



ELLIE R. HUNTER

A
New

ERA

SONS OF LOST SOULS MC BOOK THIRTEEN

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ELLIE R. HUNTER

Ellie R. Hunter

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Self-publishing

ellierhunter@hotmail.co.uk

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Editing: Jae Atal

Cover: Tracie Douglas

Formatting: Rachael Tonks

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SONS OF LOST SOULS MC BOOK THIRTEEN

ELLIE R. HUNTER

Chapter One

Leo

The sun beats down on me as I ride front and centre with my brothers behind me. With another run under the belt and more cash than the club's ever seen coming in from the Haywards, our arrangement is going strong, considering that we still haven't put Effie Rathbone in the ground. I've never known anyone to lay this low for this long before and the club grows more impatient by the day. I hit the road harder, trying to outrun the sun. JJ has no problem keeping up with me and I grin. A gas station comes up on the horizon, I wave my fingers, singling for us to pull over.

As we come to a stop, I kill the engine and hop off my motorcycle, relishing in the feeling of freedom and power that riding gives me. My body aches from the long journey, but it's a satisfying ache that reminds me of the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

Filling my tank, the smell of gasoline and the hum of engines fill the air. I walk towards the small convenience store attached to the gas station, the cool air offers me a reprieve from the heat outside while I grab a cold drink and pay. I push my bike over to the rest stop and light a cigarette. Slings my leg over the leather-clad seat, I straddle my ride then dig my phone out of my pocket and shoot Holly a text, letting her know I'll be home by this evening. My dick twinges knowing I'll be inside her tonight, knowing she'll be as desperate for me as I am for her.

“How’s the wedding plans going?” Jay asks, parking his bike next to mine.

I snort. “You’d have to ask Holly, I’m just paying for it. I’m told the occasional plan, but I told her whatever she wants that makes her happy will make me happy. It’s worked so far.”

Jay’s laugh catches the attention of our brothers nearby. “Harper’s looking to head into the city to look for her dress. Probably gonna cost me a fortune and like you, brother, I’ll just be paying for it.”

My sister, Jay’s old lady and the mother of his son, has already assured me she’ll be at my wedding. After she missed Luca’s wedding, she needed me to know she wouldn’t let me down. I would’ve told her not to sweat it, but the guilt she still feels for Luca and Victoria still burned bright in her eyes. She’s been helping Holly with the planning and Holly’s been grateful. Mom took over the guest list as she knew everyone. With just under four weeks to the day, I’m looking forward to it. The sooner she has my name and my ring on her finger, the more I’ll feel content I’m doing shit right.

My phone rings and I expect it to be Holly, but Luca’s name fills the screen. Answering, I put the phone to my ear. “Yeah?”

The first thing I hear down the line is a woman’s cry filled with pain. *Is that Victoria?*

“Luc?”

Standing straight, alarm thrusts through me.

“Brother, Tor’s in labour. We’re on our way to the hospital. Can you let Ricky and the twins know? For some reason she wants every fucker there... and I want you there too.”

I snort. Trust my brother to want to keep every moment with Victoria to himself. Sometimes I don’t think he gets that he’s married to her and gets to keep her for the rest of his life. When Rayna was born, India had her parents at the hospital along with mine, I didn’t feel like I was missing out any more than Luca would.

Victoria cries out again and the line goes dead. Knowing my brother as well as I do, in his mind, he's done his part in letting the family know and now he'll be focusing on her.

"Rick," I holler. He looks up from his conversation with Sparky. "Luca called. Victoria's gone into labour, they're on their way to the hospital." The twins perk up and head for their rides. "Once we get to the turn-off for Dog City, we'll head for the hospital. Everyone else, head home."

With everyone preparing to ride, I call Holly.

"Hey," she answers.

"Hey. Victoria's having the baby..."

"Yeah, I heard. Your mom shot out of here so fast I nearly missed it." She laughs.

Since Luca couldn't make the time to call Ricky, I wonder when he called Mom.

"Get Rayna ready and go with them. I'll meet you at the hospital."

"Are you sure they'll want everyone there?"

"Yeah. Go let Mom know to wait for you."

"Okay. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Ending the call, I store my phone away and once we're back on the road, the traffic light, my mind wanders. Luca's going to be a father. There was a time when I didn't think he was capable of holding down a relationship, let alone committing to a life with a woman and reproducing. He's been through so much and he's got many responsibilities on his shoulders nowadays, I have no doubt he'll be a great father. He's smashing life in all other aspects.

The sun is setting as we split off from the club and ride into the city. We hit traffic and my phone vibrates in my pocket. While we're not moving, I dig it out and see a text from Jay. Harper is with Holly at the hospital, and can I look out for her?

I shoot him a quick reply before putting the phone away and pulling off. The hospital isn't far and by the time we park up, night has fallen, and I'm drained of all energy.

We don't have to go far to find everyone. Mom and Dad, Kyla, Holly, and Harper are in the waiting room, with Gunner asleep on Harper's lap and my girl asleep, curled up on a chair next to Dad. Emma and Aspen show up from somewhere in the hospital and the twins head straight to their old ladies.

Tipping my chin in Dad's direction, I take the chair next to my woman and plant my lips on hers.

"God, I've missed you," I tell her quietly, for only her to hear.

"Good." She smiles, but it falls. "You look tired."

"I can't lie and say I wasn't looking forward to my own bed and not just because you'd be there."

Rolling her eyes, I don't miss how her chest heaves and her eyes fill with lust.

Sliding my arm on the back of her chair, I squeeze the top of her arm as she rests her head against my shoulder.

Dad sits forward in his chair and asks, "How did the run go?"

When he stepped down, I knew he was stepping back but I didn't imagine he'd step back altogether. He's adjusting and I'll give him the time he's been looking for.

"It was long but uneventful."

"That's what I like to hear. The brothers headed back to the club or are they stopping over at Luca's place?"

"No, they rode home."

Mom's impatience grows by the second and she jumps up from her seat and paces, meeting Kyla's pace, step for step.

"How come you two aren't in with them?" I ask.

"Your damn brother," Kyla mutters and then throws me an apologetic look.

Six long fucking hours later, Luca bursts through the doors and Mom and Kyla are straight on him.

“What’s going on?” Mom asks.

“I have a son!” he boasts, and Mom throws her arms around him. Stepping back, she demands, “Details.”

“He’s healthy. Tor’s fuckin’ perfect. Come meet him.”

Our parents and Kyla and Ricky follow him through the door, and they all disappear.

“First Sebastian, then Gunner, then Thomas, and now Luca’s had a son. You’re the only one with a daughter, little brother,” Harper teases.

“No, I’m not, you forgetting about Penelope?”

Her smile slips. “Oh my God, I totally forgot about her.”

Laughing, I sit back and close my eyes as she and Holly strike up a conversation about the wedding.

I must drift off because in no time Holly’s shaking my arm, standing over me.

“Come on, we get to see the baby before we leave.”

Holding out her hand, I take it and stand. Dad sits with Rayna and Gunner and since I trust him with my life, I nod and follow everyone to meet the baby.

“You don’t have long as it’s late,” a nurse warns as she points out Victoria’s room.

Harper and Holly’s excitement is tangible. I wonder if Holly’s thinking about us having a child together in the future.

Sitting up and glowing, Victoria holds my new nephew with a huge grin on her face. Luca takes the baby from her and walks around the bed. “Here, meet River Mark Jackson.”

Before I know what’s happening, he’s passing me the kid, and Holly’s close at my side, peeking around the blanket and melting at his little, round face.

“He’s a beauty, can’t see who he looks like yet though,” I say.

Myles grunts. “Cause babies look all the same when they’re fresh.”

“Fuckers. My kid is all Jackson,” Luca barks.

“Half Simmons, little Jackson,” Mason reminds him.

“Please, I’ve filled your sister with so much come, there’s no trace of your bloodline left.”

“Babe!” Victoria snaps.

“I don’t have any problem laying you out in front of your son,” Mason argues.

“Like you could before,” Luca bites.

“Hey, no arguing around this little one,” Holly murmurs and I pass him over to her. I know she’s dying for a cuddle.

“He’s so beautiful, Victoria.”

“Thank you,” she beams.

“How are you feeling?” Holly asks her.

“Like I’m never going to feel normal again but so happy about it.”

Holly passes River into Mason’s waiting arms and steps back into my arms. The second Victoria yawns, I clear my throat.

“We should get out of here, you need rest.”

“Thanks for waiting all this time,” she says.

“Of course. There’s nowhere else we would rather be,” I tell her, meaning it. Life is family and family is everything.

“I’ll walk out with you,” Luca says as Myles hands Victoria her son.

The twins hang back as we leave, no doubt wanting a moment with their sister.

“Congratulations, Luc.”

“Thanks.”

“We good to stay at your place tonight?”

“Like you need to ask.”

I collect Rayna from the waiting area and as tired as she must be, she keeps her eyes open as I carry her out to Holly’s car. Harper follows us out and straps Gunner into the car seat across from Rayna’s.

“Follow behind me, we’ll stay at Luca’s tonight,” I instruct Holly.

“Sure.”



Jay’s already at Luca’s clubhouse when we drive through the gates. I follow behind Holly’s car and kill my engine. I knew he wouldn’t go a night away from her and his boy unless he had to and while he took their bag, I pick Rayna up and wait for Holly to join me.

“It’s not how I imagined,” she says, looking up at the red-brick building.

“It’s not so bad inside,” I assure her.

Stepping through the door, Victoria’s dog is having a field day sniffing everyone, and Rayna tenses in my arms.

“It’s okay, it’s Auntie Victoria’s dog. He’s called Princess,” I tell her.

It doesn’t relax her and when the dog sniffs at us, she starts screaming, in turn, the dog starts barking.

“Can someone get him outta here,” I snap, and Angel clicks his fingers.

“Princess!” Angel snaps and the dog immediately goes to him. “No barking at Rayna. Victoria wouldn’t be happy with you!” Taking hold of his collar, he takes him upstairs and Holly watches with fascination.

“Did he just talk to the dog like he’s a child?”

“Yeah, apparently the dog understands.”

Sitting Rayna at one of the tables, I kneel down, tuck her hair back behind her ear, and wipe her tears away.

“Hey, you’re safe. You don’t need to be scared.”

I don’t think she hears me. Her gaze is stuck on the stairs. “You want pizza for dinner?”

“Yep, yep, yep,” she snuffles.

Angel jogs down the stairs and tells me, “He’s in Luca’s room, I’ll have Max walk him once Rayna’s in bed.”

“Thanks.” I turn back to my daughter. “You won’t see him now. Happy?”

She nods and becomes quickly distracted by her iPad.

The atmosphere at the dinner table is buzzing with excitement and the Dog City chapter join us. The presence of Rayna and Gunner, along with the arrival of the twins, Penelope and Thomas, adds to the lively energy in the room. Drinks are passed around, and everyone is in high spirits, celebrating a new addition to the club. It’s heartwarming to see how happy everyone is for Luca and Victoria. As dinner is served, Rayna enjoys her two slices of cheese pizza, but the tiredness starts to weigh on her. Her eyes struggle to stay open. Rudi, being considerate, escorts Holly to their room, ensuring she gets some rest.

Mom takes Holly’s seat and lowers her voice when she asks, “Which one is Konan?”

Scanning the bar, I settle on Luca’s prospect and he’s sat in the corner with Maxwell and Trey. “Over in the corner with the bottle of water.”

Watching my mom, I tip the bottle of beer to my mouth as she takes him in and arches her brow. “I never imagined her as a mother. It wouldn’t surprise me if he just fell out after she sneezed, what with all the dick she used to take.”

Snorting half my beer across the table, I bark out a laugh.

“Wow. The city really brings out the inner bitch in you.”

“Well,” she huffs. “It’s not like I’m exaggerating. Thank fuck he was born well after she left town and he’s not another one of your dad’s offspring.”

It’s no secret how my dad hurt my mom under my great uncle’s orders back in the day. When I first heard how he made moves for my mom to walk in while he was nailing some club ass, I didn’t speak to him for a month. I wondered how she could ever forgive him, but it seems she’s never forgotten.

“It’s suspicious why he’s here now.”

Shrugging, I tell her, “His mom sent him, knowing the club, to get revenge for his brother. Sounds like she’s had a hard life, losing a son.”

“Yes, well, you reap what you sow but she never done anything to warrant having to bury her own son.”

Dad joins us, asking, “What are you two talking about?”

I leave it to Mom to fill him in. “Oh you know, just thanking the lord the boy over there isn’t one of yours... what with you going with his mom all those years ago.”

Narrowing his eyes, his jaw tenses and he mutters, “We’re not bringing this up again.”

As sweet as sugar, she smiles. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad. Just thankful, like I said.”

Draining the rest of my beer, I push up out of my seat. “I’ll see you both in the morning.”

“Night, son,” Mom murmurs softly and I escape upstairs.

Creeping into our room for the night, Rayna is sprawled out on the air bed, fast asleep. However, Holly is still awake, lying on our shared bed. I quietly undress and slip into bed beside her, gently pulling her close to me.

“It’s gonna be weird seeing Luca as a dad.”

“I bet he thought the same about you when Rayna was born,” she retorts.

“Is having children something you think about?”

“Not really, but it’s something I thought would happen one day.”

“How about after the wedding, we just let it happen?”

“You don’t want to wait a while?”

“No. I want you carrying my kid. I wanna grow our family.”

Kissing the top of her head, I struggle to keep my eyes open.

“Think about it.”

Having her as my wife isn’t enough, like with the club, I want the lot with her.

Chapter Two

Leo

It's still early when I wake. Lifting my head, I glance down at the end of the bed, and Rayna's still fast asleep. To my side, Holly's soft snores hit my ears. My phone vibrates on the nightstand causing Holly to stir.

"Morning," she chokes out sleepily.

"Hey."

Her soft skin brushes against mine as she stretches, and I have to remind myself we're not alone in the room.

"What time is it?"

Grabbing my phone, I ignore the text from Zach and tell her, "Just gone seven."

She groans and hides her face in her pillow. "Why are you awake this early?"

Laughing, I tell her, "I have no idea."

Waking up slowly, she rolls onto her back and leans up to check on Rayna. I love how my kid is her first concern. Once she sees she's still asleep, she looks around the sparsely filled room.

"It's weird waking up in another clubhouse."

I've never really thought about it. A clubhouse is a clubhouse. "They're all the same."

Sitting up, she asks, "What's the plan for today?"

She leans over and grabs her lacey gloves from the windowsill and slides them on before Rayna wakes.

“We’ll go see the baby this morning and then make our way home.”

At the mention of River, she looks over her shoulder and down at me.

“Were you serious last night about wanting a baby of our own?”

Sitting up, I cup her cheek. “Damn serious. I want the fuckin’ lot with you.”

Her smile returns and she leans into my touch. “And how many babies do you want exactly?”

I grin. “As many as you can push out.”

Her eyes widen and my laugh wakes Rayna. “I’m messing with you. I don’t know, one or two?”

“Phew. I can handle one or two.”

Glancing at Rayna, she hasn’t got out from under her sheets on the air bed and has her iPad already on and watching some cartoons. When did the days of her waking up and jumping on my bed end? I don’t like how fast she’s growing up.

“Her screen time needs to be limited.” I grunt, chucking the sheets off of me.

“She’s not on it that much.”

It’s nice I have Holly to bounce off when it comes to Rayna. I’ve missed it so much, not that I had India around for long to be this way with.

“Daddy, is that dog going to be downstairs this morning?”

I don’t like the fact she’s afraid of the dog. Up till now, it never occurred to me there’d be things she is scared of, not at her young age.

“Shall I go check?”

“Yep, yep, yep.”

She goes back to watching her cartoon, and I sit up and reach down for my jeans.

“Maybe we should get a puppy and introduce her slowly to having a pet, let her see they’re not all huge monsters,” Holly suggests.

I don’t have a problem having a dog. “We’ll talk more about it after the wedding.”

I dress and leave them to get washed and dressed. I head downstairs and find I’m not the only one who’s awake early. Mom is cooking and Max is sitting on the kitchen counter with the dog growling at his feet.

“Princess. Fuck off!”

Suppressing my amusement, I take a seat at the table and accept a mug of coffee from Mom.

“My kid will be down soon, get him out of here,” I instruct him.

“I swear, this dog’s gonna be the fucking death of me. Ever since Ford died, it’s like the dog has it out for all of us,” Max moans, reaching for the leash hung up on the hook by the back door.

Princess, fuck I hate even thinking his name, jumps up at Max and the kid turns green.

Once he’s out the back door, Dad laughs. “He’s fun to watch. I’ve never known a brother to be such a pussy before.”

I laugh. “To be fair, having an owner like Luca, the dog was never gonna be anything but a dick to everyone.”

He snorts. “True.”

My phone pings with a text from Holly.

Rayna wants to know if the dog is around.

I type back. *He’s been taken out, telling her she’s good.*

Moments later, they walk into the kitchen and join us at the table. Rayna one side of me and Holly the other.

My girls.

Mom busies herself making them breakfast and I lean closer to Holly to see what's got her so preoccupied on her phone.

She flicks through photos of River that Victoria has sent this morning and I slide my arm around her, gently squeezing her shoulder. She gives me a secret smile and powers down her phone.

“Can we go see the baby now?” Rayna asks, looking up at me.

“After breakfast,” I tell her.

Rudi walks in and a shudder runs down my spine. My dad told me that it's probably because of her that I'm still alive today. When I was shot, she was the one to keep me alive until they got me to the hospital.

She pours herself a coffee into a travel mug and says her goodbyes as she leaves the kitchen. Pushing out of my seat, I follow her out into the bar.

“Rudi.”

She stops and turns to me. “Hey. I don't have long. I'm already running late for work.”

“I won't keep you long, but this is more than overdue. I just wanted to thank you for what you did the night I got shot. If you weren't there, I could've died. I probably would've died.”

“Leo...”

I hold my hand up to stop her. “If you ever need anything and Angel isn't around or for whatever reason you can't go to him, know that you can come to me. I'll help you in any way I can.”

Her mouth opens but nothing comes out.

“I won't forget.”

“Leo, of course, I did everything I could. I'd do it again, though I hope you're never in that position again.”

“Me too.”

Angel jogs down the stairs, looks between us, and asks Rudi, “You’re ready to leave?”

She nods and squeezes my arm. “Besides, I couldn’t let the future president of the club die, could I?”

Laughing, I tip my chin and watch them go. Arms slide around my waist, and I tightly turn around and come face to face with Holly.

“Victoria text, she’s ready for visitors.”

I enjoy her excitement and nod. “I guess we’re leaving then.”



It doesn’t matter which hospital you’re in, they’re all the fucking same. The eerie quietness, the smell, the nurses walking around in scrubs, and the doctors in their white coats. With my arm around Holly, Rayna skips off in front with Mom and Dad and Harper keeps close with Jay and Gunner. Luca is waiting for us out in the corridor.

Mom, Holly, and Rayna don’t look back as they walk into Victoria’s room but the look on Luca’s face has me and Dad hanging back. Luca closes the door and clenches his hands into fists.

“What’s up?” I ask.

He motions for us to follow and in the next room, a woman is asleep in her bed and a baby in a cot beside her.

He points to a huge bouquet of flowers through the small glass window. “They were delivered to Tor early this morning.”

“So why are they in this woman’s room?” Dad asks.

“Because they’re from Effie offering her congratulations to us.”

Arching my brow, I sigh. “I’ll see if Slade and Zach can track down where they were sent from.”

“With nothing else to be done about it now, let’s get in there, I wanna see my grandson.”

I walk into the room and my chest swells at the sight of Holly cradling River. Mom’s busy taking her photos but all I see is the future. Holly holding our child, her glowing from giving birth, and me and Rayna at her side.

“Do you want a cuddle... Uncle Leo?”

Snapping back to reality, Holly is stood in front of me, and I place my arms ready to take him from her.

I don’t usually give it any thought, but I forget how tiny babies are when they’re firstborn. He has a full head of dark hair and I see my brother in him. All Jackson once again.

Once I’ve had my photo taken with him then with me, Holly, Rayna, and River together, I pass him over to Dad. Strolling away from the blur of flashing lights, I take a seat by the window. We spend the morning getting to know the newest addition to our family. We grab lunch before leaving Dog City and I ride back to Willow’s Peak with Holly and Rayna driving behind in the car with Mom and Harper.

Dumping our shit by my feet in the hall, the sense of being home hits me and I smile. Years ago, I was content to set up home at the cabin, but it was never going to work long term. It was my plan for me and India. But Holly came along and deserved her own life with me and moving into the house at the club allowed us to start fresh and move on just being us.

“Daddy, can I go see Sebastian?”

“Sure.”

I stand on the porch and watch her run over to Zach and Nina’s and knock on their door. She and Sebastian are as close as brother and sister and I’m glad she’ll have him around more often.

Nina opens the door and moves to the side to let her in and gives me a wave, letting me know she’s got her.

Closing my own door behind me, I walk through the house, enjoying how Holly’s made it our home, and find her in

the laundry room. My dick stirs watching her bend over to haul our laundry into the washer, and I move behind her, grabbing onto her hips.

A yelp escapes her. “Leave it,” I ordered.

Instantly she drops the clothes and places her hands on the washer.

“Good girl.”

Pressing my chest to her back, I undo her shorts button and drag them, along with her panties, down to her knees. Slipping my hand around her, I cup her pussy. Her back arches as I rub hard circles on her clit. My dick strains against my jeans and I work quickly to free myself while continuing to prime her.

“I want you inside me, Leo. Now.”

She’s always hungry for my dick. I don’t keep my girl waiting and thrust inside her till I’m balls deep. Her gasp sends my dick throbbing.

“Yeah, you like that, don’t ya?”

“I love it,” she purrs as our skin slaps, the only noise in the house. “Harder.”

Rather than going for speed, I control myself to slam into her, agonisingly bruising her hips in my grip and her ass cheeks.

Thrust after thrust, my thighs tense, my balls tighten, her slickness running down her thighs, it all hits me like a lightning bolt. We’ve never used condoms. Every time I’ve been inside her I’ve been bare because she’s on the pill. The washer bangs against the wall with every thrust and when she cries out, her body shaking through her orgasm, I chase it with my own.



Making sure everyone has a drink in their hands, I lift my beer in the air and holler, “To Luca, Victoria, and baby River!”

The brothers and their old ladies, even the hang-arounds cheer and I sit back down and take a long pull on my beer.

Slade walks in, his jaw tight, and heads my way.

“I just got word that the farmhouse the Dead Rats used is up for sale. Well, the land, the house itself is still a burnt mess.”

“You hear of anyone who’s interested in purchasing it?”

“Not as of yet, but I’ll keep my ears to the ground. If Effie’s selling it, it could mean she has no interest in Willow’s Peak anymore.”

“I wouldn’t jump to conclusions just yet, but let’s hope so.”

There’s no hope, though, when it comes to her and us. Like us, like the Haywards, there’s a reason for every move she makes. If she’s selling the land she acquired here in town, there’s certainly a reason behind it.

“Victoria received a bunch of flowers from Effie this morning. Call Luca and get the name of the florist and check it out. You never know, it could help us.”

Again, I don’t hold much hope that it will, but unlikelier things have happened. You never know in this world.

“Will do.”

Zach follows his father out and I lean back in my seat. Finishing my beer, I get the prospect’s attention and order another.

Once again, I find myself balancing the good in our lives compared to the bad. River’s birth, Holly’s and I’s upcoming wedding, and no one being killed recently. No matter who comes for us, or why they come for us, we will sink to the lowest depths to protect the light in our world. For without the light, there’s no fucking point in breathing.

Chapter Three

Holly

It's been a long day. I sit out on the back porch with a glass of wine and listen to the muffled music coming from over in the bar. I thought I'd miss the silence from the cabin once Rayna was in bed and I was alone, but I'm finding that I enjoy the fact there is a whole club not far from the house. Everything has changed. It's amazing how once Leo and I got our shit together, everything else fell into place... just like it was meant to be. I found myself letting the old ladies into my life. Further than Nina, Harper, and Victoria. I sip the red wine and smile. I was never a big wine fan but since spending time with the old ladies, it's now my drink of choice.

I hear the front door open and close and fully relax knowing Leo's home.

"I'm out here," I call through and smile when he steps outside, kisses me, and takes the chair opposite me.

"You stink of beer."

"You stink of wine," he counters, grinning. "How's your day been? Rayna in bed?"

"Yeah, and it's been good. I found the perfect dress."

"Yeah?"

Nodding, I tell him, "You might not want to look so closely at your next statement."

Laughing, he says, "It's all good."

“How was your day?”

“Long, I’m about ready for bed. Come on.”

I wash my glass and leave it on the drainer while he locks up and checks on Rayna and then I head upstairs. I love our nightly routines, it’s so normal and mundane. We fall in sync together perfectly.

I sit at my dresser and slide my gloves off while he brushes his teeth and I apply my hand lotion, looking anywhere but at my hands. Having my scars out in the open around Leo has become normal to me now but in my mind, I’m still stuck in the past. Every time he kisses my scars, I cringe a little less. Every time he places my hand on him, I cringe less. I can’t accept them as easily as Leo and I do my best to act like the scars aren’t there at all. It’s the best I can do without living in the dark because of them.

He walks into the room, his jeans hanging loosely around his hips, and I ask, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Always.”

“What are the chances of what happened at your brother’s wedding, happening at ours?”

He pauses throwing the scattered cushions from the bed to the floor and frowns.

“How long have you been worrying about this?”

“Not long,” I lie.

The truth is it’s been on my mind for a while. Standing, I help unmake the bed and slide in under the sheets. He turns the lamp off, undresses, and joins me.

“As it stands, we have no reason to expect anyone to attack us here, but if we were, I’d make arrangements to thwart any such plans.”

“But your dad had men as lookouts on Luca’s wedding night and they were killed.”

He sighs but he’s not angry. “I’m not my dad and the choices I make will always keep you and Ray safe. All you

need to worry about is walking down the aisle to me.”

My fears are somewhat eased. I promise, “I can do that.”

He relaxes and pulls me against him, my back to his chest, and I remember the conversation I had with his mom today.

“Your mom thinks I should host some sort of ladies’ night for the old ladies here at the house.”

“Is that something you wanna do?”

“Your mom thinks...”

“I’m fully aware of what my mom thinks. But what do you want?”

“I guess I want to, as your wife-to-be, I should. But it’s weird.”

Drawing invisible circles on my upper arm, he asks, “How so?”

“I’ve gone from invisible to everyone talking to me.”

“You were never invisible.”

It sure felt like it, but I don’t fight him on it. It’ll be a fight I’ll never win in his eyes.

“Look, my mom is trying to help you settle in as the president’s old lady. Use it till you find your way.”

I never gave much thought past wanting to be with him, all the politics so to speak that comes with him never even entered my mind.

“She knows better than anyone what’s it like, what to expect, and all that, I wouldn’t advise you to listen to her if I didn’t think she’d steer you in the right direction.”

“And you don’t mind having a house full of women?”

He laughs. “No, babe. You do what you want. I’ll make sure I’m busy that night. The combination of old ladies and a fuck lot of wine is a minefield I don’t wanna tread.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Badass Leo Jackson is afraid of the old ladies?”

His snort reverberates down to his chest and onto my back.

“I grew up with them all, I know how their nights go when they’re all together.”

“I’ll be sure to put away the valuables.”

“You do that.”



Warm hands slide around my waist as I dish breakfast and even warmer lips press against my neck. There was a time when I despised the morning. Waking up to yet another day that I was alive and burdened with the scars. But not anymore.

Smiling, I say, “Good morning.”

Turning in his arms, I press my lips to his and savour his touch. I waited so long for him, I’ll never take his kisses for granted. Not a single one.

“Morning to you, too.” He smirks, stepping back, and snags a piece of toast.

“Hey, you could at least wait till it’s ready.”

Throwing me a wink, he joins Rayna at the table while I finish up breakfast.

While they’re distracted with their food and Rayna with her cartoons on her iPad, I head over to Alannah’s. Though I was excited to move into a new home that was just ours, I was cautious about moving across from Leo’s parents, but I’ve come to be glad of it. Alannah is a great help with Rayna, and she loves being able to go to and fro when she likes to spend time with her grandparents without the half-hour drive getting there.

Knocking twice, I’m not waiting long when Alannah answers. Her first reaction to me on her doorstep this early is to frown and look out past me to see if any trouble is around.

“You’re up early. Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Everything’s fine. I’m sorry to disturb you but I need a favour and I wanted to catch you before the day began.”

I’ve come to learn Alannah loves to be needed. A smile creeps along her face and she says, “Of course. Name it.”

“I need you to teach me all I need to know to be the president’s old lady.”

Her smile grows even wider. “You better come in.”

She opens the door for me, and I step inside. Cas is sitting at the kitchen table, a steaming hot mug of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in front of him.

“It’s a little early, is Leo in trouble?” he asks.

“No-no, nothing like that. He’s eating breakfast with Rayna. I came to talk with Alannah.”

Relief washes over him and he folds up his newspaper.

“In that case, I’ll leave so you can talk.” He stands and grabs his coffee. He leans in and briefly kisses Alannah before he’s gone, and the front door is clicking shut behind him.

“You sit and I’ll pour us a coffee,” she instructs.

Pulling out a chair, I take a seat and accept the coffee she passes my way before taking a seat across the table from me.

“Is this because I suggested you host a ladies’ night?”

“Sort of but I have been thinking and Leo and I were talking last night. Being his wife is going to be more than a normal marriage. I’ve watched you, you’re loved by everyone.”

Her laugh fills the kitchen but it’s not unkind. “You don’t strike me as someone who cares about that sort of thing.”

“I’m not but I don’t want to do something that embarrasses him.”

“That isn’t something you should worry about. There’s no handbook so to speak. With Cas and I, he took care of the club, and I took care of the families. We found a partnership that worked for us, and it has worked.”

A partnership. It's all I want once we're married. I'm not a fool to believe a marriage solely lasts on love. I'm ready to give my all to Leo and I believe he feels the same as me or he wouldn't have asked me to marry him.

"Holly, as long as you're loyal to Leo and to the club, the rest will fall into place. I promise you that."

"So no specific do's or don'ts?"

Her features soften and she cups her mug of coffee.

"The old ladies are our own version of their brotherhood. When Leo's on a run or busy with the club, it's the old ladies who will always be there for you to get through any storm. Embrace them and they'll love you too."

Frowning, I disagree. "I don't think the old ladies will see me as they do you."

Putting her mug down, she reaches across the table and takes hold of my hands.

"Sweetheart, you don't want to be seen to be like me, they'll see you for you. Stronger, fiercer, the new president's old lady of a new era."

She sparks confidence in me, and I inhale deeply, letting all the paranoia out with my exhale.

"I'll host a ladies' night."

"I'm always here if you need me, but I reckon you're going to be great all on your own. You've kept to yourself up till recently, but you've had a glimpse of life within the club. The day you marry Leo, you'll know in your soul who you're going to be and I'm very much looking forward to it."

Smiling, I say, "Thank you."

This is why everyone goes to Alannah, her way of calming you down or giving you the advice you want to hear is unmeasurable.

Chapter Four

Leo

The moon is full and partially hidden by clouds. The clock on the dash ticks over to two a.m. and my mind wanders to Holly just as my phone beeps with a text.

A picture of her in our bed with a red lacy bra barely covering her nipples fills the screen with the caption, “The bed is too cold without you.”

My dick grows and I groan. This isn’t the time for letting it have its own mind. I’m about to tell her to wait up for me when headlights shine in the distance. Sliding my phone into my pocket, I lower my window and light a cigarette. Luca comes to a slow stop beside me, his window already lowered.

We’re in the middle of Willow’s Peak and Dog City and with only the two of us in the know about this meet, it’s the way we plan on keeping it.

“How’s the baby?” I ask.

“I just got him down before I left, I’m hoping he’ll sleep through till I get back.”

“Where’s Victoria?”

“She’s with him. She’s like a walking zombie at the moment. I want her to get a good sleep.”

I nod, understanding the mental strength it takes to raise a baby. After a couple of nights of broken sleep, the mind becomes a heavyweight.

“What is it you needed to tell me?” I further ask. It’s why we’re meeting after all in the dead of night.

“I’ve had three visits from the Haywards this week alone. Jamie Boy’s been divulging their future plans. They’re looking to use the city as a pipeline down south.”

“That’s it? An entire city for one pipeline?”

“Apparently so.” He shrugs.

“Seems like bullshit to me.”

“Good thing we’re on the long road and willing to wait them out,” he throws back at me.

“Did he share how you’d fit into this plan?”

“They want us to keep the city clear of any potential threat and to facilitate their runs. But on the down low, I’ve been digging into what the city has to offer them and it turns out Bolton is smack in the middle of the line between the port up north and the airfield to the south. Whether you’re shipping in or out of the country, Dog City is a prime location.”

Mulling it over, I nod and swallow thickly. The city is basically gold and could be ours for the taking.

“See if you can find out what deals the Rathbones have had over the years.”

“Will do.”

My brother has fallen into his role as president as easy as breathing. Dad’s plans for his sons before he stepped down are playing out just as he foresaw and by the time my day with the gavel comes to an end, I hope to have the foresight he does. The older I get, the more I see how great my father truly is... as a man, a father, and as the previous president of the club.

“You should get home, we’re done here.”

Through his window, he holds his fist out and I bump mine into his. I pull forward as he does, and we both make U-turns and drive off in our own directions.

The drive home doesn’t take long with it being the middle of the night and the roads empty. Nodding to the prospect as

he lets me in and closes the gate behind me, I park up and walk through the compound until I reach the house.

I doubt Holly's still awake and it's a crying shame. A beer will have to be enough for now. Closing the fridge and opening the beer, a thud from outside the front door gets my full attention.

Placing the beer on the counter, I head for the door, knowing there's no threat here but my heart thumps against my chest all the same. Flipping the lock over and throwing open the door, I expect to find a drunken brother on the porch, but I find a parcel. No one's around and as I'm about to pick up the package, a buzz fills the air as a drone flies up from the ground and disappears into the night.

Effie Rathbone.

I fight to relax my jaw and snatch up the package. This isn't the first time she's sent a drone out here, but it better be the last.

Yanking on the twine, it occurs to me I should be handling it with care but for the life of me, I can't find it in me to give a shit.

Placing it on the kitchen island, I open it up and white mesh is crammed inside. No, not white mesh, a wedding veil. With what looks like red lipstick stained across it. I'm guessing I'm meant to believe it's blood. A note is attached.

Leo,

I'll let you into a little secret. I wasn't happy about taking over the family business, but over the last couple of years, I've come to enjoy our game of cat and mouse – me being the cat and you, Leo Jackson, being my little mouse. I sleep like a baby each and every night watching you chase your tail, failing to find me, let alone catch me. So I'm going to make it easy for you. I'll meet you at the diner in Roseville, tomorrow at noon. I would advise you not to do anything stupid, and you have my word, that you'll walk out alive. It's time you heard and accepted my deal.

P.S. Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. Meet me tomorrow and you'll live long enough to see your bride-to-be walk up the aisle.

