



UGLY

CERBERUS MC BOOK 26

MARIE JAMES

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Ugly
Cerberus MC Book 26

Marie James

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Cerberus MC

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Synopsis

Hooking up with a cop was supposed to be fun.

How joking with Detective Lennox Maison about her handcuffs transformed into her actually arresting me was something I could've never predicted.

I thought it was a joke at first, but what kind of person would joke about the murder of a local woman?

Lennox claimed I was the last one to see her alive.

I should have an alibi. I should be able to tell them exactly what I was doing that night.

The truth is, I can't remember, and that argument never holds up in court.

I manage to convince her that I'm innocent, only for it to happen again.

I not only have to worry about being falsely accused of murder, but now I have to worry if I've put Lennox in the crosshairs of a serial killer.

Chapter 1

Lennox

I don't know if the rhythm of my heart will ever return to normal.

I also don't know if I want it to.

Deep breaths while looking up at the ceiling aren't helping, and I know I look like a fool, but my night has just been too good to care right now.

No-strings sex is always a gamble. There's no way to tell if it's going to be horrible or life altering.

I got lucky this time with the latter. I roll my head on the pillow, a small smile playing on my lips at the sight of him sleeping, mouth open half an inch as he breathes softly. The mouth breathing should be a complete turn off, but I just can't find it in me to care, knowing it's a little weird that it's bordering on cute to me. I know my reaction to him would be a lot different if it weren't for the things this man made me feel tonight.

Leaving the gym with a guy that didn't even tell me his name is both uncomplicated and extremely dangerous. The thrill and danger of it lit me on fire.

Honestly, I should know better. I'd tell every other woman in the world that taking such risks could end very badly for them. I don't know why I put myself in such a dangerous situation this evening, but I just couldn't walk away from him. I was trapped by the cocky grin, and with how he left me melting with the way he swept his eyes down my body. I felt his silent attraction to me as if it were a tangible thing, as if it had enough consistency to be picked up and carried in my pocket any time I was feeling down about myself.

I should leave. I should get out of bed, get dressed, and never look back. That's how tonight should end, but I find myself more reluctant than normal to leave this hotel room.

The buzz of my phone on the bedside table is an omen, a reminder that no-strings means exactly that. This man is no more interested in me sticking around than I should be, no matter how sizzling the sex was.

The message on the phone both thrills me and makes me sad.

As a homicide detective for the Farmington Police Department, it's never a good sign when my phone lights up in the middle of the night.

As quietly as I can, I climb out of bed and gather my strewn clothes. I smile as I drop to my knees in search of my bra. We weren't exactly careful or concerned about where things landed earlier. I bite the inside of my cheek in an effort to keep from smiling, knowing I should have better control over myself than I do, as I get dressed.

As I'm pulling my shirt over my head, he rolls on the bed, his smile soft and satiated, no doubt matching the one I've been unable to control. I grin back at him wordlessly, giving him a final, little wave after gathering up all my things.

He doesn't stop me or ask for my number as I open the door and leave the room.

There's always an off chance of running into him again at the gym, and that possibility of a rendezvous keeps me company all the way to the address that was sent to my phone.

There's a sinister feel to the air when I climb out of my car near the edge of the field. It seems I'm the last to arrive. The red-and-blue flashing lights on several patrol cars cast an almost cartoonish glow on the scene.

Senior Homicide Detective Colton Matthews glances up from the notepad in his hand as I approach. He looks somber, more so than he normally does at a scene, but it's a good thing the man hasn't become hardened to murder. When that happens, it's time to switch gears and do something else with your career.

He's silent as I take in my surroundings. It's certainly a dump job, as people don't usually walk around in empty fields. There's one set of shoe prints, and a double line etched in the dirt leading up to the body, indicating the victim was dragged to this location.

"Who called it in?"

Colton's lips form a flat line before he responds. "A woman that lives half a mile away. Her kids found her earlier in the day and mentioned it at

dinner. She thought they were lying, said it was just eating at her and she couldn't sleep, so she called the department."

Mentioned it at dinner. Like a dead woman in a field is barely worth a mention over chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese.

"We'll make contact with the reporter in the morning and offer counseling services for the children," Colton continues.

I nod, pulling my eyes from his. I know there's disappointment in my eyes that matches his. Farmington isn't a community that has a plethora of violent murders, like larger cities. We have our fair share of domestic abuse that turns fatal, car accidents, death under suspicious circumstances, but murder isn't an everyday occurrence. Because of this, the children that found her should've been horrified. They should've run home screaming and crying. It says a lot about the things our children have digital access to if they aren't just utterly horrified at what they found.

"Any identification?" I ask, just needing to make sure. Presumptions will only lead to mistakes in the investigation.

Colton shakes his head.

"Accelerant?" I sniff the air as I crouch above the body.

"If so, they didn't use much," Colton answers. "She's been here at least a few days, but there haven't been any missing persons reports."

We're a small enough department that all persons working in Homicide get emailed each time a report is filed.

"It's probable she's been sexually assaulted," I say.

She's been stripped naked and set on fire, but the fire didn't burn long. There's still a very good chance that if she fought hard enough, she may have evidence on her that will help us identify her attacker.

I stand, clearing my throat as I try to keep it together.

The eerily familiar sight of it all threatens to take over, but I can't allow it. Remaining professional, proving to all of those that thought my promotion to Homicide was a mistake has always been my goal. If I lose it now, it's all anyone will ever think of me.

“You okay?” Colton asks.

I clench my jaw at his concern. I know the man is in my corner. He’s never been on the long list of those that expected me to fail, but it still hits me the wrong way.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s a pretty rough scene,” he presses, making me glare at him in annoyance. “This is your first murder.”

“And how do you know it’s murder?” I challenge. “She could’ve died of natural causes. She could’ve died of an overdose and her junkie boyfriend could’ve tried to hide her death out of guilt or because he supplied her with bad drugs.”

Colton gives me a slow smile, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that I’ve impressed him.

“Very good, Detective. We follow the evidence, not our opinions. What else do you see?”

I look around the scene, knowing it would be easier to gather clues to her death if the sun was overhead and shining, but we don’t get to pick the time of day a body is discovered. With Colton by my side, I get to work looking for evidence.

The one crime scene tech we have shows up half an hour after I do.

“She’s pretty,” Susie says as she looks down at the body, a sad smile playing on her lips. “Good chance she’s been sexually assaulted.”

I nod, having said the very same thing to Colton.

“They were more worried about hiding that evidence than her identity,” Susie continues, pointing to the burns on her lower half.

Her face is absent of burns, but there is bruising on her right cheek and around her throat.

“Possibly strangled to death.”

I take a step back, needing to not only distance myself a little so Susie can work, but also because it’s sounding all too familiar. Rape, strangulation,

and fire to hide evidence. It reads as if related to another case from over fifteen years ago, but that case was solved.

“Lennox,” Colton says, his hand on my arm.

I look up at him, trying to focus as best I can.

“You okay?” he asks again.

I nod, unsure if I’m actually lying or not.

“Are you going to answer that?” Colton asks. “You’re the lead on this.”

I shake my head, the sound of my phone ringing filling my senses. On the drive over, I thought I’d be distracted by the man I spent the last couple of hours with, but this scene is a slap in the face.

“Hello?” I say as I answer, turning my back to Colton because I’m already feeling like a fish out of water.

I’d never tell him that this case hits a little too close to home, that it may not be the best idea to hand it over to me. He knows my history. If he thinks I’m ready, then I need to believe it as well.

“Matthews said to call you with information,” the woman on the phone says, and it takes a little longer than it should to figure it out that it’s Tabatha from dispatch. “I’m sending over a picture.”

My phone chimes just as she says it.

“This car was reported as being deserted out on East Main a couple of days ago. It’s been impounded. The registration came back to Elizabeth Burr.”

“Give me a second,” I say, pulling the phone from my ear to open the text she sent.

As driver’s license photos go, Elizabeth’s looks decent. It’s not one I’d look at and cringe, wondering why the person at the license issuing office thought it would be okay not to retake it.

It’s clear the woman on the ground is Elizabeth Burr, and I feel a sense of relief. Now we can work on finding and prosecuting the person who left

her here for the wild animals to pick apart instead of wasting time trying to figure out who she is.

“I’d mark it as a positive ID,” I tell Tabatha, knowing she’ll enter it into the preliminary case notes. “Address?”

“Out of state. Red Mesa Arizona. I’ll contact Arizona’s Department of Public Safety and see if they have others listed with the same address.”

I thank her before hanging up.

“Her name is Elizabeth Burr. Her driver’s license and vehicle registration are from Arizona.”

I look around the area, the sun barely visible, but dawn is fast approaching.

“So either she’s moved here recently or?” Colton says, always using every chance he can as a teaching experience.

“It’s possible the person who left her here and set her on fire is from Arizona, or they’re from around here and brought her body back to a place they feel comfortable, a place they’re familiar with.”

He nods, his approval not making me feel the same thrill of accomplishment it normally would.

“Next step?”

“See if the vehicle’s contents offer any information, and if not, then we try and track her banking and spending to see where she was last.”

He nods again.

“It’s going to be a long day,” Colton says, and I have to agree with him.

A lot of cases go cold because others aren’t willing to put in the leg work required to solve them. Some are never solved no matter how much effort the detective working the case puts into them.

I vow to solve this case, not only because it’s my first to take the lead on, but because no matter who Elizabeth Burr was, she didn’t deserve to be dumped off on the side of the road and discarded like trash.

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Chapter 2

Ugly

Watching people, getting a read on them, is a skill I honed many years ago.

Watching and not acting or voicing an opinion is something I struggle with to this day.

It's been nearly impossible for me to keep my mouth shut where Boomer and Drake are concerned.

I suspected something was going on weeks ago, but I knew for certain they were involved the morning I showed up at the bar to get my debit card from *Jake's*, the local bar in town.

I was one of the first people back to camp after the group hike, and Drake wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was waiting for someone. He looked up every time someone else trickled in.

The drive up yesterday was miserable, neither Drake nor Boomer adding to the conversation. It had the potential to ruin the trip, but my mind kept wandering back to the woman from earlier in the week. She was seriously the hottest piece of ass I've had in as long as I can remember, and that's saying something because I'm not exactly a celibate guy.

I don't regret the night, but I do regret not asking her name. I know she's a cop. I saw the gun and badge she carried with her to the local gym, despite it being a public place. It managed to turn me on even more—a woman concerned enough about her safety to stay armed even in public places. The world is so fucked up, after all, that you just never know when you'll need to protect yourself.

I know I can find her. Hell, Colton is here on this trip and probably knows her personally.

Asking can't happen, however. We both knew what that night was, and even though it'll live in my memories for a long time, I'd never be the one to put in the effort to go looking for her. I may end up at the gym again despite having better equipment back at the clubhouse, though.

I know it's a combination of thinking of her and the way Drake searches the group of people returning to the camp that makes me smile wider. I don't know who either of them think they are fooling. I don't know a single member of Cerberus who isn't intuitive enough to read them both like an open book, but we're also a group of people who will let it play out.

It's obvious to me that they're involved, but I have no clue if it's love, infatuation, or just a fun time. I don't know if it's one-sided.

I frown when I realize that Drake, a man who is known for flirting with everyone, might have a little more emotion invested in my teammate than Boomer is willing to reciprocate. I invited Drake, not considering how that would make Boomer feel. I wanted to shove them into action, let Boomer know that whatever was holding him back from dating the man in the open wasn't something he needed to worry about.

It may have been a mistake.

Boomer disappeared hours ago, and as night starts to fall he stays gone.

I'm not the only one sitting around the fire laughing and chatting that can feel him on the periphery of the group. I see several people dart their eyes at the shadows just on the edge of camp. They have to sense that it's him as well. Many of these men are here with their families and would never risk not responding to that feeling of being watched if they didn't know who was lurking on the edge.

Boomer has to know it only makes him more obvious.

Knowing I've done too much already where the two of them are concerned, I do my best to force the thoughts of them from my head.

It isn't a difficult task because thoughts of her have been fighting to take over all day.

I'm considering calling it an early night, wanting to close my eyes in private and let the memories commandeer all of my attention. Fighting that urge is the same as fighting for my status quo. Hyperfocusing on a single woman can't happen. Hot sex is hot sex. She's not the first, and she won't be the last.

I lick at my dry lips, nodding and smiling when I sense one of the guys

looking in my direction as if I'm actually paying attention. I grin when others laugh at a joke Legend tells, but it feels awkward even to me.

Fighting it is useless, and eventually I just give up.

I may be questioned eventually about why I'm so distracted, but I know I'm not the only one who can't focus.

We all have a lot to think about.

It's been weeks since we've gone on a mission.

Aro is back from Albuquerque, having spent weeks there in recovery and working through physical therapy. He and Slick started something, and from the looks of it, they plan to stay together.

"Fuck," I mutter as I look around the group.

I must've said it low enough no one noticed because I don't get a single questioning look.

My mouth hangs open as I realize that if Boomer and Drake end up together, I'm the only single guy left in the group that entered Cerberus together.

Bishop, Legacy, and Stormy, the three newest guys who joined the team, are all single, but hell, that probably won't last very long. We also have three more members coming over the next few months, but those poor souls are going to end up exactly the same way.

I shake my head, my internal battle waging war and making it impossible to experience the struggle solely in my head.

There's a superstition about joining Cerberus. Those in the know talk about how Cerberus is where every wildcat man and woman goes to settle down. It's as if walking through the front door of the clubhouse marks you as next, and it's only a matter of time before fate sends your soulmate in your direction.

I never believed it. Hell, I still don't believe it, despite the proof smiling and laughing all around the campfire.

I glance back over at Drake, and he seems to be in the same boat as me. He's faking a smile as he tries not to be too noticeable, looking around while

waiting for Boomer to show his face.

I want to tell him that the man he's looking for is to his left, not his right, which is the direction he keeps looking, but Drake isn't skilled at tracking people the way we are.

"Another beer?" Spade asks, knocking my shoulder with the back of his hand.

"Perfect," I tell him, taking the proffered drink.

Maybe getting drunk and passing out will keep that woman and sickening thoughts of settling down out of my head.

I'll be the one to break the curse. I've never had any intention or desire to end up like all the rest of the sappy people. Heart eyes and secret smiles aren't my thing, and they never will be.

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Chapter 3

Lennox

I clench my teeth in frustration after checking my email.

The information I've been waiting on for days is sitting in my inbox, and it has been for hours.

I was very specific when talking to the tech team about letting me know when they had something. Many would argue that the email is the notification, but I was fully expecting a phone call or even a text message.

The information provided would've been best if I'd gotten it exactly when it was sent.

Elizabeth Burr's last known location was at *Jake's* bar, a local tavern where the Cerberus MC is known to hang out regularly. Her debit card was swiped for under twenty dollars, and according to the coroner, it matches up to being the same night she was murdered.

My frustration triples when I look at the time in the bottom right corner of my computer screen. *Jake's* closed over an hour ago, and I know going there will be a waste of time.

I feel like I'm wasting time as I put in a call to dispatch, hoping they can track down the information on the owner or the bartender. I'm almost certain that Drake, the guy I saw most often when responding to drunk and disorderly calls when I worked patrol, lives above the bar, but he's not the only one that works there. I don't want to waste a second of effort chasing a dead end.

It doesn't take long before Tabatha shoots me a text letting me know that a woman named Rochelle ran the bar last night because Drake is out of town on a camping trip. How the woman gathered that much information so quickly is beyond me. I'm left wondering if she's ever considered becoming a detective when she sends me another text with Rochelle's home address.

Most detectives would wait until morning, especially on a case that many would consider less emergent, to go speak with a possible witness. I'm not most detectives.

That eerie sense of familiarity threatens to sink in as I grab my cell phone off my desk and head out of the police station. The place is deserted, all the other detectives being home with their families.

I stop just as my hand reaches out to open the car door. Tabatha mentioned Drake being on a camping trip. I know after a brief conversation earlier this week that Colton is also on a camping trip. He mentioned it while we were both waiting for the lackluster coffee in the breakroom to finish brewing.

I don't have many opinions about Cerberus. I know most either love them for the help they provide to the community or they hate them because they have preconceived notions about men and women who ride motorcycles. I've lived my life trying my best to not form opinions about people on any level. Following evidence, making informed judgments, has been something I've worked very hard on.

I know Colton is connected to the group through his wife, but I'm not exactly sure how. Diving into the lives of those I work with only opens the door for them to ask questions about mine. Despite many people knowing a lot about my history already, I prefer not to openly discuss it with anyone. I know I'm judged by many. I feel their eyes on my back when I walk past, especially those that have been working at the department for a long time. My family's history is hard to forget, despite the tragedy striking us over fifteen years ago.

The drive to Rochelle's house is quiet, and I only pass a few cars on the way there. I remember reading years ago some stupid, and more than likely, completely unfounded statement that read the average person walks past thirty-six murderers in their lifetime. I've eyed nearly every person, wondering if they're one of the thirty-six, ever since.

Rochelle's house is small, but the yard is well maintained. I spend a minute sitting in my car, getting a feel for the neighborhood, before climbing out. The shield clipped to my belt and holstered gun on my right side give me courage in the darkness, but I know better than to give in fully to that false sense of security. I refuse to think I'm safe just because I'm a cop. If anything, in this day and age, it puts a bullseye on my back in some circles.

I pause on the porch, noticing no lights on in the house, knowing I'm

going to wake this woman up after she worked a long shift dealing with people drinking. I know it sort of makes me an asshole, but Elizabeth Burr deserves more than what she got. Someone missing out on a little sleep doesn't concern me.

I press the doorbell, waiting another minute despite not hearing any sort of chime come from inside the house before knocking.

My lip twitches, thinking about the last person I woke up and them complaining that I *needed to stop pounding on the door like the fucking cops*. But honestly, there's only one way to knock that's loud enough for someone who's sleeping to hear.

After no response, I look over my shoulder, reconfirming the vehicle in the driveway before knocking once again.

A light flips on, and that lip twitch turns into a smile when a woman on the other side of the door demands to know who it is rather than just swinging the door open wide in the early morning hours of darkness.

"Lennox Maison with the Farmington Police Department," I respond. "I have a few questions about a woman last seen at *Jake's* a little over a week ago."

Rochelle takes another minute before the deadbolt clicks, indicating her unlocking it.

The door opens a crack, her eyes squinted as if she's trying to see in the darkness.

"Does the porch light work?" I ask, squinting when she flips it on.

I recognize her, but I'm not sure that I'd be able to tell you where from if I weren't already aware that she's one of the bartenders at *Jake's*.

"I'm sorry to wake you," I begin before holding up the driver's license picture of Elizabeth. "Do you recognize this woman?"

Unlike many I'd consider suspects, Rochelle actually looks at the picture, reaching her hand out to take it from me.

"I don't know her name," she says after a minute.

"But you recognize her?"

“What happened to her? You said missing?”

“Do you recognize her?”

“She looks like the girl Ugly was with.”

“Ugly?”

Her eyes sweep up from the picture to lock on mine.

“He’s Cerberus, and I can tell you if something bad happened, he’s not involved.”

I give her a weak smile, but the woman must be very intuitive, because she doesn’t seem impressed with my nonverbal reassurance.

“Do you know his real name?”

She shakes her head, and at this point, I can’t tell if she’s still being honest with me. Despite not listening to rumors on either side of the argument about Cerberus, I know that many of them have a reputation of getting around. It’s very possible that the guy she mentioned seeing with Elizabeth has likely been involved in a sexual relationship with her, too.

“Would you be willing to go back to *Jake’s* and pull the video for us from the night she was at the bar?”

“All of my nights run together. I don’t remember when she was there exactly.”

I give her a little nod of understanding. “I know when her debit card was used last.”

She shakes her head, swallowing. “I’ve never touched the video equipment. Technology really isn’t my strong suit. Drake would be a better person to ask but he’s out of town.”

“Camping,” I say. “With Cerberus.”

She nods, confirming my earlier suspicion, knowing that it was too coincidental that Colton was also going camping for the two trips not to be the same.

“What about...” I begin, looking down at notes I wrote before leaving the station. “Jake?”

She shakes her head. “Jake could open the office, but he’s not very tech savvy, either.”

Frustration begins to boil deep inside of me.

I’ve learned to be skeptical of every person I encounter until I’m proven differently, and even then trust isn’t very high on my skill set. As bad as it is, I operate a lot under guilty until proven innocent, but I don’t think many people would be shocked to know most cops are exactly the same.

In my head, I’m already working out the connection between Drake, Cerberus, and the possibility that the lead bartender could be involved in Elizabeth’s murder. At a minimum, he could’ve destroyed video evidence to protect this Ugly from prosecution.

“Thank you for your time,” I tell her before walking off her front porch.

I’m to my car before I hear her shut the front door.

I have no doubt she’ll call someone from Cerberus to warn them I’m sniffing around, but there’s nothing I can do about it now.

I fight the urge to call Colton, knowing he may be too close to this too, but I can’t stop working the investigation because it’s leading me somewhere I don’t want to go.

I give the information I’ve been provided to Tabatha at dispatch, hoping she’s capable of finding out this guy’s real name as I head toward the Cerberus property.

I sit in the parking area, just as I did outside of Rochelle’s house, but this time, I’m torn. I’ll follow the evidence all the way to the end of the case, but part of me hopes this guy isn’t involved, if anything, for what it might cost Colton. The man has been my mentor for the last six months, and I have nothing but respect for him. His connection is what has always made me want to lean to the side of trusting the club like he does.

There are no lights on inside, so it tells me that most, if not all, of the members have gone on this camping trip, but I climb out of the car anyway.

I swallow as I walk past a row of bikes, wondering if they don’t already know I’m here from some sort of motion detection system. The

parking lot is very well lit, as are the houses across the street. Cameras point not only to the front door of the main building up front, but there are several visible on the garage as well as light poles in the middle of the parking area.

I realize as I climb the front steps that I've heard many things about this place, but I've never been out here. Even on patrol, I never responded to a call that brought me out here. The road ends in a dead end, and technically it's outside of the city limits.

There's a part of me that wants to solve this case so badly, I consider trying to turn the doorknob to see if it's unlocked. The *I thought it was public property like a store or something* wouldn't work if I were discovered inside without permission. Not that these guys would leave town and not secure their buildings. There are private property signs all over the place out here, so it would be a mistake to play stupid.

I bang on the door, my fist aching with the effort against the steel. I press the doorbell repeatedly, unconcerned for who I wake up inside. Both attempts go unanswered as the sun slowly creeps up further from the horizon.

Colton mentioned the Rio Grande National Forest, and knowing this guy is in the same location eats away at me as I walk back to my car.

I radio into dispatch that I'm going to be heading in that direction, and Tabatha, the godsend that she is, lets me know she'll try and track down their exact location by calling the booking office.

Every mile I grow angrier and angrier, but it isn't until I stop for gas and look at the information that Tabatha sent that I hate a part of myself as well.

I stare down at the driver's license photo, my skin growing damp, more with shame and fear than from the hot New Mexico sun.

The face of Sawyer Maddox looks back at me, unable to hide a smirk from his lips even in his state-issued license photo.

It's the same look I got when I pinched my nipple at his command a week ago.

I was in bed with a murderer. I left the gym and went to a hotel with the same man who is last known to be seen with Elizabeth Burr before her

death.

My hand begins to tremble at the realization that I could've been next. Bile threatens to spill from my lips as it inches up my throat, the burn of it just one more punishment deserved from the mistakes I've made.

He saw my gun and badge, but I ignored the way he cocked an eyebrow when I placed them on the bedside table. He never asked about them. Was it because he was well aware of who I was?

How could he have known I was going to be assigned to her case?

"Oh God," I hiss, covering my mouth with my hand.

I was with this man when I got the call. The things we did together now disgust me.

The tremble in my hands doesn't settle as I pull away from the gas station.

We used a condom that night.

Elizabeth was raped, and the man wore a condom.

The logical part of my brain tries to tell me that most responsible men use condoms, and rapists use them to prevent detection and identification. You can't keep being a criminal if you get caught.

For Elizabeth, it means there's no semen. The perp didn't leave the used prophylactic behind, and we're still waiting for the lab to see if there were other biologicals left on her body and clothes.

My skin crawls at the thought of the way he played my body, at how commanding he was and not shy to tell me what he wanted, his ability to predict what I needed from him.

By the time I reach the edge of the National Forest, I'm ready to not only arrest him but bury him under the damn jail. I'm wishing the death penalty hadn't been outlawed as I pull up to the camp Tabatha texted the club was renting for the weekend.

The arrival of my car draws attention, and I want to scream at the people gathering at the sight of me. My weapon and badge are clearly visible, so they have to be aware of who I am.

As mad as I am, I'm not foolish enough to think it will protect me. I have no doubt I'll get pushback from this group, and Colorado law protects and allows anyone licensed to carry a firearm in the park, with the exception of the actual park ranger station.

I seek out Colton, grateful when he comes closer on his own, praying he understands that I have to do my job.

"Lennox?" he asks, his brow scrunched tight as he approaches.

I watch over his shoulder, wondering how many people here know the truth when the women start to cling to the men as if they knew this day was coming.

"What's going on?"

I look at Colton, wondering if sharing any information with him is smart.

"Why do they all seem a little freaked out?" I ask, my voice barely capable of hiding a growl.

Colton looks over his shoulder. "The last time a cop showed up out of the blue, it was to notify them of Lana Cobreski's death."

I cringe. I worked patrol that night. Car accidents are always hard, but finding out the woman was married and had a very young daughter was gut wrenching. I'm all too familiar with how an unexpected death can ruin a family.

I shake my head, clearing those thoughts.

"I'm here to make an arrest," I tell him, holding up the folder, despite it not having any printed information in it. "Sawyer Maddox raped and killed Elizabeth Burr."

"The fuck he did," Colton snaps.

"I'll have to ask you not to interfere, Mr. Matthews," I say, locking eyes with him.

"Lennox, he didn't—"

"Detective Maison," I snap, feeling like a complete asshole for butting

heads with a man who taught me everything I needed to do this job properly. “According to an eyewitness, he was the last to see her alive.”

“That’s not enough evidence, Detective, and you damn well know it.”

“I’ll have to place you under arrest if you try to impede my investigation, Mr. Matthews.”

His jaw flexes, but he doesn’t speak.

I walk past him, shoving the folder under my arm as I get closer to the camp, wondering just how much of this he planned as the man gives me a reluctant grin as I approach.

“Hey there, beautiful,” the man has the fucking balls to say as I stand in front of him.

“Do you recognize this woman?” I open the folder and practically shove the only picture we have of Elizabeth in his face, bile once again threatening to rise out of my throat.

“Can’t say that I do,” he responds, and I know I have him.

He’s lying. An innocent man wouldn’t do that. He’d confess to spending some time with her rather than not admitting he knows her at all.

I close the folder and tuck it back under my arm.

“Should I?”

“I’m Detective Lennox Maison with the Farmington Police Department. Can you turn around please and place your hands behind your back?”

“Not really into being watched during kinky time,” the man says with a smile on his face, but he follows my order and turns around.

I pull my handcuffs from my belt and click them onto his wrists, taking an extra second to calm down as I use my key to lock them in place.

“You should recognize her,” I hiss. “You’re under arrest for her rape and murder.”

Only now does he stiffen, as if he’s so cocky and confident that it isn’t until this exact moment that reality hits him.

“Prez?” he asks, emotion filling his voice as I turn him and direct him back to my car to the left of the cabins at the top of the campground.

“We’re on it, Ugly,” some other guy assures him.

I don’t stick around as I shove him into the backseat, wishing I was back in one of the patrol cars rather than this issued one because there is no barrier between the two of us.

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Chapter 4

Ugly

All I can do is stare at the back of her head after she climbs inside the vehicle. I notice the tremble in her hand as she starts the car. She's stiff, scared, and it's like a slap in the fucking face. Is she really afraid of me? Is this all some sort of fucking joke?

She doesn't speak as she makes her way out of the national park, her eyes darting to the rearview mirror as if she's wondering when I'm going to make some sort of move in an attempt to escape.

Rape?

Murder?

Not a fucking chance.

"Is this because I didn't call?" She wouldn't be the first woman to get pissed that I was serious when I said I wouldn't call the next day. "I didn't even get your phone number."

She doesn't answer. The only thing she does is turn slightly in her seat and read me the Miranda rights.

I slowly blink at her.

"I didn't even know your name until today," I say rather than acknowledging what she just said.

Her jaw clenches, and I can see she honestly thinks that's a lie. There's a part of her that's wondering if I sought her out for any other reason, than the way her ass looked in athletic leggings, while she was doing squats at the gym.

My mind races, trying to picture where I might know that woman in the picture she showed me. Was it the woman who sucked me off in the bathroom at *Jake's*? I shouldn't have let her do it after she told me she was married, but getting arrested for rape and murder because someone was unfaithful seems a little fucking harsh. Did her husband kill her? Did he find out about what happened at the bar and take his anger out on her?

Sadness settles inside of me. As many horrible things that I've seen, it never gets easier.

I shake my head. The woman in the picture looks nothing like the one who followed me to the bathroom that evening. My mind is trying to work through scenarios and answers when I don't even know the damn questions.

I don't say another word during the long drive back to Farmington. I know any questions would go unanswered. I know Kincaid will get to the bottom of this, but I can't help but wonder what happened to this woman for her to think I'd do something like this.

Is she questioning her time spent with me? Of fucking course she is. If she truly believes I assaulted and killed someone, then she has to regret what we did.

I open my mouth to tell her she's wrong, but I notice the city limits sign on the edge of town.

Arguing my case while in handcuffs won't get me anywhere, so I snap my mouth closed, my jaw aching from grinding my damn teeth.

Instead of parking around back where I know for a fact they take arrestees, she parks in front of the police station.

"Really?" I ask when she opens the back door to her police cruiser. "Right through the front door?"

She doesn't answer or lend a hand. She simply takes a step back and waits for me to climb out of the car.

I don't have to have my leather cut on for people to recognize me as she punches in the code on the door to the side of the front desk, giving her access to the back part of the police station.

"Maison?" a guy I recognize but don't know by name asks as he notices her.

"Not now, Ramshaw," she snaps, jerking on my damn arm as if I'm the one that got in her way.

"I don't think I would've hooked up with you if you showed this side of you that night," I mutter.

“You like them submissive and compliant, don’t you?” she growls as she opens one of the doors down the long back hallway.

The lights automatically turn on when we enter, but she’s no less rough when she pushes me toward the chair on the far side of the table.

“Is that what happened with Elizabeth?” she growls the second my ass hits the cold metal. “Did she change her mind? Challenge you too much? Did you have to prove to her just how much of a macho man you are?”

“What?” I ask, prepared to argue with her, but the door at her back opens.

“What?” she growls, but snaps her mouth closed when she sees the man standing there.

“I know you’re not questioning my client without an attorney present,” the man says.

“You can speak with him after he’s been booked,” she snaps, walking right back around to my side of the table and urging me to stand.

Despite having hours to work through all of this shit on the way back to Farmington, the honest reality of what is happening doesn’t hit me until she takes me into a small room.

“Have a seat,” she demands. “I’ll get a male booking officer.”

“I don’t know why,” I grumble, my annoyance growing by the second. “It’s not like you haven’t seen it all before.”

Her jaw clenches but she doesn’t say a word before walking out of the room. I’m not even in a cell but the snap of the closing door seems a lot more final than it ever should.

What happens next has the power to rip some of my humanity from me. I know I’m not going to prison. I rescue abused women. I don’t hurt them myself. This will all get worked out, but that doesn’t stop me from being stripped and photographed. I obey every command and give the booking officer no trouble. The man is just trying to do his job. I don’t open my mouth and proclaim my innocence either. There’s nothing this guy can do to get me out of this. I have to be patient.

I can only hope that the attorney that Kincaid sent for me is excellent at his job because I'm feeling like a caged animal right now.

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Chapter 5

Lennox

I don't look up when I sense someone nearing my desk. The looks I got after dragging that man into the police station haven't exactly been met with nods of approval.

A bag drops near my elbow, the clink of metal sounding louder than it should.

"His personal belongings," Scott, the guy from booking, tells me.

I narrow my eyes at him as he grins at me before looking back down at the bag.

"A lot of barbells in there," he says, his grin growing wider. "His ears aren't pierced if you know what I mean."

I look from the bag up to him. "I know you probably filled out your application with a crayon considering you're about fifteen years old, but can you act professional while you're at work?"

His face falls, but I refuse to feel like an asshole for chastising him. The man should know better. Honestly, I'm more annoyed with myself because I'm very aware of where all those barbells came from, and Scott is a hundred percent right. Sawyer Maddox doesn't have pierced ears, but from the intimate way I know the man, I know two came from his pierced nipples and the other five came from the underside of his cock.

I swallow down the memories as the chastised young man walks away, his head dropped lower than it was when he tried to make a joke. Good. A woman is dead because of Sawyer, making this entire situation no fucking laughing matter.

I shove the bag of personal belongings in my desk, grab my case file, and head toward the interrogation room, knowing that Scott was also at my desk to tell me that Maddox is ready to be interviewed.

I take a deep breath and straighten my shirt before turning the doorknob. It's no surprise that hard-ass defense attorney, Russell Silva, is sitting right beside his client when I enter.

I ignore the way his eyes light up at the sight of me. The man has never been shy about flirting with me, and he's even respectable enough to chuckle when I told him I'd never date a man that spends his time trying to get criminals set free.

I know the man has a job to do, and it has more to do with viewing him as too soft, but I never get tangled up with anything related to work.

My eyes dart to Sawyer Maddox, knowing I fucked up big time with that rule where he's concerned.

For a second, I consider the trouble I could be in for not mentioning my connection to the man I'm about to question, but I can't seem to back out of the room and tell a superior.

How stereotypical for the woman on the case to have had a sexual relationship with a man who ends up being a murder suspect.

I narrow my eyes at Sawyer as I roughly pull out the chair across from him. That smirk I saw that first night we met and the one from the campground is long gone. There's just something about being stripped of your identity and told to wear jail-issued clothes that drains a man's cocky attitude quickly.

"Shall we get started?" I ask, placing my hands palm down on the folder I brought into the room.

Both men sitting across from me dart their eyes down at the folder before looking back up at me.

Silva looks bored, having participated in many interrogations before now.

Maddox looks like a whipped puppy and nothing like the man who asked me to spend the night in a hotel room with him as if he already knew what my answer would be.

"I want you to know that your personal belongings have all been logged," I say in an effort to remind him that he's not calling the shots.

His jaw flexes in irritation, no doubt the reminder that he was instructed to remove each and every one of his piercings while someone monitored him causing his annoyance.

He holds his head a little higher. “I expect nothing less from such a fine organization as the Farmington Police Department.”

Silva grins at his client’s response, probably doing internal backflips that my assurance didn’t have the intended effect. I guess I can’t expect a man like Sawyer Maddox to lose his shit in an interrogation room so damn soon.

“How do you know this woman?” I ask, holding up the same driver’s license photo of Elizabeth Burr that I showed him back at the campground in Colorado hours ago.

“Don’t answer any questions,” Silva advises his client, never taking his eyes off me.

Sawyer Maddox may not like anyone who doesn’t comply or give into his wishes, but he has no problem listening to his attorney.

I ask question after question, and the man never once opens his mouth. He stares at me, his demeanor calm whereas I grow increasingly annoyed.

I want to yell and spew hatred at him for thinking he has any right to hurt another soul, but I can’t. As much as I urged Scott to be professional, it’s something I always strive to do myself.

