



THE NOLA DEFIANCE MC SERIES BOOK 7

OBLITERATE

USA Today Bestselling Author

KE OSBORN



K E Osborn

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The NOLA Defiance MC Series Book 7

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We met a long time ago.

Our bond, instant.

And it didn't matter that she was older than me.

At the time, I didn't see her as anything but an incredible woman who stepped up and cared for me when no one else would. Now, years later, Ingrid is the 'mother' of the club I've transferred to.

The thought of us wasn't a fantasy for me back then.

But it's becoming one now.

The problem is—she's my president's stepmom.

And her deceased husband was my father's best friend.

To say it's complicated is an understatement. As we develop feelings for each other, life-threatening curveballs are launched in her direction—and I'm the *only* one who knows.

While trying to keep her safe, the club is at war, the fight coming at us from multiple directions.

The chaos is real and unwavering.

But in the face of obliteration, we can do nothing else but
stand tall because...

We *are* Defiance!

From *USA Today* Bestselling Author K E Osborn comes the
eagerly awaited ***final*** book in the NOLA Defiance MC Series.

***This is a reverse age gap, ex's best friend's son book, and can
be read as a standalone.***



DEDICATION

Because it's the end of a series, why not go out with a bang!
So, this will be a double dedication.

Firstly, to Gail.

I started Ingrid's battle in this story before you started yours, but your strength and courage shone through Ingrid in this book. You are one of the toughest people I know—and the nicest. I am so glad to have you as a friend. Thank you for all your support and help over the past few years. I am so grateful you came into our lives.

So this book is for you. xoxo

Secondly, my loyal readers.

I would like to dedicate this book and the entire series to my loyal readers.

I ADORE writing in this Defiance MC world, and I love that *you* love these guys and girls just as much as I do. Without your adoration and support for this world I have created, it would not have such a loyal and strong following.

So thanks to you all.

Let's bring on the LA Defiance brothers.

A brand-new bunch of alpha bikers to swoon over!



NOTE FOR THE READER

This book is a work of fiction, although the life and struggles of a real person inspire the story.

I am not a medical professional, and none of the medical situations in this book are meant to be taken as truth or fact.

Any inaccuracies depicting ‘real disease’ are meant to be under creative license to fit the story and not to spread misinformation.

Please be aware that this book might have some triggering content due to medical conversations, including biopsies, breast cancer, injections, and talks of surgery. There is also the loss of a child intrauterine.

More information can be found at the back of this book.

[Click Here](#)

For your convenience, below is a list of terms used in this book.

Any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the author.

1% — When a 1% patch is worn, it represents the one percent of bikers who are outlaw clubs.

Baton Rouge Bachelors – An underground criminal elite establishment.

Cut — A vest with club colors.

Chapel – The room where the Defiance club members congregate to have their ‘church’ meetings.

Church – The name of important club business meetings where only patched members can attend.

Hammer Down — Accelerate quickly.

La Fin — Means ‘The End.’ Also, the Club’s pet alligator.

Road Name — A road name is earned, given, and bestowed upon a biker. They usually have a story behind them.

The Heat — Police.

Watch Your Six — I’ve got your back, or to watch your back.



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CHAPTER ONE

Ingrid

I never thought my life would turn out this way.

If someone told me I would marry a single father of twin boys, who also happens to be the president of an outlaw motorcycle club, I would have told them they were out of their freaking mind, especially considering I have two of my own children.

A blended family was never something I thought would be on the cards for me, particularly after my last husband, Harry, left the way he did. The damn bastard had another family on the side I knew nothing about, and to make matters worse, he left us for them.

My daughter, Novah, was devastated.

My son, Nash, wanted to prove he was worthy of Harry's love.

Me? The second Harry walked out that front door, my love went with him.

But so did—as far as I was concerned—any hope of finding another love.

When Remy walked into my life—this tough, burly biker who was the complete opposite of Harry—I had *no* idea what I was in for, and I had no clue I would be swept into the club lifestyle. I had never stepped foot on the wrong side of the law, but finding the thrill of being Remy's Old Lady, or Reaper as the club calls him, is something else.

And I never knew finding love again in my early forties could be so... intoxicating.

Even if I am still new to all this.

Reaper is the president of the NOLA Defiance MC, and while his twenty-one-year-old twins, Lynx and Blaise, are back at the clubhouse, we couldn't leave my children in New Orleans to fend for themselves. Nash, maybe, but Novah is still a little too young. That sweet sixteen naivety can get her into trouble. Though I must admit, her stepbrothers have stepped up and taken care of her. Blaise, in particular, has made sure none of the brothers at the club go anywhere near her in an inappropriate way. I feel more than assured that Novah is safe.

But as I sit back, drinking my gin and trying to keep an eye on Novah and Nash as they walk around the foreign clubhouse in Los Angeles, I can't help but feel overwhelmed. I'm fairly new to all this, and coming to a brother chapter and sitting at their bar while waiting as the presidents talk business is, I guess, something I'm going to have to get used to.

Letting out a soft sigh, I sip at my drink again, and a soft chuckle comes from behind the bar. "It gets easier," a soft voice chimes.

I turn my head to the woman with kind eyes, who must be in her mid-to-late thirties. "What do you mean?" I ask curiously.

She tilts her head toward Reaper and the LA President. "The sitting back and waiting. Honestly, if you learn to have a good time yourself and not worry about what the men are doing, you'll get through this a lot smoother, honey."

Pursing my lips, I inhale, thinking about her words. "So don't try to figure them out and don't wait up, is what you're saying?"

She reaches out, placing her tender hand on mine. "They love with everything they have. Don't get me wrong, Reaper will give you absolutely everything, even his life, if it comes down to it. But, baby girl, don't give yourself a heart attack waiting by the door when they ride out or waiting for information when they're in Church because you're going to end up stressed the fuck out. You gotta take it as it comes. It's part of being a First Lady, and if you can't handle the heat that

title brings, baby, then you gotta bail right now before this world eats you up.”

I throw back the remainder of my gin and slide the glass across the bar, spinning my back to Reaper, blocking him from my view. “What’s your name?” I ask the woman.

“Ellie, and for the record... I think you’re gonna do just fine, Ingrid.” She slides another drink my way, and I smirk, taking it from her.

“Thanks, Ellie... how long you been at the club?”

Ellie wipes down a glass, tilting her head. “How long’s a piece of string?” She chuckles, glancing up at an old photograph behind the bar of past brothers. “My father was a brother. So was my uncle. My mother, an Old Lady...” She smiles, and the memories seem to touch her eyes. “So this club is in my veins. I don’t think I have ever *not* been here.”

A sense of pride washes over me as I stare at the picture, such a long history that I’m now a part of. Even though Ellie is LA Defiance, and I’m NOLA, we still share that uniting bond that is unique to us all. I can’t help but be caught up in all that. “I hope I’m in Defiance for as long as you’ve been.”

Ellie chuckles. “Oh, baby girl, you will be. I see that sparkle in your eyes. You belong in this club. Defiance has a chokehold on you too. And we all like being choked every now and then, am I right?”

My eyes widen as I let out a laugh. “You’re a lotta fun, Ellie.”

She smirks, tilting her chin up. “I think your old man is done with our pres.”

I turn to see Reaper backslapping the LA president as he reaches out, wrapping his arm around Nash and Novah on his way toward me. I spin back, grab my glass, throw back the rest of the gin quickly, then tap the bar. “Thanks for the pep talk, Ellie. I’ll see ya ’round.”

“Have a safe flight back to New Orleans.” With the cloth still in her hand, she waves as I stand and meet my family on the way out of the clubhouse.

Reaper smiles in that boyish way he does. “Catchin’ up with Ellie, she tell you bullshit stories about me?” Reaper asks as he ushers us all to the rental car.

I snort out a laugh as Novah and Nash walk ahead of us. “No, but I think there’s a lot I could learn from her... I think we could be good friends.”

Reaper chuckles, opening my car door. “Fuck... just what I need. All right, we have one more stop before heading to the airport. You think the kids are gonna make it?” he asks.

I glance at Novah, who’s busy typing away on her cell like she’s deep in a texting conversation with someone, then I glance at Nash, who is probably studying the latest stock market information on his cell, and I snort out a laugh. “I think they’ll manage.”

Reaper leans in, all leather and booze, and presses his bearded lips to mine. Smiling against him, my fingers running up into his short hair, I kiss him like I mean it.

“Ewww, gross, mooom!” Novah calls out.

I chuckle against Reaper’s lips, then pull back. Watching Novah, she makes the vomit sign with her finger in her mouth as Nash rolls his eyes while jumping in the back of the car.

“C’mon, kids. One more stop, then we head home,” Reaper states.

“Thank God. I have an exam to study for,” Nash mumbles to himself.

Novah shoves his shoulder. “You’re such a nerd.” She snorts.

Reaper watches me sliding into the passenger seat with a grin. I shake my head, knowing exactly what he’s thinking because I am thinking it too.

Maybe a little ‘Mile High Club’ action might be on the cards.

Reaper winks, closing my door before heading to the driver’s side. Then he starts the car, and we’re off.

“Where are we headed, another club thing?” I ask as he takes off into the Hollywood Hills.

“Not this time. This is more personal. I want you guys to meet someone from my past while we’re here in Los Angeles.”

Raising my brow, I shrug. “I feel like there’s a lot of people in your past, Reaper.”

He grins, side-eyeing me, then turns to keep his eyes on the winding road ahead. “You tryin’ to say I get around, baby?”

Snorting out a laugh, I lean over, resting my hand on his thigh. “If the shoe fits.”

He chuckles.

“You’re lucky we’re nearly there, or I might have to pull over and teach you a lesson.”

Novah makes another round of gagging noises in the back seat.

“Sorry, Novah, we’ll try to tone it down for you.” I turn back to look at my daughter, who rolls her beautiful blue eyes.

“You never talked like this with Dad—”

“Because Dad never paid her any attention, brat. Leave Mom and Reaper alone. Let them enjoy their new romance,” Nash states

I raise a brow, glancing at Reaper, who tilts his head.

“Thank you, Nash,” Reaper replies.

Novah shoves Nash in the arm. “Suck up!” she mumbles under her breath.

“He’s the president of an outlaw motorcycle club, Novah, and his two sons, who are now our stepbrothers, are also in that club... so, yeah, I’m not getting on their bad side. I happen to like my limbs where they are,” Nash states, his face still buried in his cell.

Reaper chuckles. “We wouldn’t hurt your limbs, Nash. If you piss me off, we’ll simply kill you and be done with—”

“Reaper!” I growl.

Nash drops his cell to the floor of the car in shock, his face turning pale white.

“Oh shit! I’m kiddin’ kid. Fuck... sorry. I’m not gonna kill ya. I promise,” Reaper backtracks.

Novah giggles as Nash swallows hard, slowly picking his cell up from the car’s floor.

I reach back and grip his thigh. “He’s kidding, darling.”

“Yeah... *real* fucking funny.”

“I thought it was hilarious,” Novah mocks.

“All right, all right, enough, kids. We’re here. I need you guys to behave yourselves. Can you do that?” Reaper demands as we pull up to a set of lavish gates after a short drive.

Nash nods his head, but he’s still sporting a terrified look while Novah smiles wide. “I always behave.”

I snort out a laugh. “Who are we meeting?” I need to be as prepared as I can be.

“This is my best friend’s home. I’ve known Angus for years. We go waaay back to when I was in the music biz, before the club.”

Raising my brow, I turn back to look at the kids. “Don’t touch... *anything!*”

“I’m not five, *Mom.*” Novah groans as she steps out of the car, Nash following her.

I turn to Reaper and shake my head. “You *had* to scare the shit out of him, didn’t you?”

He shrugs. “It’ll toughen him up.”

“Nash won’t join Defiance. He’s too set in his ways. He wants to prove to Harry he can be like him, or should I say be *better* than him.”

“Fuck Harry. Your ex is a dick. And the sooner Nash realizes it, the better he’ll be.”

Can’t argue with that logic.

“Yeah, I know... okay, so, Angus?” I ask, making sure I have his friend’s name right.

“And his wife is Lucia. I’m not sure if the kids will be home or not, but they’re around the same age as Novah and Nash, so if they are, they can hang out, or play, or whatever the fuck it is that kids do.”

I snort out a laugh. “They’re teenagers, darling. They do *not* play.”

“Then they can go smoke some pot or whatever.”

“Jesus...” I let out a laugh, grabbing hold of the car door handle to open it. “C’mon, let’s go.”

We head for the double front door of the two-story mansion. As we walk up the stairs, I feel completely out of place. Whoever this Angus guy is, he’s stinking rich, but before we even make it to the fancy double doors, they spring back with gusto to a tiny little woman with a bright smile.

“You’re here! *They’re here!*” she yells the second part like she’s trying to gain someone’s attention as she rushes out the doors straight for me. Her small arms are wide as she wraps them around me in the tightest of hugs, contrary to her tiny frame.

My eyes bug out of my face as I gasp. “Oh... hi there,” I reply to the excitable woman.

All the while, Reaper is chuckling.

“Fuck, Lucia! Calm your tits,” he states, pulling her off me.

“But she’s real!” She giggles and moves in, giving Reaper a friendly cuddle.

“Of course, she’s real. I sent y’all photos.”

Lucia shoves him playfully. “They could have been fake. I mean, she’s pretty as all get out. How did you pull such a thing of beauty, huh? *Angus! I said they’re here!*” she yells again so quickly I hardly have time to process.

Nash lets out a small snort.

Lucia glances at him. “And you... you’re not Defiance material, are you, son?” she states, and Nash glances up with a scowl.

“The club’s not for me... no offense.” He quickly snaps his head back to Reaper, who grips his shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

“None taken. C’mon, let’s head inside. Try to find this husband of yours, hey, Lucia?” Reaper suggests, and she grins, spins, then moves inside, and we follow.

The luxury and opulence of the place hits me in the face like a damn sledgehammer.

White walls. Marble floors. Chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. The grand staircase is front and center as we walk through the foyer. Not to mention an expensive-looking piano sitting in the main entrance.

Like, who the fuck has a piano in their foyer with a chandelier above it? Pretentious people with too much money, that’s who!

Nash and Novah glance around the space, casually looking back at me in awe, and I narrow my eyes on them. They’ve never seen anything like this before. Sure, their world opened up to new things since Defiance has come along, and their father Harry is wealthy in his own right, but this is something else.

We walk into a sitting room, and Lucia gestures for us all to sit on the long sofa. “Angus!” she screams again as a tall man strides in, wearing a bowler hat. The man towers over the tiny Lucia.

“Damn, woman, lower your cow horn. You’ll wake the neighbors,” Angus states with a smirk.

Reaper stands and walks over. They pull each other in, slapping their backs in some sort of manly thing men seem to do.

Lucia shakes her head. “It’s four in the afternoon. If the neighbors are sleeping, it’s because they overdosed again. And

honestly, someone needs to get Rohan into rehab anyway because he is out of contro—”

“Lucia, get our guests some drinks, will you?” Angus interrupts, his eyes drifting toward me.

Lucia’s smile falls, and she nods. “Yes, dear.” She walks over to the wet bar to make the drinks.

Reaper wraps his arm around Angus. “Well, old pal, I’d like you to meet my new family. My Old Lady, Ingrid, and her children... my stepkids, Novah and Nash.”

Angus glances at my children. “Nice to meet you all, finally. I’ve heard so much. Honestly, this idiot doesn’t shut up about you.”

I raise my brow. “Really? Because I haven’t heard much about you,” I reply.

“I’m not surprised...” Reaper rolls his shoulders as Angus smiles like he isn’t bothered by my honesty. “We sometimes don’t see each other for long periods of time. Depends on my schedule. But the tour just finished, and I’m home for a couple of months. So when Reaper told me he was in LA, and I am finally here at the same time, I knew we had to catch up. It’s been what? Six years, old friend?”

Reaper nods, gripping Angus’ shoulder. “Easily... where’s the kids? They’ve got to be really shootin’ up by now?”

“They’re with the nanny. We have to homeschool them. They were getting too much attention with kids knowing who I am and shit. They need to be protected... but Lucia can go get them for you.”

She nods, walking out of the room.

I furrow my brows, feeling like I’m missing something, and glance around the room, trying to put the puzzle pieces together.

Why are his kids being homeschooled?

Why is he away so much?

Then I see it.

The framed picture on the wall of one of the world's most famous rock bands.

Uncensored.

It hits me—Angus is the lead singer.

Sure, they're not as popular as they were fifteen years ago, but they're classic rock. They have some of the biggest hits the world has known. I've sung them in the car with Novah and Nash more times than I can count.

"Holy shit," I mumble under my breath.

Reaper glances at me, letting out a small laugh. "There it is."

Angus shrugs. "What?"

"The moment of realization, hey baby?" Reaper asks.

I nod my head. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea who you were until I saw the pictures just now."

Angus waves it off. "Oh, stop! I'm a washed-up has-been. Treat me as if I'm your old man's best friend and nothing more."

Releasing my shoulders, I exhale, trying to relax. "Okay," I reply.

Lucia enters with a girl who looks about the same age as Nash, around eighteen, and then a younger boy, maybe fifteen or so. They walk in, the girl with a little more poise than the boy who seems like he's itching to move, like he's restless, his foot tapping on the spot.

"Oh good, you're here, Arabella, my daughter. She's naturally gifted. So intelligent. She's learning the ins and outs of the music industry. I'm trying to get Romeo, my youngest, to learn the guitar, but sometimes I wonder if he's putting in any effort," Angus states matter-of-factly.

Arabella smiles wide, like she is super proud of her father's evaluation.

Romeo, however, sinks into himself and huffs. "We can't *all* be the golden child," Romeo mumbles under his breath.

Angus exhales, folding his arms over his chest. “No, that’s *more* than obvious. But maybe if we put some actual effort in, instead of being so fucking stub—”

“I’m not being stubborn, Dad. Just because I’m not into music, it automatically means I’m not good enough for you.”

I go to say something, but Angus interrupts me. “Romeo, we have guests, and any *normal* kid wouldn’t act the way you are right now.”

My eyes widen as Romeo’s nostrils flare.

I stand, shaking my head. “Okay, let’s all take a breath. In the heat of the moment, we say things we don’t me—”

“No. He meant it. I know Dad thinks I’m not... *normal*. I don’t live up to his expectations. Or should I say to what *he* expects a son of his should—”

“Romeo, that’s enough!” Lucia snaps.

Arabella begins to chuckle, not giving any support, and it seems to be the straw that breaks him. He picks up the nearest thing, which happens to be some kind of music trophy and throws it toward Arabella. She ducks out of the way before it smashes on the floor.

“Daddy, Romeo tried to kill me!” she snarks.

He goes to grab something else, his rage seeping off him in waves. It’s like a switch has been triggered as he flies off the handle at his sister.

So I jump up and race over to him, seeing as no one else is doing anything to help the situation. I reach out just as he’s about to destroy another trophy and grab his hand. “Romeo, stop!” I demand.

He pants through his mouth, hurt clear in his eyes, but I can tell the anger hasn’t subsided. His focus is still on his sister, so I place my hand on his face and force him to look at me. “Rome, look at me,” I urge calmly. I don’t know if it’s my directness, or if it’s me calling him Rome for short is what stops him. Either way, I breathe a sigh of relief when he exhales, placing the trophy down. Our eyes lock, and I nod at

him with a small smile. “You’re okay. You’re going to be okay... I promise.”

He stares at me like I’m the only person who has ever cared about him in the world, breaking my damn heart.

I wish we could take him with us.

But I know we can’t.

All I can do is make the most impact with him right now.

“It’s okay to be different, Romeo. And if you want to, you can be *anything* you want to be. Don’t let *anyone* push you in a direction you don’t want. You’re old enough... take charge of your life, okay?”

“Thank you. I don’t know who you are, but... you are kind of amazing.” He smiles.

I let out a small laugh as Reaper steps in beside me. “We should go.”

I drop my hand and nod, turning to glare at Angus and Lucia, scowling in clear disgust. “Do better.”

I snarl.

“Keep your woman in check next time, Reaper.” Angus huffs.

Fuck that! I turn, starting to storm toward him, my finger pointed out in rage. “You fucking ass—”

Reaper grabs me around the waist and starts dragging me out of the house.

“C’mon, kids, let’s go,” Reaper calls out.

Novah and Nash race out after us while Reaper manhandles me out of the house, my fist raised at Angus as I go.

I go to yell again, but Reaper pushes me up against the side of our car hard, his eyes on me, making me stop instantly. “Ingrid, I love you... but *shut the fuck up*. You’re the best mother I have *ever* known. Your heart and devotion to our four kids knows no bounds, but *don’t* tell another man how to raise his kids.”

My heart beats so fast in my chest, tears welling as I glance back at the opulent house. The thought of leaving Romeo there kills me, but I don't have any other choice. He has so much character and potential, and they're stifling him.

It's not fair.

Pulling myself free from Reaper, I spin and jump in the car, slamming the door shut for added emphasis and folding my arms over my chest.

Reaper slowly gets in, the four of us dead quiet while he pulls the car out of the parking spot and starts driving, skidding the tires as he goes.

My eyes flick to the rearview mirror where Romeo is standing by the giant window, watching us pull away, and somehow, for some reason, I get the feeling it won't be the last time I see that young man.

I have high hopes he will turn into someone amazing, and I hope I am able to witness that happen.

One day.

CHAPTER TWO

South

Twelve Years Later

Defiance MC has been a part of me for so long that it flows through my veins. The club means more to me than my brothers realize.

When I finally joined LA Defiance, I knew deep in my bones and the fabric of my soul that *this* is where I belonged.

While LA is where I grew up and where I call home, I've always felt the need to see the rest of our beautiful country. Hell, even the rest of the world, if I can. So when the opportunity came for me to transfer from the club I love in LA to my brother chapter in New Orleans, another club I have grown very fond of, I knew I needed to take that leap.

Itchy feet were pulling me in another direction. The need to stretch my limbs and breathe different air was calling me. My brothers in LA mean so much, don't get me wrong, and I know I'm going to come back, but as they say, '*a change is as good as a holiday*,' and maybe this temporary change will be my holiday.

I have no idea how long I'll be spending in New Orleans, but I will make the most of my time here. Transfers from one club to another don't come up often, so when a position is available, you grab it with both hands and make as much out of it as possible.

And that is exactly what I plan to do.

Riding into the NOLA Defiance clubhouse for the first time as a patched brother for their chapter, I don't know what to expect. Once they find a brother to fill their prospect, Jesse's spot, and he patches up to a ranking brother, my time will be

done. I'll be back in LA quicker than I can say "beignet." So, I need to ensure I make an impression—leave a legacy—and do my part.

Pulling my bike into the parking space allotted, excitement washes over me.

Will they be waiting for me inside?

Will they have a celebration prepared for my arrival?

I sure hope so.

Kicking out the stand, I lean my bike to the side and throw my leg over, sliding off my ride and stretching my muscles. The ride from LA was fucking lengthy and took a lot longer than I wanted, but I needed my bike with me. If I wanted her here, the only way to do that was to do the nearly two-thousand-mile ride. But it's worth every bump in the road, even if I do have a sore-as-fuck ass and tense-as-hell neck muscles.

Luckily, my bags and some belongings were shipped ahead of time, so if everything's gone according to plan, my shit should already be here. Craning my neck to the side, my bones crack slightly with the pressure, and I let out a throaty groan. "Here we go," I mumble to myself, then stride toward the clubhouse with purposeful steps.

Walking into the clubhouse, I expect a brother to grab me when I walk through and for all the back-slapping congratulatory "Welcome, brother" comments to be flung my way.

Instead... nothing!

Everyone is going about their usual shit.

My brows tighten at the reality check.

Not one person turns their head. They continue like my life isn't completely being altered by this moment.

Right! So this moment is only big for me.

NOLA Defiance is their home. They're used to being here, so new arrivals obviously aren't a big deal. But for me, I can

assure you, it feels like a big. Fucking. Deal.

No special treatment. Got it.

Glancing down, I spot my bags on the floor by the front door, so I reach down and take a deep breath. “Get your shit together, South,” I mumble under my breath.

I make my way to the bar, where Jaz casually wipes the countertop down. She spots me and smiles brightly in her usual way. “Hey. You’re here!”

Weakly smiling, I shrug. “Looks like it. So, ahh... where do I go from here?”

She ducks out from behind the bar and starts walking for the hall. “Follow me. I’ll take you to your room.”

“Thanks. Where is everyone today?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“The guys are around doing their own thing. Some of the old ladies are at their day jobs. Just general day-to-day life... you’ll get used to it. You’ll find your place here. I know you will.” We reach a bedroom at the end of the hall, and she pushes the door open, gesturing for me to enter.

With a nod, I walk into my room. “Thanks, Jaz, appreciate it.”

The layout is smaller than my room in LA, but it will do just fine. I don’t need material shit. I never have. I prefer the company of good people because good people are hard to find.

“If you need anything, Storm is the head club girl. So, she’s your go-to for any club-related questions. But I’m here if you need any *other* club girl services or anything at all... I’m your girl.” She winks suggestively, making me chuckle at her obvious innuendo as she turns and walks out the door.

I drop my bags on my bed with a giant smirk. “Club girls,” I murmur to myself, knowing precisely what Jaz was offering.

You never know—a guy has needs.

Just not right now.

Now, I need to find my new club president. Let him know I'm here and ready for him to integrate me into the club as he needs.

After I sort my bags into a state that will get me by, I head out into the clubroom to find Hurricane. I wander through the expanse, checking around for him, when my eyes widen, taking in the strawberry-blonde locks of the woman who took my breath away the last time I was here.

Ingrid Ladet.

Sure, she's Hurricane and Bayou's stepmother.

Yeah, she's Novah and Nash's mother too.

Absolutely, she is old enough to be my mother, but something about this woman ignites a fire inside me.

The second I saw her at Hurricane's wedding, I knew. I just knew we shared a connection. She may not know it yet, and it might come off a little creepy, but I *have* to get to know her better.

She's the kind of woman who requires your *full attention*.

To be shown that she's worth so much more than what the world has dealt her.

I've seen her the last couple of times I've been to the clubhouse. The woman is damn fine! And a bit of an age difference will not stop me from showing her what she's worth.

With a grin on my goofy face, I make my way over, ensuring I add a little pep to my strut.

Ingrid spots me, and a sly smirk appears on her lips as I approach.

"South, I see you've transitioned here okay."

That voice is like a fucking angel.

"Better now I know you're here to greet me," I reply cockily.

She lets out a stifled laugh while rolling her eyes. “Flattering as that is, I’m not here to greet you. I’m here to see my daughter. You know, the woman who’s a year older than you are, and she is the *youngest* of my children.”

I only see that as a challenge, not a deterrent.

“Age is only a number.”

She bites her bottom lip—goddamn, that little gesture sends all sorts of signals to my dick.

My words obviously affect her.

“Not when you’re the mother of so many people who belong to this club, South. Back off.”

Smirking, I lean in closer. Ingrid’s fruity perfume fills my senses as I press my lips to her ear and whisper a breath over her skin. “If you wanted me to back off, you wouldn’t still be here.”

She jerks her head back, her eyes wide, as she straightens out her already straight shirt. “Jesus Christ,” she murmurs, turns, and walks briskly toward Novah, where she’s standing, watching us, her eyes narrowed in question.

I smile, waving to Novah, but she reaches out for her mother, ignoring my greeting, and then they walk off together.

“Making waves already...” Chuckling, I click my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “Doing good, South,” I mumble to myself.

I make my way to the bar, where Jaz is smirking and trying hard to hold in a laugh. As I sit on the stool, she slides a beer my way, and I dip my head at her in thanks. Then she raises her brow at me like she’s waiting for me to say something, and I shrug. “What?” I ask.

She can’t help but let out a small laugh. “You really think hitting on Ingrid in the first ten minutes of you being here is the right message to send?”

I take a long sip of my beer, swiveling on my stool, and turn to look at Ingrid. “I don’t know if you’d call that *hitting* on her exactly. I’d call it... letting her know she has options.”

“Mmm... word of advice, South. If you want to keep your limbs intact, stay away from anyone in the Ladet family. You have to be a special kinda someone to be accepted into their fold.”

My eyes shift to Grit, and I raise a brow. “You mean, be more like Grit because it took a lot for him to be accepted by Hurricane for Lani?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You *can’t* be like Grit. No one can be like Grit. He’s one of a kind. The way he treats Lani and her disabilities? I mean... the guy’s a fucking saint. No one can compete with him.”

Tilting my head, I grin. “With all due respect, Jaz, I don’t think Ingrid needs a saint.”

Jaz wipes the bar and doesn’t look at me. “I don’t want to speak out of turn toward a brother, and it’s probably not my place, but I’m only looking out for you when I say this, okay? I don’t think Ingrid needs a boy toy, South. She’s well respected here. *Everyone* loves her. She doesn’t need you coming in here making bedroom eyes at her, making her feel uncomfortable in her own home.”

Well, shit! That hit right where it was meant to.

The last thing I want to do is make Ingrid uncomfortable.

“Yeah... you’re right. I’ll back off. My priority is to the club. To Hurricane. Everything else is just white noise.”

Jaz reaches out, placing her hand on mine. “Like I said, you’ll find your feet. Just don’t run at everything like a bull at a gate. Baby steps, South.”

“Baby steps,” I reply, then neck the rest of my beer. I slam the glass down on the bar and wipe my bearded chin with the back of my hand. “Speaking of Hurricane, I better go find him. Any idea on where our illustrious leader might be?”

Jaz tilts her head to the back door. “Try down on the bayou. I heard he and City were going down there to discuss some things.”

Winking, I stand and exhale. “Thanks for the pep talk. You’re good at this club girl thing.”

She beams with pride. “Thanks, I’m getting the hang of it.”

I tap the bar once, then turn for the rear of the club, making my way outside. The beautiful spring day shines in all its glory on my skin, instantly warming me from the outside in, filling me with contentment.

I approach the bayou fence, open it, and walk down the stairs to the rickety dock. The president and VP are standing near the end, deep in discussion.

Guess they’re talking business.

Maybe I shouldn’t interrupt?

I turn to head up the stairs as a clearing throat gains my attention. “If you’re gonna spoil our chat, you may as well come and say hello, brother,” Hurricane drawls in a Southern accent.

I turn around, and they are both staring right at me, so I make my way down the dock toward them. “Didn’t wanna interrupt... just wanted to let you know I’m here.”

“And you didn’t think it could wait till we’re done with our meetin’?” Hurricane snaps as I reach him.

“Yeah... for sure it could. I thought you’d want me to come find you, so all good.”

“There’s a hierarchy, South. And you coming here doesn’t mean you can skip the rules and do whatever the fuck you want. When the pres and I are having a meeting, it’s for a fucking reason,” City adds.

I step back while my stomach falls through the dock and into the bayou beneath me, sinking into the murky depths. “Right. I’ll come find you when you’re done. Didn’t mean to step on toes.”

“Well, you fuckin’ did. This is strike one ...” My eyes widen. “Do anythin’ like this again, and I’m gonna have to...” Hurricane and City burst out laughing. “Oh fuck, I can’t keep this up. The look on your face is killin’ me.” Hurricane

reaches out and pulls me to him in a back-slapping embrace. “We’re just messin’ with ya, asshole. It’s fuckin’ good to have ya here.”

City shoves me in the arm. “We really had you going there.”

I let out a long exhale while shaking my head. “You’re both fucking jerks. Here I was, all excited about transferring, and in the blink of an eye, you had me doubting everything.”

Hurricane chuckles, throwing his arm around my tense neck, and he pulls my head toward the muddy bayou water. “I can still make you doubt comin’ here.”

I laugh and punch Hurricane’s ribs weakly, forcing him to let me go. He chuckles, shoving me to the side with the biggest grin. “Nah, Pres, thank you for taking me in. Despite you making my asshole pucker just now, I’m really fucking excited about the transfer.”

Hurricane folds his bulked-up arms over his chest. “Good... because despite what you might think, we’re happy to have your pansy ass at the club.”

“You let me know what you need from me. I know I’m only here temporarily, but while I *am* here, I want to treat the place like it’s my home. Like you are my family. So anything you need, Pres, you just call ’cause I’m your guy.”

Hurricane dips his chin in response. “Appreciate that, brother. We need you to do your thing. Be around when we need you and have your brothers’ backs. That’s all we ask.”

“Not even a question, Pres. It’s a done deal. You can count on me.”

“All right, first job. Ingrid needs an escort to an appointment in the city. Bayou or I would normally go with her, but tensions are high with the fuckin’ Bratva. We need to be here tryin’ to figure some shit out. So you good to tail her in and out of her appointment? You don’t have to go in with her. You just make sure she gets in to see the specialist and safely back home. Got it?”

My conversation with Jaz plays on my mind. Thoughts of giving Ingrid space quickly filter through, but this is my president's orders... I can't *not* do this. "You got it! When's the appointment?"

"She should be gettin' ready to leave any minute, so if I were you, I'd be hightailin' my ass up to the clubhouse to make sure you don't miss her." Hurricane chuckles.

Dipping my head, I repeat, "It's good to be here, Pres." Then I take off up the dock for the stairs.

"Good to have you. Fuckin' watch Ingrid like a hawk. She's precious cargo!" he yells as I race up the stairs, closing the gate behind me, and jog for the clubhouse.

"Got it!" I yell, hoping they can still hear me.

Apprehension pulses through me as I sprint through the clubhouse to find Ingrid. She's already told me to back off. I don't want to come on too hot, so I will pull back with the innuendos and shit and be her escort for her right now. She's going to this appointment for a reason and doesn't need any added stress from me trying to hit on her.

Making my way over as she heads for the exit, she spots me, letting out a heavy sigh. "I don't have time to entertain you right now, South. I have somewhere I need to be."

"Oh, I know, and I'm going with you."

She continues to walk to her car, unperturbed by me following her. "I thought I told you to—"

"Back off? No, I heard you loud and clear. But Hurricane has ordered me to be your tail for your appointment. So, like it or not, I *am* coming with."

She pulls the door to her car open, her beautiful emerald-green eyes staring into mine. "Fine, but I'm going into this appointment on my own. You can stay in the waiting room."

I smirk. "Yes, ma'am." I gesture for her to enter her vehicle, and she huffs, sliding down into her seat. I chuckle, closing her door for her, then tap the car's roof twice and make my way over to my ride.

Throwing my leg over, I swear I only just got off this thing after riding for days to get here, but my duty to this club started the second I rode through those gates. I have to put my sore ass and stiff neck to the side and ride behind Ingrid's car to ensure she's protected.

She pulls out, driving through the clubhouse gates, and I hammer down, knowing I'm going to be spending the afternoon alone with her. But I have to keep my shit together because she is clearly not interested, and I have a job to do.

After a short ride into the city, we pull up to a block of medical suites and park. I jump off my ride as fast as I can, then open Ingrid's door for her.

She glances up at me with a genuine smile. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

I give her my hand to help her out of the car, and the second her hand slides into mine, it's like a fire igniting in my soul. And if I'm not mistaken, I'm sure I see her breathing hitch as our eyes lock on each other, just staring briefly.

I swear I could get lost in those eyes forever.

She finally takes a breath and slowly pulls her hand from mine, clearing her throat. "Who knew you were a gentleman?" she quips.

I chuckle, placing my hand on her lower back and usher her toward the medical suite. "I am many things, Ingrid, but a gentleman is *not* one of them," I reply.

She lets out a small laugh as we walk up a couple of stairs, and I grab the door, holding it open for her to walk through. She raises her brow at me, tilting her head. "Coulda fooled me."

Scowling, I tilt my thumb toward the suite. "Get inside, woman."

The waiting room patrons glance up, their eyes falling on me wearing my club cut. The older ladies clutch their handbags a little tighter, which makes me smile. I hang back while Ingrid talks to the receptionist, checking herself in, and I can't help but spot one of the women glowering at me like she

thinks I'm about to rob the place. Her eyes shift from me to Ingrid, like she's trying to work out the dynamic, and I chuckle to myself while waggling my brows at the old woman to stir her up. She scoffs as if she's offended. I continue looking at her as she turns the other way, folding her arms over her chest in disgust.

I snort out a laugh as Ingrid steps back to my side, curiosity crossing her features. "What are you laughing about?" she whispers to me.

"Judgmental assholes, they're everywhere," I reply loudly so the bitch can hear.

Ingrid glances across the room to the old woman and sighs, seeing her turning up her nose at me. Ingrid snorts out a laugh, then reaches out, grabbing my hand in a shock move. "C'mon, baby, let's go take a seat."

Smirking, I link my fingers with hers, relishing the moment as I raise my chin to the old bitch, who looks like she is about to have a coronary. We take a seat, and I wrap my arm around Ingrid's shoulders. She slides her hand onto my thigh to keep up the pretense, and I chuckle against her ear. "This must be killing you right now?"

She squeezes my thigh, digging her nails in. "Don't get your hopes up. I'm doing this to defend that patch you're wearing. Nothing more. I want that bitch to know Defiance is nothing to be afraid of."

I slide my nose in along her neck, really playing this up. The woman smells like fucking heaven, and it's hard to keep my dick under control at this moment. "You're doing a great job for the cause."

She chuckles under her breath. "Don't tell me you're not enjoying this, South."

Raising my head, I smirk at her. "Don't tell me *you're* not enjoying this, Ingrid."

She side-eyes me, and I see the hint of excitement in her eyes. The fact we're putting on a show for all the patients in

here is doing something for her. “South... this... us, it’s not going to happ—”

“Ingrid Ladet?” a woman wearing scrubs calls out.

We both snap our heads around to see her looking down at us with a brow raised.

“That’s me,” she states, detaching from me quickly, standing and hurrying down the hall.

The girl in scrubs glances at me as I move my hands behind my head, a giant smirk appearing on my face and the eyes of the entire waiting room on me. She exhales, shaking her head, then turns and walks down the hall behind Ingrid.

I didn’t think asking Ingrid why she’s in a medical center was polite. If she wants to tell me, she will, but I somehow think that is a fat chance in Hell.

I let out a small laugh, moving to pull out my cell to keep myself occupied. Then I get lost in YouTube videos about Harleys.

It feels like it’s been a long time, so I glance at my watch—an hour and a half has passed. Furrowing my brows, I exhale when footsteps finally make their way down the hall, drawing my attention.

I glance up, spotting Ingrid’s red and blotchy face. My heart thumps hard, seeing that she’s been crying, and I stand so fucking fast I almost lose my footing as I shove my cell in my pocket and reach out, pulling her to me. “What the fuck is going on. Are you okay?”

She snuffles, shaking her head. “C-can we go somewhere? A-anywhere... I just don’t want to return to the clubhouse right now.” Her voice is so broken, so defeated, it breaks my damn heart.

“Yeah, anything you want... I got you.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ingrid

My insides are shaking.

But at the same time, I am completely numb.

The only thing making me feel anything right now is the warmth of South's arm wrapped around me as we walk to the café attached to the medical suites. He's not saying anything, simply holding me tightly as I try to come to terms with this. Sniffing back, I wipe at my face and let out a steady breath.

You have got to pull yourself together, Ingrid.

Rolling my shoulders, I stand a little taller, my eyes shifting to South's as we make it to a booth in the café he brought me to, and he ushers me into the seat. I slide in, and he doesn't waste a second shifting beside me.

I sink into the soft seat, closing my eyes for a brief moment, gathering my strength, inhale, and then open. "Okay, I'm okay," I finally speak.

He purses his lips, tilting his head. "You're Ingrid Ladet, you're strong as fuck, of course, you're okay. But, if you want to get off your chest what happened in there, I'm a real fucking good listener. And if you just want to grab a coffee, something to eat, and sit here in silence, I'm good with that too. Whatever you need."

How can this young man be so fucking sweet and exactly what I need right now? Somehow, he's soothing me, helping me to feel at ease, and I don't know if that calms or terrifies me. But either way, he's all I have to count on right now.

"Let's grab a coffee. I could do with a pick-me-up."

He grins in that roguish way he does. “You got it.” He throws his hand in the air, hailing the waitress over.

She walks up to the table, her eyes wandering South up and down, admiring his bad-boy persona. For added seduction, she brings her pen up to her lips, twirling it around. “What can I get ya?” she sing-songs, her eyes focused solely on South.

“Latte?” he asks, his eyes never leaving me.

“Sounds great.”

“Two Lattes, thanks. Oh, and can you bring some fries? Curly ones, if you have them, with ranch.”

I glance at him as the waitress nods. “Sure thing, anything else?”

“You want anything to eat, angel. You should eat,” he demands but then backs off with, “Or you could share my fries?”

“Not hungry, but thank you. That’ll be all.”

“Gotchya. I’ll be right back.” The waitress grins at South, spins, and wiggles her ass for added emphasis as she saunters off. It’s wasted, though, because South’s fussing about with his cell, not taking one scrap of notice of the poor girl who’s vying for his attention.

I shake my head, sitting back. “You’re oblivious, aren’t you?” I mumble, and his head snaps up, looking at me with an eyebrow raised.

“Ahh... to what?” he asks, confused.

I tilt my head toward the waitress who’s now behind the counter but glancing our way as often as she can. “Server Sally over there. She wants *everything* you’re offering.”

South snorts out a laugh. “There’s no offerings on the table. Not for her anyway.”

“That’s a shame. I think you’re in with a *real chance* with that one.” I smile at him, his eyes locking with mine as he exhales.

“She’s not my type.” His words have meaning, and it hits me in the chest. A shiver runs down my spine at how he’s looking at me like he wants to devour me, making me feel something I haven’t felt for years.

Since the last time a biker swept me off my feet.

When I met Reaper, it was a whirlwind.

Crazy.

In the best way.

And I was an Old Lady before I knew what was happening.

Being part of Defiance is the most amazing life.

And I have never looked back.

One of the best things that came out of it was becoming part of Hurricane and Bayou’s life, and I love those boys as if they are my own. Even though I was only in their life for a few years before their father, Reaper, passed from liver cancer, it made no difference to me. They were and always will be part of my life.

Reaper made me feel like the world was turning on its head, and I’ve never been able to capture that feeling since. In fact, when Reaper died, my world stopped. I’ve been coasting. Just getting by. Living each day for my kids and doing the best I can for each of them.

But now, at this moment, looking into the eyes of South, my world feels different. Like it’s spinning again, and I don’t mean a slight rotation. I mean, fricking out of control, giving me vertigo, about to collapse because I can’t hold on from the turmoil, kind of spinning.

That shaking feeling on the inside returns. The one reminding me that there’s so much at stake, and my eyes begin to well with tears I can’t control. I blink rapidly, pulling my attention from South, breaking whatever contact we shared just now.

I snap my head away, swiping at my face. “Shit! I’m not normally this emotional. I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” I mumble, still averting my eyes from his.

His strong hand slides under the table, gently resting it on my knee. But there's no way it's sexual. It is purely for comfort. "Ingrid, I'm here. I know you don't know me well, but sometimes talking things over with a relative stranger is the best way to get shit off your chest?"

Slowly, I lift my eyes back to his. "Do you know why we came here today?"

"Not a damn clue, angel."

I could lie.

Make something up.

Fabricate some bullshit or another.

I already know how I'll handle and move forward from this, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to have one person to confide in.

So I tell South the whole truth—no matter how terrifying.

"I had a routine mammogram. You know what that is?" I ask.

"Yeah, I do..." He nods with a weak smile. "But I have a feeling, with how long the appointment took and the fact you keep crying, that it's anything but routine?"

Inhaling deeply, I shake my head. "No... not routine at all."

South sits taller, his hand darting out, reaching for mine, and he squeezes. "Jesus! Okay, how bad we talking here?"

I go to speak, but the waitress interrupts with our coffee and a bowl of curly fries, placing them down. "Here you go. Enjoy. Let me know if I can get ya anything else?"

"Thanks so much," I reply.

South doesn't say anything, and instantly, Server Sally frowns with disappointment.

"*Ingrid*... how bad are we talking?" he asks again, now she's gone, his tone firmer. More demanding.

Typical biker!

I turn to face him and slump my shoulders. “When they did the first scan, they saw the shadow, so they did another mammogram and an ultrasound. They found a lump that appears to be about two centimeters in diameter. I have to come back tomorrow for a biopsy.”

South rubs his hand through his long hair. “Okay, so we don’t know the full extent of what this is, right? It could be a cyst or a fatty lump—”

“You saying I’m fat?” I joke, and he scowls at me.

“I wouldn’t care if you were. You’re beautiful inside and out, angel.”

My heart beats faster. I don’t know what it is about the way he calls me angel, but fuck, I find it sexy. I shouldn’t, the guy’s young enough for me to be his fucking mother. On so many levels, it’s wrong for me to be physically attracted to him. But goddamn, there’s something about the way he carries himself, the way he looks at me, and don’t even get me started on the way he smells—*so fricking good*.

Thoughts are rampaging through my mind as I clear my throat. “In any case, no, we don’t know what it is yet. That’s what the biopsy is for. To determine the next move.”

He hums under his breath, picking up a curly fry, dunking it in ranch dressing, and taking a bite with a loud crunch. He continues, “All right! We return tomorrow, we get this biopsy done, and they tell us what this is. Then what? We get a treatment plan?”

A light smile touches my lips at his continual use of the term ‘we.’ “I guess it depends on what they find. They threw a lot of information at me today, and I got so overwhelmed.”

South slides a little closer. “Whatever happens, you’re not in this alone. You have me, no matter what. Everyone will rally around when we go back and tell—”

“We’re not telling anyone,” I interrupt firmly.

South’s eyes bug out, his head jerking back. “I’m sorry. I thought you said you’re *not* telling them? Surely you’re joking?”

I shrug. “My kids have enough on their plates. I won’t tell them until there *is* something dire to worry about.”

South shakes his head, reaching out for my hand. “Ingrid, no. Hurricane is gonna want a full report when I get back, and you want me to *lie* to my new president on my first day at the club?”

I *am* putting him in a tough spot.

I know that.

“I get it, I do. But telling Hurricane, Bayou, Novah, and hell... even Nash right now will put the four of them into a tailspin. They have their own lives. I *don't* want them focusing on me, especially if there is nothing to be concerned about.” Ingrid smiles, but there is no way she’s happy. “I have you. You can be the person I talk to about this. Everyone else can wait until we have good news to tell them.”

South picks up another fry but doesn’t place it in his mouth. “You’ve just signed my death certificate. You know that, right?”

I snort out a laugh. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“When they find out I helped hide this, they’re gonna put me in the soundproof shed and torture me to death. I have no doubt.”

I can’t help rolling my eyes. “They won’t torture you to death.”

South picks up his coffee, raising it in the air. “I’m gonna enjoy my coffee and fries because it may be my last meal.”

“South, I’m not telling them... I can’t.” I sigh and place my hands on the table in front of me.

He drops his shoulders and nods, his hand coming out to grip mine. “Okay. We don’t tell them. It’s your choice, and I’m honestly not gonna force you to do anything you don’t feel ready to do. But, they *will* have to know at some point.”

Nodding, I fight back the tears that are threatening to fall. I know he’s right. But at the moment, I need them out of this.

“I’m sorry to put you in this position. To be the only person who knows.”

“I want to be here, by your side, helping you through this. No matter what you need, Ingrid, I’m here for you. Don’t ever doubt that.”

I glance down to the napkin his coffee is sitting on. The waitress scribbled her phone number across it in black ink, and I can’t help but smirk. “I think Server Sally wants you to be there for her too,” I tease, pointing to the number.

He follows my movement, his eyes landing on the digits, and he snorts a laugh. “As I said, angel, Sally’s not my type. I appreciate her balls, though, and I’ll be sure to give her a good tip.”

I let out a small laugh. I don’t know how, but in some way, South has made what should be a momentous occasion feel not so daunting. Knowing he will be here by my side as my support through this, making me laugh, is exactly what I need.

Not Novah’s hovering.

Not Hurricane’s overprotectiveness.

Not Nash’s bold decision-making.

And not Bayou’s—

Well, Bayou is probably the only one I could tolerate right now. He wouldn’t treat me differently or try to handle the situation like the other three would. He would be there for me. But if I told him, there is no doubt he would tell Novah, and she’d tell Nash and Hurricane—so, none of them get told.

Instead, I’ll put my faith in South—he’s independent and not family—at least through the next stage. Then, I will play it by ear, and if the news gets progressively worse, I will reassess who I need to tell, but the plan remains the same for now.

“You’re a good man, South. Thank you for everything because I don’t know where this road is taking me. Whether this is a benign lump or…” I pause because saying the words out loud is utterly terrifying, but I have to face facts here, this

is my reality, and I'm living it in neon fucking colors, "... if this is b-breast c-cancer..." I can't help but stutter the words, and instantly, his hand comes out to grip mine tighter, "... then I need to prepare myself for all outcomes. Whatever they may be."

"I got you, Ingrid. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I'm in this with you now, whether you like me or not."

"Shouldn't that be like *it* or not?"

He winks. "Potato potahto," he says, then shoves a curly fry in his mouth. "You should eat. Sally makes a mean curly fry."

I shrug. "Why the fuck not." I grab a fry, dunk it in ranch, and pop it in my mouth. The cool, tangy hit of the ranch, teamed with the seasoned fry, is something I wasn't expecting. It's freaking delicious. "Oh, I like the ranch with this."

"Right? The guys back home say I'm weird. But it's fucking good, yeah?"

There's something about South that feels comfortable.

That feels safe.

That feels familiar.

I just can't place it.

"Yeah, it's fucking good."

He grabs a fry and dunks it in the ranch. "Knew it! Those fuckers giving me shit all this time," he mumbles, even though he knows I can hear him.

My hand slides up, gently rubbing his back. "There, there... you'll be okay."

He glances at me mockingly. "Look, all I am saying is, people undervalue my culinary expertise."

"Thank you for making this far less morbid than it could have been."

He grips my knee and squeezes, his eyes meeting mine. "Morbid characterizes shit like death, and we're not going there, Ingrid. You're *not* going there. This is a journey sent to

test you. To test your strength. To remind you how fucking solid and badass you are.”

A single tear falls down my cheek as I stare into his eyes, and his thumb gently wipes it away, his fingers lingering on my skin a little longer than necessary. “You got this, okay?”

Sniffing, I bring my hand up and lace my fingers with his. “I got this,” I whisper back.

“No, that won’t do at all. Say it like you damn well mean it!”

“I got this,” I reply a little louder.

South stands, throwing his arms out to his sides, grabbing the people’s attention nearby. I widen my eyes as I yank on his cut. “Nope, you gotta say it louder so everyone can hear you.”

The couple nearest us chuckles, having no clue what’s happening as South grabs my arm and hoists me up.

I groan, standing beside him. “Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I mumble under my breath.

“Say it with me now, Ingrid. And you better believe it when you do. You ready?”

I groan, but I know he won’t stop until I do.

“I got this!” he says so loud that even Sally looks our way now in curiosity. He nudges my side as I giggle beside him. “C’mon, Ingrid, say it with me!”

Taking a deep breath, I face our audience, plaster a fake smile, and sigh. “I got this,” I murmur.

South shakes his head as the other people in the café smile. Then he wraps his arm around my waist. “C’mon, Ingrid, I need you to believe it.” He looks into my eyes and nods once. “Believe it, angel.”

My heart beats faster, and my palms sweat as I stand taller, somehow finding my inner strength as I glance at the sea of people staring at me. “I got this!” I declare loudly.

Tears flood my eyes as they all cheer and a wave of relief washes over me.

Maybe I have got this.

Maybe I am going to be okay.

I spin in South's arms, flinging my hands around his neck and pulling him to me. He's taller than me, so my face nuzzles into his chest, and I inhale his woodsy smell. Teamed with the leather and the euphoria of the moment, it's driving me insane. My breathing becomes faster as he holds me tight, his nose buried in my hair while we embrace so tightly. I'm sure we're crossing some fucking line, but I don't care right now—I need this comfort.

With the café still cheering, I slowly pull back, my face in line with his. His hand comes out as he looks at me, gently caressing my cheek. Our eyes lock, and my heart races so intensely I feel like it might beat out of my chest.

“Yeah, cougar time! Go, bro, get it on,” some young punk calls out, making me jerk back from South, realizing what's happening. I take a giant step back, my mouth dropping open with shock that I was drawn into this web.

“Shit,” I whisper, then turn to see everyone looking at us. “No, it's not like that,” I defend.

“Oh, girl, don't deny yourself some young hot stuff. Honey, if I could get me a man who looked like him, *damn*. I'd be all over that too,” a woman says, walking past me on her way out of the café.

“It's not... we're not...” I don't know how to defend myself.

So I do the only thing I can think of—bend down, grab my bag, and take off.

“Ingrid. Ingrid, *wait!*”

CHAPTER FOUR

Ingrid

My heart races as I bolt out of the café.

I've made such an idiot of myself, so I rush for the car.

The intense heat of South's perceived gaze on my back sends a chill down my spine as he follows behind me. His thunderous footsteps, trying to keep pace with mine, do nothing for my anxiety. My breathing is sharp and shallow when I reach the car.

Placing my hands on the roof, I take some much-needed breaths. His presence is all-encompassing as he steps in behind me, and I can't help but close my eyes, trying to keep myself together. His large hand gently presses on my back, and instinctively, I sharply inhale, his touch instantly electrifying me. "South," I whisper.

"Ingrid," he growls out in return. His tone is deep, gravelly, and so fucking sexy.

I spin to face him, not realizing how close he is. My eyes widen at his tall frame, and I have to step back. My body hits the car, but he steps closer, his hand landing heavily against the car's roof, blocking me in.

My chest rises and falls fast as our eyes lock. My tongue darts out, licking my dry lips while South watches the movement closely. I shake my head. My hand rests flat on his chest to prevent him from coming closer. Instantly, he stops, but at the same time, he doesn't back away.

"South, I need you right now. I need your support. This... whatever *this* is... I can't."

He smiles his dazzling, roguish smile while his hand gently caresses my cheek. "I got you! But just so you know... this is

not a game for me, Ingrid. But I will be here... in whatever way you need me.”

He doesn't know how much I needed to hear those words. Sliding my hand from his chest to meet his hand on my cheek, I interlock our fingers and shake my head. “I need you as my friend.”

He nods, taking a small step back. “I can do that. I'll be the best damn rock you've ever had to lean on.”

I can't fight the smile that lights my face. “Somehow, I know you'll live up to that.”

“Well then, m'lady, your carriage awaits.” He sidesteps, gesturing for the car.

I snort out a laugh. “I'm no princess, South.”

He raises a brow, opening my door. “No, Ingrid, you're the motherfucking queen.”

My stomach flitters with giddy butterflies. I haven't had someone look at me with the reverence South does in such a long time.

I have to admit—it's nice.

But he is *far* too young.

And any infatuation he has is unconventional and uncalled for.

There is no possible way we could act on this attraction.

What would my children think?

What would the club think about *him*?

It's not something that could *ever* happen.

And it's wrong on too many levels.

No.

This can't happen.

No matter how he makes me feel.

No matter the emotions running through my body.

Actually, my emotions are heightened because of the situation I find myself in right now.

South is here helping me through this mess.

Therefore, South is who I am clinging to.

Yes, that is what this is, nothing more.

He's my savior.

And I have a savior complex.

It *will* pass.

It *has* to.

"We better get back to the club. And we should probably think of a cover story to tell my family while we're at it," I state.

South shows no outward emotion and merely gestures for me to jump into the car, so I do. He leans down, his head popping in the opening to talk to me. "You can tell them it was routine."

"What about coming back for the biopsy tomorrow?"

He scrubs at his beard. "You have an appointment you forgot about until they rang today."

I scowl. "I have to run all my appointments with Hurricane. I'm usually good at telling him so he can prepare my tail ahead of time."

"Tell him they shifted a future appointment to tomorrow because the doctor's heading out of town, and they wanted to know if you could come earlier."

Letting out a half laugh, I shake my head. "You're good at this. Just need to figure out what appointment."

"I would suggest something that will make him so uncomfortable, he won't ask too many questions," South states.

"Pap smear it is." I chuckle.

South grins as I start the car, and he closes the door. "That'll do it! It's best if you ask him to make sure I'm your

tail. Then he should be good with me coming with you.”

I glance out the window as he walks to his bike. “Thank you... I appreciate all of this.”

He throws his leg over his bike, then turns back to look at me. “You sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’m perfectly fine. I’ll see you back at the club.”

He dips his chin. “I’ll be on your six the whole way home.”

Somehow, that’s more comforting than it should be. I roll my window up as South’s bike roars to life, and I put my car into gear and take off out of the parking lot. My eyes flick to the rearview, and I can’t help but smile. I don’t know what it is about South, but this man has captured me, and he’s holding on with a vice-like grip.

The problem is—*I really fucking like it.*

“Ingrid, you need to get these thoughts out of your mind right now!” I mumble to myself as I flick my eyes from the rearview back to the road ahead and focus on driving back to the clubhouse.

My mind is all over the place, diverting from thoughts of South to my scans, to what if the results are bad news. *How the fuck am I going to tell my kids? What will my options be? Am I going to go down the road of chemo or radiotherapy?*

I don’t even know what they entail or what will be offered. *Oh God, will I have to have my breasts removed?* So many unknowns are floating through my mind that I probably shouldn’t be driving. If I’m honest, my mind isn’t on the traffic ahead of me, but somehow, I make it back to the clubhouse in one piece.

As the gates draw open, I let out a relieved exhale, hearing the roar of South’s bike ride into his spot. It’s his first official day here at the club, and already, I’m throwing live grenades at the poor guy.

As I open the door, I spot him waiting for me. Knowing I don’t want any attention on me, he doesn’t make a move to be

my escort. And I can't help but smile as we both walk toward the clubhouse.

South stays a solid yard away from me, and I have to dip my head as we make our way to Hurricane to hide what must be a stupid grin at this point. He hasn't said a word, but I know he's here for me all the same.

He glances up, bobbing his chin at South. "Thanks, brother, all go accordin' to plan?" Hurricane asks.

"Ran as smooth as a baby's ass," South says crassly.

Hurricane glances at me for confirmation, but my stomach twists in response. I hate lying to him, but I don't have a choice right now. I don't want them to know. Not until I have my head wrapped around whatever *this* could be. They have enough to worry about with Anton and the Bratva back on the scene, and the Baroness is being shady as fuck too. They don't need my medical issues clouding their judgment.

"All good, darling, nothing to be concerned over. However, I did get another call while I was out about a scheduling conflict for one of my other appointments... they wanted to know if I could move it up to tomorrow because the doctor is going to a conference the day I'm scheduled for my original appointment."

Hurricane scoffs. "Typical. Fuckers never have their shit organized. What's the appointment for tomorrow?"

I swallow the lump in my throat, hoping this will stop the line of questioning. "Pap smear."

He curls up his lip and nods. "Right, yeah, okay... I'm sure I can find someone to go with you."

"Actually, I already spoke to South, and he said he'd be fine with being my tail if you're okay with it?"

Hurricane glances at South, and he nods. "All good with me, Pres. Gets me out and about, learning the lay of the city. Happy to do it."

Hurricane rolls his shoulders. "All right, you tail her. But goin' out twice in as many days can be a draw card for trouble,

especially with the Bratva. So you keep your eyes fuckin' peeled, you hear me, South?"

He nods, straightening his shoulders. "I hear you. I'll protect Ingrid with my life."

"Glad to hear it! Good job today, South." He switches back to Ingrid. "I think Novah's lookin' for ya. She wants to talk to you about somethin'. Not sure what, though."

"Thank you, darling." I reach out, gently placing my hand on Hurricane's arm.

He smiles in that genuine kind way he always does. "You stayin' for dinner? I hear Lani's makin' somethin' *real* good."

I let out a small laugh. "Well, with an offer like that, how can I say no?"

Hurricane winks.

I glance at South. "Thanks for today," I offer, making it sound like I mean for the tail, but for me, the meaning is much deeper.

South nods. "Anytime, Ingrid. I'll be around tomorrow to escort you to your appointment. Let me know the time."

