

Bad Boy
BIKER'S BABY

A BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

GIGI REINE

Bad Boy Biker's Baby

A Brother's Best Friend Enemies to Lovers Romance

GiGi Reine

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Bad Boy Biker's Baby

Prologue

Bad Boy Biker's Baby: A Brother's Best Friend Enemies to Lovers Romance

I never knew how little of my life I was truly living until I met him. So much has happened since then, and at times it has felt like a constant rollercoaster. Even now, I wonder where the ride will end. It's been so difficult to predict anything since he entered my world and turned it upside down. He's shown me both sides of life, the intensity and passion that can be drawn from it, and the heartache and pain that it can bring too.

It's been such a crazy, wild journey, and I still sometimes find myself wondering if it was all just one big mistake. My life seemed so normal and peaceful before him. Maybe it was boring; maybe I wasn't ever truly living, but I had stability and certainty. Life with him always seems to be anything but certain. The cool air flutters over me as I stand on the balcony and gaze out at the city.

It's hard to stay focused when my mind keeps getting dragged back to all the trauma that precipitated our being together. It has been a constant circus that sometimes left me feeling

afraid of things devolving back into chaos. I sometimes feel like there is no way of ever knowing where my life is headed now. Life with him has been like following an uncharted route, and I can't help but wonder if I am destined to always feel this way—like I'll never be able to settle down or enjoy a peaceful life again. Did I make the right choice, or was I simply doomed the moment he walked into my life?

Chapter One

Cole

The rhythmic buzz of the tattoo gun is the only sound that punctuates the air for a few minutes. That's how I would prefer it to be most of the time. I use a rotary machine, so the sound isn't loud or abrasive. It's a gentle sound, far from the discordant zizzing of the old coil machines I learned the trade on. The light hum is music to the ears of a seasoned tattoo artist—which I am. The blue latex gloves I use feel sticky on the inside as usual, but I'm grateful for them today. I often am when the client is an attractive woman. With each wipe of the ink after finishing a line, the gloves and the little piece of paper towel I use insulate my bare hands from touching her supple skin directly.

It was a lower back piece. As low as Jennifer Greene could go. If her blue denim short shorts were pulled any lower, I'd be staring at half of her ass the entire time. I'm a professional, so I'm adept at ignoring these kinds of distractions and focusing completely on my line work. I'm still a man though; one who would be lying if I said jobs like this didn't occasionally turn

me on a little. Jennifer wasn't helping. The initial silence we started with was tainted now. I catch a glimpse of the wallpaper on her phone, so I know she has two kids at home. This doesn't stop her.

Every time the oscillating needle touches her skin, she lets out a little moan. I've tattooed hundreds of clients in my day. I know every type: the flinchers, the babies, the criers, the sweaters, and the takers. Takers were the best clients. They sit quietly, never move, and never indicate that they're in any pain. Jennifer was trying to portray herself as a taker. She wasn't. She was a faker. She didn't move, flinch, or cry, but she also wasn't sitting quietly anymore either. She was handling the pain, I'll give her that. Her game was a different one; one I know well.

She uses it like a sultry fishing line to reel me in. Her moans aren't actual cries of pain. They're light and airy, more sensual than anything else. They're deliberate. She and I both know the same unspoken truth; the combination of staring at her tight, dewy body, coupled with her sumptuous moans, is like a sexual dog whistle to me. I decide to play along with it.

"Are you okay? Do you need a break?" I ask her.

My voice is deep and gruff. It suits my broad-shouldered frame and large hands. Women have always liked it. They say I sound manly. I look up at the wall mirror across from the tattoo bed as I speak to her. Jennifer lifts her head up and stares back at me from its reflection. From that view, she gets a fuller picture of what we look like. She's laying stomach-

down on the tattoo bed while I sit beside her on a rotating stool, hovering over her lower body, the machine vibrating gently as I clasp it tightly in my right hand. In any other setting, it would be a picture of vulnerability. She's at my mercy. I can tell that she likes that.

"No, I'm totally fine. You can go on," she replies.

Her Californian accent is smooth and velvety as it rings out from her pouty lips.

"You sure? You sound like you're in pain," I ask, giving her a second chance to elaborate on the bullshit she's spouting.

She takes the bait. My fishing line is stronger and more practiced than hers.

"Yeah, totally. I'm not afraid of a little pain. In the right setting, a little pain can be fun," she replies with a sultry wink at me in the mirror.

I nod with a tiny smirk on my face. In my younger days it might have been a broad smile, but bedding women like Jennifer Greene has gotten too easy for me since then. It isn't much of a thrill anymore, but that doesn't stop me.

"I like the way you think," I say.

She smiles.

"Is the sound of the gun okay? Not too noisy?"

The set-up is deliberate.

"I love the sound. It reminds me of other things that vibrate."

I chuckle as she knocks it out of the park.

“Alright, settle down. It’s hot enough in here already.”

I get back to the tattoo and Jennifer winks again in the mirror before burying her face into the cushioned bed again as I work. She’s a cliché; a hot mom in her forties, recently divorced, and enjoying the thrill of being free. These are her prime years, the sweet spot when older women discover the excitement of rebelling against their suburban lives. She wants a new friend now, and I’m a perfect candidate—a younger man with more than enough sex appeal for it to not seem gross. I wasn’t lying about the heat though.

The shop is stuffy and quiet, an unusually blazing day in downtown San Francisco highlighting the fact that my air conditioner is busted. Jennifer doesn’t seem to mind. The sweltering heat coats her body in a sheen of light perspiration that looks like sumptuous little beads of dew on her skin. Her hair is dark brown and long. It smells like coconuts, the scent intermingling with her perfume and natural fragrance. The combination produces a intoxicating cocktail that doesn’t even require her advances to draw me in. I concentrate harder on the tattoo. Work comes first. The lines are clean and neat as usual, the details intricate and masterfully done for such a simple design. I switch to a magnum needle to add some color shading and realism.

“This part shouldn’t hurt as much as the outline, but I need you to keep just as still as you’ve been so far, okay?”

Jennifer nods into the cushion without lifting her head. It makes her hair bounce up and down in a sexy way.

“Sure. Go ahead,” her muffled reply floats up to me.

I work in the dazzling blue and green color amid the black outlines and shading. After a few minutes, I’m nearly done. The large dragonfly is popping now. Its wings spread out beautifully across Jennifer’s lower back, the ethereal border design adding to its aesthetic appeal. Just as I’m finishing up the last details, I hear the door alert chime. I glance up. The shop is small and simple. I work in the back, where I keep a single tattoo bed. Working alone means I can only handle one client at a time—unless they’re women and they’re back here for a different purpose.

It’s dimmer in this part of the shop so I use a portable fluorescent light tied to a makeshift beam above the bed for light. It makes the place seem more intimate. It’s untidier on this end of the shop though, the dark walls contrasting with the garish designs they display. It could be a little neater. A simple oak stand with pullout drawers sits on one end, little shelves stick out along the opposite wall with cups and containers housing ink bottles, paper towels, alcohol swabs, tubes of disinfectant creams, and other consumables.

“Gimme a minute, will ya?” I tell Jennifer.

She nods again, her head still buried in the cushioned part of the bed. She seems to be enjoying the relaxed position it keeps her in. I get up, place my wireless rotary machine on the other little stool I keep beside the bed, and walk over to the walnut colored door that leads to the front. I open it with a little

nudge. The door always sticks and makes a grating sound as it opens. I make a mental note to fix it soon.

I go in, expecting to see a potential customer browsing around. Instead, I find my ex, Alisha Myers, standing at the little white reception counter, clearly uninterested in the shop. She pays no attention to the beautiful walls adorned with myriad stunning tattoo designs, or the neat wooden floors, the little trinkets sitting inside the glass display case, and the white leather couch in the waiting area—everything I've worked so hard to put together to make the front of the shop as professional and inviting as possible means nothing to her. Standing there with her arms crossed, Alisha looks stunning, aside from the sour expression that's her default look. Her voluminous hair flows down beside her arms in wavy curls that are beset in shades of gray, blue, and a whitish tint. Californians seemed to love those colors. Ignoring how good she looks, my expression stiffens at the sight of her.

"You're late," I say a little coldly.

She's chewing gum as usual, smacking her lips with every bite. Everything about her irritates me now, even the tight black top she wears over a pair of white tights and heels that accentuate her wiry frame. Her ample breasts curve seductively below the top's plunging neckline. For once, they have no effect on me.

"Wow. You always greet people so warmly?" Alisha asks in her obnoxious drawl.

"Only when they deserve it."

Alisha grins, flashing a perfect row of chemically whitened teeth between her full lips that are drenched in pink gloss. Her dark green irises and sparkly eyeshadow show more flamboyantly now as she narrows her eyes at me.

“Do you have my stuff?” she asks as she leans over the counter, causing her breasts to squash together and display the full extent of their girth.

I look her in the face before kneeling down on my side of the counter and returning with a box that I place on top of it. Alisha pops off the cardboard lid and peers inside. It’s full of her clothes, a few DVDs, some pill bottles, and a few other personal effects. After seeming to appear satisfied that it’s all there, Alisha glances at me. Her eyes rove over my tattooed arms and chest. It doesn’t help that I’m wearing a fitting sleeveless vest that highlights their curves today.

“Is that all? I have a client waiting for me.” I ask impatiently.

Alisha’s eyes settle on my left forearm.

“Is that a new one?” she asks.

Before I can say anything she reaches over the counter and picks up my left arm, examining it closely. She could have just looked at it with her eyes. Instead, she runs her long, crimson fingernails slowly over my skin. It feels nice, but it irritates me because I know that she knows that I love that feeling. The tattoo features a dazzling bird bursting out of a border of stunningly realistic red and orange flames. I pull my arm away.

“Yes. It’s new.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a phoenix.”

Alisha’s forehead crinkles with deep lines as she tries to remember what that means.

“Oh right. That’s that mythical bird creature that dies in flames and is reborn from the ashes. I never knew you were so sentimental.”

I scowl at her.

“I never figured I’d need a rebirth while we were dating,” I retort.

Alisha chuckles, trying to make light of everything. This irritates me more.

“Aw c’mon, Cole. It wasn’t all that bad, was it?”

“No. That’s the problem. It *was* good, really good. Then you had to go and fuck it all up.”

She leans on the counter again. Her stance is obvious, but I’m not in the mood to be tempted by her breasts.

“No one’s ever had me like you did, Cole. It’s not too late for me and you to have one last party before I leave, coz baby, once I leave out that door, I’m not coming back,” she says with a resounding smack of her gum.

“For goodness sake, Alisha, he’s my brother and you slept with him. Now you want to reverse it and cheat on him with me? What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“He’s only your step-brother, and nothing’s wrong with me. Look, I messed up. I know that. I just miss you, alright? This wasn’t how things were supposed to go, but at least Charlie’s doing the right thing and offering to take care of me.”

I shake my head.

“Yeah, well I’m sure the two of you will be very happy together then. He’s got more than enough money to take care of you both. That’s what you always wanted, right? A rich guy that can support your little shopping sprees.”

Alisha sighs.

“Okay. Have it your way, Cole. I’ll leave. Just don’t come back crying for me once I do.”

“You won’t have to worry about that. I’ll be just fine.”

She looks stung. Her reluctance to leave is evident, but the pride she always stubbornly clings to makes it easier for me to ignore her obvious sadness and regret.

“Can I at least get a hug goodbye?” she asks, extending her arms out.

I sigh again.

“You got your stuff back. Just go, Alisha,” I say coldly.

Alisha purses her lips and nods.

“Screw you, Cole,” she says bitterly before grabbing the box and leaving.

She slams the door loudly as she leaves. I get a parting glimpse of the bright sunshine and bustling noises outside

before it closes. I shake my head irritably and go back to finish Jennifer's tattoo, unsure of how much she's heard.

"Hey, sorry about that," I say, taking my seat and firing up the machine again.

Jennifer lifts her head and turns onto her side, peering at me. Her breezy yellow top pulls up a bit and I get a glimpse of a shiny belly ring below it. Her breasts are smaller and less in-your-face than Alisha's, but somehow more appealing because of this.

"No worries. You're quite the heartbreaker, aren't you?" she says, biting her lower lip.

I move a clump of my shaggy dark hair away from my eyes.

"Trust me, she deserved it," I reply before she moves back onto her tummy.

I complete the rest of the tattoo in fifteen minutes, wipe it one last time, and spray on some disinfectant. Jennifer's low moan is even more sensual when she feels the sting. She walks over to the mirror as I hold one behind her. She pulls her shorts down lower than they need to be to examine it and lets out an excited squeal. I check her out more openly now. She's short and dainty, but still has a great figure. After Alisha's impromptu appearance, I'm not particularly in the mood for what I know is coming.

"Oh my god, I love it!"

I smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. It looks great on you."

This little compliment is all she needs to give in to her desires. The routine of it all is getting a little tiresome, but I'd never admit to a soul that I was starting to crave a deeper kind of intimacy the older I got. Jennifer smiles sexily as she walks toward me with a glint in her eye. She kicks off her flip-flops, and her little toes are even cuter barefoot.

“This tattoo is so awesome. I feel like you undercharged me for it.”

I smile and rub my hand across my stubbly chin, trying to figure out if I'm really up for this right now. She looks over my body from head to toe. My tight black jeans, black biker boots, and black sleeveless shirt are as one-dimensionally appealing to her as Jennifer Greene's lust is for me.

“No big deal. It's my job,” I say, wondering if it isn't too late to abort.

Jennifer is already on me. She's much shorter, but props herself onto the tattoo bed and sits with her legs apart.

I turn to face her and she asks, “Do you accept tips?”

Before I can answer, she wraps her legs around my ass and uses the leverage to pull my body toward her. Her head is at the height of my stomach as she pulls off my shirt, and her eyes widen as she sees my bulging, tattooed chest and abs for the first time. She cranes her neck and begins kissing my chest, before her tongue comes out and she seductively licks her way downward. She wraps her left arm around my buttocks and pulls me closer to her as she undoes my belt buckle with the other arm. I wasn't in the mood for this when I

opened my tattoo shop up that morning. I hadn't been in the mood for it since catching Alisha and my step-brother screwing at his apartment a short while back.

I think of them now. Jennifer's tongue licks its way lower still as she squeezes my ass and spanks it roughly, letting out a husky squeal of delight as she does. A part of me wants to tell her no, but the thought of Alisha and Charlie come flitting back. Jennifer's hand unbuttons my jeans. She sticks her fingers down my Calvins, and wraps them around my junk. The hardness her fingers find there tells me all I need to know. I'm still a red-blooded man no matter how emotionally messed up I am right now. Childhood memories of my serially philandering father's advice comes flooding back.

You have to use it as much as you can before you lose it, son.

I hold Jennifer's face on either side and raise her head to look up at me.

"You know if you lean on your back, your tattoo's gonna hurt like hell, right?"

She giggles.

"Don't worry. I like being on top," she replies.

"Fuck it, who cares?" I think.

Keeping one hand stiffly on the back of Jennifer's head, I drop my jeans and underwear, and pull her open mouth toward me.

Chapter Two

Adeline

Jake Kessler was a sweet kid, but his dad was an ass. So many of my students' fathers were. I was more than accustomed to their advances by now, but that never made them any less annoying.

“For goodness sake, I’m your kid’s teacher!” I’d yell in my head, wishing I could say it out loud.

Anthony Kessler’s eyes were lingering as usual, tracing over my neck and down to my cleavage. I wore a knee-length, navy pencil skirt, a plain white top, stockings and heels. It was a far cry from the outlandish outfits that Miss Janey sported. Of course, she was forty-six, so no one cared.

I never thought too highly of myself, but my colleague and best friend, Lucy, always joked that I was kryptonite for middle school fathers. I am twenty-eight, with platinum blonde hair and blue eyes. I’m petite but slim, retaining enough of my athletic body from my teens even though I rarely ever played tennis anymore. I feel like I look a bit mousy at times, but I’ve often been told that I have a very

pretty face. Today, as toned down as my outfit is, I still catch more attention from the fathers fetching their kids than any of my colleagues have been able to. Mr. Kessler had stopped to chat as usual, and his ridiculous questions became more inane by the minute.

“Are you sure we don’t need to discuss Jake’s progress further? I’m happy to move a few things around with my schedule to accommodate you. I mean, I am the boss. I can make some time for you if I need to,” he was saying, a little pompously.

I narrow my eyes ever so slightly. His wavy brown hair and dimpled cheeks aren’t unattractive. His entitled attitude is, though. Besides, I have a boyfriend. But most of all, he’s the parent of a student. That makes him automatically unappealing to me. My little ones are too precious for me to ever think of mixing work with my social life. The kids are my priority, their annoying parents are just distractions at times. I’m more than a little annoyed now. He seems truly oblivious that his attempts to spend more time with me are so transparent and pathetic.

“No, Mr. Kessler. As I’ve explained before, all he has to do is read the homework instructions more carefully next time. Other than that, he’s doing just fine. In fact, he’s a wonderful young man, and one of my best students.”

Little Jake beams up at me with his doe eyes and I smile down at him.

“Oh, he gets that part from me, Adeline,” his obnoxious father says with a wink.

“I’m sure he does.”

That’s a lie. Jake Kessler was nothing like his father, so I add for good measure, “If you don’t mind, please address me as Miss. Coffman in front of the students.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says with another wink.

I sighed inwardly. I say goodbye to Jake and watch his father drive him away. I have half a mind to lay a complaint against him with the PTA. It would be a waste of time, though. I’m the youngest female teacher at Fordham Middle School. That seems to make so many of my students’ dads think it’s okay to make passes at me. I just put it down to a hazard of the job that I have to contend with. It isn’t right, but that was the sad truth of the world today—or maybe that’s how it’s always been, and that’s the real problem.

The pick-up zone at Fordham is emptying rapidly now. All my kids are picked up. It’s a blistering day, and the harsh sunlight is making me a little light-headed. I’m grateful to head back to my class. Once there, I gather my things and make sure everything is in order. It’s a typical classroom. Desks and chairs for eighteen to twenty students, a whiteboard, projector, a teacher’s desk, a few little plants, and educational charts covering the walls. I lock up and head out. My best friend, Lucy Chang, is outside her class as I exit. Her usual peppy features seem a little more fatigued than usual. Lucy teaches eighth graders, and it shows sometimes.

“Leaving early? I thought you’d stay in and work on your new book as usual?” she asked.

“I’ve got a date with Duncan, so I wanted to see if I could have an early supper with Brian before I leave.”

Lucy’s features soften a little. “How’s Brian doing since....you know?” she asks, glancing around the empty hallway.

I chuckle. “It’s okay, Lucy. You can say rehab. It’s not like it’s a secret, and he seems to be doing fine so far. I just hope it stays that way.”

Lucy smiles, brushing aside her auburn hair.

“I’m glad to hear that. Enjoy your date. We’ll catch up tomorrow.”

I say goodbye and walk over to the school parking lot. As I step into my little car, I get a text. It’s from Duncan. I have his number saved as “Dr. Bennett.” It’s an inside joke, since he’s a psychiatrist.

His text reads, *Hey honey. My late appointment was canceled so I’ll be there earlier. Meet you at the reception around 5pm.*

I quickly type back, *Ok cool. See you then.*

I start my Nissan Magnite and back out of the lot. It’s been a long day. It’s going to be tighter to squeeze in dinner with Brian now. I’d much rather be working on my new book. Duncan thinks I work too much.

“You’re a teacher. You should enjoy having a shorter work day than most people,” he always says.

I find it a little condescending. I know he thinks little of my career. Being a middle school teacher and a freelance writer on the side isn't his idea of success—being a doctor is. I love writing. The books I write are fantasy stories for middle-school-aged kids, and my students love them. I also make a few extra bucks from royalties by uploading them to novel apps. It's a win-win for me, but he'd rather I focus more on being a doctor's partner than having ambitions of my own. He just doesn't get it sometimes. I love fancy things as much as the next woman, but I'll be damned if I ever allow myself to rely on a man to buy them for me. Today I feel a little rundown as I drive to my condominium on auto-pilot.

“Maybe it's true, you do work too much,” I think in-between traffic lights.

The truth is, I wouldn't have minded staying in tonight and relaxing with a nice glass of Chardonnay. Of course I'd emptied my house of all the liquor and pills I could find before Brian came to live with me a few months ago. He said he didn't mind it and didn't want me to change my life for his sake. I didn't mind either. I don't need alcohol or pills to survive, but on Brian's worst day, he does. His sobriety is too important, and I want to help. He's been doing well since leaving the treatment facility, so I don't mind sacrificing some of my own comforts to help him on his journey. I push away the thought of Chardonnay and make my way home.

I reach my place, but I get there later than expected after encountering a mid-afternoon traffic jam. Home is a cute little two-bed condo I own on the sixth floor of a great building

called Zen Gardens, on Market Street. It has wooden floors, sparkly-white Caesarstone kitchen counters, neatly carpeted rooms, and great views of the city. I probably wouldn't be able to afford it without my second income. I'm exceptionally proud of myself that I can.

I've worked hard and been every parent's dream my entire life. My place sometimes feels like a reward for all that effort. As I walk in, I'm glad to see that Brian is keeping the place neat. It's minimally furnished, everything from the L-shape couch, little glass dining table, wall-mounted TV stand, and dark venetian blinds personally picked out by me. I leave my bag and keys on the counter and look around. I know Brian's shift schedule. He isn't due to be at work, so I wonder why I don't see him. A moment of worry crosses my mind.

"Brian! Are you home?" I yell out.

I'm relieved when I hear his muffled voice answer back.

"I'm in the shower, sis."

Feeling better, I pour myself a glass of ice water and walk past the dining area to get to my couch. Something catches my eye. It's a black leather jacket lying on the backrest of one of the dining chairs. I pick it up and turn it over. It has shiny zippers that curve at the top and is full of patches with little embroidered sayings and logos. It reminds me of the kind of jackets bikers wear. My mind starts to race. Brian doesn't own a motorcycle, so I wonder what it's doing there. Someone must have been here earlier and left it behind.

“Why the hell would Brian be hanging out with someone that owns a jacket like this?” I wonder. The thought immediately makes me worry.

“Oh god, please don’t tell me he’s using again,” I say out loud. I dig around in the pockets, praying I don’t find anything. There’s nothing in there aside from some loose change and a card for a tattoo shop called “Open Road Ink”. I pocket the card and walk down the hallway past the guest bathroom. I can still hear the shower running and decide to snoop around a little while I still can. I search Brian’s room. He’s been keeping it neat, just drawers of clothing, some books, CDs, and a few other trinkets.

His copy of *The Big Book* lies open on the chest of drawers. He’s been reading page 474 about “acceptance”.

I dig around a little more, but find nothing. The jacket is still in my hand though, so I’m still worried. I check around the entire apartment, but find nothing, no signs of drugs, pills, or alcohol anywhere. I leave the jacket on the back of the chair and change into an evening dress, let down my hair, and throw on some makeup quickly. I want to speak to Brian before I leave, but he’s still in the shower. I glance at my watch and catch a shock. It’s already 4:15pm. If I don’t leave right now, I’m going to be late.

“Brian!” I call as I knock on the bathroom door. “I’ve gotta leave for my date with Duncan. You gonna be home when I get back? I need to speak to you.”

“Yup, I’ll be here, sis,” I hear him saying from the other end.

I put my worries about the jacket out of my mind for now and grab my keys again.

Twenty minutes later I reach the Nouveau Theater on Adam Street. It's a quaint little place on the artsy side of town. Duncan loves these kinds of places. He's always been more sophisticated than I am. We're meeting there for a show one of his friends is directing. It's supposed to be some dramatic piece based on an artist's rendition of modern expressionism. I don't really enjoy these things, but Duncan enjoys having me on his arm for them. I'm relieved to see I'm there before him.

I find a little coffee shop in the lobby and order a savory muffin for a quick bite since I missed supper with Brian. The theater is well-lit, expansive, and features some stunning artwork. It's mainly full of artistic types, so I'm happy when Duncan arrives. He looks dapper, as usual, dressed in black formal pants, a white button-down shirt, and a preppy burgundy scarf around his neck. He hugs me and kisses me on the cheek. I like his scent, but feel a little unkempt next to him now.

"You find the place okay?"

"I used my GPS," I say with a toothy grin.

He takes my hand and we walk around. He spots many people he knows along the way and introduces me to them. The night is pleasant enough and half an hour later, we're settled into the front row of the intimate theater. Duncan smiles all night and kisses me, holds me close, and whispers in my ear a lot. The theater starts to fill up and an excitable buzz of voices slowly

takes over as patrons chat with each while the curtain is drawn. To everyone around us, we must have seemed like a sweet, happy couple. Duncan certainly always looks the part. He's classically handsome, well-groomed, and always speaks in soft, polished tones. In a way, he's every woman's dream.

"You look great, darling," is the last thing he says to me before the curtains part and the crowd settles down.

My time with Duncan has begun feeling a little muted in the last few months. The constant barrage of art shows, theater events, and dinner parties with other doctors gets a little boring and overwhelming at times. I settle into my seat, hold onto his arm, and rest my head on his shoulder as the show commences.

