought it for you to see so I could get your opinion. My design team likes it, but I don’t know. I don’t think it has the right vibe I’m going for. Too cutesy. You know?”

I didn’t know because I hadn’t seen it yet, but I nodded anyway. “Show me next time. Or email me.”

Marley nodded and drummed her fingers on the side of her glass. “I will. Remind me.”

Marley and I had been close ever since we were little girls. We used to play with the dollhouse my mother got me for my sixth birthday every day after school, to the point where Marley became more like a sister to me than a friend. She slept over on weekends, came on vacations with us, and partook in all family events.

And then my parents were killed in a car wreck, and everything changed.

Sort of.

She was still always there. But instead of playing with the dollhouse at the mansion, we played in Uncle Tom’s backyard until our knees were skinned and our shoulders were sunburnt. Uncle Tom learned how important sunblock was for kids the first summer he had me.

Without her, I never would have made it through losing my parents. So when I got access to my inheritance of fourteen billion dollars on my twenty-first birthday, I gave some of it to her. She refused the initial amount I tried to give her, which was three billion. She said that kind of money scared her. So we whittled it down to a comfortable million dollars to make her life easier.

Now she was using that money to keep herself afloat, have a nice place to live, and start her dream of owning her own

clothing retail store downtown. She had a clear-cut vision like I did for my shelter, and with the funds she had from me, she wasn't going to quit until it was exactly what she wanted.

And then I'd give her more money. She just didn't know that yet.

Marley leaned sideways in her chair. "So? The tour?"

"Right," I said, shifting in my lounge so I could face her directly. I took a sip of my mimosa before I started. "It went pretty well. I only got to see two of the three, which was a bit of a bummer. But it gave me a clear idea of what is missing and what works well. Which, if I'm being honest, isn't much. I met some pretty awesome people though. People I might want on my team when the time comes."

"Is that ethical? Poaching employees from other shelters?"

"I don't know. It's still something I need to think about. Staff makes it or breaks it, and I want my people to be as accommodating as my facility."

Marley nodded in understanding. "You'll figure it out. You always do."

The only reason I always figured things out was because I had two champions in my corner. Marley and Uncle Tom were my saving graces. "We'll see. There was some drama, too."

"Oooh," Marley drew her knees up and set her drink down. "Drama? Bitch, don't tease me like that. What happened?"

Hiding my smile was impossible. So I grinned like a fool the whole time I told her about Annie's jackass of a partner coming to drag her out of there, and how I'd stood up to him to defend Tracey.

Marley blinked at me. "What the fuck, Genie? He could have hurt you!"

"But he didn't. Because I had a knight in shining armor looking out for me."

"I beg your pardon? When did this become a Disney story?"

“His name is Liam.”

Marley narrowed her eyes. “Wait. What’s happening here? Who’s Liam?”

“The guy who swooped in and saved me from being assaulted by the asshole. Keep up, Marley.”

“Okay. Explain this again. I’m confused.”

I told her all about the exchange again and how Liam had come in, fists blazing like the hero of an epic adventure and saved me.

“He’s dreamy, Marley. Like, really dreamy.”

“I thought you were swearing off men?”

“I said he was dreamy. Not that I wanted to take him home. Jesus.”

Marley rolled her eyes at me. “Sorry. But whenever you get like this, that means you’re about to fall for some pompous asshole, all because he has a nice face.”

“Liam definitely has a nice face.” I giggled.

“You’re smitten,” she gasped, pointing an accusing finger at me.

I didn’t deny it. Instead, I sipped my mimosa and looked everywhere but at Marley as she sat bolt upright in her chair.

“I offered him a job,” I said.

Marley clapped a hand to her forehead. “This keeps taking turns I’m not prepared for. A job?”

“Yep. As my security detail.”

“Huh?”

Her bewilderment was a little fun. I couldn’t lie. I liked stringing her along like this and holding her in suspension. She secretly loved it, too. Marley was a sucker for gossip and drama, and we both knew it. Might as well let her enjoy it as long as possible.

“You heard me. A job as my personal security detail. He spent the rest of the afternoon with us on Tuesday as a

‘working interview’. His idea, not mine. And when all was said and done, I told him I’d contact him when I needed him. So basically, when the shelter opens. He pushed for more and asked if I was sure I didn’t have work for him now. So I suggested an on-call position.”

“How does that work?” Marley’s eyes were wide with excitement.

“Well, it’s pretty simple. You see, I call him. He comes. Just like that.” I snapped my fingers and then sipped my mimosa, feeling like the extravagant diva I was pretending to be.

“I want one.”

I threw my head back and laughed.

“I’m serious. I want one.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I said.

“I don’t care how it works. Call him.”

“What? No!”

“Why not? Let’s test this whole on-call thing and see how badly he actually wants this gig.”

I stared blankly at my best friend. Was she crazy? I had him fooled into thinking I was the professional who had my shit together. I didn’t want to break the illusion so soon. “I’m not going to call him to come guard us while we eat cheese and drink mimosas.”

“So let’s go out tonight then. Somewhere boujee. Like Kadia.”

“Kadia, huh?” I pursed my lips and considered the suggestion.

I hadn’t been out dancing in a while. Come to think of it, it had probably been about four months or so. I was so busy working on my shelter project that my social life had taken a back seat. Sure, I still spent tons of quality time with Uncle Tom and Marley, but aside from that, I was at home in my office or out and about in meetings, trying to get my foot in

the door with the city council. They were finally starting to take me seriously. I'd made leaps and bounds of progress over the last six weeks.

Maybe a night out with my bestie was just what the doctor ordered.

Marley drained the rest of her mimosa. "Call him. I'm gonna mix us some stronger drinks."

She pushed herself out of her chair, and I reached for my phone on the table by my drink. I scrolled to Liam's name in my contact list and frowned down at it.

Was this childish? Was he going to think me superficial for wanting an escort to a club?

Did I care? I had the money to pay him in cash for his services tonight. And it was a good chance to see what he'd be like in a different environment from Tuesday.

I pressed dial and lifted the phone to my ear.

His sexy drawl filled the line on the second ring. "Hey there, Miss London. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

My cheeks burned, and my skin grew hot. "I didn't expect to call so soon either."

"How can I help you?"

I swallowed. "My friend and I are going to Kadia tonight. I was wondering if you were free to be our escort?"

"*Wondering* if I was free? This is an on-call gig, isn't it? You call. I come. Of course, I'm free for you."

Of course, I'm free for you.

Swoon. "All right. I'll text you my address. Pick us up in two hours?"

"See you then. Do you need anything?"

"You're security. Not an assistant."

"I don't mind stopping on my way."

I smiled and bit my nail. "No. We're okay. Thank you, though."

His deep chuckle filled the line. “All right. Text me if you change your mind. Otherwise, I’ll see you in two hours, Miss London.”

“Thank you.”

I hung up the phone as the butterflies in my stomach swirled around chaotically.

Then Marley returned with two tequila shots and two mixed drinks, with contents I couldn’t decipher. She handed me my shot. “What did he say?”

“He’ll be here in two hours.”

“Perfect. That gives us time to have a couple more drinks and get ready. Do you mind if I borrow a dress?”

“Not at all. When do you not borrow one of my dresses when we go out?”

“Touché. Now do your shot.”

We tapped our shot glasses together and tossed them back to mark the beginning of the evening. Then, after another two drinks, we made our way to my bedroom suite where we kicked off the best part of any night out: getting ready.

She started with her hair, and I went in on my makeup. Then we switched. We spent the last half hour trying on dress after dress until we settled on our outfits for the night, and then we went back out to the kitchen to have one more drink before Liam arrived.

Liam.

I couldn’t stop thinking about him. He’d been in the back of my mind all week long. It was infuriating because I’d sworn off men. I wanted nothing to do with them right now. I had enough on my plate as it was, and the last thing I needed was a good-looking guy to sweep me off my feet in the middle of my dream finally being realized.

But every time I thought about how he took that asshole down outside the shelter, I got goosebumps. And I couldn’t turn my back on that.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 9



LIAM

I pulled into Owen's driveway at nine thirty on Friday evening. I had half an hour to be at Genevieve's house, and there was no way I would go there in my old pickup truck. I loved my baby, but it wasn't the sort of thing you drove to escort a woman like Genevieve London.

It had old red leather seats, for crying out loud. And a stick shift right in the middle of the cab which would be right between the legs of whichever woman sat beside me.

That was a delicious thing to think about, but it still wasn't doing me any favors right now.

So I drove to the MC member's house who lived closest to me, got off my bike, and hurried up to his front door.

I rapped my knuckles on the door and waited. There was movement inside. Soft whispering. Then the door opened a few inches, and Owen peered down at me. "What the fuck, Liam?"

"I need to borrow your truck."

Owen sighed and cast a glance over his shoulder back into the house. I leaned to the side, planning on waving innocently at Evangeline, but Owen pushed me back a step and stepped outside to close the door behind him.

"She's not decent," Owen grumbled.

He was wrapped up in a blanket and had no shirt on.

"Oh," I said. Then I snickered. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

“Bite me.”

“So. The truck.” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder at his brand-new black pickup in the drive. “Can I borrow it?”

Owen dragged his hand down his face. “What?”

All right. My timing hadn’t been that great. I’d just been the world’s biggest cock block, and now I was asking to borrow his shiny new baby.

“It’s for a good reason,” I told him hopefully.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. A girl. Well, two girls, actually.”

“Liam,” he groaned.

“Wait! Hear me out. So I ran into this girl on Tuesday, and she offered me a job as her security detail. She’s perfect, man. Like, this is the kind of girl you don’t see walking down the street. *Ever*. And I have a shot with her. But she wants me to take her and her friend to Kadia tonight and be their escort. You know my truck. I can’t show up in that and have her take me seriously.”

Owen looked me up and down. “You expect her to take you seriously?”

I winced. “All right. Point taken. Just... do me a solid? I’ll have it back by morning. I swear.”

“Uh huh.”

“I swear!”

Owen rubbed at his eyes before exhaling a deep breath. “Fine. You can take it.”

“Yes!” I threw my fist in the air in victory.

Owen held up his index finger. “However, there are rules.”

“Don’t scratch it. Yeah. I know.”

“And if one of those girls pukes in my fucking truck—”

“I’ll clean it before I bring it back. Yeah. I got it, Owen. Don’t get your panties in a bunch. Now I’m on a bit of a time

crunch here, so if you wouldn't mind grabbing me the keys?" I grinned, showing him all my teeth.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "If they throw up in my truck, you buy me a new one."

I barked out a laugh. Owen didn't laugh. He didn't even blink.

I swallowed. "Okay. No throwing up in the truck."

The older MC member shook his head for the duration of him opening the door, grabbing his keys from the hook on the wall, and dropping them into my open palm. "Have fun, Liam. Just don't be stupid. Okay?"

"Me? Stupid? Never."

Owen waved me off and retreated back inside, where I could hear Evangeline calling for him.

Maybe that was why he'd given me the keys in the first place. He knew what it was like to shoot for a girl way out of your league.

And get her.

Keeping that in mind, I jogged out to the drive, got in his truck, and put the keys in the ignition. I picked the right playlist on his blue-tooth system that I hoped the women would like and headed off to Genevieve's house, praying like Hell I hadn't sprayed myself with my cologne one too many times.

I'd been told on numerous occasions less was more.

Genevieve London lived in a hotel.

All right, that was an exaggeration, but from the outside, it sure as hell looked like one.

The house was white and one story with a terracotta roof that made it look like it belonged in Los Angeles, not New York. The windows were trimmed in white, and the gardens down below overflowed with colorful blossoms of dozens of varieties.

When I got out of the truck, crickets were chirping. The roundabout driveway was lined with soft lighting that lent the place a sense of elegance that matched that of its owner.

The front doors were frosted glass and etched with a vine-like pattern. I rang the doorbell, squared my shoulders, and hoped my black pants and black leather jacket would give off the right impression. I had no idea what I was doing, and that had been the best I could come up with on such short notice.

At least I had a jacket without any Lost Breed emblems on it. That would have been awkward.

Hey, Genevieve. It's me, your Lost Breed security detail. I'm a nice biker. I swear.

It wasn't Genevieve who wrenched the door open and grinned at me like she was going to eat me whole.

It was a young woman with very short blonde hair, giant gold hoop earrings, and glossy pink lips. She draped herself against the side of the door, crossed her arms under her breasts—which were already on display in her low-cut dress so now it was infinitely more difficult for me to keep my gaze trained on her eyes—and she looked me up and down.

“You must be Liam.”

“I am.”

“I'm Marley,” she said, holding out her hand to shake.

I shook it. “Nice to meet you. Let me guess. You're the other lady I'm escorting tonight?”

She winked. “You know it, sugar. Come on in. Genevieve isn't quite ready yet.”

I followed her into the house.

It took my breath away. I'd never stood in such a magnificent place before. The soft gray floors complemented the smooth, bright color scheme throughout.

I was in the middle of admiring the living room when Genevieve emerged from a hallway.

Like her home, she was done up in all white. It must have been her signature look.

The dress she had on was strapless, showing off her slender shoulders and sexy décolletage, which shimmered with every move she made. Her wrists jingled with gold jewelry that matched the chandelier earrings she wore that grazed the top of her shoulders. The dress was skintight, hugging her curves all the way down to the middle of her thighs.

“Good to see you again, Liam,” she purred.

“You too.” I nodded, grateful I’d been able to make my tongue formulate words. My brain was still trudging through the shock of seeing her looking so ravishing.

Even if there was puke in Owen’s truck at the end of the night and I had to buy him a new one, it would be well worth it.

Marley ran a hand over my shoulder. “Are you going to keep us safe tonight?”

“Uh,” I stammered.

“Marley, don’t toy with him,” Genevieve scolded.

It suddenly felt like I was in the middle of a porno, and I had a feeling Marley was fucking with me just for kicks. I shot a glance her way, and her sheepish smile told me I was right.

So I stepped into my role as security detail. “Are you ladies ready?”

They both nodded, so I stepped back and opened the front door for them. They passed through, and Genevieve paused to lay a light touch on my wrist. “Thank you for coming on such short notice. We appreciate it. I need a night out to let my hair down and have some fun.”

I bowed my head. “You deserve it.”

I didn’t know if that was true because I didn’t know her. But it felt like the right thing to say.

I saw them to the truck, opened the back door, and offered them my hand so they could climb into the back seat.

“Nice ride,” Marley said, running her hands over the black leather seat.

“Thanks,” I said as I slid into the driver’s seat. There was no sense in telling them it wasn’t mine, so I didn’t. “Kadia, here we come.”

I had barely pulled away from the house when Marley cried for me to crank the tunes. Apparently, the song on the playlist was her favorite, and she wasn’t satisfied until the speakers were literally jumping on either side of the doors with the bass.

I stole a couple of glances in the rearview mirror as I drove downtown.

Genevieve was singing along to the song, her lips curled up in a smile as she watched Marley rock out in the seat beside her. The two women played off each other, switching back and forth to sing certain chords, and when the chorus came in, they both belted it out.

Had the volume been any lower, I’d have been able to hear how terrible they both were.

I did my best to focus on getting us to the club. Stealing glances at my boss every two minutes wasn’t professional.

By the time we got to the club, I was high on their energy. I got them out of the back seat, and each of them hooked an arm through either one of mine.

Genevieve nodded at the entrance to the club. “I’m VIP.”

“Of course you are.” I grinned, walking forward purposefully with two of the most beautiful women in the world on either side of me.

This was the life.

The bouncer saw Genevieve and opened the red-velvet rope blocking us from the front door without asking for any identification or payment. We strolled right through, and Genevieve shot me a cocky look. “Being me has its perks.”

I could only imagine.

We moved to the door, plunged inside, and found ourselves surrounded by warm air, the steady beat of the music, and sweaty bodies.

“Come on,” I said, leading them through the crowd. “Let’s get you to your VIP table.”

CHAPTER 10



GENEVIEVE

“What’s this?” Marley asked when Liam came back to our table with a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket.

He clasped his hands in front of himself, assuming the standard security guard position I’d seen in every movie ever, and nodded at the bucket he’d just set down on the table. “I have a couple of connections here. Champagne on the house.”

Marley’s eyebrows inched upward, and she looked from him to me with an approving smile. “Connections? I like the sound of that. Don’t you, Genie?”

Every minute spent with Liam left me with more questions. “Do you spend a lot of time here?” I asked.

Liam shook his head once. “Not too much time, if that’s what you’re asking. I just know a guy. He’s security, too.”

“Right.” I smiled, reaching for the bottle and the two glasses he’d set off to the side.

“May I?” Liam offered.

I draped myself back over my seat and nodded for him to carry on.

Marley and I watched as he smoothly popped the top off the champagne and poured us each a glass. He passed us the bubbly, and when I suggested he go get a glass so he could partake with us, he politely declined.

“I’m still trying to impress,” he said, adjusting his black leather jacket.

Of course, he was. This was his first day on the job, technically.

Speaking of which, we hadn't negotiated any terms yet. Like his rate of pay. Or *when* he'd get paid, for that matter.

Kadia wasn't the place for such a conversation. I'd have to wait for a better time to sit down with him and map out the specific details of him being in my employment.

I felt so professional. I had someone in my employ. My first *ever* employee. So far, he was setting the bar exceptionally high with his level of professionalism and, well, how good he looked in the dark mysterious lighting of Kadia.

Marley slapped my hand. "More champagne for us, right?"

"Right." I smiled, sipping from the edge of my glass while holding Liam's gaze.

He was a looker all right. The sort of guy I was sure had done a number on more than a dozen naive girls like me. Girls who dreamed of princes coming to save them and whisk them away to a dream world where he was at their every beck and call, waiting, always waiting.

And I guessed Liam was waiting on me, too. He was my prince.

I shook my head. What a stupid thought. I wasn't one of those prissy girls. Not anymore.

When I was a girl, I'd dreamed those dreams. Then my parents died, and life became a nightmare, a place where fairy tales and heroic princes did not exist. I'd forgotten all about the musings of a child and had become a strong woman. I wasn't going to lose her now just because a cute guy made me feel some kind of way.

But damn. It was definitely some kind of way.

Weak knees, trembling fingers, tingling lips, hot cheeks, hot *other* things kind of way.

Marley downed the rest of her champagne and popped up to her feet. "I have to pee."

I stared up at her. “Oh,” I said when I remembered the girl code. I had to go with her. I stood up and smoothed out the skirt of my dress. “Liam, we’ll be right back.”

“I can come stand outside the door.”

I giggled. “Don’t worry. We’ll be all right. Why don’t you go get yourself a drink or something? Come find us on the dance floor later.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Dance floor?”

“Mhm.” I nodded as we grazed past him. Marley took my hand and led me down the stairs to the main level, where we swerved through bodies and dancers to make our way to the far side of the club where the women’s washroom was.

We made our way down a narrow hallway and away from the pounding music to slip through the door into the washroom, where we were assaulted with the high-pitched chatter of drunken girls.

The bathroom was as all club bathrooms were at this time of the evening.

Messy.

While some girls were locked in their stalls, their friends leaned against the door to tell them the latest gossip they’d missed out on over the course of the night. Some stalls had two or three girls in them. You could see their shoes under the door as they moved in a well-rehearsed cycle so that each of them had their chance on the toilet.

At the far end, in the full-sized stall, was a girl sobbing her heart out. The door was open, and one of her friends was down on the floor with her, plying her with water while the other retrieved paper towels to wipe the vomit from the front of her dress.

Yep. Pretty standard.

“Good luck,” I said to Marley as she ducked into a stall.

While I waited, I turned toward the wall of mirrors above the sinks. The whole counter was wet, so I didn’t put my clutch down after I fished my lip stain out of it. I tucked it

between my thighs and held it in place as I lined my lips and filled them in before rubbing them gently together to evenly disperse the color.

Marley called my name from the stall.

“What?” I yelled back.

“Liam is hot!”

I smiled and shook my head as I put my lip color back in my clutch. “I know he is. Stop ogling him.”

“I can’t help it. The boy is the devil incarnate. Those eyes. That body.” She pushed open the stall door, fanning her face. “He’s swoon-worthy.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“Who’s Liam?” Another girl emerged from a stall, hiccupping. She had a wild head of curly dark hair and a face of makeup that had probably looked a lot more polished about an hour ago. Before she got too drunk to walk in a straight line. She staggered like a giraffe on wobbly legs over to the counter and braced herself between me and Marley. “Who’s Liam?”

“He’s a guy I just hired,” I said, hoping this was as far as the conversation needed to go.

“He’s sexy,” Marley supplied.

I rolled my eyes. “Marley, stop it.”

“And dreamy,” she added with a wink.

The drunk girl gave me a goofy, droopy-eyed smile. “Is he?”

“Well, yes, but—”

The drunken stranger grabbed me by the arms and shook me hard. “You need to take him home and fuck him tonight.”

“Uh.” I blinked at her.

“Seriously,” she continued. “Trap his ass.”

“What?” I asked.

“Trap. His. Ass.” Every word was accentuated.

It still didn't help me understand. I pried her fingers from my upper arms and offered her a polite smile. “Thank you. I'll think about it.”

As drunk-giraffe girl staggered out of the bathroom, Marley and I exchanged an amused look. Then she washed her hands, fixed her face, and marched out of the bathroom to rejoin the crowds of the club.

The music broke over me in a wave, chasing away all my worries. The alcohol was finally hitting me, and I felt pretty damn good. My lips were starting to feel a little numb, which was a sign I should have some water and start pacing myself. So I went to the bar, ordered Marley and I both a glass of water, and made her drink hers with me. Then I got a single tall vodka-cran to maintain my buzz but not push myself over the top.

I had no interest in getting sloppy drunk. I hated not being in control.

Marley and I both had our lips pursed around our straws when two young men approached us at the bar.

The first, a tall, Ken Doll-looking guy with a bit of a receding hairline looked me up and down. “Damn, baby. I had to come over here and tell you how fine you look in that white dress.”

Where some men learned their pickup lines, I had no idea.

I didn't say a word.

The second guy, a shorter, boxier, edgier-looking jock, nodded at Marley. “I dig chicks with short hair.”

“Dig?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. “You ‘dig’ it? Really? How old are you?”

The men exchanged a look.

I offered them a smile. “Sorry. We're not interested. We're here to have a guy-free night, actually. I hope you understand.”

Ken Doll's shoulders slumped. I was actually kind of flattered by his disappointment. He raked his fingers through his hair and gave me a subtle nod. "Have a good night, ladies."

Marley nudged me in the ribs with her elbow. "He knew he was shooting too high."

"You don't have to be so mean," I scolded her.

"I wasn't mean. He said 'dig'. I couldn't leave that alone. Come on. You know me better than that."

It was true. Marley was the first to point out something she thought sounded silly. And apparently, his pickup line fell into that category. Though I had to agree with her. It had come off pretty weak and super skeezy.

Marley put her empty glass on the bar. "You ready to shake that ass or what, London?"

I sucked back the final few mouthfuls of my drink and set the glass next to Marley's before holding out my hand to her. "Let's do it."

The dance floor was packed. It always was at Kadia. This place drew out the real partiers who knew how to have a good time. The DJ was playing a kick-ass playlist and breaking the songs up at the perfect times to keep the beat fresh.

I didn't care that people bumped into me. I liked it actually. The physical contact was nice. In no time, Marley and I found ourselves dancing with a couple of girls, forming a ring and facing inward to ward off any unwanted male attention.

Drunk-giraffe girl was there, making eyes at me from across the circle and mouthing words I couldn't decipher.

I assumed she was still trying to convince me to fuck Liam.

The alcohol running through my system whispered sweet nothings in my ear.

It would be so good. What's the harm in a little nookie? Bodyguard and fuck buddy. That's as good a combination as mint and chocolate.

I was starting to feel a little hot around the collar when a pair of hands settled on my hips and spun me around.

A bearded face, hooded eyes, and sloppy mouth grinned down at me.

I pressed against the chest of the stranger trying to get me to dance with him. "Sorry. No thanks."

"Come on, princess. Just one dance?" His words were slurred.