"Appreciate that." I reach out, giving his hand a light squeeze. He glances at my hand on his but doesn't react because Hurricane's watching us. Then I slowly turn and walk off, leaving the two to talk, probably about how today *really* went.

I must put my faith in the fact that South won't *out me* to Hurricane. Besides, I can't worry about that right now. I need to go in search of Novah.

Walking through the clubhouse, anxiety races through me. Thoughts of what tomorrow may bring filter through my mind, and while I know I'll have South with me, it's not the same as having my family there to support me.

Maybe I should open up to Novah?

Maybe I should tell her what's going on?

She's the most sensible of my children, so maybe telling her first is the right move?

Steadying my shoulders, I inhale deeply, deciding to tell Novah when I find her. I can't leave this burden for South to carry, especially if tomorrow's news is not good. It's not fair. He's new, and keeping this from his president jeopardizes his position.

Making my way down to Novah and Bayou's bedroom, I knock a couple of times on the door.

"Come in, Hoodoo. I'm so glad you're here," Novah mumbles through the door.

I walk in, slightly confused that she's not in the bedroom. I take a few more steps into the attached bathroom, where Novah's sitting on the floor, her head resting on the toilet bowl. My eyes widen, and I race in, squatting beside her.

She weakly smiles. "Sorry, I thought you were Hoodoo. Bayou went to get him."

Bringing up my hand, I swipe her sweaty hair from her face. "Oh darling, are you not well?"

She reaches out, taking my hand in hers, her eyes glistening with tears, but her lips smiling in contradiction to the saltwater shimmering in her eyes. "Mom, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"Novah, you're scaring me." I sit on the floor next to her.

Tears flood down her cheeks, and she snuffles back her emotions. "We wanted to wait to tell everyone... just until the timing was right."

"Novah Lee, tell me right now, darling. What's going on?" I ask firmer.

"Mom! Bayou and me... we're pregnant."

My heart pounds so fast, my eyes widening in my joy. "What?" It comes out high-pitched as my hands move to either side of her pale face, embracing her tightly.

She nods, sniffing. “I’ve just had the start of my second-trimester scan, so we could make sure everything was safe to tell everybody, but there was something we didn’t expect on the scan.”

My stomach sinks, and I reach out, grabbing her hands. “Okay, whatever it is, we will face it as a family.”

“It showed we’re having twins.”

Tears well in my eyes as I lean forward, pulling Novah to me in a tight embrace. “Oh, my darling girl. I am so happy for you both.”

Novah stiffens in my arms, and I pull back, looking into her eyes, and that’s when I see the hesitation. Furrowing my brows, I place my hand on her knee and sigh. “Novah, talk to me.”

She rubs her forehead, letting out a long exhale. “I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know what I am feeling.”

“Being a first-time mother is terrifying, let alone being a mother of twins first go around. It’s normal to be a little scared.”

“It’s not that... God, I’m such an asshole—”

“You are anything but. Now, talk to me. What’s going on?”

Novah scrunches her face like she’s mentally berating herself. “What will our kids think of us when they find out? What will their friends think of them when they find out? Am I bringing kids into the world to be terrorized because of my actions?”

“Novah, what? I thought you didn’t have issues with Bayou being your stepbrother?”

She sighs. “I don’t, not really. I just worry that other people won’t understand, and they will take it out on our children. And that will be *our* fault. We’re going to fuck up our kids because we fell in love.”

I reach out, grab her hands, and force her to look at me. “Stop that. These kids will grow up in a home full of incredible people who love and adore them. They will have

nothing but the best upbringing they could *ever* ask for. If the kids at school start treating them like shit, an entire club is here to back them up. They won't ever suffer, Novah. Not ever."

She bursts into tears, and I pull her to me, cradling her to my chest.

"I'm horrible for doubting. I should have known better."

I stroke her hair and cling to her tightly. "Darling, your hormones are all over the place. You're going to be feeling all kinds of things. I am shocked you kept this from me for so long."

She shoots up, looking me in the eyes. "I wanted to tell you *sooo* many times. We never keep anything from each other. So hiding this from you felt like torture."

My stomach twists in knots.

I should tell her.

Now is the *exact* right time.

We're talking about being open and honest.

This feels like a betrayal if I don't tell her right now.

But...

... if I tell Novah this news right now, it could send her over the edge.

She needs to concentrate on those two gorgeous babies.

She needs to keep her strength for herself and those kids.

She should *not* be worrying about me.

"Don't you worry about that. I completely understand waiting to tell people until the second trimester, darling. It's the safest thing to do, especially with the complications your body has been through. Have you been to the doctor and had everything checked?"

"Yeah, they think the scarring from the serial killer might cause some discomfort as my body stretches with the size of the twins, but all my internals should be able to cope.

Depending on how big they get and how uncomfortable I get, we might have to do an early cesarean and have the twins in the NICU.”

“Right! So we will cross that bridge when we come to it. The main thing now is for you to grow those two little babies, and then when the time comes, we will all rally around and help in any way you need us to.”

“Mom?” Novah’s voice is weak as she looks up at me.

“Yes, darling?”

“Thanks for being here. I don’t know if I could do any of this without you.”

My stomach flips just thinking about tomorrow and the outcome. I don’t know what the severity of the results will be, but I do know I have so much to live for. I have two new grandbabies to meet. So I can’t let tomorrow or whatever comes keep me down.

“You won’t ever have to.” I embrace her again as footsteps draw my attention, and I turn to Bayou and Hoodoo, stepping into the bathroom.

Hoodoo glances down at Novah, and he raises a brow at me. “I’m guessing you know?”

Smiling, I chuckle. “How long have you known?”

He shrugs. “I’m the club medic. I’ve been treating Novah’s morning sickness since it started around her six-week mark.”

Snorting out a laugh, I sigh. “Figures.” I glance up at my stepson, Bayou, with a warm smile. “Congratulations, Daddy.”

He kneels on the floor beside me, and I pull him into a tight embrace. “I am so proud of you both,” I whisper.

Bayou moves beside Novah, pulling her to him. “She’s doing all the hard work. I fucking hate seeing her sick like this.”

“It’ll be worth it.” She nuzzles into his chest, finding her safe haven.

“Yeah, it will. But in the meantime, Hoodoo, can you give her something for the nausea?” Bayou asks.

Hoodoo places his medkit on the floor beside us and nods. “You still feeling queasy?”

Novah nods. “Absolutely, and a little dizzy.”

“All right. I’m gonna give you something to hopefully stop your tummy from turning. But I’m gonna need you to drink some Hydralyte to help with your electrolytes and hydration. Can you do that for me?”

Novah nods, and Hoodoo goes about getting the meds ready for her while I sit back, wondering how much my life is going to change in the next few weeks. What if the lump is the worst-case scenario? What if it is as bad as it gets? What if I am not even around in the next five months to see my grandbabies enter the world?

My eyes begin to water, and I have to blink them rapidly to stop my tears from falling. Clearing my throat, I move to stand, allowing Hoodoo to do whatever he needs while I hang back out of the way. Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to stop my racing thoughts from running away with me.

I need to stay here.

In this moment.

And not focus on *what-ifs*.

Because that shit spirals out of control.

Hoodoo stands beside me, his eyes watching me casually as Bayou and Novah sit together on the bathroom floor.

“Okay, well... I’m going to head off. I think I’ll go to The Plantation to see Maxxy, but if y’all need me for anything, you just give me a call, okay?” Hoodoo states, heading for the door.

I glance down at Novah and Bayou and smile at them. “Hoodoo, I’ll walk you out.” I gesture that I’ll be back in a minute and turn to walk out of their room.

Hoodoo looks me up and down. “You doing okay, Ingrid? You look a little... *off*.”

We reach the door and step outside into the hall, and I make sure to close the door behind us so Novah and Bayou can't hear. “Actually, I wanted to pick your brain about something... for a friend.”

“Okay... shoot.” He leans his shoulder against the wall, folding his arms over his chest.

“So, this friend... she went and had a mammogram. They found a shadow. She has to go back for a biopsy, but I'm wondering what she needs to look out for?”

He narrows his eyes on me and stands taller like he can see right through my ‘friend’ act. “Well, your ‘friend’ should get the biopsy as soon as possible. Early detection is key.”

“She is, she's going real soon.”

He nods. “Okay, good. In that case, they will check for certain cells. If they find anything suspicious, they will remove the lump with margins to ensure they have cleared it all. But there are times when a mastectomy may be needed if they find more than one lump or if the lump is too big.”

They explained all this to me at the screening suites, but I don't think it actually sunk in. And hearing it for a second time is making it feel fucking real. “And if they remove the lump, or even the breast in its entirety, then that's all good, right?”

Hoodoo grimaces. “Maybe. Depends on the pathology of the cells, the margins, and whether the cells have spread. If, when they do the scans, it has spread to the lymph nodes, well, it will require more extensive treatments... and possibly a different outcome. It's all variable.”

My bottom lip trembles, and I plaster on a fake smile. “Thank you, Hoodoo.”

His sad eyes look me over, and he reaches out, gripping my arm. “If you need someone to talk to, you know you can confide in me confidentially.”

Sniffing, I wipe a tear that falls down my face and clear my throat. “I’m fine. I have to be. I have grandbabies coming.”

He exhales, tightening his grip on me. “Does Hurricane know your diagnosis?”

He’s not beating around the bush anymore.

I shake my head. “Only you and South know. And I want to keep it that way. With Novah and the babies, the Bratva and the Baroness, there are too many things going on for my kids to worry about right now. I don’t need them concerned until I know what I’m dealing with myself.”

Hoodoo rubs the back of his neck. “When’s the biopsy?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Someone going with you? You’ll be too sore to drive on your own.”

Nodding, I exhale. “I have South taking me. He was going to tail me, but I will have him drive me there.”

“Good idea. I want you to keep me in the loop. I’m not going to tell anyone, but I want to be able to help you should you need it.”

I reach out, wrapping my arms around his large body, and hold tight. “Thanks, Hoodoo. I appreciate this.”

“We all love you, Ingrid. You’re gonna get through this.”

I pull back and weakly smile. “I better get back in there, or they’ll think we’re having an affair.”

Hoodoo chuckles. “An affair with a younger man, Ingrid? You would never,” he jokes, turning and walking off.

My mind instantly goes straight to South—a *much* younger man.

The idea of having something with South is both tantalizing and terrifying.

But I can’t think about him right now.

I have to be with Novah and celebrate the wins while we have them.

I'm going to be a grandmother *again*.

And I can't fucking wait to meet these little angels.

Now, I have to make sure I *am* here to meet them.

Positive thinking, Ingrid. Positive thinking.

CHAPTER FIVE

South

The Next Day

My foot taps anxiously as I sit in the waiting room while Ingrid has her biopsy. I wanted to go in with her, hold her hand, and be the support she needs right now. But to keep everything sterile, I wasn't allowed. And doing what's best for her, I will sit back and wait—even if it's fucking killing me.

My stomach rolls, thinking back to the first time I met Ingrid, the first time she placed her hand on my face.

Ingrid changed my life that day.

A day when I felt like my life wasn't worth anything.

Like I didn't matter.

And with one simple look, this incredible woman made me feel like maybe I could be something—be someone.

Panting rapidly, the anger seeps through my veins like a rabid beast, but the pain is eating at my soul.

As I lash out again at the cause of my unending pain—my sister—Ingrid steps in and places her hand on my face, forcing me to look at her.

“Rome, look at me,” she urges calmly.

Her tone is so soothing I have no choice but to exhale, slowly placing the trophy down. Our eyes lock, and somehow, this older woman feels more like home to me than the people I call my family.

Ingrid nods with a small smile. “You’re okay. You’re going to be okay... I promise.”

I can't help but stare at her. She's the only person who has ever shown any type of care for me... ever. I don't know why she put herself out there for me, but the connection to her was instant. And I knew the bond was going to last a lifetime.

It may not be now, but I will see her again.

Somehow, I will make that happen.

"It's okay to be different, Romeo. And if you want to, you can be anything you want to be. Don't let anyone push you in a direction you don't want. You're old enough... take charge of your life, okay?"

Her words sink into my soul.

Deep, deep down.

My father wants me to follow in his footsteps and be a musician.

But I know when the time comes, I will find a way to join Defiance MC. Somehow, someday, I'll find my way back to her.

I don't know in what way, but I know this woman will have a major impact on my life, and I will stop at nothing to ensure I let her know how much she means to me.

Some might think I was a young kid with a crush that's become an obsession. It's not that at all. If it were, I would have joined NOLA Defiance instead of LA. I've lived my life, I've had girlfriends, I've fucked my way around California, Lord knows I have. But it's more about this intense connection I feel with Ingrid. She changed something in me that day. She made me believe in myself when I had nothing left in the tank. She made me want to fight for a life I was ready to give up on. She made me see there were other options.

A simple course correction.

One where *I* could stand up for what *I* want, not what my parents think I *should* be.

Did they hate the choices I made in the following years?
Fuck yeah. But they were mine.

They weren't dictated to me, and goddamn, it felt good.

In some ways, it only made my relationship with Arabella, my sister, closer. Don't ask me how that happened. Maybe because she stopped seeing me as her competition and started seeing me as her brother.

I glance to the door where they took Ingrid, seeing no movement, and decide I need to take a moment. As I stand and walk for the door, I pull out my cell, hit my sister's number, and lean against the outside brick wall, taking in the springtime air. The phone rings a few times, then I hear music chiming down the line and the sounds of Bella talking in the distance like she's yelling instructions to one of her workers.

I smirk, she's constantly busy, but Arabella will always make time for me. *Funny how things change over time.* The phone unmuffles, and she exhales like she's finally taking a moment. "I'm so sorry, I'm here. Hi Romeo. I miss you. When are you coming home?"

I roll my eyes with a small laugh. "I only just left LA. Surely you can't be missing me already?"

She groans. "You're literally the only sane person I know in LA. Everyone else is hyped up on Vicodin or Zoloft, or Vicodin with Zoloft, and don't forget the alcohol on top of that."

I tilt my head because, in the music business, she's probably underselling this right now. "You sound stressed."

She snorts out a laugh. "I had a big-ticket act who has a sold-out concert in three days at SoFi Stadium tell me this morning that they'll have to cancel because they've just come down with COVID. So, yeah... *that's* how *my* day is going."

"Ahh... the life of a booking agent. I'm sorry, Bells. I know how much work that means for you."

She exhales, letting out a huff like she's slumped down into a seat. "It's fine... it's all part of the job and the world we now live in, so I guess I have to prepare for these scenarios.

Anyway, enough about my bullshit, how are you liking New Orleans?”

I glance through the window behind me to ensure Ingrid hasn't come out. There's no sign of her, so I turn back, resting against the wall. “It's great. The guys are so fucking welcoming, and the rest of the club are good people. Honestly... it's been an easy transition.”

“I'm glad you've found your feet. How long is the transfer for? Please tell me it's only short term?”

I roll my shoulders. “I'm not sure exactly. It depends on when they can find a couple of new prospects to fill Jesse's place. Once he patches in, then two prospects will fill Jesse's position, and they should all be good. Then I can return to LA.”

Bella hums. “So you're saying this could take a while?”

“It could... yeah. But if you need me, I can pop back for a weekend. Just let me know.”

She's quiet for a moment, then she sighs. “Are you living your best life, Romeo?” she asks, surprising me.

I glance over my shoulder, looking for Ingrid again. There's still no sign, but I can't help smiling when I think about her. “Yeah, Bells, I am.”

“Then stay and be happy. Defiance is all you've ever wanted, and getting away from Mom and Dad was big for you too. You've done that now, and I am so proud of you... even if you *are* a criminal.”

I snort out a laugh. “Hey, you're only a criminal if you get caught.”

She giggles. “Then, Romeo... don't get caught, okay?”

“Wouldn't dream of it. Can't bring the famous North family name into disrepute now, can I?”

“I love you, little brother.”

“Love you too. Don't work too hard. Stress is a killer.”

She laughs. “So are booze and cigarettes.”

“Well, thank fuck you didn’t say bacon because my life would be over.”

“Hate to tell you this—”

“I’m not listening,” I interrupt her. “Hanging up now.”

She laughs. “Talk to you soon.”

“Later,” I reply, then end the call.

Letting out a heavy exhale, I slide my cell back into my pocket and turn to walk inside. The door to Ingrid’s room opens, and my eyes widen. I jerk the door open, rushing inside to get to her as she slowly walks up to the reception counter.

Briskly, I walk over and gently place my hand on her back for comfort. “You okay?”

She weakly smiles and nods as the nurse hands her some pamphlets.

“We will be in contact with the results within two weeks. Ensure you ice the site for ten to fifteen minutes several times over the next forty-eight hours. No heavy lifting, and try to rest as much as possible. Also, I suggest wearing a bra to bed if you can for the next night or two to keep the site supported.”

Ingrid nods, taking the pamphlets from her outstretched hand. “Thank you. Appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

The nurse gently touches Ingrid’s arm. “It’s what we’re here for... we’ll be in touch soon. Rest up.”

Ingrid dips her head and then turns to me. “Can you take me back to my place? I don’t think I can take the noise of the clubhouse at the moment.”

I wrap my arm around Ingrid’s body to support her and then help walk her to the door. “Whatever you need. Remember, I got you, angel.”

We walk to the car, and I open the door, helping her slide into the passenger seat. She winces, and I clench at seeing her in pain—pain I wish I could take away. Quickly, I jump into the driver’s side and start the car. “Let’s get you home.”

Ingrid nods, leans back on the seat, and closes her eyes. She lets out a long breath, and I reach out, sliding my hand into hers, giving her the comfort she obviously needs right now. This brave woman doesn't fight me. Instead, she grips me tight, her fingers intertwining with mine as I start the car and we head for her home.

I let her rest, not saying a single word the entire ride home, even though there is so much I want to say, want to know. But right now, I want her to be calm in the moment.

She will talk to me when she's ready.

Pulling into her driveway, I turn off the engine, and Ingrid's eyes don't make any movements—perhaps she is asleep. Slowly, I unhook our hands and unbuckle my belt, quietly sliding out of the car. I rush around the car and bend inside, sliding off her belt. Then I grab her bag, reach for her keys, and walk to the front door.

I place her bag on the counter just inside the door, then turn back to grab Ingrid. She's still passed out in the car, so I duck in and slowly scoop her into my arms. Ingrid murmurs, slowly waking, her arms sliding around my neck and gripping tight. "South?" she whispers against my chest.

"Just relax. I'll get you inside," I tell her.

She cuddles into me as I kick the car door closed, then walk inside.

This home—it's exactly how I pictured it to be.

Neat.

Stylish.

Exactly her.

I nudge the front door closed with my foot and walk Ingrid to the soft-looking sofa, gently laying her down, then pull off her shoes. Grabbing the lap throw, I place it over her body to keep her comfortable. She snuggles, her eyes remaining closed while I take a deep breath, wondering if I should leave, but I don't want to leave her alone.

Dinner! I'll make dinner. So I walk into the kitchen, having no fucking clue what she has in her kitchen or what the hell I'm going to make, but if this is something I can take off her hands for the night, then I'm going to do that for her.

Moving around the kitchen, I try to familiarize myself with everything. I glance in the refrigerator, gather some items, then move to the pantry and pick up a few more. I think I can get to work making a simple lasagna from scratch with what I have.

It will keep me busy for a while, so I get to work while she's sleeping it off. I get lost making the recipe I used to watch my grandmother make for me and Arabella every weekend until she passed.

We would help her, and it's literally the only thing I know how to cook.

Moving about her kitchen, the smell of garlic and onion filtering through her house reminds me of my childhood with my nonna. The one and only person I could turn to growing up who didn't have an agenda for my life. When she died, it made life that much harder. I got angrier at the world, and I think that's when my 'switch' activated.

It doesn't happen often, but if something sets me off, I can get angry fucking fast. It's why my brothers in LA called me South, because shit can go south in an instant, and it's also a play on my surname, North.

It usually takes a while and something substantial for me to snap. And generally, it's when it triggers something emotional inside me. But I don't need to be thinking about all that right now. I have something, no someone, I need to focus on.

Once I place the finished lasagna in the oven, I make us a coffee, then grab an ice pack from the freezer, wrap it in a dishtowel, and head to the living room. Ingrid is still out cold, and I smile while looking at her beautiful form, then place the coffee on the table.

I softly rest my hand on her arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Ingrid?" I whisper.

She murmurs, her long lashes slowly blinking as she wakes. When she realizes it's me, she inhales sharply and goes to move, but I stop her.

"Hey, it's okay. Take your time, you're recovering."

Ingrid slowly sits up, glancing over her shoulder to the kitchen. "What's that smell?"

"I made lasagna..." I hand the ice pack to her. "Here, put this on your wound. They said to put an ice pack on a few times over the next forty-eight hours, remember?"

Her brows crease, and she cautiously places the pack on her breast. "You made lasagna, *and* you remembered about the ice pack?"

Chuckling, I shrug. "Man of many talents."

"I'm beginning to see that." She gently eases into a sitting position as she studies me. "How does a biker know how to make lasagna and have it smelling *that* good?"

I slide onto the sofa next to her and relax. "You can thank my nonna for that."

She raises her brow. "You're Italian?"

"Half. On my mother's side. Though, the heritage was instilled through the family growing up."

She makes herself comfortable and faces me. Her feet are beside me, so I lift and bring them to my lap and begin rubbing each foot. She smiles, and I'm pleased she doesn't make a move to stop me.

"You grew up in LA?" she asks.

"I did. Spent my life there, though I always had this pull to want to see other places. My father has been around the world for his job, and he'd tell me about all the places he's been, all the things he's seen. I think that's why when the position came up for me to transfer to New Orleans, I took it. You know... a chance for me to see something new."

Ingrid narrows her eyes on me like she's trying to put the pieces together. "And do you have siblings?"

I nod. “An older sister.”

“What made you want to join Defiance?”

My breathing stops as I look at her, wondering how to play this next move. “Someone told me once that I could be anything I wanted to be, do anything I wanted to do. That I should stop living under the shadow of my family. I took her advice.”

Ingrid’s eyes widen, and her mouth drops open as she slowly pulls her feet from my grip. She sits up taller, staring at me so intensely it’s like she’s trying so hard to see me, really see me. I can see the cogs turning in her mind as she puts the pieces together while my heart rapidly fires in my chest, waiting for her to say something.

Anything.

“What’s your name? Your *real* name, South?” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

My eyes meet hers, and I exhale. “Romeo... Romeo North.”

Her mouth drops open as she pulls away from me like she can’t believe what she hears.

Not ideal.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Rome? I would have *never* recognized you. Did you know all this time, who I was?”

Dropping my chin, I let out a heavy sigh. “Yes... I did.”

She scoffs out a laugh and stands, then starts pacing. “Why on earth didn’t you tell me?”

Standing, I walk over and reach out, grabbing her arm to stop her from pacing. “I don’t know. I didn’t want you thinking I came to NOLA because of yo—”

“Did you?”

“No. There was an opportunity to see another city, and I took it. You being here is an added bonus.”

She turns from my grip and begins pacing again. “Jesus, Rome. You hid this from me because you know how bad this is.”

“We haven’t done anything wrong, Ingrid. All I’ve done is take care of you when you’ve needed me.”

She snaps her head around, glaring at me. “You’re my dead husband’s best friend’s son. Tell me again how we haven’t done anything wrong?”

With a sigh, I reach for her hands and hold them tight. “Ingrid, *we* haven’t done *anything* at all.”

“How you’re looking at me right now tells me differently.” She drops her hands from mine. “I need you to leave.”

My chest squeezes with tension as I try to fight the urge to race forward and fucking kiss her.

Show her that it’s going to be fine.

But I don’t.

I’ll give her what she needs.

I won’t have Ingrid uncomfortable in her own home.

“I’m gonna go because I don’t want to stress you out. But I need you to keep icing your breast every few hours. The lasagna should be ready in about twenty minutes, and there’ll be enough for a couple of meals. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I should have. I just... I just didn’t want you to see me as that weak little boy anymore.”

She slumps her shoulders as I turn to leave. “You were *never* weak, Rome,” she urges as I head for the door.

But she is wrong.

So fucking wrong.

Because I feel weak as fuck right now.

If I were a *real man*, I would stay.

Demand that I look after her.

But my position at the club is at hand, and if I anger Hurricane for any reason, I’ll be on the road back to LA before

I know what's happening.

"Take care of yourself, angel." I pull the door open and step out, but her hand on my back startles me.

"Romeo, just for the record... I don't see you as that little boy anymore. You've grown into an amazing strong man, and while you may be twenty-eight years younger than me, the age gap doesn't feel so huge when I'm alone with you."

My eyes meet hers. "The thing is, Ingrid, I don't notice the age gap at all. I see you... just as you are. Your age... my age, it doesn't matter. I like you as a woman, not as a number."

"This can't possibly work between us, Rome. There's history here. You know Novah and Nash, I'm surprised Novah hasn't put two and two together. And the fact is, while there is *no doubt* there's chemistry, you're younger than my youngest child. It's *wrong* on so many levels."

I spin, my eyes hard on hers as I pace forward. Ingrid backs up against the wall, and I bring my hand up, my fists on either side of her body, encasing her in. Her hand flies up, pressing against my chest as my breaths come hard while I try to keep calm. "If it's so wrong, then why does *every* part of me feel so *fucking* right when I'm with you?"

Her body slumps, her fingers gripping tight to my club cut like she wants to pull me closer but is fighting the urge. "South... *please*, don't."

A low growl reverbs from my chest, anger flaring inside me as I slam my fist into the plasterboard beside her head. Then I push off and go to storm out, but she reaches out, grabbing my cut. I turn back, the desperation clear in Ingrid's eyes. Her hand slides up into my long hair, and I don't have a second to grasp what's happening before she pulls me forward.

Her lips smash against mine, my eyes widening with shock as her tongue enters my mouth. My lips tingle, and I am burning with fire as my hands slide down around her ass, pulling her body tight against mine. I moan into her mouth, kissing her like there is no tomorrow.

Needing her.

Wanting her.

Devouring her.

I want to be primal.

Show her that I have grown into the man she knows me as now.

But she's recovering, so I'm trying to be as gentle as possible while still letting her know the effect she is having on me. My cock grows so fucking hard I can barely function as I grind it against her. Ingrid whimpers into my mouth as I press her back against the wall, my mouth leaving hers and trailing kisses down her neck. Her hands slide under my shirt, her nails digging into my skin.

I growl animalistically. This woman has no idea how fucking crazy she's making me.

My lips trail down over her collarbone to her chest. She's panting frantically as I make my way to her breast and slow down, remembering what she's had done today.

I place a tender kiss over the bandage, letting her know that what she's going through changes nothing for me.

I hear her sniffing.

I glance up to tears in her eyes.

So I pull back, my hand instantly moving to her face and cradling her, wiping away her tears. "Fuck! Did I hurt you?" I whisper.

Her breathing is coming in short and sharp bursts. "No! You're perfect. I just... this is too much... with the biopsy, and now you... it's too much at once. It's a lot, Rome. This... *us*... it's not simple, it's not easy, and while that was the best kiss I have *ever* had, it's also the absolute scariest. Fuck! My kids could disown me. The club could punish you... it's too damn risky. God, Hurricane might kill you for all I know."

Letting out a heavy sigh, I nod.

Because...

... she is right.

It is high stakes.

But Ingrid is worth it.

“If Hurricane wants to kill me, I’m okay with that.”

She lets out a small laugh. “Well, I certainly am not. We need to cool this. I like you, South. I can’t deny that anymore. But this... us... it only ends one way, and that’s probably with you dead. I couldn’t live with myself knowing I’d caused that.”

As I look into her gorgeous emerald-green eyes, my shoulders slump. “So... that’s it then?”

“I think you should go.” She takes a step to the side.

Rubbing the back of my neck, the tension in my body is getting tighter.

I don’t want to leave.

But I won’t stay if she doesn’t want me here.

So what choice do I have?

Spinning on my heels, I head for the door, my feet pounding the floor. “Don’t forget to ice,” I call out to her.

“Thank you... for taking such good care of me.”

I glance over my shoulder. “My pleasure. I’ll see ya ’round.” Then, I start the journey back to the clubhouse with an ache in my chest and a knot in my stomach.

I’ve waited for a fucking eternity to kiss Ingrid, and as quickly as the opportunity came, it’s snatched back out from under me.

I get it.

I do.

But it doesn’t mean I have to like it.

Because I don’t.

I fucking detest it.

CHAPTER SIX

South

My feet hurt from walking back to the clubhouse, but the fresh air has done me good.

Given me time to think.

While Ingrid can't see that we would be good for each other right now, I need to show her that, despite the odds, we could be.

I just don't know how to do that.

For now, I will give her the time she needs to wrap her head around this because she has a lot going on. I want her to know I will be there to support her in whatever capacity that may be.

In the immediate future, though, I need to focus on the club. Keep my head in the game because I am the newbie, and Hurricane is my president first and foremost. I have got to make an impression on him to ensure I can stay for as long as possible.

That kiss, though.

Shaking my head from the amazing memory, I try to wipe the smile from my face as I walk into the clubhouse. Everyone is going about their usual shit, barely even noticing me. I spot Hurricane sitting with Bayou. His daughter, Immy, is on his lap giving him daddy snuggles.

I must admit, seeing Hurricane with his daughter shows a side of him I'm not sure the rest of us thought we'd ever see. One thing is for sure, he's a good father.

Walking over, I stand in front of the twins, who glance up at me. I bob my head in acknowledgment as Hurricane glances

around like he's looking for his stepmother. "Where's Ingrid?" he asks, confirming my suspicions.

"Dropped her back at her place. She was tired after her appointment. So I got some dinner sorted and then walked back here."

Hurricane raises his brow in curiosity. "Did her appointment *not* go to plan? Somethin' I should be concerned about?"

Shaking my head, I wave him off. "Nah, she's all good. She said she didn't sleep well last night and is tired today. Wanted to get some rest this afternoon. She's fine, no need to worry."

"Why's she not sleepin'? Do I need to go 'round there and check up on her?" Hurricane asks.

Bayou snorts out a laugh, slapping his brother on the shoulder. "Leave her alone, asshole. You hover too much. Everyone has a bad night's sleep. Doesn't mean shit. And if she needs some rest, then you going over there bossing her around is only gonna make her more tired," Bayou chides.

I smirk because Bayou is more sensible than he realizes, and he's saved our asses. Because if Hurricane went over there and found out what Ingrid did today—why she needs to rest—he would blow a fuse.

"Fine, I'll stay here with my seven-month-old. At least she doesn't mind me fussin' over her, right, little *cheri*?" he asks Immy, to which she promptly replies by slapping her tiny hand into his bearded chin, accompanied by a belly giggle.

Bayou smiles, leaning in and gently caressing Immy's cheek. "Uncle Bayou thinks you have your daddy wrapped around your little finger. Yes, he does. Yes, he does," he says in a baby voice.

I snort out a laugh while Hurricane grunts under his breath. "Just wait till you have kids."

Bayou widens his eyes, rubbing his beard like he's suddenly uncomfortable. "Ahh... about that."

I snap my head to him at the same time Hurricane does. We both stare, but Hurricane is the first to talk. “There somethin’ you wanna tell me, brother?”

Bayou shrugs. “We probably should have gone about this differently. Called a family meeting or whatever. But Novah told Ingrid already, and this has come up now, and I can’t fucking lie to you any—”

“Is Novah pregnant?” Hurricane blurts out.

“Yeah! We’re having twins.”

Hurricane lets out a small laugh. “Holy fuckin’ shit. If you know that it’s twins, then you’ve been keepin’ this from me for a while. Who else knows?”

“Hoodoo’s known the whole time. He’s been keeping Novah healthy. And Ingrid found out yesterday. That’s all.”

“Nash?” Hurricane asks.

“Not yet. Like I said, we should have done this differently. A family meeting or whatever, but... here we are.”

Hurricane stands abruptly, hoisting Immy onto his hip with one hand, grabbing Bayou by his cut, and lifting him off the seat with the other. I widen my eyes as they go to walk off. I’m unsure if I am meant to follow, so I call out, “Congrats, Bayou.”

Hurricane turns, raising his brow. “Thanks for takin’ care of Ingrid. I gotta go talk to Novah, but seein’ as you and Ingrid are gettin’ along, can I leave you in charge of takin’ care of her? Takin’ her to any appointments and whatever else she needs?”

“Yeah, of course. Whatever Ingrid needs,” I reply.

Hurricane dips his chin, then takes off, Bayou chuckling beside him as they rush to find their stepsister. Rolling my shoulders, I let out a long breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Was I worried he would see right through me?

That he would know I made out with the woman he looks at like the only real mother he has ever known, and that same

woman ignites my world in a way that's never been explored before.

I'm not sure.

The only thing I am sure of? My feelings for Ingrid are real.

They have been for some time.

And they grow every time I am with her.

After today, after that kiss, I know she feels something for me too. There's no denying the chemistry I felt oozing back from her.

But I can't think about that right now.

I need her to focus on her recovery.

I need to concentrate on the club.

Making connections.

Being a part of this place.

I can't spend all my time with Ingrid because I need to mesh with my brothers.

I make my way over to the bar to where Jesse, the prospect, is sitting with his sister, Clover, and they're chatting with Raid and his Old Lady, Frankie.

With a warm smile, I say, "Hey guys," as I approach.

They all glance up. "Hey, man... you been missing in action all day. Where you been?" Jesse asks.

Raid snorts, shoving him in the shoulder. "Shut up, prospect. That's none of your damn business."

I chuckle, waving him off. "Nah, it's cool, brother. I was out with Ingrid. She had an appointment, and Pres wanted me to go as her tail. Drove her there, then walked back to the clubhouse."

Clover shakes her head. "They do have Uber here, you know?"

"Clo, don't be a smart-ass," Jesse berates his little sister.

Tilting my head, I exhale. “Yeah, I thought about it, but the fresh air was good. Plus, I came here to see New Orleans, and what better way than to walk the streets and take in the sights?”

“Yeah, and get mugged on your way for good measure. Some parts you must have been walking would have been in a pretty shitty neighborhood. South, you should make sure you have backup if you’re gonna walk around like that,” Frankie states.

“I had my piece with me, and I wasn’t dawdling. But I’ll take that advice on. Thanks, Franks.”

“So, how are you liking the Big Easy?” Jesse asks as Jaz pours me a drink from behind the bar and slides it my way.

I give her a wink. “Thanks, Jaz. As for New Orleans, you guys are great. The city is incredible... what’s not to like?”

Raid lets out a laugh. “I dunno, maybe the Russian Bratva. Or the fucking Baroness dropping by unannounced all the damn time, throwing her weight around. And don’t even get me started on the cops and how bad they have it in for us. Need me to keep going?”

“Sounds like *you* have a problem with New Orleans, Raid?”

Frankie cuddles into his side and shakes her head. “He loves it here. He does. He gets stressed because the security and tech falls on him.”

“But you’re so damn good at it,” I tell him, and he shrugs.

“Most of the time. It’s when shit slips by me that it gets to me.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, babe,” Frankie comforts.

“Yeah, man, we’d be fucked without you,” Jesse reaffirms.

“This club is bigger than one person. You’d all get by without me, but that’s not going to happen any time soon, God willing,” Raid states.

“Fuck, don’t put that jinx on yourself, babe. Too many people love and need you. Not just the club... me, Addi... we

love you, we need you. So don't go doing anything heroic because you're tired!" The tension in Frankie's tone is clear as she holds onto her Old Man.

Raid needs help, but I don't know how to do that. Somehow, I will try to find a way to make his life easier while I am here.

He softly kisses Frankie's cheek, and he smiles at her. "I'm fine. You and Addi are my life. I'm not gonna mess that up... I need a second to breathe, but I can't do that now. The club needs me. Once all this shit dies down, maybe we can take a vacation. Somewhere nice... somewhere with a beach, where you can sit on the edge of the water writing, Addi can swim in the ocean, and I can rest back and sleep in the sun."

Frankie sighs with the brightest smile. "Sounds like heaven. It'll happen. We just have to bide our time."

"Addi will love the beach. She's been wanting to go for so long. She talks about it all the time," Clover states with a smile.

Raid nods. "Yeah, I know. She's such a good kid and doesn't have a normal life here. So if I can give her one normal thing when this all settles down, I want to be able to do that for her."

"You're a good father, Raid. You stepped up when everything happened with her mom. You didn't have to do that. Addi and I talk a lot, and you have no idea how much she adores you. She loves you more than I think she lets you know," Clover tells him.

Raid's face lights up like those words have given him the boost of confidence he was clearly lacking. He sits taller and lets out a long breath of air. "Thanks, Clover. It means a lot that you have taken her under your wing while you're here. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. You're a good kid."

Jesse smiles at his little sister.

"You guys took us in when you didn't have to. The least we can do is help y'all when we have the opportunity to. Plus, I love it here. This is the home I was always meant to have.

Growing up was hard because Dad left when I was really young. I barely remember him now, and it was tough for our mom because I am sick with my diabetes. Poor Mom had to work so much to pay for all my medical bills... then when she passed, and it was up to Jesse to take care of me... I felt really useless. But at least here, I feel like I can contribute a little, whether it's helping the girls with the cooking and cleaning or hanging out with Addi. It's nice to feel like I am part of something. Part of a real family, you know?"

I get that. The thing about NOLA Defiance is they have a way of making you instantly feel like you belong. Not that LA doesn't have that feeling too. But Alpha, the president, tends to shut himself off, and sometimes it can make it feel like there's a bit of a disconnect between the ranks in the club. I think that's the difference between NOLA and LA. I mean, Alpha sure as hell has his reasons. No one is disputing that. The man's been through some shit. But maybe being removed from your club isn't the best way to be a president, and that is why he's lost three of his members to NOLA in the past few years.

"Can I ask, and you can tell me to fuck off because it is none of my business, and I am nosey as fuck, but... what happened with your father?" Frankie asks Jesse.

Clover tilts her head, looking at Jesse like she's curious about how he will answer this question.

He exhales, rubbing the back of his neck. "I was young when he left, so I don't remember much. But from what my mother has told me, my older sister was taken... kidnapped... my father couldn't handle the police investigation."

Jesse rolls his shoulders like there's clear tension surging through them. "They weren't going about it in the right ways or moving fast enough, so Mom said he went to find her himself. She said he had a lead and was following it down. She was hopeful he would get our sister back. He rang Mom and told her he was going in to pick up our sister, then Mom never heard from him again. Mom told the police what had happened, but they said because they had no idea where he was or who he was chasing after, they had no leads to search

for him. The trail went cold. So we lost my sister and my father.”

He exhales, shaking his head. “Mom was never the same. She tried, but she was always a little withdrawn from the world. I think knowing all this is why when the opportunity came to join the club, I took it. Maybe I will start looking into my sister and father’s disappearance... one day.”

I grip Jesse’s shoulder as Raid and Frankie both let out a long breath. “That’s a lot, brother... if there’s anything you want me to look into, I’m more than happy to help in any way I can,” I tell him.

Raid dips his chin. “I can try running some searches to see what I can dig up. I just need their names. If you have birthdates, it will make it easier.”

Jesse smiles, shaking his head. “Thanks, guys. And Raid, while I appreciate it, you need to focus on the club and get as much downtime as possible. I don’t want to add to your already heaped pile of work. You need a goal, and that goal is the beach vacation. You don’t need my shit adding time to your vacation waitlist. It’s been years of me wondering what happened to my family, so a little longer isn’t going to hurt. We can wait, can’t we, Clo?”

Clover nods. “Yeah, honestly, at this point, maybe not knowing is better than finding out what actually happened.”

“Well, in any case, when you’re ready, you have the whole club backing you. Whatever you need,” I tell him. Even though I’m new here, I know what I’m saying is true.

Raid dips his chin in agreement. “Absolutely, brother. Let us know when you’re ready to start digging, and we’ll get the ball rolling.”

“Appreciate that more than y’all know,” Jesse relays, then he turns to face Jaz. “Can I have another beer? I think I need it after all that.”

She chuckles and starts pouring, then slides it across the bar. He raises his glass and exhales. “I know I’m only a

prospect, but thanks for treating me like I belong here. It's been so fucking great to feel so welcome."

I tilt my head in acknowledgment because I know exactly how he's feeling. "These brothers sure know how to make the newcomers feel like a part of the furniture," I state, and Raid smirks.

"You step through those doors as a brother, you're instantly family. That's how we roll. So the both of you coming here, joining us, it was meant to be. You're here for a reason, and having you improves the club."

Jesse raises his glass, and Raid and I bring ours up to clink with his. We all 'cheer' in celebration and then have a long drink as Clover and Frankie smile.

I have to admit, coming to NOLA was a gamble. Knowing Ingrid was a risk, one I hope might pay off, but being welcomed by the brothers is something else. I could get used to this. It's hard to imagine leaving. Though I know my time here is finite, I have to ensure to make every moment count.

Every celebration worth remembering.

Every talk and connection with these guys is significant.

Because it's not going to last forever.

I *will* have to go back to LA when my time is done.

I hope I can stay for a little while longer.

Because I'm not ready to give this or Ingrid up just yet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ingrid

Two Days Later

My lips still feel like they're tingling. The sensation of South's lips on mine hasn't left since the moment he kissed me. The revelation that he's the same young teen I felt that connection with all those years ago makes me question everything about myself.

I was a happily married woman back then.

And there was absolutely no way, when he was fifteen, I had any kind of attraction to him.

But I had felt a need to protect him from Angus and Lucia.

There was so much pain in his eyes.

And all I wanted was to let him know he didn't have to be what *they* wanted him to be.

In this world, I believe children should grow up to be whoever they want, not what their parents force on them. And I saw that with Romeo. I merely wanted him to know he had the power to choose his life. And in a way, I am glad I was able to help him see he had a choice to step out from under Angus' domineering path. Because the Lord knows that man was no good for him.

I still have no clue why Reaper was best friends with him. I loved that man, but some of his decisions were questionable. He was a good father and stepfather to Novah and Nash. And he led the club well while grooming Hurricane to be the next leader.

Deep down, Reaper was a good man, and when he died, a part of me died along with him.

That will *never* change.

But there's something about South that makes me feel like he could bring that part of me back to life.

I think that's what scares me the most.

I thought I was done.

I had two loves in my life.

Both of them turned out incredibly bad in two different ways.

The first—the asshole left me for another family.

The second—he died.

So, I gave up hope of ever finding 'that someone' to share my life with again.

I never thought for a single second it could be with a much younger man and one whom I had already met when he was a teenager. I mean, it's complicated, right?

But when I look at South now, he's not that teenager anymore—he's nothing like him—South is all man with his long hair, beard, muscular body, and tattoos on every surface I can see. The guy could pass for Jason Momoa at a quick glance.

He's probably the single sexiest man I've ever had the privilege of kissing. And I can tell you, the way my body reacted when he kissed me, I mean, I know I'd just been through something, and maybe my emotions were heightened, but that kiss was *epic*.

I have never been so overwhelmed in all my life.

Needless to say, the emotions got on top of me, and I had to kick him out. I needed time to process after I found out who he was—*who he is*. He knew who I was all along, and he said nothing. I don't know how that sits with me.

This whole thing has been messing with my head. Which, in a way, is a good thing because it's distracting me from the other very real problem playing out in my life right now.

As I pull the ice pack from my breast, I lean back onto the sofa and let out a heavy sigh. “What are you doing with your life, Ingrid?” I murmur as my cell alerts me to an incoming text.

Tossing the ice pack onto the sofa, I reach for my cell and pick it up, seeing South’s name flashing across the screen. It’s the first time he has messaged me since he left. I guess he was trying to give me space, but I must admit, seeing his name on my screen makes my stomach tighten in knots.

I just can’t tell if it’s good or bad ones yet.

Swiping the screen, I open my messages.

South: *Hey, I’ve been trying to give you some space, but I just need to know if you’re doing okay. Is there anything I can do for you? Are you feeling all right? Are you still keeping your ice packs up? If you need me to pop by today to help out or to grab some groceries, just let me know. I won’t make it awkward... promise.*

Smiling at how much of a good guy he is, I pull up his number and call him. It rings twice, and then he answers. “Hey, angel, you miss me that much?” His cocky tone causes me to laugh.

“What happened to not making it awkward?”

He chuckles. “Right, sorry. I’ll start again. Hey, how you doing? You okay?”

“I’m good. And in answer to your questions, yes, I was literally just icing. Thanks for asking about groceries, but I should be good. As for popping by... you doing anything for lunch today?”

He’s quiet for a moment, then answers, “Not currently. You have something in mind?”

“I wanna get out of the house. Go somewhere nice for lunch. Forget about all the bullshit for a few hours and eat some decent food. You think you can take me somewhere?”

“You asking me out on a date, Ingrid?” He chuckles.

I roll my eyes. “No, not a date. Just two people going to lunch.”

“Mm-hmm,” he replies smugly. “I’ll come get you now?”

I can’t stop the smile as I hear him moving about.

“I’ll see you real soon, angel.”

“See you soon,” I reply, and he ends the call.

I throw the cell on the sofa beside me and sink back into the cushions, exhaling. “What are you doing, Ingrid?” I mumble under my breath, shake my head, and then stand, moving to the bedroom to get changed because I can’t go out wearing sweatpants and a tank with lasagna stains.

South’s Harley pulls up outside, and my stomach rolls, but I can’t tell whether it’s with nerves, tension, butterflies, or at the thought of seeing South. He brings out a side of me I never thought existed, but it’s so complicated. Even though it’s exciting and thrilling, the ramifications could be problematic for us both.

I need to treat this carefully.

I have to ensure I know what I’m getting into.

So even though I felt like I wanted to see him today, I’m not sure if it is to let him know this— whatever this thing is between us—is going no further or whether I will risk it and edge out of my comfort zone.

At this point, I simply can’t tell if I’m coming or going.

Moving to the front door, I pull it open, watching him stride down the pathway to meet me. A bright smile lights his face as he spots me in my tight-fitting red dress.

I didn’t need to dress up for him, but I wanted to.

South looks me up and down, unmistakable lust in his eyes as he steps up to the door, his arm resting on the doorframe as he clears his throat. “You trying to kill me? Because damn, woman, it’s lethal to look that good.”

I place my hand on his chest with a warm smile. “Stop. You don’t need to say nice things to me, South. You don’t have to try to impress me.”

“Who’s trying to impress? I’m just telling the truth, angel. You’re hot as sin. Anyone who doesn’t see that is blind.”

I slide my hands down my dress, smoothing out the creases. I haven’t felt sexy in years. Well, since before I gave birth to Nash. But the way South’s eyes are lingering on me makes it known he sees me in a way maybe no man ever has. He ignites something inside me. Makes me feel like there’s a part of me that’s still worthy of attraction and to be worshiped.

He makes me want to be loved and devoured.

He has a way of making me feel like I’m worth so much more than just being a mother.

Like I can have a sexual life again.

God, I can’t even remember what it’s like to feel the touch of a man. It’s been so long.

Clearing my throat before my mind goes off in directions it shouldn’t, I look into his eyes. “You have a way with words.”

He grabs my hand, bringing it to his lips and gently kissing the knuckles. “I have a way with many things, and I want to show you all of them... if you’ll let me.”

Sinking into myself, I sigh. “South,” I whisper.

His hand gently caresses the side of my cheek. “No pressure. Today, we go out to lunch. That’s all. Good food. Good company. Just two people hanging out. After that, we see where it goes.”

Inhaling, I nod. “I can’t make any promises... you know that, right?”

South winks. “I know. I don’t expect you to. One step at a time.”

“Okay, let me just grab my bag.”

“You wanna take your car, or you wanna go on my bike?” he calls out as I reach for my bag.

My sensible mothering side tells me I should do the respectable thing.

The responsible thing.

We should go in my car.

That way, people won’t see us together.

And it’s not as dangerous.

The car is *absolutely* the *right* option.

I walk back to him with a bright smile. “Fuck it! Let’s go on your bike.”

He tilts his head with a grin. “You continue to surprise me, angel. I assume you know how to ride wearing a dress?”

I snort out a laugh. “Yeah, spent plenty of time on the back of Reaper’s bike wearing much less than what I’m wearing now.”

South raises his brow like he’s trying to imagine that, and I reach out, punching his arm. He chuckles as we walk out of my house, and I turn, locking the door behind me. He watches me every step of the way, his eyes never leaving me. “All right, let’s get you ready to ride my beast.”

I hear the innuendo in his tone, but I choose to ignore it. Placing my keys in my bag, I swing it over my shoulder so it clings to my body.

The black and chrome glistens in the springtime sun as we walk to his bike. The sleek lines and bold shapes suit South to perfection.

He steps up to the bike and hands me the helmet.

I tilt my head. “What are you gonna wear?”

He shrugs. “Need you to be safe now, don’t we? Precious cargo and all.”

Pursing my lips, I grab the helmet and pull it down over my head, my hair clinging to the sides of my face as it sticks to me. He chuckles, leaning in and sliding my hair away from my eyes, then moves in to help with the strap. “Here, I got ya,” he says, his fingers sliding under my chin, his face so close to mine I smell the mint coming from his breath.

It’s intoxicating, making me want to reach forward and press my lips to his to get a taste. But I restrain myself as his strong fingers delicately close the straps of my helmet.

His eyes flick up, meeting mine, that roguish grin lighting his face as he catches me staring at him. “You ready to go?”

Nodding, I bite my bottom lip. “Yeah... I’m ready to ride you...” My eyes widen as I realize what I just said, and his face lights up at my Freudian slip. “Ride the bike... ready to ride your *bike* with you. Shit! You know what I mean.”

He nods, that grin not leaving his face for a single second as he turns, throwing his leg over his ride. “Ride me or the bike. Ride me on the bike. Your options are unlimited, angel.”

Groaning, I place my hands on his shoulders and hoist myself over the back of the bike, my dress instinctively hiking up as I sit behind him. I slide down, my pussy pressing right up against his back, and I can’t help but feel the pressure as I sit astride him on his bike. My thighs are pressed against his legs, but I remember to keep my bare legs away from the pipes so they won’t get burned.

It’s a fine line.

My arms wrap around his waist, holding on tight, my head leaning down against his back. It’s been so long since I’ve been on the back of a bike, but it feels like home. Even though it’s been years, this is where my place is meant to be.

Maybe I lost sight of that.

I lost who I was when Reaper died.

I became so much for so many.

I had to take on a sole parenting role for four children, and I lost myself, never truly finding *me* again.

Maybe through South being here, he is helping me find myself.

As he starts the engine, I cling tighter, loving the engine's vibration roaring up through my body, igniting my soul. That same old feeling I used to get reinvigorating me all over again. It's like a part of me was dormant, hibernating. But now I feel like spring has sprung, and I'm waking up from a deep sleep, like a coma that has kept me from living my best, most authentic self. And maybe part of me branching out and taking risks again has something to do with me having this biopsy and not knowing the results.

I don't know what my future has planned for me.

So, right now, I have to make every moment count in case I don't have a future to look forward to. I need to take every opportunity and the risks worth taking.

That's how I am looking at it right now.

South revs his engine, my face lighting up in delight as he glances over his shoulder. "You ready?"

"So fucking ready," I reply, excitement seeping off me in waves.

He winks, turns back to the front, and doesn't waste a second, hammering down and taking off from my driveway like a bat out of hell. I jerk back, not expecting him to ride off so fast. But I think he knows me better than I know myself.

Somehow, he knew I needed this.

This thrill.

This adrenaline surge.

As he skids out onto the road, his back tire sliding out as we turn, my hand throws up in the air, and I let out a cheer. "Woo-hoo!" I call out against his ear.

I feel his torso shaking with laughter as he rides. I know he is pushing the limits for me but still keeping it as safe as he

can. My arms slide back around his body, holding onto him tight, as the engine vibrates through my body while every inch of me comes alive.

I forgot how euphoric this is. The charge, the adrenaline of being on the back, giving over control to the rider. There's something primal in that. *I fucking love it.* And I have to admit, the vibration of the engine does wonders on my clit as well as the friction of his jeans rubbing against my pussy. I am getting quite hot and bothered back here.

I had no idea I would feel all kinds of aroused, but I can't seem to control my raging thoughts.

Maybe I'm having a midlife crisis.

Do women have those?

That must be what this is.

Me getting all worked up by this insanely attractive, younger man. It must be menopause or something, right? That's what must be going on. It *has* to explain everything.

As he rides faster, the tension becomes almost unbearable. Clenching my eyes shut, I grip around him so tight he must have an idea of what's happening behind him. But right now, I don't fucking care. I just hope we get there soon, or the thrill of this might work me to a point I can't come back from. And climaxing on the back of South's bike would be incredibly fucking embarrassing.

As my breathing increases, my clit throbs so intensely that I have to bite down on my bottom lip. I open my eyes as we pull into the parking lot of Revel Rose, and a slow smile crosses my face.

At least we're in familiar territory.

My muscles relax a little as the bike finally pulls to a stop.

The vibration halts and releases my clit from its intense grasp.

I blow out a long breath and hear a chuckle from South.

He knew what he was doing.

Asshole.

But I can't be too mad at him because I haven't felt this turned on, this alive, this young and free for so fucking long. And I have South to thank for that.

Pulling my shit together as he kicks out the stand, I throw my leg over the bike and stand on wobbly legs.

His arm rests on my hip to help keep me upright. "You good?" That rogue grin is back.

Nodding, I smile as I undo the helmet. "Yeah, it's been a while."

"It's a rush, hey?" he remarks, placing his helmet on the handlebars.

"One I have missed. Thanks for not taking it easy. That was..." I hesitate as I try to find the right word, "... fun." It's the only safe word I can come up with.

South places his hand on my lower back. "I think you and me are gonna have a lot of fun together, angel. You just gotta be open to it."

Our eyes lock together, and those pesky butterflies return as I stare at him, my stomach flickering in ways it hasn't before.

This feels so strange.

I know this is territory I shouldn't be stepping into.

This man should be off-limits.

So why is every part of my body screaming for him?

"It's not always that easy, South," I reply.

He shrugs matter-of-factly. "It's all a state of mind. It's easy if you let it be."

"Let's go have some lunch as friends, okay?"

South gestures for the door. "Lead the way. I hear the owner, Marcel, makes a mean gumbo."

"Oh, you have no idea. It's the best in all of New Awlins," I reply.

South rubs his hand over his extremely toned stomach.
“Well then, let’s go eat!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ingrid

South's hand stays on my lower back as he walks us toward the entry. I have to admit, it feels pretty damn good the attention he gives me. But even though he makes it seem like us being a thing is easy, there are so many layers to it.

My kids.

Hurricane.

Bayou.

Nash? I'm pretty sure he will have a coronary.

Novah might be the only one who might understand, but even then, that's up for debate.

My anxiety peaks as we walk inside the bar. This is the local haunt for a lot of people the club deals with, so we could see anyone. But if South and I keep up the pretense that we're eating a meal as 'friends,' it should all be fine. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

The old-style bar always feels like a home away from home. We walk past the long woodgrain bar to Marcel, who's wiping some glasses as we pass and bobs his head. "Afternoon, you guys here for lunch?"

"Yes, sir. Can we have a booth out back?" South requests.

Marcel dips his chin. "It's early, so there's plenty of space out there. Just sit wherever you like."

"Thanks, brother."

"Sage will be 'round to grab your order in a few," Marcel states.

"Thanks! Appreciate it."

Marcel smiles in that gorgeous way he always does. “By the way, you’re looking beautiful as ever today, Miss Ingrid.”

As we head for the back area, I reply, “Smooth talker!”

He winks. “You tell that president son of yours that he’s doing good at keeping New Awlins under control. Those Bratva were a pain in my ass. They’ve been quiet on the streets. Let’s keep it that way, huh?”

“Let’s hope so, Marcel. Though I feel you have a lot more say in what happens in the streets of New Awlins than what the club does. We know you have big power around here.”

He grins that bad-boy smirk again while continuing to clean the glass. “Don’t know what you’re talkin’ ’bout, Miss Ingrid.”

“Mm-hmm, sure you don’t.” I chuckle.

South and I take a few steps into the lower level of Revel Rose’s dining area and head to a booth at the edge of the room. The red plush seating looks so comfortable as he slides in, then I shift in beside him.

He side-eyes me, and I feel his stare as he holds his menu up, clearly not looking at it, and I huff. “Okay, just tell me what you wanna say,” I blurt out.

South places the menu on the table and turns to face me. “Why are you so scared of us?”

My eyes widen. “*Why?* South, there are *sooo* many reasons.”

He exhales and gently places his hand on my thigh, my skin instantly igniting at his touch. “There’s something here. You gotta admit, Ingrid, you must be able to feel this electricity pulsating between us?”

My eyes close, my heart rate beating so fast I feel like I’m having trouble breathing. “I feel it. It doesn’t mean it’s right, though, Romeo.”

His hand gently caresses my face, making my eyes snap open. “Ingrid, I know this is hard. But if the chemistry is right and feelings are here, shouldn’t *that* be all that matters?”

“There are other people who matter in this too.”

“Okay... so we can figure out what *this is*, and then tell them when we know where we’re going. We don’t have to include everyone every step of the way.”

“I tell my kids everything, South,” I refute.

He tilts his head, glancing at my breast.

I sink into myself, understanding exactly the message he is sending me. I’m lying to them about having the biopsy done.

So he’s right.

I don’t tell them everything.

He’s got me there.

“So maybe I don’t tell them *everything*, but that’s for their own good. I don’t want to upset them unnecessarily.”

South shrugs. “Then maybe look at us the same way. You don’t want to upset them by telling them about us until there is something solid to tell them.”

“I’m hiding too much from them. It doesn’t feel right. It’s not like me... *at all.*”

South slides his hand off my knee and looks away from me. “The last thing I want to do is stress you out, especially right now. So, if this is too much, I *will* back off. But Ingrid, I think you want me. I think you like my attention... am I reading you right?” His eyes slowly turn back to look at me.

My nostrils flare with the emotion running through me. My stomach swirls in apprehension, teamed with butterflies.

Not one person has ever understood me like South does.

This man knows I need space.

But he also knows I crave him just as much.

How does that even work?

My hand slowly slides out along his thigh, creeping higher as our eyes meet. “You are... I want you in ways that make me question who I am. That makes me question if I’m even sane anymore. You scare me, South. But that fear also brings me to

life, especially with what's happening in my life right now. I've got to live every moment because I don't know how many more moments I have left."

My hand slides up, pressing on the bulge of his crotch, his erection evident as he inhales sharply at my touch. His eyes lock with mine. I don't know what I'm doing, but I am in the moment, and fuck it! I'm just going to go with it.

My fingers slide to his zipper, and I begin edging it down.

His eyes widen, his breath catching as he stares at me. "Jesus Christ," he murmurs, his eyes clenching as I reach into his jeans, grab his girthy cock, and pull it out.

My stomach flips at the size of him. My tongue darts out and swipes across my bottom lip in appreciation. It's been so long since I've done anything overtly sexual. Yet here I am, in the middle of a damn restaurant, in a damn booth, grabbing South's cock under the table.

What in the fuck is wrong with me?

A low hiss escapes through his teeth as his body tenses, his muscles tightening as I begin to pull up and down on his cock.

My clit throbs at the excitement of doing this in public, knowing he wishes he could make some kind of noise, but he can't. His eyes lock with mine, something being said in the lustful way he is devouring me with that devilish grin.

My hand swiftly strokes him up and down, the thrill, the adrenaline of the moment, overwhelming me as his hand slides up my thigh, edging up my dress. My breathing hitches as his fingers slide my panties to the side.

Instinctively, my legs part, allowing him access.

If I'm going to do this—if I am going to let go like this, I may as well let go all the damn way.

A shiver runs through me as soon as his fingers brush against my sensitive folds. I inhale sharply, my breath harsh through my teeth. I'm already wet. How could I not be from the ride over here then having his hard cock in my hand?

"Shit, angel. Are you wet for me?"

