



MASON

DARK SLAYERS MC

ARIA RAY

Mason

Dark Slayers MC Book 18

Aria Ray

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About the Book

When secrets fuel forbidden desires, my heart betrays me, irresistibly drawn to the one man I should avoid at all costs.

The mobster's world is cruel, especially for women. While I'm still grieving the loss of my father, the mafia's merciless Don orchestrates a nightmarish union with his sinister bookkeeper. The thought of marrying a man twice my age and dripping with malevolence turns my stomach. With no family left to protect me, my only way out of this is a sham engagement organized by my childhood friend, who along with his brothers is seeking to overthrow the Don. But salvation comes with a cost - a perilous mission to infiltrate the Don's deadliest foes, the Dark Slayers MC who my fake fiancé is secretly working with.

Spying on the Slayers is a risky business. Too many people control me, and the man who was promised my hand soon turns into a stalker. On top of that, nothing escapes the attention of the big hulking protector the MC assigned me. It's only a matter of time before Mason becomes suspicious of my true motives. And he's the biggest threat of all because once he discovers my engagement is fake, he decides to keep me for himself. The worst part? I'm irresistibly drawn to the one man I should avoid at all costs.

Can I navigate this treacherous path of espionage, lies, and smoldering passion without losing my heart or my life?

"Mason" is the 18th book in the "Dark Slayers MC" hot and alluring romance series featuring bikers who will remind you why you like the bad boys so much. They're protective, rough, and running on pure diesel and adrenaline.

Each book in the series is a standalone with a guaranteed happily ever after for the couple, though it is recommended to read them in order for maximum enjoyment.

"Dark Slayers MC" series:
[Storm](#) (Dark Slayers MC Book 1)

[Breaker](#) (Dark Slayers MC Book 2)

[Grit](#) (Dark Slayers MC Book 3)

[Celt](#) (Dark Slayers MC Book 4)

[Razor](#) (Dark Slayers MC Book 5)

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Chapter 1

Mason

Five of my club brothers and I were cruising down the highway, on our way to a motorcycle rally in Mammoth Rock, when we were brought up short by a rogue roadblock. We jumped the guard rail, took cover down an embankment, and returned fire as best we could. We were fighting for our lives against almost a dozen men in dark suits. I recognized a couple of them as Don Diavonte's crew.

I called out to Javelin, "They look like those gangsters from LA who were givin' us so much trouble before. What do you think they want?"

Jav shot me a hard look. "To kill us, brother. We're not transporting anything of value. That means we've got nothing they want. They're clearly looking to pick off some Slayers today."

I grinned at his disgruntled expression. "Well, I say we give them a run for their money." Catching sight of Corey, I jerked my chin at him. "See to your blood. That boy's way too eager to get his head shot off."

I tried not to laugh when Jav grabbed a rock and threw it, hitting his younger brother on the shoulder. "Get the fuck down, you fool," he yelled.

Ace whistled to get everyone's attention and made a hand gesture for us to spread out along the embankment. He was positioning us to rise up and shoot our way out of the gutter we were all hunkered down in.

I reloaded my .45 and then pulled out my 9mm. With a freshly loaded clip in each gun and extras in my pocket, I was ready to stop being a sitting duck for some shitty gangster. When Ace gave the signal, we all jumped up at the same time and began shooting.

Just when I needed to change out my clip, two white panel vans came out of nowhere and spun sideways into a cluster of suits. They backed up and drove over to provide cover for us, bullets bouncing off the windshields. One van I recognized as being from the Slayer's garage. We used it to haul parts for repairs. The other I guessed might be from the security firm our club ran. Our vehicles were armored because sometimes our club brothers needed to haul valuables or transport clients we were tasked with protecting.

Once I got over the shock of what I was seeing, I changed out my clips and crawled over the guard rail with my club brothers. We took advantage of the

coverage and chaos provided by the vans and kept picking suits off one by one.

Thunder climbed out of one of the vehicles and yelled, “Don’t fucking kill them all. We need to interrogate as many of them as possible.”

We’d have stood there shooting until every single one of them was dead on the ground if he hadn’t spoke up. These sick bastards had shot at us in the past and were in the process of shaking down all the local businesses in our hometown. They were career criminals and deserved what they got in my humble opinion.

We changed up our strategy and plucked the weapons off of them when they reluctantly surrendered. After that, we separated them into two groups, the living and the dead.

“Load the bodies in one van and the hostages in the other,” Thunder instructed.

Suddenly, Javelin’s panicked voice rang out. “Corey, where the fuck are you? Brother, answer me.”

I dumped the body I was dragging and jogged over to where Javelin was standing. “Did y’all check the gutter?”

We jumped the guard rail, and sure enough, Corey was struggling to get up from the ground with a smoking gun in one hand and blood gushing from his shoulder on the opposite side.

When we dashed forward, we saw a young mobster in a suit laying on his back, staring blankly up at the bright blue sky. He was a few yards in front of Javelin’s struggling brother. The baby-faced kid looked to be no more than eighteen or nineteen and had a gaping wound in his chest. It sickened me to see kids drawn into violence and dead at such a young age.

We squatted down in front of Corey and his brother started tending to his shoulder wound.

I gently smacked the back of his head. “Idiot.”

Corey grimaced. “What the hell?”

Javelin ripped a piece of his shirt off and pressed it against the wound. “He’s right. How did you manage to get yourself shot?”

“We told you to keep your head down.” When he frowned, I asked again, “Why weren’t you being careful? They nearly killed you.”

“I was careful,” he replied in a pained voice, watching his brother’s blood-stained hands work over his shoulder.

I was angry, probably because my adrenaline was still up from the gun

fight. “You were being careful, my ass! If you were being careful, you wouldn’t be bleeding out right now.”

Corey made a pained sound and growled at his brother, “If you keep pushing like that, you’re gonna dislocate my shoulder.”

Javelin motioned for me to help him up. “It’s already dislocated. You’ll be lucky if your artery doesn’t rupture on the way to the hospital.”

We hauled Corey up the embankment and over the guard rail, then into one of the vans. “This one needs to go to a hospital. He’s in bad, bad shape, Thunder.”

Thunder motioned for us to load him up. “We’ll take care of business here. Take care of your brother, Jav.”

I gestured to the side of the road. “We have a body down over there. Don’t forget about him. We don’t want to be explaining a dead kid to the police.”

Thunder slapped me on the back. “I’ll take care of it personally. You driving them?”

I nodded. “Yeah, of course. If y’all need me, call and I’ll come running.”

“Will do,” Thunder replied before turning to take care of the mess we were leaving behind.

I climbed into the van and heard Corey mumble, “I don’t feel so good, Jav. I feel cold, so cold.”

“You’ve lost a lot of blood. Hold on, Corey. We’ll be there at hospital in a few minutes.”

I drove like a bat out of hell to the hospital. The map on my phone said the nearest trauma center was twelve minutes away.

I didn’t think Corey had twelve minutes. I put the pedal to the metal and watched the speedometer go from fifty to sixty to seventy and finally to eighty. We picked up a police escort along the way, but I didn’t have time to pull over.

I came to a screeching stop outside of the emergency room and we hauled Corey out of the van and inside. The medical team took him back right away. Javelin went to check his brother in while I made my way to the restroom to clean the blood off me.

The minute my ass hit the chair in the waiting room, the cops who were behind us were all over me.

The older of the two spoke first. “My name is Officer Swift, and this is my partner, Officer Wells. We’re with the California Highway Patrol.”

I never liked cops very much, but I gave them my name. “I’m Marcel

Pierce.”

“Can you tell us what happened? How did your friend get shot? Were you involved in a gang war of some kind? Maybe something with another MC?” Officer Wells asked.

I sighed in exasperation. “I don’t know nothin’. One minute we were riding down the road and the next there were people shooting at us.”

Wells started to open his mouth again, but his partner cut in. “Let’s slow down a bit and get our bearings. Where are you from, Mr. Pierce? You sound like you’re straight from the bayou.”

“Yes, sir, I grew up in St. Mary Parish in the Atchafalaya Basin. It’s about halfway between Lafayette and Baton Rouge.”

He held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Pierce. You’re being a good sport by talking to us today. Do you mind if I ask what brought you so far from home?”

I shook his hand and replied, “I was in the Army and a bit rudderless after I got out. I found a brotherhood made up mostly of veterans down in Griffinsford. Decided to settle in for a bit.”

“I can see you don’t have a one percent patch. Do you think one of the local MCs were antagonized by you and your club brothers being in their territory?”

“No, sir. It wasn’t bikers who attacked us, that’s for damn sure, excuse my language.”

“How can you be so certain?” the younger cop asked.

“Because they didn’t have leather on their backs, there wasn’t a cut in sight. No, these men were all wearing fancy suits, like big city criminals.”

“Why would mobsters come all the way from LA to attack a group of bikers that aren’t even outlaws?” the older cop asked.

I gestured to myself with both hands. “Do I look like a guy who knows anything at all about mobsters? Maybe whatever small town is near has an infestation that needs seeing to.” I raised my eyebrows, in an obvious expression that meant they needed to get right on that problem.

About that time, Storm came through the double doors of the emergency room and headed straight for us. I shot out of my seat and met him halfway. “They took our prospect back the minute we got here. While the cops were talking to me, Jav finished checking in and went back to check on him.”

His ice blue eyes held mine, worried. “I heard it was bad.”

“It wasn’t just bad, boss. We were hijacked, just like back in the war. We

were outnumbered and outgunned. It was a fuckin' bloodbath." Now the adrenaline was gone it was all sinking in, and it felt like my chest was being squeezed in a vise.

Storm grabbed my cut and pulled me close. "Pull yourself together, Mason. This situation is triggering your fucking PTSD. Go outside and take a break, brother. I'll take care of the police. Don't leave, though, in case they want to ask you more questions."

I turned and stalked out of the ER, feeling more stressed than I could remember since the military. Once I was outside, I pulled out my vape and took a hit as I paced back and forth on the sidewalk. I could see that Storm had parked the white van I drove in a nearby parking space for me. In the chaos, I'd forgotten all about it.

The words Corey had spoken in the back of that van echoed through my mind. "I'm cold, so cold."

My back started prickling with sensation as my old war wounds remembered what it felt like to take so much damage that I nearly bled out. I too had felt cold as the field medics tried to stem the blood loss. Suddenly, I was back there with the smell of sweat hanging heavy in the air and the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I took another puff off my vape as all the sights, sounds, and scents of war came flooding back.

We'd gotten ambushed on the outskirts of a small, abandoned town and pinned down while attempting to take cover in the rubble. The fucking insurgents were everywhere. I went high with my sniper rifle, looking to cover my brothers in arms on the streets below. I managed to take out three insurgents before someone tossed a hand grenade into the room through a broken window behind me.

The blast threw me forward. and I crashed through the window and fell two stories. I remembered the sickening crunch when I hit the dusty ground, as well as the burning sensation down my back. My flesh had been practically seared off by third degree burns.

I lost consciousness at some point and woke up in an evac chopper lying face down on a gurney. My shirt had been ripped open and they'd sprayed some kind of burn treatment on my back that numbed the pain. The scent of burnt flesh was so strong, but it took me a minute to realize the smell of barbecue was me. I felt bad that my fellow soldiers had to smell that, especially in such close quarters. It's strange what the mind thought about during trauma.

I inhaled from my vape again, wishing like hell for the familiar and comforting smell of the swamps I navigated as a teen, the deep earthy smell of the vegetation. No sounds of modern life—just birdsong, the ever-present cicadas and the noise of my oar breaking the water. Sometimes a louder splash indicating there were gators nearby. I was always on the water back then, enjoying the fresh air as I explored the bayou. Unfortunately, my days of being a free spirit were long gone. Now, there was nothing but the responsibility of protecting my club brothers and their families.

Storm walked out of the ER and rushed over to me. His slightly uncoordinated walk was probably a hip injury from the war. We were all broken down soldiers in one way or another. “You okay, Mason?”

“Yeah, man, of course I am. What did the officers say?”

“Nothin’. I let them believe it was just the three of you in the van. I told them they probably took their own wounded and gave them information on where they could find some blood-stained pavement. That should keep them busy for a while.”

“You don’t trust them either, do you, boss?”

Storm stared off into the distance as he spoke. “It’s not that I don’t trust law enforcement officers in general. The fact is, I don’t trust anybody without a Slayer’s patch except my old lady. Police officers in small towns can be unpredictable. The less they know about our business, the better.”

“The cops in my hometown were all dirty,” I explained. “It’s the reason I don’t trust them until I see that they uphold the law instead of use it to get their way with people.”

“When it comes to talking to law enforcement, the less we say the better. It’s not like if we give them enough information, they’re going to be able to track down big city gangsters from LA. Hell, I can’t see them caring an awful lot about strangers passing through getting into a skirmish.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I responded quietly. “Do you think this attack means they were on their way to Griffinsford when they passed us and decided to start something?”

“I think they’re gunning for us again. No doubt about that. But they already had the roadblock set up. That means they knew members of our club were riding today. It’s no secret that bikers love to take the scenic route when they’re going to rallies. But for them to know we were registered means someone was feeding them information on local clubs.”

I didn’t like what I was hearing. “So, what’s the plan, boss?”

He turned to face me. “The plan is we interrogate the prisoners and then we network with every ally that wants those suits out of our territory.”

I took another puff off my vape and thought over his words. “You mean the Twisted Metal?”

“Yeah, but I was referring to Sophia’s brothers. They’re ambitious fuckers who mentioned wanting to get rid of their own boss.”

“You can’t trust mobsters, Storm. You know that, right?”

“I don’t quite trust the Russo brothers, and their old man is bat shit crazy, but since their sister is married to Blade and they’ve been helpful before, I’ll cut them some slack.”

“I don’t trust any of them,” I responded before taking a couple more quick puffs from my vape. “What about Steel? He’s their errand boy in our neck of the woods.”

“Steel and I buried the hatchet temporarily. I know he’s just biding his time and looking for an opportunity to reclaim their territory in Griffinsford. I won’t allow that because they’re still running drugs and illegal weapons. I don’t want Twisted Metal or their club president within a hundred fucking miles of where my family lays their heads at night.”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer during troubled times, I say.”

“There’s some truth to that, brother. The rivalry between the Dark Slayers and Twisted Metal is not over, just on hold for the time being. I’m willing to extend a limited amount of trust to Steel as long as we have a mutual problem to solve.”

Storm took a step closer and clapped me on the back. “Why don’t you go in and sit with Javelin. They threw him out of the trauma bay so the doctors could work on Corey. He needs some extra support right now. I want you to drive the van back to the clubhouse later tonight. We’ve got guests that need a good talking to.”

“Yes, sir,” I responded respectfully, understanding he meant it was time to beat some information out of the men stupid enough to attack us in broad daylight.

“I’ve got an errand to run and then I’ll text you when I’m finished. If you leave before I get back, keep your cell phone turned on and your location tracker active. We can’t be too careful right now. I think it might take them a minute to regroup, but who the hell knows.”

We parted ways, Storm going on his errand while I went back into the

hospital. These were some strange times. I just hoped my club brothers and I survived to tell the tale.

Chapter 2

Aprilia

Nicco knocked gently on my bedroom door. I knew it was him because I heard him talking to the housekeeper downstairs. She'd been with our family since I was a child and acted more like family than hired help. I wasn't entirely surprised that she let him in without notifying me or asking permission. She likely saw him as a friend coming to extend his condolences.

Nicco was the nicer of the three brothers. The older one, Diego, was straight up crazy, and Lucas was the quiet one who moved in the shadows, who rarely spoke but saw everything. He left the lingering impression in my mind of a budding serial killer looking for his first victim. It was a tie between Diego and Lucas when it came to who was more dangerous. They were both utterly terrifying. I would know because I grew up with all three of them. Before he died, my father had even considered an arranged marriage with one of the brothers. Ultimately, he decided against it when their sister turned traitor and ran off with some biker.

Another knock drew me from my internal musings. "Come on, Aprilia. I know you're in there. I can hear you breathing."

The last thing in the world I wanted right now was company. I was depressed, grieving, and my eyes were swollen from crying. However, there was a tinge of determination in his voice, and I knew better than to resist. Nicco was also extremely persistent. I reluctantly sat up on my bed and called out to him. "Come on in, Nicco."

The door creaked open, and he walked into the room, looking like God's gift to women. His tanned skin, dark hair, and big brown eyes had made him the darling of our school growing up. Now, wearing a finely tailored suit, he was downright stunning. I'd probably think he was hot shit myself if I didn't know him. Unfortunately, I did. Schooling my expression into something approaching polite, I said, "Welcome to my humble abode, Nicco. Long time no see."

He dropped down into my desk chair and frowned at me. "No need to be condescending. It's only been, what, nine weeks since your old man passed. I saw you at the funeral, and I've also been texting you, but you didn't reply."

"I'm not marrying you, Nicco. Not you or either of your creepy brothers. If

that's why you came, get the hell out."

"Interesting that you mentioned marriage. While the three of us would be delighted to capture your attention romantically, I do not believe in my heart of hearts that's what you want."

I grabbed a tissue from my bedside table and blew my nose. It was embarrassing how much stuff came out. Still, the embarrassment would be worth it if I managed to gross Nicco out to the point that he actually left, I really wasn't in the mood for visitors. "If you didn't come to talk to me about marriage, why are you here?"

My childhood friend shifted in his seat, arranging his tie slightly. "Actually, I came to give you a heads up that Don Diavonte is planning to arrange a marriage for you."

It was the twenty-first century, no one had arranged marriages these days—at least not in America. Well, maybe that's what people thought but I knew better. Families like mine liked to keep their power, and that often meant aligning themselves with other similarly powerful families.

I froze in place, terrified of who he might have in mind for me to spend the rest of my life with.

Nicco quickly explained. "Now that your father has passed, Don Diavonte feels it's his responsibility to see you settled. You know he was close with your father, and these old mobsters have an honor system when it comes to shit like this."

I scrambled to the edge of the bed and pleaded with him. "I don't want an arranged marriage. You've got to help me, Nicco. There has to be a way out without pissing Don Diavonte off?"

Nicco responded grimly, "You haven't heard the worst part yet. Do you remember his bookkeeper?"

My eyes widened as I realized who he was talking about. "You mean Chester? That man's got to be fifty if he's a day."

"He's forty-six. And you're twenty-seven, right?"

Nodding, I was appalled at the thought of being in the same room with Chester, much less being married to him, the man creeped me out. Though he'd stopped visiting with my father when I was around sixteen, so luckily I didn't have much to do with him since then. "Fucking shoot me now, Nicco. I'd rather be six feet under than in that man's bed. I'm not even joking about that."

"Yeah, I'm hearing you loud and clear. My brothers and I thought that's

what you would say. We came up with a plan to put you beyond Don Diavonte's reach for a few weeks. After that, it won't matter because there's going to be a changing of the guard. Once my family is sitting in the seat of power, you'll be untouchable."

My blood ran cold at hearing him talk so casually about turning our entire power structure upside down. "What are you talking about, Nicco? Is Don Diavonte terminally ill? Oh my God. He is, isn't he?"

Nicco's expression turned to one of disgust. "No, but he's terminally stupid."

I recoiled, scooting back onto my bed. "Jesus, Nicco. What are you saying?"

"Look, Aprilia, you grew up in a mob family with your eyes wide open. You've even taken on small jobs to help out. Don Diavonte is almost eighty. You know what happens when a don outlives his usefulness."

I grabbed my pillow and held it in my lap like some protective shield. "I can't believe you just said that. You're starting to sound like that crazy brother of yours. Don't let him whisper poison in your ear. Diego will pull you right down into the mud with him if you give him half a chance."

His head snapped up and he stared at me long and hard. "My brother worked hard to cultivate his image because it serves him well professionally. That doesn't mean he's as depraved as he'd like everyone to believe. I can't believe you of all people would buy into the bullshit, Aprilia. For God's sake, he used to share his ice cream cones with you in kindergarten. Diego has always liked you. The second he heard what Don Diavonte had planned for you, he insisted we do something to save you. You should be ashamed of yourself for doubting him."

Guilt swamped my very soul. "Diego always did treat me like a little sister. He beat up all my bullies growing up and even helped me learn algebra. You know, he doesn't have to keep up the façade around me."

"Yeah, my brother's a bit of an ass that way. He's never been good at determining where the game ends and his real identity starts."

I struggled to process everything Nicco was telling me. "If Diego was so worried about me, why did he send you to talk to me instead of coming himself?"

Nicco shrugged, but it seemed anything but casual. "Maybe he knew you were scared of him."

I didn't even get into how messed up it was that Diego knew he was

scaring me but never once stopped pretending to be a terrifying mobster. Some things that man said to me really creeped me out. “What solution did you come up with? Am I supposed to give up my identity and stay on the run until this exchange of power happens?”

“We want to send you to Griffinsford. It’s a small town a few hours from LA. Don Diavonte has been trying to get a foothold in that town forever.”

“I don’t want to end up in the middle of a mob war.”

Nicco leaned forward in his chair. “Yeah, you do. Let me tell you why. First of all, my sister is there. Second of all, Don Diavonte is agreeable to you going there under the pretense of visiting your lifelong friend.”

I gasped. “Your sister is there? I thought she ran off with some biker.”

His eyes narrowed. “No, she was a peace offering between my family and the Dark Slayers MC, the foundation of an alliance that will never be broken.”

I jumped back on the bed so far, my back hit the wall. “You traded Sophia away like a piece of chattel? Why in the hell would I trust you or have anything to do with you knowing you did something like that to your own damn sister. Nicco, no. Just get the hell away from me.”

Nicco’s voice turned cold. “Aprilia, stop panicking and pay attention. We don’t have long before Don Diavonte’s men come for you.”

“Fine. Finish what you have to say and leave.”

“Do you remember my sister’s best friend Eleanora?” I nodded, but he barely waited for my acknowledgement. “She was supposed to marry Don Diavonte’s nephew. He was a scumbag and she left him standing at the altar and ran off with a biker. Sophia helped her escape and in doing so fell for one his friends.”

My mouth fell open in shock. “What in the world? Eleanora and Sophia are really nice. Why would they want to run off with bikers?”

“Good girls always fall for damaged men. It’s like some kind of bizarre relationship dynamic.”

“Bullshit. For both of them to have fallen for hot bikers would have been an astronomical coincidence.”

“Fuck, you’re gonna make me come right out and say it, aren’t you?”

“Say what? None of this makes sense, Nicco.”

“This motorcycle club they belong to is not an outlaw gang. They’re all veterans, mostly war heroes, who got fucked in the head with all the things they saw in Afghanistan. They’re some kind of support group that likes to

wear leather and ride motorcycles, near as I can tell.”

The tension in my body uncoiled. “You mean they pretend to be badass bikers the way Diego pretends to be a badass mobster?”

Nicco pressed his lips together as if to keep from laughing. It took him a moment to get a hold of himself, and when he did, his voice was almost amused. “Please let me be in the room when you say that in front of Diego.”

I shook my head. “No sense in causing Diego’s head to explode over nothing. Now, tell me more about what I’m supposed to do in Griffinsford. Does Sophia know I’ll be staying with her?”

“You won’t be staying with Sophia. You’ll be staying in the Slayer’s clubhouse. There’s no safer place in Griffinsford than the home of the Dark Slayers MC. Their two-story building is like a fortress. They’ve not only got electronic security, but at least a dozen strong fighters are on guard duty at all times. They also have a large enough armory on site to hold their own in a fucking civil war. Their guests usually get a private suite upstairs with a solid oak door that locks from the inside.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Sophia had her wedding at their clubhouse. It’s like a posh sports bar in there. Anyway, much like our families, the Slayers are extremely protective of their women.”

“Coming from the guy who traded his sister for an alliance with bikers,” I shot back, only half teasing.

Nicco gave me a sour look. “Like I said, we simply came up with a good reason for our old man to give Sophia up. Trust me, she’s right where she wants to be. Her husband even adopted our younger sister.”

“I didn’t know you had a younger sister?” I’d known Nicco and his family pretty much my entire life. I knew them well—at least I thought I knew them well.

“It’s complicated. She spent most of her time at boarding school. Sophia can catch you up on all that.”

“Going from a private boarding school to living with bikers must have given her culture shock.”

“Not really, she just goes to a private school closer to where they live because she didn’t like the boarding part. Blade takes good care of both of them. Now, back to you and your mission.”

I blinked at him. “I have a mission other than to make myself scarce?”

“Yeah, we’ve told Don Diavonte that you’ll be snooping on their numbers,

the layout of their building, and how heavily armed they are.”

I opened my mouth to speak but he cut me off. “I know what you’re going to say. Since my brothers and I have been there, we know all that already. But Don Diavonte doesn’t know that. We don’t want him to have accurate information on the Slayers, so if you get cornered, minimize everything. Our don cannot know their true strength because they are one of our strongest allies.”

Finally catching on to what he was saying, I said, “They’re the allies bound to you by blood through your sister. No matter what happens, you want that alliance and your sister protected.”

“God, it is so nice to talk to a woman who understand how our world works. Your old man did right by you, Aprilia. If someone tells you that you’re worth your weight in gold, they’re fucking lying. You’re worth you weight in gold pressed latinum.”

I rolled my eyes. “I almost forgot you were a *Star Trek* fan. That brings back memories.”

He smiled fondly at me. “We really like you, Aprilia. If you trust us, we’ll get you through this.” He winked at me. “And who knows, you might end up with a hot biker of your own.”

“Oh, aren’t you hilarious. You always were the one with the sense of humor in your family.”

“We’re all funny in our own way, including Diego. His humor is just a bit darker, that’s all.”

“I’ll take your word for that. Now, what is it you really want me to do?”

“Yeah, this is probably the part you aren’t going to like.”

“If it keeps me from ending up married to Chester, I’m all in.”

He reached inside his pocket and drew out a ring with a diamond almost the size of an ice cube. “I want you to pretend to be my fiancée. That’s the only way Don Diavonte is going to truly believe you’re our girl on the inside.”

I had a thought. “But surely if this is just to stop him marrying me off to his bookkeeper, then would us being engaged not be enough?”

Nicco shook his head. “Maybe, I don’t know how this is all going to pan out. We just want you safely out of the way while we take care of business. Also, it’s part of the deal. When I spoke to Don Diavonte, I knew he would be suspicious if I straight up said you were going in. So I came to tell him we were engaged.”

“You what?”

“Just hear me out Aprilia, I told him we were engaged, the whole thing with Chester wasn’t common knowledge so I had to get in first. Anyway, I said that you’d agreed to try and persuade Sophia to come home, and I wanted his permission to let you go in there.”

I listened incredulously. “And he was fine with that?”

“You could almost see the cogs working,” Nicco imitated the old man’s accent, “She’s gonna be in the viper’s nest? She’s gonna get real close to those bikers, she could be useful.” He laughed, “So that’s when he came up with the idea of you spying for him, while you’re trying to persuade Sophia to leave.”

He held his hand out, and the ring sparkled in the light.

I scooted forward and looked down at the ring. “Is the diamond fake too? It looks so real.”

“That’s the whole point. It’s a lab-created diamond. No one can tell just by looking with the naked eye that it’s not real.”

“Shouldn’t we go with something smaller to make it more believable?”

“No, we have a plan in place where when we walk in, my old man is going to freak out that I gave you a family heirloom without asking. We feel that the family discord will help sell the lie.”

He took the ring and placed it on my ring finger. “You know, if at any point you decide I’m your guy, I’ll pull the real diamond that looks just like this one out of its hiding place.”

I lifted my head to look at him. There was no sign of a lie in his eyes, only a hint of sadness or perhaps loneliness. I slid forward, wrapped my arms around his neck, and gave him a quick hug. “I’m not your one, Nicco. But I’m sure she’s out there somewhere waiting for you. Don’t give up on finding her, okay?”

He nodded and glanced away. “Looks like I’ll be old and gray before I find her, but thanks for the sentiment. You’ve always been a good friend and we’re not going to forget that.”

“Our conversation keeps going off course. What is it exactly that you really want me to do at the Dark Slayers clubhouse? You don’t really want me to spy, do you?”

“My brothers and I don’t really need you to do anything except hide out from an old man who likes to play matchmaker and stay safe until we’re in charge. Our don wants intel on the Slayers, but while you’re there it might be

good for me and my brothers to know if the Slayers have any intel on Don Diavonte that might be useful to us. I had to come up with an explanation as to why we're sending you to them. In addition to keeping you safe, Diego told their club president that you are to be a conduit for the flow of information between my family and the Dark Slayers."

"This seems like a flimsy excuse a smart person would easily see through."

Nicco countered quickly, "If Storm suspected Diego was lying, he didn't show it. Don Diavonte is in the middle of a mob war with the Dark Slayers MC and so he probably thinks we can't be too careful about communication."

"I know nothing about the situation and am already poking holes in the plan. Like, for example, couldn't Sophia spy on the Slayers for the don and report back on what's going on there? She's already in place and has a closer connection than I do. Surely, Don Diavonte doesn't expect you to stop talking to your own sister."

"He sure as hell does. Everyone sees my sister as a betrayer. Even my parents no longer speak to her. My brothers and I were able to slip away for her wedding, but we can't chance communicating with her often for fear of arousing Don Diavonte's suspicion."

"Wouldn't their club president be confused about why you're not just communicating through burner phones? You clearly don't need a real live person to carry messages back and forth. Couldn't you just have told him the truth?"

"You know what business is like, we all play our cards close to our chest. I told him we think Don Diavonte might have bugged our house and vehicles. Diego might have also mentioned that I want my fiancée far away from the powder keg that's about to explode when we take over. Their club president swore to assign you round the clock protection and keep you safe."

"Jesus, you and Diego have thought of everything. So, I'm to communicate back and forth with you like any good fiancée would while I'm visiting with your sister who betrayed the mob. I've got to think up false information about the club for you to pass onto Don Diavonte, and look for real intel on the don that the Slayers might have to give to you? I've gotta say, Nicco, this doesn't make a lot of sense to me." My head was just about ready to explode. It sounded like I was living in some unholy mash up of *The Godfather*, *Easy Rider*, and a Cold War spy thriller.

"Don Diavonte believes that women are peripheral to what goes on in our world. He would see Sophia as a betrayer that we cannot associate with.

However, my fiancée visiting with her lifelong friend will be seen as an attempt by our family to get her back in the fold, while netting him intelligence about what's going on with his enemy that he wouldn't otherwise have."

"Using your fiancée to snoop on an enemy while trying to manipulate his sister to betray her marital vows is completely messed up."

"Yes, according to our way of thinking it is messed up. But the old timers would find forgiveness for a woman if she abandoned the man who led her astray and earned her way back into our family with the right kind of penance. They see women as gullible, weak little puppets who are easily led astray. It's just the way old-school mobsters think. They like to believe that if you raise your children right, family will be the thread that always pulls them back in the end."

"Well, it sounds pretty damn sexist and an outdated way of thinking to me," I responded irritably.

"I agree, as do my brothers. This is one of dozens of reasons that Don Diavonte has outlived his usefulness. We need a changing of the guard, fresh blood capable of making better decisions. In order for that to happen, my brothers and I cannot be caught communicating with the enemy. It would earn us immediate execution. I'm not going to lie to you, this is a touchy situation that could very easily spiral out of control. The danger is for us, not you, though, because the Slayers have sworn to protect you, come what may, just like they did Sophia and Eleanora."

"Oh, Nicco, are you sure you want to do this? It sounds really dangerous. Your odds of winning a mob war against Don Diavonte are not good. Sophia would be devastated if anything bad happened to you and your brothers. Truth be told, so would I."

Nicco ran a hand through his hair, messing up his neatly arranged do. "We've been thinking about this for years. Now is our chance. In a nothing ventured, nothing gained world, we're just not willing to continue sitting on our hands."

I nodded, though not fully understanding where his head was on this one. Since his mind was made up and our objectives aligned, I went with it. "What will I tell the Dark Slayers when I get there? Is there a code word or anything that I need to use?"

"Diego spoke to their club president in person. They will understand why you're there." After a brief pause, he continued, "Naturally, our phone

conversations will not be private. Both myself, the Dark Slayers, and Don Diavonte will have access to everything you do and say on your phone as I've been instructed to put spyware on it—obviously, our don only thinks that he has access.”

“What about a burner phone?” I asked.

“No good,” Nicco said. “We can never be sure who’s listening in—what with high tech listening devices and spyware. Even with the best security in the world it’s always best to assume that someone may hear. Capisce?”

I thought he was being paranoid, but I nodded my agreement.

“Good girl. Because we need to be able to communicate safely, I’ve come up with a list of code words you can use to communicate what’s going on. I’ll warn you ahead of time that it’s a complicated list. I need you to memorize it and then destroy it. It’s the only way to ensure our communication is actually secret. Do you understand?”

I whispered, “Yes,” as the full magnitude of this situation finally hit me.

Nicco and his family were asking me to turn traitor against the mob in exchange for their protection and the hope that they turned out to be better shot callers than Don Diavonte. And I was agreeing to it because my back was against the wall, and this was my only chance to avoid a lifetime of staying on the run or marrying a man I despised.

Chapter 3

Mason

Storm had joined me back at the hospital once he'd returned from running his errand and we finally made it back to the clubhouse around three a.m. Corey was stable and out of surgery, Jav was going to stay with him until he woke. It had been a long day and I decided to get a few hours of sleep before we planned out an interrogation for the mobsters that managed to survive the attack against us.

I slept like the dead for once and woke up to my alarm buzzing so much my phone almost slid off the nightstand. I was tired as hell, but four hours of sleep would have to be enough, because we had work to do.

I jumped into the shower and let the hot water flow down my sore back. That always helped loosen up the tension. The last twenty-four hours had been absolute shit. Several of my club brothers had been injured and one almost lost an arm, all because some big city mobsters had an axe to grind with our club.

We Slayers were used to defending our territory from rival clubs and gangs. We had considerably less experience mixing it up with mobsters. Although they had come at us a couple of times, Storm had always found a way to trounce them in the past. I had a bad feeling that our luck was about to run out. That meant everything was riding on the interrogation taking place this morning.

Storm had discovered I was good at getting information out of people and that's why he asked me to join their team this time. Interrogating enemies was dirty work that nobody enjoyed doing. Unfortunately, it had to be done for our club to survive.

I climbed out of the shower, got dressed, and headed downstairs to get coffee. Evie jumped in front of me the minute I hit the bottom of the stairs.

"Hi, Mason. What are you up to this morning? Do you want some company?"

I stepped around her and mumbled, "No, I do not want company this morning. And my plans are none of your business."

"Why are you being rude to me when I've been nothing but nice to you?"

I kept walking and she followed, clearly wanting an answer to her question. When I stopped at the coffee pot, she was standing so close I didn't have room to make my coffee. I gently elbowed her aside. "Look, Evie, I don't have anything against you personally, but I need you to understand that I'm not looking for an old lady."

"But I'd make a really good one. Why don't any of the brothers see that?"

I turned, looked down at her sad face, and tried to explain the situation in a way that wouldn't leave her feeling worse than she already did. "I know you've been through a lot. It's understandable that you're looking for the kind of peace and security a property cut can bring. But when you immediately run from one brother to another when you get rejected, it doesn't make any of us feel very special. You're making us feel like an answer to a problem rather than a human being. I never got the feeling that you were the least bit interested in me until you got turned down by six or seven other guys. You know that ain't the way into a man's heart, right?"

Her face took on a stubborn expression. "It's not like that. I've always liked all the brothers here. You're all good men. Any woman would be grateful to be chosen. I'm just putting myself out there because if I don't ask, I'll never know."

"I understand what you're saying, but you being up at all hours and jumping at every chance to get with one of us just drives home the idea that any dick will do for you. Ain't no brother here wants that. I suggest you slow down, take your time, and figure out who it is you really want."

I turned and walked away. In my heart of hearts, I wanted her to take my words as the wisdom she sorely needed to move forward, because sometimes Evie just didn't know when to quit. I grabbed my coffee and headed for Storm's office. At this point, I wasn't sure whether I was leaving to get away from Evie or in the hopes that Storm would be up. I was pretty sure he would be, because the man's favorite expression was, 'let's get moving, we're burning daylight.'

Sure enough, Storm was at his desk with a cup, eyes glued to the screen of his laptop. He gestured for me to come in when he saw me at the door.

"I'm glad you're up early, Mason."

"Yeah, I know you hate burning daylight."

