



STEEL KINGS MOTORCYCLE CLUB
BOOK ONE



KINGS

HAVE NO MERCY

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS MC ROMANCE

SIENNE VEGA

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KINGS HAVE NO MERCY PLAYLIST



Mason:

1. I'm A Wanted Man - Royal Deluxe
2. Bad - Wale featuring Rihanna
3. Need it - Half Moon Run
4. Addicted - Saving Abel
5. Impossible - I Am King
6. Killing in the Name - Rage Against the Machine
7. Faithfully - Journey

Sydney:

1. Green Mile - SZA
2. America Has a Problem - Beyoncé
3. Hatefuck - Cruel Youth
4. Drive - Ashley Monroe
5. Smoke - Victoria Monét featuring Lucky Daye
6. Hurts Like Hell - Tommy Profitt and Fleurie
7. Lay Down My Arms - Alexa Dark

Listen to [Mace](#) and [Syd's](#) playlists on Spotify!

CONTENT WARNING



HI READERS!

Welcome to my new series! If you're looking for a wild ride, then you're in the right place. This series will feature plenty of spice ☞, dominant alpha bikers kicking ass and taking names, and some of your favorite tropes. Each book will feature a different couple. In this book, you'll be following Mason and Sydney in this enemies-to-lovers story.

Please be advised this book contains potentially upsetting content. The following topics are included in this book:

- **Graphic violence and sexual situations**
- **Depictions of bullying/hazing/sexual harassment**
- **Non-consent sexual situations**
- **Dubious consent sexual situations**
- **Sexual domination/degradation**

If any of the above content is upsetting for you, I understand. However, that means this is not the book for you and you should read something else.

This book is not suitable for readers under the age of eighteen.

<3 Sienne

PROLOGUE - MASON



August 2001

BEING A KID SUCKS.

You don't get to do none of the cool stuff. You're supposed to run and play like some dog. The same dumb games are supposed to be fun. Meanwhile, all you wanna do is what the grownups are doing—*ride*.

Bicycles don't count. My best friend Blake Cash says they do, but he's kidding himself. Riding in circles around the block doesn't compare to the open road.

I just know it.

My old man said he'll teach me someday when my beard starts coming in and I grow my first strand of hair on my face. That's gonna be years from now... which means I'm stuck like a lame ass, playing MC with the other kids in the neighborhood.

I scowl as Johnny Flanagan pedals toward me alongside Blake. He volunteered himself as president, saying it made sense for it to be him—his dad, Johnny Flanagan Senior, is in the real deal with my old man.

We fist fought over it. But then Johnny cried and the guys felt like jerks and gave it to him.

“Hey, Cutler! We're gonna have a meeting!” Johnny shouts. He can't even pedal his bike right; as he shoots toward me, his foot slips off the pedal and he goes flying into a bush.

The others laugh. I don't find nothing funny.

It's just more proof we're faking. We're a group of bored kids on a hot summer afternoon, playing around 'til the

streetlights come on and our moms call for us.

That's how it goes in a small town like Pulsboro—everybody lives in the same neighborhood, and everybody knows each other. If you're not from a family associated with the MC, you're familiar enough to know about it.

“Will you stop fooling around?” I say. “This isn't a joke.”

“Who says it's a joke?” Johnny pants, straightening himself up.

I shake my head. “You've got grass in your hair, jackass.”

“If your mama heard you!”

“I don't give a damn what she hears, you pimple-faced buttmuncher!”

“HEY!” Blake shouts. He's in between us, his blue eyes and gold hair making him look a lot more angelic than us. “You two keep screaming your lungs off, and our moms really will hear! Then we're all getting chewed out. Shut up!”

He's got a point.

That's what Blake is usually around to do—be the reasonable one and pull me back from my short temper. It's what makes us good best friends. I do my fighting with my temper and fists. He does his fighting with his words. Usually ones too big and fancy for most kids our age to understand.

We assemble like Johnny's requested. Most of the guys park their bikes in a semi-circle surrounding him. A dumb gang filled with the sons of real Steel Kings, like we're tough as nails, not just playing pretend.

I hover in the background, disgruntled and unsatisfied.

Johnny's yammering on about nothing. Just talking to hear himself talk, like my old man says.

I glance around the rest of the block. It really is a boring summer afternoon. Nothing's fun about it. Nothing exciting or unusual.

Three houses away, the McPherson twins sit on their front porch combing through their Barbie's knotted hair. The Bible-thumper kids are off in their own corner of the block skipping rope and playing catch. Some middle schoolers walk down the street, too cool for kiddy games.

I wipe sweat from my brow and pat down my pocket. I've got plenty of firework poppers. It'd be funny watching them scream and run off...

Before I can make up my mind, a car turns down the empty road. The street we live on is a dead end. Anybody who comes down our way either lives here or knows somebody that does.

The others are too busy with the fake club meeting to notice.

But I do. I stare it down as it bumbles down the road and then parks against the curb in front of my house.

1993 or '94 Dodge Spirit. Bronze. The rear window cracked. The license plate missing.

My old man was a mechanic before he was a King. I've spent hours hanging around the Chop Shop and flipping through the car magazines he collects. Blake might know a bunch of fancy words, but I know a bunch about cars.

And bikes.

Real bikes. Not the dopey bicycles we ride around on.

The Dodge's engine turns off and the driver door pops open. I'm far enough away that I haven't been able to figure out who's inside.

The guy behind the wheel gets out, and I frown. His face isn't visible, but I can tell he's not from around here.

Tall. About my old man's height. No hair. Jeans and a cracked leather vest with patches.

He walks up the front path to my house and then knocks on the screen door. A second passes before it opens and he steps inside.

I forget about my bike. It crashes down onto the asphalt. I sprint across the street toward my house. Somewhere behind me, Blake calls out, wondering what I'm doing. I don't slow down, pumping my legs faster.

Who the hell does this guy think he is showing up at my house? Where's he from and why would he be invited inside?

Something's off about him. I don't know how I know, but I just do.

“Mace!”

I slow up at the voice, turning my head.

Logan's staring at me from around the side of our house. He puts out the cigarette he's been smoking and runs a hand through his hair. “What're you doing?”

If there's anybody other than my old man and best friend Blake who can talk me down, it's Logan. He's got a knack for talking me out of trouble.

Even though he gets into a shit ton of trouble himself.

“I should ask you,” I say, pointing at the butt on the ground. “Mom said no smoking.”

“What Mom doesn’t know won’t kill her. What were you about to do?”

“Who’s that guy? He just pulled up.”

Logan shrugs and leans against the side of the house. “Probably Dad’s dealer... or a guy from another MC.”

I make a face. It’s my scowl that everybody’s used to by now—my brows scrunch and my mouth bends. Ma says my ears go redder than the reddish brown tint in my hair.

“Anyway,” Logan says, grinning. “I’m headed out. Meeting Ivy Gilliam at the ravine. Cover for me.”

“Like I care. I’m gonna find out who it is.”

“Don’t go eavesdropping—”

I ignore Logan’s warning, brushing past him on my way into the house. I enter through the backdoor in the kitchen, and though I make plenty of noise, Ma and Pa don’t hear me ‘cuz they’re too busy talking to the guy inside our house.

The three of them are in the living room.

Even catching a few words, I can tell hostility is in the air.

“I don’t know what you want. You’ve been outta control for a while now, Wheels. What you did to Hawk and his family was damn wrong and you know it,” says my old man. “You want info I don’t have.”

“You’re a fucking liar, Cutty! That’s all you do—lie and backstab!”

“Calm the hell down! Call me a liar one more time and—”

“What? You’ll what?” the man demands.

“Both of you,” Ma pleads, tears in her eyes. “Please. Lower your voices.”

I’m eavesdropping, tuned into what’s going on in the living room, that I don’t hear footsteps behind me.

Logan grabs me from behind. “Don’t go listening in on things you shouldn’t!”

“You hear this? You hear this guy? Who does he think he is?” I mumble back, pissed as hell.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not your call.”

We’re both drowned out by the voices in the living room.

“I’m sick of the lies, Cutty! It had to be you and your club!” the man roars.

The words have barely left his mouth when the loudest pop I’ve ever heard in my life goes off.

It makes me jump. It makes Logan double back. It makes several people on the block outside scream.

Then it happens again... and again.

The pops sound like fireworks blasting off, but it’s really gunshots from the living room.

“Get down, Mace!” Logan yells, tackling me to the ground.

“MOM! DAD!”

I’m crying out as panic takes over. They’re in the next room and that asshole’s shooting the place up.

The guy who pulled up in the Dodge! He’s shooting at *my* parents!

I growl and struggle against Logan as he tries to hold me down. He's bigger, older, and stronger, so he wins our tussle.

The racket in the air goes from sounding like Fourth of July to nothing. Just silence.

The front door swings open. The guy races out in a blur as he sprints straight for his Dodge.

“NO!” I yell, throwing a fist at Logan to get him off me. “He's getting away!”

But it's too late—his tires screech and his Dodge Spirit blasts off down the street, leaving nothing but empty bullet shells behind.

SYDNEY



Twenty years later...

I AM A LOT OF THINGS. HUMAN. WOMAN. BLACK. DAUGHTER. Granddaughter. College Graduate with a bachelor's in journalism. Proud card-carrying member of the Mile High Club. Habitually single. Forever in debt.

But the one thing I am not and never will be, is a damn fry cook.

The fire alarm erupts in a sonorous ring that makes ears bleed. Thick gray smoke fills up the kitchen. Grease crackles and pops from the skillet. The pork chop cooking inside blackens into a lump of charcoal.

What a difference a few minutes can make.

The last time I'd checked on it, it was raw and uncooked. Now it's burned to a crisp, about to set the whole diner on fire if I don't act fast.

I shriek as hot flames snap up and lick at the hazy air.

"Freddie, get your butt in here right now!"

My call for help isn't answered fast enough. I swallow down the fear and gather every ounce of courage, rushing toward the burning stove. I grab hold of the skillet and toss it toward the huge farmer's sink, where I fumble with the extendable hose and blast it with water.

The kitchen door flaps open and in tumbles Freddie, out of breath from his heavy-footed gallop across the diner. The most he's run in decades.

"What've you done now, Syd?"

He swats at the air and wipes sweat off his brow with the same rag he uses to clean tables.

“Can’t leave you alone for nothing. How’d you fuck this up?”

“I told you not to put me on the line!”

“My ten-year-old niece can fry a pork chop.”

“Then maybe you should hire her instead!” I dog his footsteps around the kitchen as he fans the smoky air and twists off the knobs on the stove.

“You ain’t never cooked before?”

“We’ve been over this. My idea of cooking is warming up a pot pie in the microwave, Freddie. You hired me as a waitress. Not a fry cook.”

He shakes his head and continues grumbling about how hard it is to find good help these days.

I’m let off work early. But I know what it means.

Don’t come back. Thanks. But no thanks.

Ms. Baxter spots me on my way out. She’s come by to pick up her niece Teysha, my coworker and fellow waitress, from her shift. Being widowed and in her sixties, Ms. Baxter comes by often for more reasons than giving her niece rides. She’s become a regular at the Sunny Side Up for her daily dose of town gossip and a serving of the blueberry cobbler.

“Rough shift, girls?” she asks us on our walk out.

Teysha gives me a sympathetic smile before looking to her aunt. “Sydney might’ve had a problem or two.”

“It’s alright, honey,” Mrs. Baxter says, patting me on the shoulder. “You’ll find your calling. Just pray it comes sooner

than later.”

I give her a polite nod and refrain from mentioning *she's* probably the reason Freddie was so distracted. The two sixty-somethings have taken to flirting whenever she comes in. Freddie insists she's more than Teysha's aunt—she must *also* be the aunt of Houston native, Megan Thee Stallion, with how tall, thick, and statuesque she is.

We part ways in the parking lot. Ms. Baxter and Teysha in her 1978 boat-sized Oldsmobile. Me by way of the city bus, like always.

In a town as small as Boulder, an hour outside of Houston, it doesn't take me long to make it home.

I use the time to clear my head.

Jot down my thoughts in what I refer to as my Bible.

The small thick book serves as both my therapist and memory bank. Its pages are full of any and everything you'd want to know about me, but also the things I don't know. The things I wish I knew myself...

You'd think in the technological age we live in, I'd use my phone or start a blog like most people. Maybe even a Youtube.

But I stick with my little purple book.

Today's entry is about the kitchen fire. I doodle flames and Freddie's angry face with devil horns, releasing a petty cackle as I do.

The bus rolls to a stop where I'm supposed to get off. If not for the reminder from Wade, the bus driver on this route, I wouldn't have even noticed.

Dust flits around me as the bus drives off and I stand at the front gate. Our mailbox leans off to the side, the little red flag

pointed skyward.

I almost don't check it. What's the point when I already know what's been delivered?

Junk mail. Utility bills. Mortgage. More junk mail. Credit card offers and letters from credit collectors. Even *more* junk mail.

I scoff, tearing open an envelope and reading the threats about my student loan debt.

"Good luck collecting," I mutter.

The only remotely different thing we've received is a letter addressed to Pop. Sent by a man named Harold Lautner and embossed with a metallic silver seal.

I study it walking up the dusty path leading home.

The tiny bungalow house was once a gem when Mom and Pop bought it decades ago. Throughout most of my childhood, it had a bright green lawn and flower bed. Frilly curtains in the window and a fresh coat of paint.

These days, nothing but weeds and dirt greet you. Pop stopped giving a damn the moment Mom passed. The property hasn't been cared for since.

I creak open the screen door and step inside the humid, dark space.

The only light in the room comes from the flashes of the TV. Pop lies passed out in his cracked leather recliner, snoring another afternoon away.

I flip on the ceiling fan to get some air circulating and open the curtains on the windows.

A routine I'm more than a little used to since I started caring for Pop. If I don't... no one will.

He and Mom had no biological children. *I'm* who they ended up with.

After collecting the crinkled candy wrappers and an empty bowl once filled with a chicken pot pie, I kneel beside the recliner.

"Pop," I say gently. "Wake up. I'm off work."

He grunts an unintelligible sound.

"I think I got fired today. I started a kitchen fire."

Another grunt.

"You got this letter," I say, presenting the envelope. "It's from some guy named Harold Lautner."

That does the trick waking him up. He tries to push himself up in the recliner, his eyes squinting and his body lurching like a sloth. I lean over to help him and accidentally knock over his cane propped up against the chair.

"Did you get your steps in today? Remember what the doc said. Daily walks if you're ever going to heal from your surgery."

He tries to reach for the letter, his arthritis-riddled hand failing to cooperate. "Lautner?"

I nod. "Who is he? Somebody from church?"

Pop doesn't answer. He manages to tear open the letter, putting his second set of eyes on for a read.

I should give him privacy.

The house needs to be tidied up. The trash taken out. I can sit and sort through the rest of the mail we've received.

But what's the use when unease ripples inside me watching him read his letter?

Lautner could be writing for any reason; he could be a bill collector or from the bank that owns the mortgage.

It wouldn't be the first time Pop has let his finances fall out of order. Before I came to stay and took over his care, the house had been on the verge of foreclosure.

Not that we're doing much better these days. I'm working odd jobs like the Sunny Side Up diner and bartending at night. I'm at least able to properly manage and stretch Pop's disability and pension checks to cover most of the bills.

"Anything good?"

I've gotten up and plugged in the vacuum. He's folded the letter and stuck it back into the envelope.

He grunts. "Nope."

"An old friend?"

"Yep."

"From church?" I ask again.

"Nope," he answers, his throat dry. "An old friend from way back when."

No further explanation is needed.

Pop's talking about his life *before*.

Not just his life before me, but his life before Mom.

Pop's past is complicated. Growing up, I wasn't told much beyond that he lived a life of crime and served time in prison.

From there, I've had to put together bits and pieces. Things like the old photographs in the boxes in the garage of a young

Pop on a Harley Davidson with a group of other men clad in leather and denim. Clues like Pop's devotion to the law and aversion to firearms. His thinly veiled talk of how dangerous it can be to get mixed up with the 'wrong' crowd.

Once, I found an old Hellrazor patch from what I assumed was the club he belonged to.

A stint in prison set him straight. He found God and cleaned himself up. He fell in love with Mom and married her, still a controversial thing to do even in 1990s Boulder.

Interracial marriage was frowned upon.

Even more controversial when they discovered they couldn't conceive, so they adopted a local little Black girl who had been orphaned.

I drop the subject. It's the last we talk about the letter and Pop's old friend Lautner. I mention warming him up another chicken pot pie for dinner—sometimes it's all he's willing to eat—and getting him his next dose of medication.

He grunts a thank you before he's out in five minutes. Bear-like snores fill up the bungalow.

I shake my head and decide I'll let him get another nap in while I finish cleaning up. The first matter of business is taking out the trash.

I gather the bag and head outside into the sticky afternoon heat only to stop on the front steps.

My gaze picks up on the unusual sight far in the distance. A man standing among some trees several houses away, leaning against a great big motorcycle. He's older, with a wiry ginger beard and a motorcycle jacket he's surely sweating in. A gray bandana is tied over his head and though black shades cover his eyes, he's staring over at our house.

I'm certain of it. My earlier unease ripples inside me as I frown and stare back.

The man finally gets the hint, mounting his bike and riding off with a deafening roar that's worthy of a beast.

He's gone, but something tells me it isn't the end. He was here for a reason.

A reason I'll soon find out.

SYDNEY



“PEACHES, YOU DON’T GOTTA BE HERE,” POP MURMURS between blinks of his heavy eyelids. “I can handle things.”

“Stop talking crazy, Pop. You can barely walk from the bathroom to the bed. Here.”

I guide him up the step stool at the side of his bed. He slides under the bedsheet and sits propped up on the lumpy pillows he insists on keeping. His face is fixed into what can only be called a glower.

He’s been in a mood all evening. He protested when I made him his chicken pot pie and he wouldn’t watch a minute of Wheel of Fortune, one of his favorite shows. Any conversation I’ve attempted has been stunted after only a few words. He wants me to leave him to his sulking, but I refuse.

Before I returned to Boulder, he had been living in squalor. Basically biding his time ’til he passed away.

We lost Mom prematurely. I refuse to lose Pop too.

“Here,” I say, handing him his assortment of pills. I follow up with a cool glass of water. “Drink up.”

His glower deepens. “Just like your mother. You even look like her.”

I smile with a roll of my eyes. “I’m *adopted*, Pop.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’ve morphed into her.” He guzzles down several gulps of water after swallowing the handful of horse-sized pills. “You should be off living your life, Peaches. Go on and go. I’ll be alright. Always have been.”

Softening at the hoarseness of his voice, proof enough he’s not well, I lean in and kiss his cheek. “Not going anywhere. You’ll just have to get used to it.”

“Stubborn just like your—”

“Mother,” I finish with a small laugh. “Good night, Pop.”

I ease the door to his bedroom shut and then walk the short length down the hall into my own. It’s the bedroom I grew up in. Boy band posters still plaster the walls, and the twin bed is smaller than I’m used to, but I’ve been making do.

Over the next hour, I shower, change into my sleep shirt, browse the internet, and then finish my night by jotting down more thoughts in my little purple book.

Nothing too crazy. Just a few lines about Pop’s bad mood and the letter he received. I pause for a second and consider writing down the bit about the weird motorcycle guy outside our house, then decide against it.

Setting my book in my nightstand drawer, I turn off the light and get comfy in bed. It’s in the moments laying in the dark that I often question life most. If I’m satisfied with the way it’s going, and if I can make changes. If I should pursue things about my life still shrouded in mystery.

Pop isn’t the only one with a complicated past.

As my brain creeps into childhood trauma territory, I do what I can to chase it away. I inhale calming breaths and refocus my thoughts to what’ll make me relaxed.

What makes me feel *good*.

It's been a while. Waaay too long.

Suddenly in need of scratching an itch I've ignored, my hand ventures down the front of my panties. Even though it's my own touch, it feels like coming alive again. My fingers circle my clit and I rake my teeth over my bottom lip to keep from releasing the moan in my throat.

I ignore the fact that, in this bed, many years ago, I had discovered this kind of touch. I had experimented and done what I'm doing now, paranoid I'd be caught at any moment.

The paranoia hasn't left. As my fingers work their magic and my body sinks into the growing pleasure, in the back of my mind, I'm paranoid as hell. I'm straining my ears for even the slightest noise that's out of place.

Fortunately, the dead end street we live on is silent during the day, let alone at night.

Most of our neighbors are older than Pop. They go to sleep with the sun and rise with it too. It's not uncommon for the only sound at night to come from the whistles of the wind.

My eyes close and I focus on the pleasure. On my fingers rubbing circles on my clit in just the way I like.

I'm sooo close. Right on the edge of my orgasm.

It's coming, it's a couple more rubs away—

A creak of a floorboard sounds loud in the otherwise dead silence. My bedroom window is on the side of the house, but close enough to hear the sounds on the front steps. I'd know that creak anywhere. Just another thing about the house that needs repair.

My hand freezes in my panties and my eyes pop open. I lay still and listen for more. Listen to confirm if I'm hearing things or if I just heard what I think I heard.

Seconds go by, and nothing.

I'm about to return to my secret activity when it happens again. Only this time, it's not the creak of a floorboard. It's the jiggle of what sounds like our brass doorknob. I spring up in bed, my heart booming in my chest.

Is what I think happening really happening? Is someone trying to break into our house?

I leap out of bed and quickly slink into the hall. On my way, I grab the baseball bat from the coat closet.

I make it halfway across the living room before the doorknob jiggles again and the front door falls open. A scream traps itself in my throat as I rush to double back and hide. As three burly men donning masks and heavy boots stalk into the living room, I'm throwing myself back into the closet.

It's a close call. So close, I'm covering my mouth and holding my breath. Who the hell are these guys?! What's happening right now!?!

A barrage of panicked thoughts scrambles my brain. I try to sort through them, praying the men will leave soon. They're burglars who will case the joint, discover we've got nothing of value, and then leave.

But the pit in my stomach tells me otherwise.

The dense clack of their boots against the floorboards confirms as much. They're moving through the house, heading down the hall.

I catch a couple muttered words. Stuff like, “You sure this is the place?” and “Shh, hurry the fuck up.”

I’m shaking in the closet. I’m racking my brain about what I should do. We have no firearms. My only weapon is a bat. My phone is in my room.

Pop’s asleep in his.

Pop!

I twist the doorknob to the closet and almost step out on that panicked thought alone. He’s sleeping in his bed, probably snoring through the men intruding on our home. There’s not much he can do anyway—his sickness and disability prevent him from being very mobile.

As I hover with the closet door cracked open, my heart racing, the men aren’t hesitating. A loud thud sounds from down the hall. One of them has kicked open a door.

Pop’s door.

I dart out of the closet and start across the living room without thought of what I’ll do, or how I’ll defend myself against three men.

But it’s too late. In the next second, a bang goes off.

Just one, solitary shot of a gun, and then... *silence.*

I can’t even move.

For a second that seems to go on forever, I’m stuck standing horrified and wide-eyed in the middle of the living room.

They just... shot him.

He’s gone.

Pop.

I barely register what happens next. The explosion of sound and movement that comes out of nowhere. Several pairs of boots pound the floor and sirens wail in the distance. The deadly trio reappear in a shadowy flash, bounding for the door.

My body, acting on its fight or flight instincts, leaps back into the closet as they return to the living room.

They're in too much of a rush to notice the slit I've left in the door.

“What about the girl? I heard he has a caretaker that lives with him—”

“You hear those sirens, dumbass? The law's on the way! Bet that old bitch a few houses down who peeked at us in the window called ‘em on us!”

“We got it done. That's all that matters.”

They bolt out the door, fleeing the scene into the night. By the time I scurry from the closet to the nearest window, they're already gone.

But the cops are pulling up. Their red-and-blue sirens flash and car doors burst open. I meet them at the door, speechless and dazed in my nightshirt, with the baseball bat limp at my side and the sobering reality of what's happened.

Pop's dead.

MASON



One month later...

A PURR IN MY EAR WAKES ME UP. FOLLOWED BY THE RAKE OF nails down my back.

“Wake up, baby,” coos a voice. “I want to suck that big cock of yours.”

My eyes open with a throbbing ache in my skull and blurry memory of last night. The club party had gone on for hours. Standard for our get-togethers. I had been good for most of it. Drank a little and played some cards. Mostly, I stood on the sidelines and planned with some of the guys for today.

I remember nothing else. But I must've gotten fucked up.

I already know the bitch in my bed without looking over my shoulder. I do it anyway and almost groan.

I wasn't just drunk. I had to be all the way fucked up to bring Sandie to my bed.

She smiles at me, dry mascara flakes on her cheeks and faded lipstick on her lips. She's not, and never has been, a beauty, but after one too many, she must've started looking like old-school Pam Anderson. Bleach blonde hair and bolt-on tits and all.

In the light of day, she's her distant ugly cousin.

“How about it?” she asks. She drags her talons down my back again. “You know I'm good.”

That part's true.

Sandie's a decent fuck. She's a hangaround. Just some desperate chick that's fucked most of the guys. I'm not

worried she's gonna expect anything—damn sure no title—but I *am* worried about my dick.

The bitch could've given me something. I'm no saint by any means, but I'm usually more selective in the girls I bang.

“Get out of my bed.”

“But Mace—”

“I won't tell you twice. Get the fuck out.” I push her taloned hand off me and get out of bed. I don't give a fuck that I'm naked as the day I came into this world.

This is my place, and I need to take a leak. I'll walk around with my dick swinging any time I want. Sandie's the one that doesn't belong.

She tries to follow by jumping up and coming with me to the bathroom. I stop out of nowhere and turn around. She almost bumps into me. Her eyes grow wide at the look I give her.

“I said get the fuck out. Right now.”

“Mace... Mace!”

I grip her by the upper arm and start for the door. She struggles and sticks her feet in the ground. Her clothes are still discarded somewhere in the room.

It doesn't matter to me—maybe next time she'll learn to get the hell out the first time she's told.

I open the door and shove her into the hall. The door slams in her face, drowning out her pleas to suck my dick again.

If she's lucky, she'll come across Velma downstairs and she'll grab her a t-shirt and some bottoms.

I've got more important shit to worry about. Like my splitting headache and what's supposed to go down in a couple hours.

Relations between the Steel Kings and Hellrazors have never been this bad. It started weeks ago when the Hellrazors shot up the home of one our own, Rhett "Bush" Bushman. They pulled up in a big truck in the dead of night and sprayed bullets into his trailer in what was an act of war.

In retaliation, we killed one of theirs. Some low-level guy named Curly. The Hellrazors responded by intimidating several of our club prospects, going so far as to batter one of them and land them in the ER.

Tensions have been escalating fast ever since.

Today's the day I've been waiting for. The day I get my revenge and the day that marks the start of a new chapter in the club.

My first day as acting prez. I promised Tom I'd handle things. He didn't have to worry behind bars.

This is a trial run. A test to see if I've got what it takes. Deep down, I know I do. I've just gotta prove it.

Some of the guys are at the bar counter having scrambled eggs and their morning beer. I walk out, scanning the area. All the club girls from last night have been cleared out. The unconscious guys who passed out anywhere, including on the bar floor, have been too.

Johnny Flanagan is the first to notice me coming down. He nudges Stein and Ozzie on his right and left.

Ozzie flashes a toothy grin, the rest of him from the neck down tatted up. He rises to meet me for a bro handshake and

hug. “If it ain’t the new prez in the building. What’s up, man? Remember I knew you when.”

“Temporary prez,” Johnny cuts in from his stool. “Should be an interesting year.”

I ignore him, moving on to bump fists with Stein. As one of the older guys in the club, he gives me a nod before returning to his beer; he couldn’t give less of a fuck about who’s prez. He just wants another cold one.

“We were worried about you,” Ozzie says. “Heard you got real hammered last night.”

“You missed Sandie. She was down here bitching about you,” Johnny adds.

“I don’t give a fuck if she was telling everybody I’ve got the biggest dick in the world. That was a one-time thing. I only make mistakes once.”

Ozzie grabs his plate of eggs and holds it out. “You gonna be good for today?”

I wave off the offer. “I’m ready to ride out. You tell me when you’re ready.”

“You better have a plate, Mason Thomas Cutler! I didn’t slave away over a big ol’ pan of eggs for nothing! Made ’em scrambled with butter and cheese just like you like!”

Velma’s heard before she’s seen. Her voice, like nails on a chalkboard, makes everybody at the counter cringe.

It’s a good thing Velma’s well-liked and respected—and Tom’s old lady. Otherwise, she would’ve been tossed out years ago just for her voice.

She emerges in a low-cut top and with so much damn hairspray that her blonde hair forms a beehive. Ozzie’s

nicknamed her the club MILF. A thought I block out considering she very well could be my stepmom if Tom ever put a ring on it.

She comes out from behind the counter and hugs me. Stroking the hair on the back of my neck, she gives me a once-over. “How’re you, Mace? Don’t you dare fuck Sandie again. The bitch has got crabs.”

The others laugh.

“Which reminds me,” Velma says. “I’m hiring for the new waitress today. Wanna meet the girls before I make a decision?”

“Nah. Do your thing. You know the conditions.”

I disentangle myself from Velma and address everybody at once.

“Breakfast time’s over. Make it quick. We’ve gotta head out.”

“I just started,” Johnny says, sticking a few scrambled pieces of eggs with his fork.

Meanwhile, Ozzie and Stein take my order seriously. Ozzie uses the excuse to hug on Velma and tell her goodbye. Stein chugs the last of his beer and belches so damn loud, his potbelly vibrates.

“The others are out back,” Ozzie says with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll let ’em know.”

I nod, then turn my attention to Johnny.

The shaggy-haired fucker is still eating his eggs and taking swigs of his fucking Pine beer bottle.

I spend a moment watching and waiting. He's got to sense the shift in the air. The tension that crackles to life as my glare narrows and my temper amps up.

He's testing me. Pushing limits. Seeing how far he can go.

If he needs to be shown, I've got no problem doing that.

It happens in under a second.

My temper shatters, and so does the beer bottle I slam over his head.

As Stein sets down his beer, I snatch the bottle from him and then swing it upside Johnny's skull. He screams out in surprised agony and twists in his stool. So damn confused despite being nothing but a fucking turd from the moment I came down.

Blood leaks down his temple. His eyes go wide.

I slam my fist into his face once, twice, three times before he flops to the ground. Then I'm on him, grabbing the front of his shirt and rattling him like a saltshaker.

"Next time," I growl, "I tell you we're riding out, we're fucking riding out."

My fist smashes into his face one final time. He goes limp, which means my lesson is taught. It's up to him to understand when he comes to, or I'll beat the shit out of him again.

I stand up with blood on my hands and some sweat on my brow. Ozzie, Velma, and Stein watched the whole ordeal, start to finish. The three stare at me a second and then each other.

Velma pats me on the shoulder. "Tom would be proud."

SYDNEY



I ARRIVE IN PULSBORO VIA GREYHOUND. I COME WITH nothing more than a purse, a small suitcase, and the clothes on my back. I'm not in town to stay a while. I'm in town for answers.

The Boulder police department began investigating with little results. The only evidence found was a gray skull bandana in the bushes. They said it didn't point to any new leads, convinced it must've been a stray item from Pop's garage.

"We found other bike club memorabilia in the garage," one of the officers had said. His bushy brows rose accusatorially. "I've heard rumblings about Jacob Singer's checkered past before. Your Pop wasn't mixed up in no kind of trouble, was he?"

I had stormed out of the precinct and gone straight home to look up bus tickets.

The police couldn't be more wrong. That bandana didn't belong to Pop—he was a *Hellrazor*.

That skull bandana belonged to one club and one club only, and it damn sure wasn't the one Pop had been a part of. No matter what Boulder police claimed.

I let my parents die once without fighting to learn the truth. Back then I was just a girl. I had no power. No sense of agency. The authorities threw me into foster care, and I was forgotten about 'til Mom and Pop wanted me.

Now that I'm an adult, I won't let it happen again. Pop's death isn't going to fade into obscurity as some unsolved mystery.

Towns like Pulsboro and Wheaton have big reputations for the two motorcycle clubs in the area. The Steel Kings and Hellrazors have been at odds for a while now. But what could the Kings want with Pop?

Was this payback for something that had gone down in the past? Why wait so long to get revenge?

And who is Harold Lautner? Does he have something to do with what happened to Pop that night? The letter's mysteriously disappeared. Either Pop trashed it before he died, or one of the men who killed him took it.

I intend to find answers to all these questions before my time in Pulsboro is up.

People stare as I walk out of the bus terminal and hike my backpack higher up my shoulder. The excessive hours I've been working these past few weeks will pay my way for now, but I need a job to stay ahead.

I catch a taxi off Main Street and head to the other part of town. Larson Lane is a dusty dead end road where Pulsboro allocated space for the town's sketchier establishments. Between a strip club aptly named Titty Bar and a pool bar called Eight Ball, the establishments aren't the most family friendly.

None of these places are anywhere I'd normally choose to visit.

Except for the biker bar at the end of the road that catches my eye from the second I'm on the street.

The Steel Saloon is almost as infamous as the MC that operates out of it. I've heard the stories of the wild parties and deadly fights that have gone down. I'm also aware I could be walking into a den of bloodthirsty savages.

As a Black woman on her own, the thought's more than a little terrifying.

But I'm prepared to take the risk. I need a job, and there was a flyer on the corkboard in the bus terminal:

WAITRESS WANTED

Experience preferred, thick skin a must.

Position starts immediately.

I've got experience and I've got thick skin. I also look damn good in denim cutoffs and a tight top. Both of which I'm wearing as I start down the street. Using my sexuality in my favor isn't my usual style, but I've been well aware of how my hourglass-shaped body can earn me attention from the time I was a teenager.

In this instance, desperate times call for desperate measures.

I doubt anybody will recognize me as Pop's daughter. Even with the same last name. While Pop rarely told me about his past as a biker, one of the few things I know is that he no

longer kept in touch with anybody from that period of his life. He left his gang a whole decade before he and Mom adopted me. For the rest of his life, he stayed far away from biker anything and involved himself in the church.

But I'm going in expecting everything. Hoping for the best. Prepared for the worst.

I inhale a deep breath and nudge open the saloon's double doors. The bar is bigger on the inside than it looks on the outside, with an old school charm about it that makes it strangely... cozy. If biker bars *can* be cozy.

There are peanut shells on the floor and posters of half-naked women plastered on the walls. Some old photos of the club through the years and Steel King patches are displayed on the walls too.

Everything inside is furnished in heavy dark wood and bathed in smooth, aged leather. A huge bar area takes up the whole left side, stocked with the most alcohol I've seen in my life. Smoke hazes the air, its burnt stench mixing with the spicy malt notes of beer.

I don't realize I'm standing too long in the doorway 'til someone shouts at me.

“Aye! Stop letting all that sunlight in!”

It's a heavysset man in a stretched out muscle shirt and faded denim who complains. He's seated at a table with two other guys equally as disgruntled and grizzly—with long beards and beady eyes.

Their stares follow me all the way up to the counter. I ignore them, rolling my suitcase along.

An older woman with box-dyed blonde hair mans the bar. The shot glass she's wiping doesn't seem to get clean no

matter how many times she runs a rag over it. She spots me as I make my way to the counter, and one of her thinly penciled brows jumps high on her forehead.

“Hello, how are you doing?” I start off politely. “This is the Steel Saloon, correct?”

She gives me an openly judgmental once-over. Suspicion lives in her tone. “That’s what the sign says, doesn’t it?”

“Right. So does that mean you’re looking for a waitress?”

“Who’s asking?”

I stand as tall as I can and gesture to myself. The woman’s thin brow lifts even higher.

“You?” she says. “You’re serious?”

“I’m new in town. I need a job. I’ve got experience and thick skin. Seems like I fit all the stipulations.”

“Girly, listen. That advertisement wasn’t...” she trails off.

“It wasn’t what? For someone like me? No Black women? Is that what you mean?”

“Hey! Don’t you put words in my mouth!” she snaps with a sudden scrappiness about her. I can see how she makes it here. Her grip on the shot glass tightens and draws my attention to the very sharp nails she has.

Good thing I don’t get intimidated easily...

“Then what?” I ask, standing my ground. “What is it?”

“Alright, if you want me to be honest—yeah, we don’t get too many women like you who want to be here. You’re the first to apply.”

“Oh, it’s one of *those* clubs.”

“You go talking shit without knowing what’s what and find out what it’s like on my bad side. We’ve got a couple members who ain’t White. Big Eddie and his nephew Moses are Black just like you, and Tito is like everybody’s damn long-lost *tío*. So, take those accusations somewhere else.”

“Then you have no excuse not to hire me. I look good in these shorts. Don’t be a hater and act like I don’t. Men at these bars want their waitresses to look good serving them beer. Are you going to seriously tell me I don’t?”

“You ever spend time in a biker bar?” she asks instead. She’s set down the dirty shot glass and folds her arms, her tone *marginally* less frosty.

“I’ve spent time in plenty of bars and clubs in Houston. Nothing you spring on me will surprise me.”

Her gaze rakes over me again, and she purses her lips. “The waitresses don’t have to sleep with ’em, but the ones that don’t never last long.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Nobody’ll force you, but with tits and ass like you’ve got—they *will* come on to you.”

“Sounds like every other bar and club ever.”

She takes half a step back and gives me yet another long look. “You’ve got some balls. I like it. You know what? Fuck it. You want the job? You’ve got it. What’s your name?”

“Sydney. Syd for short.”

“What’s your poison?”

I try hard not to show my relief on my face. “It’s been a long day. Just give me a shot of whiskey.”

She nods her approval. “I’ll take one with you. Then we can go over the job and I’ll show you around.”

The afternoon speeds by. The beehive-haired woman introduces herself as Velma and takes me around the saloon so I can meet the other waitresses on shift. I meet the bar manager Mick and a few of the club members too. The old ladies come across as the hardest bunch to win over.

But I hardly pay them any mind. I’m not here to bond with the girlfriends of bikers.

I’m here to find out what happened to Pop.

Velma and I take another shot as our tour comes to an end. She’s telling me some of the club history and asking questions about my past—most of my answers I come up with on the fly. My fake backstory is simple.

I’m a divorcee that was left penniless, and I’ve traveled the state in search of a cheap town to start over.

“Men,” Velma scoffs when I explain. She tosses back her shot. “My first marriage ended like that. We had it all. A thriving bike shop and dough we were raking in. Then things went left. The bastard beat me black and blue and gave me a concussion. I had enough. How do you think I ended up here? The Kings took me in. You know what they did to him?”

By the time Velma finishes the violent tale, *I’m* asking for another shot myself.

“We’re like a family. Anybody gives you shit. The guys’ll have your back.”

You mean the men who murdered my father...

It takes every ounce of restraint I have to keep quiet and bite my tongue.

A thunderstorm of rumbling engines fills the air. Everyone seated in the bar jerks their heads toward the rear entrance. Velma taps my arm with a wide smile on her face.

“They’re back. Most of the other guys. I’ll introduce you.”

It happens faster than I’m ready for—the vacant bar filling with almost twenty leather-clad, tattooed, mean-mugging men.

My heart beats out of sync as I stand by Velma’s side, and for the first time since I arrived, I feel a knot of fear.

It might not register on my face, but it’s there, buried deep inside. I pop a hand to my hips, push my breasts out, and lift my chin in defiance.

Act tough. You’ll feel tough. Hopefully...

The guy in charge makes himself known. He strides ahead of the other men with a walk that drips authority and dominance.

I suck in a quiet breath, unprepared for the six-foot-three glass of sexiness headed my way. He’s striking in how much of a contradiction he is—angry dark green eyes contrast pale skin. His straight slope of a nose juxtaposes the full lips that look suspiciously soft for a president of a brutal biker club. His buzzcut fade is so short that it’s almost easy to overlook the natural reddish-brown tint to his hair. The style’s clearly for ease and functionality versus the sheets of hair like some of his fellow members. If anything, it makes his chiseled, masculine features stand out even more.

Thick neck. Broad shoulders. Veiny arms. Tattoos everywhere. Blue jeans and a tight-fitted white t-shirt that I’d

love to peel off him. Just to reveal what I imagine is a very hard-muscled chest.

The list goes on as my gaze drinks him in.

But, while I like what I see, the same can't be said for him.

“Who's this?” he demands, looking at me.

“Mace, this is Sydney. She's our new waitress,” Velma answers.

He ignores her, stepping toward me. I don't move out of hope it'll show I'm not intimidated. I'm here to stay.

Forget the old ladies not liking me.

From the first time Mason lays eyes on me, one thing's clear: he hates my guts.

It's in the hard glare he pins me with. The aggressive manner he gives off as he begins circling me like an animal debating how to devour his dinner. Everybody else stands off to the side as he does so, circles around and around me in slow but purposeful steps. I stopped breathing a long time ago, unsure what to expect.

He comes up from behind, his lips so close, they almost graze my ear. Instead, it's his warm breath I feel that draws a shudder out of me.

“Sydney, huh? I'm going to make your life a living hell.”

MASON



SYDNEY ISN'T WHO SHE SAYS SHE IS. THAT MUCH IS OBVIOUS from the moment I lay eyes on her.

I know a liar when I see one—and Sydney's got liar stamped on that plump ass of hers.

She's easy on the eyes. Probably why I'm the only guy bothering to be suspicious. Everybody else is too busy noticing the double Ds in the tight top she's got on. They're charmed by the bright smile she flashes.

I don't give a fuck how good looking she is. If she's here to stir up trouble, then she's got to go. I want her gone.

I stalk toward her as the rest of the bar floor falls silent. Immediately, tension cuts the air. Uncertainty lingers. No one's sure what's going to happen next.

My eyes never leave her. I stalk toward her with heavy footsteps that clack on the wooden floorboards.

This ain't no friendly greeting, and I'm not here to make nice. I'm about to show this bitch who's boss. She'll be running for the hills before she can blink twice.

As I approach, she wears her confidence like a second skin. Her hand rests on the swell of her hip and she tilts her

chin up. Not once does she break eye contact; not once does she even blink.

She gets it. She knows what this is—that doing so means she loses.

It pisses me off that she does. That nobody else gets it. They don't realize she's playing some game. That there's some angle she's working.

I circle her. My gaze rakes over her as I do. She doesn't dare move, still stuck on proving she's unfazed. I take my time. I drink her in.

About five-six. Maybe five-seven. Classic hourglass. Big tits in the front and a fat ass in the back, so going and coming she's worth eyeballing. Her midriff shows, revealing a taut stomach and a belly ring with a diamond that fucking sparkles. She's got thighs to match that ass, and that look damn good in her cutoffs.

All wrapped up in rich brown skin that gleams like some earth stone.

Topaz or some shit.

But it's her face that's really got my attention—the natural smirk her full lips make. The way they look so damn soft and moist as if to make them that much more tempting. It's her fire-lit brown eyes and the long lashes that go with 'em. The enticing beauty mark on the apple of her cheek and the honey-colored sheets of hair that fall over her shoulders.

She looks like she belongs in my bed. Not on my bar floor.

The more I circle her, the more her scent permeates my sense of smell. I pick up on it without even trying. Something spicy and sweet.

Fitting considering what I'm dealing with and the act she's putting on. For as good as she looks, this chick's got bite.

Which confirms what I already know—she's got to go.

I come up from behind and place my lips near her ear. Only she'll be able to hear me. Everybody else watches on like a dumbass.

“Sydney, huh?” I ask in a raspy whisper. “I'm going to make your life a living hell.”

Velma grows tired of me being a dick. She loudly clears her throat and asks me not to spoil the mood.

She's another one who's a spitfire; Tom fell for her the moment he saw she could serve a beer with her tits out *and* turn a wrench.

No wonder these two seem to get along. Leave it to Velma to hire a girl just 'cuz she's got guts.

“Have at it,” I say to the rest of the room. “Let off some steam. Today didn't go as we hoped. But Kings don't stop. We always rise up.”

Several of the guys give hearty nods and make sounds of approval. Ozzie cries out for somebody to start up the greatest hits playlist on the stereos. I sulk off to get the fuck away from any loud music and heavy drinking.

Given how much of a fuckup today's mission was, I'm in no mood.

We were supposed to intercept the Hellrazor's next drug and armament shipment, crippling their operations big time. Instead, the lead we had turned out to be a dead end, and we were left chasing our tails like jackasses 'til we figured out we'd missed the exchange altogether.

If we're going to do damage to the Hellrazors, we've got to do better than today's amateur hour.

On my way toward the back, I overhear Velma.

"Let's get to work, girly," she says, grabbing Sydney's arm. "I'll show you everything there is to know about being a barmaid at the Steel Saloon."

I glare after them. It'd be a lot easier getting rid of the new girl if Velma and everybody else didn't take such a liking to her.

Fast forward two hours, my mood hasn't improved. But I have come out of the club office. Cash tricked me by talking me into taking a look at the repairs he's made on his FXDB Street Bob. Earlier today during our ride, he borrowed an Electra Glide from our shop. As road captain and tail gunner, we know the ins and outs of each other's bikes.

Once I came out of my cave, the others got me.

Ozzie supplied me a bottle of beer and tossed an arm around my shoulders. We wandered over to a table where he and Cash were sitting with Rhett "Bush" Bushman.

"You've had a hard day," Ozzie says. "But don't worry. 'Cuz the Tits on Heels are here to make everything better."

Cash takes a drink from his Coke can, his blue eyes glinting like he's about to laugh. "Are you trying to give Mace Sandie flashbacks?"

"My bad. What about one of the barmaids? They're a little more respectable. The ones that don't go full Tits on Heels."

“Most do,” Cash says.

“There’s the new one,” Bush pipes up. One of the senior members from Tom’s early days in the club, he’s lanky, wrinkly, and grayed, but he can still hang with the best of ’em.

“A Black chick. I like it,” Ozzie says. “Very progressive.”

“More T&A around,” Bush adds from between gulps of his pint. “Always a good thing in my book.”

At their words, I seek her out on the saloon floor. She’s already working the room solo, jotting down orders and delivering them like she’s been with us for years, not hours.

My glare narrows watching her. “She needs to go. She doesn’t belong here.”

Ozzie’s grin drops off his face. “Bro, that’s not cool. We’re all the same color on the inside.”

“It’s not that, you asshole,” I snarl. “She’s up to no good. Look at her.”

Ozzie and the other guys gladly follow my order. They lean sideways for an open and unembarrassed appraisal of her—*leering* like drunk dumbasses.

It doesn’t hurt that the girl’s being all sexy and cute taking orders. She’s smiling and doing that thing chicks do where they fake laugh at unfunny shit guys say. She’s strutting across the saloon in those damn cutoff denim shorts, leaning over tables pretending she can’t hear, meanwhile giving the guys a front-row view of cleavage.

It’s all a fucking act.

She’s not a real slut like the other club girls that come through wanting a good time with the guys. She’s not even trying to get chose and made an old lady.

Neither is the real reason she's here.

As if I don't have enough stuff on my plate between being acting prez and this situation with the Hellrazors. Today's mission was a shitshow and we failed to establish that we're not gonna let them fuck with us just 'cuz Tom's behind bars. The King's rule is as strong as ever.

If they think for one second they'll get away with shooting up Bush's trailer and battering our prospects, they're sorely mistaken.

I toss back the last of my beer and then push off the table. Cash won't trick me a second time. I've had enough of the club and need some privacy. Several of the guys try to stop me on my way out, but I ignore them.

I leave the saloon altogether.

Years ago, when Mom died and Tom put his all into the club, he had a house built out back on what used to be an empty lot of dust and rocks. Nothing too fancy... but large enough to house several people comfortably. He and Velma usually spend a couple nights a week here.

Sometimes... I do too. Now that I'm acting prez, I'll probably be sleeping here a lot more often.

I walk through the door with a hand scrubbing over my face, then fingers sliding over my short buzzcut head of hair. It's like the hangover I had earlier returns. A dull ache starts up just like it had this morning.

Fuck.

I need sleep. A good night's sleep.

I make it to the stairs before realizing Velma's already here. She's in the laundry room off the stairs, standing in front

of the washer and dryer. Linens and towels fill her arms. She looks up when I stop short in the doorway.

“Hey, Mace. Figured you’d be turning in soon,” she says.

“What’re the sheets for?”

She blows out a breath like it’s a chore answering. “Don’t be an asshole like earlier. But I offered the girl a place to stay.”

“You what!? You better be fucking kidding, Velma!”

“There you go! Being an asshole!”

“I’ll be the fucking devil if it means getting rid that bitch!”

She rolls her eyes. “She’s got nowhere else to stay. You don’t even know the girl.”

“Neither do you. Neither does anybody. Yet here you are, giving her a damn job at the club! Now you want her under our roof too?”

“She’s homeless... and broke. She just came off a bad marriage. I think he was abusive.”

I take a step toward her. “She told you that?”

“No... but I know a troubled woman when I see one, asshole,” she snaps. “You forget how I first came to the Kings?”

“Your situation and whatever that girl’s doing are very different.”

“It’s only for a few nights. ’Til she can find a place. I’ll put her up in the den. Downstairs. Far away from you.”

Velma wanders off with the armful of linens she’s clutching.

I could stop her. Put my foot down. Demand she fire the girl. Damn sure kick her out, even if it means she's sleeping on the streets, before she ever crosses the threshold into our house.

But I decide against all these things.

Because I'm going to find out what the fuck Sydney's doing here. I'm going to find out who sent her, and just why she's got Velma thinking she's some battered wife in need of sympathy.

Who the fuck are you, Sydney? And what are you hiding?

SYDNEY



“HEY, YOU GOT A PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD TONIGHT?”
Velma calls out.

It’s nearing the end of the night, and I’ve been on a roll—apparently, for a first night waitressing at the saloon, I’ve set a record. Most tables served. Most bikers pleased and charmed, supplied with as much beer and salty nuts as their hearts desired. All in as little time spent training as possible. I picked up what I was supposed to be doing and how on the fly.

I’ve worked enough bars and clubs to get it. I’ve served enough drunk, impatient, leering men to know what they want and like. The second I was turned loose on the floor, I knew what to do—slip into a role that oozes fun and sex.

All eyes were already on me as the only Black girl in the saloon. Curiosity hung in the air from the moment I stepped onto the bar floor. I combated it how I always do when put in uncertain situations—with a confident vibe to my walk, nobody could tell me shit.

I was not only the finest barmaid in the saloon in my low-cut top and denim cutoffs, I was the most competent. I memorized orders with an easy smile. I flirted when I caught one of the guys eyeing me, always in a playful but mysterious way. That left them curious.

By the end of the night, I had the bar wrapped around my little finger. Exactly as I hoped.

I'm delivering another round to a guy named Johnny and a few others when Velma asks me about my lodging.

I turn away from the table and pause as I think on my feet. Truthfully, I haven't thought that far ahead. After the bus terminal, I went straight to the saloon. My purse and luggage are in the back room. In the back of my mind, I was hoping I'd get lucky enough to snag a room at one of the motels in town.

But something about the way Velma asks trips me up. I make my first mistake of the night, my brow wrinkling, my gaze diverting.

"I'll figure something out," I say.

"Don't go being proud. You'll stay with us if you don't got anywhere else." Velma sidles over, putting an arm around me and courting me away from the table I just served. "Listen, I know how it is. Starting over's rough. I slept in the park a few nights. Before I met the Kings. I wouldn't recommend it. Not the safest place to lay your head at night. We got your back."

