

#3

Ghost

BORN WILLAINS MC

BIJOU HUNTER
JULIET FLYNN

GHOST



BIJOU HUNTER & JULIET FLYNN

Copyright © 2023 Bijou Hunter & Juliet Flynn



No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.



Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmosphere purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.



Cover

Source: DepositPhotos

Cover Copyright © 2023 Bijou Hunter & Juliet Flynn



Dedication

To SaMiJaMaLu

My lovely betas — Becky, Carina, Sarah, and Cynthia

&

Judy's Proofreading

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NOTE TO READERS

CHARACTER LIST

LUCA ELMWOOD

GHOST

OVERLORD

LUCA

GHOST

SISTER SASS

LADY BUG

LUCA

GHOST

APEX

SISTER SASS

LUCA

GHOST

DUCHESS

LUCA

TWINKLE TOES

GHOST

LUCA

LADY BUG

OVERLORD

SISTER SASS

LUCA

GHOST

DUCHESS

[LUCA](#)

[LADY BUG](#)

[GHOST](#)

[LUCA](#)

[OVERLORD](#)

[SISTER SASS](#)

[APEX](#)

[GHOST](#)

[LUCA](#)

[GHOST](#)

[TWINKLE TOES](#)

[OVERLORD](#)

[LUCA](#)

[GHOST](#)

[APEX](#)

[DUCHESS](#)

[LADY BUG](#)

[SISTER SASS](#)

[LUCA](#)

[GHOST](#)

[EPILOGUE – ANGEL EYES](#)

[EPILOGUE – GHOST](#)

[JESTER — SNEAK PEEK](#)

[BIJOU READING ORDER](#)

[ABOUT BIJOU](#)

NOTE TO READERS



This series is different than my usual ones. Each book will include multiple POV chapters with side characters. Various storylines will span several books. Not all questions will be answered in “Ghost.” However, the main hero and heroine will get their happily ever after, including epilogues.

CHARACTER LIST



TO PREVENT SPOILERS, THIS LIST ONLY INCLUDES
CHARACTERS MENTIONED IN THE SERIES SO FAR



BORN VILLAINS MC FOUNDING MEMBERS

Brody Marsden/Papa Bear — Founder

Kraken — former Vice President; now rival club President

Ominous — original chick member

Jester — Road Captain; currently in prison

Buzzsaw — former Sergeant-at-Arms; runs Sanctuary's
construction

Flagg — Secretary; Kraken's brother

Gravel — runs the Sanctuary's ranch

Dropout — runs Sanctuary's gym

Tank — runs Sanctuary's landscaping



BORN VILLAINS MC CURRENT LEADERSHIP

Claymore Marsden/Overlord — President; Papa Bear's son

Grit — Vice President

Warwick Marsden/Bomber — Treasurer; Papa Bear's son

Blunt — (Acting) Road Captain

Hawthorne Baxter/Thorn — Sergeant-at-Arms

Cyril Tayback/Apex — Enforcer

Jesse Zurika/Ghost — Enforcer



MEMBERS

Talon Marsden/Sister Sass — Papa Bear's daughter; chick member

Aqua — chick member

Stix — runs Sanctuary's auto shop

Mulholland — 2nd in command at Sanctuary's auto shop

Rave — chick member; kid: Michael

Riot — chick member; Rave's sister; kid: Michael

Motley

Doughboy

Penthouse

Neon

Smoke

Puppet

Clutch

Vegas

Emo

Topeka



PROSPECTS

Emma/Dire — daughter of Ominous



ENEMIES

Kraken — President/Founder of Horned Angels MC; former
VP of Born Villains MC

Dio — Vice President

Cypher — Sergeant-at-Arms

Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club

Black Gold Four — Primrose, TX



OLD LADIES/GIRLFRIENDS

Lady Bug — Brody/Papa Bear's second wife, kids: Nadia
(estranged), Katana w/Papa Bear

Betty Boop — Brody/Papa Bear's deceased first wife, kids:
Claymore, Warwick, and Talon

Twinkle Toes/Giselle Reinhart — Apex's wife, kids: Amelia,
Anna

Duchess/Jules Gwynne — Overlord's wife, kids: Scout, Zoey,
Evie, Anthony

Pumpkin — Warwick/Bomber's wife, kids: Conner (deceased)
and Collin

Sugar Plum — Grit's wife; kid: Vallie

Jelly Bean — Aqua's wife

Sweet Buns — Tank's wife

Bunny — Buzzsaw's wife

Flame — Gravel's wife; kid: Jay; runs the Sanctuary's ranch

Cream Puff — Flag's wife; kids: Martin, Misty

Sweetie Pie — Mulholland's wife/runs Sanctuary's store

Queen Bee — Kraken's old lady (deceased); kids: Jules and
Scout

Mother Goose — Kraken's old lady

Mabel "Mabie" Sandza — Blunt's girlfriend; kid: Clark



ALLIES

Graeme Hubbard — Metamora sheriff/Papa Bear's former foster brother

Doctor Sal Perez — owner of Refuge Clinic/Papa Bear's former foster brother

Davina — owner of Bacon Haven Diner

Risa — manager of Bettina House (Metamora shelter)

Eliza — castoff from Primrose, TX

Luca Elmwood — vigilante/castoff

Hope — castoff from Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club compound

LUCA ELMWOOD



Newest Castoff

I don't recognize myself anymore. I've gotten sloppy. Lost my edge, maybe.

In my head, the attack on the Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club's compound was a textbook operation. I did manage to take out a dozen of the human-trafficking bikers. Looking back, though, I can see how the plan was too big for one person. I shouldn't have even considered it.

Yet, I did. I chose to challenge two dozen enemies spread over a large compound. Stupid move from someone who should know better.

With the passing of each birthday, I become more reckless. At some point, I lost the part of myself interested in self-preservation.

I don't remember being afraid when grabbed by the surviving Dirty Princes. I was ready to die. Instead, they tortured me for information, and I offered them plenty of bullshit names and details. Through it all, I refused to beg or play weak to get them to lower their guards.

Maybe I wanted them to kill me. Except they made their money by selling women and children. I might no longer be at my peak beauty, but I'd still be worth more alive than dead.

When death didn't seem likely, I started planning my escape. I hoped to kill several more bad guys before going out in a blaze of glory.

Instead, another biker club showed up looking for revenge, only to find a few people left. The Born Villains Motorcycle Club saved me and one survivor named Hope. I ought to be thankful, but I'm mostly frustrated by how I don't have a plan.

I'm always plotting. Even in between kills, I relax at beachfront resorts and strategize my next target.

I've been on my own for a long time. I don't exchange real conversations anymore. I'm always putting on a show. My heart iced over years ago. Friendships mean nothing to me.

Why haven't I bailed yet? For days, I've been holed up in a small medical clinic nestled in a hilly town controlled by the Born Villains. I can't piss without one of them knowing.

Though these bikers claim to be the good guys, I don't believe a damn word.

The Born Villains put on a solid show. I'll give them that much. Hope is cared for in another room inside the Refuge Clinic. The doctor—a short Hispanic male with thick black hair peppered with gray and big warm eyes—seems competent. Doctor Sal ordered X-rays for me when I arrived with bruised ribs. He also sent me out to a local dentist to check my mouth, where the Dirty Princes ripped out one of my molars.

Hope wasn't so lucky. Those sick fuckers had her caged in a hot, underground bunker. I don't know all the details. None of the Born Villains tell me anything. Yet, I've overheard a few things.

Doctor Sal and his staff cleaned up Hope, got her on fluids, and pumped her full of antibiotics. She'll survive physically, but mentally she seems to have died back in that hole.

I only agreed to come to Metamora with the Born Villains as a way to keep an eye on Hope. Now, I'm unclear if leaving is an option. Whenever I step out of my hospital-style room, several bikers await me in the hallway or lobby. They claim to be protecting Hope and me.

When I'm tired and need to rest, I pretend to believe them. When I'm on edge, like right now, I figure they have their own plans for the battered girl in the next room.

Hope is the main reason I haven't bailed. I haven't saved anyone in two years. The last one was an eleven-year-old boy with two broken legs and the dead eyes of someone who

wished he'd been left to die. In my fantasies, he's gotten better under the bureaucratic state's loving care.

Like the boy, I'm not sure Hope is relieved to be alive. Her father sold her to the Dirty Princes to pay a debt. I plan to end the asshole. That's what I'm good at, not the savior part.

This morning, I'm itching to leave Metamora. This good-hearted hero role isn't me. I excel at killing. I would have singlehandedly defeated the Dirty Princes, if I could've kept their numbers straight.

However, I likely wouldn't have found Hope. One of the Born Villains—Thorn with his long, blond hair, thick beard, tatted body, and the sad eyes of a guy in the wrong business—claimed his team nearly missed the entry to the underground bunker.

If my plan worked, I would have made a quick sweep of the compound, looking for survivors. Then, the place would have gone up in flames, taking Hope with it.

Whenever I imagine how close I came to killing Hope, I wonder why I'm sticking around. I can't save that battered, broken young woman. I don't know any doctors. I'm ill-suited to play her nursemaid. So, why don't I take my hidden cash stashed in one of my bags and leave Metamora?

My thoughts return to six years ago when I saved three teenagers chained together in a shed by Nazi fucks running meth and guns. The girls were so relieved, crying and thanking me. I'd felt different that day as if I wasn't cold inside.

A year before them, I helped a mom and her kids escape her coked-up pimp and his machete. She seemed happy, and the little boy told me I was like Superman.

But those wins were rare. My superhero power seems to be drenching evil places with more blood rather than saving terrorized kids or broken women.

With each of those other wins, I left the survivors at hospitals or shelters. But the Born Villains refuse to take Hope to a real hospital, claiming no one will help her. I know the

system is broken. I understand how Hope will likely get dumped in a group home or end up on the street.

A little part of me wants to believe these bikers will do right by Hope. Why can't I pretend they have the money, power, and empathy to fix what monsters broke? This lie would allow me to run, regroup, and start hunting again.

Restless all morning, I finally leave my room and find Ghost in the hallway. The biker is my main jailer. His dark blue eyes are like sapphires hidden behind dark lashes and lined by darker circles. He's built like a long-distance runner, lean yet powerful. His long legs are currently stretched across the hallway, blocking my escape.

His shoulder-length brown hair is damp from a recent shower. He looks like he hasn't slept in days. I doubt he's left the clinic since we arrived.

"What?" Ghost demands when I watch him.

Ghost is a temperamental little bitch. For whatever reason, I find him fascinating. I often pretend to be checking the hallway, when I'm really craving another dose of the hunky, asshole biker.

Men have never interested me. I thought I might be a lesbian for a while, but women don't interest me, either. For years, I figured I was asexual. Then, I caught sight of the snarly biker now glaring at me and learned how good lust could feel.

"Do you have the info on Hope's dad?" I demand, meeting his antagonism with my own. Glancing down the hallway toward the lobby, I spot the boot of another biker.

Ghost follows my gaze before glaring at me through exhausted eyes. "That info is with Papa Bear."

Apparently, Papa Bear founded the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. The white-haired, thickly muscled, tattooed man is likely in his fifties. He's spoken to me twice. On the first night, Papa Bear offered me the tough-love speech. Then, yesterday, he dropped by to check on Hope and asked if I planned to stick around. I didn't give him an answer.

Ghost is probably in his thirties. His President—a softly handsome hunk named Overlord—assigned this Enforcer to play my guard. Despite how much Ghost glares at me, I sense he likes his assignment.

Whenever we bitch at each other, it feels like flirting. I don't know why I keep egging him on. I should just make sure Hope is okay and move on with my life. Instead, I'm nursing a crush on this snarly beast.

Leaving Ghost to watch me, I peek into Hope's room next to mine. She's awake and staring at the ceiling rather than the wall-hung TV playing HGTV.

Hope's color is better today. Earlier, I overheard the medical assistant, Maria, say Hope ate all of her breakfast. They've had us both on soft diets.

"Is there anywhere around here to get a decent burger?" I ask Ghost once I shut Hope's door. "Not a chain restaurant. I want a diner-style burger."

"Sure. We're no hick town."

Silence lingers while I admire his snarly expression. Finally, I ask, "Is it within walking distance?"

Narrowing his pretty eyes again, he spits out, "You fucking know it isn't."

"I'll call an Uber."

Ghost pops up from his seat. He moves soundlessly like a cat or, well, like a ghost, I guess. I get a sense he's deadlier than he looks. Right now, fatigue rolls off him in waves, and I don't know how he'll deal with me if I get violent.

Most men can't shadow my five-foot-eleven frame. However, Ghost has about four inches on me. He isn't as intimidating as his fellow biker, Apex—a monster of a man with dark eyes hinting at barely controlled rage—but I still tense with him staring down at me.

However, I don't dare back down. I like poking at the hottie to see if he'll poke back. "I want a burger."

“Then say please,” Ghost replies as his upper lip curls for effect.

Ghost wants to fuck me. His lust is palpable when we share a space. Of course, most men want to fuck me. I’m a beautiful woman. I even modeled back in my normal life.

But Ghost wants more than a simple fuck. He needs to save me. His gaze holds the same pathetic desire as mine when I see Hope. There’s more happening between us than simple lust.

The smart move would be to use his desire to gain information. If I know where Hope’s dad is, I can start hunting again.

Except no matter how much I sleep, I remain exhausted. My paranoid brain wonders if they’re drugging my food to keep me weak. My logical brain knows the Born Villains have enough manpower to overwhelm me even at my sharpest.

When I’m honest with myself, I realize I’m a predator at the end of her life span. I’ve lost my edge. It’s why I was sloppy at the compound. *What the hell am I supposed to do when I’m no longer hunting monsters?* Going back to my old life isn’t an option.

“I won’t beg,” I tell Ghost, sounding tired despite wanting to poke at the weary, lovestruck beast.

“Is it safe for your mouth to eat that shit?”

Scratching at his jaw, he leaves behind angry red marks. Ghost’s too tired to be an effective bodyguard. Is the other biker here to pick up the slack?

“I want real food,” I tell him and glance at the lobby again. “Do they have food delivery in your little town?”

“What kind of burger?” he asks rather than answer my question.

“The normal kind.”

“No fancy shit?”

I stare into Ghost's gorgeous eyes and try to see past his surly tone. This bad attitude isn't for show. Ghost's a nasty person, better at pushing people away than bringing them closer. Yet, under his naturally shitty personality, I sense he longs for a life he'll never have. Few things are more depressing than coveting dreams that'll never come true.

Sizing me up, Ghost explains, "I can't get your burger unless you scoot your ass back inside your room."

I spent a good part of my early life obeying the rules and pleasing other people. I gave up on that submissive bullshit once I went vigilante.

When Ghost tells me to obey, I naturally want to push back. Men like him don't respect submission. I can't imagine his buddy Apex bowing down to anyone. *Why should I be expected to eat shit when these men wouldn't?*

However, I want that burger, and I'm too tired to remain standing. Scooting my ass back inside my room is the smarter move. Though I normally think rationally, I still just stare at Ghost.

"I'll get a burger and eat with you," he says, taking my glare as a form of flirting. "You can tell me what your deal is."

A giddy feeling overwhelms me. I've been dying to hang out with Ghost and see what's behind his surly exterior.

Except I'm not someone capable of doing anything with these flirty feelings. I don't date. I haven't had friends in years. I'm not interested in getting close to anyone. *So why am I excited to race down this dead end?*

Once in my room, I promise myself I'll soon return to my old life. Ghost won't change anything. Neither will Hope. Once her future is set, I'll figure out what to do next with mine.

GHOST



Jesse Zurika/Enforcer

Pain has been the one constant in my life. It's what I trust. People can let you down. Good fortunate will end. Love is a burden. No matter where I've gone or done, pain lingered like a reliable old friend.

I'm wired wrong. Been that way since before I was born. I feel dirt on my skin even after I shower. I'm filled with a sense of failure even after I succeed. I often miss how I'm hungry. I don't notice when I'm thirsty. I rarely want to fuck. I hate being touched. The sound of people's voices makes my head hurt. The world has a way of grinding me down, even when it's quiet.

I've rarely read situations right. As a kid, I missed social cues and took people at face value. I trusted likeable assholes and pushed away grumpy saints. I couldn't see past the masks people wear.

That's why I distrust everyone. It's also why I give people shit nonstop. If they're focused on their possible failures, they won't look too closely at mine.

I've only made two good decisions in my life. One was linking up with the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. The club helps out losers and people stomped on by life. Their home base—the eighty-acre Sanctuary—takes in battered women and kids. The club is filled with men and women saddled with abusive childhoods and stints in foster care and juvenile hall. A place for fuckups seemed like a perfect fit for me.

Yet, even my shot at joining the club nearly ended in failure. I hated the grunt duties I had to do to get patched in, so I nearly quit.

Another prospect named Apex convinced me to stick it out. The tall-as-fuck, buffed-out asshole intimidated me in the beginning. I assumed he'd try to bully me. I'd killed a guy twice my size before, and I was willing to do it again.

Instead, Apex's hostility fit mine. We get along in a way I can't with other people. It's not that he's nicer than anyone else. He's a mumbling jerk with a chip on his huge shoulder. Apex also has a habit of pissing away perfectly good empathy on evil bitches with tears in their eyes.

That brings me to the second good decision of my life—going no contact with my junkie mother and co-dependent grandmother. Those bitches fooled me too many times with their sweet-as-sugar, back-in-recovery, “so fucking sorry” bullshit.

As a kid, I craved my mom's attention. She was one of the few people who could soothe the wrong inside me. I needed her to use her love to make me feel normal. Instead, she used my feelings to fuck me up even more. To get her next fix, I was always expendable. Everything was about the drugs. That was her true love. Never me.

I feel better having walked away. That's all I want most days, just to feel okay. I keep my life simple. I eat what I know I like. I remain stoned enough to soften my edges but stay clearheaded enough to ride at any time. I stick to people I know I can trust. Apex, mostly, and now his chick, Giselle.

I've known Thorn since we were kids at school. He was nice to me, even when I treated him like garbage. I remember hating him a little back then. No matter how many bruises his foster dad's belt left behind, Thorn still came to school wearing a smile. He got along with people. Our teachers liked him. He did okay in school, never a genius but he rarely struggled with lessons. Meanwhile, I'd get distracted by a noise and miss whole lessons.

I was jealous of Thorn then and wrote him off as a loser. But he's the one who told me about Papa Bear and the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. I don't know where I'd be now if

Thorn hadn't shown me kindness, even after I spent years being a dick to him.

Thorn's got a big heart. That's probably why he won't leave the clinic. Six four and bulging with muscles, he takes up a lot of space in the waiting room. I keep finding him asleep with his face hidden under his long, blond hair. He should go back to the Sanctuary and get a decent night's rest. There's nothing for him to do here.

I know Thorn feels rotten about the chick he saved from the Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club's compound. Raped and battered, she's a mess but should live. I suspect Thorn needs this chick to do okay to erase his guilt over not saving the other chick he found in that underground rape dungeon.

He doesn't do well on these jobs. That's why he brought a woman named Eliza back from his scouting mission in Primrose, Texas. Thorn can't just stick to the plan. He's got to play hero.

The Eliza thing worked out. She doesn't cause trouble and seems to fit in well at the Sanctuary. I also like how she pals around with Giselle. While they do their girl shit, I can spend time alone with Apex.

Not that I've seen him much over the last several days since the club returned from hitting the compound. Apex is probably cuddled up with his woman at the Sanctuary while I've remained at the clinic in a chair outside of that bitch's room.

Luca can't be trusted. I refuse to be fooled by her good looks or helpful vigilante story. I see past her lies. Just like I did with my mom's bullshit.

At least, that's what I told my club President when Overlord showed up earlier to order me to go home for a shower.

"Get some sleep, too," Overlord added as if he was my warden.

"You told me to keep an eye on her."

“That was days ago at the enemies’ compound, when we didn’t know anything about her. Now, I’m telling you to go home and get a shower.”

I shrugged like I might do what he wanted. Overlord nodded at my fake compliance before dumping a paper bag in my lap.

“Fine. Shower here and change.”

After he left, I cleaned up in one of the clinic’s showers. Not long afterward, Luca appeared to demand a burger.

I should have told her no. Luca had a molar pulled during the Dirty Princes’ torture. She shouldn’t be eating a burger and fries.

Besides, I’m no one’s fucking errand boy. Of course, I don’t think she really wanted me to get the food. Luca just wanted to walk out the front door and get it herself. I’m the one who decided to make the food run.

I can’t deny the woman’s gorgeous in a painfully addictive way. Her eyes are an electric blue as if a fire burns behind them. Her hair reminds me of a white sand beach. She’s taller than most women. Her build is lean and powerful. The way she moves reminds me of an athlete. I notice she bites her bottom lip when she’s holding her tongue. It’s a sexy tell from a woman who lies easily yet can’t help wanting to blurt out the truth.

I know I shouldn’t want Luca. Yet, I can’t get her out of my head. I see her when my eyes are closed. She’s a damn witch, having imprinted her image deep in my mind. No matter how bitchy she acts, I want to move closer, listen to her speak, feel her breathe.

Life is easier when I hate people. Luca can never be my friend. I don’t think she’s anyone’s friend, actually. Like me, she’s an asshole looking to keep her heart safely away from possible threats.

Returning with the burgers, I open her door to find Luca sitting at the room’s small table. Her hypnotic gaze sizes me

up. I hate how this woman makes me feel. She's unnaturally beautiful—like a model and a brawler had a baby.

With her making me feel small, I can only mutter, "I didn't ask if you wanted pickles."

"No, you didn't."

"Or onions."

"You didn't ask me anything."

"I should have let you go get it yourself."

Luca cocks one of her pale-blonde brows. "Or I could have just had it delivered."

"Never bring people to the clinic," I snap at her.

Luca smirks as if my temper is a curious thing. I feel her wanting to laugh at me. She doesn't, though. Instead, she takes her burger and fries and dumps too much ketchup on both.

Dropping into the second chair, I grumble, "I didn't know what drink to get you."

"Because you didn't ask."

"You could have just told me."

"I was too intimidated to speak up," she says and bites into a fry while grinning.

I glare at her, wanting to say something especially cruel. However, nothing comes out.

Luca doesn't react to my anger. She just dives into the meal as if she's starving. I wait for her to react in pain to the burger's size. She does grimace a few times but keeps eating.

"Why do they call you Ghost? Are you superstitious or something?"

I open my mouth to explain what should be obvious. Before I say shit, I catch amusement in her gaze. She's poking at me.

"Is Luca short for something?"

“No. My mom named my sister and me after boyfriends she loved in high school.”

“That’s stupid.”

Grinning at my hostility, Luca explains, “My mom was obsessed with romance. Not actual love or commitment. Just the heartwarming shit at the beginning of a new relationship. Once things got serious, she’d start noticing flaws and the guy no doubt would realize she was a fuckup. But those first weeks were divine. She was addicted to the feeling.”

“My mom loves drugs.”

Luca lifts her soda and tips it toward me. “To surviving shitty mothers,” she says, and I tap my drink to hers. “Mine’s dead. Sounds like your mom hasn’t done you that favor.”

“She’s never going to fucking die.”

“Was she a young mom?”

“Yeah,” I mutter, thinking she’ll whip up a defense for my mother’s flaws.

“You’re in your thirties, right?” she says and leans back in her chair. “Has she even hit sixty yet?”

“Not even close.”

“Then, don’t pretend she’s immortal. She just hasn’t hit the age when shit starts catching up to people. Think positive. Her funeral could be right around the corner.”

I shouldn’t smile at her bullshit. Luca is playing with me. I know she’s up to something. Yet, I really like the idea of attending my mom’s funeral.

“Did you have some handle?” I ask after Luca returns to eating her burger. Noticing how her chewing has slowed down, I assume her mouth is acting up. “There was a hitman who came around years ago. He had a handle like ‘The Cleaner’ or some shit. People would ask for him by it.”

“I’m vengeance, not a hired gun. No one asks for me or knows I exist. Even the people I help don’t know my name,” she says, sounding amused. “I’m good at this job for two

reasons. One is how I'm in better shape than most of the people I kill. Two is how no one sees me coming. I look fuckable rather than dangerous."

"I don't know. I think you're both."

Smiling in that coldly flirty way she has, Luca reaches for her drink. She takes a few long drags on the straw as her electric gaze tears apart my armor. I feel her searching for ways to fuck with me.

"Tell me about Apex."

"Why?" I balk, nearly leaving my seat and walking out. "Do you have a crush or something?"

"No, no, he's far too large, and I'm not looking to maneuver around so much man."

Narrowing my eyes, I feel her picking at me, so I remain silent.

"He's your friend," Luca says and bites a fry. "I don't get the sense you like most people. I'm curious what's so special about Apex."

"We came up in the club together."

"Just you and him?" When I nod, she asks, "You seem hostile toward Thorn."

"I'm hostile with everyone."

"No, I get that," she says, dipping her fry into the pool of ketchup. "But you have degrees of hostility. When I peeked out and saw you with your club master guy, that was a different kind of hostility than when you talk to the nurse."

"What about when I talk to you?"

Luca gives me a slow, taunting smile. "That's a special kind of hostility."

"Not special at all."

"Are you this needy with all women, then?"

Though I consider walking out, my body is worn down and my brain feels fried.

Besides, I'm curious about Luca, and my therapist told me to indulge in what makes me happy rather than focusing only on what leaves me miserable. The problem is Luca is both.

"Yes," I lie, answering her question.

Luca gives me a knowing smile. "I don't like men. That's my baseline. But I like the doctor here. Sal proved himself worthy enough to move above the baseline. Thorn seems all sloppy sad about Hope, so I figure he's a little above baseline. The jury is still out on the rest of your club."

"And me?"

"Difficult to say. You're very pretty compared to the other men. It's throwing off my judgment."

Leaning closer, I hiss, "Fuck that *pretty* shit."

"Well, you have those sapphire-blue eyes," she purrs, giving me a razor-sharp smile. "They're damn pretty."

I grit my teeth while she chuckles to herself and eats another fry. Ditching her and this conversation feels right. With anyone else, I'd most definitely walk away.

However, I can't fight how much I crave this woman. So, yeah, I'm more than a little happy over Luca thinking I'm pretty. Plus, she's flirting—badly—with me rather than Thorn or Apex. Luca only has eyes for the asshole in front of her.

Her interest feeds my misery. I want her. She's claimed my thoughts. I can't shake loose from the grip she has on me now.

But I know she doesn't plan to stick around in Metamora. No matter what I say or do, Luca will run back into battle. Though I don't know her story, I've seen people like her before. Her rage has turned into a death wish.

Luca's eventual abandonment is bound to break me. But I don't bail on this ridiculous flirting. I know no other woman will ever make me feel this way again. That's why, for now, I choose to savor what time we have left together.

OVERLORD



Claymore Marsden/President

Inside my dark house on Tobosa Road, I awake with a sense of dread. My thoughts return to the Dirty Princes' compound and recall the moment when I set Ghost on a dangerous path. The way he looked at Luca reminded me of Apex's reaction to Giselle. I thought Ghost might enjoy playing her warden until we knew what was going on.

The man doesn't have much in life, and he seems more on edge lately. I figured guarding a pretty woman might temporarily soothe Ghost's demons. After all, Apex got less restless after attaching himself to the amnesiac, battered ballerina.

But I see now how I was wrong to assume Ghost could handle Luca. She isn't a broken woman craving protection like Giselle. She isn't even like the Sanctuary's tough women. Luca is dangerous, and I've offered her an emotionally damaged toy.

Ghost hasn't left the clinic since we returned. He barely eats and rarely sleeps. Apex came to me yesterday to demand I order Ghost to stay away from the woman.

"He doesn't need a bitch pulling his strings again," the club Enforcer snarled, never able to remain in control when someone close to him was in danger.

Apex had a point about Ghost's history of women messing with him. His mother is a pretty, little doll of a woman who pimped him out to boyfriends for her next fix. His grandmother would take him in when CPS came down on his mom for neglect. Rather than helping the sickly boy, Grandma encouraged him to put all his faith in his shitty mom. It was a game they played for nearly twenty years before Ghost finally broke free and joined our club.

Even if Apex might be right, I tried to explain, “Once Luca’s at the Sanctuary, Ghost will regain his senses.”

Like my Enforcer, I wasn’t fully convinced by my words.

Waking more fully, I reach for Jules, only to find the bed empty, and my woman gone. Cold dread creeps over me. Were the last few months a dream? Did Jules never return to the Sanctuary?

In my early morning brain fog, I’m sure I haven’t made my claim on her yet. She’s never welcomed me inside her body. We aren’t raising four traumatized kids together. It’s all been an elaborate dream, and I’m once again alone.

Climbing out of bed, I stumble in the dark and seek out my four-year-old daughters. I find blonde Evie and brunette Zoey sleeping half on top of each other in their queen-sized bed.

Having them sleep together was Jules’s idea. With her consistent yet kind touch, my girls have begun to heal from their mothers’ deaths. I see other signs of Jules around their room. *Our life together wasn’t only a wonderful dream.*

Inside Anthony’s train-themed room, I find Jules sitting with her newly four-year-old son. Her long, blonde hair is messy from our earlier lovemaking. I feel her golden-brown eyes watching me in the darkness as she consoles her hiccupping and teary-eyed son.

Anthony does fine in his new room as long as his friends—Michael and Clark—sleep over. Tonight, he asked to bunk alone rather than sharing his sister Scout’s bed. Clearly, he wasn’t ready.

As I approach them sitting in the corner chair, Anthony flinches.

“It’s Overlord,” Jules whispers to her spooked son. “He’s worried about us.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I ask as I settle on his bed and watch them.

“If you slept through this spicy meatball’s wailing, I figured you were dead to the world.”

Sharing her grin, I still struggle with the dad stuff. However, I can't imagine sleeping through Anthony's crying. Or how the three girls didn't wake from the noise.

Most likely, he was only fussing, and his supermom instantly detected the sound. Jules is hyper alert to the kids' safety. Her life back at the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club's compound was chaotic. She could never let down her guard. Her short time back at the Sanctuary hasn't erased all that trauma.

"I don't think Anthony's ready to sleep alone," Jules says and starts to stand with him in her arms.

I hurry over and take him to ensure she doesn't hurt herself. Jules smiles at me while Anthony whimpers.

"I won't drop you," I promise as he watches me. I ignore how much Anthony looks like his father, Cypher—dark-brown hair, haunted blue eyes, and a forever distrustful pout—and lift him higher. "I worked out with weights and got muscles. When you're bigger, I'll help you get muscles, too."

Anthony loses his hateful gaze and smiles sweetly. The kid's first four years weren't easy, but he'll love growing up at the Sanctuary. My childhood was ideal, and I hope my kids enjoy the same experiences.

Bringing Anthony to Scout's room, he crawls in next to Jules's mini-me. The six-year-old sits up immediately, startled by the ruckus. She sees her brother—technically her nephew—and pulls back the blankets. Scout and Jules look so much like their deceased mom, Queen Bee, who died when Scout was an infant.

As Jules and Scout cuddle Anthony, I admire the three people who changed my life. Anthony might look like his biological father—an angry, unpredictable biker who left the Sanctuary to follow Jules's father, Kraken—but his heart mimics his mom's. One day, I hope the boy and Scout will view me as their dad. Just like I hope my girls will turn to Jules as a surrogate mother.

We can have that happiness if my focus remains on the club's health. That's why the Ghost-Luca thing rattles me.

I'm still worried as we ready for breakfast. Zoey and Evie dance around the family room in cute, green-and-blue shorts and matching tops, playing with each other's pigtails. Jules finishes braiding Scout's dark-blond hair while I brush Anthony's short, dark hair.

"We're getting a routine, eh?" Jules tells her kids.

"Yes, fool," Zoey replies, running over to hug Jules before eyeing me like I might win a little affection from her. When I wiggle my finger to lure my temperamental daughter closer, she smiles devilishly. "I break all the hearts, bitch."

Jules chuckles at how Zoey imitates Sister Sass's big mouth. "I'll throw you a pity hug," she says and then asks Anthony, "Will you give Overlord sympathy love?"

Once Anthony and Scout create a snuggle pile with me, Evie joins in. Meanwhile, Zoey just watches us. Months ago, she would refuse to hug me because her little heart was hurting in a way no one could fix.

However, today, Zoey refuses to hug me, just to be a contrarian. She's always mimicking Sister Sass. And my sister loves to refuse people to prove she can. It's been her power move since she was a kid.

With Zoey doing it now, I sigh dramatically and pout. She laughs at my reaction and walks to the front door.

"Want it all day long, but you ain't getting it, chump."

A smiling Jules herds the kids toward the door where Zoey waits. We walk to the nearby HQ for breakfast. The kids know the drill by now. We stop to hold hands at each street we cross. The Sanctuary is quiet with Tobosa Road and Creosote Bush Road located in the residential section where the club's families live.

HQ is the Sanctuary's home base. People can get their meals at the large, red barnlike building at the heart of the compound. Food is cooked by various old ladies and a handful of trusted townies. Past the dining hall are pool tables and a

bar for evening get-togethers. Most of the Born Villains members prefer to party at our town clubhouse—The Lockup. But the old ladies prefer HQ for their fun nights.

The building includes a meeting room in the back and is walking distance from the residential area, my father's house, the Stockade, the indoor pool, gym, and movie theater. HQ really is the heart of the community.

After entering through the double front doors, Jules and the kids head to our usual long table while I retrieve food for my group. People are becoming accustomed to seeing me with Jules. Many were wary about having Kraken's daughters in our safe space. Though the man helped found the Born Villains, he was always an asshole. Eventually, he took a sizable number of our people and created his own club, the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club in the nearby town of Cahuenga.

Kraken ruined many lives before having his stroke. Even if he's trapped in a failing body, many won't ever be able to forgive him. But over time, I hope the Sanctuary's men and women will view Jules, Scout, and Anthony as my family rather than the offspring of our enemy.

Once the kids are eating mini-pancakes and talking about games to play, I lean in closer to Jules. I wish we had time to talk alone. Once breakfast is over, I'm meeting my father, the Metamora sheriff, and several club members to go over what we've learned about our newest castoffs.

Admiring Jules, I soak in the beauty of her golden eyes and round face. She smiles so beautifully for me as if we're always in on a secret. Her long hair is tied up in a bouncy ponytail.

"What's staining your thoughts?" Jules asks, using the words my father taught to everyone at the Sanctuary.

Glancing at the kids, I whisper, "The vigilante woman might be dangerous."

"How?" she asks and instinctively reaches over to caress Anthony's head.

“I don’t think she’s a threat to most of us. But Ghost is already obsessed with her. She must realize she can manipulate him. I worry about what she’ll do with that power.”

“I got the feeling that she might be leaving soon.”

“True,” I say, scanning the room for eavesdroppers. “However, there are benefits to giving her a safe haven.”

“Like what?” Jules asks, leaning closer and giving me a dark frown.

I don’t answer immediately. Instead, I admire how Jules wants to help me run things. I’ve struggled as President. My father seemed to take charge effortlessly. Of course, he had bad days and second-guessed himself. But he also had people he leaned on, while I’ve felt I needed to stand on my own. I’m my own worst enemy in that way. Now, Jules offers me a safe space to share my worries without feeling judgment.

“If this woman is a lone wolf like she claims and she’s capable of hunting down targets, we could do what Papa Bear never did. You know he believed we should remain in our territory. If a castoff landed on our doorstep, we offered them sanctuary but never hunted down their abusers unless the assholes came here. With Luca, we’d have options.”

“Can she be controlled?”

“I doubt it,” I say immediately as my gaze surveys the people around us.

Just then, Apex enters HQ with Giselle. They’re meeting another new castoff, this one an exotic brunette named Eliza.

The women are from the same Texas town. Only one of them remembers what they’re hiding from, and I hope it remains that way. Giselle’s flourishing at the Sanctuary, and she’s brought out the best in Apex. The last thing she needs is to remember a lifetime of trauma.

“But I don’t know how much I control the rougher club members,” I admit to Jules. “They behave because the Sanctuary offers them something they need, not because I’ve got them on a leash. It could be the same with Luca.”

Jules studies our children, likely considering how a castoff took the life of my girls' moms. Every time we bring a broken person to the Sanctuary, we're rolling the dice on how shit might turn out.

"What about the other woman?"

I consider the young woman saved from the Dirty Princes' compound. Hope makes more sense to me than someone like Luca.

"Doctor Sal isn't sure why she won't talk and doesn't react to much. Her body should heal, but he can't say the same for her mind. When she moves to the Stockade, we'll need to make sure she isn't left alone."

"If Hope will be at the Stockade, where will you put Luca?"

"They'll both need to stay there. I think Luca's only sticking around for Hope. She likes to play the hero. So, we'll let her do that while we feel her out."

"You sound like you have it worked out," she says and eats her pancakes. "So why do you look worried?"

Glancing around again to make sure no one's eavesdropping, I whisper, "Ghost isn't a healthy man. Ghost and Apex are live wires, walking around, looking for shit to go off about. But Ghost is also self-destructive in a way Apex never is. I worry he won't handle losing Luca in an appropriate way."

Jules studies Apex and Giselle across the main dining hall from us. I feel her working out the same scenarios keeping me up at night.

"Ghost is your friend," she finally says. "He's your responsibility in a way Luca isn't. But it seems just as likely for him to pull the plug on any relationship they share."

"He's been at the clinic this entire time. Barely eats or sleeps. Just stares at her door. He's obsessed."

"With the idea of her," Jules replies softly as if I'm missing the obvious. "He doesn't know her. She's attractive, right?"

When I nod, she leans back and smiles. “She lives in his head right now. Once she becomes real, he might lose interest. Men like Ghost enjoy freedom. They’ll give it up for the right woman,” she continues, flashing a sly grin at how I threw aside my bachelor lifestyle once she was within reach. “Apex likes having Giselle with him all the time, but Ghost may demand his space. I don’t think you should worry until Ghost knows Luca for real and is still hung up.”

Understanding what her wisdom has inspired in me, Jules lifts her lips, waiting for my kiss. I let the affection linger. I’ve been hoping life at the Sanctuary might calm down, so I could take Jules and the kids somewhere fun and family-oriented. Until then, I’ll claim every moment of passion offered to me.

After my lips free hers, I walk around the table and plant kisses on each child’s head. Zoey dodges my attempt.

“Keep walking, chump.”

“Daddy needs love.”

Zoey’s big, brown eyes instantly brighten. She stands in her chair so she can hug me. My baby feels so little in my arms, but I know not to drag out the cuddle. Zoey isn’t fond of public affection. Even at four, she’s already working on her tough-chick image.

Soon, I leave Jules with the kids and walk to HQ’s meeting room. Papa Bear is already inside with his old friend, the Metamora sheriff, Graeme Hubbard—5’6, thick black hair tied back, cowboy hat on his head, nearly black eyes holding amusement at whatever my father shares with him.

Even retired, Papa Bear is still an impressive man. He’s always been larger than life to me. His hair went white young, yet his dark brown eyes retain the intensity of a man half his age. His thick shoulders and barrel chest were inherited by my only brother. Bomber is currently traveling with his family

Sister Sass enters HQ, circles around to smile at Papa Bear and Graeme, and takes a spot in a front-row seat like a nerd wanting to get in good with the teacher. I cross my arms and study my twenty-four-year-old sister. She’s wearing a

sleeveless white shirt and black jeans. Her golden-brown hair hangs around her face, giving her a relaxed, almost innocent look. Her eyes are dark jewels, inherited from our father. She smiles sweetly at me, so I assume she wants something.

Another chick biker plops down next to Sister Sass. With her dark hair tied in double French braids and eyes lined with makeup, Aqua salutes me before whispering something snarky to my sister. I frown at why these two are even here. This meeting wasn't mandatory. The people who need to hear everything haven't even arrived.

"Where's Apex?" I ask Sister Sass who rests her feet on the table in front of me.

"He went to the clinic to check on Ghost and Thorn. He did state he would not be checking on Vegas since he's mad at him."

"Why?"

"I think Apex is worried about his friends."

"No, why is he angry at Vegas?"

"Just PMSing. You know how men can be."

Aqua grins before glancing over her shoulder at the arrival of the Born Villains' original chick member, Ominous.

Behind her are sisters Rave and Riot. The two of them—blonde and brunette, yet sporting similar faces—often leave me picturing Evie and Zoey all grown up. The front row of chairs is soon filled with patched chick members.

I finally put shit together. Luca Elmwood is tough bitch personified. Ominous sees a viable new member for their mini-group.

Even nearing fifty, Ominous remains a beauty willing to throw down against any man. Her long, very straight hair hangs down her shoulders like golden armor. Her leanly muscular body remains as impressive as when I was a kid.

Like most guys, I had a crush on Ominous. Then, when I was sixteen, she agreed to spar with me at the gym. Having her so thoroughly kick my ass despite being half my size was a

wake-up call. Not only was I very aware of my lack of experience, but I learned being naturally big wasn't enough to win a fight.

Papa Bear shuts the meeting room door to signal how we're getting started. He walks toward the front, leans against the wall, and crosses his thick arms. Graeme remains in the back of the room. I feel like the men are more on edge than usual.

"Here's what we know about our newest castoffs," I announce. "Starting with Hope, her father is from a Las Vegas suburb. Her mother is dead. We can't find any other family. Based on the records from the compound, Hope's dad handed her over to the Dirty Princes to pay a gambling debt. Sending her back to him is off the table."

"And the vigilante?" Ominous asks as her blue eyes sparkle with curiosity.

"Here's what we know about her," I reply, holding her gaze. "Most of her IDs are fake. But the name she gave us checks out. Luca Elmwood was a professional volleyball player, modeled for a time, and lived on the West Coast. Around seven years ago, her sister, Drew, and niece, Abilene, were murdered. Graeme couldn't find much actual information in the police records. Even the news reports are vague. For a home invasion in a swanky beach town with a dead blonde chick and kid, the crimes got surprisingly little attention. The official report says the case remains unsolved. We assume this incident led Luca to go into vigilante business."

Sister Sass can't sit still and finally blurts out, "Are we accepting the lone wolf story she told?"

"There's zero reason to think she's lying. No one's been sniffing around Metamora. We mirrored her phone, and she hasn't called anyone. We grabbed her bags before heading home, and they're loaded with cash and weapons. While it seems farfetched to think she attacked these assholes by herself, it checks out."

"Be curious to see who she's hit and what she's heard out there," Papa Bear says and gives Ominous a quick glance.

“Wouldn’t hurt to have her skills around here.”

Though I’m very aware conversations have been happening when I’m out of earshot, I don’t let this fact distract me from how I’m the one calling the shots now.

“We’ll offer Luca a home here,” I say more to Ominous than my father. “Seven years is a long time to be on her own. She might be ready for a safe haven. But it’s just as likely she’s too far gone to settle down.”

“So what happens next?” Ominous asks. “How soon will they be in the Stockade?”

“Doctor Sal says Luca can be released now, but she won’t go without Hope who needs a few more days. We’ll need to monitor Hope. I’ll ask for volunteers to watch her whenever Luca leaves the Stockade.”

“And once they’re here?”

“We’ll bring Luca to this room and hear what she has to say. If she wants to stay and can avoid trouble, I’m willing to offer a home,” I say and then step closer to gain Ominous’s attention after she starts grinning at Rave and Riot. “But keep in mind how this woman didn’t come looking for us. She isn’t like Aqua or the sisters. She isn’t searching for friends or a home base. We also don’t know what kind of person she is. Just because she hates the same people doesn’t make her an ally. Do you get me?”

“Oh, I get you,” Ominous says and stands up. “Let us get a feel for her and report back to you.”

“Ghost will be in the mix,” I say, and Ominous grins at Aqua who chuckles.

“Yeah, we heard he’s got himself a crush. We’ll watch his back, too. Hell, look at how we’re willing to solve all your damn problems, Overlord.”

“I miss these heartwarming moments,” I mutter as she looks over the police report Graeme secured from Luca’s home invasion.

“Good because I’m not done talking to you.”

Papa Bear offers me a sympathetic grin as he gestures for the rest of the women to leave. Graeme hangs back to talk with my father. Meanwhile, I wait for Ominous to remind me how she changed my diapers and will never fully respect me.

“What’s the holdup with Dire’s patch?” she asks immediately, just like she does whenever we’re alone.

Dire is the future road name for Ominous’s only child, Emma. She’s been a prospect for nearly a year. From day one, everyone’s been calling her by her road name, but I refuse to do so until she gets her actual patch.

“Emma needs to jump through the same hoops as everyone else.”

“Bullshit,” Ominous hisses, getting in my face. “She’s washed the cars and run the errands and played bodyguard for your woman.”

“You mean her sister?”

As Ominous narrows her eyes, I wait for pushback. Instead, she shrugs at my mention of Kraken fathering Jules and Emma.

“I get how it works, Overlord. I’ve watched plenty of young fucks move from prospect to member. I’m aware of the process, for fuck’s sake. That’s why I want to know if you’re holding up Dire’s patch because she got gang raped?”

Ominous never minces words. Normally, I prefer her blunt talk. However, my mind doesn’t want to return to the time Emma and Sister Sass—who went by her birth name Talon back then—were nearly killed by a group of assholes.

“Sister Sass got her patch, and so will Emma,” I say after pausing to let the past settle back where it belongs. “But they can’t cut in line because of who made them. Your kid isn’t worth more than a prospect off the street.”

Ominous rewards me with a nasty smirk. “That would sound so much more convincing coming from someone who wasn’t jizzed out of the last President.”

“Are you saying I didn’t earn my rank?”

“I’m saying you’re fucking with Dire in a way you didn’t fuck with Sister Sass. I think if my girl pushed for a patch years ago when Sister Sass did, she wouldn’t have jumped through so many hoops. But back then, you had to prove you weren’t soft. Now, you feel secure in your rank, so you can let your personal feelings get in the way of fairness.”

With most club members, I’d lose my temper if they questioned my rank or decisions. However, the founding members require a softer touch. Demanding their respect will never work. Ominous has also survived far worse than my disapproval. Nothing I say will rattle her.

“I have a system,” I explain, and she rests her hands on her hips like I’m a kid blowing smoke up her ass. “I track how many bikes get washed, lawns mowed, and errands run. There’s a specific number each prospect needs to hit. It’s not a gut feeling. There’s no emotion involved. I save that shit for assignments, which is why my sister didn’t go on the run to the Arizona compound. So, if you want your girl to get her patch faster, tell her to hustle more.”

Ominous studies me like I’m full of shit before suddenly shrugging. “Fair enough. I’ll tell her to double-time her ass-kissing. But you better treat her fair, Overlord, or I swear I’ll whine to your daddy.”

We both glance at Papa Bear who smiles like he knew we’d look to him eventually. Ominous stalks off while I exhale softly.

Facing off against the founding members often makes me feel like a little kid again. I might have changed a lot over the years, but they seemed to be the same scary badasses from my childhood.

LUCA



Metamora is a picturesque little town, located just outside of a larger city called Gallup Hills. The Refuge Clinic is tucked away in a quiet corner near the bikers' compound.

When I get restless in my room, I find comfort on the clinic's grassy, front lawn, where I breathe in the fresh air.

Early on, I couldn't sneeze without a half dozen eyes on me. Today, none of the staff acknowledges me as I slip past Thorn dozing in the front lobby. I'm not sure where Ghost went, but I suspect he's resting in another room. This morning, I overheard Papa Bear tell the younger man to sleep here or go home.

I wish Ghost was awake to talk to me. We've been eating lunch and dinner together every day. Our conversations don't involve personal details beyond his mother is a bitch, and I used to play volleyball. Otherwise, we discuss people from his compound, food, or TV shows. Last night, we played a game where we listed famous movies we'd never watched. We declared ourselves both winners for never seeing anything good.

I keep waiting for my peculiar interest in him to click off. Ghost isn't nearly as snarly now as when I first arrived, but he remains a stone-cold asshole. He will occasionally stop speaking halfway through a conversation and ignore me. Other times, he'll change the channel when I'm watching something.

Ghost's mating rituals might be fucking madness, but they're working. I'm more into him now than when I was peeking at him from my room. I don't know how to process my attraction to Ghost. Sex didn't interest me before those men showed up at my house and ruined my life. I'd never felt the need to be close to anyone. Why should I change now?

Soon, I'm expected to move to the "Stockade" inside their compound. The small house is where they keep their new "castoffs." I really don't like the idea. I really should just leave, but my heart remains stuck on playing things out here.

I don't know how to help Hope. She won't talk and barely reacts to stimuli. The doctor hinted her brain might be fried from spending too much time down in the hot, underground pit. The Dirty Princes also likely filled her with drugs. They used and abused her body. Mentally tortured her by killing another woman when Hope tried to escape. There might be no way to fix the broken young woman.

Physically, though, she seems healthier. I sat with her earlier and brushed her hair. She didn't react to my touch or voice. When I got right in her face and stared into her hazel eyes, I thought I saw recognition. Or I might just be fooling myself. Do I think saving her will redeem my inability to save my sister and niece? Or is saving her about saving my soul? If so, I'm feeding infantile fantasies. After all, I had my chance to get healthy years ago. *I picked rage over peace.*

Once again, I consider bailing on Metamora, Hope, Ghost, and these bikers. The area around the clinic is quiet, except for the regular motorcycles rumbling up and down the roads. Sometimes, I hear the bikes without ever seeing them ride past. I suspect the sound echoes off the hills, constantly reminding the town who owns this place.

As I rest on the grassy lawn, a motorcycle arrives. Glancing over my shoulder, I spot Ghost's buddy throwing his massive leg off the machine.

Like a bull seeking out something red, Apex storms over to me and demands, "What are you doing out here?"

"Whatever the fuck I want," I mutter.

His brown hair drapes his bearded face, giving him a fearsome appearance. His dark-chocolate eyes hold no warmth. The son of a bitch is built to bust through obstacles, yet I feel zero fear. He's a beast, for sure, but one with a leash.

"Where's Ghost?" Apex asks when the silence drags on.

“I don’t know.”

Apex narrows his eyes, thinking I’m lying. He glances at the clinic, unable to see through the tinted windows.

“When are you leaving?” he asks rather than push on the Ghost subject.

“Tomorrow for the Stockade with Hope.”

“No, I mean, when are you leaving town?”

“I haven’t decided.”

After his dark eyes glance around as if worried someone might be eavesdropping, he squats near me and loses his hostility.

“There’s nothing for you here.”

“I need to know Hope is okay.”

“That’ll take time. She got fucked up. Might be years before she heals enough to seem normal.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know that yet. Are you kicking me out?”

Apex exhales like a pissed animal, ready to lash out. If he attacks, I’m going for his left knee. I noticed a slight limp. My guess is he twisted up the knee years ago. It’s healed but still acts up. That’ll be how I take down a man his size.

“There’s nothing for you here,” he says again. “If you’re really a badass vigilante bitch, you’ve got plenty of people to kill out in the world.”

“Of course, but it’s not like I can throw a dart at a map and attack. I need a target to hunt.”

“And you want to kill Hope’s dad, right?”

Nodding, I lean back and rest on my elbows. “Overlord has that info. You’re his man. I bet you could get the details if you really wanted me gone.”

Apex looks me over and scowls. “How did you kill all those bikers before we got there?”

“I aimed my gun and pulled the trigger.”

“You’re big for a girl,” he says, and I roll my eyes. Apex surprises me by dropping his ass onto the grass and getting comfy. “I still think you had help going in there.”

“It wasn’t that complicated,” I reply despite how I miscounted and got caught. “I attacked when they were distracted. Their shitty death metal hid my movements. I could have finished them off if I hadn’t gotten sloppy. It’s not that hard.”

“Bullshit,” he mutters.

“Fine. I have skills. But it’s helpful when the enemy is stoned, drunk, or stupid.”

Apex studies me for a long time, and I get the feeling I might need to go for his knee soon.

“I know people you could use your skills on.”

“Why them?”

“They have these girls. They call them dolls. Make them act like dolls, too. Ballerina, cheerleader, athlete, princess, crap like that. I don’t know where they get them. Buy or steal. Maybe the girls are their daughters.”

Curiosity piqued, I sit up and ask, “Where are these people?”

“Primrose, Texas. My woman was trapped there, living like a toy. Giselle managed to escape and come here. Shit went down, and she can’t remember anything, but another woman from there filled in some details. If you want to kill someone, kill the Black Gold Four. You can free the women like Giselle. That’s some heroic shit.”

Before I ask why he doesn’t do it himself, I remember his leash. I get the sense the Born Villains Motorcycle Club doesn’t go around raiding compounds often. They have their sweet setup here. Attacking the Black Gold Four might put Metamora in danger.