Colton Matthews taught me well, and I know there’s a time and place to act differently in order to get a suspect to open up and confess their crimes. I can tell that Maddox isn’t going to be one of those men.

The evidence should stand on its own. I shouldn’t have to get a confession. Those get thrown out all the time. It’s the proof that he did what he did that will get him sentenced to prison.

“Where did you get the gas to pour on her genitals after you raped her?”

This makes his jaw flex. I watch his hands that are now handcuffed in front of him rather than at his back the way they were when I first brought him in here.

His fingers flex in his lap, and it sickens me to consider he may be turned on at the thought of how he hurt that poor woman.

His eyes never soften. They glare at me as if he can't believe he's been caught.

I return the look.

I'm a great judge of character. I watch people, rate their micro mannerisms, judge everyone I come in contact with. It's second nature. I've been doing it since I was young.

I can't believe how wrong I was about him, how easily I grinned back at him and followed him to the hotel around the corner from the gym. How I watched his back muscles working under his sweat-damp t-shirt as he paid for the room. How he instructed me to watch his body's reaction to me as I stripped naked.

Did the same happen to Elle? Was she drawn in by a charismatic, cocky smile? Did she feel safe until the exact moment she wasn't? Is that how my sister ended up dead? Was I at risk at twenty-six to end up exactly like my sister did fifteen years ago?

My sister's brutal death led me to become a cop. I wanted to do better, be better, and at a faster pace after what happened so long ago. I want to make a difference. I want to stop killers on their first victim not their second. We were that second family, and I've always been bitter about it.

"Detective?"

I blink, looking from Maddox to Silva.

"You seem distracted," the attorney said, making me wonder how long I've just been staring at the man across from me.

I feel the heat of embarrassment warm my cheeks, and I look down at the very limited information I have in the too-thin case file. Someone's life should amount to more than a handful of documents, but we don't have much on Elizabeth Burr.

I don't turn to look over my shoulder when the door at my back opens.

"We have more evidence," Ramshaw says as he leans close to my ear.

I stand, not questioning why a patrol officer would be sent in here to get me rather than another detective. I give both men still sitting the cockiest

grin I can manage, so sure we now have exactly what I need to make sure Sawyer Maddox never sees another day of freedom.

I follow Ramshaw down the hallway, but instead of heading in the direction of one of the evidence rooms, he leads me to Chief Monahan's office. The man doesn't look pleased as he turns his computer screen in my direction. I know before he even starts the video that this isn't going to go my way.

"Elizabeth Burr," the chief says, pointing to the woman exiting the bar with a guy at her side. "That's Ugly."

I want to scoff, despising the man's nickname. He's so far from being fucking ugly, it's goddamned ironic.

I watch, hating that part inside of me that feels anything at the sight of him pressing a woman against the bar, their lips locked in a passionate kiss. I watch, trying to remain emotionless as his hands wander over her body, surprised at just how good the damn video quality is. I know what the roll of his hips feel like. I'm well aware of what his teeth nipping at her skin feels like.

Then they separate, the woman cupping his jaw as if they've known each other for a long time. Each second that ticks by as they talk seems like an eternity, but then she drops her hand, a victorious smile on her face as she nods. He goes around the building and she heads in a different direction. Headlights flash as a vehicle I know to be her car drives past the view of the camera, and a minute later, Maddox comes out from around the building and disappears off screen.

"Impossible," I mutter, but the truth is right fucking there. "They had to have met up later."

"I could fast forward the video of the other Cerberus members leaving the bar only to find Ugly—"

"Sawyer Maddox," I snap, interrupting my boss. I hate the way he's making this personal, as if he hangs out with this guy on the weekend or would trust him to watch his twin granddaughters.

"Ugly," Chief Monahan emphasizes, "was found outside of the Cerberus SUV, so drunk he could hardly stand."

“He claimed he didn’t know her,” I argue. “Why would he lie?”

The chief narrows his eyes at me. “He didn’t do it. You saw her drive off and leave him behind.”

“He didn’t look drunk when he was feeling her up,” I say, not wanting to admit what I already know, wondering if he can hear that bitter edge in my voice.

“You made a mistake, and Cerberus isn’t going to be very happy with the way things were handled.”

I stand from the leaned position I was in to watch the video. “Chief, it’s possible they met up later.”

His fingers work over the keys, pulling up another file. I freeze at the terrified woman in traffic camera image, the time stamp only a minute after when her car left the bar parking lot.

I can see the knife at her throat, and I have no doubt if I look hard enough, I can see tears spilling down her cheeks.

“There’s a good chance he was already in her car when she got inside. Sawyer Maddox did not kill Elizabeth Burr.”

I take a step back.

“You need to apologize to Sawyer Maddox and cut him loose. Maybe if you do it with sincerity, we won’t have to worry about the Cerberus MC suing the department.”

I can admit when I’m wrong. I’m human. This isn’t the first mistake I’ve ever made, but it happens to be the biggest one of my career, so far.

Chapter 6

Ugly

“No clue,” I tell Russell. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before in my life. At first, I thought she was a woman I hooked up with in the bathroom at *Jake’s* but the more I think about it, the surer I am that it was a different woman. Is she married? The woman in the bathroom said she was married. Have they looked at her husband? I never left the bar with her.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t have many details. Kincaid just called and asked me to meet you here. I know the victim was found like a week ago.”

“The only woman I—” I snap my mouth closed before I finish the confession. I don’t know if there will ever be a right time to tell anyone that the only woman I’ve been with in the last week seems hell-bent on sending me to prison for the rest of my life.

“She was found in a field on the edge of town.”

“Near the clubhouse?” I ask, wondering how in the fuck Lennox thinks I’m at all involved with her. The clubhouse is right outside the city limits on the edge of town. Is that how she linked us? Is it retaliation? Is she honestly mad that I didn’t reach out after our night together?

He shrugs. “I’ll find out as much as I can, but the police don’t have to hand shit over until the district attorney accepts the case.”

I blink at him. “That could take days.”

“Weeks,” he corrects. “Sometimes months.”

“And what?” I growl, my anger spilling over. “I fucking stay in jail until then?”

My attorney swallows, and I can tell he’s trying to formulate an answer that would appease me, but there isn’t one if it means I end up in a cell today.

“I can see if they’ll rush your bond hearing.”

“But you’re telling me—”

The door to the room slowly opens, and my eyes lock on Lennox as

she takes a step to the side, revealing both Colton and Kincaid.

They both must've headed right back to Farmington after Lennox shoved me in the back of her car.

She clears her throat repeatedly before speaking, each time looking more and more pissed.

"I'd like to apologize, Mr. Maddox," she begins, her eyes locked just over my head. "I, alone, acted hastily and without having the proper evidence to charge you. It's my sincere hope that you don't hold the Farmington Police Department liable for the actions of one individual."

Her voice cracks at the end, and it's obvious that she's not the least bit pleased to be doing this.

Her jaw works back and forth twice before she continues, "I'm a new homicide detective, and this is my first time taking the lead in a case. I was too excited and didn't wait for the evidence before jumping the gun. Your booking information was not entered into the computer. It means there's no formal charge, no arrest. Nothing will show on your record. You're free to go."

I stand as another uniformed officer walks into the room and motions for my hands. I keep my eyes on her the entire time he's working the cuffs off my wrists.

Silva slaps me on the back as if he just worked his ass off to win a case as I step past him toward the door. I stop in front of her, but she still refuses to look at me. She seems humiliated, on the verge of tears, and I should be seriously fucking pissed. I mean, she carted me through the front fucking door of the police department like I was just arrested for shooting the goddamned president between the eyes and she wanted all the recognition for it.

"We all make mistakes when we're new to a job," I tell her, hating the way her cheek twitches as if she believes I'm being condescending. "I truly hope you catch who hurt that woman."

I don't say a word as Kincaid hands me the bag with my personal belongings in it. I simply nod at Chief Monahan when he nods in my direction. I don't say anything that can be used in a lawsuit later on down the

line.

Colton follows me out of the building and I know what it means. He's showing his fellow officers that he fully believes I wasn't involved. It takes Kincaid a few minutes longer to get to the SUV, but still, I remain quiet.

I'm embarrassed, that's a given, but I'm also left confused and needing answers.

What was it about me that made her think I'd hurt someone?

"They have video of you leaving the bar with her," Kincaid says, making me realize that not only did I say that out loud, but I'm so lost in my head, we're already driving down the center of town.

"No," I say. "I've never seen that woman before."

"The guys confirmed it. You walked out of the bar with that woman the night Bishop, Stormy, and Legacy got to town."

I shake my head, but there's no reason for any of them to lie.

"They found you drunk outside, sitting on the ground near the SUV. They literally had to carry you to your room once they got you back to the clubhouse."

I recall them telling me about that the next day, but don't remember it myself. I didn't think I drank that much, but the proof is in the fact they had to carry me inside.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he turns left instead of right.

"The hospital."

"The cops didn't beat the shit out of me or anything. I'm fine."

"How often do you not remember what happens?" he asks as he pulls into the parking lot of the hospital.

"I'm not an alcoholic," I argue.

Kincaid sighs before giving me a weak smile. "I think you were drugged. The loss of memory, the overly drunk symptoms when you hadn't been drinking heavily. The new guys were with you so they didn't know it was out of character."

I shake my head, rejecting the idea before really thinking about what it could mean.

“I need you to be cleared medically before you can go back to work.”

“How could someone get the jump on me?” I ask, feeling violated and more pissed now than ever.

“It happens,” Kincaid says, not bothering to sugarcoat it.

I know he has to be right. I can’t remember even going to the bar that night. Hell, I don’t remember much from earlier in the day at the party, but he’s right. I never drink too much and even when I get drunk, I don’t black out.

I look to the entrance of the hospital, watching a man carrying a small infant carrier in one hand as he struggles with the decision of who to help as a woman stands from a wheelchair to climb into the backseat of an SUV. Eventually, they work it out and drive away.

“If it happened over a week ago, nothing will be in my system.”

“I know, but let’s get you cleared, anyway.”

I climb out of the SUV when Kincaid does, my mind racing a million miles an hour. I know myself. I know I had to have been injected with something. There are very few people that walk the earth that would be capable of overpowering me long enough to hold something over my nose. I’m too observant, even at *Jake’s*, for someone to slip something in my drink without me knowing. Add in the three other guys with me that night, and there’s very little chance that’s how I was drugged.

“What if they used a dirty needle?” I ask, lifting my hand to my neck, unsure of where I would’ve been injected, but feeling completely disgusted all over my body at the prospect of it happening.

“We’ll get you started on any medication needed to fight anything you may have come in contact with,” Kincaid assures me as we walk toward the front of the hospital.

Instead of checking in at the front desk or heading to the nonemergency entrance to the ER, Kincaid presses the button on the elevator, directing us to the third floor once we’re inside.

Of all fucking people, Camryn, a fucking OB/GYN, is standing there when the door opens. She's in a committed relationship with Samson who is Snatch and Itchy's, two of the original members of Cerberus, son.

"I can help you right in there," she says with a soft smile, pointing to the open door of an empty room.

Kincaid waits outside, and I'm grateful for that. I respect the man, but I don't need my hand held while I'm getting bloodwork drawn. It's bad enough the man witnessed me getting handcuffed and dragged away from the campsite. I'm innocent, and that was proven within an hour of getting back to Farmington, but it has to leave some sort of mark on the man. If anything, he's probably not impressed with having to end his trip with his family because of me.

I try to concentrate on what Camryn is saying as she prepares to take my blood, but my mind refuses to focus. I should be pissed at what happened to me today. I should be able to hold my head high and take a little satisfaction in the way Detective Lennox Maison looked when she offered her forced apology. I've eaten crow before. I know just how bad that shit tastes.

Other than some of her facial expressions, I'd say the woman operated in a professional manner, other than that little jab about my personal affects.

I grind my teeth at the memory of that young guy watching me while I twisted the ball off the end of every fucking barbell. He wasn't weird about it, but it's not something I ever imagined I'd experience.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," I say, giving her a quick smile.

I haven't had much interaction with this woman other than seeing each other at clubhouse events, and chatting in passing because it would be rude not to speak. She works a lot and she and Samson have their own place.

"I appreciate the discretion," I say when she pulls the needle from my vein and presses a piece of gauze there.

She hands me a bandage to cover the wound rather than applying it herself. It makes me wonder if she does it that way because she thinks that

maybe I was somehow involved in that woman's murder or if she knows I'm in no mood to be coddled like a child right now.

Sincerity fills her eyes after she cleans up her space. "I'll let you know as soon as I get the results back. As much as I'd like to help you with the meds you're going to need, you'll have to see my colleague, Dr. Benson, on the second floor."

"Thank you," I say before walking out of the room.

The second ride in the elevator leaves me wondering if going to the fucking free clinic wouldn't be better.

I try to think about Cerberus and how this affects them. If anything, someone at the campground had to pack my shit and take down my damn tent, but I can't seem to pull my thoughts from Lennox long enough to work up an apology for whomever had to help me out.

There's just something about knowing someone thinks you're capable of doing something so heinous.

Where did you get the gas to pour on her genitals after you raped her?

I know shit like that happens all over the world, but this is shit we deal with in South America. It's not as common for horrific things like that to happen here in the States. It feels like a slap in the damn face with it happening so close to home.

It's probably not the best idea, but needing to know what happened and issuing some sort of punishment to the person that did commit those crimes feels like a must for me now. Although, I know it's probably best if I just keep my distance from the case and Detective Lennox Maison.

Chapter 7

Lennox

I press the button, pausing the video again before clenching my hands into closed fists in utter frustration. I've watched and rewatched the video evidence we have hundreds of times, and nothing changes. A second man doesn't come out of the shadows. A miracle camera angle doesn't show up of her getting into her car.

We have nothing more than what it takes to clear Sawyer Maddox, and the cop in me thinks that's a little too fucking suspicious.

Chief Monahan told me to let it go, to move on and not let my knee-jerk reaction keep me from finding the true evidence. I should feel grateful that he didn't pull me from the case or suspend me, but I can't let go of the idea that Sawyer Maddox was somehow involved in Elizabeth Burr's assault and murder.

Barely holding back a growl of agitation, I slap my finger against the keyboard so the video begins to play again. I don't skip the part where he and the victim make out against the wall of the bar. I slow it down, needing the reminder of just what kind of man I'm dealing with. I met him at the gym four fucking days after he had her outside of *Jake's*, seconds away from no doubt heading to the same hotel he took me to. I make a mental note to call and see if they offer him a frequent flier discount for all the women he brings there.

I know it's petty. I know it was one night. I knew then not to expect anything, and I fucking don't. What I can't figure out is why it fucking bothers me so much. Maybe it's because I let the idea of who he was sink in so far, even the evidence right in my damn face doesn't have the power to change my opinion. I know I'm in dangerous territory. I know it's the sign of a not very good cop if I can't accept the facts I've been given.

They split up on the video, her going one way toward her car and him going around the back of the bar. I know he went to piss or something, and I hate him for it. Maybe if they headed to her car together, he could've stopped the person who wanted to hurt her. Maybe he would've been hurt scaring the perp away. Rapists and killers tend to have a certain victim type in mind, and

I have no doubts that Maddox isn't his type.

We're still working under the possibility that the guy was in the car waiting for her, but we don't know the actual truth. We don't have a camera angle of where she was parked. Someone could've come out of the shadows and forced her behind the wheel. She could've been stopped on the side of the road a few blocks down.

Whatever events played out that night, she encountered her killer within minutes of Sawyer Maddox walking away from her. As unreasonable as it is, I still blame him for her death.

My cell phone chimes with a text, but before I can look over at it, a shadow darkens the doorway of my closet-sized office.

"You wanna head over there together?"

I look up at Colton, confusion drawing my brows tight before looking down at my phone. Jumping from my seat, I almost agree, but in the last second before speaking, I change my mind. I still need some separation to lick my wounds. There's a very good chance that not only will I never live earlier today down within the walls of this police department, there still could be repercussions that will affect my role here if Maddox or Cerberus MC decides to pursue a civil case against either me or the department.

"I'm going to take my own car," I tell him as I gather my things.

"I'll shoot you the address," he says. I'm grateful he doesn't argue because I know he'd use the travel time to discuss what happened. Although he's not the type to spend any length of time chastising me, I have to guess he has an opinion on what happened. Especially since he told me at the campground that arresting him with so little evidence was a rash judgment.

Information has finally come through about Elizabeth's address which has been difficult obtaining since she never changed her driver's license when she left Red Mesa, Arizona. Her social security card hadn't flagged for employment yet because she'd only been in Farmington for a couple of months, and the government isn't exactly quick to update anything in their systems.

"See you there," Colton says, knocking his knuckles twice on the doorframe before walking away.

I hold my head high as I walk through the office. The worst thing I could do is appear ashamed for what happened. It makes me want to double down on Sawyer Maddox, to prove that he's somehow involved. I can eat a little crow right now, only to hand feed it to everyone that stares at my back as I leave later down the road.

Darkness is already creeping in on the neighborhood and an eerie sense of familiarity strikes me hard as we approach Elizabeth's address. I was only a few blocks down, less than twenty-four hours ago, speaking with Rochelle Leach, the bartender from *Jake's*, who was one of the last people to see Elizabeth alive that night.

Knowing this area of town houses lower income, renting singles doesn't stop the wave of foreboding from washing over me. Colton is standing beside his car as expected, and I'm a little surprised he's even waiting for me.

Taking a deep breath, I take in the home, trying to use fresh eyes devoid of any opinions I've formulated about the victim. Like Rochelle's, the house is small, no larger than a two-bedroom if I had to guess. The yard is barren with barely any curb appeal. There are no potted plants on the small concrete porch, or any plants under the two windows on the front of the house.

I don't notice the row of motorcycles parked at the curb until I climb out of my car, but my head starts to shake the second I spot them. Colton has to know this is a terrible idea.

I walk past all of them, not taking a second look at the bikers to determine if Sawyer Maddox is part of the group.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" I ask as Colton falls into step beside me.

"The Cerberus IT guy is the one who was able to track down her address," Colton says.

Maybe I should be grateful, but I'll never open my mouth to thank any of them.

"Or maybe one of them didn't have to do much searching because they already knew she lived here," I mutter.

I'm surprised Colton doesn't stop me and attempt to reassure me that no one from the club would do such a thing.

We knock on the door despite Elizabeth never having been reported as a missing person in New Mexico or the surrounding states. No one comes to the door, but Colton is prepared with a crowbar.

"Dispatch spoke with the property owner, but since he's out of town until next week, we're not waiting for keys."

I nod, standing a little behind Colton. I've made the mistake of standing too close before and was hit with flying debris when the doorframe shattered.

Colton doesn't even grunt when he wedges the crowbar and pulls it to pop open the door.

"Too easy," I mutter.

"Yep," Colton agrees. "But people trust locks not realizing they're only for honest people. Criminals can access just about any house at any time."

We both stand in the doorway, using our senses before making another move. I hand Colton a pair of the shoe covers I stuffed in my slacks before leaving the department.

We spend the next several hours processing her home and walk away no more informed than when we arrived. There are no real details about her life. We didn't find a purse, an employee badge, a scribbled number for a friend, no evidence of anyone else living with her or coming into her house after she left earlier in the day that she died.

The only relief I feel when we wrap up is that the row of bikes are gone from in front of the house. We collected samples from the sink, toilet, and bathtub, on the off chance that there's evidence there we can't see with the naked eye. We recovered writing samples, but I doubt those will help in any way since it was from an incomplete crossword puzzle. We have no information on next of kin. Elizabeth Burr led a life of solitude as far as we can tell.

"It makes me wonder if she was running or hiding from someone," Colton says, his eyes locked on something in the distance as we exit the

home. “Maybe they tracked her down.”

“Maybe,” I agree, even though I don’t believe what he’s saying.

If that were the case, then it decreases the likelihood that Maddox was involved, and I have a feeling deep in my gut that he was.

“I’m going to head to the bar and ask around about her. Maybe she had friends there or struck up a conversation with someone,” I tell Colton.

“I’m heading home, but I’m available if you need me.”

Translation—call me before you fuck up royally again.

“Appreciate it,” I tell him, waiting for him to secure the door with a hinge and padlock to deter looting.

It’s like a waking nightmare to pull up outside the bar and see an even longer row of motorcycles than the one at Elizabeth’s house earlier. Rather than the sight of them making me want to turn around and leave, they fuel the fire burning inside of me.

I know it’s unrealistic to think people’s lives need to stop moving forward when someone dies, especially when someone wants others to believe there was never a real connection between them and the victim. But it seems a little soon, considering one of their members was in an interrogation room earlier today being questioned about the rape and murder of a young woman.

I climb out of my car, knowing this endeavor will more than likely be just as fruitless as the search of her home was. The only swipe of Elizabeth’s card at *Jake’s* was from the night she was murdered. I have to work off the assumption that she’s been here before and someone else paid for her drinks. It’s bad police work to take what’s in front of you at face-value and move on.

Elle was murdered because of face-value evidence. A deeper dive would’ve revealed the smoke and mirrors.

With my head held even higher than it was when I left the office earlier, I pull open the door to the bar and stride in like I own it. I don’t have to look over in the far corner to know they clock me right away. I can feel *his* eyes on me specifically, but I still refuse to look in that direction. I tell myself that I’d never give them the satisfaction, but I know deep inside that

acknowledging him would also be akin to confessing I made a mistake. Despite my forced apology, I'm not certain I did anything wrong other than moving a little too quickly.

I nod at Rochelle when she locks eyes with me, but she holds her finger up as she makes another drink. The bar is busy tonight, meaning there might be a chance of patrol being called if it gets too rowdy. I also know from experience that those phone calls usually only come during nights when the MC members aren't here. People seem to behave better when that group of folks are sitting there. No doubt people are terrified of them.

I know of at least one instance, not long ago, that a perp was brought in after drugging a woman's drink. Cerberus got to him first but insisted that he fell down. The bruises and cuts all over his body told a different story, but no one argued. Hard to throw up a flag and talk about the problem with vigilante justice when the guy was quickly connected to several other drugged victims and sexual assaults. Whispers in the breakroom were actually in favor of what went down, and at the time, I mentally agreed as well. They only did what every cop on the force wanted to do but couldn't. Now, however, it makes me wonder how many other times one of them crossed the line. Do some of them fight for justice in the light only to hurt others in the darkness?

I speak briefly with Rochelle before spending a little time questioning the kitchen staff, but no alarm bells go up. Other than Rochelle, no one remembers seeing Elizabeth there that night nor any other night.

On my way back out of the bar, I unconsciously look over in the direction I know Cerberus like to congregate, but Maddox isn't in the mix. Maybe I had it wrong. Maybe he wasn't here to begin with.

I realize my error in thinking when I walk outside and find him standing by my car. I know for a fact from scouring the video provided by *Jake's* that I managed to park right in the same damn blind spot Elizabeth did the night she died.

Chapter 8

Ugly

God she's pretty. It's clear from looking at her that the darkness under her eyes is more than just shadows cast from the low light in the parking lot. Her jaw clenches as she approaches, the fingers on her right hand twitching as if she's deciding whether to pull her service weapon or not.

There's no doubt in my mind that she hasn't seen a bed in over thirty-six hours or even longer. It's a testament to her desire to want to solve this case, to get some form of peace and justice for Elizabeth Burr. I can't pull from memory many missions that left me hyperfocused and unable to sleep until there was some form of resolution. It's no different for her with this particular case, but maybe even that is an assumption. There's a chance she's like this with every case she's worked.

Her hand lifts several more inches when I step closer to her as she approaches. I know not to risk her pulling her weapon. I wouldn't just stand here and let the woman shoot me, but at the same time, it also hits me that she's fearful of me. It's either that or she feels the need to assert some form of power.

If the latter is the case, is it because I was the one in control the night we spent together? Does she regret the power exchange now?

"Lennox," I say, watching as her eyes dart left and right as if she's deciding which way to run even though her feet carry her closer as each second ticks by.

As a trained professional in reading body language, I know she's struggling between the decision of fight or flight, but the fucked-up thing is she doesn't need either where I'm concerned.

Even after having evidence that I wasn't involved with that woman's murder, she's still afraid of me.

I've been inside this woman, had her lips wrapped around my cock, her tongue teasing the barbells along the underside of my shaft. I know what the clench of her cunt feels like when she orgasms, and yet she's scared of me.

I hate knowing that.

I hate that she can't accept the evidence she's been provided.

I hate that her apology was forced.

I hate that I want so badly for her to drop to her knees and beg for my forgiveness.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I assure her.

"Is that what you said to—" She snaps her mouth closed, her eyes darting to the side as if the beginning of her response was an involuntary reaction.

Instead of lashing out or reminding her of my innocence, I step to the side, giving her access to her vehicle, and walk away.

The woman has clearly made up her mind about me, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I stand at the entrance to *Jake's*, my hand on the door pull, and wait for her to drive away. I know she thinks I was only waiting for her to give her a hard time, but I needed to look into her vehicle before she got back outside. Max was able to gain access to the video evidence that exonerated me, and we concluded that the man who assaulted and killed Elizabeth Burr was either waiting for her in the car or made contact with her in the parking lot. I didn't want the same thing to happen to Lennox, despite her not being appreciative of my presence.

It's eating me up inside to know that had I accompanied Elizabeth to her car, things would've gone a very different way. I know what happened wasn't my fault, but that hasn't stopped the guilt from seeping inside of me.

I don't reenter *Jake's* until after her taillights disappear down the road. I'd like to think the woman is capable of handling herself in dangerous situations. Before finding out I was more than likely drugged behind *Jake's* when I went to take a piss, I would've argued that no individual person could've taken me down.

The bar seems too loud when I walk back inside. I didn't think it was the best idea to come back here after what I went through today, but the guys urged me to let go of what happened.

I hold a finger up to Rochelle, indicating I need another drink. It only takes a minute for her to slide a tall glass of icy soda in my direction.

“Thanks, doll,” I tell her before walking back to the group.

I sit for another hour, listening to the conversations going on around me. I’m not exactly being excluded, but I’m also not as involved as I normally would be. This day seems like it’s been a month long, and I’m looking forward to falling into my bed at the clubhouse, with the hopes that tomorrow will be better.

“Are you heading to the clubhouse?” I ask Boomer as I stand, ready to get the hell out of here.

The man looks a little sheepish as he looks toward Drake who joined us at the table not long after his shift ended. I have to remind myself that Boomer’s announcement about being involved with Drake just happened this morning despite it feeling like last month’s news already.

“He’s staying the night with me,” Drake says, clapping a possessive hand on my teammate’s knee. “But we’re just gonna hang out down here until the bar closes. I want to make sure Rochelle makes it home safely.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say as I sit back down. “Call it a night. I’ll follow her home.”

“You’re sure?” Drake asks, ready to take me up on my offer. I can’t even begin to explain what it means to me that he doesn’t hesitate even a second, thinking I would harm the woman.

It seems only Lennox is still questioning my innocence.

“Not a problem.” I point to the other side of the bar toward Bishop, Legacy, and Stormy, watching each one of them smile at a different woman. “Those guys seem like they have other plans anyway.”

“I really appreciate it!” Drake says, bouncing up from his chair and grabbing Boomer by the hand.

The man doesn’t struggle against the grasp, but it doesn’t stop his cheeks from flaming red as he’s dragged away. Drake lives in the small apartment above the bar. Offering to get Rochelle home safely means they don’t have to get out and drive anywhere.

I look down at my watch, calculating how much longer my offer will keep me from bed, but the bar closes in less than an hour.

After making my way back to the bar to inform Rochelle of the plan, I sit at the bar and wait. Like any other time we show up at *Jake's*, the number of women increase. Tonight is no different, but after many notice the other guys' attention have already been focused elsewhere, they begin to trickle out.

"Excuse me?"

I turn to face the woman speaking.

"Do you mind walking me to my car?"

I stand at the request without thinking. Clearly word about what happened to Elizabeth has spread, but it doesn't surprise me.

"Of course," I tell her, grateful my name either didn't come up, or this person is confident that I wouldn't harm her even if it did.

I let Rochelle know what I'm doing before heading outside. I don't want her to think that I promised to get her home and then bailed.

One woman turns into another request, and I spend the last hour of the bar being open making sure women leave the property safely.

I'm still standing near the door when it swings open for Legacy to leave. He has a look of sated bliss on his face, telling me the woman he was talking to got down to business inside. He walks her to her car, waiting for her to drive off before throwing up a hand in my direction and leaving on his bike.

Bishop walks out, jumping on his bike and following the woman that accompanied him outside as she drives away in her car.

Stormy leaves his bike altogether, climbing in behind the wheel to drive that woman home, and by my count, that leaves only Rochelle inside.

She gives me a weak smile when I step inside, twisting the lock on the front door.

"I won't be long," she says as she pulls the cash drawer from the register. "Do you think you can let Joey out when he's finished in the

kitchen?”

“Sure can,” I tell her and take a seat back at the bar and wait.

Fifteen minutes later, Joey mumbles his thanks as I unlock the front door to let him out. Not five minutes later, Rochelle comes from the back office.

“I’ve got to swing by the night deposit box at the bank,” she says, holding the zippered bag up. “Is that okay?”

“Of course, it is,” I tell her before we head out of the bar.

I stand to the side as she uses her set of keys to lock the door before following her to her car. Wordlessly, she stands back while I check her car before she enters it.

Less than a minute later, we’re heading out.

The bank drop is quick, and ten minutes after leaving the bar, she’s climbing out of her car in her driveway. She gives me a small wave before going inside, flashing the porch light to let me know she’s safely locked away inside.

I turn my bike around at the end of the cul-de-sac, making sure I drive very slowly past Lennox Maison’s car. I clocked her waiting outside of the bar, and as much as I’d like to think she was waiting to make sure the women got into their cars safely, I know it has everything to do with me.

I have no idea what it’s going to take to convince this woman that I had nothing to do with Elizabeth Burr’s murder.

She must be feeling a little more confident than she was when she found me near her car earlier because she doesn’t hesitate to lock eyes with me as I drive past.

Chapter 9

Lennox

Despite my best effort, I'm unable to completely muffle my yawn while sitting at my desk.

I waited several minutes after Maddox drove away from Rochelle's house before heading in the direction of the clubhouse. I wasn't trying to stay hidden when I waited outside *Jake's*. If anything, I wanted him to know I was watching him. I needed him to know I wasn't scared of him, after I got past the tremor in my hands once I was in my car. It was an effort to regain that power I felt like he stripped from me.

I don't know if he went back to the clubhouse or ended up somewhere else, and I didn't realize my mistake until I got to the clubhouse and every damn bike there looked exactly the same. I wouldn't have been able to pick his out from any of the others.

I don't know what to think about the man who got there an hour after I arrived and knocked on the window of my car. BISHOP was stitched into the patch on his vest. He asked if everything was okay and if he could help me with anything. When I declined, he simply walked into the clubhouse. He didn't ask me to leave or challenge me.

I waited outside until the early morning hours, sitting in my car, trying not to fall asleep until the sun was cresting over the horizon. When Maddox exited the front of the clubhouse with a disposable cup in his hand and began walking in the direction of my car, I got the hell out of there.

A few hours of sleep was all I was able to manage, and I'm feeling it in every bone in my body. I freeze each and every time a shadow crosses in front of my door. I'm waiting for the chief or Colton to come chastise me for going to the clubhouse in the first place after the shitstorm I caused yesterday, but neither of them do. It seems neither that Bishop guy nor Maddox reported my presence on the property.

Thinking of the second man from last night and his nickname makes me think about Maddox.

UGLY.

What a damn joke. I can despise the man and still consider him good looking. I'm considering that maybe it's a reference to who he is on the inside rather than his outward looks when I hear chatting.

I have to be losing my mind with this cycle of sleep deprivation I'm in because there isn't a damn chance that the voice I hear actually belongs to the man I've grown to hate. Just to make sure and because I'm in desperate need of another cup of coffee, I leave my office, finding Chief Monahan standing outside of his office speaking to none other than Maddox. The man is wearing his leather cut, grinning at my boss like he owns the place.

"Ah! Detective Maison," the chief calls, holding his hand up and waving to get my attention.

"Yes, sir?" I ask as I approach, catching the weird twitch of Maddox's lip as I walk toward them.

An unwanted chill rolls up my back, memories of that *night* resurfacing. The man didn't insist I call him sir that night but it's clear he doesn't like it when I say it to someone else.

"I'm teaming Mr. Maddox up with you for a ride-along."

I slow blink at my boss because in what fucking world would anyone think that's a good idea.

And since when does he call him by his surname? When he was insisting on the man's innocence, he referred to him by his nickname.

"Sir?" I question just to verify but also to annoy Maddox.

"He's going to spend the day with you," the chief says before turning and walking back into his office.

I walk away, feeling Maddox close behind me. I'd never argue with my boss in front of a civilian. Hell, I respect the man enough not to do it in front of one of my fellow officers, but this shit just isn't going to fly.

My office feels even smaller than the closet it is as Maddox follows me inside. I stand behind my desk, waiting for him to take a seat in the only other chair in the room before walking back toward the door. He makes to stand again, but I wave my hand.

“I’ll be right back,” I snap, giving him a smile I intentionally pray he reads as a sarcastic effort on my part. I pause at the doorway. “Don’t touch anything.”

His eyes drop, the blue in them shifting as he lifts them the length of my body. “Sweet Lennox, you know I don’t touch anything without asking first.”

“Jesus Christ,” I growl as I leave the room.

Now is not the fucking time, and it never will be, to be reminded about his uncanny ability to make me beg, only to then ask if what I’m pleading for is okay for him to do to me.

I take a second outside of my boss’s door, needing a moment to myself to get my shit together. I’m too tired to deal with any of this, but it’s not like I can just ask for the rest of the day off and go home. Elizabeth deserves justice, and it’s up to me to make that happen.

I tap lightly on the chief’s door, waiting for him to acknowledge me before entering. I don’t hesitate to close the door behind me once I step inside. The walls and doors are thin in this place and even with the door closed, if voices are raised everyone else will still be able to hear any conversation that occurs inside.

He holds up his hand before I can speak. “I already know what you’re going to say, and it’ll only be a waste of breath.”

“He was a suspect,” I hiss, using my left arm to point out into the hallway to indicate the man as if my boss has forgotten exactly who he is. “How is this appropriate?”

“Lennox,” the man warns.

“He was the last person to see her alive.”

“That’s not possible, now is it, considering that we have still photos proving someone else was in the car with her?”

I grind my teeth, stopping just shy of stomping my damn foot. Acting like a child isn’t going to be what makes me win this losing battle.

Chief Monahan sighs, steepling his finger against his chin.

“This is the hand we’ve been dealt. I don’t think I have to state the facts, but I will. If you hadn’t jumped the gun and arrested an innocent man for sexual assault and murder, I wouldn’t be forced to agree to just about anything the Cerberus MC wants so long as it’s within reason.”

“And this is within reason?” I snap, so sure I’ve just crossed the line, and he’s going to ask for my badge and gun, which honestly seems like a better alternative than to have that man shadow me all damn day.

“The department has been known to do ride-alongs on occasion,” he states.

They’re not as popular in recent years because of the danger and liability that’s involved.

“I’ve been with this department for five years,” I remind him. “I’ve never done a ride-along before.”

“I think it’s something every officer should experience,” he says, stating it in a way that sounds like a dare to continue challenging him.

Know when to hold them, know when to fold them, or how ever the saying goes, right?

I know the man is my boss. I know I should just get the day over with, but really, I can’t spend time alone with the man.

