

Fool's

GOLD

KI BRIGHTLY
& M.D. GREGORY

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The Bad Boy from the Trailer Park

There are certain unwritten rules in the Lakeview Trailer Park, and number five is clear—No Gay Stuff.

Ethan “Shep” Shepherd has grown up hiding his true self so he doesn’t get kicked out of the only home he knows, but that doesn’t mean he can’t dream of a better life with the beautiful man who lives across the river. As a criminal, Ethan knows Jonas is too good for him, but when another one of the trailer park guys decides to attack Jonas, Ethan steps in and changes the course of their lives.

The Good Boy from the Religious Family

Jonas Nomikos is trying to survive his parents and their conservative views until he gets to college, where he can finally be himself. It isn’t an easy task to pretend to be the son they want, and when his best friend tells the truth to Jonas’s parents, he’s sure his life is over. Until Ethan. Ethan gives him hope and makes him smile, and Jonas wants to be with him, even if it means saying goodbye to the only life he knows.

The Road to Being Who They Are

If Ethan and Jonas want to be together, they’ll need to make sacrifices. The journey to happiness is filled with surprises, and Ethan isn’t sure Jonas is ready to accept the reality of his life—which includes motorcycle clubs, breaking the law, and living payday to payday. Jonas might shock him, though.

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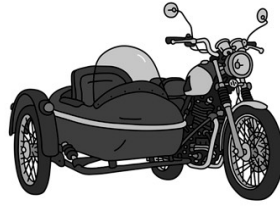
The New Gothenburg World

The Vanheim World

AUTHORS' NOTE

This book has a theme of overcoming prejudice and contains depictions of homophobia and discrimination, including scenes in a conversion camp. The authors do not condone homophobic behavior or discrimination of any kind.

ETHAN “SHEP” SHEPHERD



THE LONGER I STARED AT THE HOUSE ACROSS THE WATER, THE more I began to dream of another life—one where I had a chance with the man who lived there.

The idea was stupid, but here I was, sitting on the broken stone fence that separated my home from Cider Mill Creek—which then divided us from *the other side*—thinking about what could’ve been.

I took a drag off my joint, inhaling the smoke until my lungs burned. Every morning I waited to see him. Hoped for it.

Why was my obsession stupid? Because of where I lived—we lived.

There were five vital rules to living in the Lakeview Trailer Park, a not so nice sprawl of trailers northeast of New Gothenburg. We were at the ass end of the suburbs, almost in the country. I grew up learning the rules of survival the hard way, and they were ones I wouldn’t ever forget.

Rule one: Don’t shit where you eat.

It was simple. If you had plans to sell drugs or rob someone, you didn’t do it in the trailer park. Nearly everyone living in this dump had a side hustle, and we all did it outside of the gates.

We were surrounded by loaded motherfuckers, who’d tried for years to get the park bulldozed to build condos, but the owner refused to sell the lakeside location for the mere satisfaction of seeing their disgusted, rich faces. He hated lots

of things, but nothing more than people who had more money than him. Having rich assholes as neighbors meant we could sell our shit to them as they whined about how bored they were. They snorted blow while screaming about the druggy scum in the trailer park. A simple promise of a good time, and they bought a handful of uppers for double the price anyone reasonable would pay.

I took another deep drag and watched as two women meandered on the other side of the river, probably off to church or some shit, and when they glanced at me, I flipped them the middle finger. I imagined them letting out a gasp because they walked faster.

Rule two: Don't bring the cops to the park.

Whether you were fucking them or you were doing something illegal, if you brought cops in our gates, you would find yourself out on your ass. It was a no-brainer. A lot of people living in the trailers didn't sit on the right side of the law, and we didn't want the police sniffing around.

I watched the smoke that I'd exhaled through my nose billow in the air. Now that I was nineteen I seriously didn't need to get into trouble with the cops. I wouldn't be going to juvie. No, it would be actual prison for me with the guys my brother had been locked up with.

Rule three: Don't be a rat.

If you were a rat, you would end up poisoned or caught in a trap. Trust me, no one wanted that.

Rule four: Keep drama to yourself.

If you had a problem with another tenant, no one gave a shit. If you started issues which resulted in rule two being broken, then you wouldn't be living here long. One time a guy, who called himself Skulls, slept with another man's wife. The men started a brawl in the park. The cops came within ten minutes. We suspected the rich assholes kept an eye out, hoping for a reason to force the park to close. After the morons were released from custody, they came home to find their

belongings thrown out on the patchy brown lawn in front of their trailers. They were no longer welcome.

I stared at *the* house again as the door opened, but it wasn't the guy I'd been waiting for. His mother walked outside to sweep the one step that led up into their home, and after a moment of using the broom to get rid of the red leaves, she went back inside again. I grunted and took another long drag, letting the smoke burn my lungs.

The last rule was the most important of all. The rule that defined everything.

Rule five: No gay shit.

Ever since I was a kid, my brother warned me to bury my true self. The man who owned this place was an asshole who hated anyone different from him. My brother was the only one who knew who I was and taught me to hide it from the world. Gay men didn't survive in this trailer park, he'd said—I believed him. Leo had always taken care of me. Our father died in a work accident when we were kids, and Mom skipped town a few years later. No one cared that Leo was a fifteen-year-old taking care of his eight-year-old brother, as long as he paid the rent.

And he did.

My brother was my hero.

Now, I lived by his example. Leo might be gone, but I wouldn't forget what he'd taught me.

“Yo, Shep! Look at that rich fuck.” Murph took a drag from his joint, rocking on the fence where he sat beside me while pointing across the river.

Murph was one of the few “friends” I had in this place, but I couldn't say I liked him. Or that we were actually friends. He was scraggly, with a gaunt face, sunken eyes, and unwashed thin blond hair that fell around the base of his neck. But it wasn't his looks that were the issue, rather his fucked-up attitude and superiority complex. Anyone would think he lived in a palace rather than a junkyard version of a trailer park.

The guy he jabbed his finger at lived on the other side of the river and happened to be the same man I'd waited to see, and I hadn't even noticed him exit the house. Every morning he walked out of his quaint family home, with its white picket fence and the mailbox out front where Snoopy lay on top, and then he headed for high school.

I knew more than I should about him.

His name was Jonas Nomikos, and he was eighteen years old, one year younger than me. He was in his senior year at Cider Mill High School. His parents were conservative Methodists, who protested at the township meetings about our trailer park's existence near their *safe* neighborhood. In other words, I was sure he hated anyone from our part of the woods.

Every time Murph saw him, though, he made sure Jonas was aware we were here.

“Cockbag!” Murph called out louder, and even though Jonas glanced at us across the river, he kept walking. He made a point of pulling out a pair of earbuds from his pocket, then slipped them into his ears. With a hefty amount of indifference, he adjusted his backpack on his shoulders. “Motherfucker.”

Murph slid off the fence and pressed his fist into his palm, cracking his knuckles.

“Man, come on.” I rolled my eyes and nudged him from where I sat on the fence. “He’s a Goody Two-shoes. Let it go. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Dutch will be here soon, and we’re heading out.”

Murph bared his teeth, and I grimaced because it wasn't a great sight. “I’m not gonna be disrespected by that little fucker, Shep. Move.” He shoved me as he stormed past and headed along the river, his baggy cargo pants swinging with him as he nearly ran.

I cursed and took off after him. The last thing I wanted was for him to break one of the rules and get us both kicked out. If anyone saw us together and Murph caused shit, then told Owen, the man who owned the trailer park—I would be done

for. The rules might not be written down anywhere, but they were fucking real. This was the only place I'd known as home, and I had nowhere else to go.

“Murph! Fuck, stop.” I lunged and grabbed his arm, but he shook me off. The second time I tried to snag him, he swung at me, and I dodged a right hook to the cheek. I glared but threw my hands up in frustration. If he wanted to be homeless, that was his choice. I wasn't getting involved.

My gaze shot to the man on the other side of the river and his obliviousness to Murph stalking him like prey. My heart gave a sharp tug. He was hot, with short dark hair and enough muscles to put the few gym bunnies who lived around here to shame. Hell, I might even want to fuck him, but I didn't try. We came from two different worlds, and I didn't plant my dick in anyone who lived anywhere near the trailers. If I wanted to get laid, I went into New Gothenburg with a hookup, where I could be anonymous.

No names.

No way of contact.

No seconds.

This guy had no idea what was coming at him. I wasn't wrong when I'd told Murph he was a goody-goody. I'd snooped over the years. He got straight As in school, never got into trouble—as far as I could tell—and he taught kids how to play soccer after school. The guy couldn't be more of an angel if he tried.

Murph and I were his polar opposite. We sold drugs, took stolen cars for joyrides, and gave other people shit. We lived to cause chaos—Murph more than me. He saw something *nice* and he liked to wreck it, and right now that shiny thing was Jonas.

I glanced toward the trailer park, then back at Murph. “Motherfucking crusty old ball sack,” I muttered.

If this came back on me, I would be out on my ass, too, and I wasn't going to let that happen. I had nowhere else to go and no family to save me.

By the time I reached him, Murph had jumped on the big rocks to cross the river and was in Jonas's face, shoving him hard enough that Jonas stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his own feet. Dirt and mud flecked Jonas's perfect white shoes and jeans as he stepped in sludge from the rain we'd gotten last night. The earbuds hung around his neck; he must've slid them out when Murph attacked.

"What are you doing?" Jonas asked, too quietly. If he wanted to stand up to Murph, he needed to sound stronger and more forceful, like someone who could take care of himself. It didn't matter if he had muscles if his attitude didn't match.

"You're a pussy," Murph said with a sneer, stepping in closer for another shove. This time Jonas landed on his ass, hands slapping beside his thighs in more mud. "You think you're better than us, do ya?"

"Enough, Murphy!" I strode over to him and pushed him aside, but he reared back with another punch aimed at me. I didn't move as quickly as last time, and his knuckles met my cheek. The hit hurt like a motherfucker, but even though I stumbled backward, I managed to stay on my feet.

Agony thrummed in my cheek, a throbbing pain that extended out from my face and down my neck. I'd been in fights numerous times, so it was a feeling I could handle.

"Fuck, man!" I glared at him.

Murph's mouth curled in a snarl and he raised his fist, warning me not to come closer. "Get lost if you aren't going to help. This fucker thinks he's better than us."

"Dude, he was heading to school. He's fucking hooked on Jesus. Leave him alone. I don't want to end up on the streets because you're looking for a fight." I pointed at Murph with a glare. "That's exactly what'll happen if you keep this shit up."

Murph grunted and swiped at his mangy hair, brushing it off his forehead as he glanced at Jonas again. I could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears as his brow furrowed and he made the attempt to use his brain. The guy wasn't hard to figure out. He did too many drugs and liked to make himself

feel tough. He would never single out someone who could kick his ass in a fair fight because he was too much of a coward.

The only reason he'd punched me was because of rule number four. We couldn't create drama between each other, even if we wanted to. Fucking prick.

He went to step toward Jonas again, who stayed sitting on his ass while staring up at Murph with wide frightened eyes, but I got in between them.

"Enough, you fuckhead." I crossed my arms and kept my glare level with Murph's face, jaw tight. "If you want to fight someone, fight me."

Murph grunted, spit flying from his mouth. "You gay or somethin'? Why are you protecting your boyfriend?" He snickered.

"You talk so much about it, I'm beginning to wonder about you." I raised my eyebrows at him and smirked. "Got something to tell me, Murph? June was Pride Month, but I'll listen now."

"Fuck you."

"Not unless you got a pussy." I slid in closer to him until our faces were inches apart. His breath smelled rotten, but that wasn't anything new with Murph. "Don't you like pussy?"

He shoved me and spat a glob of grossness beside my scuffed black boots that I'd stolen last year at the outdoor mall. I hadn't gathered the courage to lift another pair yet.

"I like women, so fuck you." He shifted back and rolled his shoulders, narrowing his eyes at Jonas, who'd finally picked himself up off the ground. Murph snorted and held up his hands. "Whatever. I'm out."

Murph spun on his heel, and I watched him until he was clear of the river before finally turning to look at the man behind me. I'd never been this close to Jonas, and he was even sexier than I'd realized. His sun-kissed skin glittered under the morning light, and he had the plumpest lips I'd ever seen on a man. His nose was large on his face but perfectly

proportionate to the rest of his features. It was his warm brown eyes that had my gut feeling funny.

“Thank you,” he whispered, startling me out of my trance.

I cleared my throat and nodded sharply, but I shrugged at the same time, making the situation more awkward. My cheek stung where Murph had gotten me, but it wasn't too bad. I would probably end up with a bruise. “Yeah, no problem. Can't get kicked out of the trailer park, you know? And if he starts a fight with you while I'm here, the owner will knock me out on my ass along with him.”

“I'm Jonas.” He stuck out a dirty hand, then stared down at it, snapping it away again to rub it on his muddy jeans. He groaned.

“Sorry about him. He gets like that sometimes.” I ran a hand through my hair and laughed. “Chronic dickhead, you know?”

Jonas blinked at me, and I felt the clash of personalities. It was almost as if he didn't understand, and his confused stare had me shifting uncomfortably. This guy grew up on the opposite side of the river—the *good* side. He had no idea what I was talking about.

“I don't think he'll give you any trouble, but how about I walk you to school? That's where you're going, right?” I reached down to grab his backpack, which had fallen off when he'd landed in the mud, and threw it over my shoulder, not worried about the dirt. I didn't give him a chance to respond before I began to walk south. The high school wasn't far from here, but no one from the trailer park really went there. Most of us dropped out as soon as we were able to at sixteen.

“What's your name?” Jonas power walked to catch up to me and bumped his shoulder against mine. The personal contact was weird, and I wasn't sure if he'd done it on purpose or not, but I didn't mind. He smelled nice, even though his bottom half and hands were covered in mud. His cologne had a woody scent that reminded me of a park near the lake that Leo used to take me to as a kid. It took a few buses to get

there, but Leo had made it a habit every Saturday until I was twelve and joined him in his business.

I ignored Jonas's question and focused on the street ahead of us. The picture-perfect houses were spaced farther apart with large lawns as the neighborhood transitioned into storefronts—square glass windows covered by white curtains that looked like they belonged in a movie.

He kept talking, but I wasn't really listening. We got some strange glances, especially from people who sat in the fancy café that served up ten-dollar coffees parked in the middle of the private community. I didn't miss the suspicious stares. My spine stiffened. The unwanted attention was another reminder that Jonas and I came from two different worlds. He didn't seem to notice.

Jonas talked—a lot.

“And then, Louis Strawbridge built the church to show he meant business. That was the old one, not the one we have now. He wanted to prove his brother wrong and created the private community of Cider Mill to do that. He was cool, I guess.”

I hadn't even realized he was telling me about the history of the neighborhood until he was halfway through the conversation. It didn't matter anyway because I couldn't keep up with him.

“Do you go to school here?” he asked a few seconds after finishing his speech about Cider Mill. It wasn't exactly a suburb, since it was too far out from New Gothenburg to qualify, but I guess people had still been born here and done shit with their lives.

“I did for a little while.” I gave him a half smile, nothing too inviting. As much as I wanted to get to know him better, maybe find out if he was gay, that wasn't a possibility. He lived too close to the park, and I couldn't risk any of the guys finding out the truth about me. “I left school when I was sixteen.”

“That’s young.” Jonas stopped near a water fountain and I did, too. I passed him his backpack, and he smiled as he took it from me. He opened the zipper to pull out a water bottle and took the time to wash down his jeans. He refilled the bottle at the fountain and did the same thing all over again until his clothes were wet but mostly free of mud. Then, he meticulously washed off his backpack. I stayed quiet as I watched him work, not quite sure what to say. He clearly didn’t expect me to talk, though, because he did most of it for us.

“My parents run the church over on Hinkler Street. It’s the white building with lots of windows. You should come check it out one day.”

I frowned at him as he spoke. “Do you always bullshit this much?”

He paused as he got the final splatter of mud and glanced up at me. His cheeks flushed and he laughed, running a hand over his short dark hair. “I’m nervous.” He grinned at me and shoved his water bottle back into his bag before zipping it up. “You make me nervous.”

“Do I scare you?” The thought made my stomach clench. I lived off making people fear me so I could get the money they owed Dutch, but something about Jonas made me want to be gentle. Kind. Wasn’t that some fucked-up shit?

“No.” His eyes lit up as he gestured for me to start walking. He bumped my shoulder with his again, flashing me brilliant white teeth. “You’re cool. I’ve seen you hanging around the river, even thought about going over there to say hey. Mom would’ve had a heart attack if I did.”

That didn’t surprise me. His mother had come over to the park more than once, demanding we turn the music down or not start fires outside or some other complaint she managed to think up. There was no doubt in my mind she hated our guts.

“Cool.” Anxiety settled in my chest as we passed a newsstand outside a small convenience store, and I pointed at a gossip magazine. The cover fluttered with the slight breeze, but on the front was a redheaded man smiling beside a

younger man with curly dark hair and gray eyes. The headline —“Alton and Noah Bouchard Donate Millions to Local Art School”—made me roll my eyes. “Look at this shit. A New Gothenburg billionaire marries another rich boy, and then they spread their money all over the place, and it’s all over the news. As if it matters, right?”

Jonas blinked curiously at me before his gaze slid to the magazine I was pointing at. He cocked his head and stopped to stare at it longer than he needed to, but I didn’t mind watching him. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was about him. It was as though he had to appreciate everything he stared at, like he got joy from taking a moment to value the sights. Strange, that was the only word for him. Well, maybe sexy was in the dictionary for him, too.

“It’s romantic.” He smiled at me with a twinkle in his eye, his mouth curling in a delicious way that had my insides turning warm and my cock twitching. “I would love to get married and do good things one day.”

“To a woman?” I asked before I could stop myself. No, absolutely not. I couldn’t do this. Fuck this line of questioning.

He cocked his head toward me and the smile he gave me made my skin tingle in excitement. “I guess.” His face turned serious quickly. “My parents don’t believe in homosexuality. It’s a sin.”

I swallowed around the want lodged in my throat. I might’ve watched Jonas for years, wondering about him, but he was off-limits. It didn’t matter that this was the first time I’d talked to him or that I’d never been so close to him. I worked in a harsh environment, and I lived in an even worse one. *Rule number five*. I couldn’t break it.

We started walking again, and we were close to the school when a haunting chime sounded from my pocket. I sighed, dragging my phone out and staring down at Dutch’s name. The guy hated late assholes who weren’t where they were supposed to be, and that was exactly what I was right now. Murph and I should’ve been at the trailer park waiting for him, and I’d completely forgotten about it.

“What?” I asked as a way of answering, turning my back slightly to Jonas and hoping he didn’t hear Dutch’s mean voice.

“Where the fuck are you, man? I told you eight at the park. What the fucking fuck?” Dutch huffed, his deep baritone grating on my nerves as always. He had a slight English accent, but it wasn’t real. He liked to think he had English swag. It was weird.

“I’ll be there soon,” I answered quietly.

“Nah, fuck that. The Kings want us to deliver the product to the customers on time. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to get on their bad side.” Dutch sighed, and I did, too, when I heard Murph bitching in the background, shouting the word “pussy” again, as though it made him feel better. *Asshole.*

“I said I’ll be there soon, all right?” I glanced at Jonas, but he was staring in the opposite direction like he was trying hard not to listen, and I appreciated it. In the park there weren’t many secrets. Everyone wanted in on everyone else’s business.

“You have fifteen minutes or we leave without you. If you don’t go, no cut for you.” The line went dead.

I stuffed the phone back into my pocket and stopped, making Jonas do the same thing. Regret twisted my stomach and I gave him another half smile. “I gotta go. Work.”

He nodded. His grin was much wider and nicer than mine, and he lit up the entire street with it. Everything about him shouted danger, and I knew I couldn’t see him again. He would get me into trouble. I could practically hear Leo’s voice telling me to abort this stupid dream. Guys like me didn’t get to be gay and live in happy relationships. I was the type who either lived alone or had to pretend to be straight, marry a woman, have a couple of kids, and continue living in a dump.

“You didn’t tell me your name.” He bit his bottom lip and stepped in closer.

“You said your mom would have a heart attack if she saw you talking to me?” My voice took on a breathless tone and I

was *almost* embarrassed by it. But fuck it, he was the only one who got to hear me this way. How long had I crushed on this guy? Years. Now I'd finally gotten to talk to him, and I was a fucking sponge cake with him. All soft and gooey. Leo would be ashamed of me because this wasn't the type of guy I was.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her. How old are you, anyway?"

I snorted. "I'm nineteen."

His eyes widened. "You're only a year older than me. How did I not know you in school?"

I shrugged and glanced at a small insurance agency to our right. A lady in a nice black dress stopped to stare at us suspiciously, and she was already on her phone, whispering profusely into the call she was on. The last thing I wanted was to get Jonas yelled at by his mother, and talking to me in public would do exactly that.

"I'm a troublemaker." I nodded at the woman, and he followed my line of sight.

"That's Mrs. Mulberry. Mom's church friend." He frowned at her, then raised his hand to wave.

She returned the gesture, but the way her hand jerked back and forth made it clear she was nervous as she rushed into the insurance agency.

Jonas focused on me, those brown eyes pleading. I wasn't sure how to explain the exact color of his irises, but they made me want to stare.

"Tell me your name?" He tilted his head.

The word grew heavy on my tongue.

Rule number five—he would make me break it if I wasn't careful. All I needed to do was give him a chance, and I would be in serious trouble. Everyone would know. I could walk away now and never see him again.

"Ethan," I answered, with a full smile this time. Stepping back to start moving away, I winked at him. "My name is Ethan."

I turned and didn't look back. I began to run as fast as I could, and while I told myself it was because I needed to get to the park to see Dutch, I knew the real reason. The farther I got away from Jonas, the better.

JONAS NOMIKOS



FIGHTING DOWN A SMILE, I HITCHED MY BACKPACK HIGHER ON my shoulders. I usually liked school, but I was glad it was over. I'd felt distracted all day. The church wasn't too far from Cider Mill High, certainly not far enough that my father would come to pick me up, and besides, it was a nice day out. I studied the blue sky while the late afternoon sun warmed my face, and for the thousandth time Ethan swirled through my mind. The light cut between the orange and gold leaves of the trees along the street and made me stare upward longer. My toes wriggled in my shoes.

Ethan was so interesting, completely different from all the people I knew. His blond hair was too long—or at least, much longer than my parents would like to see on me. He had this look in his rich brown eyes, as if he knew things I didn't. He just felt. . . bigger than me. He ate up the air and knew exactly what he wanted out of life. I never knew what to do, but he'd jumped right in while that guy who'd attacked me was losing his mind.

He'd even taken a punch for me.

Who did that? No one I knew. That was hero stuff.

Sighing, I ran a hand over my face. I should've probably told someone about what had happened this morning, but I hadn't. Today was off in more ways than one. My friend Chet, who shared all my classes, hadn't come to school, either. His absence worried me. Uneasy, I glanced up to pay attention to where I was walking. We talked every day even though we'd

decided. . . we weren't going to be together. For Chet not to come to school today was beyond weird. He'd made it to class when he'd had the flu last year because his parents were like mine—there was no such thing as a day off. Everyone worked, every day, no matter what, and that went double for school. Of course, he'd gotten the entire class sick, and everyone had been mad at him.

Shaking my head, I picked up my pace. I was supposed to help Mom clean at the church this afternoon because the last person they'd hired from the trailer park to do it had walked off with some candleholders, and while they hadn't been expensive, there were no second chances at the church. I frowned at the memory. Dad had called the cops on the poor woman. I shrugged it off.

The church came into view, and I had a moment where quiet pleasure rushed through me. It was a familiar building I'd been coming to my entire life. The walls were tall and made of white stone, and at the very top was a white wooden bell tower covered by a steepled roof. The golden bell inside gleamed. When I was younger, my life goal had been to get big enough to pull the bell rope on Sundays. Now being the bell ringer was my job and some of the shine had worn off, but I still smiled upward as I climbed the wide stone stairs to the double red front doors. The door on the left was always unlocked, so I tugged on it—and nearly ripped my arm off.

My fingers stung from pulling the immobile handle. I tried again. Had something happened? I stared at the door, then jogged around the side of the building. No, my parents' cars were there. . . along with Chet's dad's truck.

My stomach sank and my hands shook as I wiped them on my jeans. Why was Chet here? I crept around the church toward the front door before deciding to go around through the back. I got out the brass key I'd been given two years ago. The rear entrance was a much smaller door, not meant for the crowd at the front, and I unlocked it and snuck inside.

I came face-to-face with Dad, who yanked me farther into the hallway and around a corner, quick as a copperhead striking.

“What’s going on?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” He glared at me. We looked nothing alike, something I’d wondered about more than once. He shook his head at me. His receding blond hair was ruffled, as if he’d been running his hands through it. He’d rolled his black shirt sleeves to the elbows, something he usually did while he was pacing and thinking.

Glancing up, I froze, and Dad dragged me a few more steps into a room. It was a Sunday school classroom for teenagers, and I led the class sometimes. There were charts of family trees from the Bible on the walls, and on one side of the room was a bookshelf full of Bibles, in case someone unfortunate enough not to own their own copy ever came in.

They’d rarely been used.

At the front was a projector screen for when Dad thought we should watch important documentaries. I knew every inch of this room, and even seeing Chet in it was fine. It was his parents, looking ready to murder, who were out of place. Mom had tears streaming down her face. She was dressed to clean in jeans and a T-shirt with her bleached blonde hair up in a ponytail. She even had yellow cleaning gloves sitting on the chair beside her, so whatever was going on had interrupted the plan for the day.

“Chet?”

He shook his head. He was taller than me and wider, and he was doing a bad job of hiding with his shoulders slumped and his head down.

Chet’s father glared at me, standing. “We have to talk to you boys,” he said sternly.

The rest of the parents in the room nodded.

Chet slunk down in his chair.

My heart rate picked up. This wasn’t happening. “About what?” I asked softly, but I knew already. I willed Chet to look at me, but he didn’t.

“About what you boys have been doing!” Mom yelled, verging on hysterical.

I stared at her. “We haven’t done anything,” I said, feeling like I was about to faint. And it was true. We hadn’t. We’d held hands once after Sunday school. We’d talked a lot. Ultimately, we’d decided not to do anything at all because of. . . well, this. We still had to live with our parents. We still had to get through college. We didn’t like each other enough to try to be anything other than what our parents expected right now. He wasn’t my type.

We hadn’t said the word *gay*.

We hadn’t dared breathe it.

Even though we’d held hands and sat too close while we talked about the ways we were different from the other people in the church, the word had never escaped into the air between us. It had all been talking around that word. To say it out loud was to risk this very thing happening right now.

I shuddered and forced a smile.

“You haven’t done anything?” Chet’s mother came toward me, and I half expected Dad to get between us, but he only shook his head and flashed a disappointed look that made me feel ten years old. “Chet said he talked to you about being. . . .” She looked physically pained. “Chet said that he’s homosexual and you told him you are, too. And you didn’t tell anyone else he was having these awful thoughts!” She hissed out an annoyed sound, and I backed up a step.

“Gay people don’t exist. They’re people looking for attention.” I parroted what Mom had said a thousand times, and when I glanced her way, her shoulders had settled and she wasn’t looking quite so livid anymore. “I told him he could talk to me about anything, and he talked to me about feeling like he didn’t belong in the church. He never said the word *gay*.”

None of that was a lie, and I wished he would look at me, but he didn’t. How had this happened? Had he come out to his parents? I cleared my throat.

“Sit,” Dad thundered and escorted me to a chair. When I didn’t put my butt in the seat fast enough, he shoved me down. “You’re going to hear this, too. We’re having a talk when we’re done. After the Richmonds called us, we tore apart your room.” The gleam in Dad’s eyes meant a nuclear explosion was on the horizon.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

They’d done that once when I was thirteen and someone had told them I was smoking. I hadn’t been, but they’d ripped every piece of my room to shreds looking for cigarettes. I’d learned then not to keep anything in my room, but when I’d turned eighteen, I’d stupidly thought they might treat me more like an adult. I’d had one manga in there, shoved between the end of my bed and the wall so I could pull it out at night. There was no playing it off. With a name like *Dick Fight Island*, everyone would know what it was about without even opening the pages. My face heated and there was no stopping it.

Dad railed and ranted for hours about the sanctity of marriage—between a man and a woman. Our duties to our parents. Not once during the entire diatribe did Chet glance up. He barely breathed. I worried about him and wanted to reach over and shake him, ask if he was okay, but it was clear that wouldn’t be allowed. I didn’t listen to anything Dad said because I knew all the Bible verses he was quoting, and I’d read all the varying opinions on them. A lot of people didn’t think they were talking about two men being in love. The translations were up for debate. It wasn’t as if I could argue, even though I didn’t agree with him. My legs were starting to go numb from sitting up straight in the chair for so long when I abruptly stood, and everyone in the room—except Chet—looked at me.

“Restroom.” I shrugged. “Be right back.”

Dad sighed and nodded, and the Richmonds stared at Chet.

I felt awful as I left. Why? Because I’d just lied. I had no intention of going back in that room. The lies I’d told in there weighed on me. I wished I didn’t have to sneak around the

truth. It would be a fantasy world if they could accept me for who I am without trying to change me, but no matter what anyone said, the church was all about making people into something they weren't. I hated that aspect of it.

I did go to the restroom, but when I finished, I snuck out through the empty, dark sanctuary and unlocked the front doors to leave that way. Then I started walking. I didn't run. I stretched my legs as far as they would go.

Okay, I was running, but I didn't want to be.

My eyes burned and I held in tears. I hadn't even cried when that strange man attacked me this morning. Embarrassment swamped me. I didn't like Chet well enough to do anything with him, it was mostly a deep friendship, but a part of me wished we had seen each other naked and touched and gotten off together. Then at least the horrible lecture would've been worth it.

And my room was ripped apart.

Dad would say things when we were alone that were so much worse than what he had while the Richmonds were in the room. I jogged faster. Sweat dripped down my temples. I took deep breaths. When I glanced up it was a shock that dusk was settling in. The sky was a rich deep purple and blue. Slowly, I shook my head. How long had I sat there and been preached at?

Maybe I should've simply confessed. I should've looked Dad in the eyes and said, "*I'm gay! Now what?*" After all, even strangers seemed to know I was different. The man this morning had been screaming nasty things at me. I sighed and slowed. Where was I going so fast? Nowhere, that's where. Would my parents let me back in the house? They'd definitely found that manga, and I was already toast.

Sighing, I stopped altogether. "Darn it."

There was a small laugh nearby, and I startled. I was standing near the metal gates that went across the trailer park entrance. I'd never seen them closed. The *L* had fallen off the sign arched above the drive a long time ago, so it just read

akeview Trailer Park, and the letters that were left were rusty. A little girl in big red rain boots and a long T-shirt stood nearby, and there were no adults around. She was probably about four and her face was dirty. On a leash behind her was a dog that was six times her size, a white pit bull with its tongue hanging out and lolling to the side.

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You wanna walkies my dog with me?”

I strode over and glanced through the gates, but no one seemed to be looking for a little girl. I crouched down. She was cute, with a button nose and big brown eyes. “You should walk your doggie in the park.”

She scowled. “The neighbors don’t like my dog. Bernadette is nice.”

The animal in question came over and leaned against my side until I petted her. “That’s an interesting name for a dog.”

“It’s my grandma’s name. Mommy gave it to her because she said they were both bitches.”

Biting my lip, I almost laughed. I had no idea what to make of that. “Why don’t you let me take you home? I don’t think you should go on a walk by yourself. It’s getting dark.”

“It’s okay. I’m not scared.”

Sighing, I stood and held out my hand. She pouted but dutifully dropped her hand into mine, and we walked back into the park. “The road can be dangerous.”

“That’s what Bernadette is for!”

Shaking my head, I stared at the rows of trailers. In the deepening gloom they all looked the same. “Which one is yours?”

She pointed ahead, and we wandered down the broken pavement of the main lane through the trailers. “Here!” She gestured at a trailer on our right that had a small pink bike leaning against the side.

Uncertain of what I should do, I went up and knocked on the door. There was the sound of some heavy footsteps inside, and then the door swung open. I blinked up into the eyes of a big man with a beard and a cowboy hat perched on his head. His expression went from curious to outraged as he banged the door open and it slapped against the side of the rusty, gray trailer. I jumped back.

“What are you doing with my sister?” he yelled.

The little girl let go of my hand and skipped up to the big man, throwing her arms around his legs.

“He said I couldn’t take Bernadette for a walk.”

The man’s face twisted into fury.

“Wait!” I said, holding up my hands. “I found her out on the main road. I brought her home.”

He shoved me, and I gasped as I landed on my ass for the second time today. The impact jolted me and pain rocketed up my spine. The big man came stomping toward me, and a car slowed on the paved road, stopping to watch me get pummeled, no doubt.

“Moose! What are you doing?” Ethan’s familiar voice rang out loud and clear as he hopped from the car. He got between me and the big man I couldn’t help but stare at.

“This fucker had Virginia!” He took another step toward me.

“I told you a week ago she’s been wandering off. You gotta watch her when your mom’s at work, buddy. Did he bring her home?”

The big guy scrunched up his face and shrugged. “Yeah.”

Ethan put his hands on the big man and pushed, but that didn’t move him at all. “Get moving. He’s from the fancy houses over there. You can’t beat him black and blue.”

The little girl took the big man’s hand, and they walked off together with the dog into the trailer. I stared after them, confused.

“Are you okay?” The hand Ethan held out for me was filthy. I had no idea where he’d been or what he’d been up to, but I wanted to touch him. I clasped my fingers around his palm, and he took a stronger hold of me before hauling me to my feet.

“Hey, Shep, we’re out of here!” The guy from earlier today stuck his head out of the car window, then quickly pulled it back in and flipped me off. I was so shocked I didn’t say anything as he laughed, and whoever was driving the car pulled away.

For a long minute Ethan stared at the ground between us, and an eternity passed. All at once, he snapped his head up and gave me a long look, the same one he’d used on me this morning. God bless it, but he looked good. His blond hair was brushed back from his angular face, and his straight nose came to a point I wanted to touch for some bizarre reason. His pink lips parted as he sucked in a breath between his teeth and glanced down my body. As he checked me out, his dark eyebrows danced upward. I rubbed my face and hated that I felt happy near him. I’d just endured a sermon from hell about the way I happened to be born—and I couldn’t do anything about it.

“Did Moose rock you? He’s got power.” Ethan crossed his arms.

What does that mean? “Uh, no. I had a fight with my parents. I’m still thinking about it. Sorry.”

Ethan snorted. “What could someone like you have to fight about? Come on.” He grabbed my elbow, then turned, heading straight along the cement path. I admitted a certain curiosity as I followed him. My mother would’ve had a huge fit if I’d ever come over here to the trailer park. There were a lot of sad trailers on our right stacked so close together there wasn’t even space between them for a lawn. Cars were parked in front of the trailers at the sides of small dirt roads that ran between the ends of the tiny lots.

On our left things were a little nicer; although, the trailers were still really close together. There was a tiny patch of lawn

at the ends of the rows and driveways separated the trailers so that at least people couldn't see from one into the other. I followed him all the way to a gate at the end of the pavement. The big house behind the fence was larger than the one I lived in and almost obscene given the rest of the park. We took a right along a narrow dirt path, and Cider Mill Creek, which I could see from the window of my bedroom, came into view.

“So, what was it?” he asked, startling me. I glanced up at him. “Were you drinking?”

“No.”

We came to a stone fence, and he easily hopped on top of it. I studied it for a second, then gripped the top and pulled myself up to sit beside him. He grinned. Fishing in his pocket, he hummed, then dragged a small tin out. I frowned at him when he opened it. Inside were wrapped white cigarettes that smelled odd. I figured it was probably marijuana, but I'd never seen it in person.

“Smoke?”

“No thanks,” I said, but I watched as he took the cigarette out, put it between his lips, and then put the tin away. He grabbed a lighter out of his pocket and lit up. After the end was cherry red and smoke billowed around him, he offered the cigarette to me. I shook my head, and he nodded, as if maybe he'd forgotten, and let the pungent smoke roll out between his lips.

“Seriously, though. What could your parents yell at you about?” He coughed and wheezed, but given the amount of smoke that had come out of his mouth with the words, it was no wonder. The smile he flashed at me did happy things to my insides, and I felt slightly less awful. “You're perfect.”

Embarrassment swamped me. “Not in one way.”

“What? You skim money out of the offering plate?” He chuckled and puffed on the cigarette again. Had I told him about the church? I couldn't remember.

“No, that would be stealing.”

He snorted and grinned. “Like I said, perfect. If it was me, I woulda pocketed money by now. It’s just sitting there. And people were dumb enough to hand it over.”

The words should disgust me, but I was too mesmerized by the way his mouth moved and how graceful he seemed when he lifted the cigarette again to smoke. He waggled his eyebrows at me. Hell, Ethan probably would’ve told everyone to go to hell today.

“Tell me what you did so I can laugh at how your parents are being jerks.” He offered the cigarette again, then sighed and took it back. “Sorry.”

“I like guys,” I blurted. It felt good but scary to say that out loud, especially since his friend already hated gay people—or at least, he’d hinted that he did. Maybe Ethan did, too. Maybe next time he wouldn’t stop that guy from hitting me.

Ethan glanced around, lips pursed. “Why would you say that?”

Rubbing my hands on my jeans, I sighed. That was about the reaction I would’ve expected from someone who went to church with us. “That’s what happened. It’s fine if you don’t understand. I’ve never told anyone. Not really.”

He turned and stared behind us at the trailers for a few seconds, then leaned over. “Why are you telling me? Keep your voice down.”

Shrugging, I held on to the edge of the fence. “It’s what happened. My parents lost it. I didn’t even tell them that, someone else did. They didn’t ask if it was true. They didn’t let me talk at all. I can’t imagine what they’ll do.”

His cigarette was almost gone now, and he hissed when he puffed on it and burned his fingers, then set it on the fence on his other side.

“How do they know?” he asked, then coughed and turned back to look at me, searching my face as if the answer was important.

“A guy I . . . I don’t know. We were never dating, but he knew about me. I think he told his parents that he’s gay, and

probably told them I was, too. You know.” I shrugged.

“Will you get into trouble?”

I nodded.

“A lot of trouble?”

I shrugged.

His jaw ticked and he cleared his throat. “Well, the answer is clear.” He winked at me.

“It is?” I rubbed my face. Maybe he knew how to deal with situations like this. “What’s the answer?”

“Lie,” he said with a laugh.

“What?” I gasped out.

He nudged his shoulder against mine, and my stomach went warm. “Lie. Tell them anything in order to make them believe you.”

“Just. . . lie?” I stared at him and couldn’t believe it could be that simple. “You think that would work?”

“Why not? And why don’t you point me at the fucker who ratted you out.” The grin he gave me this time was all teeth and nearly feral. “I’ll get him to take it back.”

“It might not work,” I mumbled. “I had something in my room.”

He straightened and stared at me out of the corner of his eye. “Why? What did you have in your room?” He rubbed a hand across his abs. “Was it bad?” He sounded as if *bad* was a *good* thing. I was so lost.

“A book,” I whispered.

“That’s all? Tell them it wasn’t yours.” He huffed. “I was thinking it would be something really hard to talk your way around, like a dildo.”

My entire body spasmed and heat rushed to my face. “Where would I get something like that? It was in my room.”

He hung his head and swatted my leg with the back of his hand. “How have you lived this long? It’s called lying for a

reason. You make shit up.” He snickered and hopped off the fence, and I jumped down beside him.

“My parents might send me away.” I sucked in a deep breath. Fear had been tickling the back of my mind. I’d heard things. There’d been rumors. Last year, one of the boys in the choir had left on a really long vacation, and his family had eventually left our church.

He turned and looked me dead in the eye. “Go home and lie.”

“I can’t.” Moaning, I ran my hands through my hair. “Besides, how will you make Chet take it back? What will you do to him?”

He shrugged. “What I gotta.” The way he moved was graceful as he spun around and play jabbed at me. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Why would you help me?”

He stared up at the sky, then at me. “You didn’t call the cops on Murph today. You coulda. He’s a fuckhead, but he’s from the park. This is me showing my appreciation.”

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I shook my head. “I don’t want to have to lie.”

“One bad turn deserves another. Throw Chet under the bus.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” I whispered.

He grabbed my shoulder and turned me, dragging me back toward the fence. When we were there, he pointed at a trailer. “That one on the end is mine. Come over if it gets bad.”

He stared at me, and I gazed right back while I felt like I was caught in a tornado. “Just lie?”

“Easiest thing in the world.” He patted the top of my head, and I snorted out a laugh.

“Maybe for you. Okay. Chet lives on the same street I do. Number 222. His room is on the first floor in the back.”

“How do you know that?” he asked sharply.

“We’ve known each other since we were babies.”

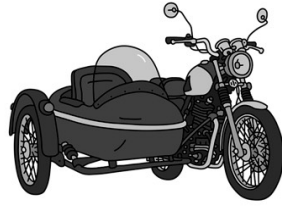
He waved his hand toward the river, and I went to the big rocks, carefully making my way to the other side. I took a deep breath as I avoided the boggy spots and walked toward my house with my heart beating seven thousand miles a minute. My parents’ vehicles were already there, so they’d probably come straight home as soon as they’d realized I wasn’t at the church.

“Just lie.” I shivered at the warm gust of air that breezed into my ear along with the words, and Ethan strolled past me. I slowed down so I could watch him walk, but he cut left through the lawns toward the trees at the back, and with the sky darkening, I lost sight of him.

Taking a deep breath, I headed toward my house.

Just lie. How hard could it be? I’ve been doing it all along anyway.

ETHAN



CHET'S HOUSE WAS NEARLY IDENTICAL TO JONAS'S, WITH THE same wide driveway, white siding, and bay windows. The place reminded me of the houses in a TV show I sometimes saw when I finally managed to get time to sit down on my ratty couch. I never watched for long because the family element seemed unbelievable, and I was quick to change the channel to a game show or something with explosions—anything to get away from the dream family I'd wanted as a kid. Until I was eight, I'd closed my eyes at night and pretended I lived in a home exactly like this, with parents who cared and an older brother who didn't have to do illegal shit to make ends meet. When I reached about nine, though, I'd realized it wasn't ever going to happen, and I'd settled into the same life as Leo.

I was doomed to that hellhole.

Movement behind the curtain covering one of the front windows had me sidling up to a particularly high hedge. I hid as the front porch light switched on and a middle-aged woman and man swept out of the door, dressed up in fancy clothes that suggested they were going out to a yuppie place. There was no guy around Jonas's age with them, which probably meant he was staying home. After making a declaration of being gay, I wasn't exactly surprised.

I smirked as they left in a BMW and headed down the street, the taillights of the car barely visible in the twilight.

Once I was sure they were gone, I slid around the side of the house and toward the back, exactly where Jonas had told me I would find Chet's room. There were only two floors, and Jonas had said Chet was on the first one, which meant no climbing. I supposed that was a relief, even if I was disappointed. Climbing meant I could appear scarier to the well-off religious jackhole, but I would take what I could get. Threatening people—especially those who had a better life than me—was fun.

The room he'd pointed out had curtains drawn across the windows, but they flapped in the slight wind that snuck its way through. I snorted at how stupid he was as I stalked my way over and crouched, listening for sounds. The only thing I heard were grunts and small moans, and it wasn't hard to guess that they were coming from one person. The rat was rubbing one out.

Chuckling quietly, I jumped to my feet, knocked in the screen, and threw the window open. I hoisted myself into his room in one smooth motion. The curtains fluttered around me as I landed on my feet inside, and the man on the bed with his cock in his hand froze, eyes wide with shock plastered on his ugly face.

Chet's cheeks flushed a ruddy red and he released his cock quickly, as though I wouldn't be able to tell he was jerking his meat, and it slapped against his belly. "Who. . . Who are you?"

With a smirk, I stalked across the room in three large steps, then jumped on the bed beside him. *What an idiot.* I wrapped my fingers around his throat and pressed them into his airway, effectively making him gasp and grapple at my wrists, trying to dislodge my grip. Even though he had wide shoulders, he was weak compared to me and didn't have a chance of winning. As tempting as it was to kill him for being a coward, I didn't think Jonas would appreciate it. I released my hold enough for him to breathe, and he desperately gulped air.

He shuddered, and something touched my thigh. When I looked, I grunted out a noise of disbelief. His cock was harder

than ever, tapping me like he wanted me to choke him again. “You’re fucked up, you know that, *Chet?*”

He shivered and blinked at me with watery eyes. I didn’t know if the waterworks were from fear or because he’d been choked. “What do you want?”