“If you get me the details on this place and the people, I’ll consider hitting them.”

“By yourself?”

“Sure.”

“You got caught the last time around.”

“I’ve been doing this a long time, and I only fucked up once.”

Apex sizes me up and shrugs. “There were a lot of them, too. Seems like fucking up would have happened to anyone.”

“Aw, look who’s buttering me up,” I taunt and win an eye roll from him. “You don’t really think kissing my ass will make me risk it to avenge your girlfriend, do you?”

“You didn’t know Hope or any other victims at the Dirty Princes’ compound. Why risk your ass for them but not a chick you can meet?”

Apex speaks the truth. I’m very interested in the target he’s given me. However, my obsessive nature demands I finish one job before starting another.

“Give me the info on Hope’s dad, and I’ll go after these Black Gold Four assholes.”

The tiniest grin tempts his lips before his gaze flashes behind me to the clinic’s front door. I instantly know Ghost has awakened from his beauty rest.

Refusing to glance over my shoulder at him, I’d rather think about work. Vengeance makes sense to me while this thing between Ghost and me is better left unfulfilled.

GHOST



I've always hated sleeping. The world changes when I close my eyes. I might fall to sleep feeling safe and in control, but I often awake to find shit's gone south. As a kid, my mom habitually bailed when I was sleeping. Or she'd invite her newest "friend" over while I was down for the night. I'd wake up to a world plotting to destroy me.

I enjoyed my first good night's rest after moving into my Yucca Road townhome, where all the patched single guys lived. The place belongs to me, and I locked it up tight to prevent anyone from hassling me.

But sleep is still a cruel bitch. I often wake up feeling covered in spiders. Or like someone is brushing my body with a steel wool pad.

Occasionally, I wake up certain I hear someone talking about me. Their words are muted as if I'm listening to them through a closed door. The paranoia cranks my tension right up, starting off my day in a shitty way.

I often find myself going too long without sleep. I'd stay up twenty-four seven, if my body would cooperate.

After Papa Bear orders me to sleep, I finally crash inside Refuge Clinic's third patient room. I like knowing Luca shares a wall with me. We might not do more than poke at each other, eat too many burgers, and talk about movies we've never watched, but she's the closest thing I've ever had to a girlfriend.

So, of fucking course, Apex decides to swoop in and fuck things up for me. I find him sitting with Luca on the clinic's front lawn in the mildly warm day.

Usually, Luca tenses when he's around, intimidated by his size and clearly figuring out ways to take him down. Right

now, she seems downright cuddly with the big bastard. I assume the worst because life rarely surprises me in a good way.

Storming outside, I notice Apex and Luca stop palling around long enough to look at me.

“Go inside,” I bark at her.

Luca cocks an eyebrow at my tone. I’m surprised when she stands. Pausing when near me, Luca whispers, “I’m only obeying because you look adorably fluffy when you wake up from a nap.”

“Shut up,” is all I can think to say as she leaves Apex and me alone.

My friend often seems like he only has two modes—angry and happy. The second tends to be obvious to read when Giselle is around. The first one actually hides all his other emotions. Right now, he’s nervous and maybe hopeful, yet his face still looks pissed.

“What the fuck were you talking about with her?” I demand once Luca’s inside.

Apex shrugs his big shoulders. “The Black Gold Four.”

I hesitate since his answer isn’t what I was expecting. After a second, I realize it’s worse.

“I don’t want her to leave yet,” I reply rather than lie since he’ll see through my bullshit.

“She isn’t right for you, but she can help Giselle.”

“She got caught on the last mission. The only reason they didn’t kill her was so they could sell her. Those Texas fucks won’t hesitate putting a bullet in her.”

“You saw how much damage she did before they caught her. No way will those Black Gold fucks have more men and firepower than the Dirty Princes did.”

Rage and panic mix inside me, turning toxic. “You’re going to get her killed.”

Apex stands up and wipes off his ass. “You know she’s gonna eventually leave and go after someone else. That’s what she does. If she plans to hunt assholes, why not the ones threatening Giselle?”

“I don’t want her to leave yet,” I say again. “She could take a break. That’s what she does between jobs. She told me how she goes on vacation. If she took her break here, I’d have time to get bored of her.”

Apex studies me with his dark eyes before asking, “What if you don’t get bored and she still leaves? Why sign up for more pain? That woman won’t love you, man. You need a soft chick like Giselle. Someone patient who can put up with your bullshit like my woman does with me.”

“You mean a soft chick like my mom who got talked into any fucking thing that would get her high? Or my soft grandma who refuses to stop giving my mom second chances and expecting me to do the same? That kind of soft?”

“Your mom’s a junkie. That’s why she’s fucked up, not her soft heart. She isn’t really soft, anyway. She’s selfish but hides it under a quiet demeanor. My mom is the same way. Your grandma just likes the drama of her junkie daughter getting clean and then getting high. Those women aren’t really soft. Giselle’s soft. Eliza is also soft. You should date her before Penthouse makes his move. She’s hot, right?”

“Fuck that bitch,” I spit out, irritated at how he’s always trying to set me up with his woman’s bestie. “She’s not my type.”

“You don’t have a type.”

Glancing at the clinic where Luca prowls, I know Apex can’t understand. Giselle makes sense. She’s pretty, small, and sweet. He can be her hero. She does put up with his bullshit. They look a little weird together, with him being so big and her being tiny. It’s like an elephant hooked up with a kitten. But emotionally, they make sense.

“Do you like Eliza?” I ask Apex, who scowls like I’m asking him dumb shit.

“Of course. She’s my woman’s friend. She never bothers me. She laughed at something I said once, and I’m not funny. So, yeah, I like her.”

“Then, why would you want her to be with me when you know what I’m like?”

Apex isn’t any better at emotions than I am. All this “feelings talk” is making him squirmy. I think he might not answer.

Finally, he shrugs his big shoulders and says, “I think Eliza could be soft with you like Giselle is with me. Luca can’t be soft like that, and it’s not fair to expect her to try. Eliza might be that piece you’re missing, though.”

“You haven’t changed, asshole. I know you probably think you’re better now because of Giselle, but you’re the same fucker I met years ago. You just have a woman attached to you half the time. That’s the only difference.”

“It’s only been a few months.”

“People like us don’t change,” I mutter, scanning the perfect blue sky and feeling mocked by its beauty. “Our scars don’t heal because a pretty girl smiles at us. You know that.”

Apex looks around like I’ve broken his big dopey-in-love brain. Finally, he shrugs again and focuses hard on me.

“I *feel* different inside. Giselle’s changed me in here,” he says and knocks his fist against his chest. “You’re wrong. I am different. Did you ever think I’d hook up and want to live in a big house on Tobosa Road? Or be open to having a kid? I want those things because Giselle made me want more.”

Rolling my eyes, I step back. “Look at how fucking healthy and honest you are with your feelings. I’m a big fan of this insightful side of you.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, it’s great. We’ll be therapy buddies and share our feelings. So, here’s my truth, pal. I don’t want Eliza. I want that crazy bitch with her murder boner and burger obsession. And until I stop wanting her, I’ll be pissed when she leaves,” I

spit out and step closer. “And you’re giving her a reason to leave me.”

“Why her?”

I consider the question I’ve asked myself for a week before explaining, “When I first looked into Luca’s eyes, I expected her to be afraid or in pain. Like grateful to be saved. Instead, I saw the same rage I feel inside me every damn day.”

“So, you want to date yourself?”

“Maybe. Or I just want a woman who doesn’t need to be coddled. You know I can’t take care of anyone.”

“What if she stayed and wanted a kid?”

Glaring at his evil suggestion, I step back. “I’d tell her no.”

“What if she was naked and asked really nice?”

“I’d say yes until she was dressed and bitchy again.”

Apex chuckles. “That’s crazy shit.”

“I never want a kid.”

“Neither do I. But I like the idea of a baby growing inside my woman. Kids suck usually. But the kid Giselle made would be cool. I’d figure out how to do the dad stuff with it. Papa Bear could explain shit in a way I’d understand. I’d figure it out.”

“For Giselle?”

“Yeah.”

I think about what I’d do to keep Luca. We’ve only really talked about basic stuff. I don’t know anything about her besides the vigilante stuff, her love of burgers, her preference in guns, and how much she likes the beach.

Metamora is beautiful with its rolling hills and dense woods, but it’s no beach. Luca will never be satisfied here.

“I don’t know how to make her stay,” I admit in a quiet voice. “I know she’s bound to rip me apart like my mom did, yet I’m still going to let her. I feel that coming. Staying at the clinic is making me crazy. I ought to go home and forget about

her. But I can't leave. I want to know she's close, even if she's the devil who'll ruin whatever good remains inside me."

Apex nearly snarls as he glares at the clinic. "Fuck that bitch."

"Hey, watch yourself. That bitch holds my raggedy and rotten heart in her cold, murderous hands."

"She's not good enough for you."

Sighing, I'm flushed cold with self-loathing. "No, she's too good for me. Luca's seen things and done shit, I'll never see or do. I'm a temporary diversion to her while she's going to be my great love. How's that for honest?"

Apex looks a little panicky at the picture I paint for him. "No, man, if she walks away from you, she's garbage. That's just how it is. I've seen the man you are when you pull back your asshole armor. You can be charming. That's why I bet you could win over Eliza, even if you've so far only glared at her."

"I don't want Eliza."

"You haven't even tried."

"Did you have to try with Giselle?"

"No, I guess not. She was so beautiful I forgot how I didn't want to be responsible for anyone else. I just wanted to keep her with me."

"So how can you hassle me now?"

"Giselle is a kitten. That chick inside is a lion."

"No, lions live in prides. She's more like a panther. It's her nature to be alone."

Apex nods at my words before frowning. "If this woman is a loner, why waste your time?"

"You're a waste of fucking time," I growl and flip him off.

As I turn around to ditch his ass, his massive hand lands on my shoulder and stops me. I glare back at him, wondering if I

should punch him and work out my frustration on his big frame.

“I want you to be chill,” he says as his dark eyes go soft. “I want you to feel good in your skin. If she can give you that, she’ll become one of my favorite people. But if she makes you suffer, why do I need to watch my mouth?”

“She hasn’t made me suffer yet.”

“You seem on edge.”

“I don’t want her to leave, but I know Overlord will push her out of the Sanctuary. You’ve just given her a new destination. So, yeah, I’m on edge. My own people are taking away what I want.”

“If she wants you, she won’t care about Overlord or me. She’ll just keep her ass planted here.”

His words are supposed to be hopeful as if I can seduce Luca into loving this place and settling down. Except I have nothing to offer her. She’s got the money to live anywhere. Beyond her duffle bag of cash, she’s got bank accounts. No way she’s paying for her fancy fucking vacations with crumpled twenty-dollar bills.

Luca is a woman with options, and I’m a guy known for wanting to hide in the dark for days at a time. I don’t have it in me to be anyone else. I’m not simply lazy and in need of a motivational speech.

Fucked up is how I’m wired. It’s all I’ll ever be.

And it won’t be enough.

SISTER SASS



Talon Marsden/Member

A chaotic, violent nightmare awakens me to a sunny, serene late morning. I breathe out a boozy scent as the light blinds me. I must have forgotten to close my blackout curtains before crashing last night.

Challenging Ominous to a drinking contest was a massive mistake. I assume someone peeled me off the floor at The Lockup and dragged me back here because my hog isn't parked outside.

Stumbling to the bathroom, I fight the urge to puke. My face hides in my hands for a long while, nearly luring me back to sleep on the toilet. My growling stomach forces my body to step into the shower for a cold wake-up.

Soon, I down black coffee and work to crank my head back on straight so I can be of use today.

My phone is lit up with messages. Overlord reminds me how they're bringing Luca and Hope to the Stockade today. Lady Bug asks if I'll be at the Stockade when the newest castoffs arrive. Papa Bear wants to know if he should take my place at the Stockade. Jules includes me in a group message about scheduling people to watch Hope whenever Luca leaves the Stockade.

Finally, I see a message from Jester from his secret prison phone.

"I've never tried sushi," he writes. "Find me a place with some."

I smile at how we've begun making a "freedom list" for when he's released from prison. Of course, the number one thing he has in mind is fucking me. That image kills my smile and leaves me grumpy as I walk over to HQ for breakfast.

Jules is still around with the kids. They're joined by Mabie and her boy, Clark. Rave and Riot's son, Michael, is also at the long table. Eliza is finishing up her breakfast shift as I shuffle up to her.

"I'm late," I mumble to the beauty with her big hazel eyes and swan-like neck. Eliza radiates an old grace. Like a piece of art come to life. I always feel like a dumpy she-dude when in her presence. "Can you make me food?"

Eliza is too nice. She immediately agrees to feed me despite how I am perfectly capable of warming up a frozen burrito or Hot Pocket rather than asking her to cook after the kitchen's closed.

While Eliza fixes me something to settle my stomach, I wander over to where the kids draw. Jules looks too put together for a woman who must not enjoy much sleep between raising four kids and dealing with my brother's insatiable dick.

Her golden eyes find me, and a smile quickly warms her face. We were friends as kids. Then, her shit-for-brains father decided to create a rival club just to piss off my father. Jules left the Sanctuary and lived under constant threats and abuse for a dozen years. Now, she's safe, thanks to Kraken's stroke and a power struggle within the Horned Angels.

I've never seen Jules look happier. Though I'm psyched for her, I'm also a little tired of all the hearts-and-flowers shit around me lately. *Everyone's in love!*

"Not everyone," Rave insisted last night before I drank myself into a mini-coma. "You're just focusing on the wrong people. If you focus on me, you'll realize happily single people are all the rage."

My club sister isn't wrong. More people at the Sanctuary are single than married. I'm just always around my father or brothers. Or Mabie who is back with Blunt. Or Giselle who glues herself to Apex. All the happy couples make me feel like there's no place in the world for bitchy women with a preference for vibrators over real live dicks.

As I wait for breakfast, Evie shows me how her horse has three eyes. I nod like that's a really nifty idea for an animal. Scout gives me a shy smile, still getting to know me. Anthony doesn't even acknowledge me since he's surrounded by his buddies. Just like the grown men in the Born Villains, these little dudes are more interested in bro-bonding than chatting with chicks. Hell, I'm surprised Apex stopped staring into Ghost's eyes long enough to even notice Giselle existed.

"How do you feel?" Jules asks me when I sway on my feet.

"Like a pail of hot vomit."

Overlord's bitchier brunette daughter instantly decides to stand on her chair and threaten me with her little fist. Zoey swings it in front of my face and smiles.

"Want a knuckle sandwich?"

"Don't start fights you can't win, Lil Miss. If we throw down, I'll steamroll over your cute ass."

"No," she says, shaking her head in that way Aqua does when I challenge her.

My club sister can back up her bullshit, though. She once hit me so hard in the right tit that I'm fairly certain I'll never be able to breastfeed. Zoey doesn't possess such power, but she's definitely sporting the attitude.

"Are you going to be a biker bitch when you grow up?" I ask my niece.

"Don't even start with me, chump."

"I'll take that as a no, you little wimp."

Jules fights between finding me amusing and wishing I would stop encouraging Zoey to be a psycho. In my defense, I don't like most kids. Teaching them to be smart-asses makes them endearing.

One day, I'll be expected to birth one of these sticky monsters. Though he's never admitted it, I know Jester wants a kid. I can't imagine I have the lady gonads to tell him no

despite last night declaring to the entire bar how I would never accept a dick into my delicious bang-hole.

Once Jester is released from prison, he'll want very specific things from me. And I'm bound to struggle to remember how to be me when faced with that imposing bear of a man. Soon, I'll be barefoot and pregnant. Rather than riding my hog and getting wasted at The Lockup, I'll take up baking or some other tedious housewife activity.

"I don't want a little person like you," I blurt out to Zoey.

Sighing deeply, Zoey shakes her head and mutters, "Fool's gone stupid on me."

Jules clamps her mouth shut tight, fighting laughter. I sigh with the same drama as my niece at how I'm getting put down by a four-year-old.

"You're mean," I tell Zoey.

Her brown eyes study me, and I wonder if my own kid will be pretty. I didn't inherit my mother's beauty. No, that shit all went to Overlord with his long lashes and high cheekbones.

And Jester's a big man with a face that would not shrink well to fit on a baby. *Good God, our kid will be hideous!*

"Bring it in," Zoey says when I tear up.

I hug her like I do Aqua when my club sister says those exact same words. Stroking Zoey's back, I mutter, "Get your own lingo, kid."

"No."

Rolling my eyes, I back up and pat her head. "I'm sorry you're sad about nothing. Get a grip, will ya?"

Zoey glares at my bullshit. Even at four, she wields the bitch mojo like a pro. I can imagine her riding with the club one day. Those boys will live in absolute fear of her temper. *Man, that'll be hilarious to witness!*

"Are you okay?" Jules asks after Zoey decides I'm too melodramatic and she'd rather draw.

“I think I’m nervous about spending time around those new castoffs.”

“Because one of them is so traumatized?” she whispers.

“No, because the other one is so badass. I’m feeling like a poser a lot lately.”

“Because a four-year-old defeated you at shit-talking?”

Glaring at Jules’s smiling face, I shake my head. “Jester’s getting his release date soon.”

Jules loses her smile, understanding how he owns a part of me. Yet, Jester’s also the scariest motherfucker on the planet. I’m both excited over his release and terrified over how he’ll be the end of me.

“You have choices,” Jules tells me like she always does.

Even nodding, I know she’s wrong. Jester was my crush when I was young. He kept blowing me off because I wasn’t old enough to handle him. His rejection sent me into a tailspin of young adult angst that nearly landed me in the morgue. His response to my violation and near death was to beat one of the assholes to death in a bar with plenty of witnesses.

Since he got locked up, we’ve been in a waiting pattern. I’m no longer near death or a lovesick teenager. However, he’s still an intimidating man with very specific ideas for our future.

“I’m weak,” I tell Jules.

“No,” she says. “You’re just hungover. Now eat breakfast and get your shit in order before you deal with the castoffs. I sense the badass one won’t be friendly to Overlord like she might with you.”

Jules has a point about the newest castoff. Luca and I share some shit in common. Not just the tough-chick mojo, but also how we’re both hot for assholes. Maybe the vigilante and I can establish a self-help group for violent bitches in love with uncontrollable beasts.

LADY BUG



Enid Marsden/Papa Bear's Old Lady

The Sanctuary's energy has been off since the club returned from Arizona. Papa Bear seems especially on edge. In the decade I've known him, I've rarely seen him so agitated. Usually when Papa Bear's this way, someone has died or been seriously injured. Yet, our people came back safe from the raid on the other compound.

Tonight, I find him sitting in the dark family room. His muscled build seems somehow fragile as he hides in his head. I run my fingers through his white hair and ache to offer him the strength he gives everyone else.

"What's staining your thoughts?" I ask as I settle next to him in the chair and cradle his head against my chest.

Papa Bear wraps his powerful arms around me and exhales his troubles. "Luca is not someone Overlord can control. Bringing her here could be risky."

"Have you spoken to him about your fears?"

Falling silent, Papa Bear doesn't need to say the words. I know he's reluctant to step on his son's toes.

"I want you to take Katana with you to the castoff orientation," Papa Bear says, and I fight the urge to go rigid in his arms.

Our nine-year-old daughter is my second chance at doing motherhood right. I made so many mistakes with my firstborn. Unable to forgive me, Nadia fled the Sanctuary to a world where her beauty is a commodity to be used and punished.

Meanwhile, Katana is confident and safe within the compound's walls. She thinks of herself as the Sanctuary's princess. That doesn't mean I want her around a killer like Luca.

“Why?” I ask rather than voice my concerns.

“Based on what we’ve learned about Luca’s past, I suspect she’ll be more inclined to behave if Katana is standing next to you than if you face her alone.”

“Behave?”

“Most castoffs want to feel safe, so they accept being locked inside the Stockade. Luca isn’t wired that way. Ghost explained how the Stockade works, but I sense she’ll push back over losing her freedom.”

“But she wants to protect that other girl.”

“Hope is frozen in her mind. She doesn’t react to much. If Luca starts flipping out, Hope will just sit there. Katana will react, though. That might be enough to keep Luca in check.”

“Because she likes kids?”

“Because her sister’s kid died. Between that and the way she reacts to Hope, I believe she’ll be on her best behavior around Katana. With you, she might feel the need to challenge shit. Then, one of the guys or Sister Sass will step in.”

Papa Bear isn’t a man who always spells out his reasoning, but I understand what he’s saying now. He doesn’t fear Luca will hurt me or break free. If she wanted to leave, no one has been stopping her.

Instead, Papa Bear worries she’ll make me look weak at a time when I’m trying to take on more authority around the Sanctuary.

I’ve often felt like I’m a shoddy substitute to a dead woman. Papa Bear’s first wife, Betty Boop, was adored by the club members and their families. Her death tore a hole in this place. Papa Bear was left in a free fall.

Our relationship helped him find his footing again. Being together allowed him to step back and hand the club over to Overlord. Katana offers him a chance to see the world from an innocent, fun viewpoint.

But I’ve never gotten the hang of wielding my power at the Sanctuary. After a decade here, I’m only now attempting to be

heard by the other old ladies.

“I’ll bring Katana to the orientation,” I say, accepting Papa Bear’s wisdom.

The next day, Katana is thrilled to hear she’ll meet the new castoffs. She wants to be in the thick of everything. Sister Sass had the same energy when she was young. I recall how stubborn she was when we met. The youngest child of Papa Bear and Betty Boop, she was her parents’ princess who spent her days roughhousing and talking trash with the club guys. Sister Sass never had any interest in clothes or girly stuff.

Meanwhile, Katana adores her wardrobe, taking great care in choosing what to wear. Today, she selects a circular gray skirt and a pale pink Eiffel Tower shirt along with her usual Converse sneakers.

As the black SUV drives through the Sanctuary’s front gate, I walk toward the Stockade with Katana and our three Hovawart dogs—Mojito, Sangria, and Daiquiri. The animals pause at the street just as they’re trained. Katana pets their heads to reward their good behavior.

As we cross the road between our large house and the Stockade, I think back to when I got the bright idea to train the three large puppies. I’d been restless after Nadia ran off. Somehow, training the dogs brought calm to my chaotic thoughts.

Today, I stroke Sangria’s head for reassurance as Luca exits the SUV. The woman’s platinum-blond hair is tied back in a messy ponytail. She notices me, revealing nothing on her attractive face. Her gaze flashes to Katana and then the dogs. If they settle her nerves, she doesn’t show it.

Sister Sass strolls over while I watch Maria from the clinic guide Hope inside the Stockade.

“She looks sad,” Katana tells me, but I don’t know if she means Hope or her obviously hungover older sister.

“Watch yourself,” Sister Sass tells Katana. “Ominous wants to recruit Luca. She won’t be happy if you scare off her new project.”

Katana lifts her chin and replies defiantly, “Ominous isn’t my boss.”

“I’m telling her how you said that.”

“I’m not scared.”

“I miss being so young and clueless,” Sister Sass says, trying her hardest to sound normal despite being hungover and clearly depressed.

“Are you okay?” I whisper in her ear as we approach the Stockade’s front door.

As Sister Sass’s hazel eyes find me, she’s clearly seeking the kind of comfort Betty Boop would provide. Yet, I’ve always given Sister Sass space. Even after the violence that nearly stole her life, I didn’t push her for more than she wanted to offer.

My thoughts return to Nadia. When my daughter pushed me away, I let her. Now, she’s gone, and I don’t know how to help her.

Sister Sass isn’t gone, though, so I wrap an arm around her and offer a little squeeze. She tenses instantly in my embrace. I see her act the same way with Papa Bear, though. Sister Sass isn’t a hugger.

“If you need to talk, I’m always here,” I whisper as we join Luca, Hope, and Maria in the Stockade’s cozy living room.

Watching me warily, Sister Sass just nods. Once Maria leaves, I give Luca and Hope the Stockade’s rules. Neither one reacts to my words. I sense Hope isn’t listening. I don’t know how lost in her mind she might be. Luca, though, is absolutely hiding her true feelings. Her gaze is electric yet controlled.

Before fleeing to the Sanctuary and meeting Papa Bear, I spent my life around violent men. That’s why I know a predator when I see one, and Luca is clearly biding her time.

Sister Sass yawns through the entire speech while Katana inches closer to Luca out of curiosity. I gently tug my oblivious daughter behind me and guide Sangria to stand in front of us.

Despite how casual I act, I notice the smallest change in Luca's expression. Maybe a slight arch in her eyebrow. Like all good predators, she knows when her prey is afraid.

I look at Hope and get the urge to take her with me. She's suffered so much at such a young age. Nothing good will come out of her staying here with this woman exhaling violence. However, my own bias might be clouding my ability to see this situation clearly. Luca isn't a warm person, but she seems set on saving Hope.

That's why I leave Luca and Hope in the Stockade rather than scoop the younger woman into my arms and fleeing. Even so, I text Papa Bear and ask for someone to keep an extra eye on our newest castoffs.

LUCA



The Stockade is a one-story rustic house with a living room-kitchen combo plus a single bedroom and bath. The place is homey, and Hope might do better here than at the hospital. However, the staff babied her a lot, so she might miss that level of care.

Once we enter the house, a woman named Lady Bug gives our “orientation” speech. The attractive brunette is working a bohemian chic style with a flowing denim skirt, a white-and-beige tunic, and the top half of her long, wavy hair tied back in a braid.

I interrupt her speech to ask if she works for the club.

“I’m Papa Bear’s wife,” Lady Bug says as if that should be obvious.

“Is that why they call you ‘Lady Bug’?” I ask, needing her to stop barfing instructions at me and talk like a normal person.

“It’s my old lady name like how they use the name Papa Bear for Brody.”

“Did you pick that name?”

“Yes.”

Sizing her up, I look around the family room before glancing at Hope sitting on the couch. The young woman’s emaciated body is hidden under a baggy, black “Metamora” T-shirt and gray sweatpants. She’s only wearing socks. Her light brown hair was brushed by the staff. She walked out of the clinic, looking well put together. Now, her hair hangs in her face as her pale brown eyes stare at the wall.

Tearing my gaze from Hope, I size up a worried Lady Bug. Papa Bear’s wife returns to her greeting speech involving security features and the dining schedule. Worse than being

locked inside this house, I'm only allowed to leave with a chaperone. Just like Ghost explained, I'll be a prisoner until they feel I'm safe to walk around unsupervised.

I've spent seven years doing whatever the fuck I want. Now, I'm the property of these bikers.

Despite my anger at their rules, I keep my mouth shut. Lady Bug isn't the one calling the shots, so bitching at her won't help. I glance at the doorway, where a new biker—this one a pretty brunette named Sister Sass sporting bare, tatted arms, a pistol at her hip, and a wicked hangover—stands watch. I don't know where Ghost went. He shadowed me at the clinic day and night. Maybe he'll no longer be so vigilant at the Sanctuary.

Lady Bug doesn't want to leave me alone with Hope. I feel her hesitating. There was talk of bringing me here before Hope was released. They wanted to get a sense of how I ticked before they locked me in this little house with the defenseless, young woman.

That would have been a smarter plan from their point of view, yet I refused to leave Hope. The clinic staff was kind. They likely wouldn't do anything evil toward the girl. However, without Hope, I have no reason to remain here. So, sticking us in one house is the Born Villains' solution to dealing with two castoffs.

After Lady Bug, Katana, Sister Sass, and the dogs leave, I sit in the Stockade and watch Hope stare at the wall.

Where is her head right now? Is she remembering horrors or imagining paradise? Or is she so mentally fried that she doesn't see what's right in front of her?

As a kid, I watched an elderly cat die in our apartment complex. He didn't belong to anyone in particular, just hung around the building and got fed by random neighbors. I used to pretend he was mine, but my mom wouldn't let Drew and me bring the cat inside.

Toward the end of his life, he would stare at the ceiling as if stoned. I now realize his brain had begun to fail. Back then,

I thought he was seeing magical stuff like ghosts.

Hope reminds me of that cat. She doesn't seem fully alive. If someone claimed she was a robot trained to eat, sleep, and shit, I'd believe them. Hope has nothing happening behind her eyes.

She doesn't flinch when the lock at the front door cracks. Meanwhile, I find myself oddly startled.

With Lady Bug leaving less than thirty minutes ago, I hadn't expected anyone to bother us for a while. I'm also on edge since arriving here. Somehow, the clinic felt safer. Now, I'm behind security fences and inside a locked house. Rather than safe, I'm really trapped.

Sister Sass enters first. Ghost follows behind her. Thorn stands outside. I think I spot Apex in the house's driveway. This isn't the welcoming committee. If they wanted to make me feel warm and fuzzy, they'd send Lady Bug back to give me another speech while flanked by her kid and dogs.

As two women enter behind Ghost, I stand to face the crowd.

"Hope stays," Ghost mutters as if he can barely tolerate my existence. "You're coming with us."

Needing to poke him, I state the obvious, "Hope can't be alone."

"We'll watch her," says the blonde woman before adding, "I'm Duchess. Overlord's old lady."

"And who are you?" I ask her partner—a dark-haired woman with nearly black eyes and a chin-length bob haircut.

"Mabie."

Her timid tone defuses my edginess. I turn to look at Hope. Should I tell her I'll be back? Does she care? Hell, did she even notice I was sitting with her?

In the end, I choose not to tell Hope anything, mostly because eyes are on me. I learned early on in life to never reveal my feelings to the enemy.

Walking next to Sister Sass, I size up the people around me. Ghost looks worn down with his long brown hair draping his exhausted eyes. Once again, I wonder what he's like when well-rested.

Nearby, Apex has returned to treating me like the enemy. That's why he keeps cracking his knuckles and shaking out his shoulders.

I glance at Sister Sass who wasn't part of the group that attacked the Dirty Princes' compound. I suspect her badass credentials are purely local, where her family can keep tabs.

The main reason I didn't grab Hope and flee as soon as we arrived in Metamora were the two women members involved in the compound attack. Over the years, I've dealt with plenty of motorcycle clubs. Their women fall into three groups—the wives they cheat on, the whores they cheat with, and the non-fuckable females like daughters, mothers, and the help. Bikers aren't usually forward thinking. For two women to come along on a big mission soothed some of my fears about the Born Villains Motorcycle Club.

Not that I don't still assume the worst about this interrogation. I'm guided to a barn-like building which turns out to be HQ. We pass empty tables and a dark kitchen to reach a back room, where I'm asked to sit in a chair at the front.

The local sheriff stands against the back wall next to Papa Bear. Sister Sass sits next to several women bikers. Overlord takes the spot across from me, but his chair is pulled back from the table. Ghost and Apex linger near the door. I catch the former's gaze for only a moment, just long enough to realize he's irritated by this situation.

I smile at how Ghost wants to protect me. I've become his possession, even without any fucking. Now, I'm on display for his friends and fellow bikers.

Sitting across from me, Overlord doesn't fit with the Presidents I've met in the past. He doesn't even sport a beard. His blue eyes are lined by thick lashes. He kinda looks like a catalogue model.

I've already deduced Overlord was raised in the comfort of this compound. He didn't know hardship early on, leaving him mentally intact and softly handsome.

My gaze flashes to Ghost who owns the same color eyes as his President. I suspect my beautiful asshole didn't grow up anywhere comfortable. Ghost always looks on edge, even when I've caught him dozing. A man unable to sleep peacefully is a man with few happy stories to share.

"Luca, how are you adjusting to the Stockade?" Overlord asks, sounding friendly.

During my walk over here, I considered how to play this interrogation. Being argumentative won't work when I'm on their territory and outnumbered. As a kid, I had a big mouth and a bad attitude. My mom was a moron, and I was always scrambling to keep my sister and I fed. I grew bitter and mean.

After my mom pissed off the wrong bitch, my aunt took pity on us. Drew and I moved to a big, fancy house in a ritzy suburb, where my bad attitude and big mouth weren't appreciated. On the third day I was in her house, my aunt screamed in my face, "Just be nice!"

I looked at my sister and realized we might be in danger again if I didn't get my attitude in order. My sister was cuter than me, and everyone liked her, yet I worried we were viewed as a package deal. If I was sent away to an uncle in another state or ended up in foster care, Drew would likely be sent packing, too.

My bad attitude was quickly crushed under the responsibility of protecting my sister. Niceness failed me later in life, but I see the use in it now. I've played the good girl on many occasions since embracing my new violent existence.

These people won't believe a full-blown submissive act from me. I already showed my hand at the compound and clinic. But I can still dial my inner bitch down a few notches to get through this interrogation.

"I'm concerned the pullout couch will give me back problems," I respond to Overlord's question. "Otherwise, the

thirty minutes I spent in the Stockade were tolerable.”

“How’s your mouth?” Overlord asks, and I instinctively rub my still swollen jaw. “Do your ribs still hurt?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

Overlord smirks at my tone. “Our people tracked down Hope’s father.”

His words fill me with greedy hate. I want that info, and I’m willing to lower myself to get it.

Settling back in the chair, I ask in a soft voice, “Your club doesn’t do assassinations, right?”

“Not regularly, no.”

“You just police your territory.”

“Normally, yes.”

“So, Hope’s dad will get to walk free?”

“For now.”

Leaning forward, I rest my hands flat on the table. “What would I need to do to get his info?”

“I thought you planned to stay here and keep an eye on Hope.”

I settle back in the chair. “You have a system here,” I say as my index finger fiddles with the Band-Aid covering my missing thumb nail torn off by the Dirty Princes. “What happens next?”

“We let you settle in and figure out what you want to happen next?”

“What are my options?”

Overlord crosses his arms and focuses hard on me. I ignore his gaze and keep messing with the loosening Band-Aid.

“Normally, the people who come to the Sanctuary don’t have anywhere else to go,” Overlord continues. “They’re starting over or hiding out. That’s Hope’s situation but not yours.”

“What do you know about my situation?” I mutter, forgetting to be a good girl after so long of rarely censoring myself.

“We know about your sister and niece.”

Lifting my gaze to meet his, I feel Overlord struggling with how to play this interrogation. I’m worthy of his pity, yet he fears me. However, I mostly figure they want to know if they can somehow use me.

When I don’t reply to his comment, Overlord adds, “Why don’t you explain how that went down?”

“Why?”

“Because the police report we got our hands on didn’t even include your witness statement or their causes of death. Real shoddy work. And the news reports about Drew’s and Abilene’s deaths were vague. Since we assume your current vigilante work is related to that incident, we’d like more details.”

Having assumed these questions were coming, I’ve primed myself to deal with this moment. I keep my tone indifferent as I explain, “When I was ten, my mom fell head over heels for a married man. Eventually, his crazy wife shot them both. The guy ended up in a wheelchair. My mom wasn’t so lucky. Drew and I moved in up with our aunt. We had a good life, but my sister inherited a taste for bad men. Drew tried walking away from that toxic behavior once she had Abilene. She left her boyfriend, who may or may not have been the baby’s dad. I hadn’t seen my sister in years when she showed up at my house, looking to hide out from her abusive boyfriend.”

My thoughts return to how Drew kept thanking me when I said she could stay at my house. I’d wanted to believe she could do better in life if she focused on her daughter’s happiness rather than her own.

“The guy’s name was Paul. I don’t know how he found my house. I arrived home to find him and three other men there with Drew. She was high. I walked into the situation, thinking she’d called him and fallen back into her old ways. I told them

to leave. One of the men hit me. I'd been so shocked. Violence hadn't been a part of my life since I was a kid. Paul told Drew to explain the situation to me. She said the guys were going to hang out and party. If we didn't start trouble, there wouldn't be trouble. She also swore if I ran, Paul would kill her baby. I didn't know what to do, so I did what she said. Drew seemed to understand that world while I'd gone soft over the years."

I allow my gaze to wash over the others before I focus back on Overlord. "They stayed for two days. More than once, I thought to call for help. Drew insisted Paul would start shooting if he saw the cops. I had to behave, if we wanted to survive. At first, the assholes were just drinking and snorting coke. I stayed really quiet and tried to disappear. I didn't fight them when they raped me. My thoughts were on saving the baby in the next room. Of course, I suspected those men weren't going to let us live, but I hoped if I waited long enough, I'd devise a smart plan where I could save my sister and niece."

Sighing, I lean back and shake my head. "They killed the baby on the second day. Abilene kept crying. She was hungry and wet. Every time Drew or I would try to go to her, one of the men would want to fuck. I was exhausted by then. Because of the drugs, the assholes rarely slept. I'd never gotten high before, and the coke made me feel out of it. Paul said the crying was driving him crazy, but then he hit Drew when she tried to comfort the baby. Another guy went into the room. A part of me knew what was happening, but everything was slowed down and distorted. Drew didn't react to the baby's muffled crying. I thought I was imagining it."

Overlord's apathetic expression cracks. Ghost said his President has kids. Clearly, Overlord's daddy heart can't bear to hear the details, even if he knows how the story ends.

"I found Abilene later. I'd never seen a dead person before. Her eyes were open. I just walked out of the room and found Paul waving a gun in Drew's face. He called her a whore and said the kid wasn't his. Drew swore she didn't cheat. They went back and forth while I kept thinking of the dead baby in the next room. Then, Paul said he believed her, but it was too

late to resuscitate the kid. My sister had stayed focused on pleasing him all weekend. She just wanted to save her baby. When she looked at me, I didn't react. I couldn't be the one to say Abilene was dead. But she saw the truth on my face and freaked out. That's when Paul shot her."

My heart hurts when I think of Drew with her baby girl. I'd never seen my sister love someone so completely.

"Paul and his buddies were exhausted by then. They also seemed a little startled by Drew's face disappearing the way it did. While they froze, I realized I had no one left to save. It was just me, so I shoved my way past those assholes and ran out my back door. I jumped my fence and ran for two blocks before stopping for help. Just like that, I was free."

Silence hangs in the room before Overlord finally asks, "Why weren't the murders solved?"

My gaze flashes to the sheriff. The indigenous, middle-aged man is wearing his beige uniform, complete with a western-style hat over his black hair and a big belt buckle around his lean waist. His cowboy vibe clashes with the denim-and-leather assholes in the room. Based on his age, I suspect he's friends with Papa Bear, just like the doctor at the clinic. I'm beginning to put together how this place came about.

"Paul was a snitch and had promised to give the cops big players with ties to a Mexico City cartel. That's how it was explained to me when I kept pressuring the local police. The head detective finally spelled out how Drew and Abilene were collateral damage in a larger war."

I allow my gaze to seek out Ghost, as if his surly expression is a safety blanket. He stares back at me, revealing nothing.

"Paul would never go down for their murders despite my eyewitness account," I continue after only a few seconds of hesitation. "None of the men would be punished. The press was told to bury the story despite it happening in my high-end neighborhood. But I was assured by the detective that it would all work out. After all, by letting Paul and his friends walk, the

cops might one day catch someone who knew someone who worked with someone who knew a guy in the Mexican cartel.”

Overlord switches topics by asking, “Were you still an athlete then?”

“I was mostly retired. I did events overseas in countries where big, blonde, athletic women cause a stir, but I wasn’t competitive by that point.”

“Yet, you were able to kill Paul and his friends.”

Exhaling, I want to roll my eyes at Overlord’s earnest tone. I consider the people in the room but don’t look at them. I imagine Ghost glaring at me. He probably feels pity. I feel the same way when I look at him. *But pity only goes so far.*

“I tried to let go of my rage, get healthy, and move past what happened. But I couldn’t enjoy life when Paul was still breathing. That’s why I tracked him and his friends down to a party.”

Memories from that night return, making me smile. I recall how afraid I was as I drove to the house party. My heart nearly pounded right out of my chest. However, as soon as I turned off the car and set my mind on death, the fear washed away.

“I was reborn that night,” I announce to the room.

The scent of burnt popcorn returns to me. I entered the house to find flashing lights, thumping bass, and a mass of bodies. I moved with the casual malice of a monster. When I found Paul, he tried to threaten me. The gun in my hand caused him to change tactics. He quickly shifted to reasoning with me. *Did I really want to lose my rich-bitch lifestyle over a wild weekend gone wrong?*

I only smiled at Paul’s words. That’s when he saw in me what I recognized in him that weekend gone wild. We were monsters driven to destroy. He’d taken Drew and Abilene. Now, I’d take his life. And neither one of us would ever feel any guilt.

Surprising myself and the room, I laugh. “After I killed those men at a crowded party, I sat in my house for days, waiting for the cops to arrest me. How could they *not* know it

was me after the stink I made for months? It seemed so obvious,” I explain and chuckle again. “But the detective claimed it was a drug hit. Not once did he consider I’d killed them. I’d gotten away with it.”

“Why keep killing?”

“I couldn’t return to my old life with sponsorships and ad campaigns. I wasn’t interested in visiting family and seeing Drew’s pictures on the mantel. I couldn’t be nice anymore. And ending those fuckers felt fantastic. So, yeah, I kept killing. It’s why I was at the compound. It’s why I’ll hunt down Hope’s dad. There’s no going back. Killing monsters and dying are all I have waiting for me.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“I get how you want to save me,” I say and glance at Ghost before focusing again on Overlord. “But I don’t need anything you’re selling.”

“Maybe we can offer you more than saving.”

Despite my best effort, I can’t help glancing at Ghost again, as if he’s the prize I hope they’ll offer. “Like what?”

“A home base, maybe.”

“Why?”

“Our people stick close to the Sanctuary, but not all of our problems are local.”

“No, I get what *you* would get out of me staying,” I say and lean forward. “But what’s in it for me?”

“The Sanctuary would be a safe place for you to unwind at between jobs.”

I can’t picture exactly what Overlord’s even offering. All I know about the Sanctuary is the front gate, the Stockade, and this building. What am I supposed to do while surrounded by bikers? This place feels like a cage rather than a safe place.

Yet, my gaze returns to Ghost who would be in the cage with me. I wish I didn’t feel anything for him, but I do, and I can’t shake the need.

“If you want to play nice, then why the audience?” I ask Overlord and gesture around the room.

“They’re here to help me get a sense if you’re trustworthy.”

“I’m not.”

Overlord uncrosses his arms and rests his hands passively on the table as if to disarm me.

“I think you do what we do, just in a different way. But I also think you might not be a good fit for the Sanctuary. Only time will tell.”

“Can I leave the Stockade?”

“Not without a chaperone.”

“Because I’ll do what?”

“I told you how one of the castoffs killed my daughters’ mothers,” he says, revealing old pain in his pretty-boy eyes. “We don’t trust as easily as we used to.”

“That’s the woman sent by the Dirty Princes.”

“Yes.”

“So, you got your revenge.”

“Sure.”

“How did vengeance feel?”

Overlord stands and mutters, “Unsatisfactory.”

Nodding, I don’t move from my spot. I’m not sure if he’s finished or tagging someone else in on this interrogation.

Overlord looks me over. “I thought you’d be less forthcoming. Since you’re sharing with us, let me be open with you. Hope can’t leave the Sanctuary. There’s nowhere to send her. She might need care for the rest of her life, and we’re willing to offer her that.”

“Uh-huh,” I say when he pauses for too long.

“But you’ve been on your own for a long time with no partner or organization watching your back. The Sanctuary

isn't a good fit for lone wolves. But you're welcome to rest up and get healthy before you head out. If you want to stay, we'll have that conversation. For now, you'll follow the Stockade's rules and keep an eye on Hope."

"What happens when I leave? Who will watch Hope then?"

"We'll get her set up in a cottage on Black Pine Road and hire full-time helpers until she can take care of herself."

Frowning, I sit up straighter. "You said she was staying here. Now, she's at some road."

"It's where some of our single women and older folks live. Black Pine Road is in the Sanctuary."

"I live there," Sister Sass says, winning a frown from her brother. "It's a nice road with cute cottages."

Settling back into my chair, I'm done talking. I only want to return to the Stockade and take a nap. If this was a normal job, I'd find somewhere to decompress for a few weeks. Let myself heal up while I watched TV and pigged out. Then, I'd start training and plotting my next hunt.

Instead, I'm in this place filled with potential enemies. I'm nervous about letting down my guard. I want to protect Hope, but I don't know anything about her.

I haven't felt trapped like this in a long time. Even when the Dirty Princes had me strapped up, I figured I'd be dead or sold off soon. The end was clear there. At the Sanctuary, I don't know which way is up.

As Overlord talks to his father and the sheriff, the others act restless. Except for Ghost who stares right at me while ignoring Apex at his side. I give in to temptation by staring back at him. His eyebrow cocks as if I'm challenging him. I grin without thinking.

If nothing comes out of my time at the Sanctuary, at least, I know I'll get laid.

GHOST



The Sanctuary temporarily returns me to my senses. As soon as I ride through the front gates, where prospects keep watch, I feel like myself for the first time in a week.

I instantly remember why I don't trust people. Even more so, why I don't let myself care about most of them.

I got too close to Apex. He's become my problem now. When he started fucking up over his idiot mom, I felt it all. Then, he got stupid in the head over Giselle. I couldn't stop stressing how he would end up in the ground. I hated that tiny ballerina in the beginning. Now, I just want to lock Giselle away in a safe room, so no one can hurt her and destroy Apex.

Caring about people leads to suffering. My childhood would have been easier if I didn't love my mom and grandma. If I was cold inside, I'd have suffered less.

The best thing for me is to forget Luca and her electric blue eyes. I ought to erase my feelings for her. Scrub them away like I do the pain and fatigue.

After showering, I stand in my living room and try to calm down. Instead, my mind is abuzz with questions and accusations.

I should go to the interrogation. What if Overlord asks something important and I don't hear the answer? Other people will be there. Why the fuck should they know shit I don't know?

Except Luca's bound to hurt me like my mom did. If I'm willing to sell out my heart to this woman, why don't I just call up the bitch, too? I could take my mom out to dinner and let her play with my head. Hell, why not bring Grandma along, too? *Just throw away all my mental health at once.*

I haven't slept right since returning from Arizona. Apex claims if I rested up, I wouldn't want Luca anymore. How I can't see clearly with an exhausted mind.

He's probably right. I get scattered without sleep. The past grabs hold of me. I start feeling under attack. People piss me off more. My skin feels dirty even after a shower.

Like right now, when I walk across the grassy land toward HQ, where the interrogation will take place. I know I shouldn't have left my townhouse. I'm setting myself up for pain. The Sanctuary's shrink has repeatedly claimed I sabotage myself.

"You're afraid to be happy, so you find reasons to be miserable."

Every time Sharona hit me with that "truth bomb," I called her a bitch and stormed out of her office. But she isn't completely wrong. I've never learned to be happy.

Even more than that, I don't *trust* happiness. I always assume whenever people talk about enjoying their lives, they're putting on a show.

Like how Luca casually talks about the murders of her sister and niece. Her calm demeanor is a con. She doesn't trust us, feels outnumbered, and knows how to manipulate people into lowering their guard.

I don't think Overlord falls for her act, but he isn't fully running this thing with Luca. Ominous has clearly shoved her way into the conversation. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing.

I've always liked Ominous. She doesn't pretend to be anyone else. No soft outer coating to trick people. Papa Bear barely controlled her. Our former VP and an all-around asshole, Kraken, tried to break Ominous. He wanted her to be another bitch in his little harem. She refused to even lower herself to be his equal.

"I'm superior to you on any day in every fucking way," Ominous told him once in front of the entire club during a birthday party.

They both laughed as if they were joking around, but I knew it was for real. Everyone did. Kraken and Ominous don't lie well. When they hate something, it's damn obvious. And by then, they really fucking hated each other.

Back then, I hadn't been patched in yet. I didn't trust anyone, not even Apex. The idea of the Sanctuary—where fucked-up people got to be normal—felt like a lie.

The night I got patched in, Ominous rode my dick. She was the first chick I'd ever fucked. I hated being touched. I also didn't like treating people nicely, and girls expected at least basic courtesy for them to spread for a guy. I couldn't be my normal obnoxious self and get laid.

Ominous didn't care. She wasn't nice, either. We drank a dozen shots, talked shit about people, and fucked.

Thinking back, I guess Ominous does have a softer side. She didn't mock me for being too quick. We just fooled around and fucked again. Ominous made me feel a little normal for a while. But normal isn't something I am most days, and Luca will always want more than I can give. I'm cursed to end up alone and miserable.

With their rage fueling them, Luca and Ominous are a lot alike. They're real while others put on a show. Except Luca spends the first half of the interrogation pretending to be a smooth operator.

Listening to her past, I tell myself to walk away. I can get a meal, talk with people I know, and go back to my life. Luca is simply a failed side quest.

Man, those words feel so right in my head. *Walk away. Stay away. Go back to your life. Just be who you were before Arizona.*

As soon as the interrogation ends, I force my feet to get moving. *Just leave. Don't follow after Luca.* She'll either get swept into Ominous's group or leave the Sanctuary.

No matter her choice, she'll be out of reach. Even if I won Luca's affections, what do I expect to happen next? Am I really capable of going the Papa Bear route and playing the

family man? Good Lord, I'm delusional. *Just walk the fuck away!*

Yet, like a junkie searching for his next fix, I follow after Sister Sass and Luca as they walk toward the Stockade.

The blonde temptress says my name, drawing me out of my head. Her gaze pulls me closer until I see nothing else. The noise in my head is silenced. Sister Sass disappears from view. I feel alone with the angry blonde and her hypnotic gaze.

"I want you to be my chaperone and show me around this place."

"No," I spit out.

Luca only smiles. "Tomorrow, then."

"No."

Her hand slides across my jaw and pats my cheek. "I believe you one hundred percent."

"You can come out with me later," Sister Sass tells Luca when I only glare at the blonde. "Ominous wants to meet you."

"More interrogations?" Luca asks while her gaze wraps me up in hopeful lies.

"No, more like shots and girl talk."

"What do girls talk about around here?" Luca asks, peeling her gaze from me long enough to glance at Sister Sass. "Is it just gossip about all the pretty boys you've got in your gang?"

"I'm confused," Sister Sass says, and I think she might be telling the truth since she seems hungover. "Are you looking to meet guys? Or are you just messing with Ghost?"

"The second one," Luca says and flashes me a smile. "Did it work?"

"I don't give a shit what you do."

"I plan to test your resolve on that."

"Have at it."

“So, which of your pretty biker friends should I get to chaperone me around this place?”

“None of them will do it.”

“And why is that?”

Erasing the space between us, I whisper in her ear, “I’ve pissed a circle around you. They know I might eventually want you. They won’t cross a member for a cheap piece of tail.”

Smiling at my dismissive bullshit, Luca leans closer and whispers in my ear, “Waiting is smart. My ribs are too tender for a rough bastard like you.”

Luca turns and walks toward the Stockade. Sister Sass doesn’t immediately follow, instead watching me.

“You need to keep an eye on her,” I grumble at my club sister.

“Do you really like her or is this a game?”

“Why can’t it be both?”

“Ominous wants her to join the club.”

Running my hands through my hair, I shake out my fatigue. “That’ll never happen.”

“Maybe she’ll work for us.”

“Why when she’s done fine on her own?”

“By ‘fine,’ do you mean ‘get tied up and tortured’? Because that’s how you found her, right?”

Glaring at Sister Sass, I don’t know why I feel the need to defend Luca or talk up her abilities. I’m not even sure what I want to happen next.

Luca sticking around the Sanctuary would give me space to breathe. I’m suffocating under the fear of her disappearing. I don’t know how I’ll live my entire life knowing she exists yet remains out of reach.

“Why her?” Sister Sass asks, sounding like a little girl.

“Why Jester?” I snarl, making her flinch. “Why anyone? Leave me alone.”

I stalk off toward my townhome with a plan to stay inside for a few days. If I'm in there long enough, I can remember who I am and what I need to survive.

By the time Luca bails on the Sanctuary, I won't miss her one damn bit.

APEX



Cyril Tayback/Enforcer

Luca Elmwood might be the devil. After having her around the Sanctuary for a day, I already want her gone. I feel like no one should engage with her, especially Ghost.

Giselle listens to me mutter about how people are blinded by Luca's beauty and sob story.

"They think she's our ally because we shared an enemy, but she didn't even have a personal reason to go after the Dirty Princes."

"You're worried about Ghost," Giselle says, snuggled against me at HQ during dinner.

Nearby, Eliza works the dinner shift. She doesn't really need the money since most things are paid for at the Sanctuary. However, the club's shrink claims people should stay busy with friends, jobs, and hobbies.

"The quiet is not your friend," Sharona has told me dozens of times.

"Ghost hasn't left his townhome since yesterday," I mumble, unsure what to do. "I don't think he's eating."

"What did he say when you visited?" Giselle asks as her little hand strokes my back and eases my worries.