A twinge of guilt sprouts inside me. I quickly squash it when I remember why I'm here and what I have to do. None of these people deserve my loyalty no matter how nice and accommodating they seem to be.

"I don't want to inconvenience you."

"We've got the room. Finish cleaning up, then come to the house out back. I'll set you up with a room." The box-dye blonde moves to walk off, then doubles back. "You're a real one, Syd. I can tell you are. I see some of myself in you. You've got that spunk to you. Listen to me, and you'll go far

here. Maybe... become an old lady. Damn sure some of the fellas have taken to you.”

I look around as she says this.

More than a couple of the guys around the bar are sneaking glances in my direction. Some outright watching... but not in a threatening way. In a way that’s openly lusty. Openly *wanton*.

My skin flushes as I turn back to Velma.

“Thanks,” I say. “I just might take you up on that room offer.”

It’s nearing three a.m., and a couple of the tables are still going. A King or two passes out in a corner of the saloon, in need of help getting up and sobering up. The ones still hell bent on drinking chug their beers and grow louder.

We stick it out for a while before we squash it. Mick, the head bartender, cuts the remaining guys off, and the handful of barmaids on shift begin cleanup.

Something else I’m familiar with after many years in my early 20s spent waitressing and bartending.

I’m fast and proficient, wiping down tables and stacking chairs. I stick tips down my tight crop top, purposely catching the eye of several Kings.

Sex appeal is my biggest weapon during my time here. I intend on using it every chance I get.

“Imagine picking up peanut shells.”

I go still at the shrill, snarky voice coming from behind. It’s female, and whoever it belongs to *wants* me to know I’ve heard her. I toss a quick glance over my shoulder.

Thin, tattooed eyebrows. Ruddy skin. Fried blonde hair. Large, botched titties that contrast a very slim waist.

I have no idea who the hell this is except that she hates me. I can *feel* it.

“Can I help you?” I ask plainly.

“You’re the one needing help,” she retorts. “You come in here acting like you’re hot stuff on the floor. But nobody’s lower than a barmaid. You clean up freakin’ puke.”

I turn all the way around, both hands notching on my waist, my rag still clenched within my fingers. “I’m sorry... who are you again?”

“Sandie,” she says with a haughty air as if she’s the Queen of England. “I’m a club girl. Tits on Heels. Know your place.”

Club girl.

I don’t know much about motorcycle clubs. But even in my limited knowledge, bits and pieces I’ve picked up, club girls are the ones who fuck the bikers. They’re around for a good time only. Just party girls that socialize with the club for a while ’til they either get tired of the club or get discarded by that club.

Yet Sandie eyeballs me like I’m beneath her. In her mind, she’s above me as a club girl.

My temper threatens me, prickling my skin, but I resist its temptation. Flashing her the same easy smile I’ve used all night, I decide to act unbothered.

“I know my place,” I answer in a calm tone. “It’s doing honest work to earn honest money. I’m above other things like being passed around by a group of men who only want me for sex. Excuse me, Sandie. You’re in my way.”

The blonde can't hide her scowl as I strut past her, so close I *almost* bump into her. I don't need to touch her to make my point—the close call is enough.

My words were. She's got the message loud and clear.

Don't fuck with me.

I check in with Mick at the bar and finish wiping down the rest of the tables.

“You're cleared off, babe,” the old man says, shooting me a yellow-toothed smile. “You've got no idea how big a help you were tonight. Damn game changer.”

I leave the bar uncertain where I'm even going. Velma said to seek out the house behind the bar. As I gather my suitcase in the backroom, I second guess accepting her offer. Do I really want to put myself in a position where I'm living under the Steel King's roof?

As if working for them isn't bad enough...

My hands tighten around the handle before I make my choice.

Turn left to leave the saloon and find lodging elsewhere. Right to take Velma up on her offer.

With a slow sigh, I go right.

The house Velma spoke of is a typical two-story American Craftsman—the porch in the front and the pitched triangular roof up top. Surprisingly wholesome for a home housing bikers.

I enter with a knock.

Velma happens to be walking by with an armful of linens. She beckons me to follow her. We head down the first floor

hall, where she shows me to what appears to be the den. The couch pulls out into a bed and there's a TV with cable.

"Costs us eighty bucks a month, but Tom refuses to cancel it," she says, rolling her eyes. "He's... uh, not around right now. But you'll meet him when he gets out."

I pick up on the context clues of where Tom could be and take her word for it.

The moment I'm left alone, I feel like I can embrace the real me for the first time in hours.

Be myself.

No act. No pretenses. No ulterior motives.

Sydney Singer without all the secrecy and spying.

I pull out the sofa bed with a *boing* from the springs in the mattress and set up my suitcase in the far corner. I'm still not sure if this stay is just a night, or if I'll be here a while. I was hoping for solitude in my off time; if I'm under the roof of the Kings at all times, I'll have no breathing room.

No privacy and time to recoup.

But that could also afford me an unvarnished view of the inner workings of the club.

To avenge Pop. I'll do it. I'll do anything.

After spreading open my suitcase and selecting my pajamas and grabbing my toiletry bag, I venture outside the den.

The hall is only dimly lit by a light on in the living room. I follow it, wishing I'd asked Velma where the bathroom was. I wander out into the open space of the living room only to discover I'm not alone—the ground floor layout flows into the

kitchen, affording me a front row view of Mason Cutler as he stands under the fluorescent lighting in his leather vest and tattoos.

He notices me immediately.

His gaze flicks to me. His face hardens... every feature takes on an ironclad quality as even the muscle in his jaw becomes distinct and prominent.

He hates me.

I first felt it in his stare when he entered the bar. A raw, crude vibration of hate that buzzed from every fiber of his being—he couldn't stand me and wanted me gone.

Out of his space.

At any cost necessary.

I almost let it affect me as I wander into the open space. Then I remember to mask, putting up the same front I had when he'd taken to circling me like a vulture.

My head held high, I strut across the open space, clutching my things. I'm hoping he'll decide to let our unspoken beef go this one time. It's late, and after a long day, I want nothing more than a hot shower and a few hours of sleep.

But that's asking for too much.

As I step toward the guest bathroom, he cuts me off. It happens in a quick, fluid movement. He goes from standing in the kitchen, lit up by the bright fluorescent bulbs overhead, to sidestepping into my path.

I stumble back half a step.

He's a glorious sight even now—his muscles bulge out from the short sleeves of his white t-shirt, inked in designs I

know nothing about, and his tall form towers over me even at my height of five-seven. He surveys me under hard, dark green eyes that are as unnerving and unsettling as they are smoldering and entrancing.

I find myself unable to look away.

It's some kind of invisible draw. Some kind of *sorcery*.

He holds me captive. His gaze and his presence and his muscled body standing in my way.

I react by glaring at him, silently demanding he move the fuck out of my path and let me pass.

The moment stretches on. A pulse of unresolved tension deepens with the seconds that go by. I expect the worst and hope for it too—Mason Cutler might think he rules over everyone, but I'm not everyone. I'm Sydney Singer, and I don't follow the rules.

I've got no problem showing him just how little of a fuck I give.

"You're in my way," I say.

"You're in my house," he answers.

"At the invitation of Velma."

"What Velma says doesn't mean shit. She's not prez. I am. And I don't want you here."

My stomach flutters, but I only stand up straighter. "Too late," I reply. "I already am here. It seems like you'll have to put up with me."

"What the fuck do you want? What's your deal?"

"I owe you no explanation."

“You’re divorced, huh?” he asks, a sudden humorous beat about him. He folds his arms over his muscled chest and surveys me with a glint in the dark green of his eyes. “You some battered wife escaping some abuser husband? I call bullshit.”

I mimic him. I fold my arms and step toward him. “It doesn’t matter what you think. I know my truth.”

“Yeah?” He’s the one to copy this time—he moves closer, making it so the gap between us ceases to exist. His chest is practically touching my chin as he peers down at me like I’m some kind of bug he’s caught. “Well, your truth might not be *the* truth. I’m gonna find out what the fuck you’re up to, Singer. And I’m going to make sure you regret the day you thought you could fucking come up in here and pull some shiesty shit.”

He bumps into me as he passes, knocking me back half a step at the forcefulness of it.

I spin around to watch him go. Anger rushes me, almost tempting me to do something I’d regret. That would probably blow my cover.

I resist as he strides off and disappears up the staircase.

“Cocky ass dick,” I mutter. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

I’m taking you down, Mason Cutler. I’m going to burn the MC—I’m going to burn everything you have—to the ground.

MASON



WE RIDE OUT AS A SMALL UNIT. ME, CASH, OZZIE, TITO, AND Moses. We're just going to the town limits. Right where Pulsboro meets its end and then turns into open country road that leads into other local towns like Wheaton.

Tito and Moses weren't originally supposed to come with us, but Tito volunteered last minute, and Moses replaced Johnny Flanagan when he fell out.

The only sound on the streets comes from the rumble of our bikes and the twitter of birds. The shops around town haven't opened up. It's summer, which means school's out and no kids piling into yellow buses. Only the occasional car passes us by.

Normally, we don't ride this early.

None of us are ever up with the sun let alone straight enough for a mission.

But today's different—today's a direct consequence of our failure yesterday.

Now, they've escalated our feud yet again.

They've gotten bold as hell. Beyond what's expected between two clubs battling it out.

In our small formation, we turn onto the long country road that leads toward the outskirts of town. I'm heading the group. Cash comes up the rear. We keep tight, riding as a unit in tune with each other.

The stretch of land known as the Brinkley Farm appears on our left. We veer toward the green farmland in a wide turn that's synchronized. The dirt path takes us up to the big white farmhouse where Gregory Brinkley's waiting.

He's a small man always found in a checkered shirt and worn denim. A long time ago, he lost the use of his left eye, which has resulted in him wearing a patch at all times.

As we dismount, he meets us with a squint of his one good eye. "About time you made it. Sun's been up for two hours."

Ozzie grins at him. "I'm a wake-when-the-sun's-going-down kinda guy."

Brinkley eyes the head-to-toe tatted-up King like he's seen an alien.

Being the peacekeeper he is, Cash quickly interjects. "Show us what they did."

We follow Brinkley far out where he grows the bulk of his crops. You can smell it before you see it—the stench of burnt grass and lingering traces of gasoline.

"All this season's zucchini and cucumbers, gone," Brinkley says, hands on his waist. "I was snoring by 8 p.m. It was Carla that heard 'em out here last night. She prodded me awake, but by the time I made it out here with my shotgun, they were hightailing it off my land."

"They come on their bikes?" I ask.

Brinkley shakes his head. “They rode up in a big pickup truck.”

“How do you know it was them?” Ozzie ponders aloud, scratching his head. “It could’ve been some college dipshits.”

“It was the Hellrazors. They had the patch on their rear bumper!” Brinkley explains with his saggy cheeks coloring red. “They’re after me ’cuz I refused to give them the same kinda prices I sell to the Kings for. They wanted my barley at discount. You know the prez owns that brewery in Wheaton. I shoulda just sold it to ’em for the price they wanted. It would’ve been a loss on my end... but now look. They took out half our produce we sell at the weekly markets. Probably would’ve gone for the barley too if they had the time...”

“No, fuck that,” I growl. “You don’t sell them shit at discount. This was payback ’cuz you’re loyal to us. You belong to our territory. They don’t get to dictate prices for shit that’s not theirs.”

“Then what are you gonna do about it?”

“Cálmate. No se preocupe, señor,” Tito says with a pat on Brinkley’s back. “We’ll handle it. Won’t we, brothers? The Kings... we got you.”

The reassuring words from Tito seem to do the trick—the color fades from Brinkley’s face and he gives a stiff nod.

We depart a few minutes later, walking back out to our bikes and talking over the situation.

“I say we go burn their shit down,” Ozzie says. “They’ve got farms in Wheaton.”

Cash gives Ozzie a disapproving look. “Punish small town farmers for what they did to this one?”

“Eye for an eye!”

“He’s got a point,” Tito admits.

“No innocents,” I say, swinging my leg over my bike, helmet in hand. “It’s the Hellrazors we’ve got beef with. They’re who we fuck up.”

Ozzie grins as the rumbles of our bikes fill the air. “I like fucking things up.”

You’d think the feud with the Hellrazors would be enough problems for one day. We return to the saloon only to be confronted by another problem. Mick, our bartender and manager of the bar, pulls me aside with a solemn look on his face.

“We’ve gotta talk club funds,” he says. “We’re underperforming, Mace.”

“You talk to Bush about this? He’s our treasurer.”

I walk out from under the cover where we’ve parked our bikes. On summer afternoons it keeps our rides safe from the sizzling hot sun; nobody likes to burn themselves touching steel and leather that’s been in the sun for hours.

Mick walks with me as we approach the saloon doors.

“I’ve brought it up with Bush. But he says we’re caught up on dues. It’s the saloon that’s not raking in as much dough. Some of our regulars haven’t been by in weeks. The result of Hellrazors running them off. We’ve gotta find another way in the meantime. I’m being told we can’t order things we need ’cuz we’re running short.”

“I’ll bring it up at our next club meeting.”

We push open the doors leading into the saloon to find it bursting with life—guys are shouting along to Ride The Wind by Poison with beer bottles in hand, and a game of poker’s going on in the middle of the bar.

Other than special occasions, the saloon’s rarely this packed midafternoon. I glance over at Mick for answers.

He shrugs. “Today’s business doesn’t negate what I said. It’s still too early to tell if this is a fluke or that new barmaid of yours got a gift.”

My mood darkens. It reflects on my face. “What you call a gift, I call a curse.”

“You see how she keeps the guys going? Look at her. It’s a damn talent she’s got.”

I turn my angry gaze on the bar floor. It’s easy picking her out of the crowd—Sydney’s presence instantly draws your attention to her. She’s standing at the table where the poker game’s going on, dressed in another tight top and even tighter jeans.

Fucking hell.

Her clothes might as well be *painted* on. The coke bottle outline of her body is distracting. The way her ass moves when she walks. The way her rack brushes up against the customers as she leans over tables and sets their beers down. The way she smiles at them and places a delicate hand on their shoulders to check if they’re okay.

She knows what she’s doing. She’s flirting with each and every one of them.

Supplying them with beer and charming them. Keeping them happy as can be.

She winks as one tips her a twenty and then moves on to a guy who catches her attention to tell an unfunny joke. She laughs anyway.

I grit my teeth, a flame of irritation torching me.

If this bitch isn't up to no good, then I'm no Steel King. I'm the fucking King of England.

“Mace? What's that look for? Mace?!”

Mick calls after me, but I can't hear him. I've set my targets on Sydney, and I've decided enough's enough. This shit ends right now.

I head straight for her. Some of the guys notice before she does. She's too busy giggling at some dumb shit Ozzie's said (I'll scold him later for entertaining her). I'm footsteps away when she finally looks over and spots me.

Surprise flickers in her brown eyes for a split second before she remembers she's not supposed to let me shake her.

“Mace,” she says in a cool tone. “Want to join us? We were thinking about playing a game of pool—”

“First off, let's get one thing straight. Kings call me Mace. Outsiders don't get that privilege. Do it again and you won't like what happens,” I snap, grabbing her by the elbow and wrenching her away from the group by force. “You're coming with me. Time to put you to real work.”

“Aw, c'mon, Mace! Don't be like that. The girl's just hanging out—”

“She was serving our beers—”

“We called her over. She didn’t do nothing—”

I ignore them all. My hand clenches tighter around Sydney’s arm and I drag her along with me across the bar. She doesn’t fight me on it, though I can sense her uncertainty. Even if she acts like she’s tough shit, she’s not that good of an actress; she’s yet to figure out how to take me. How to read my actions.

Good.

The bitch can’t be trusted, and I don’t want her to be able to manipulate me the way she has the others. I want to keep her guessing. Keep her worried.

Afraid.

“Where are you taking me?” she finally asks as I pull her toward the backroom. “I have several tables. Mick doesn’t have anyone to cover—”

“He’ll get somebody. I’m putting you to work. Real work. No more flirting. This bar isn’t social hour. It’s the clubhouse for the fucking Steel Kings. That seems lost on you.”

“You’re hurting my arm!”

I squeeze tighter and pull her so hard she stumbles. “I don’t give a shit.”

Once we’re inside the back room, I slam shut the door. She jumps and then pins me with a narrow-eyed glare.

“Great. So not only are you an asshole, you hurt women.”

“I’ve never laid a finger on one in my life.”

The sound she makes is of disbelief. Skepticism. She turns away from me like she can’t stand the sight of me.

Something about that—and the skeptical sound she made—*bothers* me.

It makes me angrier. More agitated.

I pace the cramped space of the backroom that's filled up with stacks of beer cases and other alcohol.

“Your husband put his hands on you?” I ask.

That earns a look. Her head snaps in my direction for a scalding glance. “Why do you ask?”

“You sure flirt like nobody's business for a battered woman who was supposedly married not too long ago.”

“I don't want to talk about this.”

“We'll talk about whatever the fuck I want to talk about—and you'll do whatever the fuck I ask. I'm your boss. You work for me. Got it?”

I can see the hatred bursting at the seams. The deep and intense dislike she has for me as she folds her arms across her chest and looks at me like I disgust her.

I don't give a fuck. She can hate me all she wants. I'm not too fond of her either. I can't remember the last time I've felt this strongly about a woman—good or bad—and that's because I usually keep them at arm's length. The women in Pulsboro are bland, boring, and all the same. None of them pique my interest beyond what's between their thighs.

We're a day into knowing each other, and Sydney holds my attention more than any other woman I've ever met.

But it's not something that's a good thing. It's a very bad, very dangerous thing, because she's not supposed to be here. She's nothing but trouble.

Life would be a lot easier if she got lost and never came back.

I intend on making things so miserable for her here, she'll leave.

“What do you want?” she asks through clenched teeth.

“See these cases of beer? Arrange 'em by brand. Pike with Pike and Texan Brew with Texan Brew. Then I want you to restock the bar. Then you're to mop and dust the room. It's filthy.”

I leave her speechless, stewing in the hatred she's got for me, and slam the door.

It'll take her hours to finish. The cases are too heavy for our barmaids. Cleaning up what's probably years' worth of dust and dirt will be enough to lose an appetite.

I'd feel guilty if I wasn't convinced she's up to no good. If I wasn't sure she's here with bad intentions.

Any guilt that pings me on my walk out of the backroom disappears the second I remember how she'd flirted. A day and a half in, and she's already got the guys wrapped around her little finger.

I clench my fists. “Not on my fucking watch.”

SYDNEY



MY BODY ACHES BY THE TIME MY SHIFT ENDS. I RETURN TO the King's house behind the saloon in desperate need of a long soak in the tub. Mason will be pissed if he finds out I'm about to use his bathroom to relax in a pool of warm water and Epsom salt, but I don't give a shit.

It's his fault I'm this sore and exhausted in the first place.

The asshole intentionally pulled me off the floor and gave me grunt work. I had half a mind to refuse, and would've, if it hadn't been clear he was trying to get under my skin. If I complained and refused to do the work, it'd only prove his point.

I didn't belong. I couldn't hang. I was too weak.

I am not weak.

For the next few hours, I embarked on the painstaking task of rearranging a roomful of beer and alcohol by brand. The beer cases were the worst—the first couple weren't so heavy, but by the twentieth case, my arms were shaking.

Mick happened by for a bottle of Absinthe and then lost his mind when he saw what I was doing.

“That's not like him with our barmaids. He put you up to this? *Mace* did?!”

He cleared me off and sent in several of the bikers to finish the work, but the damage was done.

I worked the rest of my shift, taking orders with a back that was aching and fingers that felt weak.

I snap shut the bathroom door and release a deep sigh. Most people take moments like this for granted. I couldn't feel more differently. This bath feels like the first real moment of relaxation and peace I've had in forty-eight hours.

Ever since setting foot in Pulsboro.

I strip down and slide into the tub of warm, fizzy water. My body thanks me. The muscles that have felt tense and achy soften up due to the Epsom salt. I breathe another soft sigh that has me closing my eyes and feeling like I'm floating in paradise.

For a moment, I pretend I am—I'm far away from the hell that's the Steel Kings's lair.

Pop is still alive. So is Mom. We're still a happy, tight knit family.

Then my eyes open, and I remember it's all a false reality.

The real reality is that I'm under the roof of one of the most dangerous motorcycle clubs in the country—I'm living with the acting president of the Steel Kings who happens to hate my guts. It's in his stare, in his words and demeanor around me.

The very aura he gives off in my presence, dripping of intense dislike.

If he could get rid of me on the spot, he would. He just might...

I banish Mason Cutler from my thoughts for the remainder of my bath. My skin's pruned by the time I convince myself to get up and head to bed. I towel off realizing I've forgotten the bottom half of my pajamas.

Of course. Ugh.

I'm so exhausted, I wasn't paying attention. I was more focused on grabbing my Epsom salt.

The time's almost four in the morning. Only Mason and Velma are here. Both of whom turned in earlier than I have (as far as I know).

The den's only across the living room and down the hall. It's dark with only the hall light on. I can sneak by unnoticed in my t-shirt and panties.

With my things in hand, I fling open the bathroom door and rush out. I make it all the way across the living room. The hall comes into view. I'm home free.

Then Mason appears from one of the doors down the hall.

There's no hiding it, even with the dim light that allows for shadows. I freeze at the exact moment he spots me. I'm forced to watch in real time as he stops, then his gaze dips—it slides lower and lower down my body 'til it reaches the apex of my thighs.

My skin warms up and my hands hurry to yank down the hem of my t-shirt. It does nothing; the t-shirt's too short to cover more than my stomach and start of my hips. My patch of baby blue panties peeks out in full view for him.

“Do you mind?” I growl, crossing my legs and holding my toiletry bag in front of my sex.

He takes another second. It's like he's stuck at the moment. For once he's caught by surprise and seems unable to think on his feet. His expression hardens and his dark green eyes finally flick back up to my face.

“Do you think you're at home?”

“What? I don't know what you're—”

“Do you think you're at home? Answer me,” he says, starting toward me. His stride's heavy, his posture aggressive.

Anyone would feel threatened. They'd feel intimidated this deadly, tattooed biker is headed toward them... or potentially turned on by how good he looks in his leather and denim, his intense eyes on me and only on me.

His energy over takes me, a dominant force that rules whatever it touches.

Including me.

As if made of steel himself, Mason's all hard eyes and muscle. A man that exudes masculinity and a bad boy edge, wrapped up in tattooed skin and dark denim. I don't think I've ever been so thrown off by a man before, so instantly lost in his sexy alpha presence that I can barely function.

My insides twist into knots, though I don't show it. As always, I force myself to stand my ground as Mason confronts me.

“Put some fucking clothes on,” he growls, passing me up. “Around here, it's all or nothing. Either be fully dressed, or I'll make you walk around here butt-ass naked.”

He leaves no room for arguments. He's gone in the next second, the clack of his boots dying out.

I roll my eyes and then make my own noise—I stomp the rest of the way to the den. I’d slam the door if I wasn’t sure Velma’s asleep upstairs.

How the hell does Mason Cutler manage to make my skin heat up from what feels strangely like sexual tension while also making me shake with rage?

I drop onto the sofa bed and pull out my little purple book. Though I haven’t had much free time, I have been making sure to write everything down like I always do. Even if it takes years, I’m going to figure out what happened to Pop. I’m going to make sure the guys who murdered him—whoever it was from the Steel Kings—suffer.

“Don’t worry, Pop,” I whisper. “They’re not getting away with it.”

The next few days are more of the same. I integrate myself at the saloon and among the club members. I might not be a club girl as Sandie so cattily pointed out, but I don’t need to be one—several of the guys are cool with me. Meanwhile, I’ve overheard a couple of them joke around about Sandie’s obnoxious behavior and bad fake tits.

It doesn’t matter to me either way. I’m only here for one purpose.

I might ingratiate myself with Velma, Mick, and the bikers, but none of these people matter to me.

Solving Pop’s murder does. Holding his killers accountable does. Seeking the revenge they’re owed...

I have only a handful of run-ins with Mason. We mostly stay out of each other's way. I'm busy spending most of the day and night at the saloon. He's seemingly preoccupied with club business, looking noticeably more pissed and stressed than ever.

On my seventh day, the club hosts its monthly meeting. The surrounding parking lot and street outside fill up with four times as many Harley-Davidsons as usual. Members I didn't even know existed pile into the saloon. Men of all ages and different looks—still most with a rugged, renegade quality about them—and even a couple Black and Latino men.

One of the tallest members, built like a redwood tree, is a forty-something Black man named Big Eddie. He approaches the second he sees me, with a laidback smile and introduces himself. "I'm an enforcer," he says, winking. "You need anything, you find me. I'll handle it. Especially for a sista."

Velma pulls me aside and briefs me on what the barmaids do during the club meetings.

"You don't hear or see shit, girly," she says in the blunt, matter-of-fact way only she can. "You serve the beer. You don't draw attention to yourself. That's it, got it?"

I nod. "If it's supposed to be a secret, then maybe it's best I'm not there."

...reverse psychology. Hopefully, my hesitation wins your trust even more.

Velma slides an arm around me. "The fellas want their beer more than they want the privacy. Just do your job and stay out of the way."

I take Velma's advice with the knowledge that my ulterior motive will still be at play. I'll present myself as an

unsuspecting and innocent barmaid while I listen to every word spoken in search of any important info.

I enter alongside the other barmaid on shift with a pint of beer in each hand and begin serving.

As sergeant at arms, Alberto “Tito” Dominguez calls the meeting to order. The first order of business is a recap of the last meeting. Ozzie happens to be secretary. He stands up with his beer bottle and a wrinkled napkin square that’s supposed to be his notes. A couple lines in, it’s obvious his so-called ‘notes’ are nothing more than gibberish.

Big Eddie tosses his own crumpled up napkin at Ozzie and boos. Several of the guys laugh, including Ozzie, who scratches his tattooed neck and then shrugs. “Cutty might’ve thought twice before making me secretary.”

“Tom made you secretary ’cuz it’s a fucking laugh riot every time, Oz.”

“Alright, fellas, time for serious business,” Bush says, standing up from his table at the front. “Mick and I have been crunching numbers. The club’s not doing so hot with funds.”

“What about the dues?” shouts out a man in the crowd whose name I haven’t learned yet.

“We’ve taken the dues into account.”

“The problem is, we’ve got less regulars coming by,” Mick says with a solemn shake of his head.

“Some of ’em have been intimidated by the Hellrazors. Specially the ones from outta town,” says another man I don’t know. Chubby, with a wiry beard that touches his belly.

“They’ve been playing dirty, that’s for sure,” Tito says. A couple of the men nod along.

I'm moving between the tables, delivering more beer. It's a hard task keeping the dozens of members reupped on their drinks. When one's good, another's empty. The job's almost so busy that I lose track of paying attention to what's being said.

I've caught wind of the rivalry between the Steel Kings and Hellrazors, even as an outsider. Tensions are escalating. There's some kind of mission Mason and the others had been hoping to complete only to fail. I'd overheard them talking about wanting to 'send a message.'

Could it have anything to do with Pop? Had they been trying to send a message by taking him out?

But why? None of it makes any sense...

"Back to the funds, fellas," Bush reminds. "We've got to figure out how we're gonna fill the gap. Normally, we get some huge boosts from the semi-annual bike show we do... but that's not for another three months. We need something in the spare time."

"We could always cut back on beer," Cash offers from his seat next to Mason. He earns even louder boos than Ozzie had. His blue eyes twinkle as if he expected such a reaction, though he was joking.

Finally, Mason decides to step in. He's remained silent at the head table where the club leadership sits until now. He rises up from his seat and surveys the men around the cavernous room.

"We don't like doing it, but it might be time we get back into dealing."

Immediately, the room breaks out in conversation. It's obvious from the get-go there's mixed feelings on the

suggestion. Some men express agreement with what Mason said while others shake their heads and explain why it's a bad idea.

Though I might not know what dealing in an MC involves, I have an idea.

I deliver Bush, Tito, and Ozzie fresh bottles, and then slide my tray under my arm.

These men are getting nowhere. Nobody has any creative ideas beyond intimidation and law breaking.

Beyond dealing.

Velma said not to get involved, to keep my head down, and do my job.

But as the men discuss amongst themselves what to do, I see it as an opportunity. Potentially, one that could blow up in my face. They could grow angry I'd dare speak up, or even eavesdrop on their discussion.

Or they could be grateful.

I inhale a quiet breath and make my decision.

"I have an idea."

My voice is meeker, lower than usual.

At first no one hears me.

Ozzie's the only one to notice—he nudges Cash who motions to Mason and then to me.

Suddenly, the whole bar room falls silent enough to hear my pounding heart. All eyes land on me, the dozens of leather-clad men turning their attention my way.

I swallow, muster up more confidence, and speak louder. "I have an idea. Why don't we... what about if we hold a

fundraiser?”

“A fundraiser?” Bush grunts.

“Yes,” I answer, clutching my large tray. “It’s summertime. Kids are out of school. The days are longer. People like to be out and about. We can make it family themed—a Steel King community fundraiser. Maybe do stuff like photoshoots with bike displays and sell club merchandise. We can open up the saloon. What about serving a simple food menu? Burgers and franks off a grill?”

Nobody says anything. Everybody stares at me.

For seconds on end.

I lose my nerve, my confidence vanishing. A cold wave of instant regret passes over me as I realize I’ve made a big mistake. I’ve overstepped my place.

These men are not amused. I should’ve listened to Velma. But then—

“That’s not half bad,” pipes up Big Eddie. “Lots of kids love the Kings. They’d want to come by to see the bikes. Buy a civilian patch.”

“We only sell merchandise during our semi-annual events,” Mason says coldly.

“Maybe we need to update that rule in our charter. What do you think, Tito? You’re sergeant at arms,” says Bush.

“I could see it working,” Cash says with a nod. “A fundraiser would also send the message to everybody else in town we’ve got them. They don’t need to fear the Hellrazors.”

A chorus of men break out in agreement. Soon it seems almost the entire club is behind the idea.

“We can have the old ladies put together a merch booth like at the semi-annuals.”

“Mick can grill out back.”

“We’ll set up a couple bikes by the Chop Shop.”

I watch my idea blossom into more than even I imagined. My confidence returns with a smile.

“I’m glad you like my idea,” I say. “We can get started planning—”

“There is no we.”

For a second time, things in the club drop off. Everybody recognizes that Mason has spoken, which means they better shut up.

I realize it’s me he’s speaking to—from halfway across the saloon he’s eyeing me, his face a callous mask.

There’s no mistaking it. He hates that I’ve involved myself.

He hates me. He always will.

I decide to clarify. “I didn’t mean to include myself—”

“Good,” he snaps. “Because you’re not one of us. You’re not a club girl. You’re not an old lady. You’re nothing here.”

“Mace,” Ozzie mutters.

Mason ignores him. If anything, his green eyes darken with loathing. “You have one job and one job only. You serve us beer. That means you keep your mouth shut, go back and grab some more bottles, and do your fucking job. You got that?”

I feel like I’ve been slapped across the face. His words sting enough. My cheeks heat up and prickle as if struck by a

heavy palm.

The other club members exchange uncertain glances as though tempted to defend me, but conflicted due to Mason being acting president. As a result, they simply sit in silence as I stand in humiliation.

For once, Mason's done it. He's chinked my armor.

There's something about the way he spoke to me, the way he scolded me like I mean nothing, that was a little too personal.

It hit a little too close to home. My wound nobody knows I have.

Mason's right.

I'm not one of them. Because I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. That's always been my curse as an orphan.

Pop was the last person I had. The last family...

"Excuse me," I mutter, turning to go. I'm gone from the bar floor before anyone can call me back.

SYDNEY



“YOU REALLY ARE ME,” VELMA CACKLES, BLOWING CIGARETTE smoke.

It’s early morning, and I haven’t even had my coffee yet. Velma’s perched at the bar counter of the saloon, smoking over a plate of cheesy eggs and black coffee.

I slide onto the stool next to hers and reach over the counter to nick a mug and the coffee pot. “I’m sorry... what are you talking about?”

“You, girly. You are me.”

“And I am you..?” I finish, confused.

She cranks out another cackle like an airhorn. “Might as well be. You don’t wanna know what I’d do being as young as you with a body like that. The fellas wouldn’t know what hit ’em—I’d have ’em worn out on the floor by the time I was through. But what I *really* meant was the other day. The club meeting.”

My usually confident demeanor diminishes. Only because the memories of what Mason said and how he treated me are still fresh—it’s been years since I felt so humiliated.

So cut down.

“I shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

“I’d advise against it,” she admits, blowing more smoke. “But this might be a one-time exception. You were amazing.”

“I... was...?”

“Your idea? The community fundraiser? It was old lady worthy. The current crop we’ve got are all lazy wannabe princesses. Not one of ’em wants to plan anything. But here you are, thinking up new ideas and trying to breathe life into the club.”

“I wasn’t trying to act like an old lady,” I say quickly. “That’s not what I want.”

Velma casts me a skeptical side eye, her cigarette between her lips and a forkful of cheesy eggs between her fingers. “Girly, whatever your motive, you’re helping big time. I’ve got a bomb to drop though. You know the bike display? The one that’ll be set up in front of the Chop Shop?”

“The display you and Mason will be setting up? What about it?”

“I’m dropping out. I’ve got too much crap on my plate. Don’t look at me like that—I’ve got my hands full. I’m manager at the Chop Shop. I’m head old lady, which means I’m dealing with shit from all the other whiny old lady bitches. Then I’ve got Tom on the back burner. He might be serving five to ten, but we’ve got some conjugal visits planned if you catch my drift...”

I almost shudder at the thought. Not that Velma is unattractive—for a late-forties woman who regularly drinks, smokes, and lives a fast lifestyle with bikers, she’s a catch—but the thought of her and Mason’s father getting down in some trailer at a prison is too much so early in the morning...

I gulp down several mouthfuls of burnt coffee to make up for it.

“Anyway,” Velma goes on, “I need you to take it on. You and Mason.”

“Nope,” I answer immediately, shaking my head. “Nope. No...ope.”

“Girly, either it’s you or it ain’t happening. I tried asking the lazy wannabe princess old ladies. Nobody took the bait. So either you do it, or there will be no bike display.”

I heave a deep, miserable sigh. “This is extremely cruel of you. He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

I raise my brows. She releases yet another witch cackle, almost choking on her cigarette.

“Okay, alright. So, he’s... not your biggest fan.”

“Mason isn’t... he’s not...” I pause. “There are club members from other races and backgrounds, but he’s not... *you know*... is he?”

“Mason? Girly, his celebrity crush is Rihanna. He loves that she’s a bad girl with some tats. But, no, he ain’t. He just... he doesn’t trust you... for whatever reason.”

“I can’t control that, Velma. I can’t make him trust me.”

“You two need to spend more time together. That’s what it is,” she says, blowing cigarette smoke, then topping it off with a bite of eggs. “Which is what makes you taking my spot for the display so perfect. You two will figure it out.”

I don’t answer her, bringing my coffee mug to my lips. I couldn’t disagree more.

Because the club profits have dipped so dangerously low, and it's the height of summer, we rush putting together the fundraiser. We go from the club meeting where I propose the idea to dividing amongst ourselves to plan and put it together.

In the span of a week, we've set a date, begun solidifying the details, and started advertising around town.

Mason makes it no secret he's pissed about working the bike display with me. I even overhear him trying to trade spots with several of the other guys—he swears up a storm when they apologize and turn him down.

“I don't want to be working with you either,” I say one evening. “Just FYI.”

“I've got a solution. You can quit and get the hell out of here.” He juts his chin to the saloon doors, glaring at me like I'm his worst enemy.

My insides knot up, my outside—my skin all over—feeling a lot like the afternoon of the meeting. As though I've been slapped. Warm and sensitive and tender.

Every interaction I have with him now puts me on edge. It makes me feel like I have to be on guard, like I can't relax in his presence.

I'm not one to avoid people. I tend to force confrontation or make people uncomfortable when they themselves seek to avoid it. Yet I find myself, as days go by, avoiding Mason. If he's in the living room, I wait inside the den 'til he's gone. If he turns up at the saloon while I'm on the floor, I invent an excuse to go to the back.

It's unlike me. It's almost... cowardly.

But what else can I do? I'm in the world of the Steel Kings, and it just so happens, their King hates my fucking guts.

To what extent, I don't even want to think about. On some level, even though I don't want it to, it hurts. It's a rejection at a time when I've lost everyone. At a time when I'm wandering the world on my own, just trying to find justice...

The first day we're set to work together, I have to mentally prepare myself. I dress in one of my looser t-shirts, trying to hide the curves I've been displaying, and I slide into distressed boyfriend jeans that hang off my hips. I put my hair up into a messy bun and forgo any make up.

In the past, I prided myself on never dressing for a man. Yet here I am, considering what Mason will think as I piece together a modest outfit and look.

I walk into the Chop Shop for the first time like I'm invading a foreign land. The bike shop sits right next to the Steel Saloon, yet in the almost two weeks I've been in town, I haven't bothered to come by.

The acrid smell of grease and gasoline attacks me the moment I walk in. It's a strong enough stench that I also taste it—if the burn in your throat can be considered a taste.

The Chop Shop is all stacked tires, broken down pieces of bikes, and the tools that fix them. The buzz of an electric drill fills the air followed by the crank of a wrench.

I walk through the garage feeling like I'm more out of place here than at the biker bar. Just when I thought I couldn't feel more like an outsider.

I wander until I find him.

Mason's by the last garage door, standing by a couple of Harley's that look half put together. The sad thing is, I think twice before approaching. Do I really want to choose trouble today, or do I want to save myself the headache?

In the end, I approach. I do it with a roll of my eyes and an almost slump to my walk, but I head over to join him.

"There you are," he says. "About time. I've been here for fifteen minutes."

"We agreed on three o' clock."

"It's three o' five."

"Since when are you punctual?"

"Since I'm forced to do shit I don't want to for some dumb fundraiser," he answers. He kicks at the nearest half broken down bike. "I don't want to do this anymore than you do."

"There's a good chance it'll go by faster if we just... focus on the display."

He doesn't hide the dissatisfied roll of his eyes. Luckily, somehow, he still looks good—he's in another white t-shirt that emphasizes his toned, tattooed arms and hints at the flat abs underneath. His eyes catch in the window light of the garage and gleam a new shade of forest green. It'd be easier to hate him if he didn't look so damn good.

"Fine," he says. "Let's get started then. I was thinking we could put the original Topper on the first display. It's a classic that bike enthusiasts love seeing. Ours is out of commission, but I can get the mechanics to get it in decent shape before the fundraiser."

I pull out my purple notebook and jot down his idea. "What year is that bike? Maybe we can do a different bike

from each decade. Kind of like through the ages?”

I can't tell if he likes my idea or finds it stupid. His expression is that confusing.

He eyes me, then strokes his chin, and turns to look at the Topper nearby.

“The Topper's from 1965. We do got stuff from different years,” he admits finally.

“People would like that—being able to see vintage bikes and modern bikes.”

“What do you know about what anybody would like looking at bikes?”

The knots inside me—the ones that already exist by being in the mere presence of Mason—tighten uncomfortably. I shift as if to correct myself before he cuts in first.

“That was an asshole thing to say,” he admits, rubbing his neck. “Look, you're right. It'll be easier if we just... get through this.”

I hold my purple notebook to my chest. “I've done nothing to you. I've tried to be nice. All you've done is be an asshole to me.”

“You're an outsider... who's trying a little too hard to become an insider.”

“I just want to work and earn my wages. I don't give a fuck about anything else, Mason.”

For a moment that stretches on, he studies me. We're only inches apart, standing opposite each other, as his dark green eyes fix onto my face, and I stare back with as much confidence as I can.

Deep inside, the knots still tighten...

Mason is my big test. The only person who seems to suspect me. If I can win him over, then there's no way I won't uncover the truth.

Mason nods. "Then let's get this display knocked out. Your idea about the bikes through different decades is a good one. I'll handle figuring out which bikes from what time period. You figure out the set up we'll put them on."

"I was thinking under the carport in front of the saloon. Maybe we can set up one of those backdrop screens that photographers use?" I say, taking a step toward him. "It'll allow for photo ops. We can charge. Maybe do photo packages for people who want to pose on the bike?"

He eyes me for another second. "You're good at this stuff."

"I'm just brainstorming."

"Better ideas than anybody else's come up with."

His nod as he says it is still stiff and unnatural, but it's probably the nicest thing he's ever said to me... which holds merit on its own. His hand comes down onto the curve of my shoulder and he gives me a quick pat.

It lasts one-tenth of a second.

Yet it draws a heat out of me. I suck in a breath. My face goes warm and the knots inside spiral in different directions.

He walks off and doesn't look back. I shouldn't be so affected. I breathe out and then in, telling myself this.

Calm down. The only reason it feels special is because Mason's attractive, and he's an asshole.

I need these reminders. The reality check brings me back down to earth.

I spend the next hour calling around town to different professional photographers, inquiring about their prices and availability.

It's nearing four in the afternoon by the time I decide to head to the King's house behind the saloon. My shift starts at six and I prefer a shower and fresh change of clothes.

It's unintentional what I stumble on.

I'm passing through the saloon, walking down the hall in the back, when I catch a conversation from the office. The door's cracked and Mason's voice travels.

"We got that revenge weeks ago," he says. "After they shot up Bush's trailer."

I frown and inch closer.

"I'm sure," Mason answers. "He's dead."

He stops again as the person on the other end speaks.

"They're still refusing to get the message. I'll make sure they understand. You don't need to tell me twice. I'll fucking handle it, Tom."

Mason hangs up on an angry note. I back away from the ajar door and flee the hall like a mouse in the middle of the night.

All while my mind buzzes. My thoughts race. I process what I've heard, and how it confirms what I've suspected.

The Steel Kings killed Pop.

MASON



I WAKE UP WITH A SEMI-HARD DICK AND A WET SPOT IN MY boxers for the sixth time this month.

She's on my mind. The first thing I think of when I wake up.

It's a secret I'd take to my fucking grave.

The first one was a fluke—it happened on the first night she'd turned up at the saloon. Velma had just hired her, and I had spent several minutes invading her space, circling her like a predator. I got her scent in my brain. I studied those dangerous curves of hers.

Was it any wonder I went to bed and they were all I dreamt of?

Every guy knows new pussy is good pussy.

Sydney Singer was new pussy. She was new in town, new at the club, new in my life. You put an attractive scantily dressed woman I've never seen before in my presence, I'm bound to want to fuck.

But that didn't explain all the other times.

Why I've *kept* dreaming about Singer. She's starred in just about every vivid dream I've had for weeks, and each time

I've woken with cum in my boxers like an overexcited teen boy.

If only she knew of the things I'd dreamed about. All the dirty, kinky things I do to her.

I've had her bent into every conceivable position—twisted like a fucking pretzel. I've had her pussy, her mouth, her backdoor, even fucked her tits in one dream.

They're so vivid, they're beginning to feel like reality. The lines are blurring, making it harder to be around her.

...which makes me more of an asshole. It brings me to be an even bigger jerk to the woman. Just to hide what's really on my mind.

Sydney looks like a scratcher, like the type to sink her nails into my chest and ride me into oblivion. Draw red lines down my back as I fuck her so deep, she can't stand it. I can hear her screams and imagine her moans. I bet she's loud as hell; I bet she likes it rough.

She's exactly the kinda woman who'd take it as good as she gives it.

I don't think I've ever wanted to bed a woman like I've wanted to bed her—it's been driving me up the wall that I can't have her.

This must be some prank by the guys. Sydney's an actress and they hired her to have her prance around me, day in and day out in barely-there clothes, knowing I'd try my damndest to resist.

The night she walked out of the bathroom in nothing but her t-shirt and panties felt like it couldn't be real.

I wanted to rip that little piece of cloth from her pussy and then pin her against the fucking wall. I wanted to grip those thick thighs and wrap them around me as I slammed my dick into her and fucked her 'til she begged for mercy and cried out my name.

I wanted to know what that pussy felt like squeezing my dick... what it looked like... if it was the same pink on the inside as the tongue that poked out and licked her lips from time to time.

I could tell she had a fat one. Plump and fucking juicy. By the way those panties clung to her pussy lips, I could make out the outline. Even from where I stood several feet away.

My brain had gotten stuck. My dick had gotten hard. I had to get the hell out of there.

So I threatened her, I insulted her like always, and then I made my escape. My hard fucking dick at rest against my thigh on the inside of my jeans. Then I went up to my room and beat my meat 'til I came hard in my hand like a pathetic dumbass.

Whatever's going on with Sydney and why she's hanging around, I won't give in.

I'll have a thousand wet dreams about her. I'll masturbate even more times than that to thoughts of her and that body with more curves than my Harley. But I won't fucking give in.

I get up from the bed to go shower and clean the cum off myself. It's as I reach for the bar of soap under the shower stream that I remember what today is.

The Steel Kings Community fundraiser.

Shit.

How could I even forget? I've been working alongside Sydney to put together our big bike display outside of the saloon.

We've reached some kind of temporary truce, where we focus on the matter at hand, and get the job done.

But that's just it—it's temporary.

Nothing's changed between us. I don't and won't ever trust her. I'll still do anything to make her life hell and run her off.

I quickly finish my shower, then towel off with thoughts circling back to my wet dream before I know it. The latest included a scenario involving the shower and Sydney on her knees.

My dick wakes up and twitches.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I swear under my breath. “Get a fucking grip.”

It's obvious from the first few minutes of the fundraiser that it'll be a success. We open up to crowds gathering on the street. Curious families and motorcycle club enthusiasts alike. We've got plenty of things that'll interest everybody.

A booth selling King merchandise like patches and t-shirts. A temporary tattoo booth where Elijah “Moses” Youngblood, our resident tattoo artist, gives guests a fake Steel Kings tat. We've got our big bike display that Sydney and I put together, and a lunch menu of burgers, dogs, and fries inside the saloon. We've even got a ring toss game booth for people to win prizes. Ozzie heads that one.

I stand beside Sydney, and we watch the crowds move every which way.

“Pretty decent turnout,” she says.

I nod. “Better than I was expecting.”

“Do you see how much merchandise Velma and the other old ladies are selling? We might need to restock. That’ll be a lot of cash for the club.”

“Let’s hope Bush and Mick are satisfied,” I say, sticking my hands in my jean pockets. “I’ll give credit where credit is due. This was all you, Singer.”

The words leave my mouth before I give them much thought.

Just hours ago, I was swearing on my life this truce was temporary. I was never going to get along with her.

But seeing the turnout, watching as the area fills up with people from all over town, it’s impossible to deny it.

Sydney’s saved the Steel Kings. Her fundraiser idea is bringing in so much cash we’ll not just reach our goal. We’ll far exceed it.

“Thanks,” she says hesitantly. She glances at me with a subtle smile on her lips. “Maybe we should celebrate with steak and lobster for the whole club.”

“And beer. Lots of it.”

“Always beer. That’s a given.”

I meet her gaze from a sideways angle. “You just might be a biker after all.”

“Can’t be. I’d have to have been on a bike before.”

“You’re fucking around. You’ve never been on a bike?” I turn my body to face her more directly, my chin tilting as I address her.

She shakes her head. “Not once. I’ve never even sat on a bike.”

It shouldn’t happen.

It’s something I’ll regret. Something I’ll curse myself out for once I come to my senses. Sydney Singer’s fucking trouble and I can’t stand the girl.

But it’s a breezy Saturday afternoon in the summer sunshine and we’re surrounded by dozens of people from around town who are checking out our fundraiser. If it weren’t for Sydney, today wouldn’t even be happening.

I can make an exception. Just this once.

My hands cinch shut around either side of her waist, and I lift her up off her feet. She’s taller than the average woman at around five-six, five-seven feet, but she’s surprisingly light. If this were the bedroom, she’d be easy to throw around—a thought I shove aside for later fantasies.

I pick her up and plop her down on the seat of the nearest Harley, a 1998 Road Glide. She squeals in surprise and kicks her legs out, as if that’ll do anything.

When I set her down on the bike seat, she sits still like she’s afraid to move, or risk damaging the bike.

I husk out a throaty laugh. “It’s not made of glass. You can grip it. Swing your leg around to the other side and pretend you’re riding it.”

“Mason...” she shakes her head and diverts her gaze.

She’s embarrassed. She doesn’t feel confident on the bike.

Sydney Singer, the same girl who struts around a bar full of bikers in fucking Daisy Dukes and a low-cut crop top like it's nothing. She's unsure of herself right now.

“Here, I'll help you,” I say, stepping toward the bike.

It becomes a moment where it's almost like I'm watching us as a third person. Some outsider standing on the sidelines as I lift her again. Just partially off the seat, enough for her to get her leg over onto the other side of the bike. I lean closer, caging her under me, taking her arms and straightening them out so she can reach for the bike handles. Our faces end up next to each other. Our cheeks almost touch.

“You position yourself like this,” I say, contorting her body. I can't help noticing how smooth her skin feels and how fucking good she smells when this close. I almost inhale a deep whiff of her hair, then think better of it, and stop myself.

Sydney's tense. Her curvy body bends to my will. It listens as I put her in the right position on the bike, but I can sense her nerves, leaning forward with her apple-bottomed ass perched on the seat. I can pick up on how I'm affecting her even if she'd never say it aloud.

Every time I touch her, she takes in the smallest, almost silent intake of air. Every time my larger body covers hers, my front grazing her spine, she goes still and her skin warms. It makes me want to find out what other kind of reactions I can force out of her...

“Hold that pose!”

Click!

We both look up in alarm.

The bike display photographer we've hired for the day snaps away on his professional camera. He clicks several

times, capturing different photos of us. Sydney on the bike. Me hunched over her, speaking so intimately only she hears.

I stand up straight and Sydney hops off the bike. You'd think we were both electrocuted the swift way we separate ourselves.

That's when I realize there's a long ass line we've let accumulate. People have started gathering in wait to admire the bike display and get their photos taken too.

I step out of the way so the first people in line can take their place.

"Don't do that," I scold the photographer.

He grins, then snaps his fingers at his assistant. She produces a handful of photographs she's printed. Photos I reluctantly take from her. They're the photos he's snapped of Sydney and me on the bike.

"It's not my fault you two look good together," he says, amused. "I'd do a whole shoot of you guys. If you're ever interested, here's my business card."

I can't even curse the guy out. I'm so damn shocked and confused that he's already moved onto photographing the first guests on the display.

You two look good together.

I shake my head. I should've known it was a mistake to treat today as a truce.

It doesn't matter how good Sydney and I look together—or how tempting I find her—she's a problem I've got to get rid of. That's the bottom line.

We celebrate that night by throwing an unplanned club party at the saloon. The fundraiser was a huge success and we raked in so much dough, Bush and Mick say we're set for months. That means we've got permission to party like bikers do.

Music blares from the stereo and club girls prance around in the skimpiest outfits. Guys get drunk off their ass and let loose.

It's a good time I watch from the sidelines.

Cash comes up on my right. "Enjoying yourself?"

"One disaster averted," I say. "That's all I'm grateful for."

"Being prez is tough. But you've got this."

"I've got no choice with Tom being behind bars and Silver being on a leave of absence. Hopefully he returns sooner than later."

"You're doing fine," Cash says. He grips the back of my neck in brotherly spirit. "You were made for this shit."

"What about you? You letting loose for once?"

