



Hell
ON WHEELS

ROYAL BASTARDS MC



USA Today Bestselling Author
NIKKI LANDIS

Hell ON WHEELS



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About the Author

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hell on Wheels is the story of Marine veteran Flint ‘Maddog’ Shepherd who becomes the new president for the Royal Bastards MC Las Vegas, NV Chapter. As with all my books, please heed the CWs. There’s dark content, reference to SA and human trafficking, torture, and violence. Please know your limits and read with care.

Spook gets his story with *Spook and Specter* on Halloween 2023. Mammoth’s story releases February 2024 with *Infinitely Mine*. Manic is next in the Vegas chapter. The Phantom returns in December with *Reckless Mayhem*. You can read the first part of Manic’s story in *Manic Mayhem*, part of the Mayhem Makers series.

There’s much more to come for Grim and his Reapers.

Flint and his shadow warriors are only getting started.

Watch for more books in the Las Vegas, NV chapter in 2024.



ROYAL BASTARDS CODE



PROTECT: The club and your brothers come before anything else, and must be protected at all costs. **CLUB** is **FAMILY**.

RESPECT: Earn it & Give it. Respect club law. Respect the patch. Respect your brothers. Disrespect a member and there will be hell to pay.

HONOR: Being patched in is an honor, not a right. Your colors are sacred, not to be left alone, and **NEVER** let them touch the ground.

OL' LADIES: Never disrespect a member's or brother's Ol' Lady. **PERIOD.**

CHURCH is **MANDATORY.**

LOYALTY: Takes precedence over all, including well-being.

HONESTY: Never **LIE**, **CHEAT**, or **STEAL** from another member or the club.

TERRITORY: You are to respect your brother's property and follow their Chapter's club rules.

TRUST: Years to earn it...seconds to lose it.

NEVER RIDE OFF: Brothers do not abandon their family.

COMMON TERMS

R **BMC** Royal Bastards Motorcycle Club. One-percenter outlaw MC. Founded in Tonopah, NV 1985. Founded in Las Vegas, NV 2023.

Shadow Rider Spiritual entity that forms from shadow. Shares the body of every Royal Bastard club member in the Las Vegas chapter.

Reaper Demonic entity sharing the body of every Royal Bastard club member in the Tonopah chapter. A collector of souls at time of death.

Devil's Ride A deadly motorcycle ride into the Nevada desert and initiation into the club.

Pres President of the club. His word is law.

Crossroads Bar & clubhouse owned by the RBMC Tonopah, NC Chapter.

One-percenter Outlaw biker/club

Ol' lady A member's woman, protected wife status.

Cut Leather vest worn by club members, adorned with patches and club colors, sacred to members.

Reaping Slang, killing those marked for death.

Brotherhood Unbreakable bond/kinship that transcends all other interpersonal relationships.

Church An official club meeting, led by president.

Chapel The location for church meetings in the clubhouse.

Prospect Probationary member sponsored by a ranking officer, banned from church until a full patch.

Full Patch A new member approved for membership.

Hog Motorcycle

Cage Vehicle

Muffler bunny Club girl, also called sweet butt, cut slut.

BSMC Bloody Scorpions MC, rival club.

Hell ON WHEELS **PLAYLIST**

Adrenaline – Zero 9:36

Brand New Numb – Motionless In White

The War We Made – Red

Only Love Can Save Me Now (feat. Matt Cameron & Kim Thayil) – The Pretty Reckless

Warrior (feat. Travis Barker) – Atreyu

Hell Of It – Beartooth

Right Now – Korn

Haunted – DIAMANTE

Monster – Starset

Watch Me Burn – Atreyu

If I'm James Dean, You're Audrey Hepburn – Sleeping With Sirens

Dance with the Devil – Breaking Benjamin

Sugar Honey Ice & Tea – Bring Me The Horizon

Fucked Up World – The Pretty Reckless

Give Em Hell – Everybody Loves an Outlaw

72 Seasons – Metallica

This Is Mongol (Warrior Souls) – The Hu

Through Hell – Citizen Soldier & Royal Bliss

Faded out (feat. Within Temptation) – Asking Alexandria

Worth It – YK Osiris

Walking In My Shoes – FEVER 333

Ghost – Kulick

Going to Hell – The Pretty Reckless

Addicted – Saving Abel

Werewolf (feat. Bring Me the Horizon) – Lil Uzi Vert

Raising Hell – Bullet for My Valentine

Blackbird – Black Veil Brides

You can listen here: [Hell on Wheels Playlist](#)



Royal Bastards MC

Las Vegas, NV



NO ONE IS SAFE IN THE city of sin.

Flint “Maddog” Shepherd is used to moving through the shadows.

As a Marine veteran who served two tours overseas, he’s become skilled at hiding in plain sight and eliminating the enemy.

When a bomb took the lives of his entire unit, he returned home a scarred and broken man.

The nightmares from his past still play havoc with his head.

As a result of his trauma, he gains a service dog as loyal as his Marine brothers, and everything starts to fall into place.

Maddog’s connections lead him to the Royal Bastards MC, where joining the brotherhood renews his purpose.

But now he’s fighting a cesspool of crime, drugs, power, and trafficked girls.

He didn't expect to find a young woman undercover in the sleazy underbelly of Las Vegas.

He's the only chance Lark Simmons has to survive.

Maddog won't rest until she's safe and back in his arms where she belongs.

A Shadow Rider and a scarred veteran just might be Hell on Wheels.

But even Lucifer can't control the monster he's unleashed.

The city of sin will never be the same.

What happens in Vegas belongs to the spawn of Lucifer, the RBMC.

This Halloween, you're invited to a ride with the devil.

Prologue

Smoke drifts along the hot desert sands, a twisting, curling vapor that signals death and destruction. A herald of the horror that awaits, inching closer with every step I make. Hidden behind each sand dune is another threat, relentless in the pursuit of death. The sun is merciless, and the dry heat crinkles every inch of my cammies. Sweaty layers of clothing press to my skin as I ignore the clinging material and the resulting chafe. My fingers and toes are scorched by the intense heat that I can't escape, blazing down from above.

All around me, gunfire pops in quick succession. Bullets graze the building above my head as my ears ring, and I stare, dazed by the grenade that exploded twenty feet from my location only ninety seconds earlier. Hollow, sharp sounds change in frequency and pitch, squealing high as I wince. Somewhere close, the heavy chug of a 50-caliber rifle rumbles through my chest.

Staggering, I hold onto my side, noting the droplets of warm fluid that trickle over my fingers and leave a trail far too easy for my enemy to follow. My body is weak, disoriented, and probably in shock, but I've been trained for this type of scenario. I know how to handle my shit.

It's my brothers I'm worried about.

We look out for one another. Would bleed for one another. Hell, we would die to protect each other and the country we love so much—loyalty, honor, and sacrifice are the building blocks of the machines we've become. Marines live and breathe by that code. We'd die by it, happily.

There aren't enough bullets in the world to stop us. When one falls, another takes their place.

The thought gives me the strength to lift my head and keep moving.

Gunfire renews close to my position as I sneak through the debris, snaking my way among the ruins of this foreign city to rejoin my men. The Barrett 50-cal echoes in my head as I

bump into a wall, clutching my rifle to my chest. I know the enemy is lurking around one of the corners ahead, and I can't see well. When the grenade was set off, my vision became disrupted by the flash. I can feel my eyes water, but it doesn't stop the blur or the echoes of pain that follow. I can hardly see more than shapes and blurs as my vision tunnels further, and I stay perfectly still, waiting for my body to adjust and recover.

Seconds pass, and clarity slowly returns but not enough. I've been wounded, but it won't stop me. Up ahead, I hear a cry that lashes at my heart, ripping it wide open.

One of my brothers is dying.

I can't find my way to him. I'm blinded and barred by the explosion, tripping as I rush into the madness.

I'm going to be too late to reach him.

I'll be too late to save them all.

Chapter 1 MADDOG

“Were you having another nightmare?”

“**W**hat the fuck do you think? I wanted to shout.

Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair and squinted, staring at the therapist who enjoyed asking personal questions and watching me squirm. I bet she was one of those kids who studied ants under a magnifying glass to see if the direct sunlight would have any impact and fry them to a crisp or baited worms on a hook only to dangle the little suckers and wait patiently for the fish to bite.

“Not like I used to,” I finally admitted with a grunt.

It wasn't a lie. Not entirely. I had nights where I didn't dream of the past. Usually, I had to get drunk off my ass first, but I didn't divulge that information.

Nightmares were the least of my problems. It was my fuckin' injuries that pissed me off more than anything. The damn VA Medical Center thought throwing in sessions with a shrink was necessary because of what I went through overseas. I could have saved them a lot of money, time, and effort. It wasn't like I was gonna do something stupid. I wasn't into self-torture. I just had nightmares about the bombs and losing my fellow Marines. Same shit a lot of guys went through. I wasn't the only one.

A lot of us were fucked up.

I got over it. Moved on. The past was the past.

“And your vision?”

“Good days and bad days.” Why did it matter? She always asked the same questions. The answers weren't gonna miraculously change.

“The bad days? Tell me about those.”

We had the same discussion last week. Didn't she keep notes?

“Flashes of light. Blurred vision. Sometimes I see particles and floaters.”

She murmured a few words. Nodding her head, she wrote in her notebook for a full fucking minute. “What’s today, Flint?”

“A good day,” I acknowledged.

“That’s what I thought.” A smile lifted the corner of her ruby lips. “Kane isn’t here.”

Nope. My service dog Kane was the best thing that happened to me since I left the Corps. I’d been anxious and jumpy after returning to the U.S. The explosions and my injuries had taken a toll. I’d grown depressed, and that shit pissed me off until I was placed on the list and Kane was issued as my companion.

“He’s fiercely protective. Didn’t like being left behind this morning.”

She laughed lightly. One of those laughs that wasn’t forced but still too professional to be genuine. “He’s good for you. I can see it. You’re far less withdrawn than when we first met.”

She was right. I didn’t talk much during the first few weeks. Didn’t have anything to say. What was the point? My brothers I had known since basic training died just feet from where I stood, and I couldn’t prevent it.

Did I have survivor’s guilt?

Fuck yeah. I hated losing men I considered family. Who wouldn’t? I still didn’t need a shrink to analyze everything I said and did to make sure I wasn’t a danger to myself or others.

“Maybe I am, doc,” I agreed.

“You can call me Joan.” Her voice gentled, and I knew what she was saying without pointing it out.

I never called her by her real name. Didn’t feel comfortable addressing anyone with familiarity. Maybe that was foolish, but I wasn’t growing close enough to another soul

only to lose them at some point in the future. My dog? Sure. Kane was my best friend.

People? I'd rather not.

"When's your next appointment?"

"Three days."

"I'm optimistic you'll hear something favorable."

Favorable? Right.

Lady didn't have a fuckin' clue. She meant well, but all her knowledge came from books and not real-world experience. She'd never fought for her country and nearly died. Or watched as a friend's chest exploded in front of you from the force of a dozen bullets at the same time.

"Yeah," I replied, my snark evident.

"I know you don't like to let hope slip in only to be disappointed again, so I'll hope for you."

Hope was a delicate thing. A small flame that could quickly grow without warning, and if you weren't careful, it would erupt into a towering inferno. Then you were stuck with all that heat and burning blaze. When it was doused with water faster than you could blink, it hurt like a motherfucker.

I couldn't afford to think that way.

Hope never entered my realm of possibility.

My vision blurred slightly, and then tried to refocus. Little flashes of light blasted off in my peripheral, and I ignored them, not wanting to reveal that I was having any problems. I'd fought hard to be able to keep my driver's license. No way was I losing my Harley now.

That bike was the only thing that kept me going besides Kane. I couldn't live without either one of them.

"Detached retina injuries take time to heal, Flint. You've been through a lot in the last few months. It's still raw, especially all the loss you suffered. Emotionally and physically. I'd like you to tell me about the journal you're keeping by your bedside. Have you been writing in it?"

Shit. I didn't use the damn thing, and she knew it.

"Not so much."

"Why?"

"I haven't had as many nightmares lately." The lie was easy to tell, and I didn't care if she knew it.

"I see." Joan folded her hands primly in her lap. "You know you're not fooling anyone, right? I'm not here to judge you, Flint. You've got to be ready and willing to make changes for the nightmares and pain to get better."

"I know," I admitted. Why was this so fucking hard?

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "I think that ends our session for this week."

Nodding, I stood, careful to keep my balance and stop squinting.

"You sure you're okay to drive?"

"I ride, not drive. My Harley has never failed me." Neither had my quick reflexes or gut instincts. You were born with them, or you weren't. I guess I could say I was lucky enough to have them both.

She tilted her head to the side, studying me as if I was an anomaly. "Alright then. See you next week, Flint."

"Sure," I drawled, heading for the door as fast as I could. Once I was out of her office, I began to relax. My shoulders eased back a little, and I took a deep breath.

Those appointments always made me feel anxious and tense. I never knew what she would ask or what memory would pop up. In the early weeks, I brought Kane with me to almost every session. He was the only thing that provided comfort and prevented the episodes I used to have.

Didn't like to think about that now. Memories weren't always my friend.

The Nevada skyline was bright and clear as I exited the Medical Center. Cerulean blue stretched as far as I could imagine without hardly a cloud in the Las Vegas sky. I missed

the days when I could see the details, but I wasn't about to feel sorry for myself. Years as a Marine brought discipline and the hard acceptance that life often didn't work out the way you expected.

I wasn't lying when I told the shrink it was a good sight day. Particles and floaters were almost nonexistent, and the blur wasn't bad. Light still bothered my eyes, so I always wore sunglasses, even indoors. The only exception was night. As long as I was home, I skipped the sunglasses on occasion when my eyes weren't hurting.

Rumbling down the busy road, I couldn't help thinking of the visit to the VA. I saw several acquaintances but didn't stop to chat. On instinct, I tended to stay guarded now. Wasn't much I could say that wouldn't end in awkward pauses. I got asked too often how I was doing or adjusting to life back in the states. Not a subject I liked to dwell on.

It wasn't long before I rode into my neighborhood and a few streets from my house. My bike rolled to a stop at the nearest intersection as I balanced her out, sitting comfortably in the saddle as I waited for the light to change. I lifted my head, scanning the area before turning right.

As I rounded the corner, I caught sight of a man and a young woman arguing. She had her hands in the air, animatedly waving them around in frustration. I was all set to keep riding when he lifted a hand and cracked her hard across the face. The girl, who couldn't have been older than her late teen years, crumpled to the sidewalk as I stopped, dropping the kickstand and hopping off my bike.

There were two things I didn't condone. Bullies were one. Men who hurt women were another.

This motherfucker was about to learn a hard lesson.

And I always enjoyed a good beatdown.

Chapter 2 LARK

E *leven months earlier—*

“You sure about this?” Torin asked, adjusting the wire hidden beneath my clothes. “It’s not too late to back out.”

I shook my head at my stepbrother, appreciating his concern, but we both knew I was too far in to walk away now. “I need to catch him in the act, Tor.”

He shook his head, pulling his hands away. “We can find someone else, Lark. *Any-fucking-one* else.”

“It won’t work, and it’s taken too long as it is. We don’t know what’s happening to Molly or what they’re doing to her. She’s alone. Every single day they’re hurting her, it could be the last. We have to stop it.”

“Fuck!” His hands gripped his short dark hair and pulled. “I can’t think about that. If I do, I’ll just gun them all down.”

“Which is why we agreed I had to be the one to go in,” I reminded him.

Torin sighed, pulling me into a hug. “It wasn’t supposed to happen. It shouldn’t have happened at all.”

“Which part?” I asked, slightly sarcastic. “The part where Fred snuck into my room at night or beat you so badly for pulling him off me that you ended up in the hospital for two weeks?”

“Lark,” he croaked.

“Or how he sold our little sister into sexual slavery to pay off his debts?”

Neither of us referred to the sperm donor/stepfather as anything other than his first name. Fred may have been related to us by blood and marriage, but he would never be considered family. We both hated him for numerous reasons, but his latest crime, trading Molly to the Guerrero Cartel in exchange for his indiscretions, spurred a new rage and disgust for the man who committed numerous crimes against us.

Torin had come into my life when I was twelve, already bruised and traumatized by Fred's abuse. Torin's mother had no idea of the monster she married. Fred played the part, moved her in, and slipped a ring on her finger so fast the woman didn't have a clue about his true intentions, which included her two children and his depraved desires. Fred was the oldest and became the protector of his two sisters.

"Fuck, Lark." His voice cracked. "You're right. We need to get Molly back. The rest doesn't matter right now."

"I want him to suffer," I hissed.

"He'll suffer as soon as Molly is safe," Torin promised for the umpteenth time. "Right now, the Cartel protects him. He knows too much about their operation to cut loose. Fred lives on borrowed time anyway."

I knew that, but it didn't make me feel better.

Clearing my throat, I changed the subject. "Angel Mackenzie likes me. I can use that to my advantage."

Torin scowled. "Be careful. He's got a reputation for overindulging liquor and beating on women. He won't hesitate to hurt you if provoked."

We'd been over this a dozen times. "I can handle him."

"I'm sure you believe that, but he's a nasty sonofabitch."

This wasn't new information. "Torin. I can do this."

"Just don't lose your temper. He needs to think you're docile and easily subdued. He likes to dominate." A frown deepened the lines between his brows. "Use safe words. Get out if he tries to take things too far. I'll pick you up."

"Tor—"

"No. We'll find another way." He held me tighter. "You've suffered enough. All of this is pointless if you end up lost like Molly or killed. It's not worth the risk."

"She is," I insisted. "We can't abandon her to those sick fucks who bought her from Angel." I pushed away, staring up

at the only man in the world I trusted. “I’ll find her. Soon,” I swore.

Torin nodded, but his lips formed a tight line. He wanted to argue, but we both understood the longer Molly lingered in that life, the higher the chance she might not survive it. We had to continue with our plan and hope Angel trusted me enough that I could find Molly.

I shoved aside my fear and uncertainty, focusing on the reason I agreed to go undercover. Molly needed me, and I wouldn’t fail her, no matter the cost. I just hoped I wouldn’t have to pay with my life.



FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AGO—

“Fuck,” I blurted, pounding the side of my fist onto the pristine marble sink as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Black trails led an inky network of fine threads down my face, constructing an interconnecting stain of harsh lines from my mascara. My pale skin had lost its luster, appearing more corpse-like than alive. On the whole, I looked as bad as I felt.

“Stupid girl,” I taunted myself, hurling the insult. “Whore. Worthless.” My eyes slid shut in painful memory as Fred’s voice invaded my conscious thought. “You’ll never be good for anything other than spreading your legs.”

Defeat was a tangible, breathing entity that whispered my failures and inadequacies with relentless brutality.

My fingers gripped the edge of the counter, ignoring the luxury that surrounded me. Why did monsters hide in plain view? How did they continue to obtain more wealth and power as those they trampled beneath their shoes were silenced by their influence?

“I shouldn’t be here,” I whispered in agony, opening my eyes to watch a few onyx droplets mar the white basin. “I’m

sorry, Molly. I tried.”

A sob broke free from my chest as I turned, facing the drugs I found in the room I shared with Angel. He acquired me as swiftly and completely as one of his expensive cars. I had no freedom. No voice. He used and fucked me at his leisure, but at least I didn't have to endure the touch of other men. Angel was far too possessive to allow it.

I thought his greed and manipulative, controlling behavior would eventually cause him to reveal secrets. How naïve. The man was vicious, ruthless, and hungry for power. He kept a tight hold on his emotions even when drunk and sated. The small amount of small talk between the sheets only served to keep me compliant. He never revealed anything about business. And he never, ever let down his guard.

The only person he seemed to fear was his uncle Salazar.

The opportunity to use that to my advantage never occurred.

Staring at the five pounds of cocaine, I became increasingly furious. Frustration and the knowledge I had thrown away a year of my life for nothing spurred a reckless act.

Picking up the glass of wine next to the sink with trembling fingers, I knocked back the dark red liquid, swallowing down every drop as I hiccupped. “It's now or never. Fuck you, Angel.”

With a pair of scissors kept in one of the bathroom drawers, I sliced open the brick and began dumping the drugs into the toilet basin. One after another, I slashed into all five, flushing down every bit of powder until none remained. The packages were tossed into the trash, where I decided to leave them. A last act of defiance before I found a way to escape and contact Torin.

Angel would return when he was no longer angry. He had a habit of showing up with gifts after yelling at me and slapping me around. I'd gotten far too used to being spoiled by

that asshole. Glancing down at the lowcut dress and twinkling black sequins, I knew I had to walk away.

I'd gotten too involved. Too deeply rooted in Angel's life.

There had to be enough evidence to charge Angel by now. At least enough to intimidate him into giving up information about Molly. I finally reached the point where I couldn't keep living like this, even when the guilt threatened to tear me apart.

I washed my face, pulled back my hair, and changed into comfortable clothes. Now, I needed a plan. Angel left me alone after I caused a scene and embarrassed him in his ritzy little club. He shoved me toward his bodyguard and ordered Miguel to take me home.

Home. What a lie.

I heard Miguel outside the door as he coughed, ensuring I stayed where Angel wanted me.

A beautiful prison.

I needed to think. How could I trick Miguel? He was a foot taller than me and at least fifty pounds heavier. All thick muscles and brute strength.

What If I made a loud noise? Broke something? Would he check on me?

Spying several expensive vases in the room, I picked one up, holding it with two hands. This could work. It had weight but wasn't too heavy to lift.

Without considering how disastrous the consequences would be if I failed, I knocked over one of the other vases, smiling when it fell to the floor with a loud crash and shattered. I ran to the door, hiding out of sight as Miguel stormed inside.

“What are—?”

He didn't get more than those two words out of his mouth before I swung the vase in my hands, cracking him against the skull. Miguel stumbled, tripped over his feet, and landed on

his back. He lifted a hand to pull out his phone, but I kicked it away.

My name slurred on his lips before his eyes closed.

Oh my God! I did it!

Angel would return soon, and I couldn't leave Miguel on the bedroom floor. I decided to tug him into the massive walk-in closet. It took effort to push and pull him across the hardwood floor. I ended up dragging him by his ankles, finally maneuvering his body out of sight. With the doors shut, he was hidden from view.

Almost free, I giggled. This was too easy. I should have paused to consider why.

None of the other bodyguards were upstairs. Angel had them patrolling the property outside. If I could reach the garage, I'd be able to steal a vehicle and drive somewhere to ditch the car. It wasn't the best plan, but I had to take the chance.

Miguel never stirred as I rushed down the stairs, slipping into the garage. I carefully lifted a set of keys, running toward one of the vehicles. A sporty model in black.

I had my hand on the handle, ready to open the door, when I heard Angel's voice.

"Mi mascota." His pet.

My body froze as terror infused every single cell. My lungs seized, refusing to draw in air.

"Turn around."

My body slowly spun to face him.

Angel held out his hand. "Keys."

I didn't hesitate to follow his directions, placing the keys in his outstretched hand.

His fingers curled inward, wrapping around the cool metal. "Strip."

My eyes widened.

“Get naked. Now.”

My fingers trembled as I removed all my clothes, standing nude with my head lowered, staring at the ground.

“You will follow me.”

Angel led me from the garage into a long hallway and beyond the rows of doors leading to his office, playroom, and guest rooms. We stopped in front of the one he always kept locked.

Keeping quiet, I watched as Angel used an electronic keypad by the door to punch in a code. The door swung open.

This wasn't my first visit to the hell that awaited. I refused to look at the various elements of torture or the devices he had bought for his pleasure. The overwhelming odor of leather, lemon, and traces of metallic blood threatened to steal my will and the tiny portion of self-control I had left.

“You will spend the night in the hole.”

I sucked in a breath, shocked he intended to rehabilitate me in such a cruel way. “I'm sorry.”

“Do not speak!” he roared.

Nodding, I followed him across the room, swallowing hard when he bent to unlock the square door located on the floor. The hinge squeaked as he lifted it, gesturing to the ladder.

“Get in.”

I nearly slipped as I hurried to obey, worried he would lash out with his fists or shove me to the bottom.

I descended into the dark, trying not to focus on the absence of light, the cold wood, or my lack of clothing. My feet moved slowly away as he shut the door, enclosing me in the silent cellar he converted into a dirt cell.

I had to be careful where I placed my steps. This dungeon held secrets, the unfulfilled wishes, and the desperate pleas of women who displeased him. Their souls probably still lingered. Maybe that was why I heard screams late at night.

The wails and moaning that woke me in the early hours before dawn on many occasions.

Sometimes, I saw blood splattered on Angel's clothing and tightly closed my eyes, hoping he didn't come for me when the sick desires took hold of his depraved mind.

Now, I was at his mercy.

Alone. Naked. Surrounded by dirt walls.

And only the bones of his victims to keep me company.

Chapter 3 MADDOG

Present time—

Fuck. I hated bullies.

Men that hurt women? Hated them even more.

The asshole yanked the young woman roughly to her feet and grabbed the collar of her denim jacket, nearly choking off her airway as her hands rose to her throat, clutching at the material. He spun her around, lifted his foot, and kicked her hard in the ass as she cried out.

Boot straight into her bottom. Hard.

Fuck. I knew that had to hurt.

She winced, trying to spin around, but he shoved her with a palm to her back, almost knocking her down a second time.

Oh, he was gonna regret that.

“Move it, you little bitch. I’ve had enough of your shit today.”

She wasn’t able to respond as she coughed and gasped, dragging air into her lungs. I could see the red marks on her throat.

Tears filled her eyes, hovering at the brim before a few slipped down her cheeks. Struggling to get out of his hold as he grabbed her upper arm, she tried to walk on her own as he manhandled her. She’d already been dragged along the sidewalk several feet when they both noticed my presence.

“Let go of the girl,” I commanded softly, standing my ground.

The bully turned in my direction, and he ticked his chin as if he thought I’d understand his actions and agree if he explained. “She has it coming, *amigo*. No need to get involved.”

I’d seen men like him plenty of times in my life. Nice clothes. Money. Power. Aggression. Thought they had the

world by the balls and could do or say whatever the fuck they wanted. Not in my neck of the woods.

“Not gonna repeat myself,” I warned.

Amusement and frustration competed for dominance in his dark eyes, followed by a coldness I knew too well. There was a flash of impending violence, and I knew his arrogance would cause trouble. Men like this didn't give up or surrender. It wasn't their way.

I'd seen enough battles to know when it was time to fight and time to run.

My feet planted shoulder-width apart, and I shrugged, ready to act fast if this went to shit.

I hoped it did.

“Walk away now, and I'll forget we met.”

“Can't do that,” I admitted, reaching inside my leather to pull my gun free the exact moment he reached behind his back and whipped out his own, pointing his weapon in my direction.

