

GLADYS CROSS

DAMAGED



DAMAGED



BOOK TWO IN THE DEVIL'S DEVIANTS MC SERIES

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DAMAGED, THE DEVILS DEVIANTS MC

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Author's Note:

Damaged is a dark MC romance and may contain subject matter that might offend sensitive readers. In this series you can expect to encounter violence, murder, death, profanity, explicit sexual situations with BDSM themes, drugs, tobacco use, PTSD, references to mental health, suspense, crime, and characters with questionable morals. Reader discretion is advised.



Join the Boys of the MC for
Dark Deeds and even Darker Delights.

Pops, Founder (San Antonio)

Ryder, President

Hunter, Vice President

Tweak, Secretary

Gunner, Treasurer

Beast, Road Captain

Cannon, Sergeant at Arms

Mad Dog, Original Member

Dagger, Original Member

Colt, Member

Marco, Prospect

Switch, Transferred Charters



It took a monster to find beauty in the
Damaged.



Rain fell in sheets, pelting my skin with cool, sharp stings. If only I experienced emotions the way I did the rain, then I wouldn't have to pretend. A portion of my brain was always devoted to gauging the reactions of others and then mimicking them. Like a color-blind pilot who faked knowing the difference between red and green in order to fly, assimilation was necessary, but exhausting.

Around the club I'd grown lax, allowing them to see a hint of the ever-present numbness that lived inside of me. It was a relief to let my guard down and have them accept me for the monster I was. That was no small thing considering I suffered the same affliction as my father, the notorious head of the *Braterstwo*, Yuri Kowalczyk a.k.a. The Butcher. It seemed in death, he'd done what he never could in life, get me to return to Chicago.

My bike hugged the asphalt as I sped around the last curve, my childhood home coming into view. The Gothic style mansion, with its gray brick exterior, single spire shooting up from the center of the roofline, and turrets at either end, looked exactly as I remembered. Heavily armed men patrolled the matching fifteen-foot brick walls, iron gate, and guardhouse. It was more of a fortress

than home. Fitting, really, considering the countless horrors it had witnessed over the years.

The roar of the bike announced my arrival long before I rolled to a stop in front of the guards. Two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, stances wide, in front of the imposing wrought iron gate. One of them squinted at me through the rain, recognition lighting his craggy face. Marek had been with my father longer than most, had been a trusted lieutenant, so why was he doing the job of a foot soldier?

“It’s been a long time, Mikołaj.” He stepped forward, his short mop of curly hair more salt and pepper than black now as it dripped into his face. “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

“That makes two of us. Did Piotr not think I’d be brave enough to step inside without a familiar face to greet me?”

Marek’s dark eyes flashed at the mention of my brother. Piotr must have demoted him out of some imagined slight. He’d been itching for a crack at my birthright since we were boys, and with Father passing, and me MIA, he must be drunk on power.

“Something like that.” He never took his eyes off me as he called over his shoulder. “Open the gate and let the boss know his brother has arrived.”

Marek backed away as the gate swung outward, both men watching through narrowed eyes as I roared past. The two-lane road gradually sloped upward until it flattened out into a circular drive by the front door. Killing the engine, I got off my bike, staring up the steps. Those brown double doors were a sight I’d hoped to never see again.

One of them opened, the slight figure of my sister Bea filling the doorway, her blond brow arched. “Were you planning to stand out in the rain all day?”

She'd been but a girl when I left, our father's blood still dripping from my hands. A girl who'd seen too much horror, yet here she was, a light of vitality shining from her pale blue eyes. I hadn't wanted to leave her behind, but I knew walking out the front door meant I'd be marked for death. Whenever it found me, she'd be guilty by association, and most likely be taken out as well.

My soggy boots felt heavier than they should have as I trudged up the stone steps. Bea stepped back from the door to make room, her guard's familiar face coming into view. From his post by the stairs, he met my eyes, inclining his head in greeting.

Bea ignored her shadow, her eyes wandering over me, a slender hand tracing over the new VP patch sewn onto my cut.

"They call you Hunter." She pointed to the other side where my road name was sewn on. "Why?"

"Most of us within the club have nicknames. Mine comes from my ability to find missing objects, or upon occasion, the person who would rather remain hidden."

"You know a thing or two about remaining concealed." She raised her eyes to mine, a flash of emotion flickered in their depths, gone before I could even put a name to it. "I'm afraid you should have stayed that way."

At the sound of heavy footfalls on the stairs, I turned my head. Piotr stood on the red carpet of the landing, sneering down at us, two guards I'd never seen before shadowing him. Time stood still for a second as we stared at one another, then as if catching himself, he pasted on a fake smile and started down the steps. He ran a hand down his royal blue suit jacket, smoothing it out as he moved. The little cunt had always enjoyed putting on a show.

"The eldest son finally returns."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by the ringing of his phone. His smile fell as he stopped to dig around in his pants pocket for it, his lips returning to their usual sneer.

“What,” he barked into it. Looking down at me from his perch on the steps, he said, “Let them in.”

His entrance ruined, he hung up the phone, shoved it back into his pocket, and jogged down the remaining steps. The slap of his dress shoes echoed off the black and white tile as he hurried toward us, his shadows seamlessly keeping up with him.

Out of necessity, I’d become an expert at recognizing in others what I lacked the ability to feel. Right now, I’d say my brother was positively giddy. Why, though, was a bit of a mystery. Not because I couldn’t relate, but because I’d never seen it in my brother before. At least, not while I was around.

He’d never hidden his hatred for me, and I appreciated that about him. It was much easier to watch your back when you knew where the knife was coming from.

“It seems our dear brother didn’t come alone after all.”



My hands flew across the keyboard, one of the three screens in front of me flashing as the red dot started to move. Jackpot! Metallica blared from my headphones as I clicked the mouse, zooming in. The background of the map was a blob of gray with bisecting white lines, and as I tried to move in for a closer look, the wheel of my chair caught on the tear in my plastic mat.

“Shit,” I muttered, lifting my butt and jerking on the chair.

A chair that leaned precariously to the side I could deal with, but this mat had to go. People always talked about how the government loved to waste money, but they sure didn’t do that around here. Pretty soon, they were going to ask field agents to throw bullets at the bad guys so they wouldn’t have to buy any more guns.

My red dot blinked, and I leaned forward, watching as it steadily moved northward. Drive baby, drive. In the next twenty-four hours, I’d have the route of the truck that just left the Hernandez compound mapped out on my screen. Their cartel was small potatoes in the grand scheme of things, but if the technology I’d developed worked, we’d be able to track any cartel shipment coming out of Mexico. All without them knowing.

Someone tapped me on the back of the shoulder, and I jumped about eight feet. “Holy balls!”

Ok, so the balls comment wasn’t very professional, but to be fair it wasn’t polite to sneak up on a girl and touch her without her permission. Slipping my headphones off, I held a hand against my chest, the fluttering of my heart as fast as a butterfly’s wings. Could a person in their twenties have a heart attack? If so, I hoped it wasn’t because they wanted me to take part in another sports pool.

When I swiveled around in my chair, Kam stood there looking a little sheepish as he pushed his glasses up. In my head, I started counting backward from a hundred. It was a coping mechanism I’d developed a long time ago to ward off a full-blown attack, which under the circumstances would be embarrassing.

“Sorry for startling you, but the boss said he wants to see you in his office.”

Figures his grouchy ass would want to see me right when I was in the middle of something groundbreaking. A chill went down my spine at the thought that my technology might revolutionize how we fought the war on drugs.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

His nose wrinkled as if he’d smelled something bad and I discreetly tipped my head down and to the side, inhaling. Nope, definitely not me. I still smelled like my favorite rose body wash.

“No, but he’s in a foul mood.”

What else was new? Tossing my headphones on the keyboard, I locked my screen and stood. Unfortunately, the stupid wheel on my chair caught in my mat again, and I fell forward, my arms flailing. Kam reached out, catching me before I could face-plant.

My skin crawled where his hand rested on my forearm, and I hoped he didn’t hear my swift intake of

breath. God, I hated being a freak. He was only making sure I didn't get a concussion, which was the least he could do after scaring the shit out of me.

"Thanks," I said, shaking the torn mat from where it clung to the heel of my Mary Jane's.

"No problem." His hands fell to his side, and he took a step back. "Good luck in there."

Before I could embarrass myself any further, I walked away. People smiled as they passed me in the hallway, and I gave them a nod of acknowledgment, and kept on going.

While I secretly had a soft spot for Herb, mainly because every time his wife made chocolate chip cookies, he brought me some, I didn't want to get cornered by the old curmudgeon. Our dumpy office chairs aggravated his sciatica, and my nerves couldn't handle listening to him complain for ten minutes right now.

The wooden door to my boss's office stood open, and I knocked, awkwardly standing in his doorway. This was like high school all over again, waiting outside the principal's office for him to see you. Except this time, I knew I wasn't being called in for something my sister had done.

"Come in," he said, not looking up from the mound of papers on his desk.

He continued to ignore me as I sat down in one of the ugly beige chairs in front of his desk, and as the silence stretched, so did my nerves. My middle finger rhythmically rubbed over the top of the one beside it, the motion doing nothing to soothe me. Next, I fixated on the credenza behind the desk. Anything to keep from being stuck in my head, endlessly obsessing over why he'd called me into his office.

There were a few kid's drawings that sat behind a "number one dad" coffee mug. In the family photo he had next to it he was smiling, which I honestly didn't know

was possible. Most of the time he stalked around the office with a scowl on his face, popping Tums as if they were candy.

His chair creaked, calling my attention back to him. He leaned back, his elbow on the arm, two fingers resting underneath his chin. Back and forth my finger moved, my palms warm against the leg of my black dress pants. If he didn't start talking soon, I was going to sweat through this stupid suit jacket.

“You have a twin sister, correct?”

That was not what I expected him to say, and for a second, I sat there, dumbfounded. Why would he be asking about Cherry? It wasn't like I ever talked about her, or my personal life, around the office. Not that playing video games or dressing up for *Comicon* was worth mentioning.

“Yes. What is this about?”

He sighed. “Either you're the world's best actress or you really don't know.”

What could Cherry have gotten herself mixed up in? Admittedly, I hadn't spoken to her much since I left for college. I'd been eager to leave the minefield of memories from our hometown in my rearview mirror, and unfortunately, my sister had been a huge part of those memories. But it wasn't as if I'd taken off and left her unprotected.

Most would consider it stalkerish to give your sister a phone, and then use it to spy on her, but I had my reasons. Surely, between that and social media, I would know if something had changed. Her last post was of a waffle that resembled Elvis and her phone never left her apartment building yesterday. How much trouble could she possibly be in?

This had to be some sort of misunderstanding or maybe even a case of mistaken identity. The DEA would have no reason to be interested in my sweet, perky,

outgoing sister. All I had to do was straighten it out for her and everything would go back to normal.

“Sir, if you’ll tell me what this is about, I’m sure I can straighten out whatever it is.”

“Doubtful,” he grunted, eyeing me over the rim of his tortoiseshell glasses. “Your sister is involved with The Devil’s Deviants.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

He could have told me Martians landed in my front yard, and I would have been less surprised. Maybe I was wrong, and I had been called in for something my sister did. No. This had to be some kind of twisted joke. No way would my sunshine and rainbows sister be involved with a biker gang. Hell, even her social media was filled with encouraging quotes and upbeat memes. In none of the pictures she’d posted, and she posted a lot, was she with men who wore leather vests.

“Congratulations. You’re being promoted to field agent. Bring down The Devil’s Deviants and we let your sister walk. No jail time, no criminal record.”

All thoughts about my moving dot and the breakthrough it signified fled. Shit! He was serious. Like prison time serious. There was nothing for me to fix and everything most definitely would not be fine. The closest I’d ever come to being a field agent was the time I controlled a surveillance drone from the laptop of a van.

“Sir, I’m not exactly field agent material. I sit in front of a computer all day. I wouldn’t have the first clue how to be a spy, or plant, or whatever you guys are calling it these days.”

His eyes hardened, a flicker of something that sent a chill up my spine was there one second and gone the next.

“I’m going to level with you here, Smith. Brass has had a hard-on for these guys for a long time, but we’ve never been able to get close enough to put them away.

Now, thanks to you, we have a way to put one of our own on the inside.”

He reached for a file folder on the corner of his desk. “We’ve been trying to go after the president’s new bride, but her brother has the entire Mexican government in his back pocket, just like his old man. We’d been spinning our wheels trying to come up with another way in until we got a tip that their newly appointed vice president”—he shuffled around a few papers—“a Mikołaj Kowalczyk a.k.a. Hunter is involved with the Polish Mafia out of Chicago.”

Oh, hell. He wasn’t seriously suggesting I become involved with the Mafia. Was he? Because that was the type of assignment that got agents killed. Agents with undercover experience. Not computers geeks like me.

The folder sounded like the bang of a gavel, making me jump in my seat as it landed in roughly the same spot as he’d picked it up from.

“Since we can’t connect the club to the Mexican cartel, we’ll have to tie them to the drugs flowing through Chicago. Either way, brass wants them out of the picture.” He waved me off with his hand. “Now, go find me something I can use. I don’t care what you have to do, just get it done. Hell, Smith, you might even have my job by the time this thing is over.”



The throaty growl of bike engines answered the question of who my brother thought I had with me. When I told Ryder where I was going, I specifically told him I needed to come alone. I should have known he'd see it as leaving a brother behind, a rule of his that had earned him my loyalty. Ryder might not have had a reason to be suspicious of Piotr, but he knew who my father was, and a little of our history.

Piotr might be blood, but his loyalty shifted depending on his own self-interests. His excitement over the club coming to back me up could only mean he wished them harm. They had become a thread in the woven fabric of Piotr's plan because I'd failed to account for Ryder's Boy Scout tendencies. A thread that I would snip at the first opportunity.

He gave me a demented grin over the top of our sister's head before turning to swing open the door. It almost made me change my stance on killing him. Father may have passed down his lack of feeling, but we differed when it came to killing. He viewed it as a sport, getting off on shocking people with his garish displays, hence his nickname, The Butcher. For me, killing was a decision born of necessity. If it was warranted, I preferred

a more clean and precise method that wouldn't bring about any backlash.

Another thing my father thrived on was the attention his antics brought him. Something my brother obviously got from him, since Piotr was preening like a peacock as everyone filed through the door, making an utter ass out of himself.

“Welcome, welcome. Oh, my, who do we have here?” He grabbed Valentina's hand and placed a kiss on top of it. “If my brother had told me they made bikers that looked like you I might have been tempted to get one.”

Despite being raised by the same brutal man, my brother was more pretentious snob than Mafia killer. Not that he wasn't capable of it, but he didn't enjoy getting his hands dirty. A series of mind games, followed by lying back and watching the results of his handiwork, were more his forte. Though, if the vein in Ryder's neck were any indication, there might be an old-fashioned brawl in Piotr's future.

“Unless taking a heel to the balls has suddenly become your thing, I'd advise you to stick with your usual drab socialites.”

Beast stood in the entryway with his arms crossed over his massive chest, adding, “And god help you if you get blood on her shoes. Those things are expensive to replace.”

Valentina smirked as my brother dropped her hand as if she had leprosy, while Ryder tried to cover his snicker by coughing into his hand.

My brother did a double take as he stared up at Beast, his mouth hanging open. Most people reacted that way the first time they saw him. He had the body of a professional wrestler with the height of an NBA player. Normally, he wore a smile to soften the severity of his dark hair and thick beard, but wearing a scowl, as he was now, he looked downright sinister.

Tweak, in typical fashion, didn't waste any time in noticing my sister standing beside Piotr. His dick must have some sort of pussy sonar because if there was an attractive woman within a hundred-mile radius, he'd find her and hit on her. Women always fell for it too. Well, everyone except for Valentina, but I'd already decided she was the exception to every rule.

“How did his ass”—he swung his dark eyes my way—“end up with a beauty like you for a sister?”

My hope that she would be like Valentina died a quick death when she batted her eyelashes at him. Why that was universal girl code for you can hit it was still a mystery to me, but I'd seen it happen too many times. Especially now that I'd been promoted to VP. However, he was shit out of luck today. He'd have to find another place to get his cock wet.

Cannon slid between Bea and Tweak, winking at me as he tucked a cigarette behind his ear. “Tweak, you're crazy. The family resemblance is clear as day.”

Piotr took one look at Cannon's torn denim jacket, gaudy gold rings, and visible prison tats, and curled his lip. My brother was accustomed to saying whatever he liked because of who our father was, and I could practically hear the insults brewing in that small-minded brain of his. With Cannon's lack of impulse control, if Piotr opened his big mouth things would take an ugly turn before I could even find out what my brother wanted.

“You put out feelers across every corner of the underworld that you needed to see me. Well, here I am. Let's get this over with, shall we? You don't want me here any more than I want to be here.”

Piotr smiled. It was no doubt meant to be reassuring, but it was more like an angler fish luring its prey in with something shiny. Thanks to my insomnia, and the National Geographic Channel, I knew all about the predators of the animal world. My brother had conveniently forgotten that he only played at being a

monster, while I was born one. It might be time I reminded him.

His smile wilted and his skin paled as I let the front I put on for the world melt away. My sister's breath caught, and I knew she was seeing our father stare back at her through my eyes.

Piotr tried to recover his earlier bravado, but his voice rose an octave as he said, "I have something to show you in Father's office."

He could have picked any room in the house for our meeting, but I knew he'd strategically chosen that one. Piotr wanted to watch me spiral while he sat there all calm, cool, and collected. Another mind game. He forgot I could walk into the room where I confronted our father, a room I'd barely escaped the last time I was here, and feel nothing.

The dark wood paneling that had been covered in droplets of my blood the last I saw it still lined the lower half of the hallway. Pristine white paint covered the upper half of the walls with gold sconces in between the paintings of our ancestors. A line of pale blue eyes followed our progress down the hall, and it was no less creepy now than when I was a child.

Stepping into my father's office, I saw not much had changed in here either. If it weren't for the massive desk, you could easily mistake this room for an old-fashioned gentleman's club with its rich leather chairs, dark wood furnishings, floor to ceiling bookshelves, and fireplace.

Piotr walked around the desk and looked quite at home as he plopped down in Father's leather chair. He even looked like him with his legs crossed, reclined back, surveying his domain as his two shadows stood with their arms folded in front of them. All he was missing was the cruel sneer and deadened eyes.

Bea slipped past me to perch on the edge of the new chair that sat in front of the desk. Father must not have been able to get my blood out of the old one. Its replica

sat empty next to her, but I made no move to take it. My brother could wait and stare all he liked, I intended to be prepared to strike in the event he grew some balls and came at me.

Ryder came up on my right, while Gunner took the left, their stances matching that of Piotr's guards. Somewhere between the front door and the office, Gunner had pulled his shaggy, light brown hair into a tight bun at the base of his skull. The only time he only wore it that way was when he was expecting trouble, and knowing Gunner, he came prepared with at least one gun hidden underneath his baggy clothing. Even if the guards had searched him, I'd never known him not to slip at least one past detection.

Despite not playing into his mind games by sitting, Piotr's eyes still gleamed. He thought he had the advantage. Sure, he had more guns and men at his disposal, but how loyal were they? If Marek was anything to go by, not very. My brother had always excelled at shooting himself in the foot, and demoting one of our father's best men was no way to garner respect or loyalty. His mistake may prove useful to me considering I had leverage against Marek that I'd never used.

Piotr leaned forward to slip a manila file folder across the desk and then sat back. Keeping a close eye on my brother, I leaned over and grabbed it. When I opened the envelope, I saw my father's bold scrawl across the bottom. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't believe the typed words in front of my face. Then I noticed the date at the top and things clicked into place.

My eyes snapped up to meet my brother's. "He never changed his succession plan?"

"Evidently not." His lips were a thin line as he bit out, "Trust me, I've checked with his attorney. Keep leafing through, there's more."

My thumbs flipped through several more pages, scanning the words, still trying to process why he'd left

me the keys to his kingdom after trying to kill me. Though, to be fair, I tried to kill him first. While I didn't regret it, that momentary loss of control had changed everything.

At the bottom of the very last page, there was a blank line with my name typed below it. There it was. His endgame hadn't changed since we were kids, but him having to legally take my birthright from me was still a shock. I thought he'd summoned me here to ensure I wouldn't make waves for him now that our father was dead. But this was more than a mere dick measuring contest.

When I looked back at him, he had a cocky half smile on his face. "If you don't sign, everyone in your precious club does hard time or goes out in a hail of bullets. Either way, I'll get what should have been mine."

I cocked my head to the side, studying him. He had to have something on the club, or he wouldn't be so sure of himself. But what? Madness tinged his eyes, a touch of our father's cruelty shining through. All this time, I thought I was the only one of my siblings who'd inherited our father's difficulties. Piotr might not be the monster Father and I were, but he hadn't escaped untainted either.

My father must have seen the same weaknesses I always have in Piotr, and narcissist that he was, feared that Piotr would topple the empire he'd clawed and schemed to build. That would also explain my success in evading him all these years. He had to have held back during our fight, then for show made half-hearted attempts to find me. At the time, it hadn't felt that way, but all my memories were through the eyes of a teenager.

Pops interrupted my musings by leaning in and whispering, "I don't think you should give him what he wants. He's telling the truth, but your brother is slicker than pig snot on a radiator. I wouldn't put it past him to do whatever he's gonna do anyway after you sign."

Ryder kept his eyes on my brother as his shoulder brushed against mine, his voice a low rumble. “I agree with Pops. Don’t sign a thing he pushes your way.”

Pops was known around the club for being something of a human lie detector, but even without his confirmation, I’d already come to the same conclusion. Our father hadn’t given Piotr a choice, not if he was hellbent on ruling. He either needed to kill me himself, which we both knew he didn’t have the balls to do, or let the Braterstwo take care of me in jail. The paper was simply the tool he was using to lull me into a false sense of security.

The easiest thing to do would be to kill him and be done with it. However, it might be more prudent to buy us some time. We needed to figure out what he had on the club. Then again, the key could be in who he had in his pocket. If I killed him now, we might never know, and the threat would hang over our heads indefinitely.

Not to mention, I could use the added time to determine which soldiers were loyal to Piotr and which could be turned. My brother would watch my every move from here on out, so it wasn’t like I could take care of it before I left. Luckily, I knew the perfect person for the job, and that someone owed me a debt.

My brother was so sure he had me by the short hairs that he practically bounced in his seat. He was about to be sorely disappointed because the game he put into play was far from over. He didn’t know it yet, but this was only the beginning.

“I’ll contact you with my answer in two weeks. In the meantime, if you so much as sneeze in the club’s direction I’ll wear your intestines like a necktie.”



My cab pulled to a stop in front of a brick two-story building with black metal numbers on the side. The satellite image I'd seen of the building when my sister moved in made me think it was a warehouse that had been converted into an apartment building. It happens all the time in New York City, why not San Antonio? Now, I felt incredibly stupid for making that assumption and not looking into it any further.

Getting out of the cab, I wheeled my suitcase onto the sidewalk and shaded my eyes with my hand as I looked up. One thing was for certain, drugs were definitely treating these boys well. This was no rundown house or junky garage like you saw on TV. The Devil's building took up an entire city block and had cute black sconces set into the brick and a scrollwork sign above the door.

The DEA's file, or the parts I had access to with my sister's involvement, said the club owned this garage and a strip club. Nobody knew for sure how the club cleaned the cash from the drugs they sold, but it was long suspected that the strip club, and possibly this garage, were fronts. They just couldn't get close enough to prove it.

My boss didn't know it yet, but that's exactly what I was going to do. He wanted me to get into bed with the Mafia, but I wasn't trying to get myself, or my sister, killed just to cement his career. If the limited information we had on the elder Kowalczyk was anything to go by, I wouldn't last a day. Hunter had probably cut his teeth assassinating seasoned undercover agents, and here I was, a wet behind the ear rookie with zero field experience.

Fuck that. I had no desire to be fitted for cement shoes and thrown over the side of a boat. A RICO case was much more feasible given my skill set, not to mention I stood a better chance of living long enough to make sure my sister didn't end up in jail. The evidence I collected would be what ensured her freedom, not the drug bust my boss wanted.

He'd dangled my sister's freedom over my head like a schoolyard bully, but I wasn't stupid. Even if I went off like a lamb to slaughter, there was no guarantee that my boss had enough clout to hold up his end of the deal. If I was going to risk my life, I was going to get what I came for.

Lies were my specialty, and after all, wasn't that what undercover work was all about? A fake identity wasn't an option given the circumstances, so there were no facts about an alter ego I had to keep straight. All I had to do was sneak around and collect evidence on the club behind my sister's back while trying not to get either of us killed. Simple. Easy. In and out. A week, tops, and I'd be back to my run-of-the-mill, boring existence.

A fine sheen of sweat coated my skin, making my mother's pearls stick to my neck. I could do this. For Cherry. With a deep breath in, I yanked the Band-Aid off and pulled on the handle of the plain black door. A bell jingled from above it, but nobody would ever hear it over the heavy metal music blasting from somewhere in the back.

The soft glow of a computer screen was like a flashing beacon, tempting me forward with the promise

of my sister's salvation. When I peered down the hallway and saw that it was empty, I walked around the desk centered in the middle of the room. A customer's information stared me right in the face, and I couldn't believe it. This seemed rather careless for criminals that were smart enough to evade justice for all these years. Either that or they had nothing to hide stored on this machine.

The mouse felt cold underneath my palm as I slid it across the motorcycle printed mouse pad. My heartbeat sped up as I toggled between accounting software and customer files, looking over my shoulder every few seconds. All the invoices I clicked on had timecards attached to justify any per hour labor charges, with the same three names appearing over and over.

Despite being behind on the accounting side of the shop, they were still turning a legitimate profit. At least on the surface. It was going to take me hours of sifting through all the records to find the proof I needed, assuming there was any. The strip club was a much more likely place to launder money, yet I couldn't rule anything out. Plus, the garage was attached to the clubhouse, making it easier for me to sneak over here after everyone went to sleep. A shiver went down my spine at the thought of what I might need to do in order to access the strip club's computers.

Heavy metal still reverberated down the hallway, but I couldn't afford to get caught snooping by whoever was in the back. My sister's freedom, and both of our lives, depended on me being smart about the way I did things. Setting the screen back the way I found it, I looked around, trying to familiarize myself with the lobby's layout for when I would have to find my way back in the dark.

Their lobby was a far cry from my depressing cubicle at the DEA with its light wood floors, dark gray walls, and comfortable looking leather chairs. There wasn't even a mat underneath the desk to get my chair

caught on. As Slipknot's "The Dying Song" ended and Five Finger Death Punch's "Wash It All Away" began, I had the crazy thought all I was missing was a latte and this would be my idea of work heaven.

Shaking my head at myself, I started down the hallway lined with pictures of bikes and cars. About halfway down, a petite blonde pushed open one of the gray industrial double doors at the end of the hall.

She stood there with the door hanging open and shouted, "If you came down here to ask me to go with you to the nail salon again, the answer is still no. What would be the point? I'd just get paint or oil on them and then be pissed that I wasted the money."

This wouldn't be the first time someone mixed us up. When we were younger, we used to trade places all the time. Cherry had trouble in math, so I'd take both our tests while she covered for me in gym class. Which was a win, win, if you asked me because Cherry hated math and I hated gym. It was doubtful, though, that this girl even knew Cherry had a twin sister.

"You must have me confused with Cherry." I walked over to her and held out my hand. "I'm Brandy."

She tilted her head to the side, studying me, tendrils escaping from her messy bun to fall down her shoulders. Her hazel eyes were a rich honey color, whereas Cherry and I had more flecks of green along the fringe of our irises. Odd. Only 5 percent of the world's population had hazel eyes, yet there were three in this building.

"I'd think you were Cherry fucking with me by straightening her hair, but yours is slightly longer, and you have a birthmark on your collarbone." She wiped her hands on a cloth she took out of the pocket of her gray coveralls and shook my hand. "I'm Stella, by the way."

Cherry was the social butterfly, not me, and making friends didn't exactly come naturally to me. But, at the very least, I needed this girl not to hate me. I was in enough danger without making more enemies.

Even though I already knew the answer from snooping, I turned around and pointed at the pictures lining the hallway as I asked, “Is this some of your handiwork?”

Her face lit up. “It is. Nobody ever thinks to ask, they always assume it was Tweak or...”

She let the last part hang in the air between us, her face falling. Balls. Now I’d gone and upset her, though I wasn’t sure exactly how. Even for me, this was a record. Usually, it took me a little longer to offend someone, because like her, I was frank. Uncomfortably so. At least that was what I’d been told.

She shook her head. “Never mind. How long are you going to be visiting for?”

“I’m not sure yet. Cherry doesn’t know that I’m coming.” I resisted the urge to cringe and quickly added, “It was sort of last-minute.”

“Then let’s go surprise her,” Stella said, turning on her heel and walking into a three-bay garage.

A Beamer missing its front end was on one lift while a Jeep with its door folded in occupied the other. Tools were strewn about on the concrete floor, and I had to pick my way around them, the wheel of my luggage catching on a wrench. Her stride was as no nonsense as the rest of her, and by the time I finally made it through the tool maze and caught up with her, Stella was almost to the wooden door at the end.

I followed her into a second, much smaller garage that didn’t have any lifts or tools. This must be the side the club came and went from. Only, where were all the bikes? She started up the steel staircase on our right, and I groaned internally, cursing my luck. Stairs gave me enough trouble in broad daylight, and these didn’t even have a railing!

Balls. How in the hell was I supposed to navigate these in the dark? I was going to break a bone, get caught,

and then die an agonizing death. No. It was bad juju to think that way. Be positive. Maybe I'd break something that could be hidden from the club, like a toe. Yeah, limping wasn't suspicious at all.

"Brandy, are you coming?" Stella called from the top of the stairs.

Shit. Was this girl a mountain goat? How did she get up there so fast?

"Yeah," I grumbled, clutching my luggage to my chest, my ass touching the whitewashed brick as I made my way up the stairs. "Must have spaced out there for a minute."

By the time I joined Stella on the landing, I felt like I'd climbed Mount Everest, and with a suitcase no less. She never once told me to hurry, seemed impatient, or teased me about how long I was taking. If I hadn't instantly liked her based on her taste in music and frank mannerisms, that act of kindness would have definitely tipped the scales.

She gave me a nod of encouragement and opened the door. The brick, metal, wood, and leather accents filling the room made it feel like a trendy downtown bar and a hole in the wall Irish pub had a baby. Not even going to lie, when I looked over and saw the array of gaming controllers strewn across the large wooden coffee table, a little drool fell from my lip.

Stella left me in the doorway, wistfully eyeballing the big screen TV and gaming consoles, while she walked over to the metal bar and sat down. If life were as simple as a video game, then at least I'd be able to shut down my feelings whenever I felt like it. The sight of my sister's mouth hanging open as she stood behind the bar made my chest uncomfortably tight. Not that I blamed her. This town had been my version of hell, and if it weren't for her, I'd never have returned.

"Surprise," I said with a lame shoulder shrug.

Her brows drew together, her perfectly pink bow lips tipped down at the corners as her eyes came to rest on the rolling luggage next to my leg. It looked as unnatural on her face now as it had on the day she'd walked in and almost destroyed everything. Flashes of memory were like foreign invaders attacking my body and stealing my breath. My feet felt like lead as I concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other. Like that day, nothing was as it seemed.

“Why are you here?”

You'd think after all these years of keeping my sister in the dark that it would come as naturally to me as breathing. Wrong. Each time I lied, even by omission, felt like it blackened another piece of my already tarnished soul.

“You're the only person I could turn to.”

Cherry would get around to asking me more questions later, she always did, but by that time hopefully this fiasco would be over. At the very least, this would give me the reprieve I needed to gather my bearings before I had to come up with a believable backstory.

“I'll have to ask Ryder if it's OK.” She fisted the towel in her hand but maintained eye contact as she said, “But Brandy, this is a bike club. None of the guys around here are going to want help with their computers for a place to stay, if you catch my drift.”

Her meaning was crystal clear, but the lump forming in my throat made it impossible for me to reply. She hadn't been around me since high school, but nothing had changed. I still didn't have any interest in men or dating. That part of me had died a long time ago.

For the second time in my life, I was about to wade into a hell of my own making. Some might be bitter, but I knew I would make the same choices if I had to do it all over again. Every action had a consequence, and at least this time there wasn't anything left of me to break.



When I opened the door to the clubhouse, a pair of rich golden eyes tinged with green flecks met mine, stopping me in my tracks. Their color reminded me of a lioness I'd seen once on the *National Geographic Channel*. They were no less rare or stunning on the girl who stood across the room than they'd been on the big cat. Dark lashes framed her wide eyes, briefly severing our connection when they fluttered closed.

"I've died and gone to heaven," Tweak said from over my shoulder, his breath hot on the back of my neck. "There are two Cherry's."

That was where he was wrong. Cherry had never pulled on my body like a magnet, drawing me in the way this girl did. Her body stiffened, as if she could sense me watching her, my legs already eating up the distance between us.

She was petite, her bone structure delicate like Cherry's, but she had more curves. The skirt she wore was more business than sexy, but the way it hugged her ass made me want to sink my teeth into the lush globes. The silken strands of her hair were the same shade of blond as Cherry's, but her locks were straight, brushing

against the strand of pearls lying against a collarbone I itched to put my mark on.

The sound of multiple pairs of boots hitting the hardwood behind me had me clenching my fists, my nails digging into the sensitive flesh of my palms. My brain should have cataloged the discomfort, but it didn't, to overcome by the thought pounding through my head like the beat of a drum. Mine. Possession had never taken up residency inside me before, but it was now eating away at the ever-present numbness I'd grown accustomed to.

Instinctively, my body moved to the right, attempting to shield her from their field of vision. I no longer trusted myself not to attack one of my brothers if any of them looked at her the way they looked at Cherry. It didn't matter that, logically, that was unavoidable. They were identical twins, and every man in this room, except for maybe Ryder and Gunner, had fucked Cherry.

Thoughts of them wanting to fuck her clouded my vision and my nails broke through the skin of my palms. None of them would get anywhere near her, let alone touch her.

Ryder rested a hand on my shoulder, and the only thing that kept me from lashing out at him was his total lack of interest in Cherry. He looked down at my clenched fist, but didn't comment on my uncharacteristic lack of control as he turned his head to look at Cherry.

“You never told us you had a twin.”

“It's never come up before,” she responded, fiddling with the towel in her hand. “Ryder, this is my sister, Brandy.”

Recognition lit her eyes, and she cocked her head to the side, reluctantly extending her hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Ryder cut his eyes to me, lifting his dark brow in question. I nodded, holding my body stiffly in check as his hand briefly brushed against hers. Her body

shuddered at the contact, but she shrugged it off so quickly that most people would probably never even notice.

“I’m hoping you’ll let me stay here for a little while.” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “If I help around the clubhouse like my sister does.”

Ryder looked my way again, and my respect for him grew. He didn’t know what was going on with me, yet he was still willing to give me the benefit of the doubt and allow me to decide her fate.

Stella’s eyes darted between Brandy, Ryder, and me, her gaze finally settling on me, two small wrinkles forming between her brows. “Cherry mentioned something about Brandy being good with computers. If she’d rather help down in the shop, I could use her.”

Brandy brightened at the idea, then glanced down at her shoes, trying to smother her initial reaction. Little did she know that wasn’t necessary. No one would lay a hand on her but me. Still, I wondered why she felt the need to cover up her relief. Was it out of respect for her sister or something more?

“She can help you in the shop, but at night she stays with me.”

Silence settled over the room, everyone no doubt in shock. In all the time I’d been with the club, no woman had ever set foot in my room, not even to clean it. Everyone knew I liked my privacy, but my reasons went beyond a basic desire for solitude.

While you slept, you were vulnerable. Something that could easily be used against me, not that I thought she was a contract killer. But in my case, my enemies outnumbered my friends, even within my family. What little sleep I got was always alone, with my gun beside me, behind a door that was dead bolted.

