



Phantom

CASSIE VERANO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PHANTOM

FIERY DISCIPLES MC



CASSIE VERANO

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PROLOGUE – 2 Years Earlier



“I hate this godforsaken town! I swore I’d never come back here,” I mutter, staring out the window.

I look out at the fog rolling in from the ocean and groan, dropping my head into my hands. What I wouldn’t give to be back in LA with all its hustle and bustle, with its hodgepodge of people with their eclectic vibes and cultures.

The glitz and glamor were what I’d been attracted to, and I swore that one day I’d make it big. The only big thing I’d made was the scream from my lungs when riding Jacob Cohen’s dick. The promises of a starring role had never manifested unless you included his personal porn flicks.

All I’d gotten from that, and the subsequent sex acts I’d performed on him, was to be his escort on out-of-the-country trips where he’d promise we would sightsee all the major landmarks. Travel that excluded his wife, and the only sight-seeing I saw was other famous men who were there with women who weren’t their wives.

Lavish parties at large mansions with old men trying to outdo one another by the size of their bank account, the number of cars and houses they had, and how young the woman on their arm was. Initially, Jacob always won that last contest.

Being seventeen then, I’d been the youngest “date” at those parties. Although, I swore there was the one time we were in Dubai, and one of the girls couldn’t have been no more than fifteen. If that.

Selling my body for a chance at fortune and fame wasn’t a far cry from what I’d grown up around, but selling my soul

was another issue altogether. That's exactly what I'd done. Fat lot of good that did me since I'm back at the last place on earth I ever wanted to be.

Hell.

Broke and penniless without a pot to piss in and a window to throw it out, I was coming home to the legacy my father left behind. Pimping a bunch of whores.

The difference between them and me?

My wages for lying on my back were over fifty grand a night, plus all-expense-paid shopping trips to high-end boutiques. These whores didn't see that in a year.

"This the place?" the driver asks from the front seat.

Leaning forward, I look at the stucco two-story home with its clay-style roof. Palm, Victorian Box, and Sweet Bay trees dot the three-acre landscape along with hydrangea and rose bushes, giving the place a well-kept, upper-middle-class feel. From the outside looking in, with its large Olympic-style swimming pool out back and black asphalt driveway, one would think it's an ordinary suburban home.

The giveaway is the amount of traffic seen coming and going on any given day. It has the potential to be a drug house or a whore house. Daddy chose to make it the latter.

Daddy had turned our large six-bedroom estate into a whorehouse the day Mama walked out. Fed up with his multiple affairs and bringing the women home, she'd left him, them, and me behind for her yoga instructor and a more "Zen" lifestyle.

At the age of ten, I was devastated but learned to cope. I had always been the center of my daddy's eye, and that hadn't changed from the time he moved the first whore in until the last.

Technically, it wasn't a whorehouse all those years ago. It was Daddy's and my house where he allowed multiple girlfriends to live with us at once. I never could understand how three or four women would be okay sharing and living with the same man, but they were.

I was a nuisance to most of them, or they ignored me. Mostly, I stayed out of the way until Daddy let me ride to the club with him. At least until he became the VP of the Fiery Disciples when I was fourteen. I started hanging out more often and staying in the bunkhouses rather than coming home.

That's when life changed for me, and would never be the same. When I turned seventeen, I was on a bus the next day for L.A. and a better life. One of the reasons I'd run away was because I was fed up with my daddy's den of sin and his skanks' attempts to outdo me for his attention.

"Lady?"

"Uh, yeah," I mumble as I struggle to step out of the past and walk back to the present.

The past and present are so convoluted that I feel as if I'm going back. The bright future I'd envisioned for myself didn't turn out so bright after all.

Pushing the door open, I step out of the car and slam the door shut. Looking at the house, I shade my eyes from the bright sunshine, my heart sinking inside.

I have no other choice, right?

"Here ya go," the driver says, pulling my luggage from the trunk and slamming it closed.

"Thanks," I mumble, accepting the handles of my two rolling suitcases from him.

"Gotta tell ya, ma'am, this place ain't for your type," the driver says.

Looking back at him, I smirk and say, "Don't I know it."

Pulling the luggage behind me, I turn away as I walk up the asphalt driveway. It's not long before I hear the car driving away.

Shaking my head, I mutter, "Thanks a lot, Daddy."

It's not the inheritance I want, but I guess it's what I need now. All my dreams and my bank account went down the drain. With no income or one to reach out to, I had no choice

but to return home and accept the inheritance Daddy left behind.

I'd returned home eight months ago to attend the funeral and listen to the reading of the will, but I'd hightailed it out of town as soon as I learned the details. I promised to find a way to make things work, but I didn't.

"Here goes nothing," I mumble, pulling the keys from my pocket and fingering them momentarily.

As I slide the key into the doorknob, it jerks open from the other side.

A bowed head covered in long, raven-colored hair slowly lifts. Dark, onyx eyes meet mine.

A gasp escapes my lips.

"Phantom?"

"Duchess. Long time, no see."

The other reason I'd hightailed it out of town.

1 – DUCHESS



“Why are you here, Phantom? Was my girl not good enough for you?” I ask, my hands resting on my hips as I lean lazily against the doorframe.

“Are they ever?”

Lifting my eyebrow, I allow a smirk to rest on my lips. I know it pisses him off because he hates being challenged. Unfortunately, I get aroused at challenging Phantom, and I can’t help myself.

“You keep coming back. It can’t be all bad,” I say, turning my lips down as I drop my eyes to his jeans.

Phantom takes a step closer to me, shifting the metal balls between his fingers that he likes to play with when he’s bored.

Although it’s clear that he’s not completely erect because he just finished fucking Cashmere, I can see that he’s still aroused. It pleases me to know that I have that impact on him. Every encounter with Phantom is tinged with this sexual tension between us.

“I keep coming back to see you.”

“And yet, you still end up between another woman’s thighs.”

“Seems to be the only way that I can get in to see you. You refuse to see me until they tell you that I have a complaint.”

I smile but don’t acknowledge or deny his comment. Phantom takes a step forward, forcing me back into the room. He kicks the door closed and locks it. Refusing to show any intimidation or acquiescence, I stand my ground, arms crossed over my ample bosom, robe partly open.

“I’m starting to think that you like this little game we play, Duchess. I’m tired of playing,” he growls as his black eyes grow cold.

“What is it that you want, Phantom?”

“You.”

“Can’t afford me, darling.”

“Can’t afford your heart, but I can fucking afford you,” he grunts, shoving the balls into the pocket of his leather cut.

Twisting my lips, I know that my eyes flash fury at him as his words fill me with rage. I won’t refute what he says, and I won’t let him see that he’s pissed me off beyond the flash of my eyes.

“Don’t you have enough women at the clubhouse? Why do you keep coming back here when every Rose over there would give you everything you need free?”

“They can’t give me what I want.”

“Phantom, there are enough women over there—”

“Told you...there’s never enough women to satiate my needs. One woman can never be enough to please me.”

He won’t claim me because he knows that I wouldn’t be okay sharing him.

This time, when Phantom steps toward me, I take a step back. Hell, yes, I’m scared of his crazy ass. Just not the way that most other people, especially women, are. I’m afraid of what Phantom makes me feel, what he makes me yearn for, knowing that I sacrificed any hopes for that life a long time ago for the one I have now.

This time, he’s smirking as he backs me into a wall as if I’d forgotten the layout of this L-shaped room. I hold my breath as he lowers his head, sniffing my neck and then back up to my hair.

Twirling it around his fingers, he says, “I love how you scream when I jerk your hair.”

“Just got it done. If you’re ready to pay two hundred dollars for the hair...you can pull it all you want. And that’s just for the hair.”

Chuckling under his breath, he whispers, “Money has never been a problem, sweetheart. ‘Specially not where you’re concerned.”

My legs quench in response to his words, and I feel my thighs dampen with my arousal.

“I’m not for sale.”

“I wish you never were.”

“Not even the highest bidder.”

“Then good. I can have you free and clear,” he says, wrapping his large hand around my throat and closing off my airway.

My nostrils flare, and my mouth flies open as I desperately gasp for air. Phantom licks the side of my neck before releasing it just enough to make sure that I don’t pass out. My eyes close, and I know that I’ll push him too far one day.

He parts my robe with his free hand and stares down at my breasts that mock me. My nipples are hard buds thrusting at him, begging to be licked.

“You sure you don’t want me.”

I never said I didn’t, but I won’t tell him that. “Is this how you get your rocks off? Torturing women?”

His eyes flick to mine, and I see something in them that he’ll never allow another soul to see. Then he turns it off just as quickly as it turned on, and his gaze drops to my breasts, where he proceeds to lick and bite them.

Pulling my bottom lip between my teeth, I shut my eyes, refusing to allow him to see or hear the pleasure that I feel with his mouth on me. But Phantom won’t be satisfied with my silence. He tugs my distended nipple between his teeth and bites down on it as he completely releases my neck and slides his hand down my belly and in between my thighs, cupping my mound.

“This is how I get my rocks off, sweetheart, by taking what I want and knowing that you love it!” he grits out between clenched teeth.

The words that want to come don't because he slides two fingers inside my dripping pussy, snatching away any words I might have said. I shudder, and the moan I've forbidden to come forth slips out.

“Yeah, that's what I want to hear,” Phantom whispers as he sucks my earlobe and works his fingers inside of me.

“Goddamn you, Phantom!” I grind out.

“Too late for that, sweetheart. He damned me before I came outta the womb.”

Phantom crushes his lips to mine in such a forceful manner that I know they'll be bruised, especially after I accidentally bite my bottom one.

I whimper, and Phantom pulls back. “Didn't know you were so soft,” he mutters, staring me in the eyes as he licks my bottom lip and then sucks it into his mouth, nursing it.

My chest heaves with unburdened desire, and I don't know how much longer I can play this game. I've been physically attracted to Phantom since I first laid eyes on him years ago. He wasn't the usual type that I fell for.

With his obsidian eyes as black as his tainted soul, long, dark hair, and long, lanky frame, he was unconventional, to say the least. It was easy to underestimate his strength based on his slender frame. At six-two and just under two hundred pounds, he sometimes looked leaner than he was.

Though he had bulked up through the years, he was still lean but solid. Those wiry, long arms were now packed with muscle and covered in tattoos.

“Do you still taste sweet, Duchess?” he mumbles, slipping his fingers out of me.

I instantly wish they were back inside of me or his dick. I'm not choosy. But when he slips his fingers inside his mouth, I almost cum at the look in his eyes.

“Just like you...nothing about me has changed.”

“One day, that smart, wicked ass mouth will get you in trouble,” he says, snatching my robe off my arms.

I try in vain to clutch it and cover myself, but Phantom rips it off further. I'm standing there in nothing but a thong before him. Phantom takes a step back and pulls his hand over his mustache and beard. It's been a while since those dark hairs have tickled my thighs and left burn marks there. The thought has me going insane as I wait to see what he'll do to me.

“Turn around and face the wall,” Phantom orders. “My God, I love a voluptuous, curvy woman.”

Looking over my shoulder, I reply, “I can't tell. You seem to go for the young, waiflike girls.”

“Jealous, are you?” he asks, walking behind me and pressing his erection against my bare ass.

“Never. I'd have to care to be jealous. I don't much give a damn about assholes.”

“Me? I love 'em,” he replies, inserting a finger into mine, causing my eyes to shutter closed.

Phantom takes his time, dragging his free hand down my shoulder, along my sides, before resting at my hip. I feel rather than hear him kneel behind me. And when his tongue presses into my ass, I sigh softly, closing my eyes.

“Fat ass just like I like,” he mumbles before his tongue buries itself inside my asshole.

No matter how often I promise that I won't allow it to happen again, I always lose my self-control when it comes to Phantom. He walks into my life repeatedly and humiliates me, takes advantage of me, makes me weak, and leaves me hungering for more.

I never know when he'll return or what he'll want next. I can smell a thousand women on him, and I'll still be available for him when he demands it.

I hate him. I swear I do, but my body loves how he makes it feel.

There's no way I can escape the life that has claimed me, no more than he can escape the one that's claimed him. It's because of those lives that we cannot have one another. It doesn't matter that I'm not fucking every man who walks through my brothel doors. The fact that I own this place displeases Phantom.

He doesn't care that I've inherited it from my father. It's a way to make a living and not much more.

I press my hips backward as he pushes my thighs wider, gaining more access to my ass. His tongue swivels and licks and prods and takes me as close to heaven as I'll ever get.

My breasts pressed flat against the cold rose-gold wallpaper, nipples taut, pussy neglected. I need and want more, wanting him to fill every orifice I own. And as he usually does, Phantom read my body's reaction.

Pulling back, he turns me around to face him, pushing me back against the wall. Phantom wastes no time grabbing a condom from his pocket, unzipping his pants, and pulling himself through the hole that his zipper leaves. He doesn't bother to unbutton his pants or unbuckle his belt. After all, why should he for such a crude act as the one we are engaging in?

Phantom doesn't make love, have sex, screw, or engage in intimacy. Phantom fucks.

Shoving himself inside of me, he thrusts deeper and deeper until he's managed to pin me against the wall, my legs spread wide and wrapped around his back. His hands roughly grip my breasts, turning them in opposite directions as though he wants to rip them off. Freeing one hand, he moves it around to my ass and plugs my hole.

My head drops to the side as my eyes close. His actions are rough and thoughtless, but exactly what I need. When he fucks me this way, it forces me to remember that I can't afford to get wrapped up in him.

Forgetting about my breast, Phantom moves a hand to my throat and asks, "Who've you been fucking?"

“Nobody,” I rasp.

His hand tightens around my throat as he bites into the side of my neck.

“You’d better not be lying to me. I told you what I’ll do if you let another man into this slit, didn’t I?”

I nod as his hand tightens around my neck again.

“Told you if I couldn’t have you, no one else ever could either.”

He tightens his grip further. I can barely breathe, and my eyes sting with the unshed tears that I refuse to release. He tightens his grip again and slams into me; I swear I’m on the verge of passing out, and he slowly releases my neck, bites my shoulder, and dips his head to bite my nipple.

I cum so violently that anyone else watching might think I’m having a seizure.

Anyone except Phantom. He knows me. Knows that I get off on this asphyxiation shit, and I believe he does, too, as much as I do.

He pulls out before he releases.

“Get on your fucking knees,” he orders, sliding the condom off his dick.

I do as he says, tears now flowing freely.

Phantom grabs a fistful of my hair, jerks it back savagely, and smacks me on the side of my face with his cock before beating me in the head with it.

Opening my mouth, I stick my tongue out, licking it with each pass of my face.

He finally gives me what I want and need, his cock inside my mouth.

“Goddamn, you feel so good,” he groans as he thrusts deeply into my mouth, fucking my face.

He shoves himself down my throat, knowing that I cannot take it all, but I try. The abuse that I’m taking is nothing

compared to what he's done in the past. Yet, I foolishly welcome it all.

Why? Because I threw the first stone. I was the one to break him first.

With both hands gripping my hair, he jerks my head back and holds it still while he pumps in and out of my mouth.

It's not long before his salty seed spills out, tumbling down my throat.

I remain on my knees while he grabs his dick and finishes jerking off on my face. When he's all done, I lick it away from my lips. Phantom kneels in front of me; his eyes soften for a moment.

“Good girl.”

I close my eyes as he kisses my forehead and then the top of my head.

“You're mine, Duch. I'll kill anyone who looks your way,” he says and rises.

I know his words aren't in vain. His promises aren't empty. He's done it before, and I know he'll do it again.

I remain in the kneeling position until he leaves my room, closing the door behind him and taking my heart with him. He's incapable of loving anyone in return, so I know my love is in vain.

“Why do you come back, Phantom? Just stay away,” I whisper as anguish fills my heart.

2 – PHANTOM



I fucking stay away because it gets harder and harder to leave each time I go near her. I can never have her, and she and I both know it.

Seeing Duchess's beautiful face, looking at those luscious curves, and feeling her warmth all around me is slow torture. And yet, it's an exquisite pleasure all at once. It's a pain and pleasure that I don't allow myself to engage in unless I've done something so horrible that I feel I need to be punished for my sins, and at the same time, I need the pleasure to drown my misery.

Today, we found out that Roxie's cousin, Courtney, is dead, thanks to Andres Garcia, Roxie's late husband. That girl's death was a horror; he burned her almost to the point of being unrecognizable except for the identification bracelet on her wrist. The crimes that I commit are committed for a reason. I don't have a death wish, and I'm not some caped crusader, but I believe in making motherfuckers pay for their sins. Unfortunately, Andres Garcia is no longer around to keep paying for his.

I need to take my rage out on someone. I'm just glad as hell that I'm not Cannon. That lucky bastard has to share the news with Roxie.

I don't want to think of the punishment that will be executed on my head for what I've done tonight. When I buried myself in Cashmere, I tried to forget. Maybe she was the last person I should have gone to anyway. Cashmere is nothing more than a girl herself. She may be twenty-five, but her tiny body and the part of her that is still innocent belies her age.

Genie normally can cure what ails me when Cashmere can't, but even she couldn't help me out tonight. I had no choice but to see Duchess.

I always come here when I have an emotional rather than a physical need to slate. The Roses at the clubhouse are good when I just need to be sucked off or a good fuck. When the need is deeper, like tonight, I have to come to Duchess' whore house. I don't have to be around them daily or see the pain of my ghosts in their eyes for what I've done. It's not the same with the Roses.

Duchess shouldn't be in this lifestyle, but I know she's doing it because she believes she has no other choice. Duchess tells me things that I want to believe, but I don't trust no fucking woman, so why should I trust a whore?

I was taught at an early age that women are manipulators and liars. They aren't to be trusted. Using their beauty and sexuality, they turn it against men to get what they want and to make us weak.

By the time I pull up to the burnt-out warehouse, it's a little after one in the morning. It's dark, and I have only the moonlight to light my path to the door I'm supposed to enter.

I step inside the shell of a warehouse. The moon casts an eerie glow on my brothers and the poor soul in their midst through the gaping hole where the roof used to be. Where there once was a concrete floor, roots, grass, and weeds are growing in some places where the concrete has been broken up.

The sizzling sound is comparable to placing a well-seasoned juicy steak on the grill. The scent emanating from it is not as delicious but equally satisfying, despite the stench it leaves and the way the burning flesh stings my nostrils.

A high-pitched shriek like that of a wolf crying rends the night air.

"He sounds like a bitch, doesn't he?" Cannon laughs.

"That's cuz he is a bitch," Anarchy snarls, circling the man. From his scent, I can tell he pissed his pants a while ago,

but another sniff and I can smell the odor of fresh feces too.

“Did he shit himself?” I ask as I draw circles in the dirt with my steel-toed boots.

Cannon spits near his feet and sniffs the air, “Yeah, he did.”

I watch as he pulls a cigarette from a pack and lights it. He’s ready to set the bastard on fire; I can see his fingers getting itchy.

“Wait!” I say, drawing close to the man as I pull a Twizzler from the pack in my back pocket. “All we need is a name. Give us one name, and you’ll be free.”

“The fuck?” Cannon says, shooting daggers my way.

As our Enforcer, it’s his job to enforce the rules and protect the MC. Cannon calls most shots outside of Anarchy, our President, and Raider, our VP.

“Give us a name,” I repeat, “and we’ll set you free.”

“Andres Garcia.”

I bite a piece of the Twizzler and chew slowly. Cannon punches him in the side of the head, making the chair fall over sideways. The man snuffles and whimpers.

“No, that’s not good enough,” I say, kneeling beside him. “He’s a ghost. I want the one you turned her over to.”

“The girl...she...she’s dead.”

“I know she’s dead,” I tell the sorry bastard. “I just want the name of the man responsible for killing her. Just a name, and you’re free.”

Whimpering some more, he says, “Martin.”

“Martin Cappellacci?” Anarchy asks with a frown.

“Yes,” the man whispers. His eyes are haunted, as though he’s seen a ghost.

Looking at Cannon, I say, “We got what we need,” and toss the final piece of strawberry Twizzler into my mouth.

“Now can I go free?” he asks.

Kneeling once more, I place a finger to my lips. “Shhh... I’m just a ghost. You never saw me.”

“You said I could go free!” the man says as I stand and turn away from him.

Shrugging, I said, “Never said I was an honest man.”

“Please, can I go free?” the man pleads.

I turn and walk to the door I recently entered, whistling as I go. The smell of the gasoline and the sound of his cries and pleas fall all around me.

“You’re free, muthafucka!” Cannon howls.

I hear the whoosh of the flames, accompanied by eerie screams, and I know Cannon has lit the poor bastard with his cigarette.

Jaime Martinez is free from this hell on Earth. Lucky bastard, he escaped the war that’s just been declared with one name from his lips.

“When are we gonna make a move?” Cannon asks.

“This isn’t gonna be easy,” Anarchy says, tapping his nail against his desk.

“Can’t let it go unpunished,” Raider says.

“Won’t go unpunished!” Cannon snaps.

“We need a plan before we make a move. We’re talking mafia here, not just another MC. We can’t just go in guns blazing and think there won’t be retaliation,” Anarchy says.

“I don’t give a fuck!” Cannon argues.

“Again, thinking with the wrong head, bro,” Raider says.

Cannon shoots a glare his way.

The four of us are standing at the edge of a bonfire, drinking beers. The rest of the MC is drinking, eating, and watching Lips and Tennessee’s drunken dance routine.

“Not thinking with the wrong head, fucker. Thinking with the only one that matters,” he says, bumping his chest at his heart repeatedly with his fist.

Raider takes another swig of his beer and shakes his head. “Can’t have a softie for an enforcer, Cannon. You gotta stay —”

“Whoa!” Anarchy shouts as he and I both rush and grab Cannon.

Before Raider could finish his sentence, Cannon was lunging for Raider and almost had his hand around the other man’s neck.

“Don’t you ever fucking threaten me!” Raider says, shoulders heaving.

I notice that he takes a step back, though, despite his argument.

“Watch how you fucking talk to me!” Cannon thunders back.

“Boys, that’s enough for tonight. Don’t need to let the rest of the fam know there’s dissension at the top,” Anarchy says, nodding at the rest of the crew.

Some have turned their gazes from the entertainment to see what’s going on with us. Anarchy gives them a nod, letting them know they need to turn their attention back to what they’d been focused on before.

“Wasn’t a good idea,” is all I say.

Anarchy nods, acknowledging my statement.

We rarely discuss business openly like this. Usually, a meeting of the council is called to discuss these matters away from the other men. If it’s something we need to put to vote to the entire MC, we call “church.” This isn’t one of those times.