My club president shot me an irritated look. "Don't start with that shit. Every fucker in this club loves to give me a hard time about that, but there's nothing wrong with getting an early start on the day."

“You ain’t wrong about that, boss. So, what’s the plan?”

Storm leaned back in his seat, and after a pensive moment, he replied, “Out of the dozen men who jumped you, only four survived. Hacker has tracked down identifying information on three of them so far. We know where they live, who their families are, and most of their personal information.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Clearly, we’re not gonna resort to going after people’s families, so how does that factor into the discussion?”

“I’m not completely sure that it does,” he replied. “I’m not above using threats to their family as leverage.”

“I don’t think they would be quite stupid enough to believe we would go after their wives, kids, and grannies.”

“Mobsters threaten people’s families all the time. Sometimes they even follow through. They wear nice suits and see themselves as smart, worldly, and sophisticated. They see us as a bunch of thugs on bikes with a limited understanding of how their world operates. They probably think we’re one step away from animals, and attacking children might be within the scope of what we consider justifiable.”

“So, are you thinking we start with the three we might be able to leverage easily or the one we know nothing about?”

“No, we can save him for last. Maybe by then Hacker will have dug up some useful intel on him, or the other two will have leaked useful information about who he is.”

I took a sip of coffee. “We waiting on the others to get here or are we getting started on our own, boss?”

Storm downed the rest of his coffee and stood up. “We might as well go ahead and get started. The others can join in when they get here.”

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wanted to say we were burning daylight. The words were itching on the end of his tongue. It was funny watching him stop himself from saying that.

When we went downstairs to the holding cells, Rob was standing guard. He stepped out to greet us. “How’s Corey doing? Have you heard anything from Javelin?”

Storm answered, “Yeah, he texted me at five this morning to say his surgery went well and he was resting. They reconstructed his shoulder and warned that although the recovery might be prolonged, he should get full use back.”

“Thank God for that,” Rob replied. “It would kill him if he had to give up

prospecting for the Slayers.”

“That would never happen,” Storm stated flatly. “If Corey couldn’t ride, we’d have a sidecar made for him, just like Hacker’s. The Dark Slayers never leave a man behind. It’s one of the founding rules of our brotherhood.”

“Yes, sir,” Rob answered quickly. “I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Storm asked, “How did the prisoners hold up overnight?”

“The medics patched them all up. Three of them were pretty tight lipped but the fourth one spent the better part of the night screaming about how we should let him go or else. That we didn’t know who we were dealing with and there would be repercussions for imprisoning him in our hobby riders club.”

Storm grinned. “Let me guess, that’s the fucker we haven’t identified yet, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re definitely saving him for last. Maybe hearing his fellow mobsters screaming in pain will drive home the fact that he’s not in charge of shit now.”

We had a look at the three prisoners and picked the one who was the least injured to interrogate first. It made sense to let the others recover as much as possible before we got our hands on them. We wanted them alert and able to respond rather than groggy and preoccupied with their wounds.

We took the first man into the small twelve-by-twelve interrogation room and chained him to a chair. It was soundproofed enough that the others couldn’t hear what we were talking about, but they could likely hear screams.

The guy looked terrified, but he wasn’t fighting back. Storm stared down at him. “You’re the brainless one of the bunch, right?”

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

Storm pulled out a wallet and held it up. “You were the only man out of a dozen who was foolish enough to carry identification.”

“And?”

Storm popped him on the top of the head with his own wallet. “Well, shit for brains, when you carry your ID and go on a violent crime spree, it makes it easy to figure out who you are. Now, we know your name, address, which bank you use, and who your favorite contacts are because you’re carrying around five business cards in your wallet. What are you, sixty? Who carries business cards anymore?”

“If you have my ID, then you already know I’m nowhere near sixty,” the

man responded, sounding genuinely confused.

“Want to tell me who sent you to kill members of my club?”

“I don’t know anything. I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“If you’re going to lie, at least make it believable,” Storm grumbled. He started pacing in front of the man. “I’m told your cover job is a consultant at a venture capitalist firm. Is that true?”

The man nodded his head.

“That’s a good cover. It’s believable enough because on one knows what those fuckers do anyway. It also has the advantage of you setting your own schedule. Being a consultant frees you up to do as you like with very few questions from people in your life, right?”

The man looked absolutely bewildered. “I suppose. I just don’t know why it matters or what you want from me.”

Storm stooped down to look him in the face. “What I want is fucking answers about what happened at the roadblock. You’re going to tell me what I need to know one way or another, so why don’t you save me some time and you some pain by answering my questions the first time I ask?”

“I don’t have answers. I do have money. I can pay you to let me go.”

Storm lifted his head to look at me. “Do you want to have a go at him before I start breaking fingers?”

“Sure, boss. I’m getting strange vibes from this one.”

“Me too, but we don’t have all damned day to hold his damn hand.”

I stared down at the man’s blank expression for a long hard moment. “I need to know why y’all were standing at that roadblock shooting at us yesterday.”

“I wasn’t shooting at anyone. I don’t even carry a gun.”

“You expect me to believe you arrived with a carload of goons bent on killing, but you didn’t have a gun and had no intention of shooting anyone?”

“Yeah, that’s about the right of it. I tried to tell the kid that getting involved was a really bad idea, but he wouldn’t listen. Unfortunately, he was the one with the gun and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Now, my car is gone, I’ve got two cracked ribs, and I’m here in your nice dungeon getting interrogated by bikers about things I know nothing about.”

Storm was standing beside me within seconds. “What the fuck is he babbling about?”

“It sounds like he’s saying the kid who shot our prospect carjacked his vehicle with him in it.”

“Why in the hell would he do that? It doesn’t make any sense to steal someone’s car and force them to come along on a killing spree. I mean, the kid would have to be worried about his hostage jumping him while he was in the middle of a shootout.”

“I don’t think he was expecting a shootout. He kept saying that he had to get to the rendezvous point. While we were driving to wherever that was, we came upon the roadblock. He got excited and said, ‘There they are.’ He made me stop the car while things were in full swing,” the man explained.

Storm glared at our hostage. “Fucking hell, why didn’t you just drive off when the kid got out of the car?”

“He reached over and grabbed my keys from the ignition. When I realized I couldn’t drive away, I got out of the car and tried to run. That’s when someone caught me with the corner of their van while they were turning around. It knocked me to the ground, and before I could catch my breath, someone in a leather vest was dragging me away.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you just say that in the first place?” Storm asked angrily.

Our hostage pulled gently at his chains as he replied, “Because I have absolutely no idea what’s going on here. I’m guessing that those vigilantes must have been upset about something a member of your club did. All I know is I got caught between two groups of people intent on killing each other. Anything I say could be the wrong thing, the thing that gets me killed.”

Storm glanced at me. “What do you think? Is he telling the truth?”

“Yeah, I think he is. I remember wondering why there was a kid at a shootout. He looked to be about seventeen or eighteen, but now I’m thinking he might have been younger. It could be that his people were trying to leave him behind, but he wasn’t having it. If he’s not old enough to drive, that could explain why he kept the driver.”

“Lots of people in LA don’t drive even if they are old enough because LA has good public transport and shitty parking in the city,” our hostage chimed in helpfully.

Storm and I both just stared at our hostage. He wasn’t wrong, though. Finally, Storm grumbled, “This is starting to look like the mother of all fuckups. I’m inclined to believe him because he thought the mobsters were vigilantes. That’s the kind of mistake someone unfamiliar with the criminal underworld would make.”

“Does that mean you’re letting me go?” The man asked hopefully.

“Yeah, we’re not in the habit of harassing innocent people. But there are some things you need to understand before you leave. First is that those men shooting at us were members of the mafia. They’ve been trying to make a push into our hometown for over a year now. And what you saw was us defending ourselves. The police are already involved, and we’ve given statements.”

The more Storm spoke, the more relieved the man looked. I began removing the chains as Storm continued talking to him.

“We’re sorry you got caught up in this situation that didn’t concern you. We mistook you as one of them for obvious reasons and are willing to go the extra mile to make that right again. If you want to come with me to my office, we can talk about restitution.”

The man looked from one of us to the other. “Are you being serious right now?”

Storm handed him his wallet and gestured toward the door. “We’re never anything other than serious around this place.”

As they walked out, I could hear our club president asking if he was hungry or if he wanted a cold beer and offering to get the club medic to take a look at him. I wasn’t too sure that even a smooth talker like Storm would be able to make this situation right.

As I rolled the situation around my mind, it made sense that this guy was the least injured since he was trying to escape rather than engage in the conflict. It’s a real shame the kid went after Corey the way he did. He was way too young to have died.

I cleaned up the room and wiped down the chair, intent on pulling out our next hostage. But Grit beat me to it, walking through the door with Vincent Lorelli. As we took turns talking to this one, it became clear that he wasn’t an innocent bystander.

Grit was good at getting people to talk, so when the hostage gave up the intel, I started texting Storm the information in real time. We learned they were Don Diavonte’s men and were headed to Griffinsford when one of their crew got tipped off that a half dozen of us were on our way to Mammoth Rock. Setting up the roadblock on an isolated part of the highway had been a spur of the moment decision, one they lived to regret.

It was pretty clear that letting them go was just asking for trouble. However, it occurred to me that they might end up being useful in the near future, maybe for extracting more specific information or even for a hostage

trade in the upcoming turf war.

Rob stuck his head in the door just as Grit had unchained the second guest in our chair today.

“Storm told me to tell you two that he’s finished with the consultant you guys nabbed by mistake. He wants to talk to Mason.”

Grit jerked his chin toward the door. “You had best go see what Storm wants. Rob and I can handle it here.”

I headed upstairs and went straight to Storm’s office. He was sitting back in his office chair with his boots on his desk, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when I stepped into the room and gestured for me to sit down.

“What’s up, boss?”

Storm held up his cell phone. “Thanks for the intel from Lorelli. I hope getting him to talk didn’t turn out to be too bloody.”

“Nah. Grit’s like a gator with a grudge when he wants to be. Lorelli took very little in the way of physical persuasion. Of course, we’ve got two more to go, so maybe we’ll be able to drill down on more details.”

Storm nodded. “It all depends on how well placed they are in Don Diavonte’s organization. If they’re low-level henchmen, they likely won’t have meaningful intel to share.” He put his phone down on the desk and he folded his hands in his lap. “However it all shakes out, that wasn’t what I called you in to my office to talk about.”

“Well, I’m all ears, boss.”

“Yesterday, when you were at the hospital with Javelin and Corey, I met on neutral ground with Sophia’s brothers. In case you haven’t heard, the Russo brothers are up and coming young mobsters with ambition and balls of solid brass. They’ve been plotting and planning over the last year to get rid of their don and take his place at the top.”

“It’s nice to have ambition and balls. The question is do they have the guns, connections, and manpower to pull off something like that.”

Storm’s expression turned calculating. “If I had to bet on one side or the other, I’d put my money on the Russo brothers because they always seem to land on their feet. It’s the reason I decided to broach the subject of an alliance with them. Truth be told, they were agreeable and traded Sophia to us in order to cement that alliance.”

“Since our club doesn’t buy, sell, or trade women, I’m going to assume there was more to it than that.”

Storm picked up a sheet of paper off his desk and handed it to me. It was a

handwritten letter from Sophia asking Storm to accept her as in-kind payment for cementing the alliance with her brothers. She went on to state that she was of sound mind and wanted to officially break with her family and marry Blade.

“Giving her to us was performative, since she wanted to be here. Am I right?”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it. All three of her brothers even came to her wedding here at the clubhouse.”

“Do you want me to work with them? If so, I can do that. I’ve got no great love for mobsters, but Sophia’s a mighty fine lady, so I’ll find a way to work with her brothers.”

“No. Sophia’s brothers cannot be caught communicating with us. It seems that one of the brothers is engaged to Sophia’s childhood friend, a woman by the name of Aprilia Agazzi.”

I found myself smiling. “Her old man must have been a biker to have named her after an Italian motorcycle manufacturer. They don’t suit my personal style, but they’re nice bikes.”

“Agreed,” Storm responded. “As far as their don knows, Aprilia is coming out to visit with her longtime friend Sophia.”

I jolted forward in my seat. “And we’re just gonna allow her to come here? We don’t know anything about her. I gotta say, boss, this doesn’t sound like a great plan to me.”

“It’s going to give us a way to keep in the loop about what Don Diavonte is up to. She’ll be a conduit for information between us and the brothers. She and her fiancé, Nicco, have worked out a secret code which she will use to help us coordinate a plan of attack.”

“There are about ten better ways to communicate than some convoluted process like that.”

Storm nodded. “Agreed. I think they just want her somewhere safe while they take down their don.”

“Well, that’s understandable,” I agreed.

“I want you to be her personal protector while she’s here. Those brothers are the key to winning this war with the mafia, and Aprilia is the piece that enables us to communicate and coordinate a plan of attack. No matter what, she must be protected, and I think you’re the man for the job.”

“I assume she’ll be staying here at the clubhouse.”

Storm took his feet off his desk and leaned forward to look me in the eye.

“Aprilia’s safety couldn’t be guaranteed if she were staying someplace else. So, the two of you will be taking Celt’s old suite. There’s a bedroom, living room, and private bath. It’s the nicest space we have to offer. The sofa in the living room pulls out into a queen-size bed. You’ll be very comfortable there. I’ve slept there myself on occasion.”

“You want me with her twenty-four hours a day?”

“Absolutely. I have a short list of three brothers who can give you short breaks, but the bulk of responsibility will fall on your shoulders. If anything goes sideways, call me directly. I won’t insult your intelligence by warning you to keep your hands off Nicco Russo’s future wife.”

“You know that sounded like a warning, right, boss?”

Storm shot me a lopsided grin. “If the shoe fits, wear it, brother.”

Chapter 4

Aprilia

I decided to drive myself to Griffinsford in my old Honda Civic. I'd put nearly two hundred thousand miles on this car. My dad bought it for me when I turned sixteen. It was now a decade later and my Civic was still going strong.

I was old man Agazzi's only daughter. I might have had my mother's auburn hair, but everything else, right down to my proud Roman nose, was from my dad. He always called me his pride and joy, and I was the world's biggest daddy's girl. Now he was dead, and I was all alone.

I was sure Don Diavonte really thought he was doing me a favor by fixing me up with Chester. If my father had taught me one thing in life, it was that mobsters always put business first. When our don saw an opportunity to get information on the Dark Slayers, he didn't hesitate to send me into the heart of darkness. That fact alone told me that any concern for me was merely performative. Don Diavonte didn't care about me.

Nicco and his brothers were cut from the same cloth as Don Diavonte. They were all gangsters, and that was the reason I didn't entirely trust them. God knew I didn't trust the bikers I was about to spend who knew how long with. When Titans clashed, mere mortals like myself often got crushed in the process. That's why I needed to be smart, keep my wits about me, and carefully navigate my way through these three powerful groups of men who were all intent on using me for their own purposes.

Don Diavonte had called me to his office to explain in detail the kind of information he wanted me to gather. Nicco stood at my side, pretending to be the dutiful husband who was concerned about his young wife-to-be being sent into a nest of bikers. It was an easy story for my long-time friend to sell because a small part of him did harbor some concerns about the situation.

After we left, Nicco quizzed me on the list of code words he'd given me to memorize. He was pleased when I aced his little test. Then he took my cell phone and turned on the location app for himself and the Slayers that was tasked with protecting me. Not that the app could literally protect me. Maybe help them find me if things went bad... or my body. Of course, I wasn't naive enough to think the man assigned to be my protector would put me first when

things got dangerous. To him, I was just a job.

When I rolled into Griffinsford, my first stop was the gas station. The last thing in the world I wanted was to end up at the Slayers' clubhouse with not enough gas to escape in the event that things went wrong.

The moment I pulled up to one of the fuel tanks and got out of the car, I realized I wasn't in a good part of town. I quickly pulled out my credit card, paid for my gas, and started filling my tank up.

Having been taught to always maintain an awareness of my surroundings, I counted three men in my immediate vicinity who seemed seriously sketchy. One was inconspicuously taking puffs from what appeared to be a crack pipe hidden in his hand as he gazed at me with a vacant expression in his eyes. Two more were standing closer, under a streetlight. They were passing back and forth a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. One of them lunged at the other. When his friend jumped, the first man threw back his head and laughed. His friend surged forward and pushed him, sending him reeling backward until his ass hit the pavement.

I looked around to see if there were any employees present, but there was only someone pumping gas into a Jeep at another pump nearby. It was an older man with his head down, presumably just trying to pump his gas and get the hell out as well.

The minute I slid the gas nozzle back into its housing, the guy with the crack pipe seemed to jump in front of me out of nowhere."

"Where you going? You wanna give a guy a ride?"

"No, sorry," I stated firmly.

When he didn't move, I tried to step around him. He cut me off and kept talking. "You don't look like you're from around here. Are you just passing through?"

"Look, I don't have time to talk to you. Please move. You're making me late for an appointment."

He shoved me back against my car and slipped his hand around my throat. Both of my hands came up to wrap around his wrist just as he began to squeeze.

"Why is it that pretty bitches are always so stuck up? You don't have to treat men like garbage to feel good about yourself."

When he eased his grip, I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I tried again. "Please don't hurt me."

"Please don't treat me like shit," he sneered.

He lowered his head toward mine. It took me a minute to realize the crack addict was about to try and kiss me. Panic surged through my chest. I lifted both hands and clawed furiously at his face, leaving a bloody trail of scratches down his cheeks.

He grabbed my hands and pinned them down. I could see a wild kind of fury in his eyes. “You want to play games, bitch? I can play some fucking games.”

The throaty roar of a motorcycle filled the air and the man accosting me moved his body closer, pinning me so hard against the side of my car that I could hardly breathe. I hadn’t had the presence of mind to knee him in the groin when I had the chance and now there wasn’t enough space between us to execute the maneuver.

A few seconds later he was gone, ripped away from me by a huge, hulking biker, who slammed him down onto the ground and kicked him in the side before walking over to me and looking me over with a critical eye.

“Are you okay, Ms. Agazzi?”

Ignoring the man groaning in pain on the pavement for the moment, I looked up at the biker. “Who are you and how do you know who I am?”

“My name is Marcel Pierce, but everyone calls me Mason. I’ve been assigned by my club president to be your protector while you’re in our neck of the woods. I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner, cher.”

He had a Cajun accent as thick as gumbo, I brought one hand up to rub against my chest. “How did you know I was in trouble?”

“Your fiancé shared your location with me. Once I saw you were headed to the south side of Griffinsford, I got here as soon as I could. Luckily, I wasn’t at the clubhouse. It would have taken much longer to reach you.”

I nodded. “Nicco explained that he’d do that to keep me safe. I believe he texted me your number at some point as well.”

“Hopefully, you won’t be needing to call me. I plan to stick to you like glue until you get back to LA. Are you okay to drive?”

“Yes.” Gesturing to the guy who managed to make it to his feet and was now trying to fire up his crack pipe again, “I just wasn’t expecting to be jumped the minute I rolled into town.”

“Of course not. This is a bad neighborhood. You ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, that’s all. If you’d like to follow me, we’ll go directly to the clubhouse so you can get settled in.”

I nodded again. I didn’t give a moment of consideration to calling the

police because I didn't want to take the time to file a police report on a guy who was just going to be released in the morning and end up right back here with his pipe in hand. It seemed like a waste of everyone's time.

My hand was trembling when I reached for the door handle. I jerked it open and climbed inside. Once the door closed behind me and I hit the locks, I felt safe again. I started my car and eased out of the parking lot behind Mason.

Something about following him down the long, lonely secondary road was hypnotic. The way his bike tilted to the right and left as he hugged the curves seemed almost sensual. Mason was different from the men I grew up with. He wore a leather cut with his club's logo emblazoned across the back instead of a suit. He had a slow Southern drawl that was easy on the ears. Unlike mine, his brown hair didn't have a hint of auburn about it. In fact, it almost seemed to have golden highlights that glittered in the sun and his skin was tanned. Though I wasn't sure if this was natural, or because he spent so much time outdoors.

I remembered his worried hazel eyes and the way his hand came out when he first approached, as if he wanted to touch me to assure himself I was okay. He stopped about five inches from my arm and slowly lowered his hand. For a second it was like my brain misfired and I actually wanted him to touch me, to reassure me and become my safe place. It was strange, but thankfully the moment slipped away.

We arrived at the clubhouse almost thirty minutes later, and despite Nicco filling me in, it was nothing like what I expected it to be. From the outside, it looked more like a pub with a large commercial garage attached. Mason helped me lug my suitcases out of the trunk and carried them in for me like they weighed nothing.

The interior looked like a cross between a gentleman's club and a sports bar, but instead of sports memorabilia hanging on the walls, it was all motorcycle gear. It was neat, clean, and a pretty redheaded bartender was serving drinks behind a log bar. She looked over at us as we passed and winked at me in a way that was more friendly than flirty. I found myself smiling back before I could stop myself.

Mason picked his way through the multitude of leather-clad bikers and led me upstairs. As I looked at pictures depicting these men at biker rallies,

cookouts, and other life events, Mason was giving me information to help me adjust to living on their premises.

“We have an electric security system in place and our prospects stand guard at the front gate around the clock. The door to the suite locks from the inside, as does the bedroom door inside the suite. Plus, I’ll be your shadow while you’re with us. Rest assured, you’ll be safe here with me and my club brothers looking out for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mason. I’m sure everything will be perfectly fine.”

He shot me an amused look. “It’s just Mason, no formalities here, cher.” Glancing away, he continued with the tour of the clubhouse. “Drinks down in the bar are free. Whatever your preferred drink is, Rosie, our bar tender, will mix it right up. We don’t allow any hard drugs on the premises. Nor do we allow guests to record others without their express consent or post the goings on at the Slayer’s clubhouse on social media. People tend to get pissy about that one, so be careful to ask.”

“I understand. That’s not something I would do anyway. I have a very limited social media presence.”

“Good. We’re a private club. Everyone here is by invitation only and vetted personally by our club president.”

Unsure what to say to that, I murmured demurely, “That’s a good way to keep out the troublemakers, I suppose.”

He set down my suitcases in the hallway upstairs, pulled out a key, and unlocked one of the doors. He handed me the key as he shoved the door open. “I hope you like your suite. It has a private bath.”

“It looks very comfortable. Thank you for coming to my rescue back at the gas station, accepting the job as my protector, and helping me orient to being at your clubhouse.”

His expression registered surprise. “Protecting you and seeing that all your needs are met is going to be my responsibility twenty-four seven. If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to let me know, cher.”

“Thank you, Mason. I should be good—I packed well for this trip.”

He heaved my suitcases onto the top of a long dresser to make unpacking easier.

“Our prospects cook meals twice a day, in the morning and evening. Again, no charge. Anyone who’s at the clubhouse is welcome to dine with us. If you want something to eat outside of those times, just let Rosie know.”

“Is Rosie in charge of running the clubhouse?”

Mason sorted a laugh. “Sometimes, my brothers and I wonder about that ourselves. However, the person in charge around here is our club president, Storm. I’ll warn you ahead of time that he’s firm but fair. If there are ever problems that I can’t resolve to your satisfaction, Storm’s the person to talk to about that. He’s got an open-door policy, all you have to do is knock. I’ll show you where his office is later.”

“Nicco told me your club was started by a veteran, by and for veterans. Is that true?”

“Yes, cher. Storm founded this club with his battle buddy, Breaker, and his childhood friend Grit. Although Grit has never been in the military, almost every other brother in our club has. Storm used to run a support group for wounded warriors. As you can probably imagine, it drew a lot of veterans to our club.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I responded, hoping none of them were trigger happy and suffering from PTSD.

His tone of voice took on a note of warning when he spoke next. “I would advise you to stay out of the basement late at night unless you are looking to hook up with one of the brothers. There’s another bar down there, and one might describe it as part bar and part sex club, if you know what I mean.”

I gasped, a little shocked at what I was hearing. “You have a BDSM club in the basement of your clubhouse?”

He frowned. “Are you talking about those places where women are tied up, spanked, and forced to have sex?” Without giving me time to answer, he shook his head vehemently. “No, cher. Any brother caught doing some crazy shit like that would be immediately kicked out of our club.”

“That’s a weird take on BDSM clubs as it’s usually consensual, but whatever. Are you saying the bar in the basement is a strip club?”

His eyes narrowed at me. “You’re asking a lot of questions for a lady with a fiancé.” After a momentary pause, he continued. “Since you’re so curious, I’ll just come right out with it. The bar in the basement is adults only because lots of our brothers enjoy an old-fashioned clubhouse atmosphere where they can drink, get a little rowdy, and have sex with the lady of their choice. The women could be strippers, club bunnies, and even wives. Some brothers want to grab a private corner of the room to do their business. Others enjoy allowing everyone to see how pretty their woman looks when she’s flushed with the orgasm he just gave her.”

His bold words went straight to my clit, making it throb with interest. I

couldn't tell whether I was aroused by his sexy Southern accent or the thought of other men watching me enjoy an orgasm he gave to me. An image came unbidden to my mind of me straddling his lap in front of all his club brothers. Of struggling to take all of him as he rubbed my clit. It was shocking how little it would have taken to make me come in that moment.

The more I tried not to think sexy thoughts, the more those images filled my mind. I imagined his hands on my hips, helping me slide up and down his thick cock. I wondered what it would feel like being stuffed full of him. I always liked a little hair pulling with my sex. The thought of his big hand tangled in my hair was enough to make my eyes flutter.

I needed to get myself together before he figured out all the dirty thoughts running through my mind were centered on him. Instead, I imagined he was on top of me, losing control as he thrust into me deep and hard. Studying his face, I tried to draw an image in my mind of his mouth open and him breathing hard with an expression of lust on his face as he stared down at me.

As I stood there unable to stop fantasizing about having rough sex with him, his mouth fell open, and his tongue came out and swiped along his lower lip. I felt myself blush because it almost seemed like he knew what I was thinking.

He reminded me quietly, "You're engaged to Sophia's brother."

Of course, I wasn't engaged to Nicco. But Mason didn't know that.

"Don't worry, Mason. I'm not trying to wrangle an invite to the club's sacred sex parlor." Truth be told, it had been so long since I'd been with a man that I was touch deprived. That must be what had prompted all the X-rated images that just bloomed in my mind.

My protector blinked down at me, then his mouth snapped shut for a few seconds as if he were choosing his words carefully. "I didn't mean to insinuate you were, cher. You're certainly welcome to go down there any time to enjoy the sights while you're here. It's not like any of us would rat you out to Nicco, but in the same vein, I don't think any of my club brothers would be interested in having sex with another man's fiancée."

"It's a moot issue since I have no plans to go down there. Is there anything else you needed to talk to me about? I'd like to grab a shower and find something to eat at some point this evening."

Mason took a step back toward the door. "I'll leave you to your own devices. If you need anything at all, send me a text. I'll be downstairs in the bar. When you're ready to eat, come down and I'll show you where to find

some grub.”

I smiled at him for possibly the first time. “I should be down in about thirty minutes. Thanks again for looking after me while I’m here.”

Chapter 5

Mason

I walked downstairs, dumbfounded by our conversation. This woman might have been twenty-seven, have a sharp wit, and be mouthy as the day is long, but she also had a certain innocence about her. It was her inability to control her facial expressions that gave away that she couldn't stop thinking dirty thoughts about the sex club atmosphere downstairs.

A sick feeling swirled in the pit of my stomach. I should have never spoken so freely about what went on in our basement. Something about my words aroused the fuck out of Aprilia. I didn't know whether it was because we had a room dedicated to debauchery close at hand or it was hearing my coarse language when it came to sex. It was a well-known fact among my club brothers that a lot of nice women enjoyed dirty talk. I wished I had thought about that before I opened my stupid trap. It didn't sit well with me that I had inadvertently teased another man's fiancée that way. That's not something I would ever have done intentionally.

I also hated how it made me feel to see her pupils blown with lust, how breathless she got the more I talked, and how she shifted to press her thighs together as if she were turned on. Fuck, no woman had ever responded to me that way before. If she wasn't already engaged and off limits, nothing would have kept me from seducing the ever-loving fuck out of her the moment she showed such blatant interest in me sexually.

Aprilia was a seriously beautiful woman. She had short rusty brown hair, big, innocent brown eyes, and her body was strong, athletic, and she had just a hint of curves in all the right places. There was no doubt in my mind that I would be stroking my cock to thoughts of her for a very long time. I wasn't quite stupid enough to think that what went on upstairs was anything more than physical attraction. I had literally just met this woman. For all I knew, she could be the most toxic human being in the entire world.

I had no intention of getting close enough to her to form any kind of emotional attachment even if she was going to be sleeping just at the other side of a door. As attractive and enticing as she was, Aprilia was spoken for. Her fiancé was one of our strongest allies in the fight against the mobsters taking over our town. There was no way in hell I was going to let a woman

destroy the alliance my club was working so hard to build. I would consistently put my club before my cock every single time.

When I stepped off the stairs, the front door flew open. Storm came stalking into the room with a crew of our most seasoned fighters at his back. I could tell by looking at them that they had been through something tonight. They were bruised, bloodied, and some were limping.

When Storm caught sight of me, he jerked his chin toward the office. “Come with me, Mason. We need to have a talk.”

I followed him back to his office. The others either went to get cleaned up or get a cold brew.

“What the hell just popped off? Y’all look like you’ve seen some major action.” I asked, pissed that my club brothers had been jumped again.

“Those fucking mobsters hit our strip club. The girls made it out alive, but they burned the place to the ground.”

“That was a neat trick, considering the building was mostly metal.” We’d set up shop at an old-fashioned gas station built mostly of steel years ago. That business was a consistent, legal money maker for our club.

Storm threw himself down in his desk chair and glared at me. “The fucking building exterior might be made of metal, but everything inside sure the hell wasn’t. A hollowed-out metal shell does not a strip club make, Mason.”

“Did you manage to get your hands on any of them?”

Storm nodded wearily. “There were five of them this time. We caught ended up killing four, but Celt and Grit are tracking the fifth one through the woods as we speak. If they manage to catch him alive, we’ll interrogate him. However, we pretty much know exactly what’s going on. Don Diavonte is sending small groups of his foot soldiers on targeted operations to destroy our assets and kill as many of us as he can. It’s not a bad strategy. If he manages to financially gut our club, we won’t be in a position to fend off a full-scale takeover of this town. Same thing if he thins our ranks.”

Storm’s cell phone started ringing. He answered it, hit speaker, and Diego’s arrogant voice filled the room. “I heard what went down at your strip club. You should have better security, especially since you own a security firm.”

Storm growled back angrily, “How the fuck is it that you can manage to call and have a private conversation? I thought you were sending us Aprilia to be a carrier pigeon of sorts.”

“Strange that you should ask. My brothers and I bought an old warehouse

down by the docks. According to public records, it hasn't been in use for close to fifteen years. Inside, hanging on the wall, was a public payphone. Believe it or not, it only cost me one shiny quarter to make this call."

Storm snorted a laugh. "I'm calling bullshit on that story. There are less than one hundred thousand pay phones left in the entire United States. One fourth of them are all somehow in New York and the rest are in prisons, schools, and hospitals."

Diego's voice turned icy. "Since this building is scheduled for demolition in a few days, you can consider this a one-off opportunity. We should make the best of it."

Storm sighed. "Agreed. Have to say I'm really pissed, your thugs completely destroyed the strip club. It was one of our more lucrative sources of income."

"Hey, don't be putting the blame my way. You know the score with Don Diavonte, he may be our don but we ain't his puppets. My brothers and I have no interest in Griffinsford."

"That may well be true, but you're all part of the same beast, and now we've got no club," Storm growled.

"That's a shame. Can you find another location on short notice?"

"One of our club members got hitched to a woman who owns a strip club for curvy girls. We might be able to buy the site from her and set up some kind of split schedule."

"Curvy girl bars are all the rage right now. This might turn out to be a blessing in disguise for your club, Storm."

"Yeah, that might be true in the long run. However, it's still gonna cost us start-up cash to purchase the new site and pay for renovations."

"We've been busy here in LA, depriving Don Diavonte of his revenue streams at every turn. It's been both gratifying and enriching. In the name of strengthening our alliance, I would be willing to front you fifty grand in the form of a loan with zero interest spread over three years."

Storm thought it over for a minute before replying, "I think you can afford to make that fifty grand a gift rather than a loan."

"Why ever would I do that? No one gives away money."

"No," Storm agreed. "They do pay reparations, though. The way I see it, it doesn't matter who the top dog in your organization is. That can change from one moment to the next. The bottom line is your organization destroyed valuable property that belong to the Dark Slayers MC."

“I’m not paying for damages I didn’t inflict, Storm. Come up with another request, something that doesn’t cost me a cent, and I’ll consider it.”

“Since we’re an ally in your quest to become the new don of your organization, how about when you finally sit in the big chair, we agree that you get the whole organization and I get the contents of Don Diavonte’s safe.”

“I think fifty grand is reasonable compensation for the damages inflicted by our organization.”

“Thank you, Diego. It’s always a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Just so you know, we’ve been depriving him of his cash operations. I’m not interested in laundering fifty grand, so you’ll have to take it in cash.”

“That’s an acceptable compromise. How do you want to make the drop?”

“I’ll send my younger brother to the meeting spot that you and I used a few days ago. Lucas is an expert at slipping around unnoticed.”

“When?” Storm asked.

“How about next Tuesday at five in the morning? Is that too early for you?”

“Not at all, but I’ll probably send one of my club officers.”

“Fine, but the code word is Oswald. If they don’t give it, they get a bullet instead of the money.”

“Look, you ignorant fuck. If you end up shooting one of my men, you’re going to be fighting a war on two fronts.”

“You’re so easy to mess with, Storm. I don’t know how you move about being as rigid as you are,” Diego said, clearly amused.

“Whatever. Just keep your fucking jokes to yourself from now on.”

“Fine. Shall I assume my brother’s soon-to-be blushing bride arrived safely?”

“Yes, and she is currently taking a rest in her suite. Her protector reports that she seems like a really nice lady.”

“Take good care of her. We’ve known her since we were children. I could issue some threats, but I’m certain you know better than to let anything unpleasant happen to Aprilia.”

“We’re wasting a lot of time talking about nonsense when we could be planning our strategy.”

Diego was quiet for a second. “Did you have a suggestion to help speed Don Diavonte’s tumble from the top?”

“I can think of one thing in particular that might immediately transfer a

good deal of his personal power directly to you,” Storm said after a long moment.

“I’m all ears. The sooner we stem the flow of blood, the better for all of us.”

“You already know that Don Diavonte leveraged Steel, the club president of Twisted Metal, into becoming his errand boy.”

“Yes. I am aware of their alliance. It’s problematic.”

“Steel and I have spent a lot of time talking and have come to an accord. He’s eager to cut ties with your don and shared an interesting piece of information with me that you need to know.”

“Our call is not traceable to my knowledge, so do share.”

“Steel did a job for Don Diavonte a few years back that involved clearing out a man’s safe and getting rid of any incriminating stuff that might fall back on him. In addition to valuables, he found a long list of prominent people that were being blackmailed in LA. Steel said there were several local political figures on it. I’m certain either someone was blackmailing them already, or Don Diavonte leveraged that information to blackmail them himself in an effort to solidify power.”

“That *is* good information, and where would one get a hold of that list,” Diego practically purred.

“Steel said he took clear images of each sheet before Don Diavonte had him burn the originals. I think he mistakenly took Steel for hired muscle and hadn’t even considered that he’d be interested in what he was photographing. Since keeping that kind of information directly on a computer wouldn’t be a very smart thing to do, I suspect he’s either keeping it locked securely in cloud storage or it’s sitting on a flash drive inside of his safe.”

“Don Diavonte has a couple of safes that I’m aware of. At least one in his home and another at his office. Both places are locked down like Fort Knox.”

“We have a member of our crew who was former military intelligence. His hot take on this is that if Don Diavonte is sophisticated enough to understand the value of using information to leverage people into doing his bidding and persistent enough to track down specific information, this is probably just the tip of the iceberg. My gut tells me that if you can access the safe where he keeps all his secrets, there’s no telling what kind of intel you might find in there. It could be enough to turn the tide of your war.”

“I do love a good challenge, especially one that will advance my cause. Give me time to work on this and we’ll get back to you.”

“My guy will see your brother on Tuesday at five a.m. The code word is Oswald. No shooting, you prick.”

Diego just laughed, then hung up.

