



**KAREN
RENEE**

A RIOT MC



NOVEL

**FIGHTING
A RIOT**

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A Riot MC Novel

KAREN RENEE

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For Jenn & Jenn –

*Thank you so much for chiming in with your suggestions, I
appreciate it more than you know!*

Let's Keep in Touch

Thank you for buying *Fighting a Riot*. The best way to keep up to date with my books is to [subscribe to my newsletter](#).

If you don't hear from me regularly, please check your spam filter and set up your email to allow my messages through to you. This ensures you never miss a new book, a chance to win great prizes, or exclusive content.

Author's Note

This book is intended for mature readers 18+. There are scenes pertaining to a cancer diagnosis, as well as scenes of gun violence which may trigger or upset some readers. Please do not read if you are uncomfortable with those types of scenes. Thank you.

Playlist

STORY OF MY LIFE by One Direction

TELL HER ABOUT IT by Billy Joel

LIFE IS AMAZING by Michael Franti & Spearhead

BY YOUR SIDE by Sade

THE SWEETEST GIFT by Sade

AMSTERDAM by Imagine Dragons

B.O.T.A (BADDEST OF THEM ALL) by Eliza Rose &
Interplanetary Criminal

GIVES YOU HELL by All American Rejects

COURAGE by P!nk

AMAZING GRACE by Béla Fleck and the Flecktones

SUN KEEPS ON SHINING by Almost Monday

RUNNING by NF

Chapter 1

Story of My Life

YAK

For once the cleaning crew finished early, which meant Yak would get out of Platinum's Strip club before sunrise. He wandered through the main floor inspecting the freshly mopped floors. They looked clean, though they still felt sticky. Between the Florida humidity, spilled booze, and other shit, Yak wasn't sure if the floors would ever *not* feel sticky.

He hit the light switch for the main floor. In the complete darkness, he noticed light coming out from under the door of a private room. Had his timing been different, he'd probably have missed it. Still, there was no reason for any light to shine from that room. No, that wasn't true. The lights in the private rooms were hooked up to motion detectors, and they were sensitive.

“It better be a palmetto bug or some shit,” he mumbled. While bugs freaked him out, palmetto bugs freaked him way the fuck out, because those assholes could *fly*. Yeah, on the off-chance he made it through the Pearly Gates, his first question for God would be what kind of punk-ass prank were those bugs? Talk about dirty pool.

He shook his head at the thoughts swirling in his mind. As he opened the door to the private room, he saw chairs put up on tables and those tables shoved to the side of the room.

Except one table wasn't flush to the wall.

Yak stepped inside and crouched down. A figure lay between the wall and the table. No, not just a figure, but a *female* figure.

“The fuck?” he whispered.

He dragged the table to the side. The woman looked like a princess. A tiara sat askew in her hair, some kind of sash was draped around her torso, and she wore all white. Yak groaned. How did a bachelorette party leave *the bachelorette* behind? And at a strip club operated by a motorcycle club of all places?

“Goddammit,” he hissed.

As gently and carefully as he could, he moved her to a sitting position, slumped against the wall.

“Hello. Lady, wake up.”

Her eyes didn't open very far, but she groaned and rubbed at her face.

“Are you okay?”

She shook her head. Then she did the craziest thing... she said his name. “Noah...”

“How do you know my given name?”

For some reason that got her attention. “I didn’t say your name.”

“You said, ‘Noah.’ I was right here when it happened.”

Her fake smile pummeled his chest... if he saw a real smile from her it would probably knock him over.

“Right, but I said, ‘No, uh,’ and trailed off because I couldn’t get my thoughts together.”

He shook his head. “Fine. Can you stand up? Or do you need some help? And how about you tell me your name since you already know mine.”

After a deep breath, she stood and so did Yak. He towered over her. Normally that bothered him, but with this woman, he found he liked it.

“I’m Elenora, but most people call me Nora.”

“That’s a pretty name, not one I hear every day.”

“You would if you read romance.” She groaned. “Oh my God, why did I have to go and mention romance novels.”

Yak fought against his laughter. She wasn’t drunk. Instead, he suspected she didn’t handle her nerves well. “Are you a novelist?”

She sighed. “No way. I was referring to Nora Roberts, the romance writer, who my mom wanted to name me after, but she wimped out and put down Elenora instead.”

He chuckled. “Okay, princess, let’s get you in an Uber.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered as she looked around the room. “I think one of my coworkers has my purse.”

Yak had started shoving the table back in place, but stopped when he spied a cell phone on the floor. “Think that’s yours, Nora.”

She picked up the phone and frowned. “Great. It’s out of juice. Story of my life.”

He shook his head. “Come to the bar. I think we’ve got chargers for two types of phones up there, maybe one of those will fit.”

The sound of her shaky breath got his attention. Her eyes were glossy with unshed tears and she had her lips pressed together so hard, he had to act fast.

“It’s all right. Seriously, a dead phone isn’t the end of the world.”

She closed her eyes and four tears ran down her cheeks. Her green eyes opened still looking watery. “It isn’t that. It’s... even when I call an Uber, I have nowhere to go. My fiancé broke up with me over the phone while I was here.”

Yak bit his tongue. A man who did that ranked as a world-class asshole, but he couldn’t tell her that. “I’m sure you don’t want to hear this, but it’s probably—”

“For the best?” she finished. “Is it though? He found out I’ve got breast cancer and he’s splitting on me. We can’t even get our deposits back and I’m gonna have outrageous medical bills and, God, it makes me so nauseous even though I haven’t started chemo yet!”

Shit. That man wasn’t an asshole, he was the scum of an asshole. Yak knew about cancer from caring for both his parents, who suffered from the hideous disease.

He hated the idea of Nora not being able to sleep in her own bed, but taking her home so he could beat up her ex-fiancé wasn’t going to help her either.

“I got somewhere you can stay.”

A leery look entered her eyes. “Don’t take this wrong way, because I really do appreciate the offer, but I don’t know you.”

He chuckled. “You’re right, you don’t. My place is at the Riot MC clubhouse, so there will be witnesses if you need them. You don’t even have to stay in my room. I can put you in another brother’s room if you want. But the sheets are clean, and if you’re hungover, there’s nowhere better to be since Punc makes a mighty hangover remedy.”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungover, exactly.” She grimaced. “Oh God! I slept on the floor in here!”

“Yeah, well, there’s a shower too, so you’re covered that way.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

Yak shook his head. “The real question is can you ride on the back of bike?”

Her eyebrows crunched down. “A bike?”

He grinned and nodded. “Yeah. I ride a Harley, so if you’re not in good enough shape for that, I gotta call someone else to pick you up.”

His blood rushed south at the sight of her biting her lip as she deliberated for a moment.

“I think I can ride.”

He gestured to the door. “Then let’s go.”

Nora

With zero grace, I clambered off Noah's—or rather, Yak's—motorcycle. Getting on hadn't been too difficult, but after he powered down the engine, I hadn't *wanted* to get down.

After all the bad news I'd had in the past few days, being on the back of this motorcycle was the first time I'd felt clear and free. The wind roaring in my ears obliterated the endless worries and negative thoughts rolling through my mind. Air rushing around my entire body felt like a freedom I'd never known. Warm early-morning sunshine on my skin mixed with a slight nip in the Florida winter air created a heady combination.

While I stood next to the motorcycle, I watched Yak dismount. His body lifting and twisting off the Harley gave new meaning to the term 'masculine grace.'

I shook my head. I had no business watching Yak like that. If Destin hadn't called me last night and broken things off, I'd still be happily engaged.

More like happily duped, a cynical part of me piped up. Right on track to marry a jerk who doesn't truly believe in wedding vows, especially not the 'in sickness and in health' portion.

Yak pulled my tiara from his saddlebag and I took in his man-bun. The underside of his scalp had a close cut fade that

was only noticeable because of his hair being up. Part of me thought I should be embarrassed gawking at him, but the realistic part of me shoved all mortification aside. He'd found me passed out on the floor... staring at him was nothing compared to that.

He threw his arm out toward a blond brick building. "That's the clubhouse. Not many bikes out here, so I'm guessing there aren't many brothers inside. Should be quiet enough for you to get some sleep while your phone charges."

I nodded.

He led me through the back door and up a flight of stairs which were to the immediate right of the doorway. At the top of the stairs, I realized it was sort of a loft area. I smelled fabric softener and laundry detergent coming from my left and I saw two washers and two dryers against the wall.

"Come on, Nora. You don't have to worry about laundry, unless you want your clothes washed while you sleep."

I followed him down a hallway with four doors along each side. For a moment, I felt like I was walking down a hotel corridor, but I knew better.

He stopped at the last room, unlocked the door and held the key out to me. "Go inside. You lock the door, nobody can get in. The only brother with the master key isn't here." He tipped his head toward the room. "I got t-shirts in the top two drawers of the dresser. You want your shit cleaned, leave it out here. Me or a prospect will handle it."

I pressed my lips together, a strange sense of panic overtaking me.

He shook his head. “What’s wrong? Is it your phone?”

I chuckled, looking down at my high heels. “No. I promise I don’t cry about dead phones. Um...”

His finger grazed my jawline, tipping my chin up. “What is it, Elenora?”

The moment I left here, and once I figured out where I was going, I’d be alone. The promise of so many other people being around made me feel... more alive. Not that I wasn’t alive, but a cancer diagnosis makes a woman very aware of her mortality.

With a deep breath, I put it out there. “This is weird and forward, but I don’t want to be alone. Can you stay in the room with me? I understand if you have things to do or... oh, geez, you probably need to sleep, too. Never mind. Forget it. I’ll be all right. Better to get used to being—”

He dragged his finger –still on my jawline– to my bottom lip. “Hush. It’s fine. There’s a recliner inside. I can sleep there.”

I sighed. “I owe you so much.”

His face shifted up a touch as he focused on a point above my head. His coppery brown eyes held steely resolve when he glanced back at me. “It’s paying it forward, Nora. You’ve been dealt a really raw deal here. To get dumped so close to D-day *and* you’re gonna be fighting cancer.” He shook his head. “No.

It's the least I can do. And if for some fucked up reason, you've spouted a bunch of lies... then it won't be the first time a gorgeous woman pulled a fast one on me."

I wheezed out a laugh. "My makeup is smeared, my hair matted, plus I slept on a floor and it shows. I'm far from gorgeous."

With very small movements, he shook his head. "Didn't know you were wearing makeup, the ride on my bike fluffed your hair, and if I hadn't found you, I'd have never known you slept on the floor. Take the compliment, princess."

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you." As I entered his room, I caught a whiff of my hair which had absorbed the cigarette smoke in the strip club. "Ugh. I hate to impose further, but I'll have to take you up on that shower. I reek, no offense to your fine establishment."

A huge smile spread across his face as he chuckled. I fought biting my lip because with that smile and his beautiful brown eyes, Yak would garner plenty of female attention.

"No offense taken, and don't sugarcoat shit with me, Nora. The assholes who come into Platinum's are there to do all the shit they can't do at home –drink to excess, smoke, and drool over the tits and asses of women they'd never have a shot at, married or not."

My brows went up, but I kept quiet.

His smile became a small grin. "That was my roundabout way of saying, 'I get it'. Hell, I never get in my bed without

taking a shower because I hate when my sheets smell like the club. Bathroom's right there. I'll grab you a towel."

I went to the dresser and grabbed a black t-shirt, amazed at the tidy organization of the three stacks. Then I noticed his bed. It was made with what appeared to be military precision. Yak had hair longer than mine, I had a hard time picturing him as a military man.

Inside the bathroom, the counter around the sink was clean. My eyes skated along the vanity and I saw something familiar. A container of hair items, and just like mine, it was impossible to keep the hair ties from spilling out.

On a groan, Yak strolled into the bathroom. "Sorry about that." He reached for the box and I stilled his hand. He looked at me. "If I'd known someone would be using my bathroom, I'd have put that away."

Facing the mirror, I locked eyes with his reflection. "It's okay, Noah. I'm amazed at how pristine your room is, your bed looks like the sheets have the tightest tuck –hotel housekeepers would be envious. Not at all what I expected from a biker."

His lips quirked with a sideways smile. "Dad was in the military. He insisted on order, and it... hasn't steered me wrong since."

I nodded. "Well, I'll do my best to keep everything shipshape, then."

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, woman. You want your clothes washed though, leave them outside the door. I’m headed downstairs for five minutes. That way you don’t have to worry about me seeing you or some shit like that.”

My brows furrowed and I turned my head toward him. “Thank you, though, I would think you’ve seen it all, in terms of the female anatomy.”

He stared at me for a beat. “That doesn’t change the fact you deserve privacy, and if you want me... or any man, to see your body, that should be your decision. Not some slip of the door or whatever. Enjoy your shower.”

I put my clothes outside the bathroom, and hurried to the shower. Stepping into the warm water, I tilted my head back and wished I could wash my health problems away just as easily. Life didn’t care about my wishes, so I turned around and looked for shampoo.

On the wire shower organizer sat a bottle of three-in-one shampoo, conditioner and body wash.

I wondered why women didn’t use all-in-one products. Were we getting manipulated by big business to buy three products when it could really be covered by just one bottle?

A citrus scent hit me once I flipped open the top. While I lathered my hair, I debated who I could crash with later today. I *could* call Mia, but she would likely be dead to the world still. For that matter, so would most of the other girls from last

night... sadly, most of them were Mia's friends more than mine.

I didn't hang out with a lot of women. I kept my circle small and close-knit. Unfortunately, I was in that strange in-between place where friendships were concerned. My friends from college had drifted away while they completed their degrees. The women I hung out with from work, well, they were work friends but we didn't typically hang out on weekends - Mia happened to be the lone exception.

Like a fool in love, I'd allowed my world to revolve around Destin. His buddies had girlfriends or wives, and I thought I was making inroads with them. But when invites for last night's party came up, all of them declined.

All of them.

Perhaps that should have been my first clue that Destin wasn't as dialed into things with me as I thought.

The urge to cry hit me at that thought, and I forced myself to finish showering and get ready for some much needed sleep.

I climbed into Yak's bed, the sheets smelling faintly of bleach. My earlier hunch had been right. The bed had been made so well, the sheets were tucked *tight*, and once I settled in, they made me feel snug and safe. I turned my head on the pillow, and I caught a whiff of cloying perfume.

I sighed. There was nothing going on between me and Yak. He was a great-looking man. Of course he would have a woman (or even women) in his bed. Still, I didn't want the

reminder, so I swapped the pillow with the one on the other side of the bed. When I curled up on my side, instead of feminine perfume, I caught the scent of the citrus shampoo-conditioner-bodywash I'd just used.

Much better.

I dozed off until the bed jostled. My eyes cracked open and I saw Yak settling into the bed. He had on a white tank top and his hair was down, the strands looked damp. His head came up, his brows furrowed.

“Shit,” he whispered.

He turned his head, making eye contact with me. After a heavy sigh, he rolled toward me, propping his head in his hand. “You switched the pillows.”

Those eyes, his stubble, and that wavy hair hanging over his shoulder. *Why was I so attracted to him?* I just got dumped. This had to be how rebounds got started.

I shook my head. “Maybe... is that a problem?”

“Why did you switch them?”

I knew he wanted to swap them back, and for some stupid reason I lied. “This one's firmer.”

He pressed his lips together and he hung his head. When he looked up at me, he had a patient smile on his face. “I'd believe that, if I didn't know they're exactly the same pillows. Why'd you switch them, princess?”

I stifled a groan. “I do wish you’d stop calling me ‘princess’. But to answer your question, this one... smells better.”

His eyes narrowed. “Want to say that sounds like bullshit, but really I think you’re sugarcoating things again.” He shifted, taking an audible sniff of the pillow. “Ah. Sorry about that. Don’t know how my pillowcases didn’t get washed. Have to kick a prospect’s ass for that.”

“What?” I cried.

He flipped the pillow over and settled onto his side of the bed. “Don’t worry about it. Get some shut-eye.”

I had thought he was going to sleep in the recliner. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him about that... but feeling as snug and warm as I did, I let sleep carry me away.

From the brightness of the room, I suspected it was three in the afternoon when I woke up.

“About time you got up, sleepyhead,” Yak said from the recliner. He had a book in his lap, black-framed reading glasses perched on his nose, and his hair tied back in a bun so messy I worried about the tangles he’d have in his hair later.

“What time is it?” I croaked.

He set the book aside, resting the glasses on top. “Two-thirty. You hungry?”

The rumble from my stomach embarrassed me before I said, “Yes.”

He nodded and stood. “Well, get up. Got a pair of shorts on the bed there, you can wear those with my shirt and we’ll go downstairs. Your stuff is in the dryer. Once it’s done, I’ll take you... wherever you need to be.”

I pulled the shorts on and tied the drawstring to keep them on my hips. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Yak had a hand at the small of my back as we walked away from his room. Two feet down the hall, a tall man with short-cut, wavy, brown hair came up the stairs. He aimed a friendly smile at Yak until his eyes darted to me. His eyes filled with anger and he charged toward us.

“What the fuck, Yak! Club’s already got enough problems.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” Yak asked.

The man pointed a finger at Yak and dropped it. “You agreed nobody gets involved with the dancers and we *damn sure* don’t mess with the fuckin’ customers!”

The two men stood a foot apart from one another. “It’s not what you think, Turk,” Yak snarled.

Turk’s eyes widened. “I was at the door when her whole party showed up and she’s wearing *your* shirt!”

Suddenly, Yak crouched. A fist hit me. Searing pain exploded along the side of my forehead.

I staggered toward the wall, my hand clutching my head.

Something crashed against the corridor. I blinked. Yak held Turk up against the wall.

A door swung open and a blond-haired man shoved them apart. “What’s the fuckin’ problem?”

Yak struggled against the blond man’s hold. “You fuckin’ hit her!” The rage in his voice made my breath hitch and my heart skip a beat. I’d never heard anyone get so angry for me. *We just met.*

“You ducked like a fuckin’ coward. That was an accident,” Turk said.

Yak leaned forward. “Nobody hits her.”

Turk’s eyes glittered with anger. “I’d never hit a woman, Yak. You know that. I’d rather take five fists from every brother than hit a woman.”

Yak exhaled hard and the blond man let go. In a flash, Yak stepped forward and slammed his fist into Turk’s belly. “There’s one from me, motherfucker!”

“Jesus Christ!” the blond hollered, pulling Yak away again.

Two men stormed up the stairs, one of them a red-head. I noticed a name patch on his leather vest, which read ‘Liar.’

“What is goin’ on up here?” Liar demanded.

Yak turned his head. “He fuckin’ hit her.”

“We don’t fuck the women from Platinum’s and it was an accident,” Turk said on a wheeze.

“I didn’t fuck her, asshole,” Yak bit out.

“Then why’d you call her your girl when you came downstairs?” Liar asked.

My breath caught again.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Yak said, and I exhaled slow and quiet. “She needs help, goddammit.” Yak whirled around and stalked to me, his fingers moving my hand out of the way. “One of you fuckers get me a damned ice pack. Then one you fuckin’ prospects can bring her up some food.”

A short, stocky guy in his twenties sidled up to Yak with an ice-pack.

He took it and held it to my forehead. “Thanks, prospect.” His angry eyes met mine and I watched the irritation dissipate - a little. “Back to my room, princess.”

“Princess?” Turk asked. “And you expect me to believe—”

“Look at her, asshole! If you found her asleep on a VIP room floor wearing a goddamned tiara, wouldn’t *you* think she’s a fuckin’ princess?”

I put a hand on Yak’s forearm, since he still held the ice to my head. “It’s okay, Yak. I’m all right. It was just an accident.”

His eyes widened. “It was uncalled for is what it was.”

A nervous chuckle bubbled out of me. “If you say so.”

Chapter 2

Dumb Luck

YAK

What the hell was happening to him? His brothers were turning on him, accusing him of shit he'd never do and questioning his every move. That alone was enough to make him crave a fistfight, and he hated fighting his brothers.

Then there was Nora. It felt like this slip of a woman had turned him inside out. He wanted to pummel the asshole who dumped her last night, then he wanted to eradicate the fuckin' cancer from her sweet, sexy body.

Sexy?

He shouldn't think of her that way. He *couldn't* think of her like that.

Sure, he'd called Nora his girl downstairs earlier, but it was a force of habit. If he had someone to take care of, they were *his*. *His* dancers, *his* employees, *his* brothers. He always took care of what belonged to him.

While Nora had showered, he'd gone down to the common room for a quick snack before trying to sleep. Liar and his

woman Andrea were at the bar, eating breakfast.

“Who’d you take up to your room?” Liar had asked.

“This woman who needs help. Her fiancé kicked her out and broke shit off with her last night –during her bachelorette party.”

“You’re kidding!” Andrea said.

He shook his head. “Offered for her to sleep here. Just hope when she’s up that she’s got somewhere to stay.”

“Our neighbor has a room for rent,” Andrea said.

“No,” he snapped. The idea of Nora renting a room from that chain-smoking bastard pissed him off.

Liar sat straighter on his barstool. “Brother, if she needs a place, he doesn’t charge that much—”

Yak speared Liar with his eyes. “Is he still a chain-smoker?”

Neither of them spoke, but Andrea’s grimace said it all.

Yak shook his head. “No.”

“He isn’t that bad,” Andrea said.

“I’ve seen him. It *is* that bad. No, my girl isn’t staying with that asshole.”

“Your girl?” Liar asked.

He pointed a finger at him. “I didn’t say it like that. She’s got health issues and that smoker’s house isn’t the place for her.”

He never thought Liar would rub those words in his face.

Hell, he never thought Turk would haul off and try to hit him either.

Right now, though, he needed to get Nora out of there and let her get on with her life.

The idea of letting her go rankled in the worst way.

A new prospect brought two sandwiches up to Yak's room. Once the door closed, he said, "Sorry about all that."

Nora held the electric-blue ice pack to her head. "It was an accident. I'm just happy his fist didn't hit you."

He froze, unsure if he was honored or pissed. He split the difference and went with annoyed. "I'll gladly take a man's fist every time, not you."

She shook her head, lowering the ice pack. "I don't mean that, but I'd hate to see you with a bloody lip. Though that hurt more than I expected. He would have broken your jaw."

He ground his teeth. "Sure as shit, I should have clocked him ___"

"Yak, stop it. I've never been hit before. I'll survive and he didn't mean to hit me. In fact, I need to go let him know it's all right."

"It fucking is not," he snapped. With a long blink, he blew out a breath. "Sorry to snap. Do you know where you're going? Do you need help getting your stuff from the moron's place?"

She held her sandwich aloft and frowned. “Not quite yet. Once I finish this sandwich, I’m calling Mia about my purse.”

“What the hell does Mia do?”

Her forehead wrinkled in question. “You sound angry.”

A humorless chuckle escaped him. “She left you behind. You were the whole reason for being at Platinum’s, and that bitch left with your purse... but not *you*. So, yeah, I’m angry. If I hit women, she’d earn a fist.”

“Yak,” she gasped.

“What? Are you gonna justify it? You haven’t said word one about that shit.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t given it a lot of thought - seeing as I’ve been too busy getting over being embarrassed for passing out in that room only to wake up and get my first-ever motorcycle ride.”

His chest locked and it felt like a warm weight took root in his body. He loved that he’d given Nora her first ride on a bike.

He nodded. “Yeah, well, there’s no denying the fact that *somebody* should have verified your whereabouts.”

She shook her head. “Everyone drove separately for some stupid reason when the limo fell through. Mia was the only one still at the club by the time Destin called me.”

After a long blink he gazed back into her green eyes. “That’s his fuckin’ name? Like the city? Destin?”

She nodded and bit into her sandwich.

He gave a low growling sigh, but kept his smart-ass comment to himself. “Eat up. I’ll take you to get your shit. I don’t have my car here, so I gotta see if someone has a vehicle I can borrow. I’m guessing you’ll have more stuff than my saddlebags can handle.”

He carried his plate down to the kitchen. At the sound of shuffling footsteps behind him, he turned to find Roll sauntering into the cramped kitchen –Trixie right behind him.

“Liar said you got a woman upstairs who needs a place to stay.”

“It won’t be with that damned neighbor of his,” Yak muttered.

Roll nodded. “Got a place I can’t seem to fill—”

Yak sighed. “Doubt she can pay the rent, man. She’s got cancer. I don’t know what she does for a living, but forking over a deposit and all that shit...” he shrugged. “I don’t see it happening.

Roll stroked a hand down his goatee. “Not like that place is making me any money right now, so I’m willing to waive the deposit, if she can swing the rent. Let her know about it. She can talk to me.”

Trixie glared at Roll. “You’re really gonna charge that woman rent? I heard she got jilted, too.”

Roll sighed and shook his head. “Woman—”

Trixie put a hand on her hip. “Oh, no. Don’t you ‘woman’ me. I know the sound of that one.”

“We aren’t running a charity here,” Roll muttered.

Trixie’s head reared back. Yak wished they weren’t in his way because he didn’t want to hear them squabble.

“Well, you better hope your nieces never need help like this woman does. Or God forbid our daughter finds herself in a messed up sitch like this because that Karma is all for you, mister.”

Roll put a hand behind his neck and tipped his head back with a groan. Then he leveled his eyes on Yak. “I got a place she can stay rent-free... but you aren’t gonna like it.”

Trixie turned a sly look at Yak. “Or, just maybe he will.”

A hollow feeling invaded his insides. “No, man. I know it’s your property, but seriously... I...” His protest died on his lips. He didn’t want Nora so close, and yet, having her that close would mean he could take care of her.

No. He couldn’t take care of her. Twenty-four hours ago she was engaged.

“You seriously what?” Roll asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing. Do your thing. I’m not stopping you.”

Roll turned his head an inch. “You actually could stop me, Yak. You been paying me extra just to keep the damn place vacant. It’s the only reason it came to mind.”

When Yak first moved into the old house on the outskirts of Avondale, Roll had an idiot renting the converted detached garage in the back yard. The dumbass blared his music until the wee hours of the morning, which didn't bother Yak... until the fuckin' cops showed up pounding on *his* door. He and Roll had made it clear that shit wouldn't fly, but the message didn't sink in.

The moment the asshole was evicted, Yak had handed Roll a wad of cash. "Keep it vacant, man. I don't have time for dipshits like that everyday."

Never in his wildest dreams had Yak expected that to come back to bite him in the ass.

"Bet you wish you'd bought a house of your own now, don't ya?" Trixie asked.

"Trix, you gotta lay off," Roll said.

Yak shook his head. "Go talk to her, Roll."

Roll dipped his chin. "Sure, but how about you introduce me."

"I got a dozen rentals in town. One of them has been vacant for nearly six months," Roll said to Nora.

Roll was settled in the recliner, his arm around Trixie who had perched a hip on the arm rest. Nora sat on his bed with her back against the headboard. Yak kept his distance by leaning against his dresser.

“Where is it?” Nora asked.

“Not far from here. It’s a duplex—”

“No,” Yak said, surprising himself and everyone else.

Nora’s green eyes widened at him. “Why would you say that?”

“I looked at that duplex. It’s right next to the railroad. You’ll never get any sleep.”

That was *half* his reasoning. In reality, he didn’t trust the area. Vamp and Cal had been out there four times to replace the windows in the past six years due to break-ins.

“I could always use ear plugs and a white noise app on my phone, Noah - I mean, Yak.”

“How do you know his name?” Trixie asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

Nora smiled and Yak braced against the dresser. Yep. A real smile from her could knock him over.

“It was dumb luck, I guess,” she said.

Yak didn’t believe it was dumb luck because he didn’t believe in luck.

“More like a coincidence,” he suggested.

Trixie aimed a sly look at him for the second time. “Whatever you say, Kemosabe. If she shouldn’t rent the duplex - that leaves one other place.”

Yak straightened. “Yeah. Tell her about it.” He sauntered to the door. “I gotta see if the prospect’s back with my car.”

Nora

While Yak drove, I texted Destin and Mia. I had heard nothing from either of them.

I called Mia, who didn't answer, and left her a voicemail. It was after three-thirty by the time we got on the road, and frankly, plenty of time for her to catch up on her beauty sleep. I really needed my wallet and keys.

As we turned onto County Road 220, Yak said, "Call the moron. You don't have keys, so it would be good if he's awake to let you inside."

Destin's phone rang four times before rolling over to voicemail. Listening to his voice, I wondered why I never noticed how slimy he sounded.

"Destin, I'm en-route to get my stuff. Mia has my keys, so you're gonna need to let me in when I get there, which should be in about ten minutes."

After a deep breath, I glanced at Yak. "I'm sorry to drag you all the way down here for this."

He glanced at me and back to the road. "Don't worry about it."

I approached the door to my apartment –or I guess now, just Destin's– feeling full of trepidation. Yak was behind me, but not close. I didn't know if that was good or bad.

I raised my hand to knock, but Yak's large hand darted to the knob. "Let's see if it's open, first." To my surprise, when he twisted the handle, the door opened.

Over my shoulder, I said, "Thanks for that."

He gestured for me to go inside.

The lights were off, but enough sunlight streamed in through the parted blinds to light the room. A pale pink sash with 'Team Bride' in rose gold lettering was draped over the couch. I halted mid-stride at the sight of it. Last night, everyone wore a sash, even me, though mine was in a reverse color scheme, all rose gold with pale pink letters reading 'Wife-to-Be'.

I glanced at the coffee table. My keys and wallet sat on the glass-topped table.

The sandwich I'd eaten earlier threatened to make a rapid and unexpected reappearance. I spun toward the door, but Yak stood right behind me.

His hands landed on my hips, causing a zing of sensation to shoot through my body. "What's the problem, princess?"

"Mia's here," I hissed.

His eyes closed, those stubble framed lips of his parted, and he exhaled. When he opened his eyes he nodded toward the hallway. "Go on, Nora. Find out what's goin' on. This won't be easy, but I'm right behind you."

I nodded. A naive part of me hoped there was a reasonable explanation for this, but I shut that hopefulness down. I wasn't stupid. Destin had pretty-boy looks and devilish charm that

enthralled many women. Mia wouldn't be immune to that. Though I'd like to think she cared about her friends more than finding her next orgasm.

For some inane reason, I tip-toed down the hall to the master bedroom. The door stood wide open, giving me a clear view of the en-suite bathroom doorway. The door swung open and Destin stood there naked, rubbing his hair with a hand towel.

His eyes were aimed at the bed. "You ready for more, my Mia-baby?"

Mia shifted up to an elbow. "You know it, Des."

My brows furrowed. 'Des'? I never called him that because he'd told me he *hated* it when people shortened his name.

Mia continued in her sultry voice. It sounded like she was trying too hard. "I've always loved taking your thick cock anyway I can get it. After two and a half years, we have a lot of catching up to do."

I turned to bolt, but Yak shook his head at me. "Oh, hell no, woman. They don't *both* get to fuck you over. Not on my watch."

"What the fuck? Who's there?" Destin yelled. "Nora? Is that you? How did you even get in?"

Yak's rich brown eyes gleamed at me. "Let 'em have it, darlin'. I know you got it in you. Give 'em hell, they deserve it."

Between Yak's pep-talk and the sound of rustling clothes, I snapped.

I strode into my bedroom. “Did you think you were *safe* because your bimbo here took my keys and my wallet? Really, Destin?”

They both spoke at the same time. Destin’s tone became placating as he said, “Nora.”

Mia scoffed. “I’m a bimbo now? Last night you were hanging on me telling me I was the best girlfriend a girl could *ever* have.”

I glared at her. “I lied. Surprised you couldn’t tell, but it seems you were too damned busy lying to *me*.”

“Who the hell’s he?” Destin demanded, glaring at Yak.

I angled my body between him and Yak, forcing Destin’s eyes back to me. “He’s none of your business.”

“Didn’t take you long to find someone else,” Destin said.

My eyes widened. “You idiot! He runs the strip club *cuntasaurus* over there insisted we go to last night.”

I heard Yak’s heavy footsteps behind me, felt his heat at my back, then it receded.

“You sorry-ass motherfucker. You’re worse than the scum of an asshole. You were *at* Platinum’s last night.”

Destin crossed his arms on his chest. “What? No, I wasn’t.”

“You drive a black Lexus sedan. I had to tell you to get out of reserved parking for the dancers. Did you and your bitch fuck in the parking lot last night?”

Destin's finger stopped just before it stroked the side of his face. Anytime he lied, he ran his finger along the edge of his face.

“Got security footage we can check. Turn that shit over to JSO, get you on lewd and lascivious.”

“You can't do that,” Destin hissed.

I should have been even more embarrassed than ever, but I was far too angry. I glared at Mia. “You never went to the bathroom alone, last night. You went out to the parking lot. How can you... God! You're such a two-faced backstabber.”

Mia had shrugged into one of Destin's t-shirts. “He kicked you out last night. You don't live here, you're trespassing.”

“Her name's still on the lease. She's not trespassing, you are, bitch,” Roll said from the doorway.

Mia screamed.

Destin's fair skin turned an even deeper shade of pink and I feared his head might explode. “Who the hell is he?”

“Your worst fuckin' nightmare, if you don't start tellin' our girl the truth.”

Our girl? That was so sweet, I almost smiled.

“Baby, you know better than that. *I'm* their worst nightmare. You're just the opening act,” Trixie said.

I glanced over my shoulder again. Trixie stood just inside the room. She shot me a grin. “Which bag of trash should we take out first, Nora?”

“Who’s she?” Destin asked.

The gleam of sheer mischief in Trixie’s eyes kept me focused on her.

“I’m the biker bitch who’s tired of lookin’ at your pencil dick. Use that hand towel to cover up. It’ll be more than enough to do the job.”

My gaze slid to Yak. He stood with his eyes closed and his lips visibly fighting a grin.

That did it. I snapped again, but this time into peals of laughter.

“Nothing funny here, Nora,” Destin said.

That brought me up short. I glared at him. “Newsflash, jackass. I’m laughing to keep from crying. I’m laughing because every time I think shit can’t get any worse or more embarrassing, it freaking *does*. And to think, twenty-four hours ago, I’d have defended the size of your pencil dick, but right now... Trixie’s right, and it’s revolting. So, get some clothes on and get the fuck out of my way. I’m packing my shit, and if there’s a loving God in this universe, I’m never going to see your sorry ass again.”

“What’s with the naked bodies?” another male voice asked from behind me.

Destin’s hazel eyes blazed at me. “How many damned people are helping you move?”

“Not nearly enough, if you can’t get some damned clothes on.” Trixie said. “I was serious about that hand towel.”

Major, another brother in the Riot MC, was the man with the deep voice who showed up last to the ‘party’ in my former bedroom. He had a large pick-up truck with a fancy lid over the truck bed. I owed him a case of beer at least, by my calculations, because his fancy truck was the only reason my antique dining room table and Shaker nightstands weren’t soaking wet.

One of the prospects had suggested I just leave the heavy pieces behind, but there was no way I was leaving those nightstands. They were one of the last pieces of my father I had, and I wasn’t going to let someone as vile as Mia use them... or more likely, misuse them.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Yak how he knew where we were going, but then I remembered Roll and Trixie telling me about the small carriage house.

I glanced at Yak. “So, we’re gonna be neighbors?”

He nodded. “Guess so.” His tone sounded reluctant. Then he asked, “Where’s your car?”

I took in a deep breath. Yak was establishing boundaries. *That was a good idea. I needed those. Especially after the shitshow with Destin and Mia.*

“My car shouldn’t be too far from your place. We went to a fancy restaurant near the corner of Park and Darcy Street.”

“The French restaurant?”

I nodded.

He glanced at me. “Whose idea was that? The... how did you say it, ‘cuntasaurus’?”

I laughed. “Yeah, no. That place was actually my idea. I didn’t want to do anything wild and crazy, but I hardly ever go anywhere fancy... and since I didn’t anticipate ever having a bachelorette party again... well, I figured go big or go home. Though, to be fair, I’d have preferred staying home.”

He shook his head. “Okay. We’ll drop the shit at your place, then I’ll send someone for your car.”

I shook my head. “I can get it. I’ll just walk. Google shows it’s like three blocks or something.”

He glanced over to me. “You aren’t walking in this rain. You’ll get sick.”

I couldn’t help my chuckle. “It’s drizzling, and we’re still a good fifteen miles away. Plus, I appreciate you being concerned about my health, but I haven’t started chemo yet. It’s not like I can make it worse... not intentionally, anyway.”

“Drinking until you pass out at a strip club doesn’t help.”

Good grief, his attitude had taken a one-eighty. I stared at the hula girl wobbling on the dashboard, and I willed myself to stay calm. “No, but I only had one glass of chardonnay at the restaurant. Then they gave me a glass of champagne with our dessert. I didn’t have alcohol at Platinum’s.”

He shook his head. “Even though we have a two-drink minimum?”

I turned toward him, admiring his profile even as I gave him a semi-fake smile. “Yes, and mine were all virgin drinks. The other ladies thought that was hysterical.”

He kept his gaze fixed on the road. “If you weren’t drinking, then why didn’t you drive to Platinum’s? And why would you fall asleep in a VIP room?”

My sigh couldn’t be hidden. I wished we didn’t have to talk about this. Everything up ‘til now had been embarrassing, but it was nothing compared to this.

Yak misinterpreted my silence. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you got roofied, but you remember way too much for that to be the case.”

We were passing by NAS Jax, so I looked out the window to gaze at the humongous planes they had outside the hangars during the day. There was something mesmerizing about watching the planes, even if they weren’t moving.

After a moment, I admitted, “I didn’t take it well when Destin laid things out.”

“Can’t imagine anyone would, Nora.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Well, I don’t know. I hadn’t slept well the past couple nights after getting the call from my doctor. Add Destin’s bomb and I guess all the stress caught up with me. Plus the wine and champagne probably didn’t help either.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re making excuses for that moron?”

I shook my head. “It isn’t intentional, that’s for sure. Destin said things, really hurtful things. I stumbled into that room with tears in my eyes. My intention was to just sit down and get my head together, but all the chairs were put up on the tables, and so I slunk down on the floor.”

He glanced at me. “Right, and so you just decided to curl up and close your eyes?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I don’t even understand why we’re hashing this out.”

Yak blew out a breath. “Because part of me really thinks your drink might have been tampered with. I saw her get out of his car in the parking lot, and I suspected they’d been fooling around. Hell, she probably got out because he saw me approaching his car. That’s serious deception, Nora. Plus, I can’t believe she thought she had time for that shit... unless she *knew* you would be impaired.”

His words stung. I fought my lip quivering and nodded. “Right,” I whispered.

“Yeah. I don’t mean to rub salt in the wound, but then for her to take off with your keys and wallet only to be *with* your ex, that’s so fuckin’ shitty I can barely wrap my mind around it.”

“Still don’t see why this matters,” I murmured.

His chuckle held no humor. “That level of planning, I really suspect she fucked with your drink. And that matters because if she did that, it wouldn’t have just been her ass in a sling, mine would have been, too.”

I turned to him. “I... somehow, I don’t think that’s entirely true, Yak. You can’t control what every patron does in your establishment.”

“Whatever. Was your head pounding when I woke you?”

I shook my head. “No. It wasn’t.”

“Well, I guess that’s good. No need for me to terrorize a bitch like her.”

Chapter 3

Feel for Yourself

YAK

By five-thirty, Yak had taken Nora to her car and followed her back to the house. She leaned against her trunk while he angled out of his twelve-year-old rustbucket.

He slammed the door and rounded the hood of his car. “Stop leaning on your car. You’re gonna ruin your clothes, princess.”

She straightened and wiped her hands against the back of her legs. “How am I supposed to leave if your car is blocking me?”

This was another issue he’d had with Roll’s prior tenant. Constant coming and going meant he’d had to leave his car at the clubhouse more often than not. That wasn’t as much of an inconvenience as he’d expected, but the jackass had nearly clipped Yak’s bike one night. That had been the moment he started setting money aside. Nobody else was going to live behind him if Yak could prevent it.

He shook his head at Nora. “Don’t worry about it. I gotta head back to the clubhouse, right after I shower. My car will

stay at the compound because I'm riding back on my bike.”

“Won't that be dangerous since it'll still be raining?” she asked.

He blinked, unaccustomed to a woman giving a damn about his well-being. “I don't know, I'm not Ron Burgundy's weatherman wingman, Nora.”

Her lips quirked as she tried not to laugh.

Fuck.

She had dimples, but only when she fought smiling. If her smile didn't bowl him over, those damn dimples would get him instead.

He offered her a curt nod. “Right. I get back, I'll park my bike where you won't hit it and all will be fine. You got keys. Trixie brought you food. I gotta get to the clubhouse before seven, so... have a great evening, Nora.”

She aimed a closed-lip smile at him as she nodded. That smile wasn't fake, but it was damn sure laced with disappointment. Working with dancers and cocktail waitresses, he disappointed women every damn day.

The idea of disappointing Nora sat like a lead weight in his gut and he hated it.

Fuck, was he ever in trouble.

Volt had his hand on the gavel to adjourn their church session, but Beast asked to speak.

“Janie and I hit that bar on the Northside where the Devil Lancers normally hang out.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Cal asked.

Beast shrugged a shoulder. “We rode out to Amelia Island, it was on the way back. That doesn’t matter, though. Heard some assholes sayin’ the Lancers have given up on finding Snake and they’ve elected a new president.”

“No way they gave up on finding their V.P.,” Blood muttered. “Whoever said that doesn’t know shit.”

“I agree, but they said the Devil Lancers are gunning for us.”

Volt gave Beast a pointed look. “You were wearing your cut, they’d do that shit just to rile you up.”

Beast’s blond brow arched. “That’s the thing. I was in the men’s room and had to take a stall because that shithole doesn’t have but two urinals. Those two assholes came in after me, and looked like they were going to shit their pants when I moved to the sink.”

Cal shook his head. “I’m with Blood and Volt. Those bastards don’t know what they’re talking about, and they were just stirring the pot.”

Volt shrugged. “Thanks for mentioning it, Beast. Not much we can do until the assholes come for us, though.”

Beast nodded. “Yeah, but better to be prepared as far as I’m concerned.”

Next to Yak, Punc shook his head. “How are they gonna come after us anyway? They don’t know we did—”

Rage’s fist hit the table with a resounding thud. “Shut your mouth, Punc. They gotta know Snake went with Rancid to confront us back in November. I’m surprised it’s taken them this long to get their shit together.”

“I’m not,” Liar said. “It’s been a little over three months. The cop they had in their pocket got suspended, and the cops were investigating the Devil Lancers, too. The heat’s probably just dying down and they still don’t have a bead on Snake. Time for them to take revenge against us.”

Volt cleared his throat. “Liar’s probably right, but like I said, we can’t do shit until they make the first move.”

Yak couldn’t help but shake his head. The Devil Lancers had caused them plenty of problems over the years. He’d rather confront those fuckers now.

“You got something to say Yak? You’re over there shaking your head,” Blood said.

Yak looked at their vice president. “Nope. I just don’t like waiting for them to make the first move.”

“Exactly,” Beast muttered.

“That’s why neither one of you are president,” Blood said.

Beast flipped the bird to Blood, but Yak refused to rise to Blood’s bait.

“Enough,” Cal muttered.

Volt nodded. “He’s right. The bickering doesn’t help. We’re waiting for now. If there’s nothing else...” Everyone kept silent, and Volt tapped the gavel to the table.

Back in January, they had patched in two prospects, Prime and Evict. Yak followed Prime’s stocky frame toward the common room. The man stopped short, causing Yak and Rage to nearly run into him.

Prime looked at Yak. “Yo, just sayin’. Me, Evict, Punc, Tundra, and Chain are ready to go after those assholes if you and Beast want to—”

Rage’s hand darted out to smack Prime upside his head. “We don’t do shit behind other brothers’ backs. Thought you knew that!”

Prime rubbed his head, dark eyes glaring at Rage. “Yeah, I know that. I also know Yak’s not alone in wanting to take this bull by the horns. That’s all.”

Rage leaned toward Prime. “We’re a brotherhood, Prime! It doesn’t matter what you want. It doesn’t matter what you and five other brothers want. If the rest of the brothers aren’t on board, you deal with it.”

Yak put a hand on Rage’s shoulder for a quick second. “Rage, it’s cool. He gets it.”

Rage’s light brown eyes caught his. “The fuck it’s cool. He goes doin’ shit half-cocked, Lisa could be in danger. Hell, *any* of the old ladies could be in danger because he thinks he knows better than our president.”

Prime held his hands up in surrender. “No, Rage. I get it. No doin’ shit on my own. I got it.”

From the end of the hall Turk called out, “Yo, Prime! You got a shift at Platinum’s you need to get your ass moving.”

While Prime hurried away, Rage shook his head. “Jesus. How did that fucker ever earn his patch?”

Yak grinned and shrugged. “Don’t know. I wonder how you ever earned your patch, too, and I was there to vote your ass in.”

“Shut the fuck up, Yak,” Rage muttered and sauntered toward the common room.

Yak stood rooted to the spot though. Prime’s words about not doing anything on his own were stuck in his head on a loop. Why that bothered him, he didn’t know. All of them considered going renegade every once in a while, but something about Prime’s tone was off.

Yak’s bike roared up Blanding Boulevard, the sound a balm to his soul and a sense of calm against the chaos he’d dealt with in the past day-and-a-half.

Nora’s problems were handled –at least as far as he was concerned. She was her own woman and perfectly capable of confronting the shit life had handed her.

The light turned red and he eased his feet onto the pavement as he stopped his Harley. “Yep. Gonna stay away from her.

Definitely.”

The light turned green and he rode four blocks before the rain started up again. It was a nasty deluge. Then, crazy Florida weather, it stopped after about five blocks. It lasted just long enough to soak him to the bone and make his ride downright miserable. The last three miles, though, there was no rain, which was a blessing.

By the time he parked his bike in his driveway, he was shivering.

Inside the back door, he shucked his motorcycle boots and socks. A stacked washer-dryer stood to his right. He tossed his socks into the open washer.

“Fuck it. Might as well do this shit down here,” he muttered, and stripped all his clothes and put them in the washer.

He took a hot shower, willing himself to think of anything but Nora.

Too bad he'd never had much willpower.

Recalling the sight of her sleeping in his bed at the compound had his dick semi-hard.