He shakes his head, his golden hair like a fucking shampoo commercial. "Nope, you know I don't play with fire anymore. Why get burned?"

"What day is it now?"

"Day one thousand and five and counting."

"I'm proud of you, bro. It's not easy staying sober."

"It is when I remember what my old man let himself become. I'll try my damndest not to end up like him. It's

safer watching the fun from the sidelines. Speaking of fun, Johnny's taken to the new barmaid, hasn't he?" Cash asks suddenly, motioning to the bar floor.

I follow his gaze, picking out Sydney instantly. She's sitting on a bar stool with a wide smile on her face. Her denim cut offs are so short that when she sits down, they look like fucking panties—her smooth thighs are in full view as she crosses her legs and laughs at something Johnny Flanagan says.

Of all the guys in the world. Of all the guys in the club.

This has got to be a fucking joke.

My jaw squares as I bite down hard. "I'll say."

"It's innocent," Cash adds. "Johnny's got no game. She's humoring him. She laughs at all the guy's jokes."

But I'm not listening.

I'm lost in tunnel vision. Everybody else in the bar blurs. The saloon walls and chairs and bar with alcohol stocked behind it blurs.

All I can see is Sydney's face lighting up as Johnny leans in closer. He grins and palms her fucking knee, then his hand travels. It moves up toward her bare *thigh*.

I set off at a fast stride. I knock into several guys on my way. No apology. No second glance.

I keep going, heading straight for them as my breath goes ragged. My fists tighten. I'm fuming beyond rationale by the time I reach them.

Sydney looks up first. Then Johnny—at the last second.

I throw my fist at him. A brutal blow to the cheek. He groans and fumbles sideways, collapsing into the table and stools next to him.

The whole bar goes silent. Somebody cuts off the music. The beer stops flowing. All the chatter ends and people turn around to look.

I don't give a fuck. I round on Sydney like a beast on a murderous rampage.

“Get in the fucking back,” I rumble. “I've got work for you.”

...and a hard lesson to teach.

The shock fades from her face. She develops a glare, then does as I say. She hops down from the stool and heads toward the back with so much damn unapologetic confidence, it's maddening.

This girl needs to learn a lesson the hard way.

I stalk after her.

No one dares utter a peep. No one fucking dares to stop me. They already know.

This is between us.

SYDNEY



THE BACKROOM DOOR SLAMS SHUT BEHIND US. SUDDENLY, THE enclosed space couldn't feel like a worse idea—two people who can't stand the sight of each other trapped inside a cramped room, fuming to the point of deep, ragged breaths and clenched fists.

I round on Mason, refusing to back down. I don't give a fuck if he's the acting prez, or that I'm an 'outsider.'

The disrespect will *not* be tolerated!

“Who the hell do you think you are, Mason Cutler?” I shout. “Because you damn sure don't get to bark orders at me—that's the last time you embarrass me in front of everybody!”

He steps toward me so aggressively, I instinctively take an equal step back, even through my anger.

“I'll order you around anytime I want. You work for me. You listen to me!” he rants at a volume that drowns me out. He takes another step, forcing me back again 'til I'm bumping into the cases of beer stacked on top of each other. His eyes have darkened so much, they're no longer a shade of green—in the dim backroom lighting, they almost look black with sheer fury. “If I tell you to do something, you'll do it! You'll

fucking shut up and listen to me. And if I don't want you out there giggling at Johnny fucking Flanagan, you'll do as I say!"

"I was on break. This is a free country. I can do whatever I want in my free time!"

"I SAID NO!" he roars with the ferocity of a lion. He slams his fist into the beer case to the left of me and sends the entire case tumbling to the floor. The cans hiss and explode into a puddle at our feet.

I've jumped at the sudden violence—his large fist pummeled into the case with so much aggression it thickens in the air.

My heart's beating dangerously fast in my chest as I look up into his angry face, his features handsome even in their fury, and I see something I've never seen before.

A certain emotion burning in his hard gaze.

Jealousy.

Not just jealousy but... desire?

It only makes my heart beat faster. If at all humanly possible. It's thumping so hard inside my chest that Mason's has to hear it.

Neither of us looks away. We're locked into a prolonged glare as I become acutely aware of how close we're standing. Of how I'm losing myself in the dark, heated, hate-filled pools that his eyes have become.

"Why do you care?" I ask simply. My tone's quiet. "Why do you give a fuck, Mason, if I laugh at Johnny's joke? If I want to be with him? Is that what the problem is?"

He bares his gritted teeth like an animal. "You're hired as a barmaid. You're not a fucking club girl. You don't go around

fucking any of the members.”

“But if I do—if I want to be with them—you wouldn’t like it?”

I’m playing with fire. As the taunting words tumble past my lips, I’m aware I’m starting shit I might not be prepared to finish, but I can’t help myself. Mason’s been an asshole from the moment I showed up.

He deserves whatever I dish out.

For a split second, he seems tempted to answer. His mouth moves as if he’s about to speak, then he clamps down on it. He settles for another scalding glare that probably makes grown-ass men weep for their mamas.

But, for me, in the moment, feeling as bold as I do, I scoff and shake my head.

He won’t answer. He can’t admit whatever this is.

What a waste of my time. I’ve had enough of the games.

I move to go around him and walk away. I make it only a step and a half before I’m being gripped by the arm and wrenched back. My balance completely thrown off, I stumble backward with the panicked thought that I’m about to fall on my ass.

Instead I’m slammed into the wall. I collide with it and find myself trapped in place by a seething, raggedly breathing Mason. His muscled, tattooed chest heaves up and down in his wifebeater shirt, and his equally strong and defined arms block any attempt at an exit.

I’m trapped. I’m a goner.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask. “Don’t you ever put your hands on—”

He shuts me up by doing just that. His hand clenches around my throat and forces my mouth to his.

It's a dominating kiss. Deep and primal.

Animalistic.

I'd expect nothing less from a man like Mason Cutler. He's seeking to establish dominance by the way he holds me against the wall and takes my mouth.

I'm marked. Nobody else gets to lay a finger on me.

Somewhere in the back of my foggy mind, I know this as I match him. As I taste his lips and kiss him back.

He tastes like whiskey and smoke. He smells like it too. All wrapped up in his warm masculine scent that I caught note of earlier during the fundraiser. He'd leaned over me on the bike, and I'd been dizzied by how fucking good he smelled.

Now, it's everywhere. It surrounds me and overwhelms my senses as Mason plunders my mouth.

His tongue and my tongue play games. We grip each other, aggressive and rough, feeding off each other's energy.

He sucks hard on my neck, and I grind into him, then reach between us and grope his crotch.

His pelvis jerks and he grunts. The sound is so natural, so impulsive and spur-of-the-moment, it's one of the hottest sounds I've ever heard.

My effect on him. A simple touch, even through his jeans, gets him going.

"You want some fucking dick, Syd?" he asks throatily. "Is that it? That pussy's hungry?"

I release a frustrated, strangled noise I'm not even sure how to explain. I don't know what it means or what I meant to say. Just that I'm fucking hot and bothered, my pussy's tingling, and Mason's hands squeezing and groping me all over my body isn't helping.

I try to push back on him. My hands come up to his chest and I try to put up a fight.

He's not having it. He pins me where I am and comes in close, licking at the shell of my ear. "Guess what, Syd baby? I'm the only fucking dick around here you're allowed to have. You want to get fucked, you come to me. Got it?"

"Mason... ohhh! FUCK!"

I scream as he shoves his hand down the front of my denim cutoffs and fondles my pussy.

She responds to his touch at once, tingling and throbbing.

What can I say? It's been a while. Waaay too long.

He grins at the discovery I'm slick and hot and ready for him. "Mmm, Syd, this pussy's so damn wet. You turned on right now, baby?"

'Baby' is spoken tauntingly. Almost more of an insult than anything else he's ever said to me.

Coming to my senses, I growl like a feral cat and fight him on it. I don't give a fuck how turned on I am right now. If my pussy's soaked and begging to be filled by his dick.

I refuse to let him.

I push at him. I slap his chest. Even his face. Hard.

To an outsider passing in the hall, it probably sounds like we're roughing each other up.

That's basically what's happening. As I launch my attack, he takes it. Then he dishes it right back. He catches my wrists and he slams me back into place against the wall.

His nasty grin has gone nowhere, making him look like more of the sexy asshole I love to hate.

“What’s the matter, Sydney?” he asks, shredding open my top with an easy pull of his strong hands. My breasts bounce out, barely contained in my bra. He immediately fills up his palms with them. “Do you want to scream and fight as you take my dick? You want to do it the hard way? I’ve got no problem teaching you a fucking lesson. It’s about time.”

“Mason!” I squeal as he lifts me up like nothing and carries me across the room.

The ease in which he does, in which he picks me up, turns me on more.

He’s got me with one arm and uses the other to shove supplies off a table in the corner. Then he deposits me so hard, my butt smacks into the tabletop.

He’s on me before I can process what’s happening. His mouth returning to mine. My lips parting to welcome his tongue, and my hands dropping to his crotch.

Who the hell am I kidding? I want this as much as Mason does.

There’s no stopping now. Something deep inside me has been stirred; something that’s needy and carnal.

That only Mason can satisfy.

Even getting each other’s clothes off becomes a fight. Mason pries my denim shorts off me, jerking me toward the edge of the table, discarding the pair on the floor.

We meet for more rough kisses as he positions himself at my slit.

And then he forces himself inside me.

My pussy's soaked but taking him, I can feel the stretch—my walls attempting to accommodate a girth that's far beyond average.

It feels like too much. All at the same time it feels so fucking good.

I moan openly, shuddering against him, resting my brow on his shoulder. He holds nothing back. I'm given no time to revel in what's happening, in how he feels deep inside me, as he hooks my legs over his arms and begins fucking me.

I plant my hands behind me on the table, spread wide for him, and find myself fighting even now.

I bite his lip when he draws my mouth to his and kisses me. My pussy contracts and flutters in its own form of revenge.

It clamps around him in a tight vise that makes him grunt like a savage. He fucks me through every clench, every spasm, like he's determined to tame me. Our bodies are still fighting. Just in a different way.

There's nothing sweet or tender about the moment.

Only raw, rough lust that drives us to use each other.

Animalistic fury lives on his face as he pounds into me. A toxic mix of hatred and desire burns in his gaze, and I'm sure it's the same in mine.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and slice my nails into his skin so intently, I'm sure he'll see scratch marks the next time he looks in the mirror.

It fuels him. His pelvis drills into me harder. He bottoms out and spots flash before my vision at him bumping my cervix. His pain for my pain.

He pushes me down, altering our position 'til I'm lying flat against the table and my legs are tossed over his shoulder.

As if he wasn't deep earlier. As he sinks in all over again, I scream out and curl my toes.

"Look at you, Syd baby," he pants, showing no mercy, never slowing down from brutal, deep stroke after brutal deep stroke. "Tell me if you can't handle it. If you can't take all this dick."

I moan, my pussy gushing and throbbing, on the brink of coming. I reach between us and play with my clit.

"Talk your shit, Mace," I answer. "I can take whatever you dish out."

He releases a deep, sexy growl that undoes me and then curls over me on the table. I'm bent in half, knees to chest, as Mason fucks me to an orgasm. Beneath me, the table wobbles.

A broken gasp falls from my lips. The resonant sound comes deep from my belly and pours out of me as the rest of my body feels like it's levitating. I'm paralyzed by a spine-tingling shiver that racks through every part of me.

Mason fucks me through my high. He holds me in my folded position and drills his dick in deep, then out, and in deep again.

I watch the erotic sight, barely lucid, so satisfied and overstimulated it almost feels like I'm floating outside my body.

Mason's delicious, thick dick pounding into me with its protruding veins and natural curve on full display. Our juices coat him, creamy and white, as finally he gives in.

His eyes close. His hips jerk. His fists clench tight on either side of me. He hovers above me, panting and sweating, a muscular, tattooed husk of man that couldn't be sexier.

...who just fucked me so good, I'd be in love with him if I didn't already hate him.

Our gazes connect when he comes down and opens his eyes. For a fleeting second, they're not filled with hate or contempt.

They're filled with... something else.

The backroom door flies open, and Mick wanders inside in the middle of a question.

"What's all this racket I've been hearing—?"

"Shit, Mick!" Mason yells.

The older man stumbles and suddenly becomes blind, clapping a hand over his eyes, and spinning in a circle.

"Sorry, didn't mean to... I heard breaking noises... I didn't know—"

"Get the fuck out!"

He wanders out just as quickly as he came in. The door snaps shut and we're alone again.

Mason doesn't look at me. It's as though a switch has been reactivated in his brain—his hate switch—and he's come to his senses. He dresses in a rush, buckling his jeans and snatching his wifebeater off the floor.

I sit up on the table, confused. "Mason—"

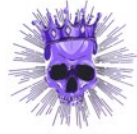
“Do as you’re told,” he says crudely. “I fucking mean it, Sydney.”

He storms from the room without a look back.

I pinch my nose and sigh.

Great. As if I couldn’t make a bigger mistake.

MASON



“MACE, WE NEED TO TALK.”

Velma *almost* sounds like my mother when she says it. I’m at the Chop Shop visiting Cash, to check out the new buckhorn handlebars he’s added to his ride.

Usually, Velma’s so busy as manager of the garage, barking orders at the mechanics, that she barely has time for chitchat.

Let alone what seems like club talk.

“What’s up?” I ask.

She checks around us to make sure nobody’s listening. Cash has gone back to tweaking the handlebars on his beloved FXDB Street Bob. The other mechanics seem more relieved than anything that Velma’s off their back for a couple seconds.

“You’re losing sight of things, Mace. You know I give it to you straight. Which is why I say this.”

I hold in a laugh, tilting my head to the side. “You gonna explain?”

“Whatever the fuck you’ve got going on with Sydney. It’s got to stop. You’re slugging Flanagan over her. You two go off alone and it sounds like World War III happening. The club’s talking. Some guys are wondering if you’ve got what it takes.”

My humor vanishes for a cold sneer. “Who said that? ’Cuz I punched pussy-ass Johnny in the face? You fucking with me, Velm?!”

“Pussy-ass Johnny’s got his pussy-ass, old-school father, Johnny Senior, taking up for him. He called up Tom and told him what happened. A prez flipping his shit over nothing like that—an acting one—it ain’t a good look,” she explains. “Everybody was already having doubts ’cuz of your age. You don’t got the seniority.”

“If I didn’t step up, who would’ve? Silver’s MIA. If it wasn’t for me, we’d be winding up like the Road Reapers when they lost their club prez. Their club’s basically been DOA the second Rollins was locked up. Nobody stepped up like I’m stepping up. I’m saving this club.”

A brief scowl passes over Velma’s face before she motions with her hands for me to settle down. “Will you stop ranting and let me finish? I smoothed things over for you, Mace. Don’t go blacking out. I sweet-talked Tom. But he wants you to call him. He wants to talk more about this war with the Hellrazors.”

I roll my eyes and swear under my breath. Tom hasn’t liked that tensions have only risen since he’s been gone—the beef we have has gotten worse with our rivals making assassination attempts, burning down Brinkley’s crops, and intimidating our town residents and prospects.

I’ll have to squash it once and for all... and soon.

As Velma gives me a reassuring pat on the shoulder and then walks off to yell at more mechanics, I realize she’s right.

I’ve been getting caught up in the trouble I see with Sydney when I should really be focused on the trouble already

at my door.

If we're going to deal a real blow to the Hellrazors, then we've got to damage them in a way that'll hurt them beyond repair, like sabotaging their drug and weapon supply.

But before we return to that more underhanded strategy, it's time for a more heads-on approach. One last direct warning.

“Fuck,” I swear. “Hey, Cash! Put down that wrench. We've got to settle the score.”

We make no secret of where we're headed and what we're doing. Harry “Dirty” Lautner agreed to meet up with us at a neutral location—on the shoulder of the country road that connects Pulsboro and Wheaton.

We roll out, ten deep. Me at the front as road captain and acting prez, and Cash rounding us off in the back.

Wherever we go, we're heard. The thunder from our engines drowns out all other sounds as we ride through. We've got our hardware on us, prepared to take this afternoon wherever it needs to go. If Dirty wants to escalate things, we can do that.

I've allowed the Hellrazors to get away with too much. If Tom wants me to handle it, I'll show him by proving myself.

Mom would cry if she learned what our relationship has become after her death. But it wasn't me who changed. She'd have to take that up with Tom...

We get there before the Hellrazors do.

“You think they’re fucking with us?” Big Eddie asks. He’s rarely with us for missions like these, but he volunteered after he found out his nephew, Moses, was coming too.

Cash peers off into the distance as cars and bikes alike zip by. “Who knows?”

“If we’re walking into a trap, then I want no part of it,” Johnny says.

“Dig your fucking panties out the crack of your ass, Flanny.” Ozzie’s irritated face is rare but almost funny—if anybody can ruin a jokester like Ozzie’s mood, it’s Johnny fucking Flanagan and his whining.

Ozzie steps up to me from my left side. “We could go to them. Ride up to their club. Surprise, bitches!”

I’d laugh if I didn’t hear the distant rumble coming our way. I stare off at the road which stretches so far, it snakes out of view, and I listen for more of the sound. The vibration under our feet.

“Be ready. We’ll do what we’ve got to do.”

The Hellrazors ride up as a pack of crusty, middle-aged dudes past their prime, the sun reflecting in their shades and their mouths tight. I don’t underestimate them, though... they’ve been around the block and then some.

Dirty Harry walks ahead of the others. I do the same, stepping forward.

He holds out his arms at his sides. “Well? You make us come all the way out here to bumfuck wherever like we ain’t got shit else to do. Speak your peace, Cutty.”

“Mace,” I correct. “Cutty’s Tom, and you know he’s not here.”

A nasty smirk starts up on Dirty's lips and reveals yellow, unbrushed teeth. "Yeah, we know. How do you like being acting prez, son?"

"Cut the shit. This ain't no friendly meeting, and we ain't no friends. You keep your ass off our territory and stay the fuck away from our people and there won't be any problems," I say. I gesture to the guys behind me, armed and ready. "If you don't, we'll be making you. It's really that simple."

Dirty folds his flabby arms over his chest. "You think we're the ones who started this?"

"You shot up Bush's trailer. You threaten our residents. Beat the prospects and regulars at our club. Then you burn down the crops at the Brinkley Farm."

"We ain't shoot up nobody's trailer that didn't deserve it!" he snarls. "You take out one of ours, we start fucking with you."

"So we killed your guy Curly. You shot up the trailer unprovoked."

"You killed one of ours before Curly! That's why we shot up Bush's trailer."

"You're out of your fucking mind."

"Bullshit!" One of the guys standing behind Dirty rushes forward with chubby, reddened cheeks. "You asshats started this shit. You killed Pop!"

"I don't know who the fuck that is, but it wasn't us."

"We heard about the bandana you left behind, jackass! Now that we're giving y'all a taste of your own medicine you wanna host meetings and be civilized?! The time for that is over!"

Dirty shushes him. “Bones, step back. This ain’t how I told you to—BONES!”

The crazy fuck takes things to the next level. As Dirty tries to tell him to get back in line, he’s had enough talking. He pulls out a SIG-Sauer pistol and opens fire. It’s an impulsive and fast move, so fucking out of the blue none of us see it coming.

I’m closest. I grapple for my Glock as the rest of the guys do the same.

The bullet might as well be invisible the way it grazes past me. I’m knocked back half a step even as I grab my piece. It’s nicked me in the arm, a hot slice that breaks skin and makes me grunt. I don’t let it keep me from retaliation.

My arm’s on fire but so is my piece—I shoot at the crazy fuck and nail him in the thigh, near his groin. The rest of the Hellrazors have pulled out their weapons. They’re just as prepared as we are to massacre each other in this shootout.

“LAY ’EM DOWN!” Dirty bellows. “LAY ’EM DOWN!”

We cease fire, though our guns remain trained on each one of them. The crazy fuck’s dropped to the dusty ground in a fit of groans and tears. Turns out, a bullet to the thigh doesn’t feel so great.

“We didn’t come here for no shootout!” Dirty yells, spit flying. “That was all Bones.”

“I don’t give a fuck. This shit ends today. Whatever the fuck you’re doing. Stay off our territory. Stay away from our people. You try this shit again, and we end you,” I growl, striding toward him. I get up close, inches away from his ugly face, and I peer into his eyes to make sure he gets it—he knows I’m fucking serious. Pointing at the sobbing blob on the

floor, I say, “Handle him. Next time I see him, he’s dead on sight for what he just pulled.”

Dirty glares back at me but says nothing. None of them do.

They don’t say or do shit as we mount our bikes, rev our engines, and ride off.

But one thing’s clear. This feud between our club and theirs isn’t over.

I’m nursing a bad headache and bandage from the bullet that grazed my arm as I sit at the bar counter. It’s a fucking Wednesday, yet the club’s in full swing. Guys drinking their asses off and club girls flashing their tits. Ozzie gets up on a table and starts popping and locking like a dumbass.

I shake my head and take another sip from my whiskey.

I’m in no mood. Since I took on acting prez, it’s become my normal. Carefree nights fucking around are nothing but a memory.

The barmaids appear in my line of sight as they trade shifts. The one getting off—her name’s Melody—briefs Sydney about what’s up.

Sydney.

I make a scowl to nobody but myself.

Fuck, if I couldn’t go for another round with her. Just to let off some steam.

We haven’t said so much as a word to each other since that night. I’ve been avoiding her. Pretty sure she’s been avoiding me too.

...except for the times when we're both on the bar floor like now, and I catch sight of her. Our gazes lock and there's an unspoken tension that's even worse than before.

I don't let myself think about how good it was. Not anywhere else except late at night in bed when I remember what it felt like to sink into her tight warmth.

I squash the thoughts now, tossing back the last of my whiskey.

There's no way I'll let it happen again. I'll screw fucking boulder-titted Sandie before I let myself relapse.

Stay fucking strong.

It was the best fuck I've had in years. Probably ever. Something about Sydney blew my mind, made my release five times more intense than usual.

But me and her have to be a one-time thing. I've still got her on my radar, ready for when she reveals her true intentions. My interest has to end there.

"There you are." Velma interrupts my thoughts and sits down on the stool next to mine. "I heard about how today went."

"I've got the bandage to prove it."

She shakes her head, not a strand of her fried hair moving. "I spoke to Tom again. He expects his call."

"You don't have to keep telling me. I'll call him when I call him."

"You don't understand, Mace. Shit is worse than we thought." She signals to Mick from across the counter that she'll have a beer.

“What’s with all the cryptic words, Velma? Speak up like you always do.”

With a heavy sigh, she says, “Don’t tell Tom I’ve told you this. He wants it close to the vest. But... Mace... we’re under investigation.”

That catches my attention. My eyes narrow staring at her. “Under investigation... like by the law?”

“That’s right. Word is, there’s an informant.”

“Shit, Velma. An *informant*?!”

“Shhh. Keep it down. Tom found out on the inside. One of the guys serving with him. You yourself know all about how they did the same to the prez of the Road Reapers. Now their club is dead.”

I do. It happened years ago. Word is, one of their most trusted members was turncoat and sold them out to the feds to save themselves. Several of the members went down for murder and drug charges.

Several more went down for even harder charges—*taxes*.

Nobody took a greater fall than their prez, Nathaniel “Wheels” Rollins. He’s been locked up most of my life.

“It’s damning if true,” Velma says, bringing her beer bottle to her lips. “It means we’re fucked. Any guesses who it might be?”

My stomach muscles clench as I survey the noisy saloon. I land on Sydney, in a black Steel Kings t-shirt she’s tied at her navel, delivering a round of shots to a table of guys. “I’ve got a few.”

MASON



“YOU THINK WE GOT MONEY TO WASTE ON GLASSES? YOU think we grow green on trees?”

Sydney eyes me like she’s not sure if I’m being serious or playing mind games. The answer is both—I’m being serious and I’m fucking with her.

This is a game. One she’s playing whether or not she wants to.

One I’ve decided works to my benefit despite the promise I made to myself I’d never relapse.

I step to her and point toward the back of the saloon. “Get in my office.”

It’s a slower evening, a lazy Sunday that’s hot and sticky and has people dialing their ACs to full blast. Sydney’s the only barmaid on shift. Ruby called out and Mick’s preoccupied watching the lotto numbers on TV.

Truthfully, she’s working her ass off, doubling as bartender and waitress, making drinks and delivering them.

But she’s dropped a glass stein and caused it on shatter to the floor in her rush.

A sympathetic guy would feel bad. He’d attempt to help her during a time she’s overwhelmed.

I have no intentions of helping Sydney Singer.

As I order her to the back, I bark at one of our prospects visiting the bar to grab a broom and clean it up.

She does as I say—she spins on her heel and marches defiantly to the back office.

It won't be the first time in the last couple days. Damn sure won't be the last.

I let the door swing shut behind us as I invade her space. I get up close with burning hatred on my face and in my gaze, setting my trap, making it so there's nowhere to run. Sydney puts up an act, playing tough. She stands defiant 'til I unleash myself on her.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” I ask, gripping her arms and spinning her around. Her hair whips me in the face, I'm so aggressive. “How many times have I warned you? You fuck up, I fuck you.”

She pushes back against me, her ass rubbing against my groin even while she's clenched in my hold. Her words are breathy. So fucking sexy.

“It sounds more like you're looking for an excuse.”

“An excuse,” I growl. My hands crush her upper arms within my grasp to the point she winces in pain. Then I push her down, bending her over the armchair how I want her. “Maybe,” I admit, letting one hand roam liberally along her ass. Her fucking cutoffs are so short, as soon as she's bent over, I have access to the underside of her ass cheeks. I slap a hand to the left one, my palm gripping the meat of it. My breathing's already out of control. Heavy and chaotic. “But it doesn't fucking matter,” I go on. “'Cuz you do what I say. And I want to fuck you. So fucked you'll be.”

She bucks back. As if she's about to put up a real fight about it. But I push her down more and she seems to accept it's happening. I shove a hand between her legs, making the denim rub against her pussy in a manner that brings friction. She sucks in air as a reaction, then squirms as if asking for more.

I lean over her, my arms trapping hers against the framework of the chair. "You like how that feels, Sydney baby? When that pussy gets rubbed on? Ask me for it."

I can feel her internal struggle. Her reluctance. Her stubbornness. Her never-ending fight.

It's the same as my own.

We're the same in that way.

I've spent every day and night since she turned up at the Steel Saloon talking myself out of my attraction to her—it conflicted with my hatred and suspicions of her—but I've found a toxic, fucked up middle ground.

A place where I can hate Sydney but still get to experience her tight pussy choking my cock.

She's discovered it too. It's why she plays along each and every time I corner her.

It's why she's yet to run scared.

I unbutton her denim cutoffs and slide my hand down the front.

"No panties, Syd baby," I groan, letting my fingers explore.

...and there's so damn much to discover. You'd think I've never fucked a chick before the way I take pleasure in touching on Sydney.

But, in a way, it's like some new experience. Whatever fucked up dynamic exists between us is different than anything else I've encountered.

I want her at the same time I want to destroy her. I'd love nothing more than to fuck the shit out of her and then banish her from my life for good.

Things between us are always impatient and aggressive. I don't bother with her top. She doesn't bother with any more protests.

Once I've got her naked from the waist down and my dick out, it's on. This time, I remember a condom. I slide into her and it's like I'm losing my mind at the feel of her.

It's enough to make me black out.

That's what happens. The best way to describe our fucks. I black out and I engage with my more primal side—I rumble like a beast and then groan at the warmth encasing me on all sides. Even with the condom, it's so good, I'd give praise if I didn't think it'd make Sydney's ego any bigger.

I fuck her 'til I lose it. We're hot, sweaty animals bucking against each other as I push her so far over the chair, she's almost upside down. Not that she minds or cares—she's getting hers too. Her ass perched against me, I hit all the right spots that make her scream out.

That's the thing about Sydney.

She knows how to work a dick. She knows when to bounce on it, how to squeeze it, and just the right moment to push me over the edge.

I fall half on top of her as I jam my dick as deep as it'll go, and she moans and writhes beneath me. I can feel her thighs quake against me... or maybe it's from me. A twitchy feeling

develops throughout my body as my dick does the same. Twitches and comes in the ultra-thin latex sheathed over it.

“Fuck you for having such a fucking good pussy,” I swear, delirious as hell. I press my lips into the side of her throat and husk out heavy breaths trying to catch up.

“Fuck you too, Mace,” she snaps. Never able to not back talk. “Fuck you and that fat-ass dick.”

The insult-that’s-not-really-an-insult-but-said-with-the-hatred-of-one makes me laugh. I rise up with my hands at work rolling off the used condom and pulling up my boxers and jeans.

“You still fucked me,” I point out.

She straightens up from being bent over the armchair, glaring at me from where she is. “That’s because you’ve got a bigger dick than Johnny Flanagan.”

My insides freeze. It reflects on my face. I know it does, because she smiles.

“Kidding,” she says. “I haven’t seen his.”

I move closer, invading her space all over again. Our noses almost touch. “You don’t fuck anybody else in this club. So help you God, Sydney, if you do—”

“What?” she challenges. “What would you do, Mace?”

I grab her by the throat in a rough kiss. My tongue shoves its way into her mouth, and I suck the air from her lungs ’til I possess her. ’Til I become the only air she breathes.

“Try it,” I say with a squeeze of her throat. “But don’t be surprised if you find Flanagan in a body bag and a dick a lot bigger than his shoved up your ass. Just don’t expect no fucking mercy.”

The dazed way Sydney eyes me tells me a part of her is curious enough to consider testing me just to find out.

It's what these moments are like. Us locked into a physical transaction between our bodies and a battle of wills.

I've probably called her back to the office enough times to make everybody suspicious. But I really don't give a fuck.

Up 'til now, I've dealt with Sydney by pushing her away. That strategy wasn't working considering I'm forced to see her plump ass and Double D tits every day at the saloon and then again in the house out back. Our hook ups keep her within my scope while also giving me the sexual satisfaction I need.

I can still figure out if she's the informant spying on the club as I get to enjoy having sex with her.

Win, win.

The house is no different.

We usually make sure Velma's not around. I corner her in the hall and drag her into my bedroom for a hard fuck. I push her down to her knees to suck my dick on the patio. We've wound up in the den where she sleeps, with her clutching the sheets as I plough into her from behind and squeeze her ass cheeks so hard, I can see the imprints of my hands dimpled in her brown skin.

My dreams still manifest. Dreams of Sydney in the most lewd situations.

I'm a man obsessed that doesn't want to fucking admit it.

I realize this when I'm supposed to be focusing on club matters and yet the only thing I can think about is how I want to eat the fuck out of her pussy.

Most guys feel like you shouldn't do that shit for a woman you're not in a relationship with. Only your old lady gets those privileges.

Damn sure no chick I can't stand and want gone from my club. Gone from my life.

But the next time I spread Sydney's thighs and lay my eyes on that bright pink center cushioned by fat chocolate pussy lips, I lose all pretenses.

I lose control of myself.

I've got to have a fucking taste.

I dive in, hooking her thighs over my forearms and dragging her across my bed so I can feast for real.

Sydney releases a shocked gasp, then pleasure takes over. Her eyes squeeze shut, and she tips her head back, lost in the sensations I bring her.

My tongue flicks her swollen clit, then thrusts into her soaked pussy.

I don't know what the fuck's gotten into me, but one swipe of my tongue isn't enough—the first taste only pushes me into another. Then another.

And another.

'Til I'm practically making love to her pussy with my tongue. Her juices coat my beard, and my nose rubs her clit for extra friction.

Sydney quivers and then moans...

...but she isn't the only one. *I'm* moaning too.

Moaning as I eat her pussy. Lapping and sucking with deep guttural sounds that I can't even censor.

“FUCK!” I groan, giving in. My fist clenches shut on my dick, and I stroke myself, unable to stand how hard I’ve become. “Sydney babe... I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to fuck you so good.”

Her moan is her answer. She’s swimming in all the sensations I’ve brought her pussy, writhing in place, her hands cupping her breasts and fingers tugging her nipples. I hook my arms under her legs and tilt her hips so I can sink in at an even deeper level.

“OH!” she gasps, then shudders. I’ve buried myself whole in one thrust. “Mace... shit... you’re deep.”

“I know, Syd,” I groan, rotating my pelvis and grinding into her. “So fucking deep. You gonna be able to take me?”

She bites her lip but never answers.

Not with words. Not with sounds. She’s too overcome.

But her body speaks for her. It has a mind of its own. Her dark skin’s flushed and sheening with perspiration as she bucks against me. As she wraps her legs snug around me and her slick walls flutter.

I swear. The word fuck becomes the only one I know pounding into her.

Sydney keeps up. She binds me with her legs and marks me up with her nails. We’re rough and hungry in these moments, slamming into each other. Kisses that bite and touches that grope and clench. There’s no sweetness, no softness between us.

Just rage unleashed on each other. Nothing but a hate fuck.

By the time we’re through, it’s like we’ve fought a fucking battle. We’ve been to war and back.

I go straight into asshole mode. The standoffish attitude and dismissive behavior. All hints she needs to get out of my fucking sight. I'm through with her.

Even if I already crave her again.

Sydney seems to feel the same. We dress and get ourselves together in tense silence.

The rest of the house is empty and quiet. Velma's out to dinner with some of the old ladies, and most of the guys I'd hang with are gone and busy.

Tuesdays are Sydney's off days. That means I'm home and she's home.

We've got the place to ourselves... if we wanted to go for another round.

Sydney buttons her jeans and moves to the bedroom door without so much as a *see you later*. Any silence is cut short by a flash of lightning and then a rumble of thunder. Rain joins in too, beating down on the roof and side of the house.

She stops short. "It's supposed to storm tonight?"

"What difference does it make?" I throw myself backward onto my unmade bed and collapse on the pillows.

Sydney stands stiff in my doorway for a second, almost like she's paralyzed. Another angry snarl of thunder rolls through and she clutches the doorframe.

"What the fuck's up with you?" I ask.

"Noth...thing." She stammers and then wobbles out of the room like her legs are unsteady.

I sit up and almost press the issue. More lightning strikes and thunder rumbles. The sound fades in enough time to hear

Sydney's door slamming shut on the other end of the hall.
Harder than usual.

What the fuck's going on?

SYDNEY



THE SECOND I'M ALONE, I DIVE FOR MY BLANKET. I WRAP IT around me, and I plop down on the sofa-turned-bed as if I'm five-years-old all over again.

The thunder pounds in my ears. It makes my pulse race and traps air in my lungs. I curl up and clench my eyes shut and urge myself to wait it out.

It's just rain. Some lightning. Only thunder.

A thunderstorm, to be exact.

My nerves split into a frenzy. I feel shaky and unsteady, yet tense at the same time. My body balls up even more on the sofa cushion. The blanket's my shield, a comforting presence at a time when the thunder sounds unbearably loud.

So fucking close, like it's right outside my window.

My mind plays tricks on me.

Suddenly, I'm five again. I'm in the backseat of my birth parents' car. My mom tells my dad to slow down. I can never remember their faces.

It's as if my psyche has blocked that part out. When they passed away, it decided I no longer needed to know what they looked like or hold onto any distinct memories of them.

Except this one.

The night they died.

“Kurtis!” Mommy cries out. “Please... don’t do it. They’re getting a rise out of you!”

Daddy sits behind the wheel. I’m in the back, strapped into a carseat. I can barely make out his expression... but by the slashed angle of his face, he’s clenching his jaw in disagreement.

He thinks Mommy’s wrong.

“Then what should I do?” he grinds out. “Let them intimidate us?”

“Syd’s in the car.”

“That’s why I gotta do what I gotta do. Sit tight. I’ll handle it.”

I kick my legs out as if wanting to do the opposite of what Daddy says. I want to jump out of the carseat and crawl up front to beg him to take us home.

The car windows streak with raindrops and it’s so dark out... too dark out...

Thunder roars and I hug my doll baby to my chest, on the verge of tears.

I’m losing my sense of past and present as I listen to the thunderstorm and tell myself it still shouldn’t affect me. I’m a grown-ass woman who is more than capable of taking care of herself.

...and yet my intense fear of thunderstorms has plagued me from the time I was a small child.

When Mom and Pop adopted me and became my new parents—my only family as far as I knew—they discovered for themselves how traumatized I was. Thunderstorms are no stranger to Texas, which meant several times a year, I was desperately climbing under the covers, crawling under furniture, hiding behind curtains and inside closets.

Though I'm better at disguising it these days, not much has changed.

I urge myself to fall asleep as I lay curled up on the sofa bed. It's easier if I just... pass out. If I sleep through the storm.

Knuckles tap on the den door. I expect Velma despite the fact that she said she's out to dinner and will be gone for a few hours.

That's still more plausible than the alternative—Mason being outside my room.

He knocks again. "Syd?"

My eyes stay shut. My voice sounds tight. "What?"

"You good?"

More rain trickles down. More lightning flashes. More thunder crashes. I flinch and draw the blanket tighter around myself.

"Yes," I answer stiffly. "I'm fine."

There's a pause that's long enough I assume Mason's left. He's shrugged and walked off. And then—

"You don't sound fine. Something up?"

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

I'd tell him off if I wasn't so crippled by my intense phobia. Right now it's taking all the energy I have to remain

calm and not freak out. At my worst, I've spiraled into incoherent sobs, weeping like a little girl in the rain who just lost her parents all over again.

"I said I'm fine," I manage. "I don't want to fuck right now. Go away."

The offense sounds in his tone. "I wasn't trying to fuck. I was... this is stupid."

For a second time, I expect him to walk off. Shrug his shoulders and give up. He hates me so much he'd probably laugh if he saw me like this, hiding under the covers like I'm five-years-old all over again, on the verge of tears.

The door opens and he walks right in.

He stops at the sight of me curled up on the sofa bed.

"You sick?" Then it hits him. "Fuck. Sydney... you're not... you ain't pregnant, are you?"

I glare in his direction from the small opening in the blanket I've covered myself with.

"No, Mason," I say, irritated. "I'm not fucking pregnant."

"Then what's the problem? You on your rag?"

Another roll of thunder passes through and I flinch, squeezing my eyes shut. "Please just go. You're making it worse."

It hits him. He laughs as it does. "Hold up... you're afraid of the thunderstorm? That it?"

"I said just go!"

The summer rain's only picked up. It's showing no signs of slowing down anytime soon. Which means it's about to be a long, traumatic evening.

Mason goes nowhere. He digs his hands into his jean pockets and stares at me. The amused bend to his mouth shifts... slightly.

“You don’t like ’em?” he asks. “Thunderstorms?”

I don’t answer him. I lay still with my eyes closed and hope he takes a hint and gets the hell out.

He thinks for a moment. “You need a distraction. You need to do something to take your mind off it.”

“For the last fucking time,” I grit out. “I don’t want to fuck you right now.”

“That’s not what I was talking about. Get up.”

He comes over to the sofa bed to collect me. I try to battle him on it, but he grabs me by my forearms and heaves me up to my feet. The blanket falls away and I feel naked despite the fact that I’m dressed. I feel more exposed than I have in years.

“Mason... stop... I don’t... let go of me!”

“Hiding away isn’t gonna make it better. You need to find other ways to deal with it. I’m gonna get you to.”

I smack his hand, but he snatches hold of me anyway and tugs me out of the den. We go into the living room where he flips on the TV and pulls up a streaming service.

“You like shitty horror flicks?” he asks.

I raise a brow. “Um, what? Shitty horror flicks?”

“Yeah, the ones so bad they’re good. They’re funny. Look at this one, *When Harry Ate Sally*. This’ll work.”

I blink in shock. “Are you... you want to watch a movie... *together?*”

“Sit down. It’s starting.”

Thunder rumbles over any volume from the TV and makes me flinch as if I'm physically struck. My heart races in warning of my panicked state. I'm right on the edge of relapsing.

"I can't do this. I need to take cover. I need..."

...a blanket. A safe space. A place where I can curl up and hide.

Mason stands opposite me and keeps me in his gaze. It's like he's reading my mind. He can tell what I'm thinking. An openness, an understanding he shows me that I'd never ever expect out of him.

"Sit down, Syd," he says calmly.

For the first time since I've known him, I don't put up a fight. I feel... compelled to listen. Accept his command without a bitter thought or combative reaction. I drop onto the sofa and watch as he takes the cushion next to me.

"Hungry? I'm thinking pizza. There's that joint a couple blocks away. They deliver rain or shine."

My brain refuses to process what's happening. I can only stare dumbly at him as he pulls out his phone and places an order. He asks if pepperoni is alright, and I nod like I've gone mute and no longer have a voice.

"Here, if it makes it better to cope." He dims the light and grabs the patchwork throw blanket folded over the back of the couch, draping it across my lap.

"Mason..." I trail off, unsure of what I even want to say.

"Shhh. Watch the movie. It's pretty bad, it'll have you busting out in laughter. Trust me, I've seen this one a few times."

I turn my attention to the TV.

Within minutes, I understand what Mason's talking about—the special effects are shockingly bad, and the dialogue is so unnatural and generic that it's worth a laugh. The D-List actors are no better.

I watch, puzzled, as a guy foolishly runs *toward* a horde of zombies and then gets his head ripped off. Squirts of blood drench everything on screen, but instead of being horrified, I'm left thinking of ketchup.

A snort leaves me. "What was the special effects budget on this? I've seen better gore displays at local Halloween parties."

"Isn't it bad? Check out this chick. She's supposed to be dead, but she's still breathing."

"Or how about that zombie in the background?" I sit up as I point at the screen. "He's *laughing*. Great professional acting right there."

"Told you. It's so bad it's good."

We spend the next half hour laughing at all the bad things in the film. Our criticisms range from zombies forgetting they're the undead and can't talk to a shot where a sound stage guy is briefly caught on camera, then scurries off out of the picture. Probably worst of all is the main couple deciding it's the perfect time to have sex in the woods when they're on the run from a horde of zombies, only to get caught and then eaten in graphic detail.

Mason and I bust out laughing as the guy dies with his dick out and pants around his ankles. The girl scrambles, trying to get away, running topless with such dramatic flair that I declare her the best actor in the entire film.

"You smoking something?" Mason asks, raising a brow.

I bite away my next laugh. “C’mon, she was pretty good! You give her some training, she’ll be Oscar-nominated in no time!”

“She’s good at screaming and running with her tits out. That’s about it.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t know talent when you see it.”

“I do. I mentioned the tits.”

Our pizza arrives toward the end of the third act. Mason gets up and answers the door.

It’s as I’m left alone on the couch that I remember the circumstances for the first time in a while—another crack of thunder sounds, and I flinch as if it’s a threat waged against me.

My heart starts racing again. I sit still and urge myself to chill.

Calm the hell down, Syd. You’re fine.

Mason returns with the pizza box and wings in hand. He’s also grabbed some beer. He sets everything down on the coffee table in front of us and reclaims his cushion next to mine.

At first, I assume he’ll return his attention to the film—the girl with the nice titties has finally found a shirt and is hitchhiking to safety as the sole survivor—but I’m wrong.

Mason flips open the large pizza box and grabs a slice. “So what’s your problem with thunderstorms?”

I’ve reached for a slice of pizza too, though I freeze as he asks. “There’s no problem. I... I just don’t like bad weather.”

“You know I just saw you flinch, right? Something bad happen to you during a thunderstorm?”

Yes...

I swallow hard. “They just make me uncomfortable.”

“And you hide under blankets?” he says slowly, chewing on his pizza. He takes several swigs of beer in between.

“I was trying to go to sleep.” I finish grabbing my slice of pizza and force myself to take a bite despite the fact that I feel like I’m chewing on greasy cardboard. I’m exposed and defenseless, two of the worst things to be in the presence of Mason Cutler.

“Bullshit, Syd.”

I choke on my bite of cheesy, grease-soaked cardboard. “Bullshit... what?”

“You were *hiding* under those covers. I saw you.”

“Why do you care to know? So you can make fun of me for it? You want to hear about how I’m so pathetic I hide when I hear thunder and heavy rain? I guess it’s another chance to humiliate me.”

“When did I say that?”

“When have you ever not made me feel that way?”

We fall silent to a beat of tension between us. I can feel the shake in my voice, dangerous territory considering it means I’m emotional. Mason sits leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his pizza slice in hand. He takes another bite and then sets it down inside the open box.

“Look, I’ve been an asshole,” he admits. “I’m not denying it. You’re not my favorite person, and I’m willing to bet, I’m not yours. Pretty sure if either of us could get away with it, we’d run the other off a cliff. But that doesn’t mean I’m gonna see you in a rough spot and use it against you.”

I don't buy it. It shows on my face. "This entire period of my life is a rough spot and that's all you've done..."

"You've shown up out of nowhere with vague intentions and suspicious behavior. You're an outsider and I don't like outsiders. But I'm still not going to see you like I did earlier in the den and make it worse."

My stomach pits, any appetite gone. "Was it that bad?"

"Syd, *I* was concerned. That should tell you enough." He picks up his bottle of beer along with mine. I take the hint and snag mine from him. We spend a moment drinking in silence, an unfamiliar contemplative vibe developing between us. "I don't like it when cars backfire," he says suddenly. "If I'm out on a street and they do, I assume it's real. Every time."

My lips dip into a frown. "Is that from being in the MC? I guess you would get shot at a lot."

"It's from before my time in the Kings. From when I was a kid. I lost my mom that way."

"Me too. My parents. It happened during a thunderstorm."

He nods in somber understanding. Then, he taps his bottle against mine, producing a *chink* noise. "I figured as much. But think of it this way. We are our experiences. You are who you are 'cuz of that night. You survived that thunderstorm, and you'll survive this one, too."

It's likely Mason doesn't get just how relevant his words are. That it applies to more than the thunder and lightning outside, but to the current period of my life.

My time with the Steel Kings is its own thunderstorm. A traumatic chapter where I've lost someone I loved and then attempt to find peace again.

It just so happens that peace this time means finding Pop's murderer. It means holding Mason and the Steel Kings accountable.

I go to bed later in the night with my little purple book sprawled open in my lap. I jot down everything Mason and I talked about—including his revelation about his mother—and I fall asleep to the rumble of thunder and his words in mind.

I've survived thunderstorms before. I can do it again.

MASON



WHEN TOM WAS FOUND GUILTY AND SENTENCED TO TEN years, he made me swear I'd take care of his club while he was gone. We hadn't been close in years. We were a broken father and son with plenty of problems, but if there was one thing we still had in common, it was the Steel Kings.

"You come see me," he said as bailiffs appeared on either side of him. "You owe me that much."

I didn't—*I don't*—owe him shit.

Everything he's done has brought pain to my life. Every choice he's made has put the Kings before his family. Mom. Me.

Logan...

But as the sixth month mark hits, and I call him up, he reminds me I owe him a visit.

Velma was already planning on going. She makes the trip every couple weeks with one of the guys.

This time's no different.

It turns into a group thing. Lenton State Penitentiary is five hours away and she hates driving long periods. Tito and Cash load up the truck. Velma packs a cooler with beer and ham

sandwiches. I get my bike ready, needing my own set of wheels in case I need to make a break for it.

“It’s a day trip, Mace,” she says, shaking her head. “Nobody’s saying you’ve got to stay a long time.”

I polish the chrome rims on my Road King. “I like having my own means to leave if need be.”

Velma mutters something about me and Tom being hopeless, then she catches sight of Sydney approaching. I pretend not to notice her—the two of us have gone back to ignoring each other outside of our secret hookups.

We had a small moment the other night where we got along for a few hours, but it doesn’t change a damn thing. I still want the girl gone and she’s not a fan of mine either.

She’s come outside to hand over some water bottles. “You forgot to put these in the cooler, Velma.”

“Thanks, girly. What’re you up to today anyway? You’re off, right? Wanna drive up to Lenton?”

“No, she doesn’t,” I answer for Sydney. I toss my oily mechanic rag over my shoulder and walk around to the other side of my bike. “She’ll stay here.”

“She’ll go,” Sydney says quickly. As always, doing the opposite of what she thinks I want. I grit my teeth, but she’s already telling Velma that she can help drive if need be.

“Perfect,” Velma says. “But Tito and Cash got that covered. You can keep me company. Lord knows we need some more feminine energy around here.”

I wait ’til Sydney goes back inside the saloon to grab her purse. Rounding on Velma with a scolding look, I say, “You invited the most untrustworthy person to see Tom?”

“I said nothing about *seeing* Tom. You’ve got no evidence she’s the informant, Mace. Besides, ever heard of keeping your enemies close? You should be all over the girl.”

I am. In a whole different way.

I drop the matter. I’ll be on my bike. What’s the difference if Sydney’s in the truck with the others?

Nobody will be discussing real club matters around her. Not even as we visit Tom.

We take off in the next half hour. Before the clock even hits nine in the morning.

You’d think that’d mean cooler weather, but you’d be wrong.

The sun’s already out, bright and blinding, sitting high up in the sky. It torches anything it touches, leaving almost no shade. No real escape from its heat.

I ride ahead of the truck with the sticky wet air pushing back against me. It’s one of my least favorite types of climates to ride in—the humidity makes it feel like going for a fucking swim.

We turn onto the long highway we’ll be stuck on for the next couple hours.

At different points, Cash and the others pass me up. Then I pass them up. On particularly barren parts of the highway, we drift side by side, taking two lanes to ourselves.

We stop two hours in at a gas station miles outside Portales, home to another MC known as the Road Reapers.

“This is Velma’s hometown, isn’t it? You think they’ve recovered from losing their prez?” Tito asks.

“Nate Rollins. He’s serving twenty-five years. All because somebody in the Reapers ratted him out,” Cash answers as he fills up.

I’m filling up too. I grab the nozzle from the gas dispenser and glance around the barren area. The diner next door has shut down and the businesses across the street are boarded up.

It’s been known for a while not just the Reapers are struggling, but the town of Portales too.

After Rollins was sent away to prison, nobody stepped up like they should’ve to run the Reapers. As a result, the business they brought to the tiny Texas town dried up. Both the club and the town’s been dying a slow death since.

Word is, apparently, in recent times, his nephew tried to take over as prez, but hasn’t been too successful. The Reapers have been a nonfactor when you compare them to other local MCs like us and the Hellrazors.

Tito rubs his chin. “I wonder if they can come back from this.”

“By the looks of it, if the local area is any indication, no,” Cash answers first.

Tito swears in Spanish. “Lucky for you, Mace. Keeping *la familia* together.”

I eye him half critically. “Me? You’re kidding, right?”

“Aye, you’re keeping us together as a unit, are you not? Your leadership is making the difference.” He winks and nudges me like an uncle would; he might as well be, as one of the older guys. “*La vida merece ser disfrutada*, I always say.”

“Wise man.” Cash throws an arm around Tito and cracks a megawatt smile that would make women throw their panties at

him.

Damn pretty boy best friend of mine.

I shake my head at the two and finish filling up my bike.

Velma and Sydney emerge from the gas station convenience store clutching Icees and magazines. The giant sunglasses Velma wears disguise half her face, but her unapologetic shrug tells me all I need to know.

“What’s that angry stare down for? You want one? I added some liquor to mine.”

“This isn’t some joyride adventure,” I say.

“Ah, lighten up, Mace. It might not be a *joyride*, but no need to be a *killjoy*.”

As Velma says this, I become aware of the fact that I’m grinding my teeth. My stance is rigid and defensive, like I’m prepared to take somebody out if need be. On the inside I’m all built up tension and pressure.