“I thought Diego was supposed to be the crazy one. He doesn’t sound that way to me. More like someone who enjoys dark humor and poking at people to get a reaction. Those were high value traits in my family growing up,” I offered.

“Good, you can deal with the stupid fucker from now on,” Storm grumbled.

“Diego values position, power, and intelligence. He won’t take well to being asked to communicate with an underling. Pushing me into dealing with him will likely damage our alliance with him. He’ll see it as disrespect if the person in charge doesn’t deal with him directly.” After a momentary pause, I added, “Also, he really likes you.”

Storm looked at me like I had just grown a second head. “I don’t know where in the hell you got a crazy idea like that. Diego doesn’t even respect me, much less like me. He’s always trying to get one over on me and it’s irritating as hell.”

“He does. It was clear from listening to your interaction that he admires you quite a bit. I could tell, mostly because he communicates with you directly and jokes around. Most importantly, he took the time to call when he learned one of our properties had been destroyed. He offered assistance. I doubt there are many people he bothers reaching out to when things in their world go bad.”

“I don’t get his sense of humor, at all. His emotions swing back and forth in a way that seems like he doesn’t have good control of his behavior.”

“He seems like he has some kind of attachment disorder, probably from being raised by emotionally unavailable parents.”

“Jesus, Mason, have you been taking psychology classes or something?”

“Yeah, while I was in the military. It was necessary to get my head around what I went through as a kid. I also spent most of my teenage years in therapy, so I’m just basically regurgitating to you what I learned in therapy and college. Attachment disorder is just a fancy term for my parents didn’t really connect with me or spend a lot of time talking to me when I was a little kid. They say it’s a form of neglect.”

“Shit, man, I’m sorry that happened to you. My parents were assholes in a different way. They were rich bastards who tried to control every fucking

thing I said and did. I haven't spoken to them in years."

"Same here. Thank God for the Slayers. If I didn't have this club, I wouldn't have anything."

"Yeah, I hear you," Storm replied wryly. He took a deep breath and asked, "What were we talking about before Diego's phone call?"

"We were discussing what happened at the strip club."

Storm sat back in his chair again, face grim. "There were five club members on site, along with seven strippers when the first shots rang out. They caught us as we were getting the place ready to open, so there were no customers. They shot the windows out first and then began tossing Molotov cocktails into the building. I'm not exactly sure what accelerant they used but it was highly volatile. Before we could do anything to respond, everything inside was on fire. We should have installed a new sprinkler system, because when we needed it, the damn thing didn't go off."

"They might have sabotaged it, in which case it wouldn't have mattered whether it was a new system or not."

"True. I guess we won't know until the place cools down enough to get an inspection done. In any event, we were all unharmed and got the strippers out safely. I'll be damned if the fuckers weren't back there waiting on us. While the women made a run for it, we engaged the enemy. It was a hot mess. By the time the fifth one made a run for it, Celt and Grit had arrived along with several more brothers. My cousin and Grit immediately started tracking him down while the others sent the women home."

"I assume someone disposed of the bodies." All the endless death was starting to make me feel like I was on active duty again."

"Yeah. I wish I could feel bad about killing the stupid fuckers, but I don't. We're not the one's going into their territory and shooting up the fucking place. They're the ones bringing the violence to us. If they set up shop in Griffinsford, they'll be pushing heavy narcotics, trafficking women and running every scam you can imagine. The quality of life for everyone in our town will take a gigantic nosedive."

Chapter 6

Aprilia

I took a long shower, washed my hair, and took my time getting ready for dinner because I was anxious about mixing with the club members and the women milling about downstairs. It was interesting that Mason had called them club bunnies. It made me wonder if they saw them as Playboy bunnies, as in beautiful women who were meant to be gazed at but not touched, or if there was something more sexual at play. Maybe they just wanted a neutral name to call the women who hung out at the club? Bunnies was far better than what some other MCs probably called their women.

After putting on jeans and a copper-colored silk blouse that complimented my complexion, I threw my hair up into a messy updo. Then I pulled on a pair of dark leather zip up boots with a low heel in case I needed to hoof it out of here tonight. I crammed a slimline wallet with my identification, credit cards, and cash into one back pocket of my pants and my cell phone into the other. My father always joked about me carrying my phone and money around like a man rather than in a purse. But I was never the girly type—the fact that I'd packed a Smith & Wesson snub nose semi-automatic in my luggage was testament to that. Though since arriving at the clubhouse my gun had been taken into safekeeping, which wasn't great, but I had to abide by their rules while I was here. Nicco had pointed out that they were not outlaws, but I didn't know if his perception of the Dark Slayers MC was accurate, so I had wanted to be ready for anything.

The stairs creaking must have given away my approach, because Mason swiveled around on his barstool and spread both his beefy arms out along the bar on either side of his body. Sitting there, wearing his cut, a tight black T-shirt with his biceps bulging, he looked like just another biker. But there was something about his intelligent hazel eyes that caught my attention. His expression was hard to read but I knew that was probably standard operating procedure for him. All the men I knew back home were that way, too proud to show their feelings.

As I walked toward him, I noticed the bulge in the front of his jeans, and by the way he shifted on the stool I walked a bit taller, knowing what that meant. He found me physically attractive. I wasn't delicate and pretty like my

friend Sophia, but I had curves in the right places and took care of myself. When my eyes lifted to his, I saw his chin come up a notch as if he was daring me to comment on his growing interest.

I stopped in front of him and gestured down with my hand. “Do you need to take care of that? If so, I can wait at the bar, maybe have a cocktail.” Putting the emphasis on *cock* got a reaction out of him.

He threw his head back and laughed. “Damn, girl, you’re brazen.”

I shrugged and glanced around the room. “Just trying to be accommodating without being, you know, accommodating.”

“You’re casual as fuck about things that make most women blush, especially for a taken woman.”

Damn, I needed to keep my mind on my cover story, and not get derailed by hot bikers with impressive bulges in their pants and a mouth that looked like it knew how to please a woman. After surveying the room for another second, I turned my attention back to my protector. “Sorry, Mason, I guess the whole situation is a bit strange, I need to think before I talk.”

He stood and gazed down at me. “I like how you say whatever’s on your mind, cher. This is going to make dealing with you a whole lot easier.”

I gazed up at him with my hands on my hips and raised an eyebrow. “You make me sound like a problem.”

“Oh, you’re a problem alright. A beautiful, strong-willed woman living among men desperate for love and companionship? Trust me, there will be problems. Good thing I’ve been appointed to protect you. I can smack any interest in you right off their faces and send you back to your man once it’s safe for you to return.”

A hint of a frown creased my face, part of me hated that he thought I belonged to anyone. Not, I realized, because I objected to ownership—though that sucked—more that I wanted him to see me as someone he could be interested in and not just as a job. “I get it, hopefully you won’t have to do babysitting duty for long. Can we get some food now? I’m starving.”

He gestured to the back door. “Getting you something to chew on besides my ass sounds like a really good idea about now.”

Outside, he introduced me to a man with the word *Prospect* in bold letters on his leather vest. “Aprilia, this is Rob. He’s our resident grill master who’s also responsible for managing all of our prospects.”

“Nice to meet you,” I murmured and held out my hand.

Before he could shake my hand, Mason shoved a dinner plate at me and

kept right on talking. “Here at the Dark Slayers clubhouse, the prospects protect club property, maintain the clubhouse, see that guests get the things they need, and operate the grill twice a day.”

“Got any vegetables?” I asked, as I eyed up the meat feast.

“Rob, give the woman a potato with her steak,” Mason shouted over, then gave me a look. “Wait, you’re not vegetarian, are you?”

I shook my head, “No, just that the Atkin’s diet is a bit last decade, but maybe you guys didn’t get the memo?”

“Ha ha,” Mason retorted deadpan. “Don’t worry cher, the prospects can get you a tomato or two tomorrow in case you’re worried about scurvy, but tonight we’re eating caveman style.”

“Fine by me, those steaks look awesome.” I said, and it was true. My mouth was watering.

When the other man forked a huge steak onto his plate, Mason’s eyes lit up. “Rob and his team grill the juiciest steaks in the tri-county area.”

Rob took my protector’s over-the-top introduction in stride. “Thanks for the kind words, Mason.” He slid a steak onto my plate, wiped his hand on a clean cloth and extended his hand again. “Welcome to the Slayers clubhouse, Ms. Aprilia. Be sure to let us know if you need anything.”

When we shook hands, Mason playfully smacked his hand away. “No touching. Friendly waves only.”

Rob’s mouth fell open. “For real?”

Mason shook his head and grinned. “Just yanking your chain.”

“Strange how you’ve never had a sense of humor before now,” the other man replied with a wry smile.

“Yeah, about that. It’s less to do with having a pretty lady at my side and more to do with surviving a shoot-out with those mobster assholes from the city.” Mason’s mood had soured somewhat at the reminder of recent violence with Don Diavonte’s men, violence no one had bothered to mention to me. Which, considering who my father had been aligned to, and who my fake fiancé worked for was a pretty big omission.

Rob added a baked potato to Mason’s plate. “Well, I have just the thing to put you back in a good mood.”

Mason’s expression turned hopeful. “You found it?”

Rob reached beneath the grill. “Yeah, I ordered the hot sauce you talked about the other day, and it just came in today.”

It was cute how Mason strained to see what his friend was pulling out. The

minute he saw the bottle, he said excitedly, “Gimme, gimme.”

When Rob’s hand came up with a smallish brown bottle sporting the image of a whacky voodoo doll, Mason made a slurping sound. “Come to daddy.”

Rob passed him the bottle. “Straight from Baton Rouge, Louisiana.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Rob. This has been my favorite for as long as I can remember. I can’t believe you got it so fast.”

“Bayou Magic Foods has an online store, I ordered you a box,” Rob replied, looking bemused by the way Mason gazed at the label as if mesmerized. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face the entire time we finished filling our plates and got drinks. Mason grabbed us a table in the thick of the action. Sitting down, surrounded by his club brothers, the big biker seemed very much in his element. Me, not so much, but I tried to appear relaxed.

I watched him peel off the shrink wrap and carefully open the bottle. Caught in his own little world, he took a whiff from the open bottle. I couldn’t help but smile at how much he was enjoying himself with such a simple treat. He drizzled a bit on top of his steaming hot steak, set the bottle aside, and cut off a long, thin slice. Watching him pop the first bite into his mouth was fascinating. His eyes drifted closed as he chewed, and a look of pure bliss settled onto his face. Everything about his reaction was over the top.

Nothing in the world of hot sauce could be this good. I picked up the bottle and read over the label. The branding was top shelf, and the glass bottle had some weight to it. I was way more intrigued by this man’s special sauce than I should have been. When I glanced up, he was looking at me.

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Love Spell Cajun Flavor Voodoo Sauce by Bayou Magic Foods. What is this?”

“Only the world’s greatest Cajun inspired hot sauces. Give it a try,” he encouraged as he sliced off another bite of steak.

I brought the bottle near my nose to smell it and could not believe the aroma. The spicy scent was unlike anything I’d ever smelled before. It suddenly became apparent that I’d led an extremely sheltered life when it came to spices. I immediately drizzled a few drops onto my steak.

“Cher, I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist Voodoo Sauce. No one can,” Mason teased me.

I chuckled. “I hope this stuff tastes as good as it smells.”

He waited expectantly for me to take a bite. When I did, a shock of flavor

exploded in my mouth. The big deal he was making suddenly made a lot more sense. “Oh my God. I can taste so many other flavors, not just chili.

He nodded, clearly pleased with my enthusiasm.

I proceeded to cover my steak in a thin layer of the sauce. “What’s with the voodoo spin on the merchandising?”

“It’s because the company is located in Baton Rouge, where Creole spices are popular. New Orleans is what most people think of when they hear the word voodoo and Louisiana, but it’s found in other cities too. When I was boy, my mémère used to talk about how Voodoo was real and her favorite deity was Papa Legba, the god of the crossroads.”

I swallowed the bite in my mouth and nodded, immediately fascinated by the conversation. “I thought that was Baron Samedi?” I vaguely remembered watching some movie that had a voodoo subplot.

He grinned, clearly enjoying the conversation as much as I was. “He’s more Haitian, though there’s some crossover. There are different names for different aspects of the deity—Baron Samedi, Papa Legba and his counterpart Kalfu, who’s pictured on the bottle, are all linked to the crossroads whether literal or metaphorical. But a lot of the true meaning of voodoo is known only to the believers, and the stuff about making deals or summoning demons at crossroads comes more from European folklore.”

“Like selling your soul.”

“Exactly, that came from people trying to put a Christian slant on what is essentially a traditional African belief system. Papa Legba is a little different. Mémère always described him as the one who controlled the spiritual crossroads that everyone has to navigate when they have important ethical decisions to make in life.”

“So he’s not a demon?”

“No, but I can understand how people might think that—there’s a lot of misinformation. He removes obstacles and opens roads. He was considered the intermediary between man and the other spirits due to his gift for communication, but he was also a trickster which meant that he could be unpredictable.”

This man was so sweet and genuine. I loved talking to him. “He must have possessed demon-like qualities at least.”

He shrugged one big shoulder and swallowed the bite in his mouth before responding. “You’re looking at this more from a Christian viewpoint, forget about angels and demons, good and evil, dark and light. It’s all about balance.

Mémère was Creole. Her family grew up around Baton Rouge and were African, Cuban and Native as well as European. She used to tell me how Papa Legba, like many of the deities from the old religion, survived because he lived in our collective memories. The spices on our foods were offerings to the loa or spirits, meant to lure them to our celebrations. That's why delicious food was such an important part of our get-togethers."

When I gazed at him, trying to imagine it all in my mind's eye, he started to look a bit self-conscious.

"I might not have explained that exactly right because, to be honest, cher, I wasn't the most attentive kid."

I rushed to reassure him. "No. You did an amazing job. I promise. I'd love to hear more about your family traditions sometime."

Something in his eyes shifted, making him appear momentarily vulnerable. When he continued, emotion crept into his voice. It made me worry that I was encouraging him to share too much. "My parents weren't interested in any of her stories. No one was, except me. I remember many a time that mémère's wrinkled hands cupped my face and she said, 'Remember my words, child. Don't ever forget them or me.'"

Something about that last bit hit me right in the feels because it reminded me so strongly of my own superstitious grandmother. She used to warn me about sitting at the corner of a table, not pouring wine backhanded, and reminded me to always lay bread loaves right side up on the table. I could even remember all her reasons for those superstitions. I also remembered how badly she suffered before she passed. I was fourteen, and losing her tore my heart out. This man brought up such emotional memories with his sharing. I teared up and felt my bottom lip quiver a little.

"That's the sweetest story I've ever heard," I choked out. "Thank you so much for sharing that with me. Let your mémère know that you didn't forget and passed along one of her stories tonight." I reached out and covered his hand with my own, giving him a little squeeze. "I won't forget it either."

He looked at me for a long, hard moment, slid his hand out from under mine, and murmured, "I'm sorry to say, my mémère is long gone."

I nodded as I tried to wrangle my emotions back under control. "Gods and people are never really gone as long as we remember them, right?"

His expression was so forlorn that it made my chest ache. He took a long draw off his bottle of beer and then answered, "Yeah, of course, you're right. I don't know what's gotten into me tonight, talking about old times and all."

I couldn't seem to take my eyes off this stranger that I felt such a strong kinship with. Feeling more confused by the minute, I struggled to understand how easily I kept feeling pulled toward him. I truly didn't understand this almost surreal connection between us or how it was progressing so quickly. This was a precarious situation for me. I couldn't afford to catch feelings for any of these men, especially when I was supposed to be promised to another.

When my eyes lifted to his, I had to admit the truth. Something about him felt familiar. I couldn't figure out who he reminded me of or if we'd perhaps met in a past life. Until this moment, I hadn't believed in such things.

A memory rose in my mind of my grandmother's stern face looking down at me as she spoke. "It does not matter one little bit if you believe in the old ways or not, Aprilia. One day, when you're all grown up, you'll understand how the world works." A chill ran up my spine at how true her words had turned out to be.

A short silence spun out between the two of us that was eventually broken by Sophia's bright, cheerful voice. "Aprilia, I heard you were here, I've been looking all over for you."

I sprang out of my chair, and we hugged like long-lost sisters. When she tried to pull back, I held on a second longer just because I needed to. Sophia was one of my best friends growing up and the one thing that made me feel like I wasn't all alone in a den of iniquity.

When we broke apart, her expression was concerned. "Aprilia, are you okay?"

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Yeah, I'm trying to be. It's so good to see you again, Sophia. How are you doing? Is your hot biker treating you well?"

The expression on her face spoke volumes about how thrilled she was with him. "I've never been so happy. Blade is really good to me." Before I could respond, she put her arm around me and whispered, "Grab your plate and come into the bar. Ella is here. We can catch up on everything."

I turned to look at the table. Apparently, we were close enough for Mason to hear our conversation because he immediately stood up and handed me my plate. "Have a nice time visiting with your friends. I'll be at the bar. If you need me, just holler, and I'll come running."

I reached out to take my plate, brushing my fingers against his. His skin was warm and a little rough. I tried not to look at how large and strong his hands were because I didn't want to spiral into another episode of thinking

inappropriate thoughts about him. Jesus, this man had me feeling like a horny schoolgirl. Sister Mary would make me say twenty rosaries for the thoughts that had flown through my mind earlier. It took me a second to realize that I hadn't actually taken the plate from him. We were just standing there with our fingers touching, him not letting it go and me not pulling it from his grasp. Sophia cleared her throat, and I snapped out of it.

Once we were on our way, my longtime friend asked, "What was that about?"

I felt my face heat with embarrassment. "I wish I knew," I whispered back.

I knew immediately what table we were going to because Eleanora was there, drinking an appletini. She waved the minute she caught sight of me. "I can't believe you're really here."

"Yeah, it's a real dream come true," I deadpanned back.

We took our seats and Sophia chided me gently, "Don't be like that. The Slayers are a lot nicer than they appear at first glance."

"Well, I heard the two of you got the best men of the bunch, so I'm not surprised you're singing their praises."

"Speaking of men," Sophia said. "Is it true, you're engaged to my brother?"

I held up my engagement ring.

"That looks suspiciously like my grandmother's heirloom ring."

I lowered my voice. "Come on now, you know Nicco's smarter than to slide a five-carat diamond onto my finger and send me off alone."

Sophia gave a sigh of relief. "He had a replica made. That's smart." Then her eyes narrowed at me. "Just make sure he eventually gives you the real thing."

"I'd rather not be responsible for the Russo family diamond," I admitted. "That's what my grandmother used to call it, by the way."

Sophia chuckled. "Our grandmothers were something else. I'm glad we're not competitive about every little thing like they were."

"I think it was just the way it was back then," Eleanora chimed in. "They were housewives who spent too much time shopping and talking about each other."

I went back and forth in my mind about whether to tell them the engagement was fake. I decided to keep that under wraps for now. Keeping them in the dark would be safest for everyone concerned, especially these two women I'd grown up caring about. We fell into friendly banter about old

times and everything except what Sophia's mobster brothers were up to and anything to do with the club business.

This is the way it had had always been with us, mostly because Eleanora was clueless about her family's mob connections and Sophia's awareness of her family's misdeeds was very limited. I was the only one in our friend group who was totally dialed in to the mobster lifestyle. Whereas most mobsters felt that withholding information made their family safer, my father believed that me knowing as much as possible would increase the probability of me being able to navigate difficult and dangerous situations. I'd never felt the need to clue in my friends. For women in our situation, ignorance was bliss.

Chapter 7

Mason

I followed the two women into the main room and dropped down onto a stool at the bar. Since tonight was Thunder and Rosie's anniversary, she wasn't wasting any of it behind the bar. They appeared to be holding court at a set of tables that had been shoved together in the back of the room. Everyone was watching them play some kind of drinking game. Every time one of them got a question wrong, they had to drink a shot. From what I could tell, they were about neck and neck.

My eyes drifted to the table in the corner where Aprilia, Sophia, and Eleanora were sitting. The women were smiling and talking amiably with each other like the long-lost friends they were. There was something different about Aprilia that I couldn't seem to put my finger on.

As I gazed at them, I decided it might be that Sophia and Eleanora were both elegant and fancy, with their sophisticated clothing and expensive looking jewelry. They were both wearing high pumps with red soles, which I was smart enough to remember meant the shoes were extra special, pricey ones.

Not Aprilia. My new charge was dressed like a regular person. She had on dark jeans, a brown silk blouse and low-heeled boots. Unlike the other two after a long night on her feet, Aprilia's wouldn't be killing her. I also liked the careless, cute thing she did with her hair. Aprilia was more down to earth and worlds more approachable than either of her friends. In addition to being well put together, she was just about the most attractive woman I'd ever set eyes on. She had a lean athletic build and exuded energy and an easy confidence. That clever mind of hers was a source of endless fascination for me. I genuinely liked this woman, but, unfortunately, she wasn't mine to like. I had a feeling I was going to end up looking back on this as one of the great tragedies of my life.

I was so deep in thought that I barely noticed a big body drop down onto the stool beside me. I glanced over to find Storm staring at me. "Wanted to give you an update on Corey."

"Did they get him patched up?"

Storm made a gesture to the prospect behind the bar to bring two more

beers for us. “Yeah. He had multiple fractures, which they pinned together, and they’re keeping him another twenty-four hours for observation. Then he’ll be discharged home with Jav and Leah, Cassandra and Ace are gonna stay with them for the next week or two and keep an eye on him.”

“Cassandra is a mighty fine doctor. We’re damned lucky to have her associated with our club.”

Storm took a long draw off his beer before responding. “Yeah, she was an ER doctor, so she’s good at dealing with broken bones, gunshot wounds, and all the stupid shit we get ourselves into.”

“I’m sure that between his brother and Cassandra, Corey will be right as rain in short order.”

“Yeah, I goddamn well hope so. So, is Aprilia giving you any trouble?”

“Not at all. It’s pretty clear she’s not wild about being here, but she’s being an exceptionally good sport about it.”

“Let me know if you pick up anything unusual going on with her.”

“What do you mean, boss?” I asked.

“I know we’ve got an alliance with the Russo brothers, but you know what these mobsters are like. It’s always better to watch your back.” Storm said, as he rubbed his hands across his eyes, it had been a long day, as far as I knew he’d been up since before dawn again.

“Understood. Will do,” I responded uneasily. I didn’t want there to be anything amiss with her. I desperately wanted her to be exactly what she seemed.

Storm took another draw off his beer and said, “I’m meeting with Steel tomorrow to iron out a formal alliance between our clubs.”

“God speed to you. I know you two temporarily buried the hatchet, but if you can strike a long-term alliance, it’ll help our current cause against the mob.”

“You’ve got insight into the human mind, Mason, and a degree in psychology. Tell me what you think the best approach to take with Steel is.”

Shock roiled through my gut. I was a fully patched brother but not a mover or shaker in this club. Storm had far more experienced men than me to go to for advice. I responded quietly, “You’ve been dealing with that man for years. You don’t need advice from me, boss.”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea what makes Steel tick. What I’m looking for are fresh ideas and a new perspective. You have an uncanny ability to understand the way people think. That’s of value to me right now.”

I rubbed my hand across my chin and turned everything I knew about Steel over in my mind before answering. “As far as I know, Steel grew up in Twisted Metal. His old man fought tooth and nail with their old club president Duke. Steel watched that his whole life and grew up doing the same with Duke’s son, Chevron, when he became club president. Being in a one percent club is all he’s ever known. That means his moral compass does not point toward true north. Ever since Steel killed Chevron and took over as club president of Twisted Metal, he’s been slowly eliminating the nastier parts of their operation.”

“They’re no longer trafficking women, but Steel’s still forcing them to perform sex work. All our strippers are employees who get paid a competitive wage, according to the laws set down by our state.”

“I think it’s a mistake to think he’s forcing them. Word on the street is that half the women left over the last six months or so. Two of them are now running Steel’s old lady’s bakery. It seems from the outside looking in that he’s changed up how they’re handling their women. Remember when we had Evie running back and forth between our clubhouse and Twisted Metal? She told me their cam girl business was drawing younger and prettier women to their place and there were now rules in place about how the brothers could treat them. She said the brothers saw the advantage to having willing club girls and were growing a new sense of pride at being wanted.”

Storm didn’t seem to accept my second-hand information at face value, so I continued making my point. His body language was closed, and he gave me minimal eye contact as he kept drinking his beer.

“Remember when Royal’s old lady needed protection? She went to the Twisted Metal website and discovered they were offering private security. That’s something new for them. We’ve been running a private security firm for almost a decade.”

Storm went rigid. “Are you saying what the fuck I think you are? They’re trying to copy our success?”

“Unless I’m mistaken, I think it’s more that he’s using our setup as a model for how to run his club, or at least getting ideas on the business end.”

“Well, fuck that,” Storm grumbled.

“If you think about it for a minute, you’ll see this for the golden opportunity it is.”

“They’re still running guns and dealing drugs. Those aren’t things I’m gonna turn a blind eye to.”

Sighing, I just came right out with it. “From what I can see, Twisted Metal is a club full of broken men, just like us. Instead of being busted up vets with PTSD, they’re mostly men who grew up in the club and addicts from broken homes who were drawn to Twisted Metal at a young age to get away from poverty and domestic violence. They’re looking for a leader to pull them up out of their suffering. Steel is trying hard to be the leader they need, but he’s broken himself because he was raised motherless in a one percent club by a hardened criminal. What if you turned out to be the guidance he needed in order to be the leader his club needs?”

“Steel is too suspicious and guarded to take advice from me.”

I shrugged. “You’re both alike when it comes to being suspicious and guarded, only you’ve learned the value of seeking advice,” I stated gently. “You might not always follow the advice others give you, but like you said earlier, you appreciate a fresh perspective.”

We sat in silence for a while, and then he stated quietly, “I don’t know if he’ll listen to me, but I can damn sure try.”

“Steel is a prideful man. He ain’t gonna listen to you if you try to treat him like a little brother. Just treat him like a friend, a peer. You’re both of equal status in his mind. Make conversation instead of suggestions. Let him pick up the pieces of information that are useful.”

“I know Steel wants to keep his old lady and kid safe.”

“That’s understandable. The bottom line, from my perspective, is that a massive amount of blood has been spilled between our two clubs in the past, but it doesn’t have to be that way anymore if we’re motivated to find other solutions that work.”

“Alright, I like this idea,” Storm said. “I want you to come to the meeting with me tomorrow. You’ll have more insight when your eyes are on their operation, and you hear Steel speaking with your own ears.”

“I’m supposed to be protecting Aprilia and can’t be in two places at once. Which club brother are we going to leave her with?”

After a thoughtful pause, Storm decided, “I say we take her with us. She’s meant to represent the Russo brothers, since Steel is Don Diovante’s errand boy, the brothers will be interested in verifying that he’s on our side now.”

“You’re taking our liaison with the mob brothers into a one percent club. Are you sure she’ll be safe with just the two of us?”

He gave me a short nod as he got to his feet. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. I’ve talked with Steel several times over the last year. He hates the deal Chevron

struck with Don Diovante before he died. Right now, he'd make a deal with the devil himself if he thought it would help get the old mobster's hooks out of his back. Plus, the three of us visiting Twisted Metal will be seen as a show of good faith."

"Okay, I just think we should err on the side of caution when it comes to exposing our mob liaison to potential danger."

"Agreed. Steel is solid for now. I'm feeling a lot more confident about being able to lead him toward more lucrative legal endeavors. I'm supposed to be there at nine a.m. I'll meet you and Aprilia for breakfast at eight and we'll talk while we eat."

"I'll make sure we're ready."

The moment Storm left, one of the new club bunnies came sauntering up to me. She was wearing a tight leather skirt and belly shirt with *Ride for Free* over a couple on a motorcycle. She probably saw it as a clever twist on riding a biker's cock. Me, not so much.

She slid gracefully into my personal space and ran one hand down my bicep. "You're looking awfully lonely tonight, swamp man."

A prickle of annoyance rippled up my spine. I hated it when people reduced me to that guy who grew up in the bayou. She might just as well have called me Swamp Thing and gotten it over with.

I shrugged her hand off my body. "I don't have time for you tonight, Lux. I'm working."

"You don't look like you're working." She jerked her chin at the beer bottle in my hand. "I don't think you're the kind of man who drinks on the job. That makes me think you might be fibbing about being on duty tonight."

Someone cleared their throat behind us. Lux whirled around to find Aprilia staring at her, or me, rather. Yeah, she was definitely staring at me, glaring actually.

"What can I do for you, cher?" I asked, way more flippant than was appropriate for this situation. I hoped she didn't think I was annoyed at her interruption. If anything, I was grateful for it.

"Your job. That's what you can do for me."

Lux let out an annoyed little sound from the back of her throat, like a growl. "I've decided that tonight he's working for me. I got to him first, so back off."

I intervened. "Look, Lux, Aprilia is our guest and Storm assigned me to be her protector twenty-four seven."

“What kind of name is Aprilia? I’ve never heard of it.”

My angry new charge opened her mouth to answer, but I cut her off. “Aprilia is the name of an Italian motorcycle manufacturer. Their line-up of tricked out bikes are enough to make any biker drool. I’m guessing her old man was a motorcycle enthusiast. Trust me when I say she’s probably very proud of her name.”

Lux turned on Aprilia and folded her arms over her chest. “Weren’t you just made to be a biker’s old lady?”

Aprilia just stared at her for a long, hard moment and then snorted a laugh. “I think that might have been the furthest thing from my father’s mind when he named me after the vintage bike his dad handed down to him.”

Some of Lux’s anger died down. “But you’re into bikers, right?”

“Not particularly, but since I’m here...” Aprilia trailed off, leaving Lux to fill in the blank for herself.

Shooting a quick glance over her shoulder at me and back at Aprilia, Lux asked, “So, you’re really going back to wherever you came from?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” Aprilia held up her left hand so Lux could see her sparkling diamond. “My fiancé would be pretty unhappy with me if I wandered off with his family heirloom. I think it’s pretty safe to say I’m going back whether I like it or not.”

Lux took a step closer and examined her ring. “If I had a rich boyfriend waiting for me, I would not be hanging around the Dark Slayers clubhouse.”

Aprilia’s hand dropped to her side. “You sure about that? You seem pretty territorial over this one.” The dismissive gesture Aprilia made in my direction pissed me off.

Lux leaned over and whispered something into Aprilia’s ear. All I could make out were the words *cock* and *pinch*. The only phrase my mind could come up with was that my cock would do in a pinch. I knew whatever she said, it couldn’t be nice based on the disapproving expression that jumped onto Aprilia’s face.

I stood and wrapped one hand around Lux’s arm. Giving her a gentle tug, I grumbled, “You’ve had enough fun at my expense for one night. Time to move the fuck on. I’m sure there are plenty of other cocks roaming around here that will do in a pinch.”

“Wait. What? That’s not what I—”

I gave her a little push and said gruffly, “Move the fuck on, Lux. Don’t make me keep repeating myself. You know how that pisses me off.”

She took a few staggering steps backward and flailed her arms to make it look like I shoved her.

All of a sudden, Storm was back. “What the fuck is going on here? You know better than to shove our bunnies around.”

I open my mouth to set the record straight, but Aprilia did it for me. “He didn’t shove her. He gave her a little push and she exaggerated it in order to make a scene.”

Storm shook his head as he stared at Lux. “What are you, twelve?”

“I told her that I was working but she wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Storm pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mason will not be available for the foreseeable future, so leave him the fuck alone until his assignment is over.”

“When is that going to be?” Lux asked. This was brazen even for her.

Storm stretched his neck, a clear sign of aggravation. “It’ll be over when she goes back to LA.”

Lux gave an indignant growl. “Why do the women from LA always get preferential treatment around this club? It’s not fair to those of us who have dedicated ourselves to the brothers.”

Storm raised his voice. “I’m suspending you from the club for the next three days just for annoying the hell out of everyone tonight. If another word comes out of your mouth, it’ll be ten days.”

I watched in disbelief as she grabbed her purse and stormed out the front door. I was bewildered about why she was pushing so hard to be with me. She hardly bothered with me until she saw me with another woman, then it was like she just had to have me. Just thinking about that was enough to give me a headache.

Storm turned to me and poked me in the chest with one finger. “I don’t know what it is with you and club bunnies, but you mix like oil and water.” He took a step back and ran one hand through his hair.

A perfectly manicured hand slid around from behind to hug him. Zoe leaned around and gazed up at him. “You did a good job, babe, now come back downstairs. Your woman needs you.”

His expression went from stressed to blissed out and aroused in an instant. Zoe glanced at me. “Pro tip for you, Mason. If you don’t put your hands on them, they can’t make it seem like you’re shoving them.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied politely.

Her eyes strayed over to Aprilia and she murmured, “I don’t know who you are, but I hope you didn’t instigate this drama.”

Aprilia frowned. "I guess that depends on who you ask."

Storm turned and started nuzzling Zoe's neck. "It doesn't matter. Shit's dealt with. Let's get back to what matters."

Storm guided Zoe away, and just when I thought it was over, Aprilia called out, "Thanks for the words of wisdom. Hope you have fun in the sex dungeon."

Storm stopped in his tracks. Without even looking in our direction, he gritted out, "Get her the hell off the main floor. Keep her upstairs until she learns some goddamn manners."

Chapter 8

Aprilia

The next thing I knew, Mason had his hand at the small of my back and was guiding me upstairs. It felt like Daddy just sent me to my room for being rude at the dinner table. I probably shouldn't have made such a smartass comment, but I was sick of being treated like an object or an inconvenience.

I asked sharply, "Why am I getting a time out?"

Mason murmured, "Let's just get back to our suite. We can talk there."

I wasn't stupid. I knew what he really meant was, *'Let's go somewhere private so I can lecture you about club culture and how you don't talk back to the people in charge.'* That wasn't exactly going to be a new lesson for me. It was one my own family tried to drive home numerous times. It didn't work then, and I doubted it was going to work now. In my opinion, if a woman couldn't speak her mind, she was not even free.

Once the door to our suite closed behind us, Mason stared at me for a long, hard moment. "Want to explain to me what that was all about?"

I looked at him incredulously, wondering just how stupid he thought I was. Even a fool could understand what just went down. "I'm guessing it was your favorite club whore getting pissed because your dick was out of action for the night."

"I'm not referring to that random club bunny."

My stubbornness got the better of me. "Maybe, I *am* referring to her. Is she your regular?"

Confusion jumped onto his face. "Regular what? I don't understand what you're asking."

"What I'm asking is if being my bodyguard is interfering with your personal relationships."

"No," he stated coldly. "I don't have a regular girl that I hook up with here."

"She sure acts like your romantic partner," I insisted.

"Well, nothing could be further from the truth."

"Want to know what she whispered in my ear?"

He glanced away, refusing to look me in the eye. "Not particularly. I think

I got the gist of it already.”

“No. You didn’t. She said you had a ginormous cock and if I needed help, she’d be happy to pitch in. Your club bunny was suggesting a threesome, not saying that your cock would do in a pinch.”

He crammed his hands into his pockets and glanced away. “I guess I misheard what she said.”

Something about this situation wasn’t adding up. “Have you been stringing her along, taking advantage of her for trying to get close to you?”

“Hell the fuck no. First of all, I’ve never been with her at all, and if we had hooked up, it would not have meant anything. Lux is here, like all the others, because she likes to fuck bikers. In their world, any biker will do. We’re all just interchangeable dicks to women who like variety.”

My eyes narrowed at him. “I’m gonna have to call bullshit on that whole train of thought. Lux was persistently interested in you tonight, to the point of getting herself thrown out of the club. How do you square that with your ‘any biker will do’ philosophy?”

Mason’s face flushed and he took an involuntary step back. “Rarely do they have a preference for one over the other, and for sure none of them would want me. Lux has been with every brother in our club. She wants to sample the cock no one’s ever had. I guess that would get her street cred with the other bunnies or something.”

Shock almost rendered me speechless. “Are you saying you’ve never slept with any of the club bunnies in all the years you’ve been associated with the club?”

His shoulder slumped and his expression looked a little defeated. “You heard Storm say with your own ears that me and the club bunnies mixed like oil and water.”

“Why won’t you avail yourself of their generous offerings? Is it because you think they’re tainted goods or you can’t stand putting your dick where your club brothers have put theirs already?” Then it hit me that the issue might be something deeper. “Is it because you’re not interested in women, but if word got out about you being gay the other brothers would feel some kind of way about having you around?”