A whimper is all I can muster, letting myself fall into this...
... whatever *this* is.

South releases a low, throaty growl, and I swear it hits me straight to my clit, my breath catching.

He dips two fingers inside me, and I need to bite my lip from moaning out.

His eyes show me the desperation in him, how worked up he is. The blaze reflected at me only fuels the desire building deep in my core.

“S-so good,” I whisper, my hand stroking him faster, needing his release as much as my own.

This man wants me.

It’s a powerful feeling.

For too long, I’ve forgotten what *this* feels like—to be desired by another with complete abandonment.

I lean in, needing his lips on me, and as if he knows, his lips slam to mine. His thumb rotates on my clit, my thighs tensing as he pushes me closer to the edge. I slide my tongue against his in a battle of control I’m quickly losing.

And I don’t care.

Not one little bit.

It’s taking everything I have not to climb on his lap right now and slide onto his perfect cock.

God, what would it be like to have him filling me? The thought has me moaning, and South is quick to swallow it, pushing his tongue further like he can’t get close enough. Like maybe he wants the same thing.

His fingers slide in and out of me, the sound audible with how worked up I am for him. His thumb presses against my clit, and I’m almost there. My breaths are short and fast, my hips rocking, seeking more.

“Mom?” a familiar voice pulls me from the intense moment.

I break away from kissing South, my lips feeling bereft the second they leave his, as I turn to see none other than Nash and his business associates, Blake and Lucas, standing beside him.

My eyes widen as Nash stares down at me, his face pale white as I gasp. *Jesus Christ!* My hand releases South's already softening dick, sliding down and shoving his hand from between my legs.

I don't know if Nash saw what our hands were doing under the table as he walked up, but he definitely saw us kissing.

Oh... my God!

"Nash, darling. What a surprise to see you here," I say breathlessly, trying to calm myself down for the scolding I know is heading my way.

He folds his arms over his chest, glaring at South. "Surprise isn't the word I'd choose to describe what I just witnessed, Mom. Does Hurricane know you're fucking making out with one of his men?"

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I sideways glance at South.

Nash said, *'Making out.'*

Hopefully, that means kissing was all he saw. "No... he doesn't. No one does because this is new between South and me. *Please* don't tell them. They will freak out."

Nash lets out a small, incredulous laugh. "I can see why. The guy is practically still in diapers—"

"Watch it! I know you're not part of the club, but *I am*. Don't disrespect me, asshole," South grunts out the words sitting taller.

I place my hand on his chest as he puffs it out in defiance. "Rome, stop. We don't need to get unpleasant here—"

"Wait, Rome? As in Angus and Lucia's kid from LA? *Jesus, Mom!* We all know him. He's younger than Novah, for Christ's sake. *What the fuck are you doing?*" Nash rants

dramatically, but the accusatory tone hits exactly where it's meant to.

My eyes flood with tears as I glance at South, his eyes desperate for me to defend our relationship—if that's what this even is.

But I can't.

Because Nash is standing right there, looking so terribly disappointed in me.

I have let Nash down.

My own flesh and blood.

A single tear slides down my face as I shuffle out of the booth and stand, moving in front of Nash.

His eyes on me soften as he notices my distress. "Oh, Mom... I didn't mean to upset you."

Sniffling, I grab his hands and look directly into his eyes. "I'm sorry I disappointed you. I never wanted to be that kind of parent. You got enough of that from your father. I'm simply trying to live every day in the best way I can, Nash." My tears flow heavier now as I wipe them from my face.

Nash's somber expression breaks my heart as he stares at me. "Mom? Is there something else going on?"

I should tell him.

But I'm too emotional.

And honestly, today has been such a rollercoaster.

I don't think I can handle having Nash being upset at my diagnosis, either.

So I bring my hand up, gently caressing his face without saying another word, and then turn for the exit.

"Ingrid," South calls out.

But I don't stop.

And I don't hear his footsteps following me.

I need to get back home, even if it means walking.

I need to get the hell away from here and this catastrophic fuck-up right now.

CHAPTER NINE

South

The urge inside me to heave my fist through Nash's skull is high.

I breathe in and out a few times, sounding like a bull, before I subtly put my dick back inside my jeans, then slide out of the booth to stand in front of Ingrid's son. He looks me up and down as I walk up to him, shoving both his shoulders so hard he has to take a couple of steps back. "The fuck do you think you're doing? You have no right treating Ingrid like that."

He charges toward me. "What the hell do *you* want from *my* mother? She's old enough to be *your* fucking mother. It's disgusting, Romeo!" Nash grunts.

Shaking my head, I point my finger in his face. "Fuck. *You!* Who are you to say what is and isn't right?"

Nash violently slaps my finger away from his face. "*You* stay the hell away from *my* mother," he demands, stepping closer.

Puffing out my chest, my nostrils flare, and my eyes stare him down. "You think your threats are gonna scare me, Nash? I'm the biker here, remember? You're nothin' but a fancy suit. What the fuck are you gonna do to me?" I question, raising an eyebrow.

Nash suddenly raises his arm like he's going to punch me. I smirk as his little brown-haired friend rushes in to pull him back. "Nash! Nash, stop!" he warns.

"I'm going to fucking kill him!" Nash growls, struggling to reach for me as I shake my head.

“You’re being an idiot, Nash. You think Ingrid would want this, huh? She fucking adores the ground you walk on and would give up her happiness for yours. Every. Damn. Time. So, do you want to be the reason she continues her life unhappy? Or do you want to give her a *real shot* at having a happy relationship like you have with Brianna?” I snap.

Nash pulls himself free of his friend’s hold and grunts as he begins pacing around the room. “Of course I want Mom to be happy. What kind of a fucking question is that?”

I let out a long breath, relaxing my tense shoulders. “Well, you sure as shit didn’t act like it moments ago,” I scold, taking a step forward. “If you want your mom happy, you fucking apologize, then let us be. If you take the age out of it, it’s no different from any other relationship. We click on the same level. And something I don’t expect *you* to understand... I like her, Nash, and by some miracle, she likes me. We can’t explain it. And honestly, *what the fuck* does any of it matter if when she’s with me, she’s happy. Your mom hasn’t been truly happy, truly free for a long time, Nash, and I think deep down you know that. Who are *you* to make her feel like shit and take this away from her?”

Nash glances at the two men beside him, and the blond one shrugs. “What’s so bad that your mom likes this guy, Nash? Does it matter who she finds happiness with? Out of everyone in your life, she’s always been the most supportive. Maybe you need to reverse the roles?”

Nash looks at him as the other guy chuckles. “Yeah, man, I mean... you know I hate to agree with Lucas at the best of times, but on this occasion, he’s right. Sure, it’s not conventional, but hey, cougars are in right now, right?”

Lucas laughs while Nash groans, running his fingers through his hair. “Do not call my mom a cougar, Blake. I swear to God...”

I turn to Nash, reaching out and gripping his shoulder. “If it is any consolation, I can assure you I only want what’s best for Ingrid. If that turns out not to be me in the end, then I *will* step away. I’ll hate it, but I *will* because I care about her, Nash. We

have some kind of bond that I can't explain. When I joined NOLA Defiance, and we spent more time together, that's when the attraction grew..." I run a hand through my hair in frustration.

"Not that it's any of your damn business, but since you are her son, I will tell you this. I have *never* dated an older woman. This is all new territory for me too. Whatever Ingrid wants, that's my priority. If age doesn't bother me, or more importantly, her, then it has no business bothering you. And *you* certainly have *no right* to make Ingrid feel bad about it, either."

"I hear you..." Nash tilts his head, some of what I am saying finally sinking in, "... but do you have any idea what this looks like? She fucking met you when you were a damn kid. You might have every good intention, but that doesn't change a thing. She's *my* mother. I *will* protect her. Even if she doesn't think she needs protection... especially from the likes of *you*. And let me tell you, it's a damn shock to see your mother in a compromising position, *especially* in a public place. Never mind, it was with a fucking biker."

Nodding, I exhale. *Nash is going to be the least of my worries.* "I can respect that and expect no less from you or her children. We should have been more discreet. But Nash, you must let Ingrid talk to the rest of the family about this. It can't come from you. It must come from Ingrid and only when *she's* ready."

He rubs the back of his neck, exhales, then nods. "All right, agreed. But Mom can't keep secrets from the family for too long. Secrets have a way of coming out like this has today. And she shouldn't keep it to herself. Besides, if this, between the two of you, *is* so great, she shouldn't want to keep it a damn secret."

I couldn't agree more.

Ingrid is keeping multiple secrets from her family, and they're all going to come out one way or another. All I can hope for is they all come out in the right way—for her. "I'll tell her even though I know she's already well aware. She was

concerned about this exact reaction. I apologize, and with circumspect, we should have refrained.”

Nash puts his hand out for me to shake.

I shake his hand, dip my chin, and smile.

“If you truly make Mom happy, then thank you, Romeo,” he offers, squeezing my hand in an unspoken warning I respect.

“I do my best. All I want is for Ingrid to know I care about her. That I want to protect her in the best way I can.”

Nash purses his lips in what I can assume is some sort of approval. “All right... I’m not saying I’m fucking happy about this because I’m far from it. But I can see you care for her, even if it’s for right now.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before opening them again. “Just don’t break her fucking heart because I won’t be the one you have to worry about. You have your president and his twin, who will be far worse than I am if you do my mom wrong. And don’t forget the way they deal with people who betray the club.” His warning is clear, and I’d be lying if I said the thought hadn’t crossed my mind.

I shrug. “I’m not going anywhere unless Ingrid wants me to. She is the only one who can make that decision. I’m in this, Nash. I’ve got her back. Now, if you’re done with all your intimidation tactics, I will go find her because I do not want Ingrid walking home alone. And neither should you.”

Nash’s face lights up, but a flash of guilt passes over him, knowing his mom should have been the priority. “A blind man can see you want to take care of her, but... if I hear you are doing anything but—”

“Watch it! I let you do your macho-son thing once already. Now you’re pushin’ it. Don’t forget who you’re fucking talking to,” I warn, then grip his shoulder and nod before turning and walking for the exit.

I give a curt wave to Marcel as I head out of Revel Rose and exit onto the street.

Looking left and right, I can’t see Ingrid.

She's making a good pace.

Damn woman.

Gritting my teeth, I rush to my bike and jump on. I'll be able to find this stubborn woman quicker if I search for her on two wheels.

Since I don't think she'll head to the clubhouse, I take off toward her home. As I ride, I keep my eyes peeled to the side of the road while anxiety rampages through me.

She's just had minor surgery only a few days ago, and she shouldn't be out walking the streets like this. I should have left sooner rather than trying to make it good with Nash.

That ass could have waited.

Ingrid is far more important.

I'm such a dick.

I turn a corner, cars honking at me for going slower than the speed limit, but I'm also searching the side streets to see if I can spot her. Then, up ahead, the strawberry-blonde beauty in a red dress is in my field of vision. My heart pounds as I hammer down to get to her.

She turns when she hears me approaching but keeps walking. This woman has another thing coming if she thinks she can ignore me. I slow the bike to a crawl, but she avoids eye contact as I try to keep the bike upright. It's real fucking hard when I'm going this damn slow.

"You know it's dangerous to walk these parts alone?" I yell above my engine.

She keeps her eyes forward as she visibly huffs. "I'll take my chances."

"Ingrid, get on the bike." Scowling, I rev my bike, moving forward to keep up with her.

"No. I don't think so."

Groaning, I inch forward, still keeping up with her as cars swerve around me, honking their horns. "Angel, I won't ask again. Get... on... the... back... of... my... damn... bike."

She stops and glares at me. “You saw how Nash reacted, South. He saw us. He fucking saw us!” Tears flood her eyes, and the pain is evident, leaving me no choice. I speed ahead to get in front, then pull my bike to a stop on the road’s edge. After I kick out the stand, I throw my leg over and jump off, catching her by surprise.

She thought I was going to leave.

She has no idea of who I am.

What I am capable of.

Her eyes widen as she gasps. “What are you doing?”

“Reminding you that it’s okay to feel whatever you’re feeling, angel. Now come here,” I demand, reaching out for her.

Ingrid tries to push me away, but I grab hold, pulling her to me and lifting her. She lets out an audible gasp as I pick her up from behind and carry her to my bike.

“South! South, *what the fuck?*” She tries to wriggle in my grip, but I hold on too tight.

On the way to my bike, she tries to fight as much as she can, but I am far too strong.

“I’ve got you, Ingrid. I’ve always got you. Remember that,” I murmur against her ear, my hot breath whispering over her skin as I hoist her onto the front section of my bike seat.

Her breath catches as she looks over her shoulder at me. “South, what are you—” But before she can finish her sentence, I throw my leg over behind her and slide in.

I pull her back so she slides against me, placing her back snugly to my front. She fits like a damn glove like her body was always meant to be pressed against mine.

Her hands reach out to hold onto the handlebars, and my left hand slides down around her waist, holding her to me.

I pull the bike upright and kick back the stand, the vibration of the engine rolling through both of us as her ass is pressed firmly against me.

But that's not what this is about right now.

I want her to know that *this* is *okay*.

That what we're doing is *okay*.

And it doesn't have to be sexual for me to be in this with her.

I want her to not be able to pull away from me—not physically or mentally.

Pulling on the throttle, Ingrid's weight draws her back into me, her body molding against mine. I rest my chin on her shoulder as she relaxes a little more. My hand around her waist gently rubs her stomach to soothe her. And I can't help but notice the tension is slowly easing from her body.

We work as a team as she helps control the clutch lever at the right times, allowing me to focus on her more. Bringing my mouth to her ear, I raise my voice so she can hear over the engine noise and the wind as we move. "I know Nash seeing us was emotional for you, and I am sorry he did. Hear me when I say this to you..." her body tenses, so I tighten my grip around her stomach to let her know I am right here with her, "... you don't owe anybody anything. Your children are adults. They have lives of their own. And if you don't let yourself live when there's a chance, angel, you will always wonder... *what-if?*"

Her body visibly shakes, and I can't see her face, but I feel like this might be sinking in, so I continue, "I like you, Ingrid. Not in a fleeting way, or where I'll be over it in a few months. This attraction sticks with you, and I want to see where it goes. If you'll let me."

Her right hand slides out, resting on my thigh as a show of comfort, so I push the point, needing her to think of herself for a change. "I know you're scared. And you have so much going on right now. I get it if my coming in at this point is too much! But I want to help *so* let me help you, Ingrid. Don't push me away."

She turns her head to the side, her mouth near my ear, as she yells over the engine, "I hear you, but it's not that easy."

What about if Nash—”

I nip her earlobe, stopping her from finishing whatever she was going to say. While I understand her stress and acknowledge her kids will be a part of this, I honestly don't give a shit what they think. My only focus is her. And if my words aren't enough to make my point, I have other ways of making her see reason.

Perhaps I need to show her those ways sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER TEN

Ingrid

My heart beats rapidly, and I've never felt so cared for.

The way South is holding me on the bike like this, I've never experienced anything like it. I've been on the back of a bike more times than I can count, but I have never, not once, sat in front of a biker while riding and been held so tenderly like this.

It's something else.

South is alpha and teddy bear all wrapped up into one. He can be assertive, telling me what to do one minute, and then the next, he's taking care of me and knowing exactly what I need even when I don't know what I need.

And even though we've technically not been in each other's lives for all that long, somehow, I feel like South knows me better than anyone else. This man can read me and sense exactly what I need. It's almost as if we are connected in a way that scares me but also electrifies me.

What he's saying makes sense.

But... he doesn't have kids.

He doesn't understand.

But when his teeth graze my ear, combined with the heat of his body pressed to mine, the vibration of the bike, and the not-so-subtle erection resting against my ass, none of it matters.

Before Nash interrupted us, I was so close to coming, and now it's all I want. I take advantage of our position and nestle my ass against him. South gifts me with a low growl that vibrates through me, and my breath catches.

My body hums with desire as he takes us out of the city, down past Woodland Park, and to the dead-end street of Patterson Drive, overlooking the Mighty Mississippi.

The sight of our beautiful river takes my breath away.

South kicks out the stand, tilting the bike to the side, then tenderly kisses my shoulder as he slides off the back of the bike. With his warmth gone, a chill shoots up my spine, and I take a stuttered breath.

When I move to get off, he stops me, making me sit, both legs hanging off one side. South places his hands on my knees, pushing for me to spread my legs.

“Your only job right now, angel, is to listen to me. Got it?”

And just like that, South’s alpha makes his appearance, and even though it makes me bristle, my body has a mind of its own. Instantly in reaction, my legs part, and my clit pulses.

“I know me making moves on you, especially right now, is making shit harder. So I will give you an out this one time. You tell me, with full honesty, you aren’t feeling this...” South waves a hand between us as he stands back, “... and I’ll bow out. But after this, you’re mine. There will be no backing away, no running from me. You gotta gimme a chance to prove that I’m not some fucking cowboy. I wouldn’t risk my place at the club if I didn’t think you’re worth it.”

His hands slide up my thighs, moving my dress with them, and instead of pushing them away, I rock my hips forward, giving him the access he wants. My breathing is fast, and the closer he gets, it makes concentrating hard. We’re supposed to be having a serious conversation, but it seems my body has other ideas.

“That’s the thing though, isn’t it, South? We don’t know how Hurricane is going to react. I don’t know if I’m willing to risk it... risk *you*,” I admit, and my heart sinks at the realization.

I’m not being fair.

I want him to want me even though I don’t see how any of this can work.

He removes a hand from under my dress and caresses my cheek. The second his fingers touch my skin, goose bumps trail down my body, while internally, I am a blazing inferno.

“I’d risk it *all* for you, angel. You just gotta give me that chance.”

My eyes meet his with such longing and desperation flowing between us, but all it does is make me want him even more. I hesitate, and in the brief moment of stillness, South crashes his lips to mine, silencing me. I whimper, needing to say *something* but not wanting him to stop.

Somehow, I find the strength to push him slightly so I can get out what I’m thinking. “If we do this, I am *not* ready to tell my family or the club...” I pause for a second, trying to ensure the words are right. “I need more time in our bubble before they burst it with accusations and bullshit. I want us to have this time together. Can we do that... *please?*”

His lips slam onto mine in obvious agreement.

My hands slide up under his shirt, my nails digging into his skin needing South closer as he steps in between my legs, and I wrap them around him, pulling his rock-hard cock against my already aching pussy.

His fingers slide into my hair, kissing me like he needs me to breathe. Kissing South is like that giddy feeling you get when you’re young and feeling everything for the first time.

Every time is like that with him.

I can’t explain it.

I don’t understand it.

South has a hold on me that makes me question everything.

What happens when the honeymoon phase has eased off? Will he still want me?

But right now, with everything else going on in my life, I need this. Even if I know, especially from Nash’s reaction, that the others are *not* going to take this well.

He slowly pulls back, breaking the kiss. The smile on his face is so fucking wide and gorgeous it takes my breath away. Then he leans in quickly, kissing me once more.

I'm tingling all over.

Goose bumps litter my skin.

I don't know how, but South makes me feel like I'm eighteen all over again. My stomach flutters as he stares at me, that roguish grin on his face, his hand still caressing my cheek.

He exhales. "We can take all the time you need as long as we do it together. Don't push me away, angel. I want to help you, to support you. Let me be here for you however you need me. Lean on me. You helped me when I needed you twelve years ago... now, let me return the favor and be here for you."

I tilt my head. "That was different, Rome."

He nods in agreement. "It was. Yeah, you're right. But still, you were there when no one else would step up. And don't you dare think this is me feeling some sort of fucking trauma bonding or out of obligation or some shit to return the favor. I *know* you feel this." He picks up my hand, placing it over his chest. His heart is racing, and I bite my bottom lip in reply because mine is doing the same. "See what you do to me, angel?"

I reach for his hand and slowly move it over the top of my heart so he can feel what he's doing to me. He leans in, pressing his lips to mine, but slower, more deliberate this time.

My fingers slide into his gorgeous flowing hair. I love the feeling of his long locks wrapped around my fingers, and I clench his hair tight, needing a little more in this moment between us.

A low growl escapes him, echoing in my mouth, and all it does is turn me on even more. I am still buzzing from the restaurant, and with the way he is kissing me right now, my thoughts are turning indecent very, very quickly.

"Rome, take me home," I whimper, needing him.

“Now, angel... where would the fun be in that?” He drops into a squatting position, then slides his arms under my legs, draping them over his shoulders.

I squeal as I’m forced to reach out and grab onto him for fear of falling back. “South, what the hell are you doing?”

“I didn’t get to eat earlier,” he states, nipping and sucking along my inner thighs.

“Oh shit... *here?* Aren’t you afraid—”

Before I can finish, he licks along my panties, which I know are soaked, effectively shutting me up.

I’d worry about someone catching us if it didn’t feel so damn good. But when he uses a thumb to pull my panties aside and sinks his tongue inside me, all worries are swept away with the breeze that’s cooling my heated skin.

South releases a growl, the vibration sending a shudder through my body, and I almost come while jutting my hips further into his face.

“Fuck, angel. You taste better than I imagined,” he growls out while pulling back and looking up at me.

I don’t have time to respond as he dives back in, lapping at my clit and sinking two fingers inside me. My fingers grip his hair, the movement pulling his face closer while my head lolls back. With complete abandon, I rock my hips, needing more as my body flushes hot and the pleasurable ache builds deep in my belly.

It’s been years since I’ve felt pleasure this good.

I had a taste of it in the restaurant, but this is on a whole new level.

He sucks on my clit, his tongue dancing around my sensitive flesh, the same time his fingers work their magic inside me. My eyes clench as a wave of heat engulfs my body. Tingles shoot up and down my skin as my muscles tense all over. Lights dance behind my eyes while everything constricts with the pressure. Then as he flicks his tongue over my clit

again, the same time his fingers delve deeper inside me, I let out an animalistic moan.

The sensations hit like nothing before. The wave drowns me like a typhoon, swirling and swallowing me whole, wracking through my body, every inch of me shuddering and shaking with sensual pleasure. “S-South... f-fuck...” I moan breathlessly, giving in to the bliss surging through my body.

South groans his approval, lapping up my orgasm. I have to nudge him back with how sensitive my body has become. It’s too much, especially after not having anything like this for years.

Once my body stops shaking and jolting with aftershocks, he adjusts me into a sitting position and then stands, bringing his hand to my flushed red cheek as I try to calm my breathing.

He leans his forehead against mine. “You’re so fucking beautiful when you let go.”

I let out a small laugh, sliding my fingers into his long hair. *I love doing that... so damn much.* “Thank you. I needed that.”

South chuckles, wiping his mouth and placing a tender kiss on my lips. I can taste myself on him. Somehow, that turns me on, and I want to start this again.

“No need to thank me, angel. I needed it just as much as you did. After having your hands on me at the restaurant, I had to taste and hear you moaning my name.”

I can’t fight the smile that lights my face. “You have a way with words.”

He places his closed fists on either side of me on the bike, leaning in so close it makes my stomach flip. *God, he smells so fucking good.* “You can thank my magic tongue,” he quips, that roguish grin lighting his face again.

I roll my eyes, letting out a scoff. “All right, we should go... take me home?” I ask, and he stands taller but leans in, kissing my forehead lightly.

“You wanna ride shotgun or piggyback?” he asks.

Riding with him behind me was something else. And I'm not sure I will get the chance to do it again. So I spin, facing the handlebars, and grip tight. "Shotgun... definitely shotgun."

South throws his leg over the bike, his left hand sliding around my waist, holding me to him. "Good choice. Now hold on tight, angel, 'cause I'm gonna hammer down on the way home so you can feel what you do to me."

A lump is caught in my throat as he pulls back on the throttle. The bike jerks, making my ass slide against his obvious erection. I love the idea that someone like me—a woman who has had two children and is in her mid-fifties—can turn on a guy as earth-shatteringly good-looking as South.

It doesn't make sense to me.

But right now, nothing about my life makes sense.

So I will roll with the punches because, in twelve days' time, my test results will be in.

And that could change the course of everything.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

South

One Week Later

The last week has been crazy.

I'm still settling into the club, but I know I'm not giving the guys my full attention because I'm so focused on Ingrid. It's not that I don't want to spend time with my brothers. Of course I do. But right now, Ingrid has no one else to lean on regarding her diagnosis. So, I want to ensure I'm there whenever she needs me.

I head to her place most nights to spend quality time with her. We don't do anything exciting. Mostly, we just sit, eat dinner, and watch television. But being in each other's company makes us feel so fucking good.

Have we taken our relationship to that next level?

No. I don't want Ingrid to feel pressure.

I don't want her to think that's all I'm after.

Sure, we kiss and cuddle on the sofa, and I may have given her another climax two nights ago with my fingers, but we haven't had sex. Honestly, I'm not looking for it. I don't need it. I can wait. I do, however, want her to know she can depend on me.

As I sit on the sofa, my feet up on the coffee table, watching the evening news, Ingrid walks in with our takeout on plates because she is old school.

I smirk as she glances at my feet on the coffee table.

"Get your feet off my damn table!" She chuckles as she shoves them to the side, slides in beside me, and hands me my food.

I do what I do best, wink, then slowly pull my feet from the table with a “Yes, dear.”

She shakes her head. “You *yes, dear* me again, and I will feed you to La Fin myself.”

“Have I told you how much I adore how sassy you are?”

She picks up her chopsticks, waving them at me. “Romeo, don’t think you can charm your way with me, sir.”

I nudge her shoulder with mine. “Hey, umm... I wanna say thanks for having me over. I’m glad you can tolerate me.”

Ingrid lets out a small laugh and picks up a piece of chicken with her chopsticks. “You’re easy to tolerate, Rome. Though I’m sure the guys are wondering where you head to most nights?”

“Yeah... it hasn’t come up yet, but I’m sure the question will come soon.”

Her smile falls. “I’m not ready to tell them... not yet.”

Reaching out, I grab her hand. “It’s all good. We will figure out when is the best time to tell them. There’s no pressure from me.”

Her eyes meet mine. “Why are you so good to me? Like honestly? Why?”

The question throws me for a second, and my brows scrunch together. “What sort of question is that? Do you not think you’re worth it? Because trust me, Ingrid. You are.”

“I don’t...” she hesitates, and I see the caution in her.

Before I turn to face her, I place my plate on the coffee table. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

She exhales, places her dinner on the table beside mine, and turns, her knees up on the sofa in what looks like a defensive pose to keep herself calm. “I... I know... I mean... fuck. Shit.”

I reach out, grab her hands, and look into her eyes. “Ingrid, it’s just me... talk to me.”

She exhales heavily, her eyes watering as she fights back tears. “No one has made me feel as sexy as you do, but I don’t understand why someone like you would ever want someone like me.”

Furrowing my brows, I scowl. “Someone like you? What does that mean?”

She swallows hard. “I have a mother’s tummy. I have stretch marks. I have wrinkles. And I’m older than you, South. It’s only because I have strawberry-blonde hair that I’m lucky I haven’t turned gray yet, but I do get the occasional gray hair that I pluck out. And to top it off, I’m pretty sure I’m going through menopause for crying out loud. I mean... you’re still so fucking young. You have your entire life ahead of you. Don’t you want kids? A family of your own? I can’t give you that, South. I can’t!” Her tone is frantic, and she’s on the verge of panic.

All I can do is simply shrug.

I have to admit, the thought has crossed my mind.

Lying in bed at night, thinking about what a life with Ingrid would look like. And yeah, I’m not stupid. I already thought she might have gone through or is nearing menopause, and that children are not something she would want to do again. But I have come to terms with that.

“Ingrid... none of it bothers me. I don’t need to have kids to feel whole.” I shrug. “Did I ever see myself as a father? Yeah, maybe. But also, it wasn’t high on my priority list. It was only one of those things that if it happened, then it happened. I’d rather have you. And if that means I don’t have kids, then I don’t have kids. And as for thinking I can’t be attracted to you because you’ve had children...” I shake my head. “Let me show you something...” I stand and reach down for her hand. Her eyes widen, and I wave my hand at her. “Well, c’mon.”

She sighs as I hoist her off the sofa and lead her toward the bathroom.

“What are we doing?” she asks.

As I flick on the light illuminating the outer area where the giant mirror and twin sinks are located, I say nothing. Then I place her in front of me, looking in the mirror while I stand behind her. Slowly, I edge my cut down my shoulders.

Her eyes widen. “South?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not seducing you. Just go with me on this.” I place my cut on the basin and then yank my shirt over my head, leaving me bare-chested behind her. Her eyes wander my heavily tattooed body as I slowly lift her shirt over her head.

“*Rome*,” she warns, a little firmer this time.

“Trust me,” I urge.

She hesitates but then helps me remove her shirt, leaving her in a white lacy bra. I fight the animal inside me who wants to devour her, but that’s not what this is about. I spin her back around so she’s looking at herself in the mirror while I’m standing behind her, my left arm wrapped around her waist, my fingers trailing the lines of her stretchmarks.

Her eyes follow what I’m doing, and her muscles tense like she is uncomfortable, but I use my other hand to force her to look up at me. “You think you’re so different from me? That these stretch marks mar your skin?”

She subtly nods her head. So I lift my arms on either side of her, out wide like the letter T. She furrows her brows as if confused. “Look at my biceps, look real close... they’re hidden because of the tattoos, but do you see...” I smile. “We’re not so different, angel.”

Ingrid looks in the mirror, narrowing her eyes, and then like a lightbulb goes off, she spots my stretchmarks. She spins to face me, her fingers trailing the lines like she can’t believe what she’s seeing. “But... how?”

“In my late teens, I hit the gym hard. My muscles grew too fast, making my skin stretch, giving me stretch marks. I know it’s not the same as having a baby, but I felt self-conscious about them. They’re on my legs and back. I was so worried about looking different I covered myself in tattoos to hide

them. But now I'm older, I know I didn't need to do that. They're a part of my journey. A part of who I am, of how I got to be the man standing before you today."

"So you're saying I should embrace my flaws?" she asks.

"No, angel, I'm saying they're not flaws at all. They're simply a part of your story. And honestly, they make you more beautiful." I spin her around so she's facing the mirror again to make her look at herself. "Look... *really* look. I need you to see what I see. These marks are the proof that you're an amazing mother. Such a strong human and so fucking resilient. I'm in awe of you, Ingrid."

She shakes her head. "You see all that in my stretchmarks?"

I move to her side and kneel beside her. Her eyes widen as I slide my hands up her hips. "These marks are *sooo* fucking beautiful, and I need you to *never* doubt that. Never doubt how stunning you are," I tell her, then lean in, pressing my lips to her stomach against her stretchmarks.

Her hand slides into my hair, holding me to her as a tear slides down her cheek.

"Will you still think my body is beautiful if I have to have my breasts removed?" she asks.

She feels vulnerable, and I need to step it up so she knows I don't care what she looks like. The fact she's a bombshell is a bonus, but I wouldn't care if she wasn't—it's her, as a person, her wonderful personality, her caring nature, just her that I am attracted to.

Everything else is added extras.

I stand and wrap my arms around Ingrid, pulling her to me. Her arms instinctively slide around my neck as I stare into her eyes. This is the first time our chests have had skin-to-skin contact. Yes, her bra is still on, but the rest of our bodies are together, and fuck, it feels so damn good.

"Baby, if that happens, I'll be there with you every step of the way. If you have to have them removed for your health, then I am all for it. I don't need breasts to adore you. I don't

need kids to be whole. I don't need anything *you* think I need, Ingrid. I. Just. Need. You.”

Her bottom lip trembles as a fat tear rolls down her cheek, and I gently wipe it away. “My God, you're sweet.”

“What the fuck! I'm fucking rough and manly and a damn biker.” I smirk. “I am none of this sweet bullshit, thank you.”

She giggles and places a tender kiss on my cheek. “I see right through your tough-guy façade, Romeo. Thank you for showing me how much you care.”

I lean in, pressing my lips to hers briefly. “You're welcome. Now, should we go eat?”

She nods. “But can you keep your shirt off for a little longer?”

I loudly chuckle as I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her to me. “You're just a perverted old lady, you know that?” I jest.

She slaps my chest. “Enough with the *old* bullshit, asshole.”

I chuckle as we walk back to the living room.

I'm glad I was able to make her feel more comfortable about herself. I know the results of her biopsy are playing on her mind, and if there's anything I can do to make her feel better until the results come in, I will do exactly that.

For now, though, it's time to eat some dinner.

Then, after, I'll eat Ingrid for dessert.

The rest of my night with Ingrid was pretty chill.

I got to eat dessert, and so did she.

It was so fucking good.

The woman knows how to give damn good head. Fuck, the way her lips wrapped around the head of my cock, I was like a teenager, my legs shaking, fighting from shooting my load too soon. Her mouth, I swear I have never come so hard in my life. Just the thought of it has me hardening again, and a shiver rushes up my spine.

It's the release I've needed since she grabbed my cock in Revel Rose.

But all good nights must end.

Her energy was fading. So I cleaned up her kitchen and said good night. Plus, I know the guys at the clubhouse will be wondering where I am. For now, I'm not raising too much suspicion.

The thought has crossed my mind that Raid would simply track my cell if they were curious.

And that's not a conversation I want to have.

At least no one has openly said anything to me about me being gone most nights.

As I pull my bike up into my space in the club parking lot, I let out a long exhale and kick out the stand. Turning off the engine, I glance up at the moon, taking in the warmth in the springtime air.

How did my life get this good?

Sure, there are hurdles to overcome—real big fucking hurdles—but right now, Ingrid and I are in a good place. Even if Nash is the only person who knows about us.

I walk inside, brothers and old ladies sitting about, mingling like normal for a Thursday night. Making my way to the bar, Grudge spots me, a smirk on his face as Jesse sits beside him. I move in next to Jesse and tap the bar. Storm smiles and starts pouring.

Jesse clears his throat. "You've been gone a few hours tonight again, South," he states.

Shit.

I take the beer from Storm.

“Just taking the time to get to know the city,” I lie.

Jesse smirks, gently nudging my shoulder as Grudge laughs into his beer.

“You might be fooling the other guys, brother. But you’re not fooling Grudge and me,” Jesse says.

“What?”

Grudge spins on his stool. “You have a lady friend, don’t ya?”

I snort out a laugh. “Who says *lady friend*?”

Jesse grips Grudge’s shoulder. “He’s right, Grudge. That’s so old-school. South, you have a fuck buddy, right?” Jesse blurts out.

I almost choke on my beer. “Jesus Christ, prospect. No, I don’t have a fuck buddy.”

Grudge wiggles his brows. “So it’s something more serious? This girl you’re sneaking out to see most nights?”

Well, I wasn’t ready for this interrogation right now. How do I play this? Do I deny I’m seeing someone and figure out a reason as to why I am out, or do I tell them I am seeing someone to get them off my back?

I go with the latter.

Groaning, I rub the back of my neck to ease the tension. “Fuck... it’s new. It’s not even anything official. We’re testing the waters to see where it goes.”

Jesse grins, and Grudge grips my shoulder. “So... who’s the lucky girl?”

“Nope, you’re not getting that info. I wanna keep it on the down-low ’til I know there’s something to talk about.”

Jesse chuckles. “She must be *real* special. If she wasn’t, you wouldn’t be so protective.”

My stomach tightens in response to his damn words. “You’re right... she is special. And when I want to tell the

club, I will. But right now... I can't."

Grudge stares at me. "As long as this woman isn't a threat to the club, you should be good."

I let out a small laugh. "Definitely *not* a threat to the club."

"I don't know what it was like for you in LA, but we're an accepting bunch here in New Awlins. Whatever you got going on, if you need us, the club will have your back. You're a part of us now," Grudge offers his advice.

Jesse nods his head in agreement.

It's so fucking good to have a feeling of belonging. And if I could tell them about Ingrid and me, I would in a heartbeat. But it's not only my decision to make. And right now, she doesn't want them to know.

So I'll wait.

But not forever.

"Thanks... means a lot. It's feels fucking good to be accepted."

Grudge shrugs. "We're Defiance. Brothers stick together."

Nodding, I take a long sip of my beer and place it on the bar. "Has the pres noticed I've been MIA at night?" I ask.

Grudge and Jesse both chuckle. "South, you're new here, and everyone will be watching you. So yeah, I'd say if we've noticed, he has too."

"You think I need to talk to him?" I ask.

"If he was worried, he'd be riding your ass. You'll know when he is annoyed with you," Grudge states.

"All right... I'm gonna go shower. Thanks for the chat," I tell them.

"I'd say have a good night, but I have a feeling you already did," Jesse quips.

I smirk, wink, and without saying anything else, turn, walking for the hall.

Grudge and Jesse chuckle as I make my way into my room, wondering just how deep of a hole I am digging for myself. If everyone has already noticed my absence, it's only a matter of time before Hurricane and Bayou start asking *real* questions.

Ones I am not sure I can answer without incriminating Ingrid.

I'm lying to them about our relationship.

I'm lying to them about their mother's health.

All within the first month of my patching into the club.

Yeah, right now, I am a *real* trustworthy brother.

Hurricane's going to kick my ass when he finds out.

And then, he will kick my ass out and send me packing straight back to LA without a second thought.

My position within Defiance is at stake!

Fuck. This is real fucking bad...

CHAPTER TWELVE

South

Five Days Later

If I said I wasn't nervous, I'd be lying.

For the past two weeks, I've spent so much time trying to keep Ingrid distracted from thinking about today that I haven't let myself think about what the results could mean—and it's scary.

As I drive Ingrid in her car to the appointment, neither of us talks. The heaviness of the moment weighs on us both. But I subtly look at her knee, tapping up and down. She's anxious. So I drop my hand to rest on her knee and gently squeeze. "It's gonna be okay. No matter the biopsy results, I am here with you."

She inhales deeply and nods. "I know, it's just daunting. I feel fine. But in the space of one consultation, it could possibly change the course of my life."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. We will take whatever path and work with it. You're the strongest woman I know."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay... thank you for being here with me."

I pull into the parking lot. "I'm damn happy you chose me to be the person you confide in." Turning off the car, Ingrid lets out a long exhale, and I reach over, grabbing her hand in mine. "Whatever happens in there, I'm not going anywhere. I need you to understand my words."

She grimaces. "What if it's really bad news? I can't expect you to hang around and watch that."

My hand cups her face. “I’m in this. I know it’s hard for you to believe, but I’m by your side... rain, hail, or shine.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve your support,” she replies.

Shrugging, I sigh. “I can’t stop myself from wanting to be with you. And however that may come, whatever obstacles are thrown our way, I’ll take it.”

“You’re bordering on obsessive,” she quips with a bright smile.

Chuckling, I nod my head matter-of-factly. “Yeah... I know, but c’mon, look at you. If you saw what I see in you, inside and out, you’d be obsessed too.”

She smiles, moving to open the door. “You’re a real sweet talker, you sonofabitch. C’mon, let’s go get this over with.”

I let out a laugh and slide out of the car, quickly walking to her door. Once she’s out, I place my arm around her waist, and we stroll toward the building. “Yeah, but I’m your sweet-talking sonofabitch.”

Ingrid side-eyes me with a smirk. “Yeah... you are.”

Hearing her admit it—*finally*—my heart thumps with excitement.

We enter, get her checked in, and then sit and wait for the doctor to call.

I can tell she’s nervous again by how her thumbs twiddle and her foot anxiously taps on the floor. Can’t blame her. Whatever the doctor says is going to affect the rest of her life.

We wait a few minutes before he exits his office and looks at us. “Ingrid, you can head on in. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

She weakly smiles and stands. We never talked about whether I would be going in with her. More than anything, I want to. I want to be that support, so I grab her hand. “Should I come with you?”

She hesitates for a moment, biting her bottom lip. “You don’t have to.”

“No, but I want to.”

She doesn’t say anything else and simply nods her head once. I stand the quickest I ever have and wrap my arm around her as we walk inside the office. I lead her to one of the chairs facing the doctor’s desk, and she sits. The seat beside her is a good yard away, so I grab and drag it over so it is right beside her.

She finally cracks a smile. “Obsessive,” she whispers.

I wiggle my brows at her as the doctor steps inside the room, closing the door behind him. I sit back, getting comfortable in the chair, but reach out, taking her hand in mine. The doctor looks at our entwined hands but doesn’t react. “How are you feeling after the biopsy, Ingrid?”

She exhales, then shrugs. “Physically... okay, a little tender.”

The doctor smiles, grabbing his folder and sitting taller in his chair. “It’s good that you have support with you, Ingrid. I have your biopsy results. It’s good news and bad news, I’m afraid.”

We both tense up as he continues, “The good news is you have atypical ductal hyperplasia. A condition which occurs in the lining of the milk ducts of the breasts... basically, the number of cells lining the ducts or lobules of the breasts has increased, and *that* is what is causing the lump. The good part of this is that your ADH is *not* cancerous.”

A bright smile lights my face as I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding. I turn to Ingrid, tears well in her eyes as she smiles back at me.

The doctor continues, “But, the bad news...” my head snaps back to face the doctor, my breath instantly catching again, “... is that the abnormal cells in ADH have a high risk of becoming cancerous in the future. You’ll need surgery to remove the abnormal cells, including a margin around the cells to ensure we get everything so it doesn’t come back.”

I glance at Ingrid, and she bobs her head like she's trying to take all this in, but not all that successfully. "Surgery?"

The doctor subtly nods. "Unfortunately, yes. There are options with this, Ingrid. If you want to be extra cautious, we can remove the entire breast or even do a double mastectomy, though in this case, I don't think we need to be that extreme, but again, that's *your* decision."

Ingrid clears her throat. "If we remove the abnormal cells and margins, what are the odds of it returning, and will I need further treatment?"

"Further treatment more than likely not. I can't give you a guarantee until we get the pathology back and check those margins, but I am happy with the diagnosis of ADH and the fact that we should be able to remove it with a lumpectomy. You will have a scar, though."

She lets out a long breath like her body is relaxing. "A scar I can handle, and if you don't think I need to have the full breast removed, then I don't want to do that."

I sit back, my stomach tightening in apprehension. "Doc, shouldn't she get the breast removed to be extra cautious?"

Ingrid narrows her eyes on me like she's shocked that I am even suggesting that right now, but I want her to make the best decision for her future health.

The doctor exhales. "Removing the breasts is a big step. Is it the safest option? Possibly. But there are still no guarantees. It lowers the recurrence rate by ninety percent, but there's always that small chance it will return, no matter what option you choose. That's why we thoroughly monitor you with aftercare for years to check for abnormalities to make sure there are no changes to cells in both breasts. And if there are, we will act immediately."

"But surely it's better to be safer and remove the breast than to do a lumpectomy?" I reiterate, and Ingrid turns, grabbing my hand.

"South, I already feel like this is monumental. Please... just let me make this decision the way I need to."

Rubbing the back of my neck in frustration, I stand from the chair and start pacing. The idea of losing Ingrid to this scares the hell out of me.

“I’m going to give you both some time. I’ll be back shortly,” the doctor states as he stands and walks for the exit.

The sound of the door closing behind him grates on my last nerve.

I try to control my breathing as I pace the terrible carpet.

Ingrid stands and walks to me. “Romeo, I need you to calm down.”

She reaches out, grabs my arms, and forces me to look at her. “I don’t understand why you would put yourself at risk like this?” I snap louder than I intended.

She reaches out, grabs my hand, and places it on her breast.

I furrow my brows. “What are you—”

“Don’t tell me that touching me like this doesn’t affect you,” she states.

My anger eases, my fingers gently squeezing and massaging her breast. “You know it does, but angel, I don’t need them to be attracted to you.”

She grimaces. “But *I* need them to feel like a woman. To feel like I can even be remotely sexy to you. As it is, I’m going to have a scar across one of them. And before you say anything, I know you’re not going to care about that, but *I’m* going to be self-conscious about it. You made me feel sexy about my stretch marks, but I don’t know how to return from a double mastectomy. It would break *us*. It would break *me*. And South, I *don’t* want that. I trust the doctors to take care of me and monitor it in the future if anything else should appear. And if it does, we deal with it then.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I gently press my lips to hers. That spark of passion courses through my veins. I don’t know how, but she’s making sense. I want her to have the best care possible, but that also means mentally, and mentally, she needs to do it her way.

“Okay... we do the lumpectomy. But Ingrid, we *have* to tell your family.”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know... maybe we tell them after the surgery?”

I sigh out my frustrations. “How are you going to explain being in hospital? And what if something goes wrong? How am *I* supposed to cover that up?”

She closes her eyes like she’s thinking it through. “Okay...” she whispers, then opens her eyes, “... we’ll tell them. But I say when. I need to do this in *my* time. I know I’m being frustrating, but—”

“It’s okay, baby. I get it. And I was only fighting you on this because I want what’s best for *you*.”

She nods, bringing her hand to my bearded cheek. “Thank you... I don’t know how I’d be doing this without you.”

“You won’t have to find out. C’mon, let’s sit and wait for the doctor to return.”

Not long later, the doctor knocks and pokes his head back inside. “Have you had enough time to discuss?”

Ingrid waves him in. “Yes, sorry about that, doc. We had to get our thoughts out in the open.”

He makes his way to his desk and dips his chin. “It’s common for loved ones to have disagreements in treatment plans. And we also offer a counseling service if either or both of you need it through this process.”

“That’s very kind of you, doc. We will let you know if we do, right, South?” Ingrid asks, and I turn up my nose at the thought of talking to some shrink but nod anyway to keep her happy.

“Right.”

“Okay, so have you come to a decision?” the doctor asks.

“We have,” Ingrid declares, reaching out for my hand.

I lace my fingers with hers. “She’s having the lumpectomy, but you make *damn* sure you get everything. *You fucking get it*

all. Otherwise, it won't just be this one-percent biker coming for you, it will be the whole fucking club.”

“South!” Ingrid snaps as the doctor's eyes widen. “He's joking. Tell him you're joking!”

I tilt my head. “Am I?”

The doctor fakes a smile. “I can see Ingrid means a lot, and I can promise you I take the absolute best care of all my patients.”

I sit back in my chair, relaxing a little more. “Good... thank you, doc. I think we're gonna get along just fine.”

Ingrid chuckles as does the doctor.

“I am glad to hear that. Well, Ingrid, if you are happy to move ahead, I can schedule your surgery for about three weeks.”

Ingrid widens her eyes, exhaling dramatically. “That soon?”

“The sooner we get on top of this, the better. Do you think you can make that work?”

I sit forward, nodding my head. “We *will* make it work. No matter what.”

“I'll get the receptionist to help you book a date and prepare the paperwork, Ingrid. You have support, which is important. But all in all, the prognosis is a really good one. You shouldn't need any further treatment, just monitoring, so that's a huge plus.”

“It really is. Thanks again. I guess we will see you in three weeks,” Ingrid states.

“If you have any questions in the meantime, please call, and I'll get back to you with an answer.”

I stand, and Ingrid follows as I reach out to shake his hand. “Thanks for taking such good care of her, doc.”

His grip on mine is firm, letting me know he isn't scared of me. Which only makes me respect him more. “It's my pleasure. You're in good hands, Ingrid.”

She leans forward, shaking his hand. “Appreciate it. See you soon.”

We turn and walk out the door, making our way to the receptionist and then back to the car.

Holding open the door, Ingrid slides into the passenger side with a small smile. “You really are a soft teddy bear underneath it all.”

Letting out a grunt, I scowl. “Fuck that! I ain’t no teddy bear.” I close her door to the sounds of her giggling as I walk around to the drivers’ side.

Opening my door, I slide in, and she stares at me, so I turn to look at her. “What?”

She shakes her head, letting out a soft sigh. “Just the way you stand up for me. The way you fight for me. The way you hold the car door open for me. It’s like you’re an old soul trapped in a young body.”

I smirk. “It’s like you’re a young soul trapped in an—” I stop wherever I was going with that, and she lets out a laugh.

“You’re fucking lucky you stopped, Romeo,” she quips, pointing her finger at me.

I lean in, clamping my teeth down on the end of her finger. Her eyes widen as I slowly suck on her pointer for good measure.

She shakes her head, pulling her finger from my mouth with a slight pop. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And you’re sexy as fucking sin, so how can you blame me?”

Ingrid snorts out a laugh, sliding her hand onto my thigh. The feeling sends a sense of calm through me that I didn’t know I needed. I sink into the seat and put the car in reverse.

“Thank you... for seeing things from my perspective in there,” Ingrid adds.

I side-eye her as I pull out onto the street. “I get it. And you know I will always have your back. I also want what’s best for

you. It's the only reason I spoke up in there."

"I know, and I appreciate it so much... having someone care about me like you do is nice."

I turn to glance at her quickly before turning my eyes back to the road. "You know... if you told Hurricane, Bayou, Novah, and Nash, they would all react the same way I did. They would all want to be here with you, supporting you. Everyone loves you, Ingrid. You're the heart of this club."

She sinks lower into her chair. "No... they don't need me. They all have their own lives they live. Hurricane has Kaia and baby Immy to take care of now. Novah and Bayou have each other, and they're pregnant now too. And Nash has Brianna and his business to keep him occupied. They don't need me to take care of them anymore."

I scowl. "They may not *need* you to care for them, but you're still their mother. They love and adore you. They will always *need* you."

She raises her brow. "Do you need Lucia?"

I let out a loud laugh. "That's different. My mother is the devil's spawn. You saw that firsthand. You're a fucking good mom. They are lucky to have you."

She places a quick kiss on my cheek. "See... teddy bear."

I snort out a laugh. "Fuck off."

She giggles as we drive back to her home, where I will spoil and treat her like the queen she is for the rest of the night.

But we need to come up with a plan.

And quickly.

About how to tell the rest of her family.

They need to know what's going on.

Because I honestly don't know how much longer I can keep this secret from them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

South

Two Days Later

I've settled into the club now for a few weeks.

I feel like I am getting a handle on how things work around here, and I have to admit, I like it here, but I miss LA. The pull of my brothers back home is starting to sink in because it's not like I didn't love the guys back in Los Angeles. There was nothing wrong with the LA clubhouse. I simply needed something fresh. And I have certainly gotten that here in NOLA.

As I pull out my cell, my homesickness grows a little more when I see a text from Bella.

Smiling instantly, I swipe the screen.

Bella: *Hey, just checking in. You still alive, or have you been eaten by those big-ass mosquitos?*

I laugh and nod because the mosquitos are fucking huge here. Instead of typing back, I dial her number as I sit back on my bed.

It rings for a few moments, and then she answers, "Hey, little bro, you *are* alive!"

"I am. Sorry I haven't called or texted. Been busy. Club life, you know how it gets?"

She hums down the line. "I don't, but I can imagine... robbing banks and stealing cars, beating up old grannies is all in a day's work," she jests, and I roll my eyes in response.

“You’re a bitch, and I’d only beat up an old granny if she was part of a zombie apocalypse. Other than that, grannies are safe around me.”

“But cars and banks are free range?” she states.

I chuckle. “Well, never say never, desperate times and all that.”

She laughs. “I’ll be sure to keep some bail money handy at all times.”

“Probably a good idea at this point.”

“Jesus, Romeo. You’re not being serious, are you?” she asks with more sternness.

“Am I ever serious?” I ask.

She snorts. “Hardly ever! But on the occasion that you are, it’s always because of a real-life situation. Something big.”

I sink into my mattress and exhale. “Yeah...”

She is quiet momentarily and then continues, “Hey... is something bothering you?”

I know Ingrid said she wanted to keep us under wraps. I know she wanted to keep everything about her situation quiet until she’s ready to talk, but honestly, all this secret keeping is fucking killing me.

Especially from my president.

I feel like I need to talk to someone.

And maybe that is someone who *can’t* tell the people here at the club.

“Bells... you remember the day when we were younger, and Reaper from Defiance came over to our home and brought his new Old Lady, Ingrid, and their two kids, and I kinda lost my shit at you?”

She scoffs out a laugh. “You threw a trophy at me if I remember correctly. But yeah... why you bringing all that stuff up?”

“You remember how Ingrid was the only one who could calm me in that moment, and how after that day, I kinda changed?”

She snorts. “Yeah, you wouldn’t take any more of our parents’ bullshit. You started standing up for yourself. Where’s this going, Romeo?”

“Well, Ingrid is here... at the clubhouse... in NOLA.”

“Oh, that’s nice, it’s good for you to know someone there. It’ll make it easier for you to have someone you can lean on, right?”

Exhaling, I rub the back of my neck to ease the tension. “It’s complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I first got here, her stepson, my president, put me on her as detail to take her to an appointment. I went with her, and when she came out, she told me they found a lump in her breast, and they did a biopsy.”

“Jesus, is it bad? What did her family say?” she asks.

“That’s the thing. Ingrid begged me not to say anything to her family. And in that moment, I became the only person who knew her diagnosis. I’ve been hiding it from the rest of the club.”

“Oh shit, Romeo. That’s bad, isn’t it? What will they do to you when they find out you’re keeping shit from them?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. But at least the prognosis for Ingrid is a good one. But they still have to go in and do a lumpectomy to remove the cells. I told the doctor I would come after him myself if he didn’t get it right.”

Bella is quiet for a moment. “Hmm... Romeo, how much time have you been spending with Ingrid?”

“A lot. I have to because I’m the only one who knows about her diagnosis. So I’m the only one who can help her. I want to protect and keep her safe.”

“Mm-hmm... and how long have you been fucking her during this time?” she flat out asks.

“W-what?”

She chuckles. “The way you’re so protective over her? C’mon, Romeo. I know you better than you think I do. You like her! So I’m not surprised now you’re both consenting adults that there’s something there. There *is* something there, right?”

I can try to deny it to my sister all I want, but she will see right through me. And maybe this is the reason I called her, so I could finally tell someone what’s going on.

So I let it out. “Yeah... there’s something, and it’s so fucking good, Bells. I’ve never felt like this about anyone.”

She sighs, and I can’t tell whether it’s dejected or contented.

“I’m so fucking happy for you, little brother. It’s nice to see you finally settling into something that you were always destined for. And an older woman will be good for you. I know she’ll keep you in line. You fucking need that!”

I snort out a laugh. I could have sworn it would have gone the other way by the sound of her sigh. “I had no idea how you would react to this.”

“I’m the easy one to talk to. I will *always* support you. Growing up, we may have fought like hell, but don’t all siblings? I love you, Romeo. You are the best brother in the world, and I *will* stand by you no matter what you do. Mom and Dad, on the other hand...” She giggles. “Oh, they’re going to have a *field day* when they hear about this.”

“Fuck... I know. The fact Ingrid was married to Dad’s best friend doesn’t get past me. It’s complicated. The fact I am a year younger than her youngest child is fucking strange too. I would never normally be the type of guy to go for something like this, but there’s something about her I can’t seem to stay away from. Ingrid makes everything... *so... much... better.*”

“Sounds like you’re falling for her,” Bella suggests.

“No, I can’t be. It’s too fucking soon.”

Bella exhales. “It might feel like it’s soon, but this woman has greatly impacted your life. She gave you the strength to stand up to our shitty parents. To become the man you are today. Without her, you wouldn’t be where you are right now. You started falling for her the moment she saved you that day. You were just too young to realize it. So that’s why this feels fast because the intensity is escalating now, but honestly, Romeo, it’s been there all along. I know because of how often you would talk about her growing up. Never in a way that made me think you liked her, but just that you admired her for what she did for you. The fact she’s reciprocating is unexpected, but you can charm the pants off anyone. So I guess she’s just a victim to the good old South spell.”

“*You’re* surprised she’s reciprocating? You should see this from *my* angle.” I chuckle along with her.

“Are you happy, Romeo?” she asks, and a light smile crosses my face.

“Fuck, yeah. I mean... it’s tough, there’s no doubt. I hate that Ingrid’s going through all this, and seeing her doubt herself and how amazing she is and how beautiful I see her... goddamn, it fucking kills me. But spending time with her is all I need. The rest is a bonus.”

Bella giggles like a schoolgirl. “Oh yeah, you’re definitely falling for her.”

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and sit taller. “Don’t tell Mom and Dad... I need to find a way to tell them that won’t end in Dad having heart failure.”

Bella giggles. “Good luck with that. And before you get any bright ideas... there is *no way in hell* I am telling them. That’s one hundred percent your job, but can I be there when *you* tell them?”

“Fuck off!” I retort, making her laugh.

“Okay, I better go, but I’m here if you need to vent. Any time, okay? I know I am a busy bitch, but I love you, and you’re my priority. Always.”

My chest warms as I smile at her words. “Thanks, Bells. I appreciate you. I miss you. I’ll try to come home for a weekend in a few weeks to see you.”

“Nah, your priority right now is to take care of Ingrid. We’ll still be here. You focus on your woman.”

“I will... and you look after yourself, okay?”

“I never do, but I need you to keep in touch and tell me what’s happening with Ingrid. Don’t be a stranger.”

“Got it! And thanks for listening. It’s been fucking good having someone I can talk to about all this who isn’t coming at me like a judgmental asshole.”

“I mean, I judge you for a lot of things, but who you fall for is *not* one of them... oh, unless it’s that Jess bitch from tenth grade. Yeah, I will *always* judge you for her.”

I burst out laughing. “Fuck! I judge me for liking her too. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking for those few months.”

“Clearly, it was the hormones talking because she had the biggest rack I have ever seen for a sixteen-year-old,” Bella quips.

“I don’t think you can say shit like that, Bells.”

“I can, *you* can’t. Okay, I am really going this time... have a good day, Rome. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I tell her, and she ends the call.

I can’t help but smile, feeling lighter somehow. Even though I have only told one person about everything that’s happening, it’s now a weight off my chest. Even though the one person I really need to tell, I am forbidden to, and he is the one person who has the power to make me pay for not coming clean about Ingrid’s diagnosis, her treatment, and ultimately now her surgery—not to mention our relationship.

I can’t tell which secret Hurricane is going to want to kill me for the most.

But I can’t worry about that, or it will drive me insane.

Right now, I need to get on with my day.

Standing, I slide my cell into my jeans pocket and head out of my bedroom to the main clubroom. The other guys are already eating breakfast, and I walk over to City and Izzy and sit next to them.

Izzy is frantically eating, like she's running late, and I smirk at her. "You heading into work this morning, Iz?"

"Yeah, got a full client list today. So I need to get my butt into gear."

City smirks. "There's something I could do with your butt if you like?"

Izzy rolls her eyes. "Stop! I need to eat and go."

City chuckles. "I can eat you before you go." He waggles his brows at Izzy suggestively.

Izzy shoves him on the shoulder as I grin. "Shut up! I'm trying to eat my breakfast. Some of us have an honest living to maintain. So stop your wicked thinking and let me get to work on time."

City snickers, rubbing her back. "Fine. I can wait 'til you get home."

She shoves the last of her granola into her mouth, then leans in, gently kissing City's lips. "I'll see you when I get home. Love you. Bye, South."

"Love you too, baby, have a good day," City replies, smacking her on the ass as she turns to walk out.

"Bye, Iz," I call out to her.

She waves to me, hoisting her bag over her shoulder.

City watches her ass every step of the way, and I can't help but chuckle at him, wondering if I will ever be that open with Ingrid. Nudging City's shoulder, I sigh. "She's a good one... a keeper," I tell him.

He turns to face me and nods. "Yeah... she is. Took me far too fucking long before I acted on it. All that time I lost with her because of Dice."

I nod my head in acknowledgment.

Dice and Izzy were the ‘it couple’ in LA. But I think we all could see something was brewing with the friendship between Izzy and City. I wasn’t surprised when Alpha told us Izzy was staying in NOLA to be with City, especially once all the shit with Dice went down. Dice lost his way long before he came looking for trouble down here. He was drowning, and there would only ever be one way out for him. It’s a shame that it ended the way it did between City, Izzy, and Dice. Because those three were inseparable at one point.

I grip City’s shoulder. “You and Iz were always meant to be, brother. The rest of us could see that. Now look at you, married, happy as fuck... next step, kids?”

City chuckles as he rolls his shoulders. “We’re tryin’.”