“Take a guess.” I rammed my fist into his naked gut, and a scream of agony slipped from his mouth.

He cringed away from me and tried to escape off the bed, but I still had a firm grip on his neck, and there was no way he was going anywhere. “I don’t even know who you are.”

I shook my head and faked disappointment. “Come on, I’ve seen you walking to school. You can’t tell me you haven’t seen me and my friend Murph sitting on the fence at the trailer park?”

His eyes widened and he tried to back away, again going nowhere because of my hold on him. I tightened my grip, and his cock jerked, nudging my thigh again. I grunted out in disgust. Now, if it’d been Jonas’s package, I might’ve been interested, but this guy was a fucking weasel.

“If you don’t control your dick, I’ll fucking chop it off,” I snarled.

Chet squeaked. Not even those words made his stiffy go down, though. He might’ve even grown harder. This was not going how I’d planned.

“Did you fucking tell your parents Jonas is gay?”

His fingers clawed at the bed at his sides as he stared at me. He made a fearful whine as he struggled against me again. I decked him across the face with the fist that wasn’t holding him around the neck, and his head jerked to the side.

“When I ask a fucking question, I want an answer.” I seized his face and turned it back toward me. “Did you tell your parents Jonas is gay?”

He whimpered and nodded, tears dripping down his flushed cheeks. His bottom lip wobbled and he let out a short cry. “I’m sorry. I was scared.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re a fucking coward, you know that?”

“You don’t know my parents.” He stilled and lay limp under my rough hold.

“And you don’t know what *I’m* capable of doing to you.” I punched him in the gut again, and he yelled, trying to curl in on himself, but I wouldn’t let him. He didn’t deserve to escape my wrath. “It’s one thing to out yourself, but it ain’t fucking cool to out your friend.”

He blinked at me. “Why do you care about Jonas?” Then, his eyes went wide again. “Are you. . . ?”

My fist connected with his jaw and spit went flying, along with blood and a tooth. He cried out, and I didn’t fucking care. I’d done enough damage. I shoved myself from the bed and stood beside it as he grasped his cheek, crying. His nakedness did nothing for me, but that wasn’t exactly surprising. I fucking hated cowards, and they weren’t attractive. Jonas, on the other hand, I would fuck into oblivion.

Chet’s shoulders shook and he cried harder.

“This is what you’re going to do, Chet.” I smirked and made a point of glancing at his cock. It was dismal, to say the least—not as long or thick as mine—but that wasn’t to say it was small, exactly, just not interesting. “You’re going to tell your parents you were lying. Tell them that Jonas *isn’t* gay, and you said it because you were afraid of coming out by yourself. Make them believe it.”

“Wha—”

I slapped him this time and another cry left his lips. I didn’t care. I wasn’t a nice person, and I wasn’t going to pretend I was. Fuck that. This fucker got to live in a nice house, and I lived in a trash can I called my trailer. When the river flooded, so did my home. He didn’t get to act like a victim.

I leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Tell your parents you lied about Jonas. If I hear from him that you didn’t by tomorrow, I’ll come back and finish the job. Trust me, I’m not one of

your religious neighbors.” My gaze slid down to his cock, still hard and standing at attention. I snorted. “You’re not so wholesome, either, are you, Chet?”

Rolling my eyes, I straightened and backed out of his room as slowly as I could, taking the door this time. I walked down a fancy hall with the walls draped in family photos that reminded me of those template pictures already placed in frames at the store. Everything about this place was *too* nice, with clean lines and floral patterns that made me want to puke. It definitely had a *Modern Family* vibe, and I didn’t like it at all, especially after how Chet’s parents apparently treated their son after finding out he was gay. They were all family oriented until their child came out of the closet. Sounded right to me and didn’t surprise me one bit. Fuck these assholes. After Chet cleared Jonas, I was coming back here with Murph and messing this place up, rules be damned.

Something sparkly caught my eye on a small, narrow table beside the front door. I smirked at the sight of a gold watch. I grabbed the jewelry, slipping it into my pocket before I left. Even if they realized the timepiece was missing, they wouldn’t know I’d been here, and I bet I could sell it for a good chunk of change. Hell, even a couple of tens was more than I had to start with.

I moved swiftly across the street and toward the river, taking the rocks over to the trailer park side. Once I was home, I glanced over at Jonas’s house, staring at the lone light on the second floor that I knew was his room. I’d seen him standing in the window many times, and I’d stared at him for too long, but this evening, his curtains were closed and I couldn’t see a thing.

I smiled anyway and walked toward my trailer, which sat on the edge of our row, close to the river. When I reached home, I paused. Tavish Greer sat in one of the flimsy green lawn chairs we often used to drink beer in front of his home. He lived in the trailer next to me, and I liked him. He was much older than me, with blond-gray hair and a square jaw, and he and Leo had been friends before Leo went to prison.

After Leo was sent up, Tav had watched over me, a lot like my big brother should've been.

“What are you doing?” I asked, grinning as I walked over to him to take the second lawn chair beside him.

He had a beer in each hand and passed me one, and I nodded in thanks. “I could be askin’ you the same thing. Saw you over on the other side of the wee river. What were you doin’?”

I shrugged and flicked the can open before taking a sip. Wincing, I glared at the beer. Fucking shit, but he already knew what I thought about the stuff he drank. He was born in Scotland and raised in America. His dad had gotten him into the Scottish beer, and I couldn't say I was a fan of it.

“You stalkin’ that lad now?” he asked with a hint of teasing.

I snorted.

Tav was the only one, other than my brother, who knew I was gay. He'd “sensed it” when I was younger—probably caught me staring too long at the wrong type of ass—and confided in me that he was gay, too. He'd had a partner once, when he was around my age, who he'd loved. The fucker broke his heart, of course. I didn't know the details, and Tav never offered them. He wore a bracelet made of shells, and Leo had told me Tav got it from the guy who'd destroyed him. It was Leo's way of convincing me that relationships weren't worth it, and it was better to fuck my way through life in secrecy.

“I'm not stalking him. That's not my thing.”

Tav raised his eyebrows at me in disbelief and took a sip of his beer. Leaning back farther in his seat, he kicked a leg over his knee and sighed. “If you're fuckin’ him, you need to be careful, Shep.”

His accent wasn't thick, but the twang of his Scottish brogue filtered in sometimes, and he used words we didn't say here, but he'd learned it from his parents—or so he'd told me when I'd asked as a kid.

“I’m not fucking him. Not yet, anyway.” I stared down at the red aluminum can and ran my finger over the large red *B* on the Bonnybridge Ale. “Planning on it.”

He laughed. “He finally notice you, did he?”

“Yeah. Murph lost it and was going to beat him up. I stepped in.”

Tav nearly spat out the sip of beer he’d just taken. “Fuck off. Murph did? Shite.” He shook his head and stared up at the dark, cloudy sky. It looked like it was trying to rain, and I could smell it in the air. We would have a storm tonight, I was sure of it. “He’s pushing the rules, isn’t he? Why’s he suddenly got a wish to be homeless?”

I shrugged. Hell if I knew why Murph did anything. His twin brother, Lawson, was different in every way. People knew Law by his first name, and he was quieter and stealthier. Murph, who preferred to go by their last name, was a bully. He didn’t know when to stop being loud, and he always thought he was the strongest in the room.

“Law will knock some sense into him when he finds out,” I said.

Tav nodded in agreement. “The last thing they need is their ma being on the streets in her condition.”

I winced. Their mom had dementia, and without money to put her in a nursing home, they had to take care of her on their own. She was a good lady, probably the nicest woman in the park as far as I was concerned. After my mom left, Mrs. Murphy cooked me and Leo dinner when she could spare the food and left it at the front of our trailer.

“So, are you goin’ to tell me what’s happenin’ with your Bible boy? You know they’ve all got religion over there.” He wagged his eyebrows at me, and I rolled my eyes, making him chuckle.

“Fuck off, man.”

His laughter grew louder, and shouting from somewhere deeper in the park almost rivaled the sound. We paused, listening as a woman screamed at a man for humping her

sister. These kinds of arguments weren't unusual around here, even if no drama was in the rules. Some people got off a little easier, especially if they lived in the *fancier* part with bigger trailers.

"His friend told Jonas's parents that Jonas was gay, and it caused some problems." I ran my finger through the condensation on the can and sighed. "So, I went and had a talk with the friend. I reminded him how fucked up it was to out someone else."

Tav took a long sip of his beer. "How messed up does he look right now?"

I snorted. "Not too bad. A few punches to the gut. One to the face. I think he lost a tooth."

"Nice. You pulled your punches."

"Only because I didn't think Jonas would want me to hurt him any more than I already did." I chugged the rest of my Bonnybridge until there was nothing left and crunched the can between my fingers. I stood and kicked the empty, and it went flying, hitting the metal trash can a few feet away from us. The can didn't make it inside, but there were already others in the grass. We usually picked them up later.

He nodded and stood, stretching tall, before drinking the last bit of his beer. "Get some rest. I heard Murph bitching about Dutch this afternoon. I told you to stay away from him."

I smirked. "Cash is cash, man."

He rolled his eyes. "Just be careful. If Dutch is doing a deal with the Kings and fucks up, they'll come for him and anyone working for him. He ain't the brightest."

"I'm not stupid. I won't piss off the Kings. They're better to work with than the Demons. Those guys are a bunch of asswipes."

Tav shook his head as if he didn't believe me, then walked over to the trash can to dump his beer. I knew when the conversation was over, so I saluted him in a casual manner and opened the door to my trailer. Unlike the squalor outside, the inside was perfectly clean, with few possessions to make a

mess. Leo had always taught me to be ready to run at any given time, and while I'd never had the need, I was always prepared.

To the left was my bed, a queen stuffed into the very end that took up nearly the entire width, and as soon as I stepped through the door, I was in my small kitchen that had a few appliances and a two-seater table. Then to the right was a small couch with a TV, and farther on, a door that led to the toilet and shower. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was mine.

I walked to the couch and fell onto it, sighing. Staring at the black screen of the TV, I thought about Jonas. His sweet smile, the wide muscles he kept hidden beneath those clothes, and the way he blushed. Everything about him was delectable, and I wanted him. I was surprised Murph hadn't worked it out already. I'd stared at Jonas enough.

I grinned. I couldn't wait to see him again tomorrow.

The next day, I met Jonas on his side of the river and farther down the street from his house. I sat alone in a bus shelter across from an empty field. The moment he saw me, his eyes lit up. His backpack was slung over his shoulder, and his dark hair danced in the wind. Today he wore a pair of black jeans with a dark blue T-shirt that clung to all his muscles.

Before he could say a word, I grinned. "Do you play football?"

He paused in surprise and mulled over my words before shrugging. "Not really. I used to when I was younger, but I didn't like it much."

"Then what's with the body?" I gestured toward his front, and he glanced down at himself, tugging at the shirt shyly. His cheeks turned bright red and he laughed.

"I go to the gym at school. It gives me a reason to stay longer on days I don't teach the kids how to play soccer."

I raised my eyebrows. "So, you *do* teach kids."

He frowned and nodded. “I teach the girls and boys from the city who stay in a shelter. Those kids don’t get the luxury of just enjoying themselves. I give them that.”

I held up my hands at his defensive tone. I didn’t think he had the ability to be an asshole, and I had to admire his stance. There was a fire inside him that had been so well contained I hadn’t noticed, and maybe it deserved the chance to breathe. Obviously, Jonas had been trampled on his entire life. Well, fuck that. He deserved to stand up for himself.

“I paid your friend a visit.” I rose and went to stand next to him, and we began to walk slowly in the direction of the high school.

He tilted his chin up to the sky and closed his eyes, and I took a moment to appreciate the sun on his face, lighting up his strong features. This close to him, I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the dimple in his chin or stop staring at how pouty his lips were. I wanted to drag him somewhere secluded, shove him to his knees, and feed him my cock. He would look so pretty with his mouth open wide as he took me inside.

I shuddered and earned a confused glance from him.

“You didn’t hurt Chet, did you?” he asked gently.

I ran a hand through my hair and chuckled. “Nah, he’s good. Maybe now he’ll think twice before outing another person.”

Jonas smiled. “His parents already called mine. Mom and Dad apologized to me this morning. Not sure if they really believe Chet was lying.”

I stuffed my hands into my pants pockets and kicked a rock, watching it tumble across the ground. “All you need to do right now is survive, man. Wait until you’re legal and get out of that religious hellhole.”

“Actually, I’m eighteen now. I just need to graduate high school. I’m counting down the days.” He sighed and gripped his backpack strap tighter. I saw the strain in his fingers. “I imagine it every morning when I wake up.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know what else to say. Our worlds were light-years apart, and even though a simple river divided our homes, it felt like we were from two different planets. He was too sweet for me, but I couldn’t stay away. I wanted to know more. “It’s Saturday tomorrow. Got any plans?”

He blinked at me. “Not really. My family goes to church on Sunday for a few hours, but I usually do my homework on Saturdays.”

I snorted out a laugh. “That’s fucking boring.” I kicked another stone and this one went farther than the other. “We should catch a bus into the city. I’m sure there’ll be shit to do there.”

He stopped abruptly, and it took a second for me to realize before I did, too. I turned toward him and took in the wide brown eyes and slightly open mouth, lips so pretty and dark red. “Are you. . . ?” He glanced around quickly and stepped in closer. “Are you asking me on a date?”

My first reaction was to laugh it off, tell him I wasn’t gay, but I didn’t want to. Even though we were so different, we were also alike. We were both hiding ourselves because of *where* we lived, and a small part of me wanted to spend time with him without the bullshit. I barely knew the guy, at least in personality, and I wanted to hang.

Instead of outright saying “*fuck yeah*” like I considered, though, I shrugged. My hands were still in my pockets, and I kept them there so I didn’t reach out to clasp his face and land a big kiss on that pouty mouth. “I mean, I guess. Or it could be two guys hanging out. Whatever’s your thing.”

Fucking classy.

I nearly rolled my eyes at my awkwardness. When I had to pretend to be straight, girls loved me. They fell all over me. I didn’t know why I was acting different around Jonas.

Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because he’s got a fucking dick?

I held back a snort. “So. . . do you wanna?”

“Um, I’ll have to come up with a good lie for my parents.” He shifted between his feet nervously but smiled, too. His eyes

seemed more vibrant today or maybe it was just because the sun was sparkling in them. “I could tell them I’m doing charity work for a shelter program. It could give me a good excuse for hanging out more than once with you.”

I nearly choked on my own spit. Heat spread through me, a blazing wildfire. I was no virgin, but fuck, I felt like one. Well, technically I was a date virgin. I’d never had a reason to actually go out with someone. I never wanted to—until now.

I cleared my throat and smirked. “Yeah. That’s good. Yeah, real cool.” *What the fuck? Cool? Really?*

He laughed, and I scratched the back of my neck in embarrassment. This wasn’t me. I was laid-back and knew the exact right shit to say. Except now, apparently.

“Do you know of any places in the city?” he asked, starting to walk again.

I joined him at his side and stared ahead. The closer we got to the high school, the more people would see us, and I didn’t want him to get into trouble, especially if I wanted him to come into the city with me. “Nah, but I got a friend I can ask. He’ll know.”

“Great.” He touched the back of my wrist, and I stiffened, but I was relieved when he didn’t try to hold my hand like I’d worried he would. It was almost as if he wanted to, though. “I can’t wait. We could meet at the bus stop?”

I nodded and stopped near Jolie’s, the small convenience store. “Sounds good. Let’s say at nine. Will you be all right to walk the rest of the way?”

The smile he gave me infested my stomach with butterflies.

How fucking stupid am I?

“Yeah, I can do that time, and I’m fine. Thanks,” he said.

I nodded awkwardly and gave him a small grin before I spun on my heel and stumbled back the way I’d come. If anyone from the park saw this, I would never hear the end of it. Even if they didn’t know I was gay, just being around Jonas

would be reason enough to give me shit. Knowing this, I still didn't care as I glanced over my shoulder to check on him, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw he was still watching me walk away.

He waved, and I sent him one back before I focused on the ground in front of me. It took all my effort not to run home.

Tomorrow, I reminded myself. I might even be able to get a kiss from him in the city. The thought had me grinning.

Fuck yeah.

JONAS



MOM STARED AT ME AS SHE PATTED THE BLONDE BUN THAT SAT on top of her head. The heavy odor of grease from the bacon she'd cooked for breakfast lingered in the air, and my stomach growled even though I had only eaten a half hour ago. I could barely stand to watch Mom pick at her hair. She'd left a few strands out and curled them at the sides of her face, and I could smell the reek of the hairspray she'd used to shellac them into shape from the other side of the kitchen next to the table.

“You look nice, Mom,” I said, glancing down at the gray knee-length dress she wore with a black belt cinching it in at her waist. She took a pair of white gloves out of her pocket and tugged them on. “Very classy.”

“Your father says I look like a young Tammy Faye.” She grinned at me and held up her hands. “I got these for the entire choir. Do you like them?”

“Uh, that's nice.” I wasn't certain Dad had meant his snide remark as a compliment because Mom's makeup was heavy handed, and he regularly railed against that sort of thing at church, but she seemed pleased. I didn't want her irritated with me, so I kept my mouth shut. Life was easier when I said nothing at all.

“I have to get going because I'm leading the ladies' choir.” She smoothed her dress down and sighed. “You're still volunteering today with those unfortunate children in the

city?” There was the tiniest bit of condemnation in the way she said the word *city* that had me on high alert.

Don't fidget. She will know you did something wrong.
“Yes, Mom. It looks good on my college applications.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” She shook her head and her curls bounced against her cheeks. “You’re already a shoo-in at Southern Methodist University. It’s where I met your father, and it will be perfect for you.” She smiled, and I felt guilty because there wasn’t a chance in hell I was applying to a Christian college willingly, let alone go to one in Texas where I wouldn’t know a single person.

“Isn’t everyone armed there?”

She crossed her arms and her mouth twisted into a frown. “Don’t get smart with me. But on to more important things, young man. You still haven’t contacted anyone above you in the program about that trash magazine you confiscated from one of the children. It’s vile. Honey, I know you want to be Christlike and kind to everyone, but you haven’t seen much of the world. Some children can’t be saved, and you must make room for the ones who can be turned toward God. Whoever bought that magazine for a child should be held accountable, tossed into jail, and the child obviously needs more help than you can give them.” She shook her head, and my face boiled with shame at the lies I’d told and her judgment.

I wanted to scream “*It was me! It was mine! I like sweaty men touching!*” just so she would stop acting all smug, but I’d worked so hard to get her to believe my lie that I couldn’t ruin it now.

“Well—”

“And after that other sordid business with Chet, you’d think you would’ve learned your lesson about being kind to *those* sorts of people. He attempted to drag you down with him and haul your good name through the mud. Daddy will be having more words with his parents today.”

I felt bad for Chet based on the fact that he might have to sit through another lecture from Dad alone. My feelings

must've shown on my face because Mom made an empathetic noise and hustled across the room to hug me. Her arms felt alien around me because we hadn't touched much in the last few years. Her perfume was the type of thing that tickled my nose and made me want to sneeze—overly sweet.

“We raised you too right.” She leaned back and smiled, the bridge of her nose wrinkling a little. “It's our fault for not arming you better against those horrible people.”

I knew what she wanted right now, and after everything, it made me low-key furious. I forced a smile. “You and Dad are perfect parents. Just the other day, I heard Mrs. Hannon tell her daughter Kyla that she wanted her to be more like me.”

Mom laughed and kissed my cheek. Embarrassment and a bit of self-loathing seethed in my gut. Making Mom happy always let me breathe easier, but it came with a price.

Mom hummed a song I didn't recognize as she went through the kitchen door into the hallway to stand in front of the mirror near the front door and poke at her hair again. “Those city kids. There's a reason we moved away from New Gothenburg when I was pregnant.” She shook her head and grabbed her purse from the half-moon table under the mirror. “Are you certain you don't want me to drive you?”

“No, if you do and you're late to the church, Mrs. Oaks will start leading the practice, and you—”

“Hate that,” she finished for me with a giggle. She pointed at me. “That woman has the worst breathing habits. She murders every song she sings.”

Smiling, I went over to hug her again, and it was a fragile, distant embrace—unlike what had happened in the kitchen—which was our usual attempt at being close. “Exactly. I've gotta go, Mom.”

“Be safe! Call if you need me.”

I rushed out the front door and gave her one last wave as I closed it behind me. I patted down my jeans for my phone and wallet as I blinked against the early morning sunshine. It was one of those days that wasn't quite cool enough for a jacket, so

I had on a long-sleeved green Henley. Mom hadn't asked why I wasn't in workout gear to go to the soccer field. *Thank you, God, for letting me get away with this.* I sent up a silent prayer begging the big man upstairs to help me stay off my parents' radar for the entire day. I'd done a lot of good in my life, and I really wanted this time with Ethan not to get messed up.

It only took me about ten minutes to get to the bus stop outside of the community next to the main road, which wound its way into New Gothenburg. It was a good thing that I didn't need to wait near any of the businesses because it meant there was less of a chance someone would notice me with Ethan and tell Mom and Dad. He wasn't there when I arrived. Disappointment sank its fangs into me as I waited. *What if he doesn't show up? What if he was pulling a prank on me with that terrible friend of his?* I didn't think so, but it was possible. A cool breeze ruffled my hair, and I wrapped my arms around my middle.

Loud music thumping from the road to my left snagged my attention, and an old car passed on the way to the trailer park—or at least, I assumed that was where it was headed. I was stunned when a beer can came flying out and clattered against the back of the bus stop shelter, narrowly missing me. The guy who'd shoved me yesterday stuck his head out the window while he laughed, and then he gave me the finger. His hair whipped into his face and he swore, disappearing back into the car.

Fury pelted through me, and I picked up the beer can, hurling it after the vehicle. I was a little surprised at myself, but I was tired of people picking on me for no good reason—strangers, Mom, Dad. Why couldn't everyone just leave me alone? I never bothered other people.

“Hey. Good aim.”

The low voice in my ear startled me, and I spun around only to have to tilt my chin to meet Ethan's gaze. My stomach fluttered because I'd never been so close to his handsome face.

He grinned and his smile, just a little wicked, made me feel hot all over. Need swamped me and my cock twitched awake

in my jeans. I wanted so badly to touch the curve of his mouth. His blond hair glinted in the morning sunlight. It would be amazing to run my fingers through it. The fabric of his black T-shirt stretched tightly across his muscled chest and the brown leather jacket he wore smelled good. I glanced down his front, not bothering to hide that I was checking him out. I bit the tip of my tongue because his black jeans cupped his groin just right and made me want to run my fingers over the bulge there. When I glanced up, he was doing the same thing—staring at my body—and my face flushed.

“The. . . uh. . . bus will be here in a few minutes.” I chuckled awkwardly and stuffed my hands into my pockets. The fabric stretched tighter over my cock, and I regretted the move because all I could think about was touching him now. *Why did I say that stupid stuff about the bus?* He ran a hand through his hair and gold sparkled on his wrist. “Oh, nice watch!”

He raised his eyebrows and glanced at the timepiece. “Thanks. I’m selling it today, and then we can figure out something fun to do.”

“Really? Where will you sell it?” Confusion had me studying his face, but he only shrugged. I couldn’t read any answers in the glint of his eyes or his sexy smirk.

“This place I know.”

The big silver bus pulled to a stop and took me by surprise. I’d been so wrapped up in him I hadn’t noticed it approaching. The bus that took the route from my house to the city was cleaner, bigger, and overall newer than most of the other ones I’d been on in New Gothenburg. The door opened, and I dragged my wallet out of my back pocket to get my bus pass ready. I got on first and smiled at the driver, who wore the typical uniform of a blue button-down shirt and black pants. The fresh scent of oranges that had to be from some cleaning product blasted my nose. The driver was old, maybe in his thirties, and had frizzy brown curls. I saw him every time I rode the bus, but I didn’t know his name.

“Having a good morning?” he asked with a wide smile, but his expression soured when Ethan stepped up behind me.

“Yes, thank you.” I swiped my card and moved along to my favorite seat at the very back of the bus near the rear door. I sat down and watched as Ethan put cash in the fare box. He smiled when he started walking toward me, and my body heated all over. There was one other person on the bus, which was the norm, and sometimes I thought maybe the only reason it stopped out here was because everyone who lived in my community got mad if they didn’t have service for kids, who went into the city occasionally.

Ethan sat down next to me, close enough that our thighs brushed, and I held my breath while sparks tumbled in my stomach. I loved being this close to him. I nudged his knee with mine, and when he grinned back an electric jolt zipped through my chest.

The other man on the bus came back to the seat in front of us and plopped down. He had on a camo jacket and his dark hair was in his face. As he leaned his chin on the seat, he swiped aside his bangs and blasted me with sad blue eyes. His cheeks and chin were narrow, and his forehead was wide. The stranger was unexpectedly handsome and seemed like he’d seen too many long nights. “Do you have any cash?”

“Get away from us,” Ethan snapped.

His nasty tone shocked me, and I dragged out my wallet. “Don’t be that way. Here, all I have is a five.” I passed the money to the man.

Ethan slapped a hand to his face. “You can’t do that.”

Frowning, I nudged him with my knee as I stuffed my wallet back in my pocket. “You and my mom say the same thing.”

Ethan groaned. “It’s just going to go to booze.”

The stranger moved away from us and shot me a grateful smile over his shoulder. He plopped down in a seat at the middle of the bus with his back to us.

I let out a strangled, irritated noise that had Ethan laughing. “That’s what my dad says about poor people. It’s discrimination!”

Ethan snorted, then chuckled.

I frowned at him and crossed my arms. “I didn’t think you would be this type of person.”

He pointed at the man. “That’s Rye. Well, his real name is Keith Hackney, but I only know that because I end up with his mail about once a month. Everyone calls him Rye because his blood is half whiskey. Hey, Rye! What are you going to spend those five bucks on?”

“A fifth of Wild Turkey,” he called back, but he didn’t turn around.

“See?”

“Oh.” My cheeks heated and I cleared my throat. “Well, maybe he won’t in the end.” I shrugged. “Maybe my five dollars will buy him a sandwich, and everyone needs to eat.”

“You have good intentions all the time?” Ethan asked, raising his eyebrows. My heart jolted.

“I don’t know. I’m lying right now.” I leaned back and got comfortable in the padded seat. “I told my parents I was going to the city to help coach kids’ soccer.”

“Ah—” He waved a hand. “—that’s not too bad.”

“I don’t like it,” I murmured, but I couldn’t help smiling because he studied my face as if he thought I was someone worth looking at.

“We’ll do something you do like. How about that?”

Grinning, I nodded.

My fingers brushed his where we had our hands on the seat between us, and I almost doubled over at the thrill of casually touching him. I didn’t move my hand away and neither did he. The bus bumped along, and neither of us mentioned what was happening. He stared straight ahead, except for when he stole peeks at me. I split my attention between glancing at him and

watching trees fly past my window, then dug deep for my courage. Was I really doing this? I slid my hand over and linked my pointer and middle fingers with his pinkie.

He flashed me a warm smile.

I'm touching him! Don't be a nerd, don't ruin this.

We sort of held hands the rest of the way to New Gothenburg. I stared out the window but couldn't focus on anything except the way my heart hammered and how I felt like I might float away. It took about a half hour to wind through a few small suburbs before the tall downtown buildings came into view. Lake Ontario sparkled beside the highway, and I felt happy as I leaned my shoulder against Ethan's. He pressed back.

In no time at all Ethan was reaching up to pull the cord to get the bus to stop at a street corner, and I followed him off the bus onto the sidewalk. I hadn't noticed the bus making its way into downtown. I'd been too busy concentrating on Ethan's body heat and the hint of the soap he'd showered with this morning.

"I've never been to this part of the city." I glanced around at the older brick structures on either side of the street. We passed an apartment building with crumbling decorative masonry along the top. Most of these places were only two stories tall and none seemed to go higher than three.

"It's not as bad as it seems," he said with a defensive note in his tone.

"Uh, I believe you." My heart took off flying. I didn't want to offend him. His brow furrowed, and all I wanted to do was smooth away his sudden bad mood. "I was just making conversation."

He ran a hand over his face. "I'm used to people acting differently than you do. You know, people are sometimes assholes. Do you forgive me?"

"You didn't say you were sorry." I smiled at him.

"I'm very, very sorry." He stepped close enough that the tips of his boots bumped my shoes, and all at once, I was

aware of my cock and how my pants were too tight. I let out a long breath.

“Then you’re forgiven.”

“Good,” he murmured and clasped my wrist. He hummed and rubbed his thumb over my pulse point, and I lost the ability to think. “I’m going to go inside and sell this watch so I can get the cash to take you out.” He jerked a thumb at the shop to our left. Demon’s Den gleamed on a neon sign above the door, and a small blue glowing 24/7 lit the window.

“You don’t have to do that. I could pay, or we could just hang out if you’re not comfortable with that.”

He frowned and slid his hand up to my shoulder. I nearly died when he glided his palm to the back of my neck. Every inch of me zinged with sweet pops of electricity. “You deserve better than fucking off around New Gothenburg.”

“Do I?”

Ethan leaned closer, and I instinctively touched his chest—not certain if I wanted to hold him off or drag him closer. He smirked as he backed away. “Yes.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

He snickered while heading into the shop. I stared at the sign in the window. Guilt began to grow in my chest as I imagined him selling his watch, which was nice enough it might’ve been passed on to him from a relative, just so he could waste money on me. Shame built up in my stomach, and I paced a small circle on the sidewalk. A man jogged past in sweats and no shirt, and I wasn’t paying attention and almost bumped him. He sent me a nasty look.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, but he had earbuds in and didn’t look back after he was past me.

When Ethan came outside, I snagged his hand. “Can you go back in?”

“Why?” he asked with a frown.

“Your watch. Please don’t get rid of something nice because of me.” Nearby on our right, a tall old man dressed in

a robe came out the front door of the building and lit up a cigarette. I coughed as the smoke wafted in our direction and tickled my nose. In the distance a car alarm went off and someone started to shout. The city was finally waking up.

Ethan's eyes widened. "Oh. Oh! Don't worry about it. You're worth it."

I knew I should encourage him to go back in for his watch, but my heart melted a little, and I found myself smiling at him.

"What would you like to do? There's a bar around here that will serve us," he said.

"Uh, I don't drink." My face heated in embarrassment. Cider Mill High was full of mostly good people, but even there I was the outlier. Almost everyone my age drank when they got the chance, and I hated how people stared at me when I said I didn't enjoy the taste. Even Ethan seemed confused; although, he didn't begin to make fun of me.

"Like, you don't at all?" He scratched his temple and raised his eyebrows.

"Even if I did, it's not noon yet."

"Hmm. Yeah. Fair." He frowned and glanced around like he was lost.

"Oh!"

He focused on my face again.

I nearly melted into a puddle at the way he studied me. "We could play a game. There's a Frisbee golf course near the park where I coach soccer. Sometimes we take the kids there after practice. The competition can get fierce."

He blinked at me. "What now? Frisbee golf? What is that?" He tilted his head, and I couldn't get over how adorable he looked.

"Come on! Let me check to see if we can walk from here or should catch another bus or Uber or something." I smiled at Ethan and took my phone out of my pocket, then nearly passed out when he grinned back. My happiness overwhelmed me to the point that my head felt fuzzy.

“Spending time with you sounds good. Any way you want. I’ll learn this game. Who knows? I might even be good at it. I used to throw a Frisbee around with my older brother, Leo.”

“Yeah, I bet you’ll be great.” I flashed him a grin and began to poke at the screen of my phone. “Why have you never played before? It’s pretty popular.”

“Does it cost money?”

“Yeah, about thirty bucks a player. Ah ha!” I finally found the website and clicked the link. “Just another second.”

Ethan grabbed my elbow, letting out a growl that chilled my blood. I glanced up, but his attention was focused out in the street.

“Is there any way you can do this while we walk?”

“Uh, sure,” I said, beginning to move my feet and glancing back down at my phone. I clicked the directions. “We’re a few miles from the park, but I don’t mind walking, do you?”

“Hey! Asswipe!” a man nearby shouted. “Don’t you work for Dutch?”

I flinched, glanced up, and then recoiled.

A monster of a guy, who had to be at least six and a half feet tall, had stopped a motorcycle in the street and was pointing at Ethan, who froze at my side. There was another bike next to him, and the skinny man on it, with an equally thin mustache, revved the engine of his Harley. He didn’t look solid enough to be on a motorcycle.

“Fuck you!” Ethan bellowed.

“You’ve been working for the Kings. I want to fucking talk to you. You have some fucking nerve going into Ant’s shop, you prick.”

“Shit. Run!” Ethan jerked me forward with a hand on my arm, and I fumbled my phone to the sidewalk. The screen cracked, and I groaned. My parents would have a fit. I tried to bend to grab it, but he was already dragging me. I had no choice except to move my feet or face-plant.

“Leave it!” The panic in his tone froze my blood and sent a shudder down my spine.

“Why?” I asked. The roar of a motorcycle revving behind me sent terror sliding down my spine. “What’s going on?” I glanced back, and there was a motorcycle on the sidewalk, larger than life. “That’s illegal!”

“Run now! Talk later!” Ethan snagged my hand and put on speed, and I was in good shape, so I was able to match his quick pace. Fear ate at me, and I ran faster. Sweat stuck my jeans and shirt to my skin, and soon he was huffing and puffing to keep up with me. He dragged us down an alleyway between buildings, and the motorcycle roared past.

Halfway through the alley, we stopped and stared back while we caught our breath, but then the motorcycle—and worse, the mountain of a man who sat on it—appeared at the mouth.

“Fuck!” Ethan yelled.

The motorcycle started forward again. In front of us another bike turned into the alley, and I moaned. It was the skinny man.

“We’re going to get run over! Why are they chasing us?” I squeezed Ethan’s hand.

“Fucking fuck!” Ethan grabbed me and shoved me against the brick wall of the building on our right, then dug in his heels in front of me with his arms crossed. He was taller, but we were more or less the same size; however, he clearly thought he was going to keep anything bad from happening to me. I rested a hand between his shoulder blades and fumbled for my phone to call 911, then moaned when I remembered I’d dropped it on the sidewalk.

“Your phone. Give it to me! I’ll call the cops!”

He snorted and glanced over his shoulder, eyebrows nearly at his hairline. “No, we can’t.”

“But—”

“You fucking ran!” the big man shouted.

The men got off their bikes but left the engines purring. I sucked in a relieved breath. We hadn't been run over, thank God. Their black leather vests were dangerous looking, especially with a symbol on the front that sent dread to chill my bones. My parents always said they'd left New Gothenburg because it was full of evil, and the men had a purple demon head sewn onto the leather on the left—over their hearts. There were other patches on the vests, but I had no idea what they meant.

The huge man who had yelled shoved Ethan, and he knocked backward into me. His black beard was grimy, like he hadn't showered in a couple of days, and his chapped lips were cracked. I couldn't stop staring at a place in the corner of his mouth where he was bleeding.

“Your friend Dutch owes the Demons cold hard cash, you little maggot. I've seen you moving product in our territory. Pay up or stay the fuck out. He's in over his head right now.” The big biker bared his teeth.

“I'm just part of a delivery service, man. That's it. I don't handle anything important. I sure as shit don't make deals or know about 'em.” Ethan put a hand back and patted my side, as if trying to tell me to be calm.

My mind went on the fritz. I didn't like Ethan's overly friendly tone. I'd never heard him sound that way. It was fake.

“I don't fucking care.” The man shoved Ethan against me again, and I put my hands on his back. “There's a tax to sell around here, and you haven't paid this month. There is no free pass in this city.”

“Like I said, I'm not selling.” Ethan's tone cooled and his fists clenched at his sides.

The big man jabbed his finger against Ethan's chest. “I know you're delivering for the fucking Kings, but if they're not paying to be on our turf, someone has to do it, and we see you around. King thinks he's so goddamned smart by not having his own men make deliveries anymore. Well, I'm not stupid, and he'll pay one way or the other or stay the fuck out of my way.”

“I don’t have to do shit just because you’re a Demon,” Ethan muttered.

“Oh, yeah?”

Nausea slammed my gut. That name—the Demons—was familiar. They were one of the motorcycle gangs in New Gothenburg. I’d heard of them before because sometimes people died and they were blamed for it, but it was rare that someone went to prison. Mom and Dad would watch the news, and the names of bike gangs would always make them look at me and say, “*This is what sin does to people.*”

The Demon snagged Ethan’s leather jacket and tugged on it, maybe trying to take it, and Ethan sank a fist into the big man’s stomach. The other Demon with the mustache pushed him, and I took Ethan’s weight as he slammed into me hard. I had trouble catching my breath because he knocked the wind out of me with an elbow by accident.

“Stop!” I slid out from behind Ethan and used all my strength to send the Demon with the mustache sailing onto his ass. The other huge man, who I’d lost track of, yanked on my elbow and punched me square in the side. I couldn’t breathe as I clutched my ribs and sank to my knees. Pain sizzled to my brain and lit up my nerve endings. I yelled but it didn’t help. Ethan landed a solid punch against the big man’s jaw, then stepped forward with his fists raised, but the biker drew a gun from under his vest and shoved the muzzle in Ethan’s face.

“Don’t fucking touch him, he has nothing to do with any of this!” Ethan pointed at me and his hand trembled.

The Demon shoved Ethan out of the way and kicked my stomach. It hurt but nowhere nearly as bad as my ribs. Ethan looked ready to lose his mind with his lip curled, but he stayed still, keeping an eye on the gun.

The Demon slapped Ethan upside the head, and Ethan huffed. “Next time we’ll shoot you both and leave you out as roadkill. Consider this your friendly warning. Pass it on to your boss. Someone pays to move drugs in our territory. You. The Kings. I don’t give a shit who, but no cash, no free pass.” The Demon used one hand to rummage in Ethan’s coat

pockets while he held the business end of the gun against Ethan's chin, and Ethan's face flushed red. His limbs quivered, and the Demon smirked in his face as he stole the tin Ethan kept his marijuana cigarettes in, a wad of cash with a rubber band around it, his wallet, and his phone.

"Fuck. You," Ethan snarled at him.

The skinny Demon was on his feet again, and he jammed an elbow into Ethan's face. Ethan's head turned hard, and I was horrified as he slammed back against the brick wall and slid down. The men laughed as they split up and went toward their bikes. For a second, Ethan seemed dazed and he shook his head before he yelled wordlessly in the direction of the man who'd stolen his belongings. He focused on me and got to his knees fast, crawling over to where I was still rubbing my side.

"Jesus fucking Christ on a goddamned unicycle. Are you okay, Jonas?" He shooed away my hand and lifted my shirt to look at the red mark that would no doubt be a bruise soon.

Adrenaline pounded through my veins. I clutched his shoulders and held on tight. "I think so." I touched the horrible mark on the right side of his jaw that was already beginning to turn a furious red, and he closed his eyes tight and allowed me to explore it with my fingers. "You?"

"It's going to hurt later, but nothing feels broken," he murmured.

"Who were those men?" I winced as both motorcycles roared, far too loud in the alley. One man backed up and the other made a tight turn to go forward away from us. They were both gone in less than a minute, and my ears rang from the noise that echoed against the walls.

Ethan grimaced. "I'm sorry. I'll get you home. I must've been fucking high to think this would work."

"No, I'm fine."

He stood and dragged me to my feet. The pain in my side thudded as I straightened, and I hissed. He gave me the worst look, eyes too wide and teeth clenched. I felt horrible for him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered and caressed his injured jaw.

“You are?” He laughed, the sound too wild and slightly scary. “I know you won’t want to see me again, but I didn’t mean for this to happen.” His gaze dropped to the ground between us.

Everything had been so nice until those men showed up. For once in my life, I was out *on a date* with a man I liked, and I would be darned if this was how it ended. My heart pounded and the hair on my arms stood on end. I didn’t think. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. They were soft and warm and wonderful. I had no idea what I was doing, simply wanted my skin to touch his.

Ethan steadied me with a hand on my waist and one on my chin, and I moaned as he took over, licking into my mouth. I almost disintegrated into a cloud of sparks when his tongue brushed mine. My cockhead pulsed—the same way it did when I’d been jerking off for a few minutes—and I was so hard in my pants.

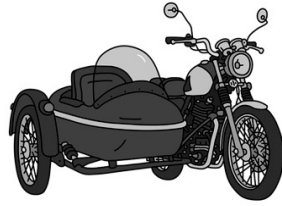
He leaned back and rested his forehead against my temple, chuckling under his breath. “You don’t hate me for this?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never felt this way, and I don’t want it to stop because some terrible men robbed you. They must have you confused with someone else.”

He sighed and puffed out his cheeks. “They’re not confused.”

My heart hammered and I couldn’t quite decide what that meant. I had no idea what sort of things Ethan did when he wasn’t with me, but then Ethan smiled, and I couldn’t think. He settled his mouth carefully over mine again, sucking a sweet kiss onto my lips.

ETHAN



JONAS MUST THINK I'M A LOSER.

I didn't want to give him a reason to believe it even more than he already did, but bullshitting him wasn't an option, either. I'd spent my life watching my parents lie to each other as they drank themselves into stupid decisions.

It was Dad who'd cracked first—literally. He'd fallen at work while drunk and hit his head, splitting his skull open and bleeding to death. Mom's version of breaking had involved packing and leaving town when Leo and I were at school. My brother had been my only role model, and he'd ended up in jail, leaving me alone. I did what I had to do in order to survive, but explaining my life to someone as *perfect* as Jonas seemed impossible.

I groaned and pressed my back against the wall of the alleyway, then slid down until I was sitting on my ass with my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands. "Fuck." I exhaled deeply and pressed my fingers into my eyes. Leave it up to me to fuck this up. "They don't have the wrong person. I'm working for the Kings. Kind of. I work through this guy called Dutch, who runs drugs for the bike club. From what I understand, there are only certain areas we can do it because they've got some deal with another club, the Demons, about where they sell. Fuck if I know. I'm not the details man." And I didn't know why I was telling him any of this. He wasn't part of this world, and even though I liked him, I also wanted to keep him away from this side of my life.

“Oh.” He curled his arms around his stomach and winced, and I saw some fear pass over his face. Pain resonated through me. I never wanted him to be afraid of me.

“I wouldn’t hurt you,” I muttered, shame flushing my cheeks. Maybe he would end up believing what his mother did and think we were all losers.

Jonas tilted his head and turned his back to slide down the wall beside me. He dragged his knees up to his chest, and to my absolute surprise, he grabbed my hand, linking our fingers together. “I know. I don’t think you would.”

“But just being around me. . . . Those guys punched and kicked you.” Anger stirred in my gut and I gritted my teeth. “I’ll get my revenge.”

“Please don’t.” He tightened his grip on my hand and gave me a sad pout. “Then they’ll come back for you. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

My heart gave a throb and I swallowed around a lump in my throat.

The sound of motorcycle engines filled the alleyway again, and I jumped to my feet. With Jonas frowning at me, I placed myself in front of him as three bikers rode into the tight space with their Harleys. They were much bigger than the Demons we’d encountered, and I couldn’t imagine the damage these guys would do, but I raised my fists, ready to defend Jonas to the death.

The tenseness in my shoulders relaxed when I caught sight of a *Kings of Men MC* patch on the arm of the lead biker’s jacket, but I didn’t lower my hands. I’d never had any interactions with the Kings, so I didn’t know how they would act.

“You gonna do something with those fists, kid?” The lead biker laughed, his voice muffled, and grabbed his helmet, dragging it up and over his head. A hard face appeared, and I’d never seen him before, though that wasn’t anything unusual. While I’d spotted the Kings around the city a few times, I’d never approached them, and there were a lot of

them. This guy looked dangerous as fuck, with a short crew cut that was gray at his temples and a thick brown beard. He also had wide shoulders that stretched the black leather of his jacket. With a smirk, he kicked down the stand of his bike and got off it. He towered over me.

“We didn’t do anything,” I snapped, retreating so I had my back pressed against Jonas, who had stood at some point. “So fuck off, old man.”

The biker laughed and so did his friends. “I saw the Demons come tearing out of here. What did they want?”

I glared. “To kick my ass.”

“Yeah?” The biker shook his head and placed the strap on his helmet around one of his handlebars. “What did you do?”

“Who the fuck are you to ask? You King?” I finally dropped my fists, but I still didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.

“Nah, the name’s Scar.” His stare narrowed on me. “Come out of the shadows, kid.”