All the members of the council aren’t even gathered around us. Whiz, our road captain, is getting sucked off by Pinky. Terminator, our sergeant at arms, is dancing with his Ol’ Lady, Bonnie, and Dime, our secretary, is lip-locked with Whimsical.

I was talking with Anarchy about what happened last night with the kill when Cannon walked up. Noticing we were meeting, Raider had left the bonfire and come over to see what was going on.

“Either way, we need to come up with a plan for what to do about the situation,” Anarchy says.

“I think we should wait until after the spring run before we make a move,” I suggest.

Cannon nods his agreement.

“No, if we’re gonna send a message, we need to be swift and exact,” Raider disputes.

“I’d normally agree, but I don’t like the idea that we’ll all be gone with no one here to hold it down. Making a move like that and not expecting retaliation is foolish,” Cannon points out.

I nod my head.

“Didn’t say I wasn’t expecting retaliation,” Raider argues. “Just think we need to let ‘em know who they’re fucking with.”

“I’d like to catch them off guard when they’re not expecting us,” I suggest.

Everyone’s quiet for a while. Anarchy looks around at our small group, rubbing his thumb back and forth across his lips.

“We’ll let the rest of the council vote and determine how we move forward,” Anarchy says.

“” Sides, we don’t have much time before we’ll be heading out on the road,” Cannon says.

“Which is exactly why we need to make a move now. Get the fuck out of dodge, and they’ll never suspect us,” Raider says.

Cannon scoffs. “I’m not a fucking bitch. If I do the shit, I want them to know I did the shit. I’m not hiding behind nothing and no one.”

Raider rolls his eyes and shakes his head. Taking another swig from his beer bottle, he walks away. Cannon and Anarchy exchange a look.

“There’s a lot to think about on this one. I’m not even saying we’ll definitely make a move,” Anarchy points out.

“We’ve got to.”

“You’re right about that, Cannon, but I agree with Anarchy. We also need to think carefully about what we’re doing. They’ve almost become our number one source of income. If we come for them, we’re shooting ourselves in the foot in more ways than one,” I say.

“Not like we’re broke if we quit fucking with ‘em,” he disputes.

“Never that. Not on my fucking watch. Still...” I say.

I take my role as Treasurer seriously. There’s not a thing that I don’t know about the MC’s finances and its operations because I manage it all and approve or decline expenses. The only one with the power to veto my decisions is Anarchy. Taking my role a step further, I’ve also been the one to suggest and implement new sources of income to broaden our vast wealth.

Hooking up with the Cappellacci’s wasn’t my idea. I never would have suggested fucking with the mafia in a million years. It wasn’t because I didn’t think we could hold our own, even if we might be seriously outnumbered, and that was a serious might.

I would never have suggested it because I don’t trust the bastards. We know the Aiello’s are into human trafficking, and the Cappellaccis are tied to them. Any slimy, spineless bastard that would sell humans deserves to be fucked up the ass and gutted.

I spit as the thought goes through my mind.

“Like I said, let me think it over, and we’ll put it to vote to the council tomorrow. Everyone in my office at noon,” Anarchy says as he and Raider walk back to the bonfire.

“Stupid bastard,” Cannon mutters, walking back to where his Ol’ Lady, Roxie, is sitting with Siren and Marlo.

I don’t know whether he’s talking about Raider or Martin Cappellacci.

I walk back to the cooler and grab another beer, opening it and taking a swig.

“Want some company?” a soft voice asks.

I turn around and see Geisha peering up at me from underneath long, false lashes. With her perfectly made-up face, blood-red lipstick to match her red eye shadow, and long dark hair pulled into a bun, she looks like her name implies. One exception, she’s not Japanese.

Just like her Japanese namesakes, she loves wearing kimonos, though they barely cover her ass, and she has the art of entertainment down pat. I often wonder how the fuck she’d end up in a place like our MC. The girl can sing, dance, and write poetry. She came from a background very different than most of ours, but rebelling against the privilege and prestige of her family somehow ended her here.

“Not really.”

She smirks up at me. “I can take your mind off your problems tonight, Phantom.”

Grabbing her hand, I lead Geisha away from the bonfire and back up to the bunkhouse where I stay. It’s seldom that I visit the Roses in theirs, and I never usually take them back to mine. If I fuck them, they’re fucked wherever we are when the need arises. Tonight, I don’t care.

Rarely, if ever, do we make it to the bed, unlike the whores at Duchess’ place.

Geisha drops to her knees and undoes my jeans before reaching for my shit. I grab her hands and shake my head.

“Rule number four.”

Her eyes widen as she nods and dips her head to catch my cock with her mouth. She lifts slightly and sucks gently, suctioning me deeper into her mouth. My eyes close as I

slowly pump, enjoying the heat from her mouth and the moisture of her lips tightening and loosening.

A firm rule that I hold the Roses to is that they aren't allowed to touch my body with their hands without my permission. This isn't anything personal, but I believe that energy, spirits, and emotions transfer through the hands.

I have no connection to any of the women in this house, and I don't want one beyond sexual. They live free here at the MC in exchange for cooking, cleaning, and fucking. They know the rules, and they're perfectly fine with them.

I'll never mislead one of them the way I've seen my brothers do in the past. Cannon still has both Angel and Smoke pissed with him about claiming Roxie. Smoke and Angel were in competition to see who he'd claim first, and he never planned for either of them to be his woman.

I know how dangerous women can be with their feminine wiles. That's why rule number one is in place. Don't fucking trust shit about 'em.

If Cannon knows what's good for him, he'd better keep his eye on those two. Although they know they'd get fucked up for fucking with any brother, especially Cannon, I wouldn't put it past them to try some retaliatory bullshit.

A woman scorned will blow up a building with herself inside just to kill her man.

Geisha dips her head, releasing my dick from her mouth to suck my balls. They tighten, and I close my eyes, relishing the feel before she sucks my cock back into her mouth.

Opening my eyes, I look down at her, watching me until she closes her eyes. Her cheeks hollow out as she slides her mouth up and down my shaft, humming as she goes.

I grab the back of her black hair and begin pumping deeper but still slowly.

"Ahh, Geisha, suck it harder," I coax.

She does, tightening her mouth around me and making an impenetrable seal.

“That’s it,” I groan, pumping harder until I can feel myself going further back. Slob drips from the corners of her mouth, and her mascara begins to run as tears streak down the white makeup on her face.

Pulling out, I lift her from her knees and turn her around, facing the bed. Her hands grip the edge as I lift her kimono to see she’s wearing nothing underneath.

I knew I could see her ass tonight at times when she bent over. I just assumed there was a thong there.

She’s wet. Dripping wet. Reaching inside the nightstand beside my bed, I remove a condom and cover myself before sliding inside of her.

I hold her angular hips in place and drive deep inside, closing my eyes and getting lost in the sensation of her pulsing around me. I’m relaxed tonight. It’s the only reason I can fuck Geisha with no problems.

I’m a man with many ghosts, and it’s because of them that I try to stay away from the Roses as much as possible. Only when I’m in a calm mindset can I come close to them. Otherwise, I’m afraid that I might scar their souls with my demons.

The sounds of our skin slapping together and the low hum of the heating register are all that can be heard. It’s late March, but still pretty cool in Smoky Ridge, California, because we’re so close to a lake.

“Phantom!” she screams as I speed up, my nails burrowing into her fragile skin.

Biting my bottom lip, my head drops back as I close my eyes and enjoy the feeling of her tightening and releasing around me.

“Phantom!” she screams again. “I can’t stop it!” she screams, shaking underneath me.

My thumb works her clitoris over to get her there quicker.

As I slide in and out, I see how she’s coated my covered dick with her orgasm. Her knuckles are pale white from

clutching the edge of the bed so tightly.

Just when I'm about to cum, I pull out.

Climbing onto my bed, I beckon her to climb on top of me.

“Ride me, Geisha.”

She widens her eyes as that's something I seldom allow. A smile forms on her face as she does my bidding. That's the one thing that I like about her; she doesn't have that sassy ass mouth most of the other women have. All Geisha truly wants to do is please people.

Someday, she'll learn that's impossible. Until then, men like me will keep stealing bits of her soul pieces at a time until she's just a shell of her former self.

Her petite legs press against the sides of my hips as she works her way down my length. Placing my hands on her hips once more, I begin thrusting upwards until she's crying and biting her bottom lip. Her teeth are stained with red lipstick, and her neck and breasts are almost as pale as her white makeup-decorated face.

With each powerful thrust that I give, her body shoots up, almost like a rocket preparing for takeoff. Tiny breasts bounce, and I lean up, taking one into my mouth. Strawberry-coated nipples pucker underneath my vicious assault.

Not for the first time, my mind wonders what tragedy brought her here. Would she have been better off in the place she came from? Did she ever think she'd made a mistake by coming here?

I don't know. I just know that she seems happy enough. Every time I see Geisha, she's happy and smiling.

She works me over, sliding up and down my cock slowly until she reaches the base, and I pump relentlessly. My fingers rub her nipples back and forth, and this time I don't care if she cums again or not. I'm tired, ready for a nut, and ready to hopefully sleep a dreamless sleep.

Lifting Geisha off my cock, I ask, “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Phantom,” she nods vigorously.

“Turn around,” I say.

She does and kneels before me, spreading her thighs wide. I sit up on my knees and press against her little red, puckered hole. It doesn't give way, and I try again. She moans, and I know that it must be hurting her.

Hopping off the bed, I head to the refrigerator in the corner of my room and grab a bottle of vodka.

“Drink it and take it up the ass like a champ,” I say, shoving the vodka into her hands.

I wait until she turns it up, takes a couple of gulps and hands it back to me. Setting it on the floor beside the bed, I take my position behind her again and spit on her asshole. Rubbing it with my thumb, I work it back and forth until she relaxes.

I slide my thumb in and out several times, rubbing around the hole and then rubbing my cock around it. When she's relaxed enough, I try again, pressing and holding until I'm finally deep inside of her.

“Fuck, Geisha! Your tiny ass...

I cannot get the rest of the words out because I'm about to go insane on her.

“Fuck it!” I groan, knowing I'd better save that type of ass play for Duchess' whores.

Instead, I pull out of her asshole right when I'm on the verge of losing my mind.

I remove the condom, toss it to the floor, and then shoot my nut in the middle of her back. Using the head of my dick, I rub it into her back as she lays there moaning.

“Go clean up,” I instruct when I get off the bed. While Geisha showers, I remove the sheets and get rid of the condom.

When I head into the bathroom to discard the condom, she makes small talk.

“Heard there’s a storm brewing,” she says over the sound of running water.

“Yeah?” I ask as I stiffen.

“Mm-hmm. Lips says that she overheard Falcon and Snake talking about Roxie’s cousin who went missing. Y’all found her?”

What the fuck? We don’t discuss business with Roses or Ol’ Ladies. Geisha and Lips both know this and have no business discussing it. What’s worse is that Falcon and Snake shouldn’t have been talking about it around Lips.

Snatching the shower curtain back, my dark eyes meet her bright ones. She lowers her head, rinses off and mutters, “Sorry.”

By the time she turns off the shower and comes out in her towel, I’ve grabbed my things, and I’m preparing for my shower.

“Can I stay?” she asks with hope shining through her eyes.

She’s standing near my bed with her kimono in hand.

I narrow my eyes. “Be gone before I finish.”

I close and lock the bathroom door firmly behind me.

Sitting in the middle of the bathroom floor, I close my eyes and focus. Geisha carries a strong aura of loss and depression. I feel it weighing me down, but even more oppressive than that is the guilt I feel for indulging in her pleasure.

I begin to meditate to cleanse my energy. As I do, rule number three flashes behind my closed eyes.

Rule number three. Never, ever, let a woman spend the night in my bed.

3 – HADIYAH



“Who was it?”

“What?”

“That was a victim of sex trafficking?”

I watch him carefully, waiting for the change in his expression. He’s not a very talkative person, but he is communicative. You just have to learn to read his nonverbal cues.

Turning his head slightly, he narrows those black eyes at me. I’ve seen that look in his eyes before, and most people might be creeped out by it, but not me. I’ve never been afraid of him, and I’m not at this moment.

I tentatively reach out a hand and brush my fingertips across the back of his. He clenches it into a fist before releasing it again.

“My sister.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugs.

“How did you know?”

“It’s in the things that you don’t say. Your reaction the day that you found us. The way that you always checked on Amina and me. The way that you look at me.”

I pull one leg up with my heel resting against my butt.

“How’s that?”

“With understanding and empathy, not pity or guilt like the others,” I say, twisting the toe ring around my big toe.

We sit in silence for a moment longer before I rest the side of my face on my knee.

“Did she escape?”

My voice is soft in the stillness of the room, as if it's scared to get too loud.

He's silent, and I realize that I'm pressing too far, too deep, and too hard.

“Sorry. It's just that I have no one to talk to about my experiences.”

“Don't you and Amina talk about it?”

“No. Not really. Just the fond memories of our parents. Our love for them and how much we miss them.”

“Why not the other?”

Shrugging, I say, “I don't know. A part of me senses she doesn't want to talk about it. Maybe not talking about it makes it seem as if it never happened.”

“That's not real.”

“I know, but still... talking about it somehow breathes life into it and makes it real. Gives it power over our thoughts and future. We don't want that.”

“But you talk to me about it.”

“That's different, Phantom.”

“How so?”

“Knowing you weren't there to witness the pain and humiliation. She saw it all just like I saw her pain. Makes it more real. With you... it's almost like I'm so distanced from the experience that it's like a story that I'm telling.”

He nods slowly. “I get that.”

“Besides, you're the only friend that I have.”

“I'm no one's friend, Hadiyah.”

His eyes darken, and I change the subject.

“Then why do you check on us so much. Me?”

I won't pretend that his attention on us isn't singularly focused on me at times. He talked to Amina before she left and listened to her, but she mostly shut everyone out. So, his attention turned to me.

"Just want to make sure that you're good."

I smile. "I am."

"Sure about that? With her so far away now?"

"Maybe it's healthier this way. Like...I can pretend to be someone else, and as if this past I'm drowning in didn't really happen. That's my key to survival."

"Only you can't."

"I know."

"It's not who you are. You're a realist, like me. You carry your sorrow and pain with you like a badge of honor."

"How'd you get so smart?"

He shrugs. "Wisdom is earned through trial and tribulation."

"Why do you do it?"

"What?"

"Check on...me the way that you always have?"

"I know what it's like to feel forgotten about. To blend into your surroundings and feel as if you have no one. How hard it is to be all alone in a crowd of people, and the one person you love most is so far away."

His pain is so raw and so strong it's taken on a presence of its own in this room right beside us. It's palpable, and I feel as if I can reach out and touch it.

"What are you going to do now?"

"You're good at that, you know."

"What?"

"Changing the subject off of yourself."

"There's nothing you need to know about me."

“Oh.”

I blink back against the unexpected harshness of his words.

“So?”

“Huh?”

“Now that your sister’s gone back to the UK, what are you going to do with your days?”

I close my eyes and drop my head back against the couch. Shrugging, I say, “I don’t know. Maybe find a job.”

“What kind?”

I swallow over the lump in my throat, thinking of all the children whose lives I could have impacted and those who could have changed mine.

“I have no idea.”

“You once said you’d gone to college. What were you taking in college? What was your career before those monsters brutalized your life?”

I heave a loud sigh and think back on sweeter times.

“I was becoming a primary teacher. I had...um, the trip that we took back to Somalia was...”

I can’t finish the sentence.

“You want a job?” he asks after a moment or two of uncomfortable silence.

I nod. “Yes. I need something to do to keep me preoccupied and busy until I figure out what my next step should be. Yesterday, I applied for a job with a diner in town.”

“Yeah? How did that work out for you?”

“The cook told me to come back tomorrow when the owner’s there. He said that they were hiring two busboys and a waitress.”

“You have any waiting experience?”

“When I was in high school, each summer, I would work at a local diner to earn extra cash. My sister worked in my

aunt's braid shop."

"Did Amina go to college?"

"She did. She was a nurse, and she was critical with the girls while we were in captivity...until our last place."

"Where you were beaten and chained like beasts," he spits out.

I hear the venom in his voice.

"They were told that she'd been caring for us before. That she would be instrumental in making us look well enough for our 'guests.'"

"And she'd done that in the past."

I nod. "Yes, whenever she wasn't drugged up. It was so hard on her, though, but she was scared to fight back too much, to rebel against their orders."

"I always sensed she was the weaker of the two of you. Not that she was weak, but there's a strength that emanates from you that can't be missed. How do you think Amina's gonna hold up so far away from you? Without your parents?"

"She'll be better back in the UK. She's got our family on both my parents' side. Before we left, she had a fiancé, but I'm sure, well, at least I presume he's gone on with his life by now."

"You think she might reach out to him again? Let him know that she's okay now?"

Shaking my head, I whisper, "No."

I pull my other leg up, wrapping my arm around my knees and biting on the nail of my free hand.

"No, I don't. She hasn't reached out to him in all this time. She's not about to start now. Something like this changes you, and I just...I don't think she's ready to be with a man like that. Amina's ashamed, and it would humiliate her to tell him what she's gone through."

"Nothing to be ashamed of. You did nothing wrong," he grunts.

I think the only reason I can talk openly to him about it is because he helped rescue us from our captivity. That and the fact that he has come to visit my sister and me at least three times a week for the last several months since our rescue.

I recall thinking that he was an odd number in his motorcycle club because he didn't look Caucasian. The dark hair, his dark coloring, and the shape of his eyes all point toward him being Asian. Roxie says he's Japanese and Caucasian.

That interests me because I thought MCs like theirs stuck to their own kind, meaning white with white and black with black. I've never seen a mixed race one percenter motorcycle club. That's not to say they don't exist; I just wasn't aware. He and Roxie are the only anomalies I've seen here. There must be a story there.

I didn't trust him in the beginning. I found it odd and uncomfortable whenever he would come with Roxie to visit.

Eventually, I grew used to his visits and even his grim personality. He seemed really bothered by what we'd gone through and didn't want to talk.

It was enough for him to just ask how we were holding up. Our answer would determine if he would lean in to hear what we had to say or stay distant while we sorted through our emotions. Mostly, he was content to sit and listen to us talk with Roxie.

In time, it became easy to forget that he was there, and our conversations flowed freer with her than before. We even found a way to laugh through some of the darkest days of our lives, but Roxie does that for a person.

Learning about the cruelties that her husband had participated in and how he, too, had engaged in sex trafficking created a certain kinship to her in a way. Not that she'd experienced it, but there was a certain bond there that she was betrayed and hurt by a monster similar to the ones who'd been our captor.

On one particularly emotional day, we were encouraged by Phantom's comment about his personal mission to make all the bastards pay. It was that day, three months ago, that I found myself opening up to him.

On days when Roxie couldn't make it, Phantom still showed up. Each time, he would bring us food. Sometimes, he'd talk, and sometimes, he'd just sit outside of the little garage apartment that we shared. He'd lean up against the tree, almost as if he were our lookout, and he'd smoke those little marijuana cigarettes.

In time, I've even come to consider him a friend. Not that we've had that discussion amongst us, but he feels like my friend. I know he says otherwise now, but he is just that to me.

Other than Roxie, he's the only one that I feel close to. Not even Duchess, who thankfully allows me to remain in the apartment, opened up to me or my sister the way that Roxie and Phantom did.

Elise, one of the escorts that lives in the house with Duchess, is nice enough. I doubt we'll ever be best friends, but she's very sweet to us.

The rustling of Phantom's leather cut forces me out of my head and back to the present. He stands and shoves his hands into the front pockets of his jeans.

With a brief nod, he heads for the door, like always.

He's always been that way, never saying goodbye, just leaving. The nod came in time.

"Phantom?"

He turns that dark-eyed gaze my way again.

"Would you like to stay? For dinner?"

I hope that I don't sound desperate, but I'm not ready to be alone with my own company.

"Not hungry," he grunts.

"Okay," I say, forcing a wan smile to my lips.

“See ya around,” he says before pulling the front door open and disappearing through it. I listen to the roar of his motorcycle’s engine as it starts and takes off. I count the seconds until it whines down again, and I know that he’s stopped at the front of the house.

As usual, I step out onto the balcony in my bedroom and cross my arms over my chest. I wait, hope pressing down deep inside of my chest.

Just like a paper caught on a breeze, that hope eventually floats away, sinking down to the ground when the bedroom light on the third floor turns on. I see their silhouettes.

Pressing my eyes closed, I push back the disappointment and breathe a sigh.

I watch as he grabs her hair and pushes her down to the floor. I can see their outlines so vividly it’s almost as if the curtains were wide open. The way that she takes him into her mouth, how he grabs her head, and how he thrusts so hard inside of her mouth until he finally pulls out.

Within minutes, she’s turned away from him, and he seems to be roughly shoving himself inside of her.

As pathetic as it might seem, I hope that one day, I might feel normal again. That the thought of intimacy or sex with a man won’t scare me. That maybe one day, I won’t be a voyeur, watching Duchess and Phantom from afar while he takes her so roughly.

Maybe one day, my panties will be wet the way they are now because he’s handling me that way.

Just maybe.

4 – HADIYAH (2 ½ Months Later)



Turning around, I look over my shoulder for the third time. I could have sworn that I heard footsteps behind me. Each time I turn around, there's no one there. Other than the other people who're hanging out late tonight. The drug dealers, the hookers, and the junkies.

I hate working nights in the diner, but I have no choice when I'm put on the schedule. As much as I would say that I hate working at that diner, that is another thing that I will not complain about. Why should I when it has given me so much freedom?

Hah! The thought of that is laughable.

If by freedom, I mean watching over my shoulder every moment of the day, then yeah, I have it. Walking in fear that someone might recognize me or, perhaps, snatch me up again. Sure, I've got freedom.

Yet, the limited freedom that I enjoy here far surpasses what I faced before. Even the gropes of disgusting customers, the filthy mouths of the truckers, and the impatient short-order cooks and other waitresses that I work with are nothing compared to before.

As I head home, I think about my other home.

Home. Such a lonely word. It should evoke images of love, protection, peace, and family. Yet, for me, all those things ceased to exist a long time ago.

I tug my coat tighter around me, thankful that I remembered to put my purse on underneath my coat before buttoning it. Amy, one of the older waitresses there, told me that I need to be careful of muggers.

As I walk past an alley, the long stretch of darkness makes me wish that I'd accepted the ride home from Alfred tonight. He's one of the busboys, and he's been giving me a lot of attention lately. Alfred is cute, but I am not interested in getting involved with anyone right now.