Another two men had closed in on the circle and were picking out girls. One of them wanted Marley. She told him to piss off before putting her back toward him and reaching for me.

We were all spared the awkwardness when Liam slid between me and the guy with the beard. He didn't say a word. Just stood there with his shoulders squared and his chin lifted. I was practically invisible behind his size.

The men left.

Liam turned toward me, took my hand, and gave me a smooth twirl on the dance floor. I giggled as he spun me into him and found myself staring up into his handsome face. "You're really good at being in the right place at the right time, aren't you?"

He cracked a crooked grin. "I take my job very seriously, Miss London."

I liked how my name fell from his lips. "Please. Call me Genevieve."

He twirled me again, this time releasing my hand so I ended up beside Marley, who held my shoulders and stood by my side as we watched Liam slip off the dance floor and disappear back into the crowd.

CHAPTER 11



LIAM

A figure in all black sidled up to me beside the bar and nudged me with his elbow.

I glanced over at Caleb, my fellow MC member and security guard at Kadia, and nodded hello to him.

Caleb hardly looked at me. His eyes scanned the dance floors, balconies, and bar line ups looking for riffraff. He was good at his job. Always had been. He took it seriously, and when Caleb was on duty, things ran smoothly.

Well, except for that time Isaac Reed showed up. But you can't win them all, right?

"How's your night going, kid?" Caleb asked.

"Good." I pointed across the dance floor to Genevieve and Marley. "I'm here with them. How much better could it be?"

Caleb watched the two women dancing for a brief second. "Not bad, kid. Not bad."

I grinned sheepishly in spite of myself and checked the time on my watch. Nearly two in the morning. These girls sure knew how to party, and it didn't look like they were slowing down any time soon. Kadia was still bumping with high energy, and it didn't close for another hour, but I wasn't sure staying until closing was a good idea.

People got testy at the end of the night.

Guys were looking for fights. Women just wanted to get home. The crowds were intense outside, and it could become a

downright nightmare trying to navigate your way out of the place.

“I think I’m going to take them home,” I called to Caleb over the noise. “Thanks for the VIP hookup. It made me look good.”

Caleb clapped a hand on my shoulder. “No problem, brother. Anytime. Get home safe. I have to make another round.”

Caleb slipped away, and I wove through the dance floor to get to Marley and Genevieve. They were both dancing with their backs pressed together, hips rocking from side to side, arms above their heads.

Genevieve saw me coming, straightened up, and spun toward me. Her blonde hair stuck to her lip gloss, but she didn’t seem to notice. “Hi!”

I smiled. “Hey.”

She reached for me as Marley watched us. I caught her wrist before she grazed my face with the tips of her fingers. Despite how badly I wanted her to touch me, I didn’t want to move things along too quickly. Or when she was drunk.

“I think I should get you two home before the late crowd makes getting out of here a pain in the ass.”

Genevieve pouted. “Already?”

“We can stay if you want. You’re the boss. But it will be harder to leave, the longer we wait.”

Marley turned toward Genevieve. “I could go for a late-night snack and my bed. Not going to lie.”

Genevieve bit her bottom lip and looked back and forth between me and her friend. “Okay. On one condition. We go through a drive-thru. Somewhere with really greasy burgers.”

My kind of girl. “Let’s do it,” I said, offering them each one of my hands and guiding them along behind me across the dance floor toward the exit.

When we spilled out onto the sidewalk, all three of us stopped to breathe in the crisp night air. It was cold enough for me to notice Genevieve's nipples through her dress. Attempting to look more like a gentleman than I was, I shrugged out of my leather jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

Genevieve closed one hand around the collar, pulling it in close around her throat, and blinked bashfully at me. "Thank you."

We walked back to the truck together. I kept my eyes peeled for any trouble, but everyone outside was in high spirits.

We passed the alley alongside the club, and I peered down it, remembering the events that happened there. It felt like ages ago now. Isaac Reed. His brother. Caleb. Ryder nearly getting blown away.

And then Rhys putting a bullet in the man who killed our crew in Chicago.

The alley was full of chain smokers, dancers and drinkers who'd stumbled out into the night to take their drags and pass around some joints. Their laughter met us on the sidewalk and reminded me that everything with Isaac Reed was in the past. This place would always make me think of that night, but it was good to see it didn't hold the same bitterness for others. Strangers milled about carelessly, blissfully unaware of the shit that went down in this place.

The blood that was spilled.

I was thankful when we got to Owen's truck. We all piled in, and I pulled out into the street and pointed the truck back in the direction of Genevieve's house.

"Don't forget the drive-thru," Marley demanded from the back seat.

I locked eyes with her in the rearview mirror. "Never."

Marley and Genevieve shouted their orders at me as I drove through the first burger joint we passed that was open twenty-four hours. The worker inside, a young kid with streaks

of blue in his jet-black hair, gave me a half-hearted smile as he handed the bags through the window to me.

I twisted around to pass everything back to the girls, who ripped the bags out of my hands like dogs that hadn't eaten in weeks and set to tearing them open with their talons before descending upon the French fries inside.

Our drive back to Marley's was punctuated with the sounds of rustling bags and wrappers, chewing, and the occasional moan of contentment from the women in the back seat. I prayed like hell neither of them dropped a single French fry on the floor or, God forbid, dripped any form of sauce on the seats or carpet.

Knowing Owen, he would get in his truck and smell the fast food. My head was already going to be on a chopping block for that one.

But so long as there was no damage, he'd let me off the hook.

Hopefully.

"It's the next driveway on your left," Marley called after I'd turned down her street and passed about a half-dozen houses, all of which were neatly spread out in rows and nestled back on green lawns. I imagined this street was humming with the sounds of sprinklers in the mornings as everyone tended to their perfectly manicured gardens.

I stopped the truck in Marley's driveway, hopped out, and offered her my hand. She accepted it and stumbled out of the back of the truck. I steadied her and then helped Genevieve out. She threw her arms around her friend, wished her a good night, and then climbed into the passenger seat of the truck while I walked Marley to her front door to make sure she got in all right.

She rummaged through her tiny clutch for her house key as we stood on her doorstep, illuminated by a single light from above. "I know it's in here somewhere. Shit. Hang on."

"It's all right," I assured her, waiting patiently.

She pulled out a silver key and gave me a victorious smile. “Ah ha!”

“Well done.”

Marley hid the key between her palm and fingers and eyed me. “Thanks for looking out for us tonight. Well, for looking out for *her*. She needs someone in her corner. Someone she can trust to have her back through this.”

I frowned. Was she warning me or thanking me?

“I definitely have her back,” I said.

Marley nodded approvingly. “Good. Because if you don’t, I’ll come for you.”

I tried not to smile. Marley was doing her best to sound and look intimidating. She had her shoulders bunched up and was pointing an accusing finger up toward my face. She looked rather adorable and harmless, but if push came to shove, there was no telling what she was capable of to defend her friend.

I held both hands up innocently. “Consider me warned.”

Marley clapped my shoulder before unlocking her door and pushing it open. “Have a good night, Liam. Take care of my girl, okay? And if shit gets freaky,” she paused to flash me a knowing smile and leaned in close, half hanging out the doorway, “make sure she gets off too, okay? My girl has been with too many selfish pricks in the past.”

I blinked. “Uh.”

Marley waved me off. “Okay, bye! Have fun!”

She slammed the door in my face.

Make sure she gets off too?

If I ever got lucky enough to take Genevieve London to bed, all I would be focused on was making sure she got off. Fuck. A guy like me didn’t get those chances. And I didn’t consider myself a greedy person in the bedroom. Quite the opposite actually.

I walked back to the truck, painfully aware of Genevieve's eyes on me as I walked around the hood and climbed into the driver's seat.

"She tried to intimidate you, didn't she?" Genevieve asked, rolling her head to the side to watch me put my seatbelt on.

I chuckled. "She tried. I think she believes she is a much bigger, scarier-looking person than she is."

Genevieve giggled as I reversed out of the driveway. "It's part of her charm."

We drove the rest of the way to her house in comfortable silence. At this time of the night, where there were hardly any cars on the road in the residential areas, it only took us ten minutes to get to her place. When I parked the truck, she was already taking her seatbelt off and turning toward the door.

She didn't wait for my help out of the truck, and as we walked to her front door, it was obvious that the alcohol had worn off. I'd watched her intake all night long. Marley nearly doubled the amount Genevieve drank, and Genevieve broke her drinks up with a glass of water almost every time.

When we got to her door, she had removed my jacket to give it back to me and her keys were already in hand. She slid them into the lock, gave them a twist, and pushed the door open before turning toward me. She was bathed in warm light flooding out of her home, painting her tanned skin in an amber glow.

She looked quite literally like an angel.

"Thank you for everything tonight, Liam. I would consider your first shift a success. When I'm a little more refreshed, we will need to sit down and discuss the terms of your employment with me. Wage. Hours. Expectations on both sides. Does that sound all right to you?"

"More than all right."

Her lips curled upward in a delicate smile as she twirled her keys in her hands. "Excellent. We'll try to make it happen this week."

I was putting on my jacket and about to respond when she lifted her face to the stars, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. For a moment, she seemed to have completely forgotten I was standing there. And that was okay by me.

I watched her breathe. I watched the way a content little smile played on her lips and how all the muscles in her body seemed to relax.

Then her eyes fluttered open, and she blushed a pretty shade of pink. “Sorry. I just had to steal a moment. It’s been so nice to get out tonight and not have to worry about things. It’s going to be a big week. I have meetings with some important people, and I think having you with me might make them take me more seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “I’m young. I’m female. The men in the room think I’m a flake. They think I’m bringing nothing more than a child’s dreams to the table. That’s been my biggest obstacle. Convincing people that I’m here to stay and I’m going to make this happen one way or another. If I show up with you, maybe that will make them see me differently.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. She had to fight harder simply because she was young and female? That didn’t sit right with me. Especially since I’d gotten to know her a bit and could tell she was clever, compassionate, and driven. All she wanted was to do some good in this city. And she had the means to do it.

Why shit on her for it?

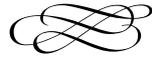
I lifted my chin. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

Genevieve’s lips puckered as she chewed the inside of her cheek. “Whatever I need?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes danced back and forth between mine. The air around us suddenly felt hotter as she moved from the doorway to join me out on the front step. Then, like it was all happening in a dream, she reached for me, took the front of my jacket in one hand, and drew me toward her for a warm, soft kiss.

CHAPTER 12



GENEVIEVE

*W*hat am I doing?

The leather of Liam's jacket creaked in my fist as I tightened my grip.

This was not the kind of girl I was. Never had been. I was the girl who sat with her knees pinched together, back straight, looking pretty while I waited for the guy I liked to catch my eye. And after, I'd give him a flirty smile, and undoubtedly, he'd wander over, and we'd start chatting. Flirting. Kissing.

Whatever.

This was different. I'd seized the reins before I knew what I was doing, and in seconds, my lips were on his.

And *damn*. Was it ever a kiss.

At first, Liam had stood there, perhaps a little paralyzed by the quick turn of events. I could see where he would be thrown off. I was his boss, after all. Sort of.

Wasn't I? Was this wrong?

How many lines was I crossing? Was I going to scare him off? Was this what he wanted? Was he only kissing me back because he wanted this job?

Stop it.

Liam was into me. I'd known it since the first second we locked eyes in front of the women's shelter on Tuesday. The chemistry was there, and I didn't know what it was about tonight that made me want to kiss him so badly, but there we

were, kissing. I wasn't going to ruin it by getting in my head about it.

I was going to enjoy it.

And whatever came next.

Liam's hands ran up my sides as the kiss became something more. It deepened, his tongue plunged into my mouth, and my breath caught in my throat as I drew myself even closer to him, crushing my breasts against his firm chest. His masculine scent filled my nose; cedar and sandalwood and something citrus I couldn't place. Grapefruit, perhaps. He tasted like Tic Tacs and lemon.

Maybe he had been hoping this would happen tonight. That would explain the minty freshness.

Suddenly, he pushed his hands against my shoulders and forced us apart.

I stood reeling in the aftermath of the most passionate kiss I'd ever had and pressed two shaking fingers to my tingling lips. "I'm sorry," I breathed.

He shook his head sharply. "No."

"No?"

"Don't be sorry. I just..."

"Just what?"

"Want to make sure you're okay with this."

"I kissed you," I said incredulously.

"Yes, but—"

It was my turn to shake my head. "*I kissed you.*"

The way he was looking at me made my blood rush in my ears. He looked at me like I was the most incredible thing he'd ever seen. Like I was the sun itself. Like I provided the air he breathed.

Yep, I was done for.

With a primal growl I didn't realize came from my own throat, I grabbed his jacket again, pulled him to me, and kissed

him as I walked backward into my house, dragging him in with me.

He was on board.

He kicked my front door closed and shrugged out of his jacket. It fell to the floor, where we abandoned it as we made our way deeper into my house. Most of the lights were off, save for the under-cabinet lighting in my kitchen, which cast just the right amount of light to throw half of him into shadow, making him look like the starring lead in a high-budget film.

He was so drool-worthy.

Hollywood-worthy, too.

Liam wrapped both hands around my hips to reach behind me and give my ass a good firm squeeze. I giggled into his mouth and felt him smile in return. Then he pushed me away, spun me around, and tugged me back into him, somehow managing to finish with both hands still on my ass.

He squeezed again while he nudged my hair to the side with his chin so he could press his cheek to mine. “Do you have any idea how sexy you are, woman?”

My panties were goners. I pinched my knees together and arched my back to press my ass into his crotch.

Oh yeah. A serious panty melter.

I reached back to cup the back of his neck and sink my fingers into his thick black hair. My breath rushed between my lips as my pulse thundered in my ears. The pressure of my very tight dress on my nipples was almost intolerable.

Liam left a trail of light kisses down the side of my neck and across my shoulder. My eyes practically rolled back in my head as I lifted my face up to the ceiling to lean more heavily against him. He chuckled deeply. I could feel the vibration of it in my back as he ran his hands over my hips and across my tummy, where he tugged and pulled gently at the fabric of my dress.

Then his touch wandered around behind me, and he fished for the zipper of my dress and, inch by inch, began drawing it

open.

My skin was on fire. Every inch of my body screamed for him as my brain went on autopilot. His knuckles grazed the bare skin on my back as he drew the zipper all the way down to where it ended right above my ass, where he slipped both hands under the fabric to run them down my bare ass.

“No panties?” he asked in my ear. “I didn’t expect that. You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

I tried to think of something clever or sexy to say, but my mind drew a blank. The only reason I didn’t have panties on was because this dress was so damn tight, it showed every line and crease of any undergarment.

That was also why I wasn’t wearing a bra, and the only thing between him seeing my complete and total nakedness was the white fabric that barely clung to my shoulders.

I turned back toward him and rested my hands lightly upon his chest. I could feel his heart beating rapidly beneath my right palm as if it was dancing in unison with mine. Then slowly, he reached for the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head with one hand. The thin fabric of his tee whispered under my palms until it was gone, and all I could feel was hot smooth skin pulled tight over swollen, thick muscle.

I swallowed. “Wow.”

Liam was, for sheer lack of a better expression, a work of art.

His shoulders were thick and chiseled, giving way to defined biceps and triceps that were hidden under snaking tattoos that reached nearly down to his wrists on both arms. His abs looked as if they were carved out of flesh-colored stone. A dark trail of hair wove around his navel and plunged beneath the waistband of his jeans between hip bones that created a perfect V that already made my toes curl.

I watched, paralyzed by his magnificence, as he undid his belt. The buckle jingled and the leather hummed when he pulled it out of his belt loops. Then he popped open the button of his fly with his thumb and drew down the zipper.

I licked my lips and reached for him as he went to pull down his pants. I couldn't wait any longer.

Our lips met in a frenzy of exploratory kisses. We tasted every crevice of each other as I began walking backward, pulling him along with me with one arm hooked around his neck. His jeans slid down his hips as he walked, and soon, he was half waddling, half stumbling after me, but neither of us had half a mind to stop and take the pants off.

We kept going until the back of my legs hit the side of the sofa.

When we broke apart, neither of us could catch our breath. Liam slipped the straps of my dress off my shoulders. Had it not been so skintight, it might have slid down. But it stayed in place.

I took over, hooking my thumbs in the top of the dress and drawing it down, exposing my tits first. They sprang free from the confines of the dress, which made them look a lot smaller than they were. Having big boobs at a club could be a real bitch sometimes. For starters, they were in your way, and secondly, they attracted too much attention. I preferred to keep them a little strapped down on nights where I was out dancing.

Liam didn't wait for me to have the dress all the way down before he descended upon my breasts with eager hands and a greedy mouth. He drew my nipple into his mouth, suckling gently and flicking his tongue over the sensitive nub as he worked back and forth between the two. As he kissed and licked and nibbled, I wiggled my hips and pulled the dress down the rest of the way until it fell around my ankles.

I stepped out of it, and Liam took his first look at me.

He rubbed the back of his head as his eyes wandered up and down the length of my body not once, not twice, but four times.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

I reveled in the attention. I knew the effect I had on men. I worked hard for this body, and I treated it right. On a daily

basis, I was the one who reaped the benefits. But tonight, it was all for my sexy new security guard.

“You’re perfect,” he said.

“You already got me naked. You don’t have to keep trying to win me over.”

Liam flashed me a devilish smile. “Is that what I’m trying to do?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, running my index finger down the middle of his chest. I looked up at him and batted my lashes. “Is it?”

“Turn around.”

I turned. Liam plunged a hand into his pocket and pulled out a condom. If I wasn’t so turned on, I might have teased him for coming to his first day of work armed and ready for a sexual encounter.

I heard him shimmy his jeans down. Then I heard the distinct snapping sound of his boxers against his skin as he tried to pull them off.

I wanted to look. *Had* to look. He’d seen *me*, after all. No way was he getting this thing started without me stealing a peek.

So I looked down over my shoulder. And there he was. Erect and ready. Swollen. Slightly curved up to his belly button.

I watched him roll the condom on as my stomach swirled with excitement and lust. Without thinking, I leaned forward and braced myself with both hands on the armrest of my sofa, and then I spread my legs shoulder-width apart.

Liam chuckled as he stepped in close behind me. “We can go to the bedroom if you prefer.”

No. No more waiting. I wanted his cock there and then. I wanted him to take me. To make me his. Just for a little while. Every fiber of my being needed to know what it was like to be fucked by a man like him.

“Here,” I whispered.

Liam obeyed. His hips arched forward, and he took his cock and pressed it between my legs. I let out a breathless moan of pure primal desire and hung my head, waiting for him to slip inside me. I was wet. I could practically feel it running down my legs.

Liam’s cock pressed against my opening. He applied more pressure and eased gently inside me, stretching me, filling me, sending me spiraling into a world of dizzying stars and pleasure and lust.

“Yes,” I breathed as my nails bit into the fabric of my sofa. “More.”

“You asked for it,” Liam growled behind me.

He filled me up.

I sighed with delight and arched my back, pressing my ass against him, daring him to go deeper. He did. Then he rocked himself gently, pushing in and out of me, warming me up for the delirious fuck session that was about to follow. I was ready for it.

Liam gathered a fistful of my hair in one hand. I let out a delighted, throaty laugh as he pulled hard to hold my head against his shoulder. All the while, he continued fucking me nice and slow. He turned my head to the side to press his cheek to mine, and as he quickened his pace, he pressed kisses and nibbles to the side of my neck that nearly pushed me over the edge.

His thighs slapped against the back of my legs. His speed quickened.

My grip on the sofa tightened to the point where I thought one of my acrylics might snap right off. I wouldn’t have cried. It’d be worth it.

“Harder,” I pleaded through clenched teeth.

Liam released my hair, only to wrap his arm around my chest, still holding me firmly against him. His forearm rested against my throat, making it hard but not impossible to

breathe. I released the sofa to clutch at his arm as he pinched my earlobe between his teeth and fucked me wildly. Had he not been holding on to me, I surely would have lost my balance.

And as my climax built below my belly, I knew I only had seconds before I came undone.

My eyes rolled back in my head, and I melted against him, yielding to him and his body and his cock and how good it all felt.

“Your pussy is so fucking tight,” Liam growled in my ear.

That did it.

His words and his hot breath on the side of my neck broke me.

I crumbled in his arms, and he held me up as I came hard and fast. My legs trembled, and my knees buckled. As the world spun around me and pleasure tore through every inch of my body, Liam pushed me forward, bending me over the armrest of the sofa and holding me there with a hand planted in the middle of my back.

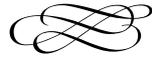
He bucked against me until my orgasm abated, and he didn't relent until he earned a second one from me. At the same time, he groaned behind me and gave in to his own release.

When he pulled away from me, it took all my strength to stand up and stay on my feet. All I wanted was to lay down and put my head on his chest.

Liam grabbed my forearm and pulled me to him, where he devoured my mouth with more ravenous kisses. Then he stroked my cheek with one hand. “Meet me in your bedroom. I'm not done with you yet.”

Hiring him had been the best decision I'd ever made.

CHAPTER 13



LIAM

What was that smell?

Roses? Lilies? Something floral, soft, and delicate. It wasn't overpowering or all-consuming, but rather a gentle scent that flooded my nostrils as I woke that morning.

When my eyes opened, it took me a minute to process everything I was seeing.

Big bay windows framed in sheer white curtains that let the sun in. A balcony through a set of inset glass doors pouring over with plants. A room of white walls, minimalist pieces of art, white furniture, fresh flowers, and the occasional unlit candle on some surfaces.

I rubbed at my eyes with the heels of my hands and remembered everything that happened last night after I brought Genevieve home from Kadia.

Dropping Marley off.

Drive-thru burgers.

And then getting back here.

And having the best sex of my life for nearly three hours.

I smiled to myself. What a good fucking night. Genevieve was out of this world beautiful, and when she was on top? God, I'd never seen such a spectacular thing.

I rolled over to wish her good morning but found her side of the bed empty. Puzzled, I frowned and sat up, peering around her sprawling bedroom quarters for some sign of her.

She wasn't there. She wasn't through the open door into her bathroom, either. The light was off, and there was nothing but silence.

And then I heard something down the hall at the other end of her home, from the kitchen.

Still groggy with sleep, I tugged the covers down and sought out my clothes, which were folded up on a chaise lounge at the foot of the bed. Genevieve must have retrieved them from the floor—from the front door to the living room—sometime this morning and set them aside for me. After I dressed, I paused to steal a glance at myself in the mirror above her vanity. I raked my fingers through my hair a few times to tame the wild case of bedhead I had, and once I was satisfied that it was as good as it was going to get, I left the bedroom to seek out the woman of my dreams.

I found her in the kitchen.

She had her back to me and was frying up some scrambled eggs in a pan while she delicately sipped from a mug of something steaming. I couldn't tell if it was tea or coffee. She was dressed in an ankle-length, sheer white robe, and underneath, she had a silky white slip. Her feet were bare, her hair was down and still wet from her shower, and as I approached, I could smell coconut on her skin.

“Good morning.”

Genevieve let out a startled breath and looked wildly in my direction. “Oh. Good morning. I didn't hear you coming.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

“I'm not startled.” She blushed. Then she set the spatula down, went to the corner of the counter, and reached for a pot of coffee. “Can I pour you a cup?”

“That would be great,” I said, sliding onto a bar stool at her kitchen island.

I watched her make me a cup of coffee. When she asked how I liked it, I told her black, no sugar, and she brought the mug over to me. I sipped from the edge and enjoyed the rich, earthy flavor.

This was likely the most expensive cup of coffee I'd ever had.

"Eggs?" she asked, picking up the spatula once more and giving the eggs in the pan one final stir.

"Sure," I said, never one to refuse free food. I watched her fill up two small plates and add a dash of salt and pepper to the eggs. Then she spooned salsa onto hers, offered me some, and did the same to mine. Then she came and sat down beside me, sliding a plate and fork to me. I dug in. "Thanks. This is good."

"You're welcome."

I chewed and swallowed and repeated.

I couldn't tell if this was awkward or not. Did she wish I wasn't there? Did she feel like she had to do these things because I'd spent the night? Or did she genuinely *want* to do them?