“We had sex,” I blurt.

The chief’s mouth opens and closes several times but no sound comes out. I watch in horror as the tips of his ears turn bright red, knowing it’s a sign he’s about to lose his fucking mind. I’ve seen it happen before with other officers who’ve fucked up in the past. I’ve never been on the receiving end of it but Colton told me once that pissing the chief off so badly that he blows his gasket is sort of a rite of passage.

“Last night?” he growls, his voice low and animalistic.

“Of course not!” I snap, my head jerking back indignantly.

“You got involved with a suspect?”

“Oh!” I hiss, popping my hands on my hips. “Now he’s back to being a suspect?”

“Detective Maison,” he snaps, the tone a warning on its own.

I wait, watching him pinch the bridge of his nose.

“I should’ve fucking retired last year like I’d planned,” he mutters.

It’s long minutes and several long, measured breaths on his part before he looks back up at me, his palms flat on his desk.

“I’d suggest not letting that happen again on the ride-along.”

If it were physically possible, my jaw would be at my feet. “What?”

He blinks at me as if confused that I don’t understand.

“Don’t have sex with Mr. Maddox during the ride-along.” Each word is slow and filled with purpose. Each feels like a slap in the face, and it makes me wonder if the confession was a mistake.

I swallow, fearful it’s going to change the way this man sees me.

“Surely you aren’t still going to make me do this.”

He sucks in another labored breath before speaking. “Did you arrest him without cause? Is there still a chance that he could sue?”

“I know you are not suggesting that I give into his... whims just to prevent a lawsuit.”

My boss narrows his eyes at me. “I’m suggesting no such thing. What I’m telling you is that you’re going to take that damn man on a fucking ride-along.”

His voice is loud enough that I know anyone outside his office heard every word.

“Report back to me at the end of the day.”

I clench my jaw but I can’t do anything else other than offer him a nod of agreement before heading for the door.

“And Lennox?” I turn back in his direction. “Try not to piss him off.”

Chapter 10

Ugly

She's practically vibrating with anger when she returns to her small office, but it doesn't stop her from making sure she turns, walking sideways as to ensure she doesn't make any contact with my arm that's resting on the edge of the chair I'm sitting in.

Her cheeks are red, her breaths a little harsh. It reminds me of the time we spent together, and how she looked after coming the second time. Honestly, I could probably transform any of her reactions right now to make them match up with that night. There's a thin line between lust and hate, right?

Her sandy-blonde hair is pulled into a tight bun on the back of her head, but I know she turns into a totally different person when she pulls those pins out, letting the soft curls float down to her shoulders.

I clear my throat, knowing now is not the time to get an erection. Not only do I know for a fact she wouldn't appreciate the gloriousness of it, but it may also come off as some sort of perverted power play that would make me seem like a creep.

I don't make a noise as she takes a seat behind her desk.

She seems hell-bent on pretending I'm not even in the room. There's a very real chance she thinks if this day is boring enough, I'll just leave her alone. She should know from our very limited interaction so far that I have the patience of a fucking saint. Plus, it's no hardship to sit across from this gorgeous woman and just watch her work.

I know a lot of people request ride-alongs or the chance to shadow a police officer because they're considering a job in law enforcement or they're doing research for a book or something. There's probably nothing they do in their day-to-day jobs that I haven't done either in the Marine Corps or while working for Cerberus.

I'm a detective of sorts just like she is, only I use an assault rifle for interrogations rather than questions. Honestly, we aren't all that different.

She tries to stay busy, but after half an hour, even her annoyance starts to wane. I watch as her head dips more than once as she's reading some paperwork, telling me she still hasn't gotten enough rest to keep her fully awake. I guess I should be glad she's sitting behind her desk rather than operating a vehicle or heading into a dangerous place. She's not exactly up for anything that might require quick thinking.

She jolts when her office phone rings, and of course she takes a moment to glare at me before picking up the receiver as if I'm the one who interrupted her little open-eye catnap.

"Maison," she snaps into the phone, her eye scrunching in immediate regret when the person on the other end of the line speaks.

She swivels in her chair, facing the wall that doesn't have a window. She speaks as if she doesn't want to risk making eye contact again.

Her end of the conversation is broken, but it becomes obvious very quickly that there's been some sort of break in the case she's working or at least a lead.

Her eyes are once again narrowed in my direction when she issues a quick apology for the aggressive way she answered the phone before returning it to the base.

She doesn't immediately stand, and I know it's killing her not to move. I think she's a take-care-of-it-now kind of woman, and not one who's really going to procrastinate or let something sit when there's action that can be taken. Take my arrest for example.

I lift my head an inch higher as she stares at me, letting her know I'm not going anywhere unless it's to follow her out of this room. She wanted to follow me and keep tabs last night, even going so far as sitting in the clubhouse parking lot all night. I didn't sense her behind me on the drive back home. She has to realize this is just payback. Whatever she does directed at me, I'm going to offer back to her tenfold. Plus, she isn't exactly hard on the eyes, and her little indignant attitude turns me on.

She taps a pen on her desk several times, but I still remain silent, loving the way her eyes dart to my mouth when I moisten my lower lip with the tip of my tongue.

I have immediate confirmation that all hope isn't lost when her own lips part a fraction of an inch, her throat working on a swallow.

"Yes?" I ask.

"What?" she asks, the word a snap of anger at getting caught.

I choose not to challenge her in this moment. "Are you going to tell me what your call was about?"

"Being forced to tolerate you today doesn't give you unfettered access to every part of my job."

I wonder if now is the right time to inform her that my ride-along is open ended, not just for today.

I shrug instead. "I just figured if there was something you could do away from your desk it may help you to stay awake better."

She continues to glare at me, neither of us dropping our eyes when the pen between her fingers falls to the desk with a clatter.

Without warning, she stands, and I hate that the quick movement catches me off guard. I'm also standing by the time she makes it around the edge of her desk, barely giving her any room to walk past me. We don't touch but she slides by close enough that I can feel the warmth of her coffee-scented breath on my chin as she passes.

I don't know if she's playing hard to get or what but I can't pass up the opportunity to taunt her.

"Good girl," I say to her back, smiling when she freezes in the doorway.

I'd hand over my life savings just to see the look on her face right now, but she doesn't turn back in my direction.

I follow her through the department out to her car.

Instead of using the fob on her keychain to unlock the door, she opens it the old-fashioned way, using the key. She seems unfazed when the alarm goes off, beeping it until it silences as she climbs inside. I don't bother reaching for the door handle on the passenger side of the car because I'm well aware it's not unlocked. I bend in the middle and lock eyes on the side

of her face.

Her hands clench the steering wheel so tight, even from outside of the vehicle I can see her knuckles turn white.

It has to be at least a minute I stand outside, watching her take long breaths before she hits the button on her door to unlock my side. Wordlessly, I open the door and settle inside, making sure to pull my seatbelt over my shoulder, all the while praying I've annoyed her to the point that she's awake enough to face whatever it is we're doing.

We don't get a mile from the department before she rolls down her window, and fuck am I ever grateful. It's probably my cologne she's trying to clear the vehicle of because the scent of her is just as distracting to me. I spend a minute getting lost in the memories of how she buried her face in my neck and breathed me in that night.

Her agitation grows with every turn of the tires, and I think not speaking annoys her as much as speaking would.

Before long, we're right back in the area of town near *Jake's* but instead of turning into the bar parking lot, we head to the gas station on the other side of the road.

She looks over in my direction when she puts the car in park, no doubt to ask me to stay in the fucking car. Like I'd agree to that.

"What the fuck is that?" she snaps, pointing her finger at my waist.

I look down. "A Sig."

Her eyes narrow so much, she looks like she's squinting, and the dark circles under them won't be helping her case any time soon.

"You brought a gun into the fucking police department?"

I shrug and it seems to anger her even more.

"It's against the goddamned law to carry a weapon into the fucking police department, Maddox."

"That filthy fucking mouth of yours," I growl, my eyes dipping down to that very part of her.

She lifts her hand and points a finger in my face. “Don’t start that shit with me. I ought to—”

“What?” I interrupt. “Arrest me?”

I can tell she hates the way I chuckle when she snaps her jaw closed with my challenge.

“Sawyer,” I say rather than continuing down a path that will lead nowhere, considering we’re in broad daylight outside of a gas station.

“What?”

“You called me Maddox. My first name is Sawyer.”

“I’m well aware of your first name.”

“Been thinking about me?”

“Fat fucking chance,” she snaps, but her eyes dart away, a tell if I’ve ever seen one. “I’ve got work to do. Think I can get that done?”

I sweep my hand to indicate the front of the store, but I don’t climb out of the car until she does. I wouldn’t put it past her to leave me standing in the middle of the parking lot and reporting back to her boss that it was my choice.

“Are you Curtis?” she asks the man behind the counter the second she approaches it.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, holding his hand out.

She looks down at it before looking back up at him. I’d say there’s a real possibility she hates this guy more than she hates me. Before the clerk drops his hand, he points to the back of the store.

“My office is back here. That’s where the camera equipment is.”

I follow Lennox as she follows him, having to stand in the doorway because the office is messy as hell and smaller than her office back at the station.

“Like I told the guy on the phone earlier, I didn’t hear about that girl until earlier today. I’m not real big on keeping up with any news, local or national. All of it is just so damned sad. Never any good news.”

“The tape,” Lennox snaps, making the man jump like a skittish feral cat.

He works on pulling up the video, relying on an ancient system of VHS recorders despite digital being the go-to technology for many years.

“Why exactly do you have this angle?”

The man’s eyes dart away, and I can tell he’s trying to decide if he’s going to tell the truth or lie.

“Don’t tell me the wind blew it perfectly to cover the bar,” Lennox warns, and I have to roll my teeth between my lips to keep from chuckling.

I may like a submissive woman in bed, but there’s something to be said for a female who isn’t going to take shit from anyone outside of that situation.

“I suspected my wife was cheating on me with someone at the bar,” he mutters, and I freeze, my mind going back to the woman I let suck me off in the bathroom a few weeks back.

“Was she?” Lennox asks.

He nods. “I confronted her about it, and she left.”

“When was that?” I ask, having to know.

Lennox snaps her head in my direction as if she forgot I was even standing here.

“Couple months ago,” he grumbles. “I never got back around to repositioning the angle. Sorry for the quality. The equipment is old as hell.”

He hits a button on a small remote and the video starts to play.

I try not to get distracted by the fact that whoever his wife is wasn’t the woman I hooked up with.

“You said it was the front of the bar,” Lennox says, noticing just like I have that the angle isn’t directly on the front door.

“The wind has blown it a little over time,” he explains on a whisper, as if he’s somehow going to get into trouble for his reasoning when she dared him to lie about that very thing earlier.

Her jaw clenches but her eyes stay locked on the screen.

I know when she sees me and Elizabeth Burr outside the bar on the very right edge of the screen. Maybe I should just be grateful this isn't as good as the video from *Jake's*. It's not something I'm proud of, especially considering I can't even remember a damn thing about that fucking night.

"I don't think that's the killer," he says, pointing to the darkened outline of my body.

"I'm still not so sure," she mumbles, making me clench my fists at her confession.

I split off from the screen but the camera angle is good enough to get the parking area. We watch as Elizabeth Burr is confronted outside of her vehicle.

"Why does it skip?" Lennox asks when it seems the man just appears from thin air.

"The equipment doesn't record like a digital image. It's got sixteen slots, and it records in stills, almost like pictures being taken. When it's taking a picture from another camera, it's not taking a picture from this one," I try to explain.

Curtis points at me as if saying I explained it better than he could've.

"So there's no way to tell where he came from?"

My guess would be from around the side after the motherfucker injected me with some kind of damn drug.

"I think that's the same guy that was struggling with her against the side of the bar," Curtis says, pointing to the outline reappearing on screen.

I note the thirty-four second change in time. Just over half a minute for a woman to be abducted from a parking lot, only to be raped and murdered the same damn night.

"I think they were working together," Curtis supplies unhelpfully.

"When she got away from the first one, the other one jumped in. Look." He points again, watching my shadowed form as I drop to my ass beside the SUV we drove to the bar that night. "Maybe you could question

those guys. There's a whole group of them. I saw on an episode of—”

“I need this tape, Curtis,” Lennox snaps.

“It's yours,” he says, but she waves his hand out of the way before he can press the stop button on the remote.

“See those guys,” he says.

We watch as those I know to be Legacy, Stormy, and Bishop, leave the bar to find me near the SUV. They help me into the back seat and within a couple of minutes, they're driving away.

“I'd like all tapes as far back as they go,” Lennox says, crossing her arms over her chest as if she expects the man to argue.

“Will you put in your report that I cooperated?”

“Why would I need to do that?”

“Well,” he says, chewing on the inside of his cheek before speaking again. “Will I get into trouble for turning my camera to face the bar?”

“The tapes, Curtis,” she says rather than answering his question.

He stops the video and ejects the VHS tape. “I have a tape for each of the past thirty days. I start recording over them after that. It's hard to find tapes these days. The rest are in that box.”

“Because your system is a dinosaur,” Lennox mutters, taking the proffered tape from his grasp and adding it to the box.

“Should I turn the camera back now?”

She shakes her head. “Do you have a new tape to start recording?”

“Yes.”

“Put it in and then let it run.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Her eyes dart to mine as if she was looking for a certain reaction from me. It tells me she noticed my not-so-impressed reaction when she said *sir* to Chief Monahan.

The look she gives me is murderous when I attempt to take the box of tapes from her hands when she turns to leave the office.

I feel more and more like a failure as we leave the store and head back to her car. I spoke with the hospital this morning, but it wasn't surprising that my toxicology report came back clean. It's been more than a week since the incident in the parking lot at *Jake's*.

I understand the science of it. I know that whatever I was injected with kept me from being capable of saving her. I also know that it was probably intended for her. I know the outcome could still be the same even if I wasn't close that night, but it also makes me consider that she went through more pain than she had to because it was wasted on me.

I'm silent, lost in my head, as she starts the car and pulls away from the gas station.

"What's your fucking deal?" she snaps as she rolls up to a red light.

"What do you mean?" I ask without pulling my eyes from the passenger side window. I'm looking without really seeing anything because scenario after scenario is playing in my head, and the outcome doesn't change.

Rather than speaking, she waits for the light to turn green before driving a few blocks down and turning into the parking lot of an old warehouse. She doesn't park out front, choosing to go around to the side instead.

"Get out of my fucking car," she snaps.

I do, but only after she climbs out on her side.

"Explain yourself!" she yells out of thin air, surprising me. She doesn't give me the chance to answer before she's in my face, the tip of her index finger jabbing me in the sternum. "Were you involved? Is this how you fucking get away with it? Who was your partner? Did you meet up later, get a piece of her yourself? Did you rape and kill Elizabeth?"

Unable to take one more fucking poke from this woman, I growl, reaching up and clasp my hand at her throat before pressing her into the side of the building.

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Chapter 11

Lennox

My hands are trembling before he can even swing me around fully.

I pushed him too far.

“Not a fucking chance,” he snaps, his hand pressing against my forearm and locking it against the building before I can get to my gun.

His body is locked against mine, leaving no room for me to knee him in the balls. I’ve had so many hours of self-defense training, yet in the blink of an eye, this man has left me with no physical recourse to help myself.

I know he’s tracking the raging pulse in my throat despite him not exactly squeezing my neck as he leans in close.

I was wrong, so very wrong, but there’s still an argument in my head. After Elle’s death, I always erred on the side of caution. I judge quickly, and if I’m wrong so what. I’m safe.

I didn’t get a hint of a negative vibe off this man that night at the gym. Even when he issued commands in the hotel room that I wasn’t instantly certain I’d obey, it never threw up a red flag that made me want to bolt out the door and never look back.

Yet, he was with her the night she died. One guy showed up the second he disappeared. I know it’s not him in the confrontation with Elizabeth by her car because the footage from *Jake’s* is ten times better than the gas station video I just procured, but there could be a chance he was involved, right?

I swallow, his eyes darting to my throat as it works under his palm.

“You going to kill me too?” I manage, refusing to back down despite the evidence pointing away from this man. That’s how smart criminals work though, isn’t it?

“I didn’t kill her. I don’t fucking hurt women,” he growls.

“Yet your fingers are around my throat.”

He looks down at my neck once again but he doesn’t back away.

“You questioning my innocence pisses me off.”

“No one likes to get caught, and you sure seem to be having an overexaggerated reaction to that fucking video,” I snap regardless of this armed man having me out of view of the street and pinned against a building by my neck. My mom always warned me about doubling down when I’m in impossible situations. Seems I still haven’t learned. “Did the attack outside her car fucking turn you on all over again? How many of your Cerberus friends raped her that ni—”

I squeak, the only noise I can manage when he tightens his fingers. But in the next breath, he loosens it once again. I feel dignified with him reacting that way right after declaring that he doesn’t hurt women.

Actions and words, motherfucker. Actions and words.

“Thirty-four seconds,” he says, his hot breath on my face, the mintiness of it out of place in the current situation. “That’s how long it took before I came back around the side of the bar. In thirty-four seconds, the beginning of the end of that woman’s life started. I was twenty yards away, and completely helpless. Do you have any fucking clue what knowing that does to a man like me? How hard of a fucking pill that is to swallow?”

I lock eyes with him, but he seems broken rather than continuing in an effort to try and convince me of a different truth.

“I should’ve kept my guard up, and I have no clue why I didn’t. Maybe because it’s Farmington and not some hovel in South America. Maybe I got lost in her kiss or the warmth of her body.”

The reminder that he kissed her that night very similarly to the way he kissed me four nights later makes my pulse race even faster, and not in a good way. I refuse to spend a second focused on the jealousy threatening to bubble out.

“I don’t even remember going to the bar that night. I walked around the bar and someone injected me with something. I was drugged, Lennox. I regret needing to piss which is the only fucking reason I’d go around the edge of that bar. I’ve done it a dozen times before and nothing bad ever happened. Why that night? Why her? Why me?”

His grip grows slightly looser, but I know better than to think he’s

calmed down enough to let me step away.

For some reason, I'm not as scared as I was the first second he rushed me and pressed me to the side. The feel of his fingers against mine makes it very clear that we're more holding hands than he is keeping me from reaching for my gun.

"I failed her. That's why I'm angry. My head wasn't where it needed to be to keep her safe, and I'll regret that every second for the rest of my life."

"Where," I begin, my voice a whisper. "Where was your head?"

His eyes lock on my lips when I moisten them with the quick swipe of my tongue.

"The same place it was the night we left the gym," he answers.

He takes a step back and fuck my life if my first instinct isn't to reach for him. Instead, I lift my hand to my throat, wondering how red it is, but it doesn't burn like I expect it to.

I want to apologize for accusing him, to explain that I feel responsible as well despite never having met the woman. It makes no sense. I'm no more capable of helping Elizabeth than I was helping Elle when I was nine years old. It makes me feel no less responsible.

I realize I have a bias against my department because they failed my sister. Had they put in the effort all those years ago when the first girl was murdered, maybe Elle would still be alive. Elle's murderer, Jasper Niers, took his own life in jail before his trial started. It left so many unanswered questions, so much pain behind. There was no justice. This isn't the first time I've blamed Farmington PD, but instead of pointing fingers, I want to make a difference from the inside. I never wanted to be the cop who let the perp get away. Focusing on the man standing in front of me is easier because solving this case means the man can't hurt anyone else. It's not pride that makes me keep looking in his direction. It's fear that the killer will get away and hurt someone else.

The Farmington police detective who worked my sister's murder killed himself, but the letter of apology after the backlash of him sandbagging the investigation on the first case didn't help much. I'm not glad the man lost his life. If anything, I wish he'd just done his damn job, and maybe Elle would

be alive today.

“I understand making mistakes more than most,” I confess.

Disappointment washes over me as he takes another step back.

“Just don’t,” he says, his tone laced with exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” I say, the words not tasting as bad as they should. “And I mean it this time. I’ve wasted precious hours looking in your direction when there’s proof you weren’t involved. If anything, you’re a victim—”

“Swear to God, baby girl, finish that sentence and see what happens.”

“I can see my mistakes now,” I say rather than challenging him. “I taunted you. It was unprofessional.”

His eyes are locked on my lips, and I’m left wondering if I want to taunt him again in some way just to have the opportunity to watch his lips move when he threatens me again.

“My sister was murdered in Farmington,” I confess, having no clue why I’m telling him any of this. “The lackluster police work on another murder left the killer out long enough to get to my sister.”

“Can’t project that shit on me, baby girl.”

“I know.”

This time when he steps forward, I don’t flinch. I fight the urge to roll my face toward his palm when he pushes a lock of hair that has fallen out of my bun behind my ear.

“I’m sorry for embarrassing you in front of your coworkers.”

“They know better than to think I’m capable of doing something like that,” he says, but I don’t miss the quick twitch of his jaw the memory must invoke. “But I forgive you.”

I know his declaration of forgiveness should make me see red. I never asked for it, but I can’t lie and say that I’m not glad he’s offering it. I nod my head, his hand now on my cheek where I wanted to rub against it earlier like a lazy cat in desperate need of attention.

His throat works on a swallow, and I know what he’s doing the second

his face moves a fraction of an inch closer to mine. I have several guesses as to why I wait until the faintest brush of his lips on mine to pull away, but those are things I can lose sleep over at a later time.

I expect irritation on his face when I look back up at him, but he's smiling despite the rejection.

"That ship has sailed, buddy."

The look in his eyes, the sparkle in the corners, reeks of challenge, but I've spent hours naked with this man once before. I know better than to argue because he'll only force the issue, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to resist him a second time today.

I walk past him toward my side of the car, praying he doesn't notice the goosebumps on my forearms from the thrill I get.

I have so many damned things to think about, most importantly, why it took him pressing me to the side of the building with his fingers around my throat before I could accept that this man wasn't involved in Elizabeth's murder.

On the one hand, I'm glad he wasn't. On the other, it means I'm right back at square one, needing to pour back over every inch of the evidence to make sure I didn't miss anything, all the while praying I didn't fuck up so bad that another woman ends up dead because of me.

Chapter 12

Ugly

I don't have a problem with anyone. I'm a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. Live and let live and all that jazz, usually.

Bishop, one of the newer guys to the club, is one I try to skirt around. I know he isn't a bad guy. He just isn't a happy guy. He's sullen and quiet until you piss him off or there's something he feels he needs to voice his opinion about.

I nod at the man when I enter the kitchen. I don't openly avoid him. I just don't usually take extra steps to interact with him. Like now, there's something in the kitchen I want and he happens to be in here.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

"Sure," I respond, wondering if this is going to be one of those times that he's going to give an opinion I don't want to hear. I've tolerated enough of the mumbled unpleasantness since he arrived at the clubhouse.

Both Stormy and Legacy are at another table, and I have to wonder if they're just sticking a little closer to him because they truly like the guy or if they feel a sense of camaraderie for joining the team at the same time.

Bishop tips his chin forward, indicating the chair across from him.

"Let me grab a beer," I tell him. It's been a long-ass day, and I'm drained from the interaction I had with Lennox outside that abandoned building. "Anyone need a fresh one?"

Everyone shakes their heads, and I dart my eyes to the door. I'm not a stranger to confrontation. It's literally our job to go head-to-head with people, but a heated conversation with someone else on the team, when anyone else could walk in and witness it, is never a good idea.

"That," Bishop says when I turn back around, beer in hand, and pull out the chair across from him. "Is why we need to talk."

"What?" I ask, twisting the top off and raising the glass bottle to my lips.

“The look on your face. The one that says you aren’t impressed and would rather run out of the room.”

I have two choices—lie and tell him he’s reading me wrong or tell the truth and finally air out all of this shit.

“Are you telling me escape is an option?”

Stormy and Legacy both chuckle, but I still can’t find the humor in any of it.

“I want to apologize to you.”

I tilt my head to the side in confusion, this taking a much different turn than I expected.

“I was quick to judge you. I formed an opinion of you based on only a handful of details instead of asking questions. I know what Cerberus stands for. I also know that Kincaid hand picks every one of us. I should’ve been more concerned, should’ve asked one of the other guys about it when we found you damn near passed out that first night we got here.”

I swallow. He’s talking about *that* night.

Legacy and Stormy grumble their agreements.

“I can’t take it back, but I want you to know that I made a mistake thinking you were the type of guy that gets wasted every chance you get. Because of that snap judgment, nothing was done to try and track down who drugged you.”

I take a deep breath. I commend him for apologizing and doing so in front of others rather than pulling me to the side and making his confession in private.

“I shouldn’t have been distracted,” I mutter. “She’s dead because of me.”

“She’s dead because some psychopath chose to hurt her. That isn’t on you.”

“I should’ve been able to stop the person from drugging me.”

“And you know damn well that could happen to any of us,” Stormy

argues.

“Being on and vigilant all the time is impossible,” Legacy adds.

“Could happen to any of us,” Stormy repeats.

“We were just getting ready to head to *Jake’s*,” Bishop says. “How about you join us?”

I know what the offer means. We’ve ended up at the bar, going separately, many times since that night I was unknowingly drugged. His offer means a lot.

“Sure,” I tell him as I stand.

I don’t know if the line of marked and unmarked cars outside of *Jake’s* are for a show of force or if something more is going on, but no one has their lights on.

“Busy as hell in there,” I mutter as Stormy pulls into a parking spot.

Legacy rubs his hands together in glee. “Think all the badge bunnies are in there?”

Bishop chuckles and shakes his head.

Cops and Cerberus at *Jake’s*? Makes it good for business and increases the night’s choices for those looking for some company.

Without hesitation, I scan the entirety of the bar, looking for one person only, feeling the slump of my shoulders when I don’t spot her.

I walk toward Colton, knowing they both work in Homicide.

“Hey, man,” I say, tapping him on the shoulder and offering my hand when he turns to acknowledge me. “Is Lennox coming?”

He’s slow to respond as if he’s trying to determine what my intentions are.

Colton isn’t Cerberus, but he’s married to Dominic’s daughter. Dominic and club president Kincaid are brothers, and that’s a tight connection to the club, if you go by the old saying that blood is thicker than

water.

“I doubt she’ll show,” Colton finally says.

“Yeah,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck and trying not to show how disappointed I am over the news. “She needed a little downtime. I think the bags under her eyes have bags.”

Colton scoffs. “I doubt she’s getting rest. The woman never sleeps. If there’s a case, she’s got all of her energy tied up in it.”

I’m not surprised by his words. I determined the very same thing when I saw her this morning, but it doesn’t make me happy. The woman is exhausted. She was literally falling asleep at her desk.

“If she doesn’t take some time to recharge, it’s going to get dangerous,” I say. I thank Bishop when he walks up and hands me a beer.

Colton waits until Bishop walks to the tables in the far back corner where Cerberus always congregates. We both watch as several women get up and make their way in that direction. Several of the plain clothes cops that were in here have already walked up to the bar and are closing out their tabs. It seems the competition isn’t exactly welcomed.

“Ugly,” Colton says on a sigh, shaking his head as if he feels like he misspoke.

“What?” I prod, wanting to ask a million questions about the woman but also torn with wanting to learn everything I can from her personally.

She shut me down earlier, and although there’s a part of me that is grateful because I’m not a man to get into anything remotely resembling a relationship with someone, it also left me feeling a lot rejected.

“What do you know about Lennox Maison? About her past?”

I’m quick to pull out the chair beside his at the pub table he’s occupying. “Not much.”

“And by that you mean nothing?”

“Exactly.”

Colton shifts his weight. “How long have you been hooking up with

her?”

The question comes out of left field, enough so that I cock an eyebrow before I can stop myself. “What did she tell you?”

“She didn’t have to tell me anything,” Colton says, his fingers peeling the label on his half-empty beer. “I’ve noticed the way you look at her.”

“I’ve never disrespected her.” It isn’t fully true. I did some pretty disrespectful things the night we met, and let’s not talk about what happened earlier beside that building.

He shakes his head. “You watch her like you know her. Listen, I get not wanting to talk about it, but I’m a cop.”

I nod, knowing exactly what he means. He’s as trained as I am, if not more so due to the nature of his job. I won’t lie to the guy, but I’m also not sharing any information about what happened between Lennox and me. Doing so would be disrespectful, and that thought surprises me too. I’m not one to go and brag outright, but I’ve been known to make the odd comment about spending time with a woman when asked. I think all men are guilty of it. Well, at least men who aren’t in committed relationships.

Colton smiles as I wage a war in my head, and it makes me feel like he knows something I don’t. But I’m not opening any more fucking doors with anyone where Lennox Maison is concerned.

“Listen.” He leans in closer as if he’s about to say something he isn’t willing to share with anyone else. “Lennox’s sister Elle was sexually assaulted and murdered when she was a kid. A previous case wasn’t worked to its potential, and it left the perp open for doing it a second time.”

The woman is willing to arrest anyone she believes is connected to Elizabeth’s murder. She’s afraid of becoming that cop who missed something.

“She was a later in life baby, so there was a thirteen-year age difference. Her sister’s death destroyed her family. Lennox’s dad died a couple years ago from a heart attack and her mom died a year after him. She’s alone. Has no one. And from the way she acts, I don’t think she wants anyone.”

“She’s afraid to lose someone else.”

Colton nods.

A million red flags are going up—warnings to leave her alone and just let her live her life the way she wants—but for some reason, it doesn’t make me any less intrigued.

“The cop who missed the information in the case ended up committing suicide. The man who was later arrested committed suicide. There was no justice. It all left a lot of unanswered questions. There have been murmurs around the station about this case being a copycat because the details are eerily similar to what happened fifteen years ago. I imagine it’s taking a toll on her.”

This information makes me seethe, my hands threatening to shake with the unspent energy raging inside of me.

“And someone thought it was a good idea to make her the lead on the case?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“One thing you’ll learn about Lennox if you spend any length of time with her, is that she doesn’t want to be coddled. She was going to have to take lead, eventually.”

“That sounds like a company line,” I mutter.

Colton looks around before he speaks. “He’ll never admit it, but I think Monahan regrets making that call. If it means anything, I argued against it. He’s still scared you’re going to sue the department.”

“I’m not going to sue the damn police department.”

He grins like he knew it from the beginning. “Any chance you’ll put that in writing to calm the chief’s ass down?”

I shake my head. “I’ll let him stew in it a little longer.”

“Of course you will,” Colton says with a laugh.

“Why exactly are there so many cops here tonight?”

“Someone mentioned coming to make sure nothing happened to the women when they left, and somehow it turned into a group thing. I honestly

think some of these guys think they'll protect the ladies by carrying them home."

"Even that one?" I ask, pointing to a guy with a cocky grin as he flirts with a woman near the bar. "Or is that his wife?"

"Not his wife," Colton says, sounding frustrated. "Pete Dresden is a great cop, but a seriously shitty husband. He's been married three times and divorced twice. I don't know why he keeps traveling down the damn aisle. It would be a lot cheaper for him if he didn't."

"Lennox ever been married?"

Colton scoffs. "I don't think marriage will ever be Lennox's thing."

We chat a little longer, but Colton eventually heads home. I stick around the bar until closing once again and follow Rochelle to her house, waiting to go home myself until she gets inside and flashes the lights for me.

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Chapter 13

Lennox

I know that Sawyer Maddox wasn't involved in Elizabeth Burr's murder. I told him as much earlier today, but that hasn't stopped me from tailing him. I made it obvious the first time. I wanted him to know I was watching him. With what I thought he did, I'd rather prevent it from happening again than risk someone getting hurt by trying to catch him in the act. I wouldn't put someone else's life on the line just to get an arrest.

Tonight I'm in the shadows, putting to use some of the skills Colton helped me hone.

I was invited to the bar, and I had every intention of going, but when I pulled into the parking lot, I saw him walking inside. Being anywhere near the man, especially in front of other people, isn't a good idea. I have no doubt he'd try to talk to me, and it was bad enough earlier that my colleagues saw him shadowing me. I've had enough embarrassment for one career already.

I sat and waited, prepared to sit all night from the vantage point I discovered across the street among the cars outside of the old mechanic's shop. I didn't know if I was going to be a witness to him taking a woman home or what. My mind raced with a million scenarios when the neon open sign went black. When Joey Dixon, one of the guys who works in the kitchen, left with Rochelle and Sawyer still inside, I grew suspicious of what they could be doing in there alone.

However, like last night, they exited the bar together, with him keeping a respectable distance. He waited for her to get into her car before climbing behind the wheel of an SUV. After a quick stop at the bank, he followed her home. The flashing porch light had him driving away.

It's damn near three in the morning and as much as I need more sleep than the couple of hours I got earlier this evening, I know I'd just lie in bed and stare up at the ceiling. Closing my eyes allows my mind to create a horrific montage of what I imagine happened to Elizabeth in her final moments. It's no better having replaced those scenes my head formulated about Elle.

Albeit using extremely tired eyes, I start back at the beginning of the evidence, plugging the newer information into the spots they fit, all the while leaving Sawyer Maddox out of the equation. I know how dangerous it is to make the evidence fit an opinion, and although I told myself I'd never do it, that's exactly what I did.

No DNA was found on her body despite evidence of sexual assault. She had no tissue under her fingernails nor defense wounds. Her toxicology screen was clean, proving she wasn't drugged that night nor was she a drug user. She had no ligature marks on her arms or legs. Cause of death was strangulation, but the bruising pattern indicates her attacker pinned her face down to do it.

I swallow, my eyes threatening to cloud with more than just fatigue.

I consider the fact that he may have assured her that her compliance would allow her to keep her life, so she fought against that part of her that wanted to try and stop it. She could know her attacker. She could be in Farmington as a means to get away from someone in her past, someone who had a history of hurting her.

There was no sign of struggle in the dirt where she was abandoned, meaning her life ended elsewhere. There was no blood or DNA found in her car that was abandoned in town, and we've yet to locate any video of her attacker driving it back to where it was found. Traffic cameras are just now being implemented around town, and the city opted to put them in the spots where most accidents happen rather than the seedier parts of town where there's a risk of them being vandalized. Either her killer got lucky, or he knows enough about the town to know to avoid the cameras. Both options have to be considered.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, a weak attempt to keep my mind from shifting. Would Jasper Niers have been caught with Caroline's murder before he got to Elle if we had the same technology today? Would Detective Frank Roth still miss that evidence even if he had it?

I pour over every piece of evidence several more times, but nothing jumps out at me. I know, that even though this is my case, that Colton has done the same thing. He wouldn't spot something that could help us solve this thing without mentioning it just to make it a learning exercise for me.

I let my eyes wander to my open office door when I hear the first signs of the office coming to life. The scent of coffee brewing fills the air along with the low murmurs of staff getting their day started.

Knowing that resisting the urge only means wasting time, I close out the digital record we have of Elizabeth Burr's case and type in my own last name.

Elle's physical folder, along with the deteriorating collected evidence, are in a warehouse a couple of miles away. The case is closed, solved. At least that's what everyone around here believes. When I think of her murder, I immediately picture Jasper Niers, the man arrested, the man who was charged, the man who took his own life after confessing to both Caroline's and Elle's murders.

There's a formula for how I always go through this digital file. I always choose the newspaper articles that were scanned, staring at Jasper's mug shot from the news article written about his suicide, first. I always work my way backward through the case's timeline because by the time I'm done, Elle is safe, untouched, alive, and capable of living out the rest of her life.

I see his eyes in my sleep. I've never been able to date a man with a beard because of the hair that grew on his face. Dark blond hair and dark eyes have always been a turn off to me, and I know it's because of him.