“Listen, *cabrón*. You don't know who you're messing with. Back the fuck up or—”

“Let the girl go,” I commanded calmly, interrupting the stupid fucker. I didn't need to hear his bullshit.

His face flushed as he pulled the trigger, and I dropped to the ground fast, rolling out of the way before I was back on my feet. Two shots left the barrel of my 9mm Luger. One hit his left shin, the other his left hand. His gun clattered to the ground as the girl screamed, and I rushed forward, picking her up from the ground as my free arm swung around her waist.

A string of curses left the mouth of the bully, along with numerous threats. I didn't give a shit and kicked his gun into the yard of an abandoned lot next door. It clattered away out of view, and I knew it didn't buy more than a few minutes before serious trouble started heading my way.

Running for my Harley, I didn't stop until I lowered her onto the seat. “Get ready to ride,” I rumbled, throwing a leg

over in front of her as my ass planted onto the leather.

“Shit,” she cursed.

“Arms around me. Now,” I ordered, kicking up the stand. I pulled back on the throttle as the bike roared to life. The heavy beast growled as her arms wrapped around my midsection. We sped off, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm in my chest. Well, fuck. I sure jumped into the shit this time.

“Hold on!” I yelled as she buried her head behind my back.

Two slim hands clutched at the material of my jacket, and the weight of my choice sank in. A life I now had the responsibility to protect. Something I swore never to do again. Fuck me.

What the hell was I thinking?

“We don’t have long,” I blurted in a rush as I rolled up my driveway and hit the opener, watching the door rise into the air. I parked my ride inside the garage and closed the door before I stood, ticking my head in her direction. “I’ll take you wherever you want to go, but neither of us can stay here. Trouble is comin’, darlin’.”

“Yeah. I think I figured that out when you both pulled guns.”

The girl turned my way, proving she wasn’t the teen I mistook her for earlier. No. The goddess in front of me had to be in her mid to late twenties, much younger than me since I had turned thirty-six last month. She had all the sass, grit, and curves of a woman who knew her mind and body. *Sexy as fuck.*

I was struck dumb as vibrant green eyes settled on my own.

She expected me to speak, but I chuckled.

“He’ll come after us. We’re both good as dead.”

Startled, I watched as she paled, frightened by the idea that she would be hunted down. She squared her shoulders, pushed

out her tits, and what perfect tits they were, and leveled me with a hard stare.

My gaze swept over her, and I couldn't rush the moment, taking in every detail. It was a shit time to notice my attraction, but I was beyond controlling it. My vision cleared up better than I could hope, and I realized I'd just stolen a prize from that asshole—a beautiful treasure.

He didn't deserve her.

He sure as fuck wasn't getting her back.

Full pouty lips begged for my mouth to explore every delicious inch of her skin. Dark hair, exotic features, and a figure ripe and full enough to take the hard pounding I suddenly wanted to give her. I liked a woman with meat on her bones. A little cushion for the pushin', as my old man used to say.

She wore a tiny little black tank top beneath the denim jacket she had on and skintight jeans that revealed every tempting inch of her figure and curves. A sexy little camel toe drew my gaze downward, and my mouth watered at the thought of gobbling her up and tasting the sweetness hidden between her thighs.

Fuck. I'd gone way too long since I indulged my desires or needs, and now wasn't the time to let my dick call the shots.

"Life is too short to live in fear," I rumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We make a plan and smart choices. Stay alive."

She blinked. "What kind of plan?"

Those fuck-me lips of hers pouted and drew my attention a second time. I wondered if she gave head with the same passion and aggression. A woman who could rival my stamina in the bedroom. Damn. I sure wanted to find out.

"What's your name, little dove?" Her creamy skin reminded me of silky white feathers. There was a sensual grace to her movements combined with a striking beauty that I appreciated on multiple levels. My cock agreed with that

thought as I grew hard, pressing against the zipper of my jeans.

“Lark,” she answered with attitude. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not sucking your dick for a ride on your motorcycle.”

A loud laugh tumbled from my mouth, and I shrugged. “I wasn’t offering but feel free to let me know if you change your mind.” Lark. Interesting name. Fit the dove description perfectly.

I saw a dove overseas once. Prettiest bird I had ever laid eyes on, flying underneath a canopy in some rich asshole’s backyard. He kept her caged. Used his money to help terrorist organizations too. When we busted him and raided his place, I set the dove free. Her flight into the sky warmed something deep inside me that had been cold since I set foot on foreign soil. I’d never forget the feeling that settled beneath my skin.

Staring into deep pools of green, I had that same feeling of heat rushing through my body. I could swear I just warmed a few degrees.

She rolled her eyes. “I won’t.”

“Did expect a little gratitude, though.”

She smiled sweetly. “Thanks for pulling a gun and shooting my ex-boyfriend. Scared me half to death.”

Snarky little thing.

“I’m packin’ a bag, my dog, and my Harley and gettin’ the fuck out of here. Happy to drop you wherever you want to go.”

She stared but didn’t reply.

“It’s worth pointing out you should stick with me, but that’s your choice, darlin’. I’ll be leaving once it’s dark. I doubt anyone noticed we were the ones involved, but I’m not sticking around to find out. My house is only a block from where I found you. Gonna lay low for a bit.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “What dog?”

That was what she wanted to ask? “My service dog, Kane.”

Lark quirked a brow but didn't ask what I meant.

“We're takin' a cage, so you can wait in my truck.” I clicked the fob on my keys and heard the locks disengage. “I'll be back in a few minutes.”

The second the interior door was open, Kane was up in my shit, sniffing around and whining. He knew the scent of gunpowder and blood and caught a whiff of both. His cold nose nudged into my hand, and I had to make it right, or he would lose his shit in the truck. I stroked his thick, black fur and glanced down at the deep brown eyes that held a hell of an amount of emotion and intelligence for a canine.

“I know, bud. I'm alright. No worries.”

“He's handsome.”

I turned abruptly to the sound of Lark's voice. “I told you to wait outside.”

I liked her grit. Her sass. Not listening to me? Not gonna fly.

“And I got spooked,” she exclaimed.

Yeah, not buyin' that at all.

Kane's snout lifted, and he inhaled a few times before his tail started wagging.

Uh-oh.

Before I had a chance to order him to stay put, he moved.

My loyal service dog went straight to the female, who lowered to her knees and began scratching behind his ears. Annoyed, I was tempted to scold Kane. He never went to other people. He was trained to protect me and never obeyed the impulse to seek out others, no matter how good they smelled.

I guess she was too great a temptation. Fuck me. I couldn't blame him. She smelled like summer wind and fresh tangerine with a hint of spice.

Kane licked the side of her face, and she giggled. “Kane? That’s your name? Fits you, handsome.”

His tongue lolled out of his mouth as he stared at her and pleaded for more attention.

“You’re a traitor,” I mumbled, walking up the stairs and running to my room. There was a seabag and duffle bag I used in the Marine Corps, and I knew how to pack fast and efficiently. I had everything I needed in five minutes and loaded them both in my truck behind the front seats. Making my way into the kitchen, I picked up a cooler and began to pack it with drinks and snacks. The trip to Tonopah would take a few hours, but I wasn’t sure where she was headed, and I didn’t want to risk stopping until I reached my old friend from the Corps.

“You’re in the military, aren’t you?”

She must have noticed my gear. “I’m a Marine. No longer active duty,” I explained, squinting as a few flashes of light danced in my peripheral. This wasn’t the time for my vision to kick up a fuss.

“Well, I figured that out when I noticed the seabag. Had a cousin that served overseas.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Any comment could spark a conversation I didn’t want to have—or worse, questions.

Lark sighed. “I’m not going with you.”

“Gotta say, I think that’s a mistake.”

“I figured that would be your response.”

Narrowing my eyes, I knew she couldn’t tell with the sunglasses, but I didn’t care. Crossing my arms over my chest, I didn’t hesitate to let her know what I thought. “Not smart, Lark. You can’t stay in Vegas.”

She shrugged. “I’m used to looking out for myself.”

Snorting, I didn’t point out the fact that she was literally having her ass kicked when I showed up. “You’re leaving.”

“No.”

“I *said* you’re *leaving*,” I emphasized, growling the words.

Slender fingers settled at her hips. “No. I’m not.”

If she thought she could win the battle of wills, she certainly didn’t have experience with a Marine. “It’s not safe. I won’t leave a man or a woman behind.” Damn. That was painful to say. My chest felt tight, and I had to take several deep breaths. “Unless you want me to drop you somewhere out of town, you’re coming with me.”

She must have noticed my struggle.

“Fine. Don’t lose your shit.”

My lip lifted in a snarl. “Get in the goddamn truck.”

She lifted her chin, debating whether or not she wanted to push it. “I’ll go. What do you need for Kane?”

Surprised, I blinked. “I’ll grab his stuff. Just take the leash and clip it to his collar for me. He knows to wait at the door.”

Lark sauntered off as Kane lifted his head, waiting for approval. “Go with Lark. Wait at the door.” Kane got the gist of what I was sayin’ and went straight to the door. “Sit,” I commanded firmly. He immediately dropped to his haunches. “Good job,” I praised.

At least someone knew how to listen.

Lark clipped his leash, and they both patiently waited as I gathered the rest of what I needed. Once the car was loaded with supplies, I ticked my head in the direction of the truck.

“Load up!”

Kane bolted forward and practically dragged Lark across the garage floor as she skidded on the concrete and had to hold on tight to the leash to prevent slamming into my workbench full of tools. I snickered as he halted next to the driver’s side front door.

She tossed a glare in my direction. “You did that on purpose.”

Shrugging, I didn't bother to deny it. "Kane likes to go out."

"A little warning next time, okay?"

"You won't need one."

I opened the door, and Kane jumped inside the cab. He plopped down on the front seat in his usual spot. Reaching in, I unhooked the leash and tossed it onto the dashboard. "Now you know. Right?"

Lark didn't reply but huffed under her breath and said a few choice words before she flounced around to the other side of the truck. She was inside with her seatbelt on before I had to say a word. Maybe this little bird was easier to instruct than I had earlier experienced. Kind of hoped she was gonna be a little harder to handle. A man like me enjoyed the challenge.

She sure had an attitude, though. I could see it in the blazing hue of her eyes as they met mine.

Chuckling under my breath, I locked up the house and set the alarm. Twilight had descended on the city long ago, and I quickly attached the trailer to my truck and fired up my bike, loading it onto the bed. Securing it didn't take more than a few minutes, but I was nervous about getting the fuck out of there before Lark's ex-boyfriend decided to scope the neighborhood for the two of us. I covered my Harley with a tarp, secured it, and made sure it kept my ride out of view.

Once we were on the road, I had more than a few questions. If she was staying with me, I needed to know why her ex was roughing her up and how the fuck she got involved with a man like him. I couldn't protect her if I didn't know the details.

Part of me wondered why a pretty young woman was caught up with a guy like that. Was she a criminal? He said she deserved the beating he wanted to give her. Why?

I couldn't think of a damn thing she could have done to deserve the way he treated her, which meant she was probably in way over her head. Drugs? Theft?

I couldn't see it. Not this girl.

Maybe he had something on her or a family member.
Blackmail? Did she fuck with his business? Insult him?

I wasn't letting her out of my sight until I learned the truth.

Chapter 4 LARK

I still hadn't asked his name yet.

The dark biker with the broadest shoulders I'd ever seen and a smile that could probably charm the cross from a bible-thumping priest drove like he didn't have a care in the world. His deep, gravelly voice settled over my chest, sinking inside to vibrate my core, increasing my need for release with every word he spoke. *Stupid*. He was a stranger. Dangerous. Rough. And yet, he was also a hero. He saved my life.

"We won't be on the road longer than a few hours."

Two words came to mind as he glanced my way in the cab of his truck and those dark brows of his furrowed. *Sex and sin*. He wrapped them up in a perilously addictive package. Part of me was tempted to give in and flirt with him just to find out if he was half as interested as he hinted at while in his garage.

Not that it changed a damn thing.

I wouldn't be staying with him. I definitely shouldn't be riding in his truck, allowing him to take me wherever he wanted.

My stepbrother was going to be pissed when he learned that I disappeared. Sure, he could track my phone, but I turned it off when I hopped off Mr. Dark and Sexy's bike.

Why? Because he intrigued me.

I grew curious about him, even more so after learning about his dog and his service to our country. A man like him lived a lifetime of experiences before he turned twenty-five. I wanted to know what made him into the rugged, seasoned warrior I met on the street and confronted a man for daring to slap a woman in his presence.

I instantly liked his no-bullshit attitude and take-charge personality. And God, that stare of his. So penetrating, even behind the dark sunglasses he wore. I felt stripped bare and naked to his sharp gaze.

Why did that turn me on so much?

With an audible sigh, I pushed the feelings of attraction aside. I had a mission to accomplish, which was taking time I didn't have, placing me at further risk and involving a stranger who didn't know how deep undercover I'd gotten to rescue my sister and her best friend.

When the leather-clad stranger headed toward Tonopah, I relaxed. My rendezvous point was in Goldfield. He was leading me closer to my goal. For that reason, I decided I could follow his lead. It wouldn't last long, but he didn't need to know that. I would make a move when I needed to, and he didn't need to learn the truth to keep me safe for the brief time we spent together.

Still, I felt guilty. How could I allow his help and involve someone else in this dangerous game I played?

This guy didn't know the cold hand of death was brushing his fingers along the back of my neck and just waiting for the moment to snuff out my life.

One wrong move and those fingers would wrap around my throat and squeeze, ending my existence.

“You gonna start talkin’, Lark? Or make me ask a bunch of dumb and pointless questions?”

Lifting my chin, I gave him a withering look. “Aren't the pointless questions and small talk the best options? The less you know, the better.”

We drove down Highway 95 with hardly a vehicle passing us in the night. The roads were mostly clear along the two-lane stretch of asphalt. Stars were sprinkled heavily above and twinkled merrily like life was just one big happy adventure filled with innocence and promise. I wish that were true.

“You've got some serious walls built up, little dove. I thought I was the best at pushing people away and keeping them out. You're a close second.”

I gave him my full attention, deciding if I couldn't tell the whole truth, I could at least reveal some of it. Stripping off my

jean jacket, I tossed it onto the dashboard and lifted my right arm, exposing the first of many scars.

“See this? That’s the first cigarette burn I earned from my dad. Guess how old I was?”

I didn’t give him time to answer.

“Five. Just a little kid.”

He scowled.

I lifted my tank top and exposed my midriff. “See that? It’s from a burn I received when a pan of hot water hit my stomach. Know what my father told the ER doctor? I pulled it down and hurt myself.” I snorted, not the least bit humored. “I was six.”

“Christ,” he cursed.

Unsnapping my jeans, I shoved them down until the wound above my pelvic bone was visible. “This scar? What does that look like? A knife wound? Well, you would be half right.”

“Lark.”

“It’s from the blade my dad used to go hunting. Has a gut hook on the end. He carved me up as a sweet sixteen present before he forced me to become familiar with how a man wanted a woman. I lost more than blood that night. If you look closely, you can see it’s his name carved into my skin.” Tears didn’t even fill my eyes when my lip lifted in a sneer. “I don’t trust easily, and I have a lot of good reasons.”

“Fuck,” he replied.

Partially naked, I didn’t bother to hide all the visible skin or remaining scars. I wasn’t ashamed of who I was or what I survived. I didn’t have to answer a single soul on this earth. Feeling vulnerable, I told the handsome biker because I wanted him to understand I wasn’t sticking around and it had nothing to do with him.

Why did I care? No idea.

Maybe I felt protected for the first time in my life by someone other than my stepbrother. Or perhaps I just wanted to let someone in because keeping everyone out was fucking exhausting. Maybe I wanted to feel something real instead of the fake life I'd been leading.

The truck slowed down and then parked on the side of the road. The biker slowly turned my way and lowered his sunglasses, placing them on the dash. I blinked when I saw the cloudy irises and the scar below his right eye that pulled the skin downward slightly.

“I’m partially blind, so it’s hard to see detail, but I figure it’s as bad as I can imagine.” He swallowed hard. “I served in Afghanistan and Iraq during Operation Freedom’s Sentinel and the global war on terrorism. Shrapnel damaged my body in a few places, but those aren’t the worst scars. I was flashed during an explosion that killed five of the brothers I served with and damaged my vision. I’ve never told a single soul what happened until now. Only the review board knows the whole story.” He reached for my hand and held it, his thumb grazing over my skin and sending little electric volts up my arm.

“My name is Flint Shepherd.”

“Hi, Flint,” I whispered, lifting my knees and scooting closer. Confessing all that had happened to me left my mind screaming to think of something else. All I wanted was to escape. Memories weren’t my friend. My fingers began to stroke the beard on his chin, and I leaned in, letting my lips linger close to his own.

“Don’t,” he warned. “Neither of us is in a good place right now. I’m not fucking you in my truck when we’re exposed, and the enemy could catch us unaware.”

“Flint, who said we’re going to sleep together?”

He didn’t buy the innocent tone. “Listen, little dove. You’re gonna straighten your clothes, buckle up, and try to get some rest. I wager you’re running on pure adrenaline right now, and when it crashes, you’re gonna be done. We’ll talk more when we’ve both had a chance to process the shit that

happened this afternoon. Until then, you're gonna close your eyes. I'll wake you when we reach our destination."

"Where's that?"

"Tonopah."

That was what I thought.

A part of me wanted to reject him and his proposal. It wouldn't be too hard to jump from the truck and walk away, but that left me in the open and unprotected. Flint didn't strike me as a predator or a monster, and I knew those kinds of men too well. Chewing on my bottom lip, I conceded.

My head bobbed in agreement, and I listened to what he asked, using my jean jacket as a pillow. Kane chose that moment to wake up, and he licked my hand before snuggling close against my side. His warmth was all I needed to relax.

My eyes fluttered, and I knew if I could trust a single person on this earth, it would be a man who fought and served his country with enough morals to reject my desperate attempt to engage him in sex.

If he tried anything funny, I had a switchblade in my pocket and within reach. I wouldn't hesitate to use it.



"WAKE UP, LITTLE DOVE. We're here."

Blinking, I sat up and stifled a yawn, staring into the intense expression of the man risking his life to bring me to safety. He wasn't a fool. I didn't tell him all the details, but he could connect some dots. It wasn't hard to surmise that I was in trouble and my life was in danger.

"Come on. I need to find Patriot."

Patriot? Was that a Marine too?

Flint left the truck and called Kane, who stayed close to his side as Flint clipped his leash and placed the sunglasses on over his eyes. I closed the door to the truck and noticed we had parked in a massive, gated lot. A few guys stood by the perimeter fencing and seemed to be watching the surrounding desert for possible signs of trouble. Buildings stretched in front of us, but one loomed more prominent than the others. Loud rock music was blaring from inside. I could smell weed and cigarettes. A few men in black leather vests smoked around the front door as we approached.

Flint's hand closed around mine, and he tugged me closer, lowering his voice before we stepped inside. "You ever been around bikers or in a clubhouse?"

I shook my head.

"Rough bunch. Booze, cigarettes, pussy. It's the norm."

"I understand."

"Stick close to me. I don't want any of the guys thinking that you're fair game."

What was that supposed to mean?

"They'll want to fuck you like a club whore," he answered, knowing I was curious. "Unless that's what you want, then stick by my side. Got it?"

"Okay."

Flint squeezed my hand, and we entered the building with the words *The Crossroads* in big letters above the door's thick frame. The noise in the room quieted considerably as curious stares roamed over us. I'd seen enough in my young life that the couples making out and the bar scene didn't shock me. Neither did the girl bouncing on a guy's dick in the corner or the man fingering another woman as she spread her legs wide, and he leaned over her, pinning her in place on the surface of a pool table.

A big guy covered in dark ink bellowed out Flint's name and sauntered over. He wore a vest with PATRIOT and ROAD CAPTAIN on patches stitched to the black leather. An

American flag was wrapped around his head, and I blinked, realizing it was a bandana.

The two men hugged each other and slapped the other's back.

Flint ticked his head at the biker. "You've put on weight, Patriot."

"Fuck off," he slurred slightly, showing off a crooked grin. "Where you hidin'? It's been too long."

"Been thinkin' on your offer to check out the club. Figured this was as good a time as any."

Patriot tilted his head and stared into Flint's eyes for what seemed like an eternity. "Alright, Flint. Let's go someplace where we can talk." Some unspoken communication occurred between them, and I didn't have a clue what it meant.

"I need to know Lark will be taken care of first."

Patriot's gaze roamed over my body in only a few seconds. "Done. I'll take care of it."

Flint nodded.

"Snooki!" Patriot yelled, calling out above the noise that had resumed around us.

A redhead with a knowing smile appeared and placed her hand on Patriot's arm. "What you need, honey?"

"Not what you're thinkin'. Got my ol' lady for that."

Flint chuckled lightly.

Snooki winked. "Good. I'd hate to rat you out to Mimi."

"This is Lark. See that she feels at home."

Snooki nodded and linked her arm through mine. "And the club?"

"No one touches her," Flint growled.

Snooki laughed. "You got it, sexy."

"It's Flint," he corrected.

Snooki smiled, immediately clued into what he wanted.
“Sure thing.”

Flint leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips, shocking the hell out of me as his hand cupped the back of my neck. Warm lips trailed up to my ear as he whispered only loud enough for me to hear. “You keep close to her. Don’t talk to any of the brothers.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I don’t want to kill anyone tonight.”

Blinking, I didn’t know what to say as he released me and followed Patriot from the room.

“Damn. Flint has it bad for you, honey.”

“Why would you say that?”

“He’s been to the Crossroads on quite a few occasions. Never showed up with a woman before, and he’s never seemed this protective over anyone or anything other than his dog.”

I barely noticed that Kane had stayed close to Flint’s side, quietly menacing from the moment we entered. The rottweiler was on edge and watched everyone for any hint of a threat.

When Flint walked from the room, Kane obediently followed his master.

“I guess that’s good to know.”

Pleased to hear all this when it shouldn’t have mattered, I tucked the information away for another time.

Snooki tugged me toward the kitchen. “Got a table going with a few of the girls. We play card games and take shots when we aren’t busy.”

Busy?

Snooki giggled. “We like to keep the brothers happy.”

“Oh,” I answered with a slight blush. *To each his—or her—own.*

“Come on, honey. I’ll introduce you to the others.”

I followed Snooki, wondering how long it would be before Flint returned. I had a feeling this would be a long night. With so many people around, I wasn't sure when I would have a chance to sneak away. For the time being, I decided to wait until I saw Flint again before I left.

Chapter 5 MADDOG

Patriot lit a cigar and puffed away, his eyes briefly closing as he inhaled. “Damn. Wraith’s Cuban cigars are no joke. Pure fuckin’ pleasure.”

Wraith would be pissed when he saw Patriot smoking his expensive tobacco.

I snorted, grabbing a beer from the fridge. We found a private room with a pool table, minibar, and a few dartboards. Tables and chairs were scattered around the area, proving this clubhouse used all the rooms frequently. I popped the top and took a long pull from my bottle. Setting it aside, I picked up a dart, throwing it without aiming and hitting just slightly off-center.

“I’m too sober for this,” I announced, giving him a smirk over my shoulder. Two more landed even farther from the bullseye.

“Fuck. I never see you miss.” Patriot inhaled, closing his eyes briefly to savor the exotic taste and aroma. “This is almost heaven.”

I shook my head. “Never thought I’d hear you say anything was closer to heaven than a nice pair of tits and a sexy ass.”

Patriot’s chuckle was as familiar as home. He sounded far too much like David. One of my best friends, and the scream I heard minutes before he died. The thought was sobering.

“Got a special girl worth taking my time and building something. She’s it for me, man. My ol’ lady is fucking fearless.” I didn’t miss the way his voice seemed to catch. “I miss David too.”

My thoughts must have been obvious. “That’s not why I’m here, though.”

“Didn’t think so.” Patriot blew a cloud of smoke from his lungs, and it rose upward, hovering in the air above our heads.

“My guess is it’s something to do with that pretty little brunette you brought here with you.”

It was hard to look Patriot in the eye for long. It was just like staring down his dead nephew, conjuring up images and memories I didn’t want to haunt the rest of my evening.

“It does. I need a place to lay low. Not sure how long.”

“Done. Before I take it to Grim, I need a little more info to go on.”

“When I left the VA this afternoon, I found a young girl being beaten on the side of the road. Couldn’t let that go, Dale.”

“Shit. That the girl you brought with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Who was beatin’ on her?” Patriot looked pissed. I knew he hated that shit as much as I did.

“He was oddly familiar. I didn’t realize who I’d shot until I was on my Harley and ridin’ away with her on the back of my bike.”

“Fuck. Tell me.”

“Guy was sticking his boot up her ass,” I fumed. “He kicked her fucking hard,” I seethed. “Should have seen the way he smacked her and how hard she hit the ground. I saw the marks around her throat when he nearly choked her.”

“Who?” Patriot had about as much patience as a rabid dog.

“Angel Mackenzie.”

Patriot whistled low. “Grim isn’t gonna like this.”

“Yeah, I figured that. Not like I meant to start shit with the golden boy of the Guerrero Cartel. What the fuck was he doing in my neighborhood anyway?” I fumed.

“This is gonna stir up a hornet’s nest, Flint. The club has to vote. I can’t say for sure if you can stay here or not. Got to take it to my pres and then church.”

“I understand.” I really did. I’d grown up around several different clubs. It wasn’t a surprise how things worked. The choice had to be a group decision, and every brother had a chance to weigh in. “If I need to leave, I won’t hold it against you.”

Patriot sighed. “That’s just it. You’re like family to me. Whatever the decision of the club, I’m going to have your back. Know that, Flint. You’re a brother whether you wear the patch or not. I don’t say that shit lightly.”

“I know.” I felt the same.

“You almost died trying to save David. Didn’t forget what you lost or the scars that you carry.”

All of the emotion buried deep within threatened to surface.

“What I’m sayin’ is that you won’t be going anywhere alone.”

He wasn’t going to risk his life for me. No fuckin’ way. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I shouldn’t have come here to begin with. I was placing Patriot, Grim, and the entire club at risk. If anyone noticed I was here, the Crossroads would be in danger.

“I shouldn’t have come.”

Patriot shot me a look. “Don’t pull that shit with me. You’re not leaving until I talk to Grim. Give me the night. That’s all I ask. I’ll let you know the decision in the morning.”

Nodding, I didn’t have any intention of sticking around.

“Fuckin’ say it, Flint. I know you won’t go back on your word if you give it.”

He knew me too well. “Fine, Patriot. I won’t leave before tomorrow.”

“That means midnight, you slick fucker. Don’t even try. I’ll put a prospect on your ass and watch every move you make.”