My phone rings as I read the last word and Luca's name fills the screen. I don't hesitate to answer and press the phone to my ear.

"Brother?"

"I just got home, and a package was waiting for me. A blue teddy for River with its beady eyes ripped off and a note."

"Don't tell me, it's from Effie and she wants to meet tomorrow?"

"You got one too?"

"Yes, but I got a wedding veil with my note."

A thud fills the line and I ask, "What was that?"

His laughter is cold. "I just stabbed the teddy to the wall above the bar."

Rolling my eyes, I should've known it was something like that with him.

"How do you want to respond, brother?" he asks. "Cause I still owe her for killing Ford and I'm losing patience."

I had numerous chances to hear her offer and take her deal while I was in prison, but I rejected them all. It should have me questioning if I should've heard her out, but whether I did or not, I can't have her dropping packages off at our club whenever she wants.

"We'll meet with her, and see what she wants." I take a deep breath and add, "You're gonna need to keep your cool. If we're gonna meet her, you need to put the issue with Ford to the side... for now."

Knowing my brother, he's going to need a minute to process what I've said and need another minute or two to agree. I hope the day I need to pull rank on him never comes, but I will if I have to.

"All about the future, huh?" he sarcastically mutters.

“Exactly. Bring two brothers with you, and I’ll bring two with me. We’ll hear her out and make moves from there.”

“I can do that as long as I get to kill her one day.”

He hangs up and I toss the phone on the counter and screw up the note. Footsteps creep down the stairs and I shove the stained veil into the trash.

“Do you plan on keeping me waiting much longer?” Holly asks, appearing in the doorway.

Planting a smile on my face, I say, “I’ll just take the trash out and I’ll be up.”

She frowns. “The trash can wait till morning.”

I can’t help but watch her too-short of a shirt drop just above her ass as she heads for the stairs. Ripping the trash bag from the can, I take it out and dump it with the rest. Inside, I unscrew the note and fold it, pocketing it to show the brothers tomorrow.



As Zach closes the door, brothers in their seats, I slam the gavel down and slide Effie’s note into the middle of the table.

JJ is the first to reach out and read it. His brow arches and he passes it along to Zach. While the brothers read on, JJ asks, “You’re not considering it, are you? I mean you ain’t heard her out yet, why would you now?”

“Luca got one too.”

“I bet he’s gonna wanna meet her just to take her out, after what she did to that kid, Ford,” Myles chimes in.

“He agreed to meet her with me and to hear her out,” I tell them all.

“Luca? Your brother? He’s going to sit across from her and not put a bullet in between her eyes?” Dex asks, his brow arched.

“Yes, I’m talking about my brother. She wouldn’t put herself at risk without covering herself. We shoot first, there probably won’t be anyone walking out.”

“What have you and Luca got planned?” Zach asks, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table.

“Jay, Mason, and Myles will ride out with me to the diner in Roseville.”

“You can’t believe her word means shit?” Slade spits out.

Scoffing, I grunt, “You don’t believe I’m able to keep myself alive? Have I not been shot and stabbed and yet I still breathe?”

“I don’t doubt you, Leo, but you’re not invincible.”

“I agree, but you’re failing to see this is the fourth time she’s reached out for us to hear her offer? To me, she doesn’t want us, she needs us in some way and my curiosity is now peaked. I’ll hear what she has to say, and we’ll go from there.”

Meeting Dad’s eye, I wait for him to disagree, but it doesn’t come. He nods once and I wonder if the club politics bore him now. He sure acts like it does.

“Does anyone else have anything to add?”

Sparky leans forward in his seat and says, “We should plan to surround the place and take her out after you and Luca are out. This is the chance we’ve been waiting well over a year for.”

“In this case, I don’t need the club behind me, not that I take her at her word, but there’s something she needs from us, and I want to find out what. If we rock up as one, she’ll attack while we’re not here and since we all live here, it’ll be our families who will be in the firing line.”

Ricky looks at my dad and asks, “Cas, you can’t think this is wise?”

I watch the unlit cigarette roll between Dad’s fingers as he sets his gaze on Rick.

“When you voted for Leo as your president, you said you trusted him, so you trust him now. If he thinks this meeting with Effie is the way to go, then that’s what will happen.”

“But what do you think?” Dex asks him.

Dad smirks. “I think my son can walk through fire and come out unscathed. He can certainly walk into a diner and walk out with his life and that of his brother’s intact.”

Smirking, I watch on and wait for anyone else to run to my dad wanting to see if his opinion differs from mine.

“However,” he adds, looking at me. “Anything happens to you, to Luca, the entire club goes to war. Two chapters and the rest. The moves you make have to count for everything to them.”

I hear him loud and clear. “My gut is telling me this counts. This is our next move.”

Myles scoffs and slams his hand on the table. “I’m starting to feel insulted.”

Sighing, I dare to ask, “How?”

“These fuckers think me and my brother aren’t up to protecting you from a little bitty thing of a woman.”

Pope barks out a laugh and the tension in the room lifts. By the end of the day, there won’t be one brother who will hold a spec of doubt in the future decisions I make.

“No one’s doubting your or Mase’s capabilities, Myles.” I snort. “We leave in an hour.”

I slam the gavel down and the brothers file out, except for Mason. He tips his chin and I remain in my chair.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask him.

“That bitch got us locked up. We missed over a year of our lives because of her. I don’t understand why we’re not gonna take advantage of this meeting and take her out. This is the moment we’ve been waiting for.”

Sighing, I say, “I’m all for making our move, but this isn’t it. Roseville’s crime level is severely low to non-existent. If

we attack or she does, it'll bring heat to the club, and we don't have time for that kind of attention."

I stand and grab my cigarettes. "Her day will come, Mase. Trust me on that."



Luca is the first to arrive at the diner, with Angel, King, and Trey. I park next to my brother and kill the engine. Scouting out the place from my bike, a single SUV is parked near the diner's entrance and two men in suits stand by the trunk.

"They're the only two. King rode out early this morning and kept watch. She showed up alone," Luca tells me, his hand resting on his gun.

Lighting a cigarette, I remain on my bike and scan the windows of the diner. Effie is sitting in the end booth and she's staring straight back.

"While we're in there, I don't want any of you making a move. However, if anyone shows up, make them wish they hadn't," I instruct.

Puffing on the cigarette, I meet Luca's eye and nod. We both climb off of our rides and I flick the cigarette across the parking lot.

Side by side, my brother and I walk inside and the smile on Effie's stiff face grows. In her usual tight skirt suit, her red lipstick, and tacky red nails, she remains seated, and Luca and I sit opposite her.

"Hi, I'm Suzie, I'll be your server today, what can I get you both?" a chirpy waitress asks.

"Nothing, we won't be long," I tell her, and she scatters away muttering under her breath.

Once she's out of earshot, I look at Effie and grunt, "Lay your offer on the table, we've got shit to do."

"Yes, I imagine planning a wedding takes up a lot of time." She then looks to Luca. "And a newborn, I bet you're tired

from the sleepless nights.”

“Like you give a fuck. Get on with it,” Luca snaps.

Under the table, I nudge my brother’s leg with mine to remind him to keep his cool.

Unaffected by Luca’s tone, Effie goes on to say, “Once you’re married, babies are usually the next step. Babies are expensive and precious, and need fathers around for protection against the horrors in this world. My offer will enable you both to provide and protect your families, and your club. You will all thrive.”

“We’re thriving as it is,” Luca says as I remain tight-lipped.

“Because of the Haywards, but the money from them is nothing compared to what you could make with me.”

Sighing, I go to stand when she carries on, “I will triple what they pay you and in return, you run and protect my city. The Haywards are only here because I haven’t even begun to send them away. I tend to find entertainment in seeing others fail. You have no loyalty to them, and they will never get their hands on what’s mine.”

“You seem to think we’re pawns to buy and use as you please,” I grunt.

“I don’t want to use you. I want us to work together. Imagine, you’d have free reign over an entire city.”

“The city is my brother’s territory, but as the head of the Lost Souls motorcycle Club, I can tell you...”

“Don’t say anything now.” She slides out of the booth and stands. “You have twenty-four hours to consider and let me know.”

“And if it’s not the answer you want?” I ask.

Her smile turns cruel. “Then we go back to our game of cat and mouse until I grow tired of it and wipe you all out.”

“I’m genuinely interested in how you think,” Luca says. “You shot my friend in front of me. In what fucking world do

you think I'd want to work for you?"

"Ask yourself, Luca, how much is one man worth to your whole club?"

Her heels tap against the tiled floor as she makes her exit. Luca slides around the table and we both watch her climb into her car.

"I fucking hate when people give us a time frame," Luca near enough growls as the waitress passes the table.

"Not here, we'll talk outside."

As we didn't order anything, there's no need to settle a bill and we walk out into the sun and back to our brothers.

"Was her offer worth the ride out here?" Jay asks.

Just as I'm about to respond, the rumble of Victoria's truck fills the air. She's accompanied by the Dog City Chapter. My brows raise in curiosity.

"I knew we'd need to talk. I wasn't going to let her and my son stay in the city without me."

Of course, he wasn't.

"Where's Rudi?" I ask Angel.

"She's got a double shift at the hospital. I'll pick her up tomorrow morning."

"So, what does she want?" JJ asks.

"Let's get back to Willow's Peak. I don't like being out in the open like this."

Something niggles in my gut. There's something that's screaming this meet was too easy... it went too smoothly.

Chapter Five

Holly

Rayna and I lie on the soft grass in our backyard, gazing up at the ever-shifting clouds above. The blades of grass brush against our legs.

“That one looks like you, Ray-Ray,” I say pointing to the cloud directly above us.

Her giggle lights my soul. “Nooooo, it looks like you.”

We take it in turns describing the clouds, making each other laugh, until we’re interrupted. “Babe, we’ve got guests.”

Sitting up, Victoria stands beside Leo on the back porch cradling River.

“Look, Ray-Ray, baby River is here.”

She’s on her feet before I am. She runs up to them and Victoria lowers herself to her knees so she can have a peek.

“Mom and Lana are in town. Do you mind if we hang here till they get back?” Victoria asks.

“Of course, like you even need to ask. We’ve been waiting for more cuddles with this little cutie,” I tell her, peeking into the swaddling.

There isn’t enough cooing in the world to convey how cute he is. “Here, he needs a cuddle with his Aunt Holly.”

Aunt?

A surge of overwhelming happiness washes over me. My smile transforms into an ear-to-ear grin. “Aunt Holly.” The term of endearment has my heart melting. In this moment, I’m acutely aware of my full acceptance into the family.

“Let’s go inside.”

I expect to find Luca, because where Victoria and now River are, he isn’t far away. But he’s nowhere to be seen.

“I’ll be over in the bar,” Leo tells me before kissing the side of my head and escaping.

“I’ll text Harper and Nina to come over.”

My home soon becomes filled with friends I call sisters and their children. There are no longer long silences in our home but I’m grateful for those moments because I needed them to heal. I wouldn’t say I’m fully healed but I’m at a point where I’m in the light and can see the end of the tunnel.

Many, many photos are taken with the kids and laughter fills the bottom of the house and reaches right up to the attic. Memories are being made and I’ll have the photos to look back on and enjoy as I am enjoying this moment.

“Sebastian has asked for a brother four times this afternoon. I don’t think Zach would be too opposed to the idea.”

I smile. It sounds like Leo and Zach are on the same wavelength.

“What about you? Do you want another baby?” I ask her.

“They say you forget the pain of childbirth, hence why women go on to have more children. But I remember the pain of pushing Sebastian out and let me tell you, I’m not ready to go through that again.”

“Sebastian is worth it though, no?”

“Of course he is but I know what to expect a second time around. I don’t know, maybe, when it’s the right time, I’ll feel it. What about you and Leo? It must be something you’ve spoken about?”

I pull out the punnet of strawberries from the fridge and choose whether to share mine and Leo's plans. On one hand, it's something we share that's just ours but on the other, I want to talk about these life-changing hopes with my friends. Leo wouldn't mind if I spoke with her.

So I say, "It's something we've spoken about recently. He wants to start trying as soon as we're married."

"And you want the same?"

Smiling, I nod. "I do. I can't wait to be pregnant with Leo's baby."

I slice the strawberries while Nina grabs the cream from the fridge. Harper walks into the kitchen holding a large box.

"This was just delivered, what is it?" she asks.

Putting the knife down, I cross the kitchen as she places the box on the island, and I pull the ribbon free. I know exactly what it is, and I can't believe I forgot it was being delivered today.

"It's your dress!" Harper exclaims as I lift it out and hold it against myself.

I'll never forget the moment I first tried it on in the shop and perfection enveloped me. I knew it was the one for me as the store assistant buttoned up the back for me. The lace-capped shoulders and ivory silk that clings to my body and pools around my feet is the prettiest dress I've ever worn.

"Put it on, we need to see you in it," she shrieks as Victoria walks in with River in her arms.

"Your dress is beautiful, and you heard her, go put it on," Nina pipes in.

An eagerness to wear it again takes over and I don't need to be asked again. Up in my room, I undress and smile as the silk brushes along my skin and the lace tickles my shoulders. Pinching it at the sides to lift it from the floor, I carefully head down the stairs.

"Wow, you're beautiful, Holly," Victoria coos but it's Harper who steps in front of me and says, "You're glowing,

Hols. It's only a dress but it signals your future and from the smile on your face, your future is nothing but happiness."

Holding onto her hands, the happiness is short-lived when the front door opens and Leo hollers wanting to know where we are.

"In the kitchen, but don't come in," Harper yells as she and Victoria move to block me from his view.

But it's too late. Leo steps into the kitchen and through the gap between his sister and his sister-in-law, his eyes find me, and I watch as his throat bobs as he takes in the sight of me.

"Leo, it's bad luck to see her in her dress before the big day!" Harper shrieks as Victoria giggles.

Leo doesn't laugh, or smile... fire burns in his stare.

"Both of you leave and take our Rayna with you." Keeping his eyes on me, he adds, just for me, "You. Don't move."

I don't think I could even if I tried. The women I think of as sisters don't need telling twice and they disappear from the kitchen, collecting the kids as they go. Their laughter lingers behind them as they leave the house.

Leo doesn't move nor do I. His silence stretches and I frown.

"Don't you like it?" I ask, my gloved hands running down the silk over my stomach.

"Every time I think you can't get any more beautiful, you prove me wrong." He takes a single step and then asks, "Why are you wearing it?"

Taking a deep breath, I tell him, "It was just delivered, and Harper and Victoria wanted to see me in it before the wedding."

I have no idea why I'm so nervous around him, I'm due to marry this man yet my stomach is full of butterflies. "Besides, I need practice walking in heels."

He closes the space between us and stops behind me, his breath hitting the back of my neck.

“I think fair’s fair if I practise taking it off of you.”

He pops one button open at a time and each time my lower stomach tightens, and my chest presses down, making it heavier to breathe.

“And I definitely think we should practise consummating our marriage.”

“I agree,” I choke out.

With my back exposed, he runs the back of his finger down my spine, sending a thrill through me. He helps me out of the dress and orders, “You have ten seconds to hang it up.”

It only takes me five.

We become a tangled mess of limbs and kisses, not able to get enough of each other. We end up on the kitchen floor with me on top and every time I rock my hips back and forth, riding him, the pressure builds in my lower stomach. We become a blur of desire, and a hunger for more takes over. It’s always more when it comes to Leo. I roll my hips faster and faster, tipping my head back, my orgasm chasing me hard and fast.

“Oh fuck,” Leo grunts, squeezing my thighs as he fills me with his load. A couple more pumps and I’m collapsing on top of him.

Once I get my breath back, I lift myself off of him and lie beside him on the floor.

Stroking my hair, he says, “I met with Effie today, me and Luca. We heard her offer, and she wants to pay us triple what the Haywards do to run the city and make the Kings disappear.”

“Did you accept?”

“No, but we didn’t decline either. She gave us twenty-four hours to consider.”

“And are you going to consider it?”

“I’m still thinking about considering.”

Leaning up on my elbow, I say, “Well, you know what they say?”

“What’s that?”

“Keep your friends close but your enemies closer. In my experience, your mind can find peace if the enemy is in sight.”

Though I never knew where the guy who hurt me was buried, I knew he was dead and never coming back. That alone was the only thing that gave me peace. It still does. There are still bad people who carry out horrific acts in the world but since I’m yet to meet them, they don’t exist to me. Curling into my man, I don’t think about the past. I enjoy the next few moments when it’s just the two of us.

“Was there a reason you came home?”

“I can’t seem to remember.” He laughs. “Oh yeah, I needed to grab my power cord. I told the brothers I’d only be a minute.”

“It’s a good job you’re the president and can do what you like, then.”

“Damn fuckin’ right, baby.”

I love it when he calls me baby. He doesn’t do it often but when he does, it sends butterflies crazy in my stomach.

“I can’t wait to marry you, you know that, right?” I ask him.

“I know. I feel the same.”

Life in the light is addictive. I’m completely and utterly addicted to Leo Jackson and the happiness he brings me.



“Jump into bed and I’ll read for an extra ten minutes.”

Rayna runs across her room and jumps onto her bed. She loves listening to stories and when it comes to bedtime, extra reading time is my handiest bribe. She snuggles under the sheets and shuffles over ready for me to join her. Grabbing the book we’ve been reading for the last week, I go to flip it open

to the last page we were reading when Rayna asks, “Are you my mommy?”

The titles on her bookshelves blur and a lump lodges itself in the bottom of my throat. I’m so glad I haven’t turned to face her yet.

Flustered, I feign hearing her. “What was that?”

“Sebastian calls Aunt Nina mommy... why don’t I call you mommy?”

I fear saying the wrong thing and upsetting her, or upsetting Leo, or the McCarthy’s. My heart pounds, trying and failing to think of something to say. My mind is racing, and I don’t know what to do.

“Is that the phone ringing?” I say instead. “Hold onto that thought, I’ll be right back. Stay in bed.”

Running down the stairs, and throwing open the front door, Alannah is the first person I see, and I call her over.

“Can you sit with Rayna, please? Just for five minutes. She’s already in bed waiting for a story,” I rush out.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine, I just need to find Leo.”

“Sure. He’s over in the bar, I’ve just left him and his dad there.”

It’s not far to the clubhouse but my freakout grows wild in the short distance. Leo spots me straight away and stands from his seat at the table he’s sharing with his dad, Sparky, and JJ. I notice the worry setting in as he makes his way over to me. When he reaches me, his worry burns brightly.

“What’s wrong?” he pleads to know.

“I was putting Rayna to bed and out of nowhere she asked me if I was her mommy... she’s confused why Sebastian calls Nina mommy, but she doesn’t with me... she knows India is her mom...” my ramblings trail off.

He’s quiet for a moment as he processes said ramblings and I wait with bated breath for him to say something.

“What did you tell her?”

“I made out the phone was ringing and told her I’d be back. Your mom’s with her.”

He cups my face and asks, “Why are you freaking out?”

“You’re seriously asking me why?” I blanch. “Because I didn’t know what to say! How will she understand that I love her like she were my daughter, that I’d protect her, and do anything for her like I were her mother but that I’m not? She knows India is her mom, she’s seen plenty of videos of her and photos, and...”

He sweeps his thumb over my bottom lip to shush me. I’m surprised to see him grinning.

“How about we tell her she has two mommies?”

I’ve lost the ability to breathe many times. Whenever my father gave me ultimatums I was never strong enough to go against him. When I was chained up in the motel bathroom. And when I woke up to the searing pain across my hands. But this, I’m stunned into shock.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I don’t want her feeling like she’s different to other kids and it’s obviously been weighing on her little mind for her to bring it up.”

This is what is going to make him a great husband. His ability to put me at ease in the fastest time.

“You’re the only woman in the world I’d let her call mommy. Marryin’ you, ain’t I?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “You are.”

Pressing his lips to mine, the kiss seals another nail into our future together.

“Come on, let’s go talk to her together.”

He envelopes his hand around mine and I no longer have any worries. My trust in him to fix anything and everything is infinite.

“We should’ve expected this at some point,” he says as we walk from the bar to the house.

“I thought she just saw me as Holly. That she knew what I was.”

“I reckon she knows who you are, that’s why she’s questioning you now. She loves you, anyone can see it. She sees how kind and loving you are, and she wants a piece of it. She was so little when you came to stay with us, she doesn’t know life without you.”

I bonded with Rayna quite quickly when I met her. She never saw me as anything but the woman who looked after her. I never thought there’d be a day where she could call me mommy. It would be a privilege to be seen as her mother. And by God, I’ll do right by her for as long as I live.

Chapter Six

Leo

I hear Mom reading to Rayna as Holly and I climb the stairs. I'd be a liar if I said I hadn't given thought to how Rayna and Holly's relationship would change after the wedding. I expected as Rayna grew older, she'd question the family dynamics. It's a failure in my eyes that I wasn't here to answer her question the second she asked it. Holly follows closely behind me as I step into Rayna's bedroom. Mom smiles and closes the book she was reading from and kisses Rayna on the top of her head.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Mom coos and leaves.

"Daddy!"

"She was yawning a half hour ago, now you're here she's wide awake," Holly points out as I climb on the bed and settle Rayna down. Drawing the sheets up to her neck, she's snuggled up how she likes. Inhaling deeply, I say, "Holly told me you want to know if she's your mommy?"

She remains quiet but looks up at me with her big brown eyes. She wants me to answer the question for her. And because I know my daughter, I carry on, "You know your mommy is with the angels." She nods and listens. "She was the first mommy to hold you and love you and she loves you still, and so very much. Even with the angels, she misses you every day. But... she's not with us anymore and Holly loves you and is going to love you forever and look after you. If you feel like Holly is your mommy, there's nothing wrong with

that. It would make us all happy. It'll be you, me, and Holly, always." I kiss the top of her head, and add, "Do you want Holly to be your mommy?"

She nods her small head. "Yes."

Smiling so she knows I speak only the truth, I tell her, "Then you can call her mommy and that's what she'll be. You'll have two mommies to love and protect you, Holly here and mommy and her angels."

Leaning forward, I place another kiss on the top of her head and stand, leaning over to smooth out the sheets.

"Mommy in heaven will always be with us and so will Holly. Okay?"

"Okay," she chirps.

"You go to sleep and in the morning, we'll make pancakes."

Her smile grows and Holly's hand runs down my back as I stand, she moves in front of me to kiss Rayna goodnight.

"Night, night, Ray-Ray."

"Night, night... Mommy."

It warms my heart to hear it but at the same time, it pinches that it's not India hearing her. It's Rayna's giggle that dissipates the pinch and I take Holly's hand and turn off the lamp, leaving the nightlight to glow from the corner of the room.

Once Rayna's door is closed, Holly spins into me and slams her lips onto mine. Winding my hand into her hair, I share the kiss with as much passion as she's pouring into me. I'm about to push her up against the wall when she pulls away and asks, "Are you sure about this?"

"I wouldn't say so if I weren't. Besides, when we have children, she won't feel left out."

"I would never let that happen," she vows with a frown.

My smile relaxes her. I run the backs of my fingers down her cheek and say, "I know."

“What about Kristen and Slade? They’ve been great about us so far, but this might be too much for them to take on.”

I shrug. “It’s not like we’re making out you’re her only mom. If they can’t see that, I’ll deal with them.”

I can’t see Slade having much of a problem, but Kristen, I’m not so sure. With nothing I can do tonight, I pull her flush against me and hold her tight.

“Anyway, enough about them. You’ve got my dick hard, and we need to do something about it.”

Her smile turns coy. Slipping her finger into my waistband, she pulls me toward our bedroom and I’m too eager to be led so easily. Once we’re through the door, she leans around me and closes it. The second it’s closed, she flips the lock and pushes me back against the wood. Pressing a single kiss on me, she lowers herself down onto her knees. She works my belt expertly until they’re around my knees and she’s grasping my rock-hard length.

I tip my head back as she runs her tongue along my shaft and winds my fingers into her hair. I tighten my grip and throb as she skims her teeth a little too hard in return. Opening my eyes, I look down and watch her head bob up and down and grit my teeth as the sensation of her power hits me in the balls. Her fingers dig into my thighs the faster she sucks and they begin to shake as she takes me fully into her mouth. The game is over the second I hit the back of her throat and she gags. I empty myself into her mouth and a shudder ripples through me as my orgasm hits. She swallows easily and holds her hand out for me to help her up. Once on her feet, her coyness has turned to triumphant and she slips my softening dick back into my boxers and zips my jeans up.

“You owe me now,” she says. “I’ve got a bubble bath waiting for me but be warned, I’ll be collecting tonight.”

“I’ll be ready to pay up.”

I make my way back over to the bar and join Dad and Jay like I’d never left.

“Everything okay?” Dad asks.

“It is now. Don’t mention anything when you hear Rayna calling Holly mommy.”

“Why would I mention anything? I thought it’d only be a matter of time anyway,” Dad asks.

“You did?”

“You didn’t?” he retorts. “Anyway, have you given any more thought to Effie’s offer?”

“Not really.” Only, it’s been on my mind since the meeting. “There’s no way I’ll accept her offer but I haven’t decided how I’m going to tell her to fuck off.”

Dad laughs and takes one of my cigarettes. Jay gets a text and says his goodnight. No doubt my sister has called him home. Dad leans on the table and lowers his voice. “Earlier this morning, in the back room, Ricky and Dex sought my opinion. That’ll fade out soon enough. The more time they see you at the head of the table, they’ll stop looking to me for approval on your decisions.”

“I haven’t given it a second thought. I expected them to keep looking at you for a while. It doesn’t bother me.”

“Not now, perhaps, but it will do in time. I remember when I took over from Michael. Though the circumstances were vastly different, it took longer than I liked for certain brothers to fully trust me the way they did Michael. Most of the time it wasn’t noticeable, just enough for me to see.”

“Maybe you were a little paranoid?” I hedge.

“Aren’t all men who sit at the head of a table like ours?”

“Touché.”

If truth be told, I don’t care how long it takes the brothers to stop looking at my dad because they already follow me.



I should’ve listened to Mom all those years ago when she promised me life always leads you where you need to be. That

you may not like where it takes you but that it's where you are for a reason. Holly is where she needs to be, with me, at my side, and a mother to my daughter. Or our daughter. With Shane riding behind me, we ride for Slade's and since I've got enough to deal with what with Effie's twenty-four hours fast approaching its end, I want to deal with the McCarthy's early before Slade heads for the club, and Kristen goes to the shop.

Time moves on so fast that I mostly forget Shane had a thing for Holly. The nights I spent in prison unable to sleep because I was struggling to deal with what I felt for her, and the thought of anyone else touching her, Shane especially after he asked her out on a date, brought out carnal jealousy. Yet now, he's a brother and I'm pretty sure he's stuck his dick in every single, and some married, women in town and around the club.

The urge to light a cigarette after parking outside Slade's house is strong. This needs sorting for Holly as much as my peace of mind, so I climb off my bike and turn to Shane.

"Wait here, I won't be long."

The door opens as I walk up the front path and Slade frowns.

"Trouble?"

Swallowing, I shake my head. "But I need to talk to you and Kristen. Settle a matter before you hear it elsewhere."

"Is Rayna okay?"

"She's good."

Inside, Kristen is preparing for work and though the tension between us has eased, I still catch her tense her jaw and put on a smile to keep our peace going.

"Leo needs to talk to us," Slade tells his old lady.

"Feels like deja-vu," she quips.

This time I don't take a seat. I don't want this to turn into a conversation, this is simply me telling them what to expect when they're around the club and Holly and their granddaughter.

“Last night Rayna questioned Holly about being her mom. Holly came and got me right away and I had a talk with her and with Rayna.”

“And why does that bring you here?” Slade asks.

“Because like when I first came to you about my relationship with Holly, I wanted to show the same respect and let you know that Rayna wished to call Holly’s mom and I let her know that she could if that was what she wanted. I explained she has two mommies. India will never be pushed out.”

Slade pulls out a chair and takes a seat, Kristen lowers her eyes and turns her back to me.

“I can’t say I didn’t see this coming. Holly is every bit a mother to her,” Slade says.

His reaction is what I expected. I wait for Kristen to say her piece. She’s the one I’m really here for.

“If I’m honest, it cuts me. I’ll never hear Rayna call my India mommy but if she was the one to bring this up, she must need it.”

“That’s what I thought too. I can’t promise you enough that India won’t be pushed out of her life but when Holly and I have children, I don’t want Rayna feeling any way about it other than included.”

“I don’t want that either. I suppose it was always going to come to this,” Kristen says.

“For a while, I didn’t believe so but I wouldn’t be marryin’ Holly if she couldn’t be the mother my daughter needs.”

I wish I could see her face, to see if the words from her mouth were as truthful as in her eyes.

To lighten the room, I say, “I doubt there’ll be any more shocks to come.”

Kristen scoffs. “Let’s hope not.” She finally turns and adds, “Thank you for coming to us, but in the future you don’t need to make these trips to let us know things. We’re family and that won’t ever change, but it is time we all move forward.

You, Holly, and Rayna are a family, and Slade and I are here when Rayna needs us.”

I step out of the McCarthy’s house able to breathe and light that damn cigarette. Happiness is a heavy fucking burden. But at the end of the day, as long as Holly is comfortable and happy and my girl is happy, that makes me happy. And since I didn’t think I would be ever again, I’ll take it while I can.

“You got any more business in town while we’re here?” Shane asks as I keep my cigarette between my lips and mount my bike.

“No, we’ll head back to the club.”

Bringing my bike to life, I take one last pull on my cigarette and flick the butt across the street before riding away from the McCarthy’s.

With the Rayna situation dealt with, I ride for home with the next situation to be dealt with that’s weighing on my mind. Effie Rathbone. My gut is telling me accepting her offer isn’t the direction the club needs to go, but it’s also tearing it in two because declining it isn’t in our best interest either. One day her offers are going to stop, and we’ll be dragged farther into the Rathbone/Hayward war.

Police sirens disturb my train of thought and the sheriff’s cruiser speeds up in my rearview mirror.

I’ve been president for over a year, and I’ve not had the displeasure of meeting her. I pull over and Shane follows suit.

“Keep your mouth shut and don’t do anything to warrant her putting you in cuffs.”

He nods. “Sure.”

I don’t give her the pleasure of watching her approach or arguing about why she’s stopped us. She’ll get to it in her own time.

“Leo Jackson. I must say you have the look of your father, but do you run the club like him?”

Keeping my mouth shut, she carries the conversation for the both of us. “I admit the town’s been quiet of late, but I

doubt it will last for much longer.”

“Since I’d rather swallow razor blades than talk to you, get to why you pulled me over. I’ve got shit to do.”

Her smug grin turns sour. “You forget I can make any charge stick to you, your brothers, anyone I see fit. If I wished, I could have you back in Bolton Corrections whether you deserve to be there or not.”

It becomes difficult to keep my mouth shut, and in fact, I don’t. My father told me to set out what kind of president I’d be and it’s time the sheriff finds out.

“You do what you feel you need to do, but I’m warning you now, I ain’t being locked up again. And you can’t get us legally so trumping up charges is your only option. And my only option will be to end you. I’m not my father, I don’t give a shit if you buzz around town, but if you buzz around my club, I’ll squash you like the dirty fuckin’ gnat you are.” Staring her straight in the eye, I add, “You stay out of my way, and we’ll stay out of yours.”

I start my bike, Shane doing so too, ending this shit show.

“Are you so far from the law you think you can threaten a sheriff?” she hollers over the roar of our engines.

But I hear the wavering in her tone, and I grin.

“Who the fuck threatened you? Me? I made you a promise.”

I ride off and watch in the mirror her kick at the side of her cruiser. Fucking bitch thinks she has power over me. She’ll soon find out how wrong she is.



In the office, I pull out the folder Slade put together on our sheriff and fall into the chair behind the desk. Flipping through the scarce papers, there’s not much on her.

“Prospect!”

He doesn't keep me waiting and appears in the doorway seconds later.

“What do you need, boss?”

“Get Zach in here.”

As fast as he appears, he disappears, and Zach walks in five minutes later. He slumps in the chair opposite me and tips his chin.

“What's up, Prez?”

Tossing the folder on the desk, I jerk my chin for him to have a look and I tell him, “There's not a lot of information on the sheriff. Do a deeper search. I want to know everything there is about her. Everything.”

With one nod, he takes the folder with him and leaves. Glancing at the old clock I'm surprised is still working, I have two hours and fifteen minutes till Effie's deadline is up. I should've declined her offer hours ago, but something is stopping me and until I know what that something is, I can't place the call. Shoving up from the desk, I grab my smokes and walk out of the bar. The more I think about it the more moving to the club was a good idea. Knowing Holly is close, knowing when I return after a run and head for the club, I'm heading to her, it's just... meant to be.

Finding her on our porch, I lean on the rail and feel my dick stir at the sight of her in her short shorts and tight top.

“You were out of the house early today,” she says.

“I went to see Slade and Kristen.”

Her chest heaves with a long sigh. “How did that go?”

“Pretty well, they understand.”

Relief washes through her and I grin. I knew this would bring her peace.

“Good, I'd hate to tell her one thing and do another.”

Say one thing, do another? An idea forms and I ask, “Have you seen Luca?”

“He and Victoria went over to your parents not so long ago.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Crossing the short distance, I knock once and step inside my parent’s house. I hear mom instructing Victoria with the baby for what I’m certain is for photos. I poke my head into the living room and sure enough, there’s a photo frenzy taking place. Dad and Luca are hiding out in the kitchen.

“I need a word,” I say to my brother.

I take a seat at the table. I remember where I am and keep my cigarettes in my pocket.

“We’ve got two hours before Effie’s deal expires,” I begin. “I’m going to call her after I leave here and tell her to go fuck herself.”

“I thought that was what you were going to do anyway,” Luca grunts while Dad watches us closely.

“Yes, but we’re going to say one thing and do another.” I grin.

“Care to share or do I have to fuckin’ guess?” Luca grunts.

“Like I said, I’m going to make it clear I’d rather work with anyone than her but you, you’re going to wait till late tonight and make a call of your own. You’re going to tell her that I don’t know what you’re doing. You’re going to make her believe you don’t agree with me and that you want to take her deal yourself, even if it breaks our relationship.”

“That kind of betrayal wouldn’t just break your relationship, if it were true, it would fracture the whole club,” Dad interjects.

“That’s what we’ll make it look like. She’s already seen what your chapter and Darius’s boys can do on your own, she’ll take the bite.”

“She fuckin’ won’t bite nothing when she won’t believe I’ll just take her offer after she shot Ford. No one would believe it.”

“I reckon she will cause she wants me to accept her offer, she’ll still want to get to me through you.”

Luca smirks but his next question isn’t as cocky. “Say she believes me, what’s the end game?”

“I’m not quite sure about that yet, but you play Effie, I play the Haywards, and what will be will be.”

Dad sighs. “Son, that won’t last long.”

“Hopefully we won’t need long...”

He cuts me off. “Leo, you need to know what the end game is before entering a play like this with powerful people. We may not like them, we may even want them dead, but they are powerful.”