It’s because of what lies ahead—a confrontation with Tom.

Maybe not a *physical* one. But still a face-to-face encounter for the first time in months.

I never answer Velma. Nobody gets the complexities of our relationship except maybe Cash, who has his own shit going with his old man.

Sydney’s laugh catches my attention. I turn around and find her and Cash chatting by the side of the truck.

I love him like a brother. As much as I loved Logan.

But I’d be a fucking liar if I said a ball of rage doesn’t surge through me at the sight of him and Sydney so friendly.

Cash with his shoulder-length golden hair and blue eyes charming Sydney like he always does with women. She's taunting me, leaning against the truck, her back to me so I'm forced to notice how her tight jeans hug that fat ass of hers.

I should stride over and slam my palm right into it. At full strength... hard enough to bruise. Embarrass the hell out of her in broad daylight. Then take her around back and fuck the shit out of her.

These are the angry thoughts on my mind as we regroup and hit the road again.

This time, I speed all the way ahead of the truck. At one point, Cash honks at me.

I rev my engine and blast off without a look back.

The deeper into the afternoon it gets, the more heat blazes in the air. The sun chases after us, offering no shade and showing no mercy.

It's a quarter past two by the time the giant gray building that's the penitentiary rises into view, protected by razor-sharp barbed wire fencing.

I have half a mind to keep going and skip out on visiting Tom altogether.

...he'd deserve it.

Velma leads the charge into the visitor's center. We're given name tags that we're supposed to wear on our chests to identify ourselves.

Sydney and Cash hang behind in the lobby. The rest of us move into the meeting area.

“Go ahead,” Cash says. “They’re limiting time per person. I’d just take up time you and Velma can have with him.”

I pause and consider staying behind too until Tito slaps a hand to my back.

“*Vamos, mi cuate*. He’d want to see you.”

The three of us move on without them. Velma struts a step ahead and goes first when he appears from the door on the opposite side of the room.

Tom and I have never looked alike.

I take more after Mom and her side of the family. Reddish brown hair, dark green eyes, and a warmer skin tone.

Logan was always the one who looked more like Tom.

They both had that dimpled smile, baby blue eyes thing going on. Except with time and age, Tom’s gained so many lines to his face, the dimples on his cheek hardly stand out anymore.

I stand next to Tito, and we watch through the plexiglass cutout as he and Velma share an affectionate reunion.

“I’m surprised no conjugal was planned,” Tito jokes.

“I’d prefer that to being here. It’d be enough of a distraction for him.”

“Your old man... he’s complicated. But he loves you. He’s proud of—”

“Don’t start, Tito. I don’t want to hear it.”

Tito lets out a sad puff of air and concedes.

Twenty minutes later, Velma returns and lets us know we're next.

"You go," Tito says. "I'll take whatever time is left to catch up with my friend."

I wear my irritation on my face as I stalk toward the door.

Tom is already seated. He doesn't get up as I approach. He studies me, his bright blue eyes emotionless and his hands folded on the table.

I take the seat across from him without a greeting.

He sighs, then presses his lips together, like he's done before our exchange has even begun.

I'm not cracking. I sit in a relaxed position in the chair, partially reclined and leaned back. I did my part—I came.

The rest is up to him.

"Well?" he says finally. "You gonna speak or stay mute?"

"I've got nothing to say."

"I hear you've got plenty at the club. I left you in charge. I expect regular debriefs."

"Then maybe you should've left somebody else in charge."

Annoyance flashes in his gaze. "Stop behaving like a fucking angsty teenager. We've got bigger fish to fry."

"You always say that."

"'Cuz you don't seem to understand what's important—"

"You said that when Mom was alive. And look what happened," I say over him, raising my voice. "You said that when Logan followed your lead. And look what happened."

Sorry if I've stopped giving a damn about the bigger fucking fish!"

"You'll never let that go. It's been years since they've gone."

"I'm not doing this. I'm done." I push off the table, getting up to my feet.

Tom rises too from his side of the table. "Mace, will you listen for one god damn second? Just one. Sit."

I slowly do as requested. Though I won't for long. "Make it fast."

"Velma told me she talked to you about the informant," he whispers, glancing around. "If you ever listen to me... listen this once. We've got to find out who it is. We've got to... take care of them. You got it?"

"I make no promises. I've got my hands full."

"This matters more than that feud with the Hellrazors. That's your problem. You lose sight of the important things. Logan would've done as I asked. He would've already handled it—Mace, get back here!"

"Logan's gone, Tom!" I yell from over my shoulder as I stalk off. "He's dead, remember? Just like Mom! Whose fault is that?"

Tom shouts some more, but I don't go back.

The others clamber to their feet at the sight of me storming down the hall. I ignore them all on my way out the visitor center.

My vision tunnels and my pulse thrums in my neck. Every muscle in my body flexes and twitches in desperation to exert

some power. Some dominance breaking shit. Destroying something.

Anything.

I want to get the fuck out of here. This was a mistake. A bad idea from the get go.

There's too much shit that's gone wrong in our family. Things between Tom and me are too wrecked. You can't repair that kinda damage.

"Mace!" Velma calls.

I don't turn around as I stride toward my bike. I get so ahead of them I can't even hear their footsteps anymore.

'Til...

"Where are you going!?"

It's a question spoken through a pant of air. It belongs to Sydney and so does the hurried thud of her boots.

"Go the fuck away, Sydney. Now's not the time."

"You're right... now isn't the time to be on the road. You're furious."

"I ride like this all the time."

"Will you just slow down?"

Tiny rocks crunch under us as we make it to the gravel. Sydney almost trips twice and swears.

I don't slow up and I don't check on her. Maybe it's best she falls. Then she'll leave me the hell alone.

I grab my gear and begin prepping to take off. Sydney finally catches up, gasping for air and wiping sweat off her brow.

Somehow, she still looks damn good—in fact, her jeans have only slipped lower down her curvy hips, and the sweat on her only makes me think of that after-sex dew she gets.

“Move out of the way,” I say, swinging my leg over my Harley.

She stands in front of it and shakes her head. “I don’t think you should be alone right now.”

“Not your call. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“It isn’t about babysitting. It’s... it’s about doing dumb shit when you’re angry and alone,” she pants. “You made me come out from under the blanket. I’m making you have some company.”

I glare at her... though she’s got a point.

The others are approaching at a distance. Their calls echo across the lot.

If I take any longer, they’ll catch up too, then I’ll be given the third degree.

I make a split second decision and choose between the lesser of two evils.

“Get on,” I say, gesturing to the seat behind me. “Just do me a favor, Syd? Shut up.”

She rolls her eyes, though there’s a slight smirk on her lips, as she does what I say. She climbs aboard, snugly positioned behind me.

“Never,” she murmurs into my ear.

“Then don’t cry later when I shut you up with my dick down your throat.”

I rev the engine and take off.

SYDNEY



AS I CLIMB ONTO MASON'S BIKE, IT'S EASY TO OVERLOOK ONE important detail: I've never ridden before. My decision to join him is so impulsive that it doesn't cross my mind 'til I'm seated behind him and he's warning me to hold on tight.

“Wait... maybe this isn't... ahhh!” I shriek as I'm drowned out by the rumble from his engine.

We're off in the next moment.

Plumes of dust rise up on our path across the parking lot. I close my eyes and squeeze my arms around his torso. He quickly becomes my anchor as I press myself against him.

Anxiety churns in my stomach and makes the rest of my body tingle. The situation feels outside of my control. Anything can go wrong, and I'd be SOL.

On the back of Mason's bike, I'm completely at his mercy.

I'm at the mercy of everything around me. The open road. The bike we speed away on. The very wind that rushes by and blows back the sheets of my hair.

Mason would probably laugh if he knew how freaked out I am. He'd tell me this isn't fast. This doesn't compare to the speeds he was doing earlier outgunning the truck.

But I've never felt more vulnerable. I've never been so unprotected.

We ride down the highway, crossing the vast Texas flat land, leaving behind the penitentiary and everything else Mason's running from.

I must squeeze him too tight the farther we go, because he calls out to me over the static of the wind.

"Syd!"

"Yeah?"

"You good?"

I shrink against his back, treating him as a living shield. "Yeah," I mumble into the center of his spine. "Why?"

"'Cuz you're damn near suffocating me." He sounds amused. The rumbling engine and staticky wind can't even disguise it.

"S-sorry. I've never..." I trail off there, my cheeks warming up from more than the summer heat.

"You wanna stop?"

I shake my head in answer.

Mason must understand because he doesn't question me again for another few miles. It occurs to me that this is the second situation where I'm coming across like a punk, curling up in fear. First the thunderstorm situation and now this.

My fault for being nosy and following him.

I'm settling into my safe spot against his back when he pulls me into another exchange.

"Let go," he says.

“Huh?”

“Let one arm go. Raise it up. Try it. You’ll feel better.”

“Mace—”

“Do it. Now.”

The command comes out as a growl against the wind. The sound’s sexy to my ears, awakening something inside me. A sudden pulse of desire that blossoms into a wave of courage.

First I open my eyes. Then I sit up slightly. I admire the surroundings zipping by on either side of us. Nothing but land and more land. Road for miles. We’re alone on the highway. Just the two of us traversing what feels like the never-ending landscape that leads home.

I inhale a quivering breath that only intensifies my sense of nerves.

It’s now or never.

Just do it.

DO IT.

I sit rigidly on the seat behind Mason and urge my left arm to let go. Unwrap itself from around his middle. It falls away and I almost instinctively squeeze it right back around him.

“Syd!” he yells over the loud summer air.

“OKAY!” I yell back.

I go for it. I lift up my left arm while my right cinches tighter around him. The moment feels like taking a leap, jumping off the edge of a terrifying cliff.

But I do it—I let go and stick my arm straight up in the air as if I can touch the wind as it whips by. Laughter gasps out of me the moment I do. It feels like I’m soaring on my own.

I'm not just on the back of a motorcycle, tagging along with Mason, speeding away from his problems.

I'm flying down an open highway, bathed by the bright sunshine, weightless and free.

For the first time in a long time without the weight of grief and trauma. It's been left behind at the penitentiary with Mason's issues.

Instead, the world is opening up to us—wide, vast and limitless. I'm on the back of Mason's bike and we're riding without anything to lose. With no real destination in mind.

Life suddenly feels brighter. The air, sweeter. I savor its warmth and lift my other arm up. Both stretch toward the sky with the wind in my hair. More laughter rolls out of me 'til I'm feeling delirious with joy.

I can only describe the ride like a rollercoaster on steroids. But so much more than that. So much more than a moment. Something inside me has stirred, and I'm not sure I can ever put it back in its box.

You'd think I'd be afraid. I'd rush to clutch onto Mason again.

An unspoken trust has developed mere miles into our journey on the open road.

He keeps us steady. He still serves as an anchor, my body propped up against his back. He checks on me with a quick glance over his shoulder, and though he makes no sound, I *swear* I see a tug at the corner of his mouth.

The experience becomes so surreal that by the time we stop again, I'm riding a high. Touching solid ground feels unnatural and unwanted.

Mason helps me slide off with an expression I can't place.

I don't care. I'm a bundle of energy, launching myself at him. My arms fly out and ribbon around him, not even considering what I'm doing.

He catches me at the last possible second with a swing. That's how we remain, my legs kicked out and his body solidly in place.

His hands curl up the sides of my torso, grazing the sides of my breasts, and it's not until our gazes meet that we both realize what we're doing. He drops me to my feet, and I take a wide step back.

Still breathless and a little delirious, I can't even be apologetic.

"Sorry," I mutter, hardly convincingly. I run my hand over my messy, once neatly combed mane and let out another soft laugh. "That was such a rush!"

A slight grin crosses his mouth with a raise of his brows. "You liked it?"

"Liked it?! Are you sure you guys don't let women into the club?"

I'm kidding... but also kind of not.

He laughs and then beckons me with a motion of his head. "C'mon, let's get some fuel in us. We've still got a long ride back."

So caught up in the ride we've experienced so far, I'm not paying attention. I follow Mason across the cratered parking lot and toward the diner we've stopped at.

And then my heart freezes with shock the second we step inside.

Oh no.

“Welcome to the Sunny Side Up! My name’s Teysha and I’ll be your—”

“Excuse me. Restroom.”

I duck out of the way before Teysha can even finish her sentence and Mason can even realize what’s happened.

How could I lose sight of Boulder being a possible pitstop along the way? We had driven by on our way *to* Lenton!

Of course the Sunny Side Up would look enticing from the highway!

I escape into the permanently stinky, single-stall restroom and catch my breath. The best I can hope for is that Teysha sat Mason without questioning him about the woman he’s with. I’ll have to intercept her on my way out and pray she won’t make our past too obvious.

Luckily, I’m more than familiar with the layout of the diner. I creep from the restroom and peer over the partition wall that leads to the rest of the diner.

Mason’s sitting on his own in a booth looking over the menu. My gaze swings around the rest of the room. It takes only another second to spot Teysha—she’s at the kitchen window speaking to the cook on shift.

I slink over like a cat. “Pssst! Teysha!”

Her eyes bulge and her mouth falls open. “I knew that was you!”

“Shhhh! C’mere, quick. Don’t be too obvious.”

“Sydney, we’ve been so worried about you! Freddie and my auntie. You disappeared,” she says in her slow southern

drawl.

“I’m looking into something. I need you to pretend not to know me.”

“That a biker you’re with? That Harley’s his, right?”

“Tey! Focus. This is a life or death situation. Pretend we’ve never met. Do you get it?”

A puzzled look glazes over her face, though she nods.

I head over to the booth where Mason’s seated. He doesn’t look up as I drop down onto the pleather cushions across from his, but he does speak.

“What were you saying to the waitress?”

“Oh. That. Toilet’s clogged in the restroom.”

“Sounds like you’ll have to take a leak in the bushes outside.”

I’m so on edge, I forget to laugh. His forest-green eyes flick up from the menu they’re studying, and my stomach knots in response.

“It’s a joke.”

“Right,” I say. “I know it was.”

“You good? You’re acting like you’re uncomfortable about something.”

“Sorry... just coming down from the high.”

“That really was your first time on a bike,” he says, sliding the menu across the table. “You did good. You panicked a little at the start. But by the end, you were relaxed and enjoying yourself. Next time we’ll need to get you a helmet.”

Next time.

My insides do another flip, though for a different reason. I pick up the laminated menu with a hint of a smile. “The \$9.99 Sunny Side Up burger and fries special is really good. It’s everyone’s favorite.”

“How would you know?”

“So I hear. The waitress mentioned it.”

The suspicion lives on Mason’s face. He reaches for his coke and takes a drink.

We order our food and sit in silence for what feels like an agonizing eternity. Mostly because I’m left questioning if I’ve been more obvious than I thought. If at any second Mason’s going to flip the script and reveal he knows my secret truth—I’ve not only lied about Teysha and the diner, I’ve been lying my entire time with the Kings.

I’m undercover and I’m out for revenge on them.

My mind goes to my little purple book, which keeps all the secrets and truths I’ve discovered over the past couple of weeks.

“I wonder where they’ll stop,” Mason says. The comment’s a thought spoken aloud.

I take the opportunity for conversation. Anything to steer away from any suspicion.

“They’ll probably stop in Portales again. We’re pretty far ahead of them.”

“That’s ’cuz Velma was reluctant to leave. She’d glue herself to Tom if she could.”

I pick up my Diet Coke. “It’s sweet she misses your dad so much.”

“Not really.”

“Do you not like that they’re together?”

He shrugs. “I don’t give a shit either way.”

“Two burgers and fries,” Teysha says, appearing out of seemingly nowhere. She sets down our plates, briefly catching my eye with a subtle wink. “I’ll be up front if you need me.”

I pour salt and pepper on my fries. “You sure seemed like you gave a shit.”

“About... what? Tom and Velma?” He grunts out a short laugh. “You think I left ’cuz I’m pissed Tom and Velma are a thing? How much salt and pepper do you take on your fries?”

“A lot. And yes. That’s what it looked like.”

“Then maybe I gave you too much credit. What happened back there... it wasn’t about no damn relationship between Tom and Velma. Shit between my old man and me—it’s complicated.”

“You’re filling in for him.”

“So what?”

I shrug, finally setting down the salt and pepper shakers. “That’s a lot of pressure. You’re half his age with a third of his experience.”

Mason’s expression hardens into a glare.

“I’m not saying it as a way to diss you,” I clarify. “But it’s the truth, right? You’re younger. It’s a given. It doesn’t mean you’re not doing a good job. All the guys love you.”

“’Cuz you’d know.” He scoffs folding his arms and turning his agitated glare on the diner window. “You really think

you're some expert on the club. Didn't we just establish you don't know shit?"

"Maybe. But I know people. And the guys... they respect you. You've done a good job. If your father can't see that, then that's his problem."

"I wish it was that simple. Tom's a selfish prick. Always has been, always will be."

"That sounds a lot like his problem too."

Mason stares at me for a second, then scoops up his quarter pound burger in his hands. The juicy beef drips onto the plate as he takes a large bite. He chews, stares at me some more, and seems to draw a conclusion.

"I get it," he says. "Why everybody likes you."

A warm flush floods my face. "You do?"

"Yeah," he says. "You're easy to talk to."

We finish our meal from there. I eat fries that Mason considers too salty and peppery. He demolishes his burger 'til there's nothing left. By the time we walk out we've got full bellies and I'm clutching a to-go baggie.

"You can put that in my saddlebag."

"Thanks."

The sun's fading away. Deep blues and purples ink onto the sky. We mount the bike with Mason checking on me one last time before we take off. I'm back to wrapping both arms around his middle.

It's darker out. More cars occupy the highway. I'm feeling tired and sluggish.

All factors that go into me clinging onto him.

We ride in silence for what feels like forever. The air's cooled down, though still warm against our skin.

My lids are growing heavy. I yawn and snuggle closer to Mason without thinking how it looks. If he even minds.

He's just so... comfortable. So damn huggable.

His broad, muscled back feels so good and solid to rest on. I bet he's amazing to cuddle with.

The thought's out of left field and almost jolts me all the way awake.

No! No thinking about cuddling with Mason Cutler!

I scold myself.

These types of situations are muddying the waters. They're blurring lines that don't need to be blurred.

Mason's still my enemy, and I still can't stand him. He still hates me.

I'm distracted by these thoughts. Mason's attention is on the road. Neither of us notice the group of motorcycles coming up 'til it's too late.

We go from riding solo in our lane to being surrounded on either side of the highway.

Their engines growl from all around me. The guys on the back of the bikes resemble dark angels, masked by bandanas and engulfed in shadows with the exception of their headlights.

I scream and duck behind Mason like he really is my shield.

"Fuck!" Mason shouts over the roar of the summer night's wind. "What do you think you're—don't fucking try it!"

They're trying it. The formation of bikers closes in on us. They slide so close that Mason's forced to speed up to escape them.

But we're outnumbered.

The men simply accelerate along with us, trying to force Mason's hand. They want to intimidate us by running us off the road. The message is clear; we're their enemies.

"Syd, hold on tight, got it?" Mason grunts. "Tight as you can. This is risky as fuck."

Another helpless scream tears from me. Mason's slamming on the gas to propel us forward. One of the bikers goes for it too. He darts at us to cut us off.

Mason swerves, dodging him and the others, leading us off-road. The bike bounces, taking us over gravel and rocky terrain as he struggles to regain control.

"Syd, hold on!"

As the gang of bikers ride off, we slam to a halt. The stop's too sudden and jarring. It breaks my hold on Mason and sends me tumbling off. I cry out as I become aware my body's leaving the bike. I collide with the ground, landing hard on my side.

My head hits the dirt and gravel. The pounding ache in my skull is the last thing I remember before my eyes close and consciousness slips away.

MASON



“SYDNEY!” I ROAR, THROWING MYSELF OFF MY BIKE. I DROP to the ground next to her, a surge of panic inside me, and roll her over onto her back. “Sydney, wake up... shit. Sydney, can you hear me?”

I pull her into my lap and curl my body around her, like I’ll be able to shield her from the rest of the world if I do. Her head droops off to one side and she releases the tiniest fucking groan of pain. If I wasn’t already in protector mode, the small, helpless sound activates it.

I caress her cheek and gently coax her awake. “Sydney, tell me you’re alright. Fuck!”

I check her for any bleeding or serious injury. As far as I can tell, it’s just cuts and scrapes from the brutal fall she took. I cradle her closer and stroke her face ’til her eyes flutter open and she stares up at me.

Judging by the vacant look she gives me, she’s beyond lost.

“Sydney,” I pant in relief. “Stay awake. Fuck, let me get you to an ER. You need to be checked out.”

I pull her the rest of the way into my arms and rise off the ground.

We're out in the middle of nowhere. It's late and all I've got is a bike to transport her.

I swear under my breath. I'd walk a thousand miles if necessary, just to get her some medical treatment... but what if she can't wait that long?

I do the only thing I can in a situation like this—I call 911. It goes against every Steel King bone in my body to resort to calling them. The cops and other types of officials have never been useful to me.

They're about as much my enemy as the Hellrazors.

The fucking Hellrazors.

My face darkens in murderous fury.

Tonight was a new low... which says a lot considering the Hellrazors were already in the fucking gutter. Shooting up Bush's trailer and burning down Brinkley's farming crops wasn't enough.

Tonight they went after Sydney. They could've killed her with the games they were pulling on their bikes.

The two of us might not be best buds, but I won't stand by and let this shit fly.

They must've been following us. We had driven all the way from Lenton, making a stop for dinner in Boulder, and then hit the highway again. Wheaton is a long ways—clearly, they had been waiting for the chance.

“Hang on, Syd,” I say as sirens flash in the distance. “It's gonna be alright.”

On the inside, with rage heating my blood, that couldn't be less true.

Shit's not alright. It won't be alright 'til I get my revenge and make them sorry they ever messed with us.

“Luck was on your side,” says the ER doc. He clicks on a mini flashlight and shines a beam of light into both of Sydney's eyes. “She's not concussed. A little banged up, but a night's rest and some pain meds, and she should be back to normal come tomorrow.”

“You sure?” I ask. “She seemed real dizzy.”

“She took a great fall—even if you say you were decelerating, on a bike like yours and on the terrain you were on, it could've been a lot worse,” he explains, dropping his flashlight into the pocket of his white coat. “I suggest next time you don't have your girlfriend on your bike without proper safety gear like a helmet.”

The doctor shoots me a scolding look.

I'm used to it by this point. When the emergency responders showed up, they asked me a thousand questions, half of them grilling me on why Sydney was on the back of my bike without a helmet.

Like I wasn't already feeling like a guilty piece of shit.

Sydney might've felt like we were going faster than anybody's ever ridden before, but the truth is that I was intentionally driving slower than usual. I was driving more cautiously, keeping wide berths between us and any other vehicle on the road.

I forgo a helmet all the damn time. But I'm an experienced rider and I don't give a damn if I eat shit a time or two.

It was stupid of me to allow Sydney on my bike without one.

“Well,” sighs the doc, “if you want my advice, she’s absolutely not fit to be on the back of your bike anytime soon. Certainly not tonight. There’s a motel across the road. They usually have vacancies. I’ve written her a prescription for some pain meds that’ll be ready for pickup in the pharmacy. You and your girlfriend have a good night.”

I’m too concerned for Sydney to give a shit that he’s called her my girlfriend five times in the last forty minutes.

Sliding my arm around her waist, I help her down from the exam table. She’s still a little dazed, noticeably exhausted as she sags against me.

“Hey, we’re gonna get some rest, alright?”

“Hmmm?” she hums. “But... the ride home...”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s been a change of plans.”

The ER doc was right. The Sweetheart Inn is the closest motel from the hospital. It also makes me sick to my stomach from the second we step into the front office decorated in Pepto Bismol pink and sugary hearts that sparkle and give me a toothache. You’d think it was Valentine’s Day 365 the way they got the place looking.

One thing’s for sure—the Sweetheart Inn isn’t the fanciest place to lay your head down at night. Even with the neon hearts and the color pink puked everywhere, you can tell it’s been a while since a remodel.

There're water stains in the ceiling and shag carpet straight out of the '70s.

I ease Sydney into one of the floral-printed armchairs in the lobby and approach the front desk. "We need a room. The best room you've got."

The guy behind the counter with round glasses and a bad combover holds up a key with a huge plastic heart attached to it.

"That would be our Sweetheart Suite. It's normally for honeymooners." He stands on tiptoe to look over my shoulder at a slumped Sydney. "Are you and your wife on your honeymoon?"

"Yeah, sure. Give me the damn key already."

The Sweetheart Suite is on the top floor... which for a motel this shitty, is just the second level. I unlock the door and guide Sydney inside to the overpowering stench of apple cinnamon air freshener. She crinkles her nose and so do I.

"I'll open a window."

We move in opposite directions. Me to the window. Her to the bed, where she plops down, and struggles to unzip her boots.

"Here. I got it." I crouch low, resting one foot against my forearm as I draw down the zipper and then slip off the leather boot.

My gaze travels up the length of her bare legs. I'd be admiring how nice and shapely they are if I wasn't distracted by the scrapes marring her skin.

"Damn it, Syd." My hand glides up her shin, stopping at her bleeding kneecap. The scrape there has opened back up

and started dripping blood.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs sleepily. “I just want to lie down. My head’s killing me.”

“We should clean you up some more. I got you some stuff from the motel store downstairs.”

She’s so exhausted, she doesn’t fight me on it. A first for Sydney. She lets me escort her into the bathroom, where I twist on the shower and test the water. I’ve set the plastic bag of stuff I picked up on the counter.

I turn around to find her collapsed on the closed lid of the toilet seat. Her eyes are wide but slow-blinking, like she’s trying her damndest to fight sleep and stay awake.

Secretly, I’m trying to keep her up another hour or two.

The doc said she’s not concussed... but I don’t like the idea of her closing her eyes anytime soon.

“How about a quick hot shower? I got you a mini loofah and body wash. There wasn’t a lot of options, but I found this men’s t-shirt with the motel logo on it. Sorry it’s so fucking ugly. It’s cotton and looks like it’ll be kinda long on you. Figured it could be comfortable to sleep in. Like a sleep shirt.”

I have no clue why the hell I’m explaining this to her. She’s barely listening, and it’s not like this is some tender situation. Some lowlife Hellrazors ambushed us tonight, and I’m feeling guilty Sydney got the brunt of it.

That’s all.

“Here. Raise your arms.”

She listens. Again telling me she’s not herself right now.

I tug her t-shirt off and announce I'm going for her bra. She doesn't stop me.

Anytime I've got Sydney naked in my presence, I'm turned on. It's a fact of life when she looks as good as she does—full, bouncy breasts with bitable nipples and a flat stomach with a pierced belly button. Her rounded hips and the tight, warm comfort between her thighs...

My body reacts to hers, even given the shitty situation we're in. I feel a tug in my groin, suddenly aware of the heaviness of my balls.

But I ignore it.

I focus on Sydney, helping her into the shower, and asking if the water temp is okay. She murmurs that it is, then something about being able to do it alone. That I don't need to help her. She's got it.

Even she doesn't sound like she buys it—her stubbornness is urging her to act tough. She hates being vulnerable. Most of all around me.

I don't blame her. I feel the same.

Bloody water from her cuts and scrapes circles the drain. I clench my jaw and begin mapping out a murder plot against the Hellrazors.

They're not getting away with this. I'll rip them to shreds myself.

After toweling Sydney off, I slip the Sweetheart Inn men's t-shirt on her, then help her to bed. The way she crawls onto the bed before flopping down on the pillow almost makes me grin. I would if I still wasn't so pissed off.

“Comfy?”

“Mmm,” she hums, her eyelids heavy. “Lay down with me.”

“Syd—”

“This bed is big enough.”

She’s right. It’s huge, and like most things in this cheap motel, ugly as fuck. It’s king-sized and in the shape of a heart. A bright red bedspread made of crushed velvet is draped over the mattress. I don’t want to stand in the same room let alone lay on a bed this ugly.

But, for Sydney, I do it.

Her medications have taken over. She’s delirious and tired.

The second she dozes off, I’ll get up, and reattack tonight’s events. I’ve got to call the guys back at the club and let them in on what’s happened.

We need to start setting our retaliation in motion.

I lay down beside Sydney, staying above the covers in my boots. I’m on my back and she’s on her side. She scoots closer, her arm falling across my abdomen. I glance down, then over at her.

“Hope you don’t mind,” she murmurs. “I always hug a pillow when I sleep. It comforts me.”

A weird sensation develops inside me at her vulnerable confession. At the fact that she’s initiated this kind of contact—and the fact that I didn’t pull away like I normally would with a woman.

I stay put, letting her curl into me. The feeling of her warm, soft body at my side isn’t bad. It’s enjoyable if I’m being honest. A feeling I could get used to...

Stop that shit right now.

I scold myself and refocus on the bloodthirsty thoughts I have about the Hellrazors.

At my side, Sydney yawns. “Mace...”

“Hmmm?”

“Why do you hate me?”

My gaze shifts to her, thrown by the question. It’s the medications making her so candid—the ER doc prescribed her a sleep aid that’s making her loopy—but it doesn’t change the fact that the question pulls at me.

The guilt I’ve been feeling intensifies.

Here Sydney is, lying half asleep in bed, banged up after a deadly encounter, and all she wants to know is why I hate her.

She’s not even mad about the Hellrazors. She hasn’t blamed me once.

I’m such an asshole. Just like Tom. I’m becoming him...

“I don’t hate you,” I say stiffly.

“I don’t hate you either,” she whispers. Her eyes slip close. “I... I’ve wanted you to like me...”

Then she drifts off to sleep without another word.

It hits me as I glance at her and watch her for a moment. The weird sensation returns. A warm fuzziness that’s about as nauseating as the Sweetheart Inn.

I already do.

SYDNEY



IF YOU TOLD ME EVEN TWO WEEKS AGO THAT MASON CUTLER and I would reach a point where we were cool with each other, I'd laugh in your face.

Surely there would be no way the prez of the club who hated my guts on sight would reach a point where he greets me first in a barroom full of club members. He wouldn't take my side in a spat against Sandie or intervene when a drunk prospect tries to get handsy. We damn sure wouldn't be laughing at our own inside jokes like BFFs.

All of these things happen.

On Poker Night, Johnny Flanagan yells across the saloon for me to join in. He and some of the other guys have gathered around with cards, chips, and beers. Some of them are already half drunk. Bush has already won the last two games. Kind of fitting since he's the MC's treasurer.

I decline at first.

"C'mon!" Johnny calls. "We're starting up another game! Ozzie's about to hurl. You take his place."

A couple of the other guys chime in.

My gaze goes straight to Mason's. He's seated in between Cash and Bush. I'm fully expecting him to issue an order or

tell me it's club members only—force of habit given our history—but he does neither of these things.

His forest-green eyes gleam. He holds my gaze and says, “Yeah... Syd can play.”

It feels like receiving the stamp of approval from the cool jock at school.

Which sounds dumb as hell, but suddenly I feel fifteen again. I feel special that Mason Cutler, the president of the Steel Kings, wants me to play Texas Hold 'Em with him and the guys.

Nobody else gets the significance. But I do.

I slip into the chair across from his and my lips tip up. It's not exactly a smile, though close enough.

Mason seems to know.

For the next hour and a half, we play. Cash wins a hand and then Mason does. Bush finishes off the final round with another victory.

“Well, thanks for the fun, guys... but I should probably clean up.” I finish the beer I've been nursing for over an hour and rise from my chair.

The other guys sit around and grumble about whether to play again or call it a night. Everybody but Johnny votes on the latter.

I'm behind the counter washing shot glasses when he swaggers over, grinning ear-to-ear.

“Hey, beautiful,” he says. If possible, his grin widens even more. “The fun doesn't have to stop now. I live a block away. When do you get off?”

“You must be crazy,” I joke with a light laugh. “I’m exhausted. The second I’m off, it’s bedtime.”

He leans over the bar counter, reeking of beer and whiskey. “That’s exactly what I was thinking, beautiful. Time in bed. You and me.”

I’ve dealt with drunken patrons before, working bars and clubs throughout college. The advice was always to keep it cute: smile, be polite but firm, and if that doesn’t work, call on the bouncers or security for the night.

The thing is, the Kings don’t have security, and I’m not sure I’d enlist them even if they did.

I’m still an outsider here. The last thing I need is to cause trouble.

So I keep it cute. I smile at Johnny and then divert my attention to the running water and shot glass in my hand.

“Ha, ha... you’ve got jokes. But I meant sleep, Johnny,” I say. “You have a good night though.”

He reaches across the bar counter, using his gangly arm to do so, and snaps his long fingers shut around my wrist. His grin remains, though it’s no longer innocent and inviting—there’s an irritation that’s hidden beneath.

“You like playing hard to get, don’t you?”

My smile falters. “Um... you’re kidding, right?”

“That’s what you’ve been doing from the moment you stepped foot in here,” he slurs. “Those little jean shorts you wear—you know we can all see that ass when you strut by. And those tits.”

His hazy eyes drop to my chest with zero discretion. He openly *leers*.

So much that I want to wrap my arms around myself. His stare isn't male appreciation. It's a straight up violation.

Any politeness goes out the window.

My smile disappears. My pleasant tone vanishes.

I harden, taking on a stereotypical resting bitch face.

"Leave me the hell alone," I say. "And don't talk to me like that again. It's disrespectful."

He coughs out a laugh. "Disrespectful? DISRESPECTFUL!?"

He plants both hands on the counter and heaves himself up. In a quick motion he vaults over the bar counter like it's nothing.

"You don't get a say in what's disrespectful when you're dressed like a slut."

My insides run cold. I take a precautionary step back as he advances. I keep the shot glass in hand. If he tries anything, I swear I'll smash it and stab his ass.

But I'm also acutely aware of the fact that everybody else has left. Mick left half an hour ago after asking if I could finish close up, and the other guys from the poker game cleared out.

Johnny was the only one who stayed behind...

I swallow and decide to keep things simple for his drunken mind. "I'm not interested."

"You've gotta be," he says, coming closer. "You think we've never dealt with bitches like you, Sydney? Slutty barmaids auditioning to be club girls? You know club girls

don't just become club girls without getting their hands dirty, right? They've gotta earn their stripes..."

"Leave me alone!" I yell, projecting my voice.

It doesn't faze him. He closes the gap between us, sweaty and feverish. "They've gotta make the rounds. They've gotta keep us men satisfied—*UGH!*"

I go from a ball of anxiety, preparing myself to stab a man, to a ball of shock. I slip into speechlessness as a powerful hand clamps shut on Johnny's shoulder and wrenches him around.

Mason doesn't even wait for him to finish spinning—he throws out left and right combos that land. That send Flanagan crashing to the sticky bar floor.

"You fucking garbage!" Mason roars, grabbing the front of his shirt and punching him again. And again. "Learn to take no for an answer! What the fuck did you think you were about to do?!"

Johnny's got a mouth full of blood as he seeks to beg for mercy. I can't make out every word but catch a few.

Things like, "flirting" and "just a slut."

Mason pummels him the more he tries. Every time he opens his mouth, blood pouring out, Mason's fist slams into it. He hits him so hard he's bruising himself, busting open his knuckles on Johnny Flanagan's face.

For a moment that's probably too long, I stand back and watch. Not because I'm enjoying what I'm seeing... because I'm so taken aback.

Finally, something clicks inside me, and I rush forward. "Mason, stop—you'll kill him!"

"I don't give a fuck! He'd deserve it!"

He draws his fist back and smashes it into Johnny's face in another brutal hit.

Johnny stopped responding seconds ago. His eyes have dimmed and his swollen tongue hangs outside the side of his mouth. His head can't support itself anymore; it snaps backward like he's in some limbo between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Black and blue bruises have already started coloring his skin.

"He's had enough," I say. "Just... just toss him out."

Mason seems to come to his senses at the suggestion. He drags Johnny, who's now half unconscious, by the collar of his shirt toward the door. He kicks him out into the night's dirt and dust with the promise there'll be hell to pay tomorrow.

Something tells me it's not over. Once Johnny's sober, he'll be punished.

Severely.

I'm shaken... but I'm also confused.

I didn't even know Mason was around. Was he eavesdropping the entire time?

He admires the blood on his knuckles and then looks up at me. I fold my arms and choose violence.

Metaphorical violence.

"I didn't ask you to do that," I say.

"Do what? Get Flanagan off your back? You've gotta be fucking kidding me!"

"You could've killed him."

"And he could've raped you."

Discomfort coils inside me like a rope. Though he's correct, I'm too damn stubborn to back down.

"I could've handled it."

"Really?" he sneers. His lips that I enjoy kissing spread into a cruel smile and his eyes that often captivate me gleam. "Cuz it sure as hell didn't look like it. It looked like you were freezing up and he was advancing on you. It looked like he was about to knock you down and take what he wanted."

I fail to come up with a defense. Mostly because... he's probably right.

I was backing away. Johnny was advancing. We were seemingly alone, and he didn't seem like he was giving up anytime soon.

But rather than concede, I fight to the end. I forget about the progress Mason and I have made over the last week and a half, and I revert back to what we know.

Old habits die hard.

"It was none of your concern," I snap. "You don't even like me! What do you care if I got into it with Johnny Flanagan?"

Oops.

The offense is immediate.

Mason's face spans a range of emotions. First disbelief, his eyes going wide and unfocused, then disgust that twists his features, and finally the pure rage that I'd say such a thing. He releases the grunt of a beast as he turns and smashes his bloodied knuckles into the wood cabinet behind the bar counter.

The collision is hard enough to potentially break his hand if he's not careful.

But he doesn't seem to care.

He goes back for another hard punch, pounding into the wood 'til it seems like it'll break before he does.

“Stop it!” I yell at him. “You'll hurt yourself!”

He rounds on me in an explosion of heaving breaths and pulsing, furious energy.

I take a step back, unsure what to make of him.

“How fucking dare you!” he roars at me. “You think so little of me, you think I'm just gonna stand by as that shit goes down!? I'm just supposed to ignore what was happening?! I shouldn't be angry that trash was gonna put his hands on you whether you wanted it or not?! HE CALLED YOU OUT OF YOUR NAME!”

The last roar is the loudest. It's so loud I wouldn't be surprised if the people in neighboring towns heard.

I force myself to stand my ground, though the ferocity of his scream shakes me. It rocks me to my core.

It's raw and full of pent up emotion.

Some kind of coded confession if there ever was one. I might not know what, but I know it is...

“Mason...”

“Let's get something straight right now.” He backs me up against the bar counter in quick, powerful strides that make me submit without thinking. “I might be a fucking asshole,” he growls in my face once he has me cornered. “I might piss you off. I might hurt your feelings. But I'm never going to stand

for anybody coming around and hurting you. I will rip their fucking guts out if they try. And you can be damn sure I won't apologize for it."

I... don't know what to say.

I can't bring myself to look away. I can't even sort out the meaning of this moment and why my heart feels like it'll bust out of my chest.

We stare intensely into each other's eyes for what feels like an eternity. My shock comes off me in waves. Mason's rage is the same, a hot firestorm that surrounds us. It lights me up and makes my skin flush.

I can feel his want. I can sense his need.

We're combustible. It's the only conclusion to draw as we find ourselves close, our bodies pushed up against each other, our faces practically touching.

Mason's backed me up and I've done nothing to stop him. His angry breaths make my own stall. I struggle against the shaky beats of my heart and wonder if I dare to give in.

He must be thinking the same—the deep green hue in his irises darkens. They dip to my lips and his hands reach for me.

I help him the second it happens. As he draws me closer by the waist, I seek out his mouth. The result is a hard kiss born of desperation.

It's a tangle of limbs and discarded clothes. Mason hoists me up onto the bar counter and devours me in another torrent of passionate kisses.

His tongue. His hands. His damn groans of pleasure.

All of it.

It undoes me. It makes my pussy throb.

I groan along with him as he kisses up my jaw and grips my hips. I'm filled in the next second, impaled by his thick girth.

Stars shoot before my eyes and my pussy flutters tightly around him.

Mason loses it, drawing his hips back and slamming into me whole. He makes no sense as he fucks me, grunting and groaning broken words. All over the slap of our skin and squelch of my soaked pussy.

“So fucking good.”

I whimper in answer, rocking with him. My fingers glide over his scalp and hold his face close to mine.

He fucks into me like a man no longer able to hide the beast inside. It's hard and unforgiving, his hips fast and his dick forceful tunneling into me. His grip squeezes my flesh enough to bruise, holding my hips and thighs. Groping my breasts.

I take it all with a wanton shudder, riding his aggressive wave, and swimming in the tingles it gives me.

“So fucking wet.”

His teeth scrape my skin. My nails do the same. He plants himself whole and bottoms out and we sing together. I'm shaky and sweaty, rocking with him, feeling fuller than I've ever felt, that I can only wrap my hands around his muscled back and grip him.

“So fucking deep,” he growls, then he pounds into me some more.

He goes so deep I'm sure he's about to split me into two.

My orgasm washes over me in a hoarse scream. He shuts me up by pressing his lips to mine and pumps into me like a feral beast holding nothing back.

'Til he comes and realizes last second what he's done.

"Fuck!" he groans, then he kisses me. Sloppily, with his tongue in my mouth. "Your pussy's so good, Syd. So fucking good... I wasn't supposed to... but I had to come inside."

I can't even be mad at him. I'm just as scrambled as he is.

When we part, we're still so dazed we stand nude behind the bar counter.

In my breathless state, I slide my gaze up and down Mason's naked, muscled body glistening in sweat. My hypersensitive, overstimulated pussy clenches at the sight. Even his damn still-huge-while-flaccid penis turns me on all over again.

How I'm so instantly turned on so quickly, seconds after we fucked, I have no idea. No other man has ever had me feeling like this much of a sex freak...

I clear my throat, force myself to chill, and bend down to collect my clothes. "I... wasn't expecting that."

"That makes two of us."

"Mason," I sigh, stepping into my panties, then pulling on my bra. "What the hell are we doing? These hookups have been intense. So has hating you. Then we... we kind of got along... and I kind of liked it. But now..."

Mason scrubs a hand over his face. "It's been a rollercoaster."

"I don't know if I can keep doing it—*this*. It's too intense."

“Syd—”

“You’ve got me confused!” I blurt out. “One second we’re hot. The next we’re cold. Then we’re hot! I need consistency!”

He hooks me by the waist and surprises me with a kiss. It ends before I’m ready for it to, but it’s affectionate enough that I’m staring at him wide-eyed afterward.

“That consistent enough?”

“But... what...?”

“I don’t want other guys thinking you’re available,” he says vaguely. “I don’t want you entertaining those guys either. I want to be the guy you give that kinda attention to. Make sense?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah...”

“Good,” he says, buckling his belt. “Let’s clean up. Then I expect you in my bed.”

SYDNEY



MASON CUTLER WOULD HATE FOR ANYBODY TO KNOW THE truth about him: he's a cuddler.

He swears up and down he isn't. The first time I tease him about it, he's insulted. He gives me a cold look of warning that explicitly says I should be careful... *or else*.

But after a few nights sleeping in his bed, there's no beating around the bush.

He. Is. A. Cuddler.

He draws me into him, tangles my legs with his, and glides fingers over my skin. The TV plays in the background, the volume down on the late-night news cast that's airing. The only other sound in the room comes from the steady thrums of our breath.

His lids are heavy. Mine too.

It's been another late night at the saloon. Another long day for Mason and the guys. He won't tell me what's going on, though it's not like it takes a genius to figure it out—the Kings are warring with the Hellrazors. Worse since they attacked us on the road.

He's seemed to take it very... *personally*.

Which makes these quiet moments between us more confusing. As I'm laying lazily at his side, tucked under a thin sheet in his bed, I still can't help wondering what's going on between us.

The more he draws me close, the more it feels real. The harder my heart beats and deeper it flutters.

I begin getting those funny knots in my stomach like I'm nervous about something I can't verbalize.

The lines are blurring, which sets off the alarm bells in my head—a stern warning not to fall for these moments. Don't get too attached. Don't fool yourself for one second.

Mason Cutler is a Steel King. The Steel Kings are my enemies.

They murdered Pop. They must pay. I'll make sure of it if it kills me taking them down.

I'm supposed to be on point, infiltrating their club. I'm not supposed to lose sight of my goal. I should be milking Mason Cutler dry. Charming the hell out of him so that when I get my revenge, he'll be shocked.

I glance over, my arms giving him a squeeze around his torso. "Mason Cutler, you're cuddling me."

He peeks at me with both lids about closed and only his left brow raised. "I'm trying to get some sleep. It'd be easier if you weren't talking."

"I wouldn't talk if somebody admitted they were cuddling me."

"You've got to be the stubbornest chick alive. Anybody ever tell you that?"

“Yes. So... are you going to admit you’re cuddling me now?”

He rumbles out a noise that rivals thunder—and *should* frighten me—but instead, as he pulls a maneuver and slips me under him, I’m turned on.

I’m lost in the deep, uncanny shade of forest-green that makes up his eyes. In some lights, they appear a shade or two lighter. In others, a hue that’s somehow darker than black.

Mason’s eyes give him away every time, framed by what’s nice lashes for a man.

I reach up and palm his ruggedly scruffy cheek without ever looking away. He doesn’t either... ’til he leans in close and takes my lips.

My stubbornness falls by the wayside. All while Mason answers me without answering me.

“That good enough?” he asks, pulling back.

I smile like a dope. “For now.”

He grunts his laugh and settles beside me again. “I’ll say one thing, Syd. You’ve got my attention. More than any woman in Pulsboro.”

“Don’t I feel special?”

“You should. The women here are all the same.”

“Funny, I could say the same thing about the men in your club.” I’m teasing, though I sense he’s *trying* to be genuine. I twist my body onto my side and raise myself up on my elbow, letting a hand skim across his bare, muscled chest. “Tell me about your tats. You have more than I’m willing to count.”

He grabs hold of my hand and uses it to gesture to the cross and scripture sprawled across his chest. “This is for my mother. See her name on the edge?”

“I do. That’s... very touching. I had no idea that’s what that is.”

“It’s a tribute to her. She was a god-fearing woman. She was a very good woman. She was... too good for Tom.” His voice thickens, growing huskier with an emotion I can’t place. Not anger, not even bitterness.

It’s deep-rooted grief.

In this moment, I relate to him more than I can possibly articulate.

“I’m sure she was amazing to have raised you.”

“You fucking with me, or you being serious right now?”

I smooth my palm over his heart, feeling its beats. “Serious. I wouldn’t mess around about that. I’ve lost my parents too. I get it.”

More than you know...

“It’s crazy when you think about it. How long it stays with you. It never goes away. It just... it becomes a part of you that you learn to live with over time.”

I ache, understanding exactly what he means without even naming specifics. I’ve missed my birth parents all my life, despite being too young to remember much about them. The pain has existed inside me, so unbelievably real it hurts to breathe when I think about it too long.

“Yeah,” I whisper, my throat suddenly sore. “It does. It’s a hole in your heart. Your heart still works—it still beats. But, there’s a hole there that you’re always aware of.”

“That’ll never be filled,” he finishes for me, and in this moment, I’ve never felt closer to another human being. He pierces me with a look. “You were orphaned, right? At a young age?”

I nod. “I can’t remember my birth parents. I was that little. Luckily, a gentle-hearted man and his wife adopted me only a couple years into the foster system. But... but they’re dead now too.”

Understanding grows in Mason’s eyes that makes me ache even more. That makes me certain I might’ve found a kindred spirit. As silly and ridiculous as it sounds, I can say with certainty that he hears and understands every word I speak—he gets the feelings I’ve had.

“Mom and Logan were everything to me,” he says. “Losing Mom hurt bad enough. It fucked me up real good for years. I was a kid and went from a B to an F student. But then losing Logan? It was like I was gone.”

My hand remains on his heart, picking up on how it beats faster as he speaks. He clasps his larger hand back over mine, giving it a squeeze of solidarity, before he seems to come to his senses. He realizes we’ve gotten a little too vulnerable. A little too real.

Dragging my hand to his bicep, he changes the subject by pointing out his next tattoo.

“This one’s self-explanatory. The club crest.”

I play along with him, understanding we need to lighten the mood again. “What about this brotherhood tat on your neck?”

“It signifies rank. Different guys have different insignias. I’m road captain.”

“Third in line,” I murmur.

He nods. “Behind Tom and Silver.”

“Silver’s the vice prez. Where’s he again?”

“On a... leave of absence. He’s going through some personal shit. Divorce and custody battle with his old lady.”

“Which is why you’ve become acting prez.”

“You sure you’ve never been involved with an MC before?” He raises a suspicious brow that could trigger a guilty conscience.

...if I had one. I don’t as far as what I’m doing. I roll with the punches and play along.

“Remember that ex-husband of mine? A Hellrazor.”

It’s a risk.

With how paranoid and suspicious Mason is, how he’s distrusted me from day one, and how intense the rivalry between the two MCs has become, it’s a joke that can backfire big time.

A second goes by where Mason stares and then husks out another rough laugh. He grips my chin and plants a kiss on my lips.

“Let Velm tell it... your ex-husband was scum. If he was a Hellrazor, I’d handle him myself. I’d handle him if he wasn’t. If he comes trying to start something or make trouble for you.”

My pussy throbs.

It shouldn’t turn me on. It shouldn’t be hot as hell that Mason’s willing to handle my imaginary ex-husband should he ever come looking for me.

But it *does*.

There's a primitive, territorial tone to his rough voice that does things to me.

Looking him dead in the eye, he's serious. He'd handle any man who comes for me.

At a time where I feel alone and unprotected, in the wake of losing Pop, it *means* something. Even when I tell myself it doesn't—that this is just an act. I'm in Mason Cutler's bed to find out more about Pop's murder and get him the justice he deserves.

I should be able to block out these conflicting thoughts and feelings. Yet I couldn't fail more as Mason leans over and kisses my neck.

“You know, some old ladies get their own club tattoo.”

Why are you telling me this!?

“They do?”

He nods, grabbing my hand and intertwining our fingers. “You're not my old lady and I don't expect you to be. You're not even my girlfriend.”

Gee, thanks...

“But,” he goes on, “I don't want you with other men, Syd. I don't want you flirting with them. I don't want you touching them. I damn sure don't want them touching you. You good with that?”

“And the Tits on Heels? Sandie?”

His normally serious and tense face eases up with a slight smile. “You're the jealous type, huh?”

“Fair is fair.”

“Alright. Fine.”

“So...” I say slowly. “We’re exclusive? But I’m not exactly an old lady?”

A sudden fire lights in Mason’s gaze. An idea’s running loose in his head, though I have no clue what. He returns to hovering over me, entrapping me under him, as he peers into my eyes and lets the tension settle in.

I’m not sure if he’s about to laugh at my bold question or grow offended. Men like Mason rarely make a commitment, and when they do, they’re complicated about it. Calling us ‘exclusive’ might’ve been a bridge too far.

“Since apparently we still haven’t cleared things up,” he says. “Maybe this will.”

He swoops in and captures my lips in a hard, unrelenting kiss. I gasp at the shock of it, trying to orient myself, but having no such luck as Mason sends me reeling. He licks my bottom lip and then sucks it between his teeth for a playful bite.

I almost jerk back, then realize I’m trapped. I’m stuck between the bed and the warm weight of his muscled body.