I glanced at Jonas over my shoulder. “Stay against the wall. No matter what,” I whispered.

He nodded, though concern flickered across his face as he sucked in his bottom lip.

I stepped forward into the part of the alley that the sun was able to reach and raised my chin. I opened my arms. “I’m here. Now what, huh?”

The big man—Scar, he’d called himself—stomped in closer, and I braced, ready to take more beatings. Everyone knew not to mess with the bikers. I didn’t know which mirror I’d broken to get this kind of bad luck, but here I was, ready to get a few more punches to the gut.

“Are you Leo Shepherd’s brother?” Scar tilted his head, studying me with hard brown eyes.

I blinked, surprised. “Yeah, who the fuck were you to him?”

“He’s got a potty mouth, doesn’t he?” One of the bikers behind Scar straightened on his seat, and I couldn’t see his face behind the dark visor of his helmet, but the tone in his voice suggested he was grinning in amusement. He also had an accent, British or Australian or some shit.

“Bishop, this is Leo’s bratty kid brother. Christ, he looks just like him.” Scar shot the comment over his shoulder. He crossed his arms. “Never thought I would actually run into you. I should’ve looked for you earlier.”

“Yeah, dude, I have no idea who you are, all right?” I shrugged.

“What did the Demons want with you?” Scar tilted his head forward and raised his eyebrows.

I cursed under my breath. “Listen, I run drugs for you through Dutch, and the Demons found out we were selling in their territory—”

“*Their* territory?” His jaw hardened. “They think they own the whole fucking city. Far as I know, no one has been anywhere they shouldn’t be. They’re full of shit.”

Alarm bells sounded in my head, and I straightened my spine, gaining some height. “Well then, they must have an understanding with Dutch, okay? Because I work for him, and he works for you, and all I know is that the Demons *think* they have a deal about where we can sell and where we can’t.” I held up my palms to him. “Listen, dude, we don’t want any trouble. I just wanted to take a sexy guy out for a date, that’s all. I know you Kings are cool with gay guys, so let me take Jonas out.”

“Gay guys? Like you ain’t one?” The British man cackled and slapped his chest. The dark visor on his helmet gleamed and it freaked me out a little that I couldn’t see his face. A plain silver ring flashed on his wedding finger. “Fuck. If you’re dating a guy, what are you, mate? You gotta be some kind of gay. Bi, pan, or whatever.”

“Bishop. That’s not true. Don’t confuse the kid. People can call themselves whatever they want. It’s not your fucking

business, and Destiny would tell you the same thing.” Scar held up a hand at him and shook his head.

Bishop chuckled and shrugged.

“Just shut the fuck up for a second.” Scar turned back to me and narrowed his eyes. “Listen, I knew your brother behind bars. We were friends.”

I raised my chin. “So? Leo’s dead. He died there.”

Scar grunted. “Yeah, I know. About five months ago. I heard. Sorry for your loss, kid. I liked him.” He placed his hands on his hips and spat on the ground. “Your brother was a good guy to me. We were in the same prison for a while before they moved him downstate. He saved my life once. There was a fight with a bunch of bastards who attacked me. Leo took a guy down when he came at me with a shiv from behind. He got a few stab wounds as a result.”

I stared at him, not really sure how to comprehend the information. “You’re the reason he’s dead?”

“Nah, that was over four years ago, but I know who killed him. The murderer’s out now. They never got him on Leo’s death.” Scar moved in closer. “He’s a Demon. They both got sent downstate at the same time.”

I swallowed, anger surging like heat waves through me. The feeling of razor blades scratched my throat. “Who?”

He shook his head. “Come back to our clubhouse. Let’s have a real convo.”

“Fuck. You.” I shoved my pointer finger at him. “If you think I’m gonna go anywhere with you, then you can get fucked.” I shifted backward, and Jonas rested his hands on my shoulders, making me startle. I’d forgotten he was behind me. “Either you give me a name or fuck off.”

Jonas’s grip tightened. “Ethan, maybe we should just go.”

I shook my head, not able to bring myself to talk to him. Blood rushed in my ears, making it hard to hear anything through the fury that flooded me.

Scar stared at me carefully. “Listen to me, kid. Before Leo died, he asked me to give you a hand when I got out. He knew he fucked you over when he went to jail. Let me help you.”

I laughed, though it wasn't in amusement. “Oh yeah? When did you get out, big guy? A few weeks ago? Yesterday?” I took note of his wince, and my laughter grew louder. “Yeah, that's what I thought. If you cared so much about what he asked, you wouldn't have waited so long. Get on your bike and go back the way you came.”

The corner of Scar's mouth twitched, and he stalked forward, grabbing me by the front of the shirt. I swung a fist at him, and Jonas yelled, ducking out of the way so my elbow didn't get him. Scar caught my hand and pushed me backward against the brick wall, and I grunted from the impact as the breath left my lungs.

He jammed his arm under my chin, holding me in place by my throat.

“Get off him.” Jonas raced forward and pulled at Scar's arm, but the British guy got off his bike, kicked down the stand, and came over to haul Jonas away.

I struggled against Scar's hold and glared at Bishop. “If you hurt him, I'll rip off your balls.”

“I'd like to see you try, mate.” Bishop's laughter grated on my nerves, and I attempted to kick Scar, but he slammed me against the wall again and pain resonated in my back when it hit a particularly sharp part of a brick.

“Enough,” Scar growled out, mouth pulled tight. “Listen to me. I don't want to hurt you or your boyfriend.”

I spat at him and the glob landed on his cheek. The world seemed to stop when his other friend slid off his bike and came storming toward us. Scar held up his hand at him, and the man stopped, though I imagined him glaring at me under his helmet. Scar slowly wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and his top lip curled. My stomach churned in fear, and I thought about all the stupid things I'd done in my life, but none had been as dumb as this.

I didn't apologize because that wasn't the type of guy I was. Leo had taught me to stick to my guns. Be brave and brazen and fuck shit up was his motto.

Scar smiled, and my heart came to a dead stop; at least, that was how it felt. "You're exactly like your brother, you know that?" He laughed and the sound startled me into breathing again. "We met the same way. The little fucker spat on me, too." He slammed me back against the hard brick wall, and I gasped as the air was walloped out of my lungs by the hit. "But if you ever do that again, I'll slit your throat. It's my specialty. Got it?"

I nodded and gritted my teeth. "Yeah, whatever."

He shook his head and released me. My knees buckled, and I clutched the wall to stay upright. My gaze shot straight to Jonas to make sure he was all right, and he gave me a small wobbly smile. Bishop continued to hold his shoulders, keeping him in place.

"Come back to the clubhouse."

I shook my head. "I told you, I have a date. Those Demon fuckers stole everything of mine, including my wallet, and they've already ruined my fucking day. I'm not letting any more bikers mess with it. I promised Jonas I would take him to Frisbee golf."

"What the bloody fuck is Frisbee golf?" Bishop asked, glancing down at Jonas, who he'd finally released.

Jonas's cheeks flushed and he ducked his head. "It's golf, with Frisbees."

"Never heard of it." Bishop grunted and crossed his arms. "Wonder if Destiny would like it."

Scar snorted. "If it's a sport, Destiny won't be interested, we both know that. Unless you play it naked, then he'd watch." Scar returned his attention to me and pointed. "I'll give you five hundred bucks right now if you come back to the clubhouse with me for half an hour."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why do you even fucking care, dude?"

“Five hundred to take your boyfriend on a date.” The corner of his mouth curled into a smirk.

“Ethan, you don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Jonas mumbled loud enough for me to hear. His gaze shot around the Kings warily and he shifted his weight between his feet. “They didn’t take my wallet. I still have money.”

“Do you really want your boyfriend spending all his cash?” Scar’s smug smile pissed me off, and I glared, but he wasn’t wrong. I’d asked Jonas out on a date, and I didn’t want him to spend his money on it. I wanted to take care of him.

I held up a hand to Scar and stepped around him, sidling up near Jonas. I lowered my head. “Do you mind? Nothing will happen to you.” I kept my voice quiet. “I would fucking kill them if they tried anything. I just need to sort this shit out.”

His eyes widened. “I . . . I’ve never been to a biker clubhouse.”

Neither had I, but I didn’t tell him that.

“But sure.” He gave me a small smile. “We can go. I trust you.”

I didn’t know why. He didn’t know me well, and as far as I was concerned, if he did trust me, he did it too easily.

I squared my shoulders and gave Scar a slow once-over in warning. “Fine. I want the cash first.” I held out my hand to him, and to my absolute surprise, he reached into his jacket and tugged out a wad of money in a clip. He yanked the bills out and began counting them. There was at least five grand or more in his hand. How the fuck did he not worry about it being stolen?

After he counted five one-hundred-dollar bills, he passed the pile of money to me and smirked. “What do you say, kid? Let’s go.”

I stared at the cash clutched in my fingers, swallowing around a lump of jealousy that lodged there. Nodding, I cleared my throat and shoved the bills into the pocket of my jeans. “Yeah. Whatever.”

Scar snorted and waved his hand at his bike. “You get on with me. Your boyfriend can ride with Bishop.”

I glared at Bishop. “Don’t try any funny stuff.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “No worries, mate. I’ve got a mister at home. I’m more scared of Destiny than you. He’d smother me in my sleep if he heard I was playing around.”

I didn’t believe him, but I shrugged. I stepped in closer to Jonas, wrapping my arm around him, and he leaned against me, giving me a small smile that made my heart flutter. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?” I whispered.

His solid warmth against me was something I could get used to. “Can I be honest?” He glanced toward Scar, who stood beside his bike with his arms crossed. “It’s kind of exciting.” He chuckled. “If Mom knew what I was up to, she would have a heart attack, and I like the idea of doing something she wouldn’t approve of.”

I laughed and guided him over to Bishop’s Harley. Bishop handed his helmet to Jonas, but I snatched it out of his hands first. I didn’t like that he was a handsome fucker with sideburns that should’ve looked stupid—but managed to do the opposite. I took the time to slide the protective barrier over Jonas’s sweet head and secured the strap under his chin. The last thing I ever wanted was for him to get hurt.

“Aw, aren’t you just the cutest doves?” Bishop said with a laugh.

I flipped him the finger.

Bishop hopped onto his bike first, and Jonas held my hand as he slid his leg over the back of the bike and got onto it. He gave me a thumbs-up, and without realizing what I was doing, I leaned down to kiss his hand in a *be safe* gesture. While I couldn’t see his face, I imagined he was blushing. My stomach churned in excitement as I took off toward Scar and his Harley.

Scar smirked and held out his helmet to me, but I shook my head.

“I’m not a pussy,” I snapped.

He chuckled. “Kid, I’m gay as fuck, but even I don’t understand that saying. Pussies push out fucking babies bigger than watermelons. That’s tough as hell if you ask me. Just wear it.” He shoved the helmet against my chest, and I had no choice but to take it. I thought I heard him mutter, “Kids these days.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled the helmet over my head without strapping it under my chin. Scar slid onto the bike first, and I got on after him. Using the back of the passenger seat as a place to grip, I kept the distance between us.

If he noticed, he didn’t say anything.

I glanced back at Jonas and Bishop as the Kings started their motorcycles again, the roar of the engines echoing around the narrow alleyway. Jonas seemed to be saying something to Bishop and had his arms wrapped tightly around Bishop’s middle, and while I knew it was because he’d clearly never ridden on a bike, acid jealousy swirled in my chest. I wanted to reach over and punch Bishop for getting a hug that I craved from Jonas.

Clenching my teeth together, I gripped the handles on either side of the passenger seat tightly.

Scar hit the ignition of his black Harley and it roared to life, vibrating underneath us. He began to push us backward until he could safely turn the bike around to face the street, and then he followed the rest of the Kings. Bishop stopped so Jonas could go grab his phone off the sidewalk before they pulled out onto the road in front of us. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Jonas the entire trip, my heart thumping wildly every time he pressed his helmet to Bishop’s back.

When we stopped at a red light, he raised his hand to wave at me, and I did the same because he couldn’t see the smile I gave him.

Bishop smirked at me and sent me a wink.

I gave him the middle finger in response.

He threw his head back and laughed.

Asshole. What was it with these Kings?

By the time we arrived at the junkyard the Kings used as a clubhouse, I was vibrating in irritation. Scar drove the bike through the gates and avoided the potholes in the rutted road that wound through stacks of junk on either side. Why didn't they get rid of all the scrap metal? Off to the right, just outside the property, was an old water tower with New Gothenburg painted on the side in faded yellow. A sprawling, two-story house with navy blue siding came into view. It seemed as if additions had been tacked on whenever someone felt like it. All the windows on the first floor were blacked out, which made me a little uneasy. I shifted, antsy to slide off the back of the Harley and get to Jonas. When Scar finally pulled to a stop next to a bunch of other bikes, I ditched my helmet, then jumped off and stalked in Jonas's direction.

He popped up the visor when I got to him, and I unbuckled the strap before I helped him slide the helmet over his head. He grinned at me and ran a hand through his short hair, excitement sparkling in his eyes as I helped him off the back of Bishop's bike.

"That was so much fun." He laughed and bounced on his feet. "I want to go again."

A strange sensation stirred in my stomach, and my chest felt airy as I stared at him and the joy that rushed across his face. His happiness was an addiction, and while I'd seen him in various states of emotion in the years I'd watched him from across the river, I'd never quite seen him *like this*.

"Come on." Scar waved for us to follow him.

I slid my hand into Jonas's, which was something I usually wouldn't do in public, but these were the Kings. They were known for fucking guys, and as badass and scary as they were, at least they understood that part of me. Dutch hadn't cared what they did, despite the rules at the trailer park, as long as their money was green.

Jonas smiled sweetly at me, and together we walked toward the clubhouse. A German shepherd lay right outside the red stainless steel door, which was hanging off its hinges

and not really closed. The dog raised its head and cocked it when we walked past. Jonas stopped me so he could pet the dog, and before I could tell him that wasn't a good idea, he was already patting the animal on the head. The shepherd made a small moaning sound and leaned into Jonas's hand.

How am I jealous of a fucking dog? I wanted Jonas to touch me like that.

"You're adorable, aren't you?" Jonas murmured, and the dog whined as if agreeing.

I tugged Jonas's hand gently. "Let's go inside and get this over with so we can do that Frisbee golf."

He nodded.

Together we walked through the front door and into a dim hallway. Scar led us straight into what appeared to be a barroom. The bright overhead lights had me squinting a little. On our left was a gleaming wooden pool table with blue velvet on top that matched the color of the Kings of Men patch on Scar's jacket. Black leather couches lined the wall straight across from us and a couple of guys were sitting on them talking. A wooden bar sat on the right, and a man with pink hair was already behind it serving drinks to a few Kings seated on stools. No one here seemed to care that it was still early.

The bartender noticed us immediately and stopped pouring rum into a shot glass. He flashed me a bright smile and settled the bottle on the bar. "Who is this?"

Scar waved us forward and pointed at me. "This is Ethan Shepherd. Remember I was telling you about Leo, the guy in jail? This is his brother."

The pink-haired dude straightened. "Yeah. Welcome to the circus, Ethan."

I shrugged. "People call me Shep."

He nodded. "Shep."

Scar waved at the bartender. "This is my bro, Josh, and this sexy fucker—" He wrapped his arm around one of the men sitting on the stools. He didn't have a drink in front of him, but

he'd been bullshitting with another guy when Scar interrupted him. "—is my man, Charley. Fish, this is Leo's bro. You never met Leo, but I told you about him."

Charley spun on the stool and stared at me with a genuine smile curving his full lips. He had short dark hair and big brown eyes. "Nice to meet you." He held out his hand, and I shook it. "Colton told me about Leo when we heard about him. . . . You know. He was a good guy."

I frowned for a moment before I put together the pieces of information. Scar was Colton. Fuck, it was easy to forget that these kinds of guys had real names. They went by fake names so often that sometimes they didn't even know each other's real identity.

"Right. Your boyfriend hasn't even told me what he wants." I took my hand back and crossed my arms. "I'm only here 'cause he gave me five hundred to come. I really don't give a shit what he has to say."

"Well, don't you have a perky attitude?" Josh winked at me. "I like him. He's spunky."

Scar leaned around Charley and grabbed a shot glass in front of another King, who hadn't bothered to turn around.

The King threw his hands up when Scar tossed the shot into his mouth. "What the fuck, Scar? Asshole. That was mine."

Scar slammed the glass back on the bar and smirked. "Drink faster, Barber."

"Fuck you." Barber went to move around Charley, but Charley shoved him back against the bar and pointed a finger at him.

"Just because Quain's mad at you and you're sulking, doesn't mean you can start a fight with Scar."

Barber pouted. "I'm not sulking."

Scar grunted. "Could've fooled me." He nodded at Jonas, who stood nervously beside me, then patted the stool next to

Charley. “Come sit here for a while, kid. I want to have a talk with your boyfriend.”

Jonas glanced at me, and I tilted my head toward the stool, leading him over to it. I pushed on his shoulders, and he plopped his cute ass down.

“I’ll be right back, okay? Then we can go on our date with this loser’s money.” I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but everyone was watching me, even Barber, so I laid a quick kiss on his cheek. The hoots I got for my action made my cheeks scald, and I glared around at them as they cheered some more.

They were all dicks.

Scar chuckled and grabbed my arm, but I shrugged away from his touch. He rolled his eyes and gestured for me to follow with a tilt of his head, so I let him lead me out of the barroom and down a small hallway.

He opened a door, and we entered a room that made me pause for a moment so I could appreciate it. I’d heard a lot of rumors about biker clubs, and I knew one of the things they did was hold church, which was what they called a meeting. This was clearly where they did it because not only was the room massive, but in the center was a thick, cherrywood table with the Kings of Men logo—a skull and crown—carved in the middle, and a bunch of leather chairs were around it. A half-empty bottle of rum sat in front of the spot at one end. At the head of the table, hanging on a lime green wall, was a photo of four men, and I recognized one of them as a much younger Scar. The man on the left looked slightly older, and I’d heard enough talk around the city to figure out that he was *the King*.

Scar pulled back a chair and gestured at it. “Sit.”

I crossed my arms. “I’ll stand.”

He stared at me for a long minute before chuckling again. “Leo said you fight against authority. He said you have an attitude, but once someone’s gained your trust, you’re loyal.”

Grief hit me hard, and my breath caught, but I didn’t wince like I was tempted to. Leo’s death had caught me by surprise,

but I'd gotten nothing more than a phone call to let me know he'd died in the prison hospital from getting his neck slashed. I was his only family, and a month later, they'd sent me his belongings and told me they'd buried him in the local cemetery without a tombstone. Nothing broke me more than that day when they'd told me what they'd done. Leo had been laid to rest in a strange place with nothing to honor who he was, and I'd failed him.

I fell into the seat and rested my elbows on my knees, rubbing my face. "I don't know what you want. Leo's gone. You don't need to keep any promises. I'm nineteen."

Scar slid into the chair beside me and moved it closer. He patted me on the knee, and I glanced up at him. "Like I said, I promised Leo I would look after you. He would've hated you being part of this Dutch guy's gang. He asked me to give you a chance to be a King when you were old enough."

I frowned. "What?"

"You heard me." Scar gave me a lopsided grin. "A King. Well, a prospect. You have to work hard like everyone else. You gotta prove you have the balls."

"I don't have a bike," I murmured, not quite sure I was hearing him right.

"We can give you one of our old ones. One of the guys has a son, kinda, who fixes up bikes, so we've had him refurb a couple just to give him some work. The one I'm thinking about isn't pretty, bit scratched up, but if you do what you're supposed to, King will pay you well. After you get a few paydays, you can do her up. I'm a mechanic, so I'll fix what I can for you and give you discounts, but again, she'll need some work on her that *you* will need to pay for when you've done some jobs for us as a prospect."

I blinked at him. Fuck, I'd never thought about joining a motorcycle club.

Scar laughed. "Prospects don't get paid as much for doing jobs as a full member, and there'll be a lot of grinding and shit chores. Literally. You'll be cleaning the shit house when it's

your turn, but like I said, it'll get you cash when we go on jobs, and if you prove your worth and loyalty, you'll get more money on the bigger stuff we pull off. After you do your time as a prospect and know a thing or two, you and me will go get the fucker who killed Leo."

I swallowed, waiting for the catch, but when he didn't speak anymore, I forced out, "Okay."

"Okay?" Scar kicked one boot across the other and stretched out his legs in front of himself. He laid an arm on the table and tapped it. "What does that mean, kid? Are you in?"

My stomach clenched in anticipation. "Yeah."

"You know how to ride?" he asked.

"Yeah," I repeated, then cleared my throat. "Leo had a bike before he went away. He sold it because he needed cash for the lawyer, but he let me ride it."

"Good." Scar tapped his finger harder. "Because being a King isn't easy. You'll get shot at, and there's always someone gunning for you. One of our brothers, Will, was chased down by Demons, and he was thrown from his bike. The accident nearly killed him. I told Leo it was dangerous, but he said you've got the guts. Is that true, Shep? Do you have the guts like your brother said?"

"Fuck yeah, I do. Let me prove it." I went to stand, but he shot forward and grabbed me by the shoulder, shoving me back into the seat.

"Down, boy." He laughed loudly. "I believe you. Listen up, you go on your date. I'll even give you the bike right now. Come back here on Monday afternoon, and I'll give you a jacket and a rundown of how this will work. I'll introduce you to King, too, and he'll give you a brand-new prospect patch. He's away for the weekend with his own man. We'll start testing your guts then, got it?"

"Yeah." I smirked. "I got it, old man."

"Hey, watch yourself." Scar smirked and patted me on the shoulder. "I know the trailer park's pretty shitty, but I can't offer you a room here just yet. You gotta prove yourself first."

But you can occasionally crash here if you're needed in the city, got it?"

"Yeah." I licked my dry lips and smiled. "So, uh, can prospects crashing here have friends over, too?"

He snorted. "If you mean your boyfriend in the barroom? Sure. Just don't get too loud. Not all the brothers have holes to fuck regularly."

"Deal." The thought of *fucking* Jonas made my cock twitch.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Scar shook his head and smiled smugly. He stood, stretching upward so I had to crane my neck to look at him. "Come on, kid. Let's get this bike for you so you can go on that date and get laid."

I couldn't love an idea more than I loved this one; although, I suspected it would take more than one date to get Jonas in my bed.

JONAS



“I’M JOSH, IN CASE YOU DIDN’T CATCH MY NAME. YOU NEED to take a deep breath.” The guy across the bar slid me a can of Coke and flashed a crooked smile in my direction. I stared down at the pop and took it, then cracked the top. The first burst of bubbles on my tongue woke me up to the real world and not the hazy adrenaline-fueled panic that had been screaming in my mind so far.

“I’m fine. My name is Jonas. Like Jonas and the whale? If you’ve ever read the Bible. You probably don’t read the Bible around here, but maybe you do?” My voice wavered, and the guy sitting beside me, Scar’s boyfriend, shook his head with a tiny smile as he studied me. I slurped my Coke to stop the word vomit spewing from me.

“Have you ever been in a place like this?” Scar’s boyfriend rested his chin on his palm and stared at me with wide brown eyes.

“Uh.” I shrugged, then sipped again to make myself think before speaking. I didn’t lie as a general rule, but I wasn’t sure what he wanted to hear, either. This man didn’t seem as if he was a terrible guy, though, because my lack of answer made him smile wider, and he didn’t look like he was making fun of me. He sat up and took off his black leather jacket, then slung it over the stool on his left, and I was a little surprised that his arms below his T-shirt weren’t covered in tattoos.

“I’m Charley,” he said, then offered me his hand. “Please don’t call me Fish. Only Scar does that.” We shook, and I

slowly began to relax.

One of the other guys came over and sat on the barstool on my right. This man, on the other hand, was covered in tattoos, and he even had one on his face. “What’s a cute boy like you doin’ in a no-good place like this? If you’re looking for dick, the biggest one in the room is sitting right here.” He wagged his eyebrows.

“Barber, I’m telling Quain you were flirting,” Josh singsonged.

“Fuck you, I’m not!” Barber said, and his scowl was real as he leaned up on his elbows and pointed at Josh. “I was just messing with him. The next thing I was gonna say was that it was already taken.”

Josh shooed at him with a bar towel he swiped off his shoulder. “Uh huh. Sure. I’m telling Quain you were begging for ass and didn’t even care that it was clearly already taken when he got here. Look at this guy! He doesn’t need that.”

My face burned.

Charley nodded along.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I murmured, starting to feel embarrassed. Two more men came in, and they were big scary looking guys dressed in leather, too. They didn’t say anything to us or even seem to notice us because they were deep in a conversation, and Josh ran off to grab beers for them before they could ask for anything. He slid the men their drinks, and I let out a long breath.

Charley sighed and glanced toward the ceiling. “You know, no one here started out as a biker.” He gave me a soft smile. “Not even that big bear who dragged off your boyfriend. I don’t know why he’s here, but you can relax. No one will bite.”

Barber snorted and knocked his shoulder hard against mine. Charley steadied me on my stool and glared at him.

Barber huffed. “Don’t say that around Undertaker, or he’ll prove you wrong.”

“Oh, well. . . .” Charley shrugged. “Yeah, you’re right.”

I stared around. “Which one is he?”

“Oh, he’s not here right now. He sleeps in a coffin and can’t come out during the daytime.” Barber smirked. “He’s a vampire.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, nodding. The supernatural wasn’t real, but what did I know?

Charley shook his head at Barber and his eyes narrowed. “You really have a death wish, don’t you? He hates that shit. King told me once that he gutted someone for calling him a vampire. Turned their entrails into a necklace and wore it around.”

“What hasn’t he gutted someone for? You know, I like to keep things interesting.” Barber winked. “Let him try.”

A man with an angular face in a black suit came up at Barber’s side and leaned an elbow against the bar, staring at him. His bright blue eyes startled me into sitting up straight.

“Excuse me?” he said in a low tone.

Barber flinched and nearly fell off his stool as he whipped around to stare at the new man. “What are you doing here?”

“Aaron left some paperwork for me, and I couldn’t help but overhear what you said. For your information, I don’t sleep in a coffin. I sleep in a BDSM dungeon.” He grinned at me, and I noticed his sharp incisors. I could only assume this was Undertaker.

“A. . . . A. . . .”

“Dungeon,” he finished helpfully, then licked his lips. “And I do have a taste for blood.”

I opened my mouth, and I had no idea what I was going to say because my brain was in a whirl, but Ethan came out of the hallway he’d disappeared into earlier, and I nearly died leaping off my stool to rush across the black tiles over to him.

He opened his arms and caught me as I smashed against him, then glared at the men at the bar. “What did they do to

you?”

“Nothing,” I said, my face heating. I cleared my throat and stepped back, crossing my arms. “I’m fine.”

“They behaved themselves. Mostly,” Josh called over with a grin, and Scar came out from the hallway behind us and scared the crap out of me. I was back in Ethan’s arms again, somehow. Scar whapped Ethan on the back in a friendly pat that moved us both.

“All right, kid. Come outside with me.”

The guys at the bar all exchanged looks. “Did he just say kid and not fuckhead?” Barber asked Charley.

Charley hummed and nodded.

I couldn’t help it. I didn’t care what it looked like, I clung to Ethan’s hand, and he held on to me. Scar went over to the bar and said something to Josh, who bent down and popped back up with a key ring he tossed to Scar.

“You sure about that?” Barber asked, whirling around to look at Ethan. “You didn’t get King’s permission. We should technically vote.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Scar scowled. “And you better not start shit at the vote. This one deserves a shot.”

“What does he mean?” I whispered to Ethan.

He sighed. “I think I joined a motorcycle club today?” He gave me a smile that wasn’t like his usual confident ones.

“Come on,” Scar said, and his boots were loud as he stomped across the room. Ethan and I glanced at each other, then followed him outside. The other guys who’d been at the bar marched out after us, and Ethan wrapped his arm around my waist. Scar walked along a row of shiny motorcycles and stopped at an older looking one with faded black paint. I knew nothing about motorcycles, but the Harley logo was hard to miss. I stared at the sidecar attached to the bike.

“Fuck, I’m gonna get made fun of with this shit,” Ethan said, tapping his boot to the sidecar. Sunshine glinted on the

chrome, which was scratch free, even though the bike was clearly old.

Scar shook his head. “You live outside of town, and I don’t trust your riding enough to put this one on with you.” He jerked his thumb in my direction. “Leave the sidecar hooked up. When King gets back in town and we get this prospect shit sorted out and it’s permanent, he’ll take you out and teach you how to ride right. Then we can ditch the sidecar, and I won’t worry that you’re gonna dump your boy on the highway.”

Ethan’s chest puffed up like maybe he was offended, but Undertaker stood nearby with his hand on his hip and made a small noise. “King is the best rider in the club. I’m okay—” Scar snorted and grinned at Undertaker. “—but if King tells me something, I take it into consideration. Scar is doing you a favor.” He lowered his eyelids. I wouldn’t say he was glaring so much as tired of the situation.

“Fuck it, fine,” Ethan said. He held out his hand, and Scar slapped the key into it.

“Be back Monday.”

“A little before two o’clock. My king has shit scheduled that day.” Undertaker stared at us coldly and it gave me the creeps.

“I will,” Ethan said.

“We have spare helmets. Hold on,” Charley said, then went back inside.

Scar started telling Ethan something about the way the bike shifted. I didn’t know anything about motorcycles, so I tuned them out and went over to pet the dog while the rest of the men stood around looking at the Harley and talking to each other. When Charley came back with the helmets, I took one from him, and he smiled at me.

“Just don’t do anything weird in the sidecar,” Charley said as I slipped the half helmet on. Ethan came over and buckled the strap under my chin, even though I could’ve probably figured it out, but the way he carefully stared at me made my belly warm.

“Like what?”

Charley shrugged. “Don’t throw your weight suddenly. Just listen to your man, okay?”

I nodded.

“Fish,” Scar said with a scowl. “What are you telling him?”

Charley rolled his eyes. “How to ride in the sidecar.”

Scar grunted, and I went over and climbed into the sidecar. I was surprised, but the red leather was pretty comfortable. It had looked hard. Me drumming out a nervous rhythm on the sides of the car seemed to break the spell, and the bikers wandered back into the clubhouse.

“Do you want to go to that Frisbee golf thing?” Ethan asked with a tiny smile as he climbed onto the bike with the visor on his helmet raised.

“So, that’s it? You’re just in this club now?” I gestured at the clubhouse.

He shook his head. “They’re going to put me through hell to join. It’s kind of like I’ll be auditioning for the job. My . . . brother dying bought me that right.” He shrugged.

I felt awful. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know your brother died. What happened?”

Ethan shook his head and started the motorcycle. The engine roared and the vibrations trembled through my body. “Hey, can you pull up directions to that place?”

Nodding, I opened the map app on my phone and showed it to him through the spiderweb of cracks on the screen. He spent a minute zooming in and out on the map, then handed my phone back. With a wink, he slapped down the visor. He seemed really calm about losing all his stuff earlier. How often did things like that happen to him? I would’ve been freaking out about losing my phone, but he was just ready to keep our date moving.

As he backed up the bike, then started to drive away from the clubhouse, my stomach fluttered and warmth returned. We

were on a *date*. I'd never been on a date. I glanced at him, but he had on a full helmet and I couldn't see what he was thinking. He waved at me and tapped the top of my helmet, and I laughed. Riding in the sidecar was fun, and the happy feeling dancing around in my stomach stayed that way during the ride through the city.

It didn't take long to reach the park where the Frisbee golf games were held. Immediately I knew something was wrong because when we got to the small pavilion where the tickets were sold, the metal shutter was pulled down over the small ticket office. Ethan stopped the bike in the gravel parking lot, and we glanced at each other before we took our helmets off.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea they were closed. It didn't say they would be online." I frowned at the shutter. "There isn't even a time listed when they might be back or open." Anxiety twisted in my gut.

He shrugged and brushed my hair off my forehead, which gave me a shiver. "Do you want to ride around? It's a nice day for it, and I should probably get more practice in. We can stop for lunch in a bit."

"Sure. Why not?"

He smiled before sliding his helmet back on, and I did the same. In no time, we were off again. Excitement curled through my gut as we raced around the city on the bike. Okay, we probably weren't going that fast, but it felt amazing to be in the sidecar, and I wasn't nervous the way I'd been when I was on the bike with that stranger. I reached up and touched Ethan's knee when we were at a red light, and he grabbed my hand, giving it a squeeze.

Eventually we ended up in a small suburb outside of New Gothenburg, and I had to laugh as we passed a banner over the street we were on—Pioneer Pumpkin Festival. He found a spot to park his motorcycle, dismounted, and then held my hand while I climbed out of the sidecar. I helped him take his helmet off, and then he got mine. We tossed the safety gear onto my seat.

“This is so weird,” I said with a laugh as a woman in an old-timey brown dress that wafted across the sidewalk headed toward us. She dragged a wooden wagon of pumpkins behind her and waved at us. I twiddled my fingers back while Ethan sort of frowned at her.

“So, uh. . . would you like to look around?” he asked, glaring at the groups of people moving between craft stands and food trucks. There were families and other couples clearly out looking for something to see and do.

“Why not?” I sniffed the air and my stomach growled. “I mean, at least we can eat some fair food, right?”

He grinned and nodded. As we stepped up onto the sidewalk, my shoe caught on the curb—probably because I was so busy staring at him—and he grabbed my hand as I stumbled. I licked my lips. We weren’t anywhere near Cider Mill. We were on the other side of New Gothenburg, not that someone from home might not be around. *Screw it, I’ll take the risk.* I tangled our fingers together.

He sucked in a deep breath and stared down at our joined hands, then nodded once as if we’d had a whole huge discussion. We strolled along the sidewalk, the same as everyone else.

“Let’s have a plan of attack,” I said.

He glanced at me. “Yeah? I’ve never really been to anything like this,” he said with a small frown. “Does it need a plan?”

I stared at him for a few seconds and squeezed his hand. “Uh, well, usually it’s good to see all the food trucks before picking,” I said with a nod. “And sometimes there are random snacks scattered around the craft tables.”

He hummed and tugged me closer so a woman carrying pumpkins could squeeze past us with twin boys trailing behind her. They stared at us, and without thinking about it, I stuck my tongue out. They laughed and did the same thing before chasing after their mother.

“Uh, why have you never done anything like this?”

Ethan didn't say a word as we came up on a group of women standing around a huge cast iron cauldron stirring the contents with long wooden paddles. In their pioneer dresses they reminded me of the three witches from the Shakespeare story we'd been reading in class—Macbeth. Rather than some foul brew, though, the sweet smell of spiced apples filled the air, and I practically drooled as a skinny girl in a similar dress to the others came over holding a tray. She had her long black hair pinned up on top of her head in a bun.

“Sample the apple butter?” she asked with a wide, dimpled smile.

“Sure,” Ethan said, and he gave her a slightly less stern look than the one he normally wore.

I smiled at her and picked up a tiny plastic cup off the tray. My face heated as Ethan's fingers bumped mine. “Thank you.”

We laughed as we clinked our small plastic cups together, then licked out the sweet apple butter. My face burned as Ethan's pink tongue emptied his plastic cup with a swirl, and then I realized he was staring at me. He winked.

The girl giggled and wandered away to offer the apple butter to someone else.

“Um. . . .”

He laughed and grabbed my empty cup, then tossed it in a nearby trash can. I was pretty sure that for the rest of my life cinnamon and spice were going to be forever associated with his quick pink tongue in my mind, along with the warm rush of tingles that accompanied getting a semi in public.

I was uncomfortably excited—to the point that I was worried someone might notice something—as we walked along, and it didn't help that Ethan stroked his thumb over the inside of my wrist. We wandered past a leatherworking stand, and I pointed out the wallets for sale.

“Those are nice. Won't you need a new one?”

He shrugged. “I can get a cheap one.”

“But he’ll burn something into it for you,” I said, watching as the man running the stand did just that with an iron he had sitting in some hot coals in a small pit at his side. The scent of rich woodsmoke was heavy in the air and a crisp breeze blew through, making everything feel perfect. The small boy who got a wallet from the leatherworker smiled and held it up, and it had a black train burned onto the front. His father patted his head, and a small pang hit my heart. Dad had been that way when I was very small, but then as I’d gotten older he’d put all his expectations for life on me, and I hadn’t been close to him in years.

Ethan glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “Like, what would I get on it?”

I shrugged and tangled our fingers tighter together.

He used his other hand to cradle mine, like he was hiding it from sight.

“I don’t know.” I bit my lip. “Maybe a heart? Maybe with our initials?”

The boy’s sister got a small bag done with her initials on it, and I couldn’t make myself look at Ethan’s face to see what he was thinking.

I expected him to laugh, but when I glanced at him, he only stared at me, eyes a little too wide. “Do you know what would happen to me if one of the boys at the trailer park realized what that was?”

My gut dropped, and I tried to tug our hands apart, but he wouldn’t let go, and I honestly didn’t want to get away. “Oh, yeah, that’s. . . . I get it.” My face scalded and I almost felt as if I wanted to cry. I’d forgotten. It had only taken half a day to get lost in the fun of doing whatever I wanted. “It isn’t like I would be able to carry it around, either. Let’s go get food.”

My stomach churned as I started in the opposite direction, but he didn’t move, and I ended up jerked to a standstill. My side hurt a bit, and I hissed. He patted my hand as if to say he was sorry, and I reached up to run my finger along the bruise darkening on his jaw.

“You know what? If I’m going to be a prospect for the Kings of Men, why the fuck not? I can do that. I can have whatever I want. Eventually I’ll be out of that trailer park.” He sounded stunned when he spoke those words, and then he grinned at me. “Holy shit.”

Smiling, I stepped in and gave him a quick hug. “That’s good, right?”

“Fuck yeah, it is. Come on.”

I laughed as he went over and stared along the rows of wallets, and I leaned against his side.

“What can I do for you boys?” The weathered man behind the counter grinned at us. He had auburn hair streaked with white and deep brown eyes that seemed to notice everything—and not judge. My heart dropped out of my throat when he simply looked expectantly at Ethan.

“How about that fifty-dollar wallet? The brown one. Can you put a heart on it and the initials ES on the top and JN on the bottom?”

I gaped at him. “You don’t actually have to do that!”

He shrugged, and my heart thundered wildly in my ears as the man laughed. He picked out a wallet from a box that was like the one on display and showed it to Ethan, who nodded. Then the man stamped it with the heart and our initials. Ethan paid. I was horrified to see that he handed the leatherworker a one-hundred-dollar bill, but the man gave Ethan change, and then Ethan put his money in the new wallet. My heart almost beat out of my chest as I snagged it. He let me take the wallet from him, and my fingers trembled as I ran them over the seared leather. My eyes stung with tears.

What did this mean? Were we *dating* dating? I glanced at him, and his face was pink as he watched me. I carefully handed the wallet to him with both hands, and he tucked it into his back pocket.

“Uh, what do you say we eat?” He glanced around and didn’t meet my eye.

I took his hand again, and he gave it a quick squeeze the second our fingers touched. I grinned at him. “Yeah. How about we start with some bacon cheese fries, then hit the sugar?” I bounced on my toes and grinned.

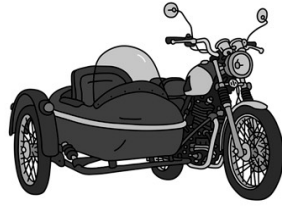
He laughed. “What, don’t they let you have the good stuff at home?”

Groaning, I shook my head. “Mom is very much into keeping her waistline the same as it was in high school, and Dad hates greediness, which means that you shouldn’t eat anything that isn’t strictly necessary to keep you alive, unless it’s a church potluck.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s been a while since I had anything like this.”

“Well, then today’s clearly the day you’re going straight to hell,” he murmured into my ear before leaning back to wink at me.

My stomach tugged with some guilt, but when he pecked a kiss on my cheek I practically floated after him, staring at his butt. If this was what the road to hell looked like, it was a pretty nice view.

ETHAN



WE WALKED AROUND THE FAIR FOR AN HOUR, CHECKING OUT more food options and the rides and exhibits. We bought funnel cakes, and the fifteen dollars was worth it to see Jonas's wide smile and hear his moans as he took bites from the deep-fried batter.

"Mm. This is so good." He swallowed and took another large bite of the dough, his eyes slipping closed as a sinful groan left his pretty lips. "So good."

"Yeah, real good." I couldn't tear my gaze away from the pink tongue that darted out from between his red lips and licked powdered sugar off his mouth. *Fuck*. My cock plumped. I shook my head, forcing myself to concentrate on the food clutched too tightly in my hands. I tore off some of my funnel cake before I shoved it into my mouth and chewed. The sweet taste was perfect. This was the best kind of date I could imagine. Hell, this was the *first* one I'd ever been on, so I didn't know what to expect.

Jonas finished the last of his late afternoon snack and took the time to suck on each one of his fingers, and I watched, hypnotized by the way his lips wrapped around his digits. Everything he did teased me, and the ridiculous thing was that he was oblivious.

"Do you want the rest of mine?" I held out the other half of the dough I had left, and he flushed, his cheeks lighting up like a Christmas tree.

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously.

I nodded because it was obvious he'd enjoyed the food a lot.

"Thanks." He took the paper plate from me and finished off the rest of the funnel cake in minutes, tearing into it like he wasn't sure when he would get to taste it again. When he was done, he threw the plate into a trash can.

"Where to now?" He bounced on his toes and the pure joy in his gaze was strange to me but also adorable. I'd never met anyone like him, so full of childlike wonder. Maybe that was why he enjoyed being around me. Maybe he saw me in a light no one else did, not recognizing the darkness for what it was. I was broken—cracked and falling apart, only held together by threads—and he made me feel shiny and new.

"I don't know." I glanced around the fair and watched as kids and adults alike shifted across the grounds, excitement fueling every movement. I'd never had the money to go to events like this, so I hadn't bothered attempting to because it would only end in disappointment. As a kid, I'd wanted to go, but Mom had refused to take me, and Leo had been broke, too.

"Oh, let's go on the Ferris wheel." He pointed at the large wheel in the corner of the park, one of the few rides here, and I couldn't say no, so we joined hands again and headed in that direction. A few people smiled at us as we walked past, and while Jonas grinned back, I ignored them.

When we got to the booth for the wheel, I pulled out my new wallet and dragged out a twenty, passing it to the sour-faced man, who grunted in acknowledgement. He gave us tickets and waved us toward the line, and while Jonas practically bounced his way there, I casually walked with a grin I couldn't contain. He was cute as fuck. Certainly not the type of guy who should be seen out with me.

"This is going to be so much fun." Jonas's grip on my hand tightened and he gave me a wide grin. "I love Ferris wheels. Have you been on one before?"

All I could do was shake my head and wince in embarrassment, but he leaned against me, bumping his shoulder with mine.

“They’re fun.”

I smirked. “I believe you.”

When it was our turn to get into the caged-in seats, Jonas sat on one side, and I took the other. The carriage rocked, and I froze, but he didn’t seem worried as he settled in. A man with a black eye patch closed the door, effectively locking us inside, and a ball of anxiety began to build in my chest. The white wheel began to move, and it stopped occasionally, letting more people on the ride, and I tried not to overthink what was happening.

Jonas was in his element, shifting closer to the edge and peering down toward the ground, and each time he moved, the cage rocked.

I stiffened, my heart thumping. Every limb on my body froze, and I grasped at the side, folding my fingers over the metal. “Stop moving.” The words came out sharp as tacks.

Jonas shot me a wide-eyed glance. He stared at me for a long moment, concern in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

My pulse raced, my heart beating so fast I thought it would jump right out of my chest. The world around me spun, and I screwed my eyes shut. We were up too high, and every time the cage rocked with a gust of wind, I was sure I was going to die.

“Oh no, you’re scared of heights.” Jonas’s sympathetic tone would’ve embarrassed me any other time, but I could barely breathe, let alone feel ashamed. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Neither had I. I’d never been anywhere to know that being this high up would scare the fuck out of me.

He shifted, and I couldn’t unglue my eyelids to see what he was doing until he was at my side, the cage rocking slightly. He slung an arm around me and pulled me closer, and I buried my face against his neck. The muscles in my legs were so tense they hurt, but I couldn’t move.

He wrapped me up in a hug, and I forced myself to exhale and inhale, though it wasn’t easy. The pain in my chest felt

ready to explode.

“Shh. It’s okay. Just stay right here. I’ve got you.”

Fuck. How childish. I delivered drugs for a motorcycle club, and I was scared of heights? I would never live this down. Even Jonas must think I’m a loser.