His worry ignites my stubbornness. I argue, “The Haywards dump vast amounts of cash on us, but it’s not charity. We earn every penny. We haven’t gotten close to her in the last year and a half. The Haywards want her in the ground, this is how we do it.”

“You could’ve led with that,” Dad grunts and I laugh.

“I’ll get the brothers together and fill them in.”



Sat in my office, the only sound to be heard is the small hand ticking on the clock. The only light to be seen is from the cherry on my cigarette and then from the phone screen lighting up. Swiping across, I answer and press it to my ear.

“I’m pretty certain she believed me. Couldn’t wait to arrange a meeting in two days.”

“Meet me at our spot, 2 a.m., the night after.”

“Will do.”

The line goes dead, and I toss the phone on the desk. The whole picture of my plan isn’t quite clear, but it’s being chipped away at, and I have faith that we will be victorious.

Chapter Seven

Leo

Luca made the call to Effie and while I wait for more information, I take apart the engine of a mini motorcycle I've been working on for when Gunner is old enough to learn how to ride. Maybe one day I'll have a son I can build a bike for. If not, I'll settle for building them for my nephews. Knowing my luck, Rayna will want one of her own, and being that I'm wrapped around her little finger, I'll build her one too. Though the thought of her on a motorcycle fills me with dread.

"The sheriff has a sister, one niece, and a nephew all living in the city. She has a brother living in Australia."

I drop the spanner and look up to Zach leaning against the doorframe to the garage.

"How come your dad didn't find that out?"

His shrug has me wondering if Slade's lack in his job is something I'm going to have to worry about.

"Have you got a passport?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"What about Nina and Sebastian?"

He narrows his eyes. "Nina has but not Sebastian. Why?"

"Get your boy sorted then take a family vacation down under. While you're there, get me proof that we can get to the

brother any time we like. That the distance won't keep him safe."

"You want me to go halfway around the world to get some pictures?"

"That's what I said."

When it comes to the Sheriff, I will cover all our bases. Today won't be the last time she pulls one of us over, but I'm going to make it clear that the next time will be the last time she uses her lady balls.

"You got it."

"I want you back before my wedding. Holly will want Nina and Sebastian there."

"You saying I wouldn't be missed?"

"Dick. I'm not saying that. Just do what I've asked."

"Got it. I'll keep you updated."

I go back to working on the minibike, one of the few times I can erase all the shit whirling around my mind and relax.



JJ throws Gunner into the air and the little boy's chuckles have everyone smiling. Everyone but Zach and Nina are here for a cookout as the day rolls into the evening. When we're together like this, it reminds me of why we fight for family, for brotherhood. But the overwhelming, almost suffocating, unhinged need to protect the club and everyone within it blinds me sometimes.

Every chapter of the Lost Souls Motorcycle Club will be rolling into town over the next couple of weeks for the wedding and as I've been president for a while now, it's long overdue. It's time they see what I'm made of. And I certainly want to know where each chapter stands in their territories. I remember when I was eleven or twelve, Dad called all chapters to Willow's Peak. They all stayed for around a week and each night they partied like it was their last night on earth.

My dad had known them all for years and built relationships with men from far and wide. It's time I do the same. The time has come to embrace the legacy passed down to me. In the coming weeks I will solidify our brotherhood.

“Mase, Myles.”

The twins look my way and I jerk my chin for them to join me.

“I want you both to track down the sheriff's sister, niece, and nephew, in the morning. Don't let them see you but get me photos. Find Zach before he leaves and he'll give their addresses.”

“You got it,” they simultaneously say.

As they walk away, I see Grim with Zara. His hands all over her as she sits on his lap. As I watch on, I see it's more than hooking up. Grim's eyes are soft as he laughs at something she says. He nuzzles into her neck and shifts her so he's on his feet and she's in their chair. He passes by me and heads inside, within a minute or two he's back out with two beers.

“Grim.”

He stops and I gesture for him to take a seat. He does and I lean forward so no one else hears.

“What's going on with you and Zara?”

Scoffing, he asks, “Why the fuck would you want to know about that?”

Narrowing my eyes, I say, “I'm not asking for the fun of it. Answer me.”

“I wouldn't say she's my old lady, but I think it's getting serious. I like her.”

Biting into my bottom lip, I tell him, “Watch yourself with her.”

He looks across to her and then back to me. “I...”

“It's your business and I've warned you, there's nothing else to say.”

He nods and stands, heading back to Zara who now has her gaze on me. The sight of her disappears as Holly blocks the view and I take her hand and pull her down onto my lap. She lands with a thump and giggles. She leans in and whispers, “Just so you know I’ve stopped taking the pill.”

Pressing my cheek against hers, her news has me growing in my pants. With less than a few weeks till the wedding, I intend to start growing our family tonight.

“Hey, stop right now, Ray-Ray!” Holly shrieks, jumping up from my lap.

Rayna skids to a stop and Holly leans over and plucks the lollipop from her mouth.

“What have I told you about these things?” Holly asks her, tossing the candy into an empty beer bottle.

“Not to run with them while in my mouth.”

“Yes, and why?”

“Because I could choke and need to go to the hospital.”

“Yes, that’s right. If you want the candy, then you sit with it. Don’t forget again, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

A gasp from behind us has me turning in my chair and Kristen is standing there. A painful smile on her face and a tear in her eye. Dragging my eyes from her, I check on Holly and I can tell she’s waiting for Kristen to speak.

“Rayna, why don’t you show Grandma Kris how the roses Auntie Victoria planted with you have flowered,” I suggest.

“Do you want to see the roses, Grandma?”

“I’d love to, darling.”

Rayna takes Kris’s hand. As they pass Holly, Kristen squeezes her shoulder and offers her a warm smile. Thank fuck that didn’t turn into a shit show.

I pull Holly back down onto my lap and as the evening passes, the conversation turns into laughter and I sit happily

playing with Holly's hair, counting down the minutes until I'm next inside her.

Zach joins us, and tells me, "It will take too long to get Sebastian a passport. I've made arrangements for him to stay with my parents and me and Nina will go alone. Our flights are booked. We fly out tomorrow night so we're leaving tonight. We'll be back in eight days."

"Good. I'm sending the twins out in the morning to do the same for the sister and her kids."

My phone pings with a text and it's from Harper.

Rayna's with me. She wants a sleepover with me and Gunner, so you don't have to rush home with Holly tonight.

I shoot her a reply letting her know it's all good and slide the phone into my pocket. With the night to ourselves and the brothers on their way to drunkenness, Holly doesn't need convincing to sneak away and climb on the back of my bike.

Her perfume envelopes me as she clings to me as we ride out of town, and I hold on to the thought that my soul is healed and all because of the woman on the back of my bike. Without a particular destination in mind, I ride until we reach the lakes. I kill the engine and say, "I haven't been out here since I was in high school."

Her laughter fills the air. "I can imagine why you would come out here."

We sit by the water and as the moon rises and shines down over the water, I ask her, "How are the wedding plans coming along?"

"Between me, your mom, and sister, it's pretty much done. It's just the nerves I've got to get under control."

Frowning, I ask, "What are you nervous about?"

"The amount of people your mom has invited for a start."

"I agree it's a lot, but you'll be fine. You have nothing to be nervous about."

"Do you personally know them all?" she asks.

“Most of them. A few I’m sure will be newly patched-in members but they’re brothers all the same. You’ve gotta remember, I grew up in the club, I forget most people didn’t.” Kissing her temple, I ask, “What’s worrying you the most?”

Looking at me, she admits, “Our first dance, and everyone watching.”

She pulls at her gloves as she speaks, and I’d bet my last dollar it’s not the amount of guests as much as it’s them wondering why she wears her gloves.

She shudders and I wind my arm around her tighter as well as reach into her pocket for her cell. Opening her music app, I scroll through her playlists, and it occurs to me I have no idea what song our first dance would be danced to. She has thousands of songs on here and I give up, handing it to her.

“Play what we’ll dance to on the day,” I tell her.

She scrolls through her playlists and stops on a song I’ve not heard of. I take the phone from her and hit play. Placing it on the grass, I stand and pull her up with me. Pulling her against me, I hold her hand and place my hand across her back.

Her giggles warm me. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

Under the moon and stars, we dance to our song, and I murmur, “I will always love you.”

She leans back and smiles up at me. “That’s nice to hear.”

Spinning her around, I pull her back into me and kiss the top of her head.

“No matter what we face, it’ll be together. I know you’re nervous about the number of guests, but I’ll be proud as fuck having them all watch as I tie myself to you. I’ll be by your side the whole time.”

She relaxes in my hold and sighs. “I’m not so nervous now.”

We dance for a while longer and as I hold the reason for my life in my arms, I silently vow to her all that I will on our wedding day.

The song comes to an end, and she looks up at me. Her love and trust in me shines brightly in her eyes. I can't form a single thought so I kiss her, hoping she feels everything I can't say in this moment.

"The part you were most nervous about is done and only for us."

Her smile is almost ethereal under the moonlight. "Since we have the house to ourselves tonight, how about you take me home and I'll show you how loving I'm feeling right now."

"As your man, I can't deny you."

I have her on the back of my bike before a minute can be wasted and I ride away from the lakes glad that we shared a part of our wedding just for us.

A part of me wants to keep Holly all for myself but the more rational part of me knows she needs the club at her back as much as I do. I've wondered how our dynamic will work as president and old lady. My parents made it look easy, they flowed together like fish swimming down the tide. But I know we'll find our way, I don't fear we won't.

The second we ride into the club, I know our plans will have to wait. JJ is waiting for me, and I know why. An SUV is parked in its usual place and there's only one family who shows up here in that car.

The Haywards are here.

It seems the cookout has ended and only a few brothers linger. Holly jumps off first and I dismount my bike as JJ walks over.

"Jamie Boy and Ritchie are here."

"I can see." Turning to Holly, I say, "Go get ready for me. I shouldn't be long."

Slapping her ass as she turns to walk off, I join JJ and together, we walk into the bar, and lo and behold, the two

kings sit at my table with a drink in hand.

“If you had called, I would’ve been here when you arrived,” I say, pulling out a chair.

“We haven’t been waiting long,” Jamie Boy says. “We were in the area and thought we’d speak in person. Our shipment has doubled, hence, you’ll need to prepare for it for next week.”

They were in the area? We’re not exactly local.

“We’ll be ready, and while you’re here, there’s something you need to know... unless you already do.”

“What’s that?” Ritchie asks.

“Luca and I met with Effie the other day,” their shoulders stiffen, and I have their full attention.

“If she’s dead we’d have liked to have known when it happened,” Jamie Boy says tightly.

“She’s not dead, she made it so it was impossible to take her down.”

“So why the fuck were you having a face-to-face with her in the first fucking place?” Ritchie fumes.

He goes to jump up from his chair, but Jamie Boy grabs his arm to stop him. His reputation doesn’t scare me.

“She made several visits to the prison when I was locked up, offering me, the club, a deal. I never once even considered it. I didn’t even get to hear what her deal was because I shut it down before I could hear her out. Last week she reached out again to me and my brother and instead of shutting her down, we met with her. She wants my club to flip on you and work with her, promising to triple what you pay us.”

Both their eyes narrow and their lips remain tightly shut. I continue, “I told her to go fuck herself and my brother agreed to her terms.”

Ritchie shoots forward in his seat and Jamie Boy remains as still as stone until he places his hand on his brother’s arm to still him once again.

“I trust there’s a reason behind his decision?” Jamie Boy asks calmly.

I nod. “My club grew bored long ago of continually failing to get our hands on the bitch. She has the means to evade us for years and I won’t put my brothers through needless risks with the same outcome each time. Luca and I will make the fracture to our club appear real and this will be how we get her.”

“Again, you should’ve kept us in the know,” Ritchie grinds out.

“You gave us a job, I didn’t realise we had to report back every fuckin’ day.”

Jamie Boy steps in. “You don’t, but shit like this, we need to know.”

Leaning forward, I say, “I couldn’t give a shit who has the power in the city. The city was never our territory until you showed up with your bottomless pockets. We gave you our word to work with you, and that means something to us.”

Tension thickens and it’s JJ who simmers the air.

“We’re well aware it’s taking a shit ton longer to get this done, but we’re not prepared to lose brothers because we’re constantly fighting a fight we’re not strong enough for. When the time is right, we’ll strike, and she will die.”

It seems to relax the two kings and they finish their drinks. Jamie Boy is the first to stand and says, “We don’t like being in the dark.” He walks out but Ritchie hangs back.

“My brother is overly cautious, but you should know that by now. My dad would say that it’s better to cover all angles before shooting your load. As I’ve gotten older, I tend to agree. My family grows restless faster than most...” He stands and adds, “It’s not good for anyone when that happens.”

He struts outside and I lean back in my seat, staring at the now empty doorway. Fucking Haywards.

“They really think they’re something, don’t they?” JJ murmurs.

“That’s the trouble, they are.”

One day it won’t always be the case but for now, I’ll bite my tongue and continue to do what’s been asked of the club.

Chapter Eight

Holly

“I can’t believe you’re going to Australia.”

Zach loads their cases into her car while Nina sits on their front step with me. I’m meant to be getting ready for Leo back at the house but he’s going to be a while with the British guys, and I can’t let Nina fly off around the world without saying goodbye.

“It’s for club business but we get to vacay at the same time, so I’m happy with that. I’ve never been away from Sebastian, though. I’m already missing him and he’s only in town with Kristen.”

Bumping my arm into hers, I tell her, “If it helps, me and Rayna will go see him every day and keep him busy. He won’t even notice you’re not around.”

“Thanks. That helps, I guess.”

“Hey, I get it’s going to be hard being away from him but enjoy this time away. Who knows when you’ll get this chance again?”

“You’re right. Zach essentially said the same thing.”

“There you go, you have no reason not to believe us.”

“Zach said Leo wants him back before your wedding so I won’t miss your big day.”

Cheap perfume fills the air and I look up to see Zara walking toward us. It's not like her to come around this side of the club. Unless a brother now lives in one of the new houses, no one ventures this far from the bar or the garages.

“Can we talk?”

There's an entire list of things I'd rather do than talk to her, but I nod and turn to Nina. Throwing my arms around her, I squeeze her tight and say, “Have the best time and be safe.” Pulling away from her, I see the excitement shining in her eyes as bright as the sun on a clear day. A little part of me is jealous that she and Zach are about to spend a week alone together in a beautiful place. I'd love for me and Leo to get away somewhere just the two of us.

“And don't worry about Sebby, you and Zach enjoy yourselves.”

Pulling myself up to my feet, I nod toward my house and Zara follows. I stop by the porch and cross my arms over my chest, readying myself for whatever this conversation is going to entail.

“I knew something was going on between you and Leo,” she starts, and I tense.

I should've known this would be about Leo. There isn't anything else we'd have to talk about.

“I'm not interested in arguing with you.”

“Nor am I. I want to clear the air. You're getting married and it seems me and Darryl are getting serious.”

Confused, I ask, “Who's Darryl?”

“Grim.”

Oh. I'm so used to knowing brothers by their road names, I don't think about it anymore.

“I got lost for a while, caught up in a fantasy about Leo but Darryl's unlike anyone I've ever met. He's real and I don't want to mess it up.”

I don't know what she wants me to say, but I tell her, "It sounds like we're both where we're meant to be."

She smiles but as she crosses her arms over her chest, it slips. My gut is telling me this isn't genuine.

"I don't want the past always creeping up behind us. I'm going to be around, and I would hate for there to be tension between us." Again, I don't quite believe her, but I keep my forced smile in place.

"Thank you and I mean no offence when I say this, but I don't think about you enough, or at all, to hold any tension. I hope it works out between you and Grim and you're happy, but we won't ever be friends like we once were. You showed some ugly traits over a guy and quite frankly, I don't trust you."

Zara sneers and her true colours bubble to the surface. "Darryl said I had to clear the air because you're his president's old lady, but I never wanted to. Do you think because he's putting a ring on your finger, it'll last? You can't even wear his engagement ring without your gloves on."

My first reaction is to hide my hands behind my back, but I think twice. I may despise them. They may make me feel sick to my stomach at the sight of them but in front of this bitch I used to call a friend, I won't hide them, only how I feel about them.

"It's time you walk away," I hear Nina sternly say before she joins me at my side.

Letting Zara's comment drag me down for only a second, I lift my chin and step into her space.

"You've shown me there's still always something uglier than scars. You. You're far uglier on the inside and if you ever come near me or my family again, I'll make you wish you never set foot around here. And if it isn't clear enough for you, you're not invited to the wedding as Grim's plus one anymore."

She huffs. "Like I even want to go to your pathetic wedding. Like I said, it won't last and the day you realise it, I

hope it cuts you in half and I hope I'm around to see it." She then laughs. "Face it, you're his second choice and only ever will be a stepmother to his brat..."

My hand flies through the air before I know what I'm doing, and I hope the sting across my palm, even through my glove, is nowhere near how her cheek feels.

Anger like I've never felt before, not even toward the man who mutilated my hands, courses through me and I spit out, "Don't you ever speak of me or my family like that again!"

"What the fuck's going on here?"

I jump at Leo's arrival and swallow heavily. "Zara was just telling us how she's not going to be coming around here anymore," Nina tells him as he walks toward us and slings his arm around my shoulders.

I dare to sneak a glance at him and find him glaring at Zara. Which is replaced with a smirk when he snaps, "Fuck off then, don't hang around on my account."

She storms off without another vile word out of her mouth, but I find myself brimming with anger.

Leo's lips press onto the top of my head, and he says, "I knew you had a wicked slap in you."

Cringing, I curl into him and hide the embarrassment on my face from him.

"You saw?"

"Yep, and I'm glad I did."

"I can't believe I hit her. I haven't hit anyone in my life, but she was saying the worst things."

"Hey, own it, it's certainly getting my dick hard."

"Trust you to be thinking like that," I say, leaning back to look up at him.

"I'm not just thinking about it, I'm gonna show you."

He tugs on my hand, and I turn to say goodbye to Nina, but she's already gone.

Leaning down, he throws me over his shoulder and walks into the house as a giggle escapes me. As soon as the door is shut and we're across the room, I'm lowered down onto the couch, and he unzips his jeans. Popping the button open, he lowers his jeans and his dick springs free. Sitting up, I lean forward and take him into my mouth. Cupping his balls, I make quick work bringing him to orgasm with a suction built from a vacuum and a magic tongue driving him into a frenzy. I swallow every drop that pumps out of him and look up to see his thighs shaking and him falling onto the couch beside me.

“Give me a minute and I'll repay the favour.”

I cuddle against him not bothered about the return, for now, and Zara fills my mind.

“Sometimes when I'm falling asleep, I imagine a life where I don't wear my gloves. I walk around showing everyone my scars don't bother me, but she was right...”

“Babe, you don't need to imagine life like that.” He leans up and runs his finger down my cheek. “I swear to all that's unholy, no one who matters notices your gloves. Every brother, every old lady, they all have something they wanna hide. Zara is a fuckin' no one and always will be.”

I sit up and clutch my hand over my chest to relieve the pain that's suddenly shooting across my heart. In the strangest way, it's a good pain.

“Hey, what's wrong?”

“Nothing. It's just... I hope I can one day see myself the way you do.”

Ever so softly, he kisses me, and I never want it to end.

“Until that day comes, I'll hold you up. Always. You good now?”

I nod. “I'm fine.”

Tilting his head, his eyes narrow and he tells me, “From now on, those two words aren't allowed to leave your mouth.”

I laugh. The lightness seeped through the dark thoughts.

“No? What will happen if they do?”

Pinching my chin, he grins. “I’ll just have to make sure your mouth’s too busy to say anything.”

Playfully slapping his arm, he pulls me back down to him and I roll on top of him.



Rayna runs into the house and Harper has to jog to keep up with her. Rayna shoots across the living room and throws her arms around me, resting her head against my stomach. Stroking her hair, I ask, “Did you have fun at Aunt Harper’s?”

“Yep, yep, yep. Where’s Daddy?”

“He left a little while ago. He’ll be back later. Why don’t you go and get your reading book and we’ll read in the garden this morning?”

Leo never changed his mind when it came to Rayna starting school and Alannah and I spent weeks looking into home-schooling. I got the paperwork sorted on Leo’s behalf and here we are. She runs up the stairs to her room and Harper pulls me into the kitchen.

“What the...?”

“I only have a couple of minutes, I left Gunner with Jay and he’s got to go out. I want all the details.”

“Of what?” I laugh.

“Of you slapping Zara! That’s what.”

Taken aback, I ask, “How did you hear about that?”

As far as I know, she’s been at home with the kids till now.

“I doubt there’s anyone who hasn’t heard about it,” she quips.

“Oh no,” I groan and sit at the table and hang my head in my hands.

“Oh no? Own it!”

There's no escaping the violence the brothers dish out and take often, but it's not who I am. Unless when provoked hard enough, obviously.

"She said some things about me and then Rayna, and I just lost it."

"Sounds like she deserved it, don't be embarrassed about it."

I don't plan on hiding from it, but I do plan on forgetting about it, so I change the conversation.

"I'm going to host an old ladies' night soon. You want to help me?"

Her face lights up and just like that, the slap and Zara are soon forgotten. She promises to come back and help me at a later time and Rayna and I spend the morning working on her reading and her maths.

Once we've eaten our lunch, I get her ready to head into town and sigh when Grim walks over.

"I can see you're heading out, but I just wanted to apologise for any offence Zara caused you last night."

I've always liked Grim. He was the one who took me to the hospital the day my father died. He was the rational person I needed when I felt nothing. He's always been polite and courteous around me. But as I look at him now, knowing he's with Zara, I don't recognise him.

"I have no issue with you. Just keep her away from me and my family."

He wisely keeps his mouth shut and nods. But I haven't said enough, the words burst from me, "I know all too well you can't help who you fall for but in this instance, maybe you should try and fight it."

Again, he says nothing and walks off. The words poured from me, but they didn't leave me feeling any better for it. I'm not the type of woman who slaps others or tells others how they should live their lives or who they should be with. I run after him and catch him up before he reaches the bar.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I shouldn’t have said what I did. It’s not my business who you go with or who you care for.”

“I’d rather know what you’re really thinking. You don’t need to apologise.”

“Still, it’s not my place. It’s hard to be happy for her, but I see you as my friend and I do want to see you happy.”

He smiles softly. “With or without her, I’ll always see myself happy,” he says with a wink.

One thing I like the most about the brothers is they’re so easy-going, it can make you forget the rest of the world.

“I just wanted to say sorry. I won’t put myself in your business again.”

He nods and walks into the bar. Chances are, he and Zara won’t last. But Grim will always be a brother and in my life in some way. The club comes first, and I don’t want to cause bad feelings between me and the brothers. I don’t want Leo in the position I’d put him in if I didn’t apologise and this shit between Zara and I festered.

Chapter Nine

Leo

Luca's already at our spot when I turn onto the old dirt road between the city and Willow's Peak. I pull up beside him and hold my fist out for him to bump. "You good?"

Like our father, he pulls a cigarette from his pack, but he doesn't light it. He keeps it between his fingers. The day River was born he gave up the bad habit. Most people say I'm most like our father, but Luca's much more like dad than me.

"All good, brother. I heard your old lady got herself into a fight last night."

The smirk on his face has my laugh escaping. "It was hardly a fight, but her slap echoed all around the club."

"You seem proud about the fact."

I snort. "Cause I am."

I'm proud as fuck that my woman is capable of handling herself when defending our family. It says a lot about a person when confronted.

"I didn't think she had it in her, but I guess you don't know someone until you do."

I love that people don't know what to expect when it comes to Holly. Grim certainly made it his mission to come to find me and apologise on behalf of Zara. I warned him to keep her away from the club but after Holly handled herself, I let

that be the last word on the matter. Letting everyone see she has a power of her own.

“Enough about my old lady, what news do you have for me?”

“I’ve already told you about the call. I met with her last night and the money she’s offering is off the scale ridiculous. She wants me to keep the city free of rivals and be there for her when she or her men need protection or needs her product moved.”

“Makes you wonder why she pays them when they need protecting.”

He shrugs. “I’ve faced her men, they’re pussies.”

“What else?”

“It took everything I had but I sold her. The bond between us has cracked over this deal and she ate it up, but it’s not me she wanted the deal with. I think she’s still hoping you’ll change your mind. She also wanted a show of faith of my loyalty. She’s seen my reaction to her killing Ford, but I made it clear making money is above all else. It was the only angle I had.”

I narrow my eyes and ask, “In what way did she want a show of faith?”

“Something to prove that we’re on the outs over her. I told her not to mistake my acceptance of her deal for me selling you or the club out. Victoria said my tone has the ability to make anyone think I don’t give a shit, Effie so far, seems to have believed it.”

Laughing, I agree. “Victoria’s not wrong, brother.”

“I made it clear that you only care about Willow’s Peak. And me, the city. That the distance between us is enough to keep a fragile peace between us as long as we stay out of each other’s ways.”

“Has she asked you to do anything yet?”

He shakes his head. “So, what now?”

“See where it goes. Find out what you can.”

“Will do but I don’t know how long I can play nice. She killed Ford. Every time I look at her, I want to see her blood trickling down her nose from the bullet hole I put between her eyes.”

“Just keep thinking about the future, brother.”

He nods and holds his fist out. We knock ours together before bringing our rides to life.

“I’ll only get in touch if there’s something to share.”

I nod and as he pulls away, I do too, riding off in the opposite direction. My gut is telling me this is the right move to make going forward. Luca is more than capable of holding his own and looking out for his chapter and he knows to keep his grief in check in order to take Effie down. Yet it’s been ingrained into me from the moment Luca was born to look out for him and protect him when he can’t.

I ride into the club and Grim follows me in. Alone. He won’t meet my eye and I sigh. More petty shit to sort out when I should be focusing on the big shit.

“Where have you been?” I ask him.

“I took Zara home.”

I nod. Broaching the events of last night, I say, “Whatever’s going on between you and Zara, I can’t keep telling you to keep her away from the club. I can’t have her causing trouble, especially when we’re gonna be making big moves.”

He nods but the tightening in the corner of his eyes and the tenseness in his jaw contradicts his nod. He says, “I get there’s history between you but I’m at a place where I don’t think I can walk away from her.”

I get how he’s feeling. “Fine, but to be clear, I’m not the only brother she has a history with. You okay with the fact she’s pretty much slid down every dick around here?”

He shrugs. “We’ve all got a past and I’m no virgin myself. Been with most of her friends.”

“If you really have a future with her, perhaps you should think about returning to Mercy. No one knows her there, you could start whatever you’re starting fresh.”

He starts to panic. “This is my home now. I can’t go back.”

“Look, the future of the club is my only concern and I need to believe every brother is completely focused on the same goal. Not having personal shit getting in the way.”

“I can guarantee Zara won’t get in the way. The club comes first, always.”

“Brother, you have my loyalty and I have your back every single day, but I need to see it returned. You get one chance, she gets in the way, I’ll bounce your ass back to Mercy without hesitation.”

I don’t like giving ultimatums, not really having to do it before now. The brothers and their old ladies are not club business unless the club is dragged in. Perhaps it’s my history with Zara and how it’s affecting my old lady but it’s not just Grim she could make trouble with and that’s too many factors for me.

I make my way to my house and drag my ass up the stairs. Holly is curled up in the middle of the bed and I undress and climb in beside her.

“I tried waiting up for you,” she murmurs sleepily.

Pressing my lips to her hair, I tell her, “I keep telling you not to do that. If you’re tired, always sleep.”

“I know but I can’t help it. I can’t sleep knowing you’re not here. Deal with it.”

I smile into the darkness. I’ll deal with it as she says. I hold her tighter and inhale her soapy scent.

“Are you okay?”

“I am now.”

I saw what my mom was going on about. No matter what I face during the day, Holly is what grounds me come the night.

Kissing her shoulder, I whisper, “Sleep now. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Wake me before you leave in the morning.”

“I will.”

Tomorrow I’ll update the brothers, but for tonight I will go to sleep.



I meet up with JJ outside the garages. He’s cleaning his bike with his son. Gunner has a rag of his own and clumsily wipes at the back wheel spokes.

“You good?” he asks looking up at me.

“Yeah. I met with Luca in the night. Call in the brothers.”

“Will do. Let me just take Guns back to Harper.”

Scooping my nephew up into my arms, I say, “Round the guys up, I’ll take him back to his mom.”

“She’s with your dad.”

I head toward my parents’ house noticing how big Gunner is getting. I missed the first year of his life. I’m glad I’m not a stranger to him any longer. Harper and Mom are sitting on the front porch and Gunner wriggles in my hold when he sees his mom.

“Hey, handsome. What are you doing with Uncle Leo?” she coos as I pass him over to her.

“Jay’s busy now, I said I’d bring him back to you.”

By the time I stroll back to the bar, the brothers are filing into the back room. I take my seat and when I slam the gavel down, the brothers quieten. Clearing my throat, I lean on the table and begin. “Luca is in with Effie. She so-calls believes he has broken away from us and we’ll do our part to make it appear real. No one at this table will contact Luca or any of our brothers in the Dog City chapter.”

Dad is unusually quiet and remains so as he leans back in his chair. It's Jay who says, "That goes without saying."

"We have our next run in a few days, and everything will be as normal. When she brings Luca truly into her fold, that's when we'll get her. The Haywards brought us into this shit show with her, but we'll show them how we do, and we'll make it clear we do it in our own way and in our own time."

Hands slam against the wooden tabletop and brothers holler until the room is filled with noise.

Holding my hand up to quieten them, they shut their mouths. "Luca found out why the city is valuable. It has a pipeline running from an airfield down to the port. That's what the Haywards want and it's what Effie's prepared to fight for. While Luca gets closer to her, he's gonna dig some more and find out everything he can. Has anyone got anything to add?"

Heads shake around the table. Slamming the gavel down, I follow the brothers into the bar and grab myself a beer.

Falling onto the couch, I settle in and watch the twins rack up a game of pool. Without getting the time to catch my breath, shrieking finds its way into the bar, and searching it out, it soon becomes clear when Zara struggles out of Grim's grip and storms toward me. The brothers quieten, all waiting to see how this shit show plays out.

"How fucking dare you!" she shrieks.

I simply stare at her, no inclination to question what the fuck she's going on about. I wait for her to continue, and she doesn't keep me waiting long.

"You can't threaten to send Darryl back to Mercy just for being with me!"

So this is what this is about. I should've known. Tipping the beer to my lips, I take a long pull as anger reddens her chest and neck. This is ridiculous. *She* is ridiculous.

Rising to my feet, I tower above her. I'll give her credit, she doesn't shrink before me. But then she wouldn't. She's always thought she had some sort of claim on me and that I'd

never go against her in any way. She's about to learn how deluded she's been.

“Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? If I want him in Mercy, that's where he'll fucking be. You have no fuckin' say in what I do. Anyway, I thought you told my old lady you weren't gonna be coming around here anymore?”

The redness creeps up to her cheeks and her eyes brim with anger. Just like an annoying fly buzzing around you, I itch to swat her away.

“I'm only here because you threatened Darryl!” she seethes.

“If I had threatened him, he'd have known about it. I suggest you bounce your ass home and don't let me see you again.” I look at Grim. “Get her out of here.”

My order and his nod ignite her outrage. “I'm standing right here, asshole!”

Brothers chuckle around us, finding her a source of entertainment. I lean into her face and lower my voice. “And if Grim does as he's told, you won't be.”

She's yanked away from me, and I broaden my shoulders to full height. “You come around here again, and you'll get more than a slap from my old lady and that is a threat.”

As I sit back down, I watch on as Grim throws her over his shoulder, and I listen to her protests as he hauls her outside.

“What the fuck was that about?” JJ asks, sitting beside me.

“Nothing.”

Over on the old timers table, Dad catches my eye, and I can't work out what he's thinking as he stares at me.

Pushing up from the couch, I head over to his table and pull out the chair beside him. I may as well find out.

“What?”

Tapping the table, he says, “Can't say too much, I had enough of my own club whore trouble back in the day but if I

were you, I'd keep a real close eye on her. When women bleed into the club, it clouds every decision."

I promise him, "The only way she bleeds into our club is physically, and then she disappears."

He nods slowly. "I hear ya, I believe ya, but it's not good business taking out women just because they give you a headache."

My frustration gnaws into a simmering rage. "Who the fuck said anything about taking her out because she annoys the shit outta me? That's not what I said, old man. But make no mistake, no one's safe when it comes to keeping this club whole."

I push up out of my seat and head outside, lighting a cigarette as I walk over to the houses. I intend to go see my girls, but Harper and Gunner catch my eye on their porch at the end of the houses. I didn't have time to speak to her earlier, but I do now. I hang back and finish my cigarette before joining them. I scoop Gunner up from the blanket Harper has laid out for them with a few of his toys.

"How you doing?" I ask Harper as I plonk my ass in the porch chair with Gunner on my lap.

The kid goes straight for my beard, and I chuckle. Being side-tracked with Gunner, I don't notice Harper ignoring me until she tosses the toys into the nearby box she brought out with them.

"Harps?"

She takes the chair at the other end of the porch but doesn't look at me. Something is wrong.

"You okay? You been taking your meds?"

She snorts. "I'm... Did you know Luca ran Lily out of town?"

I inhale deeply. We've come a long way, Harper and the family, I don't want it to slip back to shit. But I won't lie to her either.

“I did.” She sags in her chair, and I ask, “How did you find out?”

“Lily called. Slade managed to track her down and told her about Gunner. She told me everything. At first, I thought she was spinning a story, but I thought back, and while Lily was always flaky, I did think it strange she just left without a word.”

“How are you feeling about it?”

I don’t agree with what Luca did, but I don’t quite disagree with it either. I can’t fault him for wanting to defend and protect our mother and in the end, Harper. But at the same time, he could have dealt with her in a better way.

“At first, I was pissed. It wasn’t up to Luca to do that. For whatever reason. But then I looked at my son and I realised nothing, absolutely nothing, could force me to leave him no matter what I was threatened with.”

I agree but everyone’s different.

“Have you spoken to Luca?”

“Not yet. I’m trying to process it all before I approach him.”

“You know him, he doesn’t see things like the rest of us. He saw your mom hurting ours, her letting you down, and he acted. I don’t want to tell you how to feel or how to deal with this, but he came from a good place. He cares about you, and he will do anything for you.”

“I know,” she sighs. “I spent years being angry at her, and when she left, I was kinda relieved about it. I had JJ and he was all I needed.”

“Are you saying you need Lily now?”

“Let’s face it, she’s never needed me. I’m at a point in my life where I have more than I ever thought I would. I don’t need her, but I also don’t want any grief. I want her to be able to come back to town if she wants. Do you think Luca will let her?”

“Has she said she wants to come back?”

“She wants to meet Gunner, said she wants to make amends. Leo, I can’t be angry with her for going with your dad because I wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t. Your mom told me she doesn’t hold any grudges. She understands it happened before she and Dad got together.”

“Talk to Luca. Don’t ask him if she can come back, tell him she’s coming back. You don’t have to have his permission, but at the same time, if she upsets you again, I doubt she’ll get another second chance.”