I'm grateful he can't read my mind. I hadn't even begun processing all these recent feelings of wishing for a little more excitement in our relationship myself. Tonight, my mind is further away from Duncan than it's ever been. I think back to the strange jacket I found and silently hope that Brian is staying clean. Suddenly, I find myself anxious for the show to be over so I can get back home and confront him about it.

Chapter Three

Adeline

I don't admit it to Duncan, but the show was kind of a drag. It seemed like a bunch of yuppy nonsense to me. The cast couldn't have been more pretentious if they'd sipped tea out of little cups and called the audience philistines. Duncan enjoyed it. He always did when it came to stuff like this. Afterward, I have to endure another half hour of listening to his friends, most of whom are also psychiatrists, debate the age-old question of the mind-brain duality. It's riveting stuff—for them. My anxiety over Brian grows the entire time. By the end of the night, I'm more than happy to head home.

"Drive safely and text me when you get there," Duncan says.

"I will. You too."

He kisses me on the cheek and I'm on my way. He lives just outside the financial district in a penthouse, and has been suggesting that I move in with him for some time now. I sometimes wonder why I keep putting it off. We've been together long enough and it certainly makes sense. I seriously doubt if Duncan would be okay with Brian moving in too

though—not with all the expensive pieces of artwork he has at his place.

I know this is one reason why the idea just isn't appealing to me at the moment. As I drive home, I wonder if there isn't a deeper reason behind it all. I still have a ways to go, and I'm worrying too much. I switch on some music. My playlist is too upbeat for my mood, so I switch it off and call Brian instead. The worry has me too stressed to wait till I get home. I need to hear his voice and know he's okay.

He answers on the third ring.

“Hey, sis,” he says.

He sounds normal. I silently breathe a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Brian. I take it you're still up?”

“I'm speaking to you, aren't I?”

“Is everything okay over there?”

He huffs deeply.

“God, you're paranoid. Don't worry, I haven't burned your place down yet or anything,” he says sarcastically.

“Jesus, Brian. Stop being so sensitive, I didn't mean it like that,” I snap back.

His sponsor said he might get like this.

He might tend to get a little defensive and snappy as his brain adjusts to being free of drugs and alcohol after such a long time. Try not be overly harsh if this happens, but draw your

boundaries too if you need to. That's what Bill Shaferman had warned me.

I sigh as I remind myself that he isn't always fully in control of how he reacts to simple things. It will take time, and I need to help him get there.

"Look, just don't go to sleep yet. I need to speak to you."

"Okay."

His response is curt. I worry now that what we have to speak about will upset him more.

"Boundaries," I think.

He's older than me, but I've always been the more responsible one. I love him to death, but he's also living under my roof now. I chose to give him a chance and offer him a nice place to get back on his feet, so if I want to question him sometimes to make sure he's still focused on recovering, he's just gotta deal with it. I feel better now as I remind myself of this.

The rest of the drive goes by more smoothly. At least I know he's okay. I reach home, park, and hop into the elevator. I groan inwardly as I see Harry Mason from apartment fifty-four standing inside it with his little chihuahua in his arms. Right on cue, the mutt starts growling at me. His ugly teeth look vicious despite his tiny size.

"No, Luther," Harry scolds him, but retains a tiny smirk as he does so.

He offers me a curt smile, but doesn't greet me. I nod in return and get in. He's always been a rude old bastard. It's not worth

reminding him that the building's rules state dogs have to be on leashes at all times. Old gay men are like royalty in San Francisco. It's a nice building, but the other residents sometimes make me feel like I don't belong here. After all, I'm *just* a teacher, and all of them are much wealthier.

We hit the fifth floor and he leaves without looking at me again or saying good night. Luther snarls at me one last time over Harry's shoulder and I quietly flip him the bird. I get off on my floor and walk to my apartment. I find Brian splayed on the couch watching something on Netflix as I enter. He's pretty much colonized that part of the house. I don't mind. I've never been much of a TV person.

"Hey, shorty," he greets me with a wide smile.

"You haven't called me that since seventh grade," I say as I sit next to him.

He smiles. "Well you haven't gotten any taller since then, so I figured it still suited you."

I laugh and playfully punch him on the shoulder. He seems to be in a better mood now. He certainly seems comfortable dressed in blue shorts and a white surfing shirt. His long blonde hair is tied back into a ponytail. He sometimes looked like a rough-around-the-edges version of Thor to me. Our hair shades are almost identical, but his is a little more on the dirty blonde side. His scruffy beard doesn't help. People always think of him as a surfer dude type, but he's actually quite intelligent once you get know him.

"You look tired," I say.

It was true. His eyes are a little bloodshot, and he has dark circles under them. His teeth are still a little discolored, even though he's been taking much better care of himself for a while now.

"Just haven't been sleeping great," he replies.

I nod.

"That's normal. Doctor Amad did say that was a common side effect in recovery. Just give it time."

He nods. His skin still looks a little more pallid than it used to be. There's also some patches of rough skin here and there, with small clusters of little red pimples dotting his cheeks. His pupils had lost so much of the kind, enthusiastic spark he used to have back in high school. They looked a little vacant now. He was tall and still relatively well built, but looked gaunter than he'd been in his youth.

He was still handsome, but as I look at him under the light now, it's clear just how much the years of binging on meth and sleeping pills have damaged him. I sigh and glance over at the chair by the dining table. The jacket isn't there now. Whoever it belonged to must have fetched it while I was out.

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure," he says a little nervously as he reads the worried turn my expression takes.

"There was a leather jacket lying on that chair when I came home earlier. Whose was it?"

He looked more relieved now.

“Oh, that. That was Cole Lyon’s. Remember him?”

I frown a little, trying to make sense of it.

“Cole, as in your best friend from back in the day?”

“Yeah. Him.”

“I thought he moved somewhere far away a while back.”

“He did. But he’s back in town. He’s doing well, opened his own tattoo shop near Chinatown. Check it out.”

Brian lifts the sleeve on his right arm and I realize for the first time that he has a tattoo there now, high up, near the shoulder. It’s a cool design nestled into a beautifully shaded background with portions of words that appear to be jumping off the pages of a book. They’re artfully done, so the words aren’t immediately clear, but as I peer closer, I see the floating letters spell things like “serenity” and “acceptance”.

“Wow. That’s cool.”

“Yeah I know, right?”

Brian is beaming now, but I’m still a little tense and he notices.

“Aw, man. What is it now, sis?”

I feel a little irritable, but don’t want to get him upset so I speak gently.

“Look, I’m glad you reconnected with your old friend, but I remember Cole well. He was always chasing girls and taking you to clubs and stuff. You guys would always get trashed

together. Is he really the kind of person you wanna be hanging around with right now? It's still early days in your recovery."

Brian looks annoyed too, but he speaks calmly.

"I know you're just trying to look out for me Adi, but you don't know how isolated I've been. I spent six months in that facility and I've pretty much been alone, aside from attending meetings with my sponsor, ever since getting out. I really need to have some friends. I think it will be good for me. Besides, Cole knows my whole story now, and he's toned down a lot. He won't jeopardize my recovery."

My forehead crinkles with lines of worry. Maybe they're lines of doubt. I can't tell. The whole thing just feels so unnecessary right now. Brian had been doing so well. I think about how to handle it tactfully.

"That jacket looked like something a biker wears. You know what those biker groups are like. There's so much partying and drinking in those motorcycle cliques. I read somewhere that some of them are even involved in drug dealing themselves."

I flinch, worrying that he's going to get mad. To my relief, he laughs.

"You're such an elitist sometimes, sis. Cole isn't in a biker *gang*, he's in a biker *club*. There's a big difference, trust me."

I'm not convinced there is a difference and remain silent. Brian's expression softens and he holds my hand tenderly.

"I appreciate everything you're doing for me, more than you'll ever know. But right now, I need you to stop being Mrs. Judgy

McJudgerson and just be my little sis, okay?”

I sigh again. I want to help, and right now I sense that backing off is the best way I can do that. I squeeze his hand.

“Okay, Brian. I just want what’s best for you, so right now, I’m just going to trust you to make good decisions.”

“That’s all I’m asking for. You know, he did ask about you when I told him whose apartment this was.”

“Really? What did he say?”

“I’d rather not say,” he replies with a grin.

“Just tell me.”

“He asked if you were still as uptight as you were in school.”

“Oh, did he now? Well if being responsible means I’m uptight, that’s perfectly okay with me,” I say, sticking my tongue out at him in a teasing way.

He kisses me on the cheek. It feels like old times. There were times when we were so close in our younger years. It feels like a lifetime ago, before all the substances stole him from me.

“I’ve gotta try and get some sleep. I’ve got an early shift at the bookstore tomorrow,” he says.

I hug him good night and watch him leave. When I hear his bedroom door close, I take out my phone, feeling guilty as hell. My mom answers on the second ring.

“Hi Adi, is everything okay?” her gentle voice croons on the other end.

“Yeah mom. I’m just a little worried about Brian.”

There's silence followed by some distorted crackling as my mom puts me on speaker.

"What happened? Is Brian okay?" I hear my dad's concerned voice interjecting.

"He's fine. I just wanted to ask you guys. Did you know he's been hanging out with Cole Lyons again?"

Both my parents say no, but they sound as concerned as me now. We discuss it for a while, and the consensus is that I should just keep an eye on the situation for the time-being. Brian is likely to feel attacked if everyone comes down on him for this. I promise them I'll make sure everything is okay and hang up. I head to my room, take a steaming hot shower, and then get ready for bed. I call Duncan.

He's only just reached home himself. We chat for a bit, then I say good night to him and switch off my bedside lamp. The darkness envelops me and I sit in bed for a while, wondering what to do. I remember that I still have the card for Cole's tattoo shop in my bag. I feel annoyed at Cole Lyons now, even though I haven't seen the guy in ages. Things were going so well with Brian. Cole is a complication our lives could do without right now. The last thing I think before sleep finally consumes me is that I need to pay Cole a visit and set the record straight.

Chapter Four

Cole

The man and woman browsing the walls in my store are beginning to annoy me. My shop isn't a mainstream one. I consider myself an artist, and tattoos are my art. Every artist has a unique voice, one that expresses who they are. I never chose mine, but I can't deny that I sometimes have a dark soul, and that darkness is often reflected in my work. It's not for everyone's taste, just like every customer isn't for me.

"I kinda like this one," the rigid young woman tells her boyfriend.

I stand at the counter and watch them. He's dressed in a white t-shirt with a psychedelic design on it, tight baby blue pants, and has a Greenpeace sticker on the tiny backpack he has over his shoulders. She is taller, with short, dark hair, glasses, and a Starbucks cup in hand. She's wearing a beanie, lace-up buckle boots, and has ear pods on the whole time.

They were the kind to fight every cause and complain about things they had no inkling about. I was the kind to shut my mouth and do my best with whatever the world gave me.

I was a realist. Maybe I'd chosen the wrong city to settle back down in. Maybe I didn't belong here. Then again, I was born and raised here, so maybe I do. It doesn't matter now. I'm back and here to stay this time. The tattoo design she was looking at featured an angel with its head bowed. The wings were shaded to perfection and the realism was epic.

"Yeah, that one's okay, I guess. It sorta has, like, a sweetness to it. It might suit you."

I scoff to myself. It was a piece I designed for a woman named Luca Henry. She was a badass biker chick who earned her stripes as a motorcycle mechanic custom-building two hundred horsepower monsters for riders down in San Diego. There was nothing sweet about her, and she would have eaten women like this one for breakfast.

"I think it's meant to represent, like, the pain and struggle of the modern woman trying to make it in a man's world," her counterpart agreed. He peers at it closer.

"I think you're right. Good eye."

I stay quiet with some difficulty. It was actually designed for Luca after her husband was murdered by motorcycle gang members when she refused to build a custom chopper for them. It commemorated how much she loved him and how empty she felt after losing him.

"I kinda don't like most of these," the guy was saying as he points around my beloved wall.

I feel like punching him. He has no idea how painstakingly thought out and intricate so many of my designs are. People like these two are the worst kind of narcissists out there, as far as I'm concerned.

"I feel like the stuff in here is all way too dark and creepy. I want something that's fun and happy. A design that's more like me."

I glance at the woman with disdain. I doubt she's ever known real fun and true happiness in her life. She's in my shop, but barely registers my presence. It doesn't matter if I exist at all. To people like her, someone like me is simply here to be of service, to coddle their feelings, and see to their every need. I'm relieved when they finally realize this isn't the right tattoo shop for them.

"Let's check out that place on Castro Street. The designs on their Insta page were more colorful. I feel like that place spoke to me more," says the woman. Without another word or a look in my direction, they both head for the door. Just as they open the door, a young woman bursts in. The first thing I notice is that she's beautiful, and looks familiar somehow, but it's all downhill from there.

"Where the hell is the owner?" She asks, walking straight up to the counter, clearly uninterested in anything else my shop has to offer.

"I'm the owner. Who the hell are you?" I ask, matching her irritated tone. I'm not accustomed to being talked down to by a woman.

She's blonde and dressed like a prude, despite her good looks. She stares at me closer now, her eyes narrow. After the initial shock of her rude entrance, I finally notice her properly for the first time and realize that I do know her, but can hardly believe she's the same person. She seems to be studying my face intently. She must be having difficulty recognizing me. My hair's grown out a lot since my high school days, and I haven't shaved in a while. I'm dressed in my usual garb—a pair of black jeans and a dark colored t-shirt. I was also quite slim back then, but have packed on a lot of muscle since.

“Cole? Cole Lyons?” she asks, looking over my face with a slightly confused expression now.

I nod. “It's good to see you again, Adi. It's been a long time.”

That's a bit of an understatement. A part of me can hardly believe the dorky girl I knew back then looks so sophisticated and sexy now. She wears formal pants and a button-down top with long sleeves. It's clearly a work outfit and it's boring as hell, but the two top buttons are open and I can't help but notice how much her cleavage has filled out since I last knew her.

“Uh, thanks,” she says, appearing a little flustered as she looks me over once more.

Just then, she shakes her head irritably, seeming to come to her senses.

“No. Wait. I'm not here on a social visit, Cole. I came to ask you to please stay away from my brother.”

I'm taken aback by this. Not only by the request itself, but the fact that she has the gall to make it.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I want you to stay away from Brian."

I'm annoyed now. Adeline Coffman had always been an uptight person. My memories of her were of a person with her head always buried in books and her mind seemingly always stuck on her future career. But I don't remember her ever being as outwardly rude or abrasive as she is now.

"Last time I checked, your brother is an adult, and older than you. Don't you think he should decide for himself whether he wants to hang out with someone or not?" I ask.

I make sure my tone is dripping with condescension and sarcasm. If she wants to be rude, I can play that game too. It makes her angrier. Her eyes flash with irritation and she scowls at me.

"I'm serious, Cole. He's been through enough already. My entire family has. Brian's finally in a good place again and I don't want him being around anything or anyone that can tempt him back into an unhealthy lifestyle again. He's my number one priority right now, and I need to do what's best for him, even if he won't like it."

It's my turn to scowl now. This part of her I do remember well.

Adeline had a reputation for being judgy. She was a parent's dream and a teacher's pet, but also constantly looking down on anyone else that wasn't. I take a deep breath to steady myself,

so I can speak calmly and resist the urge I have to tell her to fuck off.

“First of all, Brian’s told me everything about his issues. I’m not trying to interfere with that. I’m glad he’s recovering from all that stuff he went through.”

“You’re a biker, right?” she demands to know, not even waiting for me to finish what I have to say.

I stay quiet, trying to figure out where she’s going with this.

“I saw your jacket. It’s like the ones those biker gang people wear.”

I chuckle dismissively.

“Don’t laugh at me. This isn’t a joke,” she barks.

I shake my head in dismay.

“I’m sorry to burst your little bubble princess, but not everyone that rides a bike is in a gang.”

“Oh, don’t give me that crap. I know you well, Cole. You’ve always loved partying and chasing women. You’re like a frat boy that never knew how to grow up and right now, Brian needs to hang out with people that are more mature.”

My hands ball into fists at my side and I’m grateful she can’t see them. I’m livid at her stunning display of ignorance for someone who’s always been purported to be well-educated.

“Look, I’m glad you’re clearly doing your best to help Brian. But, let me get this straight. You think that right now, the best thing for him is to just work in a book store and stay cooped

up in your apartment for the rest of his life with no friends and no social life?”

She seems to stop for a second as these words sink in. I hope they do, because she seems genuinely oblivious to the fact that Brian was struggling a lot with loneliness and isolation. I realize he must have only confided in me about those things.

“No. I don’t mean he shouldn’t have friends at all. I just mean that—” she tries to explain, but I cut her off.

“You just mean, not friends like me. I’m a bad influence. I get it. You see a biker jacket at your place and remember that I liked to party, so it must mean I’m into drugs and want Brian to get back into that stuff with me.”

She goes quiet, but glares at me a little. It’s clear that she expected me to be more of a pushover when she came marching in.

“I just want what’s best for Brian,” she says, although there’s a noticeable softening of her tone now.

I sigh. The light in the shop is bright, the sunshine outside causing swaths of it to illuminate the inside of my place more. Under the light, her attractive features seem to pop a lot more. As irritated as I am, I can’t stop thinking about how much she’s grown and blossomed physically. It has a calming effect on me.

“Look, Adi. I’ve known your brother for a long time, so please believe me when I say I also want what’s best for him. We can talk about this some more, but just not here, not now. I’ve got

a big client coming in the next five minutes and I need to focus on my job right now.”

She still looks a little stubborn.

“Yeah, well I’m not coming back here. This part of town is like a rat trap.”

If it were anyone else, I would have told her to go fly a kite by this point, but something keeps me calm and I hold back my anger.

“I know where your apartment is now. I’ll try to come by a little later and we can all discuss this more.”

“What makes you think I’ll be free later? I do have a life, you know,” she retorts.

Something about the way she says this makes me feel like there’s a hidden conflict she’s facing under the words.

“I thought you said Brian’s recovery was your main priority right now?”

That shuts her up. She scowls again, but says, “Fine. Come by after five.”

I nod. Without another word, she turns in a haughty manner and leaves. As irritated as I am by her uninvited visit, I can’t help but stare at her ass as she leaves.

Chapter Five

Adeline

I'm back home, and Brian is beside himself. I had to tell him what I did, since it's nearing 5 p.m. and Cole will be here soon. I expect him to be upset, but there's a different level of anger inside him now. It's so difficult to cope with. Ever since he's been out of treatment, it's been an emotional rollercoaster from day to day. It feels like such a slippery slope at times—one mistake and it can all come crashing down. This is my worst fear.

"I can't believe you, sis. I thought things were cool after last night, and then you go and do this behind my back?"

I feel exasperated. He's so close to my face. His expression is so contorted and angry, a far cry from how friendly and innocuous he usually is.

"You're just not seeing this from my point of view, Brian. It's not just me that feels this way. Mom and dad feel exactly the same way I do."

I thought that would make things better, but it has the opposite effect. His face tightens even more and I'm actually starting to feel a little afraid under all my anger now.

"Oh my god. You told mom and dad!" he spits out incredulously.

"Of course I did. They care about you just as much as I do. They have a right to know."

"Know what? That I have a friend? That I'm still clean and healthy? This is insane. You're all acting like I've already relapsed. Thanks for the show of faith in me, sis, really, it means a lot," he says, the last part full of sarcasm.

This is giving me a headache. There's times when I feel like it's all too much, like I want my old life back. The moment this thought goes through my head, I feel guilty as hell. It's like a shot in the arm and I calm down instantly.

"Brian, please try and be reasonable. We're not saying you shouldn't have a life, just that you should get a little more clean time under your belt before you take unnecessary risks," I plead.

This Brian can be as hard-headed as a bull, and twice as unpredictable. I sometimes wonder where it all went wrong for him. We had a fairly decent upbringing. We were upper middle class and grew up in a stable home, filled with happy memories and laughter. I turned out just fine. Brian used to be normal. Now, after everything he put us all through and everything he's been through himself, it feels like life can never be normal again.

“You need to get something straight, Adi. It’s my recovery, not yours. I decide how I’m going to maintain it.”

Everything feels so different from last night. We hugged and shared a tender moment then. Now, it’s like we’re enemies again. His arrogance is firmly back in place. I sigh again and hear my own exasperation in the sound that comes out. I’m about to reply when we hear the sound of a motorcycle in the near distance. It sounds way up the street, but the engine is so powerful we can hear it. Somehow, I just know it’s him. The engine gets closer and I hear it soften and slow down once it’s below us.

“I’m sure that’s your friend right now. I see he still loves driving like a lunatic.”

Brian stays quiet and glares at me. We’ve reached an impasse and there’s no point keeping up the argument. I hear my doorbell and walk over to my intercom to buzz him in. Brian and I sit in a fractious silence until we hear the knock on the door. Brian stands up first and opens it.

“Hey, dude,” he greets Cole enthusiastically.

Cole walks in and they clasp hands and bump shoulders like a couple of juvenile jocks. Cole is dressed in the patchy jacket I saw here before and carries a black motorcycle helmet in his left hand. I’m already annoyed. His presence feels like a disturbance to our lives right now. Despite this, just like earlier that day when I saw him at his shop, I can’t help but notice what a ruggedly handsome and well-built man he’s become since we were all teenagers.

It seems like he's showered and freshened up since I saw him earlier too. His face is clean shaven, his hair gelled and slicked back, and he smells nicer. I wonder how I never noticed all this about him before. Then again, he was way skinnier then, and I was always too consumed with my goals to care about boys. Either way, I notice now and it annoys me; it's an unwelcome distraction I could do without since I'm so pissed at him.

"Hi, Adi," he greets me.

He smiles but his eyes stay a little cold. I'm sure he's still upset about me bursting into his shop earlier. I don't care. The arrogant jerk had it coming. We were doing just fine before he showed up in town again.

"Hi," I greet him back curtly.

"Come in, man. Have a seat," Brian welcomes him.

"Can I get you anything?"

"How about a beer?" he asks.

There's a silent tension for a second before he and Brian lock eyes. They both burst out laughing and look at me. I'm not amused. The two of them always behave like a couple of clowns when they're together.

"That's not funny," I say.

"Oh, lighten up, for god's sake," Cole says as he takes a seat on the couch.

Brian sits next to him and I pull out a chair at the dining table. I'm annoyed with how confidently he seems to deal with every situation. He has a kind of natural assuredness about himself that I could never replicate.

"Nice place you have here," he says.

"So, what exactly did you want to speak about?" I ask.

There's no point in making him feel welcome or comfortable. I imagine he'll be a little defensive, and maybe even apologetic. Instead, he goes on the offensive.

"I think you were out of line showing up at my shop like that. That's my place of business. Please don't do it again," he says coolly.

I'm even more pissed now, but I realize he's right, so I yield.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Brian looks a little uncomfortable.

"Yeah, man, I'm sorry too. I had no idea she was gonna do that," he says.

I'm angry again. Now it's like they're ganging up on me and I'm the crazy one.

"So, how do we all work this out?"

"Work what out?" asks Brian.

"You two hanging out again. I still don't think it's a good idea."

Brian's irritation returns.

“I’m not gonna stop hanging out with him just because you’re not happy with it, sis. Right now, he’s the only friend I have.”

“You heard the man,” Cole chimes in, an amused smile on his face.

“Cole, stay out of this for a moment. This is a family matter, after all,” I retort.

“Hey. Don’t speak to him like that!” Brian says in a slightly raised voice.

“Relax, bro. I can speak for myself,” Cole says before turning back to me.

“Listen, this doesn’t have to be such a big deal. Like I said, we’re on the same side. I’m not trying to take your brother back down a destructive path.”

“How would you even know how to handle all this? You haven’t been around for ages. You weren’t here when all of this started, so you don’t get to decide what’s good for him,” I snap.

Brian is getting restless and irritable. I can see it in the way his knee keeps bobbing up and down non-stop.

“You can’t keep me tied up like some kind of prisoner. I’m doing the right things. I’m staying clean, checking in with my sponsor, and attending meetings. There’s nothing in the program that says I’m not allowed to reconnect with old friends.”

“Old drinking buddies you mean.”

Brian huffs angrily now. I turn to Cole.

“I just feel like you’re being irresponsible, contacting him out of the blue like this. This is the wrong time to be trying to relive your teenage years.”

Brian stands up angrily now.

“Enough, Adi! This is bullshit. You don’t know what you’re talking about. God, this is becoming so constricting. I can’t take this right now. I need some air.”

I’m stunned temporarily. Brian hasn’t acted this way in a long time. They both stand up and Brian goes to his room. Cole stands there a little sheepishly. His expression softens a little when he sees how visibly upset I am. Brian returns. He’s dressed in jeans and a t-shirt too now, but his hair and scruffy beard make him look a lot more unkempt than Cole.

“C’mon, man. Let’s go grab a bite or something.”

“Brian, please—”

“No, Adi. Don’t start. I just need some space right now. Please.”

It’s killing me inside to see him like this. I know how easily he can go from this to wanting a fix and throwing away everything he’s worked for. It’s two on one and he is an adult, so I have no recourse. Cole throws the bike key to him.