His mind conjured up the image of her laying into that moron. He'd wanted to kiss her in the worst way after she said she didn't think life could get any worse or more embarrassing but it did. The moment she reminded him they'd be neighbors, he'd forced himself to turn on the freeze.

Watching her try to pay Major for using his truck had been more entertaining than he'd expected. Then hearing her try to

wheelde information about Major's favorite beer from Roll, Trixie, or the prospects made him laugh out loud. She was persistent as hell, and sexy about it, too.

Yeah. She was sexy as fuck.

His semi- became a full-on erection.

He groaned and took his cock in hand. This one time, he'd let himself fantasize about her. Then that would be it. It had to be. She had enough on her plate, and he didn't want to add to it.

After he dressed in boxers and pajama pants, he went downstairs and started a load of laundry. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. Normally he'd finish the book he was reading at the clubhouse, but dealing with Nora had kept him from reviewing the financials for Platinum's.

He sat at his small desk perusing the spreadsheet. Things were going well at the gentlemen's club. Not as well as he'd like, but Turk said he was a greedy bastard.

Most would say the truth hurt, but Yak didn't believe that. He *was* greedy and he owned it. If surviving the foster care system taught him anything, it was to keep a tight fist on what was yours because you never knew when someone would come along and try to take it from you.

His concentration on the numbers was interrupted by the sound of someone or possibly something splashing into the pool. Even though the small pool was fenced in to keep out toddlers and people who should know better, he wasn't about

to ignore that sound. Raccoons liked to use the pool as their personal toilet, which pissed him off.

His fingers spread the wooden slats of his blinds and he sighed.

Shit. They should have covered this.

From his bedroom window, he saw Nora swimming laps—or as much as someone could swim a lap in the kidney-bean shaped pool. Then she executed a forward somersault in the water.

She wasn't a princess. She was a mermaid.

God damn him. His cock was at full attention, and he'd just gotten himself off.

He groaned and stalked to his laptop. Time to hunt for a new place. He had to move.

But he couldn't.

The frantic rhythm of splashing water drew him back to the window. She was assaulting the water with so much force. It hit him, she was taking out her aggression on the water.

She had plenty to be angry about, God knew.

It took all his strength to keep from going down there. If she wanted to take her aggression out on something, he wanted her to turn to him.

He knew he didn't have much will-power, but it seemed he didn't have much strength where Nora was concerned either. In seconds, he'd shoved his feet into a pair of Adidas slides

and he found himself standing at the edge of the pool with his arms crossed on his bare chest.

Her head emerged from the water and she blew out a breath as she opened her eyes. Those green eyes widened at the sight of him. “What are you doing down here?”

“What the fuck are you doing, princess?” he asked at the same time.

She was at the shallow end of the pool and she took to her feet. He needed her to submerge herself again. The scraps of teal lycra covering her did nothing to conceal her perky hardened nipples.

She tossed an arm out to the side. “I’m swimming, obv’s.”

He closed his eyes and tilted his head in annoyance. “Did you just say ‘obv’s,’ to me?”

He opened his eyes just in time to see her gleaming smile. “Yeah. It’s also a full moon tonight and I didn’t want to miss it. It could be the last one I get to see.”

His eyes widened even as he clenched his teeth. “Don’t talk like that,” he clipped out.

She shook her head. “No. I don’t mean it like that, Yak. But because I’m gonna be so tired all the time - or at least that’s what I’ve read.”

He exhaled, relieved that she wasn’t on a morbid train of thought. “Who’s taking you to your first appointment?”

Her brows drew down. “Nobody.”

He choked, swallowed a couple times and got his act together. “What? Nora.”

She shifted and floated on her back. A vision of her lying in his bed upstairs assaulted him in an instant. This woman could teach clinics on how to torture a man. Her soft voice cut into his thoughts. “Yak. It’s a consult. They aren’t gonna *do* anything at this appointment.”

In an effort to keep his blood from pooling in his cock, he dropped into a squat. “That doesn’t change the fact they’re gonna lay some serious shit on you. Someone should be there to make sure you ask questions and don’t forget stuff.”

She twisted from her back to more of a doggy-paddle. “I’m not *that* forgetful, you know.”

He shook his head. “Not talkin’ about your keys and wallet. Hell, that bitch probably planned that shitty move too. I’m talkin’ about things you need or want to know that doctors may not consider. Shit that’s personal to you.”

“Personal to me?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Like if your hair’s gonna change or whatever—”

He couldn’t bring himself to mention her body. God he needed to get a grip. He hadn’t wanted a woman this bad in over a decade.

“How do you know so much about it?” she asked.

“Thought I told you... Guess I didn’t. Both my parents went through cancer treatments.”

She took to her feet again, water sluicing down her body.
“Oh. How are—”

He stood. “They didn’t make it, babe. Wound up in foster care at sixteen. What about your mom? Have you told her?”

Her eyes slid to the side and he just barely heard her say,
“Not yet.”

“You haven’t told her?”

She shook her head. “I feel really guilty already, but it’s not exactly something to share in a phone convo, you know?”

“Do you get along with her?”

She widened her eyes at him. “Of course I do, but she’ll be here in a couple of weeks... actually, I should—” she cut herself off, driving her fingers into her hair.

The action puffed out her chest and his eyes immediately went to her breasts.

Shit.

He had to focus. “What’s the problem?” he asked.

She frowned. “I should tell her to cancel her trip. Save her the trouble.”

“Woman, if you get along with her, call her and tell her the wedding isn’t happening, but she still needs to be here. You’re right. Telling her this shit in person would be better –but you gotta let her know.”

She shook her head. “There’s not much she can do, and she’s fourteen months from retirement. Yet she’s got a boss itching

to give her the boot which might jeopardize her pension.”

He clenched his jaw. “Find someone to help you. You can’t... Call Trixie. She’ll help.”

“Not calling my landlords about this,” she muttered.

He stared at her for a long, heated moment. “Find someone, Nora. I mean it.” He started to turn away and thought better of it. “And stay outta the pool until May. It’s too fucking cold for you.”

Her hands settled on her hips. “It’s heated, you big lug! Get in here and feel for yourself.”

Feel for yourself. Those words went right to his balls.

He shook his head. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

Nora

Don't say things I didn't mean? Who was this guy?

The more I thought about what I said, I realized my earlier words sounded like a tease, maybe. I couldn't help it, though. Noah standing shirtless in pajama pants made me scatter-brained. He had no discernible chest hair. That intrigued me. Add to that, the *very* discernible tattoos covering his chest and arms... and boy, did my brain check out.

He put the 'score' in scorching, that was for certain.

With a headshake, I arched into a back-flip in the water to clear my head. I loved this heated pool. It was so freaking fabulous.

I rose to the surface and saw he'd stopped a few feet from the back door to his place. "Don't you have work tomorrow?"

I shook my head. "Don't you have work *tonight*?"

"No. Now answer my question, princess."

Every time I thought I was cool with the 'princess moniker', he used it like he did just now and I despised it all over again.

I climbed out of the pool and grabbed my towel. "Yeah. I have work in the morning. Sorry if I kept you from something important."

He shook his head. "Good night, Nora."

I trudged into my new digs. The sight of my many boxes and the piles of clothes I needed to sort had me lamenting my impulse decision to swim. Yet, I wasn't that mad about it. The moment Trixie mentioned the pool was heated, I was sold. Wild horses would have to drag me away from this property.

I'd spoken the truth to Yak. Very soon, I wasn't going to be in a position to swim for quite a while. The moon was full and bright, providing the perfect light for a nighttime swim since I had no idea where the switches were for the outside lights. I loved everything about the moon. Mom said it was because I was born at night, making me a moon baby. I figure that was just a coincidence. The sun was a big ball of energy all the planets orbited around, but the moon was ours. The moon orbited us and it controlled the tides and probably other stuff, too.

I took a quick shower and the Sunday blahs set in with brute force. Not only did I have to tell some of my co-workers the wedding was off, I had to figure out how to work with *Mia*. We covered for each other during lunch hours, sick days, and during vacations.

God. I actually needed her in the weeks ahead.

What the hell was I going to do?

The first thing I had to do was call Mom. I should have done it earlier today... but very few things that had happened since my bachelorette party had been in my control. I curled up under my covers (I had made my bed before putting on my swimsuit) and grabbed my phone.

“Hello, my beautiful daughter. I’m mid-way through packing.”

I tipped my head back, trying not to sigh.

The wedding was scheduled in two weeks and six days. Mom started packing for any trip as far in advance as possible though. Didn’t matter how long the trip or how far she would travel. Deep down I suspected, Mom just liked to pack.

“About that, Mom. You don’t need to.”

“I beg your pardon? You know the drill. I pack early so I don’t have to scramble later.”

I nodded. “Right. I misspoke. You don’t need to pack such fancy duds because Destin called off the wedding.”

I yanked the phone away from my ear in the nick of time. “He *what?*” Mom yelled.

“Calm down, Mom. But, you heard me. He called it off.”

“When? Before or *after* your bachelorette party?”

I snorted with a humorless chuckle. “During the party.”

“You can’t be serious! What a low-down dirty—”

“Mom, you need to sit down.”

I could almost hear her shaking her head, her attitude was so palpable over the phone. “Oh no, I do not. I’m pacing up a storm. You know it’s the only way to soothe what ails me.”

I sighed. “Right. Then I’ll call back.”

“Call back? Nora, there can’t possibly be more to this... was he cheating on you?”

I grimaced. “Yeah, but that isn’t why I want you to sit down.”

Her tone pitched even higher. “Why would he propose *marriage* if he was cheating on you? This is crazy, Nora!”

“I don’t know when he started cheating on me, Mom, but that isn’t the main reason he called things off.”

There was a long pause before I heard Mom exhale hard. “He cheated on you? And I actually liked Destin.”

“Yeah,” I whispered.

The fire had gone out of her tone. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry this happened... though, better than finding yourself in divorce court later.”

I sat up straighter. “You’re sitting down now, right?”

“Yes, dear. But wait. You said cheating wasn’t the *main* reason he jilted you. What was the main reason?”

Dammit! My mom was too smart sometimes... okay, no, all the time. “The main reason was because I found a lump a few weeks ago. The biopsy results came back this past Friday and it’s cancerous. I have a consultation appointment later this week.”

“Fuck,” Mom bit out.

Laughter threatened at the back of my throat. Mom so rarely cursed, it always struck me funny when she did. But on top of

that, she could deliver a single curse word with so much force and inflection it practically gave the word another meaning.

She exhaled again. “Well, I’m flying down much earlier.”

Steel threaded through my voice. “No, Mom. Not yet.”

“What do you mean, not yet? That’s crazy talk, Elenora.”

“It is a consult, Mom. Save your time off for when I really need you.”

She blew out a breath and I knew she was on the verge of crying.

“Don’t cry yet either, Momma.”

“Oh, and you break out the ‘momma’!”

I chuckled. “Mom!”

“My girl. Shit! I’ve been where you are.”

I did a slow nod. “Yeah. Twenty-five years ago or so. There are new treatments, proton therapy, things like that. I have two consult appointments lined up.”

“Why not three?”

“Mom. I’ll schedule a third if neither of these two are worth while, but seriously. I did my research from the moment they took the biopsy. Once I know more, I’ll fill you in.”

“Don’t you dare talk about this like I’m some entry on your desk calendar, Elenora Rose. You call me every night this week.”

I stared up at the ceiling. “Mom. When Destin called things off, he also kicked me out. I’ve just moved into a very small, but new-to-me apartment.”

She spluttered for a moment. “Oh, I am *so* flying down there.”

“Mom, don’t. If anything, you could help me more by trying to get my money back –for *me*. I don’t want anything going back to Destin, not if I can help it.”

“As I recall, you were the one footing all these bills on your credit cards. I don’t know if you’ll get your deposits, but... You didn’t give him back the ring, did you?”

I glanced down at my left hand. “No. I didn’t.”

“Good, don’t. I get down there we’re hitting a jeweler for an appraisal. Then if they won’t take it, we’ll go to a decent pawn shop.”

This week had been a whopper, so by Thursday evening, I was beyond done with it. Monday, I had hustled into work an hour early, blocked out a ‘meeting’ with my boss, John, and shared with him about my wedding being called off. During our conversation, I’d hesitated too much.

“If there’s something else going on here, Nora, you can share with me.”

I did my best to diplomatically tell him one of my coworkers was involved with Destin.

“Is it Mia?” he asked.

My eyes widened. “What? How did you—”

John grimaced. “You didn’t know they were involved. You’ve only been here a couple years, but it always feels like you’ve been here from the start. Yeah, shortly before you joined us, Blake found out Destin and Mia were an item, and threw down the no-fraternization rule. They called it off, though there were rumors that Mia wanted him to leave the company. He wouldn’t. But that’s all speculation.”

I nodded once. “Then I joined the firm, he put in his notice, and asked me out on his last day.”

John shook his head. “That sums it up. Though I can’t believe Mia would do that to you. Especially after our discussion last week.”

Last week, I’d informed John about my looming health issues which forced a conversation with Mia since she’d have to pick up the slack if I needed to take any time off.

“I was shocked, too. Though, I’d had no idea they shared a history. Bottom line, I won’t let it impact my work.”

John smiled. “No, you’re probably the most unflappable admin I’ve ever had, Nora. Why don’t you take Friday off?”

I shook my head. “No, I’d rather save my days off—”

He shook his head. “I’ll let Blake know you’re working from home.” He paused, then whispered, “Wink, wink.”

I nodded. “Well, thank you, sir.”

He groaned. “What’d I tell you about that ‘sir’ business? Get to work, Ms. Ellis.”

I got to work, but from the moment Mia arrived it was much more difficult than usual. She wasn’t sabotaging me –at least not in a way I could prove it– but she had passive-aggressive tendencies I’d underestimated.

Topping it off, my other coworkers were whispering about things behind my back. On the rare occasions I caught them, they looked at me like a lost puppy.

Whatever.

I had to keep my head down and do my job. Keeping my health insurance was paramount.

I parked my car, noting that Yak’s bike was gone. Part of me wished he were around, but our schedules were literally night and day from one another. At this point, that was undoubtedly for the best. I didn’t need a rebound and I definitely didn’t want another relationship.

Tonight my plan was to make shrimp scampi, have one glass of chardonnay, and unpack three boxes. Then I was going to read for an hour-ish, and go to bed early.

Someone knocked on my door, then I heard it open.

Trixie’s voice filled the small space. “Yoo-hoo. How’s it goin’, Nora?”

I came out of the small bedroom as she closed the door behind her. “Hi, Trixie. What brings you by? Did something go wrong with my paperwork?”

She shook her head. “No. Yak says you need a wing-woman tomorrow.”

I pressed my lips together. “He shouldn’t have done that.”

Her brown eyes widened. “You *should* have called me, Nora. I know we just met, but you need someone at your side. And he already told me what you said about it being a consultation. That doesn’t matter, woman.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t want to waste anyone’s time.”

She crossed her arms under her ample breasts. “Let’s get something straight right now. You are not wasting anyone’s time, lady. This is serious shit. What time do I need to be here?”

“My appointment is at two, but they want me there early, so... one-fifteen?”

“Done,” she said, then she peered into the small kitchen adjacent to the living area. “What are you doing for dinner?”

“I was going—”

“Wait, I said the wrong thing. You want pizza or Mexican?”

I shook my head. “Um, I was going to cook.”

She threw a hand out like she was swatting a bug. “Screw that, Nora. We’re heading out for dinner. So, what’s your preference, Carmine’s or LaNopalera?”

“Carmine’s, I guess. I was going to make pasta tonight.”

She nodded and pulled out her cell phone. “Done! Let’s go, lady. If we’re lucky, Abby will meet us over there, maybe

Jackie too.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

She waved her hand at me. “I’ll tell you in the car, get some shoes on, woman. I need a beer and a Chicago beef sandwich. In that order.”

Chapter 4

Nurse Trixie

YAK

Thursday afternoon, Yak sat at his desk and tore his fingers through his hair, then he gathered it into a man-bun. All Sunday night, he'd tossed and turned. Restless sleep used to not be a problem for him, but ever since taking the late shifts at Platinum's, he couldn't afford to lose any sleep during the day. Losing sleep because he was worried about Nora left him feeling drained all around.

He just met the woman. There was no reason to worry. She had a place to stay. The asshole scumbag let her get her shit, and Yak should let it go at that.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her, and that made no sense to him.

"Got bad news, Yak," Punc said, settling into the chair across the desk.

"What? Bella turn you down again? You know you're not supposed to hit on the dancers."

"No. You, Turk, and Blood made that shit clear months ago."

“Then what’s the bad news?”

Punc took a deep breath. “Lucy insisted on going to her car alone last night. Some asshole snatched her purse from her and all her tips.”

Lucy was better known to the clientele as Amethyst. Even before the Riot took over Platinum’s, she’d been the headliner. She had athletic moves and a body that kept men drooling. Her work ethic couldn’t be beat, and Yak often wondered why she hadn’t tried moving to a larger market because no doubt she’d make a killing.

As Punc’s words replayed in his mind, Yak closed his eyes and turned his head, struggling to keep his temper in check. After a beat, he aimed hard eyes at Punc. “Is Lucy okay?”

Punc nodded. “Yeah, yeah. Hell, if she weren’t someone would’ve called you.”

He clenched his jaw. “Get this through your fuckin’ head, Punc. This shit isn’t Lucy’s fault.”

Punc held his hands up in front of his belly. “Whoa, man. Calm down. I didn’t say it was.”

Yak leaned forward. “Your first words were about Lucy *insisting* on going to her car alone. That makes it sound like her fault, when it fucking is *not*.”

Punc exhaled hard and stood. He ran his hands through his blond hair while he paced. “That isn’t what I meant, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Wasn’t Evict on security?” Yak asked.

Punc paused, shaking his head. “No. It was Prime. His first time being security for the girls. The rest of us don’t care if Lucy takes jujitsu or whatever, we always walk her out. Martial arts don’t matter if some asshole’s holding a gun on you.”

“She said that? The bastard had a gun? What about the fuckin’ security footage?”

“Turk and Volt reviewed that. She’d parked in that far-off corner because some asshole parked in the last spot for the girls. By the time we got the vehicle moved, Jewel came in for her shift.”

That almost sounded suspect to Yak, but he’d seen that shit happen before. The dancers and the waitresses all had reserved parking in the back, and at least once a week they had to get some jackass to move his vehicle. Hell, it had happened the night of Nora’s bachelorette party - that was how Yak knew Destin had been in the parking lot. He’d told the bastard to move his car when it became clear he wasn’t dropping off or picking up one of the dancers.

Yak sighed. “She’s not comin’ in tonight.”

Lucy spoke from the doorway. “If you’re talking about me, too late. You aren’t keeping me off stage, Yak. I got bills to pay—”

“And we’ll pay your lost tips from last night,” Yak interrupted.

She arched a heavily lined brow at him. “I’m on the schedule. Was on the schedule before that shit happened. I’m not letting the asshole win twice.”

She had a point.

“Fine.” He narrowed his eyes. “But you’re gettin’ walked out to your car tonight, dammit.”

Her spine straightened. “Believe me, I got that loud and clear from three brothers already.”

With a low grunt, he said, “No more lip, Luce.”

She smirked. “Yeah, yeah. You gonna walk me to my car?”

He rolled his eyes. “No.”

Her lips rolled into a contemplative pout. “One day, you’ll wish you had.”

“I’ll walk you to your—”

Yak glared at Punc. “No fraternization. You know that.”

“This may be too little too late, but don’t blame the new guy, Yak,” Lucy said.

He shook his head at her. “Blame never helps situations like this, but he’s damn sure gonna learn a fuckin’ lesson.”

She frowned and heaved a heavy exhale. “Your business, but it wasn’t his fault.”

Yak dipped his chin. “He didn’t do his job. We’ll never know, but if he’d done his fuckin’ job you’d probably still have your tips and you wouldn’t feel unsafe leaving this place.”

She shook her head. “I’m a big girl. It’ll take more than that asshole to make me feel unsafe.”

“You’re sure there was just one? Not two, someone else hanging back?”

Her lips puffed out in a pout. “I don’t think so. Not that I could see, but that shit happened so fast. For all I know, there could have been.”

Punc shook his head. “Turk watched the security feed like five times. He said there was just one guy.”

Yak nodded. “All right, Lucy. Go get ready, and knock ‘em dead.”

She grinned. “I always do.”

“Where’s Prime?” Yak asked Punc.

“At the clubhouse. Blood caught wind of what happened and blackened both of Prime’s eyes. Turk figured Prime being on the floor with two shiners was bad for business.”

Yak tipped his head to the side. “Yeah. Too bad it’s good for Prime, because I’d have bloodied his nose.”

“Didn’t know y’all cared so much—”

Yak tossed his reading glasses on the desk. “Jesus, Puncture! Get your head out of your ass. We don’t protect the girls, they won’t be on stage to perform, because they’ll go to a fuckin’ club that offers security.”

Punc moved closer to the door. “Sorry, man. Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Not shooting the messenger, I’m educating you. Now, get back to work.”

His cell chimed with a text message.

He unlocked the screen and saw Trixie’s name.

Me and Nora are set for tomorrow! We’re at Carmine’s you want me to get you a sandwich or a pie?

It felt like a five-hundred pound weight had been lifted. Someone would be with her. He’d have preferred it to be Abby, since she was a nurse, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

His finger hovered over the screen when Trixie sent another message - this one a picture. Trixie sat next to Nora in a high-backed wooden booth. She held a bottle of Yuengling aloft while Nora held up a glass of white wine. Trixie’s grin was big and bright. He might have imagined it, but Nora’s smile looked patient and almost forced. Then again, Trixie was a force to be reckoned with.

Even Nora’s forced smile gutted him.

He pressed on the photo, intending to delete it.

Next thing he knew, he’d saved it.

Shit.

He tapped out a quick reply telling Trixie he wouldn’t get home until after three in the morning and he didn’t need food tonight.

His phone dinged immediately.

***Suit yourself. I drove, so we could even deliver...
but I'll let you work.***

His fingers itched to text her back. Getting food delivered from Trixie *and* Nora tempted him, but he had to keep his distance.

He wasn't good for Nora.

She wasn't a woman interested in a quick fuck... or maybe she was, but she wouldn't treat it the way club bunnies did. Physical release and nothing more.

No.

Nora was the settling-down type, no doubt.

She deserved that. Giving her the chance to find that was the least he could do for her.

The sound of a phone ringing wasn't right on board the *Shiverin' Dragon* pirate ship. Yak cracked an eye open, and his dream of manning a pirate ship faded fast. His cell phone had stopped ringing and his alarm clock indicated it was twelve-fifteen in the afternoon.

“Fuck,” he said on an exhale and closed his eyes. Then his cell rang again.

“What?” he answered.

Trixie's voice sounded frantic. "Yak, I'm so sorry to wake you, but I can't make it."

He rubbed the heel of his palm against his eye. "What're you talkin' 'bout, Trix?"

"Wake up, man. I'm supposed to take Nora to her appointment and I'm stuck in traffic."

At the mention of Nora's name, he sat up in bed. "Shit. Are you serious? Where are you?"

"Like a good twenty minutes away, but it's taken fifteen minutes just to go one mile."

He shook his head. "Shit. Can Abby do it?"

"She's working, Yak. This was your idea and it's a damned good one. Why can't *you* do it?"

He sighed and swung his legs out from under the covers. At least his morning wood had subsided.

"You scared or something?" Trixie asked.

He froze for a split second. "No. I'll get her to the appointment."

"Oh, wait a minute. We're moving. Oh, there's a fender-bender. Sorry, I freaked out for no reason, Yak."

He fought a sigh. "You're on your way then. No need for me to—"

"Yeah, it's all good. I freaked out because I know she's worried about this appointment. I mean, who wouldn't be, right?"

“You’re right. Drive safe, Trix.”

Twenty minutes later, he was on the verge of sleep when a horn blared outside the house. With a groan, he shoved out of the bed. There was no reason for someone to be in the drive honking their horn, but he needed to see what was going on regardless.

The side door had an in-set window and he saw Trixie’s Camaro sitting in the drive. She couldn’t pull any further forward because Yak’s bike was in the way.

“Shit,” he muttered.

His slides were by the door, and he shoved his feet into them and went outside. He stopped three feet away from the house. Nora stood with her back to him, locking her door. She turned around and Yak’s mouth went dry. She wore skin-tight jeans with frayed holes on one thigh and the lower calf of the other leg. He forced his eyes up and took in her baggy, royal blue sweater. It had a loose cowl neck and looked like it was as soft as a baby’s bottom. The weather had turned chilly, but not cold enough for a sweater like that.

“Is something wrong?” Nora asked him, when she came even with Trixie’s car.

“Why are you dressed for snow?”

She chuckled. “I’m dressed for a cold waiting room, not snow.”

The passenger window slid down. Trixie leaned over the center console. “Yo! Don’t make us late, Yak. It’s bad enough

you parked your bike all cock-eyed blocking my way to her door. And put on a shirt for God's sake. It's nippy out here!"

He didn't miss Nora's eyes trailing over his torso and her lips pressing together. He couldn't tell if that was to hide a smile or keep her from biting her lip.

Reflexively, he lifted his chin at Trixie. Then he locked eyes with Nora. "Good luck, princess."

Nora

I buckled into Trixie's Camaro, grateful the appointment was over.

"Well, I have to say, that went well, all things considered."

"I guess."

"You guess! He said the tumor is small, and it doesn't look like your lymph nodes are impacted."

I dipped my chin. "He said the scan makes the tumor look small, he won't know for sure until he cuts me open. And they're still going to pull two or three lymph nodes to make certain the cancer hasn't spread."

"That's true... but let's be positive here. You're a fighter, I can tell."

I grinned and fought against a laugh. She'd known me for almost a week, and really, being a fighter had nothing to do with it. Cancer was an insidious disease. There were tons of variables that were out of my control.

We rode along, listening to alternative rock music on the radio.

At a red light, Trixie turned the music off. "I should keep my mouth shut, but I can't help myself. I saw how terrified you looked when the doctor said chemo would send you into early menopause and you wouldn't have any interest in sex."

I choked on a chuckle. “Yeah, but the menopause symptoms will end after I’m done with the chemo –or they should. As for interest in sex, I just got dumped by my fiancé. It’s not like sex is an issue for me.”

She aimed a dry look at me then turned back to the road. “Right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her lips tipped up. “I’ve seen the way you look at Yak.”

I scoffed. “I don’t look at Yak.”

She laughed. “Okay, Nora. I’ll let you believe that. But, I damn sure saw how Yak looks at you.”

“You’re seeing things.”

She shook her head. “Oh, no. You can’t play that card with me. I’ve known Yak for over ten years. He looks at you like you’re the last candy bar after Halloween. And he called you his girl, but argued he didn’t mean it ‘that way,’ the big liar.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe he wasn’t lying.”

“Oh, he was definitely lying. Hell, he gave you a nickname.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m not letting you ‘whatever’ your way out of this, Nora. He’s into you, you’re attracted to him even if you’re gonna tell me I’m wrong. Don’t let that doctor freak you out. Or... maybe this is the nudge you need to jump Yak’s bones and get you some before your operation.”

“Oh my God! I can’t just—”

When she glanced at me, the resolve in her eyes took me aback. “You can do whatever the fuck you want, Nora. That asshole didn’t give a damn. He jumped right into bed with that backstabbing skank.”

“I found out this week that they were an item before I entered the picture. I don’t think she’s a skank,” I muttered.

Trixie laughed. “Nora, back in the day I did my fair share of skanky shit, and I’ve damn sure been around long enough that I can spot one. And that girl has it around her like a cloud of annoying perfume.”

I glanced out the window wishing this conversation would end.

“The two of them deserve each other, but enough about them. You should get yourself laid, it’ll make you feel better.”

I felt my cheeks heating and I laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind, nurse Trixie.”

Her brow arched for a moment. “That has a nice ring to it. You don’t believe me, I should’ve done this from the jump. We’ll call Abby –she actually *is* a nurse. And she’s a big believer in sex being good for what ails you.”

I held a hand up. “No, really, calling Abby isn’t necessary, Trixie. I get it. I’ll keep it in mind, okay?”

If I’d learned anything about Trixie since last night, it was that she lived for the little things in life. Great food, a beer or two, and good friends were all she needed to be happy. I

agreed with that outlook, but... my mind was filled with many other things –all of them big and heavy.

Yak's bike wasn't around when Trixie pulled into the drive. That pleased me and disappointed me. Though at four o'clock on a Friday, I suspected he had plenty to do at Platinum's.

"Bummer. I was hoping Yak would be here," Trixie said.

"Why?" I asked. "It's not like you... wait, you wouldn't dare... meddle like that, would you?"

She gave me an innocent look, but even I could see it was a mock-innocent expression. "Me? Never."

I grinned. "Yeah, right. Not that I don't appreciate that, but you just stay out of it, lady. I'll..."

"Seduce him yourself? Make the first move? Somehow I doubt it." She glanced out the windshield. "Whatcha gonna do tonight?"

I gathered my purse. "Well, I have to call my Mom first and foremost. Then I have to get in touch with three more wedding vendors who haven't returned my calls. Then, I might go swimming since Yak isn't here."

"Why would he care?"

I fought a grin. "He didn't like me swimming Sunday night. Told me to wait until May to use the pool because it was too cold out here."

"It's heated."

I nodded. "Exactly what I said."

A knowing look stole over Trixie's face. "Wait, were you wearing a bikini by chance?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean anything. He works at Platinum's. He sees women all the time. They're much hotter than me and they move their bodies way better than I do."

Her pointed look gave me pause. "Nora. You swimming in that pool didn't bother him. He didn't like you being in that pool without him. I'd bet the house on it."

I shook my head. "Don't do that. I like my little place."

She nodded. "My niece is watching Rafferty and Jasmine tonight. I'm gonna be at the clubhouse. You get bored, come visit."

"Thanks, but I think I'm gonna catch up on some sleep. I've been a little stressed."

I wound up calling the wedding vendors first since Mom lived in the central time zone and she was still at work. One of them was kind enough to give me back my deposit, which surprised me to no end. The other had to get back to me about whether I wouldn't be charged for the full amount since the flowers were already on order. It would depend on whether they could sell the inventory. The DJ on the other hand was being a right stickler about the contract.

I curled up on the couch and called Mom.

"So, what did he say?" she answered.

“Hi, Mom, how you doing?”

“Nora Rose Ellis, do not get smart with me. I’ve been on pins and needles. Now give it to me straight.”

I recapped what the doctor had said –omitting the part about sex. Mom didn’t need to know that... then again, she’d had a lumpectomy at twenty-nine. Odds were she already knew.

Mom brought up traveling down sooner rather than later, but I insisted she wait.

Movement outside distracted me. I peered out through the open slats of the blinds and exhaled.

“Holy hell with a hand basket,” I muttered.

“What’s wrong? I know how you like to mess with common sayings, dear, but that’s a new one even for me,” Mom said.

A small brick patio with a teak pagoda butted up against the main house. Yak stood out there shirtless and lifting weights. I’d seen him shirtless twice, but I hadn’t wanted him to catch me staring. Now, I could gawk all I wanted.

“It’s nothing,” I said, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip.

“Elenora Rose, you just got back from an oncologist. You cannot say things like that and tell me it’s ‘nothing.’ Spill, young lady.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, you’re right. I’m in a new place, and my neighbor is outside.”

“That doesn’t even warrant a ‘hell’ let alone a ‘holy hell.’ What’s he doing? Yard work?”

Now I'd done it. Mom was happily married, but she read romance novels. Lots of them. She had an appreciation for male bodies, and she especially had an appreciation for people falling in love.

“No, Mom. He's lifting weights. But it isn't a big deal.”

“If you say so. Now stop staring at your neighbor. When's your next appointment? And what's going on with canceling the wedding? Do you need me to help out? Gary already called your Uncle Grant. They were driving down, so at least they don't have to cancel airfare.”

When I finished telling her about my earlier phone calls, Mom let out an almighty sigh. “It's a crying shame your brother can't get here sooner.”

“Yeah, but I don't need him to fight my battles, Mom.”

I could hear the smile in her voice. “Maybe I need him to do it so I don't worry so much.”

“Mom.”

“Nora.”

If she said anything after that, I didn't hear her. Yak had two dumbbell weights on the patio floor. He had his hands wrapped around them while he held himself in a plank position. Then he lifted one weight and executed a one handed push-up. After he went back to the plank, he put that weight down and switched hands.

Between Trixie's encouragement to jump Yak's bones and the sight of him holding himself up at this perfect angle, my

vagina wanted me to plant myself directly under his taut frame.

“Nora! Earth to Nora. Are you still there?” Mom asked.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, Mom. Sorry. I got distracted.”

“My goodness, how can you be so distracted. You’ve seen men lift weights before. Especially as much as you hung with your brother and his buddies.”

That wasn’t even close to the vision of Yak on that patio. Mainly because Evan and his buddies had been seventeen at the time. I didn’t know how old Yak happened to be, but he wasn’t a seventeen-year-old acting like a twenty-something.

Hell, he even made Destin look doughy.

Ugh. Why did I have to think about Destin?

“Mom, I’ll call you after my next consultation, all right?”

“Fine. But, let me know if I can help you, honey. Seriously.”

We hung up and I tamped down the smart-alec part of me that wanted to tell Yak he needed to do his workout inside –at least until May. This felt like torture, so I wandered to the small kitchen and whipped up some shrimp scampi.

Chapter 5

Against the Wall

NORA

While I scarfed down my dinner, I reviewed the notes Trixie took for me. My instincts said Dr. Strauss was the right person to operate on me, but I knew I had to see the other doctor. Even if Trixie couldn't come with me to the next appointment, I had her notes to help me remember what I needed to ask.

And to think, I hadn't wanted anyone to come with me.

I owed Yak a huge 'thank-you'. The clock indicated it was almost seven. I didn't know what his work schedule was like, but I figured I had to hustle to catch him before he left.

I didn't feel comfortable knocking on the back patio doors, so I opted for the side door just off the driveway. The moment I knocked on one of the windowpanes, I second-guessed if this was a good idea. Through the window, I had a clear view of the galley kitchen... and Yak, who stood at the counter slicing something.

His head turned to the door, then back to the board. If he ignored me... I didn't know what I'd do, but I wouldn't be pleased.

After a beat, he wiped his hands on a towel and came to the door.

“You need something, princess?” he asked, blocking the entry.

A gust of wind sent my hair flying all around my head. Great. I probably looked like Medusa right about now.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Get in here, we're supposed to get a cold front tonight.”

I stood just inside the house as he closed the door. “I won't take much of your time, Yak. I just—”

He hurried away from me and I wondered if he even heard a word I said.

Then I smelled the bell peppers.

I wandered to the edge of the kitchen. Galley kitchens weren't my thing. They felt cramped which was only magnified when someone else joined you in the kitchen. Yet, with the black and white checkerboard flooring and black countertops off-set by the gleaming white ceramic farm sink, this kitchen felt spacious.

“You're cooking, so I'll be quick. I'm here to say thank you.”

His head twisted toward me, one of his gorgeous brown eyes squinting. “I’m not cooking. Already ate. I’m just cutting up some bananas for later.”

“Right. I appreciate you insisting someone go with me today.”

“No need to thank me for that, Nora.”

I tilted my head as I quirked my lips. “Maybe not, but it was supposed to be Mia going with me –obviously that flew out the window– and I thought I could handle it alone. Making Trixie go with me was a Godsend, so thank you.”

He put the sliced bananas in a Ziploc bag, sealed it, and shoved it into the freezer. His expression appeared wary as he stalked toward me.

At the edge of the counter, he stopped and crossed his arms on his t-shirt clad chest. “You’re welcome. You could have called instead of traipsing over here.”

My insides froze. This had become awkward. Awkwardness between me and Yak was a first - and that was saying something given how we met and everything thereafter.

I nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry to bother you.”

His lips pressed into a thin line while his eyes closed and he shook his head. On an exhale he looked me in the eyes. “It’s not that you’re a bother, Nora.”

My eyes widened. “Doesn’t sound that way.”

A ghost of a grin flitted across his face. “You’re a temptation, princess. One I have to resist.”

A swooping sensation filled my belly. Maybe Trixie was right.

“Why?”

His brow arched. “Why what?”

“Why do you have to resist?”

He shook his head. “Nora, you’re... you want things I can’t give you. Hell, you deserve better than me.”

I moved forward so we were a foot apart. Being this close, I had to tilt my head up to keep eye contact. “Better than you? What does that mean?”

“You deserve the man who can give you stability, marriage, kids, and all that shit.”

I scoffed. “After the past week, I’m *not* looking for marriage, and given my lousy judgment, I’m pretty sure stability is overrated.”

His hand dragged down his cheek stubble. “Don’t let that asshole do that to you, Nora. He’s a moron, and out there is a man who will absolutely do right by you.”

Part of me wanted to ask if he was that man, but I knew he’d say no. Which of course made me think he could absolutely be that man.

I glanced to the side and back to him. “Sometimes, it’s good to give in to temptation.”

He chuckled. “Woman, I manage a place that is all about temptation. It’s better to resist it.”

I nodded. “You’re right. We shouldn’t.”

He licked his bottom lip before he bit it while he nodded.

“But I really want to,” I muttered.

“Nora,” he admonished, chuckling.

I stepped into his personal space and put a hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, Noah. For everything.” I leaned up to kiss the side of his lips. Except Yak turned and our lips locked together fully.

I pulled back, my mouth opening to apologize, but Yak’s arms wrapped around me and he kissed me outright.

My free hand slid under his shirt, desperate to feel his rippling back muscles. They felt as good as they’d looked. That knowledge had me bringing both hands to the hem of his t-shirt and tugging it up. His arms loosened and he stepped back without breaking our kiss. The moment I had the shirt up to his armpits, he backed away to help me get the shirt off him.

My eyes flared at the sight of his inked torso. So many tats, so little time. If I were lucky, I’d get the time to catalog them properly.

“Jesus. That look in your eyes, woman,” he said, his voice husky as all hell.

I slid my hands along his cut belly and up to his chest, watching their movement the entire time.

His hand at my chin tilted my lips up to his and I got aggressive. My tongue pushed into his mouth and he groaned. Next thing I knew, his hands were at my thighs, lifting me up and I wrapped my arms and legs around him. My chest pressed to his chest, and I rocked against thick hardness between my legs.

Oh yeah. This was awesome.

He took over the kiss. I felt something cool at my back and my concentration broke. Yak's lips kissed along my cheek to my neck. Opening my eyes, I saw he had me pressed against the wall.

Even with his strong thick cock rocking against me, I felt it building in a way that hadn't ever happened before. Between the way he kissed and the way he moved his hips, this promised to be *epic*. Then he stopped and pulled his face away from my neck.

His eyes roved over my face like he might break me. "You deserve better than this—"

I slid my hand along his cheek, not stopping until my thumb rested against his ear. "Don't you dare stop, Noah. The only way this could be any better is if we were naked, because I've never had wall sex. This is the hottest thing I've ever done."

His eyes flared. "You've never had... and you were going to marry that idiot?"

I leaned my forehead against his. "Forget about him. Kiss me. Make me come, Yak. I don't just want this, I *need* this."

Still he hesitated.

I took a deep breath and dragged my fingernails along his broad, muscular shoulders. “Make me feel alive. Please.”

A low, almost feral growl built from inside him. He kissed me hard while his hand traveled along my body and inside my leggings. His fingers dipped inside me making me tilt my head back. I gasped, then felt him sucking the pulse point on my neck.

My hips thrust, but he had me pinned. I liked that most of all, being at his mercy like this.

“Come, Nora. I’m gonna watch my pretty princess fall apart on my fingers.”

I loved this, even if I knew it was going to ruin me for any other man –and we weren’t even having real sex!

“Oh God,” I moaned as his thumb rubbed circles on my clit. My head tilted forward and I inhaled his delicious scent. Citrus, fresh air, a hint of leather, and masculinity.

“Look at me,” he ordered. The bossy thread in his voice made me wetter. “She likes that,” he whispered.

“Do I ever, Noah,” I breathed.

“Fuck,” he hissed, just before he kissed me.

As kisses went, this one was downright foreign to me. Yak was so forceful, it should have scared me, but fear was the last thing on my mind. To my bones, I knew he would never harm

me. *Not ever.* In actions alone, he'd proven he cared more about me than any man I'd ever met.

And I wanted him like I'd never wanted any other man before.

His hips pressed forward, putting more pressure on his hand. He quickened the tempo of his thrusting fingers and I couldn't stop it. My release came over me, bringing with it the most delicious rush. In the back of my mind, I knew I was making noises –mewling, maybe, or moaning, more likely. This had to be the best orgasm I'd ever had, because Yak didn't stop when it started. He kept at me until I thought I might actually have a double.

His eyes smoldered at me as I came down. "God, you're so fuckin' gorgeous."

"Ditto," I breathed.

He slipped his hand out from between us, but pressed his body closer so I didn't fall down.

I pecked his lips and grinned. "That was something else, Noah."

He kissed my forehead. "Good. That's good, Nora, but we have to stop."

My legs dropped from behind him. "Why?"

He shook his head. "Nora, I can't. I got too much shit going on. Hell, I told Roll not to mention this place to you, but I hated the idea of you on the other side of town next to the railroad tracks."

I shot him a wry smile. “Me, too, since I work on this side of the river.”

He tugged at my leggings, putting them back in place, and stepped back.

I grazed my hand along his waist and down the front of his gym shorts. “Yak, let me take care of you, too.”

“No, Nora. This has to stop.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You need a man who gives you his time. I can’t do that.”

On auto-pilot, my head turned to the side and back to him. With an eyebrow arch, I said, “I just want to get laid before surgery, Yak.”

He stared at me like I’d surprised him.

“We could both scratch an itch here,” I added.

“I like feeling your claws,” he said with a sly grin, then he added. “But maybe I’m scared of getting scratched by you.”

“You lie,” I scoffed. “You’re extremely tough.”

“So are you,” he whispered.

I nodded once. “Thanks, but I still feel like a twat.”

His upper body jerked with a silent laugh. “How is that possible?”

“You gave me quite possibly the best orgasm all year, and you won’t let me even *try* to reciprocate. That makes me feel like such a taker, it’s worthy of being a world-class twat.”

His hands came up to my jaw where he held me reverently. “You could *never* be a twat, Nora. Period.”

My head dip doubled as a nod. “Okay, but I still say you’re wrong and we should get naked and get down to business.”

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “Being naked with you, babe, would be anything but ‘business.’”

It pained me to do it, but I eased out from in front of Yak and crossed to the opposite side of the kitchen. “Fine. But I don’t understand why you’re so insistent that I leave.”

“Nora... we just can’t.”

My gut said that was a cop-out on his part, but after just a week, I didn’t know him well enough to say that.

I nodded. “Okay. Well, I apologize for dropping by. I never meant to leave you hanging.” I glanced down at his groin and tilted my head. “Or, more like I never meant stiff you.”

He tilted his head back. “Don’t make me laugh, woman.”

I shrugged. “Why not? I’d think it would help.”

Yak

Laughter probably would help his painful erection, but she had to understand this couldn't happen. He couldn't get involved with her no matter how much he wanted her.

With effort, he brought their conversation back around to her doctor visit. "Glad to hear Trixie helped you, Nora."

She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked to the side. "Yeah. She asked things I hadn't even thought about yet."

"Like what?" he asked, and wanted to kick himself. He needed to get her back to her place. The more time he spent with her, the harder it became to stay away from her.

"Like whether I'd be able to drive home from chemo. I knew I'd need a ride after the lumpectomy, but I hadn't thought about the chemo effects in that way." She glanced at the floor and shook her head. "Made me feel like an idiot."

He sighed. "Stop it. Cancer sucks and it isn't something most people think about. You're allowed to forget shit like chemo treatments making you drowsy."

She nodded once. "Right. I'll get going." She glanced away, a faint blush rising up her neck. "Thanks for..."

He took a tentative step forward. "You can't even say it?"

Her head turned and their eyes locked. The blush had risen to her cheeks. Having been in the Riot since eighteen, he'd only encountered shy women on very rare occasions. When he

did, their shyness bothered him. Yet, her shy embarrassment appealed to him –a lot. *Fuck.*

“Nora, the pleasure of making you come against the wall was all mine. I’d say I’m willing to do that anytime, but you don’t need a bastard like me in your life.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re anything but a bastard, Yak. Goodnight.”

He offered her a closed-lip smile. “Be well.”

She shut the door gently when she left. His dick willed him to chase after her, so he waited a full minute before he crossed to lock the door. The vision of her riding his fingers replayed in his mind.

He’d never fuckin’ understand what made her douchebag ex call it off with her, because he hadn’t had a woman detonate like that on him in a long damn time. That thought didn’t alleviate the pressure in his groin since he could only imagine how hot Nora would be in bed.

Destin was a huge moron.

Sure, fighting cancer would be a battle, and it was going to suck. But Yak had no doubt Nora would pull through, and sticking by that woman’s side during this ordeal should have been an honor for that asshole.

Yak’s deep-rooted desire to punch Destin redoubled, just thinking about all the ways he’d done Nora wrong.

Good thing he wouldn’t see the asshole ever again.

Yak double checked the weather app on his phone. It seemed the cold front had stalled and wouldn't hit the area for another ten hours. He didn't trust himself to stick around the house with Nora just steps away from him. Her earlier words had formed a soundtrack in his brain. "I still say you're wrong and we should get naked."

Torture. Sweet fucking torture, but he had to be stronger than that. He had other things to worry about. The problem at Platinum's wasn't limited to Lucy, since another dancer was held at gun-point Thursday night.

He tucked his rain gear into one of the saddlebags and took off for Platinum's.

The front lot was packed, though there were two parking spots Yak noticed as he rolled through. For the hell of it, he looped around to the back where the dancers parked.

The hairs on his arms stood up. At first he thought it was from the misting rain that had started, then he spied a male body sprawled on the pavement not far from a vehicle.

Yak pulled his bike to a stop, swung off, and hurried to the body.

"Punc!" he yelled, dropping to a crouch.

Puncture was laying on his side, and Yak rolled him flat. "Puncture! Wake up!"

His fingers found a pulse in Punc's neck. He yanked his cell out of his back pocket and called Turk.

"I'm busy, Yak," Turk answered.

"Get unbusy. Punc's in the parking lot, knocked out. I need help getting him back in the building."