I cleared my throat. "Genevieve, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spend the night. I just fell asleep and—"

"Please don't apologize."

I blinked at her.

She smiled and covered her mouth with one hand as she swallowed a particularly large bite of her breakfast. "After such a... vigorous evening... it's perfectly understandable that you fell asleep. I, for one, slept like a baby."

Her cheeks were bright red, and I was fairly certain she'd never looked more adorable. I chuckled. "Well. That's good then. Right?"

"Right."

I polished off the rest of my eggs and leaned back. "I still think it might not have been the most professional move of me to sleep in my boss's bed my first night on the job."

She paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "Maybe your boss didn't want you to leave."

So the eggs and the coffee were done because she wanted to do it.

At least I could safely assume that now.

How I was the guy who'd ended up here, I still had no idea.

I was used to casual backyard soirees with red solo cups, cheap beer, and dinners of burgers and hot dogs on the grill. If I was lucky, one of the other MC members' wives would have brought a dessert of some kind. Ellie made a killer lemon meringue pie that all of us would literally fight over, and Holly treated us to an old family recipe of brownies when she was feeling keen in the kitchen.

But this was a whole different ball game.

Genevieve was elegance and class and her home was too. I'd never been in a house this lavish. Her kitchen was the stuff of interior-design magazines and gourmet-chef shows. Glittery white countertops caught the light above and dazzled from every angle. The crisp white cupboards were spotless and made the place feel huge. Her fresh flowers on the counter gave the kitchen a personal touch, and I couldn't help but think of what it might be like to have grown up with this kind of money.

Her upbringing would have been a hell of a lot different than mine. That was for sure.

Genevieve caught me scoping out her place as she collected our plates and slid them into the dishwasher. "It's a bit much. I know."

"What?" I asked hurriedly. "No, it's beautiful."

She smiled as she closed the dishwasher with her hip. "My taste can be a bit indulgent."

"You designed this yourself?"

She shrugged. "I picked the color schemes and countertops and finishing touches. The team I hired did all the hard work and made everything flow together. I won't lie. We had to change a couple of things I wasn't happy with."

A woman like Genevieve London always got what she wanted. I was sure of it.

She ran her fingers through her wet hair and shook it out. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, I’m all right. Thank you. I should probably get out of your hair. I’m sure you have a lot going on today.”

“I have the day off, actually.”

“Ah, even more reason for me to clear out and—”

“I wanted to go to the farmers’ market.”

Okay. Farmers’ market. Was that code for something else?

“Sounds fun,” I said.

Genevieve gave me a coy little smile and cocked her head to the side. “I would like to have an escort. If you’re available today, of course.”

“I am,” I said quickly.

She grinned. “Excellent. You’re more than welcome to have a shower if you’d like. There are extra towels folded up in the cubby beside the shower. Help yourself to whichever soap and shampoo you like.” She pointed toward the bathroom off the hall—the guest bathroom.

It felt a little odd accepting the offer, but if I was going to go out and spend the afternoon with her, I most certainly wanted to shower first.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I have to finish getting ready anyway. Take your time.”

I thanked her and made my way to the bathroom.

It was as sparkly clean and sophisticated as the rest of the house. The shower was double wide with pristine, floor-to-ceiling glass doors. The white tile on the floor and walls of the shower was lined in black grout, giving it a modern but edgy feel. I turned on the water, hung up a towel, stripped naked, and stepped under the rain shower to enjoy the best water pressure of my life.

Somehow, it even smelled like a spa in there. Like cucumber and eucalyptus.

At least, that was what I imagined a spa might smell like. I'd never set foot in one before.

When I was finished in the shower, I slicked my hair back, helped myself to the men's deodorant and cologne on a tray on the counter, got dressed, and went back out into the kitchen. Genevieve wasn't there yet, and I assumed she was still getting ready, so I waited patiently, trying my best not to get too nosy and indulge my temptation to wander around her place.

Lucky for me, I didn't have to wait long.

Genevieve came out wearing a pair of blue jeans, white sneakers, and a white pullover. She looked just as sexy in her casual wear as she had the night before in her fitted white dress. Her hair was wavy and dry, and she had no makeup on that I could tell, save for a swipe of shimmery pink gloss on her luscious lips.

"Ready?" she asked as she brushed by me and picked up her purse from the end of the counter.

I hopped to my feet. "After you."

We went out the front door and I found myself staring wide-eyed at Owen's truck in the driveway.

Right.

The truck.

Shit.

He was going to have my head for not bringing it back when I promised I would. Genevieve walked to the passenger door and stopped, waiting for me to unlock it. Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I unlocked the door, opened it, and held out my hand to help her out. I closed the door behind her and mumbled to myself as I walked around the hood.

"You dumbass. He's never going to let you borrow it again. And you're going to have to explain to her where the fuck the truck went."

I needed to get a new set of wheels.

Maybe Axel could hook me up with something. He was always connected with people moving cars. Surely, there'd be something in my price range that wasn't too flashy but was nice enough to drive a woman like Genevieve around the city in.

"Is everything all right?" Genevieve asked as I backed out of the driveway.

"Of course." I smiled tightly.

She and I had yet to spend any real amount of time together, and my lie was already getting hard to keep up with.

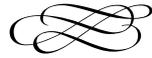
Maybe the guys were right. Maybe I never should have kept it from her that I was a Lost Breed.

I was in too deep now. If the right time came along, I'd say something.

If not...

Well, I'd jump that bridge when I got to it.

CHAPTER 14



GENEVIEVE

I was playing with fire.

I knew it. Liam probably knew it too.

He didn't need to be at the farmers' market with me. Really, who needed a security guard to watch their back while they pored over fresh produce and handmade goodies?

Sure, a real celebrity might, but little old me?

Not a chance.

Nobody was going to try something unsavory with me at a place like the market.

People were too busy finding the perfect zucchini or loaf of freshly baked bread. Their hands were full with mountains of treats and veggies for their fridges for the week ahead. Children ran around playing games of tag and hide and seek while the live band sang cover songs up on the stage in the middle of the market. All the tents provided shade and cover from the sun, which wasn't as hot today as I thought it might be.

There was a real chill in the air that afternoon.

I stole a look at Liam, who was hanging back as I looked at handmade jewelry at one of the tents.

He was dressed in the same thing he'd worn to the club last night: his dark pants, black tee, and black leather jacket. He had aviators on, which I saw him grab from the glove box of his truck. They looked good on him.

Hell, they looked *great* on him.

He looked exactly like the kind of man any parent with eyes would warn their daughter to stay away from.

Liam was a bad boy through and through. And it was getting to me.

He was carrying one of my bags for me already. I'd picked up a head of lettuce and a squash to make soup, as well as some onions and red peppers. The leafy head of lettuce was half draped out one side of the bag, but he looked less than bothered holding it for me. He scanned the market like a faithful watchdog as I mused over the jewelry.

The young woman, who made everything herself, smiled up at me from where she sat on the other side of the booth. "Is there anything you'd like to try on, miss?"

My eyes were drawn to a pendant hanging off the fake neck of one of her displays. I pointed at it. "That one there."

The young woman stood up and reached for the one I'd pointed at. Her wavy brown hair fell over her shoulders as she leaned forward, and she brushed it aside before handing me the pendant, which dangled from a silver chain.

The pendant was quite beautiful and unlike anything else I'd ever seen. A round piece of rock—obsidian, I assumed—was set in the back and coiled in silver wire, which had been skewered with what appeared to be jewels of some sort. They dazzled in the sunshine as I draped it over my neck and peered down at it.

Oh yes. It was lovely. The sun caught it just right, and rays of light bounced off it to reflect up on the ceiling of the tent.

"I'll take it," I said.

The woman blinked at me. "Don't you need to know the price?"

"How much?"

"Three hundred and fifty. It took me thirty hours to make, you see. And the stones themselves cost a lot of money."

She felt bad asking for such a high price. She shouldn't. Her work was exquisite, and she'd clearly worked very hard to sell pieces she was proud of.

I shoved my hand in my purse, pulled out my wallet, and flicked through my cash tucked in one of the pockets. Then I handed her four hundred dollars. "Keep the change. It's worth more than three hundred and fifty. And so is your work. Thank you very much. I'm going to get a lot of use out of this."

Her mouth fell open, and her cheeks turned bright pink. "Miss. This is too generous. I can't accept it."

"Sure you can because I'm not taking it back." I winked. "Have a good day!"

I ducked out of the tent before she had a chance to try to give me my money back. Liam fell into step beside me and eyed the pendant. "That's pretty."

I picked it up to admire it. "It is, isn't it?"

"And it suits you."

"Thanks." I grinned, lifting my face to let the sun kiss my cheeks. The warmth felt good against the heavy chill in the air. Our shoes struck the paved path that wove between booths, and I found my curiosity getting the best of me. I knew I liked Liam. And I wanted him to stick around. So I needed to know more about him. "Tell me about yourself, Liam."

"About me?" he asked.

I giggled. "Yes. Anything. You can ask me anything too."

He frowned. His brow creased adorably as his brows drew together and he stroked his chin with his free hand. "I don't know what to say."

"What line of work were you in before security?"

He hesitated. "Nothing worthwhile. I moved here from Chicago a year and a half ago. That's when I got into security."

"Chicago, huh?"

He nodded.

“What made you want to move out here to the Big Apple?”

He licked his lips. “There was stuff I wanted to leave behind. Bad memories. Shitty times.”

I could feel pain radiating off him. Maybe all these questions weren't such a good idea. But he wasn't giving me the impression he didn't want to talk to me. So I pushed a little further. “I'm sorry. Things weren't good for you there?”

He shook his head. “No. Not really.”

“I know what it's like to have it rough growing up.”

He looked sheepishly at me. I knew that look. It was a look that said, *You had it rough? Really?*

“Yes, I did,” I said firmly. “I know from the outside it looks like my life has been smooth sailing. But I've been through the wringer. My parents were killed in a car accident when I was twelve. The women's shelter was my mother's dream. Not mine. But after she died, I felt called to follow it through. And I don't know. Now it's my dream too.”

“I'm sorry, Genevieve.”

“Don't be. Bad things happen. And it was a long time ago. I still miss them every day, but I'm thankful for the time I did have with them. Even if it was cut short. They taught me everything I needed to know, and what they couldn't, my uncle did.”

“Your uncle?”

I smiled as I thought about Uncle Tom. “Yep. My dad's little brother. He was my godfather. He was only thirty when my parents were killed, and I turned his life upside down. But we made it work. And I owe everything to him.”

“So,” Liam paused, and I could tell he was searching for the right words. “The money. Did it come from your mom and dad?”

I nodded. This was always an awkward conversation that other people didn't like to have. But it didn't bother me in the slightest. “Yep. My great grandfather worked in the oil industry. Lots of money there. He put it all away in high-

interest accounts, and my grandfather after him made a lot of smart investments. My family was always really good at spending what they needed, donating what they could, and saving some to set up their younger generations for success. Dad always said things were only getting harder and harder for young people.”

“Can’t disagree with that,” Liam muttered.

“How about you? What was it like growing up in Chicago?”

He shrugged. “To be honest? A healthy balance of shit and not shit.”

I laughed as we weaved around a very slow walking elderly couple. “Please explain.”

Liam rolled his shoulders. “All right. Well. My parents were the kind of people who never should have been parents. You know? They preferred to spend their weeknights smoking weed in the garage, watching UFC fights, and drinking beer. I didn’t have a place in their life. I was just a burden. An extra mouth to feed. They didn’t notice when I didn’t come home at night, and they didn’t care, either. So I bailed as early as I could.”

“How old were you?” I asked.

“Sixteen.”

“That’s so young to be out on your own.”

“It was better to be alone than at home.”

My heart hurt for him. I was a lucky girl. Even though I’d lost my parents, I’d always known one thing for absolute certain: they loved me more than anything else in this world. Their love got me through every trial before and after their deaths. Growing up unwanted by the people who were supposed to love you unconditionally was cruel punishment for an innocent child.

“I wish things had been different for you,” I said softly.

Liam smiled at me. “So do I. But everything happens for a reason. Because of them, I made lifelong friends. And they

became my family. My brothers.”

A silver lining.

“Brothers?” I paused and stepped off the paved path to allow others to pass. Liam sidestepped around a couple of young girls with sticky faces from their candy apples, giving them a wide berth with their caramel-laden fingers.

He stepped up beside me and nodded. “Yeah. Guys who helped raise me. They kept me away from all the bad stuff that a young kid might find himself buried under. They gave me a purpose.”

“They sound like good men. You’re still close with them?”

Liam searched my eyes before dropping his gaze to the grass under our feet. “Yes. I am.”

There was something about the way he answered me that had me thinking there was more to the story than he was currently willing to share. It was unreasonable of me to ask him for more. The fact that he’d already opened up about this much was pretty impressive, especially considering he didn’t have an easy, cookie-cutter past to talk about.

He had dark parts, like me. The parts that made him who he was.

I adjusted the shoulder strap of my purse. “Do you want to grab something for lunch?”

Liam looked up at me. “Yeah. Sure. Here?”

I nodded. “There’s a booth at the far end that makes pretty good sandwiches and iced tea. They usually have little tables set up so there is a spot to sit and eat and people watch.”

Liam gave me a wide grin. “I like people watching.”

“Me too.”

We began making our way slowly toward the other side of the market. We smiled at people we passed, and I lingered at some of the booths. Liam never rushed me.

It felt right being by his side. It felt like he was mine and I was his—not like he was my employee.

We still hadn't had that work conversation yet. I considered bringing it up over lunch, but I didn't want to ruin a perfectly good afternoon with work talk. I knew how foolish it was to look at this as a date. But I did.

Liam was so charming, kind, patient, and willing to help that it was impossible to see him as just an employee.

And last night... well, there was no going back from that.

My toes were still permanently curled at that very moment.

CHAPTER 15



LIAM

“**B**eer?”

I looked up from my lap where I’d zoned out, fiddling with my thumbs. Owen was hanging off the doorframe to the kitchen at Ryder’s house, staring expectantly at me.

“Sorry?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

Owen growled in annoyance. “Beer?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.” I nodded.

Owen swung himself off the doorframe and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me in Ryder’s living room with Sabian, Jax, Derek, Ryder, Aiden, and Rhys. There was a race of some sort playing on the television in the corner. I hadn’t been paying much attention. While the others chatted around me, their voices rising with excitement at highlights of the race, I sat and thought about her.

My wealthy, drop-dead gorgeous dream girl.

I was still confounded that I was lucky enough to be spending so much time with her. Since the farmers’ market, she’d called me up twice asking for an escort: once to the mall and the second time as her chauffeur while she ran errands.

Truth be told, I got the impression she just didn’t want to be alone. Both times, Marley had been busy at work. Apparently, she was opening her own retail store and was in the final and most intense stages of the planning process. Soon, she’d be moving on to work on her first ever brick and

mortar store. Until then, she was dealing with orders, shipping and merchandise issues, payroll, and insurance complications.

There was a lot to being a small business owner. I was learning that on the fly the more time I spent with Genevieve. I was also learning how woefully out of my element I was.

Keeping up with her was a fucking struggle. And I ran with a motorcycle club. But the life and pace of being an MC member was a hell of a lot more relaxed than being a twenty-four-year-old female billionaire with a dream and a will to see it through.

Genevieve didn't have an off button. When she wasn't working, she was thinking about working, and all the while, she was multitasking and getting every other little thing done under the sun that she could.

She inspired me. She made me want to be better.

And she made me terribly nervous.

I'd never been one to get flustered in front of a pretty girl. I liked the adrenaline rush, and I liked showing her that I was a smooth-talking guy who could keep his cool no matter the situation.

But Genevieve changed that. I was constantly on edge, constantly wondering what loop she was going to throw me for next. She kept me on my toes, and I liked it. I *craved* it. Like a goddamn drug.

I was out of my depth and floundering.

Owen returned to the living room and tossed me a beer can. I caught it and eyed him suspiciously. "You didn't shake it, did you?"

I didn't trust Owen at the moment. Ever since I'd brought his truck back twelve hours later than I promised, he'd been hazing me. Pulling my chair out from under me when I went to sit down, putting vinegar in my water, and—his personal favorite because I'd fallen for it so many times—offering me something carbonated to drink and shaking the shit out of it first.

Owen widened his eyes innocently. “I didn’t shake it. I wouldn’t want to get beer all over Ryder’s carpet. Come on, man. His kid plays here.”

“Right,” I grumbled. “Now I’m the bad guy for being overly cautious.”

Ryder, who was sitting in his armchair near the fireplace, looked back and forth between the two of us. “When are you going to tire of this charade? The rest of us have been bored for days.”

Sabian snickered and leaned back against the wall slightly behind Ryder’s chair. “Be real, boss. Owen’s gonna fuck with him until the pipsqueak starts to get nervous twitches. And speak for yourself. I’m not bored yet.”

I stewed over opening the beer can while the others poked fun at me. Owen was delighted as he dropped down into the sofa beside Aiden, and the two of them exchanged a couple of quiet words I couldn’t hear.

“Just open it,” Ryder growled.

“If it spills on your carpet—” I protested before being cut off by the president.

“You’ll clean it up,” Ryder said simply.

I blinked at him. “Me?”

Ryder nodded, tilted his head back, and unceremoniously sipped his beer. “Yes. You.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I said under my breath.

Sabian chuckled again and ran his thumb along his jaw. “Don’t be a pansy. Just open it.”

Bracing myself for the spray that was probably about to explode out of the can, I pulled the tab back. The can gave out a resounding pop before a little foam bubbled out. Nothing serious. I slurped it up while glaring daggers at Owen, who was laughing at me.

“I told you I didn’t shake it,” he said.

I prickled. “Yeah. That’s what you said the last three times. And guess what? You were lying.”

Owen looked around at the others, still quite pleased with himself that he’d hoodwinked me so many times. “I was.”

Nobody was quite as disappointed as Sabian, who looked like a deflated balloon behind Ryder’s chair. Clearly, he’d wanted the beer to explode all over me. Again.

“Sorry you didn’t get your kicks this time,” I said to the older MC member.

Sabian shrugged. “Don’t be sorry. You’re gullible as hell. I’m sure I’ll be privy to another show.” He lifted his beer as if in cheers to Owen, who did the same.

“Assholes.”

They laughed.

“It’s karma,” Jax said, nodding in my direction.

I felt my eyes widen in surprise. “Karma? What the hell did I do? Nobody spilled anything in Owen’s precious baby. And yeah, okay, I brought it home a little late, but I brought it back in one piece. No scratches. No vomit. Squeaky clean.”

“It smelled like French fries,” Owen said.

“For a day,” I retorted.

Jax rolled his eyes. “Shut up. No. Karma for lying.”

I stared at him. “Lying? I didn’t lie.”

“To the girl,” he said, leaning back to drape one arm over the back of his chair. He blinked slowly at me like he was talking to someone with a few fried brain cells. “She still doesn’t know who you are. And you’re leading her on. So, karma.”

“Oh,” I said lamely.

The other men in the room were quiet, but all eyes were on me. I didn’t like it. Yet again, I felt like the kid brother who’d made a mistake and was now about to be chastised by all his older, wiser siblings.

I wasn't interested.

“Look,” I said, glancing around the room at all of them. “I know you guys don't agree with how I'm going about this thing with Genevieve.”

“This thing?” Ryder asked, an amused expression washing over his features.

“Yeah,” I said.

A couple of others in the room chuckled.

“What the fuck guys?” I asked, looking around at them imploringly.

What the hell was so funny?

Sabian sighed and pushed himself off the wall. “There's no ‘thing’ with Genevieve, pipsqueak. Not until she knows the truth. Then if she sticks around, sure, you can call it ‘a thing’. Until then? It's nothing.”

It wasn't nothing. They didn't understand. They didn't see what it was like when we were together. They couldn't *feel* what it was like.

“I'm going to tell her,” I said firmly. “When the time is right, I'm going to tell her everything.”

“And what idea do you have in your head about the right time?” Owen asked, cocking his head to the side.

“I'll know it when it happens,” I said.

Owen shook his head at me. “That's a kid's answer.”

“Get bent,” I growled. I was sick of being treated like the eighteen-year-old in the room. I was just as capable as they were. I'd been through the wringer just like them. Lost people just like them. Saw death. Just like them.

Gotten blood on my hands.

Aiden shifted on the sofa. “Liam, we're just concerned about you leading her astray. A woman like that has a lot of power. Hell, anyone with her bank account has a lot of power. You don't know what you could be tangling yourself up in.”

“She’s a good person.”

“Even more reason to be wary of her,” Aiden said. “Good people don’t look at guys like you and me and see someone like them. Someone good. They see riffraff. Trouble. Prison time.”

“That’s not us,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” Aiden agreed. “But you’re taking her chance away to see us in the right light. The longer you wait to tell her the truth, the worse it’s going to look that you hid it from her.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek and hated that he was right.

Deep down, I knew they were all right. That was why they were pushing me like this. They were concerned.

But fuck. All I was asking for was a bit more time. Not months. Nothing like that. Just a bit more time to figure out what this was between me and the lady in white before I jumped the gun and ruined the best thing that ever happened to me with my big mouth.

“You need to have more faith in me,” I said. “I can handle this.”

“You’re playing with fire, Liam,” Ryder said.

I shot him a dark look. “You’re the one who hitched your wagon to an NYPD Detective.”

The room was suddenly thick with tension. Then Ryder cracked a smile and drained his beer. When he was done, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’re right.”

“Any regrets?” I pushed.

Ryder narrowed his eyes at me. “No.”

I lifted my chin and looked around at all of them. “I know you’re just looking out for me. But you don’t have to. I’m playing it safe. And I *will* tell her.”

The mood in the room had shifted.

The Lost Breed's weren't on board with me keeping secrets from Genevieve London. If I was being honest with myself, I didn't like it either. Probably because I liked her so much and what we had was real.

My dishonesty wasn't right. It was selfish. And a little manipulative.

When Genevieve found out the truth, she might turn tail and run. She'd be smart to do so.

And I'd be in her rearview mirror, dusting myself off and trying to figure out how to get back to normal life after her.

And probably having a shit ton of beer cans explode on me for the next three decades.

Karma.

CHAPTER 16



GENEVIEVE

My Jimmy Choos clicked on the pale linoleum floors outside the meeting room as I paced back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

“You’re going to do great in there,” Liam said encouragingly.

He was sitting in one of the black leather chairs the receptionist, Kelly, had walked us to when we arrived for my meeting with several city council members this morning. Kelly was a tightly wound woman with a blunt bob, sharp eyeliner, and a pep in her step. She took her job very seriously, and my pacing seemed to be agitating her from where she sat behind her desk a good thirty feet away.

“I’m so nervous,” I muttered, running my sweaty palms down my tight white business skirt.

I was trying to make a good impression with these people, so I’d dressed the part: business skirt, pointed-toe white pumps (with a red sole, of course, for a bit of flair), and a long-sleeved flowing white blouse that I’d tucked in and tied off with a white belt adorned in a classy gold buckle.

Despite looking the part, I didn’t feel the part at all.

I was about to walk into a room full of mostly men, and I would have to convince them that giving me the approval to build my own women’s shelter from the ground up was a good idea.

Me. A twenty-four-year-old.

And if my age wasn't a giant red score in the cons column, my gender was.

The odds were stacked against me, and the only solace I had was the dark-haired stud sitting in the black leather chair watching me pace back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

“Seriously, Genevieve. Sit down. Your feet must be killing you.”

I shook my head. “I can't sit. If I sit, I'll throw up.”

Liam chuckled and then gave me an apologetic look. “I'm not laughing at you.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes. Promise. I'm just... I'm amused. I'm sorry. But look at it this way. It's pretty cool to have something you care this much about, right? Something you're willing to stick your neck out for like this. Do you think your mom would have been nervous if she was the one taking this step?”

That gave me pause. I stopped pacing and stared at him. “Yes. I think she would be.”

“Then give yourself a little leeway. You're killing it. The people in that room are going to see that too. They have to.”

“And if they don't?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “I'll beat them up.”