Suddenly, his expression turned furious. His whole body went tense and he raised his voice. “I don’t know who you think you are, but you have no right to demand answers about my sex life. I’m going to ask you nicely to turn around and go into the bedroom so I can cool off. There’s entertainment

available for your use. Just chill the fuck out and get some sleep. We need to get up bright and early in the morning for a breakfast meeting with Storm.”

I was wildly out of line, and I knew it. Taking a step back, I said, “Sorry for coming at you that way. I don’t know what came over me...”

He pointed to the bedroom door and his voice turned ice cold. “Stop talking and go. I can’t stand to look at you right now.” The moment he was done speaking, he jerked his head to the side and closed his eyes. His lips started moving, like he was counting to ten.

I turned tail and ran, closing and locking the door behind me. I sat on the floor with my back to the door, quietly panicking. My mouth had always gotten me into trouble. It was just like me to push and push and push for information that wasn’t mine to have. I’d always been too curious for my own good.

The part I couldn’t seem to get my head around was why I cared so much about Mason or what he did with his dick. What was it about that man that had me trembling, blushing, and acting like a lioness when other women came near him? I found him fascinating, to be sure. But I was acting just like the club whore who cornered him earlier. She wouldn’t give up until they threw her out, and just now he had to throw me out of the suite’s living room to get me to stop asking him personal questions. That probably made us the same in his mind.

I pushed up off the floor and pulled out my cell phone. Gazing down at it in my hand, I marveled that everyone from Don Diavonte to Nicco and his brothers to Storm and Mason had access. Everyone would be aware of every single call I made and what was said. They would even be able to read my e-mails and text messages. With a shaking hand, I called Nicco. It took a dozen rings for him to pick up.

His smooth voice came on the line, sounding like he always did. “Good evening, princess. How’s your visit with Sophia going?”

Princess was the code word indicating he wanted an update. “I got stuck in traffic on the freeway, but it was only a minor inconvenience. Sophia and I had dinner together this evening at the Slayer’s clubhouse. Their clubhouse seems more like a fancy pub than a biker’s hangout. Your sister seems happy as a clam with her biker.”

“I’m glad to hear the bastard isn’t torturing her on a daily basis.”

“Torturing her? Where do you get such crazy ideas? It’s kind of cute how he still fawns over her. We’re having breakfast with their club president,

Storm, in the morning.”

Traffic was the code word for important intel. *Freeway* was the code word for him to expect an incoming flow of information. And pointing out that I was in the Slayers clubhouse and having breakfast with Storm was meant to be verification for Don Diavonte that I had maneuvered myself into place like he wanted.

“It sounds like you’re having a blast. I miss you and hope you hurry home soon, sweetie.” Nicco’s tone had changed slightly.

I froze. *Sweetie* was the code we agreed on for when our don was listening into our conversation himself.

“My visit is going great. I plan to hang out and catch up on everything that’s been going on with Sophia for a few more days. Don’t worry, I’ll be home before you know it.”

We said our goodbyes and made kissy noises to each other before I hung up.

Laying the phone down on a nearby table, I began to pace. I was sent to do a job, and getting distracted by the man assigned to protect me was already causing problems. An image flashed through my mind of Mason leaning back against the bar with his arms outstretched and that big bulge growing in his pants just from watching me walk down the stairs. Even though I was totally stressed out, that image sent a shot of arousal straight to my clit.

I walked into the bathroom, got undressed, and stepped into a warm shower. I needed to purge myself of these unwanted feelings and shut it all down. Maybe this had less to do with Mason’s raw masculinity and more to do with the fact that I hadn’t had an orgasm in months. I soaped my hands and slid them over my breasts, caressing my own skin.

Then I used the detachable shower head just the way I’d done when I was sixteen and too afraid of getting pregnant to have real sex. Allowing the slow thrum of water from the lower setting to slide between my folds, I fantasized about what it would feel like to have Mason’s hand there. The sensation of one of his thick fingers sliding into my body while his tongue tangled with mine. The water tickling my clit encouraged more erotic thoughts, like Mason’s big body covering mine and how good it would feel to wrap my legs around his hips as he thrust into me over and over again. With that mental image firmly in mind, I came all too soon, his name a mere whisper on my lips.

After I caught my breath, I stepped out of the shower determined to put

this man out of my mind once and for all. In that moment of sated relief, it almost seemed possible to look into his intelligent hazel eyes and not feel heated desire light in my stomach. I climbed into bed after pulling on some pajamas and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. I turned over on my side and watched my phone light up over and over again, likely social media notifications from the dummy accounts Nicco set up to make our relationship seem authentic.

I closed my eyes and prayed that tomorrow I'd remember my place and do a better job of holding it together. My entire future was riding on helping the Russo brothers bring Don Diavonte down. I couldn't forget that, even for a minute.

Chapter 9

Mason

I got up the next morning and used the bathroom in our suite to shower and get ready for my day. Standing under a flow of warm water, I swore I could almost smell the scent of Aprilia's arousal in the enclosed area. I quickly realized that must be wishful thinking on my part. I stroked one off to thoughts of her smiling face and the way her hand felt against my skin. Pleasuring myself to thoughts of her was deplorable, shameful behavior. I did it anyway because I needed to shoot my load in order to act civilized around our pretty guest today. I carefully cleaned and sanitized the shower afterward.

It occurred to me that Aprilia was acting like a jealous girlfriend last night. After thinking it over, I could understand why she was upset with me in the bar. From her vantage point, it must have felt like she was getting stared at by every single guy there. I was fairly certain they probably enjoyed looking at the new girl. Aprilia was a beautiful woman, after all and she was classy. She had expected me to monitor the situation and make sure none of them got too close, but instead I was arguing with Lux. I totally deserved the rebuke she gave me.

It was the digging into my sex life when we were alone that picked at my pride. It felt like she was clawing at my insecurities just to humiliate me. It had really driven home the fact that I needed to mind my own business. Aprilia was a job. This was not personal and I couldn't let it become personal. Besides that, she was engaged to one of the Russo brothers.

Coming out of the bathroom, I dared a glance at Aprilia, who was still lying in bed. She looked amazing. Thankfully, a soft knock at the door forced me to turn away. When I answered it, I saw Rob with a fresh pot of coffee on a tray with two mugs.

He smiled ruefully. "Sorry the women harangued you last night. Storm asked me to bring the two of you some coffee and remind you of that eight o'clock breakfast meeting."

I took the tray from him with one hand. "Thanks, Rob. Tell him we'll be there."

He shot me an empathetic smile as I eased the door shut with my free hand. Turning, I strolled into the bedroom and announced, "Rise and shine,

cher. As Storm would say, we're burning daylight."

Without so much as a yawn, she sat up and reached for the coffee in my outstretched hand. "Good morning, Mason." Taking a sip, she murmured, "Do you mind if I ask why they call you Mason?"

"No more personal questions from you today, Aprilia. That's how things went bad last night, remember?"

She sucked in a surprised breath. "Yeah, I do remember, and I'm sorry about that. I really am."

"Great. That means we can stop talking about it now, right?"

She eyed me with a frown, clearly not happy with my ongoing refusal to tell her about my personal life. I took a sip of my own coffee. "It's seven forty-five and we agreed to meet with Storm at eight downstairs. Can you be ready to go in fifteen minutes? If not, I can push it back another ten minutes."

She pulled the blankets back to reveal white silk pajamas with tiny black polka dots and black trim around the pockets. "If you leave me to it, I can be ready in ten minutes flat." That sounded almost like a brag.

"Alright," I responded. "I'll be waiting in the living room."

I headed out to the living room and stared out the window. The prospects were at the gates and two more were walking the back perimeter. Everything seemed as it should be—except a large guy had just squeezed under the back fence and was now running away. I pulled out my cell phone and sent a message to all the brothers.

Just saw an intruder get under the fence at the far back of the property and run off.

Storm answered immediately. ***We're on it. The last thing we need is another tweaker sneaking onto our property looking for shit to steal.***

We'd had several of those lately, so I understood his concern. The lights began blinking and the security alarm started buzzing. It was to alert everyone who wasn't a brother that we had a crisis.

Ten minutes later, Aprilia walked out of the bedroom looking fresh as morning dew. She cut her eyes to the blankets I left scattered on the sofa but didn't say a word.

"What's going on with the lights and the alarm? Is the building on fire or something?"

I jerked my chin toward the window. "I just spied an intruder squirming under our back fence line."

"Are we supposed to shelter in place until they give the all clear?"

“I don’t think that’s necessary. It was one large dude wearing a khaki shirt and pants who was exiting rather than trying to get in. Sometimes we get local lowlifes looking for things to steal. Grit and my other club brothers will track him down.”

The security system was off before we made it downstairs. When we headed onto the back patio, I could see half a dozen brothers in the distance talking with Storm. “They’ve set up a table for us. Why don’t you have a seat while I talk to my club brothers.”

Aprilia glanced nervously around before agreeing.

I gestured to Rob. “Come sit with our guest. I’ll be nearby. It won’t take me a minute.”

Rob scooped up a large platter of food and walked over to the table Storm claimed as his own long ago. He put some food on her plate and poured some juice into her glass. Once I saw she was alright, I sprinted over to Storm. “Did we find him?”

Storm grimaced. “No. He was smart enough to have a pickup truck waiting. He managed to evade Grit and Celt by a minute or two and the fucker had thrown a stinger across the road—luckily they saw it in time. The dumbass had the balls to stand up in the back and salute them as he sped away.”

“Did they get a glimpse of the driver?”

“They were too far away. Neither Grit nor Celt recognized the man, and they know almost everyone in this fucking town.”

I rubbed my chin as I thought it over. “Well, he wasn’t wearing leather or a suit, so he’s probably some random dude.”

Storm’s head whipped around to look at me. “Some random dude with a getaway driver at the ready, using a military issue spike strip? I think fucking not. This guy is going to be a problem for us. Mark my words on that.”

I tried to redirect the conversation. “We need to calm down so we can be ready for our meeting with Steel.”

Storm’s head whipped around to look at Aprilia. “Did you talk to her about being polite to the old ladies? I didn’t like how she talked to Zoe last night.”

“Me either. She was upset about Lux distracting me from watching over her. She told me off and went to bed. I’ll talk to her about it later.”

“See that you do, brother. If I have to do it, there will probably be tears.”

“Oh, I know how it usually goes when you talk to women. Don’t know how Zoe tolerates you.”

Mentioning his pretty wife immediately wiped the irritated look off Storm's face. "I got lucky with my Zoe. That's for damn sure."

Rob got up to excuse himself the moment we sat down. Storm stopped him, held out his hand, and gestured for Aprilia to give him her phone. She sighed and did so reluctantly. Storm gave it to Rob, who slipped it in his pocket. Rob went back to the grill on the other side of the patio so we could talk without anyone overhearing in case her phone was actually bugged, rather than just having the spyware that monitored texts and calls. Unlikely, as Hacker had given it the once over for any unauthorized software, but it never hurt to be wary as far as the mafia went. Don Diavonte would surely find it suspicious if she simply turned the phone off. This way, if they were listening, they would just hear random conversation and it would still seem like she was present.

"Sorry about that. As you know, the cell phone Nicco gave you has spyware, so everyone involved can monitor the communication going back and forth between the two of you."

"That's why Nicco came up with the list of code words, so we could communicate without Don Diavonte knowing what we're talking about. I think it would have been better to just use a burner phone," Aprilia responded quietly.

"I discussed that with Nicco and his brothers early on. They felt very strongly that their don might have their homes and cars bugged. In which case, he would have heard everything they talked about on a burner phone. The idea of using code words was the only way. Putting spyware on your phone was a ruse meant to make your don feel like he had access to all the information you were providing. Hacker didn't find any listening software, but it always pays to be cautious."

"My father always said that people tended to underestimate our don. If that's true, erring on the side of caution was probably a good idea." She picked up her juice and took a sip.

Storm put some food on his plate and took a bite before continuing. "We overheard your conversation last night and I'm afraid we're going to need to test your ability to communicate details to Nicco and his brothers without your don picking up on it today, Aprilia."

Her head jerked up and she quickly glanced from Storm to me and back again. "Why? What's happening? Is it that guy who tried to sneak onto your property just now?"

Storm put down his fork and wiped his hands on his napkin, as though he were taking a moment to order his thoughts. “No. It’s nothing to do with that. It’s to do with the ambush Don Diavonte’s men set up before you arrived. There was only one way he could have known our club members were going to a biker rally that day. He had a contact within the organization that set up the rally and Celt has tracked him down.”

“Jesus, what did the guy have to say? Was our don blackmailing him or something?”

“Not exactly. His guy was riding a Ducati, told them he was associated with our club and looking to meet up with us. Dumbass saw a guy on a motorcycle, and even though he wasn’t wearing a cut, he took the guy at his word that he was friend of our club.

Almost before Storm finished talking, Aprilia spoke up, her voice confident. “It wasn’t Nicco. I can guarantee you that much.”

“It’s interesting how the Russo brothers ride Ducatis and have a long history of double-crossing their allies but you don’t think they would double-cross us.”

Aprilia huffed out an exasperated breath. “Nicco and his brothers have never double-crossed anyone who didn’t thoroughly deserve it. If you’re getting double-crossed, it’s your own damn fault.”

“Of course you’re going to deny it. He’s your fiancé, after all.”

“You’re being a suspicious, reckless fool. You have to know my fiancé would never double-cross you without getting me out first.”

Storm’s lips pressed into a thin line, annoyed that he couldn’t really argue that point.

“Ducatis are Italian bikes. It stands to reason that out of all the people who enjoy riding motorcycles, that brand would resonate with Italian mobsters,” I offered.

“Fucking hell, you might be right about that.” Leaning over the table, Storm looked Aprilia in the eye. “You’d best tell your fiancé that doing us dirty would be the mistake of a lifetime.”

Aprilia pushed herself up from the table on both arms and glared right back at Storm. “That sounds like a threat. Nicco didn’t send me here to be threatened by panicky bikers. He sent me to brace an alliance because he trusted you be able to control your paranoia and fear.”

Storm stood slowly, and I didn’t like the look on his face. “Are you calling me a coward who lets fear control his actions?”

I shot to my feet, slipped my arm around Aprilia's waist, and pulled her back a step. I didn't think Storm had it in him to strike out at a woman, but I wasn't taking any chances. "Look, boss, she's right about sticking to the alliance with the Russo brothers. Until we get solid evidence they're stabbing us in the back, we stand firm."

"Nicco told me point blank that his sister was a peace offering between his family and the Dark Slayers MC. He insisted it was the foundation of an alliance *that will never be broken.*" She stressed the last five words so he would understand.

Storm was stubborn and suspicious by nature. He searched her face. He must have found whatever he was looking for in her earnest expression because he smoothed down the front of his cut before capitulating. "Alright, we stand firm. We're meeting with Steel shortly, and we aren't going to breathe a word about this situation to him."

Storm gestured for Rob to return her phone. "I'll take you at your word for now, but if I find out you're lying, our protection ends permanently. Got it?"

"Are you certain you don't have some Italian mobster DNA lurking in your ancestry? I only ask because you're sure as hell acting like one right now." Aprilia was pushing her luck with Storm. I had to say I admired her balls, for some reason I'd always assumed that the women of mob families were a bit like a lot of the women who hung out with bikers, happy to let their men take control—but she gave as good as she got.

"Let's just finish our food and head out," I said before anyone could say anything else.

I dropped my arm from around her waist when she reached out to take the phone from Rob. I felt like I had just been subjected to a crisis of trust with Storm. He passed, but just barely. And that worried the fuck out of me.

Aprilia gasped when she looked at her phone and began scrolling. Before I could react, tears were welling up in her eyes. I kneeled beside her and slid the phone out of her hand. There was text after text from a man named Chester. All of them were saying that Aprilia had already been given to him and there were no take backs just because she found a younger, more attractive man to latch onto. He was calling her names and making threats. The strange part was that every time I clicked a text, it disappeared after about ten seconds, just long enough for me to read the damn thing. I quickly turned the phone off again.

"What's going on?" Storm asked.

Aprilia threw her arms around my neck, clearly shocked. “I’ve done everything I was supposed to do. Don Diavonte promised me I didn’t have to go through with the marriage match he made for me.”

I patted her on the back and whispered, “Hush now, cher. Everything is going to be okay.”

I handed the phone to Storm. “Looks like someone hacked her phone and installed a workaround that avoids triggering the spyware when she receives disappearing text messages. That’s bad shit.”

“You know, Mason, it’s been a pretty rough morning already. Make this make sense for me.” Storm said rubbing his temples.

I swooped Aprilia up, sat her in my lap, and started explaining to Storm about what I saw on her phone. “She’s getting multiple messages from some guy named Chester. He’s talking about how Don Diavonte gave her to him and he’s not giving her up. There were images of barbie dolls that had been carved up.”

“Chester’s Don Diavonte’s bookkeeper, he’s always been awful. I can’t stand him, that’s why Nicco—” Aprilia stopped and shook her head. My heart went out to her as she wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse.

“It was pretty bad, boss. We probably should get her phone to Hacker so he can figure out what’s going on.”

“I’ll go talk to him right now. He always gets here early.”

I watched him walk off before pulling Aprilia back to look into her eyes. “I know that was pretty upsetting, but you gotta know that he can’t get to you while you’re at our clubhouse. Ain’t nobody gonna get within a hundred yards of you on my watch, okay, cher?”

She nodded and drew in a deep breath. “Sorry I freaked out on you. I never expected to have anything like that directed at me.”

“He’s just acting out because his opportunity to marry a beautiful woman slipped away.”

She put one hand on my chest and shoved off my lap. “I’m not beautiful. Although I’m sure he would force himself on me if I ended up married to him, it’s not my body he’s after.”

“It doesn’t matter what the stupid fucker is after. He’s not going to get it. In fact, if he keeps scaring the shit out of the woman I’m charged with protecting, he might end up catching a bullet in the head.”

She frowned at me. “I don’t want him dead, that could make things worse if his family or Don Diavonte sought revenge. I just want him to stay the hell

away from me.”

I stood up and sighed. “For guys like him, those often turn out to be one in the same. You know that, right?”

Her voice became strong again. “I’ll tell you what I know. My best chance of never having to look at his ugly mug again is making the alliance between you, Steel, and Sophia’s brothers work.”

My head tilted to the side as I realized something odd. “You refer to your Nicco as just one of Sophia’s brothers a lot. It’s almost like you don’t see him as your fiancé. Want to talk to me about that, cher?”

She folded her arms over her chest and glared at me. “Hell no, I don’t. We’re not asking each other personal questions today. You said so yourself.”

Just then, Storm stuck his head out the back door. “Let’s load up, Mason. We’re already late for our meeting with Steel. There’s no sense burning daylight. If Aprilia’s not up to coming, she can sit with Hacker in his office until we get back.”

“I’m coming,” Aprilia yelled. Without another word, she stalked off toward Storm, who was holding the back door open for her.

Fucking hell, this woman had more guts than most men I knew. It only made me like and respect her all the more.

Chapter 10

Aprilia

Mason had an extra helmet tucked away for passengers, and I gratefully accepted it. I tried not to show my amusement when he hovered around me like I might not know how to put it on correctly. Once it was strapped into place and I climbed effortlessly onto his bike, he finally relaxed.

Although I'd rather be riding the vintage bike I inherited from my father, being on the back of Mason's bike felt more carefree. I didn't have to worry about finding my way, navigating traffic, or other drivers. I could just sit back and enjoy the ride. Since the landscape around their clubhouse was breathtaking, I took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy it, even as I tried to process the messages from Chester and what it all meant—had Don Diavonte changed his mind?

It caught me by surprise, and I reacted like a scared little girl. That wasn't me. Now that the shock had worn off, I was trying to figure out what went wrong with our plan. Surely, Chester the bookkeeper wouldn't think he could go against our don and claim me. We all knew that whoever openly went against Don Diavonte wound up dead. It was the one certainty of our lives and the reason Nicco and his brothers were moving heaven and earth to overthrow him.

A sick feeling swirled in the pit of my stomach. Maybe the Russo brothers had made a deal with Chester to help them topple Don Diavonte, using me as payment. Mobsters were good at using women to pay off a debt.

Suddenly, I wanted to cry all over again. I thought I could trust Nicco, and now I was starting to wonder if he was no better than his crazy brothers. I could totally see Diego doing something like this. I held onto Mason a little tighter. He was my rock right now.

My protector noticed I was trembling, and one big hand landed on my leg. He gave it a quick squeeze that I interpreted as reassuring, rather than anything sexual and went back to driving. It was enough to make me realize that I had options, others who might help me if Nicco turned against me. Maybe Storm hadn't been so wrong to worry about that after all.

My anxiety ebbed and flowed during the long drive to Steel's clubhouse.

When we pulled up, I was shocked to discover that their place was very different from the Slayers' property, and not in a good way. Their building was older, made of cinderblock that had been recently painted. The roof looked like it was in desperate need of repair, and the parking lot had large cracks and potholes. Several brothers were hanging around outside smoking crack. A few of them appeared dirty and much rougher than I'd seen any of the Slayers look. They nodded at Storm and Mason when we walked by.

Several of them sent admiring looks in my direction, which creeped me about a bit. I stepped closer to Mason without thinking. He put his arm around me and drew me close.

His words from earlier floated through my mind. *Ain't nobody gonna get within a hundred yards of you on my watch.* I believed him.

The moment we stepped into the building, I noticed it was similar to the Slayers' clubhouse, at least in the general ambience. The furniture matched, there was a large bar, the walls were painted a light blue color, and there was an older woman behind the bar with a glass in her hand.

Her voice rang out cheerfully, "What're you drinking today, Storm?"

Storm shot her a wry look. "Nothing. I'm here to talk business with your club president, and you know I'll be needing a clear head for that shit, Ms. Lucy."

She chuckled. "Smart man." Bringing one finger up, she tapped it against her temple. "Steel has a sharp mind. He's the best thing that ever happened to this club."

Storm smiled. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Lucy. He's worlds better than his predecessor."

"Damn straight he is." She gestured to a man wearing an eye patch on the far side of the bar. "Do you need someone to show you the way to his office?"

"God damn, I didn't see you there, Orb. How the hell has life been treating you?" Storm said, a little shocked.

The other man smothered back a smile. "Being VP turned out to suit me, I suppose. Glad we're not gunning for each other anymore. You're a fucking wily adversary."

"So are you. Never seen a man shoot straighter than you when the battle heats up. I'd prefer to have you as an ally anytime."

"Speaking of which, Steel's expecting you." He started to get up, but Storm waved him back down.

“I’ve slid into your roadhouse a time or two, so I know the way. Thanks for offering.”

The man’s eye patch shifted slightly when he grinned. “Let us know if you need anything. Don’t forget to leave your phones.” He gestured toward a steel box on the table in front of him. As we all placed our devices in the box, I realized that I’d underestimated Twisted Metal, while they might have looked chaotic on the surface, they were on the ball as far as security went.

“Hacker’s got our phones locked down tight. Ain’t no listening software getting on these things on his watch.” Storm said.

“Doesn’t hurt to be careful.” Orb responded and locked the box.

“True, true.” Storm clapped him on the back, before heading toward Steel’s office.

It occurred to me that Storm could be extremely outgoing and diplomatic when he wanted to be. Or maybe he had problems just like the rest of us but was good at holding it together under pressure. That was clearly a skill I needed to master.

Steel was sitting with his legs propped up on the desk and a laptop balanced on his thighs when Storm knocked at the open door. He immediately shifted his legs down as he snapped his laptop closed. “Come on in, Storm. I see you brought unnecessary complications with you today.” A frown creased his brow. “You know I don’t fucking like surprises.”

Storm strolled into the room and dropped down in one of the chairs in front of Steel’s desk. “Trust me, you’re gonna love this surprise.”

“I don’t need another woman, Storm. Women are flocking to us these days. I’m having to throw them out of the roadhouse.”

Mason guided me to the other chair and pulled over another for himself. Storm snagged my left hand and held it up for Steel to see.

“Nice rock. Where did you get it?” Steel asked.

“My grandmother, may she rest in peace, called it the Russo family diamond when Nicco’s grandmother wore it.”

“Fucking hell, you’re Nicco Russo’s fiancée?”

“Yeah, I’m here to help him drag our current don out of the big chair. I guess once that’s done, Nicco, Diego, and Lucas will have to arm wrestle each other over who gets to be the new don. And the rock is fake. Nicco is not the kind of man to let me run around the badlands with his family heirloom.”

A slow grin spread over Steel’s face. “I’m starting to like you. What did

you say your name was?”

“Aprilia Agazzi. Pleased to meet you.” Glancing behind me, I added, “This is my protector, Mason.”

Steel shot Storm an amused look. “She’s a bold one. What I want to know is how she fits into our plan.”

Storm began repeating all the nonsense Nicco and Diego had told him about why they were sending me to Griffinsford. When Storm was finished, Steel rubbed his chin as he thought it over. “So, the brothers think their phones are bugged.”

Storm gave him a curt nod. “Either their phones or their homes and offices.”

Steel’s eyes drifted over to me, as if expecting me to chime in, so I did. “I wouldn’t be surprised to find out it was true. Mobsters are a paranoid bunch, always worried someone is going to get the jump on them. Spying on each other is a way of life.” Considering he’d had our phones locked away before this meeting, it wasn’t just mobsters who were paranoid, but I wasn’t going to be the one to tell Steel that.

“It makes sense they’re wary of each other. Regardless of what people say, there’s no honor among thieves,” Mason added.

Steel frowned at him, clearly assuming that Mason was referring to him as well since he ran an outlaw biker club. His chin came up in a defiant gesture. “That’s just the kind of thinking I’ve come to expect from the Slayers. You’ve got the cuts, bikes, clubhouse, and all the trappings of an MC, but at the end of the day you’re all just a bunch of fucking judgmental boy scouts.”

Storm interjected diplomatically, “Now, hold on a minute. We didn’t come here to blow up any hope of a formal alliance. I’m sure Mason didn’t mean anything disrespectful.”

“Not everyone can afford to put their conscious first. Some of us are living in the real world where shit doesn’t get handed to us,” Steel gritted out. “We’re doing the best we can to put food on the table and take care of our families. That doesn’t mean we lack honor. In my opinion, putting your need to be moral and self-righteous before taking care of your damn family makes a man weak and cowardly.”

I started to squirm, shocked at how easily Steel had gone from being amused and indulgent to downright angry. He reminded me of my father, who was most definitely not a man to get on the wrong side of. Either there was some long-standing bad blood between these two clubs or Steel was the

prickliest human being on planet earth.

“Storm’s right. I wasn’t trying to insinuate anything about you or your club by that comment. The fact is, I just hate mobsters. Those fucking city slickers are not to be trusted. They’re a different breed from us. I understand your former club presidents were none too particular about the kind of work they lined up for your club. You inherited a mess. Your ideas about how you and your club brothers should earn might be different from ours, but the bottom line is we respect each other and do what we have to do to get by. Those mobsters, on the other hand, fucking love crime and they’re evil, ingenious bastards when it comes to taking other people’s hard-earned cash,” Mason explained.

Steel stared at him for a long, hard moment. I looked from one to the other, trying to anticipate whether this was going to escalate to a physical confrontation. Finally, Steel snorted a laugh. “You’re onto something, Mason. Our club stopped all street level crime under my watch. We might do some shady shit every now and then, but we aren’t stealing directly from other people. That might not sound like a big deal to you, but it was a major shift for our crew. Twisted Metal’s never gonna be filled with straight arrows, but I’m proud of the direction our club is taking.”

Storm let out a sigh of relief, leaned forward, and slapped Steel on his upper arm. “Thanks for helping Mason yank his foot out of his mouth. You know we wouldn’t be allying our club with Twisted Metal if we didn’t trust you.” Shooting Mason an irritated glance, Storm turned back to Steel. “What do you say we get back to business?”

The three men began scheming ways to limit Don Diavonte’s influence in their small hometown. Meanwhile, I was left feeling conflicted. I was a little shocked to hear Mason come right out and say he hated the mafia. I was mafia. I’ve couriered for them and disseminated information when needed.

My father was a made man, mafia through and through. He spent his entire life in the business. It was hard to grow up in a mafia family and not end up involved in small ways. You learned early on not to ask any questions, I could have played dumb and been the dutiful daughter, but I made it my business to know what was going on. I never directly harmed anyone, but my hands weren’t clean by any stretch of the imagination. It hurt some small part of my pride to know Mason hated me—or would hate me if he knew all the details of my life.

Shit, these bikers were already arguing again. Steel was upset about Storm

telling Diego about a job Steel did for Don Diavonte, something about papers in a safe that were being used for blackmail. Something in the manner they raised their voices made me uncomfortable. Most of the men I'd dealt with in life didn't yell or scream. They were calm, calculating, and the people they harbored a grudge against usually disappeared or wound up dead. I wasn't entirely sure how these men resolved their conflicts or how much danger I would be in if things went south during this meeting. It sucked that I was stuck in this situation until Nicco could take down our don.

Steel leapt to his feet. "God damnit, Storm. If the Russo brothers go snooping through Don Diavonte's safe, he might realize I talked about the stuff he's hiding there."

Trying to calm them down, I spoke up. "I doubt your name would be the first Don Diavonte thought of if someone tried to break into his safe. Everyone in his orbit has spent years speculating about what he's got hidden in there. Some think it's gold, others think it's jewels from all the old heists he used to pull when he was young. My father thought he kept an extra set of books."

Mason's head swiveled around to look at me. "Your old man was a mobster in Don Diavonte's organization?"

"He was the underboss for Don Diavonte's father when he was in charge of the business. He was an old man by the time I was born. Old man Diavonte used to come to our house for dinner when I was little. I barely remember him."

"Then you know the family pretty well, right?" Storm asked.

My eyes jumped between Storm and Steel. "Yes. I know Don Diavonte well enough to know that whatever Sophia's brothers are looking for, they aren't going to find it in his wall safe. My father always said that everyone was barking up the wrong tree by wondering what was in Don Diavonte's wall safe. He always said Diavonte was an old-school gangster, like his old man. That meant whatever he really wanted to hide would be found buried under the doghouse in his back yard with two of the most vicious rottweilers known to mankind chained to it."

All three men stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

Finally, Storm spoke. "I assume your fiancé knows about this, because his brother sure didn't. Diego was trying to decide if his office or home safe was more likely to contain the information he was looking for."

I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts before responding. "I don't

believe that conversation ever came up between the two of us. I'll drop him a clue about it that the next time we speak." Surely, Nicco had heard that story. His father was a lifelong member of the mafia as well.

I paid careful attention as Storm and Steel discussed how to handle the next group of suits Don Diavonte sent to Griffinsford. It was weird that they called the men I grew up with suits, like they weren't real people. They were all too real to my way of thinking. Some of them were absolutely despicable, murderous bastards, but others I was quite fond of.

As I listened to them talk, I realized that these bikers had their own little ecosystem of allies, IT specialists, attorneys, and police connections. Their system was very organized and easily rivaled Don Diavonte's operation. I wasn't surprised to find out our don had been leveraging the business owners in Griffinsford into paying protection money. That had historically been one of their most stable revenue streams, after all. Most of the mob's money-making endeavors didn't sit right with me. It was why I tried to stay out of it as much as possible growing up.

The conversation eventually moved in the direction of lucrative business ventures that were technically within the letter of the law. Storm seemed to be trying to nudge his friend away from illegal activities. It was clear from looking at the condition of both of their clubhouses that the Slayers were the more affluent club.

Steel started talking about his new cam girl venture. He talked to Storm about the upfront cost involved, how his crew had gotten involved creating sets, and how the women were excited about the prospect of solo performances on camera. Although Mason and Storm appeared interested, I got the feeling they weren't wild about this particular business idea.

Steel shot me an assessing gaze. "How about you, Aprilia? Would you be interested in getting in some sessions in front of the camera?"

I tried not to look shocked by his brazen invitation. "No, sir, I don't think that would work for me. In order to get comfortable doing that kind of work, a woman has to enjoy the attention or really need the money. I don't fall into either one of those categories."

Storm snorted a laugh.

Mason stood, put one arm on either side of my chair, and leaned down until he was looking me in the eyes. "Most engaged women would have just pointed out that being a cam girl while planning their wedding would be distracting, or I don't know... maybe that their fiancé wouldn't like it?"

I gazed into his eyes and knew all the way down to my bones that this man didn't believe I was actually engaged. Mason seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to deception. I froze, caught in his all-too-knowing gaze. Storm cleared his throat and my hand shot out to push against his chest. Mason backed off immediately.

I heard Storm mumble, "Can't take that brother fucking anywhere these days without him pissing someone off."

Chapter 11

Mason

With Aprilia at my back, we rode back to the clubhouse. I liked having her on my bike a little too much. Her thighs wrapped around me made me think dirty thoughts, like how it would feel if we were naked and facing each other. I imagined it would be pretty hot because of how she reacted to me before. This woman liked what she saw when she looked at my body and enjoyed my company. I thought she even got off on being snippy with me, which I found all kinds of cute. Shit, even though I promised Storm I'd be hands off, I wanted her in the worst way.

I turned the situation with her and Nicco over in my mind and couldn't get things to add up. First, no man in his right mind would send his beautiful fiancée into a biker's den. Even if he accepted that we were not a bunch of criminals who preyed on vulnerable women, there were enough single brothers to make any woman have second thoughts about marrying a fucking gangster. He had to know that sending her to us was a risky proposition.

Also, why give her a fake engagement ring? Fake ring screamed fake relationship. He could have bought her a nice, modest diamond that wouldn't have drawn attention. It felt like he was intentionally signaling to us that they weren't really engaged, that he wasn't emotionally invested in the relationship or, God forbid, not planning to follow through with marrying her. Why would he give her a huge, obviously fake diamond engagement ring unless he was sending a message? Maybe he wanted someone to take Aprilia off his hands. If so, I'd jump at the chance to make her mine.

In trying to figure out if their engagement was fake or if Nicco was trying to foist her off on one of my club brothers, memories of her repeatedly referring to him as Sophia's brother rose in my mind. If they were in love and planning to get married, why would she think of him as Sophia's brother in her own mind? That was odd behavior that made me think she didn't see him as her fiancé.

Then at the Twisted Metal roadhouse just now, she admitted that Nicco sent her here to act as liaison between our club and his family, but she somehow neglected to give him critical information about where their don kept his most valuable secrets. If Aprilia were really working with him to

bring Diavonte down, wouldn't they have schemed together before she came?

The cherry on top was the purely sexual way she responded to the sight of my body and how breathless and aroused she became when I got close to her. This woman was seriously attracted to me, and I for sure felt the same way about her. My gut told me it was more than sexual attraction, and that decided it for me. Drawing her closer was what my soul needed, and it could only make her more loyal to our cause. Maybe I was blinded by what I thought we could have together, but I wasn't seeing a downside to advancing my cause with her. Just thinking about how amazing it would be if we were compatible made my dick hard.

When we pulled into the clubhouse, it was past noon. We headed up to our room to freshen up and talk about how the meeting with Steel went and what she intended to talk to Nicco about, making sure it covered all our concerns.

She followed me into our suite and the minute the door was closed behind us, she turned on me. "I didn't like the way you got in my face about Steel's offer of employment."

"Being a cam girl wasn't the issue. It was the way you responded, like Nicco wouldn't blink an eye at you turning up naked using a vibrator on yourself on his favorite porn site."

She leaned her back against the door, her hands still behind her back. It took her a minute to formulate a response. "You act like women should make every decision based on what the man in her life would think of it. I make decisions based on what's important to me."

I stalked closer, until I was standing right in front of her. "You absolutely don't do that. You're here because Nicco wanted you to come, not because hanging out with a bunch of bikers rocks your world."

She gazed up at me and right before my eyes, she went from defiant to almost trembling. At first, I thought it was because I got too close too fast and she was afraid. Then I saw a slight blush creeping up her neck and noticed the pulse at her neck was visibly throbbing. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and bit, as if to keep her from responding.

Suddenly, the atmosphere around us shifted and there was sexual tension where there had been only irritation before. This woman looked for all the world like a blushing virgin. That lit a ball of fiery lust in my soul. It didn't matter that the probability of her actually being a virgin was practically non-existent. The fact that I provoked that response was what did it for me.

I took a step closer and put one hand on the door on each side of her body.

She dropped her gaze and I saw her nipples grow hard through the thin fabric of her top. I inhaled and the scent of her shampoo filled my nostrils. I twirled a lock of her short hair around one finger and gave it a little tug. “You know something, cher? I don’t think you and Nicco are actually engaged.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she shot back weakly.