“Here, go down and wait for me. There’s a spare helmet in my bag. It’s tied to the seat. I just wanna have a quick word with your sister.”

Brian looks irritable and his hands tremble a little, but he listens. He glares at me as he takes the key and leaves. Cole turns to me. The worry I feel is written all over my face and I'm so angry at him I could scream, but I hold it together.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come up here and cause problems between you two. Just give the guy a little space. He's still a man, and no man likes being stifled like this."

"I told you before. This isn't some game, Cole. The stakes are real."

"I get it. Trust me, I do. He's been my best friend since we were like seven years old. Do you really think I'd allow him to harm himself?"

There's nothing else I can do right now. I know if I push Brian too hard, he'll run like he always does, and who knows where he'll end up then. This way, at least someone will be with him, even if I don't fully trust who it is.

"Just please take care of him and make sure he gets home safe."

Cole nods and says, "I will. And by the way, just so you know, I didn't contact your brother. He saw the ad for my shop and contacted me."

I stay silent, since I was wrong. I notice one of the prominent patches on his jacket says "Cali Ryderz MC" and has a logo of clenched fists over a handlebar. Cole leaves and the worry envelops me. I'm so caught between wanting to trust Cole and being unable to accept that his biker lifestyle could ever be a

good influence on a person in recovery. I shower and change. It's a Friday night and I'm supposed to be meeting Duncan for dinner and drinks. I'm not in the mood now. I call him and cancel. He doesn't sound happy, but right now I don't care. I try my best to keep the thought of what Brian and Cole might be getting up to out of my head, but every distraction I try, from watching TV to listening to music, doesn't help.

Darkness falls and the view outside my window transforms into a beautiful array of lights as all the buildings in the greater downtown area consume the skyline from my vantage point. I close the blinds and settle into bed, but all my worries about Brian keep me up.

I decide to do a little background snooping on Cole. Maybe if I can prove he's irresponsible, I can convince Brian to stay away from him. I check if I can find any criminal records under his name, but nothing pops up other than a misdemeanor citation for urinating in public when he was a teenager.

“Real classy,” I think sarcastically.

I find some of his family member's profiles. They all look pretty rough around the edges—some of his cousins, and even his parents, look like they're clearly on something themselves. It becomes less and less likely to me that he could be anything but a bad influence on Brian. He has very little in terms of a social media presence himself, and most of his posts are dedicated to photos of his tattoo designs and clients. Most of the designs are macabre, but hauntingly beautiful and stunningly rendered. He's certainly talented, but I'm still

convinced his biker affiliations spell trouble. I zoom in on a few photos that he's tagged in and get a better look at the logo of his motorcycle club. I search for the name and find their page.

The address where they're based isn't far from here. Most of their posts seem overtly aggressive, mostly group photos of menacing looking men with bald heads. I'm more convinced than ever that he's up to no good now, and worry that my parents and I may have to stage another intervention soon. I can't stand the thought of just sitting back and waiting for my brother to self-destruct again, so I decide to pay the motorcycle club a visit the next day. With this thought in mind, I close my eyes and try to sleep, still desperately afraid of what Brian will get up to tonight.

Chapter Six

Adeline

I wake up Saturday morning feeling groggy and disoriented. It's been a restless night. Somewhere amidst all the restlessness last night, I managed to fall in and out of sleep. Around 3 a.m., I recall hearing Brian come in. He sounded okay. No heavy breathing or scent of liquor trailing behind him. It's early now, and as I walk past his door, I'm happy to see it's open and he's asleep.

Everything seems fine, but I'm not about to rest on it staying this way with Cole Lyons still around. I feel like my stress forced my brain to work on a solution even while I slept. I have a fully formed plan ready by the time I brush my teeth, shower, and have a quick breakfast. I dress in a simple summer dress with a flower pattern and a pair of comfortable flats, leaving my hair loose. The plan won't be easy, but I'm counting on some help. I call Duncan first.

"Hey, Adi," he answers immediately.

"Hey, babe."

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

“I have some errands to run before the book reading. I actually need to speak to you about something.”

“I’m listening.”

He sounds a little weary now, but also much more alert and awake than I am. Then again, I know his routines well. Even though it’s barely past 8 a.m., by now he’s already been up for three hours, gone for his morning jog, squeezed in a short workout, done some yoga, a meditation, and eaten a healthy breakfast. I admire his constant drive and the value he places on self-care and living a healthy lifestyle, but it can be a little overwhelming and stifling at times—especially when he tries to force me to join in on his exhausting rituals. He’s the kind of person that never stays still and has a millionaire mindset. To be honest, sometimes I feel a little pressured and undervalued if I can’t keep up. I take a breath. I have too much pride and have always rejected his attempts to carry me financially. My lifestyle might not be anywhere close to the one he enjoys, but at least I have the comfort of knowing I pay for it myself. It’s an awkward thing to ask, but I grit my teeth and do it because I know I have a worthy purpose behind it.

“Do you think you could lend me some money for a donation I want to make?”

There is silence on his end for a moment. I’ve never asked for anything like this before.

“Um, yeah sure. What’s it for though?” he asks.

I don't relish having to lie either, but the truth seems way too complicated to explain right now.

"There's this kid at school that's been selected for a trial at a European soccer club, so his family's trying to raise funds to get him there."

It wasn't a complete lie. Jamie Abraham from my sixth grade English class really was attempting this. I'd already made my donation to his cause though.

"How much do you need?"

"Um. Would four hundred dollars be okay?"

Silence again for a moment. I know Duncan isn't the most charitable person in general, but since it's me asking, he gives in.

"Yeah. Sure. I'll send it to you now."

I breathe an inward sigh of relief. The plan is working so far.

"Thanks. You're the best."

I know I can afford to add another three hundred to that. The next call I make is to my parents. My mom answers and puts me on speaker after hearing what I'm suggesting.

"So, you wanna basically bribe these people?" my dad asks.

"Well, it will be in the name of a donation, but basically, yeah."

"What makes you think this will even work?"

"I know these biker types, dad. They're always looking for a quick buck. I'm sure they'll listen."

“How much do you need?”

My parents don't sound convinced, but they agree to help. By the end of the call, I secure another three hundred. I spruce myself up a little more and check on Brian one more time. He's still asleep, but otherwise seems fine. I plug in the address on my phone and head out, feeling a little apprehensive. I stop at an ATM on the way. It feels weird carrying a thousand dollars in cash around with me. I stuff it into an envelope and drive to the motorcycle club.

It's another sunny day. A few wisps of clouds hang about here and there, but they do little to quell the heat. Downtown is bustling as usual, and there's a familiar air of cheerfulness about the place that makes me love this city. The little cafes and coffee shops are all full, and I see myriad diverse faces as I make my way through the art district. It's a short drive from there to the mission district, passing a Burmese Restaurant that I love along the way. I'm soon out of the city center and reach Folsom Street. I pass the Fire Department's Station Seven a short while later. A little farther down, I come to a point where I see a row of stores and cafes. On the corner, the club finally comes into view.

There's an entrance that leads to a parking area behind the building, but this says “members only,” so I choose street parking instead.

I gather my bag and make my way to the entrance. There's a large sign outside with the club's name and emblem on it. There's a line of other motorcycles parked out front. Most are

black, but don't look like the types I expected to see. They're not Harleys or those hot-rod looking bikes I associate with biker gangs. Some of them look sleek, and they seem more like racing bikes. Names like Ducati, Yamaha, and Suzuki jump out at me. One of them is even a BMW.

I walk up the little staircase. There's loud rock music coming from inside. Once inside, I find that it's more like a bar. There's an actual bar with a rough looking bartender standing behind it, a couple of pool tables, some lounging areas and booths, a jukebox, and a dart board in the corner. It's not full, but there are a few people here and there.

They're all drinking, playing pool, and chatting. A few stare at me as I enter. I head to the bartender, who eyes me curiously. He has a large ginger handlebar mustache and weighs about two hundred and fifty pounds, but he has a pleasant face and even smiles when I approach.

"Hey there, little lady, can I help you with something?"

I pull out Cole's business card and hand it to him.

"Do you know this guy?"

He glances at it.

"Yeah, what's it to you?"

"Is he a member here?"

"Look ma'am, I dunno what your business with Cole is, but I can tell you it has nothing to do with our club, so you need to take it elsewhere."

I'm annoyed at his attitude now.

Some of the other members walk over and one of them asks the bartender, "Everything okay here, Earl?"

"She's looking for Cole."

The other guy looks me up and down and I suddenly feel uncomfortable.

"This isn't the place for a lover's quarrel. Best you speak to Cole directly."

He's taller and wears an even gaudier jacket than the others. I reach into my bag and pull out the envelope. They look at me like I'm crazy when I flash the money.

"Here's what I'm proposing. I'm willing to make a thousand dollar donation to your, um, establishment, if you can promise me that Cole stays away from my brother."

The two men chuckle.

"And why exactly don't you want Cole hanging out with your brother?" the other guy asks.

"My brother's in recovery. He doesn't need to be getting involved with this kind of...crowd. He needs to stay away from places that could tempt him back into a reckless lifestyle."

Other people come up to the bar now and I'm suddenly surrounded by a group of scary looking bikers.

"Just what exactly do you think goes on in this *establishment*, as you put it?"

I'm angry at their flippant attitude, so I speak openly.

“Oh, c'mon. I know the kinds of things bikers are into. Drugs, alcohol, gangs.”

They both burst out laughing. The sound is raucous and unnerving.

“You hear that, folks? Little princess here takes us for a bunch of gang members and drug dealers because we ride bikes,” the bartender yells out.

“I didn't mean it like that,” I mumble.

The other guy stands closer to me now. He holds up a hand and everyone quiets down. He's obviously their leader or something.

“First of all, this is a motorcycle *club*, not a gang. Second of all, sure, we drink, but we don't like drugs any more than the average upstanding citizen, such as yourself. The Cali Ryderz are a club that does charitable work in our community. Cole Lyons does our tattoos and the logo designs for our jackets. Nobody here would ever think of tempting a recovering addict back into a life of drugs. Hell, we applaud your brother for the courage it must have taken him to get clean. So, if you don't mind, I think it's time you take your bribe elsewhere.”

I'm a little stunned. I've clearly misread a lot of things and feel foolish now. My cheeks redden.

I don't know what else to do, so I hastily mutter an apology, put the money away, and leave. On my way out, some of them laugh and heckle me.

“Don’t forget to check out our blog.”

“You might want to offer the Hell’s Angels some of that cash, they’ll take it.”

I’m out the door and their laughter and taunts die away. I’m so embarrassed. This was a disaster.

“What was I thinking?” I wonder.

I race back to my car. I have a book reading at the Graystone Book Store in a few hours. I was looking forward to it, but now my mood is a complete mess.

It’s just after midday as I complete a reading of *The Fated Prince*, my latest fantasy novel. Everyone at the store breaks out into applause. The little faces and their parents alike are all beaming at me. The book has done better than expected and the store has offered to stock it, since it has a small following in the area.

Many of the people come up to me and congratulate me, tell me how much they loved the book, and ask me to sign their copies. It feels good. I’ve worked hard on this one, and it’s my best one by far. I’m proud to finally be noticed as a writer. My little dream is finally paying dividends.

I’m sad to see that Brian hasn’t shown up. He’s obviously still angry with me. I’m sad because he’s always been the biggest supporter of my writing dreams. Duncan is there, though. He’s dressed casually, but that still means he has a sweater tied around his neck and wears a golfer. He hugs me.

“Well done. This is great,” he says, staring around the bustling little store.

I thank him and we hang around a bit, chatting with people and socializing. He’s so much better at that stuff than I am, and he soon takes a lot of the attention off me once people learn he’s a psychiatrist. I’m used to being invisible around him.

I thought today would be different. This was supposed to be my day, but he still hogs the attention now. I’m a little anxious and still dwelling on the fiasco at the motorcycle club. I’m worried now, and wonder what’s going to happen when Cole finds out. I’m most concerned that he’ll tell Brian. I don’t need to wonder much longer. I get a shock as I hear the roar and sputter of a motorcycle engine and see Cole pull up on his bike. It’s also black and looks very sleek and sporty, with cool designs painted on the side.

Cole jumps off and walks through the door with his black helmet still on. He finds me easily and approaches, taking off the helmet as he does. He’s an odd sight in the quaint little store. I’m nervous and afraid now.

“Hi. I see you’re the lady of the hour,” he says, a little sarcastically.

“What are you doing here?” I ask in a hushed voice.

It’s too late. Duncan is standing near us, talking to some people when he notices. Cole doesn’t exactly fit in. He’s dressed in all black, with a metal chain swinging from the side of his jeans. He’s unshaven and wears his leather jacket

proudly. He looks good. His longish hair falls over his forehead in strands, but somehow, it complements his rustic features. It frustrates me how attractive I keep finding him despite how much his presence has hindered my life since he came back into it.

“Hi. I don’t believe we’ve met,” Duncan greets him a little coldly but sticks out his hand.

Cole shakes it.

“I’m Cole. I’m a friend of Brian’s.”

“Oh, okay. He isn’t here,” Duncan says curtly.

There’s clearly tension. Duncan and Cole are like oil and water. Duncan is well groomed, sophisticated, and truth be told, a little snobbish. Cole’s rougher, a foot taller, dresses like he’s in a rock band, and sounds so much more crass when he speaks.

“I know. I’m here to see her. I hear she’s become something of a motorcycle enthusiast lately.”

Duncan looks at me suspiciously and then at Cole’s motorcycle outside the store.

“I’m just looking out for my brother,” I snap angrily.

Duncan looks confused.

“You had no right to go down there, but I guess there’s no damage done, except to that fat ego of yours.”

“What’s going on? Am I missing something here?” Duncan asks.

He glares at Cole now, but doesn't seem too happy with me either.

"I'll explain later," I say to him, dreading what an awkward conversation that's going to be.

"Did you just come here to gloat?" I ask Cole.

"I came here to tell you to stop all this crazy paranoia over your brother. If you could just set aside that controlling nature of yours and treat him like a human being, maybe you'll see that he's actually doing well."

"Look, I don't know who the hell you are, but I'd advise you not to speak to my girlfriend like that," says Duncan as he places a hand on Cole's shoulder.

Some people are staring now. It's a little laughable to be honest. Duncan's a pampered academic who's probably never thrown a punch in his life. Cole glares at Duncan's arm on his shoulder. Before Duncan's need to act tough gets him into something he can't handle, I step in.

"Just let me deal with my brother please. He isn't your problem," I say.

Duncan lets go of him.

Cole says, "He's nobody's problem. Maybe if you and your family stopped seeing him as a *problem*, he'd be better off. I just came here to tell you to please stay out of my personal life. What I get up to at my club has nothing to do with you or Brian. Just get this one thing through that head of yours, you

don't control Brian's life and you certainly don't control mine.”

Before I can say another word, he turns and storms off. I'm left stunned and standing next to a clearly irritated Duncan, wondering how I'm going to explain all of this to him.

Chapter Seven

Cole

I finish up a tattoo for a young kid. He looks barely eighteen, but I checked his ID. He's actually twenty. I'm barely out of my twenties, but young kids these days seem to be built a lot softer than they were when I was his age. He winced a lot and needed a few breaks in between, but that's okay. He's a nice enough kid and seems genuinely appreciative of my work. He loves the tattoo, but I'm not surprised. It has a great design. He asked for a dragon with flames. What I sketched took that idea and turned it into a proper piece of art. He stares at it over and over in the mirror before dropping his sleeve and turning to me. The excitement is written all over his face.

"This is awesome, man."

"Glad you like it, kid," I reply.

I call him "kid" even though I'm not really all that older than him. He just acts like he is one, or maybe that's just how adolescents these days act. Either way, his entire aura is a whole different vibe from what I was used to. In my day, kids

that age were rougher and far more ready to take on the world. I ask his name so I can type out an invoice for him. I charge a hundred and fifty bucks an hour for larger pieces like the one he's asked for.

"Ricardo Rodriguez," he says.

"That will be four hundred and fifty," I say, adding his name to the invoice and printing it from the little laptop and printer I keep below the reception counter.

It's taken me three hours to complete. It would have taken another artist five.

I ring him up and he pulls out a wad of cash. I'm surprised by it and wonder what someone his age is doing carrying so much cash around. I hope he isn't into drugs or anything like that.

He nods excitedly and pays me. He looks at the tattoo one more time and smiles broadly.

"Holy shit, man. This really is incredible. My girlfriend's gonna love it."

"Glad to hear. Tell all your friends about this place."

"Forget my friends. I'm gonna share it on Instagram. I have over two hundred thousand followers. They're gonna love this. They're gonna blow your spot up when they see how sick this looks."

I nod and thank him.

"You know you could triple your business overnight if you know how to market yourself on social media. I can help you

do it.”

It seems like a sincere offer, but I think of all those yuppies and dumbass kids I keep seeing breaking out into ridiculous TikTok dances in the streets and I shudder. I’ll pass. Word of mouth is good enough for me.

“I appreciate that, dude, but I’m doing all right. I wouldn’t want to overwhelm myself. If the shop got too busy, I’d have to hire another artist, and I don’t trust anyone to tattoo my designs the way I do.”

“That’s cool, man. I can respect that,” he says before fist bumping me and leaving.

I watch him leave. It’s been a good day. Barely past mid-afternoon on a Saturday and I’ve made a thousand bucks from the three customers I’ve had that day. I do post pictures of my designs at times, when I particularly like one of them. It’s for my own reasons though. Tattoos are my artform and I love the job, but I don’t need the approval of strangers to feel good about my work.

It’s still a personal space and I like protecting my privacy. I probably could generate a lot more income if I tried. I know my work is exceptional enough, but I’d rather go hungry than sell myself out for likes and follows.

Plus, the Cali Ryderz Club has brought me more than enough business ever since I came back to town. The shop is quiet after Ricardo leaves and I’m alone again. It’s getting late, so I hang around a little longer. I check out social media and find the kid’s Instagram page. He wasn’t lying. He really has that

many followers. I learn that he's one of those weirdos that goes around asking random people stuff on the street and handing out cash for inane things, like getting general-knowledge questions right.

I switch to Facebook and see that Ricardo's just as popular there. It amazes me how such a juvenile-looking kid is able to generate this much popularity. He's good looking, but in my day, a kid like him would end up stuffed inside a locker instead of being famous.

I'm friends with Brian on Facebook. This causes his annoying sister to show up as a suggested friend. I go through her posts. They're as boring as she seems. Her pictures are marked with captions about how wonderful her kids are at school or how proud she is of being a teacher. There's also a ton of posts of her and her boyfriend. I'd only met the guy briefly earlier that day, but I could tell he was a real douchebag. I'm still stewing a little when I think of how he put his hand on my shoulder. If he only knew how overwhelming the urge to twist his wrist and break his fingers had been, he'd know better than to lay his hands on someone again. I see he's a psychiatrist. That explains a lot. He seemed like a pretentious asshole, and now I know he's one for sure. I scroll through Adeline's photos. As much as her prissy attitude annoys me, I can't ignore how hot she's become.

The girl I remember as a kid was very different. Back when we were younger, she used to follow us around because she loved sports and was a tomboy. She was a loudmouth even back then, all skinned knees and full of fun. I never saw her

much after she hit puberty. That's when her parents got a hold of her. It was all about books and good grades after that, and we grew apart.

I spend the rest of my afternoon working on some sketches for the Cali club. It gets late and I lock up and head to my place. The ride is liberating as always. I ride a 2021 Ducati Panigale. It's a monster and looks mean as hell. I designed the awesome graphics on it myself. The roar of the engine and the powerful vibration of it beneath my legs are a thrill every time I ride it.

The city is lit up and dazzling as it blurs by me. When I stop at intersections, my black helmet and the throbbing engine cause a stir wherever I am. I reach my apartment block and slow down as I near it. The engine echoes too much in the underground residents' parking, so I take it easy and coax myself into my spot without too much revving. I'm not a showboat. I love riding for the exhilaration, not to turn heads. I park and make my way up to my studio apartment.

It's neat, but only consists of a single open plan room and a bathroom. My bed sits in one corner, my kitchen in another, and my lounging area in the center. I keep a little desk and lamp at one end to work on my sketches. I shower, get into my boxers and spend the rest of the night relaxing. I could have called up one of my lady friends, but it's been a long day and I just feel like chilling. I think over the events of that day. I call Brian.

"Hey, dude."

"What's up, man? Everything okay?"

“Yeah. It’s cool. I haven’t seen Adi since last night. I think she went straight over to her boyfriend’s place. I’m hitting a meeting up with my sponsor. Did you wanna hang out tonight?”

He doesn’t know what she’s done yet. I think it over and realize I don’t want to make any more trouble, even though she deserves it.

“Nah, man. I’m cool. Been a long day. Thinking of just staying in tonight and chilling.”

“Yeah, cool, man. I’ll call you up tomorrow.”

“Alright. Sweet, bro. I’ll talk to you then.”

I check social media again. Ricardo’s posted the tattoo and it’s already got over ten thousand likes. I feel better now. I was pretty angry earlier when I confronted Adeline. My mood has softened since. I know she’s trying to look out for Brian in her own stupid way, so I decide to cut her some slack. I check out her Facebook profile again. This time, I scroll past all the boring pictures and find one of her from last Halloween.

“Now that’s more like it,” I think as I see her dressed up as Wonder Woman.

She looks sexy as hell in the tight red and blue costume, and it gets me a little frisky just looking at it. The more I look at her photos, the more I begin to desire her.

It’s annoying, since I find her so irritating in person. By the time I’m done fawning over her legs and bikini bod from vacation photos she’s posted, it’s late and I’m exhausted. I fall

asleep with her still on my mind. Before I know it, I'm dreaming of her too.

She's leaning on my motorcycle. I'm leaning over her and revving the engine. She squeals with delight at the sound and the vibration of the engine under her body. I lean in and kiss her. Her tight little body squirms around underneath mine and it feels great. I lift my head up and tear apart the top she wears. She's braless underneath it, and I'm excited at the sight of her C-cups.

I lick one of her breasts and feel the nipple harden immediately as I get hard. The bike's engine is running on its own, revving more and more as I rip off the rest of her clothes and stick my fingers inside her. I work her good with them until she's moaning and screaming out, the sound of the bike growing louder with her pleasure. I pull her to the edge of the seat and spread her legs apart roughly. The sight of her smooth, sexy slit drives me wild. Just as I'm about to enter her, I awaken with a shock. I'll never admit it to her, or Brian, but I'm left sweating, shocked, and unable to believe just how badly I want to fuck my best friend's little sister.

Chapter Eight

Adeline

I'm on the brown leather couch beside Doctor Bourne, who sits on his green high-back chair with his legs crossed, as usual. He has his notepad in hand and peers at me through his glasses. He's mild-mannered and speaks with a gentle voice. I'm glad he has that kind of demeanor, otherwise I might have struggled to open up to him more. On some level, I know I probably should have been in therapy a long time ago, but it's only recently that the idea came up.

It was a weird feeling to suddenly be faced with my own mental health shortcomings. Before that, I simply thought of myself as driven. The anxiety and pressure I always put myself under were just a way of staying motivated, to keep up with the standards I set for myself. Seeing Doctor Bourne has shown me that there was a lot more to my issues than that. I was an onion, and with every layer of it we peeled together, I felt like I learned something new about myself.

"How're things being with Brian?" he asks.

I sigh. “Things were going well, but now I worry they might be derailed.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s started hanging out with his best friend from school again. The guy’s a biker and a tattoo artist. When we were all in high school, he was always out partying and chasing girls. They were like a couple of rebels together. He moved away many years ago, and I guess they just lost contact after Brian started going downhill with his addiction. But now he’s back in town, and I’m worried he might become a negative influence.”

As I say all this, I realize one part was wrong. Cole never really chased girls. Now that I think about it clearly, girls were always chasing him.

“Has this friend done anything that’s outwardly threatened his recovery?” asks Doctor Bourne.

“No. But I mean, he’s a biker and a tattoo artist.”

“Why’s that a problem?”

“You know the kind of lifestyle people like that are into?”

“I’m not sure I follow, Adeline. Sounds to me like you’re choosing to make snap judgments based on circumstantial reasoning, at best.”

“So, I shouldn’t worry that they’re hanging out?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying maybe take some time to hang out with them together and see for yourself. If they’ve

been friends since childhood, I doubt this Cole person would wish any harm to Brian. As for the tattooing and biking, that's not a reason to assume he's naturally wayward."

I think about it for a moment. The thought of hanging out with Cole isn't especially appealing. I explain what happened since he's been back in the picture, ending at the bookstore fiasco from the day before. Doctor Bourne seems contemplative for a moment. His graying hair and beard make him look wisened, and the way his therapy room is furnished gives it an aura of a professor's study that only adds to the old-fashioned vibe. The place always smells of incense too, but I like it because the aromas always make me feel calmer.

"In all honesty, Adeline, I think you were wrong on both occasions."

I've been feeling that way, and he confirms it.