She forgets that she’s embedded in the club through our father, through me and Luca, JJ, and even Sparky as her father-in-law. Shit, her uncle is a brother, and Zach is her cousin. Not one of us wants to see her hurting or slipping back into her illness where no one can reach her.

“I spent my whole childhood wanting a man in my life to make everything okay. I had Slade but I only saw him once, maybe twice a year. Now I can’t turn around without seeing a man who’s now family. I don’t think I’m angry with Luca as such. I’m so used to how the guys around here think and work, it didn’t come as no surprise.”

“So what do you feel about it?”

“I don’t know.”

I reckon she does and she’s good with Luca dealing with her mother, but she doesn’t want to admit it.

The club may face challenging times more often than not, but I’d rather deal with club politics than family politics. The club is easy to navigate, but the family, not so much. There are too many feelings and emotions in play and when you give a fuck, it leaves you no room to mess up.

Chapter Ten

Holly

Leo's kisses are like a balm over my soul, each and every one. He's mine and when he kisses me, the connection between us strengthens.

"I'll be back in a couple of days. If you need anything, Mom and Dad are around."

I sweep his hair away from his face and give him a reassuring smile.

"We'll be fine."

"I warned you about that word."

Laughing, I say, "You haven't got time to do anything about it."

Arching his brow, his smirk ignites something inside me. "I won't forget."

"Yo, Leo, we're good to go," JJ hollers as Harper walks toward him with Gunner perched on her hip.

I look back to Leo and say, "Be careful out there, and don't worry about us."

His brow arches once again, and says, "The day I don't worry about you or Ray is the day I'm in the ground... even then I'll worry from beyond the grave."

I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him once again. Winding my hand around the back of his neck, I yearn to take him back

inside and shed our clothes.

“It’s never been this hard to leave. You better be ready for me when I get back.”

“Without a doubt,” I promise.

Rayna runs out of the house, and I step back in time before she jumps on Leo. He hugs her tightly and presses small kisses on the side of her head.

“Be good and I’ll be home in a couple of days.”

He slides her down to her feet and she runs over to Alannah’s and bursts through her door.

“And you,” he says to me, pulling me back against him. “Enjoy your ladies’ night.”

“I’ll try.” I smile.

With one last tender kiss, he walks over and joins his brothers and mounts his bike. Now he’s president, he rides up front and I enjoy these moments when you get to watch them ride out in formation. I hang around on the porch for a while and listen to their engines fade into the distance, but I don’t get to dwell on his absence for long.

Harper joins me, telling me, “Dad is watching Gunner while we head into town. You ready to go?”

“Yeah, let me make sure Alannah can watch Rayna, and then grab my keys.”

“I saw her while dropping Gunner off with my dad, Ray’s fine.”

I run into the house and grab my keys and purse. While Leo is out of town, I thought it would be the best time to host ladies’ night. Harper’s waiting by the car and she slides into the passenger side as I slide behind the wheel.

As I drive slowly toward the gate, Aspen is storming toward her car with Mason hot on her ass.

Harper catches me staring and murmurs, “Since Mase got out he’s been a stage five clinger. Looks like Aspen’s had enough. I’m surprised he’s not on the run.”

Once we're on the road I push the gas harder and keep my eye on the rearview mirror as Aspen speeds up behind us and overtakes us, shooting off into the distance.

"Hold up, Mase is about to..." He passes us at an alarming fast speed and Harper and I watch on as he rides up beside her and leans so close it has me holding my breath. He bangs on her window and when she doesn't give him what he wants, he kicks at her door causing himself to swerve on the road.

"What the hell?" I murmur.

Aspen swings her car to the side of the road and comes to a sharp stop. It takes Mason a beat to slow down and turn around. I keep my eyes on the road as we pass them and watch in the rearview mirror as he jumps off of his bike and throws open her door. I slow in case trouble kicks off but all he does is lean in, bracing his arm on her roof.

"That was crazy." I sigh.

"You're not wrong." She laughs and then looks at me. "I don't need to worry about you and Leo, I thought he was never gonna leave, what with his lips glued to yours."

Laughing, I don't care that a blush is creeping across my cheeks. To take the heat from Leo and me, I ask, "Everything okay with you and JJ?"

Her smile widens. "Did you ever think true happiness was real? Like, you're so happy you're just waiting for something to go wrong?"

I snort. "I didn't but I am now."

"You know what I mean. I have everything I've ever wanted and more since I've never wanted children. Gunner completes us. But there's that small voice always reminding me it can be taken away from me at any time."

I reach over and squeeze her hand. "No one's taking anything from you. I won't allow it."

"This is why I desperately wanted Leo to sort his shit out and stop you from leaving town. You're the best friend I needed."

Dammit, I don't want to cry. If I hadn't been kidnapped, I would never have known true friendships.

"Thank you."

We enjoy the rest of the journey in silence, and I keep my eye on the car that's been following us.

"Have you noticed anything strange on the way here?" I ask Harper as I park up in the last available spot out front of the hardware store on Main Street.

"You mean the SUV that's been following us for the last fifteen minutes and just drove past as we parked?"

I sigh. "Yes. That."

"Then yes, I did."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Why didn't you?" she retorts.

"Do you think it was intentionally following us?"

"I have no idea but let's keep our eyes open, yeah?"

And we do. All around the supermarket picking up last-minute supplies and then at the liquor store as we stock up on wine and liquors. Alannah warned me the old ladies can drink just as much as the brothers and to be prepared. Leo left me more than enough cash to cover the night.

We walk out of the store to Grim and Shane sat on their bikes beside my car.

"How? When?"

"I sent my dad a text before we even got out of the car."

I wonder how I didn't see her do it but nonetheless, I'm grateful for Grim and Shane's presence. You can't be too careful, and I haven't ignored anything since I was kidnapped.

"Hey, you both good?" Grim asks.

Harper answers, "We are. I don't think anyone followed us around the store but there was definitely someone trailing us driving into town."

Shane climbs off his bike and takes the bags from me, and I open the trunk for him.

“Thanks.”

I once felt bad not going for a drink with him but not anymore.

“How are you? I haven’t seen you around in a while.”

“I’m good, thanks. Did you catch the plate number?”

I shake my head. I didn’t even think to do that. If it were one of the brothers, it would’ve been the first thing they thought to do.

“Cas wants you both back ASAP,” Grim tells us and we get in the car.

During the drive home, the excitement of our ladies’ night disappears. If someone was tailing us, why and who? Did they know Leo and most of the club left town earlier? Are they preparing to attack? My heart pounds as my imagination runs away with itself. Cas is sat at a picnic table with Rayna as Alannah stands holding Gunner. I park and the guys take our supplies over to the house without having to be asked.

“What model was the car?” Cas asks us.

“A black SUV,” I tell him.

“And you didn’t see it again on the way back?”

We both shake our heads, and he nods. “For now, don’t leave unless a brother is with you.”

“I don’t intend to.”

I leave Harper with Cas and Alannah, and Rayna and I head home. The bags of food and drink cover the kitchen floor and I start unpacking it all.

“Are you having a party?” Rayna asks, stepping over one of the bags.

Smiling down at her, I say, “Yep, yep, yep. Tomorrow night, and you’re going to have a sleepover at Grandpa Slade’s.”

I invited Kristen and she said she'd think about it. I don't hold much hope she'll stop by, but it would be nice if she did. She's been warmer toward me since Leo told her about us and for that I'm grateful. After losing her daughter, she could've made my life unbearable. Alannah spoke some about her and said she changed after India's death. That she was never truly comfortable with the club but not at all after she lost her daughter. I hope the loss of a child is something I never endure. I don't think I would be as strong as Kristen.



Since Rayna was awake at the crack of dawn, I was able to get an early start decorating the backyard. I hung fairy lights around the fencing and arranged the tables together to make one big table and placed the chairs around it. I picked up new lanterns and large candles in town last week and I placed them on the table and two on each of the steps leading up to the back porch.

The lemons and limes are sliced ready for the tequila. All kinds of snacks are covered and ready to be taken outside. My make-up is flawless and my dress clings to my body like a second skin. Since I've been with Leo, I've slowly been coming to terms with my hands. He's the only one I'm at complete ease around without my gloves on. Since we got together, my confidence has grown with everyone else catching quick glances at my gloves. It no longer bothers me when they stare. They can't see anything but the material covering my scars. My collection of gloves means I have a different pair for every outfit.

The house is silent. Slade picked Rayna up a couple of hours ago and Kristen sent me a photo of Rayna sitting watching Slade work on his bike after her dinner. She apologised that she couldn't make it tonight and wished me a great night. I take one last look in the mirror before going to answer the door when the bell rings.

This is it.

My nerves mix with excitement, and I exhale long and hard before opening the door.

Harper, Alannah, and Bonnie step inside, all dressed up and carrying bottles of wine or in my soon-to-be mother-in-law's hand, a bottle of tequila.

I open the door wider as Libby and Kyla head toward the house. I don't know Libby as well as the others, but she's always been nice to me on the few occasions we've been around each other.

"Hey, go through and out to the yard." I smile and as Harper is in charge of the music, it soon fills the house.

Emma and Aspen are last to arrive, and I notice how tired Emma is. Last I heard Tommy still wasn't sleeping through the night. Emma leans in and hugs me and I notice Aspen's a lot more chilled than when Harper and I saw her yesterday.

"I hope you stocked up on tequila 'cause I need to be drunk, like, an hour ago," Aspen says and I gesture for her to come in.

"I've got you covered. Come on, everyone's out back."

They head out the back door and I make a quick stop to grab the vodka from the freezer. While I'm alone in the house, I take a deep breath and push out the last bunch of nerves running through me. I exhale and step outside. Conversations are already flowing, and laughter fills the night.

"Pass me that vodka," Aspen hollers and I place it in front of her as I take a seat.

"I thought you wanted the tequila?"

"I need to escape, I'm mixing tonight. Anything goes."

Numerous brows raise around the table and Aspen sighs, throwing back her first shot.

"Whoa!" Kyla hollers and Aspen flinches. "You okay?"

"Right now, Ky, I don't need to be talking about Mason in front of his mom."

“Hey, talk away, you think that boy along with his brother hasn’t made me want to hit the bottle?”

Aspen throws back another shot and physically cringes from the vodka.

“It’s just since he got out of prison, he’s been on edge, like all the time. He won’t talk about it. But at the same time, he doesn’t want me out of his sight. We’ve had fights over the years, but we’re fighting all the damn time lately and over the smallest things. It’s doing my head in.” She pours herself another drink and shoots it back. “Anyway, we’re not here to listen to my miserable life at the moment. Let’s get this party started.”

And the party truly does get started. The drinks flow from bottles to glasses and down our throats without pause. At some point, the music is turned up. The food is eaten. And though the night is becoming hazy from the numerous shots I’ve had, I can still feel my cheeks aching from grinning and my sides hurting from laughing so much. Alannah was right when she suggested I throw this party. It’s what I needed to completely feel like I belong.

“So we basically know everything about everyone here... apart from you!” Bonnie slurs pointing at me.

I’ve been expecting this so I’m kind of prepared and feeling brave from the drink. “What do you wanna know?”

Though my heart thumps in my chest, it’s not like they’ll ask rude questions, not with Alannah here.

“Is Leo the best you’ve ever had?”

Wow. Okay, maybe she doesn’t give a shit if his mom is sitting right here.

“Fuck that, is he the biggest you’ve ever had?” Aspen giggles, clearly less agitated than when she arrived.

Laughter hits the table and I sink another shot. To get it over with, I mutter quickly, “Yes and yes,” and grab Emma’s untouched shot of vodka. I shoot it back and slam the glass on the table, not meeting Alannah’s eye.

“Okay, something more mother-in-law friendly. What about kids? Have you had that conversation yet?” Kyla asks.

“We have and we decided to start trying after the wedding.”

“Then we best start knocking before walking in,” Harper laughs.

The side gate opens and when I force myself to focus, I only see one of Nina walking in.

“I tried ringing the bell but none of you obviously heard me.”

“Oh my god, you’re here!”

I hope I’m not slurring too much because to my ears, I sound fine.

“I can’t stay too long, I’m so tired and Zach will be back soon with Sebastian, but I wanted to show my face.”

She hugs everyone and when she gets to me, I hold onto her before I fall. “I’m sorry to miss you drinking. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drunk before.” She laughs.

Some sort of noise leaves my mouth and I wave her away. “I’m not that drunk.”

“Okay, sweetheart, but let’s get you seated, yeah.”

I take her advice and she pulls out the chair next to mine.

“How was Australia?” Alannah asks her.

“It was amazing, but I’ll tell you all about it another time, that way you’ll remember it.”

Grabbing a clean glass, I look around for a bottle of wine that isn’t empty.

“At least have one drink with us.”

“Sure.”

One drink turns into two, then three...



If I don't move a single muscle, there's no pain rocketing across my head. If I don't breathe, I don't feel like I want to throw up. I don't bother trying to get up for fear of dying. Keeping my eyes closed, I attempt to fall back asleep when my phone has other ideas. The ringtone drills through my head like a jackhammer and without opening my eyes, I pat around the bed for my phone.

I answer it and drop it on the pillow next to me.

"Hey, where are you? I can't see you."

Leo?

Straining to open my eyes and keep them open, I roll onto my side slowly and perch the phone up against Leo's pillow so I don't have to use any energy holding it. As soon as he sees me, his laughter is too loud, and I grimace.

"Keep it down, please," I croak out.

"I take it you had a good time last night?"

"I think so?" I sigh. "The last thing I remember is pouring Nina a glass of wine."

"It's been funny as fuck this morning, the brothers have been calling their old ladies and they're all hungover big time."

"At least I'm not the only one then," I groan.

Being able to see now, I groan again when I see I was obviously in no fit state to clean the makeup off my face last night. I have mascara and eyeliner smudged all around my eyes and my lipstick is smeared across my cheek.

My mouth waters and my stomach rolls, I barely mumble a "Hold on," before I run for the bathroom and hover over the toilet.

Everything from last night makes a reappearance and for a minute I believe this is how I'm really going to die.

Once I'm finished, I quickly brush my teeth and pull out a face wipe. Crossing the bedroom, I fall back into bed, start wiping off my makeup, and pick up the phone.

"Feel better?" Leo chuckles.

"Not even a little bit. Don't ever let me drink that much again."

"Make sure you drink plenty of water and try to eat something, it'll settle your stomach."

"Oh god, the thought of eating anything right now is..." I swallow the urge to vomit again and think of something else.

"When are you going to be home?"

"Tomorrow morning if all goes well. Hopefully, you'll be feeling better by then?" He laughs.

"Nope. This is who I am now."

"You're cute when you're hungover, you know that?"

"It's not something I've heard before and since I'm never drinking again, this is the one and only time you'll see me like this."

"Shame. If I were there I'd have at least gotten you out of your dress."

I look down at myself and I am indeed still in last night's dress.

"God, I'm such a mess."

"Is it weird that it's kinda turning me on?"

"Yes." I laugh and instantly regret it. "I need to shower. Call me back when you next stop for a break or something."

"Okay. Drink water, eat something, and get some more sleep. I'll call Slade and get him to keep hold of Rayna another night."

Since I'm currently still struggling to see only one of Leo on the screen, I don't argue with him.

"Sounds good." I lie down and pull the sheets over me.

“Love you, babe.”

“Hmm mmm, love you, too.”

I don't know who ended the call but the silence filling the room returns and my head is grateful. I'm guessing the yard is a mess, but it can certainly wait till tomorrow.

As I try to control breathing through the headache, I try to piece the end of the night together. I have flashes of dancing and Harper falling over and then me on the grass next to her. A flash of Cas picking her up hits me. A flash of Kyla belting out the lyrics to a song I can't quite remember also hits me. I don't remember much but I sense it was a good night and that's what counts.

Chapter Eleven

Leo

I split off from my brothers with the prospect following behind me and head for Slade's house. Holly was in no condition to do anything yesterday. I was a little surprised she drank so much but I'm glad she had a great night.

It's still early and when I knock at Slade's door, I'm not surprised I wake the house.

"She's still asleep, Leo, can I bring her by the house after she's had breakfast?" Kristen offers but I'm here now and I want both my girls under one roof when I crash.

"It's all good, I'll take her now."

Slade prepares a fresh pot of coffee while Kris deals with Rayna.

"The run went well I take it."

"Yeah. Anything happened here while we were gone?"

"Apart from a domestic between Mason and his old lady, nothing." He leans against the counter and crosses his arms over his chest. "Something's off with him at the moment. Pope caught it but the boy won't talk to him. No one asked many questions when you guys were banged up, but did something happen while he was in there?"

Shaking my head, I say, "Nothing happened that I can think of, but he did struggle with the restrictions. One time I

had to let him kick the shit out of some guy just so he didn't explode."

"He's always kept Aspen close, but from what I caught before she stormed out, he doesn't want her out of his sight. Why wasn't he on the run with you?"

"He came to me and asked to sit this one out, something about..." Fuck. "I'll talk to him but first I need a shower and some sleep."

Kristen brings Rayna down and she's still in her pyjamas. Kristen hands me Rayna's backpack and I throw it over my shoulder and scoop my daughter up into my arms.

"Daddy, I'm tired."

"I know, sweetheart, go back to sleep."

She rests her head on my shoulder and she's out before I strap her into the van with the prospect. She stirs when we get home and I carry her into the house and up to her room. I tuck her in and creep out and close her door. I backtrack down the stairs and take a look out into the backyard. Holly already warned me it was a mess, and she didn't plan on clearing up till today. I take out my phone and text the prospect. He can clean it up for her and she can stay in bed with me.

The shift in Mason weighs on my mind. If I'm honest, I saw him change over the year and a half that we were locked up. He's never been as wild as his brother, but his frustration set in and buried deep inside him, letting it fester. My goal was for us to get out as soon as we could but looking back, maybe I shouldn't have held the leash so tight.

Opening the door to my room, Holly's out for the count, her bare leg thrown over the sheets and waking my dick. I undress, leaving a trail of my clothes across the floor.

She smiles as I climb in beside her, but she keeps her eyes closed as I tuck her against me.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Much better," she says sleepily. "Especially now you're home."

“I picked Rayna up on the way, she’s sleeping in her room.”

Like Rayna, she falls back asleep with ease and it’s not long before my mind quietens enough for me to drift off.



The sheriff’s brother is sure enough living a good, safe, life. He spends his days working as an accountant and spends his weekends surfing and living it up in the bars at night. Flipping through the photos Zach printed out, I have everything I need to see his life from thousands of miles away.

“Did he notice you at any point?” I ask Zach as he sits across from me in my office.

He shakes his head. “No, I was careful. Neen and me were the perfect tourists.”

I’m satisfied sending him across the world was worth it. To beat your enemy, you need to know everything about them.

I ask, “How was Australia?”

“It was amazing. I’m pretty sure we made baby number two.” He laughs and I join him.

I have my plan to extend my family and no jealousy runs through me hearing his own plan.

“With families growing, it’s important, more now than ever, that we get on top of everyone trying to come at us,” I say.

“The club’s behind you. We all want the same thing... our families are safe and protected. We’ll do whatever’s necessary.”

“You’re damn fuckin’ right,” I grunt and stand. “Let’s get a drink.”

Out in the bar, the brothers are relaxing after the long run, and I join Mom on the couch and kick my feet up on the table.

“I’m going to deal with Sheriff sooner or later, hopefully, sooner, watch yourself around town in case she kicks back.”

“I’m only an old lady...”

I know where she’s headed but I cut her off. “This isn’t the golden olden days, Mom. The sheriff is coming for us, and I reckon you’d be on her list to worm her way in. Just watch your back.”

If I were a fed or the sheriff, I would target her. It wouldn’t take much time and effort to see she’s the one who’s at the top of everyone and has been her whole life.

“Is this you warning me as my son, or as president?”

“Does it need to be an order?” I retorted.

“Of course not.”

My mother has a wicked smile when she agrees to something but deep down knows she’ll do whatever she wants anyway. I’m not too worried, it was rare she went against my dad, I can’t see her changing her ways now.

“Holly said her old ladies’ night went well. Do you agree?”

“That old lady of yours is going to do good. The night was a success, and it was the first time I’ve truly seen her out of her comfort zone.”

It warms me to hear it. Holly is more than comfortable in her own company, but I know she misses socialising. A part of me wishes she knew who I used to be, and I wish I knew who she was before her kidnapping. But I settle for us knowing each other for who we’ve become. Who we are today.

“She’s stronger than she lets herself believe,” I say.

“She’s finding herself again, don’t you doubt that. Time can be your enemy, but it can be your best friend, we know that better than most. She just needed longer to heal, and she is. I’ll keep my eye on her, but I don’t think I’ll need to for long.”

Myles leans in the bar door and hollers, “Leo, we’ve got bikers approaching, but can’t see their patches.”

Kissing my mom on the cheek, I haul myself up to my feet and head outside, lighting a cigarette along the way.

By the time I reach the gate, the prospect says, “Lost Souls.”

Knowing trouble isn’t riding toward us, I inhale deeply on the cigarette and order the prospect to open the gate.

“We weren’t expecting other chapters for a few more days,” Myles says as if I’m not aware of that fact.

“Go get my dad and Sparky,” I instruct.

This will be my first time as president meeting with other chapters, but I know my dad’s presence will ease the initial first moments. I don’t personally give a fuck, but it will make my life easier which I do give a fuck about.

Wyatt, the Southern Chapter President is first to ride in, followed by his VP, Creep. I recognise Jonah and Cookie as they ride in after them. The first three with women on the back of their bikes. I notice none of them have any bags or a prospect following behind. And I was expecting more brothers.

The prospect walks ahead and shows them where to park and I walk toward Dad as he comes around the bar with Sparky.

“They’re early. Expect a reason that’ll cause a headache,” he warns me without missing a beat.

“Already expecting one. There’s only four of them.”

“Look lively, here we go,” Sparks says under his breath, and I turn to Wyatt approaching us.

“I thought it would be a long time yet before I saw you wearing your father’s patch,” he says, pulling me in for a second-long hug.

He steps back and I shake hands with Creep. I clock the disarray about them, and I ask, “Where’s the rest of ya?”

Wyatt's shoulders sag and his fatigue shows. "Can we get our old ladies settled and then talk?"

Over his shoulder, they look just as tired as the brothers.

"Sure."

Mom appears with Holly, and I pull Holly under my arm. "This is my old lady Holly. Babe, this is Wyatt and Creep. And over by their bikes, is Jonah and Cookie."

Wyatt holds his hand out to shake hers and I feel her tense as she takes his hand and then Creep's. I watch them glance at her gloves, but like I promised her, anyone who's anyone, truly won't give a shit.

"It's nice to meet you both," she says, and Wyatt calls over his old lady.

The woman Creep rode in with joins her. Wyatt slides his arm around the blonde-haired woman's waist and introduces her. "This is Orla." And Creep says, "This is my old lady, Wendy."

Wyatt looks over his shoulder and says, "The chick with Jonah is Beth and as usual, there isn't a woman alive who could handle Cookie."

I don't know these guys as well as my Willow's Peak brothers, but I've met them many times over the years, but I know Cookie is named as such because he's seen as soft and sweet, but underneath he's a fucking psycho.

"As usual, you're a sight for sore eyes, Alannah. How have you been keeping?" Wyatt grins and Mom laughs lightly.

"As usual, you're a charmer and I'm well, thank you. How was your ride?"

"Long," he says with a sigh.

To Holly, I say, "Can you show Orla, Wendy, and Beth to the main house and set up rooms for them?"

"Sure."

The women walk over to the main house, and I lead the brothers into the bar. The prospect's quick to bring over beers

and everyone settles in at my table. JJ pulls out the chair beside me, and Dad on the other side. I motion for Wyatt to begin.

“About six months ago, a new gang rolled into town, calling themselves “Young Hounds”. They made themselves known rather quickly, causing trouble and just outright being assholes. We had a few run-ins with them, about thirty of them altogether. Then five days ago, they hit us hard. Our clubhouse is gone, burned to the ground, and we lost five brothers. We would’ve been here a couple of days ago, but we hung back to bury our brothers.”

Shit. My initial reaction is shock but then anger starts to simmer.

JJ leans forward, scowling. “Let me get this straight. You lose brothers and your clubhouse and instead of retaliating, you do nothing and leave town?”

Wyatt narrows his eyes, his mouth parts to no doubt defend his actions but it’s Cookie who speaks up. “We lost everything, how the fuck were we meant to fight with only four of us and no weapons?”

“You get fuckin’ creative,” Pope hollers from his table in the corner.

Tapping my finger on the table stops me from jumping across it and laying Wyatt flat out. JJ’s right to question his actions.

“You shouldn’t have left town. There only being four of you, you could’ve called in for help. Brothers would’ve come riding hard and fast and we could’ve wiped out this gang,” I say.

Creep is the first to answer, “No offence, Leo, you’ve been president for little over a year and spent most of that locked up.”

“He hasn’t been locked up for a while,” Myles defends me, but I lift my hand and he sits back.

“First off, offence fuckin’ taken,” I grunt and then to Wyatt, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re the fuckin’

president over your chapter, is it, not your responsibility to protect your chapter, fight for it, fight for your brothers... and if necessary, reach out for help?"

It takes him a moment to speak up, but it's not directed at me... but at my dad, sparking annoyance through me.

"Cas, you would've done the same. I'm not saying we don't plan on going home and reclaiming our town, but we need men and guns. We need a plan."

Dad leans back in his seat, rolling a cigarette between his fingers.

"You're wrong. I wouldn't have left town. I would've called for backup. Under no circumstances would I have left my town and let my enemy believe they had run us off." Sliding the cigarette behind his ear, he pointedly adds, "My son is president now, and I agree with him on this matter. You were wrong to leave your town. You need to stop tryin' to fuckin' justify it."

This shuts Wyatt up and he drains his beer to gain a minute to think over his next words.

"Maybe you're right, but I made the call to leave when me and my brothers were at our lowest. The shit we've been through, we're nearly done."

Done? Fucking done? I should rip their patches from their cuts. You don't admit defeat and you're fucking tired to the point you run away. It takes everything to keep a lid on my temper.

"We have the Five Falls Chapter and the Mercy Chapter arriving within the next few days," I say, adding, "I think it's time we all sit down, and sort shit out."

Rising from my seat, I grab my beer and say, "You're welcome to stay over at the main house with your old ladies, and Cookie, I'll have a prospect to show you to a room here."

I don't wait for any more bullshit to pass from their lips and head toward my office. JJ follows and closes the door behind him. Falling onto the couch, I drain my beer and toss the bottle in the nearby trash can.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“That we’ve got more shit to clean up than we thought. It seems in the time I was locked up, it was open season to fuck us.”

Reaching down to the third drawer, I grab the map of the country I know my dad kept here and spread it across the desk. Grabbing a red pen, I outline around the already circled locations where we have charters and draw a line from Dog City to each one.

“What are you doing?” JJ asks.

“These are our territories and from Dog City, we have a clear path to each location. I’m starting to think the Haywards did much more homework on us than we originally thought, and they know how prime we are for transportation. We need to claim back the Southern Chapter territory, and not just because of pride. The Haywards need these routes and I want to learn why.”

“Where the South is concerned, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking, they hang around for the wedding, let this new gang believe they now own the town, then we take a trip with our brothers and start a war.”

The changes I saw for the club are no longer just big, they’re fucking huge. It isn’t just the Willow’s Peak chapter that needs to be modernised. It’s the club as a whole.

“I think a war is going to be our only choice. It seems we have assholes at every turn. We need to make moves that put our reputation on every fucker’s lips.”

“What do you propose?” I ask.

“Exactly what you’re thinking. Wait till the wedding’s over and start sorting out the Southern Chapter. We’re waiting on word from Luca so we have time to deal with other enemies. We can use the next week to gather as many guns as we can and form a solid plan of attack.”

Nodding, I ask, “You think the club is up for this kind of fight?”

“After the last couple of years of getting nowhere with Effie, I think this is perfect to refresh the lot of us.”

It’s exactly what I want to hear. Taking my father’s place was never just taking over Willow’s Peak. By the time I get the club to where I want it to be, every soul wearing the Lost Souls patch will know exactly what I’m about.

Chapter Twelve

Holly

I close Rayna's workbooks and stack them into a neat pile.

"You go put your books away and we'll drive into town with Grandma Alannah."

While she takes her schoolbooks up to her room, I make sure I have my wallet and phone in my purse. When Leo first said he didn't want Rayna going to public school, I thought home-schooling would be stressful. It turns out, Rayna is easy to school. She's interested in learning all kinds of things and she remembers everything she learns.

She bounces down the stairs and I meet her by the front door.

"Ready?"

"Yep, yep, yep."

We meet Alannah out front and take her car into town. With the extra brothers and their old ladies showing up early, we need more supplies, and being the president's old lady, I offered to go with my future mother-in-law and help. Leo gave us an envelope thick with cash to get enough food, extra bedding and anything our guests will need while they're in town. Alannah had boxes of extra blankets and sheets for times like these, but she found them covered in mould.

"They'll be more old ladies showing up with the brothers, you okay?"

Orla, Wendy, and Beth seem nice, and they were gracious for the rooms we set up for them yesterday. Wendy is the chattiest, Orla content to just be but Beth was a little on the quiet side, and on occasion zoning out of the moment.

“I’m good. It’s nice to meet new people and like you say, they’re only here for the wedding and then they’ll leave.”

“If I can give you some advice, don’t forget you’re the top old lady so to speak. Everyone pretty much goes about their business, but it’ll be you who they go to if they have a problem or need help.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll still go to you.”

From all the stories I’ve heard about Alannah, it’s always her kindness and generosity I hear most about. “Maybe some will, but over time, it’ll be you they seek out.”

I’m distracted by her words all afternoon. I don’t mind helping anyone out, but the thought of always dealing with new people is daunting. Shopping with Alannah takes longer than it would if I were on my own. She knows everyone and each time she runs into someone it’s at least a ten-minute conversation.

“It’s important to keep a good relationship with people in town. It doesn’t matter if we don’t have a good relationship with the police, it’s the town we need to not see us as a threat.” She told me.

I see her point and it makes sense. All my life people in town were comfortable living side by side with the club because they rarely came into town. Everyone had a good idea of what they were about, but no one knew for sure.

By the time I’ve finished packing the groceries away in the main house, it’s so quiet I assume I’m alone in the house so I jump when Beth is sitting on the couch in the living room as I walk by. She stares at the wall. It doesn’t take long for her sadness to weave around me. I know exactly what it is because it’s all too familiar to me. She doesn’t look like she wants to be disturbed but I can’t in all good consciousness just leave her without saying something.

“Are you okay?”

It takes a moment before the realisation of me being in the room hits her and she plasters on the fakest smile I’ve ever seen. Again, I know this because I’ve done it thousands of times.

“Of course,” she beams but her smile is too tight.

Something inside me still can’t walk out and leave her. So I ask her, “I was planning on opening a bottle of wine, do you want to join me?”

Her smile becomes genuine and there’s no hesitation when she walks over to my house with me.

“You have a lovely home,” she murmurs as I show her into the living area.

“Thank you. We haven’t been here long but it’s already home to us.”

In fact, I couldn’t imagine home being anywhere else. It was weird packing up the cabin and saying goodbye to the sanctuary that kept me safe after I was attacked. I know Leo thought of India as he packed the rest of her things away. It never bothered me having them around but when we began unpacking here, he put her things in the attic and a part of me was relieved. Leo said this was going to be our home and our fresh start and he stuck to his word.

I collect two glasses and a bottle of red wine from the kitchen and join her on the couch.

“You must be excited about the wedding coming up,” she says but I can’t help noticing the sadness still hovering around her.

“It’s coming around fast for sure, but pretty much everything is done. It’s just a waiting game now.”

I pour out the wine and she takes the glass when I offer it. I notice she doesn’t wear a ring on her fourth finger, but I do know she’s with Jonah.

“You’re with Jonah, right?” I ask for something to say.

She nods and takes a large gulp of her wine.

“How long have you been together?” I push to keep the conversation going.

“Just over three years, though sometimes it feels a lot longer,” she jests but her strangled laugh turns to sobs and tears stream down her cheeks.

I’ve never seen someone break down so fast in front of me before. Forgetting my hands, I automatically reach out and squeeze her arm.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

Her chest heaves with heavy sobs and I end up pulling her against me and holding her tightly.

“You can talk to me. If there’s something wrong, I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

After a few long moments, her sobs fade, and she leans back. She uses her sleeve to dab around her eyes and wipes her nose.

As soon as the first word leaves her lips, she doesn’t stop. “I used to love him so much, I was saturated in it. I beg him every day to let me go but he vows he never will... I hate him.”

I cut her off and my stomach turns as I ask, “Has he... does he hurt you?”

“Never physically. I thought it was us against the world, but it turns out, it was me against the world as he fucked his way through it. I’ve lost count of the times he’s stepped out on me, but I do know I’m dead inside now. I feel nothing and yet, I want to live...” Her sobs return and I pull her in for another hug while she lets it all out.

“I need to get out,” she murmurs, “Can you help me with that?”

“Do you have a plan or...”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you had company,” Leo grunts from the doorway.

Beth jumps back and stands. She hastily swipes at her eyes and looks down at me. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have burdened you with this. Forget I said anything."

She's quick to leave and Leo barely has the time to move out of her way.

"What the fuck was that about?" he asks once we hear the front door close.

I finish my wine, needing a moment before I speak. She must've kept her feelings locked in for a long time. She purged like she was running out of air. I take my glass along with Beth's into the kitchen and Leo follows.

"How well do you know Jonah?" I ask first.

"Well, enough. Why do you ask?"

"If I tell you something, you won't tell anyone, will you?"

The pit between his brows deepens and it looks like I've offended him.

"I'd never betray you."

Inhaling deeply, I tell him, "Jonah cheats on her all the time and she's had enough."

"What's that got to do with you?"

At first, my defences rise. Why should it be a question of why she would talk to me?

"He tells her he'll never let her go and according to her, she begs him to let her leave on the daily. She wants my help getting away."

He remains quiet for too long and I can't take it. "You don't think I should get involved?"

"Involved in their relationship? No. But helping someone, yes." He closes the space between us and cups my cheeks.

"I'll deal with the brothers, and you help the old ladies if they ask for it. But I don't want it blowing back on you."

"I will only help her because I saw it in her eyes, she's at her end. I know how that feels."

“You do what you gotta do and I’ll do the same, then when we come back together here, it’s just us without anyone else’s problems.”

“Sounds good to me.”

He briefly kisses me, and I ask, “What are you doing back anyway?”

As far as I was aware he said he’d be busy today, so I wasn’t expecting to see him before tonight.

“I needed five minutes away from Wyatt before I did something stupid.”

Frowning, I ask, “Like what? What’s he doing?”

“Apart from him letting this gang run him out of our territory, it’s his attitude toward it. This is the shit my dad warned me about when it came to the patch.”

I don’t particularly understand the politics of the club and I don’t care to try and learn.