Not after the trauma I have endured the last couple of years. Tears prick my eyes as I think back on my life. Pressing my gloved thumbs against my eyelids, I force the tears to remain at bay.

At least until I can get home and wallow in my misery.

I pass a couple of prostitutes standing on a corner. A third one is leaning into a car. I keep my head down and focus on not slipping in the snow.

Two more blocks to go, I count as I cross over another dark side street. They really ought to do something about the streetlights around here. It's a pity that this is all I can afford right now.

A single bedroom, bathroom, and living room with a galley kitchen. The entire apartment isn't even five hundred feet. Three doors. One to the outside and two to a balcony that's shared by the bedroom and living area.

It's nothing compared to where I come from, but it's everything to me now. It's better than the locked room that Amina and I were chained in for three months.

One more block to go, and I hear laughing. It sounds like a group of guys as curse words ring out in the night.

I hate passing a group of guys. There's always some snide comment or teasing that I have to endure.

"Hey, shorty!" I hear one of the guys call out.

Keeping my head down, I focus on making it the final block before I get home. Only now, the footsteps that I hear are real.

"Aye! You heard my boy talking to you?" another gruffer voice calls.

"Oh, she's one of those snooty bitches," a third voice says.

Half a block and I'm free, I think as I pick up my stride. It's not enough because I feel a hand on my shoulder jerking me back. I lose my footing and go down on my ass. The pain shoots through my behind, down my legs, and up my back.

My palms ache despite the gloves that I'm wearing as they hit the snow-covered sidewalk. Even more, than my body hurting is my pride.

The guys circle around me like a group of vultures, laughing and making crude comments. I try to block out their taunts and get up on my feet, but each time I try, one or the other of them shoves me right back down again.

Fear creeps into my veins, stronger and more powerful than before. Crying out for help won't do anything because everyone out here on this street is minding their own business and don't care about what these guys do.

Not for the first time, I regret leaving Duchess' home. It was a safe place, although it was uncomfortable at the time. With all the prostitution going on, whenever any of the men saw me, they assumed that I was one of the escorts.

The women were generally nice towards me, especially Duchess, but I needed to get away.

My heartbeat races as one of the guys kneels in front of me, cupping my chin with his hand. I jerk away from him. His face is interchangeable with those of my past attackers.

"Leave me alone!" I shout, knowing no one can hear me. No one cares.

He laughs and looks at his friends. "Oh, she's got an accent, guys. Sounds British to me. Whaddya think? Think British pussy is as good as American pie?"

He snickers at his joke, and fear pumps through me like a living monster. If I had been afraid of what was going to happen to me before, I'm even more afraid now. This is no better than the nightmare my sister and I were saved from.

I vowed that I would never be anyone's victim again, nor would I suffer because of my inability to defend myself.

“Come on, pretty lady. I promise you we’ll give you the best time of your life,” the one in front of me leers.

I smile at him and reach my hand out, cupping his groin. Vomit roils through my belly as I feel his arousal jerk in my hand through his sweatpants. He smiles at me and looks up at his boys.

“You promise?” I ask.

“Yeah, baby. Wouldn’t let you down. Me and the homies are gonna show you a real good time,” he says.

I stroke him a couple of times before I twist his dick hard, and his eyes instantly widen and water. He gasps, unable to speak.

“What the fuck?”

“Bitch! Get off him!”

Their hands grab at me, but I twist the first guy’s dick harder, refusing to let go.

“I swear! I will rip it off if you don’t back the fuck away from me now!” I shout. “I’m serious!” I scream as they continue tugging on my arms. My grip on him doesn’t release but tightens as I sink my nails into his balls.

He’s screaming bloody murder and manages to tell them to back away. They release my arms, but they’re still too close.

“Back away! Now!”

They slowly start backing up. “Across the street, or I swear it’s coming off! He’ll never fuck again!” I vow.

Anger colors their faces red, and they look to their leader, who can only nod his head vigorously. I pull and twist and tug some more. I’m sure that he’ll suffer damage that will require him to visit the hospital.

“Further!” I scream, and they scramble just a little further down the other side of the street.

The leader pukes and gets some on my pants leg and my shoes. I can’t care about that right now. I only have my safety and survival to worry about. Hell, I feel like puking myself.

I lean close to him and bite his nose until tears are running down his face. Looking over my shoulder, I gauge the distance between the other two boys and me versus my apartment building. Pulling my keys from my pocket, I take one and consider jabbing the guy's eye out.

Instead, I release him and haul ass to my building. I hear their shouts and curses. Their footsteps behind me are closing in as I run up the steps.

I barely manage to get the key into the door of the building and close it before they're right at the door, pummeling their fists against it. I waste no time because I know they might try to kick it in or break the glass on the side of the door to get at me.

Running up three flights of stairs, I head down the hall to my apartment and shove the key into the door. I don't feel safe even after the door is closed and locked behind me. I slump to the floor as darkness surrounds me.

The sound of my heart beating in my chest is too loud, just as is the couple arguing next door to me. It's always something with those two. If they're not cursing each other out, they're having loud, angry sex or parties with their friends. They're rarely just quiet, except for early in the mornings and midafternoon when they're both away at work.

A loud thud sounds outside of my door. I jump to my feet, my heart speeding down a highway of fright. Using the moon's glow through the windows, I make my way to the kitchen and grab a knife before I cautiously return to the living room.

Sweat beads at my temples and under my armpits as I peer out the door's peephole.

Relief floods through me when I see it's nothing more than the man across the hall has passed out drunk right outside of his apartment door again. He makes it home from the bar and always passes out right in front of his door.

He'll somehow make his way inside by the early rays of the morning sun.

These are sounds that are comforting for me. They tell me that my world is the same as it was yesterday and the day before. These noises reassure me that nothing has changed, but inside, I know that's not true.

I know that I cannot possibly remain here for another night after what has happened. I would bet anything that those boys will be back to find me.

5 – PHANTOM



“Where the fuck is Raider?” Anarchy grouses, swiveling two metal balls between his fingers.

“He should be here in an hour. Says he got held up checking on some news about Aiello’s men in town,” I say.

“Held up how?” Cannon asks.

Shrugging my shoulders, I continue chewing a Twizzler.

There’s a storm brewing, all right. But it seems to be brewing between Cannon and Raider. The two have been bumping heads a lot, with Cannon feeling as if Raider is infringing on his role as Enforcer. I’m interested to see how long Anarchy will let it roll before he steps in. Part of me knows he won’t have to.

It’s no secret that Cannon’s crazy ass can shut Raider down in the blink of an eye. Raider may be the VP, but Cannon holds the true power between the two of them. If anything happened, I wouldn’t be surprised to see Anarchy bump Cannon up to the role of VP.

“I’ve been thinking all night, and I agree that we can’t ignore what was done to Roxie’s cousin. We know that Garcia was able to pull her kidnapping and murder off because Cappellacci had his back. And if Cappellacci allowed some shit like that to go down knowing that we were looking for her, that was a direct assault against the brotherhood,” Anarchy says.

“If we’re waging war against Cappellacci, we’re waging war against the Aiellos. Do we want that type of beef with the mob?” Dime asks.

“Looks like we’ve got no other choice. Looking the other way makes us easy targets for attacks from other fronts, and I’m not having that shit. We’re not laying down and looking the other way,” Anarchy says.

“Yeah, but what about the business we’ve acquired from them?” Terminator asks.

“Let me worry about that,” I speak up. “I’ve been checking into some other areas that we can expand into and other families we might do business with. If we go the route that I’m thinking we’d best cut ties with Cappellacci anyway.”

“Families as in the mafia?” Whiz asks.

“Yeah.”

Shaking his head, he says, “I’m not comfortable with being in bed with them.”

“We’re already ass deep,” I reply. “I could use your help digging into some men that I’ve been in talks with. If you can dig up the information we need, we could always keep that as an incentive to keep them on our side and protection against any retaliation from them.”

Whiz nods his head. “Okay.”

“Who’s the family?” Terminator asks.

“The Volkovs.”

“The fuck!” Terminator and Dime exclaim simultaneously. Whiz’s head spins around, and he glares at me.

“The fucking Volkovs? You want me to tap into information about them?”

I nod. Everyone turns to Anarchy, who nods.

“You okayed this?” Whiz asks.

“Hear Phantom out,” Anarchy says. Turning to Raider, who just walked in, he says, “This better be good.”

“It is,” Raider replies.

“All right, you can brief us after Phantom finishes.”

I bring Raider up to date on the discussion before proceeding. He doesn't say anything, but I can tell by his facial expression he's not happy about fucking with the Volkovs either.

"Daniil and Mikhail Volkov have clubs here in the States that they need some new product in. The other stuff is getting old, and it's readily available for other clubs to get their hands on. I've been talking to Mikhail, and they need something new and different. Something that takes the edge off and is just pricey enough to serve a specific clientele."

"You're thinking Doc's new product," Raider says.

"Exactly. I think it will be just what we both need. We've been looking for an exclusive clientele to push this to, one that would generate the type of money that will push our product sales to another stratosphere. They want it for their gentlemen's clubs."

"Okay, so what does Doc say?" Raider asks.

"He's onboard. Excited even for someone other than his normal guinea pigs to try it out. They're giving us thirty-five percent of the cut and an additional five percent if we'll take over transporting the product to the club managers," I say.

"Sweet," Dime says as Terminator whistles.

"They know we're in bed with Cappellacci?" Cannon asks.

"Yeah. Know that if we cut ties, he won't be happy," I say. "But they'll have our back if anything jumps off."

He grunts but doesn't say anything.

"Okay, what do you have?" Anarchy asks, turning to Raider.

"Just found out that Cappellacci has another shipment of girls coming in three weeks from yesterday from the Atlanta area."

"That's just two days before we roll out," Cannon says.

"Right. He's sending them overseas once he 'samples' the product. My source says he always tries them out before

pushing them to the buyer. Says he did the same to Roxie's cousin. Had those boys pick her up, drug her, and then passed her around at a party before giving Garcia the okay to kill her when she didn't perform the next night at the party."

Anger fires through me again. "I want to take that bastard out! Where's the shipment, and where's the party taking place?"

"Whoa! Slow up, bro," Dime says.

"You know I want to kill the fucker as bad as you, if not worse, but we've got to have a plan. Gotta find out what they did with Courtney's body. Roxie and her aunt deserve closure," Cannon says.

Everyone nods or mutters their agreement.

Memories roll through my mind. Not just old memories that will haunt me until the day that I breathe my last breath, but new memories. Fresh memories that are just as painful as the old ones.

A foul scent assails me as I recall the evening we burst into the farmhouse last summer to find two young Somalian women chained in a room. Their bodies were so bruised, eyes so haunted that I instantly connected with them.

They flinched at the slightest touch, whether it was Chainz freeing them from the locks or Bullet and Tantrum wrapping them in blankets to get them out of that hell hole.

We had gotten them to Duchess' place to hide out until they could decide their next steps. Amina had returned home, and I hadn't seen Hadiyah in a while, but Duchess said she got her own place after getting her job.

I guess she's trying to heal, but I still see their haunted eyes from that day in my nightmares. If I could revive the spirits of the bastards that did that to them, I would just so I could torture and kill them again.

We hadn't been sure at the time, but we eventually confirmed that Maxim Tate had bought Amina and Hadiyah from Cappellacci.

I couldn't wait to make his ass suffer the way countless women had at his hands. I believe that women are placed on this earth for our protection and for us to cherish them. I also believe they have free will, just like men, to live their lives as they please, though they can be monsters, too.

There are too many whores out here, like the ones at Duchess' place and the Roses, to justify stealing, kidnapping, and raping a woman. That's exactly what Cappellacci and his goons do, as well as all the buyers he does business with.

I don't give a fuck about most crimes that the mafia commits because I can't judge no man. We commit our own share in this MC, but I don't roll with sex or human trafficking. The shit just doesn't make sense to me.

"Phantom?" Anarchy calls.

"Yeah?"

"You missed most of what we just discussed?"

I stare at him and don't respond. He knows where I went. He and Cannon are the only ones that may have known where I went in my head.

"We've decided to make a move that Friday night when the shipment comes in," he explains.

"Not putting it to the MC to vote?" I ask.

"Nope. We'll let them know in Church, but that's it. This shit is going down in three weeks. Whiz, I need you with Raider to hack Cappellacci's computer to make sure Raider's source is right and that nothing changes. I also need you to ping Cappellacci's phone. Raider, see if you can get an invite to the party.

"Terminator, I'll need you and Cannon to grab four of the prospects to go with you, and Whiz keep track of Cappellacci's ass once you ping that line. Keep tabs on him, and don't let his ass out of your sight. I'll work on the other parts of this plan and have Tantrum and Cyclone get a crew together to get the women away from the bunkhouse."

“I want them on the road before we kick this shit off. We’re not running,” Cannon says, holding up a hand to stop any comments. “I have to make sure those women are safe. We can fight the war better when they’re not a concern of ours.”

“You’re right,” Anarchy agrees.

“I’ll get with Tantrum and Cyclone on pulling the right crew together to escort them to Texas a couple of days earlier,” Cannon says.

“Cool. I’ll reach out to Cyclops and see if we can have the women roll in a few days earlier,” Anarchy says of the Prez of the Fiery Disciples chapter in Dallas.

“Should we call in reinforcement from the LA and San Francisco chapters?” Dime asks.

“We’ll keep those chapters on standby.”

“Works for me,” Dime says.

“One more thing,” I say, recalling my conversation with Geisha the night before. “Snake and Falcon’s got loose lips.”

All eyes turn my way.

“Geisha questioned me about Roxie’s cousin.”

“She could’ve found out about her from Roxie,” Dime ventures.

“No, the fuck she wouldn’t! Rox doesn’t fuck with the Roses,” Cannon sneers.

Anarchy nods in agreement.

“What? Are they spilling secrets when they’re getting their cocks sucked?” Raider asks.

“Could be that bad. Geisha said she overheard them talking about it with each other. Mentioned she heard a storm was brewing.”

Raider’s eyes narrow at me before he turns his head. Something’s been off with him lately.

“Shut that shit down!” Anarchy thunders.

The last thing we want is for the women to know any of our business. It protects them in the event of an attack from an enemy trying to force them to talk or if they are ever pulled in by the cops. They can't be turned against us or used to hem our asses up. It also prevents them from turning on us.

"They shouldn't be talking about club business around the sluts or the Ol' Ladies," Whiz says.

We all nod in agreement.

Anarchy jumps from his chair and storms to the door. His boots thunder against the hardwood surface.

"Meeting's adjourned. Get the fuck busy doing your jobs!" he thunders, disappearing through his office door.

Cannon glances my way and raises an eyebrow but says nothing. Everyone disperses to do what we've been ordered to do. Now that our Prez is about to rain down terror on a couple of my brothers, my mind has traveled back to what I've learned about Cappellacci.

I feel sick to my stomach knowing more details about what those women have been through. I need to head to Duchess' place to slay some of my demons.

6 – DUCHESS



“Hey, End Game,” I greet as he unlocks the glass door.

“Duch,” he grunts. “Bout time.”

I watch as he locks the door back behind us, heads to the counter and begins to lock the cabinets.

He’s a mean bastard, one that I wouldn’t want to cross in the dark, or the day, for that matter. End Game looks like your worst nightmare come to life. A modern-day version of the devil walking the earth. He’s handsome with those narrow green bedroom eyes, angular face, and small lips.

It’s the piercings in his ears, nose, lips, and eyebrows that scare the hell out of most folks. That, paired with the perpetual scowl he wears, and he’s a giant at six-five with muscles. He’s not as big as Cannon, but taller and definitely meaner-looking.

“Where is she?”

“Back,” he says, tossing his head backward where his and Phantom’s office and the breakroom are in the dispensary.

“How long has she been here?”

“Since her shift at the diner ended around two this afternoon. I grabbed lunch around two, and she was sitting in a booth looking pitiful. Checked in on her, and she wouldn’t say much, but she was scared to go home. I had one of my employees ride over and pick her up and bring her back here with me. She’s been sitting back there the last four and a half hours,” he says, glancing at his watch. “I’m closed, but she refuses to go home.”

I frown at that bit of information. I received a text from End Game a couple of hours ago asking if I could come and

check on Hadiyah. He told me that she looked spooked but wouldn't talk to him, so he had no clue what was bothering her.

Since Hadiyah had stayed with me after her rescue, he figured I might be able to help. She's been on her own for just over two months now, and I thought she was doing good. She moved out not long after she started working.

Shrugging, I say, "I'll see what I can do."

He grunts again and then returns his attention to a couple that approaches as I'm walking away. The MC has to be taking down a few mill a year. Phantom claims it's all legit, but I have a hard time believing it. Not because of him; he's great as the MC's treasurer. Phantom is a businessman through and through, but I know Anarchy's rotten to his heart, and I can't see him doing anything legit. He's the most anti-government person I know.

I walk past the glass shelves on the wall sporting various strains of cannabis and head down a little hallway. The office door to my immediate right is open, and I can tell by the scattered paperwork that I must have disturbed End Game's closing process. The one opposite it belongs to Phantom, and a quick look through his door shows he's out.

I twist the knob, and as I suspected, it's locked. I head further down the hallway and stop at the doorway just before the bathroom. Peering inside, I see Hadiyah sitting at a table, pulling her fingers through her long, dark hair.

Taking a spot in the doorway, I lean against the doorframe, crossing my arms and legs.

I wait until she notices me, but she doesn't. "You've been sitting in this dispensary for the last four hours doing what?"

She jumps at the sound of my voice, and something like relief seems to settle over her worried expression. It doesn't quite remove the pinched lines around her eyes and mouth, but she calms down some.

"He called you?"

"Of course, he did. Said you wouldn't talk."

She shrugs.

“What’re you doing here?” I prod.

“Trying to figure out where to go. I...I can’t go back there.”

“Go back where?”

“My apartment. The diner.”

I lift an eyebrow at the last one.

“What happened?”

She picks at her nail for a long time, almost as if she hopes the question, or maybe even I, will go away. I’m patient, and I’m not going anywhere. It’s clear this girl is in some sort of trouble, and I don’t have much to offer, but I remember what she looked like when she and her sister first came to me. There’s no way that I can turn my back on her now.

“You can talk to me,” I encourage.

Her eyes well with tears, and she closes them tightly as if willing them to disappear. When she opens them again, they’re gone.

“I was walking home last night, and I was almost there when I ran into these three guys. I knew they were bad news, but I thought that I could make it.”

I listen closely as she describes the torture that she went through last night, the fear that she would be raped or beaten, if not both, and how she courageously made her escape. My heart goes out to her as she talks about how scared she was all night, even at familiar noises like the drunk across the hall or the arguing couple next door.

“What are you gonna do, Hadiyah?”

She looks up at me like an innocent and hopeful kid. It breaks something inside of me.

“Can I come back to your place?”

“And do what?”

“Stay until I can figure something out.”

“I thought we agreed that you leaving the house was what was best for you, Hadiyah. You’ve got too many fucked up memories to be comfortable at the house.”

“It’s not so bad in the apartment over the garage,” she pleads desperately.

Pushing off the doorframe, I step inside the room and take a seat across from her in a waxy orange chair. “I don’t know, Hadiyah. I’m worried that it won’t be good for you mentally. You’ve been doing so well and—”

“Look at me!” she says loudly. “Do I look like I’m doing all that well? I work at the diner where men feel free to touch and grab me, and Matt says nothing but ‘please the customers’ or ‘the customers are always right.’ I live several blocks from there, where the neighborhood only gets worse. I slept for maybe an hour last night, scared and jumping at every little sound.

“This is not good for me. I spent the entire walk to work this morning looking over my shoulder, scared these guys would jump out of an alley. Every time that bell over the door dings, I’m jumping and looking. I’ve messed up three orders today, and Matt’s threatened to fire me at least that many times. Please, Duchess, I cannot stay there a moment longer.”

Tears well in her eyes, and she swipes at them, and for the first time, I notice the dark half-moon circles under her eyes. I’m guessing they are a result of her sleepless night and the worrying she’s been doing.

How horrible to have escaped being brutalized and sexually assaulted only to go to a better place and feel that same victimization. I huff out another breath and slant my gaze back to her.

“What would you do for money, Hadiyah?”

“Couldn’t you find...work for me?”

I laugh unexpectedly, a harsh sound that startles her.

“Doing what, Hadiyah? The only jobs I give are ones where women lie on their backs or get on their knees, both of which you aren’t qualified for.”

Her almond-shaped brown eyes stare pitifully back at me.

I reach across the table and grab her hands, and she tenses slightly. “Honey, you’re not cut out for the life that I live. You’re innocent; you’ve been through enough already, and I can’t guarantee you that the men that come through my home would be any different.”

“I was thinking of maybe cleaning the house.”

“Those men see you, and they think that you’re part of the posse, and they’re going to want—”

“They’re businessmen, not these crude street boys!” she interrupts.

“Honey, men all the same. Doesn’t matter their background, bank account, or ethnicity. The ones that walk through my door can be just as cruel and unusual as the ones on the street and sometimes far worse. After all, it was those types of men that were responsible for you and your sister becoming a victim of trafficking.”

“Please, Duchess. I don’t have anywhere else to go. Going back home...it’s not an option for me.”

I sigh and roll my eyes. There aren’t too many people that I have compassion for anymore. When you grow up the way that I did with a father who communicates that women are worthless, and you find yourself in a world that reinforces the message, you seldom give a fuck about others.

Yet, there’s something about Hadiyah that tugs at my heartstrings. An innocence that I cannot ignore.

“What about money, Hadiyah? You’ll need some sort of income. Even if I let you live in the apartment over the garage rent-free, you need food and other necessities that I cannot provide. And no, you can’t clean because the other ladies are responsible for that, and I don’t have to pay them.”

“I’ll find something! I promise!” she says, latching onto the little hope that I’m giving her.

I stare at her for a minute too long and see the hope starting to dim the longer it takes me to respond.

“Everything okay, back here?” End Game asks, standing in the doorway.

“I guess so.”

“You need something from me?”

His answer catches me off-guard, and I stare at him for several long seconds before he grimaces and then turns in the doorway. I’ve never heard End Game assist anyone who wasn’t his brother. I guess this sweet little girl is doing a number on us both. She doesn’t belong here in our world. She’s not tough enough to make it, but she’ll have to come to that awareness in her own time.

“End Game!” I say just as he disappears through the doorway.

I hear the thud of his boots as he returns. He looks at me from under that hooded gaze but doesn’t say anything. “We could use your help.”

He continues to stare, and I know that he isn’t prepared for my next statement.

“Hadiyah needs a job.”