I refuse to think of Sawyer's nearly jet-black hair and surprisingly vibrant blue eyes, and how he checked off so many damn boxes for me that night at the gym, more about who he wasn't than who he actually was. I know the bias isn't fair to many people I come into contact with, but I'm not willing to test those aversions any time soon.

I take a deep breath, the mouse cursor hovering over the small X in the top right-hand corner of the document, but when I click it, I don't click the report of Niers' arrest next like usual. I breathe a little life into that part of me that has always felt like there was a reason for the unanswered questions, most importantly some of the things Niers said in his confession interview.

I don't suspect a conspiracy theory. I don't even question how quickly the department closed out this case after Niers killed himself mere days after the detective working it did the same. I don't think the angle was wrong, I just think there were things in play that were dismissed because the

department was hurting, not only from the outcry of the community because of the crimes but also because they lost one of their own because of it.

Many citizens feel as if all crime can be prevented, and when it isn't, they need to point the finger at someone. They aim their anger at the person who did it but are also quick to point at the institution that's in place that never should've allowed it to happen. They want their freedoms. They want to be able to choose, but when someone chooses violence, breaks the law, or any act of free will that encroaches on someone else, the police are supposed to be capable of reading minds and preventing it.

While on patrol, I don't know how many times I heard "if you would've" as if I had the power to keep someone from driving into town drunk. We're expected to handle victims with kindness and compassion, but also have herculean strength when battling criminals, unless those criminals are a relative or friend and then we're just brutes abusing power.

The line between all of it is so fucking thin, it's damn near invisible.

I take a deep breath, the images of my sister's smiling face filling my computer screen. The picture my parents chose for her missing person's folder is the one most people around town would probably pull up in their memories, but only because they didn't have access to the ones hanging on the walls at home. I can remember at eleven, walking around town with my dad, my little heart filled with hope that we'd find her as he taped and stapled flyers he printed out on his home computer to every pole and sign in town. I remember crying on the drive to the grocery store, seeing one still hanging on a light pole weeks after a search party found her discarded body in a field as if she was a wadded up fast-food bag thrown out the window on the drive out of town.

It took a long time after gaining access to these files for me to click on the crime scene photos. I wanted to keep the image of my sister's high school graduation picture in my head rather than what she looked like lying in that field, but eventually I caved. I need the punishment, somehow having convinced myself that I was partially responsible for not being capable of saving her from this fate.

As I click through the photos, the sinister voice of Niers fills my head, having memorized every sneer, every taunt he made to Detective Roth as he

confessed to the two murders. He tried to provoke Roth by pointing a finger at the detective, blaming him because he had all the evidence he needed.

“You could’ve caught us weeks ago.”

“It’s your fault we picked that second girl.”

Us.

We.

The forensic psychologist the department hired to view the confession tape was working through the idea that Niers was mentally unstable, leaning toward the possibility that his use of the pronouns was from an internal struggle in his head rather than a reference to a second person being involved. He never named a second person, never pointed a finger or placed the blame elsewhere. If anything, through his entire interview, the man seemed proud of what he did, using I and me as often as he used we and us. The psychologist was scheduled to begin testing to determine his mental state, but Niers used his silverware from the dinner tray brought to his cell the very same evening after he confessed to dig deep enough into his wrists to sever the arteries. The images captured and preserved in the digital file are gruesome and graphic, a testament to his determination to die that night.

As I close out the missing persons file on my sister, I can’t seem to let go of the idea that maybe he was insane, but he also had an accomplice. Maybe there was a second person involved, and maybe that person has chosen to kill again fifteen years later.

There’s a reason the Elizabeth Burr crime scene was so eerie, and that’s because it had numerous similarities to my sister’s case. The strangulation, the lack of evidence, the burns on her genitals, and the fact that she was killed elsewhere and dumped in a field? There are too many matches for it to be a coincidence.

I pop up from my chair and head straight to the chief’s office, only hesitating for a second in his open doorway.

He frowns the second he sees me, and I know it doesn’t bode well for the conversation we’re about to have.

“I know that look,” he grumbles, reaching for the steaming cup of

coffee on his desk and taking a fortifying sip. "I'm not going to have another conversation about Sawyer Maddox."

"I'm not here to talk about Maddox. I want to talk about Niers."

His jaw flexes. "Maison."

It's a warning, and one that's probably well warranted. I've brought my sister's name up, referencing her case, so many times, I'm surprised I haven't been denied access to her case file yet.

His face grows tender as he locks eyes with me, and I hate feeling like he's treating me with kid gloves.

"Please don't look at me that way. I'm not approaching you as Elle's sister. I'm here as a cop advocating for Elizabeth Burr."

He gives me a quick nod, but I know my past is going to haunt me just from the way he draws in a deep breath before speaking.

"You thought the minister of the church on Main was an accomplice because he had a gallon of gas in the backseat of his car when you stopped him for not coming to a full stop."

I do my best not to cringe at that mistake I made, but choose to double down instead, much like I did that same day when that investigation took me to the parsonage and the lawn mower that ran out of gas. "Who only buys a gallon of gas?"

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose the same way I did not long ago.

"Niers murdered Caroline Ritter and Elle Maison, Detective. We lost one of our own because of it. Detective Roth went down this same path. He couldn't accept that Niers acted alone. I won't lose you because of that piece of shit. It's been put to rest, and I'm demanding you leave it alone."

"Yes, sir," I tell him, knowing I'm not going to get an ounce of support from the department.

I nod in his direction and leave his office, well aware I can't obey his command. I wish I could, but the voice inside my head, telling me to keep digging, never silences.

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Chapter 14

Ugly

“What?” I snap at the sound of someone knocking on the door.

“Jesus fuck,” Legacy snaps, opening the door rather than speaking through it. “Why wouldn’t you tell me to wait?”

I chuckle, not bothering to cover myself up.

I just climbed out of the shower, opting to air dry rather than use a towel because I slept like shit last night, and reserving my energy for just trying to function like a normal person today seemed like a much better idea.

“You have a visitor,” Legacy says, but instead of giving me a warning, he steps to the side, revealing Lennox in the hallway.

Much to her credit, she doesn’t cover her eyes or even seem shocked that I’m sprawled out on the bed.

I’m grinning, my cock threatening to thicken at the sight of her as I stand from the bed.

Albeit slowly, I grab the towel from the bed and tug it around my waist.

“Maybe you could wait in the living room while he gets dressed,” Legacy offers.

Her eyes skate down my body as she swallows, her head shaking back and forth slightly.

“I’m fine,” she says, the hoarseness in her voice making me think of things meant only for darkness.

“Would it be too forward to confess I might’ve thought of this exact scenario?”

Her lips form a flat line, her response paused until Legacy walks away.

“Yeah?” she asks, making no move to come closer. “And just how did I look in your head?”

“Sexy as hell,” I answer. “Looking up at me from your knees, cum coating your lips.”

She shakes her head, but I don’t miss the slight shift of her weight as her body reacts to my words. I hit the nail on the head that night after seeing her badge and gun. She was either going to be compliant with my commanding nature because she was desperate for a much-needed break from being a badass, or she was going to be incapable of relinquishing the power required of being a woman in a male-dominated job. Boy am I glad I was able to give her exactly what she needed.

“Come closer.”

Her tongue scrapes over her lips as she takes one, then a second, step closer.

The threat of my cock inflating fades away, becoming reality as the scent of her skin floats around the room. The fabric of the soft towel becomes a problem when she closes the door at her back, giving us privacy.

“The walls are thinner than you’d think,” I warn. “But I can gag you if you’re worried about people hearing you beg for more.”

She slow blinks at me, and not in a way that makes me think she’s struggling with her emotions or confused by what I said. It’s comical and takes everything I have not to grin at her reaction. The challenge in her eyes shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does. I’m not normally turned on by pushback. I’ve always been more of an obey-on-command type of guy.

“Topping from the bottom while fully dressed? Impressive. Let’s see how well you can keep it up now.”

I tug the towel free from my waist, letting it crumble at my feet.

Her eyes dip, the slow glide of them making my cock jerk, precum seeping from the tip.

When she draws those pretty green orbs back to meet mine, she’s a different woman, and not in a good way.

I tilt my head slightly, shifting forward a couple of inches. When she takes a step back, I pause.

Her nonverbal no echoes around me and not in a way that makes me think she wants to be argued with or proven wrong. It's a full stop.

I step to the side, heading to the small closet, and pull a pair of jeans from a hanger, keeping my back to her as I tug them up my legs.

"I need your help," she says as she moves deeper into the room.

I can sense her moving toward the small window on the far side of the room, not closer to me as if she regrets her decision. I wince while trying to position my cock behind the denim with it still semi-erect.

She has her back to me, her forearm resting on the firearm at her hip like I've seen so many cops do. It must be something they teach them in the academy for how prevalent the action is.

I take a moment to look at her, wondering if trying my luck one last time would be fruitful, if I could convince her to get in the bed, but I drop the notion. There's something about this woman that makes me want to spend more than just a couple of hours inside of her, and that is enough to help me keep my distance.

She trusts me on some level, to be facing away, and that makes me feel worthy somehow. Worthy of what, I'm not exactly sure.

"You wanted my help?" I remind her, noticing the flash of disappointment in her eyes when she turns to face me.

I don't know if she's upset to see me in jeans or if she's not impressed I haven't put a shirt on yet.

"I think Elizabeth's case is connected to one from fifteen years ago."

I nod, trying my best to formulate a response that doesn't hint at the extra information Colton told me about her sister's case. I don't think the woman standing in front of me would be impressed to know Colton told me parts of that story last night.

"I'm not sure I can help. Have you spoken with Chief Mon—"

"Full disclosure," she interrupts. "The department doesn't want me spending time trying to connect the two."

"I don't think Monahan is the type of man to cover up—"

I pause when she shakes her head. “I don’t think he’s covering anything up. He thinks I’m connecting dots that aren’t connectable. Going with full disclosure once again, I have to admit that I may have jumped the gun more than once in my career, operating under the belief that there was a second person involved in my—in two cases that were closed fifteen years ago.”

Colton did mention her being hyperfocused and that Burr’s murder was similar to her sister’s. I think he saw this coming, and no doubt feels helpless. Now I have to determine whether helping her will feed an idea she’s created on her own or believe what she believes and help her find a second murderer that may be killing again.

“Cerberus rarely gets involved with domestic cases,” I inform her.

“I’m not asking Cerberus for help,” she says, locking her eyes with mine. “You probably shouldn’t even mention it to Diego Anderson or any other member of your gang.”

“Club,” I correct. “It’s clear you have some pretty well-formed opinions about me and this place, so why are you even here?”

“Club,” she repeats. “Sorry.”

She chews the inside of her cheek as she waits for my answer, and I’m seriously fucking torn. I have no doubt that going down this rabbit hole with her would be bad for everyone involved if she’s wrong, but if she’s right...

On one hand, I know I should tell her no. Feeding into it wouldn’t be healthy, but on the other hand, I know she isn’t going to let it go, no matter what choice I make.

I shouldn’t feel a thrill of possibility race up my back at the prospect of spending more time with her. Not only did the woman arrest me on very little evidence, she already has me acting differently than any other woman I’ve ever spent time with behind closed doors.

“I’ll help you,” I answer, and I already know I’m in trouble when a wide smile spreads across her face.

Chapter 15

Lennox

“If we’re going to work together, you can’t do that,” he grumbles.

“What?” I ask, the smile falling from my face.

“You can’t look at me like you wish I hadn’t gotten dressed.”

I’m trying to formulate a response when he drops his ass to the bed and pats the spot beside him.

My first instinct is to obey, but then I catch the twitch of his lips when I shift slightly to walk forward.

“I made a mistake. I think this is a bad idea.” I chance a look at the door, thinking walking right back out of it would be best for the both of us.

“You’re sure?” he asks, and his voice has that same silky edge to it that it had that night.

My body reads it the same way it did in the hotel room, and that’s dangerous territory for me. Getting lost in this man would be fun. I’m well aware just how skilled he is at reading my body, and I have no doubt that he’s capable of giving me the things I need, even those things I can’t bring myself to ask for.

“Maybe we can go where there isn’t a bed?” I offer.

His grin is slow, filled with mischievous intent. “Do you think I need a bed for me to fuck you, Lennox?”

I’m not normally a woman known for giving into whimsy. I don’t make rash decisions. Even the night we met at the gym, I spent time watching him as we both worked out. I knew he was circling me as he moved from one machine to the next because I was doing the same. We were both actively orbiting one another, getting a feel for the other person.

Before spending time alone with him, I probably could’ve pulled the plug on hooking up and resisted him, but there’s just something about finally finding a guy that knows what he’s doing in bed.

Most men will brag and talk themselves up. Hell, women have been faking orgasms for so long, they're part of the problem, letting men think they know what the hell they're doing, but few exist who honestly do.

There was no faking with Sawyer Maddox. His skills had skills. His confidence is also a big part of it. Right now, he's just staring at me, begging me to deny it, forcing me to imagine what him not needing a bed looks like.

On some level, I hate him for it, that ability to take over my thoughts and make me want things I shouldn't.

"Definitely a bad idea. I should've asked someone to help who hasn't seen me naked."

His eyes drop, scanning me from my legs and back up to my face. It has the power to leave me breathless, my eyes unconsciously dropping to his lap. His condition looks painful, the way he's straining in his jeans. The ridge of muscles lining his abdomen flex, the sight of it encouraging my mouth to water. I know exactly what that trail of hair there feels like against my tongue. I know his thick, pierced cock hides behind those jeans.

"It's you," he says, his voice no more than a whisper.

"Me?" I ask, reluctant to pull my eyes from his body, my mind remembering how his powerful muscles flex and clench when he's rolling his hips as he thrusts inside of me. How he'd slow down without provocation when I'd get close because he controlled my pleasure.

"I'm only feeding off your energy."

"You're wrong," I manage, but even I notice the lack of conviction in my words.

"You're not turned on right now?"

I shake my head, the action my first instinct.

"If I dipped my fingers into that pretty little cun—"

"Enough." I mean for it to come out forcefully, an effort to regain some sort of power, but it's pleading instead.

"If you can be professional then so can I." He clears his throat and when I look up, he's watching my face in a way that if his cock wasn't still

straining against his jeans, I'd be convinced I imagined the last couple of minutes.

He stands, taking a step back, despite the several feet of distance between us.

"We can go to the conference room to discuss whatever you'd like," he offers, stepping around me and opening the bedroom door.

I straighten my shirt, making sure my forearm grazes my firearm because it grounds me, the reminder that I'm a cop and capable of many things.

The massive double doors leading into the conference room manage to ramp up my expectations of the room, but there's no real grandeur when he opens the one on the right.

There's no throne at the head of the table, no carvings in the table like I've seen on television. Hell, there aren't even pictures of half-naked women hanging on the walls.

"Is that Monet?" I ask, pointing to the left.

"It's a print, I think," he answers. "Did you bring a file?" Maddox asks as we step fully inside the room. "If there's anything digital I'll have to grab Max or Shadow. They'd kill me if I touch their stuff."

I look in the area he's indicating and take in a massive IT setup.

"The chairs look comfortable," I say stupidly.

"Are you saying they shouldn't?"

"I guess I'm just surprised."

"That we have comfortable chairs? There are some days we spend hours in here going over a job."

"I'm surprised they aren't made out of bike parts."

He grins, the look different, boyish compared to the way he did earlier. "We save those for the shop. Would you like something to drink?"

I shake my head, somehow getting exactly what I asked of him but also being a little disappointed that he's so capable of turning off the charm and

seduction.

It makes me wonder if it was manipulation. If he was only doing it in an effort to control how I responded to him. I want to tell him there's no longer any need for smoke and mirrors but bringing it up again will only make me look like a desperate, wishy-washy hag.

"No thank you," I say, moving to pull out one of the chairs.

The unwanted sense of disappointment hits me again when he takes the seat across from me rather than the one beside me, ensuring, without a doubt, he can't touch me. The table is massive, and we probably couldn't even touch our fingers if we both leaned fully across it.

"You're sure you don't want anything to drink?" he asks again after I clear my throat twice in a row.

"I'm just trying to build a little confidence," I confess. "I'm going to talk about something I don't speak of with many people."

He nods, his face welcoming and soft.

I watch his face. This would make most people look away, but he never breaks eye contact. I'm left wondering how much of who he portrays himself to be is actually him and how much is an act. His openness and willingness to give me the time it takes to gather the courage to speak about my sister's murder is exactly what I need, and somehow he seems aware of that.

I haven't met one person in my life who is capable of being exactly what I need in every situation that I face. God help me if this man ends up being the one that finally is.

I drop my eyes from his, locking them on my hands as I begin to speak.

I tell him everything, some that I can remember from back then, some that I know from reading the police reports. I talk about Elle and how we looked for her and Jasper Niers. I don't exclude a single thing, not even my opinion on Detective Roth and my inability to forgive him even after five years on the force and knowing just how impossible some cases are to solve.

"I need you to request another ride-along."

He nods rather than giving me some rehearsed, seductive smile.

“I need you to have a reason to be back at the station so you can watch Niers’ confession video. Downloading it would throw up a red flag in the system, and I’m confident my days of even having access to it are numbered as it is.”

“I’ll put in a request,” he says.

I nod and stand from the table, feeling a level of disconnection right now. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about Elle, questioning why and how for so long that it leaves me pissed rather than sad. Sadness was the go-to emotion for years, but the deaths of my parents altered even that. I know stress and sadness over their own inability to keep a grown woman safe took them from me. Niers and the partner I’m sure he had killed them as well.

He doesn’t ask me to stay when I turn toward the door. I would tell him no, needing to lick these freshly opened wounds in private, but I am hit with a little disappointment.

The living room is filled with people when we leave the conference room, but I lock my eyes on the front door, refusing to look at them. No one sneers at me or stops us to question why the cop that ruined their camping trip is here. Conversations don’t even pause as we walk past.

Maddox takes my hand before I can climb into my car, but I still can’t manage to make eye contact with him. There’s something about the way he listened to every word I spoke, not once interjecting an opinion or arguing with my suspicions like everyone else always has. He never once made me think he was just biding his time until I left because I was insane and so close to my sister’s case that I couldn’t make unbiased conclusions.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says, squeezing my hand.

After a half of a second, he releases it, and I feel a little bereft.

“Be safe.”

I nod, climbing into my car when he opens the door.

I don’t know how to feel. I’m torn between being appreciative for him listening and still offering to help, but when I drive away, I also feel like maybe he was doing what a lot of people do when faced with someone they

believe is crazy, just nodding and agreeing until they have a chance to escape.

By the time I make it back to the police department, I've already determined that Sawyer Maddox is no different from anyone else I've asked to help me truly solve my sister's case. He just happened to do it in the most manipulative way ever, and somehow that's worse than if he would've told me to fuck off right to my face.

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Chapter 16

Ugly

I've lifted my eyes to the damn door every time it has opened for the last two hours, but Lennox hasn't been the one to step through. Yesterday was the same.

I could tell she needed some time alone to lick the wounds reopened after telling me everything about her sister's case. I could also tell that she expected me to repeat what everyone else has told her in the past, to let it go, to move on, that Niers didn't have an accomplice, that he wasn't mentally well.

I'm torn, wanting to look at the case file firsthand rather than it being relayed through her no matter how well versed she is with the details. I don't want to be too quick to agree or disagree. I know what it's like to have a gut feeling about something with no real evidence to back it up. Those instincts have saved my life more than once, and I'd be a fool to argue that she isn't capable of having them herself.

Staying away yesterday and all day today was purposeful. I had my own wounds to lick. I knew she only came to me because her boss has shut her down so many times and she doesn't feel as if there's anyone in her department willing to use the energy it would take to come to the same conclusion she has. Then again, there's the very real possibility that over the last fifteen years, someone else has determined exactly what everyone keeps telling her and she just can't accept the truth. It's possible there are questions that will never be answered because the rest of the truth died with Niers in that jail cell.

The idea pains me for what it means for Lennox because I doubt she'll give up, no matter what evidence she's presented with that would prove the evil man worked alone.

I agreed to help, but I doubt I can. I'm not a cop. I wouldn't even know how to investigate a crime that happened over fifteen years ago. I don't know that there's anything anyone can do that hasn't already been done, but the chances of Elizabeth Burr's murder being connected have to be slim, right?

If someone killed two women that long ago and got away with it, what are the chances they came back to the same damn town and started doing it again?

I'm lost in my head for hours, the beer I ordered when I got here now warm and undrinkable. I stick around after closing just like I've done every night Rochelle has been left to work alone. I questioned Drake about the schedule the other night, wondering why she'd be the one to close, but he argued that she wants to close. Tips at closing are better than when folks come in and have a drink or two then leave. I begin to wonder how a little more money could make such a big difference when her safety could be in danger, but her choices aren't my business. All I can do is make sure the woman gets home safely like I've been doing.

"You done with that?"

I look over to see Wallace pointing at the glass I've been staring at for the better part of an hour. "It's just that I need to wash all the dishes or Drake will have my ass in the morning."

"Sure," I tell him. "Sorry. Where's Joey?"

The newer guy has been the one to close with Rochelle every night that I've seen her home this week.

"It's his day off," Wallace says, taking the glass with a flat smile and heading into the back.

"Is it guilt?" Rochelle asks a few minutes later when she reappears from the back.

"What do you mean?"

"Staying here every night I close. Is it guilt about that other woman?"

I nod, knowing there's no point in lying. "I should've been able to keep her from getting hurt."

She doesn't argue with me like the guys on the team did that one day. She doesn't offer an excuse, and it leaves me wondering if she also believes I failed that poor woman.

"I know you probably have better things to do, but since I know you're

going to follow me home tonight, could I ask a favor?”

“Sure,” I tell her, thinking she’s going to tell me to fuck off or to follow her to her boyfriend’s house or something.

“I put in a call last week to the landlord, but he didn’t show today like he said he would to fix the garbage disposal. I can’t use my kitchen sink, and it’s really starting to smell. Do you happen to know anything about them?”

“I can take a look at it,” I offer.

She grins. “I really appreciate it.”

Wallace leaves first, and twenty minutes later, Rochelle is done counting down the till and heading out the front door. I wait for her to lock up and climb on my bike. The routine of her going to the bank and then directly home is rote by this point, and there’s a danger in that. If someone aims to hurt her, they could literally do it at any point on her route because she never switches it up.

I climb off my bike in front of her house, meeting her at the side of her car.

“You should really mix up your routine,” I tell her as she walks toward the front of her house, keys in hand.

“I like structure,” she says, the look in her eyes different now than they were at the bar. “I like rules.”

I tilt my head, the tone of her voice throwing up a flag.

“It makes it easy for someone to victimize you,” I explain.

“Only so many roads lead to my house, Ugly.”

I follow her inside, immediately taking note of the fresh floral scent filling the small living room.

“The sink is in here,” she says, turning on a small table lamp as she walks through the room.

I realize her lie the second I take a step into the room, but by the time I open my mouth to ask her why, she’s pressing her body to mine.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my hands immediately clasping her upper

arms.

“I heard about you,” she whispers, her eyes dropping to my mouth a half second before she leans in to try and kiss me a second time. “How you like to take control. How you like being bossy in bed. It turns me on. You’ve been following me home all week, waiting for an invite *inside*.”

The way she says the last word makes it very clear she doesn’t mean inside her house.

Rochelle is a gorgeous woman, and I have no doubt she spends much of her time behind the bar, turning men down, but openly forward women aren’t really my thing. I also don’t shit where I eat. I’m not a man that calls the next day or gets involved on any level with something that might resemble a relationship. Sleeping with her, even if I wanted to, which I don’t, and going back to the bar would be out of the question, and I happen to like *Jake’s*. I’d never ruin that by hooking up with one of the employees there.

“I didn’t come here for that,” I tell her, using my grip on her arms to urge her away from me.

Her eyes shutter, that breathy *let’s fuck* woman she was transitioning back to the one that gives what I know now are empty smiles.

“I guess I read that wrong,” she says, her smile not reaching her eyes. “No hard feelings?”

“None,” I tell her as I make my way back through her house to the front door. “Lock up behind me.”

Silence fills the area around me until I throw my leg over my bike. I recognize the motor immediately, and I can hardly keep the smile off my face.

Lennox is parked halfway down the block. I guess I should count my lucky stars that she doesn’t pull out and run me over as I approach her car.

I bend in the middle, watching her face in the darkness until she rolls her window down.

“I thought that was you.”

“I could’ve been anyone,” she mutters.

“Your car needs a tune up. I heard the same click when you started it that day we went to the gas station to get the video.”

She still hasn't turned her face to look at me. I'm guessing by the repeated clench of her jaw that she's either mad or jealous. God, let it be the latter because that's something I can use.

My cock takes notice of her sullen demeanor, and I struggle with making it known that the way she's acting right now is activating that part of me that wants to show her who's in control or walking away. Because getting any further tangled up with this woman probably won't end well for either of us.

Instead of saying anything, I walk around to the passenger side and climb inside. She remains silent which I see as a win because I fully expected her to insist that I get out.

“Take me back,” I insist, my voice low and demanding.

Only now does she turn her face in my direction, somehow still managing to avoid eye contact.

“To the clubhouse?”

“To the hotel,” I clarify.

She drives to the end of the cul-de-sac and heads out of Rochelle's neighborhood without another word, but when we get to the hotel, she doesn't make a move to climb out of the car.

I head inside and grab a room, wondering if I read the entire situation wrong.

Chapter 17

Lennox

The pounding of my heart has more to do with memories than fear. I know what happens if I go inside, and nearly every part of my body is urging me out of the car. It's that almost primal need that has me frozen in place. What kind of man doesn't hold a grudge after being arrested in front of his entire team and their families? What would his retaliation look like on my body?

I don't think he'd hurt me. At least not in a way I wouldn't like.

The thrill of anticipation forces goose pimples to streak down my arms.

Taking a deep fortifying breath, I climb out of my car, telling myself that I'm going to tell him off and remind him that I make my own decisions. It's the middle of the damn night. I should be sleeping, not heading into a hotel to meet a man I once put handcuffs on.

I bypass the front desk clerk and climb onto the elevator. That sixth sense, the same one telling me I'm not wrong about my sister, is also telling me that the man managed to get the very same room from last time. If I knock on the door and he isn't in there, then I'll just leave.

After stepping off the elevator, I haven't fully made up my mind which way I want it to go. No one answering the door would probably be best because spending another night with Sawyer Maddox is a complication I don't need in my life.

The door opens, a hand clapping around the wrist raised to knock before my knuckles can even meet the wood.

I wish I could say my first instinct is to yell at him, to tell him he's got a lot of nerve pulling me inside this damn room the way he does, but the second the door is closed with me inside, a switch is flipped inside of me.

It wasn't until that first night with this man that I discovered exactly what I'd been missing my whole adult, sexually active life.

"Took you long enough," he says in my ear.

He has one arm wrapped around my waist, holding me close against his body, and the other is loosely at my throat. I swallow against his palm, feeling his lips turn up into a smile on my cheek.

He hasn't forbidden me yet, so I run my hand up his sides, relishing in the minuscule power I must have over him when his muscles jump and flex against my fingertips.

I open my mouth to whisper his name when the scratch of his five-o'clock shadow scrapes down my neck, but I immediately clamp my lips closed. This isn't how I operate, hooking up with someone I know. Having people in your life means you can lose them, and I'm not capable of losing someone else.

"Get out of your head," he commands, his fingers tangled in my hair as he forces my head back so he can look into my eyes.

"Make me," I taunt.

I know we're both going to get exactly what we need from the other when a slow, devious smile tugs up the corners of his mouth.

"Unzip me."

I fumble with his zipper, my overeager fingers not working for me exactly like I need them to.

Sawyer takes a step back, his chin tucked into his chest as he watches my hands work open the button and zipper on his jeans.

I bite my lower lip, my eyes focused on his waist as he's revealed. The man is commando, but I expect nothing less from him. Hell, I get the impression that if it was socially acceptable, he'd probably run around completely naked.

Last time he was in athletic shorts, his thick cock tenting the thin fabric by the time we got to this point, and I'm having a hard time deciding which reveal I like most because they were both mouthwateringly delicious.

I reach for him, wanting to trace the tip of his glistening cock with my fingertip so I can then draw it to my lips, but he takes a step back. I feel the chastisement in his action without him saying a word, but I know better than to pout. Doing so only postponed my satisfaction last time.

“Good girl,” he says when I lift my eyes to his, waiting for him to tell me what to do next.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach, their wings fluttering inside of me and settling in that deep place I know he’s more than capable of reaching.

“Please.”

“Sweet Lennox,” he whispers, cupping my face. “It’s too soon to start begging.”

I’m lost when he takes a step back, breaking all contact with my skin.

“I want to see nothing but skin.”

I reach for the bottom button of my blouse, but I’m instantly distracted when he reaches for his jutting cock, his fingers knowing the perfect pressure to use on the barbells piercing his flesh.

I nod in approval, my thigh muscles tightening in an effort to ward off the need to touch myself.

“Lennox,” he warns. “Skin. Slowly.”

It feels like a punishment, the speed at which he wants me to strip, but maybe this is a penance for how I’ve acted since we were last in this room.

“That’s it,” he praises, the hairs on my arms standing on end at his approval as I pull my top off.

I’d be concerned he’s not impressed with my no-frills bra, but the man saw me struggle out of a sports bra last time. At least this one has a little lace at the tops of the cups.

“Pinch them like I would,” he says the second the tips of my breasts meet the air.

I whimper, wanting to cup both my breasts in an effort to ease the ache inside of them, but I obey, digging my short fingernails into my flesh just enough to feel a sting. He doesn’t want me to hurt myself, but at the same time, he doesn’t want me to go easy either.

“It feels better when you do it,” I pant.

“I know, baby, but it pleases me to see you doing it.”

I pinch a little harder with his praise, my mouth hanging open.

“Don’t forget about the bottom half.”

I risk another chastisement when I slip my hand behind the fabric of my slacks and into my panties. The first brush of fingers over my clit is electric. When I pinch it like I did my nipple, I whimper.

Instead of upsetting him, I watch as his own mouth hangs open.

“Are you wet?” he asks, his hand speeding up on his cock.

I nod. “So wet.”

“Take them off,” he demands through clenched teeth.

I’m reluctant to pull my fingers free because fuck, I could easily come with just a little more pressure, but I drag my fingers back out, working the button and zipper quicker than he probably appreciates.

“I wanted slow, Lennox, but you’re pushing against my boundaries. It’s bad enough knowing what that cunt of yours feels like wrapped around my cock. Taste yourself.”

I whimper again, my slacks barely over the crest of my ass when he speaks. I shift my weight as I lift my slick fingers to my lips but my clothing doesn’t budge.

The tanginess of my arousal skates over my tongue as I obey his command. His blue eyes are locked on my mouth, and the power I feel in this moment seems like too much. I feel as if I’m stealing something from him, and it’s the last thing I want.

“Fuck you,” he growls. “Don’t even think about it.”

My hands freeze on my slacks. “But you wanted—”

“Don’t fucking speak. Get on the bed. Ass up.”

He works his boots off and then his jeans as I position myself exactly how he wants. A quick glance over my shoulder reveals him sliding a condom down his cock before he takes up position behind me.

“Jesus,” I pant when he runs his tip through my slickness, pushing forward to press the head of himself against my clit.

I roll my hips back, wanting to take him in one long glide, but he pulls back, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass, a warning to stay still.

“I can’t.” I answer his unspoken command.

“You will.”

I drop my face to the bed, praying the curve of my back is enough to entice him into action.

“I should make you suck me off and leave this cunt unsatisfied.”

I could cry right now. Obeying would be impossible if I thought he’d leave me high and dry.

“But I’m not the type of guy that’s willing to miss out.”

He feeds himself only a few inches inside of me, allowing only one barbell to enter.

“God. Damn,” he groans. “Swear you fucking torture me on purpose.”

He pulls out completely, his scorching hot cock resting on my right ass cheek. His fingers dig into my hips for a brief second, but then he’s flipping me over, an awkward transition to my back due to my shoes and slacks hindering my leg movements.

I anticipate him pulling at my clothes to give him better access but he simply pushes my restrained legs up, curling them into my chest.

“Sawyer,” I pant, feeling like a deer caught in headlights when he peers at me over my clothes.

“Don’t,” he growls. “Can’t fucking handle you saying my name that way.”

He presses forward, impaling me fully on him, and despite the pinch of pain for having him seated completely, I also moan in pleasure because fuck, it feels amazing.

“Do it and it’ll be your only one,” he warns when my pussy clenches, threatening to orgasm.

“Sawyer,” I pant again, my hands clamping over the top of his that are tangled in my slacks.

“What did I say?”

“I can’t—”

My body convulses, my eyes going blurry with my release.

“Dirty bitch,” he growls, pulling back and thrusting forward with the same familiar power he used that first night.

My fingernails dig into his skin but he doesn’t complain. He’s too lost in his own pleasure, but rather than rewarding me with the pulse of his own orgasm, he pulls back at the last second, gripping me by the neck as he rips the condom free. In the next second, my mouth is on his cock, hot bursts of cum coating my tongue.

I moan at the same time he does, my body still wound tight and wanting as I drink him down.

He stumbles back a few feet, the awe in his eyes taking a little longer than before to return to irritation at my inability to follow his rules.

“Sorry,” I say, lifting the back of my hand to my mouth to wipe away some of the wetness on my chin.

His smile is sinister as he nods his head. It doesn’t translate as understanding or forgiveness, and the menacing look he gives me next thrills the hell out of me.

“That will be the only one you get tonight,” he warns as he holds out his hand for me to take. “Finish getting undressed.”

I’m slow to obey, my body needing just a little more time to come down.

His declaration feels like a challenge, and as I kick off my shoes, I don’t know if I should press my luck and take what I need or if I should obey with the hope that he’ll change his mind and reward me.

Chapter 18

Ugly

My recovery time after sex has always been fast, but I'm not sure my cock even fully deflated after coming in her mouth.

"You can fit one more," I urge, torn between touching her and figuring out a way to relieve myself without her knowing.

It would be impossible with the way her legs are splayed open over the top of mine with me kneeling back on my calves.

She shakes her head. "I can't."

"You're tight as hell, baby girl, but you take all of my cock. I know another finger will fit."

Her mouth hangs open as she attempts what I'm asking, and I know by the flash in her eyes that she's close to coming again. I don't think I've ever been as turned on as I am with this woman. It's addictive for sure.

"Sawyer."

My cock jerks with my name on her lips.

"If you come right now, you'll spend the rest of the night with your cunt going untouched."

She pulls her hand away, her eyes snapping closed with the effort to control her body, but goddamn, I see the pulsing clench of her cunt as she orgasms. Each throb pushes more slickness from her opening, and I watch in awe of her body and its ability to come so fucking hard. I'm envious of it, needing the very same thing.

"What did I say?" I ask, swiping my finger up the center of her before pushing two digits into her slit.

My mouth hangs open the same way hers does, and I can sense her ability to make me lose control as her cunt clenches down on my intrusion. She's not doing it on purpose, but that makes the outcome no less different. As much as I want to punish her for disobeying, I want to fuck her again even more.

“Your mouth,” I command, running my slick fingers up my length.

I discovered how much she likes tasting herself the last time we were here, and it thrilled me to witness her discovering that for what seemed like the first time.