I cursed under my breath and grabbed Jonas’s thigh, curling my fingers into his jeans, and he held me like he would never let go. The wind blew again, and the cage rocked harder. I tensed, but his hold only tightened.

“Nothing’s going to happen. The gusts aren’t too bad, and if it was dangerous, we wouldn’t have been allowed on. Trust me. It’s going to be okay.”

That didn’t help. I’d heard about accidents happening at fairs because of safety issues, and I’d never given the news a second thought—until now. It became hard to swallow.

“Ethan, tell me about yourself.” Jonas touched a palm to the back of my head, and I inhaled his woody scent, trying to focus on him instead of my possible death. “Have you always lived in the trailer park? When did you learn to ride a motorcycle?”

I kept my eyes shut and thought about his questions. He gripped me, and I squeezed him until my arms shook. “Uh, yeah. I was born in the trailer I live in.” I swallowed around the imaginary lump in my throat. “Uh. Fuck. Um, I’ve ridden a few times. Not a lot. I don’t have a license.”

“You don’t have a bike license?” He sounded genuinely curious.

I shook my head. “Any kind of license. I don’t drive. I mean, I *can*, but I’m legally not allowed to.”

“But you do?” He tilted his head, and I felt him press his lips to my cheek, and it was nice. His mouth was warm, and he smelled good.

I laughed, some of the tension clawing my chest lifting and disappearing. “Yeah. I do.”

“What if the police catch you?” The concern was back in his voice, and I gathered some courage to glance up at his face and the way he frowned.

“Then they do. I deliver drugs. I expect to get caught one day.” I shrugged, but then the cage swayed, and I swore and pressed my face against the crook of his neck again. I brushed my lips to his hot skin, then nibbled, and he sucked in a breath. There was one way to distract myself. . . and that involved my cock getting hard.

“But you would go to jail.”

“Jail and prison.” I chuckled and smoothed my hand over his thigh. “Jail is before you’re given a sentence, and prison is after. Kind of prepared for that to happen.”

“But why?” His voice wavered and he sounded close to tears. “Can’t you do something different?”

I snorted. People like Jonas didn’t understand. Sure, his home wasn’t perfect, especially with overzealous religious parents like his, but at least he didn’t have to take care of himself and worry where the next paycheck was coming from. He didn’t quit school so he could go out and make money. Living as a criminal was my destiny, and so was ending up in prison, exactly like Leo had.

The cage rocked as the wind blew, and I gritted my teeth while my stomach shook with the movement. I focused on my hand and slid it higher, closer to his cock, but as if he knew what I was doing, he grabbed my wrist in a firm grip.

“I . . . don’t want to do that.”

I froze and a new sense of embarrassment washed over me, worse than what I’d gotten from being afraid of heights. I’d never had anyone reject me. I shot backward and the cage swayed, but I was so absorbed in what had just happened that I didn’t care as I put distance between us, moving to the other end of the seat.

He stared, mouth parted and bottom lip wobbling slightly. The sun sank behind some trees, and the lights blazed to life on the Ferris wheel, casting him in a reddish glow. He was

beautiful, with dark hair that seemed to shine under the flashing lights.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

I wanted to tell him that he didn’t need to apologize, but I couldn’t form words. I wasn’t mad at him—I was furious at myself. I’d pushed, and now my face burned so hot I thought about throwing myself off the Ferris wheel anyway. Who cared about the height? It was better than sitting up here with him after what had just happened.

I cleared my throat and rubbed the back of my neck, not even realizing we were moving faster now. The ride hadn’t stopped as much, signaling they had everyone on who they needed. Even though it had just begun, I wanted off.

“Ethan. . . .” The nervousness in his tone made my stomach clench. “Please talk to me.” He sucked his lips into his mouth and darted a glance toward the ground. “I don’t want to upset you. I’m just. . . . I’ve never done that.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged because I didn’t know what else to say. I’d fucked this up and I was making it worse. The awkwardness made me grit my teeth at my stupidity. Stop it. Fuck. It wasn’t hard to tell him that it was okay. Except, I couldn’t. I didn’t know *how*. I wasn’t used to people like Jonas, sweet enough to snap so easily with words or simple actions. This handsome muscular man was a virgin? Damn it! He was too pure for me.

He stared, and I looked at anything but him. My stomach churned as we swept around toward the bottom of the wheel, and I slapped the crisscrossed metal that caged us in.

“Hey, can we get off?” I yelled at the guy who was operating the wheel.

He gave me a thumbs-up, and as we finally reached the bottom, he stopped the ride and walked toward us, unlocking the door to let us out. I nodded in thanks and stalked away. I knew Jonas was right behind me because I could hear his footsteps.

“Ethan?”

I stopped and turned toward him, and he nearly ran into me.

He glanced up with big brown eyes. “Are you mad?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “Nah, it’s fine.”

“I’m a vir—”

“I know,” I broke in before he could finish the sentence.

Around us, we were catching attention. A few people stopped to stare, and I dragged Jonas against me, wrapping my arm around his shoulders before leading him through the fair again. We didn’t say anything until we got back to the bike.

“I should take the bus,” he murmured.

“Fuck no.” I shook my head. “It’s almost dark, and there are troublemakers on the bus at night. I know a few of them. They live in the park.”

“I can handle it.” He lowered his head, and I hated that I’d made him feel that way.

A car pattered in our direction, and I grabbed his shirt, tugging him out of the way. I didn’t trust other drivers, and if he got hit, I would end up in prison for beating someone for hurting him. Except, this time it was me who’d done it. Not physically but emotionally.

“Get in the sidecar.” I didn’t leave any room for him to argue. I reached in and grabbed the helmets, handing him his before I got mine and slid it on. “I’ll drive you to the bus stop near your house.”

He nodded, but there wasn’t anything confident about his action as he stepped into the sidecar and slid down to sit in it. I didn’t speak as I slipped onto the bike and started it with a kick. This Harley was older, which meant it took more than a press of a button to get her going, but I didn’t mind because I liked the memories that came with it. When Leo rode, he let me help him start his bike the same way.

The wind was better on a motorcycle, and it was weird that I could handle speed but not height. It wasn’t something that I was going to tell anyone, especially not Tav. He would give

me hell over it and never let me forget what had happened. If I had it my way, it would leave my mind the moment I got Jonas to the bus stop.

I weaved through traffic and kept glancing at Jonas to make sure he was okay, but he seemed to be in his element. There wasn't an ounce of fear on his face, and he had a wide grin again. I never wanted that expression to disappear.

Some girls came up beside us in a Pepto pink convertible, and they raised their arms, dancing to a fast-paced club song blaring from their radio. They screamed and waved, and Jonas waved back at them, laughing. We came to a stop at a red light beside them, and the woman sitting in the back on the driver's side—a fake blonde with big tits that nearly fell out of her tube top—leaned over her door.

“Hi! Where are you guys going? You should come to a sorority party with us.” She giggled and it was clear she was well on the way to being drunk. I guess that explained why she wasn't shivering with what she was wearing.

The other three women cheered, and one raised a beer bottle, not something I'd expected her to be drinking.

Jonas laughed. “Sorry, we're going home. I'm not old enough to drink.”

“Shut. Up.” She giggled louder and licked her lips, staring him down as if he was a piece of candy. “Would you like to get with an older woman? I'm good at giving guys like you new experiences.”

I reached down into my boot to bring out a knife and flipped the blade free, facing it toward her.

She squeaked and fell back into the convertible.

“He's mine,” I growled out at her. “Fucking attempt to flirt with him again and see what happens.”

“What the fuck?” Her high-pitched voice was annoying. “You're a douche.” She huffed, but the traffic light turned green, and I hit the accelerator, shooting the bike forward. As I was driving, I slid the knife securely back into my boot for safety.

Jonas didn't say a word, but he was still smiling.

It took us another twenty minutes to get to the bus stop, and I pulled the bike over to the side when we finally reached it. It was dark, almost seven, by the time we got there, and the street was dead. The suburban hell that he called home was always quiet, so it wasn't unusual.

Jonas rose and stepped out of the sidecar, unbuckling his half helmet slowly. "You shouldn't have pulled out that knife. Where did you get it?"

I shrugged because it was a stupid question.

"Oh." He chewed on his bottom lip and glanced around.

"You're not going to get into trouble for being out after dark, are you?" I asked, concerned.

He laughed quietly. "Probably, but I can lie? I guess. I already did this morning, so I can tell Mom there was some trouble at the shelter."

I nodded and tapped the gas tank of the Harley. "Cool."

He sighed loudly. "You don't hate me for not wanting to do that yet, do you?"

I winced and threw my leg off the bike so I was standing beside him. I took off my helmet and set it on my seat so he could see my face. "Nah. I've never been rejected, though. Kind of threw me."

"I didn't reject you," he whispered furiously, glancing around again. "I'm not really ready. I like you a lot, Ethan." He rubbed his abs for a second before shooting forward so fast I didn't see him coming. His lips smashed over mine.

I wrapped my arms around him and returned the kiss until he moved back just as quickly. "Wow."

He laughed nervously and bounced on his toes. "I would like to see you again. Tomorrow's Sunday, so I have church and then more stuff afterward, but maybe you could walk me to school on Monday?"

I grinned. "Yeah, that sounds cool."

The lights of the bus stop didn't do him justice. They were bland and boring, and he was a fucking angel.

"Monday," he whispered.

"Monday."

He shifted backward before spinning on his heel and walking away with an extra spring in his step. I couldn't look away from his ass and the way it moved, and I grinned wider. Okay, so he was a virgin who'd done no sexual stuff. I could deal with that if it meant I would get that cute butt.

He gave me a silly smile over his shoulder, and I waved and returned the gesture before getting back onto my bike.

At least I would have some good jerk off material tonight.

I chuckled as I headed toward the trailer park.

JONAS



THE DARKNESS CLOSED IN AROUND ME, AND AS I STROLLED between lights along the sidewalk, I smiled and touched my lips. I didn't have anything to compare him with, but I was certain Ethan was the best kisser in the universe. My dick was half hard in my pants and hadn't gone down since I'd touched my mouth to his. Glancing around, I slipped my hand down to give my wood a quick rub and laughed, yanking my palm away again just as fast.

Swallowing hard, I held in a moan. I'd never felt so on fire in my life. That was part of why I'd stopped Ethan on the Ferris wheel. He hadn't even touched my cock, and I'd been so turned on I was halfway to embarrassing myself. Plus, it had been too much for in public. I wanted him to touch me somewhere we could be safe. I bit the corner of my mouth. I wanted to go home and take care of myself while thinking about Ethan's kiss and the way his body felt cuddled up against mine. I wanted to remember the sweet way he'd let me hold him while he was afraid.

Ethan didn't seem like the type of guy to let just anyone see the way he was feeling on the inside. In a weird way, even though Dad would hate Ethan, he was the type of person Dad wanted me to be—masculine and emotionally level. Dad talked about the value of "being a real man" a lot. I hadn't met anyone who personified those things Dad talked about more than Ethan. Tough. Unafraid to protect his own interests. Smart in a tense situation. I shook my head, chasing off those

thoughts. I wanted Ethan because he had a nice smile and he was kind to me and he let me be there for him.

Not because of some weird, messed-up view of life Dad had beaten into my brain.

Oh, and I wanted him because he was the best kisser. I smiled again and couldn't stop. Biting my lip, I thought about sneaking into the kitchen and stealing some coconut oil to take upstairs. I'd fingered my hole a few times now, and I wanted to do that tonight while remembering his lips clinging to mine. I needed to feel the stretch there in my ass, where I knew he would want to be when we got closer. My heart picked up speed, and I moaned softly, looking forward to walking in the front door.

My phone buzzed in my jeans pocket and my anticipation turned to dread. I tugged my phone out and glanced at it. I'd been ignoring the phone since sometime around four o'clock this afternoon. I'd probably missed twenty calls between both of my parents, but it had been Dad who'd called the last two times, and I knew that meant he would be waiting.

We had a very godlike household, which meant that he'd always been the one to decide any punishments, and the fact that I was eighteen now didn't change a single thing about that. The second I'd made the decision not to come home before dinner, I'd known I would get into some type of trouble. I sighed, my steps slowing until finally I stopped at the end of the path that led to our door and stared at the house.

The front light was on.

Mom left the light burning every night because *she said* she wanted people to know that they were welcome, but I'd heard her telling one of the neighbors she did it because she was worried someone from the trailer park might come and steal something from the lawn. I snorted and started toward the door. I couldn't see Ethan caring much about any decorations she had out. Her flower pots and garden gnomes were safe.

When I opened the door, I blinked as the bright light from the lamps around the living room spilled out to greet me. Mom and Dad both turned from their spot on the couch to glare.

Dread crept up my spine. Dad had his thick Bible out on the coffee table, the one he'd used to spank me until I was about ten. It had a hard back and all the words of Jesus were in red. There was a notepad in his lap, so he was probably brushing up his sermon for tomorrow, and Mom was knitting hats for babies at the hospital. I let out a long breath as I closed the door, and the sound of the latch catching was loud in the room. Mom pursed her lips so hard they nearly went white and tossed down her knitting needles.

“Thank Jesus Christ himself, you're home! Where have you been?” She shot to her feet but didn't come any closer, probably because she would've had to walk in front of Dad to do that, and he had his finger on the open Bible, shaking his head as he muttered. He quickly wrote something down on his notepad.

“Uh. . . .” I glanced at Dad and had trouble swallowing. “I was helping late at the shelter.” I wanted to go right back out the front door. My voice was wobbly, darn it.

Dad finally tossed his pen on the coffee table and glared. “Oh, that's funny.” He set the notepad on the table and stood, forcing Mom to lean around him to continue glaring at me. “Because I had an errand to run in the city and went to pick you up at the shelter. Linda hadn't seen you at all today. Where were you?” He crossed his arms.

My hands wanted to be in my pockets, so I stuck them in there, then I wanted to yank them out again, so I did, and I felt like I was going to catch on fire. “Um.”

“Well?” Dad asked quietly, eyes narrowing.

My face heated and I wanted to cry. I hated this.

“What were you doing?” Dad thundered.

My entire body stiffened and any hint of happiness that had been left from kissing Ethan vanished. After a lifetime of telling the truth, I just couldn't think of a single good lie. “I was on a date,” I whispered.

Mom gasped, and I wasn't prepared for the smile that took over her face. She patted Dad's arm. “All day?”

My face was still on fire as I shrugged and nodded.

“Oh, is she from our church?” Mom practically bounced on the spot, and her blonde hair slipped out of the bun a little on the right side, forcing her to shove it out of her face. “Was there something happening in the city today? Some sort of revival or something?”

Panic made it hard to think.

Dad harrumphed. “Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

Mom tugged on his arm, and he frowned down at her. “They were probably too busy talking. Where were you?” She grinned.

“There was a festival. Some sort of pumpkin themed autumn thing. There were rides. I . . .”

Mom pouted at Dad, and he sighed.

Dad cleared his throat and some of the stiffness bled out of his body. He brushed a hand through his blond hair. “Of course, you’re at that age, but you really should’ve brought her here to meet us first.” He frowned at Mom, and she nodded along with him, the way she always did. “We don’t want you spending time with the wrong type of girl. But you can bring her tomorrow.” I was shocked as he actually gave me a small smile. “Mom is right to ask. Is it someone from the church?”

I shook my head.

Dad sighed and stared down at his Bible. “Well, that’s okay. Your mother is a fine example for any young lady. We’ll get her on the right path.”

Mom laughed and hugged him.

Guilt slithered through me, and my heart didn’t stop racing. Fear made it difficult to swallow. “I’m going to do my homework and go to bed,” I said, hoping that would be enough from me for the night.

Mom made a small sound, and I stopped halfway to the staircase. “What’s her name?”

My brain froze solid. It didn't work at all. It was like I'd never heard a girl's name before because I couldn't think of even one.

Dad frowned. "Son? You lied to go out. She's. . . ." He groaned. "She isn't one of those Italian girls from town, is she? Please tell me you didn't go out with a Catholic girl."

I opened my mouth.

"They're all idol worshippers," he said, shaking his head.

I cupped my hands over my face. I hated lying, and now I just had no idea what to say.

Mom smacked his arm. "That's fine, she can convert."

"I'm tired. May I be excused?" I asked, falling back on the manners I'd had drilled into me my whole life.

Dad grunted and gave me a stern look. "No more tall tales, do you hear? This is the one time you get off lightly."

I almost snorted at the words *get off* because I'd been too shy to let Ethan anywhere near the parts of me that would've made that happen. "Thank you, Dad."

"There is a special place in hell for liars, Jonas," he said dourly, shaking his head.

Mom nodded along.

Anger kickstarted my brain and burned off some of the fear that had been strangling me. "You say that about everything."

Dad huffed and put his arm around Mom, tugging her close to his side. "Well, it's true. And your friend Chet is about to find out about the consequences of that behavior."

My blood ran cold. "What do you mean?"

Mom patted Dad's chest and leaned forward. "There's a camp in Mexico where people like Chet can be sent. It's a shame you can't do it here in New York anymore. He agreed to go, thankfully."

Jesus, they'd found a *pray away the gay* camp? Yeah, I was sure he'd agreed, but after how many hours of being sermonized at? A fresh wave of anger boiled in my belly. We'd had an entire afternoon of Dad and Mom and his parents looking down on us. The memories of the guilt and shame that had made my stomach ill while Dad had blasted us with Bible verses seemed so much worse after how happy I'd been today with Ethan.

"He did? He just agreed?" I asked. I couldn't help that I sounded pissed off because for the first time in my life, I was. It was a startling sensation. I'd felt a lot of things in the past, but this was a pure, cleansing rage. They were just going to ship Chet off like trash because he happened to like guys?

"It's for the best," Dad said in that placating tone I hated, as if I was a child who was too stupid to understand.

"What will they do to him there?" I asked, stuck somewhere between stunned and infuriated.

"Fix him," Dad said, just like that—like he wasn't a monster.

My stomach felt hollow and I rubbed it.

"Oh, enough of this terrible discussion," Mom said, smiling around at us. She tugged at the collar of her pink robe. "I want good news! What's her name, honey?"

Dad stared at me, clearly also curious.

Mom leaned forward as if she couldn't wait.

That anger wouldn't stop and a horrible sensation slammed my chest while my pulse thudded in my neck and ears. "Ethan," I said.

Mom nodded, mouth tilting to the right while her brow furrowed. "That's an unusual name. I didn't realize people were naming girls that one, but you know, I did meet a girl named Kyle the other day."

Dad grunted and stared at me as I walked up the stairs. He knew. She would catch up soon. When I reached my room, I went inside and slammed the door. Feeling caged and unsafe, I

moved my desk in front of the door and leaned against it while sweat poured down my temples and dripped off my chin. My heart wouldn't slow down.

Pounding on the door jolted me, and I clenched the edge of the desk, shaking my head. Why did I do that? *How could they do that to Chet?* Just send him somewhere to be tortured with more of their garbage.

“Open this door!” Dad shouted.

Mom's muffled voice came next, but I couldn't understand her.

“Now, Jonas!” Dad bellowed.

To heck with that. I rested my face in my palms and tried to breathe while my body shook, and the door rattled against the desk. I shouldn't have done that. What the hell was I thinking? I couldn't take this back, but I hated lying. Chet hadn't done anything wrong. Not a thing. I bet he wished he'd gone out and slept with a hundred guys now because he was going to be treated the same way whether it was zero or an entire roomful.

Eventually the pounding on the door stopped, and Mom's soft tone going down the hallway let me know she'd probably convinced Dad to leave it for the night. My body felt like it was falling apart as I got ready for bed, and I made the decision to move the desk and dash out to the bathroom, half expecting to get waylaid on the trip back to my room, but nothing happened.

When I got in my room again, I put the desk back where I'd had it, securing the door, then crawled under my blankets.

My eyes wouldn't close. I stared at the ceiling until the light was the gray of early dawn and my stomach was aching from hunger, then got out of bed again. All night I'd thought about Ethan and how much fun we'd had and how awful it was that Chet was getting sent away.

At least I'd gotten to kiss a guy I liked.

Chet hadn't had anything.

This was so wrong.

After another hour of going crazy alone in my room, I got dressed, went to the bathroom, and then snuck toward the kitchen. Normally the smell of breakfast would be wafting up the stairs as I went down to the first floor, but when I got to the kitchen, Dad and three deacons from the church were sitting around a table, and they all turned to look at me as I stepped foot on the tiled floor. I wanted to turn right back around and run, but Dad held up his hand. I couldn't help but notice the deacons were all the younger ones—men who might be able to physically overpower me.

“What’s going on?” I asked, glancing warily from man to man.

“As the pastor, I have to set an example,” Dad said, his voice scratchy, like maybe he’d hurt himself yelling last night.

“And what does that mean?” I asked bluntly, for the first time in my life just blurting the question in my head instead of holding it back and walking on eggshells.

Dad blinked at me, then picked up a brochure from the center of the table. The three men with him stared at me. I’d known them most of my life. They did favors for Dad whenever he asked, and a sense of terror built in my gut as they studied me. Jack Baker was the biggest, and he was probably bigger than Scar with just as many muscles. Not even the glasses on his thin nose could make him look anything other than scary.

“Dad?” I mumbled.

Dad waved around the brochure, and the morning sunlight spilling through the windows caught on the glossy front. “You’re going. Chet will be there. It’ll be good for both of you, and you will leave as friends, cured of this nonsense.”

For a few seconds, all I could do was stare, and then I nodded. “Okay, Dad. You’ve never steered me wrong. Can I pack a bag?”

All the men at the table—including Dad—shared relieved smiles.

“Of course. Only clothes, though. Nothing else. A bookbag will be fine,” he said.

“Oh, okay. How long will I be gone?” I asked.

He didn’t bat an eye as he glared at me like I was being difficult. “Six months or however long it takes.”

I nodded. “And one small bag will be fine?”

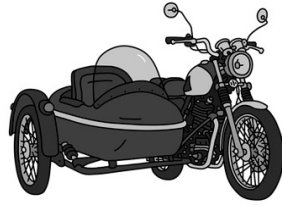
“Yes.”

Carefully, I backed out of the kitchen, then walked casually upstairs to my room. I didn’t run because that would’ve only led to those men chasing me. I packed a bag, but I also grabbed my duffel with my soccer gear and everything I had of value, including five hundred dollars I had saved doing odd jobs for people at the church. Last, I grabbed my phone charger, then realized how stupid that was and tossed my phone on the bed. I popped the screen from the window and dumped my bags out, hoping nothing would be broken. Taking a deep breath, I slipped on my running shoes, then refused to look down as I edged out of the window before turning around.

This isn’t good. I gripped the windowsill and lowered myself as far as I could get toward the ground. It was probably still a six-foot drop, but I took a deep breath and let go.

My legs hurt when I hit the ground, and I hissed as a popping, fiery sensation took over my left ankle. I didn’t have time to worry about it, though. I grabbed my bags and hobbled toward the river.

ETHAN



KNOCK.

Knock, knock.

Knock-knock-knock.

I groaned and pressed my face deeper into the pillow as the sound of someone banging their fist on the door of my trailer echoed like a bomb in my head. I'd spent the rest of last night drinking with Tav because—Scottish shit or not—what he had was still beer. I'd told him what happened with the Kings. He seemed proud of me, as if he thought it was safer for me to be with them than here in the park. And he was probably right, too. It was easy to make enemies in the trailer park, and the Kings were about brotherhood. I'd lost my family, and finding a new one was a good alternative. Although, Tav was like an older brother to me.

“Shep, get your arse up now, lad.” Tav’s Scottishness came out more deeply in the mornings, and today it was thick enough to smash me over the head like a baseball bat. “I got someone here to see you.”

“Fuck off, you bastard.” I slapped the bed beside my pillow. “It’s too fucking early. Tell that prick who owns the place that I’ll give him the money in a week.”

Tav laughed and slammed his fist on my door again, and the entire wall shuddered under the force. “It’s not Owen. Get up, Ethan. *Now.*”

Groaning and cursing Tav, I shoved away the thin blanket and threw my legs off the bed. Still half asleep, I wandered over to the door and swung it open. “What the fuck, man? Why the fuck did you—” My gaze landed on Jonas standing beside Tav, looking every bit as beautiful as he had last night, except for the fear and worry twisting his expression. The morning sun splashed across his face, and he was an angel, haloed by light. “Jonas?”

Tav chuckled and patted Jonas lightly on the back. “I found him wandering the park. Thought he belonged to you.”

Jonas’s cheeks flushed a bright red and he ducked his head. He was clutching the handle of a duffel bag that he’d rested near his feet and had a backpack strap over his shoulder. In a simple pair of jeans and a T-shirt, he was as mouthwatering as he’d been last night, and I couldn’t get enough of staring at him.

Tav cleared his throat. “Shep, your tongue is hanging out.”

I slapped a hand to my mouth, but it was closed, and I glared at Tav as he threw his head back and laughed.

He shrugged unapologetically. “It was a close call. It was gonna roll out like a fucking dog, mate. You were pantin’ for it.”

“Fuck off, Tav.” I shoved him, and he laughed, holding up his hands at me.

Jonas shifted nervously between his feet and chewed on his bottom lip. He glanced to the side, like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to run or stay.

“What happened?” I asked before I could stop myself. Who cared that I was shirtless, with only a pair of gray sweatpants on? I didn’t even have on underwear, which meant my morning wood was wide awake and pressed against my thigh. If I didn’t look at it, maybe he wouldn’t, either.

He inhaled deeply and scrunched his eyes shut. “They found out. I told them.”

I blinked at him. “Told who, what?”

Tav rolled his eyes and threw his hand up in an *are you kidding me* way. He gave me a long dubious stare, but I ignored him and focused completely on Jonas.

Jonas opened his eyes and glanced warily at Tav, then back to me.

I shook my head. “You don’t need to worry about this asshole. He knows about me. He’s the only one.”

Tav grinned and nudged Jonas with his elbow. “And I’m gay, too, which is what the wee prick didn’t tell you.”

Jonas’s anxiety didn’t disappear like I’d expected, and he released the handle of his duffel and let his backpack fall to the ground so he could wrap his arms around himself. He peeked over toward the river, and I followed his line of sight, but I couldn’t see anything.

“Chet’s parents are sending him to a conversion camp in Mexico.” He winced, and so did I because I’d heard about those shitholes. I’d never been religious, but I’d had friends at school with parents who had been. “Dad was so mad at me for being late, and I told him I was on a date. At first, Mom was really happy, but after Dad told me Chet’s parents were sending him to Mexico, they asked who I went on a date with. I was just so upset that I answered honestly. I said your name.”

My spine went ramrod straight, but I didn’t say anything because he clearly wasn’t finished.

“I panicked. I locked myself in my room, and then when I went downstairs this morning, he had three deacons there, and they were going to send me away, too. I can’t go, Ethan. I don’t want to go. Why can’t I be who I am? How is this against God’s will?” His chest rose and fell and tears began to fill his eyes. “I just want to be me.”

Tav gave me another pointed look, glancing from me to Jonas, and I realized quickly what he was suggesting. I was shit at this, but I rushed forward and wrapped Jonas up in my arms, dragging him against my chest. He shook as he cried. His softness would get him eaten alive in this park, but I didn’t care. I would protect him.

Tav grabbed Jonas's bags, then walked up the steps into my trailer. He dropped the stuff somewhere inside before he came back out and threw a thumb over his shoulder to signal he was heading back to his metal can next to mine. I nodded, and Tav gave me a wink.

It took me a moment to realize we were outside where anyone could see us, so I grabbed Jonas's arm and gently guided him up the steps and inside. Shutting the door firmly behind us, I took a deep breath before facing Jonas, who was nothing more than a lost lamb. If only he knew I was the wolf. . . .

Yet, as I stared at him in the middle of my small kitchen, eyes flooded with tears while he gazed around the shithole I called home, I couldn't do anything but guide him toward the left into the bedroom. The only thing that separated each of the "rooms" was a carpet divider, except for the toilet and tiny shower, which had its own walled-off space with a door. He must hate this.

"Come on." I led him to the bed, and while I'd expected him to refuse to lie down, he didn't. He crawled across the mattress and fell onto it, digging his face into the pillow I'd been sleeping on minutes ago.

I followed him, ignoring the wood that slapped against my thigh as I lay down beside him. I didn't know how to comfort him. Emotions weren't something I was familiar with, and he was so different from me. But I did the best I could, touching his arm and rubbing my thumb in a circular pattern there. Sighing, he turned his head so his cheek was pressed against the pillow, and he stared at me.

"Thank you." He gave me a sad smile, eyes haunted. All the joy from last night was gone, and I hated what his parents had done to him. I wanted to go over there and burn down their house. Hell, I might do just that.

An idea began to form in my head. I should've shrugged it off because causing trouble on the other side of the river could result in lots of fucking problems—but screw it. I wanted to make them hurt for doing the same to Jonas.

“You can stay here as long as you want.” It was a terrible idea. Stupid. I didn’t want to take back the offer. “You don’t need to ever go back to them.”

They were promises I couldn’t keep. I’d never said anything like this to anyone, yet I said it so easily.

“Really?” His voice wavered, and I didn’t regret my offer.

“Yeah.” I smoothed my hand over his head, and he wriggled in closer to me. He laid his cheek on my chest and sighed, hugging against my side. If he knew I had a woody, he didn’t say anything, though I felt a hardness against my hip that told me he was in the same predicament. I didn’t do a damned thing, though. If he was a virgin, then I would let him decide when he wanted to move to the next step.

If this had been a woman and I’d told Murph about it, he would have fucking laughed in my face and called me a pussy. Maybe I was, but I didn’t give a damn, either. I liked this. Him. I wasn’t going to push him away, especially now that all he had was me.

“Do you think Chet will be okay?” he asked quietly.

I exhaled. “Probably not. It’ll fuck with his head.”

“Ethan. . . .” His voice was so small, and I *knew* he was going to ask me something that I would have no choice but to say yes to. “Could we. . . . Could *you* get him out of there? They haven’t sent him yet.”

“And what?” I asked seriously. “Where would he stay? This trailer’s only big enough for one, maybe two if they’re okay hugging.” I gave him a squeeze. Not to mention I fucking hated that weasel for dragging Jonas into his mess. He’d ratted Jonas out when he could’ve just accepted that his parents had found out the truth.

Jonas batted his eyelashes at me, and I knew instantly he did it on purpose. He placed a hand over my heart, and with one simple touch, I’d lost the battle. One date and he had his hand firmly wrapped around my cock, tugging me along as if *I* were the lamb. “What about with your English friend? Could he stay there?”

I laughed harder than I'd meant to, and he blinked like an owl at me. I shook my head. "Sorry, he would strangle you if he heard you say that. He's Scottish."

Jonas's cheeks flushed a deep red and he groaned, slapping my chest. "I didn't know."

I wiped away the tears of amusement, and he got serious again, his mouth pressed in a thin line.

"Please, Ethan? I know what Chet did was wrong, but he doesn't deserve to go to that place. No one does." He pouted, and I couldn't help but stare at those glistening red lips. He knew he had me beat, I could see it in his eyes. For such an innocent man, he was also a little devil.

"Would he want to come with me?" I let my head fall back on a pillow. "If I go there and try to pull him out of that shitstorm and he doesn't want to come, I could end up in jail for attempted kidnapping."

"I know Chet. He wouldn't want to go to that camp. He's scared and alone." Jonas touched his fingers to my chin, stroking the pads of his digits across my jaw. "I had you to run to, but he has no one."

I blew out a breath between my teeth and clenched my eyes shut. There was no way I was getting out of this. I could've kicked Jonas, but I liked him, and I wasn't a douche.

"When does he leave for this camp?"

Jonas cheered and kissed me on the cheek, and I shook my head but grinned because it was nice to have him so close. I was a big old softy, and if any of the other trailer park boys found out, they would kick my ass. Hell, if they knew I had Jonas in my home, they would knock me around for breaking one of the park's unwritten—but well fucking known—rules.

"I think it will be today, since they wanted me to get ready to go."

"Fuck, you're not giving me much time to work." I frowned and grabbed my phone from the mattress beside me. I'd fired up my cranky old Samsung last night right before passing out. Hopefully it won't overheat. I would need a new

one, though. One more fucking issue to deal with. It was 8:30 a.m. on the dot. There was no time to plan, and I would be heading into the viper's den in broad daylight. What Jonas was asking for was dangerous.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "All right. I need to get moving then."

He sat up and licked his lips. "Thank you for this."

There wasn't much I could say. I shoved into a seated position and laid a kiss on his mouth, which he accepted eagerly. He tasted like toothpaste but nothing else. "Make breakfast while I'm gone. I don't have much, but there's some eggs in the fridge. You can cook them if you want, but make sure you open the window in the kitchen to let some of the smoke out."

He chuckled and gave me a winning smile, and I enjoyed seeing some of the light return to his handsome face.

I slid off the end of the bed and went to my dresser to grab out some pants, a shirt, and a hoodie, just in case I got into trouble. I could ditch the hoodie if I needed to and make an escape. He watched me as I got dressed, his wide doe eyes too innocent, but I liked having him in my bed, even if we didn't do anything.

"Stay here, and don't open the door unless it's Tav or me, got it? Lock it."

He nodded, and I gave him a pointed look. "I understand. I swear."

As much as the idea of leaving him alone here terrified me, I left through the front door and made my way to Tav's trailer. He was sitting out front with a plate of toast clutched in his hands, taking a large bite off a burned piece of bread. I never got why he liked his food that damned crispy.

"You want a roommate for a little while?" I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans when he gave me a long stare.

"Who?"

I explained the situation to him, with fewer details than Jonas had given me because all Tav needed to know was the basics—who and why.

Tav frowned, his mouth pursed in thought. “I don’t know, Shep.”

“You’ve got two beds, don’t ya?” I shrugged. “You’ve got your double bed and the fold-out one you used before your mom passed.”

“Aye.” He groaned and shoved the rest of the toast into his mouth, chewing it until he was done. “I haven’t got a choice, do I?”

“It would be helping me out.”

He chuckled. “It’d be helping you get laid, lad.”

I grinned, not denying his accusation.

He waved his hand at me, the seashell bracelet on his wrist catching my attention for a short moment. He always wore the jewelry, and it was another relic from his past that he didn’t want to let go of. “Fine.”

I slapped him on the shoulder, and he grunted. I left him there and headed toward the river. The current was gentle today and it was easy to step over the rocks to get to the other side. I tugged up the hood, hiding my face from the crazy religious folks.

The streets were lined with their boring houses and pretty lawns. Most of them would be getting ready for church, which meant I didn’t have much time to get to Chet and yank him out of there before his parents probably expected him to go pray with them or whatever the fuck was going on.

In the daylight I couldn’t go along the woods because getting back there would be even more suspicious, so I tried to blend in, which wasn’t easy because the community reminded me of something out of *Black Mirror*. Like an alternative reality full of God-fearing robots trying to take over the world.

I passed a small white house with a picket fence lined with rose bushes, and a lady at the front in a fifties-style red dress

rose from where she'd been bent over her flower beds to watch me. She had her dark blonde hair twisted into a bun and her eyes were lifeless, confirming that these people really were AI. Emotionless. Out to destroy everyone's lives.

I flipped her the middle finger, and she gasped, dragging her red cardigan closer around herself. "Well, that's rude. Who are you?" she demanded, but I ignored her as I continued walking. "I know you're up to no good, sir! I'm calling the police."

I snorted and gave her two middle fingers this time, and the scream of outrage I got in response was all worth it.

When I finally arrived at the familiar house that belonged to Chet's family, I snuck around the hedges near the front. I peeked over the top, but I couldn't see any movement inside, so I slid around to the back. Chet's window wasn't open, and with the curtains closed, I couldn't get a good view of what was happening inside. I strained to hear any sounds, but there was nothing. It was as silent as a graveyard.

Growling in frustration, I knocked on the glass lightly, hoping to catch his attention and not his parents—*if* he was still here. A few seconds later, the curtains shifted aside and Chet's face appeared, his eyes widening. He looked like a deer in headlights and glanced behind himself and back to me, as though he couldn't decide who was more dangerous, me or his parents.

Finally, he opened the window a little.

"What do you want?" he whispered. His voice shook and the nervousness in his gaze made me feel bad. . . a tiny bit. I still hated guys like him, who dragged other people into their mess.

"I'm being your knight in shining fucking armor, princess. Jonas sent me to rescue your ass from that camp your daddy and mommy dearest want to send you to, so let's go before I change my mind."

"I can't." His hands trembled where he gripped the window. "I have nowhere to go."

“Yeah, but we got you a place to stay until you figure out what you’re doing with your life.” No one had bothered replacing the screen I’d knocked out last time, so I grabbed the window and shoved it open wider, and the frame rattled, making us both freeze.

“Chet, what was that?” A woman’s voice echoed loudly outside his bedroom door.

Panic lodged in my chest, and I ducked as he closed the curtains with a *zing* of the metal rings against the rod.

“Nothing, Mama. I was just opening the window for fresh air.”

I couldn’t see him, but I imagined him trembling because his voice was wobbly.

“Why?” The suspicion in his mom’s tone made me wince, and I lowered myself more. The reverberation of heels on a wooden floor had my breath catching, and I thought she might be at the window, looking outside. “It’s chilly today, honey. We don’t want you getting sick before you go to camp, do we?”

My fists curled. I hated people like this. They were worse than my mother.

“Sorry, Mama.” He chuckled nervously, and she hummed, but then her heels echoed again and the sound of the door shutting sent a sigh of relief through me.

“Are you there?” Chet was back at the window, and I stood again, glaring.

“Get your shit together. You have five minutes. Or you go to your fun little camp.”

He went into action, grabbing a backpack, then shoving clothes into it. From what I could see, he didn’t have many belongings he wanted to take with him, and there was less than what Jonas had. When he was done, he was back at the window, face hopeful. Jonas and Chet must’ve had a sad life to choose a trailer park over a house like this.

I tilted my head. “Come on, let’s go.”

He threw a leg out, then the other, and jumped to the ground, and the grin he gave me was wide and excited but less innocent than Jonas's. No, this was a man who got off on pain and humiliation, and while it wasn't my thing, I'd known some guys who had been into that kind of kink. Jonas was far too sweet for that.

"Chet!" A scream from his mother nearly burst my eardrums, and I winced as she came running into his room. "Get away from him!"

I grabbed Chet's wrist and dragged him, and we were off, racing down the side of his house and onto the street. Tugging my hood up higher, I led him as fast as I could past the houses I'd already gone by earlier, and the woman I'd given the finger to had a couple of cops in her front yard. She pointed at me as soon as she saw us.

"That's him!"

Fuck! "Faster," I barked, and Chet picked up the pace, keeping up with me as the pigs began to chase us. One of them was slow, but the other was young and had speed that matched Chet's, and there was no way in hell we were going to escape unless we found a good place to hide.

"I don't want to go to the camp," Chet cried out, sounding teary. "Please don't let them take me."

I cursed Jonas's pretty face because it had started this mess and made me do dumb shit. My grip on Chet's wrist tightened. We couldn't go over the river without them knowing exactly where we were heading, and I didn't want to lead the cops back to Jonas.

"Listen to me," I snapped as we turned a corner, out of sight. The police officer wouldn't be far behind us. "Go to the trailer park and ask for Tav. Tell him you're Jonas's friend and you're the one who's staying with him, okay?"

He blinked as I came to a halt and shoved him. "What?"

"Go. Now." I pushed his chest, and he nearly tripped, but he nodded and kept running.

I turned as the cop came around the corner. He pointed his gun at me, and I raised my hands.

“You’re under arrest,” the cop shouted, and I sneered at him. “Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head.”

I did as he ordered, falling to my knees and touching the back of my head with my palms as he stalked forward. He grabbed my wrists and secured them together at the small of my back with cold handcuffs. I cringed as anxiety throbbed in my chest. I thought about Leo and his years in prison, and how he’d died in there with no future.

“Why am I under arrest?” I snapped when he shoved me face-first onto the ground, and part of me thought he enjoyed the power over me. He tugged back my hoodie. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You ran from us.” He slapped me over the back of the head.

I growled in frustration. “You didn’t tell me to stop.”

“Kid, stop talking.” The older officer walked toward us, his thumbs hooked into his utility belt. He glared at me, mustache twitching.

“I want my lawyer.” I threw the stink eye at him.

The older cop snorted and tugged off his hat, giving me a glimpse of short silver hair as he wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. “Do you have lawyers over in that trailer park?” He belted out a laugh as the younger cop yanked me to my feet, nearly ripping my arm from the socket.

I twisted my lips into a scowl. “You’re going to regret this. I’m a King.”

The older officer’s laughter doubled, and he patted me on the cheek patronizingly. “Sure you are. You’re nothing but trailer trash. The good religious people in this neighborhood have put up with that park for too long.”

I growled.

They didn't seem to care right now as they dragged me back the way they'd chased me. I assumed I was going to the nearest station. I hoped Jonas didn't blame himself for this.

JONAS



MY MUSCLES CLENCHED AND I HAD TROUBLE BREATHING AS I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the floor between my shoes. It was clean, or at least, it seemed dirt free, but the thin carpet was stained. Maybe someone had kicked off their grungy boots in this spot for years before dropping into the bed. I cuddled Ethan's pillow close and buried my face against it. His spicy scent tickled my nose, and I dragged it deep into my lungs, letting it soothe me. After a while I was almost breathing normally.

"Please, God, let him be okay. Please let him be okay," I murmured, shutting my eyes and wishing with all my might. I'd always thought of prayer as an obligation, and Dad said you shouldn't use prayer to ask for things like Jesus was Santa Claus, but this wasn't for me, this was for Ethan, and he needed to be all right.

The loud thump of a fist on the door sent my mind into a whirl again, and I snapped my eyes open and stared as my heart hammered against my ribs. When another loud knock sounded through the room, I jumped to my feet and rushed that direction. I was steps from the door when I remembered Ethan had told me not to answer it, no matter what.

"Darn it," I muttered, shaking my head. I stuffed my hands in my jeans pockets. "Why am I always so stupid?"

There was another round of pounding on the door, and I rubbed my cheeks, staring at it. I flinched with each thud.

“I can hear the floor creaking, you dickwad! Come out here. Dutch has work for us, and I owe you a fist to the fucking face for your bullshit.” That awful tone was familiar, and I bit my bottom lip until I tasted the tang of copper. “Come on!”

My blood ran cold. It was the guy who’d attacked me. Why would he say such horrible things? I didn’t move and held my breath. About a minute passed in silence, and I slumped to the floor on my knees.

Jesus, if you’re anywhere, please let nothing else go wrong today. I prayed hard. Please, please, please.

The door burst inward, and I scrambled backward. I was frozen in fear for a moment, then shot to my feet and stumbled away a few steps. The crazy guy who’d come after me the other day was standing in the doorway, glaring. His unwashed blond hair hung in lanky chunks around his thin face, and he looked sick, like he hadn’t eaten in a week. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead despite the cool air outside.

He tilted his head and frowned at me, and he reminded me of a skeleton on a pirate flag. “What the fuck? What are you doing here?” His scowl turned into something murderous, and his hand went to his pocket.

“Uh, Ethan is helping me out,” I said. It was true and I couldn’t think of anything else with him glaring at me.

“Why would he do that?” The man wasn’t much older than me, if he was older, but he had hard lines around his eyes.

“Because we’re friends.”

He laughed, an abrupt ugly sound. “No, you’re not. We’re talking about that assclown, Shep, right? He doesn’t do friends. He barely talks to me, and I’ve known him most of my life.”

“Well, I’m one of his friends,” I muttered, getting angry. Who was this person to judge me or Ethan?

He stared at me while tugging on a strand of his hair, then straightened up suddenly with a small, nasty smile. “You’re

buying from him, right? Coke? Weed? What's he selling to you?"

"No," I said immediately, then inwardly sighed. I should've said *yes*, then maybe he would've left me alone. "I don't do drugs."

He took a step toward me. "Then what are you doing here? Stuck-up pricks belong on the other side of the river, even if they're paying out the ass for blow." He tugged his hand out of his pocket and there was something gleaming in it—a folded up knife. I rubbed my chest and took another step away from him, but much farther and I would bump into the bed.

"Please leave." Shame clawed through me because my voice wavered.

He shook his head quickly. "No, for all I know you're in here stealing."

Another wave of embarrassment smacked me as I glanced around. "What would I want to take? Even the TV looks like it's been through a tornado."

A snarl crossed the man's face, and I thought maybe he deserved to get angry about that comment, but there really wasn't anything here that would be worth breaking in to steal.