It was my turn to laugh. My giggle made him smile, which eased my mind and my anxious belly for approximately fifteen seconds. Then I was back to pacing.

The boardroom door opened with an ominous click. A man in a navy business suit with salt and pepper hair poked his head out into the waiting room. “Miss London? We'll see you now.”

I gave him the best smile I could muster before turning toward Liam. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.”

Liam stood casually, adjusted his jacket, and came to me to gently rest his hand in the small of my back. He leaned in close. “You’ve got this. I’m going to be there the whole time, cheering you on. Just like you practiced. Don’t let them put you in a corner. Be yourself, and this will all work out in your favor. Trust me.”

His words gave me enough confidence to march forward, chin held high, shoulders back, and walk right through the office door.

Then I was confronted with the room of city officials.

Gulp.

They looked at me with emotionless expressions. I told myself their boredom was justified, not personal. If I had to sit in a room as plain as this for eight hours a day and pore over tedious proposals, I’d probably look just as sullen.

Or I’d throw myself out the window and be done with it.

I cleared my throat and forced a smile. “Good morning, everyone. I appreciate all of you taking the time out of your busy day to sit and talk with me. It’s been a long time coming.”

That last bit was a jab. Call me petty, but these people had been avoiding my calls and emails for weeks.

Probably months by this point.

Nobody in the room said a word.

So I cleared my throat, pulled out the USB from my purse, brought it over to the laptop on the table connected to the projector shooting a big square of light on the far wall, and pushed it into the USB slot. The whole room vibrated with silence.

I looked up at them as I clicked through the prompts to open the presentation I’d put together. “How’s everyone’s morning going?”

A couple of people shuffled papers in front of them and avoided making eye contact with me, while others, the bolder ones, stared placidly back at me and kept their mouths firmly shut.

“That good, huh?” I mused. “Well, my morning has been pretty good. The sun is shining. And I’m here. Where I’ve been trying to get to for months. I’m not going to waste your time showing you something you don’t need. I’m going to spend the next twenty minutes showing you my designs. They’ve all been approved by contractors and builders alike. After the tedious part is over, I’ll present you the benefits of my shelter and why New York City desperately needs it. If you still have objections, we can discuss them at the end of the presentation. But keep in mind what you’d be objecting to. Safe housing for women fleeing from homes where they are abused and mistreated. Children, too. I know how easy it is to say no. Believe me. But this is something you will want to say yes to. Your decision in this room will impact so many lives for the better. And when all is said and done, that’s something you can be proud to have had a hand in.”

I wasn’t sure if my opening speech resonated with them or not. They continued staring at me. Out of fifteen members, there were three women. One of them gave me a nod that might have meant “get on with it” or “you’ve got this.” I really wasn’t sure.

I decided to take the more positive one and launched into my presentation.

I hammered them with hard-hitting stats and showed proof of my words. I showed them the conditions of the shelters compared to the shelter—the home—I wanted to build and offer women. I showed them documents and blueprints and every scrap of evidence I had that proved I was worthy of this contract.

And the women of New York City were worthy of a safe place like my shelter.

When I finished the presentation, I turned off the laptop and looked eagerly around the room. Their opinions of me no

longer mattered. Talking about my shelter ignited a fire in me that could not be put out by their narrow minds or shallow opinions.

I was here to win this.

“So,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “Any questions?”

Not a word was spoken for at least a minute. Then I locked eyes with the man at the far end of the table, directly in front of me. He was in his fifties, maybe early sixties. He had shocking white hair that might have been fake and was slicked neatly back. His gray suit was perfectly tailored, and he looked more like he belonged in the office of a big enterprise than he did a city council room.

He stroked his chin. “Miss London.” He paused for dramatic effect. I could already fill in everything he wasn’t saying just by the undertones of his voice. He wasn’t impressed. “It seems to me like you just want to build something glamorous. I don’t say this to offend—there’s nothing wrong with that—but is that really what these women need? Nicer lighting?”

I blinked at him, reeling under his sheer lack of substance. “Lighting?”

He nodded at me.

And then I didn’t know what came over me, but I started laughing.

It wasn’t the sort of laugh I could stifle, either. This was full-blown, rib-aching, can’t-breathe, eye-watering laughter. The whole room stared at me like I was a crazy person. And maybe I was.

But fuck him.

“Lighting,” I said again in an attempt to get myself under control. I hadn’t even realized I was shaking my head. “No, sir. This is not about lighting. The fact that *that* is what you decided to pull out of my presentation and use against me speaks more to your intentions, not mine. I want to build a sanctuary. A home. A safe place. And yes, better lighting is

required.” I planted both hands firmly on the desk and splayed my fingers out wide. “Flickering fluorescent lights down long windowless hallways will not be acceptable at my shelter. I can do better. *We* can do better.”

He stared back at me like a dog shackled to a post.

I ignored him and looked around the room. “Listen. I know you guys have a lot on your plates, and you don’t care about this as much as I do. I understand. But if there is one thing to take away from this meeting, it is that I am not asking for much. You sit here and treat me and evade me like I’m begging for you to fork out money and time and energy. *I am funding this myself.* For the women of this city. For those of us who aren’t fortunate. For those who just need a helping fucking hand. All I need from you is signatures and approvals. That’s all. You’d be fools not to jump at an opportunity like this. Fools with no compassion and no regard for your own neighbors.”

I looked over my shoulder at Liam.

His eyes were bright, his jaw set, and his shoulders squared. He gave me a nod.

I turned back to the room. “So what do you say? Are you going to stop this from going forward, or are you going to give me the chance to make a positive change?”

The man at the far end, the jerk, looked around at everyone sitting at the table. They looked back at him. Not a one of them said a word.

Then he sighed and met my gaze. “You have our approval, Miss London.”

My mind spun.

“Really?” I blinked.

He chuckled and nodded before pushing himself away from the table. “Yes. You’re right. Saying yes costs us nothing. And I suspect if we said no, you’d just be banging down our doors in another six weeks.”

I grinned. “Probably.”

He walked along the back of the table and came to shake my hand. “Best of luck.”

After the boardroom cleared out and my head stopped spinning, I was able to process what had just happened.

I turned toward Liam, the only other person in the room with me, and let out a delighted squeal.

Liam laughed and rushed forward, scooping me up in his arms and twirling me in a circle as I giggled, carefree and gleeful in my victory. I cupped the back of his neck and gazed down at him. “We did it.”

“We?” he asked, puzzled. “We didn’t do shit. *You* did it. Solo. I had chills.”

I bit my bottom lip as he set me down and searched his dark, deep eyes.

This man. What was it about this man?

“Are you busy tonight?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Come with me to my uncle’s for dinner? I want you to meet him.”

“The infamous uncle?”

“That’s the one.”

Liam nodded. “Count me in. I can’t wait to see you give him the good news.”

“He might cry,” I cautioned with a soft laugh.

It was true. Uncle Tom had been by my side through this whole thing. We’d both put our sweat and tears into this dream. And now it was happening.

Yep.

He was going to cry.

CHAPTER 17



LIAM

I'd gotten lucky today.

Genevieve hired a personal driver to take us to her board meeting that morning, so I didn't have to worry about what vehicle I was bringing and whether or not I had to try to borrow Owen's truck again. I was sure he'd say yes if I asked, but he wouldn't let me off the hook easily. He'd harass me and give me that brooding, disapproving look of his from beneath his brows.

And he'd be right to do so.

But I was able to avoid all that. Genevieve's driver, Harry, was parked in the lot of the corner store she and I had just popped into to pick up a bottle of wine to bring to her uncle's.

I had no clue what I was looking for when it came to wine, so I stood back and watched Genevieve do her thing. She perused the aisles and studied the labels with pursed lips and a concentrated expression.

"I don't know if we should get red or white." She sighed, pressing the tip of her index finger to the middle of her full bottom lip. I wished it could be my finger instead. Dreams of our night together still caught me off guard every night and at least a handful of times during my waking hours. She had a body that was made to be not easily forgotten. And the things she could do with it...

Genevieve spun toward me and held up two bottles. One red, one white. "Which do you think?"

“Uh.” I looked back and forth between them. “Beats me. I’m not much of a wine guy.”

“Neither is Uncle Tom. But this is a celebration.”

“Perhaps we forget the wine in favor of champagne then?”

She arched an eyebrow and gave me an impressed nod. “Champagne. Good idea.”

Genevieve put the two bottles back on the shelves and skirted around to the coolers, where she pulled a bottle of champagne out from the bottom shelf, held it up, read the label, and nodded. “This will work. Come on. We’re already late. He hates it when I’m late.”

She was worth waiting on. I was sure her uncle felt the same way.

After paying and pushing our way out through the door, we climbed into the back seat of the luxury SUV Genevieve’s driver had parked at the curb for us. Genevieve told him we were ready, and he pulled smoothly out into traffic.

“So your Uncle Tom,” I said slowly, wanting to learn as much about the man I was about to meet as I could. Call me crazy, but I wanted to impress him. And if not impress him, at the very least, I wanted him to like me. “Tell me about him.”

“What can I say about Uncle Tom?” Genevieve leaned back in her seat and crossed one leg over the other. A small smile played on her lips. “He’s great. I mean really great. He’s young enough so—now that I’m not a girl anymore—we have a pretty strong friendship. He’s super honest. Maybe a little overprotective.”

I could understand why.

Genevieve had already been through Hell and back after losing her parents.

Uncle Tom sounded like a very respectable man. I was eager to meet him. He played a huge role in Genevieve’s life and part of who she was was because of him. That, in itself, already made me like him.

“What’s he into?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Meat.”

“Meat?” I chuckled.

She nodded. “Yep. He loves grilling steaks, burgers, all kinds of things. He’s bummed that summer is over and patio weather is almost gone. But that just means he’ll be making stews and soups and whatever else his imagination cooks up.”

“It’s nice to have a cook in the family.”

“I’m vegan. It drives him up the wall.”

I snorted. “Poor guy.”

Genevieve giggled. “I do feel a bit bad about it sometimes. He gets so much joy cooking for people. I think he’s glad you’re coming over tonight. A fellow man and meat appreciator.”

At least we had our pure carnality to bond over.

Genevieve sighed and rolled her head to the side to gaze out the window at the passing power lines and orange maple trees. “What else can I tell you about Uncle Tom? He’s funny. Really funny.”

“What does he do for work?”

“Nothing now. He’s a hobbyist. Actually, that’s not true. He’s a handyman. Sort of. He pops over to neighbors’ places or responds to ads from people living alone who need help with things like hanging shelves or—I don’t know—repairing things that need fixing. He does it for a good price, too. I think it’s his way of paying it forward. He used to be a manager for a big corporate telecommunications company before I came into the picture.”

“What changed?”

“He inherited a bunch of money from my dad and became a full-time father himself,” Genevieve said, rolling her head back to look at me. “He says it’s the best thing that ever happened to him. But sometimes, I wonder what he gave up for me.”

“Whatever it was, I’m sure it was worth it.”

“I hope so.”

The drive to her uncle’s place was short. Within fifteen minutes of picking up the champagne, we were pulling into a short driveway lined in knee-height shrubs. An opening led to a path which cut across a green, healthy lawn and wound through a somewhat overgrown garden to the steps below the front porch.

Genevieve and I hopped out of the back of the SUV.

She stopped at the passenger window when Harry rolled it down. “Thank you, Harry. I’ll call for you when we’re ready to leave. I’m guessing around ten o’clock or so. Will that be all right?”

“Of course, Miss London.” Harry smiled. He was a sheepish-looking man with hardly any hair left on his head and glasses straight out of the eighties. “Whenever you’re ready, I’m ready.”

Genevieve gave him another award-winning smile before letting her hand fall from the car door. Then she turned toward me and nodded up at the house. “Shall we?”

“Let’s do it,” I said, offering her my elbow.

We stepped through the opening in the shrubs as Harry reversed out of the driveway and drove off. Then we made our way down the path to the front door.

Her uncle’s house was a lot more on par with my comfort level and what a home felt like than Genevieve’s sprawling house. The siding was blue, and I imagined years ago, it was a much brighter, fresher shade. The sun had faded it, along with the shutters on the living room window and the white trim. The paint on the porch was peeling, but not terribly so, and was in need of a sanding, a fresh coat of paint, and some new sealer.

Maybe if he decided to get the place up to snuff next summer, I could offer my assistance.

I shook my head at myself.

Slow down, man. You've only known her for two and a half weeks.

Planning ahead like that was insanity.

The front door was white with a welcome mat that read, "No Solicitors."

Genevieve stood upon it in her white, pointed-toe pumps and rapped her knuckles on the door.

We couldn't hear anything from inside, and after waiting a good minute and a half, she decided to let herself in.

"Uncle Tom?" she called down the narrow hallway on the other side of the door. "Uncle Tom? Hello? We're here!"

There was no response.

She stepped into the house and cocked her head to the side. "Ah, I think he's in the shower. Come on in. I'll show you around, and we can have a glass of that champagne."

I followed her in, slipped out of my boots, and peered down the hall into the kitchen. That was where we went first. I popped the champagne, and she poured us each a glass, and then I began my tour.

The house was quaint and very pleasant. It smelled like mulling spices, barbeque, and smoked meat; like autumn in a nutshell. Dark hardwood floors contrasted the warm but light shade of beige on the walls. The crown molding was dark to match the floors, giving the place an almost rustic vibe.

Her uncle's furniture was all dark earth tones: greens, browns, coppers. There wasn't much in the way of decor save for some family photos all spread out above the fireplace.

I made my way over to peer at them. Genevieve stepped up beside me and picked one of the pictures up. It was of her, her uncle, and another young blonde girl who I assumed was Marley. They were at an amusement park, and the two girls were holding up two of the biggest rolls of cotton candy I'd ever seen. The man I assumed was Uncle Tom stood between them, a hand on each shoulder, looking down at Genevieve and laughing joyously at her blue-stained cheeks and fingers.

She handed me the picture. “This is one of my favorites. This was taken a couple of months after Mom and Dad died. Uncle Tom had been trying for weeks to get me to smile. And there it was. Caught on camera and everything.”

I smiled down at the picture, my eyes instantly going to Genevieve. “You were a cute kid.”

“I was a mess.” She laughed.

I heard the shower shut off down the hall. For some bizarre reason, butterflies took flight in my stomach.

I wasn’t the kind of guy who got nervous. Not this kind of nervous, at least. But here I was, with sweaty palms and a quickening heartbeat as I anticipated meeting the man who raised the girl I was falling hard for. This was a high-stakes moment.

I focused on the picture and used it as a distraction. As I stared at it, my eyes went to her uncle. I frowned.

He looked familiar. Very familiar.

My heart leapt into my throat.

That was because I knew him. Or rather, I knew him by association.

Shit.

Here it was. My karma.

Uncle Tom was one of Hyde’s old buddies. He hadn’t come to the service the MC held for him because of the reason he and Hyde lost touch in the first place: because he was a Lost Breed. But he’d been around, and I knew Ryder was the one to deal with him and explain what had happened.

It was a job none of us envied, but it was the president’s job.

Shit. Fuck.

The bathroom door down the hall opened with a soft click. I put the picture down on the mantel. It was too late to bail now. Maybe he wouldn’t recognize me.

I almost laughed at my own optimism. That was wishful thinking.

Footsteps came from down the hall. The moment of truth was here. Genevieve turned from the fireplace with a smile, and her eyes lit up when she saw her uncle.

“Uncle Tom,” she said as she moved forward to give him a hug.

His hair was still wet, and he was dressed in a black and red plaid button-up shirt and a pair of blue jeans. He had socks and slippers on, and I could smell his soap from here. Tom hugged his niece before taking her by the shoulders and holding her at arm’s length. “Congratulations, Genie. I knew you were going to get this thing done one way or another. I’m so proud of you.”

Genevieve beamed and reminded me of the younger version of herself in the picture on the mantel. The little girl with her cotton candy.

“Thanks, Uncle Tom.” She turned and gestured toward me. “This is who I’ve been telling you about. This is Liam.”

Tom’s eyes slid from her to me. Then he looked me over from head to toe, and his eyes narrowed. He took a step forward.

Genevieve sensed the sudden tension in the room as her uncle angled himself in front of her and pointed an accusing finger at me. “You.”

I stood there like an idiot, powerless to whatever was about to happen next. I deserved this. I’d pushed it too far. I should have come clean right from the start.

Tom squared his shoulders. “You’re one of those Lost Breed dogs, aren’t you?”

I winced.

Genevieve put a hand on her uncle’s shoulder. “Lost Breed? Uncle Tom, what are you—”

Tom flicked his chin toward the front door. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

Genevieve's grip on his shoulder tightened, and her eyes went wide as she looked back and forth between me and her uncle.

My mouth was dry. My face was red.

Uncle Tom took a menacing step forward.

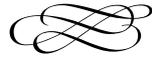
I could have taken him. Easily. But I wasn't going to fight Genevieve's uncle. He was right to hate me. Right to want me to leave.

So I dropped my head and nodded before brushing past him and making a beeline straight to the front door.

Genevieve made to follow. "Liam, wait."

Her uncle caught her wrist. "Let him go, Genie. You and I have a lot to talk about."

CHAPTER 18



GENEVIEVE

I was still standing in the living room with my mouth hanging open when the front door slammed behind Liam.

I rounded on my uncle. “What the fuck?”

Uncle Tom was boiling with anger. I’d never seen him like this before. He wouldn’t even look at me as he shook his head and marched into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of champagne. He tossed the whole glass back in one steady gulp before pouring a second.

“Explain,” I demanded, planting my fists on my hips.

Uncle Tom braced himself on the counter and kept his back toward me. “He’s a bad seed, Genie. He knows bad people. Chooses to be one of them. I don’t want you seeing him again.”

My hackles rose like that of a rabid dog. “*Excuse me?*”

He turned toward me. His expression was slack, tired. “I said I don’t want you seeing him again.”

“Why? What is the Lost Breed?”

Uncle Tom sighed and ran his hand down his face. “Come. Let’s sit. I’ll tell you everything.”

I followed my uncle from the kitchen into the living room, and we took up seats on opposite sofas. I crossed my legs and wished I’d had the hindsight to bring a change of clothes with me. The white skirt from my meeting earlier today was very tight, and the anxiety clawing at my throat and chest had me aching to be in something more comfortable.

My heart hurt for Liam. Where had he gone? And why hadn't I run after him?

"Liam is a Lost Breed member," my uncle said, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"I don't know what that is."

"They're a fairly large motorcycle gang in New York City."

I blinked at him. Then I started laughing. "Liam? In a *gang*? Yeah, right. You must have him confused with someone else."

"If I had him confused with someone else, don't you think he would have told me so himself, rather than leave with his tail between his legs?"

I stared at my uncle and he stared right back.

Uncle Tom continued. "The Lost Breeds have been around a long time, Genie. Decades. They keep to themselves, sure, which is probably why you haven't heard of them, but there was bad shit happening in their circles a few years ago. There were bodies turning up. Shit the cops couldn't figure out."

"Bodies?"

"Murders. Gruesome ones. Criminals, all of them."

"How do you know so much about this?" I asked.

Uncle Tom stared at his hands in his lap. "One of them was an old friend of mine. Someone I wrote out of my life a long time ago because of the choices he made. I didn't want to be associated with him or with the Lost Breeds. Not with you in the picture. They're trouble, Genie. Real trouble."

"Which friend?"

"His name was Hyde."

"I've never heard you talk about him," I said softly. How much did I not know about my own uncle? How much was he keeping from me for my own sake?

“I don’t talk about him. We were close. And then he fell in with the Lost Breeds, and I... well, I closed that door and made my peace with it. Then not too long ago, I got a call that he’d been murdered.” Uncle Tom shook his head. “No. Slaughtered.”

“What?”

“By Isaac Reed.”

My head started spinning. “The maniac who was all over the news and in the papers? The guy from...” I trailed off as the pieces started falling into place. “From Chicago.”

“Yes.”

Liam had told me he was from Chicago, and I’d known there was something he wasn’t telling me. Something he wasn’t ready to say out loud.

I never dreamed it could be something like this.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I whispered. “Liam isn’t bad. He’s not like that. He’s a good man, and he’d never hurt anyone.”

“He *has* hurt people, Genevieve. It’s his fucking calling card.”

“No.”

Uncle Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and let out an agitated sigh. “I’m not saying this to upset you. I’m saying this because it’s true. And after how hard you’ve worked, the last thing you need is a guy like that taking up space in your life. It will only end badly, Genevieve. Messy. Bloody, even.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know him.”

“Yes, I do!” My tone was sharp, and I suddenly felt like a teenager all over again—like I was defending my high-school sweetheart to my overbearing father. The worst part about this was that Uncle Tom was right.

I didn’t know Liam that well. Sure, I felt like I did, but feeling close to someone was a different thing than really

knowing them. I'd been well aware that he had secrets. But I never dreamed they'd be these kinds of secrets.

"He's using you."

I lifted my teary gaze to my uncle and shook my head. No words came out.

My uncle leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, and he looked at me like he pitied me. I hated that. His brows drew together as he frowned, and then he let out another long sigh. "You have to consider this from all angles. I know you think you know him. And maybe you do. But at the end of the day, even if he's different from all the others, there are still others. And they're a big part of his life. You do not want to get caught up in that."

No, I didn't.

But what was it exactly I'd be getting caught up in?

I had a hard time envisioning Liam spending any time with men who were dangerous. And I was fairly certain he'd never jeopardize my safety. He'd been by my side, keeping me safe, for weeks now. Even if it was just to get close to me, he meant it, and he took his role seriously.

"I have to talk to him," I whispered.

"I won't allow you to see him on your own."

"I'm a grown woman. You don't get to dictate my choices for me anymore."

Uncle Tom hung his head and nodded. "You're right."

"I know."

I hated this. I hated fighting with him. I hated being at odds over something like this. A night that was supposed to be all about celebrating had taken the worst turn, and now Liam was who the hell knew where, thinking who knew what, and here I was, trying to defend him and feeling like a schoolgirl.

"Can I say one more thing?" my uncle asked.

I nodded.

“The Lost Breeds have no role in the life of a woman busting her ass to open a women’s shelter. The Lost Breeds are the men those women are running from. If you’re serious about your mother’s dream, which I know you are, you won’t see Liam anymore. You’ll make a clean break. And when all is said and done and you heal, you’ll understand that it was the right call. For you and for him.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

Why did he have to go and say that?

Why did it make sense?

And why did it leave me feeling so hollow inside?

My uncle leaned back. “I’m sorry, Genie. If you’re an advocate for women’s safety, then you have to act like one.”

“Walk the walk,” I muttered.

“Even when it’s hard,” Uncle Tom said.

He was responsible for me getting through some bad bullying bouts in high school. When I would come home and tell him about how mean the girls were, he would tell me to keep my chin up and take the high road. To walk the walk even when it was almost too hard to do so.

“This sucks,” I muttered, collapsing against the back of the sofa and rubbing my temples. “I thought he was...” I shook my head and didn’t finish my thought. It didn’t matter. “Never mind.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I won’t see him again.”

“You’re sure it’s that easy?”

I nodded. “It has to be.”

My uncle pushed himself to his feet and came to stand beside my sofa, where he put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Genie.”

I closed my hand over his. “Thanks.”

It was worth something.

“Hungry?”

“In other words, do I feel like eating my feelings away? Yes, please.”

My uncle chuckled and patted my shoulder. “That’s my girl.”

I stayed on the sofa for a little while longer while my uncle started tinkering in the kitchen. I wasn’t sure what he was cooking. Whatever it was would be delicious. Not that it mattered. My appetite was gone.

I’d be more than happy to finish the champagne on my own and wallow in self-pity instead of enjoying one of his meals.

How could I have been so stupid?

Yet again, I’d fallen for the whole “Knight in Shining Armor” shtick. Like fucking clockwork. And here I was, alone, regretting the last few weeks of my life and how much I’d shared with Liam.

I’d let him in. Fearlessly. I’d shared my passions with him and my hopes and dreams. And my body.

He’d been lying to me since the very start.

Security detail my ass.