She scrambles to obey, and I get the feeling she’s doing it more for herself than a need to please me. Her submission turns her on as much as it does me, and fuck if that doesn’t make my cock jump the second she turns over and lowers her lips to my length. Her hand trembles as she lifts my shaft and runs her tongue over every barbell lining the damn thing. I clench my fingers into a fist in an effort to keep from touching her, if only because it’s what she wants.

Her mouth works me, her hot tantalizing breath warm on my nuts. I’m imagining days and weeks of nothing but she and I discovering everything about the other’s body when that fucking tingle starts in my balls. Jesus, there is more at work here than just arousal, and the realization is almost enough to take my mind from where I want it to be.

I’m leaning over, knowing I’m going to go against my word as I reach for my wallet to grab another condom, when her phone rings.

Her head snaps in that direction.

It’s after five in the morning, but still too early for Colton to be calling her with anything other than bad news.

She moves faster this time, and I don’t attempt to stop her from reaching for the phone despite the throbbing erection I’m no doubt going to have to live with.

“Maison,” she says the second she puts the phone to her ear, all business despite the flush on her chest and tits.

She doesn’t even bother to look in my direction when I run my hand down my length, so I release my erection and stand from the bed.

I give her as much privacy as the room allows by going into the bathroom and washing my hands. The scent of her on my skin will torture me for the rest of the damn day. I know our fun here is over by the way she speaks softly into the phone. She’s already pulling her clothes back on by the

time I leave the bathroom.

“There’s been another murder,” she says, exhaustion and a hint of anger marking her tone.

“I was hoping it was a break in your case,” I tell her.

Her jaw ticks as she pulls up her slacks, not even bothering to tuck her blouse back in.

She dodges me when I reach for her, but instead of pushing the boundaries it’s clear she’s putting in place, I reach for my own clothes.

I want to insist on going with her, but from the sounds of it, Colton is already on the scene. I know me showing up with her has the potential to be embarrassing for her. It’s the first time since climbing into the car with her that I regret leaving my bike outside of Rochelle’s house.

“You couldn’t have known,” I offer as I lean down and pull my boots on.

She tilts her head to the side but refuses to make eye contact with me.

I don’t have to face her fully to know she’s already internalizing this somehow. She thinks if she wasn’t here with me, she could’ve prevented someone else from getting hurt. I understand regret. I have so much built up from that night with Elizabeth Burr, so I know better than to coddle her and tell her everything is alright and she had no way to predict this would happen.

She’s trembling and I don’t know if it’s from anger or what, but her driving while she’s like this isn’t safe.

“I’m going with you.”

She freezes, her eyes narrowed as if I’ve done more than offend her. “Absolutely not.”

Her words leave no room for argument. I have the room until noon, but I know there will already be several people waking up at the clubhouse. I can easily call any one of them to pick me up and take me to get my bike.

The door slamming at her back sounds more like a great big “fuck you” than an “I’ll catch you later.”

It seems she's the type of person to not only blame herself for the actions of others, but she's also quick to point that finger at others as well.

I pick Bishop to call for a ride back, thinking if he really is sorry according to his apology the other day, he's less likely to give me shit for getting deserted by a woman at a hotel.

I'm wrong once again. He's in a foul-ass mood when he stops in front of me outside the hotel. He doesn't say a word as I give him the address to where I deserted my bike in favor of spending time with Lennox.

"I need fucking coffee first," he says as his reasoning when he pulls up to a gas station rather than driving me directly across town.

I'd wait in the SUV, but hell if I don't need some form of caffeine myself. It's going to be a long-ass day. I can already tell.

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Chapter 19

Lennox

Colton didn't have to give me the name of the victim. The second he told me the address, I knew.

I was in this same neighborhood mere hours ago.

I take it in, needing to feel the full sting of my mistakes.

Curtains move, nosy neighbors trying to figure out what the hell is going on before the sun has the chance to fully rise. Red-and-blue lights spin, turning the quaint neighborhood into an obvious crime scene.

I don't waste time getting out of my car. Anything I could see right now has already been observed by the many others that arrived before me.

Patrol officers move around, some talking to neighbors brave enough to step out of their homes. One is running crime scene tape from one edge of the yard to the next.

I hold my head high as I approach the small front porch, knowing I won't be able to do it for much longer.

I'm sick to my stomach, feeling disgusting and manipulated.

Colton meets me on the porch, his eyes confirming what I already know before he speaks.

"Victim is twenty-eight-year-old Rochelle Leach. The neighbor called about a fire in the backyard. The fire department showed up first, and I can tell you any evidence we might've gotten has been compromised."

I follow Colton around to the back of the house rather than going through the house.

The scent of gasoline hits me when I get near the rusty gate.

"Accelerant," Colton says, pointing at a discarded gas can. "I don't think he brought it with him."

I look to the left, noticing a lawn mower so old and rusty it doesn't look like it even works.

“If he didn’t come prepared—”

“It means there’s a likelihood he made mistakes,” I say.

Weeds are tall in the backyard, furthering my presumption the lawn mower doesn’t work. It’s either that or she didn’t have many opportunities to get out here and take care of her yard.

“Why pull her out of the house?” I ask more to myself than Colton. “Why open himself up to being seen?”

Colton points to the back door, and I notice the screen barely holding onto one hinge. “I think she ran out here to escape. Look at the disturbance in the grass.”

“Strangled face down?”

“Good chance,” Colton says. “The fire did a lot more damage this time around.”

I try swallowing down the lump in my throat. I had only a couple of conversations with this woman, but last I saw her, she had that glint in her eye telling me she was executing a plan when she climbed out of her car a handful of hours ago and Sawyer followed her inside.

I was jealous of her, had a flash of motivation to bang on her door and drag her out by her hair. Seeing her this way makes me sick to my stomach. It makes me wonder why I felt I could trust him. Insidious thoughts seep inside, and I can picture him getting off so quickly, knowing he was getting away with a second murder, all while making me his alibi.

I shake my head.

“It’s a difficult scene,” Colton says, snapping his hand back when I jerk at his concerned touch to my shoulder. “Take a minute.”

I shake my head, but I don’t know what I’m saying no to. I pull my hand up by my head, indicating I’m going to do what he’s requesting, but I need to do it in my own way.

Take me back, he’d said.

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to recall everything I can.

I didn't smell gas on him. He came from the front door, not the side of the house. His clothes weren't dirty or covered in grass stains. He wasn't sweaty or out of breath. He was inside less than five minutes. He didn't have time to attack her, strip her naked, sexually assault her all before chasing her outside, strangling her, and setting her body on fire.

"Have you been inside?" I ask, my voice raw, coming out barely over a whisper.

"Based on the evidence, it looks like the assault took place inside. The neighbors didn't report hearing her scream for help. She didn't get very far off the porch before he caught up with her."

I swallow and nod, watching the point of Colton's finger as he speaks, indicating the evidence.

The sun is coming up, the shadows disappearing making the scene that much more awful.

I feel the need to open my mouth and tell Colton what I know. It's pertinent to the investigation for him to know that Sawyer Maddox escorted her home, that he went inside her house before getting into the car with me, but I can't seem to open my mouth and make that confession. I know how it would look. Judgment may not come from Colton because he's just not the type, but there will be no end to the disapproval from anyone else that will get wind of what I did tonight.

I straighten my spine, trying to remind myself that I'm a grown woman. I can do as I please, but the weight of the choice I made pushes back down even harder.

As much as I'd like to point the finger at Maddox, as much as I feel like I deserve the guilt swimming around inside of me, I know the man didn't do this.

There's more damage from the fire than there was in the Burr case, but not enough that it burned for the hours in between me driving away with Maddox in my car and Colton getting the call. The timeline doesn't fit, and as great as I like to think I am at my job, even if I wasn't, I could figure that out.

I'll have to consider why I automatically jumped to that conclusion when Colton told me of the address over the phone.

It took all I had not to throw up on the way to my car with those thoughts swimming around in my head.

“The bike out front,” I begin, knowing he noticed it too, but before I can make my confession, yelling fills the air coming from the front yard.

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Chapter 20

Ugly

“What is your fucking problem?” I growl.

“I said turn around and put your hands behind your fucking back.”

It’s bad enough that Bishop and I ride up to the house and see the yard is swarming with fucking cops, realizing this is where Lennox had to have been heading, but this douche of a cop getting in my face is only pissing me off.

“Just be cool,” Bishop says, and it makes me wonder just how much of my back the man actually has.

If I lunge at Dresden, the same piece of shit cop Colton and I discussed the other night at *Jake’s*, would Bishop get into the tussle with me?

I look at my teammate and determine he wouldn’t.

The cop pushes at my shoulder, forcing me to take a step back, and I see fucking red.

My hands are shaking, and I’m seconds away from tearing into this man.

Instead of picking up an assault charge on a police officer, something I have no doubt Kincaid would not appreciate, I step around the man. All of this is taking place in Rochelle’s front yard, which can only mean one thing. The woman I saw safely home earlier isn’t safe.

Bile fills my throat as the cop slips his foot in between my legs and takes me down to the ground. It’s an effective move, one I’ve used many times. The wind is knocked out of me, leaving me stunned for the second it takes for him to put his knee in the middle of my back and get the cuffs on my wrists.

I squirm, pissed and ready to beat his ass. I’ve been through the *innocent but let’s work this out at the department* shit before with Lennox. I’ll be damned if I go through that fucking strip down again.

I open my mouth to argue further, but he pushes my face into the grass.

I vow to ruin this fucking douche despite not being a vindictive man.

“Another victim?” he hisses in my ear. “How stupid could you be to leave your fucking bike outside after raping her and setting her on fire. There’s certain corners of Hell reserved just for men like you.”

I already expected to hear about her death, but knowing for a fact that Rochelle is gone makes me deflate. The failure swimming around inside of me doesn’t leave much room to think about what the man is accusing me of.

I can see how this looks. I’ve followed her home every night she’s worked for the last week, waiting for the flash of her lights to make sure she was safe before driving away. Tonight, I was inside her house. Tonight, I failed her.

Was the guy waiting inside? Should I have walked through every room to make sure she was alone rather than bolting after she tried to kiss me?

I’m no more than a sack of potatoes when the cop pulls me to my feet. No less than half a dozen uniformed police officers are glaring at me as if they all came to the same damn conclusion as the guy that put the cuffs on me. The rage in some of their eyes tells me that they’d cross over that protect and serve vow and beat me bloody with the slightest of provocation.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I snap my head to the right, watching as Chief Monahan walks up. The look on his face tells me he’s wishing he never even got out of bed this morning.

“His bike was outside the victim’s home,” Dresden says, his tone sounding like he expects a fucking commendation for his policework. “He was released after his last arrest, but we got him dead to rights this time.”

Monahan pinches the bridge of his nose before speaking.

“I guess he didn’t think he’d get caught coming back for his bike,” Dresden continues.

“And you think he’d leave it in the first place?” Monahan asks.

“Finally a man of reason,” Bishop snaps.

“Or that he would risk trying to grab it when the neighborhood is

swarming with fucking cops,” the chief growls, growing more and more frustrated.

Dresden’s grip on my arm loosens a little.

I look up, locking eyes with Lennox as she and Colton come from around the far corner of Rochelle’s house.

I can’t tell by the look on her face if she’s one of those that believes I was involved, and it threatens to rip me apart from the inside out as she stays quiet while advancing toward us.

I try my best not to plead with her using my eyes. I want her to know I’m not the type of man who would hurt someone like Dresden is accusing me of.

“Why is he in cuffs?” she growls, her eyes darting to the group of patrol officers that have all taken a step back as if to say they weren’t involved since the chief doesn’t look impressed.

“His bike,” Dresden says, sounding less sure than he was moments ago.

“His bike was left here after he escorted Ms. Leach home. He rode away with me.”

She doesn’t have to make a full confession. Every person hearing her words is an adult and can come to the same conclusion.

The chief’s jaw clenches, and I watch as his fingers twitch, no doubt wanting to pinch his nose again.

“Maison,” he growls. “A word.”

The chief starts to walk away but spins back around in our direction so fast, I worry the man is going to throw a hip out of socket.

“Get those fucking cuffs off him,” he snaps to Dresden before locking eyes with me. “Get on your bike and leave.”

The second the cuffs are pulled free, without an apology from the dick bag cop, I might add, Bishop grabs my arm.

“It’s not the time,” he growls, tugging me toward my bike.

It's hard to ride away. I want to explain, to assure the chief, that Lennox has been nothing but professional while on the clock. What she does as a grown, consenting adult in her own time is neither his nor the department's business.

However, I don't want to cause problems for her or Cerberus or Kincaid.

There will be a million questions. Some I won't answer out of respect for the woman I was inside of less than two hours ago.

Bishop waits outside of the SUV until I make it clear I'm leaving the scene.

Guilt once again eats away at me. Every mile of road under my tires as I make my way back to the clubhouse weighs me down. It isn't the lack of sleep eating me up. There are now two women that have been brutalized on what I consider my watch.

I might not be involved with their demises, but it's certainly starting to feel extremely fucking personal.

Chapter 21

Lennox

I guess I should be grateful the man didn't yell at me in front of my colleagues while at the scene, but the redness in his face as he sits at his desk across from me isn't making me feel any better.

"That man is going to sue this fucking department," he says after a much too long silence.

"I was not involved in putting him in cuffs this time," I remind him, just in case he had that in his head.

He glares at me as if I shouldn't even have the nerve to speak to him right now. I didn't say it in a sarcastic, playful way. I'm beyond annoyed that anyone is even having to focus on anything other than working to solve these murders.

"Can we get back to the real issue?"

"I told you to stay away from him."

I tilt my head, ready to lose my shit on this man even if it means losing my job, but then I wouldn't be able to work this case. I wouldn't have access to my sister's case, and I don't know what I'd do if that masochistic tool was taken from me.

"You said not to sleep with him on the clock," I remind him. "I'm not discussing my sex life with you."

I cross my arms over my chest, feeling petulant and wondering if any of the guys would be having this conversation if the roles were reversed. I never considered Monahan to be a sexist, but my eyes get opened to things all the time on the job.

He glares at me as if he's no more looking forward to this conversation than I am.

"You're going to have to explain a little more than what you have. His bike was outside of a crime scene."

I take a deep fortifying breath before speaking. "Sawyer Maddox has

been escorting Rochelle Leach home every night that she closes the bar. He waits by the curb until she flashes the porch light, and then he leaves.”

“And that’s what happened tonight, only he rode away with you instead? Did you make plans prior to this?”

I shake my head. “He went inside.”

His jaw clenches and I can see in his eyes he’s questioning his decision to have Dresden cut Maddox loose.

“He was in there no more than five minutes. There’s no way he could —”

“Is that what you know or is that what you want to think?”

“He didn’t smell like accelerant. His clothes didn’t have grass stains or dirt on them. The scene out back showed a struggle. There’s no way he could’ve stayed clean. He wasn’t out of breath or sweaty. He hadn’t—” I clear my throat. “He didn’t struggle with intimacy when we got to the hotel.”

I don’t know of a better way to explain that the man came nearly as fast as I did. I know it’s not the best evidence that he hadn’t sexually assaulted Rochelle Leach, but it sort of hints in that direction.

Monahan darts his eyes away for a brief second, and I appreciate the reprieve.

“Kincaid only hires top-notch men. I don’t think any of them are capable of anything like we’re dealing with. He changed the way he vetted people after that psycho Wrench.”

I nod, agreeing with him, even though I have no damn clue who Wrench is.

“This is a nightmare for the department. One of my detectives involved with a murder suspect.”

“He isn’t a murder suspect,” I remind him.

“You made him a murder suspect in the eyes of some of the people that work here and the public when you arrested him and carted his ass through the front door in cuffs.”

I wince at the frustration in his voice, but I can't really argue with the man. I did all of that and, at the time, I did it with a smile on my face.

"We'd be better spending our time trying to find who actually did this rather than talking about how I spent my night. The murders are linked. They're too close together, too alike, to be coincidental."

"I agree, and as much as I'd hate to even consider it, Sawyer Maddox is linked to both of them."

"And he has an alibi."

"Because you saw Rochelle Leach standing in the window alive after he left her?"

I grind my teeth. "He wasn't involved."

Monahan nods, his demeanor changing quickly. It felt like a test, like he wanted to make sure I wasn't going to go barking up the wrong damn tree, wasting time again.

"There's DNA this time. The attacker was injured. There is evidence under her fingernails."

"DNA takes time, but every single member of the MC has their DNA on file."

"You want me to see if someone else at the club did it?" I ask, wondering why the man is going back and forth so damn much.

He shakes his head. "I want to let you know we plan to exclude them, for your own piece of mind."

"We?"

Monahan straightens his back, and I hate the look of pity in his eyes. "I have to put you on administrative leave."

I lean my head to the side, surely not fucking hearing right. "I'm being suspended?"

"I need you to hand over your case files to Detective Matthews."

"Chief," I growl, unable to accept what he's telling me.

“You know the drill, Maison. I can’t have you so close to the case. I’ll need a detailed account of your involvement with Sawyer Maddox as well as Rochelle.”

“I didn’t have any involvement with Rochelle Leach past the two times I spoke with her about the Burr case.”

“I have to cover the department’s ass. It’s getting to the point we may have to call in the fucking FBI. Should I leave you on the case and allow even more scrutiny to come to the department when they find out you’ve been sleeping with the guy you arrested for murder?”

I stand, reaching for my badge and gun to hand over to him.

“That’s not fucking necessary, Detective.”

He drops his eyes to his phone when it rings, and I use the reprieve to get my ass out of his office.

I’ve done both victims a disservice. I head back to my office, knowing that causing any more of an uproar won’t do me any good. The man doesn’t back down once he’s made up his mind.

I feel beat down, utterly useless as I sort the mess on my desk, not wanting to leave anything out. Colton is a great detective, but if I can save him some time by not having to shuffle through a mess, then I’ll do all that I can.

“Almost done,” I say when a shadow darkens my door, but it’s Monahan, not Colton, when I look up.

“Chief?” I ask when he just stands there.

He opens his mouth to speak but then promptly closes it again.

“I want Matthews to look at the similarities between these two murders and the cases from fifteen years ago.”

“Maison.” My last name is a complaint on his lips.

“Even Maddox thinks there’s too many coincidences to—”

“Maddox?” he snaps, and I feel guilty for putting words into the man’s mouth, but he seemed on board when I spoke with him about it the other day.

He had promised to help me get to the bottom of it anyway.

“You spoke with Maddox about an open murder investigation?”

“You put him with me for a ride-along while I was working the case,” I remind him.

“And I figured you’d drag your feet for the day and show him busy work, not give someone once in cuffs for a murder access to details of the crime. Goddamnit, Maison. How could you put me in such a position?”

I fight the sting of tears behind my eyes, refusing to do the girly thing and cry in front of my boss. What is his opinion of me that he’d think I’d waste a day I could be investigating a murder? He should know me better than that.

“How long will I be suspended?” I ask, wanting to know the truth before walking out of here with hope.

“I don’t know, but after learning that, there’s a good chance it’ll be indefinitely. What you’ve done opens us up to so many liabilities.”

He walks away before I can argue further. When I go to hand over the file to Colton, he doesn’t say a word of encouragement before letting me walk out the front door of the police department.

The threat of real tears burns inside of me when I realize I’ll have to find another way home. I’m not going to risk the trouble by taking my issued cruiser home. Hell, with the way my day is going, the chief would probably send Dresden to arrest me for unauthorized use of a motor vehicle.

Chapter 22

Ugly

The ride back to the clubhouse didn't help clear my head. If anything, it's even more muddled than it was before.

Complicated isn't my fucking style. It's why I don't pick women up who even hint like they're looking to date or want something serious. I don't mess around with single moms. I don't date college girls with daddy issues. I like dirty fun with straightforward needs.

Whatever the hell is going on with Lennox is beyond fucking complicated. The easiest thing I could do is to just cut ties, but there's a voice in my head that's telling me this is more than a coincidence. I can't let go of the idea that someone is out there trying to set me up. I've made no shortage of enemies in my line of work. There isn't a man or woman on the Cerberus team who can't say the same. We piss people off. We not only take the means sadistic fucks use for business, the women, men, and children they traffic, we also regularly force their meeting with their maker. Vengeance against any one of us wouldn't be surprising. It's why Kincaid and the other officers of the club are so protective of their property. Hell, I'm surprised they haven't erected a fifteen-foot fence around the many acres owned by the club.

Bishop peeled off somewhere before I turned down the main road toward the clubhouse but when I hear a vehicle, it isn't him.

I cringe at the sight of the small pickup as it pulls into the parking lot. It's not unusual for the man to be here. He and Boomer seem to be going as strong as ever these days. I imagine it won't be long before one of them packs their bags and makes their nighttime routine a little more permanent.

I give Drake a small smile as he pulls in, but then look away. It's clear he's been crying, and I want to give the man a little privacy. The driver's side door opens, but rather than the crunch of gravel under his boots heading to the clubhouse, they're heading in my direction.

I see the shift, the sadness transforming into anger, and I barely have time to stand from my bike before Drake's fist is swinging at my face. I have time to stop him, to block the shot, but I don't. I feel like I deserve a lot more

than what he's capable of dishing out. The fist brings a little heat to it, but I'm a big damn guy, probably fifty percent heavier than Drake is, and he doesn't even manage to make me take a step back.

I hold my hands up near my ears as Drake pulls his fist back once again, but he doesn't swing a second time. He speaks, and it's ten times worse than if he took a bat to my face.

"You were supposed to protect her," he seethes, spittle flying from his mouth as tears begin to flow down his cheeks.

I could argue that I saw her home, that she was as safe last night as she was every night this week. I could tell him that neither of us could've predicted this would happen, but I don't. It wouldn't help, and honestly, I doubt he'd believe it any more than I do.

That's the thing about regret and hindsight. Neither makes any difference. I'm not a mind reader and Drake isn't either. What he is, is a man hurting with the loss of a friend.

"I'm so sorry," I tell him.

"You don't have to tell me," he growls, his fist coming at my nose a second time.

He hits just in the right spot this time, but I don't move a muscle, not even to wipe away the blood starting to trickle down over my lips.

The front door of the clubhouse opens, but I don't bother to look in that direction.

Things could've been different. I could've not pushed Rochelle away when she tried to kiss me. I could've maybe been there when that sick fuck tried to make his move. Maybe things would be different. Maybe he would've noticed me there and tried a different night. Men who love to hurt women aren't always as keen to step up to someone who would really challenge them.

Maybes don't matter. Neither do what-ifs.

Shadow grabs Drake before he can hit me a third time, and I look over in time to see Boomer walking toward the group that has gathered.

Kincaid speaks in a low tone to Drake who is trembling at this point before turning his attention to me.

All of who I consider the original members—Kincaid, Shadow, Kid, Dominic, Snatch and Itchy—are standing there when my boss speaks.

“We need you in the conference room.”

I nod.

“Get cleaned up first,” Kid says before they all turn to walk back into the clubhouse.

I don’t bother heading to my room, choosing to use the small powder room in the hallway to wash my face and stanch the bleeding from my nose.

I pause in the doorway, allowing Boomer and Drake to walk past. Neither look in my direction, and I don’t speak either. It would be like pouring salt into an open wound, and I’m not a cruel man.

There’s no one but the six OGs in the conference room when I enter, but I didn’t really expect this conversation to be a club affair.

“We need to know about your involvement with Lennox Maison,” Kincaid says. His tone isn’t accusatory, but he’s also not asking.

It feels like a demand, and normally I’d tell the man what he wants to know, but for some reason I hesitate.

“Look,” my prez says. “I’m not trying to get in your business, but I don’t know if the Farmington police are done with you.”

“There’s a chance they’re only hesitant to arrest you right now because of the shitstorm that went down when Lennox arrested you,” Kid adds. “If we can prove you’re involved with the lead detective on the case then it compromises any part of the investigation she touched in building a case against you.”

“Lennox isn’t the type to let her personal life interfere with her work,” I say but know it’s a lie the second the words leave my mouth.

She’s let her blindness toward her sister’s case cause problems at work more than once by her own admittance.

“And your involvement with Rochelle Leach?” Shadow asks.

“I have no involvement with her. I’ve been following her home at night so Drake and Boomer don’t have to wait up and leave the bar. Tonight, she lured me inside with some story about her garbage disposal not working and her landlord not coming by to fix it. It was a ploy of course. She tried to kiss me. I told her I wasn’t interested, and I left.”

“Did you have Maison follow you over there?”

I shake my head.

“She followed you because she thinks you’re involved with the first murder still?” Itchy asks.

I take a deep breath, knowing deep down that’s not why she was outside Rochelle’s house. It makes my skin crawl to think the killer could’ve been lurking in the shadows, mere feet from where she was parked, struggling with the choice of if they’d make the bartender or the cop their next victim.

“She was jealous,” I say, “I think.”

“And your previous involvement with Rochelle?”

“Other than making sure she got home safely and ordering drinks from her at the bar, I’ve had no involvement with her.”

“You didn’t see through her?” Kid asks. “Couldn’t tell she was lying?”

“I’ve been... distracted.”

A couple of throats clear around the table, and I feel like every one of these guys can see right through me even if I refuse to speak about what has happened between Lennox and me.

“Do you think I’m involved with these murders?” I snap, making sure to meet the eyes of every man in the room.

“Not one of us,” Kincaid answers collectively. “But the police don’t know you like we do.”

“We were supposed to go out on a mission tomorrow, but I’m going to have someone fill in for you.”

I grind my teeth, annoyed to be missing out on the second outing in months. Other than some of us heading to Lindell, Texas after some shit went down on the college campus there, we've been grounded, going through rigorous mental health testing to make sure we're ready for whatever we may face after Aro lost his shit and part of his leg a while back.

I nod because arguing won't get me anywhere, plus I can't imagine what it would look like to have been in handcuffs twice in less than two weeks and then leaving the country.

I leave the room without another word, realizing that as much as I'm grateful to have them on my side, the only opinion that matters to me right now is Lennox's. If she has any doubt in her mind about me being involved, it would kill me.

She confessed I was with her, but would it take much for her to shift gears back to her original thinking?

Would that asshole Dresden try to convince her that I did it?

I know it wouldn't be wise to seek her out. If anything, she wouldn't want to be bothered while she was working her case, but she could be trying to build a case against me.

What kind of sick person would she think I was to kill Rochelle and then spend the next two hours making her obey my commands and getting turned on more and more when she discovered she couldn't?

I know it looks bad, and not knowing the details of what happened to Rochelle makes it even more difficult to plead my case.

I know I'll end up wearing a fucking hole in the floor pacing back and forth. Going to her isn't an option, and I wouldn't risk bringing any more scrutiny to the club by showing up at the police department. The guys could be right. The entire department could be making evidence fit together to consider it enough to arrest me right now.

I change out of my jeans and t-shirt and pull on some athletic clothing. I'll punch the fucking heavy bag in the weight room until I can no longer stand. Exhaustion is the only damn thing keeping me from leaving the clubhouse and begging Lennox Maison to believe me.

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Chapter 23

Lennox

I left the office more confused than ever. I don't know if the chief wants me to believe Sawyer Maddox is connected to these murders or not. He went back and forth, telling me not to waste my time on him, but then he promptly not only pulled me from the case, but he also suspended me.

I no longer have access to anything. I can't fixate on my sister's murder while sitting at my computer, but then again, I've been over that information so many times, I can close my eyes and see every document in perfect clarity.

As far as Sawyer is concerned, I hate that part of me that I've willingly fed year after year that told me I couldn't trust anyone. It's that part of me that keeps whispering that there might be a connection, that I should trust that gut instinct I had from the beginning, the intuition that carried me to the Rio Grande National Forest to arrest him in the first place.

It's as if two parts of me are at war with each other. My heart is telling me that it can't be possible, reminding me of the timeline. My brain says there might be circumstances I don't know about that makes it possible—that a lot can happen in five minutes, that he's strong enough to overpower someone without getting dirty or breaking a sweat, especially a hundred- and fifteen-pound woman.

His readiness to engage in sexual activity with me means nothing. Sexual assault is about power and control, and although we found blood evidence at the scene, we still didn't find semen. It's too soon in Rochelle's investigation to determine if she was assaulted in that way. Maybe he didn't rape her.

On the other hand, he has never even hinted that he was interested in making me beg him to stop. He has always liked *more* and *harder*, and I know from extensive training that assailants don't normally change their needs. If it's hurting someone that gets their rocks off, then that's what they stick to.

I'm so lost in my head, I don't know how long I've just been sitting on

the front porch of my house. After getting dropped off by the rideshare company, I haven't even bothered to go inside. Coming home usually entails a shower, a bite to eat, and an attempt to get a couple of hours of sleep. I can't seem to muster the energy for any of it.

Free time isn't something I ever have. I don't allow idle hands. Staying busy is the only way to keep the voices at bay.

I huff a humorless laugh, knowing my thoughts make me insane. I don't hear actual voices. There's just a part of me that knows more can be done, more can be investigated, all with the hopes that I'll uncover a rock no one else noticed or one investigation will lead me to another which might lead me to Niers' partner so my sister can finally rest in peace.

I stand, making it into the house and as far as the couch. I let my eyes lock on the pictures lining the narrow hallway. I'm not sitting in a way that gives me the best viewpoint, but I don't have to see the pictures to know every detail. This house was left as a shrine for my sister and my family's loss. My parents grieved every day of their lives until their own deaths, becoming shells of the people they once were. I know without the help of therapy that the way they got lost in grief affected my childhood. I was protected, led to believe leaving the house or interacting with people I didn't know not only could lead to danger but that it would.

My parents' hypervigilance should've really messed me up as I transitioned from childhood to adulthood, but it left me wanting to be different. I didn't want to be the person that was afraid. It's why I chose law enforcement. In my young mind, the gun and the badge protected me. Detective Roth's suicide told me that the only person who could hurt me was myself. It was naive, the underdeveloped thoughts of a child who didn't have real-world experience because those avenues were blocked by my parents' need to keep terrible things from happening to me.

Elle has been gone from my life longer than she was ever in it, and I hate all involved for her being taken from me, but it was my parents' acceptance of Niers' confession that angers me the most. Had they argued, had they challenged what they were presented with fifteen years ago instead of turning into shadows of their former selves, I wouldn't be forced to spend every waking hour trying to get her justice.

The longer I sit idly, the more frustrated I grow. As much as I'd like to throw shit and break a few things, I know it only leads to making a mess no one will clean up but me.

I climb off the sofa and head to my bedroom, the same one I had as a child because I've just never had the energy to change to the master bedroom. It was always my parents' room, and I doubt I'd be in the bigger bedroom if my parents hadn't moved me into the one I'm in now after Elle moved out for college. I own the house, but there are rooms in it I haven't been in for years.

I grab a change of clothes and head into the hall bathroom. I don't bother keeping it pristine for guests because I don't have guests. I don't date and sure as hell don't bring men back to my house. I don't have time for friends other than the few acquaintances I have from work, and even those people I meet at the bar for a quick drink instead of them coming here.

The way I live my life never felt lonely. There was always something to keep me busy, but as I strip down, laying my gun on the bathroom sink, making it easily accessible, I feel isolated, like I've been missing something.

The feeling doesn't go away despite wanting to wash it all down the drain. I dress quickly, knowing that my inability to just put on lounge clothes is something else leftover from my post-Elle childhood and my need to always be prepared for the unexpected.

The near-empty fridge reveals my desperate need to go shopping. My aversion to other people touching my food has me pulling the spot of mold from the bread rather than calling in an order to be delivered.

The peanut butter and orange marmalade jam sandwich is practically tasteless, but I've never been one to focus on food. It's a means to an end rather than something I ever look forward to. This is one of those things that has helped with my ability to maintain my weight because I'm more likely to forget to eat altogether than overeat.

The television is on, a national news station I know better than to trust on silent as I eat because I want to hear what's going on around my house even though nothing ever comes close.

It's why the sound of the engine being turned off confuses me at first, the sound of feet on the porch meeting my ears before I move.

My gun is drawn, held down but ready when the knocking occurs. My parents had always told me that killers are sly and slink around in the shadows. They never draw attention to themselves until they want their presence known, but as a cop, I know of countless cases where perps have knocked on the door of a home and smiled when the door was opened with a lie on their lips before making their move.

My peek through the peephole doesn't reveal a murderer or Sawyer, whom my shower musings have me almost convinced he isn't a killer. Colton Matthews is standing on my front porch, his jaw tight as if he's annoyed but understanding of the time it takes me to open the door.

I unlock the front door, pulling it open with one hand while I reholster my firearm. He doesn't look surprised or question why I have my gun out in the first place. Maybe he expected it. Maybe he does the same thing considering what his wife Sophia went through at their own home when they were dating years ago. This man is well aware how quickly a home invasion can happen.

"I need to ask you some questions," Colton says after stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

"Do I need an attorney," I joke, my hackles going up when he doesn't laugh.

The man looks like he's been through the wringer. He's got dark circles under his eyes, and I don't know if I just didn't notice them when I handed over my case files or if he's had a horrible couple of hours since I left the office.

"They're going to be... intimate questions, Lennox."

I hold my hand out to indicate the second sofa in the room, absently hoping a plume of dust doesn't choke him out when he sits. Although the house isn't exactly dirty, I'm not the best housekeeper because I didn't have a ton of free time until just a few short hours ago.

I take a seat across from him, the sofa forming to my body because I've sat in this very same spot for the better part of a decade.

"I'm not going to presume to know what has happened between you and Sawyer Maddox."

The fact that he doesn't call him by either his first name alone nor his club nickname is telling, and my mind immediately begins to race with all the conclusions I've drawn as I start to second guess every one of them.

"Have you had sex with him?"

"Colton," I grumble, my fingers automatically pinching the bridge of my nose.

"I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

"I think you know the answer to that," I mutter.

"And you know I don't make assumptions."

"I've had sex with Sawyer Maddox."

He nods, his eyes darting away before he speaks again.

"We found the ball to a piece of jewelry at Rochelle's house when we went back for a second sweep," he says, and I know immediately what he's referring to.

My blood runs cold, my eyes blinking rapidly as if it would somehow reset my hearing. What he's saying couldn't be true.

My eyes sting with anger, hatred, betrayal, and a slew of other emotions as they hit me in rapid-fire succession.

I've gone back and forth on Sawyer Maddox and whether or not I think he's innocent or guilty so many times, my fucking head is spinning from it. So many times that I can't separate which gut feeling on him was first any longer.

"He's pierced," I confirm. "His nipples and his genitalia."

He nods. "Do you recall if he was missing any jewelry?"

I take a deep breath, really needing to close my eyes to picture it but my stomach starts to turn.

I shake my head. "He had five the first night. I... last night... I wasn't paying close enough attention to know for sure."

"According to the personal affects inventory, he had five when you had

him booked in,” Colton explains, and I have to wonder if I’m so close to this it’s now personal and that’s why he’d share that information with me.

I feel beyond disgusted, wondering if he hurt Rochelle only for me to follow him into that hotel room. He didn’t bathe or wash up before I—

I cup my hand over my mouth and run from the room, barely making it to the bathroom before my peanut butter and jelly sandwich makes a reappearance.

Colton is still in my living room when I return after rinsing my mouth.

“We had sex almost immediately after getting to the hotel room,” I say, my voice weak.

Colton nods, as if he made this assumption already.

“You want me to go to the hospital, don’t you?”

He looks just as heartbroken as I feel when he nods again.

My stomach rolls again, knowing what he’s asking.

“I’ve showered,” I tell him, but he doesn’t look disappointed with the news.

If he sexually assaulted Rochelle, there could still be evidence inside of me.

My chin trembles, the urge to head right back into the bathroom stronger than it was the first time around.