My heartbeat soars into overdrive as we fall into an enthusiastic rhythm. Mason leads, his mouth plundering mine, his hand gripping my hip and pressing me into the mattress.

Oh sweet Jesus.

Need pulses through me. Awakened and intense, it fills me ’til I feel like I’ll burst.

My body aches for it. His touch. His kiss. His dick.

It becomes the only thing I can think about. The thing I want most in this moment.

I moan and grind against him, my pelvis and his pelvis aligned. He wedges himself between my thighs, his erection heavy and rock hard, and kisses me thoroughly—he goes from my lips to my throat and then dips lower. He charts a path down my breasts and stomach, pulling up the thin cami I'm wearing to bed.

My fingers dig into his tattooed skin, and I sing his praises with my moans. Moans that soon turn into pants at the feel of Mason's rough hands on my soft thighs. He pries them apart wider and then tugs at my panties.

I lift and twist my hips to help him. We had sex earlier, but damn if I don't need another round.

It's written on my face as I gaze hazily up at him and try to catch my breath. I expect him to go to town, pull out his dick, and pound away 'til we're both exploding.

Instead, Mason flips me onto my stomach. My hips are dragged backward 'til my legs bend and I'm propped up on my knees. It happens in such a fast and fluid motion that I barely recognize what's happened.

That my body's tilted as if I'm doing downward dog during yoga. My bare ass is perched in the air, and Mason's positioned directly behind me with a full view. I ball my fingers into the sheets and shift my body, distantly aware of how it must look from his perspective—my naked ass shaking right in front of him, almost tauntingly.

He rumbles out a growl more startling than thunder, and just when I expect him to fill me with his thick cock, I'm proven wrong again.

Mason grips my ass and tongues my pussy from behind.

“OH!” I gasp out in surprise at the feel of his warm, wet tongue. “Ohhh, Mace... fuck, yessss...”

It’s the only thing I can think to say as he tongues my pussy and squeezes my ass within the powerful grip of his hands.

He’s all in from the first lash of his tongue. It works it in a sweeping motion that grows more intense the more pressure he applies.

I close my eyes and ride the pleasurable waves washing over my body. I sink into the feeling of his mouth devouring my pussy. The clench of his palms spreading my cheeks apart. Even the scratch of his beard on the underside of my thighs.

Overwhelming is an understatement as my body thrums with ever-increasing pleasure—enough pleasure that I’m clutching the bedsheets and grinding back against his face.

There’s no other way to put it.

Mason Cutler makes love to my pussy with his tongue.

If such a thing were ever truly possible, this would be it.

No one has ever eaten me out the way Mason does, with such an intense passion and enthusiasm that it’s like he’s spent his whole life training for this moment.

I’m a mess as I finally surrender to the pleasure. It consumes me in a spine-arching, thigh-quivering thrash of my body. All decorum is lost in the breathless cry I let out, slumping against the bed once he’s through with me.

Or so I think.

Body buzzing and mind hazy, I’m wrought with pleasure, ready to curl up and doze off.

But Mason's just getting started. As I crawl toward my pillow, he drags me back toward him, canting my hips up higher.

He leans over me, his larger body swathing over mine in a mass of heavy, warm muscle.

"I decide when I'm done with you," he growls into my ear.

He's sinking into me completely in the next second, his thick length seated deep. An instant tremble rocks through me and I shudder at how unbearably large and girthy he is.

Mason slaps his hands onto my ass and fucks into me with a mix of passion and aggression.

Desire sparks to life as a burning fire in my belly. Any exhaustion melts away, at least for the moment, as Mason grips my hips and I arch my back to meet him.

The wild sounds we make, the bed squeaking along with us, fill up the room. Anyone within a mile radius probably overhears.

But we don't give a damn.

We don't stop 'til we're shuddering through the hard orgasms that slam into us. We fall to the pillows with entangled limbs and our mouths seeking each other out.

For a long moment, it's the only thing we can focus on in the aftermath—kissing deeply, our bodies still abuzz with pleasure.

Mason's rough hands glide over my naked curves and he presses himself into me. "I don't think I'll ever be done with you, Syd. You've got me fucking addicted."

I smirk blearily at him, barely conscious myself. "You're not the only one, Mace."

The next morning, I'm exhausted and low on sleep. Mason and I were up throughout the night wreaking intense pleasure on each other, which hardly left any time for shuteye.

Do I regret it? Hell no. Am I in serious need of some caffeine? That should go without saying.

Velma casts a knowing smile at me as I plod into the saloon with a deep yawn.

“Up all night, girly?”

I return a tired smile at her. “You can say that.”

“You two forget I sleep under the same roof most nights? Those walls are surprisingly paper thin.”

I slide into one of the stools and help myself to a heap of eggs from the platter that's been left out. “Your stepson is a very... hungry man.”

“There's some imagery I never asked for,” she says, cranking out a laugh. “Which reminds me. I wanted to talk to you about something. Mason's birthday is coming up and I was thinking we could throw him a surprise party.”

I've barely swallowed a forkful of scrambled eggs before answering. “I don't know if I should be involved. Things between us are still new. That feels like something somebody who's known him a while should do.”

“Don't tie yourself into knots, girly. I just figured with you and Mace getting closer, you'd want to help out. You've only been here a few weeks, but you're practically one of us.”

Velma's words help me realize the opportunity this could present.

After thinking on it for a second longer, I change my mind. "If you think it'll be fine if I do, I'll help. Tell me what you need."

"So here's what I was thinking. It's about time Mace let's a load off. But he won't ever do it less we do it for him. Tom's the same way—stubborn as a mule and a workhorse all in one. It's been a while since we've thrown a party out back on the patio. We could do a bonfire and beer keg. Get him a big ol' chocolate cake. He'd never admit it, but he's got a real sweet tooth just like his father. It could all be a surprise. What do you think?"

"That sounds like it'll piss Mace off," I answer, then my lips quirk into a smile. "Let's do it."

"I knew you'd be up for it! How about you head down to the basement and do an inventory of tables and chairs? We should have some foldable ones down there from our last big party on the patio. I'll call up some bakeries about the cake."

We part ways with the first steps of our game plan figured out. Velma starts reaching out to different bakeries. I finish my scrambled eggs before heading down the steps leading into the basement.

The door swings shut behind me with a tone of foreboding that makes me flinch. Heavy shadows engulf the space the deeper I venture down the stairs. It might be summer outside, but in the basement a cold draft freezes the space, making it feel a lot closer to winter.

I shiver taking in the sight of stacked boxes of old supplies and crates of stale beer. In the far corner are the foldable tables

and chairs Velma mentioned. I make a beeline for them, determined to get this over with as quick as possible. This basement gives enough bad vibes for gooseflesh to prickle my skin.

I swipe at the cobwebs spun over the table and chairs, trying to count them up. We have more than enough for a surprise birthday party. It seems like the space on the patio might not even be able to accommodate the number of tables and chairs we have.

I turn to go, then stop. My gaze has fallen on the stack of boxes nearest to where I stand. In messy scrawl written by a sharpie marker are what's labeled as "Bike Festival Meet Ups 1983-2001." Curiosity flutters through me and goads me into taking a step toward the boxes.

For some of those years, Pop was active in the MC world. He was a Hellrazor. Did he ever come into contact with the Steel Kings during that timeframe? He must've if they sought him out to kill him.

I glance over at the staircase to double check no one's coming. This could be an opportunity to find any clues that might point me in the right direction. Ignoring the fast beat of my heart and nervous twitch in my stomach, I open the flaps on the box and dig around inside.

A gasp leaves me the instant I spot them lying at the very top of the box's contents. A stack of photos of what looks like some kind of MC gathering. Some kind of big get-together with various clubs. In the first photo I pull out, I'm staring at a 30-something-year-old Pop grinning wide next to none other than...

Tom Cutler.

But that's not even the most alarming thing of all.

Pop's face is marked out. A huge red 'X' has been drawn over his face. The same has been done to a few other men in the photo, including another Hellrazor, and then a Black man in a leather-clad vest that reads, "Road Reaper."

Were these men killed? Are the Steel Kings picking them off one by one?

I feel sick to my stomach. Almost to the point I forget to take some evidence. I steal the photo with the red Xs, stuffing it into my jean pocket.

"Girly!?" Velma calls from the top of the staircase. "You done doing an inventory?"

I spin around, my adrenaline racing, and my emotions out of whack. "Ye-yeah... I'm done," I stutter, then I start toward the staircase. "I'm finished."

Except... I'm not. My revenge is only getting started.

MASON



“YOU GOOD OVER THERE, LOVER BOY?” CASH ASKS, WINKING at me.

I’m visiting my Road King, speaking with Chaz the mechanic on modifications we’re making. I look up at the sound of Cash’s voice and reflexively flip him off. He chuckles and thumps me on the back on passing.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” he says. “You’re in a good mood these days.”

“I seem to remember a time in high school when you wouldn’t shut the fuck up, so we handled things with our fists. We need to do that again?”

He grins wide, looking more Hollywood heartthrob than ruthless biker. “You won,” he admits. “But I put up a damn good fight.”

That’s true. We had been brawling over a girl. Maisy Hamilton.

It was sophomore year and she had developed tits the size of balloons. The one time Cash and I have ever come to blows. By the afternoon, we were over the feud, agreeing we’d leave Maisy to the other guys drooling over her.

This moment isn’t that different—it’s over a woman.

Cash, and some of the other guys, have begun making slick comments about Sydney.

We haven't said a thing to anybody about what's going on between us, so you'd think they'd mind their business. That's asking for too much from the MC.

Everybody knows we're fucking. They've probably picked up on it being even more than that.

What that more means beats me. I don't know my damn self. Just that I enjoy Sydney's company, and I want her in my bed. The sight of her around other men makes me fucking irate and she holds my interest like few have.

At the same time, I haven't forgotten my suspicions.

They're on the back burner. Simmering.

Still there in case anything else happens to alert my bullshit meter... but less and less on my mind each day.

Things have been good.

It's been a week since we established some kinda relationship. I'm no commitment guy and probably never will be. I don't have deep feelings for the chicks I'm involved with and likely won't ever. But the dynamic between Syd and me *works*.

So far, it's only gotten better.

Which explains what I'm guessing was a slightly less moody look on my face. The expression that's caused Cash to call me out.

I leave Chaz at my bike and follow Cash over to his. At this time of day, the Chop Shop is all business—the loud whir of drills and other power tools make it so it's hard to hear, and the place reeks of motor oil and sweat. It's an environment that

feels natural to both me and Cash; enough that we shoot the shit here often.

“That obvious?” I ask, leaning against the cement wall.

He pulls out a torque wrench and kneels before his FXDB Street Bob. “Mace, you were smiling last night. At the saloon.”

“You know I do that from time to time, right? Might not be as often as you with that Hollywood actor, Colgate sponsorship smile of yours, but occasionally, I do.”

“*With Sydney sitting in your lap?*”

Fuck. Forgot about that.

I hadn’t been able to resist—she’d been prancing around the bar floor in her favorite pair of denim cutoffs and her ass looked so fucking good, I just had to have her in my lap. Then I remembered we were in the middle of a crowded bar and eyes were on us.

“You were smiling,” Cash continues, his blue eyes shining. “I’ve never seen you smile like that.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snap. “Mind your business.”

What else can I say? He’s got me dead to rights. There’s no denying what happened, even if I’d done it after being emboldened by two beers.

“She’s good for you. She’s a woman that can go toe-to-toe with you. You need someone like that.”

“You’re an expert on love all of a sudden?”

“No,” he answers, twisting his torque wrench, “but I sure as hell know what my best friend looks like happy.”

“You teasing him about Sydney?” hollers Tatum “Tate” McKinley. Another enforcer of ours; he’s more part time than anything as a professional fighter. He grins in the same way Cash is, revealing they’ve talked about this.

“I’ve got no problem kicking your ass too, Tate—or giving it a shot against those lethal weapons you call hands.”

Both guys laugh.

I should be pissed, but deep down I can’t be.

They’re right—I am in a better mood. I *was* smiling.

And I don’t give a fuck about any of it. Considering the revenge mission we’ll be setting into motion against the Hellrazors soon, I need all the good times I can get. Sydney gives me that.

“SURPRISE!”

I almost swing blind on anybody jumping out at me. Several do, crowded around the patio as the lights flick on and I realize I’m surrounded. They clutch beers and wear fat, dopey grins. A bonfire burns in the rock pit farther out, the flames bright orange in the night. Sydney, Velma, Sandie, and a few others stand by the long table next to a huge cake.

“What the fuck’s all this?” I grunt.

But I already know. My birthday is like any other day. I treat it as such.

I spent most of the day at the Chop Shop and in the back office putting the final details in place for our revenge against the Hellrazors.

We've finally tracked down their supplier and figured out their next transaction for drugs and weapons.

When I checked on the saloon, business was slow as any other typical Monday night. I was cutting through the patio to make it to Tom's house only to be bombarded by this surprise party.

Ozzie shoves a cold beer in my hand. I'm herded over toward the giant double fudge cake on the table and sang an off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday."

At the end, I refuse to blow out my candles alone. I grab Sydney by the elbow and yank her over to join me.

"Blow," I say.

Her eyes smile at me the way they shine. "Maybe later. In private."

"Definitely fucking later," I growl, leaning close to her ear. "But right now too. Blow."

Everybody cheers as the candles go out.

The party really begins after that. The music's cranked up, blasting so loud we drown out every other bar on the block. The flames in the bonfire crackle and lick at the night's air. A group of Tits on Heels parade through in skimpy skirts and tube tops to dance. Slices of cake are passed around alongside cans of beer.

The patio becomes one big focal point of celebration.

Being the brooding ass I am, I try to stick to the outskirts. I sip on my beer and indulge in a slice of fudge cake, keeping my distance from the crazy shit popping off.

Sydney refuses to let me be a spectator at my own birthday party.

“No you don’t,” she says, grabbing my hands. “Dance with me.”

“I don’t dance.”

“But you move your hips so well.”

A naughty glint flashes in her gaze that only adds to her sexiness—tonight she’s got on one of those thin summer dress’s women wear that shows off plenty of leg and teases their chest and bare shoulders all in one go.

Fuck, does it look amazing on her.

The only birthday present I want is that dress on my floor and Sydney in my bed, legs spread wide and me balls deep in her pussy.

Sydney drags me away from the edge of the patio, closer to where the music blasts from the stereos. I stand stock-still, folding my arms across my chest, watching as she starts dancing anyway.

The hard-edged yet seductive notes of Pour Some Sugar on Me plays. She slips into a sexy little dance in front of me. We might as well be alone the sultry way she rocks her hips and keeps her warm brown eyes on me.

Damn anybody else who sees.

This is only for me.

A grin chases away the serious, composed expression on my face. I crook my index finger, signaling for her to come closer. She does, dancing still, moving that fucking sexy body of hers every step of the way.

The second she’s close enough, I snatch her up. My hands clamp down on her waist and I reel her toward me ’til she’s

flush up against my chest. I bend my head and let my mouth hover over hers.

“I want you to do that tonight. In my bedroom. Private birthday striptease.”

“Mmm, can’t wait. I’m going to ride you like a damn Harley, Mace,” she hums, her face tipped up toward mine. Her hips sway against me, like she can’t help how her body moves so naturally to the music.

I let out a throaty laugh. “I’m thinking, it’s my birthday. So I get to use all your holes tonight.”

The way her eyes widen makes me crack up all over again. But she doesn’t object—she only continues grinding against me like the sexy fucking tease she is.

We keep it up for two more songs. Sydney dancing against me while I grip her up and grope her. You might as well call it foreplay; by the time the third song ends, we’re hot and turned on.

“Mick asked me to help clean up the bar. It should only take a few minutes. But when I get back...”

“I’ll be waiting.” I palm her ass and plant a deep kiss on her mouth.

She scurries off, disappearing into the Steel Saloon.

Velma comes up on my side, beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “It’s real hot and heavy between you two, eh?”

“You know the answer to that. You’ve already told me you hear us at night, Velm.”

“What a difference a few weeks can make.”

I shrug. “The girl’s not so bad. I was wrong.”

“Never thought I’d hear those words out of you.” She’s still blowing smoke by the time she’s going for another long drink of her beer. “Do me a favor, will ya? Head into the house and grab some newspaper from the bin. We need more if we’re gonna keep this bonfire going.”

Since Sydney’ll be gone for the foreseeable ten to fifteen minutes, I figure Velma’s request gives me something to do. An excuse to ditch the party even if it’s only temporary.

I leave her where she is and head across the dusty pit of rocks that divides the saloon’s patio and the front of Tom’s house.

The loud music and wild screams from the party slip into the background. Silence surrounds me as I let myself into the house and flick on a light.

Right away, I know something’s off. Someone’s here. I’m not alone.

Call it a sixth sense, but I can tell by the vibe in the air. I walk deeper into the house on guard, ready to do what I’ve got to do if the situation comes down to it. For all I know, it’s Sydney or one of the guys wandering through.

I’m almost right.

I make it to the kitchen before the culprit reveals himself.

Sandie tries and fails at slinking up from behind. The problem is, she wobbles on her heels and squints at the bright light. Tequila’s on her breath when she speaks.

“Hey, baby,” she purrs. Her putrid warm breath blows onto my skin and makes me recoil in disgust. “Happy birthday! How about I suck your cock?”

“Get the fuck off me!” I yell, pushing her off me with my forearm.

She stumbles back on unsteady twigs for legs before losing her balance altogether. Plopping onto the kitchen floor, she glares up at me with bleary raccoon eyes.

“Why would you do that?” she mumbles. “You are such a fucking asshole, Mason Cutler.”

“When’re you gonna get it through your thick skull, Sandie? I don’t fucking want you. It was one time. Get the hell out of here or I’ll toss your bony ass out myself.”

Tears well up in her flaky mascara eyes. “You know she doesn’t even want you. Not like I do. She’s playing you, Mace.”

“Sandie,” I growl, gritting my teeth. “This is the last fucking time I’m tell—”

“See for yourself.”

It’s the first time I notice she’s clutching onto something—some kind of small purple book. She tosses it at my feet.

“Go ahead,” she says with a bitter twist of her lips. “Read for yourself what your precious barmaid’s up to. Find out how she really feels about you.”

SYDNEY



MICK THANKS ME FOR HELPING HIM CLEAN UP THE SALOON. Everybody else is out on the patio partying, including the two other barmaids on shift. Melody's making out with Ozzie, and Jennifer's dancing on tabletops alongside some of the club girls.

Mick smiles at me. "You're a good one. Best barmaid we've hired in years. Maybe ever."

"Just doing my job."

"You go out of your way to help. You can just as easily do the bare minimum like some of the others. But you really try to make the saloon its best." The lines bracketed around his eyes deepen with his smile.

I warm at the sentiments he expresses. I haven't intentionally gone out of my way to do anything special. At least not in my eyes. My reason for working at the saloon is self-serving; nothing more than a quest to find out the truth and get revenge on those who deserve it.

In the meantime, if I can help where I can, why not?

I wipe down the bar counter and scoop up any remaining peanut shells. The heavy cords and riffs from the hard rock music being played on the patio spill into the bar. They're

accompanied by the clash of dozens of voices talking, laughing, and even screaming.

Pretty sure I hear Ozzie at one point yelling something about streaking butt-naked through the neighborhood.

Mick shakes his head, his bushy white brows squished together. “You hear that? That’s what I’m working with.”

I laugh, reaching for the broom to do a quick sweep. “That’s Oz being Oz. He wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You’re calling him *Oz* now, huh? Yeah, you’re one of us.”

“Ozzie. Oz. Same difference.”

“Sorta like how you’ve started calling Velma Velm and Bushman Bush?”

“Or like how you all call me Syd?”

He tinkles out a chuckle. A sound that reminds me of Pop so much, it distracts me for a second. His deep blue eyes sparkling and bushy brows thick on his forehead, he pins me with a fond stare, and says, “See. You’re proving my point without even realizing you’re proving my point. You give as good as you get, sweets. Which is what makes you perfect for the Kings. You’re a spitfire and we like that about you.”

“I appreciate that you’ve taken me in like you have. You didn’t need to give me a job.”

“That was Velm’s doing.”

“But you’ve done the training.”

“Sweets, you were already spun up. You walked out onto that bar floor the first night and nailed it,” he says with another tinkling chuckle. “If I were thirty years younger, I might be trying to snatch you up as my old lady.”

“Mick, don’t let me find out you’re a biker too.”

He presses a finger to his lip and then rolls up the sleeve of his shirt. On the inside of his forearm is a faded Steel Kings tattoo. The logo’s slightly different than the current form, but under the art piece is his moniker.

Shots.

I study it for a moment, then flick my gaze back up to his with a teasing scrunch of my nose. “Shots?”

“Damn straight. Long story. Maybe one day I’ll tell it to you. But head on out. Go join the others and have yourself some fun. I’ll finish up here.”

I take Mick up on his suggestion only after I’ve finished sweeping the floor.

The party hasn’t slowed down in my absence. If anything it’s gained momentum.

Some of the club girls have taken off their tops and several of the guys lick and suck liquor off their bare breasts.

Rarely one to judge, even I’m shocked for half a second. It reflects on my face, my eyes widening and brows lifting high.

Velma catches me, sidling up from the sidelines clutching another beer. At least her fourth of the night. “Don’t pay them no mind. They’re doing what they do. They’re here to fuck and entertain the fellas. They know what it is—except Sandie, who can’t take a damn hint.”

“You mean with Mace?”

“Girly, if only you knew. She was so happy when he slept with her. Then so upset when he kicked her ass out.”

I tear my gaze away from the titty-licking spectacle in front of us. “Mace and Sandie?”

“A couple weeks ago. Right before you showed up.”

“Oh. That... explains a lot.”

“You mean like how Sandie hates your guts?” Velma asks, bringing the beer bottle to her lips. “The girl was practically in tears earlier seeing you and Mace dancing. I sent her to the house to get cleaned up. She was looking fucking pathetic with them raccoon eyes.”

I don’t respond, suddenly lost in my thoughts. What Velma says makes sense as far as Mason and Sandie go. I had sensed some sort of past history between them, though I had never bothered to consider what.

It’s always been clear Sandie dislikes me, but I’ve never cared. Now I know why.

“Don’t worry about it,” Velma says, snorting. “Sandie’s trash. Mace looks at you like I’ve never seen him look at anybody. She’s not your competition.”

“I never said she was.”

“Sandie’s not old lady material. She’s a club girl that’s fucked almost every guy out on this patio. Mace had a lapse in judgment,” she explains. “That night he was drunk and upset about Tom. You know how that goes. I wouldn’t be telling you all this unless I trusted you, by the way.”

I blink, thrown by how to respond. The fun atmosphere of the party has shifted into something else I can’t put my finger on. A premonition that I need to be on guard and on my toes for whatever reason, even if I don’t know why.

“Thanks,” I answer. “That means a lot to me.”

“You. You’re old lady material down to the letter. Don’t doubt for a second that’s not what Mace’s got on his mind.”

“We’re still very casual. It’s not serious. I’m not looking for anything. My divorce—”

“Nonsense,” she interrupts. “Not all rebounds are meaningless. This one’s more.”

My stomach flutters at the possibility. Meanwhile, my mind issues a stern reminder that it’s not what I want; I don’t at all want to be Mason’s—or anyone else’s—old lady. I don’t want to be his girlfriend. The only reason I suggested we become exclusive was because he demanded loyalty out of me.

I’m not the kind of woman for one-sidedness. If he requires my loyalty, I require his.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

Mason and the MC are still a means to an end.

Yet, these days, I’m all alone. I lost my birth parents so many years ago, then my adoptive mom, and finally, Pop.

My time with the Kings has been the only recent time in my life where I’ve been part of a community. I’ve belonged to a group of some kind and felt some solidarity with others—even if it’s been a ploy for revenge on my part.

I’m only human. Can I blame myself for finding comfort in that?

My conflicting thoughts are interrupted by Mason. He comes striding down the path from the house and crosses the pit of rocks in a few short, fast steps. I start to smile when I see he’s headed straight for me... then a coldness fills me up and any smile drops off.

Pure, raw fury burns in Mason's eyes and leaves scorched marks in his wake. Every part of him has hardened to the point the veins protrude in his forearms and side of his neck. His face is the same callous mask I've seen on him before, only a hundred times worse.

His energy takes over the entire party. Everybody on the patio freezes and turns to watch, confusion rippling throughout the crowd.

It reaches me too as I stand in his path with the sinking dread this can't be good.

It can't be good at all.

Then I spot what's clenched inside one of his fists and I feel like I'm about to faint. A wooziness rolls over me and strips away all thought, all cleverness I'd have to talk myself out of this moment.

A moment I've hoped would never come. At least not before I got answers and my revenge.

Mason stops in front of me and slaps my little purple book to my chest.

"Care to explain?" he growls. "What the fuck is this, Singer? All this shit you've been writing down about us? So this mean you're the traitor we've been looking for?"

MASON



SYDNEY IS SPEECHLESS FOR WHAT SEEMS LIKE THE FIRST TIME in her life. The warmth vanishes from her eyes and the smile slides off her face—she looked so welcoming, so damn excited and happy to see me, that if I weren't already mad enough to see red, I'd be under her spell. I'd be distracted by how drop dead gorgeous she fucking looks standing in front of me with her soft honey-colored hair curled into loose waves and her summer dress rippling in the night breeze.

But I am pissed.

I'm so fucking pissed that even Sydney can't break through. Nothing else matters except the fury coursing through me.

Except for the betrayal I should've known was coming. I should've seen a thousand miles away.

Sydney parts her lips as if about to speak, but I beat her to the punch—I shove the stupid purple notebook into her chest and confront her about what the hell she's been up to.

“Care to explain?” I growl. “What the fuck is this, Singer? All this shit you've been writing down about us? So this mean you're the traitor we've been looking for?”

Everybody stands as still and speechless as Sydney. Even Velma's at a loss for words.

Sydney shudders in a deep breath and pulls her shoulders tight. "Mace—"

"Don't fucking call me Mace right now. Don't fucking call me Mace ever again," I snarl in her face. "You better have an explanation for what the fuck this is, or so help me god, you're in for a world of hurt."

"I can... I can explain," she says, speaking fast. "Mace... Mason, that's my journal. I write down my thoughts—"

"Those thoughts include talking about how the Steel Kings have ruined your life and deserve to pay?" I interrupt. My hands clench into white-knuckled fists at my sides. I'm doing all I can to hold in the rage, but it's about to bust free. "What are you doing here, Singer?! TELL ME!"

She flinches at my roar, then takes a precautionary step back. Her nerves change up her voice, making her sound timid and unlike herself. "I was here be-because I was hoping to find out about my father. He was.... he was..."

"SPIT IT OUT!"

"He was murdered!" she yells back. She juts out her chin and her eyes sharpen. "Pop was murdered, and I know the Kings had something to do with it!"

There it is.

Her confession. Her real motive. The reason she's been here all along, fooling everybody.

Disgust mixes with the rage in my expression. I eye her head-to-toe like she repulses me, and she does. A scheming, backstabbing bitch wrapped up in a pretty package.

If she were a man, I'd have already knocked her out.

And worse.

I hadn't wanted to believe it. Even after my suspicions and distrust of Sydney. When Sandie tossed the book at me, I had almost ignored it altogether. Sandie's known to tell tall tales, and she's irritating enough, I wanted her gone from my presence.

But the niggling feeling crept up on me. That it was worth a look. What I found inside was enough to send me speeding down a blackout tunnel of pure rage.

I step closer, right into the little space Sydney has left. My muscled chest bumps into her and forces her backward.

"Get in the fucking office," I say in a low, dangerous rumble.

As tough as she tries to act, I smell the fear on her. She holds her head high, stays locked into my hard glare, then reveals her hand by glancing at the others. Nobody reacts; no one's coming to save her. Everybody's as shocked and disgusted as I am.

Accepting her fate, she nods, and turns to follow orders.

I track her every step of the way, like a predator closing in on its prey. We leave the stunned silence of the patio and move through the dark hall inside the saloon that leads to the office. It takes me a moment before I realize we're being followed—Cash and Bush have come along.

"Get out," I command.

"You need back up..." Cash says evenly. "To make sure you don't do something you regret."

“The only one with regret should be the bitch that double-crossed us.”

Cash throws a harsh look at Sydney. “I don’t disagree. But now’s not the time to act recklessly. We don’t know who she’s been in contact with.”

“Exactly what I plan on finding out.” I flip my pocketknife open, my cold eyes set on Sydney.

She wears her fear openly now, backed up against the desk, her body tense. Her chest heaves in rapid, startled breaths.

“Either leave or you’re going to bear witness to what happens,” I speak with my back turned to the other two. When neither moves, I advance toward her with my knife clenched in my hand. “Suit yourself.”

“Mace!”

I ignore their protests.

I grip the front neckline of her dress and slice it open with my knife. The soft fabric falls apart down the center, parting like window curtains forced open. Her breasts bounce free, and she hurries to try to shield herself. I smack her hands out of the way, then wrench her around so that she’s facing the desk.

Normally, I’d be territorial—I’d care that there are other men in the room.

But right now, it’s all I can do to keep from hurting her. My vision’s clouded and any reason has been shut out by the violent rage inhabiting my body. I position her with her hands flat on the desk and kick her legs wide open. Her dress pools at her ankles.

Naked except for the little scrap of panties she has on.

“No wire,” I say, sliding my hands down the curvy outline of her body. I grope her pussy to ensure nothing else is hidden inside her panties.

She lets out a shocked breath and bows her head, her eyes clenched shut.

I’m sure this feels like a violation. She’s humiliated.

Too bad I don’t give a fuck.

It’s what she gets for crossing the Kings. For thinking she can come into our world under false pretenses and backstab us. I’m still not clear on what her ultimate goal was. She wants revenge for what she believes we did to her father. But just how did she intend on exacting that revenge? Has she been feeding information to law enforcement? The Feds?

The more I think about it, the more furious I become. The more my thirst to hurt her intensifies.

I cage her in where she is half bent over the desk. My blade presses against her throat and my lips rumble in her ear. “Tell me right now. Who have you been feeding information to?”

“No one, I swear!”

“Nobody? You expect me to believe that? You didn’t tell anybody a thing of what you heard, huh?”

“I swear on my life!”

I grit my teeth and hold the knife firmly against the delicate length of her throat. Almost hard enough to draw blood. “You better be telling the truth or you’re about to be bleeding out on the floor.”

“Then do it! Kill me,” she chokes out in strained emotion. “I’m all alone. No one’s going to come looking for me. You’ll get away with it.”

“Mace, brother,” Bush says from somewhere behind me.

“Get out,” I say. Then when neither moves, I roar. “I SAID GET OUT!”

Cash and Bush exchange ominous looks, conflicted over whether they should leave the two of us alone. After their silent deliberation, they listen to my order, turning around and walking out. The door drifts shut behind us.

I husk out a rough breath. The knife remains pressed into her throat. My body frames hers. She’s bent over the desk, her round ass pushed up against my groin, but in a way that couldn’t be further from sexual—her hands are flat on the desk and she’s trembling despite how tough she tries to sound.

“You lying to me, Singer?” I whisper gruffly into her ear. “You fucking ratting me out to the authorities?”

“Mace—Mason,” she quickly corrects herself. She gulps down a desperate intake of air. “I swear... I’m not, okay? I was acting alone.”

“You swear on your life?” I let the blade chaff its way up her throat, the sharpness of it dangerously close to nicking her skin and making her bleed. All I’d have to do is press a little harder. “You swear on your fucking life that you’re not the informant?”

“I swear! Please, you’ve got to believe me.”

Tears roll down her cheeks and she sputters out another shaky breath.

The sight almost pulls mercy out of me, making me want to let her go. It makes me hyperaware of the fact that I've got real feelings for this woman. She's weaseled her way into my fucking freezing cold heart and I can't bring myself to hurt her.

Not in the gruesome way I would anybody else. I'd have already run a knife through anybody else.

With Sydney... *fuck*... as much as I want to be ruthless enough to, even through my blinding rage, I can't.

But I sure as hell can punish the fuck out of her. I can make her regret the day she ever crossed me and the Kings in other degrading ways.

"You swear on your life?" I growl, the built-up tension in my jaw tightening even more. I drop the blade from her throat and instead use it on her panties, cutting through the last piece of fabric protecting her modesty. "Then you're about to prove yourself. Consider it an initiation. Get down on your fucking knees, Singer."

Sydney twists around for a startled look at me. "Mason—"

"Down on your knees or you're not gonna like what happens next. Test me, Singer. Fucking test me and see what happens."

The fear on her face is plain as day. Eyes misty and her lips parted slightly in shock, she can't figure out if she's awake or caught up in a nightmare.

I'm about to show her that she would be lucky if this was only a bad dream. This is fucking real, and she's about to pay for what she's done.

Sydney complies, lowering herself to her knees and peering up at me with her pretty brown eyes that would've had me under her spell just an hour ago.

That Mason's gone. He's checked out for good. The man she's about to meet is a man she's never known before. Even throughout all our hate and loathing for each other, she's never seen the full extent of what I'm capable of.

This man can't be reasoned with and he doesn't have mercy. He's a ruthless, rage-fueled killer that crushes his enemies.

Sydney is now my enemy, which means I'm about to make her wish she never crossed into Kings territory.

“Open your fucking mouth,” I command.

She blinks as if holding tears in, then parts her lips more than they already are.

But it's not enough.

“Wider.”

Her full lips barely move a centimeter, igniting a fresh flame of anger inside me.

“I SAID WIDER!” I bark in her face, making her flinch. I wrench her mouth open by her jaw and spit down her throat without giving her a choice whether she'll swallow—she gets no fucking choices in this moment.

She'll take whatever I dish out.

Unbuckling my jeans and whipping my cock out, I smack her across the cheek with it like it's a weapon. “Suck me off, Singer. Suck like your life fucking depends on it... because it fucking does.”

Sydney hurries to take me in her grasp, curling her fingers and sliding them from the base to the head. Any time she touches my cock it's an immediate rush of hot pleasure

through me. Normally, I'd be groaning and encouraging her as she squeezes and works me like this.

But, in this moment, immersed in my violent rage, it's not good enough.

My fingers twist into her hair and I yank her head forward. "I didn't ask you to fucking jerk me off. I told you to suck my dick like your fucking life depends on it."

She whimpers in shock at the force of my grip. I muffle any protests by shoving my cock into her mouth. It doesn't matter that she's not ready for me and that her throat isn't opened up yet.

I cram myself inside 'til I'm hitting the back of her throat and she's gagging.

'Til I've forced as much of myself as possible into the wet heat of her mouth.

Then, I groan. I hold her where she is and revel in making Sydney choke on my cock like she deserves. Her mouth's sealed around me, her already-misty eyes watering even more.

"You like that, Singer?" I ask. "You like having my cock jammed down your throat just like filthy little traitors deserve? Tell me!"

I pull back enough for her to gasp that she likes it—while desperately gulping a breath of air—before I'm shutting her up with more cock.

She fights to keep up, angling her head against my grip so more of my length slides straight down her throat. She swallows like she's trying to *digest* my fucking dick, and I groan at the flex of her throat muscles. The way they contract and pulse against my dick.

My hips jerk on their own. My fist clenches tighter in her hair if possible, to the point it's got to hurt. I drive myself deeper down her slick, tight throat, cruelly wondering how far I'll go before she finally taps out.

"That's right, Singer. Take every fucking inch. You deep-throat better than the club girls. Maybe I'll let the guys line up and have their turn too. Just so they know how good this throat feels."

The threat stirs something in her. More fear. More alarm. Her fight instinct returns.

She sputters, gripping my muscled thighs, digging her nails in hard enough to draw blood. A little pain doesn't deter me. It spurs me on, causing me to fist her hair and wind my hips back for even more brutal thrusts.

For face-fucking.

Sydney has no choice but to take it. I hold her tight and pump into her wide-open mouth. Spit gathers and dribbles out and tears streak her face.

I make a wreck of her, unapologetic and uncompromising. Cruel satisfaction fills me up, right alongside the hot burn of pleasure.

I alternate between watching my cock abuse her throat and clenching shut my eyes and hanging my head back over how fucking good it feels.

She pleads with whimpers that vibrate around me. That only intensify my pending release that's already tingling up my spine.

I lose myself in my brutal thrusts in and out of her mouth. Up and down her opened throat. My hips snap forward and my fingers clench shut in a steel-like vise in her hair. I chase my

release, chase the fucking high that becomes all that matters in this moment. Even more than the rage coursing through me.

A roar rumbles from my chest as I finally reach it. My body tenses and I wrench my cock from her mouth at the last possible second. She doesn't get the privilege of tasting my cum. Instead, she's going to *wear* it. So everybody knows what a treacherous little slut she is.

My cum streaks across her face in thick ropes. Her cheeks, her lips, even her chin. I paint her with my cum 'til it drips from that pretty, backstabbing face of hers.

Sydney sucks in more hitched breaths like she's been plunged into icy waters. She's a mess—covered in cum, spit, tears.

And still I'm not through with her.

“Get up,” I order. “Turn around. Hands on the desk.”

“Mason,” she chokes out in a shaky voice. “Please... isn't this enough...”

“It's enough when I fucking say so. Get up and turn around. That was the warm up.”

When Sydney doesn't move fast enough, I'm gripping her by the upper arm and heaving her up onto her feet. I spin her around and slam her hands down onto the desk. We've come full-circle; she's back in the same position we started in.

I let my lips brush her ear almost seductively. Except there's nothing seductive about this. Nothing affectionate or warm. This is a punishment. A consequence for the shit she's pulled.

“Remember what I told you earlier, Sydney baby?” I taunt, my hand traveling up and down the length of my dick. It's

hardening in no time, turning to steel at the thought of what I have in mind next.

She shakes her head, her breaths still shallow and hitched. She can't even bring herself to answer, she's so upset.

"It's my fucking birthday," I whisper, tugging on the soft skin of her earlobe with my teeth. "Which means I get to use all your holes tonight. Ever been fucked in your ass, Syd baby?"

Her whole body trembles. She gives another shake of her head and then gasps as I tease my thumb at the tiny puckered hole.

"You will be tonight."

I reach in front of her. My fingers find her clit and begin rough circles, drawing a strangled breath from her.

Just like my body responds to Sydney's touch at once, so does Sydney's to mine. She arches into me the faster my fingers go. Never mind the fact that she's *already* wet—something I can tell she'd rather I not notice.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one turned on by that deep-throating.

Soon an unabashed moan ekes out of her. Her curvy body bucks into my touch, her eyes closed, like she's trying to ignore the circumstance. Like if she does, she'll find pleasure.

Too bad this couldn't be less about her pleasure. I couldn't care less about getting Sydney off tonight.

She doesn't fucking deserve to orgasm. She should be kissing the ground I walk on that she's still alive and breathing.

I'm rough with her pussy, groping, rubbing, pumping my fingers into her. Every time she's about to shudder in more pleasure, I'm switching it up, adding a third finger inside, making her wince, or pinching her swollen clit between my fingers.

"Guess what, Syd?" I ask as I play with her pussy. "I've got no lube. You know what that means, right?"

She warbles out an answer. "Then... then you can't."

"I will," I say, grinning and nipping at the side of her neck. "My spit and your natural juices are gonna have to fucking do. So I suggest you get as wet as possible real quick."

I work her clit like crazy. My other hand teases the rear hole I'm about to claim. I've pushed the tip of my thumb in despite her flinches and clenches.

Bending her forward onto the desk so that her body's stretched out under me, I let spit fall into the crevice of her ass cheeks. Then I spread it along her hole, using it to slick more of my thumb inside. I do this a few times 'til I'm pushing in, if only slightly easier.

"Feel good?" I ask, teasing the puckered hole.

She shakes her head side to side, but it doesn't fucking matter. She should be grateful I'm doing what little I am to prepare her.

I rub her clit 'til she's on the cusp of coming, and then I stop. I deny her at the last second and slide my dick into her instead. Quick, shallow thrusts to soak myself in her juices. She gets off anyway just on that—I can feel her walls clench and then spasm around me.

A little orgasm her body desperately clings to. Because it's the last slice of pleasure she's gonna feel for the foreseeable

future.

Instead, her ass is about to be sore for days.

Once I've coated myself with as much of her slickness as I can, I pull out and switch entrances.

Her rear is so small, still so puckered, it's going to take a while to work myself in. I hold her down, framing my body over hers, and begin the long task of pushing in my head.

Sydney gasps. Even that intrusion is too much. I add more spit, letting it dribble down onto my dick before trying again. Every inch will be a victory.

It's beyond a tight fit. Her hole resists. It refuses to let me in 'til I grip her shoulder and thrust more forcefully. My head breaks past the muscled clench of her sphincter. I release a labored breath while Sydney cries out in alarm.

That was only the first part.

Her body's shaking and a layer of perspiration dampens her skin. She's braced over the desk with her nails drawing marks into the wood. If I cared at all about this being good for her, I'd at least keep playing with her pussy.

But I don't give a fuck. My rage still blinds me. The thought she played me and everybody else for fucking weeks stays at the forefront of my mind.

I want to destroy Sydney Singer. I want to make her cry. I want to make her hurt.

Hurt like she's made the club hurt at the betrayal. Hurt like she's made me hurt—

I cut that thought off right there. Now's not the time to think about any feelings I have for her other than the rage in this moment.

This is about to hurt like hell alright. So much, she'll beg for mercy that won't ever come.

But it's deserved. Every stab of pain I'm about to give her is more than fucking deserved. As far as I'm concerned, she should be grateful this is her punishment.

That she's not bleeding out on my floor right now.

I grip her tight, so there's no chance of escape, adding another coat of spit before slicking the rest of my cock inside her tight, untouched channel. It's unlike any other experience I've had before, being seated deep inside her. Heat engulfs me. A smooth ring of muscle bears down.

It's fucking amazing in every way.

My absolute pleasure only aided by her absolute pain.

I lean back enough to enjoy the view of my cock entrenched in Sydney's apple-bottomed ass. She's gripping the table and arched up against me. There's a visible quiver of pain vibrating through her body that fuels me. It adds to the cruel satisfaction of the moment almost as much as the inside of her tight, hot ass does.

I don't go easy on her. I show her I was fucking serious when I said this was a punishment.

Moving inside her with forceful strokes, I grunt out my pleasure. My grip's bruising on her body as I hold her in place and drive into her.

Deep and unforgiving. Long and intense. My whole body thrives on the sensations penetrating her ass brings me.

The tingle up my spine starts all over again. The heaviness in my balls have me feeling like I'll spill any second.

I grunt and pump and squeeze her curves. Her tits and hips. I grip her by the throat and then bite at the base of it like we're fucking animals.

Sydney responds with another deep quake rolling through her body. A desperate gasp of air as she tries to adjust and rock with me, but it's too much. The pain's overtaken her.

I only fuck her harder, slipping deeper. So deep it feels impossible. So deep it feels unreal.

I cup her pussy from behind and sink two thick fingers inside her.

That ignites a confusing spark of pleasure in her. She writhes under me and then lets a small moan out. I work us like this 'til she's keyed up and I am too. I'm buried deep in her ass, pouring sweat from how hard I've fucked her.

Just when she seems to be enjoying it, I remove my digits from her—I purposely rob of her the fleeting pleasure she'd had, showing her how false her little bright light of hope was. How this punishment's psychological too. I can give and take her pleasure. I can damn sure give and take her pain.

Then I go harder, more brutal than ever, 'til there's a chance I might break her, roaring out as I sink as deep as her body allows.

It's a moment I'll never forget—the orgasm that takes me out and has me locking up in a rush of pleasure.

I spill inside her with heaving breaths and my slick, muscled body trapping hers. Her abused little hole shrinks the second I slide myself out. I groan and almost feel like fucking her all over again.

I would if I thought I had anything left.

But, as my mind-blowing orgasm subsides, my anger returns. The momentary fog clears up, and I remember how fucking livid I am. How fucking pissed Sydney's betrayal makes me. I tuck myself back into my jeans and then wrench her from where she is braced against the desk.

"We're done here," I growl.

"Mason," she gasps out, appearing dazed herself. She stumbles as I force-walk her across the room. "Please, will you listen—"

"If you ever fucking show your face around these parts, Singer, you'll regret it."

"I'm not feeding anyone info! Why won't you listen?!" she cries.

"GET OUT!" I roar, shoving her toward the door. I throw her torn dress at her. "You show your face at my club, in my town, again, I *will* kill you."

The heartbreak unfolds on Sydney's face. Her eyes shine with fresh tears as she clutches her shredded dress to her body, draping it over her intimate parts.

It's almost enough—despite how my temper crackles through me—to make me feel sorry for her.

But I shut it out. I shove it aside and focus on the rage.

"You have five minutes to disappear, Singer. Get lost."

I slam the door in her face, swearing if I ever do see her again, she won't make it out alive.

SYDNEY



WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN YOU'VE GOT NOWHERE THAT FEELS like home? Once Mason finishes with the most degrading punishment, warning me never to return to his club, I get the hell out of town. I rush back to the house, pack up whatever I can, and flee Pulsboro.

There's only one bus headed out of town so late in the night. I barely even check where it's headed before buying my ticket and rolling my suitcase along to rush into line. Only two other people board the bus with me: an elderly man with a limp and a cane, and a woman who clutches a knapsack like it's gold.

I take the seat farthest in the back of the bus and plop down, ready to ride for however long they'll let me.

Even though Wheaton's only two hours away, which is where this bus is headed.

We start moving with the clatter of closing doors and whoosh of air brakes being released. I settle deeper into the rear corner, the chipped pleather cushion already sticking to my skin.

Since Mason shredded my dress, I threw on a t-shirt and jeans that were wrinkled from being buried in my suitcase. It's

not like it matters considering I'm riding off in the middle of the night to another town I'm unfamiliar with.

Wheaton is home to the Hellrazors. Risky as hell, but if Pop was a Hellrazor in his former life, then maybe it's the best place for me to be. They likely have no idea who I am—I'm Black, Pop was White, and I was adopted many years after he gave up his MC lifestyle.

It seems even the Kings hadn't known he had an adopted daughter and that she lived with him. Their words from the night he was murdered trickles in.

What about the girl? I heard he has a caretaker that lives with him.

It would make sense; Pop kept me and Mom far away from his former life of crime. Nobody knows that Pop had an adoptive daughter. They might not have even known he had a wife or that he was heavily involved in the local church for the last quarter of his life.

All these thoughts and more are on my mind riding out of Pulsboro.

The bus passes by the street lined with bars. Try as I might to avoid a glance, I wind up giving in. The lights in the Steel Saloon are still on judging by the glow from the front of the building. The party music is no more. As far as I can tell, everybody went home. The birthday celebrations ended a while ago.

Some time around Mason confronting me for being a treacherous informant who was betraying the entire motorcycle club. Accusations like those tend to kill the festive mood.

I blow out a sigh and sink deeper into my bus seat. My brow touches the warm glass of the window and I try blocking out the horrible images in my head.

Every moment since I set foot in Pulsboro and met Mason and the Steel Kings.

The good and the bad.

The happy times, like riding on the back of Mason's motorcycle, and tonight when I'd danced for him. His green eyes had gleamed and his lips pulled into a wide, genuine smile. The more volatile times run through my mind too, like the moments we'd butted heads, and he'd humiliated me in front of everyone at the club meeting.

Tonight, again when he'd treated me with such hatred it was heartbreaking. All I wanted to do was cry and beg him to hear my side of the story.

The moments I'd realized I fit in, I felt like a part of something, but then quickly reminded myself this was a means to an end. I was only here for my own agenda. In order to get justice for Pop.

So many of these moments feel like mistakes. In what way, I'm not sure I'm ready to decide. I'm not ready to face the truth of the matter and the giant fucking mess that's become my life.

It takes us another two and a half hours before we pull into the bus station in Wheaton. Dawn etches itself onto the sky in fading purples and brightening golden rays from the sun. The other two passengers get off without much fanfare.

I'm the one the bus driver needs to prompt.

"End of the line," he grunts, jamming his thumb toward the foldable door.

I gather my things and plod down the center aisle of the bus, feeling like I'm being tossed into a deep pool and left to drown. Who knows what awaits me in Wheaton?

The small, dusty town doesn't differ from Pulsboro. It's the kind of place where most residents are familiar enough with each other, and small businesses reign supreme. I wander from the bus station and study the muted street outside. So early in the morning, nobody's awake.

It seems I have a select few options. I could wait at the bus terminal and choose a different bus out of town—somewhere far away from not only Wheaton but, more importantly, Pulsboro. I could head to the Hellrazors bar and take a risk confronting them with what I know.

The Steel Kings are behind Pop's death. A former member of theirs. Now they're planning to sabotage their drug and armament supply. If they care at all then they should want payback as much as I did when I started this journey for revenge.

...orrrr I can grab a room somewhere and bury myself in solitude and sleep.

The last option is the one.

I check into the local motel and collapse on the bed almost from the moment I enter the room.

I'm out for the next thirteen hours. I wake late evening, groggy and sluggish, when most of the day has already gone by. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I stare around the dark shadows of my curtain-drawn motel room and contemplate what to do next.

I could go back to sleep for the rest of the night. Sink deeper into slumber and forget my troubles for another night.

It would be so easy given the trauma of the last twenty-four hours.

Just a day ago, I was putting the final touches on Mason's surprise birthday party alongside Velma and the others.

By the night, I was being severely punished at Mason's hand.

I roll out of bed and do the things that you're supposed to do after spending an unseemly amount of time cooped up in bed—shower, groom, and feed myself. I wind up in a tank top and jeans with my hair shoved into a sloppy bun and a pizza pocket from the motel vending machine in my hand. Swallowing the last few bites, I decide how I want to move forward.

First things first, I need to get the hell away from here.

Wheaton's not safe. Though Pop was a Hellrazor, it'd be stupid and risky of me to try to use that as social currency in their circles. I obviously burned irreparable bridges in Pulsboro and nothing's left for me in Boulder.

My only choice left is to leave Texas altogether.

Start over somewhere completely different.

I venture outside the motel to the general store a couple blocks down. It's not that I'm in search of anything in particular—outside of a few basic grooming necessities—but that getting out feels like a basic human requirement.

I leave the general store with a single plastic bag dangling off my wrist.

So late into the evening, dusk hits and cools down the town. It brings the summer bugs to chirp and click their wings and encourages residents to spend time outdoors.

None of it matters to me as I wander down a street and head in the general direction of my motel.

...until I realize there could be consequences to my wandering. As I'm closing in on my motel, I spy a familiar face from a distance that conjures a flurry of panic inside me.

Velma stands outside a local bar blowing smoke from a cigarette.

I double back and pray she hasn't seen me—does this mean the Steel Kings are searching for me?

Mason did tell me to run far or they'd make me pay for real...

Panic sets my heart into a crazed frenzy. It beats painfully hard from inside my ribcage. I escape the public street I see *Velma* on and pray she hasn't seen me. If she has, may god have mercy on my soul.

Mason was clear about making myself disappear.

Velma looks up from the man she's speaking to, the cigarette smoldering from her lips, and glances around as if she senses something off.

I'm long gone, far out of sight by the time she does.

"Crap," I mutter, hurrying down a side street. "I've got to get the hell out of here."

It's true. There's no hiding from the Kings in a place like Wheaton. I've got to go far away from my life in Texas. I've got to go somewhere where none of them can ever find me...

MASON



“WE NEED TO TALK,” CASH SAYS WITH A SOMBERNESS TO HIS expression.