In order to keep everyone away from what was mine, though, I would need to make a few concessions.

After she drifted off to sleep, I'd lock myself in the bathroom and sleep in the tub. It wasn't a thought I relished, but it beat the alternatives. I didn't relish her learning things that would either horrify her or get her killed, assuming she wasn't some sort of avenging angel because she certainly looked like an angel.

Brandy let out a little half-snort, half-chuckle. "Aren't you sweet for offering to share your room, but I'd hate to put you out. I'll just bunk with Cherry. It'll be like when we were kids."

"Sweet my ass," Beast muttered.

He was right. Even as a cherubic faced infant, I doubted I was sweet. But if Brandy and I were going to get along, she needed to learn there was no way for her to outmaneuver me. That I would always be the monster she could never escape. She was mine now, and I had every intention of keeping her.

"You misunderstand me, Brandy." She shivered when I said her name and I wondered what she'd do if the next time I said it I nipped the sensitive flesh of her earlobe. "It wasn't a suggestion. You either stay with me, or you don't stay at all."

Cherry's head cocked to the side, her brow creasing as she stared at me like I was a puzzle she couldn't quite figure out. It was the only time I'd ever rendered the girl speechless, and I wouldn't even get to enjoy it because I could already hear the click-clacking of Valentina's heels.

She stepped around Ryder, her eyes narrowing on me. "What's the matter with you?"

Rapid-fire Spanish flew from her mouth as her hands gestured around wildly. When I looked over at Ryder, the asshole smirked as he adjusted the front of his jeans. Now that all his brain cells were focused on his dick, I guess I was on my own.

Valentina was unfailing and vicious in protecting those she cared about, and Cherry had somehow made it

to the top of that list. Her sense of loyalty was admirable, but I couldn't allow her to stand in the way of securing what was mine. It wouldn't be the first time I'd considered slitting her throat, but that was before she'd risked everything to go against her father.

Out of respect, I stood there, taking the brunt of her ire, waiting for her to wind down. After a few minutes, her chest heaved, but the lash of her tongue no longer held the same bite.

With my arms crossed over my chest, I asked, "Are you done?"

Before she had the chance to reply, Brandy stepped between us, her teeth biting into her plump bottom lip.

"Thanks for that vivid description of a donkey kicking a man in the balls." She looked down at my cock, then shook her head as if to clear it, quickly averted her eyes. "But I don't want to cause any problems." The entire thing only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to make my inner asshole smirk. "If it's that important to..."

"Hunter," I supplied, watching her eyes widen a fraction before she smoothed out her expression.

Interesting. Her Spanish was flawless, and she not only recognized Ryder's name, but knew something about me as well. Cherry could be trusted not to run her mouth, so I doubted she'd learned anything from her. It was the main reason Cherry had been with the club for as long as she had. That left me to wonder where Brandy might have gotten her information.

"Hunter." The way her lips wrapped around the H in my name had me thinking about how they'd look spread around my thick cock. "I can stay with him instead of Cherry. It's not like I'll be spending much time in the room, anyway."

Her voice held an air of confidence that belied the two fingers of her right hand incessantly rubbing together

as she snuck glances up at me through her lashes. That contradiction, that hesitation, only made me want to lay claim to her in front of the entire club. To show her, and the rest of them, that she belonged to me. But for now, I'd let my beautiful angel off the hook. Besides, it was my turn to make a move in the game my brother put into play.



Hunter was a tornado of danger and torment, sucking you in with the promise of carnal delights, only to spit you back out of his vortex, leaving you forever damaged. He didn't even have to be physically touching you to do it either. Those pale blue eyes of his had stroked along my skin, leaving nothing but goose bumps in their wake. There wasn't a part of me left untouched by the heat of his gaze. Even hours later, sitting in front of the garage's computer, my skin still tingled from him mapping out the planes of my body with his eyes.

If his eyes had me forgetting my carefully crafted plan of avoiding the Mafia, what could he do with those strong, thickly veined hands? It was a thought that had surfaced repeatedly, like a buoy that refused to sink. What had changed? I could have sworn my vagina was dead, but here she was alive and kicking. For the first time. Ever.

Why did my body have to come alive for him? It could have been anybody else, literally anyone, and things would have been fine. Go figure, the only man I needed to be repulsed by was the one man my body

craved. Damn it. I couldn't crawl into bed with the Mafia. Could I?

If it were solely hormones, maybe I could brush aside whatever pulled me toward him like a magnet. Ignore the attraction. People did it all the time. Sadly, it wasn't just that. Hunter had seen me in a way that nobody else ever had. Cherry and I might have been identical twins, but we were anything but. She was the one with a cheerleader's body and the natural grace of a prima ballerina. Everyone was drawn to her. How could they not be with her perpetually sunny disposition and kind heart?

Next to her, most considered me nothing but a pale imitation. A socially awkward nerd who preferred computers to people, snorted when she laughed, and tripped over her own two feet. Even when Cherry wasn't around, I melted into the background, preferring not to attract too much attention. In my experience, nothing good had ever come from men noticing you. Yet, when his fierce stare had settled on me, and then stayed there, it didn't make me nervous the way it usually did.

Hunter focusing all of his savage intensity on me could only end in brutal heartache. Unless he figured out what I was doing here, then he'd spare my feelings and simply kill me. It didn't take a genius to know that by entertaining his interest I was playing with fire. Any sane woman would run far away from Hunter, and the danger he posed, but I'd never claimed to be normal.

His pale gaze might have made me burn, but I wasn't delusional either. Underneath all the fire I loved so much was ice. A detached coldness that was as beautiful as it was destructive. My warped brain had somehow associated his icy gaze with safety, and my pussy had been all too willing to hop on the bandwagon. Ironically, my body shut down because of one man's brutality only to be brought back to life with another's.

A feminine screech rose above the heavy metal music, followed by a loud crash, and the unmistakable

clinking of metal hitting cement. My brain did a little stutter step as the past and present converged, the clank of metal being replaced by wood splintering. Logically, I knew the sounds in the back had triggered the angry shouting in my head, but the muscles in my legs refused to listen. They tightened painfully, and I hated I was frozen, caught in the past, unable to get to Stella. To know what the hell was happening to her in the garage.

Bitterness and rage were razors slicing through me as the voices in my head grew louder, while everything, except for the music, had died down in the present. It was two alternate realities dueling for space inside my fucked-up head. Desperate to avoid the past, one I hated, I focused on the old Slayer song that was playing.

As a teenager I had hated this place down deep in my bones. Now, I just despised the dark hole my memories had crawled out of, and wished I could reject them. I guess I'd have to settle for being grateful they were no longer haunting me, a reminder of what humanity was capable of.

Now firmly back in the present, I stood up, pins and needles shooting down my legs as I leaned over the side of my desk. Stella charged like a bull down the hall, a handsome man right behind her.

When we'd come down earlier, it had been just the two of us, and I wasn't sure when that had changed. I'd have to remain on alert when I switched from balancing the current accounts to searching through the garage's old records looking for evidence.

Stella stopped right beside my desk and whirled around. Wait a second. I knew who this guy was from the file. Ryder and Tweak looked more like brothers than the cousins I knew them to be. They had the same dark hair, brown eyes, and a tall, muscular build. Tweak's hair was a little longer on top and his five o'clock shadow was a shade darker, but the most notable difference between the two was in how they carried themselves. Even now, with

an irate woman about to chew his ass out, he looked like he was off to hit the bar with his buddies.

“Don’t you dare follow me either!” she yelled, pointing a finger in his direction.

Relief swirled in my chest that Stella didn’t appear to be in any sort of physical danger from Tweak, but I’d remained frozen behind the desk too long, and now there was no way for me to tactfully slip past them. So, I stood there, stuck, hoping neither of them would notice me, or if they did, that I wouldn’t get dragged into the middle of it. Whatever the hell this was.

“Oh, you want to point a finger. Ok, I got one for you.” He stuck up his middle finger, then added a second one from the opposing hand. “What do you know? There’s another one.”

A part of me admired his sarcastic assholery even though internally I shook my head at his stupidity. If looks could kill, this was the part where I’d see his spirit float out of his body like on those old Red Bull commercials.

“You, you... may you get a venereal disease that causes your dick to fall off!”

Damn, had to admire a girl that could hold her own. And that was a hell of a comeback.

He looked nonplussed, despite the threat to his dick, and folded his arms over his chest. “Now that was just uncalled for.”

“Ugh!” She rolled her eyes, and for a split second, I wondered if she was going to punch him before she turned on her heel and muttered, “I’m out of here.”

The little bell danced over the door as it slammed closed. As fights went, it was rather like a sparkler, starting out strong, then just sorta fizzling out. Not that I had any personal experience with romantic relationships, but their fight had an “end of the relationship” vibe that I

was familiar with thanks to watching the girls in my old dorm go through breakups. Many, many breakups.

“Hell of a first impression, huh,” he said with a jerk of his head toward the door Stella just stormed out of. He held out his hand. “The name’s Tweak. I saw you upstairs earlier, but I figured it was safer to wait until Hunter cooled down to introduce myself. Stella might threaten my manhood, but that crazy fucker would smile while he sawed it off.”

Despite his laid-back nature and nonthreatening vibe, the sensation of a million spider legs crawling over my skin hit me long before I placed my hand in his. He firmly clasped it, the effect multiplying, before his hand fell to his side. I’d become a master at suppressing the tiny shivers that took over my body every time a man touched me, no matter how innocently, but I still worried every time that somebody would notice.

Instead of disappearing into the shop like I hoped he would, he made himself comfortable against the wall beside my desk. He cocked his head to the side, studying me, and unlike Hunter, his stare made me want to crawl into a hole and never come out.

“Just out of curiosity, on a scale from one to five, how seriously should I take Stella’s dick threat?”

“Ten, easy.”

Balls. I probably shouldn’t have said that out loud.

“Damn.” He smiled, one dimple engraving his cheek. “Want to take a second to think about your answer, maybe?”

“Sorry.” The skin on my face felt tight and warm. Crap. While other women had “resting bitch face,” something I envied, I had “blush at the drop of a hat.” “Sometimes I’m a little too blunt.”

“Nah, you’re probably right. I better play it safe and call her tonight, in case she doesn’t piece together why I purposely started shit with her today. Otherwise, I might

end up with a pink bike like Ryder.” He shuddered. “That shit was funny because it wasn’t my bike. The girl might not hold a grudge, but she’s extremely inventive with payback.”

If this were a rerun of *How I Met Your Mother*, the narrator would show for the audience Tweak’s hot-to-crazy ratio on Barney’s graph. Ideally, you wanted to be above the diagonal line, indicating that you were more hot than crazy. At the moment, Tweak was falling below that line.

“Fix your face, young lady, it’s not what it looks like.”

Damn my “what the fuck” expression. Oh, well, at least he didn’t seem pissed.

“Stella has a lot of pent-up anger and it’s kinda hard to say fuck off to someone who’s no longer here. If she kept holding all that shit inside, eventually she’d wind up stroking out on me in the garage. Then I’d have to deal with a pissed off Mad Dog, and trust me, you do not want that.”

Ok, that actually seemed more sweet than crazy. Wait a second. Did they, or didn’t they, just have a lover’s spat? Now I was all sorts of confused, but I wasn’t about to ask.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Hey, it’s almost quitting time, anyway. What do you say we head upstairs and see if Cherry wants to play a game of pool?”

Yeah, that was a hard pass. There was always one thing I could rely on to get myself out of situations like this—my clumsiness.

“I hate to disappoint you, but the last time I played, my stick hit more balls around the table than it did on the table. I’m afraid physical activities and I aren’t exactly simpatico.”

He covered his junk and winced. “Ouch. Ok, so pool is definitely out.”

This was the part where men usually fled, as fast as their legs would carry them and with a hand covering their dick. However, Tweak didn't seem bothered, nor was he eager to escape my company. There had to be something in the water here. On the upside, I didn't have the same reaction to Tweak that I did to Hunter. One malfunction of my mind fuckery was about all I could handle in a day.

“I know,” he said with a snap of his fingers. “We can play a video game. Cherry won't want to play with us, but my nuts won't be in danger, and all you have to do is wiggle those pretty little fingers of yours.”

Damn him for guessing my only weakness. If Tweak had some kind of ulterior motive for asking me to play a video game, I couldn't imagine what it might be. If sex had been his goal, he would have suggested we play in his room or something along those lines. That was the one thing I actually liked about the male population; they were never coy about their perversions.

Hell, maybe I could use him as a distraction. Zone out, forget about Hunter for a little while, and rid myself of this budding obsession. Probably not going to happen, but a girl could dream. Decision made.

“You had me at video game.”



When I looked up from the screen, multiple sets of male eyes stared back at me, and I tried to tamp down my fight-or-flight response. I needed to get accustomed to having men around twenty-four seven, and not just when I was at the office. Stella gave me the impression earlier that she avoided coming upstairs, so other than my sister, and maybe Valentina, men were all I was likely to run into around the clubhouse.

A man who could pass for the lumberjack in the *Brawny* commercials smiled, his straight white teeth startling against his dark beard. He nudged the man next to him in the side with his elbow.

“Gunner, you ever see him play video games with a woman before?”

There was more on Gunner in the DEA files than any of the other guys because of his military service. He was six foot three, with light brown hair and blue eyes. He’d had the same girlfriend since high school, one Patricia Avery. His military record said he suffered from bouts of PTSD from the action he’d seen in Afghanistan. It was little wonder, considering he was the only one from his platoon to make it home alive.

“Can’t say that I have.” Gunner cocked his head to the side, his hair falling into his eyes. “It’s like watching an ape learn how to use a fork.”

“Fuck off, assholes.” Tweak’s words were harsh, but when I turned to look over at him, he was grinning. “She’s the only girl I’ve ever met that can kick my ass at *Call of Duty*. Seriously, come watch this shit.”

It took a tremendous effort for me to remain seated, but I didn’t see a way out of them joining us that wouldn’t seem rude. I couldn’t afford to let my fucked-up mental state alienate any of the guys, or worse yet, make them question my past. For now, I would have to tamp down the desire to run and allow myself to be surrounded.

A man with spiky brown hair came and sat on the arm of the love seat, his thigh brushing against my shoulder. My breath hitched, and I felt hemmed in as my eyes darted between Tweak’s larger frame on my right, and the man sitting entirely too close on the left.

He stuck a hand in front of my face. “I’m Colt.”

My eyes traveled up the tendons of his forearm on the way to his face. The surrounding voices suddenly became muted, almost as if I were underwater trying to hear a conversation on the surface.

His dimple melted away, and his brows drew together. Shit, if I didn’t get it together, I’d wind up having a full-blown attack in front of these men. In my head, I started counting backward from a hundred, even managing a tight smile as I shook his hand.

It wasn’t until he dropped my hand and scooted over a little on the arm of the chair that air once again filled my starving lungs. God, I was such a freak. Someone needed to hang a flashing neon sign around my neck that said disaster ahead, proceed with caution.

Legs the size of tree trunks entered my field of vision, and I had to tip my head all the way back to look

into his dark eyes. The agency did not exaggerate this man's overall size.

He grinned, crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes. "Everyone calls me Beast."

Sitting down on the end of the couch next to us, he stretched out his legs and laid his arm along the back of the couch. He seemed perfectly at ease with the boot that rested against the side of my flats. Oddly enough, that made me feel better. Like he had a sense of my boundaries, and respected them, without wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

"The name's Gunner," he said, following Beast's lead and nodding as he sat beside him.

His blue eyes were arresting, but not for the reasons you might think. Even the man's eyes seemed at war. The wisdom and warmth of an old man stared back at me, but just beneath the surface flickered the shadows of a haunted man. Having demons that never left you at peace was something I could relate to, and I gave him what I hoped was a warm smile in return.

"Don't mind these guys. They're all harmless." He pointed at Tweak. "Except for the one you're sitting next to."

My thoughts went to Hunter, and I highly doubted anyone thought of him as harmless. Probably none of them were, but I appreciated his attempt to reassure me nonetheless. Though, I couldn't quite figure out why he was warning me about Tweak when Hunter was the one who insisted I stay in his room.

"Hey," Tweak objected from beside me, a look of mock horror on his face.

Gunner shook his head. "She may as well know now that her panties are in danger of ending up by her ankles around your ass."

If he only knew how broken I was, he wouldn't worry about my panties ending up anywhere they weren't

supposed to be. Still, it felt good to have him joke around with me as if I were one of them. Like I fit in. It was high school all over again, only this time I was sitting at the cool kid's table. And not because Cherry had motioned me over.

Tweak nodded his head in their direction and winked. "Tell these assholes that I've been a perfect gentleman."

"It's true, guys," I said, playing along. "My panties have remained around my waist the entire day."

"They had better fucking have."

The object of my obsession stood there next to the TV, his nostrils flared, his fists balled at his sides, and a vein in his neck sticking out. His eyes moved over me, a familiar tingle dancing over my skin, making my core clench. He appeared slightly unhinged, and every bit the stone-cold killer I knew him to be. Yet, my body still responded to him. Yup. There was something seriously wrong with me.



I'd always considered myself logical, able to weigh outcomes and decide without the messy emotional attachments other people had. When I killed, it was purely out of necessity. It wasn't anything I took pleasure in, and unlike my father, I wasn't into messy dramatics when I did it.

Possession, however, kicked things up a notch. It made me envision how Tweak's cock would look shoved up his ass. I may even throw in making him swallow his own balls. We'd have to see how satisfying his screams were after I cut off his cock.

He held up his hands. "Don't go all Hannibal Lecter and eat my liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti."

He must have read my mind, or seen the intent in my face, because he wasn't far off the mark. That didn't bode well, given the games that still needed to play out with my brother. I'd have to do a better job covering up the darker side of my nature or the club would end up suffering for it.

Beast snorted. "Good one, dude."

"Thank you, I thought so." Tweak grinned over at Beast before turning back to me. He wouldn't be smiling

if he knew how seriously I was contemplating mutilating his junk. If she'd had even a button out of place, I would already have his dick in my hand and my knife at his throat. "She was only joking. Your grouchy ass might not have a sense of humor, but she does."

My gaze settled on Brandy, her eyes wide and her luscious lips parted. She hadn't shown the slightest bit of interest in Tweak, even after he complimented her, or he would be short a nut. Ryder would still be upset, but I thought it was an excellent compromise. Still, her reaction seemed odd, given that she looked like a fallen angel.

"Give me some credit." Tweak leaned forward, his hands resting between his knees, his brows drawn together. "She's Cherry's sister, not a she-devil or sweet butt. I wouldn't have touched her on the first day, even without that weird hissy fit you threw where you called dibs. Now, quit looking at me like I had the nerve to lick your lollipop."

"Lollipop." Beast shook his head and leaned forward with his fist extended. "Give me some dap on that one, brother. You are on a roll today." Beast's fist connected with Tweak's and as he lowered his arm, he looked over at me. "Calm down. Cherry kept an eye on her until she had to leave with Ryder for her shift at the strip club, and then we crashed their party."

All thoughts of mutilating Tweak's twig and berries were forgotten when Brandy's middle finger started rubbing along her index finger, her sweet face scrunched up. I would destroy whoever caused her distress. Except for whenever I was the culprit, of course. I was a selfish prick who knew she deserved better but would never let her go.

"What is it, *mój anioł*?"

Her fingers stilled and the mossy green flecks along the outer edges of her eyes darkened in the glow of the TV screen. "What did you just call me?"

I ached to kiss away the pout that had settled on her full lips.

“My angel. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

She peeked over at Beast and Gunner, then turned her head to sneak a glance at Tweak from underneath her eyelashes. Her cheeks had a pink tinge to them, and she shifted in her seat. My angel wasn’t comfortable with the added attention, and as someone who preferred to operate in the shadows, I could relate.

“Come with me.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked. “Where?”

She was mine to command, to protect, and to pleasure. Until she figured that out and accepted it, I would have to be patient. One day I would have her submission, but in order to do that I would first have to find out what made her tick.

“For a ride.”

She bit into her luscious bottom lip, making my dick twitch. Soon it would be my teeth nipping at her lips.

“I’ve never been on a bike before.” She looked down at herself. “But I imagine I’ll need to change into pants.”

The image of her skirt riding up those creamy thighs as she straddled my bike had my cock standing at full attention. She would be stunning with that strand of pearls around her delicate neck, the buttons on her blouse straining against her tits as she sat back. The innocence of an angel luring the devil to come out and play. There was only one problem. I wouldn’t be the only one seeing her, and it was too soon for her to see me with blood on my hands.

“While you look sexy in that skirt, you’re right, you’ll probably be more comfortable in pants.” Her cheeks turned a darker shade of pink as she stood, and I pointed to the open door behind the pool tables. “There’s

a restroom right over there. I'll wait for you to get changed."

She nodded and squeezed between Tweak's legs and the coffee table, coming out on the opposite side. I couldn't help but watch the gentle sway of her ass in that fitted skirt as she walked past me toward the bar where she'd left her suitcase. My eyes followed her until she wheeled it into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

"Hunter," Colt said, catching my attention. He waited for me to turn around before he spoke. "I asked Cherry about her sister before she left."

Beast leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "Does she know what kind of trouble Brandy's in?"

"What do you mean?"

Beast looked over at me and raised an eyebrow. "Long-lost twin sister that Cherry never mentioned before suddenly rolls into town and asks to stay with us. Come on man, you're usually ten steps ahead of everyone else and you're saying this never occurred to you?"

The quest to make Brandy mine must have overshadowed everything, even how she'd ended up on my doorstep. This type of shortsighted thinking was unnerving for me. My brain usually mapped out the smallest of details, it was just a matter of sorting through the chaos and piecing it together. Where Brandy was concerned, it seemed there was a short in my wiring. I refused to believe she'd fucked with my head, reprogrammed me if you will, in a matter of hours.

"He doesn't normally think with his dick like the rest of us." Tweak grinned. "Who knew the crazy bastard had a thing for librarians?"

Tweak had a point, at least about me thinking with the wrong head. Maybe that's what this was. A case of attraction. If I wasn't careful, it would be a case of fatal

attraction. Suck on that, Tweak. I had a sense of humor, just not when it came to people fucking with what was mine.

Gunner raised his hand. “How does he have a thing for librarians?”

“Dude, you have no imagination. All she’s missing is a button up sweater and a pair of glasses to complete the look.”

“You, my friend, are a giant freak.”

Brandy would be out of the bathroom any minute and I had more pressing concerns than Tweak thinking I had a librarian fetish.

“Colt, what did Cherry say?”

“That she hasn’t spoken to her sister since she called to tell her that their dad was sick. Brandy just showed up, out of the blue, right before we got here saying she had nowhere else to turn.”

“And Cherry didn’t press her for more of an explanation?”

That seemed out of character for a woman who could talk the ear off a deaf man. Whenever Cherry asked about your day or how your family was, it wasn’t because she liked to gossip. She genuinely gave a shit, which was why she had such a large following at our strip club.

“I asked her the same thing. She said if you press Brandy too hard, too fast, she’ll clam up. Cherry’s hoping that with a little time and space she’ll open up on her own.”

Gunner blew out a breath. “That’s assuming there’s time to spare.”

Yeah, fuck that. I wasn’t about to sit around and wait for the ax to fall. Not with her. Anyone who came after her was about to have a five-foot-ten nasty surprise.

The door swung open, and Brandy stood there, her eyes shifting between us. The khakis she wore molded to

her form, nipping in at the waist before they hugged her legs. And my eyes ate up every delicious inch of her, down to the delicate silver chain around her ankle.

“It’s been so warm that I didn’t think to bring any jeans.” She ran a palm down the front of her thigh. “I noticed the rest of you wear them, so I hope these are OK.”

Ok? Thanks to her my cock could cut through steel and in every one of my fantasies those pearls of hers bounced up and down the slender column of her neck as I fucked her.

“Those pants will be fine.”

She let out the breath she must have been holding, the outline of lace barely visible underneath her white shirt. Her chest rose and fell in shallow breaths as I moved closer. She tilted her head up, her long lashes fanning over her delicate cheekbones, and I had to know if her skin was as soft as it looked. My hand brushed against hers and her eyes shot open, but before she could pull away, I laced our fingers.

My thumb rubbed across the smooth skin on the back of her hand. I was all hard edges, an instrument of death, the monster of my father’s creation. Nothing about me fit with the delicate creature in front of me, yet we melded together perfectly.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded her head, letting me lead her out the door and down the stairs, her hand still in mine. I’d never considered hand-holding, or any other displays of affection, mainly because it seemed cruel to give a woman a false sense of hope. To pretend there was a future for us where I could give them a depth of emotion that resembled the foolish notion we called love. The only reason I did it now was a desire to keep her close.

Reluctantly, I let go of her hand and swung my leg over the bike. “Hold on to me for balance and extend

your leg until you feel the footboard on the other side of the bike.”

She let out a huff before I felt the heat of her tiny hand on my shoulder. Her body pressed against me, a faint floral scent tickling my nostrils, making my balls ache even more.

A small squeak sounded from behind me, and I felt her nails scraping my back over the top of my T-shirt.

“I’ve got you,” I told her, reaching a hand back to steady her.

Her shirt must have ridden up because instead of cotton, I felt her warm, smooth skin. She let out a breathy sigh, my shirt balled in her fist, as she regained her balance. The way her nails slid over my shoulders while her little body wiggled against me was wreaking havoc on my already swollen cock.

“Wrap your arms around my waist.”

She plastered herself to my back, her hands linked around my waist as the roar of the bike’s engine competed with the sound of the garage door rolling up. The bike moved, and her thighs tightened around me. It was a sweet torture having her this close to me and being unable to touch her the way I wanted to.

Normally, the feel of the vibrating metal beast underneath me, the roar of the engine, and the wind in my hair were enough to clear my head. Where the guys had other hobbies to keep them grounded, I had nothing but the open road. With her behind me, there was no escaping the way her body leaned into me as we rounded a curve or her warm breath against the back of my neck.

As the sights and sounds of the city gave way to an open landscape, she relaxed into me. There might not have been an absence of noise in my head while I rode, but neither was there the usual chaos that sometimes gave me headaches. It was as if being close to her gave me a different kind of peace by bringing order to my thoughts.

The chess pieces of my brother's game were all laid out in front of me, and I thought about the advances I'd made today. Thanks to the call I had with Marek, my pawns were all in motion. But the problem with relying solely on Marek was that he was only privy to my brother's movements, not his plans. Our sister Bea was going to be the queen that Piotr never saw coming.

According to my father, women were a warm hole to fuck and the only real value they had was in whatever wealth or alliances they brought to the table. My mother was Mafia royalty, sought after by every man even remotely connected to Poland's underworld. The night before she was to be married off to the son of another powerful family, my father slaughtered her entire family and took over their territory.

Piotr bought into our father's twisted beliefs, even romanticizing the story, but I saw it for what it truly was. A lucky power play that brought my father immense wealth and status while plunging my mother into a depression that she never recovered from.

My sister knew that with Father gone and Piotr in charge she was on borrowed time. He might not have the nuts to take her out on his own, but he'd marry her off to a man as vicious as our father and let him do the dirty work. Just as the little cockroach was hiding behind my club in order to get rid of me.

All I'd had to do was offer her a share of our family's earnings, enough to last the normal person two lifetimes, and the freedom to do with it as she wished. In exchange, she'd agreed to sneak around and gather all the information she could about what Piotr had in store for the club. It was the best I could do with Piotr's goons tracking my movements. Sure, I could easily slip away from my tail, but only for a day at the most without him knowing. And it was way too early in the game to waste that window.

Brandy shifted, pressing the warmth of her pussy against me. The need to claim her rose like a savage beast

within me and all my scheming was put on the back burner. A familiar white picket fence broke up the miles of grass dotted with trees along the side of the road, and I slowed down. My control was hanging on by a thread and if I didn't put some space between us, I'd end up fucking her senseless on the side of the road.

Dust kicked up like a cloud when I turned onto the dirt road that led to nowhere. The closest ranch was twenty miles away from us, so it was always quiet here except for the crickets who made their presence known around this time of the evening.

Where I stopped the bike, there was nothing but grass and a few clusters of trees for miles in any direction. I killed the engine and reached behind me, my hand resting against Brandy's side.

"Hold on to me and I'll steady you, so you won't fall when you get off."

Her ribcage moved under my hand with the intake of her breath before I heard her sigh. "I'm sorry you have to keep helping me."

When I looked over my shoulder, her face glowed with the rays of the setting sun. My angel didn't have a clue how badly the devil wanted to possess her. She was a diamond in a world full of rocks, and I was the only one who saw the rainbow. That was fine by me. Fewer fuckers I'd have to kill.

"I'm not. I enjoy having my hands on you."

The pink tinge of her cheeks traveled down her neck, and she looked away. She was even more beautiful with that splash of color highlighting her skin. It made me wonder how she would look sprawled out underneath me as I told her exactly what I planned to do to that sweet little body of hers. Would her skin flush like that when I made her come?

My hand slid down to her hip, steadying her, as she swung her leg over the back of the bike. Once I was sure

she was steady, I got off and stretched. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, her chest swelling with the movement. Fuck. There might not be enough space in this entire field to keep her safe from me.

“Will we get in trouble for trespassing?”

She needed to be more concerned with me snapping and fucking her right here in the grass.

“No. All this land is mine.”

This girl was going to be the death of me, and it would be my own damn fault. Nobody knew I owned it, and it was foolish of me to tell her. I could have lied, said a friend owned it, and left it at that.

She looked like she belonged among the wildflowers, her slim fingers trailing along the tips as she walked away from me. “If this place were mine, there’s no way I’d live at the clubhouse.”

My angel was a puzzle, and I was missing half the pieces. She’d struck me as more of a city girl, being that she liked computers and video games. Aside from that, I only knew she was a twin, had an adorable blush, tripped easily, and didn’t enjoy being the center of attention. Oh, and she got my dick hard without even batting an eyelash. Something told me even if I had all her puzzle pieces put together, that I would still find all her little contradictions fascinating.

“What would you do?”

A wistful smile played across her lips as she said, “I’d build a farmhouse with floor to ceiling windows and a wraparound porch. Then every morning I’d sit out here in my rocking chair, drink my coffee, and watch the sun come up.”

Her vision was intriguing. There was only one thing I’d change. Well, maybe a few. She’d be on the porch wrapped up in a bedsheet, her hair a mess, bearing the marks of my possession. It was a given that I’d fuck her

again on the front porch. Once she was done with her coffee, of course. I wasn't a complete monster.

"That plan holds a certain appeal. I don't suppose you'd be open to a trade?"

Her beautiful eyes narrowed, the mossy color bleeding into the gold. "What do you mean? You have all this land. What could you possibly want from me?"

"Answers."

"I don't have any to give," she said, wrapping her arms around herself and turning away.

"Let's start with what made you upset earlier?"

Her back stiffened. "When?"

"You'll find I rarely ask twice."

She couldn't hide the shudder that slithered down her spine, and I was tempted to take it back. Damn it. What was happening to me?

She peeked over her shoulder. "When you called me your angel?"

Despite the waning light, there was no mistaking the widening of her eyes. If I could be sure that whatever upset her had nothing to do with what she was running from, I might let her get away with stalling.

"Don't think you'll ever be able to hide from me, Brandy, because I see you."

She sighed, a world of resignation coming out with that huff of breath. To me it was as sweet as a symphony because it meant a part of her, however small, was submitting to my will.

"It's stupid." Her hands rubbed up and down her arms as if to ward off a chill. "It just threw me for a loop to find out my sweet as molasses sister is a stripper in addition to her job as a sweet butt."

"It kinda takes all the fun out of fucking when you consider it a job, don't you think?"

She looked back at me, her eyebrows nearly touching her hairline. Her reaction to what I said was slightly comical. Tweak, that asshole, could shove it up his ass. This was twice now I'd had a sense of humor within the space of an hour.

While I was tempted to push the envelope and watch her blush deepen, it was time to steer the conversation back in the direction that I needed it to go.

“That’s not the only thing bothering you, though, is it?”

She gave me her back again. “It’ll be dark in another few minutes. We should probably head back.”

“Not until you tell me everything.”

“Why do you care?”

The wording wasn’t entirely accurate in my case, but I understood the sentiment. She’d probably run for the hills if she knew I lacked the ability to care about anyone. Where she was concerned, it was all about possession, and even that was new for me. Until I figured it out, I was groping around in the dark for the light switch, hoping I wouldn’t bump into the wall.

“Because you’re mine.”

She turned around and took a tentative step in my direction. This was the second time she’d willingly come to me, despite her uncertainty. The first time bought her a brief reprieve, but this time she wouldn’t be so lucky.

Darkness settled around us like a cloak, cocooning us in our own world. I had difficulty making out her features, but it didn’t matter. The heat of her body called to me like a siren’s song, and I didn’t stop moving until there was only a sliver of space between us.

“I don’t know how my sister ended up on this path, but it will eat her up and spit her back out.” Her chest brushed against mine with each breath she took. “And I’ve been through too much shit to sit back and watch her sweet nature fade away.”



Two words and I'd folded like a cheap suit. I'd made the mistake of saying things I shouldn't have, and all because he'd seen the broken girl who couldn't stand for a man to touch her. The girl who covered up the rot that lived inside her with shy smiles and lies. He not only saw her, but he wanted to keep her. My foolish heart wanted to belong to this man because with him I wasn't broken anymore. At least I didn't think I was because the last thing I felt around Hunter was revulsion.

He stood a breath away, the rough pads of his fingers lightly gripping my neck just above my pearls. There was no one to hear me scream, no one to save me if he wanted to kill me, yet the only thing I felt was butterflies. This was what the girls in my college dorm had talked about. At the time, I'd been insanely jealous, never believing in a million years that it would ever happen to me.

Was it messed up that my first case of butterflies was in my twenties with a Mafia killer who held me by the throat? Absolutely. Before I ever set foot in The Devil's Garage, I knew I was no match for Hunter. I just never expected to be facing him in the dark and have my focus be on my wet panties instead of my imminent demise. Maybe I'd finally snapped because I trusted Hunter with my body, at least until he found out why I was here.

His lips hovered over mine as he spoke. “You worry about Cherry, yet it’s you who went to her for help, not the other way around. No one is making your sister stay with us. As for her sweet nature, I assure you, that will never change. A meteorite could hit the clubhouse and she’d still shit rainbows. What I’m more interested in is you.”

Even in my lust filled haze I knew I was in trouble. My sister’s freedom depended on me keeping secrets and I’d already slipped up once. The next time might mean my death, and I couldn’t keep her safe if I was dead.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Tell me what you’re running from.”

Hunter wasn’t stupid or the sort to be easily fooled. He grew up in the Mafia and he’d had yet to get so much as a parking ticket. That wasn’t by accident. He would never be pacified with a lame line like the one I gave my sister. Anything I told him he’d look to corroborate with a paper trail. No doubt by tomorrow morning. It would also have to be something my boss could easily fabricate, because there would be no way for me to sneak away long enough to do it from here.

I might not have ever been a field agent, but I could lie. Lord knows I’d had enough experience to last me a lifetime. That didn’t mean it still didn’t hurt like hell. By the time this was over, the only man who’d ever made my body come alive would hate me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“I lost my job six months ago and haven’t been able to find anything in my field. Now, I have no choice but to stay with Cherry and try to find something here. As soon as I get back on my feet again, I’ll be out of your hair.”

In the dark stillness, all I could hear were crickets. He remained close, his breath against my lips and the heat from his body tempting me to lean in. I kept waiting for that familiar tightness in my chest or difficulty breathing, but it never came.

“There’s no need for you to ever leave, mój anioł.” His gravelly voice sent shivers down my spine and made my toes curl. Another thing I’d heard girls talk about but had never experienced. “You have a job with Stella in the shop for as long as you want it, and a place with me.”

His lips were soft as they ghosted over mine and my eyelashes fluttered shut. No man had ever been this close to me without my fight-or-flight instinct kicking in, and I wanted to savor it. Memorize every detail of my first kiss so I could play it back in my head later, reliving every moment.