The chief said the Cerberus MC has their DNA and blood profiles on file, and I drew the conclusion it was for their work, maybe in case they were hurt and needed a transfusion or were being held captive for ransom or something. I know they have plans to compare the DNA found on the scene to those, but my boss mentioned them doing it for exclusionary purposes. It seems that’s changed.

Rochelle’s DNA being on my body would prove definitively that Sawyer was involved. As much as I want to help, I also take pause. A rape kit is an invasion on its own, and although I would never deny the collection of evidence, I also know what I’m facing in agreeing to go to the hospital.

“You seem reluctant,” Colton asks, his face a mask of apology before he continues. “Did you... douche?”

I have to look away from him, hating that he’s been put in this position more than anything. I don’t know how any respect he might have had for me will survive this.

I shake my head, my eyes locked across the room.

“I don’t want to find anything, Lennox. I don’t want this to be true anymore than it looks like you want it to. I’m connected to this club, but I can’t just ignore the possibility that—”

I hold my hand up, silencing him. “I know. Let’s go.”

I make it within five feet of the door, but the twisting of my stomach forces me back down the hall and into the bathroom.

Despite the strength I wish I’d felt, there are tears rolling down my cheeks when I walk out of my house with Colton Matthews.

Chapter 24

Ugly

Rage boils inside of me, but she's inside Colton's department-issued cruiser before I can make it to them. I swear on everything in my life if they're trying to fucking charge her with something, I'll lose my shit on him, unconcerned of his connection to the fucking club. If Cerberus is so fucking invested in doing what's right, they'd end up on my side anyway.

"What the fuck is going on?" I growl when Colton notices me, and blocks my path to the passenger side door, blocking my path to *her*. "Don't fucking get in my way," I growl when he stands to his full height, making it known without speaking a word that he's not going to give me access to her.

"Why are you here?"

"Why the fuck are you here?" I growl.

He doesn't answer.

"Is she under arrest?"

"Don't put me in this fucking position, Maddox."

I take a step back. Him calling me by my last name rather than my road name makes me feel like a perp. It's a fist to the fucking gut, and I know exactly what it means. Kincaid and the others were right. The Farmington Police Department isn't done with me. The chief's demand for me to be uncuffed was him covering his ass for the time being, not his position on my innocence.

"I didn't hurt Rochelle," I tell him.

His face doesn't transform. He doesn't voice his opinion either way. He also doesn't step away from the side of his vehicle.

But he's right. Putting him in any position where he'd have to use force against me wouldn't impress his father-in-law. I won't win a damn thing causing more of a scene. My battle, the one I'm not even sure of the details of, won't be won by fighting Colton Matthews in the street.

I hold my hands up, backing away.

“I’d never fucking hurt her or anyone else for that matter,” I say, my voice sounding as if I’ve spent years swallowing gravel.

He doesn’t move from the side of his vehicle until I’m back on my bike. I never planned on making contact with her. I wasn’t sitting outside of her house, waiting to knock on her door.

With every contact my fist made with the heavy bag back at the clubhouse, I couldn’t shove down the thoughts of Lennox being next on the killer’s list. The connection to two women is too coincidental. It feels as if the murderer is framing me, and that left me concerned that Lennox would be next.

I wait for Colton to drive away and pull in right behind him. I’m not following them as a means of intimidation but to try and gain clues as to what the fuck is actually going on. I’m confused when he pulls his cruiser into the hospital parking lot. She doesn’t seem hurt, despite the redness in her cheeks when she steps out after he opens her car door.

It isn’t until they disappear inside that it hits me.

DNA.

They want my DNA, but even that doesn’t make sense. I submitted to collection through the military and again when joining Cerberus. Did she not tell them that we always used condoms?

Despite being completely innocent, I still feel like a perp. I know from jobs we’ve done that sometimes things aren’t as they seem. Evidence can be misconstrued. Perception always plays a role. We’ve had to use gentle hands more than once when dealing with people, when we didn’t know if they were victims or assailants, not wanting to victimize them further but also not allowing them to go free just in case they were involved with the organization we infiltrated.

Is it possible that they have something that is innocent but they’re reading it as evidence against me? It’s not unheard of for innocent people to go to prison for crimes they didn’t commit.

I grow angrier and angrier as I sit outside the hospital, hating how the tables have turned. I have more integrity in my fucking pinky toe than half of the people I’ve ever come in contact with, and that includes some of the

assholes at the police station. Don't get me started on what my thoughts of the police chief are turning into if he was willing to release someone he thought was a rapist and murderer just to save his ass or prevent the department from being sued while he gathered more evidence.

I pull out my cell phone, calling the only person I know who can help me right now.

"What's up?" Max, the club's main IT specialist, asks when the call connects, but I can already tell in his tone he either expected this call or he was warned that it might be coming.

"I need you to tap into the hospital's system."

Silence fills the line, but I know better than to think he might be considering doing this.

"Patients' records are federally protected," he says, his tone even.

"Colton just took Lennox into the hospital. I need to know why she's there."

"You'll have to ask her," Max says.

"He won't give me access to her," I growl. "Why the fuck would he bring her to the hospital?"

"For DNA collection," Max answers.

"My DNA is on file," I remind him.

Silence fills the line, the seconds ticking by before he speaks again.

"If they think you sexually assaulted Rochelle and then had sex with Lennox then they're—"

"Motherfucker," I interrupt. "They're expecting to find a dead woman's DNA on Lennox? That's fucking disgusting."

"It's used more often than you think," Max says. "Numerous serial rapists have been caught that way."

"I'm not a rapist," I growl, wondering just how much more pressure my phone can take before it snaps in half with how hard I'm squeezing it.

“I fucking know that, man. Everyone here at Cerberus knows that. I bet Colton knows it too. Have a little faith in—”

“I swear to God, Max, if you tell me to have faith in the police department...”

“Have faith in Colton. Have faith in Lennox. They’re both good cops. I can’t access the hospital’s files. I’ll be of no help to Cerberus if I’m in prison.”

I end the call without saying goodbye, but I consider it nicer than what I wanted to say to his refusal.

I’d like nothing more than to ride for hours at a time, but it’s not possible. Not once in my life have I ever considered needing an alibi or making sure I had a witness to what I’m doing. Disappearing with a flimsy excuse as to where I was isn’t an option right now. Things are already fucking bad enough, so I leave the hospital and head right back to the clubhouse.

I hate that I can’t stand the sight of Drake’s truck still in the parking lot, and I openly cringe when I see Boomer walking across the living room with two bottles of water in his hands the second I step back inside. It means Drake is not only here, but he’s in the living room.

Part of me wants to head straight to my room and hide out until all of this shit settles, but I’m not really the type of person to hide from a fight.

I stand to the side, my eyes glued to the television although I couldn’t really tell you what teams are playing in the baseball game they’re watching.

I stiffen when I sense Drake stand up and approach me.

I know the man is hurting. He’s lost a friend, but he got two free punches in earlier, and I’m not in the mood to offer my face as a punching bag a second time.

I look to Boomer first, but he shrugs at my warning, telling me pretty much that Drake is a grown man and makes his own decisions.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry,” the man says rather than attempting to take another shot at me.

I drop my eyes to him.

“I know you didn’t hurt Rochelle.”

I swallow against the lump forming in my throat, not realizing until now just how much I needed for someone to tell me they don’t think I hurt women.

“I also know you weren’t responsible for her safety. You went above and beyond making sure she made it inside her house as many times as you did.”

I have to wonder if his opinion of me would change if he knew I went into her house that night. It seems with Lennox allowing Colton to escort her to the hospital that she thinks I had time to hurt and kill the poor woman.

“I appreciate the apology,” I tell him, keeping to myself that despite it not being my duty, I still feel responsible for what happened.

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Chapter 25

Lennox

The drive back from the hospital is silent. Despite willingly participating in the exam, I still feel violated. I know the hospital staff are just doing their job, even after Colton had to insist that Camryn, the doctor who showed up to perform the exam, recuse herself because of her connection to the club.

“Are you okay?” Colton asks as he pulls into my driveway.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

I don’t see Sawyer parked anywhere near my house. I know he followed us to the hospital but I didn’t see him when we left. It’s dark outside now, so he could easily be lurking around the corner.

I don’t know what to believe. I’d like to think I’m a better judge of character, but honestly, does anyone ever really know someone? How many times have I heard about people living double lives or friends and family claiming someone wasn’t capable of XYZ until proof of what they did was right in their faces. Some, even with all the evidence, still can’t accept the truth.

I wonder which camp I’m falling into, but I know I’ve gone back and forth more than once. I know it would be foolish to claim never for anyone, but at the same time, I don’t want to be left with egg on my face if it turns out he did hurt those women.

“I don’t know what to believe,” I say, unable to look him in the eye.

“We follow the evidence,” he reminds me.

“I can’t help but run it through my head over and over. I just don’t think he did it.”

Colton is silent, but I know better than to presume to know what he’s thinking. He’s a very analytical man. His emotions and opinions have always come secondary to the evidence.

“I know he’s capable. I know he’s strong enough. Physically he could

do it.” I turn to look at him. “But why hurt them and not me? Is he torturing me? Is this about Elle?”

Colton clears his throat. “Sawyer Maddox isn’t old enough to have been involved with your sister’s murder. He had no connections to New Mexico prior to joining Cerberus.”

“So he’s innocent.” I take a deep relieved breath, wanting to cry with the way that news settles inside of me.

“Or the cases aren’t connected.”

I frown, my head shaking immediately.

“You told me to trust my instincts, and I know I’ve brought my sister’s case up trying to link it to others more than once, but I feel it in the bottom of my soul that I’m right about this.”

Colton nods, telling me he hears me, but it isn’t an agreement that he feels the same way. There are still too many unanswered questions for the man to make that call yet.

“What I... what is she doing here?” he questions.

I look over my shoulder to see a dark SUV pulling in behind his car in the driveway. I climb out of the car, waving when I see that it’s Sophia, Colton’s wife.

She doesn’t wave back.

“What’s wrong?” Colton asks, fear in his voice. “Are the kids okay?”

Sophia ignores her husband, walking right around him, her eyes locked on me.

“He wouldn’t do it,” she says, her voice pleading. “My dad and uncle don’t make mistakes. They’d never hire a man capable of hurting—”

“Sophia,” Colton snaps. “This isn’t appropriate.”

I head to my front door, leaving Colton to deal with her.

“You’re both wasting your time investigating Ugly!” she yells at my back.

It's weird coming home to a house with the television and lights still on, but I remember not being able to think of anything but the possibilities Colton was hinting at before going to the hospital. I stand in my doorway, watching as Colton tries to calm his wife down. She's almost frantic in the moonlight as he pulls her to his chest.

I can assume two reasons why she's here. She's afraid the investigation into a Cerberus member will reflect poorly on her family's business or she knows Sawyer in an intimate way Colton hasn't surmised yet.

Instead of coming back inside my house, my mentor nods at me as his wife drives away. I know he's following her home, making sure she's safe. I commend the man for being such a caring, loving husband, but it also makes me wonder if he's got blinders on where she's concerned.

The sweep of my eyes down the street reveals an SUV that's out of place, but it also doesn't seem to be trying to hide exactly. I press my forearm to the gun holstered at my hip before walking back outside. What I won't do is live in fucking fear.

My upper lip is twitching in irritation as I approach the SUV, not hesitating for a second to lift my hand to knock on the driver's side window.

It rolls down before I can make contact, and instantly I'm swarmed with disappointment at the sight of the man sitting behind the wheel.

"Can I help you?" I ask the man I know to be Bishop.

I've memorized almost all of the people in the club and those connected to it during my investigation of Sawyer Maddox.

"I'm not here to cause you any trouble or undue stress," he replies.

"You're sure? Because it's creepy as fuck for you to be sitting out here in the fucking dark. It could be misconstrued as a threat."

He nods, his tongue tracing his lower lip as if I've answered a question he hasn't asked.

"I'm just here to make sure you're safe."

"I don't need your protection."

"Don't you?" he challenges.

It doesn't sound like a threat, but I haven't exactly been the best judge of character lately.

"You know there's a good chance Maddox killed that woman while I was thirty yards from her front door."

He rolls his head slowly to look in my direction. "You know better than that."

I swallow because deep down I know he's right.

"The guy that went after her could've as easily hurt you."

It isn't a threat. I don't feel a menacing hint to his words. It's just a fact, something that's been niggling at the back of my head. If these cases are connected, and I believe with every part of my being that they are, then what will stop my sister's murderer from coming after me? I would be the obvious choice, wouldn't I?

What kind of achievement would it be to not only get away with my sister's murder but to come back fifteen years later and kill me too?

"That look on your face right now is exactly why I'm out here," Bishop says.

"I don't need anyone's protection," I snap, but even as the words leave my mouth, they feel like a lie.

I cross my arms over my chest. A chill not one caused by the warm summer air settles inside of me.

"I want you to leave," I say anyway. "If you don't, I'll call the department and have you arrested."

He draws in a deep breath, annoyed with my threat, but he doesn't argue.

I walk away, my hand on my gun when I reenter my house. I spend the next ten minutes going through every room in the house, opening doors that I've ignored for years. I look in every closet, under every bed, and pull back every shower curtain.

When I'm done, having proven I'm all alone, I still feel no safer than I did the night we were told they found my sister dead.

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Chapter 26

Ugly

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I growl into the phone, locking eyes with Kincaid as he waits for the call to end so we can get back to work.

“She told me to leave, threatened to call the cops if I didn’t,” Bishop says, and I know the hint of awe I hear in his voice is pride in how damn assertive Lennox can be.

Only right now, her declaration that she doesn’t need protection is fucking misplaced.

“I’m going to drive off, put a little distance. Don’t worry about your girl, man. I’ll stay on her until I’m told differently.”

“Thanks,” I mutter before hanging up, knowing the order that put him there and the one that will pull him away didn’t come from me.

“She’s feisty,” Shadow says, a grin on his face.

“To her own damn detriment,” I mumble. “Where were we?”

“Going through the town’s and all surrounding states’ unsolved murders,” Wren reminds us.

Wren Nelson is the IT specialist for the Blackbridge Security team. They operate out of St. Louis and have helped Cerberus on numerous occasions. I’m not surprised they were brought in on this.

I knew Max had a big mouth. I also knew there was a chance that my request to have him look into hospital records would be relayed to one of my bosses. What I didn’t expect is to once again be called into the conference room to face all the original members. What I presumed was going to be a serious chastisement has turned into an investigation.

After hearing about Lennox going to the hospital for collection of evidence from her body, others got involved.

“I think Lennox was on to something with Jasper Niers,” Wren begins.

“She has wasted so much time on that,” I say loud enough for the man

on speaker phone to hear me. “Can we skip those same mistakes.”

“She didn’t waste her time, she just didn’t have access to all of the information,” Wren says. “I have access... well, I’ve gained access, I should say, to sealed records. Jasper Niers was in the same foster home as a guy by the name of Joseph Dixon.”

I tilt my head to the side as he speaks. The name has a ring to it, but for the fucking life of me, I can’t place it with a face.

“And the fifteen-year gap between murders?” Kincaid asks.

“Joseph Dixon was picked up on a felony possession charge the day after Niers was arrested,” Wren supplies.

“Fifteen years for drug possession?” Dominic asks. “Kind of a harsh punishment.”

“He had priors,” Wren explains. “And from the information gathered from a different database, he wasn’t exactly a model inmate. He had time stacked more than once for several incidences while incarcerated.”

“And his release?” Kid asks.

“Not long before Elizabeth Burr was abducted from the bar parking lot. Holy shit.”

“What?” several of us snap.

“He was recently employed by *Jake’s*.”

Joseph. Joey fucking Dixon. The motherfucker who’s been working in the back kitchen.

How did everyone fucking miss that?

“Do they have DNA? All felony convicts in New Mexico have their DNA collected. It should be on file,” Wren says.

There isn’t a man in that room that sticks around to gather more evidence. If there’s something more we’ll need, Wren will send it our way. We don’t exactly have a fucking slam dunk, but we aren’t exactly the type of men to stick around and wait for a smoking gun when there’s a chance someone could be in danger.

“Drake!” Kincaid yells the second the conference room doors open.

The bartender is no longer in the living room, but it doesn’t take long before he’s coming out of Boomer’s room, cheeks flushed as he pulls on a t-shirt.

He dashes at his eyes, telling me he’s upset, not doing what I initially thought was going on.

“Do you have Joey Dixon’s address?” Dominic snaps.

Drake shakes his head. “I can call Jake.”

“I’m calling him now,” Kincaid says, already lifting his phone to his ear as he turns back around to go into the conference room.

“What’s going on?” Drake asks, walking closer.

Maybe I’ll feel like an asshole for ignoring his question at a later time, but his feelings don’t register as a priority right now.

“I got his voicemail,” Kincaid says as he walks into the living room. “It won’t take us all. Dominic, grab Stormy, Legacy, and Boomer. I want Shadow, Kid, and Ugly with me. We’ll take two teams so we can split up if we need to.”

We head back into the conference room, standing in line and waiting as Kincaid keys in the code for the massive safe in there. We’re all supplied with a firearm, except for Shadow. As a very skilled sniper, he gets an intimidating as hell rifle.

Drake is still standing in the hall, his mouth hanging open as we head out.

“I’ll be back, babe,” Boomer says, smacking a quick kiss to Drake’s mouth as he passes.

“The first time you call me babe and it’s when you’re hauling ass all commandoed out?” Drake says but we’re moving too quickly toward the front of the clubhouse for Boomer to respond.

My teammate doesn’t even have a clue what’s going on. He just happened to be around when help was needed, but he’s fully on board with whatever it is just like any one of us would be when called to help.

“Kincaid,” my boss snaps into his phone.

It must be Jake because he’s relaying information as he climbs into the passenger seat of the SUV we’re in with Kid behind the wheel.

The call ends quickly, and Kincaid looks over at his older brother Dominic and relays Joey’s home address.

“We’re heading to Lennox Maison’s house,” Kincaid tells Kid who doesn’t waste a second putting the vehicle in drive and throwing gravel on his way out of the driveway.

My blood is pumping, the noise of it in my ears as we haul ass into town.

Kincaid’s phone connects to Bluetooth as he attempts to call Bishop to relay all of this information, but the call goes to voicemail.

“He could’ve left it in the SUV if he had to keep an eye out on foot,” Kincaid says, but my head is already racing with the worst.

The next call is to Colton who lives closer to her than the clubhouse.

“I saw the SUV,” Colton says when everything is explained. “But I wouldn’t put it past her to have asked him to leave.”

“Surprised you didn’t insist on it yourself,” Kid growls. “Seeing as you’ve been building a case against—”

“I’m working a case,” Colton growls. “Do you think I like being put in this situation?”

“Now is not the time,” Kincaid snaps.

“I’m heading to her place now,” Colton says, and then the line goes dead.

Kincaid’s jaw twitches, but he doesn’t voice his distaste with either Kid or Colton. He’s not the type to chastise others openly, and it’s one of the many things that makes him a good boss.

Seven minutes later, we park the SUV in front of Lennox’s house, bumper to bumper with Colton’s SUV.

The front porch light is on, but the shades are drawn. I don’t know

enough about the woman to know if this is normal or not. I hadn't paid much attention when I was here earlier because I arrived when they were already heading to Colton's car. I'd tell anyone not to make the inside of their house accessible to prying eyes, but the darkness coming from inside doesn't bring warm and happy feelings either.

"You'll wait here," Kincaid says when I open my door. "You're too fucking close to this. Kid, I want you to make contact."

Kid nods, climbing out of the SUV, and I know that he sent Kid rather than going himself because the club president is about the only one I'd obey right now.

Dread washes over me when Kid lifts his hand to knock only to back away, keeping to the fucking shadows as he slinks back to the vehicle.

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Chapter 27

Lennox

The second shower is a necessity after what I endured at the hospital. I have newfound empathy for anyone having to experience that exam after being violated.

The water just doesn't seem to get warm enough, but I know as I climb out and swipe my hand over the foggy mirror, revealing my pink skin, that the inability to get warm is coming from within.

I feel helpless as I pull on my clothes, more so than I did as a child because, back then, there was literally nothing I could do. Today, I'm being restrained by my department, but deep down, I don't blame the chief. He has a department to run, and he's responsible for having to make the difficult decisions. More often than not, those decisions will always leave one person unhappy. I just happen to be the one this time.

Wanting comfort, I picked flannel pajama pants and a thick t-shirt to wear after my shower, but the chill that seems to have settled into my bones just will not release its grip on me. My eyes dart all over in an attempt to not look at the door to my parents' room. Going in there to check for intruders earlier was easy in the moment because I was task oriented. What I hadn't expected to feel is this yearning need to want to curl up on their bed. Until Elle's death, it was always a safe haven for me. It's where I ran when I had nightmares. I cried in my mom's arms when I was eight after the new kid in class was rude to me at lunch, making someone I thought was a friend laugh at me too.

Wanting to go back to simpler times is a pipe dream, and if wishing for it could make it come true, my life would look much different than it does now. I've wasted hours and days wishing for change to no avail.

I run my hands up the opposite arm, scrubbing my palms up and down as I enter my bedroom. I'm damn near to the point that my jaw is going to start trembling. I know it's my body's attempt to rid itself of all of the anxiety and stress I've shoved down these last couple of weeks. Ignoring that kind of thing doesn't make it go away. It just builds until I can't handle any more.

I haven't had a panic attack in a long time, but I feel one coming on.

I reach into my closet for a thicker sweater, my eyes going wide when a hand reaches out, clamping on my throat.

I've never believed it when people say their life flashed before their eyes, but in this moment, I know what they mean.

I see flashes of Elle, of me standing on Rochelle's porch that first night when we discovered Elizabeth went to *Jake's*. I recall my conversation with staff, being distracted while talking to this man because I could feel Sawyer's eyes on my back. This man walked out of the bar first, leaving Rochelle and Sawyer alone inside. I remember the jealousy, the questions I had in my head about what the two could be doing inside as a murderer walked away, his job connecting him to both victims.

This is it. Distraction will get me killed.

I gurgle under his palm, his rough grip a severe contrast to when Sawyer had his hand there. My arms flail, making me feel incredibly unprepared, even having spent countless hours training in self-defense. We were warned that real life was nothing like training when you know it's coming. We were cautioned against it. Went through it over and over in an attempt to force muscle memory reactions rather than losing precious time by not responding immediately.

None of it matters. All that time was wasted on me.

Every ounce of air in my lungs whooshes out when he throws me to the floor. I attempt to scramble away, but he's faster, more prepared.

I've pictured this, put myself in Elle's place, spent so much time wishing it were me instead of her, but Joey Dixon, the cook from *Jake's*, doesn't keep me on my stomach. He flips me over, pressing all of his weight on me, and bile skates up my throat with the realization that death won't be the only thing I'll fall victim to tonight.

"I thought I saw a ghost the day we met at *Jake's*," he growls in my ear. "I couldn't believe my luck, getting to kill the same pretty girl twice."

The taunting does its intended job, making me freeze under him long enough for him to get my hands over my head. I fight, getting one arm free,

but instead of him struggling to get it back under control, he hits me.

Fire blooms from my cheek, the pain so immense that my eyes water. Sobs bubble from my throat as he pulls a length of rope from his pocket, hitting me two more times in the exact same place when I fight against his intention to tie my hands. He utilizes every second of my shock and the natural reaction to attempt to cover my face to tie my wrists together. Absently, I realize the ligature marks will be different, but Colton is a good cop. He'll eventually put two and two together and come to the conclusion that my murder is connected to the others.

I twist my body, trying to dislodge him, but he doesn't budge. My legs feel like they weigh a million pounds each, making me wonder how much damage his blows to my face caused.

My vision swims, tunneling in and out, over and over.

"...and the cop killing himself? Just icing on the fucking cake."

It's not a good sign that he's continuing to talk and taunt and I'm missing pieces of it. I don't know if it's head trauma or fear, but I'm not able to focus on every word. I know how bad of a sign that is.

"I blame your sister for his fucking death," he growls, gripping my face harshly in his hand and forcing my eyes in his direction.

I look away the second I'm able, but it only pisses him off more.

The rip of my shirt makes me fight harder, but his growled commands mean nothing to me. I know what happens before his victims die, and if fighting means dying faster then that's the fate I'll pick every time.

His face is nothing but hatred and rage as he hits me over and over. I taste blood and I know it's a really bad sign that I don't even feel the last strike to my face. I only know it happens because my head is snapped to the side.

"My brother did exactly what he was supposed to do. If we got caught, there's only one way out. He never named me, never told them he had help."

His hands are around my throat again, the sneer on his face forcing my eyes closed. I'll be damned if his fucking face is the last thing I see before I die.

I try to grasp onto good memories, the things that made me smile, but there has always been so much pain and heartbreak in my life, I struggle to draw anything from memory.

Sawyer.

Those are the good memories.

I don't get to pick and choose how the man fills my mind, but even in dying, it isn't the sex that races to the forefront.

His smile. Those pretty blue eyes and dark, almost ebony hair. His hand on my cheek. The smile on his face when he's pleased.

Sound fades, becoming nothing but the sound of my heart in my ears. It's as if I'm under water, and I decide dying isn't so bad. It's tranquil really.

"And this is another murder that piece of shit biker will be charged with. I fucking made sure of it."

But then his weight is gone. The hands lift from my throat. I struggle to argue, to beg him not to pin it on Sawyer. There's an apology on my lips for getting him involved in the first damn place despite his connection to Elizabeth Burr before I ever met him.

No sound comes out. I can't even seem to open my eyes.

My body jerks, but I can't tell if it's him moving me or some sort of reaction to the damage he's caused.

Wetness streaks down my face, and I have no way of telling if it's tears or blood.

At this point, I know it doesn't matter.

Dead is dead.

Chapter 28

Ugly

Kid rushes back in our direction, his face ashen.

“He’s got her tied up on the floor,” he says. Kincaid automatically reaches out and pushes me against the side of the SUV when I go to move in the direction of the house.

“You fucking know better,” my boss growls, his mouth right next to my ear because it’s taking all of his strength to keep me in place.

“We go in now,” I hiss, my voice low. Even with how upset I am, I know making Dixon aware of our presence only means horrible things for Lennox.

“We need to wait for SWAT,” Colton says as he approaches.

“No fucking way. Every second we wait—” I can’t even finish the thought. We’re all aware of what that man does to his victims.

“Where the fuck is Bishop?” Shadow snaps.

An eerie feeling captures me. Bishop wouldn’t just sit around, peeking through a window while Dixon tied Lennox up. He’d take the same opportunity any of us would and put a bullet in his head while he was distracted with her.

“This is what I can recall from when I was in there earlier,” Colton says, slapping a piece of paper on the hood of the SUV and attempting to draw the floor plan.

“She’s in the bedroom, here,” Kid says, pointing to a door Colton draws close to the living room at the mouth of the hallway. “I could only see part of her, but her hands are tied with rope.”

Cold desperation washes over me, but Kincaid still has a grip on my vest, and a warning in his eyes every time I look from the crude drawing back to him.

“Don’t make shit worse,” my boss growls.

I look to Colton for help, having heard the story of nearly this exact situation that he went through with Sophia and a deranged man a couple of years back.

I know the man didn't just sit around and wait for her to be hurt more.

Darkness spreads further around us, and I look over to see Shadow has unscrewed the porch light. He's frozen in place, his eyes locked on the tiny gap that makes the line of sight visible from the porch. After a few seconds, he nods in our direction, telling us that Dixon didn't notice the light being extinguished.

This is a good sign and will help us keep tabs on what's going on inside. But every second that ticks by is a fucking waste.

Shadow is making his way across the yard, his rifle held to his chest when the first gunshot goes off. I don't even have time to try and fucking figure out where it came from before it goes off again.

We all move, Shadow kicking in the front door before the rest of us can make it onto the porch.

I want to fall to my knees when Shadow breeches the bedroom she's in only to turn back around.

The worst thoughts fill my head as I cross the small room, wondering just how fucking bad it is when my teammates don't try to stop me. I don't count the shots being fired, but they continue to echo, rattling around in my head long after I clear the threshold.

Blood blooms on his chest, a look of surprise widening his eyes, but Joey Dixon is dead before he crumbles to the ground.

"Lennox," I scream as I cross the room, startling her.

She shifts, the gun swinging in my direction, and she looks confused when it doesn't fire.

The only thing that keeps me from being shot is the fact that she emptied the weapon into the dead man at her feet.

"Fuck, baby," I say, rushing to her and dropping down to her side.

She pulls the handgun back, hitting me with it. The lack of force she

can manage while I know she feels like she's fighting for her life is concerning.

"Get off me!" she screams, the gun falling to the carpet, her still tied hands attempting to strike out at me.

"It's Sawyer," I say. "He's dead. He's dead. I'm Sawyer."

"Is she—"

"Get the fuck out," I growl, reaching over her to rip the blanket from the bed.

Kincaid backs out of the room.

I notice the blood stains on the mattress, knowing she had a gun hidden there. I don't know if she didn't have the chance or if she'd initially forgotten she had it because her face and shoulders have been bruised by the number of times he struck her.

"Let me cover you up," I beg, attempting to wrap the blanket around her naked body.

Fuck, I don't know if he had time to only strip her naked or do worse.

"It's Sawyer," I repeat, pulling her to my chest even with her fighting against me.

Deep down, I know it may not be the best thing, going against her wishes, and if this were literally any other situation, I would take her request into consideration, but I can't not touch her. I need to feel her breathing. I need to see the pulse in her throat.

"Sawyer," she whispers, and I allow her to pull back a few inches so she can look up at me.

I try to wipe the blood from her left eye, but all it does is smear the red stain.

"He killed my sister," she whispers, her chin trembling uncontrollably.

"I know, baby," I say and pull her back against my chest.

She doesn't fight me this time.

“The medics are here,” Kincaid says, his voice a little different.

“We’re going to get you checked out,” I tell her, still not making a move to pull her to standing.

“Get off me,” she whispers.

My heart breaks as I move away, my hands at my side to indicate I mean her no harm.

Her eyes are wild, her movements frantic as she realizes her hands are still tied.

She flinches, pulling back when I reach for them, but when her eyes lock with mine, she holds them up, wincing when I unwrap her arms.

The damage on her wrists is so bad she’s going to have scars, and I hate that that dead motherfucker will leave more than memories from this night marking her skin.

“Don’t,” she says, her voice barely over a whisper as I reach for her again.

Chapter 29

Lennox

The blanket wrapped around me offers no comfort. The chill I remember feeling earlier after my shower doesn't even begin to compare to how cold I am now.

My head dips, the hundred-pound weight of it on my shoulders becoming increasingly impossible to hold up.

I try to fight against the people that enter the room, but I'm met with familiar eyes.

"Rachel?" I mutter.

"We're gonna get you fixed up," the medic says, but she's having trouble not scrunching her face at the sight of me.

"I'm fine," I assure her.

"I know, Detective," she agrees too quickly. "But you know protocol."

I nod, having a hard time lifting my head back up on the forward dip.

I met Rachel not long after joining the police department at a traffic accident. I wouldn't consider her a friend. I've never met up with her outside of work, but she seems like a really nice woman. I trust her to take care of me, and I don't plan to give her any trouble while she's just trying to do her job.

I'm jostled, moved, palpated. I miss the exact moment the IV is started, but the evidence of it is taped to the inner bend of my left arm.

I make sure to look down when they situate the backboard on the gurney. Dixon is still dead, still on the floor, and my emotions war with what I've done. He deserved it. He earned that punishment many years ago, but at the same time, I've taken a life. I thought I was prepared for the onslaught of emotions, but I was wrong.

That emotion is replaced with his voice in my ear, the way he continued to gloat, and give me a play by play of what happened to Elle. How excited he was to get to kill another set of sisters because he hadn't had the

chance to do that since the last time he was in Biloxi.

Blackness takes over my vision, but another jostle makes my eyes snap open.

I look to the left, needing to see Rachel, but she isn't by my side. A man I've never seen before in my life is pushing the gurney down my driveway.

"Good luck," he says, garnering no answer, and that's when I see it.

Betrayal is a bitter thing to experience. Getting slapped in the face with it when there was never the expectation that it could happen is worse.

Rachel is doing chest compressions, her face a mask of determination, but it can't be possible.

I fired ten rounds into his torso. Joey Dixon doesn't get to live after what he's done.

I reach for her, wanting to beg her to stop, to let the evil, sadistic motherfucker die, but no sounds come from my throat.

"The meds are finally working," someone says. "It took fucking forever with her adrenaline so high."

The blackness wins.

"The concussion is the worst of it," the doctor says, a gentle smile on his lips. "We had our best plastic surgeon patch up the injuries on your face and he's confident that they won't scar."

"Dixon?" I ask, but the man doesn't answer.

"Get some rest, Detective. I'll have the nurse get your discharge paperwork ready."

I don't know how much time passes before the door opens again. I also don't know how to feel about Sawyer walking toward me. Shame swims inside of me for the way he found me. Beaten, bruised, tied... naked.

At least Dixon didn't get the chance to go further. I remembered the handgun stuffed under my mattress as he stood to take off his jeans. That

motherfucker thought he had all the time in the world.

I open my mouth to tell the man to leave, to let him know being here only makes me feel worse, but I just can't manage it. Giving him an out with the lie isn't something I'm capable of right now.

"Len—"

Sawyer's mouth clamps closed when the door opens again.

Chief Monahan looks sheepish as he enters the room, but there's still a hint of the no-bullshit man in the way he strides to the edge of my bed.

"Maison," he says, his eyes sweeping over my face as if he's taking inventory of my wounds.

My head screams for silence, the throb only dulled a little from whatever they put in my IV not long ago.

I tug the blanket tighter around me. If this man is here to tell me that I'm not only suspended but fired, there's a real chance I'll turn into a damn banshee.

"The murders he committed with Jasper Niers weren't his first," I say before he can get a word out.

I need this man to know I was right, that the cases I've worked recently have always been connected to my sister's and Caroline Ritter's.

What I don't know is how Dixon went undetected for so long, and why he'd come back.

A shiver of unease crawls up my spine at the idea that he came back for me, that Elizabeth and Rochelle losing their lives was a way to taunt me, to relight that fear inside of me that my parents held a flame to for so long.

I clear my throat, wincing at the pain there and the ache it increases in my head.

"Am I fired?"

He doesn't answer immediately and it has the power to light my blood on fire.

"You did a good job tonight," he says instead. "I'm glad you're going

to be okay. Do you have somewhere to go? Your house is a crime scene right now.”

I shake my head. “I checked every corner. How did he get in?”

If Rachel betrayed me and saved Joey Dixon, I’ll never be safe there again. I could put bars on the windows and replace the door with bank vault doors, and I’d still tremble at the thought of being there alone.

“We think he hid in the blanket chest at the end of the bed in the master,” Monahan answers.

He was there when I went into my parents’ room? There when I showered?

Another wave of chills hit me, and I pull the scratchy blanket tighter around me. Sawyer steps closer, but he doesn’t reach for me.

“She’s coming back to the clubhouse with me,” he says, looking at my boss.

I want to argue, but I know I’m in no position. I know I can’t go home. A hotel would probably be less complicated but I know how easy those doors are to breach. The Cerberus clubhouse, from what I saw when I visited last week, seems like a fortress.

I nod in agreement, watching as a hint of relief fills Sawyer’s eyes.

“Take a week or so to recover—”

“Two,” Sawyer says, interrupting my boss.

I wince when I try to glare at him. My face is sore as hell.