I’m in the club office, reclined with my legs up on the desk, as I read through the latest club financial report. Bush and Mick turned it in to me after factoring in the profits from the fundraiser we held a few weeks ago.

My eyes scan over the same line several times. I read the words without really digesting what they mean. An hour has gone by and I’m barely reaching the second page. I don’t look up from the chart and text I’m staring absentmindedly at, no matter how important Cash makes himself sound.

“Spit it out,” I say.

He strides over to the desk and rips the financial report from my grip. “You’ve made a mistake.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about yourself. Snatch something out of my hand like that again and I’ll have you on the ground with your teeth knocked out.” I steal the report back with an aggressive yank at the paper. Reclining into the chair once more, I flip to the third page like I intend on understanding the information typed up.

Cash remains unconvinced. His hands rest at his waist and he peers at me like I'm some scumbag that's stolen candy from a fucking baby.

At first, I ignore him. I continue pretending like I give a fuck about the financial report. The graph on the third page is some kind of pie chart with different percentages I don't even understand. The colors Bush decided to use begin to piss me off—oranges and yellows and reds that all mean something different, like I've got time to figure it out.

I toss the report onto the desk and reach for the glass of whiskey I've been sipping on.

"Mace," Cash growls.

"What?! What is it, Cash? What the fuck do you want?"

"You've made a mistake."

"I've got no clue what the fuck you're talking about," I say, dropping my legs from the desk and sitting up. "You need to have your head in the game. Tonight's the night we get our revenge on the Hellrazors and finally sabotage their drug supply, effectively hurting their profits and the club. We've put everything in place and got all the details planned out. Why are you in my fucking face and not making final arrangements with the rest of the guys?"

"I told you," he says, his skin flushing from frustration. "Because you've made a mistake."

I heave a deep breath and almost roll my eyes. "I already said fucking spit it out. Are you gonna keep playing games, or are you gonna tell me what the fuck your problem is?"

He pulls up the chair opposite the desk and drops into it. He's got the purple book in his hands and he pushes it toward me.

“Have you actually read this?” he asks.

“I read enough.”

“Enough isn’t enough. You didn’t look into what she was saying about it, did you?”

“It’s not my job to look into liars and their stories. All I give a fuck about is that they’re lying. Sydney was lying. What’s not clicking for you, Cash?”

“Her father,” he says. “Her father—did you know he was Jacob Singer? As in Pop? *The Pop* from the Hellrazors?”

A couple seconds pass between the two of us where we sit on opposite sides of the desk and stare at each other. Cash expectantly. Me trying to fend off the surprise at his news.

“Pop,” I repeat slowly, finally swallowing my pride, searching for familiarity in the name. “Jacob Singer. You mean their old prez? The one from way back when? From when we were kids?”

“The one and only.”

I don’t know how I didn’t draw the connection sooner. Sydney Singer and Jacob Singer seem like it’d be obvious dots to connect, but I had never heard of Jacob having a daughter. Let alone a *Black* adopted one...

Jacob “Pop” Singer had been a former president of the Hellrazors way back when I was still a kid. He was from the old school crop of guys that came up even a few years before Tom’s run. At that time, all the presidents in the area got along fine enough.

That didn’t change ’til the day Mom was murdered. ’Til she was killed in cold blood.

Relations between the local MCs have never been the same.

“Pop was murdered,” Cash says. “The men who did it are still at large.”

“That doesn’t explain why Sydney thought it was a good idea to infiltrate our club and betray our trust. She was convinced we had something to do with it.”

“I repeat... you made a mistake. Sydney thought what she did for a reason. Take a look at this.” Cash withdraws a rolled-up copy of the Boulder town newspaper from his back pocket and slides it across the table the way he did the little purple book.

I hold him hostage with a hard glare before patronizing him and picking up the newspaper.

There’s nothing that can change my mind. It’s made up about Sydney and how she’s betrayed the club. Over the forty-eight hours since she’s left, I’ve battled with doubt that tried to convince me I made the wrong decision. I shouldn’t have kicked her out.

Squashing these second guesses has taken work, but I’ve done it.

More or less.

At this point, there’s nothing that can be said to change my mind. What I did was necessary regardless of how I feel about her, or how it’d be easier if things could be different.

I unfurl the newspaper anyway, flitting my eyes over the small text. Cash has circled the article he wants me to read:

Beloved Member of Local Church Community Murdered in Cold Blood

On Sunday night, well-known pillar of the community Jacob Singer was slain when three mysterious masked men broke into his home and shot him dead. The fatal attack occurred around four in the morning as Singer reportedly slept in his bed. Local police reveal that no belongings were stolen from the home.

Next-door neighbor Colleen Appleby claims she overheard the intruders crossing through her vegetable garden. "I was up walking off my arthritis flare-up when I heard 'em," Ms. Appleby states. "There was three. One was huge with ginger hair. He was the one I heard clomping around. I peeked out my curtain and saw 'em headed toward Jake's. That's when I knew I had to call the cops."

In a small-town like Boulder, where violent crime is relatively unheard of, residents like Ms. Appleby are shaken.

"Hard to believe Jake's gone," says resident diner owner, Freddie Levington. "He's been a pillar of the community for decades. A great man was lost."

Police have made attempts to calm resident's fears over the deadly situation, stating it is a one-off crime that won't happen again anytime soon. Still, the suspects are at large, and the public wants answers.

As of right now, no leads have materialized. The one possible piece of evidence is a gray skull bandana found at the scene of the crime that allegedly belongs to the infamous motorcycle club the Steel Kings. But police claim that there are still no credible leads in their investigation.

Jacob Singer's funeral will be held next Saturday at the Boulder Community Church. He is survived by his only daughter, Sydney.

"A Steel Kings bandana was found at the scene of the crime?"
I say slowly, my eyes glued to the article.

Cash nods. "You see now why Sydney was convinced it was us. Combine that with the fact that her father was a Hellrazor and we've got serious beef with them. In her book, she wrote that she overheard you telling Tom about an

assassination. *You* were probably talking about Curly. The guy we took out in retaliation for the Hellrazors shooting up Bush's trailer. But *she* thought you were talking about her father."

The new context gives clarity to a few of the interactions I've had with Sydney. She had repeatedly mentioned feeling alone and going through a rough patch. I had assumed it was her divorce that was the cause when really, it was the death of her adopted father.

It's no wonder she hated me. Aside from the fact that I was hostile to her, she believed I had something to do with his murder.

My mind flashes to the tears that had rolled down her cheek the other night in the club office—how she'd told me it wouldn't matter if I killed her, because she had no one left.

Guilt begins reemerging as a slow, creeping feeling...

I toss the newspaper at Cash. "It doesn't matter. What's done is done."

"You can't be this heartless. This merciless. I've known you all your life, Mace. You're not—"

"You don't know shit. I've got more important matters to worry about than Sydney. I let her live. That's merciful enough."

The disappointment drips off Cash as he rises from his chair and heads for the door. He pauses with his hand on the knob. "Just hope you know what you're doing pushing her away. She's the type, once she's gone, she's gone."

Tension lances through my jaw. "What's done is done."

Cash leaves me alone with a shake of his head.

I continue glaring at the spot where he stood, fighting off the intrusive thoughts telling me the opposite of what I've said. These same conflicted thoughts tell me I should fix this. Reach out to Sydney and talk about all the ways we've gotten things mixed up.

I reach into the top drawer of my desk and pull out something nobody else knows I have—the photos that were snapped of me and Syd on the day of the fundraiser. At the time they were taken, I pretended not to like that the photos were snapped, but I've held onto them for a reason.

Secretly, I've stared at them a time or two, remembering that afternoon, and how I'd enjoyed putting Sydney on a bike. I curled my dominant form over hers and encouraged her to become more comfortable on the Harley. My lips had hovered near her ear, and I'd inhaled the most intoxicating whiff of her perfume...

You might even say that was the first real time I let myself indulge in her. The first clue I couldn't resist her no matter how hard I fucking tried.

I stare at the photo so long there's a clench in my chest as the guilt multiplies.

Cash wasn't far off when he said she's the type to leave for good. It might already be too late.

Draining the last of my whiskey, I turn off these reactions emerging, and refocus on the things I need to do as prez.

Tonight's the night we head to Wheaton and finally get our payback against the Hellrazors.

SYDNEY



IN A FEW SHORT DAYS, I MAKE UP MY MIND. I'LL BE HEADING out of Texas for good and starting over further south. Mom and Pop had family in Florida and Alabama. Their brothers and sisters, which would be my aunts and uncles through adoption. We've never been close and I haven't spoken to them in years, but possibly we'll be able to reconnect.

I take up a very short term bartending gig at the bar across the street from my motel. Rusty's Tavern is the same bar I'd seen Velma coming out of.

Either her presence was a fluke, or I'd been imagining things.

No other signs the Steel Kings are after me have emerged. It's safe to say it's the former; Velma happened to be in the local area. Mason's kept his word and hasn't come after me and won't so long as I never show my face in Pulsboro.

Rusty's Tavern is deader than a cemetery most nights. Only a handful of regulars patronize the establishment, mostly pot-bellied middle-aged and retired men who seem like relics from the '80s. They're friendly enough but have a habit of wanting to haggle on the prices of their beers.

My nights at this bar pale in comparison to the Steel Saloon. At the saloon I thrived on the excitement in the air,

and the entertaining personalities of the guys in the MC. I laughed, chit-chatted, joked around, flirted, and even danced if the occasion felt right.

It became more than a casual job; it became moments of bonding with others in the same exclusive club I was in. Maybe not as an official member, but there's no denying the Kings—even Mason in due time—welcomed me with open arms.

They accepted me as one of their own.

A guy at Rusty's bar counter hacks up a phlegmy cough and draws me out of my reverie. I blink out of my fond memories as a barmaid at the Steel Saloon and tune into my drab, smoke-hazed reality at Rusty's.

The guy with the phlegmy cough swears at me and slams his hand on the counter, demanding I hurry up and get him another drink.

If this were the saloon, one of the guys would see to it he checks his tone. He'd even be thrown out the front doors if he refused to show the barmaids some respect.

I sigh and plod over to the beer tap to fill up his stein.

The sooner I earn some extra cash, the sooner I can ditch Wheaton and start over somewhere else. It'll be without the revenge and justice I swore I'd get on Pop's behalf, but what other option do I have considering what happened with the Kings?

I'm one woman. I've learned I'm not equipped to go up against a violent motorcycle club.

For the rest of the night, I'm stuck at the counter serving phlegm guy and watching the old box TV mounted in the far corner. Reruns of '90s sitcoms like Roseanne play; no one

really pays enough attention to care or notice. The handful of patrons we have are either too drunk to know whether they're coming or going, or too invested in quietly moping, drowning themselves in their sorrows.

As if the depressing atmosphere couldn't get any worse, another infamous Texas summer storm unleashes itself in a deluge of heavy rain.

My entire body locks up at the first clap of thunder. It's aggressive and resonant, traveling across the land for miles to come, and making my heart race. I go from wiping down the sticky bar countertop to swallowing against the panic lodged in my throat.

"It's okay," I whisper under my breath. "It's... it's okay, Syd."

"HELLO!" hacks the phlegm guy. He smacks his germey hand on the counter. "I'm talking to you!"

But I barely register what's happening.

I'm in a tailspin of old trauma, falling deep down a hole of bad memories that have left me so scarred, I often forgo thinking of them altogether.

"Kurtis!" Mommy cries out. "Please... don't do it. They're getting a rise out of you!"

Daddy sits behind the wheel. I'm in the back, strapped into a carseat. I can barely make out his expression... but by the slashed angle of his face, he's clenching his jaw in disagreement.

He thinks Mommy's wrong.

"Then what should I do?" he grinds out. "Let them intimidate us?"

“Syd’s in the car.”

“That’s why I gotta do what I gotta do. Sit tight. I’ll handle it.”

I kick my legs out as if wanting to do the opposite of what Daddy says. I want to jump out of the carseat and crawl up front to beg him to take us home.

The car windows streak with raindrops and it’s so dark out... too dark out...

Thunder roars and I hug my doll baby to my chest, on the verge of tears.

Daddy gets out the car in the heavy rain and approaches the group of men. Mom promptly locks the car doors and lets out a stifled cry of her own.

“Mommy,” I mumble. “Where’s Daddy going?”

“Shhh, Sydney!” she hushes from the front, distress in her voice. “Just shhh. Close your eyes and cover your ears.”

“But Mommy—”

“I said what I said. Now listen to me!”

I wrap my arms tighter around my doll baby and fall quiet, with my eyes big and round.

Mommy remains where she is and sobs some more. Her face falls into her hands and her shoulders shake. She mutters something about God and other words like, “asking for trouble.”

I don’t understand what’s going on.

From somewhere behind our car, men’s voices grow louder. So loud, even the pitter-patter from the rain gets drowned out.

My legs kick out in front of me as I try to stretch my body enough to turn around and see behind me. I'm too small, too tucked into the carseat. I can't see over the seat to look out the rear window.

A frustrated sound leaves me as I twist and turn and then give up. I'll never grow enough inches to see out the back window.

But I can click the button thing Mommy does when she comes to get me.

My fingers start pressing at the red button that controls the belt strapping me down. It doesn't come undone easily. I have to press down hard, digging my finger into the button, and then tug on the straps to wiggle free.

Mommy doesn't notice a thing. She's too busy sobbing up front.

I fall to my knees on the carpet floor of the car before scrambling for the door. The locks are automatic, but I've seen Daddy pull on the black knob to get them to open...

It pops up! It takes me a couple tries to pull it like Daddy has, but I'm able to do it.

The car door swings open for me to hop out, my doll baby wrapped up in my arms. The rain immediately drenches me. My braided pigtails sink lower on either side of my head and my dress with dozens of tiny pink hearts feels wet against my skin.

But I'm not paying either any mind.

Daddy stands up ahead, deep in an argument with a group of men near their bikes.

I blink and squint trying to figure out what's going on.

The fat raindrops falling into my face make it hard to see.

It's nothing good. They raise their voices and one of the guys has something in his hand. It looks like the water guns me and the kids around the block play with, just without the bright orange and lime-green colors. It's smooth and all black and looks scary clutched in his hand like that.

Daddy needs to come back right now. Leave those big, angry men alone.

The one with the toy gun takes aim right at Daddy. It's in that second my eyes go wide, and I figure out that's no toy gun. That's no gun that squirts water like we play with on hot afternoons. It's...

I open my mouth to scream for Daddy at the same time the gun goes off with a bang.

Both sounds get drowned out.

The much louder, more ferocious boom of thunder silences everything on earth.

My scream dies in my throat, watching as Daddy crumples to the ground, never to get up again...

“Hey, bitch! I'm talking to you!”

My whole body jerks as I'm pulled back to the present moment. I'm no longer standing drenched in heavy downpour, clutching my doll baby at my side, feeling like my whole world has been smashed to bits.

I'm in Rusty's Tavern with a soiled rag in hand and a boozing asshole shouting at me.

“Is there a problem?” Steve, the manager of the bar asks. He comes up red-faced and agitated from the back office.

Phlegm thrusts a finger in my direction. “This bitch is standing around staring off into outer space. What kinda help you hiring around here?”

“Sorry about that, Al. She’s new and not the best bartender. I was just talking to Murph about letting her go. Let me reup you.” Steve throws me a furious glance and snatches Phlegm’s stein from his hand.

I snap out of my dazed stupor in an immediate rush of anger.

Outside, the thunder and lightning rage on. They’ve grown louder and brighter, more menacing and consuming.

But I’m too pissed to let either paralyze me. At least in this moment.

I tear off my waist apron and toss it at Steve. The ball of fabric hits him in the chest, surprising him enough to drop the glass stein.

“You don’t have to fire me, Steve. I QUIT!” I scream. Then I round on Phlegm, my heart racing, and I reach for the half-full pint the last patron left behind on the counter. I toss the beer into his face and dare him to call me a bitch again.

Both men are in momentary shock as I storm for the exit. It’s only as I shove the doors open and escape into the thunderstorm that I hear Phlegm yell the ‘B’ word again.

But I don’t give a fuck.

I run down the block and cross the empty street. This time of night, few cars pass through. The motel emerges like a safe haven despite the fact that I’ve hated every minute of my stay here.

My breaths puff out of my lungs at an erratic pace, heaving my chest. I can't get them to level off. I can't even get a full breath in without feeling like I'm immediately expelling it.

My nerves are shot. My brain hazy. I'm soaking wet and surrounded by the storm that won't leave me alone. It chases me every step of the way like it has my entire life—with jarring claps of thunder that vibrate in my soul and flashes of lightning that light up the plum sky and then leave me cloaked in lonely darkness the next second.

I slam shut the door to my motel room and bend halfway over, gasping for more air in my lungs.

Calm the fuck down, Syd. Calm down right now. It's just a thunderstorm.

I close my eyes and urge myself to chill. It's a harmless thunderstorm that shouldn't rattle me like it does. That night was so many years ago, I barely remember any details beyond the thunderstorm itself...

The icy cold droplets on my skin. The pitch dark surroundings that only the bolts of lightning reprieved. The scream that stuck itself in my throat as the greater, thunderous boom eclipsed me. Even the *splish-splash* of my birth mom's footsteps as she waddled across the puddles to save my dad—only to be shot herself.

Mason's words speak in my ear, like he's a ghost present for this panicked moment of mine.

We are our experiences. You are who you are 'cuz of that night. You survived that thunderstorm, and you'll survive this one too.

"I'm going to survive," I whisper to myself. "I've survived before."

My heart begins aching for a whole new reason.

Mace.

I've never been one to catch feelings easily—most of my exes were short relationships that started off fun and then snowballed into something slightly less fun and slightly more serious than I expected. They'd fizzle out eventually and I'd shrug my shoulders and move on.

It should be the same with Mason.

We had mind-blowingly good sex. We had some laughs and wound up enjoying each other's company.

But it was only a few weeks. It meant nothing the whole time.

I was plotting against him. He was suspicious of me. We were a recipe for disaster.

It shouldn't hurt this much to let him go, yet as my heart aches, and my thoughts linger on him, it feels like torture. I'm trapped in a maze of heartbreak that I don't know how to process and escape.

I end up where I began.

What if... what if we could've...

I shake my head and step to the window. My heart's still racing as my fingers curl into the fabric of the curtains and pry them open.

Just a little. Just enough to part them so I can see the slick parking lot in front of the motel. Semi-trucks fill it up, along with the occasional car loaded with suitcases. Travelers that stopped by this roadside motel for the night.

Another streak of white light flashes, followed by a clap of thunder that rattles me. My fingers twist into a fist clutching the window curtain, but I force myself to remain where I am. As my heart pounds to the point of pain, I force myself to stay put and bear the storm.

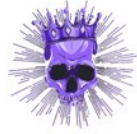
You can do it. You can survive.

It's as I brace for the next round that it happens. That I see it—a mirage of a lifetime.

Bolts of lightning illuminate the angry plum sky, and it's in this bright burst of white light that *he* appears.

Mason Cutler in the flesh, clad in his leather vest and many tattoos, peering up at my motel window.

SYDNEY



A GASP STARTS UP AND DIES IN MY CHEST AT THE SAME TIME. I blink and question if I'm losing my mind.

He can't be real. This can't be happening.

But then he moves. He steps away from his beastly Harley-Davidson he's rode in on and starts toward the motel. He holds my gaze, first at his far distance, rain sluicing off his leather vest, and then intimately, the closer he gets.

I take a step back from the window as if it'll somehow protect me from the real storm headed my way—not the thunderstorm that's made me shake and retreat into my motel room like a scared child.

The storm that's Mason Cutler descending upon me in his dominant, unyielding glory, electrifying my heart and stirring my soul.

I don't know what makes me do it... but I step toward the door as he comes up to it, wrenching it open for him. He strides into the room like he's expected; like he knew I'd give in and allow him inside what's become my sanctuary on the road.

Right away, from the first heavy thud of his boot, he's commanding the space. He's bringing a fraught tension that

charges the air we breathe.

I take another step back, my eyes wide, my throat dry.

“Mason... what...” I croak. I can’t complete a sentence.

He lets the door swing shut behind him. It doesn’t seem to bother him that he’s drenched—droplets of water slide off the smooth leather of his vest and his denim jeans must weigh an extra fifty pounds. Both a non-factor as far as he’s concerned.

He peers at me, his stare intense enough to burn a hole through me. The forest-green color has deepened along with his mood.

My brain fogs up even more, questioning if this is a friendly visit, or the visit of an enemy...

“I came to talk,” he says.

“*Talk!*?” I choke out incredulously. “You want to talk?!”

“Sit down.”

“I’ll stand! What do you think you’re doing, Mace? How do you think you can force your way in here and tell me we’re going to talk!”

“You opened the door.”

I blink up at him, incredulous at his audacity. “You told me you never wanted to see me again. You told me to get the hell out of your sight—the hell out of your *life*—or else you’d... you’d... end me. I did what you asked; I got the hell out of your town and went as far as I could. Now you think you get to come here and chat like we’re friends? Fuck off!”

He doesn’t budge. Not his unrelenting stare or his towering stance. “I expected you to say that. It wouldn’t be you if you didn’t give as good as you got.”

“This isn’t a fucking joke, Mace!”

He takes a step toward me. “Who says it’s a joke? You think I’m here to joke around, Syd? You think the shit you pulled was something for me to laugh about? Do you get how fucking irate it made me to know you played me and everybody else?”

“It wasn’t personal!”

“It was for me!” he barks louder, making me flinch. Taking another step to encroach on my space, he reaches out and grabs me by the elbow to draw me toward him in equal measure. His gaze fastened to my face, he speaks in a lower drawl. “Don’t you see how good you’ve got it? Don’t you see how lucky you are? You think anybody else could’ve done the shit you did and still be alive and breathing right now?”

The disbelieving laugh that rushes out of me does so without my permission. It’s a knee-jerk, involuntary reaction to hearing his words.

“You think I should feel lucky that you and your club didn’t kill me? Seriously?!”

His jaw clenches. “If it was anybody else—”

“But it wasn’t anybody else! It was me, and it hurt! What you did, how you spoke to me, how small you made me feel. You fucked me like your worst enemy, like you wanted me to know I was worthless, then you kicked me out like I was nothing. Do you know how humiliating that was?”

“You betrayed me! What the fuck was I supposed to do? You spent weeks undercover, assuming I was some cold-blooded murderer, plotting to take me and the MC down. You think that shit’s easy to get over? You think I was going to take that kinda betrayal laying down?”

I shake my head, feeling lost. “I don’t know what to think. That’s the problem. I’m so damn confused... so sick of this. All I wanted was to find Pop’s killer and get him justice. I never meant to... to...”

“What, Syd? Spit it out!” he growls.

I’ve wrenched my arm from his tight grasp and spun my back to him. Hot tears glaze my eyes, and I don’t want him to see; he doesn’t get to bear witness to the mess that I am on the inside.

Not anymore.

He lost that privilege the moment he kicked me out of his life.

“I never meant to get in so deep,” I whisper hoarsely. “I didn’t mean to... to... make you all... like me.”

“Well, you did. That’s what you fucking did, Syd. And it was a punch in the gut to learn Sandie, of all fucking people, was right—you weren’t what you said you were!”

“What do you want from me? An apology? I’m sorry! Sorry, I ever came to Pulsboro. Sorry I came to your club and took that job. But I’ve listened to what you wanted, and I won’t show my face there again.”

“You shouldn’t be in Wheaton. It’s Hellrazor territory.”

“Pop was a Hellrazor!” I whip around to face him once more. “It can’t be any more dangerous than being with the Steel Kings in Pulsboro. The men who said they’ll kill me if I ever go back.”

“Listen carefully, Wheaton isn’t the place for you. Jacob Singer was a Hellrazor, but that was many years ago. If you

think they'll show you any mercy, you're kidding yourself. He walked away from their club, remember?"

"I'm getting out of town. I'm... I'm going somewhere... anywhere... to start over."

"You're coming back to Pulsboro," he says. "With us. We'll figure things out there."

A beat of stunned silence lingers between us. I'm taken aback by the ease of his words and how he's so sure of himself as he waits out my reaction.

"Mace..."

"We were in town tonight for a confrontation with Dirty and the other Hellrazors," he explains. "I saw you running across the street... which is why I came by. I've got to head out. Our mission's about to go down. But you stay here. You wait a couple hours, and I'll be back."

"I'm not leaving with you—I can't. I broke your trust. You broke mine. There's no repairing any of it."

"You wait a couple hours. I'll come for you. We'll talk... about everything. Alright?"

It's a game of tug of war within myself. My mind and my heart on opposite ends, demanding I do opposite things. My heart begs me to agree, obey Mason's directions, and open myself up to the slim possibility that maybe, just maybe, we *can* fix this.

Any ounce of logic urges me to deny him. It reminds me how deeply hurt I was and how it's most vital I protect myself. I do what's best regardless of how I feel.

I'm all alone in this world. I can't trust anyone.

"Syd?" he says after seconds of silence.

Reluctantly, I nod. “Okay... okay... we can talk. Just talk. Here. When you get back. I’m not going to Pulsboro with you.”

“Stay put. Lock the door.” He surprises me by cupping my cheek and angling my face up toward his for a kiss.

I turn my head away, denying him. As much as my heart begs for it, as much as I yearn to taste his lips and fall deep into my addiction, I can’t kiss him.

“Not yet,” I whisper. “I’m not... ready...”

He pauses, his deep green eyes boring into me, his rough palm stroking the curve of my cheek. He slowly nods and then takes a step backward. That single step turns into several more as he walks toward the door.

“I’ll be gone a couple hours. Wait up.”

The second the door opens, the tinkling sound of the rain fills my ears. I rush to shut the door and slide the latch into place after him. I go to the window and peek through the part in the curtains, watching him make his way to his bike. He mounts it, and within seconds, rides off with a deafening roar from the engine.

My fingers touch my lips, imagining what it would’ve felt like to kiss him. If I’d just given in, even without talking more about what happened and where we stand. The instant desire that thrums through me makes me realize it was a blessing in disguise that I denied him.

A kiss would’ve led to more. It would’ve thrown him off his game. It’s for the best he gets whatever business he has with the Hellrazors out of the way first.

Then... then maybe...

That thought hovers at the forefront of my mind when there's a sharp knock on my door. I let the curtain flutter closed and drift toward the peephole. Tension returns to the bones in my body as I move stiffly and press my eye against the hole to see who it is.

A second later, it's fading away. Though I'm no less surprised by the appearance of my second visitor.

I unlatch the door and draw it open. "Velma," I say. "What are you doing here? Did you come with the rest of the crew for the mission?"

"Actually, I came to see you, girly. Thought I'd keep you company." She invites herself inside my room.

Still as shocked to see her as I was to see Mason, I trail after her. She makes it to the flimsy table and pair of chairs that are between the queen-sized bed and the bathroom wall. Withdrawing a cigarette and lighting up, she plops down.

"Have a seat."

"Usually the host asks the guest to sit," I say.

She smirks, her cigarette between her lips. "I'd say it's the one calling the shots that gets to decide that. I said, have a seat."

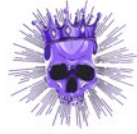
I put both hands to my hips. "Well, now I'm saying I'll show you the door. I'm not in the mood for bitchiness, Velma."

"Like I give a damn," she snorts, blowing smoke. The moment I move to go to the door, she's croaking out a thick, throaty laugh only a regular smoker's capable of. "You go ahead and open that door, girly. You're not gonna like what you find on the other side."

“What are you—”

“I told your stubborn ass to have a seat. I’m not gonna tell you again,” she snaps, eyes cold and clouds of smoke swirling around her. “I’m not playing around. You’ll soon learn your little games have been child’s play. You want a real undercover story? I’m about to school you like there’s no tomorrow.”

MASON



“ALRIGHT, BOYS, ARE WE READY TO FUCK SHIT UP TONIGHT?” Ozzie asks with a gleam in his eyes. He grins wide as he cocks the hammer on the pistol in his hand and then gestures to the arsenal of weapons strapped to the holster across his chest. “I’ve got something to cover all violent appetites. Grenades? Check. Brass knuckles? Damn right. Ice pick? I got you.”

Moses, who’s one of twenty on tonight’s mission, shakes his head. “Do I even wanna know where you got *grenades* from?”

Ozzie shrugs. “I know a guy who knows a guy. Don’t ask questions.”

“Everybody get your shit straight!” I yell, shouldering my way through the group. I’m soaked through from my pitstop to the Traveler’s Lodge to see Sydney, but wet clothes aren’t gonna stop me from what we’ve gotta do. “Make sure your hardware’s locked, loaded, and ready. No mercy.”

Tonight is the night we make the Hellrazors regret ever fucking with us.

We’ve got a foolproof plan that’s gonna show once and for all who the dominant MC is.

After weeks of trying to sabotage the Hellrazor's drug and weapon supply, we've tracked down their dealer.

Edgar Olivares is a small-time distributor that often deals with any gangs and criminal entities in the local area. He operates alongside a team of no more than six men, discreet and unknown enough that he often flies under the radar. In their war against drugs, the authorities aren't even aware he and his distribution business exists.

Olivares buys from the cartels wholesale and then uses his local connections to sell his stock to motorcycle clubs, street gangs, and other criminals alike. At one point in time, the Steel Kings had an arrangement with a distributor like Olivares. Years ago, when we were still active in Texas's drug trade.

But the feds cracking down on the motorcycle clubs, like what happened with the Road Reapers, scared Tom shitless. Our club's been more or less clean ever since.

The Hellrazors have continued to take their chances.

We camp out on the side of the road, hidden by thick shrubbery and the night's thicker shadows. We're armed and ready to act the moment Olivares and his distributors pass through.

Strewn across the middle of the road is a set of spikes designed to fuck up their tires the moment they drive by.

Cash glances at the time, then over at me. I feel his gaze even in the dark. The tension between us from our earlier argument has gone nowhere, though we're on the same page for this mission. "They're late."

"Give it some time," I answer. I refer to Bush. "What's the tracker show?"

“They’re less than five out. Should be soon.”

Ozzie lets out a snort of a laugh. “Man, the Hellrazors are gonna be scared shitless. They won’t know what hit ‘em.”

“It’s what they get for fucking with us.” I direct my attention to the road. Bush’s tracker was correct—as we lurk in the shadows, a light-duty truck appears far up ahead on the road.

Olivares and his team transporting the supply for the Hellrazors.

I recognize the truck as the same one from their campsite we recently spied on.

It bumbles down the road, curving along the bend, its headlights blinding. We edge forward, ready to strike.

The truck drives straight through our trap without realizing it. The sharp spikes slice into their rubber tires and brings them to a lurching halt only yards away.

We converge at once.

They don’t know what hit them as we appear on all sides. Ski masks covering our faces, we point guns in theirs and order them out of the truck.

Olivares sits in the front passenger seat. He sticks his shaky hands in the air and says, “Whoa... I want no trouble, brother. We’ve got no beef with each other. Whoever you are, we’re good. I’m just making a delivery.”

“Exactly,” I growl. I jam the tip of my AKM assault rifle into his neck. “Now get the fuck out the truck and lay face down on the ground.”

Olivares and the two men he has with him comply. They rush from the truck and then get down onto the asphalt.

I motion to Ozzie and Moses to check them for weapons.

“Nothing on them,” Moses says, standing up straight.

“I told you, we’re just making a delivery,” Olivares reiterates with a tremor in his voice.

“Shut up,” I snap. I step around to the back of the light-duty truck, where Cash and Bush have swung open the doors.

Inside is a whole shipment of cocaine and other drugs in pill form as well as a stockpile of weapons and ammo.

I turn back to Olivares. “This was for the Hellrazors, correct?”

“I don’t reveal my customers—*ARGH!*”

Ozzie’s whacked him over the head with the butt of his rifle. “Answer him.”

“Alright, alright,” the distributor grits out. “Yeah, it’s for them. I’m just the middleman. I want no trouble.”

“The problem with being the middleman is that you get yourself in the middle of shit. Are you gonna interfere with what we have planned, or are you gonna cooperate with us so we don’t have to fuck you all the way up?”

“But my shipment. It’s worth several hundred thou—*ARGH!*”

Ozzie’s jammed his rifle into him a second time.

He hitches a panicked breath from where he lays on the ground and says, “Okay... okay, if that’s what it takes for me to live. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. Just please... I have a wife and kids.”

“Your business deal with the Hellrazors is over. Got it?” I growl with an air of impatience. “Should we ever catch you

supplying to them in the future, you'll have a new problem on your hands. Us."

"A-and who are you?" he asks hesitantly.

"Never mind that!" Ozzie yells, striking him with his hardest blow yet.

We strip the two men that are with Olivares down to their underwear, taking their keys, wallets, and everything else on their person, before we abandon them on the side of the road. It's about as good of a deal as they're going to get. They're deserted, but they're alive and breathing and mostly uninjured.

Olivares comes with us. He's gonna be our trojan horse. The decoy we need to trick the Hellrazors.

"Part two of the plan?" Cash asks, glancing over at me.

I nod. "Part two of the plan. Let's pay our friends a visit."

The Hellrazor's bar, the Hell Hole, is only a few miles down the road. They're blasting their hard rock music so loud, we can hear it the moment we pull up. Partying the night away while their enemies get ready to leave them in a world of hurt.

We've split up into two groups. The first group, me, Ozzie, Moses and Olivares in the truck we've stolen parked in the parking lot of the bar. Then the second group still on their bikes that takes the secluded back way to the bar.

The drugs have stayed. The weapons we took for ourselves. Though the Hellrazors don't know that—from the outside, the truck looks like it always does.

Bolts of lightning explode across the sky. The thunder rumbles in solidarity with our engines. I should be focused on the mission, but every time another bolt flashes, I'm thinking of Sydney.

Hell, I thought of her the whole ride to Wheaton.

We'd crossed town lines and I'd blinked hard in the heavy rain.

There she was, scurrying in the dark. It was like some kinda mirage, her springing up out of nowhere as I was thinking about her.

I had to follow.

Cash got to me when he chewed me out. It peeled off the thin, rough-around-the-edges layer I had been hiding behind since kicking Sydney out.

I was still pissed as hell. But that didn't mean I didn't want her.

That didn't mean she didn't belong where I'd told her never to return to.

So, I went to the Traveler's Lodge and I saw her. I'm surprised she didn't smack me across the face the second I stepped into her room. Instead, she'd *almost* let me kiss her...

I twist off the key in the ignition of the distributor truck and turn to Olivares.

"Remember," I say. "The second you fuck up, you're dead. You know what you're about to do?"

The shaky, nervous fuck nods several times. "Ye-yeah... I can... I'll do it."

"Then get fucking going. Bring 'em here."

Olivares opens the passenger side door and slides off his seat. He wobbles like he's about to pass out any second, throwing uncertain looks over his shoulder at us. Looks I answer with a glare of murderous fury.

A silent warning.

You fuck up, we will kill you.

Olivares does what we've instructed him to do. He shuffles all the way across the parking lot, ignoring the red-rimmed-eyed stares from the drunken Hellrazors hanging around the front of the bar, and he pounds a fist to the door.

It goes ignored at first 'til he pounds loud enough to be heard over the party music.

The door opens and he's face-to-face with none other than Bones. The motherfucker I'd love to kill for the stunt he pulled the last time we were around the Hellrazors.

Bones stares at him with open drunkenness. "Who the hell are you?"

"Your distributor," Olivares answers. "We've got... you scheduled a transaction tonight."

Bones sways in place, clearly too damn intoxicated. "The distributor? Olivares? Yeah... right. Gimme a sec."

"Move out the way! Bones, don't go fucking shit up!" Dirty calls as he shoulders his fellow club member out the way. Dawning lights up Dirty's craggy, wrinkled face. "Right... the merchandise. Show me the way."

He and Bones follow Olivares toward the truck.

Both men, a few beers into the night, seem unconcerned and off-guard of any potential threats. They wander across the

wide parking lot without a care in the damn world, clueless that their world's about to be fucked all the way up.

Olivares walks them to the back of the light duty truck and peels open the doors to show them the cargo he's delivering.

Dirty's red eyes widen at first, spotting the many kilos of cocaine, and practically salivating at the mouth.

Then he realizes something's off—for starters, the weapons are missing—and there's a guy in the back, grinning and waving at him.

Ozzie holds up the grenade and says, "Hey, Dirty. Special delivery."

"What the fuck?" He jumps back in alarm.

In the next second, we're on him.

On either side, we've got guns pointed at him. Olivares is knocked out of the way.

"Guess who, asshat?" I growl. "Told you not to fuck with us."

"What do you think you're—"

"Tonight's the night you answer for the shit you've pulled," I interrupt, uninterested in talk. "Oz."

"My fucking pleasure. Everybody get back." Ozzie hops out the truck, pulling the pin, and chucking it.

Some of us make it out the blast zone in time. Others aren't so lucky.

Olivares, lying on the ground from where he's been knocked over, is one of the less lucky ones. Bones is the other.

The truck erupts in a burst of flames and debris, eating up both men, setting them on fire with gut-wrenching screams of

pain.

Flames that reflect in Dirty's watery, horrified eyes.

Satisfaction at his misfortune only makes me grin wider. He's in our custody now.

We force him back with jabs from our guns. He stumbles trying to walk backward and almost falls.

We've stepped into their lair, seemingly outnumbered. The other Hellrazors glare at us looking the part of caged animals just waiting for their release. The signal from Dirty they can attack.

"You think you can come here and blow up our supply on our turf?" Dirty chokes out. Color rushes to his saggy cheeks. "You're always starting shit."

"We're not starting shit. We're here to finish it."

"You think you're gonna what? Bully us into standing down? Fellas." He gives a nod over his left and right shoulders.

The pack of Hellrazors in attendance flash their weapons, pulling back their cuts to show off the guns they've got strapped on their person.

I remain unfazed, standing my ground. "You're all armed as expected. So are we."

In that moment, the rest of our group invades the bar through the back entrance. While the Hellrazors were busy chugging beers and partying on the bar floor, my guys easily slipped inside through the rear.

Dirty and the other Hellrazors look around them with fury clenched onto their ruddy faces.

“Looks like our numbers are about even,” I say arrogantly, spoken like a true fucking king. “But you know... I’ve got a new idea. Maybe it’s time we settled this like real men. With our god-given fists. What do you say?”

A grumble passes over the group of Hellrazors. Some of them have the thirst for violence written on their faces. A couple look more hesitant at the idea. It doesn’t matter either way to me; we’re holding their feet to the fire.

“You really think this’ll end well?” Dirty says. His yellow, scummy teeth clench. “You blow up our supply and beat the shit outta us, and then what? You think we won’t retaliate?”

“That’s assuming you make it out of tonight alive.”

“You’ve got a lotta balls. I see your daddy didn’t teach you shit. You’re a boy playing dress up. You ain’t no prez.”

“Then prove it. First swing is free.”

Dirty sputters, his hands on his lanky waist. “How do I know this ain’t no trap? You got your weapons on us.”

“Guys,” I say slowly, “put ’em away.”

My guys exchange looks but do as they’re told—they stow them away, though still within reach in case needed. Dirty’s eyes shrink into thin, distrustful slits. He takes one step forward, then two, then a few more after that.

“You really want an ass whooping, boy?”

“I’m giving you a head start. I want you to give me your best shot, Dirty. What more can you ask for?”

He curls his sun-spotted hands into fists that shake. All a tough guy act to seem more enraged than he is.

What he's really doing is stalling. I already know what he's about to do before he does it.

He opens his mouth in a deafening bellow that sends spittle flying. It might as well be a battlecry the way it rallies his crew.

They rush toward us as a wall of pissed off, drunken bikers. We counter their attack by running straight toward them, our own wall of muscle and fury. The two sides collide in a crash of violence.

Dirty comes at me. He gives me what I asked for—his best shot. He swings on me with a grunt from his belly, putting what I'm sure is his full power behind his punch. I dodge him without any effort. My fist slams into his temple and has him seeing stars. He staggers and throws another hit.

We're amateur boxers jabbing and dodging. Except most of my hits connect. Most of his miss or lack the power needed to do any damage.

Around us, everybody else is locked into a brawl. Ozzie's got his brass knuckles out and I catch sight of Stein head butting a Hellrazor and then tossing one over his back.

It's a good ol' fashioned bar fight. Glasses get smashed and somebody gets thrown headfirst through one of the windows.

For the moment, we abide by the agreed upon rules—nobody pulls a trigger. Nobody goes for the shortcut.

I knock Dirty to the ground and stand over him. He stares up with spacey eyes, clearly struggling to stay conscious.

Somebody sneaks up on me from behind. I catch on a split second before their attack. We duke it out, trading punches, latching onto each other like wrestlers. He slams me into a

table. The impact steals the air from my chest, but I don't let myself stay down too long. I spin out of the way and crack him in the face.

Our one-on-one continues 'til we're both bleeding.

'Til somebody decides they've had enough brawling. On the brink of losing his fistfight with Moses, one of the Hellrazors scrabbles for his gun, and then squeezes the trigger. It goes off with a resounding bang that changes the whole confrontation.

Things go from a typical bar fight to a shootout. Their guys and mine drawing their weapons and retaliating. The thing is, we counted on this—we came heavily armed for that reason, including the weapons we've stolen from the Hellrazors.

Meanwhile, they were too busy partying tonight to have enough ammo on the spot.

It takes only a minute of bullets whizzing by before they realize they're outgunned.

“Get the hell outta here!” Dirty screeches. He's finally up from the beating he took.

He and the others scramble to their feet and try to retreat from the rear entrance.

But there's no escape.

Cash and the rest of the crew that broke off earlier block them at the exit. Some of the Hellrazors drop to their knees and press their hands together in a plea for mercy. I stride outside into the alleyway to join my guys.

Cash has got a gun trained on a Hellrazor's head—one of the same fuckers who was at our last confrontation on the side

of the road.

“What d’you say?” he asks, raising a brow. “Let ’em go?”

“Kill ’em all,” I answer in an instant. I survey them with cold fury frozen onto my face and watch as Cash and the others assassinate them one by one.

We’re only a handful away from being done when police sirens ring in the air. After the commotion from the truck exploding and then the brawl in the bar, it’s a given they’d descend on the scene.

We have no choice but to get the hell out of there.

Dirty and his last few men are left weeping in their own piss on the muddy ground. We’re already riding off on our bikes before the cops even pull up outside the Hellrazors bar.

For several miles, we speed off into the warm, wet night. The heavy thunderstorm has receded. Only a light drizzle falls.

“I’ve gotta grab Syd!” I shout over the roar of our engines.

The guys riding left and right of me are the only ones who hear. Ozzie and Bush nod their heads and break off to come with me.

“Nah,” I call out. “Go on without me. Bush, you’re lead.”

The crew passes me up as I take a side detour off the main country road that takes you out of town. I circle back through some of the narrower streets, careful not to cause a commotion. A couple streets away from the motel, I brake on the side of the road at the sound of more sirens. They’re racing off in the direction of the Hellrazors bar.

Once the coast is clear, I finish the ride to the Traveler’s Lodge. From the moment I park my bike and look up at the two-story motel, I know something’s up. There’s a strange

vibe that hangs in the moist air, like some shit went down in more places than the Hellrazor bar tonight.

Something big happened here too.

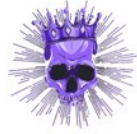
Dismounting my bike, I realize what it is. The door to Sydney's room is wide open. It's been left ajar as if she was inside and then had no choice in the matter.

The air evaporates from my lungs. I forget about taking off the rest of my gear and break out into a run for the metal staircase.

"SYDNEY!" I yell, skipping steps on the way up. I round the corner on the landing and bolt toward the open door, unholstering my Glock. "SYDNEY!"

I stagger into her motel room with heaving breaths to discover what I've feared—it's completely empty, and she's nowhere to be found.

SYDNEY



“YOU’RE THE INFORMANT?” I SAY IN A STUNNED TONE.
“*You?!*”

Velma’s eye roll coincides with the puff of smoke she blows out. “I ain’t no fucking informant, girly. You mean to tell me you bought into that tripe? I guess I gave you more credit than you deserve.”

“But I don’t get it. You told Mason that Tom found out about the informant from someone in the prison—”

“Which was a *lie*,” she interjects. “This time around anyway. But Mace and Tom barely talk. I told Tom the opposite—we’d heard rumblings on the outside. I knew their stubborn asses wouldn’t figure it out, and if they did, I’d accuse one of being a liar. They’d believe me ‘cuz I’m their middleman.”

I shake my head as if she’s speaking another language and I can’t understand a word. For as little sense as she’s making, it really might be some other language I’m not understanding.

By the sounds of it, Velma’s been sowing discord between Mason and Tom for a while. She’s done it so much, she’s practically a pro at it—and sees nothing wrong with bragging about how she’s driven them further apart.

“You’re the one pitting them against each other? Why would you do something like that?” I ask.

She sucks on her cigarette for a long moment, then returns my question with one of her own. “Why not pit them against each other? It’s worked in our favor.”

“And who is our? The Hellrazors?”

“Oh, girly, you poor thing. I was serious when I said I saw a feistiness in you—sorta like me when I was younger—but you ain’t that smart. I’ve got shit else to do with the Hellrazors. I want them gone too!”

“So then who are you working with?”

She does nothing but consider me under her shrewd gaze and blow ringlets of smoke. Suddenly, everything about her churns my stomach—her box-dye beehive hairdo, the subtle smoker’s lines that have formed on her face and the way she clutches her cigarette like it’s a weapon.

The haze it casts in the air can be—I choke on the second-hand smoke that’s clouding the small motel room. If she refuses to leave, then I will.

Velma still hasn’t made it clear why she’s even here in the first place. The deep roll of nerves in my stomach warns me it can’t be anything good. Though she hasn’t explained what’s going on, or who she means when she says *our*, I’m not so sure I want to find out.

I don’t answer her. I simply turn away and make for the door.

“No you don’t!” she screeches. She flicks the butt of her cigarette to the ground and squashes it with the heel of her leather boot. “You go and try to leave out that door, you’re gonna be in a world of hurt at what’s waiting for you. Don’t

you get it? I'm here to collect you. But go on and try—Mace told me you're too stubborn for your own good. Stuck on stupid is more like it.”

I call Velma's bluff 'til I make it within a few steps of the door and spot the silhouettes through the curtain fabric. Several men are congregating on the walkway outside my motel room. Men that look wide and burly even in silhouette. They're intimidating and dangerous without ever seeing their faces.

I back off, my heart racing in alarm. “Who's out there?”

“Never mind that. You're gonna do what I told you to do first. Sit the fuck down in this chair. You ready to listen?”

I shoot Velma a dirty look from over my shoulder. “Do I have any other fucking choice?”

“Not really.” She selects another cigarette from her half full pack, flipping open her American flag lighter at the same time. She waits for me to take the seat opposite hers before she goes on. “Almost everything you know about me has been bogus. In some way or another.”

“I've already figured that out.”

“I did come to the Kings bloodied and bruised. But it wasn't 'cuz of some battered wife sob story I gave. I was beat up, alright. For betraying the oath I took. I got trapped by my own stupidity and naivety. You remember I told you I used to own a bike shop way back when? I might've cut costs here and there, found some loopholes with my taxes, and started pocketing what I shouldn't've.

“Unsurprising when it caught up to me. The IRS came knocking on my door. They were gonna collect. I owed almost two million in back taxes. For a relatively small-town bike

shop owner, it's like a death sentence. I couldn't pay that back and I didn't wanna go to jail. Either way, I'd be *kaput*. So I made a deal."

"You made a deal with the feds to rat someone out?"

She nods. "I'm scrappy, but I ain't cut out for prison. I'm too pretty. I had to save myself. They were forcing my hand. But I had betrayed my oath—I ruined all the good things in my life just to save my behind."

"You're from Portales. The Road Reapers," I say with sinking dread. "*You* were the reason their prez went away."

"That's right. I sold out the club. I was young then... I didn't realize what I was doing. I thought the club wouldn't find out."

"But you were caught," I supply.

A cloud of smoke obscures her face as she blows and nods. "Not at first. Not for several years. Rollins went on a killing spree. He thought it was his closest ally, the vice prez Hawk. He just so happened to be trying to leave the club at the time. So he offed him. But then he thought it was somebody outside the club—so he began targeting them too. See, back in those days, the MCs were all good with each other. Heidi Cutler suffered a bad fate."

I gasp in horror. "Mace's mom? The Reaper prez killed Mason's mom?"

"He sure did. He wanted to know who dined him out. If it was a King. In response, the Kings killed Rollins' brother, Jeff. Then Rollins went away for what he did. Don't think the Hellrazors—your Pop was innocent—he killed some Reapers too in revenge. That's why he went away to prison."

All this news is making my head hurt. So much history, so much bloodshed, a tragedy vaguely linking me and Mason together. Pop was murdered in revenge, and so was Mason's mother.

"Anyway," Velma goes on. "Rollins didn't realize it was me for many years. When I was found out, I didn't get off easy like you. I was beat black and blue for my treachery. My shop was burned to the ground. The MC would've killed me if Rollins hadn't realized I could have a second use."

"Undercover," I say. "You showed up at the Steel Saloon to earn the King's trust."

"And do to Tom what had happened to Rollins."

"You're the reason Tom's locked up."

"Tom's the reason Tom's locked up. Let's get that straight right now. It's not my fault he's a dumb, cocky criminal that was easy to rat out to the authorities. But I'll do anything to win the favor back of my real club. My real family."

"The Road Reapers..."

"Yep, see, after they beat the shit out of me, I couldn't even see in one eye. They kicked me in the face and knocked out my front tooth. I needed plastic surgery to correct a couple things."

She points at different parts of her face to show where she'd suffered the most damage. I sit giving no discernible reaction, despite the mounting panic and disbelief inside me. It's too much information at once. Too confusing and overwhelming to process.

"That's when the Kings took me in. They gave me a place to recuperate and lay my head down. But I don't think they realized who I was and what I was running from."

“Yet you repay them by betraying them?”

Her stare chills into pure frostiness. “Don’t you go around judging me! You’ve done exactly what I have—those men treated you great, even Mace after a while, and you were lying to their faces! If you’re gonna point the finger at anybody, you point that shit at yourself! What I’m doing... it’s different. I’m proving my loyalty once and for all.”

“You’re working for the same men who beat you to a pulp? How does that make any sense?!”

“I betrayed my oath,” she snaps, her lips pinched around her smoldering cigarette. “I deserve what happened to me. Besides, they’ve realized they need me. I’m their best chance at survival. The club and town have both been dead for years. I’m the one bringing them back to former glory.”

“The Road Reapers are nobodies.”

She cackles. “Oh, girly. You’ve got no idea, do you? You don’t know a thing about us? If anything, you should be cheering us on. Your allegiance should be with *us*.”

I don’t understand what Velma means, though there’s a sick glint in her eye as she seems to take joy in keeping whatever it is from me.

I focus on what I do know.

“So you’ve set me up. You’ve set us all up,” I say in a burst of hot irritation. My hand curls in my lap; Velma’s men may be outside the door, but inside we’re alone. How long would it take them to bust the door down if I were to whoop her ass?