"His stash, fucko." He pointed at me with the knife, but thankfully the blade was still safely tucked away. "If he's selling to you, he has one." He glanced around with interest, clearly the real thief between the two of us.

"I wouldn't steal."

"Why?" He tossed the knife between his hands. "Because you're too good to take what you need?" he asked, eyebrows diving. His body quivered and his left hand tightened into a fist. His thin fingers showed off the bones under the skin, and I couldn't help the way my stomach twisted and felt sick. "Well, Shep's not here now to save you from what you deserve."

"Stop," I said, but he launched forward, and I caught a fist to the side of my face. Pain lit up my nerve endings, but adrenaline also slammed into me, making my skin tingle. I didn't like violence, but I wasn't about to stand around and let

myself get beaten when reason had been tossed out the window.

I shoved him, and he came in swinging again, but I managed to throw my arm up and catch his fist. *Smash!* More pain. He did it again. The jerk was fast and swung with the other fist holding the closed knife. My jaw ached as he connected. I was dazed as he struck one more time and hammered my temple, and then he dragged me out of the trailer onto the lawn, which was exactly where I didn't want to be. If my parents or anyone from the church were trying to find me, I was screwed, because there was only a small stretch of grass between the trailer and the stone fence, then the river and on the other side. . . .

He tossed me to the ground, but I was able to get to my feet before he could pounce on me, and I ran a few steps away. Tav, the big bearish man with steely blond hair I'd met earlier, stepped out of his trailer and stomped toward us. I backpedaled, but he held up a hand toward me and was staring at my attacker.

"Do you want to get kicked out of here, Murph? Because this is a fast way to get that to happen, you stupid shite," Tav roared.

"Stay out of this! It has nothing to do with you." My attacker—Murph, apparently—flipped him off.

"What are you doing?" Tav asked.

Murph spat on the ground, and I grimaced because it nearly hit my foot. "This prick was in Shep's trailer."

"So? He can have whoever he wants in there. Ain't your business, is it?" Tav got between me and Murph, and Murph tucked his knife away and his shoulders slumped. He wasn't brave enough to try to swing at someone twice his size. "Real question is, what were you doing busting into his trailer, Murph? We don't steal shite in the park or did you forget that?"

I thought I saw someone across the river, but the sun was in my eyes, and I couldn't be sure. Holding in a moan, I

backed toward the side of the trailer. “I shouldn’t be outside.”

“Go the fuck home, rich boy!” Murph shouted.

I cringed.

“Shut the bloody fuck up,” Tav hissed at Murph. “Go inside,” he said to me. “I’ll deal with this.”

As I started toward the door of the trailer, Murph stormed after me again, but Tav grabbed him and flung him.

“Leave that lad alone. Nothing good will come of this shite,” Tav said.

“Why does Shep have him in there?” Murph asked, but thankfully he wasn’t shouting anymore.

“Not your business,” Tav growled.

“Jonas?” Someone called my name softly, and I glanced around. From behind the trailer next to me, Chet was waving me over, and unfortunately Murph and Tav noticed him. It would’ve been difficult not to spot him because he was only a little shorter than Tav, with big scared brown eyes.

“What the fuck is this? Two rich kids slumming it today?” Murph asked, his tone venomous.

“Get over here, lad,” Tav said, pointing at his side.

Chet slunk out from behind the trailer.

“What’s going on?” Tav asked.

I wasn’t surprised as Chet rambled about his parents trying to ship him away—he cagily didn’t specify where they wanted to put him as he glanced between Tav and Murph. I was thrilled when he told us about Ethan helping him bust out of his house to run away.

Chet looked directly at me, and my heart almost stopped because I could tell by the expression on his face that whatever he had to say next would be really bad. “That guy you sent to help me was arrested.”

“What?” I asked. My vision grayed around the edges for a few seconds.

“What?” Tav stared at Chet.

“Fuck,” Murph said with a groan. “I was going to ask him to drive.”

Tav glared at Murph, but then we were all staring at Chet again. Panic worse than when I was sitting in the trailer alone began to strangle me.

“Where would the police take him?” I asked.

“Hard to say,” Tav said, scratching his jaw and glaring at the sky. “Depends on where the cops who dragged themselves all the way out here were stationed in New Gothenburg. There’s more than one police station, you know?”

“Oh no.” I felt like I was going to die. “He wasn’t doing anything wrong. I have to help him.”

Murph snorted and took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He shook one free and stuffed it into his mouth. I glared at him as he lit up, but he only raised his eyebrows as he puffed away. “What? There isn’t any helping someone once the cops are called. He’s fucked.”

Staring wildly around for anything I could possibly do, my gaze landed on the motorcycle gleaming in the sunshine, and I grunted before rushing into the trailer. There were no keys on the tiny counter, and when I ripped open the drawers in the kitchen, they weren’t in there, either.

“What are you doing?” Tav asked.

I spun around to see him standing in the doorway. The grays in his blond hair caught in the sunshine and made me want to go hide near him because he was clearly a real adult, and I had no idea what I was doing.

“I have to get into the city to try and help Ethan. I was going to take his motorcycle, but he must have the key with him.”

Tav slapped a hand to his face.

“You need to get the fuck out of the park. Why does Shep really have you here?” Murph asked, glaring around Tav’s shoulder.

I didn't know this guy, but I wanted to hurt him, and I didn't like that feeling.

Tav elbowed him. "Fuck off, Murph. As long as Shep said Jonas was fine to be here, which I know he did, you have nothing to stick your nose into. Mind your own fucking business. Come on, kid," he said, waving me forward. I stumbled after him and closed the trailer door. He gestured at his own trailer. "You, get inside," he said to Chet.

"But—"

"You want to go to wherever your parents wanted to send you that bad?"

He shook his head and hustled over to Tav's trailer.

"Lock it after yourself," Tav said, and Chet nodded, then darted in and did as he'd been told.

Tav had a rusty old blue Ford that might've been new in 1967. The seat belts didn't look like they could be trusted, and a spring dug into my ass when I got in. I pulled the belt across my chest anyway. All I could think about during the long ride was Ethan. Tav dropped me off at the first police station we came to in New Gothenburg, the one near the courthouse.

"I have to get back," Tav said, giving me an apologetic smile. "Murph's on a rampage, and God knows what that shite will get up to. He's not in his right mind on a good day, let alone a bad un'."

"Thanks. I have my bus pass," I said, forcing a smile.

He saluted and drove off.

But today wasn't my day.

Ethan wasn't at the station near the courthouse.

Or the Downtown station.

Or the Collingwood station.

The station out on the southeast side of the city was a bust.

No Ethan.

At the station on the southwest side, people stared at me like I was high when I asked for Ethan and didn't know his last name. I thought I did know it, but I was so tired and worried that I couldn't dredge it up and I wanted to cry.

The sun was setting by the time I got to the Lakeside station, and a tall blond cop, with shoulders that could hold up the whole world, came around from behind the information counter and out into the waiting room when tears began to prickle the corners of my eyes and slide down my cheeks.

"His name is Ethan. I don't know his last name, but people also call him Shep. He was arrested at the Cider Mill private community, but he wasn't doing anything wrong and I know it," I said, barely breathing. "He wasn't doing anything wrong, I promise. I live there and asked him to be there. He wasn't trespassing."

"We have an Ethan Shepherd," the cop said, and I was a little stunned by his light British accent. It reminded me of Bishop. "Thing is, I can't let you back there to see him or anything." He flashed me a small smile. "I'm sorry. If you want to sit tight, I might be able to find out what we're waiting for to release him or charge him."

"You don't understand, there's nothing to charge him for." I grabbed the cop's hand, and he patted my wrist before he removed my grip on him. "I asked him to go over there, and I live there!"

The cop pursed his lips. "Why don't you go home? If he really didn't do anything, he'll be let go, all right? I'm sorry I can't do more." He settled a friendly hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze, and I didn't want to upset this man who'd tried to be nice to me, so I wandered outside the front door of the police station in a daze.

"I have some cash. I'll get a lawyer," I said out loud, nodding.

The sun had almost disappeared below the horizon and stars were starting to pop out overhead. I couldn't appreciate the view even though purples and peaches were splashed across the western horizon. I could probably take the bus and

make my way through the trailer park without getting spotted. My plan wasn't great, but I went with it because it was the only one I had. The ride to the trailer park went okay. The guy who liked to drink, Rye, was on the bus, and he waved at me with a smile, so I waved back.

At the bus stop, sweat beaded on my temples and slithered along my spine, especially when Rye stumbled down the steps after me. I started toward the trailer park, staring over my shoulder to make sure no one I knew was chasing me.

"Hey, where are you going?" Rye asked, frowning and following after me.

"I'm staying with Ethan Shepherd," I said quietly. "He's my friend."

"Oh." He swayed, then stumbled forward. "I'll walk with you because it's not safe for you to go through there in the dark."

I blinked at him. "Why?"

He laughed. "You don't live there. There are rules, but they don't apply to outsiders. If someone stabbed you and left you for dead, no one else in the park would tell anyone they'd seen a corpse." He slapped my shoulder.

"Okay." I shivered.

He started humming a song I didn't know under his breath, and he was nice enough to walk with me all the way to Ethan's trailer, but when we got there, we both groaned.

"Oh, Shep is gonna be pissed about this," he said with a laugh.

I slapped my hands on the top of my head and sank to my knees on the grass. The windows had been smashed out, and when I finally got myself together to go inside, the lights didn't work—or at least, flipping the switch beside the door did nothing. Rye took his phone out and turned on the flashlight, and the inside of the trailer was totally wrecked. I knew before I went to my bag and stuck my hand inside that my money was gone. I sat there on the bed in the cold

darkness and shivered. I'd never felt more like curling into a ball and crying.

My stomach growled and I stifled a yawn. I was exhausted and hungry and every cent I had was gone.

“Hello?” Tav called through the open door. “That you, Jonas? Saw Murph do this earlier, the bastard. He’s gonna get his when Shep gets back.”

I went outside, and I still wanted to sit down and cry. The light from Tav’s trailer glowed in the darkness, and he gave me a sad smile.

“Why don’t you go home, Rye?” Tav said in a tone that wasn’t so much a request as an order. Rye nodded and swayed off in a different direction. Once he was out of earshot, Tav sighed. “Chet told me everything.”

Shaking my head, I crossed my arms. “I found Ethan, but I couldn’t do anything about it. Maybe I should’ve just gone to that fucking camp. I could’ve taken off from there.”

“You hope. No, this was smarter.” Tav growled. “Those fucking lunatics.”

His anger actually made me smile a little. It was nice to hear someone upset on my behalf.

“Come on. There’s almost no room for three people, but we’ll make do.” Tav led me into his trailer, and it was basically the same as Ethan’s. Chet was curled up on the bed, deep asleep. Tav quickly threw together a ham sandwich for me, and I stood over the sink eating it and staring outside into the darkness. I thought I saw a shadow off toward the river, and I stepped to the side to hide behind the cabinets with my heart racing.

“What’s wrong?” Tav asked from the couch in the living room area.

“I couldn’t even help myself. Now Ethan’s in trouble.” I brushed the crumbs off my fingers and turned around to lean on the counter. “I wanted to help Ethan, but someone stole my cash out of his trailer. I was going to find a lawyer.”

Tav grunted. “Murph’s been on thin ice for a while. Someone’s going to have to do something with him.” He sighed. “You helped that lad,” Tav said, gesturing toward Chet. “One good deed, there. Murph’s an asshole who takes the stupid shite people say around here far too seriously.”

“Like what?” I asked, frowning.

“Lots of shite. I didn’t grow up in this hellhole, so I got my own ideas about life, but the boys who grew up here?” He tapped his head. “They’re fucked.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not exactly living progressively on the other side of the river,” I mumbled. “Money doesn’t buy good ideas.”

“They sure don’t celebrate Pride Month here,” he said with an unpleasant laugh.

“They don’t at my house, either.”

We shared a heavy look.

Tav sighed. “Listen, lad, Ethan will be released. Don’t get worked up. He did nothing much, right? After that, well, it won’t hurt you two to get away from the trailer park. Sounds like you’ll have to do that. Maybe I’ll talk to Chet about where he needs to go.” He stared across the small trailer at the bed and toyed with a bracelet on his wrist. “There’s a whole world out there. Plenty of places for a smart man to be.”

My vision blurred and I wiped my face with the heel of my palm.

Someone pounded on the door of the trailer, and my mind immediately flashed back to earlier. My stomach sloshed as I felt sick enough to almost lose the little I’d eaten.

“Now, what?” Tav asked, standing up.

Chet sat bolt upright on the bed, eyes wide with terror, then snuck quickly toward a door and slid past it. I thought maybe it was the bathroom. The *click* of a lock was loud as I held my breath. I swallowed hard.

Tav glanced at me, then opened the front door. “What do you want?” he barked. “I’m busy.”

“We’re searching high and low for two runaways from over in the Cider Mill private community.” A shudder ran down my spine as Dad’s voice carried into the trailer.

Fury rushed through me.

Dad was the one filling everyone’s heads with his trash—that gay people needed to be sent away and fixed. Chet was hiding in a stranger’s bathroom because of him and his sense of right and wrong. My hands balled into fists. I glanced at the window. They’d probably seen me standing there, lit up like an idiot. I hadn’t been thinking. To heck with this. I walked over, and Tav stepped back as I glared out at Dad and the deacons from the church. They didn’t look any happier to see me than I was to see them.

Dad’s eyes gleamed with rage, and I did the unthinkable. I pushed him. He stumbled backward, and the guys with him caught him and kept him upright, but he stared at me like he wanted to beat me into the ground.

“Where’s your boyfriend Chet?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Not here,” I said.

Tav made an encouraging sound and came out. He closed the trailer door and locked it.

“Where is he?” Dad asked.

“Bus station in New Gothenburg.” I shrugged, not caring that I was lying anymore. Did Dad realize he was the one who’d taught me how to lie, all the while railing against it? Dad glanced behind himself at Jack Baker, and he backed away, pulling his phone out of his pocket to text someone. Good. Let them go off on a wild goose chase.

“Come with us now,” Dad said, sounding tired, but fuck him. I was exhausted and sick of this shit.

“No,” I said.

He stared at me, eyebrows shooting high. “What?”

“I said no.”

Dad stormed toward me and grabbed me by the arm, and I couldn't bring myself to hit him, though I did shove at him and try to twist away. The deacons were another story. One guy came up on my right.

"You're not doing this on my watch," Tav snarled.

"We'll call the cops," one of the deacons said.

"I don't care," Tav snapped.

The sounds of a scuffle at my back were loud in my ears as another man came over and got in front of me, and I realized they were trying to knock me off my feet so they could carry me.

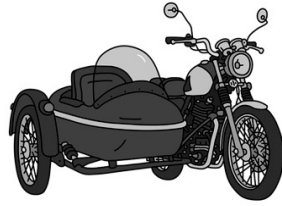
"I said no!" I shouted. "I'm eighteen. You can't force me to go anywhere!"

"I'm your father and you will do this," Dad hissed. I wasn't prepared when Dad turned and punched me. My head swam, and I whimpered at the sharp prick that sank deep into my arm, then the world got blurry.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Tav called, and I thought maybe he was talking to me.

Then I couldn't think at all.

ETHAN



RELIEF SWAMPED ME AS SCAR AND I FINALLY TURNED INTO the trailer park. A swarm of bikes followed us through the open gates. I yelled out directions to Scar, and when he finally came to a stop in front of my trailer, I patted him on the shoulder and slid off the bike. I tugged off the half helmet and handed it to him, giving him a curt nod. All I had to do was say thank you, but the words got caught in my throat.

While I'd been in a holding cell, a man had been hauled in past me wearing a leather vest with the Kings of Men patch on it, and he'd been tossed next door to me. It hadn't taken long to learn his name was Tank.

“Yeah, I was doing ninety-five on the highway,” he'd said with a bright laugh. “They pulled me in for reckless driving, but fuck that. When the club lawyer comes for me, he'll talk to you. His name is River.”

Turned out he was right, and as soon as this River guy learned I hadn't even been charged with anything, he'd called Scar, and all the Kings had come to bombard the police station, demanding I be let out. To avoid chaos, the cops did exactly that because the Kings were right. There was no real reason I'd been left behind bars other than to fuck with me for “bothering” rich people.

King, the president of the club, pulled his older Harley next to Scar and took off his helmet.

I gave him a curt nod as a thank you, and his mouth quirked to the side. We hadn't said a lot to each other since the

cops let me out, but he'd introduced himself and told me he would be expecting big things from me now that I was a prospect. I still had to do some kind of initiation, but apparently he trusted me because Scar vouched for me.

King's honey-brown hair wasn't visible in the darkness, but I'd seen him in better light at the station and he was a handsome older dude with steely blue eyes and a few age lines to go along with a dangerous smile. His gaze had searched into my very fucking soul, and he must've liked whatever he'd seen because he'd nodded and told me to get on Scar's bike.

"You said you have a partner in there?" King jerked his thumb toward my trailer, and even though I couldn't see a frown, I heard it in his voice.

I turned and glanced at Tav's trailer first. His lights were on inside and with the curtains open, the brightness spilled out to the two lawn chairs in front. Some of the glow also spread across to my area. The light was enough for me to see the shattered windows across the front of my home. I froze, fear spreading like a poison up my spine and paralyzing me for a short moment.

"Fuck." I shot forward and yanked on the door, and it swung open so easily that it clearly hadn't been locked. Swiping up the switch near the door didn't work at first. I swore and messed around with it until the light popped on and illuminated the shitwreck mess. Someone had been in here searching for something, and they'd turned my home into a crime scene, upturning everything they could get their hands on. While that would have irritated me into seeking revenge, my only thoughts right now were on Jonas and his safety. A fear I wasn't used to and didn't particularly enjoy jolted me into running back out of my trailer and toward Tav's.

The Kings watched me as I slammed my fist on the thin trailer door, and after a few moments, it opened, revealing a bruised Tav. His handsome face was marred with scratches and discoloration, and the moment his gaze settled on me, he winced.

"What the fuck happened?" I snapped.

Tav's stare traveled over my shoulder and he looked at the bikers warily. "Jonas's dad came looking for him and Chet. Jonas gave Chet a chance to hide, and he told his father to fuck off, but the bloody arsehole had a couple of religious fanatics with him. I tried to fight them, we both did, but they injected him with something, and he fell to the ground unconscious. They took him away."

"And you didn't fucking fight harder?" I wasn't angry at him, but rage bubbled over inside me, and instead of reining it in, I let it go. I slammed my fist into the trailer near the door, and Tav flinched.

"Bloody hell, lad, I *tried*, but it was me against more than one of them. I couldn't fight them and protect Jonas. And these wee bastards—" He gestured around the trailer park. "—aren't going to help for fear of getting kicked out. Owen already came and gave me an official warning." He frowned. "He told me not to start shite or he'd kick me out. I can't afford anywhere else, Shep. I'm struggling as it is."

My hands curled into fists at my side, and I gave him a short nod. I glanced around him and saw Chet sitting on a rickety old chair at a small, round wooden dining table, and he gave me a tiny, nervous wave and a sad smile.

"Fine. Keep Chet here. I'm going after Jonas."

"They've probably sent him away already," Tav murmured. "It was a few hours ago that they left."

I shook my head and bared my teeth. "Then I'll kill his father and go rescue him."

He nodded and pointed at my trailer. "Murph did that. He didn't like Jonas being in your trailer, and then thought he could raid your stash."

The news only got worse. "I'll deal with *him* later."

With that, I turned on my heel and headed back to Scar, who wore a serious scowl. I squared my shoulders. "Jonas's religious freak of a father kidnapped him and probably sent him to a conversion camp in Mexico. I'm going over to his house right now and ripping the balls off his father and feeding

them to him before I get him to tell me where he sent Jonas, and then I'm going to get my. . . boyfriend. I know I'm not a King yet, and I accept that, but I thought you should all know." I slid my stare to King. "He's important to me, and I barely know him, but I want to and I'm not letting him stay stuck in that hell."

One of King's right-hand men, a guy named Undertaker, leaned forward on his customized bike. The steampunk pipework glowed beside the flashy red paint job. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and in the light from the open door of Tav's trailer, his dark hair had a burnt orange section that swooped down across his forehead. He wore black lipstick and eyeshadow, and he was one of the scariest guys I'd ever met. His smile was dangerous and hungry.

"Torture and Mexico are two of my favorite things." He laughed and nudged King. "What do you say? It's been boring lately. Let's have some fun."

"Boring?" King drawled with a deep laugh. "I wouldn't fucking call this *boring*. We've had too much action lately." His attention slid to me. "But even without the vote making it official, he's a prospect, and I have a good feeling about him. So yeah, let's fuck up some religious cultists."

Scar clapped his hands together and chuckled. "That's what I'm talking about." He waved his hand at me. "Get your bike, Shep. Let's go pay his father a visit."

I didn't argue. I raced to get my bike. Once I had the key in the ignition and turned on, I kick-started the engine and she rumbled to life, joining the rest of the Kings' bikes in a chaos of noise.

I glanced at Tav. "If Murph comes back, tell him he better return my shit or I'm coming for him next, and it won't be pleasant."

Tav nodded, and even though his face was beaten and he looked like crap, he stared at me in pride. It was the way I'd always wanted Leo to look at me, and it warmed my gut to know I'd made someone I cared about proud.

“Listen up,” King yelled loud enough for all of us to hear, but his words were pointed toward me. “We don’t want to attract attention, but we will if the community’s like I think it is. Not many bikers around there.”

I grunted. If someone like me could get negative attention, a group of bikers would have a squad of cops called.

“We need to be smart about this because we don’t want to all end up behind bars.” King straightened and glanced around at us.

Undertaker smirked. “I could go in there, quiet as a mouse. Get the information and take him out before he knew what was happening.” He closed his eyes and his smile grew wider. “It would be my moment of introspection for the day.”

“No,” I said sharply, earning a dangerous, unwavering stare from him. “He deserves pain and suffering, and it’ll come from me.”

“Have you killed anyone, little boy?” Undertaker’s grin sent a shiver down my spine, and I’d faced some scary men in my life.

I leaned forward. “There’s a first time for everything, and I’m willing to learn if it means making that fucker scream for mercy.”

He chuckled and glanced at King. “I like him. He might fit in after all.”

King shook his head. “All right, let’s make a plan. We want to go in quiet.”

“If he wants to drug Jonas, we should do the same to him,” I said.

King’s wide grin lit up his face while Scar laughed.

“I like the way you think, Prospect,” King said.

“I can make it happen,” Undertaker said in a bored tone with a shrug.

King nodded. “We go in, drug him, drag him out, and put him in a crash van. Once we get him somewhere nice and

quiet, Sheep can do what he wants with him.” King’s orders had everyone nodding.

“Shep. My name is Shep,” I said, but King chuckled.

“I know, Prospect, but a shepherd’s a sheep boy. From now on, you’re Sheep until you’ve earned the right to give yourself a road name, got it?”

All I could do was nod, even though I fucking hated it. If I wanted a future with the Kings, I needed to accept this bullshit, for me and Jonas. Once I got out of this trailer park, everything would be a lot better for us.

When we got back to the clubhouse, a few of us hopped into different vehicles. King ordered me into a white van with five seats, so I got into the back, squashed between Scar and his boyfriend Charley. If you asked me, the drive took too long, and the more time we spent fucking around, the closer Jonas was to that camp, and I wanted to bust him free as soon as possible. From what King had said on the way back to Jonas’s house, if we needed to, we were going to drive toward Mexico tomorrow morning—it was 3:00 a.m. already, so technically it was today—then hit the camp once we’d done surveillance on it. While I understood why we had to take precautions, I was antsy and ready to fucking kill everyone guarding the jail Jonas was in, too.

I glanced behind our seats and took in the three large red duffel bags Undertaker had thrown in, and as tempted as I was to ask what was in them, I kept my mouth shut.

When we got to the neighborhood, I directed King toward Jonas’s house, and he drove as carefully as he could, switching off the headlights.

“Ski masks on,” he snapped.

I stared down at the black piece of material with holes in it for my eyes and nose that Undertaker had given me earlier, and I shoved it over my head, covering nearly my entire face. The other four men in the van did the same, including King.

When King pulled the van to a stop outside of Jonas’s parents’ white picket fence, he turned off the ignition and

twisted to look at me. He held out a syringe over the middle part of his and Dallas's seat. Dallas was King's boyfriend, and he seemed to always be at King's side. I wanted that with Jonas, which was fucked, but I didn't care. Dallas was a nice enough guy and ordinary looking, which was a strange way to think about him, but I'd assumed King's boyfriend would be someone like. . . Undertaker. Dallas had brown hair, long on the top and shaved on the sides, and hazel eyes. He was also built more on the slender side with tight muscles. I could see *why* King was attracted to him.

"Sheep, this is for you. Undertaker said to stab him anywhere except the eyes," King said.

"What's in it?" I asked, taking the syringe. There was a cap on the needle so I couldn't nick myself.

Dallas cocked his head to the side. "With Undertaker, it's best not to ask."

I took his word as gospel because the others chuckled in amusement.

"You have a gun?" King asked.

I shook my head, and he passed me a Glock, which made me smirk. "I'll like being a prospect."

Scar slapped me on the shoulder. Charley did the same from my other side. "This is the easy part, Sheep. It's gonna get a lot harder than this, trust me. You'll be washing and waxing our bikes for months for this. Hell, maybe years!" He sounded way too fucking happy.

I cringed. I fucking hated cleaning, but again, I was willing to do what I had to in order to get Jonas and I somewhere safe.

I shoved the gun roughly into the front of my jeans, and Charley sighed, but no one said a word. I could get a holster later if they let me keep the gun.

Scar opened the door and slid out, and I followed him while the rest of the guys got out. Behind us, two more vans parked a little farther back, but the Kings stayed in them, and according to the president's plan, they were backup in case something went wrong.

“Ready, Prospect?” King asked.

I nodded in answer and began to creep my way toward the house. I was careful, checking the outside for cameras, but either Jonas’s parents trusted their neighbors or they were stupid. I went straight to the front door and wiggled the knob, but like I’d expected, it was locked. Next, I went to the window to the right. One nudge, and the thick glass surrounded by a white frame moved upward.

Idiots. This was as easy as breaking in to Chet’s house. I popped out the screen and slipped inside, careful not to knock anything on a small table beside the window. Glancing around, I took note of where I was—in the living room. I moved through the archway and to the front door in a small hallway. I studied the walls and ceiling and found no security system in place, so I unlocked the knob and opened the door for the others.

King grunted. “That was too easy.”

I laughed lightly. “They think they’re safe, even with us across the river. They think the cops and God will protect them.”

King shook his head. “You get the husband. Jab him with that cocktail. We’ll deal with the wife. We’ll gag and blindfold her and tie her up in the bathroom.”

“Got it.” I led them up a set of stairs. In the darkness, we couldn’t see much, so King tugged out a small flashlight and turned it on, the beam emitting a dim glow that hopefully wasn’t bright enough to wake up Jonas’s parents but did give us some direction.

When I got to the first door on my left, I opened it gently, peering inside, and King gave me the light I needed to look, but it was empty and appeared to be Jonas’s bedroom. If there was more time, I might’ve gone in and studied it to know him better, but I would rather ask him questions about himself and have him at my side.

The second room, a door to the right, was the bathroom, and the next one was the spot we were looking for. Two people

were sleeping in the bed, their backs facing each other.

King made a hand gesture to Scar, Charley, and Dallas, and it was toward Jonas's mother's side, and Scar gave him a thumbs-up. When King gave me a similar sign but directed at Jonas's dad, I nodded and headed toward that side of the bed.

I was cautious, stepping as quietly as I could. The bedroom had carpet, and there was no creaking, which made our footsteps silent. With as much speed as I could manage, I took off the cap to the needle, slapped my hand over the fucker's mouth, and slammed the syringe into his shoulder, shoving the plunger down so the liquid was injected into him.

His eyes flashed open and widened, just as the Kings grabbed Jonas's mother and she screamed. They immediately jammed a rag into her mouth and hauled her from the bed. She struggled, but it didn't take them much effort to drag her out of the bedroom.

Jonas's dad pushed against me, and I sat on his chest with my knee, holding him in place as the liquid took effect. Slowly, his eyelids drooped, and while he fought to stay awake, it didn't work, and he fell asleep.

Shifting away from the bed, I dragged him off the mattress and onto the floor, and he landed with a hard *thump*. I smirked and maneuvered his body around until I was able to lift him over my shoulder, but my knees shook under his weight. Luckily, Scar came back and laughed.

"Give him to me." Scar took Jonas's dad from me and threw the bastard around like he was as light as a feather, and I glared, making Scar laugh harder. "Come on, Sheep."

We walked down the stairs and quietly opened the front door. After checking to make sure we were clear, we took the bastard to the van and opened the back, allowing Scar to throw him inside and shut the doors as quietly as he could.

A few moments later, the others came out, and we all got back into the vehicle.

"Now where?" I couldn't remember us talking about the next part of the plan, but I'd been pretty hyped up.

King chuckled. “We have an acquaintance back in New Gothenburg with a lot of properties. He has one out here, and I texted him back at the clubhouse. He offered the location to us for a price.”

“I don’t have money,” I murmured, shame and irritation heating my cheeks.

King waved his hand. “Don’t you worry about it, kid. You can work it off later.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know what that meant, but if I got to torture the fuck out of Jonas’s dad, I was okay with that.

I settled into the seat and took my ski mask off as the other guys got in. Wherever we were going wasn’t far away because after about ten minutes, King turned down a dirt road and we traveled for a while longer before we came to a small abandoned looking farmhouse. There were no lights on, and the wooden exterior appeared worn down.

“Where are we?” I asked.

King shrugged. “Somewhere easy to clean and where no one will hear him scream.”

“Hah.” That was the only answer I needed.

Scar dragged the bastard out of the back and toward the house as I took a moment beside the van to steel myself. I was ready for this. Torture. Murder. I’d thought about it before and had decided I could do it if necessary, but there was no better reason than this—for Jonas.

Someone slapped me on the back, and I winced when Undertaker stepped up beside me. Behind our van were the other two, and most of the guys were standing around talking, as though we weren’t about to kill a guy. I guess they were probably used to it.

“Want some pointers?” Undertaker grinned at me as light filled the inside of the farmhouse. Someone had obviously flipped some switches. His smile had a vicious edge to it. “Start with his fingers. He can still talk if you cut them off or break them. There’s no artistry in something like that, but in a

situation where time is a factor, we must be pragmatic.” He frowned.

“You’re scary, you know that?” I said honestly.

Undertaker laughed and tapped his cheek with one finger. “You don’t even know me yet, little boy. Settle in because I’m a font of information. You’ll learn a lot.”

Eyeing him with the hair on my arms rising, I left him there as I walked up two rickety steps and into the farmhouse.

Scar had Jonas’s dad tied up to a chair in the middle of an empty space that looked like it’d been a dining room once. The windows were rectangular while arched at the top and the curtains that fluttered in the wind were threadbare and old.

Scar slapped Jonas’s dad across the face, and the man groaned as he slowly came to. “Come on, man, wake up. Sheep’s gonna have some fun with you. Tell me your name.”

Jonas’s dad muttered something, and Scar leaned his ear toward the fucker before he grinned.

“Well, John, welcome back to the world. You’ll wish you hadn’t woken up.” Scar cackled as he stepped back and waved his hand at Jonas’s dad—John. “He’s all yours, kid.”

I stared as I tugged out the gun in my pants, laying it on the sole piece of furniture in the room, which happened to be a table near the entrance. Behind me, Undertaker dropped the duffel bags from the back of our van.

He whistled a happy tune as he crouched and unzipped the bags, bringing out all sorts of contraptions. Some I knew, like pliers and knives, but others were new to me, and I wasn’t sure I was quite ready to use them yet.

“What’s going on?” John grumbled drowsily. “Wha. . . .” He tried to lift his head, but it only bobbed. He blinked, managing to stare at me. “You’re. . . . You’re that boy from across the river.”

“Ethan,” I said, aware that if he was smart, he would remember Jonas telling him my name. And sure enough, after a few seconds his face went red.

His eyes widened and he struggled, but he was weak and useless. “No. . . . No.”

“Yes.”

Anger fueled the flames inside me again, and any fury that had been extinguished was reignited. I thought about Jonas, my sweet Jonas, in a conversion camp, and I curled my hand into a fist, storming over to him and smashing my knuckles into his cheek. His head went flying backward and he shrieked in pain, but I did it again and again until my skin was splattered with his blood. The violence didn't help my mood and neither did his yells of agony.

“Where. Is. Jonas?” My chest rose and fell with exertion, and I curled my hands into fists again, fingers sticky with his blood. “Tell me and I won't make it hurt.”

John managed to raise his head and glare. “I won't let you corrupt my son.”

I shook my head and thrust my knuckles into his jaw, which I heard crack under the force.

Undertaker laughed somewhere behind me. “Well, you could do it that way. I guess with your bare hands is *satisfying*.”

Blood spurted from John's mouth, splattering across the wooden floor, and he whimpered.

“Tell me,” I yelled.

“No. *No!*” He started to recite some prayer, and I growled in frustration.

I held out my hand in Undertaker's direction without looking at him. “Give me something.”

Undertaker cackled and cold metal touched my palm. I glanced at the tool—a hammer. “Start by breaking his fingers. Put each one on the chair's arm and bring that bad boy down on his knuckles.”

John's eyes widened and he struggled against his bonds. “No.”

“See if God can help you get out of this,” I snarled. I didn’t get near him before he was crying out.

“Wait. Wait. It’s down near the border, across from Del Rio in Texas. I’ll give you the address. Please. It’s called Mercy’s Christian Rehabilitation Camp.” And he gave me exactly what I wanted with the location, right down to instructions on how to get there. It was crazy how fast he broke, but I wasn’t surprised. He was a coward.

I smirked and swung the hammer in my hand. “Oh, this isn’t over yet, *John*. You and God are going to meet.” I stepped forward. I would start with his fingers like Undertaker had suggested.

By the time I was done, John’s head hung backward. His fingers were broken and bent, his teeth shattered, face bruised and battered, and neck sliced open. Blood flooded the front of his pajama shirt and pants, and it was a mess across my clothes and skin, too.

Scar whistled. “Nothing better than a sliced neck.”

Undertaker rolled his eyes. “It would’ve been more fun my way. I had all the tools to remove his heart.”

“Not everything is about you, Timmy,” King said from where he leaned against the doorjamb. “All right. We got a location, so let’s get ready. Tim, can you deal with the body?”

Undertaker winked. “Of course.” He blew a kiss at King, then fluttered the tips of his fingers.

King pointed at me with a grimace. “You need a shower. The one upstairs works. Get out of those clothes and give them to Tim. Then wash off the blood. Scar will get you something to wear. Then we’ll get our shit together and head out.”

I stared down at the dead body, as content as I expected to be after killing the man who had emotionally tortured Jonas. Maybe I should’ve ended his mother, too. If she pushed Jonas, she would be next.

“How long will it take us to get there and bust him out?” I asked.

King shrugged. “Few days to get there by bike, and then we need to watch them, figure out their weak points and ways to get in.”

“We should burn the entire camp down,” I whispered, unemotionally.

King stared at me and the corner of his lip quirked. “That’s not such a bad idea, Prospect. Those camps deserve to be destroyed.”

I turned my head and the feeling of blood was sticky on my skin. “Let’s fucking light it up.”

Undertaker laughed. “Ah, yes, I like him.” He walked over and booped me on the nose with a grin, and I had no fucking clue what to do with that because it was cute but also deeply creepy. He looked at the tip of his finger, and I realized it was bloody. “Let’s go. We have things to do,” he said crisply. “No rest for the wicked.”

JONAS



THE SUN OVERHEAD BEAT DOWN ON ME AND MY SHOULDERS ached as I jammed my shovel into the dry earth of the desert somewhere in Mexico. I wasn't entirely sure where we'd crossed the border, but I knew we'd gone through Arkansas to get here, so. . . I still had no idea where we really were. I'd never been this far away from New York in my life. Nearby, some spikey looking trees with rough bark grew together, and there were cactuses with arms on them like I'd seen in westerns when I was younger. Those were about the only kinds of movies Dad would ever let me watch.

Oh, no. I shuddered as the creepy helper who ran around after the guards—they called themselves counselors, but they were all armed—came around blasting everyone with sunscreen in a can, and I stood still while he got me with it as well, closing my eyes. When I opened my eyes, they were stinging because some of the sunscreen had snuck into the corners, and he smiled at me.

“Anson, why are you here?” I asked him softly.

He frowned and brushed his auburn hair back with one hand, then glanced at Gerard, the guard who was scrolling on his phone under an umbrella from where he sat in a lawn chair. With a small smile, he wandered away to the next person digging.

Gerard had arms and thighs the size of tree trunks and was dressed in jeans and a tank top, with his gun holster strapped to his left thigh like some kind of soldier. I really wasn't sure

what the person who'd put together this evil Jesus jail of *pray away the gay* bullshit was thinking, but they should've reconsidered some of the scenery if they wanted all the guys here to stop catching wood over other guys. Gerard wasn't my type, but Myles, the "guest" who lived in the cell—sorry, monastic dormitory—across the hall from me, couldn't keep his eyes off him.

Myles flashed me a dimpled grin when I caught him looking and shrugged before jamming his shovel into the dirt again. His brown eyes glittered with an amusement that shocked me. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead and sweat made the rest of it gleam in the sunshine. To our right was a fifteen-foot deep ditch that I suspected had been hand dug as well. We were just excavating our way toward the desert for no reason I could figure out.

Since Gerard wasn't watching too closely, I moved over toward Myles and dug my shovel into the sandy dirt next to his, tossing a good shovelful over my shoulder into the pile behind us. "Myles, why are we doing this?" I asked. "When they forced me to sign that paperwork saying I was eighteen and here of my own free will—"

Myles snorted. Neither one of us had a choice in signing on the dotted line.

"They didn't mention digging for no good reason," I said.

He smirked. "Well, I've been here a year and a half."

My blood ran cold despite the noon heat that had me feeling woozy. "And?"

He prodded the dirt with his shovel. "My best guess?" He quickly glanced at Gerard, but he was still staring at his phone. "To wear us out so we'll sit and listen to their bullshit sermons in the evening." He waggled his eyebrows and grinned. "They want us too tired to think."

"Why haven't you just told them you're not gay so you can leave? After six months they'll let you prove it to them, whatever that means."

He winced and glanced at Gerard. “Do you know what you have to do to prove it?”

Frowning, I shook my head.

He leaned closer. “There’s a reason they make you sign all that paperwork at the beginning. I heard they take you to a brothel outside the nearest town, Acuña, and you gotta sleep with one of the women there. If you don’t jizz, you don’t get to go home.”

“What are we whispering about, boys?” Gerard barked, sounding even more bored than we were.

“Oh, you know, this lovely weather,” Myles said with a wide smile, then we went back to digging. Myles had arms of steel from doing this shit for so long, and I sighed. At least I was getting exercise, I guess. Fury ate at me along with despair. I’d been here one week, and all I had was aching muscles on every inch of my body from all the work.

I missed Ethan.

Weirdly, I wanted to go home; although, I couldn’t say I minded my parents being out of the equation. My bed was a fond memory. I glanced at Gerard, and Anson sprayed him with sunscreen. The big man didn’t look like he minded the attention, and Anson’s tongue was practically rolling out of his mouth. I sighed and shook my head before I got back to work.

The day was never-ending, and at 5:00 p.m. I nearly cried with joy when Gerard blew a whistle.

“Inside! You have two minutes to shower. Do not look at each other. There will be an assigned counselor in the shower rooms.” Gerard scowled at each of us while he blew his whistle again like he thought we were in the marines.

“Yeah, getting their rocks off at the view,” I grumbled.

Myles chuckled.

We went through a door directly inside the low cement-block building that was our dormitory and to our left was a locker room that reminded me of the gym in my high school. There were twenty of us on our crew, and another crew would

be allowed to come in when we finished. Everyone rushed because they weren't kidding; the showers would only be on for two minutes once they started, and if you were only halfway through washing your hair, too bad for you. You got to live with suds and gunk until the next day. I wasn't really sure what sort of lesson they thought they were teaching us—except to hate them.

After the quick rinse off, we grabbed new clothes from the pile on the other side of the door as we left. Everything was one-size-fits-all here, even the boxers, which was gross. We had nothing that was ours. I took my T-shirt, white boxers, and shorts to a bench near the lockers. Now that we were done for the day, we wouldn't get our shoes back, probably because they were worried someone would try to run away or do something unmentionable with the strings.

There was nothing in our rooms but a mattress, either. We'd been told it was to make us closer to God, but after only a week here, I could understand how desperation might get the better of someone. After everyone was dressed, we were escorted barefoot to the cafeteria, where we had a simple meal of rice and chicken, which all things considered wasn't terrible. I picked at my food, even after the hard day of work, because the sun had gotten to me, and I knew what was coming next. I drank all my water, though. They were stingy with it, and I wanted every drop I could get.

Sermons that would rival Dad's were fast approaching. I fucking hated it.

Gerard, with Anson at his side, stopped by the long wooden table where I was sitting, and I held in a string of profanity as I glanced up at him. He had a smile that was too big and bright for anything good. He winked at me, blue eyes cold as ice.

“What's up?” I asked, just because I couldn't take sitting here in silence. The skinny blond guy at my side gave me a terrified look, but I was beyond caring. We'd come in the same day, and he hadn't even told me his name yet.

“Newbies, follow me,” Gerard said, and I shoved away my food, getting up from the bench and leaving it. We stomped through the dreary hallway behind him. If they’d tried to make this place look more like a prison, they couldn’t have done it. The gray walls were depressing. There wasn’t a drop of color in the entire building, as if they were afraid of anything that would remind someone of a rainbow. Five of us followed after Gerard into a room that was actually carpeted, with yet more institutional gray, and had old wooden student desks facing a projector screen at the front.

Well, at least this was different. I relaxed until my gaze caught on an odd device on a desk pushed against the wall to the left. It was a small black box with a wire coming out of it and a metal band on the end. Gerard noticed me staring and grinned.

“So, this is *what’s up*,” he said, winking at me. My stomach churned. “The reason we’re here and not somewhere in the lower forty-eight states is because the libs have driven Christ out of the country.”

Oh, this was going to be terrible. I could already tell.

“So, what is this for?” I asked, feeling ready to fight, even though I hadn’t said much of anything at all.

Gerard strode over to the desk and picked up the black device. “We’re going to hook each of you up to one of these, then play some indecent material that you’re probably used to watching up there.” He pointed, as if I couldn’t see the screen hanging at the front of the room. “If you become aroused, you’ll receive a simple, yet painful, shock. We use Scripture and psychological training here at the camp to help you turn away from sin. That’s why we only take people who are legally adults.” His nostrils flared, and I couldn’t help but think the sick jerk was very happy about doing his job.

My head spun and I felt like I was going to faint for a second.

“You’re going to have us watch porn and shock our cocks,” the blond to my right said, but he actually sounded excited about the idea. I turned to look at him, and he gave me

a sheepish grin. “Well, there’s a reason my parents forced me here.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

Gerard frowned at him, then back down at the device in his hand.

Of all the shit I’d thought would happen here, I could honestly say I’d never expected this. “I’m not doing it. The only person seeing my dick is my boyfriend,” I said.

There were some gasps from the other guys, and I cringed at the foul language, but I was over everything here, including Gerard and his kinky bullshit.

Anson frowned at me softly. “This is a proven method of helping to cure us. I don’t get hard for the, um, material anymore.” He glanced at Gerard out of the corner of his eye as if searching for approval and received a warm smile in return.

Gerard nodded. “This is a good retraining tool, and we can’t do it in the US. The Southern Church of Christian Loyalty has a deal with the local government, so we can bring people back to God.”

“That’s bullshit. No one here knows what you’re doing. This is illegal everywhere,” I snapped.

Gerard glared, and I was sure I must be right. He walked toward me. “This is for your own good. You can go first.” He held out the device in his hand.

“I’m not doing that,” I said, pointing and backing up. “Despite what my father probably thinks, I’ve never watched porn anyway.”

Anson huffed and rolled his eyes. “You can’t leave until you complete this program. There’s a monitor on the cuff that lets us know when you get through a full session without a physiological response.” He sounded cold and clinical and so much more evil than a simple, simpering ass-kisser. He was brainwashed.

“No.”

Gerard waved at the door. “Get out of here. Have fun. You won’t be going home until you complete the program.”