"Jesus Christ," Turk muttered and hung up.

A moment later, Tundra barreled out through the back door and helped Yak maneuver their brother into the club.

Punc came around once they settled him on the couch in the office.

"What the hell happened?" Turk asked after Punc focused.

"Is Shayla okay?" he asked.

"Didn't see Shayla," Yak said.

Turk pulled up the security app on the iPad. "You walked her out, that's on the feed."

Yak watched the screen. Punc stood behind another vehicle while Shayla backed her car out of the lot. Right after she left, a man in dark clothing came out from behind a dumpster and cold-cocked Punc. Then the man spit on him and kicked Punc in the back. Turk paused the feed.

With a groan, Punc leaned forward and rubbed his back. "Fuck. No wonder my back hurts."

"Let it play," Yak said.

Turk glanced at Yak. "I'm taking a screenshot. Hoping we can get a better look at this asshole."

Yak nodded. "Hurry up. I want to see where the hell he went. He didn't just disappear."

The office door opened. Blood came in, anger shining from his eyes. "Do you know who did this shit, Punc?"

Puncture shook his head. "No. Came up behind me."

"Fuckin' pussy," Tundra muttered.

Yak glanced over at him. "You need to get back to the floor."

Turk let the security footage play. The man hurried back the way he came, prowled behind the dumpster and out of the view of the camera.

"Shit," Turk hissed.

Yak shook his head. "Don't we have a camera that covers the other side of the dumpster?"

Turk sighed. "No. That camera malfunctioned a couple weeks back."

"That's convenient," Yak muttered.

"No, Yak. That hailstorm we had two weeks ago took it out. It's a wonder all the cameras weren't impacted," Turk said.

"You're right."

"If it happened two weeks ago, why hasn't it been fixed already?" Blood asked.

Yak sighed. "Supposed to get it replaced next week. The camera's going to arrive on Monday."

Blood tugged on his ponytail. "Shit doesn't compute here."

Punc nodded. “Yeah. I still got my wallet and shit.”

Blood nodded. “Right, and those assholes have to know there are cameras.”

“Why do you say ‘those’? Only one guy on the feed,” Yak said.

Turk fiddled with the iPad, and pulled up a still photo from the night Lucy was attacked. “Damn. This definitely isn’t the same guy.”

The man who attacked Lucy had a stocky build and wasn’t very tall. Punc’s attacker had to be at least six-foot two since he was taller than Punc’s six-foot one frame.

“Maybe he heard Yak’s Harley comin’,” Punc offered.

Yak shook his head. “No. You were out cold, man. And I didn’t notice anyone in the parking lot.”

“Were you even looking?” Punc asked.

Yak nodded. “Yeah, because I needed to figure out where I was going to park. Almost didn’t go around the back since I only saw two open spaces.”

“Maybe they expect the girls to go out by themselves if I’m knocked out.”

Yak shook his head, but Blood spoke.

“No. They gotta know we got more than one person on security. I’m thinking they’re trying to send some fucked up message.”

Yak glanced at Punc. “Tundra working the floor with you tonight?”

Punc shook his head. “No, Prime is. Tundra’s in the booth tonight.”

Yak squinted at Turk. “Then why didn’t you send Prime out to help me with him?”

Turk dragged a hand down his face. “Didn’t even think, just hit Tundra’s number. He happened to be on break.”

“Bottom line here,” Blood said. “We’re gonna have to have brothers in the parking lot starting tonight.”

“Right,” Yak nodded.

Except he didn’t mean it. Something told him the employees working security for the girls had everything to do with this. A twisted thought entered his head and he couldn’t shake it no matter how much he tried. *Could a Platinum’s employee be behind this?*

The brothers were the only ones who worked the security detail, but the bar staff had been hired. It wouldn’t be that difficult for a bartender to keep tabs on who was working with the dancers each night.

“We ever hear back from, Meena, that bartender we fired last month?” he asked Turk.

“No. What’s she got to do with any fuckin’ thing?”

Yak crossed his arms. “That bitch was so bitter when we cut her loose and she’d always been jealous of the dancers making

more money.”

Turk dipped his chin. “And what’s that got to do with this shit? Two men are on the security footage.”

Yak shrugged. “Just seems odd for them to attack and not take Punc’s wallet or his fuckin’ phone. Also seems strange to me that they know where to hide and shit.”

Blood’s brown eyes shifted between Yak and Turk. “You’re thinking it might be someone inside the club.”

Yak nodded. “I don’t want to think that, but it’s what my gut says.”

Blood nodded. “Right. Keep your eyes open, and bring it up at church tomorrow.”

Turk shook his head. “It’s probably just the fuckin’ Devil Lancers tryin’ to fuck with business. They scare off our dancers, we’re left with no talent on the stage and no business each night.”

“Then why not attack Punc and Shayla together? Why wait until he’s alone?” Yak asked.

“Don’t argue with each other about this shit. Either one of you might be right, or you could both be wrong and it’s some third fucked-up reason. Don’t be late tomorrow.”

Yak nodded. “You’re right. It’s bugs the fuck out of me finding another damn person passed out around here.”

Turk glared at him from across the room. “Punc was the first, wasn’t he?”

Yak kept quiet, and his expression stayed neutral.

“Wasn’t he? Answer me goddammit!” Turk thundered.

Turk was the most even-keeled brother of them all, so Yak gave in. “I found Nora passed out in one of the rooms. She wandered in there after it’d been cleaned and shut down.”

“That’s the chick you brought back who had a tiara in her hair,” Punc muttered.

Yak glared at him.

“What? She was cute as fuck.”

“That doesn’t sound related to this shit,” Blood said.

“Sure you’re right, but something seemed weird about finding her conked out in a VIP room. I thought she might have been roofied, but she woke up remembering going into the room, so that’s out.”

Blood groaned. “You shoulda called someone the moment you found her.”

“Shouldn’t have been thinking with his dick is more like it,” Turk muttered.

Yak took two steps toward Turk, but Blood stepped between them and stiff-armed Yak. “Let it go, man. I’m just saying we could have checked her glass or some shit.”

“She didn’t have a glass in there. By the time I found her, the glasses were washed, I’m sure.”

“Whatever. We gotta find out who’s fuckin’ with the dancers. A chick passed out in here isn’t the concern right

now.”

Chapter 6

Dragon-Headed Pirate Ship

NORA

Mid-morning on Wednesday, my cell rang and I answered, since it was a local number.

“Yo! What time do you want me to pick you up for your appointment?” Trixie asked. Her voice was so loud on my cell phone, I glanced at the screen to make sure it wasn’t on speaker.

“Um... you don’t have to—”

“That is the last time you tell me I don’t have to do something, Nora. You mentioned it was a lunchtime appointment. Want me to pick up food on my way? I can grab tacos. We can live a little and eat them on a Wednesday because they cure everything that ails us. You strike me as a strict Taco Tuesday chick.”

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m not, really. Thanks for the offer, but I’m good. If you want to swing by my office at a quarter to noon, that’d be great.”

“That’s a plan. I’ll text you when I get there because I don’t trust myself if I see that Mia chick.”

I chuckled. “Gotcha.”

From her cubicle, Mia asked, “Was that your new biker boyfriend?”

I pressed my lips together, grateful Mia couldn’t see my expression. She had some gall to ask that question in such a snotty tone. “No. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“He stood very close to you.”

It surprised me that she would willingly bring that up. The phone on my desk rang and I’d never been so grateful to answer it.

“Nora, it’s John. Before your appointment today, I need you to get me the latest quarterly estimates.”

“Absolutely.”

“You can take the afternoon off if you want.”

“I appreciate that, but it isn’t necessary. Not today anyway.”

“I’m going to trust you on that, Nora. But don’t hesitate to ask for time if you need it.”

Ten minutes later, I had just sent the reports to John when Mia leaned on the side of my cube holding a cup of tea.

I glanced at her. “Do you need something?”

She tugged the tea bag up and down. “You know you’re getting involved with the mafia on two wheels, right?”

“Mia, I just got dumped by my fiancé. It’s a little too soon for me to get ‘involved’ with anyone.”

The fact Yak gave me an orgasm five days ago wasn’t any of her business, but it didn’t count as being involved with him.

“Then why did he come with you on Sunday?”

I swiveled in my chair to face her. “Because I got left behind at my own bachelorette party by someone I thought was my friend.” I shook my head. “Is there something work-related you need?”

Her lips curved into a fake smile. “Just trying to help you out. I’d hate for you to get caught up with the wrong people. His vest had a one-percenter patch on it, but maybe you hadn’t noticed.”

There were numerous patches on Yak’s leather vest, but I hadn’t paid many of them much attention.

My phone chimed and I saw Trixie’s text. I leaned over to pull open my desk drawer, forcing Mia to step back. “Thanks for the... concern. I have to run.”

Her eyes widened like a thought just struck her. “Oh, you have your first appointment today, right?”

I tucked my wristlet under my arm, grabbed my phone, stood, and used my foot to shove the drawer closed. “Second appointment, actually.”

Her expression dimmed. “Oh. I hope it goes your way, Nora. Believe it or not, I mean that.”

I nodded, but with her hollow tone, I didn't believe a word out of her mouth.

Two blocks from the hospital, Trixie stopped at a traffic light. "You... are something else."

I twisted my head to look at her profile. "Why? Because I have cancer?"

She grinned and shook her head. "No, because with *anybody* else I speak my mind and let it all hang out. You got in my car and I've been toying with how to say what I want or ask what's on my mind. It's weird that I react that way to you."

I chuckled. "If you say so. Don't let me keep you from speaking out."

The light changed and she kept her eyes on the road. "Then tell me what had you looking so dejected when you came out of your office. I get this isn't some routine check-up and shit, but you looked especially bummed."

I sighed. "Just a run-in with Mia. She said some things..."

"What kind of things?" Trixie asked.

It would be easy to keep Mia's comments about the Riot to myself, but I was curious to hear Trixie's perspective. "She said I'm getting involved with the mafia on two wheels of all things."

She barked out a laugh. "Ha! That doesn't surprise me. Mafia. She wouldn't know a mafia on two wheels if they

drove through her bedroom.”

“But the members are one-percenters aren’t they?”

Trixie shifted in her seat. “Yeah, but not like they used to be. Most of the time they stay on the right side of the law.”

I shot her some side-eye. “Most of the time?”

She waved a hand at me. “Yeah. Most of the time. Now what other shit did she spew at you?”

A small smile pulled at my lips. “Then she had the audacity to tell me she hoped my appointment went ‘well.’ It’s hard to say what’s more insulting, how fake her words sounded or how insipid the words were. Nothing about this appointment can really go ‘well,’ you know?”

Trixie shook her head. “Don’t let that bitch get to you.”

I nodded. “I’m not letting her get to me, but at the same time I like to understand why people do things. But, heck if I can wrap my mind around why she’d throw me a bachelorette party if she was busy having sexy times with Destin.”

Trixie parked her car outside the doctor’s office. “You’re asking the wrong woman. I held out for a long time with my man. A very long time, so it took me a while to recognize that I wouldn’t stand for being second-best. But what that skank did... that’s settling for being second best, since she took him right after he broke things off. That shit doesn’t just happen, she had to be waiting in the wings. So I really got nothing on why she’d do that shit.”

I tucked my phone into my wristlet and unbuckled my seatbelt. “Me neither.”

Trixie squeezed my forearm. “The better question is, what about Yak?”

I leaned my head back. “What about him? There’s nothing happening there, Trixie.”

She laughed. “Right. I’m tabling this until after your appointment, but you need to recognize. I’m not buying what you’re selling.”

Unlike my first appointment, this one ran excessively long. I’d shown up early to do the paperwork. About ten minutes after my appointment time, a nurse called me back to an examination room. There, Trixie and I waited for forty-five minutes before a different nurse came in and took my vitals.

From the look on her face, I suspected other patients were giving her a hard time. As she secured the blood-pressure cuff on my arm she said, “I’m sorry about the wait. Dr. Loring is thorough with his patients and doesn’t like to leave any questions unanswered.”

It was nearly two-thirty by the time we climbed back into Trixie’s Camaro.

I shut my door and buckled up. “I’m so sorry that took so damn long, Trixie. I should just take an Uber back—”

“Stop it. I figured your first appointment would run long, but it didn’t. I said this shouldn’t take long, but Roll pointed out I had no way of knowing that. He’s cool. It’s all good, woman.”

I nodded. “I still feel bad.”

She shook her head as she backed her car out of the parking spot. “That woman had it wrong. It isn’t that the doctor likes to answer every question, it’s that he likes the sound of his own voice. He could have cut that so much shorter.”

I nodded, though, I actually liked how detailed the doctor had been.

“Do you have a third doctor to see?” Trixie asked after a while.

“No. I left it at two. I’ll talk to my Mom before I make a decision, she actually went through breast cancer treatment when I was a kid.”

Trixie jerked her eyes toward me and back to the road. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. But she made it through, obviously. It’s odd though, she thought I should set up three doctors also. I just feel like it’s overkill.”

“All this stress, I need a Big Mac, Nora. I know you want to get back to the office, but I need to eat. What do you want?”

I chuckled. “You’re going to think I’m crazy, but I’d love a cheeseburger Happy Meal.”

She laughed. “You are crazy. I took my kid out of my car, but I still gotta place the same Mickey D’s order. Gogurt or apple slices?”

“Apple slices. They never have the Gogurts half the time. And chocolate milk while you’re at it.”

Ten minutes later, Trixie handed me the bag of food while she shoved a straw in her large Diet Coke.

“Why a Happy Meal?” she asked.

I hurried to chew and swallow an apple slice. “Because it comes with fruit and milk. I know that’s ridiculous, but I’m not the biggest soda drinker and I like getting fruit to off-set the burger.”

She shot me a skeptical look. “That sounds like bullshit to me.”

I sighed. “It is and it isn’t. I got into the habit after my dad died. He had a stroke when I was nineteen, and nobody said as much, but I don’t think the copious amounts of diet soda he drank helped matters.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Anyway, you ask for a milk with your Big Mac and they either assume you said ‘milk shake’ or they give you the milk, but it costs so much more than a soda it’s highway robbery. With the Happy Meal, the milk’s included.”

Trixie shook her head. “Girl, you’re crazy. Coming from me... that’s saying something.”

I grinned. “Do you want your Big Mac or the french fries first?”

“Fries. I can’t eat a Big Mac and drive. I also can’t drive you back to your office until you tell me why there’s nothing happening with Yak. I saw him on Sunday and he thanked me for taking you to your Friday appointment as if I’d escorted you to see the Pope or something. Aren’t you interested in him?”

I took a deep breath. “It doesn’t really matter, Trixie.”

She grabbed three fries. “The plot thickens. Why doesn’t it matter?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to be dealing with heavy things soon, and he seems to think I deserve better than him.”

“Is that what it is?” she asked.

My eyes closed for a moment. “Crap. I hadn’t meant to say that last part.”

She chuckled. “But you did, and I’m glad. Listen, I didn’t realize Yak thought that way about himself. Though, a fair number of the brothers do... until the right woman comes along.”

I swallowed a sip of milk. “I’m not that woman, Trixie.”

She swiveled her head toward me. “Oh, you are. You just don’t know it yet.”

I finished my cheeseburger. “Whatever. He’s also very busy with other things, and frankly, so am I. The timing’s wrong.

That happens in life.”

She pulled into a parking space at my office building. “Timing schmiming.” She turned her head to me. “Everything happens for a reason, and you and Yak met for a reason, Nora.”

My fist tightened around the wadded-up wrapper for my burger. “Yeah, but maybe that reason was so he could help me get away from Destin. That’s done. It’s all cool.”

She narrowed an eye at me. “That tone of voice... there’s something else going on here, isn’t there?”

I shook my head. “No. I gotta get back to work, Trixie. Thanks for stopping at McDonald’s.” I shoved a ten-dollar bill in the cup holder. “I really appreciate you coming with me to these appointments. Take care.”

She grabbed my forearm before I could get out of her car. “Nora, don’t say it like that. You can’t write me off, and I’m bringing the other ol’ ladies around later.”

I blew out a laugh. “I’d tell you not to, but I know you’re going to do it anyway. Fine. But I don’t want to stay up too late.”

She grinned. “I didn’t say it was happening tonight. Now that I think of it, maybe we’ll have an impromptu pool party on Saturday.”

“It’s February.”

She lowered her chin. “First of March is tomorrow. But really, who cares! That pool is heated and we’re taking

advantage of it.”

Yak

The distinct scent of sawdust filled Yak with nostalgia. It always did, and it was the reason he'd been willing to help Rage and Lisa a few months ago. Nothing reminded him of his dad and granddad quite the same way.

“What are you doin’ here, Yak?” Lisa asked, pulling off her safety goggles.

Rage glowered at him. “You better not be here to spread your foul mood.”

Yak dipped his chin. “Because I’ll ruin your sunny disposition?”

“What are you two talking about? Yak’s always in a good mood.”

Rage backed away from a workbench. “He hasn’t been lately. Don’t know what’s up his ass, won’t talk to any of us about it.”

Yak shook his head. “Taste of your own medicine, motherfucker.” He looked at Lisa. “You still willing to build that hammock stand for me?”

Months ago, when Yak saw Lisa’s talent in furniture construction, he showed her a meme. It contained a picture of a hammock. Rather than use a metal stand, the stand was made of wood which had been carved to look like a pirate ship with a dragon head at the helm. The text read “When you wanna

take a nap but you also wanna pillage.” He’d been halfway fucking with her at the time, thinking it couldn’t be done and that the photo had possibly been fake. Yet, from the way Lisa’s eyes had lit up Yak saw it might be doable.

She grinned. “Like I said, if you get the wood for me—”

“And twenty-five hundred dollars,” Rage muttered.

Lisa glanced at Rage. “He can pay me when it’s finished.”

“The teak wood is supposed to arrive in about half an hour. That’s why I’m here. To make sure it’s delivered, and I’ll pay you half now. How’s that?”

Rage crossed his arms on his chest. “You could have called to tell us and sent the money through a cash app. Save yourself a trip over here from Avondale.”

Yak shrugged. “I could have, but lovely Lisa hasn’t hired anyone yet, and I know she wants more pieces out on that showroom floor. I’m here to help for the official grand opening in May.”

“It’s not even March yet.”

Lisa sidled up to Rage and rubbed his bicep. “March first is tomorrow, honey. If Yak wants to help, I won’t say no. Let it go.”

The hard stare Rage gave Yak should have made him uncomfortable, but after years with the Riot, Yak withstood it.

“You got some other motive for being here. Least you could do is be open about it.”

Sometimes it pissed him off how well his brothers could read him, but it came with the territory. Yak needed to be here instead of at home. Nora didn't leave for her office until quarter to eight every morning. After kissing her in his kitchen last Friday night, Yak had fought stalking over to her place and giving her exactly what she wanted. Yesterday morning, he nearly lost that fight. Which was when he came up with the idea of coming here straight from Platinum's.

He shook his head. "How about you listen to your woman and let it go? I'm only sticking around until about noon, then I'm going home to get some shut-eye."

Avoiding Nora was just one of the reasons he sought refuge at Lisa's workshop. When he hit the clubhouse to get some sleep, it only set his mind reeling about who could possibly be sabotaging Platinum's. As much as he hated it, he thought a brother was behind this shit.

But that was ludicrous.

Sacrilege.

Still, he couldn't get the nagging thought out of his head and sharing the idea with any of his brothers would open the floodgates.

Four hours later, the teak wood was delivered and Yak helped Rage stack it in a corner of the workshop.

Lisa stared down at the wood, her expression full of admiration. "That wood is gorgeous, Yak." Her brown eyes

caught his. “But you should have called me. My supplier probably offers a better price.”

He grinned. “But would it be better quality?”

Her hands twisted up for a moment. “We’ll never know, but this feels like Christmas. I can’t wait to work with that wood.”

Yak couldn’t resist such an easy set-up. “Good to know. Rage’s woman likes to work with my wood.”

“Gonna work my fist in your face you don’t cut that shit out, Yak.”

Yak shook his head. “Whatever. You gotta lighten up. Besides, didn’t you take shop class in high school? Any conversation around here is rife with double entendres. Wood, drilled, screws, getting nailed. Come on, man.”

Lisa nodded. “He’s got you there, Rage. Though he forgot one. Bent. ’Cause I’m really gonna need that wood to bend if it’s going to look like a dragon-headed pirate ship holding a hammock.”

Rage shook his head. “She builds this thing, how the hell are you gonna get it to your upstairs bedroom in that old house?”

Yak smiled. “Very carefully. I don’t fuckin’ know. Cross that bridge when we get there.”

Lisa chuckled. “Cross that bridge... on your dragony pirate ship.”

Yak asked, “Where’s Trixie and Roll?”

Lisa shook her head. “Trixie had to take someone to an appointment, which means Roll has Jasmine and Rafferty.”

Yak nodded, trying to ignore how much he wished he were taking Nora to that appointment. “Right. It’s after eleven. I gotta split. Catch y’all later.”

The next morning, Yak drove home after his shift at Platinum’s rather than hide from Nora. He stood at his kitchen sink sipping a beer and watching her shove flattened cardboard boxes into the recycle bin. She wore high-heels and a sexy little cobalt blue dress that flared at her waist. He groaned when she went up on her toes and stooped over the edge of the bin. His teeth sunk into his bottom lip as he imagined her shoving that ass out toward him in his bedroom. He tightened his grip on the beer bottle, forcing the image out of his mind.

It would be so easy to go out there, let her know that Tuesday was recycle day, and ease into a conversation about how her appointments went. Find out if she had plans later tonight, since it was his night off.

He tossed the dregs of his beer into the sink. “Not doin’ that shit,” he muttered and he went upstairs to read before getting some sleep.

After he flipped on his fan and shut his eyes, the vision of Nora bent over assaulted him. He rolled to his side and fluffed up the pillow he held. Her picture-perfect body wouldn’t leave

him alone. It had been a long damn time since a woman fucked with his head like this.

Sleeping during the day was difficult enough for him, so any time he had trouble getting to sleep he nipped it in the bud with a nighttime painkiller. He stalked to the bathroom and took a pill, and drank some water. It wasn't the healthiest move, but he refused to jack off while thinking about Nora again.

He wanted her, but he didn't want her in this life.

It made him feel like a hypocrite to think that, but everything about her said picket fences and two-point-five kids. There were no kids in his future.

Not a chance.

The foster system cured him of that so-called dream.

Hell, it had surprised the fuck out of him when Cal became so adamant to knock up his woman, Mallory. Yak had thought Cal was of the same mindset as him since both of them were in the foster system as teenagers. Now Cal had a daughter and from what he'd said recently, he wanted Mallory to have a second, he just had to convince her. Cal made a fantastic dad, but Yak didn't have that in him.

No matter what Nora said about her recent bad news making her leery of commitment, he knew better. She probably saw him as a 'walk on the wild side,' and years ago he'd have been down with that. With a woman like her now though, not so much.

From kissing her alone, he wasn't sure he'd ever get his fill. Finger fucking her had been more satisfying than he'd expected, which told him sinking his dick into her would only make things worse for both of them.

That would make him a total bastard. Take her time –if not *waste* her time– and lead her on in the process.

No.

She definitely deserved better.

On that thought, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

At a quarter after four that afternoon, Yak opened the side door of the house to Nora.

She fidgeted with nerves, but looked him in the eye. “I’m here about... possibly two things.”

“Possibly?”

She nodded. “Yeah. The first thing is that my mom will be here in a couple weeks for my lumpectomy. I suggested she get a hotel, but whether she does or not, she’ll have to be able to get in and out of the driveway with her rental car. I didn’t want you to be caught off-guard when you see another vehicle here.”

His head tilted a fraction. “Why can’t she just drive your car?”

Nora’s dry, non-plussed look almost made him laugh. “Believe me, I suggested the same damn thing and... we’ll just

say my mom's headstrong.”

“Okay. So, you've decided on a doctor, then?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“That's good, right?” he asked.

Her chest rose with her deep breath. “I guess. Certainly makes things more real.”

He didn't have a response to that and kept quiet.

The silence bordered on being uncomfortable. Then she squared her shoulders, the skirt of her blue dress swaying. “The other reason I came by is... because, well, I don't know, maybe if it's possible, um—”

“Just spit it out, Nora,” he said, grinning.

She swallowed and looked up at him. “If you don't have to work tonight, would you mind giving me a ride on your bike?”

His head reared back and he stepped back she'd surprised him so bad. “You need a ride?”

She shook her head. “No, I'd like a ride on your bike.”

He leaned against the jamb. “You can't get on my bike.”

Her brows drew together. “What do you mean? I did before.”

He eyed her up and down. That damn blue dress was even sexier up close. “Not wearing that you didn't.”

She glanced down at her dress. “Oh. You have a point. I'll go change.”

“Why?”

“Um, because you said—”

“No, why do you want a ride on my bike so bad?”

Her head tilted and she looked away for a beat. “Let’s just say, I enjoyed the short ride you gave me a couple weeks ago and... I’d like to do that again, just not quite as short.”

He crossed his arms. “I say that’s only a half-truth and nobody gets on my bike with me until I get the *full* truth.”

She put her hands on her hips, and his dick took notice. “I don’t see why it matters, but it’s been a pretty shitty week – hell, it’s been a shitty year so far– and being on your motorcycle was the first time I’d felt free and my mind wasn’t jumbled.”

He closed his eyes, fighting a supreme urge to kiss her. She’d all but said the same things he had the first time he’d taken a bike for a spin in his teens. For the first time, the muddled bullshit of life hadn’t overwhelmed him.

“I get it, you probably have to work,” she said, and he opened his eyes.

He straightened. “No, we’re taking a ride. Gotta put on my boots. You gotta put on some jeans and a long-sleeve shirt.” He paused and took in her wavy, auburn hair. “Tie that gorgeous mane up, too. You’ll be wearing a helmet, but I don’t want you fighting with your hair for an hour because it’s so tangled from the wind.”

“You’re sure it’s not a problem?”

“It’s not a problem,” he semi-lied. It could become a problem, but it was one of the few risks he was willing to take where she was concerned.

Chapter 7

We're Just Here for the Tacos

YAK

Yak leaned into the curve of the on-ramp to the interstate. Nora's fingers gripped him tighter and even over the rumble of the pipes he heard her laugh. He caught a glimpse of her in his side mirror and the joy on her face made him smile.

She wasn't the first woman he'd had on his bike, but she'd probably be the last.

Not because he would go there with her, but because he'd compare every ride with another woman to this one. And there was no chance they would compare.

He'd meant to ask Nora where she wanted to go or even how far she wanted to ride. Now he had to decide if they were going north or south since they were at the I-10 and I-95 juncture. Instinct kicked in and he sped up to take them north. This would keep them on the same side of the river.

Nora's hold tightened the faster they went. It only encouraged him to increase his speed.

'Sweet torture' should be her middle name.

When they passed a billboard for the Jacksonville Zoo, he wondered if the zoo would still be open. If it was, they wouldn't be able to stick around very long, which was fine with Yak because this wasn't a date. This wasn't anything except a ride on his bike.

Keep telling yourself that, asshole.

He powered off his bike in the zoo parking lot and Nora quickly hopped off.

She unclasped the helmet with a gleaming smile. "The zoo? You don't strike me as the type."

While he swung off his bike, he didn't miss the way her eyes followed his body. Strange that she had no shame about ogling him in public, but stammered her way through asking him to take her for a ride.

He tucked his keys in his pocket. "Not sure if they're gonna let us in. They probably close soon, but I'm not here for the animals. They actually sell pretty excellent tacos."

Her chin dipped and she cocked a brow. "And how would you know that if you don't visit regularly?"

He grinned. "All right smarty, you got me there, but I'm not a regular. Trixie and Roll dragged me along back in December for the holiday lights and shit. Let's see if they'll let us in, I'm fuckin' hungry."

Five minutes later, a woman behind a plexiglass window said, "We close in ninety minutes, sir."

Yak slid his credit card forward. “We’re just here for the tacos.”

The employee shook her head. “Moe’s would have been cheaper, but I guess there’s a first time for everything. Enjoy.”

As they wandered toward the middle of the zoo to the taco restaurant, Nora said, “She’s right, you know. These are going to be some overpriced tacos considering our admission cost.”

“Don’t worry about it. Not like there are too many other places where we can eat near here.”

She shook her head. “I doubt there’s anything near here, really. The docks aren’t too far and the only other thing I saw was that convenience store.”

“Biker bar not far from here, but they don’t serve food,” he muttered.

“I’ve never been to a biker bar,” she murmured as they turned into the festive courtyard in front of the taco stand.

“Not surprising since I popped your cherry for riding a Harley.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw her shake her head once. She smiled. “I wonder what Evan would think of you.”

“Who’s that?”

She smiled up at him. “My brother. Fraternal twin.”

Those words rendered him speechless. He’d lost count, but it seemed like at least the third time she’d done that.

She bumped her shoulder into his bicep. “You got nothing to say?”

“I’m busy thanking God there isn’t another female version of you out there. Not sure mankind could handle it.”

A strangled sound came from her. Might have been a scoff or it might have been laughter. “That’s an odd compliment.”

He shook his head and opened the door for her. “No, it’s the straight truth.”

They took their food outside to eat in the setting sun. Yak waited until Nora swallowed her first bite of a crunchy taco. “Where’s Evan in all this? Does he know what the scumbag did to you?”

She frowned. “He’s on an aircraft carrier. I texted him to change his leave, and Mom said she’d get word to him. But I think it’s too late for him to change things. So... he’ll probably be around sometime next week too.”

He nodded and popped the last bite of his first taco in his mouth.

Nora set down her souvenir cup. “I’ll introduce you to him when he’s here. You’d like him.”

He shook his head. “Nah. I’m gonna stay at the clubhouse that week. Stay out of your hair that way. In fact, all of you could stay in the main house if you want. Make things easier on you.”

Her gaze lowered to the concrete table and she pressed her lips together. He thought his offer would help.

Finally she looked up at him. “Much as I appreciate that, Yak, I’m having my surgery that week. I’ll be in the hospital for one night at least. Once I’m home, I’d rather be in my bed. But that’s an extremely kind offer.”

He shook his head. “That seems pretty fast.”

“Yeah, well, cancer can spread and my doctor wants to get rid of it as quick as we can. Based on my scans and the fact my mom had a similar experience, he thinks there’s a good chance being aggressive will work.”

And there it was. The reason he had to keep his distance. She needed her family rallied around her, not concerned about the rough biker next door who runs a strip club.

“You seem angry,” she whispered.

He stared into her green eyes. “Not at you, Nora. Cancer always pisses me off since both my parents died from it, within eighteen months of each other.”

She held a forkful of black beans half-way to her mouth. “Are you serious? I remember you saying your parents went through treatments, but... God, within a year and a half of each other. That’s freaking brutal.”

“Yeah, it was. But I survived that and the fucking foster care system.” Hearing the words from his mouth, he closed his eyes for a moment. “Sorry. I hadn’t meant to take us down this path.”

The truth was, something about Nora put him at ease and he shared shit he didn’t tell anybody. Yet another reason he

wanted to distance himself.

A zoo employee with a broom and dustpan wandered up to their table. “Not to rush you or anything, but the zoo closes in forty-five minutes. If you plan to take the train, the last one leaves in fifteen minutes.”

Yak nodded. “Thanks for the heads-up. We’re almost done.”

“What’s your favorite animal here?” Nora asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t have one.”

“You can’t fool me with your lies, Noah. Everyone has a favorite.”

“What’s yours then?”

She grinned. “The ostrich.”

He laughed. “You’re shitting me right?”

“Why would I be shitting you?”

“It’s my favorite too.”

“You are lying just to get me off your back.”

He chuckled. “Nope. They’re accused of putting their heads in the sand, though that’s more a myth than anything. They’re tall like me, aggressive to a fault, and even if they can’t fly, they can haul ass up to like thirty miles an hour.”

“Thirty-five, and forty-three if they sprint,” she said.

He finished his soda. “Right. And they look fuckin’ hysterical when they run and I’m all about a good laugh.”

“Well, if they weren’t on the opposite end of the property, I’d say we should pay them a visit.”

He gave her a half-nod. “Yeah, but you can’t really see them unless you take a train, so we’re out of luck.”

Back at his bike, Nora fastened the helmet on her head. “I take it we’re headed straight home. No side trip to the biker bar.”

“Not a fuckin’ chance, princess,” he said, just before his cell rang. “Let me take this.”

He saw Volt’s name on the screen before he answered. “Hey, Volt.”

“Hey. Know you got the night off. Any chance you can hit that biker bar on the Northside?”

“Sure, in about an hour. That cool?”

Volt sighed. “Called you for a reason. You live closer than any other brother. This time of evening, you should be able to get there in twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, but I need to take someone home and then I can swing by there.”

“Can’t she take an Uber? Avondale’s pretty central.”

“I’m not at home, man, and I don’t want her taking an Uber from... where we are.”

“Then take her with you. In fact, that’s even better.”

He gave a short shake of his head, not understanding how taking a woman with him would make anything better about visiting that dive. “She’s not...” Yak hesitated, then looked at what Nora wore. That fuckin’ dress from earlier had been imprinted on his brain, so he hadn’t appreciated her more casual clothes. Her jeans were faded and fit her like a second skin. His eyes trailed up her torso and he realized her long-sleeve shirt left little to the imagination. If it weren’t for the innocence she gave off like a light, she’d look like a complete biker babe.

“She’s not what?” Volt asked.

“All due respect, Prez, but why do I need to hit that place?”

“Got word the Lancers are there. By the time you get there, Roll should be there too.”

“Then why not just send him?”

“Power in numbers, Yak. You know that. Wouldn’t put it past them to attack one of us – especially if a brother is there alone.”

Yak blew out a breath. “Okay. I’ll meet him there.”

Volt chuckled. “Don’t worry. He’ll have Trixie with him.”

Yak’s head swiveled in a slow, circular nod. “Yeah, I was afraid of that.”

Nora stared at him expectantly as she adjusted the helmet. He tucked his phone back on his hip. “You’re getting your wish, princess. We’re headed to the biker dive just down the road.”

“Really?” she asked with bright eyes.

Fuck. He wished this wouldn't disappoint her, but... then again, maybe it would change her mind about him.

“Yeah, really. I mean it when I say it's a dive, Nora. And, the crowd is rough. You stay by my side the entire fuckin' time, got it? *Right* by my side.”

She saluted him with two fingers to her forehead. “Got it, sir. Good thing we went to the bathroom before we left.”

He nodded. “Yeah. That's another thing. Trixie and Roll will probably be there. *Don't* do anything Trixie says. If you get anything to drink, it'll be beer and it'll be bottled.”

She shook her head. “Trixie's not crazy, Yak.” Her eyes gazed up toward her brows as though she heard what she'd said. “I mean, she's crazy, but not *that* crazy.”

Yak dipped his chin. “You ain't seen her in this kind of environment, princess. She's off the fuckin' charts crazy, and places like this bring it out of her. You stick by my side, it won't be an issue.”

Nora

My mind waffled between whether Yak was exaggerating about this biker bar to scare me straight or whether he was serious and I should be scared outright. The moment he'd mentioned Trixie would be there, I felt relief, but then his insistence I stick with him made me think he wasn't joking.

Whatever.

The world had a way of giving me what I wanted when I wanted it –only it never worked out quite right– so I mentally girded myself for the worst possible experience.

Yak's actions made it clear that this was not a date, but I couldn't stop myself from enjoying the hell out of it. Spending time with him was easy in a way it hadn't been with Destin. But then I suppose Destin had been trying to impress me –or more likely he was juggling. Trixie's point about Mia waiting in the wings struck home, and ultimately Destin must have given her some glimmer of hope for her to even be in the wings.

Those thoughts flew out of my head once we took off from the zoo. I loved everything about being on Yak's bike. The roar of the wind, the rumble of his motorcycle, sitting so close to him –even if I didn't really need to, since his bike had a backrest.

We hadn't even ridden a full mile before Yak veered off for Main Street. Guess he hadn't been kidding about the bar being close, because we pulled into a dirt parking lot moments later.

At least thirty bikes had to be sitting in the lot and probably ten people were milling around. The men were all rough around the edges, and looking at the women—I felt overdressed. Most of the women were in tank-tops, or crop-tops if they had sleeves, and many were wearing shorts instead of pants. At least I'd opted for my black, long-sleeve Nine Inch Nails shirt instead of something more colorful, so I didn't stand out quite so bad.

Yak rolled to a stop and I stayed still.

He looked at me over his shoulder. It gave me a great view of his profile and not for the first time I admired the hoop-shaped nose ring on his right nostril.

“Need you to get off, Nora.”

I bit back my smile, but said, “There is *such* a double entendre there, you know.”

He sighed. “I don't need a distraction like that. Hop off. Have to give you a quick run-down before we go inside.”

I hurried off his bike and took off the helmet. He stood facing me, but his eyes were scanning the area behind me. From the expression on his face, Yak was all business.

“Really wish I didn't have to bring you here,” he muttered.

“Why?”

He shook his head, then made eye contact with me. “My club president wants me and Roll here because another club is here. Don’t know what the point is exactly, I’m guessing Roll does. But, they got an ax to grind with us and always have. You don’t need to be around this shit.”

“What happened?”

“Too long a story, but they’ve attacked our women rather than man up and attack one of us.”

“Oh,” I whispered.

He nodded. “Yeah. There’s a whole lot more to it than that, but you get the idea. They don’t like us and...” He paused. “Here comes Roll. Don’t act too friendly with Trixie.”

My head reared back. “Why?”

“She ain’t gonna be the same person you’re used to, either. This isn’t the place for girlie shit, Nora.”

I put a hand on my hip to argue, then lowered it. “I’m not that girlie, Yak.”

His lips tipped up. “Oh, yeah, you are. But this gives you the chance to prove me wrong.”

“What the hell is she doin’ here?” Trixie demanded when she climbed off Roll’s motorcycle.

I turned to her. “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. This is not your scene, Nora Jean.”

“You mean Norma Jean, but it’s all right. I’ve been told to stick close to Yak and not do anything you’d do.”

Trixie narrowed her eyes on Yak. “Not do anything *I’d* do?”

Roll lumbered over to us. “Stop, Trix. Both of you keep to yourselves.”

Another motorcycle rolled into the lot and pulled up next to Roll’s. A petite woman with red-hair got off, and then a tall, lanky man with long, brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail swung off.

He yanked down his wrap-around Oakley sunglasses and stared right at me. “You must be the princess.”

I slowly turned my head toward Yak. “How does he know who I am?”

Yak glanced at me and faced the other man. “She is, which is why this shit should wait twenty minutes for me to get her—”

“Be closer to forty by the time you’re back,” Roll muttered.

The red-head aimed a resigned smile at me. “I’m Abby.” She made a fist and swung her thumb toward the lanky man. “This is Blood. Any luck, this won’t take long and we can all hit Yak’s pad afterward.”

“Not happening Abby,” Yak said in a firm tone.

She shook her head. “You’re such a killjoy. I bet if Cal’s pool were heated we could swim there.”

Blood stood behind Abby and he looped his arm around her waist, pulling her back to his front. “Enough, woman. We don’t want any bullshit tonight. Any Devil Lancers who have women in there, don’t let them rile you up.” His eyes caught

mine. “That includes you. Hate to say it, but Yak’s instincts are probably right. Should have taken you home, but nothing for that shit now. Let’s go inside.”

Blood tucked Abby to his side and led the way toward the front doors.

Trixie walked next to me and I whispered, “Why should he have taken me home?”

In a low voice, Trixie said, “You’re like blood in the water, and these assholes are sharks. They’re gonna probably zero in on you, but don’t worry. Me and Abby’ll handle it.”

Yak draped an arm around my shoulders. “No, you won’t, Trix. She ain’t leaving my side.”

We walked two steps before Yak swung his free arm behind his back, grabbed my hand and wrapped my arm around his waist.

“Needs to be believable, Nora,” he muttered.

I shifted my arm so I had my hand under his vest, resting against waistband of his jeans.

His eyes cut to me. “What are you doing?”

I smiled up at him. “It needs to be believable, right? What woman wouldn’t touch you skin to skin?”

The moment we rounded the corner of the building, one of the doors swung open. Yak shifted us, putting himself between me and whoever exited the bar. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled my body to his.

A cloud must have drifted in the sky because the setting sun suddenly lit Yak's brown eyes making them look like pools of melted bronze. I could stare at them for an hour. This felt so much like a date it wasn't funny, but I couldn't let myself pretend like that –no matter how tempting it was.

His eyes darted to the side, then back to mine. Next thing I knew, his hand locked at the base of my skull and he crushed his lips to mine. My lips parted in surprise. I didn't know what prompted this, but my tongue gave his lips a tentative touch. He groaned and his mouth opened.

His head tilted and he deepened the kiss.

I reached up and slid my hand along his shoulder.

He cut the kiss short and turned his head to the side. His eyes were closed and his nostrils flared as he took in a deep breath.

His hand dropped away from my neck, he glanced back at me, and grabbed my hand. "Don't get pissed, but that was so a couple guys wouldn't come over here to talk to me. Sorry I used you."

On the one hand, if it came with a kiss like that one, I didn't mind being used, but on the other hand, I wondered if I'd lost my mind, because I despised being used.

Inside the bar, a haze of smoke hung in the air and aggressive heavy metal music played loud enough it was difficult to have a conversation. We navigated between groups of other bikers toward a large doorway on the far side of the room which led to the main bar. This area was quieter and the

atmosphere was stifling. Like danger on a short fuse, ready to explode at any moment.

Older men at the bar eyed our progress. I forced an aloof expression and let Yak guide me to a barstool. He perched on the stool next to me. Trixie settled on my other side while Roll, Blood, and Abby took seats next to her.

A man wearing a black bandana around his head stood behind the bar drying a pint glass. His beard had a smattering of gray hairs. He wore frameless glasses, and his dark eyes leveled an assessing gaze on us.

After a moment, he put the glass down and moved to Blood. “Not gonna tolerate any trouble here tonight. Don’t care that the Devil Lancers are here talkin’ shit. Now, what are you having?”

Blood ordered beers for all of us, and the bartender moved to the taps.

Trixie leaned toward me and muttered, “Before I forget, I told you.”

I aimed a questioning glance at her.

She grinned. “Saw what Yak did out there. We’ll talk about that later.”

The bartender put a beer in front of me and Yak. His eyes darted from me to Yak and back to me. Then he shook his head and ambled away to pull two more beers.

“He’s an ass. Don’t worry about it,” Trixie said.

“Woman, what’d I tell you?” Roll asked.

Trixie smiled at him. “So sorry.”

By the time the bartender put beers in front of Blood and Abby, two men approached Blood.

I tried to eavesdrop, but Yak slung his arm around my shoulder. “You’re being too obvious, Nora. Don’t attract any more attention, if you can help it.”

I glanced at him. “I don’t attract attention.”

That earned me Yak’s cynical side-eye. “You do.”

Blood stood.

Yak glanced that way, then lifted his chin. “I’m goin’ with Blood and Roll to chat with those two Devil Lancers. I’ve seen Crop before. The other one doesn’t look familiar. Enjoy your beer and don’t let Zeke bother you. Trixie’s right. He’s an ass to everyone, though he’s gone easy on you so far.”

The five of them sauntered to the far side of the room.

Abby craned her neck so she could make eye contact with me and Trixie. “That didn’t take long.”

Trixie kept a blank expression and shook her head. “Nope, and that’s strange.”

Abby shrugged a shoulder. “Eh, maybe not.”

A woman with sleek brown hair, wearing a skin-tight tank top and shiny black leggings slid onto the empty stool between Trixie and Abby, while another woman sat next to me. From

the corner of my eye I saw she had frizzy, blonde hair and hot pink lipstick.

“Who’s this bitch, Trix?” the woman next to Abby asked, nodding her head toward me.

“She’s with Yak. That’s all you need to know, Kyla” Abby said.

Kyla turned to Abby. “Didn’t ask you.”

“Don’t give a damn. She’s with Yak, which means she’s with us,” Abby muttered.

The blonde spoke in a nasally voice. “Yak’s never brought any bitch in here before. What makes you different?”

I glanced her way and took in her outfit. The black pleather crop-top with a lace-up corset she wore left little to the imagination. She’d paired it with camouflage shorts.

After a moment, I said, “I’m not that different.”

Kyla erupted with loud laughter. “Go sell that shit somewhere else. You’re dressed like a yuppie playing at being a weekend warrior.” She paused for effect. “Only it’s not the weekend.”

Trixie turned to Kyla. “You don’t know that. Plenty of people work four days a week. Thursday night could be her Friday night.”

From my other side, the blonde said, “Let’s have gin-and-tonics.”

Trixie looked at the woman. “No offense, Jemma, but only *you* like G and Ts.”

Jemma’s face screwed up into a pout. “Whatever. Zeke makes great cocktails. You bitches are wasting your time just having beer.”

Zeke ambled up to us. “Did I hear you want a gin and tonic?”

“Let’s have rum-runners instead,” Kyla suggested.

“Okay,” Jemma said. “Five of them, Zeke. One for each of us.”

I shook my head and raised a hand at Zeke. “Not for me, thanks. Yak asked me to stick to beer.”

Zeke lifted his chin at me and turned to the shelves with the liquor.

“Since when does Yak like a woman who *listens*?” Jemma asked.

Trixie opened her mouth, but Kyla said, “I can’t believe he wants a woman who’s so docile.”

I bit my tongue to keep from speaking.

However, Trixie said, “Oh, she’s far from docile.”

“Really,” Kyla said, aiming a skeptical look at me.

Before I could say anything, Yak’s deep voice said, “Let’s go, babe.”

Looking over my shoulder, the small smile on my lips fell away at the serious set of Yak’s lips.

Jemma's voice sounded coy. "Where would you like to go, Yak?"

"Wasn't talkin' to you, skank."

I slid off my barstool and moved toward him. "Don't we need to pay?" I asked in a low voice.

His hand cupped the back of my neck and I feared he'd kiss me again. Fear, because that wasn't something Jemma or Kyla deserved to watch.

His lips brushed my ear. "It's handled."

"Abs, Trixie. Later," he said, and guided us out of the bar.

