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DETROIT

Shady Valley Henchmen

Jessica Gadziala

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DETROIT

Shady Valley Henchmen MC #6

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Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

Everleigh's Playlist

"Cardigan" - Taylor Swift

"You All Over Me" - Taylor Swift/ Maren Morris

"Sweet Nothing" - Taylor Swift

"Paper Rings" - Taylor Swift

"False God" - Taylor Swift

"Delicate" - Taylor Swift

"New Year's Day" - Taylor Swift

CHAPTER ONE

Detroit

“Time to get up, Casanova,” I said, kicking his foot with the tip of my shoe. “You gotta get back to your place,” I added, voice rising. I stood over the couch where Rook’s body was mostly covered by the body of a blonde, naked save for a pair of red panties that weren’t covering much of her ass. Sighing, I pulled out the big guns. “Nancy Bird is looking for you!”

Rook bolted upright so fast that he nearly sent the blonde flying over the back of the couch before he had the presence of mind enough to grab her.

“The fuck, man?” he grumbled, bleary eyes rapidly blinking in my direction.

“I gotta drop your ass back at your place before the gym,” I reminded him.

It wasn’t often he was allowed to spend a night at the clubhouse. His parole officer, the notorious—and all-around-

loathed—Nancy Bird, was constantly on his ass, monitoring every other move of his. Especially since she finally approved his request to move to an apartment in Shady Valley, and “work” at Nyx’s karate place.

She watched him with the kind of attention to detail that made you wonder if the woman had any life outside of work. Because Rook was just one of many of her ex-cons that she was keeping an eye on. And she was constantly up his ass.

The only reason he was allowed to stay last night was because Nancy had done a surprise visit not once, but two days in a row, and no one figured she would be obsessive enough to try to do a third day in a row. And I’d also promised to get him home before I went to the gym. Which everyone knew was at the crack of dawn.

“Shit. Right. Right,” he said, rubbing his eyes with one hand while his other absentmindedly massaged the ass cheek of the blonde who’d settled back over him. “Ah...” he started, shooting the side of the woman’s head a guilty look.

He didn’t remember her name.

“Lani,” I said in the quietest voice I could muster. I mean, yeah, most of the club girls knew what they were getting into with the guys. A no-strings fuck. But it had to be a bit dehumanizing to realize a man didn’t remember your name after you were intimate.

“Listen, Lani, honey,” he said as she grumbled at being spoken to so early. “I have to get home,” he told her as he slowly started to slide out from under her body. “You can just hang here,” he told her, but she was already snuggling into the throw pillow, not caring that he was gone. Beside, maybe, for his warmth.

Rook was considerate enough to grab the blanket off the back of the couch and drape it over her before doing a long stretch, then patting his hands to his stomach.

“Right. Clothes. Where are my clothes?” he said, looking around the living room that was littered with quite a few

articles of clothing. Enough of them, in fact, that some had to belong to other brothers and girls than him and Lani.

I waited as he fumbled around, finding a tee and his jeans. He stumbled as he tried to get his feet into his shoes while still half-drunk from the party the night before that had gone well into the morning.

“Made you coffee,” I told him, holding out the travel mug when he finally located all his things.

“No shit,” he said, surprise and a hint of joy teasing his features.

After his time in prison, he was still getting accustomed to people being halfway decent, and doing things without something being expected in return.

“Listen, you leave her pretty ass alone,” he said, pointing a finger and a stern look at the club cat who was looking at the blonde from his position standing on the coffee table.

Our club cat was known for loving men and hating everything to do with women, often swatting at them for no other infraction than walking near him.

“Thanks, man,” he said, taking the coffee from me as I chugged some of my pre-workout. I didn’t usually need it, but the party was loud and long, and I hadn’t slept well. I needed the boost. “What time is it?”

“Five-forty-five,” I told him as we moved outside. Right into the dark of night still. With fall upon us, the sun slumbered till six-thirty in the morning. “What?” I asked, feeling his gaze on my profile.

“Why do you get up this early?” he asked. “The gym is open all day, you know. And most of the night.”

“It’s less crowded this early,” I told him.

“Crowded? In Shady Valley?” he asked with a dubious raised brow.

That was fair. It was a small town. Sure, it had been growing after a long hiatus since the prison brought work and business back to the area after the warehouse we now called

home had shuttered a long time back. But it was still a little nowhere town just on this side of Death Valley.

“Chilly,” Rook murmured to his coffee as we got into the SUV.

October was coming on hard and fast.

It was something I liked about this part of California. We still got all the seasons. Spring was warm, summer hot, autumn chilly, and winter actually cold. Not ‘why the hell do I even live here’ cold, but cold enough that Christmas feels like Christmas, and you’re glad when spring comes back around.

“Got any plans for today?” I asked.

“Other than plotting ways to make Nancy’s life more difficult?” he asked. “Not really.”

“Rook...” I said, sighing.

“I’m not actually going to do it,” he conceded. “Just fantasy life ruining,” he admitted. “Makes it possible to deal with her when she’s raking her hands through my underwear, and upturning all my drawers like I’m hiding contraband. I didn’t even go to prison for drugs,” he added with a tight set to his jaw.

I understood his hatred for the woman.

Not because she had a job to do and was doing it. Everyone who got out of jail early had to deal with parole. It was mandatory in California unless you maxed out your sentence.

But the fact that she relished it, that she seemed to take joy in making each of her parolee’s lives more difficult, that she always assumed that they were all still criminals, despite having done their time.

Other than that, Nancy was also being especially cruel to Rook, who she wouldn’t allow to go see his poor mother who’d been institutionalized while he was away. Despite the fact that he’d even managed to get her doctors at the mental hospital to write a letter to Nancy, telling her that Rook’s mom

might actually show some improvement if she got to see her son again.

It was killing Rook. Who'd gone to prison for beating the shit out of a conman who'd swindled his mom, and seemingly stolen what was left of the poor woman's sanity in the process.

He was about a year into this fucking fight. And it felt like there was no end in sight.

"Thanks, man," he said, looking up at his apartment over Nyx's karate studio, still dark, no woman waiting in the shadows to catch him still drunk and not in his place when he was supposed to be.

"Anytime," I said, waiting to make sure he got in and turned the lights on before swinging a K-turn and making my way toward the gym.

I'd been... mostly honest with Rook about why I went to the gym early. It was almost always empty at this hour.

But that wasn't why I cared, in and of itself. He was right; it was never busy enough to really be a bother.

What it was, though, was a damn security risk for the woman they had manning the place.

I didn't care that there were cameras, that you couldn't get in without putting your card into the reader outside.

That was an illusion of safety, not safety itself.

Ever since I'd come in because a party was still raging at five-something in the morning, and I wanted to get away from it, and found said woman getting backed into a corner by some meathead who couldn't see, or didn't care, about all the signs of discomfort she was displaying, yeah, I decided that early mornings were now my workout time.

I was pissed enough about the arrangement to seek out Gav, the owner, and have words about it. He'd insisted that she wasn't alone, that there was always the cleaning guy around.

The cleaning guy. Who was usually in the back smoking, or playing games on his phone, and not actually paying attention.

But he *was* there. And the girl claimed she was okay with the arrangement. So there was nothing I could do about it but be there just in case.

I walked up past the floor-to-ceiling windows, a small bit of condensation pooling around the bottom of the glass, the place so lit up that it practically worked as a streetlight outside.

You could see right in, all the equipment lined up, mostly unused, short of one of the prison guards who was getting a workout in before he headed to the prison.

I was scanning my membership card when I saw the front desk clerk moving behind the desk with a big basket full of freshly laundered white towels. Hand towels I knew she would stand there and neatly roll until the neighboring basket was full again, this time with easily grabbed hand towels to wipe sweat with, then get tossed in to get cleaned all over again.

I like it, she'd claimed once when I'd remarked about how futile it must have felt to be doing that folding over and over during her shift, *it's meditative*.

There wasn't a gym uniform, per se. But you were expected to look sporty, and to wear something from the gym's own merch line. Of which there were a lot of options.

This morning, she had on a pair of sneakers that looked expensive, but were knockoffs of the ones that would actually give her feet some support. This was why when she didn't think anyone was watching, she would sit and roll her ankles and move her feet around, trying to ease the ache. Her black leggings were tight, hugging every curve, and paired with a light pink hoodie because she always said the gym was too cold.

Her blonde hair was pulled up into two high ponytails toward the back of her head with a couple of strands hanging down to frame her face.

And, fuck, that face.

I got why Gav wanted her to be the face of the company. All soft, feminine features, big doelike brown eyes with lots of

lashes around them, and a cute little cupid's bow mouth.

She didn't wear much makeup, and I didn't know if it was a rule of Gav's, or because she just didn't like it. But she usually had on some mascara and some sort of tinted lip balm.

She wore small gold hoops at her ears, despite Gav telling her it was against the rules more than a dozen times.

They were a gift from my father before he died, she told me, shaking her head, I'm not taking them off.

"Hey, you!" she greeted, giving me that million-dollar smile of hers. I knew she gave it to everyone. But it was hard not to feel the impact of it when it fell on me regardless. "You look tired," she said as I chugged more of my pre-workout.

"I am," I agreed.

"The clubhouse was all lit up when I made my way to work," she said, nodding knowingly. "I'm surprised you got any sleep. I have a very strict nighttime routine," she added.

Somehow, I'd already imagined that.

Everything about Everleigh was soft, feminine, and almost meticulously put-together. I could see her with a ten-part skincare routine that she did after having a cup of tea, brushing her teeth and hair, then getting into some matching PJ set, turning on some soft music, maybe a white noise machine, then climbing into bed.

"I'd say you get used to it," I said. "But you really don't." Ruckus laughter and screaming sex was loud no matter how many times you tried to sleep through it.

"I would be a complete bear if I didn't get my sleep," she admitted, shaking her head at herself.

I couldn't imagine her being a bear.

The closest I'd seen to her being even a little bit moody was when Slash accidentally got Gav to block Taylor Swift on the radio, which prompted her to make him a smoothie that was foul-tasting and bitter to punish him for it. But even then, through her little rant about her shitty day and wanting to listen to some pop music, she'd been sweet.

“I have a new neighbor beside me. He’s a streamer, and he plays all night long,” she told me as she rolled a towel. “I had to buy soundproofing tiles to put on that whole wall to muffle it.”

She bought soundproofing tiles to muffle it instead of asking him to keep it down. That really seemed to sum up Everleigh to me. Non-confrontational. Always trying to be pleasant.

The only time anyone had ever seen her truly unhinged was when her sister’s abusive ex got out of prison, making her trek out to Morgaine’s place and pay her to take him out.

Which would have seemed really extreme, especially for a woman like Everleigh, until you saw the pictures of what that man had done to her sister, leaving her swollen, bruised, and sexually abused, stuck in a hospital bed. And that was after months or years of other abuse.

I’d have had him killed too.

Or, rather, I’d have done the killing myself.

I didn’t have a sister. But I had a cousin I would rip someone’s throat out for putting a rough hand on. And I wouldn’t typically call myself a violent man. Despite my profession and the shit that came along with that.

“What time do you go to bed?” I asked. “If you’re here before me each morning,” I added, not wanting to sound like a complete fucking creep.

“Oh, I’m going to sound like I’m ancient,” she said, shooting me a sheepish smile. “I go to bed at nine-thirty,” she admitted.

“Reasonable time, since you gotta be getting up at five. Or before then. Are you just a morning person?”

“I’m a... I like having my afternoons free kind of person,” she said, shrugging.

“Makes sense,” I said as she finished with her last towel, went to put it back in the basket, then thought better and passed it to me instead. “Thanks.”

“Have a good workout,” she said, giving me that big smile again. “I’ll have your smoothie ready when you’re done,” she added, turning to put the towel basket in its place beside the counter.

I moved in, getting right to work since I didn’t need to change or store shit in the lockers.

I was about an hour into my workout when I saw several cars pull up on the street. Two patrol cars and a car I recognized immediately, even before my brother slid out of the seat and stood beside the door for a second, speaking to one of the uniformed officers.

Yeah.

My brother.

The cop.

Detective now, apparently.

I say ‘apparently’ because we didn’t speak. We hadn’t since I’d gotten my patch for the club. From that day on, it seemed we were enemies. Each of us on the other side of the law.

We looked a lot alike.

Same height, dark skin, brown eyes, square faces, strong jaws, kind of stern brows. The only real difference came from my many hours spent in the gym, building bigger muscles. He was fit under his gray suit, but not as bulky as I was.

The hell was he doing here?

Nothing on the street was really open yet, outside of maybe the diner.

Then I watched with a strange tightening in my stomach as four officers and my brother moved toward the gym’s doors.

I’d put my weights down before they even got buzzed in by a concerned-looking Everleigh.

Were they here for me?

I racked my brain, trying to find any situation that might point back to me. But I couldn't think of anything. Not in recent history, anyway.

But there was no one else here, save for a woman and her gym bro boyfriend.

I took several steps forward, watching my brother move up to the desk as the uniforms flanked either side.

That tightening feeling in my stomach intensified as my brother's hard, disapproving gaze watched an uncomfortable-looking Everleigh.

"Everleigh Barker, you're under arrest—" he started, and my fucking heart plummeted.

Everleigh?

What the fuck could Everleigh have ever done?

I was still taking steps forward as one of the cops moved toward her.

"For drug trafficking," my brother finished.

What the *fuck*?

Drug trafficking?

Everleigh once confessed she'd never even touched weed, even though it had been legal for ages in the state.

No goddamn way was she trafficking drugs.

"What? No," Everleigh said, eyes huge as the cop demanded she put her arms behind her back. "No, you have the wrong person. I've never even touched drugs," she insisted, and I couldn't understand how my brother didn't see she was telling the truth.

"You have the right to remain silent—"

"You have to have the wrong person," Everleigh said as the cop continued to Mirandize her as he cuffed her, then started to push her out from behind the desk. "I didn't... I wouldn't," she said, eyes pleading with my brother.

And that cold bastard was completely unmoved.

Rage bubbled up as I took another couple steps forward.

Everleigh caught the movement, and she turned those pleading eyes to me.

I wasn't unmoved.

I was moved.

I was fucking gutted for her.

"I didn't do this," she insisted, eyes round and watery. "I didn't."

"I believe you," I said, nodding as her lower lip trembled.

It was only then that my brother's gaze finally slid in my direction. If his eyes were cold before, they were fucking frigid then.

"Of course *you* do," he said, disdain dripping from his tongue.

I ignored him, and the way his blind hatred still cut, even after all these years, and focused on Everleigh instead.

"Don't say a fucking word except asking for a lawyer," I told her, tone deadly serious because I knew how easily cops could talk in circles until you were so turned around that you finally just admitted to shit. Even if you didn't do it.

She nodded to me before she was pulled outside.

I was watching her be pushed into the backseat of a cruiser when my brother spoke.

"Poor girl, but I guess if you wallow around in the mud with pigs for long enough, you become one too," he said, making my gaze cut to his.

This time, it was my tongue dripping venom.

"Funny. I only see one *pig* here," I said, watching as his gaze flicked fire before he banked it down.

But it was too late.

I knew I got to him.

He knew I knew.

“Your little girlfriend is going away for a long time,” he said before turning and walking out of the gym.

Not if I had anything to say about it.

CHAPTER TWO

Everleigh

It all happened in a blur as I found myself sort of outside of my body, watching as I was searched, fingerprinted, had my mugshot taken, and was placed into a cell.

What the hell was happening?

How was I sitting in a jail cell right now?

I didn't sell drugs.

I didn't even *do* drugs.

I mean I was so clueless about drugs that I had someone laugh in my face when discussing a song called *White Girl* and I had no idea that it was a slang for cocaine.

For God's sake, I thought having a glass of wine without company to share it with was kind of naughty.

I wasn't trafficking drugs!

Even just thinking about it again had my chest rising and falling at an alarming rate, making my head fuzzy.

“Hey, you’re gonna be okay,” another female voice said, making me turn my head to notice that I wasn’t in the cell alone like I first thought. Though, to be fair, I was in such a daze when I’d been put inside that I probably wouldn’t have noticed if a dozen other women were in there with me.

“I really don’t think so,” I said, placing a hand on my chest where it felt like my heart was trying to make a break for it.

“Don’t feel like it, but you will be,” she said, and I looked more closely at her.

I guess I would put her in her thirties with red hair, a lot of makeup, and the kind of outfit that, given the day of the week, I ventured a guess meant she was possibly a sex worker.

“The first time is never easy,” she said. “You getting charged?” she asked.

“I, ah, yes. I think so, yes.”

“So, this is just a holding cell,” she told me.

“Holding for what?” I asked.

“Until the van comes from the county jail. And that’s where they’re going to keep our asses until your arraignment.”

“Arraignment?” I asked, suddenly cursing myself for not being one of those true crime girlies, so I would already understand all of this. I felt as clueless as a baby. And I suddenly regretted all of those rom-coms and romance dramas that I was obsessed with. They were getting me nowhere here.

“It’s when you’ll go before a judge to plead guilty or not guilty,” she said.

“I’m not guilty.”

“Course not. Me neither,” she said with a wicked little smirk. “If you don’t have one, you’ll have your court-appointed lawyer with you then.”

Right.

A lawyer.

That was what Detroit had said to me.

I needed a lawyer.

God, Detroit.

He'd witnessed my humiliating arrest. Did he think I was some sort of drug dealer now? I shouldn't have cared what he thought, but I did. I guess when you saw someone day in and day out for years, you kind of felt self-conscious when they saw you hauled away in handcuffs.

"Okay," I said, nodding toward the woman, trying to understand. "How long until then? Today?" I asked.

To that, she let out a raspy laugh.

"Nah, girl. They got forty-eight hours to get you in front of a judge. Then you plead whatever you're gonna plead, and the judge will decide if you get bail or not."

Bail.

Money.

Money I most certainly didn't have.

Money my sister and mom didn't have either.

Oh, my God.

I was going to have to tell them about this.

That was mortifying.

But they would have to believe me that I was innocent.
Right?

"If I can't make bail?"

"Then it's back to County."

"County. County jail?" I asked. "I don't... I don't even know what that means," I admitted.

"You'll learn soon enough. Van should come before noon," she told me, glancing out the cell door to the clock on the wall. "Just a big ol' room full of other women and bunks. They got cells, of course, but we got an overcrowding problem," she explained. "So all the new girls sleep in the common room in bunks."

“But... But... what about... the bathrooms?” I asked. If there was one thing I knew about jail, it was that there was a toilet in your cell. And you were expected to use it even if your cellmate was in the room with you.

“There’s a room with three toilets and half walls between ‘em. You’re gonna be over your insecurity after the strip search,” she told me, making my stomach plummet.

Strip search?

How utterly... dehumanizing.

“Shit. Okay. Relax. They don’t use ‘em all the time. Not anymore,” she tried to comfort me. “The law got stricter on them the past few years. You might not have to do one. They don’t touch you anyway. Just make you lift your titties and bend over. That’s it.”

“That’s... *it*?” I choked out, feeling nauseated.

I didn’t get naked in front of people. I mean, I barely felt comfortable being naked with a boyfriend. I had kinda always been a ‘let’s do it in the dark’ kind of girl.

“Listen,” this woman said, acting like a mother figure to a poor, scared child. “These women, they’ve seen a million sets of titties and coochies and asses. Trust me, they ain’t thinking about yours during or after.”

“Right,” I agreed, but that somehow didn’t make it any better.

“What’s your name, hon?” she asked.

“Everleigh,” I said.

“Everleigh. I’m Della. I’ll be there for ya, okay? Been to County more times than you can imagine,” she said. “They know me there. I’ll look out for you. But it’s not like how it is when you see prison shows. The girls... they tend to be calmer. You’re not gonna get shanked in the showers,” she added.

And that somehow didn’t make things any better. Because the mention of showers made me once again realize that I would be naked where other people could see me.

This couldn't be happening.

It just could *not* be happening.

“Two days, Evy, girl,” Della said. “That’s all. You’ll probably get bail.”

“But I can’t pay it,” I said, hearing the sob caught in my throat, and trying to swallow it down. Crying would be seen as a sign of weakness, right? And the last thing I wanted was to be seen as weak to all of these women. Regardless of what Della said about the general atmosphere there.

“Hey, you know, sweet girl like you, you got people out there who care about you. They’ll find a way. There’s always ways. There’s a whole industry around getting people out of jail,” she said.

She was right.

My mom and sister would do anything.

The problem was, I couldn’t ask that of them.

Bayleigh finally had a happy little life going for her. And my mom was a little strapped for cash after footing the bill for a lot of Bayleigh’s therapy and living expenses while she recovered and started to rebuild outside of Shady Valley.

Maybe I should have moved with them.

I’d been stubborn and dug in my heels about staying. What can I say? I was big on creature comforts. I like consistency and really hated change.

Starting over had sounded terrifying and overwhelming. So I’d stayed.

But I should have gone.

None of this would be happening if I’d gone with them.

I closed my eyes tight against the onslaught of tears, knowing I had to keep it together. There would be a time and a place for falling apart. This was not it.

“I didn’t do this, Della,” I said, the fear and confusion leeching into my words as I turned my head to look over at

her.

She stared at me a long minute. “I believe you,” she said, nodding. “Girls like you don’t end up here often.”

“They took my earrings,” I said, and that brought the urge to cry back and stronger than before.

“They have to give them back. You’ll get them when you’re released,” she said. “That’s why you have to sign about your possessions,” she added.

Right.

Okay.

That made sense.

They couldn’t just *steal* my earrings.

“Is the food in prison really as bad as they say?” I asked, looking over at Della when she let out that raspy laugh again.

“First, this is gonna be jail, not prison. There’s a difference. But not in the food. It sucks ass. Trays usually have like five compartments. And in my experience, three of those are always some sort of unidentifiable slop. But there’s usually some sort of bread. And a salad or veg. You’ll survive on it for two days.”

I was a bit dubious.

I knew it made me sound really high-maintenance, but I was picky about food. Certain smells and textures made me want to gag.

But she was right.

I could survive on bread and salad for two days. I could survive on nothing for two days if I needed to.

It was going to be fine.

Fine.

And then once I was out on bail, however that was going to come to pass, I could figure out what the heck was going on.

Della filled me in on a few unspoken rules about being in jail, and I soaked up the information until there was a sudden guard at the door.

My stomach lurched, thinking of the jail van.

“Everleigh Barker,” he said, making me rush to stand.

“Yes?” I asked, hoping he was going to say that this was all just a big misunderstanding, and that I was free to go.

“Your lawyer is here.”

“I don’t have—“

“Oh, good,” Della cut me off, voice a little loud, making me turn to see her giving me big eyes. “Go get this sorted out, girl,” she said.

I nodded, then followed the officer, even though what I said was true.

I didn’t have a lawyer.

But I was led to a small room that must have been, you know, like an interrogation room or something.

And, sure enough, a man in a very expensive-looking suit was standing there waiting for me.

He was tall and fit under that tailored suit, with light brown hair, a classically handsome face covered with a bit of scruff, like maybe he hadn’t gotten a chance to shave because he’d been in such a rush to get here, and deep green eyes.

He gave a pointed look to the camera in the corner of the room, and the officer walked over to pull the power cord from the back.

As soon as the officer was gone, the lawyer gestured toward the chair on the other side of the table, and I moved to sit down.

“Everleigh Barker, I presume,” he said, giving me a tight smile.

“I, ah, yes,” I said, nodding for emphasis.

“I’m Simon Evertz. And you are a very lucky woman,” he said.

I couldn’t stop the snort that escaped me, but my hand slapped over my mouth the second it was out.

“I’m sorry,” I rushed to say. “I just... I don’t feel very lucky today,” I told him.

“Understandable, given the charges they’re bringing against you. But you are lucky because you have me on your side,” he said, opening his briefcase, and pulling out a pad of yellow paper and a pen.

“I’m sorry, but... why do I have you on my side?” I asked. “I didn’t call a lawyer. And I don’t think you’re a public defender.”

I didn’t know a lot about menswear, but I was pretty sure a suit like that didn’t come off a rack. And custom suits, they had to cost a pretty penny.

Public defenders didn’t seem to have pretty-penny-suit money.

“I am not,” he confirmed with a nod, but didn’t explain further. “Now, this is all new for you, do you need me to discuss what happens now?”

“Now I go to County. And then I get arraigned. And maybe bail,” I said. “The other woman in the holding cell told me,” I explained to his raised brow.

“That’s exactly right. You are pleading not guilty, obviously,” he said, waving a hand like it was ridiculous to assume otherwise. “And I’m sure you will be granted bail. You’re not violent. You have no priors. Not even a parking ticket, I could find. Do you have a passport?”

“No. Ah, my idea of vacation is going to Las Vegas to see a singer do a residency,” I admitted. I wasn’t worldly. I was okay with that.

“Right. Well, there’s no good reason for the judge to deny bail then. Here, write down your sizes,” he said, passing me the paper and pen.

“My, ah, sizes?” I asked.

“Shirt, pants, shoes, bra, everything,” he said in a casual way that made me think I was being an idiot for not understanding.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted.

“You can’t go before the judge in that,” he said, waving at me. “Or in the jailhouse orange number,” he said.

“Oh, okay,” I agreed, even if I still didn’t really understand. I jotted down my sizes, then passed him his paper and pen back.

“I will have an appropriate outfit with me when I come to the courthouse. You will be allowed to change. And then we will go before the judge. All you will need to do is enter your plea. I will do the rest of the talking. Then you will get bail, and get out. Until then, try to keep yourself calm, and stay out of trouble,” he said, getting to his feet as he tucked his things away once again.

“I, ah, I don’t understand why you’re here,” I said as he started to make his way toward the door.

“To get you out of this mess,” he said as he knocked on the door.

“But...” I started, but then Simon Evertz was gone.

And I was led back to the holding cell just in time to meet the van for the jail.

“Girl,” Della said as we rode beside each other on the way to the county jail. “Was that Simon Evertz I saw?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I, ah, yeah. He’s my lawyer. I guess,” I added, still not understanding. “Why?”

“What kinda contacts do you got?” Della asked, brows raising.

“What? Why?” I asked.

“Because that fine piece of man meat is the best criminal defense attorney in the state,” she said, nodding her head.

“Really?” I asked, even more confused.

“Really really. You lucky thing. You are gonna be home, snug as a bug, in no time,” she said with a definitive little nod before turning to watch out the window as we rode the bumpy streets toward the county jail.

Simon Evertz was the best criminal defense lawyer in the whole *state*.

Why was he here for little old me then?

Me, who had to really think about it before I bought a new pair of cheap sneakers. Me, who had gotten used to buying generic. Me, who slept with a fan on all summer because I couldn't afford to keep the air blasting as much as I would need to be really comfortable.

I didn't have 'best criminal defense lawyer in the state' kind of money.

So... why was he here?

Who had sent him?

And how the hell was I ever going to be able to pay them back for this?

CHAPTER THREE

Detroit

I made my way out of the gym with my head fucking racing.

All I knew was that Everleigh was innocent of what she was being charged with.

And I had to do something about that.

It didn't take a genius to know that the woman wasn't dealing drugs. Drug dealers didn't buy off-brand sneakers. They didn't drive a twenty-year-old car that had been making a shrill noise for weeks. They didn't put so much attention to detail into their 'fake' job like she did.

This was a woman I'd watched write and erase the class schedule on a black whiteboard in neon dry erase markers until everything was perfectly aligned, and the colors working in harmony.

And if she wasn't some drug dealer rolling in excess cash, then she damn sure didn't have money for the kind of attorney she was going to need to get her the fuck out of this situation.

I was standing on the street, mind racing, when I saw someone I recognized.

Cillian Murphy.

A member of the Irish mafia.

In fact, the head of it in the area. Probably the whole state. Maybe even the West Coast in general.

“Cillian!” I yelled, running across the street to catch him before he disappeared inside The Bog, the bar he and his brothers ran.

“Detroit,” he said, brows drawing together over his light blue eyes. “Everything alright?” he asked, gaze moving down the street.

“Who is the best criminal defense attorney you can think of?” I asked.

He looked taken aback for a second. But he didn’t make me explain further. “Simon Evertz,” he said. “If I, or any of my brothers, were in any kind of trouble with the law, that is who I would hire to fix it,” he said.

“Simon Evertz,” I repeated. “You got a number?”

“I have his personal cell phone number,” Cillian said, reaching for his phone without question.

A few years back, we might have been on friendly terms. But not close enough to share this kind of information with. His baby sister marrying one of my club brothers, though, had changed a lot.

“Here,” he said, waiting for me to pull out my phone to plug in the number. “Everything alright?” he asked, keen eyes taking in the tension in my face.

“Everything with the club is fine,” I assured him, knowing that he had a vested interest in the club’s safety because his sister was currently pregnant with her next child. About to burst, actually. “This is... this is about a friend,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “I hope it all works out for them. In fact, with Simon on your side, there’s really no other

possible outcome,” he said, giving me a clamp on the shoulder before unlocking the door, and moving into The Bog.

Alone on the street, I looked down at Simon’s number for a second before I saw another procession of police cars.

And that was Gav in the fucking backseat.

Gav.

Everleigh’s employer.

Had that fuckhead gotten her name involved in some sort of drug business he was dealing in?

That was the only possible explanation of how she’d gotten wrapped up in this sort of business.

Anger bubbling, I hit the dial, and waited to hear Simon’s half-asleep voice as he answered.

“Someone better be in jail,” he said, and I could hear his yawn.

“She is,” I confirmed.

“She?” he asked, instantly sounding more interested. “What did she do?”

“Nothing,” I told him.

“They never do,” he agreed, but he didn’t seem to be overly mocking.

“They brought her in for drug trafficking, but I’m telling you, there is no way she did it.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “What’s her name, and where am I meeting her? And, most importantly, who is paying me to get out of bed at this hour?”

“Her name is Everleigh Barker. She is currently at the Shady Valley police station. The County van shouldn’t be here for a while yet. And my name is Detroit. I’ll be paying your fees.”

“And, Detroit, what makes me sure you will do that?” he asked. “Who are you? What do you do?”

“I’m a member of the Shady Valley Henchmen MC. We
—“

“That’s enough,” he cut me off. “I’m not your attorney. Don’t go confessing shit to me,” he said. “I know your organization. And that you’ll pay up. All I can say, Mr... Detroit, is I hope she is worth it. Because this is gonna be expensive.”

“She is,” I confirmed.

“Then I will be there as soon as I can,” he said, ending the call.

I didn’t even ask what his retainer was, or what he charged by the hour.

It didn’t matter.

She would be worth it.

And I did have it.

That was one perk of never going and getting my own place, all that money that Slash divvied up amongst us, just sat around, not doing anything but building over the years.

Whatever his price was, I could pay it.

And her bail.

Even if I had no idea why I was making her business my business.

I could try to tell myself that it was to make a fool out of my brother. But I had to admit that if that happened, it was only a bonus.

This had nothing to do with Dallas.

This was about Everleigh.

And the fact that, despite nothing more than simple pleasantries ever transpiring between us, I had been... harboring some feelings. Some interest.

It was obvious enough that even Slash had teased me about it in the past.

But I never made a move.

I honestly didn't think I ever would.

Still, the interest was there, for better or worse.

"Fuck," I mumbled to myself, walking back across the street, getting in the SUV, and driving back to the clubhouse.

It was early as fuck, but Slash and Coach were in the kitchen, having coffee, and talking quietly, so as not to wake up Lani, who was still out cold under her blanket.

"You're back early," Slash said, but one look at me as I got closer had him tensing. "What happened?"

"My brother just arrested Everleigh for drug trafficking."

"The fuck?" Slash asked, brows shooting up. "Everleigh? From the gym?"

"Yeah, her."

"That woman wouldn't know a brick of heroin if someone shoved her face in it," he said.

"Exactly," I agreed.

"The fuck is wrong with your brother?" he asked.

"I dunno. But I do know that Gav was scooped up too. So something fishy is going on."

"You doing something about it?" Slash asked, seeming to already know the answer.

"Cillian gave me the number for Simon Evertz," I told him.

Coach let out a whistle.

"Yeah," Slash agreed with that sound. "Hope you've been saving up your pennies and hundred dollar bills," he said.

"It's not a concern," I said, and got a nod from him.

Slash, more than anyone, knew exactly how much I made, and how low my living expenses were. The food for the kitchen that I cooked all the time, that came from a club fund, not my own pocket. So aside from my cell, insurance, gym membership, and occasional spending, I didn't have a lot of

use for all that money he'd been siphoning my way over the years.

I had enough to buy a house.

I had enough to *build* a damn house.

And then some.

This wasn't going to financially break me.

"So if Gav was taken in too, what happens with the gym?" Coach asked.

"Gav's brother was pulling up when I was coming back here," I said, shrugging. He didn't have any kind of stake in the company, but I guess he would keep the doors open. Gav was going to need the money for his own defense.

"Was Ev okay?" Slash asked.

"Ev?" Morgaine asked, coming in with her long hair half coming out of her braid. She and Delaney must have gotten knocked up at the same time, because both of them looked ready to push out a baby any day.

Despite myself, I felt a familiar stab of longing.

Out of all of us, I was the one who'd always been really clear about what I wanted in life. A wife, a house, and kids. The whole white-picket-fence thing.

And here they all were, settling down, building that future that I'd always wanted. While my life just stood still. It was hard not to be envious, even if I genuinely was happy for them all.

"Everleigh," Coach explained, handing her a mug from the high shelf, knowing her belly was getting in the way these days.

"What's wrong with Everleigh?" she asked, tensing.

The two of them weren't exactly best friends, but they had a bond what with Everleigh paying Morgaine to poison her sister's abusive ex and all.

“She was arrested for drug trafficking,” Slash supplied, then immediately regretted it when Morgaine’s face drained of color. “Shit,” he hissed to himself, reaching out like he was going to catch her if she passed out.

“*What?*” Morgaine yelled, making Lani on the couch jerk awake, sitting up and trying to orient herself for a minute before she was clutching the blanket to herself while finding her discarded clothes out of the scattered mess of them.

“Hey, why don’t you sit?” Slash asked as Coach pulled out a stool from the island and helped him push her onto it.

“She’s innocent,” I said with certainty.

“Of course she is,” Morgaine said with a little eye roll. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “But we are going to figure it out. I hired her a lawyer. We are getting this sorted.”

“God, she should come here,” she declared, making the three of us guys look at each other. “If she’s somehow supposed to be the patsy for some drug traffickers, she’s in danger, isn’t she?” she asked.

Well, shit. Yeah, she was right.

I’d been thinking this was only about Gav. Who I didn’t think was capable of actually hurting Everleigh. But if he was wrapped up with someone else, then, yeah, that was true. She could be in danger.

My gaze slid to Slash. Old friends as we might be, club decisions went to him.

“Think that’s a good idea,” he agreed, and I found myself narrowing my gaze at the bemused glint in his eye.

“What’s a good idea?” Sway asked, coming into the kitchen, giving Lani a nod as she made her way to the door.

“Long story short,” Slash said, “Everleigh was wrongfully arrested as a drug trafficker. Detroit hired Simon Evertz to get her free. Morgaine thinks she needs to come stay here to be safe.”

Sway's brows rose and that same glint Slash had met his eyes as well. But Sway had never been one to hold back, so his smirk spread into a smile before he declared, "Yeah, I think Detroit will keep her *real safe*."

"It's not like that," I insisted, even as my mind raced around at a breakneck speed, thinking of Everleigh here in the clubhouse, sitting across from the table, watching movies on the couch...

Shaking my head to knock those thoughts free, I said, "She will hate it here."

"What? Why would you say that?" Morgaine asked.

"She goes to sleep early, and doesn't like a lot of noise."

"Oh, she does, does she?" Sway asked, smile big.

I picked up the thing closest to me, a dish towel that someone didn't hang back up where it belonged, and flung it at him.

"We were talking about last night's party when I got to the gym this morning, asshole," I said, knowing he'd been trying to get a rise out of me. He seemed pleased to have managed that feat as he grabbed the towel out of the air before it hit him in the face.

"Did anyone contact Bayleigh?" Morgaine asked, looking at me.

"I don't know," I admitted.

Morgaine and Bayleigh had a distant sort of friendship, having been involved in a shared trauma a while back. But things had gotten even more distant when Bayleigh moved with her mom out of town to try to rebuild her life and recover her mental health.

"I don't know," I admitted. "And I don't know if Everleigh would want that shit coming from us," I added.

"True," she agreed, her hand absentmindedly rubbing her stomach. "The girls and I will prepare the empty bedroom," she said.

Technically, there were two empty bedrooms left on the second floor, but one was tentatively reserved for Rook, though he hadn't spent any time decorating it yet.

The other bedroom...

My gaze slid in Sway's direction, seeing that damn shit-eating grin on his face again as he came to the same realization as me.

The other bedroom was the one beside mine.

"Uh-oh. Slash has his serious face on," Nyx, his woman, said as she came into the common space, arms above her head as she pulled her long black hair into a messy bun.

"I think we're gonna have to tell Murphy we are gonna need the third floor sooner than anticipated," he said.

"Listen," Sway said, suddenly serious. "Rook can't be working for us with Nancy on his ass all the time, and I am not ready to do another renovation personally."

"I don't mind working alone," Coach said, the other newer member of the club. He wasn't quite a prospect anymore, but since he'd avoided all the work the rest of us had put in to making this clubhouse what it was, he was willing to do the same for the next crew of guys.

"Colter is getting out soon," Slash reminded us.

When we'd been looking at Rook, another inmate at the prison had caught Slash's attention. A former military man doing a bid because his best friend moved in on his wife while he was deployed, and when he came home, he beat the ever-loving shit out of him for it.

Problem was, he managed to get himself into trouble before his parole hearing, and had tacked on more time to his sentence.