“Yeah, I do. You don’t talk about him or act like you miss him. You keep referring to him as Sophia’s brother instead of your fiancé, and respond to me like a sex starved vixen from another planet.”

Her head jerked to the side, tugging the lock of hair from my grasp. Still, she didn’t deny my accusation or tell me to step back.

“My best guess is your engagement is as fake as that diamond ring he slid onto your finger.”

“Leave Sophia’s brother out of this.” Her breathless, halfhearted response made me smile. She froze, as if she just realized that she had referred to him as Sophia’s brother again and was kicking herself for it.

Her hands came up to my chest, and just when I thought she was going to push me away, she fisted my shirt and pulled me down for a kiss. Feeling her lips against mine made up for every disappointment I’d ever had in my entire life. This moment was everything and I didn’t want to say or do anything to spoil it. Instead, I concentrated on making this the best kiss of her life.

I pressed my body closer to hers, and she clung to me like her life depended on it. Everything about Aprilia was a contradiction, one moment she seemed soft and innocent and the next decadent and all knowing. I took my time exploring her mouth, enjoying everything about this experience.

Both of her hands started tugging my T-shirt up. Shock roiled through my gut. Fucking hell, she wanted me naked. This was an unexpected stroke of good fortune if there ever was one. I slid off my cut and tossed it on a nearby chair. Within seconds my shirt was lying on top of it. That’s when Aprilia finally pushed me back. It wasn’t to get me away, though. It was so she could admire my body. Being a brazen fucker, I unbuckled my belt and opened the top button of my jeans.

Instead of telling me off, my little spitfire drifted closer as her eyes drifted down to the gigantic bulge behind my zipper. The beast was rowdy and getting overly eager. I could feel my cock jerk at the thought of her sliding her hand inside for a stroke. Instead, she gestured to the front of my jeans in an unspoken command to see what I was offering.

I shamelessly obliged her by taking down my zipper and pulling out my

throbbing cock and heavy balls. She stared and stared. and stared some more without saying a word. I worried for a minute that she was punking me. Then her head came up and she pointed at my ginormous cock.

“What do you expect me to do with that?” she asked, looking awestruck.

I chuckled. “Not a damn thing until you show me the goods, cher.”

She went wide eyed. But I jerked my chin in a gesture for her to start shedding her clothes if she wanted a piece of me. Without even thinking about it, she started divesting herself of clothing one piece at a time. Watching her undress was like a visual feast. Aprilia was small but had an athletic build. I definitely liked everything she had to offer.

If I thought she was the kind of woman to waste a lot of time talking, I’d have been very surprised. She literally jumped into my arms. I caught her easily and lifted her while she wrapped her legs around my waist. This was a woman who knew what she wanted and went for it, no matter how much it made her blush.

She lifted her face to claim another kiss, but right before our lips touched, I asked, “You don’t believe in foreplay, do you?”

She slipped both hands from my shoulders up to cup my face. “Some other time. Right now, I’m turned on and aching for you.”

I closed my eyes as a wave of pure lust surged in my chest. Without thinking twice, I lifted her to allow my cock to nestle between her folds. I groaned and how wet she was for me. My lips found hers as I ground my cock against her soft, trembling flesh. She was definitely wet enough to take me, so I maneuvered myself into place and began to spear her on my cock.

Aprilia threw her head back and closed her eyes as I slowly eased her down onto my thick, throbbing cock. Her sounds of pleasure made me proud and kicked up my arousal. Then her body tightened around me. I had a bad feeling it was from pain rather than her being about to come, so I eased up a little.

She melted into my body and licked the side of my neck with her soft tongue before gently biting my earlobe. It felt like a gesture of thanks. I took a few steps forward, until her back hit the door and then pulled back so we could see how much of my cock she’d managed to take.

When she looked at me, tears were glistening in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “You’re a lot to take in one go.”

There was not a goddamn chance in hell I was going to let this generous woman feel bad about not taking more of me than she could handle. “Don’t

ever apologize for doing your best or allow a man to hurt you in order to get off. No woman deserves that, you least of all.”

I watched her swallow thickly and nod. She still seemed upset, so I did my best to soothe her. “Half is more than enough. Most of the feeling is in the tip anyway. You feel like heaven on earth wrapped around me. Trust me, you’ve got nothing to apologize for when it comes to this.”

She was chewing her bottom lip again, so I leaned down and nipped at her top lip. “Do you trust me, or do you want to change positions?”

She thought it over for a minute and replied, “I trust you, but I still want to switch places.”

I knew immediately what she meant. She wanted my back against the door and her controlling the ride. I spun us around and leaned back, giving her free reign of my body. Her hands landed firmly on my shoulders, and she lifted her body, sparking more pleasure than I’d ever known with a woman.

When she started lowering herself, I panicked and dropped one hand to grasp the lower part of my cock. She did that little thing again where she licked my neck like a kitten and nibbled on my earlobe. It was definitely her way of saying thanks.

I relaxed and used my free arm to lend support as she rode my cock, getting more enthusiastic as she bounced away. This was glorious and drove home the point that I’d gone without sex for far too long. No man should deny himself this kind of pleasure just because he’s a stubborn bastard. The thing was, I didn’t think this experience would be my wake-up call. Now that I’d gotten a taste of Aprilia, no other woman would do. I had a gut feeling it would be her or no one in my future.

She moved harder and rougher, seeking her own orgasm. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. When her movements became erratic, I turned us again and pounded into her hard and fast, careful to keep my hand wrapped around the lower half of my cock. That’s when she started telling me I really knew what women liked and that I was the best. She even said she could get addicted to my cock. I fucking loved hearing her say shit like that while we were in the moment. It fed my ego like nothing I’d ever experienced. For some reason, compliments meant more coming from Aprilia.

The next thing I knew, someone was knocking on the door. “Storm told me to bring you both some food.”

“Go away,” I growled at Rob. “We’re fucking busy.”

Just then, Aprilia yelled, “Oh God, yes. Just like that.”

Rob’s voice became alarmed. “Holy shit, Mason. Are you seriously doing the one thing Storm told us not to do? He laid down the law for all of us, including you. No fucking the mafia contact was a pretty damn clear and straightforward command. He’s gonna fucking lose his mind. You do know that, right?”

I shifted my weight to free up one hand. I slammed it into the door. “Get the hell out of here, Rob. This is the kind of shit you shouldn’t be eavesdropping on. Use your brain, prospect. Ain’t no brother wants another so close when he’s got his cock out.”

“My favorite fucking club brother is going to wind up dead because he can’t keep his dick in his pants. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Aprilia froze, probably thinking he was serious.

I thrust more gently and nuzzled her neck. “Forget about Rob. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Right now it’s just you and me, cher. Don’t worry about anyone else.”

I turned her in my arms and pressed her front to the door and continued giving her half my cock until she was screaming my name. It felt fucking gratifying that I was so easily able to get her back in the zone.

When her smaller body clamped down around mine, it felt like my cock was being choked in the most pleasurable way imaginable. I came instantly and slowed down, allowing my body to stroke slowly through her still fluttering core. I could feel our fluids drenching the hand I had wrapped around my cock. There was no better feeling in the world than having an exhausted, sated woman pressed against my body while the last of our orgasm played out.

I eased her up off my cock and brought my messy hand up as she turned to look at me. “Want to taste?” I asked teasingly.

She gave me a breathless laugh. “You’re a bad, bad man, Mason.”

When I moved my hand to get a taste for myself. She made an indignant sound and one hand shot out to wrap around my wrist. “You said I could have the first taste. Don’t take away my treat.” Before I could respond, her pink tongue came out to lick across one knuckle. I watched in fascination as she thought it over and licked me again.

Looking into my eyes, she said almost shyly, “We taste good together.”

My chest ached with affection as I swiped my tongue across the back of my hand. “You’re right. We do.”

When she proceeded to lick every drop off my hand, it hit me. In that moment, I fell in love. There was no other way to explain it. This open acceptance and act of intimacy chained my heart solidly to hers. Nicco and his brothers be damned. If Aprilia would have me, I'd stop at nothing to make her mine.

Chapter 12

Aprilia

The way Mason looked at me blew me away. Before today, I had mostly felt awkward during sexual encounters. Guys were put off by my impulsiveness and need to be in control of the action. Not Mason. He liked the same sexy things that I did. For the first time in my life, I was getting everything I wanted and it was glorious.

Lying on his chest, I could feel his heart beating wildly. Something about that was so appealing to me. Cuddling me closer, he walked across the room, opened the door leading to the bedroom, and kicked it shut behind us. When he laid me on the bed, I scrambled back to make room for him. Watching his big naked body climb into bed with me was one of the most amazing sights I'd ever seen. And he was a cuddler to boot. What more could a woman ask for?

Once we were wrapped in each other's arms he asked, "Are we spending the whole day in bed, or did you have other plans?"

I got my head comfortable on his shoulder and rolled that question around in my mind for a minute before answering. "This probably wasn't the best idea in the world."

He sighed. "I know things are a mess right now, what with us teaming up with the Russo brothers to take down Don Diavonte and whatever this is you have going on with Nicco. But sometimes when it feels right, we have to throw caution to the wind and grab a little piece of happiness while we can. Being in the military and watching good men fall all around me taught me one very important lesson, and that's that tomorrow is never guaranteed."

He wasn't wrong about that. Memories drifted through my mind of Nicco teasing me about finding my own big biker to fall in love with. How true his words turned out to be. I wasn't quite ready to have a heart to heart with Mason about Nicco right now, so I opted for another round of sex instead. "I agree. Let's spend the next few hours enjoying each other's company and we'll worry about everything else later."

Mason was absolutely right about grabbing a piece of happiness when it came our way. I'd spent my whole life hoping to meet a man who really got me, someone who understood how I thought and what I needed. Whatever

this was between us was precious, well worth being nurtured and protected.

When I tilted my face up, he didn't hesitate to kiss me. This man was like a sensual paradise just waiting to be explored. I liked everything about him, from his slow Southern drawl to his ripped body and hard-won words of wisdom. I even liked the way he teased me and pushed me out of my comfort zone occasionally. He was down to earth and wholesome compared to the men I was used to being around.

Within moments of being kissed and having his hands caressing my skin, my libido sprung back to life, eager for more of what only he could give. I threw one leg over his hip, climbed on top of him, and did a little exploration of my own as we continued kissing. His cock felt like an iron bar pressing against my pussy, and that thrilled the hell out of me.

We fucked over and over again until I felt exhausted and rubbed raw. Finally, the exhaustion won out and I tumbled off to sleep with visions of how his face looked in the throes of passion dancing through my mind.

We woke up to Storm banging on the door. "What the hell, Mason? I had one rule and you managed to break it in no time. Get the hell out here. I want to talk to you right goddamn now."

I sat up and rubbed my head. The sun was cresting high in the sky. We must have had sex for the better part of the day and then slept like the dead all night and most of the morning. The last orgasm Mason gave me had been mind-blowing. Having Storm screaming at us through the door was much less amazing. He was giving me a gigantic headache.

Mason reached out to touch my arm. "Lay back down, cher. I'll go talk Storm down from the ledge and grab us some dinner."

I flopped back down in a boneless heap on the bed and pulled the blanket up over my face, all too willing to let Mason deal with the grumpy older biker.

Mason just chuckled and climbed out of bed. I heard clothes rustling and then his zipper close. Within moments he was walking across the room. The door opened and shut, and Storm continued harassing him for having sex with me. I wasn't too worried about how this would impact the job because the job was just something Nicco made up to tuck me out of harm's way while he and his brothers pulled off their coup.

Speaking of which, I decided that I had best make contact with them while Mason wasn't here to distract me with his flirting, roguish good looks, and sly humor. I scrambled out of bed, grabbed my phone from my pants pocket,

and slid right back into bed before calling Nicco. He answered on the second ring, sounding tense.

“Aprilia, how are you doing? Are you and Sophia still getting along?”

“What the hell, Nicco? Why would Sophia and I not be getting along? Just because you and your brothers argue all the time doesn’t mean the rest of the world is in constant conflict.”

Nicco moderated his tone. “Yeah, I get that. Sorry for jumping the gun, princess. Want to tell me what you’ve been up to? The shopping in Griffinsford can’t be all that great.”

“You’re right, the shopping sucks. We’ve been getting in a lot of riding in the countryside. The scenery here is amazing, but that’s not why I called.”

“Oh, okay. What did you want to talk about?”

Here’s where things got tricky. This was the first time I needed to use the reverse code.

“My cat. I wanted to ask about my cat. Have you been feeding her and changing out her litter box regularly?”

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line as Nicco processed my question. “Of course. I’ve been taking care of Priscilla. If you don’t mind me saying, she’s a little on the snooty side and she’s clawed me twice already. I’m not sure that keeping Priscilla is going to be feasible once we start having children.”

“Try to focus, Nicco. We aren’t going to be having children for a long time and I need to make sure that Priscilla is properly cared for while I’m doing this errand for you and your brothers.”

“Do you have any specific instructions for me with regards to your cat?” Nicco asked.

“Yes, make sure you clean the shelf above her litter box. She has a tendency to fling litter, and fecal matter is a health hazard if it’s left behind.”

“Got it. I had noticed she makes quite a mess.”

Nicco should have reversed everything and come up with *look below the dog’s box for the shit you need*. I wasn’t sure what Storm and Steel had been referring to at the meeting, but I knew if Nicco and his brothers were looking for something important that belonged to Don Diavonte then his safe was the wrong place to look. If not literally under his dogs’ kennels, then he’d likely keep anything of value under one of his buildings—so hopefully Nicco would figure out what I meant.

“When are you thinking about coming back home?” he asked quietly.

That was a filler question to get me talking. “Probably not for a while. I’ve been hanging around with Sophia at the Slayers’ clubhouse.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that been like?”

“They’re an interesting bunch of men. They love to ride their motorcycles, drink at their private bar in the clubhouse, and mix it up with rival clubs. All of them are so predictable. It’s just like in the movies really.” I was supposed to let it slip that they are still at odds with Twisted Metal MC. Since they’re the only other club in the vicinity, I considered that mission accomplished. Using top secret coded messages was nowhere near as fascinating as they make it out to be in spy movies.

I continued to deliver the misinformation Storm and Steel wanted Don Diavonte to hear about the number of brothers in the Dark Slayers MC and the number of men guarding the clubhouse. I dropped in a personal observation that the Dark Slayers seemed to have quite a bit of internal strife going on—obviously Nicco knew this wasn’t true, and it was purely for the benefit of Don Diavonte should he or one of his men be listening in. “The brothers don’t seem to get along very well most of the time.”

Storm and Steel were convinced that hiding their numbers and making the club seem like it was beginning to break down would lead our don to believe their club was becoming isolated and weak. They seemed convinced that if he overestimated their vulnerabilities, he might send less men if he thought they were grossly incompetent.

“Listen, Aprilia, be careful when you’re at their clubhouse. Stick right by Sophia. I don’t trust those bikers. They’re a bunch of low-class, trigger-happy assholes who think with their dicks. They drink way too much when they should be on the lookout for trouble from that rival club. If things go bad, follow Blade’s lead. As long as you are with his wife, he’s not going to let anything happen to you.”

I yawned quietly behind my hand. Nicco had gotten the message that we were minimizing the Slayers’ strength. What he said sounded good and played right into the story we were weaving. “Yeah, of course I’ll be safe, babe. Don’t worry about me. Things here are super relaxed.”

His voice turned sharp. “Aprilia, pay fucking attention to what I’m saying. Stay alert for trouble. You never know when something might happen.”

Annoyance crept into my voice. “I heard you the first time. Stop being paranoid. These men are in their own little world and don’t drag any of their conflict with the rivals back to the clubhouse with them.”

“Fair enough. It’s just that I worry about you.”

“I spend most of my time with Sophia and Eleanora. I’ll be just fine.”

We said our goodbye and I ended the call.

On the way to the shower, I felt an ache between my legs from having so much sex. It didn’t bother me in the slightest. I loved the physical reminder of all the enthusiastic sex we’d shared. As steam filled the shower and warm water cascaded over me, I thought about our impulsive marathon sex session. I probably shouldn’t have done that because it was making an already complex and potentially dangerous situation exponentially more complicated. I vaguely remembered the nice prospect who prepared our food yelling at Mason through the door. I never really considered myself a troublemaker, but I was causing all kinds of trouble right now.

Even now, Mason was facing the consequences of allowing himself to get close to me. I didn’t want him to get chastised by Storm or punished for making all my wildest dreams come true. I decided to get dressed and head downstairs to back him up.

Within fifteen minutes I was bounding down the stairs, ready to jump to Mason’s defense. I raced through the main bar area.

As I moved closer to Storm’s office, I could hear them talking through the closed door.

Storm’s surly voice really carried, leaving no question about his hot take on our situation. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Mason? You’ve turned down every bunny in this club and were none too nice about it. You can’t seem to get a date in the community to save your fucking life because you don’t trust any woman, but jump on the one who’s a member of the fucking mafia? You’re technically fucking the enemy. How does that even begin to make sense?”

“I like her, and I don’t think she’s our enemy. Like I said before, I don’t think she’s really engaged to Nicco.”

“I don’t give a fuck whether their engagement is real or not. We agreed that no one would touch her. You disobeyed a direct order and are coming at me with a bunch of nonsense about feelings to justify putting your cock where it shouldn’t have been. The last thing we need is for Nicco to think you coerced his soon-to-be blushing bride into your bed.”

“She came to me. Aprilia was the one who pulled my shirt up and wanted me to get naked.”

“Save that bullshit for someone more fucking gullible than I am,” Storm flung back angrily.

Mason lowered his voice. “I gave her a choice and she chose me. Even if it costs me my cut, I’m not giving her up.”

Storm’s voice turned panicked. “Be fucking reasonable. How long do you think the two of you would last out there without the protection of our club? You’d be dead within a day and Nicco would lock his lovely fiancée away for a nice fucking long time.”

“I’m not sending her back to him if she doesn’t want to go,” Mason insisted, stubborn as ever.

My heart squeezed to hear him defending me so staunchly. He was starting to look a lot like my personal hero.

“You can’t trust her, Mason,” Storm gritted out. “She’s mafia through and through. She was raised by a mobster and associated with those brutal fuckers her whole life. Her old man was loyal. She’s always been loyal. Even now, she’s not trying to get away from the organization. She’s just trying to help the Russo brothers take over.”

“You don’t know that,” Mason replied weakly.

A long silence spun out between the two men.

Finally, Storm got right to the point. “If what you say is true and they aren’t really engaged, then she came here under false pretenses and lied to our faces. Do you really want to share your bed with a mafia princess who feels totally comfortable straight up lying to you? That doesn’t sound like the brother I know, who would burn in the fiery pits of hell before he lied to the people he supposedly cares about.”

“Maybe you’re right, but my gut tells me Nicco leveraged her into coming here,” Mason responded calmly.

“Nicco is the more levelheaded of the three Russo brothers. He knows her a lot fucking better than we do. He trusted her to come here and lie to us for whatever reason. Do you think that if it came down to making a choice between you, who she has known for five minutes, or the mafia she was raised in, that she would pick you?”

Hearing that pissed me off. I strolled straight into his office without knocking and surprised them both by saying, “I’d pick Mason over the mafia any day. In case you haven’t noticed, most daughters are trying their level best to get as far away from the criminal enterprise we grew up in as possible. Why do you think Sophia left? I’m no different. My father loved being Don

Diavonte's right-hand man. Me? I just want out from under the old man's thumb."

Storm gestured to the empty chair in front of his desk. "That's just great. One good fuck with Mason and you're willing to finally throw some honesty our way."

Mason spoke up, clearly trying to break the tension. "Well, I do have a fucking magnificent cock. So, it's not all that surprising that sex with me would make an honest woman of our sexy new friend."

I smothered back a smile, loving Mason's weird sense of humor. He was a smooth talker. Dropping down into the chair, I crossed my legs and stared at Storm. "You're right about coming here under false pretenses. Don Diavonte sent me to spy on you."

Storm jumped up from his chair and rounded the desk to hover over me. "I fucking knew it. Everyone says I'm the most suspicious bastard in the world, but somehow, I'm always right in the end. I should have never allowed you in our clubhouse."

I gazed up at the big guy who was looking more unhinged by the second. Before I could respond to his rant and tell him that we were on the same side, Mason was out of his seat and pushing Storm back away from me. "What the hell is wrong with you, boss? When a woman turns on her former boss, it's time to open our ears, not scream at her. Let's just listen to what she has to say."

"If I don't fucking like what I hear, she's getting a dirt nap."

Mason gave him one final shove. "No, she's not. You've never so much as hit a woman in your entire life. I doubt you're going to kill one. If you did, Zoe would take the kids and run."

Mentioning his wife and kids must have been a huge reality check for Storm because he immediately got control of himself. "Fine. You're right about me not being the kind of man to hurt a woman. If I don't like what I hear, I'm confiscating all her belongings and we're escorting her back to LA."

Mason turned away and rolled his eyes. "Sure, boss, whatever you say."

Chapter 13

Mason

The minute Storm flung himself back into his rolling chair, Aprilia started explaining. “Nothing about the situation changes. We’re all on the same page in terms of overall goals. I talked to Nicco this morning and gave him the information you wanted him to have. He was adamant that we be careful and stressed twice that we should watch our backs. Repeating things twice was one of our codes for danger is near.”

Storm grabbed his phone and called Hacker. “We have a credible report of a possible pending attack. Let Grit know to step up security and release the drones. I want aerial surveillance of the clubhouse and all our businesses.”

I was proud that Aprilia started the conversation with the most important piece of information.

Storm put his phone down on his desk and sighed. “Continue. I’m all ears.”

She responded quickly. “Mason was right about Nicco and I not being engaged. Like I told you earlier, my father died several months ago, and Don Diavonte took it upon himself to arrange a marriage for me with his bookkeeper.”

“The guy who’s currently stalking you, right?”

She nodded. “What I didn’t tell you, was that Nicco did everything he could to make sure that didn’t happen. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t close with the Russo brothers. We grew up together. Sophia had a pretty isolated existence when she was young. Her family never let her hang out with other kids, just Eleanora and me because we were mafia kids.

“That sounds about right,” Storm grumbled.

“If you don’t think too hard about it, growing up interacting with other mafia kids can seem like having a normal life. We all knew it wasn’t, but there wasn’t anything we could do about it except dream of the day we could grow up and figure a way out. For girls, it’s easier if their family shelters them from knowing about the family business because when they’re all grown up they don’t have any beans to spill. For the boys, it’s different. They almost never got out of the family business because their fathers and uncles groomed them from an early age to build their whole identity around being a

mobster. Mafia values of strong family ties, grifting, and never stepping a toe out of line are instilled in them at an early age.”

While she wasn't telling me anything I didn't know about the mafia, her story tore at my heart, particularly imagining her stuck in this situation as a little girl. “It must have been hard to be so constrained as a child, especially for someone with such a free spirit like yourself.”

She nodded, becoming visibly upset. “I was less restricted than most of the other mafia daughters. They were manipulated and left in the dark about everything to do with the business. My father was the opposite. He was convinced that the best way to keep me safe was to tell me everything. I knew who was doing what, which mobsters loved to hurt people and who the protectors were. Although I never saw anything go down firsthand, I was pretty aware of everything. I knew who to trust and who to avoid, and it saved me immeasurable pain.”

“So what's with this engagement? Storm asked.

“Nicco came to me and told me about Don Diavonte's plan to marry me off to his bookkeeper, Chester. He thought if we were engaged then maybe Don Diavonte would consider the problem of me being all alone in the world solved. You know about the Russo brothers' plan to challenge the leadership? Well, Nicco also didn't trust Chester to give me up or our don not to change his mind and give me to his bookkeeper if Nicco displeased him in some way, so he thought I'd be safer out of the way here, while they took care of business.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. “So, you're engaged to Nicco after all?”

She shot me a conflicted look. “No. His proposal was presented as a ruse to get me out of the arranged marriage. At one point he said he'd love for me to consider making the engagement real, but I turned him down on the spot. We've never had romantic feelings for each other. Marrying Nicco would have felt like marrying my brother.”

“Ah, he had a soft spot for you and that's why he's sticking his neck out.”

“To be honest, it was Diego who heard about the arranged marriage and freaked out at the thought of me being married off to a creep twice my age. Diego might seem totally unhinged at times, but he keeps his ear to the ground and will find a way to help if he can. I believe the three brothers concocted the plan together and Nicco ended up taking the lead because he's so much more social than his brothers.”

“So, Nicco was the one capable of convincing everyone the engagement was real.” Storm looked intrigued.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Aprilia acknowledged. “Nicco wanted me out of harm’s way, obviously me acting as a secure conduit for information between your club and the Russo brothers was genuine—but the engagement had to appear real so that Don Diavonte wouldn’t doubt my loyalty. He thought I was trying to persuade Sophia to leave Blade and come back to her family—when Nicco originally approached him to ask for permission for me to come here that’s what he told him.”

Storm frowned, but before he could shoot his mouth off again, she clarified.

“Of course I wasn’t. But there had to be a believable reason why I wanted to go to the clubhouse. Your club did the impossible by getting three daughters out of mafia control. They’re happy as can be with their new lives. You’re currently a victim of your own success.”

Lightening hit my brain. “Nicco knew you’d be safe in our keeping because Eleanora, Sophia, and her younger sister are, right?”

A hint of a smile cured her lips up. “That’s exactly right. The problem was getting me here without arousing our don’s suspicions. I was engaged to Nicco and like a good loyal mafia woman I was going to try and get his sister to leave her new life and come back to the family. The Russo brothers came up with the plan of dropping hints to Don Diavonte that if I was allowed to visit Sophia then I would make a good spy. So essentially Nicco got me to a safe place by having our don think it was his own idea. He was not about to let any opportunity slip by to dig up intel on his enemies. I don’t know what it is about this small town in the middle of nowhere, but Don Diavonte is laser focused on controlling it.”

“It’s because we’re strategically located and our local police force is weak,” I explained.

“And you’re not spying on us?” Storm was studying her closely.

Aprilia shook her head, “No, you know my cell phone is bugged right? So when I talk to Nicco you have access to everything, Don Diavonte obviously does too, so any information given about the MC is the misinformation you and the Russos agreed on. They are your allies, they wouldn’t do anything that could get their sister hurt.”

“How can we know for sure where your loyalties lie?” Storm asked.

“I heard Mason say that even if it costs him his cut, he wasn’t giving me

up. I'm here to tell you that I feel the same way. No matter how this all goes down, I'm sticking right by Mason's side. I'll do whatever you want, as long as you don't ask me to double-cross Sophia's brothers or try to keep me from being with Mason. Everything else is negotiable to me. I never dared to dream of finding a way out of the mafia, much less find a man I really care about. This is my chance to kill two birds with one stone and I'm taking it regardless of what you think."

Aprilia's bold words made my chest ache with pride, gratitude, and love. She was standing up to Storm who was intimidating at the best of times, just for an opportunity to be with me. No one had ever done that before. After years of looking, I had found my one. It was almost mind blowing that she felt the same way about me.

Storm's nostrils flared. "So, what you're saying is this thing between you and Mason is true love, right?"

Aprilia shrugged her shoulders. "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's not a giraffe. I've spent my whole life hanging back, having minimal contact with the men in my social circle because they were all destined to be members of the mafia. I've hooked up with guys, but it never lasted long because I could never see myself as a mafia wife, looking the other way while her husband shook down people for money or pushed drugs into the community or whatever crime was trending at the moment."

Storm asked the question that had been burning in my mind as well. "Did you ever sleep with Nicco?"

Aprilia frowned at him and responded curtly, "I've never even played doctor with any of Sophia's brothers growing up, or had crushes on them as teens, much less slept with them as adults. As I said before, they were like brothers to me. When I agreed to come here, Nicco even suggested I might find a hot biker to fall in love with, like his sister did. Trust me, there has never been anything romantic going on between any of us."

I spoke up before my brain approved of the decision. "Yet, Nicco said he'd love for the engagement to be real. He wanted you for his wife, so there must have been something going on."

Aprilia didn't hesitate to respond to my question because, unlike Storm, I had a right to ask about her personal life. "I think Nicco is just struggling to find his one and is worried that Don Diavonte or his father might try to slap him upside the head with an arranged marriage one day soon. His old man already tried that with Diego because he's the oldest. He jumped into bed

with some older lady and fawned all over her in public. It pissed his potential bride off to the point that she refused him.”

Storm actually smiled. “It sounds like Diego likes imploding situations in order to get his way.”

Aprilia nodded, her expression becoming more relaxed. “He’s always been that way. My father used to say he was a drama queen. Diego hated that, but everyone knew it was true. Don’t get me wrong, Diego is a very dangerous man. He’ll kill someone who crosses him without hesitation if he thinks there is no other way, but he definitely gets a kick out of seeing everyone’s head explode over his antics.”

“What does Mr. Russo senior think about all this? I thought these old mafia types were all over their family, keeping things under control. Storm asked.

“Their old man is a stone-cold killer, a sociopath of the first order. I don’t think he even likes his kids, much less loves them. The only person I ever thought he had an emotional investment in was his wife. He pampers her, caters to her every whim, and will do anything she wants, no matter how absurd—and you already know about Sophia’s little sister Ashley. He even forgave his wife for her affair, though he could never forgive Ashley for being the product of it. I’ve seen younger women try to get his attention, having no idea what they’re dealing with. He’d not only turn them down flat, but he’d be absolutely brutal about it.”

Storm leaned back in his seat and relaxed. “I’ve heard from more than one person that he’s completely unhinged and a real piece of shit.”

“They aren’t wrong about that. Sophia’s brothers joke that their old man is outliving his usefulness. It’s funny because that’s just the attitude Mr. Russo has about other people. Still, somewhere in the back of my mind, I think those brothers are harboring some hardcore resentment against their dad for how he’s treated Sophia and Ashley. I worry that one day they’re going to make him pay. The one thing holding them back is that their mother lives and breathes for that man. If she passes first, his life wouldn’t be worth spit.”

“Jesus, you are used to associating with some depraved people, cher.” I reached out and took her hand in mine.

“I never spent a lot of time around Mr. and Mrs. Russo, but I did pay attention to my surroundings. Over the years, I just subconsciously picked up on a lot of behaviors that might not have been obvious to others.”

“Alright, I’m willing to take you at your word that you’re batting for team

Slayer. However, from now on, I want all your conversations and text messages with Nicco to be made in my presence,” Storm instructed.

Aprilia shot back, “I’d be happy to make sure you’re present for all communication, but just to be clear I’m not batting for team Slayer. I’m batting for team Aprilia and team Mason. Right now, my goals and your club’s goals are in alignment. If anything happens to change that, I’ll give you a heads-up because I’m not the kind of person to double-cross a friend. Once the Russo brothers replace Don Diovante and I’m free to live my life as I see fit, I plan to reevaluate my loyalties. I might end up batting for team Slayer in the end. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Storm frowned, looking none too pleased by her loyalty clarification. “I suppose at this stage in the game I should be grateful for your honesty. I would say that as long as you’re an ally we’ll look out for you, but I think you already know we’ll look out for you regardless of whether or not you end up being an ally in the end.”

Aprilia smiled. “Nicco wasn’t wrong about the Slayers having a soft spot for women. Whether you realize it or not, that’s the one thing you have in common with the Russo brothers.”

When I glanced at Storm, his assessing gaze spoke volumes about how much he didn’t care for being compared to the Russo brothers in general. As we talked about the details of what she communicated to Nicco, the security alarm went off for the clubhouse.

Storm and I stood up and ran into the adjacent meeting room, tore open the door to the armory, and began gearing up. When we exited into the main bar area, I was glad to see Grit, our sergeant at arms, was there with a multitude of club brothers who were already geared up as well.

I turned to Aprilia and told her, “Go upstairs to our suite. Lock the door and the door to the bedroom. I want you behind double locks while we sort this out.”

She grabbed my arm with both hands and jerked me around. “I should stay down here because I still have a job to do. I need to see what’s going on with my own eyes. Plus, I might be able to give you pointers if I can see who he sent. I know a lot about Don Diavonte’s men.”

I stood there with my hand on the handle of the pistol resting in my shoulder holster. As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. “Go to Hacker’s office and lock yourself in there with him. He’s got drones in the sky. If you recognize anyone, let him know and he’ll disseminate the

information to the rest of us.”

Her expression turned almost grateful as I stuck my earbud in place. I watched to make sure she was safe as I listened to Hacker through my earpiece.

“I’m counting thirteen men, all suits. They’re trying to crash the front gate, but the prospects have barricaded it with a row of cars, two deep.”

“Only seriously stupid fuckers would think they could take our clubhouse with so few men in a full-frontal assault,” Storm said.

Breaker, who used to be a munitions expert in the military, cautioned, “It could mean they’re planning to let explosives do the heavy lifting.”

“Aprilia says she’s heard stories of them throwing sticks of dynamite or grenades, be prepared.” Hacker told us.

We all stopped barricading the clubhouse and ran outside. Grit had called in almost every Slayer. It made me worry about our other properties.

Storm grumbled, “Fucking great. Some of us are going to lose fingers today.”

“Not me, mate,” Celt shouted as he raised his cricket bat in the air.

That crazy fucking Irishman was going to get himself killed if he wasn’t real careful. He should be trying to get away from a stick of dynamite, not running toward it. I hoped that what Aprilia said wasn’t going to apply in this situation, it seemed like overkill to me, but with those mobsters you never knew.

I stood in the doorway, trying to decide what area needed reinforcement, when the first grenade came soaring over the fence. Fuck. Celt took off running and managed to hit it with his cricket bat, splintering the wooden bat into pieces. The grenade landed several yards away as guys dove out of the way.

I ducked for cover, but I wasn’t far enough away. “Down, down!”

Suddenly a cloud of black smoke billowed across the compound. Thank fuck, it was just a smoke grenade, I’d not been close enough to see the shape of the missile and had assumed the worst.

“They’re just smoke grenades,” I shouted. “Get the gas masks ready in case they follow through with tear gas.”

I stepped back and grabbed a couple of aluminum bats from the umbrella stand near the door and ran into the yard, tossing one to Celt.

Meanwhile, Storm was shouting directions in our ears. “Try to hit them over to the side of the fence beside the barricade. Breaker, you go and unlock

the side gates but keep watch for intruders. We need an opening to get out or we're all going to be sitting ducks."

"On it," Breaker informed him.

Celt and I did our best to hit the next few that were tossed over, so the compound immediately in front of us was clear of smoke. The next thing we knew they were lobbing dynamite at us, though luckily the first couple of sticks went out with a fizzle. These fucking reprobates loved weapons they could use from a distance even if they weren't as accurate. Suddenly, lightning hit my brain.

"Heads-up, brothers. The explosives are just a smokescreen to create chaos. Be on the lookout for snipers.

"We've got that covered, but good looking out, Mason," Storm said.

My club brothers began pouring through the side gates with weapons blazing. It reminded me of war, sending a fucking chill up my spine. I turned and caught Celt gearing up to hit several sticks of dynamite taped together. I ran full speed toward him and rammed into him with my shoulder, knocking him to the ground. When the dynamite landed, I grabbed it and ripped the fuses out, burning the palm of my hand in the process.

"Dynamite is not something you want to hit with your bat unless you want it to explode in your face, brother."

"Bullshit. It's stable, the fuse hadn't burned through to the blasting cap."

"Stable unless you hit it the wrong way and the fuse ignites it." He had never been in the military, so I shouldn't be surprised he didn't know that.

We both turned to follow the others, when a bullet nipped the heel of my left shoe. Before I could react, someone from above said, "Gotcha, motherfucker," then I heard a rifle go off. I glanced up at the roof to find Teeny with his sniper rifle smoking in his hand. He jerked his chin at me and said, "As you were, soldier. I got him."

"Good shooting. Stay high in case there are more."

Teeny just grinned at me. "That's the plan, brother."

Celt and I ran out with our handguns up and ready to shoot. Unfortunately, everyone was already cleaning up. I wasn't wild about killing, but standing there with a cold gun when everyone else's were hot pissed me off.

Glad all my brothers were still walking and talking, and no one lost any fingers, I began helping clean up. Out of the men who tried to storm our clubhouse I counted nine dead and four survivors, all with gunshot wounds. Two bled out on the ground before we could save them, and one was looking

none too good. The one remaining was smaller, with slicked back black hair and beady eyes. I didn't like the look of him.