He kept a hand around my throat while the other gripped my hip, pulling me closer. The hard ridge of his erection pressed against my stomach, and I tensed, expecting to feel tiny spider legs crawling across my skin. He broke the kiss, but didn’t move away, his lips hovering over mine as he spoke.

“You went stiff for a second. Are you OK?”

“Yes,” I breathed against his lips, shocked that for once it was true. “Kiss me again.”

A lack of fear had me acting bold, reckless even, but I never wanted him to stop kissing me. My body felt warm and heavy, an altogether pleasant change of pace that I could easily become addicted to.

His teeth nipped my lower lip, and they parted, his tongue tangling with mine. A masculine groan joined the cricket’s song, and it was like a shot of adrenaline. Hunter was powerful, cutthroat, and always in control, yet I was the one drawing sounds of pleasure from him. Sounds that only intensified the unfamiliar ache coming from deep within my core. An ache that I knew only he could fill.

My body rubbed against him like a cat, trying to create enough friction to give me a hint of relief. For once, I was itching to get closer, instead of pulling away. It was dizzying and consuming this building need inside me, and Hunter fed it with a rough hand at my throat and

the clash of his teeth. He no longer held back the monster that wanted to devour me, to eat me alive, and leave me burning. Nor did I want him to. For once, I wasn't afraid to be at a man's mercy.

He used the hand he had wrapped around my throat to control the angle of my head. To place me wherever he wanted me by moving the pads of his fingers and lightly squeezing. It should have sent off alarm bells galore, made me freeze, but instead I found myself leaning into his hand.

His teeth nipped into the cushion of my bottom lip before his tongue laved the sting away, keeping me on the razor's edge where pleasure met pain. The fire he'd stoked to life was now a full-blown inferno, obliterating everything in its path. Hunter consumed every one of my senses, surrounded me, and I never wanted it to end.

The sound of a doorbell ringing intruded like the gnat you tried to swat away from your picnic. Only that stupid ring, like the gnat, wasn't so easily put off. It came with an accompanying vibration against the inside of my thigh.

Hunter broke the kiss, spitting out words in a language I didn't understand as he lowered my leg. When had he wrapped my thigh around his waist? Without his heat, my skin pebbled, and I ran my hands over my arms.

"What?" he barked.

The soft light from his cell phone illuminated the side of his face as he listened, and I looked up at him through my lashes. He was impossible to read. The mask of indifference that he hid behind never fell. It seemed so unfair that he seemed to see down to the bottom of my blackened soul, while he remained a mystery.

"I'm coming." He sighed, his fingers tapping on the phone for a minute before his pale eyes met mine. "We'll have to finish what we started another time, anioł."

He stuffed his phone in his pocket, extinguishing the light. His hand tickled up my side and over my breast before circling my throat again. The move was possessive and dominating, two things that should have made my body rebel. All it did was make me feel warm, and as crazy as it sounded, gave me a sense of security. When I was in his grasp, it felt like nothing evil could ever reach me. It didn't make any sense at all, but then again, I wasn't exactly normal.

He briefly brushed his lips against mine before lifting me into his arms.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked, my arms tightening around his neck.

“This will be easier than trying to catch you in the dark.”

He moved with lethal grace through the darkness while I clung to him like a howler monkey. His confidence without his sense of sight astounded me, almost as much as the ease with which he blended into the shadows. The boots he wore didn't make a sound, nor could I make out the sound of his breathing. He became the night, and I envied him his comfort within it. I'd always been terrified of the dark and slept with a light on. I suppose when you were the boogeyman, you never had to watch out for monsters.

That should have terrified me, but my body never had responded to Hunter the way it was supposed to. This was a disaster waiting to happen. He would be the heartache I'd never recover from, but I couldn't give up the sensation of being alive again. I'd been going through the motions for so long that I didn't even realize that I'd become *Sleeping Beauty* until the day his pale eyes had settled on mine.

As he gently set me down on the back of the bike, I knew I wanted it all. Every bit of emotion I'd been deprived. I wanted the feel of Hunter's hands and mouth against my skin. To hear his groans of pleasure as my

hands wandered over his tightly muscled form. Most of all, I wanted to beg him to take me because, for the first time in my life, a man would enter me by choice.



My hard dick had been smashed against the gas tank for the better part of the ride back to the clubhouse, but I knew the situation had to be dire for Ryder to call all of us back, leaving the strip club unprotected. Still, it was a form of torture I hoped to never repeat. There was liking a little pain with your pleasure and then there was needing to ice your balls.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to regret it. Her lips were mine for the taking and nothing short of death could have stopped me. She was tense at first, which gave me pause, something about it bothering me. However, all my reservations were quickly forgotten when she asked me to kiss her again in that breathy voice.

Something shifted between us with that second kiss, I could feel it. Like a dam being broken inside of her, a well of pent-up desire flooding us both. I would gladly drown with her if only to hear her little mewls of pleasure against my lips. The funny thing was, I'd never wanted to kiss a woman before. Probably because it gave them the impression that I gave a shit. With her I'd been different, gentler, almost protective. It still baffled me that I was capable of those things.

Shaking off all thoughts of Brandy before my dick could get hard again, I walked with a slight limp as I

entered the room where we held church. Everyone was already seated around the long wooden table with the Devil's emblem burned into the center. Chatter ceased, and all eyes were on me as I took the empty seat next to Beast. None of these fuckers better say a word about it or I'd pull out the knife I kept strapped to my ankle.

Ryder cleared his throat, thankfully taking the attention off me. "Now that we're all here, let's get started. I don't like leaving Valentina to watch over the girls at the club by herself, even if she insists that she'll be fine without me."

"Please." Tweak reclined back in his black leather chair. "I pity the man who starts shit with Valentina."

She was just as capable as any man in this room, but Ryder would rather cut his own dick off than place her in any danger. It was something I respected, his need to protect his woman, but I couldn't ever fathom having a similar desire.

Now I understood what drove him to walk through a hail of bullets, shooting his way through the last of her father's men to get to her. Anyone who dared to touch a hair on Brandy's head would face my wrath, and I was fucked-up enough to come up with some inventive forms of torture before they met their gruesome end.

Ryder's dark eyes narrowed on his cousin before he turned to Marco, the first two fingers of his right hand tapping against the wooden tabletop. "Why don't you share with the rest of the club what you found out."

Valentina's older brother Diego had already planned to overthrow their father, but let's just say his timeline sped up when he found out his sister was on her way to kill him herself. Once the cartel was his, he made it a condition of our arrangement that we absorbed their younger brother, Marco.

Diego was a formidable ally, and I knew Marco could be a valuable asset for the club. From an early age, he'd had his ears to the ground for the cartel, and

according to Diego, he had a knack for knowing when to use the intel he received.

“Ever heard of Lazlo Royce?”

Warning bells went off in my head. If this had anything to do with Royce, shit was about to hit the fan.

“The senator from Louisiana?”

“One and the same.” Marco cocked his dark head to the side. “He announced his intention to run for president in the upcoming election and guess what his number one priority will be?”

“*Ja pierdole!*” I didn’t even realize I’d said fuck me out loud until Beast nudged me.

When I looked over at him, he raised an eyebrow. “Did you just curse in Polish?”

“Yes,” I said through clenched teeth, running scenarios in my head for how we might deal with the senator where he was most vulnerable. On the campaign trail.

Beast looked across the table. “I’m not exactly up on politics, Marco. Care to share why this stoic fucker”—he jerked his thumb in my direction—“has his panties in a bunch.”

Marco may have been addressing Beast, but his dark eyes rested on me. “Royce not only wants to focus on slowing down the flow of drugs entering the US from Mexico, thus fucking with the cartels, he wants to stop organized crime from profiting on the sale of our product. The Irish, Italian, Polish, and Russian Mafias all get their shit from us, but guess who distributes more drugs than any of them?”

“Fuck.” Gunner ran a hand through his hair, pushing it out of his face. It was his personal fuck you to the military for those in his platoon whose bodies never made it back. “How do we keep him from being elected, short of killing him?”

Before I'd seen him in action, I considered Gunner to be weak and overly sentimental. Unless one had a death wish, such things didn't have a place in my world. They still didn't, but he was the only one I'd ever known who had killed hundreds of men and still possessed a soul. Over time, I looked at him as my own Jiminy Cricket, because like Pinocchio, I didn't possess a conscience. Unfortunately for Gunner, though, I was having trouble coming up with an alternative scenario for him that would pan out in our favor.

Marco's lip tipped up at the corner as he jerked his thumb at Gunner. "Is this guy for real?"

Through my brief interactions with Valentina, I'd discovered we shared a similar background. Their childhood wasn't quite as fucked-up, nor as gruesome as mine, yet we were all cut from the same cloth.

"In time, you'll come to appreciate a man that doesn't miss thinking twice before he pulls the trigger."

Marco ran a hand over his dark goatee. He was the spitting image of his father, Miguel, except for the eyes. Marco's didn't have quite the same glint of cruelty lurking in their dark depths as his father's had. Not that Marco couldn't be every bit as dangerous.

He smiled at Gunner, his teeth a brilliant white against his tan skin. "It's a good thing we're *amigos* then, no?"

"You're as *loco* as your sister," Gunner said with an eye roll, his chuckle giving away that he was teasing.

"No one is as loco as Val." He nodded his head at Ryder. "Except for maybe this pitiful bastard who fell for her."

Marco leaned his elbows on the table, the smirk falling from his lips. "Unfortunately, there's an even bigger threat out there than the good senator. His half brother, Jack Wembley, is an administrator for the DEA. The ink wasn't even dried on Ryder and Val's marriage

certificate when Diego got word from his friends in the CIA that Wembley was planning to use Val to bring down the Devil's."

"I'm sorry, did you just say friends in the CIA?" Gunner asked, his eyes widening.

Marco chuckled. "Is it so impossible to believe one branch of your government would work against the other?"

"Not really, no," Gunner huffed, and my lips twitched at his indignant tone. "But why is the CIA still in bed with the cartel?"

"You don't actually think they stopped working with the cartels just because they were outed by the Iran-Contra affair?" Marco chuckled at Gunner's frown. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news mi amigo, but they've been working with our family for years." He shrugged. "If they scratch our backs, we'll scratch theirs."

"Jesus," Gunner muttered.

Ryder wrapped his knuckles against the wood. "Can we save the foreign policy discussion for later and please focus on the issue at hand?"

Gunner crossed his arms over his chest and nodded at Marco to continue.

"Diego thought the DEA was taken care of when he and our president came to an agreement. The president would keep them buried in red tape for us if I would handle a delicate personal matter for him. Then yesterday the president sent a messenger to the house because he no longer trusted his phone line was secure. Wembley has mysteriously called off the witch hunt."

He stroked his goatee. "It didn't seem likely to me that Wembley would give up right when Royce announced he's running for president. I'd have expected him to double down on his efforts. Nobody seems to know what the DEA's up to. Diego's contact in the CIA

said the file they have on the club now requires a high-level security clearance to access it.”

This additional information must be extremely valuable to the DEA if they weren't willing to risk it being leaked. I had a sneaking suspicion whatever the DEA had on us was the same thing my brother had gotten his hands on.

The quickest way to test my theory would be to hack into the DEA's database, but none of us had the skill set to pull that off. We didn't have enough cash on hand to bribe a high-ranking DEA official, and while a hacker was doable, it might take them a week or more to gain access to the file. By then, the DEA could have already made their move. Ryder was against threatening the family member of a politician, and we weren't at the eleventh hour yet, so he'd be against torturing anyone for information. That left only one option.

“Can Diego's contact in the CIA get us an older version of the file?”

“Possibly.” His dark eyes lit with interest. “What are you thinking?”

“How we do business hasn't changed since Pops founded this charter. They jumped on Valentina because she was a new variable to the equation. They didn't drop her because your government was giving them the runaround, they did it because they found an easier way to achieve their goal. It's possible they already had a section of the puzzle done and now they finally have a way to put the remaining pieces in place. We need to figure out what they have before they finish putting it all together or we'll be wearing matching orange jumpsuits.”

Marco's grin reminded me of how my sister Bea used to look right before she took the last cookie out of the jar. “I like where your head's at, mi amigo. When we wrap up here, I'll call Diego. It's in everyone's best interest for him to take the heat and let me remain a

ghost. Once I'm on your government's radar, I'll no longer be able to do what I do best."

Ryder nodded his agreement before looking over at his father. "Anything you want to add before we adjourn, Pops?"

Pops sat there stroking the bushy hair on his graying beard, a sure sign he had something on his mind. He was always very deliberate with what he said, his southern drawl unhurried. It seemed to bug Ryder, but I didn't care. At least he never felt the need to fill the silence with useless chatter, even when we were sitting at the bar and having coffee in the middle of the night. By unspoken agreement, we were content to escape our demons, neither of us feeling the need to bring them out into light.

"Hunter's brother is as crooked as a dog's hind leg, and something tells me he'll want to bury Hunter long before the two weeks are up. I don't want us to be chasing a rabbit down one hole only to have a snake come up from another hole and bite us in the ass."

His analysis of the situation was spot on. Despite my threat, Piotr was a ticking time bomb. I'd give it a week before he used whatever information he had at his disposal. It wouldn't matter to him how he came into power as long as he sat on the throne. Maybe there was more of our father in him than I realized.

My brother closed in on one side, while the DEA came at us from the other, and I didn't like the club's odds for coming out of this unscathed. Call it intuition, sixth sense, or my ability to visualize different scenarios and their outcomes, but I couldn't find a way to get the club clear without spilling a little blood along the way. If Piotr's endless greed cost me one of my brothers, I would make sure he paid with pain. And for once, I would take great pleasure in being the grim reaper.

The sound of the gavel hitting the table put my dark thoughts on pause.

“All in favor of splitting up and coming at this thing from two angles raise your hands.”

One by one everyone’s hand went in the air and with a curt nod Ryder brought down the gavel.

“Marco, you’ll work with Diego to figure out what the DEA’s up to, and Hunter will deal with his brother’s threat. Tweak, Beast, Colt, and Dagger you’ll help Marco as needed. Pops, Mad Dog, Gunner, and Cannon you’re with Hunter. Val and I will handle the strip club this week if the rest of you can cover deliveries in between trying to get us clear of all the bullshit.”

The gavel hit the table again and Marco stood up, sliding past Cannon on his way to the door. Cannon took his customary cigarette from behind his ear as he stood up and started flicking it between two of his fingers.

“Hunter, I’ve been thinking.”

That would be a first for Cannon. He lived in the moment, never considering what blowback the club may face for his rash actions. Honestly, it was quite a feat for him to have survived this long. If there was a god, he spent an awful lot of his time protecting Cannon.

When he stood there staring off into space, not saying anything, I prompted him. “Go on.”

“We should have someone from the club watching your brother and I should be me the one to do it. My only job around here is deliveries, and the rest of the guys can handle them without me. The best way for me to help the club is by babysitting the little cunt and warning you guys if trouble is headed your way.”

His plan was actually sound. There was an element of danger involved in sneaking in and out of the house, but surely a kid from the streets was used to remaining out of sight. Marek could keep the guards off his back, so he’d be relatively safe as long as he didn’t confront my brother.

He held up his hands. “Shit. Sorry. I meant you no disrespect with the cunt comment.”

Cannon must have taken my pause the wrong way.

“None taken,” I said, setting him straight. “I’ve called him worse to his face. When I was younger, it used to fascinate me to watch him turn red.”

Cannon’s shoulders shook with laughter, but I couldn’t fathom why that was funny. Emulating people’s emotions in order to fit in was very different from understanding them. My father had never tried, and he made it work, but I figured the ability to blend in might prove useful. Turned out that skill came in handy when I left home for the last time, covered in blood.

“That’s what I like about you. You’re crazy, but at least you’re honest about it. I can’t stand fake people, you know. Like, if you’re a douche, at least have the decency to own that shit.”

My lip tilted up at the thought of Cannon telling Piotr he was a douche, or something similar, in front of one of his little debutants. He’d most likely turn beet red and sputter right before venom spewed from his mouth.

Shit. The two of them in the same room could only end one way, and I feared Cannon was no match for my brother.

“This is very important, Cannon. Stay away from my brother. He’s the biggest fake of them all. He plays the part of the mouse until it’s time to be the snake in the grass.”



Women were bent over the pool tables while the guys played, growing ever more suggestive with how much of their ass was on display as the night wore on. More men lounged with half-dressed women sprawled across their laps on the couches where I played Call of Duty earlier, and Colt leaned against the far wall talking to a girl as his hand crept underneath the edge of her skirt. When I heard the unmistakable sound of a hand hitting flesh from somewhere in the room, warmth suffused my cheeks, and I decided it was time for me to turn my barstool around.

Shay, another sweet butt, was behind the bar, her dark hair flowing around her arms as she mixed drinks. The lights above the bar caught on the jewel nestled in her belly button and as I looked up at the black leather straps crisscrossing her sizable breasts, I wondered for the hundredth time tonight how she could breathe.

She smiled over at me, her candy apple red lipstick exaggerating the fullness of her lips. “You doing all right, hon? Need another Coke?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to stare at her chest as I skid my glass over.

At least the caffeine would keep me awake until Cherry came back. Even if I had thought to ask Hunter for a room key before he took off earlier, I'd never be able to sleep until I knew my sister was safely inside the building.

What could I say? Looking out for my sister came as naturally to me as breathing, and five years apart wouldn't change a habit I'd had my entire life. If anything, I felt like I was back in high school, waiting for Cherry to crawl back through our window.

Shay reached for the soda gun, pressing the button to pour more Coke into my glass. "Your sister doesn't drink much either."

Flashbacks from our childhood played like a football highlight reel in my mind and I wasn't surprised to hear Cherry wasn't much of a drinker. To this day I couldn't stand the smell of alcohol on a man's breath.

Ruthlessly, I pushed those unpleasant memories aside and asked, "How long have you known Cherry?"

"Let me see." She tapped a long black nail against her chin. "I started dancing at the club with her almost a year ago, but I didn't move in here until much later. Cherry caught me using makeup to cover a black eye and freaked out. When she went and got Ryder, I thought for sure I was going to lose another job."

Admittedly, I didn't know the first thing about being a stripper, but her comment seemed odd. Why would a black eye cause you to get fired? Men weren't exactly there to look into her eyes. Then the answer hit me, and I felt a peculiar squeezing in my chest.

"Jesus," I blurted out. "It wasn't because you reported a patron for hitting you, was it?"

"God no." My breath came out in a slow exhale, and she leaned over the bar to pat my hand. "You don't have to worry about Cherry. Ryder and the boys run a

respectable joint and would never let that happen. The black eye was courtesy of my ex.”

She nodded her head, acknowledging the girl who stood further down the bar, teetering on her red stiletto heels. “Hunter paid him a visit, and he finally quit coming around. The least I can do is look after his old lady while he’s gone.”

While Shay was distracted mixing drinks, I slid my phone out of my pocket to google what the hell an old lady was and snorted when I saw a text from my boss.

PICKLEBUSTER: Paint me a cucumber and call me green.

He’d probably fire me if he knew about my nickname for him, but seriously, he was a ballbuster of epic proportions. If it made me feel better to call him that behind his back, well, that was between me and my phone.

Since he’d opted to text in some sort of weird code, I tapped out a similar reply. Who knew me turning into a field agent would make him go all *James Bond*?

ME: I’ll have a latte fun with my sister in the morning.

Another way that Cherry and I differed—she’d drink any sludge you pushed in front of her while I was a connoisseur. She wouldn’t think me looking for a coffee shop close by was the least bit odd, but if she wanted to come with me, I’d have to resort to calling my boss from the bathroom. It wasn’t ideal to whisper while hovering over a toilet, but I’d make it work.

After I deleted the texts, I went back to my research. These bikers and their weird lingo were killing me. Honestly, I could have done without knowing what a sweet butt was, and now this. Shaking my head, I stared down at the screen. Leave it to bikers to come up with a shittier term than ball and chain. Didn’t they know women didn’t want to be referred to as old? Like ever.

Not that it mattered, because I would be nothing more than Hunter's biggest mistake. He was born to lead the Mafia, and I was doomed to betray him in order to save my sister.

"Hello," a male voice with a heavy Spanish accent purred, making me jump.

Holy Balls! What was up with dudes sneaking up on me lately? At this rate, I was going to get a complex, maybe even develop a heart condition.

Sliding my phone back into my pocket, I looked over at the man beside me, leaning against the bar. My brain automatically flipped through the club members' profiles like a Rolodex, but I was coming up blank. None of the guys had dark shoulder length hair.

His smile was dazzling, his teeth a brilliant white against his tan skin. "Our sisters are best friends, no?"

Now I was thoroughly confused. I think I'd remember if my sister had a friend whose brother looked like him. A woman would have to be dead to miss this guy. Not that his looks had the same effect on me as they did the rest of the female population. If he were to touch me, my reaction would be the same as with any other man.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"You are Cherry's sister, no?" he asked, a frown replacing his smile.

The way he rolled the r's in my sister's name reminded me of the year a bunch of the girls from my dorm went to Cancun for spring break. At the time, I didn't get what all the fuss was about. Now I understood why they found a Spanish accent appealing, but it still didn't help me piece together who he was.

"Yes, and you are?"

"Sorry, señora. I'm Marco. Valentina's brother."

When my boss said the president's new bride had a brother with the Mexican government in his back pocket, I was curious. There were only two cartels with enough clout and money to pull that off, the Ortiz cartel out of Colombia and the Castillo cartel in Zacatecas. The Ortiz cartel was easily ruled out when the file showed Pedro Ortiz only had sons. Miguel Castillo, however, had a son and a daughter.

It seemed a little far-fetched that the man standing next to me, in the United States, wearing the same vest as the rest of the guys minus a name patch, had the power of the Mexican government behind him. Either my boss was lying, or Valentina had another brother the DEA knew nothing about. If that were the case, I needed to find out all I could about him.

Shay returned, her startling blue eyes narrowing on Marco even though she spoke to me. "You good over here?"

While I would normally appreciate her scaring men away, thus saving me from a potentially awkward or embarrassing situation, I couldn't let her do that with Marco. Not if I was going to find out anything useful, anyway.

"Yeah, Marco's fine," I said, giving her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

Shay looked uncertain, her eyes flicking back and forth between the two of us, but thankfully Beast walked up to the bar just then. She glanced over at me one last time before moving down the bar to see what he wanted.

"Shay has become your champion, I see."

He and his sister were both gorgeous, there was no doubt about it, but curiously enough the only thing they had in common was their tan skin.

"Seems that way, though she's not nearly as colorful as Valentina."

Before I'd gone downstairs with Stella earlier, Cherry had introduced Valentina as Ryder's wife. Her sticking up for me, a virtual stranger, made a lot more sense now that I knew they'd become close. Not that it made what she'd done any less badass in my book. Nobody had ever tried to rescue me from a bully before.

He chuckled. "Colorful is an interesting way to describe my sister cursing like a sailor. Not that Ryder seems to mind her temperament."

"Eh. She can curse all day around my sister, and she'd never know the difference. I had to take Spanish twice because Cherry had no hope of passing it."

"Is that how you knew what my sister said about the donkey? When she's agitated, she speaks more rapidly than most who aren't fluent in Spanish can understand. You surprised me, and that doesn't happen very often."

"Not really. The second time I took Spanish I was actually doing math homework during class, but Mrs. Garcia never figured it out because she assumed Cherry was taking notes since she didn't pass the first time around."

Even though the room was fairly noisy, and we were unlikely to be overheard, I lowered my voice. "Few people know this about me, but I have a photographic memory."

He leaned closer while still keeping his distance. "Since you shared one of your secrets, do you want to know one of mine?"

My plan of giving information in order to get information was paying off. While it wasn't something I normally shared, even with my boss, having a photographic memory wasn't exactly something Marco could use against me. At least not in any way that I could foresee. Even though he was unlikely to spill any family secrets, I eagerly nodded, hoping he'd give me some scrap of information I could use.

“Ryder doesn’t understand Spanish half the time either. Yesterday I told him his face looked like a bull’s ass and he grinned. My brother owes me fifty American dollars.”

My laugh faded into an unladylike snort, and I felt my face heating, but now was not the time to shrink and die of embarrassment. He’d already mentioned a brother, confirming one of my suspicions. I was onto something. I just knew it.

“Was your brother mad he lost the bet?”

“Are you kidding me?” He rolled his eyes. “The tight-ass was more worried about the exchange rate than the money itself.”

Now there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that Marco’s brother was the one my boss had been referring to. Balls! Why hadn’t I thought to look up the names of Miguel’s children? Probably because at the time it hadn’t seemed important. My focus had been on building a RICO case against the club, not uncovering a drug lord’s long-lost son.

But how hard could it be to find out who was running the largest cartel in all of Mexico? Hell, I bet Google could give me the answer in a matter of seconds. When you were that powerful, there was no hiding your identity. Maybe that was why his second son had remained hidden.

“How about you and your sister,” he asked, bringing my focus back to him. “Are the two of you close enough to make such silly wagers just to challenge the other?”

His question was perfectly normal, his words almost playful, but there was something lurking in his dark eyes that wasn’t there before. He overestimated his looks and charm if he thought I wouldn’t notice the sudden shift. Scratch that. He didn’t know I was too broken for either to have the intended effect.

“Neither of us like to gamble, so I’m afraid we’re rather boring compared to you and your brother.”

His dark brows drew together, and I felt like a bug caught in his web, just waiting for him to come along and drain me dry, leaving nothing but an empty husk behind. Damn. I really needed to layoff the late-night nature shows.

“What are you two talking about so intently over here?” my sister asked, making me do a double take at her sudden appearance.

“Nothing of importance,” Marco smoothly replied, a smile forming on his lips.

The same darkness from before still lingered in his eyes, and I couldn’t control the shiver that rolled down my spine. Marco might not be the one running his family’s cartel, but he wasn’t to be dismissed either. The cartels were in some ways more brutal than the Mafia because they didn’t adhere to any sort of code. It didn’t bode well for me that I’d garnered the attention of both the Mafia and the cartel on my first day here.

“Doesn’t matter.” Cherry’s face lit up, completely oblivious to the tension swirling around her. “I’m just glad to see you settling in and making friends. After Hunter made a big deal about you staying with him, I was worried you wouldn’t feel comfortable here.”

Even if I wasn’t here to keep her out of prison, a tricky endeavor that might get both of us killed, there were entirely too many men living under the same roof for me to feel comfortable. But that was my fucked-up issue, not hers, and I wasn’t about to burst her bubble. Especially not when she couldn’t do anything to help me. With any of it.

My eyes wandered back over to Marco and his smirk made my heart stop for a second before it went into hyperdrive. He might not have initially set off my internal alarms by maintaining his distance, but this man was a true chameleon. He camouflaged ill intent behind a

handsome face and easy banter, which made him even more dangerous than Hunter. At least with Hunter, you knew exactly what sort of monster you were dealing with.

“Oh, from what I saw, you don’t need to worry about Hunter and your sister getting along.”

Marco was referring to the kiss he’d walked in on before Hunter left with the guy in the jean jacket. What I couldn’t figure out was what he hoped to accomplish with his comment. If he was expecting a Jerry Springer reenactment, he was going to be sorely disappointed.

Cherry may have slept with Hunter at some point, but I knew she wasn’t interested in him. Whenever my sister was into a guy, she giggled like a deranged schoolgirl around him. Every time. Without fail. It was her only odd behavioral trait, and I had yet to see that happen with any of the guys in the clubhouse.

Cherry smiled at Marco, but there wasn’t any of her usual warmth behind it. My sister had two modes: sunshine and rainbows, or a frown that made you feel like a category five hurricane just hit you in the face. This cloudy, rainbow, sunshine business was new.

“That is great to hear.” She patted his arm. “Now, if you don’t mind, Marco, I’m going to steal my sister so I can get her settled into Hunter’s room.”

“Certainly.” Marco straightened up and waved us past him. “I look forward to speaking with you again soon.”

His tone and demeanor were relaxed, so why did I feel like that last comment was more of a veiled threat than polite banter?

Cherry took my hand and pulled me to the end of the bar, stopping to grab the suitcase that still sat behind it. “Shay, we’re headed up for the night.”

Shay nodded her head as she poured a beer from the tap. Cherry linked her arm through mine and walked us toward a set of wooden stairs to the left of the bar. We

went up in silence and oddly enough the sounds of revelry dimmed as we climbed, making the party seem farther away than it actually was. When we reached the top, there was a long hallway lined with closed doors like you'd see in a hotel corridor.

“You sure you're going to be OK with Hunter? If not, I can ask Valentina to convince Ryder that you'd be better off in my room.”

Stifling a yawn, I waved her off. “There's no need to do that. Hunter doesn't bother me.”

Well, he did, just not in the way she meant. That, however, was something I wasn't ready to share with my sister. These feelings and urges were new for me, and I wanted to have something that was mine. A piece of me that didn't belong to anyone.

“Here we are,” Cherry said, stopping before the hallway branched off. She took a key out of the pocket of her jean shorts and unlocked the door. “I'm kind of excited to see Hunter's room.” She giggled. “It's like seeing a unicorn or bigfoot.”

“What do you mean?”

She walked in, setting my suitcase down just inside the door, and looked over her shoulder. “You're the only one who's ever been allowed in Hunter's room.”

“What? Surely, he's had other women up here.”

It hurt to say it, but I'd never been one to lie to myself.

Cherry's wide eyes, a mirror of my own, looked around in awe. “Nope, just you. He even cleans his own room.”

Hunter's room reminded me of a military barracks. The plain wooden queen-size bed had an army green blanket that was tucked tightly underneath the mattress, the corners folded perfectly. The matching wooden desk in the corner only had a laptop on it, the mouse beside it perfectly centered.

On the far wall sat a dresser with a green leather chair next to it. The chair had nothing draped over its arm nor any items shoved underneath it. We could probably white glove the place and not find a spec of dirt anywhere, which was surprising considering most men were pigs.

Cherry walked over to a door and threw it open. “Huh.”

“Do you think we should look at his stuff?” I asked even as I walked behind her and peeked over her shoulder.

It felt like a violation of his trust, being that I was the only one he’d ever allowed in here, but I was insanely curious. You could tell a lot about a person by their closet.

“Silly, it’s your closet now too. He’s the one who insisted you stay in his room, and you need someplace to put your stuff.”

One pair of boots sat perfectly centered in the middle of the closet floor. On the bar, jeans and black combat pants were hung neatly from thick plastic hangers. A lone box sat atop the shelf above it. When Cherry reached for it, I grabbed her arm.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

She looked over her shoulder and gave me her best puppy dog eyes. “You know you’re dying to see what’s inside the box. It’s the only personal item in his room.”

She was right. There were no pictures, knickknacks, or papers left out anywhere. Still, I wasn’t about to violate the man’s privacy. Yes, that was a little hypocritical of me considering I planned to rifle through the club’s computers, but that was different. At least, to me it was. Hunter’s personal effects wouldn’t set my sister free.

“Maybe he doesn’t let people come into his room because he doesn’t want them going through his stuff?”

“Party pooper,” she said with a sigh. “I’ll admit, when Hunter first set his sights on you, I was shocked. Around most people he’s detached, but with you he seems, almost...”

“Territorial?”

That was the only thing that made any sense, though I still wasn’t sure why he would be fixated on someone like me. I was nothing like any of the women I’d seen downstairs. Not that I was going to complain about only having to deal with the attention of one man as compared to the entire club. That lessor of two evils motto was what led me to agree to Hunter’s terms.

“I was actually going to say human, but that works too.” She turned around, her bright smile almost overshadowing the mischievous glint in her eye. “Though, now that I think about it, you two might be perfect for each other. You’re both highly intelligent, emotionally stunted, and entirely too serious. Maybe getting laid regularly will do wonders for you both.”

“Cherry!”



In the distance, the late afternoon sun glinted off the single spire that rose from the roof's center. Marek was running late for our meeting, making Cannon restless. He had long ago worn a path in the grass, making hiding useless should Piotr's men care to actually do their job and check for threats beyond the back fence line. Patience was not his forte, so I wondered how he proposed to deal with the boredom of babysitting my brother. At this point, I was tempted to pin him to the tree with my knife, just so he'd remain still for a minute.

He stopped and lifted the binoculars he held up to his face. "Why is your boy still hanging around?"

It would be useless to point out to Cannon that Marek was not my boy. He was paid well to help me secure the Braterstwo, and while he hated Piotr, I was under no illusions. There was only one way out of the brotherhood, but even the threat of death didn't always insure loyalty. Which was why I'd reminded Marek that he owed me one for keeping his secret.

"Where are the three girls?" I asked, the bark of the tree I was leaning against digging into my back.

"Two are sunbathing and, Jesus, is that what I think it is?" He lowered the binoculars, his lip curling as he

looked over his shoulder at me. “I cannot unsee that shit, brother.”

Plenty of shit happened at the clubhouse, so I couldn't even imagine what my brother had done that he found so distasteful. Curiosity ate at me, but you couldn't pay me enough money to look through those binoculars right now. I shuddered at the thought of either catching a glimpse of my brother's hard dick or seeing his *O* face.

“That bad, huh?”

“Dude. I'm not sure what was more disturbing. Her feeding him what appeared to be a rolled slice of bologna while she rode him in the pool or the guards standing around watching like it was grade A porn. Fucking weirdos. The least they could have done was feed each other some sexy shit like strawberries and whipped cream.”

He had a valid point. That shit was gross enough to make my dick shrivel, and with Brandy in the picture that was saying something. On the upside, this was the kind of distraction that would allow Marek to slip away.

“Look alive, he'll be along any minute now.”

Sure enough, Marek's broad shoulders and short mop of graying curls gave him away as he moved along the outside of the brick fence.

“That's the guy?”

“Yeah.”

He cracked his neck and jumped around on the balls of his feet like he was a damn prize fighter. Idiot. Marek had been killing men on my father's orders while Cannon was still sucking on his mom's tit. Ryder knew the details of my plan, but suddenly I was second guessing whether Cannon could handle the simple task of watching my brother whenever Marek couldn't.

Marek stopped a short distance from us, crossing his arms over his chest as he sized Cannon up. Thankfully,

he'd quit his *Rocky* routine, so it was only his fashion sense, or lack thereof, that Marek could find fault with.

“Marek, this is Cannon. He'll be staying behind to follow Piotr whenever he leaves the compound. He knows to remain hidden, but if you could try to make sure he doesn't get shot, the club would be grateful.”

He pointed to the jean jacket Cannon wore underneath his cut. “Piotr will spot him coming a mile away, you know that, right?”

“This version of him, yes,” I said with a sigh. “But the next time you see him, if you do, he'll be properly outfitted. Car, clothes, the works.”

“Good.” He rubbed his chin. “I see you haven't lost your touch with losing a tail.”

“I'm not sure where Piotr got the first set of guys, but they were about as inconspicuous as a bull in a field of bunnies. We lost them right after we left the club. The second guy, though, he was good. I had to drive damn near to Mexico before I lost him. He'll report that as my last known location, so as long as I show back up in the same spot within the next twenty-four hours Piotr won't be too alarmed.”

“I'll have to pass on your high praise the next time I speak with my son.” He chuckled. “You're not the only one who's grown up, Mikołaj.”

“So, it would seem,” I retorted dryly, feeling every bit my age.

I could remember his son carrying army men and race cars as he trailed behind Bea. That kid had the biggest crush on her back then. Hell, he still might for all I knew.

Marek stepped forward and held out his hand. “Safe travels, heh, *braciszek*.”

His dark eyes reflected the tug at the corner of his lip. My father never fucked with Marek the way he did others. Either he liked him, or as close as someone with

our affliction can get, or Marek had something on him. If he did, he'd never used it, which spoke volumes about his character. Only time would tell, though, if he would earn my trust.

When I shook his hand, I also clapped him on the shoulder. "I never forget to reward those who are loyal to me. It's a lesson our father taught us that my brother has obviously forgotten."

He nodded as I released him, his dark eyes somber. Marek had never been overly chatty, so with our business complete, he walked away.