I guess he was finally getting out. And we were running out of space.

Granted, the guys were starting to spend less and less time in their rooms now that they were settled down and making babies. They had other places to rest their heads at night. But,

even if they decided to give up their rooms, we would outgrow the second floor eventually.

“Will you be hearing from Simon about Everleigh’s arraignment?” Slash asked.

“I have to get back in touch with him. I didn’t want to waste time bullshitting when I knew he had to get to the station.”

“Makes sense. Keep us updated on shit as it happens,” Slash said, following Nyx who had two mugs of coffee now, back out of the room.

“I’m gonna go talk to the girls,” Morgaine said.

“You don’t have anywhere to be?” I asked, looking at the still smirking Sway.

“Murphy’s been working all night on some gun that probably shoots lasers or some shit,” he said, shrugging. “So... no. I’d rather stand here and rib you about Everleigh,” he said.

“And on that, I’m going to go take a shower,” I said, shaking my head at him.

“What? No breakfast?” Sway called. “I bet when Everleigh is here, you’ll pull out all the stops!” he said as I made my way to the stairs.

I said nothing to that.

Because, quite frankly, I knew he was right.

If Everleigh agreed to come stay with us, I wouldn’t be missing a chance to cook. Did that make sense when I didn’t plan on making a move on the woman? No. But neither did hiring a ridiculously expensive lawyer to defend her.

Why start analyzing my crazy-ass choices now?

Later that morning, I got word back to Simon, hearing the details about what was going on with Everleigh, his plan to get her an outfit for the arraignment, and the finer details about his payment.

Was it astronomical?

Yeah.

But worth it to keep an innocent woman out of prison, in my humble opinion.

“I don’t know what is going on with the other man caught up in this sweep,” Simon said.

“Gav,” I said.

“Yeah. But we might want to do some fishing around on him. If all blame can be shifted to him, and Everleigh seem like an innocent pawn in his empire, this case will be even easier.”

“Once she’s out, how long until a trial starts?” I asked.

“Depends on how open-and-shut the prosecution thinks their case is,” Simon told me. “If they think they have a verdict in the bag already, it could be days. If they still have some investigating to do, it could be weeks or months. Obviously, we want time to try to sort shit out. But I will know more by tomorrow,” he said. “I will keep you updated.”

“I appreciate—“ I started, but he’d already ended the call.

I took a shower, trying to tell myself that I’d done everything in my power to do, that I was just going to need to wait it out, pray for the best, and hope Everleigh was doing okay in county.

But as I got out of the shower and paced my room, looking out the windows at Shady Valley, seeing the square box that was the police department, all I wanted to do was charge in there, grab my brother, and pound some goddamn sense into him.

All things said, the bad blood between us had always come from his side. Did I occasionally feel bitterness that he let our jobs come between us? Sure. But I never felt this sort of over-the-top anger as I did right then.

He’d always been my little brother. And I cared about and protected that bond. Some part of me had been holding out for one day when he would mature enough to see how ridiculous he was being about this situation between us.

Now, though?

Now, I wasn't sure there was any fixing this.

Not on my end, because he'd taken so much fucking glee in ruining an innocent woman's life.

Not on his end, because I was going to spend all my time and money on proving to him how wrong he was.

Though at the end of the day, proving her innocence wasn't about Dallas.

It was about her.

And I was going to need to find an inhuman amount of self-control before she was freed, and invited to come stay with us.

One room away.

"Fuck," I hissed, rubbing my hands down my face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Everleigh

“Take this, and go get changed,” Simon said by way of greeting as he shoved a black garment bag at me at the courthouse.

The officer assigned to me guided me to a room where I was given a moment of privacy to change. And, let’s face it, gather myself.

I felt like I was trembling out of my skin.

I’d been on edge since the second Della and I were led off of the van and toward the county jail.

It was nothing like the prison situated on the hill in Shady Valley, looming over us, all doom and gloom and razor wire.

This was a much smaller building made of gray brick that was streaked with black from decades of rain and grime. There was still fencing and razor wire and prison guards and such, but it wasn’t as imposing as the prison in our town.

Still all the buzzing and thick, metal doors slamming was jarring as we were led inside, then went through the intake process where I was handed an orange set of clothes that sort of resembled medical scrubs, a pair of white panties that had nearly no elastic left, a bra that hardly fit, thick tube socks, and slides. I was also given extras of those items as well as bedding before I joined Della and the other women who came from other towns, and we were given a spiel and led toward where we would be calling home for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.

And, Lord willing, not a second longer than that.

I was trying to squash my internal disgust at wearing intimates worn by an untold number of other women before me. There were bigger issues to face, I reminded myself as we walked into a octagonal two-level room full of small cells and a big observation area for the guards to keep an eye on us.

Della had been right about the overcrowding issue.

The entire center of the common area had its tables pushed to the sides to accommodate several rows of bunkbeds where other women were sitting and lying.

Once we were free to move on our own, Della shouldered in beside me and led me over toward an empty bunk while the other women tried to decide who they could or should bunk with.

“Take the top,” she told me, nodding up at it.

“Don’t you—“ I started.

“You’ll feel safer up there,” she said, shaking her head as she started to make her bed.

She was right about that.

And I was suddenly so thankful to have a mentor like Della that I found myself blinking away tears again. The sounds of the women chatting filled my ears, making me feel immediately frazzled and overwhelmed as I climbed up to the bunk, and struggled to make my bed like all the other women were automatically doing.

I just had to follow Della's lead, keep my head down, and try not to eat or drink anything, so I didn't have to go to the bathroom.

I mean, yeah, that was completely irrational, and my bladder was already killing me, but the bathroom thing was the biggest mental hurdle for me, so I was saving it for last.

"What's going on?" I asked a while later as many of the women started to gather in a line.

"Lunch in a few," Della said, grabbing my arm, and pulling me with her.

"Where are we going? Won't we get in trouble?" I asked, voice taking on a breathless hitch in my panic.

"Now is the time to go pee when no one will look at you, because their minds are on getting in line. Go," she demanded, pushing me toward the open door.

Taking the cue, I rushed in, trying to think of anything else, to drift away, to just get through this.

Then I washed my hands and rushed back out to line up with Della.

If I thought the common area was overwhelming, the cafeteria—or as Della called it, the "mess hall"—was that times ten.

I guess the promise of hot food had invigorated these women who were all talking and laughing loudly in groups that suggested a certain sort of familiarity. I guess these were women who didn't get, or couldn't afford, bail. So they were staying in jail until their trials were over.

That could be me.

No.

No, damnit.

I wasn't going to let my mind go there.

I had a lawyer.

A good one.

I was going to be going home. Then fixing this. And never, ever, ever seeing the inside of a jail again.

“Come on, over here,” Della said after we got our trays that, yes, were full of two compartments of a certain liquid mush that I couldn’t identify as any sort of soup or stew, though that seemed to be what they were aiming for.

Della led me over to a table full of other women that had a certain similarity to Della. A hardness in their eyes, but with warm smiles.

“She don’t look like one of us,” one of the women, with coppery-red hair, older than Della, declared as I sat down.

“She’s not. But we’re gonna be nice to her while she’s here,” Della said with a certain sort of authority that brooked no argument amongst the women.

One of *us*.

Did that possibly mean that all these women had been brought in for prostitution?

I didn’t know.

I sat there, trying to zone out, as I pushed the mush around on my tray before just eating the piece of bread. Yes, plain white bread. No butter. No nothing. And the salad, which had no dressing, just because I didn’t want my stomach growling at court if I would be going tomorrow.

One of the other women took the rest of my food, “No use wasting it because she’s got first-day-jitters,” she declared as she dug in.

The rest of the day was a blur in which I sat cross-legged on my bunk, watching the women around me.

At some point, two women who’d been having an amiable-seeming conversation suddenly got loud and angry, shoving at each other, and prompting an ear-splitting alarm to go off, and guards to rush into the space to break it off while simultaneously screaming at the rest of us who were doing nothing wrong.

I threw myself back on my bunk, pressing my hands to my ears, and humming softly to myself as my heart started to hammer out of my chest.

I couldn't shake that feeling for the rest of the day, even after all the commotion died down, and everyone went back to normal.

I felt frayed and coming apart at my edges when it happened.

We were told it was bed time.

And the lights started clicking off.

I wasn't afraid of the dark.

It didn't go pitch black. At least not for those of us congregated in the common room. I had no idea what the cells were like, but they looked pretty dark. We had the glow of the observation deck on us, but it was still dark, and I had an irrational fear that people might be lurking in the shadows, wanting to hurt me. Despite Della assuring me all day that nothing like that was going to happen.

I didn't sleep.

I stayed still as a board in my bunk, the thin blanket pulled up to my chin, and listened.

Beds squeaking as women shifted in their sleep, heavy breathing, snoring, mumbles as some women dreamed, whimpers as others cried, the toilets flushing in the cells, the jangle of the keys on the hips of the guards as they walked around.

Objectively, it was quiet.

To me, though, it felt like every small noise was amplified until I was pressing my pillow to my ears to try to drown it out.

I didn't luck out to get my arraignment the next morning.

But Della did.

And Della never came back.

I felt like my insides trembled the rest of the day as I followed the routines Della had set out for me.

I kept an eye on the clock, rushing into the bathroom just as the other women started to line up.

I ate my bread and veggies, and let everyone else have what was left.

Then I sat or reclined in my bunk, listening, absorbing, getting more and more strung out with each passing moment.

Then, I had another night of no sleep. Or maybe I catnapped. But there was no way I was unconscious for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Not enough to feel any less exhausted and detached.

But I was finally told I was being arraigned, and was brought to the courthouse where I met Simon, who barely spared me a glance, and the split second his gaze did fall on me, all I saw was distaste.

I knew I looked rough.

The mirrors weren't exactly super reflective in the jail, but I could see how my hair had gone greasy, and the bags under my eyes had turned purple.

Alone, I unzipped the garment bag to reveal something way nicer than anything I could ever afford.

I was a somewhat simple girl. One who knew her budget was never going to allow for designer clothing, so I learned not to covet it.

But as my hand touched the buttery-soft material of the demure scoop-neck blouse in a light mauve color, I wondered if I was missing out. It would fit just right, without clinging. As would the plain beige slacks, underwear, bra, and ballet flats.

I was also given a hair tie, which I assumed meant that Simon wanted my hair back, so I set to doing that before slipping into the clothes.

I felt better almost instantly, more like myself, less like an inmate.

When I made my way out of the room, Simon snapped his fingers at the woman who was at his side in a black suit.

He waved at my face, and she quickly rushed forward with one of those tubes with a sponge at the end to apply cover up. She swiped it under each of my eyes, then blotted in the makeup carefully.

“Better,” Simon said, nodding. “Remember, you are to do one thing. Declare you are innocent. That’s it. The rest of the time, you sit or stand next to me looking wide-eyed with good posture and slightly parted lips that give the ‘I can’t believe this is happening to me’ look.”

“I *can’t* believe this is happening to me,” I agreed.

But he wasn’t paying me any mind then.

We were separated then, me with my guard, going in through a separate door, and Simon entering through the doors of the courtroom.

I tried not to shrink into myself as I saw the guard and the judge, looking incredibly intimidating. Because he was. He held my future in his hands.

I did my best to follow Simon’s instructions, keeping my back straight, my lips parted, and my eyes big. I didn’t even have to fake that part.

“How do you plead?” the judge barked, making me jerk slightly.

“Not guilty, your honor,” I said, worried my voice was too small and trembly to reach him, but he seemed to hear.

I was kind of numb after that until I heard the words I’d been praying for.

“Bail will be set,” the judge stated, “at fifty-thousand dollars,” he added.

“Oh, God,” I whimpered. “I’m never getting out of here,” I said, mostly to myself, but Simon turned to look at me, a curious pull to his brows.

“You’ll be out of here in under an hour,” he said.

Then, like magic, I was led to the clerk where Simon was talking to the man there like they were old friends. If I wasn't mistaken, the clerk almost seemed a little starstruck.

But, no.

My sleep-deprived eyes must have been seeing things.

"I don't understand," I said, looking at Simon. "I don't have the money," I said.

"It's done," Simon said.

"But..."

"Everleigh, I'm a busy man. I don't have time to walk you through this. You're free. But you can't go back to the gym. And you will show up for your court date if I don't get the charges dropped before then."

"Okay," I agreed, feeling my lower lip wobble a bit. "Wait, but don't you want your clothes back?" I asked, gesturing toward them as I took my bag of belongings back from the clerk.

"They're yours. Trust me, they're being paid for," Simon said, then turned and walked out.

I listened to the clerk for a moment before I was suddenly just... allowed to walk out of the courthouse.

It sounded really dumb, considering I was only in custody for a few days, but I felt weird just being allowed to move around of my own free will again.

My feet felt leaded as I walked down the hall toward the front doors, the October sky dreary and overcast.

I usually loved that.

The crisp air, the grumpy weather, the way it just begged you to curl up with a cup of hot chocolate and settle in.

Now, though, all I could think was how my mood seemed to match. Gloomy. Moody. Stuck between.

I moved out the doors.

And stood on the steps.

I would like to claim the shiver that moved through me was from the chill in the air. But I knew it was something else, something more internal than that.

What did I do now?

Where did I go?

What was going on?

“Everleigh!” a voice called, making me turn to find the source of it.

And there he was.

Tall, broad, with his dark, flawless skin, his warm brown eyes, his small, unsure smile.

He looked different, though, wearing a suit that seemed to be built for him.

I managed to have a thought about how much fabric it must have taken to make it before it all finally seemed to click together in my mind.

It was Detroit.

Detroit who'd called Simon Evertz to defend me. Who was paying his bill. Who had likely paid for my bail.

I didn't stop to think.

I just... flew at him.

The second I collided with his solid frame, the first sob escaped me. Loud. Unrestrained.

I couldn't have quieted myself down right then if I tried.

“Hey,” he murmured, voice soft, as his arms went around me, squeezing me tight, and some part of me wanted to tell him to hold me tighter, because I felt like I was falling apart.

Words failed me, so I just wrapped my arms more tightly around him, then felt him do the same, just shy of too tight as the last few days of confusion and fear and bone-deep humiliation burst out of me, leaving me sobbing into his wide chest as his hands moved up and down my back, trying to soothe me.

There was no stopping this, though. Once the dam was opened, the water seemed to just keep flowing.

People were probably staring, mumbling to each other, even laughing at me behind my back.

I didn't see, hear, or care.

I just needed to purge all of this.

"Hey, it's all going to be okay now," Detroit said as I was trying to take some deep breaths to bring some sort of order back to my mind and body.

"I... you... I owe..."

"No, you don't," he insisted.

"Yes, I do!" I cried, pressing my forehead into his chest.

"Listen, you don't, okay? If that's why you're crying..."

Sniffing hard, I pulled my arms from around him, trying to wipe my face with my hands, not the sleeves of my nice, new, designer shirt that he also seemed to have bought me. Along with my slacks, shoes, bra, and panties.

"It's part of it," I admitted when I could finally speak like a normal human being. But I still refused to move away from him.

"Come on. Let's get in the car, then we can talk, okay?" he asked, his hand sliding back and forth across my lower back.

That little quiver that moved through me?

That was... unexpected.

"Okay?" he asked when I still didn't move away.

"Okay," I agreed, finally taking a step back.

I kept my head ducked, though, knowing what a mess I had been even before all the blubbering. I had to be hideous right then.

Clutching my bag with my earrings from my father in my hand, I followed Detroit as he led me down the stairs, to the lot, then opened the SUV door for me to slide in.

I didn't feel like the tightness in my chest loosening until the door closed.

"Let's get you out of here," he said instead of launching right into it. "How about coffee on the way back to Shady Valley?" he asked.

Coffee.

God, yes.

That was exactly what I needed.

"I can make it at home," I said.

"We're getting coffee," he said, brushing it off, likely knowing what I was thinking. That it would be another expense I couldn't pay him back for. "Tell me what you want," he added.

"A caramel swirl coffee with cream," I told him.

"Hot?"

I was an iced coffee girlie a lot of the time.

But this was the sort of situation that called for hot.

"Please," I said as he turned off the road and into a lot with a drive-through, getting me a coffee and a cake pop that I didn't ask for, but my stomach was begging for.

It wasn't until I'd taken a few sips and eaten the cake pop when he parked the car and looked over at me.

"You okay?" he asked, voice gentle.

He was always that way with me, actually.

Gentle.

I'd mused more than a few times that Detroit was a gentle giant. Because he was a massive man. Tall, broad, strong.

"No," I admitted, finally looking over at him. "They think I'm a drug dealer," I said, shaking my head.

"We both know that's bullshit. And Simon will prove that. But, here's the thing," he said, voice taking on a careful edge that had me stiffening.

“What’s the thing?” I asked.

“Because we don’t know what is going on, and who might be involved,” he started, “the guys, girls, and I are all a little worried about your safety.”

“My... safety?” I asked, feeling like the ground had opened up underneath me, and I was falling.

That hadn’t even occurred to me.

That someone might want to hurt me over this.

That there was someone involved who was capable of that.

“Yeah. They arrested Gav too. But we don’t know what the fuck is going on. And until we do, we really think you should come and stay at the club where you’re safe.”

“The club?” I repeated dumbly, but it was like the information wasn’t penetrating unless I said it too.

“There will always be someone, several someones, around to make sure no one tries to mess with you.”

“Who would want to hurt me?” I asked, feeling my lower lip trembling again, and forcing it closed tight until it stopped. “I haven’t done anything.”

“No,” he agreed. “But if they planned for you to take the fall for them...”

“Oh,” I said, starting to understand just how out of my depths I was on this.

“I know I haven’t made the clubhouse sound like a place you would like, but if there is one thing I can promise you, it’s that no one can get to you there.”

And he, and likely his club brothers and their women, all seemed to know a lot more about this kind of thing than I did.

It made the most sense to go with him.

Besides, if this was what he wanted, I wasn’t really in a place to turn him down. With all he was doing for me.

“Okay,” I agreed, nodding.

“Okay? You’ll come?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Could we stop at my place to get some things, though?” I asked.

“Of course. We just won’t linger,” he added, a hint of warning there.

It became really clear to me right then that things were a lot more serious than I originally realized.

What the hell had just happened to my life?

And why was some part of me secretly really excited about being at the clubhouse?

CHAPTER FIVE

Detroit

I hadn't expected her to look as good as she did when she walked out of the courthouse.

Simon's assistant had chosen the perfect outfit for her if he was going for making her look sweet and, most of all, innocent.

She was both those things, but the judge wouldn't have known that. But Simon had portrayed it perfectly with just clothes.

It wasn't until she saw me that it happened.

The facade fell.

And she just... shattered.

My instinct had been to hold onto her lightly when she'd thrown herself at me, some part of me always thinking she was like glass—so delicate, easily broken.

But then she'd clung harder to me, and I wrapped her up as she sobbed into my chest, getting all that confusion and fear out of her, so she could think straight again.

I wasn't someone who was used to feminine tears. But they didn't bother me, either. Something about Everleigh's tears, though, brought out something primal in me. Something that had me wanting to track down every last person who was involved in making her feel this way, and ripping their throats out. With my teeth.

She was silent as we drove back to Shady Valley, then in the direction of her apartment building, but she was drinking the coffee. And her stomach wasn't growling as loudly anymore.

Didn't they feed her inside?

Had someone not let the new girl eat?

I didn't know how shit worked for women on the inside. But I did know the stories from Judge, Coach, and Rook about being inside, about the way the old timers treated the new bloods, how their food was stolen, and, well... other shit.

I guess I imagined that the women had been more civil.

That said, it was a completely different world for Everleigh. It could have just all been too much to take in at once, and she'd been too sick to her stomach to eat.

I would make her something when we got back to the clubhouse. I'd gone grocery shopping the night before, stocking up on damn near everything I could have possibly needed.

"You remembered," she said as I parked near building A.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. I went ahead and didn't tell her that I remembered exactly how she smelled that night I drove her home, too. Like caramel and vanilla. Sweet. Begging to be tasted.

"Fuck," I hissed to myself as I went around the hood of the SUV to open her door.

I needed to pull myself together.

“Top floor, right?” I asked as we made it to the elevator. “Because it’s quieter,” I added as we got into the elevator car.

“Yes,” she said, and a hint of a smile was playing at her lips as she fished around in her belongings for her key.

I won’t lie. I was curious as fuck to see her place, to figure out how she lived.

In my mind, I figured it was soft and feminine.

When she pushed open the door and moved inside, I realized I’d been completely fucking right about that.

The walls were painted a beige color that had a pink hue to it, and likely looked pinker in artificial light.

Her apartment was smaller than the one Nyx had lived in when she’d been in an apartment, but the tight feel of it seemed to only suit Everleigh more. It made it feel even cozier.

Everything was, as I had expected, very neat and organized. No dishes in the sink. No shoes strewn about.

Her furniture in the living room was light-colored with an assortment of throw pillows and blankets in neutral shades. Her coffee table had several magazines and a big three-wick candle on it.

Moving further in, I saw she’d done some DIY thing to her TV to make it look framed, but the TV screen must have timed out because there was no art on it, just a black rectangle in a gold frame.

She had art on her walls, all simplistic and feminine. A record player sat on top of a console table with a rack set beside it.

Ten of the albums sitting inside of it were Taylor Swift. The others were Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Nicks, and Carly Simon.

I’d always suspected that Everleigh was a girls’ girl. This pretty much confirmed it.

From the other side of the apartment where Everleigh had disappeared to, I heard a crash.

“Ow,” Everleigh hissed, and I was already halfway across the apartment, pausing in the doorway to her bedroom, feeling like I would be invading her personal space if I stepped inside.

The bedroom was even more girly than the rest of her apartment. She had a tufted headboard almost in the same shade of mauve as the shirt she was wearing. The bedding was all white, save for the pink blanket folded neatly on the bottom and one of those Squishmallow plushies that were in all the stores. This one white with pink dots, looking a lot like a cow, but with flippers.

“You alright over there?” I asked to her back as she stood in the doorway of her open closet. It was small, even given the narrow spaces of her apartment.

“I don’t use my luggage much, so it’s way at the top. You know, where no shelf has a right to be,” she mumbled, talking mostly to herself.

“May I?” I asked, watching as she turned. “I’m more vertically blessed than you,” I added, getting a small smile out of her. And given the events of the past few days, that felt like a monumental feat.

Her gaze moved up me as I approached, and I reminded myself she was just assessing my claim, not checking me out.

She was right about the shelf. It was high even for someone as tall as me to get to, but I grabbed down her big light pink hard shell suitcase and placed it on the floor.

“Okay. I gotta know,” I said as I turned to see her picking up the Squishmallow and putting it next to the—again, pink—stainless steel flask from her nightstand, like she was readying them to pack as well. “What the hell is that thing supposed to be?”

“Oh,” she said with a sheepish smile. “It’s a sea cow,” she said, wiggling one of the flippers. “Mondy the sea cow,” she added. “I know it’s juvenile, but I use it as a pillow since real pillows get flat so easily. He doesn’t,” she said with a shrug as

she moved forward to grab the suitcase, putting it on her bed to unzip it, and reveal another, smaller, hard shell case. Then, inside of that, a hard shell toiletry bag.

She laid each out beside one another, and got to work.

Feeling weird, like I was watching her—and I was—I cleared my throat. “Anything I can do?” I asked.

“Oh, um. Maybe clear out the fridge?” she suggested. “There are reusable bags in the drawer beside it. You can pack some of the things to bring, and maybe just toss anything else.”

“On it,” I said, happy for something to do.

I got the bag and wasn’t exactly shocked to find that the inside of Everleigh’s fridge was like that of one of those damn aesthetic fridge refill videos. All clear acrylic organizers with the contents facing forward. Nothing was in its original packaging. I left the stuff that I knew would last, figuring we could come back for it if she ended up staying for any length of time, and packed the rest. Including four mason jars stuffed with greens, veg, and what looked like chopped chicken on the top. Work lunches, I figured.

Finished, I made my way back to her bedroom to find she’d already neatly rolled what looked like almost every item of clothing in her closet, and somehow fit it in the case.

The other case was already zipped, and I figured it was likely bras and panties in there, and she didn’t want me to see them.

I, ah, I had to agree that it was probably a good thing for me not to know what they looked like. Or I’d be spending the next however long imagining her in them.

“Okay. I think that’s it,” she said, coming back in with her toiletry case. And a bag full of her full-size shampoo, conditioner, and body wash.

She was packing like she was moving in.

And I liked that more than was even remotely appropriate.

“What’s up?” I asked after she zipped her big suitcase. Then stared at her bed.

“Would it be really weird of me to bring my blanket?” she asked, gesturing toward it.

“Whatever you need to bring to feel comfortable doesn’t seem weird to me,” I said, shrugging. “I’ll grab another bag.”

I brought back two.

And was not surprised when she filled both of them with more items.

I knew a lot of guys who would call her high-maintenance.

I figured that she just liked her creature comforts.

“Anything else?” I asked as I grabbed all but the smaller rolling bag that she took and moved through the apartment.

“Okay, this is going to seem crazy,” she said, rushing across her living room to grab her records. “It’s just a comfort thing. Even though I have them all digitally,” she said, shaking her head at herself.

“I’m not judging,” I said, shaking my head. I didn’t think I cared about anything I owned as much as she did *everything* she owned. It was endearing.

“Okay. That’s it,” she told me with a firm nod, like she was trying to convince herself. Given enough time, she’d probably be taking the art off the walls.

But we put all her stuff in the SUV, then climbed in.

“Oh, word to the wise,” I said as I started the car. “Don’t touch the cat.”

To that, she looked over, brows scrunched.

“You have a cat?”

“The club has a cat.”

“Why can’t I touch him?”

“Because he has this quirk... he hates women. All of them. Even with several living in the clubhouse. I know you’re going to go all ‘I’m sure I’m the exception’ on him. ‘Cause all the

girls have. But you have been warned. Everyone has scars from trying.”

“Noted,” she said with a nod. “Any other animals there?” she asked.

“Dell has a corgi who will think you are his best friend in the world. Because everyone is. And Murphy has her two very well-trained German Shepherds,” I said. “You’re not afraid of dogs, are you?” I asked.

“No! No, I love dogs. I would love to have a dog. But the apartment...” she said, rolling her eyes.

“What kind of dog? If you could have one.”

“You’ll make fun of me.”

Not a chance of that.

“I won’t. Something small, right?” I figured. It would fit her aesthetic.

“I want a Pekingese. I know! I know. Everyone thinks they’re ugly. But I think they’re unusually cute. Especially the beige ones with the black faces. I could sit and brush one all day and night,” she said wistfully.

I wasn’t a dog expert, but my mind flashed with a long-haired fluff ball with a flat face. She was right. Objectively, kinda ugly. But I could see how she would think that it was in a cute way.

We fell into a silence as soon as we pulled onto the main street in town, and her gaze slid to the prison, every bit of her tensing.

“That’s not gonna happen,” I told her. And not only because Shady Valley Penitentiary only housed men.

“I need to believe that,” she said, voice small. “I, ah, I didn’t handle jail well,” she admitted. “Our bunks were in the common area. And there were like twenty or so of us. It was loud even at night. Thank God for Della...”

“Della?” I asked.

“Oh, she was in the holding cell when I got to the SVPD. She’s a sex worker. She went with me to County. And she’d been there before, so she kind of showed me the ropes. I think I would have been in a nonstop panic attack if not for her. But she was arraigned and released the next day.”

So she was all alone in a crowded, unfamiliar place full of perpetrators of unknown crimes, and not even a door to make her feel safer.

No wonder it looked like she hadn’t slept since I’d seen her last.

“Della,” I repeated. “Don’t think I know of her. But we can track her down if you want to thank her,” I said.

“That would be great, actually,” she said, giving me a small smile.

“I’ll talk to Jack.”

“Jack. From the motel?” she asked.

“Yeah. Working girls frequent the motel. Men stepping out on their wives. Newly released prisoners. Truckers coming through and spending the night. That kinda thing. He would know their names and when they’re usually around.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, that would be great. I’d love to... buy her a coffee or something,” she said as I pulled into the lot of the clubhouse. “Wow,” she said, looking up at it. “I mean, you could tell it’s big from down in town, but it’s even more massive up close.”

“Fifteen thousand square feet,” I confirmed. “Divided equally among the three floors, but the top one isn’t finished yet. Which is how you landed a big bedroom all your own,” I told her. “The girls will have made sure it’s clean and ready for company by now,” I added.

“Really?” she asked, big eyes looking a little watery again.

It didn’t escape me that ever since Bayleigh and her mom left town, she didn’t really have anyone left. From what I could tell, too, she’d been really close with her sister. And didn’t seem to have a circle of friends.

“Of course,” I said, nodding. “Morgaine was organizing everyone as soon as we decided you should come stay with us.”

“That’s so sweet,” she said, blinking back the tears. “Can I admit something without you telling the others?” she asked, shooting me a skittish look.

“Of course.”

“I’m a little... intimidated by the guys,” she said. “I mean, I know Bayleigh and I took a ride with them once, but that was such a crazy night that I think I was running on pure adrenaline. But on a normal day, they’re intimidating.”

“Hey, don’t underestimate yourself,” I said, shooting her a smirk. “You once tried to poison Slash.”

To that, she let out a little snorting laugh.

“He messed with my Taylor Swift channel,” she said, shaking her head. “He had to pay.”

“Just walk in there like they all want Taylor Swift banned on all radio stations. They won’t be so intimidating when you’re pissed at them for not appreciating her.”

“That helps,” she admitted, giving me a big smile. Not quite the megawatt ones I was used to, but a good one considering all she’d been through the past few days.

“Need a minute?” I asked.

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding.

“No problem,” I said, reaching for my phone, toggling through a music app, then connecting it to the car.

There was a full beat of uncertainty as the music started before she turned to me with that big smile as her favorite artist started singing about jewels or some shit.

She turned forward again, swaying a bit and mouthing the words until, eventually, she was just singing it. Not well, mind you, but with her whole chest. You had to appreciate it.

“Thank you,” she said when the song switched to something slower. “I needed that,” she declared with a little

nod. “We can go in now.”

With that, we gathered her things out of the trunk, and made our way to the front door as I tried not to think about how nice it was going to be to have her right next door.

I failed.

CHAPTER SIX

Everleigh

I didn't know what to expect of the inside.

I honestly didn't think I'd even seen a movie or TV show that had shown a biker clubhouse.

So my imagination likely ran away from me, imagining beer can pyramids and naked lady posters.

What I got instead was this massive, open space that was surprisingly decorated. Not, you know, things just tossed in a room, but chosen and placed intentionally.

As someone who really liked order and aesthetics, I appreciated that someone had really put work into the living space that melted into the dining area, then, finally, the giant kitchen.

It definitely had a distinctly masculine feel to it, but it was airy and open. And there wasn't a single centerfold pinned to a wall. Sure, there was a bar area, but it was arranged and

elevated looking. If there was beer anyway, I guessed it was in the fridge.

“I was warned about you,” I said as a cat appeared out of nowhere, jumping on the back of the couch as I was moving past it. “You’re gorgeous,” I told him. He was, with his long grayish-white fur and big blue eyes. “But mean,” I added, sensing him eyeing me up.

I’d never had a cat.

But my grandma had like a million of them all during my childhood. So I’d gotten good at reading their body language so I didn’t get a scratch or bite. And this cat was looking for blood.

“Does he have a name?”

“Cat,” Detroit said, making me turn with raised brows. “No one got around to naming him when he was a kitten. Then... Cat just stuck.”

“Well, Cat, we are just going to keep a wide berth from each other, okay?” I said, taking a giant step to the side for good measure.

“Hey, Everleigh,” a voice called, making me turn to find two men coming in. One, I recognized from the fact that half the girls who frequented the gym had talked about him and his manwhoring ways. Before he settled down, of course. Sway. The other guy, though, wasn’t familiar.

“This is Coach,” Detroit said, sensing my confusion.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, giving him a smile.

Coach was tall with golden skin, black hair, and dark eyes. Objectively really good-looking. But what drew me in more was the vibe the guy had.

I mean, that probably sounded really woo-woo, but people had an energy about them. Like Detroit being that gentle giant, someone I knew had a good soul. And Sway, with his lighthearted, carefree feel. But Coach had a sort of wise, and calming vibe. I could use some of that right about now.

“We’re happy to have you here, even if the circumstances aren’t the best,” Sway said, and I was pretty sure there was no stopping the flush over my cheeks at the suggestion.

Of course they knew what was going on. Detroit would have needed to tell them. But it was still embarrassing.

“Bet you’re glad to get a good meal,” Coach said, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Spent years eating the food inside,” he added, making some of the tension slip from me. Of course some of these men would be ex-cons. The bikers in general were criminals.

“Yeah,” I said. The cake pop and coffee helped, but my stomach was gnawing at me again.

“Lucky you, then,” Sway said, all smiles, but I sensed something, I don’t know, teasing, under his words. “You get Detroit to cook for you.”

“You cook?” I asked, turning to look at him, all loaded down with all my bags.

“Are you kidding? No one else is allowed to cook here. The kitchen is his domain,” Sway said.

“I can’t ask you to cook for me,” I said, shaking my head.

“You kidding? He already bought a bunch of shit,” Sway said.

Was it my imagination, or did Detroit almost look a little... embarrassed at that?

“Then I will be happy to eat it,” I told him. “But only if you are already cooking,” I added.

“You gonna show her her room, or what?” Sway asked when the silence stretched just a second past the comfort zone.

“Right. Yeah. Let’s go get you settled,” Detroit said, walking past the kitchen and toward a hallway with a few doors and a... freight elevator? “This used to be a warehouse,” he reminded me as he leaned down to pull open the door, so we could move into the massive space.

“Right. Duh. Yeah.”

“There are stairs too, if the elevator is occupied.”

“Occupied how?” I asked, but caught a certain flash of discomfort in his gaze that had me putting the pieces together.

“Oh. *Oh*,” I said, hoping my cheeks weren’t as red as they felt.

They had sex in the elevator?

Where others could hear?

And know about?

I mean, I wasn’t a prude or anything. I even liked kind of steamy books. I’d even packed a few when Detroit wasn’t looking. But I guess I just wasn’t... adventurous about it.

“Don’t worry. I think things will be a bit calmer while you’re around,” Detroit said.

“I don’t want everyone to have to change their lives because of me, though,” I said as the elevator stopped, and Detroit pulled up the door.

“Trust me, they could use a small party detox,” he told me as he led me out into the hall.

“Okay. Your room is the last one in this direction,” he said, walking down the long hallway of doors on either side. “This is me,” he said, jerking his head toward the door right beside mine. “And that,” he said, motioning across the hall, “is the bathroom.”

A bathroom.

With a door.

And a lock.

And no one potentially walking in on me.

I would never again take that for granted.

“Oh, wow,” I said as Detroit moved in, so I could see the room. “Oh, my God. I think my entire apartment could fit into this room,” I said, turning in a circle.

It was empty, which was probably adding to it feeling so massive. There were big windows that looked out onto Shady

Valley, letting in a ton of light, even when it was dreary out.

The only furniture in the room was a black metal framed queen-sized bed, a long white dresser, one nightstand with a gold lamp, and a little desk under the windows.

Detroit's gaze was fixed on that desk.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I think Coach made that for you," he said, brows drawn down.

"The desk?" I clarified, sure I misunderstood.

"Yeah. He was making something outside yesterday, but I didn't know what it was for. He's always making things. Guess he made you a desk."

"He made me a desk?" I asked, feeling those damn tears sting my eyes again.

It wasn't overly fancy, but it had delicate rounded edges, and an open shelf underneath for storing things, and was stained an antique white shade.

"Think he did," Detroit said, nodding.

"God, I'm never going to be able to make this up to everyone," I said, blinking rapidly.

"Hey," Detroit said after depositing my bags down on the desk and floor, then reaching out to snag my chin, drawing it up.

Yeah.

He did the *thing*.

That *thing* that is in all romance novels and movies and in the hearts of all women.

He did the thing.

And some part of me completely melted at his firm fingers on my chin.

"You don't owe any of us anything," he said, head ducked, keeping intense eye contact. "Okay?"

“Okay,” I agreed as my heart started doing this crazy little shuffle in my chest.

“Okay,” he agreed, dropping my chin, and there was no accounting for the surge of disappointment that coursed through me right then. “I’m gonna let you settle in,” he said, waving around. “Do whatever you want to make it homey. I’m gonna get food started,” he told me, grabbing the bag full of fridge items he’d brought up, so he could go put them away.

“Okay,” I said, giving him a smile, then watching him turn and walk toward the door. “Hey, Detroit?” I called, watching him turn back.

“Yeah?”

I didn’t think twice about it.

I just went with the urge.

I flew at him, wrapping my arms around him, and squeezing tight, feeling immediately more secure up close to his broad chest.

“Thank you. For everything.”

His arms were a bit slow to go around me, but when they did, they squeezed tight.

“Don’t mention it, sweetheart,” he said, then just as suddenly as he hugged me, released me, turned, and left.

I was surprisingly sad to see him go, but tried not to overthink it, knowing my emotions were all over the place from the last few days.

Taking a slow, deep breath, I looked at my room.

Yes, it was a little... stark.

But the girls had likely brought in the bed and the dresser, and made the bed with the very nice all-white bedding that was so similar to what I had at home. And Coach had built and brought in a desk for me.

There wasn’t much in here, but what there was, had been deliberately brought in with me in mind. That made it immediately feel a little more homey.

I went through my bags, hanging all my clothes in the closet. Yes, I was one of those people who couldn't live out of a bag. Even if I went on a short vacation to Vegas to see a show, I always hung up my clothes in the hotel closet. Then I put my under things into the dresser, and placed my toiletry bag on top, not knowing how many people shared the bathroom, and not wanting to clog it up with all my things.