I widen my eyes, my mouth agape at that bomb he dropped on me. “Fuck, man! I had no idea. I was just messing with you.”

He purses his lips. “We have been since the wedding, but no luck so far.”

I furrow my brows, trying to do that math. “What’s that been, six months?”

“Eight... we just can’t seem to fall pregnant. There was one time when we thought that maybe because she was two weeks late, but nope. Nothing.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry, man. Have you seen a specialist? Get yourselves checked out?” I ask.

“I suggested that, but Izzy’s too scared. I think she doesn’t want to know if there is a real problem, and for some reason, one of us can’t have kids.”

I shrug. “Better to know than to keep up the hope, right? Because that shit can fester faster than a speeding bullet.”

City inhales deeply, rubbing his shaved scalp. “What about you? You want kids one day?”

Well, fuck! I walked right into that.

I wasn't expecting it to be turned around on me. My mind shifts to Ingrid and our conversation. If everything works out and we make it, kids won't be an option for me. It would have been cool to have been a dad, but I can be the fun uncle to all the kids at the clubhouse, and I am totally fine with that. "I don't think kids are in the cards for me."

City raises his brow. "You're still young. You're not tied down to anyone. How can you be sure?"

"Just a feeling I get."

City purses his lips, nodding his head. "Fair enough. So tell me, you enjoying your time here?"

I can't fight the smile that lights my face. "I can see why you transferred."

City chuckles. "It's a good club. And Hurricane is less..."

"Tense?" I suggest, and City nods.

"Yeah, don't get me wrong. Alpha's great. He just lets his baggage get on top of him."

I dip my head. "Oh yeah. He really should see a damn therapist about all that stuff that happened with—"

Suddenly, the proximity alarm goes off, and we all shoot our heads up, glancing at Raid.

He taps away on this tablet to check who's approaching. He groans, shaking his head, and turns off the alarm. "Pres, it's the Baroness and her men."

Hurricane curls up his lip. "The fuck does she want?"

"No clue. But they're at the gate," Raid states.

"Dammit! Let 'em in," Hurricane orders and walks for the entrance.

"I better go," City murmurs, clear aggravation in his tone.

I nod as he stands and walks over to his president to stand by his side as VP, the rest of us sitting back, waiting and watching as the Baroness and her minions approach the doorway.

The familiar click-clack of her high heels resounds through the clubhouse as she enters the building. Everyone watches as her smug expression focuses in on Hurricane.

“Hello, boys, nice to see you made an effort to greet me. Glad some people know respect is still a thing in the South.”

“Constance, how can we help you?” Hurricane asks, gesturing for her to enter further into the clubhouse. Her pristine, tailored white dress suit looks even more pompous and precocious than ever.

Her heels grate on my nerves as she walks in and heads straight for the Chapel, all of us widening our eyes as Hurricane and City follow her.

“I think you should *all* be in on this. It’s a big conversation we’re about to have.” She enters the Chapel as we all look at Hurricane.

He rolls his shoulders but then gestures for us to enter.

“C’mon, boys, you heard the lady, it’s Church time,” he demands.

I stand quickly, along with the rest of the club, and hurry into the Chapel. I take my seat at the opposite end of the table to Hurricane. The others sit in their positions as Bayou pulls out a chair for the Baroness to sit between him and Hurricane. Her men stand against the walls to the side.

Hurricane bangs his gavel, signaling the beginning of Church.

The Baroness smiles wide, but her eyes tell me more than I need to know—that smile is not friendship, that’s for sure.

“I have always wanted to see you do that, so official, so efficient,” she states before Hurricane can say anything.

The look on his face says it all. He’s pissed the Baroness is here and making a fuss. Whatever she wants, she’s certainly annoying Hurricane before she gets it. “All right, we’re all here. We’re all listenin’. What is it that you want?”

She places her fisted hands on the plexiglass table. “I have information.”

Hurricane clicks his tongue to the roof of his mouth. “Information on what?”

“An imminent attack, on Defiance women.”

We all sit taller, looking around the room at each other.

“All Defiance or NOLA Defiance?” Hurricane specifies.

“NOLA specifically.” She tilts her head. “My sources say the threat is coming from the Bratva. They want to hurt you, and to do that...” she pauses for dramatic effect, “... they will come at the people you love the most, your old ladies and key female family members.”

“Jesus!” City growls as the rest of us move uncomfortably in our seats.

“How did you get this *information*?” Hurricane asks.

“How do I know anything, Hurricane? I’m the queen of these parts. I know what *everyone* is doing.” Her eyes flick to me, and she wiggles her brows, which instantly causes me to tense.

“Do you have a hit list? Actual target names?” I ask, wanting to know more than anything if Ingrid is on said list.

She smirks. “The information I was told was old ladies and family. So I would assume that means Ingrid too,” she confirms, staring at me, then subtly turns her head to look at Hurricane. “So I would ensure you’re protecting mother dearest as well when you send your women away.”

My stomach falls through the floor.

My anxiety spiking tenfold.

If the Baroness knows about Ingrid and me, then who the fuck else knows?

Hurricane, however, doesn’t pick up on the Baroness’ subtle hints as he continues with his line of questioning, “What makes you think we would send the women away?”

The Baroness snorts out a laugh. “Why wouldn’t you? There’s an imminent threat. The Bratva are coming for the people you love. Keeping them here is only going to ensure

the Bratva can find them. Surely you would be better off sending them somewhere with protection, somewhere where the Bratva won't know to look?"

"Let me guess, you have an idea where to send them? Somewhere *far* out of town?" Hurricane asks.

"Actually, quite the opposite. You know the Civil Defense Bunker out on Pontchartrain Boulevard?"

Bayou turns up his lips in some sort of smirk. "That place has been closed forever."

The Baroness tilts her head. "And why do you think that is? Do you believe all the photos they put online about it being abandoned and flooded? No, that's a cover-up. I own it. It's a heavily decked-out bunker stocked full of supplies, weapons, you name it, it's down there. Hidden in plain sight, as they say."

We all laugh as we watch her expression to see if she's bluffing.

She clearly isn't.

Holy fuck, this woman is something else.

"So what, you're just gonna let us stow our women there while we take the fight to the Bratva?" Hurricane asks.

She raises her hands in a gesture of 'I don't know.' "Well, see, this is my dilemma."

We all shift uncomfortably. It's never easy dealing with the Baroness.

I know something is coming.

We all do.

"Okay... I'll bite. Tell me, what's goin' on in that twisted mind of yours, Constance?" Hurricane grumbles.

She sits back, completely relaxed in her chair. "I give you the access codes to the bunker for your women. You can have safe haven and permission to use everything in there for as long as you need, but... this counts as another favor in the

basket for me, and in total, that will be four favors I need remuneration from you.”

Hurricane glances at City, then at Bayou. They both aren't giving anything away. The tally is getting high to a point where we are going to find ourselves in a hole if we're not careful.

Hurricane sits forward, seemingly uncomfortable, as he cranes his neck to the side. “The tally's soaring. We gotta start paying off our debts. We don't like owin', Baroness. We'll take this kind offer of the bunker for our women, but we're gonna need to start payin' off our debts in return.”

A wide grin crosses her face, and I just know it's not good. “I am so glad to hear you say that because I need you to do something for me. The task is a big one. It's going to hurt all of you. But because you owe me so much, if you do this, it will wipe all your debts with me. You *don't* do it. I will make sure to help the Bratva in their endeavors to take you out. Remember, *I* have the power of the South behind me, of every corrupt organization you can think of. I know people you haven't even thought of who could bring your club down. So... I would consider this offer carefully before coming back at me with a knee-jerk reaction.”

The tension in the room escalates to a fever pitch.

Hurricane glares at her with an animalistic stare. “Are you threatenin' us?”

“Do I *need* to threaten you? Or will you fall into line? Remember... it's *your* women on the line here,” she demands.

Hurricane glances at Bayou, and he subtly nods. Hurricane groans under his breath, and he turns back to the Baroness. “What are your terms?”

Her eyes narrow, and a frigid cold falls over the room. The imminent chill of death and deception lingers in the air like a noxious weed spreading its vines throughout the fabric of our clubhouse. I can't explain it, but if the face of the devil could show itself, I think it would look exactly like the Baroness' face is twisting in her triumph right now. Her delight is our

terror, and as it rips through the Chapel, my stomach tightens, my heart rate spikes as she pulls out a folder and places it on the table.

“I need you to kill someone for me. He’s not cooperating with me like his predecessor and is more trouble than he’s worth with his righteous bullshit.”

Hurricane inhales sharply through his nose. “So this is a rival gang? Someone we know?”

The smirk that lights the Baroness’ face is so sinister, so evil, it’s like something from a horror movie. “You could say that.” She opens the folder to a profile, and on the front page is a kill sheet.

The image on the profile is...

Six.

The Houston Defiance MC President.

We all jerk back in response.

Hurricane glares at her. “You’re outta your fuckin’ mind. This must be a goddamn joke?”

The Baroness stares him down with a steely determination. “Do I look like I am joking?”

The air in the Chapel turns frigid as Hurricane stands so aggressively the chair falls backward. He lunges across the table for her, knocking his gavel off the plexiglass to the floor with a crash. “I’ll fuckin’ kill you first!”

We all stand.

But City is the first to grab Hurricane and pull him back from reaching her. “Take a breath, Hurricane,” he growls out, clinging onto our president as he pants harshly through his nostrils while the Baroness chuckles under her breath.

“I don’t expect you to be happy about this, Hurricane, but I do expect you to comply. You *will* carry out this hit. Or there *will* be consequences for you and your club. And I can promise you... I follow through on my threats.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

South

The steely expression crossing the Baroness' face tells us she is *not* fucking kidding.

She's put a hit out on Six.

A fellow Defiance MC President.

Our friend.

A brother.

And she wants us to carry out the fucking job.

She sits taller in her chair, looking Hurricane directly in the eyes. "This is the deal, Hurricane. Your club takes out Six. I don't care how it's done as long as he's dead. I need proof, and when I get that, your debt to me will be wiped fre—"

"This is fucking bullsh—" Bayou snaps and the Baroness holds up her hand to stop him.

"In the meantime, I will help with every method at my disposal to keep your women safe from the Bratva, and I will also do whatever you need to bring Anton and his men to an end. I am sick of them going about things in their own way. I want to see New Orleans run differently, and I see a bright future with Defiance at the helm, but I can only do it if I have you working with me, not against me, like Six. And as you have seen here today, I am not above taking out those who... *work. Against. Me.*"

We all stare at Hurricane to see how he's going to play this.

We're being backed into a corner.

But surely, we *can't* do this.

Can we?

“How can we trust you won’t lead the Bratva straight to our women? After this shit you’re pullin’ with Six. How can I trust anythin’ you say?”

“I’ll go into the bunker and stay with them the entire time. There’s no way I would put myself in the line of fire. I have far too many contingencies in place for me to be taken out by the fucking Bratva... if I am there, your women will be safe.”

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck. The tension in the air is palpable while everyone waits for him to talk. He clears his throat, and at the same time, he shakes his head. “You keep our women, children, and families safe. We’ll take out the Bratva. That all goes to plan then, and only then will we take out Six for you.”

“What!”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Pres, for real?”

“Fucking hell!”

“No fucking way!”

Everyone talks over each other.

The Baroness smiles, or is that a sneer?

Hurricane slams his gavel on the table. “All y’all, shut the fuck up! I’ve made my decision. We need to think about the good of *our* club. The good of *our* family and *our* people—”

“And going to war with Houston is taking care of our families, Pres? There’s *got* to be another way!” Hoodoo states.

Hurricane scrubs at his face like he’s trying to think shit through. “Look, I don’t know how we’re gonna do it, but we won’t attack. We’ll hit him without them knowin’ it’s us. If we can do it without startin’ a war, we will do it that way. That good with you, Constance?”

The wrathful scowl follows a small laugh. “I don’t care if you make it look like a simple road accident or that he choked on a ham sandwich. I don’t care *how* it’s done, just that it *is* done.”

Hurricane looks out over the rest of us, clear hesitation in his eyes, but then he turns to the Baroness beside him and places his hand for her to shake. “You have a deal.”

A resounding huff echoes around the room as the rest of us feel the heaviness of his decision.

This is *not* good.

The Baroness shakes his hand a single time. “You’ve made the right choice for your club, Hurricane. I will get my team to send a coded message to Raid with all the information on the bunker for you to take your women there. It is available to you as of right now. You can go there whenever you have them all gathered. But from what my intel tells me, you should get them there fast because Anton will be looking for them and picking them up one by one.”

Hurricane nods to Raid, who stands and darts out of the room.

My stomach is churning, wondering if Ingrid is okay or if the Bratva has already started their attack.

“I’d say thank you for comin’ to us with this information, but I feel like you’ve also kicked me in the nuts while handin’ me the olive branch, so... I’m not gonna. I will, however, say it’s time for you to leave because we gotta get a move on and find our women. You understand the need for us kickin’ your ass out?” Hurricane states.

She chuckles, standing and gently wiping her dress suit down. “I understand perfectly. I’ll be talking to y’all real soon. Good luck! And if you need me, you know my number. I’ll send my men to the bunker to watch over your women so you can rally and deal with the Bratva at full strength. You’ll need *all* your men, Hurricane. *I* need you to take care of Anton. *Get. It. Done.*”

He nods, and she turns, walking for the clubhouse exit, her men following her like little fucking sheep. The rest of us spin, facing Hurricane, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But he doesn’t change course. “Right, you heard the lady. Go call your women. Get them back here fuckin’ now. If you can’t get

ahold of them, hop on your bike and pick them up. We need them here... *yesterday!* Go!”

We all stand slowly, unsure if that’s all.

Bayou is the first to talk. “Are we really not going to talk about *what the fuck* just happened in here?”

Hurricane cranes his neck to the side, and the audible cracks from the tension in his spine ripples through the room. “Look, I know this is a bitter pill to swallow. I don’t know how the fuck we’re gonna do this, but we gotta think about what’s more important. These are the lives of the people we love. All our women, children, our mothers, our sisters...” He rubs a hand through his hair, the pressure so great, the lines on his forehead have never been so pronounced. “This is one of those cases where it’s the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. And in this case, it’s one man. Yes, it happens to be a fellow president who we all respect and fuckin’ look up to. A friend. A brother. But what choice do we have when it’s *our* club at war?”

“We stand and fight against the Baroness, Pres,” Hoodoo states, and the other guys nod in agreement.

“And how do we do that when that bitch controls everythin’? The woman has power every-fuckin’-where. Hell, I’m sure she even has her say in what the Baton Rouge Bachelors do, and we all know the power *that* elite enterprise has in the South. The fact she came to us to do this instead of the Bachelors or the Bratva means she targeted us. She’s been using us, buildin’ these favors we owe her over time for this specific reason. She’s been planin’ this for a while. She knew once we had so many outstandin’ debts, there was no way we could say no. So I get it... this is fuckin’ crazy and reprehensible. She played us, but we need to think smarter. We need to think preservation... and goin’ along with the Baroness’ plan is the only way forward at this point.”

Bayou stands, slamming his fist on the table. “This. Is. *Bullshit!* I have fucking twins on the way, and I still would have voted for finding another way around this. We don’t turn on Defiance, Hurricane,” his voice raises higher the longer he

speaks. He rolls his chair out so hard it runs across the room and slams into the wall, then storms for the exit.

“In case you’ve forgotten, *brother*, those twins are *my* family too. I want them to be fuckin’ safe because their mother is my fuckin’ stepsister who I love more than anythin’. So *don’t* come at me. I’m just takin’ care of the people I love.”

“Yeah, while betraying those who have helped us countless times. It’s called backstabbing, *brother*, and it’s not a good look!” Bayou pulls back the Chapel door, walks through, and slams it shut behind him, the picture frames on the wall rattling with the movement.

Hurricane sinks back into his chair, scrubbing at his face. “Anyone else got anythin’ they wanna get off their chest? Now’s the time to say it! ’Cause we’re not discussin’ this again until the time comes to act on it.”

We all glance around the room, but none of us are willing to say anything. I think Bayou said everything we’re all thinking. He’s the only one brave enough to say anything because he is Hurricane’s blood. The rest of us can’t get away with standing up to our president like that. So, we sit back and keep those thoughts to ourselves.

“Good. This is a lot to take on, but the main priority is our women. Let’s bring them in. Make the calls. Get on your bikes. Let’s get them to the bunker so we can format a plan for the Bratva... now. Fucking. Go!”

We each make our way for the door when my eyes meet City’s, and we don’t have to say anything to each other to know what we’re both thinking.

Fuck me! Shit is going to hell!

If we get caught killing a fellow president, it could start a civil war within the Defiance chapters.

Which, honestly, is probably exactly what the Baroness wants—for *Defiance to self-implode*.

Hurricane is playing right into her hands because she is targeting the one thing he can’t stand to lose. *His family*. So because of that, we’re all fucked.

We walk out into the main clubroom, a sense of urgency surrounding us.

I turn to City. “You on board with this?”

He rolls his shoulders. “I have to support my president. But it’s controversial... and it will backfire. We’re men down. Houston is stronger than us... I don’t know. But right now, we need to focus on the women and getting them to safety. I gotta go call Iz, get her back here.”

Nodding, I gesture for him to leave. “Yeah, go. I’m gonna see where I can help out.”

City fist-bumps me, and he takes off.

I spot the rest of the guys on their cells.

I stand back, my heart thumping in my chest.

I have no idea what to do right now.

Every part of me wants to call Ingrid, but it might raise alarm bells if I do.

Nope! I *need* to know if she’s safe.

So I head for the kitchen, stepping into the walk-in pantry, and pulling out my cell. Dialing Ingrid’s number, it rings a couple of times, and she answers, “Good morning, I didn’t think I would hear from you this early—”

“Hey, I don’t want to interrupt you, but shit is going down at the club. Has anyone called you yet?” I blurt out.

“No, what’s going on? Is everyone okay?” she asks.

“We’re okay, but we got a visit from the Baroness... it was fucking tense. A lot of shit went down. She said the Bratva are gunning for the women of our club. We’re calling everyone in immediately. The Baroness has given us a location to hide you all while we figure out what to do with Anton and his dicks.”

“Shit, okay. How long will we be at this location?”

“I don’t know. Pack a few essentials and get to the clubhouse as fast as possible. Ingrid, be careful and watch your six.”

She's quiet for a moment as beeping sounds through the phone. "Hurricane is calling."

"You should answer it and pretend you're hearing everything he says for the first time. Just get here fast, okay? I *need* to know you're safe."

"I will. See you soon."

I end the call, feeling relieved that Hurricane is calling her. I mean, I knew he would. I'm just glad he didn't wait too long.

Gasping in a deep breath, I take a moment to let everything sink in.

There is so much going on at the moment.

It feels like the world is moving at light speed, and I'm having trouble keeping up with the pace.

But I need to keep my shit together—for the club and for Ingrid.

I center myself and step out of the pantry into the kitchen. Lani's working on gathering some food into baskets. Widening my eyes, I stop, just staring at her.

She casually glances at me with a soft smile on her face. "What happens in the pantry stays in the pantry," she whispers.

My heart rate skyrockets as I step up beside her. "You heard that phone call?"

She nods. "I did."

I rub the back of my neck, feeling that crushing weight pulling me down again. "Lani... I—"

She turns to face me and grabs my hands in hers. "Before you say anything... whatever is or isn't going on, I don't need to know. And I certainly don't care. I will say that Hurricane is incredibly protective of the women in his life. So, if this is just a fling, don't let him find out. But if it is more, if it is real... pfft, you have one hell of a job to prove to him that you're worthy. It took Grit a long time before Hurricane warmed up

to him being my guy, and I'm not even blood, just a sister-in-law. So..."

Running my hand through my hair, I lean back on the bench and let out a long exhale. "Fuck. He's gonna kill me."

Lani reaches out, placing her hand on my arm supportively. "Do you care about her? Like *really* care about her?"

My eyes meet hers, and I nod sincerely. "Yeah... I do."

Lani shrugs. "Then that's all that matters." A bright smile lights her face. "It won't be easy though, that's for sure. But Ingrid is an amazing woman, and it's about time she found someone to make her happy. I'm glad it's you, South."

"We haven't told anyone... *no one*."

She gestures as if she's zipping her lips shut. "Consider it locked in the vault. Don't worry, I'm good at keeping secrets. I got your back."

"Thanks, Lani, I owe you. Can you watch Ingrid for me while you're down in the bunker? Make sure she's okay?"

Lani bumps her shoulder into mine. "You know she's going to run around taking care of everyone else down there, right? But yeah... I'll ensure she's taken care of too."

"Thanks, Lani, you're the best."

She grins wide, swaying her dress to the side. "I know." She beams. "Now, scoot, I have food to prep!"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply and turn, walking out of the kitchen to help in whatever way I can in the clubhouse.

Because I have a feeling shit's about to get real.

And by real...

I mean fucking terrifying!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ingrid

The tension around the clubhouse has been so fucking thick you could cut it with a knife. Not just because the guys are anxious about the Bratva, there's something else. Something deeper they're not telling us.

There's animosity brewing as well. I've been a part of Defiance long enough to know when shit is happening between the brothers, and that is *never* good.

It makes me nervous.

Honestly, I have enough to worry about right now without adding my club breaking apart at the seams. It's not something I thought I would ever see. These guys are so tight. I have no idea what could be causing this kind of hostility between them.

I can't tell if the other women are noticing it, but I'm a mother and can sense these things. This club is like one big family, and when families are at odds, it's clearly because they don't agree on something.

The club always backs each other.

So whatever this is, it must be a huge.

As the guys stand around, saying their goodbyes to their old ladies, I feel South's eyes on me from the other side of the room. He looks like a lost puppy, his eyes meeting mine, both of us wishing more than anything he could come over and we could say our goodbyes like everyone else.

But that would be suspicious.

So he hangs back with that longing look, which is killing me right now. I wish I could do something to let him know I'm feeling the strain of this, too, but as my heart feels like it is

beating out of my chest, my attention is drawn away when Bayou comes over, placing his arm around me. “You make sure to take good care of Novah and my kids for me while you’re in the bunker.”

I snort out a laugh. “Knowing Novah, she’ll be running the place like clockwork in no time.”

Bayou dips his head in acknowledgment. “Yeah, I can picture that.”

Novah steps up beside us with a bright smile on her face. “Are you talking about me?”

Bayou slides his hand over her popping-out stomach, and he chuckles. “I always talk about you, baby. You should know that by now.”

She rolls her eyes, leaning into his embrace. “You need a hobby. I’m gonna buy you a llama or a fainting goat or something. Give you something else to put your time into besides me.”

I chuckle.

Bayou nuzzles his face into her neck. “But I can’t do to a llama the things I can do to you.”

I raise my hands. “Mother present! Stop that line of talk right now, please.”

Bayou chuckles as Novah turns in his grip, sliding her hands up around his neck. “You better do all the things you want to me when I get back from the bunker because these babies are going to change everything for us when they arrive.”

I smirk and let out a small laugh.

Bayou curls up his nose. “Dammit! They’re not even here, and they’re already ruling the roost. I swear these kids are gonna have me eating out of the palm of their tiny little hands.”

Novah smiles, pressing a small kiss to his cheek. “That’s because you’re a teddy bear deep down.”

I tilt my head as he groans in disapproval. “You know she’s right, darling.”

“You two are the worst. I’m going to be a strong, tough, and manly father, not this pussy shit like Hurricane is with Immy.”

Novah and I smile like we both know that’s not going to be the case. Novah gently pats his shoulder.

I nod my head. “Okay, darling. Whatever you say,” I reply.

He groans as Hurricane steps up, baby Immy in his hands as he cuddles and coos at her.

“See! I’m not gonna be like him,” Bayou grumbles, kisses Novah, then turns, walking off.

Hurricane raises his brow as he hoists Immy onto his hip. “What was that about?”

Novah leans in, caressing Immy’s cheek. “He thinks you’re a big, soft, mushy teddy bear with Imogen. He says he’s not going to be like that with the twins. We think he’s kidding himself. He’s an even bigger softy than you are, isn’t he, little Immy?” Novah coos, and she giggles in return.

Hurricane chuckles, dipping his head. “Oh yeah, Bayou is gonna be one of *those fathers*, runnin’ around wearin’ a damn tutu and makeup for fun to keep his kids happy.”

Novah smiles. “Who says we’re having a girl?”

Hurricane shrugs. “Have a feelin’.”

I turn to Novah. “Why won’t you tell us what you’re having?”

She grins in excitement. “Because I want it to be a surprise when they’re born.”

“But you and Bayou know, so how is it a surprise?” Hurricane grunts.

“No, we want *y’all* to be surprised.”

Hurricane rolls his eyes. “That’s just stupid. How are we supposed to buy them the right shit if we don’t know what

they are?”

Novah frowns, and I punch Hurricane in the arm. “Give her a break. It’s her babies. It’s her choice whether she tells us or not.”

Novah smiles. “Thank you, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, darling.”

Hurricane places a kiss on Immy’s head. “All right, you ladies better get goin’. The Baroness’ men are gonna take you to the bunker. I need y’all to leave your cells so Anton can’t trace them, but I’ve given Kaia a burner, just in case. But only use it in an emergency. I need y’all to stay dark.”

I nod in understanding, though I can’t help feeling anxious about all this. “Hurricane, how long do we expect to stay in this bunker?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know, Ingrid... we have some club business we gotta deal with. The boys and I need to get on the same page about some shit before we can settle the score with the Bratva. If we’re not united, it’s never gonna work.”

Anxiety rolls through me like a tornado.

I have surgery coming up.

I can’t be out of action for a long period of time.

“How long are we talking, though? Weeks?” I ask.

Hurricane shakes his head. “Fuck, no! I’m hopin’ to have this all settled within a few days. I need this done.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding, relaxing my stiff muscles. “Okay... but can you contact us to let us know you are okay? Can you do that, please?”

He reaches out, placing his free hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about us, Ingrid. We’re gonna be all right. We are Defiance. We pull through *all the shit* thrown at us. It’s just what we do.”

“I’m glad you’re convinced,” I tell him as the Baroness and her men walk inside, sending a signal to us all. We turn at the

loud whistle, and the others follow the Baroness and her men outside.

My stomach rolls as I glance over to South, who's been watching me like a hawk from the other side of the room. I've felt his gaze on me this entire time. His steely stare delving deep into my soul.

I wish I could go to him.

I wish I could walk up to him and kiss him goodbye.

The club is headed off for a fight, and I have no idea what kind of danger he is riding into.

If shit goes bad, I may never see him again.

And the thought that my last interaction with him will be longing glances across a crowded room absolutely kills me.

"You okay, Mom?" Novah asks, breaking me from my internal struggle.

I snap my eyes from South to Novah and blink rapidly, trying to regain my composure. "What? Shit, yeah, I'm fine. Just trying to get a grip on everything that's happening."

Novah places her arm around my shoulders and squeezes. "It's okay, Mom. We will look after each other in the bunker."

I weakly smile. "Of course we will, darling."

Hurricane kisses both our heads quickly, and then we turn, walking for the exit. I risk a glance over my shoulder, making eye contact with South one last time. We can't physically talk to each other, but we don't need to. Everything is being said through our eyes. I mouth, *Goodbye*, and he mouths it back to me. A simple gesture letting each other know we're in this together.

I hesitate to turn back to the front, but I know if I don't, it will raise suspicions. Regretfully, I break eye contact with South, even though it physically causes me pain, and I turn and walk out of the clubhouse next to Novah and Hurricane.

My stomach lurches up into my throat at the thought that it could be the last time I see South. The idea is so

overwhelming that I lose my footing.

Novah reaches out and grabs me. “Hey, you okay there, Mom?”

I right myself and let out a fake laugh. “Silly me, not looking where I’m walking.”

Hurricane hikes Immy up higher on his hip, raising his brow. “You doin’ okay, Ingrid? You’re not comin’ down with somethin’, are ya?”

I groan, shaking my head. “Shut up the both of you. I’m fine, just tripped on a loose stone or something. I’m not as spritely as you young fuckers, remember?”

They both chuckle as Hurricane passes Immy to me. I take her, cradling my granddaughter in my arms, needing comfort from her right now, more than she knows.

She cuddles into me, and I snuggle against her. “Hello, sweet pea. You’re gonna come on an adventure with the girls,” I tell her, to which she reaches out gently, playing with my hair.

“Where’s Kaia?” Novah asks.

Hurricane glances over his shoulder. “She should be comin’ any—” And before he can finish his sentence, Kaia walks out the door carrying two massive bags. “Yep, that’s my wife. Always prepared.”

I let out a snort as Izzy, Maxxy, Clover, and Addi race to help with the bags.

“You planning on going for a vacation after, Kaia?” Novah calls out.

“I’m planning for all scenarios. Always be prepared. This should carry us through for a while... just in case,” Kaia states.

Then, behind Kaia, the Baroness strides over, following her toward the vans. “I’m going to go and ensure the women are securely in the bunker. I will report back to you once everything is fine and my men are in place.”

Hurricane dips his head. “Appreciate it, Constance,” he says, shaking her hand.

She turns, walking toward us, her high heels click-clacking on the concrete. My stomach rolls in apprehension, but I can’t do anything about this now.

The club is at war.

If I stay, I could die at the hands of Anton and his men.

And that is far worse than the thought of dying because I don’t get the surgery for my ADHD cells on time.

I’m in a lose-lose situation.

I just have to wait and see how this plays out.

We walk out to the waiting vans, filing into them, including the Baroness. As I sit next to Novah and Kaia, I glance out the back of the van to South, who’s at the clubhouse door, standing and watching. He dips his chin, and I weakly smile as the door to the van closes.

Letting out a long exhale, I cling to Immy tighter, needing comfort from my family.

Novah places her hand on my knee, her eyes meeting mine. “We’re gonna be okay, Mom.”

I stare into her eyes. “It’s not me I’m worried about.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ingrid

We pull up to the Civil Defense Bunker on Pontchartrain Boulevard, the green grassy hill, nothing like I was expecting to see.

As the Baroness rallies her men pushing us all toward the extremely old-looking bunker opening, I glance at Kaia, wondering what the fuck we are getting ourselves into. This place looks abandoned and completely rundown.

I hand Immy off to Kaia and step forward to the main guy who seems to be running this task force. “Excuse me, but is this the right place?” I ask.

He glares at me as we’re continuously ushered toward the bunker opening. “I need you to stay quiet and keep moving, ma’am.”

I shift my eyes back to Kaia, and she shrugs as the man pulls back what looks like a rotten piece of metal, but behind it is a security keypad. He enters a code, and the hatch opens. The smell of mold and stale water assaults my senses first as we all take a step back in disgust.

“Is it sanitary to go in there?” I question.

“Listen, lady, I said *no talking*. Follow us inside quickly and quietly. Do you understand?”

I raise my brow before replying, “Yes, *sir*.” The sarcasm in my tone is unmistakable.

His brow twitches in response, but he walks inside the bunker, and I figure, if I am the matriarch of these women, I should lead the way, especially if the Baroness is taking a back seat in this.

I take off first, stepping onto the small ladder and descending into the dank, smelly bunker on the other side. The inside feels moist, the humidity in the air smacking me in the face like a hammer the further I step inside the rundown shit hole. I glance back, seeing Kaia has followed me down, then she stands and waits for Novah to hand Immy to her. Novah follows, and then Lani, Izzy, Maxxy, Frankie, Clover, Addi, Storm, Jaz, and a few others continue behind them.

Immy begins to sniffle as we descend the narrow, dimly lit hallway.

It appears like a dead end. So I tense as we make it to another rusty old door.

The Baroness' man punches another code into a security panel to the side of the door. "Welcome to your humble abode, ladies," he states in a sarcastic tone to match mine from before.

I tense because I have a feeling that whatever we're about to walk into won't be comfortable by the looks of the outside. He pulls back the door, and I walk through. The smell of fresh, ventilated air hits me first as I enter. What looks like natural, glowing light illuminates the bunker, and my eyes widen in shock at the upmarket, very well-kept, incredibly deceptive underground sanctuary hidden beneath the ground in the middle of New Orleans.

I let out a shocked laugh as I step inside, taking in what I see.

There's a large area, split into sections. In the middle is the living room, with multiple comfortable-looking sofas, rugs, beanbags, and even a large television on the wall. To the right is a kitchen area, including all the modern conveniences anyone could need—refrigerator, oven, cooktop, and I even see an air fryer. Not to mention all the appliances you need for babies.

Novah and Kaia take off straight for the kitchen and the baby equipment. Maxxy, Clover, and Addi head for the big-screen television in the living room. Frankie, Storm, and Jaz

help bring all the supplies in while the others wander about checking this place out.

“Not what you were expecting, Ingrid?” the Baroness calls out, walking to the refrigerator and grabbing herself a bottle of vodka.

I let out a laugh. “Nope... not at all.”

The Baroness’ men all turn toward the exit, and I furrow my brows. “Aren’t you staying to guard us?” I call out.

“We’ll guard the perimeter, but you will have the interior to yourselves. We will check on you periodically. For now, everything you need should be readily accessible.”

I nod. The rest of the girls are still doing business as the men walk out, closing the big door behind them. I hear a beep like it’s locked with a code when they leave. I’m unsure if I feel relieved or more concerned by that small click, especially because the Baroness is still here with us. But I choose to try and relax my shoulders.

Lani, however, comes to stand beside me. It looks like she might be a little overwhelmed by all this. “You okay, Lani?” I ask.

She nods, but it’s unconvincing. So I wrap my arm around her, and we move over to one of the more out-of-the-way sofas and take a seat. “What’s on your mind?”

“It scares me that we’re in here not knowing what’s going on out there with the guys. I mean... I’ve never met anyone who treats me the way Grit does. We’re supposed to be getting married. What if he doesn’t make it through this fight?”

I reach out for her hand. “Lani, his name is Grit for a reason. Because he’s made of the strongest stuff. If anyone is coming home, it’s him. He loves you more than I have ever seen anyone love another person. You guys are what couples strive to be.”

She glances up at me, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “Do you have someone in your life, Ingrid?”

Her question shocks me, not because she asked, but because of the *way* she asked. It's like she already knows the answer. *But how could she?*

“What? Why would you ask that?”

She weakly smiles, placing her hand on my knee. “I know it can be hard when we fall for people that our family won't approve of. I only had a minor taste of it with Hurricane and his disapproval of Grit, so I totally understand wanting to hide certain things. But honestly, the thing I have come to learn about this life, Ingrid, is it's fucking short. And trust me, shit happens, time and time again, that puts your life in danger. Honestly, at this point, I am so fucking grateful that I'm even still here. So, I take every day as a gift. I guess I am trying to say that if you like someone, and they like you, if it is real, then embrace it. Go with it because, honestly, it can be taken away so fucking fast, and you've spent all the while hiding and wasting time. I know the initial shock will be bad for those not expecting it, but Ingrid, he is a good guy. Actually, he's a great guy, and he really fucking adores you.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at her in disbelief. “So we're not talking in riddles anymore. We're flat out talking about my relationship?”

“The one with South? Yeah, I know... and I think it's great, Ingrid. I really do—”

“He told you?” I blurt out.

She shakes her head, gripping my hand tighter. “No, absolutely not. I overheard his phone call to you. He was hiding in the pantry in the kitchen when the club went into chaos after the Baroness dropped her bombshell. I walked in and heard his side of the conversation. He said your name, so I knew it was you. We talked after when he came out of the pantry.”

“Who came out of the pantry?” Novah asks, stepping up to us with a bright smile as she sits opposite Lani and me on the sofa. “Is this some coming-out-of-the-closet euphemism I'm not aware of?”

I love how innocent she is.

“No darling, not a euphemism. South was in the pantry, getting some food and stuff. Nothing for you to be concerned over.”

Novah slumps back onto the sofa, her hand rubbing the small lump of her four-month-pregnant belly. “Well, that’s a boring story. I need something to keep me entertained in here.”

My muscles tense as I roll my shoulders. “It’s the truth.”

Lani glares at me, and instant guilt rolls through me as her words hit me like a freight train.

If you like someone, and they like you, if it is real, then embrace it. Go with it because, honestly, it can be taken away so fucking fast, and you’ve spent all the while hiding and wasting time.

Dammit.

She’s right.

I’ve spent the past few weeks fighting this with South because I’m so worried about what my family will think.

Nash already knows.

Now, I need to tell Novah.

“You okay, Mom? You look a little pale?” Novah asks, sitting forward.

I glance at Lani, and she weakly smiles, giving me a supportive nod.

Fuck it! Here we go.

“Novah, you know I loved Reaper, right? He meant the world to me. He gave us this life, and I would never want to give that up.”

Novah furrows her brows, her smile falling as she stares at me. “Mom, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

“Just tell me that you know I loved Reaper.”

She stands, walks over to my sofa, and sits beside me. I reach out, taking her hand in mine. “I know you loved him.

Mom, what's this about?"

I glance over my shoulder at Lani, and she nods, giving me the support I need. So I turn back to Novah and exhale. "I've been seeing someone."

Novah smiles wide, and she lets out a small laugh. "*That's* what this is about?"

I furrow my brows, tilting my head. "I'm sorry, what?"

She shrugs. "I know. I know you've been seeing someone. Well, I had my suspicions. The way you've been happier lately when I've been around you. Plus, Nash spilled, said he saw you with him at Revel Rose. Said he made *quite* the impression on Nash."

My eyes bug out of my head as I stare at her. "So you know who then?"

She chuckles. "Oh, that? No. Nash kept that from me, the asshole, but you'll tell me, right? Is it Grudge? It's Grudge, isn't it? I always saw you two ending up together," she coos excitedly.

My eyes widen at the thought she's paired me with the only other mature-aged man at the club.

Lani coughs, choking back her laugh as I turn to face her with a glare.

That's not helping.

Letting out a long exhale, I take Novah's hands and slowly shake my head. "It's not Grudge. I adore him, but not like that."

Novah visibly sinks a little. "Oh... is he not a part of the club? An outsider?"

"No. He's a part of the club," I reply.

She furrows her brows, and I see the wheels turning in her mind as she tries to figure it out. But I don't want her circling around all the possibilities. I just need to tell her. "I don't..." she murmurs like her brain can't compute this information.

I understand because there are only taken guys or younger guys left for me to choose from.

Swallowing hard, I look into her eyes, nothing but the honest truth pouring from me. “I can’t help my feelings, Novah, nor can he. We didn’t expect it, and we both know it will cause an issue, but he’s been so fucking good for me these past few weeks.”

“Mom... who is it?” she asks, a clear tension in her tone.

I hesitate but then decide to get this over with. “South.”

Novah’s eyes widen as she turns, facing away. “Holy shit... Mom. Do you know who he is? Who his family is?”

I nod, scrunching up my face. “That’s why this is so complicated, darling. It’s not every day you fall for your dead husband’s best friend’s son. I mean, it’s unheard of.”

Novah spins to face me, tears welling in her eyes. “You’re *falling* for him?”

Slumping my shoulders, I nod my head matter-of-factly. “Yeah, I think I am.”

“Jesus, Mom, he’s a year younger than me... it’s so...” Novah shakes her head, wiping a tear from under her eye, not finishing her sentence.

“Weird? Strange? I know, Novah, trust me, I know. I have been over this a thousand times in my mind. I never expected *any* of this.”

She scrunches up her face, but it’s confusion, not disgust like I expected. “I just don’t understand, it doesn’t make sense?”

Lani sits forward, looking at Novah. “If you’re trying to figure out why a young guy like South would be interested in your mother and what he has to gain from it, I can tell you firsthand that it’s real for him too.”

Novah jerks her head back in shock. “You know about this?”

Lani grimaces, but nods. “I overheard a phone conversation between the two of them and then had a chat with South when he saw me. And trust me when I say this is not a one-sided relationship, Novah. There is *nothing* South can gain from this... if that’s what you’re thinking. He’s completely besotted with Ingrid. He *really* cares about her. It’s not a fling for him.”

“It’s not a fling for me either,” I add. “And I know the age gap is weird... *trust me, I know*—”

“Hey, I’m pregnant with twins to my stepbrother, so... I can do weird, Mom. I’m sorry I reacted with some negativity. It’s just a lot to take in. But... as long as you and South are happy, then who am I to stand in the way of a true romance?”

My eyes widen. “You mean that? You’re okay with us being together?”

She rolls her shoulders. “I mean, it will be fucking weird, but if South makes you happy, then that is all I could ask for. After all, you were so accepting of my relationship. Perhaps we Ladet ladies are destined for weird.” She giggles.

I reach out, wrapping my arms around Novah.

“I love you, Mom,” she says, then squeezes me tighter.

The way she squeezes me puts pressure on where the biopsy was taken, and I can’t help but let out a hiss through my teeth as pain ripples through my breast, and I inadvertently jerk back in response.

Shit.

Novah lets go and furrows her brows with a look of confusion crossing her face. “What the fuck was that?”

My shoulders slump, and I rub my temple to figure out my next move.

“Mom! Why the fuck are you sore? Is South *hurting* you?” Novah’s tone borders on irate.

I let out a small laugh at the absurdity of her comment while reaching out and grabbing her arm. “No! God no. He would never. If anything, he’s the most caring, considerate,

compassionate man I have ever known. Honestly, he has taken such good care of me these past few weeks.”

“Why would he need to take care of you?” Novah sits taller, sadness crossing her beautiful face.

My eyes well with tears, and since we’re having a moment of honesty, I may as well tell her everything. “Darling, I don’t want you to get upset when I tell you this. It’s all under control —”

“Jesus, Mom, what *else* are you hiding from us?”

I let out a long breath and let her have that because she’s right.

I have been hiding a lot from my children.

But this is a big one, and I’m not sure how to tell her.

So I’m going to blurt it out and hope it comes across okay.

“I had a routine mammogram, which came back with an abnormality. So I had a biopsy and have something called atypical ductal hyperplasia.” Her eyes widen in shock, but I continue before she says anything. “Basically, it’s dangerous cells in my breast that right now aren’t showing cancer cells but have the potential to turn that way if not treated.”

Novah’s eyes well as she stares at me. “So what does that mean?”

“I have to have them removed.”

“Your breasts!”

“No, the cells in my breast.”

A single tear falls down Novah’s cheek. “M-Mommy...” The word comes out stuttered, and I race forward, taking her into an embrace.

I’ve had time to deal with this.

She hasn’t.

This will be a major shock, so I must reassure her.

“I am okay. I’m going to be okay, baby girl. They will remove the bad stuff, and then I will be fighting fit and

running around like normal.”

“Chemo? Radiotherapy?” she asks as I wipe away her tears.

I shake my head. “Not at this stage. The doctor thinks they will only have to remove the cells, and that will be that. Like I said... it’s simple in and out. It’s one of the best results we could have asked for in this situation.”

“When’s the surgery?” Novah asks, sniffing back her tears.

“Two and a half weeks.”

“Oh my God, that soon? How long have you been hiding this from me?”

“It’s happened quite fast, but South has been with me every step of the way.”

Novah clings to me. “He took care of you?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, he did.”

“He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah... he really is.” I smile.

Novah sits taller, looking at me seriously. “God, I don’t have to call him stepdad, do I?”

I burst out laughing and shake my head. “Fuck, no. Please don’t go there. It’s still new, and even if South and I are a forever thing, there’s no way he would want to be a father figure to *any* of you. It’s just fucking weird.”

Novah visibly relaxes. “Trust you to become a cougar, Mom. But you know what? It suits you because you’re beautiful and don’t look a day over thirty. I’m glad you found someone who can make you happy. As for your diagnosis, Bayou and I will be there for you, no matter the consequences. So will Hurricane and Kaia. You know they will, Nash and Brianna too. We have the best family you could ever ask for, and South is gonna fit right into our crazy dynamic.”

Lani’s hand shifts to my knee, reminding me she is here. “And I know I’m not in your immediate family, but we’re still family, and if Grit and I can help in any way, you let us know too. Just remember... this club is your family, Ingrid. We can

all help, and hiding this from everyone will only hurt them in the long run,” Lani suggests.

She’s right.

She’s *so fucking right*.

“Yeah, I know. Once we get through all this shit with the bunker and the Bratva out of the way, I will tell everyone everything. But I need to tell Hurricane and Bayou about South privately first, not in front of everyone, because I don’t know how that’s going to go down.”

Novah chuckles. “Good call. Maybe have a family dinner. Nash and I can be your backup support to help with the twin idiots.”

“Great idea! We’re *definitely* doing that. I’ll have you all ’round for dinner at my place. I can tell the boys about my surgery and South at the same time. Before I tell the rest of the club.”

“Sounds like a plan. And now that you’ve spilled all these secrets to me, I need to spill one to you,” Novah says.

“What are you keeping from me?”

“The gender of the twins.” Her hand moves to her stomach, and she smiles.

My heart thumps in my chest. They didn’t want to tell anyone, but I have been dying to know so I can make proper arrangements for appropriate gifts for my grandbabies. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I know you want to keep it a secret.”

Novah shakes her head. “Honestly, I have been dying to tell you.”

Lani moves to stand. “Should I go?”

Novah chuckles. “Fuck it! I’m sick of keeping it to ourselves. I’m just so damn excited.”

Lani and I both giggle along with Novah.

“Okay, so, what color are we buying?” I ask.

Novah bounces on the sofa. “Pink...” I gasp, my hand flies to my mouth, “... and blue.”

“You’re having one of each?” I clarify.

Novah nods.

Lani smiles so wide her eyes sparkle. “Oh, that’s amazing. I’m so happy for you.”

Contentment floods my chest.

But no sooner than it does, a beep echoes through the bunker.

I turn to look at the main door opening.

Everyone stops dead still.

The door slowly opens, the hinges creaking with the movement.

My breathing escalates as we all watch for who might be entering.

When suddenly, a small object is thrown inside the space.

My eyes widen as I reach for Novah and pull her toward me. “Grenade!” I scream, yanking Novah with me.

And as I hit the floor with Novah beneath me, an almighty blast thunders through the bunker.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ingrid

My eyes roll around in my head, and a high-pitched ringing pierces my ears as I blink rapidly, trying to find my equilibrium. My stomach feels like it has dropped out of my body, and everything shakes as my mind flashes back to Novah. Smoke fills the air, making it harder to breathe as I crawl on the floor to find my daughter while trying to figure out *what the fuck just happened*.

There's no fire in the bunker, so the grenade wasn't your typical explosive.

My guess is it was a stun grenade.

And fuck! Do I feel that to my very core.

The faint muffle of a baby screaming breaks through the white noise. My mind instantly shoots to Imogen while panic tears through me, making it harder to function.

Get up, Ingrid.

Get. The. Fuck. Up!

I will myself to fight through the pain shooting through my body. As I stagger to my feet, the smoke lifts a little, helping me to spot Kaia cradling Immy, trying to comfort her. My eyes meet hers, sheer terror in them as I nod, then keep moving in an attempt to find Novah—I was sure I protected her with my body, but obviously, the blast moved us. Then my foot hits something on the floor, so I glance down, seeing the blonde hair splayed out.

“Novah,” I call out, though I can't hear myself. I drop to my knees, rolling her over. She has a small bump on her head, but otherwise, she looks okay. Gently, I tap her face but don't

bother trying to talk to her. If I can't hear, I doubt she can, either.

Her eyes begin to flicker, and she slowly opens them, her hand moving to the small cut on her head, scrunching up her face like she's in pain. "Can you hear?" I yell.

She shakes her head. "Not well." Her voice is muffled, but I can read her lips.

I help her up, and we glance around the bunker. Everyone is slowly getting to their feet and moving about to help each other, but as I step over to make sure Lani is okay, a flash of something grabs my attention. I turn to see the Baroness running for the bunker door, but it's too late—a group of men run in through the bunker, guns drawn, aimed at us.

We were worried about the guys going to war with the Bratva when we should have been more concerned they would find *us* first.

My heart pounds as I raise my hands, the other girls following suit. The white noise in my ears is slowly dissipating, and the sounds of disaster creep in. My breathing is rapid and heavy as I watch Anton and his Bratva enter the bunker and close the door behind them.

We're trapped.

Alone.

With the Russian mafia.

Inside a soundproof bunker.

There's no way out.

Oh God.

Anton takes a few steps forward, a cheerful sneer on his face as he looks at each of us individually. "How's the ears? Can you hear me?" he asks.

I nod, along with the other women, as Immy continues to cry. Her ears must be in so much pain from the stun grenade.

The bastard! Obviously, he has no regard for children.

What a fucking asshole.

He turns to the Baroness and chuckles, his chest rising and falling with his heavy laughter. “Two for the price of one... my lucky day! Baroness, how nice it is to see you again. I’ve been wanting to do this for a long fucking time.” He points, aims, and fires a round from his gun at her.

We all scream as the bullet hits her in the shoulder. She screams in pain as she drops to her knees, blood pouring out of her wound as she clutches it with her hand.

Anton lets out a belly laugh as he paces the floor. “*Fuuuck*, it felt good to do that. I think I can speak for everyone here when I say that we have all wanted to shoot you, Constance. Am I right, ladies?” he asks, glancing at us, but none of us say anything in return.

The Baroness pants rapidly out of her mouth, attempting to fight through her pain.

“Oh, you girls are no fun. Won’t you play along, even a little bit?” he urges.

My hands ball into fists as he begins pacing the bunker floor, waving a gun around as he thinks. “You know... Defiance and the Bratva have been at war for so long now I can’t even remember how it started. All I know is... *your* men came after *my* family. They shot up the places where we were living, with *my* children inside and with reckless abandon. I told them that once we rebuild, I *would* come back for them, and *this* is that moment. I *am* sorry you have to pay the price for the sins of your men, but... it is what it is. So... who wants to go first?” he asks so casually that we all just stand staring, unsure about what he’s saying and asking.

Uneasiness rolls through me as his men take a step closer. I wrap my arm around Novah, holding her to me, not wanting to let her go.

Anton raises his gun, aiming at Maxxy, and everyone lets out a small scream at the aggressive move. “I said... *Who. Wants. To go. First?*”

Maxxy raises her hands in surrender, but everyone stays stock-still, not knowing what the fuck he means. So I clear my throat. “Anton, you and our club have had a lifetime of disagreements. And I know it was dreadful when they came to your camp and shot up everything. The boys admitted they didn’t know your families were there, and when they saw the kids, they stopped and backed away. You have to give them that.”

Anton tilts his head, moving the gun to aim at me. “They did do that. And I *am* grateful they left. But what they don’t know is... in the moments they were shooting, *two* Bratva children were hit with stray bullets, and some of our elderly were killed. Let alone the damage it did to the infrastructure. We *can’t* let that slide. You understand!”

“But you can *be* the bigger man. We can end this war amicably—”

“You’re holding on pretty tight to Novah there, Ingrid. I think *she* can go first. Get her, boys,” Anton orders. My eyes widen as Novah’s muscles tense, but I hold her tighter.

“No, Anton, no. Take me! I’ll go first,” I call out as Novah begins to cry, turning in my grip and clinging to me for dear life.

“I got you. I got you,” I assure her.

Lani rushes to my side and grabs hold of Novah, but the Bratva soldiers race forward, and she screams as they pull at her. I hold tight as they tear at her clothing, pulling her from Lani and my grasp.

“Novah!” I scream.

The rest of the girls are crying, but they can’t do anything as the Bratva assholes have guns aimed on them.

Novah kicks at the soldiers, trying to fight them off her, but one of them pulls out a gun and presses it to her temple, flicking off the safety.

My heart leaps into my throat. “Novah, stop!” I beg, her body instantly going still, her eyes focusing on the tip of the gun. Her breathing sharp and shallow.

“Okay, I’ll go with you. Just don’t shoot,” she whimpers.

My hands tighten on hers, not wanting to let her go as tears flood my face.

The soldier chuckles, pulling her away from me. “That’s a good little girl.” Then he starts dragging Novah further away from me.

My arm extends, and my hand starts to detach from hers. My chest heaves with anxiety as I begin to whine. “Novah!” I call out, but another soldier steps in, his gun aimed at Lani this time, stopping me from trying to get to Novah.

I feel physically sick.

I have no idea what they’re going to do to Novah.

But they’re taking great pleasure in making all of us watch.

Anton chuckles as he turns to Novah with a menacing smirk. “When Defiance shot up our little sanctuary, they came there looking for you, Novah. All this... it started because of *you!*”

He turns and looks at Kaia, who’s cradling the crying Immy to her chest. “You really should stop her from weeping. Stress isn’t good for babies, or... expectant mothers,” the tone in his voice is threatening, dark, and so damn sinister it curls my toes.

My heart leaps into my throat as my eyes meet Novah’s, and then he gives a signal to his soldiers. Two assholes grab Novah’s arms, yanking them out to the sides so she’s standing like Jesus on the cross.

She whimpers as her stomach is completely exposed. “Please, don’t do this,” she whimpers.

“No!” I scream out the word so loud it reverberates in the room.

Novah bursts into tears, and another soldier moves into position, his fist coming out, looking like he is going to punch her in the stomach.

I can't stand back and watch this. I know the Bratva have a gun to Lani's head, but Novah is my priority as a mother. *I have to help her.* Rushing forward, I scream out, "Novah!"

The guard holding Lani hostage lunges for me, slamming the butt of his gun into my temple.

My vision turns instantly black, stars dancing behind my eyes. Pain ripples through me at the same time Novah screams out in hers. I drop to my knees, my hand gripping my mouth to cover my sobs at not only my pain but hearing Novah and that I couldn't reach her in time. My eyes open, blinking through the pain and droplets of blood trickling down my face to see Novah bending over in obvious agony. She drops to her knees, but the soldier hoists her back up.

"Stop! Stop this!" I yell at them.

Anton turns to me. "Oh, Mother Dearest, we're only just getting started. They took out two of our children, so we take out two of your Defiance scum. They just don't happen to be born yet." He turns back to the assholes and demands, "*Again!*"

Hopeless.

Desperate.

Unwavering hatred.

All these feelings slam into me as I move to stand, wobbling as I go, to make the move to rush for Novah again, but the Bratva presses the gun to my temple, clicking off the safety, and pulls another aimed at Lani.

"You want to be brave right now, Mama?" he growls.

I want to be able to go to Novah, but knowing if I do, they'll shoot Lani and me.

I'm so fucking torn.

My entire body shakes as the soldier strikes his blow on my daughter, but this time, it's Novah's face he is targeting. Her head snaps to the side, blood pooling from her split lip.

"Oh, Novah," I whimper.

Kaia steps forward. “Enough! I’m the First Lady of this club. You want someone to hurt, that’s going to anger the brothers, then you hurt me. But leave the rest of the women and children alone.”

Anton chuckles. “Oh, Kaia, we were *always* going to hurt you. But since you asked so nicely... get her, boys!” he demands, and the ones holding Novah shove her to the floor like a rag doll. She lands on the concrete hard.

I don’t waste one second racing for her. My feet feel like they weigh a thousand pounds, and they’re stopping me from getting to her sooner, especially with my dizziness. But when I reach her—dropping to my knees, I slide in beside her and pull her onto my lap. My fingers stroke her hair. “I’m here, darling. I’m right here,” I whisper to her. Her hands instinctively move to her stomach, which is obviously causing her pain.

I can’t see any blood, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t any or that there isn’t an imminent problem with the twins. I need to get her to the hospital *right fucking now*. But with Anton and his assholes here, that’s impossible.

We’re going to have to ride this out.

Kaia hands Immy off to Frankie, and then she’s ushered up to the front of the bunker, where Anton waits. Kaia glares at Anton. “You know Hurricane is going to kill you for this?”

Anton chuckles. “We’ll be gone before they find you.”

Kaia curls up her nose. “You’re a real piece of shit,” she snaps at him, then promptly spits at his feet.

And for the first time, I see Anton’s façade break.

He rushes forward, his hand grabbing at Kaia’s neck, and hoists her up, pressing her raised body against the nearest wall. We all gasp as her feet dangle above the floor while her hands clasp onto his tight grip around her neck. The asshole’s fingers turn red with the force his clutch has on Kaia. Her eyes bulge as she struggles against him. “You were always a fighter, Kaia. I’m going to enjoy watching my men break... *Every. Inch. Of you*. And then, I will enjoy watching the footage of Hurricane finding your broken body.”

We all tense as he throws her to the concrete with a loud thud. She gasps for air, coughing, and spluttering, clawing at her neck.

Lani screams out, “Kaia!”

“This family dynamic you all seem to have is sickening. I really wish you would stop screaming for each other. The high-pitched rambling is exhausting. Please just sit back and enjoy the show. I thought you were women of bikers. Surely, you should be used to violence?” Anton groans as he signals to his men, and they reach down, grabbing Kaia and hoisting her onto a seat.

Kaia spits out a line of blood as I continue to hold onto Novah while she cries in my arms. I stroke her hair, trying to calm her nerves as Lani slowly sits on the sofa beside me.

Her face turns pale.

A telltale sign.

Shit.

“Lani, you okay?” I whisper, but her eyes are glassy as she stares at her sister.

“Oh, God, Lani. I know this is stressful, but I need you to stay with us. Lani... eyes on me, darling!” I yell at her.

Somehow, she hears me, her eyes come back into focus, and she snaps her head to look at me.

“Good... that’s good. Now, no matter what, you keep your eyes on me, okay?” I tell her, and as tears stream down her face, a piercing scream echoes through the bunker, making me jump. My head snaps to Kaia, where a soldier slowly pulls back on Kaia’s fingers one by one until the crack resonates through the room. My stomach recoils, watching that bastard breaking her fingers with reckless abandon. The pain she must be going through tears at my soul.

Maxxy and Izzy go to take steps forward, but soldiers aim their guns at them, forcing them to stop their attempt to get to Kaia.

Lani makes a kind of gurgling sound, and I snap my head around to see her eyes have glazed over again. At the same time, Lani's body goes limp, and she falls onto the sofa.

"Lani!" I scream, letting go of Novah briefly and moving to Lani, who is now convulsing in one of her seizures.

Kaia screams out again in agony as the soldier tortures her while Novah cries out in pain. Anton walks into the middle of the room, laughing like a crazed maniac as he takes in the chaos he's causing. His arms fly out as he strides around in circles, cackling to himself. "This is exactly what I wanted. This is the *destruction* of Defiance." He looks into something sitting on top of the television, and I follow his line of sight, clearly seeing a camera. "This is the show I wanted. I can't wait to see how it all pans out when the boys arrive."

"You're fucking insane, Anton," the Baroness calls out. "You wait... I swear to God, it won't be Defiance you need to worry about, you Russian asshole."

Anton chuckles like her threats do not affect him one little bit. "How's your shoulder, Connie? That's a lot of blood, and you look quite pale there."

"Fuck. You!" she spits out.

I roll Lani onto her side and try to time her seizure, but it's hard when so much is happening around me. The screaming, the cackling, the crying—my entire body shakes as tears slide down my face so dramatically, it's hard to see.

Suddenly, the door to the bunker opens, and a couple of soldiers run in.

"Pakhan, the drones picked up a pack riding this way. We can't be sure, but they're riding fast and unhinged. My bet is it's Defiance, and somehow, they know what we're doing here."

Anton curls up his lip, lets out a furious growl, and slams his fist into the guy bringing him the information. "*Ye-bat*!" <Fuck!> He runs his fingers through his hair, then shakes out the hand he just punched the guy with. "We need to go. We're not prepared for an all-out attack with Defiance just yet. They

will be ready for a fight, and we have more work to do to prepare for that. Soldiers, let's roll out. Oh, ladies, it's been a pleasure. *Dasvidaniya.*" <Goodbye, until we meet again.> Anton spins on his heel, turning for the exit.

I have to admit, seeing the ass end of that bastard is so fucking relieving, but I can't concentrate on that right now.

Lani is not coming out of her seizure.

Novah's sitting on the floor, rolling around in pain.

Kaia is trying to keep herself together, but I know her pain is overwhelming.

The Baroness is bleeding out across the other side of the room and barely holding herself together.