“Dammit, Dale. I’m not gonna leave. Okay?”

A triumphant smile curved his lips. “Now I know.”

I flipped him off as he laughed and exited the room, the door shutting with a soft click. Kane was perched on his haunches, waiting for any word from me that he could move.

I shook my head. “Guard, Kane.”

His dark eyes focused on me, but his ears perked up, listening for any hint of danger.

Now that I was alone, I could let the stress of the last few hours release. Picking up a glass from the bar, I filled it with whiskey and tossed the contents back. Three more followed it. My belly burned with the liquor, and I welcomed the distraction.

My thoughts were so scattered that I hardly noticed when the door opened, and I was no longer alone. A sweet, sexy voice brought me back to the present.

“You’re drinking alone.”

My head whipped in her direction, and I leaned against the bar, ticking my head in Lark’s direction. “You’re observant.”

“Aw. Don’t get all offended on my account.” Lark snatched the glass from my hand, poured a shot, and drank the whiskey in one gulp. She hissed as it went down, catching my humored expression. “What? I have plenty of reasons to drink.”

She sure did. No argument there.

“Pretty reckless to shoot Angel. You’ve got a target on your back now.”

“Even more reckless to become indebted to the asshole,” I fired back.

Having a target on my back wasn’t anything new. Shit. Did she forget I was a Marine? Veteran or not, I wasn’t afraid of that prick.

“Maybe I was lonely.”

Scoffing, I shook my head. “No way. You wanted the attention, or you needed it. Maybe you craved the danger like

it was some bad romance novel and hoped he'd take you to his mystery dungeon of toys. I don't get that vibe, though. I'm thinkin' you got roped into something too deep to dig your way out. Maybe for a family member or friend. Either way, you need to stay as far from Angel Mackenzie as you can get."

She refilled the glass and drank again, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth before she hiccupped. "I'm stupid, I guess." There was far too much sincerity in her tone.

No admittance but also no denial.

"Hey," I chided, crooking a finger under her chin to lift her face toward mine. "Don't ever call yourself stupid. I mean it."

For the first time, she let some of the vulnerability she felt rise to the surface. I knew what it meant for her to let me in. Hell, I was the fucking king of pushing people away. Lark didn't have to open up to me, but she did. She tore down a wall she could have kept there, and I would have understood that too. I could feel her insecurity as she stared into my eyes, and I didn't like it. She was too fucking fierce to let this get the best of her.

"He's going to kill me."

"Why would he want to harm you?" I tried to gentle my voice so she felt comfortable enough to confess the truth. Inside, I growled like a beast waiting to rip free and avenge her.

"I might have flushed his stash of meth down the toilet."

Uh-oh. "You messed with the man's drugs?" Incredulous, I couldn't believe she had the guts to get rid of a known drug dealer's product. "How much was it worth?"

She closed her eyes and blurted out her words, wincing at the number. "I flushed about five pounds or so. Angel said it was well over \$100,000 in value."

She was fucking screwed. Angel and his thugs had killed for much less in the past. When I first came home after being discharged, the news had covered his suspected involvement in a drug bust, but nothing could be pinned on him. His daddy bailed him out.

Angel Mackenzie was a thug with an ego, and powerful men provided protection. His uncle Salazar was the muscle behind the Guerrero Cartel who moved meth and cocaine into the U.S. from Venezuela. Luis Guerrero was the old Spanish Don who ruled ruthlessly and without apology. He was also Salazar's father and Angel's grandfather.

What did this mean for the club? Patriot admitted they helped relocate shipments and provided extra muscle for a fee. I didn't think it was wise to do business with criminals like Salazar, but it wasn't my call. All I knew, Grim wanted out and had been trying to find a reason since his son was born.

I had to be careful. Didn't want to piss off Grim or the Royal Bastards but I wasn't letting Angel get his hands on Lark again either. Fuck. I had less headaches dealing with shit overseas.

"I won't let them hurt you," I responded with conviction.

Bright green eyes shimmered with tears as they opened. "You can't promise that. You don't even know me, Flint. We met today, less than eight hours ago. How do you know I'm not lying? Or using you? Maybe I staged the whole thing."

"You took a beating to ride on the back of my Harley? That's fuckin' wild, little firecracker." The words left my mouth with a seductive purr, softening the truth. I'd do what I needed to keep her safe and away from Angel Mackenzie.

"No. I, uh, shit," she cursed, distracted by how I stared at her mouth. "You don't need to worry about my reasons."

She was too damn feisty. Sexy. Stubborn. A part of me wanted to see if I could tame such a wild little bird.

My head lowered, hovering only a few inches away from the pouty pink softness I remembered touching only an hour ago when we first arrived. That kiss lit a low flame inside me, and I couldn't stop wondering what it would feel like to slide my dick through those same silky lips.

Nothing good could come from this attraction that I felt. I was oddly protective and downright obsessed with the little minx. The idea of any other man taking advantage of her

sweetness fired up a rage I hadn't felt since I left the Corps. My entire body tensed and pleaded for release.

She was the only way I'd lose some of this excess energy, and I wanted her warmth wrapped around me when I finally let down my walls for a brief moment. She made me want to feel again. It was fucking dangerous but also intoxicating.

My chin dropped another inch.

I just wanted one little taste. A single night. One chance.

This chemistry between us did wicked things to my brain. My fingers had been itching to touch her since the moment her sweet little ass dropped onto the seat of my bike. She'd been taken advantage of and abused, her trust broken, and for some reason, I wanted to prove to her that not every man would treat her that way. I could be gentle. Tender. Everything she wanted and needed.

The problem was, I knew it would only lead to craving her more. An itch that couldn't be tamed with just a few scratches. I knew this, but I couldn't walk away.

I didn't do relationships and didn't indulge feelings. My heart was untouchable. I locked it away and swore I wouldn't let anyone else in again. It hurt too fucking much.

Didn't change the fact that I wanted balls deep inside her and couldn't wait to hear that sexy voice crying out my name in pleasure.

"One night," I growled low, offering what I could give, as little as it was. "Say yes."

Her eyes locked on mine. She blinked.

"Say yes," I repeated, curling my hand around her neck, letting my palm rest against her throat as my thumb brushed her jaw.

Her body shifted closer to mine.

When her pulse thrummed, and I felt each beat of her heart as it quickened, I knew I had my answer.

Chapter 6 LARK

“Say yes,” Flint growled, his thumb gently brushing across my jaw and sending shivers across the surface of my skin.

Blinking, I knew he’d just asked me to spend the night with him.

One night. No attachment. No promises.

Most girls would find that insulting. I didn’t. I’d known plenty of liars and thieves. The honesty was refreshing. Besides, who knew how many days I had left before Angel found me? And he would. He’d bring reckoning with him, and all the hard work and sacrifice up to this point would be for nothing.

I still didn’t know where Molly had been taken. A year of my life gone. The innocents caught and harmed.

All the evidence in the world wouldn’t matter when Angel took me to his playroom. His fury would drag on as he punished me, seeking his vengeance for the betrayal I was sure he had already figured out.

I’d been living on borrowed time.

Torin tried to warn me. He asked me if I wanted out, and I stubbornly refused. I believed I had the upper hand. That Angel didn’t suspect I worked with the FBI to bring him down. It was more than the drugs and the violence. His crimes extended to the sale of flesh, trafficking women in and out of the U.S. and Venezuela. From there, he sent them all over the world.

And somewhere, my sister Molly endured unimaginable suffering. She wasn’t the only one. How could I give up? Or walk away before I found where she’d been sent?

I couldn’t.

So one night? A single moment to be selfish? The freedom to be with who I wanted and consent to sex?

Hell yeah. I was all in.

Because tomorrow I would have to figure out how to smooth things over with Angel. Would he forgive me? Not without enduring his discipline.

I brushed those thoughts away, concentrating on the ruggedly handsome man whose hands had taken lives while also defending them. If I could choose someone to share my burdens with, it would be the scarred hero/bad boy whose blue eyes burned with an intensity I could feel in my bones.

Was it stupid to throw caution to the wind? I'd done things far more carelessly in my life.

My thighs clenched together, and I felt that tingle in my core, the building desire for this man to take what he wanted from me, and I wasn't going to refuse. In silent answer, I shrugged off my jean jacket and tossed it aside, ignoring it as the fabric landed on the other end of the bar.

I had Flint's undivided attention.

My tank top lifted over my head and soared through the air before landing on the jacket. Holding his rapt gaze, I unhooked my bra, allowing the silky material to whisper away from my skin.

I'd shimmied out of my jeans when he growled, his rough hands on my hips, and I lifted, my ass planted on the bar.

Flint's deep blue eyes met mine as he ripped off his sunglasses and shoved them into a pocket in his leather jacket. My hands rose to his face as my fingers massaged the coarse hair of his goatee, lightly tracing his chin.

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. There was something hypnotic about the way he stared into my soul—an urgency mixed with lust but also a mirrored pain I understood. I caught a glimpse of the man who almost lost his life, who struggled and fought to get where he was today.

The fierce protector and brutal biker. The battle-hardened Marine and the scarred man.

Flint was beautifully broken.

Part wounded hero and part bad boy with a dark past.

All wicked temptation.

“Fuck, little dove. You see me, don’t you?”

“Yes. Just like you see me.”

His lip curled up on one side. A dangerously sexy smile threatened to snatch my heart if I wasn’t careful. “I want to devour you, Lark. I don’t care if a single soul walks in here, but I’m not leaving this room until you scream my name at least once.”

Please follow through with that promise.

“Do it.”

Flint’s lips crashed down on mine the exact moment his hands slid around my waist and cupped the flesh of my ass. I jolted as he ripped my thong off and shoved the material into his front pocket.

His fingers dug into my bare skin as he groaned into my mouth. Not bothering to break the kiss, I slid the leather from his shoulders, revealing arms that rippled with hard muscle. Black ink covered both from wrists to biceps, the blue shirt he wore hiding the rest from view.

I gasped as his lips left mine, and he shrugged off the jacket. His shirt was stripped off with my help as my fingers traced the dips and contours of every abdominal in view. It was a sin to have a body like his, and I wondered if he’d fuck me with the same intensity that he seemed to struggle to hold back.

Flint quickly unbuckled his belt, and I squirmed, already turned on by the thought of seeing beyond the prominent bulge in his jeans. The snap popped, followed by the zipper, and he shoved the material down, revealing the thick, stiff length of his cock.

A condom wrapper rustled for a couple of seconds before he had it open, and then he rolled the latex down, reaching for me again. My legs spread wide as he leaned in and kissed me,

his tongue thrusting into my mouth as he dominated my senses in every way.

Two thick fingers slid along my inner thigh, between my legs, and I moaned when they dipped inside me, gliding in and out as my head fell back and the kiss broke. Flint's lips traveled down my throat, and he paused to savor the skin as he nipped and bit at my neck and earlobe. He devoured me with open-mouthed kisses spanning my throat as he murmured in a low, husky voice.

“Fuck. You're beautiful, Lark.”

My hands rose, and I squeezed my breasts, tweaking the nipples as he hissed his approval. I felt his thumb brush my clit and moaned, tugging him closer.

His fingers pulled out of my core, and Flint lifted his hand, licking both digits as he groaned before palming his dick, stroking up and down his length. His hungry gaze met mine, and then he moved in, coating his dick in the fluids that had already leaked from my eager pussy. I was wet and ready.

“So needy,” he grunted as I locked my legs behind his back.

“Please,” I begged. “I need you.”

Flint plunged inside me with one firm thrust, and I cried out, wrapping my hands around his back. His hands gripped my hips as his fingers dug in, holding me in place as he pumped in and out, fucking me hard and fast as my tits bounced. I felt my orgasm rising to the surface, threatening to crash over me more quickly than anticipated. The man knew what he was doing, precisely the right angle and depth to coax my release and build it up. His attention focused on the place where our bodies connected.

“Fuck, Lark. You feel so good.”

“Yes!” I agreed, my voice louder than I meant, and he sent me a knowing grin.

“You're not screaming yet.”

Gripping my bottom, he carried me over to the nearest table. Despite his eagerness, I was placed down gently. One of his arms knocked the half-full and empty glasses in our way to the side, and they crashed to the floor as they shattered. My back met the firm surface as I lay back, jolting at the sudden cold. I scooted to the edge as he lifted my knees, spreading me wide.

Flint thrust back in and lifted one of my legs, angling my body so that he slipped deeper. A guttural moan escaped my lips, and I reached outward, holding onto the edge of the table as his body pounded mine into the wood.

“Yes!” The word was almost indecipherable as it left my lips.

“You’re teasing me, little dove.”

His hand splayed across my stomach as his thumb pressed down on my clit, swirling small, firm circles into the sensitive bundle of nerves. My thighs shook as he flashed a triumphant grin. I felt the tight coil inside my core reach its zenith and knew I would come. Hard.

“Scream my name when you orgasm, Lark. I want the entire clubhouse to hear who owns this greedy pussy.”

The words didn’t sound like a man who only wanted one night between my thighs. I didn’t say a word because as much as I agreed to it, I wasn’t satisfied yet. I didn’t think I would have nearly enough of him after just one night. Even when that dam inside me burst, and I flooded his dick, wailing out my climax loud enough to let the entire world know as I quivered and bucked my hips, I held onto Flint and allowed my heart to feel something that I hadn’t in a long time.

Something sweet and genuine.

Maybe it made all the difference because I gave myself freely and with enthusiasm.

“Fuck yeah!” he shouted, pumping faster as he leaned down and captured my wrists, holding them above my head as his lower body pistoned, his thrusts nearly punishing in their rhythm. I was half out of it, basking in the pleasure that filled

me in every way. There was something primitive and downright addicting about the way he held me and took what he wanted, gripping my body with a possession that belied his words. His hands were rough in their eagerness to claim my body, but not in a way that harmed me. He wasn't a selfish lover. After all, I'd already soaked the both of us with my own release.

With a roar, he filled me, my name on his lips in a reverent whisper. I held onto him as he pumped a few more times and then collapsed, his forehead lowering to mine as he panted, drawing air into his lungs as his heart hammered in his ribcage.

We lay there intertwined, my legs wrapped around his naked ass while he pressed kisses down my temple, and his hot breath fanned across my neck. His affection surprised me. I expected him to pull out and leave my body instantly as soon as he finished.

He didn't.

We both shuddered as he turned his head to kiss my lips. Not just any kiss. It oozed promise.

This wouldn't be the last time his cock was inside me.

“Fuck, Lark.”

“Is that good?” I teased, sliding my fingers through his thick hair.

“Yeah, darlin'. It's fuckin' good.”



“HERE, BOY,” I WHISPERED, scratching behind Kane's ears. “I hope you're not traumatized by watching what your owner did.”

Flint smirked. “I forgot he was in the room. He probably didn't notice how I fucked you anyway. He was guarding the

door.”

“Such a clever dog,” I praised as he nuzzled my hand.

“He likes you. Kane never goes to anyone. He’s been trained to protect and guard with his life. It’s a little shocking to see him like this with you.”

“That’s interesting.”

“It’s dangerous. Kane might feel that he now has to protect us both. He would kill for me, and I think he may for you as well.”

“Aw, you’re such a fierce boy. You watch over Flint for me, okay?”

Kane licked the side of my face, and I laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Flint stood at the foot of the bed. We’d been shown to a room where we could spend the night after we dressed and rejoined the crowd in the common room of The Crossroads.

Couples had been engaged in various sexual acts, so it wasn’t like anyone noticed what we’d been doing. It was impossible to hear what anyone was saying with the loud music.

“I think I want a shower,” I announced, stripping and leaving my clothes on the bed before I stepped into the bathroom. I didn’t expect him to follow. The man didn’t have to worry about my feelings. I knew what we shared wasn’t more than a fleeting moment.

Once I was under the warm spray, I began to wash with the bottles located inside. The shower gel, shampoo, and conditioner were decent brands and not too cheap. I nearly finished rinsing the conditioner from my hair when Flint joined me. A sexy, determined grin sat on his lips as he gently pushed me against the wall.

“Best two out of three?”

“Are you suggesting we need at least two more orgasms to decide?”

A challenging gleam entered his eyes. “Baby, I don’t know if that will be enough.”

His words sent a shiver down my spine, and I dropped to my knees, eye level with the monster that dangled between his legs. Leaning in, I let my tongue flick at the tip, and he groaned, his hand sliding down my head and lightly gripping my hair.

“Fuck yeah.”

My hands went behind my back, and I clasped them together as I sucked the crown of his cock into my mouth, increasing the suction as he bucked his hips and then one palm slapped against the tile.

“Touch me,” he ordered with a grunt.

I lifted a hand to stroke the hard stem.

Rolling over the sensitive head with my tongue, I curled around the stiff length of his shaft and began to move up and down, gliding over him from base to tip as noises of rapture left his lips.

“You... *fuck*, Lark.”

I swallowed him down as far as I could go as he cursed aloud, and I increased the pace, sucking, swallowing, and licking his dick until the man warned me he was going to spill his load. A part of me wanted him to fuck my mouth and get off. It turned me on to have control like that, to watch him tip over the edge as the powerful biker came down my throat.

Flint had other ideas.

I didn’t mind.

He slipped from my mouth with a pop and hauled me upward. My legs instantly curled around his waist. I gripped his shoulders, nodding as he grunted his words.

“Need you, Lark.”

He entered me fast, driving inside me with exquisitely brutal thrusts. I wanted all he could give and more, moaning

and writhing in his arms as he pressed me up against the tiled wall.

Rivulets of water splashed and dripped down our bodies as Flint gripped my jaw, his mouth dominating mine in a feral kiss that was wild and needy. Teeth nipped at my lips. Warm breath merged with mine.

Flint's fingers gripped my hip to hold me in place. He took me savagely, thrusting hard as I clung to his shoulders. Steam filled the bathroom, coating our bodies in hot mist. I hardly knew the moment my orgasm hit because I had been so lost in pleasure, soaking up the raw passion he gave without expecting anything in return. Such a generous but greedy lover. A combination I couldn't resist.

He followed soon after, spilling into me with every tilt of his hips. When Flint didn't separate us, I dared to look into his deep baby blues. Ragged breaths left my chest as the dark biker held me up, crushing my chest against his own.

"I didn't expect this."

"This?" I asked, out of breath.

"You. Us."

"Me either," I whispered. "It's insanity."

"Maybe," he agreed, his lips gently meeting mine. "I don't want it to end. Not yet."

Panic briefly filled my chest, but I knocked it down, knowing nothing was forever, but at least I could enjoy the few days or moments I had left.

"I don't want it to end yet either."

"Good."

His mouth closed over mine, deepening the kiss as desire flared a third time for this unpredictable man.

Funny how fate brought us together.

I wondered how long the peace would last.

Chapter 7 MADDOG

The attachment that I felt for Lark didn't make any sense. I didn't want to let her in but couldn't seem to stop myself. Every kiss deepened the connection between us. She sensed it, too. Her eyes held my gaze with an intensity that proved it.

This was dangerous. Angel Mackenzie would hunt her down, and there was no way I would let that sick fuck near her. Not after learning about his business associates and their bullshit. I never intended to fuck Lark. Not this fast. When I drove to Tonopah, I thought I had shit figured out.

I had every intention of walking away after getting her settled somewhere safe. I planned to ride off on my Harley and out of her life. She had problems she needed to handle, and I didn't want any part of it.

Nothing ever goes the way you plan it in this life.

As I drifted off to sleep with my arm wrapped around her, one hand cupping her breast as she wiggled her bottom against my groin, I couldn't remember the last time I felt this conflicted. She made me feel things I hadn't since before I deployed. Shit I didn't want to consider.

Pounding on the bedroom door awakened us both. Lark was sprawled across my chest and completely naked, her arm draped over my waist. I'd taken her two more times during the night and would have done so again this morning, but some asshole wasn't leaving us alone.

"Coming," I grumbled, slipping from the bed and tugging on my jeans. When I opened the door, Patriot didn't look happy.

"We've got company at the front gate."

Fuck. He didn't have to say who showed up. I knew.

Any lingering fatigue I felt immediately disappeared.
"Angel?"

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Understood.” I turned to grab the rest of my clothes and belongings when Patriot’s hand landed on my shoulder.

“Spoke to Grim last night. You’re family to me, which means you’re also family to the club. We’ve got your back. You’re not alone, Maddog.”

Maddog. The moniker my Marine brothers had called me since the early days back in boot camp.

Shit. I fought hard not to show the surge of emotion that followed his words. For a guy who lost almost everything defending his country, watched his buddies die, and then suffered significant wounds only to return home to no one and nothing but time and long nights alone, this was a lot to process. My old man died when I was serving overseas. My mother passed away when I was a little kid. The girlfriend I thought loved me had already hooked up with another guy and ditched my ass before I arrived at the airport.

I had no one until now.

“Gather your gear and meet me out front. The girl stays with Snooki.”

Patriot spun on his heel and strode down the hall as I walked up to the bed fast and yanked back the covers. Lark was blinking the last remnants of sleep from her eyes.

“I need to take care of something, little dove. Need you to remain here. Snooki will stay with you.”

She bolted upright in the bed, and I knew my vague orders didn’t fool her. “Angel is here.”

I didn’t confirm or deny it. “I’ll be back soon.”

Lark’s hands lifted as she scrambled to her knees, and she held my face as her lips met mine. “Come back to me.”

She didn’t beg or argue, plead with me to stay, or try to stop me. This woman understood what I had to do and didn’t try to change my mind. She was so damn perfect, even with her scars. Lark was ol’ lady material, and I wasn’t even a member of this club. Someone would snatch her sexy ass up in

a heartbeat, and that shit made me feel a rage I didn't expect. It was too fucking soon to be thinking about any of this.

“Kane, let's go,” I ordered, nibbling at Lark's mouth before I kissed her again and then rose, leaving the room without a backward glance.

Kane whimpered when we left Lark behind, and I knew he sensed something was up. He was intuitive and never failed to surprise me. My dog's senses were keen. Kane was fiercely protective. He stuck close to my side while his ears flattened against his head. Kane growled at anyone who stepped close, feeling the tension and responding as his training dictated.

Patriot flanked me on the left as Grim approached and stood on my right. The gate remained closed, but I could see Angel Mackenzie as he stood with a handful of thugs from the Guerrero Cartel. Did his uncle Salazar know what his nephew planned? Was he looking to start a war with the Royal Bastards MC?

Seemed foolish to me.

“*Amigo*, we meet again.” Angel's gaze flicked to mine, but he ticked his chin toward Grim. “I have no quarrel with the Royal Bastards. I simply came for my merchandise.”

My back stiffened with his crude description of Lark. Patriot glanced in my direction and gave a slight shake of his head. He didn't want me to react before his pres tried to calm Angel down.

Grim folded his arms across his chest. “That's a little hard to accept when your men are pointing guns at my compound.”

Angel waved a hand, and the weapons lowered. I caught sight of his bandaged palm and the stiff leg he wobbled on, sneering when I noticed. Such a shame. Maybe he shouldn't be beating women, and then karma wouldn't have to teach his arrogant ass a lesson.

“I wonder how he knew I was here,” I mused aloud, lowering my voice so that only Grim and Patriot could hear.

“That was me,” Grim confided. “The longer this goes on, the worse it's gonna get. I prefer dealing with shit upfront and

not dicking around.”

Fair enough.

“I’m not handing Lark over. He’ll torture and then kill her. Not happening.”

Grim squinted into the sunlight and then nodded. “Thought you’d say that.”

Patriot’s hand was dangling in the air next to his hip like some gunslinger in a Wild West movie. Weapons were strapped to his shoulders and in both fists. He wasn’t playing around. I had my 9mm firmly in my grip, ready to unleash fury the second this went south. Grim rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. I stood my ground, ready for whatever was about to go down.

Kane snarled as he focused on the gate and the men straight ahead, clearly a threat.

I blinked, my vision blurring a little on the edges.

My head ached from the booze last night, and I knew getting drunk hadn’t been a great idea. Those shots in the bar with Lark were only the beginning. I consumed half a bottle of Jack, pouring some of the liquor onto her body and licking it from her skin. Didn’t regret tasting her or the whiskey, only the headache and poor vision that resulted from it.

“This doesn’t have to be hard, Grim. Just let me have my property.”

He could fuck off with that shit. Human beings weren’t objects to trade around or sell. I fucking hated this guy.

Right as I was about to answer Angel, I heard the voice of my little dove. She didn’t listen. *Goddamn.*

“Fuck,” Patriot cursed as Kane lowered to the ground, flicking his ears as his gaze went from me to Lark and back to the gate.

This was about to get ugly.

“I’m not going anywhere with you, Angel.” I had to give her credit. She sounded courageous, and not the least bit fazed.

“Not really much of a choice, *la maldita perra.*”

I didn't know a lot of Spanish, but thanks to a few buddies in the Corps, I learned my share of curse words.

“Don't call her that again,” I warned.

“Open the gate, Grim,” Angel ordered, stepping closer as his men tensed.

His leg almost buckled from under him, and I smiled.

A sardonic and deadly grin appeared on Grim's face. I would have been afraid if I was Angel. “Not gonna happen. This is *my* property. You want to negotiate? Take it up with Salazar.”

“You're gonna regret that choice,” Angel warned.

“I doubt it,” Grim challenged.

Around me, more Royal Bastards slowly came into view. Every one of them was armed and ready to defend the Crossroads.

Fuck.

Made me feel like I was back on active duty.

Each of these bikers would die protecting their compound, brothers, and way of life. Fucking beautiful to witness.

The ground rumbled beneath our feet, and I thought we might have been having a damn earthquake when a semi-truck approached, hauling ass toward the gate. The *fuck?* The engine roared as it closed in, too close to prevent the inevitable. The massive beast rounded the corner of the compound fast and then smashed through the gate and into the front entrance as chaos exploded around us.

Angel Mackenzie ordered a fucking semi to crash into the Royal Bastards MC compound. *Heads are gonna roll, man.*

“Motherfucker!” I heard Patriot yell.

“Take cover!” Grim ordered.

I ran for Lark and snatched her around the middle as gunfire erupted, bullets spraying in our direction from behind

the truck. We hit the ground and rolled as I cradled her against my chest, hoping none of those bullets found their way to my new woman. For a few seconds, my ears rang. Panic exploded in my chest as the past resurfaced, smoke billowing into the air and combining with the heat the same way it had overseas the day I lost my brothers in the terrorist attack.

My vision tunneled as I hauled air into my lungs, refusing to let the past overtake the present. With a snarl, I crouched, pulling Lark with me. I tugged her behind a black SUV for cover. Frantic, I checked her over for injuries, relieved when she seemed no more than a little shaken up.

“He has to die, Flint.”