“If you do end up hitting him, just remember I don’t want bruises in our wedding photos.”

Rolling his eyes, he says, “Of course. Besides, like I’d let the old fucker get a hit on me.”

Winding my arms around his neck, I press my lips to his softly. “You’ve got this.”

“I love you.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m going to be your wife.”



Rayna wanted to have dinner and a sleepover at Grandma Alannah’s and since sending her across an hour ago, I’ve been lost as to what to do. I found myself heading over to the bar. Leo is nowhere to be seen but I join Harper, JJ, Mason, and Aspen, and notice Jonah over by the pool table. He’s not in a game, he’s more interested in one of Zara’s friends, laughing as she talks, and running his hands over her ass as he pulls her

against him. No wonder Beth feels nothing, the pain of betrayal from the man who tells you he loves you would be too much for anyone to bear.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Harper notes, adding, “Is something wrong?”

“Yes, but not with me...” I trail off, watching Jonah take Zara’s friend up the stairs. “I need to go. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Given that Jonah is here with another woman, I head straight to the main house where Beth will be. Pushing through the front door, I find her staring at the wall from the couch again.

“Hey, do you still want to leave?” I blurt out.

She jumps up to her feet and rushes over to me. Grabbing onto my arms, she says, “You’re going to help me?”

“Yes, and if you still want to leave, we have to go now.”

“I’ll go get my bag.”

She runs up the stairs and doesn’t keep me waiting long until she’s running back down them. I look out and see the coast is clear. My heart pounds as we walk over to my car, and I thank everyone I need to that no one’s around to see us drive by the bar.

“Do you think the prospect will know who I am when Jonah notices I’m gone?”

The panic in her voice has a chill running down my spine.

I lower my window and call him over. “As far as anyone’s concerned, I’ve headed into town alone. Okay?”

“If Leo asks...”

“Leo will understand, but if anyone else asks, I’m alone.”

“Got ya.”

He jogs around the car and pushes open the gate. Once we’re on the road, Beth begins to relax and though I have no

idea what she's been through, I know the depth of darkness inside oneself.

“Do you know where you're going to go?”

“Nope, but I'll choose somewhere at the bus station.”

“You've got cash?”

I have about fifty bucks in my purse but that won't get her very far.

“I've got enough for what I need.”

She's quiet for the rest of the drive and I park up and walk with her to the ticket office. She buys a ticket that will get her up north and I wonder if it would've been better to head south to where she must have family. But then I tell myself it's her business and I don't really know this woman. She'll have a reason to head north.

We find her bus and my hands start to shake like we're about to be caught. I don't know Jonah but the few things I do know don't show him in a good light.

Who knows how he'll react when he finds her gone?

She throws her arms around me and hugs me so tight I can feel her gratitude in the simple gesture.

“Thank you so much. I'll never forget what you've done for me.”

“Of course. I hope you get to where you want to be and find yourself again.”

She smiles. “This will work out for the best.”

I see her on the bus and wave through the window to her as she takes her seat near the back. Not wanting to be seen, I make my way back to the car and clench my hands to stop the shaking.

Taking a deep breath, I start the car and drive home. The closer I get to home the more I relax and believe I've done the right thing. No woman should be made to stay with a guy when she wants out. She should've been able to walk away the first time she wanted to leave. In my eyes, if Jonah loved her

enough not to live without her, he wouldn't cheat on her. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardise his relationship.

The prospect opens the gate and clocks the empty passenger seat. He doesn't say a word. Brothers are hanging around outside, some sort of scuffle happening in the middle.

I park up by the garages not able to drive through the crowd. As I climb out, Wyatt and Cookie are blocking Jonah's every move to get passed them.

He holds his gun in one hand and waves around a piece of paper in the other.

"Brother, please, just let her go!" Wyatt hollers.

I guess he knows she's gone. Since I saw him go up to a room with Zara's friend, I'm guessing he hasn't even washed his betrayal off yet. He has the nerve to be upset by Beth leaving him.

"Get out of my fuckin' way!" Jonah roars.

Slamming my car door shut gets his attention and the chill I felt earlier runs through my whole body as he stares me down.

"Where have you been?" he demands, barging past Wyatt and storming toward me.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I had an appointment in town."

The closer he gets, I instinctively step back. He comes to a stop in my face and before I can draw a breath, JJ, Mason, and Zach have closed in around me, JJ shoving him away.

"Wy, you better fuckin' reel your boy in or he's gonna get hurt," JJ warns coldly. The coldest I've ever heard him speak.

Wyatt immediately yanks Jonah by his cut until there's space between us all but Jonah fights back all the way.

"Why the fuck would Leo's old lady have anything to do with Beth?" Cookie tries to reason with him.

I keep my mouth shut and will my face not to give anything away.

“It’s too convenient. The first time she leaves since we get here, and Beth’s gone!” Jonah argues.

I mean, he’s categorically spot on, but I don’t react one bit. The farther Beth gets from Willow’s Peak and this asshole, the better.

“You need to shut your mouth, brother,” Cookie warns him.

JJ nods to Mason and says, “Walk Holly back to the house and go find Leo.”

Mason looks at me and jerks his chin in the direction of the house.

“You okay?” he asks once we’re away from Jonah and the Southern Chapter.

Swallowing thickly, I nod. “I just wasn’t prepared to face that.”

He side eyes me and I keep my face forward.

“If you helped her or not, that shit won’t happen again. Leo and the rest of us will make sure.”

Helped her or not. I forget how perceptive the brothers can be. Mason’s not stupid, he can probably guess I had something to do with her departure.

“Thanks.”

He walks me to the door and jogs away as I lock up behind me. I lean against the door and take a deep breath. I hope and pray Beth gets as far away as she possibly can, and Jonah never sets his eyes on her again.

Chapter Thirteen

Leo

“**Y**ou stay the fuck away from Holly!”

Hearing JJ in such an aggressive tone has me jumping up from my desk and running out to the bar, especially hearing Holly’s name. I first look around for my fiancée but only find JJ fronting up to Jonah with Zach and Myles at his back and Wyatt, Cookie, and Creep at Jonah’s.

For JJ to get in his face, this is bad. For JJ having to defend my old lady, shit’s going to get a shit ton worse.

“What the fuck is going on?” I bark and the brothers fall silent.

Jonah scratches the gun against his head and is clearly agitated.

“This fucker got in Holly’s face and accused her of lying to him about his old lady. Apparently, she’s left him, and he thinks Holly had something to do with it.”

“Why do you think that?” I ask Jonah.

“She left to go into town.”

Holding my hands out, I show I’m clearly confused. Holly probably has everything to do with this, but I’d never sell her out, especially when she felt she was doing the right thing. Even if Jonah had proof Holly took her into town, he knows he should’ve come to me to deal with it. With the fact they’re

already on my shit list for being pussies, this isn't helping their cause.

“My old lady makes trips to town numerous times a week. I still don't see how you jump to conclusions that she helped your old lady make her great escape.”

His agitation builds and he bounces from foot to foot, failing to find his cool.

“Beth has no fucking idea where we are, we're miles from town! How else would she leave?”

Fuck this.

JJ steps aside and I move into his space and get into Jonah's face.

“If your old lady has left you that's your fuckin' problem. You accusin' my old lady of anything makes it my problem. You think I'm gonna let that slide?”

“Prez, I didn't mean any offence. I just need to know where she is,” he groans painfully.

“Well, I'm fuckin' offended. If Holly told you she had nothing to do with Beth running, then you thank her for her time and move the fuck on. I invite you to my wedding, and this is how you show your respect?”

“Leo, I'll get this under control,” Wyatt urges.

“Nah, I'll get it under control... unless you think I'm not capable?”

He pales and takes a step back. I look back to Jonah and silently debate how to put him in his place.

“You've got me all jacked up now and if you want this settled, you'll step outside.”

Defeat plagues him and he's the first to lead the way. JJ slaps my back as he walks out behind me, and I crack my knuckles.

“Break his fuckin' nose, for sure,” he murmurs for me only to hear.

“I intend to,” I quip.

Brothers form a circle around us, but I don't plan on giving them a show for long. I want to check in on Holly. Brothers thirst for blood booms around us and Jonah stands still, accepting his fate.

Rolling my neck, I launch forward and smash my fist into my nose, feeling it crack and break as I throw a second punch and then a third. His blood stains my knuckles and drips down his face.

“Is that enough for it to sink in to respect my old lady or do I need to continue?”

He holds his hand up, and says, “I got it. I'll apologise the next time I see her.”

“No, you stay the fuck away. She walks into a room, you walk the fuck out. You lay eyes on her, I'll pluck them out with my fingers.”

He nods, his blood dripping from his chin. “I deserve that.”

Fuck yeah, he does. Not meeting anyone's eye, I walk through the brothers and head for home.

Wyatt jogs up beside me. “You gotta understand, Leo, his love for Beth is more of an obsession... a toxic, polluted, obsession. He will track her down and he'll be a nightmare till he finds her.”

“Still, it's not my problem, nor my old lady's.”

I wave him off dismissively and continue walking past the bar. Holly's necking a glass of wine and jumps when I storm into the house.

I hate how she's now flinching in her own home. She holds my gaze before her eyes drop to my right hand.

“Why are you covered in blood?” she asks, reaching for a towel.

“I heard what happened when you got back from town. I made him see the error of his ways. He won't approach you again.”

Her lips part but nothing comes out. I wash the blood off my hand and turn back to her.

“I’m guessing you took her into town, maybe to the bus station?”

She nods. “I had to. I was sitting in the bar, and he took one of Zara’s friends up to a room. The so-called love of his life was only a two-minute walk away!”

“Do you feel like you did the right thing?” I ask her.

“Yes.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard, I agree with you. I told you, I’ve got your back, babe.”

The door opens and Dad strolls in.

“You controlled yourself well, son, to only fuck his nose up.”

I smirk and Holly excuses herself and goes upstairs.

“I wanted to kill him,” I told him.

“I know because if he had done that to your mother, brothers would’ve had to stop me from ripping him limb from limb.”

“I shouldn’t have had to make the point.”

“Did Holly help his old lady?” he asks quietly.

“Beth went to her for help, I haven’t heard anything since, but if she is gone, I’m pretty sure Holly had something to do with it.”

“Your mom would’ve done the same and I would’ve had her back.”

His validation isn’t something I was seeking but hearing it nonetheless helps to calm me.

“Though I have to warn you, Jonah is fiercely loyal to the patch, but he’s deranged when it comes to his old lady.”

“If he’s so obsessed with this woman how come he’s been with two different club girls since he got here?”

Dad shrugs. “I ask no questions and I certainly never try to understand most of these fuckers minds.”

“He’s a liability.”

“He’s a sharpshooter,” Dad retorts.

“I can’t have brothers only on top form ‘cause they’re keeping women against their will.”

“You’re only hearing her side,” he argues.

“I go by what Holly tells me and she wouldn’t have taken such an interest in this chick unless she saw truth in her.”

“Try not to get involved too much with the brother’s personal lives unless they come to you...”

Cutting him off, I say, “I don’t plan on it, I only got involved today because of Holly and I’ll always back her when she does something good.”

“I hear ya, maybe keep a closer eye on who and how she helps.”

I know he means well but whatever Holly feels she needs to do, I won’t stop her. She has every right I do.

To end this conversation, I open the back door and he walks out with me and back over to the bar.

A black SUV drives in, and it only takes one guess to know who’s sitting in the back seat like the kings they call themselves.

“They’re becoming like clockwork. I bet Ben climbs out the front seat, walks around, and grabs a duffel from the trunk,” Dad murmurs, and I laugh when he calls it bang on.

Before the prospect has the chance to close the gates, Wyatt, Jonah, and Cookie are riding out.

Wherever Beth bought her ticket for, I hope she reaches her destination and finds whatever it is she’s looking for.

“Leo, Cas,” Ritchie hollers, and both me and my father put on our best grins.

“Ritchie, Jamie Boy,” I say and gesture for them to head into the bar.

Ben follows with his bag of cash, and I gesture for the prospect to bring over drinks.

“Our shipment arrived safely,” Jamie Boy jumps straight in.

“We know you’re getting married, but we’ve got another shipment coming in and we’d like it transported before your big day,” Ritchie says.

“It’s risky to up the regularity of our runs. We’re not exactly discreet in our numbers as we ride through towns,” Dad says, and I nod in agreement.

“After this run, there won’t be one till next month. You’ll have your time to lay low,” Jamie Boy says. “And of course, you’ll be paid accordingly.”

Ritchie sits forward and swills his whiskey. “Now tell us what’s going on with Effie.”

Taking a deep breath, I tell them, “She believes Luca’s broke away from us, tempted by the money she’s offering. He’s waiting for word from her.”

They hang around longer than usual, sharing drinks and stories from England and their family’s rise to power.

Their capacity for brutality in a fair manner is actually a pretty fair way of retaining their power and a strong foothold on their territories.

They’re not so different from the club. We’ve kept our hold for decades and I intend to keep it that way.

Zach moves the cash to the office as the Haywards stand to leave. Walking them out, Wyatt, Cookie, and Jonah are arriving back, and on the back of Jonah’s bike is Beth.

Keeping my eye on her, I shake Jamie Boy and Ritchie’s hands and forget they were ever here as they drive out.

Jonah’s nose is taped up and the bruising is already tainting his eyes. Beth climbs off the bike and he’s quick to

follow and pull her under his arm. Spotting me, he walks over and the difference in him is ridiculous. He's no longer on his toes, he's relaxed and smiling, carefree.

"I wanna apologise, Prez. I should never have accused Holly of going against me. As you can see, I caught up to Beth and she's come home. She explained to me Holly had no idea what she was up to." He smacks a lingering kiss on the top of her head.

"I'm sorry for causing such trouble," Beth says meekly.

Narrowing my eyes at Jonah, I soften when I look at her. "Don't worry about it," I tell her, wondering if this is going to be not only a shit show but a shit storm.

There's a spark in her eye now and I just know there's so much more Holly and now I am missing.

"Come on, Princess, you've had a long day." He takes her over to the main house and Wyatt steps up beside me.

"What's his fuckin' deal? He taking medication for that craziness?" I ask him.

"I wish he would," he sighs. "Whenever she leaves him, he hunts her down, finds her, and then for a few months he plays house with her so you won't see that side of him again while we're here."

"This isn't the first time she's run off?" I frown.

"Fuck no." He snorts. "It's fucked up but aside from cheating on her, he treats her good."

I fail to understand his logic, but I honestly couldn't give a shit. It's been a long day, and I can't be fucked with the headache.

For the last time today, I head for home and lock up behind me, shooting Jay a text that unless the club is on fire or a brother is in the ground, to leave me the fuck alone.

Holly's snuggled on the couch, the movie it appears she was watching ended, and the credits running. Perching my ass on the edge, she wakes with fright and then smiles when she sees it's me.

“You home for the night?” she asks.

“Yeah. You’ll never guess who I just saw?”

She frowns and asks, “Who?”

“Beth. Jonah found her and brought her back.”

She lurches up to sitting and concern fills her.

“But I saw her get on the bus, she would’ve been hours away from here.”

I shrug. “I don’t know how he did it, but, babe, she didn’t look like she was frightened or unhappy. She was happy. And according to Wyatt, this isn’t the first time she’s run from him.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. I saw how low she was, there was nothing in her eyes. She was desperate.”

“Tonight she’s a different person. My advice, leave it alone.”

“Leo, I don’t understand. She... maybe it’s a front she’s putting on?”

“I don’t know, babe. I like to think I’m a good judge of character. It seemed real to me.”

The crease between her brow deepens and before she can twist her mind any further trying to work it out, I slam my mouth onto hers. I don’t want her distracted by something she can’t change. A distraction of my own making is the only way to go tonight and what better distraction than my dick?

Sweeping my tongue across hers, she sits up fully and straddles my lap, pushing me back into the couch. Rolling her hips, she grinds against me, and my dick begs to be freed.

“I know what you’re doing but I’m not complaining,” she murmurs between kisses.

“Get your hand around my dick then.”

I trail my kisses down her neck as she works my belt and pops my jeans open. I pull her sweater up and over her head, tossing it to the floor. Yanking her bra down around her

stomach, I pull her closer as she grips onto my shaft. I suck on her nipple and squeeze her breast as she pumps my dick. She greedily takes my mouth and arranges her entrance at my tip. As she lowers herself taking all of me inside her, I let my head fall back on the couch. Holding onto her hips, I go with the flow as she rides the shit out of me. Her rhythm fastens and her cries are music to my ears.

“Oh god, fuck, *fuck*, fuck.”

“That’s it, take what you need, baby,” I tell her, quickly adding, “You’ve got about five seconds before I blow.”

I get an extra ten seconds before I fill her with everything I’ve got, and she cries out her final scream of pleasure.

She falls against me, and I bite into her shoulder as we try to get our breathing back under control.

“You did a good thing helping Beth, her coming back with Jonah is on her. Don’t stress yourself about it any longer.”

“I’ll try.”

Chapter Fourteen

Holly

I can't shake the news that Jonah tracked down Beth and brought her back to the club. He had to have forced her and she's putting on a brave face. There can't be any other explanation. Leo wants me to put it behind us, but I can't stop thinking about it, it running through my mind on a constant loop. Rayna's running around with Sebastian, and I've been sitting on the front porch waiting for Jonah to leave the main house for the last hour. I need to speak with Beth and see for myself she's 'happy' he found her. I remember the darkness between me and Leo before we got together, I couldn't imagine living in that same darkness after we've both admitted our love for one another. I know they'll be hard times and marriage takes time and effort to make it work, but I also know it shouldn't depress you to the point you don't feel alive anymore.

Ten more minutes pass before Jonah walks out of the main house and I stand, only to sit back down when Beth follows him out and they walk in the direction of the bar together. A glimpse of her is too brief to gauge her happiness. Orla leaves Alannah's opposite and smiles my way. She's taller than any woman I've met before and though, I'm guessing in her late forties, she's strikingly beautiful with her fiery red hair. She also looks like she has lived a life of adventures. I heard from Bonnie that Orla goes on the road with Wyatt a lot. Leo doesn't talk much about what happens when he's on the road,

but I can guess it's dangerous and wild and no place I want to be.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I call out and she comes over and sits beside me.

"Sure, honey, and I can already guess what it's about. Beth?"

"Yes. Leo said she was happy Jonah found her, but I believed her when she asked for my help. She was not happy being with him."

"So did I, and Wendy, when she came to us. This is the sixth time she's run, and it won't be the last."

Six times? I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"Why? She was empty when I spoke to her."

"Yeah, she gets like that the more he openly sleeps around but now he's going to be making it up for it thinking how close he came to losing her. You'll see a huge change in her."

"So she ran knowing, no, *hoping*, he'd chase her?"

She nods. "It's a game for them. It's messed up of course but we've all gotten used to their ways. I should've warned you to watch out when we saw how down she was. We just put it down to the trouble back home."

I shrug. "I guess it's a lesson learned. What lesson I'm not so sure of yet though."

She bumps her shoulder against mine and smiles. "Don't beat yourself up about it. We know you helped her, but we'll never tell Jonah. At the end of the day, you helped a woman you thought needed it, that in itself is above and beyond, especially as we live in a world where it's an unspoken law you keep out of everyone else's business."

She places her hand on mine, and I freeze. "Don't let your first impression of Beth tarnish us all. We're not so bad once you get to know us."

Like Leo once promised me, those who matter don't care what lies under my gloves and I relax.

“I would never do that. I don’t tend to judge people anyway. We all have a story, some want to share and others don’t.”

Her smile grows. “I like you.”

“Thanks?”

Her laugh makes me smile. “You meet some old ladies and they make you wanna slap the shit out of them. Especially as you get older and the younger ones start showing up. Not that you have anything to worry about, you’re nice and fresh.”

“Again, thanks?”

Her laughter fills the air and I laugh with her. “The guys around here aren’t like Jonah. He’s kinda taken me by surprise,” I admit.

“You certainly meet all kinds through the club. Now you’re marrying the president, the likes of Jonah won’t surprise you any longer. Don’t worry, Cas and Lana raised Leo well, I can’t see him being a Jonah, not with the way he looks at you.”

I don’t necessarily need her pointing out Leo’s loyalty, but it doesn’t hurt to hear it either.

Anger begins to bubble as I sit out front long after Orla goes in search of Wyatt. How dare Beth take my kindness for weakness. I would’ve helped her leave and faced any backlash from Jonah just to know she was free. And she saw that in me and took advantage. Leo broke someone’s nose because of me for helping her and it turns out it was for nothing.

“Rayna, stay with Aunt Nina, yeah? I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Okayyyyyy,” she calls out running after Sebastian.

I find Leo in his office with JJ on his way out as I step in. I close the door behind me and blurt out, “She fucking used me!”

Leaning back in his chair, he woefully says, “I know.”

Crossing the room, I sit on the edge of his desk.

“Did you know this is a game of theirs? He sleeps around behind her back, then she runs off, he brings her back and then they’re happy for a while. And it goes on and on.”

“I’ve heard.”

He slides his hands up my thighs and gently squeezes.

“Don’t tell me I shouldn’t have gotten involved because I don’t need to hear it. I’m fully aware of that now.”

“I wasn’t going to. You did what you thought was best. You can’t change who you are, and I don’t want you to. You might feel shit feeling used, but look at her life, babe, she’s living with a guy who cheats on her, and she puts up with it. In the long run, it won’t be you who regrets helping her. She’ll end up regretting taking advantage of your help.”

“I needed to hear that. Thank you.”

“If it helps, my mom would’ve done the same, I know she would have.”

That does sort of help but the underlying betrayal that I was played with still gnaws at me.

“I’m pissed that you were dragged into it. You broke someone’s nose defending me, though I did help her...”

“Hey, I’d do it a thousand more times. There are certain protocols we follow and regardless of your role, he knows he should’ve come to me, not you.”

I hear him, every word, but I’m struggling to let it go. He must see it on my face too. His hands slide farther up my thighs and urge me to widen my legs. I do. Just like last night, he’s distracting me.

“Lift your ass,” he instructs. Again, I do.

In one swift moment, he lifts my skirt up to my hips and my thong down my thighs, down over my knees and he throws it on the floor.

Trailing his tongue up my inner thigh, I lean back on my hands and let my head fall back with a gasp.

He peppers the top of my thigh with soft kisses and then kisses my clit. His warm breath hits me just right and I inhale deeply. Flicking the tip of his tongue continuously against my core, my breathing becomes heavily laboured. When he sucks on my clit, the building orgasm doesn't creep up on me, it comes fast and I roll my hips, needing to move and reach climax faster. Every flick of his tongue, every suckle, it all drives me hard but when he slips a finger inside me, then two, and works me over with both his mouth and his fingers, I come hard.

“Feel better?” he asks, sitting up and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Though I do feel better, I'm unable to speak.



Trying to get Rayna to concentrate on her sums is like trying to stay dry in the shower. It's not happening. A knock at the door further distracts her and my warning to sit still goes unheard. By the time I've reached the hall, she's bounding past me and up to her room.

Throwing open the door, I'm surprised to see Beth.

“This was delivered at the gate, I thought it was the perfect time to come see you and explain.”

She goes to step inside, but I have no room in me to let her into my home again. I take the box from her and make it obvious if she wants to have this conversation, it's happening on the doorstep.

“I deserve that.” She smiles sadly. “I'm sorry, Holly. I really am. But I didn't tell him you drove me into town.”

“Gee, thanks. Under the circumstances, I think that's the least you could've done.”

“Yeah. He's a good man most of the time and now he'll be good to me. He can change...” I can't help but tune out of her pity party and that's all I feel for her, pity. He won't change. He won't stay a good man. Sadly, she refuses to see it.

“So, yeah, I’m sorry and I hope we can put this behind us?”

“Of course.” I smile brightly. “I’m glad it’s worked out for you, but I must get on, I’ve got so much to do today.”

“Maybe we can have a drink in the bar tonight?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Closing the door, I exhale long and hard and put her in the past. It wasn’t a lie that I’ve got a lot to do but I don’t need to do it all today. I just wanted her gone from the house. From now on, I won’t be getting involved in anyone’s business again. It’s safer that way and Leo won’t have to go around breaking people’s noses.



“Don’t feel sorry for her, she knew what she was doing,” Harper says and Nina nods in agreement.

They’ve listened to the whole Beth and Jonah story over the last ten minutes, and I didn’t realise how much I needed to vent to my girls. These women don’t use me. They’re my family.

“To be fair, any one of us would’ve helped if she had come to us, and by the sounds of it, she’s got issues and you know how that is, you felt a connection to her. This isn’t on you at all,” Nina adds.

Across the bar, Beth is sitting on Jonah’s lap, giggling, and having a good time. He kisses her neck, and she soothingly strokes his hair as they talk with brothers. I need to let this go because they clearly have.

“Here you are,” Leo says, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. The next thing I know I’m up in the air and then sitting on his lap. Zach and JJ join Nina and Harper.

“Rayna’s having a sleepover with Sebastian at Kristen’s.”

His grin turns dirty, and I know what to expect when we get home. He lifts his hand in the air to get the prospect’s

attention and a minute later, beers are passed around the table.

“I swear to fuckin’ God, if you walk out again, I will tie you the fuck up and lock you up at home till the end of fuckin’ days!”

Everyone goes quiet and all eyes turn to Mason hollering at Aspen.

“Here we go again,” Harper murmurs.

Leo sighs but he doesn’t say anything. He watches on as we all do.

“Mason fucking Simmons, you keep yelling at me and I’ll tie you up and lock you the fuck up!” Aspen shrieks.

She takes a step closer to the door and his eyes darken. “Take one more step, I fuckin’ dare you.”

She flips him the finger and leaves. Mason lurches forward to follow her but Pope heaves himself up and steps in his way.

“Grumps, I’m not in the mood for you right now. Move.”

“Boy, sit the fuck down or I’ll put you down.”

Pope doesn’t have to tell him twice. With one last glare at the now empty doorway, he kicks out a chair from Pope’s table and falls onto it. Pope turns to everyone and grunts, “Back to your own lives, there’s nothing to see here.”

I’m quick to look away and so is everyone else. Conversations resume and I drain half my beer.

“Do you think Aspen will be okay?” Nina asks no one in particular.

“I think she’ll be just fine,” Zach says. “Didn’t you see her argue back? She isn’t a wallflower.”

“I’m pretty sure Pope and Aspen are the only two people, along with Leo now, that can push him and not end up buried in the middle of nowhere,” JJ says.

“Enough. It’s their business...” Leo says but Harper cuts him off, “Hardly their business when they float it in the middle of the bar.”

“Regardless, let’s talk about something else.”

“Like?” she retorts.

“Like how Zach and Nina are keeping something from us.”

Both their grins fall, and I realise Leo’s onto something.

“No, we’re not. Why would you say that?” Nina shakily asks. Totally guilty.

“Because I’m not stupid. So, what gives?”

Nina and Zach share a look and then he nods.

“Since you called us out, we do have news, but we were going to wait till after your wedding,” Nina begins, digging into her jeans pocket. Her movements are hidden under the table and then she lifts her left hand, and a gold shiny ring sits snugly on her fourth finger.

“We got married... in Vegas!” she exclaims.

“Oh my God!” I shriek, jumping up from Leo’s lap. Pulling Nina in for a hug, I’m so happy for her.

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

“We need to celebrate!” Harper exclaims.

And celebrate we do. I vowed last week I wouldn’t drink in excess again, but the shots keep coming and the bar spins faster and faster around me. Harper announces the song playing is her song and she drags Nina and me up to an empty space to dance. I can’t remember the last time I danced without a care in the world.

“I can’t believe you got married and didn’t tell us,” Harper slurs as the three of us dance.

“We didn’t want to steal Holly and Leo’s thunder,” Nina slurs just as much as Harper.

“Aww, we wouldn’t have thought that! We love you guys.”

One minute my head is filled with laughter and then we’re sharing a three-way hug and crying on one another.

“We’re so lucky to have each other. I love you guys like my sisters,” Harper sobs.

“Me too,” Nina cries.

“Me three,” I cry and then hiccup.

I don’t know who stumbles but we end up crashing to the floor and our tears are replaced with more laughter.

“Okay, let’s get you to bed, little miss I can’t hold my drink anymore.” It takes a minute to focus on JJ picking Harper up and throwing her over his shoulder. Nina is hauled up and thrown over Zach’s shoulder and then my man is hovering over me, shaking his head but grinning all the same.

“Is this what I missed out on during your ladies’ night?”

“I don’t know.” Hiccup. “I can’t remember.” I burst out laughing then I’m flying through the air.

I focus on Leo’s ass, and I vaguely hear Harper laughing somewhere in the distance.

“Hoollllly! Can you hear me?” Harper yells.

“Yeah!”

“I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“Okay!”

The front steps come into view and then the threshold and our front hall. The world spins for a second and then I’m sat at the kitchen island.

“Don’t fall off!” Leo warns.

I watch him fill a glass with water. I blink and then he’s standing in front of me, thrusting the glass at me.

“Drink. Unless you wanna feel like shit again in the morning.”

“Nooooooo... I don’t wanna feel shit again.”

“And if you need to be sick, please make it to the bathroom.”

I drink the water and smirk. “I don’t feel sick. I feel... like... I need you.”

“Is that so?”

I nod slowly and in the drunken haze swimming through me, I hope I’m a cute drunk.

He takes the empty glass from me and leans around me to put it on the counter.

“I should take you up to bed, shouldn’t I?”

Grinning, I nod. “You totally should.”

Chapter Fifteen

Leo

“So if you pick the cake up on Friday morning, I’ll make sure the flowers are still on track to be delivered Saturday morning,” Mom says working through the so-called wedding list she and Holly have been living by for the last couple of months.

“I don’t see why I need to be here for this,” I argue.

They haven’t once asked for my input. Mom doesn’t even come to me for my credit card to pay for things, choosing to pay herself. I learned a while ago that all I need to do is show up on the day and stand at the altar.

“Because, son, you need to make sure Luca and Victoria are here for the day after you and he hatched your plan to get to Effie.”

It hadn’t crossed my mind he wouldn’t be here, but we’ll make it happen. I’m not going to not have my brother at my wedding.

“They’ll be here,” I promise.

“The last thing is you can’t get drunk the night before,” Holly tells me.

Arching my brow, I ask, “Why not?”

“Because the first time we kiss as man and wife, I don’t want to be kissing a tequila bottle.”

“You act like I wouldn’t brush my teeth. Besides, you’re the one who’s been excessively drinking these days.”

Rolling her eyes, she ticks another item off her list and smiles. I could live with her smile for the rest of my life, and I intend to.

“Just drink moderately and I won’t try to kill you,” she threatens so fucking cutely.

I laugh. “You know it’s my right to get wasted the night before I become a married man?”

“Yes, and maybe if you were being forced to marry me, I’d understand. But you asked me and you’re willingly marrying me so there’s no need to get wasted, is there.”

Mom laughs. “Your wife-to-be has a point.”

Standing, I toss Holly my credit card and tell them, “I’m out of here, pay for whatever needs paying, and catch me up later.”

Leaning down, I kiss my mom on the cheek and then Holly on her plump, soft, lips. And then I’m out.

Dark clouds loom over the club. If we get a storm, I hope it arrives and passes before Saturday. I don’t want anything to ruin the day for Holly.

A rumble that most would call thunder fills the air and the prospect wastes no time opening the gates and letting six bikers through. JP has a huge grin and I hold my arms out wide welcoming him and his chapter.

The Five Falls chapter has arrived, and I welcome their presence. JP has been in my life as far back as I can remember. He’s around my dad’s age and is the funniest fucker I’ve ever met. Nothing gets to him, trouble slides off of him like water off of a duck’s back, women come and go, there is nothing that gets to him.

Ashton, his VP, is first off of his bike and walks over and collects me in a breath-stealing hug.

“Look at you, little Leo Jackson, wearing the big patch,” he barks out happily.

“Fuck you,” I retort playfully.

“Tut-tut, there’s no fucking me when you’re just days away from getting a ring on your finger.”

“In your dreams would you be my type,” I throw at him and pull away.

“Hey, you’re the one who was locked up over a year, you tellin’ me you never sought warmth on the cold winter’s nights?”

Shoving him, I threaten, “I should cut your fuckin’ tongue out.”

“Leave him alone, asshole,” JP grunts, pushing him out of the way and yanking me toward him.

The old fucker still has the strength of a lion in him.

“It’s good to see you,” I tell him. “Please tell me you don’t come with any bad fuckin’ news for me.”

“Nothin’ out of the ordinary and nothin’ we can’t fuckin’ handle,” he grunts, and I sigh with relief.

I shoot Holly a text that we have more company and her and Mom come over.

I introduce her to JP and Ashton’s old ladies and while she does her part of settling them in, I show the brothers into the bar.

Dad’s happy to see his brothers and it strikes me that the chapters need more face-to-face gatherings. Meeting up every few years isn’t cutting it and the little things are escalating and sliding when they should be nipped in the bud as quickly as possible.

With the Southern Chapter already here, the bar is becoming overcrowded. I order the prospect to head into town to pick up more supplies.

Luca texts wanting to meet at our spot tonight and I tell him I’ll be there.

“It’s fuckin’ good to see us all together, who knew you could fit so many ugly fuckers in one room!” JP hollers and

the bar erupts into laughter.

“Talk for yourself, asshole,” Sparky yells.

JP falls into the chair beside me and lowers his voice when he says, “I’m real happy for you gettin’ married but I’ve never given you my condolences for losing the momma of your kid. That shit, no matter how long in the past, is always painful, but I’m glad you’ve found someone.”

“Thanks, brother. Holly’s amazing and she’s a great mother to Rayna.”

“I found my Demi after losing my first wife to cancer. At the time I didn’t think I’d ever find anyone or even want to. But the first time I laid eyes on her, she trapped me. The first time she spoke to me, I never wanted her to speak to anyone else. And the first night we spent together, I knew I’d never let her go. She’s been in my bed every single night since, even when I go on the road, she comes with.”

“My mom always tells me life chooses for us, that you can’t stop destiny. I’ve learned not to fight it.”

He tips his bottle to mine and smirks. “Your mom has always been a wise woman. I remember making the ride out here for her and your dad’s wedding. Makes me feel fuckin’ old that I’m now here for yours.”

I bark out a laugh. However, what I don’t hear from him is how he’s reached his age and he’s still alive and breathing. It’s what I strive for. To reach an age where I have a lifetime of memories and I get to watch my kid get married, if I ever let her.

“We’ve only been here twenty minutes and I’m already hearing the southern chapter is in hot water. That true?”

Sighing, I nod. “We’ll discuss it when Mercy arrives. It will be hard enough keeping my cool one time let alone multiple times.”

“I hear ya. But with the patch comes headaches, ball aches, and stomach aches when you get to a certain age.” He laughs. “Though I’m sure you’ll learn it yourself pretty quickly.”

He's not wrong. I'm learning fast and I've learned to set how people see me early. By the time life returns to normal and the chapters returns home, the brothers will know exactly what's expected of them moving forward.

"I told ya I don't bring any news of trouble, but I do have some news."