I stop sulking long enough to enjoy my woman's beauty. Giselle is so gorgeous. Her blonde hair is pulled up in a ponytail, allowing me to see the soft curves of her delicate face. Her pale blue eyes watch me as I work through my issues. She owns such a good heart, and I want to protect it from her past.

I thought Luca might be capable of offering Giselle peace. If the vigilante wants to kill bad guys, the Black Gold Four fits

the bill.

Now, I doubt it's worth owing the devil anything. Except how do I finish off those people myself? I'm a good killer. I might be able to end them without dying or ending up in prison.

"What did Ghost say?" Giselle asks again when I don't answer.

"He wouldn't let me inside his place. I tried shoving the door open, but he's a surprisingly strong little fucker."

Giselle smiles at how I think Ghost is small. Next to her, he's a giant. My woman is so tiny and fragile. She only wants to be happy and safe. Why can't I give her that? Instead, the world just grinds its boot down on us.

"Is Luca still at the compound?" Giselle asks after waving at Jules arriving with her four kids and Mabie's son, Clark.

"Yes. She's been eating in the Stockade with Hope."

"Did the girl talk yet?"

"I don't think so, but I never asked."

Giselle studies me and takes my hand. "I start working at the shelter next week."

"No."

"It's happening. I want to help people."

"No."

Since we helped her, Giselle wants to do something to give back to our community. She's obsessed with working at the club-financed women's shelter, Bettina House. The place is named after Papa Bear's first wife, Betty Boop, and run by his old foster home friend, Risa.

Most of the people who show up there are battered women and their kids. Even so, Giselle isn't safe outside the Sanctuary's walls until the Black Gold Four are dead.

Giselle strokes my jaw. "You can come with me, so I'll be safe."

I consider this idea. “What will I do?”

“Scare away any bad guys.”

Smiling at how she knows just what to say to break through my angry walls, I wrap an arm around her shoulders. Even grinning, I don’t give in to my growing good mood just yet.

“Can’t you work somewhere on the Sanctuary?”

“No.”

I chuckle at how she wears her “tough bitch” expression when the word leaves her lips.

“Please?” I whisper and nuzzle her temple. “I’ll be extra nice to you in bed.”

“You’re already nice enough. I’m going to volunteer at the shelter. The therapist said it would be good for my self-worth.”

Sighing, I don’t know why I never seem to win arguments anymore. Probably because my opponents don’t fight fair. Ghost knows I won’t kick down his door and force-feed him. That’s why he can be so damn stubborn.

And Giselle loves me too much. How can I bully someone whose heart owns mine? Yeah, they’re not fighting fair.

“Do you think Eliza will flirt with Ghost?” I ask Giselle as she finishes half of her dinner and gestures for me to eat the rest.

“No, Eliza likes Penthouse. He brought her a box of kittens.”

“That’s too many kittens.”

“I know, but he wanted her to pick.”

“Did she?”

“No, I think she’s keeping them all.”

“What’s she going to do with so many kittens?”

Giselle’s gaze lifts upward as she considers a solution. “Um, I don’t know. Maybe Penthouse will fall in love with her and build a big house for all the kittens.”

“Seems like it’d just be easier to give away some of those kittens.”

“How can she choose which ones to keep?”

I consider her question and shrug. “Put them in a box across the room. Have someone tilt over the box. Then, whatever kitten reaches her first is the winner. The others can go live somewhere else.”

“That’s not how love works.”

“It’s a cat.”

“I think it’s fate,” Giselle insists. “Like how I met you. People know what they need when they meet the right person or cat.”

“What about dogs?”

“No, I don’t think it works with them.”

Chuckling at Giselle fucking with me, I like how every day on the Sanctuary fills her with more confidence. After only a few months, she feels at home here.

If I can get rid of the Black Gold Four, Giselle’s world will get bigger. If I can’t, she’ll be locked behind our walls for the rest of her life.

SISTER SASS



I walk with Jules to the Stockade, where she'll remain with Hope while I take Luca to HQ to meet the biker chicks. We don't say anything after leaving my brother's house. I've been in a bad mood since breakfast when Apex complained Ghost was hiding in his house.

“What am I supposed to do about that?” I asked him. “He's your best friend. Go talk him off the ledge.”

“With words?”

I wasn't sure if that was a genuine question. When Apex asked it, I just walked away and left him with Giselle.

I'm still wondering about Ghost when I approach the Stockade.

“Are you sure you want to babysit Hope after a long day of babysitting four kids?”

Jules smirks. “It's not babysitting when they're your own kids.”

“Sure, but wouldn't you rather chill?”

“If I ever want to be accepted within the Sanctuary's old lady circle, I need to take on more responsibilities.”

“You were a castoff just weeks ago.”

“Exactly. Overlord thinks having me do a task normally handled by Lady Bug will send a message.”

“Gotcha. You're doing a rebranding. Going from zero to hero,” I say, winning an unimpressed frown from Jules. “Going from Kraken's daughter to Overlord's old lady. Slick plan, but I don't envy you with the Hope chick. She feels emptied out. Like her mind died, but her body didn't get the message.”

“I’m choosing to think positive and believe she’s just hiding in her head. Once she knows she’s safe, she’ll find her way out.”

Nodding, I used to believe optimistic shit. But life has a way of reminding people of the truth.

However, I don’t whine to Jules about my hang-ups again. They’re always the same ones. *I’m not ready for Jester. I don’t want to be touched. He’ll expect me to be his old lady, not a club sister. I really don’t want to be fucked. I’ll get swallowed up by his big personality.*

Rather than obsess over my fears, I follow Jules inside the Stockade, where we find Luca and Hope sitting on the couch. Neither one is watching the TV playing “Storage Wars.” Hope stares at the wall. Luca studies her hands.

“I’ll stay with Hope while you join Sister Sass at HQ,” Jules explains to a blank-faced Luca.

“Another interrogation?”

Trying to sound friendly, I force a smile. “No, it’s the fun thing I mentioned yesterday.”

Luca stands, leaving Jules to sit in her spot and change the channel. I gesture for the icy blonde to follow me.

Once I’ve closed the door, I take in the sight of the killer. Taller than me, Luca gets prettier every damn day. Her jaw is no longer swollen. Her fatigue has faded. She’s more alert. Her barely restrained aggression seeps out from behind her modelesque appearance.

“You were an athlete,” I say just to break the tension.

“You know I was.”

“And you did modeling?”

Seeming ready to hit me, Luca mutters, “Again, you know all this.”

Before I challenge this bitch to a fight, I think about her locked in the small house all day with the empty Hope. If it was me, I’d go nuts. I’m not good at the warm, cuddly stuff.

Rather than taking Luca's hostility personally, I pretend she's on edge from her current situation.

"My mom was a beautiful woman," I say, and Luca's frown turns confused. "She looked like one of those pinup models."

"Okay," she mumbles, waiting for my point.

"I didn't inherit that from her."

"No, I guess you didn't. Probably best, anyway."

"How do you figure?"

"Your mom's dead, right?" she asks, and I nod. "Did people like her?"

"Everyone at the Sanctuary loved her."

"And you'd be an echo of a woman who made her mark before you got a chance to make yours. By not looking like her, no one expects you to be her."

Shrugging, I mumble, "I wouldn't mind her good looks."

Luca looks me over. "A soft woman's face doesn't handle punches like a harder woman's face does. You're one of the bikers, right?"

Knowing she knows the answer, I grunt, "Yes."

"Yet, you're pining over a pretty face that'd be fucked up by forty? Not a great plan, Sass."

"My name is Sister Sass."

"You're not my sister."

"It's my road name, dumbass."

Luca steps closer, using her extra inches to shadow me. "Did you pick that name?"

I hesitate before replying, "No, someone else did."

Whatever Luca sees on my face, she backs off and looks over my head in the direction of HQ. "Will Ghost be around for this thing we're doing tonight?"

“Doubtful. It’s just the chick bikers,” I say and gesture for her to follow me. “So, do you really like Ghost or is it a game to pass the time?”

“He’s extremely hot, and I convinced him to obey me at the clinic. Sexy and submissive are winning qualities in a man.”

Stopping in my tracks, I unleash my snarliest frown. “You shouldn’t tease him. Ghost’s a good guy.”

“Is he, though? I get the sense he’s an asshole.”

“No, no, he totally is,” I reply and then add, “An asshole, I mean. He’s got a bad attitude and doesn’t work well with others. On occasion, he has zero sense of humor. Like none. One time, I nailed a guy in the nuts with a football and Ghost didn’t even crack a smile. It was ridiculous.”

“So, he’s not really a good guy, then?”

“While he wields zero charm, Ghost is loyal. Oh, and I heard he can make a mean coconut chicken. However, that last information came from Apex who will eat fucking garbage with a smile on his face. I wouldn’t put much stock into his taste buds.”

“If you had a point, you’ve lost it.”

Stepping closer, I grumble, “I don’t want you to hurt Ghost.”

“Why would you assume I would?”

“You’re mean.”

“You’re a natural matchmaker, Sister Sass. So far, you’ve made me disinterested in dating Ghost and myself.”

Luca starts to walk past me. My temper clouds my common sense. I throw out my leg and nearly take her down. She goes still, seeming to nearly disappear as if her rage is a cloaking device.

“Your story is sad,” I tell her, refusing to back down to her quiet threat. “So is mine. But we’re both living our best lives compared to Ghost. Don’t fuck with his mind or I’ll end you.”

If I can't do it alone, I've got a few chicks who'll hold you down while I do the job."

Luca blinks a few times before scanning the twilight-lit Sanctuary.

"Where is he?"

"At his townhouse, recharging after the raid and dealing with you."

Luca studies me. There's something about her that makes me feel small inside. She's like one of those rich, blonde types who used to giggle at me when I'd go to the mall. The cliquy types with their perfect hair and surplus confidence.

"I'll visit him after I'm done doing this thing with you."

"No."

A sleek yet nasty smile slides across her face as she inches closer. "A part of you knows you couldn't stop me if I wanted to go to him right now. That part of you also realizes you've lost the script given to you by someone with more power. So, you best think hard about what you say next before your ass ends up on the ground."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're taking me to meet someone, right? Your fellow women bikers. I suspect that older blonde one pulls your strings. And she wouldn't want me to hurt you and run off searching for Ghost, now, would she? So, you need to get your ass under control and stick to whatever plan you bitches came up with."

I want so badly to throw a punch right now, but Luca isn't wrong. Ominous would give me holy hell if I fucked up the simple task of walking Luca to HQ for drinks with the club sisters.

"Fine, but I wasn't kidding about ending you if you hurt Ghost."

"What makes you think he won't hurt me?"

“Oh, he might,” I say and start walking. “I just won’t care.”

With that, I speed up my approach to HQ. If I’m not surrounded by my people soon, I might say something that sends Luca packing. I’m not sure if that would be good or bad news for Ghost.

However, I’m fucking positive Ominous will kick my ass raw if I ruin her shot at a new recruit.

LUCA



I don't know what the hell is happening anymore. When I arrived, there was talk of guided tours and meet-and-greets. Then, I found myself locked in that little house with a silent Hope. We were brought food rather than taken to the bikers' dining hall.

Heading to HQ, I feel like I'm walking into an ambush. I don't trust anyone, and I'm ready to run.

No, I guess I still trust Ghost, but he disappeared on me. For an entire fucking week, he shadowed my room. If I tried to leave, he'd nearly tackle me to keep me from bailing on his beloved Metamora. We had a low-key dating thing happening. I think back to our last "flirting" session. Did I hurt his feelings?

Ghost's absence leaves me grumpy as I enter HQ to find five women around a pool table. I recognize two from the raid, and the others from yesterday's interrogation.

In another life, I can imagine Ominous—with her long, straight blonde hair, fair blue eyes, and soft beauty—being a fat cat's aging trophy wife. Her effortless beauty can't hide the ruthless operator inside.

Ominous introduces me to a younger version of herself.

"This is my daughter, Dire. She'll be patched in soon."

Dire rolls her blue eyes. "I've heard that for a while now."

The other women laugh at her irritation. The first one to gladhand me is Aqua—her dark hair tied into double French braids, green eyes lined with thick black, lips painted red, inked skin revealed by a midriff-exposing tank top. She settles next to a grumpy Sister Sass whose mood quickly improves.

"We wanted to invite you over last night," Aqua explains. "But this place was crawling with old ladies talking shit about

whores and biker chicks. We didn't think you'd feel at home."

The two remaining women in their little group helped raid the Dirty Princes' compound. The similar-looking sisters give me synced head nods. Riot's blonde hair hangs in her face as she lines up a pool shot. Rave's dark hair is sloppily pinned up to reveal her heavily shadowed eyes.

These women seem more comfortable in their skin than Sister Sass. Maybe that's why their calm soothes my unease. I bet if I asked about Ghost, they wouldn't give me a damn speech involving coconut chicken.

"How's the broken chick you're shackled up with?" Ominous asks after pouring me a whiskey-filled shot glass.

I enjoy the burn of liquor down my throat before answering, "Talking to her is like talking to a wall, but someone needs to bring her out of her head."

"The therapist is visiting Hope again tomorrow," Sister Sass explains, and the other women nod.

Ominous doesn't react to the Hope information. I suspect the topic was only a conversational icebreaker rather than something she wants to explore.

"Overlord made good points yesterday," she says and downs a whiskey shot. "Even if you didn't want to hear them."

"Good points about what?"

"About how this is a solid place for someone who doesn't want to pretend for the normies in the world."

"I spend a lot of time hunting people."

"Well, we have plenty of targets, if that's what you're looking for." Ominous glances around before gesturing for me to follow her to a booth. Once I settle into the seat across from her, she continues, "I used to think Papa Bear was wrong to use the club as a shield rather than a sword. We have the manpower to make assholes bleed."

Rave and Riot slide into the booth behind Ominous. They turn around so they're facing me like two attack dogs behind their master.

“But I was wrong,” Ominous explains. “We have fragile people at the Sanctuary.”

Even with them putting me on the spot, my thoughts remain stuck on Ghost. Is he going to just ignore me now? Do I have any reason to stay at the Sanctuary if my crush blows me off? Hope never showed any reaction to me during the day we were trapped in the house together.

“I’m willing to kill your enemies, but I don’t think I can settle down.”

As Dire rests a beer in front of her mom and slides into the booth next to her, Ominous holds my gaze. “You’re young enough to still fuck up a lot of people, but you need to get recentered and find a purpose.”

“I have a purpose.”

“Why are you still here, then?”

“I want to fuck Ghost.”

Ominous grins. “It’s more than that.”

“I’m not nearly as deep as you’re hoping.”

“You want to help Hope. Be her hero. I think you miss being part of a team.”

Exhaling deeply, I reply, “No, that part of my life is over.”

“That was the normal world. This is the Sanctuary. No one expects you to be nice here. I don’t fake shit for anyone, and I’ve lived here for most of my life. It’s a good place with good people. You could be you here.”

Her words sound tempting. Some of the best times of my life were with my volleyball team. Deep down, I’ve always wanted to belong. That’s why I didn’t focus on a solo sport like tennis, but one where I’d be forced to work with others.

As Sister Sass and Aqua pull up chairs and lean in closer, I study the six women. They’re impressed by me but not intimidated. Riot and Rave spilled blood at the compound. When I killed a woman working for the Dirty Princes, the

sisters didn't bat an eye. If I wanted to hang out with women, these are the kind I'd pick.

Yet, I'm afraid to agree to anything until I know what Ghost wants. If he plans to blow chilly in my direction, I have no problem bailing on this place.

Ominous lets me consider the situation before explaining, "We have people coming through here all the time. Every single one of them has a monster in need of killing. You'd have your pick of targets."

"Like with Hope's dad?" I ask, narrowing my eyes. "When do I get that info?"

"Overlord doesn't trust you," Ominous says, sitting forward and lowering her voice. "You're a weapon. He respects that. While he wants access to your power, my President doesn't believe you can be controlled."

"He's right. I have zero reason to give up my autonomy to him or anyone else," I reply, refusing to let my feelings for Ghost or Hope wrap a leash around my throat. *I'm no one's fucking pet!*

Ominous grins. "If you stayed and joined our crew, got patched in, became one of us, he'd let you run wild. Like he does with me."

"But not her," I say and focus my gaze on an overly quiet Sister Sass. "She stays on her leash."

"I'm his sister," Sister Sass mumbles like a kid called out in class. "It's different."

When I don't react, Ominous explains, "Years ago, Sister Sass and Dire were gang raped and nearly died. In his mind, they're still healing, so they need leashes to keep them safe. That's not you. Or me. Hell, he sent Rave and Riot on the raid. So, don't let Overlord's hang-ups with these two get your panties twisted up."

Despite all their promises, I'm not sold. Mostly, I can't wrap my head around this place. There's no way to picture where anything is in relation to the Stockade or HQ. Do these women live here on the compound? How far away is Ghost

right now? I recall him talking about a townie bar the club runs. Is he there now? How far away is it?

And I'm not sure I get who is really running the show here. Overlord is the President, but Papa Bear still seems to wield a lot of power. Ominous makes it seem like she does whatever she wants. If I decided to stay here, I have no doubt I'd end up on someone's leash but whose?

Tension rising, I mutter, "I don't want to be part of a biker gang."

"Why the hell not?" Ominous asks, smiling as she sits back. "It's fun. We're a cool bunch of bitches. The Sanctuary has its own gym and gun range to keep your skills sharp. Just imagine if you'd been on our team when the club hit the Dirty Princes."

Feeling pressured, I want to shut down the conversation and create space. As a kid, I learned to run away when I felt danger. If a creepy neighbor got too friendly, I'd just take off running. If my mom's latest boyfriend started hollering, I'd bolt for the door. I never faced danger or even hid. I just ran until I couldn't go any further. Sometimes, Drew would take off with me. Other times, she couldn't peel herself away from the drama.

The only time I chose not to run was the weekend in my house with Drew's ex and his buddies. I went against my nature. Had I taken off running at the first sign of trouble, my sister and niece might still be alive.

But no one's life is on the line tonight. I'm just tired and cornered. These women might be friendly, but they're a team, and I'm playing solo. I don't feel any safer with them than I did yesterday at the interrogation.

"If you want me to be part of your group, you can't leave me stuck in that fucking house," I mutter and crack my knuckles. "I want to know what this place is like."

"We figured Ghost would show you around."

"You figured wrong. And if I were you, I wouldn't rely on a finicky bitch like him to keep me here. Win me over with

your warm personalities and promises of violence.”

Ominous gives me a smirk, maybe relieved Ghost’s interest—or lack of interest—isn’t a deal breaker.

Except I’m full of shit. If he blows me off, I’ll most likely bail on Hope and these big-talking bikers.

But I’m not ready to give up on him yet. I want to feel his hands on my body. I can almost taste him despite our lips never meeting. No man’s ever made me swoon like I do when I share a room with that asshole.

Rather than admit my crush on Ghost, I stick to what I’m good at and insist, “I want to kill Hope’s father.”

“Be open to what we’ve got going here,” Ominous replies immediately. “The Sanctuary will offer you a chance to be with people who get you. The club would also give you info on targets. Then, after you’re done killing, you can relax behind our walls and catch your breath. Plus, you get Ghost.”

“What happens when I don’t want him anymore?”

Ominous eyes me like I’m not fooling her with my disinterest. “Look, I’ve known him for a long time. Ghost can barely tolerate chicks long enough to fuck them. His brain is wired wrong. So, when he got silly over you, people just assumed it was magic. But we don’t care if you love or hate him. We’re just looking to add to our mini-club.”

“Would I answer to you or Overlord?” I ask before adding, “Or is Papa Bear the one really calling the shots?”

“A little of all three. Overlord is in charge, and he’ll let you run wild if you don’t cross certain lines. I’ll run interference if there are issues. And, yeah, Papa Bear has a lot of influence, as he should. I watched the motherfucker build this place. He used his connections with other foster kids to make us strong. Doctor Sal and Sheriff Graeme are our allies because of Papa Bear. I also knew them growing up, but I’m no peacemaker or planner. So, I value what Papa Bear brought to this shitty world,” she explains before muttering full of snarly angst, “And I think you should value it, too.”

I appreciate the loyalty these women show for their leaders. They have the team spirit, but I just don't think it's for me.

"I'll stay for now," I tell Ominous. "But I better get the info on Hope's father soon. I also want someone to do the chaperone thing so I can go see Ghost."

Ominous doesn't get all silly and mock my crush. These aren't those kinds of women. They possess the hard commitment to their lifestyle that my teammates did back in the day. We had to give up our social lives to stay in shape and remain competitive.

Most of my former teammates have settled down now. I occasionally check up on them online. They've gotten married, had kids, started businesses, and gone soft.

I never will, and I doubt these women will, either. I don't know if that means I can be part of their mini-club, but it does explain why Ominous sends Sister Sass and Aqua to chaperone me to Ghost's place.

On the walk from HQ to where the single guys live in a long line of townhomes, I can't imagine how Ghost will react to my showing up at his door.

"It's possible he won't open the door for us," Sister Sass warns, sounding almost hopeful I'll get shot down.

As I knock, I try to picture myself living at the Sanctuary. I could walk over and visit Ghost whenever the mood struck me. We'd require our own spaces, no doubt. Our relationship would need to remain casual. But I would also find comfort from him in a way no one else seems to offer.

Or he might refuse to open the door today and keep himself closed off from me.

GHOST



There isn't water hot enough to wash away the dirty sensation crawling over my body. I sit in the shower, crouched on the ground, long after the water's run cold. I cover my head and try to meditate like the shrink taught me to do when I'm suffering sensory overload.

The roar of the water forces me out of the shower. I crawl to the connected loft bedroom. Rather than find comfort on the mattress, I shove myself into the corner next to the bed. Tugging the comforter over my head, I block the mind-numbing lights and sounds.

Even hidden with my eyes closed, lights flash in my face. I can't silence all the noise in my head. I hear the voices of people I haven't seen in decades. They've imprinted themselves on my diseased brain to ensure I'll never find peace.

I don't know how long I remain stuck in the corner. The sun is gone when I finally throw back the blanket and hear the water still running. I assure myself the episode is over. I need to get out of the corner.

I shakily move to the bathroom, where I find a towel for my nearly dried hair. After the bathroom goes quiet and dark, I stumble to the bed and sit down to catch my breath.

My brain flashes memories—some good, some bad—until I grab hold of one of Luca from a few days ago. We were sitting in her room, full from our burgers. She put her feet up and popped the button on her jeans. I don't know why we thought that shit was so funny, but we laughed our asses off like two old friends.

I imagine I'm back in that room with Luca within reach. Even though my skin still burns, and my nerves feel like

someone's running a knife across them, I'm able to calm down.

At the clinic, Luca was mine for mealtimes. I haven't felt such comfort in knowing something belonged to me since I moved into this townhome. Having my own space brought me peace in a way nothing had before.

People at the Sanctuary respect my privacy. I can lock myself in here for weeks without anyone except Apex showing up. Overlord might text to see if I'm okay. Thorn will send me a stupid video to cheer me up. But they don't force their way inside.

That's why I ignore the knocking at the front door, assuming it's a clueless friend trying to fix what is beyond repair. Eventually, my silence will force them to leave me be.

When the knocking won't stop, the noise begins to set off another episode. I wrap the towel around my waist, stumble down the stairs, and yank open the door to tell the helpful friend to fuck off.

I find Luca flanked by Sister Sass and Aqua. I think the latter says something. I can't hear anything except my heart beating in my ears. I only see Luca, looking more beautiful than I remember.

"Can we come inside?" Aqua asks in a calm tone meant to disarm my temper.

Reaching out to snag Luca's arm, I snarl, "No."

The blonde bitch doesn't fight me when I yank her inside and slam the door on the other two women.

"You're real," I mutter, glaring at her pinned to the wall by my hand flat across her chest. "What do you want?"

"I missed you."

"Bullshit."

"You know it's not," Luca says and smiles.

At the clinic, her smiles always held a hint of malice or mockery. She viewed my interest in her as a joke. I was a fool

she was teasing. Even knowing that, I couldn't stay away.

Right now, her smile is soft and unguarded. Her bright eyes hide nothing. The rage I normally feel in her is twisted up with fear and desire.

"I don't want to talk," she whispers and slides her fingers across my jaw.

My mind goes silent as her touch sends a wave of calm through me. I sink into her gaze. No woman's been more beautiful. I can't look away when she focuses on me.

I've been addicted from the start. That's why I nosedived so quickly over the last day. Avoiding Luca was supposed to soothe the fears inside me. I don't want to need her. People aren't trustworthy, but Luca is downright treacherous. She flat-out told me one night during burgers how she didn't care about people anymore.

"I want to save them, not be their friend," she explained as if warning me to stay away.

Except now she's standing in my safe space and watching me like she might be addicted, too.

Her hands settle on mine holding her still. My free hand disappears into her soft hair. Even exhaling with relief, I hesitate, unable to kiss her lips only inches from mine.

Luca isn't like the slutty chicks who show up at The Lockup to ride biker dick. She sees me, not the patch I wear.

"I want you to take what you want," she says, when I hold her still and refuse to kiss her.

Considering how she might be tricking me, I demand, "How do I know what you want to give?"

Luca watches me with soft, weary eyes before reaching down and tugging my towel free.

"It's just us in here," she whispers as her gaze holds mine. "No one's around to impress. I already know what you are. Why are you making me talk when that's not what I want?"

I don't know if her words are welcoming or hostile. They sound like an attack. Yet, they're spoken in a tender voice that sinks through my overheated skin and digs at my core.

Leaning closer, I brush my lips across hers. I'm afraid to get overstimulated and flip out with Luca. I don't normally fuck women when I feel so out of control. I hide away from the world until I can pretend to be normal again.

I could tell Luca to leave right now. I probably should, but I don't. I need her to stay with me, even if it ruins everything.

"I wanted to see you," I admit before brushing my lips across her forehead. "But I don't like how people know I want you."

"It'd be better for us both if we didn't feel this way," she says as her hands cup my face. "But it's too late."

Luca's hesitancy breaks through my fear. She understands what I am. She suffers from zero lofty expectations. I can't fail her because she expects nothing from a man like me.

And I know she isn't a tender-hearted woman with a hard shell. She's been hollowed out like me. The only good in us are echoes from long ago.

Kissing Luca, I cup the back of her head and guide her closer. Her soft lips suck at mine as her hands slide across my chest and around my waist.

There's something surprisingly passive about Luca's demeanor. She doesn't grab my ass or reach for my dick. Is she reading my tension and backing down? Or is she decompressing now that she's safe at the Sanctuary? *Is this the real her?*

I break the kiss and stare into her eyes, searching for the woman from the Dirty Princes' compound. At first, Luca just watches me passively. When I look at her for too long, a fire ignites inside her. Irritation replaces passivity.

"What?" Luca mutters.

"You were acting weird."

“You look like a cat that’s been run over and left to die alone on the side of a dark road. I’m showing you pity as you take your final breaths.”

“Funny.”

“Yeah, because there’s nothing more hilarious than a dying cat.”

I step back from her and frown. “Why are you here?”

“Sister Sass and the other one begged me to show you pity, and I’m trying to get in good with them.”

“Aqua,” I mutter, knowing she’s fucking with me. “The other one’s name is Aqua.”

Luca doesn’t respond. Her gaze studies me, losing its fire. Finally, she says in a pained voice, “I expected you to show up at the Stockade and take me around this place. When you didn’t, I figured I misread what happened between us at the clinic.”

“I’m fucked up, Luca,” I mutter, wanting to kick her out of my place. “I can’t just play your romantic fucking hero. I have too much garbage rotting away in my head.”

Luca exhales softly and nods. I expect her to head for the door. I already imagine myself needing to block her escape. With my dick swinging in the wind, I’ll be at a clear disadvantage in a brawl.

“I can’t help Hope,” Luca says as tears fill her eyes. “I don’t know how to be soft with her. I don’t like touching her or talking to her. I hate being trapped in that house with an empty shell. I feel guilty as if I’d be able to help her if I was a warmer person. But I also feel like maybe there isn’t anyone left inside her. Like she’s a zombie, still moving around, but completely devoid of humanity.”

“What do you expect me to do about that?”

“Tell me that I’m not a monster for wanting to leave her.”

Frowning, I reply, “You absolutely *are* a monster for wanting that. And for teasing me and then walking away. Maybe you’re the one who’s lost their humanity.”

Luca angrily wipes her eyes and smiles. “Standing here naked, tempting me, but not giving in. Yet, you see me as the fucking tease?”

Stepping away, I shake out my shoulders and try to figure out the situation. My head isn't in the right place to deal with questions or temptations. My dick is only mildly involved in the conversation. Even if my cock cooperated, I don't want my first time inside Luca to be when I'm out of my fucking mind.

“I want you to be with me,” I admit and then back away. “But I don't know if I can tolerate you being with me.”

“Because you're fucked up?” Luca asks tenderly, seeming more curious than judgmental.

“I was born addicted to a bunch of junk,” I spit out, wanting her to understand yet hating her for knowing the truth. “I'm lucky I can think straight at all with the amount of crap my mom snorted, drank, injected, and smoked when she was pregnant. I'm wired wrong. That's why I want to touch you, but I don't want you to touch me.”

Luca's gaze softens, making her seem younger. She leans against the wall and watches me.

“When I was a kid, my mom made me nervous all the time,” she explains. “I was always on guard. Drew would play like a normal kid, but I felt like we were in danger every minute of the day. Then, we lived with my strict aunt, and I worried all the time that she'd send us away.”

“I'm sorry,” I mumble, unsure if we're playing therapy right now.

“I'm not looking for pity. I'm explaining why I don't let people close. Even as I got older, I never really warmed up to anyone. I just said the right things, so I could get along with my friends, teammates, family, whatever. I didn't let those relationships touch me.”

Luca walks past me and drops onto my couch. I get the urge to tell her to get out. I don't like people touching my shit. Like a wary junkyard dog possessive of his garbage, I want to growl and scare off this threat. Instead, I just watch her.

“I tried to help Drew,” Luca says and kicks off her shoes. “We weren’t close after moving to my aunt’s house. She got away with murder because of her sweet personality, but I had to work hard to be good and unoffensive. But when Drew showed up at my doorstep, with bruises on her face and a baby in her arms, I thought I would save her like I could never save our mom.”

Luca leans her head back and closes her eyes. “I thought all the experiences I had with my team had turned me into an easygoing person with a big heart. Drew and I could become close. I had myself totally fooled about the person I was inside.”

“It’s not your fault they died.”

“Oh, God, I know that,” she says, watching me through half-open eyes. “I thought my heart would tear open after I ran and survived. Except it didn’t.”

Luca sits up as if worried about seeming too vulnerable. “I don’t think I have a heart,” she says in barely a whisper. “I locked it away to keep it safe when I was young. I always planned to bring it out of its prison when life was safe. But I never did, and it died of neglect. Because I was more shocked about Drew and the baby dying than genuinely sad. Rather than grieve, I focused on getting them justice. When that didn’t work, I got revenge. Then, I threw everything away and hunted monsters.”

As her face pinches, Luca explains, “Because I wanted to feel something. I kept hoping if I saved the right person or killed the perfect monster, the experience would be powerful to revive my heart. But it’s been seven years, and I’m still cold inside.”

Luca wipes her wet cheeks and mumbles, “Hope felt like my big chance. The last week in the clinic, I thought she would be the one to make me feel. Or you would. But then, you ignored me, and Hope doesn’t show any recognition.”

“We’re not toys to make your life easier,” I grumble, despite wishing I had visited the Stockade over the last day. However, I refuse to reveal my regret to Luca. Weakness is the

worst emotion to show another predator, even one currently baring her soul.

I learned that lesson the hard way with my mom. Whenever she was low, she would whine to me. I'd fall for her tears and broken heart. Yet, no matter how much love I offered, she'd still sell me out whenever convenient.

That's why I don't offer Luca any mercy now. Her words could be a trick. They're working, of course. I *want* to console her. Be her hero. Inspire her to feel something. Dopey-love shit floods my senses.

But I need to protect myself more than I need to console her.

"We're both fucked up," Luca says, ignoring my nasty tone. "Even if you put on your happiest face, I wouldn't be fooled. I think you understand how I tick. So, why can't we be fucked up together for tonight?"

"You're just horny."

Luca doesn't take my bait. She never even glances at my dick or reacts to my nudity. Her gaze always focuses on my face. Those electric blue eyes are filled with fatigue and maybe depression. She's feeling low, and the urge to comfort her fills me with dread.

"I don't want to fuck," I grumble as I join her on the couch. "Despite any erections you see throughout the night, I can't have you touching me right now."

Luca exhales deeply as her gaze warms. She seems happier now. I almost smile in response to her pleased expression.

I like knowing she wants me. Luca doesn't attach herself to people. That's why she thinks she's got no heart. Maybe I should worry she's lying. People can be sneaky, especially beautiful women with tears in their eyes.

I believe Luca, though. She gains nothing by lying. I'm not a prize worth faking all this emotion to win. I'm probably a fucking fool, but I trust Luca.

And for whatever reason, she seems to trust me. A woman with her past ought to be nervous around a naked, angry biker. Instead, she's more hurt by my absence over the last day than worried I'll hurt her tonight.

That's why she rests her head on the back of the couch and watches me with a relaxed gaze.

"What do you do when you're alone in here?" she asks in a tender voice.

"Watch garbage TV like 'Storage Wars' or 'Salvage Kings.'"

For whatever reason, this makes Luca quietly chuckle. "We can do that. Or just sit here."

"I don't want to talk."

"I think we've said enough. Our shitty mothers don't need more attention. I'd rather forget about everything outside this place."

Studying her, I like how we're in sync. "You want to let your guard down."

"I can't do that in that house with the cameras and Hope nearby."

"No one bothers me," I say and rest my feet on the coffee table as I reach for the remote. "Well, except for Apex, but he's gaga over Giselle and barely visits anymore."

We fall silent as an episode of "Salvage Kings" starts playing in the dark living room. Luca doesn't really pay attention to the show. She's in her head but relaxed.

I feel the same way. Luca might be a stranger, but I'm starting to understand how she operates. She isn't really dead inside. People hurt her. She protects herself. We're not so different.

As we lower our guards and create a calm silence between us, I let myself wonder what we might share if she sticks around in Metamora.

DUCHESS



Jules Gwynne/Overlord's Old Lady

I'm battered with emotions as I step inside the Stockade to watch over Hope. Not long ago, I was the one staying here. I recall my first night in this place after Cypher handed me over to the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. Anthony and Scout were still reeling from the chaotic power shift at the other compound. They'd lost their home and belongings. The Sanctuary felt like a punishment.

Overlord's love saved us from lingering at the Stockade. For years, I'd dreamed of him, wishing he could be mine. After I showed up here with my son and a sister I raised as my own child, I learned Overlord wanted me, too. Soon, we became a family of six in his large, beautiful home.

My time at the Stockade feels both like a lifetime ago and still painfully raw. I'm still trying to find my footing at the Sanctuary, which is why I volunteered to watch Hope tonight.

Settling next to her on the couch, I wonder if she can ever break free of the pain she endured. Overlord hasn't told me the details. I don't need to know the specific abuse she suffered to understand she requires a soft touch now.

Hope's currently dressed in a pale green tank top and baggy gray sweats. Faded bruises cover her exposed skin.

I notice her scratching at the couch. She was doing that when she first arrived at the Stockade. I find myself wondering if she's trying to communicate, yet I can't find any method behind her movement.

Taking the remote, I click slowly through the channels while watching Hope's blank face for any sign of preference.

"Would you like to watch this?" I ask, remembering what the therapist told the old ladies and me when we volunteered

to supervise Hope. We're supposed to speak to her as much as possible, just so she hears a friendly voice.

As I keep flipping, I think I spot a change in her blank expression as I pause on a cooking show.

"I'm a decent cook, but I'm trying to learn new recipes for my kids."

Hope doesn't react to anything I say or the action on the TV. Yet, I keep pretending we're having a conversation. I show her pictures of my kids. I tell her about the people living at the Sanctuary.

Maybe it's my imagination, but I think her body language shifts over time. As if she's more alert. Her hazel eyes seem sharper as if she's watching the show rather than staring at it.

Encouraged, I start commenting on the cooking show contestants' hair, clothes, or voices. I swear she almost smiles at one point. I'm afraid to stare, though, so I can't be sure.

After an hour, the Stockade's door opens to reveal Overlord. Excited over Hope's possible reactions, I rush to his side to brag. Though he clearly sees no difference, he still smiles and kisses me tenderly as if I've created magic.

"I'm here to hang out with you while you hang out with Hope."

I study Hope, searching for signs she fears him. Despite Overlord's good looks and subdued voice, he probably doesn't seem too different from the men who hurt her. I know what it's like to get the past and present scrambled. Sometimes, I'll find myself becoming edgy when we're at HQ and a group of bikers arrives for a meal. My brain flashes back to how unsafe I was at the Horned Angels' compound. It's not easy to let go of such fears.

As Overlord says hello to Hope, she only stares at the TV and scratches at the arm of the couch with her index finger.

"We're watching cooking shows," I say as we settle in a nearby chair with me on his lap like a lovesick fool.

Overlord watches me like my obsession is mutual. “I never learned to cook anything that didn’t involve a microwave.”

“You should take a cooking class with me,” I tell him in between peeking at Hope. “We could learn dishes to cook together. It’ll be good for Anthony to understand how big, tough bikers can also slave away in the kitchen.”

Overlord gets a weird look on his face. “That’s true. When I was a kid, Papa Bear would have us cook dinner one night a week to pamper Betty Boop. So, I guess, at one point, I did know how to cook. I should also have Anthony and his little buddies help me with the laundry occasionally. Can’t have them thinking that’s only Mom’s job.”

My thoughts turn to Betty Boop. Though Lady Bug has been kind to me since I arrived, I can’t help missing Papa Bear’s first wife. I used to wish my mom was like her. They’d both been wild young women. But Queen Bee lost something after I was born. She’d moved into my father’s house, where Kraken and his old lady, Mother Goose, berated her all the time. They killed her slowly over the years until she was a nothing more than a husk by the time a difficult delivery took her life.

“Don’t cry,” Overlord whispers when I tear up.

“I miss my mom,” I explain as I struggle to calm myself. “I wish she was around to see my life now.”

Overlord wipes my tears and kisses my wet cheeks. For most of my life, I’ve felt alone. No one cared about my heart or sanity. I’d have embraced the darkness long ago if it wasn’t my duty to protect Scout and Anthony. I loved them too much to leave them defenseless.

Now, I have Overlord to wrap me up in his strong arms and help carry my pain. The darkness no longer tempts me, and I don’t hate the world anymore.

My gaze is drawn away from Overlord’s handsome, worried face by the quiet sniffing coming from Hope. The corners of her mouth are downturned, and a tear slides down her cheek.

I move slowly toward her, wishing I could hug the young woman. She's barely an adult. Her birthday was spent in that terrible place. Her father sold her, and her mother's dead. Is she missing her mom like I am?

"It's okay, Hope," I whisper as I sit close to her. "We can help carry your pain. You aren't alone anymore."

Hope doesn't react to my words. Her gaze remains locked on the TV. No more tears fall from her eyes. She sniffles a little more before going silent.

However, her frozen expression is different now. Less stunned and more dejected. I gingerly take her hand and tell her how proud I am of her for surviving.

Even though Hope doesn't react, I know she's alive and hiding inside this shell. I hold her hand and look at Overlord. He gives me a soft smile.

For years, I lived at the Horned Angels' compound, passed around and abused. I exhaled dread from when I woke up to when I mercifully slept. I pulled so deep into myself that only Scout and Anthony mattered. I could barely care about the safety of the rest of my family. They sure didn't seem to worry about me.

Now, I'm a part of the Sanctuary, where everyone is a big family. We certainly get on each other's nerves from time to time, but we're always willing to lift each other up.

Hope might be new to this place, but I believe with the Sanctuary's help, she'll break free of her shell like I did.

LUCA



Seeing my mom self-destruct over her love life skewed my view on relationships. Drew also chased every mildly interested man.

Meanwhile, I focused on school and sports. I dated a few times in high school until one jock from my social circle got too handsy and I nearly ripped off his dick before taking off running.

College guys were worse. By the time I was traveling with my team and then for modeling and sponsorships, I'd given up on even pretending I wanted a man.

It was never that I didn't find men attractive. I'm drawn to beauty like anyone else. But over the years, I got colder, less interested in people, and more oblivious to male beauty.

However, tonight, I'm very aware of Ghost's attributes. His lean, rock-hard body is laid bare for my inspection. I'd love to stand back and admire his tanned, inked skin, muscular frame, or impressive dick.

However, Ghost doesn't want me to fawn over his body. He refuses to let me touch him.

Exhausted and vulnerable, the biker dares me to ruin what we share. All I have to do is laugh at him. Or maybe reach out and take his dick in my hand. Just push him in an unsavory way, so he can free himself from his desire for me.

Admittedly, I consider cooperating and ruining everything. People like us don't get their happy ending. *Who are we fooling with this lovesick bullshit?*

We sit on the couch in his airy townhome with the high ceiling and loft bedroom. The small kitchen is tidy. Everything in this place feels relaxed yet orderly. I sense Ghost knows where all his things are and why they're located in those

places. My house also felt casually organized. The chaos of my early childhood left me craving stability.

Ghost is similar, but he's also self-destructive. That's why he taunts me by refusing to get dressed.

Despite knowing I'm setting myself up for trouble, I simply enjoy the quiet with Ghost. I feel him thinking about me, but we don't really speak.

If I ruined things, neither of us would be happy. That's the real reason he stayed away. He wants the dream to last longer. So do I. It's why I watch boring TV in the dark townhome. I need to believe in us a little longer.

Ghost's a beautiful man. I occasionally stop watching the show and just stare at him. If his childhood had been filled with happiness rather than pain, life would have been easy for him. He's gorgeous and smarter than his bad-tempered exterior implies. I can see him accomplishing just about anything if his mother's abuse hadn't cornered him into a life of crime. At least, he's found people who care about him.

Relaxing on the couch, I finally let myself see the Sanctuary as a place where fucked-up people get a second chance. They've watched over Ghost for a dozen years. I bet he was a real mess back in the day. Most people would have rejected him or taken advantage. Instead, he found a home and family here.

My thoughts turn to Hope back in the little locked house. I imagine her in a dozen years. Will this place still be her home? Can she ever feel safe? Over the last day, I've assumed the worst about her fate.

Tonight, with Ghost next to me, I see Hope differently. I imagine her talking and laughing. She'll make friends, get a job, take up a hobby, adopt a pet, and fall in love. Within these walls, she can be another success story like Giselle and Eliza. Or even the edgy hunk at my side.

"I planned to ask to stay over here tonight," I say as the show ends. Ghost instantly narrows his eyes as if I'm up to

something. “I figured your couch was as good as the one in that house.”

“It’s called the Stockade.”

“Well, during the third episode of ‘Salvage Kings,’ I started thinking that maybe Hope isn’t a zombie. She might really be hiding inside her head, yet paying attention to everything. And she could have gotten used to having me around when she wakes up. So, if I’m not around in the morning, she might be scared.”

“Seems unlikely.”

“I agree, but what if she does need me there to feel secure?”

Ghost’s face has a relaxed crankiness to it, even when he’s just staring at the wall. His eyes might shift from angry and sad to amused and horny. But that expression remains planted on his face at all times.

Right now, Ghost seems pissed as usual, but his gaze reveals a man considering the bigger picture.

“If you care about her, you should go,” he finally says. “If you care about yourself, you should go. If you care about me, you should go.”

“Is my presence really such a burden on you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I want to touch you,” Ghost mutters, trying to sound angry yet unable to hide his longing and sadness. “You smell really good, and you tasted better. But I feel wrong right now. If I touch you, that’ll feel wrong. Then, I don’t know if I can make it feel right ever again.”

“Maybe if you touch me, but I don’t touch you, it’ll be enough to feel right.”

“No,” he says, turning slightly toward me and getting that relaxed vibe we shared at the clinic. “See, years ago, I was sick. Wrong, I guess. Like now. Maybe worse. I can’t compare

shit. But Apex brought over a bunch of tacos and said I needed to eat. I told him I didn't eat when I felt like this. He insisted I was getting weak and food would help. His plan sounded logical. And the tacos did help, temporarily. But now when I see them, I feel grossed out. They got ruined by eating them when I felt wrong."

"Soft and hard tacos?"

"What?"

"Do you have an aversion to both soft and hard tacos?"

"No, just hard ones because that's what I ate when I felt wrong."

"Well, I don't want to suffer the same fate as tacos."

Ghost narrows his eyes until they're slits. "Are you fucking with me?"

"No. I just sound that way because I usually *am* fucking with people. I don't know how to talk any differently now."

Sizing me up, Ghost asks, "When you paid that gas station clerk for info on the Dirty Princes, did you sound bitchy?"

"Sure."

"But you sounded nice during the interrogation."

"Nice?"

"Subdued. Submissive. Weak. Like a loser, I guess. At least in the beginning, until you turned bitchy. But before that, you were acting lame."

Grinning, I nudge him. "Now, you're fucking with me."

"Yeah, but I don't like when you fake shit," Ghost says, eyeing me as he roughly scratches at his arm.

"That's how I act when I'm not working. If I travel somewhere to decompress, I don't snarl at the waitstaff. I can be polite."

Ghost nods, seeming calmer. "Why kiss Overlord's ass?"

"He has the power to make me leave before I'm ready to go. He can also give me info on Hope's father, and I want to

kill that guy.”

“What happens after you kill him?”

“He’ll be dead, and I’ll need something new to focus on.”

“Can’t you just focus on helping her or waiting around until I’m ready for you?”

“Those are options, yes.”

Ghost allows a little smile on his otherwise cranky face. “I was away from my place for too long. It made me feel wrong.”

“Do you mean the Sanctuary or this townhouse?”

“Both, I guess. Mostly, the second one. I like my space.”

My gaze takes in the sight of the loft bedroom taunting me from upstairs. “Does it bother you to have me here?”

“Yes. But I also wanted to see you.”

“Will you chaperone me tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Probably. I feel better, just not normal.”

“I think if you were to spend time with me, and I could get out of the Stockade some, I wouldn’t be so ready to flee this place.”

“What about Aqua and Sister Sass? You’ve met Ominous, right? Why can’t you hang out with them? They’re bitchy like you.”

“Yes, they are, but I feel like they want to absorb me into their group, and I haven’t played well with others since I was in volleyball.”

“Why can’t you try?” he asks like I’m being unreasonable. “This place welcomed someone as fucked up as me. Why can’t you find good shit here?”

Ghost already views me as having one foot out of the Sanctuary and his life. He goes rigid next to me, seeming hostile.

“I want to ride your dick a few times before I go,” I whisper. “It’s been a long time since I found a man really attractive. I’m willing to wait.”

“I’m not good in bed.”

“Neither am I.”

Ghost surprises me by chuckling. “I think at least one of us should be decent.”

“It’s unnecessary. Fucking isn’t that complicated.”

“I’ve heard of people getting injured from doing it wrong.”

“Well, your hotness is enough for me to give it a try. Let me have this dream, even if knocking boots puts us both in the hospital.”

Ghost grins at me. “I ought to refuse to fuck you. That way, you’d stay.”

“But isn’t fucking me the reason you want me to stay?”

“Not really, no.”

Ghost’s face goes downright hostile when he hears the vulnerability in his voice. He’s revealing too much. I know how he feels. I’ve been tearing off my armor since I got yanked through the townhome’s front door.

We’re both playing with fire, but I don’t know how to stop. Leaving Ghost at this point is impossible. I need to ride this thing out until the end.

“Will you get dressed and walk me to the Stockade?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“No,” he says and stands up in a smooth movement like a cat who has only been pretending to be sleeping and was really planning its attack. “Wait here.”

I remain on the couch as he strolls his fine ass up the stairs. Once he’s in the loft, I can’t see or hear him. Ghost has such a quiet way about his movements.

When we met, I thought his Ghost name was because he seemed half-present. As if life had partially hollowed him out, leaving just a whisper of who he once was.

Over time, I assumed he got the name because of his ability to just appear and disappear with barely any warning.

Dressed now, he soundlessly returns down the stairs. After shoving his feet into boots, Ghost studies me. I don't move immediately. We just settle into the quiet for a bit longer.

“Will you kiss me before leaving me at the Stockade?”

“No. I don't want you to become a hard-shelled taco.”

Though his words are said with unflinching malice, his meaning is rather sweet.

Once my shoes are on, I stand up and walk with him to the Stockade. We don't hold hands, and he doesn't kiss me goodnight. I do stand close enough to nuzzle my jaw against his. I feel him exhale deeply as if he wants so much more than he'll allow himself tonight.

“I'll take you to HQ for lunch tomorrow,” he says, sounding angry.

“If you don't, I'll have Sister Sass bring me back to your place.”

I feel his agitation settle under the weight of my promise. He knows I understand he's a damaged man. Nothing can fix what broke inside him as a child. This angry, moody hunk is who he'll always be.

But I still want Ghost. He knows what kind of person I am, and his longing is palpable. We're certain to end up in a free fall eventually.

For now, I'll enjoy everything two screwed-up people can create together.

TWINKLE TOES



Giselle Reinhart/Apex's Old Lady

Apex usually needs to do biker stuff after breakfast, so I spend my mornings with Eliza. We have therapy on Mondays and Fridays. Since today is a Tuesday, our morning is wide open.

That's why we ride our cruiser bikes to her cottage on Black Pine Road. The cottages are where most of the single women live, along with older members of the community. The other women stay in the Mesquite Apartments. If I hadn't met Apex, I think I would like living in the cottages the best.

They're cute one-bedroom homes with tiny kitchens but so much character. The size seems perfect for a single woman. Except now, Eliza has four kittens in her small space.

She's a beautiful woman with brown hair down her back, hazy-green eyes, and a long, graceful build. Lots of guys want to date her, but Penthouse is the one who caught her eye months ago.

We enter her house, where the kittens are rounded up within an octagon-shaped baby fence in the snug living room.

"Jules found this in Overlord's garage," Eliza says as the kittens fall over each other to get closer to her. "They seem too small to be left to run wild when I'm not here."

Turning to me, Eliza takes a deep breath and struggles against tears. "I knew instantly how I can't handle so many. Penthouse seemed like it was a test. If I didn't take them or only took one, I'd be failing. And I didn't know how to choose anyway."

"Maybe you can let people babysit them. Not all of them. Just one here or there. See if anyone will ask to keep them. Then, you'll raise the leftover kitten."

I look down at the four gray-and-black striped tabbies. They stare up at me with identical faces. I couldn't tell them apart if a gun was to my head. I doubt Eliza will know which one she ends up with if she lets other people adopt three out of four.

Tugging absentmindedly at her dark ponytail, Eliza whispers, "Penthouse might get his feelings hurt if I give them away."

"Did he come inside your house?"

"No. He says it's too small."

"Well, then, he should understand how it's too small for four cats."

"But he claims they're tiny, so they shouldn't take up much space," Eliza says as her bottom lip trembles. "Except I wasn't ready for even one cat, and he brings me four."

"You should be honest."

"I don't want to hurt his feelings."

"Because you like him?"

Eliza's hazy-green eyes warm. "Yes."

"And he likes you."

"I said I would wait to date for six months. It's only been four."

"If you made the rule, you can break it."

Eliza looks at the kittens and sighs. "I think Penthouse would be sad if they got split up."

"Then, he should take the four of them to his place. The townhome is bigger. You could visit them there."

Eliza snickers. "How would I even tell him that?"

"Are you scared of him?"

"Yes," she says as her smile falls. "He's handsome and sweet in this grumpy kind of way. But he's also big and scary. I feel like if I say something wrong, he might lash out."

“Apex says Penthouse is like a big, dumb dog.” Though Eliza frowns at my words, I keep talking. “Apex said Penthouse might seem scary because of his size, but he’s harmless unless it’s to protect the club or the Sanctuary. That’s why I don’t think Penthouse will get mad if you drop off the kittens at his house and tell him to deal with them.”

Eliza laughs again. “I can’t do that.”

“Those kittens might fall off the loft part,” I mumble, thinking about my home. “It’s probably not safe. Unless you give him the fence. I don’t know.”

Eliza sits down on the couch and watches the kittens staring at her now. “I don’t know what to do.”

“About Penthouse or the kittens?”

“Both. Penthouse said they should stay together because they’re sad over their mom dying.”

I smile at the thought of Penthouse getting all sappy about these kittens. Yet, he still gave Eliza too much responsibility when she’s just started over.

“We’ll get a kitty sitter, so you can see a movie with Apex and me. He can ask Penthouse to come along. You can have a practice date.”