Chapter 14

Aprilia

Sitting in Hacker's office watching the whole battle go down on several big screens had been a harrowing experience, enough that it made me regret insisting on being front and center. The computer genius of the club had drones and security cameras which gave a bird's eye view from multiple vantage points. I watched as he monitored the security feeds and relayed the information to the Slayers in real time. By the end of it, I felt like I'd witnessed every single drop of blood get spilled firsthand. My stomach was churning with a sick feeling that drove home that I never really understood how awful the mafia really was. Did my father and grandfather do shit like this, roll up on innocent people minding their own business and slaughter them? The thought of that twisted my heart with misery.

I can't believe I thought being sent to the Dark Slayers MC would be dangerous compared to being around lifelong members of the mafia. My world flipped upside down in an instant. If my loyalties were not as firm in my own head as I made them sound when talking to Storm, they sure as hell were now. Those men put their safety on the line to keep their town safe from the kind of shit that just went down outside the clubhouse.

A deep voice drew me from my internal musings. "Hey, you're looking pretty freaked out. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Don't worry about me." My voice didn't sound convincing even to my own ears.

Hacker leaned closer and lifted my chin to look into my eyes. "Look, Aprilia, we all know you're a strong woman. You don't have to put up a brave front for any Slayer, least of all me. Being strong is all well and good, but it doesn't make you impervious to the kind of violence we just witnessed. It was stomach churning for me too, and I've been on the battlefield more times than I care to remember. It's okay to reach out for help dealing with this."

I turned away and closed my eyes as I fought back the emotions rising in my chest. When I looked up at his worried face again, words tumbled out of my mouth. "What am I supposed to say? I'm mafia, but never fully understood the connection between our luxurious lifestyle and the violence

and bloodshed that funded it. I knew my father did some shady stuff, but I guess I thought it was more money laundering, bribery, that kind of thing. Your club knows all too well how brutal the mafia can be. They don't want to hear me whining about it, especially not after how hard they fought just now to keep Don Diavonte from killing every man in this club and taking over this town."

Hacker sat back in his seat with a thoughtful expression on his face. "We've learned with Sophia and Eleanora that just because a woman is born into a mafia family doesn't make her a gangster."

"I wish I could say that was true in my case, but my father was very open about what was going on in his life. He just skipped over the bloodshed to talk about the end result. I shouldn't have been so naive. Common sense should have led me to fill in the missing information. I was blind when I was growing up. Unfortunately, my eyes are open now and it's just a lot to deal with all at once."

"You're not responsible for the violence wrought by others. Whatever happened in the past needs to stay in the past. Back then, you didn't understand the full implications of participating in the system you were born into. Now, you do. When we know better, we do better."

I nodded, feeling my anxiety slowly easing. "I definitely don't want to do anything that might result in an innocent person being hurt or killed."

"I can tell violence doesn't sit very well with you, and I have every confidence that you will make different decisions in the future."

Action on the screen caught our attention. Mason and Celt were dragging one of the men who attacked the clubhouse through the front door. He was fighting them every step of the way. I frowned, trying to place his face.

"Do you know who this guy is? He's looking like the only survivor. Intel on him would be particularly useful about now."

It hit me like a ton of bricks. "I've seen him before. I remember my father telling me he was Don Diavonte's cleaner. I remember being terrified of him as a child because he almost never spoke and always had this dead look in his eyes. He creeped me out when he looked at me."

Hacker asked, "I'm guessing by cleaner we're not talking about polishing the family silver?"

My chin started trembling and the old feeling of being cold and terrified in his presence came back. "Yeah, he's not a fighter, he just cleans up their mess however that needs to be done. He probably survived because he was

hanging back, waiting to do his job.”

“What do you know about this cleaner?”

“Not a lot. I didn’t really understand what a cleaner was for a long time, believe it or not. I actually thought he cleaned the old man’s house. It worried me that Don Diavonte’s housekeeper looked like the Grim Reaper. After seeing what went down today, I have a better understanding of why he’s so creepy. He’s the guy who disposes of the bodies, and cleans away the blood, guts and DNA evidence that Don Diavonte’s men leave behind.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“Anthony. Anthony Akers. I was about ten years old the first time I met him. At that time, he had been working for Don Diavonte for about eleven years according to my father. I remember that because it was wild to me that he had been working there since before I was born.”

Hacker quipped, “If you’re good at what you do and make decent money, why take a chance on a new boss?”

“I suppose that’s true. Anthony is completely loyal to the organization. My best guess is he’ll die screaming before he gives up any useful information.”

“I hope that’s not true. We need to figure out whether he’s a friend or foe. It could be that he’s working for the Russo brothers. I’m sure Storm will want you to contact Nicco and find out what he wants us to do with him. If so, we’ll probably squeeze him for information and then keep him on lockdown until Don Diavonte is out of the way.”

“I don’t particularly care what you do with him as long as you keep him the hell away from me.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. Storm will make sure he’s locked down tight.”

“If you’re finished with me, I would like to go make sure Mason is okay.”

“Absolutely,” Hacker responded. “Go talk to your protector. Do what you can to help get the clubhouse put back together again. Thanks for your help, Aprilia.”

“You’re very welcome. If I can be of further assistance, just let me know.”

I walked out into the main room, but Mason was nowhere to be found. I went over to the bar where Rosie was cleaning the counter and setting a long row of glasses along the edge.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“If you want to sweep up around the bar area, that would be a big help. As soon as the brothers set things right again, they’ll come back, shower up, and

be wanting a nice cold beer. I don't plan to disappoint them."

I grabbed a boom from the corner of the room and began sweeping. There was some broken glass and debris on the floor, which I made short work of. After dumping the last of it in the trash can, I put the broom away and washed my hands at the sink in the bar area. Then we started serving drinks to the brothers as they began filtering in.

An hour later, Mason walked up to the bar still wearing his blood-stained clothing. Rosie slid him a cold beer and he drank it all in one go. I stood there watching his Adam's apple move in his throat as he swallowed gulp after gulp.

After that, he looked at me and said, "I'm gonna grab a shower. Wanna join me, cher? We can talk afterward."

My legs were moving before my brain fully processed the question. Within seconds we were in our suite with the door shut behind us.

I asked tentatively, "Are you okay? You didn't get hurt, did you?"

He held up the palm of one hand. "Just a little burned from pulling on a lit fuse."

"Well, let's get you cleaned up and I'll see if I can find some antiseptic ointment to put on it."

He headed for the bathroom, glancing over his shoulder at me. "There's a first aid kit under the sink."

I stooped down to look into the cabinet under the sink and heard the shower turn on behind me. Now was not the time to be thinking about Mason's ass, I chided myself. After the trauma of seeing people die, how could I even think of something like that? I needed to get a grip before I turned into one of the sad club bunnies who followed the brothers around drooling on themselves.

Irritated with myself, I stood up and turned around just in time to see him stark naked before he turned to step into the shower. I closed my eyes and silently counted to ten because my mind was a pretty messed up place right now.

Rushing back to the bedroom, I pulled out clean clothes for him. He was acting tense in the bar and uncharacteristically quiet while we walked up stairs. I took the clothing into the bathroom and found him leaning on the shower wall with both hands as hot water cascaded over his body and the room filled with steam.

He looked magnificent standing there. I cleared my throat and said, “I brought you clothing.”

My battered protector glanced at me over his shoulder. “I don’t need clothing. I need you.”

I didn’t even hesitate, just started pulling my shirt off. When I stepped into the shower, he moved back to make room for me. When he reached for me, I moved closer.

He ran his hands down my shoulders. “Is the water too hot?”

“No. I love it on the bearable side of scalding.”

He smiled. “Me too. All the steam reminds me of the swamps back home on a misty morning. It’s my happy place.”

I wrapped my hands around his waist and gazed up at him. “Do you ever think of moving back there?”

“No. Too many bad memories. After my mémère, died, nothing tied me to that place but a bunch of mentally abusive assholes who walked all over me during my childhood. Fuck them.”

“I’m sorry you went through all that. Now you have a chosen family with the Dark Slayers.”

“And with you because you claimed me,” he said in a husky voice.”

I nodded, feeling suddenly shy. “Yes, if you truly want me.”

“You know that I do. I have since the first time I laid eyes on you. Remember, in the parking lot, when you couldn’t take your eyes off me?”

“Yeah, I remember. You were easily the hottest man I ever met. I was trying to hide it because I was supposed to be Nicco’s fiancée.”

“You mean I wasn’t what you had in mind when Nicco sold you on the idea of coming to stay at an MC, right?”

I leaned forward and swiped my tongue over one of his nipples before answering. “Nicco said you were all a bunch of ex-military men. He described you as motorcycle enthusiasts. Based on his description, I was expecting tricked out Harleys and expensive leather jackets.”

Mason chuckled. “I resemble that remark, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah, but you’re so much more than some guy on a fancy bike. I figured that much out right from the start, but I was focused on doing the job and heading back home.”

“Why were you so hot to get back to LA? What’s waiting for you there?”

His words felt like a gut punch. “I guess nothing, just a big old empty house with a lifetime of memories.”

He tilted my face up to look into my eyes again. “You know, you could stay here with me and work on making new memories.”

I grabbed some soap and began soaping up his chest. “Might be for the best. I prefer to be as far away from the mafia as possible. I don’t want to see any of them again, know what they’re up to, or get roped into helping them out.”

Mason’s hands came up to cover mine. “And your two best friends now live in Griffinsford.”

I finally managed a full-on grin. “Three friends, counting you.”

“I’m sure Sophia and Eleanora would be ecstatic to hear that you were thinking about staying. God knows I would love to have you by my side.”

I playfully poked him in the stomach. “Maybe it’s you who will be at my side.”

He lowered his head to kiss me, but right before our lips touched, he whispered, “As long as we’re together, I don’t care how you phrase it. I just want to spend time with you.”

His words whispered through my mind as his lips ghosted tenderly across mine. He started slow, teasing me and making me want more. I tugged him closer and pressed myself more firmly against his warm, solid body, sliding my arums up around his neck. His hands moved up my back, tugging me closer to him. The moment my mouth opened, his tongue slid inside, moving against mine with the kind of sensual grace I never would have expected from a badass biker. Our soap-slicked bodies moved together as our arousal built.

I wanted Mason to take me against the shower wall, so I lifted one leg and wrapped it around his waist in an unspoken gesture for him to lift me into place. Instead, he pulled back, grabbed the shower head, and began rinsing us off.

“I guess sex is off the menu.”

He gaped at me. “Of course not. I can’t imagine a reason why sex with you would ever be off the table. Our first few times were too rushed. You deserve better than that. So this time I just want us to slow down so I can focus on pleasuring you properly.”

I bit my bottom lip, more than excited by the idea. We wrapped ourselves in oversized towels, and he took my hand and led me to bedroom. I had to smile when he walked right past the clothes I’d laid out for him. It made me realize how quickly the situation had flipped. We went from feeling

emotional after the attack to being able to soothe each other. I liked that we were able to do that for each other.

When we were in front of the bed, he opened my towel with one finger and watched it fall to the floor. I reached for his towel, but he blocked me with one hand. “Tonight is all about you, my brave, beautiful lady.”

“Why can’t it be all about us?”

“Because,” he said lightly. “Last time, you had your sexy way with me, and now I’m going to return the favor.” Jerking his chin toward the bed, he added, “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right with you.”

He was right about me rushing him the first time. I’d been too aroused to go slow. But now a world of possibilities had opened up in my mind and I wanted to experience each and every one of them. Excitement swirled in my stomach as I thought about all the wonderful things I hoped he would do to me. The thought of his big body covering mine was at the top of my list and made me squirm with anticipation.

I sat on the bed and then slid back into the center with my arms wrapped around my knees. I watched Mason walk around the room, his body still glistening with water droplets from the shower. He checked again to make sure the bedroom door was locked, lit a couple of candles, and turned out the lights. Watching him walk toward me in the dimly lit room spiked my arousal to new heights.

Chapter 15

Mason

Seeing the most attractive woman I'd ever met waiting patiently for me on the bed was like Christmas morning. My mind was reeling from the realization that Aprilia was really mine. She had not only laid claim to me in front of our club president, but she had told him in no uncertain terms that she was batting for team Mason. I've never had any luck with women, and having Aprilia take such a shine to me was enough to warm my cold, dead heart. I now had something to live for besides my club and I was never going to let her go. The plan was to love her so hard she would never want any man except me. Tonight, I was going to make all of her wildest dreams come true.

I pulled off my towel and dropped down onto the bed beside her. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," I said as I reached out to cup one side of her face with my hand. Her eyes lit up at my softly spoken words. And right then and there I decided there was nothing in the world I loved more than a happy Aprilia. Knowing that I was the one who put that smile on her face was everything I had ever wanted with a woman. Still, doubt niggled at the back of my mind.

"Are you sure you want a round two with me? If not, we can write that first time off as something that just happened in the heat of the moment."

"Where in the world did that come from?" she asked, looking more than a little bewildered. "I heard you telling Storm that you wanted me. It gave me the courage to speak up and demand that he listen to me and respect my wishes. This is a weird situation for me, and I don't think I would have had the guts to speak up if you hadn't done it first."

I tucked a strand of her short hair behind her ear and ran my thumb along her cheekbone. "I don't think I've ever been prouder in my whole life than I was when you claimed me for your own. I'm totally all in. Don't ever doubt that for a minute, cher."

I skimmed my fingertips down the side of her neck and across her collarbone. Touching her soft skin drove home to me how different our bodies were. I was made for roughhousing and fighting. My Aprilia was delicate by comparison. "I just wanted to give you an easy way out in case you were having second thoughts."

She glanced down at my hand now skating over her shoulder before looking back into my eyes. “I’ve been attracted to you right from the start and I think you know that, Mason.”

I grinned at her confession. “Yeah, I noticed. Promised myself I was going to do the right thing and keep you at arm’s length. The first time you offered me sex, I was all over you in an instant. Let that be a warning to you that I am not to be trusted when it comes to keeping my feelings for you under wraps or my hands to myself.”

“I like the way your hands feel on me.” She moved closer and we held hands, locked tight against our chests. “Maybe I’m being naive, but I don’t have any doubts when it comes to us test driving a relationship. I mean, it’s clearly not the right time, but I want to strike while the iron’s hot. We’re both kind of holed-up in the clubhouse right now. What better time to get to know each other? We’re both experiencing the same strong attraction to one another. If we don’t pursue it, things are just going to get awkward. You seemed on board before. Do you mind if I asked what changed?”

I glanced away before finally admitting, “Sometimes lonely men are guilty of seeing what they want to see when it comes to beautiful women. The emotional side of my brain is head over heels in love with you, but the logical side of my brain can’t quite believe I found the woman of my dreams and she actually cares for me in return.”

She leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Aww, that’s sweet and at the same time tragic.”

My eyes lifted to hers again. There was nothing but warm regard and acceptance in her expression. It felt like a beam of happiness directed at my heart, warming me from the inside. I owned up to my insecurity by admitting, “The logical side of my brain can make me question my own sanity at times.”

Aprilia let go of my hands and reached up to cup my face with both hands. “Love is one of those situations where you’re supposed to listen to your heart, not your head. Just let go of all the doubts and trust that your heart knows what’s best for you. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“I’ll try, but it’s easier said than done for a jaded bastard like me.” Deflecting the attention away from my feelings, I asked, “How about you? Are you feeling the love tonight?”

She sighed dramatically. “You’re gonna make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I shot back firmly. “If we’re both jumping into the deep end together, I deserve to know exactly where I stand with you.”

“Alright. That’s fair. You’ve told me stories about your grandma, so I’m gonna tell you one about mine. Nonna Agazzi was a serious and pious woman. She went to mass twice a week and never remarried when my grandfather passed away. Instead, she just helped my dad raise me.”

My heart warmed at her wanting to share a family story with me. Those were few and precious in my world.

“I remember when I was a teen, and all my friends were suddenly boy crazy. I didn’t see the appeal. Adolescent boys were just problems with legs. They smelled like sweat and corn chips, and stared at my breasts when they talked to me.”

I smothered back a smile because my Aprilia wasn’t wrong about that. I remembered being one of those walking problems myself when I was a teen.

Aprilia sighed. “For two or three years, I never managed to have feelings for any boys—or girls for that matter. I remember reading everything I could get my hands on about being asexual and aromantic. Strangely enough, I couldn’t relate to either of those, so I turned to religion to see if that would help.”

“That must have been a confusing time in your life.” I murmured supportively.

“Yeah, it was. It made me feel like I was different, odd, on the outside looking in. I started isolating myself. My Nonna noticed. She never missed anything that went on in her house. When she asked what was up, I broke down and told her. She said something profound. She told me that good, faithful, God-fearing girls who went to church were different from other girls. The ones who got excited about boys were destined to be loose whores that God would turn his back on and eventually cast into the fiery pits of hell. But since I wasn’t succumbing to lust, I would end up finding my true love one day. Only after I had a ring on my finger would my desires emerge. Then I would live a long, happy, virtuous life with the man God had chosen for me. All I had to do was be patient, pray for God to send me a good man, and keep myself pure.”

I frowned at her, confused by the matter-of-fact way she described the warped advice the old woman had given her. “What an absolutely horrible story.”

She actually smiled, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Yeah, by the time we had that conversation, my Nonna was about eighty, had a little dementia going on, and had grown progressively more religious as time wore

on.” She squeezed my hands. “I knew it was all toxic BS when she said it, but I always tried to pull a grain of truth from her pearls of dysfunctional wisdom.”

“I can’t wait to hear what your takeaway from that conversation was.”

“My takeaway was that one day my prince would come, and my body might recognize him before my brain does.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face for anything. “You think I’m your Prince Charming because you liked my body before you liked my mind?”

When she nodded, I said, “This is the difference between men and women. Women would be offended by an admission like that. As a man, I’m fucking thrilled that all the hard work I put into working out got me noticed by the woman I love.”

She slung one leg over me and hauled herself up to sit on my stomach. “At first, I was infatuated with your hot body. Then I fell in love with your brilliant mind and amazing personality.”

“Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. I’m finally loved by the right woman.”

She leaned over me, looking concerned. “Are you religious or just joking around right now? I can’t tell.”

“Well, I believe in God. I’m just not religious about it. How about you?”

Her expression turned conflicted. “The verdict’s still out on that. My family is Catholic. Me, technically still Catholic, but my brief teenage religious fervor kind of fizzled out.”

“Well, that’s too bad, since I’m apparently the man God chose for you. You can’t accept the Lord’s blessings if you don’t believe he exists.”

She snatched up the pillow and slapped me jokingly in the face with it. Pure joy surged through my chest.

I pulled the soft pillow from her hands and tossed it aside, causing her to fall face-first onto me. I slapped her ass playfully in return. “I want your pussy on my face right damn now.”

A smile crossed her face. “That’s not a punishment. It’s a reward.”

Lifting her slightly, I was eager to move from talking and touching to tasting. She scrambled eagerly into place, with one knee on either side of my head. Her sweet, delicate scent flooded my senses, making my already aching stiff cock throb with need. I wasn’t willing to pay my cock a moment’s notice, not when I had the woman of my dreams spread open over my face.

I got to work exploring her delicate folds with my tongue. She tasted salty

and delicious, becoming wetter as I discovered all her sweet spots. I twirled my tongue around her clit and stroked gently over the top, causing her legs to tremble on either side of my head. I ran both hands up to massage her breasts before focusing on her pussy again.

She squirmed and moaned my name, begging for more, and I intended to give it to her. Everything about this situation called to me as a man. I used one hand to hold her open as I sucked gently on her clit and the other to finger her core in search of her g-spot.

She moved sensually against my tongue as a jumble of words slipped past her lips. "Oh God, yes. Just like that, baby. Don't stop."

I didn't intend to. I was far too eager for her to come on my tongue. When I finally caught the rhythm between licking her clit and teasing her g-spot, it took no time at all for her to tip effortlessly over into her first orgasm of the night. I gently rubbed her thighs until she recovered and moved her back to sit on my chest. I brought my hand up to lick the last drops of her honey from my fingers, reluctant to move on from such a pleasurable moment. There would be other times to enjoy her on my tongue, I reminded myself. I planned to do this a lot, at least once a day if I got my way.

Aprilia moved back and bumped into my hard, thick cock. She glanced over her shoulder and said, "Well, hello there, handsome."

I shifted my hips slightly to make my cock wave. "That's him saying hello back," I teased.

She slid off my body and folded her legs neatly to the side before reaching out to wrap her hand around my cock and pretend to shake it like a hand. "Nice to meet you. Excuse me, did you just say your name was Cockalicious? I'm afraid I'll have to verify the accuracy of that nickname."

She caressed the head of my cock, then slid her hand down to spread my pre-come over my shaft. She traced the bulging veins with one finger, boldly admiring what I had to offer. Her other hand smoothed over the front of my balls until she was cupping my heavy sack in her hand. Her slow, deliberate touch was sweet, sensual, and made my balls tighten up.

The expression on her face was one of dreamy bliss. Her hand grasped my shaft and she gave my cock a long, firm stroke, squeezing me perfectly. "That feels good. What do you want me to do with it?"

Instead of answering me, she wrapped both hands around my cock, leaned forward, and sucked half of it into her mouth. I almost choked on my own spit. Her pretty pink tongue rubbed right under the head as she sucked and it

felt phenomenal, reminding me once again how soft and delicate she was compared to me. One of her hands drifted down to cup my balls again. Watching the woman I loved giving me pleasure was one of the most erotic experiences of my entire life. It didn't take long for me to get riled up enough to spurt in her pretty mouth.

When I felt myself about to come, I tugged her back. Her petulant expression at being denied my cock was all kinds of cute.

"You cut me off just when things were getting good," she stated peevishly.

I pulled her up and rolled her beneath my big form. Her surprised expression told me she wasn't expecting that. I cupped her face in my hands and gazed into her eyes. "When I come, I want it to be while we're making love. Is that alright?"

She stopped chewing on her bottom lip. "Of course. I've been looking forward to the main event since we landed on the bed."

I took a deep, cleansing breath. "Good. I'm fucking desperate to be inside you again. It seems like that more I have you, the more I want you."

I leaned down and took her lips in a kiss that was filled with all the passion I had locked away in my heart for years. She wrapped her legs around my waist and wiggled into place, wedging my cock right where it needed to be.

I trailed kisses from her mouth down to her neck. "You believe in making it easy for a man, don't ya?"

"Absolutely. I'm no pillow queen, especially not for you." Her hands drifted down between our bodies, and she placed the head of my cock just where it was meant to be.

I leaned down to lavish attention on her breasts for a moment before pulling back so we could see how well our bodies fit together. This was much more gratifying for me than the hurried sex we'd had before.

I moved in and out, going deeper with each thrust. Aprilia tilted her hips into a position that made taking my thick cock easier. Without words our bodies moved together in a way that maximized our pleasure. Both of us surging forward at the same time created a clap of intense pleasure, particularly for Aprilia when her clit bumped against my body. I intentionally moved in a way to make sure her face contorted with pleasure. I loved seeing her like this—but I was slowly losing my ability to think rational thoughts as the excitement built.

We had started with slow, sensual thrusts and slowly worked up to an inferno level heat. I could feel my cock swelling in preparation to fill her with

my come, so I brought my hand down and tapped gently on her clit. Without warning, she exploded in an orgasm strong enough to clamp down almost painfully around my shaft. But I loved every single second of making love to Aprilia.

A heartbeat later I came with the force of thunder. My release seemed to go on and on forever as my thoughts scattered. I somehow managed not to drop my full weight on her. As for Aprilia, she was as messed up as I was. Her legs were still clamped tightly around my waist and were trembling from the force of her release. This moment was everything to me, the thing I'd never dared to hope for or thought possible for a swamp rat like myself. Yet, here I was, deep in the throes of passion with a lovely woman who truly wanted me. It was heady stuff.

I nuzzled my face into the side of her neck. "Thanks for that, sweetheart. You have no idea how much I needed that."

She replied breathlessly, "I should be the one thanking you. I never even imagined that sex could be that good. We're definitely doing this again."

I chuffed out a hoarse laugh. "Anytime of the day or night, you can count me in." I held my weight up with one arm. "Want me to pull out?"

"No. Yes. Maybe." She jerked her head up to stare at me. "You're cock feels good and it's making me indecisive for the first time in my life."

Someone banging on the door made the decision for us. It was Rob. "Storm wants to talk to you. He says it's urgent. He's been texting but you didn't answer."

I felt like telling him exactly why I wasn't picking up, but the possessive bastard in me didn't want him imagining my Aprilia getting railed by me. I huffed out an exasperated breath and eased myself out of the only place I wanted to be right now. "Tell him I'm on my way," I shouted.

"He asked for you to bring Aprilia."

"Give us ten minutes to get ourselves together."

"Sure thing, Mason. Sorry to interrupt your afternoon."

Fuck, was it afternoon already? I shouldn't be irritated at Rob. He'd been a superstar today. Our most senior prospect was the one who held the gate until the rest of the brothers could get outside. He had taken charge and given orders to the other prospects like the true leader he was. The man deserved my respect.

I climbed out of bed, my cock still wet from being inside the most amazing woman in the world. I held out one hand to Aprilia. "If we hurry, we can grab

a shower before we go down.”

She slid her hand in mine and allowed me to pull her out of the bed. I watched with no small amount of satisfaction as my come dripped down her thighs.

She teased me as we headed for the shower, “Word on the street is alpha males like their women to wear their scent. Is that not a thing after all?”

“I don’t know about other men, but I’m too fucking possessive to allow another man to smell sex on you. It reminds them of all the things they’re missing out on and incites them to lust after you. I’d prefer they never even have a mental picture of you in their fucking minds.”

“Are you being serious right now?” Aprilia asked curiously.

This new woman of mine looked like a fucking train wreck with her hair standing up all over her head, my come dripping down her legs, and the soft sheen of sweat that still coated her skin. Her chest was flushed, probably from coming so hard on my eager cock.

I started the shower as I answered. “Of course I’m serious. You’re my little piece of heaven. They all need to stay away.”

I stepped into the shower and held out my hand, which she once again took without hesitation. “The big issue for me is that men can suss out a woman’s scent, particularly if they’re into you. I could pick up notes of your arousal around me even though you tried to keep me at arm’s length and wore perfume that smelled like apple blossoms. You might think that you’re wearing my scent after sex, but you’re actually wearing both our scents. If you want other men to be able to smell your arousal, I’ll lick you to orgasm and parade you all around the clubhouse. Of course, you’ll need to give me a few minutes to gear up beforehand because there will be fights.”

At this point I didn’t even know if I was being serious as I really wasn’t the kind of guy who wanted to show off his woman in that way. Aprilia just laughed as we soaped each other up. “That’s crazy talk. You make your club brothers sound like dogs after bitches in heat.”

“Maybe we are,” I countered, rinsing the soap off my body.

“No. You’re not.”

I grinned at her, “Mr. Cockalicious has joined the discussion. Although he’s got no nose, he agrees with me that males in general have heightened senses when it comes to aroused females. He even went so far as to suggest it might be an evolutionary advantage that historically enabled males to track the scent of potential mates.”

She giggled, “You’ll have to share more of Mr. Cockalicious’ thoughts another time when we aren’t in such a rush, what else does he have an opinion on?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond because she slid out of the shower, leaving me there standing under a spray of hot water with a stiff cock. With no time or real interest in taking myself in hand, I stepped out of the shower and headed out to the bedroom to get dressed. I’d bet the farm that Aprilia’s hungry eyes would be eating me up as we got dressed.

Chapter 16

Aprilia

I rushed out to the bedroom, dried off, and blow-dried my hair as I thought over what just happened. I had gone from a lonely single woman to being fake engaged to a longtime friend who happened to be a vicious mobster, to hooking up with a guy I had genuine feelings for all in the blink of an eye. Usually, in order to feel secure in a situation, I had to take my time, explore all the details and possible repercussions. This thing with Mason had happened so fast, my head was spinning but I was more certain of this than any other single decision I'd ever made. He was absolutely amazing.

He was intelligent, articulate and got my sometimes weird sense of humor. I smiled at how he picked right up with Cockalicious and ran with it. Then again, he gave as good as he got on a lot of fronts. The sex had been amazing, and I liked sharing and getting to know him when we were intimate.

Hooking up with Mason had clearly been one of my better ideas. We were good together and I wasn't going to let anyone get in the way of us being together.

Which made me worry about what Storm wanted to speak with us about. Was he planning to give me the boot after his clubhouse was attacked by the mafia that my family and I had mindlessly supported our entire lives? If that happened, where did that leave me? I wasn't willing to go back to LA. Living in the community without protection would make me easy prey for Chester or any of Don Diavonte's men who were looking to even the score for me leaving LA in the first place.

I slid on a pair of jeans and a bra. Then started scavenging for a shirt to wear that wasn't creased. While the clubhouse suite had most amenities, it clearly catered more towards bikers who weren't bothered about rumples clothing, and there was no iron or ironing board. I picked up a pale blue silk shirt from my case and shook it out.

That's when Mason walked into the room, stark naked and sporting enough wood to please any woman. He had his towel flung over his shoulder as he strutted around. Unless I was mistaken, he was preening a bit, showing off for me.

I started buttoning up my shirt and turned to him with a smile. "You're

looking like a guy hoping for more sex.”

He shook his head as he pulled on some boxer briefs. “Nope. I’m just intent on showing off my prime assets to my new love interest. Gotta keep her interested, after all.”

My heart ached for this slightly broken man. I walked over to him and pulled him down for a kiss. Just before our lips touched, I whispered, “You’re enough. You’ve always been enough for the people who cared about you. Be sure to remember that.” Then I poured all my warmth and love into that kiss. I didn’t know how long we kissed, but when we pulled apart, the expression on his face was more relaxed.

“Thanks for saying that, Rilia. I appreciate the positive support.” Indeed, his voice was more self-assured.

I knew a lot of people wouldn’t pick up on his little cues related to not feeling valued as a human being and a man. But I’d grown to know him pretty well in the short time we’d known one another. I also knew that a lot of his self-deprecating jokes were because of his childhood trauma.

“So, you finally settled on a nickname for me. I like it.”

His face lit up. “I’m glad. It just slipped out and felt right.” After a momentary pause, he added, “In case you’re wondering, I already have a club name, so I don’t need a nickname.”

“You’re finally going to tell me why they call you Mason?”

He stepped away to continue dressing. “I’ll tell you anything you wanna know about me, cher, all you have to do is ask.” His warm hazel eyes met mine, and I could see nothing but love and trust reflected in their depths. He flashed a grin at me and continued. “When I was in the military, I used to carry this thick pint mason jar around in my duffle. I had a little water filter that I could attach to the top to purify drinking water in the field. I got the nickname in the military, and it carried over when I joined the Dark Slayers MC.”

“Thank you for telling me, I have to say I was wondering about stuff like Freemasons, the Mason-Dixon line, or maybe that you were good with your hands.”

“Maybe you’re on to something with the last suggestion,” Mason raised his eyebrow teasingly. “We’d best get downstairs before Storm gets himself wound up waiting for us.”

Sure enough, when we got to Storm’s office, he was pacing in front of his

desk.

“Sorry it took us a minute to get here. I hope everything’s okay,” I said.

Storm pivoted on one foot and turned to face us. “That’s fine. We had another go at the cleaner. Needless to say, he didn’t crack.”

“What’s the plan?” Mason asked as we all sat down.

Storm responded cryptically, “That depends on Aprilia.”

“If you’re leaving it up to me, I’m always going to say cut him loose rather than eliminate him. I know all about how problematic loose ends are, but I think we’ve had enough killing already. Don’t you think?”

Storm held up both hands in front of him in a placating gesture. “I wasn’t insinuating we should kill him. He’s Don Diavonte’s cleaner. That doesn’t exactly make him our mortal enemy.”

I relaxed into my seat and crossed my legs. “Sorry to jump to that conclusion. I guess being raised by mobsters and seeing you guys kill a bunch of them earlier today triggered that response. I can drop the sweet mob fiancée act now—you know what I am, and you know while I’ve never been personally involved, I’m not some innocent who’s gotten caught up in everything. I know the score with these people, and while death offers a temporary solution it often has a far-reaching fallout.”

Mason reached out and threaded his fingers through mine. Holding my hand was such a sweet gesture that it tugged at my emotions.

“I was thinking that there might be some way to use him to our advantage. I say we allow you to slip down to the basement and unlock his cell. Keep up the ruse that you’re here with Don Diavonte’s blessing as a spy and set him free. Let it slip that we’re having a meeting at an old ball field on the outskirts of town where we plan to organize resistance among local business owners to collectively stop paying their protection money,” Storm explained.

“That’s a really bad idea,” I said. “Don Diavonte will show up with enough men and guns to brutally stamp out whatever resistance you hope to ignite.”

“Yes, and thanks to you minimizing our numbers and pushing the fiction that we are still battling it out with Twisted Metal, they’ll think we’re easy pickings. They won’t find out until it’s too late how wrong they were about that,” Storm reminded me.

“Shit,” I breathed. “I’m about to get a lot of people killed.”

“You’re not getting anyone killed. You’re merely providing information. What they choose to do with it is on them,” Mason said consolingly.

Before I could respond, Storm spoke up. “No, Aprilia is right. People are

going to die. She just needs to decide whether she wants it to be the mafia who are coming to Griffinsford to control and exploit a town full of innocent people—or if she wants those of us standing up for our right to live free of mafia control to wind up dead.”

“I already made my decision. That doesn’t mean I have to feel good about it.”

“Unfortunately, life can be unpredictable, and we often find ourselves forced to make impossible decisions. The only thing we can do is try to protect the innocent and let the chips fall where they may,” Storm responded in a serious tone.

I gaped at the Slayers’ club president. Every other time I had talked to him he seemed cagy and suspicious, but for some reason, today he was sounding more like a shaolin monk, actually scrap that, today he was sounding more like a military leader who’d seen too much of war and knew that life was never black and white but shades of gray, and that sometimes you just had to do what you felt was right and hope with all your heart you’d made a good call. This man had layers to his personality, and I had apparently only scratched the surface when it came to understanding him.

“You’re right, of course. Don Diavonte has no right to attack your club or to set up shop in Griffinsford. The mafia being here will only make life harder for everyone who lives here.”

Mason murmured, “Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. Since the townspeople don’t have the skills to fight a mafia war, that falls to us.”

I took a deep breath and got my head straight. “I’m in. What exactly do you want me to tell him?”

Storm sat in his rolling chair for a few seconds with his hands steepled together as he formulated his response. Finally, he spoke, “I want you to act like you’re sneaking down there after stealing the keys. Keep trying the keys until you find the one that opens the door. He’s behind the second door on the right. It’s the only door that’s locked.” Then tell him the town meeting will be at seven a.m. on the last Friday of the month at an old, abandoned barn where the highway intersects with Sermon Road. It’s visible from the highway. Explain to him that you overheard us talking about how we were gonna get the local citizens all riled up about paying protection money. Pretend like you’re worried about what Don Diavonte’s reaction to that will be.”

I shot Storm a dark look. “I don’t have to pretend—I really am worried

about how their don is going to respond.”

“Great,” Storm gritted out. “It’ll be all that more realistic.”

Mason looked over at me. “You used to say *our don*. This is the first time you’ve said their don.”

Something in my chest loosened. “I guess my alliances really have shifted—though since my father died and I learned of Don Diavonte’s plans for me, if I had to ally myself with any mobsters it would be the Russo brothers and their plans to take over from the old guard.”

Storm pulled out a key ring with about thirty keys on it and tossed it on the desk in front of me. “Take a few moments and think about what you’re going to say. There’s no rush. When you’re ready, walk downstairs and tell Rob that I want to talk to him. He should be the only guard on duty right now. Act like you’re going to follow him back upstairs and then just double back. Rob already knows my plan, so everything should go off without a hitch.”

“Are you sure you can do this, Aprilia?” Mason asked worriedly. “You told me the guy creeped you out and scared you.”

“It’s okay. The fact that he knows I’m scared of him will make it seem all the more realistic that I’m setting him free to please Don Diavonte. Don’t worry, I’ll hold it together,” I said shakily. Truth be told, the thought of seeing him up close and having to talk to him was wreaking havoc with my nerves.

“If it’s any consolation, we have security cameras in the basement. If he looks like he’s getting aggressive, I can be down there in two minutes flat. So, if things go bad, you just have to hold out for two minutes.”