Once he was out of earshot, Cannon asked, "What does that mean, you'll outfit me with stuff. What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Marek would have laughed in his face had he asked that earlier, and I was grateful he'd kept his mouth shut. For once. The question about his attire I wouldn't dignify with an answer. He'd be following Piotr to places like the country club, golf course, and five-star restaurants. Places where he would stick out like a sore thumb when he needed to blend in. By the time I was done with him, he would.

"Whenever you fuck up, I'm the one who has to protect the club by cleaning up your messes."

"What the hell, man," he said, taking the cigarette from behind his ear and lighting it.

"But"—his lips parted, and I held up a finger—"I know it's not because you're trying to hurt the club. Loyalty is rare, and yours has never been in question. That's why I haven't brought it to the club's attention that I've been quietly taking care of shit. This time, I won't be around to save you, and if Piotr catches you, death will be a welcome relief."

He blew smoke out the side of his mouth and when he raised his cigarette to his lips, there was a slight tremor in his hand. Good. I needed him to take me seriously.

Piotr might not like to get his hands dirty, but he wasn't without imagination. Our father's garish displays, of those bodies he wanted to be found, were infamous. Being the next in the line of succession, more was expected of me than Piotr, but that didn't mean he was spared. We both learned from an early age the things that could be done to a man with a blade.

"Your point of exit and entry from the manor is a Kowalczyk family secret. Don't let anyone catch you coming or going from it, and trust no one. Not even my sister Bea or Marek. If you get into trouble, you hightail it out of there and call me immediately. Understand?"

He put his cigarette out on the trunk of a tree and pocketed the butt before nodding his head. "Something tells me babysitting your shithead brother is going to be way more complicated than I thought."

"Nothing with Piotr is ever simple. Now, come with me. I need to get back to where we lost Marek's son before he figures out that I didn't actually go across the border."

He watched me put my bike in neutral, and followed suit, pushing his bike alongside mine through the trees. After only five minutes, sweat trickled down the side of his face. He might be skinny, but he was far from in shape. Not with the number of cigarettes he smoked.

"Jesus, you're not even breathing heavily," he complained, steadying his bike while he used the bottom of his *Metallica* T-shirt to wipe his brow.

"Our father believed in being mentally and physically ten steps ahead of your enemy. When we were boys, he'd take us back here. If we made it back to the house before he caught us, we'd earned our freedom. If not, we got the whip." I shrugged. "Some habits are harder to break than others."

He shook his head. "And I thought running the streets while my mom entertained johns was rough. At

least I didn't have to run all over creation only to have my ass whooped."

We pushed the bikes in silence for another few minutes before there was a break in the trees and the path became visible. The dirt underneath our boots was hard packed and just wide enough to accommodate a car, gently sloping downward until it dead ended at a rock face. I stopped and put my kickstand down, Cannon mirroring my movements, his brow crinkled in confusion.

A thick tangle of vines and overgrowth hung down from the top of the rock, creating a natural barrier. Sticking my hand through the thick vegetation, I felt along the right side until I came to a depression in the rock. When I pressed it, the steel door opened to reveal a tunnel.

"This is some *James Bond* shit," Cannon muttered, his brown eyes widening as he stared into the tunnel.

My father had been right about at least one thing, it was better to be prepared than dead. For 99 percent of people in the world, that meant having flashlights and canned food on hand in case of an emergency. In my world, being prepared meant you had a contingency plan for your contingency plan.

The tunnel was simplistic in design, nothing more than a cement circle large enough to drive an SUV through. It wasn't without its perks, though. Lights built into the sides of the tunnel came on when we rolled the bikes inside, the door automatically closing behind us.

"Damn," he grumbled. "Now I can't decide if I'm disappointed or not that we aren't going all *Indiana Jones* in this bitch and lighting torches."

"You've been hanging around Beast too much." I swung my leg over my bike and started it up, the rumble echoing around us. "Come on."

He tilted his head back and laughed as he got on his bike. "Someone has to provide the comic relief around

here and it sure as hell won't be you."

He was probably right on that score. My mind was focused on getting him straight so I could ride back out. A certain blonde and I had unfinished business, and Cannon was keeping me from it. But hopefully not for much longer.

We roared down the tunnel, the air that hit my face more stagnant than refreshing, and I was glad when we pulled up behind my father's old *Bugatti*. Right where it should be. It was the only chink in my plan. If it hadn't been here, I would have had to take another one from the garage. Piotr probably wouldn't miss one of Father's, but it was still risky. Cannon needed to blend in, and he couldn't very well do that on a chopper.

"Is that what I think it is," he asked, pointing to the car. "Left down here to rot in a dusty old tunnel."

"Yes. If my father had to flee, he'd take this car before he would any of us. My brother must have forgotten it was down here or he would have already sold it."

"Can't say I would blame him considering how much this baby is worth." He whistled low, running his hand along the sleek lines of the car. "I'd sell it too. After I drove it one last time, of course."

"My brother doesn't need the money. He'd sell the car to spit in our father's face for leaving me in charge of the brotherhood. And you will drive it, probably more than once."

"Seriously?" His eyebrow lifted. "Don't fuck with me right now, Hunter."

"I assure you, I have better things to be doing than fucking with you. There are only a handful of places Piotr regularly frequents and if you're going to tail him, you'll need to blend in. Part of that will be the car you drive."

Motioning with two fingers for him to follow me, I turned around and walked away. His boots were quiet on

the pavement behind me, but that damn jean jacket of his swished with even the smallest movement, and it graded on my nerves.

“What’s the other part?”

He was going to hate it, and the sadistic asshole in me smiled internally even though my mask of indifference never slipped.

“A new wardrobe,” I said, climbing up the steel rungs of the ladder.

“Where the fuck are we going to get that?”

“You’ll see.”

I twisted the circular latch and pushed the door up a centimeter, peeking around. Thankfully, only the staff frequented the wine cellar, and dinner was still hours away. Pushing the hatch door all the way over, I pulled myself up. After Cannon had cleared the small hole, I closed it back up, pointing to the chip in the cement that would grant him access to the tunnel so he could come and go from the manor without being noticed.

There was only one way into the house from here, a set of curved stone steps. When my old man designed this house, he really went all in with the Gothic look. Even the wooden door at the top of the stairs that opened into the pantry was a period piece. Its narrowly spaced slats weren’t exactly energy efficient, but you could hear a pin drop on the other side of the door.

With the coast clear, I pressed a finger to my lips. He nodded and shut the door behind us, following me down the hallway. This would be the most dangerous stretch for Cannon because there was nowhere to hide. He’d have to be careful and hope he was fast enough to retrace his steps either coming or going, if he heard someone.

The staircase leading up to the family’s private quarters had intricately carved banisters and a dark red carpet in the center. When I checked with Helene earlier, she’d confirmed that my mother’s wing of the house had

remained untouched. The only person who ever went into her quarters was Helene herself, and only to clean. She'd been with us for as long as I could remember, and had cleaned up her fair share of blood, so my request that she skip this section of the manor was the least of her concerns.

My mother's set of white double doors with the shiny silver handles looked exactly as I remembered. I hoped the saying you can go home but you can never go back was accurate because I had no desire to. She had sent me off with a babe swaddled in my arms that wasn't my father's, and by the time I'd returned all hell had broken loose.

When Helene said untouched, she wasn't lying. Mother called this her sitting room. The last book she ever read was still sitting face down on the small round table by the window and one of her cardigans was thrown over the chaise next to it. Her makeup was scattered across her dressing table, the mirror tilted downward to accommodate her petite frame. There was no point in going in the adjoining bedroom, I doubted anything had changed.

“Whose room is this?”

“It was my mother's. Nobody is using it, so this space will be yours. There's a bathroom through there,” I said, pointing to the open door. “I'm going to run next door and see if they've cleaned out my father's closet yet.”

He didn't need to follow me through the connecting door, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt for him to know how to get to my father's closet. My brother needed me out of the picture sooner rather than later in order to rightfully assume the reins of our father's empire. This way, at least we would be prepared should Cannon need to stay longer.

My father's rooms mirrored my mother's, and I'd had enough trips down memory lane today, so I made a beeline for his walk-in closet. It seemed either my brother

didn't give a shit, or like with Father's car, he'd forgotten all about his room. Suits in every color and style imaginable still lined the outer walls of the closet, picking up the first one I came to, I tossed it at Cannon.

"Try this on."

He frowned. "You want me to wear a dead man's suit?"

"My father won't be needing them anymore, but you will. Besides, it saves me having to drop a hundred grand on clothes you'll probably never wear again."

"Are all made men like you?" he asked with a shake of his head.

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a made man. You're thinking of the Italians."

He raised an eyebrow as he toed his boots off. "Isn't it all the same thing? Irish, Polish, Russian, Italian. A Mafia is a Mafia."

"Not exactly, though that is a common misconception." I gave him my back because, frankly, my day had been shitty enough without seeing Cannon's dick. "All of them are criminal enterprises, but the organization my family's a part of prefers to operate in the shadows and is far more brutal than either the Italians or Irish. The Russians are of a similar mindset, but they've grown weaker and weaker over the years, whereas our power has only grown."

"What's worse than sleeping with the fishes," he asked from behind me, the sound of a zipper being pulled up prompting me to turn around.

Cannon buttoned up the matching navy blue vest and shrugged into the suit coat. My father wasn't as broad through the chest as I was, so the suit fit Cannon perfectly.

"Trust me, Cannon, there are far more agonizing ways for a man to die. At least with cement shoes, you

would only suffer for a maximum of three minutes before you lost consciousness.”

It was just clothes, but the transformation was astonishing. He stood up straighter, and while his short blond hair was still slicked back with too much gel, it now looked stylish.

“Christ,” he muttered, watching while I dug through a drawer in the center island. “I don’t even want to know how you know that.”

“Put this on.”

“A watch?”

“That’s not just any watch. It’s a *Patek Philippe*.”

“And,” he said, clasping the platinum band in place on his wrist.

“When a woman offers to suck your dick, and it will happen with that suit and watch combo”—I pointed down at his fly—“do not think with that. Let her suck you off in the clubhouse bathroom or the car, I don’t give a shit, as long as you don’t come anywhere near the leather of that car. And for fuck’s sakes, do not get yourself killed by bringing a girl back here.”

No, he did not just give me a goofy grin and salute me while wearing a forty-thousand-dollar suit and a two hundred-thousand-dollar watch. Fuck me. My brother would be mailing me Cannon’s severed head before the day was out.



In the rearview mirror, the sun still played peekaboo with the cloud cover, but up ahead the sky was black, and I hoped it wouldn't be an omen for how the rest of my day would go. Between the hulking buildings on my right, I saw a flash of lightning, the ominous crack of thunder following as I sped up.

There was no way I was spending the rest of my day looking like a drowned poodle. Cherry could embrace our natural curls all she liked, I preferred sleek and straight even though it required me to flat iron my hair to within an inch of its proverbial life.

“In one mile, take a right onto Lahaya Dr.”

What the hell was my phone talking about? There was nothing but industrial buildings surrounding me.

“In a half mile, take a right onto Lahaya Dr.”

Well, at least my phone was confident because I certainly wasn't. This part of town might as well have been Mars for as familiar as it looked. Not that I'd ever had any reason to be anywhere near the industrial district as a teenager.

I was about to pull Cherry's little red car over and double check that I had the correct address when I spotted a long, rectangular brick building with multiple glass doors along its front. An unlit neon sign in the middle window said tattoos. Why would someone put a tattoo parlor in the middle of a bunch of factories?

"Turn right in three hundred feet."

More and more businesses started popping up along both sides of the road and by the time I turned at the light it was as if I'd been beamed up by the *Enterprise* and transported to another town. This street was straight out of middle town America, circa 1960s. There was a family drugstore, not a pharmacy, a corner market, and a malt shop. Ok, so the malt shop was actually an ice cream place, but you get the picture.

"Your destination is up ahead on the right."

Sure enough, there it was, Beans and Things. Damn, this place couldn't get any cuter if they tried. There was even a couple sitting out front with an adorable dog between them. If it weren't for the teenager smoking a cigarette as he rolled past me on his skateboard, I might think I really was in the sixties.

Huh, and to think the whole time I was growing up I'd never known any of this stuff was here. Shaking off the thought, I scrolled to Picklebuster in my contacts and snorted as I hit the button.

"Smith?" he answered on the first ring.

Who else would call him from my phone? Unless he expected Hunter to have fingered me for an agent on the first day. I wasn't sure which pissed me off more, that he'd thrown me into the deep end without a float, or that he'd expected me to sink.

"Yes."

He breathed out a sigh and if I didn't know how expendable I was, I might be touched.

“Good. The paper trail for the backstory you concocted is all set up. There’s a storage unit here in Austin rented under your name, inquiries for the ad we put in the paper for your apartment are being forwarded to an agent here, and all the paperwork to create and close an IT company by the name of Dean Earl Argeneau Incorporated has been filed.”

Laughter bubbled out of me like a water fountain, coming out in a rush, then cutting off with a snort. There was only one person in the office who would have picked that name, and it damn sure wasn’t my boss.

“Yeah. Herb said it would be easy for you to remember if you were ever questioned.”

My boss probably didn’t even realize the dummy company’s initials were DEA, and he damn sure wouldn’t know that it was my online gaming profile for the same reason. Well, that and the dark fantasy theme. Dean was the name of my favorite character from *Supernatural*, *Earl the Vampire* was an old play about a vampire’s desire for acceptance, and Argeneau came from my favorite vampire book series. I can’t believe the old man not only remembered all that, but he’d used it to cover my ass. The ass my boss was trying to get shot off.

My boss’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “The only problem we had was deciding what to do with the excess funds in your bank account.”

There was no way I had just heard him correctly. Why in the fuck would he touch my bank account?

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Smith, you can’t claim to be broke and have Kowalczyk find out you have twenty-five thousand sitting in your checking account.”

He had a valid point, but how would Hunter even gain access to that information? He’d either have to know enough about me to take over my account or hack into the banking system. Both situations seemed a little far-

fetches to me, but then again, I wasn't exactly a criminal mastermind.

Taking a deep breath in, I tried not to lose my shit. "Please tell me you didn't put my money in an evidence locker."

"Calm down, Smith. I left fifty bucks in the old account and opened another one under the alias Jesse West for you. All the paperwork, along with two thousand in cash, are in storage unit number"—he paused, and I heard heavy breathing on the line—"423 at All For You Storage. There's an envelope with the key inside waiting for you at the front desk so you can get into the unit."

There was some more shuffling.

"Agent Gillford said the place is only about a ten-minute drive from the clubhouse. If you can't make it there, shoot me a text and we'll come up with a Plan B. That was the best I could do on the fly."

My head hit the back of the seat. Ok, Brandy, do not freak out. You were the one that needed this ruse, and he did the best he could, as quickly as he could. Fucking Hunter. When I told him that lie, I thought it would be simple. That he'd investigate my fake unemployment status and move on. Obviously, my boss thought otherwise, or he wouldn't be going through all this trouble.

Looking up at the ceiling of Cherry's car, which wasn't that far since she drove a mini cooper, I forced myself to say, "Thank you, sir. My sister didn't want to go out for coffee this morning, so while I have her car I'll run by there."

"Good." He was already clearly brushing off the fact he'd just touched my money without my consent. "Then what do you have for me?"

Of course. There it was. He'd done his part and now that he knew I was alive, he expected me to do mine.

Marco's face sprang to mind, but something made me want to withhold the only piece of information I had so far.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Hunter had gone somewhere with the guy in the jean jacket after their meeting and it had to be far away because he said he wouldn't be back until late tonight. Old Picklebuster would definitely want to know that tidbit, yet I couldn't bring myself to share even that. It was probably insignificant. A preplanned trip to Mexico for all I knew, but what if it wasn't?

"Nothing so far, sir, but they have me working in the shop. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before I uncover something."

The lie easily slipped past my lips without so much as a hint of heartburn. A part of me knew I couldn't trust a man who thought his people were expendable, but if I were honest with myself, and I always was, Hunter was the bigger reason. Where he was concerned, I had been compromised.

"Just focus on getting me something I can use on Kowalczyk. I don't give two shits about an auto body shop."

The sound of a dial tone filled my ear, and I threw my phone into my purse and opened the car door. My stomach rumbled, and I marched myself up the glass door with the sideways cup of coffee on it, intent on ordering something sweet and gooey to drown out my sorrows. A woman on a mission, I stormed into the dimly lit coffee shop, only to freeze when the girl in front of me turned around.

The corner of Stella's lip tilted up. "Well, now I know you don't have the same shitty taste in coffee as your sister. As long as you're not perky in the mornings, we'll get along just fine."

With Stella, I'd never have to wonder what she meant or if she was being catty. The longer I was around

her, the more convinced I became that she was my spirit animal. But like all good things in my life, I knew my friendship with Stella wouldn't last. That didn't mean I couldn't enjoy her company and keep these memories tucked away for a time when she hated me.

“No one's ever accused me of being perky.” My lips twitched of their own accord. “And I've had no luck getting nail polish to stay on for more than a day either.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

A teenaged girl behind the counter waved at me, her blond ponytail swaying as she called out, “I can help the next person in line.”

Stella placed her order, then moved down to wait for her iced coffee. After I ordered a blueberry muffin and a caramel macchiato, I joined her at the end of the counter. We stood there in companionable silence for a beat before she turned to me.

Her brows drew together, the tiniest dimple forming between them. “About yesterday...”

I waved her off before she could go any further. “You don't have to explain yourself to me. Whatever happened between you and Tweak will stay between you and Tweak.”

She cocked her head to the side as she studied me. “I appreciate that, but what happened yesterday wasn't really about Tweak. He's annoying as hell, a shameless flirt, and talks too much, but I don't want you to think he's an asshole.”

“You might want to add crazy to the list, because after you left, he told me he purposely started it. Then he asked me how serious I thought you were about the threat to his junk.”

She threw her head back and laughed, some of the dullness that was in her eyes a few moments ago fading away. “What did you say?”

“He gave me a scale of one to five and I blurted out ten.” The barista called Stella’s name, and she leaned over to grab a straw and her cup, a smirk touching her lips. “No judgment, but I wondered at one point if you were going to punch him.”

She chuckled. “The thought crossed my mind, but it wouldn’t have been in his face.”

My laughter faded into a snort, and I could feel my face heating as I picked up my muffin. This girl was ruthless, and I admired her for it. If only I had half of her courage, maybe I wouldn’t be as fucked-up in the head as I was.

“Come on, let’s grab a seat by the window and I’ll keep you company while you eat.”

Scattered all around us were bistro style tables with black wrought iron chairs. A few people typed on laptops or scrolled through their phones and a group of women spoke in low tones in the far corner.

Stella folded one of her legs under her as she sat, the cup that rested in her hands spinning around and around on the tabletop as she stared down at it.

“Tweak’s not crazy for doing what he did. If he hadn’t, I probably would have kept all my anger at Switch bottled up inside.” She looked up. “But I’m sorry you had to witness my meltdown on your first day in the shop.”

It was all coming together—the breakup vibe, Tweak’s cryptic comments, her not wanting me to think Tweak was an asshole. The DEA had it wrong. Switch didn’t transfer charters because he had a falling out with Ryder. Stella’s breakup with Switch was responsible for the chain reaction of all chain reactions.

Not that I blamed her for causing the shitstorm that was currently my life. She had no way of knowing who would become vice president and how it would affect the club’s future. Her future. Shit, she just lost her man, and

now, because of me, she was about to lose her father as well. My appetite was instantly gone, and I slid the half eaten muffin away from me.

“It was hardly a meltdown, and there’s no need to apologize for expressing your feelings.” If she only knew the fuckery that went on in my head, she’d realize just how normal she was. “We all get pissed sometimes, and honestly, I wished I had the guts to tell a man to his face that I hoped his dick would fall off.”

She sucked on her straw and sighed as she set her cup down. “If only I could have said that to the right man. The fucked-up thing is, after I said that to him, and maybe punched him for leaving me, I’d probably fuck him senseless. How desperate is that?”

“Not desperate. Human. We can’t shut off our feelings like we do a gaming console. That’s why I like computers and video games. Everything is letters and numbers set in a predictable sequence. There’s nothing that can’t be undone with a click of the mouse.”

The corner of her lips tugged upward. “Cherry may have snagged Valentina, but I think I got the better end of the friend deal. Hers may make every word sound sexy with her Spanish accent, but mine could take over the world with a few lines of code.”



Cherry took the night off to hang out with me, which meant we were holed up in Hunter's room watching *The Notebook*. Her choice, not mine. Where I ran from my feelings, Cherry embraced them. For such a cheerful person, she certainly didn't mind sobbing over a chick flick. When we were teenagers, she dragged me to see *The Fault in Our Stars* and cried so hard that I ended up moving down a seat.

"How could you have never seen this movie before?" She reached into the bowl between us and dug out a handful of popcorn. Hunter was anal when it came to his room, and I briefly wondered what he'd do if he knew we were eating in his bed. "It's a classic."

How could we have shared a womb and she not know me at all? A small voice inside my head pointed out that it was partially my fault for not letting her in, for never sharing the things that interested me. But somehow, I just couldn't picture Cherry doing something like dressing up at Comicon or playing video games.

"Must have just been busy I guess," I said, moving the box of tissues a little closer to her.

“Speaking of busy, you didn’t come back upstairs until almost seven. You must like it down there with Stella and Tweak.”

This morning my boss might have pissed me off, but he’d also reminded me of what was at stake. I’d let Hunter cloud my judgment and distract me from what needed to be done. No one from the DEA had given me a specified time limit, but my boss had made it abundantly clear that they expected results, and soon. Today had been about making up for lost time.

I couldn’t share any of that with my sister, so I settled on, “Yeah. I really like Stella.”

My chest grew tight at the reminder that I was going to have to hurt Stella in order to save Cherry.

“I’m glad. Stella’s going through a tough patch, and she could really use a girlfriend.”

She stared at the TV, a fine line forming a crease between her brows. “Despite what some people may think, the men in this club are all stand-up guys you can rely on. They’re just used to solving the type of problems that can be fixed with money or violence. And neither thing can help Stella.”

Cherry’s words gnawed at me. She spoke about the guys with such reverence despite admitting that they could be violent. How could a man prone to violence also be, as Cherry put it, stand-up? Then I thought about Shay said Hunter “had a talk” with her ex. Hunter wasn’t the talking sort, he was the killing sort. Yet, he’d done what he had to help a woman.

There had to have been something I missed. Something she’d kept hidden that brought her to The Devil’s Deviants doorstep. How had I been arrogant enough to think that I was the only one of us who could have a secret? The answer became apparent. Because I couldn’t see past my own pain. I’d been living with it for so long that it clouded everything, including how I viewed my sister. Well, not anymore.

“Did the club solve a problem for you, Cherry?”

Her eyes met mine, the green surrounding her irises growing darker. My heart beat faster, almost as fast as it had when Kam snuck up on me at the office. That seemed so long ago now. The time before my life got complicated. Something told me things were about to change again, and I braced myself for whatever she had to say.

“I called you when Dad got sick, but I never told you how much his treatments were going to cost. You were finally away from home like you’d always wanted, and I couldn’t stand the thought of my genius sister giving up her only chance at a college education. Not when there was something I could do to prevent that from happening.”

When I opened my mouth, she gave me a watery smile and patted my hand. “Please don’t be upset with me for keeping it a secret.”

My crazy, beautiful, generous sister. Upset with her for sacrificing herself so I could have a college education? For keeping it a secret? Never. I’d be the worst sort of hypocrite considering all the lies I’d told her over the years. What I’d done would go to the grave with me, and if it ate away at my soul, well, that was my burden to bear. She’d shouldered enough.

“I could never be mad at you for making sure I got to finish college.” Her brilliant smile came back, easing a little of the pressure in my chest. “But it’s time to let me shoulder some of the burden. Tell me what you owe the club and I’ll help you pay them back. Maybe they’d let the work I do for the shop go toward the balance or something.”

“This is exactly why I didn’t want you to know.” She made a circle in the air around my face with her pointer finger. “If you don’t stop, those worry lines will be permanently etched in your face. The club and I are square, Daddy’s care is paid through the end of the year,

and I have plenty of money in savings. You just concentrate on fixing whatever brought you here.”

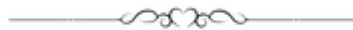
She settled into the pillows piled against Hunter’s headboard. “I don’t suppose you want to tell me what’s going on before we get too engrossed in the movie?”

Who needed a roller coaster? My sister just gave me the same sensation for free. Shaking it off, I cuddled back into the pillows beside her. My boss, scratch that, Herb, went to a lot of trouble to validate my backstory. Might as well use it.

“I was too ashamed to tell you I lost my job. As soon as I get back on my feet again, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“That’s all?” She blew out a breath and laughed up at the ceiling. “Thank god. You had me thinking you escaped an abusive ex-boyfriend or something like that. A little financial trouble is nothing compared to thinking you were in danger.”

Cherry didn’t know how close to the mark she was, only her worry was years too late. The present danger we were in, however, was very real. Even if it was the last thing I ever did, I’d make sure Cherry was safe and that nobody would ever fuck with us again.



His breath fanned the back of my neck, and I froze. It never paid to be caught unaware, but honestly, he’d never approached me here before. Normally, I smelled him long before I felt his presence and scurried off in search of someone else, anyone else. But not today. He’d caught me alone and all because his scent was... off. Different somehow.

Notes of sandalwood still clung to him, but the sickeningly sweet smell, and the staleness it left behind, were absent. What did it mean? Change was never a

good thing for a predator to exhibit, and there could be no doubt about it, he was the worst sort of predator.

All predator's exploited the weaknesses of their prey, but he took sadistic pleasure in using mine against me. It was the only thing that made any sense. Even his voice changed when he issued his taunts to make me comply. The gravelly voice that women seemed to go wild for would take on an unhinged, excitable quality that smoothed it just enough to turn it into the whiny rasp I hated.

"Tut, tut, tut, my pet. Don't forget about our deal."

Pet. What a stupid nickname for a person. Though, in my case, it might be apt. I was expected to stand up and pay attention, follow commands, and beg when he told me to. The only difference between me and a dog was, my treat wasn't food. It was him leaving my sister alone.

That was what made him the worst sort of predator. He used the love I had for my sister to take what wasn't his to take. A sacred bond that was supposed to bring joy only led to my imprisonment. The fact it had an expiration date was the only thing that kept me sane.

"How could I when you remind me of it every time?"

He chuckled, the sound grading against my already frayed nerves. No doubt like he planned.

"Can't have you running off and making up wild stories now, can I?"

Wild stories, my ass. Whoever said "the truth shall set you free" didn't know what in the hell they were talking about. There would be no freedom from this, not even when our arrangement ended.

My sister picked that moment to stick her head around the doorway, her bright and innocent smile falling. Shit. Why was she here? She was supposed to be

at cheerleading practice. I couldn't have her poking her nose where it didn't belong, or she'd ruin everything.

His breath tickled against my ear, and I nearly threw up. "You better tell her to run along before she witnesses your shame."

Oh, god, no. He wouldn't. Would he? Why was I even debating? Yes, he would.

Cherry's eyes flicked back and forth between me and the man who stood behind me. The loathsome being who didn't deserve the handsome face god had given him. Such evil shouldn't wear a pretty mask; it should be paraded around in all its fucked-up glory. That way, you couldn't say that you weren't warned.

"Are you feeling all right, Brandy? Your cheeks are a little flushed."

"Yeah," I said in an amazingly calm tone despite the tightening in my chest affecting my ability to breathe. "Just a little frustrated with a math problem. He'll help me get it sorted out and I'll catch up with you at home."

She scrunched up her nose but dutifully disappeared from sight. If she knew about my little memory trick, she'd realize right away that I was lying. He was the reason I'd kept my abilities hidden. If our mother ever caught on to the fact that I wasn't your average run-of-the-mill nerd, she'd push for me to be tested. Then I'd wind up graduating years ahead of my sister, leaving her at his mercy, which was a total joke because he had none.

Turning around, I faced the man I was still years from escaping. He cocked his head to the side, the cruel sneer I hated so much transforming his face. How he could have the entire town fooled was still a mystery to me. Then again, they never saw this side of him.

"How bad it must sting to have to pay for the sins of your mother while your sister holds you back."

There was nothing I could say that would make a difference in my suffering, so I kept quiet. He got off on

mind games, and I'd never give him the satisfaction of knowing anything he ever said bothered me. Aside from the implied threat to my sister. There was no helping my reaction where she was concerned.

"I suppose since you have nothing to say, then we'll get started. Spoiler alert! This is going to hurt. A lot."



Normally, I had the patience of a saint, but my detour along the Mexican border to pick up my tail was like the fly I'd hit with the swatter twice and still refused to die. Thoughts of all the things I wanted to be doing to Brandy's luscious body tormenting me the entire way.

Her golden hair would look like a halo as it fanned across my pillow, her lips parted. She'd arch her back with the force of my thrusts and my teeth would graze the nipples she so generously offered. Then came the best part, the part I couldn't wait for. Hearing her scream as I watched her fall apart on my cock.

Fuck. I could come just from the mental picture in my head alone, but that wouldn't hold me over for long. My cock wanted to be buried to the hilt in her sweet pussy, and nothing else would do. Trust me. I'd tried. Not even a jerk and go along the way had helped to take the edge off. She was the thirst I couldn't seem to quench, which didn't make any sense to me since I hadn't even fucked her yet.

But I was about to. The garage door slowly rolled up, and I had the urge to punch the stupid thing, which I suppressed. Barely.

I took the stairs two at a time and swung the door open to find Ryder, not Pops, sitting at the bar with a cup of coffee in his hand. What the hell was this? The twilight zone.

Unlike Pops, though, Ryder's dark eyes weren't haunted as they met mine. "How did it go?"

Fuck me. I didn't have time for some *Care Bear* let's be friends type of bullshit. Pops had obviously not given Ryder the memo that at this hour my pretend to give a shit meter was nonexistent.

"Marek won't shoot him, if that's what you're asking." He patted the barstool beside him, which I ignored in favor of getting straight to the point. "You should be in bed with your wife not waiting up to ambush me."

The fucker smirked. "I was earlier."

Now he was asking for it. Not that he was bragging, Ryder wasn't the type to kiss and tell, but he'd obviously gotten his dick wet. And I still hadn't.

"Go back upstairs to your wife," I said, passing him.

"Can I ask you a question?" His voice came out strange. Half-choked, half-strained.

I turned around and leaned against the bar as I studied him. What was his deal? He'd always been able to sleep like a baby. Now here he was, asking me questions at 4 a.m., when I had other places I'd much rather be. But respect, in my case, was the bitch of all bitches. It was what kept me rooted in place.

"Only if you're prepared to hear an answer that you might not like."

"That's why I'm asking you, not one of the other guys." He sighed. "Do you think Stella was the only reason Switch left?"

He should have asked Beast; he was much better with this type of shit. Come to think of it, why didn't he?

Beast always had a story with a moral that he made to fit into whatever dilemma you had. That, along with his sense of humor, was why he was Ryder's sounding board. Yet Ryder had asked me, the man incapable of empathy or compassion.

"Yes. You're taking the difficulties of their relationship personally because you lack an ability to accept that your friendship became collateral damage."

He laughed, but there was no warmth to it. "It's hard not to take that shit personally."

Jesus Christ. If I didn't turn into Dr. Phil and fix this asshole, I would never get my dick wet or get my allotted two hours of sleep a night. I didn't do bedtime stories and I sure as hell didn't do warm.

"Do you remember what I said about Valentina when we were on the plane to Mexico?"

He sat back and raised a brow. "Before or after I lunged at you?"

Ah, memories.

"After."

"You're a twisted fuck, you know that?"

"It has been mentioned a time or two. The point is, I took away your choice. There was no one to do that for Switch, and he chose Stella. The same way you would have chosen Valentina."

Stuff it up your ass, Beast. I just used an anecdote. It wasn't a funny one, but none of mine ever would be. All the lessons I'd learned in life involved bloodshed. At least this one didn't end in death.

"Yeah, but if it weren't for you, the club wouldn't have survived." His lips curved upward. "That doesn't mean I won't tell Beast you used an anecdote. Even if it was fucked-up, it still counts."

This was what I got for trying to be helpful. I would never live this shit down. All I wanted was a few hours of

sleep and to claim what was mine. Shaking my head, I shoved off the bar and headed for the stairs.

“Just out of curiosity.” Fuck my life. I hung my head and waited for him to continue. “Do you think Cannon can pull this off? We promoted him to Sergeant at Arms when we promoted everyone else after Switch left, but he’s only done deliveries. He’s never been tested before.”

Cannon was a street kid that Ryder had taken under his wing. Brave if you asked me. All Cannon had ever done was cause Ryder grief. Well, before I’d started cleaning up his messes. Now, he caused me grief. But the kid was loyal, and that was something you couldn’t put a price tag on.

“We’ll never know until we give him the chance to prove himself. This plan was his idea, and it was actually a smart one. Plus, he has Marek there to watch his back, which is hardly foolproof, but it’s better than letting him loose without a safety net.”

There was a sigh, but he said nothing else, so I left him to his brooding and headed up the stairs. When I reached my door, I paused, cracking it open. Light from the hallway spilled through the slit and I stood there watching her for a second. A creeper move. Sure. But I couldn’t seem to help myself.

She was curled up on her side, looking small and helpless in the middle of the bed. The beast in me stirred, wanting to disturb her serenity. My balls ached, and I needed for her to feel the same level of discomfort so I could be the one to soothe it. To satisfy her every desire. Fucked-up, I know, but what can I say? I was a selfish prick.

Gently closing the door behind me, I took off my cut and threw it over the back of the chair. Her floral scent had mixed with mine in the room and I breathed in deep as I sat to remove my boots. It wasn’t until I had slung my jeans on the chair and moved closer to the bed that I caught a whiff of popcorn.

Popcorn? She was eating popcorn in my bed. That would not do, but I'd deal with that minor infraction later. I could give her a pass since she didn't know, but my dick wasn't feeling generous. He bobbed against my stomach at the thought of punishing her, of seeing my handprint on her ass.

She shivered as I peeled back the covers and slid in behind her. If she was cold, I was game to warm her up. Inhaling her sweet scent, I nuzzled my face against her neck, and she whimpered. Not in the sexy way either. What the fuck?

Her ass bucked against my cock, and her whole body shook. "Don't touch me!"

This was not the same kitten who rubbed herself against me, practically climbing my body before I'd left.

"No, no, no." Her body went into a fit of convulsions before she whispered, "It hurts so much."

Something was seriously wrong. I grabbed her hip and turned her in my arms. Moonlight shone through the cracks in the blinds, giving me just enough light to see by. A deeply engraved crease was between her brows and from somewhere near my thigh I could feel her fingers moving.

"What hurts, mój anioł?" Her body stiffened, but her eyes were still closed, so I tried again. "Tell me who hurt you."

The fingers at my thigh stilled, and then her arm came around my torso. She burrowed into me, her head against my chest, her hair tickling me. It was as if she couldn't get close enough. Then she finally stilled, her breath warm little puffs on my chest. But she still hadn't answered me.

"Tell me who hurt you and I'll kill them," I gritted out as I pulled her more tightly against me, thoughts of my aching dick momentarily forgotten.

“Hunter,” she sighed, the sound sleepy and content, totally at odds with what had just happened. “You say the sweetest things.”

What. The. Actual. Fuck. Sweet? That was the second time she’d said something similar, though the first time was undoubtedly to placate me. Nobody actually thought I was sweet, not even my mother. She knew better. She was well aware of what my father was capable of and the monster she’d bred. It was why she’d pushed a swaddled baby into my arms and sent me away. That was the last time I would see my mother alive, and the day I’d left my father’s house, blood dripping from the tips of my fingers.

A soft snore broke the quiet and disturbed my morose thoughts. One thing was for sure. I wasn’t getting any more answers out of her until she woke up. All I needed was a name, and they were as good as dead for laying their hands on her. First, though, I would gladly teach them the meaning of fear and pain. For every second she shivered, they would suffer.