“If you were smart, you would’ve noticed,” she says. “It was me who welcomed you into the club with open arms. It was me who gave you a place to lay your head. Right under

the same roof as Mason. It was me who dropped out and made you take my place for the fundraiser. That trip to Lenton to see Tom was all me. So was the informant hoax. I even told Sandie to search your room for that book. I knew you kept all your thoughts in there, like some stupid fucking teenager. Dear diary, today my adopted daddy died—”

It slams into me in a collision so heavy, I feel like I’m being crushed to the bone. Some invisible force with the power to wreck me in a single blow. I release a strangled breath and wince as a pounding pain starts up in my temple.

This can’t be happening. It can’t be true...

“The Road Reapers were behind what happened to Pop,” I say. “You were involved. You already knew who I was before I even told you my name.”

“We had to find a way to take advantage of Tom being gone from the Kings. Some way to start a war between our two biggest rivals, the Hellrazors and the Kings.”

“So you killed Pop?”

“It was time for his senile old ass to go anyway. We knew the Hellrazors would retaliate. They shot up Bush’s trailer.”

“Then the Kings killed another Hellrazor.”

She nods. “The two clubs were too busy fighting to think somebody else could be behind it. They underestimate us Reapers.”

“You dropped the bandana on purpose, knowing I’d find it and think it was the Kings.”

“Not *me*, girly. But my Reaper brothers, that’s for damn sure.”

“Why not kill me that night?”

“That was up in the air. It could’ve gone either way. They could’ve taken you out or they could’ve let you live knowing your stubborn, nosy ass would come to Pulsboro for answers—and if you went anywhere else, like Wheaton or Portales, we’d find a way to nudge you on track. The guys thought about killing you when they killed Jacob, but then those sirens went off.”

I cover my face in my hands, still reeling from the revelations being unloaded onto me. “I’m guessing you sent me to the basement for the tables and chairs because you knew I’d see those photos and then assume it was the Kings.”

“Now you’re getting it. I even drew X’s on the right faces to really get you going. Every moment of yours has been handcrafted by yours truly. Every part of this war between the Kings and the Hellrazors is yours truly. Me and my Reaper brothers. It’s been a great time pitting you idiots against each other. They almost killed each other a few minutes ago at the Hellrazor’s bar. I’m sure Mace told you why he’s in Wheaton tonight.”

“I hope it was worth it. Choosing the team you have.”

“Believe me, it will be. I’ll finally clear up my reputation. But you... you’re not gonna be so lucky. You’re a bargaining chip. Now that the Kings all but butchered the Hellrazors, all that’s left is to pick off the Kings. That’s where you come in. You’ll help us end the Kings once and for all.”

There’s no more time to waste sitting around as Velma boasts about how deeply she’s betrayed everyone.

I don’t have many options. Mason and the other Kings are embroiled with the Hellrazors at this very moment, and there’s a group of men waiting outside the motel door.

So, I make a rash decision on the spot, to go down with a fight.

I launch myself out of my chair and surprise the hell out of Velma with my fist. I've never been a big fighter, but I land my hit on her chin. The cigarette at rest between her lips goes flying. She holds up her arms to fend me off and swings blindly at me. I block her pathetic attempts and shove her, going down on top of her.

We scrap in a chaotic blur of slaps, punches, hair-pulling, scratching, and even biting. Our fight gets lowdown and dirty by the time Velma's grabbing my hand and sinking her teeth into my palm.

"*ARGH!*" I howl in throbbing pain. I retaliate by swinging back my other palm and connecting hard across her cheek.

We're grunting out and grappling when the motel room door flies open. I'm yanked off Velma, though whoever it is doesn't set me back on my feet. They wrap their thick arms around my torso and haul me off like I'm a piece of furniture to be moved.

I scream, kick, throw my arms in wild punches. But it's no use.

The room's filled with the Road Reapers that were waiting outside all along.

"Let me go, you assholes!" I scream, thrashing in the arms of the man who holds me. "I SAID LET ME GO!"

Nobody listens. I'm ignored as I'm carried out the room and Velma's helped up off the floor.

I'm thrown into the back of a truck. Velma and the men pile in up front and the engine starts.

I push myself up on my hands and knees as we start to move. My stomach bottoms out at the sight of the Traveler's Lodge—and then eventually Wheaton altogether—sinking out of view.

MASON



“PICK UP YOUR PHONE, SYD. PICK UP YOUR FUCKING PHONE,” I growl in increasing frustration. It goes to voicemail after a couple rings. “Fuck! FUCK!”

Frustration bubbles over into a volcanic eruption. I hurl my phone across the room ’til it smacks into the wall and then set off searching for any clues I can find. Her things are still here, suggesting she left in a hurry.

She didn’t even take her *purse*, a must for most women. Though her phone’s gone.

The smell of rain has wandered into the small motel room, but the stench of cigarette smoke refuses to be outdone—I can smell it the deeper into the room I go.

Sydney doesn’t smoke. Where the hell did this cigarette smell come from?

There’s an overturned chair in the back. The table that goes with it has been knocked sideways. Definite signs of a struggle, but between Sydney and who else?

“Shit,” I swear under my breath. I grab Sydney’s purse and flee from the motel.

At this point in the night, the storm’s let up, and the rain has weakened into a drizzle. The air’s cooler than most

summer nights, though haunted by the far-off sounds of sirens. The cops must still be raiding the Hellrazors bar.

My mind's buzzing as I hop on my bike and get the hell out of there.

It couldn't have been the Hellrazors that took Sydney... could it?

Most of their major players were at the bar tonight, but what if there's something I'm missing? It's possible Dirty Harry somehow got word of our attack and then launched a counter effort. He sent some guys to snatch up Sydney.

...but we killed a hell of a lot of Hellrazors tonight. So many, their numbers have probably dropped by a third.

I speed the entire way between Wheaton and Pulsboro. It takes me under two hours. Dawn spills onto the sky by the time I'm pulling up outside the Steel Saloon. The crew's waited up for me. They're posted up in the bar when I enter.

"What took your ass so long?" Bush asks. "We were just talking about coming to get you."

"Especially with the cops out," adds Moses. "Last thing we need would be them coming at us with problems."

Cash steps toward me, knowing me at a glance. "What went wrong? Where's Sydney?"

I toss her purse on the nearest table and move straight for the bar. I need some liquor in my system. Some hard whiskey to calm the edgy feeling I've taken on. My nerves are shot, and I can't think straight.

Sydney's missing. Somebody took her. And all I can fucking do is toss back shots of whiskey and clench my jaw at the throbbing migraine I've got.

Anytime an MC takes somebody hostage it's never a good thing. That person rarely makes it out unscathed in some serious way... or worse, alive.

"Mace?" Cash prompts. "What is it? Where's Sydney?"

"I... I don't know," I answer. I accept another shot from Mick behind the bar and swallow it with the scorching burn down my throat. "She wasn't there. I think somebody took her."

That gets Mick's attention. He does a double take, his eyes wide and bushy white brows high on his forehead. "What d'you mean somebody took her? Like a Hellrazor? What're you doing here? Go after her!"

"It couldn't've been a Hellrazor," Ozzie says from where he sits. "We had their bar floor covered in their blood. When would they've had the time?"

"Unless somebody broke off the way me and a few others did." Cash slides his fingers through his golden hair and takes on an expression that tells me he's thinking hard. "You don't think she ran off on her own, do you? I know she's not the type but—"

"Did you miss her fucking purse I just threw on the table?!" I roar over him. Veins pulse in the side of my neck and I slam my fist down on the bar counter, signaling for another shot of whiskey that Mick quickly supplies. "She didn't fucking run off! It's not Syd's style to stage some kinda kidnap situation, then leave her purse behind like that!"

"She lied once. Who's to say she's not lying again?"

The skeptic's voice belongs to none other than Johnny Flanagan.

Johnny fucking Flanagan, who still sports a few cuts and a big yellowing bruise from where I'd knocked him out a couple weeks ago. He's sitting far in the corner alongside his old man. Both aim looks of derision in my direction. His old man out of dislike that I beat the hell out of his son, and Johnny being Johnny. Annoying like a damn gnat.

It's the wrong fucking moment.

I snap, whirling around, leaving the bar counter behind. In two short strides I'm coming up on Johnny, about to bash his face in a second time this month.

Cash hurries to throw himself in between. "Not right now, Mace. If Sydney really is missing, then we need to get a move on. We need to do what we can to find her."

The common sense jars me out of my blinding rage. The way only common sense spoken by Cash can.

I shake my head to refocus myself and then face the bar room. "Cash is right. We need to find Sydney. That's our priority first and foremost. The Hellrazors are suspect number one."

"That would be some grimy shit they pull," Ozzie says, smashing his left fist into his right palm. "Sounds like I've got a few more grenades to throw."

"We canvas Wheaton, Pulsboro, and the area in between far and wide. Ask locals. Check if they've seen something."

The men are dismissed and break apart in different directions to go put their gear on and grab their hardware.

I remain behind, trying to calm the fuck down.

Sydney's gonna be okay. It's only been a couple hours. She's probably giving hell to whoever took her.

“Hang on, Syd,” I mutter to myself.

“She’s gonna make it. Syd’s a fighter if there ever was one,” Mick offers with a resolute nod. “That girl’s been through a lot. I can tell.”

Guilt claws away at me listening to Mick’s admiration for Sydney. She has been through a lot. Even from just what little I know.

Orphaned at a young age. Taken in by Jacob Singer and his wife, only to lose them too. She’s mentioned being all alone.

You’re not, Syd. You’re not alone. You’ve got me. And the club. We’re your family now even if you don’t realize it yet.

The saloon doors swing open and in walks Velma looking like she’s had a rough night out. She limps through the door wearing her giant shades that cover more than half her face, and with her tall hair practically a bird’s nest.

But what stands out most, as she clutches a to-go coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, is the split lip she’s sporting.

“You alright?” I ask.

“Fine as fine can be,” she answers vaguely, limping over to the bar counter. “Where is everybody? I saw a whole lotta bikes out front, so I know they’re here.”

“They’re getting ready for our mission. What happened to you?”

“Me? Oh. Right. Uh, fender bender,” she says, sticking her cigarette into her mouth. She takes a second to drag on it, then blows smoke with a shake of her head. “It was a rough one. I had to go to the ER. But I’m good. Nothing a coffee and smoke can’t fix.”

“It gave you a split lip?”

“That’s right. How’d last night with the Hellrazors go? You give ’em hell?”

“We fucked them up as planned.”

“Good on you. I knew you would.”

“Where did your fender bender happen?”

“Huh? Oh... the country road leading into town. You know how people barrel down.”

“I didn’t hear about an accident on that road.”

“It was quick. Happened real fast. A few minutes. The guy sped off.”

“Get a look at the license plate?”

“Nope.”

“You’ll have to show me how wrecked it is. You and the guys might be able to fix it at the Chop Shop.”

“Uh, yeah... maybe,” she answers, chugging coffee. “But some other time. Right now, I feel like shit. Which means I need some sleep.”

I stare at her for a second. Pretty sure she’s hiding a black eye behind those huge shades. Something’s off about her behavior and how she’s acting. She sits at the counter trying to be her usual brash self... but it doesn’t stick. It’s like Velma *acting* as Velma, not Velma *being* Velma.

I’m about to probe some more, but Cash and a couple of the others emerge from the back.

“You ready?”

I nod. “Yeah, let’s ride out.”

“Where’re you going?” Velma asks.

“Sydney’s missing,” Cash answers for me. We’re heading for the door, strapped, with our gear on.

Velma almost chokes on her coffee/cigarette combo. She beats a fist to her chest and says, “Really? She’s missing, is she? How d’you know she didn’t just run off? You know how she is. That girl can’t be trusted. She fooled us all.”

“She didn’t run off,” I grit out with finality. “Drop the topic.”

Velma looks tempted to scowl and argue me on it a second longer, then decides against it.

Cash claps a hand to my shoulder, and we walk out to our bikes.

“We’re going to find her,” he reassures, throwing his leg over his Street Bob. “There’s no way we won’t.”

I appreciate Cash’s confidence... but I’m not as sure.

SYDNEY



I'M OUT FOR HOURS. MY HEAD THROBS AS I TRY TO PIECE together what I remember.

We drove miles from Wheaton 'til there was nothing but the desert landscape in every direction. The morning melted away before my eyes, temperatures reaching triple digits. Sweat poured out of me, and I bowed my head to try to keep the sun off me.

Velma and the Road Reapers purposefully left me uncomfortable, bound and gagged in the back of the truck as it bumped and lurched down never-ending roads.

At some point, I lost consciousness.

They must've dragged me from the back of the truck and brought me to the dark room where I wake up.

On the hard cement ground. All alone as far as I can tell.

My body pitches forward to run for it. I'm jerked backward by the chain attached to my wrist.

My gaze tracks the rusty chain in mounting disbelief. It begins where it's latched onto my wrist and ends locked onto a pipe of what looks like the water heater.

Disbelief flares into outright panic. I go to scream, then realize I'm still gagged. I scream anyway, the muffled sound

loud enough that it'll be heard by anyone in the vicinity.

Unfortunately, anyone including the people I'm trying to escape from.

The door busts open and in walk two broad-shouldered, thick-bearded men in leather cuts. It's not even their size that scares me most—it's the cold glint of loathing in their eyes. They couldn't see me as more of an enemy.

I go from trying to buck against the chain linking me to the water heater to backing up against it the closer they come.

The slightly taller one, with a wiry ginger beard, reaches over and rips the gag from my mouth. It's nothing more than a ratty bundle of rags they bunched up into a ball.

"You really want to make all that noise?" he asks. "Something tells me if you were smart, you'd shut the fuck up."

I'm breathless, I'm so shaken from the situation. "Please... just let... me go. I don't even know who you are. I'd never tell anyone. You'll never have to see me again."

He hacks out a cruel laugh, then turns to the other guy. "What d'you say, Ern? Should we just let the bitch go?"

"I'm thinking the fun's just getting started," he answers. "We haven't even made use of you yet."

"If it's money that you want—"

"Shut up, darling. Don't even try pretending you're loaded. We know you're dirt poor. You weren't waitressing at the Sunny Side Up for shits and giggles."

"Why are you doing this to me? I don't even know who the hell you are!"

The one with the wiry ginger beard leans closer. “But we sure know who you are, and you’ve got value.”

He stuffs the gag back into my mouth and dusts his hands off as if proud.

Both men turn to go, trading more laughs and taunts between them. Their clunky boots are the last I see of them before the door slams shut.

I scream.

Scream so damn loud, my vocal cords ache by the time I’m done. The soggy rags are pushed out of my mouth by my wild tongue. My head spins and a wave of dizziness rolls over me. I have to close my eyes and stay still until it passes me up.

This situation is so unbelievably cruel and dark.

I have no clue what the fuck they want with me. I’m not a member of any MC. All I wanted was to get justice for Pop.

Why would the Road Reapers be after me in the first place? Why does it seem like their vendetta is so damn *personal*?

They already murdered Pop. What could they want with me? To use me as some kind of trap to lure Mason and the Kings?

Velma already mentioned as much, but it doesn’t make sense. It still feels like there’s something I’m missing.

My brain hurts trying to reconcile everything going on around me. I huff out uneven breaths and urge myself to calm the hell down.

It’s like the thunderstorms all over again. My nerves take over and make it damn near impossible to think straight and function.

Mason's words yet again echo in my head.

We are our experiences. You are who you are 'cuz of that night. You survived that thunderstorm, and you'll survive this one, too.

"I'll survive," I whisper shakily. And then again, more confidently. "I'll survive. I'm going to fucking survive... and I'm going to fuck them up the first chance I get!"

First things first. These chains.

I keep my eye on the door for several seconds, then switch to the water heater. If I stretch my leg out, I might be able to reach the pipe the chain's attached to. I might be able to get a few good kicks in and damage the pipe.

It's no brilliant breakout plan... but it's a start.

Again, I check the coast is still clear at the door. No one seems to be around. They've left me alone for now in what I'm guessing is the backroom of some kind of building.

I position my leg at a strategic angle and then kick as hard as I can. I'm putting so much effort into the move that I almost grunt. Instead I bite down on my bottom lip, drawing blood, to keep the feisty, determined sound in.

Then I do it again—I kick and kick and kick. I jam my boot at the pipe so hard it reverberates in my bones. There's a good chance I'll be sore and achy tomorrow, but I don't care. Surviving to see tomorrow is all I ask at this moment.

Minutes pass and I don't give up. I only grow more stubborn about denting the hell out of this pipe enough that I'm able to force my freedom. Sweat drips from my brow and I've rubbed my wrist raw after so many jerky movements.

And still I keep going.

It becomes my single greatest mission in life—bust this pipe enough that I can pull the chain off.

The longer I go, the more progress I make. The pipe develops a large dent in the middle that only pushes me harder. I drive my boot into it so many times, I zone out of the moment.

The next thing I know, the pipe busts with a deafening creak, and water sprays everywhere.

Shit!

There's no way they didn't hear that.

I hurry, wrestling with the other end of the chain to get it off the broken pipe, and then I dash for the only feasible exit—the narrow window high up on the far wall. It'll be a tight fit, but I can squeeze myself through.

I'm footsteps away when the door flies open and four men pile into the room.

“FUCKING GRAB HER!”

I dodge the first guy. He closes in with his thick arms swiping at me.

I duck at the last second and then beeline for the window. I'm already aware as I grab onto the ledge and attempt to hoist myself up, it's a losing battle.

Another Reaper yanks me away from behind and tosses me to the ground. I land in a roll that crushes my ribs and steals air from my lungs. The same guy kicks me in the same ribs.

Three times.

“You fucking bitch!” he yells, drawing his boot back for another blow.

“Zane, chill. We don’t want to break her,” says a guy I recognize from the motel. He’s on the slimmer side, with shoulder-length silvery hair. He catches my eye and holds my gaze. “There’s other things we can do first.”

An immediate sickness poisons my stomach. I cough and attempt to crawl away.

The first burly guy who tried and missed me earlier takes it upon himself to get payback. He snatches me up by the hair, making my scalp ache from how hard he pulls. I’m forced to my feet and held in his arms as the man with the ginger beard produces a pocketknife.

“Get the fuck off me!” I scream, twisting nonstop. I try to step on the burly guy’s toes. I throw my head back to catch him that way, and I even spit at the one approaching with the knife.

That earns me a backhand across the face.

“You’re making it so much fucking worse,” he says, gripping the hem of my shirt and sawing into it with his blade. “We might’ve been nice and only fucked you once. Now you’re getting it twice each. Front and backdoor.”

The other three release the most vomit-inducing laughs I’ve ever heard.

Panic consumes me and makes my heart race. I’m beside myself as I continue struggling regardless of the pain smarting my cheek and scalp and ribs.

“GET OFF ME! GET THE FUCK OFF ME!” I shriek in sheer, unfiltered panic and desperation. I kick my legs out and land a hit in his balls. “I SAID GET OFF ME!”

“You bitch,” he growls, then tears the rest of my top open. “You’re gonna get it now—”

“What in the hell is going on in here?!”

The depraved confrontation comes to a screeching halt all at once.

The four men turn their heads to the doorway where Velma stands. They waffle on how to answer for a couple seconds and then sputter something out about teaching me a lesson.

“By doing what? What were you gonna do, boys?” she asks, stepping deeper into the room, her cigarette burning at her side. “Cuz it sure looked like you were about to break one of the rules in the charter—”

“Shut up, Velm,” snaps the guy with the ginger beard. “Since when do you care about this girl? She’s given us nothing but trouble.”

Velma carefully takes a drag of her cigarette, then blows a ringlet of smoke. “I might be a giant bitch, but I ain’t that giant of a bitch—this is where I draw the line. I won’t let you take turns with her. You want pussy, take that up with the club girls.”

They wear matching scowls as they twist my arms behind my back and use rope to bind me.

“Then what the hell are we waiting for? Why are we keeping her down here when we can set up her death trap?” snaps the one holding me. “We might as well get a move on. The sooner we do, the sooner I get my dick wet.”

The others nod in agreement and begin shoving me toward the door.

As we pass up Velma, she catches my gaze and says, “I’ve suffered what they were about to do to you—back when I was punished—and it’s where I draw the line. You owe me a thank you, girly. I just saved your ass a world of hurt before you die.

They would've had you bleeding from places you'd never wanna bleed from."

But I have no gratitude for the treacherous woman. I merely glare at her in return and tell her the last thing she wants to hear.

"It doesn't matter. Because the Kings are coming, Velma," I say, "and you've already chosen your side."

Her teeth clench around her cigarette. "Take her away! Bury her!"

They all erupt in a chorus of cold laughter that sends shivers down my spine. I'd like to think they're bluffing, but after everything I've experienced in their captivity, something tells me they're not. They couldn't be more serious...

I'm dragged from the backroom into the blinding sunshine. It's the first real moment I realize where I am. The Road Reapers have brought me onto some kind of construction site. I was being held in one of the few buildings erected, and now they're dragging me toward what looks like a huge pit.

A hole that's at least six feet deep.

I scream when it dawns on me they weren't kidding. They intend to bury me alive in the ground.

"NOOO!" I scream in thrashing hysterics. "DON'T!"

"Yes, bitch," answers the portly ginger. "Get in this box. You're bait. We'll see if they make it to you in time. If not... oh the fuck well."

The lid slides over me, commencing darkness, and then it comes—the weight of dirt thumping on top of the coffin-shaped box I've been put into. I scream and bang my fists and beg for someone to help me.

But the more dirt pours on top of the box, the less I'm heard.

The more I'm buried alive.

MASON



THE HELLRAZOR'S BAR LOOKS LIKE A WAR ZONE IN THE aftermath of last night's confrontation. Glass cracks beneath our steel-toe boots as we venture into the trashed bar. There're splatters of blood on the walls and broken pieces of tables and chairs everywhere you look. Bullet holes riddle the walls, and you can smell the gun residue in the air.

The cops probably still consider it a crime scene.

Not that we give a fuck. We're out to find Sydney and willing to do whatever it takes to track her down.

I motion for Ozzie and Bush to go check out the perimeter while Cash and Moses advance toward the back interior.

I stay on the bar floor, studying the wreckage for any clues. Any kinda sign that the Hellrazors would leave behind showing they've got something to do with Sydney's disappearance.

If they do, what we did last night will look like saint's hour. I'll slaughter each and every remaining Hellrazor myself.

I hear a creak from behind and spin around with my hand on my piece.

It's none other than Dirty himself. He looks like shit—eyes rimmed red, nose swollen and lopsided, and his face cut up

and bloodied. He's got his arm in a sling. His other shoots up in the air at the sight of me and my Glock 17.

"You fuckers can't be back for more trouble already? Half of us are in the ER. The other half is either waiting bail or waiting to be buried! Haven't you fucked us up enough?" he asks in his raspy voice.

"Sydney," I say, uninterested in every other word he's spoken. "What've you done with her?"

"Sydney, *who*?"

"Sydney Singer. Jacob Singer's adopted daughter. You know who she is. You ran us off the road the other week."

Dirty's face scrunches up, his cut up lips parting to reveal a couple missing teeth. "Now you're just fucking with us to fuck with us. We ain't run nobody off the fucking road! Least of all, Jacob's daughter. Why would we treat her like that?"

"You do fucked up shit all the time."

"For the last time, that wasn't us! Singer was like a brother to us. A fucking father to some. You're the ones who offed him. They found your bandana at the crime scene."

"You're blaming us for something we had no part in."

"And you're not doing the same, asshat? You assholes have been blaming us for shit we ain't done for weeks now, and I'm sick of it. You come by our territory and ruin our operation. Then you start a brawl and shoot up the place. Any respect between clubs is long gone—"

"You really expect me to believe you've had nothing to do with what's been happening?" I interrupt impatiently. "Then why would you meet up with us and threaten us when I

warned you? I told you to stay the fuck away and you *laughed.*”

“Cuz your accusations were dumb as fuck! We thought it was entertaining pissing you off. But it wasn’t ’cuz we were guilty. *You* killed Pop!”

“We had no beef with Jacob Singer,” I growl, drawing my piece and stepping toward him. “You’ve got sixty seconds to spill what the fuck you’ve done with Sydney, or I’m blowing your face off.”

The arm he already has in the air shakes. “We didn’t do shit, I swear to you, asshat!”

“It wasn’t Casper the friendly motherfucking ghost!”

“And it still wasn’t us! What would we gain from taking Sydney?!”

“You tell me!”

“You’re the ones up to no good! I should’ve known as soon as I saw that rotten Velma Disck in town the other day —”

“What’s going on in here?” Bush asks as he and Ozzie return.

Anger heats up on both of their faces at the sight of Dirty, even as bruised and broken as he is. All of us want a piece of him after everything that’s been going on. No other time greater than right now—at a time where Sydney’s missing and Dirty Harry and the Hellrazor’s are suspect number one.

“What’re we waiting for?” Ozzie asks. He pulls out a device that looks like a damn potato peeler. “Let’s skin this fucker alive.”

Ozzie and Bush step toward Dirty and wrestle him toward the bar counter where they lay him out flush against the flat surface. They're waiting for me to grab the peeler and begin scraping off Dirty's skin.

I would. I fully intend to... until I get stuck thinking of an answer to Dirty's question.

What would the Hellrazors gain by taking Sydney? After last night, they're already down bad. They've lost almost a third of their club either to death or a stint in jail.

What have they really gained from any of our feuding?

What have *we* gained?

Nothing. This war between the Steel Kings and Hellrazors has done nothing but deplete us both in different ways. They sabotaged our business at the saloon. We sabotaged their drug muling. They think we killed one of theirs. We think they've got Sydney.

Nobody's benefiting and nobody's coming out on top.

Except...

I step toward the bar counter and grip a fistful of Dirty Harry's dirty, unwashed hair. Yanking his head up and pressing the peeler to his knobby throat, I growl, "You said Velma was here the other day. What did you mean?"

"What do you think I meant? We all saw her wandering about. She was checking out the Traveler's Lodge. She was on the phone."

What would Velma be doing in Wheaton checking out the same motel Sydney was at?

And then it comes to me—the strange behavior this morning, the smaller moments where she's told me things or

pushed me into doing something for one reason or another.

Visiting Tom at the Lenton Penitentiary. Searching for the rumored informant. Sending me to the house to grab paper for the bonfire.

She stuck Sydney under our roof. She gave her a job and took a liking to her... 'til this morning where she was suddenly unconcerned.

I'd always found it interesting that she took such a liking to her. Even considering how both women were spitfires, it was a lot. It was weird as hell.

“Velma’s from Portales,” I say out loud with narrowing eyes. “She grew up there.”

By now, Cash and Moses have returned from the back. They don’t question what’s going on, but hover in the background, listening in.

Ozzie speaks up first. “That was how long ago? She’s Tom’s old lady.”

“And Tom got sent to prison after being targeted by the FBI,” I say slowly. Then a ball of tension explodes inside me, making my pulse race. “Think about it. It all fucking makes sense when you put Velma into the situation.”

“What makes sense, Mace?” Cash asks. “You can’t be implying—”

“The Road Reapers,” I answer. “Velma came to us beat up. She said it was off a bad marriage. What if that was a crock of shit, and she’s really working for the Reapers?”

“The Reapers ain’t shit these days. You saw how rundown Portales was. They lost their prez and never recovered... unlike us,” Ozzie says.

“Which means they have the most to gain if us and the Hellrazors go to war.”

The other guys all remain silent. Even Dirty Harry’s staring in interest from where he’s slammed against the bar counter.

Everybody’s doing what I’ve done—they’re putting together pieces of the fucked up puzzle we’ve found ourselves in.

I decide to settle it once and for all. I grab my phone and dial her up.

It rings a couple times before she answers, sounding distracted.

“Now’s not a good time, Mace.”

“Now’s a good time ’cuz I say it’s a good time,” I say, leaving her no room to argue or protest. “Where are you right now?”

She takes a second to answer, as if thinking. “Why do you want to know? Am I supposed to report to my old man’s son?”

“Where are you right now? It’s a simple question, Velma.”

“I’m... I’m out running an errand around town.”

“In the truck you said you had a fender bender in this morning?”

The frustration clinches in her voice, making it sound more abrasive. “I’m using Tom’s truck.”

“Then you should be able to meet me in the saloon in fifteen minutes. And I should see you pull up in his truck. Ain’t that right?”

Several seconds go by before she answers this time.

I'm calling her bluff. There's no way I'd be able to make it from Wheaton to Pulsboro in an hour, let alone fifteen minutes.

But she doesn't know that, and I know she can't... because I *know* she's lying.

"I can't," she says tightly. "I said town... but what I meant was out of town."

"Which town?"

"Wheat—"

"Wheaton," I say over her. Then I glance at the others, and they shake their heads in disbelief. "Interesting you'd say that, Velma. 'Cuz that happens to be where I really am. In Wheaton. Trying to figure out why the fuck you were here a couple days ago scoping out the motel Sydney was staying in."

Silence.

More silence.

Even more silence.

Velma stays silent for so long, you'd think she's no longer on the line. I'm half a second away from rumbling out a vicious threat when she decides she'll air herself out too.

"I take it you know," she says simply.

"Know what? Let me hear you say it, Velma."

"Say that my loyalty's with the Reapers? Say that I've been playing you Kings for fools for years now? Say that our plan is happening right now, and you can't do a thing to stop it? Sure, Mace, I'll say all that and more. Your old lady—yeah, she might as well be, ain't she—is sure in a whole lotta trouble. Hear that?"

In the background there's a scream and then a mechanical crank of some kind of heavy equipment.

“That's girly about to die. You've got about thirty minutes to get to the local Portales Construction Co site before she runs outta air and does. But it doesn't matter 'cuz the Reapers have won either way. Bye, Mace.”

With a witchy cackle and click of her phone, Velma hangs up.

MASON



I'M OF A SINGLE THOUGHT FROM THE MOMENT VELMA HANGS up. One thing and one thing only matters—making it in time to save Sydney.

We ride out as a pack, passing through town louder than the angry thunder from last night. I'm up at the front, leading the charge. The others fan out at my sides in their proper positions with Cash taking up the rear.

Though I ride with precision, I'm only thinking of Sydney.

My mind's filled up with nothing but spliced up memories of her. I'm forced to experience them all over again.

The look of hurt on her face when I confronted her at my birthday party. Earlier than that when she'd smiled and danced for me. The afternoon we ran off from the prison and went for a ride, just the two of us. I replay the moment from last night where we'd almost come together in a kiss, but she'd denied me and turned the other cheek.

She wasn't ready yet. We still had a lot of shit to work through.

Fair enough.

I'd left like some damn soldier going to war, under the assumption I'd win the fight, and come back to the woman

waiting for me.

Instead, I returned to Sydney being taken by Velma and the Road Reapers.

The twist is still so damn out of left field I can't process it. I don't know what to think. It feels like some bad, fucked up dream.

The Road Reapers have been irrelevant for years now. Ever since their prez, Rollins, got locked up for twenty-five to life, and the money they were raking in for the MC grinded to a halt. The small town couldn't escape the domino effect and suffered too.

It's been on a steady decline since.

But how the fuck could Velma betray us?

Tom still doesn't got a clue what she's done. He won't take the news well. He'll be livid the woman he's been involved with has been running game on him this entire time.

For years she's earned our trust only to do us dirty.

She might even be behind what happened to Tom and his stint in prison.

The Reapers have got some kinda long con scheme going—they're trying to destroy rival MCs to takeover what we've got.

With Portales only half an hour from Wheaton, we speed and cut the travel time in half.

We close in on a mile within the Portales construction site. My grip tightens on the handlebars of my bike and my glare darkens. I'm falling deep into a pit of violence. Not just the kinda violence that's got you throwing punches. I'm talking

the kinda violence that would make most people recoil in disgust.

I want to dismember every Reaper we come across.

I want to crack their skulls open and put them up as trophies at the Steel Saloon.

I want to make every last one of them suffer 'til their last dying breath.

Including Velma. *Especially* Velma.

We pull up to the abandoned construction site in a thick cloud of dust.

It's midday in the Texas heat, which means everything is sizzling. The heavy equipment looks hot to the touch and the dust lingers in the humid air.

We draw our weapons and approach on guard. We've got no clue what the fuck we're walking into. The kinda trap we're about to encounter. It's clear the Road Reapers abide by no sense of code, and they've got no intention of fighting fair.

This is war. Plain and simple.

"You stay out here," I say to the back half of the crew.

I capture Cash's eye and he nods. He understands he's leading 'em. Me, Ozzie, Bush, and a couple others keep going.

We head into the construction site looking in every direction. This terrain is the kind where it's easy to conceal yourself; it's the kind that allows somebody to get the jump on you.

Different equipment and machinery cover the huge site from dump trucks to cranes. There's stacks of lumber and wheelbarrows used to transport cement. Steel-framed beams

rise up several stories into the sky, forming the foundation for walls. There's a massive tarp covering another building toward the center of the site.

We stop midway down and look around us. I'm a second away from calling Velma.

Somebody beats me to the punch. A male I've never spoken to before calls straight from Sydney's number.

"Cutty, why don't you come see us—just you. No back up."

I glance over my left and right shoulder at the others, then nod to signify I'm doing it. I take no more than two steps forward before they interrupt again.

"Unarmed," the voice announces. "In the tent."

I remain composed, my face a cold mask, though that doesn't keep the rage from pulsing through me. I turn to the crew and strip myself of my weapons. Ozzie takes them with his own temper barely contained.

First chance we get, we're taking these fuckers out.

I approach the massive tent, fully aware that I'm being watched every step I take. The plastic tarp crinkles as I walk through to the other side. I'm not sure what to expect. If it'll be the whole MC waiting for me or a handful. If they'll have Sydney on display somehow or if this has all been another game of theirs.

A guy about my age, who I've seen around before, stands beside Velma. He's clutching an assault rifle that he has resting against his shoulder and watching me with a hunger in his eyes that tells me he's been waiting for this moment for a long time.

I jut my chin at them. “You wanted me here. I’m here. Speak your fucking piece.”

He glances at Velma then back at me. “So you really are Cutty’s son. Cocky like a motherfucker. For no reason.”

“And who’re you? Am I supposed to give a shit what you’ve got to say?”

“You wouldn’t know me. Name’s Auden. Nate Rollins’s son. I’m filling in for my pop behind bars.”

“Nate Rollins was a piece of shit who murdered my mother.”

“He murdered your mother because your cowardly father wouldn’t give him answers about the rat.”

“Tom had nothing to do with any rat. Your dad’s locked up ‘cuz of his own stupidity. But I’m guessing this crusade of yours is in his name?”

“Sure is. Me and Velma acting on his behalf. We’re gonna return the Reaper’s to their former glory. Everything going on between you and the Hellrazors? You can thank us.”

I direct my murderous stare to Velma. “You’ve been a Road Reaper all along, Velm? Is that right?”

“Velma has some sins to atone for,” Auden says, speaking for her. “She betrayed my father way back when. Turns out, she was the rat he was looking for. But she’s fixing her mistakes now.”

“Your old man gets locked up ‘cuz of Velma’s snitching and you decide to destroy two other MCs?”

“It’s more complicated than that and you know it, Cutty. Way back when, there used to be respect. We all coexisted. The days of your old man and mine. That all changed when

the feds got involved. The Kings and Hellrazors still thrived. But that wasn't the case for everybody. That sound fair to you?"

"This was before your time. You were a kid. So was I."

"Doesn't matter," he says, shaking his head. His sheets of greasy brown hair drape his shoulders. He's almost as tatted up as Ozzie, right down to the Reaper insignia on his cheekbone. "It doesn't matter, Cutty, 'cuz the past affects the future. The sins of our fathers are the sins of their sons. This is a new era, but it's been defined by the shit that's led up to it."

"Then spit out what you want."

"Isn't it obvious? Your surrender. Your territory. Give up your MC and every piece of land you own, money in the bank, and all those fancy steel beauts you got. Then we'll stop. We'll leave you the fuck alone. You won't have jack shit left, but that's not my problem."

"Where's Sydney?"

A slow grin comes to Auden's gaunt face, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "Sydney Singer, adopted daughter of Jacob Singer, former prez of the Hellrazors. Old lady of Mason Cutler, current acting prez of the Steel Kings."

I get a sick feeling twisted up inside my stomach by how he's speaking. He's talking about her like she's no longer around, like the fucker's eulogizing her.

"*Birth* daughter," Auden goes on, his grin widening. "Birth daughter of none other than *the* Hawk, former Reaper vice prez."

"Hawk," I repeat, and then it comes to me. "Kurtis Hawk? He was killed back when I was..."

A kid.

It was before Mom was taken out. Maybe some months ahead. I only remember 'cuz Mom and Tom got into it at the dinner table, and me and Logan overheard. She was shaken up by it because Kurtis had been trying to leave the lifestyle behind. He was gunned down anyway.

Sydney's birth father was a member of the Road Reapers. Something even she has no clue about.

This revelation almost makes me forget the urgency of the situation.

Velma intervenes. "I knew Kurtis well. He used to visit my bike shop. It was a real shame the Reapers had to take him out. But he should've known better than to leave the club the same time a rat was around."

I growl at her. "You were the fucking rat! It was 'cuz if you Sydney's parents were gunned down. And it was 'cuz of you my mom was!"

I'm blacking out, feeling out of control like a feral beast the way I start husking out ragged breaths, and rage consumes me.

"Down, Cutty. Take one wrong step and we'll blast you."

"Enough talk," Velma taunts. "Time for Mace to give it up. The longer you two yammer, the more likely it is we'll get caught up. Don't forget the cops are always sniffing around."

"Where's Sydney?"

"We've kept her busy," Auden answers. "You could say she's a little... buried right now."

My brain goes to the dozens of pieces of equipment scattered across the construction site, landing on the monster-

sized dump truck that had been parked next to the tent and a heap of dirt.

They've buried Sydney.

I don't think. I take a split second, spur-of-the-moment chance that catches everybody off guard. But I'm quick and determined about it.

I break out into a run, already prepared to be shot at.

Auden and his guys follow through. They blast their guns. I run in a zigzagged pattern, throwing them off instead of going in a straight line. At the sound of gunfire, my guys take it as a signal to fight back.

A gunfight erupts that easily. The Reapers firing at us. We return their bullets with ones of our own.

I make it to the tarp covering as a bullet hits me in the side. It's like a hot knife slicing my skin, piercing me straight in the side of my torso. A deep grunt of pain leaves me, my hand coming up to touch the wound.

It doesn't slow me up. I push through the tarp and head for the large pile of dirt.

“Hold on, Syd!”

MASON



I MAKE IT TO THE DUMP TRUNK AND PILE OF DIRT AS CHAOS erupts all around me. I drop to my knees and press my ear to the ground. Between the crackle of gunfire and loud voices from the guys filling the air, it's hard to hear anything else.

...until I strain my ears and urge my sense of hearing to pick it up.

It's faint and diluted, muffled by several feet of dirt between us, but it's a woman's scream. A desperate plea for help, for someone to get her out of there.

"Hang in there, Syd!" I roar back, hoping she can hear me. My head whips in every direction, searching for a way to move this much dirt in as little time as possible.

Across the lot sits an excavator parked by the chain-link fence. I've never operated one before. I don't know the first thing about getting one to dig dirt from the ground, but if it means getting Sydney out of the spot where she's buried, I'm going to sure as hell figure it out.

I make a break for it, but somebody clamps a hand on my shoulder to turn me around.

Auden swings on me. I leap back at the last moment, barely dodging his clenched fist. He throws another and

connects with my jaw. It's not enough to knock me off my feet, though I stumble a couple more steps before catching up.

I retaliate, block his next one, and then go in for his throat. My hand grips him by his stringy neck and I use my sheer brute strength to flip the script on his ass. I force him back, driving him toward one of the metal beams. He grunts as we collide. His back hits the metal first, then his head.

I don't let up. I squeeze his throat tighter with teeth gritted and my own side aching like a bitch. I'm bleeding all over the damn place from the bullet wound. Not that I care—my mind's on the mission at hand, killing these bastards and rescuing Sydney.

He thrusts his palm into my face to push me off. His other hand grapples for his Glock. The struggle changes course again, with me going to block him, and Auden twisting his leg out to trip me up from behind. He sweeps his foot and kicks my balance out from under me. I take him with me.

We both go down, crashing into the dusty ground. He digs his Glock 17 into my gunshot wound, eliciting a howl from me that's guttural and thick like any rabid animal. It drowns out a lot of the other noise going on around us, even the gunshots.

My side aches, a pressurized pain that's almost fucking debilitating. But, still, I don't let it keep me from fighting. I push myself harder, dripping sweat, baring my teeth.

I really might as well be a rabid animal.

My hand snaps shut over his and tries to pry the gun from it. It's a test of muscle power, who's got the better grip, the greater raw strength to wrestle it from the other. With my other hand, I grab a fistful of his greasy hair and yank.

The combination works—I've got Auden by the hair, and I've gained enough of an upper hand to loosen his grip on the gun. I break his hold, letting the gun skid away from us. Before he can attempt to go for it, or some other kinda counter move, I unleash the rabid animal in full force.

I snap up and clamp my teeth to his ear, tearing away the fleshy organ in one savage bite. If my roar of pain earlier was loud, Auden's is deafening. His eyes bulge so much they're on the verge of popping out his sockets. His face immediately pales, dripping sweat, and his mouth drops open for a blood-curdling scream.

But I don't give a shit.

I spit out my mouthful of blood and his bitten off ear, then toss a fist to his face. He crumples sideways into the dirt, immersed in paralyzing pain and horror.

I leave him where he is, pushing myself up and gunning for the excavator. Nobody else manages to stop me—another Reaper tries, swinging on me, but I pop him in the jaw with a quick elbow, then snap his neck.

The metallic taste of Auden's blood still rests on my tongue. I'm drenched in sweat, dirt, and my own blood. My side throbs and begs for mercy, for me to slow down.

Nothing I can allow. Not 'til Sydney's pulled out of the ground.

I shut out the deep, pressurized pain and throw myself into the seat of the excavator.

There's a narrow dashboard of controls featuring buttons and lights. Some of them seem pretty straight forward while others seem like they could cause damage if pushed and used

incorrectly. I start off with the common sense option: the on button.

It lurches to life with a motorized crank. I press the gas and drive it forward with the lever.

No matter how hard I hold down the pedal, it doesn't go any faster. The excavator crawls across the construction site at a slow but steady pace.

In the near distance, everybody's still duking it out. Guys are shooting and throwing hands. Auden's rolling around in bloodied, hysterical agony.

The second the excavator's within striking distance of the heap of dirt, I push the button that unlocks the boom and jerk the lever that lifts it up and down. The long mechanical arm raises up with its bucket for a hand and then lowers to the ground to scoop up the dirt.

The tricky part is getting the bucket positioned deep enough under the dirt to fill it up and then lift it and dump it somewhere else.

After a couple failed attempts, I get the hang of it. I'm cranking on the lever and directing it about like a pro, when really it's the desperation that's pushing me. That's got me so focused, I hardly blink. So damn on edge, I'm leaning forward on the seat, bleeding everywhere without a fuck to give about it.

"C'mon, c'mon," I mutter under my breath. I yank on the lever again hoping it'll push the excavator to go faster digging up its latest heap of dirt, but it's only wishful thinking—there's no getting it to speed up. My only shot is remaining patient and steady.

Soon the large pile of dirt begins shrinking. Soon I'll be able to say to hell with it and dig Sydney out myself.

"No you don't!" Velma screeches. She comes out of nowhere, clutching a gun. Her tall beehive hair is disheveled and ratty, falling into her bruised face. Somebody must've tried fucking her up, but she was able to fight them off.

She squeezes the trigger and chinks the front glass. A vein-like crack splits across the windshield, though the bullet doesn't come anywhere near landing. She tries again to results just as bad. Her bullet whizzes past me and the excavator, coming nowhere near hitting a mark.

Her third attempt reveals she's out. No more bullets.

She desperately pulls her finger against the trigger again and again, only to hear the *click, click, click* of an empty chamber.

With a distressed shriek that frightens the birds, she tosses the gun in the dirt and then launches herself at me.

I've got one hand on the lever and the other flying out to block her. Velma tries—she claws at me, she kicks, scratches, jams her taloned fingers into my face to obscure my vision.

Enough is enough. I don't hit women, but she's pushed one too many buttons, and I've got Sydney to save.

My hand wraps around her throat and with one barbaric squeeze, she's choking for air. My other releases the lever, curling into a fist that collides with her jaw. She tumbles out the open doorway of the excavator and flops to the ground.

I jump out after her, going straight for the spot where Sydney's buried. Enough dirt has been removed that after scooping several more handfuls away, I can see some kinda casket entrenched into the earth.

“Sydney!” I call out.

Nobody answers me.

Panic clogs up my chest. It takes up camp in my brain. It fuels me to move faster, my arms a blur as I dig away ’til the casket’s fully visible and I’m able to reach for the latch. Tossing it open and reaching inside, my arms wrap around Sydney and heave with every ounce of strength I have left.

Her eyelids are drooped to the point they’re almost closed. She’s barely conscious, covered in so much fucking dirt, drenched in sweat, that it’s obvious she’s hanging on by a thin thread.

“Shit,” I say, ignoring my own pain. I grunt, heaving her out the rest of the way from the casket.

“Mace...” she sputters up dirt. Her arms wrap around me and cling to me like I’m her greatest lifeline.

In this moment, I am.

“I’ve got you, Syd. It’s okay, you’re alive. I’ve got you, and I’m getting you the hell out of here.”

She’s weak—I can feel it in how her frail, damp body trembles against me. In how she tries to grip me but can’t seem to muster up enough energy to hold on the right way.

It’s okay because I meant what I said. I’ve got her. I’m getting her the hell out of here.

My side protests in a fresh dose of pain as I carry her from the huge hole in the ground.

“Mace,” she warbles out, eyes damn near closed. “M-Mace.”

“Shhh, Syd, we’re getting you to the ER.”

“No...” she says. Then she tilts her head. “Mace... watch... watch out.”

I understand her the second I feel it coming. I start turning my body to find Velma launching yet another attack.

She looks batshit crazy. Hair a knotted nest, face bruised and covered in dirt, her arms raised and shaking as she holds onto a motorized saw. She’s running toward us with eyes wide and too far gone—that vacant sorta gleam you get when you’ve checked out and are beyond saving.

Velma rushes toward us. I put myself on guard, ready to drop Sydney if I must to use my arms and block Velma’s attack.

But it never happens. Velma’s so erratic, so damn desperate that as she charges toward us, she’s not paying attention to anything else—including the metal beams lying on the ground that she’s stepping over. Her feet catch in one of the beams and shock flashes onto her face. The realization of what’s about to happen.

She crashes down to the ground, smacking into the metal beams with the motorized saw flying out of her hands. It spins in midair for a brief moment before karma does its thing, coming down like gravity permits.

Straight onto her. Straight *into* her.

Her body convulses, arms and legs flailing as the sharp blade lodges into her spine. The sound’s gruesome to the ears, the sound of metal grinding into bone combined with the throaty scream cloaked by a mouthful of blood and dirt.

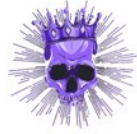
It’s the last time we see Velma move aside from the little twitches her body gives. The last sound we hear from her.

She lays where she is, face down among a spreading puddle of blood.

I release the breath I started holding in and tighten my grip on Sydney. It's only then it dawns on me the battle going on around us is slowing up too—the Kings have picked off most of the Reapers, and the ones that are still living are being held at gunpoint on their knees.

Thank fuck. It's over.

SYDNEY



THE EMERGENCY ROOM AT THE LOCAL HOSPITAL HAS THEIR hands full. They're flooded with Kings and Reapers sporting all kinds of injuries. Gunshot and stab wounds on just about every part of the body. One Reaper shot in the head manages to live, though he's placed on life support. Other injuries like concussions and broken ribs are so common that an entire section of the ER is cordoned off for any guys with these specific ailments.

I'm a more unique case. After being buried alive, I've sustained a sprained wrist and some scrapes and bruises. My stomach is pumped due to ingesting too much dirt. I'm checked out in other ways, given a physical, and lengthy examination to ensure I suffered no other serious trauma from my ordeal.

"You've had a rough few hours," says the doctor treating me. He trails his fingers along my throat checking for swelling. "How does your throat feel? Any more soreness?"

I wince when his fingers reach my jaw. "Some."

"I'll prescribe you something to ease the discomfort. It'll take away the ache. Any dizziness?"

"Not anymore..." I follow his index finger as he drags it from left to right to test my cognition.

He pats me on the shoulder and tells me I'm good to be released. I hop down from the exam table and pull on the t-shirt one of the nurses was kind enough to bring me from the hospital's chapel donations. The shirt I had on coming in had been torn open by the Reapers.

Emerging through the blue curtains of the station where I was being examined, I stare around me at the others. Behind many of these curtains are other Kings, like Ozzie and Moses.

Mason.

My stomach flips at the thought of seeing him again.

When he'd rescued me from the box, I had barely been conscious. I was so out of it, I didn't even fully register it was Mason saving me.

Now that I'm lucid, no longer drenched in sweat and buried under several feet of suffocating dirt, the look of relief on his face is the only thing I can think about. He had held onto me tightly as he pulled me out of the box, like if he even started to let go, he'd lose me forever.

All *while* he had been shot in the side.

A fact I didn't realize or grasp at the time. He was soaked in his own blood, fighting through what must've been a hellish level of pain.

I don't know where to begin processing everything that happened between us. The rescue at the construction site is enough to have my mind reeling, but it's even more than that—we still haven't sorted out what was going on between us before that ordeal.

Mason had promised he'd return after his revenge mission against the Hellrazors.

I had been intercepted by the Reapers.

The last real time we were together was before the contents of my personal Bible was released—my own revenge scheme to get justice for Pop.

In fact, the last time I was around any of the Kings, I was deemed a traitor.

Looking around me at the other ER stations and knowing that just beyond these curtains are men I had come to think of as friends, makes me nervous and unsettled. How do they feel about me? Do they still think of me as a traitor? Some kind of informant?

I heave a sigh and decide I can't handle the potential hurt of finding out.

I head for the nurses' desk toward the front. The same nurse that took pity on me and brought me the t-shirt catches sight of me and flags me down.

"I heard Doctor Shue released you."

"He did. He prescribed me some pain meds. I'll make sure to go by the pharmacy to pick them up."

She nods, then develops a sheepish sort of smile. "Did you hear a certain someone was asking about you? I'm surprised the doctor didn't mention it."

My stomach flutters. "A... certain someone?"

"Very handsome. Very rugged. The one with those green eyes." She almost speaks in a sigh, sounding more like a schoolgirl with a crush than an ER nurse on the job.

"You mean Mason Cutler?" I ask, and her smile brightens. "He was asking about me?"

“Between me and you, this is my first time treating bikers like these. Some of them... I can see how they have women throwing themselves at them,” she says, her freckled face brightening. “Mr. Cutler wanted to know if you were okay. He’d barely let us work on him ’til he knew.”

“He did?” I’m so shocked, I can’t form much more of a sentence.

“If you’d like to see him, I’ll look the other way. He’s behind the curtain of station seven. The one that was right across from yours. He demanded it that way.”

I can’t explain what comes over me, but it’s like I slip into a trance. I mutter a quick thank you to the ER nurse and then turn around to go find station seven. My thoughts feel scrambled, still processing what she’s said, while my body seems to have decided for me.

Mason wanted to see me; he wanted to know if I was okay.

I have to let him know. I want to, because I need to know if he’s okay too. My senses come swooping in footsteps outside the blue curtain, making me stop. I clear my throat and then speak in a tone more timid than usual.