"You had no right to go to his place of business in such a combative manner or check out his club, or try to bribe them. Do you remember us speaking about the pressure your parents put on you your whole life?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's becoming clearer to me with every session that the effect it had on you was good and bad. On the one hand, you became a very motivated, hard-working person. On the other hand, you also place too much pressure on yourself to be perfect. As a result, if things don't go your way, it scares you. Your response is to always try and control the world around you, even when some situations are beyond your control."

I think about it. I realize again that he's right.

I nod my head and he continues, "What happened with Duncan afterwards?"

"I had to explain everything to him. Needless to say, he wasn't happy. He's been lecturing me again about cutting Brian loose and not trying to control him. He also hates Cole, and now there's this whole jealousy issue I have to deal with. He and Cole are completely different. I wouldn't have thought of Cole as the kind of person he'd worry about. I mean, he's a psychiatrist and Cole's a biker. They're like chalk and cheese."

Doctor Bourne scribbles something in his notepad. How I wish I could get my hands on his notes and know what he really thinks sometimes.

"Did you ever think that maybe he's jealous because Cole has known you longer than he has? Since you say Cole was always a ladies man, maybe Duncan sees him as a threat in this way?"

I feel like that's silly.

"We've been together for over a year. I thought we'd be past petty stuff like jealousy by now. I'm actually wondering if things ought to start going further between us now."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Why?" I'm puzzled now.

"I seem to recall a session where you lamented how Duncan causes you to feel at times. In all honesty, it seems that you too have a little work to do before thinking about making things more serious and permanent."

“What do you think I should do, then?”

“I think maybe you, Duncan, Brian, and Cole should all try hanging out sometime. Right now, you’re a diverse bunch. Four very different people, all thrown together by circumstance. Since staying away from each other isn’t an option, perhaps you should try coexisting. If Duncan and Cole are as different as you say, let them get to know each other and see if they can find common ground. At the same time, it will give you a chance to observe how Brian and Cole are with each other in a neutral setting and see if there are any red flags there.”

“I suppose I could try and set up something like that. I do feel like I need to apologize to Brian for how I’ve been acting. I just get so overwhelmed by the fear that he might relapse. His addiction got so bad the last time that he tried to take his own life. That fear of losing him has stuck with me ever since. His sponsor called me last night to confirm that he’s been going to all his meetings regularly.”

Doctor Bourne listens intently and then asks, “Anything you’d like to add to that?”

“I guess I owe Cole an apology too. It was wrong of me to judge him like that. He just sort of annoys me though. I feel like things were going just fine and then he shows up and now everything feels precarious again.”

Doctor Bourne scribbles something in his pad again. I groan inwardly, wondering what he must be thinking now.

“It’s likely that you simply fell into a comfort zone. Cole’s reentry into your life was just a change at a time when you needed stability and consistency the most. Change is a normal part of life, though. For now, I’d advise you to try and keep an open mind.”

I let these words sink in. I never thought about it like that. That was certainly the last thing I wanted. It was just so hard to take a hand off the wheel. I was so accustomed to controlling my own destiny. Finding my brother overdosed and dying in front of me six months ago had sent my anxiety levels through the roof. My need to control him had only grown since then.

“I’ll try my best. It’s just hard sometimes. Brian is my brother and I love him to death, but sometimes I just feel like he doesn’t truly understand how much he put us all through. My family and I were victims in all this too.”

He nods and creases his forehead a little. It’s the look he has when he’s trying to find the right words.

“Addiction is a disease that pulls everyone around it into its whirlpool. There’s nothing you can do to fix it right now, other than to just show Brian as much love and support as you can.”

I nod again. I’ve come to enjoy my sessions with Doctor Bourne, and I respect his advice. He has an uncanny way of seeming like he can read my mind at times. He does it now with his next question.

“I take it Duncan still doesn’t know you’re seeing me?”

“No, and I’d like it to stay that way. He’d probably feel hurt or angry if he knew I was seeing someone else. The thing is, I know he’s a brilliant psychiatrist too, but he’s a new-age psychiatrist, so I know he’d just try to get me into an exhausting mindfulness and meditation routine.”

“Those kinds of therapies are known to be very effective in healing trauma and overcoming all kinds of mental conditions, like anxiety.”

“Not the way Duncan does it. With him, it becomes more of an obsession and I can’t keep up with it the way he wants me to. It actually ends up causing me more anxiety. Right now, all I want is to just be heard.”

“Okay then. In any case, it wouldn’t be ethical for him to treat you anyway. You’re his partner, so it’s a conflict of interest. In any event, everything we say here is covered by doctor-patient confidentiality. He’s your partner and I’m your therapist, that’s all that matters, so don’t worry about it.”

I feel a lot better now and nod again.

“Have you given more thought to trying anxiety medication?”

“I have, and I really don’t want to be on any pills. I’m too afraid of getting hooked on them because of Brian.”

“Well, you are quite right. Addiction is genetic, but I’m sure it would have manifested by now if you were an addict. As far as I can tell, you won the genetic lottery between the two of you on that count. Okay, so no meds. That’s fine with me, but if your anxiety starts getting worse or if you ever begin feeling

completely out of control, I want you to let me know and we can think about revisiting the idea again later.”

“Okay. Thank you, I will.”

“You said earlier that your parents are coming over to stay with you guys for a bit tomorrow? How do you think that will go?”

“I’m hoping it will be better, but it also means Brian may get a bit overwhelmed. This is the first time they’re going to be seeing him since he completed his treatment.”

“Try to use the opportunity for all of you to bond a little more as a family. That can help an addict regain a sense of security and comfort in their lives.”

I tell him I will and with that, our time comes to an end. I leave his office feeling a lot better, as usual, but also have new things on my mind now.

Duncan was very upset when I told him about going to the motorcycle club. Meeting Cole in person hadn’t helped. I head home and arrive there a few minutes later. It’s a dull and cloudy day today. As I enter my place, Brian is there on the couch. He’s been a bit icy toward me since yesterday, but I hope we can change that.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

He nods and I sit next to him.

“Mom and dad are coming over tomorrow. It’s going to be tough, but please try and understand that they both love you as much as I do and they just want what’s best for you.”

His expression grows a little more tender and I'm glad to see it.

"I know, sis."

"I'm also sorry for the way I've been acting. I know now that you're doing well, so I'm going to try my best to let you run your own recovery, with as little interference from me as possible, okay?"

He sighs. "Thank you. I know you're trying your best and I appreciate everything you're doing for me, more than you'll ever know."

We hug it out and I feel a huge weight lifted now that he's forgiven me. I suddenly notice he's wearing a nice collared shirt, is shaven, and has his hair tied neatly behind his head.

"You going out?" I ask.

"Yeah. Cole and I are going to check out the new place that just opened up on Valencia Street," he says a little tentatively.

My first instinct is to worry and get mad, but I hold it back and think about what Doctor Bourne advised me.

"Okay. Do you think I could tag along with you guys?"

He seems surprised, but then smiles.

"Yeah, sure. Why not? I suppose it will be just like old times, when we were all kids and used to hang out."

"Okay, great. Would it be okay if I invited Duncan?"

Brian groans. "I've got nothing against him, but he's kind of a geek. Do you really think he'd even want to come?"

I nod. "I know he can be a bit boring sometimes, but I'll ask him anyway. I don't want him to feel left out. Besides, if we're all gonna be seeing each other often now, it might be a good idea to all get to know each other a little better."

He agrees and I go to my room to get changed. While I'm picking out an outfit I call Duncan. At first, he doesn't sound very interested. Then I mention that Cole will be there and it all changes in an instant.

"I'll meet you there," he says.

Chapter Nine

Adeline

It's a little after 8 p.m. when Brian and I arrive at the place. Cole is already there, his motorcycle parked on the side of the road. The sky has cleared up and though it's dark now, there's a full moon out. Between this and the swanky neon lights that brighten up the famous party district, the street is blanketed in an atmosphere of excitement. Under the lights, I have to admit that Cole looks sexy as hell.

I'm annoyed as usual that I think this. He stands next to his bike. He's dressed in a plain black leather jacket, and is clean-shaven, with a white muscle shirt, and skinny jeans. His hair seems neater today, and I realize as we get closer that he's wearing a little bit of gel and has it styled. His lips look pink and fuller under the lights as he puffs on a cigarette. He sees us approach and smiles, flicking it away.

He looks me over, a little too obviously. I can't help but feel a little pleased about this. I'm dressed in a black off-the-shoulder mini dress with a triangular midriff cutaway starting just below my breasts and ending just above my belly button.

Cole's eyes linger on the bare flesh showing there, and then they make their way down to my legs and the black pencil-heel boots I have on. Luckily, Brian doesn't seem to notice.

"Hi," Cole says.

I find it weird that he's smiling, since the last time I saw him, he was so pissed at me. I greet him back. He and Brian shake hands and shoulder bump each other.

"How'd you manage to make this happen?" Cole asks Brian with a nod in my direction.

Brian laughs. "Believe it or not, she asked to come."

"Will wonders never cease? Just when I thought little Miss Fancy Pants was too much of a square to be seen with riff raff like us."

"Oh, shut up. I'm only here because Duncan's coming too," I retort, keeping my tone light and friendly so he knows I'm not here to fight with anyone tonight.

He sticks out his hand.

"Since you're finally showing some promise, how about a truce then?"

I laugh and shake his hand.

"Okay. Deal."

His hands feel large and strong. Even with my heels, I still barely reach his shoulder. I can't believe how tall and big he's gotten compared to how I remember him.

"So, where's the shrink?" he asks.

There's a slight tone of condescension in his voice, but I ignore it.

“On his way.”

Between Brian and I, we've made Cole and Duncan promise to behave civilly tonight. It's pretty obvious they both seem to disdain each other on sight. I look around the street. It's a bustling night. The new spot is called Dominus and seems to have attracted an eclectic bunch of people to the opening night. I see sophisticated types, hipsters, younger people, and people more our age of all colors and orientations standing in line. There's a row of cars parked along the street and

everyone is chatting away in excitable tones. As we wait to go in, I see Duncan's car pull up. He's dressed in formal pants, a coat, and a black turtleneck.

As he reaches us, there's a slightly icy stare between him and Cole, but they shake hands nonetheless. Duncan kisses me and places a hand around my waist. It's such an obvious way of marking his territory that he may as well have peed on my leg and bared his teeth.

“Nice outfit,” he says.

I smile, but then realize his tone is a little sarcastic. He also seems a little pouty and irritable now. It makes me irritable as well. Brian and Cole begin talking among themselves and the line starts to move. Once we get in, I glance around. The place is great. It has a long bar stretching from the inside to the back, a line of booths that run parallel to it, and a few other seating areas that are set up in little circles. It's noisy and already

packed. There's loud music playing and a stairway that leads to a second floor where people are already dancing.

We take a seat at one of the booths. Cole takes off his jacket. The sleeves on his shirt are short and I get a glimpse of his muscular arms up close. His tattoos are beautiful and cover most of his arms. They depict dark, gothic-looking images of angels and demons, skulls, a colorful bird, two angelic babies, and a truly haunting image of a warrior woman with red hair.

"Your tattoos look cool," I say, shouting a bit so he can hear me over the music.

"Thanks."

"Did you do them yourself?" I ask and then realize it's a stupid question.

My anxiety seems to be in full swing tonight. He looks at me a little oddly but answers calmly.

"No. The guy that taught me how to ink did the actual tattoos, but I designed them myself," he says.

I nod, but Duncan stays quiet and looks moody the whole time. I understand a little better now why Brian was apprehensive to have him here. He glances around at some of the scantily dressed women with a look of disdain on his face. This isn't his scene. He prefers quieter, more sophisticated places. We've been to so many of those kinds of places. It feels good to be in a place where I don't feel out of place and judged for once. Cole suddenly claps his hands together.

“Okay folks, so what are we drinking? I’m in the mood to get fucked up tonight.”

I feel Duncan shift uncomfortably to my right. I’ve never heard him cuss in my life. It’s obvious by the look on his face now that he thinks of Cole as trashy for doing so. I glance awkwardly at Brian. He’s beaming and reads me instantly.

“It’s fine, sis. I’m okay, really. You’re allowed to drink around me. I don’t need alcohol to have a nice time these days.”

He glances around appreciatively. “Judging by how fine some of the ladies in here are, I think I’ll be just fine,” he adds with a playful wink.

I nod. “Okay then. I’ll have a gin and tonic with a twist.”

Cole nods and looks at Duncan.

“Glass of red wine,” he mutters.

Now it’s Cole’s turn to wear a look of disdain, but he nods anyway.

“Just a coke with ice for me, buddy,” says Brian.

“You guys are boring, man. I’m getting some shots with that.”

He leaves and heads to the bar. I try to make some chit-chat with Duncan about work but he stays moody and uptight. Cole returns a short while later with a tray that carries all our drinks and a whiskey on the rocks for himself. I notice mine has a mint leaf in it and the glass looks fancy. There are also about ten shots of silver tequila, sachets of salt, and a saucer filled with lemon slices on the tray. Cole starts handing out the

drinks. He places all the shots in the center of the table and starts pushing some toward Duncan and me. Duncan pushes his back and shakes his head. Cole looks at me and I shake my head too.

“Aw c’mon. It’s President’s Day tomorrow. There’s no school.”

I realize he’s right and think, *Why not?*

“Okay fine, I’ll just have one.”

We take a shot of tequila together. Brian is in a boisterous mood and swaying along to the music in his seat. I love seeing him look so happy and alive. He has a twinkle in his eye that I haven’t seen in a long time and seems genuinely happy. It lifts my mood a lot and I have one more shot of tequila with Cole before sipping my gin. Duncan just sits there the whole time looking annoyed and being unsociable. His sour mood irritates me. We never do stuff like this, and I’m having fun, so I decided to ignore his mood and enjoy myself. Cole downs another two shots himself. I rarely ever drink since Brian came to live with me.

Cole has an air of confidence and a comfortability about everything he does. It makes me want to keep up, so I have another tequila with him. I’m starting to feel a little tipsy now, but I’m enjoying it. The DJ is killing it with the music and I’m in the mood to dance. I drag Duncan with us and we all head upstairs. By now, Cole’s downed his whiskey and most of the shots. There’s another bar upstairs and the party is in full swing, strobe lights flashing in a rhythmic way that makes

everyone seem cool as they sway to the vibey house music. We stop at the bar again and Cole orders more shots. I'm getting drunk pretty fast.

"Come dance with me, babe," I yell in Duncan's ear.

He shakes his head and I try to drag him onto the dance floor, but he stays stiff as a board. Feeling annoyed, I go dancing with Brian and Cole. They're both having a great time. I dance a bit, but the feeling is muted. I look at Duncan and he's glaring at me, a look of disgust on his face.

He walks over and shouts in my ear, "I feel like I don't even know who you are right now. I'm leaving."

He turns and walks away. I grab his arm and try to stop him, but he shrugs my hand off and leaves without looking back. I'm left feeling like an idiot and angry as hell for the way he's been acting all night. Brian has found a girl to talk to and they head off toward a booth together. It's just Cole and me now.

"Are you okay?" he asks in my ear.

I nod.

"Your boyfriend is kind of an asshole."

Even though I agree tonight, I'm annoyed by his candor.

"Only I'm allowed to call him that," I yell in his ear, and he laughs.

The yelling in each other's ears has brought us closer. I'm really drunk now and angry with Duncan. The music makes me forget my irritation for a while and we somehow end up

holding each other and dancing. Cole has his hands on my waist and our bodies are pressing into each other. Between the lights, the liquor, and the music, I feel my inhibitions lower, and I love how good his strong hands feel on my body. The music takes over and we dance together like this for a while.

As much as I hate to admit it, I feel a deep lust awakening. I can actually feel his penis protruding beneath his jeans now and know he's as turned on as I am. It's like some kind of animal magnetism has drawn us to each other, despite how much we'd been resenting each other before tonight. Each time we grind together, I pull his waist tightly to me and feel jolts of pleasure as his engorged groin presses into me. He turns me around, holds me around my tummy, moves his hands all around my belly and waist, and sways in circles behind me as we dirty dance together.

The feeling of his groin pressing into my butt and the rhythmic grinding of his body against mine gets me so wet, He spins me around again and I'm staring at his face.

His eyes are dark and mysterious as he stares at me, his lips look so kissable that it takes every bit of willpower I have left to keep myself from pulling his face toward me and kissing him. We dance like this for a while and I spot Brian making his way through the crowd. We break apart just as Brian gets there. He's smiling and teasing us.

“Looks like you two are finally getting along?”

We laugh and both pass it off like we were just talking while dancing.

“I think I preferred it better when you were fighting,” Brian says.

We all laugh and the moment passes. Brian stays with us for the rest of the night and we keep our distance from each other. By the end of it, I’m embarrassed and ashamed of my lust for Cole. It’s all so unlike me. A part of me still wants to hate him, but it’s harder now. Try as I might, I can’t help but feel something stir inside myself for him. It’s like a deep desire that envelops me, and I find myself unable to believe that a significant part of me actually wants Cole Lyons.

Chapter Ten

Cole

I can't get her out of my head, no matter how hard I try. The other night was an unexpected surprise. I thought she'd be more uptight, and behave more like her personality-deprived boyfriend did. Instead, she let loose and showed some promise that the free-spirited girl I once knew may still be lurking underneath the pretentious control freak she'd become.

My mind has been so consumed since that night. The quiet streets outside are only broken by the sound of cars passing by the shop. It leaves me with nothing to do for now, nothing but entertain myself with thoughts of my best friend's sister. The memory of her sexy body rubbing against mine on the dance floor captures all my attention. Maybe it was the alcohol, but I was surprised by how much I wanted her. If Brian hadn't been there, I shudder to think how far things might have gone.

"He's your best friend, and she's his sister," I tell myself.

The thought keeps nagging at me like the uncomfortable truth it is. Brian really is doing well, but he's still in a vulnerable

place and I don't want to rock the boat. Maybe it's just lust, but I can't help feeling drawn to her.

"Is she just another conquest?" I ask myself.

Some deeper part of me wants to feel like that isn't true. I hope it isn't. It certainly wouldn't be worth the drama if that was all my infatuation with her really was. I mull things over more. There's another aspect to all this that bugs me. I'm still annoyed by her opinion of me. It taints the entire picture and adds another layer of complexity to it. That part alone should make me want to stay away. I'm not usually the type to care what people think of me. Yet, with her, it bugs me more deeply than I'd ever admit.

The recent obsession I have with Adeline is beginning to drive me a little nuts. I think about what I should do. Brian hasn't been in touch much since that night. His parents are in town. I know what a pair of ball breakers they can be, so I don't begrudge him the radio silence we've had since. I've been dying to speak to Adeline since that night, to find a way to change her opinion of me and maybe even loosen her up a little more. She's proven to me that she can let her hair down and have some fun. I wonder if there's a way I can kill two birds with one stone and realize that there may be. The added bonus is that if she agrees, it will allow me to spend some more time with her.

I whip out my phone and fire off a text to Brian.

Hey buddy, how's it going?

He replies after a short while.

All good man. Just tryna keep the folks entertained! lol

Cool man. How's Adi doing? She got pretty wasted that night at Dominus.

There's a slight delay and I worry that he may be mulling over what I'm trying to get to.

She's all right. I think she actually enjoyed herself, but she'll never admit it.

Would you mind texting me her number? I wanted to say hi and check on her, to make sure she isn't too pissed with me for all the tequila.

I wince as I read it, hoping it comes across as casual as I try to make it.

The phone goes quiet again. I wonder if I've crossed the line. He did see me holding her and dancing that night. I thank my lucky stars he wasn't around to see us grinding away before that. I've never broken the bro code. Then again, I've never wanted to more in my life. I feel my phone vibrate in my hand and tentatively check it. I breathe a sigh of relief. He's sent the number. My guilt eats away at me, but I console myself with the fact that I haven't actually done anything yet.

"It's what you're thinking of doing," I say in my head.

Thanks man. I'll catch up with you soon. Say hi to the folks for me, I reply.

I stare at her number, mentally psyching myself up. It feels weird, since usually I don't flinch when it comes to interactions with a woman. This one's a little close to home

though. It wasn't so long ago that I was still in a shitty place mentally, after the whole Alisha and Charlie debacle. A part of me thinks of bailing on this whole plan, but then I catch sight of her contact picture. It's one of her in a summer dress, on a bustling day at Pier 39. Her dainty frame and athletic legs call to me from it and I make up my mind in an instant.

Hey you. It's Cole. Just checking in if you're okay since that night? I text her.

I wait, and it all feels a little weird. I'm tense and I hate that she has this effect on me. Finally, my phone lights up and the little burst of dopamine I get from it is a little scary.

Hi Cole. Yeah, I'm doing okay. Thanks.

I think it over and decide that texting isn't the right way to go about this. I can't judge her tone over text, and I'm far more convincing with my voice.

Do you mind if I call you real quick? There's something I wanna talk to you about.

There's a slight pause, and then, *Yeah, sure.*

I hit the call button on our conversation screen, and she answers on the second ring.

“What's up?” her airy voice floats into my ear like velvet.

“I've been thinking. Brian's important to both of us. I don't like it that you think I'm a bad influence on him. I think I need a chance to change that opinion.”

“Um. Okay. What exactly are you getting at?”

“I have a deal for you.”

There’s silence for a moment. Finally, she says, “Go on.”

“I propose that we should spend some time together. Give me one week to show you that I’m not this reckless frat boy type, or whatever it is you think I am. I see myself as someone that just enjoys living his life. I think it would be good for you to have a taste of that yourself.”

I wait. I’m happy that she’s chosen to even talk to me. It’s a sign that she doesn’t completely regret that night. I was worried that she would wake up the next day and want to stay far away from me, or pretend those sparks never flew between us. I’ve had many experiences in the past where supposedly chaste women have suspended their morals for a night with me. I was like a guilty pleasure to them, something they’d never admit they actually liked or desired, as a tonic to their mundane existences. As a consequence, many of them would disappear afterward or make a big deal about how it was just a one-time thing and how much they regretted it.

“Uh, okay. I’m not quite sure I understand what this all entails?”

“Just agree to hang out with me for a week, and I’ll choose fun stuff for us to do. It will help you see that I’m not just some one-dimensional person. How does that sound?”

“A little weird, to be honest,” she replies, sounding uncertain.

“What’s your biggest concern?” I ask, to address the elephant in the room.

“How does Duncan fit into all this?”

“Who says he needs to fit into it at all?” I ask, stirring up her irritation.

Somewhere inside her I can sense there’s a rebel waiting to be unleashed, so I play on it. She goes quiet after my comment and I know I have her on the hook. Her own need to not be judged as a prude is her biggest weakness, and I know it.

“What’s the worst that can happen? You worried you might actually have some real fun? I mean, it’s not that I don’t respect you being a teacher or anything, but I look at your life and wonder what happened to that fun-loving chick I used to hang out with when we were all younger. Now you spend your whole day with kids and your afternoons are split between looking after your adult brother and spending time with your boyfriend, who let’s face it, isn’t the most exciting person in the world.”

I take the shot and wait to see where it lands.

“Okay, tough guy. You’re on. You think I’m incapable of having fun. You set the agenda for the week and I’ll follow it.”

Bullseye!

“See, I knew the old Adi was still in there somewhere. I’ll think about what we can do this week and get back to you. Remember, you promised to do exactly as I say.”

I leave it there. I know how to quit while I’m ahead. Plus, I don’t want to give her too much time to reconsider.

“Okay. Bye.”

She hangs up and I'm not entirely sure what to make of her tone. Was it curiosity? Excitement? I hope so. I know somewhere inside her right now there has to be a part of her that's mulled over the thought of this week leading to something else. Either way, she went for it, so that's got to mean something. I lean into my chair, put my legs up on my reception counter and start thinking about all the things we can do this week to draw her out of her shell.

"First, I'll get her to ride my bike," I think.

The possibilities excite me and my mind curls into a devious mental smile.

Chapter Eleven

Adeline

I'm floored by my own enjoyment of this. It's so out of character for me. It's the strangest feeling and yet, somehow, also the most stimulating thing I've ever done.

"Why do I find this all so enthralling?" I ask myself as the wind whips my face.

It's a huge thrill. The vibration of the engine between my legs is exhilarating. At first, it was terrifying, and I definitely screamed, loudly. Now, after all the patience it required of him, I feel so much more comfortable. My mind is waging some kind of war with itself; one that's caught between how wrong this all feels, and how much I'm enjoying it at the same time. I don't even know why I agreed to it. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Something clicked inside my head and his words struck a nerve that day when he said I didn't know how to have fun. Doctor Bourne's advice also played a part. I'd never allowed myself to give in to impulses and just have fun for such a long time, but I feel guilty too. I know this wasn't what Doctor Bourne meant.

“Why does Cole have this effect on me?” I wonder.

Since that day when he'd basically dared me to have fun, we'd chatted some more. I found myself feeling a pang of excitement whenever his name showed up in my texts. Now, I was lying to everyone and skipping work so I could spend time with him. This was supposed to be a way for him to prove he wasn't reckless and a danger to Brian's recovery. Somewhere along the way, it's morphed into a way for me to prove I'm not dowdy and boring. I don't even know who I'm trying to prove it to anymore, him or myself.