Her voice didn’t even waver when she said the words.

“I know, little dove.”

As fucked up as it was, I knew Angel wouldn’t stop coming after Lark. She made him look like an idiot and incompetent when she flushed his drugs and escaped him without a trace. Angel was pissed and wanted to take out the cost on her flesh. He would use her, torture her, and drag it out for as long as possible before he finally took her life.

A man like that was ruthless. Bloodthirsty for vengeance.

I knew what surged in his blood. I’d felt that wrath myself not long ago. Losing people I cared about took me to a dark place. Somewhere cold and deadly, where I could be the merciless killer I became on numerous occasions. In the past, I never had a choice. As a Marine, I did what I needed to keep those around me safe. Now, I would unleash the killer again to protect Lark and the RBMC.

Angel Mackenzie was a dead man walking.

“He won’t get to you,” I promised vehemently.

She pressed her lips to mine and then ducked lower as more bullets hit the glass in the windows above us and shattered, raining shards upon our heads.

“Fuck,” I cursed.

Staying crouched, I grabbed Lark's hand and led her from the SUV to the auto garage. The bays were open, and three vehicles filled the inside—plenty of places to hide while I took care of Angel.

“Find a quiet place to wait this out. I'll find you when it's over.”

She shook her head. “I'm not leaving you.”

“You will,” I ordered firmly, stealing another kiss. “Kane, guard Lark.” I handed over his leash, watching as he moved in front of her, gums exposed as he snarled, ready to attack at a moment's notice. I left her inside, running toward the semi-truck and the steady flow of gunfire.

When I reached the cab, the door was ajar. Not a soul lingered inside. I crept around the trailer and took my time, clearing each side and hoping to find Angel. This bullshit wouldn't continue. The stupid fucker just started a war with an outlaw motorcycle club with chapters all over the world. He was getting a bullet between his two eyes, and I'd fucking enjoy it.

I wasn't a stranger to killing a man. Hell, the Marine Corps ensured you knew how to shoot your rifle and were good at it. Basic training instilled that skill.

I still went to the range every week to ensure my aim remained accurate. A sharpshooter expert. Same as it had been while I was on active duty. I didn't need luck—just the chance to fire my weapon.

“You're too late, *puto cabrón*.”

I spun around, jolting as I felt something bite into my right shoulder with fangs so sharp that I was sure I was about to die. Pain lanced the whole portion of my upper body. My knees gave out, and I hit the ground, still clenching my gun in my right hand. I fired a single shot and sneered when the bullet hit the dead center of the bastard's forehead. Sadly, it wasn't Angel.

My ears began to ring, and I thought I heard Patriot yell my name.

The last thought in my head was that Lark was in danger,
and I wasn't there to save her.

Chapter 8 LARK

I didn't hesitate to move the second that Flint left my side. The auto repair shop smelled like motor oil and old grease as I wrinkled my nose and led Kane toward the back. We skirted around the vehicles in the bays and further from the opening, looking for anywhere to hide. The office sat on my right side, but it wasn't wise to lock myself in there with nowhere to escape. I decided to duck behind a van in the back corner and hope that no one bothered to search inside the shop.

Staying low, I held onto Kane's leash. My breath sawed in and out of my lungs as I tried not to panic.

My fingers dug into the pocket of my jean jacket, and I pulled my switchblade free, holding the weapon firmly in my palm. Gunfire was still popping off outside, and I trembled, switching the blade to the hand holding the leash.

My free one slid through the fur of Kane's neck and head, lightly massaging behind his ears. He didn't utter a sound but seemed to enjoy the action until we both heard a metallic clatter along the floor a short distance from our location.

A rumble began low in his chest as his snout opened, a growl erupting when footsteps approached. Scared but determined, I dragged Kane by the leash and slowly moved in the opposite direction, palming the knife and flipping it open. Maybe whoever was in here didn't hear us.

Should have known I wasn't that lucky.

We rounded the front of the van and abruptly stopped when Angel stood in our way, blocking the path. His gun pointed at my heart. Kane lowered closer to the ground, his growl threatening as he snarled in a warning.

"Don't you think you've made me wait long enough, Lark?"

I didn't answer, slowly retreating as I backed up until I bumped into an immovable wall of muscle. Surprised, I spun, trying not to freak out when I saw Angel's bodyguard. The last

time we met, I knocked him over the head with an expensive vase and tugged his body into a closet, locking him inside. He seemed to recall the event as he grinned with cruel promise.

“You remember Miguel?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded.

“He gets the first night with you once we return.”

No fucking way!

Kane began to fight the leash, and I had to hold tight, nearly dropping my knife. His growls grew louder, and I knew it was only a matter of time before someone found us. This place was crawling with bikers. I just needed to buy a little time.

Carefully unclipping the leash as Angel narrowed his eyes, I hoped Kane would understand the command I was about to issue. If not, we might be in a lot more trouble than we anticipated. Still, I'd rather risk injury than certain death.

“Kane, attack!” I shouted, dropping the leash as he lunged forward and knocked Angel to the ground. I heard a crunch and Angel's scream, satisfied Kane had this under control as I spun around. Not hesitating, I jabbed upward as the blade sank into Miguel's stomach. Blood coated my hand, and I blinked, both horrified and stunned that I had the courage to fight a man twice my size. Worse, I was willing to possibly kill him.

Miguel cursed as his hands wrapped around my throat. He began to squeeze as he stumbled, and we both crashed to the concrete floor. A punch landed on the right side of my head. Another cracked my head against the ground as his fist grazed my jaw. Dazed, I vaguely realized he straddled my waist.

“I'll kill you, *puta!*”

Brass knuckles slipped onto his left hand as he raised his fist and brought it back, fully intent on punching me in the face as hard as he could. A black blur latched onto his hand, and I blinked, staring at Kane as he chomped down and dragged Miguel away. Screams filled the sudden silence and then choked off as Kane latched onto his neck and snapped it, snarling as he glanced behind me.

I tried to sit up but wobbled, falling over as everything around me blurred. Dizzy, I winced as I heard Flint's voice.

"Stay down, Lark!"

Panic clawed at my throat as I thought of Molly. "Don't kill him!"

"Lark!"

"I need him alive," I explained, scooting across the floor toward Angel's mangled body. His chest rose and fell as he breathed, still alive but passed out, probably from the pain and blood loss.

Kane had ripped into his arm and shoulder, immobilizing him. I didn't see his gun. Looking around, I found it kicked across the garage by the bay doors.

My head pounded as Flint rushed forward, falling to his knees at my side. "Little dove, you're hurt."

"I'm not the only one."

Flint tried to hide the pain evident in his vivid blue eyes. His shirt was soaked with blood, and he teetered, almost falling over as I helped him lower to the ground. His sunglasses were missing, and he blinked like the light bothered him. I covered his eyes and started yelling for help. Shouts from outside the auto shop echoed around us as I leaned down and pressed my lips to Flint's.

"Baby. You okay?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

Flint didn't get a chance to respond.

"We've got Maddog," Patriot assured me as several big guys in leather rushed inside and lifted Flint off the ground, carrying him toward the Crossroads. I wobbled as I stood, and Patriot scooped under my knees, heading in the same direction.

"Angel," I mumbled, knowing I couldn't keep this secret any longer. "He's got my sister."

"Shit," Patriot cursed. "We'll figure it out."

I had to accept that answer for now.

My head lowered to his shoulder as I tried not to vomit. My stomach felt queasy. I didn't have more than a few cuts and bruises, including a sore jaw. A nasty bump on the head, too. Didn't make sense why I felt so weak. Maybe it was just the aftermath of fear and adrenaline.

"Is Flint going to be okay?"

"Maddog's been hurt a lot worse. He'll be fine. Just a little flesh wound."

A flesh wound? "What? Was he shot?"

"Damn, honey. Why do you think he was bleedin'? The man took a bullet to the shoulder. Don't you worry. We got him."

Flint had been shot in the shoulder. Oh my god!

Concerned, I lifted my head, looking for him as soon as we entered the clubhouse. The rough bunch of bikers placed him in the guest room. Patriot lowered me onto the bed, a short distance from Flint.

Bikers rushed around under Patriot's guidance, cleaning my hero up, removing the bullet, and bandaging his wound. There were numerous stitches, so Flint would need to keep his movements minimal until the injury healed. This last part came from a pretty blonde in red scrubs.

"He's going to be fine. Trust me. This club looks after their own."

I stared at the blonde nurse, wondering how she fit in here.

"I'm Nylah. Rael's ol' lady." She shrugged, tossing the long, silky strands of her hair over her shoulder. "Let's take a look at you."

"Okay," I agreed.

She cleaned up the scrapes and noted the lump on my head wasn't as severe as I thought. My throat was slightly bruised, along with my jaw. I didn't need stitches, though.

Nylah handed me a couple of pain relievers and water.
“Thanks.”

“Let me know if you need anything. You both should rest. I’ll check on you later.”

I nodded, watching her clean the room and take out the blood-soaked linens.

Patriot seemed to know quite a bit about the human body and standard medical procedures as he finished up with Flint and then ticked his head toward the bed. “Get some rest. He won’t wake up for a few hours. I gave him strong painkillers.”

“Alright.”

I climbed onto the mattress next to Flint, resting my head on the pillow as I watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Eyes fluttering, they closed as a soft sigh escaped my lips.

A hand squeezed mine as my eyes opened. I didn’t realize I had fallen asleep until I blinked, stifling a yawn.

“Hey, little dove.”

“Hey, sexy hero.”

“I like the sound of that,” he admitted, lifting my hand and pressing a kiss to my palm.

“You’re sitting up,” I observed. “Shouldn’t you be lying down? To keep from pulling on the wound?”

He tilted his head to the side, giving me a soft smile.
“Well, I had a problem with that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you weren’t with me.”

Damn. I never had any guy saying things this sweet to me.

“Huh, I wonder if that means you have the hots for me.”

He blinked. “The hots?”

“You know,” I added with a wink, shaking my boobs in front of him. “You like what you see and want more.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” A confident smirk twitched his lips.

“Not really.”

As much as I enjoyed flirting, I had other things on my mind. “What are we going to do? Miguel is dead. I don’t know what happened to Angel. The Guerrero—”

“Shh,” he hushed. “I’ve got that handled.”

“You do?” I asked, sitting up as I rested on my knees.

“Yeah.”

I didn’t have any clue what that meant. “But—”

Flint cut me off when his mouth captured mine in a kiss so sensual and hungry my stomach did a quick little flop, and I felt tingles erupt along my skin.

His fingers curled around my bruised jaw when he leaned back, gently rubbing a thumb across the tender skin. “I’ve been thinking of hanging around here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but I’d be damn lonely if you didn’t stay.”

There. He did it again. Sweet talk with a spicy flare.

“Who said I was leaving?”

“No one,” he replied firmly. “Definitely not me.”

“Well, I think you and Kane need someone to help keep an eye on you. You’re a magnet for trouble.”

“You’re right about that,” a deep voice added.

I glanced up and caught Patriot leaning against the doorframe.

He moved out of the way as Grim strolled in, followed by Mammoth and Rael, his VP and SAA, or so Flint mentioned last night before all the drama. “Nice to see you both up and awake.”

Flint snorted. “Can’t say the same for your front gate.”

Grim chuckled. “The prospects needed somethin’ to do. They’ll be busy for a long while. I’ve been wantin’ to upgrade security anyhow.”

Flint winced as he sat up straighter. “I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not. Angel needs to pay for what he did.”

“Yeah, he will,” Patriot agreed.

“Won’t that cause trouble for the Royal Bastards?” Flint asked.

“Maybe, but we can handle it.”

Rael snorted. “I’m almost insulted.”

“When are you not?” Mammoth mumbled, shaking his head.

Flint squinted, blinked, and cursed. “Fucking eye bullshit.” He squared his shoulders, facing Grim. “I’ll be visiting your guest downstairs.”

Grim nodded. “Thought you’d say that.”

“Told you he wouldn’t be askin’,” Patriot laughed.

“You Devil Dogs never do.”

That brought a smile to both Patriot and Flint’s faces.

“A Devil Dog?” I asked, picturing some satanic monster from hell.

“It’s a nickname for Marines because of our tenacity and fighting ability,” Flint explained.

I could see that.

Flint squeezed my hand. “We need to talk later.”

I wasn’t surprised he said that. There was a lot of information he didn’t know, and it served no purpose to hide it from him anymore. Sure, I still had a plan. Finding Molly was my top priority. With Flint’s help, maybe I could finally get the answers I needed.

“Okay.” I cleared my throat, turning to Grim. “I have to see Angel.”

He arched a brow. “Why?”

His club. He deserved to know the truth. Patriot probably already mentioned it.

“Angel has my sister.”

I felt Flint’s grip tighten around my fingers. “Explain.”

“Molly is ten years younger than me. Only sixteen.”

Grim scowled. “Don’t tell me that motherfucker in my basement uses kids.”

“I can’t say for certain,” I admitted, “but I don’t believe so. He gets his pussy from, uh,” I paused, realizing this part of the story sucked. “From multiple women.”

“You?” Patriot asked softly.

Nodding, I tried to pull my hand from Flint’s, but he held tighter. “I got close to him to find Molly.”

“Fuck,” Flint cursed.

Patriot held my gaze. “I understand. Better than you know. Traffickers held my ol’ lady.”

Swallowing hard, I fought tears. “You helped her, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Wow. Finally. I found men brave enough to stand up to the Guerrero family and the traffickers who had my sister.

“Angel knows where she is,” I divulged. “I’ve been trying to find her for a year.”

Flint tugged me into his arms. “He ever hurt you before we met?”

“I think that’s obvious, but it doesn’t matter. Finding Molly has to be the priority.”

Flint’s eyes turned cold, his gaze a blustery blue that chilled me to the bone. “I’ll find out what he knows. All of it.”

“Well, fuck,” Grim growled.

Patriot agreed. "I'm coming with you. Got no tolerance for this shit."

"Something else needs to be handled first," Grim announced.

Flint frowned. "I don't like the sound of that, Grim."

He ticked his chin at Flint. "Can't say I blame you. You ever thought seriously about patching into the club? We could use another brother who's as fearless as you are, Shepherd."

That wasn't what I thought he would say.

The Royal Bastards President's presence radiated power, ruthless brutality, and something almost sinister. He was the most intimidating person I'd ever met, even more so than Angel or Salazar Guerrero, but I wasn't afraid of him.

A protective vibe hovered around all the guys in this motorcycle club. They treated their women with a firm but gentle hand, and as I watched the interaction of the others, I hoped they could stop the monsters who took Molly. Every effort to recover her before now had failed.

Maybe the Royal Bastards were the reckoning I needed.

Accepting that meant trusting my sister's life with an outlaw motorcycle club and a scarred Marine Veteran I had only known for two days. Torin was going to be pissed when he found out.

Flint lifted his chin, a mischievous glint in those dark blue eyes. "Well, when you put it like that, sure."

"There's just one thing left then," Grim added, flashing a wicked grin.

"And that is?"

"The Devil's Ride."

Chapter 9 MADDOG

“We head out in an hour. Be ready to ride,” Grim rumbled as he spun on his heel, leaving the room as Rael and Mammoth followed.

Patriot cleared his throat. “Didn’t want to bring this up until you were awake, Flint.”

I braced with his tone, immediately alerted something was wrong. Scanning the room, I noticed my dog’s absence for the first time. I’d been so caught up in Lark, and my injuries that I failed to see Kane wasn’t in the room.

“Where’s my fucking dog?” I asked, growling the words.

“Fuck,” Patriot cursed. “He’s in bad shape, Flint.”

“Define bad shape, Dale.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, brushing the stubble that almost bloomed into a full beard. “He got injured during the attack.”

“Be specific,” I ordered, throwing my legs over the side of the bed. “Injured how?”

“Angel and one of his guys punched and kicked him. I tried to set the broken bones, but the injuries are severe, brother. I,” he choked, clearing his throat. “I don’t think he’s gonna make it.”

I shoved to my feet, shoulder-checking Patriot as I stomped from the room. “Where?” I roared, taking the hall too fast as my vision blurred on the edges.

“I didn’t dare move him. He’s in the common room on one of the tables. I’m trying to keep Kane comfortable.”

Fuck!

I managed not to pass out before I reached Kane, falling into a chair at the table as I reached for him, running a hand through his short, dark fur. His ears twitched, and a whine left his lips. I lowered my head, making eye contact as I stared into

his big brown pools of warmth and unwavering loyalty. He'd always been an intelligent animal. Seeing the pain in the depths, I rested my chin on the table, staying locked to his gaze.

"I'm sorry, bud. I wasn't there to protect you from those assholes."

A little noise of agreement rumbled in his chest.

"I should have been there. You're my best friend, Kane."

Lark's hand rested on my shoulder. "He knows. Look at the way he stares at you. So much love."

"Yeah," I grunted, almost tearing up. "Can't lose him."

"He's a strong, brave boy." Her hand slid over his fur and rubbed behind his ears. Her voice wavered as she sniffled.

Kane trembled, closing his eyes.

"I don't want to leave him, Patriot." Just the thought of taking the Devil's Ride and missing his last moments tore me up. "Can't do it."

"Grim's invitation won't wait."

"Then I'll refuse it. Kane is more important right now. I'll call a vet—"

"Already did," Patriot muttered. "There's not much we can do."

Kane's chest rattled as he breathed, a shallow, murky noise that worried me.

"Fuck," I cursed. "Hang in there, Kane. I won't leave your side."

As the night wore on, his breathing grew shallower. He tried to pant, but the raspy sound accompanied by whimpers of pain broke my fucking heart.

Angel Mackenzie would suffer for this. He would scream for mercy, and I wouldn't relent. There should be a level in hell just for those who hurt animals.

Somewhere close to dawn, Kane slipped away as his head rested on his paw close to my head. I watched the final exhalation of his lungs, unable to hide my tears as they followed.

“Kane,” I blubbered, crying so hard my shoulders shook.

Lark’s arms slid around my body from behind as I heard her sniffing. Her warmth brought comfort but no justice. Angel would pay severely for hurting my woman and my dog.

Suddenly furious, I shot to my feet, ready to confront that asshole and unleash some of the fury roiling within me.

Rael stood in front of the basement door with his arms crossed over his chest, ticking his head toward the exit. “You ain’t in the right mindset right now, man. We’ll deal with Angel later.”

“Fuck off,” I snarled, determined to shove my way through even if it pissed off every member of the Royal Bastards.

“Maddog,” Grim’s gravelly voice rumbled. “Take this outside. Now.”

He wasn’t my pres. Not yet.

Something in my expression must have warned him I hovered on the edge of my sanity.

“I know what you’re feelin’. Swear to you that vindication will happen. You’ll have your vengeance.”

Fuck. My neck popped as I rolled my shoulders, following Grim outside. The night sky was still fading into hues of blue and creeping into violet, orange, and bright pink. A glowing ball of fire slowly peeked over the horizon, casting shimmering waves of sunlight upon the ground.

“You need to ride. Sort this shit out best you can,” he advised.

“Easier said than done,” I growled.

“So take the Devil’s Ride. Nothin’ for you to lose if you do.”

Nope. Already lost my fucking dog, my eyesight, and my pride.

“Fine,” I relented, stomping toward my bike. Someone unloaded it. Probably Patriot. Sneaky fucker.

I fired up the engine, following Grim and his Bastards out of the compound, merging onto Hwy 95 and allowing the crisp morning breeze to ruffle through my hair. The ride brought no peace or closure, only the memories of the past that played like a sorrow-filled tune in my head.

I failed to pay attention to the others until we turned off the road, driving into the desert as our hogs trampled over tumbleweeds and cacti. The wind picked up, blowing hot desert air into my face as the temperature steadily rose.

For a few seconds, it felt like I was back in Afghanistan, alert as I patrolled the long stretch of desert between cities. My mind must have been playing tricks on me because I saw a massive shape hovering above the ground. As I watched, the object closed in, hurtling toward me at an alarming pace.

“Fuck!” I cursed, swerving my bike as I narrowly avoided crashing into the creature that slammed into the hot desert sand and created a crater in the middle of the fucking Great Basin. Jerking to a stop, I stared at the being that slowly rose upward to a towering height.

Jet black hair matched enormous black wings that rose another few feet above his shoulders, slightly folded as the lower portion curled inward toward his feet. Dark blue eyes began to swirl, hues of blue sparkling with the light of a dozen stars. A wicked grin spread across his face as the lights changed and multiplied with the depth of numerous souls.

Hundreds. No. More like *millions* of souls.

How did I know that?

A sinister chuckle left his lips. “Knowledge is a gift.”

The being who stood before me was evil personified but also charismatic, charming, intelligent, and altogether frightening with his handsome features and unwavering attention.

Damn. The devil sure liked to sell himself.

“A gift from you?” How bizarre.

“Do you see any other deity?”

“Deity?” Was the devil a god or an angel?

He bowed. “I am many things. Some of them obvious. Do not be limited by what you think you perceive.”

An interesting choice of words.

I didn't have time to dwell on it because his expression sobered as his grin disappeared.

“You lost a companion today.”

The reminder set off an ache in my chest so fierce my fist rose to press against my breastbone. “Yes.”

“Oh, the sorrow. The suffering.” He inhaled, shivered, and then lifted his head. His mouth opened as a forked tongue poked out, licking at the air before slithering back inside.

Woah. That was freaky as fuck.

“Your loss has intrigued me.”

My eyes narrowed. “Don't be patronizing.”

A smirk rode his features. “Yes. Quite so.”

“What do you want?” Why the fuck was he in the desert? I spun around, noticing the absence of my bike. “Where's my Harley?”

“Not important.”

“I think it is, Satan.”

His head tilted back, and a full-bodied, boisterous laugh escaped his throat. “Lucifer Morningstar. No other name matters at present.”

“You're still Satan—the Devil. Calling you Lucifer changes nothing,” I wisely concluded.

“Perhaps.” His eyes began to darken in color, swirling with ominous black clouds before burning a bright crimson. “I prefer Lucifer. Grim agreed to it.”

Ha. I bet he did. Didn't surprise me at all that the Tonopah Bastards also met the dark being who stood before me. I'd always thought there was something different about them. Bet Grim and his Bastards struck a deal with the devil at some point.

Didn't matter. I needed to return to the Crossroads and bury my dog. Kane deserved a final resting place of honor. Lucifer was distracting me.

"You know," Lucifer began, "it's true."

"What's true?"

"The old saying."

I frowned. What the fuck was he talking about?

"All dogs go to Hea—," he coughed. "He—," he tried again. "Heav," he hocked, spitting. "Fuck it. That place full of sunshine and rainbows and worthless sycophants."

It was so fucking hard not to laugh. If I wasn't losing my best friend in this world, I probably would have found his inability to say the word hysterical.

"All dogs go to Heaven?"

A scowl morphed his features into a demonic snarl. "Yes."

"Not much comfort," I admitted.

"You're not the first to feel that way."

So? It didn't lessen the pain I felt.

Lucifer shrugged. "Kane's spirit lingers. For *you*."

What?

"Kane isn't gone. Not in the way you think."

"Don't fuck with me," I growled. Now wasn't the time.

Lucifer whistled. "I can bring him to you."

Oh, fuck no. I wasn't making some deal with the devil to see my dead dog. What kind of sick shit was he trying to pull?

"You're an ass—"

“Careful,” he warned.

My mouth snapped shut as I glared at the monstrous form of the devil. “You have an intriguing road name, young president.”

Road name? President?

“What?” I asked, confused by his abrupt change of subject.

“You’re a Devil Dog. A *Maddog*.”

Everything that happened overseas suddenly burst into my mind. The caravan. The attack.

Fuck. Not the past, not my failures. *Not fucking now*.

“The shadows call to you,” Lucifer observed, stroking the light stubble grazing his jaw. “They flock to you like moths to a flame. Interesting.”

I blinked. What the fuck was he going on about?

My vision blurred. The floaters were back with a vengeance. I squinted, hating that I appeared weak and lacking.

“Yes. It’s the right time. The perfect twist.”

Goddamn. I hated the way he could manipulate everything to his will.

“You have all that you need.”

The devil flicked his wrist, snapping a thick piece of parchment in front of my face. “Your band of brothers, for lack of a better term. This lists the men who will ride or die beside you. A club worthy of the Royal Bastards name.”

“I thought I was patching into Tonopah,” I replied dumbly.

“No. I have a different task for you. The Reapers fulfill a special bargain I’ve struck with each of them. But you, young bulldog, are a different breed. A mad dog with heightened senses and the ability to hunt with more precision than any of my hellhounds.”

Well, hell. I didn’t expect him to say that.

“As a token of my appreciation for founding this new chapter in Las Vegas, I have a gift for you.”

A gift? From the fucking devil? Sounded like a trick.

Wait. Lucifer wanted me to start a new RBMC chapter? What the fuck? Why?

Confused, I pressed on my temples. It was all jumbled together in my head. What did he mean? He said a new president for the founding chapter in Las Vegas. But who could I trust by my side?

“An excellent question.” He wiggled the list, bringing it closer to my face. “Read.”

The names presented were almost all familiar. I met several at boot camp. Some during active duty. One from high school. Two I’d never heard of before today.

The names began to dance on the page, swirling before my eyes. The script took on a life of its own.

Skeletor. Manic. Creature. The Jackal. Crusher. Dice. Hex. Slash. Tombstone. Snapshot. Testament.

The letters rose upward in splotches of black ink, floating on an invisible current of wind before rushing forward to slam into my forehead. I toppled over, losing my balance as I slammed to the ground, flat on my back. My tailbone smacked into a hard, jagged rock. Fuck.

Roaring laughter tumbled from Lucifer’s lips.

Asshole.

“You won’t forget your club members now.”

In the blink of an eye, his wings disappeared.

Lucifer dusted lint from his impeccably tailored suit jacket, lifting his hand as another parchment appeared. This one rolled downward from his fingertips, sporting dark purple, glittering nail polish, hitting the ground and finally ending next to my boots. Golden particles floated above the bloodred ink. A wax seal matched the color in the shape of a skull. The

devil was nothing if not narcissistic and flamboyant. His vanity was almost comical.

“I need your signature. Your agreement.”

“To start the new chapter in Vegas? Not your call,” I dared to point out.

The devil smiled. Goddamn. That was creepy.

“I assume you know the founding chapter in NOLA?”

Of course. Patriot had filled me in.

“Then you understand that Jameson has the authority to approve new chapters. We spoke last night. A rather titillating conversation.”

I bet.

“There is no further obstacle to gaining all that you desire.”

Ha. Wasn't that eloquently put?

Not so fast.

“What's this gift you have for me? Other than the new members of my club?”

“Kane's spirit,” he replied enthusiastically, clapping his hands together as the parchment stayed in place, lingering in the air. No part of his body touched the paper, yet it didn't move.