I put my blanket and Squishmallow on the bed, and my books in the drawer of the nightstand where no one else would see them.

I was just trying to figure out what to do with the records I'd impulsively brought with me, some silly part of me scared that someone might break into my apartment while I was gone and steal them. And, sentimental value aside, I couldn't afford to replace all of them. And I couldn't live without them. Dramatic, I know. But it was my comfort and feel-good music. I needed it.

It was right then that someone cleared their voice in the doorway, startling me enough to yelp as I whipped around, finding Crow standing in the doorway.

I didn't know him well. But I guess maybe a bit more than all the others, Detroit aside. He was married to Morgaine who I'd had a few conversations with. Including when I'd paid her to poison my sister's abusive ex.

He was tall with longish inky black hair and a thin sort of fit with this amazing bone structure that belonged on TV.

And he was holding something in his arms.

"Oh, hey," I said, smiling.

"Detroit told me to bring this up to you," he said, shuffling the thing in his arms. "Said it was gathering dust downstairs, and you'd get use out of it."

"What is it?" I asked as he stepped into the room.

"A record player," he told me. "But it has Bluetooth and everything too. Where do you want me to put it?" he asked.

“Oh, ah, the desk would be great,” I said. “Thank you,” I told him.

“Don’t mention it. Morgaine’s gonna be happy to see you. She’s fussing with her chickens. But I’m sure she’ll be by to check on you,” he said, then turned and left without another word.

I didn’t waste any time.

I plugged in the player, pulled a record from the sleeve, and slipped it in, then dropped the needle.

I immediately felt a little better with some familiar music to dull the unfamiliar sounds of the clubhouse.

I finished everything up, piling my bags inside my luggage then the luggage inside the closet, walked over to the bed, slipped out of my shoes, grabbed my sea cow, curled on my side, and slept.

Long, hard, deep, and dreamless.

I woke up disoriented, staring into the darkened room, my panic shooting through my system for a moment until I remembered I wasn’t in the jail. I was at the clubhouse.

Safe.

Comfortable.

Really, really lucky.

It wasn’t until there was a knock that I realized what had woken me up.

“Yeah?” I called, sitting up.

The door inched open, bringing in bright light from the hallway.

“Did I wake you?” Detroit asked.

“It’s okay. What time is it?”

“Seven,” he told me.

“Seven?” I hissed. “At night?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have woken you up, but you haven’t had anything to eat. And dinner is ready.”

“Oh! No. I’m glad you woke me,” I said even as my stomach let out a painful grumble. “I’ll be right down,” I told him.

He nodded and closed the door, blanketing me in darkness again. Seven at night. I’d slept for, what, six hours?

Granted, I needed it. But I didn’t think I’d sleep so easily in a strange place. I always tossed and turned in hotels or even at my mom’s place.

Stretching, I climbed out of bed, turned on the light, then made my way across the hall to the bathroom, putting myself together, then following the happy sounds of friends downstairs.

It wasn’t as packed as I expected.

There was Sway and a pretty blonde at his side, Crow and Morgaine, Coach, and a guy I hadn’t been introduced to yet.

He was a little younger than the others. Tall, thin, with brown hair that, when the light caught it, showed flecks of red, and a beard.

“Feel better after some sleep?” Morgaine asked, holding a hand out toward me, likely not wanting to have to struggle to her feet with her very round belly making it more difficult.

I stepped forward, squeezing her hand.

“Much,” I agreed. “Thank you,” I added. “The room is lovely.”

“We were mixed on what to do with it. It was Murphy whose logic prevailed,” she said, waving toward the blonde situated next to Sway. “She thought you’d feel better if you got to decorate it to your taste. And since none of us know what that is, we left it simple.”

“It’s perfect,” I assured her, giving Murphy a smile too.

“Oh, this asshole here is Rook,” Sway said, tossing a crouton off his salad at the somewhat younger guy. “He’s a

prospect that turns into a pumpkin at ten,” he said.

My confused glance moved to Rook who shook his head. “I got a pain in the ass parole officer,” he explained. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly wondering if that was true of me too. I wasn’t on parole, but I was on bail.

“You can be anywhere you want,” Coach said, drawing my attention over to him. “It’s different. You haven’t been convicted of anything, so as far as the law is concerned, you are innocent and can do whatever you want. Outside of whatever provisions they might have given you. Rook is convicted and let out early, so he’s stuck on parole for a bit.”

“Oh, right,” I said, nodding, soaking the information up like a sponge in case I needed to know that in the future. “Detroit told me you made the desk in my room,” I said, not wanting to assume he made it *for* me, and embarrassing myself when he corrected me.

“I thought you might need somewhere to sit and work on projects,” Coach said. “So I threw it together for you yesterday.”

I moved toward him, reaching out both of my hands, and taking his.

“It’s perfect. Thank you so much. That was really sweet,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” he said, shaking his head.

“Don’t ask him where he got the wood,” Sway said, and there was a shared chuckle, making me think I was missing out on some kind of inside joke.

“You’re over here,” Coach said, patting the empty chair next to him. Which left one other vacancy. The one at the head of the table. Presumably for Detroit, who was the only one still standing, scooping something into a bowl.

“Can I help with anything?” I asked, watching him look over.

He hesitated, like he didn't want to put me out, but I was already walking toward him.

"Sure. If you want to take that platter out," he said, nodding toward one on the island.

There was a lot of food.

Like maybe the man thought he was feeding an army or something instead of just the eight of us.

I brought the platter of asparagus, and grabbed the bowl full of orzo as well, and took them toward the table.

Detroit followed with a bowl of golden roasted mini potatoes, a bowl of mushrooms and zucchini in some sort of dark marinade, then went back to grab a big tray of baked macaroni and cheese, and a platter of bone-in pork chops with some sort of glaze and fresh herbs sprinkled on top.

My stomach let out another loud grumble as I finally took my seat, accepting to have my glass filled with water that Coach was passing around.

"This all looks amazing," I told him as he took his seat beside me. "I don't think I've seen this much food since Thanksgiving," I added. And maybe not even then.

There was a clatter of passing dishes, and I watched as both Coach and Detroit started to pile up my plate before they passed on the bowls. Before I knew it, there wasn't an inch of space left.

I was almost glad I hadn't been able to stomach any of the jail food, because there was no way I would be able to fit all this in otherwise. And one bite of the mac & cheese told me that I wanted to devour every single bite of this food.

"Oh, my God," I moaned as I tasted it, looking over at Detroit. And I swore, for a second, there was a flash of something heated in his eyes. Something that my body immediately responded to, making me press my thighs tightly together under the table before I forced myself to keep eating.

I had no idea how long it had been since I'd shared a meal with someone. But I guess a part of me had forgotten how nice

it could be to share a meal *and* light conversation.

Everyone tossed playful jabs back and forth, everyone laughing and piping in, making me wonder how nice it must be to be part of this bigger found family that they had. With people who knew you well enough to know what they could tease you about without you getting offended.

I had nothing to add to the conversation as it went on, but I was enjoying hearing it, and occasionally laughing at something someone said.

My mood felt so much lighter by the time Coach and Rook were getting up and gathering dishes.

When I tried to stand to do the same, Detroit's hand covered mine, stilling the motion as I grabbed for my plate.

"It's kind of their job as prospects to do the cleaning," he explained. "It's their way of paying their dues and proving they'll be valuable members of the club," he added.

"Oh," I said, totally not understanding, but figuring it wasn't my place to question it.

"You're an amazing cook," I told him. "Do you enjoy it?" I added, knowing my mom was a good cook too, but she didn't love doing it, save for the holidays.

"I do," he said, nodding. "Cooking for me is what meditation is for Coach," he explained. "Helps me clear my head and focus. And there's a good meal at the end of it," he added.

"I think I like your kind of meditation better," I decided. I wasn't going to tell him this, but I was so full that the button on my pants was digging into my belly.

After dinner, the couples kind of made their way off, and Coach drove Rook home before he could get in trouble for being with the club.

"You look like you want to go back to sleep," Detroit said.

Honestly, I'd been half nodding off in my seat.

"I have some catching up to do," I agreed.

“Go on up then. You’ll feel better once you’ve had a few more hours.”

With that, I decided he was right.

But not before I took a long, hot, private shower first. And did my skincare. And all the various little before-bed rituals I had.

Then, because the room was so big and empty, I felt like I could hear myself thinking, so I got up and put one of the most mellow records on, playing low, and climbing into bed to pass out.

Only to wake up some time later. Shivering. It felt like the room had dropped thirty degrees since I’d gone to sleep. Even under the bedding the girls had set up and the blanket I’d brought.

I tried to just endure it until it felt like it had seeped into my bones, and I couldn’t ignore it anymore.

Then, knowing I’d never get to sleep without another blanket, I climbed out of bed, and did the only thing I could think to do.

I knocked on Detroit’s door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Detroit

I wasn't sleeping.

As fucking ridiculous as it was, I couldn't, knowing she was one wall away.

I'd gone into the bathroom after she'd gone to bed to brush my teeth, and the scents of her bath products were all around. It's humiliating to admit even to myself, but I stood there for a second, breathing it in before I snapped myself out of it and went into my room.

I closed the door, leaning back against it, and letting out a breath as I looked around.

Usually, my room felt like a sanctuary. It was where I went to escape the parties when I didn't feel like partaking.

I'd put a lot of work into it over the years. From the rustic floors and the wall of brick tiles I'd installed to warm up the space that had felt very cold and industrial before, to the decor. The tufted brown leather bed, the shelves under the window

that mostly housed cookbooks I'd collected over the years, and some pictures of my family back in the day.

My gaze landed on an image of me and my brother, young teens still, smiling for a picture my grandmother had taken of us outside in the driveway playing basketball.

I moved toward it, picking it up.

“What the fuck happened to you?” I wondered aloud as I looked at my brother's face. He'd been a happy kid. Despite the hard times, he was always light and smiling. Nothing like that man with the ice-cold eyes I saw at the gym.

With a sigh, I put the picture back down, but flipped it facedown this time.

I turned on the TV to distract myself, but couldn't even focus on the game playing as I found myself pacing, trying to sit, then getting up to pace again.

Shower, rinse, repeat, for fucking hours.

Before I just forced myself to lower the light and get into bed, figuring I would pass out eventually.

It was right then that I heard a soft knock at the door.

I knew it was her before I even threw off the covers. The guys would have just charged in, knowing I never had women in my room. And the girls never came to my door.

I flicked on the light before pulling the door open, finding Everleigh standing there with a sleep mask pushed up on her forehead, and her pink blanket wrapped around her, her whole body trembling.

“Do you have another blanket?” she asked, jiggling to keep herself warm. “My room is so cold,” she added, leaning in toward mine. “It's so much warmer in here,” she said, leaning into my room.

“Come in,” I said, ushering her inside. “Let me see what's going on with your room,” I said, moving past her.

It was always an empty room, door closed, so we clearly hadn't ever known before that something was clearly wrong

with the vents.

She was right.

It was fucking frigid in there. Even though I knew Slash had started turning the heat on at night because the girls were complaining about the cold.

“The fuck?” I said, feeling a shiver course through me too as I moved toward one of the vents, way up high in the ceiling, and felt nothing coming out of it.

With a sigh, I moved back to my room to talk to her, only to find her in my bed, the covers pulled up to her nose.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m being rude. Your bed is so warm,” she told me.

“It’s fine, sweetheart. Something is wrong with the heat in your room,” I told her. “You can’t sleep in there until we fix it.” Not if she got that cold that easily.

“Can I stay here?” she asked. “I promise I don’t move around a lot in my sleep,” she added, surprising the shit out of me.

I knew what I was supposed to do.

Tell her to take my room.

To grab my pillow and go sleep on the couch.

That was what a good man would do.

I was suddenly not feeling that good, though.

“Of course,” I said, nodding. “I’ll grab your cow thing,” I added, moving back out to get it, taking a few slow, deep breaths, trying to remind my body that it was never going to fucking happen with her, so it could just stop having a reaction to her nearness.

There was no reasoning with attraction, though.

So self-control was just going to need to win out.

When I walked back in, she was in the same position, but she’d thrown her blanket over the top of all the others.

Looking right at home.

And, fuck, did a part of me really like that.

“Feel better?” I asked, handing her the sea cow, then moving around to get in the bed from the other side.

It was a king-sized bed.

But I was a big guy.

So she was close enough for me to feel her body heat and smell that caramel/vanilla scent of hers. I bet my bedding was going to linger with that smell for days.

“So much,” she said, nodding as I reached for the remote, and handed it to her.

“No, it’s okay. Watch your game,” she insisted.

“I wasn’t watching it anyway,” I assured her.

She didn’t try to insist again, taking the remote, and flicking around until she found what she was looking for.

That damn movie channel that did Christmas movies all November and December.

Apparently, they also did fall romance movies.

And we were going to be watching one.

Honestly, it fit right in with my idea of what kind of content she would consume. Nothing about her implied she’d be the kind to love true crime or action. She was all things soft and girly. So was her music. And so, of course, were her movie preferences.

“I know it’s cheesy,” she said as the townspeople all seemed to be interested in or participating in a pumpkin pie contest, “and the acting is... not the best. But I can’t get enough of these. The fall ones *and* the Christmas ones.”

“Puts you in the mood for the holidays,” I said. “I suddenly had a craving for pumpkin pie.”

“And apple cider donuts,” she said, giving me a smile. “Do you bake too?” she asked.

“Not as much. I like cooking better. More chances to explore. Baking is more of a science than an art. A lot of the

parts have to be just right. Cooking gives you more room to play around.”

“I love baking,” she said. “If you have the ingredients, I can totally bake a pumpkin pie or two tomorrow,” she said, eyes bright. Like she was excited at the possibility.

“If I don’t, I’ll get ‘em,” I told her.

We had to stop talking then.

Because the clueless male hero suddenly realized he couldn’t let the heroine go back to the big city, got his head out of his ass, and made a move.

Everleigh was lapping that shit up.

But by the time the credits rolled and the opening ones started on another movie, she was drifting off to sleep.

As I sat there, I couldn’t help but hope that her heating issue couldn’t be fixed in one day. That she would share my bed another night or two. Even if I knew that was a slippery fucking slope.

And a couple hours later, when the heat seemed to lower again—likely a trick by Slash to appease the women while they were awake, but drop cool enough for comfortable sleep all night—I could feel her inching closer to me.

Until, eventually, she was plastered to my side.

And that’s exactly how I should have left it.

But I lifted my arm, inviting her closer.

It wasn’t long until she was moving up over my chest, seeking my warmth. First her head. Then arm. Then, yep, her leg hooking over my hips.

Desire, fierce and long-repressed, blazed through me, making me hyper-aware of every inch of her. The way her hair brushed over my arm and chest. The swell of her breast against me. The softness of the inside of her thigh. The heat between.

I was rock-fucking-hard in minutes with my teeth gritted and my hands fisted, trying to think and breathe through it, to

try to move past it.

It was an impossible feat.

Even when sleep claimed me, it seemed the desire stayed with me, because when I felt Everleigh shifting around as she strained toward wakefulness in the morning, I could still feel the strain of my cock.

Fuck, I thought to myself as she shifted even more, moving completely over me, arms and legs on either side.

The second she was awake, there'd be no way for her not to notice how hard I was.

I should move.

Whip to my side, knocking her back, like I was just turning in my sleep.

But even as I decided to do that, she was shifting. A little lower this time.

And my cock was pressing against the juncture of her thighs.

The movement immediately stopped.

She had to be awake.

And she had to be feeling every thick inch of me against her.

I tried to focus on staying still, playing asleep, not letting her think this was any sort of conscious desire on my part, just an unconscious physical response to her moving around on me.

I figured she would slowly move off of me, try to pretend none of this happened.

I was so surprised when her hips wiggled and a little whimper escaped her that I almost bucked up against her.

She had to be awake, right? Not just unconsciously moving against me, lost in a sex dream. But I was having a hard time thinking that Everleigh would be the type to take the lead like that, to be so bold, if she was fully awake.

Even as my mind was racing, though, her hips were rocking again. And again. And again.

Her face was in my neck, her breathing fast against my skin, and her soft whimpers and moans ringing in my ears.

It took every goddamn bit of self-control I had in me not to roll her onto her back, and rock my cock against her, to slide down her body, yank her clothes out of the way, and bury my face in her pussy, to lick and suck until she was writhing and screaming, then move over her again, surge inside her, and fuck her until we both exploded into oblivion.

But I just stayed there, stock still, and she writhed against me, as her body tensed and her breathing got faster, as she got closer and closer.

Then, with a catch of her breath and an almost pained whimper, she came, her body shuddering against me.

I damn near came with her.

From some dry rubbing.

Like a fucking teenager.

Everleigh was stiff as a board after, mind likely clear, and freaking out about what just happened.

I kept as still as possible as she slowly moved off of me to the other side of the bed. Then, inch by inch, off the bed. Across the floor.

I waited until I heard the soft click of the door before my hand was going under the sheets, into my pants, grabbing my cock, and stroking it.

Hard.

Fast.

Desperate.

With the feel and smell of her fresh on my mind. With the sound of her moans as she came still in my ears.

I came harder than I could ever remember, unable to keep my sounds to myself—something I'd never experienced

before.

I jolted then, though, sure I heard the click of the door.

But when my head whipped over, it was closed.

It was probably just the door of her room next door, going back in after stopping in the bathroom to pull herself back together.

“Christ,” I hissed as I climbed out of the bed, making a beeline for the bathroom, needing to clean up, but also clear my damn mind.

It was going to be almost impossible to go through the day with her nearby, knowing I couldn’t touch her, but thinking about her grinding against me, coming hard from just the slide of my cock against her pussy.

I took exactly no comfort in the fact that Everleigh seemed equally as unsure and uncomfortable as I did, both of us keeping a wide berth from each other as we moved about the kitchen—her making coffee and me working on breakfast.

She was eager to go outside and see the chickens when Coach said he was going to go let them out of their coop after we ate.

Then she spent a really long fucking time throwing the ball around the yard for Murphy’s dogs. Then playing tag with Delaney and Judge’s eldest when they dropped by for a visit.

Anything she could do, it seemed, to stay away from me.

It was for the best, I tried to remind myself, as I ruthlessly scrubbed the kitchen, half-surprised that I didn’t wipe the shine off of the counters in the process.

It was after lunch, and more cleaning, that I looked in her direction, watching her gaze dart away like she’d been looking at me when I hadn’t been watching.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

“I’m gonna head into town to grab the makings for pumpkin pie,” I told her. “Do you want to tag along?” I asked.

“No,” she said quickly. Too quickly. She immediately went a little pink as she realized that too. “I, ah, what if people in town saw?” she asked. “I don’t think I could stand to hear them looking at me and talking about me behind my back,” she said. “I know it’s stupid to care what other people think, but I can’t help it.”

It might have started as an excuse not to be alone with me, but there was clearly a lot of truth in her words as she leaned into it.

I wouldn’t say that Everleigh seemed insecure to me. But she definitely cared about how she appeared to others, what narrative she played in their lives. However small a part she might have played.

“I understand,” I said, nodding. Because I did. It took me a long-ass time not to be bothered by the sideways looks some of the townspeople, or other people outside our town, gave my brothers when we rode around on our bikes or walked around with our cuts on.

You had to get to a certain level of “Fuck you and your opinions” to get past it. And I wasn’t sure Everleigh was the kind of person to think that way.

“Is there anything else you want me to pick up?” I asked. “Snacks?” I added.

“Vanilla ice cream,” she said. “I could really go for some vanilla ice cream today,” she said.

Comfort food.

Because she was feeling weird about this morning.

I felt guilty about that.

But I couldn’t think of anything to say that might make it better.

So I said nothing.

Just grabbed my wallet and keys, and moved outside.

Where Coach was standing. Almost like he’d been waiting for me.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, shaking his head.

“Going to the store. Everleigh wants to bake pumpkin pie,” I told him.

“Nah, that’s not what I meant,” he said.

“What do you mean then?” I asked, tensing because I had a feeling I knew what it was.

“What are you doing with that girl in there?” he asked, pinning me with those eyes that saw too much.

“I’m not doing anything with her,” I insisted. This morning excluded. And that didn’t count because neither of us were acknowledging it.

“Yeah, but why is that?” he asked. “You’ve had moon-eyes for that girl since the moment I came into this club. Before then, most likely. “Now you got her right here... and you’re avoiding her like she’s contagious.”

“I’m not—“ I started, but we both knew I had been.

“What’s the problem? Why not make a move if you like her so much?”

To that, I shook my head.

“What? Say it.”

“Girls like that don’t belong with men like us,” I said, shrugging.

“Girls and men like what?” he asked.

Really, nothing about this shit seemed like it needed to be spelled out. But Coach was relentless when he wanted to know something, so it was useless trying to brush it off. It was easier just to come out with it.

“She’s a good girl, Saúl,” I said.

“And what? We’re bad men?” he asked.

That was a tricky question.

Objectively, no, we weren’t bad men. We did a lot of good. We had a code.

“We’re criminals,” I said, shrugging.

“Seems to me she’s involved in some crime shit all on her own.”

“She’s innocent. She’s not at fault if someone else got her wrapped up in shit without her knowing about it.”

“So, what? We’re not allowed to find women and be happy?” Coach pressed.

“We can. But if you notice, the guys find women like us.” Delaney was the sister of the Irish mafia. Nyx worked at a mafia bar. Morgaine poisoned men for a living. Murphy made weapons.

Even the ones who weren’t directly criminals themselves were a part of the criminal world.

That wasn’t Everleigh.

She had a nice, normal life.

She deserved to continue to have a nice, normal life.

“She deserves better than the constant worry about the repercussions that can come with this lifestyle,” I insisted.

To that, Coach tipped his head to the side, watching me with those intense eyes for a minute.

“Don’t you think you should value her own intellect and sense of self enough to allow her to make that decision?” he asked, then turned and walked away.

Leaving me to ponder that shit all through shopping, pretending not to watch Everleigh baking, me prepping dinner, and all of us eating it.

It was closing in on bedtime, and I hadn’t said a single private word to Everleigh since asking if she wanted to go to the store with me.

I was sure she overheard the conversation I had with Slash about having the HVAC guy in, and then when he’d heard back and the guy said he couldn’t come until the following afternoon. So she knew she couldn’t sleep in there. But I

needed a chance to tell her that she could take my room, and that I would crash somewhere else.

When I finished taking Rook back home and went upstairs, the bathroom door was cracked open, steam billowing out, making me figure she'd taken an ultra-hot shower in the hopes of chasing the chill away, so she could sleep in her room.

I wasn't having that.

But I had to give her a few minutes to get dressed before I knocked, so I pushed into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

Only to find her standing there.

Wrapped in a barely-there towel, her hair pulled back in a clip.

There was that caramel/vanilla scent again.

And way, way too much exposed, tempting skin.

And, if I wasn't completely fucking mistaken, heat in her eyes.

"Fuck it," I said, taking a step forward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Everleigh

Oh. My. Freaking. God.

Really, that was the only thought that played over and over in my head after the orgasm fog cleared from my mind.

A part of me wanted to blame sleep.

And, to be fair, I had crawled up over him in my sleep, wanting to steal some of his warmth. I was always, always cold. Being that close to him was the warmest I'd ever felt.

I could even blame, to an extent, the steamy dream I'd been having in my sleep. A dream that had desire pulsing through my body before sleep cleared from my mind and I realized I was not only on top of him, but his hardness was pressed against me.

I mean, what the hell was wrong with me?

I'd... I'd kind of assaulted him in his sleep.

It wasn't his fault he was having a reaction to me climbing all over him. It wasn't intentional.

But the way I shifted down so his hardness could press against the juncture of my thighs, and then rocked against him to bring myself to an orgasm?

That was intentional.

And really, really, really wrong.

I'd been horrified with myself as I climbed off of him, then out of the room, glad that he had managed to sleep through it because that would be so hard to explain to him.

I mean, it didn't make what I'd done any *better*.

And when I went into the hall to pull myself together, I decided that the only thing I could do was go to him, address it, and apologize for it.

Then leave town and never come back because there was no way to live that down, no chance of me ever facing him again.

I had the door open, and was a step in before I looked to the bed.

Then there he was.

With his hand down his pants, gripping and stroking himself.

For a moment, I was too surprised to move.

Then, well, I don't know.

I was too mesmerized to.

That probably sounded so silly and juvenile of me. But the fact of the matter was, I'd never seen a man doing that before.

God, maybe I was a prude.

I guess I just figured that solo stuff was for alone time. Not to be witnessed by the other person. And my previous couple of boyfriends seemed to silently agree with that.

I owed Detroit his privacy.

He had no idea I was there. His eyes were shut tightly.
Lost in some fantasy.

But I couldn't seem to force my legs to move, to carry me out.

Desire, just sated, blazed through my body once again, making a deep ache start between my eyes as I watched his body tense, his arm pump faster, his face twist in that pained look that pleasure sometimes took on, as his ragged breathing turned to low groans and curses.

Then, as his entire body jerked hard as he came.

It was only then, realizing I would be caught watching him—as if I hadn't done enough terrible things already that morning—that I managed to rush right out of the room, closing the door a little too quickly, and it wasn't completely silent.

But I ran from there, hoping that he had been too distracted to hear.

I spent the rest of the day feeling like a complete creep. Or, worse yet, some sort of predator. But not brave enough to address it the more time passed.

So I avoided him as much as possible.

Then resigned myself to sleeping in a frigid bedroom because there was no way I could be trusted beside him again.

With that in mind, I went into the bathroom to take the longest, hottest shower of my life. Until every inch of my skin was bright pink, and all I could think about was getting cool enough again.

I cracked the door as I brushed my teeth, then did my skincare.

I had just finished that when the door flew open.

And there was Detroit.

I didn't have that knee-jerk moment of insecurity at being caught wearing nothing but a towel that just barely covered my lady bits, and my boobs were all but bursting out of.

Because his gaze moved over me, hungry, heated, and I felt the desire bloom through me once again.

“Fuck it,” he grumbled, that deep voice of his seeming to vibrate into my bones, as he slammed the door behind him and stalked forward.

I had no idea what he was doing.

But then his giant hands were sinking into my hips, lifting me up and off my feet, then depositing me onto the cabinet beside the sink.

My breath was caught in my chest as his molten gaze met mine for a minute as he stood before me.

His hands went to my knees, pressing them wide.

There was a short pause, him waiting for any signs of objection.

I bite my lip and gave him a slight nod.

He held my gaze, and suddenly dropped down to his knees.

Then his face was buried between my thighs, his tongue tracing up my cleft.

My entire body jolted at the sensation, my thighs shaking as his tongue circled around my clit.

I felt myself spreading my thighs wider, silently inviting more.

I could feel the surprise of how much I was responding to him.

I'd never really liked receiving oral sex before. I couldn't tell if it was based on personal insecurities, or because of less skilled partners, but I generally just avoided it. And my exes hadn't seemed to care to do it anyway, so it just never really happened.

But I was so absorbed in this moment, in the feel of him, in the way my body was responding.

Before I knew it, my hand was slapping down on the back to his head, holding him to me in case he dared to try to pull away before I could get more of this. Get all of it.

My thighs closed around the side of his head as he continued to tease around my clit, but refused to make direct contact.

Just when I thought I'd go crazy, his tongue teased over my clit, making pleasure jolt through me, hinting at an orgasm, but not quite giving it to me yet.

My soft sighs became moans as he continued to work me.

His hand moved between us, his fingers tapping at the entrance of my body, then teasing inside, dragging a loud moan out of me.

He started to thrust as his tongue finally worked relentlessly over my clit, driving me up hard and fast.

My thighs were shaking, my moans loud and almost constant.

When I felt I couldn't take the anticipation anymore, the orgasm coursed through my body, the pleasure overtaking me completely as Detroit continued to lick and thrust, dragging it out until I was completely spent.

It wasn't until the fog of the orgasm cleared that my mind seemed to come back to me, kicking into overdrive until it was racing and spinning and doing freaking somersaults.

What the heck just happened?

Did this somehow mean that he'd... known about this morning? That he had been awake? That I hadn't kind of attacked him while he was unconscious? That he was an active participant?

Or was it just a spur-of-the-moment thing?

You know... me being an almost naked woman standing in front of an outlaw biker.

Because, well, I didn't know a lot about the bikers, but I knew they slept around a lot. Like... *a lot* a lot. Enough so that

there were ‘club girls’ who came over and slept with like... all of them. Or at least did when they were single.

I could see how a guy who was used to such easy, casual sex could walk in on a woman in her towel and see it as an opportunity for more easy, casual fun.

The thing was, though, that there were two words that no man I’d known would ever use to describe me. And that was ‘easy’ or ‘casual.’

I was a serious relationship kind of girl.

I wasn’t even a ‘third-date-rule’ person.

I always felt like I needed a strong connection, and to feel like I really *knew* someone before I got physical with them.

Which meant that sex didn’t happen until I was already in a committed relationship.

At least, that was how it had always been before.

That said, it had been a really, really long time since my last relationship ended. And with it, my sex life.

Was I just that hormonal that I was willing to break a pattern that had existed since I lost my v-card the week of my nineteenth birthday?

My mind was in so many places at once that I didn’t really register that Detroit had stood, that he was looking down at me.

It wasn’t until he murmured a soft, but kind of savage-sounding “shit” that I seemed to snap out of it and really notice him again.

But by then, it was too late. Because he was walking out of the bathroom, and closing the door behind him.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I climbed off of the counter, finding my legs still a little wobbly.

When I glanced in the mirror, the woman staring back at me was wide-eyed and flushed.

The longer I stared at myself, the less and less I recognized myself until I had to look away, setting my mind back on getting ready for bed, then cleaning up after myself.

I walked out of the bathroom with my heart jackhammering in my chest, staring at Detroit's door like he might burst out of it at any moment.

Then I turned and went into my room, finding it somehow even colder than it had been the night before.

It was a matter of minutes before it felt like the cold was seeping into my bones.

I went to the dresser, putting on two layers of socks, then found one of my work hoodies, and threw that on too.

My sea cow and extra blanket were still in Detroit's room, but I couldn't go in there and get them.

I just had to make do.

I climbed under the blankets, pulling all the bedding up over my head to lock in my body heat as well as I could, then overthinking myself to sleep, hoping I had cocooned myself well enough to not get hypothermia or something like that.

I woke up with the sensation of the world falling away, making my entire body jolt like a hypnic jerk.

"Shh," a voice murmured, and the closeness of it had me jerking again.

It was then that I understood why the world had fallen away.

Because I'd been lifted up off my mattress, and was being held against someone's chest.

I knew that fear should have overtaken me then. A single woman being carried out of bed in the middle of the night.

But I was in the biker clubhouse. Safer than I could be anywhere else.

And, besides, the chest I was resting against was absurdly wide. The arms around me were massive, strong, yet gentle.

Then there was the familiar scent of him. Something masculine, strong but not overpowering.

I knew exactly who had me in his arms.

“You’re sleeping in my bed tonight,” he said in response to the jolt, holding me a little tighter as he started to walk toward the door.

I probably should have insisted I could walk.

Did I do that, though?

No. No, I did not.

I cuddled in.

I rested my cheek against his wide chest, letting his warmth seep in as he walked into the hall, then his room.

He’d already turned back the bedding and had my sea cow on the spot waiting for me as he lowered me down. Then he carefully tucked me in, making sure the blankets were covering everything but my face.

“Where are you going?” I called when he turned to go toward the door.

“I’ll crash downstairs,” he said, voice low.

“No. I’m not kicking you out of your room,” I said. “I won’t make you watch any more cheesy fall romances,” I added, watching as he turned back with a smirk. “Unless you like them,” I added, seeing his lips twitch. “You totally like them,” I said, smile spreading as I watched him.

“There’s... a certain small-town charm to them,” he decided with a shrug. “And if they might inspire you to bake some more shit...” he added, coming back to the bed to grab the remote, turning it back to my channel, then getting in beside me.

We didn’t talk about it.

Any of it.

We just watched a movie with a bit of a caper—*Who spiked the pumpkin spice coffee at the Harvest Festival?!—*

then drifted off to sleep.

This time when I woke up, Detroit was turned away from me, and I was cuddled into his warmth, doing an imitation of spooning, but my much smaller body made a really poor big spoon.

His body was still, so I let myself enjoy the closeness and warmth for an embarrassingly long time before I finally turned away, trying to convince myself that I wasn't disappointed that I didn't wake up on top of him again.

Eventually, the sounds of the house had both of us climbing off of each side of the bed, and getting our days started.

All the while, I had a sudden craving for a pumpkin spice latte. And the feel of Detroit's weight on me in bed.

CHAPTER NINE

Detroit

The bell rang, ushering in a man who would ruin any chances of picking up a stubborn-ass Everleigh from her bed, and depositing her in mine, so I could feel her cuddling up against me in her sleep.

The damned HVAC guy.

Ready to fix the vents in her room, so she would be toasty warm without me to snuggle into.

I didn't have a lot of time to be pissed off about that, though, because not ten minutes later, there was another ring of the bell.

"Who the hell could that be?" Slash asked, brows pinched, as I walked toward the door.

We didn't exactly have a lot of visitors. The clubhouse was pretty far out of the main area of town, so we didn't get solicitors or shit like that. Plus, you know, the whole outlaw biker thing.

When I pulled open the door, the man standing there looked out of place as hell standing there.

Simon Evertz.

In a three-thousand-dollar blue suit.

With a watch that was likely double that.

I glanced back toward the kitchen where Everleigh's face completely fell at the sight of him. And the reminder of how fucked up her life had become.

"Simon," I said, brows furrowing. "Were we expecting you?" I asked, though I knew there'd been no contact.

"You should be until we get this mess sorted out," he said, moving past me and inside without being invited. "This is nicer than you'd expect," he decided as Cat did a long stretch before jumping off the couch, and all but slamming his body against Simon's pant leg.

For a second, Everleigh's gaze narrowed at the cat. Who she'd been trying to woo with treats and tuna fish. To no avail. And here was this stranger who completely ignored his existence, and he was rubbing all over him.

"You look better than the last time I saw you," Simon said as he approached the dining room table, putting his briefcase down on it, then pressing his thumb into the scanner to unlock it. "Let's get to work."

"To work," Everleigh repeated. "On what?" she asked, not moving a step closer.

"Your case, Everleigh," Simon said, sounding frustrated already. Like he wasn't getting paid an insane amount of money for this visit.

"Oh, uh, okay. But... but how are we working on it?" she asked. "I thought this would, you know, be a court thing."

"We are trying to avoid court," Simon said. "Unless you want to be judged by a jury of your peers. And let me tell you, from experience, you don't want to put your life in the hands of the general public. But, hey, your choice," he said, and I didn't like his tone.

“Easy,” I hissed as I walked past, giving him a hard look that had his brows raising, but he didn’t seem intimidated.

I guess when you worked for all of the West Coast’s most notorious, hardened criminals, you didn’t startle easily.

“No, ah, of course I don’t want to go to court. I just don’t know how that is avoidable,” she said. “I really don’t know anything about this,” she said.

“No,” Simon said with a sigh. “You don’t come off as a true crime or cop drama kind of woman,” he said, shaking his head. “I guess I’m gonna have to walk you through this.”

“And if you could do that without speaking to her like she’s a fucking child, that’d be great,” I said, grabbing three coffee mugs, and pouring.

“You’re paying me for my specialty,” Simon insisted.

“Is your specialty being a complete dick?” I asked, getting a surprised snort out of him.

“Fair enough,” he agreed, nodding. “Nothing,” he said when I lifted the cream and sugar containers in a silent question.

I put a little extra cream and sugar into Everleigh’s cup, then brought all of them over to the table where Everleigh had moved to sit, straight-backed and uncomfortable.

Simon took a sip of coffee as Everleigh just held hers between her hands.

“Alright. So. If we can avoid court, that is the goal,” Simon said in a much more tolerable tone. “But that means we have to work. In essence, it means we have to be our own investigative team. Because the DA has the entire fucking police force if he wants it to pin this on you. Especially your asshole of a brother,” Simon said, surprising me.

“How did you know?” Everleigh asked.

“Have you seen the two of them?” Simon asked. “Strong genes going on there. Anyway, he’s got a goddamn personal vendetta going on here. So we have to work harder to prove him wrong.”

“He *is* wrong,” Everleigh insisted.

“We know that. But the DA believes what the cops tell him. So we have to create another explanation.”

“What about Gav?” I asked. “Is he still inside?”

“He was granted bail, but no one has posted it.”

“He has family, though,” Everleigh said, confused.

“His bail was set at seventy-five grand. And unless someone was going to risk their house, they probably couldn’t pay it.”

“Would it be possible to talk to him?” I asked.

“I’d have to talk to his attorney. An overworked, underpaid public defender who is probably trying to talk Gav into a plea deal to avoid court.”

“A plea deal,” I repeated. “And what are the chances he’ll throw Everleigh under the bus to get his sentence cut?”

“High,” Simon said, no bullshit. “Especially if he’s having a hard time inside. Jail is a bit rougher for men than women. One way sexism works for women, I guess.”

“So we need to prove she’s innocent before he decides to come up with some lie about how it’s all Everleigh’s fault.”

“That’s the plan. So, Everleigh. Tell me about the drugs.”

“*What* drugs?” she asked.

“The ones that have your fingerprints on them,” he said.

“What?” I barked at the same time Everleigh did, but in a much more pained voice.

“To be fair, they have your fingerprints on the boxes that had trace amount of drugs on them, likely because they were used to transport the drugs,” Simon clarified.