“I really like him,” Eliza says and watches the kittens. “I was so overwhelmed when I got to the Sanctuary. There were so many beautiful men, and they’d flirt with me. I wasn’t sure how to tell what was real. I figured six months would be enough time to know what I wanted.”

“If you need two more months, Penthouse can wait.”

Eliza’s eyes light up. “I don’t want to wait, but I’ve never had a real boyfriend. I’m nervous about doing stuff wrong. Life here is great. What if I mess up things with Penthouse and make it so I need to leave?”

“No, Papa Bear wouldn’t do that. He’d get Overlord to fix things. Lady Bug said when Mabie and Blunt broke up, they wanted her to stay at the Sanctuary. It was Mabie’s choice to

leave. So, I know they wouldn't make you leave if Penthouse and you broke up."

Eliza's big, exotic green eyes reveal everything—fear, excitement, and sadness.

"I thought waiting six months would make everything perfect. Even after I knew I liked Penthouse, I wanted to pace myself, so I wouldn't make mistakes. But I think I already did by taking in all the kittens."

"No, don't think like that. I say and do dumb stuff with Apex all the time. He doesn't know how to be in a relationship any better than I do. Building our house is difficult. We have issues, but that's okay. You can't expect something real to also be perfect. Only fantasies work that way."

Eliza considers my words. She arrived here only two weeks after I did, but she always acts like I have the inside track on how to be happy. I just got lucky by having Apex claim me right off the bat. He's taught me many things and made me feel like I belong.

I also don't have the baggage of my past to drag me down. Sometimes, I have nightmares of people hunting me. But I don't remember who anyone is or where I'm going. I don't even know who I am.

Not being tied to the past means I get to be Apex's Twinkle Toes. However, Eliza can't wash away her bad memories like I can. She overthinks her every choice to ensure her second chance at life isn't a failure.

Now, though, she's ready to take the leap with Penthouse. If he offers her even half the happiness Apex gives me, Eliza will learn to stop expecting perfection from herself and just enjoy life.

GHOST



After I take Luca to the Stockade, I don't want to leave. I like how she looks at me. She never pushes me to be a better man. I'm allowed to be a fucked-up jackass without losing her affection.

I don't know what to do with myself after leaving Luca. I wander around the Sanctuary. The place can get really quiet once the sun goes down. The younger members usually head into town to party at The Lockup. The older members have families and do whatever families do in the evening.

As I circle around the Sanctuary, wearing myself out so I can rest at home, I think about Apex. His mom's supposed to be on her deathbed. Been hearing the same thing for a while. I used to hate how long it was taking for her to die. Now, I'm glad she isn't going easy.

Her passive bullshit caused Apex to lose his brother. Nothing was ever the same for him afterward. Yet, he loves the bitch. He just can't help himself. At least, his obsession with Giselle keeps him busy.

I spot Thorn when I arrive back at Yucca Road. He's out front, smoking a joint, and working through shit. Back when we were kids, he had similar problems as me. He went from his abusive parents to abusive foster homes. He can't hear out of one ear after a beating. Yet, he was always happy at school. I took a really long time to realize he was faking it.

I never even considered pulling that move. All these years, I've been skittish and then surly and eventually downright hostile. On my best days, I'm cranky. People around the Sanctuary don't expect me to be friendly. They understand how I operate.

But maybe I should have faked I was happy like Thorn did. People have always liked him more because he lies. Is that

what I want? More friends? To be popular?

Of course not. However, I *do* want Luca. If I was a fake fuck like Thorn, would she settle down in Metamora and stay with me?

After a shower and hiding under my blanket, I let myself imagine Luca living at the Sanctuary. Unable to picture her shackled up at my place, I mentally stick her in one of the cottages on Black Pine Road. I see her standing on the porch as I approach.

We could make something work together. I don't know if she is any more prepared for a relationship than I am. But if she lived here, we'd have time to figure things out.

I wake up around eleven, groggy and in a bad mood. In my head, Luca's already gone. I hate myself for not being able to push past my bullshit and be normal.

Arriving at the Stockade to take Luca to lunch, I assume she'll already be gone. Ominous or one of the other chick bikers will have stolen her away. I should let them. If they win her over, Luca will stay at the Sanctuary. *I'll have more time.*

Unlocking the Stockade, I find the living room empty. I'm ready to bail when I remember Hope never leaves. Someone must be here.

In the small bedroom, Luca sits on the mattress, facing Hope. They're positioned with their legs crossed. Luca's back is to me. She sings along with a chick song playing on her phone. I think she's encouraging Hope to react to the song. I don't know if it's working since Luca blocks my view of the other chick.

My mind wanders to Luca's story about her sister dying. I don't think she ever really processed what happened. She went from fear to shock to rage. That last one stuck. She never grieved. It's probably why she doesn't like being around Hope. Getting up close to someone fragile makes her feel the same way.

Rage is a much more comforting emotion compared to sadness. When I hate my mom, I get through my day easier.

When I mourn the little boy who wanted a good mommy, I feel crushed under the weight of my broken dreams.

The song repeats two more times on Luca's phone before she acknowledges me. I can't tell from her face if she always knew I was standing at the doorway or if I've startled her. Luca's expressions aren't genuine glimpses of her mind. She fakes a lot of things.

As Luca glances at me over her shoulder, her gaze is soft yet guarded. She doesn't want to give me too much power over her heart. I feel the same struggle inside me.

It would be so much easier to turn off this need and avoid each other. My life was fine before the raid on the Dirty Princes' compound. I wasn't lonely. I didn't want this unsatisfied desire. It's a hassle more than anything.

Yet, I can't turn it off. I tried when I was hiding in my townhome. I thought I could make things like they were before.

Even though I didn't see Luca, I felt her. No amount of distance kept me from sensing her in the world.

That's how it'll always be. Even when she leaves the Sanctuary, and I'm alone, I'll never be able to let go of this need.

“Hope, this is Ghost. He's the guy I have a crush on.”

The other woman doesn't react to her words. I do by giving an eye roll. Luca grins at my reaction and slides off the bed.

“Sweet Buns is here,” I say and gesture toward the door where Tank's old lady waits. “She likely brought pictures of her cat. Poor Hope will need to listen to boring stories about Taffy. It's possible her first words at the Sanctuary will be, ‘Please, shut the fuck up about your damn cat.’”

Sweet Buns grumbles a few insults under her breath. When I look back at the brassy blonde and ask what she said, she smiles sweetly at me.

“Don't bother yourself with women issues, Ghost.”

I smirk at how she's been dealing with cranky bikers since I was a kid. Nearby, Luca strokes a passive Hope's head.

"I'll be back after Ghost takes me to lunch. I'll let you know if he kisses me goodbye this time."

"The answer is no," I mutter.

"Your hard-to-get act isn't as slick as you think," Luca taunts as she walks past me to the living room where Sweet Buns waits. "Hello. I am Luca. You are Sweet Buns. You're married to Tank who is a founding member of the club."

"Yes, that is correct," Sweet Buns replies in a robot voice.

"You have a Persian cat named Taffy and no children with names I will need to remember. You are here to supervise."

"Also correct. I'm glad this is all computing."

Luca smiles softly. "There's like a hundred people I'm supposed to remember at your compound. This robot thing helps."

"Affirmative," Sweet Buns replies and walks past us toward the bedroom. "Be back by three. I have to take Taffy for a walk."

Luca turns to me and exhales softly. "You have my attention for three hours."

"I don't need that long," I grumble more for Sweet Buns's benefit than Luca's.

Her electric blue eyes soak me in until I can't breathe right. Feeling like I'm drowning, I want to flee her witch powers. Instead, I sink into the emotion I feel coming off her. When I don't fight this need, I breathe easier. *Submission is my only option.*

Luca inhales sharply once we step outside. She looks at me, at first in an almost hostile way as if she's on guard. Then, her gaze softens until she's nearly eye-fucking me as we walk to lunch.

"I like when you wear light-colored shirts," Luca says and reaches out to stroke the sleeve of my pale blue T-shirt.

“Don’t care.”

“Makes you sexier.”

“Not even a little interested.”

Luca stops on the way to HQ and asks, “Then why will you wear lighter shirts whenever you see me from now on?”

“Just a random coincidence. Don’t you worry yourself over the details.”

Studying me, Luca wears a little smile. “At breakfast, Jelly Bean and Aqua told me all your secrets.”

“Bitches,” I hiss, hating them instantly.

“No, no, they made you sound like a real catch. I’ll be throwing myself at you soon. Prepare yourself for the romantic onslaught.”

Chuckling at her bullshit, I’m very aware of eyes on us. New people gain a lot of wary attention, ever since a bitch came here with a sob story, only to slit the throats of Overlord’s baby mamas. If a weak shit like Emerald could do that much damage, Luca could wipe out half the compound. People are right to fear her.

Of course, I know she isn’t dangerous. But I refuse to share that info with anyone. Best for them to keep their distance, so I can have her to myself.

“What did you eat for breakfast?” I ask as I start walking again and force her to follow.

“French toast, eggs, bacon. Real fancy setup you have here with the old ladies waiting on you hand and foot.”

“They volunteer. We also have paid help like Eliza.”

Luca smirks. “Yeah, I heard Apex tried to set you up with her. Saw Eliza at breakfast, too. Real good-looking gal. You missed out there.”

“Lucky for you, I only date bitches,” I say and open HQ’s red front door for her.

Luca rewards me with a smile capable of instantly killing my bravado. No matter how snarly I get or whatever nasty shit I say, this woman has the power to wreck me.

LUCA



As a kid, I was told I had a terrible singing voice. I filed that information away in my young mind, refusing to sing in front of people ever again. Even when the bitch who shot down my vocal abilities had a birthday party and everyone sang, I just stared at her. I hope she knew how much I hated her, but she probably just thought I was going through a hormonal stage.

I hold grudges, and I was happy when that woman died. Heard it was from a terrible car accident. She suffered greatly. I smiled whenever I saw updates on Facebook. *Yeah, I absolutely love to hold grudges.*

However, I never sang in front of people again. Long after she suffered and died, having long forgotten about scarring my self-esteem, I still remembered her words. In the end, she won.

I'm thinking about that while watching Hope after I return from breakfast. Last night, Jules told me how Hope nearly cried. No matter her blank gaze, she's still alive inside her head. She might be safer in there. I consider leaving her alone. *Who am I to force someone to face their demons?*

Yet, Hope is still so young. I also consider the random things Jelly Bean said about her plans for the week—art therapy, gardening at the greenhouse, baking cupcakes for a Sanctuary member's upcoming birthday, visiting Eliza's kittens.

There's a lot of fun, safe shit to be done at the Sanctuary. If Hope wasn't hiding in her head, she might enjoy her new life.

Since I want to push Hope, I decide to push myself, too. I sit on the bed, facing her and put on an easy song to sing. "Moral of the Story" doesn't have any high notes that I can't hit. Nothing to make me feel like a loser like that bitch did when I wanted to sing Christmas carols.

Hope doesn't react to my singing in any obvious ways. I do notice how her pupils sharpen. She isn't staring through me. Over the next thirty minutes, I stop singing occasionally to talk about Ghost.

"I'm afraid he'll reject me," I explain while she stares expressionless. "I fear feeling like I did as a kid when people held power over my fate. My aunt didn't really want Drew and me at her place. She had so many rules. I followed them, not because I was a good kid, but I was afraid of the consequences. I trained myself to be cold. That was good. I don't regret that decision, but I miss having something warm in my life."

Hope doesn't react, but I know she hears me. I probably sound like a moron fumbling over myself. Thirty-four is too old to be so silly over a man. I'm unsure why Ghost affects me so powerfully, but I can't let go of my feelings for him.

Once I'm sitting across from Ghost at HQ, I feel like we're on a date. I've never known that kind of excitement, where I hope the guy likes me and I'm not simply counting the minutes until I can leave.

Ghost pushes me away in a teasing way, but there's also a wall between us. He doesn't want to be soft with me. I'm interfering with his fucked-up existence. I've become the enemy.

I'm surprised by how his coldness hurts my feelings. I guess I need him to admit I'm special. Opening my heart isn't easy. I'm way outside my comfort zone by remaining at the Sanctuary, getting close to people, and wanting him. Yet, Ghost acts like I'm annoying.

After twenty minutes of him giving me dirty looks, I realize he's putting on a show, something he claims to dislike when I do it. We're in the heart of the Sanctuary with his friends watching. He doesn't like them knowing he cares. So, he snarls his way through our lunch. I watch him while he avoids my gaze. Whatever I say, he has a smart-ass response.

At first, my heart hurts. This pain is why I never push myself emotionally. I refuse to stand on a ledge by revealing

my heart to people. Now, for the first time since my sister, I'm trying to open up. Yet, Ghost acts like he's doing me a favor by boring himself with my presence.

My temper takes hold. I stand up and walk to another table. I'd noticed the men as soon as I entered. They were around at breakfast. Jelly Bean told me their names, but I only remember Vegas. The biker—slicked-back, blond hair, bright green eyes, and oozing sex appeal—winked at Jelly Bean when she said his name. He seems like the kind of guy who walks through life, charming men and women alike. He isn't awkward like Ghost who can't deal with people.

I lean down and whisper in Vegas's ear, "I'm testing to see if I can make Ghost jealous."

His gaze finds mine as he offers me a lazy grin. Just as quickly, his green eyes widen as he catches sight of something behind me. I hear a ruckus before I turn to find Ghost shoving past two bikers and straight for my flirting partner.

Several bikers act as a wall between Ghost and Vegas. They hold back his thrashing body, barely keeping him from crashing into the other man.

Annoyed by his behavior, I walk over and flick Ghost's nose. He snarls at me like a dog disturbed from a hunt.

"Stop being a dumbass and come with me."

Walking out HQ's back door, I don't know if Ghost will follow. He is more comfortable feeling rage. No doubt, attacking Vegas is probably easier than dealing with what he wants from me.

"Bitch," Ghost spits out as he follows after me. "Cock-jumper."

Turning around before walking backward, I mutter, "I've never been on your cock, remember?"

"You made me look stupid."

"No, you did that. I just made you get real instead of that 'too cool for school' bullshit you've been doing since we

arrived and your friends saw us. I refuse to revert to high school crap. If you want me, you need to be real.”

Following me as I still walk backward, Ghost grumbles, “You fake shit.”

“I’m trying to survive in a new situation. You have all the power here.”

“Bullshit. You hold my fucking sanity in your hands.”

I stop and look at my hands. Slapping them together, I glare at Ghost and walk right at him. He holds his stance, refusing to back up. If he was anyone else, I might throw a punch and exert my dominance. Except I want Ghost to desire rather than fear me.

“I’ve been completely honest with you,” I say and flick his nose. He tries to smack my hand away, but I’m too fast. “I’m the one trapped in that house on your territory. This is your home. You can come and go as you please. I’m alone in the world while you have all these people who care about you.”

I flick him again. Knowing it’s coming, he tries to bat away my hand. I’m too fast again.

“You should want to protect me,” I insist as I step back. “Instead, you treat me like I’m shit stuck to your boot.”

“You’re a killer. What the fuck am I going to protect you from?”

“Protect my heart, you fucking moron,” I say, surprised by the hurt in my voice. “I showed up at your place last night and shared personal things. I’m doing for you what I never do for other people. Why can’t you do more for me?”

Ghost’s glare turns nasty. “Like what?”

“Why did you act cold when we were eating?”

“I don’t like having people watch me.”

“They were watching me, asshole. I’m the new one. The scary vigilante. They’ve seen you plenty. I’m the only one around here who finds you fascinating.”

Ghost’s glare softens. “You’re going to leave.”

“Maybe. But I’m trying to stay. Not for Overlord or even Hope. I’m staying for you. Then, you pull this shit where I’m good enough to go homicidal over but not important enough for you to make eye contact with while we eat.”

Ghost angrily rubs his face and grumbles, “I can’t do that dating shit.”

“You made eye contact when we talked last night. It’s not like you’re incapable. It’s just that you’re embarrassed.”

“I don’t like showing weakness in front of the others.”

“People know your shit, Ghost,” I say, circling him as I lower my voice. “They know why you act like an asshole. You’re not fooling anyone. Why pretend around them? With me, I guess I can understand your choice to hide. But these people have been your family for years.”

Ghost’s blue eyes seem darker as he frowns at me. He glances back toward HQ and scowls with more force.

“I’m embarrassed about my feelings for you. I don’t want them knowing.”

His words are a punch to the gut. “Why?”

“They’re going to think I’m copying Apex when he met Giselle. But he got the girl, and they know I won’t. I don’t need them thinking I’m stupid.”

I step back and consider what Aqua told me at breakfast. When she said Ghost didn’t like women, I’d only heard how I was special. When she said he’d never had a girlfriend, I thought I’d be the one to win his heart. Except she wasn’t encouraging my relationship with Ghost. Her words were warnings.

Trapped in his past, Ghost can’t create a future. And it’s not like I know what to do. I struggle to connect with a young woman who asks nothing from me. *How the fuck am I supposed to soothe a man like Ghost?*

“When your friends tease you about not getting your own Giselle, you just tell them how you don’t want one,” I say,

winning an even darker scowl from him. “You be honest and explain how we’re just fuck partners. That’s it.”

“But we aren’t.”

“Not yet, but that’s all we’ll ever be.”

Ghost gives me a hurt puppy dog expression. “You’re going to leave.”

“Maybe, but even if I was here for a decade, you’d never let me close in a real way. That’s who you are. If you wanted a woman in your life, you’d have gotten one long ago.”

“We just met. I don’t know what I want.”

“No, I think you do. You want to touch me but only a little and for a short time. You want me close but then you need me to leave you alone. The best you and I will ever manage is transactional and temporary. Our problem is we both have other ideas in our head. I thought you could care about me like no one else has, and you thought you could want me like Apex does Giselle. Neither of those things are options.”

I look around the area while Ghost sulks. Returning to HQ isn’t really an option. I don’t want him pitching a fit with Vegas. I’m uninterested in people pretending to check on me when they’re mostly worried about Ghost.

I can’t return to the Stockade, either. I thought I’d be free of the small space for a few hours. Trapping myself back in there would drive me crazy.

“I see you bikers riding around the Sanctuary. Can we do that?” I ask, drawing his sullen gaze back to me. “You can show me where stuff is.”

“Why would I do that?”

Leveling my gaze to meet his, I feel exhaustion creep deep into my bones. Life feels too damn long. I assumed I’d be dead long ago. Ever celebrating my thirty-fifth birthday seemed like a joke. Now, I’m facing all those candles and no idea what happens next.

“You need to ask yourself what you’re willing to settle for, Ghost,” I explain and sigh. “You can’t have what Apex does

with Giselle. It's not something you'll enjoy. So, do you want to be strangers with me or simply friends with eventual benefits? If you choose to be strangers, I can buddy up with the biker chicks. But you can't whine later about how I walked away. So, ask yourself if having something is better than nothing? If it is, you need to take me for a fucking ride."

Ghost's face remains hostile, yet I see longing in his gaze. Or maybe I just want to believe that's what he's showing me. In under two weeks, I've invested a lot of fantasies into the idea that this man is special.

As he gestures for me to follow him, I don't know what he'll choose to do. Either way, I feel my fantasies withering under the weight of reality. Ghost and I can't have what others do. We're too wrong in too many ways.

So, I ask myself the same question—is something better than nothing? For me, the answer is yes. For now, at least.

That's why I climb on the back of his favorite Harley Fat Bob parked in front of his townhome. As we ride along the Sanctuary's winding roads, I feed my fantasies for a little longer and pretend Ghost can be mine.

LADY BUG



The unknown number on my phone acts as a jolt of adrenaline. I got a call once from Nadia's boyfriend from a burner phone. He threatened to make my life difficult if I didn't stop hounding her. That was over a year ago. When I asked if he treated her right, he hung up.

I leave Katana in the living room with Mabie and Clark. Finding quiet in the pantry, I want a little space in case the asshole plans to berate me again.

"Hello?" I ask, trying to sound tough in a way that won't alert Papa Bear, who stands in the kitchen, pretending to be oblivious to my behavior.

"Mom, it's me," Nadia says, and I can picture her lovely blue eyes in my mind.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

The silence hangs between us.

"Did you get my gift?" I ask, hinting at the latest money drop Papa Bear organized for her. "The shampoo and conditioner work great on thick hair. I thought you might like the scent."

Nadia sighs. "They were a nice gift."

I sense her silence isn't tension from an eavesdropper. She's just not sure what to say.

"I'm thinking of cutting off my hair," I say, just to keep her on the line. "Just chop it short and make life easier."

"You don't have the head shape for that look."

"It's always good to test your man by looking like absolute shit to see if he'll still get a boner. I read that in a Dear Abby

column once.”

“What if he doesn’t? How does knowing he only wants you to look attractive help you?”

Nadia’s edgy tone leaves me nervous. “I don’t know. I’ve always been too chickenshit to try it.”

“You had short hair once when I was a kid,” she says, sounding so tired. “It wasn’t bad once it grew out to your shoulders.”

“Is your hair long?”

“You already know the answer. I feel you watching me here.”

“I can’t pretend you don’t exist.”

Nadia sighs. “You need to let go.”

“Of you?”

“Of the past.”

“You’re my daughter, not my past.”

“Well, you’re my past.”

Her words twist the knife in my heart, but I don’t give away how much she hurts me.

“You don’t have to come here,” I say, changing courses to keep her on the line. “If you want a fresh start, you can move anywhere with my help. I don’t even need to visit.”

“And you’d do this all to appease your guilt?”

“Would my reason even matter? You’d get what you needed.”

“And you’d keep stalking me like you do now.”

“I want to know you’re safe.”

“You worry too much.”

“You’re a beautiful woman surrounded by criminals.”

Without missing a beat, she replies, “So are you.”

“Yes, but my criminals value me. I don’t know if yours do you.”

“I don’t want to talk about Rudy.”

“I didn’t mean him. I meant the men at the card games.”

“Uh-huh,” Nadia mutters, not buying my bullshit.

Changing tactics again, I decide to go tough love on her. “I love you, baby. I miss you more than you can imagine. And I think your boyfriend’s a turd, and your job is dangerous. And I will never stop watching out for you. But I won’t interfere with your life. If you don’t want the money I send, donate it to someone in need.”

“Everything you do comes with strings.”

“We’ve sent the money for three years without you doing anything in return. Where are the strings?”

“They’re in your head, waiting to be tugged at to make me dance for you.”

“What am I waiting for?”

“I don’t know,” Nadia says, sounding so young.

“Maybe I should just send Papa Bear’s boys to grab you,” I say, feeling her out. “I could force you back here, so you’d at least be safe.”

Nadia doesn’t hang up or rage at my failings. She just sits quietly, thinking about my threat.

“But you won’t do that,” she finally says softly. “It’s easier to just threaten.”

Now, I’m the silent one. I think about Nadia’s stubborn streak. When I was young, I had plenty of chances to improve my life, but I always hated asking for help. Only when I was desperate enough did I come to the Sanctuary. Is Nadia desperate enough to come home now?

“I could ask Papa Bear to bring you to me for my birthday,” I finally say, feeling out the real reason behind this call.

“You do whatever you want,” Nada finally says and sighs. “I need to get off the phone. Thanks for the money.”

The line goes dead while I consider what Nadia wants from me. I’ve always believed I should let her ask for help rather than force it on her. Tonight, she never flat-out asked to come home. I could be misreading her.

After Katana goes to bed, I cling to Papa Bear and explain what Nadia did and didn’t say.

When I’m finished, he offers, “I can send someone to get her.”

“What if she doesn’t want to go?”

“Fuck it. We still bring her back here. Make her stay for a few days. If she wants to return to her shithead boyfriend and that job, we’ll take her back. But we’ll separate her from the situation first.”

I press my cheek against his bare chest and struggle against the feeling that I’m crossing a terrible line by agreeing to this plan.

“You’re giving her a chance to break free,” Papa Bear explains when I don’t speak. “If she hates you for stealing her away, you’ll be in the same situation you are now. But, at least, you’ll be sure she’s staying there by choice.”

I realize I’m afraid to see my daughter. Nadia and I have become strangers. Maybe we always were.

I know Katana so well. When she struggles with a school problem, I never push her to ask for help. I know she likes to fix her own issues. She’s a feisty little girl, planning to be a badass like the rest of her family. I can imagine her riding with the Born Villains one day.

But I wasn’t the same kind of mom with Nadia. That’s why I don’t trust my impression of the conversation we shared tonight. Papa Bear believes she wants out, even if only temporarily.

Trusting him more than anyone I’ve ever known, I let my husband take control of the situation. He’s been dying for me

to ask for help. Now that I have, he'll make things right.

OVERLORD



With Luca settling into the Sanctuary routine, I get poked by Ominous every damn day about sponsoring the castoff. She was already hassling me over Emma getting her patch. I feel like I need to give in to one of her requests if I hope to keep her in line.

I'll probably always struggle with controlling the founding members. They saw me in diapers, which means they will never respect me like they do my father.

Of course, I don't pretend to be Papa Bear. I'm my own man. When he talks to the younger members, he acts like the dad they never had. I can't pull that off, so I come at them as a calm force against their often-raging souls.

Ominous, though, will never bow to me. She didn't for Papa Bear, either. Her refusal to submit to Kraken is legendary. Some even claim her unwinnable heart was a main reason he bailed on the Sanctuary and started his own club.

Whether that's true or not, I'm still stuck with Ominous hounding me every day. So, I turn to the only man who's come close to soothing her temper.

Papa Bear and I stand outside HQ and watch the community flow around us.

"Ominous is like a dog with a bone when it comes to Luca being a prospect," I tell him when he smiles at my reluctance to complain.

"Is Luca interested in that?"

"I don't know. When I talk to her, she gets weird like she's putting on a mask. I can't tell what she's thinking."

"Well, in the end, it matters more about what you want than what Ominous hopes for. You're running the club. If you say no, she'll go along."

“Not without throwing a massive fit.”

“No doubt, she’ll make you suffer for telling her no, but she’ll still get in line. Just like she did with me.”

“Emma’s probably ready for her patch.”

“But you figure with Ominous bitching so much, people might think she’s why Dire got the patch rather than it being your choice?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll talk to Ominous about backing off. Make her see how she’s putting you in a bind and hurting Dire’s ability to get her patch. Ominous understands strategy, and she’s always willing to eat shit for those she cares about. It’s not a problem.”

Nodding at my father’s help, I decide to push for more advice. “I’m torn on something.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Luca wants to hunt down Hope’s father. Giving her the information to find him would be a smart way to build trust. But if she gets killed or doesn’t come back, I’m not sure how Ghost will handle things.”

Papa Bear considers the situation before answering, “He’ll spiral for sure, but Ghost needs the Sanctuary if he wants to survive himself.”

“So I should risk it?”

“Depends on if you want Luca to stay at the Sanctuary. If you’re looking to drive her away, holding on to that info is a good way to set her off. She needs people to kill. She’s a junkie that way. If you don’t give her the next fix, she’ll bail and find it herself.”

“Whenever Ominous talks about sponsoring Luca, I struggle to picture that woman riding with this club, let alone going through the dogshit involved with being a prospect.”

“No, you’d need to handle Luca differently. She’s too old and stubborn to wash people’s bikes and run errands. Maybe you could get her to do a few of those things, here and there,

but she'll never hustle. Being submissive to the patched members probably won't happen, either."

Eyeing my father, I mutter, "Ominous is building her own club."

Papa Bear chuckles. "She's been trying to do that since day one. It wasn't easy for her to be the only chick member for all those years. With every new castoff, she hoped to find a woman to ride with. She tried to mentor several of the guys' daughters, but most women don't want to get rowdy."

"So how would you handle Luca?"

"First off, I'd explain how she can have the info on Hope's dad once she's healed up. You need to give her a little time here to bond with people while also letting her know she'll get her next fix. That'll make it more likely for her to return. Assuming she does the job and comes back, you let Ominous sponsor her. The women will keep her organized and focused on this place. You can expect her to do a little grunt work, but mostly, you should use her talents."

"If we send her out on a job, and she gets tagged, that'll come back on us."

"That's true about anything we do outside of Metamora. But with this woman, we could hunt down the evil fucks who send people running to the Sanctuary."

"We'd be breaking your rule about helping people rather than killing assholes."

"There were so many times people came here with horror stories," Papa Bear explains as his dark eyes reveal ugly memories. "Of course, I wanted to hunt down the monsters who hurt them. But our people aren't assassins. With Luca, we can see what seven years of hunting has done to her. But there's no taming her now. She's going to kill assholes whether we let her or not. Why not use those talents?"

"Ghost might have a chance at being really happy with this woman. If I'm the reason he loses her, I'll never let go of that guilt."

Studying me, Papa Bear nods. “Apex seems to be doing okay with Giselle. Blunt got himself in therapy to keep Mabie. Hell, Penthouse is all smitten with Eliza. Plus, you’re now settled with an old lady. It feels like love is easy, but I don’t know if Ghost has it in himself to let anyone close.”

“Maybe he doesn’t need to let her all the way in. Luca reminds me of that old tabby who showed up when I was a kid. The one who warmed up to Bomber.”

Papa Bear grins. “Mittens.”

“Right. He came around for the free food and would let Bomber pet him. But if anyone tried to pick him up, he flipped out. Luca’s like Mittens. She doesn’t mind certain encounters. She and Ghost could find a way to be together without actually being a normal couple.”

“I hope you’re right. Ghost might want more than he demands for himself. Sometimes, you have to set things in motion and hope for the best.”

Sensing we’re not only talking about Ghost, I ask, “What’s staining your thoughts?”

“Nadia might want to come home but can’t leave her current situation. She didn’t ask for help, but I still want you to send a small crew to get her.”

“Who are you thinking?”

“Ghost and Apex would be my usual choices, but they’re both in weird headspaces. Thorn got spooked during the raid. He won’t be sharp. Blunt’s been depressed since killing Mabie’s husband.”

“I could send Ominous with a few other chick members. It’d keep her busy.”

“Send Dire as a final test.”

“What about Sister Sass?” I ask, and Papa Bear goes still. “She did well in Texas with Blunt and Thorn.”

“She and Nadia aren’t tight.”

“As far as I know, no one’s tight with Nadia.”

“She got along with Clutch, but he won’t do well with Ominous running the show. Best to just send the chick members. Maybe Luca can go with them. Might be a good bonding exercise for her.”

“What if this road trip makes her realize she doesn’t want to be a member?”

“I’d still keep her around. Luca could be an asset. Those Texan assholes are still sniffing around town. Fact is we have plenty of enemies.”

“Think we could send her after the Horned Angels?”

Without missing a beat, Papa Bear asks, “Who would you kill, Dio or Cypher?”

“Why not both?”

Papa Bear’s rough face lights up. “They both deserve a bullet in the head, that’s for sure.”

Despite making plans for Luca, I can’t imagine her here in a year. Mostly, I’m unable to wrap my head around Ghost falling for a woman. He barely enjoys them wetting his dick for twenty minutes. I don’t really understand why he wants Luca or what she sees in him. I guess that’s why I assume every little thing could send her running or him spiraling. They make no sense to me.

Or maybe Luca and Ghost are like Jules and me. I’ve known many beautiful women, but none made me feel like she does.

If that same magical—and often irrational—connection exists between Ghost and Luca, they won’t be willing to walk away from each other. So rather than worrying about maybes, I choose to start testing what’s possible.

SISTER SASS



Dire is over the fucking moon when Overlord assigns her to go with Ominous, Luca, me, and the other biker chicks to pick up Nadia in Reno. She knows this is her ticket to finally earning her patch.

I remember when I was patched in to the Born Villains Motorcycle Club. I'd been hungry to prove I was more than Papa Bear's scrappy daughter turned rape victim.

I struggled with tremendous guilt after the attack. I dragged Dire into going out drinking and ignored how we were in danger. I was lost in my grief over my mom's death and resentful about Lady Bug sharing Papa Bear's bed. Though I felt like a woman, Jester treated me like a kid. I had so much pent-up bullshit bubbling up inside me.

And it came out in reckless behavior that nearly killed Dire and me. My choices also led Jester to hunt down and kill one of the men who hurt us. Every year with such a powerful man locked up feels like an indictment against me.

My therapist often reminds me how I didn't cause those assholes to attack us. And, of course, I didn't ask Jester to hunt down anyone. Basically, even if I made bad decisions, other people did, too, and we all have to live with the consequences.

In my head, I know the therapist is right. My heart, though, feels tremendous guilt, even now, with Dire closer to earning her patch, and Jester getting his release date. I've gotten so used to blaming myself that I can't seem to stop.

This assignment is a good chance for me to get away from the Sanctuary. Overlord hadn't wanted to send me to Texas months ago. I did fine, though. I followed Thorn's instructions, didn't get distracted, and stayed on task. All the stuff anyone else would do. I even gave Blunt a little lady wisdom that seems to have spurred positive action on his part with Mabie.

Jester was pissed when he learned I left Metamora. He still brings Texas up in passing. In his eyes, I'm not a real biker. I'll never be like Ominous. Instead, I'm forever that barely legal woman he wanted yet kept at a distance.

We talk every week. Sometimes more. Never less. I feel like I'm his girlfriend, even if we've never done anything. It's not like we're talking dirty. We keep things vague. I tell him about people and discuss HQ's menu. Just light, first-date stuff. But I also hint at bigger things happening, like I did with the trip to Texas.

For the Reno assignment, I decide to keep my mouth shut. Jester can't wrap his head around my life. I don't know what he'll do when he's home and we're no longer editing ourselves. That question often keeps me up at night.

Ominous brings us together at the shooting range before Luca arrives to train. We stand around a picnic table on the Sanctuary's east side. Ominous and Dire have their long, straight hair tied back in ponytails. Aqua's hair remains in her usual double braids. Riot and Rave let their hair fly in the breeze like me.

Ominous absolutely glows as she sets out her weapons and dumbs down the assignment.

"It's very likely we're only looking at a bitchy boyfriend who will back down once he's faced with women willing to punch him. But this guy might be connected."

"Is a gunfight an option when we're outside of our territory?" Dire asks her mom.

"The location is industrial with several buildings converted into housing. That area won't get a quick police reaction. But even if cops roll up and we get nicked, better for our people here to hire lawyers than morticians. So, if you're under threat, just open fire and worry about the law later."

Aqua kicks dirt off her boot and sighs. "Okay, I'll be the asshole and ask. Are we sure Nadia's going to leave with us? She's been playing the 'lost little girl looking for love from a

bad man' role for a long damn time. What are the chances we'll arrive and she'll fight to stay?"

"Papa Bear warned Nadia might refuse to go. He's okay if we force her ass into the car."

"What about her stuff?" Rave asks Ominous.

"That's the deal. We need someone to bring a normal ride for Nadia and her shit. Luca isn't comfortable on a hog, so she'll take an SUV. Whatever can't come with us, ain't coming. If leaving was as simple as Nadia renting a U-Haul, we wouldn't be escorting her out of town. This seems more like a 'smash and grab' job."

Riot gives Rave a weird look. Her sister nods, and Riot returns her gaze to Ominous.

"What are the chances Luca bails once we're out of here?"

"No one is keeping her at the Sanctuary. She also agreed to help us. I think Overlord promised her info on Hope's dad if she completes this job. No way she'll run."

The conversation stops as Luca rides up on one of Ghost's hogs. I see him in the distance, playing chaperone from afar. Luca glances back at Ghost after climbing off the motorcycle.

"He wants to make sure you don't bully me," Luca says, allowing a smirk. "He claims you're devious."

"Fucking right we are," Aqua declares and looks at the obstacle course. "I'm ready to get this show going, so I can get back home. Jelly Bean is ovulating, and I have a cup of Smoke's sperm in the fridge waiting for her."

"Love seems like too much work," Dire taunts as she walks toward the obstacle course. "Flowers, anniversaries, cups of jizz. It's all too saccharine for me."

Ominous smirks at her daughter's bullshit as Luca looks over the training course.

"Where did you learn your skills?" Ominous asks her.

Luca lets her gaze slide over us before shrugging. "I started with a gun course. Went to a few of those camps for

wannabe tough guys. Hired trainers who seemed actually knowledgeable for special instruction. The rest I learned on my own.”

“Well, let’s get started and see how we work together.”

I’m surprised when Luca takes up the rear as we begin moving. I thought she’d shove her way to the front and be top dog. Instead, she lets Ominous lead.

However, I quickly realize Luca isn’t at the back out of fear. She views Dire and me as soft. I want to complain, except I’ve only been in one real fight with a man before and lost badly. Maybe I should just hold up the middle.

When we arrive at Reno, I’ll be armed. My adrenaline will be pumping. I hope to remember my training.

Yet, lately, I’m forever reminding myself of my failures. I feel scared when there aren’t any threats. *How can I handle a situation where I might be in real danger?*

LUCA



Ghost and I have spent the last week acting like a dating asexual couple.

Each lunch, we ride into Metamora or the nearby Gallup Hills to try different burgers. Ghost likes when I'm on his motorcycle since I'm touching him without getting sexual. Plus, I can't flee, and he's suffering from hardcore abandonment issues.

Ghost's problem with intimacy was the topic of conversation during my first Overlord-mandated therapy session. Sharona kept asking me questions, not pushing on any topic. When she mentioned Ghost, I got chatty. Mostly because I am fully aware of who I am. But I have no experience with a man like Ghost who doesn't want to fuck twenty-four seven.

The shrink didn't give me any information about him personally. But if I mentioned something—like how his clinginess betrayed his indifference—she brought up kids with unreliable mothers. Everything she shared was hypothetical, but I got how she was guiding me toward patience.

“You need to give Ghost time,” Sharona explained. “And do the same for yourself. A month ago, you didn't even know this place existed.”

She's right, of course. I never in a million fucking years would have imagined myself in this place, fixated on a man like Ghost, and joining an all-women convoy to Reno.

My life before the Born Villains had become predictable. I found a target, studied the target, killed the target, went on vacation, and searched for a new target. Now, I'm in uncharted territory.

Rather than figure out if Ghost and I can create a real future together, I focus on my role as the sniper and SUV driver on this job.

The night before I leave, Ghost and I sit in his townhome. He's pissed over the job and even asked Overlord to let him come along.

"Fucker," Ghost mutters, thinking about his President's choice to keep him back at the Sanctuary.

I straddle Ghost's lap, startling him. He gets his back up and glares like I'm a threat.

"I won't be around to see you for a few days," I say, and his scowl turns downright hostile. "I need to scent you up, so other women won't get any ideas."

Ghost's face flips completely into a cocky grin. He likes when I "scent" him. My cheek slides across his. The tension leaves him immediately. I close my eyes and enjoy the heat of his body against mine.

Ghost's fingers curl through the loops on my jeans. He wants to touch me. Though I feel his erection between my legs, I don't grind down against it. Ghost isn't ready for sex. He can barely kiss me without looking ready to puke or run. Early on, his hostility made me think he might hit me, but I now realize he'd rather hurt himself.

I don't know the exact details behind why Ghost is this fucked up. He told me his mom was a junkie bitch. Jelly Bean and Aqua added more context.

"An addicted mom in need of her next fix will do some sick shit for money," Aqua explained at breakfast days ago.

I got what she was hinting. Ghost isn't grossed out by me. I'm not what he fears.

"Ghost screws women at your bar, right?"

"Sometimes," Aqua said and shrugged. "When he's really wasted on something. If you're horny, get him blitzed and he'll put out."

Jelly Bean frowned at that comment. She's got stars in her eyes, believing my heart is destined to fix Ghost. She's sweet, but I'm uncertain if I'm capable of love, and I don't think anything can fix Ghost.

However, Jelly Bean is correct about how getting Ghost wasted so I can ride his dick is a reckless move. If he isn't fully on board, I'll end up as a hard taco, and he'll be repulsed by me forever.

Right now, I'm his sweet kitty hiding her claws. My touch is soft. I don't push for anything. I'm not sure I really want to fuck anyway. My ribs remain tender, and I haven't had sex in a long damn time.

Yet, Ghost is exceptionally handsome. Every day around him builds a little more heat between us. After a lifetime of sexual disinterest, I feel a new craving taking hold of me.

My lips stroke his jaw, forehead, and cheeks. I rest my hands passively against his chest, afraid to demand too much when Ghost might already be at his breaking point.

I'm startled when his arms wrap around the back of me, and he inhales sharply. I go still, waiting to see if he's pushing us farther or backing off. Instead, he just holds me against him and breathes me in.

"I should be going with you."

"Overlord said he'll give me the info on Hope's dad if this job goes well."

"He's telling the truth. Overlord doesn't lie as much as maneuver people."

"Will you come with me?" I ask as I stroke his head.

Ghost goes rigid, thinking about leaving the Sanctuary. He's left plenty of times. I don't know why going with me is so scary.

He looks up as I glance down. Our gazes hold, and I feel him doubting my true intentions.

"I can't live anywhere else."

Nodding, I run my fingers across his furrowed brow. “I don’t live anywhere,” I reply after a moment. “Sister Sass told me about her cottage. I could see myself in one.”

Ghost glances around, imagining me living here. He clearly isn’t thrilled with the prospect. When his gaze returns to me, he sighs.

“What about Hope?”

“I don’t know what the plan is for her. She isn’t talking, but I know she’s listening.”

“You shouldn’t leave her.”

“I have to do this job.”

“No, I mean, instead of rushing to a cottage, stay at the Stockade. Nadia won’t be treated like a normal castoff. She’ll just go to Papa Bear’s house. No one needs to rush you out of the Stockade.”

“The house is fine, but sleeping in the living room leaves me feeling exposed.”

“Hope is a skinny thing. Just shove her over in the bed and sleep next to her.”

“I’ll try that tonight,” I promise before claiming his lips for a quick kiss.

Ghost holds me tighter. I feel him fighting the urge to flip out over my leaving the Sanctuary. He really believes I won’t come back.

Maybe that’s why Ghost acts cold on our walk to the Stockade later before kissing me with a heat I’ve never felt in him.

I go soft and willing under the weight of his affections. Never has a man made my body feel so electric.

With Ghost, I nearly shove him against the Stockade’s door and mount him. The man’s body begs to know mine.

Rather than hump against the Stockade, Ghost steps back, stealing his lips away and breaking the heat between us.

“If you don’t come back, I’ll hate you,” he mutters, sounding like a hurt kid with no power to punish the one threatening him.

“Even if you don’t trust I’ll come back for you, you must know I’ll return for the info on Hope’s dad. I might be a cold bitch, but I do love my vengeance.”

Ghost allows a hint of a smile. “You need that info.”

“And only Overlord has it. The other Dirty Prince members went underground after we hit their compound. At least, that’s what Ominous claims. The easiest way for me to get the info is to do this job and return to the Sanctuary. You know I can’t walk away from killing assholes. It’s all I know how to do anymore,” I say before sliding my fingers across his tight lips. “Though I’m trying to learn new skills.”

Ghost stares at me with only the house light illuminating his sexy face. I see enough to know he’s convinced I’m bailing on him. It’s why he’s both clinging to me and shoving me away. Nothing will change his mind about my intentions until he sees me return through the Sanctuary’s front gate.

After I enter the Stockade and Jelly Bean leaves, I shower and guide Hope to do the same. She doesn’t really wash herself as much as rub the soap in one spot until I tell her to stop. In the living room, I dry my hair before doing the same for her. I pull the same repetition with brushing our hair.

We watch a Pixar movie. I have a theory she hates those kid movies and will complain if I make her watch enough of them.

Though Hope doesn’t speak, she does yawn a lot during the movie. We eventually head to bed.

“I can’t deal with the couch anymore,” I say as I tuck her in and shut off the light. “I’m going to sleep in here with you tonight.”

Hope’s blank face reveals nothing, yet I sense she’s wary of my choice. I adjust my pillow and sigh. The darkness is only broken up by the moonlight from a window over the bed.

“I’ll be gone for a few days to get Lady Bug’s daughter. I haven’t worked with other people in a real way since I was on my volleyball team. We knew each other’s skills and weaknesses. I miss that life sometimes, but I could never go back.”

Hope’s fingers stop scratching at the mattress and drag the blanket over herself. I notice how she’s less passive tonight. She even opened the shower door on her own. I feel her waking up.

“I’m coming back,” I tell her. “Ghost thinks I won’t. He doesn’t trust me. But I want to be in this place. I like waking up knowing I’m secure. I can get my meals at HQ. I’m starting to recognize people better. Some are easy, but a few bikers look a lot alike. I’m getting it all straight in my head.”

Hope stares at me in the darkness. If she weren’t listening, she’d close her eyes as a hint for me to shut up.

“I think I could love Ghost, but I need time to settle into the idea. Men usually gross me out. For whatever reason, I’m endlessly curious about Ghost. I’ve got to see these feelings through, or I’ll always have regrets.”

Hope blinks a few times as if she’s considering my situation.

“I know you’re scared,” I whisper. “These people have all the power. But I’m figuring them out. I think we might be safe here.”

The dark room doesn’t allow me to see the nuances of her expression, yet I sense she’s truly listening and considering my words.

“I don’t know if you can trust everyone here, but Jelly Bean, Lady Bug, Sweet Buns, and Jules seem like good people. That Mabie chick is harder to read. I think she got beat up in life. Broken down, you know? She’s used to hiding her pain. But I saw her with her kid, and she’s really sweet with him. Not that fake-good-mom crap. I think you can trust her, too.”

Hope might not know what the fuck I'm talking about. Her brain could be mush, unable to tell one person from another. I might be reading too much into the smallest changes in her behavior. But I want to believe she's still alive inside and alert enough to worry about her safety.

She's only seen the Sanctuary from the Stockade. No one takes her outside, worried she'll be overstimulated. She eats here with various people playing babysitter.

"When I get back, I want you to come to breakfast with me. You can be quiet while I talk your ear off about the trip. We'll go after the morning rush. The building looks like a barn. I think you'll like it if we can avoid all the kids and louder people."

Of course, Hope doesn't react to my words. But I close my eyes and pretend she's curious about the world outside the Stockade. After this job, I'll return to prove myself to Ghost and Hope.

Overlord will also give me the info on her evil dad. Killing that asshole won't fix what happened to his daughter, but his death will ensure one less piece of garbage clutters the world.

And sometimes, that's enough.

GHOST



The Sanctuary feels empty without Luca's presence. I feel emptier, too, since she left. Mostly, I wish I held on to her tighter so she wouldn't have slipped away.

Despite my gloomy mood, I receive regular texts from her. She tells me about where they stop to eat, what weird roadside attractions she passes, and who is getting on her nerves. More than once, Luca mentions a comment made by one of the other women and asks for context.

I ought to feel good about her relying on me for inside information. We've gotten tight over the last week. That's why I miss her. We would normally spend our evenings eating dinner together before walking back to my place for a movie.

That was our new thing, too. We were watching all the classic movies we'd ignored for thirty years. Each night, we'd check one off our list. Now, I'm stuck in my townhome, watching garbage reality shows.

During my first night without Luca, Apex pawns Giselle off on Eliza after dinner so he can babysit me. We walk around the Sanctuary, stopping to talk to random people. Mulholland and his old lady, Sweetie Pie, are out in front of their house when we pass by. They talk about putting in a pool. Down the road, we see founding member, Flagg, shooting hoops with his kids.

"Remember when this was the only road with homes?" Apex asks as we leave behind the family part of the Sanctuary and walk toward the prospect trailers at Wildflower Circle. "Now, all those young fucks we came up with are settling down."

Rolling my eyes, I light a blunt and inhale deeply. "You just want to talk about your house again."

Apex chuckles and stretches his arms. “If you and Luca hook up long term, will you build a house?”

“Only if it’s right next to yours, so I can come over for a cup of sugar.”

“Why can’t you get your own fucking sugar?” he grumbles, thinking I’m taking his shit.

Rather than explain the reference to him, I only shrug. Apex glances back at Tobosa Road and sighs.

“Giselle and I will feel even more real once we move in to our place. She’ll have her own space instead of just living in mine.”

“Do you think you’ll have kids?”

“Yeah. Probably won’t take long. We’re not careful.”

“She’s a tiny chick,” I point out as the pot settles my shaking hands. “Maybe knocking her up with your monster-sized baby isn’t smart.”

Apex looks horrified as if it never occurred to him how his size might be inherited by his kid.

“What if she dies?” he says in nearly a fucking whimper.

“Dude, don’t think like that,” I say and pat his shoulder. “But seriously, she’ll probably be on bed rest to gestate your King Kong kid. You’ll get to play her hero every day. I know you like that shit.”

Apex shrugs as if he can’t argue, but that monster-baby thing definitely freaked him out.

Once we arrive at Wildflower Circle, we’re handed beers from the new guys hoping to make nice with the club’s Enforcers. Apex and I don’t stick around to chat. I refuse to believe these guys really want to shoot the shit with us anyway. We’re not exactly the friendly type.

Instead, we settle nearby and open our beers. My mind’s on Luca, of course. She haunts my thoughts day and night. I can’t close my eyes without seeing her face. Deep down, I keep waiting for her scam to reveal itself. Somehow, she’s

using me or not who she claims to be. There's no way someone with her beauty and skills would be so hung up on me.

"Are you going through bang withdrawal?" Apex asks when I don't say anything for long enough. "I couldn't be without Giselle for so long. Well, I bet we could go a while without banging, but I'd need her close."

"We don't do that."

"Do what?"

"I have a hang-up but also good reasons not to."

"Not to do what?"

Taking a pull on my beer, I grumble, "We don't fuck, dumbass."

"Oh, wait, what? I know you guys are in your townhome for hours. That's a long time. What do you do?"

"Talk. We started watching a movie each night. That 'Godfather' movie is really good."

"What 'Godfather' movie?"

"*The* 'Godfather' movie."

"With Pacino?" When I nod, he shrugs. "I liked him in 'The Devil's Advocate.' That mafia movie seems too long."

"Take a Valium and watch it."

Apex stares at me and then shrugs. "I don't want to watch movies that make me think."

Rolling my eyes, I flick a bottle cap and hit the side of a metal trash can. "Luca has a list of things she wanted to do in life but never got around to doing because she was busy with volleyball. Then, she started the killing thing. So now, I'm helping her do stuff from the list."

"But not banging her. Because she's frigid."

"I said I had the hang-up."

"That seems like a lie. I've seen you bang chicks before. You stopped in the middle of a pool game once to bang a

chick. Was that fake?”

“No, I banged that chick, but fucking her was just like doing it with my hand. No feeling to it. I’m not sure I can fuck someone in a real way.”

“Real?”

“Romantic, I guess,” I mutter and shove him. “Why make me say sappy shit?”

“I just don’t get it. You fucked those chicks. Now fuck Luca. It’ll be better.”

“What if it’s not?”

Apex gets a dopey look on his face. “Giselle makes my heart race, and my skin go supernova. No woman has ever come close. My dick inside a pussy isn’t the same as my dick in Giselle’s pussy. It’s different. Trust me.”

“What if Luca becomes like hard tacos?”

Apex stares at me for a long time. His dark eyes just go fucking blank, and I know he doesn’t understand but won’t ask. I see the exact moment when his brain latches on to the right memory.

“That’s right. You can’t eat them because you ate them when all fucked up. It’s coming back to me. But that’s food. You can have other food, but there’s only one Luca. Like literally. I can’t imagine another person like her existing in the world.”

Letting the silence grow, I suck at my beer and enjoy the world gone quiet. I’m not looking to turn a relaxed evening into a therapy session. Apex doesn’t have the answers. Why even talk about this shit?

“She’s going to leave,” I finally mutter when he keeps nudging me like an obnoxious kid. “The Sanctuary won’t be enough.”

“No, you figure *you* won’t be enough.”

“Of fucking course!” I bark at him. “I didn’t need you to spell it out.”

“But why not just say it. Why hide from what’s real? This is like when you got mad at me for caring about my dying mom. Instead of saying how you thought I was a fucking idiot, you treated me like shit. Really hurt my feelings, too,” he says and adds in a growl, “Dickhead.”

Chuckling how he holds a grudge, I shrug. “I don’t want to talk about shit. Things in therapy are fine because that’s the whole damn point of going. But outside that office, I want to shove everything back down deep.”

“Have you asked Luca if she’s going to leave you?”

“She says she can’t read her future because she never thought she’d be here.”

“She’s on that job with the chick bikers. They want her in their girl-power group. I heard Aqua say how most women are too weak to ride with them. Then, Jelly Bean looked sad over how she wasn’t strong enough to be in their group. Then, Aqua snuggled her, and they started making out.”

“That’s a fascinating story.”

“Yeah, that’s why I told it.”

I close my eyes and ignore him. Apex used to claim he could sit still for hours as a kid, just watching the shadows change in his room. I thought he was full of shit. No little boy wants to sit still for that long. But he really is a patient fucker. I also suspect his stepdad would lock him in that room, so leaving wasn’t really an option.