With a swish of his hand, my dog appeared, galloping over to me with a wide open muzzle, licking my face. I couldn't help choking up as I saw him. No visible injury. As happy as the day we met. Eager for my affection. His eyes brightened without pain or death to cloud them over.

“How?” I asked, knowing this couldn't be real. Kane had died.

“Ah, but did he? You see, a canine's spirit is different than a human one. They attach to their owners in a bond that can be almost impossible to break. Why do you think so many

humans feel the presence of their pet or swear to see a glimpse after they pass?”

Sudden tears rushed to my eyes as I rubbed behind Kane’s ears, noting the ethereal texture of his body. A slightly translucent, almost ghost-like version of the hound I knew. “Explain what you mean.”

“I can combine his spirit with yours. Kane will live on inside you. You’ll feel his presence. His loyalty and love.”

“Will it harm him? I don’t want him ever to feel pain again.”

“No. It is painless for you both.”

Thinking it over, I wondered what changes would occur. “What will happen to him? To me? He’s an animal. I’m a human being. We’re not compatible.”

“Not in the physical sense. No. But this is a spiritual bond forming from an emotional one. You began the process in life. He’ll complete it once he’s become a part of you.”

This sounded weird. Really fucking weird.

“Yes. Deliciously unpredictable. Almost scandalous.” Lucifer’s eyes brightened to a shade of bright red.

His excitement freaked me the fuck out.

“I don’t know about this.”

“If you decline the merge, Kane will perish. His spirit will join the others in Hea,” he choked. “Heav, oh fuck. That happy place for believers.” He made a face. “Your choice.”

Sighing, I patted Kane’s neck. “I’d love to have you with me always, but—”

Kane began to growl. His gums bared as he snarled.

Woah. He never acted aggressively with me.

“What the hell, Kane.”

“He doesn’t like that you’re sending him away.”

I frowned. “You could be manipulating this whole thing to get what you want. It could all be a dream.”

Lucifer snorted. “Maybe. I certainly have the means to do it.” He shrugged. “Far too easy and boring. I like a challenge.”

“Right.” Kane bumped my hand with his nose. Big brown eyes searched mine. “You want this, Kane? To merge our spirits? Because it’s fucking crazy.”

He barked, lifting his head in wordless agreement.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Does this mean I’m a fucking dog now?”

Lucifer erupted in laughter. Tears leaked from his eyes as his humor continued for a full minute. He gripped his side, shaking his head with undeniable mirth. “Yes, I picked quite the pair with you two.”

Wonderful. I amused the devil. Didn’t sound like a good thing.

“Let’s begin.”

Kane’s body began to tremble as he pushed his nose into my shoulder.

My gaze shot to his brown eyes, knowing I would stop this merge if I saw any hint of pain, even if it pissed off Lucifer.

My own body jolted, a feeling of unease taking hold.

“It’s not physical pain you feel. It’s the merging of souls. A delicate surgery. Focus on his presence. Kane is already completely tuned to you and devoted. His portion is complete. Stop fighting the merge and allow the sensations to overtake you.”

Fuck me. This was the most insane thing I’d ever done.

I let the last of my need to control slip away, caught up in the emotions and feeling churning in a volatile tornado inside me. When I thought it reached a point when I couldn’t handle a second more, everything shifted. The pain ended. The murky cloud over my thoughts lifted.

The particles in my vision vanished. The floaters melted away. My sensitivity to light no longer existed. I tugged off

my sunglasses and popped them into a pocket of my leather jacket. Everything was fucking crisp. Clear. Vibrant.

“No longer weak. No longer lacking.” Lucifer grinned. “You are the Mad Dog. Embrace your new abilities.”

The old Flint, with his physical limitations, had been transformed. I was stronger and more alert. My vision clearer and sharper. And my sense of smell. Holy fuck. It was almost too much. I could smell Lucifer’s nearly nonexistent sweat and his goddamn musk. Pheromones. A female dog in the distance. Dried blood on the sand from a scorpion’s fresh kill.

“Enjoy, Maddog, president of the Las Vegas Royal Bastards.”

Damn. This felt fucking amazing, overwhelming, and addicting all at once.

A new club. A new breed.

“Bring reckoning, Maddog. Unleash the hound within.”



GRIM SMIRKED WHEN HE saw clarity return to my eyes. He stood a foot away, watching me as he took a hit from his cigarette. “Have a nice chat with Lucifer?”

“You could say that,” I groaned, rolling back my shoulders. “It was an experience.”

Rael chuckled. “Always is, brother.”

“I’m not,” I began, but Grim shook his head.

“No. Not Tonopah. You’re not a Reaper. I can sense when one of my brethren has merged with a new member of my club. You’re different.”

A Reaper? Blinking, I tried to make sense of his words.

“You reap souls.” The knowledge flooded my brain. Fucking Lucifer.

“Yes.”

Wow. “He called me a Maddog. The president of the Las Vegas Chapter of the RBMC.”

“Then that’s your title,” Grim grunted. “Congrats, you unlucky bastard.”

Mammoth and Rael chuckled. Patriot slapped me on the back. “Congratulations, Maddog.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I feel lucky.”

Laughter erupted around me. “Get ready for the fuckery.”

Well, shit. That sounded like a bad omen.

“Find Lark when you get back,” Grim advised. “Right away.”

“Why?” I asked, spooked by his words.

“You’ll figure it out.”

When I returned to the Crossroads, I felt a surge of anticipation thrumming through my body. A thrill of excitement I could hardly contain as I parked my bike. The thought of seeing Lark, of touching her, dominated everything else in my brain. I moved on a mission, undaunted by any other living soul.

She slid from a barstool when she noticed me enter The Crossroads, strutting my way as I felt my mouth water, salivating at the idea of pushing her to one of the pool tables, bending her over, and sticking my nose into her cunt, followed by my tongue. The need to taste her overwhelmed me. Sudden lust consumed my brain, grasping my cock and driving a wild, feral need to mate into the forefront of my thoughts.

I’d never reacted this way to any woman. So feral. So visceral.

My gut knotted, and a slow burn began low in my belly, smoldering, growing into an inferno of caged desire I feared would soon unleash. My breath hitched. My lungs nearly seized.

Fuck. Now I knew what Grim meant. This need to fuck overwhelmed me, lifting my lip into a snarl.

“Darlin’, room. Now.”

Her eyes widened, then dilated. Instant arousal flooded my nostrils as I inhaled, almost tasting her response on my tongue. *Such a good little bitch.*

The thought shocked me. It wasn’t derogatory. Not intentionally. I meant it as a compliment.

Fuck. Was that Kane’s intrusive thoughts?

Shaking my head, I stalked closer, following her down the hall and to the guest room we shared. Once inside, I had her pushed against the wall, one hand grasping her wrists and holding them against the wall above her head. The other slowly trailed her body, seeking the wet warmth between her thighs.

I popped the button on her jeans, shoving my hand inside as my nose buried in her neck, drawing in the delicious mixture of aromas that made up my woman.

Mine. All fucking mine.

She might not agree to that yet, but she would.

Lark smelled amazing. Fresh tangerine with a hint of spice invaded my brain. Summer wind on my Harley. Clean, fresh sheets. A light floral undertone.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” I murmured, licking the side of her neck, tasting this female I wanted to fucking devour.

“Flint,” she gasped.

“I want you on your hands and knees. Naked. On the bed.”

My head rose to stare into her eyes.

“Now, my sweet little dove.”

A flush rose from her chest upward into her cheeks.
“Anything you want.”

My mouth captured hers, tangling our tongues in a wild, needy kiss before I nipped at her bottom lip. “Go.”

I released her, watching as she hurried to obey, discarding clothing as she went. Once her round, voluptuous ass was in the air, I grunted, feeling my cock harden at the sight.

“This isn’t going to be gentle,” I warned.

She gave me a look as her head turned. A sultry smile that beckoned me forward. “I don’t want gentle.”

“So fucking sexy,” I growled, shedding my jacket, boots, and t-shirt.

Her little pink tongue darted out, licking her lips. “Fuck me, Flint. Hard.”

I planned on it.

Chapter 10 LARK

The predatory, hungry gaze Flint sent my way ignited a fierce response as I shivered. My thighs trembled with anticipation as his hand tilted my chin upward, curving around my jaw as he kissed me. A tongue-lashing, brutal, demanding kiss that promised he would fuck me as hard as I needed.

His mouth left mine, trailing across my shoulder and carving a pathway with open-mouthed kisses down my spine. When he reached my ass, I sucked in a breath, unsure what he planned to do and enjoying the uncertainty.

Flint's hands gripped my hips as I heard him growl. "So fucking wet and ready."

Without warning, he dove into my core, his tongue spearing me as he fucked me with his mouth and fingers before his cock.

I moaned as my hips began to rock back and forth, far too turned on to remain still.

A slap on the ass cautioned me. "Don't move."

I groaned but listened. Squelching sounds followed as he pumped those long fingers in and out of my pussy, licking and sucking as he ate me with a skill few men could boast. My orgasm came on fast, and I wailed his name, shaking as I tried not to buckle beneath the waves of pleasure rolling through my lower body.

Flint entered me in a swift stroke, slamming home as I cried out, still fluttering with my release. "Fuck. You grip me so fucking tight, darlin'."

I couldn't answer.

"You feel so fucking good." His thrusts grew almost punishing. "I can't get enough."

He slapped my right cheek, kneading the flesh as he continued to ride me into the mattress.

"Fuck. This ass. So goddamn perfect."

“Flint,” I managed to reply.

His finger brushed the tight muscle, using the cream I leaked to lubricate the area. Moaning, I felt him breach my ass and insert a second finger, stretching me to the point it almost burned. I never wanted anyone to do that before now.

“I want to fuck you here, baby. Someday soon.”

His fingers gently stroked in the same rhythm as his cock, hurling me over the edge as I began coming again.

“Fuck. You’re soaking the sheets. Hot as fuck.”

He drove into me harder, faster as I fisted the fabric beneath me, losing my resistance and letting him burrow deep into my heart. Letting him in was dangerous, but I couldn’t stop it. He owned me and touched more than my body. Flint pushed through all my barriers. He made me want more.

His grunt of satisfaction filled the air while his hips pinned me to the mattress, pistoning as he came, jerking with the intense climax. My name left his lips with reverence. He pulled free from my body, curling around me from behind as he breathed hard, rolling us to the side.

I never met a man who liked to cuddle like he did, especially after sex. Maybe that was why it endeared him to me. His genuine affection made me feel treasured, wanted, and beautiful. Things I’d never felt with a sexual partner before meeting him.

As I drifted asleep, I wondered if his feelings had become as strong as mine.

Running water woke me an hour later. The shower steamed the bathroom, and I heard Flint bumping into the tiled wall. A naughty thought entered my head as I slid from the bed, deciding to give him a morning he’d remember.

He needed it ... after Kane.

With a sigh, I pushed away the sorrow I felt for his dog, focusing on the present. I’d become skilled at deflecting and shoving all my shit into neat little boxes. Too late to stop doing it now.

When I slid the glass door open and stepped inside, pressing my naked body against his, Flint growled. His mouth crashed down on mine as he deepened the kiss, gripping my bottom with two hands as he lifted me.

“Sore, little dove?”

“A little,” I admitted, “but I want you again.”

A dark chuckle followed. “Then I can’t disappoint.”

And he didn’t. I came twice.

Afterward, his forehead lowered to mine as he held me. “I think I’m addicted.”

“To my winning personality?” I teased.

“To your pussy, your sexy mouth, that thick ass,” he emphasized as he squeezed, “and *you*, Lark. Every beautiful inch of you.”

I leaned back, staring into those blue eyes with a ring of brown around the edge that slightly reminded me of a dog. Like Kane. How odd. I didn’t remember noticing that before today.

Regardless, Flint’s sincerity and adoration were hard to deny.

“I’m a total keeper,” I joked with a wide smile.

“And I’m not letting you go,” he declared.

Slightly freaked out by his possessive tone, I lifted my head to receive his kiss. His mouth lingered on mine, savoring the connection that continued to grow between us.

“I know that scares you. Wanna tell me why?”

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s all the shit in my past.”

He nodded, understanding I meant Fred. It was more than the man who touched me when he shouldn’t have, who forced a girl to live through experiences a grown woman would have found hard to endure. It was the revolving door of men I couldn’t commit to and the assholes I let treat me like a worthless whore because that was what I believed for years.

And then there was all the trauma of the last year, the abuse from Angel that I willingly took for my sister Molly. Did that make me pathetic? Sometimes, I wasn't sure.

"Hey," he murmured, gaining my attention. "Don't get lost in those dark memories. I'm here. Stay with me."

"Will you do the same?" I asked, knowing he battled demons nearly every minute of the day like I did.

"Yes," he promised, sliding his thumb across my cheek while his hand cradled the side of my face. "Battle those fucking scars by my side, Lark."

"We barely know one another," I pointed out.

"That doesn't mean shit, little dove. We're good together. Don't you feel it?"

I did. "Yes," I admitted.

"Then fuck the past. We make our future. Together."

"What are you saying?" I asked, trying to figure out the hidden meaning of his words.

"Be my ol' lady. My ride or die, Lark."

My breath hitched. "What does that mean?"

"It's sacred. Among bikers, it's the equivalent of a wife. You're protected and respected, darlin'. In my world, that's fucking huge."

I made a face. "Ol' lady?"

He laughed. "Say it, baby." His expression grew tender. "Tell me what I need to hear."

Shit. If I agreed to this, there was no going back. All in or nothing. Staring into his handsome face, I knew the answer. My heart skittered a few beats. "I'll be your ol' lady."

His wolfish grin ignited a spark in my belly. "You should know that I'm going to be the president of a new chapter for the Royal Bastards in Las Vegas."

Wow. "I get to fuck the pres? Sign me up!"

“Fuck,” he swore, running his tongue over my lip. “I love it when you talk dirty.” His hard cock nudged between my legs, seeking entrance. “I need to be inside you. Right fucking now.”

He thrust hard, sliding into me as my eyes nearly rolled back in my head. God. I loved how he filled and stretched me: a snug but perfect fit. I could get used to this, to *him*.

“Say it,” he ordered gruffly, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I’ll be your ol’ lady.”

He slammed into me, grunting.

“Maddog,” I added in a raspy voice.

His lip lifted in a snarl as he began pumping hard, bouncing us both as my tits smashed into his chest.

The beast inside him unleashed, fucking me so wild that I could barely hold on. The water began to turn cold, but he didn’t stop until I cried out, unable to form a coherent word as my release flooded his dick.

He followed, panting as we clung to one another, slamming a hand on the tile to hold us both up.

Boneless, I managed to kiss his jaw. “Now I’m sore.”

He smirked. “Then let’s get you cleaned up.”



TWO HOURS LATER, I stood in the common room, lost in thought. My phone buzzed as I finally turned it on, chewing on my bottom lip as the flood of messages followed.

Torin was pissed. Not that I blamed him. I shouldn’t have lost contact for so long. We had an agreement.

With a sigh, I sent him a text, promising I was okay.

That didn't suffice. His name appeared on the screen as I swiped across, answering his call.

"What the fuck, Lark?"

"Don't yell at me," I snapped, instantly defensive. "It's been a shitstorm."

"Yeah, I know. Having fun shacking up with the biker?"

Shit. I shouldn't have been surprised he found me, but it did. Tonopah wasn't a big city, and the last contact I had occurred in Las Vegas before I left. "His name is Flint." My voice lowered. "I like him, Torin. A lot."

"Fuck, Lark. You weren't supposed to let your heart get involved, remember?"

"I didn't. Not with Angel."

"Just with this biker," he deadpanned. "Christ."

"Hey, I know you think you're protecting me, but he's the real deal. A Marine veteran. Loyal. Dedicated. He treats me right and is a good man, Tor."

He scoffed. "He's a biker. What kind of life do you think he can give you?"

That didn't matter to me. Not as long as Flint stayed honest. I could deal with almost everything, but liars pissed me off.

I heard his loud sigh. "I don't like it. Meet me out in Goldfield. We got shit to discuss, and those bikers are trigger twitchy after the attack on their compound."

"I know."

"Come alone. I don't want to deal with any bullshit."

Grumpy fucker. I loved my stepbrother but damn. Cut me a little slack. This was the first time I had a chance to stop looking over my shoulder in months. The last year had been exhausting. I was over dealing with Angel Mackenzie and his cartel goons, the overwhelming fear that was constantly present, and all the abuse. Couldn't he understand that?

“Give me an hour.”

“Don’t be late.”

I hung up on him out of frustration and powered off my phone, not wanting to risk anyone learning about my plans, stepbrother or the feds. I had a feeling that Grim and his club wouldn’t take to that well. Hell, neither would Flint.

Or Maddog. I guess I should get used to that road name. If all this worked out and I wasn’t dead, I wanted to give this thing with him a real try.

Ol’ Lady. Wow. I was still shocked that Flint asked me.

I just needed to sort through the mess with Angel and find Molly first. I wasn’t going to lie if anyone asked questions, but I sure as hell wasn’t volunteering any information.

Secrets weren’t lies. Not when they protected the ones you loved and cared about.

Walking to the bar, I asked for a beer, taking it outside to clear my head and think. Flint wouldn’t be around for a couple of hours since he had a meeting with Grim and his officers.

I didn’t ask what they had to discuss or what they did with Angel, but I needed to see that asshole and ask him about Molly. After I met with Torin, I’d come back and find where they stashed him. I hoped they strung him up like a pig ready for slaughter because I was bringing my knife and getting answers.

I popped the top off the beer and took a long chug, enjoying the simple act of drinking what I wanted when I wanted without someone else dictating my every move. Angel was a control freak and a narcissist. He enjoyed making people uncomfortable and watching them squirm. Degradation was his favorite form of punishment. I experienced it more times than I could count. Just thinking of the trap door in his closet and the cell full of bones made me shiver.

Finishing off the beer, I stared into the distant mountains, and my thoughts returned to Flint. He was so different than Angel. Different from any man I’d ever known. I never

believed in love or fairytales or happily ever after. How could I? Those dreams were ripped away when I was a little girl.

Being with Flint made me feel vulnerable but alive, conjuring all those girlish fantasies about Prince Charming that I never dared to indulge. I wasn't naïve to think I could have forever with him, but I wanted as long as it would last. I deserved a little happiness once my sister was safe.

As much as I enjoyed it, I couldn't stay in this contented little bubble with Flint forever. Tossing the beer in the trash, I contemplated calling a cab or an Uber but decided against it. I didn't have that kind of time.

Strutting over to the prospect at the gate, I flashed a broad smile, blinking up as I caught the name *Spook* on his leather vest.

"Hey, Spook. I need to take a quick trip to the store. Is there a vehicle I can borrow?"

Or a motorcycle. I wouldn't mind that kind of ride at all.

"Uh, hey. No one is supposed to leave. We're on lockdown."

I almost panicked until I realized Flint wasn't a member of their club. "That doesn't stop me. Maddog isn't one of yours."

Spook frowned. "It's about keeping you safe, honey."

"I appreciate that, but I need to pick up some personal items if you get what I mean. I need to have them for tonight. Flint won't be happy if I wasn't allowed to leave."

"Well, shit. Okay. I'll come with you. Just let me grab someone to stay at the gate."

Dammit. I'd have to text Torin and let him know we had a slight change of plans. I didn't want to ditch Spook and get him in trouble. "What should I take? One of those SUVs?" I pointed to the sleek black vehicles lined up along the far side of the massive lot. The front gate was still damaged, and I didn't blame Spook for being extra careful.

"Yeah. Keys are inside the shop in the office. Hooks by the door."

I rushed across the lot, slipping through one of the open bays. A couple of guys were working on motorcycles but didn't look up as I entered. The keys were easy to find, each with a number that probably matched one of the SUVs. Heading back outside, I clicked the fob.

Sure enough, the third vehicle in the row flashed its lights and beeped, confirming the match as I glanced down at the number three painted on the back of the key fob.

“Ready to go?”

Spook's voice caused me to jump as I was startled. “Yeah.”

“You wanna drive? Or I can.” He held out his hand.

“You know what? I'll enjoy the ride. You go for it.”

Spook nodded as I handed over the keys.

Once inside the car, I powered my phone on, shooting a quick text to Torin. Hopefully, he didn't lose his shit when he saw the message.

Chapter 11 MADDOG

“Your woman left, just like you predicted,” Grim announced, clicking off the screen on his phone. “Spook texted. He’s with her. Didn’t let her go alone.”

I insisted on that when I agreed to this bullshit. “She’s anxious about her sister. Can’t fucking blame her.”

“I don’t,” Grim replied, “but I also don’t trust her. Not yet. She ain’t got any loyalty to Tonopah.”

“No, but she’s loyal to me,” I replied with conviction. “So that should be enough.”

Grim scrubbed a hand down his face. “My club took a hit for her. Fucking had a semi drive through the goddamn gate. I need to know what she’s plannin’ on my turf, Maddog.”

I opened my mouth to reply when he held up a hand.

“From one pres to another, give me a chance to sort this.”

I leaned back, crossing my arms over my chest. “He keeps eyes on her at all times. Shit goes down and he moves in right away. I don’t want Lark hurt.”

“Already taken care of, brother.”

I snorted at his use of the term. “Not patched in yet.”

“Not according to Lucifer.”

That deceptive asshole. He never fully disclosed everything about my contract or what I would become. I could feel Kane’s presence, though, and the comfort it provided released some of the tension I felt about Lark.

Why didn’t she tell me her plans? We got close. It wasn’t just the sex either. I believed I broke through those walls she erected to keep out the world and additional suffering. I fucking dealt with soul-shattering trauma too. We were two broken souls finding a home in one another.

No, she wouldn’t fuck me over. Or the Royal Bastards.

The only logical conclusion was that she was working with someone else. Someone she had to keep secret because of her sister. Didn't explain why she felt she couldn't talk to me. A part of me was fucking pissed. The rest understood she operated from a mixture of fear and experience. Life had not been kind to my sweet bird.

"Who do you think she's working with?" I finally asked, reaching for the Johnnie Walker Blue Label bottle on the table and pouring a heavy shot, tossing it back before he answered.

I welcomed the resulting burn and the hint of spice on my tongue. Always could taste the orange, honey, and ginger first. Then, the hazelnut, sandalwood, and dark chocolate. Smooth, rich, and decadent every damn swallow.

Grim didn't fuck around with his whiskey. Made me like him a little more when he wasn't being a fucking demanding prick.

"I'd say the feds. Local police are crooked even after we got rid of the sheriff who liked touching little girls and kidnapping women. She's from Vegas. Lots of power players there who could have gotten their hooks into her."

I didn't like to assume shit like this, but Lark didn't leave me much choice. "Fuck."

"Doesn't matter, Maddog. We've got tabs on her now. Even if she manages to give Spook the slip, I've got Xenon following her. He's got eyes and ears all over the city of sin. She won't get far without turning up on our radar."

"Xenon?" Who the fuck was that?

"Forgot you hadn't seen him yet. He's been buried in his fucking monitors again." Grim shook his head. "Fucker forgets life happens around him while he's stuck in his world of voyeurism."

"Your point?"

"Xenon is the best tracker I've ever met. He can hack anything. Find anyone. He's gone down some dark trails for us and never fails to get what we need. If your woman's sister is alive, he'll find her."

“So he’s watchin’ Lark and lookin’ for her sister Molly too?”

“Yeah. Been deep in the shit, brother. That’s why we haven’t seen him for a couple of days. He goes dark until he finds what he’s looking for.”

“I’m not sure that’s good for Lark.”

“It is. He’s good at multitasking. Crazy good.”

I had my doubts but didn’t argue. It didn’t fucking matter. Not yet. Once it did, I’d make a move. If the Marine Corps taught me anything, it was patience. Hurry up and wait. The fucking unofficial motto of the United States military.

I knocked back another shot of whiskey before shoving the bottle in Grim’s direction. “I hate to drink alone.”

Grim smirked. “The Reaper doesn’t share a glass with anyone. You should feel special.” He poured a heavy shot, slung it down, and wiped his hand across his mouth. “You don’t have any questions?”

I suppose I did. I’d been so preoccupied with Lark that I never thought much about it yet. “Do you feel him? Your Reaper?”

“Every fucking minute. Sometimes, he’s silent. Like he’s sleeping or waiting. Quiet but always ready.”

“And the other times?”

“He’s brutal. Ruthless. Death’s harbinger and executioner. When I wield the scythe, it’s a power unlike anything I could ever describe. We become one entity. One shared goal. Reaping souls is our job, but we fucking love it.”

“Sounds creepy as fuck, brother.”

“Yeah, it can be. When I feel his presence, it’s soothing. When he speaks, it’s demanding and arrogant, often belligerent.” He chuckled. “But the Reaper is loyal, intelligent, charming, and has a wicked sense of humor. He pisses me off as much as he makes me want to laugh.”

“Sounds like Lucifer,” I replied with a wince.

“Yeah, and it makes sense. The Reaper is a demonic being similar to the devil. I don’t know all their secrets. Probably never will. Lucifer likes to hold the trump card. Can’t say I blame him.”

“I don’t know what that means for me.” I cleared my throat, wondering how to say what was on my mind. “He combined Kane’s spirit with my own. He called me a shadow rider. A new vessel to bring wrath and justice upon the world, specifically in Las Vegas.”

“A little cryptic, huh? Lucifer loves that shit.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the problem. I can figure shit out. What worries me is how I’ll change. What abilities might manifest because of this deal I made.”

Grim nodded. “I hear you, Maddog. I can tell you from nearly twenty years of experience that he never goes back on his word once he gives it. He’s shady as fuck. Tricky. Annoying. None of that will surprise you, but he’ll stick to the agreement. The devil loves to watch his puppets perform.”

Snorting, I shook my head. “I always fucking hated puppets as a kid. Used to freak me out.”

Grim laughed hard at my admission. “Have you noticed any differences?”

“Shadows,” I blurted, leaning back in my chair.

“What about them?”

“I saw Lark’s when I came home after we took that ride into the desert.” Ticking my chin his way, I couldn’t help my humor. “None of you Reapers have a shadow.”

“The fuck? I see it all the time.”

“It’s not the physical one. Spiritual, I think. An extension of your soul. Since you all sold yourselves to the devil, it’s overtaken by the Reapers.”

“Well, fuck. Never knew that.”

“Lark’s shadow is beautiful,” I continued. “Hers danced around her body, gyrating to a beat of music I couldn’t hear.”

My voice softened as I thought of my songbird. My little dove. “I don’t think any living soul would be able to hear that music or the beat. It exists for her alone.”

“Damn, Maddog.”

“She’s been through so much darkness. Maybe that’s why her shadow loves the light and dances in it.”