“Boxes at the gym?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I mean... I carry boxes at the gym all the time,” Everleigh said. “We are constantly getting deliveries. New towels or

soaps, cleaning supplies, ingredients for the smoothies. The delivery people drop them all off at the desk, and I carry them to wherever they belong.”

“Exactly the problem,” Simon agreed, nodding. “Both sides have a case for your prints being on the boxes. And even film of you carrying the boxes, which I am sure they have by now.”

“Oh, God,” Everleigh hissed under her breath.

“Listen, they have nothing else on you. From what I can tell, you’re a model citizen. You’ve never been arrested, or even had a ticket. You pay your taxes and your bills on time, but you don’t have much left over after that.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, eyes going round.

“It’s my job,” he said, shrugging. “You make a modest living. And you live within it. There’s no indication that there is an excess amount of drug money in your life. Your car is barely operational,” Simon said with no small amount of disgust. “What I do need to know is if there are any skeletons in your closet,” Simon said.

Everleigh’s gaze slid to me, the concern clear.

Because she did have one.

The time she paid Morgaine to kill her sister’s abuser.

“Um, well, my sister...” she started, looking over at Simon.

“I know all about her ex,” Simon said, brushing it off. “And the situation that had him kidnapping her and another woman who eventually poisoned him and herself at the same time. She lived. He died. Am I missing something?” he asked, shuffling his papers. “Was there something that wasn’t in the official paperwork and news?”

“No,” Everleigh said, and I was surprised how steady her voice was, because I knew she was a bad liar. “I mean, I hated him with a fiery passion,” she said.

“For obvious reasons.”

“I wanted him dead,” she added.

“But you didn’t kill him.”

“No.”

“Or maim him.”

“No,” she agreed.

Because, in the end, she had nothing to do with his death. Morgaine even gave her the money back.

“So then this has nothing to do with you and your case. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of,” Everleigh said.

“Now, as for your personal life... you have none. No boyfriends. Two... no... three exes,” he said, making my brows raise. That was a lot of fucking intimate detail. Who the hell did he have doing this research? “And you don’t fuck around outside of your relationships.”

It wasn’t a question, but Everleigh answered in a tiny voice. “No.”

“So, your character seems pretty impenetrable. What we need to focus on instead is Gav’s character. So, spill on him. Is he a creep? Does he grab your ass or stare at your chest? Does he make lewd comments, or give the female patrons of the gym the ick?”

“He’s... I don’t know. He’s kind of...”

“Reclusive,” I supplied for her.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. “He’s not around that much. And when he is, he usually stays in his office. I don’t want to say he’s anti-social, but he just... keeps to himself.”

Simon jotted that down.

“Does he ever have visitors to his office?”

“No, not really. If he has meetings with someone who has a complaint about the gym, or maybe his brother or his mom once or twice. Nothing, you know, shady?”

“Okay. Does he ever handle the boxes? Whose job is it to handle the boxes?”

“Oh, ah, I guess that depends on the boxes? Like, I wouldn’t unpack the cleaning supplies. I would leave that for the cleaning staff. I would unpack the merch or sometimes the stuff for the juice bar if the evening staff didn’t handle it.”

“How many other people work at the gym?”

“Ah... eight? Four other front desk people. Depending on the shift, there might be two people working. Then the girl at the juice bar. The rest are cleaners. But that’s not counting the, you know, personal trainers. But the personal trainers really have nothing to do with how the gym is actually run. They rarely leave the gym floor.”

“I’ll have all of them looked into,” Simon said, still jotting down notes with a pen that likely cost more than Everleigh’s car was worth at this point. “What else do you have to say about Gav?” he asked.

“I...” she started, then shook her head, thinking better of it.

“No, say it,” Simon demanded. “Now isn’t the time to be nice.”

“Well, it’s just that... I always thought him owning a gym was kind of strange.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I never see him workout. He’s naturally on the thin side. But he doesn’t use any of the equipment or take classes.”

“Is that unusual? Do you?”

“I get a free membership and one free class a week,” Everleigh said. “I do pilates and use the elliptical. Not as often as I probably should, but I use it. So does everyone else who works there. Everyone but Gav.”

“Alright,” Simon said, jotting things down. “I’ll look into him deeper. But it wouldn’t hurt if you guys ask the people you know in town for more information on Gav.”

“Will do,” I agreed. Everleigh didn’t seem to have much of a social circle, and I at least could talk to the Murphy brothers, Jack at the motel, maybe even the Russians. And I could have the other guys put out feelers to anyone else they knew.

“Now,” Simon said, dropping his notepad into his briefcase, then snapping it shut to look between us. “What the hell is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Everleigh asked, spine straightening.

“You don’t live here.”

“No, not usually,” Everleigh agreed. “It’s just temporary,” she added. And I had to ignore the way those words made my heart deflate in my chest. Even if I knew that was the way of things.

“Because I knew Everleigh was innocent, and I was worried about whatever connections Gav might have, I thought it wasn’t safe for her to be alone in her apartment. She’s staying in our guest room.”

I noticed Simon’s dubious look.

Clearly, he had made up his mind about things since I was paying Everleigh’s legal bills.

I got it.

It made no sense.

People didn’t act that selflessly.

And, I guess, I hadn’t either. Everleigh being free meant I got to see her, talk to her, spend time with her. I would lose that if she was convicted.

Was that pathetic of me?

Yeah, pretty much.

“I would try not to advertise that you are staying here,” Simon said, looking at Everleigh. “It’s fine to do it, but we don’t want it getting around town that you’re staying with bikers. We know they’re not involved with drugs, but you know how gossip can get spreading in a small town. It would

be best for you to just... stay in the clubhouse as much as possible.”

“I can do that,” Everleigh said. “I kind of don’t want to go to town anyway. I’m sure everyone is already talking about me.”

“Probably,” Simon agreed, standing. “Anyway, I will have my team on this for a few days. See what we can come up with. You work on your end. Then we will have another meeting. Compare notes. Hope we come up with something before the DA decides to go to trial.”

With that, he was gone.

“He’s... intense,” Everleigh said after we listened to his door slam, then his engine purr to life.

“He’s an asshole,” I countered. “But, I guess, that’s what makes him good at what he does. Rather have an asshole on our team than against us.”

“That’s true,” she agreed. “I feel like he wants more from me than I can give. I just don’t really have any contacts. And I guess I’ve always kind’ve seen the best in people. I still can’t believe Gav is a drug dealer. And that he was so heartless as to get me involved. I’ve worked so hard for him,” she added, voice going thick.

“Hey, don’t be crying over him,” I said. “He’s not worth it.”

To that, she sniffled hard. “Maybe not. But I think it’s okay to be upset that he took advantage of me.”

“That’s fair,” I agreed. “I’d hate for you to turn cold and cynical because of him, though. This is on him, not you.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, hiding her face in her hands as she tried to pull herself together.

Some part of me almost wished she didn’t. That she would let me go over there and pull her against my chest and hold her like I’d done at the courthouse. I liked how soft she was, how sweet and good. She was everything the world needed more

of. And I was fucking enraged that Gav had the power to potentially change that about her.

“Ah, ‘scuse me,” a voice said, making Everleigh jump, turn, and rush into the kitchen, busying herself by starting to wash some dishes. “Did I interrupt somethin’?” the HVAC guy asked, shuffling his feet.

“It’s alright,” I said, following him out of the room to give Everleigh some privacy. “Did you figure out what’s going on with the heat?” I asked.

“The blower,” he said, nodding, but the way he sucked his teeth afterward told me that it didn’t end there. “Problem is, I don’t have the one you need. I can order it in, but it’ll be a couple days. Mail is slow out this way.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that,” I said, shrugging, playing it off. While, inwardly, I was fucking over the moon about it. “Order it. The room’ll be there when you get it in stock.”

To that, he nodded.

“Aight. I’ll get it going. And will be back in... three days. Don’t have a time. I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“Drop in whenever. Someone is always around.”

“Good good. I’ll head out,” he said, but then turned back. “It’s none of my business, but I find buying some flowers and running a bath for the lady does wonders,” he said. “Less it’s a hormonal thing,” he added, clicking his tongue. “Then, your best bet is a boatload of chocolate, ice cream, a soft blanket, and keeping your damned mouth shut,” he said, whacking me on the arm, then walking off.

When I walked back into the kitchen, Everleigh had pulled herself together. “Why do I feel like that was too quick?” Everleigh asked, nodding toward the door where the HVAC tech had just walked out of.

“Because it was. He has to order a part. It’ll be another couple of days.”

“I can, ah, sleep on the couch until it’s done,” she said, looking uneasily at the living room.

“No. You’re fine where you are,” I said, brushing that off. “If anyone is going to be sleeping on the couch, it’s me.”

“No!” she said, a little too quickly. “No, it’s your room. So long as I’m not kicking you around or stealing your covers, you should just stay too.”

It was stupid.

It was getting harder and harder to keep my hands to myself. I’d needed to roll away from her just to keep myself from touching her.

But I wanted her there, no matter the struggle.

After the thing in the bathroom, I knew that I had no other choice but to practice some self control.

Because, yeah, she’d enjoyed herself. Yeah, she’d moaned and writhed and dug her fingers into my head. She’d come hard and long.

But when I’d looked at her afterward, her eyes huge, shock clear on her beautiful face, I knew it couldn’t happen again.

“You okay?” Everleigh asked, head tipped to the side.

“Yeah, fine,” I said, nodding.

“Why don’t I believe you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at me. “You know what you need?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“Hot chocolate and *Home for the Holidays*,” she declared.

“*Home for the Holidays*?” I asked.

“It’s one of the few Hollywood Thanksgiving movies. It’s perfect for this time of year. I’m not really a Halloween girl. So I like the Thanksgiving movies more. That one and *Son in Law*, in particular.”

“Sounds like a mini marathon is in our future,” I decided, watching the excitement brighten her previously sad eyes.

You had to love that about her.

How simple her pleasures were. How easily she found things to be happy about. Movies and hot chocolate. That was all it took to lift her mood.

And that was how we spent the afternoon.

When everyone started filing in, asking about dinner, she was all too happy to help me prep some food, then help me stir and plate it all.

Later, we took turns getting ready, then climbed into bed with her cheesy fall romance movies, and fell asleep together.

It was the best day of my fucking life.

And I had no idea what to do about that.

CHAPTER TEN

Everleigh

The sexual frustration was making me feel like I was on edge every single moment of the day. But never quite as strong as in the bed at night. Where it felt like desire was pinging off every nerve ending, like my skin was on fire, and my heart was hammering, and my sex was aching.

It was so overwhelming.

Especially when I woke up against his back. Even, one night, with my arm around him, and my leg cocked up over his hip.

Did that mean that my leg, lower back, and hip were aching like crazy because he was so much higher off the bed than me? Absolutely. But did I stay there a little longer? Yep.

Before forcing myself to roll to the other side of the bed and try to reason with my body.

Eventually, Detroit climbed out of bed, disappearing, and coming back fifteen minutes later.

Wearing a towel.

Likely thinking I was still asleep.

Did I mention that this was, you know, a normal towel? Like, the same ones that were a little tight around my chest. Which meant it was positively straining against his ass. His very high, round, well-toned ass. And parted on his thigh. His thick, trunk-like thigh.

Not a small gap, either, I have to add.

I mean, it was a real slit.

Like I was pretty sure if he shifted just right, the gap would reveal, you know, all his secrets.

His big, thick, tempting secret.

Oh, God.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I mean, sure, I appreciated an attractive man.

But I never really had a physical reaction to a man I wasn't seeing. It was just a sort of detached appreciation. Like looking at a painting or something like that.

This, though, this was a whole body sort of reaction.

Like I was just barely able to keep myself from climbing off the bed, walking over to him, grabbing that towel, yanking it off, then lowering down in front of him, and sucking him into my mouth.

Like I wanted to do it so badly it hurt.

He finished fishing around for his clothes then, though, and turned his back on me to yank his boxer briefs up his legs.

I got a split second view of his bare ass before it was covered by a deep blue material that somehow almost made his butt look just as good as it did bare.

He turned again, and, well, I suddenly wanted to figure out who invented boxer briefs and their perfectly clingy material and thank them for their service to womankind.

Then his pants were on and his shirt as well, and it was time for me to stop pretending to be asleep.

“Morning,” I said as I moved across the room, heading toward the bathroom with a promise to my poor, aching body that I would do something that I just rarely did.

Take a bath and... satisfy the ache between my legs.

I mean, it wasn't that I never masturbated. But it just always kind of felt only partially satisfying. I couldn't make that make sense. An orgasm was an orgasm. It just didn't satisfy the same way when I was alone, I guess.

Any relief, though, would be preferable to this never-ending ache inside.

So I scrubbed the tub.

Then I filled it, dropped in some soap, and climbed inside.

I had just started to, you know, get things going, when the door suddenly flew open.

I saw his arm shoot inward toward the counter, reaching for the phone I'd noticed then disregarded in my need for a release, that he'd likely left when he'd showered before me.

The bathrooms in the house weren't private. In general, people used the one across from their bedrooms. But I'd noticed that some people left doors open afterward, others cracked, and others still closed the doors.

He wouldn't have thought anything about opening a closed door.

And I, accustomed to living alone, didn't always remember to lock the door.

It was all just... happenstance.

The thing was, as soon as his hand closed over his phone, I must have jolted. Because the water made a little splashing noise. It drew his focus away from the counter and toward the tub. Where I was under the water with my hand between my thighs.

The soap had settled toward the sides of the tub. So he wasn't... missing anything.

There was a strange sound that escaped him then. Something low and almost primal. The look on his face was molten as well.

But he seemed to snap out of it, shaking his head.

"Sorry, I..." he started, hand closing around his phone as he reached back for the door.

"No!" the sound squeaked out of me. I hadn't even been aware of thinking it before it was coming out of my mouth.

"No?" he asked, hand still on the door knob.

"No," I repeated, barely hearing my own response. But he did.

His hand fell from the knob. The other one released his phone back onto the counter.

He leaned back against the door, a deep breath exhaling out of him as he watched my fingers move between my legs.

I'd never done this.

Touched myself with someone watching.

But something about the apt way Detroit was watching me made all my insecurity fall away.

It wasn't even my hands I was thinking about anymore; It was his hands between my thighs, stroking me, driving me up.

It wasn't long before my sighs became some whimpers.

I needed more, though.

I needed him.

"Detroit," I called, my voice a sigh as my free hand moved out of the water, a silent invitation closer.

He didn't even hesitate.

He closed the distance in two strides, lowering down to his knees at the side of the tub, and slipping his hand into the water, sliding under mine, and teasing over my clit.

My legs fell open, giving him more access as my free hand grabbed his arm, fingers digging in as he drove me up.

There was something so intuitive about his touch, like we'd been doing this for years, as if he knew the exact pressure and pace that my body was craving, and when to apply more and go faster.

He got me closer faster than I probably even could.

His free hand moved out, slipping under the water too, closer over my breast. It was completely swallowed up by his massive palm. His fingers curled inward, squeezing with just the right pressure, then releasing to tease my nipple until it was hard and straining, before moving across my chest to continue the sweet torment.

His hand between my thighs shifted, two fingers slipping inside of me as his thumb continued to stroke over my clit.

My walls squeezed around his fingers tight, making a groaning sound escape him before his fingers started to thrust. Slow for a moment, then fast and insistent, driving me up, demanding the release that felt like it was clawing its way through me. Painful and pleasurable somehow at the same time.

Then, just like that, my walls were squeezing his fingers as the waves crashed through me, hard and almost violent, making a cry escape me as he continued to stroke and thrust, dragging it out until my body was shaking and my fingers digging crescents into the skin of his forearm.

He wasn't done with me, though.

Because as soon as the pulsations stopped, his arms were grabbing me, pulling me up out of the water. His strong hands kept moving me until I had my knees up on the wide brim of the tub, a little unsteady if not for his arm that went around my lower back, holding me there as his hand moved between my thighs again.

His fingers didn't go right for my clit, somehow knowing it was too sensitive right then, so stroking around it instead.

His head dipped suddenly, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth. The sensation of the cool of being out of the water and his warm mouth on me sending a shiver down my spine as I arched into his mouth, as my hands went around the back of his head, holding him to my chest as he slowly started to drive me up once again.

It wasn't long until my own hands felt curious, greedy for the feel of him.

They left his head to trail down, moving over his strong shoulders, chest, back, but unable to explore lower, given my position.

Impatient, I shifted, dropping my butt down on the edge of the tub instead, keeping my legs spread wide for him as he worked his magic, taking me from one orgasm, and working me toward another.

But my hands were finally free to explore him now, too. So they did, moving under the material of his shirt, feeling his hot skin, and the bulges and indents of his muscles that I'd been spying on in his room not long before.

My head dipped inward, lips teasing over the skin of his neck. There was a catch in his breath at the contact, and that small reaction bolstered my confidence.

My hands explored lower, over those deep indents of abdominal muscles, into the dips of his Adonis Belt. Then teasing across the waistband of his pants.

A small shudder coursed through him, and there was no more uncertainty.

My hands clawed at his button and zipper, desperate to get them down, to reach inside his pants and boxer briefs, and close my hand around the long, thick length of him.

A hiss escaped him as my hand closed around his cock and my hand was still for a moment, marveling at how my fingers couldn't quite close around him. Maybe my hands were small. But there was no denying that his cock was huge, either.

Almost as if sensing my thoughts of how he would feel inside of me, his fingers slipped inside, and my walls clenched

around them, aching for more fulfillment.

My hand started to work him then, stroking him from head to hilt, and it was like his fingers fell into motion with them, working me how I was working him.

My little whimpers became moans that I muffled with my lips to his neck. His reaction was just catches of breath at first, then a deep, rumbling sound in his chest.

As my hand stroked him faster, his fingers worked me faster as well. Until we were both breathless and lost in the sensations, in the need for release.

Until the orgasm crashed through me, leaving me crying out against his skin, my body shuddering hard.

I was still present of mind enough to keep working him through it.

But the sound of a voice made us both freeze.

Close.

Too close.

“Detroit, where the fuck are you?” Slash called. “Coach is waiting.”

“Fuck,” Detroit said in this pained voice.

Because he was so close.

But he didn't have time to finish.

He pulled away from me, yanking his hard cock back into his underwear and pants, then looking at me, his eyes heated, yet somehow soft at the same time.

Leaning forward, he pressed a soft kiss to my forehead before getting to his feet.

“Coming,” he called as he zipped up, then reached for his phone.

I'd probably dripped on his clothes, but he seemed oblivious as he moved out of the door, leaving me there, spent, yet somehow disappointed.

Because I wanted to make him fall apart too.

I wanted him to grab me, slam me up against the wall, and surge inside of me.

I wanted to feel him stretch me, move inside me, drive us both toward oblivion together.

If we hadn't been interrupted, I was sure that was exactly what would have happened.

Taking a deep breath, I moved to stand in the shower, draining the water, and rinsing the soap off of me, then climbing out.

As I stood in the mirror, brushing out my hair and doing my morning skincare, I made a decision.

One that was completely out of character for me.

I was going to seduce Detroit.

I was going to let myself be okay with something casual for once in my life.

Maybe I would regret it.

Maybe I would get my heart broken because I would catch feelings, and outlaw bikers didn't really do that.

I mean, that's not fair. They did. Slash, Sway, Crow, and Judge all had. But they did that with kind of exceptional women.

Morgaine, the poisoner.

Delaney, the Irish mafia princess.

Nyx, the goddess bartender at a mafia bar.

And Murphy, the weapons designer.

They were all extraordinary.

I was, you know, just an average girl.

I was okay with being that. I liked who I was. But I wasn't delusional enough to think that some adrenaline junkie, outlaw biker was going to think I was enough to settle down with.

So I had to accept that I was just going to get something casual out of it while I was staying at the clubhouse.

Even so, I knew myself too well to think I wouldn't develop feelings.

But I was just squashing those negative thoughts as I got myself dressed, and went downstairs to find Slash standing in the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee.

"Want some?" he asked.

"Yes, please," I said, giving him a smile. "Where did Detroit go?" I asked, trying for casual, and having no idea if I pulled it off or not.

"He went to pick up another prospect from the prison," Slash told me as he handed me my mug of coffee.

They didn't keep any flavors in the clubhouse. And I was a flavored coffee kind of girl. But I made do with cream and sugar, poorly pretending I wasn't aching for some caramel syrup or even some of that flavored creamer that comes in like fifty different variations.

"Oh," I said, surprised, even though I knew they did seem to take their club members from the ex-convicts being released from the local penitentiary.

"His release date was changed," Slash told me. "We didn't find out until the last minute," he added. Like he could read my thoughts. About why Detroit didn't tell me he had plans. Even though he wasn't my boyfriend, and he didn't have to tell me what he was doing with his days. "I hate to break this to you, babe," Slash said, giving me a wince. "But the peace in the clubhouse is gonna end tonight."

"What do you mean?" I asked, tensing.

"The guys are going to want to party. Just out of prison and shit like that," he said.

"Oh, right. Yeah. Of course," I said, nodding. "I don't mind," I added.

In fact, that might just work into my plans of seduction perfectly. No insecurity about anyone overhearing us if there was a party raging downstairs.

"Riff and Raff should be pulling in soon too," he added.

“Oh, yeah,” I agreed, knowing the stories about them, but never having actually met them.

They weren't in town that often. Or when they were, they weren't around for long.

If I understood correctly, Riff and Raff were brothers. Twins? Maybe? I didn't remember. And they seemed to do a lot of the, ah, weapons acquiring from down South where the laws were looser, and brought them back to the clubhouse.

“For the sake of plausible deniability,” Slash said, interrupting my thoughts. “You might want to go... make your bed when they get here.”

“Make my... oh,” I said, understanding.

If Riff and Raff were bringing in weapons, then I needed to be busy, so I didn't see, and wasn't involved.

The last thing in the world I needed was to get involved with more criminal stuff.

“I actually have to, ah, sort my laundry today. It should take an hour. At least,” I said.

“That's a girl,” Slash said with a smirk as he walked out of the room.

Just to be safe, I went upstairs after I grabbed a bite to eat, bringing an extra drink with me, in case I needed to hide away for an extended period of time.

I sorted my laundry.

Tidied up both mine and Detroit's room.

Then I planned out my, you know, under things to change into later.

I would do a shave and lotion first too.

Over the top? Maybe. But I wanted it to be perfect, since I was having a little anxiety about it.

All that done, I stared at the bed, realizing there was one thing I was missing.

Protection.

I always had some at my apartment, a box that I had rotated out twice already, not trusting them when they got close to their expiration dates, and not having any men in my life.

But I didn't ever carry protection with me.

I didn't need it.

Exhaling hard, feeling like I was invading his privacy, I went into Detroit's nightstands.

I lucked out, finding a box that was still good.

I took out one, putting it in the other nightstand, making sure we had them in easy reach.

Then, when the sounds of voices rose, sounding more friendly than work-related, I took a deep breath, and made my way downstairs.

All the while wondering if Detroit could sense what was coming.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Detroit

“You alright?” Coach asked as he drove the SUV out of the driveway.

Granted, Coach was intuitive.

But there was also no mistaking my mood right then.

I was fucking aching with need for the woman who had her hand wrapped around my cock just moments before, whose pussy was squeezing my fingers, and whose lips were against my skin.

I wanted her to keep stroking me until I came.

I also wanted to pick her up, press her against the wall, and slide my cock into her tight pussy, feeling her walls close around me, hearing her moans as I stretched her, as I made her mine.

And then I couldn't have any of that.

I never expected, when I'd rushed back in to grab my phone, that I would find Everleigh in the tub. And I damn sure couldn't have imagined that she would be in that tub with her

hand between her thighs. Or that she wouldn't want me to leave, that she wanted me to watch, then participate.

I'd been in a rush, or I probably wouldn't have burst in at all.

But when Slash said our next prospect was getting out almost immediately, it meant we had to hustle.

The disappointment, though, yeah, that was making me surly.

"Fine," I said. "Just wasn't expecting this today," I admitted. Which was true. None of us were. We were anticipating Riff and Raff coming with a drop of weapons. But not having to go meet and talk to this guy.

Because it wasn't like we could approach them in prison with the offer of becoming an outlaw biker. We had to do it once they were free.

It was usually Judge, Sway, or Crow doing this shit. Judge, because he'd been that unsuspecting guy walking out of prison one day only to be met by one of us. Sway and Crow because they were just more personable than I was.

But Judge, Sway, and Crow were busy with their women or their kids now. Which meant Coach got to act as the ex-con mentor. And I had to try to be the fucking welcome wagon. When all I could think about was the soft feel of Everleigh's skin, the moans as I touched her, the way her hands felt greedy as they moved over me.

"The party'll be good, though," Coach said. "With Riff and Raff in town too."

I didn't even get a chance to tell Everleigh about that, either.

I knew how she felt about her sleep.

And this would be the first night that she would have to endure a club party. Which, from personal experience, I knew could be impossible to try to sleep through.

"That him?" Coach asked, jerking his chin toward where a man was walking down the street from the prison.

He was still a ways off, but he seemed to fit the picture we had of him.

Colter was a tank of a man with dirty blond hair and a beard. Though the beard wasn't as long now as it had been for his mugshot. The prison probably had rules about facial hair length for identification purposes.

Coach swung the SUV up a few yards ahead of the guy, and we each climbed out our doors, waiting for him to approach.

As he got closer, I could make out his dark blue eyes as they appraised us, his gaze sliding over our cuts.

"I have no beef with any bikers," he said, shaking his head, seeming tired. And who wouldn't be, after what he'd been through?

"This isn't about a beef," Coach said, and Colter's gaze moved over him, squinting like he recognized Saúl, but couldn't quite place why.

"It's a job offer," I added.

"A job offer," Colter repeated, looking at me. "To do what, exactly?"

"Prospect at the club," I told him. "Do you know Saúl?" I asked. "They called him Coach inside," I added.

We watched the recognition hit.

"Knew of you," Colter said. "Never met," he added, offering Coach his hand. He had a tattoo on the back of his hand. Likely prison ink. But really fucking well done. An intricate compass design.

I knew he was ex-military. But with a compass, maybe a Marine or Navy?

I was sure we would figure it out.

He extended his hand to me next.

"Detroit," I said.

“Detroit,” he repeated. “So, what kind of job offer is this? I was never affiliated with a club before,” he added, in case we were misinformed.

“Ex-military. Doing a bid for beating the shit out of your best friend who moved in on your wife while you were deployed,” I said, watching as one of his brows quirked up.

“Sounds a fuckuva lot dramatic put that way,” Colter said with a self-deprecating smile.

“The job is, you prospect. You hang around the club, free room and board while you do little jobs around, see if you fit in with the crew. If you do, you get a patch. And a nice paycheck,” I told him.

“Not a lot of good opportunities for guys with a record. Not around these parts. Not anywhere,” Coach said, getting a nod from Colter. Who’d likely been thinking of little else since he knew he would be making parole.

“And if we aren’t a good fit?” he asked.

“Then you go your way, we go ours. No hard feelings,” I said.

I had a feeling he would fit in, though.

No matter what branch of the military he’d come from, he was clearly accustomed to living amongst a lot of other men. Same went for his time inside. He would be a pro at knowing when to engage and when to agree to disagree, how to bite his tongue when it didn’t matter, but speak his mind when it did.

It wasn’t easy for your life to revolve around the club. It wasn’t exactly natural in our society for so many people, who often had different personalities and views, to live all together under one roof.

You had to know how to keep the peace.

You had to be able to hold tight to your bonds and friendships even when shit sometimes got rough.

“Got a question for you first, though,” I said.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Who did you get for a P.O.?” I asked. Because if he got fucked like Rook did with Nancy Bird, he wasn’t going to be able to move in. And it would be a difficult transition for us to get him into the club, when we were already trying to make shit work with Rook.

“Oh,” Colter said, brows pinching. “Mick? Mick Ellers.”

“Thank fuck,” Coach said with a smile and a deep exhale, like he’d been holding his breath.

“Who could I have been strapped with?” Colter asked, sensing they must have been bad if this was our reaction to Mick.

“Nancy Bird. Our other prospect is dealing with her. Does constant drop-ins. Sometimes on back-to-back days, so you can never let your guard down. It’s like she wants to send us back,” Coach told him.

“Mick isn’t like that?” he asked.

“Mick is a four-time loser,” I said, meaning his marriages. “Got alimony on all of those ex-wives, plus child support for three, and a college tuition for another.”

“Meaning he’s looking for cash to look the other way,” Colter said, quick on the pick-up. And you had to appreciate that.

“Exactly,” I agreed, nodding.

“I don’t have the cash to pay him,” Colter said, looking like it killed his pride to admit that.

“We do,” I said. “And we will continue to pay it while you’re prospecting. Once you’re patched, if you’re still on parole, you can pay him yourself.”

“Sounds fair,” Colter agreed. “So what are the accommodations like?” he asked.

“Better than that,” Coach said, jerking his chin back toward the prison, looming large and intimidating from the hill. “Right now, we are using the spare room that would be yours for a house guest,” he added. “But once she is back to

her life, it's all yours. Until then, you can steal Rook, our other prospect's room. He can't be caught at our place."

"Not having to share a room sounds like a fucking dream after all this time," Colter admitted. "What kind of work am I expected to do?"

"Chores, mostly," I said. "Shit the rest of us don't want to do. But we are going to start working on transforming the top floor into more bed and bathrooms soon. So we'd expect you to work on that."

"Well," Colter said, exhaling hard through his nose. "Grew up with a handyman for a father," he said. "Seems like it's meant to be."

And so his decision was made.

Not that it was a hard one.

He couldn't go back into the military.

Other jobs would be hard if not impossible, to find. And the ones he might be able to, would be back-breaking for not nearly enough money. The kind of job that would age you prematurely.

Sure, agreeing to this life meant you would forever be on the wrong side of the law. But, honestly, once you were convicted of a crime, even after you did your time, society seemed to consider you on the wrong side for the rest of your life anyway. If that was how it was going to be, you might as well embrace it, make the most of it, and live a much easier life because of it.

"Where is this place?" Colter asked, letting Coach take his bag.

"Right there," I said, waving toward the clubhouse.

"Looks like a factory," he said, eyeing it.

"It was. Now it's fifteen thousand square feet for us to live in," Coach said.

"Fifteen thousand," Colter repeated, sounding a bit awestruck.

“Rooms are huge,” Coach told him. “And you can do whatever you want to them,” he added. “Been working on mine since I got out.”

“Any rules I need to know about?” Colter asked as he walked toward the side of the SUV, but pausing, wanting the fine print before he got in.

“No hard drugs. Using or selling,” I said. “And we respect women,” he said.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“Pretty much. But you’ll have to talk to Slash, our president, if you want finer details,” I told him.

“Got it,” he agreed, nodding, and reaching for the door.

“You’re not from around here, right?” Coach asked.

“Fresno,” Colter said as we all got in and pulled away from the curb.

“Gonna be an adjustment,” Coach told him. “Shady Valley is a small-ass town.”

“With a thriving criminal underbelly, I hear,” he said.

“Yeah. We got us. Then the Murphy brothers. Irish mafia. An alley of ours. The Novikoff brothers. Russians. Then there’s Erion and Czar who seem to be working together these days. And, well, I guess Gav too,” he said, making my stomach tighten at the mention of him.

I knew I needed to be working on Everleigh’s case. It sounded sappy as fuck to admit it, but time working on that meant time away from Everleigh. And, as it turned out, it was getting harder and harder to leave her. Even just to run errands and shit. Having to go out for days on end to try to chase down leads? That was gonna be fucking torture. And she couldn’t come with me.

Coach drove down through the main area of town, pointing out the very few stores and restaurants we had, giving Colter the tour of the town, then pausing outside of Nyx’s place, where Rook rushed out of and hopped in the back with Colter.

“Rook,” he said, shaking Colter’s hand.

“Hiding from your P.O.?” Colter asked with a smirk.

“Lemme guess. You didn’t get her?” Rook asked, envy clear in his voice, then on his face when Colter confirmed that.

“She’ll be outta your life eventually,” Coach reminded Rook, who seemed to get more and more upset about the arrangement with each passing day. And when Nancy wasn’t letting him visit his ma in the psych facility, I guess I could understand why he was so worked up about it.

“Not soon enough,” Rook said, exhaling hard. “I saw Riff and Raff rolling through town,” he said after a second, trying to shake off his mood.

“Yep. They’ll be around for a few days,” I said.

“Sounds like we’re gonna party tonight,” Rook said, smirking. “You are overdue,” he said, nodding at Colter.

“What kinda party are we talking?” Colter asked.

“Booze, girls, good times,” Rook said.

“Food?” Colter asked.

“Gotta ask Detroit about that,” Rook said, nodding toward me.

“I’m cooking,” I agreed. I figured Everleigh would likely pitch in with me, not seeming to be much of a party girl, but not wanting to be seen as anti-social by staying upstairs either. “Got any requests?” I asked.

“Steak. A fucking steak,” Colter said. “Been dreaming about real meat for years. Mashed potatoes not from a box,” he went on. “Vegetables not from a can. And something sweet.”

“Everleigh has the sweet covered,” Coach said.

“We got Everleigh cooking now too?” Rook asked, always feeling a bit out of the loop because he wasn’t allowed to live with us yet.

“Baking,” I clarified. “She likes to bake. She’s on an autumn baking kick. Pumpkin pie, apple cider donuts...”

“Think she could make a chocolate cream pie?” Colter asked.

“I can ask,” I said, nodding, but I knew she would agree to do it.

“Fuck,” Colter said as he walked into the common space of the clubhouse, his gaze moving around, trying to take it all in. “Cat,” he said, reaching down to scoop up Cat, flipping him upside down to hold him like a baby. And the fucker started to purr like it was the greatest thing in the world. “Dogs too?” he asked as Murphy’s dogs walked into the room, eyeing the stranger with curiosity, and maybe a little suspicion. They were her guard dogs, after all.

“Miranda and Samantha,” Rook told him as he moved forward to pet the German Shepherds. “Also got chickens out back. Oh, and Dell’s dog. Little Corgi. Thinks everyone is his best friend. He’s not always here, though.”

It seemed like Colter was easy with animals, putting the cat down to give each of the dogs a solid petting.

“Fucking miss my dog,” he said with a deep sigh. “He passed right before I got home from my last tour.”

The poor bastard.

Lost his dog.

Then found out his best friend was fucking his wife.

What a homecoming.

“What kind of dog?” Murphy asked as she followed her dogs in from, likely, playing fetch out back.

“Basset,” Colter said with a smirk. “Stubborn-ass dog. But lots of love to give.”

“And, I mean, the ears,” Murphy said with a smirk.

“Gotta love the ears,” Colter agreed.

“Anytime you need a dog fix, the girls love fetch. And long walks,” Murphy told him. “Murphy,” she said, giving Colter her hand. “I’m with—“

“Me,” Sway said, coming up behind her, and slinging an arm over her shoulders. “Sway.”

It was all introductions then as Slash, Riff, and Raff came in. Eventually, Crow and Judge showed up to meet the new guy too, and I snuck out to go grab the groceries for dinner, snagging some pumpkin spice creamer for Everleigh because it seemed like it would be right up her alley, then heading back.

By the time I got there, Crow, Judge, and Slash had either headed out or went to their rooms, and the guys were already drinking and getting loud.

I found Everleigh waiting in the kitchen, looking uncomfortable, but waiting to help me unpack the food, and start working on the chocolate cream pie she’d agreed to make for Colter.

“So, this is a biker party,” she said a few minutes later as I set her up chopping some veg for dinner while I seasoned the steaks.

“Sweetheart... no,” I said with a little laugh that had her turning, brows furrowed. “This is... a pre-party,” I told her. “It’s about to get a whole lot crazier. But we’re gonna try to get some food in their stomachs before it gets there,” I told her.

We worked quickly and quietly. Not that we would have heard each other with the music starting to blast anyway.

“Detroit, my friend, my brother, the light of my stomach’s life,” Raff said, already halfway to sloppy drunk. “That last part was a little weird, but you know what I mean,” he said, trying to stick his finger in the bowl of mashed potatoes I was trying to whip, only to get his finger swatted with the wooden spoon Everleigh was holding.

“I’m not calling Lula,” I said, knowing where he was going with this.

“But she’s the love of my life, man,” Raff said, pressing a dramatic hand to his heart. “We are suffering each moment we are not together,” he insisted.

“She barely knows you exist,” I said, smirking as his body jerked like bullets were riddling it.

That wasn’t technically true.

Lula knew Raff existed. How could she not, when he was forever declaring his undying love to her? But as far as I knew, Lula just found it charming and silly rather than an actual interest in her.

Which was fair.

It wasn’t serious.

If it was serious, Raff would plant his ass in Shady Valley and take her on a proper date. As it was, he just liked to flirt endlessly with her when he was in town, and enjoy the life of a single man when he wasn’t fawning over her.

I suspected that Raff had a Lula in every town he frequented. He was a shameless flirt and notorious manwhore.

But the girls indulged him because who didn’t want to be flirted with like that?

“Go call a club girl,” I suggested, waving him away from the food that was almost ready.

“Lula,” Everleigh said. “She comes to the gym,” she added, a question hanging in the air.

“She’s my cousin,” I told her. “She works for the Murphy brothers.” I didn’t say that what she actually did was cook their books, so the law never found out which money was legit from the bar, and which came from... other endeavors.

“Is he really in love with her?” Everleigh asked, pupils practically heart-shaped. The woman loved love. And it was sweet as could fucking be.

“No. He barely actually knows her. He thinks she’s gorgeous.”

“She is,” Everleigh said.

“And he likes that she never gives in to him. He’s just a flirt,” I said, shrugging. But I hoped the warning was there too: *Don’t fall for his attention. He doesn’t really mean it.*

Even though I had no right to warn her about anything. She wasn't mine. No matter how much I wanted her to be.