Right now, he stares at me until I open my eyes and look at him. Apex doesn’t react to my gaze on his face. When he’s really quiet like this, I can see him as the monster other people see. There’s something wholly empty about this large man.

But I know he’s just dumb. Apex might be staring at me in a cold, detached way, but he’s probably thinking about his woman and what to eat for a snack later.

“I have a fantasy in my head,” I say as he stares at me dead-eyed. “I see myself with Luca in bed. She feels better than anything I’ve ever known. But that’s just a fantasy. The

reality won't be as good, and I'll be disappointed. Then what?"

"It'll be better," Apex insists, snapping out of his dead-eyed expression. "I was crazy for Giselle as soon as I saw her. I thought the real chick would seem like a step down. Just like you're thinking. Life is usually disappointing. But the flaws I find in Giselle make her better. She isn't an idea in my head. She's real, and I get to keep her."

"But I might not be able to keep Luca."

"Do you really want to? I can't even stay at your place overnight without you wanting to kick my ass."

Snorting, I mutter, "You put your feet up on everything."

"I like to relax," he says and shoves me. "But what about Luca? Can you have her in your place, touching your shit, putting her feet up on everything?"

"I don't know. Probably not. If I don't test it, I can pretend it's still possible."

"Or maybe you'll hate it the first few times, but it'll get easier. Like that Hope chick doesn't say anything when people talk to her. But one day, she's going to speak up. Then, over time, she'll say a little more. Are you going to think she shouldn't say anything the first time just because it's only a little? No, she's gotta build up to being normal. Just like you and Luca can build up to being a normal couple."

"Like you and Twinkle Toes are?"

"Yeah. We might be messed-up people, but we act like normies. I take her to the movies. She cooks dinner. We chill with our friends. We're normal. You can be that way, too. Just maybe not all at once."

Apex makes my fantasy seem completely doable. Like, Luca and I just need a little tweaking to become a happy couple.

"She's a hot chick," I say, making Apex nod. "We've only kissed a few times. Nothing too intense. She tastes better than anything I've ever known."

“I know people are scared of Luca. She isn’t cute and warm like my woman, but I like how she only pays attention to you.”

“She fucked with Vegas that day.”

“To mess with you. She even told him that was what she was doing. The chick wants you to pay attention to her. That’s cool. I wouldn’t want her being lukewarm and crap.”

“Are you sure you don’t just want her to stick around so she can handle your Texas problem?”

“No, you two being something real makes things worse. Now I’ll feel bad if she decides to handle those fuckers who hurt Giselle. Like, I want them dead. But I also don’t want you to lose your woman to protect my woman. Though if it’s between our women, like ‘Sophie’s Choice’-wise, I’ll pick Giselle every time. Sorry, but no one matters to me like she does.”

“You’ve seen ‘Sophie’s Choice,’ but you won’t watch ‘The Godfather’?”

“I don’t watch sad movies. I just know what happens in that one because Betty Boop said something years ago.”

Nodding, I think of Papa Bear’s first wife. She was always kind toward me, even though I was a huge asshole. She’d tell people how I was just working through things, as if my being a rude fuck was a temporary thing.

The Sanctuary fell apart after she died. Papa Bear couldn’t cope. He seemed in absolute shock after a simple bee sting stole his woman away. The randomness of her death was just another reason why I figured people shouldn’t care about each other. Even if you did everything right, some fucking insect could come along and rip it all away.

To me, love was for suckers.

Yet, Papa Bear fell in love with Lady Bug. I didn’t think it would stick. Who could replace Betty Boop? But Papa Bear got lucky with two good women.

Probably because he's a warm person who makes a conscious effort to be his best. Papa Bear doesn't half-ass things. That's why his kids love him, and he's won the attention of two good women.

Without a doubt, I've half-assed shit with Luca. Not that I don't have reasons. *She might leave. I don't trust anyone.* My excuses sound reasonable in my head.

Except having Luca away from the Sanctuary is killing me. What if she leaves for good because I won't make a conscious effort to keep her happy? Do I want to spend the rest of my life with regrets?

The one blessing from my childhood is how I did everything my mom wanted. I never told her no. I was a good son. She still fucked me over. Still, I did my very best, so I never suffer any regrets. The blame belongs completely on her.

However, I won't be able to claim I'm blameless if Luca leaves me broken. To ensure I avoid regret, I can't be the reason things end.

Sometimes, knowing you didn't light the fire is all a person has when the world goes up in flames.

DUCHESS



Overlord looks so proud of himself as I get ready to leave the house and take a shift at the Stockade. The three girls are piled in his lap, giggling over how their little butts keep sliding off his thighs.

Located at the center of the pile, Scout smiles at me. Her grin reveals the joy she feels over having Overlord include her in the cuddles.

Anthony waves at his sisters as he sits on my hip. The four-year-old is excited about playing with his friend this evening. No matter how often the boys get together, they always act like it's been forever since they've enjoyed each other's company.

After I give Overlord a lingering kiss, followed by nose snuggles with each girl, I carry Anthony out of the house. He wants down once he sees Clark walking toward us. The younger boy holds Mabie's hand with his right one and waves wildly with his left.

I can't believe how quickly my life at the Sanctuary has found a happy rhythm. At the Horned Angels' compound, I never had any friends. The old ladies viewed me as an inconvenient bastard, born to Kraken's side piece. When I grew up, I turned into a whore used by their cheating men. The club daughters my age didn't want to be associated with me, either.

At the Sanctuary, I already have a solid group of friends. Mabie and I have gotten especially close since our sons are also besties.

The dark-haired beauty seems tired tonight. Her nearly black eyes radiate depression. Her bob haircut is messy like she was in a rush and forgot to brush it.

Mabie's currently staying at Papa Bear's house. The long-term plan is for Blunt and her to build a house on Tobosa Road, where she'll be my neighbor. However, they've only been back together for a few weeks. I don't think they're even sleeping together yet.

Despite our friendship, Mabie remains careful with what she shares, as if I'll turn on her if she's too honest. I learned from Overlord how Blunt used to cheat with club sluts.

"He's got no ability to turn a woman down," Overlord explained. "Blunt grew up feeling no boundaries with his body. He thinks sex is what you do, even if you don't want to. He's going to therapy now. But I worry he won't be able to stay away from temptation."

I'm wondering about Blunt's sex addiction as Mabie and I enter the Stockade to take over for Sweet Buns. Tank's old lady is quite attached to Hope already, volunteering many shifts. Sweet Buns never had kids, focusing her attention on her man and their cat. Now, she's gone sweet on the silent young woman.

However, tonight, Sweet Buns seems unnerved by Hope who won't get out of bed.

In a hushed voice, Sweet Buns explains, "She won't eat. I got her to drink a tiny bit of Gatorade, but most of it ended up on her shirt. When I tried to change her clothes, she made a growling sound. I still made her change her shirt, but I kept thinking she was going to bite me." From our spot at the front door, she studies Hope resting on the bed. "Your kids might not be safe here."

"Hope's been in bed all day, right? If she gets out, we'll know something is up, and we'll hit the panic button."

Sweet Buns is torn between her worries for Hope and her fears for Anthony and Clark. She pats each boy on the head.

With his thick head of hair and little round glasses, Clark has a gentle vibe. He quickly smiles at Sweet Buns. My son is the spitting image of Cypher. Anthony also wears the same

borderline hostile look when he's uncomfortable. Right now, he unloads it in Sweet Buns's direction.

After she leaves, though, Anthony settles down. He adores Clark and Mabie. When it's the four of us, his sweet personality returns.

The boys play on the floor while I check on Hope. Her eyes are open, and she's scratching at the bedpost with her index finger. She seems more awake than usual. I feel the hostility coming off her, just like Sweet Buns described.

"I think she's upset over Luca being gone," I whisper to Mabie when I join her on the couch. "Last night was her first one at the Stockade without Luca."

"I wish she could have amnesia like Giselle does," Mabie says and chuckles bitterly. "I think we'd all benefit from memory loss."

I consider Blunt, who isn't an easy biker to read. He seems in his head a lot, I guess. When I see him with his friends, he can appear aloof, separate from their joking around. Not angry like Ghost or Apex but detached.

When Mabie and Clark are around, Blunt's an entirely different person. Last week, Overlord and I went on a double date to the Sanctuary's movie theater with the other couple. Blunt couldn't get enough of Mabie, and she glowed in his presence. They felt like a love match.

Except I know how the past can sink its teeth into the present and refuse to let go. Is that why Mabie looks so sad tonight?

"Are you sleeping?" I ask as a not-so-subtle way of approaching the topic.

Mabie shrugs and sighs sadly. I decide to skip the subtle shit and just ask her if she's okay.

"Papa Bear is the dad I wished I had," she replies.

"I feel the same way."

Mabie's dark eyes fill with tears. "He was the first man to ever touch me in a tender way that wasn't about getting in my

pants. The first time he comforted me with a hug, I thought he would try to fuck me. But he just let me cry. I never knew men could be like that.”

Clark stops playing when he notices his mom crying. She wipes her eyes and smiles reassuringly at him.

“It’s okay. Mama’s just talking.”

Clark’s an empathetic child, always picking up on people’s moods and trying to comfort those who are sad. I caught him watching Blunt the other day. When the man seemed to get a far-off look about him, Clark hugged him.

Right now, he wants to fix his mom’s pain. He continues to watch us while playing with Anthony.

Lowering her voice, Mabie explains, “Lady Bug was so kind to me when I got here. She helped me clean up and brought me treats. I was terrified they’d send me back or hand me over to the people looking for me. I couldn’t believe anyone would be so nice without wanting something in return. But they’re always that way. Even when I moved off the Sanctuary, they made sure to keep an eye on me. I know they didn’t want me to marry Gordon. Papa Bear said I was moving too fast, but if I got in over my head, he would be there to help steady me. They’re always so kind.”

“So why are you upset?”

Mabie gives me a scolded look like a kid afraid to get in trouble. Her dark eyes study her hands as she considers whether to fess up the truth.

“Nadia will be at the house now,” Mabie mumbles. “She’s Lady Bug’s real daughter. I’m just someone taking up space.”

Taking her hands in mine, I reply, “You know that’s not how they see you.”

“I feel like they’ll want me to move out faster now.”

“I don’t think anything will change.”

“But I can’t live in a cottage with Clark,” Mabie says, ignoring my reassuring words. “I’ll get scared being alone and end up turning to Blunt. We’re trying to take things slowly. If

I'm alone, I'll make him move fast. Then, we'll start fucking, and he might stop therapy. I'm going to ruin everything between us again."

I squeeze her hands, knowing her fears are silly, even as I suffer from similar ones. Overlord used to have fresh pussy every night. He had two baby mamas at one point and still fucked women at The Lockup. When I'm in a negative mood, I convince myself that I won't be enough. He'll get bored and start sleeping with those club sluts. Will I leave him? No, but I'll feel like our love is over. Everything will fall apart.

Except Overlord acts like monogamy is no big deal. It's what his father did with both of his wives. His brother, Bomber, would never cheat on his old lady, Pumpkin. It's just not done in their family. Yet, I grew up with men who thought nothing of sticking their dicks in women who weren't their wives.

It's easy to doubt what should be obvious. That's what Mabie is doing now.

But it's also about the stress becoming ingrained in us. I'm not accustomed to happiness, so I assume something bad is always around the corner. Just like how Mabie's so used to life going wrong that she can't trust people she knows won't let her down.

"I don't know Nadia," I say and smile at Clark still watching us. "I heard she and Lady Bug don't get along well. So, yeah, things might be stressful at their house soon. You'll need to be there for Lady Bug like she was for you. When she doubts herself and focuses on her mistakes as a mother, she'll have you to remind her of all the good she's done."

Mabie's melancholy expression shifts immediately. She likes taking care of people. I see how much she enjoys waitressing and being around Clark. When she does nonsexual things for people, she erases more of her old programming. I'm the same way.

Motherhood once felt like a burden. I hadn't been ready to raise my sister or give birth to a child I hadn't wanted. But

loving my babies gave me worth outside of the “servant, bang mate” role I’d been sentenced to years ago.

“I should have listened to Papa Bear when he said not to marry Gordon,” Mabie says, lowering her gaze. “But I felt like he was bullying me. The shrink says I was going through my adolescent phase and pushing back against my parents. If that’s true, I’m past that now. I want to stay close to them and do what they say.”

“Mabie,” I whisper and gesture for the boys to come over now that Clark’s worries have infected Anthony. Once they sit in our laps, I continue, “Even if Nadia becomes a problem and you need to move out of Papa Bear’s house, you don’t have to go to a cottage. You can come stay with Overlord and me.”

Mabie bites her bottom lip. “I feel like I drag down people and exhaust them.”

“I’m raising four kids. If you were tiring me out, I’d avoid you, not want to spend more time together.”

Kissing her son’s head, Mabie settles down. “I want to do everything right this time. I love Blunt, and I feel like he’s mine. But we can’t survive another clusterfuck. We have to do things right this time.”

“And you will. No one is pressuring you to move faster. Those ugly thoughts in your head are just self-sabotage. They’re not real.”

Mabie exhales deeply. Despite knowing Papa Bear won’t send her away, she needed a backup plan to soothe her irrational fears. When I first moved to the Sanctuary, I came up with plans and escape routes. I couldn’t shake my fear. But I know I’m not alone now. Mabie isn’t, either.

Hope also has people who care, but she’s isolating herself.

Leaving Anthony with Mabie, I go sit with Hope in the bedroom. I tell her about my day and how Luca will be home soon. I talk and talk until her finger doesn’t scratch the post with such intensity. She even sits up to drink a protein shake from the fridge.

When I look in her eyes, I see a raw panic. She's woken up in a real way now, and I can't imagine what's happening in her head. I ask if she needs anything, but she only responds with silence.

Still, she holds my gaze for longer than usual. I hope she can understand how she might be the one carrying her pain, but she isn't doing it alone.

LUCA



Despite my recent nostalgia over my volleyball years, I'm quickly reminded of my habit of fading into the background when part of a team.

Stopping for meals at restaurants, I remain quiet unless someone forces me into the conversation. The six women enjoy a natural chemistry. While I listen to them banter and poke at each other, I find myself missing Ghost more.

Though the bonding-session part of the trip proves to be a bust, the main goal is to rescue Lady Bug's daughter. Attacking abusive assholes is where I excel.

"How would you play this tomorrow?" Ominous asks me when we're at the Reno hotel.

"According to Papa Bear's local PI, Nadia's boyfriend is a trust-fund baby turned low-level drug dealer. Rudy has two thugs at his side most days. Normally, I'd sit on a location for a few days to see who did what. But we don't have that kind of time. So rather than bust through the front door and hope for the best, I suggest we draw the boyfriend out."

I point at the laptop with maps of the target location. "This area is going through a transitional phase. The industrial parts have closed down. The new apartments haven't opened yet. There isn't any work going on. His building is one of two with actual occupants. If we go during the day, most of those people will be gone."

"Hitting during the day seems riskier than trying to force shit at night," Ominous states, glancing at the others.

"Look, when I attacked a location in the past, my goal was never about saving anyone," I admit, so they don't assume I've got super powers to ensure this assignment goes easily. "So going in at night, guns blazing would work if the plan was

to end Rudy and his two thugs. We'd need to hope Nadia was alive by the end of the gunfight. But that's not what Papa Bear sent us to do. Engaging during the day allows us to leave with her without anyone dying."

"I don't know," Ominous mutters, and I realize she's gotten cold feet about sticking her daughter in the crosshairs.

"These guys will be hungover. The neighborhood will be quiet. The cops take an average of thirty minutes to show up there. We'll approach him soft. I'm thinking you and one other person could knock on his door and explain how you've been sent to take Nadia home."

"No way will he back down unless I hurt him," Ominous states.

Ignoring her worries, I explain, "This is where I'll be on the rooftop with my rifle." I tap the building on the screen and continue, "We'll keep our line open, so I can hear if he's giving you trouble. I want two people at this right corner across from his building. Two more at the left corner. Close enough for him to see, but far enough away to allow them a chance to back up if he gets trigger happy. Meanwhile, I'll be able to see incoming problems and blow his head off if necessary."

My final words settle Ominous immediately. I notice the others also chill out.

"The goal is to convince him to hand over Nadia. Not to shoot him and worry about his friends opening fire. We want everyone to live. That's why, at the first sign of pushback, you should suggest calling the cops to have them supervise Nadia's escape. No way does a drug dealer want the law in his place. It'll also show you're willing to go the legal route and aren't there to kill him."

"I think killing him would be ideal," Aqua mutters.

"Then, Papa Bear can send me back later to do the deed. But that's not this job. We're here to get Nadia."

"What if Nadia doesn't want to come with us?" Sister Sass asks.

“Ominous will calmly explain how her orders are to bring Nadia back. Then, she can look in the opposite direction as my location, and I’ll fire a warning shot near Rudy. That ought to get both of them on board. But if this guy is strung out, he might flip out and start shooting. That’s why I’d rather we don’t push him unless he earns threats from us.”

“What’s the timing on this thing?” Riot asks me. “How long should we give Nadia to pack?”

“No more than twenty minutes. If he calls for backup, we have a short window before they arrive. I hope a woman in her situation is smart enough to have an escape bag ready. If not, too bad. She gets twenty minutes and then we move out.”

Ominous seems satisfied but wants us to go over the plan again at dinner. I sense she hasn’t been out of her comfort zone in a long time.

That night, after they go to their rooms, I remain alone. I’m unnaturally nervous. Having other people to watch over makes me worry about my sloppiness at the compound. If I fuck up tomorrow, someone I know might end up dead.

“How did you pick your second target after you finished off Drew’s killers?” Ghost asks me when I call him.

He’s at his townhome, hiding from the world and assuming I’ll never return. He seems relieved to hear my voice.

“I looked at crime articles about people who got away with something or didn’t do much time. Rapists, murderers, not petty shit. I wanted to find another asshole like Paul. The next target ended up being a murdering pimp, let go because witnesses wouldn’t testify and the cops fucked up the crime scene. I wanted someone who was clearly guilty, and the asshole fit the bill.”

“Have you ever killed anyone who wasn’t a thug or known criminal? Like, an upstanding member of society who was scum behind closed doors?”

“Yes, a few times. They’re harder to find since their victims are kept quiet. They’re usually easier to kill, yet the

cops care more about their deaths. It's trickier but doable. Why, do you have someone in mind?"

"No, I was just wondering if you had people helping you pick targets."

"I never trusted anyone enough to admit what I was doing."

"And those martial arts and weapons trainers didn't think it was weird for you to want to learn those skills?"

"They assumed I was paranoid because of what happened to me. People rarely scratch below the surface."

Ghost doesn't say anything right away. When he speaks, I hear the worry in his voice. "Nadia's boyfriend might not care about doing time," he says rather than blurt out how the guy will likely shoot us.

"I think you're wrong. He's a rich guy playing the thug role. Even if he doesn't fear prison, I know he's afraid to die. I've seen pictures of him from the file Papa Bear made. Rudy thinks he's slick, like a player or some shit. He's real flashy, you know? Men like that aren't tough. They don't want to feel pain or live with scars. His first inclination will be to put Ominous in her place. Once he realizes he might die, he'll back down. Even if he isn't scared of the women in front of him, he knows your club will end him. It'll be fine."

"It better be," he grumbles as if threatening me.

I chuckle quietly at how his every emotion comes out as rage. If he ever says he loves me, it'll probably be worded, "I love you, but don't get any big ideas, okay, bitch?"

"Want to watch a movie?" I ask him. "We could check out 'Reservoir Dogs.'"

Days ago, Ghost mentioned how he'd seen part of the movie. He missed the second half when his mom's latest boyfriend showed up and threw the TV. I figure maybe that means the movie is a "hard taco" situation, but I want to watch something violent before bed to psych myself up.

"Okay," he says, sounding soft and cuddly over the phone.

I don't know why he's so happy. We put on the movie. Even with the distance between us, I feel Ghost with me.

Halfway through the movie, I realize the reason Ghost softened up after I picked this movie. All I need to do is prove I remember things he says. Though Ghost works very hard to be invisible and left alone, he craves to be noticed and valued.

Smiling to myself, I like how easy it is to please my cranky, quasi boyfriend. When I tell him goodnight after the movie, he sounds sad like he'll never speak to me again. With anyone else, I'd warn them how negativity can jinx me. With Ghost, I just let it be.

The next morning, I wake up feeling like myself. A cold determination washes over my newer warm attachments. *I'm back in hunter mode.*

Everything outside of my target falls into the darkness.

I arrive first at the location and leave the club's black SUV near Rudy's condo building before hoofing the rest of the way to a nearby empty building. I climb a fire escape, reach the roof, and crawl toward the edge. Resting on the ground, I assemble my Barrett Mk22 MRAD rifle and wait for the others to get into place.

Soon, Ominous rides up with Riot. She leaves her daughter and Sister Sass back at one corner. Rave and Aqua hang back at another one.

The next few minutes involve Ominous pushing the buzzer and speaking into the intercom. At first, she's just brusque. Then, she starts making snide comments about Rudy's tiny-dick energy.

"Is the itty-bitty fucking baby shitting his diapers?" she taunts.

That finally does it. Two minutes later, Rudy throws open the door. In one hand, he holds a Glock 19. In the other, he grips Nadia's long, brown, highlighted hair. He shoves her against a wall and waves his weapon at Ominous. The biker doesn't flinch. She actually grins in the face of his rage.

“Nadia’s coming with us,” Ominous explains calmly. “Our club President wants her back. How that happens is up to you.”

Rudy dresses like Chris Kattan from “A Night at the Roxbury.” His suit shines in the midday sun as does his slicked-back hair. The guy is a dime store gangster. I wouldn’t be surprised if the gun’s safety is on.

Men like him—with inherited money and a baselessly flamboyant ego—find pretty, broken women to show off in public and abuse in private. He has zero idea how to handle women like the ones in front of him right now.

Through the scope, I spot Nadia’s shiner and a busted lip. She’s been crying but is currently frozen in his grip. She’s not the spitting image of Lady Bug. Kat looks a lot more like her mom than this woman, but I notice they share a nose and a habit of shrinking into their shoulders when they’re scared.

“Tell him about your friend,” I say over the phone.

Rudy stops babbling random threats about how “bitches learn their place with him” and looks around. “Who is that?”

“We have friends listening,” Ominous explains and gestures at the buildings nearby. She doesn’t point toward mine. I wait until his gaze zeroes in on one where he thinks he sees someone. I fire a shot that bounces off the sidewalk feet away. I’m careful to keep any ricochets from hitting my people.

The shot echoes in the mostly abandoned industrial park.

“What the fuck?” Rudy hollers and shakes a limp Nadia.

“We didn’t come alone. Now do you want to bleed today or can Nadia leave without anyone dying?”

Rudy glares at Nadia, avoiding the gazes of the other women. He’s in full “flight mode” now. I half expect him to flee inside and barricade the door. His gaze scans the building tops. One of his goons sticks his head out to see what the shot was about, but Rudy waves him back inside.

“Fine,” Rudy says and shoves Nadia against the doorjamb. “You want to be gone, then fucking go,” he snarls in her ear. “You’ve got an hour to pack up. If you’re not gone by then, I’m going to get angry.”

“Actually, Nadia, you have twenty minutes,” Ominous says in an icy voice and gestures for Rudy to move so she can enter.

Over the next few minutes, I hear Ominous and Riot speaking to Nadia. Her voice is too soft to pick up over the phone. Rudy waits outside, pointing his gun at the buildings like a moron. When the women exit, Dire brings around the SUV for Nadia’s escape.

I hear Rudy asking his fellow wannabe gangster if Nadia took any of his shit. Once the guy says no, Rudy can’t think of anything threatening to say.

Ominous doesn’t allow the lovers to have a quick goodbye. She shoves Nadia into the back seat and climbs in next to her before gesturing for the others to get moving.

I linger on the rooftop until I know the SUV and its escorts are nearly back at the hotel. Rudy returns to his place. The area remains quiet.

After I break down my rifle and stuff it in my backpack, I move slowly until I’m down the fire escape and on the ground. Rudy and his goons aren’t much of a threat, yet I know how money can hire talent. I still treat the situation as perilous to avoid a screwup like at the Dirty Princes’ compound.

Moving through alleys until I reach a main road, I meet an Uber and make my way to the hotel.

Traffic slows me down, and the guy behind the wheel bores me by bragging about his fantasy football team. Checking my messages, I find a text from Ghost, stating how he wants to go with me to fix the Hope situation. I reply with, “I miss you, too.”

Exiting the Uber at the hotel, I spot a red SUV pulling awkwardly into the parking lot and moving toward the back where the Born Villains and Nadia are located.

Running after the suspicious SUV, I reach for my pistol stashed under my shirt. As I turn a corner, I hear yelling from two groups. Ominous tells someone to back off.

I reach the back half of the hotel in time to see the red SUV has blocked in our motorcycles and SUV. Several men are barking orders at the women who are bracing for a fight. Another man yells at Nadia still in the back seat.

The hired goons are too old and flabby to be high-end security. Despite their lack of talents, they're still capable of making a mess.

The one at the SUV window starts banging, trying to shatter the glass. That's when Ominous throws a punch.

All hell breaks loose. The first guy staggers back, ending up on his ass once Ominous follows with a left hook. Another guy moves to take down Ominous and gets punched by Aqua. He shoves her back against the SUV. Rave and Riot are on the asshole instantly, taking him down to the ground.

Two more guys rush out of the SUV. Dire and Sister Sass freeze up. When the SUV's driver reaches for the young blonde, Ominous lets out a mama-bear roar.

The two women snap out of their fearful stupor and lunge at the guy. He immediately tries to back off, but they pin him to the red SUV.

His friend rushes at them, but I've finally reached the battle and run interference.

Sweeping his leg hard at the ankle, I send him to the ground. He isn't down there for five seconds before his hand disappears inside his jacket. Assuming he's going for a gun, I kick him hard in the face, sending his head bouncing against the SUV's tire.

"You're about to die for a shitty paycheck," I warn while aiming my gun at his face.

His blue eyes widen. There's no male bravado. He's gotten his ass kicked. His head is likely throbbing. His friends are busted and bleeding. Though they can no longer win, they're facing various ways to lose.

My heart is racing as the other men hold, waiting to see if I pull the trigger.

The women around me exude unchained hostility. They want to fight, but I'm looking to get back to Ghost in one piece.

My heart rate steadies as I ask the guy, "Did your boss mention we have a biker club ready to ride here to kill you if something happens to us? I hope you got a fucking bonus for that."

"We're done," he says and then repeats himself louder. "We'll get back in the car and go."

Though I step back, my gun remains trained on him. "We just want to leave. You just want to live. Don't do anything that forces me to end you."

Despite the tension in the air as the men limp to their vehicle, I don't feel any fear. I never lost my cool on the volleyball court and that calm stuck with me when I was on a hunt. Today is a little different since my goal is extraction rather than assassination. I thought I'd be more nervous. But I'm back in my groove.

The red SUV speeds backward out of the parking lot. I immediately turn to the women and holster my weapon.

"We need to get out of this fucking town."

"Everything's in the SUV, and we're checked out," Ominous says and hurries past her daughter, giving Dire a casual hand pat to settle her nerves, before climbing on her motorcycle. "We just go and don't stop until we've reached the state line."

And that's what we do. As the women roll out in front of me, I slide in the driver's seat of our SUV and follow them out of the parking lot. Nadia climbs out of the back seat and joins me without saying a word.

Afternoon traffic proves to be manageable. Yet, every light we stop at, I feel like we're sitting ducks. Those guys weren't real threats for women like us. But it doesn't take a talented assassin to open fire and get lucky with a shot.

At another red light, I glance at Nadia holding her phone and seeming lost in thought.

“They’re using your phone to track us,” I tell her once my brain stops searching for threats and wonders how those thugs found us.

Opening her window, she tosses it out on the street. I don’t say anything, and she doesn’t, either. The silence is only broken up by Concrete Blonde and the rumbling motorcycles flanking us.

Finally, as we leave Reno city limits, she asks, “Who are you?”

“I’m a new castoff. My name is Luca.”

“Do you know my mom?”

“Yes, but not well.”

“Are you shackled up with any of the bikers yet?”

Her voice is devoid of emotion, yet I hear a bitchy undertone to her question.

“I’m Ghost’s girlfriend,” I reply, daring her to say negative shit.

Nadia frowns at me. “I thought he was into Apex.”

“No, he’s straight and likes me.”

“Huh, well, consider me corrected.”

After a few minutes of silence, I say, “I know you’ve been through a lot, and I’m glad you’re safe. I also really want to make nice with your mom and stepdad. With that said, I’d rather not spend the rest of this trip gossiping or making small talk.”

“Can we change the music?”

“No.”

“I don’t remember much about Ghost, but I can see why he likes you.”

“Aw, thanks, sweetie.”

Nadia smirks at my feigned friendliness. As we settle into silence again, I don't sense we'll run in the same circles at the Sanctuary. She'll likely find a biker and become an old lady. I'm more comfortable with the rough women who occasionally flip me off during the ride.

I loved watching them fight. Even Sister Sass and Dire got their shit together and beat down a man twice their size.

Ghost might be the main reason I'm attaching myself to the Sanctuary, but these women make me feel more like the old Luca, even if I'll never be the life of the party.

LADY BUG



Ever since Ominous and her crew left, Papa Bear has been cornering me in the house and kissing me until I stop stressing. I feel sane as long as I'm wrapped in his powerful arms.

Papa Bear represents everything good in my life. The moment we met, I knew something changed inside me. I want to be Lady Bug rather than Enid. The old me failed her daughter, screwed up every relationship, didn't know how to make a single good decision. No longer a train wreck, I help other people. Now, I get a chance to make life easier for my firstborn.

But first Nadia needs to arrive safely.

Sister Sass sends updates every few hours. Admittedly, the part where they escape Reno is worded vaguely, making me stress.

"Sister Sass is used to editing herself on the phone because of Jester," Papa Bear explains at breakfast, hours before we expect the group to return. "In person, she's got a big mouth. When she texts or calls, she sounds like an entirely different person. Don't worry."

His hand wraps around my shaking one. I hadn't realized I was trembling. Smiling at him, I follow his gaze to find Katana watching us. My normally relaxed daughter wears a pout.

"What's staining your thoughts?" Papa Bear asks his youngest child.

"How come Nadia's never texted me? Sister Sass has texted me three times since she's been gone."

"What did she say?"

Katana allows a little grin. "She said I was a nerd for reading so much. And how she might have a hemorrhoid. I had

to look up that word. Oh, and she said Dire has stinky feet.”

“She knows you well. Nadia doesn’t yet,” Papa Bear explains as he runs his hand down the back of her dark bob.

Katana looks up at him and frowns. “What if I don’t like her? Or she doesn’t like me?”

“You argue with your nieces,” Papa Bear says, mentioning Zoey and Evie. “They get on your nerves, but you still love them. Family doesn’t always get along, and that’s okay.”

“Like when Pumpkin beat up Jules?” Katana asks, having heard the story of Jules’s first breakfast at HQ after returning to the Sanctuary.

“Like that, but you shouldn’t punch Nadia.”

“She can’t punch me, either!” Katana cries. “I’m a little kid. She’s a grown-up.”

“No one is punching anyone. Even Pumpkin promised to behave from now on,” Papa Bear insists. “What are you really worried about?”

Katana’s gaze finds me, and I see her true concern. She can’t remember ever sharing me. Sister Sass, Overlord, and Bomber don’t treat me like their mother. For years, Katana has felt like my only child, while Nadia was only a picture on the wall.

“Why don’t you go riding at the Hot Mama Ranch before Nadia gets home?” I suggest rather than hide in my head like I was prone to do with my first daughter. “We can bring fresh tomatoes to Flame and carrots for the ponies.”

Katana jumps up as I share a smile with Papa Bear. We’ve talked a lot over the last week about how I can’t fall back into bad habits. Nadia is bound to test me by pushing my buttons and saying things to hurt my feelings. Though she might be thankful to be free of her violent boyfriend, we have a history filled with disappointment and resentment.

To keep my mind away from the past, I spend the morning and lunch with Katana at the ranch located near the

Sanctuary's outer border. I talk with Flame while Katana rides and then brushes her favorite pony.

My daughter is so beautiful and confident. She isn't untouched by pain, having lost people in her life. Katana also spends her days around people busted up by life. She isn't spoiled in that way.

Yet, she's also grown up in a loving family, surrounded by people who protect and cherish her. On an average day, her biggest problem is if Evie and Zoey will gang up on her when they visit.

Nadia's childhood wasn't calm. I had a taste for bad men, replaying the cycle I saw with my parents. When love left me run down and unhappy, I drank too much. All while Nadia just tried to be normal. She'd hold me and promise everything would be okay when I cried.

After we came to the Sanctuary, her life got easier. Instead, of settling into the quiet, she became unhappy. The chaos of our old existence distracted from how her father ran off and her mother was a wreck. Once she could feel that pain, she seemed unable to find happiness.

Now, Nadia's gotten her second chance. I don't know what path she'll choose next—run off again or build a happy life here. I can't picture my daughter well enough to be sure what she needs from the Sanctuary or me.

Back at home after the ranch, I find Mabie and Clark in the kitchen. The boy smiles happily, yet his mom seems scared. I hug Mabie, relishing how she's only seen me at my best.

"They're pulling through the front gate," Papa Bear announces as I reassure Mabie.

Katana bounces off her chair and goes to the porch. Clark follows despite not knowing what's happening. Mabie seems reluctant as her insecurities rise inside her.

"I'm nervous," I tell her.

Mabie instantly shuts off her panic and reassures me. This broken young woman views me as the ideal mom. When I see myself through her eyes, I can't help wanting to do better.

Once we walk to the porch to wait, Papa Bear takes my free hand. He seems bigger today. Harder maybe, too.

Sister Sass leaving town rattled him. Papa Bear tries to give her freedom and respect her choices. However, he can't stop thinking of her back in the hospital room, barely holding on after those monsters were done with her.

Sister Sass looks healthy and strong as she rides down the road with Aqua and Dire. Ominous and the sisters roll up behind them. Finally, the SUV driven by Luca turns into our circular driveway. The day goes quiet as the women turn off their hogs.

"No one died," Ominous tells Papa Bear as if disappointed.

Grinning at her pouty expression, he promises, "Next time."

They chuckle at her bullshit while Sister Sass and Dire climb off their motorcycles and walk over to say hello.

"False alarm on the hemorrhoid front," Sister Sass tells Katana. "I was just sitting on the remote."

Katana giggles at her big sister before going silent at the sight of her other sister emerging from the SUV.

Nadia looks beautiful yet tired. Her eye is bruised and lip busted. Her brown hair brushes across her shoulders now. I notice golden highlights. She's wearing a pale pink tank and denim shorts.

I want to throw my arms around her and hold on forever. Yet, I'm afraid to be too emotional and spook her.

"Hey, Mom," Nadia says when I only smile at her.

Taking charge, Papa Bear asks, "How was the trip?"

"The music was terrible, but good otherwise."

Luca doesn't react to the comment. She's not really paying attention from her spot next to the SUV. I catch her gaze searching for Ghost, who I caught lurking near the Stockade this morning.

"Thank you for bringing Nadia home," I tell Ominous.

“Daughters need to be protected and valued,” she replies, clearly hinting at how Dire deserves her patch. Ominous notices Clark and shrugs. “Little boys are cool, too.”

Clark smiles at her in the same sweet way he grins at everyone. Ominous can’t deny the little charmer and goes to poke his belly.

Nadia watches me, waiting for something. I smile reassuringly at her until she loses the fear in her eyes.

Sister Sass gets bored of the tension and walks inside. Taking charge, I introduce Nadia to Mabie and the sister she barely knows.

“Why don’t we go inside?” I suggest while Papa Bear and Dire remove bags and boxes from the SUV.

Nadia follows me into the house, seeming like a ghost. Mabie clings to Clark as if a threat lingers around the edges of our day.

“Are you hungry?” I ask as we arrive in the kitchen.

“We ate a few hours ago.”

Katana peeks out from behind me and frowns at her sister. “Do you ride horses?”

“No.”

“What do you do?”

“Nothing worth talking about.”

Katana stares at me like she’s scared and wants the world to go back to the way it was. Mabie doesn’t look thrilled with the changes, either. Nadia seems worn down.

I stroke Katana’s head and try to find a way to make everyone feel comfortable. Papa Bear always reminds me how distracting people from pain doesn’t do anything except kick the can down the road.

“This is weird,” I say. “Awkward, right?”

My daughters and Mabie look at each other and back at me. All three nod. Clark mimics them by nodding, too.

“It’s going to be that way for a few days, at least. As long as we don’t expect everything to be perfect, we’ll do okay. It takes time to breathe together in sync.”

Nadia watches me with exhausted eyes. I don’t know if what I’m saying makes sense or sounds like a copout. With her gaze on me, I feel like a loser, trying to win over someone who sees what others can’t.

Sister Sass and Dire soon fill up the kitchen, making Nadia edgy. I take Katana’s hand and gesture for Nadia to follow me. We head upstairs to Nadia’s old room. It’s been a guest room for years. Now, my daughter’s back to claim it.

Nadia sits on her old bed and looks at me. “I’m tired.”

As Katana lingers at the doorway as if afraid to come inside, I reply, “You can take a nap before dinner.”

“No,” Nadia says and reaches for my hand. “I’m mentally exhausted. I should have come back years ago.”

I settle next to her and squeeze her hand. “We all make mistakes. Some of them can never be fixed, but what matters is you’re choosing to expect more for yourself.”

Nadia’s blue eyes hold so much emotion. I’m instantly wrecked with guilt and regret. I wish Nadia got the life Katana enjoys now. To feel loved and protected would have led my oldest daughter toward a better path.

My thoughts flash to Sister Sass, who did grow up loved and protected. Bad things happen to everyone. But that doesn’t change how I let my own problems affect my firstborn.

“Tell me what you want right now,” I say, mimicking Papa Bear.

“What would you be doing normally?”

“I’m supposed to watch ‘Little Women’ for school,” Katana mutters, wearing her jealousy on her sleeve. “Mom was going to watch it with me and talk about it.”

Nodding, Nadia tells me, “We can do that. I just want the attention off me for a while, okay?”

Soon, we're in the family room, watching the movie. Katana sits on my right side, Nadia on my left. Mabie joins us while Clark takes his nap. Papa Bear peeks in on us regularly, in between entertaining Sister Sass who keeps reenacting the fight from the hotel.

The longer the movie goes on, the calmer the room gets. Katana stops giving Nadia dirty little glances. Nadia's wariness fades as does Mabie's anxiety. Everyone settles down. For those two hours, we learn to breathe in sync.

GHOST



Luca looks better than I remember. When her electric blue eyes focus on me, I'm left dumbfounded for a minute. I notice her smile at how I just stare at her. I bet I look pissed and disinterested. People claim I always look like an asshole. There's no off button for that in me.

Once Luca reaches where I stand, I wrap my hand around her waist and tug her closer until I can kiss her lips. There's more relief than heat in our embrace. I hadn't been fully sure she'd return. I think she distrusted the staying power of my interest. Either way, we share a little grin after our lips part.

"I need a shower," Luca says, and I immediately imagine her naked.

Her grin widens as she senses where my head has gone. She gives me a quick once-over. My dick twitches, approving of her interest.

We enter the Stockade to find Sweet Buns sitting on the couch. The curvy, middle-aged blonde flies to her feet, seeming on edge. Her anxious gaze washes over Luca before landing squarely on me.

"Hope's been agitated," Sweet Buns explains. "Won't eat or get out of bed. Hasn't showered since you left."

"Agitated how?" Luca asks when I say nothing.

"Grunts and goes limp if we try to force her out of bed. The shrink came to talk to her. Didn't help. She's getting dehydrated again. We thought we'd wait to see if she mellowed out after you returned. If not, she'll need to return to the clinic to ensure she gets enough fluids."

Luca doesn't rush to the bedroom. She tugs off her boots and removes her weapons. I watch her strip down and slide

into a pair of sweats from her bag in the living room. Only then does she crawl onto the bed where Hope rests on her side.

“I’m back, Hope,” Luca says and runs her fingers over the woman’s fingers scratching at the pillow. “We got Lady Bug’s daughter. I got to kick a guy. I also ate a really bad hamburger in Nevada.”

When Hope makes a weird noise. Sweet Buns instantly steps forward as if to check on her. I lift my hand to signal for her to stay put. She looks worried, not only over Hope but the old ladies don’t trust Luca. She reminds them of Ominous who rubs them wrong as often as possible.

“I didn’t get to shoot anyone with my gun. It was a little disappointing, so the trip wasn’t all good.”

Hope makes the noise again, and I watch Luca wrap her hands around the girl’s scratching one.

“It’s okay,” Luca whispers, sounding so tender that her words soothe my own edginess.

“I’m sorry I ran,” Hope mumbles, sounding thirsty as her voice breaks. “They punished you.”

Sweet Buns frowns and glances at me. I think back to the Dirty Princes’ compound. Thorn said another woman was dead in the underground prison. The bitch who worked for that club claimed Hope tried to escape but was worth more, so they hurt their other victim. Hope remained trapped in the dark with the body for at least a day.

At some point, Hope clearly got that woman and Luca confused. It makes sense. Luca has been with Hope since the compound. In her messed-up mind, the trafficking victim and Luca merged together.

Hope begins to whimper before hiding her face against Luca’s chest. Deep down, Hope probably realizes this is not the woman locked up with her. But if believing otherwise helps her heal, Luca seems willing to go along.

“We did what we had to do to survive,” Luca whispers as she cradles Hope. “No one has a right to judge us.”

As Hope whimpers and shakes, Sweet Buns asks me, “Should I get the shrink?”

“I don’t know.”

She takes that answer as a yes and starts texting like a speed demon.

I stand at the doorway and watch Luca. She seems calm. Her fingers against Hope’s cheek are tender. Nothing obvious gives away her pain, yet I feel panic rushing off her.

Luca plays the cool, comforting chick routine until Sharona shows up. As soon as she sees a chance to escape, Luca backs out of the room and rushes from the Stockade. I follow as she stumbles toward a bush and pukes. Her legs nearly buckle. When I try to steady her, she pushes me away.

“I can’t do this. I’m not that person,” Luca says, holding her hands out as if I’m a threat. “I thought Hope and I were connecting. Like, the things I shared were helping her. But she just thinks I’m that dead woman from the compound.”

Luca starts to walk before losing her balance and stopping long enough to steady herself. I stand passively as the sound of passing motorcycles startles her. Luca’s frenzy reminds me of my mom in need of a fix.

I’m frozen to my spot. All I’ve wanted the last few days was to see Luca again and force myself out of my comfort zone. Now, she’s flipping the fuck out, and I can’t make my feet move.

“I need to get out of here,” she says even as she backs away from the road and ends up behind the bushes where she crouches by the house. “I need to breathe.”

“Do you want to go for a ride?”

“I need to get out of the Sanctuary.”

“You just got back.”

Luca peeks at me through her platinum-blond hair. “I thought I could do this. Have friends, help Hope, and be with you. But it’s not who I am. I miss my cold, unfeeling bubble. Everything here is too much. I need to leave.”

“Fuck that,” I snap, feeling my own panic. “You can’t go until I’ve fucked you.”

Tears fill Luca’s eyes as she whispers, “She thinks I’m that dead woman.”

“That woman might have made her feel safe. Now you do. It’s all jumbled up in her head.”

“She doesn’t see me. I can’t save her.”

“Like you couldn’t save your sister.”

Of course, my words set off Luca’s tears. That’s what I do. I make shit worse for people. I hate my mom, but I’m just like her.

Luca sobs in her hands and mumbles, “When Drew showed up at my door with her baby, I wanted to send them away. I panicked over letting her drama fill my life. I wanted to stay on course, but I felt like it was my duty to help her. But maybe Drew would be alive if I had been colder and sent her away.”

“I don’t see how,” I grumble, unable to show her tenderness. “That guy was tracking her.”

Luca wipes her eyes and seems small crouched down against the house. I finally squat down next to her and take her hand.

“It’s not your fault you lived and she didn’t.”

Luca snuffles. “I could have run sooner. Gotten help. Or I could have fought back. I just did what I was told like with my aunt and coaches.”

“Most people don’t push back in those situations. And you probably would have been killed if you had fought.”

“I’ll never know, though.”

“No, since you survived while she didn’t, you’ve got to blame yourself.”

As I settle on the grass next to her, Luca rests her head against my shoulder and exhales. “Before Drew showed up, I’d been thinking about having a baby. My career was shifting

from appearances and tournaments to coaching. I had money saved up to work less. I'd already started looking at sperm clinics and bought a crib I saw one day while out with a teammate."

"No room for a baby as a vigilante."

"And I didn't want to feel that responsibility. Not after I saw my sister's reaction to learning her baby was dead." Luca begins crying, fighting every sob. "I'd watched her suffer with those men for two days but nothing compared to the pain when she realized Abilene was gone. She made an awful noise like her heart was literally tearing apart. I hadn't known what to do. The men were laughing at her while I just stood there. Then, Paul shot her, and everything became a blur. But I still hear that noise she made in my sleep. It's like Drew's haunting me."

"And you think helping Hope will silence Drew, but that's not how it works."

Luca wipes her eyes, hiccupping now. "I can't be responsible for that girl. Or you. I don't want to know Sister Sass's history or Dire's hopes. I can't be close to people. I thought this place would be my sanctuary, but I feel like I'm drowning."

Sliding my arm behind Luca's back, I tug her against me and don't let her escape.

"You're smart about a lot of things but stupid about others. For fuck's sake, it's only been a few weeks. Why would you feel safe here yet? This isn't your home. You're still in the Stockade. You need to be chaperoned everywhere. Of course, the Sanctuary hasn't healed you."

Luca stares into my eyes, pleading with me to fix her pain. "If I could just leave for a few weeks, I think I'd get my head back on straight."

"No," I growl, hating her for wanting to leave me. But then, as I consider how much I'll miss her, I lose my hate. "What we're doing isn't done, but I know you won't come back if you're gone on your own. You'll talk yourself into

waiting a few more weeks and then several months. Eventually, you'll decide it's been too long for you to come back."

Luca knows I'm right. Deep down inside, she understands how she wants to leave for good.

"For the first year I lived here, I barely spoke to anyone," I explain as my fingers slide across her knuckles, still healing from the raid on the compound. "I had to kiss ass and do errands for the founding members. I obeyed every order, but I wouldn't really look at them. If I was at HQ or The Lockup with those guys, I'd just drink my beer and keep my mouth shut. I only really talked to Apex and Thorn. Papa Bear, too. Hell, I barely said two words to Overlord during that time. I felt overwhelmed and intimidated. Here were these big-ass men ready to throw down at any moment. I was scrawny and felt sick a lot. I didn't know what I was doing at the Sanctuary, and I never really believed they'd let me join."

Luca's fingers caress my chest as if thinking of me as scrawny. Her gaze is soft when it meets mine. She's calming down and seeing more clearly.

I know we both closed ourselves off when we were young. While we were smart to put up the walls to protect ourselves, we're now trapped in the prisons we created.

"What happens when Hope realizes I'm not the woman from the compound?" Luca asks, sighing deeply as her panic peels away from her. "If she falls apart because I played along, isn't that my fault?"

"You can't save Hope. Maybe no one can. She's gotta save herself. We can only give her the tools. At least, that's what Papa Bear told me back when I was a prospect. I'd been attached to Apex, following him around like he was my security blanket. Papa Bear told me if I was drowning and grabbed for Apex, I'd take us both down. I needed to learn to swim on my own, but he was willing to give me lessons."

"I can't seem to warm up to Papa Bear."

"Why?"

“He reminds me of one of my mom’s old boyfriends. Also, of a man who visited my aunt’s house. They didn’t like me, so I don’t like him.”

“Papa Bear saved me,” I reply in nearly a whisper. “He saved a lot of people. I’d be dead now if he hadn’t seen something in me. I couldn’t have survived in the world. I’d have gotten high to deal with the way my body feels. Eventually, I’d have realized I turned into my mom and ended shit.”

Luca studies me before wiping her wet cheeks. “I haven’t been close to anyone in a long time. And even back then, I didn’t really feel like I could be myself. This trip made me feel both good and bad. I realized I liked those women. But I also felt like an outsider with no right to join their circle. That’s why I was so happy hunting bad guys. I did the job alone. No one to judge or reject me.”

Breathing easier, she explains, “With Hope reacting to me, I feel too much responsibility. I’m good at killing, but I fail people.”

“Just give yourself time here,” I explain, struggling to focus on her fears rather than my own. “That’ll give me time, too. And those biker chicks like you. But they’re like you in that they only trust people they really know. You were doing fine before you left.”

“Will you stay at the Stockade with me?” Luca asks as more motorcycles race by the house. “I don’t think I should leave Hope. I told her I was leaving for this job, but I’m not sure if she understood. I don’t know what’s happening in her head, but it’s probably best if I hang around here.”

Luca grips my shirt and stares into my eyes like I might reject her. I’m unnerved by the power I have over this fiercely independent woman. I don’t own the right tools for this relationship. I’m going to fuck up too much, and she’ll bail on me.

But while she was gone, I decided I would give this thing all I was capable of giving. If and when things went sour, I’d suffer no regrets.

That's why I stand and tug Luca to her feet. My thumb strokes away the single tear clinging to her beautiful face. Luca looks as emotionally exhausted as I feel. But she's watching me with such warmth. I gave her enough in my pep talk to lure her off the ledge.

We head back inside where Sweet Buns acts like Hope's current state is Luca's fault. I get how the old ladies are already accustomed to a passive, silent Hope. They think her crying and hiding her head under a pillow are signs she needs to be fixed.

Luca ignores Sweet Buns's angst, which I find hilarious. The old lady frowns at my chuckling. Sharona doesn't acknowledge our drama, instead focusing on Luca climbing into bed next to Hope.

"I got upset and sat on the ground," Luca tells Hope who tugs the pillow off her face to see her. "Now, my ass is dirty."

Hope doesn't speak, but she stops hiding. They watch each other for a few minutes while the shrink slowly backs out of the room.

"See if Luca can get Hope to eat or at least drink. If she still refuses, we'll need to talk to Doctor Sal about readmitting her to the clinic."

The shrink starts to leave before pausing at the door. "Even if Hope starts talking and eating, she still shouldn't be left alone. Also, double-check the house for anything she can use to hurt herself with. We don't know what the next week or two will look like, so plan for the worst."

With those dire words, Sharona leaves. I stand with Sweet Buns while Luca tells Hope about her trip.

"You can leave," I mutter to Tank's old lady.

"I don't think it's safe to leave her here with you two."

"Fine, then get comfy. Just don't talk or annoy me in any way."

Sweet Buns rests her hands on her hips and glares at me. "Tank is a founding member. No other man at the Sanctuary

talks to me like you do. You aren't special. You shouldn't get away with such disrespect."

"I can't help it. You remind me of my junkie mom."

Sweet Buns's angry resolve breaks immediately. Feeling pity for the kid I used to be, she settles into a chair and doesn't give me more attitude. I almost feel bad for lying. In reality, Sweet Buns doesn't remind me of my mom at all. I'm just a disrespectful guy.

But maybe that'll change. I didn't believe I'd ever want a woman, yet Luca is all I've thought about since her gaze first met mine.

LUCA



I haven't felt this tired since after Drew's death. I barely have the strength to hold up my head. I end up resting it against Ghost's shoulder as we watch a movie. My gaze isn't on the TV but the room where Hope rests.

I know she isn't my sister. Saving Hope doesn't fix what happened in my past. I'm aware of the logic, yet I feel the same pressure with her that I did with Drew.

Wanting Ghost is breaking down the walls around my heart. I find myself curious about people now. On the ride with Nadia, I considered asking questions. I did try to engage with the biker women.

But now, I'm not so sure about anything. Hope feels like a threat to my mental health. Those biker women expect too much from me. I'm ready to bail on it all.

Only the man at my side keeps me planted in this life. Ghost is an asshole. He doesn't really pretend to be anyone else. Maybe he can't be anything more than a grouchy fucker.

Yet, I find him relaxing to be around. We've pushed past the awkwardness. I feel like we're old friends now. We might talk mostly about movies and food, but there's a comfort in how neither of us is trying to impress the other.

After Sweet Buns leaves, I tell Ghost, "I promised Hope I'd take her to HQ when I got back."

"Why the fuck would you do that?"

"I thought she might be bored in this house."