"Go on."

"This will be my last ride as president. I guess I'm following in your dad's footsteps apart from I've been diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's. The brothers know that when we get home, they'll be voting on who takes the gavel."

"Shit. I'm sorry, JP."

"Thanks. Thought I'd ride till I died but when shit gets worse, I'll end up killing everyone else around me on the road. My old lady deserves to have time with me before I'm a fuckin' liability."

"She won't see it that way, brother."

"Nah, she won't but I will, and I won't put her through it. I know how it feels to watch someone you love die slowly and painfully, I won't do it to her. I've had a longer life than most in this world, can't say I'm ready to go out, but I'm too tired to fight the inevitable."

I frown. "You planning on taking yourself out?"

"Damn, fuckin' right I am. When the time comes I'm not going out a shakin', dribblin' mess. I'll enjoy the time I get and then put a bullet in my head. All my assets are in order. My old lady won't want for anything. Then pop, I'm gone."

Shit. I don't know what's worse. The shit storm the southern charter is in or hearing this shit.

"Is this common knowledge?"

"My charter knows, my old lady, and your dad, too. I called him just after I was diagnosed."

"He didn't say anything."

“I asked him not to. I wanted the so-called pleasure myself.”

“I don’t know what to say, man.”

“Not much to say, brother. It is what it is. It’s the hand I’ve been dealt. I should’ve been dead a long time ago. I’m lucky I had this long. Don’t start crying for me, I don’t need your tears.”

Trying to lighten the moment, I snort. “Please, like I’ve got the time to cry over your ass.”

Death is always a constant reminder that it’s coming for us all at some point. As arrogant as we all are, none of us will escape the Grim Reaper when he comes knocking.

“I’m proud to be here and see you wed, Leo. I’ll ride the fuck outta the road on the way home and I’ll happily give my patch to the next brother. It’s not all bad.”

I hold my hand out and he shakes it. Times are always changing, and the trick is never to be stuck behind.



I enjoy the silence of the road compared to the chaos back at the club as I ride out to meet Luca. The mess with the Southern Chapter can wait until the Mercy Chapter arrives and we can all sit down at the table. The news about JP sucks horseshit but like everything else, we’ll ride it through. He’s got his old lady covered but she will always have help from the club if she needs it. It makes me feel lucky to have all that I have. The wedding plans are all going smoothly. My daughter is thriving. Effie is being dealt with. The sheriff is keeping her distance. With everything compartmentalised, the building headache I was getting earlier fades away.

Once again, Luca is the first to arrive and he’s too busy on his phone to even look up at me. No doubt on the phone to Victoria.

“You’re late,” he grumbles once I’ve killed my engine.

“Am I fuck. You’re early,” I retort. “How’s Victoria?”

The corner of his mouth turns up. “She’s fuckin’ glowing, brother. Motherhood is hot on her.”

“How’s my nephew?”

When and if Holly gets pregnant, I’m hoping for a boy this time. A son to call my own and maybe one day follow in my footsteps.

Again, a grin breaks through. “I always knew I’d create perfection but he’s more than perfect.”

“Glad to hear it. So what was so important you wanted to meet tonight?” I ask, getting to the reason we’re here in the middle of the night when we could both be home with our families.

“Effie’s ordered me and the brothers to head out on a run this Sunday. I’ll get the details an hour before we’re due to leave.”

This is good... or could be a trap.

“I see it on your face that you think it’s a trap,” he calls out in seconds. “If it is, we’ll be prepared. She said I’d be meeting up with her and her European supplier and then making sure her shipment reaches its destination. Once I’m back, I’ll catch you up.”

“Watch your back, Luc. I’m not entirely comfortable with you going alone.”

He snorts. “I’m not alone, I’ll have my brothers with me. Besides, this is what we wanted to happen.”

“I know, it’s just hard to swallow. I won’t be there with you if shit goes down.”

“Don’t worry about me, big brother, worry for them if they try to trap me,” he says with a smirk that could shoot bullets. This is the shit that gets my brother excited.

“Make them pay if they do.”

“That I can promise.”

“Good. Mom wanted me to make sure you and Victoria will be at the wedding.”

He frowns. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Cause of the play we’re living,” I remind him, though I shouldn’t have to.

“Oh, that. Effie actually asked me about that. I told her mom asked me personally and as she’s ill I couldn’t refuse. Family is still family.”

“Fuckin’ hell, Luc. You told her mom is sick?”

“I had to tell her something.” He shrugs. “I wouldn’t miss my brother’s wedding. It is what it is.”

It is what it is? Trust Luca to be flippant about using such a lie.

“You best hope mom doesn’t get sick, or she’ll think you put it in her universe or some shit.”

He laughs and says, “I’ll deal with it if it comes to it.”

He drags out a cigarette from his pack with his teeth and rolls it between his fingers.

“Are you still smokefree?”

“Yep, not had one of these little bastards since River was born.”

Luca won’t admit it to anyone, but it got to him when Dad was diagnosed with lung cancer. When River was born it changed something inside him and he doesn’t want to put his son through what he went through watching dad fight the disease.

“I better get back. I’ll see you Saturday.”

We say our goodbyes and I ride home content in the knowledge Luca is making progress but also, my gut tightening at the thought I won’t be there with him.

The bar is heaving with brothers, and old ladies, and hangarounds when I return but I pass by without hesitation and head for home. I let myself in and lock up. Holly’s asleep on

the couch and I shut off the TV and as I peel back the blanket, I find my fiancée clad in black lace.

“What time is it?” she asks sleepily as I lift her in my arms.

“Time I take this lace off of you.”

She becomes alert and my dick hardens as she bites down on her bottom lip.

I climb the stairs and take her into our room. “What’s with all this get up anyway?”

“Thought I’d show you what married life is going to look like.”

Fuck me. My chest heaves with the biggest sigh in my life and my dick strains to be let free.

“I must admit, I approve.”

Laying her on the bed, I stand back and admire the view. She slowly sits up, fully awake, and pulls me close with her finger in my waistband. She pops open the button and slides down the zipper.

My dick springs free as she yanks down my jeans and boxers. I tip my head as she grasps me firmly and flicks her tongue over my tip. She sucks me in and works my shaft like a pro.

“Fuck, babe. You suck so good,” I grunt, my balls tightening.

She hums and the vibrations travel down my dick. I think of anything but her lips around me to keep myself from filling her mouth with my come. I go through bike parts, even the wedding plans, just to prolong the moment.

My balls start to tighten and buck my hips back and she releases me with a pop.

“Lie on your front.”

She does as I order, and I grab a pillow from the top of the bed. I slide under her hips and her ass arches nicely.

Careful to keep most of my weight off of her, I thrust inside of her and pressed my lips to her neck.

“I can’t wait to hear the pastor say you’re my wife.” Thrust. “To know you’re mine, now and always.” Thrust. “I’m going to make you come for me every fuckin’ day.”

She muffles her moans, hiding her face in the sheets. Using my free hand, I wrap it around her hair and pull her head back so I can kiss her. I swallow her moans as I pound into her.

“Who do you belong to?” I grunt, slamming into her.

“You,” she gasps.

Her pussy clenches around me and as I withdraw from her, she pushes her ass back and I’m fully back inside her and it’s game over.

“Fuck, I belong to you too, fuckin’ always.”

And fuck, I plan on filling her with my come every fucking day till she falls pregnant.

Chapter Sixteen

Holly

Letting myself into my mom's house, the radio plays in the kitchen. Something I've found she plays every day to mask the silence in the home since my father's passing. Walking into the kitchen I join her at the table and drag the sudoku book from her.

"Hello to you too, honey."

"Hey."

My mom is more human these days. She dresses every day. She wears make-up again. Her hair is brushed and primed to perfection. Yet her soul still cries for my father.

"I wasn't expecting you till later this afternoon. I thought you were picking up the cake at four?"

"The baker called and said it was ready early, so I thought I'd pick it up and get back."

"Are the nerves setting in yet?" she asks.

The first time she met Leo, it was like my father was still in the room. She put the room on edge until she saw the way he was with Rayna and realised he wasn't quite the biker trash she believed him to be. She hasn't been out to the club yet so the wedding should be an eye-opener for her. I reckon she'll be okay once she sees they're good people.

"No nerves, I can't wait."

“Your dad used to say that the proudest days as a father would be your graduation from school, your college graduation and the day you got married.”

I don't think my father would approve of my choice of husband, but I keep that to myself because there's no point voicing what we both know. If my dad were still alive there would be no way my mom would be coming to the wedding. She'd stand at his side and do as he said. In a way, I'm glad he's not here, I'd rather have at least one parent at my wedding than none.

Changing the conversation, I ask, “Do you need me to pick you up anything while I'm in town?”

“No, thank you, darling. I'm all set.”

“And you remember that Cas said he'll come and pick you up on Saturday.”

Her lips purse and I wait for her to moan about it. But it doesn't come.

“I'll be ready.”

“You're still welcome to come and stay at the house with me the night before.”

I wish she would. I want her to see it's a home. That me, Rayna, and Leo are just like any other family.

“It's okay, you know I don't like staying out.”

I've heard it time and time before. I had hoped she'd come out of her shell without Dad around. I don't mean to be harsh, but everything was my father's way or not at all. She spent years going along with whatever plans he made. She has the choice now to make her own decisions and live a life full of family and good times, but she still chooses to hide away.

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

I don't stay long and drive to the bakery. I'm met with a much larger cake than I ordered and trying to fit it into the car is an epic failure. They con an extra twenty-five dollars to deliver. This pisses me off because I originally asked if they offered a delivery service, and they said no. The minute I said

I'd have my fiancé come and pick it up, they were all too helpful. It's ridiculous. They acted like Leo would've burned down their bakery or something.

Though I did spend extra on my wedding night lingerie and that I can take home myself.

I turn the radio up and sing along to the song, happy in the knowledge there is nothing left to do apart from wait to get married. Leo loves me, I know that with all my heart. He and Rayna are the light my life needs and each day with them heals me like no one else could. I've found a person who can see when I'm hiding and as much as it irritates me sometimes, I love him even more for it.

Police sirens ruin my song and glancing in the rearview mirror, the sheriff's cruiser is close behind me. I pull over and shut off the radio. I take out my registration papers from the glove compartment and dig around my purse for my licence.

I watch her climb out of her cruiser and stroll toward my car from the side mirror. She comes to a stop and motions for me to lower my window. I do.

"Are you aware you were speeding?" she asks, holding her hand out for my documents.

Frowning, I pass them over and say, "I don't think I was, but I'm sorry if I was."

I pray she gives me a ticket and I can get on home. I've never been stopped before. I'm always careful when I'm driving.

"Can you step out of the car, please," she orders.

"But..."

"Can you step out of the car," she repeats more sternly. "Keep your hands where I can see them," she says, taking two large steps back.

Keeping one hand up, I open the door and climb out, wondering what the hell is going on.

"Deputy Norris, search the car."

Her sidekick swaggers over and it's hard to keep my eyes on both of them.

"You won't find anything," I argue to no avail.

"That's what they all say," she mutters, not meeting my eye. "Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"Are you on any narcotics?"

"No."

"Sheriff, I've found something."

In my naivety, embarrassment runs through me thinking he's rifled through my lingerie bag.

"Don't move," the sheriff orders me, before joining her deputy.

Like I would and where would I go? I'm sure they'd give chase if I jumped back in the car and drove off and then what would happen to me? However, I wish I had quickly shot Leo a text before she approached the car.

"Well, well, our lucky day and you're not so lucky day. This looks to be a key of heroin."

Heroin? My eyes shoot to the sheriff and she's holding a taped-up package. My heart thrums erratically and my mouth goes dry.

"That's not mine! I've never seen it before!"

"Of course you haven't," she smarts. "Cuff her."

This is not happening. The deputy struts toward me, unclipping his cuffs from his belt.

"If it isn't yours, then maybe it belongs to that fiancé of yours? Or someone else in his club?"

Any shred of hope I had this would be nothing but a misunderstanding vanishes. This is a setup, and she wants me to pin it on the club, or more specifically, Leo. I keep my mouth shut and say nothing.

The deputy shoves me against the side of the car and grabs my arms. He twists them up behind my back, slams the cuffs on me and leads me to the back of the police cruiser. Shame washes over me as he places his hand on my head and lowers me onto the back seat. I've never been arrested and since I know I don't carry around heroin, I shouldn't be in cuffs now.

"What about my car?" I ask stupidly.

"What about it?"

Neither she nor the deputy is obviously going to be any help, so I keep my head down and don't ask any more questions. I know enough to know I'll get a phone call and once I do, I can let Leo know what's happening and where to pick my car up from. I want to freak out and I most likely would if I knew I didn't have Leo who will sort this out when he hears about it.

At the police station, my shame grows as everyone stares while I'm being booked in. I'm almost faint with dizziness when the deputy instructs me to take my gloves off so he can take my fingerprints.

"Please, I can't."

"If you refuse, I'll..."

Knowing I won't win, I rip one glove off and then the other. I squeeze my eyes shut to his reaction. But I can't shut off my hearing. His gasp rolls through my stomach and I want to puke.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"A-Accident."

He can hardly stand to touch me as he presses each finger onto the ink pad.

When he's done, he mutters, "Put the gloves back on, no one wants to see that shit."

I desperately want to cry. This goes far beyond humiliation. I will never forget this moment. I'm led through to a cell. Once the door is locked, the deputy gives me one last disgusted glance and walks off.

I want to scream that this has been a misunderstanding or let them know that I know they've set me up but a part of me refuses to give them the satisfaction.

I sit on the bench and do my best not to gag at the sweaty odour coming from the woman sleeping at the other end. An hour passes and as an officer lets the sweaty woman out, I jump up and say, "I need to let my partner know where I am. I was meant to be home hours ago."

"The sheriff will let you know when you can make a call."

A deep throaty cough comes from the woman across from me and she uses the back of her wrist to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

"I wouldn't bother asking for shit. Since the new sheriff rocked up, everyone walks around like they're gods these days."

She stands and stretches her arms above her head, her dress riding scarily up her thighs.

"First time in here?" she asks, her eyes soaking me in.

I nod.

"Yeah, I can tell by the fear radiating off of you," she cackles.

"It's a misunderstanding."

"Yeah, that's what happened to me too."

She's mocking me but I ignore her. I don't need to find myself in even more trouble.

"Don't worry yourself, it's not so bad in here."

Again, I ignore her and after she paces the cell twenty-two times, I count for something to do, she lies back down, and her snores fill the small space.

Hours pass and I end up watching the clock, counting how long I've been here. I count down the minutes till the wedding just for something to do.

After seven hours, I'm taken to a desk, and a retro-style telephone is pushed in front of me.

"Two minutes," I'm told, and I dial Leo's number.

He answers after one ring, and I clear my throat.

"Holly?"

"Leo, I need you to listen..."

"Holly, where the fuck are you? The prospect found your car and you were nowhere to be seen. I've got brothers out searching for you."

"I've been arrested. I'm at the police station. I've only just been allowed to call you."

The officer across the desk from me raises his brow and I look away.

"The fuck you say?"

"You heard me."

"What did they take you in for?"

"They found a key of heroin in the car after stopping me for speeding but it's not mine and I wasn't speeding."

"It's okay, don't freak out. I'm on my way." Relief surges through me. "JJ, you're with me," he barks and then more softly, he says to me, "I'll make this right, Holly, I swear."

"I know you will."

I put the receiver down and I'm taken back to the cell. I have never been so embarrassed.

"Are you going to cheer up now you've had your call?"

I've managed to ignore my roommate or whoever she is, and I've been grateful she's slept her way through the day.

"Who did you call?"

"My fiancé. He's on his way to get me out."

Her laugh fills every inch of the filthy space, and it sends a shudder down my spine.

“He must be someone if you think he can just walk in here and they’ll release you.”

That’s exactly what I’m hoping for. I trust he’ll burn the place down if the sheriff fucks him around.

The sound of boots echo around us and I swallow the hope I have when the sheriff stops outside the cell.

“You’ve had some time now to think about the situation you’re in. Is there anything you want to tell me before your man gets here? I heard you made your call.”

“What is it you want me to say?” I snap.

“I want you to tell me where the heroin came from?”

Narrowing my eyes, I can’t believe I have to say this. “We both know where it came from.”

Her smile is cruel. “I can’t exactly write that on my report now, can I?”

“You wouldn’t have a report to fake if you did your job by the book,” I retort.

“Have it your way, then. Don’t say I didn’t allow you to get out of here.”

She walks off and I blow out a heavy breath.

“Huh. She really has it out for you. What did you do to piss her off?”

“I fell in love with a *Lost Soul*.”

Chapter Seventeen

Leo

No fucking way Holly knows what's it like to be locked up. Trapped behind bars and her every move ordered by assholes relishing in the power they have. I fucking warned the sheriff to stay out of my business and she's gone after Holly. This shit is not okay and I'm not going to stand for it.

"What's going on?" JJ asks.

I go to answer him when Jonah's laugh gets my attention and I spin around till I lay eyes on the fucker.

Deep down I know this is down to the sheriff but before I leave, I need to cover all my bases.

"Hey, you put anything in my old lady's car?"

His genuine confusion has me not waiting for a reply and making sure Jay's behind me, I wait till we're on our bikes to explain.

"Holly's been arrested, our friendly sheriff planted a key of heroin in her car."

"The fuck?"

I bring my bike to life and I'm about to peel out of here when JJ grabs onto my hoodie sleeve.

"I know you're pissed, but she's still the fuckin' sheriff and we're gonna be going into her patch. You lose your shit, you'll be in the cell next to Holly."

Grinding my teeth, I grate out, “I got it.”

Though I warned her to stay the fuck away, it seems she wants to test me and I’m not going to fucking let her down.

As JJ and I ride into town, I can’t see past the haze to form a plan. All I see is Holly in a cell, knowing what she’s hearing... the bars clinking, people shouting, guards taking the piss. The holding cell in the town police station won’t be like that but still, I don’t want her in there.

The thing that makes me the angriest is I promised Holly I’d keep her safe and I’ve already failed her. We’re not even married yet and I’ve let her down.

I don’t care if we’re parking in the red zone outside the station. I shove the door open and walk inside. The place is the quietest I’ve ever heard it. It’s like I’m expected. Stopping at the front desk, I slam my fist on the counter and demand, “Get me the fuckin’ sheriff.”

The flake behind the desk gets on the phone and the good old sheriff of Willow’s Peak comes strutting out of her office with a fucking smirk on her face that I’m itching to slap away.

“I told you, Leo, you’re not all above the law. Your fiancée was driving with over a key of brown...”

Officers move in as I jump over the front desk and get in her face. “I fuckin’ warned you.”

“And I told you, you weren’t above the law.”

Smirking, I say, “When I’m digging a grave for your nephew, the last words he’s going to hear is how he’s gonna die because of you.”

Her smirk slips away. She motions for the officers to move back and her eyes dance as she returns my glare.

“If you wanna call my bluff, you better have yourself a pretty black dress for his funeral... if you can find his body.”

After a few beats of silence, she orders, “Rogers, release Mr. Jackson’s fiancée,” while keeping her eyes on mine.

“You’ll do well to wait outside before you do or say anything else that will put you in her place.”

For once I agree with her. “I want her out of here in no more than five minutes. Make it quick.”

I hold her stare a few moments longer and physically force myself to leave the building before I burn it to the fucking ground.

Jay’s giving the shit eye to two officers climbing out of their cruiser when I step outside and light a cigarette.

“Don’t pull anything until Holly’s on the back of my bike,” I warned him.

“Hey, wasn’t I the one warning you to watch yourself not that long ago?” He laughs and then sobers up. “We can’t have her picking up old ladies trying to get to us.”

“No shit, brother. She won’t get away with this, trust me.”

I’m glad I had Zach fly halfway across the world and sent the twins out to gather intel on her sister. I knew I’d need it one day and that day has come.

“I just warned my mom the other day to watch her back with the sheriff. I thought she’d be the one they’d go for. I didn’t see this with Holly coming.”

And I should have. My dad will say, you can’t see everything, but it doesn’t stop the notion of feeling like I should be able to, especially when it comes to my old lady.

“She just wants your attention. You walked in there and less than five minutes later you’re walking out, and Holly’s being released. She’s fucking with you.”

“No fuckin’ shit, Jay. Tell me something I don’t know.” I desperately want to smash my fist into something, instead, I pull out my pack of cigarettes and light another cigarette. “She’s going to fuckin’ regret coming after Holly.”

JJ tips his chin and I look over my shoulder. Holly’s walking out and I meet her at the bottom of the steps and collect her in my arms.

“I’m so sorry, babe. I fuckin’ swear that’ll never happen again.”

“I just want to go home and take a shower,” she says so quietly it takes me back to the nights we’d talk after one of her nightmares. If this experience sets her back, I’ll burn down the whole fucking town.

Kissing the top of her head, I walk her over to my bike and now is when I plan. For this to never happen again, I’m going to have to push boundaries until they’re so far behind me that I can’t see them any longer.

It’s how I find myself on the sheriff’s street late that night with Myles at my back. With the photos of her family tucked into my inside pocket, I climb off my bike and join Myles by her back door. He’s managed to pop her lock without bringing any attention to us.

“You want a ski mask?” he whispers.

“No.”

I want this bitch to see my face, to know who the fuck will end her life if she ever comes for my old lady again or any brother’s old lady.

Her place is sparsely furnished, it’s definitely not a home for her. We creep through her house, pushing open doors until we find her sleeping in her bed.

“If she makes a move for her gun, go for yours,” I instruct him quietly.

I don’t make a sound walking into her room, she’s sleeping for sure, and her breathing is too relaxed.

I remember my dad telling me once that to lead the club, every decision is made with ninety percent head and ten percent heart.

My decision has been made with no input from my heart. Digging my knee into the mattress, I straddle the bitch and slam my hand down over her mouth as her eyes fly open. I could’ve moved her gun from the nightstand, but I want her to see I don’t give a shit.

Now fully awake, she tenses beneath me. I grin.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of. This is your last chance to stay the fuck away from me, my family, and my club.”

Keeping one hand over her mouth, I use the other to pull out the photos of her family.

Dropping them one at a time, her eyes widen and finally, fucking finally, she looks at me like I’m a threat to her.

“You will not win against me. Come for me or mine again and I will kill every single one of them. Your badge, the law, none of it scares me. You don’t scare me, but if you have half a brain, you’ll be scared of me.”

Hauling myself off of her, I leave her with the photos and walk out. I leave her back door open, it’s not like she’ll be falling back to sleep any time soon.

“I like how you work.” Myles grins.

“It’s how we all work from now on.”

Just as I thought, she doesn’t call it in, and we walk back to our bikes without the cops coming guns blazing for us. Both straddling our rides, I ask Myles, “What’s up with your brother? He’s not been himself lately.”

Pulling on his riding gloves, pain flashes across his face. “Believe it or not but he hasn’t said much to me, just keeps vowing that he’s never going back to prison. He’s more intense than usual with Aspen too, and she’s near her end with it.”

That’s not good. Since Mase has been with Aspen, he’s not as unpredictable. In fact, neither he nor Myles are such a liability with the crazy shit they used to pull since they found their old ladies.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow, and see what’s going on with him.”

“Good luck.”



As luck would have it, Mason's about to leave the club as I ride in. Myles headed home so I haven't got to send him away to talk to his twin. Signalling for him not to leave, I park my bike and walk over to him.

"Where's Aspen?"

For a moment I picture her tied up and trapped in a cupboard in their house. Myles and Mason weren't interested in moving into the newly built homes here.

"She's at home. I'm headed there now."

"You good? You've been losing your shit a lot lately."

He rolls his neck, and I wait for him to speak. Pushing him won't get me very far or any answers.

"It's been different since we got home."

"In what way?"

"I thought everything would go back to how it was but shit's changed and I can't help the feeling I'm gonna lose everything."

"Brother, you ain't gonna lose shit. This isn't like you."

"Yeah, I get that. But fuck, I can't deal."

"How about after the wedding, you go back with Luca? Stay in the city for a while, sort your head out."

"I'll think about it."

I hold my fist out and he bumps his to mine. He rides out and I head home. I climb into bed with Holly, still awake, and pull her against me.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"I paid our sheriff a visit."

She groans and rolls around to face me. "You shouldn't have done that. She'll come for you even harder now."

“If she’s got a death wish, she might. But she won’t. I’m more concerned about you. Are you okay?”

“I am now. I knew you’d get me out, but it was horrible. I don’t know how you did that every day for over a year.”

Nor do I sometimes when I think back on it. “It won’t ever happen again.”

“Leo,” she sighs. “Don’t make such promises. I know you’ll try to keep them, but you don’t know what the future holds. You won’t be at my side all the time.”

“That may be, but I can have brothers with you whenever you leave the club.”

“That’s not a life I want.”

“It’s the only life I can give you right now. It won’t be forever, but in order for me to be able to make a promise to you, this is the only way to keep it.”

She won’t be able to move without having someone beside her until I know where we stand with the sheriff.



Coffee in one hand and my pack of cigarettes in the other, I step outside to have my morning smoke on the front porch to find Dad’s already sitting there.

“You’re up early.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“So you came to my porch?”

“Fuckin’ built it, didn’t I?” he grunts. “Besides, I wanted to catch you before you left. I heard about Holly and the sheriff.”

“I sorted it and she’s okay.”

“I don’t doubt it, she’s been through a fuck ton worse. But how exactly did you sort it?”

Lighting a cigarette, I draw long and hard, exhaling for even longer and drain half my coffee.

“I paid her a visit last night at her house, let her know that if she comes for us again, her entire family will disappear.”

Conflict shines in his eyes, but he says nothing.

“You don’t agree?”

“You gotta be careful.”

“It’s either let her use us or go extreme. I chose extreme.”

“Extreme brings heat, Leo, and heat brings a whole world of bullshit.”

“You wanted me to set my place, I’m setting it. I can’t live trying to appease her or tread carefully. Between the Haywards, Effie, and anyone else who wants to start with us, I want them all to know who I am and what I’ll do to keep the club in one piece. We’ve got our Southern Chapter running from their town, which I will personally step in and rectify the situation. You always said to keep shit tight and I’m going to do just that.”

He takes one of my cigarettes and puffs on the unlit stick. “I don’t think you’re wrong. I think you’re making waves...”

“But?”

I know there’s one coming.

“But... I’m afraid there’ll come a time when you can’t come back. When it comes to the law, there’s always an agency above the fucker coming for you, with more power and fewer jurisdictions.”

“If you didn’t have faith in me, you shouldn’t have stepped down.”

“Fuck you. I told you I’d advise you, I guess I forgot to say I’ll give it to you whether you ask for it or not.”

I laugh. The old timer will never change. My phone pings with a text and I quickly glance at the notification, it’s from Gabe.

“You can put your old heart at ease in a few minutes. The Mercy Chapter is a minute out and the sheriff is tailing them. We’ll find out how my late-night visit will affect us.” I finish my coffee. “All I need now is to hear Mercy has trouble of its own.”

Dad smirks. “Welcome to life at the top, my son.”

We walk together around to the front of the bar and the sheriff parks out front while our Mercy brothers ride in.

“Go see what the bitch wants, and I’ll deal with Mercy.”

The sheriff leans against her cruiser, and I keep my eye on her as I take my time welcoming the Mercy Charter.

“Good to see ya, brother. It’s even better visiting under happy circumstances,” Gabe says as he pulls me in for a hug.

“Well, we’ve got some shit to sort out, but it’ll wait till later.”

“It’s a day ending in Y, so yeah, there’s always shit to sort out.”

Slapping him on the back, I make my way over to the gate and walk out onto the road.

“I’ve said all I have to say and I’m not in the game of repeating myself.”

“I come in peace,” she begins, throwing me off track, not that I show it. “I’m here to make a deal.”

“Yeah? Let’s hear it.”

“You stay away from my family, you forget they even exist, and in return, I’ll forget you’re out here... and I want fifteen thousand a month.”

“Fifteen grand?” I snort. “We’ve been in town for years, I’m born and raised here, the same as most of my brothers. We’ll be here long after you’re not. Why the fuck would I pay someone on Effie’s payroll?”

Her eyes widen and I smirk. “I haven’t been on her payroll since the explosion out at the farm. Your money will make me

and my office blind to the Lost Souls. It's a good deal and you know it."

"For fifteen grand a month, I want you not only to be blind to us, but I want to make sure no one else starts looking into us and if they do, you keep us in the know."

"Deal."

If she thinks this will make me trust her, she's dead wrong. Never trust a cop and never fully trust someone you have to pay for loyalty.

"Your first payment will be waiting at home for you by the end of your shift. Now fuck off."

She reaches her car without argument and an idea hits me.

"I'm getting married tomorrow, make sure no one comes through town that's not meant to."

"You got it."

Well, that was easy, borderline too easy. I watch her cruiser drive away and turn to find my dad behind me.

"I had the prospect record your exchange. I couldn't tell myself what went down though."

"She came in peace. For fifteen G's a month, she'll turn a blind eye to us and give us a heads up if anyone starts looking into us."

"And you agreed?"

"For now. I'll reassess from month to month. If it works out, she'll remain alive. If not, she'll disappear. I ain't fuckin' about."

He nods. "Come on, let's welcome the brothers."

Chapter Eighteen

Leo

I keep hearing how the brothers plan on getting me wasted to the point I don't remember my name but there's business to be dealt with before the brothers can't speak at all and are distracted with drink and pussy.

I neck the shot of tequila the prospect hands me, hoping it will keep me level-headed for the next however long as I've called for everyone to get their asses into the back room. It's a tight squeeze with the extra brothers in town. I take my seat and pick up the gavel.

"It's hella weird not seeing you at the head of the table, Cas," Wyatt points out to Dad.

"You'll get used to it."

I bite down on my smirk. I doubt there's a man alive who will ever get one over on my dad. I slam the gavel down and a hush falls over the room. Brothers give me their full attention and I begin, "To start with, we'll update you on our relationship with the Haywards. We've all benefited from their money in one way or another. We've been searching for Effie Rathbone for too fuckin' long. A couple of weeks ago she made us an offer, one I declined, and one Luca accepted as a way of getting close to her. When the time is right, we'll take her out."

"What happens when she's taken out regarding our deal with the Haywards?" Wyatt asks.

“They haven’t been too forthcoming with their plans as of yet but I’m sure we’ll deal with it when we have to.”

I lean on the table and continue, “We’re all here today because of my wedding but it’s been a long time coming that we all meet since I took the gavel. And I’m glad we are. Our Southern brothers are in trouble and have recently been run out of their town.”

Mocking murmurs float around the room while Wyatt and Creep, Jonah, and Cookie shrink in their chairs.

“I want to know what’s been going on in each of your chapters that you’ve kept from this chapter?”

JP shakes his head, Gabe shakes his head, and Wyatt won’t meet anyone’s eye.

“Don’t be fuckin’ shy,” I grunt. “I want everything laid out at the table tonight. If it affects the club, I don’t care how small a problem might be, I want to hear it.”

“Life’s been good to us, Leo. If we had trouble at our door, I would’ve let you know by now,” JP says. “We’re simply here to celebrate your wedding with you all and catch up with everyone.”

Gabe speaks up. “There’s been no trouble with us since your last visit to the mountain. The business has returned to normal and we’re all enjoying the cash it comes with.”

“So it’s just our Southern brothers who are the weak links in this club.”

“Leo...” Sparky says but is cut off by Wyatt. “He’s right, Sparks, we have been weak. We should have had our shit locked down and we didn’t. Now we’re paying the price.”

“We’re Lost Souls! We don’t run! Even if we lose our lives, it’s because we’ve fought to the bitter end!” Clenching my hands, I look at every brother in the room. “What’s the fuckin’ point in our patch if we can’t reach out and ask for help when needed?” I take a deep breath. “After my wedding tomorrow, we’re going to ride south and we’re going to wipe out this Young Hounds crew. Every one of them. We’re not gonna show mercy. We’ll set the message clear for anyone else

with aspirations to step onto our territory and try and take what's ours."

Brothers holler their agreement and I lean back in my chair. Dad catches my eye and nods.

I hold my hand up for silence and then I continue, "There's no room for weakness moving forward. The Lost Souls are gearing up a level and we won't stand for anything less than a hundred percent."

Brothers pound their hands on the tabletop.

"A new era has begun, brothers, be fuckin' ready," Dad hollers and I grin.

I slam the gavel down and stand. "Go drink, fuck, whatever. Tomorrow you'll be on your best fuckin' behaviour for my old lady and then Sunday, we ride and we fight."

Dad hangs back as the brothers file out of the back room. It's clear he wants to talk so I hang back with him.

"Luca called your mom earlier. He and Victoria will be here in the morning."

"Good." Not that I didn't know. "What's on your mind, Dad?"

"Not much, I just wanted to say you're good at bringing the brothers together. I doubt Wyatt will let anything slip through his fingers again, he won't want to face you." He laughs.

"He's gotten lazy. If he can't handle it anymore, he should let someone else take his place."

"I don't disagree."

"You held back the news about JP."

His chest heaves with a long sigh and his brows knit together. "He wanted to tell you himself. Can't say I disagree with how he's gonna take himself out. I thought about it once or twice when I was ill."

It wouldn't have surprised me to hear this at the time knowing my dad, but still, hearing it still guts me as if he

actually did it.

“Mom would’ve brought you back and then killed you herself.”

He smiles and nods slowly. “Luckily no one was put in that situation, but JP ain’t fighting his disease. We just need to be there when or if he wants us. And of course, we’ll look after his old lady.”

“It goes without saying.”

He slaps me on the shoulder. “Come on, let the brothers send you off into married bliss and we’ll pick this up Sunday morning.”

With the meeting concluded, there’s one last thing I need to do before tomorrow.

“Give me an hour and I’ll join you. If anyone asks where I am, tell them to mind their own fuckin’ business.”

“Got ya.”



The night is warm, and I have to climb and jump the gate at the cemetery. I used to prefer visiting India’s grave during the day. I couldn’t stand to think of her out here in the dead of night on her own. I approach the Lost Souls section and stop by her grave.

“Hey, darlin’, it’s been a while since I was last here. There’s quite a bit to catch you up on but I’ll start with Rayna. I decided she’d be homeschooled. I want her where I know she is all the time. She’s a smart kid. Holly says she picks up her maths and her reading real quick. She takes after you, college girl. I can count my money but that’s about where it ends.” I laugh. “The wedding’s tomorrow, I have to admit, for a long time it was only you that I saw walking toward me in a white dress, but I see Holly now and she’s good for us, babe. Not only that, I’m good for her. We fit together.” I light a cigarette and kneel. “I’ll bring Ray out soon, she’s drawn you a picture of a pink butterfly that she says reminds her of you. You’re

never forgotten, never.” I inhale the cigarette and exhale the smoke up into the air. “I should also tell you Rayna calls Holly’s mom now. I hope you’ll agree that our daughter needs as much normality as possible. I made her understand that Holly is her other mom. She will always know who you are.”

Standing to full height, I finish my cigarette and grind it out underneath my boot.