The second Anton and his merry band of assholes leave the bunker, Maxxy, Izzy, and Frankie swoop into action, racing for the rest of us.

Now is the time we all need to band together.

"Maxxy, go to Kaia. Izzy, you go to Novah. Frankie, come help me with Lani. Clover and Addi take care of Immy and the rest of the women. And someone, get ahold of Hurricane. *Now!*" I scream at the top of my lungs as the doors to the bunker open again.

For fuck's sake, what now?

I turn to one lone soldier walking in with a machine gun.

"Anton told me to finish the job!" His tone is menacing, dark, depraved.

My muscles clench when I hear the click of the safety, and I close my eyes tight, my mind flicking instantly to South and the life we could have had.

I hold my breath.

Gunfire...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

South

My stomach churns as the vans pull away with the women inside. The idea they're headed off to the bunker without us to protect them feels all kinds of wrong.

But the Baroness is on our side.

At least if she wants us to carry out the bullshit task of taking out Six.

She will need to follow through with her side of the bargain and take good care of our women.

In any case, being unable to say a proper goodbye to Ingrid is doing my head in.

Hurricane slaps my shoulder as he walks past me, raising his chin. "You good? You look like shit, brother."

Turning and following my president into the clubhouse, I nod, rubbing the back of my tense neck. "Yeah, it's a lot of shit going on right now. Wish I could help more."

Hurricane chuckles as we make our way into the Chapel. "Brother, you bein' here is helpin'. If you hadn't transferred down, we'd be a man short, and we're gearin' up for another damn fight. We need all the bodies we can get to protect this club and the people in it."

I don't have the heart to remind him that he's also going to be fighting the rest of fucking Defiance if he goes through with his kill order on Six. The problem is, they will take the rest of us out along with him.

But that's not important at this moment.

I got to keep my head in the game.

There are too many moving parts in my life as it is.

I have to focus on one thing at a time—right now, it’s the women and the Bratva.

“That’s my main aim, Pres. To protect everyone here. I just want to do my part.”

“That’s why we wanna keep ya ’round because you’re good for the club. All right, let’s get this Church under-fuckin’-way. Brothers...” he calls out. “Get in here!”

We all take our respective chairs, and then Hurricane bangs his gavel on the table. “Okay... we know the Bratva are gonna come at us. The women have been dealt with. The Baroness has assured me they’re safe. I’m sure she’ll do everythin’ in her power to ensure the girls are protected, considerin’ what she wants us to do in return. But what I wanna know is... where do we go from here?”

We all look at each other, letting out a collective sigh, but it’s Bayou who’s the first to speak. “I think it is safe to say that Anton is getting looser and looser with every passing day. What he did to Hoodoo with the drone and the strychnine poisoning? He’s getting braver, which means he’s getting scarier because he will do *anything* to get back at us for our mistake.”

Raid swings his laptop around to face us. “He’s also gotten bigger, recruiting more of an army. We took out many of his men, but in the past few months, he’s almost doubled in size. He’s creating something he knows he can overrun us with, especially because we’re low on numbers.”

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t think we’re gonna have time to recruit before this goes down. We’re gonna have to rely on our alliances—”

“Before we shatter them, you mean?” Bayou snaps.

The rest of us anxiously shift in our seats because we know Bayou is right.

Hurricane places his closed fists on the table. “All right, let’s get this all out in the air... this shit about Six is fuckin’

crazy, and I know it's a bitter pill to swallow, but we don't have a choice—”

“We do. We figure a workaround, Pres. We are Defiance. That's what we do. We come up with plans that suit us,” Hoodoo urges.

Hurricane scrubs at his face in annoyance. “You're not hearin' me, brothers. We *don't* have a choice. The Baroness has us by the balls. You don't understand the power this bitch has in the South. She owns *every-damn-thing*. She's put herself out there for us time and time again. If we don't pay this debt, she'll be gunnin' for us like she's gunnin' for Six. And trust me, she won't stop at us. She'll come for the people we love. I don't know about you, but I'm *not* willin' to risk my Old Lady, my kid, or my family for the sake of that woman. Are *you?*”

“Why don't we just take her out then? Won't that solve all our issues?” Grudge asks.

We all nod in agreement as Hurricane glances at Raid. He dips his head and types something on his computer. “She's heavily guarded at all times. The woman has action plans on top of action plans in place. If she dies, all the files on corruption and blackmail she has on the people she lords it over will be leaked, including the shit she has on Defiance. And I am talking about every Defiance charter, not just NOLA. She's made it so she's impossible to kill,” Raid states, showing us a disclaimer on his computer.

“What the fuck is that?” I ask.

Raid shrugs. “It's the disclaimer the Baroness sent me when she wanted me to go work for her. Of course, I said no and then checked her systems... unfortunately it's legit. Her tech team has everything in place the second her death is announced if it's of suspicious circumstances.”

We all sink into our chairs, seeing a little more of where Hurricane's coming from now. He tilts his head, looking directly at his twin. “So, can you see why I'm so adamant that we *have* to do this? I don't fuckin' like it. *It fuckin' kills me*. I love Six like a real fuckin' brother, and turnin' my back on

Defiance is a mortal sin. But we made a deal with the devil, and now we must live with that consequence. For the sake of our club and our families.”

It feels all kinds of wrong.

But the problem is, I get it.

We did make the deals. In fact, Houston is the one who put us into bed with the Baroness. So, honestly, this is their doing.

They made this damn mess.

And we’re the ones who are going to have to deal with the fallout.

My priority is keeping Ingrid safe.

And to do that, we must be on the Baroness’ right side.

I steel my shoulders, being the first to speak, “I’m with you, Pres.” My tone isn’t convincing, but I say it nonetheless.

Everyone glances at me. I see the hesitation in their eyes, but I can tell they’re all thinking this through.

Grit is the next to nod his head. “Lani means everything to me. I need her to be safe. If this is the *only* way to do that, then I’m in,” he says, shaking his head. “Jesus, forgive me,” he mumbles under his breath.

Hurricane glances at Raid, and he shrugs. “Frankie and Addi are my world. I don’t want to do this, but if it’s the only way, then...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, but his intention is clear.

Grudge simply nods with some kind of grunt.

Hurricane turns to City. “VP, your opinion carries a lot of weight in this room. What say you?”

City runs his hand over his shaved scalp, looks at Bayou, and sighs heavily. “Izzy and I are trying for a family. I want to make that happen for her, and I can’t if everything is falling to shit. Way I see it... we’re gonna be in a world of hurt either way. We’re screwed. But if we do it properly, if we’re discreet, we might be able to pull this off and make it look like an accident, and NOLA’s there to pick up the pieces. We gotta

play our cards right. We keep in good with the other Defiance charters and are okay with the Baroness... it's the only way I see us surviving this fucked-up mess."

Hurricane risks a side-eye toward Bayou. He's been the most vocal, and he slumps his shoulders.

"I don't want you to think my reluctance is me not wanting Novah and my unborn babies to be kept out of harm's way. To me, turning on your club is a big fucking deal. I wear this patch with pride, and doing this... killing a fellow brother when there's no good damn reason *fucking* hurts. I *don't* agree with this. I *don't* like it. I certainly wouldn't have gotten into bed with the Baroness in the first place if I knew *this* would be the outcome. I guess I'm feeling this deep in my soul because I know part of the reason we need the Baroness is on me. *I'm* the reason we stormed into the Bratva camp and shot it up that way. I initiated that call to get Novah back from them when she wasn't even there. The fallout from that day was always going to land firmly on my should—"

"I made that call too, brother. It's not on you. We were both worried about her. She's family, and that's the reason we're doin' this, Bayou. Not because you started somethin' with the Baroness. This is not your fault what's happenin' with Six. Don't take that weight on your own," Hurricane offers.

Bayou scrubs at his face, letting a low grumble escape him. "Fuck... fine. But we do it City's way. We make it look like an accident and are there to help. We don't need the backlash from Defiance."

Hurricane nods his head. "I'll work it all out, don't worry. I'll make sure the plan is flawless. There is too much ridin' on this for us to fuck it up."

"In the meantime, what do we do about this fucking Bratva problem we seem to have?" Grudge asks.

Hurricane grimaces. "We call in reinforcements, and while they're here... we kill two birds with one stone. Literally speakin'."

“You want Houston to help us with the Bratva?” I clarify what we’re all thinking.

“What better way for Six to go out than in a club war as a hero?”

We all glance around the room at each other.

This might actually work.

Bayou nods his head slowly. “Okay, so we call Houston down to help us take Anton and these assholes out, then what?”

“Then, while we’re fightin’ to get rid of Anton and his men, a stray bullet finds its way into Six. It’s a battle. Shit happens,” Hurricane states.

City nods, so does Grudge, and the rest of us join in.

“I think it’s the only way we *can* do this, Pres,” Grudge replies.

Bayou sighs. “So the next question is, who’s taking the shot?”

A deathly silence falls over the Chapel as everyone goes stone-cold still. No one wants to volunteer for the murder of a club president. Hurricane goes to say something, but his cell beeps with a message as he does. He furrows his brows because most of the people who would text him are in this room. We all tense as he reaches for his cell. Pulling it out, he glances at it, flipping the phone open. Furrowing his brows, confusion crosses his features. “The fuck?” he murmurs.

The way his face shifts from curiosity to panic within a micro-second sends my stomach plummeting through the floor.

Our president stands dramatically, his chair falling back from the force.

“Pres?” City asks.

Hurricane doesn’t say anything. He just starts punching something into his cell, then puts it to his ear.

We all wonder what the hell is going on.

But it's Bayou who's the first to push. "Hurricane, talk to us."

He growls, slamming the cell down on the table. "I got a text from the burner I gave Kaia to use in case of emergency. All it said was 'SOS.' I tried to call her, but it rang out. Boys, we need to get to that bunker. Right fuckin' now!"

We stand faster than you've ever seen a group of bikers get up, and we race out of the Chapel, grabbing whatever weapons we can snatch on the way.

"Jesse, we're headed to the bunker. Take the van. We don't know what we're walkin' into," Hurricane calls out to the prospect, who has no idea what's happening. But without missing a beat, Jesse grabs the keys from behind the bar and races out with us.

We hightail it as fast as possible to our bikes, jump on, and take off, not making our usual formation, just racing off in whatever way we can.

We need to get to the girls.

I hammer down hard, my mind running like crazy at the thought that Ingrid could be in danger.

I've only just found her.

We've only just started whatever this is.

I can't lose her now.

Not like this.

Not to the damn Bratva.

I pull back on the throttle, my front wheel lifting with the acceleration. I pull back a little, my tire falling down, but then I hit it again, smoother this time to increase speed. My chest hurts with how hard my heart is racing.

Weaving through the cars, Bayou is beside me, and City is approaching close behind. We are riding hell for leather to get to our women. Grit and Hurricane pull up close behind, the other guys following as we dart in and out of cars. They honk,

some civilians throwing their hands out their windows and waving their fists as we zoom past their cars.

We pull onto Pontchartrain Boulevard, riding dangerously to get to the bunker. As we arrive, it's clear the Baroness' men have been gunned down around the perimeter. Their bodies lie on the grassy knoll, the bunker hatch open, but nothing is happening outside, though I see some cars driving off in the distance.

I skid my bike to a halt, the other guys doing the same. I don't even turn my bike off before I'm off and running for the bunker. My feet feel like lead as I jump the stairs, taking multiple steps at a time, the other guys hot on my tail. Then I slide down the ladder on the inside, taking off as soon as I hit the bottom, and run down the hall, seeing another bunker door and a man walking in with a machine gun.

"Fuck!" I think as he walks inside the bunker.

Pulling out my gun, I bolt as fast as I can, making it to the entry to hear him say, "Anton told me to come finish the job." He clicks off the safety and raises the machine gun, aiming at the girls in the room.

Without thinking, I raise my gun, aim at his head, and pull the trigger twice. His head explodes, blood splattering all over the nearby wall as the girls scream with fright while I step through the door to see the chaos inside, with my brothers following behind me.

"Everyone all right?" I yell, my eyes desperately trying to find Ingrid.

She stands, her watering eyes meeting mine, and my heart leaps into my throat, seeing a line of blood trickling down her face. "No. We have women with injuries. We need help."

The boys file inside, taking in the disaster zone surrounding us.

"Are *you* okay?" I ask Ingrid flat out while rushing over to her, where she stands with Novah and Lani, who seem to be passed out on the sofa.

She weakly smiles. "I'm fine, honestly."

I reach Ingrid, my hand moving to her hip, just needing to touch her, my breathing fast and frantic. My other hand gently touches the wound on her temple.

“You sure?” I reiterate, and she glances down at Novah and Lani. “They need help, and Kaia, and surprisingly the Baroness too.”

“Sha!” Hurricane calls out, running in and rushing straight for his Old Lady, who is trying to hold it together, even though her hand is a mangled mess.

“Novah?” Bayou screams as he frantically searches the bunker.

“She’s over here, darling,” Ingrid calls out, and Bayou rushes to Novah, who’s in a ball on the floor.

Bayou slides onto the floor, cradling her into his arms as she cries against his chest. “What the fuck did they do to you?”

Ingrid kneels beside them, tears in her eyes as she rests her hand on Bayou’s shoulder. “They roughed Novah up, Bayou. Hit her in the stomach. Hard. She’s been in pain ever since.”

Bayou’s face drops.

My skin prickles at what it could mean, my eyes meeting Ingrid’s.

Bayou picks Novah up into his arms. “I have to get you to the hospital right fucking now. It’s gonna be okay. They’re gonna be okay, baby. I promise.”

Novah remains quiet as she clings to him, and they rush out of the bunker.

I lean down to support Ingrid, but Grit races in beside me, his eyes landing on Lani. “How long has she been out like that?” His voice is laced with fear.

Ingrid clears the tension in her throat and looks down at her watch. “She stopped convulsing maybe a minute ago, but she hasn’t woken, and I couldn’t get her to rouse. I didn’t know what to do, and so much was happening. I’m sorry, Grit.” A tear slides down Ingrid’s face.

Grit shakes his head, leaning down and gently placing his hand in front of Lani's mouth. "She's breathing, but I think she's still in seizure... look at her hands," he says, and I glance down, and so does Ingrid.

Lani's hands are clenched in a weird way.

"How long has she been like this?" he asks.

"At least five minutes," Ingrid replies.

Grit scowls. "Fuck, we gotta get her to the hospital... *now*. That's too long. She could be going into brain damage territory." He takes off with Lani in his arms, leaving me with Ingrid.

I reach out, grabbing her hand. "Look at me," I demand.

Her hand trembles against mine as her watering eyes stare into me. "I c-couldn't h-help t-them."

I don't give a shit who's watching—I've got to try and ease her anguish. So I bring my hand up to her cheek and gently caress her. "I know you did your best to minimize the fallout. Whatever happened in here... is on Anton. Not you. You tried to care for everyone, and you did good, angel."

"The way they hurt Novah..." She lets out a sob, shaking her head. "Oh God, if she loses those precious babies and I did nothing—"

I tighten my grip on her cheek, forcing her to look at me. "Stop. It. Think about it. You would have done anything to protect Novah. I know that deep in my bones. So what was the reason you couldn't?"

Ingrid sniffles, a tear falling down her face. "I went to help her, then the Bratva hit me over the head with his gun, almost knocking me out. I tried again when I got up, but he held a gun to my head and also to Lani. Said he would shoot her if I tried anything."

Those fucking bastards.

"I'm so sorry we weren't here. But there was nothing you could have done. The assholes would have shot Lani and you if you tried to help Novah. And to be honest, by the looks of

the guy with the machine gun about to mow you all down when we arrived, their intention was never to let you all live anyway. They wanted you to suffer before they killed you.”

“How did you know to come help us?” Ingrid asks.

“Hurricane got a text from the burner saying SOS. When we tried to call, there was no answer. We knew something wasn’t right.”

Ingrid weakly smiles. “Kaia must have sent off a sly text before they started breaking her fingers.”

I grimace at the thought. “Who else is hurt?”

Ingrid turns to look at the Baroness, who is walking around aimlessly, holding her shoulder.

I raise my brow in surprise. “Who shot her?”

“Anton, he was particularly crazy today.”

I turn back to look at Ingrid. “He doesn’t care if she comes after him?”

“I think he had every intention of mowing her down along with us.”

My eyes widen as I let out a small laugh. Well, thank fuck that didn’t happen. Because the Baroness’ death right now, with her contingencies in place, would be a *big* fucking problem for Defiance MC.

We might have had a real lucky escape with this one.

Thank God Hurricane gave Kaia that burner, and she was able to send a text off to us in time.

Shaking my head, I turn back to Ingrid, my eyes narrowing in on her, as my hand pulls her closer to me, still not caring who sees.

She sighs a little. “South, we can’t be like this here. There’s too many people who don’t know—”

“Then maybe it’s time they *do* know?”

She slowly removes my hand from her hip and takes a step back. “Not here... not now. It’s not the time. Our club is in

chaos. We need to focus on everyone else right now. It would be selfish of us to do anything else. I need to focus on my family. On Novah, on Kaia, on Lani. My family who are so badly injured at the moment. I've got to get to the hospital and make sure they're okay because I have my own shit to deal with, and I don't know that I can go into that knowing that my family is not okay."

I raise my hands in surrender, seeing she isn't coping at the moment. I need to be here to support her. *Our shit can wait.* "C'mon, let's get to the hospital. I'm sure Jesse has already taken them in the van."

Ingrid snuffles and goes to walk out but then turns back, her eyes widening. "Shit, wait! Immy?" she calls out, snapping her head around.

Frankie steps out from the kitchen area, holding Immy with a bottle in her mouth to keep her calm. "I got her, Ingrid. You go look after our girls. I'll take care of everyone who's left and get us all back to the clubhouse."

Grudge nods. "Raid, Hoodoo, and I will stay with the other girls to make sure they get back okay while you guys go to the hospital. South, keep us informed and your damn eyes peeled. Once Anton knows his man didn't succeed, he'll be wanting to finish the job."

I nod. "Yeah, well, he'll probably want to regroup and devise another plan. But I can tell you now... once we get the girls settled, I know we're gonna come out fucking swinging."

"You bet your fucking ass," Hoodoo replies.

I grab Ingrid's hand, but she doesn't fight me like I thought she might. Instead, she intertwines our fingers as I pull her toward the exit.

Shit just got real!

And I have a feeling life for NOLA Defiance will get a lot worse before it gets better.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ingrid

This is torture.

I've been sitting in the hospital waiting area for hours. They patched up my wounds and then sent me back into the waiting area.

My stomach churns.

My mouth is dry.

My chest tightens in my anguish.

My leg bounces up and down with anxiety. Knowing Novah is in there, and I can't do a thing to help her as they check her babies is killing me.

At least Bayou is with her—that fact helps me a little.

I'm also glad Hurricane is with Kaia and Grit is with Lani. I just wish the staff here would update us occasionally. Just something to keep us informed of their progress would be helpful.

South reaches out, placing his hand on my knee to stop it from agitating. My watering eyes glance up to meet his, and he weakly smiles. "It's going to be okay. No matter what happens, we will deal with it together." He reaches out, lacing his fingers with mine.

I spot City glancing over at us, his eyes narrowing on our joined hands, but he says nothing, just paces the hospital waiting area.

"What's taking them so long?"

"No news is good news, right?" South tells me, and I sigh in response.

“You’re just saying that to try to keep me calm.”

“Yeah, is it working?”

I bump into his side with my shoulder. “Thanks for trying, but I don’t think anything will calm me at this point.”

Aubree steps out from the emergency room doors, and we stand to greet the doctor as she walks toward us.

I’m tense as hell and desperate for something, anything on how they are doing, so I rush to meet her. “Dr. Adams, how is everyone?” I ask anxiously.

“Everyone is stable at the moment and receiving treatment. Novah, however, would like you to come see her.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Are the babies okay?”

“Let’s go in and discuss things further with Novah and Bayou.”

My muscles tense, the fear of God rushing through me as I turn to South, looking for reassurance that it *will* be okay if I go in there without him.

“Go. I’ll be here when you get back.”

I should have known he’d be supportive. I glance around at City and the others who aren’t watching at the moment, so I lean in quickly and kiss South’s cheek. “Thank you for always being here for me.”

He squeezes my hand. “Always, angel. Now go. Do your thing. I’ll wait for you.”

I weakly smile, then take off with Aubree toward the emergency room doors. My heart hammers as Aubree says, “He seems very supportive of you.”

I side-glance her. “He is. He’s great.”

Aubree continues to walk us through the emergency department, but my unease doesn’t lessen. “Is he more than another brother at the club to you?”

I let out an exhale. “Yeah, he is, but Hurricane and Bayou don’t know yet, so please don’t say anything.”

She chuckles. “Ingrid, confidentiality is literally my job. But hey, I am happy for you. Gives me hope that I can find a younger, gorgeous man for myself one day.”

I let out a small laugh as she leads me toward room four. Before Aubree pulls back the curtain, she pulls me to the side. All the niceties of the moment before seem to have vanished, and she looks me in the eyes, pain clear in them. “Ingrid, Novah will need you to be strong, okay?”

My stomach drops, and the weight of the moment hits me like a ton of bricks. I think I already know the outcome before we even step inside.

My bottom lip trembles, my eyes watering as Aubree grips my arm, but I nod. “Okay, I got this.”

She pulls back the curtain. Bayou stands over Novah, gently stroking her hair and whispering something into her ear. The tender moment shared between them makes my heart sing.

Novah’s eyes instantly light up, her hand automatically reaching out for me as I step inside the small space. “Mom, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too, darling. Me too,” I assure her, then move in beside Bayou as he stands by her head, and I reach for Novah’s hand, taking it in mine. My other hand rests on Bayou’s shoulder. “You okay?” I ask him.

He doesn’t say anything, just gives me a simple nod. Which means he is far from okay. I know him well enough that when he goes quiet, he’s internalizing everything and is hurting.

Bad.

“Okay, so I have had all the scans and tests. You must know what’s going on by now, Aubree?” Novah asks as Aubree steps up to the other side of the bed.

“I do...” The tone in her voice is not soothing, and I think Bayou and Novah pick up on it straight away. I grip Novah’s hand in mine, and Bayou continues to stroke Novah’s hair as Aubree continues, “After the ultrasounds and the scans, I’m so

sorry to tell you that the blow to your stomach caused some complications to your pregnancy.”

“What kinds of complications, doc?” Bayou finally says something, but his tone is full of anguish.

Aubree exhales, her eyes drop, and instantly, I know the news is not good. “I’m so sorry, Novah. One of your babies has died in the womb.”

It hits like a sucker punch.

Hard.

Fast.

Unrelenting.

Novah gasps, tears streaming from my eyes as I reach over to hold her hand.

“No, no! That can’t be right!” She blubbers.

The sound of something smashing makes me jump. Bayou has grabbed the nearest thing, which happens to be a bedpan, and he’s thrown it at the cupboard. It hits the wall, then clangs down onto the stand where the surgical supplies are located. Shit flies all over the floor as he lets out an animalistic wail and drops to his knees with his head in his hands.

My heart hurts seeing my children so torn up like this.

Novah is devastated as she cries on the hospital bed, but Bayou is a complete wreck on the floor.

So I stand between them and kneel at Bayou’s level, placing my hand on his shoulder. “I know how terrible this is, darling. But you still have a baby you need to focus your attention on. I understand how much this hurts right now, but you’ve got to focus on the positives...” I spin to face her. “There *are* positives? Right, Aubree?”

She grips Novah’s hand. “The water within the unviable twin’s tissues, amniotic fluid, and placental tissue should be reabsorbed, so we won’t need to do anything about removing the unviable fetus. But with the fetal death just before mid-gestation, there is an associated risk of preterm labor,

preeclampsia, and perinatal mortality of the other fetus, but... the surviving twin will most likely develop without further consequences. However, we will need to monitor you closely until the birth. The positives are you still have a healthy baby who wasn't impacted by the trauma of your injuries, and while it is utterly devastating, you should put all your energy and focus into the child you still have."

Bayou snuffles, affected by Aubree's words, and slowly stands from the floor. I move with him as we stand beside Novah, the three of us rocked by this news.

Bayou leans over Novah, his mouth by her ear. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there to protect the three of you," he mumbles, his voice cracking through his obvious pain.

I rub his back as Novah clings to him, her tears falling freely. "It wasn't your fault. It was no one's fault other than Anton's—"

"He picked on you because of me, because I led the club into his camp to find you. He did this to get back at me. *I* killed our baby."

Novah lets out a sob as her arms wrap around Bayou tightly. I stand back, letting them embrace each other. "No, no, you didn't. I couldn't stand it if you took that blame. You did *not* kill our baby. Don't you *ever* think that!"

My arms wrap around my body, holding myself together as tears fall freely down my face. I swipe them away as I snuffle, trying to keep my shit together.

Aubree takes a step closer, resting her hand on Novah's knee. "I know this is difficult, but would you like to see your baby? I can do an ultrasound to show you the heartbeat and how strong it is?"

Bayou pulls back from Novah, glancing down at her watering eyes, and she nods. "Do we know which one survived? The boy or girl?"

Aubree smiles. "How about we have a look, and we can find out?"

Novah and Bayou nod, and Aubree moves over to the ultrasound machine already in the room from previous testing.

Aubree grabs the gel, smiling at Novah. “Little bit cold.”

Novah exhales, taking Bayou’s hand so tight his fingers turn white, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He continues to stroke her hair with his other hand, and his eyes fixate on the screen even though Aubree hasn’t started the scan.

She pulls out the wand, placing it on Novah’s small bump. The white noise sounds through the room, the fuzzy whooshing sound is my heart pounding, waiting to hear that little thumping noise of the baby’s heartbeat.

Then, as she slides the wand over Novah’s stomach, the view of the two babies comes clearly into focus. Novah’s bottom lip trembles and Bayou watches with a steely demeanor as they see their children for the last time.

Novah reaches out, her hand gently caressing the monitor, a tear falling down her face.

“Can you tell which one is gone?” she whispers.

Aubree nods. “I can... the unviable fetus is the girl. I am so sorry for your loss.”

Novah closes her eyes, letting out a heavy exhale. “So... we’re having a boy?” She snuffles.

“You’re having a beautiful, strong, healthy boy. Would you like to hear his heart?”

Bayou nods, wiping a tear from his cheek. “Yeah... I want to hear my son.”

I slide my hand up and down Bayou’s back comfortingly as Aubree moves the wand over my grandson’s heart, and the whooshing thump of his powerful heart plays over the machine. My breath gets caught in my throat as I gasp, hearing it for the first time. The moment so incredibly moving that it makes me choke up.

Novah’s eyes flick to Bayou. “He’s okay!” she cries out, finding some relief through the grief.

Bayou nods, planting a tender kiss on her lips. “He’s perfect.”

Aubree takes a couple of pictures and prints them out. “This will probably be the last imagery you will have of your baby girl, so I have printed pictures for you to keep. I’ll need you to come back in regularly so I can monitor baby boy and ensure he’s going strong.”

“Whatever we need to do to keep him healthy, doc, we’re gonna do. Right?” Bayou states, and Novah nods.

“Absolutely, whatever it takes,” she reaffirms.

“Okay, let me clean you up, and then you guys can spend some time together while we run some more tests on you, Novah, just to make sure you’re okay from all your other injuries. If everything is fine, we will keep you in for observation over the next few hours, but you might be able to go home later this evening. We will see what the other results tell us. Hang tight. I’m going to go check on Kaia and Lani, then I’ll be back.”

“Thanks, Aubree. We appreciate you looking after us,” I tell her.

“Yes, thank you. Even though it wasn’t good news, at least we still have one baby. It could have been much, much worse,” Novah states.

Dr. Adams nods. “Technically, you’re not completely out of the woods yet, but you can at least see the edge of the forest from here, which is a blessing. We just have to play it safe from here on out. So please keep Novah out of all future club wars if you can. She can’t risk any further injuries.”

Bayou dips his head. “She’s going to be so well-guarded she’s going to hate being surrounded by people for the next five months.”

Novah smiles, though I can tell it is forced. “Somehow, I don’t think I’m going to mind one little bit.”

“You let me know if you need anything in the meantime, okay?” Aubree states.

“Will do, thanks, doc,” Bayou states, and she walks out, leaving the three of us alone.

I turn to face them and shake my head. “I am so sorry, my loves. Words can’t express how sad I am for you both. But then, I’m relieved because you’re okay, and so is your little boy. It’s such an odd feeling.”

Novah reaches out, grabbing my hand in hers. “Thank you for being here, Mom.”

“You’re always here for us whenever we need you,” Bayou adds.

I bring my free hand up and cup his bearded cheek. “Of course, darling. I love you both with everything I have, and I never want to see you in pain like this.”

“I’m not going to lie. This fucking hurts. Knowing I was going to have a daughter and a son is every girl’s fantasy when having twins. I really wanted my little girl, Mommy.” Novah sniffles.

I hold her hand a little tighter. “I know, darling. I’m so, so sorry... but once you and your little boy are settled, if you want to, you and Bayou can try again. Or not. You don’t need to make any plans now, just know there are options.”

Bayou nods. “Ingrid’s right, baby. There’s gonna be so many kids in our future. This is just a blip. A fucking horrific blip, but we’ll be okay. We *have* to be. For the sake of our son.”

Novah grips onto Bayou tighter, and he continues to stroke her hair.

I gently pat his back and exhale. “I’m going to give you two some alone time and go find Kaia and Hurricane to check in on them, but if you need me for anything at all, Bayou, you come find me.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Novah says, wiping under her damp eyes.

I lean in, placing a kiss on her cheek. “I love you, darling.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I turn to Bayou.

“I’ll walk you out. I’ll be right back, Novah. Okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Novah states, her eyes focusing on the sonogram printout.

Exhaling at the sight of her so lost in grief, Bayou and I walk out of her med bay and into the emergency ward. He turns to me once we’re out of her room and out of sight and suddenly pulls me to him in a tight embrace.

I wrap my arms around him tightly, putting everything into the hug. “I love you so much, Bayou, and I know how hard this is for you, but she needs you to be strong for her.”

He sniffles, pulling back, his eyes full of tears, and he nods. “I know... but I don’t know what hurts more. Knowing we lost our baby girl or seeing the pain it’s causing Novah. I can’t stand seeing her upset.”

“You and Novah have had a bond ever since you met. When your father and I got married, the relationship you and Novah formed was unique. You two have been through so much together. You were destined, Bayou, and like you said, this is a blip. You will be okay. I feel it.”

He pulls me to him for another hug, then kisses me on the cheek. “You always were a far better mother than my actual mom. I just want you to know that.”

My chest squeezes in appreciation, and I try to hold my tears in. Bayou and his twin mean everything to me. To hear him say that means more than he will ever know. “I love you like you’re my own blood, Bayou. I always have. Always will. No matter what. Now go back in there and take care of our girl and your son. Be strong, Bayou. I know you can be.”

He inhales sharply, his chest puffing out with a deep breath. “I got this. I’ll hold it together... *for her.*”

“Good, because falling apart in front of her like you did earlier won’t do Novah any good. But when you’re away from her, I am here if you need someone to talk to about your grief. You can unload on me, cry on my shoulder, punch walls, and

scream into pillows. Whatever you need to do. Just not in front of Novah. She needs your strength and guidance right now.”

“I hear you, and I know you’re right. I let my grief consume me. Didn’t stop to put *her* needs first.”

“You’re human. We all react to that kind of news differently. Now is how you and Novah build a stronger foundation. You need to be there for each other. This kind of thing can make or break a relationship. But you guys will fight for each other. I know you will.”

Bayou swallows hard. “We’ll be okay. We have to be. I’ll make damn sure of it.”

“Right. I’m going to go find Hurricane and Kaia.”

“I heard they’re in room nine.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I place a light kiss on his cheek. He smiles at me as I turn and head for room nine.

Stepping up to the curtain, I hear Hurricane’s gruff tone on the other side, so I know I’m in the right place. Carefully, I pull the curtain back to see Aubree working on Kaia’s hand. Hurricane glances over and gestures for me to come inside.

“As I was sayin’, doc, tell me in fuckin’ English. I’m not a goddamn doctor. I don’t speak medical shit,” Hurricane grunts out.

Aubree is wrapping tape around Kaia’s bright purple and swollen fingers as she winces, but it’s Hurricane who’s making more noise than Kaia at this point. Aubree continues with what she’s doing, completely unfazed by the brute of a man harassing her. “In layman’s terms, her three middle fingers are broken and must be kept strapped together for support to induce healing. Her pinky was lucky, and they didn’t get that far. It is just badly sprained and bruised.”

Kaia huffs out her annoyance. “So does this mean, with my fingers out of action, that my tattoo career is in jeopardy?”

Aubree continues strapping Kaia’s hand and shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. The injuries are minor fractures,

and you should be okay with about six to eight weeks of healing time. But you may not have the same strength you had in them before. You will probably need occupational therapy to help regain full strength and to teach you how to do tasks like dressing yourself and writing.”

“What about picking up and holding Immy?” she asks with a little more panic in her tone.

Aubree shakes her head. “Not for the next six to eight weeks, I’m afraid... I’m sorry, Kaia. If you want to regain full functionality of your hand, you can’t lift with that hand.”

“How the hell am I meant to tell a seven-month-old that I can’t pick her up?”

Hurricane places his hands on Kaia’s shoulders and gently squeezes. “I can take over Immy duty for a while. We’ll figure it out. Plus, we have plenty of people at the clubhouse who can help. It’s only temporary, Sha.”

Kaia’s eyes water, and she snuffles back her frustration. “I can’t hold my daughter for eight weeks because of that *fucking bastard*. My sister is still unresponsive from a seizure caused by watching me be tortured in front of her, and God only knows what’s happening with Novah.”

Aubree side-eyes me, and I step forward. “Novah lost the girl. The boy baby is doing okay, though. We heard his heartbeat, and he’s going strong.”

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck as Kaia’s tears finally fall. “See, see the trauma this has caused, Hurricane? This war *has* to end! An innocent child died before it was even born. Do you *not* see how fucked up this is? We *can’t* drag this on any longer. Once we’re all back at the clubhouse and settled, I don’t care who you have to call for help, you get them *the fuck* into New Awlins, and you finish this, once and for all. Obliterate those fuckers!”

Hurricane and I stare at Kaia in shock.

Aubree finishes wrapping her hand. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear any of that. But I might get some extra blood supplies and bandage stocks ordered in. I have a feeling I will

need them in the coming days. I'll leave you to discuss. Remember, Kaia, don't use your hand unless you have to. I want you to come back in two weeks for a checkup. You're good to go. You can go see Lani if you like. She's in room six."

"Thanks, Aubree, appreciate everything you do for us," I tell her as she walks out, throwing her gloves in the trash.

Kaia hops down from the gurney, not waiting a second before heading for the exit. "Kaia... Sha, you need to take it easy, for fuck's sake!" Hurricane grunts out, taking off after her.

We both follow quickly as she pulls the curtain back with her good hand, rushing out into the emergency ward, looking for room six as we chase after her. "I'm not waiting for the Bratva to come after us while we're sitting ducks. I need to go and make sure Lani is okay!"

I turn to Hurricane, the tension clear on his face.

Kaia is pissed.

And rightly so.

The Bratva came at us, and they are a clear threat. They attacked at the heart of Defiance. We need to strike, but we're not in a position to do that just yet.

Kaia's feet pound through the emergency ward like she's on a mission, even though the pain in her broken hand must be killing her. I hope Aubree gave her some relief or numbed her fingers before I came in. Either way, Kaia is on a war path, which is why she makes a great First Lady of the club.

Kaia makes it to room six and doesn't hesitate. She grabs the curtain, yanking it back. "Lani?"

The pulled-back curtain reveals Grit standing beside her bed, holding her hand, with tears in his eyes. Kaia stops dead still as she spots her sister lying on the bed.

Lani has machines hooked up to her everywhere, and we approach with a lot less force, trying to ascertain what's happening.

Kaia steps up to the side of her sister's bed, tears dripping down her face as she uses her good hand to gently stroke Lani's cheek. "Oh, Lani, what have you gone and done to yourself?"

Kaia glances up at Grit, and he clears his throat. "The seizure was long, and although her brainwaves appear normal, she's not waking up on her own. It's a waiting game at this point."

My chest squeezes as Hurricane moves in behind Kaia, wrapping his arm around his wife and holding her to him for support.

Kaia shakes her head. "Jesus... all this time, I've tried to protect her from her seizures. Tried to help her the best I could, but the reason she had the worst one of her life was because she was stressed about me."

I step forward, placing my hand on Kaia's shoulder supportively. "Kaia, what happened in that bunker was stressful for all of us. So much was happening in there. There were a lot of factors that contributed to this. She saw what happened to Novah. She saw the Baroness take a bullet. And, of course, what happened to you. But it wasn't only seeing you tortured that tipped her over the edge. The entire shit show was too much for her. Bayou is blaming himself for Novah, and you're blaming yourself for Lani, but what you both have to realize is the only person you should blame is Anton fucking Novikov."

Hurricane growls under his breath. "That bastard has to pay!"

Kaia glances up at Grit, a longing look in her eyes. "Has she shown any sign of improvement since she's been here?"

Grit nods. "Her hands have stopped clenching. They managed to stop the seizure and bring her back. Now we wait for her to wake and see what the damage is, if any."

Kaia exhales. "How long will she be in the hospital?"

Grit shrugs. "I have no idea. That all depends on when she wakes."

Kaia turns to look at Hurricane. “I’m staying. I can’t leave her.”

Hurricane runs his fingers through his hair. “All right, Sha. If you need this, then I’ll stay too. Club business can wa—”

“*No!* I need you to go back to the club. I need you to be there to take care of Immy when you’re not coming up with a plan to deal with this *fucking* problem. I need you to make Anton and the Bratva pay for what they have done to our family. To our club. Fix this, Hurricane, or so help me God, I will go after Anton myself, and trust me, you do *not* want me to let loose on that bastard,” she demands, her tone so forceful that I wonder if Hurricane doesn’t follow through if their relationship might be in trouble.

Hurricane grabs the back of her head and pulls her lips to his in a passionate kiss, making my eyes widen in shock.

Not the response I was expecting.

But he kisses her like it might be the last time, his fingers in her hair, holding tight. His other hand clenches her ass, and her good hand runs up and down his back. Her bad hand hangs loosely against his bicep as they make out without regard for us being in the room.

Grit clears his throat, reminding them we’re here.

Kaia pulls back, stumbling a little as she leans against Lani’s bed. “What was that for?” she asks breathlessly.

Hurricane’s lips turn up in the corner as he looks her up and down. “I fuckin’ love it when you take control and get all demandin’ like that.”

She rolls her eyes and spins to face Lani. “Don’t flatter me, Hurricane. Just *fix* this.”

He kisses her shoulder tenderly, his arm wrapping around her stomach as he holds onto her from behind. “I’m gonna make Anton suffer in ways he has never dreamed of. He came after my family, my club. There’s no comin’ back from that. It’s all-out war, and Defiance *never* loses a war.”

“Pres... I’m out of this fight. I want to help the club. You *know* I do. This patch means fucking *everything* to me. But my place is right here by Lani’s side. I’m not leaving until I know she’s okay,” Grit admits, and Hurricane nods.

“Wouldn’t want it any other way, brother. I need you here to watch my girls. If Kaia is stayin’, then I need my best men watchin’ over her, and you’re one of the best, Grit. I need to know they’re both safe here while we’re goin’ to deal with this shit.”

“You know I got this, Pres. Leave another man with me for backup, and we should be all good.”

Hurricane nods. “I’ll leave Ghoul. Any sign of problems, any updates on Lani? You fuckin’ call.”

“Got it,” Grit replies with a head bob.

Hurricane spins Kaia around to face him. “You take it easy, Sha. You rest as much as you can while here.” He turns to look at Grit. “Make sure she fuckin’ rests!”

Grit dips his chin in response. “I’ll take care of her, Pres. We’re family.”

Kaia brings her good hand up to Hurricane’s cheek and sighs. “Take care of Immy. She may only be seven months old, but she witnessed a lot in that bunker. Make sure she’s fine. Give her a lot of attention, okay?”

“I got this, baby. Love you.”

“Love you too. Now go. You’ve got shit to do.”

Hurricane chuckles, turning for me, and we head to the exit to tell the others who have been waiting for hours what’s happening.

“What a day,” I mumble as we walk the hall.

Hurricane shakes his head, his grip tight on me. “I don’t know that the club has ever been on a knife’s edge like it is right now. We’re at a tippin’ point, and I’m either gonna lead the club into a new phase, or I’m gonna do this all wrong, and it’ll be the death of us all.”

I tighten my grip on him. “Heavy is the crown, my love. But if there is one thing I know about you, it’s that you wear that crown with so much fucking pride, power, and persuasion that you can do anything you set your mind to. You want this club to win this war? One way or another, you will.”

“There’s so many movin’ parts to this. Things happenin’ in the background that have the potential to be catastrophic for Defiance, not just NOLA, but every chapter. Plus, this Bratva bullshit, and now our women are hurt... I need to fuckin’ focus. I gotta sit and think this through. I can’t fuck this up, Ingrid, for the sake of my brothers.”

His face scrunches, his fingers running through his hair in his frustration, a single bead of sweat rolling down his temple. He’s stressed. He’s struggling. And I need to step in and help him the only way I know how.

Reaching out, I take his hands in mine and look him in the eyes. “Lynx, look at me...” His shocked eyes meet mine. I hardly ever call him by his real name, only when I desperately need to get his attention, and I think now is that time. “When your father was the president of this club, he faced challenges every day. He struggled with the weight that responsibility carried. The burden on his shoulders. Being a president is fucking hard. You have *so* many lives you need to take into consideration. But Lynx, your father would be *astronomically* proud of the man, the father, the husband, and the president you have become. Darling, Reaper ran things with an iron fist. He was hard but fair, and he taught you to be the same.”

I bring my hand up, caressing his bearded cheek. “I see so much of your father in you, and that is *such* a good thing because Reaper was a great man. But Lynx... you are even better than he was. Don’t let the heaviness of everything that is happening cloud your judgment. You *will* make the right call, no matter what the situation is. I have every faith in you because you’re the legacy of Reaper.” I let out a small laugh. “And we all know his drunk ass is looking down on you, helping guide you through this.”

His lips turn up in the faintest of smiles, his eyes dropping away from mine. I don’t know the depths of what’s going on

with him and the club. The ins and outs of all the club business, but I know whatever it is, it must be big for him to be all out of sorts like this. So, I do the only thing I know how to do. “Hurricane, you will make the best choice you can. You are one person, and you can only do so much. Do what’s right for your family and club. Everyone else can sort their own shit out.”

He closes his eyes tight like he’s relieved to hear me say that. “Thanks, Ingrid. I needed to hear someone’s thinkin’ the same way as me for once.”

“No matter what, darling. I am always on your side.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that because I need you to move into the clubhouse for a while. Until I can figure out what we’re doin’ with this Bratva bullshit. I can’t risk you bein’ out there on your own and havin’ Anton come after you again. I gotta know you’re safe with us.”

Staying at the clubhouse has never been an issue.

And normally, it wouldn’t be.

But there are a couple of extenuating circumstances.

One—South and I are a thing. And trying to keep that under wraps while living together, surrounded by everyone, will be increasingly difficult.

Two—I have my lumpectomy surgery.

How the hell am I going to explain that to Hurricane and Bayou?

But right now, I know he needs this.

He needs to be able to see me.

To know that I am safe.

So I will give him this.

The rest, I will have to work out as we go.

Holy fuck!

CHAPTER TWENTY

South

It's been a hell of a day, and as everyone is settling back into the clubhouse, I can't help but notice Ingrid sticking around. My overwhelming need to talk to her runs through my veins like poison invading my system, making it increasingly harder to fucking concentrate.

As she sits by the bar, drinking with Frankie and Izzy, I can't stop staring at her, probably making myself obvious. Suddenly, City slides into the seat beside me, finally pulling my attention from the strawberry-blond who is quickly stealing my heart.

I turn to City and raise my beer his way. "Cheers, brother. Guess we're headed for a fight soon."

City chuckles, clinking his glass to mine. "Oh, brother, I think you're in for a bigger fight than the one we've got with the Bratva."

"What do you mean?" I ask, lowering my drink to the table.

He chuckles. "I saw you and Ingrid at the hospital today. If *I'm* seeing it, there's only a matter of time before Hurricane and Bayou pick up on the chemistry between the two of you."

Groaning, I run my hand through my hair. "Fuck."

"Mmm... fuck." City nods, taking another sip of his beer.

"So what do you think we should do?" I ask him outright.

City snorts out a laugh. "South, the age gap is gonna be a big deal for Hurricane and Bayou, let alone the fact that no one is or will *ever* be good enough for the women in their lives. If I were you, I'd stop whatever this is and get out now before you end up in a ditch. Now is the time this club needs to be united.

A scandal like this could break the club apart. Hurricane needs to be focused.”

My stomach twists on itself because I hear the words City is saying, and deep down, I know he’s right.

I should stay away.

I should keep my distance.

But I already know there’s no possible way in hell I can do that. There’s this insatiable pull toward Ingrid. It’s chemical. I can’t keep away from her. And I owe it to her to be there for her when she goes through this surgery.

I need to be there for her every step of the way.

“I don’t think I can stay away from her, City,” I reply honestly.

He looks me in the eyes and lets out a small laugh. “*Shiiit*, brother. Hurricane *is* going to kill you.” He slaps my shoulder, chuckling to himself. “Good luck. I hope she’s worth the beating you’re gonna get when he finds out.”

I simply shrug. “She’s worth *every-damn-thing*.”

City smiles, his joking side seeming to evaporate. “You really like her?”

“Can’t help it, brother. We just... fit.”

City widens his eyes like he’s in shock but squeezes my shoulder. “Then you need to tell Hurricane and Bayou before they find out. Tell them openly and honestly. I still don’t think you have a chance in hell of coming out of this alive, but maybe if you’re open with them, they might see it from your point of view.”

“Thanks, brother... I’ll have a chat with Ingrid. She has some other shit going on that we need to talk to them about too. So it’s gonna be a double whammy.”

“Jesus, you haven’t got her pregnant... have you?” His eyes widen.

I snort. “God, no, nothing like that.”

“Good, all right. So just warn me when you’re gonna talk to them so I can at least say my goodbyes to you properly before they off you.”

“Fuck you!” I quip, and he chuckles, standing and taking his almost-finished beer with him.

“In all honesty, South. I’m glad you’re settling down with someone who makes you happy. I hope you can make it work.”

“Thanks, brother. I hope so too,” I tell him, and he spins, walking off.

My eyes instinctively find Ingrid again by the bar, but this time, she is looking at me. I raise my glass in a gesture of hello.

She smiles and stands, making her way toward the kitchen. My pulse rate skyrockets as I figure out if that’s a subliminal message for me to follow her. As far as I can tell, everyone is in the main clubroom, so I stand, trying to be as discreet as possible, and make my way down the hall into the kitchen.

Carefully, I walk inside, but she’s nowhere to be seen. As I round the corner, the door to the pantry opens, and she pops her head out, waving at me with a bright smile.

Chuckling, I quickly check over my shoulder that no one is coming. The coast is clear, so I dart off for the pantry, walk inside, and close the door behind me. Turning, Ingrid is pressed against the shelves, her chest heaving with heady breaths.

“I’ve fucking missed you.” My voice is low, gravelly, and full of lust as I stalk toward her. My hands reach out, gripping the shelves on either side of her head as I lean in so close to her mouth that I can smell the mint on her breath. Her hands rest on my hips, dragging me closer. “I’ve been needing to touch you all day.”

My mouth connects with her neck, tasting her delicate skin. My teeth graze along her goosebumps, my tongue darting out, sampling her salty sweetness. “I was so worried about you when that message came through, angel. I was fucking

murderous thinking someone could be hurting you,” I admit, then continue kissing down her neck to her collarbone.

She pants breathlessly. Ingrid’s fingers run through my long hair, caressing my scalp.

Fuck, I love the way she does that.

“After everything happened, and the soldier came in with the machine gun, I thought I would never see you again. You were the last thing that went through my mind, and then you were there. I thought I was dead and dreaming.”

My lips trail back up her neck to the corner of her lips, gently kissing the edge of her mouth. “I will always find you, Ingrid. I will always fight for you. And, if I need to, I will *always* kill for you.”

A tear forms as her beautiful eyes meet mine. She stares at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. “Always?”

“Fucking always, angel,” I tell her, then slam my lips to hers.

The adrenaline surging through us in this moment feels like a freight train. I can’t control myself as my hands shift to her ass, and I lift. Her legs wrap around my waist, her arms around my neck as I lead her over to the butler’s kitchen and rest her ass on the edge. We kiss frantically, furiously, like we’ve never kissed before. Hands going everywhere, teeth, tongues, then her hands move to pull at my belt buckle.

I draw back, shaking my head. “Uh-uh, angel. This is all about you. I need to make you feel good. I have to relieve your tension,” I tell her, my hands sliding up her thighs and under her dress to grab her panties. Her chest heaves with her frantic breaths as I slowly pull her panties from her, my lips kissing along her thigh as I go.

Dragging her panties off completely, I shove them in my jeans pocket for safekeeping. “These belong to me now.”

She chuckles, shaking her head. “You’re an animal.”

Grinning from ear to ear, I kneel between her legs, easing them over my shoulders. “Only for you. Now grip onto my

hair and pull *hard*.”

Ingrid threads her fingers slowly through my hair, and I let out a growl, nipping at the soft flesh of her inner thigh. This gets her attention. She squeaks, tugging firmly and pulling my face into her, and I hum in appreciation.

I’m starving for her.

City’s words flash in my mind about how I need to walk away.

And while it would be the smart thing to do because no doubt Hurricane is going to lose it.

I can’t.

To give this up?

To never taste this pussy again?

Never going to happen.

Slipping my tongue between her folds, I growl with a primal need. She’s already so damn wet for me.

“Oh, God, yes,” she moans out, her hips bucking into me for more.

I pull back, biting along her thighs again, and she whimpers, “Mmm... someone’s eager for my mouth,” I taunt, sliding two fingers into her. I watch her breath hitch, and when she moans again, I quickly draw back my fingers, earning me another whine of displeasure. “Now, angel, you’re gonna have to be quiet.”

“Please...” she begs, her hips rocking, seeking more.

Seeing her needy for me does something to me.

My cock strains against my jeans zipper. “Look what you do to me,” I tell her, rubbing my palm over the bulge in my jeans.

She watches with hooded eyes as I unbutton my pants, the head of my cock visible. I can’t suppress the groan that escapes when she licks her lips at the sight.

“Don’t worry, angel. Soon I’ll have those gorgeous lips of yours wrapped around my cock.”

Then without another word, I bury my face in her pussy, gripping her ass with both hands. I nip at her swollen bundle of nerves, then sink my tongue deep inside her. I’m rewarded with another sharp tug at my hair as she rocks into me, fucking my face.

I peer up at her, and her head is lolled back, small moans emitting from her throat. It’s obvious she’s trying to be quiet but can’t.

Shifting my hold, I push two fingers inside, hooking them as I lick my way up to her clit where I vigorously lap at the bud. Between me thrusting my fingers in and out and the focused attention on her clit, she hollers out, unable to keep quiet any longer, and I smile, knowing I am the one to make her lose control.

Not wanting to risk getting caught, I pull back and reach up to her lips with the fingers I just had inside her. “I told you to be quiet. Now open up, angel.”

She immediately sucks them into her mouth, taking them to the knuckles. I groan, realizing my mistake. My cock throbs, wishing it was wrapped around her mouth and not my damn fingers.

Our heavy breaths echo in the space, and a light sheen of sweat coats our skin.

God, what I wouldn’t do to be able to sink into her.

Knowing our time is limited and the longer we stay in here, the more likely we are to get caught, I tell her, “Ingrid, fuck my face like you mean it. I want to be covered in you.”

Unable to speak, she frantically nods her head in agreement. As soon as my tongue slips between her delicious folds, she does as I demand.

Her legs start to shake, and one hand releases its hold on my hair, slamming into the shelf next to her and sending a variety of boxed foods to the floor. I latch onto her clit, sucking, licking, and nipping, and she presses me even closer

with her other hand. At this point, I can barely take a breath, but I fucking don't care.

I growl, and the vibration is enough to send her over the edge. She opens her mouth, but my fingers hold her chin closed as her muffled moans whimper through the room. Her arm flies into the shelf again, this time sending canned goods to the floor with a clattering bang.

“Brothers, Church!” Hurricane’s voice echoes slightly through our panting as I pull my mouth from between Ingrid’s legs, my head flying up at the thought of being caught. Her juices coating my lips, making me smile so fucking wide as I bring my arm up, regretfully wiping them away.

Ingrid is still coming down from her high, her fingers gently stroking my hair as I glance up at her still between her legs. “Feeling better?” I ask.

She lets out a small giggle, her satiated eyes meeting mine. “I didn’t know how much I needed that until I was moaning so loud you had to tell me to be quiet. You’re so good at that.”

“Where the fuck is South?” Hurricane calls out in the main clubroom, and I chuckle, slowly standing from between her legs.

“I better go before they come in here looking for me.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me briefly. “This running around, hiding behind people’s backs stuff is exhilarating.”

I snort out a laugh. “It is, but it could also get me killed.”

“Yeah, we have to tell them... about everything.”

“We do, just not right this second. Right now, I have to go to Church.”

“You go. I’ll follow behind in a while so we don’t raise suspicion.”

I smirk and step back, trying to straighten out my still semi-erect cock and button up my jeans. “I have to try and concentrate in the Chapel now without thinking about what we just did. You’re a bad influence on me, angel.”

She snorts, ushering me toward the door. “Go before they come in here searching.”

I kiss her one more time, look her up and down, shake my head with a small groan, and then carefully open the pantry door. I peek out, seeing no one around, then I walk out into the kitchen with a pep in my step, fixing my tousled hair and making my way into the main clubroom, where Jesse is madly searching for me.

“Hey, there you are. Pres is looking for you. They’ve gone into Church without you.”

“Thanks, prospect.”

Making my way to the Chapel, I knock several times, then head on in. Everyone is taking their seats, so at least I’m not too late, but Hurricane looks at me and furrows his brows as he sits with baby Immy on his lap. “Where the fuck were ya? I was callin’ out?”

I snort out a laugh. “Can’t a brother have a shit in peace around here?”

Everyone laughs as I walk to the end of the table and take a seat.

Hurricane bangs his gavel, making baby Immy jump with the shock. Her eyes widen as he brings the gavel for her to play with. “First of all... apologize for havin’ a baby in here with us, but Kaia specifically wanted me to pay closer attention to Immy after the attack. And as you can see, my little *cheri* is jumpy. I’m gonna try to spend the time I’m at the clubhouse with her. So she’s gonna be attached to me a lot more. Of course, when we go out, Frankie or one of the girls will be watchin’ her. If there are any objections, you can fuck off. This is happenin’. My daughter’s well-bein’ is important to me. So get on board, or get the fuck out. Got it?”

We all nod our heads. There’s not a brother in this room who would object to having Imogen in here with us. She’s seven months old. She can’t understand what we’re saying. So it’s a no-brainer.

“Secondly, you’ve all been updated on Kaia, Novah, and Lani’s conditions. We will keep you informed as we know more about Lani. Novah is restin’, and we gotta try to keep the noise level in the clubhouse down so Novah can sleep. Kaia is stayin’ at the hospital with Grit and Ghoul to keep an eye on Lani. We have to keep our thoughts positive for a good outcome.” He leans in, kissing Immy’s hair lightly, his finger playing with the curls on her head.

“The fact is, we all know this war’s been brewin’ for months. No, fuck, years. Well, brothers, it’s not brewin’ anymore. The war is here. It’s landed right on our motherfuckin’ doorstep with a huge fuckin’ wakeup call. The time to strike has come, but we all know we have other obstacles we need to overcome while doin’ this. Our backs are against the wall. NOLA Defiance has never seen such dark days as we’re in right now. But brothers, if we stand together, tall and united, we can get through this... all of us.”

He’s definitely talking about the hit on Six.

The fact that while we’re fighting for our lives, and Houston will be here fighting beside us, we will all know there’s a subplot to assassinate their president during the fight.

We’re all Judas.

We’re all going to hell.

But for the sake of our club—for the safety of our women—it *has* to be done.

“I spoke to the Baroness. She is still insistent on us carrying out the hit, even though she wants revenge on the Bratva just as much as we do. So I’m gonna get Houston on the phone tonight, get them on the first plane out here. As many of them as they can spare, and then... we’re takin’ this war to the Bratva. So take tonight. Spend it with the people you love because the next few days will be chaotic. We’re bikers. We fight hard. We protect what’s ours. I’ll be damned if we’re gonna let those Bratva assholes break us apart. Why?” he asks, placing his left fist over his chest.

We all stand, following in his footsteps, slamming our left fist on our chest and yelling in unison, “We are Defiance!” We pound our fists into our chests three times, bringing unity and a sense of brotherhood.

Hurricane bobs his head. “We’re NOLA fuckin’ Defiance, and we’re gonna obliterate those fuckin’ Bratva bastards until there is nothin’ left but their bones for us to crush into ash.”

We all burst into a round of cheering, throwing our hands in the air. Little Immy jumps again, but the mood of the Chapel is one of unity—of perseverance.

We have a huge job ahead of us.

A fucking tough job to do.

One that involves some fucking shitty tasks.

But if we stay united like this—we can do anything.

Now we have to wait for Houston to arrive...

... including their president, Six.

I don’t know what the future holds, but things are about to get fucking interesting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

South

As I lay back in bed, staring at the ceiling, the idea that life at this club will get very anarchic over the next few days is terrifying.

Life for Ingrid will become complicated in a couple of weeks, and I need to ensure that not only me but the rest of her family are around when everything is going down.

When this fight happens, when we go to war with the Bratva and we take on Houston, I need to make sure I'm doing everything I can to back Hurricane and Bayou because my woman needs them like she needs to breathe. If I have to fight harder to keep them protected, that's what I will do.

Fuck! If it comes down to us arguing over who'll take the shot on Six, I'll fucking do it to keep Ingrid's family with her.

My mind is rapidly cycling after tasting Ingrid today and knowing tonight could be the last time I get to spend with her because tomorrow isn't promised.

I roll over, completely restless.

Knowing she is only a few rooms away from me doesn't help.

It's late.

Everyone is asleep, or at least they should be.

But every inch of me is screaming to make sure she's okay.

Ingrid's been through so much today, and leaving her alone tonight feels like so many levels of wrong.

"Fuck it!" I murmur to myself as I throw back my sheets and stand. I take a second to really think this through. "What

are you doing, South?” I quietly question, running my hand through my hair.

My heart hammers, telling me I should stop.

That this is a danger far too great to risk.

But my feet don't listen as they head for my door.

I'm shirtless, wearing only tight boxer briefs, as I pull back my door and peek into the dimly lit hall.

It's quiet—so fucking quiet.

The only thing I hear is the unusually strong springtime wind whistling outside. Slowly walking out into the hall, the floor creeks with the weight of my movement, and I pause, my heart leaping up into my throat as I wait to see if anyone's heard me.

But there's nothing.

I smirk, continuing into the hall and venturing down, slowly and steadily, toward Ingrid's room. When I get to her door, a soft glow of light is peeking out from beneath. Furrowing my brows, I wonder why she's still awake at three in the morning, so I gently rap on the wood and carefully open her door.

As I pop my head around, I see her sitting up in bed, reading a book by the lamp on her nightstand, a sexy little red silk nightgown on, her hair up in a messy bun, and a pen in her mouth. She glances at me, looking like some kind of kinky librarian. I swear my cock grows so hard I can't control it, and in these tight briefs, her eyes drop straight to my tenting erection, and she smirks.

“Well, hello to you too,” she whispers.

I quickly close the door behind me, shaking my head as I turn back to face her. “Jesus Christ, woman, you have never looked sexier than you do right now.”