Ghost's sapphire eyes scan the stylish yet comfy home. "Most castoffs leave during the day. It's why the house can be small."

"That's why I plan to take her to get a meal."

“No,” he says like a kid who can’t help shutting down every idea. “She’ll flip out. You can’t handle that, and I can’t handle you running away.”

“We could go at the tail end of service when most people are gone and HQ is quiet.”

“That doesn’t mean she won’t flip out.”

“Can’t you just carry her back here if she gets upset?”

Ghost leans back and frowns. “Wait, how am I involved in this? You should do it alone, so you’re the one to suffer the consequences.”

“I know you’re full of shit, so let’s skip to the part where you admit as much.”

Ghost smirks. “I don’t want to be her dad or whatever. Like, she’s never becoming my responsibility.”

“Why would she?”

“People at the Sanctuary attach themselves to other people. Everyone wants a new parent or partner or kid to replace what they lost.”

“Who are you trying to replace?”

Ghost narrows his eyes, offended by how I threw his logic back at him. I slide my hand over his thigh and squeeze.

“Am I supposed to replace your bitch mom or a rotten girlfriend?”

“Neither. You’re my new grandma,” he sneers.

Laughing at his bullshit, I like how his fake rage deflates immediately. He takes my hand from his thigh and holds it against his chest.

“You said you couldn’t handle the pressure of taking care of her. Why do something that’s bound to upset her? Is that you looking for a reason to leave?”

“Maybe,” I reply and then shake my head. “No, if I really wanted to leave, I just would.”

“Then why push this thing?”

Straddling his lap, I whisper, “I’m looking to move into your place and stink it up with my girl scent. I can’t do that as long as Hope’s so fragile. If she were stronger, I could have more freedom.”

“I don’t want you in my place.”

“Yes, you do. When I have to leave in the evening, you throw fits over missing me.”

Glaring at me, Ghost growls, “Fuck off.”

“I don’t mind your tantrums. A girl likes to feel wanted.”

Ghost reaches for my hands stroking his jaw. He considers shoving them away but his desire for me trumps his bitchiness.

“I like you,” he mutters, “but I’m not *in like* with you. Living together seems excessive.”

“If I do that prospect thing, won’t I live at the trailers with the other wannabes?” Ghost literally growls in response to my question, making me crack up. “Is that not a good thing?”

“They’re all guys.”

“And you fear for their safety?” I ask, brushing my lips across his furrowed brow. “Well, you should. I’m never letting any man touch my private spots unless he cries over me leaving.”

“I don’t cry.”

“You want to, though.”

“Yeah, sure, but I don’t,” Ghost mutters and shrugs. “Give me some credit.”

Smiling, I lift my shirt off and let him enjoy the possibility of what’s hiding under my black bra. “Will you come with Hope and me to HQ?”

Ghost admires my chest as his fingers dance along the bra seams. His gaze lifts to meet mine. “I don’t want to care about her.”

“Then don’t. Just come along because you care about me.”

“I don’t want to care about you, either.”

“Too late.”

“True,” he says and glances at Hope motionless in bed. “I had a girl castoff bite me once. I don’t need that in my life.”

“I’ll protect you. Don’t be scared.”

Ghost’s snarly expression flips as he laughs. “That’s right. You’re a super badass. If things get dangerous, I’ll hide behind you.”

“And I promise to keep you safe.”

His expression softens. I feel him considering how most women aren’t safe, but maybe I’m the exception to that rule.

His lips press against my collarbone. I feel him inhale deeply. His fingers slide behind me, soaking in my bare back.

I don’t speak, allowing him to savor this quiet moment. I used to believe Ghost was a complex man, and I needed a roadmap to figure him out. But he’s really quite simple.

As a child, he easily trusted people. He was weak and wanted comfort. Everyone was a possible ally. But he got burned again and again until he decided no one was trustworthy. That’s why he acts put out even when talking to his friends.

But deep inside, he’s still that kid wanting someone to wrap him up in their love.

I could be that person. Ghost makes me feel different. He’s lit a fire inside my long-cold heart, and I don’t want to walk away.

Admittedly, I panicked today. Bailing on the Sanctuary felt like the safe move, but I know I can’t survive without Ghost.

Never before could I be myself with anyone. I always had to hide flaws, pretend to be strong when weak, know the answers when confused, and stay calm when overwhelmed. I’ve been putting on a performance since I was a kid. With Ghost, I let the real me out as if I have nothing to fear.

My belief in him and us is likely delusional. Yet, for whatever reason, I plan to be the person to wrap him up in

love and make him trust again.

OVERLORD



The original plan was for Jules to bring Eliza's kittens to Hope at the Stockade. I'm amazed by how much effort she's putting into helping the young woman. After all, since Jules recently arrived at the Sanctuary, she's taken on my girls and helped me get my shit in order.

Papa Bear warned me weeks ago how Jules was pushing herself too hard.

"She wants to prove she's worthy of her second chance," he explained while we played pool at HQ. "You need to find a way to shut down that nonsense before she spreads herself too thin and comes crashing down."

I took his words to heart, scheduling breaks for Jules. We've gone out for date night. I asked Mabie to help out during the day to make sure Jules didn't push herself too hard.

And that might have been enough if her oldest brother didn't try contacting her.

"I'm fine," Jules told me again today when I showed concern for her behavior. "You said I should take it easy, so I'm just sticking close to home."

Despite how sincere she told that lie, I knew Jules was panicking. That's why she doesn't want to leave the house, even to eat at HQ. She knows her oldest brother isn't coming for her. Rafe's still locked up in prison. But he represents an old life unwilling to let her go. Our house is her safe space, so she's retreated there.

I don't push Jules or even point out how she's hiding. Instead, I ask people to pick up the kids and take them out to play or for therapy. Though Jules struggles to allow them out of her sight, she knows they're thriving with a more consistent routine.

Mabie, Giselle, Eliza, and Lady Bug visit the house often, keeping Jules from hiding in her head.

As for Jules's kitten therapy idea, I decide to pick them up for their Hope playdate. Once at the Stockade, I turn off the alarm and open the door. The burger scent hits me immediately as I enter. The kittens must smell it, too, because their squeaky meows become more frantic.

"What?" Ghost asks from the small table where he plays cards with Luca. "Oh, the kittens."

I smirk at the way he grumbles that last word. "Can I let them loose?"

Luca stands, gaining a hostile grunt from Ghost. "I'll get her."

"Are you done with your errands for the day?" I ask Ghost.

"Yes, Mom. Thanks for checking up on me."

As Luca goes to get Hope, I explain to Ghost, "I just want to make sure this new girlfriend of yours isn't a bad influence. I'm looking out for your future, like any good mother would."

Ghost's hostility makes me chuckle. He's like a surly dog worried someone will steal away his bone.

Luca guides Hope out of the bedroom. This plan with the kittens came up after Hope's second successful lunch at HQ. She's feeding herself more and will speak a little to Luca. If this keeps up, we'll add trips for dinner.

Now settled on the couch with Hope, Luca eyes the cat carriers.

"Let it rip," she says and tenses as if the kittens might come flying out and attack.

They do bolt out of the carriers, scattering in every direction before meowing in a panic when they can't find each other. Luca doesn't react one way or the other. Hope stares at the dark TV as if waiting for it to turn on.

Suddenly, the young woman flinches when a kitten walks over her bare foot. She yanks up her legs until her knees are

just under her chin. The kitten tries climbing onto the couch, drops on its ass, and meows like someone needs to fix shit.

I can tell Luca's worried the tiny furballs are upsetting Hope. Everyone's terrified of being the reason the young woman spirals.

Ghost walks over and frowns at the kittens who have found each other and now wrestle.

"I thought about getting a cat," he says and glares harder. "Aren't they supposed to exude indifference?"

Shrugging, I reply, "I think that's when they're older and know you'll clean up after them. Right now, they have a lot of energy."

"What if she's allergic?" Luca asks and leans closer to Hope. "Are you allergic?"

When Hope doesn't react, I announce, "I'll leave them here while I walk over to Papa Bear's place."

"No," Ghost grumbles. "You need to stay and supervise."

"I think three adults can handle four kittens."

"You thought wrong."

"I'm leaving," I tell him and walk to the door.

I half expect Ghost to jump me from behind as a way to distract from the kitten situation. He's weird about animals, overall. Doesn't like dogs. One time, he nearly punched a club brother's parrot.

Now, he's gotten his back up over the cats. Except as I'm walking over to my dad's place, I realize Ghost is really bothered by having to share Luca's attention. No way will she pay him any mind while four kittens wrestle and Hope is out of the bedroom.

Normally, I don't like to stand in the way of a new romance. However, since Ghost and Luca haven't fucked yet, I don't consider myself a cock blocker. At the very most, I've interrupted a card game.

As I arrive at Papa Bear's front porch, Kat stops brushing Mojito. She looks up at me and pouts.

"Mom is ignoring me so she can play with Nadia."

Squatting next to Kat, I ask, "Is that like how Evie claimed you stole her pigtails?"

Kat narrows her eyes at me, all diva-like. "I don't lie."

"Bullshit."

"I'm a little kid."

"I don't know what that has to do with anything."

"You should be more delicate with my feelings."

"Did Sister Sass coach you to say that?"

Kat smiles. "She says I'm supposed to claim my womanhood by destroying men while they're still boys."

"But I'm already a man."

"So you say."

"No, I'm fairly sure it's true."

"Well, I don't know any boys to destroy."

"Can't you bust Bomber's balls when you see him instead?"

Kat narrows her eyes and returns to brushing the dog. "You're not a good brother."

"I won't argue with you about that."

Standing up, I leave my sister and head to the kitchen, where Clark helps Mabie dump banana chunks into a blender.

"We're making a smoothie," she explains.

"With ice cream?"

"No, yogurt."

"Gross," I say dramatically, making Clark laugh. "Where is everyone?"

“Papa Bear went riding with Tank and Flagg. Lady Bug is getting ready to garden at the greenhouses.”

“And Nadia?”

“She’s in the living room, listening to us talk.”

Craning my neck, I lean around the kitchen island until I spot Nadia on the phone. Yesterday, Lady Bug, Kat, and Nadia went shopping. That explains my stepsister’s brand-new, red tennis shoes and matching iPhone.

Joining her in the living room, I think back to the young woman who fled the Sanctuary. Lady Bug had been an emotional wreck. Papa Bear promised Nadia would come back eventually. I never would have guessed it would take so long.

“How are you settling in?”

“Fine,” she says, eyeing me warily in that way women do when they’ve spent too much time around violent men looking for a reason to lash out. “I’m planning to get a job.”

“I’ll leave that to Lady Bug. I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

“I’m fine,” she says, still afraid to make eye contact.

“Do you think your boyfriend will cause you issues here?”

“No,” Nadia replies immediately and stares at her hands. “Rudy already has someone else. He just wouldn’t let me go. Now, I’m gone, and he’ll pretend it was his idea.”

“Before you travel alone into Metamora or Gallup Hills, I want to be sure no one might be looking to grab you.”

“Rudy isn’t like that.”

“He had a gun and made threats. Men who do that,” I say and gesture toward her face, “don’t let their victims go easily.”

“He’s weak, okay?” Nadia says, raising her voice. “He’s a pussy. The only people he pushes around are women. Not even women like Ominous. I knew he was terrified of her. Rudy knows about Papa Bear and the club. He tried to act tough in Reno, but those guys at the hotel were just his dumbass friends

from high school. They won't come here for me or look for revenge."

"You get how we want to help you, right?" I ask softly.

"Yes, but I'm not like the other people who come here. I wasn't held by a super powerful unit of psychos. Rudy is weak. I could have left early on, but then, he found the last stash of money Papa Bear sent. Once he realized I was worth money, he wouldn't let me go."

Nadia has no reason to lie. If she thought her boyfriend was a threat, she'd want us to be ready. Yet, I can't get over how awkward this house has gotten since she returned home.

With no way to fix the situation, I leave Nadia to sulk like our little sister.

Back at the Stockade, I find Ghost embracing his inner pissy asshole by sitting at the table and frowning at the wall.

On the floor, Luca and Hope become jungle gyms for the kittens who crawl all over them. I've never seen Hope so awake. She smiles more than once and strokes their little heads. Animals are like magic to some people. The horses at the ranch bring out the best in a lot of my club family.

After the kittens get tired and Hope seems overstimulated, I corral the furballs back into their carriers. Luca takes Hope to bed while Ghost glares at me.

"I'm giving Luca the info on that person she's been wanting to kill," I tell him.

His frown shifts immediately. "I hate you."

"I know. You've never been subtle."

"I'm going with her."

"I assumed as much."

Ghost radiates rage as Luca joins us. She doesn't react to his hostility. Her gaze is on me. She's giving me the "I've been a good girl, so give me what I want" look again.

"I hired a guy to track the asshole," I tell Luca. "I have his movements. The weekend would be the best time to hit him."

He's always on the move, giving you more opportunities."

I hand her the drive with the photos, maps, and other details loaded. "Ghost wants to go with you."

Luca finally turns off her "good girl" persona and sizes him up. He instantly gets pissed by her hesitancy.

"We'll probably fuck if we're alone for that long. Can you promise your dick won't distract me from the mission?"

"No."

Luca offers him a smile. "Well, I guess, that's a risk we'll need to take."

"I'll leave you two to come up with a plan."

With the carriers, I head back to Eliza's place. She's sitting on her front porch with Penthouse when I arrive. They act like I'm dropping off their kids. I don't appreciate how worried they seem. I'm the father of four. I can handle a few furballs for an hour, for fuck's sake!

Still, I'm relieved Penthouse finally made his move. Happy couples make the Sanctuary a calmer place.

SISTER SASS



The Sanctuary is always throwing parties for birthdays and anniversaries. But the club gaining a new member is a cause for a bigger celebration. And Dire's inclusion into our group feels particularly special. Her road from Sanctuary kid to barely surviving the ICU to becoming a member of the Born Villains was a long one. I'm proud of the work she's put in to earn her patch.

During the party, every healthy adult shows up at HQ to show their love for Dire. Most people stick around to drink, eat, dance, and share long-winded stories about how the younger members are soft. That last part was mostly Tank, Buzzsaw, and Dropout.

Ghost and Luca stop by for a short bit before returning to Hope. He seems a little less pissed off at the world. She looks as cold as ever. I don't know if I'll ever be able to read Luca. She even seems cold when she's walking around with Hope.

A few hours after they leave, I'm sloshed on lime jello shots and thinking about the happy couple.

"They both have resting bitch faces," I tell Dire who is eating way too many taquitos.

"Who?"

"Ghost and the lady."

Rave and Riot stop snickering at me long enough to nod in agreement. I realize I might be slurring my words at this point, so I stumble past Papa Bear and Lady Bug and through the back door.

Dire follows after me, finishing another taquito.

"Are you happy?" I ask as she chews her last bite. "You worked so hard to get to this moment."

Dire nods, glancing back at HQ where the party goes on despite the late hour and booze-filled company.

“I used to be jealous over how you recovered faster and got your patch sooner,” Dire explains as her fingers stroke her vest. “But there are times when I think you went too fast and skipped several steps on your way to becoming a healthier you.”

“What steps?”

Dire watches me in the darkness before shrugging in an exaggerated way brought on by the high quantity of booze she’s digested over the last few hours. “You still don’t think you own your body. That’s why you get so wound up on Jester coming home. You figure he’ll take what he wants, and you’ll have no say.”

“I love Jester.”

“Do you, really?”

Offended by the question, I step back. “Are my brothers feeding you this bullshit to tell me?”

“There it is!” Dire cries and points at me. “You still flip out when you think anyone is hassling you. Yet, you plan to roll over and present your pussy for Jester, no questions asked.”

“You’re being an asshole.”

“I’m being honest. Sure, some of it is the whiskey, but fuck it. I’m telling you how it is, Sister Sass. You need to grow the fuck up.”

“Eat shit.”

When I turn away, Dire grabs my arm and spins me around to look at her. “Why are you scared of Jester? He never fucked you, even after you turned eighteen. Did he pressure you back in the day and you covered for him? Where is this fear coming from?”

“I don’t want to make a mistake and get hurt again.”

Dire rests her palms flat against my cheeks in a weird show of tenderness. She smiles softly.

“You and I fucked up that night. We never even considered we’d get roofied by those frat boys. Nope. We were biker princesses, and they were lame. We didn’t have a care in the world.”

“I wanted to be grown up and forget my grief.”

“And I wanted to follow you around. We were dumb, like most eighteen-year-olds. But we’re not those chicks anymore. And if we’d dodged a bullet that night instead of nearly dying, you know what? We’d still be different right now. We’re older, more experienced, smarter. Just like everyone is as they get older. That’s why your dad didn’t want you hooking up with Jester until you were older. You might have been legal, but you were stupid like a kid.”

My guilt refuses to be silenced. Dire would have been patched in years ago if we hadn’t gone partying that night.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t smarter or tough enough to save us.”

“You’ve got to move on,” she says in a sad voice. “You’re still stuck reliving your pain. It’s like after Betty Boop died, and you refused to deal with your grief. You’re living in the past.”

“Well, aren’t you fucking healthy,” I grumble and shove her off me.

“My mom wouldn’t let me take shortcuts. You got coddled by your family.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, Sister Sass, fuck you!” she says and shoves me.

Dire dodges the punch I throw at her. We’re both so wasted, we lose our balance and end up on our asses. Still on the ground, we kick at each other.

“Ladies,” Thorn murmurs and plops down between our warring feet. “You’re kicking an innocent man here.”

“Well, get out of the way, then,” I snap at him.

“I’m too drunk to move. It’s a party, and I got myself fully bombed. You’ll just have to stop kicking.”

“Or we could roll away from you,” Dire suggests.

Thorn pats our knees and sighs. “I’ll just roll with you.”

“Stop interfering.”

“No.”

Dire leans into his body and starts laughing. “You’re such a naggy bitch.”

Thorn smiles at her reaction before asking, “Why are you two throwing punches during a celebration?”

“She tried to punch me,” Dire says and rests her head on his shoulder. “She makes everything about her. What a cunt.”

“You’re the jealous one, ya punk-ass fool.”

“Naw, I *was* jealous,” she says. “Now, I realize I have my shit in order. I’m getting my apartment just like I planned. I’ll wear my vest with pride. Might even find a dick to ride but never love.”

“I volunteer for that last part,” Thorn says while using his shirt to wipe Dire’s slobber from his arm. “You’re not going to die right now, are you? Is all this drooling related to alcohol poisoning?”

Dire snorts. “No, I can hold my liquor.”

“I only ask because I’ve been wasted plenty and never slobbered on anyone.”

“That’s just what you think,” I mutter, taking Dire’s side since I momentarily forget we’re feuding. “I’ve seen you slobber plenty.”

Thorn grins at my crap and then focuses on Dire. “Congrats on getting your patch. As your club brother, it’s my duty to hold your hair when you puke, but try to keep it off my shoes.”

“No one’s puking,” I insist and shove him.

Right about then, Dire makes me a liar by leaning over and barfing.

“Weak,” I snarl at her.

“It’s the taquitos,” she mumbles and stretches her leg around Thorn to poke me. “I’m fine with the booze.”

“What is this?” Overlord asks, stepping out of HQ with Jules by his side.

“She’s weak,” I tell my brother. “She also talked shit about you. Fire her from the club.”

Dire crawls over to him and whispers loudly, “She said you smell like dirty diapers, on account of how you have too many kids.”

“None of our kids are in diapers,” Overlord replies.

“Facts won’t stop Sister Sass from talking shit.”

I crawl over to where Dire lies about me and stare up at Overlord.

“I would never speak ill of my brothers,” I promise before fucking up by adding, “Even the diaper-smelling-chump one.”

Jules laughs while Overlord looks disappointed. *He gives me that obnoxious look a lot.*

“If you can’t hold your liquor, don’t drink,” Overlord says as if life is ever that simple.

“Am I weak?” I ask Overlord while using his body to help me to my feet. “Am I a bad friend?”

“My answer is ‘no’ just to avoid drama.”

“He’s right,” Dire mumbles while using a still-seated Thorn to brace herself as she stands. “You’re strong and a good friend.”

“Aw, I love you, Dire, even if you’re a big-mouthed bitch.”

Dire and I fall into a hug, remaining upright with each other’s help.

“And I love you, Sister Sass, even if you are a showboating twat constantly whining about her man

problems.”

Jules laughs again while I consider yanking on Dire’s hair. Rather than escalating a war I’m too drunk to win, I hug her and rest my cheek against her leather vest. The smell is so familiar and comforting.

I grew up viewing the vest and that patch as a sign of home and family. The first time I opened my eyes at the hospital, I didn’t focus on the people talking nearby. My gaze zeroed in on the patch across the back of my father. I’d been afraid at how my body felt. A panic grew in me as I became aware of the tube down my throat.

Yet, the patch felt like a warm blanket wrapped around me, promising I’d be home again soon.

As Dire and I stumble back into HQ, I push aside my insecurities and embrace the pride of wearing the vest alongside my friend.

APEX



Giselle's nightmare wakes us before the sun comes up. Her petite body squirms next to me. When I reach for her, Giselle flinches and falls out of bed. Scrambling away, she hides in a corner of our loft bedroom.

I slowly join her, speaking softly so she can find her way back to the present. Giselle finally wakes up enough to feel me. Her body wraps around mine as we sit in the corner.

"I was supposed to save them," she whimpers against my chest. "I ran away to get help, but I failed."

"Who?" I ask, knowing about the other "dolls" in Primrose, Texas. However, Giselle doesn't remember them, and Eliza promised not to share any ugly details about that place. "Who were you supposed to save?"

Giselle cups my face. I feel her staring at me in the darkness. Her breathing is ragged. Her pulse races. She's sweaty from the nightmare.

"I don't know."

"Do you see them in your head?"

"No. I feel them. A part of me knows I failed. It's trying to make me do something."

"Do what?"

"Call the police, maybe?"

"When you escaped, you came here. You didn't call the police for a reason."

"I left them behind," Giselle whimpers, before breaking into sobs. "I'm so happy here, and they're still back at that place. I don't know how to help them. It seems unfair that I get to be happy."

“It’s not your fault,” I reassure her as she sobs against me. “You didn’t choose that life. You escaped and wanted to help the ones left behind. It’s not your fault you hit your head and can’t remember. None of it is your fault.”

When Giselle still cries, I understand why my words have no effect. I heard similar things when my brother was murdered by my stepdad. People promised I wasn’t responsible. I didn’t make the bad things happen. I couldn’t have saved Crispin.

I didn’t believe them then, and I don’t to this day. In my heart, I’ll always be certain I could have protected us both. Yes, my stepdad was a monster, and my mom acted as his enabler. I know all that rational shit. But I also feel in my heart how I did something wrong that day.

Rather than tell Giselle more words she won’t believe, I cradle her against me until her tears end. I can’t fix her guilt, but I can make her feel safe in the darkness. While I hold her, I think about Texas.

According to Eliza, the Black Gold Four are dripping in oil money. They live on huge stretches of land surrounded by gates and security.

Why can’t Luca do to the Black Gold Four what she did to the Dirty Princes? Those assholes had security, too. She still managed to kill a majority of them. Could she free the women Giselle was forced to leave behind?

I’m still considering if I could just handle Texas myself when I see Thorn at breakfast. He’s been keeping to himself since we returned from Arizona. Unlike most of us, Thorn puts on a better show of being normal.

“Where’ve you been?” I ask him as Giselle and I stop at his table where he eats French toast with Vegas, Smoke, Puppet, and Topeka.

Giving Giselle a grin, he explains, “That shit at the compound hollowed me out for a while.”

“But you’re good now?”

Shrugging his big shoulders, Thorn admits, “The nightmares I got from that underground bunker ain’t going away. But I’m past wanting to camp out at my place.”

I don’t know what to say. Before Giselle, I’d be eating here with the guys. Ghost would be around, and we might all go riding afterward. I haven’t been doing much male bonding since I found my woman. The only time I seek out the guys is when Giselle does her girl stuff with Eliza, Mabie, Jules, and Lady Bug.

Giselle and I move to our table. Our plates are filled with offerings from the breakfast buffet. I frown at Giselle who seems tired.

“Do you think I’m a bad friend?”

“You’re my best friend.”

I smile at her words before getting cranky again. “But am I a bad friend to the guys?”

“No. If they need you, you’re there.”

“Thorn’s been in a weird place, and I didn’t check on him.”

“He had other friends to check on him. They know you’re going through your own stuff. That’s why they check on you.”

I think of my dying mom. When Lauren got in contact with me last year, she made it sound like she didn’t have much time left. I felt bad and started visiting her. Every time I dropped by the hospice, a dark feeling wrapped around me for days.

Not long after Giselle entered my life, I brought her to meet Lauren. Giselle didn’t mince words, stating she didn’t like my mom. Once I told her about the day Crispin died, she insisted I stop visiting Lauren.

I guess I was waiting for permission to cut off contact with my mom. Sure, Ghost told me repeatedly to stay away from Lauren, but he isn’t an objective person. He never trusts women. I catch him frowning at Giselle sometimes, as if she’s up to no good.

Once Giselle gave me permission to stop visiting Lauren, I cut contact with my mom. Blocked her number and the one from the hospice. I still think of Lauren every day. Just can't seem to ignore my heart lately.

"If you want to do man stuff with your biker friends," Giselle says as she pokes at her food, "I could hang out with someone or just be by myself tonight."

"What about Eliza?"

Giselle gives me a sweet grin. "She's going on a date with Penthouse."

Single women don't last long at the Sanctuary. The place is filled with unattached men. I doubt it'll be long before Nadia's hooked up with one of my club brothers.

That's not why I nailed things down so quickly with Giselle. Once I saw her, I just couldn't survive without having her close.

Running my fingers down her spine, I want her to have everything. If I thought I could kill the Black Gold Four assholes and save whoever Giselle left behind, I'd be on the road to Texas right now. But my skills aren't stealth-based. At least, that's how Overlord put it when I wanted to ride to Texas months ago.

"You'd end up dead, and Giselle would blame herself," he told me when I still insisted my plans were brilliant.

His words cut me deep. Not the dying part. I grew up thinking I'd never make it to adulthood. Every day, I assumed someone might end me. However, Giselle deserves to be free of guilt rather than have more dumped on her.

I'm thinking about the Black Gold Four situation when I meet Ghost at the gun range. Overlord ordered us to train for an hour. I thought he was giving me shit since I'm not great with a gun and would rather punch problems.

But then, I realized he wants Ghost to practice before he leaves with Luca tomorrow on their hunting expedition.

“How are you going to go on a trip with your girlfriend and not fuck?” I taunt him while we face the targets. “I couldn’t be alone with Giselle without wanting to feel her on my dick.”

“That’s because you’re a pig,” Ghost snarls before opening fire on the target and likely imagining my face. When the gunfire dies down, he adds, “And you have no self-control.”

“What’s the upside to self-control when you want Luca? Her ribs are probably all healed up by now. Why not make your move?”

“You know why.”

“No, man, she’s not a piece of food. You were never in love with a fucking taco.”

Ghost shoots me a dark glare. “Don’t say that word.”

“Taco?”

“No, love, you fucking moron. I’m not falling in love with Luca or anyone else.”

Shrugging, I decide to let my feelings fly. “I don’t know why Luca puts up with you. She could have any of the single guys, but she wants you. Seems like she’s cracked.”

“We’re all cracked.”

“Yeah, I might be fucked up, but I’ve never once wanted to date you.”

Ghost smirks. “If you were gay, you’d be all over me.”

Throwing my head back, I laugh for way too long. Ghost watches me with an angry expression. Finally, I settle down and shrug.

“Yeah, probably. I like you better than other men, and you’ve got pretty eyes and a shapely woman’s body. Yeah, I see it now. We’d make a good-looking couple.”

Ghost rolls his eyes. “Shut up.”

“No, man, if I could do a dude, I would be all over you. But since I can’t, you should probably focus your lust on

Luca.”

Ghost eyes the target as if he’s never hated anything more. He fires until his ammo’s spent, leaving a massive hole in the target’s face.

“I think I waited too long,” he mutters as he reloads. “I’ve built up the anticipation. Now, the fucking’s going to be garbage.”

“You know what I think?”

“Good Lord,” he mutters and opens fire again. When the day goes quiet, he throws in, “Just let it be.”

“I think you know it’s not about fucking. This woman matters to you. But if you don’t fuck her, you can pretend as if that one thing will keep you safe. Like she doesn’t already own your heart. As if you could walk away from her now without feeling pain.”

“I know it’ll kill me, and I know she won’t stay.”

“But maybe she will,” I say and poke him hard in the chest. “If you wrapped her up in your Ghost powers and made her feel special, she might realize nothing in the world feels as good. She’s been alone for a long time. We know how that feels. It’s why we can’t leave the Sanctuary or the club. If Luca feels that way with you, she won’t want to go back to a cold world.”

Ghost frowns at the rugged land around us. “I don’t know why Luca likes me. If I were her, I wouldn’t want me.”

“In a roundabout way, you’re insulting me,” I say, and he glares in my direction. “If I was gay, you’d be my dream guy.”

“Yeah, yeah, my pretty eyes and shapely chick bod.”

“So beautiful. You’re a good listener, too. I mean, you frown a lot, so it seems like you want the person to shut up. But that’s just your face,” I say and shove him. “Your pretty, pretty face.”

Ghost chuckles. “I get it. You can stop flirting with me now.”

I lift my gun to aim at the target and tell him, “You’re lucky as fuck that we’re not gay because I’d so dominate you and our relationship. Wouldn’t even be close.”

“Sure. Like you dominate our friendship.”

Before firing, I frown at him. “I do.”

“For the entire time we’ve known each other, I have set the pace.”

“That’s not true.”

“I can see how you’d think that, but you’re wrong. I’m the dominant one.”

“Are you the dominant one with Luca?”

“No,” Ghost says as if he never noticed that fact before.

Smiling at how my wisdom just blew his fucking mind, I fire at the target. I hit stuff. Not necessarily what I’m aiming at, but if a few members of the Horned Angels Motorcycle Club were standing together, I’d most definitely hit one of them. Good enough for me.

“This weekend will likely end this thing with Luca,” Ghost says as we pack up. “We’re sharing a room. That was my idea. I thought about getting my own and making it away from hers. Except I worry she’ll bail when I’m not around.”

“I don’t think you see her clearly. You only focus on your feelings. But from where I’m standing, Luca doesn’t seem like she wants to run. Mostly because if she wanted to go, she could. No one is making her stay.”

“When she got back from Reno, Hope freaked her out. Luca said she wanted to bail.”

“But she didn’t bail. Luca always seems relaxed when I see her around the Sanctuary. She was walking with Hope the other day. And I saw her with the biker chicks one morning. And her interest in you isn’t subtle, man. You need to settle the fuck down and stop waiting for her to end shit.”

Ghost nods as if my words make sense. I’m rarely the guy who says anything smart. But I see the world better since

Giselle entered my life. Her love opened me up. I'm not healed or anything, but I'm definitely different.

Maybe if Ghost lets Luca close, he can be different, too. I hadn't thought she was good enough for my friend. I figured he needed someone soft like I did. But Luca brings out Ghost's better side, plus she's tough enough to put up with the rest of him. Since Reno, I can imagine Ghost and Luca being together in a real way, even living on Tobosa Road and borrowing sugar from me.

As we're leaving the shooting range, I get a text from Overlord to meet Giselle and him at Papa Bear's house. I know Ghost plans to check on Luca at the Stockade. The text's tone makes me want to ask him to come along. He notices something on my face. We stare at each other, waiting for the other one to speak.

"Something might be happening," I finally say and show him the text.

"I'll be nearby if you need backup."

We both know nothing violent is about to go down. More likely, Giselle's bad dream spurred action on the Black Gold Four. Or trouble's come to Metamora from the people looking for her.

Ghost and I ride back to the heart of the Sanctuary. I peel off to go to Papa Bear's house while Ghost pulls up to the Stockade.

Climbing off my hog, I spot Giselle on the porch. She's wearing a sad expression. I run to her and wrap her in my arms. No matter what's coming for Giselle, I'm willing to take the brunt of the pain. She's suffered enough for this lifetime.

"What's wrong?" I ask with her cradled in my arms.

Giselle's pale blue eyes flash to Overlord and Papa Bear standing next to us now. The men are wearing their own sad expressions.

"Apex," Papa Bear says, taking the lead. "Your mom's gone."

I look down at Giselle who reaches up to stroke my jaw. “It’s okay.”

“I know. I don’t care about that woman.”

Papa Bear gives me a soft smile. “It’s not going to be that easy.”

“I knew she was going to die.”

“She was your last connection to Crispin,” he tells me and rests his hand on my shoulder. “You need to let yourself feel this.”

Hearing my brother’s name hits harder than knowing Lauren’s gone.

“I think you should handle her memorial,” Papa Bear explains.

“Fuck that. Let her friends do it.”

“She didn’t have any friends except those at the hospice. Besides, you need to work through this now, not later when you aren’t ready.”

Giselle squeezes my hand and says, “I’ll help you.”

Opening the front door, Overlord asks, “Why don’t we go inside and make a list of what needs to happen next?”

I feel lightheaded as I fight to shove the past back where it belongs. Lauren’s death shouldn’t affect me. I’ve hated her for too long. Her death is a burden lifted off my shoulders.

Yet, I’m still spinning. Grief hits me hard. Not for her but for my brother. No one remembers him except me now. Once I’m gone, it’ll be like Crispin never existed at all.

Giselle hugs me like I did her this morning. Now, I’m the one spiraling. Following Papa Bear into his house, I want to run away and feel bad. Except Giselle keeps me anchored in a place where people won’t let me fall.

GHOST



I feel more fucked up than usual when I hear Apex's mom is dead. I'd never met the bitch. Couldn't wait for her to be dead. Apex is better off with her gone. Her death still triggers ugly shit inside me.

Mostly, I'm fucking jealous. I don't know how my mom is still kicking. Hell, even my grandmother refuses to die. I wish they'd stop wasting oxygen.

Beyond jealousy, I don't know what happens next. After getting the news, I walk over to Papa Bear's house. Tension hangs in the air, leaving me to wonder if I need to postpone the hunt for Hope's dad.

Except if I stick things out here with Apex, I'm not sure Luca will wait for me. She's been different since she got the info on Hope's dad. She studies it constantly, memorizing facts, strategizing how to end him. With Luca in hunt mode, I doubt she'll postpone the trip.

Apex doesn't need me to hold his hand. He's got Twinkle Toes to soothe his broken heart. His mom might have been a royal fucking bitch, but he'll be thinking about Crispin a lot now. What can I do for him that Giselle can't?

Instead, I focus on keeping Luca alive. Her badass skills don't change how she nearly died less than a month ago. If those assholes hadn't been so greedy, they'd have put a bullet in her head and I'd never have known what I was missing.

"I could fix your mom problem," Luca offers as we step into our hotel room just outside Vegas. "If you're jealous of Apex, I can give you the same closure he just got."

I study her from my spot near the door. We're on the top floor of a mid-tier hotel. The room is spacious, leaving Luca

feeling far away when she walks to the window to admire the view.

“I should say yes,” I grumble, thinking of the way my mom toyed with my heart and ruined my chance to be normal, “but I don’t want to.”

Luca glances at me over her shoulder and smiles. “I understand. Even though my mom was a train wreck, I still missed her once she was gone. Nothing personal, it’s just how we’re wired.”

Luca realizes I’m stuck at the door. The room is too bright, and I’m edgy from being away from the Sanctuary. When I do run for the club, I get in a different mindset. Cold and filled with hate, I can’t feel my nerves on fire or how bright the day might be.

With Luca, I’ve lowered my guard, leaving me to feel everything.

As she stands at the large windows, the light wraps around her blonde hair, giving her almost a halo. My avenging angel looks glorious as she watches me.

“You could have asked me to wait,” Luca says as she walks toward me.

“Apex doesn’t need me there.”

“Not really, no,” she says, pausing halfway as if sensing I need my space. “But he probably wants you around when he’s dealing with the funeral stuff. I see how he’s calmer around you than with the other club guys.”

“Should we go back, then?” I grumble, still stuck at the door.

Luca finishes walking to me and sighs. “No, we’re already here. But you still should have asked.”

“If you knew I wanted to wait, why didn’t you just wait without me asking?”

Luca’s bright eyes reveal a woman unwilling to bend to my bullshit. “It’ll never be that way between us. You must

speak up like a big boy. I refuse to guess like I have to do with Hope.”

“Bitch,” I sneer.

“Whiner,” she growls back.

We share a smile. Luca turns away before I can get a taste of her lips. I watch her long legs make quick work of the room as she tugs the curtains closed. As the room turns dark and gloomy, my muscles unclench. I can breathe easier now.

Luca tosses her suitcase on the bed and removes her SilencerCo Maxim 9 from a beauty case. She assembles the weapon and shoves it into a goofy-looking purse, complete with pink tassels.

“Why?” I ask when she glances at me.

“It doesn’t look like the bag of a badass. Sometimes, I need to get close to someone with actual trained security. Looking like a killer is a great way to gain their attention. But if I look like a lame-ass tourist, people rarely give me a second glance.”

“I doubt that. You’re sexy as fuck.”

Luca’s expression shifts immediately, and I regret complimenting her. The heat between us feels great, but I fear giving in to it. Without a doubt, I’ll disappoint Luca. I’m not good at fucking. Her beautiful body will be wasted on my efforts. Once she figures out how much I truly suck at life, Luca’s bound to walk away.

“We’re going hunting,” Luca says as she wraps her body against mine and pins me to the wall. “This is my first time with a partner. I need you to get in the right headspace.”

“What does that mean?” I grumble before spitting out, “You know I can’t control when my wires get crossed.”

Luca kisses me softly as her fingers slide under my shirt and tease my belly button. Her desire cuts through my anger, leaving me swimming in lust and sporting a boner.

“That wasn’t particularly helpful,” I tell her as I adjust my cock.

Luca stares in my eyes and startles me by saying, “I can’t let you die. This thing today shouldn’t be dangerous. Hope’s dad is just a crummy gambling addict. But I’m still scared you’ll get hurt.”

“I’m not a fucking baby,” I mutter, hating how she sees me.

Luca presses her thumbs against my temples and stares into my eyes. “You need to hear me. Not that bullshit in your head. Can you do that? I’m not scared because of any doubts about your skills. I’m scared because I can’t go back to living without you.”

“I’ll let you take the lead,” is all I can think to say.

Luca smiles softly and leans into my embrace. Unlike Apex and Giselle with their elephant-and-kitten thing, Luca and I fit just right together. I press my face into her soft, blonde hair and inhale the familiar scent

I can’t help smiling at how well I already know Luca. Back at the clinic, she seemed untouchable. I never thought we’d share anything real.

Now, holding Luca against me seems casual and normal. For a man like me, normal might be the best fucking feeling in the world.

LUCA



Ghost claims my plan is madness. He tries to change my mind several times during our drive to Hope's hometown just outside Vegas. I explain my reasoning behind the plan, but he isn't convinced.

After all, killing someone in public seems reckless. However, I've done it more than once. It's easier than sneaking up on someone or breaking into their house. In a crowd of people, someone falling over creates confusion, and confusion can be a killer's gift.

On the first day, Ghost and I track the piece of shit named Emery from when he leaves his dumpy house around six in the evening. I imagine Hope's life before her father sold her off to pay his gambling debts. The neighborhood is run down and not particularly safe for a young, attractive teenager. We pass the dilapidated school she likely attended.

Hope still doesn't really talk. She'll say my name or choose food. But she hasn't said anything about her old life. Maybe she misses it.

I try to see this neighborhood from her eyes. Did she have friends or a job? Was she dating? Did anyone search for her after she disappeared?

No one filed a missing person report for Hope. Though her father likely claimed to people that she moved away, who would believe him? Poor teenage girls with friends and relationships don't just pack up and move.

If the cops had pushed her father even a little bit about her disappearance, he would have quickly cracked. Emery's got a jittery vibe, always checking over his shoulder. A man like him wouldn't do well under pressure.

I'm not looking to interrogate him. I've never been one to enjoy torturing my targets. I tried once. Thought it would even out the universe to have the guy suffer like he made those kids suffer.

But he just cried and felt sorry for himself. There was no self-awareness. In his mind, he was a victim. And the pain blurred for him quickly. In the movies, there are degrees of torture, and each one is worse. But in real life, a person goes into shock relatively easily. The pain wraps around the person, making them immune to new suffering.

Torturing an asshole didn't turn out like I expected, so I never tried again. I don't plan to change my ways now, especially when Ghost is always a breath's distance from me.

After tailing Emery to a busy street near the smaller casinos and off-the-books gambling haunts, Ghost and I continue our hunt on foot. I don't hurry after my target. Killing someone in a heavily monitored location isn't an option. We just need to stay close enough to watch his habits.

"I doubt we'll kill him today," I told Ghost before we exited our black SUV. "I like to do recon first."

Since he knows I worked the same way against the Dirty Princes Motorcycle Club, Ghost didn't complain.

The truth is I'm reluctant to kill Emery today because I don't want to return to the Sanctuary yet. Ghost is currently out of his comfort zone. I'm his only friend out here in the world. If I want to push past his walls, tonight at the hotel would be the best time. Something could go wrong when we hit Emery. Death or the law might ruin our mini-vacation.

For the next two hours, we follow after Emery, who hits up several casinos. Tailing someone is usually boring, but this guy is erratic. He'll play a few hands. No matter if he wins or loses, he'll suddenly leave. I suspect he's on many casinos' banned lists. Each time Emery bails on a place, I play the ditzy blonde and drag Ghost away from whatever shit we were doing at the time.

Once again on a busy street, Emery gets himself immersed in a heated phone call. Since we can't pass him, I pin Ghost against a wall a few yards behind the asshole.

My sexy biker grunts his disapproval as I glue my body to his. Stroking his jaw with mine, I want to do more than scent him kitty-style. I crave his powerful body stripped down. I've seen what hides under his leather and denim. This time when he's naked, I plan to do more than sneak peeks.

"You're making me feel wild," I tell him as my hands slide under his jacket. "You've whipped up a heat inside me."

Ghost snarls, "You're just horny."

My hands pause mid-caress as I stare into his eyes. "Don't dismiss my feelings that way. I'm not someone who feels lust. I've faked my way through sex a few times, but I never wanted anyone inside me. So maybe lust is no big deal for people you know, but it's a new thing for me."

Ghost stops shooting daggers and goes soft before my eyes. He cups my face and kisses me hard. His tongue demands entry. We've kissed plenty of times. He's even felt me up. Ghost isn't asexual. He wants to fuck, but he fears his body won't cooperate.

Now, we grab hold of each other and refuse to let go. I don't know when Emery walks off. I'm too focused on Ghost's fingers wrapping under my ass and tugging me closer.

When our lips break free, I stare into Ghost's eyes and hope he feels what I do.

"I don't want to be here," I say and grip his shirt. "We need privacy."

Unable to reclaim his cold exterior, Ghost can't hide how he wants to claim me. Some part of him understands how he already owns my heart. But Ghost's too afraid to push for more and ruin what he has now.

I see the moment his resolve snaps. No longer afraid, he takes my hand and walks with purpose back to the SUV. We slide into our spots before he presses his lips against mine,

sucking the air out of the vehicle. His lust feels like a wild entity released after a longer slumber.

As we drive back to the hotel, I'm the one feeling unsure. Ghost will own me in a new way after today. Am I really ready for commitment? Can I handle the responsibility of holding his heart in my palm? Is my need for him enough to push past long-buried trauma?

Yes, to it all!

My clothes feel like a burden, even before we reach our top-floor room. Once the door shuts behind us, I tug free of my jacket, gun holster, and weapon. Yanking off my boots, I smile at Ghost.

“The moment I saw you at the compound, I felt this moment coming. Can you believe that shit?” I say and throw my head back and laugh wildly as if I've broken free of my chains. “I was tied to a fucking board with my tooth ripped out and expecting to die. But then, I saw you and pictured us naked.”

“I can't say romantic shit like that,” he grumbles, feeling on the spot.

I shove my pants down and yank up my shirt. Standing in my black underwear, I steal the grumpiness from his face. His gaze sharpens. His breathing grows heavier. Ghost is now blind to everything except the pulsing need between us.

“I don't want you to say anything,” I tell him as I plaster my body against his and shove him back onto the bed. “I just want you to want me.”

“I've never wanted anything more,” he says, seeming unsure.

“Stop trying to be Don Juan and just be Ghost. That's the man I want, and he isn't capable of flowery words or promises. But he does make me feel like the world is more than pain and vengeance.”

Ghost wraps his hand against the back of my head, holding me steady for a breath-stealing kiss. I moan into his mouth as

he rolls us over. Now on top, he tugs his lips free and lets his gaze soak in my bare flesh.

His jacket soon hits the floor, followed by his shirt. I admire his tanned, tatted flesh as his heavy boots drop to the ground. When I reach for him, Ghost snags my hand and presses it back against the mattress. He lowers his lips to my jaw, sucking softly.

My lust breaks through my usual need to take the lead. His kisses leave me soft and vulnerable. I suspect my touch does the same to him.

Ghost's lips suck at my throat as his fingers tug down my bra straps. I try to stroke his head, yet he gently swats away my hands. Unwilling to overstimulate him and end our fun, I dig my fingers into the sheets.

Ghost's hands move with intent. Sliding under my body, he unhooks my bra and drags the fabric away. After Ghost shimmies my panties down my hips and thighs, I'm fully exposed to his gaze.

He kisses me with a tenderness I'm not expecting. Ghost finally lets me wrap my arms around him. He seeks comfort as if my vulnerability has infected him.

"I haven't loved anyone in a long time," I whisper as tears burn my eyes. "But I know I love you."

Ghost stares into my eyes, saying nothing. He's heard so many sweet promises from those he trusted. A part of him wants to protect his heart and shove me away. Why take another chance? We're still strangers in a million ways.

Rather than raise his armor, Ghost kisses me again before offering a sly grin. "You need to behave," he insists as he slides down the bed. "Don't be bossy. I'm in charge. Get it?"

Lifting myself up on my elbows, I cock an eyebrow as he inches between my thighs and rests my right leg over his shoulder. If any other man told me to behave, I'd instinctively want to make him miserable. Overlord's rules drive me crazy, but I bow to him so I can stay with Ghost.

Now, I have my sexy, bitchy biker blowing on my unloved, overheated pussy. I sigh at the feel of his beard tickling at my inner thigh as he nibbles at my flesh. My toes dig into the mattress as I watch this beautiful man make me weak.

Ghost spreads my pussy and inhales sharply. My body clenches with anticipation. I lick my lips, mimicking him.

His finger dips inside my pussy, testing just how wet I am for him. Sliding it free, Ghost licks my juices while his gaze holds mine. There's no challenge to his expression. He isn't playing a game. His eyes reveal everything—lust, distrust, hope, anger, and finally love.

I remain quiet, docile even. With my legs spread open, I'm completely exposed. Ghost isn't even naked yet. He holds all the power. If he wants to hurt me, I've got no armor left.

"I've never gone down on a chick before," Ghost says in a rough voice.

"Neither have I."

Ghost's edgy gaze breaks as he chuckles. "Well, then, you can understand how I feel."

"I shouldn't say this," I mumble, nearly stopping myself. "But I don't care if you're a bad fuck or gobble my pussy like a hog with its head in a trough. I just want you inside me. I need to be close to you. I want nothing left undone between us. The actual sex could be awful, but I'm so fucking excited anyway."

"You're weird," he mutters, unsure if I'm for real.

Smiling, I brush his hair from his face. "So are you. We're fucked up and clueless, but I really want this to happen."

Ghost offers me a little grin. He rarely smiles in this way, so unguarded, almost sweet like a kid without a care in the world.

"You won't leave," Ghost says, edgy again. "After this is finished, you're not going to bail."

"I said I love you."

“Yeah, but women say a lot of shit to get what they want.”

“It’s true that I do enjoy lying.”

Ghost narrows his eyes as his fingers absentmindedly tease my clit. Sighing, his wariness deflates.

“But you’re not lying now.”

“No.”

“And you won’t bail.”

“I don’t think I can survive without you.”

Ghost’s breathing hitches, and he blinks rapidly. I’m offering him too much. He can’t handle the burden of other people’s needs any better than I can.

“I know I can’t survive without you,” he says in a sad, soft voice. “If you leave me, I’m never coming back from that loss.”

“We get this one shot,” I whisper, tearing up. “And I’m really scared to fuck up or rely on anyone. But I still want this.”

Ghost lifts himself up and kisses me gently. First, on my lips, and then against my wet cheeks. He feels different now. His armor, forged from rage and heartbreak, has slipped off.

We’re both bare now, revealing two messed-up people afraid we’ll fail at our one shot at being happy.

“I’m going to try and eat you out now,” he says against my ear. “If it’s terrible, just tap my head and I’ll fuck you. I know how to do that much.”

“I’m not a good lay,” I say, forcing him to meet my gaze. “I can’t connect to someone else. We both have terrible moves. Let’s just accept that fact and have fun.”

Ghost grins and kisses me again. Seeming less burdened now, he slides down my body, leaving wet kisses against each curve. His lips linger on my breasts, sucking at my hard nipples.

Encouraged by my moans, Ghost kisses my belly. He pauses to give an especially tender kiss to a scar across my belly.

His hot breath against my pussy makes me gasp. I've never been so aroused. I feel on the verge of an orgasm already.

And I'm right. Ghost spreads my pussy open and offers my clit a long, loving kiss. My heels dig into the mattress, and my head falls back. I feel like I'm spinning as the heat from my pussy flushes through my entire body. Groaning deep in my chest, I'm almost embarrassed by how easily I've come apart, as if my body is a cheap thing with no standards.

"Already?" he asks after sucking my clit through the orgasm.

"You're really hot, and I really want you."

Ghost shrugs his shoulders and smirks. "I can see that. I'm nearly jizzing in my fucking jeans right now."

"Let me see," I insist as I sit up. "I want you naked and satisfied. Then, we'll both be calm enough to play around and see what works."

Ghost frowns at my hands on his zipper. "Apparently, just kissing your clit works."

I grin at his arrogant tone while dragging his jeans down his hips. His impressive cock springs free, begging for my attention. Blowjobs have always seemed like the nastiest shit possible. But with Ghost, I'm dying to feel the length of him sliding along my tongue.

As I suck him into my mouth, Ghost groans as if in pain. My gaze flashes up to check on him. But he's just watching me with those beautiful blue eyes. Not a hint of uncertainty can be found on his face, leaving me to return my attention to his cock.

His salty precum quickly coats my tongue. I take deep drags on his flesh, drinking down his pleasure. Ghost is so close. His balls feel heavy as I softly stroke them.

"Luca," he says as if reassuring himself.

Feeling him nearly there, I draw his cock deeper down my throat. My mouth tightens around his flesh, sucking harder, wanting him to let go.

I feel Ghost thinking he needs to last longer, as if it's a rule men should follow.

Popping his cock free, I smile up at him as I lick jizz from the tip. "Ghost," is all I say as I hold his gaze.

I suck his cock faster as my right hand wraps around the base and my left strokes his balls. Ghost stops trying to be in control and lets himself dissolve into the pleasure.

When he says my name again, the word sounds like a warning. He's letting go. His balls release everything he's had pent up inside him. I swallow every drop of his pleasure, feeling detached from my past and future. Right now, I'm simply a woman in love with a sexy man at her disposal.

GHOST



Luca is a gorgeous woman. Sometimes, when she's pissed or on alert, she can seem too attractive like the sexed-up robot from the third "Terminator" movie. But when she lowers her guard like right now, her beauty feels hypnotic. I can't peel my gaze away.

Not as I fist my hard cock and think about her wet pussy begging to be fucked. Or when she pops up from her sultry position and kisses me.

"I love the way your body moves. Your flesh is sharp and sleek," she purrs before leaning around me and gently biting my ass cheek. "I'm so excited."

Chuckling at her weirdness, I'm unbelievably fucking relieved Luca isn't one of those passive chicks in bed. If she just fell back and waited for me to pleasure her, I'd crack under the pressure. Banging chicks in the back of The Lockup didn't prepare me for wowing this beautiful woman.

Wearing a silly smile, Luca bounces on her knees and slides her hand over mine. My dick twitches under her soft touch.

When her electric blue eyes focus on me, I feel undeserving of her affections. What have I ever done worth bragging about? My life consists of hiding at the Sanctuary with people who put up with my crap. I didn't even hunt down and kill the men who hurt me as a kid.

Luca seems like a prize I don't deserve to keep.

Yet, her carefree smile makes me feel like she's the one who's won.