I struggled to get my anxiety under control. “I’ll be fine. He’ll probably be so happy to get a surprise release, he’ll just make a run for it.”

“We left the back of the property free of obstacles that might get in the way of his escape. If he skirts around the patio area, I doubt anyone will see him,” Storm said.

I reached out with one shaky hand and grabbed the key ring. I closed my fist around it and stood. “I can do this,” I said out loud before turning to leave the room.

Mason’s voice drifted to my ears. “Be careful. Don’t get too close to this guy. Open the door, deliver the intel, and get the hell back upstairs.”

I glanced over my shoulder at his worried face. “I will. Keep your eyes on me, okay?”

“We’re watching, and if that guy lays one finger on you we’ll be down

there in a flash. But if there's anything that you aren't comfortable with and you want us there but don't want to blow your cover, then you need a safe word or a gesture."

Mason paused as he thought, and I was starting to have second thoughts.

"Grandmother," he said. "If you need us to come to your aid then slip that word into the conversation. If you can't, then maybe point your finger at him when you talk."

He made the gesture that he wanted me to do, and I nodded, "Got it."

"Trust me, Aprilia. I'm headed to Hacker's office now to watch the security feeds in real time. Storm and a few of the brothers will be out of sight but within earshot. Call out if you need to."

Chapter 17

Aprilia

I headed out of Storm's office and down the hallway toward the basement. I walked down the steps, and into the downstairs bar that I had heard so much about. It was totally empty, but then I remembered someone saying it didn't usually begin filling up until almost midnight on the weekdays.

I made my way to the far side of the room and opened the only doorway in the bar. It led to a short hallway with doors on both sides, like something out of a horror movie. Sitting in a chair beside one door was Rob, scrolling on his phone. When I began walking toward him, he glanced up at me. His eyes darted down to the wad of keys I had fisted in my hand and away again. Storm said he'd coached Rob on the plan, so he knew what the keys were for.

"Ms. Aprilia. I don't think you're supposed to be down here. You should go back upstairs before Storm finds out you're trespassing in our private spaces."

I spoke loudly in order to be clearly heard by Anthony. "I'm just here to get you. Storm's looking for you. They want you in the meeting."

"I can't leave you down here, Ms. Aprilia. It wouldn't be safe."

"You Slayers are all so overprotective. You act like there are monsters lurking in every dark corner. Come on. I'll walk upstairs with you, so you know I'm safe."

We made a production of chatting as we walked down the hall and locked the door behind us. We got to the top of the steps when Rob whispered, "Good luck. Be careful. That gangster is slick."

I wouldn't have used that expression to describe Anthony. The vibe he gave off was something along the lines of the world's gloomiest dead-eyed mortician. Thinking back, I couldn't say I'd ever actually heard him speak. He just kind of lurked around in the background when my father took me to functions at Don Diavonte's mansion, just another of the don's men.

I hurried back down the steps and began trying all the keys to unlock the door leading to the hallway. I didn't know how much Anthony could hear from inside his cell, but I tried to jingle the keys extra loudly. It took me eleven attempts to find the right key.

Within moments I was standing outside the door that Rob had been

guarding. I could now see the door was made of some kind of bullet-proof glass. I quickly began trying all the keys on the key chain as I whispered, "Mr. Akers, are you in here? It's Aprilia. I'm here to rescue you."

A familiar face flashed into view so quickly it made me jump. "I'm here. Are you really going to let me go?"

"Yes, of course I am. I just have to find the right key to open the door, if it's even on this ring." I tried two more keys in rapid session. "God, I hope the key to your door is on here."

Anthony whispered, "Where did you get the keys?"

"I stole them from Storm's drawer. He had a little freak out about something the prospects did and didn't lock the door to his office. I let myself in, grabbed them, and got out."

"They don't see you as a threat here?"

"No, they bought the story." I finally found the right key and the dead bolt flipped open. "Thank goodness for that."

"Aren't you worried about getting caught?"

"Yeah, of course I am. That's why we have to be quiet getting you out of here. Their meetings usually last an hour. As long as I have enough time at the end to get these keys back into Storm's desk drawer before their meeting is over, everything will be fine."

"They're going to suspect you first because you're mafia."

"I doubt it. They just think I'm some little airhead. I told you, they bought the story that I'm here to visit with Sophia, and soon I'll go back home to LA and Nicco." I tried to make my face look soft as I spoke about my fake fiancé. "Anyway, these guys are so preoccupied with organizing some kind of grass roots meeting to get everyone to stop paying their protection money to our don, that you turning up missing is just gonna be a blip on their radar."

"What are you talking about? Why would they do something like that? It's just a modest amount and all local businesses pay it."

The key got stuck in the lock and I started wiggling and tugging on it as we talked. "I know, but folks around here aren't used to paying it, and the Slayers are exploiting their naivete to cause trouble for Don Diavonte."

I pulled the door open, and he asked, "What else did they say?"

I fought the cold fear that rose once I was face-to-face with Anthony. He still had that dead look in his eyes as he stood there waiting silently for me to answer him.

"They told me that eleven days from now, there's going to be a big

meeting at the crack of dawn. Storm told us he wants us all up at six to be there by seven. I told him I'm not a morning person, but he said it didn't matter. They want their women there serving coffee."

"That makes sense. Local business owners have businesses to open. If he wants their attention, he has to work on their schedule."

"Well, I don't like being manipulated into being the hired help."

He grabbed my arm and jerked me close. "You're doing a good deed by sneaking down here and opening this door, little one. But don't forget why you're here. Don Diavonte has spilled a lot of blood to take over this territory. You're here to be his eyes and ears on the ground. So get yourself up early and pay attention to every single thing that happens."

I tugged my arm from his grasp. "Lower your voice. I know why I'm here. I'm trying my best to do the job, but I'm not as disciplined as men like you, who've been trained and had experience spying. My father would turn over in his grave if he knew Nicco sent me into a dangerous situation like this."

"You'll be fine with all these gun toting war heroes. It's Chester you have to look out for. He's gone rogue and is looking for you. He didn't take too kindly to losing out in favor of Nicco."

"I know. He's been sending me a bunch of nasty messages and threats on my phone. They all disappear after a minute or two, just enough time for me to read them. It was scary."

"Tell Nicco about it. I'll get word to Don Diavonte. Meanwhile, you keep your head down and don't wander off alone if you leave the clubhouse."

"Thank you, Mr. Akers. The last thing I want is to end up married to someone twice my age." I turned to walk away, but he grabbed me and spun me around.

He stared at me for a second, like he wanted to tell me something, but didn't think he should. Finally, he said, "Chester is his nickname. You know that, right?"

I shook my head, too scared to say a word with him gripping my arm so hard.

"What's the only reason someone would have been tagged with the name Chester?"

"Chester the child molester?"

"Yeah, Don Diavonte hates that he's that way, especially after what happened to our don's niece. Our don decided to tag him with a name that would alert anyone with half a brain about what he is."

“I’m twenty-seven. Why the hell did our don think it was a brilliant idea to marry me off to him?”

Anthony’s eyes slid down my body and back up again. “He clearly thought it was a compromise between what his bookkeeper wants and what he’s allowed to have.”

A sick feeling twisted in the pit of my stomach. My body was smaller, my chest was flatter, and I was lean on curves. I might have been twenty-seven but for someone who didn’t like womanly curves then maybe I was some sort of compromise. “I didn’t know any of that.”

“Your fiancé does, and that’s why he sent you here. He wants to prove you’re more valuable as his wife than as Chester’s consolation prize. I’m telling you this, so you understand the seriousness of your situation. Being asked to get up early is a small price to pay for Chester not getting an opportunity to use you to farm his own victims.”

“Why does everything in our lives have to be so twisted?” The words slipped out before I thought the situation through. I hadn’t even considered that Chester wanted to use me as a breeding machine.

Anthony’s hand slid from my arm. “Be smart, Aprilia. You’re in a prime situation to solve all your problems at once.”

My eyes lifted to his and lurking in their murky depths was some kind of emotion that I couldn’t readily identify. “What do you mean by solving all my problems at once?”

“The next time Chester texts you something, just respond with a heart emoji. He’ll see that as a yes to his sick game. I’ll make sure he knows the best time to snatch you is at this meet up the Slayers are planning in eleven days.” He tapped his temple. “Think about it, Aprilia. Our don is surely going to take the opportunity to eliminate the Slayers and prove to the people of this town why they shouldn’t buck the system he put into place. Things will be chaotic. The Slayers would love to kill us off, so there’s every chance that if you stick close to the Slayers, they’ll take care of your problem for you. Chester the child molester will simply be another mobster who got caught in the crossfire.”

I was nodding before he even finished speaking. “I’ll do exactly that and hope it works.”

“If the Slayers don’t put a bullet in his brain, I will. Solving your Chester problem once and for all is my thanks for saving my life today. Afterward, we’ll be square, okay?”

“Absolutely. And thank you for that. Now, let’s get you out of here. Follow behind me and don’t make a sound. They Slayers are probably deep in conversation at this point, which makes it best time to make our move.”

I closed my hand around the keychain to keep it from jingling as we headed down the hall, through the downstairs bar, and back up the stairs. I slipped out first to make sure the coast was clear. I knew it was because Storm had planned for it to be. We heard voices from the Slayers’ meeting room as we made a hard left and slipped out a rarely used side door that was reserved for emergencies. This door normally had an alarm that sounded if the door was opened. But that had been disabled so we could pass through it without drawing notice.

As we were walking through the door, Anthony reached up and pulled at some wire sticking out of a little box near the top of the doorframe. It was clearly what triggered the alarm. “Did you do this, Aprilia?”

I shook my head, unsure why a wire was sticking out that way. Thinking on my feet, I whispered, “Keep your voice down. The Slayers aren’t all that worried about details. The door locks once it closes. Since they can get out but people can’t get in, it’s just one of the dozens of things that fall to the bottom of their list of things that need to be done.”

Anthony, like all mobsters, was suspicious as hell. As the door closed behind us, he asked quietly, “Don’t their prospects take care of shit like this?”

I motioned for him to follow me and made for the forested area alongside the building. “When would the prospects have time? The brothers have them watching the front gate, cooking all the meals, shopping, escorting the wives, around and every damn thing else around here.”

“They aren’t running a very tight ship,” Anthony commented as we jogged into a thicket of trees.

“If you go straight back, you’ll see a river. If you follow it to the left, you’ll see it begins to run parallel to the interstate. You can probably hitch a ride.”

Anthony nodded. “Don’t forget what I said about luring Chester in. The only way to kill a made man is in battle, or making it look like an accident. Dying in battle is common, while accidents are always suspicious.”

“Got it. You’d best get going before anyone realizes you’re missing. Thanks again for the heads-up about Chester.”

“Get back to the clubhouse, put back those keys, and lay low until our don brings you back home. This is no job for a girl like you, Aprilia.”

I looked him in the eye. “This is most I’ve ever heard you say.”

“There’s no use speaking when no one listens or gives a shit what you have to say. We’re each trapped in our own hell, Aprilia. If I can’t break out of mine, the least I can do is help you break out of yours.”

Before I could respond, he turned and dashed away. Truth be told, I was feeling conflicted about my conversation with Anthony. Ever since I’d learned what a cleaner was, I assumed he was just some dead-eyed creep who loved cleaning up crime scenes. I’d give anything to know how he was trapped, and for a moment I wondered if maybe he was secretly rooting for the Russo brothers, and biding his time until the old guard was removed.

I cut through the patio and went through the back door. Several brothers were milling about, and one barely lifted his chin in acknowledgement. It was Grit, the Slayers’ sergeant at arms. I was pretty sure he and the others had been looking out for me as I escorted Anthony off the property. I gave him a weak smile and slipped inside.

A small group of Slayers were sitting around the meeting room waiting for me. I noticed Hacker had his laptop open and they were watching as Anthony made his way to the river.

“I’m surprised he didn’t see the drone hovering overhead.”

Everyone turned to look at me, but it was Hacker who responded to my question. “I use high altitude drones. They carry cameras that enable us to zoom in on the terrain below.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I responded as I tossed Storm his keys.”

Mason looked me over and ran his hands over my arms. “Are you okay? You’re looking really stressed.”

“It was less scary than I thought it would be. Did you hear what he said about Chester?”

Storm looked frustrated. “We did. And I feel like a fucking idiot for not realizing that was his nickname rather than his given name. Every fucking thing about that makes sense now, especially him sending you pictures of messed up dolls. I hope to hell I’m the one who gets to put a bullet in his head.”

“Stand in fucking line, boss. That twisted asshole is mine,” Mason ground out.

“Or we could just leave him to Anthony. He volunteered, after all,” I suggested.

Mason wrapped one arm around me and pulled me close. “Fuck that.

You're mine, so any threat to you is mine to eliminate."

"Okay. Well, I've done my share of work for one day. I'm going upstairs to decompress."

Mason frowned at me. "You said you were okay, Rilia."

"I am. I just need some alone time to get my head together."

"Are you sure? I can come with so we can talk whatever this is out."

A stern feminine voice drifted over from the doorway. "Or you could just leave her the hell alone like she asked."

"My woman shouldn't be alone if she's upset, Zoe. She needs me to soothe her," Mason countered.

Zoe walked into the room, inserted herself between Mason and myself, and started nudging me toward the bar. "Believe it or not, the answer to every woman's problem is not being soothed by a man."

I was torn between wanting her to stay out of it and being amused by Mason's sad face.

Mason just said, "If you need me, cher, just yell. I'll be down in the bar waiting for you."

Chapter 18

Mason

The minute Aprilia and Zoe were far away enough not to hear, I stated flatly, “I’m going to kill Chester the molester and none of you fuckers better try to steal my glory.”

“Don be such a prick, brother,” Celt said. “There’s no glory to be found in feckin’ murderin’ a man in cold blood.”

Renegade’s head whipped around to stare at his best friend. “You have got to be shitting me, Celt. You and I are both ex-convicts. Tell me with a straight face that you never killed a pedo on the inside.”

“Never, not once,” Celt swore.

Renegade frowned at him. “You mean because others got to them first, right?”

Irritated, Celt shot back, “Of course others got to him first. I might never have had the opportunity to nail one, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have.”

Storm stepped in then. “Alright, alright. I think what my cousin was saying, none too articulately I might add, is that incarcerating or killing a pedophile is only way to get them to stop. Since we’re not about to begin locking them up in our basement and taking care of them, killing them is the only option. It’s necessary, but that doesn’t mean we should think of it as glorious.”

I shrugged. “I don’t care what we call it as long as he’s six feet under and I don’t have to worry about him coming for my Rilia every damn time my back is turned.”

Celt nodded. “We’re all in agreement. Chester doesn’t leave the meet up alive. Killing him is a necessary evil.”

Storm wrinkled his nose and glared at me. “You just had to give our mob contact a cutesy little nickname, didn’t you?”

I poked my finger brazenly against his chest. “Stop fuckin’ calling my old lady the mob contact. That’s just her job at the moment. Not who she is.”

“If you want her to be seen as anything other than a mobster’s daughter, you might want to put her in a property cut. If you don’t respect her enough to do that, don’t come whining to me when she gets disrespected.”

“You sure about that, boss? She’s undercover and still wearing Nicco’s

ring.”

Celt gasped. “What the feck, Mason? I would not be toleratin’ my old lady wearing another man’s ring. You need to grow a pair, brother, and sort your business.”

Storm cautioned, “She wears a property cut only while she’s at the clubhouse, but that ring has to go, Mason.”

“It will once she doesn’t need to have a cover story—when Don Diavonte’s been dealt with then I’ll see about replacing it with a proper engagement ring,” I said, and Storm nodded in agreement.

Celt slid his bulky arm around my neck and walked off with me. “I’ve got just the thing to replace it with, brother.”

“Let me fucking go, you maniac. Your pits smell like something crawled up in there and died.” I fisted him in the ribs and he let me go, playfully pushing me to the side with his knee.

“God help me, I never knew your voice sounded so squeaky when you whined.”

“Fuck you, Celt.”

He stopped at the bar where Rob was sitting alone, nursing a beer. “Got a job for ye, prospect. Are ye up for it?”

Rob stood up quickly. “Yes, sir. Whatever you need, I’m here for it.”

“Park your hefty ass outside Aprilia’s room until we get back. If she leaves, I want ye to be her feckin’ shadow. Don’t let anything happen to her, got it?”

He did an about face and walked toward the stairs. “I’m on it, sir.”

I followed Celt out the front door. “Where are we off to, brother? I don’t like leaving my Rilia when I know she’s upset.”

“We’re going to find her something to cheer her up. Trust me on this, Mason. I wouldn’t lead ye astray.”

“I don’t reckon you would, brother.” Worry still niggled in my gut. Storm assigned me to watch over Aprilia, not Rob. Still, Celt was Storm’s cousin and the road captain of the Dark Slayers. If an officer told me to do something, I usually obeyed. Plus, Celt was a good man who treated his own wife and kids well. I had no reason to distrust him.

We got on our bikes, and I followed Celt down a long, winding country road. Eventually, we pulled up at a newish looking building that looked like a cross between a store and someone’s home. The windows had steel coverings

that rolled down from the top like a pawn shop. Celt cut his motor and sat there. I pulled up beside him and cut my motor as well.

“Why aren’t you getting off your bike? Is something wrong?”

“No, we’re waiting for my friend.”

Jerking my chin toward the building, I asked, “What kind of place is this?”

“It’s where my friend Sterling lives. He’s a jeweler who’s made most of the rings our old ladies wear. It’s a bit of a Slayer tradition to get something special in the way of engagement rings.”

Shock rolled through my gut. “Holy shit, Aprilia and I are not ready to get engaged. When I talked about getting her a proper engagement ring, I meant sometime in the future not right now.”

He rolled his helmet between his hands. “Nonsense, brother. Anyone with eyes can see that you love that woman.”

“Look, Celt, I get what you’re trying do for me, but Aprilia would have to be bat shit crazy to accept a proposal from a guy she hardly knows. Putting her in a property cut is going to take all my skills of persuasion. Proposing to her is out of the question. She’s a very strong-willed woman.”

He grinned at me. “Those are the best kind, brother. Look, I’m gonna need you calm the feck down. This friend of mine custom makes the engagement rings, so you’re not going to take it home to her right this minute. What we’re gonna do is look them over and talk through ideas.”

Just then, a motorcycle came roaring up the road and stopped behind us. A man with long, stringy brown hair and dark blue eyes jumped off his bike. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. He quickly hung his helmet on his handlebars and gestured for us to follow him into the building.

After spending an hour or so looking at the jewelry I finally found the perfect design, Sterling was going to customize it and I’d email him details of Aprilia’s ring size and the final gemstone choice. I’d also made another purchase that had set me back quite a bit, but my woman was worth it. Celt stayed behind to talk to his friend, and I went outside to put the bag in the storage compartment on my bike. By the time I was strapping on my helmet, Celt walked out, and we headed back to Griffinsford.

We made it back to the clubhouse to find the place in chaos. Thunder was at the bar talking to his old lady, Rosie.

“I don’t who the fuck it was, but he shot down three of our drones. We had a dozen men scouring the back of the property all the way to the river and

couldn't find a living soul. Storm put extra guards around the perimeter and wants the building locked down tight."

I rushed up to him. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah, get back to protecting Aprilia. She's a high value target and we can't afford for anything to happen to her."

Rosie pulled a property cut from under the bar and tossed it to me. "Storm said to make sure you got this."

"About that," Thunder interjected. "We decided to write Property of Dark Slayers MC rather than Property of Mason on the back. Storm felt like it would be more acceptable for her to be wearing a guest property cut. Making it clear that she's yours will have to wait a little while longer. That was a safety-related decision and nothing more."

I felt disappointment bloom in my chest, but I could see where they were coming from. We needed to protect the alliance for now and as far as anyone knew Aprilia was engaged to Nicco Russo. I turned and walked upstairs with a heavy heart, vowing to add my name to her cut the first fucking chance I got. Aprilia was important to me. I had never been the kind of man to believe in love at first sight, but Aprilia turned me into a believer. I knew all the way down to my bones that this was the only woman I would ever want.

I stopped in front of the door to our suite, wondering where Rob was. I knocked gently on the door and entered, it wasn't locked. Rob was sitting on the sofa scrolling on his phone. "Why are you inside our suite? Celt told you guard the door."

Rob stood up, looking none too happy at being called out by me. "Ms. Aprilia got more crazy messages from that Chester dude. She had a bit of meltdown and insisted she wanted me inside the suite in case he somehow broke in."

I laid the cut down on the arm of the sofa and shot a quick glance at her bedroom door. "How long ago did that happen?"

"About thirty minutes, sir. You should go to her. She needs more than I can give and it's not fair to leave her in there all scared and worrying about that stupid fucker."

My hand closed around the bag holding my purchase. Suddenly, leaving her didn't seem like such a good idea after all. "Thanks, Rob. Sorry for biting off your head."

"No problem. I get how intense the emotions can get when you first get with your old lady. I hope the fuck that never happens to me."

“I’m gonna try to refrain from pointing and laughing when it happens. They say the men who don’t want to get married always fall the hardest.”

Rob headed for the door. “I can’t imagine being felled by love of all things. We’ve got a club full of bunnies I can chase. No reason for me to tie myself down to just one.”

The door closed firmly behind him, I locked it and quietly made my way to the bedroom. I gave a warning knock and then stepped inside the room to find Aprilia sitting in the middle of bed, hugging her knees. She wasn’t exactly crying, but she was deep in thought, so deep in thought that she didn’t notice me at first.

Chapter 19

Aprilia

I looked up to find Mason staring at me. He was wearing his cut and holding a white bag in his hand. “Where have you been? Did you go out for food?”

He moved closer and sat on the edge of the bed. “I went to buy you a gift. Are you feeling okay? I heard from Rob that you got more messages from your friendly neighborhood stalker.”

“Yeah, it made me sick to my stomach, but I did the little heart emoji thing Anthony suggested.” I shuddered.

“Well, put all that out of your mind. He can’t get to you here and will be too dead to bother anyone in eleven days.”

I nodded and sucked in a deep breath, trying to get my emotions under control. “I’ve just been sitting here imagining what my life would be like if I’d ended up married to him. What it would have been like trying to protect my children from him. I realized that I’d have to poison him or something. Before I let him touch my kids, I honestly would kill him. Realizing that I’m truly capable of murder was mind blowing.”

Mason moved closer. “Under the right circumstances, anyone can become a killer.”

The tight knot in my stomach loosened a bit. “I suppose you’re correct about how anyone can become a killer when put in the right position. It’s just one of the thousand and one things I’ve never really considered before.”

“I could totally see you turning into a mama bear,” he replied with a guarded smile. “If you want, I can even teach you some basic self-defense moves.”

“I’d really love that.” I didn’t tell him that I already knew how to fire a gun and was pretty adept at taking care of myself, my father might have been an overprotective mobster, but he wanted to make sure that I knew how to defend myself if push came to shove.

He held up a slightly crumpled gift bag and handed it to me.

“I hope this isn’t one of those get to know each other board games that ask a bunch of boring questions.” I said trying to bring some levity to the situation.

“It’s nothing like that. This is something I believe you’ll like, cher.”

I peered down into the bag and saw a long velvet box. I gently pulled it out, it was heavy, and the velvet felt thick and luxurious. When I opened the case, there was a lovely gold choker inside. It was so beautiful that it stole my breath. I took a minute to gaze at the elegant curves.

“Do you like it?” Mason asked. “The moment I saw it I thought of you. It’s modern and streamlined, like your other jewelry.”

My eyes lifted to his and his hopeful expression hit me right in the heart. I leaned over and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek. “I love it, but why did you buy me an expensive present for no reason?”

“Oh, there’s a reason, alright. I need to butter you up.”

I plucked the choker out of its case, wrapped it around my neck, and turned so he could secure the clasp. I felt his warm, calloused fingers moving against my neck as he secured it.

I turned back around to face. “Hit me with it. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

His expression was doubtful. He opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again as if he was struggling to find the right words. My gut told me this was something that Storm had cooked up, something Mason didn’t quite agree with.

“Look, Mason, as long as whatever it is moves us closer to completing our goal of removing Don Diavonte from power, I’ll happily do it. I just want this whole thing to be over as soon as possible. I knew the risks when I came here.”

He was quick to respond, “It’s nothing like that, Rilia. I promise.” My new lover stood from the bed and held out one hand. “Come with me. I have something to show you.”

I eagerly slipped my hand into his and allowed him to tug me to my feet. Within seconds we were in the living room of our suite, and he was holding a plain black leather vest in his hands. It was similar to the one he wore, but clearly designed for a woman. When he turned it around, there was a large patch of a reaper, and *Property of the Dark Slayers MC* was embroidered across the bottom. It was just like the cut that Dusty wore.

I ran my hands across the butter smooth leather and glanced up at Mason. “I’ve seen these on some of the girls running around the clubhouse. Dusty calls it a property cut.”

“Yeah, that’s what it is. Normally, brothers give one to their old ladies as a

sign that they're spoken for. Instead of it saying Property of the Dark Slayers MC, it would say property of whatever brother was her old man. However, we began slapping them on the daughters as a warning to the men in town that they are not to approach them without approval."

"And does that actually work?"

"Mostly," he replied. "Except the prospects, or one in particular."

"Oh, I've seen Corey in action. He's hellbent on making Dusty his wife and it seems as though she's locked him in her sights as well."

"Yeah, that's been the talk of our club for months now. I think that boy's gonna end up married to her or die trying. Anyway, we wanted it known that you're under the protection of the Dark Slayers MC, as Don Diavonte seems to have bought the story that you're spying for him, having you wear a property cut makes it look like we totally trust you." Something dark shifted in his eyes. "I wanted it to have my name on so everyone knows you're mine, but obviously that's not something that's safe to do right now while the mafia believe you're Nicco's fiancée."

I took a step closer, snagged the cut, and slipped it on. "It fits perfectly."

He gave me a lopsided grin. "I gave Storm your size."

I grinned. "Been snooping through my wardrobe?"

He nodded. "Anything for you, cher." His voice turned husky. "You look good in a Slayer property cut."

My hand went up to my new choker and I couldn't help but smile. "I'm feeling kinda cute this evening. How do you feel about going out?"

His expression immediately shut down. "I don't think that's a very good idea at all. You're safer here at the clubhouse."

"Yeah, but I'm going a little stir crazy. Maybe you can take me to a nice restaurant." Grinning, I added, "Maybe in a nice neighborhood as opposed to the area I wandered into when I first arrived in Griffinsford."

He looked doubtful. "I'm not sure Storm would approve of us even leaving the clubhouse."

"We already left the clubhouse when we went to visit Twisted Metal. Surely, going out to a restaurant in a nice part of town can't more be more dangerous than fraternizing with an outlaw motorcycle club."

He frowned and I knew he was having a hard time arguing with my logic.

"Come on, Mason, it's just dinner. It won't take long." I ran my hand up his up his chest. "I'll come back to the clubhouse with no complaints."

"I don't know, cher. My instincts are telling me this is a really bad idea."

Why go out when we can stay right here and enjoy voodoo sauce on your perfectly cooked steak?”

I lowered my voice. “Don’t you want everyone to see me wearing my new property cut? If I’m with you, everyone will just assume that I’m yours. It’ll be almost like your name is on the bottom of my cut.”

Mason swore under his breath. “Alright, cher, we’ll go. You know exactly how to work me to get what you want.”

I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “I’m looking forward to the day I don’t have beg you to take me out to eat.”

Chapter 20

Aprilia

Mason had taken me to Bennigan's Bar and Grill, it was one of the nicest restaurants in Griffinsford—well, aside from the ones that required a tie. The food was amazing, and it was so good to get out. Not that there was anything wrong with the Dark Slayer's clubhouse, but seeing the same four walls day in and day out was starting to get boring, and I'd had my fill of steaks no matter how amazing Rob's cooking was.

Mason was the full package—rough, hot, plain spoken, and sweet as can be. I had a feeling he was my one. I ran my fingers around the edge of the gold choker. It was lightweight, comfortable, and pretty, just the opposite of the leather cut he saddled me with. I'd popped to the restroom to freshen up before we headed back, and I preened a bit in the large mirror in the restaurant bathroom. I liked wearing a Slayer cut way more than made sense for the daughter of mobster. All in all, I was happy with my own reflection for once.

I stepped out of the restroom and turned to head back into the main area but stopped when I heard a sound that sounded like someone whining. I heard it again and realized it sounded more like a puppy in distress. I turned around, trying to figure where the noise was coming from, it seemed to be coming from the far end of the short hallway. I walked up to the emergency exit and put my ear against it.

Sure enough, I heard it again. It sounded so pitiful, like maybe the puppy had gotten itself trapped in trash or something. I shoved the door open, half expecting an alarm to sound but there was silence and I walked out onto what appeared to be a small cement loading dock. The area was dimly lit but I was determined to search for the dog.

The moment the back door closed, someone grabbed me from behind. "Gotcha," a gruff voice whispered into my ear as he dragged me backward and off my feet. I tried to scream, but the hand over my mouth stifled any noise.

We stumbled down a ramp and I kept hearing the whining puppy. Finally, I realized the sound was looping, like it was a recording. Shock roiled through

my gut as I realized whoever this was had intentionally lured me out of the restaurant. I caught sight of a white panel van and that's when it hit me full force that I was in the process of being kidnapped.

This realization catapulted me into action. I began fighting as hard as I could. Kicking, making him bear the brunt of my weight, and clawing at his hands. He tried to shake me into stopping. I didn't stop. I bowed my back and went for his eyes. He didn't like that. Not at all. He made his displeasure known by slamming me face first into the van.

The door immediately slid open, and the barrel of a gun poked out. Instead of being pointed at me, it was pointed at my abductor. Relief surged in my chest. I was being rescued.

"I dare you to injure my property. You were explicitly told not to damage her. She's no good to me if she can't bear children."

As I was forced into the van, I wanted to throw up. Chester was sitting with a gun in one hand and the other holding a roll of duct tape. I tried to scream again and fought against being wrangled into the vehicle.

Chester tossed the duct tape down onto the seat, grabbed my arm, and pulled me inside and the door slammed shut. He threw the duct tape to another man, who promptly tore off a piece and put it over my screaming mouth. I kicked and fought until he put another piece over my nostrils. I started freaking out even harder because I couldn't breathe.

"Hold out your wrists, my little wildcat. Once we have you immobilized, we'll take the tape off those pretty nostrils, be a good girl." Chester said.

I stopped fighting and held my wrists out. I knew the golden rule of abduction was to fight with all your might to get away—that was your best chance of survival. However, once the van door closed that wasn't going to be possible. The next rule was to comply and bide your time, I knew Chester didn't want to kill me. What he had planned was far worse, but if I could calm myself down and start thinking rationally then maybe I'd have a better chance of getting away from this alive. His accomplice quickly put on several layers of thick tape and then roughly yanked the tape off my nose. I took a deep, cleansing breath and took a minute to gather my thoughts.

During this whole struggle, my abductor had climbed into the front seat and the van had started moving. I was totally at Chester's mercy, mercy I couldn't even beg for because my mouth was taped closed.

My mind began spinning in a thousand directions, but I focused hard on everything going on around me. There were four men, two up front and one

in the back with Chester. Four against one didn't leave me many options.

Chester was trying to talk to me, but I tuned him out and concentrated on trying to figure out where we were going. I couldn't think of Chester right now and what lay ahead. The thought of him touching me in any way was too much to fathom. I knew it was going to happen, but I locked all thoughts of it away in a little box in the back of my mind as the road signs flew by.

I wondered if Mason had realized something was wrong or if he thought I was still primping in the restroom. Speeding away from the restaurant, it seemed almost too much to hope for a quick rescue from my handsome protector. No, my luck had finally run out.

I brought my bound hands up to touch the choker he'd given me, only for my fingertips to brush against naked flesh. That's the moment I realized it had been ripped from me during the struggle. Sadness settled in my heart as I tried to block out Chester's excited chatter.

Chapter 21

Mason

I glanced at the clock on my cell phone. Aprilia was taking a long time in the restroom. So long that I'd already finished my coffee and paid the check. Though I knew women sometimes took forever—Celt would often joke about how long his old woman spent primping herself.

I looked at my phone again, twenty-five minutes. That was too long, plus Aprilia wasn't really into the whole dressing up and heavy makeup thing. Tonight, she'd had on mascara and a touch of lip gloss and that was it.

No... something was wrong.

I bolted out of my seat and headed toward the back. I knocked on the restroom door and got no response. I knocked again with the same result. Finally, I pulled the door open and stuck my head inside.

"Aprilia, are you okay?"

Panick surged in my chest when I didn't get a reply.

I rushed inside and searched each stall. She was nowhere to be found. I headed out of the restroom and began looking around the restaurant.

Someone must have alerted a manager, because a man hurried over to me. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, do you have security cameras at your establishment?"

He shook his head. "Not really. The only cameras we have are on the back dock. We had to install them last year due to an incident with a delivery driver."

"Where is your dock?"

He pointed toward the back of the restaurant, right where the restrooms were.

I rushed in that direction with him at my heels, hoping to find a trace of the woman I loved. When I stormed out the back door, I saw that trace I'd been looking for in the form of a glittering gold choker lying broken on the ground. I stopped to pick it up.

"This belongs to the woman I've been tasked with protecting. How quickly can you spool up the security feed from the last hour or so?"

"I don't know if I'm allowed to do that," the manager replied.

I turned to face him. "What's your name?"

“Douglas Farmsworth. I’ve only been in this position a few months. I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize my job.”

“Well, Douglas, you’d be doing that right now. A woman has been abducted from your establishment and every second we waste arguing when we could be saving her life is gonna to come back to haunt you. Do you want that on your conscience?”

His expression morphed into a conflicted one as he looked me over.

“How about you load up the security footage and call the police if you feel the need. Right now, I just need to do my job.”

He finally nodded and I followed him into the back office. Thankfully, it only took him a few minutes to pull up the footage. I fast-forwarded until I saw Aprilia walk out the back door onto the dock, where she was immediately jumped by some guy wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. He had dark hair and huge muscles. To my eye, he looked like a hired gun. A van pulled up and he threw her inside. It happened pretty fast. I didn’t recognize the man and couldn’t make out the blurry faces of the others.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to all my club brothers.

Aprilia was abducted from Bennigan’s approximately thirty minutes ago. She was thrown in a white panel van by a hired gun I didn’t recognize. They have the whole thing caught on their security feed.

Immediately, texts began flowing in.

Hacker: ***I’m on my way to copy the security feed.***

Storm: ***We’re going to hit the road and see if we can locate the van.***

Grit: ***I’m close to the main drag. I’ll monitor the only road out of town.***

Celt: ***I’m about twelve miles southwest of town. I’ll begin patrolling the highway and see if we can catch them before they get too far away.***

Feeling like Celt had the right idea, I texted back, ***I’ll join you. My best guess is they had enough time to get out of town with her by now.***

Turing to the manager, I alerted him to expect Hacker. “Our security firm

has an IT specialist by the name of Hacker. He's on his way to grab a copy of the security feed. Maybe he can isolate the license plate number."

"I can't give control of our system over to a hacker." His tone was nothing short of scared shitless.

"That's not his occupation, it's his nickname. He used to be with military intelligence and is good with computers. Move these chairs so he can get his wheelchair into your office. If you don't want him touching your shit, he can talk you through it verbally."

Without giving him an opportunity to respond, I stomped out of his office and left the restaurant as my stomach twisted with worry. I was barely holding it together because I knew losing my shit wouldn't help save Aprilia's life.

I got on my bike and sped toward the interstate. My head was filled with images of her screaming for me, needing me, and me not being there for her. I shoved all that away and turned the situation over in my head rationally. I didn't think Nicco, his brothers, or Don Diavonte would have tried to snatch Aprilia. They wouldn't have had enough time to realize we were together and execute a kidnapping. The fucker stalking her might be involved, but he had already been set up to grab her at the meet up. Either he couldn't wait to get his hands on her, or it was an opportunistic spur of the moment act by some rando who saw her walk out that back door and nabbed her.

The big question was why she went out the back door. Was she running from me? My gut told me no. She'd been having an amazing time just moments before, laughing and flirting with me. It almost felt like she had been lured outside, maybe by someone knocking, pretending they accidentally locked themselves out.

Aprilia was beautiful enough to turn any man's head. It was unfortunate that she caught the eye of some sick fuck who was willing to abduct her to get her attention.