"So, the food situation..." Colter said, coming up with Cat in his arm again, purring so hard that Everleigh narrowed her eyes at him.

"I gave you a whole bag of fishy treats, and all I got was a nasty cut on my hand," she said, shaking her head at him.

"I heard he doesn't like women," Colter said, shifting Cat closer to Everleigh. He immediately stopped purring. And had his paw ready to strike. "Weird," he decided, shaking his head.

From there, it was time to eat. Which Colter did with relish, having seconds, then thirds, and eating almost a whole chocolate cream pie by himself. Thankfully, Everleigh had made four of them, given how many people were around.

The club girls showed up not long after, and things really got into swing.

"If you want to head up, I got the clean-up," I said. The dishwasher was already going, so it was just a few pots and pans left.

"Ah, yeah, actually," she said, and there was something in her smile that I couldn't quite put my finger on. "I don't want to get a headache," she added, then turned and rushed out of the room.

Weird.

But, then again, I'd never seen Everleigh at a party, so maybe she was just that eager to get away from the craziness.

I had no idea she had anything else in mind.

Not after I cleaned up, then got ready for bed, even though I knew it would be rough to sleep as the noise level just kept rising.

Eventually, I made my way in the room, surprised to find it already almost completely dark in there, save for the screensaver on the TV for one of the music channels, playing something kind of bluesy.

Interesting choice since it was completely clashing with the mix of hip-hop and rock going on down below.

Again, I thought nothing of things as I got into my side of the bed.

It wasn't until I was under the covers that I felt her shifting.

Sliding over me.

Wearing nothing but a barely-there lace bra and panty set.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Everleigh

I was nervous.

It was so silly.

It wasn't like I was a virgin or anything.

But, I guess, the first time with someone new was always kind of nerve-racking. And, at the same time, exciting.

So the butterflies were at odds with the flip-flops in my belly, making me feel a little jittery as I slathered on my lotion, then slipped into the pretty pink bra and panty set, then tossed on a robe to rush across the hall and close myself into Detroit's room.

I knew he wasn't far behind me, so I got the music on the TV and turned off the lights before chewing a mint, then lying there, waiting for him to finish washing up in the bathroom, then making his way into the room.

My heartbeat was frantic as a hummingbird's wings as he made his way toward his side of the bed, lifting the sheets, then climbing under.

I couldn't hesitate.

I knew I would psych myself out if I waited.

I sucked in a deep breath, rolled onto my side to face him, then slid a leg over his hip, before shifting my whole body over his.

His whole body tightened, and I wondered if maybe he thought I was asleep, and just seeking his warmth like I had several times before.

“Hey,” I said, voice a soft whisper.

“Hey,” he replied, voice low, but rough as usual, as the sides of his fingers brushed my bare thighs.

It was a barely-there touch, but it sent shivers through my belly as I planted my hands beside his head.

“We don't hav—“ he started.

But we did.

God, we did.

I cut off his sentence when my lips sealed over his.

A gooey sensation moved through me at the contact, at the way he groaned against my mouth, and his hands slid over me to sink into my ass, squeezing hard.

His lips were soft and reactive at first, giving me a chance to change my mind.

When it was clear I had no intention of doing that, they grew harder and more demanding. Until his teeth were nipping, and his tongue was teasing over mine.

A moan escaped me, muffled by his lips.

The sound dragged that rumbling sound out of Detroit, and he was suddenly shifting, moving to sit up, shifting me on his lap, and the movement had his hardness pressing against the juncture of my thigh.

With nothing but the thin material of my panties and his sleep pants between us, I could feel each thick inch of him.

My hips writhed restlessly, needing more of the feel of him even as his hand gripped the back of my neck, fingers gentle at first, then slowly digging in as his lips slanted over mine.

My hands roamed over his shoulders, his chest, his sides as his moved from my neck and into my hair, giving it a slight tug, forcing my head back, and exposing my neck to him as he leaned down to run his lips over the skin there, setting off little fires that started to catch and spread.

My hips ground down into him again, dragging a moan from me and one of those rumbles from him.

Suddenly his hands were sliding down my back, sinking into my ass, and guiding me over him again. And again. And again.

My hands slid up his chest, pressing him flat again, overcome with the urge to make him lose a little bit of control like he'd done with me earlier.

I moved over him again, pressing my lips to his for a moment before traveling down his neck, the center of his chest, down his stomach, where his muscles twitched at the contact of my lips and tip of my tongue.

His hips jerked upward slightly as my hands pulled at the material of his pants until his cock was free, the thick weight of him in my hand.

My tongue teased out again, tracing across the head for a moment, making his breath escape with a savage curse as his hand dropped heavily onto my shoulder, finger curling into a fist.

Slowly, I opened my mouth, letting him slide inside inch by inch until I couldn't anymore, getting a low groan out of him as his other hand moved outward. I didn't know why until I saw the light flick on.

Normally, I think I would have stopped, would have turned it back off. But something about the way I was unraveling him had me forgetting about anything but feeling more and more of his control slip away.

He gathered my hair, moving it out of his way, so he could watch as I started to suck him. Slowly. Then more quickly. Sometimes up and down, other times little twisting motions. Loving the taste of him, the feel of him beneath me, the way his fingers were now digging into my shoulder as I drove him up.

Suddenly, I didn't care if things progressed, if I finally got to feel him inside of me.

I just wanted him to fall apart.

Even as I was thinking that, though, his hand was grabbing my hair more tightly, and pulling until the pain across my scalp forced me to lift up.

His cock slid from between my lips, and my gaze rose to his, some part of me worried I'd done something wrong, until I saw the heat in his gaze.

His hand was still pulling until I had no choice but to crawl back up his body.

He didn't release me until I was straddling him again, but not sitting on his lap.

Only then did his hands start to move, teasing down my arms, the sides of my thighs, then over my ass, my back. His fingers flicked the clasps of my bra free, then he drew the straps over my shoulders, then tossed the material to the side when he was done.

It wasn't like he hadn't seen me naked before, but the hunger in his eyes was like this was the very first time.

His fingers splayed to the sides of them for a moment before his palms closed over my breasts, squeezing hard enough to drag a moan out of me.

I arched into his touch.

Then his thumbs were teasing my nipples into points before rolling them with this delicious little pinching sensation that had me dropping back down on his lap, grinding into his cock.

But he didn't allow that for long,

Because he was grabbing me again as he moved flat, pulling me over him, but higher, positioning me so that when he pulled me back down my breast was in his face, and he was sucking my nipple into his mouth.

His hands were moving down my back as his lips sucked and tongue teased. On one side, then the other.

His fingers dug into my ass for a second before they moved back up, sliding under the material of my panties, and sliding them down my ass, so he could grab my bare skin.

I swear there was something almost possessive about how hard his hands dug into my ass.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

He released me to continue to slide them down, and I lifted up to get them free of my knees, and off of me completely.

As soon as the material was gone, Detroit was rolling over, rolling me under him, his weight pinning me into the mattress. And I was sure nothing had ever felt quite as right as the feel of him against me.

My legs wrapped around his hips, and my arms around his shoulders, holding him tightly to me when he tried to push up, to transfer the weight onto his forearms.

“No,” I grumbled when he tried to pull back slightly again. Then, more softly, never being the type to communicate well in bed, “I like the feel of you.”

That rumble thing he did? It was even more intoxicating when his weight was pinning me, when I could feel it vibrate from him and into me.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he said before his lips were on mine again, kissing me hard and long and deep. Until everything fell away. Until all there was in the world were the two of us, and the kind of kiss that felt like it cracked open my chest and slipped inside my heart.

Dangerous territory.

But I couldn’t have cared less right then.

All that mattered was getting more of whatever this was.

My hands were digging into his shoulders as my legs grabbed him more tightly. My hips ground up into him.

On a growl, his pressed down into me, making a moan escape me.

The kiss broke then as he finally pulled away from me, kissing down my neck, chest, stomach.

My legs fell from his hips, spreading wide for him on the mattress as his path continued downward, not stopping until he was sucking my clit into his mouth, making my whole body jerk at the sensation.

My hands slapped down onto his head, holding him to me as his tongue started to work me.

There was nothing slow and sweet about it, no trying to tease me.

He was driving me up hard and fast.

His hand moved between us, fingers sliding inside of me.

Stroking.

Twisting.

Then separating, widening, preparing me.

It wasn't long before I couldn't take the torment anymore, before I needed the feel of him, the fullness of him.

My hands were grabbing him, pulling him up.

But he kissed back upward, prolonging the sweet torture for another moment or two before his lips were on mine, and his weight was anchoring me.

My legs wrapped him up again, feeling the thickness of him pressing against me, and I rocked shamelessly against him.

His weight shifted, and I heard the nightstand opening.

I said a silent *Thank you* to the me from an hour ago who'd put that condom there in easy reach.

His weight shifted away.

Just for a moment.

But it felt like an eternity to my system that wanted nothing more than the feel of him.

As soon as he was done protecting us, my hands were grabbing him, pulling him back down again.

A sexy little chuckle moved through him at my desperation.

“Easy, baby,” he murmured, his lips pressing a kiss to the corner of my lips.

I couldn’t be easy.

There was nothing easy about the ache inside me.

The desperate need for more, for everything.

“Detroit, please,” I begged, my legs wrapping around him again, my hips rocking restlessly.

“Say it again,” he demanded, voice rough, yet velvety-soft in my ear as his lips teased the shell of it.

“Please,” I repeated.

“No,” he said, nipping the lobe. “Say my name.”

“Detroit,” I said, his name sighing out of me as he rocked his hips against me, the head of his cock teasing over my clit. “Please,” I added when he didn’t do anything more. “I need you inside me,” I added, voice a faint whisper. But it was the truth. I felt it down to my bone, my marrow.

I needed him inside me like I needed my next breath.

“Fuck,” he hissed, pushing up to look down at me, eyes flicking fires down at me as he shifted, as the head of his cock pressed against me.

My mouth parted on a gasp as he started to slide inside of me.

There was an unexpected, and strangely satisfying pinch at the way I had to stretch for him.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he groaned as he kept sliding in, kept claiming me. That was how I felt right then, too.

Claimed.

His.

Every inch of me.

“Feel how perfect you are for me?” he murmured as his cock settled deep, taking every inch of me.

“Yes,” I whimpered, hips wiggling, needing more of the feel of him. “Please,” I pleaded, rocking against him as my arms and legs wrapped him up tight. “Please,” I tried again.

Only then did his control snap.

Finally.

And completely.

He wasn’t slow or soft then.

He pulled out and slammed in. Hard. Fast. Deep.

And again.

And again.

My nails raked down his back as my hips met his thrusts, as my desire reacted to his lack of control, to his raw, untamed desire.

A shamelessly loud moan escaped me as I arched into him.

“You’re taking me so good,” he hissed, lips meeting my neck as he fucked me harder still. “There,” he hissed as my walls tightened around him, close. So close. “Fuck, baby, come for me,” he growled.

Then, like I’d been seeking his permission, I did.

The pleasure shot through me violently, overtaking me, as a cry escaped me, and my body shook.

A growl escaped Detroit at the feel of me clenching around him over and over.

He kept thrusting through it, giving me every last shock of pleasure my body had to offer.

Only after did he slow.

He didn't come with me.

And he was still moving inside of me.

But softer, gentler, giving my body time to come down but still somehow reigniting the spark of desire as his lips claimed mine once again.

It wasn't long before I felt somehow just as needy as before, my hips wiggling against him as he refused to move more quickly.

Impatiently, I threw my weight, catching him off guard and forcing him to roll onto his back as I moved over him.

I couldn't claim it was often that I was bold enough to take control, to move on top without prompting.

I didn't have a second of uncertainty, though, as I rose over him and started to move to the rhythm my body was aching for.

Harder.

Faster.

Detroit's gaze was liquid fire as he looked at me riding him.

His hands were still at my hips for a moment before they started to move.

Teasing over my thighs, up my belly, then covering my breasts.

His fingers weren't gentle then.

They matched my own desperation.

Squeezing, pinching.

Hard.

Creating a pleasure/pain sensation that had me riding him faster, had my head falling back, and my moans escaping me unbidden.

“Fuck,” Detroit groaned as his hand slipped down, slid between my thighs, and started to work my clit, getting me closer faster.

The orgasm caught me by surprise, shooting through my system like lightning, turning my bones to dust.

I fell forward into him, crying out into his chest.

His arm went around my hips, holding me as he started to thrust up into me, dragging out the pleasure until it was almost painful.

Then coming with me, choking out my name as his body convulsed with the pleasure.

I couldn't tell you how long afterward I stayed exactly there, dead weight on his body, breathing fast and shallow, Detroit's arm heavily draped across my hips.

I could tell you that it was Detroit who recovered first, rolling us onto our sides, and I felt this irrational disappointment as he slid out of me in the process.

But then his lips were on mine.

Soft and sweet.

Undemanding.

Because we were both spent.

So it wasn't desire that bloomed.

It was something else.

Something far more lethal.

Something that started in my chest and spread outward until it overtook me completely.

I knew then that it wasn't something new. It was something that had been building. While I'd been in the clubhouse, sure. And especially in his bed. But it had been longer even than that.

In those conversations in the gym, as brief as they might be sometimes. In the soft smiles he sent me. And the way his

voice kind of always gave me little shivers. Especially when he was talking softly, just for my ears.

I was falling for him.

Had been for longer than I could have ever realized.

“I’ll be right back,” Detroit murmured against my lips.

I think I nodded.

But the second he slid away from me and out of the bed, I felt that sort of crushing heavy-heartedness at his absence.

“Oh, boy,” I murmured to myself when I was alone, rolling onto my back to look up at the ceiling.

I knew this was possible.

Even inevitable.

But it didn’t make it any less soul-crushing to know I could have this. For a short time. Then it would be gone.

He would be onto another woman.

Maybe even one of those club girls a floor below us.

I hated to admit this even to myself, but jealousy slithered through my system, wrapping around my throat until it felt like I was being choked by it as my traitorous mind flashed with images of him in bed with one of them, saying the things he said to me, to them instead.

It wasn’t until the door closed that my mind seemed capable of forcing those imaginings away.

Because there was Detroit.

His pants low-slung.

His eyes warm.

His smile soft.

Mine.

He was mine.

Maybe just temporarily.

But I wasn't going to waste the time I had with him by thinking and worrying about the future.

I was going to enjoy every second of this.

Detroit slipped back into the bed, hooking an arm under me, and rolling me onto his chest.

His arms went around me then.

Not casually.

They wrapped me up tight, held me like I was trying to escape, and he couldn't bring himself to let me.

But I wasn't going anywhere.

I just nestled into him.

I listened to his heartbeat until mine seemed to fall into step with it.

Then, slowly, bit by bit because I was fighting it every step of the way because I never wanted this night to end, I drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Detroit

I didn't sleep.

Even as my eyes and body were aching for rest.

I couldn't.

Because some irrational part of my mind was afraid that if I did, if I woke up again, I would find that this was all some sort of dream. Some fantasy conjured by my subconscious when I couldn't take her closeness anymore without making her mine.

So I stayed up, even as she slowly drifted off to sleep some time later, her body dead weight on me.

My hands softly traced over her, like if I tried hard enough, I could commit every inch of her to memory.

I could draw you the flare of her hip, the shape of her thigh, the roundness of her ass. I could describe in explicit fucking detail the feel of her hair as it slid through my fingers like spun silk.

As the sun started to peak through the dark sky, and the party below us wound down, and people made their way to the rooms around us, I had to finally admit that this wasn't some dream.

This had happened.

Not only had it happened, but she'd been the one to initiate it.

She'd been the one to climb on me, to run her hands and lips over me, to suck my cock into her mouth, to tell me how much she liked the feel of me, to beg for more.

I wanted to go slow with her, to make it last fucking hours. Because some part of me was sure I would only get this once.

But the feel of her, the sounds of her, it snapped my fragile hold on my control.

And, somehow, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

I was pretty sure this night would be what would replay over and over on my deathbed as I was waiting for the end.

The first chirps of birds were singing in through the windows as my body stirred, as my cock started to thicken with the closeness of her, with the heat of her sex right above it.

Before I could even think of trying to slip away, to let her sleep, I was rolling her onto her back, holding some of my weight off of her as she slowly blinked awake to me grinding my cock against her.

"Mmm," she moaned, her back arching up even before she seemed to fully wake up.

Another sweet little whimper escaped her as I rocked myself against her again.

Her pussy was already wet against me, already ready for me.

I reached toward the nightstand, grabbing another condom, and slipping it on as Everleigh watched me with heated eyes.

Finished, I didn't play for another second, I slid inside of her, feeling her tight pussy close around me, pull me in deep.

A growl escaped me as I pressed my forehead to hers, surprised at how strong the need was for release already.

Everleigh's arms and legs went around me, holding me close as I started to move inside of her.

I tried to take it slow, to savor it.

But we were both too fucking needy.

Her fingernails were raking across my shoulders. Her hips were grinding impatiently against me.

Pulling back, I knelt on the bed, hooking her legs up onto my shoulder, and picking up the pace, fucking her hard and deep, the headboard knocking against the wall with each thrust. Not that it mattered. The sound was drowned out by Everleigh's moans as I drove her up.

Her thighs were shaking as I felt her pussy walls tighten around me, as she got close, then crashed down into the orgasm that damn near took me with her.

But, fuck, she was so gorgeous when she was coming. I wanted it to happen at least one more time before I fell apart with her.

"I can't," she whimpered afterward as I kept moving inside her.

"Yes, you can," I countered as I reached up to remove her legs from my shoulders, pulling them down and spreading them wide on the mattress, giving me a view of my cock buried almost to the hilt inside of her.

And, fuck, was that a good view.

My finger slid across her clit. Slowly. Almost lazily. Giving her time to build back up before I started to move again.

When I did, I did it slowly, watching my cock slide out of her.

My gaze slid up, finding her gaze downcast, watching herself take me inch by inch as I slid back in.

A low, deep whimper escaped her as I settled deep, then slid back out again.

“Oh, my God,” she cried, her pussy a fucking vice grip around me.

That reaction had me refusing to give into the desire to fuck her harder, faster, to find my own release.

I kept the painfully slow pace, hearing her moans get deeper and louder, feeling her nails biting into my thighs, watching her back arch and her thighs shake.

“I... I...” she moaned, the sound choked and desperate.

“Come,” I demanded as my cock settled deep. I jerked up a bit as my thumb moved across her clit.

She came hard then, crying out so loud that there was no way my brothers, were they still awake, wouldn't know that things had gotten physical between us.

Her whole body shook as she came, and little whimpers escaped her afterward.

“One more,” I demanded, finger moving away from her clit.

“I can't,” she said, eyes hazy.

“One more,” I repeated.

But this time, I slid out of her, so I could reach down, turning her onto her belly, then grabbing her hips, and dragging her ass up and back toward me.

A growl escaped me as I looked at her.

“This is a fucking great view,” I said, my hand massaging her ass as I rocked my cock against her cleft.

Little *Mmm* sounds started to escape her at the sensation, and she kept her ass pitched up to me as my hand pulled back, then landed a small slap to her ass cheek.

Her breath sucked in.

Her body tightened.

And I was worried I'd taken it too far.

But then she wiggled her ass at me, a silent plea for more.

With a smirk tugging at my lips, I landed another slap. A little harder.

This time, she hissed, then sighed.

If that wasn't begging for more, I didn't know what was.

I slapped harder, then worked on her other cheek.

Until she was rocking her ass back into me.

Only then did I slam my cock back into her, listening to her long, loud moan at the change of position, the way my cock was gliding against her G-spot.

She was impatient, not even waiting for me to move, but rolling her hips in circles, and whimpering.

It wasn't long until I couldn't take it, though.

I grabbed her hips, using them to slam her back into me as I fucked her. Hard and fast, loving the sounds of her moans as they grew louder and louder.

Her head turned, though, pressing her face into the bedding, muffling her sounds.

"No," I urged, my hand sinking into the hair at the nape of her neck, wrapping it around my palm, and yanking back. "I want to hear you cry my name when you come around my cock," I told her, and I swear her pussy tightened around me at those words.

She was so fucking close.

All it took was another few thrusts before she was doing exactly what I wanted.

Crying out my name as her pussy spasmed around me, taking me with her, the orgasm so fucking intense that I swear my vision went white for a minute.

I seemed to come back from it all at once, her ass still in my lap, her breath heaving hard, and her thighs shaking.

Reaching down, I massaged her ass cheeks for a second before pressing her down onto the bed.

I found my pants, yanking them up, then going into the bathroom to deal with the condom.

I was going to go make us some coffee, but then I heard the distinct sound of someone fucking somewhere downstairs, and turned to make my way back into my room instead.

There was Everleigh, flat on her back, the bedding at the bottom of the bed, her perfect body on full display.

Fuck.

That feeling spreading across my chest?

I wasn't stupid.

I knew what it was.

Something I couldn't feel toward a woman who would, sooner or later, wise up and leave me behind.

I took a deep breath as I moved further into the room.

“Don't do that,” I demanded when Everleigh seemed to finally notice I was looking at her, and draped one arm over her breasts and the other over her pelvic bone. “Don't hide from me,” I added as I yanked down my pants at the side of the bed. Her head turned, her gaze moving over me. “See how you like looking at me?” I asked, watching the heat rise on her face. “That's how I like looking at you,” I told her as I kneeled next to her, moving her arm off of her breasts.

Leaning down, I pressed a kiss between her breasts.

Then, pulling her arm away, placed one right on the triangle above her sex.

I climbed over her to my side of the bed, pulling her back onto my chest.

“Shouldn't we be getting up?” she asked.

“Everyone else is going to be sleeping until at least eleven. Might as well catch up on some sleep too.”

We did then.

But not for long.

We both woke up seemingly in unison, and I couldn't seem to stop myself from watching her with a small smile tugging at my lips as she rolled onto her back and stretched like a cat before remembering her nudity, and pulling her blanket off the bed to wrap around herself.

"I get the shower first," she told me, then grabbed clothes, and rushed off to shower.

Alone, I let myself marvel at this turn of events while she showered, then climbed in after her, loving the way the smell of her was all around, and her line of skincare products was on the sink cabinet. And her toothbrush, with its baby pink cap, was sitting next to mine in the drawer.

By the time I finished, Everleigh was out of the room, and I made my way downstairs to find she'd already brewed a pot of coffee, the smell filling the downstairs, chasing away the scent of beer and liquor and, it seemed, pizza, judging by all the empty boxes scattered around.

She was standing in the living room, brows pinched as she looked down at a pile of clothing on the floor.

"That's... three sets of underwear," she said, glancing over at me as I moved next to her, seeing a pair of pink panties, and a yellow one, along with a pair of black boxers.

"Told you the parties get a little wild here," I said.

"I underestimated how wild. Ah, out of curiosity, and in no way related to the scene in front of me, do you guys happen to own a carpet cleaner? A fabric steamer? Something to sanitize soft surfaces?"

A chuckle moved through me as I pressed a kiss to her temple on my way to the coffee pot.

"I, ah, I kind of wasn't, you know, joking," she said as she followed me, going to put her hands on the island, then thinking better of it at the last second. "We all sit on that couch," she said.

“Don’t worry,” I said, passing her a mug, then getting the pumpkin spice creamer I’d gotten her at the store. “I got everything we need to clean this place. It’s all in the hall closet. But I got it. I’m usually who does the clean-up after the parties.”

“This might make me seem like a complete loser, but I kind of... like cleaning and organizing. I wouldn’t mind helping.”

So then we drank our coffee.

Got supplies.

And set to work.

Did we sweep and shimmy to a Taylor Swift soundtrack of her more upbeat songs? We sure did. And I got to watch as she jiggled her ass, and shook her hips, and sang her heart out.

“Hey, watch out for—“ I started to warn as she turned in a circle near the island, not seeing him until it was too late.

And Cat reached out and scratched the shit out of her hand.

“Ow ow ow ow ow,” Everleigh cried out as she all but tossed the roll of paper towels onto the island, making Cat dodge it with a blood-curdling yowl before hopping down.

“Alright. Let me look,” I said, reaching down for her hips, to lift her up onto the counter as I reached for her hand.

The sweet smile she gave me then had that sensation moving through my chest again.

“Not horrible,” I said. “Give me a sec,” I added, turning away to go grab the medical kit.

I squirted some antiseptic on it, then got a bandage covered in triple antibiotic, and wrapped it around.

Finished, I pulled her finger up to press a kiss to the bandage.

“How’s that?” I asked, looking up, and seeing something in her gaze that I couldn’t quite put a finger on, but it made that sensation in my chest intensify.

“Better,” she told me. “That cat needs therapy,” she decided.

“How about I make something for breakfast to make up for him?” I suggested.

“Something... sweet?” she asked.

“Pancakes? French toast? Waffles? What are we talking here?”

“French toast. The answer is always French toast,” she said, beaming at me.

“French toast it is. You stay right here,” I demanded, handing her back her coffee.

So that was where she was perched as I stood next to her, whipping eggs, dipping bread, chopping up some fruit for the side.

We sat and ate breakfast by ourselves, small talking mostly about her mom and sister.

Apparently, Bayleigh had really done a lot of healing once she moved away. She’d started a career, she found a man who worshipped her, and then, recently, she’d gotten pregnant.

Everleigh was excited as fuck to be an aunt to her coming niece.

“Do you want kids?” I asked after she finished gushing about all the clothes and toys she had saved for the baby shower.

“Definitely,” she said, no hesitation. “At least two,” she added. “I think the number will mostly depend on how much I will need to continue to work, that kind of thing,” she said. “You?”

“Always have, yeah,” I said, nodding. “Think everyone around here having kids has only made me want them more,” I added.

I’d always been a lot more... traditional than the other guys. I knew pretty much my whole life that I wanted a wife, a

house, and kids. I'd never been big on fucking around with every woman who would have me, or partying excessively.

I liked the simpler things in life.

"I can see that," she agreed. "I mean, my niece isn't even, you know, *here* yet. But I find myself scrolling baby clothes online, and wondering if or when I can move to get an extra bedroom for when she can come visit as she gets older.

"Do you hold the babies? My sister says her husband is terrified of holding the baby. She's worried he won't get over it."

"He will," I said. "I was scared as fuck the first time Delaney put her baby in my arms. They're so small," I said, remembering this bone-deep fear that I could possibly crush him or hurt him because he was so delicate, and I was so damn big.

"And you're so big," she agreed, nodding, understanding.

"Exactly. But it wasn't long before I became the Baby Whisperer around here. Dell swears that when the babies get too fussy for her or Judge to soothe, I'm the only one who can do it."

"I get that. You have a very... calming presence," she said. "Do you feel calm?" she asked, brows pinched. "Like, I always wonder if people who have that calming presence actually feel calm themselves, or if it is just something they project, but they are as harried as the rest of us inside."

"Ah... I dunno. Not much gets a rise out of me," I admitted. "I've always been kinda even-tempered."

"That must be peaceful," she said. "I can never shut that voice inside my head up. And it's super easy to get to me. I care too much about everything all at once. And, as much as I hate to admit it, I care way too much what everyone thinks of me too. So I'm forever thinking about what others are thinking about what I am doing or saying or how I look literally all the time."

"You've got nothing to worry about," I said, shaking my head. I couldn't relate. I generally didn't give a fuck what

anyone thought of me. But I could empathize with how overwhelming it must be to always wonder what everyone around you is thinking of you and how you were presenting yourself or living your life. “You’re always perfect,” I added, watching as her gaze skittered away, uncomfortable with the praise.

I didn’t know how long I had with her.

But I was suddenly dedicated to making her see herself the way I saw her.

“Is that French toast?” Colter’s voice, rough with booze and lack of sleep, called as he walked into the kitchen.

“Everleigh had a craving,” I told him, waving toward the stove where the platter of food was sitting.

“You’re a good woman, Everleigh,” he told her, giving her shoulder a squeeze as he moved past her.

Everyone started rolling in then, changing the little playing house vibe we had going on.

She was laughing at something, likely obnoxious flirting, that Raff was saying to her when my phone started to ring in my pocket.

Simon Evertz’s name was on the screen.

“Hello?” I answered, moving outside to take the call.

“You by her?” he asked.

“No, I stepped outside. Why? What’s up?”

“My office got a call today. From the county jail,” he said.

“County? Gav?” I asked, stomach tensing.

“Yeah,” he said, sighing hard.

“What did he want?”

“Not to hire me,” Simon said. “He openly admitted that he can’t afford me.”

“But...” I started.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “If he’s some big fucking deal drug dealer, how can’t he afford my fees?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “What did he want then?”

“He wants to talk to Everleigh.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” I said.

“He can’t,” Simon said. “Codefendants can’t be in contact outside of court. The thing is...” Simon trailed off.

“He must have something to say,” I filled in.

“Yeah. But as her lawyer, I won’t have contact with him either. I will talk to his attorney. Who is a baby lawyer. Just graduated like a year ago. Knows dick-all. But I will talk to him. The thing is, what Gav has to say, I suspect, is not something he would say to his lawyer.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded even though he couldn’t see me.

“You think I should visit,” I said.

“Technically, you are connected to Everleigh, seeing as you are paying for her defense. But no one outside of your club would know that she is personally connected to you. Not even your brother, I assume.”

“No,” I agreed. “I’ll do it. Do you think he will see me?”

“Out of curiosity, if nothing else,” he said. “He knows you.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’ll go.”

“You have to set up an appointment. I’d do it as soon as possible. Shit can escalate at any point right now. If you can get any information out of Gav now while we can, I think it’s best for the case.”

“Right,” I agreed, hearing what he wasn’t saying. That he and his team weren’t finding much to help Everleigh. And if Gav had something—anything—then we owed it to her to find out what it might be. “I’ll call now and set up an appointment. I’ll call you on the way back.”

“Great. I’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

I did the call.

Set up the appointment.

And said nothing to Everleigh.

She was finally relaxing, not seeming to think much about her time in county, and the potential for a prison sentence in her future. I didn’t want to force her mind back there. Especially after she admitted how hard it is for her to shut her mind down.

I could do this.

Then hand over the information to Simon, who could then do something with it.

She couldn’t do anything about it.

So I felt it was better to just... let her be in the dark.

I never could have known at the time that this would be the dumbest fucking move I could possibly make.

That in trying to protect her, I’d done the exact opposite.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Everleigh

Lips pressed into the space where my neck met my shoulder, rousing me from a deep, dreamless sleep.

Detroit's hand was resting on my bare belly, the feel and heat of him immediately making need build in my system.

We'd fallen into bed sometime after dinner and before the party started, both of us seeming to silently agree that we'd rather spend our time tangled in bedsheets than drinking and watching the guys make fools of themselves.

I mean, it wasn't that I didn't want to spend time with the guys. I was actually really starting to like them.

Especially the guys who were around all the time. Coach, with his endless knowledge of books and his wood projects he seemed to always be working on. Sway, with his lightness and ease of being.

Rook wasn't around all the time, but I liked him when he was. He had seemingly endless computer know-how. And I,

someone who still hadn't figured out how to hook up my sound bar to my TV, kind of admired that. Also, you had to be charmed by his love for his mother who he still hadn't been allowed to see.

There was Colter, new, yes, but really interesting. My heart went out to him. Losing his wife, best friend, and his dog almost all at once. Like an old-school country song or something. It was nice to see him finding some joy, even if it was in superficial things like food and casual sex.

Riff was a little harder to get to know. He was more standoffish than Raff. Definitely the more serious of the brothers, I am sure it would take some serious time with him to actually get to know him. But I imagined there was a lot going on with him. That whole 'still waters run deep' saying and all that.

Raff, though, I was kind of sad he traveled most of the time, because he was a trip. Funny, over the top, quick-witted. He gave me a tour of his tattoos. Which included a slice of pepperoni pizza on his ankle and a really, really bad Marvin the Martian stick figure.

I liked them all.

The women too, though they weren't around as much. The ones who were moms spent more time at their *actual* homes. Which made sense, of course. All their stuff was there. The things they needed to occupy and take care of their kids.

As a person of creature comforts, I understood completely.

So it was mostly Murphy who was around.

She was the exact kind of woman I thought belonged with one of the bikers. Strong, badass, sure of herself, with skills that I could only ever dream of possessing.

But that also meant we kind of had... nothing in common. So we did interact, of course, but there wasn't a lot of common ground to form bonds with.

I liked all of them individually and as a group.

But I would just much rather spend time alone with Detroit.

I decided it was pointless to try to fight the growing feelings. I knew me. There was no stopping them. Once I started falling, there was no stopping it. So I was just going to cling to him and enjoy it while I could.

Then, well, deal with the consequences later when it ended.

We explored for what felt like hours, learning each curve and indent of each other's bodies. He found my hotspots and I found the area behind his knee where he was so ticklish that he nearly kneed me in the face when my fingers drifted over it.

Then we'd watched the end of one of his football games before turning on one of my movies to fall asleep to.

It was perfect.

Made even more perfect when I was woken up to his lips and hands on me.

The party below was still raging, the beat of the music thumping through the floor, the occasional sound of laughter echoing up into the room.

But we were oblivious to it as I slid my body over Detroit's, and felt his hands moving down my back to sink into my ass, squeezing and massaging in a way I never could have known I liked so much until he showed me.

Desire was instantaneous, a fire that only burned hotter with each passing moment as our lips met, as we kissed slow and soft for a while, then hard and deep as our bodies got impatient for more.

I shimmied down until his hardness pressed against my heat, then rocked shamelessly against him as he folded upward, then arched me back, to suck my nipple into his mouth.

I reached over, pulling open the drawer, and grabbing a condom, handing it to him as my lips claimed his again.

As soon as he was finished, I lifted up, then slowly took him in, sighing as he filled me, as his hands grabbed my ass, and started to move me against him.

It didn't take long, though, before I was taking over, riding him hard and fast, hurtling toward an orgasm, then crying hard as it crashed through me.

Hooking an arm around me, Detroit moved off the side of the bed, stood, and turned.

He moved me, pushing me onto all fours, then surged back inside of me, dragging a long, low moan from me as he started to fuck me.

His free hand went between my thighs, working my clit as he pounded into me hard enough that my thighs started to smart from my thighs knocking into his.

But I was only barely aware of that as he drove me toward another orgasm, one that seemed to start at the base of my spine and spread outward.

“You feel so fucking good when you're squeezing my cock,” he groaned, but he was still hard inside of me.

His arms went around me again, turning us so he was sitting off the end of the bed with me in his lap, my back to his chest.

“Ride me,” he demanded as his hands slid up my belly and cupped my breasts, palms squeezing, fingers rolling.

It took me a moment to be driven up again, but then I was doing little rocking motions, head falling back on his shoulder as the position hit all the right places.

“Harder, baby,” Detroit demanded, voice rough. “Fuck, yeah,” he growled as I started to move, rocking harder and faster. “Just like that,” he said as his hand slipped between my thighs to start teasing my clit, driving me up once again.

My walls tightened around him as my nails dug into the sides of his thighs as I held on.

“That's it,” he hissed, jerking his cock upward into me. “Squeeze my cock,” he demanded.

Then I did.

Over and over and over until my legs gave up on me, forcing him up onto his feet, holding me up as he pounded into me until he found his release too, doing so with this savage curse that made another little mini O course through me.

“Always wake me up like that,” I demanded as we fell back onto the bed together afterward.

“I think I can manage that,” he said, turning me away from him, so he could tuck his body around mine, his arm draped over me, his heat warming my back, making me feel somehow safer than I ever had before.

I was asleep in moments.

I woke up cold, though.

I knew before my eyes even opened that I was alone. The spot behind me was even cool to the touch.

The disappointment was instantaneous and almost overwhelming.

But my gaze slid to the nightstand where there was a thermal travel mug and a plate with an apple turnover sitting there waiting for me.

I wouldn't pretend to understand the workings of the club. So I figured maybe he had some sort of work to do that meant he couldn't be with me.

So I sat up, grabbing the remote, and turning on a movie as I sipped my coffee and enjoyed my turnover in bed, warmed with the thought that he'd thought about me as he'd gone about his morning, wanting to make sure he made it clear to me that he'd been thinking about me.

Eventually, I climbed out of bed, showered, then made my way downstairs, and set my mind on cleaning up the mess since I had nothing else to do.

“Oh, hey,” a girl said, coming downstairs in her dress from the night before, eyes wide.

“Hey,” I called, giving her a smile. “Black stilettos or glittery gold flats?” I asked, noting her bare feet.

“Stilettos,” she said.

“Right on the other side of the couch. There’s a hoop too on the table there that I thought might go with the pumps.”

Her hand went to her ear.

“Oh, right, thanks,” she said, giving me a tentative smile.

“Here,” I said after she got her shoes on and slipped in her earring. Walking across the room, I handed her a sports drink. “Make sure you rehydrate,” I said as her car pulled up out front.

“Thank you,” she said, smile going warmer, more comfortable.

I watched her go, thinking that I would be okay with this being my little role in their world.

Being with Detroit.

Cleaning up after the parties.

Making sure the girls got on their way with all their belongings and with some electrolytes so they didn’t have too bad of a hangover.

I was happy with that arrangement.

“My favorite girl!” Raff declared, coming into the kitchen with his hair in about eight different directions, his blue plaid pajama pants low on his hips, and no shirt on.

Were those bite marks on his shoulder?

I forced my gaze away.

“You say that to all the girls,” I said, smirking at him.

“That’s not untrue,” he agreed as he made a beeline for the coffee maker.

“How about some water first?” I suggested, waving toward where I had several set up alongside different flavors of electrolytes.