I slunk out, and when I opened the door there was another guard waiting. His name was Benji, according to his white plastic name tag, and I refused to look at his face on the walk back to my room—fuck it, it was a *cell*—and when he closed the door, it locked. They could say we were free to do whatever we wanted, but as long as we weren't allowed to leave, this place was a prison. I flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Jesus jail.

The next day was the same as each one I'd spent here. Before the sun was up a building-wide alarm went off, and we were all hustled from our rooms to the cafeteria, then out into the cold morning air. The nights in the desert were freezing compared to the days, and I shivered as I grabbed a shovel from the pile next to the door with my aching arms. Scanning the desert before I drove my shovel into the dirt near the ditch, I frowned because I thought I saw something glinting out there near a cluster of cactuses, but whatever I'd seen I couldn't spot again.

As Gerard came out to take his place under the umbrella, the sun began to rise higher and burn off some of the chill. He winked at me before slipping on his sunglasses. My heart pounded hard, and my body felt like it was electrified. I turned my back on him. Anson came around with the sunscreen, and the scent tickled my nose because he started at the far end of the line. I began to dig while rage burned through me.

What had I done to deserve this, really? I'd always listened to my parents. I'd done everything I'd ever been told to do during most of my life. As Anson came over to spray me, I finally realized I'd messed up.

I should've tried to escape somewhere on the highway in Arkansas.

Nothing, literally nothing, was worth being away from Ethan, even though I hadn't felt like I'd had much choice. Foolishly, I'd thought I could stay here and just nod my head the way I did with Dad, then tell them I was fine and go home. I hadn't really considered what kind of place this would be or

the methods they would use to try to make us good in the eyes of God.

Well, fuck Gerard, and fuck God, too, if this was really what he wanted from me.

I couldn't imagine that was right, though.

Anson got to me, and I didn't think. I shoved him. He cried out and rolled down into the ditch, and it looked like it hurt when he hit the bottom, but I didn't care anymore. "Why are you helping them? Gerard isn't going to fuck you, you moron," I shouted.

"Unless he already is," Myles said with a laugh, tossing his shovel over his shoulder. I didn't know what he was up to until he swung, and there was a loud *twang* behind me like something out of a cartoon. I glanced back in time to see Gerard go down onto his ass while he blinked up at the sky. Red bloomed across his face and two lines of scarlet began to pour from his nostrils.

Myles and I took off running, and everyone else scattered, some people heading for the desert, others going back to the building. Fuck that, I was getting away. Footsteps racing behind me sounded too heavy, and I just knew who it had to be—Gerard. I put as much speed as I could into bolting away because I was smaller and I knew I was faster. I huffed and puffed and quickly began to lose steam. Apparently a week digging a ditch in the desert sun had worn me down.

He barreled into my back, flattening me onto the ground. The wind was knocked out of me, and I struggled as he grabbed my arms and somehow got them anchored behind me. It hurt. He hauled me to my feet while I shouted in pain, then marched me toward the building. There was yelling and screaming as other people were chased by guards.

So far, they'd only sent me back to my room for not partaking in scheduled "activities," but this time I was taken to a row of doors lined up along the exterior wall. I would've said the outcroppings were sheds, but they were connected to the cement blocks of the main structure. I was dumped inside a little steel room with actual fucking bars across the window,

which didn't have any glass. I growled when I saw a hornet's nest in the upper-right corner, but thankfully there didn't seem to be any coming in or out. Gerard smiled down at me, and I scrambled away from him, but he stomped in and slapped me so hard across the face my head spun.

“Have fun baking in here, you little cock smoker.”

I flopped onto the floor, even though the entire room vaguely smelled like pee, and the heavy metal door shut. It didn't take long for me to hear Myles cursing and swearing, and then a door that sounded as if it was next to this room clanged shut. I sighed. Next time I would need to be smarter. If there was a next time. How many of these rooms were there?

It didn't take me long to figure out why everything smelled like urine as I relieved myself in the corner because there was nowhere else to do it. After two hours I was boiling hot and thirsty and starting to feel bad. My stomach churned. I lay down on the floor and closed my eyes.

The day crawled by.

No one came to let me out for dinner or give me any water, and I was starting to get scared as the sun went down. A chill that felt a thousand degrees colder than air conditioning cut through me down to the bone as darkness settled. I was drifting when I heard something that vaguely sounded like fireworks popping off in the distance. Frowning, I forced myself up onto my elbows, then heard the weird sound again.

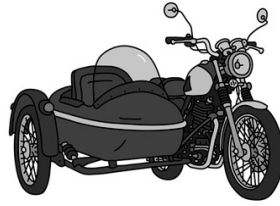
With an energy I hadn't realized I still had, I hopped to my feet and peeked out through the bars in the window. Gasping, I slapped my hands against the bars as I watched men dressed in black with ski masks over their faces rise up out of the ditch like scary demons. The lights on the building went out, and all the normal sounds that came with electricity—the central air that was pumping into the rest of the building—stopped.

“Help!” I called, desperately hoping that whoever was here was someone better than Gerard and the other guards. I gasped as a shadow emerged on the other side of the bars, and a phone flashlight went on, illuminating the underside of a grinning face. “Ethan!”

Beautiful excitement, the first I'd felt since the last time we were together, powered through me. I reached out, and he leaned forward. I pressed my face between the bars and my body jolted with the joy of touching my lips to his.

“Thank God, you're here.” I moaned, and he kissed me harder.

ETHAN



I DIDN'T WANT TO LET JONAS GO OR MOVE AWAY FROM HIM, but I needed to if I wanted to get him out of this prison. It had taken us too long to get here, but King had insisted on getting a bigger team together. In New Gothenburg, we'd met up with another club full of women called the Harlot Queens MC, but King didn't stop there because we met two other clubs halfway to Mexico. The Desert Bones MC were from Las Vegas, while the Greek Lords MC came from Louisiana, and they were a bunch of interesting guys, though I wasn't focused on making friends with them.

No, my mind had been on getting to Jonas and saving him from this hell.

We'd watched the camp for the entire day, and Scar had to physically hold me back on more than one occasion so I wouldn't rush in here and beat down the guards. There was one bastard I wanted to gut more than the rest, and I'd watched in fury as he'd tackled Jonas and dragged him to the cell he was currently in. Charley had to help Scar hold me back when I saw that happen. Only King slapping me across the face had made me focus on the plan, rather than my instincts.

Now I was here, my lips against Jonas's through the bars, and I would die for him. I would burn this place to the ground, exactly like I'd told King back at the farmhouse. I wanted to make these religious psychos hurt.

"Move back," I ordered, and Jonas shuffled away immediately.

One of the Bones—a young guy with curly blond hair and mismatched eyes—came up behind me with a wide grin and a sharp stare. He passed me a can that reminded me of shaving cream. From what I'd been told, he was the Bones' explosive expert. "It'll blow the door right off its hinges. Come on, let me show you how to do it."

Jonas pressed his face to the bars. "Hi, I'm Jonas."

The Boner—I smirked when I called them that in my head—grinned widely at him. He bounced on the tips of his toes and stuck his hand toward Jonas, who shook it. "Hey, Jonas. I'm Glitch. Now do me a tiny favor. Take a step back and close your eyes, okay? I'm about to make fireworks."

Jonas did exactly like Glitch ordered, backing up until he was pressed against the wall on the other side of the small room. Glitch snatched the can back out of my hands, and I watched with interest as he sprayed foam all around the door, then coated the hinges with an extra layer. He patted me on the arm. When he was done, he took out an electronic device that was smaller than a wristwatch and inserted a wire into the foam.

"Move back, lover boy."

Together, we hustled away, and Glitch pulled out his phone.

"Close your eyes."

I didn't know what he was tapping on the screen, but a few seconds later, the foam detonated with a bright burst around the door, which shook the metal and rattled it right off its hinges. The door came crashing down to the dusty ground. Glitch howled like a coyote in excitement.

"Oh, thar she blows! Oh baby, yes. You beautiful thing!" Glitch spread his arms and did a weird dancing glide across the dirt before clapping his hands excitedly. "Fucking beautiful!"

I shook my head as the smoke began to clear. Jonas stepped out onto the door. I met him halfway and hauled him into a hug and another deep kiss. To feel his firm muscles

against my body was electric, and I swore I was never letting him go again. He was mine.

“Hey, you two, stop making out and help me with the others.” Glitch laughed and shoved my shoulder, and I sent him a glare.

Jonas chuckled and followed Glitch to the next solid door.

“Myles, we’re getting you out,” Jonas said.

A man’s face appeared at the barred window, and even though the light from my phone didn’t let me see much, I thought he was about our age. He sighed in relief. “Christ, I was convinced I was gonna die. Who’s this?”

Jonas sent me a smile and reached out to grab my hand, his fingers warm against mine. “This is my boyfriend, Ethan.”

“He’s sexy.” Myles whistled.

Behind us were more explosions, and there were gunshots, too. The night erupted into complete chaos. The number of bikers swarming the camp was amazing to see, and I couldn’t help but take in the fucking awesome mess they made. Some of the bikers had lights attached to their jackets so they could see, and it created bizarre flashes of fighting. They grabbed the guards and forced them to the ground, tying their wrists and legs together so they couldn’t move.

The otherwise darkened grounds were lit up with fire as a vehicle that belonged to the camp exploded nearby, and more flashlights blazed to life. Each club handled their own part of this fucked-up rescue mission. The Greek Lords bikers wore masks on their lower faces, and they looked like monsters coming to collect souls for the underworld.

The Bones’ president, Trip, was kicking in the head of a guard on the ground, shouting something I couldn’t hear. He was easy to spot with his deep blue hair and wide build, but when I’d met him, he’d seemed laid-back and cool, the complete opposite of the angry man kicking ass, which made me wonder if he had a history with conversion camps.

The Harlots were making the biggest mess. They tore the camp apart, and my initial assumption that they would slow us

down was blown out of the water because they were merciless. I saw a woman with deep pink hair and snake bite piercings bring a bat down on one of the guard's legs, causing him to scream in pain, and she grinned, clearly enjoying it. Maybe Undertaker wasn't the coldest person I'd met. . . .

Jonas touched my arm, and I turned back to him with a grin, tilting my head.

"Let's get out of here," he pleaded, and even though I was shit at reading people, I saw the fear in his eyes, as though everything that had happened to him in this place had finally caught up to him. "Please, I want to leave."

I cuddled him close to my chest and kissed his forehead. "Not yet, baby. We've gotta finish this once and for all so they don't do this shit again."

He stared up at me, eyes glittering, and nodded. "Okay." He glanced over my shoulder and pointed at one of the guards lying on the ground, curled up in front of a Harlot as she kicked him in the face. His nose was bloody and he tried to twist away from her. "Him. Hurt him. His name is Gerard, and he put us in those cells. He enjoys every second of the sick crap he does in this place."

I nodded, hunger to hurt that fucker making me step away from Jonas. I stalked my way over to Gerard and stopped beside a Harlot with black hair and a septum piercing. She was tall and curvy, wearing a leather corset that propped up her boobs in a way that might've interested me if I was into women. Jonas was right behind me, his footsteps quiet compared to the screaming and gunshots happening around us.

"We want a turn with him." I gave Gerard a pointed look. "He hurt my boyfriend."

The Harlot raised her eyebrows and held up her palms. "He's all yours, sugar." The thick Southern accent surprised me for a moment, but I finally nodded in thanks as she stepped away.

Jonas moved closer to Gerard, who raised his gaze from where he lay on the ground. Gerard was a big man, muscular

and wide, and while Jonas was ripped, too, Gerard had something Jonas didn't—a gun. The weapon was gone now, probably taken by the Harlot, but earlier today he could've murdered Jonas in cold blood. The idea that this man had threatened my boyfriend had me shooting forward, kicking him across the jaw.

Crack.

Gerard screamed, a bone in his face jutting through the skin. When I went to kick him again, Jonas grabbed my elbow, stopping me.

He shook his head. “Let me do it.”

“Are you sure, baby?” He was such an angel that he couldn't mean it. I wrapped an arm around him and laid a kiss on the skin behind his ear.

He shivered and inhaled deeply. “Yes, I'm sure. I deserve this.”

“Here, honey.” Another Harlot came up behind us with a bloody baseball bat. She winked as she passed the bat to Jonas. With short brown hair and a scar that traveled across her jaw, she didn't look like someone to mess with. “Give him a good beating. This scum needs to learn a lesson or two.”

Jonas gave her a small nervous nod and gripped the bat so tightly in his hand that his knuckles turned white. His body shook as he stared down at Gerard. Jonas was just as sweet and innocent in the darkness of the night as he was in daylight. This man was pure, and while he deserved every bit of revenge, the hesitation took too long, and I saw it for what it was. He couldn't hurt Gerard, not because Gerard didn't deserve it, but because Jonas was a good person, even after the pain he'd been through.

I reached out and took the bat from him.

He gave me a startled glance.

“You don't have to do this,” I whispered, laying another kiss on his cheek. “Let me be your punisher. I will be the one who hurts them for you. I will make them bleed and scream in pain for you. I will have them begging for your mercy while

they also ask for God's help. I will be your justice and your executioner. I'm yours, Jonas."

"I would never use you that way." His voice was so soft, and it confirmed he was too sweet for this world, and even this asshole on the ground hadn't destroyed his good heart.

"You're not using me." I cupped his face like he was a precious treasure. "You rescued me from myself, and now it's my turn to rescue you from anyone who wants to hurt you. Let me be that for you."

"You saved me first, from that Murph guy." He smiled, and it broke my heart because I fucking loved it. I didn't care that we'd only had one date, I would die for him.

I touched my forehead against his. "Let me be your villain, the one who makes him suffer for your pain."

"You're not that to me, though, Ethan. You're not a bad person."

Behind us was another explosion that rocked us on our feet, but I held on tightly to him. There were cackles of insane laughter. I didn't care what was happening because all that mattered was Jonas.

"I am but not to you. Never to you. I'm trash, but you don't see that."

He took a shuddery breath. "Don't say those things. You're not. You're as good as gold."

I laughed because I couldn't help it. "I'm fool's gold."

"Then I'm a fool." He slammed his mouth against mine, and I ate his lips, not wanting to let him go anytime soon.

Someone cleared their throat behind us, and the Harlot who had handed Jonas the bat smirked. "He's trying to sneak off."

I broke away from Jonas and spun on my heel, focusing on Gerard as he crawled along the ground, half dragging himself through the dirt. I didn't know where he thought he was going. The camp was surrounded by King's army, and this piece of shit wasn't getting out of here alive.

I swung the bat in a circle while I walked toward the desperate man. Resting the end in the middle of his back, I smirked when he froze in fear. “Going somewhere, twatbag?”

The big man turned his head to stare at me, his swollen bottom lip quivering. “Please. Let me go. I swear to God I’ll never tell a soul.”

I laughed. “Am I supposed to believe your word, you psychopath? Did you enjoy torturing people?”

He shook his head. “We were doing God’s work. They wanted to change.”

I tapped the end of the bat against his back harder, and he tensed. “Liar. I don’t believe in your God, but I also think that if he did exist, he wouldn’t ask you to hurt people in his name.”

The acidic stench of piss filled the air, and I scrunched up my nose.

“Did you actually piss your pants?” I shook my head and chuckled.

Myles, the guy who’d been in the small cell next to Jonas, came up to stand nearby. “Kick his ass, Jonas’s boyfriend! Make that fucker bleed.”

I snorted and didn’t exactly mind Myles’s demand. Raising the bat, I brought it down across Gerard’s back, eliciting a loud scream of agony from him.

“Again!” Myles growled out loudly.

So, I did. Again and again, I slammed the bat across Gerard’s back until I heard a crack that I thought was his spine. His yells of pain filled the air, joining in with the rest of the chaotic noise happening around us.

I half expected Jonas to stop me, but he watched, eyes wide as I got his revenge for him.

An hour later, the guards’ dead bodies were thrown in a pile at the bottom of the ditch. Gerard’s was on top, his face battered and crumpled from the bat. Jonas watched the entire time, never looking away once. While I’d expected him to be

disgusted afterward, he'd accepted my hug freely, some of the tension gone from his body.

The buildings that the camp used were on fire, the large flames eating away the roof and reaching for the sky. The men and women who had been prisoners here watched as the place that had tormented them was burned to the ground, and not one of them appeared upset—just the opposite.

One guy—who Jonas said was corrupted and brainwashed—Anson, had tears in his eyes, but there wasn't quite regret in his gaze, which made me hold out hope for him. Maybe he *knew* the camp had been a horrible place, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

The bikers surrounded the group, protecting them in a way their families should've.

“What happens to us now?” Myles glanced around like he wasn't quite sure who he was asking. “My parents ripped me out of my first year of college to send me to this nightmare. I can't imagine what happened to my apartment.”

King cleared his throat. “Now, you go back to the US. We've got a bus, and we found your passports that they had stashed away. One of our men who came over legally will take you back over the border.”

“And what? We'll go back to our parents?” A man with curly brown hair stared at King with scared eyes. “I can't go back to them. Dad said he'll kill me if I go back *uncured*.”

The bikers shifted, and a wave of animosity washed through them, if the expressions that crossed their faces were anything to go by. I could tell that if there was one thing all the clubs agreed on, it was that you didn't hurt innocent people.

A beautiful woman with her black hair up in a bun and a midnight complexion stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder. Her black leather jacket reflected the flames from the burning building. “You don't have to worry about that. We'll protect you, if it comes down to it. New Gothenburg has resources for people. New York's an all right state to live in.” She smiled.

One of the Greek Lords grunted behind his skull half mask. He had long hair that he'd tied up into a bun on the back of his head. "We've had this discussion. Each of our clubs will set up a sanctuary for you. We have funds. You'll get a new identity if you feel safer that way, and you'll finish school if you need to do that. You'll have the right to live free of judgment. Love whoever you want. No one will stop you."

"You can choose where you want to go." King raised his hand. "New Gothenburg is in New York, where you'll be protected by the Kings and the Harlots. St. Loren is in Louisiana, where you'll be with the Greek Lords. Las Vegas is obviously in Nevada, with the Bones. There's another club called the Norse Lords in Pleasant Beach over in California. They will set up a home for you, too. The choice will be yours, because while we'll help you, we're not here to tell you how to live your fucking life."

Chatter began immediately. The camp survivors turned to each other and began to talk about where they could possibly want to go. Anson had his head down and his arms wrapped around himself, his entire body trembling.

"Will you go with us in the bus?" Jonas whispered from beside me.

I turned and wrapped my arms around him, bringing him against my chest. He'd been quiet for the last hour. Too quiet. I wanted to ask him what was going through his head, but I didn't know *how*. I'd never known how to communicate with people very well, but I wanted to with Jonas.

"No. I don't have a passport. I never needed one, so I came over the border in a tunnel with most of the other bikers." I sighed and shrugged. "I can't go with you on the bus, but I'll meet you on the other side. They're stopping somewhere over in Texas. There's some Irish mob boss over there who owes the Harlots and Kings a favor for something. I'm not sure what. But he's setting up a camp there for us. That's where everyone will have to make their decision."

"Will you be staying in New Gothenburg?" He hid his face against my neck, and I heard him inhale, then his lips touched

my skin.

I smiled. “Yeah. I’m a prospect with the Kings now.”

“If we stay in the trailer park, Dad could find me again.” His voice wobbled, and I held him tighter.

I inhaled through my nose and closed my eyes. Would he think I was a monster if I told him the truth? “You don’t have to worry about him.”

“Why?” He leaned away from his safe spot against my neck.

When I glanced at him, I immediately saw the suspicion.

“What did you do?” he asked quietly.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. I couldn’t tell him the truth, because while he saw me kill strangers, this was different. This was his father. I smiled. “I told him to stay away, and he got the message. Trust me.”

He gave me a shaky smile. “I do trust you.”

And it was a mistake. I tugged him back into a hug, wishing I hadn’t lied to him. He couldn’t hate me; I wouldn’t allow it. What he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

JONAS



MY EYES STUNG FROM ALL THE EXPOSURE TO SMOKE AS I blinked them against the glare of headlights approaching from the opposite direction. I sat nervously as a Customs Officer stood at the front of the bus staring along at us. He swiped his fingers across the lapel of his navy blue short-sleeved button-down.

What if they send us back into Mexico?

He shifted, and his head nearly bumped the roof of the repurposed school bus we were all trapped in. A different officer was leafing through our passports in a cardboard box, occasionally holding one up and staring back at us. Her brown eyes were wide as they darted around. Her lips pursed as she glanced back at the bus driver.

“Where were all these kids staying?” she asked.

I flinched. She had gray hair peeking out from underneath her blue hat, so I supposed to her we were all pretty young—*kids*.

“They were at a volunteer activity for church.”

Myles snorted at my side, and I elbowed him. He batted at my elbow.

The officers glanced at each other, then the lady handed the box back to the bus driver. With a wave, she got off the bus. The other officer glared around at us, as if he thought we were lying but couldn’t quite figure out how, before he clomped down the steps.

Exhausted, I slumped against the window and took a bite out of the Snickers bar one of the Harlots had given me as soon as we got onto the bus. The sugar and chocolate went a long way toward making me feel human again. I'd already chugged two bottles of water, and I hummed as Myles passed me another one. I couldn't even begin to guess how dehydrated I'd been. He leaned lightly against my side as a shiver ran through him, and I didn't think he was doing it on purpose, but I fully understood why he wanted some human contact.

One of the Harlots got up from where she'd been sitting in the seat behind the driver and came back to plop in the empty one in front of us. She smiled at me when I caught her eye and smoothed her short blonde hair back behind one ear, which made it easier to see the tattoo of an olive branch that ran from above her ear along her hairline to the center of her forehead. She pushed up the glasses on her nose and smiled at me.

"I'm Charity." She held out her hand, and I shook it, staring at her black fingernail polish. I was dazed by the tattoos on her neck. I didn't think I'd ever been near a woman with so much ink. I couldn't imagine what Mom would think about her, or rather I could, and those thoughts made me feel awful. God, I missed Ethan. I wished with all my heart he'd been able to ride on the bus with us, but he couldn't.

"Jonas," I said, forcing my attention back to her. "That's Myles."

He smacked my shoulder and smiled at me.

She stared at Myles for a second before she grinned at him. "If you come to New Gothenburg, I can find you a job. I work in accounting. My name is. . . . Oh, well, you probably just heard."

"Charity," Myles said, wagging his eyebrows. "I'm a good listener."

"Yes." She shrugged and puffed out a long breath, as if maybe he'd flustered her.

“I want to go there. That’s where you’re headed, right, Jonas?” he asked, glancing at me.

With a sigh, I forced a smile. “It’s my hometown. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

Myles leaned harder against my shoulder, clearly seeking comfort.

Charity drummed on the top of the seat in front of us. “We’ll make sure you’re all okay. This was a bunch of shit.” She scowled around the bus and the hoop through her left nostril glittered. “Sapphira, our president, hates things like this. I do, too. She’s a good person.” Charity bit her lip, then leaned closer to us. “Her son died when he was small, and she won’t hesitate to send someone six feet under who hurts their kids. Where are your parents?” She rested her chin on the seat and stared at Myles.

“Uh, that’s okay,” he said with a nervous chuckle. “I would rather just not talk to them ever again. That was already my plan.”

Charity nodded before sitting back and tugging something out of her pocket. She handed a pink business card to Myles. “Keep that. Each of the Harlots decided we’re going to pick someone to help out once they get to New Gothenburg. You’re my pick of the litter.” She wrinkled her nose at him as she smiled. “We’ll get you more info tomorrow when everyone breaks apart to travel. We’ll have vans going to New Gothenburg because this bus belongs to the Desert Bones MC, and they’ll be heading back to Las Vegas.”

Myles smiled at her and nodded, and she moved on to sit with a woman who’d been rescued from the camp. Charity grinned at her, and I assumed Charity was asking her where she thought she would like to go as well.

Myles nudged me with his elbow, and I glanced into his face. His bottom lip jutted in my direction. “Will you be okay with your boyfriend?”

Smiling, I turned to stare out the window. “I’ll be happier with him than I’ve ever been in my entire life.”

“That’s good,” Myles said softly, his tone a little wistful.

It took forever to travel to the next pit stop on our journey. Nerves hit me as we passed a sign for a place called Bluebell State Campgrounds. Just seeing the yellow words on the brown sign twisted my stomach into knots, and I didn’t think I would ever look at the word *camp* the same way again. As the bus came to a stop in front of a cheerfully lit small log building, Charity stood up.

Her face flushed in a way it hadn’t when we were talking to her, and with the way she ducked her head, I thought maybe she wasn’t very good at being the center of attention. She fiddled with her glasses, then squared her shoulders.

“Everyone, pick a friend. Please make sure it’s someone you’re comfortable bunking with. We’re going to have two people per cabin. There are beds in there, but it’s just one big room. The bathrooms are in that building,” she said, pointing at the one nearby with all the lights glowing. Bugs gathered around the bright bulbs in a swarm.

“What do you think?” Myles asked, glancing at me. He tilted his head.

The bus door opened with a squeak, and Ethan hopped up the steps, looking directly at me. My stomach unclenched and my body tingled as I smiled at him.

“Sorry. I’m spoken for,” I said.

Myles chuckled and stood up so I could squeeze out of the seat. I made my way up the aisle and into Ethan’s arms, and he gave me a big hug. I wanted more. I didn’t know if he would ever be able to hold me tight enough after a week in that hellish nightmare.

“Are you okay?” Ethan pressed a kiss to my temple.

“Mm-hmm.”

He leaned back to look at me, and I shrugged. His blond hair was a little dirty from who knew what, but I didn’t care as I ran my fingers through it. I wasn’t anywhere close to fine, but I wasn’t stuck in that camp anymore, so I couldn’t complain much.

We were too big to walk off the bus in each other's arms without tripping and dying, so he let me go and turned around to get off the bus. I followed after him, and the second my feet touched the ground, he grabbed my hand. I was confused when he started tugging me toward the building to our right.

“What are we doing?”

“You're covered in soot,” he said, tone surprisingly gentle. He ran his thumb across my cheek. “And dirt, and. . . Well, you definitely need a shower.” He led me to the door on the left that was marked with a small sign that said Cowboys. On the other side of the building there was a sign that said Cowgirls. I felt bad because one of the people who'd stepped off the bus stood frowning between the different doors.

“Just pick the one you want,” a big man with a Texan accent yelled at them. I turned to get a better look at the guy, and he had wide shoulders and black hair.

With a laugh, they nodded and went to the right. I watched as the door swung shut behind them, and then Ethan tugged me inside the bathroom nearest us.

The white tile and overhead lighting made everything bright enough to hurt my eyes and leave me blinking. We passed sinks and urinals and stalls, and we kept going. In the next room there were showers on both sides with flimsy white curtains, and three of the showers on the left were already running. The sound of splashing water echoed—a noise sent directly from heaven.

“Yes, a real shower,” I said with a happy sigh.

“Hey,” someone in a leather Kings' vest said. He was sitting on a stool right before the showers, and beside him was a table with towels and clothes that reminded me far too much of the camp. I had trouble swallowing the spit in my mouth. “I'm Dallas.” He gazed at me with sad brown eyes, but there was a small smile on his face. His dark hair curled around his ears and he appeared exhausted, with purple bags under his eyes.

I blinked at him. “You don’t sound like you’re from Texas.”

He sighed and handed me a towel, washcloth, and soap. “I’m not. That’s just my name.”

Ethan snatched the towel from me, and he swiped up a pair of shorts and a black T-shirt from the table. There didn’t seem to be any underwear, but I didn’t care after everything I’d been through. I just wanted to be clean and not have anything touching my body that had come from that awful fucking camp. I hurried toward the showers on my right and went into the first one. I didn’t have any shower shoes, but I didn’t really care. I set down my washcloth and bar of soap on a small metal rack that was hanging on the wall, then stripped and tossed all my clothes over the shower curtain.

The moment I was naked I began to feel uncomfortable.

“Ethan!” I called.

“Are you okay?” He came over and I could see the tips of his boots underneath the shower curtain.

“Could you maybe just stand right there?” I asked, feeling silly but also completely unable to take a shower otherwise.

“Anything you want,” he said quietly.

“Thank you.”

I turned the water on and yelped at the cold deluge, then laughed as it slowly became steamy and warm. I moaned and stood under the water. I’d missed being able to take my time.

“Why are you making all those noises?” Ethan whispered near the curtain. I could clearly see his outline on the other side. My cock felt heavy and excited for the first time since this nightmare had started.

I snickered and felt better than I had in a long time. “Because the water feels good. Why did you think?” I asked, grabbing the soap and washcloth. I used the bar of soap to lather my hair. Anything would be better than smelling like that cell.

“No reason,” he said, then tapped the shower curtain.

I laughed.

Even though Ethan was waiting for me, I took the longest shower of my life and washed my hair four times to make sure I got the stench of smoke and piss out of every pore of my body. I scrubbed and scrubbed and might've soaped up a fifth time, but Ethan tapped on the shower curtain again, and I let go of the urge, setting the soap back on the shelf and hanging the washcloth there.

“Towel, please?”

He slipped the towel over to me, and I hurried to dry off. I stuck a hand out for my clothes, and he sighed, but I chuckled as he passed them in. I dressed quickly, then slid back the shower curtain.

Ethan smiled, and I loved the way he always looked like he was thinking something a little sexy.

“You need it next.”

He shrugged. “I want to get you in our cabin,” he said gruffly. I stood very still as he brushed his fingers through my damp hair. “You deserve to relax. I can come back later.”

I wanted to argue with him, but I stifled a yawn and nodded instead.

When Ethan took my hand a thrill zipped through my body, and it was so much more potent after being stressed that I might not see him ever again. I didn't know where he'd found them, but he bent and slipped some cheap flip-flops onto my feet. My heart hammered as I walked with him outside into the pleasant warmth of the night. There were other people standing around outside the door when we emerged, waiting their turn, and I recognized some of them, but others I didn't.

Ethan put his arm around me when a tall guy with blue hair came walking over, a hand-rolled cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth. He inhaled, and the end burned bright red. It took me a moment to realize with the sweet smell that it was probably marijuana. He blew out a long stream of smoke toward the sky, then grinned at me.

“Hey, Ethan. This is the guy who got us all out here, huh?” He held out his big hand, and I shook with him.

“Thank you. . . ?”

“Trip. They call me Trip. Oh, don’t thank me. This was a pure fucking pleasure.” He snorted and shook his head, an unhappy expression passing across his face. He slapped Ethan’s shoulder with the back of his hand in a friendly way. “You Kings are never boring!”

“Yeah, thanks again, man. I want to get him to bed,” Ethan said, giving me a firm squeeze around the middle.

Trip stood back and gestured off to his left toward a row of log cabins that all had lights burning beside their doors. I wanted to fucking cry. We would have some privacy, and those homey buildings were worlds away from the desert prison I’d just been in. Ethan had a key in his pocket when we reached the third cabin in the row, so I assumed he’d already gotten it before he met me at the bus. He opened the door and let us inside. I sucked in a breath because the room was dim, but as my eyes adjusted, I noticed a small night-light giving off a friendly glow on the far wall. He strode across the room and turned on a lamp on a nightstand. I hurried inside and locked the door.

Ethan took up a lot of space.

He wasn’t a small guy, and the room wasn’t huge. He shrugged off his jacket and it fell on the floor. The corner of his lips twisted up into a smirk as he unlaced his boots and kicked them away. I crept toward him as he emptied his pockets onto the nightstand. Bullets rolled, and I reached out to stop one from falling off the edge. A knife. His wallet. I smiled at the sight of our initials and the heart on the leather, but I sucked in a breath when lube and a few condoms were plunked down. He glanced at me, and my face heated.

“Well,” he said, but then he pursed his lips.

I grinned. All the shyness I’d felt before was replaced by a thrill that made me feel desperate to touch him. And with the

way Ethan was looking at me, I was sure he must want me, too. With a burst of confidence, I pressed my lips to his.

Ethan grasped the back of my neck and held me still as he devoured my mouth. He tasted like sweat and dirt, and I swore I caught the tang of blood, but I didn't care. I sucked on his tongue as he slipped it into my mouth and held on tight. As he pulled away, I nipped his lip because I didn't want him to stop, and he growled and kissed along my cheek to my jaw. When he reached my neck, he sank his teeth lightly into the skin there.

"Oh, that feels good," I whispered.

Then he bit down. The bright burst of sensation should've been pain—I knew that—but I'd been running on adrenaline since he showed up tonight, and it all felt strangely good. As he moved to a different spot on my neck and sucked, I was hit by an avalanche of need—buried and completely in over my head. My cock pushed out the front of my gray shorts and throbbed so much it almost buckled my knees.

"Do it harder." I licked my lips and whimpered when he did as I asked. "I don't want anyone to ever be able to take me away from you again without knowing I'm yours. Do it again, Ethan. Please."

He growled and leaned back, knocking his forehead against mine as he stared into my eyes. "I wanted to treat you nice."

"This is everything," I muttered, then pecked a kiss onto his lips. "I thought I was going to die there. Or worse, die a virgin. To heck with that."

Ethan found a new spot and bit me, dragging me against his body. I nudged my hard cock against his upper thigh, and he licked away the sting, sending a sizzle of electricity bouncing through my stomach.

"While I was there, I wished a thousand times that I'd let you touch me on the Ferris wheel." I tugged on his shirt.

He pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, so soft I could barely feel it. "You weren't ready. You told me you weren't ready."

He studied my face with a small frown.

I used his shirt to pull him closer. "I am now."

Ethan didn't hesitate, just covered my mouth with his again. My entire world narrowed down to him. Motorcycle engines revved outside, and I barely registered the sound. Ethan slid his hands under my shirt, and the sensation of his fingers on my bare skin was like the sun shining after a storm, warming me directly to my core. I gasped as he slid his hands up my back, then rushed to lift my shirt off and toss it on the floor. He leaned down and nipped tiny bites across my chest that didn't quite hurt but had all my attention focused on him.

I couldn't think of anything except the heat of his mouth as he closed his lips over my left nipple. The point of his tongue teased me, and I whimpered. He sucked hard, and I scrabbled my hands against his shoulders, then tugged at the material of his shirt. He broke away to strip off his top, but then his fingers were on my waistband. He dropped to his knees. I rested my hands over his, and he stared up at me, expression intense.

"I've never done anything, but I want to do everything with you, Ethan. I don't want to miss a single thing. Don't stop once we start, just tell me what to do."

He smirked and it was just the right amount of a bad boy look to curl my toes, and then he tugged down my shorts. I kicked off my flip-flops and bit my lip. My cock bounced up and smacked against my lower abs. He stared at me for a second, lips parted, as if he couldn't get enough of looking at me. I ran my fingers through his hair, and he tilted his head back, staring up into my face.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he said, without a hint of sarcasm.

Warmth started in my cheeks, then spread down my neck until my whole body glowed from the compliment. I shrugged and smiled. I felt the same way about him as I stared at his chiseled chest. I didn't think that he worked out a lot, but he was constantly on the move and doing things. The way a trail of hair disappeared into his jeans had me feeling like I might

overheat and tip over onto my ass. My cock pulsed and a drop of precum rolled down my shaft, distracting me into glancing at it.

His gaze followed mine, and I went up on tiptoe as he bent and licked the drop off my skin. My cockhead flushed red and stayed that way, thumping in time to my heartbeat, winding me up. He closed his hand around my shaft and stared up at me as he sucked on my cockhead. I dug my fingernails into the skin of his shoulders as pleasure blasted through me, unable to stop myself. He hummed and sucked harder, and I had to thrust into the scorching, wet heat of his mouth. He pulled off me with a *pop* and shot to his feet, unbuckling his belt as he stood.

“Let me help,” I said in a daze, reaching for him, but the belt was already open, and he unzipped his jeans. I rested my hands on his hips as he shoved off his pants and underwear at the same time, and I stared at his thick cock. I couldn’t stop myself from memorizing all the differences. He wasn’t longer than me, but he was wider, and his cockhead was bigger. His skin tone there on the tip was a bright pink that reminded me of candy—something I often hadn’t had when I was younger. He was a temptation, one I wanted to indulge in.

He bared his teeth as I traced my fingertips along him, reveling in the soft skin over his hard flesh. Then, I closed my hand around him and gave him a soft tug. He grunted. With a shocking move that was so fast I couldn’t keep track of it, he grabbed me around the waist and turned, dropping me onto the bed.

With a curse, Ethan fought with his pants, and I chuckled. When he was finally naked, he glanced at me with a head tilt that was clearly asking if I wanted to keep going.

I nodded as he covered my body with his and kissed me until I was struggling to breathe. I dragged him closer and my cock nudged against his. I moaned as a million different wonderful things I’d never felt overwhelmed me. I clawed at his back with my fingers, and he hissed.

“Sorry,” I said, realizing I’d been digging in my nails.

“Don’t stop. Fuck, don’t stop,” he muttered and kissed me again. He snagged one of my legs, and I got the idea and wrapped them around him, grinding our cocks together as I arched my body. Soon the bed was squeaking, and I had to turn my head away to drag in air because everything felt too good, too fast.

“I’m gonna come,” I said.

Ethan grunted and eased away from me, and I tried to keep him in place. He grinned and kissed my cheek as he stretched an arm to the side, and I realized he was grabbing the lube. I bit the inside of my bottom lip as he popped the top and stared into my eyes. He’d been planning this, or something like it, and I was glad he’d thought ahead.

“Are you—”

“Don’t even ask. From here on out, if you want to do something with me, do it, and I’ll let you know if I don’t want it,” I said.

He swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed. “I don’t want to scare you off.”

I leaned up and kissed him hard enough that it was almost painful. “I never want to miss out on anything with you. If I’m a little scared, oh well. I would rather be scared and get everything you have to give.”

Ethan nodded and went up on his knees. He licked his lips and stared down at my body, and I had to chuckle as he glanced at my face and shrugged. “You’re probably the hottest guy I’ve ever been with. You’re a ten.”

“Are you keeping track to brag?” I asked, grinning at him.

“Well, yeah.” His smile was wide and real, and I wanted to keep it on his face.

“Ethan, I. . . . Will you. . . . Will you make love to me?”

He squirted lube onto his fingers and nodded. “Tell me, okay? If it’s too much?”

My cock jerked toward my abs when he slid his fingers down behind my balls, and I curled up and grabbed my thighs,

giving him room to work. “The only thing that’s too much is the wait,” I said with a grin.

He kissed me, and I moaned as he tapped three fingers against my hole. I tensed, but he deepened the kiss, distracting me, and I whimpered as he used one finger to slip into my ass. The stretch wasn’t awful, but he quickly added a second finger, then the third, and I shivered at the slight burn as he opened up my hole. I dropped my head back against the bed.

“Fuck, I need to get the condom,” he muttered.

I shook my head. “I want you.”

“But—”

I leaned up and sucked on his bottom lip.

He fucked his fingers deep into my ass, which I really hadn’t been prepared for, but everything he was doing was like a miracle in my body that made my cock harder. He tugged his fingers out of my hole, causing a slight twinge. I wasn’t sure why he was stopping, but then he slapped the lube into my palm and sat up a little.

“Take care of me.” Ethan’s words were almost a growl.

This couldn’t be real.

I was about to have sex with Ethan, this amazing guy who somehow wanted to be with me despite all the trouble I’d caused for him. I squeezed lube onto my hand, then quickly realized it was too much. I coated his cock, and his face screwed up as he thrust into my fist. He let out a long breath and shoved me flat against the bed.

“I want to fuck so bad. Just tell me when I can go because I’m ready now,” he said, words trembling. At first, I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but he lifted my legs onto his shoulders, smearing lube on my skin. With a wink, he leaned in and pressed his cock against my hole.

Excitement streaked through me, but he didn’t slip inside, just tapped against my hole.

He let out a chuckle. “You’ll have to relax.”

Biting the tip of my tongue, I nodded.

Ethan pushed again, and once more—nothing. He snickered and groaned, leaning his head forward. “I’m not tiny. You have to let me in.”

“How?” I asked, frowning.

“Uh—” His eyebrows dove. “—I’ve heard you should push out.”

“You’ve never done it?”

He shook his head, and even though it wasn’t very useful, I was happy that we both had some things we hadn’t done yet. Closing my eyes, I nodded, and he tried again. This time, I focused on the directions he’d given me, and I gasped as he slid inside me a little bit. The stretch of his cock in my ass blew my mind and had me scrabbling at the blankets. Then he kept going. I cried out as he nudged something in my ass that distracted me from the slight burn of him filling me.

“Oh! What?”

He stayed still.

I forced my eyes open to stare into his face, which was a mask of intense concentration.

“Huh?” he asked.

I laughed. “That felt really good for a second.”

He smirked and carefully pulled out. I hissed, but the burn was less than it had been, and when he rocked back in that good tension bolted through my cock from the root all the way to my cockhead again.

“There!” I dragged him closer, and he leaned in to kiss me.

Ethan went from barely moving to an explosion of motion that quickly destroyed my worry that this might stay painful. All I could focus on was the way him smashing against that spot in my ass made my dick feel like it was going to erupt with cum.

“That’s your prostate,” he said with a grin, then smooched my ear.

“Love it. Can we play with it every day?”

He groaned and kissed me again, nodding while he swallowed my shouts. I had no idea how much time passed, but everything kept feeling better and better until I was arching up to grind against him and smash our bodies together. The bed squeaked, distracting me for a moment, but then Ethan twisted his hips, and I couldn't do anything but make almost the exact same noise. He pummeled my ass with his dick, battering that delicious spot. Bliss burst through me. I held on to him as he kept moving, but I would've believed it if he'd told me my body stopped existing for a few minutes.

“Yes, yes, fuck yes. You're beautiful, Jonas. Damn it,” he snarled, then pushed deep into my hole, but joy was still rolling through me in waves while my balls dumped every last drop of cum between us. There was a burst of warmth in my ass—his load—and I whimpered at how good every part of this felt.

When I finally started feeling like myself again, I was sweaty and sticky and oddly aware of the lube smeared on my leg, but I felt so good with his heavy weight anchoring me in place that I didn't care. I never wanted him to move.

Ethan rested his forehead against mine, almost glaring into my eyes. “Are you okay? Tell me for real.”

With his cock still buried deep inside me, I shut my eyes. “I feel safe with you.” Tears slid out of my eyes as my chest tightened. “But I was so scared. While I was stuck in that hellhole, I realized something.”

“What?” he asked, then dropped a harsh kiss on my lips.

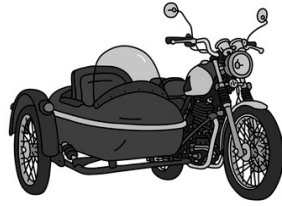
“I love you. Thank you for finding me, Ethan. I owe you everything.”

He gasped, then licked his tongue into my mouth, as gentle with this kiss as the last one had been rough. “Always. There's no place anyone could hide you that I wouldn't find you.”

More tears slipped out of the corners of my eyes. I hadn't expected Ethan to have a lot of patience with emotional stuff, but he held me and kissed my cheeks. I wrapped my arms

around him and clung. I wasn't sad or scared, exactly, but I'd been sure I was going to die, and now I had nothing but hope for the future.

ETHAN



IT TOOK US A FEW DAYS TO GET HOME. THE CAMP SURVIVORS who had decided to go with us to New Gothenburg immediately went with the Kings and the Harlots so they could set them up in their new home, somewhere over on the southwest side in an old apartment building they would be sharing. Jonas insisted on seeing if they were okay, so we went to check on them.

King and the Harlots' president, Sapphira, took charge together, working as a team and ordering around their members. There were two separate levels in the large gray brick building, one for guys and one for girls. I noticed two people seemed unsure about where they should go, and when Sapphira talked to them, I overheard them telling her they were nonbinary.

"Where would you be most comfortable?" She wrapped an arm around each of them. "You choose that. You're safe here."

Jonas stared around, eyes wide as he took in the various people walking through the double doors. I couldn't help but watch him. He looked good in my clothing—even though everything was a little big on him—and the new boots we'd stopped to buy for him, along with a few essentials.

"This is where they'll be staying? Honestly, I didn't realize this many people would come to New Gothenburg," he said.

I shrugged. "I guess."

King hadn't talked about the plan with me when it came to *after* we rescued everyone. I'd known he had something set

up, but I hadn't known what until now.

Scar stepped up beside us and crossed his arms, and Charley was at his side. "One thing we're good at is protecting people. Adults can make their own choices, but when assholes put kids in danger because of their selfishness, that's when we step in."

Jonas sighed. "They made a big deal about the fact that we were over eighteen and there willingly, but we weren't allowed to leave. It was just another way they were gaslighting us."