Chapter 8

It Isn't Like That

YAK

On a Sunday evening, a week and a half later, Yak pulled into the back lot of the clubhouse. Their normal session of church had been canceled last week due to so many members going to Bike Week in Daytona. He put down the kickstand on his bike, swung off, and then put his small duffel bag into the trunk of his beat-up Kia Rio. His car hadn't been driven in a week, and he didn't feel like riding back from Platinum's on his bike tonight.

Nora's family had arrived last Monday, if the rental car in the driveway was any indication. Yak hadn't spoken to her since bringing her back from the bar. He'd felt guilty about it until today. If he'd kept in contact with her, she would have insisted he meet her family.

They didn't need to worry about her new neighbor on top of her health crisis.

He hit his room inside the clubhouse to put his phone on the charger. He wouldn't need it during church.

On his way to the meeting room downstairs, he ran into Turk.

“Everything good at Platinum’s?” Yak asked.

Turk nodded, but his expression was troubled. “It’s good.”

“Why do you say it like that, man? It’s either good or it isn’t.”

After a long inhale, Turk said, “It’s only good because we got four brothers wandering the parking lot each night. Can’t keep that shit up forever. Hell, it’s gonna come up in church, and in the past two weeks there hasn’t been a single reason to keep them out until two in the morning every night.”

Yak shoved a hand through his long hair. “Protecting one of the club’s revenue streams should be reason enough, Turk.”

Turk gave him a pointed look. “Yeah, but most of them have young kids now. It isn’t cool to insist they do this on top of their day jobs and shit.”

From the end of the hall, Patch said, “What are y’all whispering about down here? It’s time for church. Get out of the way.”

Yak and Turk moved aside so Patch could unlock the door.

After the meeting was called to order, Volt turned it over to Blood for a recap of what happened at the Northside biker bar.

“From what Crop hinted at, Ghost is positioning to get the presidency.”

Across the table, Beast said, “Hearing that must have put your poker face to the test. The only thing Ghost could lead is the line to his next hit of coke.”

Yak fought against a grin. Beast hit the nail on the head. Ghost had a certain energy about him that came from drug addiction. He was always twitchy and looked like he could use three-square meals a day. The idea of him being smart enough to lead an entire club was laughable.

Blood’s lips twitched with a smile. “That’s why Yak had to be there. He always cuts the tension.”

Yak gave Blood a dry look. “So glad to be the comedian.”

Volt pointed a finger at him. “It was your proximity and your mean right hook that had you there, and you know it.”

Cal said, “In all seriousness, is Ghost making a run at being their president? Maybe they were just goading you three. I remember that asshole saying shit about Trixie and Abby during Biketoberfest.”

Blood shook his head. “This had the ring of truth to it. Their ranks are slim and Ghost’s been with them longest. He’s been talking to Steel, the president of their mother chapter.”

Patch tapped the table. “Why would they share all that?”

“Crop didn’t want to share all that. He brought a newly patched in member, who ran his mouth,” Blood said.

“The other reason I wanted Yak there,” Volt said.

Yak sighed.

“It’s true,” Blood said, grinning. “People talk to you, man. You’re like a snake-whisperer, but for people or some shit.”

“What else did they say? Hell, how did you find out they were there, Volt?” Cal asked.

Volt stroked his goatee. “Zeke called and said they were talking shit, which isn’t anything new. But they mentioned pressing charges against Rage for Snake going missing.”

Blood looked from Rage to Volt. “But Rage had nothing to do with it. Why would we give a shit what they’re threatening?”

Volt dipped his chin. “I’d rather know than not know. And if Zeke had heard that much, then I figured we might find out if someone had taken the presidency or not.”

Roll shifted in his seat. “All due respect, why not approach Steel like we did years ago? Then we got the info from the source and—”

Volt shook his head. “I don’t want to owe that man in any way, Roll. He’s not to be fucked with –though, presidents of mother chapters normally aren’t. Right now it’s all bluster.”

Yak frowned. “Except those assholes knew about both of our dancers being targeted.”

Blood shook his head. “They were guessing, Yak.”

Yak couldn’t contain his scoff. “That’s not something another club guesses at, Blood.”

Roll narrowed his eyes as he thought about it. “It isn’t, but the way they said it, I think they were fishing for info. Strippers make for easy marks if they don’t have security.”

“Speaking of that, it’s our next item of business. Some brothers believe it’s time to pull the plug on the extra security,” Volt said.

Yak clenched his teeth as he willed himself to keep a lid on his anger. If Blood or Roll dealt with the dancers every day, they’d recognize nothing in that conversation had been speculation. It only furthered Yak’s suspicion that someone inside Platinum’s was doing them wrong.

Turk’s voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“Yak and I believe the security is still needed, Volt. It may not seem like having four extra men on hand is helping, but my gut says the moment we lay off is the moment another dancer gets mugged.”

Rage, who sat next to Turk, aimed a sideways glare at Turk. “A brother walks all those girls to their cars, though.”

Yak glanced at Punc, expecting him to speak up. Finally, Yak said, “And a brother was laid out not that long ago, too. Those assholes had been lying in wait. I say we keep brothers in the lot until we can hire a security firm—”

Patch, their treasurer, shook his head. “Platinum’s is finally turning a decent profit. You hire a firm for this, it’ll cut that margin by more than half.”

Yak tossed his hands out with his palms up. “Beats the fuck out of losing one or more of our staff because they got accosted in our lot.”

Tundra, who rarely spoke up in meetings, raised a hand for a moment. “For all we know it’s random tweakers and they’ve moved on by now.”

Yak stared at Tundra. His earnest expression didn’t raise a single doubt for Yak. Tundra believed what he just said, but it still surprised Yak. He saw Prime sitting next to Tundra, nodding. They were both young enough they didn’t know how underhanded other clubs could be.

Yak caught Tundra’s gaze. “You know better, Tundra. You saw Punc that night. They didn’t even touch his wallet. That’s how we know it *isn’t* tweakers. They’d take the money and find their next hit.”

Volt leaned forward. “Enough. I’m with Turk and Yak on this. Let’s keep the watch shifts going for at least another week. Then, I’ll assess with them and get financial reports from Patch.”

Yak hurried out of the meeting room. He turned the corner toward the stairs when Trixie stepped in front of him.

She stood glaring at him with her arms crossed under her breasts. “What’s the big idea, mofo? You treat Nora like she’s made of glass, then ghost her when shit gets real? I thought you were better than that.”

He shifted his jaw from side to side. “Step aside, Trixie. You’re way the fuck out of line, here.”

Trixie’s eyes blazed with anger. “She came home from her surgery and you weren’t even around for her!”

“I didn’t need to be since she had her family in town.”

“They won’t be here for much longer. She’s gonna start chemo and probably lose that beautiful hair of hers. What then? Are you that shallow?”

He blew out a breath and shook his head. “You’re not making sense, Trixie. Her hair will grow back.”

Trixie’s eyes widened. “Yeah, but you made out with her in front of a dozen bikers and then ghost her... for what? Shits and giggles? You care about her.”

Roll lumbered up to them. “Woman, lay off. It isn’t your business why he kissed her that night.”

Trixie glowered at Roll. “He’s sending mixed signals. That shit isn’t cool.”

Yak leaned toward her. “It isn’t your business. Keep at me and *that* isn’t cool.”

Trixie let out a sigh and moved out of the way.

While he climbed the stairs two-at-a-time, he heard Roll say, “She’s his neighbor, but he doesn’t have to hold her hand through shit like this.”

Unfortunately he didn’t take the stairs fast enough to miss Trixie’s response. “He should though.”

The fuck of it was, she was right.

Yak rolled out of bed at one o'clock Monday afternoon. Trixie's tirade had haunted him all night long. After he ate breakfast, he made a call to Fred, a barber he hadn't seen in over a year. The idea had struck him shortly after meeting Nora, but he wasn't sure how she'd take the gesture. He still didn't know how she'd take it, but hesitation never got him anywhere worth while in life.

An hour later, he had a white collar protector tied around his neck and Fred secured the cape around him.

"I misspoke on the phone earlier, man. You can donate your hair, but the program we use, there's no guarantee it's going to a specific patient."

Yak stared at Fred's reflection in the mirror. After a beat, he nodded. "Yeah, that's cool. Might be rather forward to give this woman a wig made from my hair. Besides, no kid should have to face cancer, so anything I can do to help is a small sacrifice."

"She must be something, this woman."

Yak tipped his head marginally since Fred had pulled his hair into a smoother ponytail. "She is, but it isn't like that between us."

Fred laughed. "Not sure who hears those words more often, barbers, bartenders, or psychiatrists."

Yak grinned. “Starting to remember why I don’t come here that often.”

Fred held the scissors at the top of the ponytail. “After today, you’ll be back more often. At least until your hair grows back out.”

He watched as Fred took the banded lock of hair and put it into a plastic bag. “So, that hair can only make one wig?”

Fred nodded. “That’s what they tell us. Couple of your brothers have hair long enough, they could donate too. Especially that really angry one. Sydney’s just itching to get her fingers in his hair.”

Yak chuckled. “I’ll let Rage know. Though, I’m gonna catch a lot of shit for this.”

Fred stilled with his fingers in Yak’s hair. “Doubt that, but if you do, I’ll come kick their asses. I don’t care how many of them there are.”

Yak smiled. “Keep that in mind, man.”

Fred gave a single nod. “Women would kill for hair like yours. Doesn’t seem curly when you let it grow, but what do you want me to do with this? Shave it all, or you want a scissor cut to manage it for now? I leave it as it is you’re gonna look like a broccoli kid.”

Yak snorted out a laugh. “A what?”

“It’s a thing these days. Kids come in wanting a one-blade on the sides and little to nothing taken off the top. That kid has

curls like yours, they look like they got a stalk of broccoli on their head.”

“That’s tempting, but I’ll let you trim me up, Fred.”

Fred focused on Yak’s hair, but did it nodding for a while.
“Mm-hmm. Because it isn’t like that with you and... what’s her name?”

“Nora, and it isn’t like that.”

“Okay, boss.”

Nora

The knock at my door baffled me because my mom and Gary had left yesterday morning. My twin brother Evan had left yesterday evening to visit friends in Orlando. He'd intended to cancel those plans, but I insisted he make the most of his military leave. Whoever was behind the door wasn't likely to be Yak since he'd made himself so scarce after our ride to the zoo and the biker bar. Though, in some ways that was a good thing because I wasn't looking that great after my surgery. Each day was an improvement, but I still looked like I'd been through a physical and emotional wringer.

The lumpectomy had been successful –the tumor had been removed and we were awaiting the test of my lymph node sample. That would determine how much chemo I would need.

I peeked through the peephole and grinned. Trixie stood on the doorstep with another woman who had chocolate-brown hair and brown eyes.

I opened the door. “Hey, this is a surprise!”

Trixie held a brown paper bag from Trader Joe's in one hand and she waved me out of the doorway with her other. “I'll just bet it is. If your neighbor didn't have his head up his—”

“Trixie,” the brunette said in a warning tone.

She glared at her. “It's not my fault when the truth hurts.” She looked at me. “Nora, this is Mallory. Mallory, meet Nora.”

Mallory held a Trader Joe bag in each of her hands. “I’d shake your hand right now, but I’d rather know where you want us to put these.”

From my small kitchen Trixie called out, “Don’t worry. Mallory has a thing for red wine, but I made sure we stuck to the healthy shit for you.”

“A glass of red each day is supposed to be healthy,” Mallory said, moving into the kitchen.

I grinned and followed Mallory to the tiny kitchen. “I’ve heard that... though I think it requires genuine French baguettes or copious amounts of Italian pasta to be effective.”

Mallory set the bag down and smiled at me. “I like you already.”

Trixie kicked the fridge door shut. It hit me that I didn’t even see what she put in it.

“What did you load into my fridge?”

Trixie folded up the paper bag. “Food. Now give me your phone. I gotta program Mallory’s info into it because I don’t trust you to add her.”

My head tilted to the side a touch. “Why would I need her contact info?” I glanced at Mallory. “No offense, but we just met.”

She chuckled. “None taken, but surely you don’t need to be reminded that Trixie is as pushy as they come.”

Trixie spied my phone on the dinette table and grabbed it. “Girl, you’re about to go through some serious shit. Not that surgery isn’t serious... but I got little doubt chemo is next level. You lucked out when you passed out at Platinum’s because it means you got the attention of the Riot. Between me, Mallory, Abby, and Andrea, you’re gonna be covered on all fronts. Food, dealing with those drainage tubes you got right now—”

“That’s all Abby, though. Sorry, I’m not a nurse,” Mallory said.

Trixie widened her eyes at me and nodded. “She’s got that right. I’m not cool with drainage stuff either. But you need something, we’re your people. And since I get the impression you wouldn’t want to... ‘impose,’ we’re gonna be droppin’ by when we’re in the neighborhood.”

I leaned against the counter. “That’s so sweet, Trixie. I appreciate it, but you’re right. I don’t want to impose on anyone. It sounds like I’m much farther north than most of the other women.”

Trixie gave me a stern look. “Woman, that shit doesn’t matter. Everywhere is half-an-hour away in this town. It’s no biggie.”

“She’s right,” Mallory said.

My head wobbled as I thought about it. “She is, but she isn’t. A half-hour here means another half-hour to get back to wherever home is.”

Mallory leaned toward me and lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “You should go with it. This is Trixie we’re talking about.”

Trixie held my phone out. “Okay, unlock this thing. I gotta put in her digits and we found something you gotta have.”

With a head shake, I unlocked my phone. “You just brought me groceries. What else could I possibly *have* to have?”

Trixie kept her eyes glued to my phone screen and entered Mallory’s contact info.

Mallory edged closer. “A song, and believe me, you have to have it.”

Trixie handed my phone to Mallory. “Here. Looks like she has the right app, but you said something about gifting it to her.” Trixie grinned at me, but it almost looked evil. “Every woman needs a theme song. Mine’s ‘Bad Reputation’ by Joan Jett. But yours... We found the perfect one for you.”

I felt my smile fall. “I’m scared to ask.”

Mallory chuckled. “Don’t be. It’s called, ‘B.O.T.A.’ and stands for Baddest of Them All. And we *know* you’re a badass because you’re showing cancer who’s boss.”

I shook my head, but the music started before I could argue. A fast dance beat filled the air. The more I listened to the song, the more I suspected these two ladies were off the mark.

When the song was close to ending, Trixie wagged a finger at Mallory. “That’s not why I think this song is so great for her. She and Yak totally have this damned vibe going on. Both of

them acting like they don't want something to do with the other."

I tilted my head. "There is no me and Yak, Trixie. Besides dealing with surgery and chemo, I don't want to treat him like a rebound."

Trixie arched a brow. "From the way he kissed you, he wouldn't mind."

"That was to keep some other men from talking to him."

Trixie laughed. "Don't tell me you believed that?"

I shrugged. "Whatever. He hasn't spoken to me since dropping me off here that night."

Silence filled the room.

Mallory looked at Trixie. "Well? Aren't you going to tell her how you got in trouble for putting your nose in Yak's business?"

My eyes shot to Trixie. "Why would you do that?"

"She's a romantic at heart, but she'll deny it," Mallory said.

"There's nothing going on there, Trixie."

Trixie scoffed. "Peddle that shit somewhere else, Nora. I saw him lay that kiss on you. He knew your family was here, he knew shit was getting real for you, and he avoids you? I've known him a long damn time. That isn't like him."

I aimed a small smile at Trixie. "I love that you're looking out for me like that, Trixie, but I don't expect anything from

Yak. I'm just a woman he took pity on, and now I'm his neighbor."

The fact we made out and he finger-fucked me wasn't any of Trixie's business.

Mallory swiped the music app closed on my phone. "I don't know what happened in the beginning, but there's no way Yak 'took pity on' you. If one of these guys pities a woman, they find some other way to deal with it."

Trixie nodded. "More like they find someone else to deal with her, but Yak did just the opposite."

Before I could refute them, someone knocked on my door.

"Speak of the devil," Trixie muttered.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "It might be someone else."

"Nora, is Trixie in there?" Yak's muffled voice asked.

I grinned at Trixie. "Seems the devil is looking for you."

Mallory choked on laughter. "More like he's concerned about what Trixie's doing to corrupt you."

"I don't corrupt... much," Trixie said.

My body stilled when I opened the door. "What did you do to your hair?"

His hand went to the back of his head. "I didn't think it looked that bad."

It didn't. It looked so good I actually wanted to put my fingers in his hair more now that it was short than when it was long.

I shook my head. “No, it looks good. Never realized you had such a huge diamond stud in your ear because of your hair.” I paused, then whispered, “Impressive.”

Yak’s eyes closed and he gave two short shakes of his head. He opened his eyes and looked past me at Trixie. “Can you come out here for a moment, Trix?”

Trixie assumed a stubborn woman stance with her arms crossed and a foot jutting out at an angle. “Pretty sure whatever you need to say can be said in front of these two.”

Yak’s tone became deeper, almost darker. “Not when it concerns my rent.”

If Yak had taken that tone with me, I’d have scurried out the door.

Trixie smiled coyly. “You should be talking to Roll about that. Not me.”

“Trixie.”

Her smile widened. “Love the haircut. When was the last time you cut it? Ten years ago?”

Mallory hung her head and whispered, “Oh, man.”

Yak ignored Mallory. “Stay out of other people’s business, Trixie, or we’re gonna have problems.”

This had become uncomfortable. “Is that all, then? Thanks for dropping by Noah.”

His eyes locked with mine. “I’m glad your surgery went well and that your family was here for you.”

I heard footsteps and realized a car door had slammed a moment ago, but had been too engrossed in Trixie and Yak's conversation.

"Who are you?" my brother Evan demanded from behind Yak.

Yak turned around. "Shit," he breathed. "You must be her brother."

"Yeah, and you still need to answer my question."

I stepped past Yak onto the small stoop. "Tone it down, Evan. This is my neighbor, Noah or he may prefer if you call him Yak."

My twin shot me a skeptical look. "As quiet as that house was all last week, I didn't think you even had a neighbor."

"I stayed somewhere else to keep out of the way," Yak said.

Evan gave a single nod. "He must be the weightlifter."

I frowned. "Don't be rude. And don't believe everything Mom tells you."

Evan smirked. "Whatever. He's not your type."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you want me to kick your ass? I may have just had surgery but I can still outsmart you."

From somewhere behind me, Trixie said, "Oh my God, you don't just have a brother—you have a twin!"

Yak sauntered past me. "I'm gonna get out of your hair. Be well, Nora."

My stupid mouth wouldn't stay shut. "You too, Noah."

“Trixie, we should follow Yak’s lead, and give Nora and her brother some space,” Mallory said.

Evan stared at Trixie for a moment, and to be fair, I couldn’t blame him. None of my other friends had ever sported two-toned hair, and definitely not hair with bright purple tips.

Evan came closer to the carriage house. “You’re the woman who took her to the early appointments.”

Trixie nodded. “I am. Are you sticking around for her first round of chemo?”

My twin blew out a sigh that sounded exactly like mine. “Unfortunately, the Navy wants me back on a carrier.”

“That sucks,” Trixie said while Evan and I came inside the house.

Mallory smiled at us. “What she means to say is thank you for your service.”

Evan nodded at Mallory. “You’re welcome, but Trixie’s right. It sucks that I can’t be here for my sister. However, the doctor’s initial findings seem... hopeful, so I’m praying I don’t have to come back.”

Trixie pulled a chair out from under the dinette table and sat down. “Why isn’t Yak her type?”

Mallory tipped her head back for a moment. “Trixie! Let’s give them some time—”

Evan grinned while he took the seat across from her. “I was screwing with them. More her than him. Maybe it’s hindsight,

but I never cared much for her ex. Hell, I told her with a name like his, she was *destined* to get hurt.”

I blew out an exasperated breath and slugged my brother on his bicep. “Will you stop it. It’s not cool to rub my nose in my mistakes.”

Trixie turned her serious gaze on me. “*You* didn’t make a mistake, that pencil-dicked asshole did. Giving you the heave-ho just because you found a lump. What a fucker.”

Evan looked up at me. “I like her. She’s way cooler than Mia.”

Trixie choked on her laughter. “That’s not hard to do seeing as that hoe was in his bed when we picked up her stuff.”

Evan’s head reared back and he narrowed his eyes on Trixie. “Run that by me again.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, rounding the table and sitting down.

Trixie ignored me. “How do you think I know he’s a pencil-dick? We followed Yak when he took Nora to her old place. That asshole was standing bare-ass naked, with Mia lounging in his bed drooling. It was disgusting.”

Mallory made big eyes at me. “I am so sorry I didn’t get her out of here sooner.”

I pressed my lips together trying to fight it. After a moment, I burst into laughter. “Don’t be. Hearing her tell it like that, it’s actually kinda funny, because it was so damned disgusting.”

“You’re lucky I gotta be on base before sixteen hundred hours.”

I bit my lip and looked at Evan in concern. He only reverted to military time when he was focused on something or when he was angry.

“Why?” I asked.

Evan’s green eyes glinted with anger. “Because I remember moving you *into* that apartment with him, and I’m itching to go kick his ass after hearing what she just said. You didn’t even tell Mom that story.”

“No. Getting dumped before a wedding is as much as Mom needs know about it.”

Evan stared at me. “Except Mom hinted at maybe Destin would change his mind and take you back. Especially now that the surgery is done.”

“Why would she bother with an ass like that?” Mallory asked. She waved her hand over the table. “Sorry, it isn’t my business.”

Trixie laughed. “No, but I was gonna ask something similar. What about what Nora wants? She’s smart enough to see that asshole for the conniving weasel he is now.”

A benign smile played at Evan’s lips. “You’re both right, but our mom is a die-hard romantic.”

I smacked the table lightly. “Enough about that. Why did you come back early from Orlando?”

His eyes darted between Trixie and Mallory before he shrugged and said, “Kayleigh gave me the run-around. Again.”

“She’s a dumbass,” Trixie muttered.

My eyes slid to Trixie.

“What? You two are twenty-eight. If I were ten years younger, and into the clean-cut military type, I’d clear the decks when he came to town.”

I glanced at Evan and saw pink creeping into his cheeks which made me chuckle. “You are something else, Trixie.”

“That’s for sure,” Mallory said. “Now, seriously, we should leave them be.”

Trixie shook her head. “He just said he has to be on base by four o’clock. We should take them to Kickback’s.” She looked at me. “Have you been there before?”

I shook my head.

She pointed a finger at me. “Their Fluffernutter sandwich is exactly what you need.”

Evan’s head tilted a touch and he nodded. “Serve that up with a beer, and it sounds like it’s right up my alley.”

Trixie dug out her phone and I assumed she was tapping out a text.

Mallory stood up, grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter, and came back to the table. “What are you doing, Trixie? It’s almost twelve-thirty, we’re gonna be lucky if we don’t have to wait for a table.”

I hurried toward my bedroom for my phone and wristlet.

Halfway to my room, I heard Trixie's response. "Since you and Yak are both so quick to tell me to mind my own business, I texted Roll with instructions to find out exactly why Yak cut his hair."

"His hair was longer?" Evan asked.

"Almost as long as Mallory's," Trixie said.

I looked over my shoulder. "The weather's warming up. He didn't cut his hair for some special reason."

Trixie's teeth sunk into her lower lip as she contemplated my words. "That's where you're wrong. I got no doubt you're the 'special reason' he hacked off nine or ten inches of hair."

I grabbed my stuff and came back into the living room. "You're wrong, Trixie."

She aimed her coy grin at me. "We'll find out now, won't we?"

Chapter 9

Dodged a Bullet

NORA

Before I would qualify for FMLA leave, I had to exhaust all of my vacation and sick days. Since I was still using vacation days, but couldn't do anything very vacation-like, I headed into the office on Monday.

To my surprise, Mia wasn't around most of the morning. She rolled in after ten and from the way she spoke on the phone, I knew she'd been at the dentist.

I didn't get a chance to even say good morning to her before I had to attend a ten-thirty meeting. Some co-workers in the meeting were surprised to see me back after my surgery. It was strange how people figured I'd go from surgery straight into chemo treatments.

When the meeting ended, I couldn't wait to get out of the office for lunch.

The meeting room was located not far from the front desk, which meant I had to pass by the receptionist to get back to my cube.

I stutter-stepped at the sight of Destin standing in front of the receptionist.

“I’m sorry, she’s not picking up her phone,” Roberta said.

At the sound of my high-heels, Destin looked my way. If I wasn’t mistaken, he paled. “Nora. Wha... Erm, what are you doing here?”

I gave him a fake smile. “I work here, Destin. I’d ask what you’re doing here, but my hunch is that you’re looking for Mia. She had a dental appointment this morning.”

Destin looked to the side and back to me. “Can I talk to you for a minute? In private?”

My brows drew together. “I can’t imagine there’s anything you need to say to me—”

He sighed. “Please, Nora. It won’t take long. I just want to explain.”

Down to my gut, I didn’t think there was any explanation for his behavior, but I gave into his earnest tone and pleading eyes. “Fine. There’s a small meeting room, right here.”

His lips tipped up. “I know. I used to work here, remember?”

I gave him a dry look and waved my hand out for him to precede me.

I shut the door and leaned against it. “Let’s hear it.”

Destin shoved his hands in the pockets of his navy blue dress pants and stared at his brown Oxfords. When he looked at me,

his pleading expression grew stronger. “I never meant to hurt you, Nora.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it. Your timing couldn’t have been any worse unless you’d said no at the altar.”

He pulled one hand free to run it through his sandy-brown hair. “Cancer is a big freaking deal, Nora.”

My brows shot up. “I just had the lumpectomy done last week, Destin. Believe me, I’m well aware of how serious breast cancer is.”

He sighed. “I’m messing this up. It’s just, we talked about starting a family and my sister mentioned how chemo can keep a couple from getting pregnant.”

“During the chemo process, yes. But, we weren’t going to try to get pregnant our first year of marriage anyway.”

He kept quiet for a moment. “I had hoped to change your mind about that.”

I raised my chin in a very slow nod. That served as another sign that we might not have worked out for the long haul. “I didn’t know that.”

He shoved his free hand back in his pocket. “Starting a family matters a lot to me, Nora.”

It hurt to hear that because I’d been looking forward to that with him in due time. Like a year or two from now— even before I found the lump. When I felt the tingle in my sinuses, I turned around, because I’d be damned if he saw me cry.

“I’m sorry, Nora. I never meant for things to happen like this. After Sara told me about the chemo side-effects, I panicked.”

I faced him. “You know, they won’t decide what drugs to use until after they’ve analyzed my tumor and lymph nodes. Even if they use drugs that cause my hair to fall out and my fertility to be impacted, that’s all temporary. Afterward, my hair will grow back, and similarly, my fertility should go back to normal, too.”

“Should, Nora. Sara said many people freeze their eggs to be safe. If starting a family is something that matters to them.”

While I fought to control my anger, I gave him a pointed look. “You talked to your sister about freezing eggs, but you couldn’t bring yourself to talk to *me* about it before calling off the engagement?”

His face fell. “Nora, I swear I pani—”

“No, save it. Mom was right. I dodged a bullet finding this out about you before we walked down the aisle.”

He frowned. “It isn’t like that.”

“I’d believe that, but you and Mia hooked up pretty darned fast for it not being like that.”

“And you found a biker awful fast,” he bit out.

I crossed my arms, careful of the stitches and my drainage tube. “He found me passed out because my ‘friend’ left me behind. But really, Destin, that isn’t the point. You explained

your side of things, and I hope you enjoy picking up your old relationship with Mia.”

I almost smiled at the surprise on his face. “She told you—”

“No. Someone else did.”

Before I could open the door, he said, “I never cheated on you, Nora. I care too much about you—”

I put my hand on my hip. “Destin, it’s clear to me that you only care about yourself. Funny enough, I think you and Mia have that in common. Have a nice lunch with her.”

That evening, I opened the fridge and pulled out the to-go container with the other half of my Fluffernutter sandwich. Had I known Destin would be dropping by the office, I’d have taken that for lunch, because heaven knew I wanted to stress-eat after he explained his side of things.

I warmed up the sweet potato fries separate from the sandwich and poured a glass of lemon-flavored sparkling water. While I ate, I debated calling Mom. For some strange reason I didn’t want her to think even less of Destin... mainly because I felt like it reflected on me and my ability to find a good man.

My phone ringer had been set to vibrate and it shimmied in a small arc with an incoming call. The screen lit up with Trixie’s name.

I chuckled at her timing. “Hello, Trixie.”

“Hello, yourself. I dropped by earlier and you weren’t home. Tell me you didn’t go to work.”

“I could tell you that, but it’d be a lie.”

“Woman, you had surgery last week. You got no business going into work so soon.”

I grinned. “Trixie, I figured out how to hide my drain lines. For once, I felt up to it, and seeing as how I have to use up all of my paid time off before getting medical leave, I want to save those days for when I really feel like crap.”

She sighed. “Fine. I can’t argue with that. Get a load of this, I was right.”

“I’m scared to ask, but right about what?”

Her chuckle sounded self-satisfied. “Roll kept at Yak about why he got his hair chopped off.”

“It wasn’t chopped off,” I said without thinking.

She laughed. “For as long as it was, that was a crap load for him to lose. Anyway, he donated it to a firm that makes children’s wigs for kids going through chemo.”

My heart skipped a beat and I held my breath while I enjoyed the warm feeling those words sent through me.

I exhaled quietly. “That’s great to hear, Trixie. But how does that make you right?”

“Those brothers love to join in on someone else getting razzed, so between Roll and Turk needling him, Yak let it slip

that he wanted his hair made into a wig for you, but he didn't think that would go over well."

Part of me wanted to ask why he thought that, but I refused to dwell on this. His thoughtfulness was one thing, but being thoughtful wasn't the same as being interested in me.

Not that I wanted a man interested in me right now.

Who was I kidding? If that man were Yak, I absolutely wanted his interest.

"Did you hear what I said?" Trixie asked.

"I did, but that's just him being thoughtful."

Her bark of laughter made me jolt. "Nora, Nora. You need to get with the program. The Riot brothers can be thoughtful, but that only happens when it's someone they give a damn about."

I shook my head. "Trixie, he and I met under really strange circumstances, that's all there is to it."

"That's bullshit and we both know it. Don't downplay this, girl. I told you he looked at you like a last meal, now he's cutting his hair off for you. I shouldn't share this, since he and Roll have told me to stay out of it. I'm not doin' that. He cares about you, even if he won't admit it to you or himself."

I sighed. "That's good to know, but it's not meant to be, Trixie. The timing's bad all around. That's the way life goes sometimes."

The silence on the line went on so long I pulled my phone away to check the screen. The call was still connected. I put

the phone back to my ear just before Trixie spoke. “Abby and I are swinging by and taking you out.”

“Trixie, that sounds like fun, but I already ate.”

She scoffed. “I didn’t say we were taking you out to eat. We’re going out. Probably some place boring because Abby knows you shouldn’t be imbibing and shit. You need to be clued in and Abby’s just the woman to do it.”

I took a deep breath. “I’d love to get to know Abby more, but Trixie, I’m serious. Yak and I are not a thing. Hell, Destin dropped by the office today and it reminded me just how complicated my life is right now for any kind of relationship.”

“Ha!” Trixie cried. “It’s funny you used those words because as complicated as your life is, it hasn’t kept you from building a new relationship with me, and Abby, and Mallory, and any of the other Riot women if I have something to say about it.”

Trixie gave stubborn a new meaning.

I straightened my shoulders, not that Trixie could see it. “Those are new friendships, which are entirely different from a new relationship with a man.”

“Wrong, but I’m not gonna let you try to fly under the radar with Destin showing up at the office. Why was he there and what happened?”

For once, the perfect stall tactic hit me. “Am I going to have to rehash this when Abby shows up?”

Trixie spluttered and something told me that was a rare thing with her.

“Yeah. I’ll just wait and tell you both at the same time.”

Abby’s lips twisted skeptically after hearing about Destin’s visit to the office. “I hate that I’m going to say this, but I understand why he did what he did.”

With wide eyes, Trixie put her beer bottle down hard on my dinette table. “You’ve never even met him. How can you understand him?”

Abby nodded. “Yeah, I do. He was a total coward and an asshole for not talking to her before hand, but if you know going in that starting a family might be a problem, I understand why he’d panic and want to call things off.”

Trixie stared at her for a long moment. “You only understand because you got baby-fever so bad and you always have.”

She shook her head. “It’s more than that, Trix. I can’t recall if it was the night we met or the night after, but Blood and I agreed we wanted a gaggle of kiddos.”

Heaviness permeated the air and even though this was my second time around Abby, I knew she and Blood were facing problems getting pregnant.

I opened my mouth to offer a subject change, but Abby spoke again. “Enough about him, and no more talk about cancer, either.” Her eyes met mine and her brows arched. “I figure you’re tired of talking about your health, right?”

With a smile, I nodded. “Right.”

She nodded back. “Then tell us more about you. Did you grow up around here? Trixie said you have a twin brother?”

Yak

“Are you serious about Lisa building that ludicrous hammock stand?” Rage asked when Yak hit the common room.

He fought glaring at Rage. “I had three thousand dollars worth of teak delivered to her shop and I paid her fifteen hundred dollars. So, yeah, I’m pretty fuckin’ serious about it, Rage.”

Rage shook his head. “Seems like a total waste. Especially when she’s planning a real grand opening in six weeks.”

Yak’s body stilled. For some strange reason he hadn’t realized May was just around the corner. He didn’t know if Nora needed chemo or if it had already started, but from dealing with his parents almost two decades ago, he knew he had to keep his distance.

And it was killing him.

Night after night he went to bed and visions of Nora pinned up against the kitchen wall assaulted him.

He hadn’t even gotten off that night, but he’d never been more satisfied. Watching her come... No, being the man who made her come gave him the ultimate power-trip. On the surface that didn’t sound good, but he couldn’t wait to do that again... and then some.

Yes, his mind had served up a myriad of ways he and Nora could take each other higher.

Dammit.

He knew better. She *should* know better, but that one night in his kitchen proved otherwise.

“Yo! Yak, did you hear me?” Rage demanded.

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. What?”

Rage’s brown eyes shone with concern. “Christ, never seen someone zone out like that. Lisa wants you and Punc at this big grand opening she’s planning in May. You better fuckin’ be there.”

“I’ve been making you look good for her all these months, of course I’ll be there.”

Rage’s groaning sigh made Yak smile. Then Rage said, “Whatever, asshole. Your pirate-ship hammock better not interfere with her other shit.”

Yak stood straighter and assumed a fake air of self-importance. “It’s a dragon-crested hammock stand. Get your business straight.”

Rage shook his head and stalked to the other side of the common room while mumbling. “Nothing is ever serious with your ass.”

Yak smiled, then yelled, “That isn’t true! Hammocks are always serious!”

Liar and Andrea came into the clubhouse through the front door. The moment she saw him, Andrea's eyes lit up. "*Who* cut your hair? I've never seen you with short hair, it looks great!"

Yak's lips tipped up and he held a hand up as though shielding himself. "Whoa, there, Andrea. Gonna give Liar the wrong impression, sounding all impressed and shit."

She shook her head. "I am not. You have curls. How is that possible but your hair was never that wavy when you had it down?"

"I hardly ever had it down, woman."

Liar slung his arm around her. "He's right."

She glanced up at him. "Yeah." Then she turned her gaze to Yak. "But women would kill to put their hands in those curls."

Too late, he willed himself not to think of Nora putting her fingers in his hair. That idea appealed more than it should.

The room brightened as the back door opened. Major ambled up. "Who's this?"

Yak looked at him. "Seriously, Major?"

The older man chuckled, low in his throat. "Ain't seen you with hair this short since you prospected, what? Thirteen years ago?"

"Eleven. But who's counting?"

Volt wandered through the front door followed by Cal, who almost bumped into Volt when he stopped short. "Why'd you

cut your hair?”

Cal peered over Volt’s shoulder. “Jesus. Haven’t seen you like that in over a decade.”

Since Yak couldn’t catch a break, Blood entered the room, his face twisted with confusion and a hint of disgust. “What happened to your hair?”

Yak tipped his head backward and told the room. “I fuckin’ cut my hair. It’s not a capital crime.”

Blood chuckled. “You’re right, but *why* did you cut your hair?”

Yak heaved a sigh and met Blood’s gaze. “I donated it to a place that makes wigs for kids with cancer.”

Andrea’s hand went to her chest. “Oh my God, that is so sweet, Yak!”

He shook his head, fighting the urge to say it was far from sweet. It started one way—wanting to give his hair to Nora, so he could get laid at a later date— but it ended a different way — giving his hair to, hopefully, two kids in an effort to assuage his guilt.

A rare, abashed look crossed Blood’s face. “Damn. Now I feel bad, like I should go donate my hair.”

Yak’s grin was laced with mischief. “Damn right. It would help the kids and help your ugly mug.”

Blood flicked Yak off. “Fucker.”

Volt grinned. “Good we got that out of the way before church. Let’s get this shit done.”

Sitting at the head of the table, Volt glanced between Turk and Yak. “Are you both on board? We end the two-man parking lot surveillance today.”

Turk sighed and shrugged. “Yeah. Everyone voted.”

It wasn’t a unanimous vote. Yak, Turk, and Punc voted against ending the extra protection.

Yak nodded. “Got no choice but to *be* on board. Though it’s Sunday, and not to jinx myself, but things aren’t usually as crowded or hectic.”

Turk tipped his head to the side. “Right. All day it had that feel to it.”

Volt adjourned the meeting and Yak prowled out of the meeting room before most of his other brothers.

After the grief he took before church, he hit his room, and scarfed down a sandwich before leaving for Platinum’s.

He’d walked two feet down the hall before Prime came out of his room. He gave Yak a chin lift. “Sorry the vote didn’t go your way, but I think having brothers in the parking lot hurt business the past couple weeks.”

Yak aimed mild side-eye at him. “Based on what?”

Prime shrugged a shoulder. “Didn’t seem as crowded, even on Friday nights. Plus, I saw a couple guys turn around when

they first came in because they noticed the lot being patrolled.”

“It occur to you that was a good thing?”

“I figure men walking in the door with their money’s better.”

Yak dipped his chin. “Sure, until they start a fight or some shit and we gotta replace chairs or tables.”

Prime nodded. “Hadn’t thought about that. Anyway, I think things are gonna be fine.”

“Time will tell. You on tonight?”

Prime shook his head. “Nope. Later, man.”

An hour later, Yak moved through the floor of Platinum’s. Turk’s observation that business was slow still held true. The sun hadn’t set yet however, so he held out hope that things would pick up.

As he settled at his desk, his phone chimed with a text from Desiree –one of their dancers.

I’m in the parking lot, but there’s someone shady out here. Can somebody walk me in?

He called Punc’s cell, but he didn’t answer. Not too surprising since the thrum of the bass made it difficult to hear himself think. He tried calling the bar, but there was no answer there either. A glance at the security monitor showed their bartender filling orders for two of the waitresses.

“Shit,” he muttered.

He rose just as the door flew open.

“Has anyone been backstage?” Lucy asked, hurrying into the office.

His lip curled slightly upward. “Not as far as I know. Why?”

She sighed. “Desiree can’t find her cell.”

He shook his head. “I find that hard to believe since I just got a text from her. When was the last time she saw it?”

Lucy shrugged. “Hell if I know, but I’ll go ask, and tell her someone’s using her phone.”

“Don’t tell her that yet. The text says she’s in the parking lot. I’m gonna check it out.”

Her bright blue eyes widened. “Be careful, Yak.”

He gave her a chin lift. “I will.”

Yak stepped a foot away from the building when he saw Tundra holding a phone in his hand. Yak would have thought nothing of it, except the case was a glittery bubblegum pink with a huge capital D on the back.

His temper snapped and he shoved Tundra up against the building. “What are you doing with Desiree’s phone?”

Tundra’s eyes blazed with anger. “Get the hell off me, Yak!”

He pushed against him harder. “Answer my fuckin’ question, Tundra!”

Tundra had light brown eyes, close-cropped brown hair, and a beard. This close to him, it hit Yak how damn young Tundra was, which meant he was stupid enough to fight against Yak.

“Ain’t a crime to pick up a cell phone from the parking lot, asshole!”

Yak struggled against kicking Tundra’s ass. “Don’t give me that bullshit. You texted me from her phone to lure me out here! Why?”

In a sneaky move Yak should have anticipated, Tundra brought his fists up between Yak’s arms. He broke Yak’s hold, then pushed Yak up against the wall. “I haven’t done shit with that fuckin’ phone because it’s locked, Yak!”

The back door flew open and Volt yelled, “What’s goin’ on out here?”

Yak got in a punch to Tundra’s gut before Volt pulled the two men apart.

With eyes blazing on Tundra, Yak said, “What’s goin’ on out here, is that this asshole sent me a text message from Desiree’s phone trying to lure me outside. And it almost worked except I caught him off-guard.”

“Bullshit,” Tundra wheezed. “Check the fuckin’ security monitors. I just found this fuckin’ phone.”

“Convenient since Lucy *just* came in my office to tell me Desiree couldn’t find it.”

Volt glanced between the two men, then turned serious eyes to Yak. “You really suspect him of shit like that?”

Yak nodded. “It’s someone with inside knowledge of Platinum’s. Nothing else makes sense.”

Volt’s brow arched. “Can see that. But accusing a *brother*? That’s crazy, man.”

“What’s crazy is getting a text from a woman who can’t find her damn phone. Why would someone snag her phone and then text *me* as if they were here and demand help getting into the building?”

“It wasn’t me,” Tundra bit out.

Yak looked at him. “Then why were you out here at all?”

“I always take the trash out after the shift change, you know that –hell you were the one who trained me.”

That wasn’t saying much. Either Yak or Turk trained every brother who worked at Platinum’s. Those words were on the tip of Yak’s tongue when gunfire rang out.

All three of them hit the ground. Chunks of concrete sprayed off the building as bullets flew.

“Fuck! I don’t have a gun on me,” Tundra yelled.

“Stay quiet, Tun,” Volt bit out.

Yak saw movement from across the parking lot. He lifted up to a crouch and ran behind a close by vehicle. A bullet hit the taillight of a car as he dove behind it.

In a recess of his mind, he registered the sound of footsteps pounding across the parking lot.

Yak rounded the front of the car, still in a crouch. He prowled along the curb of the parking area, keeping level with the vehicles. Like Tundra, he didn't have his gun on him either, but he pulled his switchblade from his pocket.

The crack of another gun rent the air, and he suspected Volt was drawing fire to cover for him.

A man wearing grass-colored cargo pants came out from behind a car ten feet from Yak. Making the most of the element of surprise, Yak tackled him. He heard the gun clatter on the pavement. The movement of the man's head telegraphed his intention to head-butt Yak. He dodged it and pressed his blade to the man's neck.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

The man's knee came up sharp against Yak's inner thigh. He shoved his knee on that leg, his eyes wide with anger. Then he realized the man wore a leather cut.

The club name drew his attention first.

Devil Lancers.

The name patch below read 'Ghost.'

"I should kill you, motherfucker."

Ghost snickered. "You don't have the balls. Never fuckin' have. None of you Riot pussies do."

Yak didn't rise to the bait. The Devil Lancers had fucked with the Riot multiple times in the past and they'd eliminated the threat every time.

A siren could be heard in the distance as Volt and Tundra came up beside them.

“Let’s go. Need to get him inside before the cops show up,” Volt said.

“Fine, but Tundra isn’t helping us tie this asshole up.”

“I’m not in on this, Yak,” Tundra clipped out.

“Then you won’t mind waiting to be brought in the loop,” Yak said.

Thirty minutes later, Yak wandered away from the front of the club after answering questions from police officers who had responded to the call about gunfire in the area. He’d feigned ignorance because turning Ghost over to the authorities wouldn’t give them any answers.

And likely wouldn’t put an end to the issue.

He entered his office to find Volt, Blood, and Turk inside.

With a sigh, he shook his head. “Gang’s all here to rehash shit, I take it?”

Blood nearly rolled his eyes as he blew out a breath of irritation. “You’re accusing a brother of being in on this shit. What the fuck?”

Chapter 10

No Problem

YAK

A sour sensation hit Yak's gut at Blood's words. Yak didn't like accusing anyone of shit they didn't do, but he couldn't ignore his instincts any more.

He twisted his hands up and out in question. "How else do you explain this shit? Besides the dancers, we employ just over a dozen people who aren't part of the brotherhood. My gut tells me this shit is an inside job and I've looked into all the non-Riot employees except two waitresses."

Blood's brown eyes narrowed. "One waitress would make an easy mark for finding out shit about how we do business. Hell, it could be both those waitresses working together. But you're gonna accuse one of your brothers?"

"Which servers?" Turk asked.

Yak's eyes cut to Turk's. "Selma and Jillian."

"They're too new."

Both of his brows rose. "Right. Except, they began when all this shit started going down."

Blood stepped closer to him. “Then why the fuck are you accusing Tundra of shit? He’s been with us for over four years now! Hell, he was instrumental in helping Roll and Trixie. Why would he fuck us over, Yak?”

Yak’s calm demeanor slipped and he raised his voice. “Why the fuck was he holding her goddamned phone, Blood?”

“Blood, lay off,” Volt said.

“Why?” Blood asked, staring at their president.

Volt stroked his bearded chin. “Because we don’t have any reason to mistrust Yak’s gut. He’s got good instincts and always has. I’m not convinced it’s Tundra, but I think there’s something to the idea that it’s one of our own. We need to take a hard look at all of our prospects—”

“They don’t ever work here as prospects,” Turk cut in.

Volt shook his head. “No, but that doesn’t mean someone like Tundra, Punc, Evict, or Prime wouldn’t run their mouths about how things work here. Hell, just last week, I heard Punc talking about the audition where Rage lost his shit.”

“Did you set him straight about that bullshit?” Turk asked.

Volt grinned, then gave a low chuckle. “Rage was in the room, right behind Punc and he did it far better than I could... given that Punc was talking about Lisa’s interrupted performance.”

“We’re off topic,” Blood muttered. “Just because brothers run their mouths about working here doesn’t mean one of us has turned against the club.”

Volt moved his head in a half-nod. “You’re right, but I won’t ignore something like this. If we got someone whose loyalty is with the Devil Lancers we need to deal with that shit. Immediately.”