Ever slept so hard you woke up disoriented? Until now, that had never happened to me. My nightmares ensured I never slept all the way through the night, and I wasn't sure why last night would be any different. Based on the firm mattress underneath me, and the soft fleece brushing against my shoulder, I knew I was still in Hunter's bed.

Someone's breath ruffled my hair and my body gave an involuntary jerk, my eyes squeezing tightly closed. Did Cherry leave after she made me sit through another one of her chick flicks, or had we fallen asleep? Damn, I couldn't remember. But it had to be Cherry. Right? That was the only logical explanation for why my chest didn't feel the slightest bit squeazy despite waking up to find that I wasn't alone.

Please be Cherry, please be Cherry, I chanted in my head as I cracked an eye open to find my nose a hairsbreadth away from a male chest. A very naked male chest, to be exact. My breath stilled in my lungs. Definitely not Cherry. Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard Hunter's voice, the same one that had played a part in my nightmare. Jesus. I must finally be losing the few marbles I had left.

Opening my other eye, I leaned back a little, but found I couldn't go far. My head had been resting on a bicep, which was oddly comfortable, the lower portion of an arm resting against my shoulder. Now that I was fully conscious, I could feel the weight of a hand on my hip holding me in place. There was only one man I knew of that could touch me, let alone cage me in, without me totally melting down. Hunter.

Maybe Hunter's voice hadn't been a part of my nightmare. No, I wouldn't think about that right now. Not when I wasn't ready to deal with the aftermath of that reality. Hunter would ask questions that, for my sister's sake, I couldn't answer.

Warm breath kissed my face as I tilted my chin, looking up, trying to see him better. His chin had dark blond stubble on it that hadn't been there the last time I'd seen him. It made the sharp angle of his chin appear less harsh. His beautiful lips appeared fuller now that they were relaxed too. The bow of his top lip oddly fascinating in its perfection.

Warmth spread through the lower half of my stomach as memories of what his lips felt like pressed against mine assaulted me. The way the rough pads of his fingers felt against my neck as he'd taken control of the kiss. How he'd devoured my lips and left me wanting more. Even now, fresh off the reminder of my personal hell, I couldn't keep my legs still. They rubbed together, my cotton sleep shorts bunching at the tops of my thighs, as I tried to ease the ache forming in the center of my core.

Pale eyes fluttered open, and they were even more unnervingly intense this close up. His stare had never failed to lay me bare. It was as if he saw past flesh, bones, and sinew, down to my soul. Not good for a woman with as many secrets as I had, but I couldn't seem to look away.

Gone was the cold, calculating, detached beauty of the killer who lurked inside him. But the man staring back at me was every bit as dangerous to my heart, if not my

body. This version of Hunter was raw and primal, his desire transparent, his need feeding my own.

“Were you planning on staring all morning or were you actually going to touch me? Not that I haven’t enjoyed listening to you trying to fidget your way to an orgasm.”

His voice was like cut glass, smooth in some parts while rougher in others. A faint accent played peekaboo with his words, growing stronger on some before disappearing altogether on others. The effect was just as mesmerizing as his eyes.

Now touching him was all I could think about. Well, that and an orgasm. Heat crept up my neck as I recalled tales of the all-powerful big O from the girls who lived in my dorm. According to them, sex never guaranteed an orgasm and there was something about a G-spot. God, now I wished I’d paid better attention to what they’d said. In my defense, though, never in my wildest dreams did I think an orgasm might be attainable for someone as broken as me.

I had no clue how one achieved this mythical orgasm, and I wasn’t about to ask. Then Hunter would find out that I was a freak, and I’d rather die than have him look at me with disdain, or even worse, pity.

No, I would pretend like I knew what in the hell I was doing. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know the basics from past experience, if you could call it that. Besides, how hard could this be? People had sex every day, at least according to my sister they did, so I ought to be able to figure out how to touch a man.

Using the hand that wasn’t trapped beneath me, I started by running my fingertips along his collarbone and down to the hollow of his neck. A patch of raised skin rested right below it, and I sucked in a breath. The scar was barely noticeable, only about half an inch long, but its placement threw me off balance. My eyes closed for a second, blocking out the reality that someone had gone

for Hunter's throat, even though it shouldn't have come as a surprise given his background.

Normal people didn't have someone trying to decapitate them. Then again, did I have any right to judge? At least he owned who he was, let the world see the evidence of the brutal life he led. He didn't hide his scars. They were badges of honor because they meant he had survived. That he was stronger than his opponent. The only difference between us was my scars were on the inside, tearing me down, the lies piling up.

When I opened my eyes, he had his eyebrow raised. I wasn't sure if it was in question or challenge, but I made the split-second decision not to dwell on where any of his scars came from. They wouldn't matter when this was all over. He would hate me, and I'd go back to being dead inside. If I lived that long.

The swell of his pecs were silky smooth beneath my fingertips until I hit the jagged slash over his steadily beating heart. With a swallow, I forced myself to move on, letting my hand trace the individual lines of his abs. Holy Balls! I thought an eight pack was a myth, like unicorns and bigfoot, but there were definitely four distinct sections of muscle, and I was only halfway down his stomach.

Hunter had the type of body featured in ancient Greek sculptures. Sheer perfection. If it weren't for the vertical scar running down his side and disappearing under the blanket, I'd think he was a god. Except gods didn't bleed. They were invincible. To me, he seemed larger than life, strong and virile. But he was still just a man. Though I couldn't say he was like all the rest. This was the closest I'd ever willingly been to a man's dick.

His stomach muscles jumped against my hand as it disappeared under the blanket, my fingers coming into contact with warm metal. Wait. Metal?

Hunter moved like lightning, his hand circling my wrist, holding me in place. "I meant to warn you before

you reached my cock, but I was distracted.”

He let go of my wrist to throw back the covers, then shackled me again with his long, tapered fingers. What was he doing? Then I looked down and was rendered speechless.

He had a monster sized cock that I swear waved at me. Granted, I'd only seen one other one in person, but I'd watched a few pornos after college. Purely for research purposes mind you, but enough to know that he was hung, and that even phantom TV dick had made me want to break out in hives.

Why on earth, then, did I find all the metal bars running up the base of his dick mesmerizing? Damn if I knew, but I couldn't seem to look away. The girl who'd been afraid of a little dick was staring directly at one. My mouth watered, and I briefly wondered if that was normal.

“Have you ever seen a Prince Albert or Jacob's ladder piercing before?”

“I'm sorry, what?” I asked, warmth creeping up my neck when I realized I was still staring.

What was wrong with me? It was rude to stare. I was probably going to give the man a complex or something.

Maybe his dick had me under some sort of spell. I mean, the metal running up and down it sorta looked like little wands. Was there such a thing as Harry Pottering a woman's pussy? If so, Hunter had accomplished it.

“I'll take that, combined with the look on your face, as a no.” Hunter rolled us, thankfully breaking the dick trance he had me under. He joined my wrists together in one of his hands and raised them above my head. “You've had your fun, now, it's my turn.”

My breasts were in his face, my nipples visible through my pale pink tank top, and I watched in fascination as he bent his head. The cotton scraped against my sensitive nipple, his warm breath sending a

shiver down my spine before his mouth closed around it. He alternated between sucking and teasing my flesh with his teeth through the tank top.

No man had ever put his mouth on me before. Sensations swamped my starving cells, making it difficult to breathe. But not in a panic attack sort of way. Was this what an orgasm felt like? I didn't know, nor did I care, as long as he didn't stop.

He ignored my silent plea, releasing my breast to tug my tank top over my head. But he didn't take it off, opting to leave it tangled in my arms, the cool air drifting over my wet, heated skin. Hunter bent his head again, this time latching onto my other nipple. Just when I thought he was going to leave the first one aching, he released the hold he had on my wrists and rolled it between two of his fingers.

My body took on a life of its own, wiggling beneath him, trying to get closer. I was reaching for something, but I wasn't sure what. Higher and higher I climbed, some imaginary goal just out of reach. He pulled back, taking away his mouth and his hands, moving down my stomach, and I wanted to cry out in frustration.

He tugged my sleep shorts down my legs and shouldered his way between them. My already pleasure-fogged brain checked out altogether the second his tongue lapped at my sex, his groan vibrating against my slick flesh. I'd died and gone to heaven.

“Your pussy tastes as sweet as it looks.”

His dirty words propelled me back into that space where I was climbing, reaching for that thing I couldn't find before. I could almost touch it, whatever it was. It was right there for the taking. My hips bucked against his mouth, moving on their own, the arm he slung across my stomach keeping me grounded. His teeth scraped against a bundle of nerves I didn't know I had, and all of a sudden I was flying, my mouth opening on a wordless scream.

It was the freest I'd ever felt in my life. I was no longer the broken girl who couldn't get close enough to a man to receive pleasure. This was definitely it. The thing I'd heard about, but never experienced. The elusive big O. It was everything they said it was and more.

Hunter raised his head, his pale eyes piercing. "You want to be my good girl, don't you?"

If he could make me feel like that again, I was liable to say yes to anything he asked. A dangerous thing indeed, but at the moment I didn't care. I would deal with the consequences later and eagerly nodded. It was by far the boldest move I'd ever made in my life.

"Next time I want to hear you scream my name. I want every man in this place to know it was me who made you come."

My cheeks flushed at his request, and he pinned me with his eyes as he spoke. "Remember, only good girls get to come."

It was embarrassing how easily I caved, nodding my head again, this time in understanding. He bent his head, his tongue lapping at my already slick flesh, my hips bucking against his arm. The blunt tip of his finger circled my opening before pushing inside. He pumped in and out of me, slowly at first, using both his finger and his tongue in concert. Did being eager for a man make you a slut? If it did, then I was totally OK with being a big old slut.

His finger pumped in and out of me faster and faster as his lips closed around my bundle of nerves, sucking hard. It was as if Hunter could read my body and knew exactly what I needed, when I needed it. Off the cliff, I jumped. Soaring. Free.

His words echoed inside my brain as I screamed his name. Only good girls get to come. This feeling, an orgasm, the big O, whatever you wanted to call it, was worth the embarrassment of knowing someone might have heard me.

Hunter lifted his head, his face wet with my juices. He'd never looked more beautiful.

“Good girl. Now you'll scream while you come on my cock.”

His words made me shiver. Holy balls! My body felt like a giant limp noodle, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to come again. Then a naughty little voice in my head reminded me I had a lot of making up to do.

But the second the tip of Hunter's dick nudged against my entrance, I tensed up, conditioned to expect pain at the intrusion. He stopped, and I worried about what he was seeing with those intense eyes of his. Would this be over before it ever began?

“There was never any choice for you, mój anioł. You were mine the second I laid eyes on you. Mine to command, to protect, and to pleasure.”

His words sunk into me, cloaking me in warmth. Some women might find his brand of possession frightening, but if things were different, I'd take comfort in belonging to a man like Hunter.

He was dangerous, yes, but not to me. Not anymore. Not unless he figured out why I was here, and even then, I couldn't say that I blamed him. How could I? He was protecting the club in the same way I was protecting my sister. If I had to kill in order to do that, I knew I would. There was nothing I wouldn't do to keep her safe, even destroying my only chance at happiness.

Someday he would hate me, and the thought of it made bile climb up my throat. But it wouldn't be today, so I swallowed it down, ready to give Hunter what he needed. There was no going back, I knew that as surely as I knew my own name.

Hunter would have the power to destroy me after this. It had been stupid of me to think he couldn't end me, metaphorically speaking, because there was nothing left to break. The last man didn't finish the job, and somehow

it seemed fitting that at least it would be a contract killer who took me down and not a weak man who preyed on a little girl's love.

My head slowly bobbed up and down, acknowledging his words, giving him permission to use my body. I wanted to give him back the pleasure he'd given me.

The tendons in his neck bulged, his rough hands sliding along my calves and up my thighs. He lifted me, placing a leg over each of his shoulders, the desire in his eyes searing me. The head of his dick pushed inside, and he hissed, his chest expanding with each breath he took.

There was no pain, only a mild discomfort at my body being stretched to accommodate his girth. How could that be? He was so much larger than anything that had been inside me before.

“You're taking me so beautifully, just like I knew you would.”

He stared down at the spot where we were joined, watching as he slid more of his dick inside me. Normally, I hated being the center of attention, and if you'd have told me a year ago that I'd welcome not only a man's eyes on the most private part of me, but his dick, I'd have called you crazy. Maybe that meant he really had Harry Pottered me. It certainly felt that way.

My body adjusted to him, the pleasurable fullness sending ripples of sensation down my spine, and he wasn't even halfway inside me yet. Was he even going to fit? When I looked up to gauge his reaction, his face was pinched, almost as if he were in pain.

“Fuck, you're strangling my cock just right.”

A strange fluttering started low in my belly, and I struggled to place it. My skin felt heated, tight. In my ears, I could feel my heartbeat thundering like a thousand galloping horses. Alive, that was what this feeling was. *Cinderella* was finally waking up from her long slumber.

He pushed the rest of the way inside with a grunt, and I couldn't help but look down in wonder. I'll be damned. He fit. And I felt...complete. At peace. Like the restlessness of his dark soul had brushed against the blackness of mine, one recognizing the other, the two now intertwined.

His hips moved, his cock pulling out of me a little, and I whimpered at the loss. It wasn't needed though, because a second later, he filled me to the brim. Over and over. He set a slow rhythm, but it wasn't enough. He was holding back, and I hated it.

“Never hide from me. I want you to give me everything.”

“You may come to regret that request.”

He withdrew all the way, flipped me over, and jerked me up until my knees sank into the mattress. My arms were tangled in my tank top, and I had to brace my forearms on the bed to stay upright. The position was a familiar one and the air in my lungs collapsed. I tried to take a deep breath in, telling myself that Hunter wasn't him, but it wasn't working. No matter how hard I sucked, no air filled my lungs.

“You will scream my name as you cream all over my cock.”

He seated himself deep with one hard thrust, and the air rushed back into my starving lungs. The force of his thrust hadn't hurt and something in my chest cracked with the revelation. It made what happened before so much worse. He didn't need to hurt me, he'd chosen to. He'd said as much, but I never really believed him until now.

The sounds of flesh slapping against flesh filled the room and it might just be my new favorite sound. Exhilaration filled me as I let go of all my negative thoughts to focus on something much more pleasant. The here and now.

Back at the base of that pleasurable mountaintop, I eagerly climbed upward, thinking I knew what awaited me. Nope. Just when I thought I couldn't be surprised, Hunter did just that. He made the other orgasms, while exceedingly pleasurable, seem somehow hollow. Bright stars appeared behind my eyelids, the release so much more potent than before.

The scream slipped past my lips before I even realized what I was doing. "Hunter!"

Strength infused my limbs, and I felt like I could lift a Mack truck. The weight and shame of the past was still there, but it was no longer a heavy chain wrapped around my neck, choking the life out of me. Knowing that I wasn't entirely broken, only a little fucked-up, made the weight of it easier to bear. To most that wasn't a victory, but to me it was everything.

Hunter's thrusts never faltered, one hand digging into my hip, while the other wrapped around my throat. He gently squeezed, and another orgasm took hold, my body jerking against him. But he didn't stop, not even when I grew hoarse from screaming his name.

He released my neck, and I sucked in a deep breath, his hand straying to my hair. He fisted the strands at the back of my head, pulling my head back, a pleasurable burn tingling the roots. With one last grunt, I felt his hips hit my backside, warmth filling my womb. Contentment filled me to overflowing until his breath tickled my ear.

"Now, be a good girl and give me a name. Nobody hurts what's mine and lives."



Brandy was an intriguing puzzle I wanted to take apart, piece by piece, examine, and put back together. It was rare for me to have this level of interest in another human being. Maybe that was because I had most people figured out in a matter of minutes. But not my angel. Oh, no. Every time I thought I was close to cracking her code, she would do something unexpected, and I'd have to start from scratch.

Her lies, while told with utter conviction, didn't fool me. I wish I could say I found them off-putting, but they only added to the mystery surrounding her. One I intended to solve. It was the reason I stood in the shadows of an overhang across the street from her apartment building.

Nobody knew about this little side errand of mine, not even Ryder. Well, nobody from the club at least. The inept goons that Cannon and I had easily evaded on our way to Chicago sat in a sedan a few cars down, smoke from their cigarettes pouring through the crack in the window. Marek's son, at least, had been smart enough to spy on me from inside the coffee shop across the street.

Being followed was already growing tiresome, but shaking them hadn't been worth the risk. With a few precautions, all these guys would report back was which

building I entered and where the elevator stopped. They'd never find out which apartment I went into or why I was here.

Even if Piotr found Brandy's name on the building directory, it wouldn't mean anything to him. Brandy and Cherry might have had the same last name, but Smith was so common it bordered on ridiculous. Not that my brother would have any reason to find Cherry worthy of investigation. To him she was just another club whore, and I intended to keep it that way.

Before I rode out, I'd done my homework on the building and its inhabitants. Originally, I'd been thinking exit strategies, but knowing there were four other single females in the building besides Brandy, all of them living on the third floor, was about to come in handy. If I played this right, my brother would either think I'd gone out of my way for pussy, or that the club had expanded their territory. Neither thing would concern him, considering he planned on removing me from the equation, which was exactly what I wanted.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum would be easy to get around. They would likely report back to my brother that the elevator had stopped on the third floor from the comfort of their car as they chain-smoked while waiting for me to leave the building.

Marek's son was the real challenge. He struck me as the sort that might wait around to see if I actually got back onto the elevator from the same floor as I exited. This would require some improvisation on my part, since Brandy's apartment was on the fourth floor. Luckily, her balcony overlooked the alley that ran between her building and the coffee shop. Worst-case scenario, I could drop to the balcony below and sneak through that apartment.

With my plan in place, I casually crossed the street, watching Marek's son exit the coffee shop out of the corner of my eye. He fell into step a few feet behind me, and I carefully ignored him as I swung the glass door

open and walked past the rows of mailboxes on my way to the elevator. My hands tucked casually in my jeans, I looked straight ahead, watching as the numbers counted down.

A lady with a poodle got off, her eyes pinched as she looked down her nose at me. She saw jeans and my leather cut and thought it meant I was here to steal something. If she only knew I had accumulated enough wealth to buy this entire building. Twice over. And that didn't include all the wealth from the Braterstwo that was now rightfully mine. Wealth my brother was no doubt spending at an alarming rate because the fucker had expensive tastes.

The elevator doors began to close as Tweedledee and Tweedledum rounded the corner, Marek's son facing away from me along the wall where the mailboxes were. Dumbasses. They would be the first ones to go.

On the third floor, the elevator shuddered to a stop, and as soon as the doors opened, I jogged toward the door marked emergency exit. Taking the concrete steps two at a time, I heard a door opening far below me, and chanced a peek over the railing. My lip tugged up at the corner at the sight of Marek's son booking it up the steps. Balcony exit it was.

The stairwell door shut behind me with a soft click, and I dug out the worn leather wallet from my back pocket. My set of lock picks slid into my palm as I approached apartment 12B. In ten seconds flat, I was in, softly shutting and locking the door behind me. The faint scent of roses filled my lungs, and I inhaled the lingering traces of her, desperate for a hit as I studied my surroundings.

Everything was tidy, as if she'd left for work. There were no moving boxes, empty shelves, or bare walls in either the living room or dining room. In the kitchen, there was still a coffee cup face down in the strainer.

Childhood pictures of Brandy and Cherry lined both sides of the hallway, and interestingly enough, neither of their parents appeared in any of them. I stopped in front of one where they had their arms around each other, in front of a school. Taking out my phone, I zeroed in on the name of the middle school and snapped a picture.

In her bedroom, it was more of the same. Everything in its place aside from the few stray items normal people left lying about. Especially if they were in a hurry. A sweater was draped over the chair and in the bathroom a tube of toothpaste lay forgotten on the counter.

On my way out of her bathroom, I stopped at the desk in the corner. Two giant monitors sat side by side, taking up all the space. When I wiggled the mouse, a screensaver with the *Call of Duty* logo appeared, asking me to enter my password. The desk only had one drawer, and when I pulled it open, the few files inside slid forward. Apparently, my girl was religious about keeping her car maintained and had a manual for every piece of electronics or kitchen appliance in the apartment.

Shutting the drawer, I opened the trifold door to her closet. The top shelf housed old photo albums and a shoebox with a few random trinkets inside. About the only thing of interest hanging on the bar were the weird costumes. Jesus, this was Tweak's wet dream. He could never know about her penchant for playing dress up or I'd wind up having to cut his balls off.

Thick carpeting muffled the sound of my boots as I walked back out to the living room, a set of bookshelves catching my eye. She obviously loved to read, yet she had brought no books with her.

Curious, I snagged a book from the shelf. Really? *Single White Vampire*. Though, I suppose this could be useful. If she had fantasies about being bitten, I would be happy to oblige. She'd look sexy as fuck with an indentation of my teeth marring her delicate throat. Just above her pearls. My palm ground against my cock as I adjusted my growing erection. Damn, I needed to get out

of here before my dick made it impossible to jump or run anywhere.

I was about to put the book back on the shelf when I noticed the name printed along the bottom. Argeneau. I'd only seen that name one other place. When I googled Brandy's name. Dean Earl Argeneau Incorporated was a failing IT company that had recently gone belly up. She'd never said who she used to work for, but it hadn't been hard to connect the dots.

Finding a book with that same name in her apartment was a hell of a coincidence, and if there was one thing I didn't believe in, it was coincidences.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, Cannon's name lighting up the display as I looked down at it.

"Everything OK?"

"Aside from not being able to sock your brother in the mouth for being a total douche, I'm aces. Got my dick sucked in the golf cart while he played this morning. You were totally right, by the way, about the clothes and watch. My dick thanks you."

If I had to kill my brother ahead of schedule because Cannon was thinking with his dick, I was going to rip it off. Slowly.

"Nobody saw you, did they?"

"Really? That's what you ask after what I just said."

He should be grateful he was far away from me at the moment.

"Congratulations. You got off. So did I. So did half the club, I'm sure. Now, are you positive Piotr didn't catch you?"

His laughter filled my ear. "Please. I've been fucking around with girls in public since I was thirteen and haven't been caught yet. Boy, for a dude who just got laid you seem awful tense. Maybe I should ask if everything is OK with you."

The urge to reach through the phone and strangle him was growing stronger by the second. Not that he didn't have a point. Ever since Brandy told me it was only a nightmare, I'd been on edge. Of all the lies she'd told, that one bugged me the most. Why would she want to protect the person who'd hurt her?

Maybe she feared what I'd do to them. She knew I was a predator. It was right there in her eyes—the uncertainty tinged with a careful kind of respect. The way one might view a panther. But there was no way she could know what I was capable of, that I lacked the ability to care about the things I'd done, or those around me. If she did, she'd have run from my bedroom this morning, not let me fuck her tight little cunt. Twice.

I'd hoped her apartment might give me some much-needed answers, because unless I resorted to torture, they wouldn't be coming from her. She was going to make me figure out this puzzle on my own. A part of me even respected her for it, but that didn't mean I wouldn't make her pay. No, I'd be taking out my frustrations on her willing body.

“Uh, Hunter, you still there, man?” Cannon asked, disrupting my wayward thoughts before they turned X rated.

“Yeah. The club is fine. We have church in”—I looked down at my watch—“a couple of hours. Anything you want me to report?” I added dryly, “Aside from a golf cart blow job.”

“Damn, I almost forgot why I called you. When we got back from the golf course, I was sneaking back into the house and overheard your sister talking to someone. I was going to mind my own business, I swear, until she said she would suck his dick. Before you get pissed, I was only going to peek around the corner to get a look at the dude. If she was sucking off a rival or something, that might be important.”

Fuck. It might not be Piotr who killed him, but me.

“Anyway, there was no dude. She was having phone sex right there in the kitchen. At first it was sexy, but then things took a weird turn. She started talking about your Mafia shit, what do you call it, again?”

“Braterstwo,” I said through clenched teeth.

I wasn't sure which was more disturbing—knowing my little sister had phone sex or that Cannon had listened in. I'd let the fact he thought it was sexy go, otherwise Ryder would have to kick me out of the club for killing his little humanitarian project. Slowly and painfully.

“Yeah, that shit. She said she was going to laugh when her brothers destroyed each other over control of the Brat-whatever. Then a short dude in an apron walked in and started muttering about the quality of the potatoes, so she left the kitchen. Want me to keep tabs on her when I'm not watching fuckface?”

Bea was born into this world. She knew better than to run her mouth. That mistake, especially right now when our position within the Braterstwo was tenuous, could cost all of us our lives. And for what? To impress a paramour.

Did she not understand that if neither Piotr nor I survived she would be left unprotected? Bea was a Kowalczyk, a survivor, but she didn't stand a chance in hell of holding on to the Braterstwo. The men would never follow her, at least not without a fuck-ton of bloodshed or a powerful man they trusted by her side. So, not only would our enemies be gunning for her, but the Braterstwo would also send a cleanup crew out.

That was why I'd made the arrangement with her that I had. To protect us both. Not only hadn't she upheld her part of the bargain, but now she'd put me in a hell of a position with the club. But that wasn't on Cannon to deal with, it was all on me.

“I can handle my sister, finding out what Piotr's up to is more important.”

“Ok. I’ll call you when I have something.”

After I pocketed my phone, I stood there, staring down at the lone gaming controller in the center of her coffee table. There were at least four at the club, not that I’d ever touched one, and that one controller spoke volumes.

For shits and giggles, I turned on her TV to see the last thing she watched. Fuck me. She was an animal show watching loner whose pussy wrapped around my cock beautifully.

Now I was more determined than ever to figure out what was going on with Brandy and make the one who hurt her pay.



When it came to coffee, I had the nose of a bloodhound. Just not for the drivel my sister had tried to slide across the bar top this morning while I sat there picking at a muffin. That stuff wasn't even worthy of keeping a trucker awake. No, I was talking about being able to spot premier roasted goodness from a mile away. The kind of coffee that had a fancy Italian name and came with whipped cream.

My nostrils flared, instantly alerted to the sweet, nutty aroma wafting in the air. As I swiveled in my chair, Stella came into the lobby of the shop with two cups in her hand.

"My hero." I made a gimme motion with my outstretched hands. "I don't even care whether you give me the americano or the macchiato."

She stopped just short of me, teasing me with the goodness in her hands to examine each cup. One brow lifted in question when she realized neither one was marked on the side. Technically, I could have craned my neck and read the initials on the top of the lids, but I hadn't needed to. My nose knew which was which.

"I'm tempted to fuck with you right now for looking like a crackhead, but I'd be afraid of you shanking me

with the letter opener on your desk over a cup of coffee.”

Her honey eyes sparkled, her dimple a deep groove in her cheek as she handed over the americano. Setting it on the desk, I peeled back the lid and blew on it. No way was I waiting for it to cool down. I needed my fix, and I needed it now.

The first drop hit my tongue, and it was heaven in a Styrofoam cup. A warm, sweet symphony of creamy caramel that made my taste buds stand up and take notice. Folger’s wasn’t lying when they said it was the best part of waking up. There was only one thing I could think of that was better to wake up to than coffee, and my cheeks heated at the memory.

“You gonna fuck that coffee or drink it?” A dribble of coffee escaped my lips at her comment, and she chuckled, watching as I used a finger to wipe off my chin. “That blush of yours is freaking adorable.”

“Thank you. I think?”

As soon as the last part left my mouth, I regretted it. Stella was one of the few people I felt comfortable around. She’d just caught me off guard. Nobody teased me quite the way Stella did. Maybe that was why it was my favorite thing about her.

“Forget I said that. I don’t know why I’m being weird today.”

She flopped down in the chair across from me, her feet propped up on my desk as she took a sip of her coffee. Today her blond hair was twisted into a messy bun on the top of her head, a bandanna keeping any loose strands in place. There was a spot of grease on the fitted white T-shirt she wore underneath her gray coveralls that made my lip curve up in the corner.

“Eh, no biggie.” She gave me a lopsided grin and her eyes did that sparkling thing that meant she was about to make me blush. “I’ve heard good dick will make you do some weird shit.”

A snort bubbled out of me, and I looked down at my coffee, not really sure what to say. I'd intended to keep whatever this was with Hunter to myself, but I realized that this might be my only chance to talk about him. Hunter was not only my anomaly, but he also part of a federal investigation.

Something about being the only one to know I'd felt tingles rippling up my spine like you read about in romance books made it seem less real. Like whenever I walked away from here it would all be erased. As painful as it was to think about how it would all end, it was even more gut wrenching to have to pretend that none of it had ever happened. That it meant nothing, when in reality, it was everything.

"I..."

"Oh. My. God. I was just messing with you. Never in a million years did I actually think you'd fuck Hunter. But you totally did, didn't you?"

Her pale pink lips parted, her cup suspended in the air just below them. She watched me with wide eyes and words caught in my throat, which was completely stupid because it was actually one of the few things I didn't have to lie about.

"Yes." The word rushed out like a breath of air from my lips and instantly it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

"You weren't even going to tell me either. A fine slap in the face that is after I argued with Tweak earlier this morning on your behalf. He said he'd heard you scream Hunter's name, and I told him he should be more worried about Hunter bleeding out because he was missing his dick. That it wasn't like that."

Heat suffused my cheeks even though I knew someone might have heard me. Whenever I saw the guys now, I'd no doubt turn a delightful shade of red before booking it for the door. What I didn't understand was why Stella thought he'd be missing an appendage. An

appendage I'd once feared and now wondered how I was going to live without it.

“What made you think that?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I'm not an idiot. The day you came here, I saw the look on your face when you said you'd help around the club. Why do you think I suggested you work down here?”

Damn. She'd seen what my sister never had. The crack in my façade. A downright dangerous prospect, considering the situation. Still, I admired her for sticking her neck out for a perfect stranger.

“Then Hunter had to erase my good deed by insisting you stay in his room.” She looked down at her coffee like it held the answers to all life's greatest mysteries. “It wasn't until after Valentina stepped in and I saw how you reacted to him I knew you'd be all right.”

When she looked up, sorrow tugged at my heart. She seemed so lost. Broken in a different way than me, but broken nonetheless. It was something I understood well.

“Just promise me something.”

“Anything.” The words were past my lips before I even thought about it.

“I don't care if he has the most beautiful nine-inch dick you've ever seen, under no circumstances are you to get dickmatized and wind up like me. Still obsessed over a man who left without looking back. Hell, my pussy is like an abandoned Wild West set, complete with sand and tumbleweeds. It's fucking pitiful.”

She groaned. “Christ, bitch. The least you could do is throw me a bone and tell your face to lie to me about how great the sex was.”

Setting my coffee down, I leaned over the desk, checking to be sure the hallway was empty. When I sat back down, I lowered my voice like I was getting ready to spill state secrets. Hell, they might be easier to keep inside than what I was about to reveal.

My fingers stilled on my leg as I choked out, “I’ve never had a, you know. Before.”

“Get the fuck out of here.” She sat forward, setting her own coffee on the edge of the desk. “Like not even by yourself with a rabbit?”

“No.” I hissed, my cheeks no doubt crimson at this point.

“This is worse than I thought.” She sat back, looking pensive. “You’re totally screwed.”

“I am?”

“Please, I bet you’re thinking about fucking him right now, aren’t you?”

Now that she mentioned it, I couldn’t help the highlight reel of carnal delights from flashing behind my eyelids. What could I say? Hunter was as addicting as any drug out there, maybe more so. Balls. I really was screwed. What the hell was I going to do when everything went to hell in a handbasket?

With a sigh, she stood and picked up her cup from the corner of the desk. “Fine. If you insist on following in my footsteps, at least promise me you’ll make it worth the pain?”

The memories I made now were all I would have to hold on to later when the crippling agony of loss set in. Only time would tell if they would be worth it or not, but I’d keep this promise to Stella. For the both of us.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” I said, making an X over my heart with my finger.

Stella laughed and shook her head at me before walking back down the hallway. Once she was out of sight, I took out my phone and googled what the hell a rabbit was. After scrolling through several pictures and reading a few reviews, I quickly put my phone down on the desk.

That was what I had to look forward to. A bed filled with memories and a plastic dick that had a piece shaped like rabbit ears. Stella was right. I was totally screwed.



Ryder's dark eyes followed me as I entered the room where we held church and slipped into the empty seat beside Beast. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the wooden table, and raised an eyebrow. It was hard to say what was going on inside his head. He could have been wondering why I ghosted the club for the last couple of hours or if it could have something to do with Brandy screaming her head off this morning. Frankly, I didn't want to talk about either, so I kept my mouth shut.

He nodded his head, a smirk on his face, as he banged the gavel against the wooden table to start the meeting. Fuck. It was definitely about Brandy, but Ryder wasn't stupid. He knew me well enough to know that silence was the only answer he was going to get.

It wasn't that I was shy. Everyone in this room had seen me fuck women around the clubhouse. Hell, sometimes we even shared them. None of us really gave a shit as long as she was willing and not already spoken for. There were strict rules when it came to old ladies—and for good reason. Nothing threw shit into chaos quite like guns being drawn between two brothers.

I might have wanted them to hear her scream, but that didn't mean I wouldn't kill anyone who so much as leered in her direction. She wasn't the garden variety

skank, or a sweet butt, and I wouldn't pretend that she was.

Brandy had been mine, and only mine, from the second she walked through the door. None of them would ever hear about how beautiful she looked when she came apart, or that despite her lack of experience she fucked like she was made for that purpose alone. That shit was only for me to know.

Ryder threw the gavel down on the table in front of him, the smirk falling from his face. Whenever church was in session, he usually kept things strictly business, saving the bullshit for either before we started or after we were done.

“What do you have for us, Hunter?”

“Cannon's report of my brother's activities has confirmed my suspicions that not much has changed. He's still the asshole that would rather fuck around and spend our father's money than run a complex criminal organization such as the Braterstwo. Unfortunately, this presents an added layer of danger to the club that I had hoped to avoid.”

My eyes wandered around the table, briefly touching on each man, before I settled on Ryder. “Should Piotr come into power, and not be strong enough to hold on to it, it'll only be a matter of time before the brotherhood will have no choice but to act. They will come in and decimate not only my family, but every person tied to us.”

“Wait a second,” Gunner said, holding up a hand. “I thought your father was the Braterstwo.”

“The brotherhood is more than just one man or one city. It might have started in Poland, but it's grown into a complex criminal network steeped in violent traditions with strict rules that, if broken, are punishable by death. There are Braterstwo leaders in every corner of the globe. My father was a high-ranking member of the organization, thanks to his marriage to my mother, but

that won't matter if Piotr spends more than he makes or doesn't adhere to the code."

I sighed. "Should we not deal with the threat Piotr is holding over our heads in time, I'll be killed before the cell door closes behind me. Once I'm dead, I'm afraid the rest of you might not be safe from the brotherhood's reach. Even in prison."

Gunner stood up and began to pace, his hands running through his hair, tugging on the ends. "And you didn't think to mention any of this shit to us before now?"

"The less you knew about the brotherhood and my involvement in it, the safer it was for all concerned. I never wanted the club and the Braterstwo to cross paths, but my brother's actions combined with Cannon overhearing a phone conversation of my sister's, left me no choice. She never mentioned the club, but she did reference Piotr and I fighting for control to an outsider. Should that information become common knowledge, it will further weaken my family's position."

"What exactly does that mean," Ryder asked, a bite to his voice I'd never heard before. He was about to get a crash course in how my world worked. It was going to be a rude eye-opener for the man who refused to use a politician's family against him.

"You've seen the pictures in the paper of my father's garish displays. He got off on torturing rats, federal agents, and enemies alike, dumping their bodies for all the world to see. Hadn't you ever wondered how he could get away with it?"

Ryder winced, but nodded his head. Sometimes I wished I'd been burdened with a heart like his. It wasn't exactly pure, but he had plenty of noble convictions he stood by. I hoped for his sake he could set them aside, just this once, so they wouldn't get him killed.