Of course, he was a good fighter. He was a criminal.

My stomach rolled over.

CHAPTER 19



LIAM

My brothers had warned me this would happen.

And like the stupid shit I was, I ignored them. I stuck my head in the sand like a damn ostrich and pretended not to hear their worries. Because it was all worth it to have Genevieve on my arm just one more night. One more morning. One more anything.

Now she was gone.

I could only imagine what kinds of things her uncle was saying to her. And truth be told, I couldn't blame him.

He'd been scarred by what our MC went through all those years ago with Isaac Reed. I hadn't been there when Hyde died or when Ryder lost Jason, but I saw the aftermath. I knew what grief looked like, and I knew how long the hurt stuck around for.

Hell, Rhys was a testament to that. Even though he was on the mend and had his woman in his life, there were still bad days. Ryder was the same. We all were. I'd lost people too. Max was my brother, just as he was Rhys's.

But I had the real facts. In this life, there was a price to pay. Hyde paid the ultimate price. And we settled the score for him with a bullet in the alley beside Kadia.

Tom had it all backward, but I couldn't expect him to see it any other way.

The trouble was, now Genevieve was going to see it his way. She was going to see me through his hate-tinted lenses,

and things would never go back to how they were. She probably wanted nothing to do with me now that she knew the truth. I was a liar and a manipulator, and from the outside looking in, I was just as bad as Tom's idea of me.

I ran my fingers through my hair as I stared at my reflection in the mirror above my bathroom sink.

"You fucked it up," I growled.

I needed space to clear my head. Otherwise, I was just going to sit around, hating myself and what I'd done.

I splashed cold water on my face, patted my skin dry with my hand towel, and marched out of the bathroom to put my leather jacket on. Once I was suited up, I went into my garage, opened the door, and got on my bike.

A ride was just what the doctor ordered.

The weather was chilly, but that wasn't going to stop me. The alternative was sitting around at home, kicking myself for ruining the best thing that ever happened to me.

I needed to ride. I needed the air pushing against my chest, rushing over my shoulders. I needed the hum of the engine between my knees and the rumble of the throttle at my fingertips. I needed speed.

I pulled out of the garage and peeled off down my street, earning the middle finger from an older man walking his dog on the sidewalk. I ignored him. He could hate me, too, for all I cared.

My Harley was loyal. She roared with power when I opened her up and ate away the pavement as she picked up speed. I swerved gently across the dotted line on the empty street I rode down, pretending the broken pieces of paint were cones, ducking and weaving and dancing through them until I grew bored and picked up speed again.

I didn't know how long I rode for. I didn't have a destination in mind when I left the house, but I ended up in Owen's driveway, nonetheless. He was in his garage with the door open, checking the oil in his truck.

When I turned my bike off, he straightened up and wiped his hands on his jeans. He nodded hello at me and dropped the hood of his truck. “No. You can’t borrow it again.”

“Not here for the truck,” I said.

Owen had broken a sweat. He wiped his upper lip with his wrist. “Then what do you want?”

“Advice.”

Owen studied me. “So, shit finally hit the fan?”

I nodded.

Owen sighed and leaned up against his truck to cross his arms over his chest. “What happened?”

I rubbed the back of my neck before setting my helmet down on his workbench on the right wall of the garage. “She took me to her uncle’s house for dinner last night.”

Owen nodded, encouraging me to continue. When I didn’t, he arched an eyebrow. “And?”

“And... her Uncle was an old friend of Hyde’s.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Shit is right.”

“Did he recognize you?”

“Immediately.”

“How?”

“No idea, but he did.”

“Maybe he’s seen you around town with some of the original crew?”

That was the only conclusion I’d come to as well. Seeing as how I’d never met Hyde, it wasn’t like he knew me through him. It was all by association.

“Yeah, well, regardless, he knew who I was as soon as he saw me. And he sort of freaked out. Told me to get the fuck out.”

“What did you do?” Owen asked slowly.

I shrugged. "I left."

"Simple as that?"

"Simple as that." I nodded.

"And the girl?"

"She stayed behind. I didn't ask her to come with me or anything. I knew I wasn't wanted there, and staying to try to defend myself would have only made things worse. It's his house. And I'm not that guy."

"No, you're not," Owen agreed. He pushed himself off the truck and went to the mini fridge on the back wall. He tugged the door open, and the air sealing strip let out a little grunt as it came open. He reached in, grabbed two cans of Bud, and tossed me one. I cracked it and drank thankfully. Owen did the same. "Have you talked to her since?"

"No. I wasn't sure I should."

"Fair enough."

I frowned. Not the answer I wanted. "Do you think I should?"

"Should what?" Owen asked.

"Call her or something? I don't know. Try to explain myself."

"How can you explain it? You lied. End of story. Now she knows who you are, and she probably thinks you're just as untrustworthy as her uncle does."

"Thanks for the support," I grumbled before tipping my head back to drink.

"Did you come here for a pep talk or real talk?"

He knew the answer. I didn't like bullshit. Neither did Owen. And he'd always been good in the sense that he told me how it was, when it was. If I didn't listen, that was my call. But in the end, he had never led me astray.

I had to remember that and start taking his word for things more often. For starters, it would have spared me this shit with

Genevieve.

“So what do I do, then?” I asked. Now was my chance to take his advice.

“You let it go.”

I blinked. That was easier said than done. “Just like that? I walk away from it and let her think we’re all shit? That we’re all bad guys? Shouldn’t I try to prove we’re not what her uncle thinks we are?”

“You want honesty?”

Fuck. Not really. But it was better than a sugar-coated answer, so I nodded.

Owen tipped his head like he was acknowledging that I made the right choice. “In my experience, you can’t make people think we’re anything other than what they believe we are. People are going to think what they’re going to think. It’s our job not to let that affect our day to day. Sure, we might do things... unconventionally. And yeah, when it comes down to it, shit can get a bit messy. But at the end of the day, I have to believe this family of ours is good.”

“We are good,” I said, hating how desperate I sounded.

Owen shrugged.

I stared at him. “You think we aren’t?”

“I think we’ve done things. Seen things. Things we could have handled better. Things that cost people their lives.”

“People like Hyde and Jason.”

Owen nodded and drank more of his beer.

“We didn’t do that. The Lost Breeds didn’t do that. Isaac Reed did. He fucked them just like he fucked us back in Chicago. And if Rhys hadn’t put him down when he did—”

“I know. I know. He would have killed more people. I’m not saying that would be different. I’m saying there’s a line. We are not the law, Liam.”

Owen never called me by my name. It caught me a little off guard.

He scratched his jaw. “We like to think we are, but we’re not. The deeper we get into shit like what happened with Reed, the drunker we become on our own egos. It’s a slippery slope. And you, my friend, are too good to fall down it. That’s why this shit with Genevieve had me all bent out of shape. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like you becoming one of us.”

“But I *am* one of you.”

He nodded slowly. “But you can be *better*.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to. This MC is going to get fresh blood. And one of these days, it’s going to look entirely different than it does now. And it will need good men calling the shots. Men like you. Men with the least amount of blood on their hands as possible.”

I shook my head. “You’re too hard on them. On yourself.”

Owen licked his lips. “Maybe.”

“You are. We’re good. All of us. You had it right before. We do things unconventionally. But our intentions are good every time, and that’s what matters. I don’t regret what happened to Reed. Not for one second. And if I had to go back and be the one to fire the gun, I would. In a heartbeat.”

“Killing a man is not that easy.”

“No. I wouldn’t expect it to be. But making the choice to stand between him and another victim? That’s easy.”

Owen gave me a lopsided smile. “Yeah. Well. You’re one of the good ones. I’m sorry this all blew up in your face. I know you cared about the girl.”

Cared about her was an understatement. I wasn’t willing to say it out loud, or even confirm it in my thoughts, but there was something very real between me and Genevieve London.

And I wasn’t the guy to sit back and let it all fall apart. Not without putting up a bit of a fight.

Because that was what a Lost Breed really was. A fighter.

“I have to go,” I said.

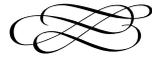
“Go where?”

“There’s something I have to do.”

“Don’t get into trouble.”

I grinned as I put my half-full beer can down on his workbench and grabbed my helmet. “No promises.”

CHAPTER 20



GENEVIEVE

Marley and I had been getting our mani pedis done at the same place since we were sixteen years old. It took a lot of convincing to get Uncle Tom on board. He thought it was a reckless way to spend money and tried to convince the two of us that natural nails were prettier and there were better things to spend our money on.

Try convincing a sixteen-year-old girl with a bank account the size of an Academy Award Winner not to spend a hundred dollars on her toes and fingernails.

Not gonna happen.

Marley and I had found our perfect salon all those years ago. They were a full-treatment location with plush white massage chairs, a breezy atmosphere, and extremely talented and accommodating employees. Upon arrival, you received a hot towel for your hands and a glass of champagne to sip while you pored over their generous selection of colors and designs.

That was what Marley and I were presently doing while we waited for our pedicure appointments to start.

I flipped through my plastic ring of samples, not really paying much mind to the colors.

“You’ve looked at those three times over,” Marley said, plucking the ring from my hands and switching it out with the one she’d been looking through. “Look alive, Genie.”

I sighed. “Sorry, it’s been a long couple of days.”

“You still haven’t called him?”

“Liam?”

Marley gave me a bored look. “Yes. Obviously Liam. Who else would I be talking about?”

I ignored her attitude. “No, I haven’t called him.”

“Are you going to?”

It wasn’t as easy as that. There was more mixed up in this than just how I felt about him. Even though I’d called it quits in front of Uncle Tom the other night, I wasn’t so sure I’d made the right call. I flip flopped back and forth between what was the right choice almost every hour: to be with him or not be with him.

“I don’t think I will,” I said finally.

Marley shook her head. “That’s too bad.”

“Yeah,” I said lamely.

The nail colors in my hands weren’t making me feel better. I thought if I came here, sat down, and picked a bright, cheerful color, it might put a bit of pep in my step. If anything, I felt worse. So I settled on a black polish that shimmered with green and blue flakes of glitter and set it aside to give to the esthetician when she took us to our seats.

“I thought he might have reached out to you between now and ‘the event’,” Marley said. She’d been referring to Uncle Tom’s blow up as “the event” all week. It was a fitting name. He never lost his cool, so seeing him crack when he saw Liam was a sight to behold. It was a little scary, too.

“I think he’s embarrassed,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because he got caught.”

Marley shrugged. “I suppose. Do you think he was planning on telling you? I mean, you never know. Maybe he was waiting for the right moment?”

I grumbled. “Waiting for the right moment? This isn’t middle school, Marley. There are no right moments. He should have come clean as soon as there was something between us.”

“I agree. I’m just saying. People make choices, and we don’t have all the facts.”

“I have enough of them.” I sighed, leaning back to rest my head against the back of the chair as I gazed around the salon. Our pedicure chairs were being prepped. The basins at the foot of the chairs were filling with hot water that smelled like lemons and lavender while our two estheticians wiped the chairs down and released the sheer white curtains on one side of each chair to give us privacy from the other customers.

“He didn’t strike me as the bad sort,” Marley said.

“No. Me neither. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t.”

“True. But it doesn’t mean he is, either.”

“Bad?”

Marley nodded. “Yeah.”

“You are the people you spend the most time with, right? So how can he be anything but bad? Uncle Tom told me about this Lost Breed group of his. How dangerous they are. The things they’ve done or let happen. And I don’t know about you, but I think it’s pretty savage.”

Marley rubbed her lips together and was about to respond when our estheticians called for us to come take a seat. I brought my champagne and nail color to my tech, Raven, who gave me a big hug. “It’s so nice to see you, Miss London. You look beautiful as always.”

“Thank you, Raven. You too.”

I wasn’t lying. Raven was a drop-dead gorgeous young woman. She was the daughter of the salon owners, and after trying to make it in business, she switched careers to work for the family company. She made more money now with her talent and extreme eye for detail than she did before, and she enjoyed every second of it. She had a massive client base and

no longer took on any more customers. She was booked straight through every day all week and liked to stay busy.

She told me I was her favorite client. I wondered if she said that to everyone. It didn't matter. She made me feel like I was genuinely her favorite every time I came in, and that was good customer service.

Marley and I settled into our chairs as our techs bustled around us, prepping our stations and getting our colors. They topped off our champagne before they began, and then Marley and I were free to go back to our conversation.

“What was I saying before?” Marley asked as her tech removed her old color from her toes.

“I said the Lost Breeds were savage.”

“Right. From the outside.”

I arched an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

Marley shrugged as she toyed with the remote that powered her massage chair so she could get the roller balls into the middle of her back. “I don't know. Just that he hasn't had a chance to explain things from his side of the tracks.”

“This isn't Lady and the Tramp.”

Marley snickered. “No. Well. Actually, if you think about it, it sort of is.”

I blinked slowly at her. “What?”

She giggled. “Oh come on, Genie. Lighten up. I'm trying to make a shitty situation less shitty. He's Tramp. You're Lady. Rich, sophisticated, beautiful. He's a little rough around the edges. But he's still *good*.”

“You can't use a cartoon as an analogy for this Marley.”

“Sure I can. I just did.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes as I sank deeper into the massage chair. “This is just another case of me falling for the wrong guy, Marley. Nothing more. Nothing less. I've put Uncle Tom through the wringer a dozen times. I'm not doing it

again. I should have stuck to my guns when I said I was done with men for a while.”

“That’s too bad.”

“If you say so.”

Marley sipped her champagne and giggled as her tech gently ran over the sole of her foot with a pumice stone. Then she looked over at me. “You deserve to find someone who makes you happy. Sometimes, the person who makes us happy isn’t what we thought they’d be. And I know for a fact Liam made you happy.”

Liam made me a lot of things. Excited, giddy, hopeful. But how was I supposed to know what was real and what wasn’t?

If he could lie to me so early on and about something so massive, how could I trust him not to do the same thing in other areas? It was a risk I wasn’t willing to take and a position I wouldn’t put my uncle in. He’d done too much for me to repay him by falling in with a crowd like the one Liam hung around.

“Genevieve?”

I looked over at Marley.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. He *did* make me happy.”

“He did. Very happy. Like, first day of summer happy.”

I smiled a little. “I know.”

We spent the next several minutes in comfortable silence as our techs worked on our feet. We chatted with them, talking about our usual topics: how the shop was doing, what progress I’d made on my shelter, and how far Marley had come with her retail shop.

By the time the polish was on our toes and they were curing under the light, Marley was itching to say more. I could feel it radiating off of her.

“Yes?” I asked.

Marley chewed her bottom lip. “We don’t have to talk about it, but... do you worry about him?”

“Worry?”

“About his safety?”

I nodded and polished off the last of my champagne before setting it on the table between us. “Yes. A lot. He’s so young, Marley. And I don’t know what kind of men are in this club of his. What they expect of him. What he has to do to be a Lost Breed. It’s all really convoluted, and I’m terrified that he’s in over his head.”

Marley acknowledged my concerns with a supportive hand over mine. “He’s tough. He can take care of himself.”

“People have died, Marley. And by died, I mean been violently slaughtered just for shits and giggles.”

Raven looked up at me, puzzled.

I laughed nervously and held up a hand. “Don’t worry. Sorry.”

Marley didn’t care what our conversation sounded like to anyone in the salon. “Is that what happened to this old friend of your uncle’s?”

I nodded.

“How was he killed?” Marley asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Uncle Tom wouldn’t tell me. All he said is it was bad. Really bad. Bad enough where an open casket wasn’t an option.”

“Oh,” Marley breathed.

I nodded and slumped back in my chair with a defeated sigh. Despite knowing all this, my heart still wanted Liam. I missed him terribly, and I thought about him all the time. Even when I slept, my mind was drawn to him, conjuring up images of him that were a comfort in my dreams but painful when I woke and remembered he wasn’t in my life anymore.

“Everything will work out, Genie,” Marley assured me.

I wanted to believe her.

But in my mind, everything “working out” meant Liam and I could be together. And that simply wasn’t possible anymore. Somehow, I was just going to have to find the strength to move on. Maybe once the ball really got rolling with my shelter and I had something to pour all my energy into, it would be easier to leave his memory behind.

Maybe.

CHAPTER 21



LIAM

This was probably a mistake.

Yeah, definitely a mistake.

I stood staring at the front door of Thomas's little blue house. I could hear him inside running the vacuum, and I had been standing here for a good two minutes, wondering if I should knock or not. The longer I waited, the colder my feet got.

"This isn't going to handle itself," I muttered, finally lifting a finger to the doorbell.

"Handle" might not have been the right word. For all I knew, Thomas would open the door, see me standing on his welcome mat, and blow his top like he did the first time he saw me. Only this time, Genevieve wasn't there to keep the peace. If he wanted, he could kick my ass.

I wouldn't stop him.

I'd come back where I clearly wasn't wanted, and that was on me, not him. He'd said his piece and made it quite clear he never wanted to see me around here or his niece ever again. Message received. Loud and clear.

But this was important. And the right thing to do. So I rang the doorbell.

The vacuum stopped whirring inside, and Thomas called, "Just a minute!"

I waited anxiously, drumming my fingers on the sides of the box I held in both hands. It was black and in pristine

condition. Ryder had taken good care of it while it was in his possession.

Footsteps came down the hall and approached the door. I swallowed back a lump of nerves and hoped like hell he didn't look through his peephole first. Then he might not bother opening the door and might just tell me to fuck off.

The deadbolt unlocked. The handle twisted. And Thomas opened the door.

"Hey," I said.

Thomas stood there dumbly for a second, trying to process the fact that my dumb ass was right back where it wasn't supposed to be. Then his eyes narrowed. "What the fuck are you doing back here?"

"I wanted to bring you this," I said, nodding down at the box in my hands.

"Get lost. I don't want it. Whatever it is."

"Please. I understand—"

"You don't understand shit," Thomas growled, stepping out onto his front porch with me. His gaze darkened, and his nostrils flared, but I held my ground. "If I see you around here again, I'm going to call the cops."

The cops wouldn't do anything. I knew that much for certain. And if they tried, Dani would have my back.

But that was not how I wanted this to go down. I pushed the box toward him and flipped open the lid. "Please. Look."

Thomas's hard glare flicked from me to the contents of the box, and then his furious expression grew even darker. "Why would you bring me this?"

Inside the box was a black leather jacket. A Lost Breed jacket. It was neatly folded with the crest on the back face up.

I resisted the urge to close the box. "It was Hyde's." I watched Thomas for any sudden or unpredictable movements as he stared down at the jacket. "I went to my president and told him about you. He and I both think you should have it."

“No,” Thomas said firmly, shoving the box back at me and shaking his head.

I frowned down at the jacket and ran the fingers of my right hand over the patchwork. A Lost Breed jacket was more than just a piece of clothing to us. “This doesn’t mean what you think it does, Thomas.”

“It means blood,” he growled.

“No.”

No.

I’d been struggling with this concept ever since my conversation with Owen about whether or not we, the Lost Breeds, were good or bad. I’d come to the conclusion that nothing in this world is ever that black or white.

People know what they know based on the life they live and the experiences they have.

Exposure was key.

My life in Chicago and here in New York had exposed me to a hell of a lot, and I saw everything through a gray lens because of it. Perception was everything.

I lifted my chin and met Genevieve’s uncle’s angry stare. “No. It means family. Brotherhood. Strength in numbers. It means that no matter what happens, your brothers and sisters will have your back. It means solidarity. Justice. Hyde knew that. He wore this proudly. And if he was here himself, I’m sure he’d tell you the same things, and he would do everything he could to make you understand that the Lost Breeds are not bad. We stand against bad. Always.”

Thomas had gone stiff, and his angry expression had softened. It wasn’t gone, but the creases in his forehead weren’t as deep, and the muscles of his jaw weren’t flexing. He stared at me, and I stared right back until his shoulders slumped.

He rubbed the back of his neck while shaking his head at me like a disapproving parent. “Those are just words, kids. Easy to say.”

“You’re right.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes at me. “Then what are you here for?”

A sense of calm washed over me. “I’m not here to change your mind. I’m here to give you what’s yours. That’s all. And this? This is yours. Do with it what you want. Hell, burn it if you want to. But Hyde wore this proudly. We all do. It was part of him and still is.”

As soon as the weight of the box shifted from my hands, I stepped back and put enough space between us for it to be impossible for him to hand the box back. I gave him a curt nod and slid my hands into my pockets before turning and stepping off the porch to head back to my bike, parked in the drive.

I’d intentionally worn my jacket to show him I wasn’t ashamed of who I was, and I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked away.

Whether or not this changed how he saw me didn’t matter.

What mattered was that he forgave Hyde for making that choice and let go. I said what I needed to say. I was at peace with how it went down.

From here on out, it was up to fate.

CHAPTER 22



GENEVIEVE

“Hurry up, Marley,” I said, impatiently tapping my foot as I waited for her to finish getting ready. She had half her hair still in pins while her curls cooled, and she was presently leaning in close to her bathroom mirror to apply her third coat of mascara. “Your lashes look beautiful. Let’s *go*.”

“One more coat.”

“Who are you trying to impress? My uncle?”

“No,” she said shortly. “You know I don’t like to leave the house with my eyelashes naked.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well neither me nor Uncle Tom care. But you know what I do care about? Punctuality.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, waving me off as she screwed the wand back into her mascara tube. Then she reached for a tube of lipstick on the counter, twisted it open, and painted her lips a pretty berry color.

“Uncle Tom hates when we’re late. And he always blames me.”

“Oh please, Genie. He only does that to spare me the embarrassment. He knows I’m the one who makes us late.” She slammed the cap back on her tube of lipstick and began pulling the pins out of her hair. Short little ringlets framed the side of her face, and some strands that weren’t long enough to hold the curl jutted straight out. She messed it up with a monstrous amount of hairspray, then fed her hoop earrings through her ears. “There. Done. That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“I’ve been here for twenty minutes. My driver is waiting.”

“He’s getting paid.”

“Yeah. By me. Chop chop!”

Marley giggled as she skirted around me in the doorway to her bathroom. She slipped into her bedroom and changed into a pair of jeans and a cute sweater. Finally ready, the two of us made our way out of her house and to my driver’s car. We slipped into the backseat, and I told him to take us to my uncle’s.

“What’s Uncle Tom making for dinner?” Marley asked as she patted her stomach. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“You have to stop doing that. It’s not good for you.”

“I had a busy day, okay? A bunch of orders for the store came through, and I had to process each item individually to confirm I had everything. I think I’m going to have to hire an assistant.”

“Probably,” I said. She should have hired someone months ago. She’d been running around like a chicken with her head cut off for weeks. Had I not been so busy with my own project I would have been by her side to help her. But I had my own things going on, clearly.

“So what’s he making?”

“Pardon?”

Marley blinked slowly at me. “Your uncle. What’s he making for dinner?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I didn’t ask him.”

“Rookie mistake.” Marley sighed, resting her head back and closing her eyes as she rubbed her tummy. “I’ve got my fingers crossed for something hearty and warm.”

“Chances are high.”

Her craving for something hearty and warm was not exclusive to her. I also wanted some comfort food. In fact, I’d been indulging in a lot of comfort food over the last couple of

days while I wallowed in self-pity and longed for Liam's company.

I couldn't help it. It was entirely out of my control, how much I missed him. And it surprised me.

When I agreed not to see him anymore, I thought I'd be able to keep my word to my uncle. But each day that passed only made it more difficult not to pick up my phone and call him. Or just send him a simple text to tell him I was sorry. That I didn't think of him like that. Like a Lost Breed animal the way my uncle did.

The only thing was, I didn't know if that would help him or me. It might only make it all harder. And I couldn't handle harder.

I needed a break somewhere along the way.

And a big batch of something my uncle cooked was sure to do the trick, even if it was just temporary.

When we arrived at my uncle's house, it was ten minutes to seven. We were a good twenty minutes late, and I was preparing my apology as I lifted my fist to knock, but I never got the chance because my uncle opened the door and smiled happily at both of us.

"Girls."

"Hi, Uncle Tom," I said, leaning in for a big bear hug.