“Mason?”

“Sydney?”

“Yes... are you... can I...?”

The curtain’s shoved aside, and there he is, in the flesh. He’s shirtless, his abdomen bandaged up while the rest of his many tattoos are still on display on his muscled chest, shoulders, and arms.

I suck in a breath—Mason looks so indescribably sexy even standing as he is, in an emergency room with thick

bandages wrapped around his midsection, and a couple bruises decorating his face.

My body aches to go to him. Throw myself at him. Toss my arms around him and bury my face in his neck and feel his warmth. The hard, steely security he offers me with his presence alone. The same security I'd felt when he'd pulled me out of that box buried in the dirt.

Instead, I hold back, but allow for a small quirk of my lips. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me."

"I wouldn't let them remove the bullet from my gut 'til they told me how you were doing. That answer your question?"

"Your gut? Mason—"

"It didn't do any serious damage. It clipped my side. Only some of the bullet wound up inside me. All removed."

"Can I... is it okay if I... fuck it!"

I give up trying to articulate myself and go for it. I do what I've been thinking about, throwing out my arms, and hugging him.

To my relief, he welcomes the show of affection. His own arms snake around my back and hold me in place against him. He surprises me by rasping out a thick laugh.

"There's the Syd I was worried about," he says, brushing his lips to my brow. "You weren't yourself when I pulled you out of that hole."

I close my eyes and press my cheek into the solid wall of his chest. "You rescued me. You didn't have to come for me. You could've let them do what they were doing."

“Not a chance in hell.” His fingers enclose on my chin, tilting up my face so that my gaze connects with his. “It was my fault. I cast you out in the first place. You ran away to Wheaton ’cuz of me. You were put in that situation with the Reapers ’cuz of me. I was blinded by anger and too slow catching on to what the fuck was going on.”

“We both were. Velma—”

“Dead,” he interrupts. “Dead by her own stupid fucking desperation. So are Auden and most of the Reapers.”

“I still don’t understand what they wanted. Least of all with me.”

He strokes his fingers through my messy, disheveled mane of hair and then drops his hand to grab mine. “There’s a lot to explain. A lot of shit that was going down that neither of us were aware of. But, right now, all I wanna do is go home and get some sleep.”

I clutch his hand, grateful we’re on the same page again. “Me too. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

MASON



THE FIRST DAY FOLLOWING THE BATTLE WITH THE ROAD Reapers is a blur. Most of the guys are released from the ER and return to Pulsboro. Sydney and I head home, take quick showers, and collapse in bed, sleeping for almost twelve hours, we're so damn exhausted. We don't emerge 'til the next day like we're waking from a much-needed hibernation.

And it's true—after being buried alive and a gunshot wound to the abdomen, we need the break. The shuteye and rest do us some good.

I wake to the trickling sound of coffee brewing. It's an unexpected sound to wake up to, leaving me lost as to what's going on.

I drag a hand over my face, feeling the coarse scruff growing on my jaw. It takes my brain another half a minute to play catch up and figure out the most basic things.

Where am I? What day is it? Time? Where the hell is that trickling sound coming from and who's causing it?

The drawn window curtains block out most of the sunlight from the room, though the birds twittering outside tell me it's morning.

My gaze lands on the empty spot beside me in bed. There's a groove there—the curvy outline of a body that's been lying there almost as long as I have.

Sydney.

I swing my legs over and let my bare feet touch the ground. It's as I stand up that I realize I'm butt-naked. In my exhaustion, I must've collapsed immediately after my shower and not even paid mind to it. Most nights, I sleep naked, but I usually remember taking my clothes off.

Yet, right now, my mind's blank. All memories of even hitting my pillow are fuzzy.

I slide into some boxers and venture past my room.

I find Sydney in the kitchen, sporting one of my plain white t-shirts. On her, the shirt falls teasingly to her upper thighs, and judging by her nipples poking through, she's not wearing a bra.

My dick being the pervert he is, twitches awake.

Down, boy. At least say good morning first.

She looks up with surprise lighting her brown eyes. “Hey... I made coffee if you want some.”

There's hope in her tone. Hope in her expression. Nervousness otherwise.

She's still not sure where we stand. If I'd want her here right now.

I approach at a slow pace, never taking my eyes off her, aware my presence feels dominating. I take over the second I'm around.

Sydney's no small, shrinking violet—she's got inches and curves on her and plenty of confidence to last her a lifetime, but there's no comparison once I'm invading her space. I eclipse her easily, stopping in front of her, and taking the mug she's holding.

Her coffee. My coffee now.

Ours.

I swallow a sip and then swoop in, dropping a kiss on her round cheek. "How're you feeling?"

She takes a second to find her voice. "More rested. You?"

"Same. 'Cept I've got this bitch of an ache in my side and can't figure out why."

A gradual smile brightens her pretty face. She bites down on her bottom lip and says, "Beats me. You'd think you were shot or something."

I'm grinning looking down at her, holding her gaze, hovering my mouth over hers. There's an amused wave that rides between us trading our little jokes, but there's more too.

I glide a hand along her elbow, a gentle caress that's unlike my natural, but communicates what I want it to—the closeness between us. The bond that I've started feeling with her. That she needs to understand.

"I was being serious," I rasp before tasting her lips in a brief kiss. "You good, Syd?"

She hesitates a second. "Depends. Do you want me here? I can leave."

I set the mug down on the counter and invade more of her space. My body against her body. My chest, my hips, my arms brush against her and then around her. I want to consume this

woman in every sense of the word. For her to understand with no doubt in her mind that she's mine and mine only.

That she'll never have to ask if she should be here.

Because she'll know that her place is by my side at all times.

I can hear her breaths shallow as her eyes darken with desire. As they zero in on my mouth. She's as tempted as I am, as overwhelmed by the simplest physical contact.

But this is more than that. Recent events made me realize that truth I've spent weeks denying.

I curl my fingers along the side of her throat and bring her lips to mine for another greedy kiss. She sways into me, as if suddenly forgetting how to stand on her own, but really, it's a way of seeking me out. Confirming I'm here to catch her.

I do by showing her. My arms enclose around her and our lips caress and slide. We stand in place and take in the moment.

"Syd, you're right where you belong," I say, after our kisses, once I'm done sucking on her bottom lip and feeling the softness of her mouth. I hold her to me by the hips, tamping down the intense urge to possess her in every sense of the word. "Syd, you're fucking mine, okay?" I tell her, my patience wearing thin. "I'm a Steel King... but you're my Queen. My god damn old lady whether you realize it or not. I'm not giving you a choice 'cuz I want you that much."

Her kissable lips break apart in a smile and she leans slightly away. "I don't have a choice?"

"Hell no. You're fucking mine."

"Mace—"

“You’re. Fucking. Mine.”

I sweep her into my arms and carry her away from the kitchen. She’s thrown off judging by the shriek that she releases, but I don’t give a damn. I’m taking the woman that belongs to me back to my bed to claim her in more ways than one.

There’s a lot of things to sort through in the aftermath of our fight against the Hellrazors and Road Reapers. Both MCs have been reduced to a fraction of the size they once were, at our hands. With the Road Reapers, we had a real case of sabotage.

But, beyond informing Tom his previous lover Velma was a spy all along, I take the first few days to focus on the club’s unity.

Fuck the Hellrazors. Fuck the Road Reapers even more.

My family is the Steel Kings. The men in the club that feel like brothers. Some as good as uncles and even fucking fathers.

These are the people I owe my attention to. My loyalty.

We throw a huge party. Celebrating what? None of us give a damn.

We’re celebrating ourselves. Our fucking *survival*.

We’re the dominant MC in the whole county. The Reapers failed to sabotage us and the Hellrazors suffered severe consequences of the war that was going on.

Our reign has never been stronger. Our numbers bigger. Our dominance more obvious.

The Steel Kings ain't going nowhere, which seems like a pretty damn good reason to celebrate if you ask me.

The Steel Saloon packs to max capacity. Every club member, every last prospect and regular ever known, fills the place. The club girls go all out, putting on a Tits on Heels performance that has men foaming at the mouth and fucking them like there's no tomorrow at the first chance they get.

Ozzie serves as DJ. He plays a wide selection of music from '80s hard rock to modern shit that gets him booed by older guys but also cheered by some of the younger ones.

Mick goes all out with the alcohol. He has the taps flowing like rivers and a seemingly endless supply of any alcohol you want. All hands are on deck helping him. Every barmaid we have on staff.

Including Sydney at first... 'til I greedily pull her away.

"Mace—" she protests, looking tempted to grab onto the counter and resist my pull.

I snatch her away anyway. She's looking so fucking good in another summer dress that flutters around her thighs and holds on by thin straps on her shoulders. It's a delicate tangerine-orange fabric that looks so mesmerizing against her dark brown skin that I can't stand it. I'm reduced to a dumb beast the second I see her in it.

All I want to do is get her in my bed and pump her full of my cum 'til she physically can't hold any more. 'Til I've filled her up so much I'm pouring out of her.

I growl into her neck, nuzzling her, as I wrap an arm around her waist and hold her close.

Sydney makes me crazy. Her presence. Her smile. Her scent.

It all awakens the most primal senses inside me. Which says a lot for a man that's already pretty fucking uncivilized.

She giggles and grabs hold of my rough face, looking me eye-to-eye like she recognizes I'm a beast that's about to lose control. Like she knows if she keeps eye contact, she can talk me down from the ledge.

Down, boy.

"Later," she breathes against my lips.

"What if I want now?"

"It's hotter when you wait," she murmurs back, then smirks as she teases a kiss. A gentle brush of her lips to mine.

I growl in response and squeeze her ass. My hand's so large that it grabs a large chunk of her ass meat and holds it firmly, enough that she shudders against me.

It's crazy how much I want this woman. How much I need her.

If you asked me only a few weeks ago, I would've laughed in your face if you ever insinuated I'd care about a woman in Pulsboro. The women I did bed were out of necessity, an attempt to stave off blue balls, more than anything. None of them held my interest, and none of them damn sure deserved to be my old lady.

But Sydney—she's been different from the start. The first moment she set foot inside the Steel Saloon and set my world ablaze.

"Mace," she bemoans. "I've got to help Mick."

I sigh. "Make it quick. Or I'll come looking for you."

She scurries off like she's been given a task on a set time table. I can't help the chuckle that rumbles out of me watching her go. We still might not have everything figured out, but damn if Sydney doesn't bring me more joy than anybody else around. Even the smallest antics of hers.

Cash walks up and stops at my side.

"I see you two patched things up."

I shrug, bringing my glass of whiskey to my lips. "We've reached an understanding."

"That seems like more than an understanding."

"What is it you're really asking?"

"I take it Syd's here to stay?"

I try damn hard to fight off my grin. "What do you think?"

"I think you even asking me 'what do you think' answers my question. She's not going anywhere." Cash sounds amused as he folds his arms over his chest and stares out at the bar floor like I am. "It'll be good for you. She challenges you while balancing you out. It's what you need."

"I wasn't aware I needed anything."

"'Cuz Mason Cutler's perfect." He shoots me a sideways look with his brows raised.

I can't help chuckling again. "You're one to talk. Make any new women swoon?"

"You know that's not my style."

"You're about as noncommittal as I am," I point out. "In fact, the only girl I ever remember you having a real thing for was your childhood best friend. The girl one."

"You mean the one you were jealous over?"

“Yeah, what was her name again? The little tomboy that lived next-door to you? Cute little Black girl that fixed bikes better than you and you were crushing on hard? Korine McKib ___”

“That’s in the past,” Cash interrupts with a heated pink tone that tinges his ears. “*She’s* in the past. That was decades ago, Mace.”

“Point still stands.”

Cash doesn’t deny it. He merely takes a sip from his Coke can and stares ahead at the party that’s thriving before our eyes.

I abandon him where he is to go collect. It’s been fifteen minutes, and I want my woman.

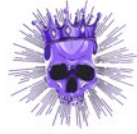
Sydney shakes her head and slams down her dishrag when she sees me approaching.

“You are hopeless,” she says.

“Glad we both agree.” I scoop her up with a scream of surprise and plenty of stares from others, then we’re off.

Without a single bone in my body giving a fuck.

SYDNEY



“BEG FOR IT,” MASON GROWLS, HIS HOT BREATH AGAINST MY pussy.

I shudder and turn the other cheek, my legs splayed open. “Fuck you, Mace... fuck... FUCK!”

“Beg,” he demands. “Beg me to make you fucking come.”

The words do something to me. I shudder as his mouth devours my pussy. There’s no fighting it. No pushing back against the wave of pleasure that crashes over me.

Next thing I know, I *am* begging. I’m writhing and screaming out.

My orgasm is slamming into me and leaving me *wrecked*.

Mason licks and sucks me through the pleasure, only making it worse. My pussy walls clench and sweet pleasure flows. I’m so wet I feel myself dripping. I feel his tongue pushing inside me, his teeth grazing my clit, my fucking pussy.

I pant and twist in my delirium, unable to take it.

Unable to accept this man that’s about to make me insane.

No one else has ever wrecked this much pleasure on my body. No one has ever made me feel like my entire body pulses with so much pleasure, I can’t handle it.

But Mason takes me there... and then some.

He positions himself at my sex and warns me we're only getting started. We're only at the beginning.

I whine, unable to help the spoiled princess sound that escapes me, but fuck if I'm not already spent. I'm already a goner from the intense pleasure he's brought me with his mouth and fingers.

Mason grips my hip and guides his length into me with his other hand. His gaze holds mine. There's something unspeakably intimate about it—about staring into the deep green of his eyes as he enters me, our bodies joining in every sense of the word.

He doesn't let me break the contact. He doesn't either.

He keeps us there, keeps us on the same beat as he fills me, and we both shudder at the immediate pleasure because of it. Him filling me and me tight around him.

For a moment that feels suspended in time, we hold ourselves in place. His chest hardens like steel, and I'm clamped down like I won't ever let him retreat.

We stare into each other's faces, curled and entangled, our heartbeats fast.

Then... then he begins to move in a burst of feral need.

Immediately, I know this is different. So different than the other times we've been together.

His cock jerks inside me and his bed feels like it's moving when really it's the ferocity of his deep thrusts.

I move along with him, reaching up to clutch his face. He kisses me, grinding himself deeper, filling me up 'til I'm shuddering and crisscrossing my legs around him.

It's how we operate. His pelvis grinding into mine. My legs tightening around his waist. Our hands sweep over our bodies, feeling each other's soft and hard spots. I revel in his muscles, and he worships my curves.

We develop a dance that includes nipple-biting and hips-grinding and nails-digging. Every thrust, every touch and kiss are enough to make me feel unlike myself. Make me feel like I'm being born again as he goes deep and I open myself up for him.

Throughout it all, we never lose contact.

We keep each other in tune. His eyes on mine. Mine on his.

Hip thrusts turn erratic, almost machine-like. I take his punishing thrusts, and grind with him where I can, letting my pussy throb in soaked, clenching torture that makes him grunt. The sound does something to me. So unfiltered, so honest it turns me on even more.

His mouth seeks mine and we come a few strokes apart. Me, crashing into a tidal wave of pleasure. Mason as if his orgasm pains him, releasing a rumble that's deeper than the one from his bike engine.

He collapses and takes me with him. He pulls me against him in his bed, his arms inflexible as if signaling there's no asking needed—I'm right where I belong.

I find comfort in it.

As someone who has struggled my entire life feeling like I've never belonged, it means more than I can ever say.

Now that Pop's gone... it means everything.

My place is with the Steel Kings. My place is beside Mason Cutler.

He presses his lips to my damp forehead. “Rest up. That was round one.”

I laugh. “Shut up, Mace! That was... too much. *You’re* too much!”

“Me?” He pins me to the pillows and grinds himself against me. Somehow, his flaccid dick is already hardening. “How about you look in the mirror, Syd? You’re too damn much. Every fucking moment. And don’t tell me you don’t know what you’re doing in those denim cutoffs and summer dresses of yours.”

My cheeks warm. “They’re cute and flattering.”

“They get the job done. That’s all I’ll say.”

I slap a hand to his chest and peer up into his eyes. “What do you see long-term?”

“Hmmm?”

“Long term, Mason Cutler,” I say in a lecturing tone. “If you mean it—if I’m really yours—you need to tell me what that means.”

“Syd, what do you want it to mean? All I know is it better mean you’re here in my fucking bed. You’re my fucking old lady,” he explains, kissing my mouth. “But you’ve gotta want to stay. You’ve gotta want to be here in the club. And I know you—you need a purpose. Something to do. Velma was manager at the Chop Shop. What do *you* want?”

What do I want?

The question spins around in my head as I take it into consideration.

Mason's correct when he guesses I'll need something to do. Some sense of purpose. I'm not sure that's in being a barmaid, but it's also definitely not in filling Velma's shoes as the manager at the Chop Shop.

I rack my brain and then come up with what seems obvious.

"How about club relations?"

He raises a brow. "Club relations?"

"I put together the fundraiser, didn't I? I made you thousands in profit," I explain. "I like doing things like that. Maybe I can help with the town's perception of the club."

He thinks for a second and then grins. "That sounds right up your alley, Syd."

Before I can reply, he's already claiming me by my lips. He's pressing his to mine and letting his rough hands squeeze my supple curves.

We're lost in each other within seconds. Another round as Mason predicted.

I don't regret a thing. I'm right where I want to be, in the passionate arms of the man I've developed real, undeniable feelings for.

Life doesn't get much better than this—orgasms at the hands of a man who practically worships you.

MASON



THE HELLRAZORS REQUEST A MEETING.

Dirty Harry arrives with the handful of men he has left, looking fucking pitiful in their bandages and bruises.

I watch from behind my desk in the back office as they approach, surrounded by a wall of armed Kings. Nothing is given away in my expression. No thought, no emotion either way. Just hard, chiseled indifference as they stop before me and plead their case.

“It wasn’t us who fucked you over,” Dirty says. “It was the Reapers. It was all a misunderstanding.”

I clasp my hands together. “You were happy to let us think it was you.”

“That’s ’cuz we thought you killed one of ours—our damn former prez no less. A man that was like family to us in the past.”

“Do you think that excuses some of your actions?” I ask, tilting my head.

“We were playing off you,” Dirty says. We had no way of knowing what the fuck was really happening, Cutty.”

“Pretty sure I already told you my name’s not fucking Cutty.”

“Mace,” he corrects quickly. “But none of that was on us. We lost one of our own ’cuz of the Reapers. They took Singer. They caused us a world of hurt warring with you. Ain’t we all suffered enough?”

Dirty Harry’s got a point.

Both the Kings and the Hellrazors have been through it these past couple of months. We’ve battled and lost casualties. We’ve gone through betrayals that’ll last us a lifetime. What purpose would there be to continue the animosity if the true rat’s been taken out?

Every prez handles his club differently. Some rule with iron fists. Nothing’s too grimy and twisted for them so long as their MC comes out ahead in the end. No alliances and no limits. No rules and damn sure no mercy. Anything goes at any time.

It’s how the Road Reapers were conducting themselves. It’s how things got fucked up years ago when a lot of this shit began.

Sydney’s birth parents. My mother. The casualties that were lost were innocents, more or less. Our mothers and Sydney’s dad, who was trying to walk away from the Reapers.

...again with Pop. The Reapers had taken him out simply to start shit between the Hellrazors and us, knowing we’d blame each other.

I could keep it going. Decimate the rest of the Hellrazors as another warning to any other MCs in the area that we won’t tolerate no shit from anybody. Guilty, or otherwise.

But then I think about the days before all the bad things went down. The days when MCs were able to coexist out of

mutual respect. Before Tom was president and brought down the motherfucking hammer on everybody.

There's gotta be a way forward that doesn't include the extinction of everybody else, driving the other towns nearby into poverty, like what happened with the Reapers and Portales.

I maintain eye contact with Dirty as I reach into the desk drawer and pull out some Jameson and a couple of shot glasses. His brows rise and his pudgy cheeks flatten in shock.

“What's your poison?”

“What's not my poison?” He cracks out a laugh. “Jameson always hits the spot just fine.”

“Pour it.”

We sit down and have a drink. The others in the office spread out into the rest of the saloon and have drinks at the counter. My men and what little's left of his.

The occasion turns into another sort of celebration. This time between our club and theirs, establishing a mutual understanding.

It's what happens in the office between Dirty and me—we drink and talk territory and our operations going forward. I still hold him accountable, placing a strict limit on their territory that's smaller than before, and making him hand over a portion of their artillery.

He agrees, if only out of relief he's still alive.

“You're a good one, Mace,” he says at the end, standing up. He holds out his hand for a shake. “A fair prez. Tough but still fair. Tom could learn a thing or two from you.”

He walks out on that note, leaving me with thoughts on what he's said.

Tom.

It's been a week and a half since shit went down with Velma and the Reapers and we've only talked once. Briefly, over the phone when I'd told him about her betrayal.

I pick up my phone and dial the penitentiary. It happens to be a day he's allowed calls, which seems like another sign what I'm doing is right.

When I am eventually able to get him on the line, he sounds surprised I'm calling him. I recap the meeting with the Hellrazors and the new understanding we've come to going forward.

He's silent for a while, making me think he'll have a problem with it—he's gonna start up about how he would've handled it, how Logan would've...

"You did right," he says after a moment. "You made the decision that'll be best for the club in the long run. That could damn near take us back to how things were before. I'm proud of you, Mace."

The last part are words he's never spoken. Words I didn't know I'd want to hear.

But hearing them from him means something. It doesn't change any of the bad things we've been through, or even the bad feelings between us, but it's a start. For the moment, that's enough.

"Listen, Mace," he says. "About Velm..."

"It's not on you. You had no way of knowing she'd turn out to be a lying piece of shit."

“For so many years.” The shock sounds in his gruff voice.

“She’s six feet under where she belongs.”

“I heard from Tito that you’ve got an old lady. The girl that was with you all the day you came to visit. I didn’t get a real good look at her, but I saw her waiting with Cash. That her?”

“That’s her.”

“Kurtis Hawk’s daughter? Jacob Singer’s adopted daughter?”

“That’s her,” I repeat.

He whistles. “She’s damn near MC royalty. That’s gotta be some special old lady rank she’s got going.”

I grin. “You’ve got a point. She’s real special.”

“You’ve seen the photos in the club charter book. Those photos show our history. A few of them—the ones from our old get-togethers between clubs—are her history too. She might wanna see ‘em.”

We hang up after a few more minutes. It’s not ’til we do I pick up on the noises coming from the rest of the saloon.

It sounds like the rest of the club and the Hellrazors are having a hell of a time.

Sydney appears in the doorway with a tap of her knuckles. She’s got on a Steel Kings t-shirt she’s tied at the navel and another tight pair of jeans that show off her hips and ass.

Leaning against the doorframe, she smiles. “What are you doing all alone in here? Come out. Ozzie’s singing karaoke to You Give Love a Bad Name.”

“Sounds like a good opportunity to laugh my ass off at him.”

“You’d be joining everybody else. Something on your mind?” Sydney breaks away from the doorframe and starts toward me.

I lean back in my chair and survey her. The first and only woman who can ever call herself my old lady.

Tom was right. She’s fucking special beyond words.

The little purple book on the corner of my desk catches my eye. I reach out for it and then hold it up for her to take.

“You probably want this back?”

Surprise flits across her features. “My journal. But...?”

“It’s yours. Take it.”

She turns the book over in her hands a couple times, staring at it cover to cover. “I’ve spent years writing every little thought inside here. Did you read any of them?”

There’s no use lying. After it was discovered Sydney was here with potentially bad intentions and I banished her, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. So I read more parts of her journal. The earlier stuff from before I knew her. I read about her confusion over her birth family and her times in college studying for a journalism degree and bartending most nights.

In a way, it was like getting to know Sydney even without her around anymore.

Cash was right to call me on my shit—I did miss her. I was reading her fucking *journal*.

“I might’ve read an entry or two,” I fess up, giving a shrug.

Sydney laughs. “So, in other words, you read the whole damn thing.”

I don't bother fighting off the grin that comes to my face. I snatch the purple book from her hands and set it down on the desk. At the same time, I hook my other arm around her hips and pull her into my lap.

"How could I resist?" I ask, pressing a kiss to her lips. "I wanted to look inside that head of yours."

"Did you like what you saw?"

I nod. "About as smart allecky and stubborn as hell as I figured."

"Mace!" She breaks out into more laughter as I squeeze her hips and thighs and press more kisses to her neck.

It's a while before we go out to the bar floor. What for when we're having a private celebration of our own?

SYDNEY



“WHERE ARE WE GOING, MACE?”

“For a ride.”

“For a ride, *where?*” I ask as he tugs on my hand and leads me outside the Steel Saloon.

It’s late on a Sunday evening, breezier than most summer days in Pulsboro. I was seated at the bar counter brainstorming club activities we could host in the fall when Mason appeared and told me to follow him outside.

He escorts me out to his bike and then opens the top box compartment. First he pulls out what looks like a slim-cut, mini leather vest that he holds up for me to see.

I eye him warily. “Mace, that looks about three sizes too small for you.”

“Not for me.” He thrusts the vest into my hands.

It takes me another second to understand that it’s supposed to be mine.

The size of the vest really should’ve been the first giveaway—it’s a third the length of his, designed to stop just below the bust. The other clue is in its width, clearly meant for someone with narrower shoulders.

I look up from the vest and at Mason. “This... is for me?”

He grins. “Your own cut. You’re an honorary King. An honorary... *Queen*. Turn it over.”

My heartbeat gathers speed as I turn over the mini leather vest in my hands and then gasp at the rocker stitched into the fabric. The Steel Kings logo is in the middle with its steel skull and crown and then beneath that is my name.

Steel Queen.

“Mason,” I choke out. I blink many times, staring in shock at the vest. “You can’t be serious. This is a joke. You’re fucking with me.”

“Not fucking with you. It’s yours. You’re my old lady, which makes you head old lady, which makes you a King.”

“Which makes me a Queen,” I answer with a surprised giggle.

His grin lights up his handsome face and makes me want to kiss him all over. I do as I launch myself at him, looping my arms around his neck and squeezing him as tightly as you can a man made of muscle like Mason.

He holds me, the two of us swaying in place. “Put it on. Grab your helmet. I was serious when I said we’re going for a ride.”

I hurry to do as he says. I slide on the mini leather vest—which happens to fit me to the letter—and I yank on the helmet he’s got me.

He mounts first, positioning his powerful body on his powerful steel beast. I slide in behind him and hold on for dear life.

We take off in a ferocious roar that draws the attention of the men standing outside the Chop Shop next door. They hoot and holler and cheer us on as we speed by.

It's only my third time on the back of a bike. First time after the near-crash and injury I sustained thanks to the Road Reapers. Clutching Mason, I find myself letting go without any fear or hesitation.

I welcome the feeling of freedom that takes over me. The sensation that I'm flying on the back of a steel beast that seems to travel at the speed of light. We hit the highway and I'm laughing in delight, sticking my arms in the air to feel the summer breeze.

Mason's grinning up front. I don't need to see him to know. I can feel how amused and happy it makes him to know I'm enjoying myself on his bike.

He revs the engine, and we blast off even faster. I'm not sure I ever want the moment to end as I stretch my fingers as high as they'll go and feel like I'm painting the sky the opalescent colors that make up dusk. Pinks, purples, blues that spread for miles to see.

I wrap my arms back around Mason and marvel at the open road and terrain surrounding us. It's like we're the last two people on earth. The Steel King and his Queen exploring the land that belongs to us and only us.

I rest my head against his back, nuzzling him as it sinks in.

This is my life now.

It's another forty minutes before we stop. Mason pulls over on the side of the highway and pulls his helmet off. I mirror him, climbing off his Road King bike. There's no gas station or diner around. The sign says another five miles. The only

thing within walking distance is what appears to be some kind of old, abandoned house in the middle of a field.

He grabs my hand. “C’mon, I want to show you something.”

“An abandoned shack?”

“Believe it or not, it was once a pretty nice house.”

We walk through the wild grass that’s grown so tall it’s past my knees. Fireflies and other insects buzz and click the purpler the sky becomes. The farther across the field we make it, the less sure I become. The slower I walk and the more Mason has to pull me along at his side.

“Mace... is this safe?” I ask.

“You’re with me, Syd. I’ve got you.”

My heart warms at the words of reassurance. It’s true—Mason wouldn’t let anything bad happen. He’d fight tooth and nail the second it did.

We stop in front of a worn-down, rickety picnic table. Mason digs around in the pocket of his vest and pulls out a polaroid that he hands over to me.

I hesitate taking it, unsure where this is going. Lowering my eyes to the photo, I understand why it’s being handed to me, a small gasp traveling up my throat and past my lips.

I stare at the picnic table and cozy home in the photo, then look up at what’s become of it today. The table’s wood has worn down and borderline collapsed while boards are nailed to the home’s windows. Any past warmth is long gone.

What’s before my eyes couldn’t be more different than the photo.

It must've been taken sometime in the early '90s, though the quality has faded with time. In the picture, the home is a charming powder blue with a huge, thriving lawn and garden. There's a garage on the side of the house with a car and a Harley-Davidson parked next to it.

Sitting at the picnic table is none other than Pop. He's in his Hellrazor gear, almost thirty years younger. He grins at whoever's taken the photo. Seated at the table across from him is a man with dark brown skin and a woman with a bright smile that probably lit up rooms.

And then I spot her—in the grass is a small little girl with braided pigtails, picking wildflowers. She can't be older than three or four-years-old, but she looks as happy and carefree as can be.

Tears water my eyes. "This can't be..."

"Jacob Singer was best friends with your birth parents. It's why he adopted you the moment he got outta prison," Mason explains. "This was your home. The night your parents were murdered, they were coming home and then were followed by some Road Reapers on the highway we were just on."

"I... I used to live here?" I sputter out. My lashes are so wet they're sticking together. "These were my birth parents? I'm the little girl in the photo?"

These are all spoken as questions, though deep in my heart, I know it's true. From the moment I set eyes on the photo, I've realized it's real. I'm staring at a vital part of my past that has always been a mystery.

"Pop never told me he was best friends with my birth father."

“They were very close. Your birth father was one of the first Black members in any of the local clubs. Back then, they had just started opening it up. He made it far. Vice prez.”

“I’m the daughter of a biker,” I laugh almost sadly. “Two bikers.”

“Both fathers. It’s in your blood. In every part of you.”

I wipe at my eyes and shudder out a breath. “My father was trying to leave the Reapers. He wanted out.”

Mason nods. “The story goes, he tried to leave, but the prez at the time thought he was the rat. So he had the other members track him down and kill him. Your mom tried to interfere, so they killed her too.”

“But I survived.”

“The cops found you on the side of the highway, crying in the rain.”

Suddenly, I remember. I had stood there for over an hour, soaked through, beside the dead bodies of my parents. Thunder and lightning raged on around me, but I refused to go hide in the car, no matter how terrified and heartbroken I was. I refused leave their side ’til finally sirens flashed through the wet dark.

“Do you want to know what Jacob went to prison for?” Mason asks. He slides his arm around me in a show of support. “He murdered the Road Reaper that pulled the trigger and killed your parents. Turns out, the Road Reapers have a history of taking out innocent civilians. Just like Rollins murdered my mother.”

“Wow,” I breathe.

“It started a war. You saw how it ended. With the Road Reapers a shell of their former selves and more bitter than ever. It’s a big reason why they’ve been out for revenge.”

“So, basically, everything that’s happened to us was for revenge against our parents.”

He husks out a deep breath and tightens his arm around me. “Yeah, pretty much. But we’ve fought back and made them pay. It’s what we’ll continue to do, Syd. Me and you and the club.”

“It feels... it feels...” I’m so overwhelmed I can hardly speak. I wipe my teary eyes from thinking about my family history and the happy times we must’ve shared here before it changed forever. “It feels... good to hear you say that.”

“Say what, Syd?”

“Me and you,” I repeat. “And the club.”

“Why?”

I twist my body so that I’m turning into him, my head tilted up to meet his gaze. “Because it finally feels like I have a place to belong again.”

Rarely does Mason ever show emotion, but this moment’s an exception. His brows draw close and it flickers in his eyes—the deep sense of caring he has for me. He cups my cheek and brings my lips close to his, though he doesn’t kiss me.

Not yet.

“You’re part of our family,” he says. “You’re one of us. You always have been in a way. Even before we knew you were. I love you, Syd.”

I smile, touched by his confession. “I love you too, Mace.”

We give into our feelings with a soft kiss that only affirms everything we've said.

We're in love and I've finally found where I belong.

THE END.....FOR NOW.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thanks for reading! It would mean sooo much to me if you left me a review on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#)! It takes just a quick second and it helps boost my book so it can be noticed by more readers!

Preorder book 2 in the series, Kings Don't Break, [HERE](#). It tells the Friends-to-Lovers BWWM MC romance story of Blake Cash and the girl he's secretly loved since he was a boy, Korine McKibbens. For an (unedited) sneak peek of KDB, turn the page!

KINGS

DON'T BREAK

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS MC ROMANCE



SNEAK PEEK

CHAPTER 1 - KORINE



“Miss, has anyone ever told you you should model?” the sales clerk asks with a wide, welcoming smile. She holds up a bottle of foundation with one hand and flags me down with the other from behind her make up counter. “We’re offering a free item from our Bella Beauty line if you let us use you for a live make up demonstration.”

I flit by, clutching my purse and cursing my luck. “No thanks! I’m in a rush.”

“But miss! This is an eighty dollar value—and that’s not counting the free make up demonstration by one of our most talented professional artists. We just need fifteen minutes of your time.”

“Can’t. Busy. Sorry!” I call from over my shoulder as I flee the scene.

I hop on the escalator and ride it all the way to the second floor of Keaton’s department store. The home decor section is the first thing you see stepping off the escalator. Crystal vases that sparkle under the store’s fluorescent lighting and a rainbow of throw pillows in every shape, size and pattern. The clock aisle jumps out at me, the hands on the many clocks for sale ticking away.

Just like the panic ticking inside my chest.

I take notice of the time glaring at me from the aisle full of clocks and mutter under my breath, “Please be ready. Please, please be ready.”

Racing down the sales floor, weaving between customers browsing at their leisure, I practically break out into a run.

The tailor’s station emerges among racks of men’s suits and dress shirts. He looks up with his pointed glasses low on his nose, his hands fast at work with a measuring tape and scrap of fabric.

I’m panting by the time I skitter to a stop at his counter. “Hi...” I puff out, my brow shining with sweat. “I’m here for... to pick up... Friday at three.”

His thin lips quirk into a knowing smile. “Yes, Mrs. Stricklin. I’m aware why you’re here. I was the one who took your order. You made it just in time. We close up in four minutes.”

Thank you, Sweet Jesus. Phew!

I can only mouth thank you as he turns away and rummages among a rack of assorted clothes. “Ah, here it is! A man’s Dioni three-piece suit tailored to the measurements of a 44 regular.”

I tap my credit card to the card read machine and take the suit protected by pristine plastic covering with gleeful hands, feeling like I’ve just been given a lifeline.

“I presume this suit’s for Mr. Stricklin,” says the tailor. “He should be pleased with the fit.”

My stomach clenches, cutting my glee short. “I really hope so. Thanks again.”

I'm able to duck out of Keaton's with only two more sales clerk harassing me about special sales and offers. I dart straight to my dented and dinged Geo Metro in the crowded parking lot, blowing hair out of my face and jerking the key in the ignition.

Forty-five minutes left. I can still make magic happen.

"C'mon, c'mon," I mutter under my breath, encountering traffic.

Even merging onto the highway is a headache.

I slam my palm to my steering wheel, honking my horn at the indecisive car in front of me. They've got their blinker on going forty in a sixty, driving so slow I'm not sure how we'll ever seamlessly merge. At least not before the threat of our lane runs out.

"You dumbass!" I growl. "That's not how you... ARGH!"

The car in front of me speeds up, then slams on their brake before doing the same thing all over again. We play this game to more frustration and swear words from me.

The truck behind me honks their horn as if *I'm* the problem.

I glance in the rear view and see an irate middle-aged, red-faced man clenching his teeth. How he's pissed at me is beyond me. It's not like the car in front of me isn't the culprit!

The car comes to a complete stop rather than merge, causing me to smash my foot on my brake to avoid rear-ending them.

I'm not so lucky. The truck tailing me knocks into me from behind like a bad game of bumper cars. I shriek jerking forward against my seat belt, my grip tight on my wheel.

No, no, no! Not today! Not right now!

The shock takes several seconds to wear off. I've been rear-ended. On the worst possible day ever. This would happen to me.

I heave a sigh and go to unlock my car door. We need to assess the damage and exchange information. I've barely set a foot on the ground when the truck revs its engine and then speeds off, cutting around me on the shoulder of the road to make it onto the highway.

"Wait!" I scream, my jaw agape. "You can't take off! You hit me! COME BACK!"

But, as he speeds off down the highway, it's clear he has no intention of doing so. He's long gone, whoever he is.

"Unbelievable!" I growl, kicking dirt. Other cars drift by, some passengers nosily sticking their heads out the window to ogle the damage on my rear bumper. I glare at them, a second away from telling them to fuck off.

Thirty-eight minutes left...

Unsure what direction to even go in, I return to my driver's seat and pull out my phone. Donny's voice mail answers me. At the beep, I inhale a deep breath, and launch into an explanation.

"Hey, baby, it's me," I say tensely. "Nothing to worry about. But... someone hit my car. A hit and run. I didn't even get his plate number. I'm going to call the insurance and take it to the shop tomorrow if you're okay it. I didn't involve the police either. I... I knew you wouldn't like that. Again, nothing to worry about. Please don't stress over it. I'll make sure everything's still perfect for tonight. I love you."

The recording cuts me off at the minute mark, ending the call on its own.

I release the breath I've been holding in, cursing my luck again, before I go to turn the key. The engine gives a pitiful whine that lasts a few seconds and then dies out completely.

“No,” I whisper. “No effing way! NO!”

There's no way my engine would die like this. Not right now. Not when I'm already behind on what's such an important night for Donny...

Thirty-one minutes...

I should've known an old beater like this was on its last leg. I'd have fixed it myself if I weren't forbidden from doing so. The least that could've been allowed was taking it to a shop.

But that suggestion, too, was frowned upon. Mechanics are too friendly and friendly leads to trouble...

Despite my lack of tools, I pop the hood and go take a look. There was a time in the past where I used to keep a secret stash of tools in a make up pouch tucked away in the bottom compartment of my driver's side door. Those proved to be trouble too when they were found out.

A wary sigh leaves me eyeing my dead car engine. I'm not even sure it's salvageable, which would mean my only sense of freedom, my wheels, will be gone. For who knows how long, I'm not sure.

But the thought of going an indeterminate amount of time without my own mode of transportation makes my heart shrivel up.

Twenty-seven damn minutes...

There's no way I'll finish in time. No way I'll make it home and get started on dinner in time with the set schedule.

Panic infects me, so that I feel breathless and clammy. I half consider flagging down one of the many cars zipping by just to see if they'll help me. Even just provide the tools. I can do the rest myself.

Really, I'd like to hitchhike the hell out of here. Get as far away as possible from our new home in Pulsboro. I would if I didn't have Mama to think about.

"What the hell am I going to do?" I groan out loud, staring around at the dreary November landscape.

The thunder of an engine answers me. I look up from my own dead car engine and my heart leaps in my chest at what I see barreling toward me.

Going way too fast for a highway on-ramp, clutching the buckhorn handlebars of his Harley Davidson FXDB Street Bob, his golden brown hair rippling in the wind, is no other than Blake Cash.

Otherwise known not just as my first love but my ex-best friend.

CHAPTER 2 - BLAKE



A whistle leaves my lips walking into the Steel Saloon. “Mason Cutler, I never thought I’d see the day.”

My best friend’s seated at the bar counter grinning wide with his hand on the thigh of his old lady. The sight’s still surprising even after a few months of their whirlwind romance.

Once upon a time, Mace swore he’d never settle down let alone be a one-woman-kind-of-guy.

That changed the day he met Sydney Singer.

The two couldn’t stand each other at first, butting heads at every turn, but after false betrayals were cleared up and the real bad guys were held accountable, they’d been smitten with each other ever since.

So much so Sydney’s head old lady and Mason’s in better spirits than he’s ever been.

Not something I say lightly—the two of us have known each other since we rode around in training wheels. He’s never been happier than he is with Sydney.

He tears his attention away from her and looks over at me, his dark green eyes glinting. “Well, if it ain’t Cash. My best

friend who has every woman in town begging to have his babies.”

My face warms as the couple laughs. I play it off with a shake of my shoulder-length golden hair and a modest smile. “Not every women. Just most.”

“Do you hear this cocky mother ‘effer?” Mace asks his girl.

Sydney humors us both by holding up her hands like she’s innocent. “Don’t drag me in the middle! I just got here.”

“You’ve been here four months now. That excuse’s wearing off.”

She lets out a squeal as he squeezes her thigh and leans close, nipping at her neck.

I fold my arms over my chest admiring the two. “You need to tone it down. You’re making even me sick.”

“Then get you a girl and we can double date,” Mason says.

I wink in answer. “I’ve got plenty of girls. Just not *the* girl.”

“How are things with Janessa?” Sydney asks in a hopeful tone. “The woman you brought to our last club party. How’s she doing?”

“Right... she’s good. We’re good. Things are very casual.”

“In other words, she’s for late night calls only.” Mason ignores the chiding look Sydney gives him and reaches for his pint of beer. “I didn’t care for her anyway. She didn’t fit in with the club.”

“She was nice!” Sydney says.

“She wouldn’t even put her purse down. Like the bar had fucking germs or some shit.”

I shoot my best bud an easy smile. “I’d say it’s a fair assessment considering the last time the saloon was deep-cleaned we were in diapers. I’ll leave you two lovebirds be.”

Both call after me as I turn around and wander the rest of the saloon. On a chilly Friday afternoon like this, the mood’s relaxed and casual. The few guys visiting the saloon are sitting back sipping on their drinks and chatting among themselves.

I pay Mick a visit on the other side of the counter and then hit up the table where Stein and Bush are enjoying a Texas Brew and some pretzels.

There’s a reason I spend most of my afternoons at the Chop Shop. Otherwise, unless we’ve got club business or a mission we’re carrying out, I’m left aimless. I’m left bored; things never go too well for me when I get too bored...

I’m chuckling as both Stein and Bush give me a hard time about my looks (something I’m used to at the club). I don’t have the same harsh ruggedness that most of the other guys do. They tease the hell out of me for looking like a Hollywood actor version of a biker versus a real life one.

I take the digs in stride like I always do.

My phone vibrates in my jean pocket. I pull it out as Bush yammers on about my shiny golden hair and how I must spend hours conditioning it.

Janessa’s texted me.

Except there are no words in the text message—just heart emojis and a photo.

An *explicit* one that almost has me feeling it's inappropriate even for a damn biker club.

Janessa lies on her bed in nothing but a lacy panty. Her body's arched, pierced breasts thrust forward and ass pushed back at an angle showing off her feminine curves.

It's a photo that would make any male brain malfunction.

Damn sure makes mine. I forget where the hell I am for a second.

A moment later, she follows up with another text.

miss u babe. im so lonely. when can i see u? 😊

I glance over my shoulder at Stein and Bush's table. The two older gentlemen have moved onto talking sports. I refocus on my phone and text Janessa back, asking what she's up to this afternoon.

thinking of u. duh. come over ☐

I think on her reply one more second before I agree.

Mason's correct when he says she's for late nights only—our most recent club party being the exception. I had tested waters and brought Janessa around the guys. Something I don't do often with women I'm sleeping with.

It's never been serious enough to. Just casual flings that burn for a couple months before the fire goes out altogether.

But Janessa... it's been longer than usual. Though we've got little in common and our chemistry starts and ends in bed, I don't mind her so much.

An afternoon lay will give me something to do. That photo did what it was supposed to—it turned me on enough to make

me want to see Janessa at a moment's notice.

I mount my bike parked outside the saloon and take off.

November in Pulsboro means frosty air and muted skies. Today's no different. I speed through the small-town streets causing looks everywhere I go with the rumble of my Street Bob.

Janessa lives one town over in Jefferson. Another twenty minutes, and I'll be there.

I turn down the last street that'll lead to the highway. The late autumn wind blows my hair back and feels icy-cool on the skin. I've got my shades on or else I'd be squinting against the force of it.

I grip my buckhorn handlebars and turn to merge onto the highway. The road leading out of town looks crowded, even for a Friday. I'm easing up on my speed, gradually braking, when I spot the car on the shoulder of the road.

A beat-up Geo Metro that looks like it belongs at a junkyard rather than on the highway.

The female driver stands in front of the popped hood with the kind of glower that tells me she's having a bad day.

None of my business... 'til I realize I recognize her.

I glance and then glance again.

I'm staring and braking. I'm pulling off to the side of the road to let the impatient cars behind me pass.

My eyes have got to be playing tricks on me. It can't be... there's no way it's...

As I've slowed up and pulled over, the woman's noticed me too. Surprise freezes onto her face, her eyes going wide.

It's when our gazes meet that I know with certainty. That a wave of familiarity strikes me down.

Korine McKibbens.

The Korine McKibbens.

The girl I haven't seen in a decade yet have never stopped thinking about.

Distantly. Deep, deep in the recesses of my mind.

The only girl I've ever been nervous around. The only girl I've ever called my best friend. The only girl who... *got away*.

It's like becoming a time traveler seeing her again. An onslaught of memories rush me. They've got me locking up and speechless as I suddenly feel seventeen again.

Our history runs that far back. Even further than that.

We were *five-years-old* the first time we met.

The McKibbens moved in next-door and my world changed forever. I still thought girls were gross and had cooties, yet here was this cute little rowdy thing making me all sorts of confused—she climbed trees and played with her brother's action figures. She raced all the boys—and even beat some of us—and she wasn't afraid of a damn thing.

I hated her... 'til I realized I liked her. Then I realized I wanted her to like me.

We settled for friends. Good friends. Friends so close at times Mason was jealous. Friends so close eventually, as we grew older and hormones ran rampant, things got too complicated too fast.

I'm so lost in memories, I have to force myself out of the past. I jerk and take a stilted step forward, then I stop again.

Korine's staring back at me, eyes wide and questioning. She hasn't budged an inch.

She hasn't changed a bit—that's almost more startling than even seeing her again.

Korine's always been the kind of girl that stands out without even trying. In high school, she was one of the prettiest girls. Never with a stitch of make up on. Damn sure with no heels or frilly fixings other girls dabbled in.

Korine, the tomboy with the pixie-cut and faded t-shirts, was beautiful all on her own.

A decade later, that's far from changed.

Every last detail about her is the same. Golden brown skin blessed with a kiss from the sun itself. The earthy shade of her eyes and the fullness of her mouth. High cheek bones and a soft, diamond-shaped face.

Her hair's currently a frizzy mess of chin-length curls, yet standing opposite her, I want nothing more than to dig my fingers into the tight tendrils and seal my lips over hers—

I clear my throat and grip my belt buckle. "Kori," I say hoarsely, like old times. "How the hell are you? It's been how long?"

She blinks out of her shock, no other emotion on her beautiful, bare face. She's dressed down, in a hoodie and some jeans that swallow up the slim, athletic figure of hers that I remember. Nothing really has changed.

Kori's still a damn tomboy at her core.

"Hey, Blake," she says softly. "I... I wasn't expecting to see you... right now."

“What are you doing in Pulsboro?! You come back to town and you don’t hit me up?”

Her head bows to stare at the sneakers she wears. “It’s been a crazy couple weeks. We’re still getting settled.”

“You’ve moved back to town?!”

I should taper my reaction. Drain some of the enthusiasm from my voice and demand my heart stop beating so excitedly in my chest.

But I can’t help it—it’s second-nature to have these reactions around Korine. After a decade spent apart, being around her for even a few seconds, feels like old times again.

A familiarity I’ve missed. A sense of home that can be dangerous but addictive.

“Yeah, I have,” she answers after a tense pause. “*We* bought a house here.”

The spinning cogs and wheels in my brain come to an abrupt, lurching halt. I freeze up again digesting her words, realizing their meanings. The excitement disappears from my mood and my skin warms despite the November chill.

It’s in this moment that I metaphorically step back and reassess the situation—a diamond-encrusted gold ring glints from the fourth finger of Korine’s left hand. Inside her car, dangling from the backseat overhead handle is a men’s suit wrapped up in a layer of plastic. I look into her eyes and suddenly I get it.

I understand what’s going on.

Korine’s married.

Of course she would be. Girls like Korine don’t stay on the market for long...

“Who is he?” I husk out, my voice gravelly, sounding almost primitive. I try to be the opposite—the usual levelheaded, mild-mannered Blake Cash most know me as. *Mason’s* the hot head. Not me.

But damn if I don’t become one in this moment. I don’t even know the guy and yet I already want to bash his face in. A deep-rooted, irrational hatred scorches through me at the thought another man married Korine.

My Kori.

“No one you’d know,” she answers vaguely. “We moved here for a promotion.”

“Kids?”

She shakes her head to the side. “You should get going, Blake. Don’t stop on my account.”

“Your car broke down?” I ignore her comment and walk around to stand side by side in front of her engine. Peering down at the rusting guts of the car, I cast her a glance. “I’m surprised you didn’t fix it on the spot. You’ve always been a pro at this.”

“No tools.”

I raise a brow. “*You?* No tools? You practically carried ‘em wherever you went back in high school! Did you ever open up your own shop like you dreamed about?”

“You should get going.”

“I don’t got much on me. But the Chop Shop’s not far. I can give you a ride. We’ll have one of the guys tow the car back there—”

“No, Blake, really... it’s okay.”

“It’s no trouble. It’s what we do at the Chop Shop. You know. You worked a summer there.”

“It’s not a good idea. You should be on your way.”

“I’m not leaving you on the side of the road—”

“Please,” she snaps, irritated. “Just go!”

I take half a step back and survey her up and down. Now that I think about it, now that we’ve interacted, something’s off about her.

There’s a restraint she possesses that wasn’t ever there before. Almost as if she’s holding back. Her true personality’s bottled up inside. Trapped for some reason.

I cock my head to the side. “You okay?”

“I just need to get home. Without your help.”

“Alright,” I say slowly, taking another step away from her. An awkward beat passes between us where we don’t speak but our eyes remain on each other. I can’t put my finger on it, on what’s off about the moment. So I play along. I do as she asks. “It was cool seeing you again, Kori. Come by the Steel Saloon sometime if you get the chance. We can have a beer and catch up.”

She gives a stiff nod in answer. Restrained and noncommittal.

Eyes dark and mysterious.

Her vibe anxious.

I turn and walk away, feeling like my teenage fantasy has been crushed. The many what ifs and someday that always lingered in the back of my mind about Korine go up in smoke. Not only is she married to some asshole she’s bought a house

with, she wants nothing to do with me. She doesn't even want to be friends.

...she won't even let me give her a ride.

We hadn't left off on the best of terms, but shit. I thought we were still friendly enough.

I mount my bike, revving my engine, aviator shades disguising any emotion from my face. Then I blast off, speeding by Korine as she stands stranded on the side of the road.

Leaving my dream girl in the dust.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sienna has a thing for dark and brooding alphas and the women who love them. She enjoys writing stories where lines are blurred, and the romance is dark and delicious. In her spare time, she unwinds with a nice glass of wine and Netflix binge.