"No branch of law enforcement knows the full extent of the reach, power, and capabilities the Braterstwo possesses. That's why it's expressly forbidden to discuss

the brotherhood with those who haven't passed the trials and taken the oath. If the little I've told you today ever left this room, it would mean my death. But I couldn't leave you defenseless when it's my fault you're in danger to begin with. Believe me, if I thought there was a way to kneel on the sword, take the hit for all of you, I would."

Beast's chair brushed against mine as he angled himself to face me. "This might be a stupid question, but how is this your fault, exactly? Sure, a heads up when you joined the club would have been nice. Hi. My name is Hunter. I'm an unfeeling assassin with the ability to find shit and a genius level IQ. There's only one minor problem. My old man is a part of a crazy criminal underworld, the likes of which is straight out of a movie, and my brother is an asshole bent on world domination."

"Not in the cute way, either, like the mouse on that cartoon," Tweak piped up, his usual careless attitude in place even now.

"You're thinking of the Brain," Dagger supplied from beside him. He leaned back in his chair and ran a hand down the graying center of his beard. Oddly enough, the hair on either side of his mustache and beard remained jet-black. It made his gray streak that much more pronounced. "Beast has a point. There was no way Hunter could have known when his father would die or that this would happen when he did."

"Even if he saw this coming, would it have made any difference?" Colt asked, his chair slid back and his elbows on his knees. "If it weren't for Hunter, Valentina's father would have already taken us all out, anyway. At least Hunter warned us about the possible fuck-ton of trouble knocking at our door and didn't roll out without a word, hoping to save his own skin."

"And to think, I was worried Diego would have all the fun in Mexico while I rotted away here in exile." Marco's dark eyes gleamed, the cunning and ruthless nature he normally kept contained rising to the surface. "There is nothing to be done about your brother until he's

no longer of any use to us, but tell me about this sister of yours. Can you talk to her? Bring her to heel.”

“If I can’t, then she becomes my problem to take care of.”

I let the threat hidden in my words sink in. My sister, my problem. Besides, our fates were intertwined now, whether we wanted them to be or not. Their father would have taken Valentina out with the club had I not helped Diego take over the cartel. If we hadn’t succeeded, the club wouldn’t have been the only ones dying by Miguel’s hand.

Marco inclined his head, his eyes searching mine, before he finally nodded. “It’s just as well you’re handling the Braterstwo threat because the CIA just came through with the old file we requested. Diego said he would have it in the next hour and forward it to me. Should make for some illuminating reading.”

“Marco,” Ryder said, drawing Marco’s dark eyes to him. “Dagger, Pops, Mad Dog, and Tweak’s father were all founding members of the club. Have them go over that file with you. One of them may catch something you might overlook because you don’t know the club’s history the way they do. Everyone else cover shipments and anything Hunter may need.”

Ryder pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers as he asked, “Gunner, how are we on guns and ammo?”

Gunner had stopped pacing, his back against the far wall, his body still but tightly coiled. His demons were unraveling. Not a bad thing if I had a target for him to aim for, but the fact of the matter was I didn’t. That left him to wander his own headspace, but there wasn’t much I could do about that until either my brother or the Braterstwo made their move. There could be no mistakes going forward with Piotr, and that included taking him out before we knew the cards he held in his hand.

“We’d be flush under normal circumstances, but we won’t have enough to go to war with the brotherhood. I’ll call some buddies of mine and see what sort of heavy firepower I can acquire along with added rounds for the sniper rifles. Might also want to have Val on rooftop shifts with me instead of with you at the club. She’s the best we have next to me.”

“I can work the club with Ryder,” Beast grunted from beside me. “Gunner’s right. We need to see any threats coming at us before they knock on the door.”

Ryder’s finger tapped against the table as he spoke. “I don’t like Val being in the line of fire. Not with these guys.”

“She’ll do whatever she wants no matter what you tell her,” Marco spat, the words like venom as they left his mouth, his hand running through the tangles of his dark hair. “Trust me. I’ve been eliminating threats to my sister for years, and even now, she still refuses to listen. You’re better off letting her play sniper. Otherwise, when shit hits the fan, you’ll be chasing your asshole all over town trying to find her because I guarantee you, she won’t be where she’s supposed to be.”

Even now, she refused to listen. An interesting little slip of the tongue. He obviously considered his sister to already be in some sort of danger, and whatever it was, it worried him more than the impending specter of the brotherhood. He knew something, something he wasn’t sharing with the club. I’d stake my life on it.

Ryder ran a hand over his face and grabbed the gavel, banging it on the table. “All right. We all know Marco might have a point with Val, so Gunner and she will take shifts on the roof to cover us on the off chance the brotherhood makes a move against the club. In the meantime, everyone else has their marching orders.”

He threw the gavel down and stormed off. Everyone looked after him for a minute, silence filling the room. Ryder had a depth of emotion for his woman that I would

never possess, so I could only imagine what was running through his mind. If anyone ever touched a hair on Brandy's head, they were as good as dead, even if it was the last thing I ever did.

"That went well," Tweak said with something between a sigh and a laugh, his dark eyes staring out the door.

The guys began to stand up and file out of the room, but Tweak never moved. He sat there, staring off into space, his brows drawing together, until just the two of us remained. I wasn't even sure why I sat there watching his knuckles turn white against the wood of the table.

Tweak was normally the epitome of calm, cool, and collected, always making a joke out of every situation. Ryder envied him his ability to do that, but I didn't. It was a very convincing act, I'd give him that, but hiding behind his dimples all the time had to be about as exhausting as faking emotions you couldn't feel.

"Something's up with Marco." He looked over at me. "And don't even try to pretend you don't know exactly what the fuck I'm talking about either."

No one would ever expect Tweak to have this level of insight because he played the role of selfish playboy to perfection. Even I forgot sometimes that there was more going on beneath the surface than he let on. Maybe I could use it to my advantage.

"I wouldn't dream of it. Though, I am wondering if you plan on bringing it to the attention of Ryder and the others."

He leaned his head back against the chair and sighed. "If I do, whatever is happening will only get covered up and I can't take that chance. Val, I feel solid about, but that doesn't mean her brother isn't a snake in the grass. He's still Diego's spy and confidant, despite his supposed exile. Outside of his loyalty to his sister, which I don't doubt, he has no reason not to fuck the club should the need arise."

Everything he said was true, and all things I had already considered. He could just as easily be a worthy adversary as a formidable ally. Only time would tell which one he would become. For now, I at least had my own spy. One Marco would never see coming.

I stood up and looked down at Tweak. “You heard what Ryder said. He wants you to scour that file with Marco. We’ll kill two birds with one stone and bring the rest of the club in if we find something.”

“Hunter,” Tweak said, stopping me in the doorway. When I looked over my shoulder at him, his signature cockeyed grin was back in place. “I’d like to live long enough to see the club have its first ever criminal kingpin sitting in the VP’s chair. So, try not to fuck this up.”

My middle finger rubbed the back of my head as I walked out, his laughter following me from the room. Asshole. See, I had a sense of humor.



“You’ve been busy, no?” Marco’s heavily accented, stilted voice came from somewhere in the shadows beneath the stairs.

“Holy balls!” My heart pounded, and I sagged against the wall hoping if I pressed a hand against my chest that it would magically slow my racing heart. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you it’s rude to sneak up on a lady?”

He chuckled, the sound ominous, a shiver moving down my spine. My eyes flicked between the safety of the garage behind me where Stella and Tweak worked just a few feet away and the top of the stairs. Stairs had never been my friend, so with my back still against the wall, I moved down a step.

“I’m afraid Papa didn’t give her the chance to spend much time with me. He thought it more prudent to keep me busy with endeavors that would strengthen my brother’s position.”

Marco appeared from between two bikes parked beside the stairs leading up to the clubhouse. No wonder I hadn’t seen him at first, he wore a black T-shirt, cargo pants, and boots, his jet-black hair shielding part of his face from view. Yeah, him lying in wait for me in the

clubhouse's garage wasn't creepy or intimidating at all. What was up with this guy?

He had it out for me, I just wish I knew why. One reason came to mind, but I quickly dismissed it. If he knew why I was here, someone from the club would have already killed me.

"Always the bridesmaid, never the bride," I asked, goading him a little. If he could play his twisted game of hide and seek that my heart still hadn't recovered from, then I could certainly get in a jab.

His dismissive snort graded on my nerves. "Hardly. I'd much rather be a ghost than deal with the political bullshit my brother does."

My foot touched the cement floor, and I breathed a sigh of relief. There was no guarantee that I wouldn't still go sprawling if I had to run, but at least now I wasn't impeded by the stairs. Only my clumsiness.

"I can't say I blame you. The glare of the spotlight is harsh."

He flashed straight white teeth, the corner of his eyes crinkling. It wasn't anything like the smiles he'd given me the first time I met him. Back when he'd been playing a part, trying to hide the predator that lurked inside. I bet his handsome face got him into all kinds of doors.

"You and I are very similar, are we not? Both of us with siblings destined to bask in the spotlight while we prefer the shadows."

Marco stalked closer while I took a step back, and he stopped and put his hands in his pockets. But he wasn't fooling me with his attempt to appear nonthreatening. There was no masking that the man exuded violence. How I'd ever thought any different was still a mystery to me. I chalked it up to being out of my element.

"That's the thing about you and me. We're often overlooked, discounted, tossed aside. It allows us to slip

in undetected.” He cocked his head to the side. “Wouldn’t you say?”

I wasn’t sure what kind of game he was playing, but I wanted no part of it. Even a noob like me knew better than to admit to anything. If he could prove who I worked for, he would have already jabbed his blade through my heart rather than dancing around me, waiting for an opening. He wouldn’t get one from me.

“You’re lucky. No matter how hard I try not to get noticed by men, I have yet to succeed. Between Hunter’s advances, Tweak bugging me for a *Call of Duty* rematch, and you lurking around the stairs waiting to ambush me, I dare say I can’t even go to the bathroom in peace.”

This smile was warmer than the last. Not only did it crinkle the corners of his eyes, but it actually seemed to penetrate their darkness. If I weren’t immune to the opposite sex, or rather, mostly immune, I’d probably be swooning right about now. But I was, and I didn’t know if a playful Marco was a good thing or not. Knowing my luck, it would be the nail in my coffin.

“You’re a most interesting creature, Brandy. So full of contradictions. I think I’m starting to see what Hunter has from the very beginning.”

He whistled a cheery little tune and kept his hands in his pockets as he moved closer. I shrank against the wall, struggling to decide whether I should stay or run, when he brushed past me and jogged up the stairs. Still whistling his merry tune.

Holy hell. Talk about Jekyll and Hyde. Either that or this dude was totally off his rocker. Which, of course, meant I’d caught his attention. Maybe that was why this kept happening to me. Crazy attracts crazy. And I’d known for quite some time that I was far from normal.

Blowing out a breath, I trudged up the steps in search of my sister. Before Marco had waylaid me, I’d been on the way up to catch her before she left. He’d just given my mission an added sense of urgency. In my heart

of hearts, I'd always known the strip club was the answer to my problem. I guess I'd just been stalling, hoping against hope that the garage would end up being my salvation.

Today, that pipedream had met its brutal end. Every record, invoice, receipt, timecard, and payment had been checked. The garage was on the up and up. Part of me was relieved, even though it would have been simpler if I had found something, because that meant Stella was in the clear. My chest tightened at how much she was going to hate me for sending her father to prison, but there was nothing I could do to keep him off their radar. However, once the sharks started circling, I'd ensure they never bit Stella.

My sister was right where she should be, humming behind the bar as she put away clean glasses. Her routine within the club was predictable, almost boring, which was laughable when you thought about it. How I wished she'd thrown me another curveball by being somewhere else, kinda like when my boss told me she was with The Deviants. It seemed no matter where I turned today, I just couldn't catch a break.

Her smile was brilliant when she turned and saw me, but today it only made me feel like shit ground into the bottom of a sneaker. Nothing could make me feel clean, whole. Not even Hunter.

“What are you doing up here so early?”

My head felt as heavy as my heart, and I sat on a barstool, leaned to the side, and supported my head on my hand. There was something sticky against my elbow, but I didn't have it in me to care. It was time to get this over with. Time for my nightmare to begin. I kept reminding myself that there was nothing any of those leering, handsy men could do to me. That I was already broken. It wasn't working, though.

“I want you to take me with you tonight.”

Her blinding smile fell, and she pursed her lips. “Why on earth would you want to go to a strip club?”

“To earn a quick buck,” I said with what I hoped was a nonchalant shrug.

Her nose wrinkled like she smelled something bad, and I sat there feeling like I did the time mom grilled me about the money missing from her purse. Of course, I took the blame for it. The alternative was further crushing my mother with the reality that her high school sweetheart was a sorry excuse for a man besides being a drunk.

“How much do you need?”

“I’m sorry what?”

“I already told you I had money saved up. Just tell me how much you need, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I see what’s happening here. You think I’m not pretty enough to earn it the same way you do.”

It was a low blow, using my insecurities against her. Part of me hoped she’d just be straight with me. Tell me what I already knew. That I was the ugly, broken twin.

“What?!”

Her face turned red, and all her muscles tensed up. For a minute, I wondered if she was going to explode. This was a side of her I’d definitely never seen before. To be honest, I didn’t know she had it in her. Though I wasn’t sure why she was getting worked up. She had to know she was the prettier twin, everyone else certainly did.

“You take that back right this minute!” Cherry stamped her foot. “You know that’s not why I offered to give you the money.”

“What the fuck is going on here?”

It wasn’t bad enough that Cherry was threatening to throw a wrench in my plans. Plans that made me gag at the thought of them but were essential to getting her clear

of the mess she'd gotten herself in. Now Hunter had to show up and witness my humiliation. Fuck my life.

I turned to him, hoping to downplay how badly I needed this to happen. "Cherry's making a big deal out of me wanting to work with her tonight."

His light eyes slid down my body, his jaw clenching. Why did his disapproval have to sting this much? You'd think by now I'd be used to falling short when being compared to Cherry.

My stomach bottomed out at the realization he was about to say I wasn't sexy enough to be a stripper. I panicked. That was the only explanation I had for the word vomit that fell out of my mouth.

"Don't all guys have a twin fantasy. The club would make a killing with both Cherry and I on stage together."

His mouth thinned into a tight line before he bit out, "Not me."

I was debating what he meant by that when all of a sudden he was in my space, towering over me.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear. You need money, you come to me. You do not step one foot inside that strip club unless you want me to slaughter every man there for daring to look at what's mine."

Holy balls! He must have short-circuited my brain because there was no part of what he just said that should turn me on. It was totally, unequivocally, fucked-up. Yet, here I was, staring up into his light eyes, eating that shit up like he was chocolate ice cream, and I was on my period.

He cocked his head to the side. "Maybe you need to be reminded who you strip for. That I'm the one who owns your body. I've shown you what happens to good girls."

A shiver slid down my spine at the word good girl, like he'd conditioned my body to respond to those words.

“Now, it’s time I show you what happens to the bad ones.”

Wait. What?

The steel bands of his arms wrapped around my waist as he hoisted me out of the chair and threw me over his shoulders. Women’s rights and all that jazz demanded I be indignant, that I order him to put me down. Secretly, his actions made me giddy until he walked away from the bar. My sister stood there, eyes wide, lips parted, watching him carry me toward the stairs.

As she disappeared from view, I wondered how I was going to look her in the face tomorrow without turning eight shades of red. Worse yet, how in the hell was I supposed to get the dirt I needed without stepping foot inside the strip club because I had no doubt that Hunter would follow through on his threat.



A little thing like Brandy had got the drop on me when men had been trying unsuccessfully for years. In a matter of days, she'd unraveled my sense of control and taken away my ability to think clearly. As fucked-up as this sounds, she could put a gun to my throat right now, and I'd still fuck her senseless. Did that mean I had any intention of staying away from my little liar? Fuck no.

Anticipation crawled up my spine as my boots slid over the wood in the hallway. The key turned in the lock and I felt her body jerk. She didn't know what was coming, what I did to bad girls. She was about to get up close and personal with the dark play I was so fond of.

My hands molded to the luscious ass I'd been meaning to bite as I let her slide down the front of my body. From this angle, I could see the swell of her gorgeous tits rising and falling with each labored breath she took through the gap of the V-neck T-shirt she wore.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" She shuddered as I ran my nose along her neck, drinking in her floral scent. "Tie you to my bed, your legs splayed apart for my pleasure. You'll want to come, but I won't let you. Not even when you beg for it. And you will."

A tortured moan left her parted lips, the sound going straight to my already swollen cock. Her eyelashes fluttered for a second before the green strands around her irises came into view, her teeth biting into her full bottom lip. My thumb drifted along her lip to separate them. They were mine to torture.

Her breath was a hot kiss against my skin as she spoke. “You’re going to tie me up and not let me...”

My angel couldn’t even say the word come, and she already had my cock weeping for her. Sticking to my punishment might be tougher than I thought.

“Yes. Does that bother you?”

“No,” she said without hesitation, her eyes wide. “Just. Can I have a safe word or something? You know”—she looked down—“in case I freak out.”

My finger caressed along the side of her jaw, tilting her chin until she met my eyes. “Mój anioł, you command the devil, even while he punishes you. Ask me to cut down a thousand men for you and I would kill them all without blinking an eye. Want your enemies to grovel before you? Consider it done. But never think of yourself as powerless. Not even when I have you chained to my bed.”

“How do you always manage to do that?” she asked, a touch of awed wonder in her voice.

“Do what?”

“Make me come alive.”

Her words were a conundrum, one I’d have to solve when I had more blood flow to the right head. The only thing I could focus on now was my desire to torture her heated flesh as she twisted and turned underneath me, begging for me to allow her to come.

My fingers trailed a path down to the hem of her shirt, bunching it in my hand before lifting it over her head. Lace stretched over her pebbled nipples, hiding them from my view until I unclasped the front enclosure.

Her tits bounced free, twin peaks of creamy perfection begging to bare my mark. All in due time.

She stood there, eyes wide but focused on me, as I slid her pants and underwear down her legs, baring her perfect pink pussy. I'd never been the praying sort, but I'd happily get on my knees and worship at the altar of her cunt. It was as if it were made to give me pleasure, my personal playground, a place where I finally felt free of the coldness that clung to me like a shroud.

My hand pressed her backward until her legs hit the edge of the bed, her lips parting on a gasp as she fell onto it. I yanked open the drawer of the bedside table and found what I wanted underneath a package of zip ties.

She leaned back against the bed, a soft gasp spilling from her lips when I bent over and pulled out the knife strapped to my ankle. It cut through the length of softly woven rope like butter, each piece long enough to secure her to the bedposts while still allowing a comfortable range of motion.

Her eyes darkened, the color more moss than gold now, as she watched me tie the knots that bound one of her wrists. God, my angel was a vision, and both of her arms weren't even bound yet. I made my way around the bed, carefully securing each of her limbs, before I stepped back to admire my handiwork.

Sheer perfection. Her cheeks were rosy, the golden strands of her hair cascading around her head like a waterfall, the pearls I loved so much resting against the base of her throat, and her chest rising and falling in even measured breaths. Lava filled my veins as my eyes wandered down her body, planning where I would mark her. When I reached the juncture of her thighs, I stopped, almost coming in my jeans at the sight before me.

Her wet pussy glistened in the fading afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. She was glorious. A wet dream come to life. If I had any artistic talent at all,

I would sit here and paint her. She'd be my own Madonna.

“Hunter.” My eyes traveled up to her face, watching as her tongue darted out to lick her pink lips. “You’re... staring. At my, well, you know. While you’re fully clothed.”

“Not for long.” My eyes wandered back down to her naked pussy as I tossed my cut onto the chair. “I plan on tormenting every inch of the creamy skin I’ve been admiring.”

She inhaled sharply, the scent of her desire teasing my nostrils as she shifted on the bed. Her eyes tracked the progress of my T-shirt as I lifted it up and over my head, the heat of her stare on my chest and abs burning me. A soft feminine gasp fell from her lips as I freed my cock from the confines of my jeans and damn if the sound didn’t make him strain toward her.

My entire body was hard and aching to fill her. To fuck her into oblivion until neither of us could move. But there was so much I wanted to do to her before that happened.

Her head tilted to the side, wisps of hair that had covered part of her face now cascading over her shoulder as I crawled up the bed. The second my lips touched her pussy it was as if she were being shocked. Her head tilted back, lips parted on a wordless cry, back bowed, and tits jiggled, the rope pulling taut against her limbs. I’d never seen anything more beautiful.

After a minute, her body relaxed against the bed, her chest heaving and her legs shaking. That was when I inserted one of my thick digits past her slick folds. Her entire sex clenched around my curled finger, her bonds stretching tight again as her body bowed from the stimulation to both her G-spot and her clit.

“Holy Balls!”

My angel was a sight to behold when she was in the throes of pleasure, and as much as I wanted to watch her come, I couldn't. Not until we were clear on who owned her. The pitiful whimper she let out at the loss of my finger almost made me change my mind. Almost.

She shivered as cool air brushed over her barren sex. Glistening. Ready for the taking. She didn't complain or say even a word. Just that pitiful whimper. Looked like I needed to up my game.

Spreading her sex, my tongue lapped up her juices. She tasted as sweet as she smelled, and I doubted I'd ever get enough of her flavor. I was addicted from the first burst that hit my tongue. Hell, eating her pussy just might be my new favorite hobby.

"I need," she whimpered, her head shaking back and forth, her sentence left unfinished.

My angel never failed to surprise me. She caved way sooner than I would have given her credit for. Too bad for her, I wasn't done with her yet. I backed off again, and this time she rewarded me with a snort. Now we were getting somewhere.

My eyes peeked over the top of her mound as I dove back in, my tongue continuing to swirl around her bundle of nerves. Her arms stretched taut, and her tits bounced in time, their peaks rigid and begging for attention. If there was a heaven, this moment was my version of it.

"Please," she panted, her body still twisting against her bonds. "I'll do anything."

Well, she did ask nicely this time. At least, that was what I told myself. It had nothing to do with my desire to feel her pussy cream all over on my tongue.

She'd been teetering on the edge for long enough that when I inserted two fingers at once and curled them as I fucked her, she exploded on my tongue. It was pure nirvana to taste her, watch as her back bowed and her bonds tightened, hear her hoarse voice screaming my

name. I might even be willing to let her get away with thinking she could give other men a show. At least temporarily.

The skin of her stomach was soft and warm under my lips, the muscles in her stomach dipping as I moved up her still shaking body. Her little gasps and sighs were the backdrop to the symphony my tongue was painting on her skin. Now and then, I would stop to nip at her skin with my teeth, just hard enough to leave behind a mark, but not hard enough to do any permanent damage.

She let out a moan. Every. Single. Time. They were my favorite. Ok, that was a lie, hearing her scream my name when she came was my favorite, but her moans were a real close second.

Her arms stretched taut as she whimpered, shoving her beautiful tits further into my mouth. My teeth worked her hard nub of flesh, the sting of my bite quickly soothed away by the lap of my tongue. The little breathless sounds of pleasure escaping from her lips were driving me to the brink of madness. My hard cock wept against the top of her mound, demanding entrance.

Sinking into her wet heat, feeling her wrapped around me, holding me tight, was suddenly all I could focus on. I couldn't ever remember being this hard before in my life, wanting a woman the way I wanted her. Not wanted, needed. It went well beyond want.

Her pussy tightened around the head of my cock as I sank inside her, a tingle already starting in my spine. Fuck, she felt good. I looked down, watching as her pussy stretched around my cock, more and more of me disappearing inside of her.

A hoarse moan broke free from her chest, the sound a mix of lust and need, snapping the last of my control like a twig. My hips thrust forward, my cock filling her to the brim. Consumed, I pulled out, only to slam back in. Her pussy clamped down around me, her come coating

her thighs as she screamed my name, but it wasn't enough.

Over and over, I rammed my cock into her tight little channel, watching her head thrash from side to side on the pillow as her tits bounced. I wanted her to know who owned her pretty little pussy. Who made her come. Hours later, I wanted her sore pussy to be a constant reminder that she was mine.

Her moans and cries reached a fevered peak, and my balls grew tight knowing she was about to come again with me. With one last thrust, my cocked jerked, and I emptied inside of her, the sound of my name being ripped from her chest only heightening the pleasure.



Hunter had messed up every one of my carefully laid plans, starting with my resolve not to get into bed with the Mafia. Now, as I trudged downstairs to my work haven, I contemplated my options. If I went to the strip club, despite Hunter's warning, I'd probably get noticed before I even had the chance to find their computer, let alone hack into it.

That only left sneaking into the club to get the job done, and that was problematic. Stella and Tweak would notice my absence during the day, and Hunter was a light sleeper. He'd probably drag me back to bed and punish me before I even reached the first set of stairs.

Goose bumps broke out along the flesh of my arms at the thought. Jesus, was I fucked-up. My sister's freedom hung in the balance, our lives were in danger, and here I was thinking with my lady parts. Again. I'd gone from a lack of sex drive to an overload. How had I let this happen? Things had gotten way out of hand, and if I didn't get my shit together soon, I'd get both of us killed.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard "Square Hammer" coming from the garage. Ghost was a favorite of mine, and flashes of the band's video played in my head as I walked down the hall.

The song reminded me of something Marco had said yesterday. He'd called himself a ghost, and a ghost's identity remained hidden. They could move around undetected. Pretty handy when your brother was the face of the cartel.

The brothers were opposites. Flip sides to the same coin who worked together, with no one being the wiser. Maybe I didn't need to worry about breaking into the strip club after all. If I could give the DEA the largest drug cartel in Mexico, they wouldn't need The Deviants. Sure, the club would be out of business, but that was better than them rotting away in jail.

I'd be marked as a traitor and have to enter the witness protection program alongside my sister. She'd be pissed, but safe. That was the important thing. Nothing would change with Hunter and me. We were doomed. He would hate me either way, but at least I'd have the comfort of knowing that I could spare him. That he was out there somewhere, walking around, free. Just not with me.



Brandy's old middle school blended seamlessly into its surroundings with its perfectly manicured lawn, rows of shrubs, and crop of trees that ran along the back side. Bark and forest colored brick seemed as far from natural as you could get to me, but I was no architect. Kids probably learned better in a sterile, conforming, bland environment like this.

The halls were quiet, kids already in their assigned classrooms. Tan linoleum floors gleamed underneath my combat boots and when I opened the glass door to the front office, the florescent light hit me like a ray of sunshine. A woman with a graying bun and a pinched face slid her glasses down her nose to stare at me. Smiling and sucking up weren't my bag of chips, and I instantly regretted not bringing Tweak along. He'd have this old broad singing like a canary in seconds.

Schools tended to freak out about guns being drawn, so I needed to use alternative methods. My face felt weird when I pasted on the most charming smile I could muster. God, how did Tweak do this shit all the time?

"Can I help you, young man?"

She was already on my nerves with her screechy voice, and I reminded myself that slitting her throat

wasn't an option.

“My wife, Brandy Smith, and her twin sister, Cherry, went to school here. I wanted to surprise her with a slideshow I've been working on for her birthday, and I was hoping you could fill in a few gaps.”

It was a hell of a lie, and I admit I even surprised myself by maintaining my fake-ass smile.

She raised a graying brow, and I bet she scared the shit out of the kids who went here. “We don't give out personal information.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement and twisted my head to the side. The woman frozen in the doorway reminded me of my girl even though physically they were worlds apart. It was all in how she carried herself. That mixture of shy and confident was rare, and I couldn't even tell you why I found it captivating. Hell, maybe Tweak was right, and I had a thing for librarians.

“I'm sorry for interrupting,” she murmured as she slowly backed away. “I'll just come back later.”

Miss Sour Puss rolled her eyes on the other side of the desk and if we weren't in such a busy public setting, I would slit her throat. For now, I'd settle for dropping my mask of civility and hearing her swift intake of breath before I turned toward the door.

My quarry was already speed walking down the hall with her head bent when I stepped into the hallway.

“Miss.” She kept going, and I cursed under my breath as I chased after her. “Miss.”

She sped up, the soles of her flats squeaking, her dark hair covering part of her face.

“I'm trying to surprise my wife, Brandy, for her birthday,” I tried again.

Maybe I was wrong about her and Brandy being similar. This woman was downright skittish, and there was no way for a man like me to appear nonthreatening. I

was about to turn around and try torturing the front desk lady when she stopped.

“Does your wife have a twin sister?”

Her soft, soothing voice fit her.

“Yes, Cherry. Do you know them?”

She nodded, her back still turned. “We were in the same grade.”

This couldn't have happened better if I'd planned it. Fuck old sour puss. All I had to do now was try not to scare this girl off. Which, I was afraid, might be easier said than done.

“That old battle-ax in the front office is a piece of work, isn't she? Wouldn't even answer a few questions about what my wife was like when she was younger for the slideshow I'm putting together.”

She snorted. “Ignore her. She's just bitter because the school is forcing her to retire this year.”

When she turned around, she wouldn't meet my eyes, but I took it as a good sign that she wasn't running off. Yet. Better start with something simple and unimportant. Warm her up to what I really wanted to know.

“Tell me. Was Cherry a cheerleader barbie in middle school too?”

Her twinkling laugh carried down the hall and I wished Tweak was here so I could tell him to suck my balls. No sense of humor, my ass.

“You could say that. Cherry must be popular at her kid's soccer games.”

Cherry had a restless energy about her that made it hard for me to picture her settled down with two kids and a minivan. She was more likely to be the aunt who randomly showed up, took the kids out for ice cream before dinner, then dropped them back off covered in

chocolate and hyper. Damn. That mental picture just gave me a chub.

I cleared my throat and discreetly tried to cover my zipper with my hand. “No husband or kids yet for Cherry.”

“Wow. I always thought Cherry would be the one to settle down, not Brandy.” She shifted her weight and played with the stack of papers in her hands. “Oh, dear. That sounded far less insulting in my head.”

“You’re fine,” I assured her, sensing that she was getting ready to bolt. “Cherry’s the more social of the two, so I can see why you might think that.”

“She was, I mean is, but that’s not why. Never mind. It’s not important.” The hand she used to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear shook. She must have noticed it at the same time I did, because she quickly lowered it to her side. “Brandy never pretended like I didn’t exist, so I’ll be happy to help you do something nice for her. Just make it quick because my planning period is about to end in a few minutes.”

Something was wrong here, and I had a feeling this woman had the answers I’d come for. If she thought I gave a fuck about her schedule, or that the end of her planning period would save her, she had shitty survival instincts. Even if I had to kidnap her, she would tell me what I wanted to know. How that happened was entirely up to her.

“When I came across some childhood photos in Brandy’s things, I couldn’t help but notice a pattern. In all the earlier photos, both girls smiled, but starting with the one that was taken in front of this school, only Cherry did. And I think you know why.”

Wide, started eyes met mine for a split second before she looked down again. “You’re not really here to put together a slideshow for Brandy, are you?”

“No. But if you want to help Brandy, and I think you do, you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

She snuck a fleeting glance up at me through her eyelashes, and I stood there, waiting for her decision. For her sake, I hoped she chose wisely.

“Are you even her husband?”

“Yes.” I hissed through clenched teeth.

It was a stupid lie, but really, what did it matter? Brandy was mine with or without a piece of paper, and I’d burn down this whole fucking school if I had to in order to get the answers I needed.

“The first day of Spanish class when they called out Cherry’s name, she said present. I knew right away that I was sitting next to Brandy and not Cherry because Cherry always said here. Nobody ever figured it out when they switched places except me. Like I told you before, Brandy didn’t ignore me the way everyone else did.”

For a woman who, I suspected, spent a large chunk of her life staring at the floor, she was highly observant.

“Brandy spent most of that block doing her math homework, not even listening to the teacher, and still aced the first test. She’d always been the more academically gifted of the two, but still. Even if she’d taken the class before as herself, there was no way she would be fluent enough to carry on a conversation with the teacher when the rest of us struggled to string together a sentence. So, I looked for her after classes ended for the day. To find out what her secret was.”

Her narrow shoulders folded in on themselves. “Now I wish I hadn’t. When I finally found her and saw her face as she left coach’s office, I knew what he’d done. Because he’d done the same thing to me.”

Jesus Christ. Middle school girls? Fuck that. His own daughter? Brandy and Cherry’s old man was a sick, twisted, perverted old cunt.

“Did you ever report what happened to you? What you saw?”

She flinched. “It would have been my word against his. Who was going to believe the handsome hometown football hero and beloved coach was molesting the weird girl, let alone his own daughter? And on school grounds? Nobody, that’s who.”

It seemed I’d be paying old daddy dearest a visit. Good thing I knew exactly where to find him.

“One person does.”

I turned around and hadn’t taken more than a few steps away when I heard her soft voice from behind me. “What are you going to do?”

“Make him pay.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I dug it out as I pushed in the metal center on the glass door. Bea’s name flashed on my screen, and I swiped to answer her call.

“What have you got for me?”

The same two idiots of my brother’s slumped down in the seats of their car, purposely looking anywhere but at me. They were total shit at their jobs and a part of me wanted to be an asshole and wave at them as I walked past.

“Hello to you too, dear brother. I’m not sure why you felt the need to leave me a message earlier. If Piotr had done something besides golf, work on his tan, and fuck girls, I would have said so. Would you like me to text you the next time he takes a shit?”

What the fuck kind of shit show was Piotr running? He couldn’t even be trusted to keep our sister out of trouble, let alone run the Braterstwo. My baby sister might have grown up, but she could check her attitude at the door. It was time for me to remind her of her responsibilities to this family.

“What I would like is for you to act like a fucking Kowalczyk before you get us all killed. Trying to clean up the mess that is our incompetent and power-hungry brother is bad enough, but I didn’t think I needed to worry about you. Let me remind you that if I die or go to jail, and Piotr fucks up, like we both know he will, that you die. There’s no escape from the Braterstwo and you for damn sure can’t run it if you can’t even keep your mouth shut.”

“What are you talking about?” she whisper hissed, a door closing behind her.

My eyes scanned the parking lot as I straddled my bike, searching for Marek’s son. He was much better at concealing himself than the other two idiots, but I should still be able to find him. It was odd that I couldn’t.

“Do you think Piotr is the only one with spies? You forget yourself, sister. Pick your side carefully, because it may be the last thing you ever do.”

“You want me to help you secure the Braterstwo, yet you dare to threaten me?”

Jesus. Was I the only one left in this family without a penchant for theatrics? I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath in so I wouldn’t be tempted to reach through phone and strangle her.

“Please, Bea, you know me better than that. I’m simply extending you the courtesy of a reminder. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not eat a bullet over my family’s stupidity.”

She breathed into the phone. Seethed, actually. Bea never could take being bested and there was nothing she could say to refute me. She needed to be reminded what was at stake, not only for herself, but for the rest of us. Unfortunately, that also now included the club.

“At one time I thought I did.”

A dial tone replaced the soft rasp of my sister’s voice, and I looked down at my phone. What the hell did

she mean by that? Whatever bug she had up her ass would have to be dealt with later. There were more pressing matters that needed my attention before I catered to the emotional whims of an eighteen-year-old girl. Besides, if things didn't go according to plan and I wound up dead, it wouldn't matter, anyway.

Shaking my head, I looked up, watching an SUV slowly drive past. Now this recent development was worthy of my attention. These men didn't stick out like a sore thumb, but nor were they here at this time of day to pick up or drop off a student. It seemed my brother had replaced Marek's son with some new goons. He must be growing bored with this game and sped up his timeline.



Marco wasn't lying when he called himself a ghost. No matter where I went on the dark web all I found was chatter about his late father, Miguel, and his brother, Diego. When I searched Mexico's public records, there was no birth certificate or immunization records for him. I even hacked into the posh private school they attended. There were photos and grades posted for Diego and Valentina, with Valentina clearly being an overachiever, but, again, nothing for Marco. Whoever had wiped him from existence had done a damn fine job.