He gave me a tight squeeze before pressing a whiskery kiss to my cheek. Then he gave Marley a hug. "Dinner is keeping warm in the oven. Are you two famished, or do you have time for a before-dinner drink?"

"Famished," Marley said.

Uncle Tom chuckled. "Well, I can put out some bread to start?"

"Awesome." Marley grinned. "Carbs."

Uncle Tom stepped aside to let us into the house, and I considered how much better his mood was today than the last time I saw him.

I slipped out of my shoes and tucked them into the shoe cubby against the wall. Marley did the same, and then we padded sock footed down his hall into his living room, where he was already clearing his coffee table of all the motorcycle and car magazines to make space for our drinks and bread.

He looked up at both of us. "I have red or white wine. Or rum and coke. Or cider. Or beer. What do you feel like?"

"Red wine please," I said as I slicked my hair back and secured it in a ponytail.

"Works for me," Marley agreed.

My uncle nodded. "Got it. Get comfortable. I'll bring it to you. I also have something I want to show you, Genevieve."

I arched an eyebrow as I settled down into my favorite corner of his brown leather sofa. "Okay."

My uncle disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me under Marley's curious smirk. "What do you think he has?" she asked, leaning back in her seat and resting her chin in her hand.

I shrugged. "No idea."

"Maybe a congratulations gift for the shelter?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Maybe when the shelter is done. You know Uncle Tom and I don't like to exchange gifts. We like to share company and time."

"Yes, so noble," Marley said dryly.

Uncle Tom walked into the room with a big black box. Marley shot me an "I told you so" look before shimmying closer to the edge of the sofa so she could rest her elbows on her knees and watch as he set the box down on the coffee table.

Then he stood back and looked from me to the box with his hands planted on his hips. "Open it."

Marley giggled. "You're so sweet, Uncle Tom."

"Huh?" He grunted. Then he blinked at her. "Oh. It's not a gift, Genevieve. It's... just open it. It's something I want you

to see. Something I have to explain.”

Frowning in confusion, I shifted forward and reached for the box. When I lifted the lid, I found myself staring down at the back of an old black leather jacket. The leather was faded with time, having turned a dark shade of gray in some of the worn areas like the elbows, and there was a crest on the back of an angry-looking skull set against an upside-down triangle filled with a dark swirling pattern. The image was menacing. Foreboding. But also quite beautiful.

I ran my fingers over the words etched above the crest and read them aloud. “Lost Breed.” I looked up at my Uncle. “Why do you have this? Whose is it?”

“Hyde’s.”

I gazed back down at the jacket. “How did you get it?”

“Liam brought it over. He and his president wanted me to have it.”

My mind started racing. “He came back here?”

Uncle Tom nodded as he took the spot on the sofa beside me. “Yes. And I’m glad he did. He said some things I needed to hear. And now I want you to hear them too.”

“Why?” I looked at my uncle. “I thought you hated him? I thought you hated the MC?”

“I do. Well, I did. Before I understood who they really were. What they really represented.” My uncle’s gaze saddened as he looked at the jacket I still had my hand resting upon. “Before I understood why my friend decided to become one of them in the first place.”

Marley cleared her throat, and we both looked up at her. She licked her lips. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m going to excuse myself and get that wine I was promised while you two talk about... this. And while I’m in the kitchen, I’ll get some of that bread you teased us with, Uncle Tom. All right?”

My uncle laughed. “Yes. Go ahead, Marley. Thank you.”

Marley pushed herself up off the couch and disappeared in record time. I supposed if I was her, I might have wanted to

escape this too.

My uncle reached for the jacket and pulled it out of the box. “Hyde was young when he joined their MC. Only twenty or so. We were just kids, and I was on the straight and narrow, getting my foot in the door with my telecommunications company. I knew there was money to be made there. Success to earn. Your father had my back and pushed me to go for it, so I did. And while I was making strides in the corporate world, Hyde was immersing himself in the wrong crowd. At least, what I thought was the wrong crowd.”

“And that’s when you two stopped talking?”

My uncle nodded. “I didn’t want to be associated with it. So I cut our friendship cold turkey and never looked back. He chose them over me, and since then, I’d hated him for it. Then Liam... well, I think you know how good he is with words.”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

“He told me things about Hyde I didn’t know. He told me why he joined the Lost Breeds and what the MC meant to him. And what it means to Liam.”

I ran my hands down my thighs. “Which is what?”

“Brotherhood. Loyalty. Family. All the things I wanted for myself and prioritized but saw through a different lens than Hyde.”

I chewed my bottom lip. “Uncle Tom, I don’t think I quite understand why you’re telling me all this.”

He sighed. “I want you to know what happened to Hyde. I want you to know everything. And then if you still choose Liam, at least you went into it with both eyes wide open.”

“Choose Liam?”

He nodded. “He’s a good boy, Genie. I misjudged him.”

“What?” I asked. How had he changed his tune so quickly? What could Liam have possibly said to him that made the pendulum swing so far in the other direction?

“I have a lot to tell,” my uncle said. “Let’s have that glass of wine, and I’ll tell you everything. Who he was and how he died.”

I swallowed and nodded. “Okay.”

Was I ready for this? Was it going to change everything?

And, if it did, where did that leave me and Liam?

If my uncle was all right with me seeing Liam again, I knew where my heart was and had been for weeks. And if my uncle trusted him, then I was ready to run full speed into his arms and never look back.

But first, I had to hear how my uncle’s friend was murdered, and that might very well change my mind.

CHAPTER 23



LIAM

Owen handed me a beer, and I looked up at him from where I sat in the corner of Ryder's sofa.

"I didn't shake it," Owen said earnestly.

I frowned.

Owen sighed dramatically and popped the tab himself before pushing the beer in my hands. "I feel sorry enough for you right now, man. I wouldn't do you dirty like that."

I accepted the beer with a gracious nod and gulped back the first half of the can. When I came up for air, I dragged the back of my hand across my lips. "I should have listened to you guys."

The men in the room with me, Ryder, Owen, Rhys, Jax, and Sabian, all nodded their agreement.

Sabian was the one to pipe up. "You should have. But everything is clearer in hindsight. And you were the one living it, not us. It's easier to see the answers from the outside looking in."

"That doesn't mean I shouldn't have listened to you," I muttered.

Owen clamped a hand on my shoulder and sat down beside me. "You'll get past it, man. Give it time."

I wanted to believe him. I really did.

But getting past someone like Genevieve seemed like an impossible feat. A feat harder than taking down Isaac Reed

himself.

So I sighed and drank more beer.

Rhys watched me out of the corner of his eye. “You did the right thing, Liam.”

“Then why do I still feel like shit?” I asked, looking at the five of them for answers.

It was Ryder who answered. “That’s part of the gig, kid. Making tough choices. Taking the back seat. Watching other people carry on with their lives without you. It hurts like a bitch. But the right girl will come along one of these days. You just have to be ready when she does.”

It was easy for him to say. He had Dani.

They all had their version of Dani. Their women were their other halves, steady rocks in their lives who were always there for their man when the going got tough. I wanted that. God, did I want that. And for the briefest time, I had wholeheartedly believed I’d found it with Genevieve.

Now here I was, nursing a beer and a broken heart.

“Cheer up, pipsqueak,” Sabian drawled. “It’s not all bad. Look at the bright side. Now you’re free to hit the open waters again.”

That wasn’t even remotely tempting, but I nodded anyway. “Yeah. I guess.”

“Jamie thinks you’re cute,” Owen suggested.

“Leave my little cousin out of this,” Jax growled.

Owen laughed and held up both hands. “Relax. I’m just saying. She and Liam get along great. Always have. Maybe there’s something there?”

I shook my head as Jax boiled in the corner. “No. Jamie and I are really good friends. That’s all. She’s like a sister to me.”

“That’s better,” Jax said. “Besides. Last I heard, she was seeing someone.”

“Really?” I asked.

Jax nodded. “Don’t know his name or what he does. She won’t tell me. Says I’ll scare him.”

I snorted. “Can’t say I blame her. She should at least test the waters and see what he’s made of before she terrorized him with the likes of you.”

Jax shrugged. “Only the best for my little cousin.”

Rhys pushed himself to his feet. “Another beer, Liam?”

I looked at the nearly empty one in my hand. “No. I’m all right. I’m going to head home in a bit here.”

Rhys nodded and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a beer for himself and one for the president. The two of them cracked them open, and I amused myself by comparing the two of them.

Rhys was younger by a good many years, but he had the same, “I don’t take any shit” air that Ryder had. Both men were powerhouses and leaders, and I thought back to the good old days in Chicago before everything went sideways and people started dying.

Rhys was the man. He was in your corner always. He was there for you when nobody else was, and if you needed help, he’d give it. Hell, he’d give whatever he could to help you. Ryder was the same. They were both worthy of the men they led in their MCs, and I couldn’t believe how lucky we’d all gotten to have both of them in the same club as friends.

Usually, men like them could be nothing but enemies.

“We should get you laid, pipsqueak,” Sabian said, drawing my attention to him as he leaned against the fireplace. “What’s your type?”

I shook my head. “Not interested.”

Sabian arched an eyebrow and looked around at the other men in the room. “He’s not interested?”

“Leave him be,” Rhys said. “Not all of us get over a woman by getting on top of another one, Sabian.”

Had I not felt so lousy, I would have partaken in the playful banter that kicked off after Rhys's comment. I listened instead, trying to find some solace in the laughter of my friends as they took jabs at one another's expense.

There was a knock on the door.

Rhys glanced at Ryder. "Were you expecting other members?"

Ryder shook his head and got to his feet. "No."

Rhys stood as well. The two of them went to the door, giving us a look to stay put. Unannounced visitors had a tendency to put Ryder on edge these days, especially at this late hour of the night when his son and woman were sleeping just down the hall.

Owen, Sabian, Jax, and I glanced around at each other as we waited. We heard the door open. Then we heard muted voices, and the front door closed. Someone new had come inside. Ryder was talking to them, but I couldn't make out what the newcomer was saying.

Rhys came back into the living room first and shot me a knowing smirk. He stepped aside and was followed by two young women.

Genevieve and Marley.

I instantly popped up to my feet.

Genevieve moved into the living room with Marley right on her heels. Her best friend practically clung to her back as Genevieve came toward me and stopped a couple feet away. She looked nervous and rightly so. She'd just walked into the home of the president of the Lost Breed MC.

She wrung her hands. "Um. Hi."

"Hi," I said.

Ryder came in behind the two women and instantly went to sit in his chair. He had the air of a man who was about to kick his heels up and enjoy the show.

Sabian, Jax, and Owen leaned in close to each other and muttered something in each other's ear before chuckling.

I shot them a dark look. "Shut up."

They all snickered like schoolboys.

Genevieve swallowed and looked around the room anxiously before settling her stare on me. Then she smiled. "It's good to see you."

"You too. But I have to ask... what are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"Rude," Marley hissed over Genevieve's shoulder.

Genevieve waved her friend down. "I... I needed to see you and Uncle Tom told me where I might find you. Um." She looked around the room again. Clearly, we had too big of an audience for her to find her words. I couldn't blame her. The MC men could be more than a little intimidating.

So, I was caught completely off guard when she lifted her chin with determination, moved forward, grabbed the front of my shirt, and kissed me like her life depended on it.

Sabian threw his fist in the air and hooted and hollered like a sports fan. Owen whistled then high-fived Jax. Rhys stayed quiet while Ryder chuckled, clearly pleased with this turn of events.

When Genevieve pulled away, her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes sparkled with joy. "I needed to do that."

I wanted to kiss her again.

She still had my shirt clutched in her fingers as she looked me in the eye. "Liam, I pick the wrong guys every time. Like clockwork. I pick the guys with a chip on their shoulder and a point to prove. The guys with jealousy issues and tempers. The liars. The ones who hurt me and everyone else around them. And here I am, falling for a biker."

I licked my lips. "And? Is that bad?"

"I don't know yet," she whispered. "I really don't. But I want to know what this is. I want to give us more time."

Because I've never felt the way I do when I'm with you. And it would be a shame to end things just because you have a different lifestyle than mine. Especially because I think that's the reason I like you so much."

"What about your uncle?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He's on board. Whatever you said to him changed his mind. Changed everything. Thank you."

"For what?"

She gave me a beautiful smile. "For redeeming his friend in his eyes and giving him the chance to grieve."

"Oh," I breathed. I hadn't expected that.

Genevieve bit her bottom lip and stepped in closer to me before looking around the room at the men. "Which one of you is Ryder?"

Her boldness turned me on. She was asking for my president like a damn boss.

Ryder got to his feet.

Genevieve had to tilt her head back to look up at him, and she released my shirt so she could hold out her hand to him. He took it and shook it as he gazed down at her. "I wanted to thank you," she said softly. "For giving Hyde's jacket to my uncle. I know it must mean something to you, too. I want you to know my uncle will take good care of it. It is very special to him. And it's the only thing he has left to remember his friend. Your friend."

Ryder nodded. "It belongs with him."

Genevieve looked around the room. "I'm sorry for what happened to him. For what happened to all of you. For Hyde. And Jason. And Max."

Rhys stiffened by the fireplace.

Genevieve turned her attention back to me. "And I'm sorry I didn't reach out sooner. I'm sorry I let my uncle's hatred cloud my vision of you. I'm sorry I didn't fight harder and come find you and—"

“Genevieve,” I said, cupping her cheek and pulling her in close. “You have nothing to be sorry about. Nothing.”

Her cheeks turned rosy again as she smiled up at me. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

Sabian cleared his throat. “Just kiss her already.”

I grinned.

Genevieve’s eyes closed as I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. The room erupted in cheers as she clung to me and the kiss deepened. My heart filled with joy that pushed out all the grief and pain that had made a home there over the last couple of days.

This was how things were supposed to be.

I’d known it the first time I saw her.

“Hey,” a sharp female voice cut through the cheering.

Genevieve and I broke apart, and everyone looked toward the hallway where Dani stood in her fleece house robe. Her dark hair was drawn up, her eyes were heavy with sleep, and she had a steely gaze set on Ryder. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Ryder winced. “Sorry, babe.”

Dani’s gaze flicked to Genevieve and Marley before she self-consciously drew her robe a little tighter. “Sorry. I didn’t know we had company.”

I pulled Genevieve along behind me to Dani. “Genevieve, this is Dani, Ryder’s partner in crime. She’s a detective with the NYPD. Dani, this is my girl, Genevieve.”

Dani smiled and instantly looked less tired. She shook Genevieve’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Genevieve. Liam has told us a lot about you. Like, a *lot*.”

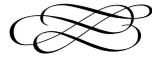
Genevieve giggled as I introduced everyone to Marley. The poor girl had been standing there like a fly on the wall, looking around at all the big bikers in fear. Once they got her talking, she relaxed a bit.

I pulled Genevieve in close as we took a seat on Ryder's sofa. "I'm going to take you home after this."

She snuggled in close. "How soon can we leave without it being rude?"

I laughed. "We're bikers, Genevieve. Don't worry about being rude."

CHAPTER 24



GENEVIEVE

I'd only been sitting on Ryder's sofa for a grand total of half an hour when Liam squeezed my knee. "I think it's time," he muttered.

"I just got here," I said. I was painstakingly aware of everyone in the room and didn't want to offend anyone by leaving earlier.

Well, "offend" wasn't the right word. I didn't want them to think I was afraid.

I wanted them to believe I was perfectly at ease there, especially with Liam by my side. They were his people and his family, and if I wanted to be part of his life, then I needed them to be my family too.

My stomach flipped over. That was an insane thought.

Liam turned his head to the side to hide his face from the others and dropped his voice very low. "I want you on your back. Naked. Screaming my name. *Now.*"

I pinched my knees together. *Oh God.*

"Stop it," I hissed, willing him to behave.

I tore my eyes away from him and instantly locked eyes with Dani.

She gave me a knowing smile before looking around the room. "All right, boys. Time to clear out. I have a sleeping child in the next room, and if any of you wake him up, you're on night duty. Got it?"

I wanted to hug her.

The men all grumbled and complained but did as they were asked, and soon, Liam, Marley, and I were being ushered out the front door to our vehicles in the driveway. Liam walked to an old F150 parked in the driveway and tugged open the passenger door. “I’ll drive you home, Marley. Climb on in.”

She looked up at his massive old truck. “I think we should have asked your driver to stay. There’s only one seat.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. I know. Get in.”

I pushed past her to climb up and sit in the middle seat. She got in behind me, and we sat hip to hip. Then Liam got in the driver’s side and started it up. The truck was loud as hell, and when we pulled out of the driveway and took off down the road, the seat vibrated under my ass as the engine rumbled.

It was a cruel tease. My body was already high strung and eager for Liam’s touch. Having Marley on my other side was horrifying and a painful reminder that I couldn’t just reach over and rub his crotch.

Not yet, at least.

Soon, she would be dropped off, and Liam and I would have this whole bench seat to ourselves.

I was chomping at the bit by the time we pulled into her driveway.

Marley popped her door open and then turned back to us. “Thanks for driving me, Liam. Tonight was nice. Your friends are—”

“Okay bye, Marley,” I said, leaning across her and pushing her door open the rest of the way. “I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Genie, what the hell? Can you—”

“Sorry. Can’t talk. Get out.”

Marley blinked at me before she processed what was happening. Then a knowing smile stretched her cheeks, and

she winked at me. “Be safe, kids. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

She climbed out of the truck. She turned back to say something else, but I’d already closed and locked the door behind her. She shook her head at us as I told Liam to back up, and by the time he pulled out onto the street, I had my hand on his cock and my other sinking into his hair.

He was already hard.

“So you’ve been thinking about it too?” I whispered in his ear.

His grip tightened on the wheel. “You’re going to make me crash, woman.”

“It would be the sexiest crash of all time.”

He chuckled deeply as I slipped a finger into the waistband of his pants. “Why don’t you just find a nice dark place to pull over? Hmm?”

“Fuck,” he growled.

“Is that a yes?”

“Do you think I could ever say no to you?”

I smiled. “That’s better.”

Liam found a good spot to pull over down a side street lined with heavy maple trees that cast the dark street into even darker shadow. It was an industrial area, so there was no fear of any homeowners poking their heads out their windows to scope out the truck they’d never seen parked on their street before.

And it was the perfect place for me to take off my seatbelt, slide down onto the floor of the truck, and undo Liam’s jeans.

He lifted his hips for me, and I drew down the waistband of his boxers. His cock sprang free, and I wasted little time pressing his tip to my lips before trailing my tongue down the length of his shaft.

I watched him the whole time as his hands tightened to fists on the seat and he pressed his head against the headrest. A

low growl came out of him that made my blood boil with lust, and I took him between my lips, gently easing him along my tongue and to the back of my throat.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, his body tensing as pleasure rolled through him.

If I didn't have his cock in my mouth, I would have smiled. I liked making him squirm like this. I liked seeing how good I made him feel. And I liked the feeling of his cock sliding in and out of my throat as I worshiped him.

I'd needed this. Our time apart had been some form of cruel punishment neither of us deserved, and this was the closest I could get to him.

I swirled my tongue in a slow circle around the head of his cock, and he tightened his buttocks, lifting his hips. I smiled before trailing my lips down his shaft and back up, and the look of sheer pleasure on his face had my knees aching.

“Get up here,” he demanded.

When I didn't listen right away, he grabbed my upper arms and pulled me up onto the seat beside him. Then, without waiting for me to get comfortable, he pushed me down. My head rested against the door panel of the passenger side, and he wasted little time snapping open the button of my pants and shimmying them down over my hips and thighs. They were skintight, so it took some effort for him to pull them all the way off.

Liam dropped them on the floor and went to his elbows between my legs.

I gazed down at him as he tugged my panties to the side and left soft kisses on the inside of my thighs, teasing me, daring me to keep my cool as he worked his way closer and closer to my pussy.

By the time he reached my center, I was shaking with desire. I reached for him, plunged my fingers into his thick mess of hair, and guided him down on me.

His tongue grazed over my clit.

My eyes fluttered closed, and I let out a soft moan.

Liam tugged my panties farther to the side to run his tongue up and down my aching slit. Once he had me panting up a storm, he indulged me in some gentle sucking of my clit. He pulled it between his lips and rolled his tongue over the swollen nub.

I gripped the back of the bench seat and let out a breathless cry.

He looked up at me, face buried between my legs, and by the glint in his eye, I could tell he was smiling. Then, suddenly, he was filling me up with a finger.

And he got what he wanted.

I cried his name up to the roof of the cab, and he didn't relent. He pressed up while he swirled his tongue over my clit, and I fell into a glorious madness. I forgot my name; forgot where we were and *why* we were. Everything melted away, and there was nothing but me and him and this perfect moment we'd carved out of nothing.

Liam planted kisses up my stomach as he inched my shirt up. I lifted my arms over my head so he could push my shirt up and off. It joined my pants on the floor. I helped him take my bra off, and he worked to pull my thong down my legs. Then he hurried to strip out of his pants, pausing only to take a condom out of the pocket.

He tore the wrapper open and rolled it on his cock. I gazed up at him, loving the way the shadows of the night carved his face into stark contrasts of darkness and light. He was beautiful. And he was mine.

"Take the shirt off too," I whispered. "I want to see all of you."

Liam pulled his shirt over his head and leaned over me. I spread my legs, letting him settle between them, and he dropped his hips, lowering himself until his cock rested against me.

"I've missed you," he breathed.

I reached up and caressed the sharp line of his jaw. “I’ve missed you too. I thought about you every day.”

“We have a lot of lost time to make up for.” Liam leaned over me, his lips hovering just inches from mine as he stroked my cheek softly. “How the hell did I get this lucky?”

I lifted my hips. His cock teased me. “We both got lucky. Now, are we going to keep talking like schoolgirls, or are you going to fuck me?”

He grinned and let out a deep, masculine laugh. “You asked for it.”

He pressed inside me.

My eyes rolled back in my head, and I gripped his forearms as a wild pressure built up below my belly. “Yes,” I breathed, hooking my legs around his and using my heels against the back of his thighs to push him in deeper.

Liam groaned softly and turned my head to the side to kiss my neck. His hot breath against my skin had me panting desperately beneath him. I ran my hands over his back, relishing in the feeling of his taut muscles shifting beneath his skin as he fucked me.

Liam slid his hands under me and pulled me up to him. He pressed in deeper, and the pressure that was building suddenly tightened into a knot. My toes curled, and I sucked in a sharp breath, and then he bucked wildly against me. Stars exploded behind my eyes as a pleasure unlike anything I had ever felt broke over me.

“Yes!” I screamed, digging my nails into his skin.

Liam growled against the side of my neck and pinched my earlobe between his teeth. The sharp bite of pain, coupled with the relentless euphoria of my climax, had me clawing at him and moaning his name between breaths.

Liam rolled his shoulders as he buried himself inside me. His arms shook, and his muscles strained, and I knew he was losing himself too.

I pressed my cheek to his. “Fuck me until you come, baby.”

Liam groaned.

I clung to him as he fucked me harder. The truck shook and creaked all around us, but we were oblivious to it. I cried out again in one last blissful orgasm as Liam climaxed with me, and soon, we both broke apart, sweaty and breathless, and leaned back against the bench seat naked and spent.

“I’ve never had sex in a vehicle before,” I whispered.

Liam chuckled and played with a strand of my hair, twirling it around his forefinger before letting it fall free. “I can promise you that won’t be the last time.”

I grinned. “Good. It was fun as hell.”

“And illegal.”

“Maybe I’m more of a bad girl than I thought,” I teased, rolling over to swing one leg over his lap and straddle him.

Liam rested his hands on my thighs. “If you’re not careful, I’m going to spread you out again.”

I licked my lips. “There’s a big bed waiting for us at my place.”

He ran his hands up my thighs to rest them on my hips. “Maybe I want to have a bit more fun here first.”

“Oh yeah?”

Liam’s hand fell between my legs, and I rocked my hips.

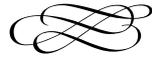
He grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled me down to devour my mouth with a ravenous kiss as he eased his fingers inside my pussy. I moaned into his mouth and surrendered myself to him.