While knowing Volt trusted Yak’s gut gave him reassurance, he had no idea how they would be able to determine who was working against them. He was pretty sure they wouldn’t be interrogating Ghost, though. Asking him who he was working with would give too much away.

“What are we doing with Ghost?” Turk asked, reading Yak’s mind.

Volt’s brow jumped. “I called Cal, Roll, and Vamp. They’re coming by to help us rough him up, then we’re dropping him at the Devil Lancer’s door.”

Turk nodded once. “We’re starting a war, then.”

Volt shook his head. “While you were watching Yak field questions earlier, I called Steel. This violates the terms of their tentative charter. He’s advised other Devil Lancer chapters to stay out of it.”

After a deep breath, Yak asked, “We aren’t even going to ask what his aim is? What good does it do them to—”

“If he’d been a better shot, you and Tundra might have been dead since neither of you had a gun on you,” Volt said.

Under his breath, Blood said, “Yet another reason I don’t think Tun is in on this shit.”

Volt speared him with a quelling look. “Enough, Blood.” He turned to Yak. “You want in on this? Get a few licks in since that asshole shot at you?”

Yak mulled it over. “Nah. I got a phone to return to a dancer. And an apology to make to Tundra.”

“What?” Blood demanded.

He shrugged. “It might be him. It might not. Either way, it isn’t cool that I accused him like I did or that I punched him.”

Turk scoffed. “Can you ever make up your mind?”

Yak smiled. “Nope. Helps to keep everyone guessing.”

Volt cleared his throat. “When you return that phone, do us all a favor. Ask her why it was unlocked and how she lost it. When they aren’t on stage, or busy putting on make-up, all those dancers are glued to their phones. That shit doesn’t make sense to me either.”

“You got it, Prez.”

Desiree’s eyes widened as she turned her face and shook her head. She made eye contact with him again. “I stopped locking my phone this week because it’s the only thing that keeps my two-year-old quiet.”

Yak nodded. “Well, you should start locking it again with everything that’s going on here.”

She sighed. “Yeah. I’m sorry, Yak. I swear I had no idea my phone was missing until I went apeshit looking for it in here.

Lucy went to tell you even though I was convinced it had to be inside my boho bag in the dressing room. Hell, I didn't *want* her to tell you, because it would just be a waste of your time."

Or she could be working with Ghost.

Even as that thought hit him, it seemed easy. *Too* easy.

He hadn't shared with any of the dancers about finding Ghost in the parking lot. To his surprise, none of the dancers knew there had been any gunfire.

Then again, as loud as Punc played the music, there could be a full-scale riot outside and nobody would be any the wiser.

Yak aimed a patient smile at Desiree. "Helping you –or any of you ladies– is never a waste of my time. Or Turk's. Got it?"

The dancers gave him a mixed chorus of "Got it."

He nodded. "Good. Now dance your hearts out. I'm not so sure things are going to pick up tonight."

Three hours later, Tundra knocked on the door jamb. "We walked all the dancers to their cars. I'm out of here, Yak."

He lifted his chin. "Thanks. And, again, I'm sorry for flying off the handle."

Tundra shook his head. "All's forgiven. Hell, I can see where you were coming from now..."

Yak's head turned an inch as he realized Tundra had trailed off in hesitation. "What is it?"

After a twist of his lips, he said, "It's just strange. Before church, Prime wanted to switch shifts with me today. Be here

tonight, then have Monday off. I told him I'd think about it, then after church he cornered me and said he'd changed his mind."

"Okay."

Tundra shook his head. "It's just, the moment there's no more surveillance, he doesn't want to work. It's... almost like he expected something bad to happen now that other brothers wouldn't be watching the lot."

Yak shrugged. "Maybe, but he told me it was probably for the best. Business hasn't been as good since we had such a heavy presence."

"Yeah. Guess this shit makes everybody a little on edge, right?"

"Yeah," Yak muttered.

He hated this shit. For the past decade, he had nothing but complete trust in his brothers. Now he didn't trust any of the newest members. That made him feel like scum. Still, other clubs had new members patch-in, only to turn rogue on the brothers. Nothing said it couldn't happen to their chapter.

Being the doubting Thomas thoroughly sucked.

Thursday afternoon, Yak stood at his kitchen sink sipping a cup of coffee and watching Nora get out of Trixie's Camaro. He couldn't hear what Trixie said, but he suspected she didn't

like Nora getting out of the car on her own. His guess was that she had her first chemo treatment.

He should intervene, keep Trixie from giving Nora too much grief.

No. His throat had felt scratchy since Sunday night. If there was even a remote possibility he was getting sick, he had to stay away from Nora.

Hell. He had to stay away from her regardless. Leave the way clear for her to find a decent man who would give her the life she wanted.

An hour later, he heard Trixie's car engine growl down the driveway. After another hour, he sent Trixie a text.

You take Nora to chemo today?

The little dots rolled in a wave pattern and stopped.

Then his phone rang, Trixie's name on the display.

"Dammit. Why did I bother?" he asked himself. He took the call. "Hey, Trixie."

"Hey, your damn self. Why do you want to know if I took Nora to chemo? You've ghosted her since that run-in with the Devil Lancers. What the hell, Yak? If you're worried about her, drag your ass outside, and go knock on her door."

"My throat's been killin' me for two days now. I'm not making her sick... or sicker."

He heard the faint sound of a notification and realized it had been Trixie's phone.

She chuckled. "Well, get over yourself Yak."

"Excuse you?"

"Nora just texted me. She ordered some stuff from Amazon. They said they delivered it. She's guessing it's at your front door. Put on a mask or wrap a bandana around your nose and mouth and take her that box. It's got her favorite soup mix in it. It's the least you can do."

He trudged to his front door and saw a small box on his welcome mat. "Fine."

"It's one round, Yak. You're not going to contaminate her."

He raised his shoulder up to his ear to hold onto the phone while he picked up the box. "Trix, they're killing the cells in her body. *Including* her immune cells. Her defenses are going to be down and I'm not gonna harm her."

"You're doing that any way, did that occur to you?"

He shifted so he had the box in one hand and the phone to his ear in the other. "No, it didn't. Leading her on is more harmful –especially since that asshole dumped her. She doesn't need a man like me."

"I should pretend I didn't hear that, but I've never kept my thoughts to myself."

"Now is a great time to start," he muttered.

She laughed. “Not happening. A man like you is exactly what Nora needs. Someone who cares enough that he doesn’t want to make her throat scratchy. A man who argued with his MC president because he didn’t want a bunch of other bikers to get a look at his gorgeous neighbor. A man who—”

“Stop, Trixie. Thanks for the confidence boost, but I’m not gonna give her a house with a picket fence and—”

“No, cause Roll and I did that for both of you.”

He sighed. “You know what I mean, woman. She’s looking for the regular world. I don’t live in that world.”

“That’s bullshit, but get that soup to Nora. She needs to eat something tonight.”

Trixie hung up, he tucked his cell in his back pocket, and took the package to Nora.

With a smile, she opened the door before he could knock. “Trixie texted that you were on your way. Thanks. I’d have gone to get it off your stoop, but I made the mistake of texting Trixie before it hit me that they probably left it at *your* front door. It’s not like this is registered as a separate address.”

“It’s not a problem, Nora,” he said, holding the box out to her.

Rather than take the package, she opened the door wider. “You can come in.”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t. Got a sore throat.”

Her lips tipped up. “That makes two of us. It’s not like you can make it worse. Besides, the soup in there is like magic for sore throats.”

Seemed ‘Doubt’ should be *his* middle name since he doubted that, too.

A grin split her lips. “Don’t give me that skeptical look and judgey silence.”

He did a long blink. “I would never judge you, Nora.”

She swung her arm toward her small living room. “It’s just soup, Noah.”

Something about her using his given name always got to him. “Fine.”

Or maybe she just got to him.

No, he wouldn’t admit that to himself. That felt entirely too dangerous.

Nora

I grabbed the soup mix out of the box and bustled into the kitchen. My energy was fading fast, but I did my best to hide that from Yak. Bonus, I could hide how enraptured I was by his haircut. He looked so different, and I loved the short haircut, but part of me wished he still had his long hair. Probably because he was the only man with long hair I'd ever been interested in.

“Why'd you have to buy your soup online anyway?”

Throwing a grin at him over my shoulder, I said, “The grocery stores around here stopped carrying it. It wasn't my idea to order it. I was going to go with a different mix, but Mom insisted and now I have over a dozen boxes of this stuff.”

I heard his boots hit the kitchen tile. “Let me make the soup, Nora. You need to rest.”

“How about you slice up some celery for me?” I suggested, tipping my head toward the fridge. “There's also some shredded carrots in there that I put in with the boiling water.”

His lips pursed and I wanted to kiss them. Then I recalled his sore throat and I poured water into the pot.

He stepped up to the stove, effectively sidling me out of the way. “Go sit down, Nora. I'll make the soup.”

I nudged my shoulder into his bicep. “Water has to boil first, Yak.”

His bronze eyes caught mine. “Sit down before you fall down, lady. I’ll cut up the celery while the water warms. Though, why you want to have a vegetable with the texture of crunchy, wet hair in your chicken noodle, I’ll never know.”

I chuckled. “It’s good for you.”

“Straight propaganda from the national celery foundation.”

My laughter couldn’t be contained. “There’s no such thing!”

His brows arched as his eyes met mine. “How else is March National Celery Month? Somebody is behind that.”

I plopped onto the couch still laughing. “You’re pulling my leg.”

He put the celery on a cutting board and bowed his head to watch what he was doing. “I joke about lots of things, Nora, but food isn’t one of them. Learn that quick.”

“Duly noted,” I said, tucking my feet under me.

I did my best not to stare at him, but watching Yak move around a kitchen mesmerized me... and reminded me of that one night in his galley kitchen.

He dumped the carrots and celery into the pot just before adding the noodles and seasoning packet. I knew it would be another five minutes, so I wandered into the kitchen to get us both drinks.

“I’d offer you a beer, but alcohol is off limits during my treatments.”

“That’s all right, Nora. I shouldn’t stay anyway.”

My eyes looked up at the ceiling. “We went over this, Noah. It’s just soup.”

He wrapped his fingers around my bicep. “It’s been a while, and I’m not the dumbass sixteen-year-old I was when Dad had it, but I remember having to stay away from him. If he got a fever it was a problem, and schools are nothing but fuckin’ cesspools of germs.”

“Right, but—”

“Nora, don’t repeat this, but Platinum’s isn’t too far off from being a cesspool. I’m *not* gonna be the person who gives you some fuckin’ cold or ear infection that forces you to spend more time in a hospital or any of that shit.”

Oh my God. That was both the most unromantic thing anyone had said to me and the most romantic thing anyone had said to me. My heart swelled at the conviction in his tone.

“Yak, it’s my first treatment. My white blood cells aren’t going to die instantaneously. It’ll take time, which is why I have another eight treatments to go.”

His eyes widened. “Fuck. Eight? Did it get into your lymph nodes?”

I exhaled quietly through my nose as I closed my eyes for a moment, then focused on him. “Just one, but the oncologist would rather be aggressive.”

He nodded. “Yeah. That’s good though.”

“It will be once it’s all done assuming it works.”

He stared at me. “Don’t be negative, Nora. You gotta have faith. The treatment is going to work. The more you believe that, the more likely it is to happen.”

My brows arched. “You’re sounding very Zen, there Yak.”

He scoffed. “Whatever. Set the table, smarty.”

I frowned. “Do you mind if we eat on the couch? I really don’t feel like eating at the table.”

As soon as the words were out there, I regretted speaking. It sounded like a manipulation tactic. Maybe it was in some small way, but really, I just wanted to slouch on the couch with a cup of soup in my lap.

The fact Yak would have to be mere inches from me was an added bonus.

“Whatever floats your boat, princess.”

I set out two bowls with handles, put spoons next to them and wandered back to the couch.

Even though Yak wasn’t wearing his cut, when he sat down next to me I swore I could smell faint traces of leather along with his soapy-citrus scent.

Half-way through my bowl of soup, Yak announced, “I’m givin’ you space for a reason.”

I turned my head to him. “Because I’m ill?”

His head tipped to the side a touch. “More because you’re dealing with major life issues – more than one, when you think about it.”

I swallowed a spoonful of soup. “If by more than one, you’re referring to Destin, I’m over it.”

He gave me a skeptical look. “No, you’re not. And if you are, I have to wonder why you’d get engaged to him in the first place.”

My brows shot up. “If he’d only cast me aside because of my health diagnosis, that would have been one thing. It happens to a fair number of people facing dire health issues. The spouse can’t handle the upcoming changes, bills, whatever. Not that I think that’s any more forgivable, but, Yak. He was cheating – maybe not physically, but there’s no reason Mia should have been able to dive right into his bed like she did. Not unless there was open communication happening between them already.”

“She was at your bachelorette party... Wasn’t she going to be *in* your wedding? Wouldn’t that force the two of them to be on talking terms? And what I want to know is why did she insist on taking you bitches to Platinum’s? That is such an odd choice, though your party wasn’t the first batch of women to come through our doors.”

After a single deep nod, I smiled. “Exactly. She dragged us to Platinum’s because she met up with Destin while we were there. At a minimum, Destin had to have been flirting or giving Mia some sort of signal that things could go there

because that's awful fast for things to progress –even if they *did* date before I came along.”

He shook his head. “I’m giving you space because you need a different kind of man in your life.”

A mirthless laugh bubbled out of me. “Oh, we’re back to this except, instead of it being what I *deserve*, you’re going to tell me what I *need*.” I shook my head. “Yak, I like you... as a person. Am I also attracted to you? Yes. But, what little I know of you, I like you. That shouldn’t mean you have to give me space.”

He stared at me for a long moment. “I won’t be around while you’re having your treatments.”

I set my bowl on the coffee table, then threw my hands up in the air. “For heaven’s sake, why? That sounds like you’re scared and you don’t strike me as a coward, Noah.”

“Stop using my real name,” he grumbled.

I chuckled. “Not a chance, *Noah*. If that bothers you, then good. It bothers me that you’re treating me like a fragile piece of art.”

He stood, grabbed my bowl, and took it to the sink along with his. “Not my first time dealing with someone I care about who has cancer.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

The biggest smile stretched across my face.

From the kitchen sink, he aimed an assessing look at me.
“What the hell are you smiling about?”

“I’m someone you care about.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, his eyes sliding to the side like he hated that I’d caught him. After a moment, he stared at me and the glimmer in his eyes made me brace.

“It’s my fault my parents are gone.”

My teeth sunk into the side of my lower lip. “That isn’t true,” I whispered.

He drove his thumb into his sternum. “I got Dad sick while he was in his last chemo treatment. Mom told me not to go to a party and I snuck out. Got drunk, had to walk home in the rain during the winter. By Sunday, I had a cold, or so I thought. Turns out it was the flu. Dad got sick, fucked with his chemo. He died ten days later.”

I shook my head with two small shakes, then I whispered, “That doesn’t make it your fault.”

His hand tore through his hair. “Doesn’t it though? If I’d just listened to Mom, he wouldn’t have had complications.”

I stood. “You don’t get the flu from walking in a winter rainstorm. Like you said, schools are full of germs. You probably got it from going to class and you’d have been sick regardless of partying.”

He shook his head. “Whatever! I won’t do that shit a third time.”

My brow cocked. “A third time?”

His chin lowered so he could give me a stern look. “My mom died of cancer, too, Nora. Followed all the goddamned rules, and she had fuckin’ complications, also.”

Which only solidified my point that he wasn’t responsible for his dad’s death, but I kept that to myself.

He moved toward the door. “I *won’t* do that to you, too, Nora. You get any more deliveries at the front door, I’ll bring ‘em by.”

“Can I just text you? Give you a heads up?”

“Sure.”

I shot a sardonic smile at him. “I’ll need your number, then.”

He opened the door. “I’ll have Trixie send it to you.”

Two weeks later, my second round of chemo made the first dose feel like a walk in the park. I’d gone back to work *that* week, but I couldn’t tolerate even half a day at the office after the second treatment.

Mom had ordered me a bunch of little things to help me feel better or focus on something other than my illness - like a few paperbacks, a deluxe manicure kit, fuzzy socks, and a fancy journal with an even fancier pen. The items arrived on three different days. Without texting Trixie, Yak brought them to me. Well, brought them to my doorstep anyway.

I'd texted him my thanks and received the same response each time.

No problem.

Boy, did he have that wrong. There was a problem all right. Namely that he thought he could stop, drop, and roll where I was concerned. Not that I didn't appreciate him bringing my packages by, but I wanted a friendship with him if nothing else.

Okay, that was an outright lie. I wanted more, but I'd take what I could get at this juncture.

I'd slept so much that afternoon, I had more energy than I expected that night. My fingers slowly spread the wooden slats of my blinds. In the moonlight and weak streetlight, I saw Yak's Harley glinting in the driveway.

Excellent.

I pulled up my text thread with him and tapped out a quick question.

Whatcha up to?

The little symbols appeared under my text indicating it had been delivered. What didn't appear were the trailing dots indicating a forthcoming response from him.

*I slept too much today after my second session.
Now I can't sleep. Wanna play twenty questions?*

I sent that and thought better of it.

Then I decided to stick to my guns.

I'll go easy on you... for a little bit.

After what felt like a month, he texted me.

Watching a movie. Some other time, Princess.

My lips pursed and I was a stone's throw away from tossing my phone to the side. Then I forced myself to keep at him.

*What are you watching? My guess is I haven't
seen it. An Uber will have me there in three
seconds flat.*

The dots flowed in their wavy pattern, stopped, started up again, and then stopped again.

Finally, my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Have you lost your mind?”

I bit back my smile. “No. You’re the one who won’t answer questions. If you’re watching a horror flick, I’m out. But you know, classics like *The Godfather* or *The Maltese Falcon* and I’m in. Or anything with Jimmy Stewart.”

From the garbled sound, I suspected he fought against a choke. “You’re kidding. Jimmy Stewart?”

I smiled. “He is everything, Yak. He can be dramatic, but when he’s in a comedic role, it can’t be beat because he’s so damned subtle.” *A lot like you*, I didn’t say because Yak didn’t have a role to play. But my gut said he had all those qualities and then some.

“You and my mom would have gotten along then,” he murmured.

“I take it she liked Jimmy Stewart.”

“*Harvey* was her favorite.”

I smiled. “An invisible bunny. What’s not to love?”

“Yep,” he whispered.

“So, what are you watching?”

“Nora, you don’t need to traipse over here to watch a movie with me,” he said in a resigned tone.

I wondered why I was bothering with him, but I wanted company. However, a girl had to know when to stop. “You’re right. I’ll let you get back to your undisclosed movie. Eat some popcorn for me, will you? Goodnight, Yak.”

I ended the call before he could respond.

After I brushed my teeth, I curled up in bed. Seemed my second wind was short-lived and I fell straight to sleep.

Chapter 11

Smile Like That

YAK

Maybe it was a trait of all women, but just like his mom, Nora had made him feel guilty for not inviting her over for the movie. Since he'd already made popcorn, he ate some for her. It sucked being such an ass to her, but she needed to focus on getting better.

He emptied the popcorn bowl and washed it in the kitchen sink. As he rinsed it, movement outside Nora's place caught his attention.

He turned off the lights. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw two men prowling around the perimeter of the carriage house. Yak grabbed an extra gun he left hidden in the cabinet, hurried to the laundry room where he shoved his socked feet into his boots. He opened the door slow and quiet, then stalked to Nora's place.

The sound of glass breaking infuriated him. The woman had just undergone another round of chemo, it had to be taking a toll, and these assholes were breaking into her place?

Oh, fuck no. That would not stand.

His adrenaline surged and he hurried to her door because he didn't think a woman like her had a gun.

He kicked in her front door. A gunshot rang out in the small house. Dread filled his veins, filled him to his soul with an icy chill.

“You fucking bitch! You shot me in the foot!”

A rustling sound came from his left. He crouched just as a fist flew through the air. Rising from his stance, he used his momentum to land a powerful uppercut to the man's abdomen.

The overhead light in the kitchen came on and Nora still aimed her gun at her attacker. His face was twisted with pain.

Yak turned just before his assailant threw a jab at him. He dodged that and connected with his own jab to the man's jaw.

A siren cut through the night air. Both men wore balaclavas, but the one in front of Yak darted to the front door. Yak lunged for him, but he pulled back when the man threw out a nasty backward kick at Yak.

“Drop your gun, bitch.”

The other man's voice forced Yak's attention back to Nora and her assailant.

“Get on the fuckin' ground asshole, before I blow your brains out,” Yak snarled.

“Fuck you, Yak.”

“Not happening, asshole. Drop your gun, and get on the ground.”

The front door stood open, and he heard a car—possibly two—stop near Nora’s home.

“Police! Drop your weapons!”

Yak caught Nora’s gaze and she slowly lowered her gun while he did the same.

The asshole, however, kept his gun aimed at Nora. Regret slammed through Yak as he realized his mistake. This person, whoever he was, didn’t care if he went down for a crime.

“Get down, Nora!” Yak yelled.

She hit the deck like a trained soldier a moment before another shot rang out. The officer behind him shot the man. Then Yak saw the man’s body jerk again as another shot rent the air.

A strange sense of disappointment washed through him as he watched the man’s body fall to the ground.

Shit.

Yak knew the man was dead. Whoever it was wouldn’t be offering up any answers... hell, it might be days before they found out *who* the man was since the cops were here.

Two officers came inside, one coming to him and the other going to Nora before checking on the attacker.

In no time, he stood on the opposite side of the backyard from Nora while an older, African-American officer asked him

to recount what happened that night. For the fourth time, he repeated his story for the officer. The entire time he wanted to be at Nora's side. He'd underestimated her thinking she wouldn't have a weapon, but this *had* to be her first police questioning after firing a weapon. She needed someone to have her back.

No, not someone.

Him, and only him.

The officer nodded and folded his notebook closed.

Yak took a calming breath. "Please, can I help my neighbor? She just had her second round of chemotherapy today, and something like this is tough enough... add chemo to the mix and I can't imagine how tired she is."

After an assessing look that lasted an interminable length of time, the officer asked, "Before you join her, why would Crop break into her house?"

That came as such a gut-punch, Yak didn't have to act surprised. "I have no idea, sir. Until you mentioned his name, I had no idea that was who broke into her home."

The officer nodded. "Go help your neighbor."

Yak sidled up to Nora just as the female officer questioning her shut her notepad.

Typical. The other officer had to know things were wrapping up all around. The female officer gave Yak a hard-eyed stare. On auto-pilot, he put his arm around Nora's shoulders. She leaned into him and wrapped both arms around his waist.

The officer shifted her stare to Nora. “Take care of yourself, Ms. Ellis. Call if you remember anything about the other intruder.”

While they had stood outside answering questions, the temperature had to have dropped by ten degrees. Another reason Yak had wanted to be by Nora’s side. Nobody had even offered her a blanket.

Once the last cruiser backed out of the drive, Yak guided Nora back into her small home.

As soon as they were inside, she let him go. “Thanks for coming out here, Yak. I appre—”

“Pack your shit,” he ordered.

Her teeth clacked as she clamped her mouth shut. She stared at him for a long beat, then said, “I’m not going anywhere.”

He pointed a finger at her. “You’re not staying here. I heard glass breaking. There’s no plywood around here, and I’ll be damned if you sleep in here with the temperature dropping like it is.”

From the look she gave him, he expected more lip. “Fine. Give me a second. And also, it’s not like I can’t swing by here and get—”

“Nope. Anyone’s gonna ‘swing by,’ it’ll be me, not you. I don’t know if you were the target for this shit or if it was just a way of letting me know the Devil Lancers know where you live. Bottom line, you aren’t stepping foot back in here, so if you got sentimental shit or whatever, get it now.”

Her head cocked to the side. “I like you better when you’re cracking jokes.”

He fought shaking his head. “Not a damn thing funny here, princess. And if you still have it, don’t forget to bring your gun. Where the hell did you get it, anyway?”

She pulled a duffel bag out of her closet. “Evan, of course. He was dead-set that I had to be protected. Taught me to shoot, too. Though, he’s gonna be pissed the cops took my gun from me.”

He crossed to the front of the small house and examined the broken out window. It had only been the lower pane, but if he had to guess the whole thing would have to be replaced.

“I know my way back to the main house, Yak. You don’t have to hang around while I pack.”

He turned around. “I’m not leaving your side tonight, Nora.”

She shook her head. “The cops shot the main attacker, and the other guy has to be long gone.”

He took a deep breath. “The assailant went by the road name ‘Crop.’ He was at the bar that night we went for a ride. I meant what I said, Nora. I don’t know if the Lancers are targeting you or trying to get to me. Either way, you’re gonna have a Riot brother on you at all times.”

With a stack of clothes in her hands, she paused and looked at him. “I still have a smaller gun, Yak. Your brothers don’t have to do anything special for me. Especially not after...”

His brow cocked at her trailing words. “Especially not after what?”

She shrugged. “Not after the way Trixie and all the other ladies have been so sweet and accepting of me. I don’t want to cause problems for their husbands or whoever you’re going to have assigned to me.”

If he had anything to do with it, *he* would be the only brother assigned to her. But he knew that was outlandish. He had to sleep at some point, and she needed to go to work. Assuming she felt up to it.

That urge to distance himself from her reared its ugly head, and for once, Yak ignored it. She was stuck with him. Hell, he hoped she was down with stairs because she would be in his bed. Even if they’d just be sleeping.

There would be time for sex later.

That thought made him a right bastard.

He couldn’t get involved with her, but here he was... doing just that.

He damn sure couldn’t lead her on and let her think there could be more for them. And she would think that if he became intimate with her.

With a growly sigh, he shoved his hand through his short hair. “Don’t worry about the other Riot brothers, Nora. It won’t be an inconvenience for them. Hell, the moment some of them hear it was the Devil Lancers, they’ll probably want to double up the protection on you.”

She zipped her bag while making a face at him. “Why? It was a home invasion.”

“They’ve done some really shady shit in the past, Nora. It’s getting late, so leave it at that. If I’m feeling nice in the morning, I’ll share with you.”

Before they left her place, Nora had mentioned wishing she could shower so she could wash away the feeling of someone breaking into her home. He led her straight to his ensuite bath and told her to take her time. He used the downtime to call Volt and Roll. They were having an emergency session of church at noon, and Roll was on his way to board up the window since Yak had no plywood on hand.

Once Nora finished in the bathroom, he took a quick shower.

Now, he stood in the doorway of his bathroom wearing his pajama pants and staring at his empty bed. That forced him to see his mistake.

He hadn’t told her she was sleeping in his bed.

With a head shake, he hurried downstairs, hoping she hadn’t fallen asleep yet.

He found her spreading a sheet over the couch with a snapping sound. “Stop right there, Nora.”

She turned to him with a confused look. “Why? Something wrong with your sheets? They smell fine.”

Part of him hated that she'd smelled the sheets first because it reminded him of her switching the pillows that first morning. He forced himself to ignore that.

“No. You're sleeping in my bed.”

She nodded. “Oh. Well, then I'm making up the couch for you then. Though, I hate the idea of forcing you—”

“I'm in my bed with you. It's a safety precaution.”

If he hadn't been holding his breath, he'd have missed her muttering. “Of course it is.”

Her frustrated tone almost made him laugh. She stared at the sheet, and he snatched it off the couch, balled it up in his hands and tossed it on the floor.

“Yak,” she admonished.

“Let's go, Nora. We're both wiped.”

She eyed his chest and he made a note to put on a tank.

He followed her up the stairs since he didn't trust her strength. It was overkill, but between the adrenaline crash and the chemo treatment, she had to be dead on her feet.

Should have carried her.

His breath caught at that thought.

Dammit. Maybe Cal would let her stay with him and Mallory.

He sighed. Then she'd be on the wrong side of the river from her appointments and her job if she had the energy to work.

Errant thoughts about her staying with someone else left his mind when he watched her climb into his bed. Having her there settled something inside him, made him feel more at ease.

He shoved that idea aside and climbed into his side of the bed.

“They won’t come back,” she whispered.

“I won’t take that chance,” he said.

“You’re a good man.”

He kept his eyes on the ceiling and chuckled. “If you think that, you need to reevaluate how you define a good man.”

“You’re humble, too.”

“No. Your brother’s a good man, Nora.”

She laughed. “No. I mean, he is... but so are you.”

“He wouldn’t bring danger to your door.”

She shifted closer to him. “You didn’t do that. Those two assholes did. And regardless, he’d have responded the same way. Gun in hand and ordering me to get out and stay with him.” She hesitated. “Though, not in the same bed.”

“You’re twins.”

“Yeah, but I’m a snuggler at night.”

He recalled waking up next to her at the clubhouse. She’d been rolled into him –though not quite a full ‘snuggle.’ It had spurred him to sit in the recliner.

“Which reminds me.” She sat up and started shoving a pillow between them.

He grabbed her hand. “Stop.”

She leveled her green eyes on him. “Yak. The last few weeks, you’ve gone out of your way to be scarce. I get it. There’s nothing between us. So, I’m not gonna make you uncomfortable in your own bed.”

He yanked the pillow out from under the covers and tossed it behind his head. “Nora, I don’t want anything between us. Just sleep.”

She stared at him for a long, loaded moment.

With a sigh, she shook her head, muttering, “I *wish* I understood men. Gah!”

His body shook with a silent chuckle. “Men feel just the same way, woman.”

One thing he understood with certainty, this long night was about to get even fucking longer.

Nora

I woke up three times during the night. All because of nightmares.

The last time, I caught faint traces of morning light against a hairline crack in one of Yak's black-out shades.

I exerted the utmost care to move my legs away from Yak, slow and easy.

His arm darted out, his hand landing on my thigh. "Where you goin'?"

His husky, sleepy voice did things to me. I ignored those things.

"The bathroom," I croaked.

"Hurry."

That seemed strange. I supposed he need the toilet, too.

I finished up and opened the bathroom door, light spilling into the room.

Yak laid on his side in bed, the covers down around his hips. His body was so still, I suspected he fell back to sleep.

I turned off the light and tiptoed toward the doorway when he said, "Get back here, princess."

I turned around. "Enough with the princess bit. And I can't sleep anymore."

“Bullshit. You been up three times in the past four hours. You’re comin’ back to bed.”

He threw me off, admitting he knew I’d been awake. His bossy tone didn’t help either. *Where was the happy-go-lucky man I first met?*

His stern voice pulled me from my thoughts. “Don’t make me come get you.”

Part of me wanted to see him try, but it wouldn’t be good for my stitches. I trudged back to my side of the bed.

I planted my hands on my hips, not that he could see that. “I don’t know if you’re grouchy or what’s gotten into you, but you can’t force me back into bed. And you certainly can’t make me sleep, Yak.”

He flipped on his bedside lamp. When my eyes adjusted, I saw his lips curled with a sly grin. “I could make you sleep, woman –but my guess is that the chemo doesn’t put you in the mood for me to make you come with my tongue and my mouth.”

I closed my eyes against his words, but that only made things worse since I envisioned exactly what he’d described.

My eyes opened and I stared at him. “You are *so* confusing. Why would you want to do that?”

He scooted across the bed toward me, wrapped an arm around my waist, and gently tugged me onto the bed.

When he had us side-by-side under the covers, he tucked my hair behind my ear. “I want to do that and so damn much

more, Nora. Get this through your head, I want you in the worst way.”

The heated sincerity of his eyes reinforced his words.

“Why me?” I blurted.

His eyes widened and his head reared back. “You’re joking.”

I gave a short shake of my head. “I’m not. You hang with strippers all night, why would you find me attractive? I’ve had a lumpectomy. I’m grateful as can be that I don’t have to have reconstructive surgery. But the scars, and all that... there’s no way you would want *anything* to do with me.”

He blew out a long, patient breath. “You’re a fighter in a way most people would never know that you fight. I find that to be incredibly admirable, and beauty comes from within, not from what’s on the outside.”

“That’s what everyone says,” I scoffed.

His eyes heated. “I know that’s where beauty comes from, *because* I’ve spent so much time holding auditions and watching gorgeous women dance. They can wear makeup, do their hair, but *nothing* hides a bitchy disposition and no sense of humor.”

“But they have better bodies,” I muttered.

His expression softened. “They have bodies, and so do you. This will sound crass, but pussy is pussy. Sex isn’t everything in a relationship.”

“But I’m sure big breasts turn you on.”

He shook his head ever so slightly. “I’m more of an ass man, but you need to get me, Nora. It’s about *who* I’m with, not what they look like.”

I nodded. “I get you.”

A small smile appeared before he said, “You better.”

“To clarify, you’re done with the whole ‘you deserve someone better’ routine?” I asked, pitching my voice lower to imitate him.

His lips tipped up. “Yeah. I’m done with that shit. You aren’t goin’ anywhere without me puttin’ up a fight.”

“What about rebounds?”

His brows drew together. “Those happen in basketball. What are you on about?”

I resisted rolling my eyes. “Yes, but I was engaged until a month ago.”

One of his brows arched. “Check your dates, woman. Been almost eight weeks by my count.”

“Yeah, but—”

He shifted up on an elbow. “I’m not likely to offer you marriage and I don’t want kids. But I can’t stand not having you close to me.” He stared into my eyes. “What’s with that look?”

I tried to clear my expression. “I respect waiting to have kids, but why are you so firm about it?”

He fell to his back. “Not getting into that now, but you should know going in where I’m at.”

“It’s just... not exactly sad to me, but you’re such a great person. A child of yours would be just as great, if not even greater because they’d be raised by you.”

“Not happening, princess. Now, get some more sleep. You need it.”

“Get up, princess! We’re running late.”

I rubbed my face. “What are you talking about? You forced me to call in sick to work. I don’t have to be anywhere today.”

Yak stood at my side of the bed. His head moved in the barest hint of a nod before he dropped his hands on either side of my shoulders and lowered his lips to give me a forehead kiss.

A curl of excitement shot through me. That kind of tenderness was wholly unexpected.

He straightened. “I know that, but I have a surprise for you.”

My eyes widened. “Really? I love surprises... but you don’t sound that excited about this.”

He shrugged. “Let’s just say...this could go really fuckin’ great or not great at all.”

“Sounds intriguing. Let me get dressed.”

I came out of the bathroom after brushing my teeth and changing into my jeans and a flowy navy blue blouse. Yak stood right outside the door. He brought his hands to my cheeks, slid them along my jawline to tilt my head, and then he lowered his lips to mine. I expected a quick and light kiss. Instead, his head slanted and his tongue darted out making me open my mouth. I slid my hands around his waist and down to his ass. I tried to return his kiss, but it became clear he was trying to communicate something and I let him have his way with me. It wasn't a hardship because this kiss topped any I'd had before it.

When he stopped and withdrew his lips from mine, my eyes opened, and I focused on his handsome face. "What was that all about?"

"Just showing you where I stand."

A shy smile quirked my lips. "I like how you showed me." Then, I blurted, "You know I have cancer, right?"

He chuckled. "Heard something about that, sweetheart."

"Things aren't going to be easy for me for a while, you know. Like, I'm gonna have zero hair soon."

He nodded. "You're not gonna scare me away, Nora."

I nodded. "Good to know, Noah."

For some reason, that made him growl and he kissed me again.

Half-an-hour later, Yak swung his car into a small strip mall with a Mexican restaurant on one end and a small pool supply

place on the opposite end. In between them were three other businesses, one of them appeared to be a hair salon.

I gave him some side eye. “Are we here for chlorine?”

His grin started out fake, but softened to a genuine smile. “No. We’re going to my barber shop.”

The familiar smell of hair products hit me when Yak guided me inside the ‘barber shop’. I wasn’t about to tell Yak his barber was working in a hair salon - even if that salon was as hip and edgy as they came. The walls were painted a muted gray and various rock posters hung on the walls. The lobby felt like a club, while the florescent lights in the back allowed stylists to work their magic. A lengthy strip of LED lights ran along the entire room where the wall met the ceiling. Those lights were a pale blue enhancing the subdued nightclub vibe.

“Hey, Fred,” Yak said.

A man with jet black hair and traces of silver in his sideburns turned our way. At a glance, I figured he was at least five years older than Yak. His eyes were such a dark brown, they almost seemed inky black. He was probably as tall as Yak, but not as built and he didn’t have that air of being ready for a fight. In addition to his faded jeans, he wore a dark blue-gray t-shirt featuring the Stone Temple Pilots logo.

He smiled so big at us, it made his eyes seem to narrow. “It’s about time you brought her around.”

Opposite Fred, a tall slender woman with turquoise hair swept around her station.

She looked up and grinned at Yak. “Long time no see, biker bro!”

“Hey, Sydney. My girl, Nora, needs a great haircut. Fred said you had an opening.”

Her eyes cut to Fred and back to Yak. “I do... though that ‘opening’ was something Fred forced.”

I glared up at Yak. “You didn’t have something to do with that, did you?”

“He doesn’t tell me how to run my business, lady,” Fred said. “She cleaned up her floor. You sit down in her chair.”

Sydney put the broom away and Yak introduced us before I planted myself in her chair. She wrapped a cape around me and ran her hands through my hair. “What are we doing today?”

A closed-lip smile curled my lips. “I guess a pixie cut since the chemo is going to make it fall out very soon. The nurses said between two to four weeks after my first round... and that was four weeks ago.”

Her eyes caught mine in the mirror. “Chemo?”

I nodded.

She backed away and stepped into the middle of the salon. Out of the blue she started throwing punches at the air.

“What’s the problem?” I asked Yak in a low voice, but it wasn’t low enough.

“What’s the problem?” she repeated. In the mirror, I watched her prowl toward me. “The problem is a great woman like you getting freaking cancer!”

I shook my head. “I’m not great. I’m just a regular woman.”

“Nope. You’re anything but regular.”

One of my brows drew down. “You met me two minutes ago.”

She rested her hands on my shoulders and tipped her head at Yak. “Yeah, but I’ve known him half my life. Nobody has made him smile like that before.”

“Shut up, Syd,” Yak muttered.

Fred chuckled. “She speaks the truth, man. Shoulda seen him last month when I clipped his ponytail.”

Yak frowned. “Should have just taken her to a Great Clips.”

“You take that back,” Sydney said.

I laughed.

Yak smiled at me.

I didn’t know if it was different from other smiles, but it was glorious.

Thirty minutes later, Sydney spun me around in the chair. “Not to brag, but this may be the best pixie cut I’ve ever done.”

I grinned. “I’ll take your word for it, but you should put it on your Instagram or something if you really think so.”

Sydney's eyes slid to Yak. "You're cool with that?"

My brows drew together. "It's my hair in the picture... I don't understand why he has to be cool with it."

She gave me a patient smile. "Yeah, but I heard you two had a run-in with the cops last night. Things work differently with the brothers."

Yak's head wobbled. "Yeah, but if you keep it to the back of her head, that's cool. Anything else, I'd rather you wait until this shit dies down."

The volume on the radio was pretty low on the way to the clubhouse. I glanced at Yak's profile, marveling at his relationship with Fred and Sydney. The three of them were tight like they'd been through some rough times together.

I spoke without thinking. "I'm surprised you're not attracted to Sydney. She's got that sexy, edgy vibe going on."

He gave me a sideways glance. "Nope. She's married to Fred, over ten years now. Even if she weren't, she wouldn't even be on the radar."

"Really? That's surprising. She seems much more your type than me."

He shook his head. "Thing is... a dead cell phone isn't what she would call 'the story of her life.'"

I felt a smidge of embarrassment at the reminder of how we met, but it was chased by a wave of warmth.

I caught his eyes. “It’s not the whole story.”

He grinned. “Nope, but it’s a good start. Besides, edgy chicks aren’t my type.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Don’t tell Sydney, but she’s prone to drama.”

I nodded. “Okay, so who did you meet first? Fred or Sydney?”

A wistful smile crossed his face. “Believe it or not, I met them at the same time but in entirely different places.”

“That sounds bizarre.”

He stared out the windshield. “It is. Syd joined my last foster family about eighteen months before I got out of the system. That... family liked to have as many kids under the roof at a time as the system would allow.”

“They did?”

His lips quirked and he shot me a wry look. “Yeah. Gives them a bigger paycheck from the government to buy us all food. Not that they bought decent food and they didn’t even make sure all of us got it.”

“What?”

He grimaced. “There was a cabinet with canned food. They stocked it twice a day. We all had to fend for ourselves. Sydney’s first night, this asshole a year younger than me took the bowl of canned chili she’d made for herself.”

I closed my eyes and sighed.

He huffed out a chuckle. “Thing was, he didn’t know I’d just come back. I beat his ass and made sure Sydney got to eat.”

I glanced over at him, admiring him anew. “And I’m gonna guess you two were thick as thieves after that.”

He laughed. “Fuck no. She hated my guts for that. A fourteen-year-old having to rely on my ass to save her. She almost didn’t eat the damn chili.”

We braked for a traffic light. “Anyway, after that she kept to herself and I figured that was that. Instead, I found her following me back from the Riot clubhouse.”

I shook my head. “Wait. I thought you couldn’t patch in before twenty-one.”

His eyes met mine. “Mallory’s man, Cal, started prospecting early and patched in at eighteen. I’d heard rumors about him – he’s two years older than me– and I wanted to finagle the same deal.”

“Did you?”

The light changed and he turned onto Blanding Boulevard. “No. Teach wasn’t down with that said Cal had been a rare exception.”

I nodded. “So where does Fred come into play? Did he try to get in the club and change his mind?”

He chuckled. “No. He’s the person who told me the rumors about Cal. He’s also the person who kept me from strangling Sydney that night when I found out she’d followed me to the clubhouse.”

“He did?”

“He saw that, for whatever reason, she idolized me. I said she had a lousy way of showing it, but bottom line, he knew that foster home was no good for anyone –especially not a fourteen-year-old girl.”

I shook my head. “Wait. How much older than you is Fred? He looks like he’s at least forty.”

Yak drove through the gates of the compound and parked near the back door of the clubhouse. “He’s forty-five if I’m not mistaken. Syd’s thirty-three. Twelve-year gap between them, and Fred met her when he was twenty-six.” He blew out a breath. “Trust me, I never saw things going where they did with those two.”

“Wow,” I whispered.

He dipped his chin and met my gaze. “Yeah, but they work.”

I nodded. “Absolutely. I mean, after five minutes in that shop I can see that they’re right for each other. It’s just amazing to me how life works out.”

He grinned. “Good. Let’s go inside.”

As I shut the car door, I took in all the bikes in the lot. The first time I’d ever been here, there had been maybe six bikes, now there were at least a dozen more. Considering how many there were, it surprised me he found such a close spot.

With his arm around my shoulders, Yak pulled me to his side and we walked toward the clubhouse. I saw Trixie standing in the open back doorway.

A smug grin lit her eyes. “If I’m wrong, don’t fuckin’ tell me, but it looks like you two finally got your shit together.”

My lips pursed to hold back my laughter. After a beat, I asked, “Why don’t you want us to tell you if you’re wrong?”

“Because Trixie never admits when she’s wrong,” Yak muttered, shifting our bodies so I walked in front of him.

At the same time, Trixie said, “Because my man waking up at one-fucking-thirty to board up a broken window always starts my day on the wrong foot, and you two admitting you’re hot for each other would be the best damn news I’ve had all day.”

Yak’s body grazed me from behind. His lips brushed my ear. “Go ahead and make her day, Nora.”

I grinned. “You’re not wrong, Trixie.”

She tossed her hands up in the air above her head. “It’s about fuckin’ time.”

I lost Yak’s body heat. “You’ve said your piece, Trix. No more gloating, and let us inside.”

Chapter 12

Getting Out of Hand

YAK

“**W**ait, wait, wait. Where’s Rage?” Blood demanded after Cal called church to order.

Volt shook his head. “I filled him in, and unless something new is brought to light, he’s voting by proxy.”

Beast leaned forward. “I thought you had to be in the hospital to vote by proxy?”

A few brothers nodded their heads and made murmurs of agreement.

“Rage is concerned for his ol’ lady since it was the Devil Lancers who showed up at Yak’s place. If they’ve been tailing Yak, they’ll have seen him coming and going from Lisa’s shop. Rage isn’t taking any chances with that, and considering how that shit went down months ago, I don’t blame him.”

“But they went after Yak’s woman,” Liar said.

“Or so he says,” Prime muttered.

Yak clenched his jaw and slid his eyes to Prime, who sat across the table and four seats down from Yak. Every brother at the table tensed.

“What are you saying?” Blood asked.

“Ain’t that clear? He thinks Yak is lying,” Major said.

Prime turned his head toward Major. “Why do you believe him?”

Major leaned toward Prime, who sat on the other side of Razor. “Because he’s my *brother*.”

Prime sat straighter in his seat, his chest puffing out. “But he can accuse Tundra of being behind this shit?”

Tundra stood against the wall behind Prime. “I told you, it’s cool. He apologized and I understand where he was coming from. Too many of those attacks felt off. Like someone knew how we operate. I get where Yak’s comin’ from.”

“You think one of us is actually in on this shit?” Prime demanded, twisting in his seat to look at Tundra.

Even though Yak couldn’t see Prime’s facial expression, he saw Tundra’s eyes widen with surprise.

“Damn sure think it’s possible.”

Volt cleared his throat. “Prime, if we got a rogue brother, that is a serious accusation because it’s an even more serious problem. I won’t ignore the gut instincts of any brother, and Yak’s gut says this is an inside issue.” Volt raised his brows at Yak. “Did you check on those last two employees?”

Yak nodded. “Yeah. They check out clean, and I had the IT firm double check for me.”

“When did we get an IT firm?” Prime asked.

Vamp ran his hand over his bald head. “Jesus, when did Prime start runnin’ our meetings?”

“I ought to fine both your asses, but you’re right, Vamp. Prime, keep your mouth shut until the floor is open.”

Cal caught Volt’s gaze. “Do you think we should remind our brothers of the consequences of betraying the Riot?”

Volt’s head turned an inch, as a remorseful look crossed his face. “Yeah, you’re right, we should. Fuckin’ hate this shit, but we find out who’s done the brotherhood wrong, we strip your patch. Physically.”

Blood rubbed his hands together twice. “That includes tats.” He glanced at Volt. “We haven’t done this in a long time. You gonna open it up to more than just knives?”

Volt kept quiet and deliberated.

Patch muttered, “He should. Threats to women don’t stand around here, no matter what those ladies do for a living.”