Charley nodded. "Not all the Kings and Harlots went to Mexico. The ones who stayed behind cleaned this place out and got some furniture in there for them."

"You bought a building?" Jonas's eyes went even wider, which I didn't think was possible, and I couldn't help but smile at how adorable he was.

Charley chuckled. "No, we have connections. This place was for sale, but we couldn't afford it. King got in contact with someone we know, the owner of the Killough Company, who funded this place."

"The Killough Company? Isn't that a shipping and logistics business? I'm surprised they cared." Jonas leaned against me, and I curled my arms around him tightly. He hadn't left my side since we got to the campground in Texas. Wherever I went, he came along, whether it was to the bathroom or for a walk to stretch my legs when we stopped for a rest on the trip back. While the rest of the victims—because that's what they were—took vans that the clubs provided, Jonas had insisted on riding with me in the sidecar on *our* bike. While I'd had plans to get rid of the sidecar, I was beginning to think Jonas liked it too much, so I was going to keep it instead.

Scar laughed so loudly that he startled a woman who'd been at the camp. Apparently they'd had a small section for them. Jonas hadn't encountered anyone but guys until after we'd come in to bust up the place. She wrapped her arms around herself tighter, and a Harlot came up to her, whispering something and glaring at Scar.

“Yeah, *sure*. That’s what the Killough Company is.” He shrugged.

Jonas frowned and so did I.

“But that’s what they are, right?” Jonas glanced at me, and I shook my head because I didn’t know what Scar was talking about.

Charley elbowed Scar hard enough that he winced and glared. “Ignore this jerk. You’re right, the Killough Company does do shipping and logistics.”

I had a feeling there was more to the story, and if this Killough Company was friends with the Kings, it probably included illegal crap.

“As long as they’re safe.” Jonas turned back to stare at his friends, who were clearly very scared. “They need to be taken care of. If their families find out where they are—”

“They won’t,” Scar grumbled, a fierce protectiveness in his voice. “And if someone does find them and start shit, we’ll deal with the fuckers.”

To my surprise, Jonas went straight to Scar and hugged him. Scar stared at me over his shoulder for a long moment before he wrapped his arms around Jonas and returned the gesture.

When Jonas finally moved away again, he smiled. “Thank you for helping us.”

Scar cleared his throat nervously, and while I didn’t know him well, I had a feeling he wasn’t caught by surprise very often. “Yeah, sure.”

Charley chuckled and nudged Scar with his shoulder. “Come on, big guy.” He slipped his hand into Scar’s, and together they walked toward the building.

“Do you want to go back to my place?” I wrapped my arms around Jonas again. I couldn’t stop touching him. A sense of fear crept its way inside me every time I didn’t have him against me, as though I would lose him to that camp again if I didn’t hold on a little tighter.

I'd been so sure I wouldn't find him with the others, and the terror had consumed me on the trip there until I was on the verge of passing out. King had kept looking at me like he knew something was wrong, but he hadn't said a word, and I was thankful because I would've probably snapped at him and told him to fuck off if he had.

I'd never done emotions well. Not since I was a kid, and I was taught to hide everything I was feeling. Between my parents, the trailer park, and Leo trying to protect me, I'd learned it was better to be hard and emotionless, nothing more than a living, breathing stone. Now, I didn't know how to show Jonas what he meant to me. He'd told me he loved me, and I wanted to say it back so bad, but I couldn't. I'd shut down exactly like Leo had taught me to when someone expressed romantic feelings.

"It's safer not to fall in love, Ethan. You being gay doesn't work in this park, and loving a man? It can't happen if you want to be safe," he'd told me when I was twelve, and I'd believed him.

Jonas sighed, pressing his cheek against my shoulder. "Yeah, take me to your place."

I kissed his forehead and began to lead him back to the bike when King stopped us. He pointed at me. "You did good, kid. Meet me at the clubhouse on Monday at ten. You'll be joining Pike and Hound for a few weeks on their runs."

"Will it be paid?" I raised my chin. "I'm all for working hard, sir, but I need to know if there's cash involved, because if there's not, I need to sell drugs around this gig. There's two of us I need to take care of now." I smiled down at Jonas.

King grunted out a small chuckle. "Call me either King or Pres. I'm not a sir." He stroked his chin. "And yep, it's paid work. If you do your part, you'll get cash in hand. It'll be prospect rates, but it's okay money. It'll get you out of that trailer park quickly."

I swallowed. "Thanks."

“Undertaker’s been talkin’ about needing someone who isn’t squeamish at the funeral home. He’s not the kind of guy who takes on apprentices, but he liked you.” The corner of his mouth twitched as if there was a private joke somewhere in those words. “So, you might not be working with Pike and Hound for long.”

I tilted my head, even though I wasn’t sure if I liked the idea of working with Undertaker. He seemed unstable, but I wasn’t entirely sane, either. I’d killed Jonas’s dad, then Gerard, and I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse. Both were brutal deaths they’d earned.

I led Jonas toward the bike, and even though it was only afternoon, he was fading. His shoulders slumped and he kept yawning so widely his jaw cracked. Once I had him settled in the sidecar with the half helmet on, I got onto the bike and kicked her to a start. I probably should’ve put on my helmet, but it was on the floor of the sidecar beside Jonas, and I didn’t bother. The drive to the trailer park was tedious, and by the time we got there, I wasn’t surprised to see Jonas sleeping, his head tilted to one side and his body lying deeper in the sidecar.

I stared at him from where I sat on the bike, taking in his angelic features and long, dark eyelashes. Even though he was muscular from years of playing soccer, he was also soft, too, with smooth skin and plump lips, the same ones I wanted on my cock.

“Shep!” Tav’s Scottish brogue ripped me out of my fantasies.

I raised my chin to see Tav stalking toward me from his trailer. With his eyebrows dipped, he looked more serious than I’d ever seen him. I slipped off the bike and met him around the other side, holding my finger to my lips to shush him before nodding at Jonas.

“He’s sleeping,” I whispered. “He’s been through hell and back and needs every wink he can get.”

Tav sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “You went to get Jonas.”

I nodded, even though he already knew that. “I got the information from his dad.”

“Did you do something to him?” He shot a glance across the river, and I turned to look at Jonas’s family home in the distance. The other side was quiet, too quiet.

“Why?” I narrowed my eyes. “What happened?”

“Cops were over there, and it was taped off like a crime scene. Then they came over here wanting to talk to you. I told them you went out of town, but it’s not like they believed me. People like us don’t have the cash for that.” He sighed. “I tried to tell them it was for work, but they were suspicious, mate. They said they’ll be back.”

I shrugged. “Let them. I have nothing to hide.”

“And Jonas?” Tav sent him a look, but Jonas’s soft snores were loud enough for me to hear. “They’ll ask him questions.” He narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t ask me what happened for the place to be a crime scene.”

“What happened?” I didn’t have to pretend, though. We both knew I’d taken Jonas’s dad. Maybe Tav didn’t know I’d killed him, but it was easy to guess.

“His mother was tied up and gagged. His father was abducted. No one knows where he is or if he’s even alive. But they’ve got no corpse, so who’s to say? The people over the river are calling for a head from one of us.” He shook his head and glanced around nervously. “People around here are trying to figure out who did it, though with your disappearance, the suspicion is on you.”

“I’m back, aren’t I?” My spine stiffened. “And you were right, I’ve been working. With the Kings of Men MC. If the cops want answers, they can go to King himself and ask.”

“You think they’ll believe *him*?” Tav whispered.

Jonas groaned and yawned. He blinked up at us, then around the trailer park. The afternoon sun was getting lower and managed to hit him in the eyes. He squinted as he took off his helmet and stood. I held out my hand to him, and he gave

me the sweetest smile as he took it and let me help him step out of the sidecar.

“Tav, hi.” Jonas waved at him. “Where’s Chet? Is he safe?”

Tav offered him a smile. “He’s fine. He’s still staying with me. We agreed that he’s going to crash with me until he finishes school. We don’t know how, if I’m honest, we’re going to do that. If his parents find out where he is—”

“He doesn’t need to worry about that conversion camp,” I growled out, anger searing my insides as I thought about everything they’d done. “It’s gone.”

Tav shook his head sadly. “That’s not the only camp, Shep. There’s others out there.”

Jonas shifted in closer to me. “Do you think the Kings could help him get a new identity, too?”

“I could ask King.” I curled my arm around his waist and tugged him closer. “Let’s get you inside. It’s a mess in there, but we can clean up a spot for you to sleep.”

Tav cleared his throat and flushed, his cheeks flooding with a pink I’d never seen on him. “Chet and I, uh. . . . We wanted to do something for you both. We knew you would be back. So, we cleaned up the trailer.”

“Why?” I asked bluntly.

Jonas poked me in the stomach. “Ethan! They were being nice.” He laughed and went over to Tav, giving him a hug, which Tav happily returned. “Thank you. Tell Chet the same. I need to sleep, but maybe I can come over tomorrow morning and talk to him?”

Tav hummed in agreement. “He would like that. He keeps asking me if I’ve heard word from you both. He’s inside showering right now.”

“We’ll be around then to talk.” I grabbed the back of Jonas’s shirt and tugged him gently. “Jonas needs sleep and something to eat.”

Tav said his goodbyes, and I finally led Jonas inside. The door to the trailer wouldn’t lock, and I made a mental note to

go to Owen tomorrow about getting someone in to fix the broken latch. He would bitch and whine and give me the bill, but if I was doing work with the Kings, I would be able to afford it soon. I also had to find Murph and let him know exactly what I thought about him, and it would involve my fist in his face before I took back the cost of my product, whether it was from his cash or flesh.

Once I closed the door, I went straight to the cupboard above the small stove to find some snacks, but I froze when Jonas's arms went around my waist. His lips met the back of my neck, and the warmth of his mouth made me melt. His breath tickled my skin.

"I don't want food. I want you."

"You have to be hungry." I turned in his embrace and wrapped my arms around his waist, dragging him flush against me so our hard cocks rubbed together through our jeans. He moaned and slanted his mouth over mine. I kissed him roughly, shoving my tongue between his lips so I could get a better taste of him. He rocked his hips and pressed me against the counter, and I slid my hands down south to grab his ass and squeeze it.

He moaned. "For you. I want you."

I laughed gently against his lips and slowly began to push him backward. He let me lead him straight to the bed, trusting me as I guided him in the right direction. When his knees hit the edge, he fell back onto it with a chuckle.

I didn't waste any time. I grabbed his boots and tugged them off, along with his socks, while his fingers worked at his belt and the zipper of his jeans. When he had the pants undone, I grabbed the bottom of the legs and yanked the jeans down until I had them off him completely. He sat up and ripped his shirt over his head.

"Get naked," he ordered.

I grinned, amused to see the difference in him since I'd taken his virginity. His trust in me was mind blowing, and I wanted to give him the world.

I got off every piece of my clothing, including my underwear, until I was standing bare for his starving gaze. He took me in, studying me in a way I imagined a dying man would a piece of food. His boxers tented as his cock twitched in them, and he let out a shaky breath as he slipped his hand inside his waistband and stroked himself.

“Please, Ethan, let me taste you?”

The fact that he asked was adorable, and I stepped in closer to the bed. He shuffled forward and planted his feet on the floor, then grabbed my hips, dragging me closer until I was right in front of him. He reached out a little nervously at first before he curled his fingers around the base of my cock with more confidence.

“You’re so thick,” he murmured, and I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself.

He took a breath before he sucked the head of my cock into his mouth. Tongue swirling around my slit, he teased me in a way that no one ever had. His innocence brought a new intimacy, and he made up for his inexperience with eagerness. He pushed himself too fast, though, and when he sucked in too much of my cock, he gagged and choked, then pulled back. A trail of spit still joined his bottom lip with my cock as he leaned away, and it was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

He laughed, cheeks burning red. “Sorry.”

I swiped my thumb over his pretty mouth. “Don’t be. You’re so fucking hot sucking my cock, baby. I want to feed it to you every night.”

“Yeah?” He blinked up at me with those naive eyes, and I leaned down to kiss him hard.

“Yeah. Fucking beautiful.” I cupped his cheeks and placed soft smooches across his face, and he moaned. “No one is ever taking you from me again. I’ll protect you no matter what.”

“I know.” He wrapped his arms around my neck like a pair of tentacles and dragged me on top of himself. I devoured his mouth and rubbed my cock against his, which was still trapped

in his boxers. I reached down to smooth my palm over him, and he moaned.

“I want to fuck you,” I growled into his mouth.

“Please.” He begged so nicely.

I pushed back on my knees and hooked my fingers into his waistband, ripping off the last piece of material that separated us. I threw the boxers somewhere over my shoulder before I shuffled to the right side of my bed and stuck my hand down between it and the wall, fishing underneath. I gave Jonas a wink that had him chuckling.

Once I had the lube, I crawled back between his legs and spread them, taking in the mouthwatering view of his long, veiny cock, which was hard enough to do damage, and the hole that peeked out between his round asscheeks.

“Fuck.” I gripped the base of my cock and squeezed so I didn’t come here and now and ruin this. “Do you know how crazy you make me?”

“Tell me,” he whispered, voice desperate.

“You’re gonna make me come just by looking at you.” I shook my head at the absurdity. “No one’s ever been able to do that.”

He sighed and grinned. “Please, Ethan. Make love to me. Show me you need me, like I need you.”

Jonas had never had sex before me, and while that usually scared me away from people, I’d quickly become obsessed with him. I wanted to be everything for him, but I didn’t know how to *say* that without sounding corny. I didn’t think Jonas would mind, but I would because I would replay the words over and over in my head like a bad romantic movie and laugh at myself.

“Ethan?” He touched my chest, and I blinked at him. “Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

“No, baby. Never.” I kissed him again, and he moaned into my mouth while fluttering his tongue against my lips.

I didn't rush through preparing him, but he didn't need it as much as the first time. Two fingers were all it took before he was begging me to put my cock in, so I slicked up with the lube before throwing the bottle on the mattress. I lined up with his hole and rested his legs on my shoulders. He grabbed his cock, jerking off as I pushed into him.

He threw his head back and groaned, rocking toward me to meet my cock halfway. "Oh yes. So good. You feel so good. Oh *God*. No one should give this up."

I chuckled and kissed the inside of his knee. "I agree, baby."

When I bottomed out in him, I rolled my hips, and he whimpered. The tip of my cock hit the bump inside his ass, and I grinned when he shuddered under me, his moans growing louder. Found it again.

Using every move in my arsenal, I began to thrust with purpose. His tightness and warmth surrounded me, and it was perfect, but tonight was about him. I wanted to watch him fall apart like he had the other night. He'd been so beautiful, head thrown back and Adam's apple bobbing as he came, and I wanted to experience that again because *I'd* done that to him.

His hand jerked furiously on his cock as I rocked into him, hammering his prostate with the kind of passion I didn't put into just anything. I stared down at him, unable to tear my gaze away from the way he screwed his eyes shut. His mouth popped open as he chanted "Oh! Oh! Oh!" like it was one of the hymns he'd been taught at church.

And it was fucking beau-ti-ful.

"Ethan!" His entire body stiffened, and his cock jerked, streams of pearly white cum splattering across his abs and chest.

Another thrust, and I was a goner after seeing that sexy display, and my orgasm ripped through me. My balls tightened, and I came deep inside him, burying myself as far into his hole as I could get.

“Fuck. Fuck, yes! Jonas.” I shuddered through my release, panting until my balls were drained and so was I, and only then did I tug out and crash onto the mattress next to him.

Our chests rose and fell in exertion.

He laughed and rolled so he could cuddle against my arm. “Wow. Why did I wait so long?”

“You needed me,” I murmured, not because I was egotistical, but because he was mine now and I was glad he’d found me.

“Yeah, I did.” He kissed my jaw and sighed, eyelids getting droopy. “Promise me you won’t go far?”

“Promise,” I whispered back.

“Good. Love you.” His gentle snores filled the room almost before his eyes fully closed.

I left the bed to pad my way to the small bathroom. I grabbed a washcloth and cleaned him up before shifting him around to lay the thin blanket over him. Once everything was good, I joined him in bed again.

I stared at him and stroked his cheek. “I love you, too.”

If only I could say it to his face when he was awake and could hear it.

JONAS



I SAT ON THE WORN-DOWN COUCH STARING INTO THE DEPTHS of the cold can I held. I'd never had an energy drink in my life, but Ethan had left me one in the fridge with a heart drawn on the side in metallic red permanent marker. How could I not drink it? I glanced at the neon green claw on the side and shrugged, sipping the ridiculously sweet liquid. Then I took a huge gulp and grinned.

My mother had always said the people in the trailer park would corrupt me if I allowed them to talk to me, and she also thought things like sugar would turn me into a monster, so here I was proving her right. And I kind of loved it. Laughing, I took a few more mouthfuls of the drink, but then I set it down on the floor beside me and leaned back against the couch. I had no idea what to do with myself.

Patting my hands on the knees of my secondhand jeans, I stared at the black screen of the silent TV. I didn't try to find something to watch because it was morning, and I'd never been allowed to do anything unproductive to start my day. It would be too weird. My life was in shambles, but it wasn't really because of anything I'd done, it was over stuff my parents had done, and wasn't that ironic? Ethan was outside changing the oil in his motorcycle, something I hadn't known he could do. While I was interested in the bike, each time I was outside I kept staring across the river at my house.

My father was missing, Tav had said so, but my mother was still over there in the house I'd grown up in. Sighing, I went outside just as Ethan was finishing up with his

motorcycle. He straightened from where he'd been crouched and wiped his hands off on a rag that he tossed on the grass.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” he asked, brow furrowing. He gave me a once-over as if he was searching for injuries.

Smiling, I hugged him, and he was fast to wrap his arms around me. Sunshine glinted in his blond hair as I rested my cheek against his shoulder.

“You know, there’s an unwritten rule in this park that no one can be gay,” Ethan said, giving me a squeeze. “I’d say we’re busting it up right now.”

Frowning, I peeked at his face. “But you *are* gay.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, then pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“And probably some others are, too,” I whispered.

He nodded. “I’m tired of life here. We’re getting out soon, I promise. King said he has a job for me today, but it’s not the kind of thing I want to take you with me to do. And I don’t really want to leave you here, so I would like you to go and sit at the clubhouse. You’re going.”

I nodded because it wasn’t as if I had anything else planned.

He let out a long breath. Maybe he’d been worried I would say no. “All right. I’m going in to take a shower.”

“Okay.” I gave him a harder hug.

“Do you want to come in and talk to me?” he asked, gaze hungry as his attention landed on my mouth.

Holding my breath and staring across the river, I shook my head. The crisp fall air was waking up my brain faster than caffeine. “You go. I need to clear my mind a little.”

He frowned over his shoulder in the direction I was looking. “Do it inside, okay?”

“Sure.”

I followed him into the trailer and sipped my drink while the shower kicked on and started to squeal. The water pressure was all over the place and it made a high-pitched sound half the time. The longer I thought about everything that had happened to me in Jesus jail—in a fucking conversion camp—the more I wanted an explanation from the people who'd done it to me. My foot tapped. I knew it was stupid, but I wanted to go over and demand answers from Mom. I gave myself a hug and hurried to the bathroom door.

“Ethan?”

“Yeah,” he called out immediately. “You good?”

Not really. “How did you know where to find me?”

He didn't say anything.

I had to wonder about a few things. Dad was missing, and we were worried the cops might come to question Ethan because they'd already been here once. “Ethan.” I pressed my forehead to the bathroom door, then cracked it open.

“Huh?” he said, but his voice was tight. Steamy air blasted me in the face and the scent of a masculine soap tickled my nose.

“Did you talk to my parents?”

He didn't say anything.

“Are the police right?”

Silence.

My gut churned. I hated Dad for what he'd done to me, but did I want something bad to happen to him? He'd been ready to hurt Chet. Hell, maybe he'd sent people to that camp in the past, and who knew how messed up they were now as a result? Were they even alive?

“Would you really want to know?” Ethan asked, and the showerhead made another terrible squealing sound. He cursed and smacked the wall and the noise stopped.

My mind froze. I hadn't cared that he'd beaten Gerard to death. Not at all. I knew Gerard had tortured people. In his

own way, Dad had done the same thing.

Ethan's answer *was* an answer, even though he hadn't said anything at all.

Anger ripped through me, and I pushed open the door. I shoved aside the cheap plastic shower curtain, and he turned with his fists up, then lowered them and grabbed my arms. I stared at him, and he looked right back. His lip curled a little when I shoved him.

"I have to know what was in his head about all this shit," I said, pulling away from his grasp. "How can I know now?"

Confusion passed across his face, but I closed the shower curtain on him because I couldn't explain why getting an answer mattered. I wouldn't have liked anything I heard from Dad, but I wanted a reason. He'd given me a sermon before he'd sent me away. I wanted to hear real words from him, what he'd truly thought in his heart about me. I grabbed Ethan's brown leather jacket and stomped across the lawn toward Cider Mill Creek, then hopped the stone fence and jumped across the rocks as if I'd been doing it my entire life.

I hadn't.

I wouldn't have dreamed to disobey my parents before they sent me away to hell, all because I'd disappointed them with who I wanted to love. It was surreal walking up the front path to my house. I turned the knob and the door opened, the same way it had my entire life. I'd never had a key to my house because my father had always said it wasn't mine, it was his castle, and there was no reason for me to have one.

Inside the front door I stopped and stared around, but then I heard the water turn on in the kitchen, and a rage I hadn't known I could feel crackled alive inside me. I walked in that direction with my hands clenched into fists and stopped when Mom came into view. She was wearing a pink dress, which wasn't unusual. The flats on her feet matched the material in the same modest shade. If Dad were here, he would compliment her on how feminine she was, as if that was something great. She had her hair up like she might be going

out soon, and she was humming. She didn't appear to be a grieving woman at all.

Did Ethan kill Dad? Where is he? "Mom?"

She jumped and whirled around, slapping the water faucet so that the water stopped running. Her hand flew to her heart.

"Jonas! What are you doing here?" Her hand crept to her neck and she curled her fingers around her cross necklace. Her bottom lip trembled. "Daddy went to check on you in Mexico. I figured that had to be it, you know. That's all. He'll be back. I told the congregation he was checking on you." She laughed, and the frantic tone made me sick to my stomach.

"Check on me in Mexico. What was I doing in Mexico?" I asked her.

She knew. She had to know, but she just waved a hand. "Missionary work, of course. Helping rebuild houses that collapsed in an earthquake."

I stared at her and couldn't tell if she knew the truth or not, and the longer I stood there, the more defiant her expression became.

"So—" She forced a trembling smile. "—where's Daddy?"

"Dad didn't come to Mexico. I left the conversion camp he sent me to and I'm still gay." I smiled at her and stalked closer, feeling a terrible sensation rise up inside me. The tips of my boots touched her shoes, and I glared directly into her eyes. "Did you know?"

Her face crumpled. "Your father is the head of this household."

We said nothing for so long all I could hear was screaming in my head.

"Did you agree with him?"

She nodded. "You can't stay here if you won't try to be Christlike."

I snorted and backed off a few steps while my heart broke all over again. "I hoped you didn't know what he'd done, but

you're just as bad as he is."

"Where is your father?" she asked, and I didn't like the fear that clouded her expression.

I shrugged. "Maybe he's in Mexico like you said. Maybe he's checking on me and my missionary work. You love fairytales, so you might as well keep living in one." Shaking my head, I turned around to go back to Ethan and the real world. Maybe it wasn't as shiny as my parents' house, but it was safer. I should've never come over here to begin with.

"Should I sell the house?" she asked quietly. "I don't know if I can do anything. Your father had all our money tied up in his name. He was the head of this house, Jonas."

I closed my eyes and stopped walking. "Why would you do that if he's on his way back from Mexico?" I glanced at her over my shoulder.

She began to cry as I stormed out of the house, and I didn't look back as I made my way to the river. I felt bad as Ethan frantically ran toward me, hair still dripping wet. He met me before I reached the rocks, and I let him wrap me up in a hug. He trembled against me and pressed a hard kiss to my temple.

"Why did you come over here?" he asked, and he stepped back, staring as if he'd seen a ghost.

"I had to ask if she knew," I whispered.

"You don't want to come back here. You don't want to give the cops a reason to look at you funny," he said in a rush, and his strong hands were too tight on my arms as he turned me around, and we both stopped because there was a cop car parked outside of his trailer.

My heart jolted.

He swore.

We stayed low and snuck across the river, then hunkered down against the stone fence. We watched the cops for a while, and eventually the cop car went away again.

"We're going to get fucking kicked out because of them," he snapped, shaking his head.

“My mother says my father is in Mexico.”

He whipped around to stare at me.

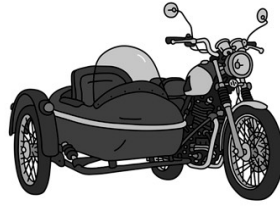
“As long as she keeps saying that, will they keep looking for him?” I asked.

He let out a long sigh. “Well, I hope not.” He grabbed my hand and rubbed it. “You’re so cold.” He kissed my knuckles and blew his warm breath across my palm. “You’re still up for sitting at the clubhouse, right?”

I shrugged because I wasn’t sure I was good to do anything, but I knew I didn’t like the panic in Ethan’s eyes, and I never wanted to put it there again. “Anything you want.” I leaned over and kissed him on the lips. “I love you.”

His cheeks went pink and he grinned. Together we hopped over the fence.

ETHAN



BY THE TIME WE GOT BACK TO THE TRAILER AFTER THE COPS had left, Murph was waiting for us, mouth twisted in a sneer. He wiped his nose with the back of his wrist and sniffed, and he looked tweaked out on something, but that wasn't unusual for him.

I shook my head. I hadn't seen him since we'd gotten back, and I had a few choice words for him. "What the fuck are you doing, Murph?"

He grinned at me, his teeth appearing more yellow than I'd remembered, which made me wonder just how many drugs he was doing and what kind. I felt sorry for his twin, who had tried so hard to keep his brother under control, but it seemed like Law was failing.

"You're a freak, you know that?" he grunted out, smirking over my shoulder toward Jonas. "I know *exactly* what you are, and I'm gonna tell everyone. Between you being a cock sucker and bringing in the cops, Owen will kick you out."

I stared at him. "Who'll believe you? You're high twenty-four hours a day." I stepped in closer to him, and he tried to stumble backward, but I grabbed his threadbare shirt in my fist, holding him tightly. "And you wrecked my trailer and stole from me and Jonas."

He attempted to knock my hand away, but he didn't have the strength. "Yeah, well, you fucked up, Shep. You left that religious loser in there and he shouldn't have been."

“Who I have in my home is my fucking business, not yours.” I tightened my hold, and his shirt made a ripping sound, causing him to wince. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kick your ass.”

“Owen will kick you out.” His voice wobbled and he didn’t sound sure.

I laughed. “You already said he’ll do that. I have nothing to lose, do I?”

His eyes widened and he struggled, slapping my wrist. “I’m important to Dutch. You hurt me, and he’ll take off one of your fucking arms.”

My laughter rose and I shook my head. “You’re nothing but a pissant. He could replace you within minutes. Finding dickheads like you, someone stupid enough to hold a gun and act like an asshole, is fucking easy.”

He finally managed to extract himself, but only because I released him, and he backed up with a glare. “You’re gay.”

I stared at him for a long moment and finally nodded. “Yeah, I am. But guess what, *Murph*? I’ve always been gay. It isn’t anything new.”

He pointed a bony finger at me. “Owen will kick you out!”

I spread my arms. “Dude, stop repeating yourself and come up with something new. We all know Owen’s a fucking bigot.”

The sound of shuffling feet behind me met my ears, and Jonas laid a hand on my shoulder. “Ethan, let it go. Come on, you’ve got a job to do.” His voice was so sweet and quiet, and it canceled out Murph’s incessant sniffing that always drove me crazy.

“Yeah, listen to your *boyfriend*,” Murph said with a sneer.

I squinted at him. “Thanks, I will, because he *is* my boyfriend, jackass.”

Murph froze.

I couldn't tell if he was shocked that I'd admitted it or if he actually hadn't thought we were in a relationship.

"He's nothing but a religious freak," Murph finally said again, frowning. "You had to go for that weird fucker?"

I reacted on an impulse. No one insulted Jonas like that, especially not Murph, so I shot forward and slammed my fist into his face. He went flying backward, yelling as he crashed to the ground.

I pointed at him. "Don't you fucking call him anything but his name again or I'll kill you."

Murph groaned, gripping his jaw with his hand as he turned to glare at me. "He's got you by the balls. Did he even give up his ass to you, or is he a sweet virgin and you rub one off every time he doesn't spread his cheeks for you?"

Anger exploded in my chest.

"Ethan, no!" Jonas called out.

Shaking my head, I shot forward again, landing on top of Murph. I smashed my fist into the same jaw I'd hit moments ago, and he held up his arms, trying to block my attacks, but it didn't work. I punched him again and again, blood spurting from his mouth and nose and splattering across my knuckles as I continued to pummel him until he was motionless on the ground. A small groan escaped his battered mouth, signaling he was alive, but he was half unconscious after I'd managed to get his forehead a few times.

I stumbled to my feet, and Jonas was there, grabbing my shoulder with his eyes a little too wide.

Behind us was a commotion, and the owner, Owen Robinson, came storming toward us. He was a tall, chubby old man with white hair and a matching beard, and as a child he'd reminded me of Santa Claus. That impression had faded as I'd gotten older and heard some of the awful shit that came out of his mouth. Other residents had come out of their trailers to watch our fight, including Tav and Chet, and Tav shook his head in disappointment at me.

Finally Owen reached me and shoved my chest. “Look what you did.” He waved his hand at Murph, who was regaining some sense as he groaned and rolled to his side in an attempt to get to his knees, then his feet. “You know the rules, Shep. You’ve been here your entire life. I’ve never had to give you a warning, but in the last few weeks, we’ve had pigs here and those *people* from across the river, too. Now there’s this shit.” He shook his finger at Jonas. “And what is he doing here? You didn’t get permission for one of those silver spoon fanatics to be in your trailer.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Tav push Chet toward his trailer door gently, and I squared my shoulders to keep Owen’s attention on me so he wouldn’t spot Chet. This was my fault, and as much as I hated Chet for ratting Jonas out, he had nowhere to go and Jonas still liked him.

“Say what you’re gonna say, Owen.” I shrugged even though I knew what was coming. This was the last straw.

Owen crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at me. “It’s time for you to leave this park. I don’t need no trouble, and you know the rules. No cops and no fighting.”

“And no gay shit,” Murph slurred drowsily. He’d managed to get into a seated position on his ass, but he was swaying like he was about to pass out completely.

Owen gave me a squinty look. “You gay, Shep?”

I inhaled deeply and thought about all the rules Leo had taught me. They’d been about survival because he’d known Owen and all the things he hated. Everyone who lived here knew because Owen didn’t keep his views on anything quiet. In my head, I could already imagine what Leo would say if he were still alive.

“Don’t admit it, Ethan. You can still save this. You can suck up to him, pass him extra cash, and he’ll let you stay, as long as you don’t cause any more trouble. But if you admit you’re gay, you’ll never be allowed to stay.”

I glanced at Jonas, who had his arms around himself with his lips sucked into his mouth, concern lingering in his gaze.

Finally, I nodded. “Yeah, I’m gay, and Jonas is my boyfriend.”

Owen stamped his foot in a move that reminded me of little Virginia. “You need to leave. Now. Get your shit and go. You know I don’t truck with that shit here.”

“Fine.” I stepped back and grinned. “I don’t want to live in this stupid hellhole anyway. I’ve got a new gig.” I shot Murph a glare. “And as a King, I’ve got some things to tell my pres. Like how Dutch is playing two sides. He’s got some deal with the Demons that *the* King doesn’t know about, and I’m gonna tell him.”

Murph’s eyes widened and he attempted to stand again, but he fell right back on his ass. “You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“I do.” I crouched in front of him and flicked him on the forehead, and he groaned, falling onto his back on the ground like the simple touch had hurt him. “And the Kings are going to fuck you and Dutch up for double-crossing us.” I stood again and backed away. My attention bounced to Owen. “I’ll grab my stuff and leave.”

Owen grunted but didn’t say another word.

I slid my hand into Jonas’s, led him back to my trailer, and went inside. Jonas’s grip was tight, and he threw himself at me in a hug. I sighed and kissed his cheek. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry. You didn’t have to admit anything. I wouldn’t have minded,” he whispered, burying his face against my neck. He smelled woodsy, and I inhaled as much of him as I could get.

“I know, but I don’t care anymore. I’ve been hiding all my life, and I’m done with it. You make me happy, Jonas, and I don’t give a fuck what they think. If you can go through hell to be yourself, I can tell a couple of assholes to fuck off.”

“Where will we go?” He laid a gentle kiss on my skin where my neck met my shoulder, and I hummed at the pleasant brush of his lips.

“We’ll ask to stay at the Kings’ clubhouse until we find a place. If we can’t, then we’ll figure something out.” I grasped

his shoulders in a gentle hold and tugged him back so I was staring into his face. “I’ve spent my entire life working stuff out as I go, and I promise I’ll protect you.”

He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth. “Tell me the truth?”

He didn’t have to go into detail. I knew what he wanted. I ran my fingers through my hair and exhaled loudly. “I killed him.”

Jonas let out a gasp but otherwise stayed silent.

“I had to. He wouldn’t give me information, and when he did, I couldn’t let him go. He would’ve ratted us out to the police, and I needed to rescue and protect you. I did what I needed to do.”

He poked his tongue out to lick his lips. “Was it quick?”

“Do you want the truth or a lie?” I asked.

“Truth please?”

“No, it wasn’t quick. I tortured him and made him scream because when someone hurts *you*, I will never make their death painless.” I waited, focusing on his face and the reaction that came with the new information, but he didn’t seem entirely upset. It was as though he’d already known because his shoulders slumped a little and he nodded. “Are you mad?”

“I don’t know how I feel.” He rubbed the sides of his face. “I’m not surprised, I guess, and he wasn’t the best father. Mom is a shell of herself. He shaped her life to be centered around him and now he’s gone. She’s lost and living in a fantasy. That isn’t a good man.”

“Fuck no. Listen, I don’t know jack shit about that sort of life, but it’s abusive. It’s no better than my mom and dad and how they treated us. They lived on alcohol, and they never took care of us.” I shrugged. “The people on your side acted as though they were better than us, but they aren’t. They’re just as bad.”

He blinked sadly at me. “Yeah, they are. Leaving our past behind would be good for both of us.”

I opened up my arms, and he walked into them, resting his cheek against my chest. I curled around his solid body and kissed the top of his head. “Yeah. Let’s start fresh.”

After I packed a few things—I didn’t have much I wanted to take—Jonas and I got onto the bike and took off to New Gothenburg. He sat scrunched in the sidecar next to our bags with his half helmet perched on his head. He was so sweet and such a good sport about everything. I would’ve been complaining about the lack of space, but he’d settled in for the ride. At one point, he reached up toward me, and I grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze to let him know I was here and not going anywhere. I got a small smile in return.

When we got to the Kings’ clubhouse, I pulled the bike up next to a row of motorcycles already there, and Jonas stood up and stepped out. He slid off his helmet and dumped it onto his seat. Once I dismounted the bike and took off my helmet, I met him on his side and dragged him against my body. He offered me a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes and it broke my heart. I didn’t know if the truth about his father upset him or if it was everything else. I shouldn’t have let him go over to his mother’s house, but I hadn’t realized he would do something so stupid, either. I suppose it made sense to him.

We walked past the German shepherd guarding the front door and into the clubhouse. I took Jonas into the barroom, where I heard a commotion, then grinned when I saw Scar playing a game of pool with Barber. A group of Kings surrounded them, and money was changing hands, as though there was a bet on who would win.

A man I didn’t know, dressed in black pants and a black turtleneck, stood near Barber and was whispering things in his ear. The stranger had short dark hair and a vigilant stare that darted toward us when we entered, as though he was aware of everything happening around him.

“Hey, no cheating,” Scar growled out, shaking the pool stick at the stranger. “Quain, you might be Barber’s boy toy, but don’t tell him how to win.”

Ah, so he was Barber’s partner. That made sense.

On the trip to Mexico, Barber hadn't stopped whining about how much he missed his boyfriend. I'd never met anyone like him—he never shut up. He babbled about *Quain's cute sleep talking* and how *Quain could kill you in a second, and you wouldn't even know you were bleeding out*. Seeing Quain now, I wasn't sure I believed Barber. The guy was. . . dainty. Slim and sinewy, with thin wrists and a narrow face. He didn't look like the type to kill easily.

Scar glanced at me, and I raised my hand in a wave.

He grinned. "King's in his office. Go see him."

I pulled Jonas tighter against me. Since we'd started dating, we hadn't spent enough time with each other. I hated that I had to do a job, but I also knew that to make this new life work, that meant getting cash. The Kings were my new family, and I'd heard about their brotherhood and what it meant to be one of them. I was going to make the most of this opportunity.

"Can Jonas stay here?" I asked loudly over the shouts from the other bikers.

Scar gave me a thumbs-up, then waved Jonas into the room.

I turned to Jonas and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. "I know a lot has happened over the last two weeks. Fuck, even I'm still reeling, but I need to make this work with the Kings so we can get our new life, okay? I promise I'll protect you no matter what."

He gave me a small smile and cupped my cheek. "I know. I don't regret meeting you, Ethan. I'm glad I found you because I love you."

There *it* was again. An uncomfortable feeling squirmed inside me because I knew I loved him back, but it was awkward to think about saying it. I grinned and knocked my forehead against his. "How about after I do this job, I take you out tonight on the bike. We can do fun stuff."

His eyes lit up. "I like that idea. We could go to the movies and go for a walk."

I gave him a long, hard kiss that earned me wolf whistles from the bikers, and I flipped them the finger without breaking contact with Jonas, which made them laugh. Tonight, I would tell him I love him. He deserved that, at least, no matter how awkward it made me feel.

“Maybe if we move into New Gothenburg I could go to a school in this district. Finish my senior year, so I can go to college,” he murmured against my mouth.

“I like that idea.” I smoothed my thumb under his eye. “Whatever you choose to do, I’ll support you however I can.”

He smiled again, but this time it was more real. “Thank you.”

I gently pushed him toward the bar, and he waved at me as I left to head down the hall to King’s office. When I reached the door, I knocked, and a few moments later, I heard an order to enter. I went through the door and closed it behind myself, offering King a nod. He might call this an office, but to me it was part palace. He had a sitting area with a red leather couch and other chairs, a private bar to the left in the corner, and set into the far wall was a fancy fireplace.

He sat behind his wooden desk, a pair of reading glasses hanging on the end of his nose. Undertaker stood beside him, and they were staring down at some paperwork I assumed was financial stuff because I’d learned Undertaker was the treasurer.

King waved me farther into the room, and I moved to a seat in front of him. There was a cigar smoldering in an ashtray on the corner of the desk and the rich scent of cherry tobacco hung lightly in the air.

Undertaker gave me a long look, eyes brilliant and scary as fuck, especially with the shadow he’d created with makeup around his lashes. “You’ll be working for me starting next week. You can do whatever jobs you want around the hours I give you, but I need someone in the funeral home. Think you can handle it, Ethan?”

I straightened at the use of my real name. “Yeah, I got the balls for it. Dead bodies don’t worry me.”

“I know.” His black lipstick-covered mouth curled in one corner. “It won’t only be old people, who died from successfully finishing life as valuable citizens, going into the fire.”

I shrugged.

Undertaker laughed and it made me jump. “I have three rules. If you violate them, you’re done. I won’t talk to you. We won’t discuss it. First, no hurling. Second, stay away from Lee. He’s mine. I’ll kill you if you go near him without my express permission. If you try to fuck him, ever, I’ll rip your heart out and feed it to you. If you upset him because you think it’s funny to screw with people, I’ll do worse.” He said all that without a hint of sarcasm. “There are other reasons I will kill you, but those are the main ones.”

I shook my head immediately. “No interest. I’ve got Jonas, and he’s mine, too.”

Undertaker nodded. “Third, I’m in charge. If you fail to follow my orders, you’re gone and not just from the job. I will not tolerate threats of any kind. We will be doing illegal shit that could put us in prison forever. I have zero interest in that.”

“Yes, sir.” I kept my arms on the chair, so I didn’t look hostile by crossing them over my chest, which was what I usually did when I was confronted with another dominant man.

Undertaker made a pleased sound and took the papers off the desk, gathering them in his arms. “King.” He left without another word, and I stayed silent, not quite sure if I was allowed to talk.

King shook his head and took off his glasses, massaging his temples. “All right, kid. Now’s the time to prove your worth. I’m sending Hound to give a drug dealer a message. A physical message. I want you to go with him and help him. Usually Pike goes, but he’s busy doing something else for me today. Think you can do that?”

“Yes, Pres. No problem.”

He grinned. “You’re eager to please.”

“I’m willing to do any job.” I drummed my hands on the arms of the chair. “I’m used to the dirty work. I’ve done it my whole life. And I need security for Jonas. His parents fucked him over, and now I want to keep him safe.”

“Hm.” King clasped his hands together in front of himself. “How is the trailer park working out?”

I winced. “I got kicked out.”

He pressed his mouth together. “I heard you know something about Dutch.”

Surprise socked me in the gut. Did he know someone else in the trailer park? Or had Scar talked to him? “Yeah, I think he has some deal with the Demons. When I worked for him, I always had instructions not to do business in certain areas of the city, that it belonged to the Demons. Dutch also paid them a cut. I thought it was a deal you had with them, but when I first met Scar, he said otherwise.” I frowned. “I don’t really know much beyond that.”

“Okay. Sounds to me like Dutch is a fucking coward and was paying out protection money to the Demons, rather than doing his goddamned job and fucking them up to keep their hands off our product. That’s bad because it makes the Demons think they’ve got some say in what we do. I’ll fucking end that notion.” King’s mouth curved into a smirk. “You and Hound can pay Dutch a visit, too. Give him a little message that I want to personally see him in my office tomorrow at eleven sharp, come hell or high water.”

“And by message you mean—”

“Give his head a few kicks.” King rose from his seat and walked over to a baseball bat leaning against the bar. He picked the bat up and walked back, holding it out for me. I took it from him and slapped the thicker part against my palm a few times. “And take out his kneecaps. And if he wants to make it up to us, he’ll be here tomorrow, even if he’s in a wheelchair.”

I smirked. “Yes, Pres.”

King fell back into his chair and crossed his arms. “You and Jonas can stay in the clubhouse until you get some cash together. You’re one of us, and we take care of our own, even the prospects.”

Something warm filled my chest, but I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it. After Leo went to prison, the only person I had was Tav, but now I had Jonas and the Kings, and even though both were very new, I had a good feeling about them.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you, King. I mean it.”

He winked. “Now go send my messages. Hound’s in the barroom.”

I nodded. “With pleasure.”

A few hours later, we couldn’t find Dutch. It was frustrating as hell. Hound was hungry, though, so we stopped at a burger place for him to get something to eat, and I waited outside, leaning against the brick wall beside the door. My mind wandered to Jonas, and I couldn’t wait to be done with this bullshit.

A few people left the restaurant, talking and laughing, and I was getting ready to see where the hell Hound was, when I noticed a silver Nissan pull up beside our bikes. I shoved my sunglasses higher up my nose. Crossing my arms, I watched as a man in a gray suit got out. There was something off about him. He began to pace near the bikes, and I groaned. I could tell by the way he strutted around like he owned the whole parking lot that he was a fucking cop. A detective. *Fuck*, that was all I needed. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t quite place him. The fact that I knew him had my spine stiffening.

With dark hair and a strong square jaw, he could’ve been any of the law enforcement I’d bumped into in the past. When he glanced at me, though, I knew I was fucked because his eyes narrowed. He stalked his way toward me like I was his

target. Behind him, another cop got out of the other side of the car, and this one was in a uniform. He stayed where he was.

“Ethan Shepherd?” The cop in the suit came to a stop in front of me, eyeing me up and down carefully, as if assessing whether or not I was a threat.

“Who wants to know?” I asked, curling my lip.

“Detective Hanlon. I’ve been trying to find you.” He glanced at the door to the burger joint, then back at me. “Are you with the Kings now?”

I shrugged. “I’m with myself.”

“You wouldn’t be riding that motorcycle, would you?” He pointed at my Harley. “Because I checked, and you don’t have a license.”

I grunted. “Nope. If you saw me riding it, then you must be seeing things, Officer.”