The night was still young, and he had clearly only just begun.

My body quivered with lust and gratitude.

I was one lucky girl.

CHAPTER 25



LIAM

Genevieve stood with her hands on her hips and a confident grin on her lips. “This is it, Liam. This is where my shelter is going to be. I can’t believe it.”

I gazed out at the property she’d just purchased last week. Everything had been finalized earlier that morning, and she brought me out here to show me where her dream would finally be realized.

At the moment, it wasn’t much of anything.

There was an old school on the property that had been shut down over a decade ago after asbestos was found in the walls. Tearing it down was going to be a big job, especially doing so safely. The fact that Genevieve had so much money to throw at the project meant it would be done right.

Genevieve pointed at the front right corner of the lot. “I want this to be an outdoor sitting area. There will be hot coffee and hot chocolate in the fall and winter and cold drinks in the summer. Maybe some outdoor game for the kids, too. And lots of benches and places to lay in the sun. I want ten-foot-tall fencing all around the property and high shrubs planted all along the perimeter for privacy so the women can be free to enjoy the amenities without the onlookers on the street.”

“It’s going to be perfect,” I told her.

She kept gushing about her dream. “And over here, in the opposite corner, I want an outdoor activity area. Yoga. Yes. Definitely yoga. And maybe a hot tub somewhere.”

“Sounds like a resort more than a shelter.”

She turned to me and smiled. “That’s the idea.”

I chuckled. “You’re going to have women fighting each other to get in here, you realize?”

She shrugged. “Then I’ll build another one.”

She never ceased to amaze me. Every obstacle she came across was a chance to improve. No wonder she was such a marvel.

Genevieve snapped a picture with her phone. “I want to have framed pictures in the shelter of the stages of the development. I want people to see what it used to be.”

“Good idea.”

She turned toward me. “You’re still on board to be my security detail, right?”

I felt my eyebrows lifting. “You still want me to?”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I do.”

“But I’m not—”

“You’re not real security. I know. But I don’t care about that. I trust you to keep me safe, and having you on my arm makes me feel better about walking into some of these situations. I’m going to have to deal with a lot of people I know aren’t going to take me seriously, and having you in my corner makes me feel like I can do anything.”

I smiled. “That’s because you *can* do anything. With or without me.”

She giggled. “You’re right.”

Laughing, I pulled her in close to steal a kiss. “Have you had your fill of admiring your baby? I’m starving.”

She pressed her hands to my chest. “Yes, I’m ready. Let’s go eat.”

Genevieve took a seat in the chair I pulled out for her at our table at the restaurant. We were trying out a new place that

she'd been poking me about for the last couple weeks, telling me they had some of the best vegan options in the city.

My enthusiasm was less than high, but I was willing to try anything for my girl, so here we were, sitting down at a completely vegan restaurant with menus made of papyrus and chairs of bamboo. The ambiance was pleasant if not very millennial, and the soy-wax candle burning on the table between us smelled like grapefruit and clove.

"This is nice," Genevieve said as she draped her napkin over her lap.

"Very," I said as I peered down at the menu.

They actually had a lot of options, most of which sounded delicious.

"Thank you for trying this place with me," Genevieve said.

"Anything for my girl."

She grinned. "I like when you call me your girl."

I wagged my eyebrows. "Good. Because I'm not going to stop."

She giggled and was cut short when our server arrived. She had piercings galore all over the place; up her right ear, in her lip, nose, and eyebrow. "Hi there," she said, beaming as she looked back and forth between us. "Welcome to Leo's. What can I get for you two?"

We started with wine and a roasted-cauliflower appetizer. It was brought to our table quickly, and the first bite was heavenly and very unexpected.

The rest of the meal went about the same. I hadn't anticipated vegan food being so good, and I didn't want Genevieve to rub it in that she was right, so I tried to play it off like I wasn't enjoying it as thoroughly as I was.

She saw right through me.

"Good, isn't it?" she asked, winking at me.

"Very," I agreed. "You were right."

“Of course I was.”

“Wow. Try not to be so humble.”

She snickered. “I’ve been trying to get Uncle Tom to come here for months, but he won’t budge. Maybe he’ll give it a try now that you’ve given it the stamp of approval.”

“We could try to invite him. See what happens. Or trick him.”

“Trick him?” she mused.

I nodded. “Yeah. Tell him we’re going to one of the other places down the street and then bring him here.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not? It’s harmless. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He hates it.”

I laughed. “Then he hates it, and we go through a drive-thru on the way home.”

It felt good sitting and talking with her like this. The last couple of weeks had been nothing but pure bliss. I spent almost every night at her house, and during the day, I was with her, helping with her shelter and filling in wherever she needed me.

When the workday was done, we’d indulge in quiet evenings together. She liked to cook, and I liked letting her teach me. I also liked the eating part, naturally. I’d been slowly making steps toward warming her up to the MC.

She was a little nervous about spending more time with them, which I completely understood, and I didn’t want to push her too far too fast. I knew nothing would go wrong. The guys all understood that she came from a different walk of life, and they would never do anything to make her uneasy. Once she gave them the chance, they’d prove that they were just as trustworthy as I was.

I’d told her a dozen times over that she could go to any of them if she ever needed help. They’d be there for her just like

I would at the drop of a hat.

She didn't seem to believe me. Not really.

I supposed it was because she didn't really know how our MC worked yet. But once she spent more time with us, she would see that every member was family. And she was now a member by association. Sure, she might not wear the colors, but she was mine, and therefore *ours*.

They would have her back at any cost. Just like they had mine.

Genevieve and I finished eating dinner and slumped back in our seats to rub our very full bellies. I smiled at her as she sipped her wine.

"So," I said slowly. "Have you warmed up to the idea of coming with me to one of the guys' places soon for a drink or something?"

She licked her lips. "Maybe."

"Don't worry. If you're not ready, you're not ready. I can wait."

"I feel bad."

"Don't."

"But I do," she said, nudging her wine glass a couple of inches to the right on the table. "They're your family, and I'm being silly to be afraid of them."

She *was* being silly, but that was subjective. She didn't know there was nothing to fear.

"How did you feel when you came to see me at Ryder's?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Nervous."

"Because of them, or because of what you were coming to tell me?"

"Both?" she replied, her shoulders creeping upward in discomfort.

“Makes sense. Don’t worry. I was just asking. Don’t feel pressured. They will all be there when you’re ready. Though, if it helps, they’re looking forward to getting to know you better.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes lighting up.

I nodded. “Yes. I’ve told them a lot about you. And about your shelter. They respect the hell out of it, and all their women are all over me to bring you over every time I visit.”

She blushed. “That’s sweet.”

“Jamie also really wants to meet you.”

“And I want to meet her. I’ll be ready soon. I promise.”

That was enough for me. Genevieve and I finished our wine, paid the tab, and put our jackets on before slipping out of the restaurant onto the sidewalk to walk down the block to my truck.

There were no more lies between us.

When I told her all about me borrowing Owen’s truck, she’d burst into a fit of giggles. Then, when she saw *my* old truck for the first time in the light of day, she laughed even harder and told me she understood why I had to borrow Owen’s to uphold my lie.

She had insisted that my beat-up old F150 was charming to appease my hurt feelings. It had become an inside joke that amused us both to no end, and I was now her boyfriend, bodyguard, and personal chauffeur. I didn’t mind. Driving my girl around in my old truck was officially my favorite pastime.

We were half a block from my truck when two men walking in the opposite direction split apart to walk past me and Genevieve on either side.

One of them, the one who passed closest to her side, whistled at her. The other snorted and turned to call back at her. “If you ever wanna know what it feels like to fuck a real man, come find me, sweetheart.”

I stiffened.

Genevieve wrapped her arm tightly around mine. “Ignore them.”

I clenched my teeth.

“Look at that ass, bro,” one of them hooted.

“Give us a smile, baby,” the other one chanted.

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head.

“Liam,” Genevieve warned.

“Nope,” I said again, shrugging out of her grip and turning around to face the crude assholes who, as soon as they saw me turn, grinned at each other.

They had no idea who they’d just pissed off.

“Apologize,” I growled.

Genevieve stepped in behind me.

The taller of the two, a guy with a serious beer belly and a red nose from years of alcohol abuse, looked me up and down. “Or what, kid? You gonna teach us a lesson?”

They were older than me. And bigger, too.

But that had never stopped me before.

“Apologize,” I said again. “Or I’m going to make you even uglier than you already are.”

CHAPTER 26



GENEVIEVE

This is bad. This is bad.

This is really, really bad.

My palms were sweaty. My pulse fluttered wildly in my throat, which felt like it was getting tighter and tighter by the second as I watched the two drunken strangers close in on Liam.

My Liam.

This was the hard part about loving someone. You had to love all of them. Not just pieces of them.

And Liam was a fighter. Which meant, by sheer logic, that every now and then, he was going to fight. Whether I wanted him to or not.

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat and watched as the two men converged on Liam.

They were bigger than him. One of them had a beer belly that looked hard as a rock. It strained against his long-sleeved gray shirt and hung over his jeans. A little bit of it peeked out when he leaned back and spread his arms out wide, cracked a toothy smile, and addressed Liam.

“You sure you want to do this, kid? When we clobber you, there ain’t gonna be no one there to take care of your girl but me and Mike.”

Mike, the other man, laughed and closed a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Don’t give him an out. He wants to fight. So let’s fight.”

Liam bristled. “This isn’t going to go how you think it will.”

At least he was warning them. I had faith that Liam could hold his own against these men, but I couldn’t help but still be nervous. What if they had weapons? I’d read tons of online articles about fights that went south because one of the participants had a concealed knife or something. All it took was one mistake.

“Liam,” I said nervously.

He looked over his shoulder at me. “Stay back. It’s all right.”

I looked around, wishing there were more people out on the street, but there weren’t. Leo’s was located on a quiet side street, and at this time of night, everyone was turning in and not wandering down darker roads like this one.

They were smart.

Beer-belly drunken man stopped about ten feet from Liam and rolled up his sleeves. He had thick forearms—the kind of arms a man earned in a job requiring hours of physical labor. He was stronger than he looked. I doubted there was a squishy spot on his body.

Liam stood with his arms by his sides and showed no signs of bravado as the two bigger, older, drunker men laughed to themselves and muttered back and forth.

Then Mike nodded in my direction. “You just sit tight, sweetheart. We’ll be done with this waste of space in no time.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Fuck you.”

“I like a girl with a dirty mouth,” Mike said, rubbing his hands together.

“And I like a man who can spell his own name, you ignorant prick,” I spat.

Liam looked over his shoulder at me and gave me a warning look to stop talking.

Mike slapped his bigger friend in the gut. “Listen to her! It’ll be fun teaching her a lesson.”

“That’s it,” I hissed, fishing my phone out of my purse. “I’m calling the cops.”

“Wait,” Liam said, grinning like a madman. “Call them once I’ve had my fun. Someone needs to teach these assholes a better lesson than just locking them in a cell for twelve hours. And my knuckles are itching for this.”

So talking him out of it wasn’t an option. Okay.

“So I’m just supposed to stand here?” I barked.

Liam was still grinning. “Yep. Don’t worry. This won’t take long.”

“It better not,” I grumbled sourly.

Did it annoy me that I was going to have to watch him fight two men who looked like they could effortlessly clobber him into the pavement?

Mildly.

Was it worth it to be with him?

Absolutely.

Was I good with blood?

No. No, I was not.

The men paced toward him with their fists raised. Liam was light on his feet, like a little forest sprite, and he kept his arms loose at his sides. None of this meant anything to me, of course. I had no experience with fighting, unless you counted my high school days, at which time, one of my boyfriends defended my honor at a house party where I was a little too drunk and so was he, and we both ended up getting kicked out. I had a foggy recollection of the whole thing.

This, I could see and would remember in acute detail.

Liam taunted the men. “Come on, thing one and thing two. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

They rose to the bait, the beer bellied one coming in first, right fist swinging, mouth hung open in a loud bellow that blared down the sidewalk like a foghorn. He missed and swung wide. Liam ducked under his fist and left a flurry of strikes up his side, followed by one hard blow right to the middle of his very round belly.

The man doubled over with a grunt and dropped heavily to his knees as he clutched at his stomach.

Then the second one moved in. The one named Mike.

He was faster. Meaner. And he aimed to hurt.

Liam saw him coming a mile away, so my cry for him to look out was completely unnecessary and I felt a little foolish after shouting his name. I clamped my hands over my mouth and retreated several steps as Mike's attack pushed Liam back several paces.

Liam blocked six successive blows from Mike's fists with his forearms. It was like watching a very up-close boxing match. The sounds of the impacts made me feel ill. Liam grunted with pain as the final blow landed, and then he turned the tables, coming in low and driving upward into Mike's gut.

Mike must have been drunker than he looked because the hit didn't even phase him.

In fact, it made him laugh.

Liam didn't get his hands up in time. Mike swung and landed a punch to Liam's jaw. I let out a yelp and made to rush forward, but Liam rounded on me and pushed me away, forcing me out of harm's way. He spun back, ready for whatever came next, and Mike came unhinged, lashing out and hitting Liam three times in the ribs before decking him across the face again, hard enough to lay him out on the sidewalk.

Liam braced himself on all fours and stumbled back up to his feet. He wiped the blood from his split lip with the back of his hand and then spit a clump of blood onto the pavement. "All right, fucker. Playtime is over."

Mike laughed.

Liam didn't.

I watched, transfixed by how effortlessly Liam moved as he went in for his final strike. Everything else seemed to stand still, including Mike, as Liam swerved right, drew his fist back, and rolled in sideways to plant a blow right in the middle of Mike's nose.

Blood sprayed all over the place. Mike howled. Liam stood over Mike when the other man landed on his ass on the sidewalk clutching his bloody nose.

"You bastard!" he cried.

Liam moved in close and dealt a kick to Mike's shin. "That'll teach you to harass women on the street. Keep your slimy thoughts to yourself, you pig."

"You broke my nose!" Mike wailed.

Liam shot me a cocky grin. "Serves him right, don't you think?"

I folded my arms over my chest and popped out one hip as I stared down at the pathetic excuse of a man sitting on the sidewalk. "I'd say. And I believe I'm owed an apology."

Mike looked pitifully back and forth between Liam and me.

I arched an eyebrow. "I'm waiting."

Mike scowled. "I'm sorry."

I clicked my tongue. "Like you mean it, *sweetheart*."

Mike leaned sideways to let his blood drip from his nose. Then he lifted his eyes to me. "I'm sorry."

"Better." I grinned, reaching for Liam and wrapping a hand around his wrist. "Now, let's get out of here. I don't want to be around these assholes any longer than I have to."

Liam let me pull him down the sidewalk toward his truck. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"No you aren't," I said knowingly.

He chuckled. “All right. Well, I’m sorry it scared you. I’m not sorry I kicked their asses.”

“Me neither. They deserved it. Fuck those guys, right?”

“Right.”

“Fuck any guy who thinks he can harass a woman on the street like that,” I said when we got to the truck.

Liam opened my door for me and wiped his bloody lip on his wrist again. I frowned and cupped his face in my hands to inspect his injuries. He had a split lip and a nasty gash in his eyebrow that was leaking blood down into his eye. “I think you need stitches. We should go to the hospital.”

“No. No hospitals. We’ll go to Rhys’s place. His girl, Quinn, will fix me up.”

I pursed my lips. “I think I should drive.”

“I’m fine, I just—”

“Keys,” I said, holding out my hand expectantly.

He stared at my open palm. “I’m fine, Genevieve. Really. Just a couple bruises. Nothing to worry about.”

I blinked placidly at him. “Keys.”

He groaned and rolled his eyes before fishing his keys out of his jean pockets and dropping them into my hand.

I tightened my fingers around them. “Good call. Now get in and tell me how to get to Rhys’s house.”

Liam gave me directions to Rhys and Quinn’s place. It was about a twenty-five-minute drive from where we were parked, and Liam had to rummage around in his glove box for old fast-food napkins to stop his bleeding eyebrow.

“Does it hurt anywhere else?” I asked.

He shrugged. “A little in the ribs where that dick got me. But other than that, I’m all right.”

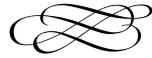
I licked my lips.

He glanced over at me. “Really. I am. I promise.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure whether or not I should believe him. I wished he’d let me take him to a hospital to at least make sure nothing was broken. I could still hear the sound of Mike’s fists hitting Liam’s forearms, and it made me nauseous. “Thank you for defending my honor.”

Liam gave me a sheepish smile and put his hand on my knee. “Always.”

CHAPTER 27



LIAM

Genevieve looked hot as hell driving my truck.

I told her so.

She flashed me a flirty little smile. “Yeah?”

“Definitely. You look hot doing anything.”

“That can’t be true.”

“It’s quite true.”

She shook her head as she took a right turn at the red light as I instructed. “You’re just kissing my ass so I’m not upset about the fight.”

“No,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow at me.

I chuckled. “Okay, maybe a little bit, but that doesn’t make it any less true.”

I gave her directions as we made our way up the residential streets to Rhys and Quinn’s house. It was half-past nine, and I hoped they weren’t asleep or otherwise occupied when we arrived. I’d hate to break up any of their intimate time so Quinn could stab me with a needle to pull my split and bloody flesh back together.

That would definitely be a mood killer.

When we pulled into his driveway, Genevieve killed the engine and peered out the windshield at the house. “So, just to

confirm. Rhys was the one who used to be your president back in Chicago, yes?”

“Yes.”

“But he gave up his title when you guys merged with the Lost Breeds?”

“You got it.”

She glanced at me. “Do you think he was better than Ryder?”

I frowned. Nobody had ever asked me that before, and I’d never actually considered it. They were both presidents and worthy leaders in my eyes. Even though Rhys didn’t hold the title, in my eyes, he was still my president and probably always would be. That didn’t mean Ryder was any less a leader than he was. I supposed I respected them both equally.

“No, I think they’re both pretty equal. Rhys is a bit more patient, where Ryder is more willing to make the tough choices. Both have advantages and disadvantages.”

Genevieve pushed her door open and slid out of the truck. I did the same and met her in front of the hood, and then we both walked up the rest of the drive to the front door which was illuminated by a single light above.

I knocked softly. “Fingers crossed they aren’t up to any funny business in there.”

“Why’d you have to go and say that?” Genevieve muttered, wrapping her arms around herself. “How awkward.”

“Don’t worry. He’d give me shit. Not you.”

Genevieve groaned beside me. She was about to say something when the door opened and we found ourselves staring at Rhys, who looked from me to Genevieve, and then back to me. He lifted an eyebrow as his gaze raked over me from head to toe.

“Let me guess,” Rhys drawled as an amused expression softened his features. “Fight?”

I rubbed the back of my neck and chuckled nervously. “Yeah. Is Quinn up?”

“Come on in,” Rhys said, waving both me and Genevieve in after him. “Feel free to leave your shoes on if you like. Quinn is taking her makeup off.”

“I hope we’re not catching you two at a bad time,” Genevieve said as she slipped out of her shoes and tucked them neatly against the wall. “Liam refused to let me take him to the hospital.”

Rhys chuckled as we followed him into his living room. “Yeah. Well, hospitals are a no-fly zone for us for little injuries like this.”

Genevieve cocked her head to the side as she and I took up seats on the sofas. “Why?”

Rhys went into his kitchen and grabbed a cloth which he ran under the faucet as well as some ice, which he wrapped in a dish towel. Then he came back, passed me the ice and the towel, and sat across from Genevieve. “Well, guys like us have to fly under the radar. Hospitals ask questions.”

Genevieve frowned.

I clarified for her. “If they were to find out I was in a fist fight, chances are it would automatically be blamed on me because I’m a Lost Breed.”

She nodded. “Got it. People jump to conclusions.”

“Exactly,” Rhys said.

“Like my uncle,” she said softly.

Rhys shook his head. “Your uncle was right to be wary. He had personal stakes in this because he knew Hyde.”

“I suppose so,” Genevieve said.

I dabbed gingerly at my lip. The bleeding had slowed for the most part, but my eyebrow was bad, and every time I pressed the cloth to it, it came away bloody. “I think I ruined your rag,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Rhys said. “We have plenty. Besides, you’ll be giving Quinn an excuse to go shopping.”

“What are you saying about me?” Quinn appeared from down the hall and walked languidly into the living room. She was wearing her pajamas, loose gray pants with a long-sleeved shirt, and powder-blue slippers. Her tattoos were on display, and her dark hair was drawn up in a braid down her back.

“Only good things,” Rhys said.

“Uh huh,” Quinn said, coming and standing beside me. She planted her fists on her hips and clicked her tongue. “What have you gotten yourself into this time, Liam?”

“Nothing,” I said hurriedly.

Quinn turned toward Genevieve. “He’s lying, yes?”

Genevieve nodded. “Yes. Fist fight.”

“Naturally.” Quinn sighed. “I’ll get my sewing kit. Sit tight. Want any painkillers?”

“I’m all right,” I said.

Quinn nodded at Rhys. “Grab him some aspirin or something from under the bathroom sink.”

“I said I was fine,” I protested.

She scowled at me. “Hush. I wasn’t really asking.”

Genevieve smiled at me. “I like her.”

“Of course, you do.” I sighed.

“And don’t get any blood on my couch,” Quinn called as she made her way down the hall to retrieve her sewing kit.

“You heard her,” Rhys warned. “Buying new dish rags is one thing. A new couch is another.”

When Quinn returned, she had a mini sewing kit with her. She flipped it open and sat down on the couch beside me, where she threaded a needle with medical thread, burned the needle with a lighter to sterilize it, and forced me to tilt my head back so she could start stitching.

Genevieve watched in horror as the needle slid through my eyebrow.

Rhys caught her shocked and horrified expression and tried to distract her. “Did Liam ever tell you about the time he got his first tattoo?”

Genevieve’s eyes flicked toward Rhys. “No.”

“Shut up,” I warned.

Quinn pushed at my chest. “Hold still. I’m stitching your face. I don’t want to make you uglier than you already are.”

Rhys leaned forward, drawing Genevieve’s attention to him, and proceeded to tell her all about my first experience in Quinn’s tattoo parlor about five years ago.

“He put on a brave face, but he was just a kid at the time. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. Quinn warned him it would hurt.” Rhys shot a grin to his girl, who grinned right back. “He took it with a grain of salt and insisted he’d be perfectly fine.”

“And?” Genevieve asked, clearly amused with the story so far.

“And,” Rhys carried on, “he passed out.”

“The first person to ever pass out in my chair.” Quinn giggled.

“You’re not telling the story right,” I grumbled.

“Oh no?” Rhys asked, sitting up straight.

I almost shook my head but caught myself. “No. I hadn’t eaten all day because I was nervous. And I didn’t pass out right away, thank you very much. It was about fifteen minutes into it. And I felt dizzy, but I didn’t want to say anything because you and Owen would have had a fucking field day if I bitched out after only fifteen minutes.”

Rhys snorted. “We had a field day anyway.”

There was nothing I could say to that.

Quinn slid the needle through my brow for the last time before breaking the thread and tying it off. Then she held the ice wrapped in a towel to my jaw. “I’ll get you another one for your arms. And that painkiller Rhys never got around to.”

“Sorry babe,” Rhys said as she got up and bustled down the hall to the bathroom. Then she went to retrieve ice and a glass of water from the kitchen. In minutes I was fully set up and icing all my aches and pains while Rhys finished telling Genevieve all about how I slid right off the chair and slept face down on the tattoo shop floor until they were able to wake me.

Genevieve giggled. “Well, you’re a lot tougher now I’d say.”

“I hadn’t eaten,” I protested.

Quinn settled down on the couch beside Rhys and draped her legs over his lap. He rested his hands on her ankles and ran his thumbs in circles on her skin. Then he nodded in my direction. “Have you heard about the meeting on Thursday?”

I shook my head.

“Eight o’clock at Ryder’s. Mandatory. Every MC member is expected to be there.”

I felt my brows drawing together. “Mandatory?”

Rhys nodded.

“When was the last time he called a mandatory meeting?” I asked, looking between Rhys and Quinn.