“Look at you, looking out for me. If you weren’t Detroit’s girl, I’d snatch you up and make you mine,” he said, snagging a bottle of the orange flavor, but still making his way right to the coffee machine.

If you weren’t Detroit’s girl...

I knew I probably should have corrected him.

I wasn’t Detroit’s girl.

But, God, did it feel good to hear that, to have other people think that.

“Is Detroit, ah, working today?” I asked as Raff put an ungodly amount of sugar and cream in his coffee before taking a long sip and letting out a groan.

“Working? No. Not that I know of,” he said, shaking his head. “Maybe he went to the gym,” he said.

Oh, right.

The gym.

I’d almost forgotten the place existed.

That was crazy, of course. I mean I went there almost every day of my life for the past several years. I spent more time there than I did anywhere else but my bed.

But a few days away and... it was like I’d Etch-A-Sketched the place right out of my head.

Maybe that was some sort of, you know, trauma response, given what had happened the last time I’d been there.

I’d somehow managed to avoid the memories almost since I’d arrived at the clubhouse. Now, though, they all came flooding back.

It was like I was right there again.

In the gym, getting handcuffed and read my rights. Being pushed into the back of a cruiser. Being booked and stuck in a cell. Being questioned about drugs. Being transferred to jail. The fear, uncertainty, lack of sleep, hunger, and bone-deep confusion about how my life had taken this big of a turn.

“You alright, pretty girl?” Raff asked, head dipped to the side, watching me with red eyes. “You look a little... sick,” he said.

“What? Oh. Ah, yeah. I’m feeling a little off,” I admitted. “Maybe I just need some fresh air,” I decided, thinking maybe a walk around the yard might clear my head, let me think clearly again.

“Ev,” another voice said, coming into the kitchen, looking a little less wrecked than his brother, but not by much. “Didn’t mean to overstep,” he said, moving toward me. “But your phone was ringing over and over,” he said, waving it at me. “So I went in your room to grab it for you.”

“Oh! Thank you,” I said.

Honestly, I was shocked it was still charged. I’d barely even glanced at it recently.

My finger swiped across my screen to wake it up, wondering if it had been Simon who’d been calling so frantically, if he had some sort of break in the case.

But it wasn’t Simon in my call log.

It was my mom.

Oh, God.

Had she heard the news? Did things like my arrest make the news? I hadn’t even considered that.

“You okay?” Riff asked, watching me with his brows drawn together.

“What? Yeah. Sorry. It’s my mom,” I said. “I have to call her back,” I added, moving toward the front of the house, stealing whoever’s jacket was hanging there, and moving outside.

There was a bite to the air, even though the sun was up and doing its best to warm the world, only to find it was just too far away to really manage the task.

I walked toward the back of the house, hyper-aware that I wasn’t supposed to be caught at the biker clubhouse. As far as

the world was concerned, I was supposed to be sitting in my apartment, waiting for my trial.

As soon as I rounded the building, several of Morgaine's chickens came running toward me, letting out little clucks that I found oddly comforting as they looked up at me, expectant, wanting treats.

"I don't have anything, babies," I told them. "I will cut you up some bread later, okay?" I added. Two wandered off, ready to go scratch in the ground for some bugs. The third one, though, hung by my legs, pecking at my shoes.

Sucking in a steady breath, I hit my mom's contact, hearing my heartbeat hammering in my ears so loudly that I was worried my mother could hear it when she answered.

"Honey! I've been trying to get you for days!" she said, voice sing-song with just a hint of worry.

She didn't know.

If she knew, she would have that choked voice that she always did when she was worried about something.

"Sorry, mom. I keep losing track of my phone," I told her. It wasn't a lie. And my mom had never really been the type to pry for small life details. We'd always been close, but I was pretty sure my mom would never be the kind of mom who wanted to know that you didn't answer your phone because you were having world-shattering sex with a guy you knew wasn't going to want to commit to you.

"Oh, that's okay. I was just worried, is all. We need to start discussing Bayleigh's baby shower," she said.

It somehow felt wrong to focus on something so normal when so much was going on that was decidedly *abnormal*. But it was comforting too, especially as I listened to my mom prattling on about shades of pink that weren't 'overdone' and 'tacky,' but would still be very feminine and sweet.

And were party games cheesy? Or a good way to waste some time?

Would we open gifts at the shower, or save it for later? The internet was, apparently, divided on that.

Bayleigh had requested something upscale, not super baby-themed. Which, yeah, my mom and I were completely on board for.

She'd also demanded food.

“Real food.”

Meaning, not finger foods.

It was her baby shower, and she wanted to stuff her face.

According to my mom, her pregnancy cravings had gotten out of control lately.

I felt like the worst sister in the world not calling to ask how she was. Even if it had only been a few days.

The thing was, talking to them would mean lying to them. Because I couldn't bring myself to tell them about the arrest, the charges, about my time in county jail, about having to hire a criminal defense attorney. About the potential for me going away to prison.

Neither of them needed that stress right now. Least of all Bayleigh. Who deserved to be having the best, most peaceful time of her life right now. She'd earned that.

I would also be lying to Bayleigh about the whole Detroit thing. We had never had a conversation where she hadn't asked me about my love life, asking why I hadn't been seeing anyone.

I couldn't tell her about Detroit because to tell her about him would entail telling her how we came to start hooking up.

Besides, if there was one person in the whole world I would never be able to lie well enough to, it was Bayleigh. She knew me too well, would be able to hear things beneath the surface that I wasn't ready to talk about yet.

Like how I was falling for him.

And how I was terrified that he was going to realize how painfully... average I was. Then be quick to shrug me off and

move on with his life.

While I spiraled.

“Honey, is everything okay?” my mom asked, and I realized I’d been mostly yessing her to death the past few minutes while my mind raced.

“Yeah. I’m just a little stressed out lately,” I admitted.

“You could come visit,” she suggested. “We could go get massages and mani-pedis. Really relax. It would be good for us both.”

It would.

But I couldn’t face them.

Not yet.

“When my schedule lets up, definitely,” I told her. I meant that. Whether that was a week from now when the charges were dropped, or a decade from now when I got out of prison.

“Okay. Call me, okay? If you just need someone to vent to. I hate that you’re there all alone now.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured her, putting a little extra pep in my voice that I didn’t really feel as I walked further away from the clubhouse, heading closer to the mountains. “But thank you. I’ll call you soon, okay?”

“Okay. Love you, honey.”

“Love you too,” I said, and oddly felt tears spring to my eyes as I hung up.

I exhaled hard and kept walking, needing the fresh air and exercise to clear my mind.

Lost in my head, I didn’t realize just how far I’d gone until I saw that I was closer to the prison than I was to the clubhouse.

I must have zoned out.

I glanced back toward the clubhouse, wondering if Detroit was back yet.

“Knew you’d come out of there eventually,” a voice said before there was a sharp pain to the back of my head... and nothing else.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Detroit

I was sitting in the little cubby in the line of cubbies at the county jail, staring ahead at the glass that Gav was supposed to appear on the other side of at some point.

I couldn't see the door where the inmates came in through, but I could hear the jangle of chains each time someone came in to sit down with their loved ones.

Three cubbies over from me, a woman who was holding a baby who couldn't have been more than seven or eight months was sobbing and rushing to speak, tripping over her words to, I imagined, the father of her child.

A few down from her, a mother and father had been trying to be upbeat for their son. But as soon as he was taken away again, the mom had broken down in her husband's arms.

This was a place full of misery for all involved, it seemed.

I think I was the only person in the area who didn't seem to be dealing with some intense personal emotion.

Because I barely knew Gav.

And the only emotion I was feeling was a bone-deep need to prove Everleigh's innocence.

There was another jangle of chains, and this time, they stopped in front of me.

Gav was in front of me in jail orange, the color making him look a sickly kind of pale. Or maybe that was the lighting or the shitty food inside.

He sucked in a deep breath then lowered down, giving me a nod as I reached for the phone as he did as well.

"I wasn't expecting you to be here," he said.

"Word got to me that you have something to say about this mess you got Everleigh involved in," I said.

To that, he let out a humorless smirk.

"I always wondered if there was something going on there."

"There wasn't," I said.

"But you wanted there to be," he said, shrugging.

His dark brown hair was messy, and I swear he looked like he'd dropped fifteen pounds since I'd seen him last. He hadn't had it to lose in the first place, and was looking kind of gaunt.

His green eyes were intense, though. Fierce, even.

Sensing I wasn't going to comment any further on that, Gav sighed.

"I didn't do this to her," he said, and there was nothing in his voice or face to make me think he was being anything but honest. "I didn't do this to myself," he added. "But I damn sure didn't do this to her. Hurting her would be like hurting a fucking puppy," he added, shaking his head.

Gav had always been hard to get a read on.

He wasn't one for small talk.

And he didn't seem to show any softness toward Everleigh. But, clearly, he picked up on her softness.

“I still feel fucking bad for blocking Taylor Swift,” he added with a shake of his head. “But, fuck, I was getting kind of sick of it too,” he added.

“What’s going on then?” I asked, knowing the clock was ticking.

“Fuck. I don’t know. All I do know is I don’t fuck with that shit,” he said. “Not recreationally. And not professionally,” he added for emphasis.

“It’s being moved through your gym and you want me to believe you’re not involved.”

“I’m not,” he insisted. “I have no fucking idea what is going on. All I know is I didn’t do this. And neither did Everleigh. But we are getting framed for it. I just can’t figure out a why or a how.

“Worst of all, my attorney says there is fingerprint evidence.”

“There is,” I confirmed. “I know for Everleigh. I figure for you too. Could it be your suppliers?” I asked.

“The suppliers? The same big-name companies that supply everyone else? I find that unlikely.”

So did I.

But I was willing to think miles and fucking miles outside of the box if that was what it took.

“What about your other employees?” I suggested. “They could be involved with someone and got the shit delivered to your place, then they got it back out to distribute it.”

“I guess it’s possible. I mean, it’s not a big staff. And, from what I can tell, no one walking around with the kind of disposable income that would suggest they are into that kind of thing.”

“Do you have a list of your suppliers?” I asked. “You could have your lawyer give it to Ev’s lawyer,” I said.

“I mean... yeah. Yeah, I can get that figured out. I mean, the food is shipped from Felco Innovations,” he said,

shrugging. “Typical shit. Towels and that kind of shit is from that commercial supply place. I mean, I find it hard to believe oversight is so low at those places that someone could be moving massive amounts of dr—that shit through there,” he said, clearly aware that the jail could listen to all the conversations going on in the visitation room.

Down from me, the baby was starting to fuss, and the mom was trying to put extra cheer into her voice as she told him to *Say bye to Daddy, baby!*

“Still, you never know,” I said, making a mental note to send those names to Simon. He seemed to have pretty good investigators.

I had to get Rook on things too.

I’d been trying not to put him on a case, since he really wasn’t supposed to be hacking again with the threat of Nancy Bird constantly hanging over his head. But he could figure out shit about the gym employees that no one else would be able to. Private social media exchanges, crypto wallets, texts. That kind of shit.

I would have to ask Slash before getting Rook involved, but I added that to my list of shit to do before I headed back to the clubhouse.

I knew once I got there, all I was going to want to do was grab Everleigh, take her back into my room, and get lost in her, and forget all about this shit.

I had to get the ball rolling with her defense, with her innocence. Then and only then could I go back and feel good about letting the world fall away for a few hours.

“Is there anything that comes into the gym from smaller companies?” I asked. “The pre-workout or the protein powder? The add-ons for the juice bar?”

“Maybe,” Gav said, but didn’t seem convinced.

“What about the cleaning supplies or the merch?” I said.

And it was like I’d detonated a bomb located somewhere inside his core.

His entire body jolted hard.

And his gaze shot to mine, eyes huge.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The merch,” he said, the words coming out small and tight, and I couldn’t tell if it was shock or confusion in his voice.

“What about the merch?”

“It’s the fucking merch,” he said through gritted teeth, and I finally saw that it wasn’t shock or confusion at all.

Oh, no.

That was blind fucking rage coursing through him.

“How is it the merch?”

Gav’s eyes were daggers as he exhaled hard and tried to speak past the clenching of his jaw.

“I get the merch from my *brother*.”

I wasn’t proud of my first thought following that declaration.

Something about how it was refreshing to not be the only one with a complicated relationship with their brother.

“Okay,” I said, nodding, wanting to understand. “But why him? More than anyone else?”

“Because this is just fucking like him. He’s been a fuck-up his whole life. In and out of juvie for beating up on kids, on our *mom*, for tagging, for defacing school property. For using and dealing drugs...”

And there it was.

The smoking gun we were looking for.

“He was supposed to have turned shit around. Supposedly been clean a year. That was the only reason I’d agreed to help support his new business venture. I’d bought him the fucking heat press machine and his supply of clothes and bags and shit. Thought I was doing something good. Supporting his new life.

Ma was fucking thrilled about it,” he added, spitting out those last words like they left a bad taste in his mouth.

“Say it is your brother,” I started, “why is he sending the boxes of... shit through your gym?”

Gav opened, then closed his mouth.

“That’s a good question,” he said.

“Unless you have someone working for you that is involved. Is maybe dealing out of the gym?” I suggested.

I made it a point to go to the gym when next to no one else was around. I had no idea what went on during prime hours.

Had there been deals going down right there at the gym? In the open?

“No, none of my staff...” he started, then realization dawned.

“Beacher,” a guard barked, then came up behind him. “Time’s up,” he added, already reaching down for Gav.

“M—“ Gav tried to say into the phone. But the corrections officer grabbed the phone, and slammed it down into the receiver before I could hear what he was trying to tell me.

A name.

It had to be a name.

Someone’s name who started with an M.

That couldn’t be too hard.

Everleigh could tell me all of the names of the employees. How many Ms could there be?

I watched as Gav was led away, glad Simon had told me to visit.

“Yo?” Slash answered as soon as I got on my bike and pulled my phone out again.

“Give me permission to pull Rook in on this case for me,” I demanded. “It’s... gotten more complicated, but I got leads now.”

“Yeah, go ahead. Just remind him that the computer stays in Nyx’s studio. If he brings a laptop upstairs, Nancy is gonna catch him.”

“Got it,” I agreed, then hung up before ringing up Simon.

“Got something?” he answered, no nonsense as usual.

“His brother. He said his brother was an addict and dealer as a child. Did time in juvie. He’s providing the merch to the gym.”

“And Everleigh was the one to handle the merch deliveries...”

“Yeah. But we got cut short. Someone who is working at the gym with an M name. I think anyway. The C.O. was pulling him away.”

“Can’t be that many. Talk to Everleigh. I’ll have my people look into it too. Good job. If there’s anything else, let me know.”

He hung up then.

And I drove back to Shady Valley, taking a minute to drop in to the karate studio to find Rook wasn’t pretending to work there.

“Open up. I got a job for you,” I called through his door.

“Thank fuck,” Rook said, swinging open the door.

His place was sparse and surprisingly neat, considering how big a mess he could leave at the clubhouse at times.

He was likely used to not having much while inside, and was still learning to adapt to being outside. Eventually, he would buy more shit, would make this place feel more comfortable. Maybe even let a mess form, knowing a C.O. wasn’t going to get on his ass about it.

“There are rules,” I told him.

“Always,” he agreed, walking through his apartment to grab a shirt, pulling on a wrinkled white one from a laundry basket. “What am I looking for?”

“You’re looking into Gray Beacher,” I told him. “Anything you can find about his life the past few years.”

“What’s he into?”

“Drugs,” I told him.

“How’s he swinging that in this area?” he asked. “What with Czar and Erion cornering that market.”

That was... a good point.

I made a mental note to look into that some more if it became necessary. If we could pin this on Gray and exonerate Everleigh and Gav, that was the cops’ job to figure that shit out.

“I dunno. But my concern is Gray and whoever he is working with. Especially if you can get him on camera doing shady shit.”

“And what are the rules?”

“You work downstairs in the studio. No bringing the laptop up here. No looking at shit on your phone. Nothing that could give Nancy a reason to lock you back up again.”

“Got it,” he agreed, nodding, as he shoved his feet into shoes. Grabbing his keys, he followed me out. “Anything else?”

“Time is of the essence. I gotta get this information to Everleigh’s lawyer before a court date is set.”

“Then I am gonna hit the store to grab some energy drinks before I get started,” he said, passing the studio and heading toward the grocery store.

“I will be in touch. Don’t call,” I demanded.

We tried as much as possible not to let Rook have any technological trail that could lead back to him.

Finished with that, I glanced toward the clubhouse, feeling my lips curve up at the idea of getting to spend some time with Everleigh again. After I gave her the good news about a lead.

I was starting to wonder if maybe, just possibly, this thing between us could actually go somewhere. If Coach was right about me letting her make the decision if she wanted to be a part of this life or not.

After all, she'd been settling in just fine.

No, she wasn't into the parties. But neither was I. That didn't make me any less a member of this big family of ours.

Besides, if we started to get serious, build a future, we wouldn't be living at the club anymore. We'd get a house. Maybe in the 'burbs. Room for kids. A nice yard. That kinda thing. The parties wouldn't matter so much anymore.

That was what my mind was on as I made my way into the clubhouse.

I'd been expecting to find her there waiting for me. What I found instead was touches of her all around. The neatly arranged random items she'd found lying around, the scent of all surface cleaner and fabric spray, the line of sports drinks on the island.

Maybe she was waiting for me in bed instead.

Which was even more exciting.

I dropped my keys and made my way upstairs.

But my room was empty.

So was hers.

And the bathroom.

"Everleigh?" I called, walking down the hall, wondering if she was hanging with one of the girls somewhere. "Ev?" I called.

"Hey, hey, what's with all the hollering?" Raff asked, blinking red eyes at me from the doorway a room.

"I'm looking for Everleigh," I said. "Have you seen her?"

"Since she forced me to hydrate this morning, you mean?" he asked.

"Yeah. Since then."

“She... she took a call outside,” he said. “Riff said her phone was ringing. So he brought it to her. She said she had to call her mom back, then went outside.”

That made sense. She wouldn't want her mom to hear the various racy shit that went on in the club.

“Thanks,” I said, nodding, and making my way back downstairs.

It wasn't until I stepped around the back of the building and saw... nothing, that I felt the prickle at the back of my neck.

“Ev?” I called, startling a chicken who was near my feet enough to get an indignant balk out of her before she rushed off to find her friends. “Everleigh!” I called, panic rising through my system.

This wasn't exactly hilly terrain, save for the Death Valley mountains in the distance. You could see all around. And I wasn't seeing anyone.

“Everleigh!” I yelled, rushing around the house.

“Hey, you okay?” Riff asked, coming out the front door.

“I can't find Everleigh,” I said, stomach twisting.

“She was out here taking a phone call,” Riff said. “Pacing around though. Seemed a little anxious. Could she have taken a walk?”

She could have.

But I would have seen her when I drove through town and toward the clubhouse.

“I... I don't like this,” I said, voice tight.

I didn't panic often. And even Riff, who wasn't around much, understood that. He got stiffer at the sound of it in my voice, in the way it was rushing off of me in currents.

“I'll get everyone moving,” he said. “Call her phone,” he suggested.

Right.

Yeah.

She had her phone.

Reaching for mine, I found her in my contacts and dialed as I started to walk around.

It rang once.

Twice.

Three...

To voicemail.

Wait.

I dialed again, and sure enough, faintly, a while off, I could hear something ringing.

Could she just have fallen? Gotten hurt? Was on the ground, and that was why I didn't see her?

I took off at a dead run as I kept calling.

But there was no Everleigh.

Just her phone, facedown on the ground, the screen cracked.

I picked it up, finding she didn't even have a passcode on it. That was how trusting this woman was.

I checked her call log.

Sure enough, the last call was her mom.

But that had ended well over an hour ago. Closer to two.

"Fuck," I yelled, not caring who heard me and the raw desperation in my voice. "Fuck fuck fuck," I added for emphasis, running back toward the clubhouse where the guys were all outside. "I found her phone. But not her."

I watched the understanding dawn on their faces. Mingled with a small bit of guilt.

It wasn't their job to watch her.

There'd never been any indication that she was in danger. Especially not so close to the clubhouse.

“Rook,” Riff said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding at him.

We had cameras.

And even if they didn’t catch anything, the ones in town might give us some insight.

Riff was rushing off without another word.

“What can I do?” Colter asked. New, but ready and willing to act.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“How willing you are to get involved with a potential street war,” I told him.

“What are you thinking?” Sway asked, Murphy at his side.

“I’m thinking we need to find Gray Beacher. Now. And he might be working with Czar and Erion. Which is where I am heading now.”

“We’ll check out Gray’s place,” Sway said, nodding toward Raff.

“And me,” Murphy said.

“Like hell,” Sway hissed.

“Murphy, can you stay here and tell everyone else what is going on as they pull in?” I asked. I understood she was capable. But also Sway’s desire to keep her safe.

Murphy’s eyes flashed, but she gave me a tight nod.

“And wake up Coach from whatever trance-like state he’s in, and send him toward Czar and Erion,” I added.

“Got it,” she agreed, turning, and making her way back to the clubhouse.

“So you and me against a couple of drug lords,” Colter said, nodding. “Sounds like a good time to me.”

We didn’t wait for Coach.

He would just have to catch up.

There wasn't time to spare.

We only paused to grab guns and our keys, then we were off, Colter keeping close on his borrowed bike as I sped through Shady Valley so fast that everything fucking blurred.

I didn't know a shitton about Erion and Czar's new alliance and business ventures, but I did know that they were operating out of Nyx's old apartment building for the time being.

Lotta people in and out, hard for the cops to stake the place out. It made sense.

I didn't pause to make sure Colter was there, was keeping pace, would have my back. I flew up the stairs because I was too impatient to wait for the elevator, and stormed down the hallway to find the apartment I was looking for.

Then I nearly knocked the fucking thing off the hinges.

"The fuck..." a voice called as the door opened.

There was Erion Kadare.

Former boss of the Albanian mob before the Russians took the whole crew out while he was locked up.

Current dealer of heroin in the area.

He was tall and strong with black hair and bright blue eyes. His face was all angles from his sharp, cleft jaw to the juts of his cheekbones and stern brow.

There weren't a lot of criminals around these days that had that sort of bloodthirsty, cold, ruthless mindset of the glory days of organized crime.

Erion Kadare, though, was one of them.

So when I raised my gun and shoved it into his throat while pushing him back into his apartment, the only reaction I got out of him was a slightly arched brow.

There wasn't much in the apartment.

A couch, a TV, a table.

Basic shit you needed to be able to spend a lot of time in a place, but not necessarily live there.

I remembered Slash saying that Erion had his eye on a house on Millionaire's Row. I wondered if he was somehow there without me realizing it. Because he clearly wasn't living here.

"This is an... interesting development," Erion said as Colter slammed the door behind me, placing his body in front of it, so no one could come in or head out. "What have I supposedly done now?" he asked.

"Where is she?" I hissed, pressing the muzzle of the gun harder into his neck.

"This again? Who's been kidnapped now? Why can't you Henchmen keep an eye on your women?" he asked, tone bored, if somehow a bit amused.

"Where is Everleigh?" I growled, my finger itching to slide to the trigger, even if I knew that was completely irrational.

"Everleigh?" he asked, racking his brain, trying to place the name. "From the gym?" he asked, brows scrunched. "The fuck would I want with her?"

"Because she's taking the charge for your crimes?"

"Is she? I should send her a fruit basket," he said.

"You mother fuck—"

"Hey," Colter said, voice calm, hand grabbing my forearm, and pushing it down. "This is getting us nowhere," he said. Rational. Solid under pressure. I would have to tell Slash about this when it was all over and Everleigh was safe again.

"Smart man," Erion said, reaching into his pocket, and coming back with a pack of cigarettes, slipping one into his mouth, then retrieving a lighter to light it. He took a long drag then exhaled before speaking again. "What crime is this girl involved with?"

"She's not. That's the problem," I said. "She's charged with distribution of heroin. As is her boss."

“Gav?” Erion asked, gaze dubious. “No.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “But there was heroin. And it was moving through the gym. So she is wrapped up with it. And since you are the one dealing H in the area...”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that I’m offended you think I’d let someone take the fall for me. I would. Yes, even your innocent, Taylor-Swift-loving girlfriend. And her boss. But I don’t deal through the gym. The fuck kind of business model would that be for me?” he asked.

“What about Czar?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“Could he be doing it?”

Honestly, now that I had a minute to think about it, I really didn’t think so.

Sure, Czar had linked up with Erion to start their own organization. The former Albanian and Bulgarian mobsters. And, yeah, I did think Erion was capable of being a cold, calculated, heartless bastard. But Czar?

No.

Czar Petcova was Nyx’s ex. A man who, by all accounts, loved her and tried to protect her.

She wouldn’t have been involved with someone who would mistreat innocent women.

“If you think that, you don’t know the players in this town as well as you should,” Erion said, taking another drag of his cigarette.

“But would he let Gray do it?”

“Gray?” Erion repeated, and I instantly knew, fucking *knew* that they weren’t in bed together. “That fuck,” he said, exhaling so deeply that a growl escaped him.

“You’re not working with him?” I asked.

“No. He wanted in.”

“Then why isn’t he in?” I asked.

“Because I’m a businessman,” Erion said. “And it’s bad business to have a former user dealing your drugs.”

That... made perfect sense.

“Well, he’s dealing now.”

“That explains it,” Erion said, the only sign that he was irritated being a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“Explains what?”

“Business being slow. Former clients dropping dead all over. I don’t cut my shit. He must,” he said.

Whatever he was going to say next was cut off by the sound of my phone ringing.

I reached for it with my free hand, swiping the screen.

“Yeah?”

“He’s not here,” Sway said. “Looked all over, but he’s not here.”

“Fuck,” I hissed. “Any luck on finding someone with an M he’s in contact with?” I asked.

“He’s a fucking slob. There’s nothing but old food wrappers and piles of laundry all around his apartment. Nothing personal.”

“What about a t-shirt press?” I asked.

“What?”

“A t-shirt press. He runs a merch company. Where are the supplies?” I asked.

“Not... not here,” Sway said.

“Get Rook working harder,” I snapped before ending the call. “What?” I barked at Erion whose lips were curved up ever so slightly.

“Was fucking a girl for a while,” he started. “Used to love taking pilates classes at the gym. A strong core makes a lot of positions a fuckuva lot more fun.”

“The fuck do I care about that for?” I asked.

“Just thought you might be interested,” he said, taking a dramatically long drag of his cigarette. “Because her instructor was named Melissa.”

Melissa.

M.

Melissa?

A woman?

I mean, yeah, of course it could have been a woman. Hadn't I known enough women in the criminal world to stop thinking that we were all men?

“What's going on here?” a voice said as the door opened.

And there was Nyx's ex.

Czar Petcova.

Looking between all of us with raised brows.

“Another day, another Henchmen girlfriend kidnapping,” Erion said, waving a hand dismissively. “We were prime suspects for a while,” he added, completely not offended by that fact.

Before Czar could even process what was going on, though, I was turning and storming out of the room, vaguely aware of Colter's footsteps behind me as we went.

“Melissa,” I hissed to myself as I reached for my phone, calling Nyx's studio.

“Ah, karate place,” Rook answered, too distracted to remember the name of the place he was pretending to work.

“Rook. The name we are looking for is Melissa,” I said.

“Melissa,” he repeated. “That sounds... familiar,” he said, and I could hear the keyboard clicking at a pace that felt inhuman for a second. “There it is. Melissa. Ex-girlfriend of Gray. Also has a rap sheet. Lots of arrests for possession. Only one charge, but she got out in six months.”

“Is she still living around here?” I asked as I rushed toward my bike.

“Ah...”

“Rook,” I hissed.

“I’m trying, man. I don’t see her listed any... hm,” he said.

“Hm, what?”

“She’s got a grandmother who lives in the trailer park,” he said. “Thing is... her grandma is in long-term rehabilitation after breaking her hip.”

“What’s the trailer address?” I asked, getting on my bike, mentally calculating the distance.

Not far from the apartments.

Past the schools, then the ‘burbs.

The park.

Then there it would be.

I’d lived there on and off through my childhood, staying with my grandma when my old man was traveling for work since our ma died young.

I had only good memories of the trailer park. My grandma had struggled a lot when my grandfather died, leaving her with kids and a no resume since she’d been home raising kids. She’d lost their house and needed to struggle for a while, living in short-term housing until she could build a nest egg.

She bought that trailer and had so much pride of ownership since she’d managed to buy it and take care of it all on her own.

The inside was always meticulously clean. I wasn’t sure I’d ever been there without it always smelling like lemon cleaner and carpet foam.

The outside had gorgeous flower beds full of bright, happy flowers that she tended to lovingly.

It didn’t look like that anymore.

Because she didn’t live there anymore.

Since she’d joined her husband in the graveyard a few years before.

My old man lived there instead.

I doubted it smelled like lemon cleaner anymore.

And last time I'd been around, the flowerbeds were full of weeds.

I didn't hold that against him. I didn't garden either. And with his fucked-up back, he didn't do any extra work if he could help it.

I drove down the road I remembered riding bikes on all summer with Dallas, always trying to beat him to the end of the street.

There was a second of longing, a nostalgia for the way things had once been, before my mind was on other shit.

Like how our bikes would alert people to our presence.

If Colter was surprised by my swinging a turn and driving away from the park, he didn't seem to hesitate to follow me.

"Is there a plan?" he asked as I heard more bikes driving toward us.

"We go in, we get Everleigh," I said.

"I get that your head is with your heart right now," Colter said, nodding. "But you need to be smart here."

"Okay..." I said, brows pinching as the rest of the guys pulled up, cutting their engines.

"Look, the thing is, you can't go in there and kill anyone," he said as everyone else walked up. "If they die, so does your proof that Everleigh and Gav are innocent."

Fuck.

That was true.

I couldn't explain it, but the disappointment I felt right then was almost overwhelming.

I'd never been an overly violent man.

But I wanted to wrap my hands around Gray's throat and slowly strangle the life out of him. I wanted him to suffer for what he'd done to Everleigh.

“He’s not wrong,” Slash agreed, nodding. “You got a better plan?” he asked, looking at Colter.

“You’re not gonna like it,” Colter warned.

“What is it?”

“You need to call your brother,” he said.

“Oh, fuck no,” I said, shaking my head.

“Listen, I’m not saying don’t go in and get your woman. I’m saying leave the real criminals alive to be hauled in and turn on each other. And exonerate your girl.”

He was right.

I fucking hated that.

But he was right.

I couldn’t kill Gray.

“Alright,” I said. “I want to scope it out. See what kind of danger she’s in. Then, depending, I’m going in. You call my brother,” I said, looking at Slash.

To that, he sighed, and nodded.

“Give me five,” I demanded.

Then I ran.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Everleigh

I woke up to a migraine jackhammering into my skull, the pain so intense that I could do nothing but press my hands to my eyes and rock my body to try to soothe myself, to think past it.

My mom suffered from migraines until she hit menopause.

I'd always empathized with her and the long afternoons spent lying in darkened rooms with her hands pressed to her skull and a trash bin nearby, in case she got sick from the pain.

But I never could have known what the pain was like. How it felt like your skull was being ripped open, and something nailed right into your brain over and over.

My stomach rolled, and a low whimper escaped me as I prayed I didn't get sick.

I honestly wasn't even thinking for a while. I couldn't even tell you how long. I was just... enduring. Trying to survive pain that seemed determined to make me pass out from it.

I wouldn't say it ever eased, per se. But that my system got more accustomed to it over time. And allowed me to start thinking once again.

Like why my head hurt.

Not because I just had a random migraine.

No.

Because someone had hit me.

Hard.

Hard enough, it seemed, to make me pass out.

Because the last thing I remembered was being too far from the clubhouse, having taken a bit of a walk to clear my head after talking to my mom.

Then... then someone talking to me.

The pain.

And... nothing.

Panic seemed to start atmospherically at first, a charge in the air around me that started to choke out the oxygen, making a suffocating sensation flood me. My heartbeat started to beat a wild, erratic drum in my chest, so strong and overwhelming that I couldn't think of anything else but the sensation for a long second.

Until I tried to lift my arms, so I could press my hand to my chest. And found my wrists bound together.

My skin prickled, a cold sensation like icy fingertips trailing over me, leaving a clammy bath in its wake.

My wrists were bound.

Almost at once, I realized that there was something over my mouth as well.

I was bound and gagged.

Bound and gagged.

Like in a freaking action movie.

You know the one. Where the girl finds her strength in the chaos, breaks out of her binds, and goes on a revenge mission to destroy her attackers.

The problem was, I wasn't that girl.

I'd never *be* that girl.

My thoughts unraveled then, leaving nothing but frayed edges of rationality. I was assaulted by a million distinct catastrophic possibilities, each more irrational than the last, my mind hijacked by chaos.

Time warped as I struggled to gain control of my own thoughts, to force them to stop swirling, to allow me to catch on to one, singular, logical thought.

I struggled for breath as a vice tightened around my chest.

I sucked in air again through my nose, pulling it in until my chest burned, then slowly releasing it. Once, twice, three times.

Time warped. Seconds stretched into eternities.

But I kept breathing.

And, eventually, little by little, the panic started to recede.

My pulse slowed. My mind stopped spinning.

I felt utterly drained from fighting with my own mind.

But there was no time for exhaustion.

I had to think now that it was possible again.

I'd been hit.

I'd been... taken.

I'd been gagged and bound.

I was sure that Detroit would look for me.

The problem was, I had no idea where Detroit was. How long he would be gone. If anyone else would notice my absence until he returned at some unknown time in the future.

I couldn't rely on him.

I, painfully average Everleigh Barker, a girl who couldn't change my own tire or call to cancel an insanely overpriced car insurance policy because of the potential confrontation, was going to need to save myself.

A little helpless whimper escaped me, muffled by the duct tape that was biting into my skin with its glue.

I let myself feel the helplessness for just a moment.

Then I took another deep breath and looked around.

At... a bedroom.

A bedroom?

I'd expected a basement. You know, because what kind of criminal put you in a bedroom?

One full of their own personal items.

There was a bed crushed against a wall, a twin-size only. With a comforter half hanging off of it. Blue. But with some sort of pattern to it.

I squinted at it, making out the shapes of those little caricatures that I saw on children's clothes and backpacks. Likely from a show that all the kids loved, but I was clueless about, not having any of my own.

That was a child's bed.

Almost as soon as that thought formed, my gaze was sweeping around, taking in other signs of a kid.

A multicolored plastic storage unit, little animal figurines and trucks poking out of their buckets.

The carpet on the floor was one like my cousin had when I was a kid. A little town. With streets to run those little Matchbox cars on.

Little sneakers were on their sides near an open closet.

Oddly, though, the closet didn't have a lot of clothes in it.

My gaze moved around again, seeing a window.

I was bound, sure. But in the front.

I could open a window.

Then I could, you know, just... throw myself out of it.
Hope I landed well. And run.

Run where, I had no idea.

But, surely, there would be people around. Someone would see a gagged and bound woman, and do the right thing.

I had to believe that.

Pulling my knees inward, I tucked them under me.

My head spun.

And I worried for a moment about my head injury.

I couldn't reach back to touch it, but the ever-present throbbing, and the wet sensation on my skull made me think that I had some sort of open wound there.

A concussion?

Worse?

Would I live through this at all?

No.

I had to stop that.

I needed to focus.

As I thought that, I heard a door slam, dragging my attention to the side where the bedroom door was still firmly closed.

Someone was outside there.

And they would be coming for me eventually.

For nothing good, I was sure.

I knee-walked closer to that door, gaze focused on the little silver lock. My pulse quickened as I rose my bound hands upward, my fingers closing on the lock.

I swear the sound seemed to be amplified loud enough to wake the dead as I slid it into the horizontal position.

I wasn't naive enough to think that would protect me for long. Criminals picked locks, didn't they? Hell, my mom used to have to unlock my sister's bedroom door when she was little and throwing a fit.

If my *mom* could unlock it with a screwdriver, whoever kidnapped me surely could too.

It was just a stall tactic.

While I got to the window.

Got it open.

Then got out.

Even as I started to move away again, though, I heard voices.

"The fuck do you think you're doing, Gray?" a woman's voice called, loud, unconcerned about being overheard.

Gray.

Gray?

As in Gav's brother?

The guy who...

The guy who made the merch for the gym.

The same boxes of merch I handled daily.

"Cleaning up the mess," Gray responded to the woman as I heard the hiss of a can opening.

"How is a woman in my son's bedroom cleaning up the mess?" she shot back, and there was something... familiar about her voice. I couldn't quite place it.

"Well, we can't have her out there, talking to her fancy lawyer, putting shit together, can we? He's already sniffing around too much. Saw his investigator taking a tour of the gym," he added, piquing my interest. I didn't know that. Was that even legal? But, I guess, no one would know what was or wasn't legal more than a lawyer.

"But she's *here*," the woman hissed. "Leaving her DNA all over the place."

“Well, I guess you’ll have to fucking *clean* for once in your life,” Gray snapped.

I didn’t know who the woman was.

And I knew she was in on this.

But I somehow sympathized with her for having to put up with such an asshole.

“Says the man whose entire apartment is covered in old food and shower is so moldy, there’s no way to get clean inside of it,” she shot back.

Despite myself, I felt myself nodding.

Good for you.

“Being a bitch isn’t helping right now. I’m trying to think.”

“Must be hard for you. Try not to overheat.”

A snort escaped me at that before I snapped myself out of it, and forced myself to stand. I felt wobbly for a second before my legs seemed capable of leading me over toward the window.

Peering out, my stomach dropped.

We seemed high.

Or maybe I was just being a chicken.

It was definitely the first floor of a house.

The fall just looked like it could easily break a bone or five if I landed wrong.