My hand hovered over the mouse as I debated if what I was about to do was sheer genius or criminally insane. I supposed only time would tell. They say history favors the bold, and hacking into the DEA's database was about as ballsy as a person could get. But what other choice did I have? I couldn't very well use Marco to save my sister if the DEA already knew about him.

On orders of the US government, I'd hacked into plenty of things. Foreign government's satellites, private businesses camera feeds, financial records. You name it and I'd poked my nose in it. But this was different because it was unsanctioned. What I was about to do meant risking my job and my freedom. There could be no

evidence left behind. No digital footprint, no detectable keystrokes, no mistakes.

As “Executioner’s Tax” played from somewhere in the back of the garage, I took a deep breath, and plunged in. If I had the guts to go undercover in a motorcycle club to save my sister, I could hack into the DEA’s database for the same purpose. Besides, it wasn’t as if my boss had been thinking of my safety when he’d dangled the carrot of my sister’s freedom in front of me.

Anger fueled my keystrokes as everything else faded into the background. Screen by screen, I searched, my eyes scanning all the information the DEA had on the cartel. My brain automatically cataloged and saved everything I saw—known houses, aliases, safe houses, fields, workers, suspected government contacts, and associates. But no mention of Marco. Anywhere.

I’d gotten what I needed, yet I still hesitated to cover my tracks and sever the link. My boss’s words played inside my head. Before me, they’d never had a man on the inside, never gotten close. The government had spent years trying to bring down the cartel, and The Deviants along with them, and I had to wonder how far they’d go. Would they, for example, set up one of their own to get the job done? And, more importantly, was I willing to let them get away with it?

If I was smart, I’d let this go. Use Marco to barter for my sister’s freedom, and walk away, while I still could. But what happened if Marco wasn’t enough? If they kept coming for her? Once I did this, it couldn’t be undone. I’d never have the chance to know what they knew. What my sister had done, and what they could prove, might be two very different things.

Was I willing to risk it all on the word of the DEA? If you’d asked me that same question a few months ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated. Now, I couldn’t be sure. Something about that just didn’t sit right with me, and I knew I had my answer.

The file on the club was significantly smaller than the one on the cartel, and I wasn't sure if that was because the club was better at covering their tracks or if the cartel didn't give a shit. I tended to think it was the latter. In Mexico, the cartel was untouchable because they owned the president. While that wasn't the case in the US, it would be difficult to extradite them without the help of the Mexican government.

As I scanned the file, I wondered if that was why the DEA had been gunning so hard for The Deviants. They knew they couldn't reel in the big fish, but they still had to prove to the American people they were stemming the tide of drugs entering the US. The sad fact was, even if they took down The Deviants, it would only temporarily slow the cartel down. The Italians, Irish, Polish, and Russians would be there, waiting for their chance. Drugs were too lucrative for criminals to give up on them, no matter how long the prison sentences were.

A sense of unease settled in the pit of my stomach as I neared the end of the file. All of it I'd already seen before, which didn't make a bit of sense, until I came to the very last note. At least now I knew why they'd sent me here. Bile climbed up my throat, and I bent over the trash can underneath my desk. The coffee I'd drank this morning tasted bitter coming back up as I emptied the contents of my stomach.

When I was done, I wiped my mouth off with a napkin Stella had left on my desk this morning and tied off the bag. I needed to pull myself together and get my head in the game. Erasing one's digital footprint was painstaking work, and like I said before, there could be no mistakes. The DEA could never find out that I knew the truth.

For a long time afterward, I sat there at my desk in the garage, staring off into space, wondering what I was going to do about the fucked-up situation I found myself in.

"Earth to Brandy," Stella said, making me jump.

“Balls! How long have you been standing there?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Long enough to know you look like you could use a stiff drink and I need a break from staring at the same four walls.”

My fucked-up brain would be triggered by the smell of alcohol and sweat. Not to mention the likelihood of losing my shit whenever a man bumped into me. Still, all of that was more appealing than having to face either my sister or Hunter. Right now, I just wanted to forget what I’d seen.

“Can I spend the night at your place?”

She smirked. “As long as you don’t rub it in that you’re only spending the night at my place because your vagina needs a break from all the pounding it’s taken lately.”

God, I loved this girl. Even when she said things just to make me blush.

Before Hunter and Stella barged into my life, I was an empty shell, living only to protect my sister. Which was tragically fucked-up, considering I had avoided my sister for years, watching out for her from afar like some creeper. Not that my staying away had done any good. My mental state never improved, and Cherry was still in danger. The only thing that had really changed was the source of the threat.

My phone buzzed from atop the desk, a text message from PICKLEBUSTER lighting up the screen. Speak of the devil.

“If you can ask Tweak to let my sister know where I’ll be, I’ll just go grab a few things and we can head over to your place.”

She gave me a funny look but walked back down the hall to find Tweak. I slipped out the front door, knowing the music in back would cover the sound of the bell, and took the long way around to the club’s garage. No one

was in there when I poked my head in, and I scurried up the steps.

It was my lucky day, because for once, my sister wasn't behind the bar. In fact, it was a little weird that no one was in the club's common area, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Beast passed me in the upstairs hallway, his eyebrow raised at my unusually brisk pace, but thankfully he didn't ask any questions. As I shut the door to Hunter's room, I sagged against it, staring down at the phone in my hand. The hand that shook, making it hard to click on the message.

PICKLEBUSTER: Paint me a cucumber and call me green.

The same coded message as last time. With a deep breath in, I pressed the button to call, and held the phone up to my ear.

“Smith?”

“Yes.”

My voice had a breathless quality to it, but thankfully it remained steady. He couldn't know anything was off or how unnerved I was at the sound of his voice.

“Hadn't heard from you in a while.”

That was code for I was checking to see if you were still alive. Bastard.

“Been”—I cleared my throat—“a little busy.”

“Does that mean you have something for me?”

This was my moment of truth. Did I end it all now or keep playing the game? A shiver of unease slid down my spine. It would all go to shit if I chose wrong.

“The shop is clean.”

“That's it. That's all you have to say for your time there?”

“I have to go now,” I whispered and hung up the phone.



Blood coated my hands. The driver of the SUV, one of Piotr's goons, face was now a mass of lumps and bruises. His ugly mug could use some rearranging. Considering one of my punches had actually straightened his nose, I'd call it an improvement. If I didn't plan on killing him anyway, I might even charge him for the service I'd provided.

He spit the blood pooling in his mouth at me. "*Pipa.*"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. You forget yourself, Filip. I'm not my brother. He's become too Americanized. Forgotten half the Polish our father taught us. I, on the other hand, am still perfectly fluent. As I recall, our father used to love to call a man a cunt before he cut them from chest to dick."

I stood in front of him, running my knife along my nail as his partner screamed behind his gag, shaking the chair he was tied to with his movements.

"Your partner over there"—I nodded my head—"seems like he can't wait to talk to me. Maybe he's the smarter of the two, choosing a quick death over hours of torment. Come now, Filip. You're new, but you can't be that stupid. Everyone's heard about The Butcher's son, and I don't mean Piotr."

He snarled, but there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. And here I was, worried that Ryder's morals had made me soft. Though it felt good to know that I hadn't been completely forgotten.

"Shall we try this again? Where is the other tail Piotr sent?"

He spit at me again. This time there was snot mixed in with the blood.

"You saw them in front of the school."

Was he really this stupid or playing me? It was tough to tell because, as Pops would say, "He ain't got the good sense god gave a rock."

"No. The man you replaced. The one who's actually worth something rather than being a sack of meat taking up space like the other two Piotr sent."

The sound of metal reverberating off cement echoed behind me as the other man's chair fell to the floor from all his jerking about.

"Never mind," I muttered, sheathing my knife.

When I set him upright and removed the gag, he stared up at me wide-eyed. His bindings were tight and each breath he pulled in was labored. He was considerably smaller than the other man Piotr sent, his gaunt shoulders shaking. Sweat trickled down the side of his pale face and I wondered if he was going to save me the trouble of killing him later by having a heart attack.

"I don't know where Piotr sent him." I loomed over him and, if it were possible, he grew even paler. "But Piotr has been talking to a DEA agent."

His eyes were bloodshot, and his pupils were blown, but judging from the amount of cursing coming from Filip, he was telling the truth.

"What do Piotr and this DEA agent talk about?"

"Don't say a fucking word, Jan."

I made a show of taking the knife out of my ankle holster. Each of my movements was slow, methodical. His eyes widening even further as I stood. With the flick of my wrist, the knife embedded itself into the side of Filip's throat. His friend watched as he gurgled, choking on his own blood.

"There now. Where were we? Yes, Piotr and the agent. What do they talk about?"

He tore his wide eyes from his partner and looked up at me. Fear came off him in waves as sweat dripped from his chin. The pungent stench of urine filled the air, and I sighed. I hadn't even touched the man yet, and he'd already pissed himself.

"I overheard"—he swallowed—"a phone call once. Piotr said he'd upheld his end of the deal, yet Mikołaj still walks around free. Then he said something about a window closing and he'd just take care of you himself."

"Hmm. I'm rethinking that quick death I promised."

"Wait!" His voice shook. "Piotr referred to him as Agent Schakowsky. That's all I k-kn-know. I swear."

I believed him. He was a low-level grunt with a drug problem. Not exactly the type of man Piotr would confide in.

"Thank you. You've been most helpful."

Unlike his friend who still graced him with a choked gasp now and then, Jan had earned himself a quick death. He didn't even see the gun until it was pressed to the side of his head. Had even less time to react when I pulled the trigger.

My phone rang from inside my pocket, and I wiped the blood on my hand on the leg of my cargo pants before answering.

"Yeah?"

"We have a problem," Tweak said, the sounds of traffic loud in the background. "Well, two actually. The

first being that the DEA file is a dead end. Everything they have, except for Gunner's military record, is public knowledge. What little they know dates all the way back to Pops arrest record."

"Anything they can use?"

"Fuck no," he scoffed. "Even their theories are way off base. Like we'd be stupid enough to clean drug cash through a business that had our name on it."

"And the second problem?"

A tractor trailer honked, and Tweak yelled back, "Blow it out your ass."

"Where the hell are you?"

"On the side of the road at the exit for Austin."

"Is our second problem that you're stranded because I'm in the red at the moment so it'll be awhile before I could come get you."

"Jesus. You killed someone didn't you? You know how Ryder feels about that."

"That's why he has me," I remarked dryly. "To make sure his Boy Scout nature doesn't get us all killed. Now, hurry up and tell me what our second problem is so I can clean up. I have somewhere to be tonight."

"Boy, am I glad you're on our side." Another car horn blared but this time Tweak yelled nothing in return. "When a tractor trailer cut me off right before the exit, I lost sight of Marco."

"Why would Marco be going to Austin? We're the only people he knows in the US."

"Exactly," Tweak huffed. "And he left the phone you gave him at the clubhouse, so it's not like I can track the little shit."

"Which means he doesn't want us to know where he went." The Austin connection was too big of a coincidence to ignore. "I'm going to text you an address."

If he's not there, then head back to the clubhouse and tell Ryder that Marco has gone rogue, and my brother is working with DEA Agent Schakowsky."

"Shit. Do I even want to know what sort of seedy joint you'll be sending me to? Please tell me Marco doesn't have some sort of weird fetish that he goes all the way to Austin for."

Knowing Tweak, he was picturing all manner of fetishes. Not that I was one to judge, because I wasn't exactly vanilla, but I'd never understand why some people got hung up on feet. I'd once watched a documentary about a guy who got off on women trying on shoes.

"It isn't clowns, is it? Because you know they freak me the fuck out."

Jesus. It was worse than I thought. What sort of porn had he been watching?

"No, idiot. I'm sending you to Brandy's apartment."

"She still has her apartment?"

I sighed. "Just call me if you find Marco."



Bass threaded through the club, the leather seat underneath me vibrating with it. But I didn't mind. From where we sat in the VIP area on the second floor of the club, we had a perfect view of the bodies writhing on the dance floor below us. I could enjoy myself without worrying about a man bumping into me and the atmosphere here was electric.

Stella said she'd fixed the owner's *Maserati* a few months back after someone had rear-ended him, and he'd been begging her to come by his club ever since. When we got in line downstairs she'd texted him, hoping we wouldn't have to wait as long to get in. We were both surprised when the bouncer motioned for us to follow him a few minutes later. Stella tried to tell him that all the fuss wasn't necessary, but he ignored her, and now I was glad he had.

All the strobe lights were centered on the dance floor, making the space inside the booths darker and more intimate. In the next booth over, someone stood up, but in the dim lighting it was tough to see anything beyond the outline of a man. He moved closer and light reflected off a gold signet ring on his hand, the same one that smoothed down the lapel of his suit jacket. When he

stopped at Stella's shoulder, I could tell the cut of the dark gray suit he wore was expensive.

Part of his face was in the shadows, but when Stella looked up at him, he shifted, and I caught a touch of gray around his temple. He was one of those guys that was probably older than he looked because he appeared more fit than guys half his age. Only something about him made me think he didn't stay in shape with a mundane game of racket ball, and I shrank back into the booth.

Stella leaned forward and shouted, "This is the owner of the club."

He inclined his head in greeting and waited until Stella sat back against the booth to bend down and whisper in her ear. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but I wasn't comfortable with him being that close to Stella, which was crazy. Maybe this was the final stage of insanity, projecting all of your fears onto other people.

She'd done so much for me without even realizing it, the least I could do was walk away before I embarrassed her in front of her new friend. Nobody needed to know what a damaged wreck I was on the inside.

When I stood, Stella reached over, her hand lightly touching my arm as she shouted, "Are you OK?"

"Yeah," I shouted back to be heard over the pounding bass. When I leaned over to pick up my clutch, I made sure my mouth was close enough to her ear so I wouldn't have to shout. "I'm going to the ladies' room. You catch up with your friend and I'll be right back."

She gave me a thumbs up and I squeezed around the glass table. On my way past, her friend grabbed my arm to stop me. His touch was unexpected, and I couldn't help the shiver of revulsion that slid down my spine at the sensation of a million spiders crawling over my skin. He quickly dropped his hand, but leaned in close, too close,

his warm breath fanning my neck. I sucked in a breath, trying to maintain my composure.

“If you’re looking for the bathroom, they’re up ahead on your right.”

My smile was tight as I nodded, taking a step back to give myself the space I needed to breathe. The urge to run, the desire to get as far away from this man as I could, smacked into me. It took everything I had not to give in, to walk, not run away from him. A voice inside my head whispered that it would be dangerous to show any kind of weakness in front of this man. To ever let him find out that I was afraid.

Great. I’d gone from calling myself an overeating freak to hearing voices. This wasn’t one of those times when I could splash a little water on my face and shake it off. No. My body had gone into full on flight mode and I need to get rid of some of this nervous energy. Stella couldn’t see me like this, she just couldn’t.

The stairs up ahead were illuminated from above me and I took it as a sign. Normally I hated stairs, but today they were my salvation. When I finally made it to the bottom and saw the heavy red door leading outside, I practically sobbed as I pulled on the gold handle.

At the curb outside, I bent over, resting my hands against my knees as I sucked in big gulps of air. Closing my eyes, I started counting backward from a hundred as I focused on my breathing. Ninety-nine, in, ninety-eight, out, ninety-seven, in, ninety-six out. The pressure in my chest was just easing when I felt the prick of a needle against the side of neck.

My eyes flew open, all thoughts of counting and breathing forgotten when I saw a set of black boots on the pavement beside my flats.

“Don’t worry, man,” a deep voice called out from above me. “Her friend called me to come get her. She’ll be all right after she sleeps it off.”

I opened my mouth to scream, but all that came out was a meager croak. The outer edges of my vision blurred, the dizzying sensation like a punch to my stomach. Even if I blew chunks on the sidewalk right now in front of everyone, they would all assume it was because I was drunk, not because some asshole had drugged me.

“It’s going to be all right,” he murmured, trying to placate me. “We’ll be out of here in a minute.”

Why would anyone want to do this to me? Oh, god, it was like something out of a movie. I was being abducted, in the middle of all these club goers, and nobody would remember a thing because my body was too weak to fight him off. He could do anything he wanted to me once he got me alone. No! My mind screamed as it fractured even more. Not again.

Whatever he’d given me had a numbing agent in it, because no spiders crawled across my skin when he lifted me over his shoulder. The loss of sensation was almost worse. Being inside your body, watching what was happening to you, but not being able to do a damn thing about it. This was far worse than any of my previous nightmares and I found myself wishing for pain.

My mind was already fucked, and I doubted it could take another round of abuse. If I made it out of this alive, I’d never recover my sanity. There was no going back. No matter how hard my body fought against it, this was the end of the road for me.

My eyes felt heavy, and I let them flutter closed. Even in the pitch-black, Hunter reached for me. I shouldn’t have been surprised that he found me here. He was darkness and everyone knows the darkness always wins.



The florescent light down the hall blinked, casting room one-forty-two in shadow, which was perfect for my purposes. The smell of disinfectant hung heavy in the air and from the room beside me a man hollered out a woman's name over and over, his pleas going unanswered. Machines whooshed or beeped up and down this stretch of hallway.

Everyone here was waiting to meet their maker, some sooner than others. The man in one-forty-two would meet his tonight. He just didn't realize it yet, but he soon would.

I'd timed everything just right. The eleven o'clock shift change had just taken place and none of the nurses would be by for another hour. By then, I'd be long gone, and they would think he'd died peacefully in his sleep.

My father always said the devil came for every man at some point. The devil was about to be sorely disappointed because this man's soul was mine for the taking. Normally, I didn't care enough to drag out a man's death, but he was different. With him, I'd actually enjoy playing the role of executioner.

The heavy wooden door was open enough for me to slip inside. Light from a streetlamp outside the window

cast shadows through the blinds and onto the wall. A steady sucking noise came from the machine beside the bed, and he let out a barking cough that ended in a wheeze.

His physical appearance had drastically changed since the last time I was here. Back then, he'd still had a head full of sandy blond hair and some semblance of his formerly muscled physique. This man had patches of gray hair sticking straight up from his head, his skin was wrinkled and sunk in, and the outline of his hip bone was visible underneath the blanket as he lay on his side.

I hated that by killing him I was actually doing him a favor, but this wasn't about him. Not really. No, when he took his last breath, I wanted him to know it was because of her. If I could bring her his head, let her know he suffered, I would. But I didn't have the time to give that to her, so I'd have to settle for the next best thing.

He opened his eyes, and they widened in terror. A beautiful sight, but alas, unhelpful to my cause.

I brought my finger to my lips and shook my head. "Let's keep this visit between us, shall we, Mr. Smith?"

He sighed and struggled to sit up. "Did my daughter send her little watch dog up here in the middle of the night to make sure she's getting her money's worth?"

A cough hit him, and he pounded his chest, a sound coming from him I had a hard time placing. Wheeze? Gasp? Croak? Didn't really matter. He wouldn't have to worry about it for much longer.

"I'm actually here for your other daughter, Brandy."

"Hmm," he grunted. "She finally made it over to the club, did she?"

He started coughing again, and I left him to it while I contemplated his words. No matter how hard I tried to make the pieces of the puzzle fit, they just didn't. Clearly, I was missing something and judging by the smug smile on his face; he was about to enlighten me.

“This is just too good. You still don’t have a clue who Brandy works for, do you?”

He’d handed me the last piece of the puzzle, and everything clicked into place. Dean Earl Argeneau Inc—DEA. The most disturbing part was that it had taken this waste of skin to make me see it.

She might have been a traitor, but that changed nothing. He still had to die, and I might even enjoy it more now, given the circumstances. But before he did, I wanted him to answer one simple question for me.

“Why are you out to destroy the club when we’re the ones who helped Cherry pay for your treatments?”

He threw his head back and laughed, causing another coughing fit. When it finally faded to a wheeze, his eyes, so like Brandy’s, met mine.

“You dumbass. It was never about the club.”

“Enlighten me, then.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and prayed for the patience to keep him alive long enough to make sense of his babbling. “Because I can’t see how any of this would benefit you.”

“Revenge.”

This man was off his nut, and my patience was fading fast. He needed to spit it out before I killed him on principal.

“Revenge?”

“I was being scouted by the NFL when the girls’ mother came to me and said she was pregnant. The last game I ever played in high school, I was so damn distracted I didn’t see the tackle until it was too late. Tore my knee to shit.”

He stopped there like I was supposed to understand where he was going with this. I raised an eyebrow, hoping he’d get on with his pathetic walk down memory lane.

“Don’t you get it?”

“Get what? That you’re a sad excuse for a man who blames the woman he was fucking for his injury? Sadly, yes.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t act like your shit don’t stink. The guy that came to see me told me who your family is.”

That was where he was wrong. I knew exactly the type of monster I was, but at least I wasn’t a delusional pedophile who’d let himself be so easily manipulated by a DEA agent.

“Let me guess. This man promised you’d be the hero you always should have been by helping him to rid the streets of crime.”

“Nope.” His left eye twitched, and I wondered if he was too far gone to recognize sarcasm. “The cocky little puke didn’t even need to threaten me, though he did, to get me to answer his questions. He had no idea he was giving me the means to finish what I started. What better way to get back at my late wife for refusing to get an abortion than to destroy the very thing she’d been trying to protect?”

Jesus Christ. “Come again.”

“You see, I thought raping Brandy over and over would surely get her to turn on Cherry and destroy them both. But instead, Brandy guarded Cherry better than a secret service agent assigned to the president.”

My nails dug into my fists, and it took everything in me to wait to kill him.

“When I got sick, I thought that was it. That I’d die without getting the vengeance I so richly deserved. Then what does Cherry do? Whore herself out to you guys in order to save me. I thought that would finally be the nudge Brandy needed to drive her over the edge.”

He shook his head. “Nope, wrong again.”

Psychologists would have a field day with his maniacal smile as he looked up at me. And people

thought I was crazy.

“It wasn’t until that guy, the one in the blue suit who, ironically looks a bit like you, came to see me that I knew I would finally have my revenge.”

Fuck me. It wasn’t a DEA agent who’d manipulated him, but Piotr. Brandy was the thing he was lording over the club. Cherry would never rat us out, but Brandy was obviously willing to do anything for her sister.

“All I had to do was give him her location and the right buttons to push.” He coughed as he leaned forward and whispered, “And you want to know the best part? He promised that the girls would know it was me who had helped him.”

A loss of control had never overcome me before. When it happened to other men, I could never fathom it, but possession was a cold-blooded bitch. Even in the face of her treachery it made me act in ways I never had before. I had to say I didn’t care for it. Especially when the bastard smiled as I choked him.

Releasing him, I hissed. “What’s so fucking funny?”

“You’re screwed,” he wheezed. “You, the club, my daughters. All screwed. And to be honest, you’re killing me is a favor. Less time I have to spend in this dump.” He laughed, which turned into another coughing fit and when he was done, he looked me dead in the eye. “I guess I’ll be seeing you in hell.”

He was right about one thing. We would see each other in hell, and I looked forward to it because I’d happily bring him death there too. Put his face to the fire and laugh. I knew death was too good for this man, but no matter what Brandy had done, she still deserved the vengeance that only I could give her.

“A quick death is too good for the likes of you. The only reason you’re getting this mercy from me is because I don’t want to leave your soul in the hands of anyone else. But I’m not killing you for myself, or on behalf of

the club, though you deserve it for those reasons. This is for Brandy.”

He cackled. “Don’t tell me you fell for the ugly duckling.”

He quit laughing when my fist connected with his nuts. In fact, this pitiful excuse for a man was hunched over, wheezing. What kind of man betrays his blood?

I’d always considered myself to be a monster, but now I was rethinking the title. A cold, unfeeling bastard. Absolutely. But to be honest, this man sickened me, and that was saying something considering I’d spent my entire childhood watching my father torture men.

“I wish I could bring your head to her on a silver platter, but alas, I have other places I need to be. I guess I’ll just have to settle for your fear.” The tiny vial I dug out of my cut made his eyes go wide. “It’s a cocktail I made especially for you, but I’d hate to spoil the surprise of what it does to the body.”

He fought me then, the headboard of his hospital bed banging against the wall as I made him swallow every drop. My hand covered his nose and mouth, leaving him no choice but to swallow it.

“That’s a good boy.” I patted the side of his face. “See that wasn’t so hard.”

“Fuck you,” he spit, his eyes narrowing into slits. “I hope you enjoy getting fucked in the ass in jail asshole. Death was already knocking on my door, anyway.”

He had another coughing fit, and I checked my watch. The new nurse on duty would be by in about fifteen minutes. Time to wrap this up.

“I appreciate your concern, but the Braterstwo will kill me long before I see the inside of a cell.” Standing up, I gave him a smile of my own. I hated smiling, so I hoped he found mine as disturbing as I found his. “Tell the devil to name his price because I’ll want to start the minute I arrive.”

He leaned on his side; his breathing labored as he looked up at me. “Start what?”

I cocked my head to the side. “Torturing you, of course. I don’t expect the devil to turn over the privilege of hearing your endless screams without some sort of payment.”

His choked gasp turned into a gurgle, and I wished I had the time to watch the results of my handiwork, but I couldn’t be seen anywhere near here. As I told him, I had other places to be. It was time to end this, take my rightful place in the Braterstwo, and send Brandy on her way.

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I let myself out the back door I’d left propped open with a scrap of paper. This couldn’t be good.

“Yeah.”

“I was at the edge of the grounds, having my last smoke of the day like usual, when one of the guy’s interrupted Piotr while he was swimming laps. Everybody around here knows he fucking hates that shit, doesn’t matter what time of the day or night it is. So, I put my cigarette out and snuck closer, thinking shit was about to pop off.”

There was a rustling noise on the other end of the line before Cannon whispered, “I heard the guard say it was done. That they had her. What do you want me to do?”

That mother fucker had been a pain in my ass since the day he was born, and he was going to regret coming at me like this. We had a lot of catching up to do, Piotr and me. Blood or not, he’d crossed a line, and he was about to pay for it with his life.

“Keep watch and call me if there are any changes, but under no circumstances do I want you to approach Piotr. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cannon quietly huffed into the phone.

This boy was almost as big of a pain in my ass as my brother. The only difference was, I might actually like Cannon. At least, enough that I didn't want to see the kid go off half-cocked and get himself killed.

"I'm on the way. Try not to do anything stupid before I get there."

When I dialed Ryder, he picked up on the first ring and spoke before I could.

"I was just about to call you. Stella just walked into the clubhouse a minute ago, hysterical. Apparently, she and Brandy were at that new club, Tilt. Brandy told her she was going to the bathroom and never came back. We're headed over there to search for her now."

"Don't bother." I swung my leg over my bike. "Cannon just called. My brother has her."



The darkness I'd been floating in slowly faded and I tried to will it back. Once it was gone, I'd have no choice but to wake up and deal with what was happening. I didn't want to. Things were simpler in the dark, where I couldn't feel anything. It was easier to lie to myself in that place where I was sheltered, at peace, floating in the abyss with Hunter. When I opened my eyes, he wouldn't be there, protecting me. I'd be alone, again, left to face the horrors of the world.

Sadly, staying in the darkness was no longer an option. Now I was left with the fuzzy grit of reality. Fuck that noise. Literally. My head pounded like a tiny little man was rocking out on a drum inside my head and my mouth felt like a sea of cotton balls had been shoved into it. Please have clothes on, I silently prayed before making myself pry my eyes open.

When I looked down, I still had on the same anchor print navy shorts and button up white shirt that I'd worn to the club. No buttons on my shirt were askew or missing, and my shorts were still buttoned and zipped. Thank you, Jesus! As strange as it sounded, I was relieved to find myself strapped to a wooden chair. Based on the soreness in my limbs I knew I'd been in this position for a while.

My fingers tingled, and I wiggled them, trying to get the feeling back in my hands as I took in my surroundings. The massive mahogany desk in front of me suggested I was in somebody's office, yet the rest of the room looked like the library from *Beauty and the Beast*. Balls. Where the hell was I?

From behind me, I heard the scuff of a shoe, and I craned my neck, expecting to see the guy who drugged me in front of the club. But the air in my lungs stilled when I got a glimpse of the man walking through the door. He had the same flaxen hair, lean build, and pale blue eyes as Hunter. They could easily pass for each other from a distance, but up close, the differences between the two were unmistakable.

This man tried to hide the danger he posed behind a well-tailored suit and charming smile, but he didn't fool me. Hunter's eyes may have lacked his warmth, but this man had a gleam in his that I didn't trust. It was one I'd seen every day of my life. My father had a cruel streak a mile wide, and I doubted this man was any different.

He walked around the front of the desk and cocked his head to the side, studying me. His stare wasn't intense like Hunter's, but the way he angled his head was eerily similar.

"A woman would have to be rather exceptional to hold my psycho brother's interest for more than a few hours. Yet here you are, plain and wholly unremarkable. How disappointing."

Great. He was a total douche on top of being cruel. I'd be lying if I said his ten second assessment of me didn't sting, even if I'd thought the same thing myself. Oh, well, at least he didn't give off a rape-y vibe. I'd take a grade A sadistic asshole over that any day of the week.

"It's interesting that you call him a psycho, yet he's never drugged, kidnapped, or tied me to a chair."

Balls. I probably shouldn't have said that.

He chuckled, only it was more disturbing than charming. It reminded me of the evil villains in the cartoons I used to watch as a kid.

“My brother’s gone soft. That doesn’t sound like him at all, not to have at least tied you up. Let me guess, he also lied through his teeth, professing his undying love while holding you close?”

My cheeks heated at the memory of the last time we were together. Now was so not the time to be thinking of mind-blowing orgasms, but where Hunter was concerned, my body seemed to have a mind of its own.

“Not exactly.”

His pale eyes lit with interest as they focused on me, and I instantly regretted my words. Oh, sweet Jesus. In what world did I admit to anything about my sex life? Especially to my lover’s brother, who incidentally, had just abducted me. Though, to be fair, I’d never had a sex life or been kidnapped before, so maybe I was being a little too hard on myself.

“I’m starting to see why my brother finds you so fascinating. It’s been ages since I’ve been able to make one of those insipid country club debutants blush. Yet, even with the rosy cheeks, you don’t seem the slightest bit bothered by my brother’s, how shall I say this delicately.” He put his hand next to his mouth and whispered, “Condition.”

Hunter’s brother had to be the most bizarre human being I’d ever come into contact with. And this was coming from the girl who’d dressed up like the girl from *Avatar* last year for Comicon.

“Pardon me?”

“Poor, dear. Of course, you don’t know. My brother isn’t what you would call normal.”

Insert internal eye roll. Anyone with half a brain already knew this about Hunter. The fake way he said it, though, like we were best girlfriends instead of me being

forced to be his captive audience, made me want to punch him in the junk.

“I’m afraid my brother suffers from the same affliction as our father, The Butcher of Chicago.” He shivered, but there was no mistaking that it was all a part of his act. “It’s what made our father able to perform all those atrocities you saw on the news. His inability to feel or process emotion.”

The lack of life behind Hunter’s icy gaze now made perfect sense, but nothing had changed. The fucked-up parts of him would always call to the left over, fucked-up pieces of the girl I’d once been. There would never be anyone else for me, it didn’t matter that Hunter was incapable of loving me back. He was my safety blanket, my person, the one who brought me back from the dead. And I’d always love him for it.

Until now, I hadn’t put a name to it, but it was love. That all-consuming thing took over and made you do dumb shit like fall for a guy who’d never love you back. I’d done the one thing Stella didn’t want me to do. Become her. Only I’d probably never get to tell her we were both in the same canoe, paddling upstream. And that it was totally, unequivocally, worth every second of the pain that would undoubtedly follow.

“You’re wrong, you know,” I told him, my voice scratchy with emotion. “They might have had the same condition, but Hunter is nothing like your father.”

“Not that I wouldn’t love to hear you extol my brother’s virtues, the way I had to listen to our father as a boy,” he snarled, his eyes darkening. “But I’m afraid we’re going to have to cut our little chat short. You took longer to wake up than I planned, and I simply can’t take any chances at this late stage of the game.”

Balls. Now I’d gone and pissed this maniac off. As he walked around the other side of the desk and pulled open the top drawer, I contemplated how to recover from my slip up. Get us back to the place where we were

before. He would still be a dick, but I stood a better chance of making it out of this alive when he was at least a level-headed dick.

“It’s poetic, really.” My lungs froze in my chest, the air trapped, as I watched the muzzle of a gun emerge from his desk drawer. “That he’ll arrive to find his lady, dead, in the very office he barely escaped from the last time. I apologize for this bit of ugliness between us, and normally I don’t like to get my hands dirty, but good help is so hard to find these days. One minute you think a man is on your side and the next you find out that he’s not.”

“But I digress,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m afraid I really need you bleeding out on the rug when my brother gets here, and from what I understand, he’ll be here shortly.”

He winced. “It’s nothing personal. Just a bit of family business. You understand, don’t you?”

Hunter’s brother was even crazier than I suspected if he thought that convoluted explanation absolved him of his actions. The black handgun pointed at my chest was all I could see as I shook my head no. My bound wrists barely moved as I frantically struggled against my bindings.

His maniacal laugh at my feeble attempts to break free filled me with dread as I watched him walk around the desk. They say a person’s life flashes before their eyes, but mine didn’t. Maybe that was because I chose not to taint my last moments on earth. When I gave up the fight and shut my eyes, resigning to my fate, all I saw was Hunter. His pale icy gaze that never failed to strip me bare, but also gave me strength.

A second later, the sound of a single gunshot made me jump in my seat. Not that I went very far. But oddly enough, I didn’t feel any pain. Was I having a delayed reaction? Surely, I should feel something by now, cold seeping into my bones, or at the very least, a little woozy.

Peeking through my lashes, I looked down at myself, sucking in a breath at the dark red stains across my top, shorts, and bare thighs. Frantically, my eyes searched for the source of all that blood, but I couldn't find one.

When I raised my chin, afraid of what I might find, there was Hunter's brother, sprawled across the top of the desk, not moving. Mentally, I shrank back from the horror of the image. From the red that pooled underneath his head and dripped from the side of the desk.

My lips parted, a scream filling my starving lungs, dying to break free, when someone whispered from behind me, "Don't. Then they'll know Piotr didn't just shoot you and we'll be in an even bigger world of shit than we already are. I need you to keep it together until we get out of here."

His voice. It was familiar. Where had I heard it before? But my brain was still struggling to process the horror of what had happened, and there wasn't enough room for riddles.

The rope at my feet loosened and then gave way. As feeling returned to my lower extremities, tiny painful pinpricks of sensation replaced the numbness that had long ago taken over. I jiggled my legs and feet, preparing for when I would have to run with this man, whoever he was. What other choice did I have but to trust him? He was my last hope of survival, my only one, really.

"I'm sorry, hero, whoever you are, but I can't let you spoil my plans."

Where did the woman with the low raspy voice come from? Why was she here? What did she mean?

The sudden bang left a ringing in my left ear, and I jumped again, feeling a heavy weight settle against my shoulder before it fell away. There was a soft thud that came from beside me, and I could feel something wet on my face, my eye tracking a line of red down my cheek to my chin. Drip, drip, drip.

My whole body shook in my binds, but still I forced myself to look down. A man's lifeless body lay beside my chair, and even with half his head missing I recognized him.

There was no holding in the scream this time. The keening wail that was ripped from my chest sounded inhuman and my vision blurred. I hadn't cried since I was a young child. Honestly, I didn't think I was capable of it any longer, but I couldn't hold it back any more than I could resurrect the man lying beside me. A member of the club had died trying to help me, and the pain of that was almost more than I could bear.

Seeing Hunter's brother lying across the desk, still, had been horrible. Deep in my heart, though, I'd known he deserved his fate. The man at my feet had no choice but to kill in order to save me. What this woman had done, however, was completely different. She'd murdered a man in cold blood to keep me here. What had I ever done to her?

You know what, nothing I could have ever done warranted this man's death. Something inside me snapped, and I wanted to tear her limb from limb. For the first time in my life, I wanted to do someone bodily harm. Fuck her. Fuck them all. If I was going to die in this insanely beautiful room, I was going to at least do some damage before that happened.