Volt nodded. “Right. Any method for stripping a tat is fair game as far as I’m concerned. So, if one of you is working with Ghost or any of the Devil Lancers this is your only chance to get out.”

Prime fidgeted in his seat.

Volt dipped his chin. “Floor’s open, Prime.”

“How do we know it isn’t Yak?”

That felt like a direct gut-punch and Yak fought to keep a stoic expression.

“How do we know it isn’t you?” Volt asked.

Prime’s face paled. “What? Me? I just earned my patch, no way I’m gonna jeopardize that. Hell, I just learned how shit works at Platinum’s. But Yak and Turk know all the shit that goes down there.”

“Because they’re the managers,” Cal grumbled.

“Yeah, what better way to hide a double-cross,” Prime said. “Blame it on someone else inside the organization. He first blamed Tundra, then acted like he fucked up.”

Yak glared at Prime. “And the two men holding guns on Nora last night? What the fuck is that? Some grand plan of mine to put *another* woman in further jeopardy? She’s already fighting cancer, so I’m gonna have two men break into her place with guns? You’re way the fuck out of line, Prime.”

Turk’s even-keeled voice cut through the tension. “It could be me. Did you think of that, Prime? I know how Yak thinks. I know his weaknesses. I trained you, Tundra, and Evict. If I had a death-wish in addition to an ax to grind with the Riot MC, I know good and damn well, Yak’s gonna be the first to suspect another brother. Not because he wants to pin shit on somebody, but because he cares that damn much about the business, the dancers, and this club.”

Tundra looked at Turk. “Yak trained me too, though.”

Turk dipped his head. “Yeah, but most of your training was with me. Bottom line, if I wanted to fly under the radar, I’d know getting Yak’s suspicions up would be the way to go because of this meeting right here.”

“God damn, I hate this shit,” Razor muttered.

Cal, Blood, and Volt stared at Razor. After a beat, Volt said, “You would since you went through this.”

Razor shook his head. “Wouldn’t say that. Hell, I’m the brother who renounced his club to come here, but I did shit against them because of the bullshit they had allowed.”

“So it could be you,” Prime said, his tone bordering on snotty.

Cal speared Prime with a glare. “Get your head out of your ass. The point here is that it could be *any* of us. You aren’t helping shit pointing the finger at Yak without proof or turning shit around on Razor because of his past.”

Between Turk’s words and Cal’s, it hit Yak that Prime had every opportunity to fuck with the dancers.

He wouldn’t share that now, though. Regardless of who had turned against the Riot MC, the next time Yak mentioned it, he had to have his facts –and proof– at the ready.

“Where does that leave us?” Blood asked.

Volt sighed. “This whole meeting’s been a clusterfuck. In case anyone doesn’t know, Crop, a long-time member of the Devil Lancers was killed last night by police gun fire. He and

another man broke into the carriage house behind the house Yak's renting."

"A house he's renting from me," Roll muttered.

"Right. The other intruder ran and got away. Crop's dead, and we don't know if the Lancers are going to retaliate against us."

Prime squinted at Volt. "We didn't kill him, the cops did."

Volt gave Prime a patient look. "They won't see it that way."

Patch tugged on the ponytail at the nape of his neck and blew out a sigh. "So if I'm hearin' this right, we got another club gunnin' for us, a brother turned against us who is most likely also gunnin' for us, and we're gonna be working to roust this mofo who's disloyal to the Riot?"

Blood grinned at their treasurer. "Sums it up perfect if you ask me." He looked down the table at the rest of the brothers. "If you got an ol' lady, take precautions. Just because the threats are happening at Platinum's doesn't mean they can't target your women. Know we all hate helmets, but your women need to wear them until we know shit's been taken care of." He glanced at Volt. "And I'll be sure to tell Rage about that."

"Thanks, Blood," Volt said. "I know we just stopped the parking lot patrols at Platinum's, but those go into effect again tonight. Vamp, Beast, and Liar, you're up first."

Yak opened the door to his room and felt a different kind of gut-punch. He knew Nora was with him, but somehow he didn't expect to see her in his room... and in his bed. Part of him could get used to this.

“I think I like that look on your face,” Nora murmured as he shut the door.

He smiled. “Well, I *know* I like the look of you in my bed, princess.”

“Yeah, it's just nobody has ever looked at me with so much intensity... and intention.”

He stalked closer to the bed. “Oh, I got intentions where you're concerned... if you're up for it.”

She shifted in the bed. “If I'm up for it?”

With his knee on the bed, he put his hands on the bed on either side of her waist. “Yeah. For weeks now, I've been thinking about having you in my bed.”

Her eyes darted to the side and back to him. “What about wall sex?”

He chuckled. “Definitely on the list, but that happens at the house.”

“Why?”

“No way do I want my brothers to hear us. Those sounds are just for me and you. If you're lucky, we might have wall sex in here when things get loud downstairs. Really loud.”

She reached up and stroked his cheek. “So what have you been thinking all these weeks?”

He slid his hand under her tank-top and found she wasn't wearing a bra. “Lots of things.” He palmed her breast, pinched her nipple, then glided his hand back down to her belly. “All of them filthy, and all of them satisfying. For both of us.”

Her eyes flared at him. “Was that a tease? Why did you stop?”

“Don't want to hurt you, babe.”

A small smile made the skin around her eyes crinkle. “You wouldn't hurt me. That's my good breast.”

He did a long blink. “Can I undress you, Nora?”

She grinned. “Sure. Right after you get undressed.”

It went against his nature since he always hung it up, but he shrugged out of his cut and tossed it on the recliner. He made short work of shucking his boots and clothes. His dick twitched when Nora stared with hungry eyes and licked her lips.

“Now who's looking with intention?”

A blush crept up her cheeks. “You forgot about the intensity.”

He shook his head while he pulled the bed covers down. “I didn't forget, woman.”

He wanted her mouth on him, but he wanted inside her sweet pussy more.

Her hands drifted to the bottom of her tank, he grabbed them and moved them above her head. “Let me, please.”

The sight of her tongue darting out almost made him groan. “Okay, but... can you hurry up?” she whispered. “I’ve thought of a lot of things I intend to do with you, too.”

He gently lifted up her top. She arched her back to help him. With her shirt off, he caught her staring at him. She expected him to be turned off by the scar on her other breast, but he wasn’t. “You’re beautiful, Nora.”

“I’m healing is more like it.”

He stared into her green eyes. “Doesn’t mean you aren’t beautiful. I bet you wanted to tell me not to lift your shirt, but you still let me. Hell, you helped me do it.”

Resolve hit her eyes. “Just don’t treat me like some kind of flower.”

His eyes drifted to the headboard and back to her. “Can’t promise that, Nora.” He slipped his fingers into the waistband of her pajama shorts and tugged them off her well-sculpted legs. “You get past all your therapies and shit, I’ll get rough with you, but like you said, you’re healing.”

She fidgeted her legs. “I don’t think you know how long I’ve wanted this.”

He aimed a wan smile at her. “I think I do.” He noticed her panties were navy blue and white polka dot and trimmed with a wide band of navy lace. “Damn. I like your panties... but I’m gonna like getting them off you even more.”

She grabbed his hand and guided it to the waist band. “Then what are you waiting for?”

A growl rumbled through him. “You’re being naughty, baby.” He tugged the scrap of satiny fabric down to her ankles.

She kicked them off.

He memorized the look of anticipation in her eyes, then lowered his lips to her belly button.

Her gasp filled the room. He stayed focused on his goal, trailing his lips down her silky skin to her pelvic bone, and sliding his hands under the globes of her ass.

“Yak... you can’t do that.”

He lifted his gaze to hers. “Why can’t I?”

Her eyes darted away. “I just... nobody’s ever...”

His fingers dug into her plump ass. “Are you telling me, not even your ex gave you oral?”

She sighed and looked away. “I... I’ve only been with two other people. The first in high school, and he dumped me the next day. And as for Destin, he said that was perverted.”

He leaned down and nipped her inner thigh. “I’d like to punch that asshole, but...”

“But what?” she asked, her eyes intent on him.

He couldn’t contain his grin. “But I fuckin’ love that I get to be the first to make you come with my tongue.”

“Yak,” she whispered, her legs restless beneath him.

“What?” he asked.

She stared down her body at him.

He arched a brow. “Tell me what you want, princess. I’ll do it. But I want you to say the words.”

“I really want you to kiss me.”

While he stared up at her, he brought a hand out from under her. “Where do you want me to kiss you?”

Her neck arched as she looked up at the ceiling. “Anywhere, Noah.”

He chuckled and traced his finger up to her belly button. “Here?” He glided his finger down to her pelvic bone. “Here again?”

She growled and looked at him again. “Noah.”

He slid his finger along her wet folds. She was just as wet as that night in his kitchen. “Maybe here?”

She kept quiet, but her breathing had become labored.

“Thought about your tight, wet pussy every night since then, baby.”

“No, you haven’t,” she said.

He pushed his finger inside. “Oh, yeah, I have. Didn’t forget how slick and hot you are. Wondered what you would taste like ever since. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“Yes, I did,” she almost whined.

He traced his tongue along her inner thigh. “Anywhere isn’t specific enough, sweet Nora. What do you want me to do? Tell me.”

Her green eyes were imploring. “Do... what you said you wanted to do. That nobody else has ever done before.”

“Princess... are you saying you want me to kiss you here?” he asked, his finger rubbing her clit.

She gave a sharp inhale and arched her back. He groaned. Responsive women always turned him on in a huge way. He hadn’t forgotten how she detonated in his kitchen weeks ago. He’d been looking forward to this very moment, when he could make her do it again in his bed and he could watch. His dick throbbed, but he would make sure Nora got off first.

“Use words, baby.”

“Yes, Noah. I want you to kiss me there, lick me, whatever you have to do. I need you so bad, it hurts.”

That made two of them, he thought.

He gave a cursory lick to her clit, savoring her flavor. “Don’t you worry, Nora. You’re gonna have me.”

Nora

After Yak licked me once, I thought it was a tease. Luckily I was wrong, because the next thing I knew he went after me like a starving man sitting down to feast. He worked me up fast, but didn't let me come. My body threatened to revolt at his ministrations... or lack of them.

“What are you doing to me?” I demanded.

His teeth sunk into the top of my thigh playfully. “Drawing it out, baby. It'll make it that much better. I promise.”

My throaty laugh filled his room. “Doubtful, mister. I wasn't kidding earlier I need you so bad—”

“It hurts,” he whispered. “Don't remind me, Nora.” He drove two fingers inside me and lowered his lips to my clit. My ankles dug into his back. With his free hand, he gave my hip a squeeze and he hummed his approval.

“Oh my God, Yak,” I moaned, my hips moving.

He increased the rhythm of his fingers, but pulled his mouth away. “That's it, baby. Ride my fingers and my face.”

His words were so coarse, yet I wanted to do that... no, I needed to ride him. I gave into my instinctive desire and heeded his words. My eyes closed while my hips alternated between bucking and grinding.

Yak made a satisfied noise against me and my gaze shot to his. The skin around his eyes had crinkled and I knew he was

pleased with my reaction.

An orgasm like no other rushed over me. While I reveled in the sensations, I felt the bed jostling. The faint sound of something hitting the bed near my shoulder registered in my mind. Then I felt Yak's warm lips trailing from my rib cage, up along my breasts, and gliding up the column of my neck.

He settled his hips and some of his weight on me. "Are you ready, Nora? Tell me if you're not, because I don't think I'll be able to stop once we get started."

I smiled. "I'm definitely ready, Noah."

"Open the condom," he ordered.

At his unexpected bossy tone, my breath caught in my lungs. I glanced toward where I'd vaguely heard a sound and saw a foil packet. Once I opened it, he went up on his knees giving me an up-close look at his cock. I handed it toward him, but rather than take it from me he guided my hand toward his cock. He caught my gaze and we both rolled it on him.

It was the most erotic and intimate moment I'd ever experienced.

Heat and something more than admiration filled his eyes as he stared at me. He lowered his body, his cock lined up with me. I widened my legs and tipped up my hips. He ever-so-slowly and gently slid inside my pussy. For a moment, I thought he was treating me like something fragile, then I recognized it was because of the girth of his cock, and possibly because like me he wanted to savor the moment.

Once he had bottomed out, he nipped at my lips. “You’re all mine, Elenora.”

I trailed a hand up from his abs to his broad shoulders. Before I could speak, his lips came down and his tongue met mine. I drove my other hand into the soft curls at the back of his head. Our kiss intensified and Yak began to move his hips.

He broke the kiss and concentrated on taking us both there. My eyes took in the curve of his biceps as he held himself up. The day he worked out on the patio raced back to my mind and I grinned.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

I hesitated. “My vagina is thrilled because she’s finally where she wanted to be weeks ago when you lifted weights in the backyard.”

He grabbed my hand, linked our fingers, and slid our hands above my head. “Good to know, babe.”

His weight shifted and he used his other hand to grab my thigh. He pulled my leg up, his angle changed, and my back arched as pleasure flooded through me.

“Fuck, you’re hot,” he hissed, sliding his hand down my thigh to the globe of my ass.

I moved my hips to meet his thrusts. His grip tightened and he lost some of his control. He powered into me and another orgasm hit me.

He dragged his lips from my neck up to my ear. “Love making you detonate, woman.”

My fingers grabbed his hair and I gave him a hard kiss.

Into my mouth, he made a noise, it sounded like a growl of satisfaction. His hips stilled and I felt his cock twitching inside me.

He took over the kiss for a moment, broke it, and gently rested his weight on me. “That was worth the wait, woman.”

I chuckled. “You sound surprised.”

He kissed the apple of my cheek. “Not surprised, satisfied.”

“Good,” I smiled, hoping he didn’t hear the relief in my voice.

His eyes widened at me. “Woman, don’t you say it like that. Knew the night I made you come in my kitchen that we would be fuckin’ phenomenal. It’s good to be proven right.”

I smirked. “I’m glad I could help you with that.”

He traced his nose alongside mine. “Gotta take care of the condom. Don’t move.”

With a single nod, I said, “Fat chance of that. I’m pretty sure you turned my whole body to mush, Noah.”

When he returned to the bed, I eyed his many tattoos. “You’re going to let me have my way with you, Yak. I want to take in all of your tattoos with my fingers and my tongue.”

His eyes closed and he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Woman, do not make me hard again. That was my last condom.”

I grinned up at him. “Won’t need one if I get to return the favor of oral.”

He shook his head. “Nope. Not tonight. You put that luscious mouth on me, I’ll lose my mind.”

“So?”

“That means I’ll have to get inside that sweet pussy.”

“No, it really doesn’t, Noah. It’ll be good to test your restraint.”

He gave me a squeeze. “We’ll see about that, darlin’.”

Late the next morning, Yak and I came back to the house. Roll needed one of us to be at the carriage house for the window company. Seemed he couldn’t get Cal and Vamp to replace the window because they were booked solid for the rest of the week.

Luckily, the other company arrived right on time and completed the job without any complications.

We’d finished eating lunch when Yak pulled his phone from its holster. “Shit.”

“What?”

He cast his eyes to the side for a moment before meeting mine. “I forgot I have to be somewhere this afternoon and into the evening.”

I glanced at my phone. “Well, it’s still early afternoon, it’s not a big deal. I’ll just—”

His brows arched. “You’re gonna have to go with me. Not leaving you alone in this house, Nora.”

After a deep breath, I gave him a closed-lip smile. “Not to relive it or anything, but I shot the one guy in the foot.”

He tilted his head to the side and widened his eyes. “Not helping there, Nora.”

I sighed. “Where are we going then?”

“Friend of mine is opening her own furniture store –this is her grand-opening party.”

I couldn’t hide my confusion. “What’s the big deal? That sounds like fun.”

“You’ll deny it, but you look tired, and I’d rather stay in.”

He was right, and it scared me how easily he could read me. “I’m not that tired, and this will be fun. I take it she isn’t part of the Riot?”

The rich sound of his laughter sent a curl of warmth through me. “Oh, she’s part of the Riot all right. She’s Rage’s woman and her older brother is the Sergeant-at-Arms for our Biloxi chapter. You might get to meet him, too, if we stay long enough.”

“Why wouldn’t we stay long enough?”

He dipped his chin. “You said you weren’t *that* tired, which means you are tired –so we’re cutting it short.”

I twisted my lips. “I didn’t peg you for being so overbearing. The night of the attack was one thing, but this... this is getting out of hand.”

His strong hands wrapped around my shoulders. “Keeping you healthy isn’t me being overbearing, Nora.”

I nodded. “You’re right. Thanks, Yak.”

We drove back to the clubhouse after leaving Relax –Lisa’s furniture store, which was cool as all hell. Before Yak turned off the car, he looked at me. “You only have one more chemo treatment?”

I grimaced. “That was... kind of a fib.”

His eyes narrowed a touch. “What do you mean, ‘kind of’?”

My eyes darted to the side for a moment as I weighed my words. “I just met Lisa. And everything was upbeat and positive. Talking about chemo has a way of making everything very somber.”

He sighed. “You never have to worry about that shit when you’re with me, woman. Hell, Lisa and Rage wouldn’t have ___”

I grabbed his hand. “I know they wouldn’t have, but at the same time I just wanted to change the subject and fibbed. But, to answer your question, I have a treatment next week like I said, and then three more after that.”

He powered off the car. “Wow.”

I grinned. “Then I do either proton therapy or radiation.”

“Then you’re done?”

I gave a slight frown. “Then another PET scan and we’ll see. Fingers crossed, I’ll just have yearly mammograms.”

His lips twisted. “That seems quick –not that quick is bad, but—”

I grabbed his tattooed forearm. “It was a small tumor, but given my family history, they were aggressive.”

He shook his head. “That moron is a serious moron.”

“What?”

His index finger traced the shell of my ear. “It’s one tough year for you, but I can tell you’re gonna move on like nothing happened. He couldn’t stick with you for this—”

“He wants kids. Badly. He’s the opposite end of the spectrum from you about kids.”

“That doesn’t—”

“It’s why he broke things off – or so he told me.”

His head reared back. “When did you talk to him?”

I shared about the work run-in with Destin.

When I finished, he kept quiet for a beat. “Guess I’m glad he’s an idiot.”

That was one way to look at it.

He unlatched his car door. “We’re sleeping here tonight.”

I threw him a sideways glance. “I have work tomorrow.”

“Call in sick.”

“No.”

He faced me. “Nora.”

“Yak, the next treatments are probably going to hit harder. I need to save my time. And I don’t feel that bad.”

His eyes filled with irritation. “There’s also a lunatic out there who broke into your home.”

“Or thought it was Roll’s house.”

“Don’t split hairs.”

“It’s no biggie for me to go to the office.”

He leaned his head on the headrest with a heavy sigh. “Fine, but Liar takes you.”

I should have let it go, but I couldn’t help but poke the bear a little more since he’d acquiesced. “Why not Andrea?”

He leaned toward me, his eyes flaring. “Because she’s so chill and eco-friendly, if the asshole caught you two, she’d probably try to *talk* to the bastard.”

With my sweetest smile, I said, “There is something to be said for diplomacy.”

I watched him run his long fingers through his thick hair. “Jesus.”

“I’m kidding. Liar’s bike has that nice backrest, it’ll be fine.”

“Nora,” he growled.

I rubbed his bicep. “Okay, okay. Let me soothe the beast.”

His face lit up. “That’s a great idea. Beast has a truck. That’ll work better.”

I opened my car door. “Fine. Good thing I brought extra work clothes with me last night. For the record, though, this is overkill.”

He cupped my cheek and gently turned my face toward his. “Never. Your safety is everything Elenora.”

For the next two weeks, Beast took me to and from the office. Sad to say, Beast didn’t have any great stories about Yak. Seemed he had patched-in while living in Biloxi and transferred to Jacksonville.

With his eyes on the traffic on Highway 17, he said, “Wouldn’t tell you anything even if I knew, though.”

“Why?”

He glanced at me and back to the road. “It’s his to tell, not mine.”

In the span of two weeks the only things I learned about Beast were how tight-lipped he could be, how much he loved alternative rock music, how much he loved his son A.J., and how much he hoped his old lady, Janie, would have another child.

None of that bothered me. I enjoyed hearing about Janie, and I loved not dealing with traffic.

This morning, Mia stopped by my desk not long after I sat down. “I thought you could drive while doing chemo?”

I looked up at her from my seat. “I can.”

She crossed her arms under her boobs. “Then why are you getting rides from that hot guy?”

I bit back both my smile and the info that Beast was married. “It’s just temporary.”

She arched her brow with a knowing look. “Because of the biker?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not your business, Mia. And really, why do you care? Looking to move on from Destin already?”

She inhaled sharply. “No, I... Never mind.”

I turned back to my report, but Mia didn’t leave.

“Seems weird you go from being engaged to two different men in two months.”

I shook my head and kept quiet.

“No response?”

Against my better judgment, I swiveled toward her. “Beast is married. Though even if he weren’t, who I’m with doesn’t matter to you.” The way she stared at me, it suddenly clicked. “You’re worried about Destin.”

Her lip curled into a half-snarl. “I didn’t say that.”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. If Destin thinks I’m still available after I’m better, you think he’ll dump you.”

“No,” she said, her tone petulant.

I shrugged. “If you say so, but word to the wise... focus on your own relationship and stop worrying about me.”

She let her snarl loose this time. “Whatever. I’ve got work to do.”

I heard footsteps approaching and Mr. Blake rounded the corner of my cubicle. “Nora? Wait, what are you doing here? I thought you were on medical leave.”

“No, sir. I still have to use up a few more vacation days before the FMLA kicks in.”

From his expression I knew he was about to balk, but I reassured him that I was feeling up to working.

“Make sure you take the time if you need it, Nora. You have to take care of yourself.”

Once Mr. Blake was out of earshot, Mia muttered, “Not like you give a damn about your health. Hanging out with criminals isn’t a good way of taking care of yourself.”

I inhaled as deeply as I could. After another moment, I shoved her words out of my head. Life had proven it could be short. Whether or not Yak was a criminal, I wasn’t sure I cared any more. I knew he’d done right by me in ways very few people had in the past year. That alone put him head and shoulders above Mia and her judgmental ways.

Chapter 13

Stole the Moon

YAK

Yak spotted Volt nursing a highball glass of Jack Daniels at the bar inside the clubhouse. Rage sat next to him, and Yak strode straight to them.

He rested his forearm on the bar and leaned sideways so he faced both men. “What are we doing about the fuckin’ asshole who broke in with Crop?”

With a sigh, Volt threw back the remainder of his whiskey. “Just finished answering the same shit for Rage.”

“And?” Yak asked when the silence stretched.

“And nothing,” Rage muttered.

“You gotta be shitting me,” Yak said, fighting against his temper.

Volt banged the bar, scaring the prospect to attention. After the prospect refilled his glass, Volt sipped his drink and tipped his head to the side for the prospect to give them some privacy.

Volt put the glass down quietly. “If we got someone who’s turned on us, that takes priority. You’ve had Nora in your house, Beast taking her to and from work anytime you can’t, and she’s staying in your room here when you work. She’s safe.”

Yak bit his lip and turned his head toward the pool tables. He was a stone’s throw away from disrespecting Volt, and he never did shit like that. As he exhaled slow and easy, he turned back to Volt. “Not that it matters, but I agree that finding the leak is more important—”

Volt’s brows shot upward. “You sure? The first thing you demanded was what we’re doin’ about Crop’s accomplice.”

Yak sauntered behind the bar and made himself a rum and coke. He took a healthy swig. “Yeah, because I’d like for Nora to sleep in a quiet environment after her next treatment. She thinks she’s pulling the wool over my eyes, but it’s catching up with her. She’s doing as well as can be expected, but I can tell she feels like shit. It’d be nice for her to sleep in her own damn bed.”

Rage aimed a pointed look at him. “Don’t you mean *your* bed?”

Volt gave a short chuckle. “Pretty sure it’s all the same thing, Rage.” He looked at Yak. “I get you, brother. But, even if we knew who the other asshole was and took him out, I suspect the Lancers will just send someone else.”

“Their ranks have to be thin as fuck,” Rage muttered around his beer bottle.

Volt looked to Rage. “They aren’t. Members from other chapters have ridden out from what Blood, Cal, and Razor can see when they’ve snuck around their clubhouse.”

“What? I thought you spoke to Steel about Ghost and shit?” Rage asked.

Volt nodded. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean Steel was quick to inform other chapters, or that other chapter members give a damn. With over fifteen years in that chapter, Ghost has alliances—”

“He isn’t smart enough to make alliances,” Yak said.

Volt tossed a hand up. “Thought the same thing, but those visiting members have been at the bar and that’s what Zeke’s overheard. These men like Ghost and a few of them owe him favors.”

Rage gave Volt a sideways glance. “Do we really trust Zeke? At this point he could be under Ghost’s thumb or some shit.”

Volt shook his head. “I’m not underestimating Ghost, but Zeke doesn’t get himself into situations where he owes any MC favors. Bad for business, since he prefers to serve all bikers, not just certain clubs.”

Yak nodded.

Rage stared at Yak. “Who do you think’s turned against us?”

His eyes darted between Volt and Rage, then he shook his head. “I’m not saying shit again until I got proof. Pretty sure I fucked up the moment I accused Tundra.”

Volt pointed a beefy finger at him. “No. You did the right thing. Hell, it’s never comfortable accusing a brother of shit. With or without the damn proof.”

Yak nodded. “It’s still got my stomach in knots, though.”

Rage tipped his beer bottle at Yak. “Which is why I asked who you think turned on us.”

Yak twisted his head and scanned the room. The prospect was sweeping the floor and Vamp lounged on one of the couches with his phone in hand.

Even though the room was nearly empty, he lowered his voice when he spoke. “That’s the fuck of it. Every time I think I know, I double-guess myself. I thought it was Tundra, but then saw I was wrong. Now I think it could be Prime. Or even Punc, though that doesn’t make sense since he was the person I found in the damned parking lot at night.”

Rage tossed his bottle in a nearby garbage can. “Makes for the perfect cover if you ask me. But I’m surprised you’d accuse him.”

Yak shook his head. “Yeah, but that man’s been about this brotherhood from the start.”

“Why Prime?” Volt asked, aiming a hard stare at Yak. “Are you thinking that because he accused you? If I hadn’t known you the last thirteen years, I’d say Prime makes a decent argument against you.”

“Gee, thanks Prez,” Yak deadpanned.

Rage stroked his stubbled chin. “Why are you focused on the newer members? We all voted them in.”

Yak sighed. “I know, but the thing is, none of them were working Platinum’s until they earned their patch. The problems didn’t start until recently.”

Volt nodded. “Right, but we voted Prime and Evict in nine months ago. Why wouldn’t the problems have started then?”

Rage said, “Devil Lancers were focused on other shit nine months ago.”

Yak finished his drink. “Which is why I feel like an ass for accusing anyone of turning against the club because—”

“They could have approached someone four months ago. Hell, they could have done it before we voted Prime or Evict into the club. Trust your gut.”

“Easier said than done. I’m second guessing everything after our last session of church.” He sighed. “I just want Nora to rest easy and beat the fuckin’ cancer.”

Volt’s lips quirked and his eyes slid to Rage then back to Yak. “Heard you’ve got a new hammock she can use to rest up after her treatments.”

Rage slammed a hand on the bar. “Not until he pays Lisa the rest of the fuckin’ money, he doesn’t.”

Yak shook his head. “Jesus. Cool your jets, Rage. I gotta get my bedroom rearranged first.”

“And get a fuckin’ crane,” Vamp said, sauntering to the bar. “I saw that monster in the back of her shop. No way it’s goin’ through your front door.”

Rage glowered at Vamp. “When did you go to the back of the shop?”

Vamp looked anywhere but at Rage.

“You motherfucker... you didn’t take Rainey back there—”

Vamp glared at Rage. “No, asshole! But she’d been back there before and she wanted me to see it.”

Anyone could feel the ire rolling off of Rage. “Wouldn’t put it past you to try fucking your woman back there.”

Vamp scoffed. “And give my woman a splinter? Not a fuckin’ chance.”

Yak held up a hand at Vamp. “On that note, I’m goin’ upstairs.”

Yak could have picked up Nora this afternoon, but Beast insisted it wasn’t a problem. Since the A.C. in the Rio was on the fritz, Yak relented. He didn’t want Nora riding home in a pool of her own sweat, and he wasn’t going to pick her up on his bike in case the Devil Lancers were targeting either one of them.

He left the door to his room open and heard her footsteps before she came into the room.

“Hi, Noah,” she greeted.

He stood from his desk chair and wrapped her in a hug. “Hey, princess. Good day?”

She shrugged. “I guess. Just, I’m worn out.”

“Well, get into bed. I can bring up some food for you.”

She shook her head. “No. I want to go out and see the full moon tonight. It’s supposed to be especially gorgeous.”

His head tilted. “Woman, it’ll be there next month. Rest up, your body needs it.”

Her frown was so cute, he fought smiling. “It’s annoying when you’re bossy and right.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’ll take a picture of it for you. Video if you’re a good girl.”

Her hands wrapped around his neck, and she tipped her chin up to look him in the eyes. “I’m thinking being a bad girl is more fun these days.”

She brushed her lips against his. He deepened the kiss because he had no restraint where she was concerned. His hands slid down to her ass and he broke the kiss. “Soon, you’ll have plenty of time to be a bad girl. Go get ready for bed.”

Her head tipped back. “The sun hasn’t even set yet,” she groaned.

He nipped her neck. “No, but you also have to eat dinner. I’ll get some food while you change.”

Downstairs, he found Punc in the kitchen looking for something.

“Lose something?” Yak asked.

Punc’s glanced at him and went back to examining the counter. “Yeah. Can’t find my fuckin’ flip phone.”

Yak’s brows drew together. “Is it a burner?”

Punc turned to him. “Not exactly, but it’s pre-paid.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Why the hell do you have a burner?”

Punc ran his hand through his wavy blond hair. “It’s not what you think, Yak. Phones are a fuckin’ racket. I go pre-paid and always have. Learned that from my mom.”

With a long nod, Yak gave it some thought, fighting against the knee-jerk reaction that a burner meant Punc was keeping secrets. “That’s why we always gotta go places with fuckin’ Wi-Fi.”

“That’s part of it.”

Yak shook his head. “What are you twenty-five or fifty-five?”

Punc narrowed his blue eyes. “At least I don’t have my life tied up in a fuckin’ gadget some asshole just walked off with.”

“But you kinda do, since you’re lookin’ high and low in this kitchen.”

Punc groaned, but cut it short and looked at something behind Yak.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who finds his logic annoying,” Nora said.

Yak turned and understood why Punc's groan was short-lived. Nora had on a silver satin camisole trimmed with black lace. The matching shorts weren't that short, but they damn sure made a man yearn to touch them.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked. He noticed his voice had gone husky and he cleared his throat.

"I wanted to tell you I'm good with just soup or something. I'm not that hungry, but I know you're gonna insist on feeding me."

Yak nodded. "Got it. Please, Nora, go upstairs before anyone else sees you."

She glanced down at herself and a faint blush crept up her cheeks. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I saw your phone on the nightstand and knew I couldn't text you, so..."

"It's cool, babe. I'll be up in a minute."

She left and Punc let out a sigh. "How long before I get to close down Platinum's? Maybe I'll find a woman like her—"

"Shut the hell up, Punc," Yak groaned.

Punc chuckled. "You find my flip phone, I'll be in my room."

"You're giving up? Where'd you see it last?"

He shook his head. "It's gotta be around here somewhere. Know I had it when I left this afternoon. Hell, Tundra stormed inside Platinum's just before I left and made Prime drop his phone when he plowed into me from behind."

“You liked that, huh?”

Punc rolled his eyes. “No, motherfucker. I remember because my first thought was I didn’t have that problem with the flip-phone since it fits perfect in my back pocket.”

“But you don’t remember using it since you came back?”

“No.”

Yak grabbed a can of soup from a cabinet. “Maybe it fell out on your ride back here.”

Punc shook his head. “Anything’s possible, but it’s never happened before. I’ll keep looking.”

Yak saw Rage heading to the back door. “Yo, Rage! You drive your Explorer here tonight or your bike?”

“Bike. Need to get Lisa to take the Explorer back to my place tomorrow.”

A smile split Yak’s lips. “You willing to let me use it tonight? I’ll bring it back with a full tank of gas.”

Rage gave a him a healthy dose of side-eye before he shrugged. “Guess that’s cool. Don’t know why you need it. That fuckin’ hammock stand won’t fit in it.”

Yak chuckled. “Believe me, I know that. It’s all good, I just can’t do this with a car or a bike.”

Rage pulled a set of keys from his pocket. “Here you go. Don’t fuck up my ride.”

Nora

Yak strolled into the room carrying a tray with two bowls of soup. He kicked the door closed behind him.

I scooted up in bed. “What was Punc looking for?”

He set the tray on my lap. “How do you know he was looking for something?”

I grinned. “You said he was still looking high and low for it, whatever ‘it’ is.”

He grabbed his bowl of soup and rounded the bed. “He’s looking for his cell.”

“Oh man, that sucks.”

Yak gave a light chuckle. “Not so sure Punc sees it that way since it was a pre-paid and he doesn’t like the idea of having his info tied to a device –or whatever the fuck he ranted about.”

I wobbled my head as I ate some of the soup. “I can see that. All the crap companies force you do on your phone now, it’s nuts. Mom and Gary can’t stand it.”

Yak swallowed some soup. “Well, it’s strange to me that he lost it. It’s like everyone at Platinum’s is losing their fuckin’ phones. A dancer lost hers a few weeks back, but then Tundra found it in the parking lot not fifteen minutes later. Now Punc’s lost his...”

He trailed off, and I got the feeling he was trying to figure something out. Though what there was to figure out I didn't know.

“You make it sound like there's something sinister going on.”

I watched as Yak put his soup bowl to his lips and drunk down the remainder. He set it on his nightstand. “Don't you worry about it, Nora.”

With a chuckle, I set my spoon on the tray. “That's a sure fire way to encourage me to worry about something.”

He shifted in the bed to look at me. “Strippers make easy marks. Some of our dancers have been targeted, and Punc was attacked two months ago. We've taken precautions to keep that shit from happening again.”

My eyes widened. “What the hell, Yak?”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? Why do you sound angry?”

“Because I am,” I scoffed. “*You* could be attacked. And you're telling me not to worry about it.”

He shook his head. “There's nothing for you *to* worry about. I leave after everyone else when I close and the sun's so bright when we open, everyone would see an attacker.”

I frowned. “Not always.”

He took a deep breath. “What do you mean not always? How would you know?”

“The night... or more like the morning you brought me here, there was a guy in the parking lot watching us. He lifted his chin at you, it’s the only reason I didn’t mention it to you at the time.”

His bronze eyes focused on something just over my shoulder and he sunk his teeth into his lower lip. “Yeah, you’re right, but that was Ralph, the head of the cleaning crew.”

I pressed my lips together and kept quiet.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s just that I could swear this man was wearing a Riot cut just like yours.”

He stared at me for a few moments. “Part of me thinks you’re misremembering things, but my gut says I need to check into it. Guess I know what I’ll be doing while you get some sleep.”

“What’s that?” I asked, scooping up some soup.

“I’ll be checking how long we keep footage from the parking lot and reviewing who you saw.”

I dunked a saltine into the broth. “Maybe I can help you with that.”

He grinned at me. “I saw you try to hide that yawn. You’re finishing your soup, brushing your teeth, and going to bed, Nora.”

I twisted my head so I locked eyes with him. “I’d ask you to dial it back on the bossy, but I’m pretty sure you won’t listen.”

“Gorgeous and smart, I like it,” he said with a grin.

I gave a short growl, which made him laugh and made me feel like I’d scaled a mountain. Riding that feeling, I finished my soup.

One of the greatest things about staying in Yak’s room at the clubhouse was the blackout curtains. They had to be industrial grade because they were better than any hotel curtains, that was certain.

I woke up feeling disoriented because of the darkness. My bladder was killing me, and when I opened my eyes I saw Yak sitting in the recliner reading his phone.

“What time is it?” I asked.

In the glow of his phone, I saw his lips tip up and his eyes warmed on me. “Little after one.”

I swung my legs out from under the covers. “Typical. Waking up at the same time in the middle of the night is ridiculous. Why are you still up?”

He switched on a small lamp. “I’ve always had trouble going to bed before midnight. One of the reasons I was willing to take on Platinum’s. For other people, it gets old working into the wee-hours of the morning. It’s not typically a problem for me.”

I hurried up and did my business in the bathroom, eager to get back into bed. The tightness of the sheets could not be

beat. I felt Yak's eyes on me while I situated myself under the covers.

He sat on the edge of the bed near my hip. "I gotta show you something before you go back to sleep."

"What?" I asked, almost laughing because I couldn't imagine what would make him sound so impatient.

"The moon was full tonight."

I nodded. "I know, it was the Flower Moon. Another one I missed."

His head tilted. "You didn't miss it."

I blinked and shook my head. "Pretty sure I did, Noah."

He righted his head, a serious expression stealing over his face. "You didn't because I stole the moon just for you. So you could see it being full and all."

I chuckled, careful of my incisions. "You can't steal the moon, silly."

He turned his phone to me. A picture of him pushing a wheelbarrow filled the screen. Inside the wheelbarrow sat the moon.

I smiled. "How did you pull this off? That is something else."

He shook his head and made big eyes at me. "No. That isn't something else. I'm not done."

His finger swiped the screen and I saw a silver SUV with the hatch open. Yak was bent in a deep squat, and the moon

appeared to be cradled in his strong outstretched arms. My breath caught, my hand went to my chest, my nose stung, and I felt tears well in my eyes.

He waved his hand at me. “Now, don’t go doin’ that. You’ll give the poor moon a complex seeing as I stole it and all.”

I laughed. “Okay.”

In the next picture, Yak had his legs only slightly bent, and it looked like he was pushing the moon inside the vehicle. My lips tipped up. “You stole the moon,” I whispered.

“Only for you, sweetheart. I told you, nothing has to change because of this bullshit disease, Nora. Not on my watch.”

“Thanks, Noah,” I breathed. But ‘thanks’ shrouded the truth. While he ‘stole’ the moon, he proceeded to steal my heart. Coward that I was, though, I couldn’t tell him that because for all I knew, like Destin before him, he probably didn’t want my heart.

If I hadn’t fallen for him shortly after he found me inside the strip club, that would have sealed it.

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “You’re more than welcome. I’m goin’ to brush my teeth. I’ll turn out the light when I’m done.”

While he was in the bathroom, I forced myself to stay awake until he slid under the covers. In the dark, I slid my hand toward him until I found his fingers and gave them a squeeze. “I mean it, Yak. Thanks for the pictures. I can’t tell you how much I freaking love that.”

The room was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, “Trust me, princess, I got an idea. The way your face lit up said it all, and that made it well worth the effort.”

In the morning, I watched Yak make me breakfast while sitting at the small two-person table in the kitchen. I offered to make my own food, but he flat-out insisted on serving me his ‘famous’ fried eggs.

He put a glass of orange juice on the table. “Last night while you were sleeping, I double checked the parking lot footage from the morning when we first met. That was Ralph the head of our cleaning crew, he was wearing a black down-vest, not an MC cut.”

I nodded. “Thanks for checking.”

The back door opened, and two men came inside. One of them was a biker named Vamp, who I’d met before though briefly. Vamp kept his head shaved bald, had gages in his ears and an eyebrow ring. His blue eyes were mesmerizing they were so striking. The man beside him wasn’t wearing a cut, but had the same eyes. He didn’t sport any piercings and was dressed in tan cargo shorts and a Rip Curl t-shirt.

Vamp smiled when he saw me. “Just the woman we’re looking for.”

“Why’s that?” Yak asked before I could respond.

Vamp’s eyes darted to yak. “Make four more eggs. We’re joining you.”

Yak had slid two eggs onto a plate. “Fuck that. Make your own, Vamp. You know where everything is.” He glanced at the other man. “No offense, Brock.”

Brock grinned and shook his head. “None taken, Yak. But we are here to help your friend, so maybe just make two eggs for me.”

Vamp prowled to the fridge. “You bastards. Nora, you’re lucky it’s your problem we’re solving and not Yak’s, or we’d be out.”

I chuckled. “Okay, but I’m confused. What problem could you possibly solve for me?”

Yak put the plate in front of me. “Trixie said you got a wedding DJ giving you grief.”

During our first trip to my oncologist, Trixie had asked about what kind of wedding I’d planned and if I was getting money back with the cancellation. I had forgotten how much I’d told her, but I’d never expected her to share with any of the men.

With a slow nod, I glanced at each of the men. “Yeah, but I don’t see how a biker... and his non-biker brother are going to help.”

Brock pulled out the other chair and sat across from me. “You’re right, I’m Vamp’s biological brother and I live in Orlando.”

I cut an egg using the side of my fork. “Nice to meet you, but how can you help with a DJ who lives here?”

He smiled and it made his eyes twinkle. “I used to be a nightclub DJ, but our youngest brother, Gabe, is still working as a DJ while he builds a small business catering to weddings and other events that need music.”

“Okay.”

Yak plated his food and got out of the way for Vamp, who had the eggs out along with a loaf of bread.

While Vamp started cooking, Yak leaned his back against the counter and looked at me. “Brock and his brother Gabe looked into the asshole who’s jerking you around.”

“But... why?”

Yak set his fork on his plate with a clatter. “Are your doctor bills gonna pay themselves? That bastard got a night off at your expense. I get that he probably couldn’t book the time with such short notice, but hell, the florist let you off the fuckin’ hook—”

“Only by half and really that was because they were able to sell the flowers that had already been ordered.”

My gaze went back to Brock when he spoke. “That guy should have done the same at least. But, Gabe found out you aren’t the first woman he’s given the run-around, and we’re gonna do something about it.”

I scoffed quietly. “What could you all possibly do about it? I mean, I know bikers are intimidating and all that, but this seems like overkill.”

Brock grinned. “Won’t be the brothers doing anything about it, Nora. It’ll be me and Gabe.”

“I signed his contract, Brock. Technically, he hasn’t given me a run-around... he just isn’t very empathetic or kind.”

Brock’s eyebrow went up for a moment. “You’d be right if he were using a contract that was on the up-and-up. Gabe’s reaching out to these other women he’s hustled, and he’s checking with the professional organization they’re both members of to see if there aren’t other things that can be done.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to make waves.”

Yak had finished his food and set his plate on the counter. “Too bad, princess. We’re gettin’ your money back. Hell, be happy it’s Brock and Gabe handling this. I’d enjoy roughing this asshole up and demanding more than your money back.”

The way his eyes flared with malice when he said that, I had no doubt Yak meant it.

Vamp turned off the stove burner. “Never know, Yak. That could always be arranged.”

A mischievous smirk twisted his lips before he looked at Vamp. “You’re right.”

Chapter 14

Sounds Like a Hazard

YAK

Yak stared at the security monitors inside the office, not believing his eyes. The Sunday night crowd at Platinum's was double the size compared to last week. That was good, except these patrons were twice as rowdy as a Friday night crowd.

Tundra poked his head inside the office. "This is the busiest Sunday night, I've seen in three years, man. I think Prime was right. The parking lot patrols hurt us."

Yak stood. "Maybe, but my money's on the fuckin' full moon. That's when all the crazies come out. Or it could be our new dancer, Ava. She posted a video of her routine to TikTok, said it had a hundred thousand views before it was removed for violating community standards or some shit."

Tundra shrugged. "Whatever. Any chance we can get Beast or Blood to show up tonight? Those bastards down there are fuckin' crazy. We need an extra bouncer or something, ASAP."

He left the office and followed Tundra down the hallway. “Don’t worry about the floor, Tundra. Between me, you, Prime, and Puncture, it will be cool.”

An hour later, Platinum’s had hit capacity. That had only happened four times in the past four years. They always came close on Saturday nights, but this was the first time on a Sunday.

He texted Turk with the news and got an immediate call-back.

“Turk, we are fuckin’ slammed. What do you need?”

Excitement rather than annoyance laced Turk’s tone. “Calling to let you know I’m comin’ in, and Blood’s on his way too.”

“Cool, but I didn’t really need the memo. Later.”

“You are a fuckin’ shit when you want to be. Later.”

That made Yak grin before he came between two men who were having a stare-down.

At two-thirty in the morning, Turk whistled shrill and high as he counted one of the registers from the bar. “Damn, we need to get all the dancers to work on their social media.”

Yak paused with his drawer to glare at Turk. “You lost your mind to the dollar signs floating in your eyes, motherfucker.”

“What are you talking about, Yak? It’s never been like this before.”

“Turk, it’s been almost three months since Lucy got mugged and two months since Punc got laid out—”

“That’s the Devil Lancers, Yak.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t change the fact we haven’t done shit about those fuckers. A crowd like this makes it that much harder to stay on our toes where the Lancers are concerned.”

Turk finished up with his count and caught Yak’s gaze. “Wouldn’t hurt for us to make the most of this.”

Yak pressed his lips together, then said, “That’s true except we don’t know where half these assholes came from, but I heard at least one group say they drove down from Savannah. We aren’t ready to be the strip club guys travel to on the weekend.”

Turk shook his head. “The hell we’re not. For all we know half our existing clientele comes here from two-hours away already.”

Blood barged into the office. “What the hell are you two bickering about? I could hear you down the fuckin’ hall.” He shook his head. “The only thing you should be arguing about is how long the velvet rope’s gonna be and what color you want—spoiler— blood red is the *only* right answer.”

Turk arched a brow. “Really? Not silver for a club called *Platinum’s*?”

Blood pointed a finger at Turk. “Fine, that’s worth deliberation.”

Yak glanced away from the men and noticed two of the security monitors were off. “The hell?” he whispered. It took a moment for the screen to come back up, but the first one showed Prime sprawled out on the parking lot. Yak bolted from his chair, but kept his eyes glued to the screens.

“What the fuck, Yak?” Turk demanded.

The second screen lit and Yak’s stomach plummeted. “Fuckin’ security monitors were off. Shit! Prime’s out cold and somebody’s beating the shit out of Ava!”

He ran out to the parking lot, and heard Turk and Blood behind him.

Yak’s boots slid over the loose gravel on the asphalt. The attacker straightened and whirled.