It didn't take me long to catch up with Celt on the interstate. We took turns taking every exit to check that they hadn't stopped to get gas. I was desperate to find her. I kept my phone in a cradle attached to one handlebar. I couldn't keep up with all the texts coming through from my club brothers, but when I saw big red exclamation marks preceding, I pulled over to read it. The message was from Hacker. He was tracking her cell phone and saw she was halfway to LA. He dropped a slowly moving pin on our map app. I hauled ass to catch up with her, my heart pounding in my chest.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was a trap. Abductors usually took away their victim's cell phone immediately, unless they didn't think she had it with her, she'd left her purse at the table—that opened up another possibility, had someone been watching us? It didn't matter if it was a trap, it was our only chance at getting to the bottom of who took her and saving her from whatever dark deeds the crazy fuckers had in mind for her.

I broke the speed limit to get to her, noticing my club brothers were doing the same. I had to find her untouched or I was going to lose my fucking mind. I kept glancing down at the map and realized it was not only leading me off the interstate, but Aprilia had stopped moving. Maybe they'd stopped for gas, or they'd reached their destination. My mind jumped from wondering if whoever this was wanted to force some kind of information out of her, to whether some filthy asshole was already putting his hands on her.

I sped into the parking lot of a fancy hotel about twenty miles outside of LA. Celt, Renegade, and Blade were right behind me.

Celt grumbled, "This looks like the kind of pace a feckin' mobster would pick."

"They man who grabbed her wasn't wearing a suit. He looked like a hired thug," I pointed out.

"Well, they're not gonna live long enough to spend any of the money they earned. That's for damn sure," Renegade said.

"I don't see a white van. Let's head to the back of the building. They've got to be here."

We crept around the side of building in time to see two men wearing black jeans and T-shirts putting magnetic signage on the side of a white van.

"That's the van," I whispered. "They're clearly trying to disguise it a little, thinking that if we're looking for a plain van, we're not going to follow one with a contracting company's name on the side."

Renegade put his hand inside his vest and let it rest on his gun. "They ain't smart, that's for sure."

I said, "Let's grab them, throw them in their own fucking van, and make them tell us which room my old lady is in and who fucking took her."

We snuck up on them from behind and Celt jerked open the van door while Blade, Renegade, and I threw them inside. They came up fighting as Renegade and I climbed in, but the second my club brother pulled out his handgun, they settled down.

"What do you want from us? We've been working hard today. All we want

to do is get a hot shower and catch some sleep.”

Renegade cursed under his breath, reached into his pocket, pulled out a silencer, and began screwing it onto the end of his pistol. He glanced at me. “I don’t know about you, brother, but I don’t have the patience for a bunch of bullshit today.”

My lips pressed into a firm line. “Me either. Kill one and I’ll bet the other talks.”

“What the hell are you two talking about? We haven’t done anything to you.”

I picked up Aprilia’s property cut from the floor and held it up in front of his face. “How about you tell me where my old lady is before anyone does something to her that you’re all gonna fucking regret?”

They looked scared shitless, but they still weren’t talking. Renegade held his gun up to one man’s face. I reached out and shoved it in the direction of the other man.

“Don’t kill this one. He’s the one who took Aprilia. I want his death to be slow and painful.”

It only took the second man a few seconds of looking down the barrel of Renegade’s gun to begin blabbering. “I’m not getting paid enough to take a face full of lead. They’re in room three sixty-eight.” He pulled a white plastic card from his front pocket. “The number’s right here on the room key they gave us.”

I snatched the card out of his hand and asked, “Who the fuck is behind this?”

“It’s her fiancé.”

“Nicco?” I said, thinking of what I’d do when I got my hands on that double-crossing mobster piece of shit.

“No. I heard someone call him Charles. He’s short, pudgy, and none too handsome. Slicks his hair back like it’s the fucking sixties.”

I swore under my breath. “His real name might be Charles, but his nickname is Chester the child molester.”

I banged on the van door and Celt slid it open from the outside. “The pedophile has her. They’re in room three sixty-eight.”

“Let Renegade stay down here with these fuckers while we take care of the pedo,” Blade said.

I climbed out of the van. “We’d best get up there. We’ll grab them, perp walk them back to their own fucking van, and head back to the clubhouse

with them.”

Celt nodded. “Good plan. Storm, Grit and Thunder will be here shortly.”

“I ain’t waiting on them,” I ground out before heading for the back door of the hotel. The key card opened the door and three of us walked in, raced up three flights of stairs, and began searching for the door marked three sixty-eight.

I slid the keycard into the slot on the door handle and we all rushed in at the same time. Aprilia was nowhere to be found, but Chuck was sitting there on his laptop like he didn’t have a care in the world. Another man jumped up and went for his weapon, but Blade was all over it before Celt and I could move.

I slammed my hand down on his laptop, closing the screen, as Chuck stared in horror at Blade driving a hunting knife through his accomplice’s shoulder blade, practically pinning him to the chair he was sitting in. Blade stated roughly, “Do not fucking move another muscle if you want to survive this awful day.”

The man did as he was told, because hired thugs were never as dedicated as someone with skin in the game.

I turned to Chester. “Where’s Aprilia?”

“She’s mine,” he responded stubbornly.

Suddenly, the bathroom door flew open, and Aprilia stepped out. “Fuck you, I’m not yours and I never will be.”

She ran over to me and allowed me to carefully check her over. Her wrists were bound with tape, so I made quick work of tearing it off. “Are you okay?”

She nodded.

Chester stood and frowned. “You sent me the heart to let me know you wanted me, and I came.”

“You’re a fucking liar,” I spat out. “You were already here, trying to get your hands on Aprilia. I saw you behind our clubhouse last week, squeezing your fat ass under the fence.”

“I like to keep an eye on what’s mine. That’s all. You never should have tried to make her one of your club whores. Aprilia wasn’t made to wear cheap leather with a biker club’s name on it. She was meant to be my reward for years of service to our don.”

“He cancelled that arrangement. That means the deal is off the table.” Although it made my stomach churn, I reminded him, “Don Diavonte

accepted Nicco's claim on Aprilia. He's not going to be happy to learn that you went rogue and tried to abduct her."

Aprilia stepped closer to him. She was practically shaking with anger. "You tricked me into opening the back door of the restaurant and then your hired thug grabbed me. Did you actually think that was going to endear you to me?"

"How you feel about me is irrelevant," he snarled. "You'd learn to like me in the end, I might even have considered letting you go if you gave me a daughter."

I opened my mouth to set him straight, but Aprilia flew at him, pounding on his chest. Before the surprised man could respond, she started clawing at his face, leaving red streaks behind. "You sick bastard. I'll claw your fucking eyes out until you understand that I belong to me and no one else." She even tried to knee him in the groin.

Suddenly, he flipped her around until her back was pressed against his chest, I saw the glint and realized he had a small knife at her throat.

"Let her go, you fucking moron."

"No," he shot back with a smug look on his face. "I managed to turn the tables on you. Now, I'm calling the shots. I want you all face down on the floor with your hands behind your backs."

I figured we were all scheming about how to get that knife out of his hand. Needless to say, we weren't moving fast enough for him.

"I said get down." He jerked his chin toward the middle of the floor and shouted, "Now!"

I caught Aprilia's eye, and she gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Fuck. Once he had us down, he truly would be calling all the shots. Aprilia was signaling that come what may, she didn't not want this asshole walking off with her.

"You're making a big mistake, Chester," I warned him. "The man who has a rightful claim to her will track you down and skin you alive for threatening her life. You ain't leaving this room alive with Aprilia. However, if you let her go right now, I give you my word that you and your men can walk out of here and our club won't retaliate against you at all. We don't get involved in mob business."

His voice turned cold. "I know you won't because you'll be dead. The only question is if the woman you've sworn to protect will die as well."

"You won't kill her. We both know she can't have your children if she's

dead.”

The knife he was holding pressed more firmly against Aprilia’s pale skin. I almost lost my mind when a drop of bright red blood beaded up against the edge of the knife and ran down her neck. “If I can’t have her, nobody can. If you think I’m fucking bluffing, just try me.”

Something about the look in his eyes made me think he was as serious as a heart attack. I quickly held up both hands in a gesture of submission. “Stop. I’ll do whatever you say. Just ease up on that knife.”

“I knew you’d eventually see reason,” Chester sneered.

“We’re wasting a lot of time talking here. Could you two sort your shit out already? It’s been a while since I carved a man up and I was kinda lookin’ forward to it,” Blade said, his voice eerily quiet.

Chester snapped his head around to glare at Blade. “Do you have any idea who you’re talking to? When Don Diavonte finds out that you attacked me, you’ll be dead before sunrise.”

I surged forward while Chester’s attention was on Blade and grabbed the hand holding the knife. I yanked his hand away and kept hold of it as I punched him square in the face with my other hand.

Aprilia took advantage of his distraction and ducked away and ran behind me, I took a deep cleansing breath and seriously considered killing him where he stood. I turned my head and looked at the knife that was still in his hand stained with Aprilia’s blood. It would be all too easy to wrench his hand up and plunge the knife into his throat. But killing the man in cold blood would achieve nothing, so I resisted the impulse, but just barely.

Instead, I wrenched the knife out of his hand and punched him in the face a few more times. When he was limp and bloody, I tossed him to the ground and kicked him in the ribs for good measure. Staring down at him, I grumbled, “Glad we got that out of the way.”

“We get to kill them now, right?” Blade asked.

“We’re taking them back to the clubhouse where we can interrogate them properly. I don’t know what shit is going on with Don Diavonte and his men, but if his fucking bookkeeper is running around disobeying his direct orders then the whole organization is on shaky ground. The only real question is if they’re gonna walk out to the van on their own two legs or if we’re gonna knock their asses out and carry them.”

The man with the bleeding shoulder was quick to answer, “I’ll walk out. I’m not looking to get interrogated because I don’t know anything. I’d rather

make a deal and get the hell out of this situation.”

Just then there was a knock at the door that I recognized. It was the pattern of knock our club president used. Celt opened the door and Storm strolled in. He frowned at Blade. “You made a fucking mess on the chair.”

Aprilia spoke up as she wiped at the blood on her neck. “He didn’t have a choice. They had to fight to rescue me.”

Blade grinned. “Yeah, boss. I practically had to stab this asshole to rescue her.”

I walked over to Aprilia but spoke to Storm. “We were about to wrangle them all into the van and head for the clubhouse. You good with that plan?”

“Yeah, we’ll see what Nicco and his brother want to do with them.”

“What do those fools have to do with anything?” Chester practically hissed. “You should contact Don Diavonte. He’ll pay whatever ransom you want for me.”

I checked Aprilia’s neck and verified it was just a nick. I couldn’t believe how close she came to dying because of this prick.

“Your don’s dead, Chester. The Russo brothers are in charge now.” Storm said.

The color drained from Chester’s face, but he didn’t want to believe it. “I call fucking bullshit on that. You must think I’m a fucking idiot.”

Storm pulled out his phone and held it up to Chester’s face. “The old man looks pretty damn dead to me.”

I glanced at the screen and saw an image of Don Diavonte lying in a pool of his own blood on the pavement. It was difficult to tell if it was a city street, parking lot, or alley, but his dead-eyed stare was ten kinds of creepy.

“How in God’s name did that happen?” Chester gasped.

“Don’t rightly know at the moment. Let’s get a move on. We’ll sort all this out at the clubhouse.”

Celt and Storm walked Chester out to his van. Blade put a jacket over his bleeder’s shoulder so as not to attract attention and walked him out as well.

Aprilia’s hand closed around my arm more tightly. When I turned, her bravado had fled. I wrapped my arms around her and drew her close. My sweet love always put up a strong front and fell apart after the fact. I needed to always remember that and be sure to take care of her.

“Are you okay, Rilia?”

She nodded against my chest. “Yeah, now that you’re here. I hate Chester with the fire of a thousand suns.”

I rubbed her back, trying my best to soothe her. “Yeah, me too. That stupid bastard is deranged. I’m just glad he didn’t harm you.”

“He wasn’t about to do anything to harm the woman who was going to breed his kids. He kept talking about love and romance, but I knew what he really wanted with those children. I’d rather die than get used by him in that way. I still can’t believe you found me.”

“Thank God we were able to track your phone or it might have taken a lot longer. How’d you end up in the bathroom? Did you lock yourself in there?”

“The moment they opened the door, I ran inside and locked myself in. I hoped there might be a window, but there wasn’t. My phone was in my back pocket where I usually keep it, I guess I was lucky they never thought to check—not that it did me much good as I couldn’t reach it with my wrists bound in front. There was nothing to barricade the door with and I knew it was only a matter of time before they forced the lock when they wanted me out. Chester just let me stay there as he knew there was no way I could escape.”

“It sounds like you were out-thinking them every step of the way.”

“If that were true, I wouldn’t have fallen for their trap in the first place, I’ll think twice before I go to the aid of a puppy.”

“I want to hear all the details, but we should probably get going. They’ve probably loaded the assholes who abducted you into the van by now.”

She pulled back and nodded. “I’m ready to get the hell outta here. I’m riding with you, right?”

“Yeah, I don’t want you anywhere near those idiots.”

By the time we made it outside, the van was long gone, and the only brother left behind to ride with us was Renegade. The long ride home was uneventful. My tires ate up the road as we relaxed and enjoyed the fresh country air.

My mind filled with images of our small hometown finally shaking off the mafia. I knew that wasn’t a done deal. The image Storm had shown Chester of his dead don was a fake, one Diego Russo had come up with for his own amusement before realizing it could be used for a misinformation campaign once the Russo brothers had learned that Aprilia had been abducted. With any luck, eleven days from now we’d snare Don Diavonte in our carefully laid trap. Only when he was disposed of would our town be rid of his vile influence for good.

Chapter 22

Aprilia

The next eleven days flew by. Days of lounging around the clubhouse, getting to know the club wives and learning that just because the Dark Slayers was an MC didn't mean the men were rough, uneducated, and uncouth.

The best part of the last eleven days was spending day and night with Mason. I loved everything about him, from his slow Southern drawl to his protective streak and brash sense of humor. Mason was hot, sexy, and gave as good as he got in bed. He was unlike any man I'd ever met, and I wanted a chance with this man. I'd already decided that I wasn't going anywhere. As long as this man would have me, I planned to stay at his side.

My hand reached for the chain around my neck, and I smiled. Mason had gotten it mended—he had offered to see if he could switch it for something else in case I associated it with bad memories, but I loved it, and if he hadn't found it lying outside the restaurant then it might have taken him longer to realize I'd been abducted.

I looked up when Mason came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. He was all bulging muscles, sexy smiles, and practically preening as I watched him get dressed. "I ain't never had a woman eat me up with her eyes the way you do, Rilia. I gotta say, it feels good to be admired."

"You're more than just admired. I can't get enough of you, babe. If today weren't the big day, I would show you just how much I love that body of yours."

"And I'd take you up on an offer like that in a fuckin' heartbeat, cher. Unfortunately, I have to stay focused on the task at hand. Today is the day we run the mobsters out of our town once and for all."

I sighed, if the past couple of weeks had shown me anything, it was how naive I had been about what my family was really involved in. I thought I knew all about the shady dealings thanks to my father being open with me. But now I think he had only shown me the tip of the iceberg—a sanitized version—and had hidden the true depths from me. I was part and parcel of the mafia, it ran through my veins, and it was people like my family who ultimately caused all the shit that was happening in towns like Griffinsford.

The Russo brothers might not have been squeaky clean—in fact, I knew for sure they weren't, but compared to the old guard they were trying to change how the organization ran, and stuff like protection rackets didn't sit well with them. I looked up at him. "You're actually running the mobsters out of town with the assistance and support of other mobsters that you happen to be on better terms with. Technically, I'm a mobster as well, remember I've carried messages for Don Diavonte and his men? Sometimes it feels like it's all too much, this never-ending circle of violence."

Mason came to sit beside me on the bed. "I apologize, Rilia. I never thought you saw yourself as a mobster."

"There's nothing to apologize for, I was born into a family of mobsters, Mason. No matter whether I see myself as a mobster or not, I'm mobbed up by virtue of my father being in the mafia."

"Yeah, I get that. Only, I thought the one thing we agreed on was not being wild about crime."

I looked up at him, feeling more at odds on this issue than I could ever remember feeling in my whole life. "You're right, Mason. I know you are. I guess I'm just feeling conflicted about the whole mess. I loved my dad even though he was a member of the mafia. Same with the Russo brothers. Even Don Diavonte, he was like a grandfather to me growing up." I shook my head in disbelief that I'd held such fondness for that cold-blooded killer. "There are varying degrees of bad. When it comes to being raised in the business, you learn to appreciate distinctions, like how deep each person is embedded into the mob and where they draw the line."

He stared at me for a minute before responding. "I get what you're saying, cher. We all have our own moral compass, while I don't necessarily agree with the shit the Russo brothers are involved in, they are our allies. It's like the Slayers and Twisted Metal, we had to put our differences aside and come together to clean up the town."

I slid forward, wrapped my arms around his neck, and hugged him. Mason had a smart brain and a kind heart. He didn't deserve me dumping all my insecurities on him. "I'm sorry to spew all that at you like that."

"No, never be afraid of telling me what's on your mind, cher. If I can help I will or if you just want to vent, I'll listen. Always. That's my promise to you."

"Thanks, babe. We should probably get going before Storm sends Rob to pound on our door again."

As we headed downstairs, I asked, “Do you really think Don Diavonte will show up today?”

Mason grinned. “I’d be very surprised if he didn’t. This is his big opportunity for what he thinks is a sneak attack. My best guess is the old buzzard will show up to oversee the attack and then stroll around town to inspect his new holdings. He’s in for a rude awakening.”

It was four in the morning and all the brothers were gearing up for the coming battle. Mason walked over to the closet the club used as an armory and came back with a bullet proof vest. Before I could ask what he was doing, he slid it onto my body and began tightening the Velcro straps.

When he was finished, he pulled something from his waistband and handed it to me. It was my Smith & Wesson snub nosed semi-automatic that had been taken into safekeeping when I’d arrived at the clubhouse. I wrapped my hand around the handle and felt the familiar weight of it in my hand. My father had made sure I could shoot, but until today, I hadn’t considered it was a real possibility.

Mason murmured, “Since you insist on coming, I want you not only wearing body armor, but I want a weapon in your hand. Do you actually know how to use it?”

I slid the clip out, checked to make sure it was full, and clicked it back into place, which I guess answered his question. “My father had enemies, which probably doesn’t come as a surprise, so he wanted to make sure I could defend myself if I had to.” I tucked the gun into my belt holster and felt the comforting weight at the small of my back. I’d never fired it outside of a range, and I hoped to God that wasn’t going to change today. “I know I was only supposed to go to lure Chester out into the open, and since he’s safely under lock and key my presence isn’t required. But I’m not the kind of woman who can sit quietly at home and wait for my hero to come running back to me. Plus, we don’t know how it’s going to go yet, Don Diavonte thinks he’s gatecrashing a meeting of the local business owners, if he’s got eyes on the building then he might be suspicious if it’s just men coming and going. But if they see me wheeling a twenty-liter coffee dispenser out one of the panel vans and carrying in supplies, it’ll just look like we’re setting up, and you’ve got the women sorting out refreshments.”

Mason sighed, clearly still not approving of my decision. “Yeah, I know.

But it doesn't thrill me that you're gonna be there when all hell breaks loose. I'm doing my best to come to grips with that fact."

I closed my mouth while I was ahead on this issue and watched him put together his sniper rifle with deft precision. My real reason for going was that I wanted to cover his back. No one cared more about Mason than me, and I wasn't about to sit around twiddling my thumbs at the clubhouse while he put his life on the line not only to keep his town safe, but to get me out from under Don Diavonte's thumb. No, I'd be there to look out for him, whether he realized that was my motivation or not.

The next several hours were a whirlwind of activity. After everyone was armed to the teeth, Storm went over their plan one more time and verified that every brother knew where he was supposed to be and what his job was. It only took us about forty minutes to reach the remote location, where Steel and about thirty members of his Twisted Metal MC were already waiting. They'd brought cars instead of bikes because Don Diavonte would be expecting townspeople to be present. The Slayers weren't quite foolish enough to invite innocent people to a shootout with Don Diavonte's crew.

The plan was to arrive first, have snipers in place and scouts making sure they didn't sneak up on us from behind. I'd made a big fuss about dragging the supplies in, there was no sign that we were being watched, but it always paid to be careful. When it got close to the time for the meeting to start, they closed the barn doors, leaving all their vehicles outside.

We'd been inside for about thirty minutes when Storm got the first reports of dark SUVs pulling onto the property. The plan was to wait until they were right outside the barn and then for Steel's crew to meet up with the Slayers who weren't in the barn and surround the interlopers. Nicco and his brothers would arrive first, followed by their fearless leader, who would be none the wiser that the Russo brothers were about to double-cross him, and snipers would take out Don Diavonte and his captains once the fighting started.

It was a good plan. And it was shocking how smoothly it rolled into action. Mason stepped in front of me the minute the fighting started outside. "Stay behind me, Rilia. No matter what happens, use me for cover. Shoot only if you have to."

"I will. You be careful as well."

He turned around to look at me. "I'll be fine. Fought a hundred battles, most worse than this one. This ain't nothing but a day at the office for me,

cher.”

I swallowed thickly and nodded. The thought that he'd been in the line of fire so many times felt like something I should have realized before now, especially as his body bore the evidence of those battles in scars. But they were something we simply didn't talk about. They were part of his body as much as his washboard abs and huge biceps.

Mason moved along the perimeter of the barn, keeping our back to the wall. This particular barn had cement blocks running about four feet up from the ground to form a foundation, so it gave a measure of protection from the bullets flying outside. Suddenly, the barn door flew open.

Storm and Mason instantly had their guns drawn.

“Aprilia, are you here?” Nicco stepped through with a gun smoking in his hand.

It was Mason who answered. “She's here. How about Don Diavonte? Is he here yet?”

Nicco rushed over to us. “Yeah, the old man's just arrived, we managed to slip away.”

“Everyone okay?” Diego's voice rang out, Lucas followed closely behind his brother, providing cover.

Storm jerked his chin toward the door. “We'd best jump into the mix. I don't want to end up in a shootout in an enclosed area.”

I stepped forward to follow Storm's directions, but Mason's hand came out to block me.

“Head for the ladder. We're taking the high ground with Teeny.” He pointed to the wooden ladder leading up to the hayloft. It suddenly made sense why he agreed for me to come. It was because I wouldn't be boots on the ground where bullets were flying, but safe in the loft. I grabbed the ladder and hoisted myself up. Mason and the Russo brothers followed close behind.

Teeny was already lying in front of an open window, taking shots. When I scrambled into place, he spoke without looking over his shoulder at me. “Welcome to the fight Aprilia.”

I fell into place beside him and pulled out my gun. “How'd you know it was me?”

He squeezed off another shot. “It's that expensive perfume you wear. None of the other women wear it and I can smell you from a hundred paces.”

I almost got the breath knocked out of me when Mason literally landed on my back. “What in the world are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“My fuckin’ job, cher. I’m doing my fuckin’ job and protecting you.” He eased over to the far side of my body, putting me squarely between him and Teeny. “Relax, Rilia. We’ve got this. Y’all ready?”

Diego snorted a laugh, “I was born ready,” and he and his brothers took up positions at the other windows. They broke the glass and began shooting.

“I’ve got him in my sights,” Teeny said.

“No. He’s mine,” Mason responded in a dark tone.

A quick glance to my left revealed that Mason was using the scope on his rifle to scan the horizon.

“Diavonte’s in the back, behind the main skirmish. I caught sight of him because the sunlight reflected off the binoculars he’s using to watch the fighting.”

“That’s unsurprising. The old goat isn’t going to risk catching a stray bullet. That’s what he has us for,” Diego said sarcastically.

Nicco responded gleefully, “That’s what he used to have us for. Too bad I can’t see his face when he realizes we orchestrated his downfall.”

“Shut the hell up and kill some enemies,” Lucas hissed.

The Russo brothers continued to give Mason and Teeny a run-down of who’s who on the ground. Most of the mobsters who’d come were loyal to Don Diavonte and they were fair game—but there were others who were allied to the Russos, so they were careful not to aim at them.

Finally, Mason murmured, “I got him.” Without another word, he squeezed the trigger on his sniper rifle.

There was a long pause as the enormity set in, and then Teeny said, “You got him. I saw him go down.”

Mason moved his rifle slightly and replied, “It’s not a done deal until we take out his captains.”

“We’re three down and two more to go on that accord,” Nicco replied.

“One to go. Storm just took out Marino,” Diego interjected.

The men went back to shooting, but I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Someone was coming up the ladder. I turned with my gun in both hands and aimed at the top. Shock roiled through my gut when the bruised and battered face of Chester emerged. I’d honestly thought the Slayers had squeezed him for information and killed him.

Chester jumped into the loft, his hand reaching for a gun the moment his feet hit the ground. “I should have known. Fucking scum betrayers. Our don’s most trusted, joining forces with his enemies when no one’s looking.”

I had a clear shot and wanted to pull the trigger with all my heart and soul, but my hands began shaking and I just couldn't do it. Suddenly, the sound of multiple guns firing at the same time rang out. The sound was almost deafening. When it was over, Chester was lying on the floor of the loft riddled with holes.

"See, this is the kind of thing that fucking happens when you don't tie up your loose ends. Assholes keep popping back up for one final scare," Diego said, disgusted.

"I agree. Where the ever-loving fuck did he come from? And where the fuck did he get that gun? I thought Storm said you had him locked down," Nicco said.

"He was on lockdown. We had him in one of our vans with a bunch of shovels. The plan was to take care of him along with whatever bodies needed disposing of from this battle." Teeny said. "I'm guessing when the fighting started he took his chances, probably got the gun from one of his fallen comrades."

Lucas grumbled, "It pays to be smart, not lazy. Digging is part of the process. As satisfying as having Chester dig his own grave would have been, it's safer to kill them and dig the grave yourself."

Teeny rolled to a sitting position with his rifle across his knees. "Dude's not wrong about that. Lesson learned."

Mason turned and got onto his knees, holding his rifle in his hands like he was expecting Chester to rise one final time. "I don't think it has anything to do with digging graves. Storm doesn't kill people at our clubhouse, where our old ladies and kids hang out. Too many eyes and ears around for shit like that."

"It doesn't matter now. Done is done," I said.

Nicco approached me and squatted down to look me in the eye. "You okay, princess? You're looking a little worse for wear."

Mason opened his mouth, probably to tell him to get away from me, that he was too close. I quickly said, "I'm better than ever. That freak is dead. Our don is also dead, so he can't arrange any more marriages for me. And I found myself a hot biker, like you suggested."

Nicco grinned and tilted his head toward Mason. "He wouldn't be the one shooting daggers at me now, would he?"

I reached out to grip Mason's arm with my free hand. "Yeah, he's the perfect mix between protective and allowing me to make decisions for

myself.”

I pulled off Nicco’s fake engagement ring and tossed it to him.

Nicco caught it in one hand, playfully tossed it in the air, and caught it again. “You’re a good girl to be following my directions so closely.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was more of a suggestion than a command of any kind.”

Diego came over and squatted down as well. His expression was guarded but his voice was pleasant when he spoke. “Well, if you were mine, I’d burn in the fiery pits of hell before I ever put you in this kind of danger.”

“Rilia does what she wants. It’s my job to make sure bad shit doesn’t happen to her.”

Diego glanced over his shoulder at Chester. “You’re doing a fantastic job of that so far, Bubba. I believe it was my bullet that hit the mark.”

I gave Diego a playful kick. I’d realized that I had been mistaken about him and Lucas, they weren’t sociopaths in training—and underneath the hard front, he was still the little boy who would share his ice cream cone with me. “Stop being an ass. We’ve all zigged when we should have zagged.”

Diego looked around the room and sniffed. “I suppose. I learned early on to shoot first and ask questions later.”

Suddenly, Anthony Akers popped his head up into the loft. “What’s going on up here? I heard shots.” Before anyone could answer, he caught sight of Chester and pulled an annoyed face. “Making messes for me to clean up, I see.” Glaring at Diego, he stated flatly, “I charge double for offsite work.”

“Yeah, I know. Now that I’m in charge, there are going to be a lot more messes that need cleaning. You might want to go ahead and hire a crew.”

Anthony’s face blanked out so fast it was almost comical. “Yeah, sure thing, boss. Whatever you say.”

When I turned back to look out the window, the Slayers and Twisted Metal brothers were restraining their remaining enemies and sitting them all down in a long line. Cassandra and several medics were treating brothers that had been shot. I didn’t see any brothers down and I prayed that meant all of them had survived.

Epilogue

Mason

It had been three months since the day I killed the don who'd been intent on using Griffinsford for his own personal criminal homebase, and the asshole who had been stalking the woman I loved all the space of a few minutes. Of course, I couldn't take full credit for ending Chester. That had been a team effort, but the hole I left with my rifle was bigger, so to my mind that meant he was deader because of me.

Without having to worry about Don Diavonte trying to marry her off and Chester trying his best to breed her, my Rilia had really come out of her shell these last few months. She was bright, engaging, and her happiness radiated out to all she touched, including me. For the first time in forever, I had something to smile about.

I had the engagement ring I'd ordered months ago safely resting in my pocket, waiting for the right moment to pop the question. That moment would be very soon because I'd brought her to my family home, the one I inherited from my grandmother. My grandmother's best friend and longtime companion, Miss Adeline, still lived there and would continue to do so until she passed. She was eager to meet the woman I was going to marry, and I was just as eager to show Rilia where I grew up. I'd never want to move back to Louisiana, but visiting occasionally filled a need I would be hard pressed to name.

I watched her walking down the dock with a picnic basket in her hand. Aprilia was a beautiful woman, especially wearing cut-off jean shorts and a skimpy tank top that left nothing to the imagination. Her strappy sandals weren't the best for boating, but I didn't have the heart to ask her to change them. Instead, I held out my hand to help her into the boat.

She eyed the large fan at the back. "What kind of boat is this? My grandfather had a small speed boat, but I've never seen anything like this."

I helped her get comfortable as I explained. "It's an airboat. It has a flat bottom and an aircraft-type propeller that generates movement. Some folks call them swamp boats, plane boats, or bayou boats. I use the last term. Bayou boats are better than regular boats for navigating the swamp because they don't have propellers to get tangled in the grass."

“It’s nice. I can’t wait to get out on the water with it.”

“We’re going to go into the part of the swamp I always hit out in as a kid. It has a lot of trees and vines to keep the sun off us. The peace and quiet there is the only thing I truly miss about home.”

“How old were you when your parents first allowed you to go out on the swamp alone?”

“I wanted to at twelve. They put me off until I was thirteen and had spent a lot of time on the water. For me, it was better than getting my first car.”

We chatted about my childhood, and if she had similar memories, she shared them with me. It was relaxing. For the first time in my life, sharing memories of my childhood wasn’t something that made me relive the bad times. Maybe because we were talking about how much I liked being on the water.

When the boat slid into my favorite spot, I turned off the propellor and we drifted along in the slow-moving currents. I sat across from her, and she handed me a cold drink to sip on.

“So, what do you think of my favorite spot?”

She took a few minutes to look around before answering. “I love the way the branches reach out over the water, creating a cozy feel, especially with the moss growing over them. And the way those thick vines climb over the landscape almost like a pretty green blanket.”

I snorted a laugh. “That’s all kudzu vines. It’s considered an invasive plant. Some states have nuisance laws against cultivating it. Down South, we lost that battle ages ago.”

“Well, I like it,” she insisted with a grin. Something large moved in the water and she jumped. “What about the water? Are there fish in there?”

“This area is teeming with life. The gators have always been plentiful. Regardless of what you’ve heard, they don’t usually attack people. They have a natural fear of humans and will avoid us, but every so often someone will get on the wrong side of one.”

Her eyes went wide. “Are you serious? Are we safe here?”

“It’s all about respect, you don’t bother the gators and they won’t bother you. We share the swamp.”

Aprilia relaxed and asked, “What about other animals? Am I going to like the ones that live around the swamp?”

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. “Probably not. There are still a few wild boars trotting around, but mostly the swamp draws snakes,

snapping turtles, racoons, river rats, toads, and lots and lots of birds. Occasionally, you'll find an otter has taken up residence, but they're few and far between."

"Wow! It seems so peaceful here, to think there's all these critters hiding out of sight."

I laughed, with the ever-present bird song and cicadas you couldn't call the swamp peaceful in the strictest sense of the word—though it was peaceful in a way, devoid of signs of human habitation. "On land you'll find squirrels, bobcats, opossums, armadillos, and black bears. So, there's that to look forward to."

She gave me a doubtful look. "I think you're pulling my leg."

I shrugged. "How do you think I turned out to be so tough? I grew up fighting off copperheads, diamondback rattlesnakes, and even coyotes. It makes a man hard."

Her face lit up. "Wait a minute. Is this all just some segue into talking about you getting hard?"

I threw back my head and laughed. "No. I'm always hard around you, though. No need to talk that fact to death." I leaned forward and pulled the ring box out of my pocket. "I have more important things to talk to you about today." I held the small red velvet box out for her to examine.

One trembling hand came out to lift the box from my hand. "Is this what I think it is?" she asked nervously.

"Yeah, it sure is. I know we haven't known each other long enough to think about jumpin' the broom quite yet, but I want that with you eventually."

Aprilia pulled the hinged lid back and gasped. "It's beautiful!"

After looking through all the rings that Celt's friend Sterling had in his store, I'd found the perfect one. It was a simple gold band with a platinum setting holding the gemstone. I had Sterling add a couple of fleur-de-lis on either side set with diamonds representing my Louisiana heritage—it kind of fitted both of us as the lily was also the national flower of Italy. The choice of gemstone had taken a bit of detective work, but when Aprilia mentioned that her grandmother's engagement ring had been emerald but had gotten lost after her death, that had sealed the deal.

She looked down at the ring. "It's huge, babe. Are you sure you can afford this?"

I shrugged carelessly. "I sold off five acres of land I'll never use. Plus, I ain't exactly poor, Rilia. You don't have to worry about how much things

cost when we're together."

Her eyes lifted to mine. "I'm not exactly poor either. I know the subject never came up, and talking about money is considered crass, but I inherited from my father and grandparents."

"Most of my money is tied up in property, compliments of my *mémère*." That was something I'd never told a living soul. It seemed silly now to have been so guarded.

Aprilia chuckled. "Well, we've established that neither of us are gold diggers. Glad we got that out of the way."

"If you will have me, I want to marry you, *cher*. I've never felt about anyone else the way I feel about you. I want you in my life forever. What do you think of that?"

One hand clutched at the open ring box and the other drifted down to rest against her stomach and my heart lurched in my chest.

"Maybe getting married sooner rather than later would be best. I don't want to walk down the aisle with a belly the size of a house."

An ear-to-ear grin jumped onto my face. "You really think you're pregnant?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to take a pregnancy test without you, but I've got all the signs—throwing up in the morning, the smell of certain foods making me queasy, and an incessant need to nest."

I eased forward so as not to rock the boat and took her into my arms. Once she was seated on my lap, I pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it onto her finger. "Thank you for agreeing to be my wife. I promise you all I'll ever need in this world is you and our children. You'll always come first for me, and I'll do whatever is needed to make sure you're happy."

She looked up at me through her long lashes and responded in a quiet voice, "We've got a lot of things to talk about and decisions about our future to make, but I'm confident marrying you will be the best decision of my life."

I lifted up her shirt and bent my head slightly. "Did you hear that, child of mine? Your mama said yes."

Aprilia laughed and I liked her joyous expression when she looked at me. She rubbed her belly with both hands and murmured, "Just so you know, your daddy is too hot to say no to. I picked him because he's going to make beautiful babies. Hopefully, if all else fails in the world, that will give you a leg up."

I swatted her hand away playfully. "Don't listen to your mama. You're

going to be smart, resourceful, and have the sharpest tongue in the tri-county area. In fact, I hope you turn out to be just like your mama, because she's fucking awesome."

Aprilia cupped my face in her hands and kissed me. My heart was filled with marriage and babies. I was the luckiest man in the world to have a woman who loved me for me and not my hefty estate. In this moment, it felt like my past, present, and future were all coiled into a big ball. One I happily accepted responsibility for and couldn't wait to enjoy for many long years to come. Aprilia was my happily ever after and I was hers.

THE END

Hope you enjoyed the book!

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About the Author

Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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