Strength surged within me, and I stood, the chair still attached to my arms. Wildly, I twisted my body, hoping that she was still standing behind me, because the chair was the only weapon I had. Her soft grunt was the most satisfying sound in the world, and I turned toward the sound, hoping to catch her with the chair again. Only this time, she was ready for me.

"*Ty suko,*" she screeched, hunched over, the gun in her hand aimed at me as she cocked it.

Her fair complexion was mottled red, but it was her eyes that drew me in. Hunter's eyes. There was no

mistaking them. Nobody else had eyes that shade of blue. Jesus. Was his whole family out to get me? And this slip of a girl, with a gun trained on me, didn't even look like she was old enough to vote.

“Balls! How old are you?” My chest heaved under the tight coils of the rope; my body bent forward at an odd angle. “Never mind, that's not important. Just tell me why your family wants me dead.”

She straightened, the sound of her tinkling laugh making dread pool in my stomach. The same way it did with Hunter's brother. There was something seriously wrong with these people.

“Not all of us want you dead. I'm betting Hunter will do just about anything to keep his pet alive. Too bad for him that's not going to happen. Loose ends and all.”

Lord Jesus, Hunter might be the sanest one of them all.

“Let me make sure I understand this correctly. You and Hunter's brother want me dead to get back at Hunter?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Agent Smith.”

When I thought this was entirely about Hunter, I was fucked, now I didn't know what I was. Fucked times two? Not that it really mattered. Either way, I was dead, and I didn't know where that left Cherry. Which means I failed her, and I'd never failed to protect my sister before. All my sacrifice, gone in the blink of an eye.

Her face contorted into a mask of rage, and I braced myself, waiting for her to pull the trigger. Saviors didn't come along twice. Then again, what did I know?

“Uh, uh, uh, señora. I'm afraid I can't let you do that.”

Her eyes flicked between me and the man who stood on her left. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Marco?!”

Could this situation get any more bizarre? He was the last person I ever thought would come to my rescue. I was pretty sure he hated me just as much, if not more, than this girl. Yet there he stood; a gun pointed at her.

She nodded her head at him, her attention now solely focused on me. “Who is this Marco and what is he to you?”

“Now, is that any way to treat a guest,” he asked. “Especially one bearing gifts?”

“What are you talking about?”

She looked over at him, but her gun stayed firmly fixed on me. I had to admit; I was a little curious myself.

Marco’s gun never wavered as he shifted his weight, letting a bag fall off his shoulder. He tossed it at her feet.

“Open it.”

She kept her gun trained on me, and an eye on him, as she bent down to unzip the bag. When she peeled the sides back to reveal its contents, I leaned over to have a look. At first, I couldn’t tell what I was seeing, my brain trying to block out the horror of the bag’s contents. But there was no mistaking her deafening screech as it filled the room. Suddenly, I wasn’t the one with a gun pointed at them.



She hadn't betrayed me for her career or money, otherwise I might have left her fate in my brother's sadistic hands. While I respected her desire to keep her sister out of jail, it didn't take away the sting of what she'd done. Loyalty was a rare commodity in my world, which is why I valued it above all else.

The Kowalczyks were known for being unforgiving, and I guess I wasn't much different from my father in that respect. In the end, it was why he'd killed my mother. But unlike my father, and I had no desire for Brandy to die.

Much to my dismay, I'd recently discovered how essential her life was to my peace of mind. This whole possession thing was a royal pain in the ass, and I couldn't imagine how Ryder and Gunner coped with loving a woman. Their women were everything to them, and while I was incapable of their depth of emotion, I didn't like how important she'd become to me.

The thought that I could place a woman above the club, the Braterstwo, or even myself was disconcerting. Yet, as I snuck through the kitchen of my father's house and heard the gunshot, the only thing that mattered was her.

The guard on the other side of the kitchen door was so distracted by the sound of the gunshot that never saw me coming. His body fell to the ground at my feet as the other guard finally noticed me and raised his gun. My blade beat his reflexes, embedding itself into his neck before he had the chance to fire. There was no time for hiding bodies, so I'd have to rely on Piotr's guards being as slack as he was.

Hallways were eerily silent as I swiftly moved further into the house and closer to my father's office. Either the sound of the gunshot had sent them all running in that direction or Piotr had fewer guards than usual posted inside the house. I hoped for the latter, but I'd shoot my way through a million guards to get to Brandy. That assumed that bullet hadn't been meant for her, because if I was too late, god help them all. Every man would die tonight before I burned the entire place to the ground.

Two more guards stood with their backs to me near the main foyer, both of them dropping in a spray of red, my boots tracking their blood across the foyer. Motion to my left had me lifting my last blade. Marek held up his hands and silently shook his head. Blood was sprayed across his face and down one arm, a knife still dripping red at his side. Guess that explained the lack of guards.

"I found my son's body upstairs," he whisper hissed. "Near Bea's room. I took out all the guards in my path and when I find Piotr, he will answer for what he's done."

Something about this situation didn't sit right with me. Bea's had the same two guards since the day she'd been born and neither one of them would have seen Marek's son as a threat. Even if he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. Marek was owed a blood debt, of that I was sure, but I wasn't convinced he should be collecting from Piotr.

A feminine shriek came from the hallway leading to my father's office, and Marek and I shared a look before

both of us took off in that direction. I rushed through the door, gun in one hand, knife in the other.

Marco's face remained devoid of emotion as he glanced at me, his gun still trained on my sister. Bea's eyes widened a fraction at my arrival before they narrowed back down to slits as she faced off against Marco. A snarl left my chest as my eyes landed on Brandy, standing off to the side, hunched over, a chair strapped to her back, and her chest tightly bound with rope.

“What the fuck?!”

At her feet lie a familiar body, blood pooling around what was left of his head. Dammit, I'd been too late to keep him from doing anything stupid. Where the hell was... The thought was left unfinished as I looked past Brandy and saw my brother splayed across our father's desk, a gun loosely hanging from his fingers.

I rounded on Bea. “Explain yourself, and if I were you, I'd be quick about it.”

“For a genius, lately you've been rather slow on the uptake.” She nodded her head at Marco. “This fella has it all figured out, and I don't even know who he is. Soon it won't matter though, because he'll be dead.”

Marco chuckled. “You wouldn't be the first to try it, little girl, but by all means, if you think you can finish the job, have at it.”

“Before the shooting starts, anyone care to tell me why there's a severed head in a bag on the floor?”

At the mention of it, Brandy looked down, a sickly green pallor washing over her skin before she quickly averted her eyes.

“That would be your sister's boyfriend and Agent Smith's”—he nodded his head in Brandy's direction—“boss.”

While most would be squeamish at the sight of a severed head, there was something in Brandy's eyes as

she'd looked at it that confirmed what Marco said. At least that explained what Marco had been doing in Austin, and the screech I heard before I busted up in here. Jesus, what a clusterfuck.

I looked over at Marco. "Let me guess, Bea knew he was DEA when she fucked him."

"Oh, yes." He smirked at the very unladylike snarl Bea directed at me. "Her little boyfriend sang like a canary before I took his head. He said she was the one who brought Piotr and him together to get rid of you, then she planned to turn on Piotr so she could take control of the Braterstwo."

Marek stepped out from behind me and hissed, "You're delusional if you think the men would have followed you after such treachery."

Bea turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "Really? Your son didn't seem to have a problem following me."

He took a step forward, and I placed a hand on his chest to stop his advance. His chest heaved as he looked over at me and I shook my head. He was owed a debt, and he would collect what was due, but not before I heard the full of extent of what had gone on here.

When I turned back to Marco, he was smiling, his straight white teeth reminding me of a shark. "What your sister doesn't know is that her boyfriend planned to double cross her after Agent Smith got him his corner office. Only Piotr messed all that up when he took Agent Smith before she could finish the job."

He turned to Brandy, his smile dropping, and his dark eyes flashing. "My brother said you had the means to catch an even bigger fish. Why didn't you tell your boss about me?"

Brandy raised her chin and met his icy stare head on, which was tough to do leaning forward as she was with the chair attached to her. She might be a traitor, but somewhere along the way she'd also grown a backbone. I

wasn't sure if it made me want to throttle her or fuck her senseless. My dick knew which one he wanted, but he didn't get a vote anymore.

“What difference could it possibly make? You've always hated me, and you'll put a bullet in me the first chance you get.”

My eyes went to the gun in his hands, which remained pointed at my sister. If he'd wavered at all, or even batted an eyelash in Brandy's direction, I would have killed him. Ryder's brother-in-law or not. I wasn't sure what Brandy was talking about, but she was making it tough to control the monster within. The one that screamed at me to bathe in his blood for threatening her.

“There is a big difference between hate and distrust, Agent Smith. Your sister became friendly with mine rather quickly, then all of a sudden you showed up. Her long-lost twin. It was a rather big coincidence, and I don't do coincidences. Not with my family. Now, I'll ask you again. Why?”

“You're not the only one with suspicions concerning their sister's safety. Before you showed up and dropped my boss's head on the floor”—she winced—“I'd been trying to decide what to do about the danger he posed. If he'd been willing to sell out one of his own agents to get ahead, I got to thinking about all the other things he might do.”

She narrowed her eyes. “But I can promise you this, I wasn't about to do anything that might help the bastard's career.”

His dark eyes appraised her like he was trying to decide which of his knives he was going to skin her with, and my muscles tensed, preparing to take the backlash that was sure to follow.

“And now that he's dead, what do you plan to do with the information you have?”

She moved closer, her eyes narrowing. “Nothing as long as you leave Cherry alone. She has no clue I was blackmailed by the DEA into coming. Look as hard as you want, you won’t find a deceitful bone in my sister’s body. All she’s ever wanted was to be Valentina’s friend.”

He nodded, his dark gaze moving over to my sister. If she’d been successful, we’d all have wound up dead. He didn’t need to say a thing because I had plenty to say to her now that Marco was no longer eyeballing Brandy with murderous intent.

“Christ, Bea, why didn’t you just take the deal I offered? You could have had a piece of the pie with none of the risk. If it had just been me, you might have been able to get away with it, but not both of us. Marek was right, the men never would have followed you. Not to mention the Braterstwo coming for you. Did you think they’d leave you alive just because you’re a woman?”

“At least I would have died knowing I took you down first.” She laughed when I raised an eyebrow. “After all these years you still don’t get it.”

“I guess not.” I hissed. “So why don’t you spell it out for me.”

“You left me here after killing our baby brother!”

Her chest heaved with her outburst, and for a minute I was stunned. No wonder she hated me. It wouldn’t change anything, her fate had been sealed by her actions, but she deserved to know the truth before that happened.

“When our baby brother was born with a head full of dark curly hair, I knew right away who his father was. You and I both know Papa would never have stood for being cuckold. Everyone needed to believe that I’d killed him, or he would have suffered the same fate as our mother.”

There was a challenge in her stare, yes, but there was also a seed of doubt. “If he’s alive, then where is he?”

“His father’s sister took him in. She and her husband had been unsuccessfully trying for years to have a baby.”

Her mouth formed an O, recognition dawning as she cleared her throat. “Our brother is Jessup, isn’t he?”

I nodded, and she narrowed her eyes. “That still doesn’t excuse you leaving me with that monster!”

“I thought for sure I’d been marked for death after attacking Father, which meant when they found me, you would have been killed as well. You were far safer with him than you would have been with me. Had I known he would cover for me with the Braterstwo because he didn’t think Piotr was capable of taking over, I might have risked taking you with me.”

Brandy’s voice startled everyone when she softly asked, “Why did you attack your father?”

“I mistakenly thought I could spare my mother’s life by hiding the evidence of her affair. When I came back, Piotr told me our father had walked into her room while the staff was cleaning her up and changing the sheets. When there was no golden headed baby to show for it, he put two and two together, and went ballistic.”

Her eyes widened in horror, which mystified me. If she worked for the DEA, then she had at least a passing knowledge of my father’s body count. No matter how adept the brotherhood was at covering shit up, how he preferred to handle traitors and spies was common knowledge. Surely, she couldn’t be that green. Though it would make sense. If she’d only asked her sister the right questions, she would have easily figured out that Cherry didn’t know anything.

I shrugged. “It was stupid of me to challenge him over something the Braterstwo would have seen as being well within his right.”

“What?!” Her honey eyes had a fury, a fire in them, that only proved she’d been thrown in the deep end without a life raft. “Has the Mafia never heard of a

divorce? While adultery is morally wrong, it's not a reason to a kill someone."

Marco snorted. "There's a reason people in our world keep to the adage until death do us part. Anything else is too dangerous."

He was absolutely right. A girl like Brandy, who hadn't been born into our way of life, would never understand our rules, let alone follow them. Hell, Bea had been born a Kowalczyk, yet she'd gone and royally fucked things up.

Marek's voice was hoarse as he asked, "What had my son done to deserve death? Besides being a terrible judge of character."

Bea's eyes held mine, misery written all over her face as she answered, "He had an attack of conscience. When Piotr ordered him to take the girl, he threatened to tell you about my plans, unless I spared her. If I'd only known that we shared a brother, I would never have pulled the trigger. I would have done things differently. You have to believe me."

Whether it was the Braterstwo, Marek, or the club who meted out her punishment, the result was still the same. She would have to pay the ultimate penalty for her misguided need for revenge, treachery, and greed. In the end, we all had to accept the consequences of our actions, and no one understood that better than me.

Her body jerked with the force of the bullet, Brandy's scream filling the room as my sister fell backward. She was grown now, and yet as I watched the life leave her eyes, I knew in my mind she would forever remain my shadow. The girl in braids who peeked around corners and asked a million questions, even when I'd come home covered in blood.

"Stop killing people in front of me, you crazy assholes!"

Memories of my sister would keep, but Brandy wouldn't. She'd reached her breaking point, not that I blamed her. There weren't too many people that could handle being kidnapped, tied to a chair, then have three people killed in front of them. Honestly, it was a miracle she wasn't catatonic at this point.

Each of her breaths was invaluable to me, which was why I would always protect her and her sister. But I couldn't condone her betrayal, even if it was to save her sister, or ignore the fact that she was an undercover DEA agent.

The time had come for me to let her go, but I knew I wasn't up to the task. It would have to be someone I could trust with her safety and that damn sure wasn't Marco at the moment. That fucker was still on my shit list for threatening her, and I wasn't all the way sure I wouldn't still kill him.

I turned to Marek. "Are we square?"

He nodded. "A life for a life."

It was a quote I'd heard many times from my father. A motto of the Braterstwo. Marek, like my father, stuck to the code. In all the years he'd served my father, the only time he'd ever slipped up was with my mother.

He'd paid for that mistake a thousand times over, so killing him had seemed like a waste. Especially when I may have needed the leverage to outrun my father. Now I was glad I'd never used it because I gained something even more valuable in the end. His loyalty.

"I'll clean up things here and see to your son's arrangements if you can make sure Brandy gets home safely."

Brandy jumped when Marek touched her arm, his knife resting in the other hand, ready to cut her bindings.

He stilled, his voice low and soothing as he spoke. "You'll be more comfortable once we cut you loose."

After everything that's happened, we should get you home so you can rest."

She studied my face for a minute, her brows furrowed, before she nodded her consent. After Marek had removed her bindings and set the chair down, she ran her hands up and down her arms. Her eyes never left mine, two of the fingers on her right hand rubbing together.

When she made no move to leave, I prompted her. "You'll be safe with Marek."

She wrenched her gaze from mine and stared down at the arm Marek had offered her like it was a snake about ready to strike her dead. Licking her lips, she shook her head no. He let his arm fall to his side and walked away. Every few steps, she'd stop and glance over her shoulder, giving me the chance to change my mind. I wasn't going to, but that didn't mean I wouldn't torture myself and watch her until she disappeared around the corner.

"Get the fuck out of here," I bit out through clenched teeth once she was gone.

Marco could thank Ryder for the only warning he would ever get from me. If he didn't move quickly enough, well, that one was on him.



The DEA pulled me off the case after they found my boss's body. Well, most of it anyway. Before they would let me return to work, though, they wanted a psych eval. I was told it was standard protocol for all agents coming out of the field, no matter the outcome of the case. But let's face facts here, if they were waiting on me to pass a psych eval, I wouldn't be going back. That didn't stop the lady from incessantly calling me, though.

After three days, I finally relented, just to get it over with, so here I sat. She stared, her pen twirling in her hand, lined notepad on her perfectly pleated black dress pants. I suppose she was attractive in a brutal sort of way. All the lines on her face were sharp angles, especially her nose and chin. My mind wandered as I focused on the deep dimple in her chin.

She cleared her throat. "How do you feel the mission went?"

"Shitty. Sideways. Colossal disaster. Take your pick."

"Hmm. Can you tell me why."

There she went with the pen twirling. It was very distracting.

“It’s classified.”

That worked in the movies, didn’t it? I could hardly sit here and tell the woman I was a broken shell before, and now I was this inhuman thing that stared off into space for large chunks of the day. It didn’t take a psychiatrist to figure out I was mentally fucked.

“Anything you say here I’m required to keep confidential. You may tell me anything you like.”

Cough. Pen twirl. Can I say fuck off then? Probably not.

“I was a computer analyst. A nerd with no field experience. My boss threw me into the deep end with the sharks and I wasn’t the only one who got eaten. I can’t return to my normal duties until you pass me, and we both know you won’t. To be honest, I’m not even sure why I’m here.”

It was a fuck off of sorts, but at least a polite one. How I managed it, I wasn’t sure. Normally, stuff slipped out that I couldn’t take back.

“Why do you think I won’t pass you?”

Pen twirl. Was she for real? Might as well get this over with.

“I’m damaged, deficient, a freak. There’s only one man on this Earth who can touch me without me freaking out, and he’s crazier than I am. But I’d still fuck him in a heartbeat if he wanted me to. Shall I go on, or are we done here?”

She smiled. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

What the hell did that mean? Maybe I got a psychiatrist that was also a psycho. Wouldn’t that be something? Like a Hannibal Lecter type, who sat there and fucked with people’s heads all day.

“Do I amuse you?”

She was still smiling, and it was a little creepy.

“Sorry. I was thinking about a psychiatrist being off their rocker.”

Her face fell. Balls. I’d gone and said the wrong thing again. Why couldn’t I even fail a psych eval without upsetting people?

“Mental health is no laughing matter.” She looked down her nose at me. “Now, shall we continue?”

Was it bad if I felt like screaming fuck my life?

From outside the door, I heard raised voices before the door swung open. I sat up, because I thought when you saw a shrink that you were supposed to lie down on the couch. There stood the last person I expected to see, the skinny little receptionist lady hiding behind her.

“I’m sorry Dr. Weston. I don’t know who this person is. I told her you were with a patient and that she couldn’t come in here, but she just brushed past me.”

Stella turned her head. “You’ve done your job and recapped what everyone can plainly see. Run along now, back to your desk, and look down your nose at the next person in line.”

She was a sight for sore eyes. How I’d missed her these last few days. Stella turned back to me and nodded at the psychiatrist. Briefly, I wondered if she thought Stella was off her rocker too.

“Bitch, if you’d answered my calls, I wouldn’t have had to drive all the way to Austin to talk to you. Cherry’s been worried sick, and I hate to say it, but I sorta miss her being perky.”

Balls. I’d deleted Stella’s number from my phone, thinking she probably hated me, and hadn’t answered any of the odd numbers that had tried to call me. A day after I walked away from Hunter, my sister had shown up at my apartment, after she blew up my phone, but I’d yelled at her to leave me alone. And she had.

The only people I’d spoken to since I’d gotten home were the agency and the psychiatrist’s office. And I’d

only answered the call from the psychiatrist, after multiple tries, because my new boss had given me the number and told me to expect a call.

“Sorry. I figured you’d never want to talk to me again, after, you know.”

“Oh, you mean the part where you were secretly undercover trying to save Cherry when you didn’t even need to?”

Her hand rested on the hip that was sticking out just a little, and for the first time since I left the club, I smiled. What could I say? Stella might be crass and have a bit of an attitude, but she would always be my ride or die.

“How did you even find me?”

“I went by your apartment, and when you didn’t answer I asked Cherry to track your phone.” She shrugged. “I wasn’t about to turn around and go back after I’d driven all this way to talk to you.”

The psychiatrist cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, and you are?”

“Her best friend.” Stella crossed her arms over her chest. “Who came to tell her she won’t be needing your services because she’s not crazy.”

That was entirely debatable, but I appreciated her vote of confidence, anyhow.

“Stella, mental health is no laughing matter.”

If I said so myself, I had her snooty tone down pat as I parroted the psychiatrist’s earlier words back.

Stella smirked back. “That’s devious as shit if you’re sitting here to fuck with her.”

“Not really.” I could feel my face fall. “I have to pass a psych eval in order to return to work.”

“I wasn’t aware Tweak put such strict measures in place.”

She had to be fucking with me.

“What?”

“You don’t belong here, and you know it. Just look at you. Have you even showered today cause you look like shit.”

Her assessment of my abysmal appearance was spot on. Showering had been beyond me, and I wasn’t even sure if I’d brushed my hair. About the only thing that was fresh on me was my teeth, cause even in my comatose state I needed to have some standards.

“Nice to know I can pull off homeless chic with a side of depressed.” Her lips twitched, and I hated to disappoint her, but one of us had to have our feet on solid ground. “You’re my best friend, my only one really besides Cherry, but I can’t go back to the club. I can’t see Hunter knowing that he doesn’t want me. Watch him move on when I’ll never be able to.”

“That’s hilarious and a little delusional.” She raised an eyebrow. “What about Hunter’s psycho obsessive personality makes you think he’s likely to move on?”

I looked down at my hands. “He doesn’t love me. It’s over.”

From beside me, I heard the psychiatrist’s pen tapping her note pad. “Do you love him?”

What kind of stupid question was that? You couldn’t make a man love you. Especially not one who wasn’t capable of it. It was pointless to sit around and try.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does.”

She sounded exasperated, not that I blamed her. We both knew I’d been a less than an ideal patient today, and that was before my best friend hijacked our session.

“Yes.”

The answer didn’t require any thought. Again, not that it mattered.

“Then go back to this club and be with him.”

Her answer was surprising. Maybe I really had gotten a shrink that was off her rocker.

“Dr. Weston, I hate to tell you this, but that’s horrible advice. Hunter isn’t capable of loving anyone and he let me go, not the other way around.”

She tapped her pen on the lined notebook as she crossed her legs. “Was this Hunter not the one you were speaking of earlier? The only one who could touch you? There were some other things said that are best left unrepeated.”

“Yes,” I sighed, feeling more exhausted than I did when I came in here. Again, not that any of this mattered.

“You obviously experienced some sort of trauma that caused your body to shut down. If he made it start up again, so to speak, there has to be a reason. I think you owe it to yourself to explore what it was about him that allowed you to feel safe enough to entrust him with your body.”

When I looked over at Stella, deep lines had etched themselves into the space between her brows. It touched something deep down inside of me I thought was lost.

“I don’t know what went wrong between you two, but it’s clear you’re both miserable. Don’t be like me, take that leap, and go talk to Hunter. Regret won’t keep you warm at night, and it for damn sure can’t make you happy.”

“He’s miserable?”

It was shitty that I sounded so hopeful when I asked, but I had to know.

“Tweak said he only comes to the clubhouse for church and then leaves again right after. If anyone tries to talk to him about anything other than club business, even Pops, he walks away. At first the guys assumed he was always away on”—she looked over at the psychiatrist and

then back at me—“family business. But now Tweak wonders if he just can’t stand being in the clubhouse.”

Hope swelled in my chest. It remained to be seen if it was going to be my salvation or my downfall. Either way, Stella was right. It was better to be the embarrassing schmuck with a boombox in your hand than live with regret. But before I could face my future, I had to let go of the past.



“Never took you for a coward,” Pops drawled from behind me.

I knew it was a mistake coming back to the club this afternoon, even if I really needed a shower.

There was a choking noise and when I turned around, Pops was slapping Beast’s massive back.

“Shit,” Beast muttered as he leaned over the bar sucking in air.

“You all right, big man?”

“Yeah,” he sputtered.

Tweak turned to Cherry. “Did Pops just call Hunter out?”

Cherry sucked in a breath and slowly nodded her head, her wide eyes reminding me of the angel that I set free, growing rounder.

“This is bad,” she whispered to Tweak, shifting closer to where he stood behind the bar.

Her sister never feared me, never shied away from my nature. It was one of the many ways they were different. I wasn’t even sure why Brandy wasn’t wary of

the one man she probably should have run from. Then again, maybe she sensed she was my only weakness.

“You got something to say, old man, spit it out. I have shit to do.”

“Old man,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Maybe I am. But at least I had the balls not to run away from a woman.”

“Oh, shit.” Tweak smothered a grin behind his hand. “He went there.”

Yes, he had. I cocked my head to the side, really looking at Pops for the first time in a while. His hands were wrapped around a coffee cup. That was all I’d ever seen him drink besides beer. He released the cup to straighten out his hand, his knuckles appearing swollen, his hand shaking slightly. His hair and beard were grayer than I remembered, too. He was aging before my eyes, and yet, he was still as sharp as a tack. Even being wrong in his assumption, he was still the wisest man I knew. That didn’t mean I wouldn’t shovel his shit right back at him.

“Tell me, how did that go for you?”

Beast coughed and shook his head. Pops watched him for a second before he turned back to me. His eyes searched mine, but I doubted he’d find any answers. There was nothing there. Not anymore.

“Sometimes life gives you a shit sandwich, and you either swallow it down and move on or throw it out and start over. You can’t blame the girl for swallowing her shit sandwich. Hell, if you ask me, she licked her plate clean, which is more than most could stomach. Don’t be the dick that throws her out because of it.”

“Damn, I think Ryder has rubbed off on Pops,” Tweak said out the side of his mouth to Cherry. “Did you understand anything he just said?”

“Actually, yes.” Cherry straightened her spine and narrowed her eyes at me. “Mikołaj Kowalczyk, if you

don't get your head out of your ass and bring my sister home, I'll annoy you to death. You think I shit sunshine and rainbows now, well buckle up, mister, because I can turn things up a notch. I'll be so damned jolly it'll be like living with a Christmas elf."

Beast looked over at Pops. "Cherry just cursed."

He stroked his beard. "And used his full name."

"Not to mention threatening him with her perkiness," Tweak snorted.

I was pretty sure she had to be bluffing, because come on, no one could be that nauseatingly cheerful. But one look at her face and I knew she would try. While killing her would easily solve the problem, I never would. No matter what, I'd always protect Cherry with my life. My angel had gone through hell for her and the least I could do was make sure her efforts weren't in vain.

Still, I wasn't sure I could do what she asked. Bringing Brandy back meant chaining her to this life, and I knew she deserved better. The horror of death, the constant danger, wasn't meant for my angel.

The clubhouse door swung open and when I turned, there she was. For a second, I thought she was a figment of my imagination until I saw Stella standing behind her. Damn, she was a sight for sore eyes. Beautiful, angelic, perfect.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

I even missed the low rasp of her voice.

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"My father. It was you, not the cancer that took him, wasn't it?"

The room was silent except for Cherry's soft gasp.

"If I'd had the time to spare, I would have either brought you his head, or let you do the honors and disposed of his body for you."

“Holy shit,” Cherry whispered behind me, horrified, as she should be.

But Brandy had always been different. She ran to me, and I caught her as she jumped, her legs wrapping around my waist. Her lips pressed feather light kisses all over my face before they finally found my lips. Everything else became insignificant.

My angel might not have been born into my world, may even be horrified by parts of it, but she understood me perfectly. Her reaction proved it. She still deserved better than I could ever give her, and I’d been wrong to think that she didn’t belong.

She was my perfect match. Damaged but not broken. Never that. Her halo couldn’t be crushed under the weight of any man.

Her lips were heaven, but I wanted to be buried deep inside of her. Needed to feel her wrapped around me. Needed to own every luscious curve of her body. There was no turning back. She would be mine, even beyond the grave.

I’d never be able to love her, at least not in the traditional sense of the word, but she’d never have to doubt my loyalty. Every dark, depraved, fucked-up piece of me was hers to do with as she pleased.

Her pout when our lips parted was adorable, but I needed to see in order to get her safely upstairs. She looked around, a pink tinge painting her cheeks. God, she was beautiful.

“Hunter, everyone is staring.”

I strode away from the bar and ran up the stairs with my angel in my arms, not giving two shits about what any of them thought.

“And if they come anywhere near my room, they’ll hear you screaming too.”

Her blush traveled down her neck, making my cock thicken against my zipper. Needless to say, opening my

door was a rather painful endeavor.

She slid down my body, her eyes searching mine the second her feet touched the floor. “Did you get hurt carrying me up here? I could have walked, you know.”

My eyes fell to her lips, plump and pink. They would look so beautiful, struggling to wrap themselves around my girth.

“Fuck.”

She bit into her lip. “What do you need?”

“For you to wrap those pretty lips around my cock.”

Her eyes grew wide as understanding finally dawned. My angel wasn't like anyone else, and her ability to continually surprise me was a fascination I doubted I'd ever tire of. Yes, she was blushing furiously, but she had a small smile on her face as her deft fingers made quick work of my jeans. Between my size and all the piercings, women never wanted to give me a blow job, let alone smiled at the prospect. Not that they didn't enjoy both when I fucked them.

My cock sprang free, and I had my T-shirt halfway over my head when I felt her tongue wrapping around me. Jesus. I hurried up and finished tugging off my shirt and looked down. Her eyes met mine as her lips stretched around the head of my dick. She was magnificent on her knees before me, tears at the corners of her eyes as she swallowed as much of my cock as she could.

“Such a good girl, mój anioł,” I purred as I stroked her cheeks, moving stray strands of hair away from her face. “Eagerly sucking my cock.”

You'd have thought my cock was chocolate ice cream the way she licked it as she slid back on her haunches. Then she'd rush forward, metal clanking against her teeth as she choked on me, tears streaming down her cheeks. Over and over, until my balls tightened painfully. My hands dove into her hair, yanking on the strands as I tried to pull her off me.

She only hollowed out her cheeks, sucking harder, and I stared into her eyes as I came in her mouth. My inhuman roar filled the room as I watched her throat work as it struggled to swallow my come. Fuck, she was magnificent.

I could barely stand when she released me. Her pink tongue darted out to catch a little bit of my come at the corner of her mouth and I groaned.

Her brow furrowed as she stared at the floor. “It felt right, what I was doing, and you came, but I’ve never done that before. At least not willingly. Should I do something different? You know, for next time.”

Damn, with her mixture of eagerness and innocence it was easy to forget. Especially when remembering made me all murder-ish. It made me want to dig him up just so I could kill him again. Slower this time with a dash more pain. Then repeat. Over and over and until I felt satisfied, though I doubted I ever would. There was nothing that could make up for what he’d done.

My hand stroked along her jaw as I tilted her head up. She didn’t meet my eyes at first, and I patiently waited until she did. I hated that look of uncertainty on her face. It was time I erased it.

“You are sheer perfection.”

The words easily tumbled from my lips because they were the truth. I wasn’t one to pander to a woman in order to offer her reassurance or comfort, because frankly, I’d never given two shits. Love might not be in the cards for me, but she’d have the rest. My words weren’t flowery or poetic, but they didn’t need to be because she understood me. Probably better than anyone else ever had, even my own mother.

I held my hand out, and she took it as she stood, her breath catching in her throat. There was nothing better than how she reacted to me. The way she leaned into me, craved my rough touch. All things considered, I’d call it a miracle if I believed in such things.

My fingers trailed along her pearls on the way to the top button of her shirt. There was no way I'd make it through all the buttons but for some reason I felt the need to tease her a little. Watch her eyes on my hands as I worked a few of them free.

She sucked in a breath when I suddenly grabbed the bottom of her shirt and lifted it over her head. The outline of her ribs still visible when I threw it to the floor. I fingered the little flower on the latch between her breasts before I set them free. They were perfect like the rest of her, the rosy tips taut and begging for attention.

I gladly dropped to my knees before her, her beautifully gleaming pussy at eye level. She smelled fantastic, that heady mix of her arousal and flowers. Her hands dropped to my shoulders as I lifted a leg and draped it over my shoulder, eager to bury my face in the best pussy known to man.

Her little mewls and gasping moans as I ate her out like she was my last supper only spurred me on. As my tongue worked her clit, I slid a finger inside her, curling it upward. The leg on my shoulder twitched, and I added a second finger. She grabbed my hair, yanking on the strands as she came in my mouth, and I knew I'd never tire of her taste. Or anything else about her.

She wasn't just sheer perfection when she sucked my cocked. The way she shouted her pleasure was my ultimate aphrodisiac and I couldn't get enough. One orgasm rolled into the next and my fingers dug into her hips, refusing to let her go, holding her up when she couldn't stand anymore.

The only thing that broke through my haze was the husky voice above me. "Hunter, please, I need you inside me."

How was I going to say no to a request like that? Besides, there would be plenty of time to taste her later, when her arousal dripped down her thighs from my cock.

Standing up, I turned her around, my hand at her throat as I entered her from behind. There was no waiting for her to adjust, it had been days, and my need was too great. Her cunt gripped me tight, warm, and drenched, welcoming me home. My own slice of heaven given to me by the angel who didn't know how truly powerful she was. How she ruled the dark beast inside me.

She tilted her head back, her moans filling the room. My cock swelled impossibly inside her and still she rocked against me. Those pearls, how I loved to watch them glide along the column of her neck as I fucked her.

Her cunt tightened around me, her arousal coating both of us, and I squeezed lightly. It was like an explosion, her orgasm. Exquisitely beautiful, this woman looked when she was in the throes of her pleasure. And I gave it to her. Only me.

“My pussy,” I grunted in her ear. “And I’ll kill anyone who tries to touch it. To take away what’s mine.”

She shivered in my hold, angling her head until golden eyes tinged with green stared back at me. “I was always meant to be yours, Hunter, like you are mine. No other woman can have you. Ever.”

Her breathy words of possession filled me up, spreading through my veins like blood. She was right. There would never be anyone else. None of the ones who came before mattered and there would be none after. Love might be beyond me, but loyalty I could easily give her. That she even wanted it, or me, rather demanded that I give it to her, was my undoing.

My roar of satisfaction as I emptied inside her mingled with her own cry of satisfaction. Her pussy milked every last drop from me, my body spent, satisfied, complete with it. She went limp in my arms, and I picked her up, walked her over to the bed, and gently laid her on top of it.

After I crawled in beside her, she nestled into me, just like the first time she slept in my bed. Her desire to

be skin to skin settling me, blocking out every thought that wasn't her. She had a way of wrapping around me, filling me, that I'd never wanted before.

Her voice was soft as she asked, "Do you want me to stay?"

I understood her just as well as she did me. That wasn't what she was really asking. What happened to her may have damaged a part of her, yes, but in my eyes, it only made her stronger. And she would need that strength to be with a man like me.

"My beautiful anioł, I will always want you. In my home and in my bed. There will never be a time that I will let you leave me. Even if you wanted to."

She huffed out a breath and muttered, "I think you have the wrong sister with that description."

I pulled back and tipped her chin up with my finger. "I don't think I do. The beautifully damaged angel is the only one capable of bringing the devil to his knees."

Thank you for reading.

If you enjoyed Brandy, and her dark protector, Hunter, then you will love Stella and Switch. The only thing that could bring this former VP back into the MC's fold is Stella. In this dark friends to lover's tale, find out what happens when the club discovers Stella has been taken.

TORN is coming December of 2023. For more on Switch, and the rest of the boys from the MC, read [Defiant](#).

I'd be incredibly grateful if you would leave me a review! I'm always telling my family and friends about the sweet comments you guys leave!

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About the Author



Gladys Cross lives in South Carolina with her husband, daughter, and furbaby. When she isn't dipping her toe into the darker side of love, you'll find her reading, beating her family at cards, petting goats, or spending time outdoors. She is skilled at witty banter and has an inappropriate sense of humor that finds its way into all of her books. Her everyday life might be mundane (she prefers it that way) but her books aren't.