Yak stepped forward while aiming an upper-cut at the man’s jaw, but the coward lunged to the left and took off running.

“Stop, motherfucker!” Yak yelled, chasing the man.

In the back of his mind, he heard Blood talking and he realized his Vice President had called 911.

The attacker was tall and thin, but didn’t appear to be as tall as Ghost. When the man scrambled up and over a chain link fence, Yak was nearly certain this wasn’t Ghost. That man didn’t have the physicality for fences.

Turk had come even with Yak in their pursuit.

Yak had gripped part of the chain link and took a foothold when Turk grabbed his shoulder.

“Man, we gotta get back to Ava and Prime. We’re not gonna catch this asshole and Blood’s called the cops.”

He dropped his foot down and turned from the fence. “This is so goddamned fucked-up, Turk! We never call the fuckin’ cops.”

Turk glared at him before he started jogging back toward the club. “We got two people who are gonna need medical attention and most of the dancers still haven’t left yet.”

Yak hoofed it to keep up with Turk’s long strides. “Right, but is Ava really that bad off? I saw red the moment I realized someone was beating her.”

Turk kept jogging. “I didn’t see much either, man. But, that guy wasn’t going easy on her when we busted out through the back door.”

At the reminder, Yak yearned to turn back and scale the fence after the asshole. “Goddamn it, man. How did we miss this? And for fuck’s sake why were only *two* monitors off in the office? Who the fuck would have done that?”

They slowed to a walk in the parking lot as they neared Blood, Punc, and Tundra who were talking to two patrol officers. An ambulance blocked the drive while EMTs tended to Ava. From the corner of his eye, Yak saw a burly EMT examining Prime.

“Follow the light with your eyes, sir,” the EMT said.

“Maybe he can tell us something when the medic is done,” Turk muttered.

Yak let out a quiet sigh. “If he’s got a concussion, that shit’s serious and he’s got to get checked out at the hospital, T.”

“Fuck, you’re right,” Turk hissed. “But he’s gonna argue.”

“Tough shit.” He halted as the EMTs moved a stretcher and the florescent light pouring out of the ambulance lit Ava’s petite frame. “Fuckin’ hell,” he whispered.

One of the patrol officers blocked their way. “The two of you shouldn’t have run after the assailant.”

Yak shrugged. “Sorry, officer, but it was reflex and adrenaline.”

The officer glanced to the side, then nodded. “Right. That’s understandable.”

Yak wished he could see the officer’s name tag, because that was the first time any cop had told him something was ‘understandable.’ However, with the officer standing with his back to the ambulance light, Yak couldn’t make out the letters.

“He got away from us by climbing over a fence. Is there any chance—”

The officer sighed. “We’re trying to get an air presence, but that takes time. Odds are good the perpetrator is already long gone in a vehicle. Or on a bike.”

Yak fought bristling at the mention of the person being on a bike, as though the cop were needling him and Turk for being bikers.

Turk lifted his chin. “Can we check on our employee who was so badly assaulted? She’s only been on the job for a week with us, and I hate the idea of her being taken to the hospital without hearing from either me or Noah.”

Yak just barely kept himself in check at the surprise of hearing Turk use his real name. The officer nodded at Turk. “You can go, but come right back. I’d like to ask both of you questions about tonight. This gives me the chance to start with Noah, first.”

Over two hours later, the police were gone, along with the fucking news crews, Ava and Prime were at the hospital, and all the dancers had gone home with each one calling Yak or Turk to say that they had made it inside their homes safe.

Now, Volt, Blood, Turk, and Yak were sitting in the office sipping Jack Daniel’s, Volt’s drink of choice.

Blood polished off the whiskey in his highball glass. “Okay, so... We don’t suspect Tundra anymore. After tonight, I’m thinking Prime’s out, too.”

Yak had taken three sips of his liquor. “You’re probably right,” he muttered.

“Probably?” Blood demanded, and Yak realized the booze was hitting Blood harder for some reason.

Yak lifted a hand in the air in semi-surrender. “I’ve ruled no one out entirely, but I damn sure won’t accuse anyone without irrefutable proof.”

“Irrefutable,” Blood slurred.

Along with Volt and Turk, Yak glared at Blood.

“How are you drunk right now?” Volt asked.

Blood shrugged. “I had a couple shots down at the bar. Can’t fuckin’ stand seein’ any woman get hurt like that. Fuck. We should be at the hospital right fuckin’ now, but we gotta figure out security feeds and shit.”

“She’s gonna be all right, though. That’s what the EMT told Tundra,” Turk said.

Volt tossed back the rest of his drink and refilled it from the bottle on the table between them. “Yeah. We’ll hear more about Ava in a couple hours. We know Prime’s gonna be okay. Hell, I had to tell him four times to stay in the hospital overnight like they ordered. Didn’t realize he was such a stubborn motherfucker.”

“That leaves us with Punc and Evict, doesn’t it?” Turk asked.

“Or maybe a prospect who’s eavesdropping or some shit,” Yak suggested.

“No,” Volt said. “That’s too far. We keep them busy as hell. The Devil Lancers could be staking us out and there is no traitor.”

Blood and Turk nodded. It made sense to Yak, which made him feel that much worse for accusing anyone.

They pulled up the security feed for the office. A man wearing dark clothes had slipped into the office, but kept his head down - aware that cameras were installed.

“Whoever that was is too short to be Punc and not burly enough to be Tundra. We know it isn’t Prime because he was busy walking Ava out to her car.”

The person who attacked Prime knew the placement of the outdoor cameras and kept his back to them.

“Are you sure it wasn’t Ghost you chased after?” Volt asked.

Yak tilted his head side to side to stretch his neck and alleviate the building stress. “My gut says it wasn’t. Ghost isn’t nimble enough to scale a fence as fast as this fucker did, and Ghost is taller than that asshole was.”

Blood’s eyebrows arched. “Your mind could be fucking with you. Letting you see what you want to see.”

“Maybe,” he said, sipping his whiskey and enjoying the loose feeling he had. “Punc ever find his phone?” he asked without thinking, compliments of Jack Daniel’s.

All three men stared at him.

“He lost his cell?” Turk asked.

Yak nodded. “Day before yesterday. It’s a pre-paid phone, so I guess he gave up on it.”

Blood bit his lip. “That seems suspect, even for Puncture.”

Yak nodded. “That’s what I thought, too.”

Turk cleared his throat. “No, he’s always used phones like that.”

Volt nodded. “You’re right. Hell, he gives me the heads up when they go on sale since we use them every so often.”

Blood blew out a breath while shaking his head. “You’re right, Volt. It’s not anyone inside the club.”

Yak guzzled some water and took his glass to the bar. His brothers were right. Everything they’d said made sense. The Devil Lancers were behind this, and they couldn’t infiltrate the Riot. That was crazy.

Yak rolled over and felt Nora’s hand roving his back.

“Not that you need me saying so, but you have fabulous tats, Yak,” she murmured.

A lazy grin spread across his face as he looked at her. “I’m glad you like them. What time is it?”

She smiled. “Quarter after ten. I should have let you keep sleeping.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her on top of him. “It’s all right. Needed to talk to you first thing today.”

Her body stiffened. “Really?”

“Yeah. Prime and one of the dancers were attacked last night.”

She leaned up to look him in the eye. “Oh God, are they okay?”

He sighed. “Prime has a concussion. Ava... last I heard before I came to bed was that they had to put her in a medically induced coma.”

“That’s awful!”

He gave her a squeeze. “Yeah. All that means you aren’t going anywhere today.”

Her lips twisted to the side. “Good thing I didn’t have anywhere to be today.”

That earned her a light swat to her ass. “Smart ass, let’s see if there’s some breakfast downstairs.”

In the common room, a large McDonald’s bag held over half-a-dozen breakfast sandwiches. He and Nora settled at the bar with Lisa, Rage, Trixie, and Roll to eat their food.

“This is some bullshit,” Trixie muttered around her glass of orange juice.

Rage glowered at her. “Anything that keeps my woman safe isn’t bullshit, Trix.”

The front door opened and Turk followed Prime inside.

“What are you doin’ here? Shouldn’t you still be under observation?” Trixie asked.

Turk sauntered to the bag of food. “They let him go. But we get to wake his ass up every four hours.”

Prime grabbed a sandwich out of the bag, slowly shaking his head. “I’m going upstairs.”

“I’m glad he’s okay,” Nora murmured.

“Yeah,” Yak whispered.

He needed to get his suspicions under control. Blood, Turk, and Volt may have ruled out any traitors, but his gut said something was still off.

“He really good to be here?” Roll asked. “We don’t want to call an ambulance out here.”

Turk nodded. “Yeah. Talked to the doctor. He makes it through to this evening without puking or other shit, he can work tomorrow.”

“He doesn’t have a shift today or tomorrow,” Yak muttered.

Turk shrugged. “Whatever. He should be fine.”

After Turk left, Lisa grinned at Yak and Nora. “Onto a happier topic... well, maybe not. But Rage and I are thinking about a wedding. Who do you recommend for flowers and stuff? If it’s tacky of me to ask –just say so.”

Nora’s body jerked with a single chuckle. “I can tell you which DJ not to use.”

Yak wanted to shut the conversation down, but Nora seemed thrilled to talk wedding shit. He hated being reminded of what that asshole did to her.

When he heard Nora talk about daisies and wedding planners, he stood. “I’m catching a nap. Don’t go anywhere

without me, Nora.”

The smile she shot at him made his breath catch. Even fighting such a horrible disease, she was radiant. He loved that about her. No, he loved her. He couldn't deny it anymore. But he couldn't tell her yet, either.

Her words pulled him from his monumental thoughts.

“Cool, Noah. I may take one too. I didn't sleep that well last night.”

Nora

Late on Monday afternoon, Yak had to go back to Platinum's. I convinced him we should shower together before he left. Our shower didn't end up being the fun-time I had in mind because my hair started falling out. Yet, it was good he was with me for that. I kept myself from dwelling on the hair loss and focused on him.

His fingers lifted my chin. I couldn't avoid his gaze. "Don't bottle up your feelings, Nora. You can let it all hang out with me. And, you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever met. Want me to teach you how to tie your wrap doo-rag style?"

I chuckled. "Maybe later. You have places to be."

He nodded. "All right, princess. You gotta lay low and stay here. I know this shit sucks, but I think Trixie's around. Text her after I leave."

"I will. And... thanks for being so understanding, Noah."

His eyes widened. "There's nothing to thank me for, Elenora. Now give me a kiss."

After he left, Trixie texted and encouraged me to join her in the common room since a couple of the other old ladies were there. I suddenly wished I had taken Yak up on his offer to help me with my headwrap.

Can you come up to Yak's room? Just you...I need some help.

“You look gorgeous. This lavender color brings out the green of your eyes, girlfriend,” Trixie said to my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

“Thanks, Trixie. You’re—”

She wagged a finger at me. “Ah, ah, ah, don’t finish that. I’m goin’ back downstairs so you have a moment to yourself. You got this shit, Nora. Join us when you’re ready.”

Five minutes later, I walked into the common room and sat next to Mallory at the bar.

“I love your headwrap! I’m surprised you didn’t go for a wig, though,” Mallory said, sipping her merlot.

“It wasn’t for lack of trying,” Trixie said from the other side of Mallory.

I smiled. “Thanks, this one was a gift from my brother. After visiting the wig shop, I worried about having to adjust a wig and stuff.” My eyes darted to Trixie. “And it was more like not for a lack of *you* trying on wigs.”

Something like concern filled Mallory’s eyes. “She took you to a wig shop?”

I nodded. “Yep, after my first chemo treatment. It was... more fun than I expected.”

Trixie put her beer bottle down. “I don’t like the way you said that. Why wouldn’t it be fun? Get to have a new ‘do every day. That’s awesome.”

“That’s true... for *you*,” Mallory said, her tone gentle. I wasn’t sure if that gentleness was for me or Trixie.

“What are you saying woman?” Trixie demanded.

Mallory rolled her eyes. “I’m saying it might not be so fun for Nora.”

“Which is why I went with her to the wig shop.”

Mallory glanced at Trixie and hesitated. “You have a way of taking over a situation.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Trixie and Mallory were friendly, but I sensed Trixie was ready to blow.

I chuckled. “You did make that trip all about you. I had to talk you out of buying five wigs instead of the one you *had* to have.”

Mallory chuckled. “There you go! She bought a wig and *you* didn’t. Trixie always takes over a situation.”

After she finished her beer, Trixie said, “Whatever. We had fun. Just wait until Halloween.” Her eyes lit on me. “You’re gonna have to up your game Nora.”

“What?” I asked.

Mallory grinned. “Oh God, you’re right!”

Trixie's grin was devilish. "Yak's birthday is right around Halloween. He does it up big on costumes. Last year he was Abraham Drinkin'."

My brows furrowed.

Mallory nodded. "That was hysterical. He wore a top hat he made from beer cans."

"It was so impressive, Volt and Jackie's daughter Simone told her first grade teacher that the man on the penny is Abe Drinkin'. Jackie was fit to be tied, she was so embarrassed," Trixie cackled.

Mallory grimaced. "You can't blame her though. It's not fun when your own kid makes you sound like you party all the time."

Trixie gave Mallory a sideways glance. "But they do, Mallory. Volt's a biker, for fuck's sake. There was nothing to be embarrassed about." Trixie caught my gaze. "Yak had to drink like a full case of beer to get all those cans."

My eyes widened. "That sounds like a hazard."

"It was," Yak said from behind me. He looped his arms around me. "I'm thinking this year, I'll resurrect Captain Yak Sparrow."

I laughed and looked over my shoulder at him. "Seriously? A pirate?"

He nodded. "I came up with that costume the year I got the Kia Rio. Teach –our last president– gave me a bumper sticker that proclaimed me as the Pirate of the Car-I-be-in."

I groaned and chuckled.

Trixie pointed at us, smiling at Yak. “And *that’s* why I love her for you.”

My heart skipped a beat at the L-word.

Yak’s arms tightened around me. “Trix, you’re getting to be as bad as Abby. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Trixie slid off her bar stool. “There are worse things I could be.”

Mallory and Trixie were back in the common room, along with Andrea, the following Monday. I sensed they weren’t pleased about it, but at the same time they were resigned to it because nobody wanted to endure what Ava went through over a week ago.

I plopped down on the end of a couch when my cell rang. My physical therapy group’s number showed up on the display and I answered.

“Nora, this is Julia. Would it be possible to have you come in for your therapy treatment this afternoon at two? The office won’t be open tomorrow afternoon for your scheduled appointment due to a training meeting.”

On the one hand missing my appointment wouldn’t be the end of the world, but on the other hand, it was crazy how much having a lymph node removed impacted my range of

motion in my shoulder. “Can I call you right back? I need to see if that will work with someone else’s schedule.”

“No problem. If today doesn’t work, we’ll fit you in later in the week.”

I looked at Trixie. “What are the chances one of you can take me to Fleming Island for physical therapy this afternoon?”

Trixie frowned. “I have to get to Relax or I’d take you no matter what the brothers say.”

“You would not,” Mallory said.

Andrea nodded. “Yeah. Someone would lose their mind if we took you.”

My lips twisted into a small pout. “Well, I guess I’ll call Yak.”

After I explained what was going on, he repeated what I’d said and I knew there was someone else in the room with him. He kept quiet for a long moment. “I know those appointments help you, Nora. Can you reschedule to five? Then I could—”

I heard someone talking in the background.

Yak said, “Hold on, Turk has an idea.”

He made a humming noise, as if he didn’t like Turk’s idea.

Then he said, “Yeah, I know, Turk, but...”

There was the garbled sound of another man talking.

Yak blew out a breath. “Fine.” Then to me he said, “You there?”

“Yep.”

“Gonna call Prime. We think he’s at the clubhouse. He can take you. Cool?”

“Sure, but I could drive or take an—”

“Nope. Had a dancer attacked eight nights ago. I’m not taking any chances.”

That silenced me. Another hospital visit turned my stomach. “Gotcha. I’ll wait for Prime.”

“FYI, he’s over his concussion, but he still has a black eye healing up. Don’t let that scare you. Got it?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Prime’s eye was bruised though it didn’t look as bad as I expected. He moved as though his whole body was still stiff. I quickly told him where the rehab facility was off of Highway 17.

He nodded. “Yeah. I know that area.”

Trixie scanned him up and down. “You sure you’re good to drive? You’re moving like you’re stiff.”

From the way his lips quirked, it was hard to say if he was holding back a smile or annoyed at Trixie’s concern. “I’m fine. But thanks, Trixie.”

As we drove south on Blanding Boulevard, he got in the left turn lane for I-295. Taking the interstate to travel the mile and

a half to Highway 17 wasn't how I would have done it, but I wasn't going to be a side-seat driver.

The moment he merged into the far-left lane of the interstate, I pulled my cell phone from my wristlet and gawked at him. "Prime, you're going the wrong way. We needed to get off back there."

He snatched my phone from my hand and tossed it between his feet onto the floorboard. "Shut the fuck up, bitch. You aren't making your appointment. You aren't even making it to tomorrow."

My eyes widened, my mouth went dry, and fear gripped my chest.

He sounded nothing like the good old boy he'd been in front of Trixie, Mallory, and Andrea.

The amount of hatred lacing his tone scared me as much as his erratic driving.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Like it fuckin' matters. Shut up."

The not-knowing was killing me. Even though I should listen to my abductor, my nerves were getting the better of me. "You're right. You took my phone, so it doesn't matter if you tell me. It's not like I can call for help."

"Jesus Christ. Do I need to backhand you? Fuckin' hell. The Devil Lancers didn't pay me enough to do this shit. Kiss ass to pussies like Yak and Turk. Sucks I don't get to see how scared

Yak's gonna be, just like the night I helped Crop bust into your place."

My big mouth ran away from me. "You mean the night you ran like a coward?"

We'd rounded the southeastern portion of the beltway. Glancing at the speedometer, we were approaching Gate Parkway at eighty-five miles-per-hour.

That wasn't that fast since most other drivers were doing speeds of seventy to seventy-five, but an ominous band of clouds loomed over the interchange with J. Turner Butler Boulevard –an area perpetually under construction. By some miracle, Prime weaved between cars and semi-trucks without clipping or sideswiping them.

He veered off the interstate not long after we crossed the Dames Point bridge. We weren't far from the port or the zoo. I almost thought he might take me to the biker bar Yak and I visited, but then he hung a left onto a hidden driveway.

We barreled through an open chain link gate. From the number of parked motorcycles, I knew we were at the Devil Lancer compound.

The clubhouse –if you could call it that– appeared to be constructed from two double-wide mobile homes. The area between the two double-wides had been turned into a large outdoor patio to create one building.

A thin man with oily dark hair prowled out of the patio toward the car.

Prime reached between his legs and pulled a gun from under his seat. “You’re gonna get out of the car, nice and slow, bitch.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and did what he said.

The other man had come even with the car and I saw his patches. He was a Devil Lancer and his name was Ghost.

His lip curled with disgust as he took me in. “What the fuck, Aiden? You were supposed to bring me one of their women... the hotter the better.” He gave my head wrap a pointed glance. “It looks like you brought me Voldemort.”

Prime slammed his door closed. “She can wear a fuckin’ wig instead, Ghost. Hell, she’ll be able to—”

Anger suffused Ghost’s features. “A wig? Doesn’t she have hair?”

I should have kept quiet, but I couldn’t help myself. “Chemotherapy,” I said in a smug tone.

Ghost glowered at Prime/Aiden. “You brought me a woman who could *die* at any moment?”

This time I kept my mouth closed, but I was itching to tell him that cancer didn’t quite work like that most of the time.

Prime shook his head. “She’s fighting it off. Hell, she was hot as fuck when she had hair. It’ll grow back.”

Ghost closed the distance between himself and Prime. “We need one more *healthy* female if we’re gonna make any money

with the traffickers. You put my ass in a sling with this shit, moron.”

Prime’s face fell for a moment before a calculating expression took hold. “Then we hold her for ransom and take one of the other brothers’ bitches instead.”

Dread coursed through my body. They couldn’t do this. I didn’t know how I could stop them, but I’d have to think fast. The idea of Trixie, Mallory, Lisa, or any of the other women being targeted because of me filled me with rage and despair.

It struck me that if I ran, they wouldn’t have anyone to ransom. Since they were both focused on each other and not me, I took a step to the side, careful not to step on the sticks and pine cones on the ground which might make noise.

“Where’s her phone?” Ghost asked.

“I took it from her.”

He nodded. “Good. We get her tied up, I want to have some fun with those Riot bastards. Whose old lady did you say she was?”

“I’m not,” I muttered, but I didn’t use the smug tone.

Ghost glared at me, then turned his glare to Prime. “And she’s not anybody’s old lady!”

Prime shook his head, looking exasperated. “She is, Yak just hasn’t made it public yet. Hell, you should have seen how scared he was the night me and Cr—”

“Don’t say his name. Can’t fuckin’ believe he died because of the goddamn cops.”

I took two more small steps to the side.

A disgusted frown twisted Prime’s face. “No, it was because of fuckin’ Yak. Another reason to take his woman.”

My goal had been to edge farther and farther away from the car. Unfortunately, I hadn’t edged far enough away to make a break for it before Ghost noticed.

“Get the fuck over here, bitch!”

I hated these men anew. Part of me wanted to run, but I sensed it was a bad idea. I had some energy, but it definitely wasn’t enough to outrun either one of them. My better bet would be to get a gun away from one or the other of them.

I had to pray I hadn’t blown it by trying to sneak away.

The moment I was within arm’s reach, Ghost gripped my bicep so hard I knew it would bruise. “Let’s fuckin’ go.”

I scrambled to keep up with him while he dragged me to the large patio area. From behind us, I heard the car door open and close again.

“Wait!” Prime yelled. “Before you do anything with her, we need to unlock her fuckin’ phone.”

Dammit! I was hoping they’d forget about that.

Ghost stopped short and glared down at me. I noticed how gaunt his face was. Part of me wanted to ask if he was ill

because he looked anything but healthy. “No fuckin’ funny business, bitch. Or you’ll regret it.”

Prime brought my phone over, and I entered my unlock code. Ghost jerked me inside the patio and two men wearing prospect cuts grabbed me while Ghost bound my wrists with a zip tie.

“Put her in the closet and don’t let any sweet-butts in there.”

I didn’t know what kind of closet they planned to put me in, but I knew I wouldn’t like it. The various scans I had to endure for cancer treatment had only exacerbated my sense of claustrophobia. I wasn’t about to spend days inside a closet because these assholes said so. One of the prospects pulled me forward, but I stood firm on the patio. He turned and glared at me.

From behind, Ghost said, “Fuckin’ dumb bitch. Move before I knock you out.”

He gripped the back of my neck so hard pain radiated down my spine, making me cry out. I had no choice but to climb the steps into the mobile home. The air reeked with the stench of various types of smoke. Prime squeezed past us into another room.

Ghost shifted me to Prime, who shoved me with so much force I almost took a header into the closet door. He flung the door open and rammed me inside. I hit a wall instantly. I turned around and the door slammed in my face, darkness enveloping me. Anxiety reared up and I wasn’t sure if I would be able to stay calm.

I heard rustling and gasped.

“It’s me... another woman they took. I’m scooting over for you,” the woman whispered.

“Uh, is there... are there any other people in here?” I asked when my heart rate was under control, though I sensed it was just the two of us.

“No. Just me.”

I hesitated, not sure if I wanted the answer to my next question. “How long have you been here?”

“I’m guessing anywhere from four to six hours. They took me outside my work this morning.”

“Ugh. I don’t know what time you report to work, but it’s close to three-thirty.”

She sighed. “That would put it at the six-and-a-half-hour mark then.”

She sounded older than me. That seemed strange if traffickers were involved.

“Can I ask your name?”

“Suzy. What’s yours?”

“Nora.”

“Wait...not Nora, as in... Yak’s Nora?”

Something that felt like hope bloomed in my chest at Yak’s name. “Yeah. How’d you guess?”

“I’m Turk’s woman.”

I shifted on my feet. Part of me worried if I sat down, I might not be able to get back up in such a cramped space with my wrists bound. “Oh, I didn’t realize he had a woman, though some part of me recalls Trixie saying something about a woman named Susan.”

She chuckled. “Trixie’s funny like that. She insists on calling me by my full name these days.”

“So, why do you think they took us?”

“It’s part of some vendetta. Turk’s gonna be so pissed with me.”

I scoffed. “No. Why would you say that?”

Her rueful chuckle filled the small space. “Because he *told* me to stay home –hell, he’d wanted me at the clubhouse Friday and Saturday. Since I was safe all day both days, I argued there was no reason to stay home from work. I mean, I hate letting these things dictate my life.”

“Yeah.”

“How did they get you? Yak had you at the clubhouse last I heard.”

“Prime brought me here,” I muttered.

“Prime? What?”

I explained about my therapy appointment. When I finished I felt around the door with my bound hands. “Any chance of us getting out of here?”

“I’m not sure. I just broke out of my zip tie when they threw you in here. Scared the shit out of me, thought they might have seen me get loose.” She gasped. “Speaking of that, give me your hands, I’ll get you free.”

I shook my head. “How could you possibly do that? And in the dark?”

I could hear the smile in her voice. “Not long after Turk claimed me, he insisted I learn self-defense techniques. Fat lot of good they did me since that asshole Ghost tased me from behind, but in that training I learned three ways to get out of zip ties, and one of them is shimmying.”

Her hands gripped mine, then moved to my wrist. I felt her tracing around the tie to find the ends.

“That tickles,” I whispered.

“It won’t in a minute,” she whispered back.

Suddenly I felt the strap loosen and my hands were free. “Wow. That’s awesome. I’d say I want to learn that, but I’m not planning on getting abducted again any time soon.”

“Right,” she whispered and stopped short.

Voices could be heard and they were growing louder. “I can’t believe you forgot to gag her, you moron. The Riot really will give anyone a patch.”

Suzy stood, cupped her hands around my ear, and whispered a plan to me.

The moment the door opened, we charged forward surprising Ghost and Prime.

I blinked against the bright light of the room, and grabbed Prime's wrists. He had a gun, but I'd caught him off guard and managed to shove his arms upward. He squeezed the trigger. Bits of ceiling fell around us like snow.

My ears were ringing like a gong had been clanged inside my brain.

Prime tried to push my hands down. He shifted his body, forcing me to shift with him. I saw Suzy struggling with Ghost. He suddenly doubled over, clutching his groin and stomach. Taking her lead, I lifted my knee, but Prime evaded me.

Fear gripped me because I wouldn't be able to hold him like this much longer.

I heard men yelling, but my ears were still ringing. Two men in tactical police gear barged into the room.

I let go of Prime. An officer charged in front of him.

Suzy grabbed my hand and shuffled us to the side of the room.

In seconds, Ghost and Prime were cuffed and lying on the floor. A female officer escorted us out of the building and into an unmarked police SUV.

Chapter 15

Steer a Situation

YAK

Toward the end of the afternoon, Volt dropped by to review the weekly revenue.

“Surprised you came by this afternoon, man,” Yak said.

Volt shrugged a shoulder. “Jackie took Simone to a doctor’s appointment.”

“You didn’t want to tag along?” Yak asked, grinning.

Volt shook his head. “No. I fuckin’ hate doctor’s offices and I hate watching my girl get shots. Didn’t hurt that I was already on this side of town.”

Yak nodded, recalling how much he despised doctor’s offices. To his mind, it seemed everything revolved around the *doctor’s* schedule. In some cases, he could see that. Docs who delivered babies didn’t get to dictate when that shit went down. Yak got that. But, rescheduling physical therapy to a day earlier with no true explanation or even monetary compensation... that pissed him off. Especially since doctors were so damned quick to charge people if they canceled the

day of an appointment or worse, assess 'late fees' if someone didn't show within twenty minutes of their appointment.

It was all a racket. And it always had been.

Ava wandered into his office. "You got a minute?"

Two days ago, Ava had been discharged from the hospital after a six-day stay. The induced coma had been lifted after forty-eight hours when her brain swelling subsided. She had a broken rib and four others were bruised. Her face had been beaten, but her nose wasn't broken. The light in her eyes had dimmed somewhat, and Yak despised seeing that in any woman.

He smiled at her. "For you, I got twenty of them, but then you need to go home."

She noticed Volt sitting on a sofa to the side and her eyes widened. "Am I interrupting? I can come back."

Yak shook his head. "Anything you got for me can be shared in front of Volt. You know that."

She settled into the seat across from the desk. "Right. Just saying, I'm not going home after this, because I'm here to help Desiree with some stuff for her new routine. Anyway, I don't know if I should tell you this because I'm not sure if my brain's playing tricks on me."

He straightened in his chair. "What do you mean by playing tricks? Is this about the attack?"

Her lips pressed into a straight line as she nodded. "I swear I came to before you guys found me and I heard Prime talking

to the attacker. That's why I think it's my mind messing with me."

Tightness invaded his chest, and as much as he wanted to think this was a mind trick, his gut said Ava was right.

"What did he say to the attacker, Ava?" Yak asked.

"I heard the word Ghost multiple times, and he said something about how Iggy would be proud –though it might have been 'Ziggy'. Before I passed out again, he said something about how he didn't have to hit him so hard." She hesitated. "That's crazy, right? I mean, why would Prime talk to the asshole who attacked us like that? And only musicians go by a names like Ziggy or Iggy, right?"

Volt leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees, concern creasing his features. "Did they see that you were awake?"

She shook her head. "No. That's all I remember. It seems like so little, but with all the weird shit going on, Desiree told me I needed to share with you guys."

Yak nodded. "That's right, Ava. You did good."

Volt stood. "Yeah. You need anything while you heal up, don't hesitate to tell us."

Ava left the office, Volt closed the door behind her then turned to Yak. "Where is Prime? Still at the clubhouse?"

"Fuckin' shit!" Yak hissed.

"What is it?"

Yak couldn't keep the panic out of his voice. "He's got Nora. Her fuckin' physical therapy was moved and dumb ass that I am, I let him drive her."

"All right. At least we know where he's going with her."

The ease and nonchalance Volt used had Yak seeing red. "No, we fucking don't, Volt. No disrespect but they don't use their clubhouse for wet work any more than we do. He could be taking Nora anywhere!"

Volt shook his head. "Nothing bad is going to happen to her."

Yak jerked to standing, upending the office chair in the process. "You don't know that," he yelled.

"Dial it down, Yak."

His words from months ago rushed back to him. *I won't do that shit a third time.* Yet he'd done it again. He was the very fucking person who forced Nora to ride with a rogue brother.

He glared at Volt. "I can't fuckin' dial it down, Volt! He's got her. And I swore I wouldn't be the reason shit got harder for her— but I am!"

The room spun as Volt grabbed Yak by the lapels of his cut. He fought against his president's hold, but found himself shoved up against the wall.

"Pull your shit together, Yak," Volt bit out.

His eyes widened. "I have to go get her. I'm gonna kill that motherfucker... I should have *known!*"

Volt gave him a slight jerk. “Pull it together! It’s daylight, we aren’t—”

“There’s no *we* about this! I’m getting her back. No matter what!”

“Won’t do you –or her– any good if you’re in jail for twenty fuckin’ years afterward.”

The door flew open and Turk stormed inside. “What the fuck is goin’ on up here? I can hear shit banging around downstairs, so that’s saying something.”

Volt looked at Turk but kept his hold on Yak. “Prime’s working with Ghost and the Devil Lancers.”

“And he’s driving Nora to fuck-knows-where.” Yak said.

Volt turned back to Yak. “We can’t go in half-cocked.”

“No, but I fuckin’ can.”

“No, you can’t,” Turk said. “We’re a brotherhood, we handle shit together.”

Volt tightened his grip on Yak. “You got your shit together? I need to call our brothers who are closer to the Devil Lancer compound. I can’t fuckin’ do that until I know you aren’t gonna haul ass out of here.”

With an exhale through his nose, Yak lifted his chin. “Yeah, it’s going to kill me. But I’ll wait.”

Yak ran his hands through his hair and the foreign feeling of it being short hit him again. That made him think of Fred and

Sydney and Nora's pixie-cut. He growled wishing he could do something. *Knew* something.

His cell dinged with a notification.

He pulled it out and saw a text from Nora.

Still at therapy.

The iron grip he had on his phone made his palm hurt and he willed himself to loosen his hold.

“What is it?” Turk asked in a low voice, closing the distance between them.

He shifted his jaw side to side. “Just got a text from Nora, but I know it's that asshole. Says she's ‘still at therapy.’ She's never once texted me from an appointment.”

Turk nodded. “Which means she never made it to therapy.”

Yak pointed a finger at Turk. “I'm having a prospect toss that fucker's room. He's got any fuckin' cash in there, it goes to Nora to pay the damned no-show fee that office is gonna hit her with.”

Turk took a deep breath and lifted his chin. “Better idea is to have someone like Patch or Major do it. For all we know he's got a prospect or two working with him.”

He ran his hand through his hair again. “Fuck. You're right.”

“It's why Volt insisted you get your shit tight.”

Volt tucked his cell into his back pocket. “Rage and Roll are at Lisa’s shop. They’re closest to the Devil Lancers and are heading out in Rage’s Explorer.”

“They’ll see them,” Yak muttered.

Volt shook his head. “They know better, Yak. Besides, the cops will get there before them, most likely.”

Yak clenched his fists. “Cops? Would you let the fuckin’ cops handle this shit if it were Jackie?”

“We know she means something to you, man. Rage and Roll are there to make sure a trafficker isn’t taking her.”

Yak widened his eyes. “Christ! She could end up in the crossfire. It’s a damned miracle she wasn’t shot when Crop broke into her house and the asshole wouldn’t drop his weapon. Hell, my guess it was Prime with him who ran off.”

Volt nodded once. “You’re probably right about that. Doesn’t change the fact I don’t want you in an orange jumpsuit because multiple people witness you killing Prime in what will look like cold blood.”

Yak shook his head. “Fine. Can we get moving now? I need to get the woman I love away from those motherfucking assholes.”

Cal moved directly in front of Yak. “Don’t say a fuckin’ word, brother.”

His eyes blazed at Cal. “We tipped our whole fuckin’ hand and the cops didn’t do shit for us!”

“Not true,” Roll said from behind Yak.

They were gathered in a strip mall parking lot not far from the Devil Lancer compound, but Yak hadn’t seen or heard Roll arrive. Once Roll stood next to him, Yak asked, “Where did you come from?”

“I walked here from where Rage and I were watching the Devil Lancers. The cops may not have come out with your girl yet, but not ten minutes before the raid some traffickers had words with Ghost outside. Then they hauled ass in the nick of time before the cops showed up. They didn’t take anyone with them.”

Cal shook his head. “How do you even know they’re traffickers?”

Roll cocked his head to the side. “Who else drives BMW sedans to that shitty compound?”

Relief started to build within him, but Yak tamped it down. “Nothing says those assholes won’t come back once the sun sets in about an hour.”

Four police vehicles flew down the street, lights swirling but no sirens. All four turned down a side street. If Yak wasn’t mistaken, it was the lane that led to the Lancer compound.

“We need to follow them,” he bit out.

Roll shook his head. “No. Come with me, but keep your shit tight. Tighter than you had it for Volt.”

He clenched his jaw and glared at the big man. “I got my shit tight, Roll. Put Trixie in this sitch and I’ll tell *you* to get your shit tight.”

A devious gleam hit Roll’s brown eyes. “I know it ain’t easy, Yak. But, you aren’t gonna lose her.” He paused and the gleam faded. “And I know you don’t believe that right now, but you should. Let’s go, brother.”

He tromped through the wooded area surrounding the Devil Lancer compound wishing he’d worn long sleeves, even if it was over ninety degrees outside. Every fuckin’ tree seemed to have low hanging branches that snagged at his arms. Both men stopped at the sound of a vehicle racing down the narrow dirt road.

An plain black SUV barreled back toward the main drag.

“Fuck!” Yak hissed.

“Calm your shit, Yak,” Roll said.

“How do we know that wasn’t a fuckin’ trafficker?”

Rage stepped out from behind a tree. “Because that was an unmarked cop car and you fuckin’ know it. They got two people loaded in there, and from what I can tell it’s two women.”

Yak wanted to sprint back so he could follow on his bike.

Roll read the look on his face. “If Nora’s in that vehicle, she’s safe, Yak.”

A battle blew up inside him. He wanted to get to Nora, but he needed retribution.

He locked eyes with Rage. “What about the other vehicles? Cops taking in all the fuckin’ Devil Lancers?”

Rage dipped his chin. “They got Ghost and Prime in the back of a marked JSO Explorer.”

He turned on his heel. “Fine. I’m goin’ to get my woman.”

Roll grabbed Yak’s bicep. “You don’t even know where they took her.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t get to beat the shit out of Ghost or Prime. What’s the fuckin’ point?”

Before anyone could respond, Yak’s phone rang. The display indicated it was a Private caller. He suspected it was a police cell and he took the call.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, honey,” Nora said.

He exhaled hard. “Thank, fuck. Where are you headed?”

“How do you know—”

“Saw an unmarked vehicle fly by, Rage told me two females were inside and you were most likely one of them.”

“They’re taking me and Suzy—”

“Suzy?” he almost hollered.

“Yeah, Ghost tased her this morning.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Fuckin’ hell.”

She chuckled and he clenched his jaw. Not a damn thing was funny, but he needed to know where she was.

“It’s good she was there, she got me out of my zip tie. Anyway, they’re taking us downtown to the FDLE building. Do you know where it is?”

“Yeah. It isn’t far from the juvenile detention center. I’m familiar.”

He heard a voice in the background. “It will be a while before you’ll be able to leave, Ms. Ellis.”

Yak blew out a breath. “Tell that officer, I don’t care how long I gotta wait. I’m gonna be there to take you home.”

Nora

Yak said very little after we left the FDLE building. He insisted that I wear a helmet. I opened my mouth to point out I'd dealt with much more danger that day, but the quelling look he gave me stopped me cold. We roared through downtown, but rather than head toward the house in Avondale, we rode to the clubhouse.

Considering that Suzy and I had been abducted, I expected a very somber crowd inside the Riot clubhouse. My expectations were totally wrong. The brothers were having a party - almost as though nothing happened.

There were even some of the Biloxi brothers in town.

With my hand on Yak's tattooed bicep, I asked, "Why are there out-of-town brothers here?"

His jaw clenched and he ran his hand down his face. "Lots of reasons, but Suzy's sister is the Biloxi President's old lady. Pretty sure that has a fuckuva lot to do with it."

"I see."

He wrapped me in a bear hug that was as awesome as it was short. "I need a drink, the stiffer the better. Want me to get you something?"

I shook my head. "Not right now. I'm gonna get some food from the kitchen."

With my treatments, I couldn't have alcohol, but I loved drinking from stemware so in the kitchen, I'd snagged a wine glass and filled it with water.

Yak found me and guided us to a sofa. We sat down and I suddenly noticed Yak's jeans had holes in them. Full holes, unlike mine, which were frayed holes with lots of threads holding the denim together –or appearing to, anyway.

Yak nudged my shoulder with his. "Sorry I was being a jackass earlier. This shit's had me a little wound up."

I nodded. "I can only imagine. I was a little... wound up wondering how things were going to turn out."

For some strange reason, I couldn't stop staring at the hole in his pants. Part of me thought I should be more upset about this ordeal... but in the big scheme of things, I felt numb.

"Like your jeans," he muttered.

I looked up at him, allowing the abrupt subject change. "I don't. I mean, I like yours, but I really wish I could get jeans without all the distressing and shit."

He tilted his head. "I can see that. It sucks that we pay full price for holey jeans."

I nodded. "Yeah. The only upside with these," I paused and wedged the flat stem-portion of glass between the frayed threads. When the glass sat secure, I looked up at him. "I have a built-in glass holder."

He burst with laughter and slung an arm on my shoulders. "I love it, Nora. That's funny."

His voice trailed away on his last words and our faces were very close. I could kiss him, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I was pretty damn certain he didn't want to, with all the extra brothers around.

Yet again, my expectations were proved wrong because he wrapped his other arm around me and laid a hot and heavy kiss on me. Every stroke of his tongue told me how grateful he was that I was safe. The more I tried to return his kiss, the more controlling he became.

It pained me to do it, but I pushed against his shoulders to break the kiss. His eyes stayed closed and I stared up at him.

Finally, he opened his eyes. A strong feeling gripped my chest at the molten heat in his bronze irises. The rock music didn't seem quite as loud all of a sudden. It felt like the two of us were in a small bubble amidst his biker brethren.

“I fuckin’ love you, Elenora.”

I rested my forehead against his and exhaled. That strong feeling surged through the rest of my body and I knew. Anything I'd thought was love before was nothing compared to this.

I smiled up at him. “I love you, too, Noah.”

With a grin, he leaned forward and gave me a quick peck. “That’s great, but I’m not having kids, babe. Are you gonna be good with that?”

I couldn't help but tilt my head. “Why? Because you lost your parents? Or because the foster care system sucked so bad

for you?”

“One and the same, Nora.”

I glanced around the room. Abby held Trixie and Roll’s eighteen-month-old daughter in her arms while Mallory and Andrea were playing games with Simone, Rafferty, and Alexandra.

With a wry smile, I looked back to Yak. “God forbid the unthinkable happened to you, all of these people would step up for your child. All of them, Yak. But I get it.”

He sighed and tightened his hold on me. “Doesn’t sound that way.”

I rested my cheek on his chest. “I do, but what about adopting teenagers from the system? Be the people you never had in your life at that time.”

“Princess, I was a fuckin’ hellion back then.”

I grinned up at him. “Funny, I thought you still were.”

“Nora.”

“What? Having been a hellion, you’re well suited to dealing with their bullshit.”

He stared across the room for a long moment. “You’re trouble, Nora.”

I wrapped an arm around his waist and gave him a squeeze. “I’m not, Yak. Just think about it.”

We went upstairs after an hour of communing with the brothers and their women. My exhaustion was written all over my face, according to Yak. I was tired, but after his revelation, I was determined to catch enough of a second wind to do what I'd been wanting to do with him for weeks.

Yak locked his door and wrapped me in his arms. "I know you have your fancy pajamas or whatever, but... I want you in my shirt tonight."

I cocked my head to the side. "What about sleeping naked?"

"Woman. That isn't happening tonight. All I ask for is to have you in my shirt with me, in that bed, and I get to hold you, knowing you're fuckin' safe in my arms."

I shrugged. "Okay."

He slid his hands along my back and up my arms to cup my shoulders. "I don't trust that. Not a bit."

"I'll sleep in your shirt. They're comfy... or at least the one I wore when we met was really comfy."

With a nod, he let me go. "I'm gonna shower. You want the bathroom first?"

I wanted us to wash this day away together, but I knew he wouldn't have that. I shook my head. "You go ahead. It'll give me time to pick out which of your t-shirts I want to sleep in tonight."

The moment I heard the shower, I snagged one of his black tees and went to his nightstand. It wasn't cool to snoop through his drawers, but I wanted to be sure he didn't try to

nope out on sex tonight. In the top drawer I found an unopened box of condoms.

Excellent.

I opened the box, grabbed one, and tucked it under my pillow. If I got my way, we wouldn't really need it. However, I'd come to realize that even though Yak didn't come off as headstrong and stubborn, he still found ways to steer a situation the way he wanted it. Especially where sex was concerned.

I wasn't putting up with that tonight.

The bathroom door opened and Yak sauntered out with only a towel wrapped around his waist. It took serious willpower not to yank the towel free, ball it up, and drop to my knees. Instead, I picked up his t-shirt, grabbed a pair of my undies from my duffel bag, and set a personal record for shower speed.

I turned on the lamp on my side of the bed and Yak threw me a curious look. "If it's okay, I'd rather fall asleep with the light on."

His face set with a hardness I realized was his banked anger. "Because of what they did to you."

I climbed into the bed and snuggled up to him. "Just for tonight."

"That shithead's lucky he got arrested."

I put a hand on his tank-top clad chest. "We *aren't* talking about him in bed."

He heaved a deep breath. “You’re right, woman. Come here.”

As I snuggled closer under the covers, I let my hand wander from his chest down to his waist. He had satiny-feeling basketball shorts on if the waistband was any indicator.

“Why are you wearing shorts?”

His free hand grabbed mine, bringing it up to his lips. “Why do you care?”

I locked eyes with him. “Evasive, much?”

One brow lowered and he narrowed that eye at me. “You’ve been up to something since we came in here, Nora.”

I leaned up on an elbow, pulled my hand from his, and tugged his tank up his torso. “You’re right. I’m going to do what I wanted to do weeks ago. Get up close to your gorgeous tattoos, trace them anyway I want, and then suck your cock.”

He pulled at his tank, but I put my hand on his. “Not that I needed the reminder today, but life is short, Noah. I’m lucky as hell. I get that, but I’ll be damned if I squander even one more moment with you.”

He cupped my cheek. “You’re tired, baby. It’s written all over you.”

“I have enough energy for this. And don’t think you can argue with me until I give in. You told me you love me. I love you and I’m having my way with you, dammit.”

“Fuck. You are hell on wheels when you want something, babe.”

I pushed his shirt up. He grabbed the hem of his tank top, leaned forward and tore it over his head.

“Finally,” I whispered.

His tats ran from his collar bone down to his pectorals, all in black ink. A compass rose surrounded by chains took up the majority of his right pec, while the Riot MC patch sat over his left, moving in time with his steady heartbeat. Both tattoos had intricate lines to make it look like the pieces had been framed on his skin.

I traced the compass with my lips. “I never knew a tattoo could have such shading without other colors.”

His teeth let go of his bottom lip. “Yeah. Fred’s a fuckin’ master tattoo artist.”

My head raised. “Fred... your barber?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but I thought you had a mission, babe?”

I smirked. “So, I do.”

I kissed the point of the ‘S’ on the compass, then dragged my lips over to his Riot patch and traced my tongue around the fist which held up a skull. I didn’t get to the wings stretching out from behind the skull before Yak’s hand cupped the back of my neck.

“What are you doing, woman?”

I grinned. “Whatever I want.”

He took a deep breath. “There’s gonna be repercussions, Nora.”

With an eyebrow arch, I slid my hands down to the band of his shorts and pushed them down. “I intend to take care of that, Noah.”