“Detective.” Hanlon mirrored me by crossing his arms. The gun on his hip drew my attention, but I didn’t let it shake me. I’d talked to law enforcement more than I’d wanted to, or at least, I’d *listened* to them. I never ran my mouth. “I’m looking into the disappearance of John Nomikos.”

“Who’s that?” I drawled in a bored tone. I looked at my nails.

“I think you know.” Hanlon stepped in closer. “According to some reports, you’ve been seen with his son. Plus, you were dragged out of that pretty little private community to cool your heels in a jail cell.”

“Hm?” I smirked. “What can I say? I can’t help it if Jonas wants to take a ride on *me*.”

Hanlon’s mouth curled in irritation and his gaze lingered on my face. “Listen to me, kid. This would be so much easier on you if you told me the truth. Do you know what happened to John? He and his wife were attacked in the middle of the night. His wife made a desperate call to the police about seven hours after he was taken. She’d been tied up and was found by a friend who was worried she hadn’t come to church. When

we got to her house, she was in shock and became disoriented. She believed her husband might have gone to Mexico to see her son. According to her, that was where her son had traveled to, but our contacts say he reentered the US days later. You wouldn't believe who he was with."

I rolled my eyes. "Please, tell me. *Who?*"

"A suspected Harlot."

I gasped and slapped a hand to my mouth. "A prostitute? Those religious folks know how to party, don't they?"

He let out a frustrated breath. "You know I mean a woman from the Harlot Queens Motorcycle Club."

"Ah, so he's into bad girls. Good for him." I could see the frustration grow on his face in the way he pressed his mouth together in a thin line.

"You had something to do with Mr. Nomikos's disappearance, and I'll prove it." He stepped in closer. "The neighbors told me about you sneaking around their neighborhood, and I saw the report of you being brought in with my own eyes."

"And not formally arrested because they couldn't get me on anything." I shook my head. "Tough luck, Officer."

"*Detective.*" He exhaled in irritation and glanced toward the restaurant's door when the bell chimed as Hound stepped out. Hanlon swallowed and shuffled back when Hound came stalking toward us, looking like a hunting dog on a mission. He had short dark hair, thick eyebrows, brown eyes, and a short beard, and he stood out dressed in black.

"Problem, Detective?" Hound shook a paper bag he held in his hand. "Because me and my buddy here need to eat."

Hanlon dropped his arms and focused on me. "I know you had something to do with this disappearance, just like I know Jonas is probably with you. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"Where's your usual asshole partner?" Hound asked, ignoring everything Hanlon had just said. "He on vacation?"

Hanlon turned on his heel without a word and walked away.

I pushed myself off the wall and stood tall. “Detective.”

He paused, keeping his back to me.

“Maybe instead of worrying about some fuckhead from a religious cult, you should be more concerned about his son.” I clenched my jaw, my own words stoking a fire in my belly. “*Maybe* you should find out where they were sending Jonas in Mexico.”

Hound knocked my arm and shook his head, while Hanlon glanced over his shoulder at me.

“Why? Where did they send him?” he asked.

I grinned. “No idea, but if you do find out, let me know. Sounds fun.”

Hanlon let out a sigh of frustration and strode back to the Nissan, jerking open the door and getting inside. I watched until he’d turned on the vehicle and left, then groaned.

Hound laughed. “You know how to piss off the boys in blue, Sheep.”

“He knows I don’t have a license.” I glared in the direction the Nissan had disappeared.

“Then you better get one sooner rather than later, or you’ll get caught eventually.”

I knew he was right, but hopefully the license was the only thing I had to worry about from the cops.

JONAS



MY DAY WAS SHOCKINGLY GOOD, CONSIDERING HOW IT HAD started. For about an hour I'd cleaned out a small room on the second floor of the clubhouse that only had a bed and a closet, which was about the same as the trailer—minus a fridge and private shower. Someone had done a bad job of patching a hole in the ceiling. After a minute or two of scoping out the situation, I'd decided that if I painted everything, no one would notice the shoddy repair work. After I got the last of the trash out of the room, I spent the rest of my time behind the clubhouse bar being coached through mixing simple drinks by Josh. He was patient and smiled more than anyone else in the room, which put me at ease.

“You've really never had a sip of alcohol?” he asked, drumming his fingers on the shiny wooden bar as I carefully measured out a shot of Jack Daniel's into a tumbler. “This is for King. Just pour,” he said with a laugh. He reached over and grabbed the heavy glass bottle, then didn't stop until the alcohol was in danger of sloshing out.

“Teach him right, Josh,” King said from the end of the bar where he was glaring at an open folder. He sighed and slapped his hand on the bar, and I carried the tumbler over to him. He grunted, which was kind of a thank you, but didn't look up as he accepted the drink. He sighed and shoved the folder aside, then slipped his sunglasses from his head down onto his nose.

“Don't drink that all at once.” Josh leaned his elbows on the bar and glared in King's direction. “Dallas asked me not to

serve you, you know. You're really making me pick my friends here." Josh's lip curled.

"Is Dallas the president or am I?" King asked, pointing at him, but there was no fire in his tone as he gulped half the alcohol.

Josh sighed, and I backed away because I got the feeling I didn't want to be involved in whatever was going on there.

I picked up the clean white rag that Josh had tossed down on the bar and started wiping along the shiny wood, buffing away fingerprints.

"Hey, I wondered what you would be doing," Ethan said.

I glanced up toward the front hallway. He swaggered through with a big smile on his face, and I couldn't see anything else. God, he looked good. A black T-shirt clung to his muscles and his jacket was slung over his shoulder. Excitement vibrated through me as I went around the end of the bar to meet him, and he dragged me close for a kiss that had me sighing against his lips. He smelled good, like outside, and his tongue was a delicious fire swiping across my mouth. Electric waves of excitement zipped through my body. Touching in public was new, and I loved everything about it, including feeling safe in Ethan's arms.

"Damn it," King snapped, and Ethan spun toward him.

Hound, the guy who had been out with Ethan, sat on a stool near King.

King slapped a hand to the bar and glared toward Ethan. "You couldn't find that piece of shit traitor, Dutch?"

"No. We checked everywhere," Ethan called over, and he started toward King. I didn't have much choice except to follow Ethan because he didn't let go of my hand.

"Well, fuck." King grunted and shook his head, then smirked at Hound. "How did Sheep do?"

Hound shrugged and took the drink that Josh passed across to him. "Not bad. Better than my first time out. He's fine."

King snorted. “Good. Fucking great to have some good news,” he said, smiling at Ethan, and I loved the way he stood taller. “Tomorrow my bike needs some love.”

Ethan pursed his lips and nodded, but King only grinned in a way that was a little bit jerky. “Yours does, too. I don’t want to see any man in this club driving around on a dirty fucking bike. They all need to gleam. Who wants their bike detailed tomorrow?” King called to the room in general. There were a few guys over on the couches and playing pool, and most of them laughed.

“I’ll have mine here!” Bishop said. He ran a hand along his chinstrap beard and grinned. He’d only arrived a few minutes ago, and Josh had slid him a beer without ever exchanging a word with him.

“It’s okay. I’ll help,” I said to Ethan, then patted his chest. “We’ll get it done fast.”

“Like hell you will,” King said, then snapped his fingers at Josh, who let out a sigh and grabbed a pack of cigarettes from behind the bar. He tossed the box to King, who tapped a cigarette out and popped it between his lips. Hound pulled out a lighter and lit the end for King, and he sat back, sucking hard on the cigarette and making the end glow.

“Why not?” I asked, frowning.

Ethan gave me a squeeze, and I thought maybe he didn’t want me to ask too many questions, but that was stupid.

“If you want something to do—” King exhaled smoke like a dragon. “—you come back down here tomorrow. I’ll pay you for helping Josh. Sheep has to do his own shit work. That’s just the way it is. There are rules around here. One of them is that all prospects, even good ones, have to work their way up.”

Ethan scowled at King, but my heart soared. I’d been so worried about how we were going to get by, but we had a room here, and I’d sort of just been offered a job, at least for tomorrow.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“Ha! Colton won’t believe it. I finally get my own prospect.” Josh beamed at everyone.

King barked out a laugh that made me want to smile, too. “He isn’t a prospect. Maybe an apprentice? Is that a thing for bartenders?”

“It is now,” Josh said with a wide grin.

King glanced between me and Ethan, and then his eyebrows flew up and he grunted before he dug around in his pocket and pulled out a roll of cash. Ethan frowned at him until King peeled off some bills and flung them at him. Then he did the same thing for me. I stared at the three twenties he slid toward me on the bar, then picked them up.

King sighed. “You’re going to work your ass off for any cash you get around here,” he said, staring directly into my eyes.

“Yes, sir,” I murmured.

He winced. “Fuck, kid. Call me King.”

“Okay, King.”

He was still frowning but shrugged. “That’s better. Get out of here. You’re young. You want to fuck. You got better things to do today.” He winked at Ethan, who flushed pink, which was unusual enough that it had me chuckling, even though my face was hot, too.

Ethan didn’t hesitate to drag me outside, and he stood to the right of the door, counting the cash he’d stuffed into his pocket. He gasped when he was done and quickly did it again.

“He’s being nice to me,” Ethan said, sounding suspicious.

I shrugged. “He was nice to everyone from the camp. I think he’s a nice guy.”

Ethan gave me a look like maybe he wanted to say something I wouldn’t want to hear.

“How much is there?” I asked.

“Six hundred.” He glanced at me.

“What did you do today?” I whispered.

“Nothing legal,” he muttered.

With my throat feeling tight, I shrugged. Being really, really good hadn't helped my life any. And when I was in trouble it wasn't the church that had helped me. Heck, they'd screwed me over. So, maybe I needed to stop panicking about crime. After all, I'd seen a murder and hadn't called the cops. I let out a long breath. “Maybe that's what illegal jobs pay?”

He stared at the money before he dragged his wallet out, and I smiled the way I always did when I saw our initials burned into the leather. He tucked the money away.

“It's too much,” he said quietly.

“Well, if he's being nice to you, maybe you should let him,” I said, poking his side.

He frowned at me. “Why?”

Glancing toward the clubhouse, I wondered which window on the second floor was ours, then thought maybe none of them were, but I wasn't familiar enough with the layout to really know. “There's only a mattress in that room. We need to buy blankets and pillows and everything.” I bit my lip. “I know we said we were going to go out, but should we spend the money?”

Ethan sighed and stared up at the sky. The sun was beginning to set. Purple and pink stained white clouds toward the west. “Might as well. We'll at least have dinner and buy crap for the room, right? See a movie.” He shrugged.

My gut churned thinking about the cost of going to a theater right now. “We can't do the movie.”

He ducked his head. “Fine,” he said with a smirk. “We can get naked and make our own entertainment in bed.”

My stomach heated and I nodded. “I love that plan.”

He laughed and snagged my hand, dragging me toward the sidecar and his bike.

Dinner was quick because we just stopped at a Wendy's, and we didn't waste much time at Walmart. I stuffed the bags with the bedding down in the sidecar so they wouldn't go anywhere. We were sitting in the parking lot outside of the store when I tapped Ethan's leg.

"So, Josh and I were talking today. There's a nice path for walks behind one of the historic hotels around here. The Courtesan? Apparently people from the club are allowed to go there when they want, and he said there's enough light reflecting off the lake that it's really, um. . . ." My face burned. I didn't want to say the word romantic for some reason. "Nice." The heat in my face spread down my neck to my chest.

Ethan stared at me, then a small smile quirked the corner of his lips. "All right. Let's do it." He waggled his eyebrows, and I felt like I was going to fall over but nodded.

It only took a minute to find directions to the Courtesan Hotel, and when we got there, the parking lot was half full. We put the bike near the back, out of the way of the cars. Ethan helped me out of the sidecar, something he absolutely didn't need to do. His attention left me smiling. When we went alongside the hotel looking for the path, a big man with red hair, who'd been standing near the entrance, came over to us.

"What are you up to?" he asked, sounding slightly annoyed. "Are you here for the art auction?" He glanced toward the front as an elderly couple in really nice clothes got out of a BMW, and a valet I hadn't noticed earlier got in and drove the car off to park it. I gasped and turned my back in that direction because it was Mr. and Mrs. Hollace, and they went to my parents' church.

"Taking a walk," Ethan said, and he didn't sound nice. I squeezed his hand.

"We were told that the Kings are allowed to use the walking path behind the hotel," I said, surprising myself by speaking up. I clutched Ethan's fingers tight. With him here, I felt like I could say anything on my mind.

The man cocked his head and glanced at Ethan. “Which one of you is a King?”

“I’m one of their prospects,” Ethan said.

The man frowned. “If you see anything from the back windows, you didn’t see it, okay?” His dire expression melted into a smirk, and I frowned at Ethan, who shrugged.

“Uh, okay,” I said.

“Keep going to the right. You’ll see the path. Have fun.” The guy chuckled as he turned to go back toward the front door.

“What was that all about?” I asked as we walked across the lawn.

“Beats me. It’s a pretty hotel, though,” Ethan said.

All three stories were lit up by spotlights along the front of the historic brick building. The arched windows glowed in the night like vibrant jewels. There were pillars and curved balconies. I’d never breathed near anything as expensive as that place. It reminded me of a tiny castle or something out of a fairytale.

I hummed in agreement.

We easily found the path, and Josh was right. Even though there weren’t very many decorative pole lights on either side, the ones that were around reflected on Lake Ontario and made everything feel surreal. The stars were out and glittered overhead in between fluffy clouds, and a cool breeze blew through my hair.

Ethan pulled me to a stop more than once to kiss me, and by the time we were almost done with our walk, I was hard as he guided me under a willow tree to where it was really dark and pressed me against the trunk. I whimpered as he slid down the zipper of my jeans, then wriggled his hand inside to pull out my cock. I thought I was going to pass out from the exhilaration of doing this outside. I did the same for him.

We’d messed around with each other for so long that it only took a couple of tugs for both of us to come while he

sucked the tip of my tongue. I whimpered as my balls emptied, and pleasure burst on my cockhead while tingles rushed through my stomach.

When the tremors in our bodies had finally subsided, he laughed and leaned his forehead against mine.

Groaning, I held up my cum-covered hand. “What am I going to do about this?” I asked. I couldn’t really see his eyes, but they glittered in the dark.

He snagged my wrist and brought my hand up to my mouth. “Eat it.”

Licking his cum off my palm gave me a dirty thrill, and his bright, bitter flavor had me making low sounds that were halfway between a moan and a whine.

“Fuck, let’s go home and put the blankets on the bed,” he growled into my ear.

“Yes, I’d love that.”

We were halfway back to the bike before we got close enough to the hotel that the lights illuminated his face.

“What did you do with my mess?” I asked, frowning at him.

He shrugged. “Wiped it on the tree.”

“Oh no!” I laughed.

He grinned at me and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

We made it back to the bike in time to watch a line of nice cars leaving the parking lot, so whatever had been going on at the hotel must’ve ended. I was excited to go home because there was also a bottle of lube hidden in that bag between the new blankets.

Ethan looked at me and licked his lips, and I wanted to do whatever was floating around in his head right now. My stomach clenched as he stared at me. Ethan picked up my helmet and gently settled it onto my head, then buckled the strap under my chin. I tilted my head toward him, and he didn’t hesitate, just pressed his mouth to mine.

“I could get used to living this way,” I said as he leaned back and put on his helmet.

“Me too.” He raised the visor to wink. “I’m going to speed on the way home. Hold on.”

I laughed because I was pretty sure he was teasing me—he’d never done anything dangerous with me in the sidecar. He started the engine, and I loved the vibrations. It was almost like getting a massage. As we left the parking lot, Ethan swore, and I gulped air as the bike lurched forward.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He glanced in my direction. “Fucking Dutch, that’s what. The asshole must’ve known we were looking for him earlier because he’s out right now. Doesn’t look like anyone’s in the car with him. I gotta get him.”

“What? Why?”

He grinned at me. “Because King told me to. Stay down in the seat, okay?”

“That isn’t a good reason!” I shouted.

“Because I fucking owe him a punch to the fucking face.” A snarl crossed his lips. “He could’ve gotten us killed the other day.” Ethan slapped his visor down, and I hunkered into the sidecar. We followed the car for a long time, and I didn’t know New Gothenburg very well, so I was confused and lost by the time the car bounced into a dirt parking lot next to a baseball field. There were a few struggling lights near the field, but the area was mostly dark.

The car door whipped open, and I gasped at the silver gun that was pointed in our direction. It was all I could focus on. Ethan didn’t stop the bike, just kept driving as he swore, and I cringed as the gun went off. The sound of metal pinging on metal—a bullet hitting our bike—had my heart in my throat, but then Ethan slammed the brakes.

“You fucking shot at me, Dutch!” Ethan shouted, raising his visor.

“Fuck, Ethan? That’s you? I heard a lot of shit about you,” the man in the car said, then got out with a weaselly smile stretching across his face. He had an accent that was sort of like Tav’s but not. It didn’t sound real, somehow. He was skinny to the point of looking sick, a lot like Murph. “I wouldn’t have shot at you if I’d known.” By his tone, I was pretty sure that was a lie.

Ethan got off the bike and marched over to Dutch, and when he was close enough, Ethan reared back and punched him. Dutch tried to swing the gun around toward Ethan, but Ethan grabbed Dutch’s arm, and the gun went off, a round firing into the ground.

“Oh no!” I didn’t think. I jumped out of the sidecar and ran over there, then drove my fist into the side of Dutch’s head. The jolt hurt my knuckles and rattled all the way up to my shoulder, where it ached. Dutch wavered on his feet and the gun fell to the ground. I hit the guy again and again, until he dropped to the dirt, and I was still punching when Ethan dragged me off him.

“What are you doing?” Ethan asked. His eyes were huge and he shook his head.

“He was going to shoot you!”

He pursed his lips. “We have to hurry. Someone will have heard those shots.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as Ethan dragged the groaning man away from his car.

“Giving Dutch what he deserves and following orders. King’s pissed at you for making him look bad, asshole.” He slapped Dutch, but much like when he’d beaten Gerard, I didn’t exactly mind it. This man wasn’t good. “And I’m mad because you could’ve gotten us all shot, you fucking idiot.” Ethan drew his arm back and blasted Dutch’s cheek with his palm. His head flew to the side.

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

“Get in the sidecar,” Ethan yelled.

Nodding, I rushed back to the bike, and I thought we were going to leave the guy there, since he was already hurt, but I covered my eyes as Ethan hopped on and drove toward him.

“What are you doing?” I felt like I was stuck in a loop.

Ethan let out a dark chuckle. “Taking him out at the knees.”

The sound as we drove over the man’s legs was horrendous, and he immediately began to scream.

“King wants you at the clubhouse tomorrow by eleven,” Ethan yelled in Dutch’s general direction, and he wore a grim smile as we left.

I gripped Ethan’s thigh as he drove us away, and I held on until we reached the clubhouse. When the motorcycle stopped, he hopped off and cursed as he looked at the front of the sidecar. He ran his finger over something while he shoved off his helmet.

“There’s a bullet hole here.” He glanced up at me, face going white. “You could’ve ended up shot.”

“You could’ve, too,” I said, ripping off my helmet and tossing it. I got out and for the first time ever, I was furious at him. I walked around and my heart nearly stopped as I spotted the hole in the metal. Where had the bullet gone? Not into me or him, but that was some serious luck. “What was that back there?” I shoved him.

He dropped his helmet, then dragged me against his chest and kissed me. I moaned, and he reached into the sidecar, tugging out the big bag from the store. We kissed our way over to the door, which was leaning on its hinges, but then someone came bursting out. He was huge, with the kind of chest that had enough muscles to stop a moving car, and he stumbled, landing on his front with a groan.

“Do you need help?” I asked.

“Nope, just leave me here,” the man said, then tugged his hat down so that the brim covered his eyes. “Floor’s comfy. Wait, this isn’t the floor.”

“Goddamn it, Dash,” someone shouted from the hallway. He came out and began to drag Dash off to the side so he wouldn’t be blocking the door, and I noticed a jagged scar cutting down the right side of his face. “Fuck, you need to drink less. You’re too big for this.” Another tattooed man I didn’t know came out to watch what was happening, and he shook his head.

“Shit, aren’t you Andy Spire’s boyfriend?” Ethan asked the guy busy swearing under his breath.

The man laughed. “Yeah.”

“Who is Andy Spire?” I asked.

They all looked at me.

“What, were you living on the other side of the moon?” the guy who’d been dragging the drunk man asked, then stopped to laugh again.

“I guess,” I said.

Ethan hauled me through the door, and we went down the short hallway to the barroom, then over to the doorway hiding a set of stairs. Ethan kept snagging kisses as we went up to the room. I wanted more and pressed my mouth to his as he shoved the door closed behind us. He tossed the bag next to the bed, and it was a race to see who could get naked first. I’d never felt this way. I was hot and my cock pulsed. I could run a marathon right now.

“You hit someone for me.” Ethan laughed like that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. He shoved my shoulder.

Several emotions raced through me, but I kept obsessing on how I’d thought he was going to get shot. I pushed him back toward the bed, and he landed on it. We should’ve stopped to put the blankets and stuff on the old mattress, but my cock was hard and leaking. All I wanted was him inside me. I grabbed the lube out of the bag and fought with the packaging while he cradled his head with his hands and gave me a smug smile.

“You hit someone for me,” he said again, still sounding shocked. He spread his legs and his thick cock curved up

toward his abs. I could barely think because he looked so good with his summer tan and hard muscles.

“Yeah, well, I love you,” I said, scowling at him.

He blinked at me, but I’d finally gotten the lube open, and I dribbled a bunch on his cock. He gritted his teeth as I slicked him up, barely taking the time to slide my fingers over him, and then I crawled on top of him.

“Are you okay to do this? Shit,” he said with a hiss as I sank down onto him. I gasped because it was too fast, but I wanted him in me more than I cared about a little pain. When my ass was flush to his groin, he sat up and grabbed the back of my neck. His grip hurt, but all I did was grind against him. The sensation of having my ass full made me tremble inside and out.

“You love me,” he said, almost as if it was a question, then flopped back as I began to move.

“Yes.” I bounced on his cock like we would win a million dollars if we came in less than a minute, and he grabbed my hips, grunting as I ground down on him, looking for that bump of his cock on that good spot in my ass. I shouted when he nudged me just right and didn’t care who could hear me.

“Yes, oh my God. Fucking hell, Jonas.” Ethan turned my name into both a prayer and a curse somehow. My heart flew as he held on to my hips and fucked up into me. I rested my palms on his chest and rolled my abs until it all felt good, then kept doing that. His mouth fell open, and then his eyes rolled back in his head. He shuddered and fucked me harder, and I whimpered as he began to tug on my cock.

That was it. I couldn’t handle any more.

I unloaded into his palm, but this time, with his dick inside me smashing my prostate, the ecstasy kept going, and a softer, delicious pleasure rolled through me after the initial blast stole my breath. After a while, I flopped onto his chest, and he laughed while he cradled me close.

“I don’t want anyone to hurt you,” I said with a sigh. “I love you.”

He rubbed my back, then kissed my neck. He mumbled something.

I sat back, and he tickled his hands along my thighs. “What?”

“I said, I love you. Please stick with me while we get our lives back on track. I’ll do anything for you. No one’s ever given a shit about me like you do. I promise, I’ll help you do anything you ever want.” He sat up and hugged me, burying his face against my chest. I gasped as he licked my nipple.

I grabbed his hair, tugging his head backward until he looked up into my face. A thrill raced through me. “Say it again.”

“I love you.” He stared into my eyes and pressed a kiss over my heart.

I hugged him close and buried my face against the top of his head. “We’re in this together. Forever.”

He rolled me onto my back and gazed into my eyes, and I didn’t want him to stop when he started kissing me again—which was good, because he didn’t. I didn’t care if we ever had a place of our own or a bunch of useless nice crap that would sit, shiny and perfect, on shelves, like in my parents’ house. This was real life, and Ethan was what counted.

“I love you,” I sighed out as he began to fuck me all over again.

“Love you, too,” he said, then attacked my lips.

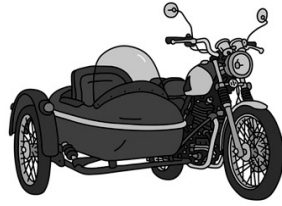
With a whimper, I held on to him tight. I didn’t need to die to go to heaven, this was it right here. All those people in my life had been wrong about *everything*, and now I knew better.

“Harder,” I demanded, and he laughed and did exactly that.

Real love didn’t hurt my heart, it made me happy.

EPILOGUE

ETHAN



“OH NO! DON’T LET HIM WIN, JONAS.” DESTINY, BISHOP’S boyfriend, slapped Jonas on the shoulder and giggled.

I didn’t know *who* had bought the racing car game, but someone had, and they’d plopped it in the corner of the barroom. The brothers and their partners had been taking turns playing. Jonas was currently sitting in one of the four seats, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly as he spun it, making the car on the wide screen spin in a circle as he attempted to turn a corner. I couldn’t stop staring because recently he’d started wearing eyeliner, and it made his brown eyes pop even from across the room.

“No, no!” Destiny screamed and slapped Jonas on the shoulder again. He stood at Jonas’s side, his blond hair hanging loosely around his shoulders. Compared to the other men in their all-black clothing, Destiny was a shiny diamond with a glittering pink shirt that clung to his slim build and silk silver pants that sat low on his thin hips. His fingernails were painted pink and had some kind of small stone on each one. “Come on, Jonas, you can’t let Barber win!”

Barber threw a glare over his shoulder at Destiny.

Destiny fluttered his fingers at him with a wink.

“You’re distracting me. Go away,” Barber whined.

“Shouldn’t you be supporting me, Bunny?” Bishop asked in his watered-down British lilt. He was in the third seat, driving his video-game car like a maniac.

Destiny waved his hand. “Destiny knows you don’t have a chance, honey. And Jonas is my new best friend. Us biker bitches need to stick together.”

“Hey!” Bishop didn’t sound very outraged, though. If anything, he was amused.

Scar, the fourth player, was focused firmly on the game, eyes narrowed in concentration and hands so tightly clutching the wheel that his knuckles went white.

Beside me, Charley—or Pike, as King occasionally called him—shook his head with a small laugh. We’d just been out sending another message for King, and while Hound had gone straight to the bar, Charley and I stood near the entrance, watching the crowd of bikers that surrounded the players.

“Who bought the game?” I asked, genuinely curious.

Charley rolled his eyes and slapped me on the back. “Who do you think?”

“Barber.”

He chuckled. “Of course. The childish fucker of the bunch.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t exactly surprised because during the past few months we’d been living in the clubhouse I’d learned a lot about my fellow brothers and their personalities. Barber was the shit-stirrer, the one who riled up the others, and he enjoyed a good game. Scar always seemed to take on the challenges Barber presented, and there was a continuous competition between them. Bishop always got in the middle of their feud, along with Quain and Charley.

“Yes, yes! Go around him!” Destiny bounced higher and clapped his hands.

Jonas laughed, and Scar let out a loud growl, making Barber howl in laughter. It was pure chaos, but I couldn’t help but smile because Jonas was clearly enjoying himself.

“Fucking hell. *Move.*” Scar slammed his hand against the steering wheel, then let out a massive yell of frustration as his car crashed into the wall when he tried to turn a corner.

“You did it! You won!” Destiny dragged Jonas out of his seat and hugged him, and they both jumped in each other’s arms and laughed.

I shook my head and grinned wider. Jonas had made a large group of friends, but Destiny had become one of the people he spent the most time with. When Jonas was stuck with his senior year homework, Destiny was the one who sat down and helped him through it. He was smarter than he let on, apparently.

I wolf whistled, and Jonas’s gaze snapped to me.

“Ethan!” He laughed and plopped a kiss on Destiny’s cheek before he came rushing over to me and into my arms. I grabbed him around the waist and dragged him into a long kiss that left my toes curled in exhilaration. I’d already washed off the blood, but I could still *feel* the warmth on my skin and it added to the hot and heavy emotion roiling through me. “I won.”

I laid a kiss at the corner of his mouth. “I saw that. You did amazing.”

“He cheated,” Scar grumbled as he rose from his seat, and even though he pointed at Jonas, he smiled. “He’s lucky I like him.”

Jonas gave him a shy smirk. “Stop being a sore loser, Colton.”

Scar grunted. I’d never been allowed to call him by his first name, but Jonas had a special touch when it came to the Kings and their partners. I didn’t blame them. It was easy to love Jonas and his upbeat personality.

“Did you get your homework done?” I asked, aware of how much I sounded like a parent, but I knew how important it was to Jonas for him to succeed and get into college. He’d already told me he wanted to teach.

He nodded eagerly. “Destiny and King helped me.”

I gaped for a second. “King?”

Jonas’s eyes sparkled. “He’s smart.”

A grunt came from the bar, and I glanced over to find King sitting on a stool, a glass of amber liquid clutched in his hand. Dallas—or Viper, as I'd heard was his road name—stared at him with concern, his hand lying on King's knee.

King raised the glass. "I know some shit."

"Didn't say you didn't." I shrugged and released Jonas to walk over to him. "Job done, Pres. That asshole won't be threatening us again."

King made a sound almost like a laugh and slapped me on the shoulder. "Good job, Prospect."

"Have you decided what's going to happen to Dutch?" I asked.

It'd been a few months since I'd run over Dutch's knees. He'd come in to see King when I'd told him to, and to no one's surprise, he was in a wheelchair, but also a hospital gown because someone had found him and called an ambulance. He'd snuck his way out to get to the clubhouse in time.

King hadn't told me what he'd planned on doing with Dutch, but from what I'd heard, he'd given Dutch to a part-time King for "care." I didn't know what that meant, but King had told me he would keep me updated with his plans for Dutch.

King took another sip of his drink and hummed. "Let's just say Bull will take good care of him." He chuckled.

I hadn't met Bull because he was a busy brother who didn't only ride bikes, but bulls, too. He cruised around the US on tour. I didn't know how he was supposedly taking care of Dutch or what that involved, so I kept my mouth shut.

King waved his hand behind me. "Here they are."

I turned and frowned when two new guys walked into the barroom. Maybe they were a year or two older than me. They were polar opposites, with one wearing completely black, the same as most of the Kings, while the other had a *bright pink* jacket that matched the color of his hair. The one wearing black had wavy brown hair, and while it seemed as if he was

the goth to Pinky's Barbie, they had identical face structures. They were. . . twins.

Pinky was sucking on a white-and-pink lollipop, and when he saw me looking, he winked and grinned with a glossed mouth, tongue darting out to poke his candy on a stick as though it was a cock.

Jonas's eyebrows dipped and he walked across the barroom, latching on to me tightly like he thought Pinky was going to steal me. Well, he didn't have anything to worry about because Pinky wasn't my type. Not only was he too bright, but he was sinewy, and I preferred Jonas's muscular body.

King got to his feet and wobbled, and Dallas grabbed his arm, mouth curling down sadly. "Sheep, meet the two new prospects who'll be working closely alongside you. Candy and Toffee."

I snorted in amusement, and they both looked at me. "Let me guess. Pinky there is Candy."

Pinky—or Candy, apparently—stuck his tongue out at me. "Aren't you clever? Let me guess, with that big brain you won a Nobel prize."

His brother rolled his eyes and nudged him. "Remember what I told you. Don't be a smart-ass, Emry."

Candy rolled his eyes.

"And let me guess, you have a pink bike, too?" I snapped back.

He laughed and his pale cheeks flushed nearly the same color as his damned hair. "I do, actually. Custom painted, pink-and-black. A Triumph Speed Triple 1200 RS. My brother here has a Rocket 3. What do you have?"

I smirked. This was clearly a game of measuring our cocks, but with our bikes. Luckily I'd done a lot of work for King and Undertaker's funeral home, so last week I'd managed to buy a new Harley Davidson, while keeping the old one we had, too. I still wanted to repair her and make her beautiful again, which was part of my future goals.

“A yellow-and-black Harley Street Bob with a sidecar for my man.” I curled my arm around Jonas, kissing his cheek.

King slammed his glass on the bar, breaking the tense moment between us. “Enough.” He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out three wads of cash, each one held together by a rubber band, and threw one at me. “Here. Take that and go finish up that apartment of yours. You earned it.”

I held up the cash to him in a salute. “Thanks, King.”

Giving the new guys an eyebrow waggle, I tugged Jonas past them and toward the exit. He had to rush back to grab his jacket and gloves from where he’d tossed them on a couch, and on his way past the guys, Jonas turned to wave goodbye to Destiny and the other Kings, and Destiny blew him a kiss.

The sun blinded us for a few seconds when we stepped outside, and as soon as I could see again, I led Jonas to the Harley and held out my hand to help him into the sidecar. He grinned, shaking his head. Thankfully, today had been a perfectly clear one with no snow or ice, and we’d been able to ride the bike despite the cold.

“Such a gentleman.”

I winked. “Shh, don’t tell anyone else.”

He laughed and slid his palm into mine, stepping into the car and sliding down into the seat. I grabbed his half helmet and put it on his head. I buckled the strap up securely before I gave him a kiss and went around the other side of the bike.

Jonas made a small happy sound as I pulled on my leather gloves, and smirking, I started the Harley with a simple push of a button—so different from the older one Scar had given me. He gave me side-eye until I put on my helmet. I was glad the weather held steady as I began to drive. Jonas and I had saved enough money to rent an apartment close to the clubhouse and it had become ours last week. We’d bought some basic furniture, and we’d gone paint shopping yesterday. We’d planned to spend this weekend painting the walls the light blue Jonas had insisted on, but King had called me to do another job.

We'd specifically chosen this location because not only was it close to the clubhouse, but because Jonas didn't need to change schools again. The last thing I wanted was to make his life harder. If we decided to move somewhere else after he finished his senior year in high school, then we could.

The apartment wasn't in the best area, but it was a lot better than the trailer park. This home was *ours*, and we wanted to create it together. Outside, it looked like a white boxy building, three stories high. The fire escapes were silver and rusted, and the small rectangular lawn outside was basically dead, but it was identical to the buildings around it.

Our parking lot was through a small driveway beside the apartment complex and around the back, and I pulled into our reserved spot and turned off the bike. Jonas grinned at me and heaved himself out of the sidecar. He unbuckled his helmet and took it off before tucking it under his armpit as I came around to his side and did the same with my helmet. I wrapped an arm around him, and together we walked through the back door and up one flight of stairs to get to our apartment. His eyes sparkled as he yanked out a set of keys from his jeans pocket and unlocked the door.

The entire scene felt very homey, exactly the way I'd imagined myself living all those years ago when I was a kid watching those family TV shows. Except I'd never quite expected a sexy guy like Jonas tucked under my arm, though I wasn't complaining.

Once inside, he closed the door while I dropped my helmet next to it, and he hummed.

"Not there, Ethan. It has a place like everything else." He gave me a long look, and I laughed, picking the helmet up again and stowing it on a hanger that he'd bought for our jackets and helmets.

He smiled and did the same before taking off his winter gear and putting it in its place, too. I did the same thing while he smiled at me. He wrapped his arms around my neck and laid a gentle, lazy kiss on my mouth. I sucked on his tongue,

enjoying his taste. Hell, I fucking loved everything about him, and I couldn't get enough.

“What are we going to have for dinner? No takeout. We're trying to save. I can cook steak and veggies.” He brushed his nose against mine and sighed happily. “I finished my weekend homework already, so I'm all yours.”

I took a deep breath. For the last few months, we'd done everything together, whenever possible, and I'd loved every fucking minute. Everything, except *one* thing Jonas had mentioned he'd wanted to do—but was okay with *not* doing if I never wanted to.

“How about you fuck me tonight?” I cleared my throat because the words came out gruffly.

Jonas froze and he raised his chin to stare up at me. “Are you. . . Really?”

I nodded, unable to speak. It felt like a giant baseball had been shoved in my throat. Finally, I forced myself to say *something* as he continued to stare at me, as though judging if I was joking or not. “Yeah. You said you wanted to try it.”

“I said it would be nice, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable.” He laid a kiss on my jaw. “If you don't want to, we can keep making love the way we always do. As long as I'm with you, Ethan, I'm happy.”

My heart jumped and warmth spread through me. Was this truly what it was like to love? No wonder some people go crazy once they lose it. I was going to do my damndest to never lose Jonas again.

I cupped his face and slanted my mouth over his in a soft kiss that made him moan. “I want you inside me, baby.”

He let out a startled breath and kissed me harder. He slapped his hands to my chest and shoved me backward, and I let him push me in the direction of the bedroom. Our apartment only had three rooms—the joint kitchen and living room, the bathroom, and our bedroom, but it was the perfect size for us.

The entrance to our room was a sliding door, and he reached around me to grab the handle and shove it open, and it rolled across its hinges until it came to a stop at the other side.

I smirked at him and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, yanking him inside. He laughed as he stumbled over one of the shoes I'd left on the floor last night, and he pointed at it, but I waved my hand.

"I'll pick it up later. Come fuck me, baby." I kissed him hard, and he moaned with such neediness that my cock reacted purely from the guttural sound. Jonas was mine, and no matter how many times I thought about it, it didn't quite seem real. My life felt like a dream. A fantasy.

We worked on each other's clothes, and when he got my shirt off, he trailed kisses over my neck and down my chest, flicking his tongue against my right nipple. I groaned and slid my fingers through his hair, scraping my nails over his scalp.

He didn't spend too much time torturing me, thank fuck, and went straight back to ripping off my clothes. I did the same until we were both naked. I took a step back to appreciate the hard lines of his body, which he continued to keep in shape at his school gym. I wanted to lick every inch of his skin, suck and nibble until he had my claim marks all over him. *He's mine*, I reminded myself for the thousandth time.

Jonas flushed under my gaze and rubbed the side of his neck, smiling so sweetly that my heart slammed hard against my ribs. "I want this. I want to be inside you."

"Come get it." I walked backward, and he followed me, his hard cock bouncing. He licked his lips, and my gaze settled on his hard-on, not quite sure how I was going to take his length in my hole but willing to try for him. There weren't many people in this life I would do just about anything for—actually, Jonas was now the *only* person I would do literally anything for.

I smirked and grabbed my cock, stroking it as I fell back onto the bed, and he jumped on me. Laughing, I wrapped my arms around him and slammed my mouth over his, and he groaned, rocking his hard cock against mine for friction.

He was heavier than I'd expected, and it took me a moment to realize he'd never fully been on top of me this way. He'd ridden my cock, yes, but he'd never lain on me like a blanket, and I loved the warmth he provided.

Our kiss grew hotter, and I spread my legs, rolling my hips and causing him to whimper so prettily into my mouth.

"Can I?" he asked quietly, gaze flicking to the nightstand where our lube was.

"Yeah." I kissed the corner of his lips. "Do it."

He grinned and leaned over, opening the top drawer and tugging out the bottle. He sat back on his knees and stared down at me as he poured some lube onto his fingers. "I'll prepare you as much as I can."

I grunted. "Don't. Just do the two fingers and that's it. I can handle pain."

"But—"

"Baby, I want you inside me. Sooner rather than later. Just shove the fingers in and get it over with so your cock can take over, huh?" I waggled my eyebrows at him.

He chewed on his bottom lip but nodded. I lifted my legs and hooked them around his waist, and he used the access I gave him to press a finger against my hole. He pushed in slowly and it didn't hurt, but it was *weird*. Not pleasurable. Not painful. Just weird as fuck.

When he was third-knuckle deep, he pulled back and began to add the second finger, and that was when the weirdness amped up to some pain. His digits were thick, and he spread my ass wider than it'd been before.

"You're resisting me," he whispered in concern. "Maybe we should start with a dildo or—"

"No, keep going." I wriggled on the bed and scrunched up my nose because I didn't really like the feeling of his fingers. It'd gone beyond strange to uncomfortable.

"Ethan, you've never done this before, even with a toy. I don't want to hurt you." Jonas pouted at me.

I grabbed his face and dragged him down, slamming my mouth against his in a hungry kiss that shut him up. When I was done asserting my dominance, I nipped his bottom lip. “Get your cock in me. Now.”

He hesitated and his pout grew deeper, but he huffed and grabbed the lube after pulling his fingers from my hole. He slicked up his cock and it glistened as the afternoon sun filtered through the white blinds, and it reminded me of what an angel he was with the light haloing around him.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but I shook my head.

“Ass. Now.” I smoothed my hand up his arm. “Come on, baby. I want you.”

I wasn’t sure how thrilled I was to bottom. I’d never tried it before because it was one thing to be gay, but to take it up the ass? I wasn’t entirely sure I would like it, either, but this was Jonas. I would give him the world if he asked for it.

Jonas let out a breath and held the base of his cock. I wrapped my legs higher around his stomach, and he leaned over me, lining up his hard-on with my hole. Gently, he began to push inside me. I was going to tell him to hurry up, but the pressure of his cock spreading my ass stole the air from my lungs. The feeling was new and weird and painful all at once. He was so fucking wide that I began to reconsider the entire thing, but I looked up at his handsome face and the way his mouth popped open in a cute *O*—and I couldn’t. This was for Jonas.

I focused on his nose, a little too wide for his face but still absolutely perfect, and tried to forget about the pain as he forced himself inside. Maybe I should’ve let him do more than two fingers, but we were here now and there was no turning back.

“Breathe through your nose,” he whispered, pausing.

I glared at him. “Don’t stop.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He frowned.

“You won’t. Trust me.” I cupped his cheek. “Come on, keep going.”

Even though he didn’t look entirely sure, he kept moving forward, and I took the strange sensations and ignored them the best I could until he was balls deep and moaning.

“You’re so tight.” He let his forehead rest against my chin and shuddered. “You feel so good.”

“Yeah?” I slid my hand higher and carded it through his short hair. “Good. That’s good. Now move.”

He blinked down at me. “Are you okay, though? Maybe I should wait until you get used to me.”

I rocked my hips against him, and he moaned loudly. “Nope. Find that sweet spot for me, baby. Make me scream and cream at the same time.”

He chuckled and began to move. The thrusts started off slow at first, and the twinges of pain began to dwindle until it was just strange, and then after a few times of pounding into me, I felt *it*. The prostate. I’d always been the one using my cock to find it in another guy, but never did I imagine it would feel this fucking good.

And just like that, my cock exploded, cum splattering across both of our abs. Pleasure burst through me and stole my breath.

I froze, shame making my cheeks burn hot. I came already? What the fuck?

Jonas blinked down at me, and after a moment, he grinned so widely I was surprised he didn’t break his face. “Wow. I’m flattered.”

I wanted to die from the embarrassment. Clearing my throat, I fell back against the bed and threw an arm over my eyes. *Fuck*. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

He began to move again, hitting the same spot that had sent me over the edge, and almost instantaneously, my cock

was twitching again even though I'd just released my load. Sweet tension socked me in the gut and I gasped, toes curling.

"It's not over yet," he whispered, and there was a sliver of wickedness I hadn't heard in his voice before. He began to move faster, the head of his cock hammering my prostate. It was as if he knew exactly what he was doing because my cock was back from its premature vacation and was so fucking hard that I thought I'd lose my load just as quickly again.

"Oh fuck." My toes curled, and he leaned down, wrapping his arms around me. I held on to him tightly as he fucked into me without remorse, and everything felt incredible. His weight was the perfect topping to a delicious dessert, and an array of sensations smacked me hard.

An overabundance of pleasure was the hardest hitter, and it got the home run, batting me right where it felt the best. I mentally cursed my weak body and the stupid prostate as my world spun.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." I groaned and stuck my face against his neck, biting down on his skin hard enough to taste blood.

He yelled and stilled, and his warm load flooded my ass like a goddamned volcano. He trembled through his release, murmuring my name. I held him tighter because I was so fucking close I was about to die.

He rocked his hips a little, and I groaned, reaching between us to jerk off. Two seconds was all it took, and the world shifted and glittered like I'd gotten high and gone to fucking Wonderland. My balls exploded and my cock shuddered as I blew my wad *again*.

"Fuck!" I roared like a bear, and Jonas held me tighter.

I didn't know how long we lay there, but by the time I gathered enough energy to talk, my cum was nearly cool and my limbs were still weak. Jonas had moved to lie at my side, and he kissed my shoulder gently.

"I love you." He rubbed circles on my chest. "So much."

I hummed and gave him a stupid grin. "I love you, too." I thought about what happened for a moment, then frowned.

“Don’t tell anyone how quickly I came, okay?”

He laughed loudly. “I *did* make you scream. And cream.”
He held up two fingers. “Twice.”

I groaned, and his laughter only got louder.

Yeah, I could be happy in this life.

“You’re mine,” I murmured to him.

“And you’re mine.”

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