Riding his motorcycle is a jolt of excitement, an adrenaline rush. As wonderful as the experience has been, there is something more to all of this. *He* is the rush. With the way he showed me how to handle the motorcycle, his firmness and strength made me realize how much I'd been lacking a real dose of unadulterated masculinity in my life. It was surprisingly easy, although he sat behind me the whole time and guided my hands, patiently showing me how to ease off the clutch and control my shifts. After two hours of circling around in an abandoned lot, we took to the road. Feeling his strong arms looping around me and my back pressed up against his chest gave me a feeling of comfort as we rode around together that way. He even gave me my own helmet.

“That's it. Gently now, slow down a little. Downshift for the turn. You're doing great,” were the kinds of things he'd say.

He towered over me, so it wasn't difficult for him to keep an eye on the road for us both while also helping me control the

powerful machine. We stop at a gas station first, fill up, and grab some snacks. He insists on paying. We manage to make our way out of the city and across the bridge without issue. The scenery soon gives way to a more rural road that leads up to Mount Tamalpais State Park. The scenery is beautiful, and a dusky orange glow covers the sky in a dazzling hue. It's late afternoon now when Cole takes over.

"Hop over. It gets a little bumpy on the fire road trails," he says.

It's my turn to hold him now as he expertly steers the motorcycle over the dirt roads. His stomach feels taut, and I can feel the strong little blocks of his abdominal muscles through his shirt. The scenery here is breathtaking, with lush green trees and beautiful hills as far as the eye can see. He seems to know his way around the park, and we soon end up at a somewhat secluded spot. We park and he pulls out a large table cloth and unfolds it across a spot. It's near some bushes, but close enough to the massive lake that sits ahead of us that we can still see the shimmering water. For a moment, I get the crazy notion that he thinks we're going to make love on the cloth, but I'm soon embarrassed by this thought when he starts laying out the snacks and I realize he's set up an impromptu picnic. We spend some time snacking on chips and beer, laughing and talking about the good old days. I never thought I'd actually enjoy a beer. Between the sun and the sips I was taking, my head was feeling a little light. It's such a different side of him than the one I saw when he first came back to town. The last rays of sunshine glint off his sunglasses, the

light making his dark hair look more brown than black. I'm dressed in hiking pants and boots, like he told me to, but he seems just as comfortable in jeans and sneakers, even out here amongst all this natural beauty.

"Remember that time Brian tried to ask Krissy Scott out and she turned him down in front of the whole cafeteria?" he was asking.

I laugh as I think back to the memory.

"Yeah. Gosh, he stayed away from school for days after that."

He goes silent again and then turns to me earnestly.

"So? What do you think so far? Am I as dangerous as you thought I was?"

I smile. "No. I'm sorry for judging you so harshly."

He nods and smiles back. His teeth are so white and straight, and his grin is infectious.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What happened back then? Before your family moved away, I mean. I heard that there was some kind of trouble. It all happened so suddenly. It was like one day you were always around and the next you were just gone."

His expression softens and he looks a little ponderous.

"Look, that's not something I want to discuss right now. I promise, I will tell you about it sometime, but just not today, okay. Besides, this was supposed to be a day of fun."

I sense something in his tone. I've obviously touched on a nerve, so I leave it alone.

"Okay, Mr. Fun Man, what do we do next?"

He nods towards the lake. "We jump in there."

"What? You never said anything about that. I didn't carry any swimwear!" I say.

The combination of the sun and the beers make me feel a little woozy, but it's a nice feeling. Everything around me feels so comforting, and the lighter my head gets, the more distinctly I begin to notice his strong arms and shoulders as he sits next to me.

"That's the point, silly. We've gotta skinny dip."

My jaw drops, but before I can even contemplate how outrageous an act that would be, he's up on his feet and already has his shirt off. The dazzling sunlight, my light head, and the way it all combines to cast his body into a hypnotic figure before me is enrapturing. I barely have time to register that he's actually doing it. He unbuckles his jeans, kicks off his boots, and drops his pants and underwear. I'm flustered by his confidence, but not surprised at all when I see what he's working with. His member hangs there, large and proud, and I'm almost paralyzed by the perfect tone of every muscle on his body. His chest has a few tattoos too, and together, his looks, muscular body, ink, and nudity are like a magnificent painting standing before me. He turns and I see that his shapely buttocks are just as enticing. Without another word he runs and jumps into the lake. I'm still stunned when he

emerges from the water and waves me in. In any other world or lifetime, I'd be frozen with fear and self-consciousness, but he somehow makes all these things disappear. Shocked by my own bravado, I peel off all my clothes and join him. We swim together, splash each other with water, and end up close enough for our naked bodies to touch under water.

The feeling is electrifying. It's like my entire world is suspended for a moment, and he and I are the only two people that exist. He looks so dazzling in the afternoon sun that I feel an overwhelming urge to kiss him. The way he stares at me, a look of pure desire plastered on his face, I know he's thinking the same thing. Before either of us can lean in, we hear some voices in the distance.

“Oh shit, that could be rangers.”

We hastily get out of the water and throw our clothes over our wet bodies. It feels colder now and I shiver a little. Afterward, we see that it's just a large hiking group. They wave and greet us but linger nearby. Laughing to ourselves over the close call, we pack up our stuff and decide to call it day. As we're just about to leave again I get a text from Duncan and the blissful escape of the day evaporates instantly. I suddenly realize how crazy this has all been. I can't believe that I've allowed myself to get so swept up by it all so easily. I feel ashamed of my actions. If my family, Brian, or Duncan only knew—I shudder at the thought of how they'd react. As we make our way back onto the trail, I hold onto Cole a little uneasily now. My mind is at war again. This day has felt like being in a happy dream, but reality is still there and I have to face it again.

Chapter Twelve

Cole

It's been a few days and I've felt confused and annoyed by her silence. I've tried texting and calling, but she's been ignoring me. I know now that she's feeling conflicted inside. I am too, but I have more clarity. I'm not tied down to a life that can't be upended. I'm free to do with my life as I please. Yet, all I want to do with it right now is spend more time with her. This is infuriating. I wrap up my real feelings in a lie, pretending that all I feel is annoyance that she's renegeing on our deal. This was meant to be a week of fun, an agreement that we'd spend more time together. Instead, we had one awesome day together and then she ghosted me. All that was going to change. I wasn't completely clear on why I felt so motivated to keep pushing things like this. Maybe it was backlash from Alisha's betrayal.

"Was I really that wounded by it?" I wonder.

What Alisha and Charlie did had certainly stung. I wasn't completely surprised by it though. Alisha had always shown signs that she couldn't be trusted. She loved dressing up and

flirting. I'd just always thought she was an attention seeker and loved toying with men's feelings because it made her feel good about herself. She was a damaged person. But she'd acted on it too, and worst of all, with my own brother. Him, I wasn't surprised by. He'd always been jealous of me as kids. I was younger, but still got all the attention from girls. He'd realized early on that he could never compete in that aspect, so he threw himself headlong into his ambitions and became a millionaire. He found a string of women for whom money meant more than looks. Finally, the dweeb was getting some tail of his own.

Alisha was personal though. He regularly flaunted his wealth and the women he got because of it. I'd accepted that he'd bested me at last on that front, but it wasn't enough for him. Whether Alisha realized it or not, I knew the truth. She was a personal conquest. A way of silently sending me a message.

“I can have any woman I want now, even yours!”

He'd always resented me since we became step-brothers. It was different for me because I'd always looked to him as a real brother. I wondered what Alisha would do when he eventually grew bored with her and discarded her like all the others. We might have fought like cats and dogs, but we had good times too. I was really beginning to think about settling down when it all happened. The timing had been rushed, but my pursuit of Adeline was a more nuanced situation. I might actually be falling for her, but I'm certainly not ready to admit that to her or myself. I reach her apartment door and knock. The door opens and there she is, looking radiant again, even

though she's in sweatpants and has her hair tied, wearing no makeup, and looking irritated.

"Hi," I say.

"What are you doing here?" she says in a hushed voice.

"Can I come in?"

"Is that Cole?" I hear Brian's voice behind her, and she has no choice but to open the door and let me in.

I walk in and greet Brian warmly. He also seems a little irritable and weary. I'm not sure if that's because of me or his parents. I get my answer soon enough as they walk in.

"Oh. Hello. I didn't know we had company," Mrs Coffman greets me.

Her fake surprise is ridiculous, since it's a small apartment and she had to have heard the intercom ring.

"Hi, Mrs. Coffman. It's good to see you after so long," I say as I leave my helmet on the counter and hug her.

She hugs me back stiffly. I remember her as being warm and kind, but it's obvious to me now that times have changed. She looks a lot older than I remember, still slim and attractive for a woman her age, with the same blonde hair as her children, and sparkling blue eyes. Only now, her face is lined with age and she looks a lot more frail. Her husband stands behind her. James Coffman was always a severe man, serious looking, and never one to be lighthearted about anything. He was balding now and dressed in a golfer tucked into brown pants that hung over his protruding gut.

“Hi, Mr. Coffman,” I say, extending my hand.

He shakes it firmly, but looks me straight in the eye. I don’t flinch and stare at him back, maintaining eye contact the whole time. I remember his lectures when we were younger. He was an executive for a major Japanese automobile manufacturer. His years in the boardroom had turned him into a perpetual marketer.

“You always shake a man’s hand firmly, and maintain eye contact,” he used to say.

Little lessons like that were his way of always trying to turn Brian and I into upstanding men. He wanted to groom Brian to follow in his footsteps. Neither of Brian’s parents ever seemed to realize that he was more of a creative, introverted person, and not the machismo business type they wanted him to be. I sit and we all talk for a bit. Mr. Coffman fires questions at me about what I’m doing with my life these days. The old bastard seems to think we’re still in school and he can talk down to me like I’m some kind of wayward kid.

“I own a tattoo shop,” I say.

He looks deep in thought, his eyes scouring my arms disapprovingly. Her mother’s no better. She keeps casting furtive glances at my helmet, like it’s a bomb or something. No one offers me anything to eat or drink. It’s clear after a few minutes that I’m not welcome. Brian and Adeline seem nervous and on edge. We all talk a bit and it’s painfully obvious that I’ve probably been a topic that’s come up since their folks have been in town. I’m saddened by Brian’s cold

shoulder and wonder if he suspects that something between Adeline and I has stirred up. Then again, his parents have always placed him on the back burner. Instead of looking down on me and thinking I'm responsible for his downfall, neither of them contemplate the roles they might have played in always making him feel like a loser compared to Adeline. He's confessed all this to me, but they have no way of knowing that. While her parents are busy on a call with their friends from the city and Brian leaves to take a shower, I turn to Adeline. She looks guilty and doesn't meet my eyes.

"I thought we had a deal," I snap.

There's no point pretending like I don't care and I want her to know I'm not just going to give her a free pass.

"Look, things have been getting complicated," she says quietly.

"That's got nothing to do with anything. You made me a promise and I want you to fulfill it."

She looks up at me now, surprised by my candor and forcefulness.

"I know. I'll give you your five days. It just might take two weeks for you to get it. My parents being around has been... difficult."

I feel no sympathy for her situation because I know she's using it as a scapegoat to stay away from me.

"I don't care. A deal is a deal," I say with a slightly raised voice.

She hushes me and glances behind her to the hallway where the bedrooms are. I don't know why I'm being so harsh, but a part of me feels like she needs it. Her bubble needs to burst so she can be free of the constraints of her life that she seems so oblivious to.

"Keep your voice down, please."

"Why? Because you're embarrassed of me? Because I'm that wrench thrown into your perfect world? Because you're afraid to admit you actually feel something for me?"

She looks pissed now.

"Let's not get things mixed up here. I have a boyfriend, and if things go well, he'll be my fiancé soon. Whatever you think I feel for you is in your head."

I'm stung but I don't show it.

"Whatever. A deal is still a deal. If you don't feel anything for me then prove it and stick to your word. You have nothing to fear from hanging out with me if you feel nothing for me."

My logic gets to her. I've played on her stubbornness and pride. It works.

"Fine. I'll meet you at your shop tomorrow after work. What do you want me to do next?"

"Since you'll be at my shop, that's a simple one. You're gonna get a tattoo."

Her eyes widen.

"I can't do that. My parents and Brian will see it."

“Not if it’s on your upper thigh.”

I use her father’s trick and stare at her eyes unblinkingly, because I want her to know I’m being purposely provocative. It seems to have some effect. The show of force by me makes her not want to back down or seem weak and prove me right.

“Fine. But you have to leave now.”

I get up and grab my helmet.

“Tell Brian I’ll see him soon,” I say.

She opens the door and walks me to it.

“You’d better show up tomorrow.”

“I will,” she says in a hushed voice just as I notice her mom walk back into the living room. The last thing I see before she closes the door is the annoyed look on her mother’s face. I wonder how she’s going to explain herself to everyone.

Chapter Thirteen

Cole

I clear my schedule and don't take any new appointments for that afternoon. As the time ticks close to 3:30 p.m., I find myself waiting expectantly for her. It's been a warm day and I'm in jeans and a sleeveless shirt again. I've spent the last two hours going through my best designs for women. Most of them are darker and too over-the-top for her personality. For the first time I find myself not liking my own designs. None of them do justice to her or capture her the way I want them to. Eventually, I design one from scratch and I'm finally happy when I see how it comes out. The detail and color I add make it pop, and it's beautiful. Finally I hear the bell chime out front and head there. She's at the reception desk and looks amazing. She wears a dark pencil skirt, heels, and a white button down blouse with long sleeves. Her hair looks fresh and is set neatly. The side of the skirt has a high slit and my eyes rove over her thighs.

"Come this way," I say and nod toward the back.

She follows without a word, but I can see she's nervous. I'm happy that she's shown up. All my anger and irritation from the other day has disappeared. I'm like a slave to her rhythm. It's astonishing how eager I am to be okay with her again simply because she's graced me with her attention and not pushed me away. This isn't me.

"Why does she have such a hold on me?" I think.

It doesn't matter now. The tinge of excitement I felt as soon as she entered the door tells me everything I need to know. We head to the back and I point her to the tattoo mattress. She lies down on it.

"Is this going to hurt?" she asks.

"That depends on what your threshold for pain is."

Her expression hardens with resolve and now she'll never squirm no matter how hard it hurts. Given what a headstrong person she can be, I'm surprised at how easily manipulated she is.

"Can I see some designs and pick out something?"

"No."

She looks surprised.

"I've designed something for you."

"Can I see it?"

"No."

She looks annoyed now and I'm enjoying toying with her.

"How do I know if I'll even like it?"

“You’re just gonna have to trust me. Besides, part of being fun and spontaneous means getting out of your comfort zone.”

The moment I challenge her, she goes quiet with the same look of resolve in her face. Without another word, she hikes up her skirt without the least bit of embarrassment on her face. Her thighs are like two sensual pillars of pure desire to me as I see them up close. She’s pulled the skirt up so high that I can see she wears a white lace G-string underneath the skirt. She kicks off her heels and I see that her beautiful feet end in perfectly painted crimson toe nails that match her bright lipstick. Now I know why her ghosting left me so annoyed. I know that she wants me too. She’s obviously been so deliberate in the way she’s chosen her outfit and makeup today. Everything’s been designed for maximum sex appeal. I also know if I bring it up she’ll just pretend I’m flattering myself too much, so I don’t say a word. My eyes do linger on the space between her legs though. There’s no point in feeling awkward, since we’ve already seen each other naked.

“Well, are we doing this or not?” she asks in an impatient tone.

The white of her underwear complements her milky skin and it’s all I can do not to get a raging hard-on right there in front of her. I look away and ready my equipment, slap on my gloves, stretch her legs apart, and dab on the rubbing alcohol—all with the precision of a surgeon. It’s like a game now and I know if I flinch first she’ll gain the upper hand and turn this all on me.

I get the sketch ready and place the stenciled outline exactly where I want it, on the inside of her right thigh. She stares at me when I'm done. As much as I want to keep up the game, a moment of softness and honesty breaks through.

"I'm glad you came today," I say softly.

Her eyes soften too and she nods, leans back, and closes her eyes.

It's just me and her legs spread before me now, my face inches from her crotch as I fire up my machine and begin working on the outline. She never flinches, moves, or makes a single sound the whole time. To keep from becoming entranced by her open legs, I speak to her as I work.

"Is everything okay with your folks? I can tell they're pretty pissed with me."

My honesty and candor is deliberate. There's no point in pretending.

"They're just worried about Brian," her soft voice floats back to my ears over the hum of the machine.

"Why does everyone assume I'm not?"

There's silence, so I go on.

"He's been through a lot, but he's also pretty determined to get things right this time. Instead of doubting him all the time, maybe you all should just try supporting and encouraging him."

Still silence from her.

“It’s crazy how much the two of you bend over backward to please your parents. Especially you. I’ve never seen you look more stressed than when I showed up yesterday.”

Finally, I hit the mark. I expected a denial or anger. Instead she goes with blunt honesty and I appreciate that she opens up.

“It’s just the way we were raised. Dad’s success has always been something he’s wanted us to emulate. They have high standards and expectations, that’s all.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice your own happiness to meet them. I remember you being so carefree, but then high school started and it was like you changed overnight. You pushed yourself so much after that.”

“So? What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, except that it made Brian feel left behind, and like a constant loser in comparison to you. The more he failed and you excelled, the more he internalized his own failures and felt like an outcast.”

“What makes you think that? Are you a tattoo artist and a shrink too now?”

“He told me all this himself.”

That shuts her up. I can almost hear the wheels turning in her brain, wondering why Brian’s never told her any of this, yet chose to confide it all in me.

“Speaking of shrinks. What the hell do you see in Duncan?” I decide to go for a direct approach. I’m done with games.

“Duncan’s highly accomplished. He did his residency at Stanford Medical. He’s sophisticated, and already on his way to being one of the most accomplished psychiatrists in the state.”

“I didn’t ask for his resume. I asked, what do *you* see in him?”

Silence again. I know I’ve annoyed her again. My questions are hitting a nerve, but I don’t expect her below-the-belt reaction to shut me up.

“I love him. I think he may propose before my parents leave town, since he’s asked to see my dad next week.”

That stung. I try to brush it off, but I’m annoyed and feel outraged that she’s actually thinking of marrying that joker. I go silent and focus on the tattoo. Despite how erotically charged the whole situation is, I ignore my lust for her now and keep working out of irritation now more than anything else. When I’m done, I rub it down one last time and survey my work. It’s stunning.

“It’s done,” I say.

I grab my little mirror and hold it at the right spot so that she can see the reflection as she sits up. I see her eyes widen. She wakes up, walks over to the large wall mirror, lifts her skirt and checks it out in more detail. I get a small glance at her ass as she does this. Given the underwear she’s wearing, I feel myself harden against my will and look away to suppress it.

“Oh my goodness. It’s amazing. What does the writing mean?”

It's a lotus flower with shades of deep pink and green shading. Below it is the symbol गुरु).

“It's Sanskrit for ‘teacher.’”

I see her expression grow milder as she realizes how much care and thought I've put into the design to personalize it for her.

“I—I love it,” she says and I can hear the sincerity in her tone.

She pulls up her skirt and I give her a copy of the little printouts I keep that explains how to care for a new tattoo. I walk her out and her mind seems consumed now. I can tell from the contemplative look on her face now that she's feeling conflicted. It doesn't matter. I feel irritable and harsh. She turns before she leaves and tries to pay me for the tattoo. I refuse and let her out. She leaves a little reluctantly, sensing that I'm not happy.

“It doesn't matter,” I think as she leaves.

Whatever happens from here on, at least I'll always know that she'll be forced to think of me every time she's naked and looks down at her leg—and so will Duncan.

Chapter Fourteen

Adeline

Mr. Johnson's always given me a creepy vibe, ever since I was younger. He and his wife are old family friends of our parents. That meant they were often over at our house or we were always at theirs when I was growing up. I never told my dad how Mr. Johnson used to try to corner me whenever I came out of the bathroom and talk to me as a teenager. He never said anything overtly incriminating, but there was just a vibe I got from him; one that told me he was undoubtedly one of those dirty old men that had a thing for underage girls.

As I watch him across the dinner table at the chic restaurant we're in, the memories come flooding back. He's fatter, older, and even more pompous than I remember. He keeps stealing glances at me across the table while his hapless wife sips her red wine and stares at the handsome waiter herself.

"I can't believe how much you've grown," he kept saying when he first saw me that evening.

The hug I was forced to give him felt loaded with desire from his side. I hated the way he rubbed his hand up and down my lower back, lingering a little over the top of my buttocks, and pressed his hips into me.

“So, what do you say, Brian. Would you like to come work for me?” he was asking Brian.

I could see the tension written all over my brother’s face as he shifted uncomfortably.

“Um. Can I think about it, Mr. Johnson?”

“What’s there to think about, son? Allan’s offering you a golden opportunity to get yourself together at a great company with a steady salary, room for growth, and a chance to finally make something of your life.”

I wince inwardly as I recognize the pained look in Brian’s eyes. Ever since Cole told me what Brian confided in him, it’s like the rose-tinted glasses I’ve had on throughout our childhood have suddenly been removed. I’ve become hyper aware of all the little needling and denigrating comments my parents have made to Brian all his life.

“I know, dad,” Brian says meekly before turning to Mr. Johnson.

“And believe me, I’m very grateful for the offer, sir, but if it’s okay with you, I’d like to try and find something on my own and in a field that I’m more passionate about.”

Dad snorts derisively. Mom just sits there and says nothing as usual. Her silence is an indication of the fact that she agrees

with my father.

“You can’t always live like a bum, Brian. At some point, a man has to get out there and make something of himself.”

It’s all I can handle now that my eyes are open.

“I don’t think you’re being fair, dad. Brian’s been working really hard and he’s doing great. Right now, I think he just needs some stability and to pursue something that makes him happy.”

My father turns to me with mild surprise while Brian gives me a grateful look.

“Really, Adi? Now you’re encouraging him to be some kind of vagrant too?”

The restaurant is one of those bougie places that my parents always love going to. It’s the kind of place Duncan would love too, but he’s been so distant with me lately I’m not even sure where we stand anymore. No wonder my parents love him so much. He’s just like them. Only now, for the first time, I can clearly see all the patterns of subtle psychological trauma they’ve been metering out over the course of our lives. I see Brian’s face turn a little sour. The gentle clinking and buzzing of polite conversations from the other tables provide an austere ambience. This isn’t the kind of place to make a scene, but I can tell my parents have been pushing things too far all night.

“You know what? Dad, Mr. Johnson, thank you for a *lovely* evening as usual, but I think I’m going to excuse myself now and go home.”

Mom gasps as Brian removes his napkin and yanks off the tie and sport coat he's been wearing. It's a ridiculous look, and so far from who he is. His hair was neatly tied, but he loosens it now and lets it hang out.

"Brian, sit down. What are you doing?" dad tells him in a commanding tone.

It might have worked when we were younger, but even I'm fed up with pretending.

"No, dad. I think I've had enough of being the black sheep of this damn family. I'd rather live like a hobo and crash on Adi's couch all my life than force myself into some mindless corporate job and slave away all day like a robot. I'm not like you and I never will be. Maybe, it's time you finally accept that, because I have."

With that, he slams his napkin on the table, stands up with a loud, abrupt scraping of his chair and leaves. I can feel the embarrassment burned into my parents' faces. I'm buoyed by Brian finally standing up to them.

"I'm leaving too."

Both my parents look at me pleadingly. I ignore them and walk away. It's a wild feeling, but I'm glad this finally happened. I catch up to Brian. He's fuming, but I grab his arm and hang onto it, resting my head on his shoulder. Instead of a cab, we decide to walk home. I'm comforted by the cool night air and buzz of the city.

"Are you okay?" I ask him as we walk.

He nods.

“Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner. I get it. I can see now what you’ve had to put up with from them your whole life. Just know that you never have to feel that way with me. I’ll always be proud of you, no matter what.”

He smiles and I see a familiar twinkle in his eye. The only times I’ve ever seen him happy were during sibling moments like these, which were interspersed among all the other crap from our childhoods. We stay quiet like that for a while and eventually make it to my place. Once inside, we both change and reconvene in the living room.

“There’s something we need to talk about.”

He nods, and I decide to open up. I tell him all about the deal I’ve made with Cole and apologize to him for judging their friendship now. I even show him the tattoo. At first, he’s happy and even impressed that I’m actually choosing to live a little, but then a frown crosses his face.

“It’s beautiful, sis, but like, why’d you get it there, of all places?”

“I’m a teacher, plus I didn’t want mom and dad to see it.”

“So basically, Cole got to stare at your open legs the whole time while he was doing it.”

I see the worried look on his face and know where this is going.

“He’s a good guy, but you’re not completely wrong. When it comes to women, he’s always been, well, let’s just say he likes hopping around. Plus, you’ve got a good thing going with Duncan. I don’t get why you’re putting that at risk.”

“Trust me. There is nothing going on between Cole and me.”