"Stop bogarting that hunk of meat," she says and then throws her head back and laughs. "My dirty talk needs work!"

Covering her lips with mine, I breathe in her carefree vibe and stop putting off what we both want.

I wrap an arm around her body and lean her back. My teeth nip at her throat before giving each of her perky tits a nibble. Her red nipples harden between my lips.

Luca spreads her long, powerful legs, leaving her pussy stretched out and begging to be fucked.

Fisting my cock again, I slide the head against her swollen clit. Luca flinches and starts breathing faster.

“My skin is on fire,” she says with a mix of desire and fear.

Our gazes meet and hold. A silent conversation takes place. *Does she want me to stop?* No. *Do I want to stop?* No fucking way! But maybe our bodies will betray us once my cock fills her.

I’m aware of how overstimulated I already am. Normally, I’d back off, smoke a joint, and try to settle myself. But with Luca, I want to feel more, not less.

Yet, I hesitate. I feel like the line we’re crossing will be the end of us.

“I know you,” she says softly. “You know me, too.”

Her comforting words bring me back to reality. Luca won’t be startled if I flip out. And I won’t be surprised if she cries or wants to stop. This might be new, but we’re not strangers.

As my lips cover hers, I sink into her hot flesh. Luca moans approvingly. Her hands are in my hair, soft yet commanding. She wants more.

My hips thrust, filling her completely. The pleasure nearly breaks me. I’ve been suffering from a low-grade heat since I first saw Luca. Whenever I close my eyes, she’s waiting for me. She owns my dreams. I always feel her against me, even when she’s not.

Now, she tightens her pussy around my cock and sighs deeply. Her legs wrap around my hips. Her fingers wrap around my biceps. Luca is completely present.

I stare into her eyes, ignoring the way my body wants to overreact to every sensation. Luca holds my gaze, at first seeming too intense before a smile warms her face. She's struggling to stay out of her head. I feel better knowing I'm not the only one on the edge here.

Her fingers disappear into my chest hair, stroking me softly, keeping my brain focused on her touch rather than how my every nerve is on fire.

Every time I feel myself hitting a point where I want to back away, Luca says my name. Soon, I'm moving faster, filling her deeper, making her flush bright pink.

As my pleasure builds, I rock into her body. My jaw is clenched. I'm utterly focused. Everything falls away until Luca reaches down to stroke us both. Her ultra-sensitive clit needs so little to set her off. But her fingers also brush across my balls.

I'm startled by my orgasm. With my brain overloaded with signals from my horny, fucked-up body, I can't think straight.

Our bodies move together, my hard flesh against her slick flesh, until we're spent.

I drop next to her, swimming in pleasure and pain. I feel like the room is closing in on me. The sunlight burns my eyes, leaving me steeling myself against too much stimuli.

As I drape an arm across my eyes to block out the light, Luca rests on her back next to me. She doesn't speak. I don't know if she's disappointed or angry. My brain starts self-sabotaging by claiming she'll leave me now. Or I've proven I'm beneath her. I'm overloaded with endless criticism.

Luca's long fingers slide against mine, taking my hand as her rapid breathing slows.

"When I was being tortured by the Dirty Princes, I remember being angry about a lot of things," she says as her voice fills the room, distracting from the loud air conditioner and the noise in my head. "Mostly, I was pissed about being tortured. But I also remember thinking how I'd never see the end of that 'Goodfellas' movie. I'd started watching it once in

a Tallahassee hotel. I was around the part where the main guy gets married and the wife is doing the voice-over about how gross all the other mob wives were. Then, I had to leave to hunt a target, and I never saw how it ended. At the biker compound, I remember thinking I'd die without ever knowing if that little psycho Joe Pesci got whacked."

Luca squeezes my hand. "I don't want to go back to the Sanctuary after Hope's dad is taken care of."

Forcing my eyes open a crack, I turn my head to find her resting with her eyes shut.

"I can't survive without the Sanctuary," I tell her, unable to lie.

"I don't mean never going back. I just want to drive into Vegas and gamble and eat buffet food. I've never played roulette or a slot machine. I've never tasted a Long Island iced tea. I want to see one of those Cirque du Soleil shows and listen to a lounge singer do cover songs from long-dead singers. Will you stay with me while I try those things?"

"Why now?"

"Because I always figured I'd have time to do them. But then I was tied to a board and had my tooth ripped out. I started thinking maybe I'm too old and live too dangerously to be putting off things for tomorrow."

Rolling on my side, I let my gaze wash over her body. Not to get my dick hard again, but to see her stripped bare like she saw me that day when she showed up unannounced at my townhome.

Luca's life story is written across her body. I admire her muscled frame, toned from decades of athletic training. Vigilantism became just another sport.

I see scars on her knees and elbows, likely from diving for balls. I found clips of her playing online. She was different back then. Colder, maybe. Her life was about her team, the sport, winning.

I notice the scar across her stomach, thin and ragged. She said one of the rapist fucks mocked her for not having a kid.

Said she was too selfish to be a mother, likely too lazy to give birth as God intended. He sliced her stomach to mock how the kid would be removed. Though the knife didn't cut deeply enough to kill her, it left a gnarly scar.

I notice a scar on her shoulder from one of her targets who got off a shot before she finished him.

There's a mark under her chin from one of her mother's boyfriends. Apparently, he still wore his high school ring like a douche despite being in his thirties.

Luca shared those stories in between garbage TV shows and classic movies. I've told her plenty of my shit, too.

Back then, I assumed we were just treading water until she bailed. Right now, as I look over her body before holding her gaze, I settle into the resilience of this thing we share.

"All those years on your own," I ask in a rough voice, "were you lonely?"

"If I was, I didn't feel it. Loving you is hard, Ghost. I don't want to give anyone power over me. But with you, it's not a choice. I just need you. And needing you has made me need more. It's why I feel responsible for Hope and I'm considering Ominous's offer to sponsor me. Being alone isn't enough anymore. I know you exist now."

Her words hurt as much as they soothe. "I've never been enough for anyone."

"No, that's not true," she says, turning over and facing me. "That's just your mom who felt that way. Maybe your grandma. But Apex isn't everyone's friend, but he likes you. Papa Bear didn't ask just anyone to join his club, but he welcomed you as a member. I'm not the only one who sees your worth. But maybe because I'm a woman, and you don't trust them, my affection holds more power."

"And my affection holds power with you," I say, stating the obvious because trusting anyone has always been a recipe for more pain.

"I wouldn't stay at the Sanctuary if not for you. Yeah, Ominous and those women are cool. I can see myself growing

friendly with them in a real way. And I want Hope to be healthy and safe. I know she isn't Drew, and saving Hope won't fix what happened. But I still want the best for her."

Luca pauses long enough to kiss me softly. When our lips part, I see her gaze sharpen as she considers a different path for herself.

"However, I wouldn't stick around long term if you weren't in the picture. Loving you hasn't stripped me of my addictive need to fuck up bad guys. It's a fundamental part of me now. However, to hunt and kill like I used to would mean leaving you. I've come to terms with how I can't be happy if you're not with me. So, yeah, you have value like no one else does for me."

Kissing her, I let myself imagine Luca in my life in a year's time. What would five years together look like? Or ten? Is it possible we can get old together and still feel this way?

"Did you like fucking me?" Luca asks after we're quiet for a minute.

"Of course."

"You were overwhelmed."

"Of course. My brain's wrong. Love won't rewire my damage."

"I know."

"Did you like me fucking you?"

Luca smiles. "Yes, that's why I asked if you enjoyed it. I want to try again soon. And I want to be on top. If you need to close your eyes to decrease your stimuli, I won't take it personally. I just want to feel good together."

"You're being too nice," I mutter, suspicious now.

"Ghost, I get how your mom is a cunt. But do you get how I'm *not* pretending to be someone else, only to spring on you how I'm secretly the same sneaky bitch as your mom? This is me. I've been square with you from the beginning. I might put on a show for Overlord or even Hope so they feel comfortable

with me. But with you, I've always been myself. If you like this person in front of you, it's safe to lower your guard."

"You still have too much power."

"Your own mother treated you like shit. She broke your little heart, but you survived. Nothing I could do would ever be as cruel," she explains softly like I'm a dumb kid. "If you could survive her, you can survive me. So even if I'm secretly a cunt with plans to break your heart, you should remember how you've outlasted people worse than me."

"You're not wrong."

"I so rarely am."

Grinning at her smug tone, I inch closer and rest her hand on my chest. "I have a really good poker face. That's what Aqua claims, anyway. She says I look so pissed all the time, so it's impossible to read my mood or what kind of hand I'm holding."

Luca realizes I'm agreeing to hang out in Vegas with her. When she rewards me with such a lovesick expression, I can't understand why I've been pinning my abandonment fears on her. Ever since she asked for a burger, I got the feeling she was hooked on me.

My choice is to see what's right in front of me or listen to the asshole in my head. Of course, he's often right. My asshole thinking has been a surefire system to keep me safe from pain over the years.

But Luca could be mine, for real and for good. I can have this incredible woman at my side. She sees me and hasn't run away. The only thing standing in our way is me.

TWINKLE TOES



I only met Lauren Tayback once before writing her off as a terrible human being. When Papa Bear shares how she's finally died and I should be there when they tell Apex, I hide how relieved I am to know she's gone.

Apex doesn't know how to feel about her death. He quickly thinks it's a good thing before seeming sad. I know his mind is on Crispin. Everything in Apex's life got twisted up by watching Crispin die.

I can only wrap him in my arms and remind him how nothing has really changed. His mom wasn't part of his life. Crispin is still alive in his memories.

"She didn't remember him right," I whisper in his ear as we prepare to ride into town to deal with the memorial. Settling on the motorcycle behind him, I hug his body against mine. "Lauren twisted his memory to fit the lies she told herself. You remember the real Crispin."

I don't think my words are true. Apex has rightfully created an idealized view of his brother. Why apply faults to a child who never had a chance to grow into a man?

Apex turns to look at me over his shoulder. "I wish Ghost was around."

In my mind, Ghost would offer Apex something I can't. They go way back, and both men hate their moms. Ghost would trash-talk the dead woman. Is this what Apex needs right now?

"I can talk like he does," I reply and then lower my voice and try to sound gravelly. "I wish I believed in hell, so I could imagine that bitch frying for all eternity."

Apex smirks at my impression of Ghost. "He hates when you do that."

Sharing his smile, I'm startled when Thorn rides up next to us. Apex frowns at him.

Thorn just grins like we're offering him a warm welcome. "Papa Bear figured you might miss Ghost, so I'm here to pick up the slack."

"I'm already saying the stuff he says," I tell Thorn and change my voice. "Stop fucking with my plan, fucker."

Thorn chuckles at my impersonation before telling Apex, "Since I've buried my parents, I know the routine. And that bitch mom of yours didn't mean shit to me, so I can think straight while you might be distracted."

"Oh, okay, you can do the thinking part," I say and wrap my arms tighter around Apex. "I'll do the cuddly part."

Thorn must see something on Apex's face because he pulls his motorcycle out of the lot and heads to the front gate. I tighten my hold and prepare to move with the bike. Apex pats my leg to be sure I'm ready.

Soon, we're outside the Sanctuary and riding down Metamora's hilly roads toward the funeral home. I love the feel of holding on to Apex with the wind whipping at my body. I often close my eyes and pretend I'm flying. All my worries about the past fall away, leaving me fearless and free.

After we climb off the motorcycle, Apex smiles at whatever he sees on my face. His chocolate-colored eyes offer such warmth. I crawl up his tall, powerful body, using my former dancer skills to get closer to his tempting lips.

Apex wraps me up tight and meets my passion with his own. I hope he can see how nothing's changed since Lauren died. He's still the powerful man who saved me, and the Sanctuary will always offer him the home he craved as a kid.

Thorn doesn't wait for us to finish making out. He goes inside to talk to the funeral home director about the service. By the time Apex and I arrive, he's already written the obituary.

"Wouldn't you like to mention her family?" the funeral director asks, but Thorn shakes his head.

“Leave them out of it. If Lauren’s friends want to get together and mourn her, they can do it. We’re only here to pay for shit.”

Thorn glances at Apex who nods at how his longtime friend has gotten everything handled. We still need to choose a photo and other cosmetic elements for the memorial. Apex gives the funeral director a picture of Lauren surrounded by flowers at the hospice. She looks lovely and innocent, like a woman who didn’t stand by and watch her son get murdered.

Yesterday, I didn’t really understand why Papa Bear wanted Apex in charge of these details. I always think people should do what’s easiest. *Why suffer unless you have no choice?*

Maybe I’m naïve or stupid. I don’t remember my past. Many people would want to get their memories back. But I’ve decided I prefer a gaping hole where my past would be.

The people I left behind need me to save them, but I don’t know how I can. Papa Bear and Overlord don’t normally send the Born Villains outside their territory. The attack on the Dirty Princes’ compound happened only because the other club attacked the Sanctuary first. Otherwise, Overlord and Papa Bear would have stuck to their rules.

That’s why I don’t know how I could ever help the people in Texas. For right now, though, I see nothing beyond Apex. The longer we’re at the funeral home, the more he shakes off his sadness.

“I’m oddly relieved,” Apex says as we stand in the parking lot. “I thought her being gone would mean something changed. But everything’s the same. Crispin doesn’t feel any closer or farther away. He’s right where he always is, for good or bad.”

Thorn pats his back. “That woman belonged in your past. The fact that she tried to dig her way into your life again is bullshit. You were right to blow her off.”

Apex nods as Thorn climbs on his motorcycle. I wait next to my man as he works through something.

“I thought she was going to steal Crispin from me again,” Apex whispers. “Like we’d come here, and he’d start fading from my mind or something. It’s dumb.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that. You deserve to feel any way you want,” I tell him, making him grin.

“You sound like the shrink.”

“I just memorize what Sharona says and use the same words with others. It makes me seem smarter.”

“We should go,” Thorn announces from his motorcycle. “Now.”

A frowning Apex scans the area, focusing on a gold SUV with Texas plates parked across the street. The passenger door open as Apex takes my hand and hurries me to his motorcycle.

“Giselle?” a voice calls out.

Frozen with panic, I stare at Apex as if this might be the last time I look into his beautiful eyes.

“They’re going to take me away,” I whisper.

“I’ll burn down the world before I let that happen.”

Thorn revs his engine before typing furiously into his phone. Apex throws his leg over his own motorcycle and tugs me up behind him.

“Hold on, baby. This might get bumpy.”

Suddenly, his motorcycle jerks forward. I wrap my arms around his waist, afraid to look back. Thorn comes up behind us as we fly through an empty four-way intersection.

The two men zigzag through the serene roads on their way back to the Sanctuary. I’m unsure if anyone is following us, and I don’t dare look.

Closing my eyes, I picture myself back at Apex’s townhome. We’re cuddled up on his beloved couch. I’m cooking a new recipe I learned from Lady Bug. The TV is playing a funny show. We’re safe inside the Sanctuary, surrounded by people we can trust. There is no danger or anyone to drag me back to a life I fled.

The image in my head is so real. I hold on to it as dearly as I do to Apex. The sound of additional motorcycles inspires me to open my eyes. I notice Blunt to our left, Rave to our right. Other bikers bring up the rear.

Promising myself I'm safe, I only close my eyes and wait for the familiar sound of the Sanctuary's security gates opening.

In my mind, I'm at HQ now. I smile at the thought of going on a double date with Ghost and Luca like Apex and I did with Eliza and Penthouse. Our lives are so normal. I don't need to be afraid.

Despite my happy thoughts, my heart is nearly beating out of my chest by the time we reach the Sanctuary. Apex pulls up to HQ, where Papa Bear and Lady Bug stand on the porch. Apex helps steady me and wipes my wet cheeks.

"Don't cry," he says in a voice laced with panic and rage.

"I don't want to go back."

Papa Bear joins us as the other bikers arrive and surround us. He leans down to make eye contact with me.

"This is your home," Papa Bear says in a no-nonsense voice. "You're not going anywhere."

Nodding, I want to believe his words. In such a short time, I've found love, friends, hobbies, and a place where I can be me, even if I don't always know who that is.

"Why don't you sit inside with Lady Bug while we figure things out?" Papa Bear suggests, earning an annoyed grunt from Apex.

I look up at the man I love. His anger fills the air. I feel guilty over bringing trouble into his life, yet I have zero regrets.

I tug Apex down and wrap my arms around his neck. He immediately stands upright and holds me against him. I get the sense he might take off running. Apex feels like a cornered animal, searching for an escape.

“I love you,” I whisper in his ear. “You have to listen to Papa Bear, so we can be safe and have a life together.”

Apex stares into my eyes, begging me to stay with him. We probably seem a little crazy right now. I’m in his arms like a kid. He’s breathing like an angry beast. Yet, we’re just scared to lose what’s been so beautiful.

“It’s okay,” I say, going limp in his arms to encourage him to lower me to the ground. “Look around us.”

Apex turns his head to find his club brothers and sisters ready and willing to bleed to protect him. His rage and fear deflate immediately. Apex remembers how he isn’t alone in the world.

And neither am I. That gives me the strength to leave Apex’s side and go with Lady Bug inside HQ. Old ladies hurry over to check on me. Eliza rushes in through the back door after hearing what happened. I’m soon surrounded by my support system.

Outside, Apex finds comfort and direction from Papa Bear and Overlord. I don’t know who those men were today, but I’m certain they’ll regret drawing the ire of the Born Villains Motorcycle Club.

OVERLORD



My day begins with Jules waking me with soft kisses. I open my eyes to find the most beautiful woman smiling down at me. I used to wake up to a world of problems, many of them I refused to face. With Jules at my side, I no longer start my day in denial.

But life is complicated, and our kids still struggle. This morning, Evie gets clingy and refuses to walk to breakfast. I carry her while Zoey keeps calling me a chump and threatening to punch me in the ass. Sometimes, I think the sisters plot overnight on how they'll behave the following day. Their behavior seems synchronized to keep us off our game.

No matter the girls' plans, Jules remains calm throughout the entire meal, and I'm smart enough to mimic her. By the end of breakfast, Evie and Zoey are no longer playing clingy cop/bad cop with me.

"I need hugs," I insist as we arrive at Papa Bear's house.

Evie gives me a tight one and pats my cheek. "Be good, Daddy."

Zoey considers refusing my hug request before breaking under my smile. She still sighs deeply and shakes her head after the embrace.

"Why you be busting my ovaries, fool?"

"I'm just naughty that way."

Zoey laughs and runs to hide behind Jules. Next, I receive a hug from Scout who still looks like I might turn hostile with her. I snuggle her good and whisper how much I love her. Jules's mini-me steps back and smiles shyly at my affection.

Finally, I glance at Anthony who watches me with the same wary gaze his father often wears.

“I need four hugs from my four kids,” I insist and wiggle my finger for him to come closer.

He lifts his shoulders and lowers his gaze as if shy. But then, his little feet shuffle closer until I can wrap him in my arms. He sighs at my affection and smiles when I let him go.

Our family of six is still struggling with traumas—old and new—but I think we’re doing damn well, all things considered.

After Jules rewards me with a kiss I feel deep in my balls, she wears a flirty grin while taking the kids inside. I hate to leave them. My hope is we can soon go on a vacation. Unfortunately, the Sanctuary isn’t tranquil enough for its President to leave town right now.

Walking around the back of my childhood home to a side courtyard, I find Papa Bear listening to Jester bitch on the phone.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Jester demands, sounding more beast than man. “First, you send Talon to Texas, and now to deal with this Reno thing. Why are you putting her at risk?”

“I didn’t send anyone,” my father calmly replies. “That was Overlord’s decision.”

“Bullshit. No way is he sending your girl on a job to get Lady Bug’s daughter unless you approved it.”

Papa Bear’s dark eyes look relieved to see me as I settle next to him.

“Jester, we sent the chick members to handle it,” I explain as I lean over to be seen on the phone’s camera. “I know you’re aware Sister Sass wears our vest and rides with our club. Yet, I feel like we have this fucking conversation every damn time we hear from you.”

Jester narrows his pale blue eyes, growing more hostile in reaction to my presence. For him, I’ll never be his President. Jester wasn’t even eighteen when the club was founded and he got his patch. Before then, Papa Bear and Betty Boop basically

raised the rage-filled preteen into the reasonably civilized man he is now.

I often wonder if Jester's interest in my sister is really about her or a desperate need to recreate the warmth he found with Betty Boop.

Though I consider Jester a friend, I never wanted him around Sister Sass. He wasn't safe, and I didn't believe he'd ever love her right. Sister Sass had better options. But Papa Bear warned Bomber and me that the quickest way to send her into Jester's bed was to tell her to stay away.

Keeping my mouth shut didn't work, either. Sister Sass was crazy about him as soon as she hit puberty, and he became obsessed with her at some point.

I often found her hanging out around his townhome, usually just helping him work on his motorcycle. He knew not to mess with her. Few things can turn my father into a violent beast, and my little sister was one of them.

At some point, the men had a chat, and Papa Bear explained how Sister Sass—who was still Talon back then—was too young for him. He could either wait for her to get older or he was free to fuck off.

Jester behaved out of respect to Papa Bear, but he never pretended he didn't plan to claim her as soon as she aged up.

Then, Talon and Emma nearly died, and Jester killed one of their attackers in public. That's how the man works. He doesn't plan anything. He just follows his urges, even if they lead him to years in prison when he could have quietly killed the guy and gotten off scot-free.

And right now, his urges demand Sister Sass remain locked down at the Sanctuary.

"She's not hard like us," Jester says to Papa Bear. "Overlord can give her a vest and change her name, but she's still Talon. Your girl talks tough, but she freezes up when shit goes south. You know that. It's why she nearly fucking died."

Papa Bear's resolve cracks, not only as his mind returns to his daughter needing a machine to breathe for her. He also

hears the pain in Jester's voice.

My father once shared how Jester claimed there were only three beautiful things in the world—his kid, Betty Boop, and Talon. He lost his son and my mom in quick succession, leaving only my sister to act as the one shining light in his life. When she nearly died, something broke inside him.

My parents tried to give Jester a home where he felt valued. Yet, he remains a lost and angry child trapped in a large man's body. And that broken man is coming home soon with very specific ideas in his head.

The thought of him pushing around my little sister ignites my temper. "Let's be honest here. Sister Sass has an entire life you know nothing about, Jester. And that life won't disappear once you're released."

"You little shit," Jester growls, and Papa Bear signals for me to ease up. "Talon thought she was a badass when she was young. You all said it was fine to let her run wild. But how did that fucking work out, you cocksucker?"

Ignoring my father's signal, I refuse to back down. "Where were you when she was healing? You don't know shit about what's happened to her because you decided to play hero. If you had any sense, you'd have been here to help Sister Sass. Instead, you're locked in a cage."

"I'm going to ask for you two to kindly shut the fuck up," Papa Bear interjects in a relaxed voice. "Jester did what he thought he had to, and he's paid the price for his action. As for Overlord," he continues, turning the phone so Jester only sees him, "he's running things now, and Sister Sass is more than his little sister. He holds the lives of everyone here in his hands. So, you need to keep that in mind when you return. I'm not your President, he is. If you want to live within the Sanctuary's walls, you need to remember who runs this place."

Jester is so pissed, I doubt he heard most of what Papa Bear said. I see in his eyes how he can't get past what happened to Sister Sass. He still views her as broken in that hospital bed. When they talk, he doesn't really hear her. She's

still the barely legal woman he wanted and other men nearly destroyed.

Soon, he'll be free, and I don't know how he'll handle Sister Sass. Though she's still crazy about him, my sister's also gotten used to making her own choices. Their coupling seems like a recipe for disaster.

"Overlord's wrong, and I'm not pretending otherwise," Jester grumbles to Papa Bear. "We'll see what's what when I'm released."

"Well, until then, shelve your opinions on how I run this club," I tell Jester.

After Jester tells me to fuck off and hangs up, Papa Bear sighs.

"He's going to swallow her up," I tell my father. "He'll obliterate her life until she's an extension of him."

"You don't see him clearly."

"He's too old for her."

Papa Bear's dark eyes study me. "Jester just wants her to love him. If she can't, it'll break him. Sister Sass will recover, but he won't. You're doing what you claim he does by seeing your sister as a helpless victim despite her holding a lot of power in that relationship."

His words feel all wrong to me, but I suspect he's right. Papa Bear knows how to read people. He sensed my feelings for Jules, even when I thought I was hiding them well. I can't deny he knows Jester better than I do. If he has a handle on the situation, I'll step back and let him lead.

Papa Bear and I enter the house to find the kids working on a large puzzle at the table with Kat. Jules smiles at me. Her golden eyes reveal how she senses I'm uneasy. She reads people well, too.

"Let's practice ponytails," she says, and I grin.

As the girls patiently endure my clumsy hands in their hair, I show off my new skills to Lady Bug who seems very impressed. I've just finished brushing Scout's hair into a long

ponytail when my phone chimes with a message from Thorn. Papa Bear also gets it.

“Giselle’s people are at the funeral home,” Thorn messages. “We’re on our way back to S. This might be an ambush situation.”

“Stay here,” I tell Jules who hears the tension in my tone and understands we might be in danger.

On my way out the door, I text Thorn to use whatever force necessary to get everyone back here safe.

Papa Bear messages the club with orders. Everyone in town is to find and escort Giselle back to the Sanctuary. Everyone inside our walls needs to remain locked down. We don’t know how many threats are in play or who ratted out Giselle’s movements. The Black Gold Four clearly have a spy in Metamora.

The next five minutes are a gut punch. I want nothing more than to ride out and help. Instead, I’m forced to wait with Papa Bear as our members outside the gates find refuge within our walls.

Lady Bug arrives to help reassure Giselle. Calming Apex proves to be more complicated.

“I want them dead,” Apex growls in my face. “I want their houses burned to the ground.”

“We’ve discussed this. Sending our people to Texas could be a suicide mission. We don’t want that, right?”

“I don’t care anymore,” Apex blurts out, tripping over his words. “Send Luca. She killed all those fuckers at the compound. Let her work her magic in Texas.”

“And what about Ghost?”

Apex’s rage hits a wall and flames out. His dark eyes beg me to just fix the problem.

“They don’t want to fight us. If they did, they’d come with firepower. They just want to grab Giselle,” I explain, and he shakes his head. “We’ll keep her at the Sanctuary from now on.”

“It’s my fault they nearly took her,” Apex says, spiraling as his rage gets swallowed up by panic.

“They don’t know she has amnesia,” I tell him as I rest my hands on his shoulders. “A few guys showed up here a month ago. We acted like she remembered everything.”

Rage flaring again, he snarls, “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’d react like this.”

Apex blinks rapidly like I’m tricking him. Gripping his shoulders, I steady him. My voice is calm, and my gaze direct. I need my relaxed demeanor to wash over him.

“Since we sent those assholes away, we’ve done low-key research on the Black Gold Four. I’m not blind to what’s happening here. But we can’t take them on outside our territory. You know that’s not how the club does things.”

“They’re going to steal her away,” Apex mutters, unable to process a situation where a different brand of violence is necessary.

“What did they say today?”

“Just her name.”

“See? They think she remembers. They don’t know what she’s told us. They fear she might go to the authorities or even the press. That’s why they’re being careful. And we’re going to be careful, too.”

I look around to find my club brothers and sisters frowning at me. In their minds, I ought to hunt down the men in our town and kill them. Every single one of them has a monster in their past. They like to believe if that person arrived in Metamora, we’d make them disappear.

And we would. But the people from today aren’t the real monsters. They’re just hired muscle.

“These rich fucks are hiding in their big houses and sending hired guns. We can’t end this thing by killing disposable assholes. We need to destroy the core threat.”

“How?”

“They aren’t the only one with spies. We’re learning the layouts of their homes and land. We’ve found out the names and skills of their security detail. With those Dirty Princes fuckers, we thought we had an idea of what we were dealing with. But we still got lucky. If we send a team into Texas to kill Giselle’s people, we need to get more than lucky.”

Apex hears my meaning. If I send Luca, Ghost will come along. As much as Apex wants to protect Giselle, he isn’t cool with sending his best friend on a suicide mission.

“So we wait,” I say as he breathes easier now. “We let those Texas assholes linger around the edges of our town while we’re focused on their territory. We make sure we’re ready. When Luca and Ghost return, I’ll talk to her about what she’d need and how an attack would work. She might say it’s easy or claim it’s impossible. We both know she understands this shit better than we do. But right now, I need you all to stand down. I’ll ride into town and talk to Sheriff Graeme. His guys will round up the men from today, and we’ll have a chat. But you stay here and watch Giselle. Understand?”

Apex looks so tired as he stares at me. “You know if they grab her, we’ll never see her again.”

“That’s why she’ll never leave the Sanctuary unless necessary and only with security.”

Nodding, Apex gives in because he doesn’t know what else to do. After sending him inside to find Giselle, I address the others.

“Metamora is our town, but not everyone is our ally. You know who you can trust. Everyone else is suspect. And if you don’t recognize someone, assume they’re the enemy. Don’t ride alone, especially at night. These rich assholes can keep sending henchmen, so just killing them won’t help. And never think you’re being a hero by challenging any of them. The henchmen don’t matter to their masters, but you matter to the Sanctuary. Play shit safe.”

Stepping back, I cross my arms. “And you shouldn’t be lowering your guard anyway. A few members of the Dirty Princes weren’t at the compound. If they figure out we hit them, they might come here. And there are our old friends, the Horned Angels, who are in the midst of a low-key civil war. Any of them might just decide to lash out at us. So, always be on guard.”

I turn away from the others and move toward Papa Bear and our club’s VP, Grit.

“Someone’s ratting out the club,” I tell them. “Won’t be difficult to figure out who. Giselle was in town for such a short time. Not many people saw her. Once we tag who betrayed us, we’ll make an example of them.”

Papa Bear and Grit nod in agreement. They understand the vise around the Sanctuary is getting squeezed. Tranquility isn’t returning anytime soon for the Born Villains Motorcycle Club.

LUCA



Ghost is so beautiful. I find myself watching him whenever we're quiet in the room. He's struggling to calm himself before we head out for dinner. I don't rush him. Hope's dad will be dead tomorrow. Tonight belongs to Ghost and me. I'll wait however long he needs to reclaim his calm.

My body feels different after sharing it with Ghost. I never knew I was capable of experiencing such pleasure.

Even before Drew showed up at my door, I'd already given up on the idea of marriage and instead was planning on having a child on my own. Romance seemed like a dream for other people.

After I became a vigilante, I refused to bring a child into a world I wasn't sure I wanted to survive. My heart felt dead.

Tonight, my heart is no longer cold. I watch Ghost and feel such love for him. He isn't an easy man to desire. He pushes me away and then accuses me of leaving him. The man's a ball of disfunctions. I don't know if he'll ever look at me without suspecting I'm a twisted bitch like his mom.

But Ghost still makes me happy. When his gaze finds mine, he glares hard at how I'm watching him. He tries to intimidate me into looking away. I just keep my gaze on the most beautiful thing in the room. Finally, he relents and crawls closer on the bed.

"I looked at pictures of your old house," he says, resting his head in my lap. "It's a craftsman style."

"When I was a kid and lived with my mom, I passed a similar-looking house on my way home from school. I used to dream she married a nice man with money, and we'd go live in that house with the big, white porch. I saw myself sitting on

the steps. Drew would play in the leaves from the large front tree. It was always autumn in my fantasizes.”

Stroking his forehead, I think back to my childhood dreams. “Now, I realize that house wasn’t even expensive, but it felt lavish compared to our shitty apartment. My aunt’s house was bigger and fancier than the craftsman. But her place seemed like something out of a catalogue rather than a lived-in home where people felt comfortable. So, eventually, when my teammates started settling down and making long-term plans, I found a house like the one I loved as a kid.”

“You’re a follower,” he says and chuckles. “Ominous is going to fucking love pushing you around.”

Grinning, I stroke his smiling lips. “I gave up that sheep shit when I started hunting assholes. But I do miss having people who matter. I wasn’t super close to anyone, but I had my own little tribe of people. Those connections felt like a hassle after Drew and Abilene died. Now, I can’t seem to stop collecting people.”

Ghost studies me from his spot stretched out on the bed. His shirtless chest is begging to be fondled, but I don’t dare touch him. He’s overstimulated from earlier. He isn’t as agitated as when I went to his townhome for the first time. Lately, Ghost is doing better at distracting his fucked-up brain.

My fingers trace his lips, sliding through his dark beard, and stroking under his jaw.

Maybe I’m being too tender because Ghost asks, “If I wasn’t an option, who do you think you’d hook up with at the Sanctuary?”

“Oh, my, who *wouldn’t* I fuck in this scenario?” I reply, rolling my eyes at how he can’t stop sabotaging us. “I’d start with the single members and move my way into the married ones’ beds.”

“I’m serious.”

“No, you just want me to say how no one would interest me.”

“Yeah, sure, say that.”

“Thorn is hot and single,” I explain, making Ghost narrow his gaze angrily. “But I never once thought about him as anything more than a member of your club. He seems nice. He’s certainly easy on the eyes, but he’s just a guy. You’ve never been just a guy for me, Ghost.”

“He couldn’t handle you,” Ghost mutters, angry at the emotions he’s stirred up in himself. “Your bitchiness would swallow him up.”

“You really are an asshole,” I reply and grin. “It’s not just an act. You can’t help starting shit.”

Ghost offers a pissy grin. “I refuse to get over what happened to me. I plan to die bitter.”

“But you have me now. And I might foist a kid on you one day. A cat, too.”

“Nope, you have to choose. A kid or a cat. I’m not giving you both.”

Laughing, I tap his nose and shake my head. “I’ll just ask for the kid and show up one day with the cat. What can you do? Leaving me won’t be an option.”

Ghost loses his annoyed expression and stares at me full of longing. “No, it won’t be an option.”

“Just like I might miss hunting like I used to or living on my own, but I can’t walk away from the Sanctuary. It’s where you are, so it’s where I’ll be.”

Offering me a small grin, Ghost says softly, “I never get the best of anything. I’ve occasionally assumed Apex was my friend because he doesn’t like anyone else, not because he likes me. It’s just how I see the world. So, it feels wrong to think I get to keep the best woman I’ve ever known.”

His words fill me with pride. “I feel confident saying no other man views me as a prize like you do. That’s why you get to keep me. We’re the right kind of fucked up for each other. No one else will satisfy,” I say and stroke his forehead. “Hell, I don’t think I could do more than tolerate any other man, let alone hope to be satisfied. Even with the messed-up way you see the world, you must understand how we work.”

Unable to answer with the right words, Ghost sits up and tugs me down against him. We're quickly wrapped up together, kissing softly, tenderly exploring, and relishing the comfort we find.

The world falls away, losing its noise and sharp edges. For now, Ghost and I become a normal man and woman cherishing the gifts in front of us.

GHOST



Luca doesn't mention Hope's dad all evening. We get burgers and watch a movie in the room. Luca runs around in her panties. I don't even have that much on.

Normally, if I get overstimulated, I want people to stay the fuck away from me. Luca wields a witchy power no one else possesses. When she wraps her arms around me, I rest my cheek on her chest and settle down. Her voice breaks through the noise in my head. She never pushes me to do anything.

Halfway through the movie, we start fooling around. Our kisses lead to her riding my dick. My hands grip her long, tightly-muscled waist, feeling the power behind her movements. Luca rolls her hips, smiling down at me.

Out of nowhere, I feel like we're being watched. I know the sensation isn't real. We're on the top floor. No one knows we're here. But the feeling is so real, primal, and all I can focus on.

"Wait," I snap, angrier at myself than her.

Luca's hips stop on a dime. Her pussy grips my dick possessively. Her electric blue eyes size me up before surveying the room.

I stare at her and will my body to settle down. Instead, every nerve feels plucked by a hot poker. Luca slides off me and rests at my side.

"Is it me?" she asks.

"No," I mutter.

"Do you need me to finish you off?"

"Just leave me alone."

"No," she replies in her bitchiest tone.

Chuckling, I stare at the ceiling and try to be someone else. In my eyes, I'm a gnarly mess, unworthy of the sexy, powerful woman at my side.

Luca kisses my shoulder. "You took care of me when I was flipping out about Hope. We're not healthy people. We can only do our best."

I don't dare speak. I'm pissed at myself. I think of my mom getting high when I still had a chance to be normal. I used to wish she had OD'd before I was born so I would never exist.

After a few minutes, Luca sits up in bed and rests against the headboard. I can smell the heat of her pussy, and my dick remains rock hard.

The movie starts playing again on the hotel TV. Luca doesn't say anything as she watches "Goodfellas." Her fingers casually brush across my furrowed brow. She doesn't look down at me. Or seem impatient or annoyed. After a few minutes, I realize she's super into the fucking movie. I watch her watching the screen.

Her eyes widen. She smiles at certain parts. She's absolutely transfixed by it in the same way I am by her. Eventually, I sit up and watch the movie. She rests her cheek against my shoulder. That's when I feel the smile on my face.

I'm back in control. Luca didn't bail. Her calm infected me until I was able to ride through the pain and noise in my head. I'm not fully calm again, but I can enjoy the movie and the beautiful woman at my side.

As soon as the credits roll, Luca twists around to face me.

"How is your dick still hard?"

"It does whatever it wants."

"And what does it want now?"

"Your pussy wrapped around it."

Luca watches me with her bright gaze. "And what do you want?"

Smiling, I slide my hand between her strong legs to her moist, unsatisfied pussy. Luca shares my grin before straddling my lap and kissing me tenderly. When I don't protest, her lips grow more possessive.

My fingers slide across her clit, making her flinch and moan in my mouth. She lifts her hips and allows my cock entry. Now, I'm the one moaning with approval.

Our bodies take charge, seeking more of everything. Harder, faster, hotter, we move together. I can't see past the woman in my arms.

I feel a weird disconnect, like an out-of-body experience. All the buzzing in my head goes silent. The pins dragging down my spine and across my palms go numb. A comforting stillness comes over me as if Luca infects me with her eerie calm.

Finding relief, I can't keep my hands off Luca. She meets my need with her own.

"I've long believed I was incapable of this kind of closeness," she whispers in the darkness long after we run out of energy. "Yet, with you, it feels so easy."

"I've been an asshole since the moment we met."

"That's just how you protect yourself. Inside, you love me."

Holding her closer, I enjoy how our sweaty bodies feel wrapped together. Her lips find mine. In the darkness, we can be honest and vulnerable. In the daylight, we'll need to return to our asshole, defective ways.

After all, we'll be back on the hunt for a monster.

Every time I imagined Luca killing Hope's dad, I pictured her making him beg. Instead, she wants to handle it quick and quiet.

Like yesterday, we follow him from his place, first by car and then on foot. Luca leans into my embrace, seemingly blind to the rest of the world. She's lovesick in a way that doesn't seem possible.

I feel like we should be on guard. The sun is up. We're hunting a sick motherfucker. Yet, she offers me soft smiles as if we're already on vacation.

Despite my concerns, I don't dare push her away. *Luca's mine now*. She's said again and again how I'm special. I do something other people can't. She won't leave me.

And I can't let her go. Not now on this mission or when we get back to the Sanctuary. Luca belongs to me.

A worry rises in my chest as we walk down the street, tailing Hope's asshole dad. What happens when we get back to the Sanctuary? Will Luca move in with me? Am I supposed to build a house like Apex is doing? Are kids even an option?

Mostly, I'm worried I'm not wired right for such commitment. Blunt wasn't ready for Mabie. He wanted her, though. From day one, he was blinded to his problems because he could only see her. But those fucked-up parts of him didn't go away. Blunt played whack-a-mole with them, thinking he could ignore how fundamentally damaged he was.

But he couldn't, and he lost Mabie. Sure, she's back with him now after getting her ass beat for two years and having another man's kid.

If I fuck up with Luca, I can't imagine her sticking around and giving me another shot.

Does worrying help anything, though? Should I just let things happen and roll with whatever comes up?

That's not how Papa Bear handles his wives. He didn't hope they were happy and clean up the messes when they weren't.

If I want a relationship with Luca, I don't want to fumble around like Blunt. I'm looking to be like Papa Bear. Meaning, I need to figure my shit out.

"I like when you're thinking hard," Luca says as we push through the crowd of people. "You get a really sexy look on your face and your lips pucker up a little. It's hot."

I'm about to poke back in response to her teasing when I realize we're nearly on top of Hope's dad. Luca slides her hand inside her dark gray jacket. As we pass the asshole, I detect several faint whooshing sounds from her silenced weapon. It's nearly undetectable in the packed sidewalk. People keep talking. We keep walking. Nothing seems to have changed, except we're leaving the asshole behind.

I quickly glance back to see him staggering around confused. People shove him out of the way, thinking he's hammered. I hear someone tell him to go home and sleep it off.

Luca doesn't look back. She stops at a light, waits for our turn to walk, and gets moving again. If I didn't know what happened, I'd think she never looked away from me for a second. She's creepily calm.

Her coldness isn't what I expected. She seemed so angry when we found her at the compound. But now, I realize she was pissed over being caught and tortured. No doubt when she was on the hunt, she was as coldly focused as she is now.

We backtrack, walking on the sidewalk parallel to where the asshole has collapsed. People avoid his limp body. His dark jacket hides the blood. The world goes on, ignoring his feeble cries.

Luca keeps walking toward our SUV. I look back once more before we're out of range. I see the asshole on the ground, mumbling in pain, dying alone in a crowd. No one stops. A few people curse at him for blocking the sidewalk. Eventually, a cop or do-gooder will check on him. By then, we'll be long gone.

"Just like that?" I ask after sliding in the driver's seat while Luca dismantles her gun and shoves it deep inside her bag.

"Just like that."

"He didn't even know why."

Luca studies me before asking, "Do you think he would have cared? Over the last day as we followed him around, did

he ever seem, even once, like he felt guilty over what he did to Hope?”

“No, I get that. But his death seems too easy.”

“The entire time those bikers were torturing me, I never once considered how I killed their friends. I didn’t feel guilty over not saving anyone. I only plotted on how to get loose and keep killing. People don’t react to torture like you think they will.”

Leaving the engine off, I think about the men who hurt me in exchange for giving my mom drugs and money. I’d always wanted to make them bleed. Over the years, I created wild fantasies about long, drawn-out tortures. But deep down, I knew it wouldn’t make me feel better. The fantasies did, though, so I avoided killing them, even if a few lived in the county.

Glancing at her patiently waiting for me to work out my shit, I ask, “Is dead enough?”

“Dead doesn’t bring justice,” Luca tells me in a haunted voice. “I thought I’d feel better after killing those assholes who raped me and killed Drew and Abilene. Like a burden would be lifted off my shoulders, but the darkness they left behind infected every part of me. It’s who I am now.”

Luca reaches over and takes my hand. “I might never be free, but they can never hurt anyone again. And with Hope, she might get it in her head one day to confront him. We know that wouldn’t end well. Now, we’ll just say he’s dead and take away the option. So, yeah, dead is enough, Ghost.”

“There are men who hurt me,” I say, feeling lightheaded as I force out the words. “I wanted revenge, but I figured I’d never be able to steal from them what they ripped away from me. So, what was the point? But maybe dead is enough.”

Luca leans closer so her arm is pressed against mine. I like how effortlessly she offers herself to me for comfort.

“It’s not a fix for your trauma, but it does feel good to know they’re not out in the world hurting anyone else. Hell, even if they felt guilty over committing such evil acts and

swore off all bad shit forever, I still don't want them to keep breathing. I never offer forgiveness, only death.”

My gaze soaks in Luca's beauty. She seems different now. When we met, I'd only known she was gorgeous and interesting. I felt like we had a connection, but I really didn't want to push things. I hate feeling bad. Why increase the chances of going to a dark place?

But neither the raging bitch from the compound nor the flirty chick at Doctor Sal's clinic are next to me right now.

I know this woman. Our relationship feels lived in. Luca can handle my sensory-overload freakouts as well as I can deal with her emotion-overload freakouts.

Despite our baggage, we've proven willing to weather each other's storms. Those skills ought to come in handy in Vegas.

APEX



Giselle climbs me as soon as we share a room again. Her little body wraps around mine and refuses to let go. We walk around like that for the rest of the day until I break under the curious stares from my fellow Born Villains. Retreating to the townhome, Giselle and I settle down enough for her to let me piss in peace.

“What if they come to the Sanctuary?” she asks from the bathroom door. “What if they have guns?”

“We’ll shoot them. We have guns, too,” I explain as I leave the bathroom. “There were just two guys in that car today. I’ve killed more than two guys by myself before. It’ll be fine.”

Giselle lifts herself onto the balls of her feet before coming down hard on her heels. It’s a weird thing she does whenever she’s really agitated. I walk past her to find the ballet shoes Lady Bug bought for her.

“No,” Giselle says, backing away when she sees them. “Those people taught me to dance. Ballet is bad. I’m bad. I didn’t save the other girls.”

“What other girls?”

“I don’t know!” Giselle squeals and starts running around like a dog with zoomies.

When she comes running past me, I reach out and lift her into my arms.

“No,” she whines and pushes against me.

I wait for her gaze to meet mine. Once it does, her crazy deflates.

“I don’t want to go back.”

“No one is taking you from me. We’ll just stay in the townhome until they’re all dead. Those guys today looked

around fifty. I bet they'll be dead in a few years."

"Fifty isn't old."

"Fine. I'll kill them."

Gripping me tighter, Giselle whimpers, "Stay with me."

"I don't know what to do."

"What did Overlord say?"

"To be patient. He's got a plan in motion. He's going to send Luca."

"What about Ghost?"

"I don't know. Maybe I can hire some mercs to attack the compound. I have money. I can send a team of hired killers."

"Will they save the ones I left behind?"

"Sure."

Giselle exhales deeply. "Lady Bug kept telling me how everything would be okay. She was so kind. I don't think I had anyone like that back in Texas. I feel bad in here," she says, patting her stomach, "over leaving people behind. They'll never know Lady Bug's hugs."

"You have a right to be happy. If you were the one left behind, you'd want the one who escaped to find love."

"No, I'd be selfish and hold a grudge."

Grinning at her stubborn expression, I shake my head. "No, you've got a big heart."

"I feel selfish for designing a house with you and talking about babies and being happy."

Settling on the couch, I hold her against me. "I'm selfish for wanting Luca to kill those Texas fucks. If she died, Ghost wouldn't recover. He's really into her, and he's not into anyone. But I'm still going to ask her to do it. Does that make me a bad person?"

Giselle stares into my eyes and nods. "We're both bad people."

“I don’t care. I get to be really happy for the first time in my life. I won’t give you up. And I want a big house like my club brothers and sisters have. It’s a sign our relationship is real and forever. So, Twinkle Toes, even if you feel bad, I’m going to help you feel happy. You’ve earned it. Escaping and reaching Metamora wasn’t easy. I’m your reward.”

Giselle’s pouty expression snaps as laughter flows out of her. Bouncing in my lap, she pats my cheek.

“You are a wonderful reward,” she says, and I feel her panic fading.

For the rest of the evening, we refuse to discuss what happened. I don’t plan on Giselle ever leaving the Sanctuary again despite her still wanting to volunteer at the women’s shelter. We’ll leave that argument for another day.

DUCESS



My brother's attempt to contact me pulled the rug out from under my new confidence. I panicked, wanting to hide, even though Rafe is locked up and unable to reach me. Though I knew my feelings were irrational, his interest made me consider the other men who might reach out to me.

Overlord's patience and my friends' support get me back in charge of myself. I even contact Rafe's prison to organize a time to talk.

Unconvinced about my plan, Overlord would rather I cut myself off from my oldest brother. His reasoning makes sense, but there's logic behind keeping open communication with Rafe. After all, my brother will be released next year and is bound to stir up trouble with the Horned Angels.

For ten minutes, I speak with Rafe while Overlord sits silently nearby. My brother acts weird by asking zero questions about the Horned Angels or Born Villains. Instead, he mostly wants to know about Scout and Anthony. I'm not fooled by his feigned love for me or the kids.

Rafe has always been smart. His loyalty to our father is why he's locked up. I suspect he regrets such a selfless choice.

These days, Kraken is paralyzed from a stroke and no longer in power. Rafe will return to a club unimpressed by his sacrifice. To Cypher and Dio, my brother is a threat. They're both planning to end him as soon as he leaves prison.

Overlord and I even talked about offering Rafe a safe haven here. Not because he's my brother, but to help him destroy our enemies. It's just talk so far. Rafe might prove too dangerous for the Sanctuary. Plus, allowing him to stay here will absolutely set off Cypher and Dio. So far, those two have been so busy eyeballing each other, they've forgotten they have other enemies.

Rafe doesn't mention any of this during our call, and I don't say a word about our old compound.

"I've heard you're with Overlord," Rafe tells me at the very end of the call.

Having assumed he would eventually learn this information, I remain calm. "Yes, he claimed me and the kids. I'm raising his little girls."

Rafe nods. "That's what you want, right? This isn't a safety move?"

"No."

"And you're not saying that because Overlord's listening to us now, right?"

"I love Overlord."

Rafe stares at me through the screen. His blue eyes are so much like our father's, leaving me feeling small under his gaze.

"Good," Rafe says. "There might never be any other home for you."

His words confuse me, and I'm tempted to ask a follow-up question. Instead, I just say thank you.

Before ending the call, Rafe insists we speak monthly. I agree without pushing for a reason. I know he doesn't really care about my safety. Rafe is working angles and figuring out his plan for after his release.

Now feeling in control, I decide to take charge with Hope while Luca and Ghost enjoy a few days in Vegas. After the playdate between Hope and the kittens went well, I arranged for them to visit her weekly.

Wanting to do more when she's rattled over Luca's absence, I bring my three girls over to the Stockade when Lady Bug is watching Hope.

After a little sweet-talking, I convince Hope to come outside to meet one of Lady Bug's dogs. Though Daquiri looks harmless while stretched out in the lawn, Hope seems hesitant

about the Hovawart's size. She doesn't say anything, yet I sense she's planning to retreat back into the house.

"It's okay," Evie insists and takes her hand. "I help you."

Hope looks at the four-year-old's hand in hers before standing passively for a long time.

"Hurry up, fool," Zoey snaps.

"Be gentle," I tell my temperamental baby girl. "Hope is scared."

Zoey frowns like I'm dumb, but she also side-eyes Hope for a long minute. Relenting, she takes Hope's free hand.

"I'll wait, fool," Zoey tells the woman.

Inching closer, Hope stares at the large dog panting in the warm day. When she seems to be walking in place, I almost give in and have her return to the Stockade. Hope's already upset over Luca's absence. Today might not have been a good time to push her.

"He's really sweet," Scout tells Hope and starts brushing the dog's golden coat. "Daiquiri is soft, too."

Hope's bare feet finally get moving until she sits next to Scout.

"Nearly got a roid from waiting," Zoey announces and sighs dramatically.

Ignoring her comment, I encourage Zoey to sit with me on the ground. Evie takes a spot closer to Hope. Scout brushes the dog while the rest of us pet him. He closes his eyes and enjoys the attention.

Hope's tension eases the longer her fingers stroke the animal's soft coat. Her gaze finds me and holds. She doesn't speak or signal me in any obvious way. However, much like the first night we spent together, I feel her reaching out.

"It's going to be okay," I tell her.

"She knows," Zoey says and pats my cheek. "Punk-ass fool."

Hope startles me by bursting into laughter. She covers her mouth, but the giggles take a minute to subside. Her amusement gets Scout and Evie laughing, too. Zoey just looks at me like we're surrounded by morons.

"I love you," I tell the feisty brunette.

Zoey's bitchy expression cracks immediately. Melting against me, she holds on for the rest of the playdate. Hope doesn't laugh again or look at anyone except the dog. But I believe we're one step closer to her finding her voice again.

LADY BUG



Papa Bear and I sit in the hot tub, mulling over the anxiety currently filling our home. Nadia's restless and keeps mentioning paying rent. Katana can't share a room with her older sister without seeming on edge. Mabie's insecurities often have her teary-eyed.

Massaging my shoulders, Papa Bear suggests, "Why don't you take Nadia out alone tomorrow to Gallup Hills?"

"I worry Katana will be jealous."

"Kat will be fine. You and Nadia need to get away from everyone and focus on each other."

Since Nadia returned, I've tried to keep everyone happy. Yet, I sense my daughters are growing more anxious. Mabie feels the tension in the house and assumes she's the problem.

"I keep telling Mabie how she can stay here as long as she needs, but she doesn't seem to believe me."

"She's just working through issues she hid from years ago. She fears living with Blunt, but I know she wants to stay over at his place. Sex calms them both, and they're not sharing a bed right now. Everyone's going through a stressful period," he explains as he brushes hair from my shoulders and kisses my throat. "You can't take any of it personally. Just keep reassuring the girls until they finally hit a point where they can hear you."