“You changed me, babe, in ways I’ll never be able to tell you. I guess I wanted to thank you for loving me, and showing me who I could be.”

Pressing a kiss to my fingers, I place it on the top of the headstone. “Watch over us.”

During the ride back to the club, my shoulders are no longer weighed down by grief or guilt. It’s still there but I’m able to compartmentalise the past to where it’s meant to be... in the past.

I can hear the music and the brothers enjoying the night before I ride in, and I remain seated on my bike. Zach steps outside and lights a joint. When he notices me, he walks over.

“Are you on your way out?” he asks.

“Nah, just got back. I went to see your sister,” I told him.

He raises his brows and puffs on his joint. The smell of pot fills my nose.

“I went by yesterday and left flowers.” He exhales the smoke from his lungs. “I feel like I should say something corny like, she’d approve of Holly or something.”

I shrug. “We’ll never know but I’m glad your parents approve. For Holly.”

“Mom’s come a long way and she just wants the best for Rayna. She likes Holly and she sees how much Rayna loves her.”

I smile. “Who would’ve thought this day would come.”

It’s his turn to shrug. “It was always going to happen, Leo, no one deserves to be alone, or living with a ghost. God knows

I miss her. I think all the time about how I'd push her away, wrapped up in my head about shit going on at the time. I took her for granted and didn't know it till she was gone."

"She loved you, Zach. Don't doubt that. And she'd love Sebastian and Nina, she'd be happy for you, that you've found happiness."

"I sometimes forget her voice and her laugh, but then I'll hear Rayna and it all comes back."

I understand his pain. I've lived through it every day.

It's like he snaps out of his grief haze, and he says, "Anyway, it's not the time to dwell in the past, you're getting married, it's time to celebrate and embrace the fuckin' future."

For the first time in a long, long time, I want to celebrate. I want to laugh and join in with the brothers as they drink too much and crack joke after joke.

Climbing off of my bike, I take the joint from Zach and take a long pull. His smirk turns into a grin, and I hand the joint back to him.

"Let's get fucked up, brother," I say, slinging my arm around him.

"The brothers are waiting to help you get fucked up, just so you know what you're walking into."

My chest rumbles with laughter and I take the joint from him before he smokes it all.

"They can fuckin' try."

Brothers cheer as I step inside, and I'm dragged toward the bar by JJ and Myles.

"Fuckin' finally, our president's here!" Myles hollers. "It's our duty as his brothers to send him off into marital bliss. His last night of freedom before that ring goes on. Who thinks we should give him a night to remember... or not remember come the morning?"

Brothers laugh and hollers of agreement fill the bar. I catch my dad's eye and the fucker winks and laughs.

“I swear to God, you fuckers will have my old lady to deal with if I’m not able to stand tomorrow,” I warn them all.

“It’s a good job we’re not afraid of anything then,” JJ retorts.

Myles grabs a bottle of tequila from the bar and unscrews the cap. With a wicked smirk on his face, he says, “You need to catch up. Open.”

Tipping my head back, I open my mouth and he pours enough tequila until I’m choking on the shit.

“Don’t worry, Prez, we won’t let you die,” Myles offers and it’s the last thing I remember.

Chapter Nineteen

Holly

From where I lie in bed, I stare out the window at clear blue skies. On my other side, Rayna's still fast asleep and I roll over and lie watching her instead of getting up and into the shower. Today is the day I get the life I've wanted for so long. Rayna isn't my daughter by blood, but she's as good as. I don't know what comes for us after death but if India can somehow hear what I'm thinking, I think, "I promise you, I will always be the mother Rayna needs in your absence. I already love her like my own, protect her as I would my own, and will guide her as I would my own. When she needs a mother's touch, I'll be there. When she needs advice and help, I'll be there. And I'll always make sure she's happy."

I hope in some way she knows but like life after death, we know nothing about it or what happens.

"You and Daddy are getting married today!"

Snapping back to reality, Rayna is sat up and grinning from ear-to-ear, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"Yes, we are." I sit up and her hand falls on my glove. I don't think anything about it as I'm used to her touching my gloves and not asking questions. But not this morning.

"Why do you wear these when you sleep?" she asks, picking at the lace.

I'm too stunned to come up with a lie. "A long time ago I got hurt. I wear these gloves because I don't like people seeing

how hurt they are.”

I don't know how else to explain it to her without giving more detail. These details no little girl needs to hear. Her smile slips and worry fills her little eyes.

“Don't worry, Ray-Ray. I'm okay now.” I hold my hands up and wiggle my fingers. “See, they're okay.”

Satisfied with my explanation, she bounces off the bed and skips out of the room and into hers.

Slipping on my robe, I head downstairs to make a coffee and make Rayna's breakfast before the day truly begins. Alannah is sitting at the kitchen table. A spread of fruit and pancakes, glasses of champagne, and orange juice are laid out.

“Good morning,” I say, getting her attention.

She smiles and slides out of the chair next to her for me. “Come sit down.”

I do as she asks and help myself to a strawberry.

“Before the day gets away from us, I wanted to give you this.”

She hands me a long sleek black box and I open it to find a white gold choker necklace with a single diamond pendant.

“On the morning of my wedding, I had never missed my mom more than I did that day. There was no special memento handed down to me, no words of wisdom going into married life. Your mom might have her traditions, but I wanted to hand this down to you, and if or when the time comes, you can hand it down to Rayna.”

I run my finger over it and admire the gesture.

“Alannah, thank you. It's beautiful.”

“Marrying into this life is more than marrying the brother. You really do marry the club but in return, they take you under their arm and would die for you. My advice to you is to learn to read the future and never show anyone when you're down. Strength counts for everything, and it will get you far.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m glad you’re joining the family. Between you and Victoria, I couldn’t have asked for better daughters-in-law.”

Without thinking, I hug her tight. It would be cruel for me to wish she were a mother to me, but a mother-in-law? I couldn’t ask for anyone better.

Pulling away, I promise her, “I’ll hold your son up when he asks and when he doesn’t.”

“And I’ll hold you up when you need it.” She stands and nudges a bowl of cherries toward me. “Eat up and then take a nice bath. I’m sending Rayna over to Harper’s to get ready, so you’ll have the morning to relax and get yourself together.”

She walks over to the bottom of the stairs and calls for Rayna. While she waits, she looks back at me.

“Enjoy today, apart from the days you have your own babies, this will be close to the happiest day of your life. I know you’re nervous about the number of guests but they’re here for you and Leo. Get to know them and they won’t be strangers to you after today.”

Her words soothe me in a way Leo’s haven’t. Alannah amazes me. She never fails to know the right words to say or the right actions to carry out.

I take her advice and spend the morning soaking in the tub, imagining life after today, while sipping champagne. By the time lunch rolls around, I’m relaxed. I have two hours to do my hair and makeup and slip into my dress. It’s never taken me long to get ready and even on my wedding day, I can’t see it taking much longer than normal.

The door barrels open, and Harper, Nina, and Victoria walk in, all pretty in their dresses and their hair done.

“Rayna’s with Alannah, and Cas just left to pick up your mom,” Harper informs me.

“And we’re here to help you get ready,” Victoria beams.

I’m dragged up to my room and plonked down onto the dresser chair.

“Remember, I want something simple,” I warn them.

“Trust us, once we’re done with you, you’ll be happy,” Nina says softly rifling through my makeup bag.

“Can you believe today is finally here?” Victoria asks.

“In some ways, no,” I laugh.

“Any doubts? Want us to sneak you out of here? You can pull a Rudi and run?”

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. “There’s not a single doubt in my body,” I say with perfect truth. Then a doubt creeps in that Leo doesn’t feel the same. Maybe he woke up with doubts this morning?

“Hey, I can see what you’re thinking. The only thing Leo’s thinking about this morning is how to breathe without throwing up,” Harper tells me.

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. “I told him not to get wasted.”

“I don’t think he had a choice. Jay told me the brothers took over and made sure he had a great night. From the groaning coming from my couch this morning, I know he’s at least alive.”

“As long as he’s at the altar, I don’t care.”

“That’s the attitude. Now, let’s get your hair done.”

Time becomes a blur. Nina does my make-up and Victoria does my hair. When I was little, I imagined my wedding day was a lot different from this. My father spoke often of me marrying a doctor or a lawyer, getting married in a big church, and holding the reception in a fancy hotel in the city. He thought more about my big day than I ever did. But this is perfect. This is all I need before spending the rest of my life with my biker.

“Can I look now?” I ask.

“Wait till you’re in your dress,” Harper says, taking it down from the hanger.

The three of them help me into the dress and Harper works the buttons.

Nina moves to close the door so I can look in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door and for a moment, I can't breathe.

I don't recognise myself but in a good way. Victoria has worked her magic creating an intricate updo with braids sweeping around my head. Wispy strands of hair have been curled and fall perfectly around my face. My eyes are subtle and elegant. My lips are a light blushing pink.

With a final touch, all that remains is to switch my gloves to the ones I carefully selected to match my dress. I don't know how long I stare at myself but when I focus on the next step, I'm alone in my room.

Before anyone can walk in, I swap my gloves for my new ones and roll them up to my elbows. Many women wear gloves on their wedding day. It won't be out of the ordinary to anyone here today.

I hear the door open downstairs and I bunch my dress up and head down.

"Mom. You're here!"

I must admit, a part of me thought she might make excuses at the last minute as to why she wouldn't make it. But I'm so glad she's here.

"I said I would be," she says quietly, looking around the house.

"You look lovely," I tell her.

She finally looks at me and her bottom lip wobbles. "Holly," she says barely above a whisper. "You're stunning."

"So I look okay?"

She snorts. "Okay?" Coming over to me, she holds my hands and I swallow the urge to pull away. "You've been beautiful since I first laid eyes on you as a baby but today, there are no words. Leo will be speechless."

"Thank you."

I blink back tears and take a deep breath. “Your father would be choked for words, that I know for sure.”

It’s bittersweet thinking about my father and how he would’ve been on my special day. I doubt he would ever approve of Leo and his lifestyle. I’m certain that if he were still alive, I’d be getting married today without any family here.

Cas steps in through the back door and Mom kisses me on the cheek. “It looks like that’s my cue.”

She nods politely to Cas on her way out and he steps farther into the kitchen.

“Harper and JJ married on the fly, and I didn’t get the chance to walk her down the aisle. I know your dad isn’t here anymore, so it’d be an honour if you’d allow me to walk with you.”

I gasp. “Really?”

“Don’t look so surprised. It was you who brought my son back from a place not many come back from. Because of you, Leo will have a fulfilled life. You’ll always be a part of my family.”

It reiterates I have a purpose and always have done. Leo is my purpose. Rayna too.

“I’d love for you to walk me up the aisle.”

“You look beautiful, by the way,” he says, holding his arm out for me.

“I don’t think I’ll get fed up hearing that today.” I laugh, taking his arm.

“And so you shouldn’t.”

Outside, the sun is warm and my heart thrums inside my chest. My feet wobble in my heels and I’m thankful to be holding onto Cas for support. In no time at all I’m going to be Mrs. Holly Jackson and it can’t come soon enough.

Chapter Twenty

Leo

“Check again,” I order Jay and Luca.

“Brother, you huff your breath on me again, and I will punch you in the fuckin’ face, wedding day or not,” Luca grumbles.

Jay slaps me on the shoulder and assures me, “You’re fine, stop being a pussy.”

I breathe into my cupped hand and shove another piece of gum into my mouth. Holly never asks for much, but she did ask not to kiss a tequila mouth on her wedding day.

“Last chance to run, Leo, it’s now or never,” JP hollers from where he sits halfway back in the rows of chairs.

“You think I’m mad enough to let a woman like mine go?” I holler back.

“Maybe *she* should run,” Ashton hollers and I roll my neck.

“Then you fuckers will have to sit here till I chase her and bring her back. Now shut the fuck up.”

Laughter ripples through the fuckers and quietens when the music begins. Rayna walks up the aisle, scattering rose petals and my heart swells. I’m not biased because I’m her father, she truly is the most beautiful girl in the world. Not fazed by everyone staring at her, she beams her stunning smile

at everyone and then runs to me when she notices me standing at the altar.

Scooping her up into my arms, I kiss her cheek. “Hey, pretty girl.” The music changes and I slide her down to her feet and nudge her toward my mom on the front row. Mom presses a kiss to the top of her head and Rayna’s smile grows. Holly’s mom watches on and I relax when she smiles. Holly was worried she might not even show up but I’m glad for her sake that she did.

Holly and Dad appear at the end of the aisle. Though I’ve already seen her in her dress, her hair is done up pretty and all the nerves she’s had in the run-up to today are clearly not on her beautiful face. It’s like seeing her in it for the first time.

“One day your luck is gonna run out, brother. She’s beautiful,” JJ murmurs at my side.

I don’t give a shit who’s looking at me, my smile turns into a full-blown grin at the sight of the woman I’m about to marry. Dad once told me there’ll only be a few times in life when decisions you make truly feel right. Today is one of those decisions I’ve made that feels right.

“Fuck luck,” I mumble.

This shit is destiny like my mom always bangs on about. I was meant to be her husband and fuck me if I’m not going to keep her for the rest of my life. Every vow I’m about to make is going to be fulfilled with everything I have and more. I will spend the rest of my life making it my mission that she never feels pain again.

I’m glad Dad is walking her up the aisle. I want her at complete ease and from the smile on her face, she’s feeling it for herself. She doesn’t break eye contact with me and I’m sure I don’t even blink.

In time I’ll wish I had looked around and watched how everyone is reacting to her, but it won’t be a regret because I no longer fight myself. I can’t take my eyes off of her. And the closer she gets, nothing and no one around us matters. I don’t see any of it.

She and Dad stop before me, and I step closer and take her hand from Dad's. The lace covering her hands reaches up to her elbows and her dress clinging to her body is just as pretty as the day I saw her trying it on over at the house.

"You ready?" I ask just for her to hear.

"Are you?" she retorts.

I pull her against me and slam my lips onto hers, much to the hollers and cheers from the guests.

"Does that answer your question?"

"It sure does."

The pastor from town clears his throat and we take our places. In front of my brothers and our families, well her mom, and my family, we say our vows, and as just like the night I took the patch, I soak in the seriousness of the moment.

"Do you, Leo, take this woman to be your wife?"

"Fuck yeah," I mouth to her making her smile grow, then louder, "I do."

"And do you Holly, take this man, to be your husband?"

She doesn't hesitate. "I do. Yes."

"Then I..."

The rest I barely hear, her gaze has me captured and I can hardly refrain from cutting her off and kissing her now.

The second he mentions for me to kiss my bride, I step closer and kiss her. She winds her arms around my neck and leans up on her tiptoes, everyone going wild.

"We did it," she beams.

"Fuck yeah, we did. No regrets?" I ask.

"No, just hope... for the future."

"We once agreed hope was dangerous."

"What's life without a little danger?"

I laugh. Throwing my arm around my wife, we walk down the aisle to brothers slapping me on the back and the old ladies

reaching out to hold Holly's hand. The day is made perfect when she doesn't withdraw her touch. She takes everyone's hand and when it comes to having our photos done, she doesn't shy away from being the centre of attention. Her mother on the other hand does all she can to be out of the picture. She's clearly not comfortable here or around us. Like her daughter, she's taking everything in without having anyone notice her. I accept every congratulations all the while keeping my eye on my wife. When it comes time for the guys to step up for photos, Mom is a dab hand in keeping everyone in control.

She makes sure to get one of me, Luca, and Dad. Me and JJ as my best man. Numerous photos of numerous groups of us and then one of all of us wearing a patch.

Brothers scatter once Mom dismisses us and then Holly and the girls take their turn, and then the kids. Mom will be in her element today, capturing it all with her camera.

She buzzes around clicking the camera when we cut the cake, the speeches are given, and when she asks about the first dance, I offer Holly a secret smile. She returns it. That was just for us and always will be. After what feels like an eternity, I'm done. I nab Holly as she passes by the table I'm sitting at and ignore the hollering as I scoop her into my arms and whisk her away.

"I'm sorry I can't take you on honeymoon."

"Hey, all I need is you," she promises, and I love her all the more for it.

"How about I give you me right now?" I smoothly ask.

She knows exactly what I'm referring to and her smile turns to a hot smirk.

"What are you waiting for?"

Mom is watching Rayna tonight and not caring to thank anyone for coming today or saying good night, I lead my wife into the house and kick the door shut behind us.

"Are you planning on keeping this dress?" I ask.

She frowns. “Why?”

“Cause I don’t have the patience to unbutton it. I want you now.”

“I was planning on keeping it, but not wearing it again, it doesn’t matter how it’s boxed. It’s only going to live in the attic.”

I don’t waste a moment. Using my flick knife, which Holly doesn’t know I kept on me today, I run it down the spine of buttons and listen to her giggle as they land on the floor one at a time in quick succession.

With all the buttons ripped off, her dress slides down her thighs and pools around her feet.

Her ass is covered in white lace and her matching bra is the skimpiest piece of lingerie I’ve ever seen.

Turning her around, I run my finger over her lace-covered nipple, and tell her, “You’re gonna need to order this in every colour it comes in.”

I expect her to giggle but lust is heavy in her gaze and the time for talking is over. Grabbing her thighs, she jumps up wrapping her legs around my waist. Walking up to our room, I lay her on the bed and undress, never taking my eyes from hers as I do.

I lie beside her, trailing my fingers up her thighs and up onto her stomach. Now it’s just the two of us, I say, “Hey, Mrs. Jackson.”

Her giggle ignites me.

She asks, “Does it feel weird for you to call me that?”

“Not really. It feels like I’ve been waiting forever to say it.”

Holding my left hand above me, enough moonlight is spilling through the window I can see my wedding band as clear as day. I didn’t expect it to hold so much weight, but it does.

She lifts her hand and entwines her fingers with mine.

“Together, always,” she vows, and I kiss her.



My eyes open and Holly’s already awake beside me.

“I was wondering when my husband was going to wake up.”

I drag her across me until she gets the hint to straddle me. “If you wanna make a baby, shouldn’t I be the one on my back?”

Laughing, I grab at her and buck my hips until she’s in the air and flip her onto the mattress.

“You wanna do this on your back, so be it.”

Cupping both sides of my face, she pulls me down to kiss me and as her tongue sweeps over mine, I line my dick at her entrance.

Thrusting inside her, I bask in her gasp and swallow it with a kiss. Slow and steady, I make love to my wife and if possible, I’d stay like this for the rest of my life. No worries, no troubles, nothing but pure warm bliss.



Holding hands, we head out to see the charters off. The Mercy chapter is the first to ride out, followed by Five Falls. Wyatt brings his bike to life when I motion my finger across my neck, signalling for him to hold off leaving. I go to tell Holly to meet me in the bar when the Haywards drive in. I tighten my hold on her and she frowns up at me.

I wink letting her know everything’s fine when in actual fact, I have zero patience for the British gangsters this morning. Jamie Boy, Cody, and Ritchie climb out of their SUV and straighten their jackets on their way over.

“Congratulations to you both,” Jamie Boy says, and then Cody, “Congratulations and all that. We hope the day went

well.”

“It was perfect, thank you,” Holly says, shocking me.

Jamie Boy produces an envelope from his jacket pocket and hands it over to me. Since it’s addressed to Mr and Mrs Jackson, I pass it over to Holly to open.

Working around her gloves, she rips it open and pulls out tickets. It better not be to some pompous opera show. I would rather sit on a cactus naked.

“Oh my God, am I reading this right?” Holly exclaims.

Leaning closer to get a better look, I see they’re flight tickets.

“Two first-class return tickets to London, leaving in three days.”

“The return date is a week later. We can’t accept this... as generous as it is.”

Ritchie smirks. “Of course, you can, and while you’re in our neck of the woods, we can show you the future.”

Holly places her hand on my arm and gently squeezes it twice. She wants to go and it’s obvious without the Haywards having to outright say, this isn’t a nice gesture. I’m wanted in London.

“Thank you.”

Kissing the side of Holly’s head, I say, “Why don’t you go start making arrangements for Rayna and I’ll meet you at the house.”

“Hey, Leo, we’ve gotta get goin’...”

Ritchie glances between Wyatt and me and huffs, “They shouldn’t leave just yet.”

“Give me ten minutes, Wy,” I holler and lead the Haywards into the bar.

“Your brother has been instructed to go on a run for Effie and we’re going to take advantage of finally having him on the inside,” Jamie Boy begins.

Ritchie unbuttons his jacket and takes a seat. “We’re running out of patience, and you have three hours to round up as many men as you can and be ready to head out.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah, just like that. We have our soldiers waiting on word from Luca as to where he’s being asked to go.”

The Haywards are starting to piss me off. They always seem to have a plan behind a plan, yet they keep it locked tight from anyone who doesn’t share their name.

“Oh and let your wife know that it’s winter in England, she should pack warm.”

“I’ll get on it.” Catching up to Wyatt, I tell him, “Call back Mercy and Five Falls. I’ll explain in ten minutes.”

Letting myself into the house, Holly’s at the kitchen island writing a list from what I can see.

“I’m guessing you’ll have to deal with club business while we’re away but how crazy is it we’re going to London?” she beams.

“I admit it’ll be cool to see what the hype is about.”

“Rayna is going to spend a long weekend with Kristen and Slade and then three nights with your parents.”

“Huh, you sorted that out fast.”

Cocking her brow, she looks at me like I’m stupid. “It’s London.”

“Well, London is still a few days away and I’ve gotta head out of town today for a couple of days.”

Normal women would argue that it’s not even twenty-four hours since our vows, but Holly understands this is life. And that I’ll make it up to her when I can.

“Do you want me to pack for you?”

“Yes. And apparently, it’s winter over there, so pack our warm shit.”

“I don’t care if it’s snowing. It’s London.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” I laugh. “I’ll come find you before I leave.”

She’s so engrossed in her list I don’t think she heard me but one thing I love as I glance once more at her is seeing my ring on her finger.

By the time I join Wyatt, the Mercy and Five Falls chapter have returned and are waiting to hear why they’ve been called back.

Jamie Boy, Cody, and Ritchie walk out of the bar and join us. Dad walks around from the bar with a shotgun resting against each shoulder.

Arching my brow, he just laughs and stands at my side. Ritchie nods his approval. “I like your style, Cas.”

Putting my fingers to my mouth, I let out a loud whistle and get everyone’s attention.

“I’ve called you back because our plans with Effie have changed. As we know, Luca’s been given orders to meet her today. With the Haywards, we’re gonna attack tonight.”

I walk over to JP and ask quietly, “You good with this? You can sit out if you need to.”

He’s shaking his head before I finish speaking. “I’m good. It will be my last fuckin’ fuck you.”

“Good, brother.”

Turning to everyone else, I say, “Your old ladies are welcome to stay until we return. We leave when Luca lets us know where he’s going to.” I look at the Haywards and ask, “That’s good with you?”

“Perfect,” Jamie Boy says.

The last time the club attempted to take Effie down Ford lost his life. We can’t afford to take another hit but if I have my way, it will go as smooth as fucking butter.

Chapter Twenty-One

Leo

“**M**aybe it’s best Luca doesn’t know we’re coming?” Jamie Boy says, and I want to smash my fist into his jaw.

“I’m not blindsiding my brother.”

Brothers murmur their agreement and I walk over to the side of the road and dig out my phone. I want to take down Effie as much as the Haywards but not if it puts my brother in harm’s way. Hitting his number, I press the phone to my ear, and each ring has my gut tightening.

When he answers, relief hits me like a boulder.

“Brother?”

“Where are you?”

“We’ve just stopped for gas. Got about an hour’s ride till we got to the docks. Why?”

“I couldn’t tell you earlier, but the Haywards found out about this run and we’re currently about an hour behind you. I’m calling to warn you that we’re attacking today.”

“What the fuck? I’m only getting what? An hour’s notice? Is that why Jamie Boy wanted to know where I was going?” he barks.

“Yeah. If it weren’t for me, they wouldn’t have warned you at all,” I tell him. “Be ready and warn the guys but give

nothing away.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll text when we’re there so you know to expect us at any second.”

He hangs up and I put my phone away. I join the Haywards near their SUV.

“Since you’ve got all the answers, care to share your plan once we get there?” I say, losing the will to keep my patience.

Ben spreads a map of the docks across the hood of the car. Jamie Boy steps closer and points to a bay in the docking area.

“This is where her shipment is coming into. You and your men will arrive on foot and come from here,” he says pointing to one side, then, “and here.”

Ritchie is next to say, “Our men will be on these rooftops,” pointing to the warehouses surrounding the docks.

“And we’ll come in bold as brass and we’ll shoot the fucking lot of them,” Cody says.

“So a sneak attack?” I mutter.

“Basically,” Jamie Boy says.

I let my brothers know the loosely formed plan and after Ritchie spends ten minutes on the phone, he hollers his watchers have notified him Effie has been seen driving toward the docks.

Rounding up the brothers, I tell them, “When we hit the docks, we’ll split into two. Half of you follow me, the rest follow JJ. Once we give the okay, shoot anyone who isn’t us but don’t take out Effie. Just surround her.”

The rush that comes with impending violence washes over me. My brothers and I ride until we hit the entrance to the docks. I’m well aware it’s myself and the club who are taking the biggest risks, but this is what we’re good at and to get the city out of Effie’s control, it needs to go down like this.

Turning to my brothers, I remind them, “It doesn’t matter what the Haywards or their men do. Our focus is taking out as

many Rathbone men as possible. Leave no one alive. And for the love of God, no one gets shot.”

“Prez?” Myles grunts. “We’re the ones who should be saying that to you. Last check it was you with a bullet in your back.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Let’s do this.”

There’s something about launching an attack that takes over you. Tunnel vision automatically hits you and the grip on your gun becomes second nature. The docks are unusually quiet, and I put that down to Effie making it so. It makes our job easier.

We don’t see any Haywards or their men on our way around the shipping containers. Not until we reach the last shipping container. I was expecting a boat but in its place is a fucking ship. Effie’s men stand out in their suits, not so different from the Haywards and their men. Luca and the Dog City chapter are waiting off to the side, their prospect leaning against the van.

Because I know my brother as well as I do, I can see his jaw set tight. I sent him a text warning him he’s got sixty seconds before we attack. That should be enough time for them to finish unloading the ship to the van.

Effie strolls off the ship and walks over to Luca. She hands him a folder and as he flips through whatever’s inside, he shrugs. He knows I’m here somewhere. If it was anything I needed to worry about, he would’ve let me know with a look.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket.

Move in.

I forwarded it to JJ.

Raising my hand, I signal to my brothers to do as Jamie Boy instructs and move in. The brothers and I focus on the men on the ground, and the shots from the rooftops flying over our heads target the men still on the ship. Effie’s men go to surround her, but my brother’s chapter whip their guns out and aim them at her men. Luca has his gun against Effie’s temple

and as I raise my gun to shoot, searing hot pain spreads across my upper arm.

“Fuck’s sake, Prez, I was only joking about not getting shot,” Myles grunts, coming up behind me.

I shoot the fucker who shot me, and he falls to the ground in a heap. Effie’s men drop like flies, and we close in within a few minutes. Luca’s chapter kills her closest men. The Haywards SUV rolls in and Effie’s shoulders sag when she watches the brothers climb out of the car.

If looks could kill, my brother would be six feet under right about now with her glare she’s shooting him.

“I should’ve known,” she mutters.

“Nothing personal, sweetheart,” he grunts.

Ritchie walks straight up to her and leans in her face. “It’s personal to us, though, darling.”

He looks over his shoulder and nods. Two of their men come over and take one of her arms each and haul her toward the SUV.

“What the fuck?” Luca grunts. “We deserve to see her die. She killed Ford!”

I step between Luca and Jamie Boy. “Where’s she going?”

“To England,” Ritchie tells me curtly.

“Why? Seems a bit excessive just to put a bullet between her eyes.”

“Yeah, well, the thing is, she hasn’t actually harmed one of us for us to justify killing a woman,” Jamie Boy says until Ritchie chimes in, “But our cousin has no problem with it.”

I doubt I’ll ever understand how they think and I’m not sure I want to try.

Luca steps up beside me and passes me a cigarette. “I think your new wife is gonna have something to say about that,” he says, jerking his chin at my arm.

“She’ll be okay. It’s through and through.”

The fact is I can barely feel it at the moment. Regardless of what the Haywards will do to Effie motherfucking Rathbone, this chapter is now closed for the Lost Souls MC. And for that, I'm fucking overjoyed.

"We'll see you in London in a few days," Jamie Boy says, and the brothers and their men leave. As usual, they don't hang around.

Turning to Luca, I say, "I'll see what London is all about and we'll discuss it once I'm back. In the meantime, lock your shit down."

"Obviously."

Slapping him on the back, the Willow's Peak chapter, along with the Southern chapter, Five Falls, and Mercy, head back to our rides. Walking beside Wyatt, I tell him, "Once I'm back from London, I'll be heading to you. While I'm gone, go home and take back the town. Take a group of brothers with you and whatever guns you'll need."

"Thanks, Leo."

"No worries."

As we ride for Willow's Peak, another chapter closes but the next is already opening and coming for us whether we want a breather or not.

I still don't have an idea how to handle the Haywards, but I'm sure after the trip to London, I'll damn well know.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Holly

“How have you not had a breakdown over the years waiting for them to come home?”

Alannah and I sat out on the porch with a glass of wine. Leo's been gone for nearly three days.

“I guess it's because it's always been a part of my life. I don't know any different and Cas has had to survive all his life and though we got married, his need to survive for us has kept him coming home. There's been a few close calls but he's still here.”

It's the close calls I'm worried about. Leo's already been shot, and it was touch and go whether he made it through. “Holly, listen to me, Leo's safer out there on the road if his head is on the club. Just trust him to know what he's doing and that he'll come home to you.”

I think it's easier said than done but I will try.

“I could tell you many stories from over the years but I'm not sure if it will help or not.”

“Maybe best to keep them to yourself.”

The roar of motorcycles fills the air, and she bounces up to her feet and smiles down at me.

“See. They always come home.”

Together, we walk around the bar, and my husband, wow, it's weirdly good to call him my husband, is riding up front.

"Now he's home, look forward to your trip and enjoy the time away together. Trips like this are rare."

"How many times did you and Cas manage to get away alone?"

I'm not sure if I truly want to hear the answer but I've asked now and she says, "While he was president... not once. Now he's not, hopefully, many times."

Leo and Cas walk over and while Alannah is happy to have Cas back. I notice the bloodstained bandage around Leo's upper arm. Has he been hurt?

"It's just a graze," he tells me before I can ask.

He slings his good arm around me, and we walk over to the house. Inside, I busy myself collecting wet cloths and the first aid box.

"Sit," I order, and he slides onto a stool at the island.

He takes his cut off and whips his t-shirt off. I undo the bandage and it's more than a graze. Pursing my lips together, I get my shit together.

"This is a shot wound," I point out. "Are you collecting them now?"

He snorts. "You're funny."

"I won't be laughing when one of these bullets kills you one day. Do I need to remind you we're married now, wives don't take lightly to losing their husbands... especially two days after their wedding."

For a moment I fear I've said the wrong thing after he lost India. But he plucks the roll of bandage from me, plonks it in the first aid box, and slides his hand around my waist.

"I'm not going anywhere," he promises.

"No bleeding from now on," I warned him.

"I hear ya. Now kiss me, I've missed you."

I press my lips to his and sweep my tongue over his when he parts his mouth. He tastes of home. Our tongues dance like we've been kissing all our lives. He pulls away leaving me breathless and asks me, "Are we packed and ready to go tomorrow?"

"We are," I say with a big grin. "I still can't believe we're going to London."

I cannot wait till we're on the plane and up in the sky. For the last three days, it's all I've been able to think about.

"I know being with you is accepting the club too, but I'm looking forward to having you to myself for a few days."

He kisses me before saying, "We've got this, babe."

But one thing stands in the way of the future, so I ask, "Did you get her?"

His smile turns from soft to wicked. "We did, though the Haywards wouldn't let Luca kill her. They're taking her back to London with them, something about they don't wanna kill a woman, but their cousin will. I don't know. I'm just glad it's over."

"What does it mean for the club moving forward?"

"I'm guessing that's what I'm going to find out in London. But as of now, there isn't anybody coming for us."

I process the knowledge that Effie is no longer on the fringes of our lives while I clean his wound and bandage it up tight.

"You should get some sleep, we're going to have a long couple of days."

"I've gotta go talk to the guys first then I will."

I start to tidy the bloody cloths and pack the first aid kit away when he takes my hand.

"Come with me."

Outside, I bask in the sun shining over us and I'm taken aback a little by all the people congregating in front of the bar.

I scan them all and point out, “Out of all the men here that went with you, you were the only one to get shot?”

His laugh warms me. “Babe, it didn’t kill me.”

“No, it didn’t.” I sigh. “I’m starting to think you’re invincible.”

He snorts. “You just learning that?”

With his arm around me, I tuck my hand into the back of his jeans as he calls for everyone’s attention. Old ladies are back at their man’s side, and I admit, it’s going to be strange when they all leave, and life returns to a quiet normal.

“Effie is gone!” he hollers and his brothers cheer. “After I return from London, we’ll know exactly what’s in store for the club, but I do know it will be fuckin’ glorious. I meant what I said, the Lost Souls are moving into the future with the thirst of blood and no fuckin’ weakness in our hearts. Who are we?”

A chill runs down my spine when everyone hollers, “Lost Souls till we die!”

I join Leo in saying goodbye to the Mercy and Five Falls chapters and get the hint that something’s wrong with JP. Leo and Cas especially, hug it out with him longer than they do with everyone else.

“Prez, got a second?”

Leo keeps me at his side and Mason tells him, “I’m not gonna go to Dog City. I’ll head South with Wyatt. Show ‘em what it means to be a Lost Soul.”

Leo fist-bumps him, and he looks around. “Take a few brothers with you. Keep JJ informed and make sure those fuckers know who we fuckin’ are.”

“You got it.”

Leo spins me into his arms. “See, life has a way of falling into place.”

I’ve experienced Hell firsthand, excuse the pun. I’ve known what it is to live with fear trying to crush you every second of every hour of every day. I know all too well what it

is to suffocate in the dark. Though the day Leo brought me to his home was the day my life changed, I just didn't see it at the time. Love saved me. Leo's love. Rayna's love. Even the club's love. Above all, I learned how to love, and I can admit, I'm finally at a place where I love myself. I'll always hate the sight of my hands, but I own my scars. My attacker could've killed me that day. But he didn't. I'm still here and I'm here with the man of my dreams and a beautiful daughter who loves me so much she thinks of me as her mom. I couldn't ask for more.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Leo

The plane hits the tarmac on the runway and Holly's grip on my hand tightens to the point I'm certain she's cutting off my blood supply.

The flight attendant's voice comes over the speaker and lets us know we've landed and Holly leans in and whispers, "We've got a problem."

Arching my brow, I try not to laugh. Instead, I ask, "What would that be?"

"I did not like that and right now, you're not getting me on a plane home."

I laugh. "Out of everything, you're scared of aeroplanes?"