She kicks her legs out from under the covers. Her long, toned, gorgeous legs go all the way up to that delicious pussy, making me want to dive right in and taste her all over again.

“How ’bout now?” she asks in such a seductive way it makes my cock harder if that’s even possible.

I stalk over to the edge of her bed, glancing down at her. “You know I only came in here to check and see if you’re okay after what happened today?”

Her face falls, like she’s remembering it all over again. She clenches her eyes shut, then suddenly shifts to her knees, crawling to the edge of the bed to me, her hands splaying out on my chest. “I don’t want to talk about today, South. I want you to help me forget. I want to finally get lost in you.”

I groan, reaching out and caressing her cheek. “Are you sure? Stop me now because I won’t be able to after I have you. I won’t be able to hold back in front of everyone.” I trail my hand from her face down to her pussy and cup her firmly. “Everyone will know this pussy is mine,” I warn, my gaze never wavering as I drop to rest my forehead on hers.

Her breath hitches, and when she doesn’t respond, I pull back, but she stops me, wrapping her arms around my neck and slamming her mouth to mine. I growl, lifting her with ease, hooking her legs around my waist.

“Oh, angel, I warned you. Now I’m gonna worship this body, imprint myself in you so when I look at you, your pussy will ache for me,” I murmur against her lips, grinding her against my throbbing cock.

I know I need to take my time with her, show her exactly what she means to me, but when she whimpers, the heat of her pussy and the dampness of her panties soaking into the thin fabric of my boxers, precum forms on the head of my cock.

Walking her to the wall by the door, I press into her, letting her feel how much I want her, and she moans.

And that moan is almost my undoing.

Unhooking her legs, I let her slide down my body. She’s panting, her eyes heavy with desire. I take a step back, and she moves to follow, but I stop her, turning her to face the wall. “Hands on the wall and stick this delicious ass out,” I order, smacking her plump, round cheeks. Ingrid jumps in surprise

with a yelp but does as she's told. "Look at you, angel. Mmm... good girl."

I step in behind her, appraising her positioned at my mercy, keeping my hips close enough for her to feel my presence but not so close that I'm touching her. However, the temptation she presents in this position is deadly.

She tilts her head back, trying to see me, and I can't resist wrapping my hand in her loose bun and pulling her, causing her to arch her back more. "Please, South," she begs, and I growl, slapping her ass.

Releasing her hair, I grip her hips and lean, kissing between her shoulder blades. "Shh, angel. I've got you."

I push her nightgown up and slip her panties down her legs, appreciating the view as I kneel behind her. Her pussy glistens in the soft light, taunting me of the heaven I know awaits. I lightly blow, watching as she tries to push back, seeking more.

"Fuck, South. Put me out of my misery... *please.*"

My chuckle turns into a growl as I bury my face, sinking my tongue into her. Her moan echoes through the room, and while I know she should be quiet, I can't bring myself to care.

Those moans are for me, and I want every one of them.

Gripping her hips with bruising force, she presses into me, fucking my face, and I love it—love when she takes what she needs from me. With one hand, I slide between her legs, encouraging her to open for me.

She steps her legs apart, arching further.

"Fuck, yes!" she hollers, and I pinch her clit.

Ingrid's body tenses. She breathes frantically as her skin covers in goose bumps. Her body convulses against my face, and her muscles give out, sending her over the edge. I continue to work through her orgasm, lapping her up, not wanting to waste a drop. She's panting, her hips shaking.

"No... no more. It's too much!"

She tries to pull away, but I hold tight. I want her to come again. I don't think I will ever get enough of her. "Never. Never enough. You're going to give me one more, angel."

"South, I... I... oh fuck!"

I growl with pride, lapping between her clit to her puckered entrance, keeping a firm rhythm on her clit. She starts bucking her hips, and I know she's close. I quickly pull back, turning so I'm now between her legs, giving me access to her gorgeous tits and allowing me to see her come undone.

"That's it, Ingrid. I want you to ride my face like your life depends on it," I tell her, pulling her to put weight on me.

I want to be smothered in her.

My cock aches to the point of pain, but I don't care.

Her pleasure is *all that matters*.

She straddles my face, continuing to brace her hands against the wall. I reach up and pinch a nipple before grabbing her breast. With my other hand, I slide my fingers through her wetness before pressing two fingers into her and rubbing a finger against her other entrance. She cries out, her pussy immediately clenching around them.

We both moan as I nip and suck her clit. She bucks her hips, grinding into my face and fingers. I release her breast and grip her throat lightly, watching her face succumb to the bliss that follows.

"Yes, yesss. Fuck..." Her breath catches, eyes fluttering closed, and she releases all over my face, her legs shaking uncontrollably.

After thoroughly cleaning her with my tongue, I slide my fingers out. "Open your eyes, angel." Her eyes snap open, and I offer my fingers coated in her. "Taste what I do to you."

She hesitantly opens her mouth, and I slip them inside, her lips closing around them. I pull them back, tugging her to sit on my lap, wanting her, needing her.

My lips slam onto hers, my tongue sweeping inside, tangling with hers. Tasting Ingrid like this, her wetness

covering me, has me ravaging this woman. Hands tangled in her hair, pressing up into her, needing to be balls deep.

She pulls back, and I groan as I watch her slip her nightgown over her head. Her glorious tits are now free. I don't wait a second longer, leaning in, sucking each taut nipple, nipping and biting. My lips trail up to her neck, where I sink my teeth. Not enough to be painful but enough to show possessiveness.

"Get on the bed," I tell her, unable to control my gruff tone.

She stands, and I can't help but nip at her thigh, causing her to squeak. When she turns, I can't suppress the groan at the sight of her gorgeous ass.

With a sassy smirk, she looks over her shoulder. "See something you like?"

"Angel, you don't know the half of it. Now get that sweet ass on the bed."

"You're awfully demanding," she teases, and I love that she's not in her head, too self-conscious to let go.

She's previously expressed her worries about her body, and I wasn't sure how this would go. I know all my angel needs is for me to show her she has nothing to worry about and that she's perfect in every way.

She gets up on the bed like a good girl, watching me stand. Her eyes travel down my body to the unmistakable hard-on in my boxers that are so strained, it's a wonder they don't rip from the pressure.

"Seems to me you see something *you* like," I counter, my breath heavy with want as I slip my boxers down.

My cock bounces, no longer confined, and I grit my teeth. I don't know if I have ever been this hard. And watching Ingrid watch me like she wants to ravage me only adds to the ever-growing desire. A drop of precum falls to the floor, and I have to grip my shaft almost painfully to edge off the need to come.

“You know I do. Now come over here. It’s my turn,” Ingrid tells me, licking her lips.

“Lay on the bed with your head slightly off the edge. You want to taste me? I’ll give you a taste, but just know, I am going to be balls deep inside your sweet pussy when I come.”

Her eyes blaze with hunger at my words, and she scoots into position. I stand before her, my gaze roaming over her body, and I groan, gripping my shaft. Her chest rises and falls with each heavy breath, and now I’m licking my lips.

Stepping closer, I grip my shaft and guide my cock to her lips. Her tongue sweeps over the head, and my body tenses. I release a low, throaty groan at the contact.

She hums her approval before opening her mouth as she reaches up, grabbing my hips, and pulling me forward. My cock slides inside, and it’s nothing like I’ve ever felt before.

Her cheeks hollow as she sucks, and it takes everything I have not to thrust deeper.

I meant what I said.

I want to be inside her when I come.

“Fuck. So fucking sexy with my cock in your mouth, your body laid out for me.”

I reach down, pulling her nipples. The way her body squirms and the moan she gives me has me doing it again. I smirk, loving how responsive she is even after two orgasms.

With one hand lightly holding her breast, I slide the other over her throat as I thrust a little harder, wanting to feel myself. But when she gags, I know it’s too much. I pull back, her lips making a popping sound as she releases me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, worry showing in her furrowed brows.

“Are you kidding? Nothing’s wrong. I need to be inside you. Your mouth is fucking incredible,” I tell her, having to reassure her.

And it’s the truth.

I've got to stop for fear of taking it too far.

I help her up, spinning my angel on the bed so I can crawl over her, nestling between her thighs. Lifting her hips, I set her ass on my thighs, watching as her legs fall open. Her pussy glistens for me, and I can't resist dragging my cock through her slick folds.

She wiggles her hips, jutting them up when the head probes her entrance. "South, I can't take much more of your teasing. It's on the verge of cruel torture."

A growl from deep in my chest echoes through the room, her breathing heavy as she pants in anticipation. Grabbing her wrists, I push them over her head and thrust into her in steady movement, sinking all the way in. My mouth connects with hers, swallowing her gasp and moans.

I still for a moment, not just to let her adjust but to keep myself from coming. Pulling back, I nip her bottom lip. "Fuck, you feel so good. It's like I'm a teenager trying not to blow my load on the second pump."

She giggles, her eyes bright with mischief. "So I probably shouldn't do this?" she asks, swirling her hips, rotating them around and back again.

My breath catches, and I have to think of anything but what she's doing to me. My muscles strain, my skin slick with sweat, and I haven't even moved.

Fuck, after tomorrow, I might not be able to do this again.

Too much is on the line.

Too much is at risk.

More in control, I lift her leg and rest it on my shoulder as I press forward, grinding further into her. My pelvic bone rubs against her clit, and she tries to move her arms from my grip. While I love having her at my will, I also adore to see her let go and take what she wants.

As soon as I release her wrists, her fingers are in my hair, and she's pulling me to her. She kisses me with the same heady passion I feel about possibly losing this.

Of losing her.

Our teeth click together at the force, and she groans, but it almost sounds like a growl of frustration. Suddenly, she breaks the kiss, pressing her forehead to mine. With an intense gaze, she pants out, “South... I need you to fuck me... *Now!*”

My only answer is to pull back and slam into her, giving her what she needs. Ingrid’s pussy clenches around me, and she cries out, “More!”

“I’ll give you more, angel. You better hold on.”

I thrust into her again, grinding my hips before pulling back and doing it again. The smell of sex permeates the room. Her moans and the slapping of our bodies drown out any other noise that might be there.

There’s no way no one hears us, but I don’t care.

All I care about is my woman’s pleasure.

Dropping her leg, she wraps herself around me, locking her ankles together. Then she reaches around and drags her fingernails down my back, the sting it leaves in their wake only adding to the pleasure burning through my veins.

I lower to my elbows, wanting to feel her body against mine, her breasts rubbing against my chest. My fingers thread through her hair, tightening and pulling her head back, exposing her throat. I kiss and suck, feeling the vibrations of her moans as she calls out my name.

“Fuck, don’t stop. Alm—”

Her breath catches, and when I bite the juncture between her neck and shoulder, her muscles tense, and her pussy clamps around my cock as her entire body shudders with her explosion. The force is enough to bring that familiar tingle to the base of my spine. My balls pull up, and I am at my woman’s mercy.

She digs her heels into my ass, pressing me closer and holding me deep. “Fuck, Ingrid...” Her name is a plea on my lips.

White hot heat shoots up my spine, my vision blurring. I clench my eyes shut, and my breath catches as lights flash behind my eyes. A ringing sounds in my ears, my head spinning with the adrenaline rush as my balls pull up and the force of my climax rocks through me. “*Fuuuck!*” I groan as I rest my forehead on hers, panting frantically while slowly coming down from the intense as-hell high.

After what feels like forever, I roll us to our sides and pull her leg to rest on my hip. Her eyes are heavy, and I nuzzle my nose against hers, lazily kissing her lips. She gives me a satiated smile, and I’m lost in her once more.

Ingrid is so fucking beautiful.

And with all of her insecurities forgotten, she is breathtaking.

Her pussy clenches, reminding me that I’m still inside her. It’s then I realize I’m not wearing a condom. “Fuck, angel. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? Why the hell are you apologizing? That was *in-fucking-credible.*”

“I didn’t put on a condom. We can go to the pharmacy. *Shit.* I can’t believe I was that irresponsible. That never happens,” I ramble, because, fuck! How did I manage to forget something so important?

Her laughter brings me out of my head. She’s stroking her fingers through my hair, staring at me with the warmest of smiles. “Relax. It’s fine. There’s nothing to worry about. I’ve started to go through menopause, so getting pregnant shouldn’t be an issue...” She pauses, her face turning serious. “But... should I be worried about how many women you’ve been with?”

My heart rate slows, and I take a deep breath. “That is the last thing you need to worry about,” I assure, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

I pull my angel closer, tucking her against my chest.

This woman.

I don't know what I did to deserve her, but I will do everything in my power to keep her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

South

The Next Morning

Something tickles my chest, making my entire body jerk. My hand snaps to whatever is crawling on me, and my eyes flash open as I grab Ingrid's hand while she gently strokes my chest. She chuckles at my reaction as my muscles relax back to a normal state, and I loosen my grip on her wrist, bringing the back of her hand up to my mouth to kiss the back of it.

She smirks. "You scare easy."

"And you shouldn't scare a biker when the club's going to war."

Ingrid leans in, resting her head on my chest, my fingers threading through her strawberry-blonde hair. "Do you think it's going to be okay? That we're all going to make it through?"

Leaning in, I press a kiss to her head and wrap my arm around my woman, pulling her closer. "We have to... we are Defiance."

She lifts her head, looking at me, her finger tracing my jawline. "Do you think *we're* gonna make it through?"

A cheesy grin lights my face as I stare at her. "I'm not going anywhere, angel. You're stuck with me."

Ingrid leans down, pressing her lips to mine. My fingers slide into her hair, gripping tight. My tongue collides with hers as my other hand slides to her back, holding her, and I spin us. She squeals into my mouth so playfully that it makes my heart soar as we chuckle. I press my erect cock against her pussy, kissing her passionately. My cock throbs, aching to be inside her again, her legs wrapping around me. I know she wants that

too. We are desperate for each other. Our need to be joined again is too much for us right now. I can't wait to work her up. I know she is soaking for me, so I line the tip of my cock up with her pussy.

"Fuck, yes, South!" she whimpers out, and just as I go to slide inside her, there's a loud knock at her door.

"Ingrid, you in there?" Hurricane calls from the other side of the door.

Terror shoots through me.

My cock is soft instantly.

"Fuck!" I murmur as I fall to the side of the mattress.

Ingrid pushes me to get me to run for the bathroom.

I grab a sheet to cover me as she does the same thing, both of us fighting to cover ourselves in the frantic panic. But I don't have enough time before her bedroom door flings open, and Hurricane steps inside, a bright smile lighting his face as he enters her room.

I fall off the edge of the bed with a bang and pull some shit off her nightstand with me.

Ingrid grabs the sheet to cover herself, leaving me exposed as I sit on my ass on the floor beside her bed, in a state of panic.

"I was just comin' in to check on..." He changes tack instantly. "*South?* What the... are you *fuckin' naked?*"

Ingrid sits up in the bed, the sheet covering her breasts as she places her hand in the air to appease him. "Hurricane, we can explain."

Hurricane takes a step forward, his fists balled.

I stand and grab a pillow to cover my junk.

"Did you..." The uncomfortable way he runs his hand through his hair makes me squirm. "*Nooo*. There's no fuckin' way this is what I'm seein'. There's no way, *right?*" he asks, his eyes narrowing on me.

I flare my nostrils. “Yes. But it’s not like tha—”

He races forward, his fist slams straight into my jaw, the hit so hard my ears ring as I fall to the floor, having to spit out a line of blood.

“Jesus, Hurricane, stop that shit right now!” Ingrid yells as I blink my eyes a few times to stop my head from spinning.

The fucker has a mean right hook.

“You’re supposed to be my brother, and you’re pullin’ this shit, now? At a time when the club needs to be united? Fuck this shit!” He growls, grabbing my hair and yanking me up off the floor.

I grit my teeth as Ingrid yells at him to stop.

But I won’t fight him because I knew this was coming.

He’s my president, and I *can’t* fight back.

My scalp hurts like a motherfucker as he shoves me toward the door so hard I trip over my feet. “Walk!” he grunts out.

“Can I put on some clothes fir—”

“Walk! *Now!*” Hurricane reiterates, cutting me off,

I turn back, looking at Ingrid, who’s stuck on the bed under the sheets with tears in her eyes.

“Rome...” She whimpers my name as I walk out the door naked, knowing I’m in deep shit.

We always knew that Hurricane would react without hesitation if he found out before we told him.

Well, he’s reacting.

As we rush down the hall, he bangs on Bayou’s door, and as we wait for him to answer, I try to talk to Hurricane again. “Pres, I—”

“If you talk to me right now, I’m gonna slice off your tongue and push it down your damn throat.”

His eyes pierce mine with such anger and venom that I can only take his word as gospel. So I stand in the hall, my hands covering my junk as Bayou opens his door. He takes one look

at me, then his eyes move to Hurricane, and he slowly closes the door behind him.

“We have a problem here?” Bayou asks, his eyebrows raised as he takes in the situation before him.

Hurricane exhales, puffing out his chest. “Caught South in Ingrid’s room... fuckin’ *naked*.”

Bayou jerks his head back. “Why the fuck were you naked in Ingrid’s room?”

I go to speak, but Hurricane cuts in. “He fucked her last night.”

Bayou scowls. “That noise... dear God. That was *you* and... and... *Ingrid*?” He grimaces, his whole body shuddering.

I nod, and before I can say anything, Bayou rushes forward, landing a fist in my gut. The pain makes my vision turn black for a moment, and I see stars as I let out a heavy breath, hunching over, coughing after getting the wind knocked out of me. I place my hand on the wall to keep myself upright, but Bayou and Hurricane only get angrier the more they talk to each other.

“He’s obviously takin’ advantage of Ingrid in her vulnerable state,” Hurricane grinds out the words in a low growl.

I would say something, but I can’t.

I’m completely winded.

Bayou adds, “Has to be. I *never* pictured this asshole as the type. But if he would do this to her, he could take advantage of any of the girls. We need unity in this club, Hurricane. He *has* to pay for this bullshit.”

Hurricane nods. “No one uses and abuses *our* family. Family is everythin’ to us, South. You’ve been here long enough to understand *that* by now. You’ve given us *no* other choice.”

Hurricane glances at Bayou, and he nods, a secret twin code being shared between them. Before I know it, they’re bending

down and hoisting me up. Hurricane grabs me by my torso and Bayou at my legs.

My eyes widen as I try to wriggle, but they're the same size as me, so two of them against me is impossible for me to fight off. "The fuck, guys?" I somehow rasp out as they drag me through the clubhouse, the other guys watching as they walk me through, furrowing their brows, obviously wondering what the fuck is going on.

I try to call out, but I'm still so fucking winded from Bayou's gut punch as they take me out the back of the clubhouse. My anxiety reaches a critical level when they walk me toward the bayou, knowing precisely what is down that way and what they do to people in the bayou.

I try to fight and kick, but nothing is working—they're too strong.

Hurricane opens the gate to the bayou, and they begin walking me down the rickety dock to where they feed La Fin.

Somehow, I find my voice again. "Stop! You don't know what you're doing," I yell.

Hurricane's holding my arms, Bayou's holding my legs as they dangle me over the murky depths.

The faint outline of the alligator swimming up makes my heart race so hard it feels like it is about to burst out of my chest.

"You messed with our family, South. We don't give a *fuck* who you are! You hurt the women we love... we *will* come after you."

"Stop this *right fucking now*, or so help me, God, or I will *never*; and mean... *never* talk to you again," Ingrid calls out as she races down the dock.

My heart leaps into my throat. Ingrid's fully dressed, though her hair is messy, but she has never looked more like an angel than she does right now.

Oh, Jesus!

An armed angel.

Firmly in her grip, she holds a 9mm casually at her side.

Hurricane and Bayou are both tense as fuck as she steps up to them, a serious expression on her face. Using the 9mm to point to the dock, she demands, “Put him back on the dock right this instant, boys. *Right fucking NOW!*” she demands, shooting a single round into the dock.

Of all times for my cock to wake up, now is not it.

She’s hot as hell fired up like this.

And for me.

They hesitate but slowly bring me back toward the dock, and Bayou lowers my legs to the wooden slats. Hurricane shoves me with a little extra grunt as he lets me go, and I take a few steps back to gain my equilibrium.

I will gladly take whatever they have to dish out as long as I’m still breathing at the end of it.

It’s then I notice Grudge standing behind the gate, watching this all go down with the biggest smirk on his face. Jesse is coming down the path toward us.

Fucking hell, I guess everyone is going to get an eyeful.

At least it’s not watching me be La Fin’s next meal.

I shake off the shudder threatening to overtake my body as I walk over to Ingrid, who touches my shoulder and hands me a pair of boxers.

Slowly, I pull them on as Ingrid folds her arms over her chest, glaring at the twins. “I have never... *ever*... been as disappointed in you twins in all my damn life. I understand your need to protect me, and I thank you for that protection, but did you not think for *one... single... second*... to stop and ask what *I* wanted? What the truth is before you went off half *fucking* cocked?”

“Ingrid—”

“*I am not* done! You assume South is the bad guy. Have you ever stopped to think this is a mutual relationship? That the feelings are equally shared? This has been going on for

longer than you know, and for you to come acting all fucking *high and mighty*, threatening to kill my man and feed him to the club alligator, is absolutely reprehensible.”

I smile because she called me her man.

She continues, “You talk about club unity, but at the *first sign* of someone doing something *you* don’t approve of, you go and shoot that all to shit. Grow the *fuck up*, Hurricane. Not everything is about what *you* want. Other people’s feelings matter too!” Ingrid turns, throwing her hands in the air in her anger, and storms off, gun still in hand.

Grudge approaches Ingrid, taking the gun. He says something to her, but there’s ringing in my ears, so I don’t catch whatever he says.

“Show’s fuckin’ over. Get your asses back inside,” Hurricane yells to Jesse and Grudge. “How the *fuck* did she get a gun anyway?” he snaps at Grudge before he walks away.

Jesse is already headed to the clubhouse, probably not wanting to chance being the subject of Hurricane’s wrath after what he witnessed, especially being a prospect.

Grudge glances at it and chuckles. “Looks like it’s your spare from under the Chapel table, Pres.”

Hurricane grunts, then takes off after Ingrid, shoving past Grudge with a huff.

I must admit, hearing her sass like that was such a fucking turn-on, but as I turn to Hurricane, he looks fucking shattered.

“Ingrid, I care about your feelin’s. Talk to me!” Hurricane begs, catching up to her.

She lets out a loud, obnoxious laugh, turns back to face him, and throws her hands in the air. “Talk to *you*? *You* want me to open up about everything? Well, let me tell you something, Hurricane... I was so fucking scared to tell you about South and me because I was so concerned you would *actually* kill him, and look at you proving me completely *fuckin*g right! How can *I* talk to *you*, Hurricane, when you don’t even ask me a simple question before flying off the handle.”

Hurricane clears his throat. “I don’t fly off the handle. I protect those I love. There’s a difference.”

She lets out another loud laugh. “Ignorance is bliss, my darling. While you’re busy protecting everyone, and since we’re currently in the business of being *so open and honest* about everything, I have atypical ductal hyperplasia in my breast. And to top that diagnosis off, I am having the lump removed in a little over two weeks. How’s *that*, for being honest?” she asks, again turning to storm off after dumping that stick of dynamite firmly at his feet.

My mouth drops open, and my stomach catapults into my throat.

Hurricane and Bayou turn pale white, their shoulders slump with the realization that everything just got much heavier for them.

Hurricane takes off, chasing after my woman. “Ingrid, stop! Wait! We gotta t-talk about this. When did you f-find out? What the fuck is that? Is it breast cancer? Are you gonna be okay?” His tone is broken as he grabs and pulls her to him in a tight embrace.

Bayou jogs up and joins in the hug.

I stand back, letting them have their moment.

She sniffles, wiping a tear from her face. My woman is still full of sass. “I found out when South took me to my appointment. It’s been an ongoing situation since then. The prognosis is quite good. They have to remove the benign lump, then it should be okay. But you know... the one constant has been South through it all. He’s been my biggest support. So you being immature and wanting to feed him to La Fin shows the mentality of you both, so... grow the *fuck up!*”

They both stare at her as she storms off again.

And this time, they let her go.

Hurricane and Bayou both stand stunned by what has just happened.

I let out a long sigh. “She’s strong. A fighter. She’s gonna be okay.”

Hurricane and Bayou both turn to look at me like they’re still confused by this whole situation, but Hurricane is the first to speak. “Are you in love with her?”

His words shock me for a microsecond, but I know the answer, so I reply without hesitation, without falter, and without reservation. “Yes.”

A slow smile crosses Bayou’s face.

Hurricane’s expression doesn’t shift. “You hurt her... one single hair on her body, and next time, I won’t feed you to La Fin. I’ll make it painful and slow and *sooo* fuckin’ gruesome the Bachelors in Baton Rouge will hear your fuckin’ screams. *Got it?*”

“Loud and clear.”

“Don’t be too public with your affection. Hearin’ that shit is weird. But you make her happy, and we’re good. You understand me?”

“All I want is to make her as happy as she makes me.”

“Un-*fuckin*-believable,” Hurricane mumbles, then turns, walking for the clubhouse, rubbing the back of his neck like he’s totally uncomfortable with everything about this whole thing.

Bayou, on the other hand, walks over and slaps my shoulder. “Welcome to the family, *pops*.” He chuckles so loudly.

Scrunching my face, I groan. “No, just fucking no.”

He lets out a louder belly laugh as he wraps his arm around my neck and walks back to the clubhouse with me. “Honestly, if I could have picked a guy for my stepmother, you’re the kinda guy I’d want her with. Is it weird you’re younger than me? Yeah! But so what? Whatever makes that woman happy makes me happy. Give Hurricane time... he takes longer to get used to shit. Me, I’m already over it. If you love Ingrid, that’s all I need to know.”

I breathe out, the release of tension waning as we walk inside the clubhouse, everyone looking our way, wondering what the hell is happening. “Thanks, brother... appreciate it.”

“What the fuck is going on? You’re being fucking weird,” Hoodoo calls out.

I glance at Ingrid, sitting by the bar looking tense, drinking some kind of hard alcohol.

The secret is out now.

It’s better if everyone knows.

So I stand in front of my brothers, practically naked, and throw my hands to the side. “I, South of NOLA Defiance, am utterly in love with Ingrid Ladet.”

She gasps, dropping her drink to the floor, the glass shattering on impact.

Oh, shit.

Did I read this wrong?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ingrid

The burn of bourbon does nothing to soothe my anger.

Or is it nerves? I'm not entirely sure.

I've come a long way from that gin-drinking girl I used to be. Now, it seems the hard stuff doesn't even work for me anymore. It's been a hell of a couple of days, and this little stunt from Hurricane and Bayou is something I really didn't need to top it off.

I watch as the three of them walk back inside the clubhouse, Bayou and South seeming to be back on friendly terms, which eases my anxiety somewhat.

But I feel like this went down exactly how I *didn't* want it to go.

I never wanted to feel ashamed or disappointed in my boys.

But boy, do I feel it.

And I think that hurts most of all.

"What the fuck is going on? You're being fucking weird," Hoodoo calls out.

I tense all over, knowing the entire clubhouse is officially aware that shit is going down. So I take another drink of my bourbon as I spot South.

I see a sparkle in his eyes, and if anything, he looks relieved.

Somehow, that makes me feel calmer as he strolls out, standing in front of everyone, practically naked, throwing his hands to the side. "I, South of NOLA Defiance, am utterly in love with Ingrid Ladet."

Everyone stares at me, and I gasp, hearing the words. It's like a bolt of lightning shoots through my body, jolting my heart into a frantic rhythm. The impact so dramatic and unexpected that the glass slips from my hand, dropping to the floor, shattering into a thousand tiny pieces, bourbon spilling all over my shoes.

"Fuck," I blurt out, but my eyes don't glance down at the broken glass. They stay focused on South and the terrified look in his eyes. I sense everyone watching me, but I don't care as I stand. My feet start their brisk pace, but it feels like I am slowly running toward him.

That gorgeous rouge smile he is known for lights his face as he begins rushing for me, and we meet somewhere in the middle of the clubhouse. He lifts me, our lips slamming together as we kiss passionately for everyone to see. His hands slide up my back, holding me to him, my fingers running through his long hair, just needing him right now.

I can't explain this feeling.

I never thought I could fall for someone like South.

It's complicated.

It's crazy.

We shouldn't work.

But... I love South.

I love him with everything that I am.

Everyone around us cheers in celebration as he slides me down his body, our lips parting while we breathe breathlessly, our foreheads touching as we stare into each other's eyes.

His hand caresses my cheek. "I mean it, Ingrid. I fucking love you."

A tear slides down my face, and I sniffle. "I love you too, Rome. So much it hurts."

Hurricane steps up beside us, and we turn to look at him. He's holding Immy on his hip, and he has a softer expression on his face. "This is still fuckin' weird. But I can see now that

this is a real thing you two have goin' on. I apologize, Ingrid, for the way I reacted. I'm not sorry I punched you, South." He hesitates and then continues, "You are, however, our brother and I shoulda talked to you before flyin' off the handle. But that woman is more of a mother to me than my real mom, so you gotta understand I'm gonna protect her when I think someone is fuckin' with her life."

South turns to Hurricane, standing strong. "I get it. Because I would do the same thing for Ingrid, Pres. I'd lay down and fight for her. I'd kill any fucker who tried to harm her... so I understand why you did what you did. You thought I was taking advantage, but believe me when I say I'd *never* do that to Ingrid. Is our relationship unconventional? Yeah! But we fucking work. I don't know how or why, but *we... just... do*. I want to take *care* of her. I want to be by her side for *everything*. This amazing, incredible woman is my ride or die."

My heart pounds, hearing him pour his heart out, and I cling to him a little tighter, needing to touch him. South tightens his grip on my hand as Hurricane shifts his gaze to me. "The feelin' mutual?"

"Undeniably." I glance up at South, feeling nothing but absolute devotion toward him.

"Then I guess there's nothin' more to say on the matter. Welcome to the family, South." Hurricane places out his free hand for South to shake, and I can't help but smile.

South takes Hurricane's hand, shaking it firmly, and then slaps him on the back. "I regret we hid this from you, brother... we didn't know how to tell you."

He grumbles under his breath. "Honestly, the fact you've been keepin' multiple things from me, Ingrid, is what's grindin' on me. I thought we were an open family. I thought we told each other everythin'?"

My shoulders slump, and I step forward, taking his hand in mine. "I should have told you about my medical issues, and I am so sorry about that. I was terrified and didn't want to burden you when you already have so much on your plate. I

didn't want it to cloud your judgment in any decision-making."

He looks me right in the eyes—there is so much sadness in them. "Listen, and *really* hear me when I say this... I don't care if the world is implodin' all around me, you are so *very* important to me. I wanna know what's goin' on with you. Good and bad. We gotta deal with this shit as a family. I don't want you doin' this shit on your own."

I grip hold of South's arm, glancing up at him. "I wasn't alone. South has been amazing. But I hear you, and I promise y'all will be a part of this moving forward. But I don't want you focusing on me and holding off this payback. Anton and his men, we need this revenge. We have time to do both."

"Damn straight we do. We will deal with Anton, annihilate the Bratva, and then focus solely on you. One step at a time."

"One step at a time," I reply.

Hurricane leans in, giving me a small kiss on my cheek, and whispers in my ear, "I love you, Ingrid. I never meant to upset you. You know I only ever wanna do right by you, yeah?" he asks, his tone soft, like he's disappointed in himself.

I grip his shoulder and whisper back, "I know, darling. I know your heart's in the right place. However misguided you were, you were looking out for me. I will always love you, Hurricane. No matter what you do. Know that."

Hurricane turns to South, looking him up and down. "Now go put some damn clothes on, brother. We don't need to see your tattooed ass all over the fuckin' place."

South grins as everyone chuckles. He leans in to kiss me briefly before turning and heading for his bedroom. I give a small head bob to Hurricane, and he walks off with Immy still on his hip as he heads for the Chapel.

My guess is he needs a moment to decompress.

He goes in there alone when he needs time to think.

Sure, he's taking Immy in there with him, but she is a safe space for him. He needs a moment to let all this information

sink in. It's been a lot, and I don't blame him for taking a breather.

The other girls look at me with big smiles but don't say anything as I approach the bar. Jaz simply slides me another bourbon to help with the nerves running rampant through me as I smile at her. "Thank you. I need this."

She chuckles as she wipes the top of the bar. "Honestly, girl. You deserve a medal. You nailed down the most eligible bachelor in this place. Kudos to you." She raises a drink to meet mine, and I chuckle, clinking my glass to hers.

I never saw it that way.

I guess South is a really good-looking guy with a great personality.

He is one hundred percent a catch.

And out of every woman he could have had in New Orleans—he chose me.

A bright smile lights my face as I sip on my drink. Grudge slides in beside me, cigar hanging out of his mouth. We've been friends for as long as I can remember.

"It's taken you many years to move on from Reaper, and you do it with someone young enough to be one of your children?" There's an accusatory tone in his voice.

I was waiting for someone to find our relationship offensive. *Damn!* I guess my oldest friend at the club is going to be the culprit.

"Grudge... I didn't plan for this to happen with South. We connect in a way I didn't see coming. When this first started, I had reservations too, but the chemistry is too strong to deny. And it's not just physical. We connect emotionally too. I can't expect you to understand. You were one of Reaper's closest friends, so it must be strange for you to see me moving on with someone el—"

"Ingrid, stop!" he scolds. "What I was going to say before you started rambling was... congratulations. It's nice to see

you finally doing something for yourself for once rather than thinking of everyone else.”

That’s not what I thought he was going to say.

“You’re not mad at me?”

He rests his hand on my knee and squeezes. “Ingrid, we can’t choose who we fall for. Love doesn’t have a reason. It’s random. Poetic in a way. It always tends to choose the person who will test us the most. The one we have to work the hardest for. To make sure the love is strong enough to last. If you can stand the trials sent your way, then that love can withstand anything. And you and South... you’ve had to overcome your own issues with the age gap, and you’ve had to hide your relationship from your family. You’ve kept your health issues between you and him, all while having club drama thrown at you. It’s a lot for a new relationship to take on, Ingrid. If you guys have survived all that within the first month of your being together? I think you have it made.”

My heart soars with Grudge’s kind words. Having the blessing from my oldest friend here means everything to me. “Thank you, Grudge. You don’t know what it means to hear you say that. To know you don’t think terrible of me.”

He reaches out, gripping my hand. “I could never think terrible of you, Ingrid. I adore you. I, like everyone here, only want to see you happy. If South is the man to do that, then *thank fuck* he transferred to our club. Because your happiness is all we want.”

“Well, what about you? When are you going to find someone and settle down? It’s been so long... it’s time, Grudge.”

He lets out a small groan. “After Cole’s mother, I don’t think I could do another relationship. That was too crazy for me. I’m happy being single... I can fuck whoever I like.” He winks, and I chuckle.

“Speaking of Cole, how’s he doing?” I ask. It’s been ages since we’ve seen Grudge’s son. The last time was when we went to see him fight in Tallahassee.

“He’s doing so well. His coach mostly trains him in Vegas, and he likes it there. Says he’s been spending time with the Exiled Eight MC. Before you ask, no, he doesn’t want to patch in. He knows we’d give him shit if he chose a different club, but I suspect it has something to do with that Blair girl. Though he won’t outright say anything about her to me.”

“Kids, huh! They’re a handful,” I tell him with a laugh.

Grudge nods his head. “You know that more than anyone. Do Novah and Nash know about South?”

“They actually do.” I grimace. “They both found out not that long ago. I’m going to have a dinner with everyone so we can get everything out in the open as a family.”

Grudge exhales. “I don’t envy you, but you’ve handled yourself well through all this, Ingrid. Just know, the rest of us are rooting for you.”

“Thanks, Grudge. Means a lot.”

South steps up beside me, now fully dressed, sporting a casual smile. “You doing okay?” South asks, sliding his arm around my shoulders.

I grin up at him. “I am now. Hiding everything was exhausting. I’m sorry I put you in the shadows. We should have been upfront from the start.”

“You were scared, and you had every right to be. They reacted exactly how we thought they would.”

I reach up, gently cupping his bruising face. “Is your jaw sore?”

He shrugs it off. “Worth it! Now I can do this without worrying about being caught.” He leans down, pressing his lips to mine. That tingle shoots through me, igniting my soul, and I can’t help but feel excited about the possibilities that surround us.

I slowly pull back, Grudge chuckling beside me as I stare into South’s eyes. He smiles, taking my hand. “You wanna come make a phone call, and we tell my sister, Bella?”

My stomach flips, but I nod. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

South

Three Days Later

The club has been in planning mode. We know what we want to do. We just need everything to fall into place.

Houston Defiance should arrive at the clubhouse any minute, and then we can get this party underway.

As for other club news, Lani has woken up in the hospital and seems to be recovering from her seizure. She's still groggy and restless. Grit and Kaia are standing vigil over her while Ghoul is on protection detail. They're staying out of this fight. Novah is on bed rest, Bayou's orders, and he is strict on enforcing them. But honestly, I think she's happy to be taking care of herself and their baby.

I'm keeping my eye on Ingrid. The fact is, she's going through a hell of a lot right now. I'm waiting to make sure she doesn't fall over—emotionally speaking.

The club is about to head off into something big. I want to go into this, ensuring my woman is okay. Because if something happens and I don't come back, I want her to know that she has got this no matter what.

As we all sit in the main clubroom, mingling around, the proximity alarm sounds and the roar of multiple Harleys approaching are heard. We are all tense, knowing the time for Houston's arrival is here.

Hurricane stands signaling to everyone. "Brothers, you know the task at hand. I need you all to act normal. We're a brotherhood. These are your peers. Don't let them think otherwise," Hurricane states, making all the women in the club furrow their brows in confusion.

Only the ranked patched brothers know of the assassination plot on Six.

The fewer people in on the plan, the better.

Ingrid looks at me, her eyes widening like she's slowly realizing there is more to this than we have been letting on. She leans into my side, whispering, "Tell me you guys aren't planning something stupid?"

I glance at her and press a tender kiss to her forehead, saying nothing in response. She scrunches up her face like she knows the club is in deep shit as Raid lets Houston ride into the compound. Ingrid leans in close to me again and exhales. "Whatever happens, promise me you won't let the twins get hurt. Take care of them out there. I know you can look after yourself, but watch out for them too. They're gung-ho, and whatever it is the club is planning, it's going to fall back on them."

I nod, grabbing her hand. "I promise... I'll keep them safe."

The clubhouse doors open, and Texas is the first to step through, his giant, bulking frame taking up almost the entire doorway, but the giant smile on his face is a contradiction to his muscular body. "Fuckers! It's good to see ya! We gonna fuck up some Bratva or what?"

We all chuckle as Slick walks in behind him, shoving him out of the way. "Hey, guys!"

Their two prospects, Keith and Jarred, walk in carrying all their luggage, and they make their way to Jaz and Storm to figure out where to put everything.

The poor bastards look like deer in the headlights.

Can't blame them. We were all there once.

Neon walks in next, playing on his cell, grunting something unintelligible as he walks straight for Raid's tech den. Kevlar follows soon after in a conversation with Wraith and Chains.

We all tense as Zero walks in, the man, the myth, the legend. His hands look better than they were, but you can still

clearly see they're not as useful as they were before *the Houston battle*.

Six strides into the clubhouse, his shoulders broad, he seems so much stockier than when I saw him last. For a young president, he is really coming into his own. He's fast growing into the man Houston needs him to be, and it fucking hurts that we are the guys who will deprive Houston of another president in the span of a two-year period.

I can tell the rest of my guys are thinking the same thing, as we're all quiet when Houston enters, being noisy and happy to see us.

Hurricane is the first to make a move. He rushes forward to greet Six and Zero, slapping them on their backs. "Brothers, thanks for the save... don't think we coulda done this on our own. So glad you brought everyone down for this."

Six laughs, shaking his head. "Oh, this isn't everyone. This is only about half our men. Our intake has doubled for some reason, and we're in excess at the moment. We don't have enough rooms at the clubhouse to house everyone. Brothers are having to stay at our accommodations across the street."

"Fuck! We're strugglin' to keep our numbers at a minimum 'cause we keep losin' men to this fuckin' war. It has to stop."

"That's why we're here to help, Hurricane. We *will* end this and get your club back on track," Six states.

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck like the guilt is eating him alive. "We know the Bratva have upped their forces, so numbers are gonna be tight."

Six cranes his neck to the side. "We're Defiance, Hurricane. Your club has helped us more times than I can count. Of course, we're gonna come down to bail you out of this shit hole, especially after what they did to your women. There was *no way* we weren't stepping in to help."

"Appreciate that more than you know. All right, we're gonna take a few moments to get everyone settled, then we're gonna run through the plan. Church in five," Hurricane instructs, and everyone nods.

The brothers all move about greeting each other, but I turn, facing Ingrid, and pull her to me. “You know, when this is all over, and you’ve had your surgery, I’m gonna take you to LA. Show you around my hometown.”

She smiles wide, her arms wrapping around my neck. “I’d love that. I want to know everything there is to know about you, Romeo North.”

I lean in, pressing my lips to hers briefly. “I’m so fucking lucky. I want you to know that I know that.”

She snorts out a laugh. “Shut up! Go take out those Bratva bastards, then come back and fuck me like you mean it.”

I raise my brow with a grin. “Oh, angel, I plan on it.” I wink, slap her on the ass, then turn and head for the Chapel. The massive amount of brothers walk in with me, and I take my seat at the end of the table.

The NOLA brothers are seated first. Six and Zero take a chair beside Hurricane, with the rest of Houston lining up against the wall. I’ve never seen the Chapel so crowded.

Hurricane sits back in his chair, looking comfortable as he bangs his gavel. “First of all, I want to thank Houston for comin’ to our aid. We owe you a debt.”

“Don’t even think about it. You’d do the same for us, brother,” Six replies.

Hurricane rubs at his chin, then clears his throat. “All right, I’ve been conferrin’ with Neon and Raid about how best to go about this. Obviously, we need to hit the Bratva where they least expect it. We hit them once at their camp. They don’t expect us to hit there again because of the way we backed out last time ... so, I think the only thing we can do is... hit them there again.”

“What about the women and children?” Bayou asks. “They may do that shit, Hurricane, but we *don’t*.”

Hurricane signals to Raid and Neon on my left. Raid spins his laptop around so we can all see, but Neon is the one to explain. “We’ve been researching the Bratva camp, hacking into their security feeds and how they run things there, and we

have good intel. We know during the day, the women and children go into the warehouse at the end of the camp to run the school while the men do whatever they do. If we can verify that the men are there when we want to attack... during daylight hours... we can guarantee the women and children should be in the warehouse, with only a couple of guards watching them.”

Kevlar is the first to speak, “So you’re saying we go in and stay away from the warehouse when we attack, or do you have another plan for the warehouse?”

Raid spins his laptop, typing something into it, then spins it back to show us what looks like a schematic camp layout. “This is the blueprint of the base. It shows where the fences are and the flaws in their security systems. Neon and I can hack into their security feeds, putting them on a continual loop while some of you break through the fencing, get into the warehouse, and remove the women and children after taking out the minimal guards.”

Texas nods. “Sounds easy enough. I’m down for that. Slick, back me up?”

Slick cracks his knuckles. “Fuck, yeah. You tell us how to break in. We’ll get those women and kids out before the fighting even starts.”

“I’ll be there to help in case any of the kids get hurt in the process,” Hoodoo states.

Hurricane dips his chin. “Good... good. We don’t wanna stoop to their level. Hurtin’ women and children is not part of the plan. Our only goal is to take out the Bratva men. *All* of them. *No* exceptions. We can’t have them rebuildin’ once this is done.”

Six steps forward to stand next to Hurricane. “We move as a team, united as a club. We’ve fought together side by side many times. We’ve lost brothers together. We’ve won wars together. We can win *this war* together too.” He rests his hand on Hurricane’s shoulder. Hurricane’s eye twitches, obvious guilt flowing through him at the knife we’re stabbing into Six’s back.

Hurricane dips his head. “Together. *That’s* how we win. The Bratva are goin’ down. Defiance will run the streets of New Awlins again. We get the kids out, then we attack. Raid, Neon, are the Bratva at the camp now?”

Raid spins his laptop, typing frantically. He hacks into their feed and tilts his head. “They’re there, and the children are in the warehouse as expected. If we want to go, now would be the optimum time.”

Silence falls over the Chapel, and everyone looks around at each other. But it is Six who steps forward first. “It’s time to get New Orleans back. Let’s go annihilate these Bratva bastards!”

The rest of the room erupts into a round of cheering. We bang our fists on the table as Hurricane nods his head and bangs his gavel on the table. “Let’s ride!”

We all stand, rushing for the main room, the Houston brothers, except for Zero, heading straight for their rides. The rest of us head for our loved ones.

I make my way to Ingrid, her eyes somber as she watches me approaching. “It’s time?” she asks.

“It’s time.” I pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her.

She lets out a heavy exhale. “Please be careful. I need you *all* to come home.”

“The only people dying today, baby, are the Bratva.”

Tears flood her eyes, her bottom lip quivering as she rests her forehead against mine. “God, I hope you’re right.”

“You should know by now, angel... I am *always* right.”

She lets out a small laugh, tugging on my hair. “You’re full of shit, is what you are.”

Smiling at her sass, I lean in, pressing my lips softly to hers, just needing to taste her. She opens her mouth, allowing our tongues to intertwine delicately. It’s not passionate or desperate like it normally is. This is sweet, full of love and devotion.

The promise of tomorrow.

Slowly, I pull back, looking into her glistening eyes. “I love you, Ingrid. I’m coming home to you. *I swear it.*”

She licks her lips and nods. “You better... I’ll tell you I love you when you return to me.”

I chuckle with a smile. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“You better go. They’re leaving without you,” she says, glancing past me. I follow her line of sight, seeing my brothers all walking out.

Sighing, I kiss her one last time, just in case it *is* the last time. Regretfully, I pull back. She pants breathlessly as I groan, letting her go, but step back. “You better be ready for me when I get back because fuck, I’m gonna make a meal out of you.”

She snorts out a giggle as I wink at her, then I turn, jogging to catch up with my brothers.

We make our way to the ammunition containers outside in the soundproof shed. We all stock up, strapping multiple guns to our bodies and enough ammo rounds to hopefully finish the job. I even grab a knife and strap it to my ankle.

Just in case.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t anxious about this fight.

The Bratva are a worthy adversary. Sure, they don’t know we’re coming, but they do know that at some point, we will, so they will be ready in some form or another. They know we go tit-for-tat. They came at us hard and will be waiting for us to return fire.

It’s guerilla warfare, but we’re the small forces this time.

So we have to play this smarter.

We all lock and load, grabbing everything we can, then make our way to our bikes. The journey to the Bratva camp is longer than I would like. I’m restless and need to get this underway. There are a lot of cards on the table in this game, and not everyone is showing their hand.

It makes this a volatile fight when there are multiple moves at stake.

My mind is flashing, racing over all the possible scenarios that could happen as we ride in formation.

Houston and NOLA—side by side.

An alliance that has seen the test of time for as long as the clubs have been formed. I think it is safe to say every NOLA brother is thinking about how this will go down and whether it will go down smoothly without consequences.

But we must focus on our priority—Anton and the Bratva.

We have to make sure they are taken care of first and foremost.

Eventually, we ride to the long path that is the camp entrance, where we pull up our rides, jump off, and hide behind the bushes. Hurricane and Six stand at the front of us as we gather.

“Okay, Texas, Slick, and Hoodoo have already gone around the back way to deal with the women and children. We just have to wait for their signal to let us know they’re all clear, and then we can start our assault,” Six instructs.

“What’s the signal?” I ask.

Raid pulls out his small handheld device, typing in something. “Neon and I plugged a code into the security cameras, so they’re on a loop. The Bratva inside the compound won’t know their people are being taken. Hoodoo has a silencer on his gun to take out the guards inside. Once they’ve started their part, Hoodoo will ping me, activating the camera attached to his cut so I can see what’s happening on their end. We’ll be able to watch them taking the children out, and then we can move in safely.”

Wraith grins, cracking his knuckles loudly. “We okay to kill by any means necessary?”

Hurricane chuckles. “You wanna choke them, Wraith, you go right ahead.”

Wraith smiles wide while the rest of Houston chuckles, shaking their heads at their VP's murderous tendencies.

Raid lifts his chin. "We're on. Hoodoo is live," he says, spinning the device so we can all watch as they usher the women and children out the back of the warehouse to the waiting vans.

We take a deep breath, centering ourselves, and Hurricane and Six both stand taller.

"Okay, here we go. Remember, stay united. Fight hard, fight strong. We are Defiance!" Hurricane states and NOLA all shift uneasy while Houston nods emphatically.

"Guns up, let's get these fuckers!" Six calls, charging for us to move forward.

We all bring up our weapons, rushing out from behind the bushes, but as we do, a sound twangs through the air, and we all halt as we look down to see Chains' ankle pressed up against a trip wire. We tense, all of us looking around for something to happen.

Six steps up to his side. "You gotta be so fucking slow when you take your foot away, brother," he tells his SAA.

Chains inhales sharply as the rest of us wait with bated breath, not knowing what is coming when he removes his ankle from the wire.

He's slow.

Meticulous.

But he draws back.

And the wire stays in place.

We all breathe a sigh of relief as Six turns to Hurricane. "Might have dodged a bullet there."

Hurricane chuckles. "Off to a good start. Keep your eyes peeled, everyone. We don't know what other shit they have in store for us out there."

We all nod, each taking a careful step over the trip wire and more cautiously heading toward the entry, when suddenly,

three drones roar up, buzzing in front of us, making us all stop dead still.

A lever lowers.

Our eyes open wide as something clicks, and three grenades drop to the ground in front of us, rolling to our feet.

Oh fuck!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

South

My heart leaps into my throat as the grenades roll toward us.

We all turn and run back the way we came as fast as we can. My feet feel like they're not running, and my breathing accelerates as we all bolt as fast as possible.

I hear the blast first, so loud my ears begin ringing instantly.

Then the wall of energy hits me, knocking me on my ass.

I fall flat on the dusty ground, my other brothers falling beside me with the brute force of the explosion. The heat wave is so intense from here that my arm hairs begin curling, and sweat pours off my temple as we all duck, sheltering from the three explosions.

Dust and debris filter from the sky, falling over the top of us like ash and embers, letting us know this war has well and truly begun. Only, we're the ones bringing guns to a nuke fight.

We all glance around at each other, trying to catch our breaths.

They know we're here.

The element of surprise is gone.

We need to get up and take this fight to them the best way we can.

Hurricane moves to stand, Six jumping up with him. "Defiance, we have to move. We're on their home turf, and they have the upper hand, but we're fuckin' angry. We have that fire inside us. Remember, they hurt what's ours. So we need to make them pay... *you with me?*" Hurricane cries out.

We all stand, throwing our fists in the air. “Yeah!”

“Then let’s go get these fuckers,” Six orders.

We all yell out a war cry as we race for the front entrance through the brush that’s on fire from the explosions, the leaves flickering up into embers as we race past them, one unified front. We fan out into groups so we’re not all sitting ducks, running in for them to mow us down in one go. Running, guns up, waiting to approach any of the Bratva, but there’s no sign of them as we run into the camp, where the cabins are located. We slow down, brothers cautiously approaching the main area.

Suddenly, Jarred, Houston’s prospect, steps on something. It makes a click sound, and we all stop turning to look at him. His eyes widen as Six raises his hand, signaling Jarred to halt his movement. “Prospect... Don’t. Fucking. Move.”

We all glance down, and I spot little indicators in the ground beneath us. “It’s some kind of booby trap,” I call out.

Jarred begins to pant frantically. “What the fuck do I do, Pres?”

Six begins searching. “We’ll find something to replace the pressure, a rock or something. We’ve got you!” Six states and we all carefully begin looking.

But before we can begin searching, the doors to the cabins fly open, and the fucking Bratva rush out, guns drawn.

“Fuck! Bratva!” I scream, and everyone turns just as they start shooting.

Bullets ricochet off the wood of neighboring cabins as I bring my gun up and return fire. The Bratva are clearly trying to hunt down Hurricane. My promise to Ingrid is clear, so I raise my gun, my bullet slamming straight into the chest of one of the soldiers, the other trying his hardest to get to Hurricane.

But Jarred is spooked by the fight headed his way and pulls out his gun, taking off from the booby trap. The second his foot leaves the mechanism, I expect it to explode, but instead, a wireline descends from the roofline of the cabins, slicing at headline.

“Duck!” I scream as loud as I can over the noise of the bullets.

Everyone turns, seeing the wire coming, full speed for them, except for Keith, who is in a hand to hand with one of the Bratva. We all tense as the wire races straight for them.

“Keith!” most of Houston calls out to their other prospect.

The Bratva he’s fighting spins him, and he turns, his eyes spotting the wire, and they widen, but he doesn’t have time to duck before the wire slices his head off at the neck. The Bratva ducks as Keith’s blood splatters all over him. Keith’s head drops with a thud, rolling across the dirt as the Bratva lets out a small laugh, then carelessly hurls Keith’s lifeless body to the dirt next to his decapitated head.

“You motherfuckers,” Jarred screams out, taking off after the Bratva as we all storm forward, watching our damn step as we go.

I take off, chasing a Bratva soldier, the fight well and truly underway. Brothers all in one-on-one combat as the Bratva keep filing out of the cabins and attacking. I slide around a corner, dust flying up in the air as I skid to a halt.

Three Bratva turn to face me.

I’m outnumbered.

Fuck.

I bring my guns up, one in each hand, but they just smile, knowing I can take out two, *maybe*, but the third *will* get me. I take a step back as they stalk toward me when suddenly, the middle one’s blood splatters all over my face. It shocks me for a moment as he falls forward. I reach out, catching him when the other two turn behind them as Hurricane and Bayou race forward, each shooting the other two in quick succession, their bodies ricocheting back with the bullets pummeling into them. They flop like rag dolls as I drop the middle one to the dirt.

Hurricane and Bayou step up to my side, and Hurricane grips my shoulder. “If you died, Ingrid would never forgive us. Don’t fuckin’ die. That’s an order!”

“Ingrid doesn’t just need me to come back. That woman needs *all* of us. You also need to make it back in one piece, but... thanks for the save,” I throw back at him.

He tilts his head like he’s impressed I’m standing up to him, and then he takes off without another word. Bayou smirks as he follows his twin back into the fray.

Taking a deep breath, I steady my shoulders, then head back out into the fight, knowing my brothers have my back. I run through the camp’s main street, my gun up, aiming at any Bratva I see. I race past Wraith, who has a soldier in a chokehold, and I can’t help but smirk, knowing he’s getting off on the thrill of the kill.

As I continue to run and shoot, a loud explosion rocks the side of one of the cabins. Defiance brothers fly through the air in response. We all duck when they hit the ground with a thud. Neon frantically pats at his jeans as they’re on fire while Grudge shakes his head from the intense fall. And it looks like Jesse is out cold from the hit to his head.

Someone obviously set off another fucking booby trap.

I slide in next to Jesse, slapping his face to bring him around. “Prospect, wake the fuck up!”

His eyes blink a few times, and he lets out a small cough. “I’m good, maybe a little concussed. But I’m good.”

Suddenly, something slams over the back of my head. Instantly, I see stars as I face-plant it straight into the dirt beside Jesse. I stretch out, trying to reach the gun I dropped, but my head is fogging as I roll over onto my back. As I open my eyes, Jesse slams his fist into a soldier, another smashing a piece of wood from the exploded log cabin into Jesse’s rib cage. Jesse lets out a huff, but he reaches down and grabs the wood, yanking the soldier toward him, then head-butts him with so much force both their heads begin bleeding. The Bratva asshole can’t handle the hit, and he collapses to the ground beside me while Jesse continues to fight the other soldier.

I roll to my side and grab my gun from the ground, finding my strength. As I aim the gun between the asshole's eyes, the soldier looks at me in a daze.

"Goodnight," I growl, then pull the trigger.

The asshole's head jerks back, blood pooling in the dirt beneath him as I turn to see Jesse single-handedly grab the gun from the soldier's holster, pull it from his waist, and use his own gun to shoot him three times in his chest. The soldier stumbles back, blood pooling from his mouth, but he still tries to raise his other gun toward Jesse to fire one last round. Fortunately, Jesse is too quick, bringing up the gun, aiming for the soldier's head, and firing a single kill shot. His body jerks, rotating and falling face-first into the dirt.

I let out a small chuckle as Jesse wipes the sweat from his brow, then turns to me, placing his hand out. I grab hold, he hoists me up from the dirt, and then I slap his back in thanks. "You did all that with a concussion, prospect?"

He shrugs. "Adrenaline will do crazy shit. Pretty sure you've got a concussion now as well," he states.

Rubbing the back of my sore head from where that asshole hit me with that plank of wood, I pull my hand back to see blood. *Fucker got me good.* But Jesse got him back, so I'll chalk that up to a win.

Jesse takes off, heading for more Bratva.

My head's still slightly rattled, but I must keep focused.

I race for a cabin where Hurricane, Bayou, and Hoodoo are battling it out with the Bratva. It looks like they're getting overrun, so I race in, my guns drawn, and I start shooting at the Bratva soldiers. I hit one, and another spots me. His eyes narrow as he jumps from the rafters, lunging for me. I shoot, but he's moving too fast, and the bullet lodges in his bicep. He doesn't stop, landing on me and tackling me to the dirt. We roll as the others keep fighting, bullets spraying everywhere. Fists flying in different directions.

We come to a stop, a sudden click sounding beneath me. My eyes widen, knowing we've tripped a booby trap, and the

damn soldier laughs, grabbing me by my cut. The asshole yanks me forcefully, pulling me to the side, activating it as we continue to roll.

“Defiance! Booby trap,” I scream as a wave of flaming arrows are sent from one cabin across to the other.

Hurricane, Bayou, and Hoodoo duck and weave, trying to dodge the arrows. One narrowly misses Bayou as it catches on his cut, ripping through the leather and setting it on fire. He quickly pats at the fire with his hands to put it out as another arrow lands in the back of a Bratva soldier who was fighting Hurricane. The soldier yelps as his back bursts into flames, and he runs off screaming, his hands flailing in the air as he goes.

I don’t have time to focus on the rest of the guys because the soldier on me lands a blow to my face—*like I needed another knock to the head*—but I can’t let this guy get on top of me. I have far too much to fight for waiting for me back at home.

I shove forward with intent with everything I have. The soldier is knocked to the ground, and I spin, bringing my fist up and slamming it into his eye socket. He grunts as I pull back and slam another punch into his face. His lip splits as he brings up his hand, his gun aiming at my head, but I duck out as he pulls the trigger right by my ear. My eyes roll around in my head at the loud blast. My ear buzzes, disorienting me for a second, just enough for him to regain strength and punch me in the ribs. I let out a gasp as I hunch over. He reaches out, grabbing my hair in his hand, forcing me toward the dirt as he places the butt of his gun on the back of my head. “You put up a good fight, Defiance scum,” he jeers.

But I’m not done with him yet.

I grab my knife attached to my ankle and swipe it up against his arm, holding his gun. Blood pisses out, and his gun drops to the dirt beside me. The asshole lets go of my hair, reaching to grab hold of his deep wound. I jump to my feet, blade still in hand, and I reach out, grabbing his hair this time as tight as I can.

I walk around behind him, forcing him to his knees. “You put up a good fight, *Bratva scum*,” I growl back at him, then stab my knife into the side of his neck, puncturing his jugular. His blood pools over my fingers while I rotate the knife for emphasis, making me feel like maybe we can win this thing. He gurgles, blood pooling from his mouth as he struggles to breathe, slowly drowning in his own blood. I pull out the knife, his hand rushing to his neck as I bring my foot up and kick his back so he falls face-first into the dirt. His body jerks a few times, and then I know he is dead.

Good.