“I hope so, sis. He’s the only real friend I have right now, and I’m glad that the two of you are finally getting along, but that doesn’t mean I’d be okay with anything starting up between you two. I’ve burned too many bridges, so please don’t ever complicate the friendship we have. There aren’t many other people I can turn to right now. ”

I remain quiet for a bit. I don’t know how much of what I said was true, but I also know that the truth would be far harder to explain right now, so I stick with it.

Chapter Fifteen

Adeline

I've tried my best to stay away from Cole, but now it's like I've been left isolated. The thrill of standing up to my parents has worn off. I don't regret it, but now I have to contend with them being pissed at me. I got an ear lashing from my father about how disappointed and embarrassed they were. For the first time, I feel like more of a black sheep than Brian.

With Brian, he's been spending so much time at his sober meetings, hanging out, and attending retreats with them that I've hardly seen him. Duncan's still being distant. Far from proposing like I thought he might, I learn that he instead had a conversation with my parents behind my back about how disappointed he is in the way I've been behaving. That caused a fight between us, and now we haven't really been talking for a while. Duncan is stubborn, so I know he'll never apologize. I'm also pissed though, so we both just ended up taking an unofficial break from each other.

It's been pretty lonely, so when Cole texts, I'm actually happy this time. He apologizes for getting angry and the way he left things when I got the tattoo.

My tattoo has healed now and every time I look at it I'm stunned by how beautiful it is. Cole invites me to his motorcycle club. He says they're having some event there as a toy drive for needy kids. I'm happy to be a part of that, so I decide to join him there. The event was great. It raised a lot of money and toys for a local orphanage. The club members are actually a fun bunch of people now that I've stopped judging and actually gotten to know them. We all head to their clubhouse after. It turns out to be a surprisingly huge lake house situated out of town in a private lodge.

"Are you sure you're okay being here?" Cole asks.

We've been sipping beers and I've had a blast.

"You can stop asking me that, really. I had a great time. I'm sorry I judged you all before. The people here are great and I think what you guys do for the community is amazing."

He smiles. The place is buzzing with bikers and revelers. The lake house is expansive and gorgeous, surrounded by lush greenery and huge woods that make it feel so cut off from the buzz of the city. He's very popular and people seem to respect him a lot. A lot of people have naturally assumed we're a couple.

"So, how long have you two been together?" Earl the bartender from the club's bar asks.

Everyone treats me so much nicer now that Cole has explained my change of heart about what they do. His question brings up an awkward moment.

“Oh, uh, no, we’re not together, Earl. We’re just hanging out,” Cole answers for us.

“Really? Well, you guys sure look great together. I’m surprised you haven’t snapped this one up already.”

Cole smiles, but looks a little awkward too. I’m dressed in a short black skirt and heels. The slit at the side makes the bottom of my tattoo just barely visible. It’s nice not having to hide it for once. A new group joins us. They’re all boisterous and a lot of fun. When they find out we’re not a couple, things suddenly take a different turn.

One of the men that’s there is young and handsome. They all dress alike with black jeans, leather jackets, and muscle shirts, but there’s a kind of style with this guy that sticks out. He introduces himself as Jason.

“Wait, so you guys aren’t together?” Jason asks with an interested look at me.

“No,” Cole says, but this time he sounds a little irritated about it.

Jason invites us to have a few drinks with his friends. I’m a little tipsy by this point and enjoying myself.

“Cole, can I interest you in a shot?” Jason asks as he starts pouring whiskey for everyone in our group.

“I’ll stick with the beer,” he responds.

“How about you, little lady? Feel like putting some fire in that belly?” he asks, shaking the bottle in my direction.

“Sure. Just a single though, please.”

He smiles and pours a double instead, but adds lots of ice and a twist. I sip it and he hangs out near my side.

“So, I hear you’re a teacher. What grades do you teach?”

“Elementary. Mostly fourth graders.”

He’s certainly good looking. I’ll give him that, but he’s also trying too hard and being a little obvious. Somehow he just doesn’t have the same natural appeal to me that Cole’s had in this last week.

“I sure wish I had a teacher like you when I was a kid,” Jason says with a laugh and a suggestive glance over my outfit.

I laugh, but I’m also starting to feel a little uncomfortable now. Also, Cole doesn’t look very happy.

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“Are you kidding? If I had a teacher like you, I would have probably gone to school every day, and then I wouldn’t have flunked,” he says with a huge guffaw.

His friends join in, and soon, I’m the center of attention, wedged between Jason and three other men that are all surrounding me and trying to chat me up. Largely out of guilt for my previous behavior, I’ve been happily joining in on all the activities to show the club members that I’m not that judgmental, boring person they met the day I tried to bribe them.

“Would you like to shoot some pool?” one of Jason’s friends asks.

“Sure.”

I join them at a table that sits in the center of the bar area of the house. Cole follows, but sits on a stool nearby and watches. Jason and his three friends are all surprised that I’ve never played before. They show me how to set up the balls and then I try to break. They’re all watching me and it makes me nervous. On my first two attempts, the cue slips at the last moment and I slice the white ball.

Jason says, “Here, lemme show you.”

He walks over, stands behind me, bends me lower over the ball, and holds my hands to help me guide the cue. I can feel him pressing into my butt a little with his jeans, but I try to ignore it. It’s a little obvious that it’s just an excuse to try and be a little intimate with me. As he guides my hands softly, he talks beside my ear, his face pressed against the side of mine.

“What you wanna do is get down to eye level with the ball.”

The way he does it is a little creepy, and I don’t like how much he’s touching me now, so I try to move him a bit and stand up. That’s as far as he got. From the corner of my eye, I see Cole stand up. He’s at least a foot taller than Jason and much beefier. He yanks Jason off me forcefully.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, man?” he growls at him and shoves him hard.

Jason looks stunned, pushing his wavy brown hair out of his eyes.

“What the fuck, dude?” he exclaims. “You said you guys weren’t together!”

“That doesn’t give you the right to put your hands on her and treat her like she’s just a piece of meat.”

I’m afraid now and hope there isn’t going to be a fight, but luckily Jason puts his hands up defensively.

“All right man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it, I was just trying to show her how to shoot the ball right.”

Cole pulls me away and says, “Let’s go somewhere else.”

I look apologetically at Jason as we leave, but inside, I can’t help but feel a thrill of excitement for the way that Cole stuck up for me.

Chapter Sixteen

Cole

I lead her by the arm, a little forcefully. We head down the long hallway and into one of the empty rooms. This side of the house is far away from the din of the party that's taking place in the lounge and entertainment areas. The inside of the room is neat and well kept. It has wooden floors, a large window that's covered with a charcoal gray curtain, some built-in cupboards, and a large bed that's neatly made up, like the kind you'd find in a hotel room. It even has throw pillows and a dark runner over the crisp white duvet. She takes a seat at the foot of the bed as I close the door and go to sit beside her. My head feels a little light and the smell of her perfume is intoxicating.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Yes. You didn't have to do that.”

I sigh and a pained expression crosses my face. The brightly lit room throws her features into sharper focus and she looks dazzling this close up.

“I know. I just kind of lost it when I saw his hands on you,” I admit.

“What does all this even mean? We’re not together, Cole. You’re not supposed to be getting jealous of other men being around me,” she says.

I sigh again. The situation between us seems to become more complicated every time we’re together, and I feel like a lot of things need to be cleared up or said openly.

“Believe me, I’m painfully aware that you’re not mine to protect.”

“Does that bother you?” she asks.

I decide to go with honesty.

“Yes. It bothers me, okay? I’ve never felt this caught up over a woman this soon, ever. I can’t understand it. I never felt this way about you when we were younger, but now it’s like I can’t get you out of my head. Knowing that you’re with that idiot boyfriend of yours, or that other men desire you, just makes me crazy.”

Her eyes grow wide. Until this point I thought all there was between us was lust. Somehow, the vulnerability of me admitting these things makes me desire her more.

“I sometimes feel the same way,” she finally admits.

I’m tired of the lies I’ve been telling myself and decide to just be honest for once. I can’t help it, and my curiosity gets the better of me.

“Tell me about him.”

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend. What’s it like being with him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, physically. I mean, do you two even have sex?”

I can tell she wants to be mad at me for being so obtuse and assuming so much, but she can’t do it because I’m onto something. She thinks for a moment and then provides me with more honesty than I could have ever hoped for. My instincts were right.

“Sex with him isn’t bad, but it’s sometimes flat. He likes to light scented candles and set a mood. He prefers it to be slow and passionate and calls it making love.”

Her words cause my desire to take over, and suddenly I don’t care about the pretense or our surrounding issues. They all seem like annoying distractions now, excuses to keep me away from what I’ve really been craving. I place our glasses on the little table that stands to the side of us. Before she can say another word, I take her face in my hands and pull her towards me. I kiss her deeply and she doesn’t resist. I stick my tongue inside her mouth and use it to gently lick hers. When we break apart, she’s breathing more heavily and the same desire I feel is written all over her face.

“I want you to say what I know you’ve been thinking ever since we started hanging out.”

At first, she stays silent, but then I see a determined look cross her face.

“You want to know what it’s like with Duncan? He makes love to me,” she says.

With the look she gives me, she knows that I know why she’s telling me all this.

“So, what is it that you really want?” I ask.

She stares me right in the eyes and says it without blinking.

“For once, I just want to be fucked. Hard.”

My eyes widen slightly, even though I’ve sensed this from her for weeks now. She should be feeling embarrassed. It’s out of character for her to be this blunt and provocative, but there’s an ease and chemistry between us that I know she feels too. I don’t say a word. I get up, walk over to the door, and lock it. She stands up too and walks toward me to kiss me again. Instead, I grab her by the shoulders and fling her onto the bed. I kick off my shoes, take off my shirt and lie on top of her. For a moment I can tell she’s a little afraid and tries to squirm, but when I grab her wrists and pin them to the bed, she suddenly understands and submits to me.

As I kiss her neck and lick my way down, I feel waves of pleasure course through my body. I move back up and kiss her on the lips again. Her hands are still pinned down, but I know she’s enjoying the power I exert over her body. She kisses me hard and bites my lip so hard she draws the tiniest spot of blood. This only eggs me on and I yank off her dress, bra, and

underwear before unbuttoning my jeans and kicking them to the floor. We're completely naked now and the touch of her body against mine is magical.

She's practically dripping with desire and the sight of it between her legs stiffens me so much it almost hurts. As I kiss and lick my way over her breasts, I suck on her nipples and bite them hard. The pain intertwines with the pleasure and I know she loves it even more.

"Harder baby, bite it harder," she says breathlessly.

I oblige, biting down harder on her nipples, licking them into an ecstasy I know she's never known before. I stop as she gets breathless again. I lick my way to her belly button. As I go lower, her instincts cause her to hold her legs together stiffly. I take my hands off her wrists and use them to pry her legs apart. She's catching on quickly, as she realizes resisting me only makes the experience more pleasurable. I glance down at her opening and feel almost uncontrollable desire. She's waxed and the smooth skin there turns me on even more. I bury my face between her legs and she squeezes my head tightly between her legs as I lap her up.

I concentrate on her clit first, licking and nibbling gently on it with quick and fast strokes of my tongue before sticking my tongue inside her. She moans with pleasure and grabs my head, pressing me down harder onto her. After a few more minutes of this, her nails dig into my shoulders as she shudders and climaxes with a loud moan of pleasure. I lift my head up and she pushes me until I'm lying down and she's on

top. She kisses my body and runs her tongue all over my chest and stomach. As she goes lower, my legs spasm with pleasure. Her hands find my dick and she strokes it hard for a few seconds before lowering her head and taking it into her mouth. The pleasure is immense, and I'm writhing around now as she works me good, with the hungry desire of someone who's been waiting to give in to her deepest desires. As much as I love being in her mouth, the pleasure builds until I know that if she keeps going, this is all going to be over sooner than either of us want it to.

I pull her head and yank her toward me. She kisses me hard again and bites my lips as I grab handfuls of her hair. She straightens up, reaches below her waist and grabs me again, gently guiding me inside her. The moment I'm in, she lets out another groan of pleasure and starts riding me. She reaches down and grabs my neck with her hands, squeezing tightly, choking me as she rides me harder and with more gusto than before. I use my left hand to hold her by the neck too, exerting just enough pressure to heighten the pleasure without actually hurting her. With my right hand free, I use it to slap the back of her ass as hard as I can. It causes her to convulse with more pleasure and the side of her thigh turns red.

"YES! YES! Fuck me harder!" she yells out.

She works me rougher and I continue spurring her on with more spanking until the sides of her thighs and buttocks are almost maroon. We lock eyes and she continues to bounce harder and harder, she looks at me with eyes that are laced with wild desire.

“This is how I wanted to be fucked,” she screams out.

The mixture of pain and pleasure from our wild fucking reaches a crescendo for us both. We climax at the same time and she crumples into a heap on my chest, breathing as loudly as I am and loving every second of the release she’s just experienced, just as much as I do.

Chapter Seventeen

Adeline

I awake with a shock and realize we've both fallen asleep at the lake house. Finding myself naked next to Cole is a jarring feeling. I don't regret what we've done, even though I should. God knows I certainly enjoyed it. Still, it's a weird feeling somewhere between shame and fear when I wake up and realize the full extent of what I've allowed to happen. Duncan and I are technically not together, but it still feels like cheating. I've never done that before. I've also never been as provocative and verbal in bed, yet it felt so good to let loose and give into desires I've held back for so long without even being consciously aware of them.

Now it's time to face the consequences. My parents are staying at my place, so there's no point trying to sneak in. They're gonna know that I've been out all night. Sure enough, I check my phone and see a ton of missed calls and texts from them and Brian. I text Brian back.

"Tell mom and dad I'm safe and I'll be home soon."

My stirring causes Cole to wake up just as I'm putting my underwear back on. He smiles, looks at my naked body approvingly, and tries to pull me back to bed.

"I can't," I say, gently pushing him away.

He seems a little annoyed, but also concerned.

"Are you okay?"

I nod. "Last night was...great," I finally say.

A part of me wants to say it was a mistake, but I don't want him to feel angry or used. It was, in a way, but I also did enjoy myself—a little too much. He nods and we both get changed.

"Do you wanna grab some breakfast?"

I shake my head.

"I've gotta get home. My parents and Brian are freaking out."

His expression turns more concerned as he realizes there is a price to pay for what happened between us. The walk out of the lake house is shameful to say the least. Whoever stayed from the night before whoop and cheer us, making jokes when they see us emerge from the room together, hair tousled, and looking as guilty as a couple of high school kids caught making out. I don't see Jason and his friends. I guess they left after the altercation. Cole and I endure the ribbing, but it's all in good fun. Some of the seniors from the club offer us some breakfast, but I explain that I have to go and thank them for a lovely time.

The ride home is quiet. I hang on to Cole's chest and rest my head on his back, feeling a little morose. He drops me off at his shop and I hop into a cab from there. He tries to kiss me goodbye, but I turn my head slightly and he gets me on the cheek. I hope he isn't angry. I just need some time to figure this all out and face my family.

As I trudge up to my apartment door ten minutes later, I feel a sense of foreboding. I use my keys to let myself in and find Brian, my parents, and Duncan sitting in the lounge. They all stare at me a little coldly. Well, everyone except Brian. He looks at me with confusion.

"Hi," I greet them hopefully.

"Where the hell were you?" dad asks me.

"I was just out, dad. I'm a grown woman. I'm allowed to go out if I want to," I say back a little irritably.

"This isn't like you, Adi," mom piles on.

I'm annoyed at being treated like a child. I know my behavior has been off, but I'm going through something and no one seems to get it. I decided that I need to finally get this all off my chest. I tell them everything about the deal with Cole, but I leave out all the parts where he and I shared intimate moments. I concentrate on making it all seem like it was for Brian's own good. I end by telling them that I think Cole is good for Brian and I can see now that he's not a bad person and I shouldn't have judged him. It seemed convincing in my head, but the glaring truth is there within the details, and no one's buying my watered down version.

“So you’ve just been parading yourself around town with him and you think that’s appropriate?” dad asks.

They’re all dressed neatly in summer clothes. The curtains are opened and bright sunshine cascades into my living room. It feels like being in a spotlight. Also, my disheveled clothes and appearance, smudged make-up, and tousled hair is a dead giveaway. I feel their eyes rake over every inch of me. For once, I feel like I’m the addict and this is an intervention. I have more sympathy for what Brian must have felt like now when we did an actual one for him. It’s not a good feeling.

“I can be friends with whoever I want,” I say in a rebellious tone.

I’m even making excuses and being defensive about my behavior now too. It only adds to the inquisitorial nature of the meeting.

“You see what I’ve been saying? She’s not herself,” Duncan says to my parents.

I’m annoyed by his input.

“Why are you even here? I thought we weren’t even together anymore?” I snap in his direction.

“So that makes it okay for you to just gallivant around with that creep? Did our relationship mean that little to you?” he asks in his most scathing psychiatrist voice.

I’m stung, because he’s right. I know it’s all been extremely inappropriate, yet I can’t help but feel attacked and persecuted for just trying to live for once. I do feel bad. It’s not that

Duncan means nothing to me. He's a decent person, always treated me respectfully, and provided stability. On some level, I'll always care about him. Only now, I've just recently realized how much I've been compromising to keep us steady. All the sacrifices I make to assimilate into his idealized version of a partner has been exhausting. It reminds me of my entire childhood, trying to always please my parents. Brian remains quiet the whole time and I feel guilt again. I guess the fact that Duncan is here and still trying to turn me around means he still cares. A few weeks ago, before Cole arrived, I'd been so sure that he was going to propose soon. I wonder if that option is still on the table, or if I even still want him to anymore. I get my answer soon enough as he turns to my dad again and keeps talking.

“You see what I mean? I can't understand where all this childishness is coming from? I've been trying to hide my disappointment in her behavior for some time now, but this is too much.”

His words stir something inside me and I fill with rage. He acts as if he's been tolerating me this whole time. I think of all the quiet dinners, boring shows, art exhibitions, bougie friends, and mind-numbing theater acts he's dragged me to over the past year and change—all the preaching, needling, and subtle put downs about how I should dress and speak and behave. I glare at him and my rebellion comes back in an instant. Suddenly, I can't stand the sight of him. If we weren't over before, I know for sure that we are now.

Chapter Eighteen

Cole

Once again, I've been patient and given her a few days to think things over and hopefully make peace with it. I feel like we've finally broken new ground after what happened. I know she's struggling with feelings of guilt, but I intend to remedy that. There's no need to feel shame if we're together. I want things to be official between us. I like her more than I ever imagined I would, so that's the right thing to do—show her she's not just some fling or conquest to me.

I hope by now that she's opened up to her family and Brian and told them about us. What's the point in hiding anymore? At least that way, we can be together without needing to hide or sneak around anymore. The wind howling past me as I speed toward her apartment is less of a thrill when I think about her. Her face floats at the forefront of my consciousness and my ride feels empty without the touch of her arms around me and her head resting on my back. I've fallen hard in a short space of time. It's not altogether logical to me, but it is what it

is and I've decided to accept it. At the very least, I can no longer deny it.

Brian hasn't talked to me much since I spent the night with her. I tried to speak to him, but he's been a little vague and distant. I hope we can all work this out between us. I don't want to lose him as a friend. Despite the way the world judges him for being an addict, I know he's a good person underneath his habits; someone who's more caring and sincere than most people I know. I want to make him understand that I value Adi. It will take some convincing, because he knows me too well, and he's been around for enough of my other conquests to know that I usually don't stick around. With Alisha, things were different, but he never met her, so he doesn't know how much I've actually changed since our younger days.

I reach her place and someone buzzes me in. I get to the door. She opens it.

"Brian, Cole's here," she says.

I'm immediately annoyed because she's acting like I'm just here to see him. She's in a robe and bedroom slippers, and she looks very tired and strained. I've never seen her look more ordinary and uninviting. She lets me in and I see Brian in the living room. He greets me, but it's a little stiff and it doesn't seem like he wants to talk much. Her parents come into the room and it's clear they're all dressed up and on their way out somewhere.

"Oh, Cole. Hi," her mom says awkwardly as she notices me.

Her father scowls, but I ignore it. I just say hi back and let them leave.

“Adi, I left some casserole in the oven if you guys get hungry,” she says.

Adeline just nods. She looks exhausted.

“Thanks mom,” Brian says from the couch.

“Brian would you help us carry some stuff to the car?” Mr. Coffman asks him.

He nods and gets up. They disappear into the other room and come out carrying some boxes.

“Do you guys need an extra hand?” I ask.

Mr. Coffman shakes his head and they all leave, although the tension is palpable. It’s just her and me now.

“Are you okay? You look like shit,” I say honestly.

“Thanks. You always know just what to say,” she replies sarcastically.

She looks annoyed with me and it’s infuriating. She’s the one that keeps denying what there is between us, but somehow I’m the bad guy, like I’m forcing her into this.

“I take it you haven’t told anyone about us yet?”

She looks surprised.

“Why the hell would I tell anyone about us? In any case, we just had sex. There is no *us*.”

Her words sting and I suddenly feel resentful. I've never fully ever understood women, and now I know why. Their bouts of suddenly changed behavior make it so difficult to align our emotions sometimes. Every time we were together it was clear that she wanted to be with me and actually enjoyed herself. Yet, now it was clear that she was so conflicted that it was causing her to switch back into denial mode.

"I see. Okay, then. At least I know where things stand between us. Please don't inconvenience your life for my sake anymore. Since it's just sex, there's plenty of other women out there I could do that with, so I don't wanna disrupt your perfect little life anymore. It's clear that you're too ashamed of me to ever admit that you have any feelings for me."

I turn to leave. She tries to stop me.

"No, Cole, wait please. I didn't mean it like that."

I'm furious, so her pleas mean nothing to me. I ignore her and walk away.

Chapter Nineteen

Adeline

Weeks have passed by, agonizingly slow. I look at the state of my life and wonder how it is I got here. It wasn't so long ago that I had a great life. A boyfriend that loved me, a family that thought the world of me. Now it felt like everything had been upended. Everywhere I turned someone was mad at me. Cole had entered my life and somehow run a wrecking ball through it. Yet, I had to take an objective look at everything. This has all been due to my own choices and decisions.

Did he really wreck my life, or was I more angry that he exposed how little of my carefully constructed world was actually authentic? I hear the phone ring and ring. I wanted to stay stubborn and mad, pretending that he was the problem, but he has a way of cutting through my bullshit and exposing the truth. When he came over I was determined to not be caught up by him. By the time he left, I felt like crap and couldn't deny that I was wrong yet again.

"Come on, pick up, please," I plead in my mind.

It rings and rings, like it had for days. My calls and texts go unanswered and they glare back at me like reminders of my guilt and shame. I'm about to give up for the umpteenth time when he suddenly answers.

"Adi, can we just leave it alone please? I'm not mad anymore, but I think it's better that we just stay away from each other," he says.

"Wait, please!" I cry out in desperation before he can end the call.

I hear silence for a while and the sound of his breathing, so I know he's still there.

"I'm sorry, Cole. I never meant for any of this to happen, or to hurt you. This isn't just about Duncan. It's about Brian too."

"Really Adi? I feel like it's about neither of them. It's about you being embarrassed of me. Ashamed that you actually might want to be with someone like me. I thought that us hanging out together would show you that I'm not who you thought I was, but you seem determined to only see me that way."

I sigh. I contemplate what he says, but I know that it's not so black and white. The situation is way more complicated. A part of me does want to be with him and explore what this thing between us could really be, but another part of me is too afraid to step into the unknown without a safety net.

"It is about Brian too. He told me that he's okay with us hanging out, but wouldn't be okay with it being anything more

than that.”

“I don’t think you give Brian enough credit. I think it would bother him at first, but he’d get over it eventually,” he replies.

I think about it, but it’s not holding up.

“Can we afford to take that risk? What if he doesn’t? What if it sends him on a spiral again? Are you willing to live with the guilt of that? Because I’m not.”

He goes silent and I know that I’ve managed to penetrate his anger with some rationality. I think I’ve gotten through a little, but then his anger returns.

“It doesn’t matter now anyway, Adi. You’re clearly still caught up with Duncan and trying to get your other desires satisfied through me so you can drop this whole good girl act. I’m going to do you a favor and remove myself from the equation.”

“Cole, Pl—”

Before I can even finish, he cuts the call short and the ringing silence in my ears is deafening. Once again, my misery over the state of everything comes seeping back and I feel depressed again. It turns to anger as I contemplate what he’s said. He honestly thinks I’m trying to play two men at once. It doesn’t matter now, because neither wants me anyway. I’ve never known rejection like this and it hurts feeling this way, but again, I remind myself that my own choices got me here.

Brian’s being distant again and mom and dad have been infuriating. Their dislike of Cole has been maddening because

it's placed so much added pressure on me. After telling Duncan off, he's pretty much stayed away. I'm alone in my apartment, wrapped in a blanket and huddled with my knees up to my face. The tears well up and come cascading down until I get sick of being so miserable and wash my face. I hear the intercom and buzz my parents in.