His hands came to my wrists. “Sweetheart, you don’t—”

“I *want* to do this. You stopped me a few days ago, but I’m getting my hands on you, Yak.”

He bucked his hips and I dragged his shorts and boxer briefs down his legs. Then he let out a sigh. “Put those hands on me, but I’m looking forward to your perfect, hot mouth the most.”

I licked my lips and settled between his legs. “Me, too.”

His cock hardened more as soon as I took it in hand. His girth was even more admirable as I traced the thick vein from root to tip with my tongue. Yak’s breathing became labored and a sense of power flowed through me.

His knees came up and his thighs opened a little more. I opened my mouth and took him in fully. After the fourth upward stroke, I realized now *he* was breathing hard. I loved making him feel good, but I really wanted him to lose control. With my hand at the base of his cock, I gripped him firmly and stroked while keeping at him with my mouth.

“Dammit, Nora. Fuck, you feel so good.”

I peeked up at him. His eyes blazed at me, which only served as encouragement. I picked up my pace and sucked harder.

He put his hand behind my head to slow me down.

“Mm-mm,” I said around him.

“Nora,” he breathed, his head tilting backward. “You gotta slow down.”

I let him go long enough to say, “No way.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Nora.”

My fingers trailed down to fondle his balls while I took him in my mouth fully again. “Mm-hmm,” I hummed.

His deep-pitched groan sounded like a growl. He curled forward, forcing me to let him go. His hands grabbed my hips and I found myself turned one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. I still wore his shirt, but he wasted no time tearing my panties off. He licked at me and my breath froze in my lungs.

“I can’t stand the idea of coming in your mouth. I’m damn sure not gonna come and not be the one who gets you off at the same time.” He gave my upper thigh a slight swat. “Take care of the repercussions, woman.”

I smiled for a moment, then I got back to work. It didn’t take long for him to get me off since going down on him was such a turn-on. Seemed Yak felt the same way about going down on me, because it didn’t take much longer to send him over the edge. If these were the repercussions from having my way, I’d deal with these everyday, and gladly.

Chapter 16

Normal Is Overrated

YAK

Four days later, the brothers filed into the meeting room for church. The somber mood mingled with an air of relief, or maybe it was just Yak who felt relieved. The women—dancers and old ladies alike—were safe, and Prime, the traitor, was behind bars.

Volt called the meeting to order. “The district attorney is focusing on bringing down the Devil Lancers. From what Bernstein —the club lawyer— can tell us, Prime worked a plea deal for lesser charges.”

“Fuckin’ coward,” Turk muttered.

Volt’s lips tipped up. “Right, but that means his charges aren’t so severe that a judge would deny bail. Five minutes ago, Patch’s contact at the jail called. He’s gonna fill us in when he gets off the phone.”

Roll frowned. “Do we know if Prime’s posting bail? If he isn’t, he’ll end up being moved to the prison soon too, right?”

“He should, but that slippery fucker will probably work some deal on that shit too,” Blood said.

“I’ll post his bail,” Turk said in a vicious tone.

“Not if I post it first,” Yak said.

“No,” Volt said firmly to keep other brothers from chiming in. “I’m putting it to a vote. The club will post his bail.”

Razor cleared his throat. “I’m all for stripping this asshole’s patch and any other form of retribution Yak and Turk want, but we post the bail, there will be a paper trail.”

Blood nodded. “And that’s money down the drain, not to mention they typically want some form of collateral.”

Volt said, “One more thing Bernstein heard is that Prime’s mom has been arrested.”

“Why?” Liar asked.

Yak leveled his gaze on Liar. “That bitch works at the physical therapy firm Nora goes to –but a different location. She called the other office for Nora’s contact info, spouting bullshit about Nora thinking of changing offices. That’s how Prime got to her, since she was convinced her appointment had changed.”

Liar shook his head. “How do you know all that? Prime sure as hell didn’t admit to it.”

Yak took a deep breath to get his anger in check. “When Nora got her phone back from the cops late that night, she saw the confirmation text from the PT office for a Tuesday

appointment, and we knew something was wrong. Nora mentioned it to the cops and first thing the next morning, we found out the truth.”

Beast whistled. “So, that fuckin’ coward sacrificed his mother.”

Volt nodded. “You bet he did. Let’s stay focused though, Blood makes a good point: we bail his ass out, we won’t get the cash back.”

Beast sat back in his seat. “There’s another option. Heard this morning that two of the Southside Slayers are in jail for selling meth. We could get them to—”

“Then we’d owe them a marker,” Cal said. “I don’t want to owe them and they’d probably do us wrong.”

Punc, who stood against the wall, stepped forward. “I’ll get arrested and handle it.”

A mixture of confusion and annoyance crossed Volt’s face. “Even if you could arrange that, why the hell would you?”

Punc’s jaw clenched. “That asshole didn’t just turn against us. He fuckin’ arranged for sweet Ava to be beaten. Turning off monitors and shit.”

Turk’s brows rose. ““Sweet Ava”? What is that?”

Punc glanced away.

“Is there a single dancer you *don’t* flirt with?” Turk demanded.

Yak sensed there was something more to this than Punc's interactions with the other dancers. "Let it go, Turk. Not the focus of this meeting."

His eyes cut to Yak. "Right. But we will discuss it."

After a lengthy silence, Volt said, "That's a great idea in theory, but Prime gets so much as a fuckin' paper cut, and they're gonna be looking at you."

Punc shrugged, then ran his hand through his blond feathered hair. "So?"

"So... sweet Ava will get snatched up by some other asshole. Probably one who doesn't work at Platinum's," Yak said. "It's great you want revenge, but you'll do more time if you even get near Prime."

Tundra shook his head. "How are we at an impasse with this? We aren't bailing the asshole out, though that would be cool as fuck. Punc's crazy ass *wants* to get arrested, but you put the kibosh on that. There has to be a solution."

Patch came into the room and took his seat across from Blood, next to Volt. "Randy, my buddy at the jail tells me Prime's plea deal kept him away from Ghost before they moved Ghost to the Duval county prison."

"Is Prime posting bail?" Turk asked.

Patch stroked his beard. "His momma got fired for being an accomplice in Nora's abduction. She's facing her own problems with the law."

“Probably why he struck a plea –thinking it would help him save his mom,” Tundra said.

Patch shrugged. “Hard to say, but Randy heard two Devil Lancers who weren’t at the raid are bailing Prime out. He should be released later this afternoon, assuming they get a judge.”

From the look on Volt’s face, Yak had a bad feeling.

“We aren’t going to let the Devil Lancers deal with Prime, are we?” Yak asked.

Volt stared at him. “It would be easier, and less dangerous.” He paused. “But it also sends the wrong message. Nobody earns a patch with us and helps another club attack us.”

“Then what’s the plan?” Turk asked.

“Vamp, you and Razor stake out the jail. Follow Prime – don’t get spotted,” Volt said.

“We won’t,” Razor muttered.

Volt continued. “The rest of you, be ready to ride late tonight. Prime’s gonna learn a lesson before he disappears.”

“What about Platinum’s tonight?” Patch asked.

Volt dipped his chin. “You and Blood will manage it tonight. Four Biloxi brothers are on the way to act as security.”

“Why? Won’t we pick him up in the wee hours –after Platinum’s closes?” Punc asked.

Volt shook his head. “We’re nabbing him and taking him to a meet with brothers from the Memphis chapter. They had a

brother turn years ago. Hearing about this shit, they want to help us with Prime.”

“How does that ‘send a message’?” Punc asked.

Blood sighed. “We leave him to be found, local cops are looking at the Devil Lancers *and* us.”

“They’ll do that when he fails to appear, too,” Tundra said.

Volt nodded. “Yeah, but we won’t have seen him since the day he took Nora.”

“It’s a shame we don’t have his phone,” Punc said.

“Why?” Yak asked.

“Tracking and shit. Could lead cops right to the Devil Lancers or where ever we drop him.”

“Well, we don’t have his phone, so let’s stay focused,” Blood said.

Volt turned to Blood. “Anybody go through his room yet?”

“No,” Punc and Tundra said.

Their president nodded. “It’s a long shot, but we should check it. He may have used a burner to talk to the Devil Lancers.”

Yak scoffed. “Yeah, right. Only Punc goes out of his way to use a burner.”

Roll pulled his cell from his back pocket. “Texting Trixie. She can check for us. Since she needed something from the saddlebags just before church, she’s got my keys which means she’s got the master to get in his room.”

Punc leaned toward the table to get Volt's attention. "Not to question the plan, but how are Vamp and Razor gonna know when the two Devil Lancers come for Prime? None of us even know what they look like."

Beast grinned. "That's where you're wrong. When I covered for Yak and Turk two days ago, two Devil Lancers showed up at Platinum's. I zoomed in the security camera on each of them. Got their ugly faces printed out just in case we needed them."

"Why the hell would they come to Platinum's?" Tundra asked.

Beast's blue eyes widened. "To start shit, man. Hell, you're the one who told them they'd get kicked out."

Tundra shook his head. "Those two weren't wearing cuts."

Beast nodded. "Yeah, but they were when they were in the parking lot. They left 'em in their saddle bags. The moment I saw you dealing with two rough-looking assholes, I thought it might be either Devil Lancers or some other club trying to fuck with us, since Prime's face was all over the fuckin' news."

Cal sighed. "And you're just now telling us about it?"

"First time we've had church. I let Blood know, and he passed it on to Volt."

Volt sat back in his chair. "He did pass that on. If you printed their pictures, give those to Vamp and Razor."

A banging on the double doors prevented anyone else from weighing in. Muffled voices made their way into the room.

“They wanted me to come down here, prospect,” a female voice said.

Yak pressed his lips together since he knew it was Trixie.

“Let me handle this, Volt,” Roll said.

The door opened and a prospect stuck his head inside the room. “Sorry, President. I tried to keep her from getting down the hallway—”

Roll stepped in front of the prospect. “Don’t worry about it. Let me out, I’ll deal with my woman.”

A couple minutes later Roll set two cell phones on the conference table. “Seems we got lucky since that asshole was such a moron.”

“Hey! That’s the phone I lost last week,” Punc said, stepping forward to grab it.

Yak held a hand up to stop Punc. “Wait, wait, wait. Why would he have your cell phone?”

Punc shrugged. “Hell if I know, but, come to think of it, he bumped into me the day I lost it.”

Yak nodded. “Remember you telling me that –and how you were happy your cell fit in your back pocket. Seems to me he could have lifted it then, when you were distracted by him dropping his phone.”

From across the table, Razor grabbed the other phone. “Motherfucking shit.”

“What?” Blood asked.

Razor glanced up at Blood and Volt. “If I’m reading these messages right, Prime and Ghost were going to set Puncture up for Ava’s murder. Had Yak not seen the feed being off, Ghost was set to beat her to death in the parking lot and make it look like Punc was behind it.”

For a moment, Punc stood at the wall breathing deep and hard. “I’m getting the first punch.”

Yak shared a look with Turk. “I don’t mind, as long as I get the first slice at his tat.”

Turk shrugged and his lips tipped up. “You should rethink that. The asshole opted for his forearm. It’ll be my blade that kills him, though.”

At nearly six a.m., Yak stood in front of the door to his room. He slipped his key out of the lock as quietly as he could. To keep as much light out as possible, he squeezed through the doorway. He closed the door and realized his lamp was on.

Nora sat with her back against the headboard and a book in her lap. “It’s done, I take it.”

He shrugged out of his cut. “Yeah. And that’s all you get from me, Nora.”

She smiled. “That’s all I wanted.”

“Maybe now things will get back to normal,” he said.

She set her book on the nightstand, eased off the bed, came to him, and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Normal is overrated, Yak. And you haven’t said that, but your every action tells me you believe it, too.”

He sighed. “Maybe. But things will *definitely* be safer for you from now on, and I’m down for that.”

She brought a hand up along his cheek. Rising up on her toes, she brought her lips to his. “Thanks for taking care of it, honey.”

He pulled his head back to look her in the eyes. “You’re welcome, Elenora.”

Her sideways smile bordered on being a smirk. “Now that we have that out of the way... you look like you need a shower. I thought... I could join you and show you my gratitude.”

A growl bubbled out of him against his will. “Love that you want to do that, but I hate the idea of you on your knees on a ceramic tub, babe. That shit hurts.”

Her eyes widened even as she smiled huge. “How would you know?”

He narrowed his eyes at her playfully. “Shower with me, and you’ll damn well find out, princess.”

Nora

In the morning, Trixie knocked on Yak's door. She wanted me to come eat breakfast with her, Suzy, and Stephanie, Suzy's sister.

When I came downstairs, Suzy closed her eyes and shook her head. "Dammit. If I'd known you were here, I'd have insisted you come hang with me and Stephe."

I waved a hand at her. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure the two of you needed some one-on-one time."

A tall, muscular man wearing a Riot MC cut entered the room. From his name patch, I knew he was Har, the president of the Biloxi chapter. "Steph, we need to head out."

Stephanie frowned, but nodded and turned her back to him in order to hug Suzy. I couldn't hear what was being said, but the two were whispering to each other.

"Let's go, Miss Priss," Har said from behind her.

She rolled her eyes while grinning at me. "I'm not prissy in the least –so don't sweat Yak calling you 'Princess.'"

I nodded. "It's growing on me, but don't tell Yak."

She winked. "Secret's safe with me."

Three weeks later...

Yak had gone for a run, telling me to sleep. Unfortunately, my body had other ideas and sleep wouldn't come.

Rather than toss and turn, I went downstairs and started a pot of coffee. I heard footsteps on the front porch. The kitchen sat at the back of the house. I peeked around the corner into the hall that led back to the living room. The two large windows in the living room had the heavy maroon curtains open with ivory sheers covering the window. Even through the gauzy material, I had a view of the front porch. Destin paced in front of two rocking chairs.

Great.

In all the media frenzy surrounding Suzy and me being abducted, the reporters set up camp in front of the address listed on my driver's license... which I had yet to update. Trixie had nearly laughed herself off a couch in the common room when we saw the morning news segment where Destin opened the door shirtless and with a bedhead.

“That boy never learns!” she cried.

I thought the coverage was dying down finally, but maybe he was here to ream me out regardless.

Either way, I really wasn't up for a confrontation this morning. Not without a whole lot more caffeine.

Yak jogged up the front yard, and I watched surprise fill his expression at the sight of a man on the front porch. He stopped just shy of the stairs, locked his fingers together, and cupped the top of his head. From the heaving of his chest, he was taking deep breaths. Destin turned around and Yak dropped his hands to his sides, his fists clenching immediately.

I hustled to the front door and heard his terse words. “You got some fucking nerve showing up here, asshole.”

Quietly, I opened the door but didn’t close it. I watched Destin cross his arms over his polo-clad chest. “No, you owe it to Nora to get her out of this house. Including the one behind it.”

Yak shook his head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s your fault Nora was traumatized three weeks ago.”

“Traumatized?” he asked, unclenching his fists and setting his hands on his hips.

Destin rolled his eyes. “Yes, traumatized. She was held hostage for God’s sake.”

The local news had gone overboard sensationalizing the headlines surrounding the show-down between the Devil Lancers and law enforcement.

Yak kept quiet.

“You don’t even care that you caused her harm.”

In two strides, Yak stepped onto the porch. From the venomous look he aimed at Destin, I feared things were going

to get ugly... or uglier.

I swung the door closed loud enough to get the attention of both men. It hit me I hadn't dressed and I stood there in one of Yak's t-shirts and my purple head wrap.

"About time you got back, honey," I said.

Yak shot me a brief grin. "This asshole wake you up, princess?"

Destin frowned. One of his hands formed a fist and he threw it at Yak. He ducked just in time. As Yak straightened, he used his upward momentum to land a shot right at Destin's nose.

Destin clutched his nose. To my surprise, it didn't appear to be bleeding. "Motherfucker, you broke my nose," he said in a muffled tone.

I glanced at Yak. "Wouldn't it be bleeding if you broke it?"

He smirked. "Maybe, everybody's different, princess."

Destin glared at me. His eyes roved up to my headwrap and he loosened his grip on his nose.

I didn't want to hear anything he had to say, especially not pity. "I don't know why you showed up here to start with, but we're over and you should go."

After a long silence, he gave me a chin lift –Yak's were much sexier– and he trudged back to his car.

"Feel better?" I asked in a low voice.

Yak closed the distance, shaking his head. "No. It's like getting communion wine. You know it's the real deal, but it's

so damned little it's never enough.”

I grinned. “I’ll take your word for it, but I think it was more than enough and Destin definitely should have gotten the message.”

Yak came closer, droplets of sweat rolled down his face. I bit my lip. He chuckled. “Did he though? He doesn’t know you’re mine, and he doesn’t know I’d have put myself in your place rather than let you go through that shit.”

A stick snapped to our left and we both turned toward the sound.

Evan slowly made his way around the side of the house. “I was of the same mindset as that douche bag, but I see that’s wrong.”

Yak shifted so he was next to me and facing Evan. We watched Evan climb the stairs to the porch. “Good. I’m gonna do whatever it takes to keep her happy and safe.”

Evan looked at me and back to Yak. “Even from yourself?”

I gasped, but Evan held up a hand to silence me... I made a mental note to have words about that later.

Yak held Evan’s gaze but kept quiet a long while. He sighed. “I’m not gonna let her go.”

From the ghost of a smile tugging at Evan’s lips, I knew all was forgiven. “Be careful. You’re damn close to Rick-rolling me. That shit isn’t done, man.”

I shook my head. “Let’s go inside. I should have put on clothes before coming down here—”

Yak chuckled. “Not if you ask me, babe. It’s the only thing that *might* have gotten the point across to ol’ Destin.”

I led Evan into the kitchen and set out three mugs for coffee.

“Leave mine empty, babe. I’m gonna shower,” Yak said.

Evan grabbed the coffee pot and poured two cups. “You want creamer?”

“I’ll get it. I’m sure you don’t want any, Mr. Military Man.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Today, I think I’ll live a little.”

I doctored both cups and Evan took them out to the living room.

He held his cup close to his lips and stared at the huge, ornate, oak fireplace mantle. “Are you on board with his attitude? Never letting you go and all that?”

I took a deep breath and sipped my coffee while memories rolled through my mind of Yak ‘stealing’ the moon for me. I recalled how strong and immediate my feelings were for him. None of that had changed... if anything they’d only become stronger. Especially after watching him handle Destin—no matter how little that said about me.

After swallowing my java, I locked eyes with my twin. “I’m on board, all right.”

His lips pursed a touch. “That fast. Really?”

I shook my head. “It isn’t really that fast, Ev. It’s been almost five months.”

The faintest creak of the stairs could be heard, but my brother homed in on any strange noises and went quiet. Yak came downstairs after what had to have been a five-minute shower –a feat I never managed. I blamed the three-in-one mens products. He went into the kitchen and got his coffee.

After Yak settled himself next to me, Evan eyed him for a moment. “I don’t understand how that asshole got in with your club or why he’d want to.”

Yak sighed. “Turns out, his sister was with Iggy, a member of the Devil Lancers. She took Prime around him –he would have been seventeen or so at the time. He idolized Iggy. But, Iggy went missing a few years back and the cops couldn’t make heads or tails of it.”

A shrewd look crossed Evan’s face. “But the Devil Lancers blamed you?”

“No, they never said that to us or the cops,” Yak said, shaking his head. His baffled expression would have fooled most people, I was on to his tone and expressions, though. The Riot had everything to do with Iggy disappearing.

If Evan suspected, he kept quiet about it. “But why take Nora and Suzy?”

Yak swallowed some coffee. “From what we found, the Devil Lancers planned to hit Platinum’s that night. Assumed

we'd be short-staffed and shit because Turk and I would both would be searching for our women."

Evan nodded. "So, the cops kept that from happening."

Yak's patient smile probably seemed genuine to Evan. I had said something similar afterward, and Yak made it clear that was the civilian in me speaking. The Riot brothers would have prevented it regardless.

"Yeah, guess so," Yak muttered.

Evan took his coffee cup to the kitchen sink. "I'd stick around, but I got shit to do. Nora, you need help with your radiation appointments, call me." His eyes slid to Yak. "This guy needs to sleep during the day."

Chapter 17

Warped

YAK

Yak entered the common room at quarter to five the following afternoon.

Cal sat at the bar with a bottle of Yuengling. He held up his bottle. “You want one?”

Yak shook his head. “Nah. I’m hoping we can keep this short.”

Cal shook his head, his hazel eyes narrowing. “But we couldn’t do this shit over the phone? Or in my backyard?”

Yak settled on a barstool. “No. It’s sensitive... or Mallory would probably take it that way.”

“What the fuck does she have to do with this?”

He inhaled. “Why did you get Mallory pregnant?”

Cal looked away and chuckled. “Once I claimed her, I made it my mission to knock her ass up.”

Yak fought shaking his head, because he’d heard that from Cal at the time, but he chalked it up to being bluster. “I could

have swore you said you never wanted kids, no matter who you met.”

The sight of Cal tipping back the green bottle almost made Yak wish he had a beer, too. Cal swallowed. “I did say that, but that was before I met Mallory.” Cal cocked his head to the side and stared into space for a moment. “No, that’s wrong. That was before someone took her right out from under me. Shit like that opens your eyes. Hell... after what happened with Nora, you ought to understand that.”

Yak blew out a breath. “Yeah, yeah. I guess.”

“What’s this really about, Yak?”

“Aren’t you scared Alexandra could end up in the system? Growing up in some shitty foster home?”

Cal smacked the bar. “How big of a dumbass are you?”

“What? You’re one of the reasons I joined the Riot, how am I a dumbass?”

Cal’s hazel eyes rounded. “Yeah. I remember. You joined the Riot for what? Brotherhood. We’re fuckin’ family. Some shit goes down, you think anybody here’s gonna let Alexandra go into the system? You think nobody’s gonna step up and take care of my daughter? Come the fuck on, Yak.”

Yak sighed. “You sound like Nora.”

Cal laughed. “I heard she was smart.”

He shook his head. “Or maybe I’m the smart one. I can’t do that to a kid.”

Cal leaned back on his stool. "I'm itching to knock some sense into you, brother. Are you hearing yourself? You aren't dying, and Nora's only got two more treatments left."

Yak shot Cal some side eye. "How the hell would you know?"

"Trixie. She checks in on Nora every day. Hell, Roll thinks it's twice a day."

Yak pressed his lips together and considered Cal's words. Nora hadn't said outright she wanted kids, but the way she asked about adopting kids in the system, he knew she wanted a family.

"Were you followed again?" Cal asked.

Prime's day in court had come and gone. After he missed his date, many of the brothers noticed police officers following them. At first it was unmarked cars, but over the past week they'd dropped the pretense and used cruisers.

"No. I'm surprised, too," Yak said.

"Don't be," Volt said, joining them at the bar.

"Why's that?" Cal asked.

"I was just downtown. They stopped me this morning. Asked me to go in for questioning. So I did."

"What the fuck for?" Yak asked.

Volt almost grinned. "Because Bernstein advised me to do that the next time they stopped me."

“They accuse you of being the reason behind Prime’s failure to appear?”

Volt sauntered behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels. “Not in so many words, though they were trying to get me to trip up and say shit like that.” He set out a high ball glass and poured two fingers of whiskey. “They also asked if I’d seen Jackhammer or Warden.”

Cal shook his head. “Those must be the two who weren’t at the raid.”

Volt sipped his drink. “No, they’re from another Devil Lancer chapter.”

Yak narrowed his eyes. “Why would they think you know those assholes?”

One of Volt’s brows went up. “Prime’s mom knew he got out. She’s raised hell that he’d never leave her without saying goodbye and he’d never fail to appear.”

“Surprised she’s able to do that from the inside,” Cal muttered.

Volt twisted a hand out. “They did turn to her first when he didn’t show. Figured she’d know where he went.”

“Has she told them everything she knows? Or do we not know that?” Yak asked.

“That’s the one thing Prime did right. He didn’t let his mom know who he was taking orders from –though she had figured out he was going to be a Devil Lancer once he was done fucking us over.”

A prospect put another Yuengling in front of Cal and wandered off to the other side of the common room. Cal opened the bottle. “I thought Iggy had been with Prime’s sister.”

Volt nodded. “From what I’ve heard, the whole family loved Iggy.”

“That shit’s warped,” Yak muttered.

“More like *they’re* warped,” Cal said.

“Do they think Jackhammer and this other guy helped Prime leave town?” Yak asked.

Volt aimed a dry look at Yak. “Something like that. Pretty sure they know Prime’s dead. They’re just trying to figure out where they can find his body.”

“Bernstein was there when you were questioned, right?” Cal asked.

“Yeah. He earned his paycheck today. If he hadn’t been there, the detectives would have brought every one of us in for questioning.”

Yak stood and grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge behind the bar. “Thanks for taking one for the rest of us, Prez. Does this really mean they’re done following us?”

Volt shrugged. “Probably. But I still wouldn’t speed across the Buckman or any shit like that. If they can find a reason to take us in, they’re gonna do it, for now.”

Cal set his beer bottle down and turned both of his hands up in question. “But really, they can’t do shit with us. Right?”

Volt’s lips tipped up. “We aren’t the last people seen with Prime. Nobody knows what the hell happened to him, though Jackhammer and Warden *were* the last people seen with him. Bernstein says the focus will be on those two.”

“Good,” Yak murmured, drinking his water.

Cal polished off his beer. “Good? That’s fuckin’ great news, motherfucker. You need an attitude adjustment.”

Yak glared at Cal. “When Nora gets a clean bill of health, I’ll have a fuckin’ great attitude.”

Cal’s eyes closed and he dipped his head. “Sorry, man. You’re right.”

Yak felt Volt’s eyes on him and he glanced that direction.

Volt poured another drink. “You gonna make it official? Put a cut on her at some point?”

“Yeah, probably. If she wants that. Right now, it’s one day at a time.”

“Why probably?” Volt asked.

“He’s worried about kids. Too focused on the bad shit to see all the good in front of him,” Cal muttered.

Yak chugged his water. “I didn’t say that.”

Cal scoffed. “You didn’t have to since you’re the one who asked me to meet you here for some mysterious reason, and that turned out to be kids.”

Volt's chin turned a fraction to the side. "I get that. Never thought I'd see myself with a daughter." His eyes slid to Yak's. "But it's the best fuckin' decision I ever made, man. Don't cheat yourself out of the best that life has to offer because you got such a raw deal when you were young."

Yak ran a hand through his hair and groaned. "Fuck."

"What?" Cal asked.

Yak's eyes cut to Cal and then to Volt. "Leave it to Volt to hit close to home. First night I met Nora, I told her she'd been dealt a raw deal. Hard to ignore something that kind of echoes what I said to her."

Nora

Chemo had a lot of strange side effects nobody mentioned. How could I feel so exhausted, yet suddenly find myself with insomnia? It was the most bizarre thing, yet it had hit me last night. I hated keeping Yak awake, so I forced myself to skip an afternoon nap today.

Lounging on the couch reading wasn't doing the trick, my eyes were closing every other line. I had opened up a mahjong app, and since that worked my brain to some extent, I wasn't nodding off.

I heard Yak's bike roar up the driveway. Part of me wanted to greet him at the door, but he'd told me to take a nap before he left for the clubhouse. Needless to say, I hadn't obeyed.

He spied me in the living room and joined me. "Did you nap at all?"

"Not really. It's okay, I'd rather sleep through the night."

He kept quiet, but he did shake his head. I kept playing my game and felt his gaze drift from me to the tablet.

"Is this like dominoes?" he asked, while slinging his arm along the back of the couch.

I tilted my head as I thought about it. "Not really. Each piece has to be accessible before you can match them up to remove them from the board. And each tile has a name."

“That’s cool. What’s that one?” he asked, pointing to a piece with three blue dots in a diagonal line.

“Three dots.”

I felt his stare on me. I glanced up, his dry look made me fight a smile. “Original.” He pointed again. “What about that one.”

My lips quirked. “Four bamboo, because they’re—”

He nodded. “Yeah, four sticks shaped like bamboo. And that one? It looks like a pitch fork but isn’t.”

“That’s dragon one,” I said, fighting a chuckle.

His tone became slightly outraged. “How do you get dragon from that? I can see it with that green one.”

‘That green one’ had a drawing of a dragon in green.

“Yeah because that’s dragon two, like the number.”

He slouched further down into the sofa next to me. “I’ll take your word for it, darlin’. You want anything to eat? Though I use that term loosely since all you’ve been eating lately is broth.”

I smiled at him. “Nah. I’m not hungry.”

His eyes went sharp. “You aren’t lying to me, are you?”

“No.”

“You have to keep your strength up.”

I rolled my eyes and immediately regretted it. “Yak, I appreciate the concern, but I don’t think my strength is gonna

mean a damn thing against this awful disease.”

He tugged the tablet away from me, put it on the coffee table, turned back to me, and cupped both my cheeks. “Listen to me, Elenora Rose.”

“Really? Using my middle name,” I muttered.

“Bet your ass I am. You’re fighting this disease and you’re gonna fuckin’ beat it.”

Part of me yearned to argue, but with the depth of sincerity shining from his eyes, a big part of me believed him.

“It’s out of my hands, Yak,” I reminded him.

His hands slid so his thumbs were at my ears and he rested his forehead against mine. “No, it fuckin’ isn’t. You keep fighting. Not gonna listen to that resigned tone from you, woman.”

God, how I loved him. His words were fierce, but the resolve in his eyes... that would’ve bowled me over had I been on my feet.

“It’s not a resigned tone, honey. But I love how adamant you are.”

“Good, because that isn’t gonna change.”

My phone chimed and I grabbed his wrists. “That’s probably my mom texting.”

He pulled his forehead away. “Okay.”

I grinned. “I hope you’re ready to meet her and Gary. They’re flying in tonight.”

The alarmed look wasn't quite deer-in-headlights, but it was as cute as it was funny. After a beat, he said, "Why the fuck are they flying in *tonight*? Didn't they tell you ahead of time?"

My head tilted a touch. "No. Trust me, I wasn't thrilled... I mean, I love seeing Mom and my stepdad, but I'd have preferred time to change my sheets and get food in my kitchen."

He leaned away. "Say that shit again?"

At his irritated tone, I replayed my words. "Well, I figure I'll be back in the carriage house while they're here."

"What the fuck for?"

"What do you mean?"

His huge hands grabbed my waist and he moved me so I was straddling his lap. He leaned back in the sofa. "You love me, and I'm in deep with you. I told you I'm not letting you go without a fight. That includes even a few nights away from you. There's no need for you to be in that carriage house. Hell, let them stay at the carriage house."

I rested my hands on his broad shoulders. "That was the plan. They're going to sleep in my bed –hence the need for clean sheets– and I'm going to be on the couch."

His eyes flared. "You are *not* on a fuckin' couch, Elenora. You're in my bed no matter if the damned Pope comes to visit with his shiny, see-through Pope-mobile or whatever."

My body shook with silent laughter. "All right, you've made your point. I'm sleeping here. Though, I'd love to arrange for

a ride in the shiny, see-through Pope-mobile.”

He nodded, but his eyes darted to the front window and he frowned.

“What?” I asked.

His expression held hints of disappointment when he looked at me. “You won’t be embarrassed, right? Your new man being a biker and manager of a gentlemen’s club and all that.”

I leaned forward and slid my hands along his cheeks until my thumbs were at his ears. Just like he’d done to me a few minutes ago, I rested my forehead against his. “Not a chance in hell would I be embarrassed by you, Noah Spencer. I love you and part of what makes you who you are is your club. Seems clear you’re great at managing Platinum’s, so if you enjoy that work, then I’m all for it. Hell, Mom’s gonna think it’s romantic how we met.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s far from romantic, Nora. Especially since your drink was tampered with that night.”

I leaned back, shaking my head. “No it wasn’t.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it was. We reviewed all the security feeds that had Prime in them. That motherfucker messed with your drink. Though from what we can see, he fucked up. Had his eye on a blonde that was with you—”

“That’s Sofia. She’s a friend of Mia’s.”

“Yeah, well, he looked real confused when she left on her own, sober as could be.”

My head reared back. “Wow, guess I took one for the team, huh?”

Irritation settled over his face like a flimsy mask. “You aren’t taking one for anybody any more. Got it?”

I scooted forward on his lap. “Yes, Mr. Protective. I got it. But, I guess I’m kind of glad Prime fucked up.”

“Nora.”

My eyes widened at him. “Yak, think about it. If he hadn’t fucked up, I probably wouldn’t have wandered off to that room, and you wouldn’t have found me.”

“I’m not thinking of it that way, princess.”

The doorbell rang followed by persistent knocking.

“Who could that be?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m about to school them on patience.”

Through the windows, I heard Mom’s voice. “Yoo-hoo, Nora? You didn’t pick up your phone or text me back.”

I shot to standing. “They’re early!”

“Fuck,” Yak said.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head and stood. “Nothin’. Had something else to tell you, but it can wait until later. Let’s meet your mom and Gary.”

Gary and Yak were out on the patio grilling burgers, which were going to be done any minute.

Mom added sliced cucumbers to the huge salad and tossed it. She caught my eyes as I grabbed silverware to set the table. “The first thing we have to do, Nora Rose, is find a reputable pawn shop. We completely forgot to handle that when we were down here last time.”

“You had other things to handle when we were here, Cheryl, like Elenora’s surgery,” Gary said, carrying in a tray of burgers.

Yak set the spatula in the sink. “What do you need a pawn shop for?”

Mom’s eyes twinkled when she grinned. “That awful engagement ring, of course.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from pointing out how much mom gushed over the ring last year.

She glanced my way and cocked a brow. “Don’t give me that look, Nora. I know I loved that ring, but it’s not the glitter in the stone that matters, it’s the feeling behind the gesture.”

“It’s the thought that counts, in other words?” I asked, and gave her a closed lip smile.

Her chin dipped. “You could say that.”

Yak stabbed a tomato with his fork. “Tomorrow around mid-morning, she’s takin’ it to Hock. We’ll give her the best offer.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” I asked.

Yak looked at me. “The Riot. We run a pawnshop in Clay County.”

“Really? That’s fascinating,” Mom said.

Gary’s dark brown eyes slid to Mom. “Cheryl. You are months away from retirement, but it don’t mean we’re opening a pawn shop.”

Mom chewed and swallowed a bite of salad. “You can be such a party-pooper. I bet Grant would help us.”

Gary aimed an exasperated look at her. “My brother lives in South Carolina. How’s he gonna help us in Ohio?”

Something struck me and I narrowed my eyes at Mom. “Is that the only reason you insisted on coming down?”

“No,” Mom drawled.

Simultaneously, Gary said, “Yep.”

She glowered at Gary. “Now that isn’t true. I wanted to spend more time with her, and get to know her new beau.”

I laughed long and loud. “Mom, look at him. Yak is hardly anyone’s beau.”

She turned her glower to me. “Don’t you go spouting semantics with me, young lady. Even over the phone, I could tell things are serious. Plus,” she looked Yak in the eyes. “I needed to thank you for punching Destin in the nose. My son says it was impressive and given his military background, that’s saying something. So thank you.”

Yak's eyes warmed with his smile. "You're more than welcome, but it wasn't half as impressive as I'd have liked it to be."

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about," Gary said, picking up his burger.

"Your little club could give those *Pawn Star* guys a run for their money," Mom said from the front seat of the rental car.

I started choking at her calling the Riot MC a 'little club.' Yak and I were crammed in the backseat, and he patted my back.

Mom looked over her shoulder at me. "What?"

Gary's eyes met mine in the rear view mirror. "I'm gonna guess that you shouldn't have called his club little. Not much about him or those other two guys is little, dear."

I gazed over at Yak and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

He smirked. "Don't be. It's cool."

"See," Mom said, her tone triumphant as she stared at Gary's profile. "It's cool."

Gary's eyes widened at me in the mirror. "You sure you want to go to this Champion place?"

I chuckled. "It's Chamblin, and I'm not going to be responsible for what happens if you deprive your wife of experiencing one of the best used bookstores this side of the Mississippi."

Mom's head whipped around. "It's a used bookstore? You didn't tell me that!"

I smirked. "I know."

Yak slung his arm around my shoulder. "We can only stay an hour."

I looked at him askance. "Good luck with that."

Three hours later, Gary and Yak dragged me and Mom out of the depths of the bookstore.

As we all buckled up, Mom said, "That place is just like going to a casino. No clocks and it feels like all time stands still."

"Dropped as much money as a trip to the casino, but without any free drinks," Gary muttered.

Yak wheezed out a chuckle.

"Anyway, we're not staying tonight, dear," Mom said, reaching back to grab my hand.

"Why?" I asked.

She grinned. "Part of this trip was to check on you. The chemo's taking its toll no matter what you try to tell me. But the other reason for this trip was to scope out retirement condos, so, we're headed to a few places south of here and maybe a little west of Orlando."

"Really?"

Gary nodded. "Yep. Then we're flying out of Tampa at the end of the week."

“Well...” I said, not sure if I was relieved or disappointed by this news.

Mom smiled at me. “Honey, it’s easier to rest without house guests. I get it, but until you have a child, you’ll never know how hard it is to stay away when your child is going through something tough.”

Gary glanced over at Yak. “Translated, now that she’s met you, she can rest easier.”

“Gary Powell!” Mom cried.

We hardly heard her, though, because all three of us were laughing too loud.

An hour later, Yak and I stood in the driveway waving as Gary motored the rental car toward the downtown.

I had an arm around Yak’s waist and I gave him a squeeze. “Yesterday you said you had something else to tell me, but Mom and Gary showed up, and then you never mentioned it.”

With his arm around my shoulders, we went back into the house through the side door. He led me to the kitchen, then picked me up by the waist and put me on the counter.

His teeth sunk into his lower lip for a beat before his eyes met mine. “Don’t get excited.”

I laughed. “I love it when people say things like that. ‘Don’t look now,’ or ‘don’t get excited.’ Spoiler alert, I’m always gonna look and I’m already excited.”

He sighed. “Now that I’ve met your mother, I was afraid of that.”

I waved my hands toward myself. “So, the suspense is killing me.”

“When I came in here, I’d been at the clubhouse.”

“Right, you were going to meet Cal.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist. “I wanted to know why he went back on his word. He’d been through the system and said he was never having kids.”

“But he has a daughter now.”

Yak nodded.

My legs wrapped around his thighs. “So... what did he tell you?”

His eyes seemed even more bronze in the bright sunlight pouring in through the windows. “He told me everything changed when he met Mallory.”

“Right,” I whispered. For some crazy reason, this conversation in this position was turning me on.

He exhaled through his nose. “I told you not to get excited, Nora.”

I leaned closer and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “I can’t help it. You haven’t said it, but it sounds like you’ve changed your mind.”

“Not yet, but I am considering the possibility of kids. With you. But not now, obviously.”

I beamed at him, then kissed his jaw. “Obviously. But, I don’t care what you said, Yak. I’m so freaking excited!”

Epilogue

COMPLETELY OVER THE TOP

Nora

One year later...

“**Y**our hair is gorgeous,” my nurse said after she took my blood pressure.

I smiled. “Yes. It seems straighter than before the chemo. It had been wavy and I’d hoped it would come back curly.”

She smiled. “Many of our patients say that, but my sister-in-law has naturally curly hair. She tells me it’s a pain to fight frizz all the time, especially with this humidity.”

I nodded.

She held out a thermometer, I opened my mouth. “And for what it’s worth, your hair might get back whatever wave it had beforehand.”

Ten minutes later, my oncologist came in with a smile. “I’m thrilled to tell you, your scans are all clean, Nora. You’re in remission.”

I smiled. “That is fantastic news.”

He glanced at my file and back to me. “Given your age, I would advise you to wait at least six months before getting pregnant, and if you’re trying to start a family, waiting two to five years might be better.”

“Okay,” I said, surprised to hear how disappointed I sounded.

He grinned. “Mother Nature has a way of determining the timing of pregnancies, though. We simply advise waiting six months to be sure damaged eggs are fully out of your system.”

“I understand.”

“Great. Other than that, keep up with your monthly self-exams and be certain to get your annual mammogram.”

Yak stood at the kitchen counter eating a sandwich. “So, what’d they say?”

I hung my wristlet on a wall hook. “I’m in remission, and I need to do my monthly breast exams.”

After he swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, he said, “Fan-fuckin’-tastic, baby!”

I smiled. “Yeah, it is. The only bad thing he said was that we have to wait at least six months to try for a baby, though two years would be better.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s still doable, and your mom would be happier since we’re not officially married.”

We weren’t, but Yak had given me a cut that declared me to be his property. It told everyone I belonged to him. Eighteen months ago, I wouldn’t have been cool with that, but after spending time with the Riot MC, I loved wearing it.

“You’re right. Plus, as the doctor pointed out, Mother Nature has her own timing.”

He nodded. “I got church in half an hour, Nora. Want to take the bike? Weather should be good.”

I smiled. “You know my answer, Noah. I *always* want to take the bike.”

My hunch was that Yak always wanted to see me in my cut.

Over an hour later, the brothers were holding church and Mallory, Andrea, Abby, and I were having a cocktail in the common room. A prospect poured Trixie a beer and she joined us on an adjacent sofa.

“Yo, bitches! How’s it hanging?” Trixie greeted us.

I heard a door open down the hall, and then the brothers filed into the room.

Yak squeezed in next to me, forcing me closer to Abby. Mallory sat on the far end, and to give us all space, she went to sit next to Trixie.

“You’re just in time,” Abby said, grinning.

“For what?”

“Wedding talk,” Abby said.

Yak’s eyes went up toward his brows. “Great.”

Abby chuckled. “What? Talking about wedding ceremonies is so much fun.”

I waved a hand at Abby. “Oh, no. I don’t want a ceremony.”

“Why?” Trixie demanded.

I wobbled my head. “If I have a ceremony, I’m more likely to go completely over the top.”

“What do you mean?” Mallory asked.

Vamp wandered over and leaned against the wall near Mallory and Trixie’s couch.

“You know, big gown, multiple flower girls, and a live band. Brock and Gabe got me back the money from that DJ, but I’m thinking live music would be better,” I said.

“How’s that over the top?” Abby asked.

I glanced at Yak. “Yak and I have a favorite bird.”

He did a long blink, gave a short shake of his head, and a small smile grew on his face. “Almost makes me want to shut down the zoo.”

“What the fuck does the zoo have to do with it?” Trixie asked.

Abby’s eyes widened. “Oh, hell. You don’t want an actual yak at your wedding, do you?”

I grinned sweetly at Trixie. “Isn’t it romantic to release birds at weddings?”

“Not anymore,” Vamp muttered. “Believe me, Gabe would know.”

Trixie shot me a stern look. “This better not be something you had planned with Pencil Dick, but I’ll play along.” She paused and pitched her voice slightly higher. “Yes, Nora, it’s

very romantic to release birds at weddings. What did you have in mind?”

I struggled to keep a straight face. “Well, you know, Yak and I wouldn’t have just any birds. We’d release ostriches.”

Mallory put her forehead in her hand and chuckled. “Oh my God, that’s awful. And yet, it would be hysterical, too.”

“Why are you hanging over here, man?” Yak asked Vamp.

Vamp’s eyebrow ring gleamed. “Wanted to know where you ordered that teak wood for your hammock. And did you ever get it upstairs into your bedroom?”

Yak shook his head. “I’ll text you the contact info. And no, we put it on the patio. Didn’t want to ruin the walls inside the house getting it up the stairs.”

What Yak didn’t tell Vamp was that we wound up dragging it inside through the double doors to the patio. It weighed a ton, and was now in the living room. I wished we could disassemble it and get it upstairs in pieces because it was great for naps... and sex with my man.

Yak

Yak unlocked the front door and led Nora straight upstairs to their room. His every instinct said she'd get the news of remission today, but he still felt a thousand pounds lighter after hearing it from her.

In their bedroom, he went to his dresser. "Get ready for bed, babe."

"Okay. I'll be quick in the bathroom."

He heard the door latch, and he grabbed the small velvet box from the back of his top drawer. The sole upside to the trip to Hock last year was that Yak had told Liar to set her old ring aside. It had allowed him to get an idea of what she liked in an engagement ring, and it gave him her ring size.

He had money set aside for a down payment on a house, which he used for the emerald-cut engagement ring. Nora had mentioned how much she loved living in the historic home, so Yak figured he had time before they needed money to buy their own house.

"What are you doing?" Nora asked from the doorway.

He turned, surprised by how fucking nervous he felt. She was going to say yes. For fuck's sake, she wore his property cut every chance she got. That didn't change how damned sweaty his palms were or how rebellious his stomach felt. To

make matters worse, his mouth had gone dry at the sight of her.

He cleared his throat. “Come here.”

Her head cocked to the side a touch. “I’m right here.”

Leave it to his woman to get difficult *now*.

“Nora, please, come closer. Actually, sit on the bed.”

She moved in front of him, but she didn’t sit on the bed.

He dropped to one knee. Her eyes widened and she put a hand to her mouth... her left hand of course. Even though he’d practiced opening the damn box over a dozen times, his fingers still fumbled with it now.

She gasped when he pried it open. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Nora Rose, will you marry me? Legally?”

Her head tilted and her neck craned toward him. “Is there a way to do it *illegally*? That might be fun.”

He closed his eyes, not believing she was cracking jokes. Then it hit him... that very trait was what made her *his* woman.

He opened his eyes, smiled, and reached for her hand. “I don’t know, but we’ll do it both ways if possible. Now, will you marry me, princess?”

She spread her fingers. He slipped the ring onto her ring finger, it fit perfectly.

She smiled down at him, a shimmer of tears in her green eyes. “Yes, Noah. I’ll marry you.”

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Thank you for reading. The Riot will continue with *Punc* and Ava’s story coming in Fall 2024.

Acknowledgments

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About Karen Renee

Karen Renee is the award-winning author of the Riot MC, Riot MC Biloxi, Beta, and O-Town series of books. She once crunched Nielsen ratings data but these days she brings her imagination to life by writing books. She has wanted to be a writer since she was very young, but it's taken the last twenty plus years for her to amass enough courage and overall life experience to bring that dream to life. Some of those life experiences came from the wonderful world of advertising, banking, and local television media research. She is a proud wife and mother, and a Jacksonville native. When she's not at the soccer field or cooking, you can find her at her local library, the grocery store, in her car jamming out to some tunes, or hibernating while she writes and/or reads books.

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