She snorts. "Out of everything?"

"My wife is fearless, not even an aeroplane can take her down."

"Just because you add 'My wife' to things now doesn't mean I'll believe it."

It takes a while to get from the plane out to the pickup bay, where Ben is waiting for us. In the place of an SUV I'm so used to seeing with them, is a top-of-the-line Range Rover.

"How was the flight?" he asks as I note he's alone.

"Too long," I say as Holly says, "Terrifying."

He laughs and opens the door for her. She climbs inside and I tell her, “Call Mom and let her know we’ve landed.”

I close the door and light a cigarette. After going without for so long, I smoke two before I join her.

“I trust there hasn’t been any trouble on your end since the docks?” Ben asks.

“Nothing so far.”

The airport is chaotic but as soon as we hit the highway, or motorway as they call it here, there’s nothing but green fields on either side of us.

“How long is it to London?”

“Not long. You’ll be staying at Jamie Boy’s hotel while you’re here.”

“He owns a hotel?” Holly asks.

“Between the four brothers, they own hotels, restaurants, bookmakers, and numerous businesses all over London.”

Holly pulls a face and I smother a laugh. She spends the rest of the journey with her face up to the window looking at everything we pass.

As we hit the city, I admit I take a look and find the place as cold as the weather.

Ben stops outside the hotel and it’s fancy as fuck with valets and shit. It doesn’t surprise me with the Haywards’ wealth.

I take our cases from the trunk, and we follow Ben into the hotel. We pass the reception and Ben pulls out a key card from his inside jacket pocket. In the elevator, he swipes the card and punches the button for the penthouse, and I glance sideways at Holly.

She’s so excited. It makes me feel guilty I didn’t even try to get away for a honeymoon.

The doors open and Ben is first to step out. He places the key card on a side unit and tells us, “You have the whole top floor. Living area, two bedrooms, bathroom, and ensuite. If

you need anything, call down to reception. They know to be ready for you.”

“Thank you. This is... I’ve never seen anything like it, except in the movies.”

He smiles and tips his chin. Holly goes off looking around and Ben says, “Jamie Boy will meet up with you tomorrow.”

He produces a burner phone from his pocket and hands it over. “While you’re here, this is clean.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Once he’s left, I wander through the suite until I find my wife. In the bathroom, she’s sat fully clothed in the biggest tub I’ve ever seen.

“This is ridiculous,” she beams. “It’s like a small swimming pool.”

Though she’s over-excited about the size of the tub, I’m picturing her bent over the edge as I pound into her from behind.

In fact, there are a lot of places I plan on fucking her while we’re here.

“I gathered they were wealthy, but this is over the top, don’t you think?”

I help her out of the tub and pull her against me. “It’s only materialistic shit.”

“Oh I know, I couldn’t ever imagine spending more than necessary when it comes to this.”

“Considering I’m up for fucking you any time I can, I’m guessing you wanna get out and see the place?”

She runs her finger down my chest and bites down on her bottom lip.

“Considering you haven’t been inside me for nearly a day, I don’t think you’ll take long.”

“Oh really,” I grunt. “We’ll see about that.”



If I have to spend one more minute taking photos and listening to Holly tell me the history of the city from Google, I'm going to burst my eardrums. We're outside Buckingham Palace and Holly has taken a hundred photos of the place.

"It's where the Queen of England lived for decades when she was in residence before she passed away, babe," she exclaims, finding the whole thing fascinating.

"And unless I can fuck you on her bed, I ain't interested."

"Oh my God, keep your voice down. It's like, blasphemy to talk like that here."

"Babe, look around, the only people who give a shit are tourists like you."

"Don't you find it interesting? The royal family dates back hundreds of years."

"I like that you like it, but not much after that." Taking the camera from her, I sling my arm around her and say, "We've been walking around all day. Let's find somewhere to eat."

"Sounds good to me and my feet."

It feels like forever before we find a restaurant we like and one we can get a table. Jamie Boy texted earlier to say he'll be at the hotel at eight.

I have to admit, I'm enjoying spending this time away from the club. Just me and my woman.

"How's your steak?" she asks.

"It's not bad, my mom's better."

"One day you'll say mine is better."

"Food goals." I laugh.

"Don't you think it's weird that we're married now, and yet this is the first time we've gone out to dinner?"

"You married me for my dick, not for restaurants."

Her eyes widened and she quickly looks around making sure no one hears.

“While that’s partly true, can we keep our voice down?”

Her cheeks redden and I say, “I didn’t realise you were embarrassed so easily.”

“I guess we’re still getting to know each other.”

“True. I like it, though. I like seeing you happy.”

“It’s nice being happy. You know yourself I forgot what it was like.”

Reaching across the table, I take hold of her hand and gently squeeze. “It’s in the past now.”

We finish dinner and pay the bill. Hand in hand, we stroll street after street and I admit, “I think we’re lost.”

“It’s about time you said something, I haven’t known where we are since we left the hotel.”

Spying a bar across the street, I suggest, “How about we go for a drink then get a cab back to the hotel so we don’t get lost again.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me.”

The place is what I imagined a pub in England to be like and every single face looks our way when we step inside. Holly’s hand instantly tightens in mine. She knows just as well as I do that we’ve walked into an upcoming shit show.

“Maybe we should leave?” she murmurs under her breath.

“We’ll have one drink then get the hell out of here.”

We stick to the end of the bar closest to the door and like I do back home, I keep my eyes everywhere without actually looking anywhere.

“A bottle of beer and a glass of white wine, please,” I say to the barman as I dig out my wallet.

“What’s just about worse than a grass, boys?” someone hollers from behind us.

“A dirty fucking Yank!”

I'm immediately on alert and regret not taking Holly's advice and leaving. I have no backup, no gun, and a pub full of guys who are slowly rising from their seats.

Holly grabs onto my arm as I go to turn around. "Let's go."

"Listen to your Yank wife."

Maybe I would have until he insulted my old lady.

"Leo," she warns.

"You should find somewhere else to drink tonight," the barman says and slyly starts moving glasses away from the front of the bar and I know I don't have long till this kicks off.

Digging the burner phone Ben gave me out of my pocket, I hand it to Holly, instructing her, "Call Ben, tell him where we are, and that I'd appreciate his or Hayward's presence."

It irritates the shit out of me. I can't fight the lot of these assholes. The barman clears his throat and asks, "The Haywards?"

"Yeah. Why? What's it to you?"

He holds his hand up to the guys closing in on me and tells them, "Sit down, lads." He looks at me and says, "Please, sit and I'll get your drinks. I apologise for the misunderstanding."

Holly finishes the call and passes me the phone. I tuck it away and slide onto a stool next to Holly. I know she's uncomfortable and wants to leave, but we're going nowhere till Ben or one of the brothers gets here.

The barman places our drinks in front of us and is quick to tell us, "They're on the house."

"Thanks?"

It's not long before the door slams open, and Ben walks in with Jamie Boy behind him. The entire pub goes eerily quiet.

"Mr. Hayward, I apologise for you having to come down here. It was a misunderstanding that's been let go now."

Frowning, I spit, "Who the fuck said I let it go?"

“What’s going on, Leo?” Jamie Boy asks.

“Me and Holly got lost and decided to get a drink before tracking down a fuckin’ cab and we were refused service and then these assholes insulted my wife.” I add, “And since I can’t carry my gun here, I was outnumbered when they came for me.”

Jamie Boy looks at the barman. “This true?”

He nods.

“Who?”

The barman is quick to point out the two instigators and they are physically pale.

“Everyone else, leave.”

The pub empties faster than a landslide and Ben suggests, “Holly, why don’t I take you back to the hotel?”

“I’m okay here, thanks.”

That’s my girl.

“Please, let me get you away from here.”

She points her gaze at him and sternly says, “I’m well aware of who my husband is. I’ll stay and finish my drink.”

I catch Jamie Boy smirk and then it’s back to business.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Jamie Boy starts. “First, you’re going to make reparations for this slight toward our guests. Your monthly payment has been doubled for the next year,” he says to the barman.

“I didn’t know who he was. I just thought they were tourists stumbling into the wrong pub.”

“Regardless, turns out you were wrong.” He looks at the two pricks and walks up to them. “Who the fuck thinks it’s a good idea to insult women? Apologise to the lady and hope she accepts it.”

“Sorry,” one says, and the other, “Sorry, lady.”

“I don’t even need to ask her if she accepts. That was the shittiest apologies I’ve ever fucking heard.”

“We are sorry, Mr. Hayward.”

Jamie Boy looks at me and tells me, “I’m sorry this happened. Do what you have to.”

I look at Holly. I heard how she rebuffed Ben but when it comes down to it, she might change her mind. She nods once and it’s on.

For the next six minutes, I beat the shit out of them, my knuckles split, their blood covering me, until I’m fucked.

The barman slides another bottle of beer to me and passes over a towel. I clean myself up listening to them groaning in pain.

“You good?”

“I am now. Fucking assholes.” I drain my beer. “Look, I have no brothers here, and my old lady to consider. Let’s get tonight over with so I can get home.”

“I understand. We’ll take you back to the hotel, you get sorted and then we’ll leave.”

Me and Holly take the back seat while Jamie Boy sits up front and Ben takes the wheel.

“You okay?” I ask her quietly.

“I’m good. Though you’re bleeding again,” she says looking at my knuckles.

I promised her, “They’ll heal.”

It turns out, we were only ten minutes away from the hotel before stopping at the pub.

“Goodnight, Holly. Again, I’m sorry your day ended on a blowout,” Jamie Boy says to her.

“It’s okay. Thank you for coming when you did.”

I take her up to the suite and wish I wasn’t leaving her so soon.

“You sure you’re okay?”

She’s never seen me lose my shit before and I’m not believing she’s totally fine about what went down tonight.

“Would you believe me if I said seeing you kick the shit out of those guys turned me on?”

For a minute I'm speechless, though my dick instantly believes her. Not that I have the time to deal with him now.

“Keep that in mind till I get back.”

I clean my knuckles and quickly change. By the time I'm ready to leave, she's sprawled on the bed.

“Are you sure you'll be okay here on your own?”

She said this morning she was looking forward to taking a bath in the huge tub once we got back but after a day of walking around London and then the clusterfuck at the pub, she has no energy left.

“I'll be fine. I'm going to check in with Rayna and then take a long, hot bath. Then I'm going to crash. I'm more concerned with the fact that trouble can literally find you anywhere in the world. Please be careful out there.”

“I will be. Nothing will happen to me.”

“Good, 'cause you don't have the club here, you don't know the area and you've already nearly gotten into a fight.”

Rolling my eyes, I assure her, “I'll be back before you know it.”

Kissing her, I drag myself away before my dick takes over.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Leo

Jamie Boy and Ben are waiting in the lobby. I feel naked without my cut. I can't remember the last time I went around without my leather and patches. The scene at the pub never would've happened back home if I were wearing my cut. Every fucker would've known who I was and what I was about if they wanted to step on me.

"Ready?" Jamie Boy asks, leading the way out to their car. "I hope you're enjoying your time in our city so far, apart from the last hour or so?"

Sliding into the back seat, Ritchie is sat up front and Ben takes the wheel.

"Holly's having the best time, but it's too much walking for me."

He laughs and I arch my brow. I've not heard Jamie Boy laugh before. Perhaps he's more relaxed in his own territory.

"Lucky for you, we don't tend to walk anywhere."

The glamour of the city darkens to the back streets. Ben drives for a while before we stop at an old warehouse. Two more cars are parked.

They said I'll be shown the future while in their city. Is this what we're doing here tonight?

I brace myself for anything only to find Austin and Cody inside with a woman I haven't met before and two other men I

haven't met either.

"Leo, this is Kendell and Wesley," Jamie Boy introduces, and I tip my chin. "And this is our cousin, Eva."

Ben walks over to her and kisses her before standing behind her, holding her at the waist. I notice their rings.

"And Ben's wife," Ritchie chimes in as if he can read my mind.

"Nice to meet you," I say to her.

"I've heard a lot about you. You're the one who gets shot a lot."

I bark out a laugh and say, "Yeah, that'll be me."

We walk through a door, leading to the main floor and two men are strung up in chains. Both are bleeding and bruised.

Violence isn't new to me, but I wasn't expecting this tonight. I keep myself straight and look between the brothers.

It's obvious I've been brought here for a reason.

"Leo, meet two of our employees. They've been helping themselves to our stock and money," Ritchie explains.

"As you know examples have to be made and we thought while you're in town, you'd like a show," Cody says.

Eva extracts herself from Ben and gives him a nod. He walks over to the two jerry cans. He undoes both caps and places them in front of each man. Ritchie moves beside me, and excitement radiates from him.

Ben dowses the men in gasoline, them both trying to shake the liquid off of them.

"Please, Ritchie, you gotta believe us, we won't do it again... we'll pay back every penny."

"It's not only me you stole from," Ritchie says. "You know Eva is my partner in the West Quarter."

They both look to Eva and before they see it coming, Ben throws a right hook to one and then smashes his left fist into the other's jaw.

“Don’t fucking look at her!” he orders. His voice echoes around the warehouse.

Eva steps up and places her hand on Ben’s arm. It calms him in the only way a woman’s touch can and she slides her hand in his pants pocket. She pulls out a lighter and leans up in her heels and kisses him.

It’s like no one else in the room, only the two of them. Until a throat is cleared from someone’s phone. I didn’t see it when we walked in but there’s a phone propped up on the table and someone’s on a video call.

“Sorry, Dad,” Eva chirps and pecks Ben on the cheek before her smile vanishes and she sets her gaze on the two men.

One of them starts to cry and the person on the phone laughs. “Fucking brave enough to rob from us but not enough to own the consequences. Fucking disgraces.”

Eva flicks the lighter wheel, and the flame burns bright against the dark backdrop. She drops it to the floor where the gasoline trail ends and steps back into Ben’s embrace.

The two men are covered in flames and their screams are bloodcurdling. Briefly glancing at the brothers, the violence excites them. I like to see someone face the consequences but setting them on fire while alive is a little extreme even for me, especially over something as theft.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” Ritchie murmurs. Before I can agree or disagree with him, he carries on, “I once saw her slice off a man’s dick and shove it in another man’s mouth, taped it in and everything.”

My dick twinges and not in a good way. “What the fuck did they do?” I ask, hoping it was because of something more than theft.

“They raped her,” he explains bluntly.

Fucking hell.

Looking back at the burning bodies, their screams are silenced, clearly dead. Ben grabs a fire extinguisher and puts

out the flames.

I light a cigarette to mask the smell of burning flesh and it makes me wonder if this is what Holly woke up to with her hands.

“Enjoy the show?” Jamie Boy asks while Cody talks to the guy on the phone.

“It’s not every day you see men burned alive. Is this a backhanded way of showing me something?”

“Not at all. Unless you need to be reminded?” Austin scoffs.

Ritchie barges on his brother’s shoulder. “This is just entertainment.”



I expect to be taken back to the hotel but I’m following behind Ritchie as we head toward an underground tunnel.

I’m learning quickly that I should drop all expectations. When it comes to the Haywards, it’s never what you expect.

A strange smell comes from the nearby river, and I light another cigarette to mask the smell.

“You’re the only one outside of our family and the most trusted here in England we’ve brought here,” Jamie Boy says. “We want to show you, now that Effie is out of the picture, what the future holds for both our families.”

I appreciate him calling my club my family because that’s what it is.

Only because I’m used to scooping out every inch of my surroundings, I notice the camera looking down over us from a hidden nook. I notice the alarm system and I certainly don’t miss the two guys sitting in what looks like an old, abandoned van.

I take one last pull on my cigarette and grind it out under my boot.

Jamie Boy presses his hand to a panel that I didn't notice, and the door opens. It's like Batman's fucking lair or some shit.

After taking the first left, crates of heroin all wrapped up and ready to go are piled up on both sides of me. Through another tunnel, lights above us flicker. Another door is unlocked with Jamie Boy's palm. More crates line both sides of the tunnel but this time they're packed with various weapons.

"This will be the first shipment using the Dog City pipeline," Jamie Boy says, and I have to tear my gaze from the product. "From now on you won't see us unless people need us to be seen."

"This is impressive, but can you keep this size up each month?"

All four brothers smile. "Show him." Cody laughs.

We take yet another turn and tunnel after tunnel is full of crates. "Is this enough for you?" Ritchie quips.

"It's a start," I grunt, not wanting to show the awe I'm feeling.

"You'll run the business stateside. Your cut is about to jump from twenty percent to forty-five." Jamie Boy is always business and I'm starting to like that about him. "You make sure our connections get our product and we make sure you have said product and we'll sort out any bumps you may hit."

This is an expectation I wasn't expecting, and it changes everything. The money we've been making from the Haywards has put the club in a more than stable position. Getting an extra twenty-five percent will rocket the club into positions it's never seen before.

"Are you ready for the future, Leo?" Jamie Boy asks, pulling me from the money.

"I'm ready."

The Lost Souls are ready.

“But you could’ve told me about this back home. Why bring me all this way?”

All four brothers’ smiles turn into smirks. “Our uncle wants to meet you.”

I’ve heard all about the infamous Jem Hayward.

“He’s in prison, ain’t he?” I ask, my brow arching. “It doesn’t make sense for me to have my name on the visitor’s log.”

Besides I don’t want anyone looking into me because they have no idea who I am. And being an American in London and visiting someone in prison is going to raise questions.

“We’ve got you covered.”

I’m dropped off at the hotel and fatigue weighs me down as I step into our suite. The place is quiet, the faint buzz of the TV on in the bedroom. Holly’s spark out in bed and though all I want to do is join her, I head back into the living area and call JJ.

“Hey, brother, how’s it goin’?”

“Considering I started the night watching two men be burned alive for stealing from the Haywards by their cousin. Eva. She’s fuckin’ brutal. I just got dropped off at the hotel.”

“I hate the smell of burning flesh.”

“Yeah, and cigarette smoke doesn’t hide it,” I grunt.

“So what’s up? Harper’s been in touch with Holly, but all I hear about from her is how you’ve seen the Queen’s mansion or some shit.”

“Ha. It was boring as fuck, brother. But tonight, the Haywards showed me the future. Brother, they have underground tunnels spanning miles stocked with products and weapons and our cut has risen from twenty percent to forty-five.”

He whistles down the line and I can guarantee he’s seeing dollar signs the same as I did.

“We’ve basically got full reign on our side. They said we won’t see them anymore, as long as there’s no trouble.”

“How does this work into your plan to step away from the Haywards?”

“I’m not sure.”

Ending the call, I undress and climb into bed. Holly doesn’t even stir. The flight has caught up with her and I cuddle up to her and envision a new future for the Lost Souls Motorcycle Club.



Holly rides me, her hips rocking back and forth steadily driving me insane. Her thighs tense under my palms, as I stroke her outer thighs.

She clenches around my dick and her rhythm fastens. Thank fuck. I don’t know how much longer I can stop myself from blowing inside her.

She cries out her climax and I flip her over until I’m pounding into her without holding back. I fill her up with every drop and we collapse side by side.

“London sex is something else,” she pants.

“The fuck? You say there’s something bad about our fucking back home?”

Her laugh fills the suite, and she rolls onto her side, facing me.

“I’m saying there’s an upside to having space to ourselves. I propose that every now and then we make time for ourselves, somewhere out of Willow’s Peak. Nothing too long or even too often. Once we have babies...”

I lean up and kiss her, mainly to put her at ease.

“I agree.”

I order breakfast while Holly showers. Since Jamie Boy is covering all costs, I order everything on the menu. We dress

and eat our weight in English food, talking like we've never really talked before. I've married this woman yet I'm still learning about her. And I hope it never stops.

A knock at the door interrupts the end of our meal and I answer to Jamie Boy and his wife. I know who she is from information Slade and Zach dug up on the family.

I open the door wider, and they step into the suite.

"Leo, Holly, this is my wife, Cleo," Jamie Boy introduces us, and we all shake hands.

"It's nice to meet you both," his wife says, and my wife smiles brightly.

I frown. "I thought I was to meet your uncle?"

"Oh, you are, but Cleo wondered if you, Holly, would like to go shopping?"

Cleo cuts in. "London can be daunting walking around alone if you don't know the place and staying cooped up in the hotel will probably bore you to tears, and who doesn't like to shop?"

"I'd love to. Thank you for thinking of me."

As Holly's excitement grows, I regret bringing my credit card.

"Of course, and then the both of you are invited to dinner at the Manor tonight."

"The Manor?" I ask sceptically.

"It's my parent's home."

I go to politely decline but my wife is quick to accept.

"We'll wait down in the lobby for you. Our visit with Jem is in half an hour."

As soon as the door shuts, I turn to Holly.

"It's our last night here and you want to go to dinner at the Haywards?"

"She called it a Manor, Leo! The closest I'll get to England and English things again will be watching reruns of

Downtown Abbey.”

Sighing, I tell her, “Fine, we’ll go, but you owe me.”

“It’s a good job we’re married, and I can thank you any time I like.”

My dick stirs and since we don’t have time, I push my wife’s naked body from my mind.

I collect my smokes and phone as Holly grabs her purse.

“I know you’re only visiting someone in prison, but I wish you never stepped inside of one ever again,” she says as we ride down in the elevator.

“Apparently I’m only the third person allowed to visit him who isn’t family and he’s been locked up for over thirty years.”

“Seems strange he’s allowing you in, then.”

“We’ll find out.”

Outside, there are two Range Rovers with both their back doors open. Jamie Boy kisses Cleo goodbye and holds her hand as she climbs into the back of the first car.

I hand Holly my card and remind her to keep her eyes open. With a kiss and a promise, she joins Cleo and Jamie Boy and I take the second car.

Jamie Boy hands over a passport and as I flick it open, I’m half surprised that one, they have my photo, and two, the thing is as real as my legitimate passport.

“There won’t be a problem signing in. But for the prison records, you’re Shaun Higgins.”

“Won’t the guards be suspicious that someone outside the family will be sitting at his table?”

He waves his hand dismissively. “There isn’t a screw that isn’t controlled by my uncle. The governor is so deep in our pocket, he’ll never climb out.”

“Your uncle must have the easiest sentence in the world?”

“It’s where he wants to be so the family makes sure he’s comfortable.”

The prison is old. Like, fucking old. All stone bricks and heavy bars. Essentially, it’s the same as prisons back home but this place oozes violence from the carpark.

Jamie Boy was right about signing in not being a problem. The guards treat him with respect and it’s a stark contrast to prisons back home. They eye me suspiciously, but I keep my mouth shut and eyes forward.

We walk into a waiting room, and I notice everyone gives Jamie Boy and in turn me, a wide berth.

“Is it like this every time you come here?”

“Pretty much.”

A guard leads everyone into the visiting room, and I follow Jamie Boy to a large table over in the corner of the room. It’s not long before a door opens across the room, and I know who Jem is the second he walks in. The top dog is noticeable in any prison in any part of the world.

Jamie Boy stands and embraces his uncle before he takes his seat.

“I’m Jem Hayward and you must be Leo Jackson.”

“According to the sign-in, I’m Shaun Higgins,” I say.

Looking around the visiting room, more inmates are staring our way than spending time with their friends and family.

“They’re only staring because I don’t have anyone who isn’t family at my table.”

“I’ve heard. Though I’m not sure why I’m here today.”

He nods, then looks at Jamie Boy.

“Why don’t you go get us drinks.”

I stop my jaw from falling open. I didn’t think there was a man alive who could order him or any of the Haywards around.

Once Jamie Boy is out of earshot, I gain Jem's full attention.

"Me and my brother have ruled over the East Quarter for nearly four decades. When my nephews became men, they took the whole city. There isn't a single deal that goes down that we don't allow. Your club dynamic isn't so different from ours. It's why my nephews approached you in the first place. When partnering with another organisation, both sides have to understand loyalty."

"I agree."

"I arranged to meet you because while my family can and do hold their own, it took some convincing on their part to make me see this transition to the States is a move we should be making."

"They certainly ruffled shit up."

"It runs in their blood." He smirks. "Making money was more my brother's thing, mine was power. What's yours?"

"We all need cash, and power comes with headaches and people always wanting what you have. My thing is keeping my family safe, and my club on top."

"Then our arrangement will work for the both of us."

"I must admit, I was expecting threats of some kind."

"Threats?" he huffs. "Nah, for a good partnership to work, it has to be based on respect, while both sides knowing the consequences of betraying the other. You're fully aware of what my nephews will do if you betray us, and we know what your club is capable of."

Jamie Boy certainly is taking his time getting those drinks.

"There's more money to be made than any of us could imagine and us Haywards are already extremely wealthy. For this partnership to be more than just a partnership, we have to have a level of friendship. Hence why we're sitting here this afternoon and then this evening, dinner at the Manor with my brother and his wife. I've been told your club is family to you,

so you should understand where I'm coming from. This could be life-changing for all of us if there's trust."

I took the patch planning on how to break away from the Haywards. But after this trip, and after meeting their uncle, the future has changed and is clear to me.

"You have my loyalty for as long as we have yours."

He holds his hand out across the table, and we shake on the future.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Leo

I'm well aware of how the rich live. I've not once ever given a shit about it either. But as the car drives up the Manor drive, I admit I'm a little awed. The lawns are pristine. Water features everywhere. When the house comes into view, it screams Haywards. Wealth, style, and over-the-top expense. The cars parked up out front of the house are a poor man's wet dream. Ben comes to a stop, and I step out of the car.

"Is Holly and your wife here?"

"They're still on their way back. They won't be long."

In the house, the place screams money from the fine furniture to the art hung on the walls. Children's laughter comes from the back of the house and as we enter the huge kitchen, children are chasing Cody around and a small boy is trying to shoot Nerf bullets at Ritchie. One hits him and he drops to the floor, feigning death, and making the kid laugh.

I knew their business was family orientated but I didn't spend any time giving thought to their actual family dynamics. These men are the most feared in England, their reputation spreading to the states and here they are with their kids, being playfully shot and comically dying to make them laugh.

"Mum, Dad," Jamie Boy says. "This is Leo Jackson." He turns to me and adds, "Leo, this is my mother, Flo, and my father, Jack."

His mom is a beauty for someone who must be in her fifties or sixties. She drips in wealth and smells just as good as she looks. I shake her hand and then Jack's. I can see each brother in him, and I see his brother's old-school ways too.

"It's nice to meet you," I say.

"It's nice to put a face to a name," his mother says. Though I'm pretty sure she's seen photos. Just like I've seen photos of them all.

"Can I get you a tea, coffee, cold drink?" she offers.

"I'm good, thanks."

I'm led into a home office by Jack, and he closes the door.

He heads over to the drinks table while I take a seat on the couch by the floor-to-ceiling window.

The backyard stretches on and on and it makes me think of Victoria. She'd love strolling around looking over all the different plants and flowers. No expense has been spared and it certainly shows.

"We've lived here over thirty years now and it still takes my wife's breath away."

"You really do have a nice place."

"It's my wife's, really. It's all for her. I pay for it, and she makes it a home."

He passes me a whisky and this drink I can get on board with. Being here is weird as fuck.

"I spoke with my brother after you left the prison. I'm sure you don't need his validation, but he liked you. And coming from my brother, that means a whole lot."

"He wasn't what I was expecting but he didn't piss me off."

Jack laughs and I drain my tumbler of whisky.

"My family has held power in London for many years. Before I handed it down to Ritchie, I was more than content with the East Quarter. It gave us all this and much more. My

boys always wanted more. From the deals you've made since taking over from your father, you know what I mean."

"I do."

"My son Jamie in particular is the most cautious and he's the one who has vowed we can trust you. Is he misplaced?"

I lean over and place my empty glass on the fancy glass table.

"I admit when I first took my father's patch, I considered moving away from your family. The club isn't about accumulating large wealth. We're happy as long as we have the road and cash for beer most of the time. The brothers over the years have been content to do the minimal and keep the enemies at bay."

"But you want more?"

I nod. "I'm not greedy. I already have more than I thought I ever would. But we both know in our world, waking up the next morning isn't a given. If I'm put in the ground, I want to go out knowing my old lady and my kid will never have to worry about money. I want my club set on top financially. Above all, I want to grow my club."

"I see why my brother likes you. Though you seem more level-headed, you have the same ambition as him."

"My brothers rely on me to take us in the right direction and for them to have good lives, this partnership between us needs to take the club in the right direction. You have my word that I will do anything to make this work."

"As will we."

Jamie Boy knocks at the door and then walks in, letting me know, "Holly's here."

"Thanks."

I look to Jack, and he stands as do I. "Here's to a long and fruitful relationship."

I shake his outstretched hand.

"May the money roll in."

His laughter follows us into the kitchen, and I relax having Holly back in my sight.

“You have a lot of bags,” I point out, wondering how hard my credit card was hit this afternoon.

“The stores here are amazing. And each boutique we went into, they closed the store for us.”

My brows lift and I’m not sure what to say to that. Yet, I’m still not surprised when it comes to the Haywards.

I snort. “I doubt Rainy will shut her store for you when we’re home.”

“Once we’re home, I’ll stick to online shopping,” she promises.

I help store her bags in the fancy-ass living room and Flo calls dinner is ready.

“How was your day?” she asks as we walk back to the biggest kitchen I’ve ever been in.

“There was nothing out of the ordinary.”

As Flo serves dinner, we’re introduced to the Hayward’s wives and kids. Holly instantly makes friends with them all and I admit, it’s not as bad as I was expecting.

“Uncle Ritchie says you ride a motorcycle, is that true?” one of the kids asks. I believe his name is Felix.

“It is. Do you like motorcycles?”

“I think they’re so cool, but my mum says I’m never allowed to have one. She says they’re too dangerous.”

Grinning, I tell him, “She’s right, one time when I was younger, I was racing my brother and skidded a half mile down the road. I couldn’t move for days.”

Instead of scaring the kid, his eyes light up and excitement washes over him.

“Please, Mum. Please, can I get one?”

I think her name is Tamara, grits her teeth and looks at Austin.

“He’s your son too, deal with him.”

“Felix, eat your dinner and we’ll chat later.”

The kid sulks over his chicken and I suppress a laugh. He goes on to ask, “Uncle Ritchie also said you own a gun. Is that true?”

I shoot a glance at his parents and while Austin doesn’t seem to care, his mother is clenching her teeth.

“I do, but I don’t have it on me.”

“My dad has a gun and all of my uncles, but they only shoot bad guys. Do you shoot bad guys?”

“Oh wow. Austin, please sort him out,” Tamara snaps.

Ritchie laughs and looks down at his nephew. “What have we said about not telling people our business?”

“That I shouldn’t. But he’s in Grandma’s house.”

Tamara stands and pushes away from the table. She picks up her dinner and instructs Felix to follow her. Once they’ve both left the kitchen, Flo explains, “Don’t mind her, she likes to live as we’re not who we are.”

Holly and I nod, and it makes me wonder how Rayna will be the older she gets.

“So, Holly, what do you think of London?” Natalee asks and I keep my eye on her. She’s the writer and she’s always looking to write a book on the club.

“It’s just like the movies,” she says and laughs. “I was warned it was winter but it’s too cold. I don’t know how you guys live with it.”

“You get used to it,” Flo says, then asks me, “My boys tell me your mother is quite a woman.”

It’s not quite a question but she’s waiting for me to say something, so I clear my throat and say, “She’s one of the strongest women I know. She’s held down my dad, that’s for sure.”

“Sounds like you, Mum,” Cody says around his mouthful of potatoes.

The rest of dinner is polite chat and I’m glad when it’s time to leave. It’s our last night and I want to spend it with my wife. On our own. Ben drives us back to the hotel and I start to relax when we ride the elevator up to our suite. Holly dumps her bags by our cases and falls on the bed.

“Today has felt like it lasted a month.” She leans up on her elbows. “How was your day?”

“Just as long. I didn’t see what the hype around their uncle was, he seemed pretty normal to me.”

“Maybe all those years in prison mellowed him?”

“Maybe.” I cross the room, undressing as I move. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about them any longer. I want to spend our last night here, just the two of us, minus our clothes, and in the shower and then the bed.”

“I like how you think, Mr. Jackson.”

She sits up on her legs and unbuttons her blouse. I push her back on the mattress and drag her jeans down her legs.

Trailing my lips up her inner thigh, I say, “When we get home, things are going to be a lot different.”

“I’m ready for it.”

Slipping her panties to the side, I run my tongue up her clit. “I love you, babe, and I’m going to give you the fuckin’ world.”

She gasps as I assault her entrance and she digs her fingers into my hair. I have my responsibilities and as far as this one goes, it’s one of my favourites. I had hoped this trip would set in motion the future of the club and it’s certainly been successful. The Lost Souls are heading into a new era and dare any motherfucker try to come for us.

Epilogue

MASON

The walls close in around me. I push at one wall, using all my strength to stop it moving. I can't though. Taunts from above from people I can't see when I look up grow louder. The air is sucked out and I scramble to climb the walls, never being able to get anywhere.

"Mason!"

Aspen's voice drowns out the taunts, but I can't see her. The walls are inches from crushing me and then I'm back in my room, at home, in my bed.

Sweat is slick across my skin, and I roll out of bed and take in my surroundings. I zero in on Aspen, who sits up in our bed. I shy away from her concern.

"I need a drink."

Without looking back at her, I make my way downstairs, fill a glass of water, and drain it in three large gulps. Slamming the glass down on the counter, arms wrap around my waist from behind and Aspen's warm breath hits my back as she rests her head against my back.

"I think there's something you're not telling me about when you were locked up."

Closing my eyes, I struggle to shake off the claustrophobia prison imposed on me. All I could think of was getting home to Aspen, the club, back to life as I knew it. Little did I know that nothing would ever be the same again.

My brother and I have done some fucked up shit and we're in charge of disposing the bodies of our enemies. Yet, it ended with me locked up for something I didn't do. A setup by Effie Rathbone. The brothers know prison time is a huge consequence of our lifestyle and we've all heard stories of what prison life is like. But experiencing yourself, it's nothing you can prepare for.

"Nothing happened... as such," I lie.

"Then talk to me, tell me what's going on with you. You're not going to sleep peacefully until you do."

Turning around, I take hold of her hands and press them to my mouth.

"It was prison, it's meant to be hard. All I can say is I'm where I'm meant to be now. With you."

Frustration burns in her eyes. "I've never known you to lose sleep, not over anything. You don't want to tell me, that's fine, but know that it will put a wedge between us until you do."

She goes to pull away, but I tighten my hold on her. "The fuck it will."

"It already has!" she shrieks tugging at my hands. "I can't breathe around you at the moment."

"Stop being so dramatic, babe. We're fine."

She loses the fight in herself. "If you honestly believe that, we're in even deeper trouble than I thought. I've been waiting for the perfect time to tell you I'm pregnant, but with the way you're acting, there's never gonna be one. So go help the Southern Chapter and only come home if you want to sort your head out."

I recoil in shock, releasing her from my grip. She's pregnant? I can't tell her what's going on in my head because I won't ever tell a soul and as of now, I can't think about anything but her announcement. The gates of Hell are about to burst open, and I don't know if we're going to survive.