Wiping my hands on my jeans, I glance up to see Bratva soldiers climbing the cabins to gain high ground. My stomach tightens when I recognize their tactics.

They can mow us down like damn flies if they gain height advantage.

I race to try to get to Hurricane.

This fight is far from over.

My euphoria from a moment ago is now gone.

It’s like we’re not even making a dent.

We kill one Bratva—two more assholes appear from the cabins.

They’re coming out in waves, and with the booby traps, we’re sitting ducks out here.

I run, trying to find Hurricane.

As I approach, the rest of the guys are being corralled in one section.

I don’t like this.

I glance up, watching more and more of the Bratva headed higher. My anxiety reaches a critical level as I go to yell to Hurricane that the Bratva are above us, but I am too late. They open fire on us as we’re huddled together.

We all duck, bullets zooming in at us from every angle.

We have nowhere to hide.

I watch Fox take a bullet to the shoulder, and he drops to a knee. I go to help him, but piercing pain radiates through my leg. Blood seeps through my jeans, and I know I've been hit. My eyes shoot up, seeing my brothers taking bullets, and out of the corner of my eyes, I watch as Hurricane brings his gun up subtly, aims at Six as he tries to protect his men from the spray, and as he turns to pull his gun to defend, Hurricane takes the shot. My heart leaps into my chest as blood bursts out of Six's chest, his eyes rolling back into his head, and he drops to the ground.

My eyes meet Hurricane's, and I dip my head in acknowledgment and look away.

The Houston brothers crowd around their president, horror on their faces while taking on bullets themselves. Hoodoo rushes to Six's side, our medic frantically working on Six to make it look like NOLA is helping.

This is fucking madness.

This is fucking chaos.

And I see it on the faces of the rest of my NOLA brothers. They understand what just happened, but we can't take the time to process it now. We're in the middle of a fight we're desperately losing. And if we want to come out of this, we must find a way.

We huddle together while bullets continue to pummel all around us. Then, the faint clapping of something overhead comes from the distance. I glance up and see a helicopter flying in at full speed. Smiling wide, I already know exactly who's piloting, but I had no idea they were joining this party.

Alpha from LA Defiance soars his helicopter closer to the cabin with the Bratva mowing us down. Then he opens fire, the force of his giant military-grade ammunition blowing parts of the roof away and sending the Bratva soldiers flying off the roof.

We cheer as Ink, Strings, Loki, and Swift descend along the battle ropes down to the cabin's roof to fight the remaining

soldiers. They jump onto the roof, the fight breaking out between the LA brothers and the Bratva as soon as they reach their marks.

Alpha takes off, but Anton *finally* steps out of a cabin with a grenade launcher in his arms.

We widen our eyes and bring our guns up to fire at him, but it's too late. He sets the rocket launcher off, the missile heading straight for Alpha's helicopter. He tries to duck out of the way, but the rocket clips the rotor blade and explodes the side of the chopper. It begins to plummet toward us, and we don't have time to run after Anton. We only have time to get out of the way before the helicopter lands on top of us.

We scatter fast as we can as the chopper descends on the cabin opposite the one the LA brothers are fighting on, then explodes, sending a shockwave through the camp, forcing everyone on their asses with the blast.

My chest squeezes, thinking of Alpha in that helicopter.

He was a fucking good brother, and in the space of a few minutes, we've lost two Defiance presidents to this *fucking war*.

Shaking myself off, I stand calling out to Hurricane, "Pres, there!" I yell as we all turn to see Anton running toward the warehouse. His soldiers are depleted thanks to Alpha shooting them like the rabid dogs they are.

As we take chase after Anton, we fire on any remaining Bratva on our way. The tide has turned, and we're now on top, winning this fight.

We have to get to Anton before that bastard gets away.

Injured and sore as hell, but with some fight left in us, we all race, following Anton into the warehouse where the children are stored, but Texas, Hoodoo, and Slick evacuated them to safety earlier.

Anton skids into the warehouse, his eyes wide when he notices the women and children are gone and his guards are dead on the ground. The rest of us slowly stalk up on him as

he watches Houston, NOLA, and LA Defiance aiming their guns at him.

“You have nowhere left to go, Anton. You have no one left to fight for you. Hand over your weapon, *now!*” Hurricane demands.

Anton stops walking backward and exhales heavily, shaking his head. “I guess it was always going to come to this, wasn’t it, Hurricane?”

Hurricane steps forward, shrugging his shoulders. “You made this personal when your men killed my unborn niece. When they broke the fingers of my wife. When they terrorized my sister-in-law, she went into a tonic-clonic seizure so bad we weren’t sure she would recover. Not to mention, you shot the Baroness. If you killed her, the ramifications of that coulda been catastrophic for *so* many people. You don’t think, Anton, that’s *always* been your damn problem.”

He raises his gun in the air, shaking his head. “This war got out of hand... the harming of children by both parties was unjust. Where are the children who were in here?”

“They’re safe. They *won’t* be harmed. You have my word.”

“And the women? What will you do to them?” he asks like we’re some kind of fucking animals.

Hurricane glares in response. “They will be let go to care for your children, Anton. We will set them up with new housing. We will ensure they’re taken care of. We don’t hurt women or children. Not intentionally, unlike your men did to ours.”

Anton rolls his head to the side, his bones cracking with the tension. “You want to do this, man to man, Hurricane?” he waves his gun haphazardly.

Hurricane goes to step forward, but I place my hand on his chest. “We’ve already lost two presidents today. Think this through. For the sake of your family,” I warn.

Anton chuckles, shaking his head. “Honestly, I’m glad my men didn’t fail completely at their tasks. Taking out some of

your men makes me fucking hard,” he sneers, grabbing his cock through his jeans.

We all tense, but Wraith is the one to react. “You motherfucking prick. Don’t talk about our president that way,” he yells, racing forward to get to him, but Anton raises his gun, firing off a round at Wraith. It hits him in the chest, making him fall to the floor.

Anton bursts out in maniacal laughter as Grudge rushes for Anton, wrestling the gun from his hand. Houston crowds around their VP, and the rest of us rush for Anton and Grudge. But Anton overpowers Grudge, shooting him in the side of his chest three times. Grudge’s eyes widen as his body spins, falling to the floor.

“Gruuudge!” Hurricane calls as we race for him.

This time, we don’t hesitate as Anton raises his gun to fire on the rest of us, running toward him. He fires another round, but we all fire back. The sound of dozens of guns all firing at once floods the warehouse, and Anton’s body jerks from the massive number of bullets hammering into him. We shoot multiple rounds at this fucking bastard who has taken so much from us.

We keep shooting. Every brother in here as Houston joins. Anton drops to the ground, blood splattering like fireworks, chunks flying off because so many bullets are driving into his body.

As we reach him, the firing slows to a stop, each of us panting frantically with the adrenaline surging through our veins as we stare down at the bloody, mangled mess of a man.

Emotions are high as Grudge’s dead body lay beside him.

My entire body shakes as we stand in silence, staring at the *finally dead* Anton Novikov.

We defeated the Russian Bratva.

We won.

But at what cost?

So many lives have been lost or injured along the way.

How do we come back from this?

Hurricane lets out a loud growl, almost a scream, as he steps up to Anton's side, unloading another three rounds into what I can only assume is left of his head. "*Fuck you!* Fuck you for makin' us do this, you asshole." He fires off one more round as we all pant, trying to calm down from the chaos we've been through.

All of us glancing at each other around the warehouse, but no one is saying a damn thing.

That is until a slight coughing noise makes us snap our heads around to look at Wraith as he clutches at his chest. "Little help... here... please?" he mumbles.

Houston takes off to help their now president.

NOLA leans down by Grudge's side, all of us mourning our fallen brother.

Hurricane wipes the sweat from his brow as he clears his throat. "We've asked a lot of our brother chapters to fight with us today. We've lost men. Good fuckin' men and I can't explain how undeniably fucked up it is that it's come to this. That they have perished on my watch. But know this... NOLA Defiance will do everythin' in our power to get their bodies back to your hometowns as quickly and as safely as possible so you can start makin' arrangements."

Suddenly, the doors to the warehouse burst open.

Fuck! What now?

We all snap around, guns drawn, ready to fire, when Alpha stumbles in, his jeans ripped, his cut half hanging off, and his left side looks like he's been on fire. LA let out a loud cheer as they rush for their president, who we all saw go down with the helicopter.

For the first time since this all started, I manage to smile.

Hurricane lets out a relieved exhale, shaking his head. "How the fuck did you survive that crash, you lucky sonofabitch?"

Alpha limps into the warehouse, looking at the carnage surrounding us. “I was trained in how to jump out of a descending helo. When the height is right, you jump before it hits the ground. Fucking hurt. Pretty sure I’ve torn something in my leg, but I’m alive, ain’t I?”

“You’re a badass, Pres,” Loki states.

“Knew we couldn’t keep you down,” Swift states, slapping his president on the back.

“Glad you’re good, Alpha,” Hurricane states. “Now, let’s gather our dead and injured and make our way back to the clubhouse. We have some mournin’ and some celebratin’ to do.”

Everyone cheers as Houston helps Wraith to his feet.

This war wasn’t without casualties, and we may have won.

But even though we carried out our duty to the Baroness...

... I am sure the *real war* is only just beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ingrid

My heart beats hard and fast as I pace the clubhouse.

The anticipation of not knowing what's happening in this war is fucking terrifying.

I make my way to the bar where Novah and Izzy are sitting, and they look at me somberly.

"Ingrid, you need to sit down. You're wearing a hole in the concrete," Izzy states.

"Yeah, Mom, come have a drink. It'll take the edge off," Novah states, and I snap my head around to her.

"You shouldn't be drinking," I scold her.

She chuckles. "It's apple juice, Mom. Chill. The guys have got this. Houston is with them. They have the backup and a fire up their asses. I have no doubts. You shouldn't either."

"You have people you love out there fighting. They might not come home, Novah. That's a very *real* possibility. You need to take this *more* seriously," I tell her and tap the bar for a drink.

Jaz dips her head, sliding a bourbon my way. I throw it back in one fell swoop, then slam the glass back on the bar.

"Damn, Mom, are you worried about Hurricane and Bayou, or is this about South?"

I turn to look at my daughter, who sees right through me. "I'm worried about all three of them and our boys too. Anton and his men are ruthless bastards, and they *will* be waiting for them."

Novah finally begins to look concerned. “You really think Anton will know they’re coming?”

I let out an exhale, rolling my shoulders. “Maybe not at this exact time, but they will be prepared. They hit us, so they know a return fire is imminent. I just hope the guys are ready for whatever the Bratva have to throw at them.”

That’s when I hear the roar of Harleys in the distance.

We all turn at the noise, and I can’t wait for a second. I race out of the clubhouse to see the men riding in—NOLA, Houston, and surprisingly, LA Defiance too.

I raise my brow.

I had no idea LA was coming to help.

A couple of vans pull in behind them, and I know I should wait for them to come inside before I make my way to them, but I can’t.

I’m too anxious.

My problem is, I don’t know who to go to first.

My eyes dart around, trying to find everyone. I spot Hurricane and Bayou, and they seem okay—covered in blood, but okay.

So my eyes search for South—he’s sliding off his bike, and he is limping.

He’s injured, and I rush to him. “Romeo,” I call out.

He turns, a slow smile appears as he opens his arms for me, and I dive into them. He releases a groan of pain as I land in his arms, and I go to step back. “Shit, sorry! Are you okay? You’re covered in blood,” I ask, but he pulls me closer, his hands all over me.

“I need to hold onto you for a moment,” he murmurs, his head nuzzled in my neck.

I stop fighting and let him do exactly that. My arms slide up his back, and I hold on. “How badly hurt are you? What can I do?”

He continues to nuzzle into me, his lips gently kissing my neck. “You’re already doing it, angel.”

“I told you before you left that I would tell you when you returned that I love you. So, I love you, Romeo. Thank fuck you came back to me.”

He grins, pressing a tender kiss to the tip of my nose. “There was no way in hell I wasn’t coming back to you, Ingrid.”

I exhale. “Did we lose anyone?”

He clears his throat and pulls back, looking into my eyes. “We did, and we have multiple injuries.”

My breath catches as I look around. “Who did we lose?”

His hand gently caresses my face, and I feel like it’s to ease the blow that is coming. “Houston lost their prospect, Keith, and Six was killed too.”

My eyes bug out of my head as I let out a gasp. “Oh my God! Those poor brothers.”

South narrows his eyes, his expression somber.

“Oh no, there’s more, isn’t there?”

He nods, holding me to him tighter. “Baby, he went out fighting. But I’m so sorry... Grudge didn’t make it.”

My vision blurs as the world starts spinning. I sink into South’s arms and let out some strange muffled noise. “No! No, this can’t be real. He can’t be gone.”

South clings to me, placing tender kisses on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, baby. I know how important he was to you.”

Tears flow like rivers down my face, and my stomach twists as Hurricane and Bayou step to my side.

Hurricane grabs me from South and pulls me into a tight embrace. “I am so, so fuckin’ sorry, Mom.”

I clench my eyes. This is the first time Hurricane has called me mom, which makes this moment bittersweet.

I slowly glance up, looking into his eyes and whimper, “Do you have his body?”

Hurricane nods. “We do, don’t worry. We’ll give Grudge the send-off he deserves. I promise you. But for now, let’s celebrate him tonight... he would want that.”

Nodding, I let Hurricane go and wipe under my eyes. I check Bayou and Hurricane up and down to determine if they’re injured. The one thing I cannot control is my frantic beating heart. “Are you both okay?”

They nod.

“A lot went down out there, but we finally took Anton and the Bratva down. Houston is hurtin’, and now I have the job of tellin’ Zero that his baby brother and president didn’t make it, and his VP, the new president, is fuckin’ injured,” Hurricane states.

My eyes shoot to South, his nostrils flaring like there’s more to this story, but I let it go because they all look so tired and need to be patched up.

“Okay, go talk to Zero. South, I need you to get your leg looked at. Bayou, you good?” I ask.

Bayou dips his chin. “I’m good. Couple of holes in me, but I’ll survive.”

“Let’s head inside,” I tell my boys, and we all turn, walking for the clubhouse.

Novah rushes out for Bayou, jumping into his arms. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but if I had to guess, he is telling her off for not resting.

But she doesn’t care.

All she cares about right now is his safety.

I watch as Zero approaches Hurricane, and he gestures for them to head into the Chapel. Zero glances around, looking for Six, and anxiously, he follows Hurricane into the Chapel, closing the door behind them.

That will not go down well.

Holding onto South's hand, I lead him over to a chair. "Sit, I need Hoodoo to come take a look at you."

South snorts out a laugh. "Trust me, Wraith needs Hoodoo far more than I do right now."

I shake my head. "If Wraith is bad, Aubree can look at him."

"Wraith isn't the type to go to the hospital, angel."

I glance over my shoulder to the corner of the room. "That's why I made sure to bring the hospital here. I had a bad feeling, so I asked Aubree to come here when y'all got back."

South smiles. "Baby, you're so fucking smart."

I let out a laugh. "No, just been here long enough to know when shit needs escalating."

Texas and Neon carry a barely hanging-on Wraith through the clubhouse doors, and Aubree stands as if on cue, racing toward them. "Put him on the pool table," she demands, grabbing her med kit, ripping open his shirt, and getting to work.

I turn back to South, raising my brow. "See, she's doing her thing. Now you can be seen by Hoodoo, okay?"

He growls in response. "You're bossy... I like it."

I chuckle and signal to Hoodoo to make his way over now he's finished examining Jesse. Hoodoo places his med kit on the table beside us and looks at South. "Where's your biggest problem?"

South points to his leg, and Hoodoo nods. "Okay, can you take off your jeans? Or do I need to cut them off?"

South lets out a laugh. "You're not cutting my motherfucking jeans off, asshole."

Hoodoo continues pulling shit out of his med kit. "Then stop talking and get your damn jeans off."

South groans, then slides his jeans off, leaving him in his boxer briefs. The bullet hole is clearly visible in his lower leg, plus all the scrapes and bruises along his body. My heart aches

knowing the hell they must have gone through out there on that battlefield. I reach out, grabbing South's hand and holding on as Hoodoo gets to work.

"You want me to numb it?" he asks South.

South snorts out a laugh. "Does anyone ever want you to numb it?"

Hoodoo rolls his eyes. "True. But this shit's gonna hurt. I gotta go in, poke around, and get this bullet out."

"Just go for it, brother," South states, his eyes focused solely on me.

I don't know if he's trying to be brave or tough, I have no idea, but I wish he would take the damn numbing. But the one thing I have learned about these men is that they are headstrong and will stick to their guns when it comes to medical shit. So, I will sit here and be his anchor to get through this next part.

Hoodoo swabs the area with, I'm assuming, alcohol, but I can't be sure, then moves in with some instrument to remove the bullet. "Okay, here we go," Hoodoo states, then begins pushing into South's leg.

South grimaces, gritting his teeth, his hand clenching mine so tight. I bring my free hand up and caress his face tenderly. "Breathe, baby, you got this. Just breathe."

He pants harshly through his nose as I focus my eyes on his, letting him know I am right here with him. Hoodoo moves about, doing whatever he's doing, as a bead of sweat runs down South's temple.

"You got this, Rome. Just a little more," I tell him.

"Got the little bastard!" Hoodoo pulls the fragmented bullet from South's leg, holding it up for us to see.

South lets out the breath he was holding as I press a kiss to his cheek. "You did so well, babe."

"Should have had the numbing," he quips.

Hoodoo and I both chuckle as Hoodoo moves to get the sutures ready. “I can numb you before I suture you up if you want?”

South shakes his head. “Nah, just get it over with. I’m all good.”

I let out a scoff. “You men are all the same. Never accept the help when it’s right in front of you.”

South glances up at me with a smirk. “You being here helps.”

“Not as much as lidocaine,” I tease.

South groans. “Fine, keep my woman happy, doc. Numb me up.”

Hoodoo grins. “Good choice,” he says, pulling out the needle. “Okay, this may sting, but as you said, you can handle it.”

South rolls his eyes as Hoodoo jabs the needle into the wound.

South jumps. “Fuck, man!”

Hoodoo shakes his head. “You’re telling me that hurt more than me digging inside your leg to get the bullet out?”

South huffs. “Different kind of pain. Coulda warned me first.”

“I did, you big baby. Now tell me... can you feel me pressing you here?” he pokes South in the middle of the wound, and South shakes his head.

Then, he presses on another part of the wound. “Here?”

South shakes his head again. “Nothing.”

Hoodoo grins. “Here?” he asks, using the tip of the needle to poke another section.

South’s leg jerks. “Fuck, yeah, I can feel that.”

Hoodoo chuckles. “Yeah, I know... I didn’t numb that area, just wanted to piss you off.”

“You’re an asshole,” South grumbles as he sits back, and Hoodoo gets to work.

I can’t help but feel relieved that, after everything these guys have been through, they can come back and have their usual banter with each other.

I’m glad this stupid war hasn’t changed them.

I was worried it could.

I was worried it would.

But everything seems okay.

For now, anyway.

And I will keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Winning a war always gives this empty feeling because even though we won and we’ve defeated the enemy we’ve been fighting for so long, it comes at a cost.

Winning always has a cost!

We lose people—good people.

And somehow, that feels like a loss.

Later That Night

With everyone patched up and the three clubs here in a period of mourning and celebration, we’re drinking and spending time together. Heavy rock music blasts through the speakers. Jaz and Storm have prepared food, and it’s being shared around the clubhouse.

Right now, there is a real party atmosphere.

Earlier, we had our memorial moments for our fallen brothers, and now we’re trying to lighten the mood and enjoy this moment in history.

The club took down the Russian Bratva.

Those fuckers have been a pain in our asses for as long as we can remember. And now we don't have to worry about Anton coming back at us again, especially because his remains were fed to La Fin. There was no way the club was going to risk any chance of Anton making a return, and with him in pieces inside the club's alligator, we feel secure in that knowledge. Now, we can run the streets of New Orleans without worrying about backlash or street warfare.

NOLA Defiance is on top, and now that we've had time to let that *really* sink in—damn, it feels good.

It's something Reaper could never accomplish as president, but fuck, he would be proud to know his legacies have been able to carry it out. I can't help but smile as I sit back, looking over all the Defiance members who are having a good time. Sure, Houston is struggling with the loss of their president and the injuries to Wraith. But Wraith will be fine in a few weeks, and their club can rebuild their ranks.

They *will* be okay.

Zero, on the other hand, sits alone by the bar, drinking his sorrows away.

You have to feel for the guy, losing his brother in a battle he couldn't fight. The heaviness of that must be weighing heavily on him.

As I sit on South's lap, he rests his hand on my upper thigh. He's had a few drinks tonight, and I don't mind because he needs to relax. He slides his hand higher, whispering against my ear, "Did I tell you how fucking good you looked when I got back today?"

I turn to face him. "You did not. But I am pretty sure you weren't in any fit state when you got back to be thinking that way, sir."

His hand shifts higher. "Well, angel, I am thinking it now." His lips graze my neck, his bearded chin tickling my skin as I let out a heady exhale.

"South, we need to celebrate with the guys. We can do this when you're healed," I whisper.

His eyes meet mine, desperation clear. “I need you, Ingrid!”

I nod in understanding and move from his lap, taking his hand in mine. He stands, and we go to walk off as Hurricane turns the music down, sending a whistle through the room and gaining our attention.

South groans but moves in behind me, wrapping his arms around my stomach tightly, his erection poking me in the ass. I grin, feeling his hard-on, and wriggle my ass against him, trying to get some friction for him without being obvious. He growls against my ear, biting down on my earlobe. “You keep doing that, angel, and I don’t care who’s watching. I will fuck you in front of everyone here.”

I grin and stop, even though he’s slowly grinding his cock against me now as Hurricane and City step forward.

“We know today was fuckin’ hard on all of us. Houston, you especially. Words can’t describe the hurt we feel for y’all...” Hurricane takes a moment. “But through the fuckin’ shit, there were some acts of bravery that need to be acknowledged. Alpha... you flew your club into the line of fire, then literally went down in flames and still came through it all. We thank you for your help and for puttin’ your men first and goin’ down with the ship, or helo as it were. You’re a brave motherfucker, and if I am honest, we woulda been fucked if you didn’t show up when you did.”

Alpha raises his glass to Hurricane. “You put in the call for help. We’re always gonna show up. Just like Houston. We’re a unit. We don’t abandon each other. We fight for each other, no matter what.”

South tenses his grip on me, like something that was said has struck a chord with him. I just can’t tell what. I go to turn to look at him but don’t get the chance.

Hurricane continues, “In the theme of not abandonin’ each other, one brother stood by and helped another out when shit got tough, even though he was strugglin’ with his own concussion and injuries. He stayed and stopped South from being killed.”

I tense, my stomach in knots at hearing how close it was for South. He holds me tighter, pressing a tender kiss on my neck. “I’m okay, angel. I’m okay,” he whispers as if he knows he needs to settle my nerves.

“Jesse, get your ass up here,” Hurricane grunts out to our prospect.

Jesse hesitates but slowly hobbles to where City and Hurricane are standing.

“Jesse, you stood up and protected a patched brother from certain death. You’ve shown time and time again your loyalty to this club. For that, you’ve earned your patch and your Road Name of... Maverick.”

Jesse smiles as Bayou comes out with his official club cut and patches. He helps him shrug on the cut, and Jesse shakes his head as Clover rushes to her brother’s side to shake his hand. “Thanks, brothers. I’m not gonna let you down.”

Hurricane dips his chin. “I know you won’t. We called you Maverick because Mavericks tend to be innovative, influential, darin’, and direct, with a remarkably high tolerance for takin’ chances. You took a chance on movin’ you and your sister to New Awlins and into the club. You made a life here, and you fight so fuckin’ hard to ensure every one of us is safe. You’re a Maverick, Jesse, and we’re fuckin’ lucky to have you as part of Defiance.”

We all cheer and then congratulate Maverick.

However, I have noticed South hasn’t let go of me. Not that I mind. Having his arms wrapped around me is the only place I want to be right now.

We walk over to Maverick as he stands with Clover, both of them laughing, taking in all the praise, and South bobs his head at the newly patched member, putting out his hand for him to shake. “Mad Mav, thank you, brother, for saving my life out there.”

I exhale hearing those words, hating the idea I could have lost South today.

Maverick shakes South's hand. "You'd have done the same for me, brother."

"Yeah, but thank you for getting me back to my woman."

I reach out, placing my hand on Maverick's arm. "Yes, thank you. So much. I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost South as well as Grudge."

"Luckily, we don't need to find out..." Maverick smiles. "You guys go and have a good night. I intend to." He wraps his arm around Clover. "We made it, sis!"

She giggles as they take off, and I spin in South's arms, looking him in the eyes. "If you don't take me to bed right now, I'm gonna explode."

He wiggles his brows, starting to back me toward the hallway. "Oh, angel... I'm gonna make you explode, all right."

I giggle, spinning in his arms, and turn, rushing down the hall to his bedroom. He chases after me but at a slower pace because of his leg. The amount of alcohol he's consumed doesn't help either.

Slowing my steps, I turn back and grin, loving the mischief in his eyes. After a frantic day of worrying, I need this. *I need him*. He might be injured, but he's here. And it's time to show him how much he means to me.

Just inside his door, I pause, letting him catch up. When he's within arm's reach, I tug him inside and lock the door behind us. Before I can move, he pulls me against him, backing me up against the door. My breath catches, but I don't miss the grimace flash in his eyes as he leans in to kiss me.

With a gentle press against his chest, I encourage him to back up. He watches me with confusion but doesn't fight it and drops to the bed. He shrugs out of his cut, resting it on the end of the bed, then quickly grabs the back of his shirt. Pulling it over his head, he tosses it to the floor with a cocky expression.

His tattooed body is marred with bruises and cuts, but he still looks like a gift from the damn gods, the way that trail of

hair leads down into his low-riding jeans right to where I want to be.

Shaking my head, I lift his legs onto the bed. “South, you need to get off your leg and elevate it. You’re overdoing it as is,” I tell him.

“Fuck that. I need to get *you* off.” He growls the words out, sending a burst of desire through me.

I smirk, stepping back and slipping off my shirt. This catches South’s attention as he groans, his eyes never leaving my body. Feeling bold, I shimmy my jeans down my hips and watch as his breathing becomes heavy.

He goes to jump up but immediately falls back to the bed, and I put my hand on his chest, holding him in place. “I’m gonna need you to stay put on that bed. Got it?” I smirk, his eyes lighting up in curiosity.

“You serious right now, angel?”

“As a heart attack. You’re injured, and I finally get the chance to show you how much I love you. How much I *need* you. And you’re going to sit there and take it. *You* understand?”

“Shit, you can do whatever you want to me.” South chuckles as he leans back on his elbows, his brow arched in a challenge.

I slide my jeans down the rest of the way, leaving me in nothing but a lace bra and matching panties. Then I walk up to him, reaching for his belt buckle and undoing it, keeping my eyes firmly on him.

His eyes are heavy with desire, and his cock strains against the zipper. But I take it slow.

Time.

We have time.

He came home to me.

The heaviness of the day still lingers. The fact I could have lost him—hell, I could have lost everyone—plays on my mind,

and I'm determined to give him the attention he gives me. But the reality is, I'm a little selfish too.

I need this like I need my next breath.

After removing his boots, I slip off the pant leg off his good leg before shifting and carefully sliding the other down. Once I have gently removed his jeans and boxers, I'm distracted by him gripping his cock, squeezing and stroking it. My tongue moves on its own, licking my lips.

"Come put that gorgeous mouth around my cock, Ingrid," he orders, and even though it's a mighty fine temptation, I have other plans.

With effort, I shake my head. "Tonight, we are going to do things *my way*. I can do whatever I want with you, *remember?* Now, let's get you comfy on that bed. We need to make sure your leg isn't further injured."

I help him shift so he's sitting against the headboard, then maneuver his leg so it's resting, cradled in some pillows. South doesn't object, but with each movement, he groans in pain, his face wincing.

I would have thought with the amount he's had to drink, it would have taken the edge off, but it seems the numbing has officially worn off.

"Fuck, that was a lot of work. But you're right. Getting my weight off it, the pain lessons," he begrudgingly admits, and I chuckle.

"Close your eyes and don't open them. No peeking. Got it?"

"What're you up to?"

I press my finger to his lips. "Be quiet," I tell him before I lean down, taking his lips with mine. Our tongues collide, fighting for position, and I moan, my hand slipping down and cupping his balls.

When I pull back, we're both panting. The room is an echo chamber for our heavy breathing. Slipping off the bed, I search

for anything I might be able to use as a blindfold. I find a black satin tie in the back of his closet that will do just fine.

I barely have it across his eyes before he's protesting. "I don't think—"

"Shh... trust me."

South immediately stills, allowing me to secure the tie around his eyes, effectively making it so he can't see. He's panting now, his cock visibly throbbing. A bead of precum forms on the tip, and I can't let it go to waste. I lean over, licking the head before taking him in my mouth and moan from the salty taste.

His hands thread into my hair, and I stop, knowing I'm going to have to do something about him being able to use his hands. He might not be able to see me, but I know that won't stop him from trying to take over.

I scoot out of his grasp, his cock slipping from my lips.

"I didn't say to stop, woman. Fuck, you're killin' me here."

Instead of responding, I bend, picking up his jeans and letting the belt whir through the loops. Over my shoulder, I glance at South, who tilts his head at the sound. "Give me your hands, South," I tell him, and he hesitates, his jaw clenching.

When he doesn't move them, I slap the back of his hand, getting his attention.

"Damn, angel. No need to get violent."

"I love it when you are in control, but please, I need this. I need this for me. I need this for us," I state, and South's shoulders raise with the deep breath he takes.

He dips his chin, offering his hands to me. I don't know what I'm doing exactly, but I wrap the belt around his wrists, binding them as best I can. He can easily wiggle out of them with little effort, but I'm hoping he gives this to me.

I take my panties off but hold on to them, an idea sparking. Crawling back onto the bed, I straddle his lap, letting his cock rest between my slick folds.

“Fuck, you’re so damn wet,” he growls out, attempting to jut his hips up, seeking more.

I guide his bound hands up, resting them just behind his head. “You’re to keep these right here, understand?” I ask, and he leans in, trying to nip at my mouth.

“I need to touch you,” he argues, and I giggle.

“Don’t worry, you will feel all of me soon enough,” I promise, wiggling my hips and enjoying the groan he releases. Then I remove my bra, letting it fall to the side.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I grab his hair, pulling it back. I lean closer, ensuring my breasts press against his bare chest as I suck and bite at his throat, now bared to me.

The growl he releases vibrates through his chest, causing my nipples to pebble. I moan, rocking my hips, my own desire making it impossible to take this any slower.

“Dammit, Ingrid. I need to be inside you. You are soaking me. Let me taste you,” South pleads.

“Open,” I order, tapping his lips with my fingers.

He cautiously does so, and I ball my wet panties up, stuffing them inside.

If only he could see me grinning.

He is truly a sight like this at my mercy.

His muffled grumble becomes a moan as I slide my wet pussy over his shaft. I didn’t plan on coming like this, but it feels too good. His hard yet smooth length, effortlessly slipping through my folds as I grind against him, has me lost. “Fuck, South!” I holler out, the familiar tension building low in my belly.

My thighs start to shake, and I pull him closer, grabbing a firm hold of his hair to give myself more leverage. A sheen of sweat glistens over our skin. His head arches back, and I lean in, sinking my teeth into the top of his shoulder. Heat invades my body, washing over me like an adrenaline rush as my breath catches. Lights dance behind my eyes as my muscles

tense, and the explosion hits with such force I let out a loud moan against his shoulder.

My body tingles as I come down from my high.

South tries to say something, but it's garbled, so I pull my panties out of his mouth. "Fuck, Ingrid. Please. I am beggin' you. Let me taste you. I want to sink my cock so deep inside you."

Finding strength, I rise onto my knees, stroking him before guiding him inside me. The feeling of his thick cock fills me as he slides in, and we both moan out in our pleasure. I can't take it slow. I sink down on him in one firm motion until he's fully seated inside.

South clenches his jaw, sucking in a breath through his teeth, and my breath stutters. He's so deep like this, filling me to the point it's almost painful.

"So full," I cry out, my lips seeking his.

I can't get enough.

I kiss him with so much force our teeth click together, my tongue pushing its way inside. Instead of pulling back for some room, South loops his bound hands around my neck and threads his fingers into my hair, keeping me tight against him.

We devour each other, panting for breath, and when he juts his hips, pushing somehow deeper, my head falls back as I scream out in a mix of pleasurable pain.

My hands move to my lower belly, pressing slightly to feel him inside me. The slightest rock of my hips has him pushing against the front wall, and with a little pressure, I can feel him as he moves inside me. I don't think I've ever been as turned on as I am right now.

"Jesus, angel. You're soaking me," he tells me as he pulls my head back, kissing along my throat, down to my breasts.

His fingers dig into my scalp as I start to rotate on his lap, and he draws a nipple into his mouth, clamping it between his teeth. Pulling his arms over my head with one hand, I remove his blindfold with the other, letting it hang loosely around his

neck. “Keep your hands behind your head while I fuck you,” I tell him as I rise, letting the tip of his cock rest at my entrance.

I pause for a second. The tantalizing pleasure makes my core ache, but I hold, wanting the sensation to build. Resting my forehead against his, I carefully wrap my hand through the tie, giving me something to hold on to, and then I slam down onto him.

My breath catches at the sudden fullness and the sharp jolt of him pressing against my cervix.

He lets out a grunt that turns into a moan as he tries to push deeper, rocking his hips. I scream out his name like a prayer or maybe a plea.

“This cock was made for me. Holy fuck. So... good,” I pant out, building a steady rhythm, my pussy clenching each time I lower myself.

I adjust my hold on the tie, twisting it once for a firmer grip, and nip at his lips. He growls, rocking up and into me, using his good leg to brace on the bed. Needing more, I arch back, and the change in position has him rubbing that sweet spot. With my free hand, I slide it down my front, feeling each time he slides in and out.

It’s still not enough, so I slip my hand down, my fingers circling my clit.

South groans, grumbling something I can’t quite make out, my hearing muffled by the intense pleasure racking my body. “Fuck, angel. That’s it. Take what you need. Use my cock and fuck that pussy. Let go, Ingrid,” he encourages, his voice hoarse and his eyes dark with burning desire.

I ride him with abandon, my fingers circling my clit with determination. Something builds deep in my core, and I don’t know if it’s too much or not enough. My breaths are heavy, our moans echoing around the room. You would think the loud thumping of music coming from the party would be enough to drown us out, but it’s all I can hear.

Slamming down on him, I change the pace, rocking my hips and grinding into him at a determined pace.

“Oh shit. You’re squeezing me so tight. Fuck, you better come,” South warns, and his words are enough to push me over the edge.

My thighs are shaking, and my breath ceases as I come, soaking over him. My vision blurs, I gasp, my body desperate for oxygen.

“So damn gorgeous. And *mine*,” South demands, bringing my sight back into focus.

It’s then I realize he hasn’t come. My legs are still shaking, aftershocks zipping through me.

Knowing I don’t have the strength to ride him like I was, I reach back and cup his balls, letting my finger rub underneath and to his puckered entrance. South tenses at first but soon groans, and when I gently apply pressure, his balls draw up, heavy in my hand. When he pushes up again, I grind into him at the same time rocking my hips.

“Come for me, Rome.”

Our eyes lock, his breath catching on an exhale at my use of his name.

Then he comes so hard that each time his cock jolts, shooting ropes of cum inside me, a new warmth fills me, causing another orgasm to build. The added sensation and the fierce look in his eyes pushes me over the edge once more, my body still humming from the first orgasm. I close my eyes, stars dancing behind my eyelids as I pant for breath.

Using the tie, I pull myself up, falling into him and capturing his mouth. I release my hold, making quick work of the belt around his hands. It barely slips free, and his hands ravage my body, pulling me closer.

I pull back, resting my forehead on his, getting lost in his gaze and panting for breath. “Thank you for this, for trusting me. After today, after seeing you injured and hearing you could have died... and losing Grudge, I-I just needed to be in control of something.”

His hands smooth out along my hips, sliding up my back tenderly. “You can take control of me anytime you like. But

you need to grieve, Ingrid. It's been a huge day for everyone."

Sliding off, I roll onto my back on the bed beside him, a sticky, sweaty mess. He shifts, resting his head on his hand beside me and looking down at me, his fingers trailing up the center of my body. "I don't know how I'd get through all this shit without you."

He leans in, pressing his lips to my temple. "Let's make it so you never have to find out."

My eyes meet his. "What does that mean?"

His eyes focus, full of intent, as he stares into mine. "I'm claiming you right here, right now. And I'm not asking if you want to be an Old Lady again. I'm telling you. You're *mine*. I can't let you go. No matter what anyone thinks, or says, or does... alligators included." I let out a small laugh, but he continues, "I love you, Ingrid. You're *it* for me. I don't care about the age gap, I don't care what people think, I don't care that you're going through menopause and we won't be able to have kids. All I want is... *you!* So... you're my Old Lady, got it?"

Pursing my lips, hearing him talk to me like that is both highly romantic and demanding at the same time, but somehow, it's such a fucking turn-on that I don't even mind that he's not giving me a choice. Because even if he did, I would have jumped at being his.

"Then I guess as your Old Lady, I have to consummate our relationship. You know, just to make it official."

His eyes bug out of his head. "Again? Now?"

I chuckle, sitting up, pushing him onto his back, and kneeling over him. "You think because I'm older that you're going to wear me out? Oh no, never. I have stamina like you wouldn't believe. So buckle up, baby. Your Old Lady is only just getting started with you tonight."

He grins wide as I grab his wrists and pin them above his head. "Fuck, I love you."

"Love you too. Now shut up and let me ride your face."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

South

The Next Day

To say we're all a little hungover emotionally, physically, and, of course, from actual alcohol would be an understatement. We've had a huge couple of days. We've lost men, good fucking men, and I don't even begin to know how we come to grips with that fact.

My night with Ingrid helped ease the pain for a moment. Claiming her made a piece of my soul that was missing feel complete. But there's still work to be done. There are battles ahead that we need to face. My beautiful angel's surgery is in twelve days, and we need to be prepared for that, let alone our meeting with the Baroness today to tell her what went down.

I don't think any of us are ready for the victory lap she's going to perform around New Orleans—the fucking cunt of a woman.

She put us in this position.

We've managed to dig ourselves out without Houston suspecting.

Maybe we *will* come through this unscathed.

For now, though, LA has just left, and Houston is hanging around as we figure out how to get their fallen men back to them safely. We sit in the Chapel, the sore heads and somber mood hitting us today, all celebrations seeming to have passed.

We won, but it feels like we lost more than we gained.

“Wraith is recovering but will be fine. But there's no way he can take a plane ride back to Houston. He can ride with Keith and Six in the van back via transit,” Zero states, taking

the leadership role for Houston once again for the interim until Wraith is back on his feet.

“All right, sounds like a plan. We will prep the bodies for travel. You guys sit back and relax at the clubhouse. You were here as a favor to us. Your men died on our watch. Let us handle this while you recover before your travels back to Houston,” Hurricane states.

Zero nods, his head hanging low. He’s defeated, devastated, and completely shattered. “My men will take the time to rest, and we will take up your offer on the bodies. We’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

Hurricane dips his chin at Zero. “Again, so fuckin’ sorry for your losses, brother.”

“Yours too,” Zero states, referring to Grudge.

We all drop our chins thinking about our fallen brothers.

Hurricane bangs his gavel on the table. “If Houston wanna head out, grab some grub, then NOLA will go over the details of what we’re doin’ next.”

Houston walk for the door, but Zero spins back. “Take care of Six,” Zero demands, a tone firm in his voice.

Hurricane weakly smiles. “Nothin’ but utmost respect, we promise, brother.”

Zero walks out behind the rest of Houston Defiance, and they close the door, the remainder of us exhaling collectively.

But Hurricane is quick to speak, “Okay, we all know what went down, and we’re all doin’ a great job of savin’ face. We just gotta get through this next part. We’re on the home stretch, brothers. We go to The Plantation to the walk-in freezers, get the Baroness to witness Six’s body, and then we should be free of her. This is gonna work. It *has* to work.”

We all sit quietly, taking in this massive *deal with the devil* we’ve succumbed to.

We are the pawns in her game, and we’ve played right into her damn hands.

How did it come to this?

“So, when do we move?” I question.

Hurricane clears his throat and bangs his gavel. “Right fuckin’ now. I’m gonna go call her and get her ass over to The Plantation, and we’ll be there when she arrives.”

My stomach churns at the thought this could play out in so many different ways. You never know how the Baroness is going to spin shit.

That bitch makes me nervous.

Everyone files out, but I figure I need to talk to Hurricane before we head into something that could turn sideways for us again. When everyone is gone, his eyes linger on me as I approach.

“Pres, can I grab you for a brief second?”

He glances to the doorway, like he’s in a hurry, but then stops and nods. “Eveythin’ okay with Ingrid?”

Rolling my shoulders, I have no idea how he will take this, so I figure I will just come right out and say it. “She’s doing good. A little anxious about her surgery but otherwise good.”

“So then, what the fuck is this about? Because if you haven’t noticed, we have somewhere we need to be?”

“I know, but in case shit goes south while we’re out, I want you to know.”

He tenses, tilting his head. “Fuck... what have you gone and done?”

“I claimed Ingrid last night,” I blurt out, figuring it’s the best way to get it out there, like tearing off a BandAid.

He’s quiet momentarily, his jaw ticking from side to side. Then he lets out a long exhale. He grips my shoulder, his fingers digging in tightly, so tight it’s almost painful. “You’re in this now... you must be fuckin’ serious to claim her. But if this is what you both want, then I’ll have Storm make a property patch for her. But I *swear to God*, South, you fuck her over at—”

“I know, straight to the bayou.”

He chuckles, nodding his head. “Damn straight. All right, game faces on. Let’s go settle this with that bitch.” He slaps my back, and we walk out of the Chapel together, Ingrid watching us as we leave. I subtly nod to her with a small smile and instantly see her body relax. She knew I was going to talk to Hurricane about us today.

I’m glad he seems to be more accepting of our relationship.

As a club, we all make our way out of the clubhouse, casually nodding to Houston as we go. They’re staying behind while we go deal with this. Though you would think they’d have to be wondering why we’re all going to deal with only two of their men. But luckily, they haven’t asked any questions, and we’re certainly not giving any answers.

We take off in formation, headed for The Plantation.

My leg aches like a bitch, but Hoodoo gave me some solid painkillers to knock the edge off. So I’m able to walk properly, at least. The lump on my head feels like it’s getting bigger, but I’m ignoring everything right now because we have to get this shit done and fucking dusted.

We jump on our rides, taking off out of the clubhouse gates. The wind whips at my hair. Somehow, the breeze causes me to feel calmer. We’re going to settle things with the Baroness. To finally get out from under her damn clutches. She holds the cards in this relationship we have with her.

We carried out the fucking sin of a task she bribed us to do.

Now—*we owe her nothing.*

We will be done with her.

At least, I hope that’s how this goes down.

The ride to The Plantation has my mind wondering about all kinds of things. How I should have called Bella before the fight with the Bratva. If something did go down, I should have given Bella a chance at a final phone call with me if I lost my fight in that battle.

I've been so wrapped up in Ingrid and my life here that I am neglecting the one person who was there for me all those years when my parents were making me drown.

I need to find some time to go back out to LA to see Bella, to take Ingrid to meet her, to tell Mom and Dad I have an Old Lady, even though they're not going to like who it is.

Ingrid's family has welcomed me into their life.

It's time mine welcomed her into theirs.

But I can't be thinking about all that right now. I need to be focusing on the fact that we're pulling into The Plantation, and shit is going to get very real, real quick for us.

We pull up, Maxxy walking out from the main building as a couple of the Baton Rouge Bachelor workers stroll past, nodding their heads as they go. I'd actually forgotten in all the shit that's been going on that they're still working here. Hoodoo walks over to Maxxy, pulling her to him, and he kisses her in front of us all. They're such a loved-up couple.

Hurricane approaches them, the rest of us following. "Max, you're positively glowin'."

She snorts out a laugh. "About that..."

Hoodoo widens his eyes, looking at her. "Now?" he murmurs.

She shoves him playfully. "Yes, now. They're all here, and it will be obvious soon anyway."

Hoodoo wraps his arm around Maxxy's shoulders, pulling her to him. "We have news, Pres."

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck. "Okay, out with it."

Maxxy shrugs. "This fucking ass-fucker knocked me up."

Hoodoo stands there, happy as a pig in shit. "Damn straight I did!"

Maxxy rolls her eyes. "You were fucking determined, is what you were—"

“What does this mean for The Plantation, Maxxy? How much time are you gonna need off?” Hurricane interrupts, clearly concerned for our ever-growing business enterprise and offering no congratulations at all.

She snorts as Hoodoo scowls. “Time off? Are you kidding? I’ll have this thing in the office, then return to the field. I’m not stopping work. Hoodoo wanted the kid so much he can stay at home and look after the baby.”

We all burst out laughing because that is the most Maxxyest answer I have ever heard.

Bayou grips Hoodoo’s shoulder, who doesn’t seem bothered by that outcome in the slightest. “Stay at home, biker daddy? Sounds like you to a tee, brother.”

Hoodoo doesn’t even bat an eyelash. “Sounds fucking good to me.”

We all snicker. The gender roles are reversed with these two, but that is why they work so well.

“Congratulations, guys, we’re happy for ya,” Hurricane finally states, leaning in to embrace Maxxy.

“You’re happy I’m not leaving the Farm, you mean?” she taunts.

“That too,” he relays with a smirk. “Now, on a more serious note... you got the bodies in the giant chill room?” he asks, and Maxxy’s smile falters.

“Yeah, they’re in caskets on trolleys waiting for you. Keith on the right, Six on the left.”

“Thanks for taking care of this, Max. Appreciate all your help. Send the Baroness through when she gets here,” Hurricane adds.

“I got your back,” she states.

Hurricane leads us off toward the giant walk-in chill room. He stops at the door and turns back to look at us. “Before we go in, I just want y’all to know that what went down had to be done this way. For the sake of everyone involved. For the sake of our families. This was the *only* way to save everyone.”

City grips his shoulder. “We know, and it was fucking tough, and it must have been horrific for you to pull that trigger, Pres, but we got your back. For the sake of our families.”

We all nod, even Bayou, as Hurricane opens the door to the chill room. A mist of fog puffs out, the instant wave of coldness hitting us as Hurricane steps inside the cold room. It’s not as cold as a freezer, but it’s still fucking chilly. We all head inside and see crates of products and various shit sporadically placed. But as we walk in, the two caskets in the middle of the room draw our immediate attention.

Silence falls over us as we take a deep breath.

Hurricane walks over to the casket on the left, hesitating, then pulling back the lid. He shakes his head, and we crowd around him, looking down on Six. His hands crossed over his chest, his eyes shut, and he appears asleep. His lips have a slight tinge of blue as we all stare at the fallen president.

“Damn, that’s hard to look at,” Raid states as we all take a few steps back, hearing the telltale click-clacking of high heels entering the chill room behind us.

“But *is* the job done?” she asks, stepping closer with a big smile.

We all turn to face her, Hurricane puffing out his chest, his face tense and angry as hell. “This... *this* is *all* on you, Constance.”

She walks over to the casket and leans in, taking one look at Six’s still body, the blood on his chest, and then lets out a menacing chuckle. “Job well done. Honestly, I *never* thought you would pull this off. But this? This is *amazing*. My plan is coming to fruition. Houston Defiance will have someone more *pliable* at the helm, and I won’t have to worry about Six pushing back all the damn time.”

She lets out another laugh as she starts pacing the floor. “You don’t know what you’ve done, Hurricane. You’ve made my pull in the South superior now. Six was turning people against me. *I know he was*. Little syndicates here and there

telling them to fight back. All because *I* have the pull. *I* have the power. I think little Six here proceeded up the ranks *far* too quickly and grew too cocky for his own boots. He thought he was *invincible*. He thought *he* would be the next *big president* to rule Houston. The next powerhouse of Texas. I sure showed that little runt, didn't I? Don't even get me started on how *weak* Zero has become. *Pah-thetic*, the bunch of them.”

We all shift uncomfortably, hearing her talk about another Defiance chapter like this, but it is Hurricane who speaks first, “If you can turn on Houston like this, what's to say you won't turn on us the second you think we're not of value to you anymore?”

She snorts out a laugh, waving her hand through the air. “Oh, honey, the second people are of no value to me, I wipe them from my life by *any* means necessary. The idea, Hurricane, is to... stay... of... value.”

The rest of us glance at each other, tense as shit, not liking how this conversation is going, but Hurricane doesn't budge. He stays strong in his defense. “That's precisely what I thought you would say.” He sends out a loud whistle.

The door to the chill room opens, and the Houston brothers all stride in, anger etched in their faces, vengeance seeping through their eyes.

I see it—*they're pissed*.

But I can't tell if it's directed at her or us.

Zero stands in front of all of them as the Baroness lets out a small laugh, rolling her eyes. “*Oh, please*. Like this show of force is going to scare me.”

Zero folds his arms over his chest, a low growl emanating from his throat. “You planned *all* this? You backstabbed us after *everything* we have been through? After *everything* we have *done* for you?”

The Baroness sighs and steps forward, looking at Zero. “Can't you see? I needed this for us to move forward, so we can go back to how it *used* to b—”

“With us groveling at your feet? No, Connie! That’s *not* how this is gonna work.”

She lets out a long, exaggerated huff. “Why?”

Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, movement from the casket has us all jumping out of our skins as Six sits up, looking directly at us and taking a deep breath.

“Jesus Christ! What in God almighty?” the Baroness screams in her deep Southern drawl, her hand slamming to her chest as Hoodoo rushes over to Six’s casket, checking his vitals.

“Deep breaths, brother, the sedative is wearing off,” he states as he checks Six’s pulse.

The rest of us let out a small laugh as Houston rush to Six’s side, surrounding their president.

While we all stare in shock at Hurricane.

“How?” Bayou asks the question we’re all thinking.

“I filled Zero and Six in on what Constance wanted us to do. And I told him of the plan that we would shoot Six in the battle. From there, we figured out how to make it all happen, but we had to bring Hoodoo in on it.”

We turn to him as he steps away from the casket, Houston still surrounding their president in celebration as Hoodoo steps over to be with us. “I made a blood bag with a minor explosive for Six to wear under his cut. We strapped it to him before the fight, knowing that at some point, Hurricane would shoot him with the blank in his gun. He’d need to count specifically to the right bullet in his chamber. Everything would need to work precisely for it to happen perfectly. Six placed a lot of trust in us to do this because once the blank was fired, I had to run over to him and pretend to revive him when, in actual fact, I gave him a sedative that mimics the effects of death for twenty-four hours. It’s why he looked dead.”

“*You* played me!” the Baroness screams out in her anger.

Hurricane chuckles, shaking his head, and folds his arms over his chest. “We are Defiance. We *don’t* turn on each other.

No. Matter. What.”

She throws her hands in the air, letting out a loud scream. “I’m going to take down *all* of Defiance for this. I have dirt on *every. Single. Club.* Not just Houston and NOLA. You mark my words. You won’t even see it coming when I am done with you. You won’t know what hit you... you haven’t even begun to *feel* my wrath—”

“That is unlikely...” a smooth, silky voice chimes as more footsteps echo outside the chill room doors.

We all turn to Marcel and his men, stepping inside the room. It’s getting crowded in here, but I honestly don’t mind because the Baroness is heavily outnumbered.

And I like those odds.

“Marcel? Need I remind you who *you* work for?” The Baroness sneers.

He tilts his head. “Tsk-tsk-tsk... you think you have *all* this pull, *all* this power and persuasion, but, Connie, the valuable information you keep to bribe everyone is only as valuable as the systems you store it on.”

Her eyes widen, her muscles tensing. “What the fuck does that mean, Marcel?”

He smirks. “With the help of Raid, Neon, and my team, we have secured *all* your files, and *all* your encryptions have been overridden. *All* your assets have been handed over *to me*. So you see... *I* own the South now. And Constance...” he shakes his head, “... there’s no use for you anymore.”

We all turn, glaring at her, her eyes widening in obvious terror as she backs away for the exit. But the door closes, and she turns to none other than Six, who has closed it, shutting her inside.

“The fact you tried to have me assassinated doesn’t surprise me. The fact you bribed my own club to do it, though... that takes balls. But you should know, Baroness, Defiance *always* finds a way. And we had to get a lot of moving pieces working behind the scenes to make this plan work. But everything fell into place, and now? Now your ass is *ours*...” His eyes find

Marcel. “If you want your hands clean, I suggest you leave now,” Six states.

Marcel chuckles, shaking his head. “Fuck, no! I want everyone to know as the new *King of the South*, I’m willing to be there when chaos goes down. I don’t fight my battles through other people like Constance does. That’s the difference between a Baroness and a motherfucking King.”

We all smile as she lets out a heavy exhale. “So this is it, huh? It’s come down to this? I have to say... I am actually pretty impressed you pulled this off. Well, then... let’s get down to it,” she says, kicking off her heels and shrugging out of her white blazer, placing it on the edge of a metal table.

Hurricane signals to Bayou and City. “Boys, grab her,” he states, and they rush forward. She narrows her eyes, raises her fists, and slams her fist forward, ramming it straight into Bayou’s cheek. His head snaps to the side, but City grabs her arm and yanks it to the side as she chuckles to herself. Bayou quickly regains his composure and reaches for the arm that just hit him, grabbing and pulling it with City along to the table.

“At least I got one good punch in before all this happens.” The Baroness chuckles to herself as they drag her to the table, lift and drop her harshly on the top. The metal clunks with the force of the hit, and she lets out an “oomph.” Six walks back over to his casket, reaches in, and grabs a set of handcuffs, making us laugh.

“You guys thought of everything while keeping the rest of us in the dark,” I jest.

Zero chuckles. “We had to keep you in the dark. Your reactions had to be real in case she was watching.”

The Baroness laughs as Bayou handcuffs her hands to the legs of the table. “Oh, I was watching. You did a good job of fooling me, you assholes. Though, I guess I fooled you too with that little stunt I pulled with the Bratva?”

We all tense, snapping our heads to her.

Hurricane steps to her side. “What stunt?” he growls.

She chuckles. "I'm going to die, so why should I tell you?"

Hurricane signals to Hoodoo, and he walks over with a tray of utensils and a square bucket. He places the bucket under the table beneath the drainage hole in the table where she's lying and shifts the tray of utensils onto a bench by Hurricane. He picks up a pair of scissors, lifts them into the air, and sighs. "Because, Connie, we can get the information out of you the easy way, or we can do it slowly and painfully? Either way, you *will* tell us."

She snorts out a laugh. "I'm not going to make this easy for you, Hurricane."

He shrugs. "Fine by me." He leans in, running the scissors up the center of her silk blouse, shredding it down the middle, exposing her flesh and bra to us all. She swallows hard when we spot obvious torture marks on her skin, and we tilt our heads in surprise. "Been here, done this before I see, Baroness?"

"You're not the only people I've pissed off in my lifetime. As you can see, I got away from them too." She grins.

We all chuckle, but it's Zero who answers this time, "You're not getting out of it this time, Connie."

"We'll see," she replies, jiggling her wrists on the handcuffs.

"You made these two clubs hurt. The most *unimaginable* hurt there is to feel. You tried to pin us against each other. You almost made my club turn on me, and for that, you need to suffer... slowly," Hurricane states. "People can lose fourteen percent of their blood without dyin', so let's see how close to that we can get you."

She gulps as Hurricane picks up a scalpel, shining it right in front of her face. "Last chance... tell me about the stunt with the Bratva?"

The Baroness turns up her nose, and Hurricane shakes his head. "Let the drainin' begin." He then thrusts the scalpel into her side, and she screams as he slices her down to her ribs, the

blood draining instantly onto the table, then sliding down and dripping into the catchment bucket below.

“Anythin’?” Hurricane asks as she pants out her fast breaths.

She spits at him, but it falls short, falling to the floor at his feet.

He shakes his head. “I see we’re in for a ride, Baroness. But I don’t want to have all the fun... boys?”

Six steps up, his lips finally turning back to a normal color, though he still looks cold as he moves in next to the Baroness, grabbing a melon baller that has been sharpened on the edges especially for torture. He glances down at her, rolling his shoulders. “I’ve had a lot of enemies in my time, Connie. But there was never one where I had to literally die for twenty-four hours to beat them. You’ve been a worthy adversary, just not good enough to beat all of us as a brotherhood. I’m gonna enjoy this.”

He pushes the melon baller into her stomach, carving out a hunk of flesh. Connie screams a blood-curdling howl.

Her eyes flood with tears from the pain as Hurricane steps forward again.

“Ready to talk, now?” he asks.

She shakes her head from side to side, breathing frantically out of her nose. “Okay, we resort to stronger methods. Brothers, one in, all in.”

We raise our brows as we step forward, grabbing an instrument of some kind off the table. I take a scalpel, and we surround the Baroness. A man at every position of her body. Her eyes widen like she’s finally terrified.

Hurricane tilts his head. “I need her alive, but we all have a cross to bear with her, so... *make. Her. Bleed,*” he states.

We all hesitate for a moment, but Bayou chuckles. “Fucking yeah!” he states, then begins slicing into her leg.

She screams out, but we don’t hold back. I move in, over her stomach, and slice down. The baroness screams so loud

with the dozens of cuts slicing into her body in synchronization. It must be agony. But there is a thrill in doing this with my brothers beside me, in taking pain out on the person who caused so much to all of us—the person who tried to break our clubs apart.

She screams, her body struggling against the attack on her system as she wriggles, trying to fight us off. Blood streams down the table to the bucket below as everyone except Zero joins in.

He stands back, arms crossed, watching—*waiting*.

“*Stoop!*” she screams out. “I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you, just stop!” she begs.

We all glance at Hurricane, and he nods, so almost in unison, we step back, raising our hands. Her skin is turning pale. She’s fading, and we need to get this information quickly.

Hurricane steps up to her head, grabbing her face in his hands and staring her in the eyes. “Tell me... *what you did!*”

The loss of blood is causing her to shut down. He slaps the Baroness’ face to bring her back, and she clears her throat. “The Bunker... the girls... As a distraction, I went down in the bunker so it looked like I had nothing to do with it. But I told Anton exactly where the girls were, told him to shoot my men out the front so it looked like I had no involvement, and to shoot me in the process.”

Anger surges through all of us at her betrayal.

Hurricane begins pacing, pure rage racing through him. “We trusted you to keep our women safe. Why the *fuck* did you lead them down there to be slaughtered?”

Her eyes roll into the back of her head, but Hurricane slaps her across her face. “No. No fuckin’ way. You wake up and tell me *right now!*”

She lets out a little cough. “If you were at war with the Bratva, you had more of a reason to need Houston to come fight with you, more of a reason to carry out what *I* needed. This was *all* for my benefit. The women were simply casualties in the war I was waging, Hurricane. It wasn’t

anything personal against your women. Just personal against Six... and Zero... for not being man enough to be the president they all need.”

We all turn our heads to Zero, who has been fairly calm and quiet throughout this whole process. He was the first to start an alliance with the Baroness.

He has dealt with her the longest.

This bitch’s betrayal cuts the deepest with him, especially because she tried to kill his brother. He walks over to stand at her head and brings his hand out, gently caressing her hair. “Baroness, we’ve been through a lot. I trusted you with my club... with my family. I recommended you and your services to fellow chapters. I fucking *vouched* for you. I was your cheerleader. And *I* was a *fucking fool*. No one has *ever* been as manipulative and as willing to stab you in the back while staring you in the eyes as you are. Well, Connie... let me look you in the eyes while I am man enough to do so... I have needed to do this for a *long fucking time*...” he snarls, reaching for her shirt and ripping off a section of the material. He hands it to Six and then bends down under the table and picks up the bucket of her blood.