Their visit was supposed to be comforting, a chance for us all to bond as a family and show Brian support. Instead, the way we all argue and fight all the time has made him want to spend most of his time with his sober group. I can't blame him for that. He's managed to stay clean through all of this and I'm proud of him. At least he's okay, even though my life is in shambles.

I hear the knock and get up to let my parents in. Sweatpants and a robe have become a uniform throughout my depressive period. It's late afternoon and there's a slight chill in the air. I wrap my robe tighter around myself. When I reach the door and unlock it, I'm surprised to see Duncan there. They all come in and I sit on my couch, staring between them. I thought my parents were out shopping, but now it seems they've spent the day with Duncan. He looks neat and sophisticated as usual. It annoys me, since I look like crap.

"What are you doing here, Duncan?" I ask through red eyes and a puffy face.

His countenance looks soft.

"I came to apologize. I'm sorry that I got so angry. I know that whatever you're going through is just a phase. I forgive you

for it, and I'm sorry that the way I reacted pushed you away. I've taken some time to think things over. I know we're not even together right now, but I don't want to lose you."

I want to feel happy and warm inside that he still cares and still wants me, but so much has happened that it's difficult to still see him the way I used to. I open my mouth to say something, but he stops me and reaches into his overcoat. He pulls out a little black box and opens it. I see a sparkly diamond ring inside it.

"I should have done this a long time ago, then maybe none of this would have happened. I want you to be my wife, Adi," he says as he gets down on one knee.

I stare at my parents. The huge smiles on their faces lets me know that they've all planned this together.

Chapter Twenty

Adeline

I'm floored by what's happening. I feel a rushing sound in my ears and everything suddenly feels like it's spinning. This is all happening too fast and I have no time to stop and digest it all. Duncan looks at me expectantly. He has a huge smile on his face, but right now none of it resonates. If anything, this is all too much for me right now. I feel no one's giving me a second to breathe anymore.

"I— I—." I stutter, not knowing what else to say.

The hesitation in my voice breaks the spell that Duncan and my parents seem to be under. I realize that they probably saw this moment going very differently. It's only now that I notice that one of the shopping bags my mom carries has a bottle of champagne sticking out of one of them. They'd obviously imagined this moment ending in a big celebration.

Suddenly, the truth of everything comes crashing down on me. I feel like my entire life has been pre-planned by my parents and now, as an adult, they were passing the baton over to Duncan. I can't stand another second of living that way. In an

instant, everything I've held back in my life comes crashing down on me and I glare between Duncan and my parents.

Duncan stands up with a confused look on his face as he glances back sheepishly at my parents. My dad looks livid and mom looks like she wants to cry. No one seems to care what I think or feel. It's like they're oblivious. I run out of the living room and into my bedroom and lock the door. My parents follow me and hammer on the door, desperately trying to get me out.

"Honey. Come out, please. What's going on? We thought you'd be happy about this," dad yells.

"Adi. Please talk to me," I hear Duncan's voice.

I ignore the voices and cup the sides of my head. Everything feels like it's spinning around in a rush. I feel trapped here. I need to leave, to get out of this place for a while. I quickly throw on some neater clothes and fix my hair and face as much as I can. The shouting and banging on the door only adds to my anxiety. I still look like a trainwreck, but I'm more presentable when I emerge. My parents and Duncan all look relieved but I push past them.

"Adi, talk to me please. We need to work this out," Duncan says.

"I can't deal with this right now. I need some time and space to think all of this through. Please, just give me some time," I reply.

He looks like he's stuck somewhere between concern and annoyance. My father tries to stop me and grabs my hand.

“Adeline. What's gotten into you?”

I wrench my arm out of his grip and leave. I run down to the underground parking and jump into my car. As I drive, I call Cole over and over but he won't answer. I have no idea where I'm going. It's too late now for his shop to be open so I decide to go to the motorcycle club. I don't even remember how I get there with my mind consumed by racing thoughts. I park and go inside. People recognize me now, and I get a lot of warm greetings. I check in with Earl in case he's seen Cole, but he hasn't. I look around. The place is buzzing. There's a lot of people hanging around drinking and listening to music. A few are dancing and some are playing pool.

I feel angry and resentful. I've been trying so hard to work things out with Cole, but he keeps pushing me away now. I see a group of guys playing pool at a table in the corner near the jukebox. They look familiar and I realize that it's Jason and his friends. He sees me, smiles widely, and waves me over. A part of me knows that this might lead to trouble. Then, I think about the fact that I only know this place because of Cole. He's the one that forced me to come out of my shell and start enjoying my life as he calls it.

“Fuck it,” I think.

If he's not gonna show up, I'm just going to wait here until he does. I walk over to Jason and his friends. They all chat me up and seem happy that I'm there.

“Where’s Cole?” Jason asks.

I shrug and notice a bottle of Jack Daniels and some glasses on a side table. Cole wanted me to enjoy my life more, so that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Duncan’s proposal and Cole’s cold shoulder still fresh on my mind, I pick up the bottle and pour myself a drink.

Chapter Twenty One

Cole

I'm at a wealthy client's apartment when I get the call. It's Earl. I don't have any appointments for members due until next week so I wonder why he's calling. Luckily, I've just wrapped up the piece for the client.

"Hey, Earl, what's up?"

"Hey man, just thought you might wanna know your girl's here."

His voice sounds worried and I'm a little confused.

"My girl?"

"Adeline. From the party. She came in about an hour ago looking for you. She's been hanging out with Jason and those two idiot friends of his. She's getting pretty wasted man, I think you need to come over here."

My ears grow hot with anger when I hear what he says. She's been trying to call me. I've been ignoring her, but the moment I hear what she's getting up to it's like all the anger and

frustration melts away and all I feel is concerned. She came to look for me. I wasn't expecting that.

"Thanks for letting me know. I'm on my way."

I complete the client's wipe down, rush through the care instructions, collect my payment and leave. Fifteen minutes later, I reach the bar. A couple of riders are outside. I greet them hastily and head in. I see her in the corner. She's pretty drunk by the looks of it and dancing with a beer in her hand. I hate the way that Jason and the other guys are watching her sway with thirsty smiles on their faces. I head over to Earl. He sees me and looks a little worried.

"I hope you're not thinking of causing any trouble. You know our rules. Fights aren't tolerated on club premises."

I nod. "It's okay. I'm not here to fight. How long has she been here?"

"Just over an hour. She came in looking for you. I said you weren't here. She said fine, she's just going to have fun like you wanted her to, and wait here as long as it takes to see you."

I can't help but feel a little happy about this. I should be pissed at her for her behavior but I glance over at her again. Her hair is all messed up, her clothes are unironed, and she looks like hell. She's obviously going through something. I don't want to fight. I just want to be there for her. Her behavior and appearance show me exactly how conflicted she is about me. I get it. The idea of me and her has driven me crazy too. No matter how much I've tried to ignore her, she's all I can think

about. I've missed her, I just never admitted it to her and chose to stay away like the stubborn jackass I am.

"Thanks, Earl," I say and get ready to go over there when I notice a group of people come in.

I groan as I realize it's her parents, Brian, and that dickhead Duncan. Earl tries to come around from the bar, but I hold up a hand.

"It's okay, Earl. I'll take care of this."

He strokes his handlebar mustache thoughtfully for a moment, but then nods and stays where he is. They don't even notice me and walk over to her. I follow. Jason looks up at that point. He nudges his friends and they all turn to us. Most of the other patrons are thankfully too busy with their own groups to notice what's going on and the loud music provides some more cover.

"Hey, we're not looking for any trouble. She just came over and started hanging out with us."

The family turns when they realize he's talking to me. They notice me for the first time. I see the disgust and anger on everyone's faces, except Brian's. He just looks disappointed.

"Forget about it, Jason. No one's here to make trouble," I say.

Adeline spins around and her eyes widen when she sees us all. She's swaying on the spot and is clearly drunk as hell.

"Oh my God, what the hell are you all doing here?" She yells at her family.

“We should be asking you the same thing, Adi. I thought you weren’t even supposed to be seeing Cole anymore. Isn’t that what you told me?” asks Brian.

She squints and moves her hair aside from her face, slurring heavily as she speaks.

“For your information, I haven’t been seeing Cole because he’s been ignoring me. I’ve just been hanging out with my other friends here.”

She looks around and realizes that Jason and his friends have quietly slipped away. They obviously want no part of this. I see Brian’s face soften a little when he hears that I’ve been ignoring her.

“We just don’t understand what’s gotten into you,” Duncan says.

He’s dressed in a long black overcoat and a turtle neck, looking more dweebish than I’ve ever seen him.

“Oh fuck off, Duncan. How the hell did you even find me here?”

“I still have your location on the Find Me app.”

Her eyes widen and she looks enraged.

“So, you’ve been tracking me? Oh, my goodness. Thank you for making this so much easier. I have my answer for you now. It’s a NO! How could I ever marry a pretentious asshole like you? Our entire relationship, all you’ve ever done is make me feel this small,” she says using her fingers to illustrate what she means.

“I’m sick of being dragged to all your bullshit dinner parties and theater shows. You always make me feel like I don’t belong there anyway, so I don’t know why you even ask me to come. You should dress like this, *Adi*. You should talk like this, *Adi*. Don’t you know that Port is a dessert wine from Portugal, *Adi*,” she says, sarcastically mimicking the fancy tone he speaks with.

I can’t help but break a smile as I watch her. She’s finally sticking up for herself and I feel so proud of her. Duncan’s face goes red and he looks more annoyed than I’ve ever seen him. He turns and walks away, stopping beside me as he leaves.

“You wanted her, she’s all yours,” he says before leaving.

I can tell that’s the last time I’ll see him. *Adi* turns to her family now.

“Please come home with us,” her mother begs.

“No mom, I’m staying right here because Cole and I need to speak about us and none of it concerns any of you. I’ve spent my entire life trying to please everyone around me and what do I get for it? I get everyone’s judgment. I get controlled and manipulated into thinking I’m not good enough if I’m not Miss Perfect all the time. Well, I’m *sick* of it!”

She yells that last part. A lot of people are staring now. I walk over to her and see Brian’s face scrunch up angrily.

“So, you two really are together?”

“It’s not that simple, bro,” I say. “I’m sorry for keeping this from you, but we haven’t even had a chance to work out our own feelings for each other yet.”

He glares at the two of us, then ignores me and asks her, “Are you coming with us or not?”

She shakes her head and refuses to. I glance at her father. Being the severe man he is, I expect him to be livid, but instead I see a concerned and hurt look on his face. It’s the expression of a father who can’t believe that his perfect daughter, who was always a straight A student and followed all the rules, has turned into this. I actually feel a little sorry for him. Brian and her mom try to argue more, but he stops them and tells them to leave her alone. They leave. Brian and his mother walk away, neither looking in my direction as they do. Mr. Coffman looks pleadingly at me as he passes. I can read the look of worry on his face.

“I’ll take care of her and make sure she gets home safe,” I tell him and the little nod he gives me lets me know he’s grateful.

They leave and I turn to Adeline, having no idea where this is all headed.

Chapter Twenty Two

Cole

After they leave I realize the extent of Adi's emotional state. She can barely stand, so I support her and walk her out. Jason tries to come over and apologize again. I tell him not to sweat it. The fact that I know she came there looking for me tells me all I need to know. Plus, she stood up to her family for me and I'm grateful to her for that because I know it took a lot of courage. I didn't even know that Duncan had proposed until she mentioned it. Knowing that she turned him down—possibly for me—gives me a warm feeling inside. I thank Earl on the way out. I lead her to her car, which is parked on the side of the road, open the door for her and get her in. I drive us to a nearby diner. The place is warm and cozy. She stays silent the entire time and slumps into the corner booth I lead her to. The waitress is friendly, but glances at Adeline a little suspiciously. I order two strong coffees and she looks relieved now as she leaves to get them.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

She glances up at me with bloodshot, tear stained eyes and I soften a lot more with regret over how cold I've been to her.

“Do you even care? She asks a little bitterly.

I stand up and slide into her side of the booth and sit next to her. I place my arm around her shoulder, the red leather seat creaking a bit under us. There's a large glass window to our right and the street is a little busy, but no one pays us any attention. The diner's largely empty and no one bothers us. The smell of coffee and chocolate croissants lends a homey atmosphere to the place.

Adeline rests her head on my chest and wraps her arm around me. I feel her anger and bitterness melt away. This feels so right and perfect that I can't believe we've known each other for so long and somehow never discovered it earlier.

“I'm worried about Brian. I lied to him about us and now he knows. What if he relapses?”

I can hear the fear and tension in her voice. I hold her closer and speak softly.

“He'll be okay for now. Your parents are with him. When all of this calms down, we can sit him down and speak to him together and explain that this isn't just some fling.”

She nods and I'm glad she doesn't contradict me in any way.

“Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?” she mumbles from my side. The way she buries her face into my chest and speaks softly from there, like a little kid that's sleepy. It's so cute and enamoring.

“For what you did back there. For sticking up for me, for us.”

“Do you believe that I’m not ashamed of you now?”

I kiss her forehead and squeeze her more tightly to me.

“Yes, and I’m very grateful for that.”

The coffees arrive a short while later and as she sips hers I get a bottle of still water that she drinks between her sips of the coffee. After a short while, she sobers up considerably and we talk a lot, hold each other, even kiss, and laugh a lot. It feels so easy and natural being with her. We share a slice of apple pie and by the end of all this, she seems completely sober again, although her eyes are bloodshot. She looks at me earnestly and I know there’s something on her mind.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened to you after your family left town?”

I sigh and realize that if we really are going to be together, I can’t avoid topics like this forever, so I decide to open up.

“You and Brian never really met my family back then, because I was always too ashamed to take you guys to my home. We didn’t have much and I pretty much grew up in a trailer park. My folks were both alcoholics and used to fight all the time. My dad was always getting arrested or getting drunk and beating my mom, my brother, and me. My mom was always sleeping around. We were dysfunctional, to say the least, but Charlie and I stuck it out and we were still a family. Then, my dad got ill and died. Things were pretty bleak. Charlie was always the smart one, so he got a scholarship to study and I

got left behind. One day, this dude shows up outta nowhere. Him and my mom start arguing and I go to see what's going on. I hear her pleading with him not to say anything, but I hear enough to figure out what's going on. I learned when I was nineteen that my dad wasn't my real father. Charlie and I were half-brothers, because my mom had gotten herself knocked up by this guy after a drunken night out. I was pissed. It felt like my whole world had turned upside down. I ran away, worked odd jobs, drank a lot, and pretty much stayed away from her after that. She died too, a short while later, and I'd never gotten the chance to forgive her and make up with her. I have a biological father somewhere out there that I've never met or known."

I pause a while and see that her expression is somber and she has tears in her eyes. I keep going, trying to get it all out, so there can be no more secrets between us.

"Turns out that Charlie knew all along. We had our issues growing up. He always resented me. He was the smart one, but I was always the one that got all the girls. I didn't know he resented me deep down and felt like I was the reason why his parents drank and fought all the time. I pretty much bounced around from bar to bar, woman to woman, for a while, with no direction. I would have probably ended up an addict too, or in jail, if I never met the riders. They gave me a family of sorts, taught me how to be a man. One of the older guys taught me how to tattoo and I found a way to put myself through art school. I turned my life around because of being a biker. Charlie made it big, got himself a nice corporate job, and

became pretty rich. I thought all our childhood rivalries were over. I met a girl named Alisha. Things were going great for a while, and I thought maybe I could finally settle down, but then I found out that Charlie had been secretly taking her on shopping sprees and the two of them were sleeping with each other behind my back. That was around the same time my mentor passed away. I decided I needed to get away from all that, so I moved back from Vegas to my hometown of San Francisco to start my tattoo shop.”

With my jacket off, she looks at my tattoos again. Her eyes wander over the one I have on my forearm. They feature two peacefully sleeping babies lying next to each other, with angel wings and halos around them. She’s listened to my whole story and never once said or done anything that’s made me feel judged or ashamed. For the first time in my life, someone’s penetrated the walls I’ve kept up since childhood to keep myself from having to relive it all.

“Tell me the story behind that tattoo?” she asks.

She’s so perceptive that somehow she’s worked out that out of all my tattoos, that one means the most to me.

“When I was nine, my mom got pregnant again. She got pretty big early in and the doctor said they were going to be twin girls. I was so excited at the prospect of having two little sisters. I would sit and daydream about them all the time. I even made up my own names for them. One day, my step-father and mom got into it and he beat her up really bad. She lost both the babies, so I never got to meet my baby sisters.”

She looks at me somberly.

“What were the names you picked out for them?”

“Allison and Skye,” I say.

She smiles.

“Those would have been beautiful names,” she says, stroking my arm and tracing her nails over the faces of the babies on my tattoo. She seems to see me in a completely new light. She holds my face and kisses me tenderly.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all that.”

I nod. We stay quiet for a while and just hold each other. It feels like we’re the only two people in the world, and I’m grateful to have her by my side. Opening up to her took an emotional toll on me that she’ll never fully know. Afterwards, I pay the bill, and we head back to the car. As we jump in, I’m about to ask if she wants me to drop her at home while she strokes my hand tenderly.

“I wanna get outta here for a while and just be with you. Let’s go check into a hotel somewhere.”

I know exactly what’s on her mind, so I just nod. We find a little motel that looks somewhat neglected. Despite this, it’s actually quaint and neat inside. We reach our room and I wonder if she wants to talk some more, but instead she kisses me and leans me back into the bed without saying a word. As she undresses herself and me, there’s a passionate tenderness in it. It’s not like the other day. Her naked body still excites me

just as much, and her touch fills me with pleasure again, but we go slower and more passionately this time.

I'm on top and as I enter her, her mouth opens and she gasps softly with pleasure. I thrust in and out in slower, more intimate strokes as she pulls my face closer and kisses me the whole time. Her finger nails dig into my back, slowly guiding my tempo, and I increase my vigor in response to her prompting. Her moans grow louder and more pleasure-filled. She pulls my face closer, her hot breath on my face as he speaks into my ear.

“That’s it, baby. Just like that.”

I respond to her encouragement and suddenly we’re getting wilder and rougher, building it up more and more. It’s still passionate, but there’s a deeper intimacy beyond the physical pleasure that wasn’t there last time. This time, it’s closer and slower. Yet, somehow, this only heightens the pleasure. She pushes me away, sits up, and then turns around and bends over. She grabs me from behind and guides me inside her once more. She arches her back and the rhythmic sound of my thighs slapping against her buttocks with every thrust fills the room. She moans louder and pushes the back of her head up to me. I grab a handful of her hair, twist my hands around it, and use it to tug on her as I thrust harder and harder. She cries out and moans loudly, and I can feel the pleasure building its way toward a glorious finish for her. As this happens, she straightens her back up until she’s almost standing on her knees and wraps my arms around her. Her face is cheek to cheek with me, and she turns her head slightly so we can kiss

and mingle our tongues hungrily, without breaking rhythm. She guides my left arm to her breasts, forcing me to squeeze and cup them roughly while she moves my other hand down. I'm still inside her from behind as she presses my right hand firmly to her clit and rubs my hand roughly over it. Within a few short moments of doing it this way, I feel her whole body stiffen and convulse as she climaxes so violently, it causes me to follow. Our bodies shudder together and I fall backwards from the exhaustion and pleasure. Her body rolls over onto mine and we just lie like that, my hands still wrapped around her body, our faces cheek to cheek.

Chapter Twenty Three

Adeline

I awake feeling groggy. I lift my head off Cole's chest and look up at him. He's smiling, but looks tired. He kisses me on the forehead.

"Hi, sleepyhead. You look so cute when you're asleep."

I smile, but feel a little awkward and overly conscious of myself now that I know he was watching me sleep. I sit up and rest my pillow against the headboard. He shifts, sitting more upright, and puts his arm around my shoulder. I rest my face against his chest and run my fingers up and down his bare stomach. We stay like that for a few minutes, just enjoying the moment. It's been another amazing break from reality, but the moment the fog clears, I'm again wary of how much turmoil my life has been placed under. He seems to sense my trepidation and moves me so that we're facing each other.

"You don't need to overthink things this time. I'm not going to pressure you into anything."

I stare at him for a moment, wondering if I can trust what he's saying.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I know that you're under a lot of stress and feeling tugged from one side to the other. We don't have to make any major decisions concerning us right now. You obviously still have a lot of issues to work out with your family. Take some time and try and smooth things over with them. I don't want to come between you and your family. I do want us to be together, but I also want the idea of us to be acceptable to everyone else too.”

I'm glad he's finally thinking this way, and understanding that wanting to have things be okay with my family doesn't mean I'm ashamed of him. I kiss him and we hold each other for a bit before showering and getting changed. He gets me a muffin and a coffee and I eat it while he drives us back to the bar. He leaves me there and hops onto his bike. The sun is out in force today and it's dazzling my eyes.

“Thank you for last night.”

He laughs. “Was I that good?”

I laugh too and now realize how ambiguous my statement was.

“You were, but I mean for taking care of me and keeping me safe.”

He leans over from his bike and kisses me through my driver side window.

“You’re welcome. Just take some time and work things out with your family. I know now that you’re not trying to run away from us, and that’s good enough for me for the time being. I’ll be around if and when you decide you want to see me again.”

I smile again. He looks so handsome in the sunlight, his tight shirt fitting his body so elegantly. I kiss him again and then head home. My mind is consumed with thoughts of everything that’s happened. Despite all the surrounding drama, I can’t help but think back to last night. It was amazing again, but this time it was different. It was like the connection between us had cemented. It wasn’t just physical anymore. There was a deeper intimacy there now too, and it only heightened the pleasure he was capable of making me feel. A short while later, I reach my apartment. I park and head in. I find my parents in the living room and they both look harassed with worry.

I see my father breathe an audible sigh of relief when he sees me. I expect him to be mad, but he just walks over and hugs me. I feel worse. I could have dealt with shouting or disappointment, but his worry hurts more.

“I’m sorry,” I say to both of them.

They sit me down and mom busies herself making some breakfast for us all. Brian comes in. He looks tired and irritable. I know this is all putting a huge strain on him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, instead of leading with anger.

I nod. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve been acting crazy and treating you all like shit just for caring about me. I just need everyone

to understand that I'm going through some personal issues, but I'm fine and I'll be okay."

They all nod.

"I've been wondering if this is all just some kind of latent rebel phase. I mean you were always such a good kid. I guess you needed to just act out a little. Now that you have, I'm hoping you can go back to being who you were," dad says.

I'm about to retort when I notice the weary look on Brian's face. I've seen that look before. It's the one he gets when he feels like all the pressure of the world is bearing down on him. I know he's not completely stable right now because of everything that's been happening, and I just can't bear to add to it, so I just nod and agree with my father.

"What's going to happen with you and Cole?" Brian asks plainly.

I sigh. "I'm not going to lie. I've grown to care about him a lot, and he feels the same way about me. He's not a bad person in any way, you of all people should know that. But, we've decided to take some time apart and take things slow."

He still winces a little when the thought of Cole and me together enters his mind, but he nods gravely. My parents seem okay for now, so we put the topic away and have breakfast together like a normal family. No one brings up Duncan and I'm grateful. Things stay a little tense, but no one's fighting now or angry with each other, so it's still better than before.

Later that night, I text Cole. He's doing okay and glad that I'm working things out with my family. I fall into a deep and peaceful sleep that night for the first time in weeks. When I awake the next morning, I'm in a better mood. I have some toast and a cup of tea before hitting the shower, thinking I need to catch up on some writing today and maybe spend some time with my folks. The cool water feels great against my skin until I suddenly start feeling waves of dizziness and nausea. I have to hold the shower wall to keep myself steady, and then I start heaving and feel like I'm going to vomit, though nothing comes out. By the end of it, I'm feeling pretty miserable. I finish showering and head out to the pharmacy. Some troubling thoughts go through my head, but I try to push them away and grab what I need. I know I'm late, but my mind still clings to hope. When I reach home, I quietly lock myself in the bathroom. A few minutes later, I'm staring at the little purple stick, and the room begins to spin around me.

"No, no! This can't be!" I think.

I stare at the stick again, but it's clearly marked and it really hits home. I'm pregnant.

Chapter Twenty Four

Adeline

The ringing tone in my ears just makes me more anxious. I worry for a moment that he's not going to answer, but he finally does.

"Hey. Is everything okay?" he asks in a concerned voice.

"Why the hell weren't you answering?" I yell and my voice echoes throughout the empty parking lot at my complex.

"I was doing a tattoo. What's going on?"

"We need to speak in person. It's urgent."

I expect him to ask a million questions, but he seems to sense the worry in my voice.

"Okay, meet me at my shop."

I hang up, start my car, and drive to him. My mind has been a wreck these last few days. I've tried my best to keep all this hidden from my family, but that means it's back to lying and sneaking around again for me. I've just returned from a gynecologist. She's confirmed through ultrasound the date of

conception, and Cole is the father. I'm still desperately afraid and panicking about the situation, but I'm relieved it's his. I don't know where things are going with Cole, but I know for sure that Duncun and I are finished, so if it was his baby, it would have been a disaster. I have no idea how Cole will react. I wonder if it's going to make him run again. I've always heard all these sad stories of women being abandoned and forced to raise their kids as single moms. I just never thought I'd be one of them.