He lifts an eyebrow, and I hear a slight gasp from her, but I don’t turn to acknowledge it. Instead, I continue staring at him, waiting for a response. Anything.

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“She can’t work at the diner anymore, and I can’t offer her anything,” I say pointedly.

He snorts and rolls his eyes. “What do I have?”

“A possible position in a safe space where she’d have guaranteed protection.”

“Ain’t no bodyguards up in this place.”

“No, but it’s run by members of one of the deadliest MCs in the state. One nobody would dare mess with or run up in their business, starting shit with one of its employees. Just your presence here alone is enough to guarantee her safety, not

to mention Phantom's presence. She's got cashiering experience."

"What's she know about weed?"

"You can teach her. She's got a damn brain, she can learn. She's beautiful and will attract potential customers. Frees you to do other shit...whatever it is you do when you're not selling cannabis."

"Got help already."

"John, Alicia, and Mike. You could use another body. I happen to know that Mike's moving back to L.A. soon, and you'll be short a body."

He frowns at me, and I know that he wonders how I know so much about his business, and I didn't get it from Phantom either. That asshole doesn't share anything.

"Besides, she'll be a lot more trustworthy than Mike could ever be. Loose lips sink ships," I say smartly, leading him to believe that's where I got the information when, in fact, it was John.

End Game turns his attention back to Hadiyah and sizes her up for several seconds before he shakes his head.

"Why not?"

"Didn't say I wouldn't," he barks. "Just questioning my sanity for agreeing to this stupid shit."

I smirk and stand. "You won't regret it."

"You'd better hope not."

Turning to Hadiyah, he instructs, "Be here at ten in the morning."

She smiles for the first time since my arrival. "Thank you so much, End Game."

"Come on. We'll have to get your things from your apartment," I say.

"Don't worry about it. Give me the key, and I'll get it taken care of," End Game says, surprising us both.

With shaky fingers, Hadiyah reaches into her purse and removes a single key, which she hands to End Game. He gives a brief nod and then storms back to the front.

“You ready?” I ask.

“I can’t thank you enough.”

“Look, it’s temporary, Hadiyah. Just six months, okay? You need to be saving your money to find a safe place after that.”

“Thank you,” she says humbly.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

7 – PHANTOM



“Fancy seeing you here,” she greets, coming out of the kitchen with a glass of wine.

“Need to clear my mind,” is all I say.

“Who do you want? Cashmere? Genie?”

“You.”

I see the surprise in her eyes and even see the yearning desperation. Maybe I shouldn't have said that to her, but it's true. Tonight, all I need is to bury myself in something familiar. The one woman who understands my demons and knows how to truly slay them. She's the only one who doesn't judge me, and she holds my secrets close to her heart because to reveal them would be to reveal who she truly is.

“I'm not in the mood for your shit tonight, Phantom.”

“Didn't ask you to be. I'm in the mood for it, and that's all that matters.”

Duchess doesn't say a word but heads to the stairwell that leads to her bedroom. It's separate from the rest of the house. I don't wait for an invitation but follow her.

She walks into her room and throws off her mauve silk robe displaying her creamy breasts, rose-tipped nipples, and hairless mound.

“Is this what you want?”

I don't say a word. Just remove my cut and then my boots. Her eyes widen because she knows this won't be a quick visit. The closer I walk to her, the more I can hear those harsh breaths coming from her.

I know that it pains her every time that I visit her, but I can't seem to help myself. All we do is hurt each other, but like moths to a flame, we're drawn to that pain.

When I finally reach her, I grab her hips harder than I intended. She flinches and bites her bottom lip. Lowering my head, I pull her lip from her mouth with my teeth. Licking it, I relish every moan she releases before I suck on it.

Duchess cups my cock, and I grab her hand, twisting it cruelly as I pull back.

“You know the fucking rules.”

“It's always about control with you, Phantom. You know you're not in control as much as you seem to think.”

“No one could remind me of that ugly fact better than you, huh?”

Her eyes narrow, and I pull my wallet from my pocket. Opening it, I pull out ten crisp one-hundred-dollar bills that I just removed from the bank and toss them on her dresser.

She eyes them and closes her eyes. “You don't have to—”

“Yes, I do. Don't want you to get the wrong impression.”

“It's not that much anyway!” she spits.

I know that I've pissed her off, insulted her. I can't help myself. It's the only way to keep that wall up between us and yet the only way that I can have her, too. She'll accept nothing less.

“Whatever. I'm staying.”

She turns away from me, and I know she's trying to gather her composure. I give her a few minutes as I walk around her room, checking out the lotion and perfume bottles on her dresser. There are no pictures in her bedroom except for a framed one of her mother.

Other than that, she has no personal mementos, which makes me wonder again if she ever engages in sexual encounters with any of the clients that come through here. I

know they mostly have sex with Aria, Cashmere, Elise, Genie, Maisie, and Shelby.

I'm jealous where Duchess is concerned, and I have no right to be. When she turns back to me, she has the sultry look on her face that I've come to expect. The one that tells me that Duchess is no longer with me and that she's in acting mode, ready for whatever I have planned.

Unzipping my jeans, I pull my dick out and stroke it.

She licks her lips as she stares at me.

"On your knees."

A spark of fury flashes in her eyes, but she does as I ask. She licks her lips one more time before she clamps them around me. I grab her long, blonde hair and roughly shove myself down her throat.

"You're a whore, Duchess, just like your father and your mother. No matter how many ways you turn it, you're the daughter of whores. It's your fucking destiny."

She sucks me deeper, wraps her hand around my cock and jerks me off as she caresses my balls.

"You look good with a mouthful of dick. You were fucking born to this life," I growl as I pump furiously inside her mouth.

The pale pink lipstick that colored her lips smears onto my cock, leaving her lips a paler shade of pink than before. She pulls me out of her mouth and licks my shaft up and down before dipping lower to suck my balls.

"You love sucking dick, Duchess?"

"Mm-hmm," she moans.

"You love sucking it more than you like taking it, doncha?"

She freezes for a moment, and she knows what I'm referencing.

"Take this dick, bitch!" I growl, grabbing her jaws and forcing them open further.

Closing her eyes, she focuses on the task at hand again, making me feel good. Duchess loves our love-hate relationship as much as I do. She needs it, same as me.

The brutal reminders of who she is also remind her of why we could never be.

I shove myself further down her throat until slob is running down the sides of her mouth. Shove until she's gagging. Only then am I satisfied and pull myself back.

"You may get off the floor now," I tell her.

She blinks rapidly, swipes at her eyes and does as I tell her.

"Are we fucking tonight or not?"

"Get on the bed," I tell her.

When she's laid out before me, I casually peruse the length of her body. I see the bruising starting to form on the spot where I grabbed her roughly.

A part of me feels bad for how I've behaved with her, but I know that Duchess doesn't accept tenderness. In fact, she hates it.

After I cover myself, I spread her legs wide and find my place between them. When I settle into her, I push her legs up until her legs rest on my shoulders.

There's nothing sweet or kind about the way that Duchess and I come together. I shove myself roughly inside of her, forcing a grunt from her partially open lips. Her eyes fly open at the unusual amount of force that I use, more than normal.

Pushing her legs back and toward her shoulders, I dig deep inside of her.

"Make me feel you, Phantom. I can't fucking feel you," she lies.

It's a game that she gets off on, taunting me about my size until I humiliate her more.

"Are you even hard yet? Or did you fall asleep in there?" she asks, even as I shove myself deeper inside.

“I. Can’t. Fucking feel you!” she cries out as her face turns red.

Tears are slipping from her closed eyelids. I’m so deep inside of her. She rocks back and forth with me, gyrating wildly as I grab her nipples and tug hard.

“Maybe I should call in a real man,” she laughs through the tears. “Maybe someone like Cannon. Or End Game. Now that’s a real man.”

I bend down and replace my hand with my teeth, roughly biting her nipple until she’s screaming and shouting, “I fucking hate you!”

Only then do I remove my mouth from her breast and place my hand around her throat.

“That’s a good whore. Tell me how you really feel,” I say as my hand slowly closes.

“You’re a bastard. A bastard even a mother couldn’t love,” she says.

My hand grows tighter and tighter as she squeezes my cock tightly. I pull out of her pussy and shove myself roughly into her ass.

“Phantom!” she screams.

I’m not gentle as I beat her ass up, but from previous experience, I know that she can take it. Yes, it will be red and swollen for a couple of days, but she loves it.

“What’s in your ass, Duchess?”

“A dick.”

“Is it big enough for you?”

“Yes!”

I pull out. “Turn over. Ass up!”

She does, burying her face in the sheets. I spread her ass cheeks and find my place within her hole again. Once more, I murderously claim her ass until she’s sniveling and juice is

running down her thighs. Then I pull out, remove the condom, and shoot my shit all over her back.

Duchess lays on the bed, heaving as she tries to claim her breath. I head into her bathroom and turn on the shower. Only five minutes pass before she joins me and washes my body in silence. When I'm done, I exit the shower and return to her bed, leaving her alone to cleanse herself.

“What’s going on?” Duchess asks when she climbs into the bed beside me.

“Nothing,” I reply, staring at the ceiling.

“Another victim?”

“Always.”

“What’s the story this time?”

Shaking my head, I reply, “It’s just the shit he takes ‘em through. He passes them around at parties to be ‘sampled’ before he sells them. He’s got another ‘shipment’ coming through, and he’ll do the same before he sends them overseas.”

“So, what are you guys gonna do about it?”

“Not my place to do shit.”

“You’re lying,” she says, turning away from me.

Duchess knows that I’ll never discuss club business with her. It’s the way that it is. The same rules applied when her father was the VP. Nothing has changed, and nothing will ever change. It’s the life we’re patched into.

“Why do you torture yourself this way, Phantom?”

“Same reason you do.”

She flips around on the bed facing me with anger written across her face in the scowl lines on her forehead, the narrowing of her eyes, and the way her lips are turned down.

“You think I want to be like this? To do this to myself?”

“It’s a choice, Duchess. You didn’t have to come back.”

“It was better than selling myself for large sums of cash to rich bastards who were crueler than the ones that I knew.”

“So, you return home and sell them to broke bastards?”

“These men that are clients aren’t broke. They’re not as rich as the men in the circles that I ran in, but they’re not broke. Besides, they can’t touch me. They may want me, but they can’t have me.”

“You’ll always be a tease, Duchess. That’s your problem now. That’s what led us to that night that—”

She climbs out of bed. “I don’t want to talk about that night!”

I jump out of the bed and grab her by the shoulder, spinning her around. “You don’t fucking have a choice!”

“I do! You can get out!” she says, pointing at the door.

I stare at her, and we stand in silence for several long seconds.

“Not leaving, so fuck off,” I sneer, turning back to the bed.

“Fuck you,” she mutters, climbing onto the chaise lounge opposite the bed.

“Quit acting stupid and get in your bed.”

“Don’t wanna be near you.”

“That’s a lie.”

She smirks, gets off the chaise, and joins me again.

“Why’re you so scared to face your past?” I ask.

“Don’t wanna struggle with nightmares like you.”

“You chose your poison, Duchess. I didn’t choose what happened to me. There’s a clear difference.”

“You chose how you handled that night. Could’ve walked away.”

“And left you to what? Be raped?”

“I could’ve handled myself, you know.”

“Yeah, cuz you were doing a great job of it that night.”

“Said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t you ever think about what you did to create the situation?”

“I feel bad, okay? I can’t turn back to that day. Just look forward. It’s all I got.”

“You act as if you didn’t have options. Coming back here to be a madam wasn’t your only option.”

“It was, Phantom. I had nothing and no way to take care of myself. So, I had to return to my inheritance. A whore house with a few struggling whores. I turned this business into the escort service that it is, and we’re doing well for ourselves.”

“Look, you could’ve come back to the clubhouse. It was your choice not to. You knew we would’ve protected you.”

“No, I couldn’t have. Just come to the MC for what? To be a club whore the way my mother had been before my dad claimed and married her, only to keep fucking around on her? You think that’s what I want for my life?”

“You didn’t have to. I would’ve protected you; you know that. Made you mine.”

She scoffs, and something deep within clenches. “They wouldn’t have accepted that. You and I both know it.”

“Why, cuz I’ve always been the half-breed?”

“Exactly, and they wouldn’t have respected me. In fact, they would’ve respected me less than they do now.”

“I’ve earned my rights. I get respect, Duchess. You underestimate my power and overestimate yours, but what do I know? Seems to me you were looking for an excuse to be a whore.”

“Shut up,” she says, turning away and pulling the sheets up over her shoulder.

We lay in silence for a while, and eventually, her soft snuffles let me know she wasn’t asleep. I’m not about to disturb her moment. So, I lay as still as possible until my own

demons claimed me, pulling me into the depths of a restless sleep.

8 – HADIYAH



I had the best sleep this past week. I haven't slept like that since I came to America. The first time that I stayed with Duchess, it was hard to sleep because I was always scared someone would come and steal my sister and me. After a while, I grew a bit more comfortable, but not too much.

When I save some money, I'm thinking about asking Duchess if I can stay a while longer. I don't mind paying her. It's just a place where I feel safe because I know the girls and Duchess are close by. It's a safe neighborhood.

Today is my third day at the dispensary. Duchess has paid for an Uber to take me back and forth to work until I get my first paycheck.

Every evening, I go home with a headache from learning the details of the products we sell, the different strains: Indica, Sativa, and the hybrids. Not to mention learning the aromas, tastes, and colors of the different strains.

It's ironic, really. Before my sister Amina and I were kidnapped, I had just finished my studies at university and received my Bachelor of Arts degree. I was preparing to become a teacher for primary students. Part of my graduation present was our trip to Somalia.

The cause of celebration in my life quickly turned to one of devastation. Since that happened, I have not thought once about my initial goal to become a teacher.

I have no goals or dreams at the moment. Just learning this new game I've entered. Alicia, one of the budtenders, is nice. She tells me to think about the various meals the diner offers and the specialty plates. That advice helped a little, but I'm

still overwhelmed. It doesn't help that End Game moves around here with powerful energy that consumes the place.

Every time he steps out of his office and into the open store area, he looks like he wants to kill someone. I know that he's nice, though. He was one of the few brothers from the MC who checked on my sister and me a couple of times after they saved us.

The only other person who checked on us more than him is the man who is walking through the doors now.

I've been fascinated with him since I first laid eyes on him that day the Fiery Disciples saved Amina and me from hell. There was something in his eyes that I recognized that day that felt familiar to me. He was so angry full of rage, and it seemed like he would lose his mind when he stepped into that room.

I remember that day so vividly. I'd been expecting Anne or one of the men to walk through the door. I could hear the ruckus on the other side, but I wasn't certain what it was.

When he came into the room and saw us, he looked as if he wanted to cry at first. Then, his sadness morphed into something else right before my eyes. There was a deadliness in his eyes that day, and as much as I don't condone violence when he slapped Anne, a small river of vindication flowed through me.

Then, it seemed as if he started spiraling out of control because the other bikers had to calm him down. Cannon was the one that brought him down again, but he'd had to use force on him.

I watch him now with his helmet tucked under his arm and black jeans fitting him perfectly. Raven hair, so dark and shiny it's reminiscent of a body of water on a moonless night.

Exotic, close-set dark eyes scan the room before resting on me. It's all the other things that most women might find attractive about him. The way that his Henley hugs his long, muscular arms, the fit of his jeans, or his bowed legs.

For me, it's the eyes. They look haunted and fearless at once, full of fire but also pain. Those eyes look like mine as if

they've seen a thousand stories of loss, torture, and pain. I want to know more about him and his story because everyone has one.

The chatter between Alicia, Mike, and John ceases as they eye him and nod or wave. He doesn't even acknowledge them, but his eyes remain on me until he passes me, heading to the office.

"So fucking sexy," Alicia says.

"Ask me, and I think the guy's a loon. Never says shit," Mike complains.

"Well, you don't gotta worry about it no more," John reminds Mike.

Mike snickers and then looks at me. "Might wanna grab a can of mace or something. The guy's crazy. Don't get caught alone in this shop with him."

"End Game won't let shit happen to her," John says.

"Nah, he's been busy sneaking down the way to the new bookstore. Think he's got a thing for the chick that owns it. Besides, he's not all wrapped tight either," Mike replies.

"Yeah? I can't tell the way you're always up in his face," Alicia says.

"Just wanted to find out more about the MC."

"Like he'd tell you anything," she says, chuckling and shaking her head. "Hadiyah, that's Phantom. He helps manage this place. I mean, I guess. He doesn't interact with the customers or even us. He just handles business in that back office with the door closed when he comes."

I won't tell her that I know him. Disclosing that information will only lead to more questions, questions that I am not ready to answer.

"And keeps her nose open," Mike says before walking around the counter.

I watch as Mike walks away to assist a customer, and John does the same.

“Don’t pay him any attention. I don’t think End Game or Phantom are bad guys...well, maybe they are, but I doubt they’d hurt you. Honestly, I feel safer with them here than when they’re not. You don’t have to worry about Phantom, though. He’s hardly ever here. We see him maybe once or twice a week,” Alicia informs me.

“Do you like him?” I ask, watching her cheeks pinken.

“I mean, yeah, he’s sexy as fuck, but I’m not fucking with him like that. Darren would kill me.”

“Who’s Darren?”

“My boyfriend of the last two years. Besides, I’ve heard a lot about the Fiery Disciples. As sexy as most of them are, I’m not trying to get caught up in bullshit,” Alicia says.

“That makes sense,” I reply.

“What about you? You got a boyfriend?”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t have time.”

She laughs. “What else do you do other than work here? I bet you’re a virgin, aren’t you? Mm-hmm, you’re a virgin. I can smell it on you.”

She laughs again and walks away.

My heart squeezes in my chest at her words. She has no clue, and I can’t help but wonder if a girl as shallow as Alicia could survive half of what I’ve been through. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, though.

I push those thoughts away and turn back to study the book that End Game gave me this morning when I first arrived. He says that it will help me learn about the products the shop offers. I feel as if I’m in high school again.

The store stays busy most of the day. It’s a Saturday, and John says it’s their busiest day for sales other than Friday. Mike says most people are restocking their supplies so that they can party all weekend.

I finally get a break around two to eat lunch, and my feet are killing me, along with my head. I’m halfway through my

sandwich when I sense someone in the doorway.

Turning my head, my heart drops when I notice it's Phantom. I break eye contact and place my sandwich back in the foil wrapper. I've lost my appetite.

I have not been attracted to anyone since my sister and I were kidnapped. The idea of being with a man or close to a man terrifies me, and I don't like to think that I'll have to live the rest of my life this way. Knowing that those bastards robbed me of a fulfilling life fills me with rage. I'm curious, though, about the lure I feel to Phantom.

"Hadiyah," he says.

His voice is mellow and low. The odd thing is I'm not afraid of him the way that I am most men. Just like with End Game, Phantom makes me feel safe.

I nod quickly, clear my throat, and reply, "Yes."

His eyes narrow and flash with something unfamiliar before he nods.

"Um...did...do I need to go back from break?"

He shakes his head. "No. I didn't know you left the diner."

"You disappeared," I accuse.

"Didn't think my visits were good for you."

I lift an eyebrow. "Or you were uncomfortable with me constantly asking you to stay for dinner."

"Look, I'm not the best person for you to hang around. Not while you're trying to heal."

"I should be able to make that decision."

He nods and then does what he's best at, changing the subject.

"I'm guessing the others don't know," he says, jerking his head backward in the direction of the front of the store.

"No, they don't, and they don't know that I know you. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Of course," he replies as his eyes narrow.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so harsh. It’s just that...”

“You don’t need to explain.”

“Thank you.”

Nodding, he pushes off the door frame and says, “Let me know if you need anything,” then he disappears.

My parents were killed during a traffic stop at an illegal roadblock in our homeland of Somalia. My sister and I were American-born, but our parents moved to the UK when we were just five and seven.

The trip to Somalia was to be our first time visiting our homeland, the land of our parents’ birth and youth. Unfortunately, it would become the site of devastation and heartache. Amina and I were kidnapped after vigilantes shot my parents down in front of us.

We were held in a dark, abandoned warehouse for what we eventually realized was two months with little food or water. Chained to the walls during the day and the bed at night robbed us of our strength and was taxing on our mental health.

The day when we were finally moved, both Amina and I were hopeful that we might escape. Unfortunately, that wasn’t to be. We were placed in a truck in crates along with several other women and traveled for a long time. By the time we reached our next destination, another nightmare awaited us.

When we were removed from the crates, it was only to be injected with something that knocked us out for an excessive amount of time. Each time, we would wake up in a new location. This went on for quite some time until the final trip landed us in hell. I woke up and somehow knew that I was back in America. The thought thrilled me for only a moment until I came face-to-face with my new captors and Anne, our keeper.

There were other girls there, and they all looked resigned that this was their new normal. They seemed ready to accept their fate. Amina and I did not do the same. Our parents, Iimaan Omar Duale and Sabia Abdir Liban were strong fighters. They were resilient even in the face of death.

We are not weak women who cower in the face of danger, but we stand for what we believe in and for what is right. We attack injustice and fight for freedom, and that's what I'm determined to always do.

My sister, Amina, returned to the UK. She wanted to reclaim the life she'd had before, saying that she refused to allow our oppressors to rob her of that. I know better. There's no way that we can ever return to the life we'd once known.

We are different individuals, different women who could never be the same. While I accepted that it wasn't as easy for Amina to accept, she was fighting to prove that she was the same as she'd always been.

We had been held hostage for a year. Three months in the first location with no contact with others, just me and her and our captors. Then we'd traveled to a few different locations where we'd stay at each of them for a few days or weeks before moving on again. Arriving in America was our last spot.

Anna was a bitch. I didn't understand how a woman could be so cruel to other women, how she could lure other females into a sex trafficking industry. The other girls that were there weren't kidnapped and sold along a route the way that Amina and I were.

They told stories of Anna pretending to represent a modeling agency. She had passed out flyers looking for girls that fit the criteria for a commercial or ad. When the unsuspecting victims arrived for their interview, they were caught off-guard in either the restroom or the hallway, subdued with chloroform and taken away from the premises. Another girl said she'd met Anna on the side of the road when her car broke down. Then there were the runaways.

Anna had always pretended to befriend them only to lure them into the sex trafficking web. Amina and I were the only ones that hadn't met her. Perhaps that was why she'd been especially cruel to us because she had no part in our capture.

Our captors drooled over our dark skin, large brown eyes, and every other feature that made us different from the other

girls. Sickening enough, Anna seemed to envy that.

“Hey, break’s over,” Alicia says, sticking her head into the breakroom.