Zero glares at her. “You’re so full of your own self-importance, so I think it’s about time you drown in it. Goodbye, Baroness,” Zero states and signals to Six. He slides the piece of her shirt over her mouth, smothering her face.

Constance screams out her protest. The words she cries are muffled by the fabric and the force Six holds the material down with as he grips either side of her face, keeping it locked in position.

“You tried to play us against each other. You wanted blood, Connie? We’ll give you blood.” Zero growls as he begins pouring the crimson liquid over the cloth above her mouth. She writhes, struggling from side to side, coughing and spluttering, but the slow, steady pour keeps going, the rest of us hanging back, watching as the Baroness drowns in her own demise.

Her body jerks, her hands fisting on the table, as her entire body stiffens with the lack of oxygen circulating through her system. Her lungs flood with blood, draining the life from her before our very eyes.

There's something so calming, so intoxicating, so fulfilling in that.

This woman has put countless lives at risk. Been the cause of death, chaos, and corruption. She has been a bane in Defiance's side for so long now that this moment has been building and building.

Every member of Defiance is standing back, watching her writhe as she suffers. It's like a beautiful harmony, a song we have all been desperate to hear.

The bitch gurgles, coughing and spluttering. Her tense body slumps back to the table with a thump while her lungs give up the fight as Zero runs out of blood. He throws the bucket to the floor, his nostrils flaring with the anger flowing through him. "How's that for weak, you stupid bitch?" he mumbles, letting out a long, languid breath. Then, finally, he places his fingers on her neck, checking her pulse.

We all wait anxiously, and he gives a simple nod.

Silence filters through the room, no one saying or moving a muscle, when Marcel pulls out a camera and takes a photograph of the Baroness' dead body.

We all widen our eyes, and he chuckles. "Don't worry, none of you are in the picture. It's evidence this bitch is dead, so I can get her competitors on my side. Strictly business. You understand."

"You keep our names out of this, Marcel," Hurricane demands.

Marcel dips his chin, turning for the door. "Defiance and me, we're good. You know that. This was a good thing, Hurricane. There's gonna be some changes in the way the South is run. You will have more freedom, both of you. Defiance comes out the victors here. I'm so glad I was here to

witness this masterpiece, but I am *not* staying for this mess. Kings don't clean."

We all chuckle as Marcel and his men leave the chill room.

We all turn to Hurricane, Zero, and Six, who, together with Hoodoo, have pulled off one of the best twists I have ever seen.

"Glad you're alive, Six. It was killing us to think we'd gone through with this," I tell him.

He chuckles, tilting his head. "I'm glad it was a struggle for you because if it was an easy decision, then we do have a problem. But I am regretful we couldn't tell you, especially my brothers, who thought they had lost their president. Believe me, we didn't want to put you through that, but we thought it was the only way we could get this fucking bitch once and for all."

Texas cranes his neck to the side. "Not gonna lie, I'm a little fucking pissed. But I can see you needed real reactions. So I get it! Just glad you're okay. But you look like shit. Do we need to get you to the hospital or something?"

Hoodoo chuckles. "It's because he's been in the chill room for so long. We do need to get you out of here and warm you up, Pres. It's time to head back to the clubhouse. This time, we can really celebrate because we got the Bratva, *and* we got the Baroness."

We all send a cheer around the room, and Hurricane raises his hand to quiet us down. "We may have won this battle, but our job is not done. Bayou, I know our boy has only just had a feed, but do you think he has room for another one?"

Bayou chuckles, nodding his head. "Have you seen La Fin, Pres? He's not that fat because he's counting carbs. My man will eat anything you throw his way. And trust me, I think this will be his best meal yet. I know I'm gonna take *greeeat* pleasure in watching him eat that cunt."

Zero turns to Hurricane and places his bloodied hand on his shoulder. "I know La Fin is a NOLA icon. And I realize his feeding time is sacred to the club, but Hurricane, I'd like my

guys to be there to witness the Baroness' final moments... it's closure for us."

Hurricane dips his chin. "I think this moment is gonna be *big* for all of us, brother. Disposin' of Anton was huge. He was a fuckin' fucker who needed to be gone. But this bitch... she *is* the reason the Bratva even found our women in that bunker. She tried to blackmail us into turnin' against our own brothers. There ain't nothin' more un-fuckin'-forgivable than the shit she pulled. So yeah, watching her end will be closure for us all."

Bayou and City move over to her body and begin to package it.

"We will transport her over to the clubhouse, get her dismembered, and then meet you all on the dock," Bayou states as he, City, and Maverick get to work wheeling the table out of the cool room.

A collective exhale sounds around the room as we all look at each other, but Six is the first to speak, "Hurricane told me you guys had a real hard time coming to terms with having to take me out. I regret we put you guys through that torture, but we saw no other way. But thanks for trying. I do appreciate you standing up to your president. I'm just glad it didn't tear your club apart, and we got through this. We came out with the win. Now, we have to let all those grievances go and realize that everything that was said, everything that was done, was for the greater good. Our alliance is stronger than ever. We are Defiance. We overcome the odds, even when they're stacked high against us. I am proud of Houston. I am *so* fucking proud of NOLA. Good job, guys," he says, slapping Texas on the back for good measure.

Hurricane dips his chin and leads everyone toward the exit. "All right, let's get back to the club so we can finish this once and for all."

It's been a long-ass day, and honestly, I can't wait to get back to see Ingrid just to let her know we're okay and that we got the damn bitch. She's the reason Anton and his men hurt Novah, so Ingrid will watch the Baroness' demise. I think

there's going to be a lot of people out on that bayou to watch this show.

And I, for one, can't fucking wait.

Three Hours Later

An eerie silence filters around the clubhouse as we all walk together. I wrap my arm around Ingrid, holding her tighter to comfort her in the moment.

The Houston brothers walk as one club while we make our way through the gate toward the water. There are too many of us for everyone to stand on the dock. The rickety wood will collapse under the weight.

Bayou is already at the end, with a row of buckets, and Zero, Six, Hurricane, and Novah step down onto the dock while the rest of us stay back on the bank of the bayou.

Ingrid stands, her back to my front, and I wrap my arms around her tightly. I lean in, pressing a gentle kiss to her cheek as Bayou draws Novah close to him.

Houston and NOLA Defiance. Brothers, old ladies, and family, all looking on to witness this momentous occasion.

Hurricane turns to face us, a calm expression crossing his face. "Constance Squires, the Baroness, thought she ruled the South. But in the end, all she did was manipulate, wrought the system, and pin allies against allies for her own personal gain. She was a poison to the South. One we had to find the antidote for. It took us havin' to fake losin' one of our own to finally put an end to her. She doesn't deserve a send-off. She doesn't deserve accolades on how she almost outwitted every underworld empire in the South. The only thing she deserves is the cold, hard reality that when you fight real fuckin' dirty, you end up in the belly of a gator."

Everyone nods in agreement as he glances at Bayou, giving him the signal.

Bayou bangs his foot hard on the dock surface, trying to gain the attention of La Fin.

We all take a steadying breath.

My eyes search the murky depths for any signs of movement when the telltale ripples in the water begin to appear. My heartrate spikes as the ripples grow larger, and the spine of La Fin's prehistoric back emerges from the muddy abyss, snaking his way to the edge of the dock like a predator on the hunt.

Fuck. Hurricane and Bayou almost fed me to this beast.

I hold onto Ingrid a little tighter, a thank you for saving me that day. If she hadn't come out, literally all guns-a-blazing, who knows if I would have made it.

We've come a long way since then.

We've done a lot as a family and even more as a club.

Resting my chin on Ingrid's shoulder, I watch as La Fin circles around the front of the dock, waiting, his tail snapping to and fro in the water like he's impatient for his feed.

Bayou is the first to step forward, picking up a bucket and handing it to Zero. "Would you like to be the first?"

A slow grin slides up Zero's face, and he nods. "With absolute pleasure." He steps forward, pulling out a hand. He shakes his head, curling up his lip. "I shook this hand multiple times, doing countless deals with you, Connie. You played me like a fool. Well, who gets the last laugh?" He tosses it up into the air, and as if on cue, La Fin leaps out into the air, his thunderous jaws snapping open to grab the Baroness' hand in his mouth, then his heavy body falls back into the water with a booming splash. Water flies up onto the dock at their feet as La Fin descends under the water for a moment to eat the start of his meal.

"Jesus Christ! I don't know whether to be horrified or turned on by this?" Texas mumbles, making the rest of us on the landing chuckle.

“I think a little of both,” Izzy replies. We all glance at her, especially City, who looks at his Old Lady like he’s surprised to hear her say that. “What? It’s true,” she defends, and City holds onto her a little tighter.

“You continue to surprise me every day,” he says as Hurricane throws in a foot, La Fin chomping away on the tasty treat.

Then Novah and Bayou step up, and Novah stands at the edge of the dock. Bayou holding on to her as she stares down at La Fin. “You led Anton and his assholes straight to us. You told him to shoot you so you wouldn’t look guilty. They took our daughter from us, and that is solely *on you*, Baroness. You destroyed a piece of our hearts that day. Today, I watch your heart be destroyed too.” Novah reaches into the bucket, pulling out the Baroness’ cold, dead heart. Blood runs down Novah’s fingers, but she doesn’t seem to care as Bayou taps his foot on the dock again.

“C’mon, come to Daddy,” Bayou calls out as La Fin swims closer to the dock.

“I hope you rot in hell, Connie.” Novah growls, then throws the heart toward La Fin.

His head pops out of the water, snapping at the heart. The squelching sound is clear as the heart bursts with the pure force of his jaws as he bites.

Bayou wraps his arms around Novah, his hands falling to her stomach to protect the one baby she still carries, and he pulls her back from the edge.

I hear Ingrid sniffle like she’s holding back tears. Seeing her daughter do that must have been hard—or maybe it was freeing, I’m not sure. Either way, I know everyone is still hurting from the pain the Baroness caused.

Finally, Six steps up with the last bucket. He scrubs at the back of his head, letting out a heavy exhale. “I honestly thought you were an ally to the club. Yes, I know we didn’t always see eye to eye, but I never thought that meant you were plotting my damn assassination, especially at the hands of my

own club. You betrayed me, and I didn't see it coming. We had a good thing, you and me, Connie. But you had to go and ruin it with your innate need for more power and control. Well, trust me when I say this... you lost your head, but I'm going to remember this moment and make sure to keep mine and use it properly in every situation in the future. This taught me to always think twenty steps ahead. You've made me a better president. So, in a way, I thank you, Baroness. But there's *no way* I'm going to miss you."

He pulls her decapitated head out of the bucket by her hair and looks her in her eyes for the last time. "Rest in pieces." A bright smile lights his face, like all the demons he's been harboring lift from his soul. He tosses her head into the sky, and La Fin jumps higher than I've ever seen him do before, his entire body leaping out of the water, his tail swooshing around, almost hitting them on the dock. They have to take a step back as he latches onto Connie's head, then he lands upside down in the water and starts a death roll. Water flies in the air as he flops his body around and around in the water, making sure to kill his prey.

We all let out a cheer seeing La Fin put on a show. That animal really is a marvel, and I can understand why Bayou is so enamored with the huge beast.

As we look around at each other, all of us cheering for the demise of the Baroness, a sense of ease washes over the bayou. The air floods with a natural calming effect, one that can only be brought on by unity, by bonds so tight that nothing can shake us. And by the knowledge that we have defeated not only the Bratva but the Baroness as well.

When Defiance bonds together, we are a force unstoppable, unbeatable, unbreakable.

As we stand together, I believe we all feel that to our very souls.

La Fin may not be able to consume all of the Baroness right now, but the intention of the moment is clear.

We all need to let her go.

And we did that as a united front.

Now, we need to move on.

Start the next phase of our lives.

This is it.

It's done and dusted.

Marcel is running the South, and that can only be a good thing.

We have no enemies...

... on the horizon.

The only hurdle we have to jump moving forward is Ingrid's surgery.

But that might be the most terrifying thing I will face, and honestly, that scares me more than the Bratva and the Baroness combined. And if there's one thing I hate, it's being scared of the unknown.

Because if, after all these wins, I lose Ingrid due to surgery, I will lose my fucking shit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

South

Twelve Days Later

My stomach feels hollow, or maybe I feel nauseous. I can't tell what this feeling is, but as I pace the hospital waiting room, a bead of sweat rolls down my temple, and I swipe it away, trying unsuccessfully to swallow the large lump caught in my throat.

We just buried Grudge. We had a massive biker funeral for him. It was a great send-off with other Defiance chapters joining in the celebration of his life. His son, Cole, flew over with the Exiled Eight MC, and though it was great to see him again, he was devastated at the loss of his father.

But now all I can think about is fucking death. The idea that eventually everyone dies—most of the time when you least expect it—like when you're performing routine surgery, for instance.

Fuck, this goddamn hospital isn't helping me one little bit.

My palms are clammy as I try to control my breathing, but nothing seems to calm me down.

Novah steps up to my side, her gentle hand sliding out and touching my arm. I turn to face her, her kind eyes meeting mine. "She's going to be okay, South. She has to be. My mom has too much to live for."

Letting out a long exhale, I nod my head. "Yeah... I know you're right, and honestly, I get that this is a routine surgery, but after everything, the thought of losing her. I... I c-can't..." My voice cracks a little at the end, and Novah pulls me to her in a tight embrace.

Hurricane is the next to step up to my side. “Thanks for caring about her the way you do, brother. We treated you like y’all were a fling. I didn’t realize how *in this* you are, even after you claimed her. But seein’ you here, watchin’ you fallin’ apart... I know you would literally do anythin’ for her... so, thank you.”

Nash steps up next, Brianna on his arm. “I came across harsh when we saw you in Revel Rose, and for that, I’m sorry. But after talking to Mom and seeing how happy you make her, I know you’re going to be great together.”

Bayou crowds around us, popping his head through the throng of people and smiles. “I’m just happy you’re a bro and not some old boring guy we have to pretend to get along with. This is a much better outcome, I reckon.”

Novah rolls her eyes as the rest groan at the typical Bayou response.

I finally manage to smile. “Thanks for accepting me into your family. You don’t know what it means to me.”

Hurricane slaps my back. “Yeah, brother, I think we do.”

Dr. Adams steps around the corner with a bright smile on her face, and my heart thumps back into a normal rhythm. “Hi, everyone. I thought I’d come by while Ingrid’s surgeon does the post-op check-up and fill you in while she’s in recovery. Everything went really well.”

We collectively let out a relieved sigh as I bend, placing my hands on my knees, letting my anxiety get the better of me.

Bayou places his hand on my back and taps a few times. “She’s okay, brother. She’s gonna be just fine,” he says, comforting me as Aubree continues.

“There’s more good news... Dr. Stockbridge was able to remove what was needed, and the lab results so far suggest there are no suspicious cells in the surrounding margins.”

Novah bounces on her toes. “So what does this mean? Is she clear?”

Aubree smiles. "It's the best news we could hope for. All her other scans indicate that the ADH hasn't turned malignant, and therefore there are no metastases."

"English, doc!" Hurricane grunts.

"It's not cancerous and therefore hasn't spread. She won't need radiotherapy or chemotherapy, but Ingrid must be monitored closely every six months for the next three years. Then, if everything looks okay, we can extend her visits to yearly for seven years."

We all let out a celebratory laugh in excitement.

This is the best news we could have hoped for.

"When can we see her?" I ask the question I'm dying to know the answer to.

"She's in recovery now. Once she's taken back to her room, you can all see her. Maybe an hour or two. For now, she's doing great. Go take a break, grab a coffee and something to eat. You guys deserve to unwind a little. I've seen how stressed y'all have been since Ingrid went in."

Hurricane places his hand out, shaking Aubree's. "Thanks, doc, for takin' the time to come tell us what's happenin'. We appreciate havin' you on our side."

She shrugs with a warm smile. "I've never told you guys this, but when I was young, maybe seven or eight, I was riding my bike on the path, and some guy was driving along slowly beside me. I was so naïve that I didn't know he was casing to snatch me. Long story short, the guy stopped his car at a set of lights, jumped out and grabbed me, tried to put me in his car."

"Holy shit!" we all say in unison, but she continues, "Luckily, a biker was riding past and saw what was happening. He pulled over, beat the shit out of the guy, and took me home to my parents. He also stayed with us until the police arrived..." She sighs. "I never forgot that day or that man. So I have had respect for the patch ever since."

"Do you remember the club?" Hurricane asks.

Her face lights up, and she nods. “I do, vividly.” Her hand gently touches the Defiance logo on Hurricane’s chest. “NOLA Defiance... he’d only just gotten his Road Name at the time, but it was Reaper. I think you might know him.” She smirks.

The name is so familiar to us all.

Hurricane and Bayou nod their heads like they kind of knew that was coming.

“Our father, always doin’ the right thing,” Hurricane adds.

Bayou chuckles, rolling his shoulders. “Why haven’t you told us until now?”

Aubree exhales. “I didn’t want it to be a conflict of interest at work. I don’t want the people here to know I have a vested interest in Defiance MC and might be playing favorites.”

We nod in understanding, but I think the favoritism cat was let out of the bag a long time ago. Aubree has been giving us handouts for a couple of years now. But we’re certainly not going to be outing her secret to anyone here at the hospital. If anything, it just means we will protect her even closer. She’s a part of our inner circle, but now we know more, we can safely say she is a part of Defiance.

“We got your back, Aubree. You’ve had ours for so long. The least we can do is stand by you whenever you need us,” Hurricane reiterates exactly what I was already thinking.

“Thanks... but I mean it. Take a break. Go get some food and coffee. Y’all look like shit.” She chuckles, turning and walking for the exit.

Hurricane dips his chin. “Let’s go eat. Then we’ll be ready when Ingrid’s back in her room.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ve been starving for the last two hours,” Bayou states.

“You’re always starving.” Novah chuckles, cuddling into him.

“Yeah, so let’s go!” he demands.

With a huge bunch of flowers, a box of chocolates, and a stuffed teddy bear in my hands, I walk with the others toward Ingrid's room. The others laugh at me as we go.

"Little overkill, don't you think?" Nash asks.

"Leave him alone. I think it is sweet," Novah defends me.

"Yeah, exactly. I think you macho asses could learn a thing or two from South," Brianna adds, making Kaia chuckle.

"Absolutely. South is the only one making a *real* effort here, guys. You're all failing miserably in the *showing love* department," Kaia teases.

"Even I got Mom something." Novah rubs salt into the wound as she holds up a few magazines and books for her to read.

The three sons all turn up their noses.

"I didn't know it was a prerequisite, or I would have bought her something." Nash groans.

"What do you think we were doing in the giftshop exactly, brother dearest?" Novah chuckles.

"Shut up! Let's just go see her, for fucks sake!" Hurricane grumbles, making the rest of us laugh.

We round the corner, and the others all go in first. I feel like I should let them see their mother before me because family is so important.

The most important.

I hear her greeting them. The sound of her voice sends warmth through me as I round the corner, all my gifts in hand. My woman looks pale and tired but happy and as beautiful as ever.

She spots me holding everything and giggles, waving me in. "Romeo, what have you gone and done?"

I move in, placing the giant flowers on the opposite counter so she can see them. Then I walk to her bed with the chocolates and a stuffed bear that says *I love you* written on its tummy and hand them to her. Leaning in, I plant a soft kiss on her lips.

Fuck! I want to show her how scared I was that I'd never see her again.

How fucking terrified I was.

How badly I want to take advantage of this kiss right now.

But everyone is watching.

So I limit the kiss as much as possible and bring my hand up to caress her face. "Thank fuck you're okay. That was the longest wait of my damn life."

Her hand meets mine on her face. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that, but thank you so much for my gifts. You didn't need to do that."

"No, I know. They don't even come close to showing how much I care about you, but I had to get you something."

She brings the teddy up and smiles. "I love you too, South." Ingrid glances around the room. "I love all of you so much. Thanks for being here and supporting me."

"We wouldn't want to be anywhere else than here with you right now," Hurricane states.

"Exactly," Novah reiterates.

Ingrid glances at Nash, raising her brow. "What about work, darling?"

Nash smiles at his mother. "Why do you think I have Blake and Lucas? They can steer the ship for a while. I am right where I want to be... *with my family.*"

Ingrid smiles so wide.

We all huddle around her to spend the evening together—*as a family.*

Seven Months Later

On my way to grab a beer from the bar, I spot Maxxy waddling her way through, making her way to the bathroom *again*. I can't help but smirk. Her very heavy nine-month pregnancy has made her bladder weak, which has made it almost impossible for her to work at The Plantation for the last couple of weeks. It won't be long before their baby boy will be here.

This club is changing with all the babies on the scene. The family atmosphere is starting to take over. Not that I mind. With Ingrid and I unable to have our own babies, it's pretty damn good to have other kids I can be that fun uncle to.

As I walk past Novah, she's breastfeeding baby Elijah. Luckily, everything went smoothly with the rest of her pregnancy with their son, and he is a healthy three-month-old and doing so well.

Not only that, but because Houston was so grateful for us helping them with the Baroness situation and for Hurricane coming to them with a plan to bail out Six instead of actually following through with the assassination, they let NOLA recruit some of their brothers to help fill our diminishing quota. So now we're back up to full numbers, and Houston is back to normal. So both clubs have evened out.

Have to admit, it's fucking great having a decent quantity of brothers back in the clubhouse. Especially because with the recruitment, we were able to bring in an additional tech guy to help out Raid. He desperately needed another set of hands in the den, and now he has that support. Everything seems to be easing the pressure, which can only be a good thing.

Stepping up to the bar, I tap it, signaling to Jaz that I'd love a beer.

She pours then slides it my way. "Looks like you're in a good mood," Jaz states.

“I am. Ingrid has decided she’s gonna put her house up for rent in a few weeks’ time and move into my room with me in the clubhouse. It will be easier than us back and forth all the time.”

Jaz grins wide. “You two are serious couple goals. I swear whenever I see you two together, I get giddy.”

I chuckle, grabbing my beer. “It will happen for you one day, Jaz. But you’re doing well with your writing, aren’t you?”

She nods in response. “Oh yeah, I mean, I’m not Frankie with two published books, but I’m getting there.”

“Way I see it is we all have to ride the wave. Our time comes when it is supposed to. Yours will too, Jaz.”

She clinks her glass with mine. “Cheers to that.”

We both take a sip of our drinks when my cell rings. I widen my eyes at the unexpected call and reach into my pocket, pulling it out to see Bella calling. A spontaneous smile crosses my face, and I swipe the call to answer. “Hey, Bells, what’s going on?” I ask her with a pep in my tone.

Her usual chirpy demeanor doesn’t hit me straightaway like it normally does. She is quiet for a moment, and then she exhales heavily. “Rome... do you have some time to come home for a bit? I really need to see you.”

Her tone tells me something is wrong as I sit taller, my anxiety instantly peaking. “Bells, what’s going on?”

“I need to discuss something with you, but I don’t want to do it over the phone. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you. You said you would bring Ingrid over to meet us. It’s been months.”

Guilt flows through me. I’ve been so happy in my little bubble I forgot about my family on the other side of the country. “Okay, sure, let me talk to Ingrid and see when we can come out there.”

“Rome, make it soon... *please*.”

Furrowing my brows, I clear my throat. “Bells, are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No, nothing like that. I just *really* need to talk to you.”

Unease washes over me.

She is never like this.

Something is wrong.

I need to get back to LA as soon as possible.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’ll talk to Ingrid now.”

“Okay, let me know when you’re coming. Talk soon, Rome. I love you.” She ends the call before I have a chance to respond, which only makes me more concerned for her.

Picking up my beer, I throw the contents back in one swift gulp, slam the glass down on the bench, and stand. “Thanks for the drink, Jaz.”

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“No... I don’t think so, not at all.”

“Good luck!” Jaz calls out as I go in search of Ingrid, who, from what I remember her saying, is out back with Kaia and a fourteen-month-old Immy playing on the new play equipment.

As I walk out, a child’s laughter filters through the air. Ingrid is pushing Immy on the swing, and Kaia is standing back, taking photographs of the two of them.

Such a precious moment.

I hate that I am about to spoil it.

Ingrid spots me and smiles as she continues to push Immy. “Hey, babe, you okay? You look... rattled.”

My woman can read me so well.

“Just got a call from Bella... she sounded off. Something’s wrong, but she won’t tell me. Says she needs to see me. Has something to tell me but won’t do it unless I’m there face to face.”

Ingrid stops pushing Immy and stands tall. “Well then, we’re going to LA.”

There’s no hesitation, no questions, only determination.

No wonder I love this woman.

“Are you sure? I understand if you want to stay here with your family.”

She picks Immy up from the seat and then places Immy in Kaia’s arms.

Then she walks over to me. “They’re my family now too, Rome. We may not have had any interactions since we’ve been together, and hell, I don’t even think your parents know about us officially yet, but we need to get this done. We need to see what’s happening with your sister and help her if need be. This would always be a problem for your family, South, because of our history. So now’s the time we have to face the consequences. Mine came around. Maybe yours will too.”

Rolling my shoulders, I can’t seem to shake the feeling this is all going to go to shit, but with Ingrid by my side, I can’t help but feel I will be all right. “Okay, let’s go. I’ve gotta find out what’s happening with Bells.”

“Then let’s head inside and book that flight. Kaia, you gonna be okay while we’re gone?” Ingrid asks.

“Go! If there’s one thing we’ve learned at this club, it’s that family means *everything* through the good and the bad. Go figure this out, South. We’ll all be here when you get back.”

I grab Ingrid’s hand and lead her back inside so we can make plans.

I need to tell Hurricane we’re leaving to go back to Los Angeles, and then maybe I should call Alpha so we can call into the clubhouse while we’re there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

South

The Next Day

Something is terribly wrong with Bella.

I can't shake the awful feeling I have building inside me.

So Ingrid and I hopped on a flight this morning, rented a car, and we're on our way to Bella's house. I have to admit, it's weird driving around LA again. I haven't been here for so long. It's like it's not my home anymore.

My muscles tense as I drive up the long driveway to her gate.

Ingrid glances around, taking in the affluent suburb. The thing about Bella is that with her career in the music industry, she's wealthy as hell. I press the buzzer for the gate, and the intercom sounds. "North residence, how can we help you?"

"Rosie, is that you?" I ask Bella's housekeeper.

"Romeo? Are you really here?" she calls back down the line.

"Yeah, Rose, it's me."

"Well, let me buzz you right on in. I can't wait to give you a big ole hug!" The buzzer sounds, and I turn to Ingrid, who is smiling.

"What?" I ask, and she chuckles.

"Did you have a thing with Bella's maid?" she quips, and I scowl.

"No, fuck no. She's so much older than me."

Ingrid bursts out laughing. "Like that's stopped you," she chimes, waving her hand up and down in front of herself.

I tilt my head in recognition because she's right.

Age didn't stop me where Ingrid was concerned.

"You're different, and you know it. You're my woman. You're the only older woman I have ever been with or wanted. Don't worry, angel. Rosie has nothing on you."

She snorts out a laugh as I pull the car to a stop. Then I walk around to Ingrid's door and open it for her. She steps out, and I place my hand on her lower back, ushering her toward the door. "And anyway, no one could look as sexy as you do right now," I whisper against her ear.

She smirks, shaking her head. "Smooth talker."

The door pulls back wide as Rose stands there, her short black hair with flecks of gray puffs out in a wave. Her tiny stature slams into me, and I wrap my arms around her tightly, holding her back. "Fuck! It's good to see you, Rosie."

She glances up at me. "Oh, it's so good you're here to support Bella. Romeo... she really has been struggling with the news."

Furrowing my brows, I rest my hand on Rose's shoulder. "What news, Rose?"

Her eyes widen, and she gasps. "She hasn't told you yet? Oh, *Dios mío!*" <Oh my God.>

Tensing all over, I glance at Ingrid as Rose rushes inside. "Miss Bella... Romeo is here," she calls out, then ducks off into the kitchen before I can even introduce her to my Old Lady.

"Well, that was interesting," Ingrid states.

I close the door behind her, and we make our way through to the living room.

"I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I don't like—"

"Romeo, Ingrid... thank you so much for coming all the way here to see me," Bella chimes, walking into the living room with the grace of a ballerina.

I give her the tightest squeeze I ever have in my life. “Bells, you have me worried. What the hell is going on?”

She pulls back, smirking at me. “Always so serious. We’ll get to that, but first, introduce me to your Old Lady properly. It’s been too long since we last met.”

Hesitantly, I pull back, taking Ingrid and pulling her toward Bella. “Bella, this is my Old Lady and the love of my life, Ingrid.”

Bella smiles wide as she rushes forward, taking Ingrid into her arms. “I am so happy for you two. Honestly, I am. Now, I have had Rose make us some afternoon tea. Shall we go into the—”

“Bella!” I grab her hands in mine. “Don’t do this to me. Tell me what’s wrong. *Now!*”

She exhales, her eyes glistening with tears as she gestures for the love seats for us to sit down. Bella and I sit on one, and Ingrid takes the other.

Bella and I continue to hold hands. “Okay, I think the best way is to just come out with it.”

“Yeah, tell me whatever it is. I will help you fix it.”

She shakes her head. “You can’t help me fix this, Rome. I have been diagnosed with motor neurone disease.”

Ingrid lets out a heavy exhale, tears welling in her eyes as I sit here a little confused. “I... I don’t know what that is. What does that mean?”

“Basically, it’s a disease that affects the motor nerves, or motor neurons. When that happens, my muscles will become weaker and weaker. Which will eventually lead to paralysis, including the way I breathe.”

My ears begin to ring as a hot flash races over my body so intensely I feel sick. I begin to feel dizzy, and I don’t know whether to sit, stand, or just lay down in a ball on the floor. My heart races so fast it feels like it’s going to burst out of my chest as my legs finally make a decision, and I stand and begin

pacing while running my hands through my hair as I try hard to wrap my head around this.

“Rome, do you understand what this means?” she asks, making my heart ache even more.

Tears well in my eyes as I turn to face her. “How long?” I ask. My bottom lip trembles as I try to hold my grief inside the best I can.

Bella exhales, glancing down at the floor. “The doctors say two to five years... give or take.”

I let out a sound that can only be described as a wail as I drop to my ass on the floor, bringing my knees up to my chest, and Bella drops with me. “It’s going to be okay. I’m going to get nurses to come and take care of me because we know Mom and Dad will be useless. I’ve already got things happening on the work front to protect my business. I have everything taken care of—” She stops and sighs. “The only thing I worry about leaving behind is *you*.”

I feel like shit that I had no idea she was sick and that I’ve been gone for so long. She’s been asking me to come home for months, and I have been so caught up in my own shit that I didn’t hear the signals.

“I’m so sorry, Bella. I’ve been a real shit brother. Do Mom and Dad know?” I ask.

“They do. They think it’s a cry for attention, so I’m not talking to them right now. Are you and Ingrid going to go and see them while you’re here?”

My hands ball into fists, and I shake my head. “Fuck them! If they’re abandoning you, I’m abandoning them. So you’ve been dealing with this on your own?”

Tears flood down her face, and she nods, wiping them away. “That’s why I caved and begged you to come see me. I needed you to know before the symptoms started becoming too severe.”

I reach out, grab her face, and force her to look at me. “Bella, I never want you to think you can’t talk to me. You

should have called and told me the second you thought something was wrong.”

Tears flow down her cheeks, and she nods. “I know. Just things were happening with you at the club, and you were starting out there, so I didn’t want you to feel obligated to come back home and check on me every ten seconds.”

My stomach flips at her words. *Come back home and check on me.* The fact Mom and Dad aren’t going to be here to support her is driving me crazy, and the idea of my beautiful sister having nurses being the ones to support her through this kills me.

My eyes meet Ingrid, a heaviness weighing me down.

My life in New Orleans is everything I had ever thought it would be.

I fucking love it there.

But Hurricane is the first person to tell me that *family comes first.*

I have a huge decision to make.

But it doesn’t only involve me.

I have made a small decision for now, but I need to talk to Ingrid. Moving to stand from the floor, I pull Bella with me, and I walk with her over to the sofa. “Bells, I need to talk to Ingrid for a sec. Can you make us a coffee? I need a real strong one, please.”

Bella looks from me to Ingrid and then back to me. “Yeah, okay, sure,” she says, then heads off for the kitchen, leaving me with my Old Lady.

I make my way over to the sofa Ingrid is sitting on, and she weakly smiles, reaching for my hand. “You okay?” she asks. “That was a lot to take in.”

My eyes meet hers, and I see the moment it clicks. She weakly nods, a tear sliding down her face. “You have to stay in LA, don’t you?”

My chest squeezes as I stare at her, feeling like my entire world is being ripped away from me right now. “I fucking love you more than anything, but as Hurricane said, *family means everything*. I have to stay to help mine, and I won’t ask you to leave yours for me.”

Ingrid exhales, her eyes welling like she’s fighting a battle in her mind. “South...”

“Nothing will change my mind, angel. I have to stay for Bella. And you can’t leave New Awlins—”

“Romeo, I’m pregnant,” she blurts out.

My eyes widen in shock as I stare at her, now feeling like the world that was falling away at my feet suddenly exploded into a ball of fireworks, but the good, celebratory kind. I let out a shocked laugh as I shake my head, trying to wrap my mind around this. “You’re...”

“Pregnant? Yeah, I’m just as shocked. Apparently, Aubree said I’m in the final stages of perimenopause, not full menopause, and she was as surprised as anyone that a woman of my age was not yet in full menopause. Because of that, the risk was super low of me getting pregnant, but because of the amount of sex we have, I guess those odds shot up.”

My heart pounds so fucking hard I feel like I am going to pass out at any given second. I thought the chances of me being a father were never going to happen, but here it is, staring me in the face.

But I also have my sister who needs me.

What the fuck do I do?

Scrubbing at my eyes, I let out a heavy exhale. “How do you feel about the pregnancy, Ingrid? I mean, you know that I’m going to support you no matter what, but this is your body. I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

She beams in excitement, then shrugs. “This baby made its way into our lives even though the odds were so minuscule. You’re supposed to be a father, South. I never thought I would be a mother again, especially not at this age. But with you helping me, I know we will make an amazing team.”

“We’re having a baby?”

Ingrid chuckles. “We’re having a baby. Oh my God, that’s terrifying to say out loud.”

I lean in, pressing my lips to hers, kissing her tenderly, and placing my hand on her stomach. “So what do we do about Bella? Do we bring her back to New Orleans with us? Because I’m not missing out on *any* part of my child’s life. But I also don’t want to leave Bella to fend for herself.”

Ingrid caresses my face and smiles. “I think you know what we have to do... her doctors are here. She will need to be comfortable, and I want our baby to know their Aunt Bella as much as they can before...”

My heart races as I stare into her eyes. “So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying, the three of us...” she places her hand on her stomach, “... need to move here to take care of Bella for as long as it takes. Then, we can reassess if we need to move back to New Orleans. But we’ve taken care of my family, and now we need to take care of yours.”

My heart feels so fucking full right now as I stare into the eyes of the woman I love, the mother of my unborn child. “Are you sure? Because when we tell Hurricane, he’s probably going to try to feed me to La Fin again.”

She chuckles. “When I tell him about this baby and that family needs to stick together, that we can’t be away from you, and you can’t be away from your sister, it will all make sense to him. Plus, we’re only a plane ride away.”

“So we’re doing this?” I ask.

“We’re doing this as long as Bella is on board,” Ingrid replies.

Bella rushes around the corner. “I am so on board! I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt. Oh my God, this is the best news you could have brought me today. I am so happy for you guys. And of course, you will be moving in here with me if you want to. I mean, this house is huge, so there’s plenty of room. We can even make a nursery for the little one.”

Ingrid clings to me, smiling wide. “Sounds perfect. I can’t wait.”

A Few Hours Later

Ingrid and I arrived at the LA Defiance clubhouse after I called ahead and told Alpha we’d be popping in. The memories and nostalgia of being back here are making me feel all kinds of things. If I said I hadn’t missed this place, I’d be lying. If I said I didn’t miss the people, I would really be lying.

As we walk through the entrance, it looks exactly the same as when I left. Ellie is working behind the bar with the club girls. Alpha, Swift, Ink, and Loki are playing doubles on the pool table, and the rest of the brothers are mingling about. They all send a cheer around the room after we walk in.

“The prodigal son returns, motherfuckers,” Loki calls out, throwing his pool cue onto the table.

Alpha steps up, nodding his head. “Glad to see you. It’s been a while, brother. Everything calm and collected now we’ve taken care of those Bratva bastards?”

I chuckle and nod. “All five by five.”

Alpha smirks. “Mm-hmm, you and Ingrid wanna head to the Chapel? I feel like there’s more for us to discuss?”

I glance at Ingrid and then back to Alpha. “Yeah, Pres. We got shit to discuss.”

The Next Day

As we pull up to the mansion and turn off the car, I spin to look at Ingrid, anxiety rippling through me in waves. “Are you sure we should be doing this? Because I’m ready to write these fuckers off for good!” I tell Ingrid.

She leans over, placing her hand on my cheek, and sighs. “I know they’re in everyone’s bad books right now, but if we don’t make an effort to at least tell them about us while we’re here before we move back, Rome, your parents will *never* forgive us.”

I snort out a huff. “I don’t really care at this poi—”

“I do, South. They’re the grandparents of our child. I *need* them to know about me and about that. So *please*, put your emotions aside, and let’s go tell them... *together*.”

Letting out a huff, I nod. “Okay, but I don’t think this is gonna go as smoothly as you’re hoping.”

Ingrid smiles. “They might surprise you.”

I raise my brow. “You remember meeting them, right?”

She chuckles, opening her car door. “C’mon. Let’s do this.”

Groaning like an errant child, I jump out of the car, taking a deep breath. I don’t know what it is about my parents that makes me feel like a teenage boy all over again. Somehow, they have this power that makes me feel inadequate and powerless just by being here before I even see them.

Fuckers.

Ingrid stands by me as we step up to the front door, and I press the doorbell.

“Here goes nothin’,” I murmur, my stomach swarming with anxiety.

Ingrid rubs my back tenderly, but as soon as the door opens to my mother standing there, she drops her hand from me.

“Romeo! I’m so glad you could finally make the trip back home to see us. You could have taken that *ghastly* club cut off to visit us, though. Be a little respectable to see your parents and all. Never mind, you can take it off when you come inside.” She waves her hand, gesturing for us to enter.

“It stays on, Mom,” I tell her in no uncertain terms as I walk inside the place that holds so many terrible memories for

me. Ingrid follows, and Mom looks her up and down in curiosity.

“Fine, fine, I don’t want to argue with you. I thought you were bringing your girlfriend with you. Could she not come?”

Clearing my throat, I exhale. “You remember Ingrid, Reaper’s Old Lady?” I ask her.

Mom furrows her brows, looking Ingrid over intently, but then the recognition hits her. “Oh yes, of course. I’m so sorry to hear about Reaper, my dear. What a tragic loss that was. You had that darling daughter, Novah. Oh! Is Novah your girlfriend, honey pooh bear? She would be *perfect* for you—”

“Mom, stop! No, Novah is *definitely* not my girlfriend.”

She places her hand on her tiny hip and exhales. “Then I can’t for the life of me understand why you’re here, Ingrid?”

I lean in, wrapping my arm around Ingrid’s shoulders, and pull her to me, placing a kiss on her temple. “Because Ingrid is my Old Lady, Mom.”

Her hand snaps to her heart like she’s having palpitations, and she shakes her head. “Oh no... no, this just won’t do. *Angus!*”

His heavy footsteps thump down the grand staircase as he enters the toxic environment. “What the fuck do you want, woman?” he yells.

“Angus, this *harlot* has seduced Romeo. I don’t know what she wants, but she is up to no good.”

My blood begins to boil, and my palms are clammy as I hear my mother talking about Ingrid this way. “Do you even hear yourself, Mom?” I berate as Dad steps down to join us.

Mom scoffs, pointing at us while Dad moves in beside her, and she scrunches up her face in disgust. “She’s Reaper’s ex, Angus, and they’re having an affair. This *has* to be illegal or something,” she screeches.

Dad places his hand on Mom’s chest, making her take a step back. “Calm down, woman, it’s not illegal, just immoral.

How long has this been going on?” Dad asks in a much softer tone.

Maybe he will be the sensible one in all this?

“A while. Long enough for us to know we’re in love, and this is a forever kind of deal,” I reply.

Dad wracks his jaw from side to side, his eyes focusing on Ingrid. “You think Reaper would agree to this kind of behavior from you?”

Ingrid lets out a small laugh. “Honestly, what your son and I do and share between us has absolutely *nothing* to do with Reaper. He’s not here. My time with him was wonderful and magical, and I would *never* give that up. But I can’t live in the past. I have to focus on my future, and my future is with Romeo and the family we’re creating together.”

His mother bursts out laughing. “Family? *What family?* You can’t provide a family for him! You can’t provide *anything* for him. You’re trapping him in a life where you will die years before him, and he will be left pining for you. That’s *not* fair!”

I step forward, my anger beginning to boil. “The age gap doesn’t bother us. We live for today. Yes, down the road, it will be harder, but we cross that bridge when we get to it. Will I love her any less? *Fuck no.* And the fact you think she can’t give me a family? Well, congratulations, Mom and Dad, you’re going to be grandparents because Ingrid is pregnant right now.”

Mom gasps, turns, and begins pacing. “This is ridiculous!”

Dad shakes his head, stepping forward and getting closer to me. “You’re bringing a child into this world now, Romeo. That’s a *huge* obligation. You’re *not* responsible enough to be a father, and she is too *old* to be a mother. This is a disaster waiting to happen. You should get this taken care of immediately. For everyone’s sake.”

A huge wave washes over me so intensely it’s like burning acid runs through my veins, boiling my blood to the point I can’t see anything but red.

I feel it.

The second the switch inside me flicks, all my control is lost. I can't hold back. My anger surfaces as I lunge forward, my need to protect my family the only thing on my mind right now. I let out an animalistic growl, my hands grabbing for my father's collar, and I shove him back so forcefully he stumbles, falling back onto that fucking piece-of-shit piano.

"Romeo!" Mom screams, but it's a blur as my fist comes back, slamming into his face, punching as hard as I can. Blood spurts out of his nose as he struggles against me to get me off him.

No one wishes harm on my unborn baby—no one!

I punch him again, pulling him from the piano to the floor, kneeling over him, letting years of pent-up rage fly out of me, punch after punch. My mother is screaming in the background when a hand touches my shoulder gently. A calm voice sounds in my ear. "Rome, look at me," she urges.

It's the same tone she used to soothe me the first time we met. It does exactly what it was meant to, and I stop hitting my father.

I turn to look at Ingrid, and her hand caresses my cheek as I pant for much-needed breaths. Our eyes lock, and she nods at me with a small smile. "You're okay. You're going to be okay... I promise."

My chest floods with love for this woman.

I don't know how she remembered exactly what she said to me the first time we met, but those words were what I needed to hear right now. I sink to my ass on the floor beside my father as he coughs out a line of blood moving to sit beside me. Ingrid slides in on the other side of me, wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

Mom picks up her cell, shaking her head. "I am calling the police. You are no son of mine—"

"Lucia, stop!" Dad grunts, spitting out another line of blood.

She hesitates, then places the cell on the table. “He assaulted you. Unprovoked!”

Dad looks at me, then chuckles, shaking his head. “It’s about time you stood up for something. Growing up, all you did was shut down, act out, then run away to that damn club.”

I furrow my brows at him. “So that’s what you were trying to get me to do growing up? Be a fucking man?” I ask.

He exhales with a shrug, hesitating to reply, but he finally finds the words he’s looking for. “The world I live in, Romeo... there’s standards to be upheld, an image to protect. I’m in the public eye twenty-four-seven, which also means my family is too. I may not have been the best father growing up, but my publicists and agents were firm on me maintaining a certain brand—”

“Fuck you, Dad... I was just a kid. Bella was just a kid. Who gives a shit what your agent wanted. You should have cared what *we* wanted... what *we* needed. *We* should have been your priority. Not your damn image!”

Dad snuffles, wiping the blood from his face. His eyes glisten with his regret. “I could have done better... I should have done better. I pushed you and your sister away, which is the exact thing I was trying to avoid. I wanted us to maintain the image of a happy family, and by doing that, by forcing it and my views on you kids, I tore us apart.”

I glance up at Ingrid, and she weakly smiles, giving me the encouragement I need right now.

Fuck. He is trying. Maybe I need to ease up a little.

“You just gotta stop, Dad, you and Mom. Stop trying to force your views on us. Bella and me... we’re grown adults, with our own lives, with our own ideas, and people we want to spend our lives with. You have to stop trying to control us. I know what we do affects your brand, but honestly, Dad, the world knows about me being in an MC. They know I’m your problem child and that Bella is the golden child. So please... let us live our lives the way we want. Ingrid and I are the real

deal. I'm going to be a father. Can we celebrate that instead of fighting?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "You really love her and this kid you're having, don't you?"

"Yeah, Dad. They're my world. And you might not think we're going to be good parents, but I can promise you, we're going to be *far* better parents to our kid than you were to me and Bella."

Mom scoffs out her disapproval while Dad dips his chin in response. "That's fair... but we do love you. Both you and Bella."

"Then *why the fuck* are you treating Bella's diagnosis like it doesn't exist?" I growl at him.

Suddenly, Mom bursts into tears as she runs out of the room, rushing for the kitchen. I furrow my brows as Dad exhales. "That's why! Your mother doesn't want to admit to Bella that knowing her illness is terminal is killing her. Your mother is such a strong-willed person that she doesn't want Bella to see her breaking."

I throw my hands in the air in exasperation. "That's always been the problem with this family, Dad. You don't tell us how you're feeling. It left me and Bella to fend for ourselves, to depend on each other because we felt like you didn't care about us... At. All."

He moves to stand and offers his hand for me to take. I hesitate but then take it, and he helps me up, pulling me into an embrace I wasn't expecting. My eyes widen, but I sink into the hug.

"I love you, Romeo. I always have. I always will. Your Mom and I will do better at showing that, especially with our grandchild on the way." He pulls back, looking in my eyes, his face a bloody mess. "But I need you to promise you'll come to LA and visit us more."

I turn to Ingrid, helping her off the floor, and pull her to my side. She nods, and I clear my throat. "We're moving back to

LA, Dad. We're going to be staying with Bells to help her through her illness, so we will be here for a while."

A genuine smile lights his face, tears glistening in his eyes as he grips my shoulder. "Well, all right then... we will unite as a family around Bella and do everything we can for her, all while helping you, Ingrid, with your pregnancy. Okay?"

A slow smile creeps over my face, and I exhale. "You mean it, Dad?"

"Yeah... I spent years not being there for my family. It's about time I do exactly that. I need to man up and be the dad I always should have been. Now I'm gonna go clean up, but how about you stay for a while, and we talk more about your time in New Orleans, and you tell us everything you've been up to."

"You really want to know."

"Yeah, son, I really want to know. Tell me everything."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ingrid

Six Days Later

South and I have been back in New Orleans for a couple of days, but we thought the best way to tell my family about everything that's going on would be to bring them all together and tell them at the same time. So prior to me putting my house up for rent, we're having one last family dinner at my place before we need to start packing to head for LA.

I'm looking forward to the move. At least I know when I go over to the LA Defiance clubhouse, I won't have to get to know absolutely everyone because my friend Ellie is still there. She's still hanging out behind the bar, so it will be nice to know at least one other person besides South when we get to the clubhouse.

South steps behind me as I stand at the stove, stirring the pasta sauce. His arms wrap around my stomach, and he leans his head on my shoulder. "Do you know how much I love... your pasta sauce?" He chuckles as I slap him on the arm.

"While I am glad you enjoy me feeding you, remember that I am your Old Lady and carrying your unborn child. Thank you, sir."

He raises his brow in appreciation. "Now that I like. You can call me, *sir*, anytime you like."

I snort out a laugh as the doorbell rings. "Shut up and go answer the door, *sir*."

He wiggles his brows, slaps my ass, and nods. "Anything you say, angel."

South walks to the door, and I hear the commotion of everybody walking in. We have the whole family coming

tonight. Hurricane and Kaia with Immy. Novah and Bayou with Elijah. Nash and Brianna, and Lani and Grit. And from the way the noise level just rose in the house, I am pretty sure they're all here. So I wipe my hands on my apron, pull it off over my head, then walk into the living room where they are all making themselves at home.

It warms my heart.

Seeing my family together like this.

South steps beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders, and softly kisses my temple. "You okay?"

"Yeah, this is the last time we'll do this for a while, just taking it all in."

He weakly smiles. "You sure you want to do this? We can still change our minds."

I shake my head, placing one hand on my stomach and the other on his cheek. "I'm sure."

"I love you."

"I love you... here we go." I clear my throat, graining everyone's attention. "Excuse me! Can you all focus on me for a moment?"

They all turn to look at me, and suddenly, I feel very exposed. South tightens his grip on me, letting me know he is with me every step of the way. So, I continue, "On our trip to LA to visit South's sister, we got some unexpected news. Unfortunately, Bella is very sick..."

"Oh no!" Lani whispers her concern.

"What kind of sick?" Kaia asks.

"She has motor neurone disease. It's terminal, and they have given her two to five years," South says, his voice barely holding together.

"Shit, brother. I'm so fuckin' sorry..." Hurricane shakes his head. "If you need leave to go be in LA for a while, consider it done."

We both tense, and seeing us tense makes the rest of the room react. “You’re not going for a while, are you, South?” Bayou asks.

South shakes his head. “I met with Alpha while there, and he’s good to take me back on so I can stay with Bella and take care of her while she goes through this. Our parents are being of minimal assistance, so she needs me.”

Hurricane rubs the back of his neck. “So you and Ingrid are gonna do long distance? For how long?”

“We’re not doing long distance, Hurricane,” I tell him.

“You’re breaking up?” Novah whimpers like the thought is terrifying to her.

“I knew we couldn’t trust you not to break her heart, you sonofabitch!” Hurricane growls, standing from his seat.

“Sit. Down!” I yell, and he huffs, retaking his seat. “We’re not breaking up, we’re very much together, and we’re not doing long distance. I love you all. I need you to know that. You’re my world and have been my entire life, but South needs me now. So I am going to LA to help him with Bella.”

They all widen their eyes, gawking at me.

“You’re moving to LA?” Novah blurts out in the same tone as before.

Hurricane shakes his head. “No... you stay here with us. *You* have to stay where *your family* is.”

I lower my hand to my stomach and nod. “And that is exactly what I’m doing. South is my family because... I’m pregnant.”

Their eyes all bug out of their heads as they gasp, then silence falls over them, so I continue, “Trust me... we’re just as shocked as you are. But South needs to be with his family, and I am the one bringing that family into the world, so I *have* to be with him.”

Hurricane stands, letting out a long exhale and rubbing the back of his neck. “All right, I get it... *family is everything*. You have to go. But fuck, I am gonna miss the hell out of

you,” he says, walking over and taking me into a giant embrace.

I wrap my arms around my stepson, holding onto him for dear life with tears running down my face. “I love you, Hurricane. You have been such a *huge* part of my life, and just because I’m starting a new chapter doesn’t mean I close this one. You will *always* be my son.”

He pulls back, tears in his eyes, as he smiles. “And *you* will always be my mom. I love you.”

“Love you too.” We hug again as everyone else steps up in a big group hug.

“Congratulations, Mom! But can you please have a girl? I am so overrun by boys,” Novah jokes, and we all laugh as I wipe away my tears.

“I will certainly try, darling. I’m going to miss this.”

“But you have someone who is going to take great care of you and my little brother,” Nash states, clearly revving Novah up.

Novah glares at him. “She’s going to be our sister, Nash!”

I roll my eyes, turning to South and wrapping my arms around his neck as they continue to fight amongst themselves. “See, even as adults, they’re still babies... are you ready for that?”

South leans in, briefly pressing his lips to my nose and smiling so wide. “So fucking ready. I can’t wait to be a parent with you.”

“It’s going to be a journey,” I tell him.

“It will, but were on that road together, and that is all that matters. ’Til the end, angel.”

“ ’Til the end,” I reply, then kiss him passionately. I don’t care that all my children are watching or that the dinner is burning in the kitchen.

If there is one thing I have learned in the past few months, it’s that life is short.

In a matter of a second, everything you love can be obliterated in the blink of an eye.

So you have to hold on to what you have and treasure it like it's gold. And that is what I am doing. Holding onto my precious pieces of gold and treasuring them because when your life is sparkling and shining bright, it makes everything that much better.

That is what South does. He makes everything better.

And I can't wait for us to start this next adventure together—me, him, and our precious little piece of sparkling gold growing inside me.

EPILOGUE

Hurricane

One Month Later

This feels bittersweet.

On the one hand, Ingrid is moving away, which feels like a pain I never thought I would have to endure. Losing her is fucking heartbreaking, especially when I know she's pregnant. All I want to do is watch over her, take care of her, and support her like she has done for me for most of my life.

But I have to let her go.

She belongs to South now. She is his family, and he has to take care of her.

As I watch them pack, I stand back, knowing they will be leaving tomorrow, that their time at NOLA Defiance is limited, and every inch of me hurts.

But I realize this is the right choice for them.

I know South will take the best care of Ingrid and their baby.

But I have an idea up my sleeve.

I make my way over to Maverick sitting by the bar, drinking and watching all the commotion. I slide in beside him and sit quietly. He turns to me, bobbing his head. "How you feeling about all this, Pres?"

Letting out a heavy exhale, I shake my head. "Honestly, the idea of my baby stepbrother or sister bein' over in LA without a NOLA Defiance backup is eatin' at my very fuckin' soul."

Maverick raises his brow in confusion. "I'm not sure what you're saying here, Pres."

So I just out-and-out say it. “I know this is askin’ a lot. But out of everyone, you’re the guy who goes above and beyond to make sure everyone is okay, to make sure they’re safe. It’s why we called you Maverick.”

He narrows his eyes on me. “Okay? What does this have to do with Ingrid and South?”

“I want you to transfer to LA to keep an eye on them and report back to me. Just to make sure they’re doing okay.”

Maverick furrows his brows. “What about Clover?”

“Take her too.”

Maverick rolls his shoulders like he’s uncomfortable. “Is this an order?”

“No, I’m just askin’. But I would really appreciate it.”

He rubs the back of his neck and exhales. “Let me talk to Clo to see what she wants to do. Can I get back to you?”

I smile because he didn’t say no. “Yeah, brother, talk it out with her. Lots of opportunities for a seventeen-year-old in LA. She could thrive over there.”

“Yeah... I’ll get back to you as soon as possible, Pres.”

I slap his shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready, just let me know. And if you do, I’ll contact Alpha and let him know.”

“All right... just so you know, I am interested. So I will go talk to Clo now.” He stands and goes to walk off, but I call him back, “Mav,” he turns, and I continue, “You’re a fuckin’ asset, don’t forget that.”

He dips his chin, walks to the other side of the room, and sits with his little sister, who has grown into herself.

Six Months Later

Life feels so different than it was eight months ago.

We were at war.

Life looked like it could alter in the blink of an eye.

And in a way, I guess it did.

We lost Grudge.

That still doesn't feel real some days.

We gained a heap of new brothers and, with it, their families and friends.

But I also said goodbye to my stepmom.

She's been in LA for six months. My stepsister is a month away from being born. And as the time gets closer, the harder it is for me to be away from her. Maybe as the due date draws closer, Kaia and I will take a trip over to LA to be with her and South.

We need to make an effort to meet Bella before her symptoms get worse.

It's the right thing to do.

I sit at the bar looking out over my club and can't help but smile. I think about how far all of us have come.

Kaia and I are trying for another baby now that Immy is getting bigger. The idea of a brother or sister for her is the right timing for us now, and with shit settled and more allies than enemies for the first time, it's a safer place to bring more children into the club.

Novah and Bayou are doing well with baby Elijah, and they plan on having a bunch more kids on the horizon. Bayou is a great father. I sometimes think he's more of a baby than Elijah, but I think that is what makes him such a good dad because the way Elijah laughs when Bayou does the stupid things he does is fucking heartwarming.

City and Izzy have decided to try going down the surrogate route. It's all underway, and we're hopeful for some progress on that front soon. If anyone deserves happiness, it's those two.

Lani and Grit finally married in a beautiful ceremony and are currently away on their honeymoon in Hawaii. They're going to meet a bunch of Lani and Kaia's family, to which I am envious of because I still haven't met them.

Maybe I need to take Kaia on that honeymoon I keep promising her.

Maxxy had her baby not long after Christmas—it was, in fact, a girl, much to Hoodoo's dismay. But he is a doting father, and as we all thought, he's spending all his time being the full-time dad while Maxxy continues to work at The Plantation. Nothing was going to stop her from being the powerhouse woman she is. Don't get me wrong, she adores Hallie and is an amazing mother, but Hoodoo is definitely the one calling the shots when it comes to Hallie, and Maxxy is the one wearing the pants financially.

Raid, Frankie, and Addi took that beach vacation. It was to help ease the pain for Addi of Clover leaving to go to LA with Maverick. I felt bad about splitting the teen friends up, but at least I am getting solid reports back from Maverick on how South and Ingrid are doing. That eases my nerves, and Maverick sounds like he's having a great time over there. Clo has settled in, too, which is good.

Raid, on the other hand, got so sunburned on vacation that Hoodoo had to treat him for second-degree burns. And Frankie hasn't let him live it down since.

And Marcel? He's running the South like the King he promised to be. His kingdom is growing larger every day. He's a powerhouse, and we're glad to be on the right side of him and his influence. Because Lord knows, we don't need another situation like the Baroness on our hands.

It took us a long time to get there...

... for NOLA Defiance to obliterate their enemies.

We had so many along the way, but we've conquered them all.

As a brotherhood, as a family, bonded together by grit, determination, and drive.

The thing is, Defiance isn't just our club name, it's our motto. We strive to live by it, and in the past four years, this club has been through so many ups and downs—the trials, the tribulations, we have faced it all together.

United as one.

Our bond—unbreakable.

I love this club.

I love my brothers.

I love my family.

And we will never be defeated.

Our loyalties were tested.

Our strength was tested, but in the end, we came through it all victorious.

We came through defiant.

This club—this entity we have forged is *so* strong that nothing can break us.

But the one thing that truly unites us all—is love.

The love for each other, the love for our women, and the love for our kin.

Love is the key.

Love... is... Defiance.

THE
END

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Jane – Any time I spend with you is never enough. I know life can be hard for us, but knowing you're always there, just a FB phone call away is always a comfort. I just have one thing to say, and I hope it helps if you're ever feeling low, in need of a pick me up or need a motivational kick in the ass... WWVD? ;)

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Last of all, I want to thank YOU, the reader. For putting your trust and devotion into this seven-book-long series. Thank you for enjoying the NOLA Defiance MC and for continuing to read since Gravitate's release in May 2022. I fell in love with New Orleans when I visited America back in 2019, and I knew with the culture and the ambiance, I could create something special.

I hope I have done that for you with my NOLA Defiance MC.

So thank you, dear reader, for your continued support of my writing career. It is both humbling and heartwarming. I adore my readers so much; honestly, I couldn't keep going without the love and encouragement you all show me daily. Again, thank you for believing in me, and I hope I can keep you entertained for many years to come.

Bring on LA Defiance!

Much love,

K E Osborn

On a more serious note:

This book is a work of fiction, but some situations discussed are of a sensitive nature.

If you or anyone you know is in emotional distress, has medical issues, or suffers from loss, please seek help or assist them to obtain help.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With a flair for all things creative, *USA Today* Bestselling Author K E Osborn, is drawn to the written word. Exciting worlds and characters flow through her veins, coming to life on the page as she laughs, cries, and becomes enveloped in the storyline right along with you. She's entirely at home when writing sassy heroines and alpha males that rise from the ashes of their pasts.

K E Osborn comforts herself with tea and Netflix, after all, who doesn't love a good binge?

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