When I reach the shop, Cole is already waiting outside. I park on the street beside his store. The place is busier today, and there's cars and people scurrying about everywhere. The buzzing noise they all make is driving me insane, so I'm grateful when he takes me inside the shop and locks it. We head to the back and I sit on his tattoo bed while he sits on the stool beside it. He looks gravely concerned and my worried expression probably isn't helping. There's no easy way to break this to him, so I just blurt it out.

"I'm pregnant."

His eyes widen. He's stubbly today, and looks a little tired. We haven't seen each other in a few days. It feels like he's going to stay shell shocked for a while, but then he speaks.

"Are you sure?"

"I've just come back from the doctor's office."

He rubs his chin. He looks weary. I know he's been working hard.

“I know it’s not my choice, but I hope you’re not thinking of doing anything.”

I realize he’s wondering if I want to get an abortion. The thought never even crossed my mind. I could never go through with something like that, no matter how worried I am. I’m grateful now when I realize he doesn’t want me to either. I never even contemplated a scenario where he’d ask me to do that, so I’m grateful that he doesn’t. I warm up a little toward him when I realize that he’s willing to face this.

“No. This is my child. I’m not interested in doing that. I’m just scared shitless about how I’m going to break the news to everyone.”

He looks thoughtful for a moment.

“Don’t stress yourself out about that.”

He squeezes my hand.

“Whatever happens, we’ll face this together.”

My face softens and for the first time since I got the news, I feel like I can breathe again.

“Thank you. I’m glad you feel that way. I was worried you might want to...” my voice trails off.

“Might want to what? Bail on you and our child? That will never happen. I wasn’t planning on being a father any time soon, but that doesn’t mean I’d just run out on my own kid. That’s not the kind of person I am.”

I smile and I'm so surprised that he's actually able to bring one out of me in these circumstances. I squeeze his hand back tighter. He kisses me and I feel closer to him than I've ever felt. I suddenly realize how much I've missed him these last few days. I've been feeling so alone and the stress of the pregnancy news has been difficult.

"I'm done with my appointments for the day. Do you wanna come over to my place? Maybe we can have something to eat and talk about this a bit more."

I nod and realize I've never been to his place before. The idea of seeing how he lives intrigues me. He locks up the shop and we take my car. He lives nearby. The apartment building is neat and has a yellowish brick exterior. We park in a visitor's bay at the side of the building and head inside. There's automatic glass doors, and a friendly male receptionist who greets Cole and I warmly. I'm impressed so far. It's a quaint little building. We take the elevator up to the fifth floor. I smile as I notice how lovingly Cole stares at me. He's dressed in blue jeans and a white t-shirt. I'm wearing a summer dress and I wonder how long I'll be able to dress like this before I start showing. We reach his place and once inside, I'm again impressed. It's a small studio apartment, but it's neatly kept and has a nice, minimalist feel to it. We order a pizza and eat it together on the couch. We talk a bit and he asks a lot of questions about the baby. There isn't much to tell, since I don't know the sex or anything yet. There's an ease about him that I never expected, and he seems genuinely interested in all this stuff. Everything happened so fast that I've barely had time to

actually contemplate it all myself. By the time we're done talking, I feel so much more at peace and comforted.

Afterwards, he asks, "Do you wanna watch a movie or something?"

"Sure," I reply, realizing I need to relax a bit.

We sit on his little couch. It's plain but comfortable. He has a modest forty inch TV mounted to his wall, but the picture quality is great. We scroll through Netflix for a bit and find a thriller to watch. I hold him and rest my head on his chest. I feel a lot happier and more content than I have all week. The movie is only a few minutes in and he starts to rub his hands up and down my arm slowly. I know he's doing it affectionately, but the touch of his strong hands on my skin causes it to tingle. I've been feeling so miserable and alone these past few days that I'm comforted by his touch and find myself getting turned on by it. I'm stunned by how easily he invokes lust inside me.

I stroke his forearm with my nails and before I know it, I automatically find myself moving his hand to my shoulder, guiding it lower, and then down to my breasts. He realizes what's happening and goes with it. Before I know it, the straps of my dress are down and my bra is off. He fondles my breasts and I feel waves of pleasure as his fingertips trace over my nipples. I move over to his lap, lying backwards onto his chest and slip my dress and underwear off. His hands slide down my belly and gently drift lower, stroking the insides of my thighs and then tracing over my clit. He plays with it gently for a

while and I feel myself moisten and my lips part for him automatically as he sticks two fingers inside me, and slowly works them in and out. I'm moaning with pleasure and can feel him growing underneath me.

I reach underneath myself and find his buttons, working them apart and opening his jeans. He slides them off and my hand holds onto his penis. It feels so hard and large in my palm, pulsing gently as I stroke it with my fingers. His breathing quickens as I spread my legs apart, adjust myself and guide him inside me. I use the sides of the couch for leverage and to balance myself as I slowly rock my body up and down and gyrate my hips. It feels amazing. He wraps one arm around my waist, pressing his hands to my slit and rubbing the sides of my lips while he continues to thrust underneath me. The dual action builds the pleasure so rapidly that I climax twice in quick succession.

"Oh, baby, don't stop!" I yell out as I feel him slow down in response.

The intensity of it leaves my body shuddering for more and I'm glad he's not done. He takes my cue and carries on, harder and more vigorously while he cups and squeezes my breasts tightly. I've never known a sexual connection that has reached these peaks. His form causes my body to take over instinctively and I'm soon bouncing up and down on him with more vigor than ever. After a short while, I'm breathless and unable to believe how amazing it's been as I climax a third time, this time feeling him join me at the same time. He lets

out his pleasure with a huge, deep grunt that echoes around his place.

We're both panting, and it takes a minute for either of us to move and find our breath again. Finally, I move myself off him. My joints feel stiff and cramped as I get up, and I feel a little embarrassed when I notice the large, wet stain I've left behind on his couch. He catches my stare and chuckles.

"It's okay, I'll clean it up."

My face reddens, but I nod and head to his bathroom to clean myself up. It's a small bathroom with a shower and toilet, but it's thankfully very neat and clean. This is something else I've come to admire about Cole. As rough an exterior as he portrays, he's always neat and tidy, which is an attractive quality to me in a man. He joins me and we take a cool shower together, towel off, and go hang out on his bed. He stares at me a little furtively as I realize what's going through his mind. He's wondering if I'm going to regret this all and grow distant, or want to run again. I can't bring myself to feel this way. He's stuck by me and shown me this isn't just some passing attraction between us, so I chat with him to put his mind at ease.

"This is all a little crazy huh?"

"Yeah, but I'm not complaining."

I chuckle. "It sometimes feels like we can't keep our hands off each other as long as we're together."

He smiles and chuckles too.

“Oh well, you’ve already knocked me up, so I guess we can just enjoy it now.”

He laughs and looks a little relieved now.

“I can’t believe we’re actually gonna have a kid together,” he says.

“Are you afraid?”

“A little. I know this is crazy. We’ve barely even been together. I mean, this is the first time you’ve ever been inside my place, but I still can’t bring myself to feel weird about it, because I’ve known you for so long. There’s a comfort I feel by being around you.”

I smile and my insides feel warm. I know now why I’m here. It’s because being with Cole has always felt so natural and easy from the beginning. Every problem that came from us being together was a result of being conflicted about wanting to be with him. We still have a long way to go though, and I have no idea what the future holds for us. We joke around about being a biker and a teacher and having a kid together. We wonder if the kid will be smart and uptight like me, or rebellious and cool like him. Instead of me pulling away or wanting to leave, we end up spending the entire day together, and it ends up being one of the best days of my life.

We talk about all the issues we’re still facing with my family and Brian. For the first time, all the stuff we discuss about the future hits home. Cole offers to help me pay for ultrasounds and doctor’s visits. He tells me he has some money saved up, and I should let him know if there’s anything I need. I feel

closer and more enamored by him than ever. He's proven to be a decent person in every way that I could have hoped. He can tell that I'm still a little concerned about my family and how to break the news.

After a while, he looks at me earnestly and says, "I'll take care of it. I think I need to face your family too. I'm as much a part of this as you are, so I owe them that much, especially Brian."

Chapter Twenty Five

Cole

When we show up to her apartment, things are already tense. I've tried to ease this as much as I can by calling Brian in advance to let him and his folks know that we have something important to tell them. The news that I'm going to be a father is still fresh, and a part of me wonders why I'm not freaked out. I should be, but there's an ease and comfort I get from being with Adeline that I've never felt with anyone before. The fact that I've known her practically my whole life probably helps. Rather than being completely wracked with fear and uncertainty about the news, the weirdest thing happened.

After the initial shock passed, I started feeling excited about the prospect of being a father; even more so since I'd be sharing the kid with her. I would have never expected to find myself feeling such intense feelings for someone this soon after being with them. We haven't even been together officially yet, and I was still hooked. Maybe I'm just getting

older. Fuck it. Whatever the reason is, I can't bring myself to be anything but happy right now.

I hope we aren't headed for a derailing. I haven't told her this, but I'm prepared to fight for her if her family won't accept us. The dynamic has changed now. We're having a kid, so whether they like it or not, we're destined to be forever linked now.

She looks tense as we reach her place. She unlocks her apartment and we enter together. The look on everyone's faces is immediately tense. I see furtive glances between us from her mom. Her father seems irritable, and Brian looks downright murderous.

"I see you two are back at it?" Brian snaps as we enter.

Their father had been relaxing on the couch, but sits bolt upright now.

"We have something we need to talk to everyone about," she says.

She looks neater and calmer. The time we've spent together in the last day seems to have done her a world of good. She's even managed to get some sleep and looks fresher. There's a determined look on her face, and I'm glad she's not backing down from this.

"Come sit down," her father says.

Everyone's dressed casually, but the weather outside is dull and dreary. It makes the apartment look somber as it casts Adeline's living room in a gray tinge. The comfort with which

everyone is just sprawled about in her apartment has been so telling. Every time I've been here since her folks came to town, it's always felt like Adeline is the odd one out and feels like the most uncomfortable one here. Yet, it's her apartment.

We take a seat. I sit at the dining table while Adeline joins them on the couch. She looks around at all their faces and I can feel her anxiety from where I am. I feel for her, but I also know we need to clear the air with this or we'll never be able to move forward and concentrate on what's really important—our child.

“I know you all aren't happy with the idea of Cole and I being together.”

“So, you are together then?” Brian interjects irritably.

“Yes, Brian, we are together!”

The way she says it with so much authority and defiance in her tone makes me smile. It certainly shuts Brian up. Her parents stay quiet, but I can feel their loathing toward me burning inside them. I've unraveled their life's work, which has taken years of meddling in their daughter's life to achieve. Adeline continues, seemingly unbothered by all the elephants in the room, and I can't help but feel deep affection for her right now. She's finally stepped out of her comfort zone and it's clear that she's determined to take control of her own destiny, no matter how awkward and nerve wracking this all must be for her.

“It's become more than that. I can't deny anymore that I have feelings for Cole, but the situation is more complicated now.”

“What are you trying to tell us, Adi?” her father asks, catching on that something’s not right.

Adeline takes a deep breath and just says it. “I’m pregnant with Cole’s child.”

It seems like the small room has suddenly erupted into a cacophony of voices. They all shout and yell at the same time, but I can hear much of what is said.

“What the hell? How could you be so stupid?” screams her father.

“Oh my goodness!” her mother exclaims.

“I can’t believe the two of you. How could you both do this to me?” Brian shouts.

I expected this kind of reaction from her parents, but Brian’s words sting and annoy me. He continues ranting and raving.

“This is bullshit. I can’t take this shit anymore. I’m supposed to be trying to live a stable and stress-free life. How the fuck am I supposed to stay clean if I’ve got all this crap going on around me?”

He holds his head and begins to tremble.

“Do you see what you’ve done?” their father growls in my direction while her mother comforts Brian and pleads with him to hold it together. I’ve never seen a more blatant display of self-centeredness from any of them. This was supposed to be a moment that brings a family together. Instead, they’ve all hijacked our news and tried to make it about themselves in some way. Adeline glances in my direction and sees the flash

of anger cross my eyes. I stand up, about to give them all a piece of my mind, but she senses it.

“Everyone, just *stop!*” she yells with finality.

That stuns them into silence. She’s about to keep speaking, but I take over.

“I know you all feel like I’m some kind of trailer trash that doesn’t deserve her. Maybe in some ways, you’re right. She is too good for me, but that doesn’t matter right now. What’s supposed to matter is that this family will have a new member in nine months, whether any one of you seem to care or not. Like it or not, there’s a child inside Adi. Do you all honestly think she needs this added stress right now?”

They go quiet as the truth of my words dawn on them. Brian still looks miserable and dangerously unstable. Adeline looks livid with all of them.

“Maybe we should all just take a breath here,” her mother says, but it’s too late. They’ve already done the damage.

“No, mom. Right now, what I need is some space. I think the two of you need to get a hotel for a few days until I can calm down a bit.”

Her parents look hurt, but the ferocity of her glare lets them know it’s not negotiable. Brian is still holding the sides of his head. Everything goes quiet and there’s a ringing silence in the room.

“I’ll bring the car around,” I say.

I have to hold back my smirk as I see the stunned expression on her parents' faces.

A little while later, we have her parents checked in at the Hyatt on Third Street. Brian's antics have gotten worse, and he's been threatening to go on a bender. His behavior has been grinding on my nerves, but I stay calm. Once we're at the hotel, Adeline calls his sober counselor and sponsor and requests an immediate family session. They meet us at the hotel. Having two neutral parties there eases the tension. Everyone snipes at each other and tries to shift blame. The full extent of her family's dysfunctionality is on display. I stay quiet through most of it. Between the two interventionists, they help to calm things down and quickly diagnose the main issues. By the end of the session, they tell us that their parents need to back off and allow both the kids to manage their own lives more.

I try to stay out of it for most of the session, but I do have my say when it comes to Brian. I tell him that he's my best friend, and I care about him enough to tell him the truth. He needs to man up and stop using everyone else's problems as an excuse to be immature and relapse. He has to take control of his life, and Adeline and I are both here for him, but he's got to put in some effort too if he wants our support. One of the other main concerns raised is that Brian often feels suffocated. Toward the end of the session, Brian's sponsor tells us what to do. He's a short, bald man, with a slightly scowling expression, but I respect his demeanor. It's clear that he has his own sobriety in check and has a commanding presence about him.

“Brian, you need to find other hobbies and things in life that you can pursue on your own. Your family can be your biggest support, but they also tend to be your biggest crutch. That isn’t healthy, since it means anything they do wrong in your eyes can become the reason why you derail. I’m appointing Adeline as your support structure at home, but her role is only to *support* you, not to *parent* you. I think it’s time you took the lead over your own life and recovery. Don’t you?”

Brian has composed himself a lot by then and he nods. Afterwards, he apologizes to Adi and I, and the three of us hug it out. By the end of all this, I’m glad things are finally out in the open, and there’s no longer any need for pretense. Things are still tense with her parents, but I don’t care right now. There will be plenty of time to win them over once they see how much I’m going to love and spoil their grandchild.

Chapter Twenty Six

Cole

A few days later, and there's a slightly somber edge to the atmosphere when we see her parents off at the gate. We've booked them on a flight home earlier than they expected, but they're slowly learning that Adeline isn't who they want her to be anymore. I hope that in time, they'll learn to accept that and the idea of us, but for now, things remain a little frigid. Brian and she hug them. I step forward and they look at me awkwardly. Her mother stares at me a little furtively, but when she speaks, I hear the sincere concern in her voice and soften a little.

"Please take care of her," she says.

I nod and take her by surprise as I lean forward and wrap her into a warm hug. She's a little stiff at first, but then she eases up and actually holds me back tightly. When it's her father's turn, I shake his hand firmly, the way he once taught me to shake a man's hand. It seems to convey some of the determination I feel inside to make this all right and prove them wrong about me.

“I promise you that your daughter and your grandchild are in good hands. I’ll take care of them both,” I say simply.

He nods and I see that he’s a little more relieved to know that I plan on seeing this through, instead of running away or something. They leave and Adeline holds me around my waist as she watches them. As they turn back one last time, Adeline kisses me on the lips passionately and they both look horrified as they reach the boarding gate. We all head back to the city together, and Adeline and I leave for my shop after dropping Brian off at his weekend sobriety meeting. He’s eased up a lot more now that he’s spent some time with us and seen how happy we are together.

I open the shop, turn on the lights, and then lock us both in while I hang the closed sign outside. We head to the back and I get everything ready.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

She nods sweetly. She looks so dazzlingly beautiful under the light that I can barely believe she’s actually mine. I feel a rush of affection for her in my heart and kiss her. She settles into my tattoo bed and sits upright with her back facing me. We’ve done our research, and I choose a non-toxic ink so that the baby won’t be affected. I place my stenciled version of the piece on her upper back, near her right shoulder. It takes me less than two hours, and when I’m done, the design is beautiful, and the color glows even more vividly against her pale skin. It’s a design I made for her. It’s a warrior woman. She looks deadly and intimidating, but is so devastatingly

beautiful that if you were to be slain by anyone, you would hope for it to be her. It represents the way I see Adeline's spirit. She's fierce, unbreakable, and stronger than anyone gives her credit for.

I swab it down and pat it dry. I reach around her waist and hold her for a moment, our cheeks pressed together as we stare at each other in the wall mirror.

"I'm sorry I tried to turn you into someone you're not. I know you well enough now to know that you're perfect just the way you are," I say softly as I kiss her cheek.

She reaches a hand up and strokes the side of my face softly.

"It's okay. Thank you for forcing me out of my shell. I would have never had the courage to be who I really was and find myself if it wasn't for you. I think I'm really falling for you Cole Lyons," she replies in a soft and soothing tone.

"I don't *think* I'm falling for you. I *know* I have," I reply.

She turns her face slightly and kisses me. It was meant to be a simple peck on the lips, but the moment our lips brush each other's, a familiar desire takes over and we end up kissing more vigorously. It's a little scary how easily we keep giving in to our desires whenever we're alone. She grabs my hands and guides them over her breasts, lowering her top and exposing them for me to squeeze them as hard as she likes me too. I press into her back and she winces from the pain of the fresh tattoo.

"I'm sorry babe," I say and immediately back away.

“That’s okay. I guess I’ll just have to be on top again,” she says with a kinky wink. She stands up, strips off her clothes and rips off my shirt so roughly that it actually tears. I kick off my shoes as she undoes my jeans and pulls off my Calvins. I’m already stiff as a board, and my member springs to attention once it’s freed.

She adjusts the tattoo bed so that it’s now raised at a twenty-degree angle and presses me down into it. She stands at my side, and runs her finger nails down my chest and stomach, making me shiver with pleasure. She walks over to the foot of the bed, gets onto her knees and begins stroking me. The soft touch of her hand is like velvet, and I’m already struggling to keep from cumming. She brushes aside her hair and takes me into her mouth, sucking down on the tip roughly as she uses her hand to stroke my shaft. After a while, she lowers her head farther, taking me deeper into her mouth. I grab a handful of her hair and use it to gently shove her head up and down as I fill her mouth until her cheeks are engorged.

She licks me up and down from tip to base over and over. The smacking sounds her mouth makes as it gets sloppy only increases my pleasure. She takes me so deeply into her mouth I can actually feel myself hit the back of her throat as she gags slightly, but keeps going. My breathing reaches a fever pitch and I moan out loud, gripping the sides of the tattoo bed tightly. When I can take no more without exploding, I pull her head up. I try to sit up, but she forcefully pushes me back down. The tattoo bed is small in breadth, like a bench. She steps over it so that each of her legs are on either side of it.

Her naked body standing before me is glorious, and I stroke myself to the sight of it. She edges forward until her legs are stretched apart and she's right in front of my face. I see her parted lips dripping already, and it turns me on even more.

She grabs a bunch of my hair and yanks my head up a little. I love it when she gets this wild and uninhibited. It's like a sexual demon inside her takes over and it drives me crazy with desire when she's hungry like this.

"You taught me how to be crazy like this, baby," she says as I stare up at her.

"Now I want you to fuck the shit out of me."

She lowers herself until she's sitting on my face. My tongue goes straight inside her and she rubs herself all over my lips and cheeks, grinding my face until she's moaning from the pleasure it gives her. As I keep licking her, she looks straight into my eyes, reaches one hand down, and begins playing with herself as she rubs the bottom of her sex all over my lips. The harder I lick her inside, the more furiously she flicks her clit until she finally shudders to a climax and cums all over my face. The taste of her pleasure on my lips and tongue excites me more. She lowers herself, grips my member tightly and pushes it inside her. She rides me hard, screaming and moaning loudly with every thrust. She reaches down and chokes me while I grab the back of her hair and pull down tightly. The roughness with which we both handle each other sends our fucking into overdrive until we finally climax

together, and she crumples into a heap on top of me, out of breath, but smiling with a giddy kind of happiness.

I can't believe we're finally together. The flash of a life together, and more of this, comes to my mind, and I finally know what it means to be truly happy and content. She's mine now, and all I can think of is how much I want it to stay that way, forever.

The end.

Epilogue

Bad Boy Biker's Baby: A Brother's Best Friend Enemies to Lovers Romance

We're at Brian's cookout when it finally happens. I haven't thought about it in a while since I've been so happy and content with how things have been. I stare at Brian and Felicia. I've never seen my brother so happy and at peace with himself. She's great, and the two of them seem so happy together. I can't believe how much he's achieved in the last nine months. I couldn't be prouder of him. He's celebrated his one year of sobriety, completed a diploma in creative marketing, and even started his own online business. He's whole again, and I can tell that this time it's for life.

I hold Cole, taking in the musky scent of his cologne. It's a warm and still day. Brian and Felicia's little place is quaint. I finally feel like I have a sister now. I rub my belly proudly, though it hurts a little today. Everyone's been in a happy and boisterous mood, and I can't remember the last time I've felt this happy. Cole looks at me and smiles. He's also continued to surprise me every day. The way he's stepped up ever since the news of my pregnancy has been overwhelming at times.

Even my parents have nothing bad to say about him these days. He finally took the plunge. One of his clients, a young kid named Ricardo, helped him build an online presence for his shop and designs. The brilliance of his work went viral on social media in no time, and he's been inundated with work since. He finally bit the bullet, and now he has a larger shop and three apprentice tattoo artists that work for him. His shop and his brand as an artist are both thriving. His motivation to provide for the baby and me has clearly made him more determined than ever to succeed, and he has in so many ways. My own career trajectory has exploded. I've quit teaching and focused on my books. Between social media marketing and my growing fan base, I've become a best-selling fantasy author for younger readers.

Brian and Felicia are beaming and seem to know something I don't as they stare at Cole and me expectantly. Life feels so perfect right now, I couldn't have imagined anything making it better, until Cole gets down on one knee and pulls out an engagement ring. I feel a jolt and a weird sensation. I'm stunned and glance over at Brian and Felicia. I expect to see them excited, but they look horrified instead. Cole quickly gets off the ground and stares at me with shock too. I wonder what's going on. Why are they ruining this moment? That is, until I look down and realize my water has just broken.

Three hours later, I hold my little girl as I stare into her eyes. I can't imagine anything ever being more beautiful. She's perfect. She has my eyes and cheeks, but his hair, and the mix is just stunning. She gurgles and her pink lips curl into tiny

little smiling expressions that just melt my heart. Cole sits beside me on the bed, staring at us both with a deep look of happiness etched onto his face. He strokes my head and kisses me. She's perfect, he's perfect, and this moment is just perfect.

"Yes," I say softly to him.

He looks confused. With all the excitement that came after his almost proposal, it seems he's actually forgotten where this day started.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He smiles broadly and kisses me, and then little Allison-Skye on the forehead. In that moment, I finally know for sure that I made the right choice. He's shown me that motorcycles can be a thrill, that bikers can be fun and wonderful people, that tattoos can hold so much meaning, that sex can be the most amazing experience, if you give in to it without inhibition, and most of all, what life can truly be when a person actually starts living theirs. I finally know now, for sure, that I want to be with Cole Lyons for the rest of my life.

Bad Boy Biker's Baby

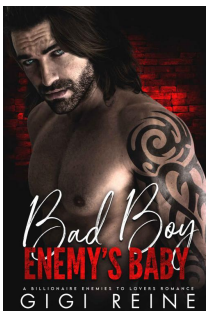
A Brother's Best Friend Enemies to Lovers Romance

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Getting knocked up by my boss's archenemy was NOT in my plans...

I met Matteo Larsen when I crashed my SUV into his Maserati.

He's my client's competition and enemy.

He's maddeningly hot with his piercing blue eyes, long dark hair, and strong tattooed arms.

Also, unbeknownst to me, a famous racecar driver.

He was so arrogant thinking everyone should know who he was.

The next time our paths crossed I was the lawyer fighting against him in court.

My brain tells me I should hate him, but my heart and hormones feel differently...

I give in and let him claim me.

We had a sizzling hot night together I'll never forget.

One off-limits night could cost me my job, and my heart.

Especially when I have to tell Mateo he's going to be a daddy...