Grim nodded. “I agree. I can’t see those shadows, but I see auras. The aura exposes everything about a soul.”

“Then Lucifer gifted us both with unique qualities,” I observed. “To lead our clubs.”

“I think you’re right.”



“WHO THE FUCK IS THAT?” I growled, staring at the big motherfucker pulling my woman into his arms. She hugged him back, not hesitating to reach up on her toes and place a kiss on his cheek.

The cheek. Not the mouth.

I grunted as I realized he wasn’t a lover.

“Spook has us on mute,” Grim reminded me.

“Yeah, I know.”

We watched through the screen on Grim’s phone. Spook used Skype to call us and then turned the camera toward Lark as he hid out of sight. She met with a man she called Torin. Their familiarity meant he was someone close to her. No physical resemblance, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t family. They could be cousins or siblings by marriage.

The guy held himself like he had served in the military. Once you were in, you could recognize the different branches. I guessed he had a brief stint in the Army. Infantry. Still kept his hair short and sported a buzz cut. Wore a suit but nothing

too fancy. He wasn't a cop. I would say a detective if I had to guess.

The guy was smart. Alert. He glanced around often, keeping an eye out for trouble.

Fuck. He knew something was up.

“What’s the matter, Tor?”

“I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Why?”

“Because I think we’re being followed.”

“Shit.” Lark spun around, checking out the aisle in the store. The place wasn’t crowded but not empty either. “You think it’s the cartel?”

“I don’t know. Probably. I don’t think Salazar would bother with the cat and mouse game.”

“Then it’s Angel.” She nibbled on her lip, clearly distressed. “He must have left instructions with some of his men.”

“It makes sense. He’s far too calculating to leave anything to chance.”

“What about Molly? If he knows, he could have—”

“Hey, we’re not going to speculate. It won’t do any good.”

Lark’s shoulders drooped. “I’ve given up a whole year of my life, Tor. What if it was for nothing? What if Molly is already gone?”

“Fuck. Don’t say that.”

Lark backed away, shaking her head. “Angel’s men will find me. They’ll take me back to that hole, Torin.”

“Hole? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“What if those were Molly’s bones?”

As soon as Lark said those words, I knew I’d kill Angel Mackenzie.

“What bones, Lark?”

“The skeletons underneath the floor in Angel’s closet. There’s a trap door there. It leads underground. He keeps it locked with the only key.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“He keeps girls down there. Pets. When one of us misbehaves, he puts us in the hole.” She shivered. “Women have died in that dark, small space. I’ve heard the screams.” Lark’s hands closed over her ears like she relived the horror, trying to block out the sounds only she could hear. “I can’t go back there.”

“You won’t,” Torin promised, “because we’re getting the fuck out of here. Now.” He snatched Lark’s arm, tugging her against his side. “I’m pulling you out. It’s too fucking dangerous. I told you I’d make that call if I felt you were in too deep. You’re done, Lark. I’m placing you in protective custody.”

Fuck that!

Wait. What the hell did he mean?

“She’s working undercover.” Grim shook his head. “Fuck. Why didn’t I see that before now? I sensed something about her was deceitful. I thought she was using you somehow.”

“The fuck?” I growled, pissed.

“I was wrong, Maddog. The secret she’s been carrying is that she went undercover with Angel Mackenzie to find her sister. It’s the only conclusion that makes sense. I bet Torin is FBI. He’s probably building a case against the Guerrero Cartel, and she’s trying to find Molly before they take all those assholes down.”

Son of a bitch. He was right. “Well, fuck. I can’t let him take her away. I’ll never find her once she goes into WITSEC.”

“The Reaper could help, but it wouldn’t be easy.”

Lark shocked us both when she pushed Torin away. “No. I can’t leave Flint.”

“This isn’t the time to get caught up in some romantic fling, Lark.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Just because you’re my brother doesn’t mean you can boss me around. I’m going back to Flint. Besides, the Royal Bastards have Angel, and I need answers. He’s the only one who can tell me what happened to Molly.”

Torin mumbled a few curses. “You have to stay in contact. I can’t worry that you’ll disappear again. It almost fucking killed me.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I know about Molly.”

“I’m serious, Lark. I’ll fucking go into that biker compound guns blazing, and I don’t give a fuck. No one messes with my sister.”

Lark’s expression softened. “I love you, too, Tor.”

He smirked, shaking his head. “You need to go before that kid comes in here looking for you and blows your cover.”

She rushed forward, throwing her arms around his middle to give the big guy a hug. “Stay sharp, Tor.”

“Always,” he promised as she backed away, hurrying from the store to meet up with Spook.

The camera clicked off, and I heard Spook’s voice. “What you want me to do, pres?”

“Say nothing. Bring her back here and stay alert. Notify me right away if you notice anyone following you.”

“You got it, pres.”

The call ended, and I shoved away from the table, agitated as I mulled over all the shit I just learned. My little songbird had a hell of a lot of secrets. She had a right to them. It wasn’t my place to force them from her, but I felt gutted that she didn’t come to me. I didn’t care whether her brother was a fed or she worked with him to free her sister. I just hated that she placed herself in danger.

I wanted Lark to trust me. To lean on me when she needed strength. I'd burn the whole fucking world to the ground for her to keep her safe and eliminate every threat against her and her sister. She needed to know that.

With a determined set to my jaw, I strolled toward the door, determined to meet her once she arrived.

No more secrets.

Chapter 12 LARK

Flint stood in the parking lot, arms crossed over his chest, when Spook pulled onto the lot and parked the SUV. I couldn't read his expression. The sunglasses and beard blocked his features. I hoped he wasn't going to lose his shit about me leaving without permission because that was definitely a trigger for me.

If I was honest, I had more than a few.

As soon as my door swung open, he was there, tugging me into his embrace. "Hey, handsome," I greeted him.

"Get what you needed, little songbird?"

Those sweet nicknames he had for me warmed my heart.

"Sure did." I held up a bag of random items from the store. "Can we talk?"

"You can have all of me," he rumbled, sliding his hand around mine. "Talk. Fuck. Whatever you need."

Dirty man.

"Got something I need to ask you." Nervous butterflies flitted in my belly with those words, but I followed Flint inside the Crossroads, passing Grim, who ticked his chin my way in greeting.

I stopped, looking up at the intimidating president. "Can I have a word?"

He shot a look at Flint briefly, then nodded. "My office has the most privacy."

We followed him across the bar and down a narrow hall, entering the room. I scanned the dark wooden bookcases, the massive desk, and the rows of filing cabinets taking up most of the space. A minibar underneath the window next to a leather couch provided the only furniture other than Grim's leather office chair and the two big chairs in front of his desk.

A calendar with muscle cars and scantily clad women hung on the wall. Several framed pictures lined his desk. I saw his

ol' lady and his son. Creed was only two.

Flint squeezed my hand and released it, lowering into the chair on the right, closest to the door.

Grim moved behind his desk, leaning back as he locked his hands together over his stomach.

Both men watched me with curious gazes, remaining silent.

Too restless to sit, I began to pace. "I figure you both remember what I said about my sister Molly."

Grim nodded. Flint frowned.

"I need to talk to Angel as soon as possible. I've wasted enough time as it is."

"You think he'll talk to you?" Grim asked.

"I don't think he'll miss the opportunity to intimidate me," I replied honestly. "Angel likes to be in control. I'm going to let him think he is."

"Why?" Flint's brows lowered as he scowled.

"I'm hoping I can trick him into giving up something about Molly."

"Her location?"

"Anything. I don't even know if she's still alive." Saying those words aloud hurt. "If he knows I'm searching for her, he'll shut down or brag. Not sure which. I just need to get him talking."

Grim stroked the stubble over his jaw. "It could work, but I don't think he'll be receptive to helping you out. He's been cursing us all for days."

"Maybe, but he's hungry, tired, in pain, and out of his element. I think it could work to my advantage." I turned to Flint. "I want you with me. Angel is going to be cruel and try to fuck with me. He'll bring up the past. It won't be easy to hear it."

Flint rose to his feet. “Fuck him.” He joined me, brushing the side of my jaw with his fingertips. “I know he’s done terrible things to you. You don’t have to be afraid. I won’t leave your side.”

Good. Relieved, I nodded. “He used to put girls in a dirt cell underground in his house. You have to access it from the trapdoor in the floor, using a ladder because it’s such a far drop to the ground. There are bones in there.” I shivered.

“Bones?” Flint tilted my chin up. “From who?”

“Women he wanted to torment. The ones he bought from his trafficker friends. The same assholes who took Molly.”

“Christ,” Grim muttered.

“He’s a sadistic freak. Angel enjoys watching others writhe in pain and misery. He gets off on it.”

Grim smiled. “Not anymore.”

“He’s smart. Tricking him won’t be easy.”

“We’ll provide a distraction,” Grim announced.

“The kind that spills his blood,” Flint added. “Slowly.”

“I don’t mind watching him suffer.”

Did that make me a bad person? I didn’t think so. Not after all I had been through and endured.

“Give me an hour.” Grim pulled out a pack of smokes, lighting one up. “I’ve got some shit to handle first.”

“Okay.”

Flint reached for my hand, leading me toward the door. “We’ll meet you downstairs.”

As the door shut behind us, I hoped the long wait for information about my sister would finally be over.



“YOU ALRIGHT?” FLINT asked, studying me closely as we paused at the top of the stairs, seconds from descending into hell to meet with Angel.

“I think so.”

“Little bird,” he chided.

“Fine. I’m anxious and feel like I’m going to puke. Happy?”

A dark chuckle escaped his lips. “Honesty, babe. Always. Okay?”

My forehead pressed to his chest as I groaned. “Okay.”

He smoothed the hair from my face, his tender touch soothing me in a way that was new but welcome.

“You don’t have to do this. We can figure out another way.”

“There’s no other way. Trust me. I’ve been trying for a year.” I leaned back, staring into the clear blue eyes ringed in brown that had become so vital to my existence. “I haven’t been doing this alone.”

“I know,” he admitted, confirming my suspicions.

“You waited for me to tell you,” I guessed, surprised when he nodded.

“How did you figure it out?”

“It doesn’t matter, Lark. We’re going to learn what we need to know about Molly and find her. That’s it.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I blinked them back. “You gave me time to work through this on my own. No one else has ever done that for me. Well, only my stepbrother Torin but he’s a pain in the ass.”

Flint's head lowered as his lips brushed mine. "Trust me as I trust you. You've got a big heart, little dove, and I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you again."

"Thank you."

"Angel doesn't have a fucking clue about who he messed with. He declared war on the Royal Bastards. He won't live long enough to enjoy that mistake."

It should have shocked me that Flint discussed murder so casually, but it didn't. Angel Mackenzie was evil, and he needed to die for the crimes he committed. I felt no sympathy for him. I bet none of the women whose bones lingered in Angel's house would care either.

They deserved justice. I planned to exact some of my own vengeance.

"You ready?"

"Yes."

We opened the door and descended together.

I could tell Flint wanted to step in front of me to shield me from Angel when we reached the bottom, but he didn't. His body angled so that he could react quickly if a threat emerged, and I appreciated that he wanted to be my protector, but I wasn't helpless. I learned a long time ago how to fight off the enemy.

Fred made it necessary.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim lighting in the basement as I hovered on the last step, noting all of Angel's injuries as he came into view. The only light in the room hung low, directly above his head, shining so brightly that it messed with his vision. He squinted, squirming in the wooden chair where he'd been trussed up like a hog ready for slaughter.

I appreciated that analogy.

The back of the chair bowed inward, pushing out his sternum. His forearms were lashed to the armrests, held down with leather straps. Both ankles were strapped to the legs, which had been secured to the floor.

Naked, his bruised, battered body was fully exposed.

Someone had roughed him up. Angel's bottom lip was puffed and split, leaking a tiny trickle of blood from the cut. One eye was swollen, almost shut. Several cuts dripped more blood from above his left eye and high on the right cheekbone.

One of the Tonopah Bastards, Rael, the SAA, didn't bother to hide bloodied brass knuckles. The VP, Mammoth, wiped blood from his hands with a towel.

Angel's chest and midsection displayed various cuts, bruises, and darkened patches of skin. Burned skin. The round diameter of a cigar.

Damn. They worked him over good.

"Mi mascota."

Angel's voice greeted me before I left the shadows. I wasn't sure how he knew I entered the basement, but he seemed tuned into my presence.

"I'm not your pet."

He tsked, shaking his head. "Not from my point of view."

"Good thing your opinion is irrelevant."

The words hit their mark.

Angel's upper lip curled into a snarl. *"Puto.* You waste my time."

"It doesn't look like you're going anywhere," I pointed out boldly, moving closer.

Rael laughed. "Nope."

"Tell me, Angel. How many women's bones are in that little underground cell in your house? Two? Ten?"

"Why do you care? Want to add to the pile?"

Flint growled, and I ignored his reaction.

"You don't look like much of a threat."

"You didn't think so last week."

“That’s true,” I admitted, staying out of the light. The high-wattage bulb must have been awful to sit under for so long. It blinded the eyes. “You keep squinting. Are you uncomfortable?”

Angel hissed. “Fuck off.”

It was my turn to tsk. “You’re no fun at all. So grumpy.”

“You seemed to enjoy me fucking you for the last eleven months. Lots of fun, *mi putita*.”

“Don’t call her a whore,” Flint warned.

“Ah, you’ve found another to quench that fire in your traitorous pussy.”

Traitorous? “That sounds bitter.”

Angel laughed, wincing as the movement tugged on his lip. “No. Why should it? You’re as good a fuck as your sister.”

I froze. My breath hitched, betraying my reaction.

“Ah. You still think I’m stupid? That I don’t know why you came to me?”

The game was over. Angel held the upper hand all along.

“Where’s Molly?” I demanded, moving far too close.

He finally saw me, flashing a grin. “So beautiful. An ice queen.”

“Where’s my sister?” I asked a second time.

“She bled when I fucked her the first time. Lost her virginity to me,” he replied, “in both holes.”

A screech of rage flew from my lips as I yanked my switchblade free, rushing forward to bury the blade in his shoulder. I really wanted to gut him on the spot and spill his blood in the most painful way possible. The blade sank into his flesh as I shoved it deep, glaring into his face.

“Where’s Molly?”

“Fred is watching.”

I lifted a fist, punching him in the jaw. My hand throbbed, but I didn't care. "Where?"

"He'll find you. Soon."

"Where?" I screamed. "Tell me!"

"He wants to finish what he started."

I yanked the blade free, lifting my hand to stab downward again when Flint caught my wrist.

"Blackbird. He's not worth it."

Angel's laughter followed as Flint wrapped an arm around my waist, lifting me away from the man who didn't deserve to breathe.

"Hello, nephew."

Angel's laughter vanished. He turned his head toward the deep voice that echoed from the stairway. "Uncle."

"Grim was kind enough to give me a call."

Angel didn't respond.

His uncle Salazar crossed the room, pausing a foot from where I stood. "I send my deepest apologies regarding your sister. Angel will disclose all the information he knows about Molly."

My jaw dropped open.

Flint held me tighter, not trusting a Guerrero. I didn't blame him. The family didn't have a good reputation.

"Angel?" Salazar prompted.

"Fred sold Molly directly to Luis Diego. I never touched her."

Furious, I fought Flint's hold to get to Angel, desperate to inflict additional harm. That liar!

"Where is Luis? Does he have Molly?" I asked, shaking with fury and the rush of adrenaline.

"He's had her in Vegas the entire time. She never left the city."

Devastated by his words, my knees buckled.

Flint held me upright. “The location?”

Angel gave us the address.

Salazar approached Grim. “I take full responsibility for my nephew and his actions. He will no longer cause any trouble.”

“That’s not good enough, Salazar.”

The man sent his nephew a glare. “He damaged your property.” Salazar handed over a briefcase. “There’s half a million in American dollars. All untraceable.”

Grim accepted the money. “If he ever shows up again, we’ll reap his soul.”

Salazar nodded. “Agreed.”

“Pass this along to his associates, friends, and contacts. We’ll show no mercy, and the Reapers never fail to catch their prey.”

“I have no wish to start a war.”

“One you won’t win,” Grim growled.

Salazar conceded. “Release my nephew. You have my word.”

His declaration meant nothing to me.

“What about all those bones?”

Rael untied the asshole as I struggled again to leave Flint’s embrace. The man’s arms were steel cables. He didn’t budge.

Angel wobbled as he stood. “The fake bones I use for props?” He shrugged. “It’s almost Halloween.”

That lying, manipulative prick!

Salazar gestured to the shadows as two men in black suits held Angel up and escorted him up the stairs. He turned to me with an apologetic smile. “My nephew has always had a flare for drama. I will see to it he learns from his mistakes.”

Without another word, Salazar Guerro left, plunging the room in bewildered silence.

“We need to check out that address and see if Angel told the truth.”

Four tattooed bikers turned my way, focusing on my words.

“If Molly is in Vegas, I need to know.”

Chapter 13 MADDOG

Lark finally had answers. Not all the ones she wanted, but a few. She bounced on her feet, excess energy vibrating from her in waves that jiggled her tits and drew my attention.

My mouth salivated at the thought of stripping her down and licking a pathway across her soft skin, mapping every curve and scar until they were imprinted on my brain forever.

We stood in our room as I pressed her up against the door, holding her arms against the wall as I leaned in, inhaling the sweet fragrance of my luscious, intoxicating blackbird. She was fierce. Unapologetic. A badass bitch.

My fucking ol' lady.

Her scent did wicked things to my brain. Maybe it was the parts of Kane inside me that latched onto her musk and the pheromones. Or perhaps it was the lust that burned with emerald fire in her seductive gaze.

Long black lashes fluttered as my lips kissed a trail up her neck, peppering her jaw and stopping at the plump, pouty flesh of her mouth.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of you," I murmured, capturing her lips with a hunger that intensified the longer I felt her body against mine.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," I rasped, leaving her lips to taste her skin, licking at her neck before I nibbled with my teeth. Falling to my knees, I reached for the snap on her jeans, tugging the material down with her red thong until she stepped out of them.

My nostrils flared as I scented her core, diving my head between her legs.

Lark gasped as her fingers slid through my hair, gripping my head. "Oh, God. Flint. Yes!"

I lifted one of her legs, placing it on my shoulder so I could fully open her up to me, spreading that silky pussy wide

so I could devour what was mine.

Mine.

All fucking mine.

The possessive feeling in my chest expanded, and I focused on Lark's pleasure, teasing her clit with light flicks of my tongue. I had two fingers inside her tight channel, slowly gliding in and out, loving that she grew wetter with the motion.

Her hips began to roll as the friction increased. I pumped my fingers faster, deeper, tilting her hips to gain the best angle.

"Oh, shit," she moaned, tugging on my hair.

I latched onto her clit, nibbling and sucking on the tender bundle of nerves, coaxing her orgasm, needing to watch her fall apart as she came.

Lark's movements became jerky. She cried out when her release slammed into her, riding my face as I speared her core with my tongue. *So fucking good.*

I rose as she fell back against the wall and lifted her, carrying her to the bed where I gently dropped her, flashing a wicked grin. My hands slid up her thick thighs, eagerly tracing the soft skin until I gripped her hips.

"This is going to be rough and fast," I warned.

"Just the way I like it."

Impatient, I pulled her to the edge of the bed, smacking her ass into my thighs. Both of her legs went over my shoulders.

Without a word, I thrust hard and deep, groaning when I felt how tightly she gripped me. My cock was so fucking hard I could fuck her for hours. The lust overrode every other thought in my head. Need replaced my focus.

The room filled with the vicious, wet sounds of flesh on flesh.

My hand splayed across her lower belly as my thumb brushed her clit. Pressing down, I strummed little circles into the sensitive nubbin, growling when Lark called out my name.

She gyrated beneath me, lifting her hips with every brutal plunge as I took her as hard as I promised. “More!”

I gave her more—every hard inch of my dick.

When she came a second time, soaking me with a warm gush of her cream, I lifted her lower body up, slamming so deep I almost worried I would hurt her. She took me without a flinch, digging her nails into my arms.

My balls tightened, and I roared out my release, filling her with several long thrusts. I kept coming, pulsing with the aftershocks.

Fuck. “Damn, baby. You feel fucking amazing.”

Even though I had just emptied, I still remained hard.

Taking my time, I slid in and out of her, watching my cock with every stroke. Her velvet walls pulled me in. I didn’t want to stop.

“So do you,” she whispered, staring up at me with a sated expression I wanted repeated often.

Still inside her, I lowered my body, draping over hers as my elbows rested on the mattress. “You and me. Fucking forever, Lark.”

“Forever,” she repeated without hesitation.

I finally pulled out of her, groaning as we separated. “Let’s go shower.”



LARK FELL ASLEEP IN my arms after our shower. I held her during the nap, my mind far too active to shut down. All the shit with Angel pissed me off. My girl suffered because of that lying sociopath. He toyed with and used her, never giving any information about Molly. The fucker knew all along.

Lark sighed in her sleep, rolling away from me to rest on her back. Soft, deep breaths lifted her chest as I watched her, brushing my fingertips over her flat stomach. I stopped when I reached the scar on her pelvic bone. Fred's name puckered on her skin—a reminder of his brutality and the horror she experienced.

Hatred for the man conjured a rage I only experienced a few times in my life when I served overseas. I saw things that would make most people shit themselves. Death. Violence. Gore. None of it compared to how I felt when I thought of Fred forcing himself on Lark when she was sixteen.

He would face justice. I couldn't let this go.

Someday, when Lark was ready, I would pay to have that scar removed from her body and plastic surgery to smooth over the skin. She didn't need to see it every time she looked down. That shit messed with her psyche. I knew that as soon as she showed me in my truck the day we met.

My hand drifted higher, spanning her ribcage, lightly tracing the flock of little black birds tattooed on her left side. My sweet dove. My fierce blackbird.

Those birds resembled freedom. I would do everything in my power to help her achieve that.

Seeing her struggles made me realize I had yet to deal with a lot of my own shit. It would take time, but I didn't try to resist it anymore, letting the emotions and memories in even when the pain felt like it would overpower me. I wasn't used to being vulnerable. I fucking hated it. But Lark gave me a reason to try.



“YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” I asked, staring at Lark and hating the fact that I was leaving her for any length of time. The attack on the Crossroads was too fresh, along with all the

shit with Angel, and even though I made up my mind and wanted to patch in with the Royal Bastards, I didn't like going too far from her presence, even if it was for a good reason.

“Hey, sexy hero, we talked about this. I'm safe here.”

“I know,” I murmured against her lips, nibbling on the soft pink flesh. “Gonna be here when I get back?”

My lips pressed to hers as I cupped her neck, drawing her close as I deepened the kiss. When we separated, her cheeks were flushed.

“What kind of question is that?” She popped out a hip, placing her hand at her waist as she gave me a once over. “I need that dick. It's become an obsession.”

I couldn't help the stupid grin that followed.

“You okay with that?”

Hell yeah. “As long as you're spread and ready when I get back.”

She snorted, flicking out her tongue as she traced my upper lip. “Guess you'll have to hurry back to me if you want to find out.” The wicked girl winked and then sashayed toward the Crossroads, tempting me with that fine ass. I couldn't wait to get back and smack it, maybe taking her from behind as I drove into her hard and fast. The bestial side of me loved to fuck her that way.

“You're in for it, baby,” I yelled, grinning as she stopped, glancing over her shoulder.

“I hope so,” she replied with a flick of her hair.

Fuck. I had it bad for this sweet little bird. Not that she didn't know it.

“Hey,” I called out, my voice dropping low as I caught the smile she tried to hide. Sure was taking me forever to leave the clubhouse and join my new brothers, including Patriot. I just couldn't seem to say goodbye. Lark snared my heart. She brought me into a safe, comfortable place I hadn't felt in far too long. I didn't want it to end, not now, not ever.

“Yeah, baby?”

A shiver ghosted down my spine. I loved the way her voice softened when she called me that. It made me think of how she sounded after sex when her tone became husky, and she was fully satisfied. “Stay sharp.”

“I will,” she promised.

“And darlin’?”

“Yes?”

“Hold onto my heart, too.” I didn’t know why I said that. It was silly. Emotional. Far too exposed, but at the moment, it felt right.

“You got it,” she whispered before she palmed her chest, tapping over her heart.

“Gonna be a wild new ride for us. Hope you’re ready.”

“As long as I’m with you, it’ll be perfect.”

Perfect. A word I never used much until I met my broken dove.

“That hit me right here.” I pointed to my heart. “You feel me?”

“Yeah,” she answered softly. “Your brand of sweet is my favorite.”

“Damn straight.”

Grim smirked as I fired up my bike, joining Patriot, Rael, Wraith, and Exorcist. “You ready, honey?”

I flipped him off.

Chuckles erupted around us as the rumble of Harley engines overpowered any further conversation. We left the Crossroads, heading toward Las Vegas. In three hours, I would know if Angel Mackenzie told the truth. I sure hoped he did because if I had to ride home and tell my woman I didn’t find her sister, he was a dead man.

Chapter 14 LARK

As I watched Flint ride away with Grim and a few of the other Royal Bastards, I felt hope. For the future. For my sister. A chance to start over and leave all the shit in my past behind for good.

Until now, I wasn't convinced I belonged anywhere, but that changed the moment I met Flint and arrived at the Crossroads. The Royal Bastards welcomed us both in and didn't judge. For the first time, I found people who could become family and a place I could call home. Not necessarily here as a permanent residence, but with Flint in Las Vegas.

Maybe Molly would feel that way too.

"Hey, Lark."

I tore my gaze from the gate and turned to Snooki. "Hi."

"We're decorating the clubhouse for Halloween. You want to join us?"

Why not? "Sure."

I forgot it was the end of September, close to Halloween or Beggar's Night, as my mother used to say when I was a little kid before she died—the annual Trick or Treat night held special meaning for me. It was one of the few memories I had that were full of joy and excitement long before Fred stole the rest of my childhood.

I felt a surge of longing as I thought of my mother and how she died far too young. The doctors said her heart gave out. I never believed it. To this day, I blamed Fred. Maybe she would still be alive if he hadn't put her through so much heartache.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I followed Snooki into the clubhouse, laughing when I saw the chaos unfolding around us. Club girls and ol' ladies mingled together, rummaging through black totes with bright orange lids. Several tables had been shoved together in the center of the common room to make room for all the fall decorations.

These women didn't mess around.

Snooki handed me a mug of hot liquid that smelled heavenly. A mixture of apples, spices, and rum. "Spiced cider. Enjoy."

I took a sip, instantly sighing with happiness. The flavor burst across my tongue with all the familiarity of my youth. I could taste the cinnamon, orange, cloves, and apples with a generous amount of spiced rum. Delicious.