“Oh, yeah, okay,” I mutter, tucking my sandwich back into my lunch bag.

“You okay?” Alicia asks, walking into the room with me. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Or maybe had an encounter with one,” Mike snickers, joining us in the breakroom and grabbing a soda out of the refrigerator.

“An encounter with a ghost?” Alicia smirks, crossing her arms and shaking her head at Mike.

“Yeah. Like Phantom. Thought I saw him come back here.” He makes a spooky sound and eerie laughter. “What the fuck kind of name is Phantom? Who does he think he is, Casper the Friendly Ghost?”

Before he says a word, I feel the atmosphere change. It’s charged with his energy, a dangerous, pulsing heat, threatening to combust at any moment.

The hairs on the nape of my neck stand up, and my eyes are involuntarily drawn to the doorway. Alicia is standing stock still, and the smile on Mike’s face drops, and I see him gulp.

Slowly, Mike turns to look over his shoulder and locks his gaze with Phantom’s, who’s standing in the doorway right behind him. The color seeps from Mike’s face, leaving him as pale as a ghost.

Intimidating would be too tame a word to describe the look in Phantom’s eyes or the scowl on his face. For once, I’m thankful that his attention isn’t on me, not with that lethal gaze he’s slicing and dicing Mike with.

It’s almost as if Phantom has cast a spell on the entire room because no one utters a word or dares to move. Every molecule is suspended in the air, hoping not to be noticed.

The stare looks as if Phantom's reached inside of Mike and snatched the boy's soul, grabbed it around the throat, crushed it, dragged it to hell, smacked the shit out of it, and tossed it back again.

"Nah, more like the Grim muthafuckin' reaper," Phantom says in a dark tone.

Mike turns back to look at us, his eyes slowly blinking as if returning to himself. When we turn to look up once more, Phantom has disappeared.

9 – PHANTOM



“Why is she here?” I ask, chewing on the end of a fresh Twizzler.

“Work,” End Game says.

His boot-clad feet are propped onto his desk as he takes another bite from his burger. Burgers that Terminator, our sergeant-at-arms, dropped off for us earlier from his diner, *Dark Horse Diner*, when he learned we’d be staying late for inventory tonight.

I glare at him, and finally, he nods.

“She was scared to stay at the diner that she worked at. Said she couldn’t go back there or the little apartment that she’d been renting.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got a lot of fucking why’s and ain’t telling me shit about why you want to know,” End Game grouses.

I continue chewing my Twizzler and don’t bother to reply, but I don’t have to. He sighs, kicks his boots down, and takes another large bite of his burger.

Chomping around it with a mouthful of food, End Game says, “All I know is some dudes roughed her up, said some shit that sounded close enough to rape, she freaked out and couldn’t make herself return to that neighborhood. Gave up her apartment and her job.”

I nod. I need names and descriptions, but I won’t bother End Game with that shit. I’ve got my ways of finding out what’s going on in the streets, and I will find out.

A glance at my watch tells me that it's almost ten. We've done all we're going to do for the day. It's the witching hour. I push back from my seat and grab my helmet off the chair beside me.

"We done?"

I nod.

"Where the fuck you going?" he asks.

I don't say a word. Just head out the door. Not much to be said. My brother knows that I don't waste time on words. With one guess, he already knows where I'm going. He just doesn't know why.

"Wait! I'm fucking coming," he growls around another chomp of the burger.

By the time I've started my bike, I can see him heading for the door. The purr of *Abyss* between my thighs is satisfying, and the hum of my engine as I rev it feeds the hunger growing inside of me.

Someone will pay for the pain they've caused, and I'm on a mission to find out who and why.

I pull to the edge of the lot once End Game hops on his bike, *Agony*.

We peel off down Retribution Highway towards the inner city. We pass several cars and a truck as we speed down the highway. Large, well-lit buildings replace twinkling stars and the night changes from a beautiful midnight blue to a smog grey.

The downtown buildings give way to abandoned warehouses and projects as we exit the highway. Sporadic streetlights shine on Ranger Boulevard, the haven for drugs, alcohol, and prostitution. The police rarely bother to come down this street.

Our bikes slow to a crawl as I look around for the sources that will give me the information I'm looking for. When I spot one of them, I turn my engine off and get off my bike. End Game is at my side as I approach the sheisty-looking guy in

the black skinny jeans, black puffer coat, white ballcap, and blue hoodie.

“Dré.”

He turns around with a scowl on his face until he sees me. Passing a package to the guy standing in front of him, he jogs in my direction.

“Aye! Yo, Phantom! Wassup, dawg?” he says, bumping my fist and nodding once at End Game.

He eyes End Game warily, and I know that he’s cautious about strangers on his turf. Men like Dré are always wary of undercover cops, but he should know me well enough by now to know that I don’t fuck with the police like that.

“I need some names.”

“Okay, what kinda business you looking for?”

End Game shakes his head and says, “The murdering kind.”

Dré shakes his head and holds his hands in the air. With a nervous chuckle, he says, “Nah, dawg. You got the wrong one. I’m not into that shit. Aye, yo, Phantom, why you bring this deranged-looking cat around here asking shit like that?”

“Not asking you to murder anyone, Dré. Just looking for info,” I say, eyeing End Game, who always gets too far ahead of the plan.

I signal End Game with a nod, and he pulls out his phone, flipping to a picture that he took of an unsuspecting Hadiyah.

“You seen this girl?” End Game asks.

Dré looks from End Game to me warily, and I nod, letting him know it’s okay and that he can trust End Game.

“Yeah, I might’ve seen her around a time or two. Fine, pretty lil thang, but she don’t got shit to say to nobody round here.”

“She’s a friend of mine,” I say.

“Yo, word?” Dré replies with an eye lift. “Ain’t seen her around in about a week, though.”

“Word on the street is she was attacked by some fellas from around here,” End Game says.

Dré’s eyes shift side to side, and he pulls at the stringy beard at his chin before licking his lips. He pulls the ball cap lower over his eyes and then pulls his hoodie up over that.

“Dré, I’m not fucking around,” I say, leveling a gaze at him.

“Damn, Phantom. Come on, man,” he pleads. “I ain’t no snitch.”

“Do we look like the fucking cops?” End Game asks.

“Names,” I say.

Dré’s eyes dart in my direction again, and I can see the moment the resistance seeps from him. His shoulders sag, and he hangs his head down. Looking around again, he looks back at me and then says, “A’ight, dawg. You didn’t get shit from me, though. Okay?”

I continue staring and waiting for the information that I need. One way or another, Dré knows that I will get the information even if I have to beat his ass.

I’m not on my turf and don’t want to create an uncomfortable situation for my brother and me, but I’d do it in a heartbeat if necessary. Shit might get dicey, but I have no doubt we’d come out on top.

“Dirty Red, Salt, and Meechie. Usually, can find them on Eighth and Baker Streets,” he says.

I nod and turn away, not waiting for another word. I know that Dré does the same because he doesn’t want to be caught talking to us for too long after whatever goes down.

“How do you know these cats?” End Game asks as we stride back to our bikes.

I slant him a glance. He nods and says, “Yeah, I know, I know. The less I know, the better.”

That's the motto that I live by. It helps me to protect the people that I care about, but it's not only me who lives by that, but our entire MC does. We don't share information with anyone outside of the brotherhood, not even the club whores, or the Ol' Ladies. It's for their protection, as well as our own.

We hop on our bikes and ride a couple of blocks over to Eighth and Baker Streets. At this time of night, there are a lot of people hanging out, walking to the diner, the local drug store, the liquor store, and a gas station across the street from the others.

Some people are eyeing us, but not many. I spot a hooker that I know and nod my head towards an alley across the way. End Game follows me to the dark alley, and we pull down it until we're out of sight. It's not long before Peaches sashays down the dark alley toward us. She hesitates for only a moment until I flash my lights at her.

"Hey, whatcha got?" she asks.

There's no way that she'd ever mistake me for coming to get sex from her. She and I are strictly business.

"Descriptions."

She lifts an eyebrow and continues to pop her gum.

"Dirty Red, Salt, and Meechie."

Her eyes widen, and she starts coughing. I wait patiently for her to regain her composure.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Don't be comin' round here asking me no shit like that! You tryna get me killed, Phantom?" she asks, looking over her shoulder.

I slowly climb off my bike, holding a hand out to tell End Game to stay in position.

"I fucking look like I give a shit, Peaches?"

"Come on, Phantom. Man, I thought we were better than that."

"Descriptions," I repeat, taking one step closer.

She shivers and purses her lips as she looks at the ground.

“These punks got you that scared?” End Game asks.

She looks at him and shakes her head. “Nah, I’m not scared of them, but...”

“But what?” he coaxes.

“Salt’s daddy is my pimp. Ain’t nobody fucking with Joe Johnson like that. Nigga crazy as hell,” she says.

I smirk at her, showing just a little of my teeth as I tilt my head.

“Okay, okay, Phantom! Damn! You win. Spooky ass.”

She shakes her head again and pulls out a cigarette. I watch as she lights it with shaky hands. “Don’t fuck around and get me killed, Phantom. I ain’t playing.”

“I’m running out of patience, Peaches.”

“Okay, okay. Dirty Red is a tall, light-skinned dude with big hazel eyes and red hair. He always wears this Lakers cap, and he has earrings in both ears. Meechie is a lil’ chubby, brown-skinned boy with light brown eyes and dimples. Got sandy-brown curly hair.”

She takes a couple of puffs on her cigarette, and I know it’s the last description that she’s scared to give me. End Game doesn’t have the patience that I do.

Getting off his bike, he walks up beside me. “If he ain’t gon’ put a bullet in your ass, I will,” he says, pulling out a gun and aiming it at her.

I place my hand over the muzzle and push it down, never breaking eye contact with Peaches, who is more afraid of me than she is that damn gun End Game is holding.

“Salt...that’s Joe’s boy. He ‘bout as dark as his daddy with them same midnight black eyes. He got dreads, a septum ring, and tats on the side of his face and one on his neck of a black and red snake. Its tail is gold-tipped. Right in the front of his hair is a white patch of hair that he was born with. That’s why they call him ‘Salt.’”

I turn around and climb back on my bike with End Game by my side.

“Hey, whatcha lookin’ for them for anyway?” she asks.

I don’t bother to give an answer. I rev my engine and take off out of the alley. The noise of my bike drowns out the loud music, raunchy laughter, cursing, and other sounds of the night.

10 – HADIYAH



“Come on in and join us,” Elise says.

I like her. Of all the girls that live and work here on Duchess’ ranch, that’s what she calls it. I like Elise the best. She’s sweet, caring, and funny. I’m not sure why she works here, but she seems happy enough.

“No, thank you. I was just coming to get some ice. The ice machine in the guest apartment isn’t working,” I say with a shrug.

“Girl, bring your ass in here. We rarely have time to sit together and just relax,” Aria says, poking her head around the door to look at me.

I peer into the living room and see the others: Genie, Cashmere, Shelby, Maisie, and even Duchess. They’re all lounging on couches, sitting on chairs, or lying on the floor, and they look so comfortable.

There’s a large bowl of popcorn and candy on the coffee table, and beside that, there’s a tray of cookies. Some of the girls have soda, while others have water, but Genie has a beer.

“Come on. We don’t bite,” Genie says with wicked laughter.

“Chill, G,” Aria says, slanting a glance her way.

“Come on, Hadiyah,” Duchess invites.

I step hesitantly inside the room and take a seat on an oversized armchair that Maisie is sitting in when she waves me over.

If anyone didn’t know any better, this would look like a group of girlfriends relaxing on a Sunday afternoon. They’re

in various stages of dress, but nothing inappropriate. Jeans, sweats, cutoff shorts, t-shirts, pajamas, and Duchess is wearing a caftan.

The makeup, jewelry, fancy clothes, and lingerie they usually use to create a façade are nowhere to be found. They don't look like what they are, high-class call girls. Most of them meet their clients at expensive hotels, but each of them has a special guest or two that they entertain here at the house.

“We were talking about our dreams, Hadiyah,” Shelby says in her raspy voice.

“Dreams?”

“Yeah, dreams. Or did you not think that we had any?” Genie snaps with a roll of her eyes.

I look around at the other women, at a loss of how to respond to that question. Dreams could have meant anything, from the dreams they had last night to the dreams they had for their lives. I was simply looking for clarification and nothing more.

“Aye, G. You need to chill with all that,” Aria says.

She has a deep, sexy voice, and when she's not dressing up for her clients, she usually is slumming in sweats and ball caps. In her normal persona, she looks like a tomboy, not a woman who would sell her body for money or one to dress up in fancy clothes, heels, and jewelry. However, when she dons that other personality, she transforms into another woman. Not only the hair, nails, clothes, makeup, and jewelry, but even her attitude becomes pretentious. It's like she has an alter ego.

I prefer the Aria that I see today. She's more relaxed and easygoing.

“Chill with what, Aria? I mean, I don't get why she's here. She left the first time, not wanting to be here after she got her little diner job and shit. Now, for some reason, she's come running back.”

“Genie, I respect you, but it's none of your business why I allowed her to come back, just as it's not your business why she left in the first place. Hadiyah, we were talking about what

our perfect lives would be like, or at least the things we'd like to accomplish in the next year or two," Duchess says softly, meeting my gaze.

I nod, still uncomfortable after Genie's verbal attack.

"One day, I'll finish school and start my interior decorating business. This will all be just a bad nightmare of my past. One that I won't carry forward," Cashmere speaks up.

"You ashamed of who you are? Ashamed of us? Girl, we're your family," Genie says.

I see that I'm not the only one she's ready to challenge today. Maybe she's always this way, maybe not. I avoided her in the past. When Amina and I first arrived here, we stayed in the apartment over the garage, out of everyone's sight, for the first three months. Eventually, we would start coming out of the house and spending time outdoors.

Sometimes, Duchess would invite us inside whenever they were having a "pajama party," which only included the girls in the house. We never did click with any of the girls, except for Elise.

"No, I'm not ashamed of where my choices have led me, and I'm not ashamed of y'all. But let's keep it real, Genie, how many upper-class women... cuz let's face it, that's who would be hiring me. How many of them are gonna welcome me into their home to redesign their houses knowing I made a living off my back, spreading my legs, most probably for those same husbands," Cashmere says.

"You called this a nightmare, though," Genie points out.

"Hell, the shit that landed me here was! Raped by my stepbrother, turned out by my own mama who told me that's the way I could get money so I could help her pay rent. Yeah, I started thinking that was the only option I had. But you know what, Genie? It's not. I'm sick of tired of buying into the bullshit that it is, that it ever was.

"So, yeah, this is a nightmare. Cuz every time I lay down for a man that don't love me, don't give a fuck about me, that's what I'm doing. Reliving the nightmare that led me here.

When I close my eyes, I see the sick bastard who was my older stepbrother or the men my mama pimped me out to. And when I open my eyes and see these bastards over me or the ones that I'm down on my knees for, I see somebody else's man. A man who don't see me, the real person inside. I'm just another hoe they bust a nut in, and so are you," Cashmere snaps.

"You've only got a year left of school, and you there, girl!" Aria laughs, sucking her teeth as she leans forward to slap hands with Cashmere, who's lying on the floor.

"I want to be a teacher," Maisie says softly beside me, and it resonates in my heart. I don't speak on it, though, because that was another lifetime, one that I don't want to discuss.

"It's not too late, you know," Cashmere says.

"Yeah, it is. Most times, people go straight to college after school. I went straight to the streets after junior year."

Shelby pipes up.

"Not fair. You were kicked out on the streets by your aunt and had nowhere else to go. You're only twenty, Maisie. You still have your entire life ahead of you. You got good grades while you were in school. You could always go back and get your GED and then enroll in a technical college or something."

"She's right, you know," Cashmere agrees.

"I think you should do it," Aria interjects.

"What about you? What do you want, Aria?" Duchess asks.

She smiles. "Honey, I want me a balla!"

Everyone laughs at that.

"That NBA player you're messing around with ain't going to get you those hoop dreams," Genie inputs.

Aria rolls her eyes and flips a bird at Genie. "For real? I want to start my own business. A nonprofit for underprivileged youth and young adults. I want to teach them

job skills, help them get their GED, and expose them to a life outside of the hood.”

“How do you plan to do that when you don’t have job skills yourself? I mean, come on, you had to lay on your back to get out of the hood,” Genie says.

“First of all, heffa, I do have job skills. I chose to be an escort because it afforded me a better life. I was delusional, captivated by the power I held over men and how I could get their money when none of that shit mattered. Besides, I know some people who might volunteer if I opened a center. They would come and teach these people interviewing techniques and the skills they need to hold a job down,” Aria retorts. “Genie, what is it that you want? I mean, you’re giving everyone else hell, but what do you want for your life?”

“I’m where I want and need to be in life. Besides, if I gave up hoeing like the rest of y’all, where does that leave Duchess? What’s she got to offer?”

Duchess toys with her bottom lip and winks at Genie. “Don’t worry about me, babe. I’ve got skills that will last a lifetime. I’ve got a trick or two up my sleeve that don’t involve turning tricks.”

Everyone laughs at that and makes a few jokes. When it grows silent again, Aria turns to me.

“Well, before you came in, Elise said that she wanted her own talk show. We know that Shelby wants to be a professional blogger, which is something she’s already working on. What about you, Hadiyah? What do you want?”

I sigh, not sure if they will understand something so simple. Something so basic but that burns brightly within my soul that it cannot be ignored.

“I want a family. Somewhere that I can fit in and know that I’m loved.”

They’re all silent for a while, seemingly lost in their thoughts. Something flashes in Duchess’ eyes as she stares at me, but I don’t know what it is.

“We all want that, I think,” Maisie says, grabbing my hand in hers.

She gives a little squeeze and a reassuring smile.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I don't dare to share my other dream with them. The one where I find a man who loves and protects me from this scary world. The one where I'm strong enough to be an advocate against sexual and human trafficking.

Some things are better left undisclosed.

11 – HADIYAH



The loud rumble of thunder sends a shiver through my body. I have been scared of storms since I was a little girl. When they would rage outside of our apartment, I would climb into bed with my sister. Later, I would wake up to realize that she had left me, and I'd find her in our parents' bed.

We would tuck in between our parents for safety: Amina with Mom and me with Dad. I squeeze my eyes tightly at the thought of never seeing them again. Not receiving Mom's sweet and gentle words of praise and a kiss on my cheek or my dad's big arms around me as he gave me butterfly kisses just doesn't seem right.

I don't have enough money to catch an Uber tonight, so I'll have to catch a bus. I have another thirty minutes before the next one arrives. Glancing up at the clock, I blow out a breath, thankful that it's closing time.

Now, I have to count my register down and grab my things in time to make it to the bus stop on the next corner. I carry my register to Phantom's office, where he's sitting looking at something on a computer. Normally, this is a process that End Game would handle, but lately, he's been slipping away in the evenings just before closing, and Phantom has stepped in.

"I'm ready," I say.

He glances up and looks me over before nodding.

He taps a few keys on the keyboard before he says, "Grab that report off the printer."

I do as he says and hand it back to him. He's quiet while he's looking over the report. I glance around his office, noticing there's nothing personal here that would help me

know him better. It's all so impersonal: two office chairs, a desk with a computer, a bookshelf with some accounting books, another table that holds a printer, a couch, and a table.

“What do you do when you're not working here?” I ask, trying to make small talk.

He glances up at me but then turns his attention back to what he's doing.

“Do you have a college degree? To run your business, I mean. Or is this End Game's business?”

His eyes slant my way again before he resumes working.

“I realized something the other day. We always used to talk about me when you visited but seldom about you.”

He remains quiet.

“Look, I know that I was somewhat dismissive the other day when you came into the breakroom. I want to apologize for that.”

“No need.”

“Yes, there is. I'm not naturally that rude. It's just that... well, I wasn't sure how to feel after you disappeared on me for the last couple of months. I'd started seeing you as my friend, Phantom.”

His eyes jump to mine, and he stares at me as though he's trying to incite fear in me. I know that he probably doesn't allow many people to get close to him, but I can't just turn away from the only person that I trust.

“I already told you that you shouldn't.”

“Why not? I'm not scared of you. You make me feel safe and comfortable. You're probably the only person that I trust. It's not just because you rescued me—”

He pushes the paperwork aside. “I didn't rescue anyone.”

“Yes, you did.”

Once again, he turns back to the computer, and this time, I shut up. He doesn't want to talk.

The printer starts humming again, and I get up to grab the paper. He hands me a pen when I sit back down in the chair, and our fingertips brush. Surprisingly, his are callused and hard.

I glance up into his hardened gaze and accept the pen. Scrawling my signature on the paper and handing it and the pen back to him, I say, “Well, guess I’d better go.”

“Got a ride?”

“Umm, I’m going to catch the bus home.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. How else would I get home?”

“It’s storming out there.”

“I know. A little rain never melted anyone,” I reply.

“Okay.” He returns his attention to the computer once more. I head to the break room and grab my phone and purse.

“Damn it!” I swear when I see my phone has died.

I was on it late last night talking with my sister. I fell asleep on the phone with her, and by the time I got off, I forgot to charge it.

I blow out a breath and search through my purse for a charger. Once I’ve found it, I plug it in and sit down at the table in the breakroom, waiting to get a little juice. I don’t want to be on public transportation without my phone.

It looks like I’ll have to catch the next bus, which comes in another thirty-five minutes from now. I blow out a breath and sit in a chair, dropping my head on my folded arms on the table.

“Thought you were gone,” Phantom says several minutes later.

“Battery died in my phone. I don’t want to be out there without it.”

“Want a ride?”

“On what?”

“My bike.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Don’t see that there’s enough room for that.”

“You could ride bitch.”

“Excuse me?”

“The back of my Harley. You could always ride in the bitch seat.”

I turn up my nose, wondering why, in God’s name, anyone would ever want to ride in any seat that references a woman in such a derogatory manner.

“Think I’ll wait for my phone to power up.”

He smirks.

“What?”

“You’ll be safe. I promise. Safer than riding on public transportation.”

“It’s raining out.”

“A little rain never melted anyone,” he says, tossing my words back at me.

“I would only be in the rain for a little while waiting for the bus to come. After that...the rest of the ride is dry.”

“Got a helmet.”

I chew at my bottom lip. “I’ve never ridden on a motorcycle before. Bitch, or otherwise,” I reply, smirking.

“You’ll enjoy it,” he says, though his face remains expressionless and not persuasive at all.

It’s the idea of riding that close to him and touching him that makes me say, “Okay.”

I grab my phone and purse and head toward the front of the shop with him. A flash of lightning and several loud cracks of thunder sound out, shaking the building.