But it was likely better than whatever Gray had in mind for me.

The voices on the other side of the door were rising, an argument that sounded less like two coworkers and a lot more like an unhappy couple.

I hoped their fighting would drown out the sound of the window as I grabbed it with the tips of my fingers, the position unnatural and difficult.

“You can’t kill her!” the woman snapped, making my head swivel to stare at the wall they were on the other side of. “That’s just going to show the police that other people are involved.”

“She’s gotta die,” Gray said, making my stomach turn over and twist.

“Well,” the woman said, and any solidarity I felt toward her as a woman dissipated as the next words left her mouth. “Yeah. But... but what if it looked like a suicide. Or an... accident. She’s dealing drugs, right? Who’s to say she isn’t using them?” she asked.

That was what they were going to do to me.

Inject me with heroin, so it looked like I was overwhelmed by the stress of going to trial and being convicted on drug charges, and I accidentally took too much, and overdosed.

Ridiculous, useless tears flooded my eyes.

Would that be a painful way to go?

Slow?

Terrifying?

Or would it be fast?

Easy?

I had to *stop* it.

It wasn’t going to happen, so I didn’t need to worry about it.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed the window again, but this time put my whole weight into it.

The window moved upward.

But it did so with an awful shrieking sound.

The talking in the other room silenced.

Then there were footsteps.

The hand jiggled the knob.

The savage curse.

I didn't have a lot of time.

However long it would take to locate a screwdriver, then come back and twist the lock.

I leaned into the window opening, my arms hanging out, hopefully still capable of breaking my fall, even bound.

I didn't factor in that not everyone would stop and do the logical thing like unlock the door.

That some people were all action and little thought.

There was the sound of a body slamming into the door, then a crashing.

He'd broken down the door.

"She's getting out the window!" a woman called, but I couldn't see her. Or him. Just the ground beneath me.

Stomach flip-flopping, I tried to throw myself forward.

Only to have the back of my shirt grabbed in a fist and yanked backward. Hard.

My head slammed into the window instead of sliding back in, the pain blacking out my vision for a moment as my body was flung to the floor. Where I sat on my knees, crying out against my gag.

"Get her out of here," the woman hissed.

I struggled.

No one could say I didn't.

I thrashed and whacked my head around. I tried to kick. I scratched.

But at the end of the day, I was smaller. He was stronger. And I was being dragged through the bedroom, then into the main living space.

And that was when I saw her.

The woman who'd been on the other side of the door.

The one who'd sounded vaguely familiar.

It wasn't until I saw her blonde hair and her blue eyes and her familiar face that I finally understood why I couldn't place it.

Because I'd never actually heard her *real* voice. I'd heard her fake soothing voice. The one she used while coaching us to put our bodies into interesting positions and use them to create long, lean muscles.

Melissa.

My pilates instructor.

It all seemed to start clicking then.

Gray brought in the merch where the drugs were hidden. I moved the boxes into storage where I always assumed Gav cut them open to inspect the new merch.

But it was never Gav.

It was Melissa.

And then she, what? Dealt the drugs? At the gym?

That part, I didn't know.

I couldn't know.

And pretty soon, there was no more wondering about Melissa, because I was being dragged right out the front door.

My gaze shot around, sure someone would see this, would do something, say something, call the police, something, anything.

The trailer I was inside was wedged in the sharp corner of a cul-de-sac. The one across the street looked abandoned, judging by the high grass and broken windows. The closest one to the side was cut off by a long line of tall arborvitae.

There was no one.

No one who could *see* anyway.

Not as I was pulled too fast, and stumbled over my own feet, sending me down onto my knees on the steps.

The impact had me crying out loudly against my gag.

“Fucking Christ,” Gray hissed, yanking me up so hard that my shoulder screamed.

I blinked away tears, trying not to fall into hopelessness.

There was always hope. Always. So long as you were still alive, there was hope.

I just had to focus, stay sharp.

I could find a way out of this.

Gray yanked me one more time before he popped his trunk, then stooped down, scooped me up, and tossed me inside.

The air was knocked out of me, and the trunk was slammed shut before I could suck in a new breath.

Alone in the trunk, I tried to focus.

I lifted my arms, angling them to the side to start pulling at edge of the duct tape on my face, whimpering at the sting as I freed my skin inch by inch.

I stopped when my mouth was exposed, leaving it stuck to my other cheek.

I tried to move my hands up and down, trying to make some space between the duct tape, so I could free my hands. All it did, though, was bite into my skin, rub it raw.

Tears sprang again, and this time, I didn't bother to try to stop them. They flowed freely down my face as I tried to keep freeing my hands.

I heard it then.

The rumble of bikes.

It seemed to be getting closer.

Hope swelled.

Sure, other people owned bikes in Shady Valley. But I had to believe that this wasn't them. This had to be Detroit. Detroit and his brothers. Men coming to save me.

But then the sound cut off.

Desperate, I sucked in a breath and screamed.

It got me nowhere. Save for the car I was in speeding up.

It wasn't a long ride. And I could barely make any room for my hands when the car suddenly stopped.

The engine stayed on.

Then the car shifted as Gray climbed out, slammed the door, opened the back door, and fiddled around for a minute.

Another slam.

The crunch of footsteps.

I had to run.

It was all I had left to do, right?

I didn't know where we were, but we couldn't be far from the trailer park. We hadn't been driving for very long.

Surely, wherever we were, we couldn't be far from other people.

I could run and scream until someone helped me.

The trunk popped, making my whole body tense.

The light spilled in, and I looked up in horror as I saw a needle stuck between Gray's lips.

My lethal dose of heroin.

My death sentence.

But wait.

Was that a siren?

Had someone seen after all? Me being dragged around, thrown into a trunk, hauled away?

Or, maybe, had Melissa had a change of heart?

Had she called it in?

That seemed less likely, but the siren did seem to be coming closer.

“Fuck,” Gray murmured around the needle in his mouth as he looked at my exposed mouth.

With him momentarily distracted, I just... threw out my legs, catching him in the stomach, and sending him stumbling back a few feet.

I didn't hesitate.

I pushed my legs out, then got to my feet.

And I ran.

Suddenly, I wished I hadn't been so dedicated to pilates and the occasional elliptical session.

I wish I'd taken up running.

I wish my body had been honed for this sort of activity. I wish my mind had hardened itself to ignore the way my heart was slamming, the tightening of my chest, the ache in my knees and ankles as my feet pounded the ground.

I was on the other side of the park.

Closer to the schools.

But I'd run without thinking, so I was running deeper into the woods, heading back toward the damn trailer park. Where I was less likely to get help than if I'd run toward the schools.

It was too late, though.

I couldn't turn around now.

Not with Gray gaining on me.

Unlike Gav, Gray was more fit. He did spend time at the gym. On the damned treadmill too.

He was also taller, longer-legged.

I didn't have long before he caught up to me.

I broke through the tree line at the other end of the park when I felt his hand close around my forearm, wrenching me back so hard that I think he dislocated my shoulder.

A cry escaped me.

But I stopped it.

Then sucked in a breath as I saw the police cars a couple dozen yards away.

And I screamed like my life depended on it.

It did.

My throat ached as a sound escaped me that felt bigger than something I could make.

I saw people.

Were they coming toward me?

I didn't know.

What I did know, though, was that a needle pricked my skin.

My gaze slipped over, and I watched as the plunger shot the drugs into my system.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Detroit

My gun was out as I tore open the door to the trailer where Melissa lived.

Her whole body jolted as I charged inside.

“Where is she?” I demanded, suddenly, for the first time in my life, not giving a single fuck about scaring a woman.

Melissa stepped backward, dropping her ass down into one of the folding chairs in her small dining space between the kitchen and the living room.

“She’s not here,” she said.

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” I seethed.

“I’m not!” Melissa squeaked. “She was here. He just left with her.”

“When?”

“Just... just a couple minutes ago!”

“Where?” I growled as Colter came in behind me.

Distantly, I could hear the sirens as the cops left the station. It wouldn't be long until they got here. Until my chances of getting information out of Melissa with intimidation fell away.

“Where the fuck did he take her? What is he doing to her?”

“He's going to make it look like an overdose!” Melissa said, tears starting to stream down her cheeks.

“Where?” My voice was so loud that she shrank into herself, shoulders coming up, hands moving outward at me.

“I don't know! I swear!”

“What kind of car?” I asked.

“Black sedan. With a missing hubcap on the front passenger side.”

“Detroit,” Colter said, voice calm. “It was pulling out as we were coming in.”

“Fuck,” I growled, the sirens pulling into the neighborhood.

I tucked my gun away, turned, and walked out of the house.

“She's not here,” I told Slash as he looked over at me. “He took her out as we were coming in. To drug her into an overdose,” I added.

Two uniformed cops were exchanging looks, confused. Understandably so.

I ignored them.

And beelined for my brother as he climbed out of his car instead.

“You fucking did this,” I yelled as I made my way toward him. “If something happens to her because of your fucking ass, you're going to regret it,” I added.

“No,” Dallas said, holding his hands up. But not to me.

When I looked, the uniforms were reaching for their guns.

“What happens to who?” Dallas asked, brotherly disgust pushed back behind professional curiosity.

“Everleigh,” I said, biting out her name. “She was innocent. And now someone’s going to fucking kill her to cover their tracks.”

I wanted to say more.

I wanted to haul back, then punch him full-force in the face.

But I didn’t have time.

I had to find Everleigh.

I had to save her.

I charged past him.

“Wait,” Dallas called. “Get in,” he said, waving toward his car.

I wanted to tell him to fuck himself.

But the bike would give me away before a car would. And if he heard the bike, he might hurt her faster.

I said nothing, just rushed around his hood, climbed in, and waited for him to pull off.

Which he did in a rapid K-turn, and there was a moment where a memory came back to me. The two of us in this very position. Him much smaller. All limbs and acne-filled face. My whole body ramrod straight as he almost took out a mailbox when he backed up too far into the K-turn and jumped the curb.

I’d been the one to teach him to drive, refusing to let him out onto the road until he could not only do a three-point turn and parallel park, but do it quickly and precisely.

I’d taught him to do that perfect K-turn.

And for a moment, he was just my brother.

There was no bad blood.

Until, of course, I remembered why I was in his car.

I hit the button to lower the window as we pulled to the edge of the trailer park.

“Wait,” I yelled, hand slamming into his chest.

“What is it?”

“Don’t you hear that?” I asked.

Screaming.

There was screaming.

Dallas was reacting before I even had to tell him to, taking a turn toward the park as he put the pedal to the floor.

Behind us, two of the cruisers were following at the same breakneck pace.

Dallas slammed on the brake and rushed out of the car before I could see what he was seeing.

I was running when I saw her.

And that fuckhead behind her.

Pulling something from between his lips.

And plunging it into her arm.

Melissa’s words came back to me.

About Gray making it look like an overdose.

Then Erion’s played in my head too.

About ‘that shit’ that Gray was cutting his heroin with.

I didn’t have to ask to know what that ‘shit’ was.

It was the same ‘shit’ that was causing deadly overdoses all over the country.

“Put your fucking hands up!” Dallas roared as we ran.

I wasn’t focused on Gray.

I was looking at Everleigh as she slumped to the ground.

Rationally, I knew she wasn’t likely to die that quickly. But my heart seized in my chest as I pushed my legs faster, then dropped down in front of her.

“Get on the fucking ground!” Dallas yelled as I heard more footsteps approaching.

“Dallas!” I yelled as my arms went around Everleigh, yanking the needle out, then pulling her tightly to me. “You’re gonna be okay. I’m gonna fix this. Dallas!” I yelled again, hearing the desperation in my voice.

He must have heard it too, because he was right there, casting a shadow over us.

“He drugged her,” I said. “You have those overdose meds, right?” I asked, voice shaking as I looked up at him.

He gave me a tight nod, then ran off toward one of the police cruisers.

“It’s okay. Dallas has the stuff to reverse this,” I told her, stroking her hair, pressing my lips to her forehead. “You’re going to be okay.” My fingers went to her neck, feeling the thump of her pulse. Slow. Too slow.

Dallas was running back, fingers ripping at the plastic holding the reversal drugs. The kind that squirted up the nose.

“Here,” Dallas said, dropping down next to us. “Turn her,” he demanded, even as I was doing it. “Lay her as flat as possible.”

His hands were surprisingly steady as he stuck the applicator into her nose, and plunged the medicine in.

“Get her up,” Dallas demanded. “We have to get her to Dr. Price,” he said. “In the cruiser,” he added. “We have more of this,” he added as I gathered Everleigh and got to my feet.

By the time I got into the back of the cruiser, Dallas had gotten more of the nasal stuff, and had tossed them in the back with me before climbing into the front, and peeling off.

It wasn’t a long drive to Dr. Price’s, but I was terrified it would be too long.

“That shit works,” Dallas said, as if he could sense the anxiety swirling around me. “Ninety-four percent survival rate. And we got her early,” he said, taking a sharp turn at a

high speed. “Keep an eye. If she’s not getting better, give her another in the other nostril.”

My fingers were on her neck, feeling her pulse. Still slow, but not as stalled as before.

Her breathing, though, seemed too shallow.

I grabbed one of the wrappers, ripping it open, and putting the applicator in her nose, then shooting more meds into her system as I said a silent prayer that it would do the trick, that she wouldn’t need more.

I knew we were there when Dallas started laying on the horn.

He rushed out of the car, opening the back as Dr. Price himself came rushing out the front door.

“She was drugged,” Dallas told him as I carried Everleigh up the front path. “Gave her two doses to counteract it,” he added.

“Okay. Come on in,” Dr. Price said, cool and collected. Like he’d seen this a million times. And maybe he had. Drug use and overdoses happened everywhere. And in our little nowhere town that didn’t have a very close hospital, Dr. Price likely had to handle just about everything. At least while waiting for an airlift to a trauma center. “Put her down on the table,” he demanded. “What did she take?”

“She was drugged,” I corrected. “Heroin. Likely cut with Fentanyl.”

“Okay,” Dr. Price said, tone soothing as he stuck a pulse-ox onto her finger, and turned to get a blood pressure cuff. “How are you feeling, honey?” he asked.

“Okay,” she said, sounding a little slow, but awake.

Awake was good.

“Yeah?” Dr. Price asked. “That’s good. Just be still for one minute,” he said as he pumped up the blood pressure cuff. “Okay. Alright. Your vitals are okay,” he said. “But I want to keep you here for a few hours to keep an eye on you. Give you fluids. Make sure you don’t need another dose of the meds.

They work fast and almost completely within a few minutes, but sometimes you might need another dose in a few hours. That's why I want to keep an eye on you," he explained.

"Yeah, I would be too worried to leave," she admitted. "And, um, can you check my shoulder?" she asked.

"What happened to your shoulder?" I asked, starting to move forward, but Dr. Price moved in my path.

"How about you step outside?" Dr. Price suggested.

"I didn't do it," I insisted, offended he'd think that was possible.

"He didn't," Everleigh said.

"Just one second, Everleigh," Dr. Price said as he waved me toward the hallway. "She needs to be examined," he explained. "And she could use some calm. You're all over the place," he said, and, well, he was right about that. "Go cool off. Let me look over her, then come back in when you calm down."

"Okay," I agreed, knowing she deserved the best of me after what she'd been through, and that I was nowhere near that. "Take care of her," I said, getting a knowing nod from him.

"I will."

With that, I turned and moved out front, wanting to take five minutes to get my head on right. So I could go back in there and comfort her.

But then my gaze landed on my brother who was talking to a uniform, likely the one whose cruiser we'd stolen.

"You motherfucker," I hissed, charging toward him.

The anxiety of Everleigh's health lessened, the rage I felt toward him for putting her in this position came back.

"It's okay," Dallas said to the officer as he took a step away. "Watch your fucking tone," he warned as he moved toward me.

“I’ll talk to you however the fuck I want,” I countered.
“When all of this was your fucking fault.”

“I was doing my job,” he insisted, glaring at me with eyes so much like my own.

“Your job. Dragging innocent women in on bullshit charges while the real bad guys got away? Doing a great fucking job, man.”

“Her fingers were all over the box.”

“And seeing as she *worked* there, that was not enough to bring her in on. So busy trying to get more feathers in your fucking cap to actually do a thorough job.”

“You don’t know a fucking thing about my job.”

“I know I managed to do it for you in less than a day. And do it *right*.”

“You’re just pissed off because you were fucking the woman.”

“I wasn’t,” I countered. Because I wasn’t. Not at the time, anyway. “I just knew an innocent woman when I saw one. Everleigh? Fucking seriously, Dallas? Probably the most innocent woman in this entire fucking town.”

“What the fuck can you possibly know about innocence?” he shot back.

“What the fuck happened to you?” I asked, exhaling hard.

“Me?” he asked, letting out a humorless laugh. “What happened to me? What happened to you?”

“What happened to me?” I scoffed. “I had a dad who couldn’t work, a brother who needed to be provided for, and bills piling up every single fucking day. I was drowning in responsibilities I didn’t ask for, and no way to handle them save for finding a job that would give me a lot of money in a short amount of time.”

“Don’t you dare blame me and Pop for your life decisions.”

“How did you think the lights stayed on, Dallas? When Pop was in bed for months on end, when the disability paychecks barely covered putting some food in the fridge? Who handed him the two grand you needed to go to the fucking Academy in the first place? Even when you stopped speaking to me.”

That seemed to shock him enough to silence whatever he was going to spit at me.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“Why would you pay for me to train to be a cop when you were a criminal?” he asked.

“Because it was your dream. And because you were my brother and what you wanted mattered to me. Regardless of how you felt about me and my choices.”

It was like I’d knocked the wind out of him with that.

His mouth opened and closed a few times before he seemed to give up on saying anything.

“You can think whatever the fuck you want about me. I don’t care. But you stay the fuck away from Everleigh from here on out. Do you hear me?” I vowed, staring at his eyes for a moment, then turning and walking away.

I was about to go back inside, even though I knew I was no calmer than before, when my phone started to ring in my pocket.

Simon.

“Yeah?” I answered, sounding as tired as I suddenly felt.

“So, it’s done,” he said.

“How the fuck—“

“I’ve got my ways,” he said. “Sounds like they have the right people in custody now, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

“I suspect your lovely brother will be dropping the charges against Everleigh and Gav by the end of the day.”

“I hope so,” I agreed.

“Is she alright?” he asked, seeming to sense something in my tone.

“Gray shot her full of drugs to make it look like an OD.”

“Hm,” he said.

“‘Hm?’” I repeated. “That’s all you have to say about that?”

“No. I could also say that he’s smarter than I would have given him credit for. It would have made her look guilty as fuck, and there would be nothing to trace back to him then. His brother would have gone away for a few decades, and he and his girlfriend would have gone on doing what they were doing.”

“You’re seriously not going to ask about Everleigh?” I asked. “After I just told you she was drugged.”

“I didn’t figure you’d be taking my call if there was something seriously going on with her,” he said, brushing it off. “I’ll send you my final bill by the end of the week,” he said. “It’s been nice working with you.”

With that, he ended the call.

“What a dick,” I said to myself, exhaling hard.

“Who?” Colter asked, making me turn to find several of the guys had shown up. Solidarity in hard times, we were good at that.

“Simon,” I said.

“Don’t imagine you get to be one of the organized crime world’s best defense attorneys by being a nice guy,” Colter reasoned. “How is Ev?”

“Price thinks she’s going to be alright. He wants to observe her for a while, though. And give her fluids.”

“Good. She’s in good hands, right?” he asked. Not a local, so he didn’t really know just how skilled Dr. Price had to be to cater to an entire town of ailments without any sort of backup.

“The best,” I said.

“What can I do?” he asked.

Suddenly, my legs felt really fucking tired.

I lowered down to sit on the top step of the Victorian house that acted as Dr. Price’s office. And home.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“She’s coming back to the clubhouse tonight, right?” he asked.

“Right,” I agreed. There was no question about that. I wanted her close. I was going to sit awake all night watching her, just to be safe.

“How about some sort of care package?” he suggested. “A ‘feel better’ basket or something like that. Used to throw them together for my wife all the time,” he said, but a dark look crossed his face after the admission.

Colter hadn’t been around long enough for me to claim I really knew the guy. But it had to fucking eat at his soul to know how much he’d tried in his relationship, only to have it ending with the ultimate betrayal from the two people closest to him.

“She likes that Squishmallow thing she has,” I said. “I bet she’d like a new one. Pink.”

“Alright. What else?”

“She likes... comfort shit,” I said. “Blankets and face masks and bubble bath bombs...”

“Got it. Snacks?” he asked, and I rambled off ideas. “Anything else?” he asked after jotting down notes in his phone.

“Not unless you can find a Pekingese puppy in the next few hours,” I said, shaking my head. “Thanks for this,” I said. “She’s really going to appreciate it.”

“I’m sure she’s worth all this and more,” he said, turning, and walking away.

Slash and the others came up next, wanting a breakdown of what happened from me.

“I’ll head back and make sure Raff doesn’t plan on any partying tonight. Give Everleigh a peaceful night to recover,” Slash said.

“I appreciate that,” I said, exhaling hard.

“And we’ll order in tonight,” Sway said. “Know cooking is your love language, but I think she’s gonna want you at her side tonight, not down in the kitchen.”

That was fair.

“Good plan,” I agreed.

“What should we order? Italian? Diner food? Chinese?”

“Yes,” I said.

I didn’t know what she would want.

But I wanted her to have all the choices the town might have to offer.

“And someone needs to tell Rook it’s all over,” I said.

“Coach is on his way there now,” Slash said. “It’s all handled. Go be with your girl.”

With that, I got to my feet, and moved back into Dr. Price’s office.

“Here,” he said, coming in from the back of the building, carrying two cups of coffee. “One for each of you. And this,” he said, pulling a blanket off of his shoulder to drape it over mine. “She’s gonna be here for a while. Might as well let her get comfortable.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I said, exhaling hard. “For everything,” I added. “Is there anything I will need to know when I can take her home?”

“Sometimes the Naloxone has after effects. Upset stomach, body aches, headache, dry nose. I wouldn’t worry about those.

If she spikes a fever, has a big change in her blood pressure or pulse, I'd like you to bring her back. But that's very unlikely. If she had anything, it would likely be the headache, a dry nose, that sort of thing."

"Okay," I agreed. "And her shoulder?" I asked, feeling my jaw tightening at the idea that the bastard had done anything else to her.

"Dislocated. She'll be fine. I gave her a sling, but she's probably not going to need to use it unless she keeps forgetting about it and trying to use that arm. I prescribe rest for that. And some ice for her head and knees."

He said that on his way toward the phone that was ringing from the desk.

And I was left to feel my blood start to boil at the idea of her knees being bruised and something being wrong with her head.

Why?

Had he forced her onto them?

For what purpose?

I hadn't even considered what else she might have endured before I got to her.

I wanted to press Price about it, but he had his serious face on as he asked someone on the phone how long the fever had been so high.

I guess I had to get my answers from Everleigh. And it looked like we had a while to talk.

Letting myself into her exam room, I found her sitting on the padded table that Dr. Price had angled up for her to make it more like a chair.

"Hey," I said, giving her a small smile.

"Hey," she said, attempting a smile, but it fell quickly.

"You alright?" I asked, approaching her, and handing her one of the coffees. I set mine down on the little rolling table

thing, so my hands were free to spread the blanket over her legs and torso.

“I think I’m a little in shock,” she admitted. “And my head hurts.”

“Baby, what happened to your head?” I asked, glancing at it, and seeing the dried blood for the first time.

“He hit me to knock me out,” she said. “I woke up with a splitting migraine. I think the anxiety chased away the pain for a while. But now it’s back with a vengeance.”

“Dr. Price doesn’t think you have a concussion?” I asked.

“He said he’s not too worried, but that I can go and get a scan if I am.”

Maybe she should.

Though, I’d gotten a concussion or two in my life. And aside from headaches and some dizziness, they hadn’t been too serious.

“And your shoulder?” I asked, running a finger over the strap of her sling.

“He pulled me too hard,” she said. “Trying to get me out of the house and into the car.”

I nodded at that, then swallowed hard.

“And your knees?” I asked, hoping my voice came out more even than it sounded in my own ears.

“I fell on the corner of the porch steps. They really hurt,” she admitted.

And she wasn’t going to be able to take anything but acetaminophen for it. Which wasn’t going to do much.

I reached down, sliding her pants up her calves, exposing her knees, then leaning down to press a kiss to each of the quickly-forming bruises.

When I looked back up at her, her lower lip was wobbling.

“Hey,” I said, voice soft.

With one hand, I reached to take the coffee cup, placing it on the tray, as I reached behind her back to pull her closer.

“It’s okay. You’re okay now,” I assured her.

She needed to cry it out, though. So I stood there, holding her through it, murmuring assurances, running my hand up and down her back, just letting her purge it all.

“Okay,” she said, sniffing hard when it was done. “That just made the headache worse,” she admitted with a whimper.

“Lemme see if I can get you some acetaminophen,” I said, then came back a moment later to give her two with her coffee.

While she was taking those, I reached for my phone, finding the right playlist of ‘Chill Taylor Swift songs’ and putting it on.

The sweet smile she shot me let me know it was the right thing to do, especially when that baby with a fever came into the office, screaming in the other room.

“Did they get him?” she asked three songs later.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “He’s going to be going away for a long time. Drug charges, kidnapping, assault, attempted murder...”

“And Melissa?” she asked.

“An accessory to all of that, at least.”

“She has a son,” I heard her say. “I was in his bedroom.”

“I’m sure there’s family to take care of him,” I told her. “She has to go away too.”

“It was her idea,” she said, letting out a sighing breath. “To make it look like an accident or an overdose. It was her idea.”

All the more reason she had to go away.

“She was my pilates instructor,” she said, shaking her head. “How did I not know?”

“People are really good at putting on a front when they need to,” I said, shrugging. I knew plenty of criminals who

went to parent-teacher meetings and Little League games. No one would know they were dealing drugs or working in extortion.

“I guess that’s true,” she said, leaning the side of her head into me. “It sounds like I’m going to be here a while. You don’t have to stay,” she said.

“Yes, I do.”

“You could—“

“Absolutely fucking not,” I cut her off. “I’m right where I need to be.”

There was a moment of silence before she sucked in a deep breath.

“Hey, Detroit?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I was kind of brave today,” she said. “I was going to throw myself out of the window.”

“Of course you were brave,” I said, confused.

“I mean, I know that I’m not, like, you know, a weapon designer or from a mafia family, or a poison expert...”

“Where are we going with this?” I asked, suddenly a little concerned about her head injury.

“But, you know, I’m braver than I thought. And I know it’s not the same as being badasses like they are, but—“

“Why are you comparing yourself to them?” I asked.

“Because I know they are who outlaw biker guys are supposed to be with,” she said. “And I’m not that. But, I, ah... I kind of love you. And I was thinking maybe you—“

She kind of loved me?

Loved me?

Fuck.

There was no way to prepare for the way my heart felt like it was trying to burst from my chest at those words.

This woman, this fucking amazing, beautiful, kind, sweet woman loved me. Wanted to be with me. And somehow fucking thought she wasn't worthy?

"Ev," I said, voice soft. "Think I fell for you the first day I met you," I told her. "And have just kept falling ever since. I just... I never thought you'd want this."

"Want what? You?" she asked.

"Me. This lifestyle..."

"Well, I do," she said. "I don't think I've ever wanted anyone like I want you. And I'm the club electrolyte-pusher and lost-clothes-finder now. I belong there," she said with a wobbly little smile, still uncertain.

"Fuck yeah you do," I said, leaning down to brush my lips over hers. "And you're coming home with me tonight," I told her.

"And every other night?" she asked, pressing her cheek to mine.

"Absolutely."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Everleigh

We didn't get back to the clubhouse until almost eleven at night.

Dr. Price, my personal doctor since he'd come to Shady Valley after his residency, wanted—out of an abundance of caution—to keep me there until he was sure I wasn't going to need any more meds or anything like that.

As much as I wanted to be out of the cold exam room, a part of me was terrified too.

I mean, from the sound of things, I could have very, very easily died if not for the fact that Dallas had those meds to shoot up my nose.

Apparently, Gray had been cutting his heroin with that stuff that was making people overdose like crazy. Even lifelong addicts who would have had a little more tolerance to drugs. For someone like me, who'd never taken any, it could have been so much dicier.

By the time Coach showed up with the SUV, and I was shuffled inside of it, I was freezing, starving, and desperately in need of some sleep.

“Raff ordered every kind of takeaway you can imagine,” Coach told us as we pulled into the driveway. “Even went a few towns over to get more options. So, basically anything you want is inside waiting for you.”

As if responding to that, my stomach let out a loud growl that had Detroit giving my thigh a little squeeze.

My legs felt kind of numb as we walked up the front path, but my mind was racing, and my soul was soaring.

Because he did love me.

Because I was going to get to call this place home.

Because I could really dig in, get comfortable, without the fear of it all being ripped away from me.

My heart seemed to be screaming *Home* as Coach opened the door and I walked back inside with Detroit’s hand wrapped in mine.

As promised, I was assaulted almost instantly with so many scents that it was almost impossible to tell them apart. That tang of red sauce that said pizza and Italian food was featured, the spicy scent of Mexican food, the unmistakable umami scent of Chinese, then the greasy scent of fried food.

The clubhouse wasn’t overly busy, but I could hear the low hum of televisions from the floor above, so I figured everyone had gotten plates and gone to their own rooms so I could have some peace.

“Hey, pretty lady,” Raff said, and even his usually so animated voice was hushed as he greeted me. “Come on. Let’s get you a plate,” he said, waving toward the spread across not only the island and dining table, but most of the counters as well.

I went ahead and did that, Detroit close by as we both piled plates, then sat to eat.

Raff broke up the silence by telling us about his most recent trip to a place called Golden Glades, Florida. Apparently, there was another club there that was a ‘sister’ to this one. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I was smiling and laughing as he told this story about some guy named Zayn who was, apparently, an international arms dealer.

It passed the time as I stuffed my belly until my pants felt too tight. And they had an *elastic* waist.

“How about I run you a bath?” Detroit suggested.

“That sounds perfect,” I agreed, trying to get up to clean while he went to do that, but getting coaxed back into my seat by Coach.

I hadn’t had this in a really long time.

Help.

People to lean on.

Even when my mom and sister were in town, I guess I’d kind of always been the one doing the taking care of everyone. When they were sick, I was making soup and making sure they were taking their meds and going easy.

When my sister was being abused by that asshole ex of hers, I was there, treating her wounds, icing her bruises, telling her how loved she was, how she could come be with me anytime.

I showed love with acts of service.

I guess I just never knew quite how nice it could be to be on the receiving end of that, to have others take care of me.

“I give a mean foot massage if you need one,” Raff told me after Coach offered to try to ease my headache with some sort of breathing/tapping exercise. “Fuck. I made her cry. Ah, someone. She’s... leaking,” Raff declared, getting an eye roll from Coach.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m just a little emotional,” I admitted, wiping at my cheeks with my hand. “It’s just really nice to have people who want to take care of me,” I admitted.

“That’s what family is for,” Raff said, shrugging. And it really was that simple for them.

This, it seemed, was their family.

I didn’t know all their stories yet, but it did seem like almost everyone here had strained family ties. So this found family of theirs had taken the place of their blood families.

I really loved that for them.

No, the club wouldn’t replace my blood family. My mom and sister genuinely did love me, even if we didn’t see one another as often anymore.

But it would be lovely to have this expansive, loving, varied family to fall back on in times of need as well.

“Come on, baby,” Detroit called, voice soft.

I followed him upstairs and let him carefully undress me before helping me into the tub.

He left me to soak, and I wouldn’t claim the bath worked as well as some medicine might have, but it did make the headache, throbbing shoulder, and achy knees become a little more tolerable.

Afterward, Detroit wrapped me in a towel and led me across the hall.

To where a giant basket was sitting on the bed, overflowing with items.

Soft pajamas, fluffy socks, a new blanket, a Squishmallow, candy, snacks, and more that I couldn’t see buried under all the other stuff.

“What’s this?” I asked, feeling those damn tears sting my eyes again.

This day was just... a lot.

Crushing lows followed by soaring highs.

My emotions couldn’t quite keep up.

“I can’t take full credit,” Detroit admitted. “It was Colter’s idea. I just told him what you liked,” he said.

“You’re both amazing,” I told him as I pulled out the soft, light pink pajama set.

Detroit insisted on helping me into it. And, despite all the fear, uncertainty, pain, and exhaustion, I felt little fires spark at my skin. But they were extinguished pretty quickly as his fingers finished with the last button of my top.

He pushed me onto the bed, and I started picking items out of the basket as he slipped the ridiculously soft socks onto my feet.

“Oh, yeah, that can be cooled or heated up,” Detroit said as I lifted a heavy eye mask. “To help with the headache,” he explained. “There’s another bigger one for your shoulder too.”

“This is all too much,” I said as I pulled out a piece of chocolate, unwrapped it, and stuck it in my mouth.

“Not even close,” Detroit said. “There is one more thing. But we’re gonna give it to you in the morning,” he said as he moved the basket to the nightstand, so I could pick through it, but also get under the covers.

He flicked the new blanket over me, handed me the new Squishmallow, then joined me in bed.

“Tell me again,” he demanded, voice soft as we both settled in.

I didn’t need to ask what he meant.

“I love you,” I told him.

“Think I’ve been waiting my whole life to hear that outta the mouth of the right woman,” he said. “I love you too,” he added, pressing a kiss to my temple.

Not much was said after that.

It had to be closing in at one in the morning. Maybe even later. It had been a hell of a day. We were both exhausted.

Or, at least, I was.

I passed out quickly.

I didn't realize he didn't too until I woke up the next morning to find him red-eyed, like he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep.

Like, maybe, he'd been up all night watching me to make sure I was okay.

God, if I didn't already love the man, I would have fallen hard and fast with him at the first light of that morning.

"How're you feeling?" he asked, brushing some hair out of my eye.

"Achy," I admitted. "But the headache seems better."

"Don't be surprised if you're a little dizzy today," he said. "So try to move slow," he told me.

"I'm not the most graceful on my best of days, so that is probably good advice," I said. "What time is it?"

"Eight or so," he told me. "You could go back to sleep."

"I want coffee," I said. "And breakfast. And to know what my other present is," I added.

Admittedly, it was that third thing that was going to get me out of bed.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I loved presents and surprises as a whole. Even the littlest of things. My mom used to drop me off a muffin at the gym when she took a coffee break from work, and I swear my whole day was great after that.

There was just something *to* knowing people loved you and were randomly thinking about you enough to buy you something or bring you something.

"Luckily for you, Raff got up this morning and went to get French toast at the diner."

"He didn't," I said, already salivating at the thought.

"He did. Should still be hot, too."

"Then I better get a move on," I said, throwing the covers off a bit dramatically with my good arm.

“Slowly,” Detroit reminded me as he got off the bed too, hovering over me as I got to my feet, like he might need to catch me at any moment.

I was a little woozy when I first stood, and when I looked too quickly to the side, but it faded pretty quickly.

Detroit threw himself together as I did, and he led me to the freight elevator and toward the kitchen.

Where Raff was standing.

In an apron that must have belonged to one of the girls because it was pink and frilly. A spatula was in his hand.

“I already told her you got it at the diner,” Detroit said with a chuckle as he eyed the plate of French toast.

“Man, come on,” Raff griped. “I was gonna get all the points for this.”

“Despite the fact that there are no pans on the stove, no syrup bottle, a to-go container sitting right on the counter, and the fact that she’s not an idiot?” Detroit shot back, smirking at his club brother.

“You’ve got me there,” Raff agreed, unbothered, as he brought me my plate to the table, then sat down himself with a to-go container of what looked like every breakfast food known to mankind. Still wearing the damn apron, mind you.

Detroit made us coffee, then got another to-go container, and brought it to the table to start eating.

“So, ah, can we give her the last gift yet?” Colter asked, ducking his head in from outside, face a little red, like he’d been out there for a while.

“You ready?” Detroit asked.

Was it so big that it had to be outside?

This was... odd.

“Absolutely,” I agreed.

“Okay. Come sit on the couch and close your eyes,” Detroit said, and I could feel him sit down beside me.

Honestly, I was kind of bouncing with excitement. Whatever it was, I was sure I was going to love it.

But it wasn't until something very fluffy was put into my lap and it *moved* that I had any clue of just how much I would love it.

My eyes shot open.

And there it was.

A little ball of tan fur with a smushed black face.

A Pekingese puppy.

I couldn't explain the sound that escaped me then. All I can say was that it was loud and embarrassing. As were the tears that filled my eyes.

"Oh, my God!" I squeaked, hand moving over its soft fur. "You're so cute! How? Where?" I asked, looking between Detroit and Colter.

"Lucked out and found one just a couple hours away," Colter said. "Detroit kinda made a throwaway comment about how you'd love a Pekingese puppy. I... made it happen."

I wanted to tell him that, one day, he would make a woman so incredibly happy. I felt like maybe that would seem insensitive, given that he'd already had a woman and she'd betrayed him.

In time, I was sure he would heal from that. Then find a woman who would appreciate him and all he had to offer.

Until then, I guess I—and all the other club women—got to enjoy his kindness and generosity.

"Is it a boy or girl?" I asked as it sniffed and licked my hand.

"Girl," Colter said. "Ten weeks," he explained, smiling at my enjoyment.

I reached out my good arm, grabbing his hand, and giving it a squeeze.

"Thank you. Really."

“Don’t thank me. I was just her transportation. This was your man’s idea,” Colter said, giving the puppy a little pet, then moving away.

“Don’t thank me,” Detroit demanded when I turned to him as the puppy hopped over into his lap, looking comically small against his tree-trunk thighs. “I think we’re gonna need to have Coach build her some steps for the furniture,” he added as she almost fell off his leg.