"Good, huh?"

"Oh, yes," I agreed, looking at the pretty nurse in red scrubs. Nylah. Rael's ol' lady. She treated my wound after the attack.

"How are you, Lark?"

"Good." The answer was honest.

"I'm glad to hear that. I've been so busy with the twins and work I haven't had a chance to visit the Crossroads since that mess with the cartel."

Rael had twins?

The question must have been evident on my face.

"Yeah, my man is as feisty as his boys. They keep me on my toes." She laughed and shook her head. "What about you? Any kids?"

No. Fred made sure of that. I was placed on birth control as soon as I had my first period. "Uh, not yet."

She shrugged. "You've got plenty of time to decide."

True enough.

"Have you met everyone yet?"

I shook my head.

"We're going to fix that. Come on."

I spent the next hour visiting with each of the ol' ladies. Grim's woman Trish and his son Creed. Shadow's woman Stefanie sat most of the time rubbing her round and very pregnant belly. Patriot's ol' lady Mimi and their adopted son

Yeva. Too many to name each one. How amazing that each of those hardcore bikers found love. Not just love, a family.

With humor, I noticed the absence of all the men except for the prospects, including Spook. The Royal Bastards who didn't ride out with Grim and Maddog made themselves scarce. Hilarious.

A bit shocked, I realized I found my smile again.

"It's okay, you know."

I was startled, blinking as I noticed Mimi. "What's okay?"

"To let the happiness in and feel joy. It's good for the soul after all we've been through."

How did she know what Fred and Angel did to me? "Is it that obvious?"

"Not to most. I just happen to have better insight and experience than everyone around here. Not that these aren't all beautiful, intelligent, and amazing women."

Nodding, I remembered what Patriot said about Mimi.

"Did Patriot tell you?"

Shit. Was it a secret? "Yes, but he didn't go into detail."

"You don't have to worry about my feelings. I encourage Patriot to share my story when he thinks it will help."

Oh. Okay. "That's nice of you."

She laughed. "No, it's not. I got my license to help women who have been through traumatic experiences like me. Like you. It's a rough road, and it sucks, but therapy can bring healing."

I supposed she was right. "You have a point."

"I want you to know that I'm here for you. Come talk to me. When it gets to be too much, and you feel like you're going to explode, that's when you're ready. That's when the healing process begins." She patted my arm. "Until then, try not to stab anyone."

I laughed. Wait. I already stabbed Angel.

For some reason, I laughed harder, delighted that no one stopped me in the basement. Not a soul. None of those bikers ordered me to stop until Flint pulled me away.

Did they understand how badly I needed Angel to bleed?

It wasn't just Angel. He was one of my abusers but not the primary one. Fred still needed to pay for what he did to me, preferably while I stabbed him. Repeatedly.

Shit. I bit my lip, smirking. This was almost funny.

Mimi snickered. "Yeah, you're feeling a little stabby, huh?"

"I won't deny it."

She winked. "Only those who deserve it. Okay?"

"You got it."

"I've got a session coming up. I'm helping a friend. Bree is an ol' lady from the Devil's Murder MC. Her man, Raven, is close to Grim. You should join us."

"I'll think about it," I replied honestly.

"That's good enough for me."

I watched her walk away, calling out her son's name as he stuffed a handful of candy corn into his little mouth.

It didn't take long to decorate the Crossroads. As my mother used to say, *many hands make light work*.

The décor looked wicked. Black and orange color scheme. Spiderwebs and giant spiders inside the clubhouse and outdoors. Lifelike grim reapers stationed at the doors. Ghosts. Pumpkins. Plastic jack-o'-lanterns that cast an orange glow. Bundles of hay and scarecrows. I couldn't help giggling at the numerous headstones scattered around with different comical names like Noah Scape, Dee Capitated, and Albie Back.

As dusk settled over the compound, the lights heightened the festive and creepy atmosphere. Purple glows mingled with flickering black candles. The jack-o'-lanterns lit up the lot with various toothy grins, some downright frightening. A few spotlights focused on scenes that included a coffin and

vampire, a woman in a rocking chair that moved on its own, a batlike demon with glowing red eyes, and various skeletons.

Pulling out my phone, I checked the time. Four hours since Flint left. One since his last text. He only messaged once to say he reached Las Vegas and wouldn't be in touch until he had news.

I hated waiting.

“Hey, Lark. You okay?”

I lifted my head, meeting Spook's concerned gaze. “Yeah. Just missing Maddog.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. He's the person you know the best out of everyone here.”

“The one I love.” When the words left my mouth, I froze.

Wow. How the hell did I fall for him so fast? We hadn't known one another for a week. How silly and cliché to lose my heart to the first guy who showed me genuine affection.

“He loves you too. Everyone can see it.”

“You think so?”

Shit. I sounded desperate to hear confirmation.

“Yeah. Flint is a Marine. He's never shown his emotions much in all the time I've known him. He's hard as nails. Know what I mean?”

I did.

“But with you, he's different. Softer somehow but still a badass motherfucker.” Spook shrugged. “I sound like an idiot.”

“No, you don't. It makes perfect sense.”

Spook's gaze focused on the group of club members, ol' ladies, and friends close to the picnic tables. “I see people. That might sound odd, but I've always been good at reading them.”

“Actually, I can see that about you.”

“I know when they're hurting. Like you.”

I sucked in a breath.

“And Maddog.” He ticked his head toward the group.
“And Heather.”

“Who’s Heather?”

“The girl trying to break my heart.”

I stood there, stunned by his admission, as he pulled out a cigarette and lit the end. He smoked, watching a girl with raven hair and smoky eyes. Their body language spoke more than words ever could. She stiffened, turning slightly away from him. He took a step closer, refusing to be dismissed.

Heather looked his way, lifting her chin. Something in her eyes seemed to plead with him. Spook shook his head. I could tell he wasn’t giving her up without a fight.

Wow. Those two had some serious chemistry.

“She’s fighting her attraction,” I guessed.

Spook took a long drag before he replied. “At times.”

Oh shit. “If you love her, keep fighting.”

“I knew you would understand.” He smiled, tossing down the remainder of the cigarette and stomping out the cinders with his boot. “She’s worth it.”

He stalked his way toward Heather, and her eyes widened. His hand slid around hers when he reached her, and they walked across the lot, disappearing into the shadows.

“I hope it works out,” I whispered.

My cell vibrated in my hand as the screen flashed with an incoming call. I glanced down, seeing the name that appeared.

Fred Simmons.

My heart rate picked up as I answered, determined to tell him to fuck off.

“That prospect almost got a bullet in his forehead.”

I wasn’t sure what shocked me more. The fact that Fred chose that moment to show up or that he managed to get inside

the Crossroads with all of their added security since Angel's attack. He must have a weapon, too.

Shit. I couldn't let any of these people get harmed because of me. They were in danger because I came here. Both times.

"You're gonna do exactly as I say. Got it, girly?"

I cringed with his tone and choice of words. Girly. I hated that nickname. "Of course."

"Walk to the end of the building. I'm waiting. Take the phone off of vibrate and turn up the volume. Stash it out sight on the ground once you see me."

That walk was the longest of my life. Around me, everyone partied, unaware of the wolf that hunted on their property.

When I saw Fred, I followed his instructions, placing the phone on the ground where someone could find it easily. I wasn't stupid. He was going to call that number later. I didn't want to think about why or what he would do.

When I reached him, his hand shot out, slapping handcuffs on one wrist. He attached the other cuff to his own.

"Don't try anything foolish. You don't want innocent blood on your hands."

"I won't," I promised, staying close against his side as he led me away, hoping no one would notice.

They never did.

Chapter 15 MADDOG

“There’s no one here. It’s a dead fucking end, brother,” Grim spat, pissed we wasted our time riding all the way to Las Vegas.

“Fuck!” I shouted, kicking at one of the wooden beams inside the abandoned warehouse. “Angel fucking lied!”

“Yeah, the fucker did,” Patriot agreed.

“I’m not surprised,” Rael added. “He gave us that info too fucking easy, even if Salazar was there forcing him to do it.”

Fuck. Another dead end.

Angel Mackenzie lied.

“I need to call Lark.”

“Wait.” Grim held up a hand. “We aren’t alone.”

Each of us alerted, we moved at the same time, retreating into the shadows. Footsteps on the stairs proved someone had heard and followed us. Angel’s men? A trap? The feds?

I didn’t have a clue.

I saw the gun first, then the burly big fucker attached to it.

Torin. Lark’s stepbrother.

He kept the gun pointed outward as he rounded the corner, facing me.

Pissed, I aimed at his fucking forehead. “Why the fuck are you here?”

“Needed to know if you found my little sister.”

“Why are you pointing a fucking gun at me then, you dipshit.”

Rael snickered.

“Because I don’t like your type,” he snarled.

“My type?” I roared, rushing toward him as he blinked.

He stood his ground. “Outlaw. Degenerate. Bad influence. You get the picture.”

“Lark doesn’t seem to mind.”

“She’s good at sabotaging herself.”

“You’re a dick,” I spat. “Lay off the testosterone. She’s not even here. Neither of them are, for fuck’s sake.”

“I know.” Torin lowered his gun, holstering the piece. “I followed you.”

“No shit,” Patriot muttered.

“How about you don’t blow through the next place we check out like a bull through a china shop. Yeah?”

I had to laugh at Rael’s comment.

Torin glared at him before focusing on me. “Molly has to be in Vegas. I haven’t been able to find any evidence that she ever left.”

“Who has her?”

Torin sighed. “I still don’t know the buyer. Fred sold her, but Angel Mackenzie wasn’t involved in the sale. He showed up at the same club the night she disappeared, but that’s it.”

“A coincidence? I doubt it.”

“I’m not saying Angel is innocent. He’s not. He hurt Lark.” Torin cracked his neck, trying to stay calm. “I’ve got enough evidence to convict him on multiple charges. I’m just not moving in until I find Molly. I don’t want to spook her captor.”

“Smart,” I conceded. “What’s your plan now?”

“Keep searching. I want to go back to that club. It’s the last Friday of the month. The same night that she was sold.”

“It’s a pattern.”

“Yes. I’ve been able to confirm it since the dates for missing girls always coincide with the last Friday of a month.”

Damn. Those fuckers trafficked new girls every month.

“They use the club as a front, don’t they? An easy way to find young women since they’re drinking and easy prey.”

“Yes.” Torin shook his head. “Molly is only seventeen. Sixteen when she went missing. She never should have been let inside the doors.”

“Then the owners have to be in on it,” Grim concluded.

“I believe so. We’ve put pressure on them. I had them under surveillance, but nothing has turned up yet. They’re smart. They know we’re looking into the disappearances.”

“We should go to the club.”

“We?” Torin gave me a look like he dared us to tag along.

“I’m not going back to Lark without answers. She deserves to know what happened to Molly.”

Torin grunted. “I respect that.”

I turned to Grim. “Don’t need you there, brother.”

“But?”

“I’d like the backup in case shit goes down.”

“Didn’t plan on sitting this out anyhow.”

Torin eyed the others. “Follow my lead. Don’t fucking wear those vests inside the club. It’ll wave a fucking red flag.”

Rael got in his face. “It’s not a *vest*, asshole. It’s a *cut*. There’s a huge fucking difference.”

“Try not to piss off Rael,” Grim warned. “He’s a loose cannon.”

To prove the point, Rael leaned in, letting his reaper partially surface. “Boo, motherfucker!”

Torin stumbled backward, tripped over a chair, and landed flat on his ass. “The fuck was that?”

“My Reaper,” Rael growled. “He doesn’t like you. Thinks you’re a pussy.”

Torin looked insulted as he scrambled to his feet. “I’m not afraid of you!”

“You should be,” Patriot responded as all the Reapers made an appearance at the same time. Five skeletal visages popped into view. The minimal tissue over the bones was fucking macabre. The kind of shit you saw in horror movies, only this was real life.

“Fuck me,” Torin cursed.

“Don’t piss your pants, man,” Wraith laughed.

“What the fuck are you guys?”

“Haven’t you been listening?” Rael asked with annoyance.

“Reapers,” Grim answered. “The real grim reapers.”

“Holy shit,” Torin exclaimed. “Okay. Wow. Fuck.”

“So don’t make me want to reap your soul,” Rael grumbled.

“Yeah. Shit. Fine.” Torin backed away. “You ready, Flint?”

“It’s Maddog,” I corrected.

“The new president of the Royal Bastards in Las Vegas,” Patriot added.

“So give him your respect.”

That last sentence came from Wraith.

“Christ. You’re all fucking touchy.”

I slid my gun back into the holster and pulled out my phone. “Give me a minute to call Lark.”

“Let her know we’re checking this shit out together.”

I frowned. “The point isn’t to worry her, asshole.”

Torin chuckled. “Good point.”

I called Lark’s number, surprised when it rang about ten times before going to voicemail. That seemed odd. I figured she would have been waiting for me to check in since she was anxious about Molly.

“She’s not picking up.”

I sent off a couple of texts.

“Try her again. Maybe she had a few beers to relax,” Torin suggested.

I had the weirdest feeling in my gut. Hitting redial, I listened to the phone ringing again. On the seventh ring, someone answered.

It wasn't Lark.

Spook's anxious voice filtered through the line.
“Maddog?”

“Hey, Spook. Where's Lark?”

“I don't know. I heard the phone ringing and thought it was odd, so I picked it up and saw your name.”

“She's not with you?”

“No, man. Haven't seen her for about two hours now.”

Shit. That feeling in my gut deepened.

My ears began to ring, and I shook my head, noticing the heightening of all my senses at once. I could hear with such clarity I noticed the fly buzzing around across the street. Each heartbeat in the room thumped, growing louder as I exhaled a breath. My vision enhanced, bursting with color. I detected heat signatures from each of the guys and small rodents as they scurried along the dirty concrete floor.

Somewhere close, I smelled the unmistakable, pungent odor of decaying flesh.

What the fuck was happening?

“Maddog?” Spook sounded ... *spooked*.

“I need you to check the Crossroads. Call me back once you're done.”

“On it.”

He hung up, and I gripped the phone tight enough to hear a small crack. Shit.

Grim appeared in front of me. One of his hands landed on my shoulder. “Is it Lark?”

I managed to nod.

Torin moved closer. “What happened?”

“She’s gone. Her phone was on the ground with the ringer turned up. Spook found it when I called.”

Torin paled. “Fuck!”

“I’m riding back to the Crossroads.”

Grim didn’t argue.

“I need you to go to that club with Torin. Find Molly.”

“Okay, brother. Sending Patriot with you.”

It took everything in me to reply in a calm tone. “Yeah.”

Torin shook his head. “Fuck that! If something happened to Lark, I need to find her.”

“No,” I growled, staring him down. “I’ll find my woman.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but I didn’t let him get a word in.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to find and protect Lark. You have my word.”

“Maddog.”

“No one touches what’s mine. That’s a fucking declaration of war. You understand what I’m sayin’?”

Torin finally relented. “You better not fail.”

“Never failed a mission yet.”

“Then we both know what to do.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

Patriot followed me downstairs as we ran to our bikes, firing them up as I heard Rael, Grim, and Wraith ride off, joining Torin. Heading in two separate directions, I hoped we found both young women tonight. One stuck in a life of hell. The other being pulled back into it.

The ride to Tonopah usually lasted three hours. Took us that long to get to Vegas. Returning to the Crossroads? We got back in an hour and a half. I fucking pushed my bike and the

speed the entire ride, not giving a fuck how many laws I broke to find Lark.

Spook must have tried to call me during the trip, but I didn't check my phone, leaving it inside a pocket in my leather jacket. I still didn't have a Royal Bastards cut yet, but I'd get one. Soon.

Spook waved me down as we entered, passing through the gate as chaos greeted us. "I've looked everywhere. She's not here." He pulled at his dark hair, freaking out. "I shouldn't have left her alone."

"Hey, she was at the club. It wasn't your fault."

He shook his head. "It's my job to protect the ol' ladies and club girls."

Patriot clamped a hand down on his shoulder, giving him a shake. "This isn't on you, Spook. There are members here. You weren't the only one who missed her leaving."

Spook nodded, still torn up about it.

"I don't blame you, kid. Stay sharp. We don't know what happened yet."

"Yes, sir, Maddog."

All of my enhanced senses were tuned into the clubhouse and the surrounding desert. I picked up Lark's scent, tracking like a hound when I stomped off, moving toward the empty building on the far end of the lot. Grim said it was their old tool shop, but after they renovated it a few years ago, it sat empty until he could figure out what he wanted to do with the space. I headed there now, noticing the smell of gasoline.

By the time I entered, thick black smoke was beginning to fill the room, clogging my lungs. I coughed, staying clear of the flames that started to climb up the northern wall.

Lark's scent grew more potent. Afraid she was trapped inside, I rushed through each of the rooms, busting through doors to find her.

"Lark!"

A loud crash above my head alerted me to the fire raging out of control and quickly devouring everything in its path. The ceiling caved in as I darted to the side, smacking into a wall so hot it scorched my jacket within a couple of seconds. My skin burned as I tugged it off, placing it over my head as more debris fell, joining the burning pile of furniture piling around me.

Smoke infiltrated my lungs as I lost my balance, falling onto a desk that broke into sharp pieces as I landed on it. A jagged piece of metal ripped through my side. I felt the warm metallic fluid as it left my body, the blood trickling from the fresh wound and feeding the hungry flames.

With a grunt, I pressed my hand to the wound.

Not that it mattered.

I probably wouldn't survive this.

Someone set this fire intentionally and waited for me to arrive, timing the destruction and my arrival so they would collide.

Somewhere close, my enemy waited for me to die.

The worst part of it? They had my woman, too.

Chapter 16 LARK

“You won’t get away with this, Fred.”

He finished pouring gasoline from a can, tossing it aside as he pulled out a lighter. With a quick spin on the dial with his thumb, a flame sparked to life.

Fred stared at the flickering light. “Fire is fascinating.”

I didn’t reply, yanking on the metal cuffs in a desperate attempt to pull free from the pipe he attached them to when we entered this abandoned building.

“It doesn’t have any preference,” he continued, dropping the lighter as it landed with a spark, igniting the gasoline. “Hungry, insatiable, it’ll consume anyone and everything in its path. A beast so terrible it inflicts the most horrendous pain imaginable.”

Just as he described, hungry flames traveled the path along the floor, out the door on the second floor, and reached for the walls.

“I don’t know what you think you’re going to accomplish. The fire will have every biker in the compound running toward us.”

He ignored me.

“Skin heats first, getting red and warm. Sweat breaks out to help cool the body. It doesn’t work. Blisters form, filling with fluid.”

What the hell?

“The blood begins to boil in the veins. Organs and tissue cook.” He smiled at me. “Everything becomes charred if it’s heated long enough.”

Oh my God. He was crazy!

“Lark!”

My eyes widened when I heard Flint’s voice.

Fred aimed his gun at my head. “Don’t call out to him.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “Okay.”

The room was filling with smoke, and Fred didn’t uncuff me. Panic filled my chest as I yanked on the cuffs harder, the metal cutting into my wrists.

“Don’t leave me here,” I begged, hating that I found myself at his mercy again.

Fred had all the control. Just the way he liked it.

“Not yet.”

Shit! No amount of struggling helped. I wouldn’t get free on my own.

“Please.” I paused, closing my eyes with the next word that left my mouth. “Daddy.”

A hand cupped my face. “Open your eyes.”

I stared into his gaze as I obeyed.

“Good girl,” he praised.

My stomach clenched, and I felt ill. I swore I would never give in to his sick, twisted desires again.

“Please,” I choked, coughing on the thick smoke filling the room. “Get us out, Daddy.”

“You’ll come back to me?”

Was that what he wanted? “Yes.”

“And the biker?”

“I’ll break up with him.”

Fred’s cruel grin appeared a couple of seconds before he slapped me. Hard. “That’s for running away.” Another slap followed, landing on the opposite cheek. “And that’s for making me hunt you down.”

The skin stung on both sides of my face.

I didn’t cry. I wouldn’t. He didn’t deserve my tears.

Breathing hard, I noticed my clothes dampening with sweat. Terror gripped me. Would he leave me to die? Where was Flint? Would he find me in time?

Fred reached into a pocket, pulling out the key to the handcuffs. He unlocked one, slapping it over his wrist. We were connected. If he burned, I burned too.

Determined to get out of here alive, I pressed my body to his, trying to get to the door as the thick smoke grew dense. I felt the heat of the flames as the walls began to wrinkle and melt.

Fred tugged me toward the door and out onto the second floor, marking a pathway for me to follow through the fire.

I heard the building groan as the greedy flames popped and crackled, consuming the drywall, carpeting, and sporadic pieces of furniture. The flickering light danced as it cast an eerie glow on our bodies.

The floor was burning fast. I felt everything under me shift.

Fred picked me up, running down a staircase that would soon be nothing but embers. We busted out a side door as the dark smoke followed, billowing into the cloudless Nevada sky. The stars twinkled as they witnessed the catastrophic event unfold.

My lungs struggled to fill with air. I coughed and sputtered, staring at the building that appeared to be a living entity, trembling with the waves of heat that shimmered across the surface.

Wait. Where was Flint?

Fred began laughing, his body shaking as he grasped my chin. "He's in there. The floor fell on top of him. He'll burn!"

"No!" I shouted, lifting my fists to pummel his chest.

"He'll burn!" he repeated with glee.

I remembered my switchblade far too late. Fred was distracted, and I didn't hesitate to reach inside my back pocket, pulling it free with my free wrist. I flicked the blade open, stabbing Fred's stomach as his eyes widened.

He stared, blinked, and then snarled. His body tackled mine to the ground, and we landed hard. My wrist with the

cuff snapped as I screamed while excruciating pain traveled up my arm. A wave of dizziness nearly made me puke.

Fred straddled my waist, laughing as he shook his head. “So fucking pathetic. You were only ever good for one thing. I still dream about your tight pussy and the first time I fucked you.”

He kept talking, but I tuned him out, refusing to relive those horrors. My gaze swept over the burning building and the bodies moving in the night. People were shouting, trying to contain the blaze before it reached the clubhouse.

The two buildings weren't attached but far too close.

“Flint,” I whispered, devastated as I realized he never could have survived the raging, relentless fire.

Fred slapped my face. “You won't escape. Not again. I won't let you.”

He uncuffed his hand before reaching for my clothes, tearing them from my body. I couldn't fight him. Not with my broken wrist.

My mouth opened, and I managed a single scream before his hands wrapped around my throat and began to squeeze.

Why did no one come? Didn't they see us?

Flint. Flint. Where are you?

“Flint,” I choked, devastated he was inside that building.

He was dying inside. I was dying outdoors.

I never got to tell him how I felt.

Flint was my lifeline. He threw out a life preserver when I didn't realize I was drowning.

How could it end like this?

I can't breathe!

My chest felt too tight. The lack of oxygen was taking a toll.

Help!

“Get off her, you sick fuck!”

Spook!

Fred’s hands left my neck as I rolled over, cradling my wrist and sucking air into my lungs, too weak to help.

I heard a struggle and blinked, staring at the burning building now wreathed in shadows. Dozens of dark shadow warriors headed toward us. They formed a mighty army as they approached. Two souls emerged ahead of the others.

The first, a hound.

The second, the man I loved.

That’s not possible.

The shadowed hound reached me first. Familiar brown eyes seemed sad as he arrived, licking the side of my face.

“Kane,” I croaked.

Kane whined as I heard Flint’s voice.

“Stay, Kane. Guard!”

Kane’s body slowly grew more solid as his ears flicked back, and he sat on his haunches next to me, snarling with aggression.

I thought he died. How was Kane here?

My head turned to the side, catching Fred as he lifted his weapon. The gun fired as several bullets left the barrel ... headed straight for Flint.

“No,” I tried to scream, but the word got stuck in my throat. A raspy sound followed as I nearly choked on my saliva.

God. It stung and hurt when I tried to swallow.

The bullets reached Flint but didn’t penetrate his body. They went through him as his solid form morphed into a shadow, breaking apart and quickly reforming into his body again.

My lips parted in shock. No sound came out.

He roared as he ran toward Fred, who stumbled, trying to back away but didn't stand a chance against the shadowed warrior.

As Flint reached him, the army of shadows caught up, overlapping as they converged on Fred.

His frightened cries filled the night.

Was it terrible that I only cared about justice? Revenge for me and Molly and Torin?

Flint parted from the shadows, walking my way with a determined stride. He bent down, scooping under my body to lift me into his arms. My hand lifted, cradling a face that seemed to crackle with flames. Beneath the surface of his skin, embers glowed with the remnants of the fire.

Cool to the touch, he didn't burn me.

"You're hurt, my blackbird."

I couldn't speak, tears filling my eyes.

"You need healing."

I wasn't sure how we managed to reach his Harley. It didn't make logical sense.

Flint placed me on the seat and threw a leg over, facing me. He pressed my back against the leather as the bike roared to life. He revved the engine, pulling back on the throttle.

Around us, white smoke began to rise.

"Do you trust me?"

I stared into the blue eyes of the man who owned my heart.
"Always."

He twisted the throttle again, holding the massive iron beast in place as the smoke intensified, growing in size. Thick billowing clouds of white surrounded us, cocooning us in a world where only we existed.

Shadows left his body and gripped the handlebars as Flint reached for me. His hands cradled my face as he lowered his

lips to mine. A sensual, needy kiss quickly evolved into a passionate promise.

“I’m yours.”

The connection electrified my body. Desire and lust erupted deep in my core, followed by an insatiable need.

The remainder of my clothes disappeared. Flint’s mouth moved to my throat, kissing across the tender skin. He licked at the column of my neck, adding open-mouthed kisses to the bruised area.

Swallowing, I gasped when I no longer felt pain. “Flint.”

A smile curved his lips as he lifted my hand, gently licking and kissing my broken wrist. The skin tingled as it heated, slowly losing the ache. After a minute, no pain remained.

Still weak, I felt much better than before we began this ride.

White smoke drifted around us, rising high to cover our bodies and never receding. The world faded.

Only the two of us existed.

I felt Flint’s cock harden as he rolled his hips. “Lark.”

“Fill me,” I pleaded as he fisted his erection, gliding a hand over the velvet-wrapped steel. “I need you.”

His expression softened.

“I love you,” he declared, staring into my eyes.

“I love you too,” I replied with conviction, sliding my fingers over his shoulders and around the nape of his neck.

He lifted me over his lap as my legs dangled over the bike. His boots firmly planted on the ground as he flashed a wicked grin. “Put me inside you.”

I slid my palm over his girth, squeezing once as he groaned, and guided him to my pussy. Lifting with his help, I fed him into my body, slowly sliding down the hard, thick length.

“Hold onto me, baby. It’s gonna be a wild ride.”