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s safe to ride like this,” I say, peering out the window.

“Scared?”

“Yes, and I’m not afraid to admit it,” I say.

“Mm,” he murmurs, leaning against the door and staring down at me.

“What’s that mean?”

Shrugging, he says, “Didn’t think there would be much you’d be scared of.”

I shrug in return, and we both remain silent, staring at the storm. The heat of his body envelops me like a warm blanket. His long, dark hair is scented like eucalyptus and peppermint and the masculine smell of his leather cut that he wears tickles my nostrils.

I’m standing slightly behind him to his left. My eyes roam over the different patches he’s wearing. There’s a three-piece patch that bears *Fiery Disciples*, their chapter, Smokey Ridge, California, and the club’s logo.

The skull has two guns crossed underneath, and fire blazes from behind the skull. He has a patch denoting his position as Treasurer, an Ace of Spades, and the number thirteen, along with various other patches on his cut. My eyes pull towards the black diamond-shaped patch with the number one and the percent sign and “ER” stitched in gold. My eyes jump back to the number thirteen, and I can’t help but wonder what that represents.

“Don’t ask,” he says.

I tear my gaze away to see that he hasn’t moved at all. He’s staring into my eyes in the reflection of the door. My heart beats fast as he holds my gaze.

I’m the first one to look away, staring down at the floor when another roll of thunder rips through the building, and lightning flashes, shutting off the power. I hate that I cry out, but I do. When another roll of thunder hits, I grab his wrist. Expecting him to jerk away, I’m shocked when he lays his hand over mine.

“It’s okay. We’re safe,” Phantom mumbles quietly.

Nodding, I reply, “I know.”

“Come on,” he says, walking away from the door.

“Where’re we going?”

“Away from the windows. You might feel better that way,” he says, taking long strides toward the back.

I rush to catch up with him just as a powerful hum sounds off, signifying that the generator has kicked in. We step inside his office, and I take a seat on the couch.

“We’ll just sit here and wait it out.”

“Sorry. If I’m holding you up from something, I can always wait alone...until the next bus comes.”

Glancing sharply at me, he says, “The last one comes a few minutes after nine. It’s five minutes til nine. Doubt if the storm will have passed by then.”

I nod. “I’m so sorry. I know you must have more important things you can be doing.”

He shakes his head. “You always been scared?” he asks, taking a seat on the low-slung table in front of the couch.

I nod. “Ever since I was a little girl. I used to climb into my sister’s bed and wake up, only to realize she’d left me. She would go to my parents’ room, and soon enough, all four of us would be there together.”

“Were you close with them? Your family.”

I don’t talk about my family with anyone anymore. Losing them was so unexpected, and being kidnapped on the heels of that hasn’t left me time to make friends or connect with anyone.

“We used to be.”

I love that he’s not forcing me to talk. He grows silent, sensing this is a difficult topic for me. For some unknown reason, I want to discuss it with him. Of all the things we’ve discussed, we haven’t talked about the day it happened.

“My...my parents were killed in an illegal traffic stop in Somalia.”

His eyes find mine, and I see the softness and compassion in his beautiful brown gaze. He hasn't said a word, yet I feel comfort in his stare.

“We were visiting our parents' homeland for the first time. It was a graduation present to me after I'd finished my studies, and these monsters shot and killed our parents right before our eyes. That was the day that we were taken,” I say softly.

I feel his energy, the anger rolling off him in waves. When I look up, I can see how he's struggling to rein in his emotions. His clenched jaw and the dead look in his eyes are both dead giveaways.

“They will pay.”

“I don't understand...who? I don't even know who they were.”

“Their actions cannot be erased. Every evil deed will receive retribution. Although they may not suffer this lifetime, it will come to them in their next one.”

He speaks these words so evenly and calmly. Even if I hadn't believed it before, because of the power in his words, I believe them now.

“I take comfort in that. Does that make me a bad person?”

“It makes you human. The cowards that violated your parents, your sister, and you are the bad people. The epitome of evil.”

Tears flood my eyes, and I press them close because I cannot stop them from coming. I'm ashamed that I'm crying like this before him, but I guess it's to be expected since I've held so much in for so long.

It feels like a figment of my imagination. As soft as a butterfly's wings or a baby's eyelashes, I feel it on my face. When I open my eyes, Phantom's fingertips are wiping my tears away.

How can a man so deadly, someone rocking on the border of psychotic, be so calm, so soothing, and make me feel the things that I'm feeling?

My eyes search his, trying to understand him and what moves him, but he shuts me out. His eyes once again go blank, and he pulls back.

Standing, he says, "It's time for us to leave."

12 – PHANTOM



Don't even know what the hell I was thinking inviting her to ride in the bitch seat like that. That seat's reserved for Ol' Ladies, and I have no plans to claim one.

Claiming a woman means opening myself up to her and exposing all my secrets. That will never be me. Exposure like that comes with great risk for both me and her. I'm fine being a loner and satisfying my sexual needs through whatever means I choose without having to explain myself to anyone.

There's only one woman I'd considered making mine in the past, but she didn't want to belong to any man. She's broken me in so many ways, and I'm not sure if she opened her door and told me to come to her tonight, I wouldn't go running.

What's worse is that I'm not sure why I touched Hadiyah the way that I did. Feeling the softness of her skin and getting drowned in her energy was more than I bargained for. She was so fucking vulnerable. I almost lost self-control and took advantage of that.

Losing self-control is not an option. Bad things happen when you lose self-control, and I've worked on mine for too many years.

Thunder rumbles deep and hard, rolling over us like an angry shout from the skies above. The lightning flashes, and each time it does, Hadiyah grips me that much tighter. The heat from her hot thighs pressing against mine and her tits pressing flush against my back feel like perfection.

A woman whose curves are wickedly designed for danger, like the Tail of the Dragon. The adrenaline rush, the insanity,

and the empowerment of taking on something so dangerous resonates within.

But she's not that.

Hadiyah could never be mine. Like me, she's scarred. The type of abuse people like her and me live with changes you forever.

Some people learn to live with it and become more cautious and more alert. Then, others like me become dangerous to anything in our path. Fury always hums underneath but is carefully restrained and controlled, only being allowed to breathe when it's time.

I would destroy Hadiyah, and I can't have that. She's far too precious, in need of my protection rather than my corruption.

At my core, I'm a peaceful man, but the darkness that lurks deep inside is too dangerous for any woman. She's seen more than enough to last her a lifetime.

I weave my way off the highway and through the posh suburbs of wealthier areas of town than those Hadiyah came from. I knew the moment that Hadiyah returned to Duchess' place. I wasn't happy about it, but I understood her need to be in a safe place.

We pull up to the house, and I roll to the back where the apartment over the garage is located. The place where Hadiyah is staying. Somehow, it doesn't seem like she belongs in a place like this, not with everything that goes on in that house. She's too innocent for it, but damn, she doesn't belong at the compound either.

We climb off my bike, and Hadiyah reaches up to undo her helmet. I pull her fingers down and remove it myself, setting the helmet on the back of the bike.

Early in the drive, the rain slowed down to a light drizzle. Hadiyah's cotton shirt is wet. I can't see through it, but I can see her hardened nipples poking perfectly through. The scent of her cologne lingers mixed in with the scent of rain and the fresh outdoor air. A perfect combination.

“Thank you for the ride, Phantom.”

I nod.

“It wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be. It was actually fun.”

I nod again, not wanting to encourage her to think that this would ever happen again. I was just taking precautions after her incident walking home alone when she’d worked at the diner. Seeing her home safely is important to me. Otherwise, she might become a part of my constant nightmares.

“Don’t know if End Game told you, but we’ll gone for about a week and a half.”

“He mentioned it. Something about a trip to Texas?”

I nod.

“There’s going to be some other men working in our place. Security purposes.”

She nods. “Okay, well, thank you for letting me know,” she says, sounding disappointed as if maybe she was expecting me to say something else.

“Hadiyah.”

“Yes?” she turns around with a hopeful look in her eyes and a smile.

I have no idea why that gets to me, and I have no desire to crush her spirits, but damnit, she can’t be looking at me that way. The hope in her eyes and the smile on her lips shoots straight to my dick.

“Do me a favor.”

“What’s that?” she asks, the hope still lingering even if a bit more hesitant.

“Stay close to this house in that week when you’re not going to work.”

“Oh...I...I don’t have anywhere to go,” she reassures me.

I wonder if it’s that she doesn’t have anywhere to go or if she is scared to go anywhere because of what she’s been

through. Again, a powerful need to protect her overwhelms me, and I know it's time for me to disappear.

“Anything else?”

I shake my head and climb back onto *Abyss*, starting her engine, enjoying the familiar hum between my thighs and the powerful purr as she roars to life. I remain where I am until I see Hadiyah disappear behind her door.

Now that I know she's safe, I can return to the place I belong. That's the plan anyway until I roll halfway up the driveway and see Duchess step out from behind a tree like a ghostly apparition.

I slow down and wait as she approaches me.

“What're you doing?”

“Specifically.”

“With her, Phantom. You know what I'm talking about. You'll only hurt her.”

“Assumptions must be a bitch.”

“Excuse me?”

“Living paranoid, always reacting to figments of your imagination. Can't be easy.”

“So, you're saying that you're not fooling around with her, Phantom?”

“Not saying anything.”

“I'm just worried about her. She seems strong, but she's not. I think she doesn't want anyone feeling pity for her, so she tries to act like everything is normal, as if she could ever be with a man and feel the same again,” Duchess says.

“You're an expert in pain now?”

“No. Just what I've witnessed about her, that's all.”

“She needed a ride.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I could've—”

“Her phone died.”

“Never knew you to be so generous, Phantom.”

“Sure about that?”

Her face reddens, and she turns away and looks over her shoulder at the house.

“Want to come up?”

“Don’t think that’s a good idea, Duchess.”

“Just casual. Friends. We’ve always had that.”

When I say nothing, she touches my gloved hand on the handlebar. “Please. I could use a friend tonight.”

I sigh, shutting off my bike and climbing off.

Duchess’ hips sway side to side as she makes her way through the yard and the few steps to the front porch. She hesitates and turns to make sure that I’m following her.

Satisfied that I am, she continues her trek through the house and up the stairs to her bedroom.

“Let me dry your clothes for you before you get sick,” she says, extending her hand.

I remove my cut, my Henley, boots, and jeans, handing my clothes to her. I don’t miss the fiery gaze in her eyes as she takes my clothes. That’s one thing that’s never been missing between Duchess and me.

The attraction is primal and has always been strong, but that’s where it ends. She knows that I don’t trust her despite our friendship.

I take a seat in a chair in the sitting area of her bedroom and wait for her return, wondering why she was outside in the first place.

She knows me well because when she returns and sits at my feet, she says, “I was downstairs in my office at the back of the house when I heard your bike. Thought you were coming to see me, but when I looked out the window, I saw you at the apartment.”

“We’re leaving town in just over a week,” I say.

“The annual run?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to go.”

“Duchess—”

“I’m family, Phantom. Always have been and always will be. I’m sure if I ask Anarchy, he won’t have a problem with me going.”

She’s right. We’ve always looked out for our own, and Duchess is a part of the MC, and she always will be, because her dad was the former VP of the club until he and Anarchy’s dad, Tank, got too old and stepped down.

“No, he won’t.”

We don’t speak another word, but she starts running her hand up and down my leg. I lay my head back against the chair and close my eyes.

I must have been more tired than I realized because sleep crept up on me and caught me off-guard. When I wake, my dick is in Duchess’ mouth, and she’s moaning and slobbering down my shit.

Fuck!

I want to pull her off, but she’s got a bead on how to satisfy me the way none of the others do. A smirk graces her stretched-out lips, and her fingers caress my balls.

Rather than going in on her for breaking rule number four, I relax in the chair and close my eyes once again. Shame fills me when I see Hadiyah’s face in my fantasy.

Hadiyah on her knees, her pretty, roasted peanut brown skin glowing and those sensual brown eyes full of lust. It’s her full, thick heart-shaped lips that I imagine sucking me off.

It all comes to a head when I reach out and grab Duchess’ hair and feel the silken strands of her blonde hair rather than the silky curls that frame Hadiyah’s face.

I force my eyes open again and concentrate on Duchess. Thoughts like that about Hadiyah will only drive me crazy

because I know I can never act on them. She's deeply wounded, and like Duchess said, she's putting on an act to appear strong to others.

Opening my eyes isn't helping because I hear Hadiyah's soft voice in my head and see her teasing smile even with my eyes open. My thoughts run wild with what it might feel like if she were underneath me.

Cum shoots forth from me in voluminous spurts, so much so that Duchess can barely keep up as she sucks it down, gulping and choking.

When she's done, she sits back on her haunches, wiping her lips. A satisfied smile appears as though she's done something to be proud of.

"Why're you staring at me that way, Phantom?"

"You broke rule number—"

"I know, I know! I broke fucking rule number four. So, what does it matter?"

I won't argue with her, nor will I try to explain. I've shared with her in the past how important it is to protect my energy. If someone does touch me, I need to be in the right space to receive or deflect the energy they're carrying. Spirits pass from one person to another so easily, something most people take for granted. I have enough demons that I carry around, and I won't be receptive to anyone else's.

"Are my clothes ready?"

"Really? That's all you got to say?"

"Duchess."

"Fine!" she says, storming from the room.

Duchess' master bedroom is on the third floor of the house. Her bedroom, en suite bathroom, and sitting room take up the entire floor. The front of her bedroom looks out at the front of the house, and the rear looks out into the backyard.

I stand and walk to the window on the far back wall and stare out at the garage apartment. There's a dull light shining

from the bedroom, and I can tell the hall light is on.

Somehow, I know Hadiyah is asleep, but she seems to feel safer with the lights on. For the first time ever, I want to teach a woman to shoot. Before I leave town, I need her to know everything possible about guns and gun safety.

I turn around and return to my chair when I hear Duchess' quiet footsteps in the hallway.

“Here you are,” Duchess says quietly.

I take my clothes and get dressed.

“You leaving?”

I nod.

“Why won't you stay?”

“You know why, Duchess.”

“You always say the biggest issue between us is that you can't trust me. I've never betrayed you, Phantom.”

“You betrayed the most important person in the world. If you'd betray yourself, how can I trust you to have my back?”

13 – PHANTOM



The Ol' Ladies and club whores hit the road yesterday evening with Tantrum, Cyclone, and several other brothers a couple of days ahead of our scheduled annual run. Roxie gave Cannon hell about leaving his side, but in the end, she had no choice.

This situation with Cappellacci put all of us in a bind. My thoughts have been wavering about Hadiyah all day, and I need my mind clear to do what needs to be done.

Anarchy didn't want me in on this part of the plan, but he knows that I'll have it no other way. He's worried about me freaking out the way that I did when we discovered Hadiyah and her sister, Amina, last year in that hell hole.

Falcon has men watching the dispensary and Duchess' place. Snake, Warrior, Cyclone, Bullet, Decker, Doc, Ryder, Chainz, Terminator, and Dime are all outside of the club, positioned and ready to storm the place if needed.

Raider managed to get an invite to the party for Anarchy, Cannon, End Game, Mayhem, himself, and me.

We step to the club doors where the party is held. The security team at the door eyes us warily and pats us down before insisting we have to remove our guns.

"Not doing that. Cappellacci didn't say we had to come unarmed," Anarchy says.

"No one's allowed in the club with guns. That's just it," the red-head guard says.

"Maybe you might wanna bring him out," Cannon says, stepping up beside Anarchy and eyeing the two men, who are both just a couple of inches shorter than him.

He crosses his arms, and even I have to admit that his muscles are impressive as hell in his cut. Cannon's a big monster who looks like he could crush a man's head just by clasping it between his bicep and his side. Despite his monstrous size, Cannon is swift and agile.

"We're not disturbing Mr. Aiello," the other blonde guy remarks.

"Hey, I received a personal invitation from him. I don't think he'll take too kindly to you turning guests away," Raider says.

"What he won't take kindly is me not enforcing his rules," the blonde says.

"Fellas, wait here. I'll go inside and get Mr. Aiello," I say, removing my gun and handing it to Cannon.

I take a step forward, and the red-head grabs my wrist and says, "You won't disturb—"

A quick strike with my forearm to the side of his neck forces him to release his grip, and he becomes disoriented. The blonde grabs his gun, but he's suddenly facing six other guns. Two are aimed directly at his head, and one under the chin.

His jaw clenches. "Enjoy yourself, gentlemen," he grits out.

I release his comrade and lead the way into the club. Every eye in the place treks to us as soon as we walk through the door.

I do a quick assessment and see that aside from our MC, there are at least forty other men here. Some of them I recognize as soldiers in Aiello's family, but there are more that I don't recognize.

"Gotta think that shit was too fucking easy," Cannon says.

"Yeah, it was," Raider agrees.

Cannon hands my gun back to me. "Think you might be needing this, bro."

"You think?"

“Phantom, keep a grip no matter what the fuck you see. Got me?” Anarchy drills me.

“I said I was cool,” I grunt.

We’ve taken a few paces before Cappellacci greets us.

“Gentlemen, glad you could make it,” he says, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

I would love nothing more than to slice that smile off his face.

“Had a bit of trouble at the door,” Anarchy says. “Our guys took care of it.”

Cappellacci’s smile drops briefly before he resumes it. “Yes, saw that on the camera,” he replies, eyeing me closely.

A couple of naked girls come up to us and offer us drinks.

“No, these men will be joining me in the VIP room. They’ll get drinks there. Gentlemen,” Cappellacci says, smiling and beckoning us to follow him with a nod.

I look around the place and see scantily clad women, naked women, and women in nothing but boots. They all seem comfortable; not like they’re forced to be here at all. They smile, and some that are close to us touch us as we pass, but I swear if you’ve seen one pair of tits and ass, you’ve seen them all.

The music is loud, and women are draped over men lounging on couches and in armchairs. The men are smoking cigars, drinking, snorting coke, or popping pills. Another thing that I notice is that we’re the only ones not dressed in suits or dress attire.

My brothers and I refuse to conform to this dipshit’s rules for his party. So, we’re all clad in jeans, hoodies, a Henley, lumberjack shirts, or tees and our cuts and biker boots.

Cappellacci slides a keycard from his pocket and unlocks a frosted glass door. Inside, the temperature is about ten degrees cooler, and the music playing isn’t as loud as what’s on the other side of this door. Black and blue leather couches, armchairs, and chaise lounges dominate the room.

To the rear is a bar, and directly ahead is a raised platform with a stripper pole. There are twelve men in here, not counting the ones standing in the shadows. There are six of them standing at attention.

I'm sure there may be more soldiers in spots that we haven't noticed, like the one standing behind the curtains near the bar. I can see his shoes, and six feet away, another man stands beside him. I'm able to detect his outline behind the thick drapes.

"Eight soldiers, not counting the men chilling," I whisper to Cannon.

"Yeah, bro. I saw six."

"Curtains. Two."

He nods, and we take seats on the two large sectional sofas.

"What would you gentlemen like to drink?" Cappellacci asks.

"Whatcha got?" Mayhem asks.

"Whatever your pleasure is. Pills. Powder. Leaves."

"Alcohol," Cannon sneers.

"Whatever pleases you," Cappellacci replies.

"We'll defer to your selection," Anarchy says.

End Game snickers at Anarchy's word choice, earning him a scowl from our Prez.

Cappellacci snaps his fingers, and an Asian woman runs to his side. She's wearing heels, a thong, and a bowtie. She meets my gaze briefly before returning her attention to Cappellacci.

"Bring a couple of bottles of Paradis Imperial," he orders. "I didn't think the Disciples were into anything more than arms and pharmaceuticals."

"We've got a few side hustles. Those are just our primary sources," Anarchy answers. "Besides, Phantom, our treasurer," he says, nodding at me. "He's always looking for opportunities

to expand our business. Says this is the hottest market going now.”

Martin Cappellacci is relaxed on the couch, his arms spread out on either side of him, one ankle propped on a knee. His gaze meets mine, and I swallow the vomit in my throat when he addresses me.

“Smart businessman. If this works out for you, gentlemen, I’ve got some other ideas you might want to venture into.”

“Like what?” Cannon asks, leaning forward.

Easy Cannon, not too eager, big guy.

“Just some things. Don’t really want to open that box yet until I see just how serious you gentlemen are,” Cappellacci says, turning and accepting the bottles from the woman.

There are several glasses turned upside down on a napkin already sitting in front of us. Cappellacci nods at them.

“If you don’t mind, we’d prefer fresh glasses,” Cannon says.

Smirking, Cappellacci replies, “Never can be too careful. But, if we’re going to do more business together than just the pharmaceuticals, my friend, we’ll have to learn to trust one another eventually.”

“Trust and health are two different things,” Cannon replies.

Cappellacci doesn’t say anything. He just nods and sends the woman to do as Cannon says. I watch her closely as she pulls fresh glasses from a cabinet and hands a few to another girl. They return to where we’re sitting with the glasses.

“To new business ventures,” Cappellacci says, holding his glass up after we’ve all poured some of the Hennessy.

The floral and citrus aroma wafts to my nose before I take a sip.

We clink glasses and down the liquor. I like the smoky notes and spicy finish. Good stuff, but what else would you expect from someone of Cappellacci’s level?

He brings out the cigars, and a couple of other men come to join us. We talk shop about drugs and arms for a while before the conversation rolls around to politics.

“When are we going to be able to sample the new product, Martin?” a man with a Russian accent asks.

He smiles. “In time, in time.”

The man looks at his watch and says, “My time is money, Martin. I have another venture I’m looking into tonight. Now, I gave you my word that I would use you as my supplier first, but I do not have time to play games.”

Cappellacci eyes the man, and a flash of anger sparks in his eyes.

“Vito! Divertiamoci!” he shouts to another man standing near the curtains.

Turning back to us, he says, “I said to him, let’s have fun, so we’re about to have fun, gentlemen.”

The curtain pulls back slightly, and a man steps out from behind the curtain and heads to the stage. No sooner than that happens than a young, blonde girl who barely looks like she is legal age is brought out. Her dazed blue eyes and slight stumble tell me that she is high.

She wears a white thong bikini and tall high heels. The man, Vito, holds tightly to her arm before he takes her onto the stage. He whispers something to the woman, and she turns in slow circles. I grimace when he spanks her ass and pinches her tits.

My stomach sours when he tells her to step out of her thong and bikini top. She stands in nothing but those damned heels sashaying back and forth across the stage before she is brought down in front of us.

“Phantom,” Anarchy growls.