“We’ll discuss your return to the department when you’re feeling better.” Monahan gives me a quick nod before turning around and leaving the room.

I want to argue with Sawyer, to tell him that I’m a grown woman and capable of taking care of myself, but my injuries aren’t exactly evidence of that at the moment.

He inches closer, and as much as I want to tell him to give me some space, I know how lost I’d feel if I were left alone.

It takes everything I have not to cry when he sits on the side of the bed and cups my cheek as if I'm the most precious thing in the world to him.

The injuries are painful, but I think the lie hurts worse.

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Chapter 30

Ugly

It took the threat of being admitted overnight before Lennox caved and allowed herself to be pushed from the room in a wheelchair.

I know where her head is at. She was victimized tonight, and she views not being allowed to walk out of here on her own as a sign of weakness. No one but her feels that way, but explaining that only sounds condescending in my head. I know she's already questioning why I'm around in the first place.

“Do you want me—”

“I got it,” she says, her voice weak as she pushes up on the armrests of the chair and stands. “Couldn't we have done this around the back or something.”

I nod to the couple walking by, knowing from the look in the woman's eyes that she thinks I beat the shit out of Lennox.

“Sorry,” Kincaid says as he rounds the front of the SUV. “They made me leave from back there.”

“Doesn't Cerberus own this town,” she mumbles, making me think she still sees us as some kind of criminal enterprise like some others do in town.

I recall her coming to me and saying she was asking for my help, not the help of the club. I know she's been in Farmington her whole life or at least since before her sister's murder. So maybe there's some bad blood there that I don't know about.

I keep my hand near her back as she climbs into the back seat of the SUV, and as she settles, it seems to take everything she has.

I go around to the other side of the vehicle while Kincaid pushes the chair back into the entryway before climbing in behind the wheel.

She seems dazed or maybe a little groggy from the pain meds they gave her, and she flinches when I reach across her to pull her seatbelt around and click it in place. Instead of pushing me away, she clamps her hand on my forearm.

I lock eyes with her, wanting to kill Dixon all over again at the sight of the bruises on her face and the swelling around her left eye.

“Lennox,” I whisper.

She shakes her head in response and then buries her face in my neck. The tears falling from her eyes are warmer than her skin as I wrap my arms around her and hold her as she cries.

Her pain is silent, her body shaking as if she’s been conditioned not to make noise when she’s upset. It makes me wonder what her childhood was like after Elle’s death. The loss of someone in such a brutal way has the ability to make families grow closer together, but it can also rip them apart at the seams. She never discussed what life was like after, but from the way she lives her life, I don’t think it was a great experience.

Her crying eases as we pull out of the hospital parking lot, and after watching Kincaid drive past the solid row of motorcycles, I turn and press my nose into her hair, unconcerned of the dried blood in the tangled strands.

She killed an evil man tonight, but not before that man injected Bishop with what we were told could quite possibly be a lethal dose of what they suspect to be some back-alley form of GHB. He was found unresponsive around the back side of the house, having parked the SUV on the block behind her house and was injected in her backyard. They’re not hopeful that he’s even going to wake up. Kincaid will return to the hospital right after dropping us off.

I meet my boss’s eyes in the rearview mirror as he pulls into the Cerberus parking lot. He isn’t judging me for being here instead of there, but some of that guilt swims inside of me. He told me it was an impossible choice before she was discharged, so he took it from me, insisting I came back with her.

That’s an order, he had said, his voice a little broken from the night’s events.

Lennox still has her head tucked into my chest when he puts the SUV in park, and he climbs out when I nod at him.

My boss throws his leg over his bike and leaves. He’s prepared just like everyone else to escort Bishop’s body to the morgue if it comes to that.

It's another couple of minutes before her shoulders stop shaking, and a couple more after that before she pulls her head back, wincing in pain when she attempts to wipe the wetness from her face.

"Dixon," she whispers, and just the sound of his name on her lips makes me see red.

I've hated a lot of people in my lifetime. I've done exactly what she did tonight more times than I care to count, but the bone-deep hatred I feel for that man will never fade.

"Did she save him?"

My brow creases in confusion.

"Rachel," she whispers, making me think her head injury is worse than the doctors realized. "She was trying to save his life when they were taking me to the ambulance."

Realization strikes hard and fast. The female medic who was helping her was called to help when they found Bishop.

"Every shot you made was true, Lennox. Dixon is dead."

Relief washes over her face, her body growing a little less tense at my side. Now is not the time to explain who Rachel was helping. Plus, I don't think I could get through it and stay in the headspace she needs me to be in right now.

"I made so many mistakes," she says. "I spoke with Dixon At *Jake's*. I was distracted. I didn't give him the attention he deserved."

I watched her speak with him that night. It was quick, and she didn't take many notes. That's the night I met her at her car.

"I spoke with him, too," I say, knowing she's blaming herself for missing it. I need her to know she isn't alone, that he didn't throw up any real flags for me either. "I never suspected him either."

I watch her face transform several times as she struggles with her own thoughts.

"Let's go inside," I offer, opening my door. By the time I get the keys out of the cup holder and turn off the vehicle, she's already out of the SUV

and walking toward the front door of the clubhouse. She holds her hands up when I offer my assistance. As close as she was inside the vehicle, she has no interest in being that close to me now.

I give her some distance, opening the front door for her and waiting until she walks past to close and lock it.

She was in my room once before, but she doesn't immediately start in that direction.

"It's so quiet."

"We're the only ones here," I tell her, but then think maybe she won't be comfortable knowing that. "Ivy and Gigi are across the street if you'd prefer to go over there."

I don't add that everyone else is at the hospital. Hell, if she blames herself for her attack, for not identifying Dixon before he went after Rochelle, I don't know how she'd react to find out one of ours may have been his latest victim.

I run my hand over my neck, wondering how it took Bishop out but not me. I guess there's always a good possibility that it was from a different batch or was something different altogether.

"This way," I mutter, wishing I could focus on one thing at a time, but knowing the impossibility of it.

"Hey." I jolt, my first instinct to jump in front of Lennox even with the familiar voice.

Slick gives me a small smile, noticing my reaction.

"I thought everyone was... out."

"Just me here," she says, holding her hand out to Lennox. "Detective Maison, I'm Brynn."

I know there's a reason she isn't introducing herself as Dr. Brynn Sullivan, that she doesn't make it known right away.

Lennox shakes her hand.

"I'm around if you need me," Slick says, taking a step back and

locking eyes with me.

Everything I need to know is there on her face. She also feels as helpless as everyone else where Bishop is concerned, but with Lennox here, she could help her if Lennox wanted to talk.

I nod in understanding at the club's psychologist before urging Lennox down the hallway.

"You're safe here," I remind her. "The room is yours for as long as you need it."

I walk past her, grabbing a couple shirts and a discarded pair of jeans from the end of the bed and throwing them into the bottom of my closet. I'm fairly certain they don't make it into the hamper, but it's not exactly top priority for me right now.

I pull open the top drawer of my dresser and rummage around, looking for the keyring I was given the day I arrived. I threw it in here and haven't thought about it since.

"So you know you're safe," I tell her, holding out the keyring.

She gives me a soft smile, and I ache a little with the pain it causes when she takes it from my hand. As much as I wanted her to insist she didn't need it, that she knew she was safe here with me, I knew it would be foolish to even consider it a possibility.

I step closer to her, cupping her face in my palm. "I'll be in the living room if you need me."

She nods a little, her eyes downcast for the longest second before she looks back up at me.

"You could tell me to forget him. You could demand I never think of him again."

There's pleading in her voice, but she knows as much as I do that the dynamic we've enjoyed in the past doesn't work here.

I want her to ask me to stay, but even after leaning forward and brushing my lips on hers, she doesn't.

I leave the room, pulling the door closed behind me, my heart aching

when I hear the slide of the deadbolt locking into place.

“She’d never say it,” I tell Slick as soon as I step into the kitchen. “But she needs someone to talk to. Maybe with you being a woman...”

“Say no more.” She gives me a quick smile as she stands from the table, squeezing my shoulder on her way past.

I watch, holding my breath, as I peek my head out of the kitchen and watch as she knocks on my bedroom door. There’s soft talking, whispers almost, but much to my surprise, the door opens and Slick disappears into the room. I don’t miss the turn of the lock once again as it echoes down the hallway like one of the many gunshots I heard tonight.

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Chapter 31

Lennox

“I’m not going to lie and say I’m fine,” I tell Brynn. “But I’m not suicidal. I fought too hard tonight to stay alive to change that myself.”

Brynn gives me a soft smile, but it doesn’t feel the least amount dismissive.

“He’s worried about you,” she says.

I look away from her, not knowing exactly how I should feel about the news.

“That’s very kind,” I say because how else should I respond?

I went back and forth so many times, convincing myself that Sawyer was somehow connected to Elizabeth’s and Rochelle’s deaths, and then in the next breath, I worked to prove it wasn’t true. I wasted precious time and fell right into the trap that Dixon planned. He wanted Sawyer to be blamed, and I was ignorant enough to play right into his trap.

“I’m around if you need to talk,” she says before leaving the room.

I’m quick to move to the door and twist the lock. It’s not that I feel unsafe, but the barrier between myself and everyone else gives me the sacred seconds I need to get my shit together mentally before anyone can come in. I can’t have just anyone walking into this room and seeing me so out of sorts. It was bad enough Sawyer and his boss saw it.

I’m wholly unprepared to be here, in desperate need of a shower and no clean clothes to wear. I’m standing in the middle of his room, taking in the unmade bed as I scrape a fingernail over a patch of dried blood on my forearm.

I feel as if I’m wasting time, but I have nothing else to do other than rest and recuperate. I’ve lived my life this way, rushing from one thing to the next because slowing down allows the pain, grief, and regret to settle inside of me.

I attempt to hold my head higher, the mantra *fake it until I make it* an

echo in my mind as I walk to the dresser and pull out a soft t-shirt and a pair of lounge pants. I know they're going to be too big, but I have no other choice. I can't leave the room and ask Sawyer to take me to a hotel completely naked.

The warm water of the shower helps soothe sore muscles but it also stings the small cuts on my face and hands. I did my best to avoid looking at myself in the mirror, but the tiny glances I did get make me want to hide away for a month until I'm fully healed. I won't, however. Even with Dixon dead and unable to witness my strength, I'd never give him the posthumous satisfaction of cowering in fear.

The shower ends sooner than I'd really like but my exhaustion forces me to make it quick and economical rather than luxuriating in the way the pounding water on my back releases some of the tension in my muscles. If there were a tub in this room, I'd no doubt sink into it and stay until the water turned too cold to withstand.

I pull a folded towel from the small cabinet and dry off. My skin feels too tight, like I stayed in the sun too long without proper hydration. I dress quickly, knowing the lock on the door only holds so much protection, and my hands shake, remembering Dixon being in my house the entire time I took my last shower.

As I suspected, the clothes are much too loose. I eye the door, knowing what I should do, but the bed is too inviting. I hold onto the waistband of the lounge pants as I climb up on the mattress, feeling both out of place and relieved as my head settles on the pillow. I thought about this bed more than once after leaving Sawyer's room days ago. I wasn't beaten and bruised in those fantasies, however.

I pull the blanket up to my chin, the cool sheets seeming to take an eternity to warm up enough that the shivering stops, but even after five minutes, I'm finding no relief. Closing my eyes is torture, a violent mix of what happened to me tonight, and reliving the details Dixon spoke of about my sister.

I have a mind to go ask Brynn for some form of sedation, but not being in control of myself isn't a position I ever want to be in again.

I climb out of bed because even with as tired as I am, I know there's no

chance of me falling asleep. I feel ridiculous leaving the room in the rubber-bottomed socks I was provided at the hospital but there's no chance Sawyer would have a pair of shoes that would fit me.

The hallway is silent when I pull the door open, but as I walk down the hallway, the sound of the television and low murmuring meets my ears. Sawyer is on one of the couches, nodding as the guy I know as Stormy speaks with him. They both stand when they notice me, but neither make a move to walk closer.

“Did you need something?” Sawyer asks.

I nod, swallowing in shame when I see Stormy taking inventory of the wounds on my face. I hate that he's looking at me with sympathy. I don't want to be viewed as a victim.

“I'd like you to take me to a hotel please.”

Stormy's eyes widen as if he knows my request will be shutdown.

“Do you want a beer?” Sawyer asks rather than making a move to fulfill my request.

I attempt to narrow my eyes at him, but pain shoots through my head. “It's four o'clock in the morning, and I have a concussion.”

“We have a team that's going to get your house cleaned up as soon as the police release it,” Stormy says, giving me a small smile.

“Thank you,” I tell him but don't voice the fact that I don't know if I could ever go back there again.

Not even taking into consideration that the house was still a shrine to my sister and deceased parents, Dixon was inside of it, curled up and hiding in a damn quilt locker for over an hour before he made his move to attack me. There's no chance I'd ever feel safe there again. It's filled with nothing but death and fear.

“A hotel?” I remind Sawyer.

The man nods reluctantly, and I follow him to the door.

“I'll give you a call if there's any news,” Stormy says just before we walk out the front door.

I step lightly on the gravel on the way to the SUV Sawyer points at, feeling awkward when he opens the passenger side door for me and waits until I'm settled inside before walking around to the driver's side.

He doesn't speak as he cranks the vehicle and pulls out of the parking lot. I try to focus on the trees flashing by under the headlights, but I'm even more anxious than I was in the clubhouse.

"I can't do this," I tell him, my voice tainted with more emotion than I can control.

"You don't have—"

"I don't have a wallet or my ID. I can't get a hotel room."

I feel lost and helpless. I told myself many years ago I'd never put myself in a situation like this.

"I can swing getting you a hotel room," he says, before adding, "You can pay me back later."

We may not know each other well, but he knows enough about me that I'd insist on paying him back, and that helps me settle a little. Knowing I'll never be able to pay him back fully, not only for his kindness but also for suspecting he was involved with the crimes Dixon was framing him for, settles in my bones. Apologies only go so far.

"What was Stormy talking about when he said updates?"

I look over to see his jaw flexed tightly, his eyes locked on the road.

"It's club business."

"I should've asked if you had something else going on."

He shakes his head. "It's... Bishop."

I turn my head to look at his profile, watching as he seems to be gathering his thoughts.

"The man you thought the medic was helping wasn't Dixon. It was Bishop."

My body locks up. I've seen Rachel putting that much effort into helping someone, and the outcome is usually never good.

“Is he—?”

He shakes his head violently.

“No.”

The one-word answer sounding more like *not yet*.

I swallow down a bubble of emotion.

“He was injected with something, and it made him go into cardiac arrest.”

“I told him to leave,” I say absently.

“He didn’t.”

I’m grateful the rest of the drive is spent in silence, and also that Sawyer chooses a hotel different from the one we’ve spent time in together. I stay back, feigning interest in the rack holding all of the tourist pamphlets, while he pays for the room, all the while trying to avoid looking at my reflection in the glass of the artwork hanging above it.

I walk closer when he takes a step back from the counter, thanking the clerk without looking in her direction. I know what people automatically presume when they see a woman with injuries to her face. Even as a cop, having responded to numerous car accidents, my mind is quick to go in the same direction.

Sawyer keeps his distance on the walk to the elevator, only getting close enough to hand over a key card for the room.

Once we arrive at the room, he doesn’t hesitate to step inside after I unlock it. He doesn’t seem mocking as he crouches down, looking under the bed, before moving on to the small closet, even checking the bathtub and behind the curtains covering the massive window.

“Thank you,” I whisper even though there’s a very good chance I’ll retrace his steps and do the same thing again.

He doesn’t say anything as he steps closer, and I swear I’ll lose it if he says a word.

It’s already hard enough to keep my mouth closed rather than begging

him to stay with me because the thought of being alone is making my hands tremble.

I lean into the palm of his hand when he cups my cheek, feeling a little disappointed when he simply brushes his lips at my temple before leaving the room.

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Chapter 32

Ugly

Lennox doesn't freeze when she opens the door to her room, finding me standing in the doorway of the room directly across from hers. I know she wanted some distance, some space she could call her own, but leaving her? It was never going to happen.

It took her a couple of minutes to open the door after I saw her shadow under it. I'm not surprised she'd check the peephole before opening it. I imagine she'd do this even if last night had never happened.

"I need to take you to the station," I tell her, figuring just ripping off the bandage would be better than beating around the bush. I've never taken her as the kind to appreciate wasting time.

Her right hand tugs at the back of her neck as she looks from me back down the empty hallway.

I clear my throat, trying to gain strength for the next part of the conversation.

"Unless you need to go back to the hospital. Last night you said that he didn't—"

"He didn't," she snaps. "I wasn't lying. He stood to get his pants off and that's when I shot him."

I nod. "Okay."

I don't feel better knowing he didn't sexually assault her. The man never should've had the chance to hurt her in the first fucking place. I should've been there to protect her. Dixon never should've been sneaky enough to get the jump on me that first night and then again on Bishop. We're both trained fucking professionals. But that tiny window that allowed Dixon to drug Bishop could leave the man dead, and I can't help but feel as if that's somehow on my head too. If I would've been able to stop him the night Elizabeth Burr was attacked, then Rochelle would still be alive, Lennox wouldn't have a face covered in bruises, and Bishop wouldn't be fighting for his life at the hospital.

All of this shit is on me. I wasn't able to protect her. She was left to do that on her own.

I hate myself for it.

"You'll need to give a statement," I tell her. "Monahan wanted to get that info from you last night, but Kincaid told him he'd have to wait."

She nods, but she doesn't look very impressed to be told Kincaid put his nose in her business.

"I need to see if I'm going to be able to keep my job."

"They have no reason to take it from you," I tell her, but there's a part of me that feels as if I have a right to tell her that she needs to find something less dangerous.

Yet, it was her connection to her sister that might have brought Dixon back to Farmington and not the fact that she was working the case after he murdered Elizabeth.

"But if you're not ready to go," I say, stepping out of the doorway of my room and grabbing her hand, "It can wait. All of it can wait until you're ready."

"I'm ready," she says, a snap of irritation in her tone. She pulls her hand away as if I have no right to even think she'd need more time. "I'm fine."

Instead of arguing with her, I just nod. I know the dangers of trying to pretend nothing happened until it's easier to deal with, but she's not in a place where she'd even listen to me. The effort would be wasted and she'd probably tell me to fuck off.

Moving too fast now, trying to outrun those feelings, won't last forever. I can only hope she'll let me stick around long enough to help her through them when it finally does hit her.

She looks annoyed when I reach for the passenger side door of the SUV when we get down to the parking lot, so I step away and let her tug it open herself. The wince of pain on her face is indicative of the bruising the doctor mentioned her having on her ribs. I'd like nothing more than to wrap her in a protective layer and hide her from the world, but she'd never allow it.

It makes me wonder, not for the first time, just what kind of life she had after her sister was murdered. She sees support and kindness or the need for it as a weakness. I don't know if it's because she was smothered as a child or missed out on that from her parents altogether.

She wouldn't be the first person to be forgotten in her parents' grief, but I've also seen people pull back and create distance in fear of losing someone else. They're trying to hedge their pain if it happens again.

"I feel naked," she whispers, her eyes locked outside the passenger window as if she can't stomach the sight of me.

"I can have one of the guys go by your place and grab you some more clothes."

She shakes her head, rejecting the idea outright.

"I can run into Target—"

"These clothes are fine," she says, tugging the front of the softest t-shirt I own.

I should be ashamed of how my body reacted at seeing her in my clothes, especially after what she'd been through. I shut it down as quickly as I could when she came into the living room last night, but those thoughts still happened.

"My gun," she continues. "I feel naked without my gun."

I know the weapon she used last night was confiscated for evidence, but I have no idea what happened to the one she normally carries at work.

"Did the chief take it from you?"

She doesn't turn her head in my direction.

She asked her boss at the hospital if she was fired and he dodged the question. The man would have a lot of nerve to do that to her, especially after she was proven right about the link between the recent murders and her sister. If the man was worried about me suing for being falsely arrested, he's not going to be very happy with how hard I'd advocate for her if she lost her job over this.

"Here," I say, reaching for the glovebox.

My jaw flexes in irritation when she moves her leg out of my way. I wasn't planning on touching her. I'm not using this as some fucked-up chance to try and seduce her, but her pulling back as if she wouldn't even tolerate my touch is a slap to the damn face. I don't blame her. I'm not upset with her. I fucking hate Dixon for hurting her and putting her in this position in the first fucking place.

"You can use this one," I say, pointing at the handgun in the glove compartment.

She looks from the weapon to me and back again. "How many guns do you have?"

"In the car?" I ask, no hint of a joke in my tone. "Or in general?"

She shakes her head, a small smile playing on her split lip.

"Go ahead," I urge when she just sits there. "It's registered."

She slow blinks at me. "You register your guns?"

I understand her surprise. Registration isn't a requirement in New Mexico, so most people don't do it.

I tilt my head, trying to hide my own smile.

"*That* one is registered."

I'm awarded with another half-smile, and at this point, I'll take anything she's willing to offer me.

I pull up in front of the police department, reaching into the back seat to grab the shoes Slick brought by and stuck inside the SUV earlier this morning. I blame her ability to make me lose all train of thought for not remembering them sooner.

"Slick brought these," I say, holding the sneakers up. "She had to guess your size."

"Thank you," she offers as she bends to pull them on without a single complaint about the fit.

She looks to the front door of the department but makes no move to leave the vehicle.

I want to offer to go in with her, but I get the feeling she'd decline on principle alone.

"You probably have stuff to—"

"I don't," I say, interrupting her in my eagerness to give her anything and everything she needs.

"Will you go inside with me?"

Rather than answering her with words, I pull away from the curb and find a parking spot.

With it decided that I'll join her, she doesn't hesitate to open her own door and start the trek to the front of the department. When we enter, drawing every eye in the place, I'm left wishing I'd called ahead and had someone open the back door for us. Even the guy in cuffs sitting at one of the detective's desk looks at her with sympathy.

"Maison?" Chief Monahan says as he approaches. "I thought I said to take some time off to rest and recover?"

"If I'm going to need to clear out my office, I'd rather get it over with."

Monahan's face crinkles.

"You're not fired, Maison."

Instead of speaking more on the subject, Lennox walks toward her office.

"Is she okay?" Monahan asks me.

I turn to glare at the man. I was there yesterday when he all but ignored her questions about her job. She didn't rub it in. She didn't say I told you so or blame him for her attack after refusing to listen to her about the connections in the cases.

"If you have questions for your detective, you need to ask her."

I leave him standing in the middle of the office, annoyed that he'd think I'd break any damn confidences she might've given me. I know there's a process of getting back to work after something like this happens. She has to be cleared for duty and that may take some time, but telling someone not

to worry and treating them like a child when all they think they have is the job, it's a form of psychological torture no one should endure.

Lennox looks lost when I step into her office. Her eyes are open but unseeing as she stares off into space.

“Hey,” I say, hating the way she jolts.

She gives me a quick smile. I know immediately it's fake, and I fucking hate it. I hate that she feels like she has to put on some sort of mask for me.

“I was wondering how you'd feel about me using you for sex.”

Her tone is flat, as if it's a business deal that she could either take or leave and not feel any certain kind of way about it.

My heart races, my palms growing sweaty. I barely resist the urge to wipe them down my jeans.

In the same indifferent tone, I answer, “I guess that's okay.”

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Chapter 33

Lennox

I'm wondering if these are the final hours before my head just completely breaks in two. I know it's crazy to have almost been raped and murdered last night and have this urge. I don't have to be a psychologist to know it isn't a healthy response, but at the same time, no one else has to live my life. I'll do with it how I see fit.

My hands are trembling as we take the elevator up to the fourth floor. We're in the same hotel he brought me to last night, only we're in different rooms.

He exits the elevator first, his eyes darting up and down the hallway as if he expects someone to jump out and thwart our plans.

I don't know why I'm anxious. Elle's case has been solved, and I was able to do it by putting the man in his grave rather than having to fight for my sister's justice through the court system. I would gladly sign up for repeating it all again to avoid having to see that narcissistic smug bastard across a courtroom.

Sawyer is not Joey Dixon. The man waiting for me to exit the elevator could never hurt someone the way Dixon did, and I feel like shit for even being capable of thinking he could.

"Look," he says, holding up a second key card. "I got a room across from yours, just like last night. There's no obligation to—"

"Do you not want to fuck me?"

There's no accusation in my voice. I'm not forcing him to do a damn thing, but I also don't want to be a pity fuck either because he thinks I'm some fragile woman who needs coddling.

"You know better," he says, his eyes serious. "But I don't want to fuck a woman who doesn't really want to be fucked."

I pull one of the keys out of his hand and walk toward the room, grateful when he steps inside with me.

It feels awkward and it shouldn't. I've been in this position with him before, but this time seems different. He's not making commands of me.

I turn around to face him, a chill running up my spine when I press my face into his chest and his hand runs up my back.

"I need you to be... you," I whisper in his chest.

"Yeah?" he whispers, his fingers tangling in my hair.

"I'd be offended if you were anything else."

He doesn't waste a breath before pressing his lips to mine.

"Missed that tight cunt of yours, Lennox. Take my cock out."

This man. This is the man I've needed.

Eagerness makes me clumsy, but he simply chuckles, a deep rumbling sound low inside of him when I fumble with his zipper twice before managing to pull it down.

"I love that you go commando," I say, feeling chastised when he grabs my hand before I run it up his exposed shaft.

"Did I say you could touch me?"

I bite my lower lip, angling my head just enough that I can lock eyes with him.

"Use your words."

"No, sir," I say, loving the thick, heated intake of breath it causes.

A slow smile spreads out on his face, and I feel like prey trapped in a deadly spider's web.

I drop my eyes, wanting another look at the way the light glints off his piercings, but he catches my face in his huge hands, keeping my eyes locked on his.

"You said you wanted to use me, but I'm getting a feeling you're the one who wants to be used. Am I right?"

I nod without hesitation. Giving your power to someone else you trust is vastly different from someone trying to steal that power from you.

Submitting to Sawyer tonight isn't the same as what Dixon did last night.

"I'm yours," I manage. "Use me."

He doesn't immediately move. His eyes dart back and forth between mine as if he's somehow assessing my true intent.

"I'll stop anytime you want," he says, and I know he's saying it for both of our benefits.

Playing these games is one thing, taking it too far isn't something either of us want to do.

"I know," I tell him.

"On your knees."

He doesn't even have to bother with putting pressure on my shoulder to urge me down.

My first instinct is to reach for him again, but I know disobeying will only postpone things.

He watches my face as he swirls his thumb over my lips, dipping inside just enough to make me moan but then pulling back before I can lock my lips around it and suck.

"You are so fucking tempting, Lennox. Knowing how hot and tight your cunt is makes me want to skip all of the fun stuff and dive right into it. Lick my tip. That's it. Taste me."

His groan of pleasure rumbles out of him, and although I've not been given permission, I reach up and place my hands, palm down on his abdomen just in case he does it again.

My mouth works him over, my throat opening exactly the way I know he loves.

I gasp, blinking up at him in shock when he pulls at my hair, forcing me to release him.

He doesn't say a word as he stares down at me. There are hints of both humor and some irritation in his eyes, and, despite being on my knees, I've never felt more powerful.

“So fucking bad,” he says, telling me I’m reading him right. “Make it last, baby. We have all fucking night.”

“You’re saying,” I begin, licking up the side of his cock. “If you come once that’s all you can manage?”

The twitch of his lip almost brings a smile to my face, but I think too much teasing wouldn’t benefit me.

“You’ll make me come as many times as I please,” he growls. “The question is whether or not I’ll let you do the same.”

“You love the way I feel clenching around your cock,” I remind him.

His eyes sparkle with mirth, but in the next breath, he’s prying my mouth open with his fingers and fucking it, using me just the way I like.

I’m slick between my thighs, the borrowed lounge pants too loose to provide any relief no matter how much I rock back and forth.

“You seem needy, baby. Too bad you’re hell-bent on being a brat.”

I don’t pout because it just isn’t part of my dynamic. If anything, I’d rather be stubborn and refuse to orgasm than beg him, although I know he has a few tricks up his sleeves to make me crawl on my hands and knees.

He doesn’t issue a command, choosing to lift me by a strong grip on my hair.

He doesn’t ask me to remove my clothes like he’s done in the past. He pushes down the pants, waiting as I shift my weight from one foot to the next and kick them to the side.

“How’s that needy cunt of yours?” he growls, making my stomach practically twist in on itself.

“Empty,” I complain, pulling a wicked grin to his lips.

He takes a step back, pulling his t-shirt over his head before sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling off his boots and then his jeans.

“Want to watch me?” he asks, his hand working up his length, his fingers moving rougher over his jewelry than I’d ever feel comfortable doing myself.

I shake my head, drawing a quick chuckle from his lips.

“Your other option is closing your eyes and listening.”

I swallow, thinking that him teasing each and every one of my senses would be erotic as hell.

His jaw is loose as he continues to stroke himself.

“Strip,” he says, laughter bubbling out of his throat at the speed in which I move.

I wince in pain when I pull the t-shirt over my head.

I’m grateful he doesn’t pump the brakes. I’d probably claw at his skin if he tried to treat me like some broken doll right now.

“Come here,” he says as he moves to the lounge chair on the far side of the room.

I avoid the mirror directly across from it much like I did the mirror in his room back at the clubhouse. I feel my injuries. I don’t want to see them too.

“Nope,” he says when I try to straddle him. “Back to my front.”

I spin around, backing up and wanting to curl into him when he grips my hip.

“We should—” I begin when I start to lower myself on his cock.

“Not that,” he says, moving me just in time so his cock presses against my slit without entering me.

My legs are trembling uncontrollably when I settle my weight on him. He spreads his knees, forcing my legs wide.

“Haven’t even touched that greedy thing, and it’s already glistening.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I mutter, my eyes downcast so I don’t see my reflection.

“Look,” he growls. “Look at what I own.”

That’s new, and not completely off putting.

I allow my eyes to lift, but my brain short-circuits when he brushes his fingers over me.

His thick cock is standing up straight between my legs, and for the most part, it blocks my view as he circles his thumb over my clit. What I can't see, he makes up for in making me feel. It's possible that if we hadn't been intimate before I might be a little embarrassed at the wet noises he's causing, but my mind has taken a vacation. All I'm capable of doing is feeling.

He practically purrs in my ear, ramping up the experience. I don't even have time to ask permission before my body is clenching.

I whimper, still feeling empty and needing more from him. Sawyer is in a giving mood tonight, and he doesn't make me wait long before he's sliding two thick fingers as deep as he can manage.

He whispers filthy stuff in my ear, pulling another orgasm from my body that's so strong, it makes me forget all my other pain.

"That's my girl," he whispers as he pulls his hand from me before stroking his length.

His thumb brushes against me as he pleases himself. If I weren't already drained, I know that it would have the power to make me come again.

Three strokes is all it takes before ropes of cum paint my skin.

Chapter 34

Ugly

Not fucking her last night when I knew that's what she wanted was hard as hell.

I've always been a live and let live kind of guy. Someone else's mistakes aren't my sin to need redemption for but as much as she wanted it, it wasn't what she needed. I knew that as well as I know myself.

She didn't seem disappointed. I did give her pleasure, after all, and by the time I washed her body in the shower, she was too tired to ask for much else.

We got to the hotel in the middle of the afternoon, and when she fell asleep in my arms, neither one of us cared that the sun hadn't even begun to set. We were exhausted, her more than me, because it's been over twelve hours since we laid down. I've been lying here awake, unwilling to move, so I don't wake her.

She hasn't slept well in weeks, and the proof of that was darkening the delicate skin under her eyes with each passing day.

Her hands twitch in her sleep as if she's dreaming of something, and part of me hopes it's a good dream, the other half wishes that good dream is about me. I pray she gets a reprieve from her demons, at least when her eyes are closed, but I've seen and experienced a lot of shit and the likelihood of that is slim.

Unable to stay with her naked body pressed to mine any longer, I begin the arduous process of trying to slip out from under her. She shifts with each of my movements, but doesn't fully wake, proving she needs even more sleep.

I'm standing, trying to ignore the erection, blaming the time of day despite being awake for a while.

"Where are you going?" she whispers, her lithe body shifting between the sheets.

"Gotta piss," I grumble as I walk toward the bathroom.

“Crass,” she snaps, but there’s humor in her voice.

She’s a cop for fuck’s sake. I know she’s heard worse.

I throw her a quick smile over my shoulder before heading into the bathroom.

I don’t bother closing the door, but the bathroom is nice enough that the toilet has its own little room. It’s a luxury we don’t have in our efficient bathrooms back at the clubhouse.

I’m flushing when she walks into the bathroom without knocking or even attempting to let her presence be known. There’s a lot more confidence in her stride than I saw from her yesterday, and it makes me smile.

“Gonna watch?” she asks, completely naked as she steps into the small, secluded room.

I huff a laugh but turn to the shower and turn the water on, giving her the privacy she wasn’t willing to ask for.

I drink from the falling water the second I step into the shower, attempting to rinse my mouth as best I can. We didn’t exactly plan this very well and came to a hotel room with no amenities at all.

I jolt, my hand running over my face when cold palms skate up my torso before nimble fingers twist my nipples.

“Get me hard and you won’t leave this fucking room for a week,” I warn, but the joke’s on me because I started to thicken the second she stepped into the room with her ass swishing back and forth as she walked. The sight of the woman is like Viagra to my fucking libido, and I have no chance of being able to control that anytime soon.

Her hands roam my skin, her body bumping against my erection.

I cup her cheek, my thumb rolling back and forth as I look down at her.

She pulls her face away, looking annoyed with me.

“What?” I ask without a hint of irritation in my voice.

Instead of answering, she takes a step back, her eyes locked with mine for a long moment before shaking her head in disappointment and stepping

out of the shower.

She's drying off when I turn the water off and follow her.

"Care to tell me what that was all about?"

"Care to explain why you're treating me differently?" she challenges.

"I'm not," I lie because I can't tell her the fucking truth.

Proclaiming anything where she's concerned wouldn't work out in my favor. She doesn't want to know how I feel. Hell, I'm not even supposed to feel anything for her at all. It's my complete fuckup that I do. She wasn't supposed to be able to get under my skin. She was never supposed to affect me at all.

She said she wanted to use me. She was up front about it.

I'm the rule breaker here and declaring my feelings wouldn't be well received.

"I'm not some fragile fucking doll," she snaps, her perfect fucking tits jiggling as she pulls the towel across her back.

I try not to lock my eyes on the bruises on her side. I'm murderous at the sight of them, but I also know her killing Dixon is what she needed for over fifteen years of pain. Wanting to shield her from all of it is my own issue to contend with.

She drops the towel, but my eyes are still locked on the tips of her peaked breasts, my body controlling my response as I thicken right before her eyes.

"I don't want you cuddling my face and looking at me like you're afraid you'll break me. I don't want sympathy or fucking pity from you."

"I'll give you one quick minute to change your tone," I say, my voice calm even though I don't know if taking this tack will work since she's so angry.

She narrows her eyes at me, but I don't miss the way her throat works on a swallow.

"I didn't cup your face in the shower because I think it's what you

need. I'll touch you how I want to touch you. Your job is to please me, Lennox. Do you think snapping at me pleases me?"

She doesn't respond, but her body relaxes some.

"I'm not afraid I'll break you. You're too strong to be broken. But you'll give me what I need, and in the shower that was cupping your face. Do you understand?"

She nods quickly, her weight shifting from one foot to the other.

"You didn't fuck me last night," she whispers.