And it was. Delicious. Dirty. Downright sinful.

He fucked me on his bike, but he made love to me too. I lost my heart to him in the middle of that smoke-wreathed ride, promising my forever and making an oath to become the ol' lady he needed.

He deepened our connection with every thrust, solidifying a bond that could never be broken.

A shadowed, fiery biker outlaw claimed me.

And I loved it.

Chapter 17 MADDOG

I understood Lucifer's gift now.

Holding Lark in my arms, thrusting up inside her, I healed us both with every intimate touch.

When the roof caved in, and I became trapped in that fire, I thought I was dead. I shouldn't have survived. I wouldn't have made it if the shadows hadn't arrived. They rose from the flames and surrounded my body, repelling the heat and reversing the damage done by the fire.

For long minutes, I writhed in agony as the process reversed, repairing the cells and invigorating every inch of my body.

When I rose from the smoldering debris, I felt Lucifer's presence. His dark laugh bounced off the burning walls.

"A promise kept."

The words echoed as the shock began to fade.

The shadows became mine to control and lead, following my every whim and desire, eager to wreak havoc and destruction in my name.

The Tonopah chapter might be reapers, but the Vegas Bastards commanded the darkness.

A new chapter to fight against men who chose depravity and degradation, harming others in their weakness. I would lead my shadow warriors in this fight, and we would vindicate the lost and broken. I would never fail to protect those who needed me again.

My thoughts returned to Lark as our bodies collided, rutting as we approached release.

She was the pulse in my veins. Burrowed deep under my skin.

The war I'd wage until death stole me from this earth.

My drug of choice. My fucking addiction slithering through my veins.

She was as damaged as I was. My wild bird finally freed from her cage—a hellion in heels.

Her tormentor would no longer live in her nightmares.

“Lark,” I rasped, crashing my lips into her soft, sweet mouth.

White smoke began to fade as we both climaxed, dissipating as the engine stopped revving. The shadows left us. No longer needed, they rejoined my body, sucked into the void inside me that waited in silent expectation. I would always have them with me, ready to act on my command.

Our breaths mingled as I brushed the hair out of Lark’s face.

“I’m all sweaty,” she laughed, “and naked.”

A gust of wind blew around us, hastened by the will of the shadows.

“Are you?”

She glanced down, her eyes growing round. Big and green, they appeared to shimmer in the moonlight.

“Flint?”

The bike disappeared. We stood, clothed, as the fire behind us smoldered.

“How?”

I tapped the tip of her nose with my finger. “I can’t spill all my secrets.”

She giggled, stiffening when we heard Fred crying out in pain.

“His final judgment begins now,” I promised, clasping her hand in mine.

We walked over to where he lay on the ground, pressing a hand into his stomach. Blood trickled through the gap in his fingers.

“Fuck you,” he snarled when he noticed the cruel smile on my lips.

I didn't have to reply. It wasn't necessary.

“We want his soul.”

The sinister voice belonged to Grim, the king of reapers.

When he returned to the Crossroads, I didn't know. How long did Lark and I linger on my bike?

I took a few steps backward and slid an arm around Lark's shoulders. “Proceed.”

Grim, Rael, Wraith, Patriot, and several more members of the Tonopah chapter approached. In an instant, their physical bodies disappeared, replaced by the incorporeal form of the reaper. Scythes appeared in each hand. Black cloaks billowed in the wind as they hovered above the ground. I had never seen anything more frightening than those ethereal harbingers of death.

Frankly, I expected Fred to shit himself.

Sadly, he didn't. The terror of what awaited stole his soul as the reapers' laughter rumbled the ground beneath our feet.

They swiped through the air with their scythes, moving as one entity as Fred's soul was ripped from his body. Screams launched from his throat before his physical body puddled.

The shell caught fire and burned to ash. His spirit, sliced into numerous pieces, hung like an inky stain in the air between the reapers. I smelled sulfur. Rotten eggs. *Gross.*

The earth cracked, popping open as I stumbled, holding onto Lark. We watched the fires of hell burst through the opening and ignite Fred's soul. His wails of terror and pain fed the shadows. I couldn't help but chuckle.

“Burn in hell, you sick fuck.”

Lark buried her head in my chest. “Is it over yet?”

The ground swallowed Fred's soul with greedy slurps before closing as quickly as it opened. I heard Lucifer's praise before everything went silent.

“Well done, my shadow warrior.”

The disembodied reapers lowered to the ground as their physical forms returned. The cloaks and skeletal faces vanished. Only the bikers in their cuts remained.

“You can look now, little dove.”

Lark opened her eyes and turned, gasping when she saw Kane’s shadow form. He wiggled his tail, nuzzling her leg. She bent down, attempting to pet hair that no longer existed.

“He’s not real.”

“He is,” I assured her, “but he’s also shadow. He’ll come to you when you need him, but he’s no longer a physical being.”

“But I felt him after the fire started.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“You left the burning building, and he came with you. I petted his fur.”

“I don’t know how that happened. He’s only shadow.”

“Maybe he knew I needed to feel him at that moment,” she guessed.

“Probably.” I cleared my throat. “Come, Kane.”

Kane’s shadow form jumped, merging with my body in one fluid motion. I felt a slight jolt and then his presence.

“This is surreal.”

“Yeah, it is.” I tilted her chin up. “You okay with it?”

“Yes.”

My lips captured hers. “Good.”

Grim slapped me on the back. Fucker caught me off guard.

“What?”

“Figured you were ready for your tattoo. Yeah?”

Tattoo?

“Your skull and crown, Maddog. About time you officially joined the Royal Bastards.”

Fuck yeah.

“Let’s do it.”

I didn’t get one tattoo that day. I received three. The skull and crown on my back. A pawprint and Kane’s name on my chest. And on my left bicep, a blackbird with Lark scrolled across in bold script.

Lark’s eyes filled with tears when she saw it. “You marked me on your body.”

“Hell yeah, baby. You’re my blackbird.”

“I want you inked on my skin too.”

“When you’re ready,” I agreed.

She tapped her heart. “Right here.”

“All of me,” I agreed.



LARK

GRIM ENTERED THE CROSSROADS as I sat at the bar, watching Diablo ink Maddog’s back. My man had a high tolerance for pain. He’d gotten several tattoos over the last few hours and never flinched. Of course, he had a bottle of Johnnie Walker with the blue label in his hands, and I was sure that helped.

Diablo was a bit scary with red and black face paint. He reminded me of Rael, who liked to walk around with Day of the Dead makeup. A skeletal visage that resembled the reaper I saw outside when Fred’s soul was reaped.

Reaped. Gone. Forever.

I was still coming to terms with that.

Grim walked my way as I saw Torin enter after him. I jumped from the stool, rushing to my stepbrother.

“Torin!”

“Hey, Lark.” His arms wrapped around me in a tight hug. “You okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

He shrugged. “Grim told me about Fred.”

Ah. “It’s done. We don’t have to worry about him ever again.”

“Good.” He cleared his throat. “I found Molly.”

I stopped breathing. My knees buckled, and he caught me as I heard Flint call my name. “What?”

“Molly is outside.”

“Is she hurt? Why didn’t she come in?”

“She wanted me to tell you first. Make sure you understood.” His voice sounded strained.

“Understood what?”

“She’s not staying in Nevada.”

I shoved Torin aside, running out of the bar and through the door, anxiety swimming in my gut.

Molly stood by three scary bikers. Big guys with plenty of dark ink, piercings, and hostility. Their leather cuts read Feral Rebels MC.

“Molls?” I asked, scared these guys had threatened her.

“It’s not what you think,” she blurted. “They rescued me.”

Confused, I blinked. I didn’t care about that. “Can I hug you?”

“Yeah,” she replied quietly, blinking back tears.

I ran to her, crushing her as we collided, tears overflowing as we both sniffled, unleashing all the emotional baggage we carried since her disappearance.

“I thought I lost you,” I blubbered.

“You almost did.” Tears streaked down her face as I finally leaned back, holding both of her hands in mine.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I will be with time.”

I didn’t like that answer. Smoothing the hair away from her face, I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I love you, too.”

“Torin said you’re leaving Nevada.”

“I can’t stay here.” She glanced at the guys who hovered behind her, taking a protective stance as they watched everyone in the vicinity. “There are too many memories. Too much that overwhelms me.”

Saddened by her words, I hung my head. “I don’t like it.”

“Lark.”

Lifting my chin, I sniffled. “I don’t want to let you go, but I will. If it’s the only way you can heal.”

“I believe it is.”

“You’ll stay in touch?”

“Of course.” Relieved, she pulled me into a quick embrace. “Trust me. I need time.”

“Alright.” I looked at each of the bikers behind her. “Protect her with your lives. I swear if you harm her or anything else happens to my little sister, I will hunt you down and make you bleed while I slowly murder your asses.”

“Damn,” the tallest one muttered.

The guy with a shaved head grinned. “She’s feisty like you.”

“We swear to keep her safe,” the third one answered.

“I have a switchblade, and I’m good with it,” I added.

Three amused nods followed.

I turned to Molly. “Slay those demons, baby. Fred is gone. He can’t hurt us anymore. You can conquer this. I know it.”

We hugged for so long that I thought maybe I could change her mind, but she finally stepped back into the protective circle of the guys as they surrounded her. Each seemed tuned into her in a way I knew meant she had a relationship with these men—all of them.

I wouldn’t judge. Each of us found love where fate led us.

“Stay safe, Molls. Call me when you’re settled.”

“I will,” she promised, leaving on the back of the bald biker’s bike as one led in front and the other followed behind.

My heart ached, but I knew from experience healing had to come when you were ready.

Chapter 18 MADDOG

My phone buzzed inside my cut, and I reached for it, sliding across the screen to answer. “Yeah?”

“Maddog? It’s Jameson.”

“Hey, brother.”

“Heard you got inked today.”

“Yeah. Diablo is a fuckin’ artist.”

“He is,” he agreed. “Welcome to the Royal Bastards. Wear the patch with pride.”

“Plannin’ on it.”

“Got something for you. A present. Grim should have it ready by now.”

Frowning, I scanned the room, finding Grim by the bar. He held up a new leather cut with two patches.

PRESIDENT and MADDOG.

Fuck yeah!

“About fucking time,” I answered with a slight slur.

I might have been a bit drunk by this point.

Jameson grunted. “I’ll be in touch.”

Moody fucker.

He ended the call, and I rose to my feet, stumbling on my way to Grim. The room silenced as I reached for the leather, shedding my old jacket before sliding on my new cut.

Something settled inside me that had been restless before now—a feeling of acceptance but also the hand of fate.

Cheers broke out as bottles and glasses rose around the room.

Grim lifted his shot of Johnnie, passing one to me. “To our new brother, the president of the Las Vegas Chapter.”

“To Maddog!”

I lost count of the shots I drank after that, nearly falling over when Lark’s arm slid around my waist.

“Baby, I think I need to occupy your time with something else.”

A few guys laughed as I flipped them off.

“All I need is you,” I replied, giving her a sloppy kiss.

She giggled as we headed down the hall to our room, barely making it inside the door before I tripped and landed on the mattress.

“Need a few minutes, blackbird.”

I closed my eyes, asleep so damn fast it was scary.

Lark was passed out next to me when my eyes blinked open, scanning the dark room. I sensed we weren’t alone as I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“Maddog,” Lucifer greeted, flicking on a little ball of light by his head. “We need to talk.”

“About?”

“Your club.”

“Right now? In the middle of the fucking night?”

“Eh.” He waved a hand like it was unimportant. “You need to recruit Manic, Creature, and Skeletor as soon as possible.”

“Why?”

“Because shit is happening out of my control. I can’t interfere.”

“Meaning?”

“You need your SAA, VP, and Enforcer.”

Fuck. I hated how cryptic the devil could be.

“Angel Mackenzie is trouble. He’s a threat to your woman. And her sister.”

That got my attention. “What do I need to do?”

“Stay alert. Build your club. Be ready.”

He flicked off the light.

“Lucifer.”

“Be ready for anything.”

Well, fuck.



LARK

“HEY, LARK.”

“Hi.” I entered the room that Mimi used for her meetings, sitting on an empty chair.

I spotted a gorgeous brunette to my right who smiled shyly. “I’m Bree.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“It is. I never know what to expect at these sessions, but I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” And I meant it.

I glanced around the room as Mimi began introductions. Each woman in this room had been brutalized in one way or another. Sexual assault. Domestic violence. Trafficking.

It made me realize I wasn’t alone. Women suffered too often and, many times, alone. Fear, shame, and reluctance drove us to remain silent.

But we were stronger, braver, and more resilient together.

Mimi was so right. I needed this. I was ready.

When she gestured to me, giving me the floor, I began my story. “My father started coming to my room at night when I

was only eleven.”

Those words used to haunt me. Now, they set me free.

Bree reached for my hand as the tears began to fall, weeping for the loss of innocence in the young girl inside me. I squeezed her hand, appreciating the strength she gave me as I finished.

When she began her story, I silently lent my support.

Hours later, we stood, embracing in friendship.

No matter what occurred in the future, I knew I had an army of women there to hold me up. These meetings would begin a circle of trust that would blossom into a family where we shared our dreams, successes, and every victory, no matter how small.

Flint waited for me at the bar as I left the meeting, pausing to hug Mimi and Bree before I left. “Hey, blackbird. How did it go?”

When we first met, he used to call me a dove. A symbol of purity. Light. Innocence. At one time, the girl I had been resembled that dove, but she wasn’t anymore.

The blackbird had emerged. Resilient. Bold. A symbol of rebirth. Strength. Hope.

I loved that he understood my transformation and embraced it.

“Good. Really good.”

“That’s because my ol’ lady is fucking fierce.”

Sliding my arms around his neck, I teased his nape with my fingertips. “This fierce woman needs a ride with her man.”

He wiggled his brows. “What kind of ride?”

Always thinking with his cock. “Both. Your Harley and your dick.”

“Then we better get to the one on the bike first because I don’t plan to let you out of bed before morning.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

“Fuck. I hope so.”

Within ten minutes, I had my arms around Flint’s middle, feeling the wind blow through my hair on Hwy 95.

The freedom of it, the exhilaration, enabled this blackbird to fly.

Thank you for reading!



If you enjoyed Maddog & Lark's story, please consider leaving a review.

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Catch up with the Reapers: [Tonopah, NV Chapter](#)

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LAS VEGAS, NV CHAPTER

Pres – Maddog

V.P. – Skeletor

SGT at Arms – Manic

Enforcer – Creature

Nomad/Enforcer – Darius “The Jackal”

Secretary – Crusher

Treasurer – Dice

Road Captain – Hex

Tail Gunner – Slash

Member/Cleaner – Tombstone

Member/Tech – Snapshot

Chaplain – Testament

Prospect – Red

TONOPAH, NV CHAPTER

Pres/Founder – Grim Reaper

VP/Founder – Mammoth

SGT at Arms – Azrael, Angel of Death “Rael”

Enforcer/Founder – Exorcist

Enforcer – Jigsaw

Secretary – Wraith

Treasurer – Hannibal

Road Captain – Patriot

Tail Gunner – Daniel “Chaos”

Founder – Papa

Member – Chrome

Member – Bodie

Member – Bones

Member/Cleaner – Diablo

Member/Tech – Xenon

Member – Shadow

Member – Toad

Prospect – Spook

Prospect – Zane





One Hell of a ride!

Royal Bastards MC Facebook Group -
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/royalbastardsmc/>

Website- <https://www.royalbastardsmc.com/>



The following characters were mentioned in *Hell on Wheels*:

Jameson, Royal Bastards MC NOLA, National Chapter,
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SNEAK PEEK

Jigsaw's
BLAYDE

Every other prospect for the Royal Bastards chased pussy day and night. Not me. I only had eyes and a continual hard-on for one girl. The sweet redhead who dominated my thoughts. My sexy little gingersnap. Both naughty and nice. A good girl with the fire and passion of a woman with far more experience in bed.

She. Consumed. Me.

Every hour of the day, she popped into my thoughts. I fucking lived for the days when Abby spent time at her mom's house. She only left with her dad when she had to, preferring to stay across the street or in my house with Heather.

I couldn't get enough of her and made excuses just to walk by Heather's bedroom. Goddamn pathetic.

Bear gave me constant shit, and I ignored him.

My old man shook his head as I entered the kitchen the following day, preparing to ride out. He leaned against the counter, sipping on coffee. I could tell he wanted to talk by his stare.

"What's eatin' at you, pops?"

"You know what," he grumbled.

"If this is about Abby," I began.

"You were told to stay away," he reminded me, holding my attention with his stern gaze.

"She's here all the damn time. Am I supposed to ignore her?"

"That's not what I'm referring to, and you know it, son."

One thing about my dad, he could be lethal when pissed, but it was almost scarier when he was calm. The low tone of his voice held just enough of an edge to clue me into his mood.

“It’s hard,” I sighed. “I care about Abby. She’s been in our lives since she was nine. I can’t just turn that off.”

“I understand. It’s where your cock goes that worries me.”

Damn. He didn’t hold back. “Uh, I haven’t done anything with Abby.” Total truth.

“Not yet.”

Yeah, I didn’t fool him. He knew it would happen at some point.

“I promised to wait until she turned eighteen,” I confided. Swallowing hard, I turned to him. “I think I might love her, Dad.”

He stilled, blinking a couple of times as he processed my words. “Fuck.” His mug rested on the counter as he walked toward me. “Feelings are dangerous, Micah. We’ve been over this. Once you get that deep, it’s too late to turn back.”

“I know. That’s what I’m telling you. I can’t walk away now.”

I swallowed hard as the realization hit me. I fucking loved Abby. Her stubborn nature. That sexy ass. Her beautiful smile. It happened so gradually I didn’t understand until now.

My father saw the truth written on my face. “Shit. Things just got a lot more complicated.”

Yeah, probably. I couldn’t stop my stupid grin from widening, though. Thinking of Abby made me feel happy. It had been a long time since I felt that way.

My mother left us a year after I met Abby—one of the lowest points in my life. I never talked about it. My father avoided the subject. There was too much hurt involved for both of us. For the first time, I wanted to know the real reason she walked out and never came back.

“Did mom leave because of your life in the club?”

His head lowered, and a sigh escaped his lips. “The short answer is yes.” He took a minute to gather his thoughts. When he looked up, tears glistened in his eyes. “I fucking loved your

mother more than anything in this world, son, except for the Royal Bastards. Some women can handle it. Others embrace it, and those are the ones you hold onto when you find them. Then there are women like your mother, far too delicate and sensitive for club life. She chose to walk when it got hard.”

Frowning, I wondered why he never explained before today.

“The way we live is brutal. Rely on your instincts and trust only those who earned it. Women complicate shit if your heart gets involved. Love has the power to rip you apart.”

“Fuck, Dad.” I walked to him, wrapped my arms around him in a hug, and squeezed like I used to do when I was a boy. “I understand.” I thought he’d gotten over my mother, but maybe he never did.

Me? I missed her. She broke a little piece of me when she left, and it took years for my father to repair the damage she caused when she left. Now? I was fine. I dealt with that shit a long time ago and moved on.

I never stayed in the past. Took too much out of me to dwell there. My future was all that mattered, especially with Abby in it. Once I patched into the RBMC, all the pieces would fall into place. I’d have my girl and my club.

My father cleared his throat. “We need to ride. Daylight is burnin’.”

Finishing off my coffee, I joined him in the garage. We left together, our bikes side by side as we rode toward the Crossroads. The sun glistened off the metal on our hogs, and life felt perfect at that moment. A snippet in time I never wanted to forget.

It was dark by the time we returned. I was itchin’ to see Abby and rushed into the house, climbing the stairs three at a time to reach her. Soft feminine laughter drifted down the hall, and I grinned.

Stopping at the doorway, I found Heather and Abby giggling as they stared at a magazine. Looked like they were

taking a quiz. Why would anyone want to do that outside of school?

“Hey, Gingersnap.”

Abby’s head snapped up, and she scrambled to her feet, rushing into my arms as I held them open. Fuck. She smelled good. And so sweet. Like sugar and cherries.

“Let’s get out of here. Yeah?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Heather joked, waving us off.

Yeah, that list was fucking tiny. She knew it too.

“Stay safe and use protection.”

Christ. I swear she said that shit just to fuck with me.

Abby’s arms wrapped around my waist five minutes later, and her hot core pressed into my ass. Her fingertips nearly grazed my cock a dozen times. I was so fucking distracted I didn’t know how we reached our destination.

I brought her to one of my favorite places. A hideaway from the world. Outside Tonopah, beyond the old silver mines, stood a forgotten warehouse abandoned by the military—one of several scattered around the desert. The best stargazing in the whole U.S. could be seen from the giant hole in the roof.

Before I left with my father earlier this morning, I rode over and stowed a few blankets, pillows, and some drinks in a cooler with ice. I hoped she would be surprised by the date I set up. It wasn’t much, but I didn’t need more than her tonight.

I parked my bike and led my girl inside, climbing the stairs as I tugged her with me.

“What’s going on, Micah?”

“You’ll see,” I murmured.

I found the stash of items I had brought and let go of her hand to set out the blankets, spreading them across the floor.

The pillows followed. I kicked off my boots and gestured to the ground.

“We’re stargazing,” I explained. “Come here.”

“Oh, my God! This is a date!”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Yeah, babe. It is.”

“I can’t believe you’re so romantic.”

“Hey, I can spoil my girl.”

She paused, biting into her bottom lip. Big blue eyes blinked. “I’m your girl?”

“Yeah, Red. You know you are,” I teased.

Her chin lifted. “Damn right, I do.”

Christ. How could she be so feisty and sweet at the same time?

Abby joined me on the blanket. She didn’t hesitate to remove her shoes and jacket, laying half on top of me as I brought her close to my chest.

She stared down at me as she perched on her elbows. Didn’t even look up at the stars. “You’re my first kiss, Micah.”

I knew that.

“I want you to be my last kiss too.”

How the fuck did you know you wanted to spend the rest of your life with someone at such a young age?

Some people had old souls. They knew things. I’d seen that in the short time I lived on this earth. Then there were those whose souls connected, and it was like they reincarnated hundreds of times so they would never be apart for long.

That was what I shared with Abby.

Her words didn’t scare me or sound crazy. They were a reflection of the emotions swirling inside my heart. Maybe it wasn’t an accident that her mother divorced her father and moved across the street from us. It wasn’t hard to believe that fate forced us to meet the morning she tried to run away. A

dozen things could have prevented us from talking that afternoon, but they didn't.

“Then that's what I'll be,” I promised, sliding my palm across her lower back as she straddled me. My fingers itched to push aside the material of the little yellow dress she wore. Thin straps slipped over her shoulders as she closed the distance between us, mashing her lips to mine.

The innocent way she plunged her tongue into my mouth ignited a fire inside me. I wouldn't take her virginity on a dirty floor, but I sure wanted to do other things.

The kiss became needy and wild. I slid my hand lower to cup her ass, rolling her body into mine as my hips snapped upward. She could feel my hard cock and moaned, breaking the kiss.

I grabbed her hair and gently pulled, exposing her neck as I placed open-mouthed kisses along the smooth, flawless skin. She tasted like summer and sweet cherry cordials—my favorite.

I nibbled and licked at her until I couldn't take anymore. Turning my body, I let her back rest against the blanket. Far too eager, she pushed up her dress and opened her legs wide.

Fuck. Me.

I had dreamed of seeing her pussy for weeks.

A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she pulled the material aside. So fucking naughty.

My eyes were glued to her glistening pink core and the bare lips she exposed. Without hesitation, I lowered to my stomach. Tasting her became my only priority.

With two fingers, I spread her wider, dipping my head between her legs to swipe my tongue across her delicious little cunt. She let out a needy whine.

“Micah.”

“I'm just getting started, baby.”

I began licking, sucking, and teasing her, using my tongue to lap at her folds while slowly circling her clit. I wanted to probe deeper, stretch her for later when I finally fucked her. The white panties she wore were in my way.

“I need to take these off.”

She helped me, kicking off the material before rolling her hips into my face when I resumed my feast. I couldn't get enough of her, hungrily devouring her pretty little pussy. When I slid a finger inside her, she jolted.

“You okay?”

“Oh, God. Yes, Micah. Please. Don't stop,” she panted.

I didn't plan on it.

I ate her out while my cock throbbed, and I couldn't help moving my hips, thrusting in tandem with hers. She wasn't aware of the sexy noises she made or how her body reacted so perfectly. Inserting another finger, her tight pussy squeezed me. Goddamn. She was perfection.

Fuck. How would she feel when my cock plunged inside her?

I began to move faster, taking cues from her reaction. The sharp little inhalations. A gasp. A tiny whine as she bucked toward my face. She was close. I could tell.

I sucked on her clit, teasing it with light flicks while my fingers pumped in and out of her tight channel. A faint wail fell from her lips as she contracted around my fingers, gripping them tight as she came.

She was so fucking beautiful, writhing in my arms as she unraveled, falling apart because of the intense pleasure I gave her. Abby's pretty skin turned pink.

Glassy-eyed, she gazed up at me with adoration and awe.

I wanted to fuck her. Make love to her. Ensure she was mine forever. It took every ounce of control I had not to do it.

My tongue swiped across my mouth, gathering the last of her juices. I was experiencing all her firsts and loving every

second of it. Her first kiss and orgasm. All mine. First ride on a Harley. Mine. First boyfriend. Me. First love? I owned that too.

Hell yeah.

For the first time, I noticed the vibration inside the pocket of my cut. I reached in, pulling out my phone. I flipped the device open, noting the missed calls.

Fuck. Grim's number. Rael's. Mammoth's. The whole goddamn club was trying to hunt me down.

Well, shit. What the fuck was going on?

I told my dad where I was headed. He knew where to find me.

“Hey, Abby. We've got to get back. Something is going down.”

The bliss in her expression disappeared, and I hated it.

“It's fine.” She must have sensed my tension. “Let's go. We can always come back another day.”

Yeah, maybe.

I helped her dress and couldn't resist another kiss.

Something in my chest felt far too tight.

I dreaded what awaited me at home.



Jigsaw's Blayde, Royal Bastards MC is now available. Click here: [Jigsaw's Blayde](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nikki Landis is the USA Today Bestselling & Multi-Award-Winning Author of wickedly fierce romance. Her books feature dirty talkin' bikers, deadly reapers, dark alpha heroes, protective shifters, and seductive vampires, along with the feisty, independent women they love. There's heart-throbbing action on every page.

Within her books, you can find suspense, fated mates, instalove, and soul bonds deep enough to fulfill every desire. Like your books on the darker side with plenty of spice? Look no further!

She lives in Ohio with her husband, boys, and a little Yorkie who really runs the whole house.

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