I’m imagining a dozen ways to kill these bastards right now. I can do it and get away with it, but I know that we won’t get the answers we need. The plan is to make Cappellacci think that we want into this game. The more he trusts us, the

more he'll let down his guard, and we can get the answers we're searching for.

We will take his ass out, but my bros tell Cannon and me that we've gotta be patient. I usually have more patience than any of them, but not on this.

Another girl is bought out, and another until nine girls are circulating the room, being felt up by the men. End Game and Mayhem are playing their roles well, talking to the women, even having them sitting on their laps, rubbing their backs and legs. I want to beat their fucking asses, but I know they're putting on a show.

Anarchy and Cannon are talking to a man in the corner, and Raider is pouring himself another drink while sizing up one of the women. I watch as he steps to her and whispers something to her. She nods dully.

“What’s wrong, il mio amico?” Cappellacci asks.

I bite my tongue to keep myself from telling him that he’s no friend of mine.

“Nothing,” I say instead, taking another sip of the Hennessy.

“You don’t like the girls?”

“I don’t see one that attracts my interest.”

“Oh, my friend,” he says, laughing. Clapping me on the shoulder, he says, “Pussy is pussy, no?”

I physically bite my tongue now and begin Jin Shin Jyutsu, an ancient hand technique my grandfather taught me to relax. I wrap all my fingers and thumb around each finger and thumb of the opposite hand, waiting until I feel the pulsation I’m searching for. Then, I press my thumb into the center of my palm of the opposite hand for another minute.

The entire time, Cappellacci is talking, reciting the benefits of the MC working with the *Famiglia*. By the time I’ve finished my practice, the man on the stage starts a bidding war, and I watch as several of the men start bidding on the girls.

Fuck! I feel so wrong for sitting here and not doing a damn thing about it.

“You’re sure you don’t want to bid?” Cappellacci asks again, smiling at me over his glass.

“Looking for a black girl,” I say.

“As in African American?”

I nod.

“Now that’s prime pussy right there. There’s a high asking price, but we didn’t have any on this shipment. Maybe on the next one, you’ll get lucky. I promise to have one for you,” he says, winking.

My jaw is clenching, and I feel as if this mission was a bust.

Anarchy and Raider return and sit beside him. The conversation turns to supply and demand. I stand with a drink in my hand and roam the room.

“Aye, you good, buddy?” Cannon asks, walking up beside me.

I slant a look his way, barely containing the snarl in my throat.

“Yeah, that’s what I was worried about. That deadly as fuck look in your eyes is about to get us all killed. You’ve always been the one to keep everyone else calm. We need that now.”

I shake my head. “Don’t know how much longer I can hold off.”

I see one of the girls that Cannon spent some time with walking through a door with one of Cappellacci’s men, and I wonder where she’s going. I’ve noticed, off and on throughout the night, that some of the girls are disappearing behind that door and not returning.

“Yeah, well, if you don’t, we won’t get the information we came looking for, and that’s not shit I plan on going back to tell my Ol’ Lady. Got that?”

“I know you’re doing this for Roxie, but Cannon, these girls. You see the looks in their eyes?”

“They’ve been drugged,” he says.

“It’s more than that, Cannon. They’ve lost all hope. Even if we were to free them now, they couldn’t go back to the lives they once had. The demons they’ve been exposed to...you can’t know what it’s like,” I grumble.

He grips my shoulder tight. “I know, brother. I know.”

“His man isn’t letting anyone get too close for long. Not by themselves anyway.”

“That’s because he doesn’t trust anyone with them. To him, these girls are nothing more than a high-end product. Monsters like Cappellacci don’t see them as human, and he’s worried we might do something to fuck up his money, and he’s fucking right to be,” Cannon explains.

“That’s the least of his worries,” I reply, tossing back the remnants of my drink.

I look around at all my brothers, and maybe Cappellacci and the rest of the men don’t see it, but we’re all on edge. Generally, when these brothers get in a room full of pussy there are good times to be had. None of them can behave themselves for too long except for Cannon.

Not tonight, though. They look like they’re all ready to go to war, and I’ll be the first to lead the charge. All I want is for them to give the word.

“Come on, looks like we’re about to get out of here,” Cannon says, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Martin, thanks for having us. Sula is perfect for what we’ve got planned,” Anarchy says, clapping and then rubbing his hands together.

“Good, good. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you. I’ve taken into consideration some of what you’ve told me, and I promise to have a more exclusive collection next month,” Cappellacci says, watching me over the rim of his glass and winking at me.

I don't take my eyes off him even as he turns to Anarchy and Raider, shaking their hands. I want to know how high his screams go when he's tortured, how quickly he pisses his pants, and what his eyes look like when staring back at his worst nightmare.

I know Cannon wants to be the one to punish this fucker, but I'll be the one to finish him.

"Let's go, bro," Cannon whispers, placing a firm grip on my shoulder.

I turn away without acknowledging Cappellacci's comment and lead the pack out the door with Anarchy to my left and Cannon to my right.

"Just a few more steps, brother, and you'll be home free," Anarchy says.

Fury is emanating off me as bright as my aura normally does.

The ride back to the clubhouse is quick and tense. When we pull up to the clubhouse and get off our bikes, Anarchy crosses his arms and stares at me and then Cannon and back to me.

"Look, I know you wanted to burn the asshole up," he says to Cannon. "You..." he says, turning back to me again. "I don't even want to know what the fuck you were thinking, but here's the thing, if we're gonna get what we need, we need patience. From both of you, is that clear?"

Cannon grunts something and kicks the rocks of the graveled parking lot. I don't utter a single word because I don't believe in making promises I can't keep. This thing will only allow me to take it one moment at a time.

"We've got one girl out. I can only hope to get a couple more so that we can help take this fucker's empire down."

"What do you mean you got one girl out?" Cannon mumbles.

"We purchased a girl from him," Raider informs us. "Sula Ramirez was the dark-haired girl wearing the gold high heels."

We bought her from him tonight.”

“Bought her freedom,” Anarchy clarified.

“You can’t possibly keep buying all these girls from him,” Cannon says.

“That’s not our intention. Just enough of them to send them to David Lawrence,” he says of the DA. “So he can build a case that will get into the heart of their empire. Tear that shit to pieces brick by brick and send them upstate for life,” Anarchy informs us.

“I’m not interested in his ass serving time,” I seethe.

“Not talking about him. Just the rest of the players. Oh, I know you and Cannon’s got plans for Cappellacci. I wouldn’t dream of getting in the way of that,” Anarchy smirks.

“Just be patient, bro. You’ll get your time,” Mayhem says, clapping me on the shoulder.

“What are you gonna do with her?” End Game asks.

“Well, we’ve got Scout and Shooter rolling the cage. Should be here soon,” Raider says.

“Yeah, and Snake, Warrior, Chainz, and the others will be riding down the highway to make sure they get here safely. They’re taking her to Duchess’ place for now until Roxie comes back.”

“Duchess left with the rest of the crew,” I say.

“I know. Her girls will watch over Sula until we all get back,” Anarchy says.

My stomach roils because I’m not so sure Duchess’ place will be the best place for her.

“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” I mumble. “Not with the men coming and going.”

“Well, it’s all we’ve got right now,” Anarchy says. “Besides, Falcon has men on the house. She’ll be safe, and Aria and Maisie agreed to look out for her.”

“Shit, at the rate we’re going, we need to build a fucking safehouse for bitches to hide in,” Cannon grumbles.

“Not planning on turning us into that, man. We’ll keep her long enough to infiltrate his empire. Roxie’s agreed to work with us, so there’s that.”

“She wants to do all that she can. Don’t know why she feels responsible for the shit that her fucked up ex did.”

“I’m grateful that she’s helping. Unfortunately, handling our business ran us into two separate sex trafficking issues, and though I’m not trying to make this our focus, I don’t mind doing what we can when we can,” Anarchy says.

“Wouldn’t be mad if you did it,” Cannon replies.

“Two separate issues tied to the same muthafucka,” I grumble.

14 – HADIYAH



The knock at the door catches me off-guard. It's quiet, and most of the girls are away on "dates." Even Duchess is out. Maisie said that Duchess was out of town somewhere.

I set the book that I've been reading aside and head to the living room. Peering out the side light, I'm surprised to see Phantom standing on the other side.

Quickly, I unlock the latch and smile openly at him. "I thought you were out of town already. I didn't hear your bike."

Shrugging, he pushes in past me and says, "We're heading out tomorrow."

"Oh."

He walks in, looks around and says, "I just wanted to check on you before I left to see if you needed anything."

A warm feeling floods my insides, knowing that he's thinking about me before leaving town, that he came to check on me.

Shrugging, I say, "I went grocery shopping earlier and made sure that I had everything that I needed."

Phantom doesn't say anything; he just takes up the same seat on the couch that he always occupies, and I find myself on the other side like I always do.

"Have you eaten?" I ask.

Shaking his head, he says, "Not yet. I'll grab something on the way back to the clubhouse."

"I cooked...made more than enough if you'd like something to eat," I ask hopefully.

I hate how desperate I always sound for his company, but I never want him to leave. I always want him to stay just a little longer. Part of it is because I'm bored and lonely, and the other half is that I enjoy being around him.

"I'm good."

"Are you sure? I made fettuccine alfredo, a chickpea salad with carrots and dill, and garlic bread, and I've got a great white wine to go with it. I've also got a homemade chocolate mousse for dessert."

A smile takes over his lips, and he says, "You missed your calling."

"What do you mean?"

"You should've been a saleswoman."

I laugh. "Either that, or you're just hungry."

"Maybe a little bit of both," he says and then winks at me.

My stomach drops, and an ache builds down below. I miss the companionship of a man and feeling wanted and longed for in a normal way.

"I can fix your plate if you'd like," I say, uncomfortable with the feelings growing inside me.

"Okay," he says with a subtle nod.

I hop off the couch and head into the kitchen to prepare a plate for him.

"So, what are you guys doing when you leave town?" I call out to him as I grab a plate from the cabinet.

"Partying."

I jump, startled at the nearness of his body to mine. I thought he was still in the living room on the couch, but he's followed me into the kitchen, and he's only steps away from me.

"Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," I say nervously as I move around the kitchen, aware that his eyes are on me with every movement.

“Are you always this quiet?” I ask him.

“You’ve been around me long enough. You should know.”

“It seems that I always do the talking.”

“You do.”

I glance at him as I slice a piece of the garlic bread to put on his plate. “Are you saying that I talk too much?”

He shrugs with a smirk on his lips. “I like it.”

“So, I do talk too much.”

He shakes his head. “I enjoy listening to you talk.”

“Oh.”

I hand his plate to him and grab the bottle of wine and a glass.

“Eat with me,” he says when we sit on the couch again.

“I already ate.”

“I don’t like eating alone.”

“Why does that sound like a lie to me?” I ask, smirking.

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“I think that you do a lot of things alone,” I say, watching his lips slowly move as he chews his food.

Why does it look so sexual to me?

We talk about everything and nothing while he eats, and I pour myself a glass of wine to enjoy while he finishes his meal. By the time he’s finished his dessert, I’ve moved to the red wine from the white, and I’m on my second glass.

When I return from taking his dishes to the kitchen, I say, “Come onto the balcony with me.”

He looks toward the kitchen’s double doors and asks, “You use that thing?”

Nodding, I smile and say, “All the time.”

I open the door, taking the bottle of wine and two fresh glasses with me. I feel good inside when his eyes light up at

how I've transformed the old balcony. When Amina and I first moved in, boxes were stacked on the balcony, cobwebs covered everything, and the floor was littered with old beer bottles.

Now, there are two wrought iron chairs and a matching table that I'd salvaged from a second-hand store in town. Two tall potted plants and several hanging plants transformed it into a lovely place.

"Nice," he mumbles.

"Nice? Did you see what it looked like before?"

He nods and says, "You've made this place into a home. It's nice, Hadiyah."

He pulls out a chair and takes a seat, and I sit beside him and pull my feet up on the chair.

"So, partying. What else are you guys doing there?"

"Just partying."

"You're going out of town for that long to just party?"

"We've earned it. All year long, we bust our asses and constantly find ourselves in danger, and this is our time to just let it all out. It's the one time that we get to see the other chapters and just celebrate our brotherhood."

"That must be nice to belong to something...greater than yourself," I say, resting my chin on my knees.

Phantom reaches out and pulls my curls back from my face. "You don't feel as if you belong to anything?"

"Not anymore."

His fingers trail the line of my jaw, and I close my eyes, basking in the intimacy of his touch.

"Tell me about before," he says.

I smile as my mind floats back to when we lived in the UK. I talk about my parents, my sister, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I talk about friends and coworkers, as well as finishing school. He listens patiently, taking it all in. Even

when I talk about my likes and dislikes, Phantom seems extremely tuned into me, interested in what I have to say, and it makes me feel good.

He stands and stretches after a while, and I stand with him.

“Are you leaving?”

Under the pale moonlight and the twinkling stars above, it seems as if this space has grown too small. A chill runs down my arms, and I wrap myself up, rubbing my hands up and down my arms.

“Come on, let’s get you inside.”

Shaking my head, I turn my back to him and grab the rail. “It’s beautiful out here. I don’t think I’m ready to go in. The only things waiting for me on the other side are bad dreams and nightmares,” I mutter.

“You don’t sleep well?”

“Most nights, I don’t. Every now and then, I do,” I say, staring at the sky.

“You dream about the things you’ve been through.”

I nod, and he swipes at the tears falling from my eyes. I hadn’t noticed I was crying until he wiped them away. Phantom’s fingers are rough and callused on my face, and I turn to him, and he swipes some more.

I look up at him, and I can’t turn away from what I see in his eyes. Of all the things that I lost through the turbulent time that I went through, I haven’t lost the ability to detect when a man is attracted to me and Phantom is attracted to me.

Boldness courses through me that I don’t recognize, not even from before. I’ve never been the type to take the initiative with a man, but with him, I do.

Tipping up on my toes, I kiss his lips, and at first, he remains still not moving, but I don’t back down. In time, he wraps an arm around me, and his mouth opens to me. He crushes me against him with one arm, and my arms loop around his neck, pulling him closer.

His mouth is warm and sweet. Phantom takes nothing for granted, his lips seeking permission first before allowing his tongue to take over. He guides us through the uncertainty that lies between us, and he calms my troubled soul, eases the fears in my mind, and settles peace within my spirit.

My fingers find their way under his cut, running over his chest and down to the hem of the Henley he wears. Slowly, they slip underneath and run over the hard planes of his abs and then up his chest and back down to his abs again.

As they twirl in the hairs that swirl just above his pants line, he grips my fingers tightly, breaking the kiss and resting his forehead against mine.

“You’re not ready for me, Hadiyah.”

“You have no idea what I’m ready for, Phantom.”

“You’ve been through a lot already, and you need time to heal.”

“Don’t tell me what I need.”

“You’re pushing yourself and—”

“This isn’t an argument that I want to have with you right now. Don’t ruin what could be so beautiful.”

“Or it could devastate you further.”

“You see me as a victim. I want you to see me as a strong, beautiful woman with needs.”

“I see you as a strong, beautiful woman, and I’m sure you have needs, but—”

“Then shut up making excuses and give me what I need, Phantom. I need a man to see and want me and to take me in a normal way again. I need to equate sex with something beautiful once more and not with the scars and brokenness that I hide within my heart.”

I can see the tortured look in his eyes, but aside from that, I see the desire and the raw lust that he’s trying to douse.

I pull my tee over my head so he has no doubt about my intentions and toss it to the balcony floor. Next, I tug at my

joggers, and he groans, “Hadiyah,” but it doesn’t stop me.

Standing before him in nothing but midnight-blue lace panties and a matching bra, I look up at him and say, “Tell me. What do you see, Phantom?”

He stares at me and pulls his hand down his face. I reach out and grab it, jerking it away.

“Look at me!” I demand. “Tell me what you see.”

His voice comes out strangled at first but gains clarity with each passing word.

“A woman. A sexy, beautiful woman with passion, desire, and...fuck! A woman that if it weren’t for the circumstances, I would take with no questions asked.”

“Then that’s what you do. Don’t judge me by my circumstances or my past. Every woman has them, just the same as every man. Take what you need, Phantom, and give me what I need.”

His nostrils flare, fists clench, and jaws flex, but he doesn’t move otherwise. I step closer to him, and he backs up to the door.

“Are you scared, Phantom?”

He doesn’t say a word but takes another step back, bumping into the door.

“No, that can’t be it. You’d never be afraid of a woman. Not with all the women that surround you at the clubhouse.”

Phantom turns and opens the door, and steps inside. I’m right behind him, leaving my clothes on the balcony.

“Are you running?”

“Hadiyah, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing, Phantom! I know what I want...who I want...” I say, stopping him in his tracks.

I watch as his hands clench into fists and his shoulders heave up and down. I walk up behind him and rest a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re what I crave, Phantom. Don’t hide yourself from me.”

He spins around and says, “You can’t handle me, Hadiyah. It’s not you that I’m running from, but me. One woman can never be enough to satisfy me. I go from one woman to the next, and I don’t give a shit about any of them. They use me, and I use them. I’m not a gentleman nor the man you want to take home. I’m the fucking one that gives you nightmares. You have no idea what I can do to you. How fucked up I am or how I might damage you.”

“No. I don’t, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t try. It doesn’t mean that we can’t just sample what each other has to give. It’s a hell of a lot better than burning in our desire for each other and not putting out the fire.”

He grabs my waist, pulling me to him. This time, when his mouth covers mine, he doesn’t ask permission or hold back. His hunger feeds my appetite, increasing the burning desire within me until I find my fingers unzipping his jeans.

Phantom shrugs out of his cut and pulls his Henley over his head. This time, when he reaches for me, he lifts me into his arms and carries me to the bedroom. He tosses me onto the bed, reaches into his back pocket, removes his wallet and removes a condom.

I reach for it so that he can free his fingers to remove his jeans and his underwear. I swallow as his dick bounces free, happy and erect, pointing in my direction as though it calls, “C’mere, girl!”

I keep staring at him as I sit up on the bed on my knees. His hand reaches for mine, and he removes the condom.

“Second thoughts now?”

“Never,” I whisper, reaching for him.

I stand up on the bed and walk to the edge, leaning down slightly to kiss him. He hooks an arm around my thighs and pulls me down onto my back. Within seconds, he’s hovering over my body, and I welcome the warmth, the safety, and the feeling of protection that he brings with him.

I pray that when we connect, it will drown out the horrible memories of my past.

“If you feel the need to stop me at any moment, don’t be afraid to say that. You understand?” he asks, rubbing his thumb over my lips.

I nod.

“I need to hear you say that you understand.”

“I understand.”

“You never have to be afraid of me, Hadiyah. If I make you uncomfortable, tell me that, and I promise that I won’t be mad. If it gets too rough or hurts, say it. If it triggers anything —”

This time, I press my fingers to his lips. “Stop. Just give me you.”

His eyes darken. He huffs out a breath and then slicks his fingers between my thighs, parting them.

I graciously make room for him, needing to feel the connection between our bodies. He’s the only soul on Earth that I feel connected to other than my sister.

His mouth trails a path of kisses from my lips down to my neck and to my breasts. He takes his time sampling each of them, and I’m amazed at the gentleness and care that Phantom shows me. Time seems to tick slowly by as he makes it a point to touch every part of my body, attentive to where I need to be touched, caressed, and soothed.

I push him onto his back and climb on top of him. It’s the only way that I can make the connection without fear. I know it as well as I know my name.

When I’m finally seated on him, it’s with his eyes on me, his fingers brushing my lips.

I hiccup a cry of sweet relief and then close my eyes. For several seconds, I hold my breath, watching as a plethora of images from my twisted past flash behind my eyelids.

“Hadiyah, it’s me, sweetheart,” Phantom’s gentle voice calls to me, forcing me to return to him.

I open my eyes, and I see the hurt, the need, and the empathy within his eyes. When I lean down and kiss his lips, only then does he begin to move inside of me.

It takes a minute, but I finally relax, opening to him and giving him all of me. Although he’s attentive and gentle, I can tell it pains him to be that way. He’s not, by nature, a gentle lover. Though we’ve never been together before today, somehow, I know this.

I know that he’s brutal during intimate moments, and it’s how he connects with others. Yet, for me, he’s sacrificing all of that to give me what I need. I take and take and take, and when I try to give back, he still gives to me until my heart quakes, tears spill forth, and my pussy pulsates violently around him.

He continues to give until the shudders pass through me, and I’m empty with nothing left to give.

When I climb off him and lay down, Phantom kisses my forehead and says, “Get some rest.”

“Where are you going?” I ask when I sit up on my elbows, watching him pull his clothes on.

“Gotta head out early in the morning. I’ve only got a few hours to get some sleep, and I can’t get it here.”

“Are you...are you okay?” I ask.

He looks over his shoulder, smiles and winks before he says, “I’m good. Get some rest. I’ll lock up.”

I lay in bed replaying every moment, wondering where I went wrong. I second-guess my decision to take things into my own hands, and I wonder if it wasn’t what he needed. It’s a couple of hours later, and I’m still wondering how I failed him.

What did I do so wrong that he did not cum?

15 – PHANTOM



Nothing ever feels as good as riding with my bros in a group, flying down the freeway for an annual rally. I always look forward to any of the runs that we do for our business, but this is different. A week of R and R in the South is exactly what we need after all the shit that's going on with Martin Cappellacci.

I've promised myself that I'll try to put that shit to the back of my mind, and I do just that as we enter the Dallas chapter compound. Our brothers from the other chapters are all outside in the parking lot and across the grounds, drinking, laughing, and partying.

Women are all over the place, and as sad as it seems, I'm in no mood to be bothered. Hopefully, I'll get over this funk that I'm in. I didn't make it back to the compound until just before midnight, and I still didn't fall asleep until well after two. We were up and on the road by seven.

I've raked myself over the coals about being with Hadiyah every waking second. I knew being with her was a bad idea, but it wasn't her fault. She needed something that I couldn't ignore. Yet, I can't help but wonder if she's worse off now than she was before.

I feel like such a fucking asshole for leaving her the way that I did. It was hard as hell for me not to fuck her raw, release my aggression on her, and use her body the way that I've done others. Use it to pour my pain, anger, and need for control.

The only problem was that Hadiyah wasn't like everyone else. She's nothing like the others, the whores that I use to

baptize my soul in, to hide my sins, and to cleanse my guilty conscience.

Unfortunately for her, she doesn't know that the only way that I can cum is to fuck. Sweet, gentle sex isn't my thing, and it is more a turnoff than it is a turn-on. I need raw, hard, aggressive fucking to push the painful memories from my mind. It's the only way that I can feel in control and release. What most women consider to be lovemaking leaves me feeling empty, weak and out of control.