“Oh, wait,” I gasped as Detroit let her down onto the floor, and she made a beeline for Cat. “Oh,” I said, surprised when Cat let her walk all over him, then turned and started licking her. “I guess she kind of is the size of a kitten,” I mused.

“You have to think of a name for her,” he told me.

“Betty,” I said automatically.

“Let me guess,” Detroit said, shooting a smirk in my direction. “It’s from a song.”

“It is,” I agreed, beaming at him.

“Is Everleigh awa—“ Slash’s voice started. “Christ, how did a dust bunny come alive?” he asked as he looked down at Betty as she ran toward him, jumping all over his feet.

“Probably should have asked first,” Detroit said, looking guilty.

“Right. Because this thing is taking up so much space,” Slash said with a head shake. “How you feeling, babe?” he asked, looking at me.

In love.

Over the moon.

So full of joy that I was going to burst.

“I’m good,” I told him with a nod. “Is everything okay?”

“I just... the news this morning,” he said, waving toward the TV. “It’s all over. You might want to call your mom and sister. I dunno how far this will spread, but I figure you want it coming from you, not the media.”

“Oh,” I said, some of that joy slipping away.

“How about we take Betty upstairs and you call your mom while you play with her on the bed?” Detroit asked. “Make it a little easier.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Thanks, Slash,” I said as I stood.

Then I got to watch the hulking Detroit chase after the lightning-fast Betty across the lower level, trying to catch her.

By the time we made it back upstairs, I had a smile on my face again as I dialed my mom’s number.

I won’t lie.

It wasn’t easy.

First, because I’d been keeping a lot from her for a long time.

Second, because of the whole drug angle and the county jail parts.

Detroit had given me privacy to talk to her, which I was glad for. Because I segued from the talk about being framed for drug distribution and into what was happening with Detroit.

“He got you a puppy?” my mom asked, her voice tight.

“He did. She’s asleep on my lap,” I told her.

“And he sat with you all day at the doctor?”

“He did,” I confirmed.

“Oh, honey. He sounds amazing,” she said.

“He’s, ah, he’s a biker,” I told her, not sure how to explain this part to her, or how much information to give her about what that meant.

“I dated a biker once!” she said, making my brows shoot up.

“Really?”

“Really. I was young. My girlfriend dragged me to a party at a biker clubhouse. There was a guy there... oh, those were

some fun few months,” she said, lost in the memory. “I’m so happy you found your person, honey. Can I meet him when I come to town?”

“Definitely,” I agreed. “Bayleigh already knows him. Not well, but she’s met him a few times.”

“I can’t wait to pester her for details,” she said. “If you want, I can tell your sister about this. I can ease her into it, so she doesn’t get too upset.”

“That would be great,” I said, even if I felt a little guilty for not telling her myself. But my mom was there. I wasn’t. I couldn’t gauge how she was handling the information over the phone.

“We’re going to come see you this coming weekend,” she said. “Any idea if the motel has any openings?”

“You can stay at my apartment,” I told her. “I haven’t been there since I was released. It would be much more comfortable than the motel.”

“Oh, so you’re *living* with him?”

“I... yes,” I agreed. “I mean, we haven’t really talked about that yet, though,” I admitted.

“Talked about what?” Detroit asked as he came in with a new coffee for me.

I felt my cheeks heating.

“If we are living together or not,” I admitted since my mom was listening, and I couldn’t try to evade the question.

“Well, we gotta move the rest of your stuff out of the guest room,” he said. “But I didn’t wait this long for you to have you leave every night.”

“Oh, honey, what a *voice*,” my mom gushed in my ear.

“I know, right?” I asked.

“Okay. Well, I won’t keep you. But I want to hear from you when you get your check-up with Dr. Price.”

“You’ll be my first call,” I assured her.

“I know this sounds strange with so much going on, and not all of it good, but I’m so happy for you, honey,” she said. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said, and hung up feeling like the weight of the world had been lifted off of my shoulders.

“It go okay?” Detroit asked.

“Yeah. She was a little upset that I didn’t fill her in sooner, but she’s not mad or anything. Oh, and she likes your voice,” I told him, watching what I could only call a bashful smile play across his face. “And she wants to meet you.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her too,” he said, reaching to pluck the puppy from my lap as she woke up. “Figure anyone who created you has got to be pretty fucking amazing. We gotta take her out,” he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead as he stood to do just that.

I followed behind, watching him as this giant wall of a man walked my tiny little puppy on a leash around the yard, asking her over and over to ‘go pee.’

And I had to agree with my mom.

A lot had gone on.

Some of it was really not good.

But I was still so incredibly, blissfully, indescribably happy despite all of that not-great stuff. Because so much good had happened to offset it.

And, it seemed, there would only be more of that good to come.

I couldn’t freaking wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Detroit - 5 days

I wasn't sure I'd gotten a full night of sleep until we went back to Dr. Price for a check-up, and Everleigh was given the all-clear from him. I would constantly find myself dozing off, then startling awake to check on her.

Watching someone you love overdose was even more fucking traumatic than I could have realized. And I'd been lucky enough to know we had reversal meds and a doctor close by to help her.

But Dr. Price assured us that there was nothing of the drugs in her system, that her head was healing great, and that, unfortunately, she was just going to have to keep nursing her shoulder for a while, that dislocations could take months to fully heal, and it would only take longer if she didn't make sure she took it easy.

Luckily for her, there was nothing she needed to be doing around the clubhouse, manual-labor-wise like she would have needed to do at work or her own place.

Colter, Coach, and Rook when he was around did the lion's share of the work around the place. I did the cooking. So all she had to do was occasionally pick up her three-pound dog.

"Oh, hey!" she said as we pulled the SUV into the gas station to fuel up.

"What is it?" I asked, but she was already throwing open her door, and rushing out.

"Della!" I heard her call before the door slammed.

Turning, I watched her rush up to a red-headed woman wearing yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt.

It took a moment for my mind to catch up and place the name with the story.

Della.

The sex worker who had helped Everleigh navigate County. It had been on my list to track her down. But it seemed our small town did all the work for me.

I climbed out of the SUV, pumping the gas while she talked animatedly with Della, whose eyes kept widening, making me think that Everleigh was telling her the wild details of her story since they'd seen each other last.

The whole interaction ended with the exchange of cell numbers and a hug before Everleigh was rushing back to me.

"Had fun catching up?" I asked.

"We're gonna get lunch later this week," she told me.

"Nice," I said as we climbed back into the SUV.

"What do you get someone that will convey the message: *Hey, thanks for walking me through the process of county jail; I wouldn't have made it without you?*"

"No fucking idea, but I bet Colter has some ideas," I said.

"That's true," she agreed. "He really does have a knack for that," she added. After all, he'd thrown together her basket. And he'd also helped throw together one for Delaney, who'd

been upset that the doctor put her on bed rest for the last few weeks of her pregnancy.

“Oh, don’t look so sad,” I said, reaching over to squeeze her thigh. “He’ll find someone eventually,” I told her. “He’s been away for a while. He just needs to get his crazy out for a bit before he is even thinking about something serious.”

“That’s true,” she agreed. She’d already gotten so attached to the guys. She’d gotten a little wobbly-lipped when Raff told her that he and his brother would be heading out tomorrow after one last party tonight.

“Anything else you want to do today?” I asked, glancing over quickly enough to see the little smirk she had before she looked out her window.

Oh, I knew what she wanted to do today, alright.

I’d been fucking dying for it, too.

I’d just been insistent that we wait it out until she got the all-clear from Dr. Price.

“Where are you going?” she asked when I drove straight past the clubhouse, and toward, well, nothing.

Out this far, back where Morgaine used to live, there wasn’t much of anything.

Which was exactly what I was after.

“Detroit,” she said, and I felt her staring at my profile. “Where are we going?”

“Here,” I said, pulling the SUV to a stop.

She craned her neck around. “There’s nothing here,” she said, brows pinched when she looked back at me.

“Exactly,” I agreed, cutting the engine, and climbing out.

She was too curious not to follow, slamming her door, then turning in a circle, sure she was missing something.

But aside from the Death Valley mountains to the back and the farmlands to the side, there was nothing and no one around.

“What is this?” she asked.

I said nothing, though, just took her hand and led her closer to the mountains, just a little more hidden from view.

Then grabbed the back of her neck, and yanked her against me as my lips crashed down on hers.

There was a second of stunned unresponsiveness before her hands were running up my arms, digging in, as her lips came alive under mine. Getting harder. Demanding more.

It wasn't long before her hands were sliding under my shirt, teasing over my back and shoulders, then my chest and stomach.

Getting bolder, one hand dipped between us, cupping my cock through my jeans, dragging a ragged groan out of me. Which only spurred her on, her fingers moving up and down with the material between us.

My hands slid down her back, sinking into her ass, squeezing hard, then letting one slide between her thighs, feeling the heat of her through her yoga pants, and stroking until she was writhing against my touch, until she was moaning against my lips.

“Take me home,” she demanded, breathless. “We can't do this here,” she added.

“Yes, we can,” I countered.

And to prove my point, my hands slid up to snag the material of her pants and panties, dragging them down even as I lowered to my knees in front of her.

I freed one leg completely, and braced it over my shoulder as I buried my face in her pussy. Licking and sucking until any thoughts of objection flew from her mind.

Her fingers dug into my skull, and her moans echoed back to me.

My fingers slipped inside of her, making my cock throb as her walls tightened around them.

I drove her right up to and through an orgasm that had her thighs shaking.

I kept my fingers in her as I got to my feet, moving behind her, and fingering her as she looked down at Shady Valley, her head tipped back onto my chest.

It wasn't long before her hips were rocking against my touch again.

Impatient, I grabbed the condom out of my wallet with my free hand, tossing the damn thing to the ground because I couldn't be bothered to get it back into my pocket.

Freeing my cock, I slid on the protection, then bent her forward, and teased my cock along her cleft until she was rocking and moaning, until I was wet with her need.

Then I slammed inside her, her moan echoing out across the expanse around us as I stilled, trying to take a deep breath, pull myself together.

I couldn't find much control, though. And Everleigh seemed find with my lack of it as I started slamming into her, my fingers digging into her hips to yank her back into me as I thrust deep and hard.

She braced her hands on her thighs, holding herself up as I drove us both to the edge, then sent us crashing over together, her cries drowning out my groans as we came.

"Well," she said afterward as she tried to hop her leg back into her pants and panties.

Her cheeks were flushed.

And her eyes were bright.

"Well what?" I asked, head cocked to the side.

"I wasn't a criminal before," she said, turning a mischievous smile at me. "But I officially am now."

The giggle that burst out of her was contagious as I threw an arm over her shoulders, hauling her close, and pressing a kiss to her temple.

"Welcome to the club."

Everleigh - 3 months

I knew he knew I was being a little shady the minute I slammed my laptop lid shut when he walked into the bedroom carrying us our morning cups of coffee.

Late morning.

We were up late.

Because the club was up late, partying. Riff and Raff were back in town. And as much as I adored them, I had to admit that the club was much rowdier when they were around.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Detroit asked, sitting at my feet, concern etched between his brows.

I exhaled hard, knowing it was probably time to tell him, but still feeling oddly protective about it.

“So, you know how I’ve been unemployed since the whole wrongfully arrested thing?” I asked.

I hadn’t gone back to the gym.

I couldn’t.

I didn’t even go back to workout, choosing instead to do Tai Chi with Coach instead of my usual pilates, and taking walks or runs with Detroit around Shady Valley. Sure, he had to go at about a third pace because he was much longer-legged than I was, but we both seemed to enjoy the activity.

I knew it was probably silly to be avoiding the place, especially given that Gray and Melissa were both in jail without bail, awaiting their trials. And Gav was back there.

But I just... I didn’t *want* to go back, either.

The gym job had just been that.

A job.

And I suddenly had my mind set on something else. Something more along the lines of a career.

I was feeling oddly protective of this new venture I’d been toying with and working toward, which was the only reason I hadn’t told Detroit yet.

“Baby, we talked about that. You don’t need to work,” he insisted. As he had several times before.

Like after my mom and sister visited, and we both agreed that it was probably better to let my apartment go now, since I was never there. And I didn’t have money to pay for it anymore, either.

Like when I’d felt weird asking him to pick me up anything at the store.

It wasn’t that I didn’t genuinely believe he wanted to take care of me. He did. I’d just always been very independent. It was... harder than I’d anticipated to not have an income.

“No, this is... different,” I said. “It’s just... I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. And I’ve been doing some talking with Della,” I added.

Actually, she'd been the one to suggest it. Since I didn't even know this particular career path existed until she'd mentioned it.

Once she did, though, it was like someone set a fire up under me. Suddenly, I had this single-minded focus about looking into it, trying to plan it out, pinning quite a few hopes and dreams on it.

“Okay. Talking and thinking about what?” he asked, taking a sip of his coffee to make this seem more casual, but I could see the tension in his shoulders.

He'd confessed to me once, post sex, when we were all glowy and half-asleep, that some part of him was afraid that I would wake up one day and realize that this was all a giant mistake, that I shouldn't be with an outlaw biker after all.

“About a, ah, new career path,” I said, voice weird and squeaky.

“Yeah?” he asked, brows shooting up. “What kind of career path?”

“A prison social worker,” I told him.

I knew he was surprised by the way his brows drew low for a second before he forced them straight again.

“I know. I know. I hated the two days I spent in county jail. But that is kind of the point, I guess. It made me realize how... not great the system is. I mean, I think everyone knows that the prison system in this country is really broken. But knowing that and seeing that are different things.

“Like, a county jail shouldn't be so crowded that people are sleeping in bunks in the common area.”

“I agree,” he said, nodding.

“And I've been doing research. A quarter of the women in jails and prisons are in for drug offenses. Or property offenses, usually in conjunction with drug offenses.”

“That makes sense,” he agreed, nodding.

“And, unfortunately, it’s often that their men are arrested and locked up first. So the women being incarcerated means their families are torn apart. The kids go into foster care. And because they aren’t getting proper help while inside, or support to adjust to life outside again, they just keep reoffending, and the kids keep getting pulled into the system over and over.”

“You really have been looking into this,” he said, smile and eyes soft.

“I just think if women were given the right tools to get and keep their lives on track, the repercussions would be felt for, you know, generations. Kids who grow up in broken homes are more likely to continue the poverty-to-prison pipeline.”

“You know what I think?” Detroit asked, head tipped to the side.

“What?” I asked, tensing.

“I think it’s a fucking great idea.”

“It’s going to require a lot of schooling. A Bachelor’s, at least. But I’ve been looking into it, and I can do a lot of it online before I have to start traveling to a college.”

“Whatever way it has to happen, I think it’s worth it. You seem to really want to do this,” he said.

“I really do,” I said, nodding. “I’ve always felt a little... aimless, y’know? So many people I went to school with knew what they wanted to do with their lives. And I just... never knew. So I just got a job.”

“There’s nothing wrong with waiting for life to show you what you’re meant to do,” he said.

“Maybe I should thank Gray for making me finally see what I want to do with my life.”

“Yeah, I don’t think we need to go that far,” he said with a little chuckle.

“Guess what?” I asked.

“What?”

“Della is going to do it with me,” I said, beaming.

I’d needed to talk her into it.

Even after she told me all about it, sounding a lot like she’d looked into it herself at some point.

I think, to an extent, she’d gotten caught up in that cycle too. In and out of jail for prostitution charges, but no other way to make enough money to take care of herself, so it just kept happening over and over.

“She needs to finish her GED first,” I added. “But she’s been working on that.”

“That’s what you two have been doing every week,” he said, nodding.

We’d taken to having weekly diner dates. But, admittedly, we sat there for hours and hours as I helped her study and quizzed her, tried to help her rebuild her confidence. And, well, helping me brush up too. Apparently, I’d forgotten a lot of what I’d learned in high school. It was nice to have a refresher while she got caught up.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I know it was wrong to keep it from you...”

“Hey, no,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s okay not to tell me every little detail about your life. You know there are... things I can’t tell you too.”

“I just wanted to make sure it would all work out before I mentioned it,” I said. “And I just got my acceptance to the course that starts in the spring. Which will be perfect for Della too. She will be done in like three more weeks, if she passes. And she will. Then she will enroll too.”

“That’s really exciting, baby,” Detroit said, reaching out to give my thigh a squeeze.

“I know we are, you know... building something here,” I said, waving between us.

“We can build while you work on your career. They’re not mutually exclusive,” he said. “We got long lives ahead of us. A few years for you to work on something this important to

you is no big deal. Besides,” he said, smirking. “I might be keeping something from you too,” he said, getting up to go grab his own laptop, opening it up, and then turning it to face me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Plans. Ones I’ve been working on and not exactly sharing with you.”

“This is... is this a floor plan?” I asked.

“I was thinking... about building a house,” he said.

“Really?” I asked, brightening.

“Really. There are houses that go up for sale around here, but I thought it might be nice to buy one of the lots and build ourselves. But, of course, that would require us staying here for a few years. I didn’t know how you’d feel about that.”

“Well, now that I don’t need to get up at the crack of dawn, I don’t really care about the parties,” I said, shrugging. “Plus, the loud noise allows for... privacy,” I said, feeling my body warm just at the *mention* of getting steamy with him.

I don’t know what to say.

I’d become downright wanton with him.

Sex almost always with the lights on. In the shower, the bath, outside, in the car, and even, once, in the damn freight elevator. Which, apparently, was just something all the club guys needed to do at least once in their lives. And Detroit never had before. So once a party was really kicking off, I dragged him into it, stopped it between floors, then went down on him until he was grabbing me and slamming me into the wall, then fucking me until I was almost screaming with pleasure.

And, yeah, it didn’t exactly escape me that, despite the thick walls and lots of space between all of us, you could still hear people getting spicy.

Sure, we all just... turned up our TVs and were adults about it.

But I couldn't shake the insecurity about that sometimes. So I really liked the party nights because I could be as loud as I wanted.

"You know what I think?" Detroit asked, taking both laptops away, and placing them on the floor. Then putting both of our coffee cups on the nightstand.

"What?"

"That we should celebrate your new career path. And our new house plans," he said, his body coming over mine.

So, then, yeah, we celebrated.

I, in fact, celebrated *four* times.

Detroit - 6 months

Everleigh looked exhausted, but bone-deep happy.

See, it came to my attention that she'd spent her last two birthdays alone. Like, fucking *alone*. No one to give her a gift or sing her 'Happy Birthday.'

She said she got calls from her mom and sister, but they hadn't been able to visit because of work.

As you can imagine, that was fucking unacceptable to us.

So, we went big for it.

The girls and the guys alike.

Riff and Raff even insisted on coming back to town earlier than expected when they'd heard about it.

It had been a whole-day-long event.

Multiple meals.

Gifts.

Drinking, partying, birthday cake, making wishes.

The whole thing.

And while her sister couldn't make it, since she had the baby and both of them had a cold, and her mom was helping take care of the two of them, they'd video-called to sing 'Happy Birthday' too.

Della also paid a visit.

As did Gav.

Everyone who was important in her life was there.

But, clearly, she was about full-up on birthday festivities.

"You got enough energy for one more present?" I asked as she leaned into me on the short elevator ride to the second floor. "A two-part one, I guess. But one more," I clarified.

I'd given her some little stuff that she'd opened in front of everyone else. But I'd been keeping her big gift to myself. For months.

"You didn't have to get me anything else!" she insisted, but I knew that look in her eye.

“Too bad. I already did. But you can open it in the morning if you’re too tired,” I offered.

But then she was grabbing my hand, and pulling me into the bedroom.

If there was one thing you could count on about Everleigh, it was that she loved surprises.

“Okay. Where do you want me?” she asked, eyes bright.

“Edge of the bed works,” I said, smiling as I went into the closet to grab two things. One envelope and a box.

“A card?” she asked, smiling as she slid her finger under the flap, then pulling out the card.

Blank.

Save for the tickets inside of it.

It was worth the headache and every penny of getting them when I saw her eyes go huge, then her lips part.

“No way,” she said as her shocked gaze slid to me.

“Yes, way.”

“You got Taylor Swift tickets?” she asked, needing confirmation.

“Stage seats,” I confirmed. Some of the best in the entire venue. As they should be, for several grand a piece.

“This... this is too much,” she said, shaking her head.

“Nope. But I did tell Slash that we would stop in to see the Golden Glades crew while we are down there,” I told her.

“I’ve heard so many stories that I feel like I practically know them at this point,” she said. “Detroit,” she went on, shaking her head.

“Wait. There’s a part two,” I said, handing her the box.

“Part one was way more than enough,” she said, but she was already tearing at the paper like a kid on Christmas morning.

Then she pulled out the giant-ass plastic storage box with a ton of compartments full of different colored beads.

“I hear making bracelets is a thing,” I said.

“It really, really is,” she said, practically buzzing with excitement. “I can’t wait to make them,” she added, flipping open the lid to take a look at the contents. “Fair warning, I am going to make you one,” she told me, already picking out the beads, and sticking them in the empty compartment.

“Of course you are,” I said, smiling.

I knew that Everleigh was used to being the one doing the taking care of people, the gift giving, the spoiling.

It was really fucking nice to be able to do that for her.

“I love you so much,” she said, beaming at me. “And I’m not only saying that because you got me Taylor Swift tickets and are going to make friendship bracelets with me.”

I never said I’d make them with her.

I didn’t plan to.

Yet, a few days later, we were sitting on the fucking couch, making bracelets while she sang the songs I was starting to learn all the lyrics to as well.

“I think I’m going to dress up in a *Lover* era,” she said. And, you know, I fucking knew what she was talking about.

She did end up in her *Lover* era outfit with a short, bright pink skirt, matching cowboy hat and pink heart-shaped glasses, a shiny, bejeweled white top and matching boots, and a whole arm of friendship bracelets to trade.

As for me, she’d gotten me a black shirt with paper rings on it.

Ironic, considering my other plans for that trip.

But it would be a diamond.

And the offer of the rest of my fucking life.

Everleigh - 1.5 years

Taking a deep breath, I looked around the trailer that I'd been working on for weeks.

All the junk had been cleaned up. The surfaces scrubbed into a shine. The linens all washed and re-hung. I'd even attacked the flower beds outside, pulling out the weeds, and planting some seeds that would hopefully come up in the next month or so.

"You sure about this?" Ronald, Detroit and Dallas's dad asked from his position in his fancy recliner that took some of the pressure off of his back.

I couldn't tell you exactly when I'd decided to work on this plan. To try to reconnect this family that had somehow gotten strained due mainly to, well, pride. And everyone involved being entirely too stubborn.

I'd happened across Ronald one day when visiting Della, who'd gotten a trailer for herself as well. One she painted in shades of red and pink, claiming she didn't want any man who stepped inside to feel his testosterone levels plummet.

There'd been no mistaking the family resemblance, though his back injury and the inactivity that followed it had made him much thinner than his sons. Almost gaunt and sickly-looking.

And... I don't know.

I just... hated the idea of these three men being so pig-headed that they were going to turn their backs on each other because of silly things.

From the stories Detroit told me, his rift with his father came mostly from two things.

One, being that Ronald had, unfortunately, become addicted to his prescription pain meds following his back injury, and, apparently, those pills made him really, really mean.

Even Ronald admitted that to me.

But he'd been off of them for a long time. Ever since he'd gotten a pump in his back that was letting him function more.

Two, well, because Dallas and Ronald were still close, and that put Detroit as the odd-man-out.

There wasn't a lot of bad blood.

Just tensions and misunderstandings and everyone's inability to try to sit down and hash things out.

"No," I admitted to Ronald, shoulders falling. "A part of me is really worried I'm overstepping," I told him.

"If I know anything about my son, even if he's not happy about this, he will understand your good intentions," he said, shrugging.

I really liked Ronald.

On the days I visited Della, I stopped in to help Ronald breathe some life back into his home, then sat with him and

listened to him tell me his stories.

I knew he'd been a long-haul trucker when the boys were growing up. Which was why they'd spent so much time with their grandmother while he was on the road, trying to provide for everyone.

But, unfortunately, a drunk driver cut him off one night, and the subsequent crash had caused lifelong damage and pain that had sent all their lives spiraling.

I was hoping to grab a hold of all of these men, and get them all to stop that spiraling.

“He’s a really, really good man,” I said, nodding at Ronald.

“I understand that you might not be able to see it, given the circumstances, but Dallas is too. They’re just too bullheaded to admit it about each other. Put a pinch more basil in that sauce for me, would you?” he asked after sniffing the air.

It turned out that Detroit’s love of cooking was an inherited thing. His grandmother and father both had a knack for it. Ronald struggled around the kitchen these days, but he was letting me throw together one of his signature dishes for him.

He was hiding it well, but Ronald was nervous too. Clearly, the man missed his family as well. And I was hoping we could fix that.

For him.

And his sons.

And, by extension, for me.

And for our future children.

I hadn’t exactly confessed this yet, but I was just waiting for the moment I graduated with my degree. Then I wanted Detroit and I to start a family.

There would be time for working on my social work once the kids were in school.

I think all the time at the club and around all the babies being born there was really getting my clock ticking.

Watching Detroit deftly handle all those kids and babies, too, had definitely been a factor to that ticking that was practically keeping me up at night these days.

And if we were going to have babies, I'd really like them to know their Grandpa Ronny. And their Uncle Dallas.

It felt like a lot was hanging on this.

And I wasn't sure how either of the men were going to handle this.

"Here we go," Ronald said when there was a knock at the door.

My stomach tensed as I walked toward it, expecting Detroit.

But it was Dallas at the door.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, brows scrunching.

"Is that any way to talk to a lady?" Ronald snapped, making his son immediately look sheepish. "She's gonna be your sister-in-law, you know," he added as he tried to haul himself out of the chair.

Dallas and I went to him in unison, each grabbing one of his arms and lifting.

It was right then that a shadow passed over all three of us.

And there was Detroit.

I stared at him, knowing I had this whole speech planned, but my mind was suddenly wiped clean.

I watched as confusion and tension moved across his features. Then, as his gaze landed on me, a softness.

"I should have known you were in on this," he said, gaze moving around. "So, this is where you've been when you said you were visiting Della."

"No! I visited Della too! I wouldn't lie. Sometimes, Della and I were both here with your dad."

"Your girl has been an angel," Ronald declared.

“Can’t argue with that,” Detroit said, nodding. “Dallas,” he said, and there was tension in his voice.

“Detroit,” Dallas said back, eyes and tone cool.

“That’s enough of that,” Ronald said, taking on such a fatherly tone that I missed my own father so much it ached. “Go out, shoot some hoops, and work this shit out once and for all,” he said, waving at the door. “While my future daughter and I finish dinner.”

“Bring Betty,” I told them, waving toward the princess that was sitting on the arm of the couch, sunning in the window.

“When the fuck did you get a pet gremlin?” Dallas asked, getting a laugh out of Detroit as he grabbed her leash and attached it to her collar.

“She might be small, but she bosses around the German Shepherds at the club,” Detroit explained as he led her outside.

Dallas shifted his feet awkwardly before Ronald barked at him to get moving too.

“They’ll work it out,” he assured me.

“You have more faith than I do, I’m afraid,” I admitted.

“They get that stubbornness from me,” Ronald said, shaking his head. “Their ma was an angel like you. All sweet and good. Dunno how she put up with me.”

“Hey, you’re a good guy too,” I insisted, reaching out to give his hand a squeeze.

“So,” he said, eyes bright. “When are you giving me some grand babies?”

“As soon as I am done with school,” I told him.

Though, as it would turn out, fate would have other plans. Ones that meant I was as big as a house when I finally got my degree.

But that was a story for another day.

All I can say about this day was that when I went outside to call the guys to dinner, I found Betty perched in one of the

flower beds I'd just planted, and Detroit and Dallas in the middle of a serious-looking game of basketball.

One that ended with laughter.

And tentative reconciliation.

I wouldn't act like everything was better that day.

But some talking, good food, and togetherness went a long way to rebuilding those burnt bridges.

Detroit - 11 years

“She’s broken,” Everleigh declared, eyes wide and as the baby settled down as soon as I turned on her playlist.

Of soothing... old-school gangsta rap.

“She’s... got varied taste,” I said, smiling as the song just kept cutting out at all the curse words. Finding ‘clean’ old-school gangsta rap had been... difficult. But we couldn't have

the other kids singing about guns and drugs just because it soothed our youngest.

“How come all the boys were soothed by the songs of the *Evermore* and *Folklore* albums, but my only girl thinks songs about street gang fights are lullabies?”

“It’s probably the beat,” I said, shrugging. “Maybe it reminds her of your heartbeat when she was in the womb?”

“Maybe,” she agreed, standing up from the glider, to go put the baby down in her crib.

We’d learned the hard way after the first baby how important it was to put them down when they were sleeping. I don’t think we slept at all for the first six months because our son had gotten so accustomed to being held that he screamed his head off if we put him down.

Everleigh tiptoed out of the room, and my phone was held captive there, playing our little girl her ‘lullabies’ as we moved into the hallway.

“You okay?” I asked, putting a hand to her lower back, and pulling her against my chest.

“Tired,” she admitted, exhaling hard.

“You know what we could do?” I asked, rubbing at the knots in her back.

“Get some coffee?” she asked.

“Call up Dallas to come scoop up the boys,” I suggested. “And hand off the baby to your mom,” I added, “so we can get some sleep.”

Her mom had been amazing.

With each grand baby, she took her vacation for the year to come and stay with us for the first several weeks, so we had some extra help. When she left, Bayleigh would usually come to visit, her two kids keeping our older ones occupied, so she could help with the baby.

It was fucking amazing to have the kind of support system we did. And that wasn’t even counting the club guys and their

women.

“That sounds so... decadent,” Everleigh decided, already sounding half asleep just leaning against me.

“You go get started. I’ll rally the troops,” I said.

“Make sure Dallas takes the inhaler,” she said, walking numbly toward our bedroom.

“Of course,” I agreed.

Our oldest had developed asthma when he was just three after a bad allergy season, the wheezing terrifying the shit out of us, leaving us rushing him in the middle of the night to Dr. Price’s doorstep.

We’d been so traumatized that we kept inhalers all over the place, just in case.

I called up Dallas, packed up some basic shit for the three boys, ages eight, five, and three, and handed them off to their uncle who was going to delight the shit out of them by letting them play in a police cruiser.

We kept going to get the girl that Everleigh had her heart set on doing girly shit within a few years. But those boys of ours? Total mama’s boys. I had a feeling that our daughter was going to be a daddy’s girl.

“She’s listening to hip-hop on my phone,” I told Everleigh’s mom as I handed her the monitor as she stood in the kitchen, baking cookies for the kids.

“I got this,” she assured me. “You two get some good sleep.”

With that, I made my way through the house.

I’d spent a long fucking time designing this house, wanting it to be perfect. The kind of place the kids came back to on the holidays, bringing their spouses and kids, a home base for all future generations.

It had the two of us all over it.

The exposed brick walls and leather accents that I preferred. The extreme organization, throw pillows, and

delicate accents that Everleigh loved so much.

There was a giant kitchen where I spent a lot of my time, a family and living room, big back deck, and a fenced yard where Betty could often be found, basking in the sun.

Upstairs, we had five bedrooms and three baths. Because we'd always known we were going to have several kids.

I walked into the primary bedroom, expecting to find Everleigh passed the hell out across the bed.

But she was sitting there on her side of the bed, picking chocolates out of the massive postpartum care basket that Colter had brought over for her, remote in hand, and a guilty look on her face.

"The *Countdown to Christmas* started yesterday," she said. "We've already missed two new small town Christmas romances."

"Well, we can't have that," I said, kicking out of my shoes, and walking to my side of the bed.

"One movie. Then sleep," she said.

We didn't even make it all the way through the opening credits.

But, fuck, there was no one in the world I'd rather fall asleep watching cheesy Christmas movies with than Everleigh.

Everleigh - 25 years

“Hey, honey. What’s the matter?” I asked as our girl came walking into the kitchen after getting dropped off by her youngest older brother, drunk on his freedom as a new driver, and who likely already taken the car to drive to the clubhouse to hang out with his older brothers.

Our little girl, kind of always the odd-man-out these days. It had to be difficult being fourteen while everyone else was almost, or was completely, grown.

She flung herself onto the kitchen stool, yanking the baseball cap off of her head, and tossing it onto the countertop before bracing her chin in her hand, and letting out one of those world-wary sighs only a teenager was capable of.

“Can we go shopping?” she asked.

“For what? New sneakers?” I asked.

Alas, the little girl I’d waited many years to have never did get into girly stuff. The only kind of shoes she collected were sneakers. And, sure, she kept her hair on the long side, but it was always pulled back and then typically stuffed under some sort of hat.

“Bugs for your lizard?” I asked, proud of myself for not shivering while talking about that unsavory errand.

All the pets in the world to choose from, and she wanted something that ate *bugs*. To avoid me having to brave that aisle of the pet store, Detroit had set up a service that had them

delivered through the mail. But sometimes her scaly friend got extra greedy, and she ran out early.

“No,” she said, gaze moving away as she tapped her fingers on the counter.

“What do you want to shop for then, honey?”

“New clothes?”

“New clothes?” I asked, confused. School had just started a few weeks ago, and we’d done the requisite ‘back to school’ shopping over the summer, getting her tons of new clothes. “Are yours not fitting anymore?” I pressed when she said nothing else. To me, she looked about the same size, but, well, I wasn’t the one trying to put her jeans on every morning. And she liked her tops baggy, so it was hard to tell if maybe she’d gained or lost a few.

“No, they fit,” she said, drawing something on the countertop with her fingertip.

“Hey,” I said, reaching across the counter to close my hand over hers, giving it a squeeze. “You can talk to me, remember?” I said, watching her gaze slip up, then back down.

“I just... I want more... girly clothes,” she said, voice tiny.

It didn’t matter that some part of me had wanted this day to come for fourteen years. It wasn’t joy that filled me right then.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

The way her gaze darted up, her big brown eyes wide, told me I’d hit the nail right on the head.

“Lance,” she admitted.

“And, let me guess, Lance likes the girls in the dresses with the makeup and long, shiny hair?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, lower lip a little wobbly.

“I know you think I’m old and lame and out of touch,” I said, having heard each of the kids say something of that variation at least once or twice over the years. Until their

father overheard that, and they got a long talking to. “But can I say something I learned about boys and dating?”

“Okay,” she said.

“There is not a single man on the face of this Earth who is worth you changing who you are just to get their attention. Not one,” I added with more emphasis. “There will be a guy who will see you for exactly who you are, and fall madly in love with you.”

“Easy for you to say,” she grumbled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You like makeup and dresses and have long, shiny hair. And like all that girly crap.”

We’d given up on telling the kids that they needed to wait to curse until they were out of our house. Not when they were surrounded by club members who had mouths that would make sailors blush.

“Okay. That’s true,” I agreed. It was useless to pretend I wasn’t the definition of ‘girly.’ “Here’s the thing though... it’s all relative. So when I first met your father, I was sure he would never want to be with someone like me. Because I was so... I don’t know what you kids are calling it these days, but back then, they used to call girls like me ‘basic.’”

“Basic?” she repeated.

“Yeah. Like... I liked all the things that girls were supposed to like. Dressing up, looking pretty, pink stuff, pumpkin spice lattes. They’d call girls like me ‘basic bitches,’ because there was nothing ‘unique’ about us. And back then, I would watch the guys of the club end up with all these badass women who were strong and talented. And I just... wasn’t. So I never thought he would want me.

“The point is, I was wrong. He did want me. More than any of those other badass girls he was ‘supposed’ to want. The right guy will want you for you. Not for some facade you put on to try to please them.”

“I guess,” she said.

“The thing about changing for a guy is... they can also... change their mind. And then what? You don’t know who you are anymore because you twisted and squished yourself into the mold of the woman he wanted? That doesn’t seem worth it to me.”

She’d never admit it. Because, well, *teenagers*. But I could tell I was getting to her.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do, or refuse to take you shopping if you do decide this is actually something you want to do for yourself, not him. But I’m just asking you to give it a little thought first.”

“Okay,” she agreed, back to tracing over the countertop with her finger. “I’m gonna go do my homework,” she said, getting up, and heading toward her room.

It was only when she left that I noticed Detroit leaning in the doorway, eyes soft.

“I know it was hard not to jump for joy at the idea of shopping for girly shit with her,” he said, coming closer, and wrapping his arms around my lower back. “But you handled that well. And you’re right about everything.”

“Could you do me a favor and tell the kids that? They keep forgetting,” I said, leaning into his familiar strength.

“I do. Constantly,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

“You know what!” our girl said, storming back into the room, making us break apart like we’d been doing something untoward. “You’re right. Fuck him!” she said, making my eyes go big. “I’m great the way I am,” she added. “He’s missing out if he doesn’t see that.”

With that, she stormed back through the house with her renewed sense of self.

“I know I should probably scold her for dropping F-bombs at her age,” I said, nodding at the closed door. “But I’m kind of too proud of her little speech to do it.”

“Hey, if we lose the swearing battle but win the self-esteem war, I think we did a good job as parents,” he said. “Looks like we have the house to ourselves for a while,” he said, shooting me a smirk. “You know what I’m thinking?”

“That the autumnal small town romance movies started a week ago and we haven’t seen a single one of them yet?” I asked, teasing. Mostly. Okay, only a little bit teasing. I really did want to catch up on them.

“Well, of course, that,” he said, but his hands were gliding down to sink into my ass, lifting me up by it. “But maybe something else first,” he said, dropping me on the counter, and sealing his lips over mine.

Oh, yes.

Definitely *something else* first.

But cheesy movies after too.

For ever and ever with this man.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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