Resting the palm of my hand against his jaw, I ask, "What about Sister Sass's mood swings? She seems calm one minute and anxious the next."

"Time will settle that issue, too. She needs to come face to face with Jester and figure out if they can work. No matter the answer, she'll have our support."

I think of the times I've tried to comfort Sister Sass since entering her life. So many nights, I found her crying over her mother's death. Then, after she nearly died, I'd see her struggling. Sister Sass missed her mom's soft touch, and I wanted to comfort her, but she refused to let me in her heart.

A few times I felt her opening up. She might say how she didn't feel comfortable in her own skin anymore. Or that she was afraid she wasn't as strong as she claimed. I'd try to follow up, only for her to panic over betraying her mom by turning to someone else.

"Take Nadia out for a nice lunch," Papa Bear insists when I fall silent. "Maybe walk around the mall first to wear her out like a cranky kid."

Smiling at his teasing, I can't deny I'm afraid to be alone with Nadia. She's holding so much resentment toward me. I fear the pain I'll feel when she finally lets it all come flowing out.

The next day, Nadia doesn't seem resentful. She mostly acts tired like she hasn't gotten a good night's rest in a very long time.

At the Gallup Hills mall, we're tailed by a prospect. Papa Bear insisted on sending security after what happened with Giselle at the funeral home. I'm accustomed to tatted, rough men and women around me, but I worry Nadia will make a fuss about the situation.

Instead, she doesn't show much interest in anything. Rather than allow her silence to linger, I loop my arm in hers and talk about random things. Anything is better than to let our awkwardness take hold.

At the restaurant, we sit across from each other. I can't seem to shut up by this point. I tell her all the ugly details about poor Connor's shooting before ending up on how Bomber, Pumpkin, and Collin are taking a long vacation but will be back soon.

"Collin has the same blue eyes as Betty Boop," I babble after we put in our orders.

Nadia lifts her gaze and mutters, “I never understood how you could live in another woman’s shadow. How can you deal with those people knowing you’re his second choice?”

Her words give voice to many of my insecurities. I know I’ll never be as good as Betty Boop. I chose years ago to focus on my happiness rather than feed the self-destructive part of me.

“Nadia, life isn’t a zero-sum game,” I explain after a moment. “There doesn’t have to be a loser for there to be a winner. Papa Bear can have loved Betty Boop with his whole heart yet also love me with his whole heart. It’s not a competition.”

“If she was alive, he wouldn’t have wanted you.”

“There would have been an attraction,” I reply, not allowing her to bait me into feeling bad. “But Papa Bear needs his woman to be completely loyal to him and trust him wholeheartedly. The only way we can is if he’s loyal and trustworthy toward us. So, even if he felt an attraction to me while Betty Boop was alive, he would never act on it. Just like if I’d met him first and Betty Boop showed up years later, he wouldn’t have acted on their attraction. Papa Bear is faithful to a fault.”

“That’s nice, but it’s weird to have her pictures everywhere.”

Nadia is too much like me. I used to search for reasons to feel bad. If life was good, I’d pick at a small problem until it got bigger and unavoidable. Then, I’d wonder why I was always stressed out.

But I’m not Enid anymore. I’ve changed, even if Nadia can’t—or won’t—see it.

“Betty Boop feels like a friend to me,” I explain, winning a frown from my daughter. “She’s the one who helped Papa Bear grow from a boy to a man. She built him up when he struggled. She was at his side when the Sanctuary started and when Kraken walked away with a part of the club. She gave

him three children and helped him become a great father. She turned him into the man who saved me.”

Nadia shakes her head but doesn't speak.

“You know what I was like when we got to the Sanctuary,” I say as tears fill my eyes and shame rises in me. “I wasn't doing right by you or myself. I always picked the wrong choice. Self-sabotaging was the only thing I was truly good at.”

Nadia looks into my eyes, wanting to agree. I feel her anger over how her childhood wasn't what she deserved. Her resentment fills the air, but she doesn't speak.

“Most men looked at me and saw flaws they could exploit. Papa Bear saw qualities he could support. He realized I was addicted to negative feedback. I didn't think love was passionate unless it involved screaming and fists. I was in a loop, replaying the same violence I saw as a kid.”

A smile touches my lips as I think back to when I first saw Papa Bear. He should have been intimidating, but I couldn't stop staring.

“With any other man, I'd have fallen back into that pattern,” I continue as I stroke my smiling lips. “Papa Bear simply refused to play that game. He saw I was capable of more and expected me to live up to my potential. Because of him, I broke the loop. That doesn't change how you were stuck in my pattern for the first part of your life. I did to you what my parents did to me. Papa Bear saving me didn't mean you also felt saved.”

“It's not about me. It's you. Living in that place with people who don't view you as special.”

Nadia seems so young as she refuses to stop picking at a problem to make it bigger. As a small child, Katana learned to deal with negative feelings. In contrast, Nadia is like me, not only letting problems fester, but feeding the negative while remaining blind to the positive.

“You can't have everything in life, Nadia,” I say and she narrows her eyes as if I'm talking down to her. “I can't ever be

as close to the other old ladies as they were with Betty Boop. Many of them think like you do. That it's a contest between Betty Boop and me. If they're too friendly with me, they don't miss her."

"I feel them judging you, even after all these years."

"That's why I said we can't have everything. I can't make them like me like they did Betty Boop, but I've made other friends. I'm happy without being close to the original old ladies. They're happy without being close to me. It doesn't have to be a battle."

Nadia shakes her head. "It feels like you're giving in to them."

"How would I make them change their hearts? Can I just tell you to stop resenting me for being a terrible mom? Could you just erase your feelings like that? It's better to accept how people feel and work with what's possible."

Lowering her gaze, Nadia mumbles, "You weren't terrible."

"I spent my youth craving love. Then, I had you. But it wasn't the right kind of love. You didn't play games or hurt me. I felt unsatisfied, when I should have realized I'd been given a gift. My baby girl would never sell me out or steal from me or break my heart. You just wanted to be wrapped up in my love. But I couldn't see past my old habits. So, I might not be the worst mom, but I *was* terrible."

Nadia seems uncomfortable, fidgeting in her spot. Papa Bear told me a few days ago how she was the same angry, young woman as when she left. However, she's also grown nostalgic over our relationship. That's why she's been cold to him and Katana. Having forgiven me, Nadia needs someone to blame for our failed relationship. My choice to accept responsibility is messing with the lies she tells herself.

I reach across the table and rest my hand on hers. Nadia's blue eyes meet mine, and she looks so lost.

"I messed up a lot for a long time," I whisper. "You've made mistakes with bad men. You're hurting like I was when I

arrived at the Sanctuary. I didn't magically get fixed and neither will you. But we can figure things out. You're still so young and those bad habits you learned from me and other people don't have to last. The good you see in yourself can be what takes hold. But you can't force it by pretending the past didn't happen."

Nadia fights the tears pooling in her eyes. "I sometimes wonder what my life would be like if I hadn't left the Sanctuary. Would I have found a good man by now? We might have a kid. I'd have hobbies and friends. I wouldn't feel all beaten down and washed up," she says and then whimpers, "I feel old like my life is over, and I've got nothing to look forward to besides bad memories."

I slide out of the booth and come to her side, where I wrap her in my arms. Nadia sinks into my embrace as her tears dampen my shirt.

"Do you remember our first night at the Sanctuary? We slept together in the Stockade bed. I couldn't stop crying. I felt like a trapped animal ready to gnaw off a limb just to break free. Except I chose to go there. I wasn't being held against my will. I trusted Papa Bear as soon as our eyes met. I knew you were safe in that house unlike any other place we'd lived before. I should have relaxed and enjoyed the quiet, but I was miserable and thought nothing would change."

Nadia wipes her eyes and snuffles. "And you think I can be like you with a little therapy and a biker with a heart of gold?"

"I think you can do better than I have. You're younger. Even without you fessing up to everything that's happened since you left, I believe you haven't fucked up as much as I did before I got my second chance. You don't have a sad daughter who cries because of your bad choices."

I take the napkin and wipe her face as she remembers we're in a public space. I see her shame in showing emotion.

"Right now, you feel low," I say softly. "But you won't feel the same way in six months. Let yourself heal before you expect to be someone else."

“It’s awkward in the house.”

“Give that time, too. Don’t expect everything to be perfect. It’s normal for you to need time to figure out your path. If you want to stay with us, no one expects you to leave. If you want the privacy of a cottage, no one will disagree with you. Just figure out what you really want and not what you think you *should* want.”

Nadia stares at me in the same way she did as a kid. I hug her against me and help her carry her burden. Nadia craves the comfort she didn’t trust me to give her when we moved to the Sanctuary.

When our lunch arrives, I don’t return to my side of the booth. We remain close, trying each other’s meals and regularly hugging. Today feels like the first real step to getting back what I lost so long ago.

SISTER SASS



The Sanctuary's been on alert since the Texas assholes tried talking up Giselle. Overlord claims he has things handled. Rather than complain, I decide to trust my brother. It's just part of my new "mature" stance on things.

I got the idea after telling Jester about the Reno trip. He flipped out so hard that his secret phone got nabbed. Then, he freaked out so much during a video call with Papa Bear that he lost his communication privileges for a week.

His inability to see the big picture is common knowledge. I usually admire Jester's temper. He doesn't let people push him around. But now, his temper's gotten him cut off from me.

"One of you needs to be mature and stable," Dire told me last night at The Lockup. "And it sure as fuck won't be him."

So I've decided to feed the "Betty Boop" part of me. I plan to be more responsible, less temperamental, more nurturing. To practice that last part, I decide to hit up my little sister.

Kat and I can usually only talk about unimportant things. I'm too old to care about her doll collection. She's too young to hear me whine about my hang-ups regarding cocks and babies. We keep our conversations solely on easy stuff like who annoys us and what foods make us fart. Despite her girly-girl outfits, Kat can let them rip with real flair.

Today, I show up at my dad's place to find my youngest sibling pouting on the porch swing.

"Did you start your period?"

"No. I'm only eight."

"You're almost nine, and I started a month before my tenth birthday. You're in the danger zone, kiddo."

"Is it awful?"

Settling next to her, I nod. “Even after fifteen years, I’m still pissed.”

Kat smiles before looking at her doll. “I don’t like Nadia.”

“She doesn’t like you, either. The jury’s still out on how I feel about the both of you.”

“No, you like me.”

“I tolerate you. It’s different.”

Kat scoots closer and shoves me gently. “You love me.”

“Of course. I have no choice. You’re my little sister.”

“I’m her little sister, too.”

“Yeah, but you got everything while she got garbage. She’s right to hate you. I’d hate you, too. Instead, I just tolerate you.”

Kat pouts at how I refuse to sugarcoat the situation. “I gave you advice about your hair.”

“Unsolicited advice, ya fool-ass brat,” I snarl at her, winning a grin. “I don’t want a haircut.”

Kat snickers. “You’d look prettier if your hair was shorter and sleek.”

“Like yours?”

“Yes.”

“But your mom has long, wavy hair. Are you talking trash about her? Should I tattle on you?”

“My mom is beautiful.”

“Yes, and mine was, too.”

“You don’t look like your mom.”

Narrowing my eyes, I mutter, “Thanks for reminding me, ovary-stomper.”

“You’re not ugly.”

“Nice half-ass compliment, bitch.”

Kat laughs. “You don’t look like anyone. Are you sure you’re not adopted?”

“Did Bomber tell you to ask me that?”

Snickering, Kat shakes her head. “He said you were dropped off on the doorstep by a method-out stork. I don’t even know what that all means.”

“He looks like Papa Bear. Overlord has my mom’s beautiful eyes and soft features. I didn’t get shit.”

“Do you wish you looked like Papa Bear?”

“I happen to think our father would make a lovely-looking woman.”

Giggling wildly now, Kat hugs her doll and leans into me. “I want you to be my only sister.”

“Don’t be a stuck-up brat. You got all the goodies growing up. If you were the one who got screwed and you came home to get snuggles from your mom, wouldn’t you want your little sister to chill the fuck out?”

“I still think I’m right.”

“Yeah, I do that a lot. You know, fool myself with lies.”

Kat sighs sadly. “I want Mom to pay attention to me.”

“Where is she now?”

“With Mabie and Clark at the greenhouses.”

“Are you mad at Mabie and Clark for stealing her away?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“Mabie’s nice.”

“Is Nadia mean to you? Should I smack her around?”

Kat shakes her head, making her little bob haircut bounce. “She seems weird. I don’t like her.”

“She looks a lot like your mom, while you look like our dad. Are you jealous you have a man’s head?”

Kat shoves me, making me laugh. “I’m pretty like a girl.”

“Sure, chump. Whatever floats your ego.”

“I thought you’d be on my side.”

“I’m a really warm person with no hang-ups. That means, I’m on *everyone’s* side.”

“Go away.”

“No, it’s my dad’s house. I can come inside and stink up the place.”

Kat refuses to smile, so I wrap an arm around her and sway us on the porch.

“I love you, Kat. You’re my favorite sister, but you’re being a bitch about this Nadia thing.”

“I’m your only sister.”

“No, Nadia’s my stepsister. That shit counts.”

“How come you never come talk to her?”

“She’s a girly-girl, and you know I can’t stand those types.”

Kat’s pretty little face scrunches up as she admits, “I want Nadia to go away.”

“Yeah, that’s why I said you were being a bitch.”

“You’re mean.”

“So are you. Nadia got all beat up by her jerk boyfriend. Just like Mabie got hit by her husband. How come you don’t mind Mabie in your house, but you’re being cold as ice toward Nadia?”

Kat frowns hard and looks at her doll. “She made Mom cry.”

“When?”

“A bunch of times. I heard Mom talking to Dad, and she’d cry.”

“Did you know I made your mom cry, too?”

Frowning, Kat tries to push me off the swing. “Well, you should leave, too, then.”

“Too bad you’re too small to make that happen.”

“I’m learning karate.”

“Let me know how that turns out.”

Kat starts crying. “I want my mom.”

For a moment, I only stare in horror. Children are weird. We were just goofing off, and now she’s sobbing her little eyes out. I’m used to that kind of moodiness from Evie but not Kat.

Wrapping her in a hug, I mumble, “Lady Bug’s at the greenhouse with Mabie and Clark. Is there a reason you stayed here instead of going with them?”

“She’s being too nice to Nadia.”

“But not to Mabie?”

“Mabie is different.”

“Because you know Mabie while Nadia seems like a stranger?”

Kat nods, lowering her chin to cry more. I hug her to me and stroke her head.

“As a natural peacemaker, I have an idea. Why don’t I take you and Nadia out to the movies or other boring activities? We can get lame kid food and eat ice cream. That last part is probably the best part. Then, Nadia won’t be a stranger. She’ll be your bored older sister. That’s right, kiddo, you’ll have two of them.”

Wiping her face on my shirt, Kat asks, “Can I pick the movie?”

“I said I’d be bored, so obviously you can.”

“And you won’t let her bully me?”

“Does she bully you here?”

“No. She doesn’t talk to me at all.”

“Who the hell would want to talk to a gross little kid who eats her own boogers?”

Kat shoves me off her as I laugh at her reaction. Realizing I’m fucking with her, she settles down.

“Does Nadia talk to Evie and Zoey when they come over?” I ask as she fixes her hair from the mess my erratic head rubs created.

“No.”

“Maybe she doesn’t like bratty, little girls. Or she might be scared of you. Like how Dire fears children will sneeze on her.”

Kat grins and informs me, “Dire never wants kids.”

“Yeah, she’s told me that. I think she might have told everyone in the world at this point.”

“Are little kids that bad?”

“Yes, but you’re also cute, so it evens out.”

Kat strokes her hair and nods. “I am cute.”

“So are Zoey and Evie. I didn’t mind babysitting them. But with the two new ones, I just can’t even, you know?”

“Do you like Jules?”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling as I remember being pals with Jules when we were kids. “She’s cool. And she really loves Overlord. We have to be protective of the people who love the people we love. Get it? Since Nadia loves your mom, you need to be nice to her. Just like how I didn’t like your mom when she arrived at the Sanctuary and started slutting it up with my dad,” I explain as my little sister angrily narrows her eyes. “But then I saw how much she loved Papa Bear. How could I steal his happiness? I loved him enough to learn to love her. I think you should do the same with Nadia.”

Kat stops glaring at me. She’s a smart but spoiled kid. I wasn’t nearly as composed at her age. I’d flip out over small things. Mostly, I felt I should have been a boy like my brothers. I’d try to be tough like them and end up on my ass.

Fortunately, my parents were great about helping me back up every time I flopped at something.

Despite the bullshit I told Kat, I never play peacemaker. In fact, I often egged my brothers on when they'd argue. And I'm known to start arguments between club brothers, just to see what'll happen. *So, yeah, I'm usually an asshole.*

But Jester will be home next year, leaving me thinking about marriage and a kid. Those are adult plans, so I best start behaving like a grown-up, even if that involves kid movies, garbage food options, and playing the middleman.

LUCA



I surprise myself. This giggling, giddy woman isn't me. I'm like a kid on vacation. I can't stop smiling or touching Ghost. My heart races when he watches me. If I had any idea love could feel this way, I would have been searching for it all my life.

The sex is surprisingly great, and my body is completely open to fucking. I keep expecting to panic from having a man's hands on me. I'm ready for the flashbacks. But I never forget I'm with Ghost, and I don't worry about his rejection. His desire for me has been palpable since we met. Since returning from Reno, I've trusted his feelings, even when he pushes me away. I know he's just fighting his own demons, not reacting to mine.

We have a ball in Vegas, doing all the touristy shit. I even buy Ghost and me matching Elvis T-shirts. He agrees to wear his after I bribe him with a blowjob. Totally snookered him! After all, I'd have sucked him off for free.

Ghost is sexy enough to look slick in his Elvis shirt and the Hawaiian-themed bowling shirt I also get for him.

"Stop making me look like someone's dad," Ghost grumbles as we pass a middle-aged guy dressed in a similar outfit.

"I might want a baby one day. This is good practice for when our kid is a teenager, and we want to shame him with our lameness."

Ghost stops walking and unleashes his darkest frown. "Do you really think I'm capable of being a father?"

"Of course. My fancy-pants aunt and her rich-prick husband might have been as boring and normal as people can be, but they still fucked up raising their kids, Drew, and me.

They got impatient, lost their temper, and made mistakes. Nothing they did right is something you couldn't also do. And nothing you'd do wrong is something they didn't also do."

Ghost's shoulders sag as if my praise is wearing him down. I slide my arms around his hard waist and console his soft heart.

"I'm not ready for a kid," I promise as people move past us. "Until I met you, my life goal was hunting monsters until one of them finished me off. Now, I'm in love. I'm also thinking about joining up with a new team, which comes with a lot of responsibilities. Everything is new, so a kid isn't in the cards right now."

"Eh, cards," he says gesturing around at the bright lights of this gambling mecca. "I get it."

"But one day, I will want to have a baby. Not alone, but with you."

Ghost unleashes a morose glare. "What if my kid is fucked up?"

"My cousins weren't superstars, even though they had normal parents."

"I meant like genetics."

"Every time anyone has a kid, they're rolling the dice. So, yeah, our kid might be prone to addiction or born disabled or, you know, a terrible person like the people who hurt us. But that's the same for everyone."

"It's that easy, huh?"

"No. It'll be difficult. Babies cry, and you sometimes can't handle noise. We'll need to work around your needs and the baby's needs and my occasional freakout over how I can't handle the pressure. But we're not the only people who have hang-ups. Why should we be deprived of something we want?"

"What if I don't want a kid?"

"That's a conversation for a few years from now."

“No, people should talk about these things in the beginning of their relationship. Why invest time and emotion in something that’s bound to break apart?”

I stare into his eyes and ask, “If I say I want a kid, will you dump me?”

“No. But what happens when I don’t want a kid in two years?”

“I’ll have to decide if I want you or the kid. Right now, I don’t know what you’ll want in two years. Neither do you. Let’s just drop the worry until the time comes.”

Despite my logic, Ghost refuses to chill out. Mostly, he’s overstimulated by the lights, noise, and crowds.

“I can’t see myself having a kid.”

“Before we met, could you see yourself having a woman?”

“No, but I could never have pictured someone like you. I’ve got no problem picturing a kid. They’re loud and gross.”

We stand on the sidewalk, stuck in a conversation about a problem for the future. Though I might be fooling myself, I believe Ghost has the right qualities to be a father. Not right now. He’s still struggling to trust me. But in a year from now, he’ll stop doubting us. By then, he might be able to see past his own suffering, fears, and anger to the idea of creating a child.

And if he can’t, I’ll need to ask myself if a hypothetical son or daughter is more important than the very real relationship I’ve built with Ghost.

“The kid conversation can wait,” I insist and tug him along. “We’ll be busy for a while with house plans and hitting up all your mom’s old boyfriends.”

Ghost’s edgy energy disappears. I don’t know if he’s psyched about us living together or excited about hunting down his old abusers. Either way, he’s in a great mood for the rest of the day. He barely growls at anyone. He even manages to smile at our dinner waitress.

For the Cirque du Soleil show, I expect him to be annoyed or bored. I'm only attending the show to check it off my bucket list.

To my surprise, Ghost finds the entire thing hilarious. He keeps chuckling. At first, I think it's nervous laughter, but then I realize he finds their movements hysterical. The people around us get annoyed, but he has me also laughing by the end.

"I used to think there was nothing to see outside the Sanctuary or Metamora," Ghost explains during our late drinks at the hotel bar. "I didn't even want to visit Gallup Hills. But this right here isn't bad. I'd never do it alone or think to ask Apex to come with me. If he and I did come here, we'd just play cards and drink. Nothing we couldn't do back home."

Brushing my fingers across his cheek, I smile. "I would go to those resorts and drink cocktails and sit by the pool or ocean. Nothing more. I'd consider doing water sports or exploring, but I was afraid to have too much fun. I felt a duty to be miserable when I knew people were suffering. I haven't thought like that once since we arrived here."

"We're good together, right?" Ghost asks, seeming wary. "It's why I don't want to punch everyone around us right now."

Smiling softly, I promise, "Yeah, we're good."

As Ghost watches me in such a nakedly lovesick way, I nearly panic over the power I hold. That sense of impending failure rises in me. I don't want to one day regret my choices with Ghost.

I wish I could promise myself I won't fuck up, but I don't know how to be another person. I tend to freeze up when on the spot. I've pushed myself with Ghost, fighting against my natural tendencies. But there are no certainties. I can only hold on to him and hope for the best.

Fortunately, our vacation cements our relationship. We return to the Sanctuary as a committed couple, wanting to share space.

Knowing my future is with Ghost, I'm unsure how to handle Hope's situation. If she wasn't in the picture, I'd have stayed longer in Vegas. But I've taken on the responsibility for her safety and happiness.

Arriving at the Stockade, I run through the messages I've received over the last few days about Hope's behavior. After a day or two of going out with Jules and Sweet Buns, she's returned to hiding in her room and refusing to eat. So far, she isn't lashing out or scaring the old ladies.

Arriving at the Stockade, I find Sweet Buns fussing over how Hope's only had two nutritional shakes all day.

Seeming panicked, she explains, "She's skin and bones."

"Let Luca handle it," Ghost insists.

Sweet Buns doesn't give me any attitude. She's grown fond of Hope, and I know her worries are genuine.

Walking into the bedroom, I climb into bed with Hope. She stares blankly for a long time. I like to believe she's making me wait after I ditched her for a vacation. She doesn't know about her father's death. I doubt I'll ever tell her the truth, even if she heals up and wants to know how he died. Sometimes, lies are the only treatment for a gaping wound.

"Ghost said he loves me," I whisper as her eyes finally focus on my face. "I love him, too. I never thought I'd want a man. They seemed like too much work. He's worth it, though."

Hope blinks a few times, coming out of the daze she keeps herself in when stressed. Her gaze sharpens, and she reaches for my hand.

"Don't leave me," she says in a dry, thirsty voice.

Tears immediately fill my eyes. I hear Drew begging me to stay with her. I'd whispered about running for help. I thought I could jump the back fence and get to a neighbor's house. She looked at me and literally begged for me to stay with her.

"If you run, they'll kill my baby," Drew pleaded in the same desperate voice she often used when we were little and

our mom's drama crashed down on us. "I'll do anything to save her."

The pain of that memory nearly sends me spiraling. Over the last few days, I let my guard down and believed I could walk away from my past. Now, I feel those bad memories sucking the air from the room, until I can barely breathe.

My gaze flashes to the door, where Ghost lingers. He doesn't want to be away from me. I feel the same way about him. We've found something warm and comfortable after a long time struggling in the cold.

Looking to him for help, I fight the urge to run. Ghost's expression is so relaxed. If he sees my panic, he doesn't respond to it.

His gaze reassures how I'm not stuck back with my doomed sister and niece.

Exhaling softly, I squeeze Hope's hand. "You and I are linked now. I might have to go on jobs for the club, but the Sanctuary is my home now. I want it to be yours, too."

Hope chews on her bottom lip and seems to wake up a little more. She's remembering our time walking around the Sanctuary. Ghost showed us the greenhouse, the indoor pool, and the stables. She's eaten at HQ for every meal. The world outside the Stockade feels welcoming, but she's been back inside these walls for days now. I watch her reach for the memories and make them real again.

"I want to stay here," Hope whispers.

"You can. These people will protect you. I know some of them are scary. Ghost can seem that way, but he will suffer to make sure you don't. These are good people, and the Sanctuary is a good place. I think you and I will be happy here."

Hope's hazel eyes study my face before she nods. Sitting up, she looks around, flinches at the sight of Ghost at the doorway, and then slides off the mattress.

Her body is still so thin and fragile, yet her mind is growing sharper. Sweet Buns and I help her get dressed for a

walk to HQ.

As her stomach growls, Hope takes the juice I offer and watches me while she drinks. Her gaze flashes to Ghost and then Sweet Buns before returning to me. The tiniest grin warms her face as if she's thinking about what I told her.

For the first time, I look into Hope's eyes and witness a spark of optimism.

I smile at Ghost, thanking him for keeping me grounded. Running was the right choice many times in my life. Yet, the Sanctuary is my home now, and I plan to stay put.

GHOST



Overwhelming with its lights, noise, and crowds, Vegas should send me spiraling. I do struggle more than once, especially when we walk through certain casinos. The sounds seem to crawl inside my brain and set off all the bad wiring. I get nauseous and lightheaded. People instantly get on my nerves. I want to hide somewhere dark.

Luca doesn't react to my sudden hostility. When I start mumbling about how stupid people are, she just tugs me along until we end up in a little club with celebrity impersonators. In a dark corner, she cuddles with me and fumbles with the lyrics to "Believe." The music is too loud at first, but I close my eyes and feel Luca.

My brain zeroes in on her peachy shampoo, terrible singing, and the side of her tit pressed against my chest. Luca's presence feels like a great joint, softening the tattered wires in my defective brain.

I finally open my eyes to find a Bette Midler impersonator singing "Wind Beneath My Wings." Luca looks up at me and smiles.

"This music is awful," she says, laughing before the second word leaves her sexy lips.

Sharing her smile, I get control of myself and order a drink. That's what we do for those few days on vacation, just bounce from one location to another. We play a couple hands at one table before spending twenty minutes at a slot machine before getting a bite to eat at a bistro before seeking out entertainment. There's no plan. I shouldn't enjoy such chaos, but I know Luca needs to get away from micromanaging things. This is less of a vacation and more like a practice run for the rest of our lives.

We end our trip by dropping by a jewelry shop near the hotel, where we ordered matching titanium spinner rings. Luca doesn't act goofy by calling them "promise rings" or anything. She just says we need help with staying centered, and the rings will remind us of our first vacation. I like how she makes our damage seem normal. Everything is better when Luca's at my side.

But back at the Sanctuary, I'm forced to share Luca with Hope. The young woman and I have some shit in common. We both ignore our bodies' signals when we're upset. I hear her stomach growling, but she's been refusing food. Meanwhile, I haven't eaten since breakfast. My stomach knows I'm hungry. But my brain doesn't get the message until I'm met by the familiar scent of the HQ's fried chicken and waffles.

We're earlier than normal, meaning more people linger. I feel a lot of eyes on us. Thinking my fellow Born Villains might be sizing up a future hookup when they see Hope, I turn into a surly older brother and glare hard at them.

With everyone knowing Hope's backstory, I'm sure none of these men would do anything skeevy toward her. But there's no harm in me reminding them how I'm an asshole, and she's mine to protect.

That's the reality of the situation. I love Luca, and her heart's set on saving Hope. If I want my woman, I'll need to accept responsibility for her substitute sister.

Usually, Hope has a zombie, drugged-up vibe. Occasionally, she'll get a weird, hostile energy. Today, she seems so curious about things. Though she orders a potato chowder, she eventually eyeballs my plate until I offer her a bite of my chicken. Luca cuts off part of her burger for Hope and adds a few fries.

I get a surprising kick out of how Hope's hazel eyes light up and a little smile plays around her lips. She doesn't seem to notice the people around us. Her focus remains solely on Luca and me.

For the first time, I think I might be able to handle fatherhood. Not yet, of course. Apex is running full speed

toward family life. Giselle and he use zero protection. They aren't ready to be parents, but that's the fate they're jumping into with both feet.

Luca and I will play shit slower, safer, smarter. But the destination might be the same.

And to reach that destination, I need her to remain alive. That's why I flip out when Overlord approaches her after we return to the Stockade and Hope wants to sit in the grassy lawn.

"Several Texas goons approached Giselle while you were gone," Overlord explains in that deceptively calm voice he learned from Papa Bear. "Sheriff Graeme rounded them up, and they claimed to be concerned family friends hoping to check on her."

"Just end them," I grumble, stepping between Luca and Overlord.

"They're henchmen. We need to kill her father, Zack Reinhart."

Still trying to block his view of Luca, I snap, "Then hire someone."

Overlord inhales sharply and peers around me to see Luca. "They have other women like Giselle locked up in that estate. I don't know how to hit a place like that without collateral damage."

Luca slides around me and nods. "I rarely save anyone. You should be aware of that."

"But how many people have died while you tried?"

"A guy burned down a house where they had people chained up. I killed him, but none of those victims survived. You need to know if we hit these people—"

"No," I snarl at her. "It's not your problem."

Luca glances at Hope and then focuses on me. "I'll look at the situation and then decide."

I scowl at Overlord who nods and says, “These fuckers will never let up with Giselle. If we can kill even one of the Black Gold Four and steal away their safety, she has a shot of living a relatively normal life. Except she’s also haunted by those she left behind.”

“She can’t remember.”

“A part of her does,” Overlord replies immediately. “And the more she pulls at that thread, the easier it’ll be for her entire past to come crashing back on her. I know you don’t want that.”

My heart demands to cut loose Apex and his happiness. But I can’t deny our past. He was my first real friend. Most people found me annoying or exhausting. Apex always stuck it out, no matter my fuckups.

If he lost Giselle to those assholes, he wouldn’t survive. She’s this amazing gift he’s put up on a pedestal. Her love proves his worth. That’s too much to lose.

Except I can’t replace Luca, either. That leaves us at an impasse.

Luca ignores my anger and tells Overlord, “I plan to talk to Ominous about being a prospect. If I say no to this Texas thing, will you refuse to give me a patch? You know, like how you only gave Dire her patch once she went on the Reno run.”

Overlord smirks. “You aren’t Dire. She had to prove herself in a way you’ll never need to. But if you want to ride with our club, you’ll need to show you can follow orders. But that doesn’t mean I’m willing to send you on a suicide mission. If you say this thing isn’t doable, we’ll come up with another plan. But you’ll still need to eat a little shit, just to show you’ll behave.”

Glancing at me, Luca asks, “And can a member also be an old lady?”

“I don’t see why not,” Overlord replies, likely thinking about Sister Sass and Jester. “But why don’t you settle in tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll get together with a few people and go over options regarding Texas.”

Luca gives him a nod and glances at Hope who rests on her back and enjoys the sun on her skin.

Everyone seems so calm, yet I remain pissed off!

Overlord gestures for me to follow him. I stalk away from the Stockade and try to think of something fucking evil to say. I'm just about to unload nasty insults when Evie and Zoey run toward us, screaming "Daddy!"

Narrowing my eyes, I growl, "You planned that."

Chuckling, Overlord gestures at Jules across the road with the other kids. "She sensed I was in danger."

"Hardy, fucking, har har, asshole."

"Don't start with me, chump," Zoey warns and waves her fist up at me. "I've got a knuckle sandwich waiting for you right here."

Overlord plays with the girls' pigtails and grins at me. "I won't sacrifice your woman to help Apex's woman, okay?"

"Jackass," I snarl, angry at how he's defusing things when I want to scream at him.

"What a punk-ass loser," Zoey says and tries to flip me off.

I frown at how she struggles to get the right finger up. Evie helps her sister until they finally successfully keep the four other fingers at bay and give me the bird.

Behind me, Luca snickers. When I frown at her, she only smiles wider. Her gaze is a little too horny for the situation we're in. Her flirty shit does remind me how we'll need to break in my bed. Maybe Sweet Buns can babysit Hope for a while.

Returning my gaze to Overlord, I find him showing the girls his middle finger. He's not even a little intimidated by my rage. Giving up, I turn away and return to Luca.

"We're a team," she says and cups my face. "If you say no, I say no."

"If you keep calming me down, I'll stop being an asshole to everyone. These people won't recognize me anymore."

“You’ll still be the hot badass watching their back, so I think they’ll recognize you just fine.”

“Good Lord,” I say and kiss her lips. “You’re going to turn me into a fucking teddy bear.”

Luca responds with the wicked laugh of a woman who knows even at our softest, we’ll remain razor sharp. That’s what will keep us alive when we hunt down the fuckers from my childhood and face whatever mess is waiting for us in Texas.

EPILOGUE – ANGEL EYES



Luca/Ghost's Old Lady/Member

For six months, I play the role of prospect around the Sanctuary. Ominous explains how I'll need to eat shit from each of the founding members. Bowing to the rules of this place, I do a single errand for each one of them while wearing a smile. They're smart enough not to rub in my face how I'm cleaning their cars or toilets.

Overlord gives me real prospect jobs. After he gets word about the whereabouts of the remaining Dirty Princes, I finish them off while they're partying with their jailbait "girlfriends." Ghost waits outside, playing lookout, even if it kills him to let me go inside alone. No way would those assholes relax if a man like Ghost showed up at their party, but I enter and exit with ease.

Over those next few months, Ghost and I hunt down the men who hurt him when he was a boy. He gets so wired and weird during the hunts. More than once, he turns on me, seeming on the cusp of violence. I refuse to back down to his temper. Ghost knows I'm not his enemy, just like I know he's hurting from a childhood ruined by evil people.

After each man dies, Ghost gets sullen, depressed even. We retreat to the townhome and watch movies.

By then, Hope and I have moved into his place. She sleeps on his pullout couch. A few evenings a week, Hope will stay with Sweet Buns and Tank. Their affection for her allows Ghost and I to be alone at the townhome, fucking and running around naked.

When Ghost is in his dark moods, we usually have Hope stay somewhere else. Occasionally, she won't go. Ghost will order her to leave. She'll ball herself up in a corner. The only way to make her go would be to get physical. Despite his rage,

Ghost won't put his hands on her. During those evenings, we watch funny movies until they're both calmer.

By the time I get my Born Villains patch and the road/old lady name "Angel Eyes," I know the Sanctuary inside out. This place is my home in a way nowhere ever has been before. I party with the club chicks once a week, drinking and playing pool. On Sundays, I ride with them around Metamora, often meeting up with a group that includes Ghost.

As much as I love riding my Nightster Special and being one of the biker chicks, I'm still happiest wrapped around the back of Ghost as we explore the beautiful, rugged land where Metamora is nestled.

With three people living in the small townhome, we're in a rush to build our house. That pushes me to make a decision about Hope's future.

By then, I've accepted how she'll never be normal again. I don't think she even remembers herself from before the Dirty Princes. The woman she is now is mostly docile, scared of her own shadow, and silent. Even after she begins to speak to people besides me, Hope never says much. She won't instigate a conversation. The most she speaks is when she's singing along with songs or mimicking a TV show.

Ghost thinks Hope's brain got fried in that underground bunker. More than traumatized, she's actually wired wrong now.

I assume that's why she'll take off running after getting spooked by random things. If it happens when I'm not around, she'll refuse to stop running. Members of the Sanctuary will try to round her up, like sheepdogs with a panicked sheep. A few times I arrive to find six guys circling her from a distance just to keep her from taking off again. They don't dare touch her, knowing she'll scream, claw at them, and often hurt herself.

Once Hope sees me, she only needs a moment to turn off her panic. I'm her tether to this new life. When she loses herself in the fear, everyone feels like a threat. She'll even run

away from Overlord's girls. But I act as a sedative, bringing her back down and helping her to see clearly.

Over time, Hope views Ghost in a similar way. He can still spook her. The man's too quiet and seems to appear out of thin air. I keep explaining to Hope how he's like a cat. She even gets to calling him "Kitty" from time to time when he's grumpy.

Despite Hope's attachment to me, I consider letting her stay permanently with Tank and Sweet Buns. She likes them. They do well with her. They don't travel for jobs like Ghost and me. Living with them would be more stable. However, if Hope flips out, they'll still need me to show up and reassure her.

I'm torn in the same way I was when Drew showed up at my house with her baby and a shit-ton of problems.

Except Hope isn't Drew. If her boyfriend hadn't shown up, my sister likely would have gotten her life in order and moved out. However, Hope will never be able to fend for herself or live alone.

In a few years, she might mellow out enough to cozy up with one of the Born Villains. Her brain is scarred, but she's still a young woman with hormones. Eventually, she's bound to view the hot men around her as more than threats.

But it's just as likely she'll be a permanent fixture in my home.

"She's already your new sister," Ghost says when we talk about the living situation. "She already cockblocks me all the time. Why change shit by thinking she might do well full-time with Tank?"

"It'll be your home, too. I need to be sure you want this and aren't agreeing because you think you have to."

"I don't have to do anything," he grumbles.

Thinking of how he pitched a low-key fit about her sleeping on his pullout couch, I point out, "You didn't want her in your townhome."

“Where else was she going to go?”

“She can go live with Tank and Sweet Buns.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know.”

Ghost doesn’t answer for a long time. He’s working through his own boundary issues. Hope doesn’t usually bother him. She’s quiet and likes the house closed up. But she’s also underfoot. He can’t run around naked or fuck me with her around. Hope is less like our sister and more like our kid.

“It seems like more trouble to have her live here,” he finally tells me. “But if she has a nightmare, she’ll want you. If she gets spooked and runs, you’re the one who’ll need to track her down. Having her full-time at Tank’s place isn’t really saving us much hassle. Besides, we’ll design the house with her bedroom far from ours, so we can fuck in peace.”

“I’m not even that loud.”

“I am,” he grumbles, smirking at his bullshit.

We decide to keep Hope with us, though she still spends a few nights a week with Tank and Sweet Buns. She likes their cat and the way Sweet Buns lets her help in the kitchen. Though I occasionally worry I’m choosing wrong for Hope, she’s capable of telling me if she wants to stay at their house.

With Ghost and I on the same page, we design our dream home. We decide on four bedrooms for the craftsman. Hope’s suite is on the first floor. We turn a guest bedroom into her hangout space, where she reads and draws. Upstairs are two bedrooms, our primary one and a spare for the baby we’re still unsure about having.

Ghost becomes more curious about fatherhood once Apex takes in a toddler named Amelia. By then, Giselle is pregnant with Anna. Their house isn’t even built, and the situation is far from ideal. Yet, Apex and Giselle manage to build their family with the Sanctuary’s help.

Getting pregnant isn’t as easy for Ghost and me. By the time we get our positive test, our house is built and Anna is

newly two.

“Why isn’t it happening?” Ghost asks me months before we get our good news. “Am I defective?”

“No, we’re just old.”

“I’m the same age as Apex.”

“Fine, I’m just old.”

Ghost frowns. “I don’t buy it. I still think it’s me.”

That negative thinking sticks with him for the entire pregnancy. He’s certain I’ll miscarry. Then, he assumes the baby will be wrong somehow. Ghost is positive I’ll die during childbirth or the baby won’t survive.

“I’m never lucky,” he tells me one night when stress leaves him hiding in the dark.

“You won my heart. That’s lucky, right?” I ask as I settle my very pregnant body next to him in the primary closet. “You got to be a Born Villain. Not everyone does, so that’s lucky. You had the money to build this beautiful house. And you’ve lived in it for a while without the baby, so you don’t feel overwhelmed like Apex did. All lucky stuff. I think you’re just a whiner.”

Ghost grunts his disapproval, even while mellowing out and wrapping me in his arms.

“If something bad happens, it’ll be because of me.”

“I also had bad luck before we met.”

“No, you were a badass killer.”

“So were you, idiot.”

Chuckling, Ghost stops sulking and sees the world a bit more clearly. He’s no longer that messed-up kid fighting the world alone. We’re going to face the future together.

After I have a normal pregnancy and average birth, Reece is born healthy. My genes absolutely dominate Ghost’s. Our son has my fair hair and eyes. He looks a lot like I did as a baby. Ghost sees nothing of himself in Reece.

“He’s a good-looking boy,” he tells Apex. “I hope he takes after his mom in every way.”

I don’t know if Ghost will get his wish. I was never a particularly cuddly child, but Reece loves to snuggle. He’s got such a sweet disposition, too. Maybe that’s what Ghost was like as a boy. Or our son might be a natural little charmer. Whatever the reason, Reece doesn’t struggle with people like his parents. The kid wins over everyone he meets.

My son thaws the last cold part of my heart. One day, I watch him chilling in Ghost’s lap while he watches a football game with Apex. Reece doesn’t care what’s on the big screen. He just relaxes and daydreams. His face wears a soft smile like he’s thinking about something fun.

I stand in the kitchen with Hope nearby. She’s baking cookies with Amelia’s help. Giselle carries Anna with her. In the living room, Ghost is at his best. His body behaves. His mood is good. He chuckles at whatever Apex says. He looks comfortable with Reece in his arms.

In that moment, I find peace after too many years of only ignoring the pain. I finally forgive myself for not saving Drew and Abilene. I comfort the child I once was who suppressed her personality to fit into the box others created. The past loosens its grip on my heart and lets me enjoy life in a real way.

As if sensing something’s changed, Ghost looks to me. He’s still the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. Best of all, he makes me feel right in my skin.

Without a doubt, I’ll never love anyone more than the man who helped me step out of the darkness and give the light a chance.

EPILOGUE – GHOST



Luca retires from the vigilante business once she gets pregnant with Reece. By then, she's only killing a few people a year, usually small-time assholes who've messed with people coming to or already living at the Sanctuary.

Every year for my birthday, Luca offers to end my mom. I always smile and pretend to consider the idea. But a part of me enjoys knowing the bitch is out there struggling while I'm happy. She'll never visit my slick craftsman-style house with its wide porch and picturesque backyard. She'll never get to spend time with Luca, who's seen the world and experienced a wildly diverse life. And she'll never hold her only grandchild or enjoy the sight of his smile lighting up a room.

I can't believe Reece is real sometimes. He's beautiful like his mom. Athletically inclined like her, too. But his bright personality is what breaks me from time to time.

Before Reece was born, I couldn't imagine being a decent father. Whenever we talked about a kid, I'd flip from skeptical to downright hostile to the idea.

Plus, Apex made fatherhood seem nerve-wracking. Why the fuck would I sign up for that shit?

But I'd often find myself thinking about how Luca bought a crib for her future baby. Sick fucks stole her dream. I wanted to be the guy to give her dream back.

I still worried I'd mess up the kid. I'm an okay "uncle" with Apex's two girls. I even held the older one a few times. Amelia didn't particularly like my attention, but it's not like she cried or flipped out. I viewed those encounters as overall successful.

Despite how stressed he gets, Apex is a good dad and so careful with his little girls, just like he is with Giselle. I don't

know how he avoids squishing those tiny chicks while I have trouble not stepping on the cat I get for Hope.

“I thought you said I had to choose between a baby and a cat?” Luca taunts when I agree to take Hope to the Gallup Hills’ animal shelter. “You’ve gone soft.”

“No, I said *you’d* have to choose one or the other. This cat is Hope’s. Completely different.”

“Oh, I stand corrected,” Luca replies, barely able to contain her joy at my new teddy bear status.

Hope falls for a fat, middle-aged male cat with the shelter-given name, Candy Corn. We end up calling him “CC.” Not that the cat responds to any name.

Hope and CC handle the new baby well. She’s good with kids and plays with Apex’s girls as they get bigger. I keep waiting for her to wake up and go wild, teenage-style. The older she gets, the more grounded into this new silent personality she becomes. The Dirty Princes broke Hope down deep and permanently. However, she finds her smile in the same way so many do at the Sanctuary.

After a while, I learn to accept happiness is a real thing rather than a show people put on. Not that I embrace this idea easily. For the first year with Luca, I often zero in on imaginary problems to keep me from being happy.

The house we build is large without being too big, stylish without being fussy, open without feeling cavernous. Luca and I create a comfortable place with just enough space for the family we plan.

Yet, I zero in on how the craftsman-style home clashes with the majority of southwest-style houses on Tobosa Road and Creosote Bush Road. No one cares but me. Though I often act like an asshole contrarian, I’m actually sensitive about seeming too different or weird.

Same with my boy’s name. Luca chose Reece years ago to honor her childhood volleyball idol. I don’t mind the name. It feels slick and simple to remember. Then, Clutch says in

passing, “Like Reese Witherspoon?” and I instantly panic over the name.

Jesse isn’t even a feminine name, but shitheads in school would taunt me with lines from “Toy Story 2” as if I was a girl cowboy. Despite being normal mean-kid crap, their bullying left me paranoid about my son going through the same garbage.

“I’m not naming our kid ‘Bob,’” Luca insists when I push her to pick something else. “You liked the name. I want the name. We’re sticking with the name.”

Luca refuses to give in to my panic. That’s how she handles my second-guessing of our house choices. Whenever I claim our tastes are terrible, she’ll just shake her head and explain how the decision has been made. As soon as I crash into her stubborn wall, I give up and feel better.

In the end, I like my house and Reece’s name. But my fucked-up brain can’t embrace feeling good. Assuming the worst is how I’m wired.

When Luca can’t get pregnant, I assume I’m too polluted to create life.

Her entire pregnancy freaks me out. She doesn’t show for a long time, unlike Giselle who seemed to show from day one. I figure my kid is a tiny mutant. Refusing to give in to my paranoia, Luca explains how her height means she’ll carry differently.

Next, I’m certain our son will die. Then, I’m sure he’ll be sickly like I was as a boy.

But Reece is born big and strong. He isn’t at all like Apex’s tiny daughter. I never fear holding my son like my friend stresses carrying his baby girl. Reece fits comfortable in my arms and on my lap.

Turns out, I really like being a dad to Reece. Maybe a different kid wouldn’t make me feel this way. But Reece is a funny, chill guy. Not always the brightest, Reece often has a stoner vibe about him.

“I think my defective sperm made him weird,” I tell Luca after Reece laughs his ass off about something dumb the cat does.

Luca kisses me tenderly before rolling her eyes and pointing out, “He’s just happy.”

Her words make sense. No one treats Reece’s chill vibe as odd except me. Most people claim he’s a fun kid. Even child-hating Dire will play with my boy because he’s a ham who thinks she’s hilarious.

Something about knowing I’ve created a sweet-natured, happy human being soothes an ugly part of me. Not overnight, but as Reece gets older and Luca doesn’t bail on me, I start to shake off my negative thinking. I’ll never be a nice, normal guy. My body won’t ever behave. Even if I live to be an old man, I’ll remain fucked up.

But like Papa Bear chose to do better than what was done to him, I start dragging myself out of my negative thinking.

It’s never easy. Darkness is where I feel most comfortable. Assuming the worst is soothing. Hating the world makes me feel safe.

However, when Luca sits with me, I admire a woman who loves me even when I don’t deserve it. She might have gotten more comfortable in her skin at the Sanctuary, but she never looks at me and wishes she chose someone else. That knowledge lures me into the light.

Hope can also work magic on my fucked-up thinking. Though I still scare her from time to time, she understands the man I want to be and always treats me tenderly.

And then there’s Reece who will find me grumpy or hurting. He’ll stand awkwardly, watching me. When I find his gaze, he’ll shuffle in place like he’s got ants in his pants.

“What?” I always ask as if I don’t know what he’s going to say.

“I’m Reece, not a hard taco.”

Once I give him a smile, he hurries to climb in my lap and share whatever kid thing is rolling around in his little head.

One day, Reece will want to know about that ‘hard taco’ thing. His mom taught him to say it when I’m feeling shitty, but they’re just words right now. Sooner or later, he’ll learn about the ugly versions of his loving parents.

For now, Reece just thinks his dad has ouchies. He views his mom as another tough woman in a place filled with them. Hope is just quiet and shy.

I hope if Reece decides to become a Born Villain one day, he’ll be like Overlord—soft from a loving childhood. That’s the greatest gift I can give my boy—to never experience the world’s evil up close. I hope he doesn’t need to “survive” life like Luca and I did.

But if he does, I hope my boy finds his own Angel Eyes who sees through his bullshit and loves the best of him.



THE END

JESTER — SNEAK PEEK



Rayland “Jester” Crest has been locked in prison for a crime he most definitely committed. As the original Road Captain for the Born Villains Motorcycle Club, he’s returning to a compound filled with his people. Though he helped found the Sanctuary, he can’t shake how he’s returning to a changed world where he no longer knows his place.



Talon “Sister Sass” Marsden has loved Jester since she was a lovesick teenager. Violence and vengeance kept them apart for six years. Now, the intimidating biker is coming home with very specific plans for their second chance.



Finish the journey with the Born Villains Motorcycle Club as Jester and Sister Sass finally claim what they’ve wanted for too long.



*The Born Villains MC series contains sexual content, harsh language, graphic violence, and drug use. This book is only suitable for readers 18+. **Trigger warnings: childhood and sexual abuse.***

BIJOU READING ORDER



Note: These books are written to be read as standalones, but the list below is the preferred order regarding character introductions.



BOOKS CONNECTED TO THE DAMAGED SERIES

- Damaged 1-7 (Sunday Morning is a prequel while In the Wind takes place a decade after book 7)
- Ramsey Security 1-3 (book 3 links the most to the other series and introduces Angus Hayes)
- Junkyard Dog
- Serrated Brotherhood MC 1-3
- Rawkfist MC 1-3
- Right Amount of Wrong (second generation Damaged novel)
- White Horse 2-4 (second generation)
- Reapers MC: Ellsberg Chapter 1-3 (second generation)
- Reapers MC: Conroe Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bks 1 & 2 take place before Ellsberg bk3)
- Reapers MC: Shasta Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bk 1 takes place before Ellsberg bk1)
- Elko Executioners MC (EEMC) 1-3 (bk1 takes place after Shasta Chapter bk3)
- Reapers MC: Pema Chapter 1-3 (second generation) (bk1 takes place after Shasta Chapter bk3 and Ellsberg Chapter bk3)
- Reapers MC: Nomads (bk1 takes place after Ellsberg, Conroe, Shasta and Pema series)
- Rawkfist MC 2nd Generation (bk1 takes place after Reapers MC: Nomads)



BORN VILLAINS MC SERIES W/JULIET FLYNN

- Apex
- Overlord
- Ghost
- Jester



BOOKS RELATED TO THE STEEL BERSERKERS MC SERIES W/NOELLE ZANE

- Pieces of Me
- Bits and Pieces
- Fall to Pieces
- Pieces We Keep
- Pieces of Heaven
- Jagged Little Pieces



BOOKS RELATED TO WET DICKS MC SERIES COWRITTEN AS ECHO SLATER

- Dirty Bastard
- Daddy Bastard
- Bully Bastard



BOOKS RELATED TO LITTLE MEMPHIS MC SERIES

- Little Memphis MC 1-2
- Rawlins Heretics MC 1-3



BOOKS RELATED TO SPENT SHELLS SERIES

- Gator
- Badlands & Shellshock



STANDALONE BOOKS

- Rich S.O.B.
- Rebound Biker
- Used

ABOUT BIJOU



Bijou and Juliet live in Indiana. Contact Bijou using the links below.



[Blog](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

[Facebook Group](#)

[Email](#)



Sign up for my [mailing list](#) to receive exclusive info on giveaways, release dates, and more!



Disclaimer

Bijou Hunter is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for sites to earn advertising fees by advertising and linking to Amazon.com.