"Your body couldn't have handled me last night, baby."

"Y-You said you weren't afraid to break me," she argues.

I do my best to keep from smiling. Leave it to her to latch on to my contradiction.

"Is that what you need, baby? Do you need to be broken?"

She shakes her head, swallowing again. "I need to be fixed."

"And you think I know how to fix you?"

"I know you do."

"Bend over the bed."

She moves without further instruction, and I resist running my fingers over the scratches on her back. I have no fucking clue how she got them, maybe trying to move away from Dixon when he was attacking her.

I take a deep breath, my heart clenching for what she's gone through, but my cock, the ever-resilient fucker, is ready to go.

"Hands fisting the sheets," I tell her as I reach and grab a condom from my wallet. "You'll come with only me fucking you, or you won't come at all."

She whimpers but obeys, her fingers tangling in the sheet under her face.

She's glistening, slick and ready, but I'm the one that needs a minute to calm down. It's not that I don't want to do this. That isn't the case at all. I just

don't want this to be all that I am to her.

I know some of this is a trauma response, but I also know that her need to hand over her power in the bedroom is something instilled so deep in her, that she's been looking for this in every man she's allowed near her. I don't want my ability to provide this to be the only reason she keeps coming back.

"Maybe I'll fuck you bare," I threaten, sweeping my finger from her clit to her ass. "Fill this pussy with cum."

She looks over her shoulder, her body frozen under my touch, and I read it as a hard limit for her.

"Not this time," I say, dipping my thumb back inside of her. "Your pussy is too fucking tight. I want it to last."

The slightest nod of her head is all I need to see to know that the threat is more than okay, but actually doing it can't happen. I respect that. Pushing boundaries is one thing. Crossing them completely compromises everything, and I'd never do that with any partner.

"If you scream too loudly, someone will report us to the front office," I warn as I tease her entrance with the tip of my cock. "If someone knocks on the door, you'll spend the rest of the day on your knees, my cock so deep in your throat you won't be capable of making a sound."

Her moan makes my balls ache because it sounds like she doesn't exactly hate the idea.

I grind my teeth together when I slide inside, the grip of her perfect cunt tight as her warmth surrounds me.

I may have talked too big of a game because my nuts are already threatening to draw in close.

I've had this woman on her back, face down, riding my cock facing me and away, so I know from experience that there isn't a position that would help my current predicament. Pulling out of her is the only thing that would postpone my orgasm, and I'm just not masochist enough to suffer that type of punishment.

Her knuckles turn white as she grips the sheet, her body lifting a little, standing on the tips of her toes when I press inside of her fully. She doesn't

complain, and when I pull back, she rocks her hips, hating my retreat. She's utter fucking perfection, and is stroking my ego without saying a single word.

"You can come," I tell her when I slam back inside.

Her mouth opens, moans and whimpers escaping, and I can tell she's trying not to make too much noise but finding it impossible. I like that she's enjoying it so much she's having a hard time controlling herself.

"Swear to God, Lennox, if you don't fucking come." Her hands break free from the sheet, and I realize I'll just have to punish her later because she needs the release as much as I do.

Her hand skates between her legs, her fingers brushing my balls, and I swear I get a spasm in my damn eye.

My fingers grip her hips, slipping some on the parts she didn't manage to dry during her little snit of irritation. I dig in deeper, wondering if she'll get bruises and if she'll have the same reaction to those that were already marking her skin that I saw in her eyes when I made her watch me touch her in the mirror last night.

"Fuck, Lennox."

The growl is more praise than anything because her orgasm takes control of both of us, that clench utter perfection.

I wrap an arm around her, my hand finding her breast.

"Sawyer," she pants, her body jolting more from my repetitive intrusion now that she's relaxing.

I explode, my cock pulsing so hard it challenges the erratic beat of my heart.

I pull back, stumbling a few steps before falling to the bed beside her.

As sweat cools on my skin, I pray that I did the right thing.

Chapter 35

Lennox

My heart is racing, the pounding echoing in my ears, and I just want to get lost in it. I want to feel nothing, think nothing. I want bliss to carry me away and leave me in this exact moment for the rest of my time on earth.

It can't.

It doesn't.

I was a fool to think it would last longer than a couple of minutes.

The sweat on my skin isn't even dry before the memories resurface, before the pain and loss and regret start to take back over.

Out of sight out of mind is complete bullshit. The memories and trauma always last longer than the initial experience.

I turn my head in Sawyer's direction, watching his chest rise and fall with breaths heavy from exertion and his own release.

The man gave me exactly what I wanted, the ability to willingly hand my power over to someone. I trust him enough to do that, but I can't help but feel like it's offered out of obligation or regret somehow.

I wanted him to fix me, to mend that broken part inside of me that for some reason feels guilty that I survived Joey Dixon when so many women didn't.

Sex with Sawyer was simply a distraction, and the logical part of my brain knows it's too soon. The bruises Dixon left behind haven't even started to fade or turn yellow. It's foolish to think I can go to sleep and wake up a different person, but it doesn't make me wish for it any less.

I pull my eyes from him, trying to shove back down a rush of questions I have no business asking as I stand from the bed. I can feel his eyes on me, but he doesn't say a word as I walk to the bathroom.

On instinct, I lock the door, needing it to be a sign as well as wanting the minimal protection the lock provides.

I swallow bile with the thought of being in my own home and Joey Dixon right there. I locked the door then too. I've done it every time I've bathed since I was a young girl, and the habit has always stuck with me. There's no way to know why he waited in my closet for me to finish rather than coming after me when I was most vulnerable. It's possible he wanted to strip that power from me as he pulled off my clothes.

I shake my head again, hating that my mind insists on focusing on the pain rather than the good things I have in life. I still get to keep my job although I know I won't be returning to active duty any time soon. The man in the room on the other side of the door is capable of giving my body what it needs, and he doesn't seem overly pushy at all.

Lots of people don't have a sister or parents. They do just fine.

I clear my throat as I step into the shower, turning the water on and letting that first frigid blast hit me right in the face. If there was a way to speed past all this regret and pain, the millions of questions I have, so many I know will still go unanswered, I'd sign up for it in a heartbeat. Hell, if I could just not feel a damn thing for a year, that would be awesome as well.

My shower lasts as long as the hot water does, and since this is a nicer hotel, I calculate that's well over an hour. My fingers and toes look like raisins as I towel off.

I sigh, the irritation I'm feeling directed more at myself than anyone else as I realize I didn't bring any clothes in here with me. I'm also beyond annoyed that I haven't made plans to get more clothes. Leaving my house behind and everything in it isn't even practical. My driver's license is there, every stitch of clothing because I have no idea what happened with my clothes from my attack. It's possible they were taken into evidence.

The towel is wrapped around me when I step back into the room, but Sawyer is sitting on the edge of the bed. He didn't take the hint I figured he would when I locked the bathroom door.

His face is a mask of calm when he looks up at me. His eyes don't linger on my legs or the swell of my breasts against the taut towel.

He's looking at me as if he sees me, and I don't know how to feel about it. Being hopeful on any level would be a huge mistake, but it doesn't

stop my heart from kicking up a notch with the notion.

“I figured you’d be gone,” I say, because just accepting things and making assumptions has never been my strong suit.

“Do you want me gone or do you think I want to be gone?” he counters, remaining frustratingly stoic.

I shrug because I don’t really know how to answer that. My inability to determine exactly what I want is a major part of my problem right now, and only a few of those questions are in regard to him.

Do I still want to be a cop now that my sister’s murder has truly been solved?

Do I want to stay in Farmington when the town holds nothing but pain and sorrow for me?

I’ve heard of existential crises before but I think this may be my first one.

Does my life have any meaning any longer? What’s my purpose if I’ve lived my entire adult life fighting for the truth in my sister’s case.

“Lennox,” he prods, and I can only imagine how crazy I look standing there wordlessly as a million thoughts jumble in my head.

“I figured it was just sex.”

He nods. “And you want just sex? Or you think I want just sex?”

I swallow again, my mouth suddenly dry.

“It could be if that’s what you want.”

“What do you want?” I manage, my voice a little weaker because I honestly don’t know how I want him to answer it.

His eyes once again dart between mine as if his answer is reliant on more than himself.

“I know that you need me.”

I shake my head because that’s not an answer.

“I—”

He stands from the bed, my words falling away.

“You may not be able to say it with words, but your body speaks to me, Lennox.”

“I could have sex with anyone.”

He practically growls his distaste in my response as he inches closer.

“I’m not talking about sex, baby.”

His breath is warm on my cheek as he leans in closer, and it takes a lot of focus to keep my eyes from fluttering closed and pressing my hand to his chest so I can feel his heartbeat against my palm.

“I need you,” he whispers, his hands frustratingly down at his sides. “I need you close. I need to know you’re okay. I need to be there to give you what you *need* and take anything you’re willing to give to me. Being beside you, having you in my arms, is what I need.”

Tears burn my eyes and nose, and rather than making me feel ridiculous for not being able to stop it once the first tear falls, I feel safe with him.

He doesn’t wrap his arms around me when I press my hand to his chest, but the rhythmic beating of his heart settles me. My tears are silent, the body-racking sobs somehow staying locked inside for now.

The stubble on his cheek presses to the side of my face, making me feel alive, making me want to stay that way.

It isn’t until right now, this very second, standing before him, that I realize I’ve never really lived. My overprotective parents made every decision for me. Hell, I was grown when they passed and yet I’d never left home except to go to the police academy. I never rebelled, never did anything to cause them undue stress. Suffering the loss of their first-born child was enough pain for a lifetime. I never wanted to add to it.

“I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, and I’m sorry. I just—”

His words fall away when I lift my eyes to his.

“Grab a quick shower and come back to bed,” I whisper.

I can't make declarations. I can't untangle my feelings right now. Too much has happened recently for me to trust anything I'm feeling and voice them as the truth.

What I do know is that I don't want him gone, at least not today.

His hand is soft when he lifts it to my cheek. His lips are even softer when he brushes them against mine.

His fingers trail down my shoulder when he steps around me heading toward the bathroom.

I don't know how long it will last, but right here is exactly where I want to be.

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Chapter 36

Ugly

Waking up alone is the status quo. Hell, it's preferred.

Today is different. I can't even manage getting my eyes open much less climbing back out of this bed.

The room is silent. There's no shower running in the bathroom or breathing across the room.

Empty. It all just feels empty, like something more than just her presence is gone.

As much as I want to go hunt her down, to chase her and correct her behavior exactly the way she likes me to, I also know she's made up her mind. Lennox relinquishing any of her power to me was a gift. It was temporary. I need to come to terms with that because fighting for something she doesn't want will only end up blowing up in my face. She'll dig her heels in and she'll be lost to me forever. I can't think of anything worse.

Walking away should be easy. I've been through some crazy shit before. There's always a woman in danger, always someone that needs to be saved. My inability to see Lennox that way surprises me. I should be bored by her already. I know it makes me sound like an asshole, but my presence in a woman's life at any given moment has always been upon agreement that I wouldn't stay there. I'm not permanent fixture material, but despite it starting that way with her, I just can't seem to pull back.

She's stronger than me, having made that choice. It's probably the best one, and maybe one day I'll be able to see it as such.

Her tragedy and my lack of stopping Dixon is what joins us. Maybe I want to help her now in any way she'll let me because of the guilt I feel. My failure to keep Elizabeth, Rochelle, and her safe has me overcompensating.

As much as I'd like to put the way I'm feeling now on all the shit that has happened, I know I can't.

These tragedies may bind us to each other, but I'm not exactly fighting against it.

I think back to my stance on settling down and feel completely foolish.

I argued about New Mexico, Farmington, and Cerberus and how so many think the combination of the three somehow has magical powers capable of changing who you are at soul-deep level.

I was the playboy, the man who preferred a different woman each night rather than putting in the hard work of figuring out what made one woman tick over time.

I'm a man. Bad sex is actually pretty hard to find. We're simple fucking creatures when it comes to getting off. If there isn't a medical condition causing problems, coming is going to happen no matter the situation.

I knew that first night with Lennox that something had the potential to change. I didn't fight it. I did absolutely nothing to tamp it down or even dig deeper to see what could happen.

If I believed in fate or soulmates, I'd probably be freaking out right now.

I still can't ignore the voice in my head that is screaming and telling me that if she's not right next to me that she isn't safe.

Chances and probability play a huge role in my job. I know all about tragedy and trauma and actions and reactions and self-harming behaviors. I'm aware of regret and how all of it combined can lead to some really horrible decisions.

It's what pulls me out of the bed and forces me back into my clothes.

I tell myself that I can deal with it if she's done with me. I know it will be a journey because, for some reason, without her in the room, I feel less than whole, but I have to see her and know she's safe.

Stormy holds his hand up when I climb off the elevator, and pain circles around in my gut like the twine on a weed eater is lodged in there.

He shakes his head but it does nothing to calm me.

"She's safe," he says when he's within hearing distance.

I know he wouldn't lie to me, but I also know I won't fully believe it

until I see her with my own eyes.

I feel frantic, almost as if I'm coming down from a host of drugs I didn't agree to have in my body in the first place.

"She called Colton and he came to pick her up. She's at his house with Sophia."

He holds his hand up when I go to step around him, and then it hits me. Stormy is here to prevent me from going to her. He's been put in place as a roadblock.

I tilt my head, really looking at him.

He's not here because he feels a certain way or he thinks that I might make the wrong call.

He's here because someone instructed him to be.

It makes me wonder what Lennox might've said to Colton. Maybe he pulled the son-in-law card and an original member and Dominic put him here. Maybe Kincaid is frustrated with what happened the night I was drugged outside of *Jake's*. It's what set everything else into motion isn't it?

I could argue that Dixon's plan all along was to get to Lennox.

None of it makes me feel better. It doesn't lessen that urge to go to Colton's house and demand she tell me why she chose him instead of me. I know they don't share the same things I've shared with her. The man is a million percent dedicated to his wife.

"No," Stormy says when I growl and try to get past him one more time.

"Is there a problem?"

We both dart our eyes to the woman standing behind the front desk.

"The last thing she needs is another man in her life taking liberties, Ugly. You know that as much as I do."

His words make me freeze. I'd never want to be one more problem in her life, but I also don't think she's thinking clearly either.

"She's got me fucked up," I mutter, running my hands over my face.

“I wish I could offer some decent advice, but I don’t know shit about relationships.”

“Why’d they send you?”

He shrugs. “Luck of the draw?”

I huff. “Everyone still at the hospital?”

He shakes his head.

“Someone from the administrative team pulled Kincaid to the side and asked if we could sit up there in shifts of smaller groups because it was distracting for others. People were showing up who didn’t have any reason to even be up there like it was some kind of fucking meet and greet.” He shakes his head, annoyance clear in his voice and on his face. “People were asking for autographs, pictures with their kids, rides on the bikes and shit. And the fucking groupies. I thought *Jake’s* was bad on any given night.”

“Nothing says ‘sorry about your friend’ like a chick offering to blow you in the family restroom,” I mutter, knowing exactly what he’s talking about because some of the women in town are ruthless when we do community events.

The first time it happened at a barbecue at the park, I questioned what we were doing as a club to bring that kind of attention to ourselves, making these women think it’s alright to behave that way.

“Right now Kincaid, Shadow, Kid, and Legacy are there,” he explains. “I’m sure they wouldn’t have a problem with you swinging by if you like.”

“There’s been no changes?”

He shakes his head. “They don’t know how long he was down with no oxygen. Kincaid said one of the doctors mentioned his body needing to heal some before they attempt to pull him off the ventilator, but I got a couple minutes in there with him, dude, and he looks completely normal. There’s no wounds or anything. Whatever that piece of shit injected him with really fucked him up.”

“I think I’ll just head back to the clubhouse.”

He nods as if he understands, but how could he? He’s not responsible.

He didn't get injected, leading to a series of events that left a man in the hospital fighting for his life, two women dead, and a police detective that may never be the same again.

"I'm right behind you," he says, and I hear the warning in his tone.

He's a smart man for thinking I won't at least drive by Colton's house despite it being out of the way.

And I do, but Colton's truck is gone, leaving Sophia's SUV in the driveway.

I roll up, lowering my window as I pull up beside the Cerberus SUV.

"Stormy said you were at the hospital," I say to Legacy when he rolls his window down.

"Colton got called out. Didn't want to leave Sophia and your girl in there alone."

My girl. Oh how I fucking wish.

I'm torn between telling him to go ahead and leave and I can take over and going back to the clubhouse and giving her some room like she asked for by leaving me alone in the hotel room.

I look in my rearview mirror when a horn blares, cussing Stormy for drawing attention to the three dark SUVs now idling outside in this residential neighborhood.

The curtains in Colton's house shift, and I know before long Sophia will either call her husband or her dad to report back, and that's heat I don't really want right now.

I nod at Legacy and shove my hand, middle finger raised, out my window before rolling it back up, and I drive back to the clubhouse.

I quietly join the other guys who are working on the extension to the clubhouse. A couple ask me how Lennox is doing, but no one voices their own opinions. We all seem content to just get lost in our own thoughts as we work.

Chapter 37

Lennox

“You don’t have to apologize again,” I tell Sophia, the best smile I can manage tugging at my lips. If she only knew how uncomfortable people wanting forgiveness makes me feel.

“I’m not doing it because I’m bragging or anything,” she says, handing me a glass of iced soda, her hands immediately going to her rounded belly.

We were in high school at the same time, but here she is married with a grown stepson, another young son, and she’s pregnant again.

I’m not usually one to gauge my life against others, but we’re not in the same place in our lives despite our closeness in age. I can’t help but wonder which one of us made the right decision.

“I didn’t think you were,” I assure her, wishing she would drop the subject altogether.

I think I knew deep in my gut before she showed up at my house yelling that no one connected to Cerberus is capable of doing what Joey Dixon did. I also think I knew Sawyer wasn’t.

“Sawyer is a good man,” I say, knowing I believe it deep inside and I’m not just saying it because I think it’s what she wants to hear.

Him being a good man is a lot of the reason why I slunk out of the hotel room this morning without looking back.

My life is an utter fucking mess. My connection to Dixon got Sawyer drugged, got Rochelle and Elizabeth killed. One of their own in the hospital fighting for his life. I got so many people hurt, and I don’t know if I’ll ever get over the guilt of that.

The least I could do is leave that man alone no matter how much the thought of doing so squeezes my heart like a fist.

“So you and Sawyer?”

I stare past her at a spot on the wall. I’d much rather talk about my attack and the fact that, although justified, I killed someone. Granted he

deserved to die in a much more brutal manner, but I was sort of in a time crunch situation.

I thought by leaving Sawyer earlier today that was the resolution, but it only feels more complicated now that I'm here.

I doubt words would've helped so I didn't use any. He's an astute man. He'll figure it out.

Maybe then he can enlighten me because it felt like the right thing to do and for some reason now it doesn't. I blame my head and the erratic chaos of my life. It's another reason I don't need my complications to cause him problems.

"There's no Sawyer and me," I mutter when it seems she's got more patience than I first thought. She's not going to drop it with only my silence. "Tell me about Dennis Milton and his brother."

I expect her to snap her head back, refuse to speak about him with the understanding that I don't want to talk about any of this shit either.

She gives me a soft smile.

"It was hard coming back here after he held us hostage," she says.

Sophia, her stepson, Rick, and his best friend now husband, Landon, were taken hostage in this very home when she and Colton first started dating. The man who showed up at the house that night was deranged, wanting to kill his brother who was in police custody for killing a woman he loved in a fit of rage. A series of bad decisions and drugs brought him here, his mind telling him he could trade the brother that was in custody for murder for the three hostages he took.

"I only felt safe when Colton was around. Even the weapons training that I'd done since childhood didn't stop the cold chills. I wouldn't answer the door if someone was on the porch. The people in my life got used to calling or texting before showing up because the doorbell gave me anxiety. We started having packages delivered to the clubhouse because a random shadow crossing the front door had the power to make me hyperventilate."

I swallow as she describes my future.

"You didn't think about moving?"

“And let a dead man win? Let him continue to have control over me?” She shakes her head. “We made adjustments until things got easier, but Colton raised his son in this home. We couldn’t let Milton take that from us, but that was what we thought was best for us. You may not feel the same way.”

I look down at my hands as I consider how I’d feel going back to the house I was attacked in.

Right now it’s a crime scene, and before that night it was a shrine to my parents and Elle.

But before Elle’s murder, it was home. It was laughter and my mom baking casseroles on the weekends to restock the freezer for the upcoming week because both our parents worked, but we enjoyed family meals together.

It was the place Elle would come back to when her adult life got to be too much and she needed to be reminded that she was loved unconditionally.

We had joy there. It’s always been home for me.

Joey Dixon is dead. Only the memories of him and what he did can hurt me now, and as much pain as that is, he can’t show up on my porch or reach through my hanging clothes and wrap his fist around my throat.

“I don’t even know if I want to stay in town,” I confess.

Silence draws my eyes back up to Sophia. I fully expect her to give me a list of reasons to stick around. She’s made assumptions about my connection to Sawyer, and having her perfect life with Colton made me think she’d push for me to run to Sawyer, as if he’s waiting for me to jump into his open arms. But I don’t have what she and Colton have.

How often does someone who was supposed to be a one-night stand end up turning into more?

How often does a one-night stand end up in the middle of a serial killer’s plan to destroy the sister of a woman he killed fifteen years prior?

I huff at my own contradictory thoughts. I’m all over the damn place and that’s why I can’t make any life-altering decisions right now.

“What do you know about Sawyer?” I ask because I just can’t help myself.

“Not much. I don’t go to the clubhouse very often. My parents don’t live on Cerberus property. I know that my Uncle Diego does his research. I know that only elite men and women are brought into the fold.”

I open my mouth to inform her just how I met Sawyer and what happened less than an hour later, but I snap my own mouth closed. We were consenting adults and having any negative feelings about that night comes from my own prejudices and the voices in my head that sound a lot like my mother’s voice warning me about dangerous men.

Sophia’s son wakes up from his nap, and then she’s in mom-mode.

The afternoon and into the evening is filled with a smiling happy toddler who takes it upon himself to show me every single toy he has.

I eat dinner with them, realizing just how lonely my life has been since I came here. I have literally nowhere else to go but home and I’m not ready for that yet. I wouldn’t even consider Colton a close friend, and before today I only had a cordial connection to Sophia. She was the wife of my mentor, not someone I’d call out of the blue to ask if she wanted to grab lunch.

When I thanked her for the blanket and pillows, that had already begun to change. She had no obligation to keep me company all day while Colton worked. She didn’t have to be nice to me.

Yet, she never batted an eye.

As I lie on my side, I keep my ears open. As a detective, being nose-y is both a character flaw and a requirement.

I’ve always looked for the bad in people. I’ve always judged and waited for the other shoe to drop. People aren’t nice. They want something. There’s always something they think they can get from you.

Sophia being so nice today was odd. It went against everything my mom and dad made me believe about people.

I listen, waiting for the complaints, waiting for her to ask him if she’s going to have to babysit me again tomorrow.

Their bedroom door isn't even closed, and maybe that's purposeful. Maybe they'll talk loud enough for me to hear them so they don't have to ask me to leave to my face.

They don't complain.

They don't even mention me, but not in a way that I feel like they don't want to talk about it because it's a sore subject.

Their conversation is what I'd consider normal.

Sophia tells him all about her day. They discuss their son and how he's so energetic. They joke about how much trouble they're in with a new baby coming soon. Sophia laughs after calling him an old man.

It's clear they love each other. They're thriving even after a madman tried to rip all of that away from them.

I try not to be bitter about it. Colton didn't lose his son that day, like my parents suffered with Elle's death. I'd never wish that pain on anyone, but our story had a different ending.

I close my eyes, trying to will sleep to take over, but all I see behind my eyelids are flashes of Sawyer, as if he's the only one capable of seeing me through all of this.

I reject the thought outright because I don't need anyone. Relying on people just gives you something to grieve when you lose them. And there's no amount of happy right now that can make that worth it.

Chapter 38

Ugly

Nothing has felt right for the last two weeks.

Today as some of us hang out in the garage is no different.

Two of the teams are working in South America, and I have a feeling I'm the reason my team didn't get picked to go. Maybe it's because we're still a man down. Bishop has stabilized but he hasn't regained consciousness. The doctors are hopeful he'll wake up, but they won't even speculate on how he'll be when that happens.

I keep catching Slick and Aro making eyes at each other, and it's not that it bothers me, but they think they're being inconspicuous and boy are they wrong. It's as if they're playing out some fantasy, building anticipation for a later rendezvous.

It makes me miss her more than normal which is saying a lot because Lennox Maison is always on my mind. She infiltrates my dreams, stars in every fantasy I manage to conjure.

She's everywhere but here.

I catch both Jinx and Thumper glancing in my direction more than once. I've been part of this before, been one of the ones expected to give an opinion when one of the guys are on the outs with their girl. When I stepped in here and Slick handed me a beer, I thought for sure this was an intervention.

It still feels that way, but no one is mentioning Lennox. I'm waiting for it because I've built up the argument in my head. I have all the fucking answers, the biggest one being Lennox isn't the type of woman you throw over your shoulder and demand she love you. She's had enough of people trying to make decisions for her. I won't be another person she has to add to that list.

Half of me imagines her pining over me. The other half knows better.

The sound of gravel crunching under tires draws our attention, but it's Jinx that stands to go see who has arrived.

I take another sip of my beer, knowing they won't get started on giving me shit about my personal life until he gets back.

The crazy thing is that I think I may want to talk about it, but in a way that will lead to answers because the complete silence is quite possibly killing me.

She left the hotel room without so much as a whisper, yet somehow it was the loudest thing I'd ever heard in my entire life. She made it clear what she wanted. Her expectations were in her choice.

Contacting her, trying to insinuate myself into her life, wouldn't be welcome. It might possibly be the first time I went completely against my own judgment. She issued a wordless command, and I obeyed, despite the pain and anguish it caused me.

I look up when a shadow crosses the front of the garage, but it isn't Jinx returning.

Lennox stands there, her eyes locked on me.

As if this entire day was somehow choreographed, everyone else stands and leaves.

I know they're giving me privacy, and I seriously appreciate it. There's no need to witness this beautiful woman ripping my heart out, and that's how I have to view it. Getting hopeful she's here for any other reason will only leave me more devastated than I was waking up alone in that hotel room.

"Hi," she says softly, her eyes still locked on me.

I feel entranced by her as much now as I always have. It started that day in the gym and has yet to release its hold on me.

"I heard the kids splashing in the pool behind the clubhouse," she says, walking a little closer.

She swings her eyes to the right, and suddenly I feel a wash of relief as she focuses some of her attention on the tools lining the far wall.

"There are extra bathing suits in the pool house if you wanted to take a dip," I say, my voice sounding distant in my ears.

"I may take you up on that some other time."

I watch as her finger traces the edge of the workbench. It's not inherently sexual, but my body doesn't care. Every damn thing about this woman turns me on. It's impossible to be near her and not think about getting her beneath me.

I shift in my seat, watching as her lip twitches because she doesn't miss a damn thing. My attraction to her is an open damn book, and I don't know if I should like it or hate it.

"The weather—"

"Lennox," I groan. "Really? The weather?"

She chuckles as if she was going to keep up with stupid fucking small talk until I changed the subject.

"I enjoyed the time we spent together."

Honestly, that conversation isn't any better either.

I wanted her here. I've wanted her in front of me countless times since she left me alone. I had worked through half a million conversations, ways to convince her that I'm a risk worth taking. Now, I'm left speechless and unsure.

"I think I'd like to spend more time with you."

My heart kicks up, considering what she's saying, but instead of a smile, my lips turn the opposite way.

"You want to use me for sex?"

She turns to face me.

"The sex was amazing."

"Lennox, I—"

"But I'm also interested in other stuff."

My foot taps on the floor, but I know better than to jump up with assumptions on my tongue.

"Other stuff?"

She shrugs as if she's not deciding my fate right now.

“I thought maybe we could date.”

“I—”

“Unless you don’t date.”

“I could date,” I say stupidly, my throat growing dry.

“Don’t sound so enthused,” she mutters, her eyes darting toward the door as if she’s thinking she made a mistake by coming here.

“I’m freaking out a little,” I confess.

“Too forward? I mean, I know you’re a guy that likes control, and you didn’t come hunt me down which Sophia assured me you’d do if you were interested. Apparently, Cerberus men aren’t exactly known for taking no as an answer. And God, that’s sounds so rapey and I didn’t mean it like that, it’s just that—”

Her mouth snaps shut when I pop up from the chair.

“I was giving you space.”

“Are you done?” she snaps.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding my head as I close the distance. “I’m done.”

She melts against my body when I wrap my arms around her.

“I’d love to date you,” I tell her.

Her eyes sparkle, but I can also see some of the shadows looming there.

It took a lot of courage for her to show up here and put herself out there. I know she isn’t where I am yet, but I also know it’s going to be a lot of fun getting her there.

“Want to go back to your place?”

She shakes her head. “I’m in an apartment right now.”

The thought of her still not being able to go home makes my heart clench.

“I’m having the house remodeled. It wasn’t exactly my style, but from

the looks of the completed extension on the clubhouse, I hired the wrong crew or maybe I didn't have a big enough budget to bring in the right people."

"A lot of sexual frustration went into the clubhouse extension." Not only from me. After Drake and Boomer made everyone aware of their relationship, it made me understand the days he was up working before anyone else. I spent a lot of lonely mornings out there until it was done last week.

"Is that a warning that you won't last long?" She bites her lip, her cheeks turning pink.

"How do you feel about exhibitionism?"

She crinkles her nose.

"Because if you keep talking about it while rubbing your body against mine, I'm going to fuck you on that workbench over there, and any one of the team could walk in here at any given minute."

She looks past me at the workbench as if she's actually considering the odds.

"I swear, Lennox," I growl, stepping away and grabbing her hand.

The clubhouse is full of people as we walk through, and she's astute enough to know every eye is on us as we shuffle toward the hallway.

She chuckles when someone says it's about damn time. I throw the entire group in the living room a middle finger over my shoulder and escort her to my room.

"Think they're going to hover outside the room and give you pointers through the door?" she asks as she steps inside my room.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Get on your knees, baby."

Her eyes widen as she turns around, finding me unzipping my pants and shifting from one foot to the other to kick my boots off.

Her smile is wide as she lowers herself to the floor.

"You're going to make me come," I explain. "Then I'll make you

come, and then we'll come together.”

Her hand disappears between her legs as she rubs herself over her clothing.

“If you come before it's your turn, you won't come at all. Do you understand?”

She nods, her throat working on a swallow.

“Open wide.”

She obeys as I press the glistening tip of my cock to her lips.

The rest is a blur, and she turns me into a liar because she does come before her turn, but I'm too busy coming at the same time to correct her behavior.

I get the feeling this woman is going to challenge me for the rest of my life.

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Chapter 39

Lennox

My eyes volley back and forth as I try to keep up with the excitement that has everyone talking so animatedly.

“It was just a twitch,” Slick says as if she has to be the level-headed one in the group.

“It’s a big deal,” Stormy says. “He hasn’t moved a muscle in weeks.

We’re all in the common area of the local specialized nursing facility. Bishop was moved here a week and a half ago after spending two weeks unresponsive in the hospital.

Kincaid wanted him back at the clubhouse, but his level of care meant he needed full-time nursing. He tried to persuade Sunshine, the best nursing assistant the world has ever known, to come take care of him, but she refused to leave her job to care for only him. She felt a responsibility to all of the residents at the facility and refused to give them up.

Cerberus, including Sawyer, have been a permanent fixture since he arrived.

The elderly ladies here swoon. The nursing staff have been extra helpful to the guys that come and sit at Bishop’s bedside. There’s a mix of probably ten different perfumes floating around us right now.

“I brought in homemade cookies today,” Susan tells Stormy.

The facility administrator has to be pushing sixty, but she doesn’t seem to think she’s pushing her luck as she blinks up at the leather wearing Cerberus member with her hand on his forearm.

“I love homemade cookies,” Big Daddy says. He’s Sylvie’s grandfather who is Spade’s girlfriend.

“Your blood sugar was elevated this morning,” another nurse says as she joins the fray. “Let’s see if the kitchen has any of those sugar-free butterscotch candies you like.”

Big Daddy grumbles about sugar-free things and how they give him

the shits as she tries to guide him away. The man is amazing but being told he can't have something always leads to him reminding everyone he didn't fight for his country only for people to decide what he can and can't eat.

"Sorry," Sylvie mutters, but she's not apologizing to anyone in particular, and I think everyone in the group thinks the man is absolutely hilarious.

"I bet your ass is still red," Sawyer says, leaning in so only I can hear him, but then I see Drake, Boomer's boyfriend turn his head, a wide smile on his face.

My cheeks flame with a combination of embarrassment and arousal.

We've been at it nonstop, and I would feel guilty about that if we didn't also spend hours in the afterglow talking about us and life and the things we can see ourselves doing in a year, five years, or even twenty years down the road.

He speaks as if us still being together is a fact, not a possibility, and I sort of love him for it.

Not sort of. Completely love him for it. I knew I felt that way when I showed up at the clubhouse, but my fear of rejection had me testing the waters. The man hasn't so much as flinched since I showed up that day.

The only time he had an opinion was when I needed to go back to my temporary apartment. He declared that I was to stay with him every second. I haven't argued. I want to be near him. I want to be in his arms. I live for the days his eyelids lower and he issues a command.

"Sometimes the muscles move," one of the nurses informs us.

I try my best to concentrate on what she's saying.

Time has helped, but it hasn't been a miracle cure for my guilt. Even Sawyer fights with it some days. What has helped is no one at the clubhouse blames me for what happened. Dixon made his own choices, and no one is to blame for his psychosis but him.

"There's Sunshine," someone says, and we all turn toward her as she approaches.

The woman is an angel. She's been working nonstop. Her first shift is with the facility and then much of the time after spent in Bishop's room. I visited once with Sawyer and we walked in on her talking so animatedly as she moved around the room we thought he'd woken up. He hadn't but she doesn't let him lying in bed with a feeding tube stop her. She says he'll wake up when he's damn good and ready and not a second sooner.

She doesn't seem upset, but she's also not smiling as she approaches.

"He's not awake?" Kincaid asks, the hope draining from his voice.

"He's awake," she says, her eyes darting over the group.

We knew this was a possibility. The doctors had told Cerberus that there could be major neurological consequences of him having gone without oxygen for so long.

"Is it a stutter?" someone asks.

"Is he paralyzed?" another chimes in.

"He umm seems to have good motor skills. I'd say about what you'd expect after being comatose for a month. He's..."

"If he's giving you hell, he doesn't mean it," Stormy adds. "He's a man's man. He's not going to be very happy about being in a bed with a tube in his di—penis."

"He's more confused than anything," Sunshine says, her eyes locked on Rivet, one of the female team members of Cerberus. "He's asking for you, and wondering why he's here instead of Bahrain."

Rivet's fiancé Cannon freezes beside her.

"Bahrain happened over five years ago," she says, her eyes locked on Sunshine.

"I don't think he remembers the last five years," Sunshine answers.

Rivet steps forward, and Cannon does nothing to stop her. It's clear his trust in her is infinite.

Shadow is the one to head her off. He happens to be Cannon's father also.

“You don’t have to do this,” Shadow whispers.

Rivet looks to Cannon who nods, and she follows Sunshine down the hallway into Bishop’s room.

“Holy shit,” someone mutters.

“No joke,” comes another response.

THE END

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