Rhys ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s been a while. Since we were accepted, I’d say.”

“Has something happened?”

“Beats me,” Rhys said.

I caught Genevieve looking at me. “It’s probably nothing,” I said, offering her a smile I hoped was reassuring. But my stomach was already churning.

What if it wasn’t nothing? What if it was something serious? Something like Isaac Reed?

No, I couldn't think like that. If someone like Isaac Reed was back in the picture, then things with me and Genevieve were going to come to a very abrupt halt. There was no way I'd bring her off the deep end with me and get her caught up in an ordeal like that. She deserved better. And, truth be told, I'd be too terrified of losing her to be of any help to my brothers.

And I had made an oath.

I watched my girl as Quinn started chatting with her. She cast worried glances in my direction every so often, and I loved her for caring.

Hell, I loved her for everything she was.

And that was why, if this meeting ended badly, I'd have to let her go and trust her uncle to look after her.

CHAPTER 28



GENEVIEVE

“I wish I could come with you,” I said as I leaned up against the wall in my hallway.

Liam was standing in front of the door, shrugging into his leather jacket. He had a bruised jaw from his fight on Tuesday and a swollen brow from where the cut was still healing. He was missing hair that I had concluded probably wasn't going to grow back because the gash was definitely deep enough to scar. Aside from that, he was in good shape. His ribs were a bit bruised, and I noticed he moved a little slower and more carefully than normal, and he had dark purple skin on his forearms.

I couldn't deny that the roughed-up look suited him well.

He turned toward me as he flipped the collar of his jacket down. “I know. I wish you could come too. But I'll be home before you know it, and we can put whatever this thing is to rest. No more worrying.”

“No more worrying,” I echoed.

This mandatory meeting had been looming over both our heads for two days now. Ever since Rhys had told Liam about it back at his house, it was all either of us could think about.

He'd warned me that the last time a mandatory meeting was called, things weren't going so well for the MC.

I didn't like the sound of that. It sounded dangerous. It sounded like blood.

Liam put his fingers under my chin to lift my face toward his. “It will all be okay, Genevieve. Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” I whispered.

His lips curled up in a smile. “Everything will go back to normal soon. We’ll focus on your shelter. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He turned to go, but I caught him by the back of his jacket and pulled him back for a kiss.

He chuckled, and I felt the vibration of his laughter under my palms as I pressed my hands to his chest. “Ride safe,” I said when we broke apart.

He cracked a grin. “Never.”

I stood in the doorway and watched him get his bike ready in the drive. He put his helmet on, started the bike, and waved before swinging one leg over the seat and peeling out of the driveway onto the street.

My poor neighbors probably hated me by now.

Once the sound of his roaring engine was far off in the distance, I locked the front door and padded into the kitchen, where I poured myself a glass of wine to try to calm the nerves.

This was my life now.

Worry. Relentless, agonizing, exhausting worry.

I wouldn’t trade any of it, though. Liam was the brightest light in my life by a landslide, and no amount of fear would ever make me give him up. Of course, I might lose him, not have to give him up, but that was a whole different beast entirely.

I lasted about fifteen minutes before I caved and called Marley.

“What’s up, babe?” she asked as she answered the phone. Her tone was chipper as always, and it made me smile.

“Are you free?”

“For you? Always. Is everything okay?”

I sipped my wine. “Yes. Well. Sort of. Liam is at that meeting I told you about, and I’m home alone, and it’s getting to me. I could use some company to wait out the hours.”

“Say no more. I’m on my way. Should I bring anything? Wine? Cheese?”

“I have it all. Just come over.”

“Give me twenty.”

After getting off the phone with Marley, I distracted myself by preparing a rather ambitious charcuterie board loaded with an assortment of crackers, vegan cheeses, and meats for Marley. I added grapes, dried apricots, and jalapeno jelly for good measure before topping off my wine glass and brooding as I stared at the clock on the stove.

As per usual, she was later than promised.

When she finally arrived with a hurried knock on the door, I was well past frazzled. I unlocked the door and let her in. She slipped inside and stepped out of her sparkly sandals. “Sorry I’m late. Traffic was a bit mental.”

“Sure,” I said, noting how nice her makeup looked. “I hope you weren’t getting all glammed up just to come over here.”

“I wasn’t,” she said thinly.

Liar.

It didn’t matter. I poured her a glass of wine, and the two of us retreated to our favorite spot in my home: my enclosed solarium deck.

We took our usual seats and draped fleece blankets over our laps that I’d brought out last week when the nights started to get really chilly. Then we dug into the snacks.

“So this meeting,” Marley said, looking up at me while she smothered a cracker in cheese spread. “What do you think the deal is?”

“I have no idea. Liam says it’s probably nothing. But he seemed pretty caught off guard when Rhys told him it was

mandatory. Apparently, mandatory meetings are rare and are only called when something serious is going down.”

Marley popped her cracker in her mouth and covered her lips with her hand as she chewed. After she swallowed, she washed her bite down with a sip of wine. “So he has no clue what it might be about?”

I shook my head. “He says it’s probably not as bad as our imaginations are making it out to be. If something bad was going down, he says they’d know about it by now. Last time, everyone knew about Isaac Reed before they took action and decided to, well, you know. Kill him.”

Marley scoffed. “I can’t believe this is the shit we talk about now.”

“Tell me about it.”

Marley leaned back in her chair to stretch her legs out in front of her. She crossed her ankles as she swirled her wine around in her glass. “I’m sure everything will be fine, Genie. And if it isn’t, we’ll figure it out. Okay?”

“We?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

She nodded. “Yes. *We*. Always *we*. We’re in this together. And I don’t want you to lose Liam because of whatever this meeting might be about. He’s good for you. Like, really good for you.”

I smiled as I stared down at my wine. “He is.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you two together.”

I giggled. “Thanks, Marley.”

“No sweat, boo. Now, let’s talk about something other than this ominous meeting tonight. How’s Uncle Tom handling things?”

“Good,” I said.

Marley raised an eyebrow. “Really? That surprises me. Does he know you and Liam are basically living together?”

I shrugged. “More or less.”

“So, less?”

I snickered. “Yeah, I guess so. I know things are moving really fast, but it feels right, and Uncle Tom trusts me not to make any stupid choices. And he trusts Liam, too.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I invited him over for dinner this weekend so he and Liam can get to know each other a bit better. Would you care to join us?”

Marley pursed her lips. “Will it be weird?”

“I hope not. Weird isn’t what I’m aiming for.”

She ran her finger along the stem of her wine glass. “Then count me in. But I have the right to bail if shit goes sideways.”

“Of course.”

“What are you cooking?”

“Do you ever think of anything besides food?” I laughed.

Marley sat up straighter and reached for more crackers and cheese, which she slathered in jalapeno jelly. “No. Come on. You know me better than that. Food is my main squeeze. Cheese is the Liam to my Genevieve.”

I snorted. “Oh my God.”

“It’s true. Cheese never betrays me. It’s always there when I need it. And a good listener, too.”

“Stop it.”

Marley cracked a wry smile. “You don’t get it. Vegan.”

“No, I don’t.”

We spent the next half hour devouring the food platter. When there were only a couple grapes and a few broken pieces of crackers left on the tray, we both slumped back in our chairs and moved on to our second glass of wine.

“I hope he’s not having a hard time,” I said quietly.

Marley looked over at me. “Why don’t you set something up for him to come home to? Something romantic?”

“Like what?”

Marley shrugged one shoulder and gazed up at the night sky through the solarium windows. “Like putting on a sexy outfit and lighting some candles or something. You can take his mind off of whatever goes down tonight. He’d love it. And let’s be real. You’ll need the release too.”

“Do you have any filter at all?”

She grinned. “Nope. But give me a little credit. It’s a good idea.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “It’s not bad.”

“Do you have something you would wear?”

What a silly question. Of course, I had something to wear. Hell, I had half a dozen outfits already coming to mind. There was the black lace one with the sexy garters and red ribbons. There was the pretty sheer pink baby-doll one. The all-red lace bodysuit. The two-piece bralette and panties with leather straps—very dominatrix style.

“I have a couple of things I could make work,” I said.

“Then that’s what you should do,” Marley said decisively. “You should have a nice hot bath with some essential oils, and when he gets home, you’ll be waiting for him in your sexy little outfit. Whatever troubles he has will be gone as soon as he looks at you. And then you guys can sort it all out after. When the endorphins are coursing through your bodies and—”

“I get it, Marley. Thanks.”

“All right. All right. I was just saying.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. A bath sounded lovely. So did essential oils. And candles.

And a night of passionate lovemaking to relieve the pent-up stress in both of our systems.

I smiled at my friend. “Thanks for coming over, Marley.”

She lifted her wine glass to mine. “Anything for my main bitch.”

CHAPTER 29



LIAM

Ryder's house was overflowing with MC members.

I found Sabian in the living room, draped up against the fireplace in his typical nonchalant way, studying the room with a blank expression.

"Hey," I said, leaning against the wall beside him.

"Pipsqueak," he said in greeting, tipping his chin toward me.

"Any clue what this is about?"

"Nope," he said, dark eyes still scanning the room as men took up spots on the sofas. "I'm still trying to figure out how all these fuckers are gonna fit in here."

"Have you seen Ryder yet?" I asked, ignoring his comment about the packed house.

"No. No one has."

"What's the deal?" I muttered more to myself than to him.

"If you figure it out, let me know because I haven't been able to figure it out for the life of me. All I can think about is ___"

"Reed," I said.

"Yeah."

"Me too."

"It's a bitch," Sabian growled. "Haven't been able to eat all day."

“Pussy.”

He arched an eyebrow and peered down at me. “The balls on you tonight, hey?”

I laughed nervously. “I’m just trying to pass the time, okay? Ryder has me on pins and needles.”

“You’re not alone. The whole room is tense. Look at Derek. He’s pale as a sheet.”

“Poor bastard.”

Sabian was right. There was definitely a thickening tension in Ryder’s living room.

None of us could be blamed for being on edge. I was sure every man was thinking of the worst-case scenario: we might be going to war again.

The casualties last time had been great. Nobody wanted round two of Isaac Reed. Ryder wouldn’t want that either. Not with his son in the picture now.

Owen sidled up on my other side and cracked open a can of soda. “I’ve got a bad feeling, boys.”

“Don’t get me started,” Sabian growled.

Owen gestured at my face. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“Fight.”

“No shit. With who?”

“Two assholes who harassed Genevieve on the sidewalk the other night. Pissed me off. Had to teach them a lesson.”

Owen chuckled. “Looks like they were the ones who taught you the lesson.”

I scowled at him. “They’re much worse off than this. Trust me.”

“I hope so. Otherwise, you’re gonna give our MC a bad name.” Owen winked at Sabian, but the other member was too absorbed in his anxiety to indulge our petty bickering. Owen

nudged me in the ribs. “Have either of you seen Ryder yet? I couldn’t find him anywhere.”

“He hasn’t showed,” Sabian said.

“Weird.” Owen peered around the room.

Rhys walked in the front door, and I waved him over. He wove through the thickening crowd of men taking up every square inch of space in the place to reach us, then nodded in greeting. “Boys. What’s the word?”

“Nothing yet,” Owen sighed.

Rhys frowned. “Who’s missing?”

“Ryder,” Sabian said.

“Haven’t seen Axel yet either,” Owen said.

“And Aiden?” I asked.

“In the kitchen,” Owen said.

“Right.” I nodded.

As far as I could tell, it looked like every member had officially arrived. We were only missing Axel and Ryder himself, and it could probably be safely assumed that the two of them were together.

My skin itched. “Someone should give them shit for making us wait them out like this.”

“Go for it, pipsqueak.” Sabian grinned. “Let us know how that works out for you.”

Minutes passed. Nobody said much of anything. There was nothing to say. The room hummed with anticipation and nerves that seemed to become more and more obvious as the time ticked by.

The only word I could think to best describe it was “dread.”

I thought of Genevieve back home, waiting for me, and wondered how she was holding up. I knew she’d been nervous about this, and even though I tried to play it cool, I was fairly certain she saw right through me.

I couldn't wait for this to be over so I could be back home with her.

Even if things went badly here tonight, I could at least steal one more evening with her before everything went sideways again.

The room fell into a hush.

I looked up and peered over the heads of taller men as Ryder emerged from down the hall where the bedrooms were. Axel was with him, and so was Dani, which surprised me a little. She hadn't been at any meetings for a long time.

I swallowed and shared a look with Rhys, who closed a hand over my shoulder. "Steady," he said under his breath.

Ryder and his companions moved into the living room. The crowd parted for them, and he stopped in front of the windows, putting his back to them so he could face us.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," he said, casting his cool, calm gaze around the room. Being the leader he was, he took his time, taking care to lock eyes with each man, acknowledging each of us and our presence at the meeting. When he looked at me, I felt a swell of pride to be one of his subjects.

Even if everything was about to go to Hell in a handbasket, I knew I'd follow him anywhere. To death, if I had to.

Ryder cleared his throat. "I know there have been rumors about this meeting. And I can't blame you for wondering why I've called you all here. But it's time to put the rumors to rest. Brothers, relax. We are still at peace."

The whole room let out a shaky breath. Relief washed over me that was so overwhelming I felt lightheaded. Rhys's hand was still on my shoulder, and his grip loosened. He probably didn't even realize he'd done it.

Ryder smiled around at all of us. "I have good news, brothers. Dani, come."

Dani moved to stand beside him. He wrapped an arm around her waist to pull her in close to him, and she gazed up

at him adoringly, her eyes tracing the line of his jaw as he addressed the room. “Dani and I are with child.”

The room shifted from tense to celebratory in a matter of seconds. Everyone cried out their joy for our president and his woman, and Dani beamed around at all of us as her cheeks turned bright pink. She laughed and so did Ryder, who watched her the whole time as the room shook with sentiments of congratulations.

Ryder held up his hands to call for silence. He had it in seconds. “Now, this isn’t the only thing I’ve called you all here for. Things are changing. We are changing. And I think it’s time I take a step back.”

The silence grew heavy. I sucked in a breath. *Take a step back?*

Dani stepped in even closer to Ryder and put her hand on his chest. He looked down at her, and she nodded encouragingly. Then he lifted his eyes back toward us. “This winter will be my last as your president, gentleman.”

Wait. What?

My mouth fell open.

A quick look around the room confirmed that everyone else was just as floored as I was.

A few voices called out in question of the decision.

Ryder stroked his jaw. “I know it’s sudden. And I know it’s a big change. But I have thought this through, and I will be leaving you in capable hands. Leaving *us* in capable hands.”

I looked at Owen, who mouthed Axel’s name.

It made sense to name Axel as the next president. He was Ryder’s right-hand man. But the more I thought about it, the more insane that seemed. Axel had his hands full with his kids and his family and his auto shop. How was he going to take on the responsibility of being our president without compromising something else?

No, that didn’t make sense. And Ryder wouldn’t ask that of him.

So who did that leave?

The room had descended into wild muttering. The voices grew louder as the men spiraled, and Ryder let it go for a minute or two before he called for order again.

“My successor is worthy of the title,” Ryder said. “He has proven himself, and I am confident that he will lead us wisely and fairly, should he accept the mantle.” His cheeks stretched in a grin. “Shall I name him?”

The room thundered with a unanimous cry: “Yes.”

Ryder’s gaze slid around the room and then fixated on someone standing very close to me. Someone with their hand on my shoulder.

“I give to you, the new president of the Lost Breeds, Rhys Davies.”

More applause. More celebratory shouts. More noise.

My mind reeled as Rhys’s grip on my shoulder tightened tenfold. Then I turned toward him, laughter pouring out of me, and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Holy shit!”

Rhys looked like a deer in the headlights as he stared at Ryder. Then his gaze slowly slid to me, and his face broke out in a wild grin.

“Holy shit!” I cried again, this time launching forward and wrapping him in a huge bear hug.

Rhys laughed and pounded my back with closed fists, and then the two of us were swarmed by the others. Owen got to us first. Then Aiden. And it was right and just that the four of us were the ones in the middle when everyone else converged and buried us under their bodies.

Rhys took me under his arm and knuckled my head, messing up my hair. “I’ve got your back, kid.”

I was glad we were buried under the bodies as I gave him one final squeeze. My original president was going to reassume his natural role, and the Lost Breeds were going to be grateful for him. Ryder was going to be grateful for him.

He'd made the right call.

Rhys would lead us to a bright future. A future that was fair and right and ready for us.

And we would meet it head on with pride, standing behind our leader fearlessly, ready for whatever the world was going to throw at us.

“Somebody get me a beer!” Rhys cried from under the dog pile of men.

“Fuck the beer,” I heard Owen yell. “Break out the real shit!”

EPILOGUE



GENEVIEVE

I studied my reflection in the full-length mirror in my bedroom.

“This will do,” I said, running my hands down my hips and thighs.

I’d tried on every single lingerie set I owned, trying to find the perfect outfit to surprise Liam with when he got home from his meeting, and I’d settled on the one I was fairly certain would get his blood pumping the fastest: the sexy little red one-piece number.

For a bit of extra flair, I’d paired it with a pair of thigh highs with thick black lace straps around the thighs. They clung to my body perfectly. My black Jimmy Choos completed the ensemble, and the red soles matched the lace one-piece immaculately.

I’d gone to the extra effort of curling my hair, back combing it, and dousing it in hairspray for some serious lift. The desired effect had been achieved. I looked as close to a Victoria’s Secret model as I could get, and I felt pretty damn sexy.

All that was missing was my man.

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. It was ten o’clock. Much later than I thought he’d be. The room flickered and danced from the flames of the six candles I’d lit and placed on different surfaces for the right amount of ambiance, and they’d already burned down about an inch or so.

I hoped he would get home soon. I could barely stand to wait any longer. I was nervous as hell, and it was taking every ounce of self-control I possessed not to call him and find out what the hell was going on.

With a sigh, I turned from my mirror to pluck my long white robe off the back of my bedroom door. I shrugged it on and caught a whiff of my lavender-scented bath oil that still lingered on my skin. I'd taken Marley's advice and indulged in a steamy bath, and it had helped soothe my nerves a little and get me in the mood.

But the longer I waited, the more anxious I got.

I padded down the hall to the kitchen, and I poured myself another glass of wine. It was the only thing I could think to do to slow down my spiraling thoughts.

Liam was fine. He was among friends. And we could handle whatever transpired at this meeting. I was confident of that much. Whatever it was, we would get through it together.

And hopefully in one piece.

Fifteen more minutes passed as I sipped my wine in the kitchen.

Don't call him. Don't call him. Do. Not. Call. Him.

My fingers twitched as I stared at my phone, facedown on the kitchen counter. It taunted me, dared me to just pick it up and call Liam and make sure that everything was okay. That he was okay.

That *we* were okay.

I was being paranoid.

Liam was in the middle of important MC business. I refused to be the girlfriend who called to check in on him like an overbearing helicopter parent. I could only imagine how badly they'd harass him for that.

Besides, I wasn't that girl.

I was the girl who would be waiting here for him, ready to brace for whatever storm awaited us—together. I would be

whatever he needed, whenever he needed it.

Although it would be nice if he needed something *now*. I'd never been very good at waiting.

Then, right on cue, my front door opened with a soft click.

I spun to the sound, and my wine sloshed over the side of my glass to spill in a dramatic red splatter down the side of my white robe. I didn't care.

Liam stood framed by the doorway, smiling at me.

"Everything is okay?" I breathed.

He nodded. "Everything is okay."

"Thank God." I put my wine down and rushed to him. He met me with open arms and scooped me up as I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him. "I was so worried."

"I'm sorry I'm so late."

"It's okay."

"No. I should have called. Things just got a little wild."

"What happened?" I asked, pulling away and cupping his face in my hands.

"Ryder—" He paused and looked me up and down. "What are you wearing?"

"I'll show you in a minute. When we're in the bedroom. Tell me what happened first."

He gently pushed me back a couple of steps so he could close and lock the front door. Then he shrugged out of his jacket and hung it on the hook on the wall by the door. "Ryder named a new president."

"What?" I asked. "Really? Who?"

"Rhys."

"Seriously? That's huge, right?"

"Very huge." Liam nodded. He was still grinning from ear to ear.

I laughed softly. "This is good news?"

“Yes. Rhys deserves this. And Ryder deserves the break. He and Dani are expecting a second child.”

“That’s exciting. What does this mean for you?”

“It means my best friend is the new president of the Lost Breeds. It means I have a very bright future. And it means change is coming. But I’m ready. Because I have all I need.”

My heart swelled with joy. “So do I.”

“You’re still willing to do this thing with me?” he asked, reaching for me and stroking my cheek.

I leaned into the warmth of his palm. “I can’t see my future without you, Liam. I think—I think—”

“I love you too,” he said.

I bit my bottom lip and smiled at him. “You do?”

He nodded. “I’ve loved you since the day I saw you walk by the cafe on your way to the women’s shelter with Tracey.”

I giggled and pushed playfully against him. “Say more sweet things to me.”

“I’ve loved you since the first time you told me your name. Since you held your ground in front of that asshole to defend strangers. Since—”

“I get the picture,” I whispered, pressing a finger to his lips. “I love you too, Liam.”

I dropped my robe.

Liam’s gaze slid down the length of my body. “Whoa.”

“Whoa?”

He nodded, letting his gaze wander back up. “Yeah. Whoa. Now come here.”

“No,” I said, resisting. “You come with me.”

I took his hand. Liam let me guide him down the hall to my bedroom—our bedroom—and I knew his eyes were on my ass as I walked, so I deliberately threw a dramatic sway into my hips.

When I slipped through the doorway to the bedroom, I turned back toward him, feeling even sexier in the candlelight. “I wanted to take your mind off of things when you got home.”

“My mind is only on one thing,” he growled.

I giggled softly and reached for the top of one stocking to slowly draw it down. Liam watched, practically salivating as I put on a show for him.

“We’re going to run this city, you and I,” I cooed. “You’ll run the streets with the Lost Breeds. I’ll run the shelters.”

“Sounds good, baby,” he purred.

I moved on to the other leg. “We’re going to help people.”

“You’re so fucking sexy.”

I went to the bed and sat down on the edge before beckoning him closer with a curl of my finger. He came to me, and I gazed up at him—at the man I loved more than anything in this world. The man I never expected to find.

“I’m ready for whatever comes next,” I whispered.

Liam went to his knees on my bedroom floor and rested his hands on my bare thighs. “I’m ready for a future with you.”

“I never would have dreamed I’d fall in love with a biker,” I said, running my thumb along his jaw. “And yet, here we are.”

He pushed my legs apart. “Here we are.”

As he laid me down on the bed, I descended into a realm of suspended paradise, where the worries that plagued me minutes ago could no longer reach me and where the long-awaited sense of calm made a home in my heart.

This was what had been missing from my life.

The constant of a man who adored me, who knew how to love me, and who knew how to hold me when everything else around us was unknown.

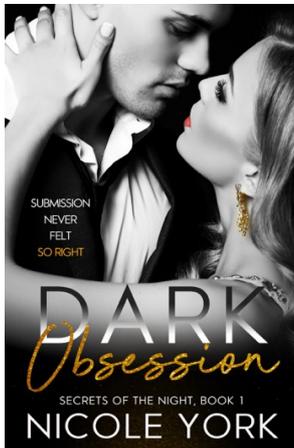
This was only the beginning of a life full of memories we had yet to earn together.

I was home and so was he.

The rest would fall into place in time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole York is a woman that loves the thrill of suspense. Whether that be flipping upside down on a roller coaster or sitting on the edge of her seat watching the latest thriller movie, she's all in. If you see the sports car on the freeway flying by you, take a pic, because you probably just saw her!!

She is the one that always figures out the plot in the movie and comes up with the ending that no one else ever saw coming. It just serves her right that now in the books she writes sometimes the characters take the book a direction the author had not planned on.

Copywrite

The Lost Breed MC Box Set

Ryder- 2017

Axel- 2018

Jax- 2018

Sabian- 2018

Derek- 2018

Caleb- 2018

Rhys- 2018

Aiden- 2019

Owen- 2019

Liam- 2019

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