I vow to stay away from her when I return. I can't give her what she needs because I'm only capable of taking from a woman. Instead, I'll satisfy myself with Duchess, her whores, and the Roses.

Cheers go up as we roll in, and the Ol' Ladies from our chapter come running up to us along with the club whores from all locations.

There's a bonfire going, and the sweet smell of marijuana can be detected under the other scents like barbeque and alcohol. There are more than a thousand members here tonight.

After riding for damn near an entire day and taking a few breaks, all I want to do is relax. We didn't have the entire club riding with us, but we enjoyed the time we were on the road together.

"Anarchy!" Cyclops greets our Prez with a sidearm hug and a clap to the back.

Anarchy looks up to Cyclops. He and Anarchy's dad, Tank, came into the MC together many years ago. When Tank and Cyclops were up for the presidency, Cyclops was sent to Dallas to become the Vice President of that chapter, and eventually, he was promoted to president.

It's about time that he retires, too, but the stubborn old bastard will probably hang in for a few more years.

"Got you boys all set up in the west bunkhouses that way," he says, pointing to his left and our right.

"Thanks, man. We appreciate it," Anarchy replies.

“Got that business all squared away?” Cyclops asks.

“We did what we could. It’s not complete, but my dad always said wins came by way of patience.”

“Yeah, dirty bastard always had a lot more of that than I did,” Cyclops chuckles.

“It’s why you ended up here. Don’t look like you did too bad to me,” Anarchy says, looking around at the compound.

“Nah, I didn’t, but it wasn’t home, either. Now...I’m happy. It just took a few years to adjust,” Cyclops admits.

“Well, thanks for taking care of the rest of our crew until we could get here,” Anarchy says.

“Yeah, well, I know you boys must be tired. So, if you’re ready to pack it in, Boomer and Machete can show you your bunkhouses. Otherwise, join the party!” he shouts, spreading his arms wide.

The cheers of the other brothers go up, along with a bunch of club whores.

Anarchy looks around at us, and most of my brothers opt to join the party, except for Mayhem, Terminator, Decker, Cannon, and me.

“Machete. Boomer. Show these boys where they’ll be hanging out the rest of the week,” Cyclops orders.

We shake hands with them and introduce ourselves before they climb onto their bikes and lead the way.

The two men in question, one a short, dark-haired guy who couldn’t be more than five-two and a tall, lanky, blonde man about six-three, make a comical pair.

“This is where you boys will be staying,” the tall one, Machete, says. “Except for you, Cannon. You’re in that one over there with Roxie. She’s waiting for you.”

Cannon wastes no time heading towards where he and Roxie will be staying this week. I know he’s missed her because all he’s done is whine about being without his woman since she left. He’s been a moody, miserable bastard.

“Phantom, you’re in the smaller one over there,” Boomer says, pointing to the right of the bunkhouse.

Scowling, I ask, “Why am I not staying with my brothers?”

My three brothers turn their attention to me.

“They’re keeping eyes on you, bro,” Mayhem says.

“Scared you might run off?” Decker teases.

“If that were the case, he’d be in the house with us,” Terminator grunts.

“All I know is we got orders. That’s where you’re staying,” Machete says.

I climb off my bike, grab my gear, and head across the walkway. I guess it doesn’t really matter where I rest my head tonight. As long as I can sleep after the shit we’ve seen, I’ll be fine.

Doesn’t quite seem like it’s been two days since we were at the club with Martin Cappellacci. There’s no way in hell that he should still be breathing air on this earth.

Just the thought of that has me tense again, breaking the promise that I’d made myself about relaxing and enjoying this trip. Maybe because I know when I lay down to rest what awaits me on the other side of sleep.

It’s been that way since we saw the women in that nightclub. The dreams always start up after another traumatic episode, another brush with evil.

Pushing the door open, I reach for the wall switch but stop when I notice that I’m not alone in the room. It’s not anything that I see but more the energy that I feel. My hand instantly goes for my knife just as I hear a soft, husky voice.

“No need for all that. You know your brothers wouldn’t set you up like that,” Duchess drones sleepily.

“What’re you doing here?” I grunt, anger running through me because I know she manipulated this arrangement.

“I told you that I’d be coming on the run,” she says.

“No, not here in Dallas. Here in my bed.”

“Thought you might want a warm welcome. Thought it would be good to see a friendly face,” she purrs, pulling back the covers to reveal her nude body in the moonlight.

“Got plenty of friendly faces out there,” I murmur, dropping my bags.

“Yeah, but how many of ‘em know you the way that I do? Will adhere to your rules?”

“You’ve already broken rule number three,” I reply, taking off my boots and my cut.

All I want is a hot shower and to lie down and rest. My hope is that I’ll be too tired to dream, let alone have nightmares.

“Technically, I haven’t,” she says, hopping out of the bed with her tits bouncing. “It’s not *your* bed that I’m staying in, Phantom.”

Duchess reaches up and laces her arms around my neck. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but there’s been whispers among the ladies when we rode down that you guys were handling some business. If it involved any of your usual techniques, I know how worked up you get. I know how to ease your strain, Phantom.”

Duchess grabs one of my hands and places it on her ass while taking the other, pressing it between her thighs. She loops her arms around me again and rocks back and forth on my hand, moaning as she presses herself against me, her thighs flush with mine.

I think back to Hadiyah and how she approached me. Everything about her was genuine, sexy, and alluring. Completely opposite of Duchess.

Strangely, guilt flushes inside of me as I realize that I was with her just the day before. Never has it bothered me in the past to be with one woman and then another within the same time frame. Yet, for some reason, I feel as if I’m cheating on Hadiyah, though I’m committed to no woman.

Removing her hands, I take off the rest of my clothes. “How many others have you been easing since you been here?”

The look of hurt that flashes in her eyes isn't missed by me, but she just as easily dons that cloak of nonchalance once more.

“No one. That's something you know I'd never do to you,” she says softly.

Searching her eyes, I say, “I wish I could believe you, Duch.”

I stalk away to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind me. I may be tired as hell, but I'm also all man. Pretending that I didn't like the way that her tits felt pressed against my chest or how hot and wet her cunt was, isn't something that's helping me right now. Except I know that with Duchess, I can get the relief that I can't get with Hadiyah.

The shower beats down on me with force, relaxing my muscles. There's only one muscle that's not soothed, and that's the one that bounces of its own accord under the water. I soap up my washcloth and rub it all over my body, but when I get to my thick, angry cock, my eyes close, and I use the washcloth to stroke myself.

Closing my eyes, I see Hadiyah's beautiful smile and her fat ass bouncing on my thighs as she rides my cock. I see her beautiful expression as she rides the waves of ecstasy with every hiss and moan. And I recall how gorgeous she looked when she fell apart and came. In another lifetime, it would be so easy to be with a woman like Hadiyah. A woman who could satisfy all my needs.

Just as easily, Duchess, hot and waiting in the bed beyond this door, replaces images of Hadiyah until I barely recall what she looks like.

Rinsing off, I don't waste another moment before I turn off the shower, grab a towel and head out the bathroom.

“Thought it wouldn't last for long,” Duchess smirks, standing just on the other side of the door when I open it.

My hands reach out and grab her hips, pulling her firmly against me as my towel tents with the force of my hungry dick.

I bite her bottom lip, making her cry out, and then nibble at her top one. Duchess reaches under my towel, fisting my cock and giving it soft, even strokes that turn into hard, jerking motions.

“Damn it,” I grumble thickly through my cloud of sexual tension.

She releases me long enough to drop to her knees and take me into her hot mouth. I fist my hands in her hair to aid her in sucking my length down.

It’s always been so easy with Duchess and me when it comes to fucking. I wish that it wasn’t because everything else is so convoluted, but it’s just the way that it is.

Her mouth and hands are greedy, vying for attention as one gobbles me down and the other cups and caresses my balls gently. My grip on her hair grows tighter as my strokes grow more rigid, warning me that I might explode soon.

Her large eyes glance up at me, and I know she’s asking if I want her to finish me off. Grabbing my shaft with one hand and her head with the other, I free myself from her mouth.

“On the bed,” I rumble, stalking after her.

She grabs a condom that’s lying there and hands it to me. Something shifts in her eyes, and I know she wants to please me. Duchess turns away, plants her hands on the bed and spreads her legs.

Damn, sometimes I miss my old friend, Duchess Riyann Wilson. I miss how easy it used to be for us to talk and share our thoughts. I know that I’m hurting her, but she hurt me long ago, and despite the fact I told her that I forgave her, deep inside, I never did.

Betrayal has become my legacy. When you can’t trust those who are closest to you, all you have left is yourself.

Tonight, I just want to go back in time to a safe place. In my mind, I know that it no longer exists, but there’s nothing

wrong with reminiscing this one time.

I climb onto the bed, lying on my back.

“Come here,” I say, extending my hand to her.

Confusion scribbles across her face, and then a smile breaks out before she climbs up and takes my hand.

“Cover me,” I demand, giving her the condom.

She takes it with confidence, rips it open, and covers me with it.

Duchess climbs astride me confidently and eagerly.

Her wide hips spread even wider, and her thighs grip me tightly as if she were riding a horse and coaxing it into movement.

Up and down she goes, squeezing and milking my dick, making my shit harder and harder until I’m ready to explode. Our bodies are in sync because I can tell when her breathing turns heavy and her teeth are clenched that she’s on the border too.

For so long, we’ve done a crazy dance of brutal sex that borders on violence as though we hate each other. In reality, we’re only punishing ourselves and each other.

Tonight, all of that is missing, and for a moment in time, we reclaim the tenderness we once shared, erasing the hurt and the pain and finding that ease of friendship once more.

The way that her hands move down my chest and how she leans forward, sealing our lips, lets me know that she wants more than I will ever give to her. When she lays down low, her ass tilted up as she slides up and down my dick, our mouths open, sharing a passionate kiss that we haven’t shared in more than a decade.

My hands grip her cheeks, opening her wider for me as I slowly pummel into her until we find a rocking, smooth cadence.

The gleam and delight in her eyes betray her heart when I flip her over onto her back. We’re sealed as one. We haven’t

been this way in a long time, and I find it hard to break the eye contact we make as I dip inside of her.

She wraps her arms and legs around me, pulling me closer. Somehow, it seems that I can't close my eyes, can't break the stare and deeper than that, the thread that pulls us together.

I swore a long time ago that I'd never be this open for her again, for any woman.

I never should have come to her like this when my soul was vulnerable. Usually, when I'm this raw, I take one of her girls, and I release the energy into them because I don't care about them. That's not true with Duchess.

I treat her harsher than most because I care about her. It's the only way that I can keep my distance. Our lips clash, issuing a challenge one to the other.

"Phantom, you must believe me. I still love you."

"Your love hurts, Duch.

She runs her hands through my long hair and pulls me closer. "Tell me you don't love me anymore."

I close my eyes and drown my sorrows inside of her.

"Please," she whispers. "Tell me you don't love me anymore."

Inhaling deeply, I kiss her instead. When we finish, she clasps my face.

"You can't tell me, Hikari, because you still love me."

The painful part is she's right. A part of me will always love Duchess, but I know that I can't have her. There's no use in aiming for something that I can never have.

"Say it!" she demands, jerking her hips up furiously.

Duchess' pussy milks me.

"Doesn't matter. I want you, but I can't fucking share you, Duch!" I growl.

"Tell me you love me, Hikari," she cries out.

Angrily jabbing inside of her, I growl, “Yes, I fucking love you!”

What was sweet and slow and filled with emotions catapults into what I need it to be, blind, raw fucking. When we cum it’s nothing short of mind-blowing. That was what I needed.

“Wow. That was like...”

“Whatever,” I grunt when I roll off her.

“We haven’t—”

“I know!” I grunt out, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She tugs on my shoulder, trying to pull me back down, but I refuse to lay beside her.

“Why are you so mad that you still love me, Hikari?”

“Because you don’t deserve my love.”

“Wow! That’s cruel.”

“No crueler than you’ve been.”

“When was I cruel to you, Hikari?”

“When you lied to me about going away. When you left me without saying goodbye. Every time you used me to get your father’s attention. Should I go on?”

“You lied. You never forgave me,” she says softly.

“I tried,” I mutter.

I get up, leaving Duchess alone in the bunkhouse. I walk until I find a quiet place to meditate and to think.

16 – PHANTOM (BEFORE)

14 YEARS EARLIER



“Get out! Get out!” The cries are as loud and as frantic as the screams, except the screams are eerie, haunting even.

“Unlock ‘em now!”

“Don’t got time for that!” the younger man hollers.

“Gotta make time! I’ve sunk too much money in them to lose ‘em, boy!”

The door rattles, and I can still hear the screams.

“Come on! Get outta here!” the young man says after he unlocks me and then my sister, Ichika.

“Don’t you dare try to run. We’ll put a bullet in your ass when you take the first step!” the younger man warns.

We don’t know their names. I just know that they call each other “Pops” and “Boy.” They’ve held us in this cabin for one year, two months, and six days.

I have been counting the days for revenge. I know that no one will come to save us because we have no one.

When our mother was beaten to death by her live-in boyfriend, Ichika and I went to live with my aunt, Mei, my mother’s sister.

Mei took us in and played the part of a doting aunt for the first four months after Okan died. She paraded us out in front of her “friends,” who were all male. Mei would tell them how we were all she had in this world, and she loved us so much, but she might not have a choice but to give us up because she couldn’t afford to take care of us.

Ichika and I eventually learned that sob story was used to get money from her unsuspecting male callers.

By the fifth month, her words to us and about us weren't as nice anymore. One of her "male friends" picked up on it and told her that he could take us off her hands.

We overheard the conversation that night in our bedroom. We heard the discussion about how much he would pay her. She laughed and joked about all she could do with that type of money.

It hurt Ichika and me to hear Mei talk about us that way, and we planned to run away. We would leave after school the next day, only we never made it to school the next morning.

I failed my sister. I was supposed to stay awake and protect her, but I fell asleep in the night. A pinch in my arm woke me up before I fell asleep again. When I woke the next time, I was tied up in the back of a van.

We have been shipped from one location to another before landing here. During the two years and three months we've been held, I've been molested on several occasions and raped a few times. The other "handlers" used me to clean and do their grunt work, but they never touched me.

I was safe until these two bastards got their hands on me. The Old Man is a sick bastard, and the "boy" feeds his fetishes. He's got a club that he takes my sister to and the other girls he's holding.

Ichika says that she dances for the men, and they feel her up but nothing more. I know that she's lying to me because I see it in her eyes. She's ashamed and doesn't want to admit that she's been raped, her virginity stolen. As her older brother, I can't tell her that I've been through the same. I don't want to share my shame with her as much as she doesn't want to share hers.

We are hustled out of the cabin along with the other girls. The flames lick up the roof and singe the trees overhead. The sky is black tonight, blacker than I've ever seen it.

The heat from the fire encroaches on us, suffocating us with its thick smoke. Ichika and I cling to one another, the first time we've been allowed to touch each other in a long time.

The other car, the one that Old Man's wife drives, is gone, and I'm certain that his other son is too.

Old Man starts the van up, and I can hear the screams of the other girls still inside. All of them haven't made it out.

"Get inside!" Boy shouts at Ichika and me, and two other girls.

"What about the others?" I shout back, earning me a backhand.

Rage pours through me, and I want to fight back, but I can't. If I do, it will only cause trouble for Ichika. That's a lesson I learned early on.

We scramble into the back of the van, and he slams the doors shut on us. The two other girls look scared, staring at Ichika and me. My sister trembles beside me.

"Please," Ichika whispers.

I don't know what I can do, but I can't fail her again. Closing my eyes, allow my body to go completely still as I listen to our surroundings. I can still hear the other girls screaming just as I can hear Old Man wheezing.

Over that, I can hear the stillness. The trees aren't moving, and the animals aren't calling out to one another. There's only the eerie cries of the girls still stuck inside, locked in the other room.

I go deeper into meditation, allowing the vibrations of my body to shut off so that I can feel all the sounds around me. I can no longer feel Boy's footsteps, so I know that he's gone back for the girls.

I lunge towards the doors of the van and push lightly. One of the doors swings open, and I turn back.

"Shhh, stay here until I tell you to move," I say, pressing a finger to my lips.

I slip out of the van, creeping along the side until I'm at the passenger door. Sliding my hand into the back of my pants, I pull out my homemade shank and grip it tightly in my left hand.

The passenger side door is still partly open. I open it wider and shove the shank into Old Man's side before he can look down at me. I twist as he grunts and slumps to the side.

Closing the door softly, I return to the back of the van.

"Let's go!" I call out.

"We can't leave. They'll come for us," Maria, one of the girls, cries out.

"We don't have long! We leave now, or there's no escaping," I hiss.

"They will kill us. They said they'd put a bullet in us," Perla, the other girl, says.

"Ichika! Ikou!" I shout.

My sister scoots to the edge of the van, and her legs hang over the edge. Just as she's about to jump down, I feel the vibrations of Boy's evil energy emanating all around us.

"Ichika, isoide!"

Fear creeps into my sister's eyes, and I can see that the fear is debilitating because she doesn't move. I have no choice but to scoop my sister up. The others can come, or they can stay. I cannot be worried about them. I created the opportunity now they must take it.

Carrying my sister, I rush towards the woods. No sooner than we clear the tree line, I hear Boy's shouts as he orders the other girls inside. It's only a matter of time before he realizes we're gone and we haven't made it far. Worse still is when he realizes his father is dead.

After I've run a little way, I put Ichika down to preserve my strength.

"Ichika, you have to move on your own," I plead with her.

She looks at me with tear-filled eyes, her bottom lip trembling and her face scrunched in worry. She shakes her head at me.

“No! You must! I’m not strong enough to carry us both right now. Not for much longer, but we’ve gotta keep going.”

She shakes her head again.

I grab her hand and tug at it, but she pulls back, not moving.

“Come on!”

She shakes her head again just when we hear leaves crunching. Ichika’s eyes widen.

“Ima!” I bark at her.

Ichika’s eyes fill with tears and fear at the command in my voice. I’ve never spoken to her this way, but I have no choice.

“Run!” I whisper.

We take off, jumping over logs and stomping through bushes. I hear Boy shouting after us, but I keep encouraging my sister with the word “freedom” repeatedly.

She’s huffing and puffing right alongside me. I hear a gunshot, and I know that he’s getting closer. Ichika cries out, giving away our destination. She stumbles over a limb when another shot rings out.

I grab her arm and pull her down an embankment, and we roll together. There’s a grassy overhang that we hide under, waiting, trying to contain our breathing. I hear Boy over us, and I press a finger against my lips, telling my sister to be quiet.

I hear him when he leaves, not even two minutes later, but we remain in position. We can’t afford to get caught now, or the punishment might be worse than the suffering we’ve endured.

The rain comes, and although we’re cold and shivering, we remain in place, holding each other, trying to stay dry under the grassy overhang.

By the time we're on the move again, we're both sleepy and tired.

I have no idea how long we're walking before we stumble on a safe place to hide for the rest of the night. There are no buildings or people in sight, just a lot of grassy land as far as my eyes can see and the trees behind us.

"I'm tired," Ichika groans.

"Okay." I nod and look around for anything that we can use as shelter through the night. "Help me grab some branches."

We work steadily for a while, grabbing branches to build a makeshift shelter, nothing fancy, just enough to cover us and hide us through the night. It takes almost an hour to create the shelter of twigs, branches, and leaves. We scoop up handfuls of mud and pack them onto the roof of the shelter to create a seal of sorts.

When we're done, Ichika looks at me as if to ask what's next.

"I'll build a fire. I'm sorry there's no food. Maybe in the morning, we can start again and find some."

"How're you gonna build a fire?" she asks.

"Here," I say, removing my jacket. "Lay down and rest and leave it to me."

Ichika does as I ask, and I grab several tree limbs, peeling the bark off until I can get to the dry parts. Once I've got them piled on, I remove my shoes and socks. Fumbling around in my back pocket, I remove a lighter and set my socks on fire, tossing them onto the dry wood.

"Hikari," she says softly.

I turn around and stare at my sister. "Yes?"

"Were you the one who started the fire?"

I turn back to what I'm doing, moving the socks and wood around to get the fire stronger.

"Please. I just want to know," she says.

“Rest, Ichika.”

I’m thankful for the lessons that I learned from my grandfather, but perhaps the greatest one is patience. He always said that no matter what else he taught me, that was the most important one. If we have no patience, the other techniques will fail.

With two years of patience, I’ve honed my escape plan, and I knew if we weren’t moved again, it wouldn’t fail me. The moment that I heard Boy and Old Man talking about selling us, I knew that I had to do something.

With all the materials, information, and skills I’ve been gathering over these last two years, I knew it was just a matter of time. I always hoped that I wouldn’t have to kill anyone, but I’ve had no choice.

The old man started in on me about six months ago, and I tried to stay away from him, but it hasn’t always been possible. When he raped me again three nights ago, I knew it was time to make my move before we were sold.

Tonight, after everyone fell asleep, I started the fire. I started it in the bathroom near the old man and old woman’s bedroom. I’ve only recently been allowed free rein in the house but not outside of the house. You have to have a key to leave the house, and I’ve never been able to get close to it. The fire was my only means of escape.

I look over my shoulder once again and confirm my sister is finally asleep. I warm my hands by the fire and look up at the sky. It shouldn’t rain anymore tonight; at least, I hope not.

I stand from my kneeling position and walk back to the trees. Placing my hands on my knees, I start puking until everything I’d been allowed to eat today comes up. When I’m done, I drop down on the grass. Finally, the tears come. The tears that I’ve held inside for more than two years.

I will never be defenseless again.

Never will I be a victim again.

17 – PHANTOM (NOW)



The cheers are almost as loud as the sounds of our motorcycles revving as we take off down the parkway. It's been a wild week full of partying, sex, drinking, and drugs. We've had several live bands, dice runs, burnout pits, and bike contests.

Gates have been erected all around the parkway to keep onlookers safe. Cyclops paid a pretty penny to keep the cops away from today's show. I know it cost him an arm and a leg because he said the sheriff was worried about people getting hurt.

That's not gonna happen. We're good as fuck at what we do, and we know how to control our bikes. I stand back, watching as each biker takes his turn performing stunts. This isn't something most of the crew know how to do, but there are a few of us in each of our chapters who are good at what we do. I'm one.

Rock, Blue, Riffraff, Texas, Mammoth, and Patriot all finish, and I'm the one to close out tonight's show. All day, women have been hanging all over me. As uncomfortable as it makes me, I try to deal with it when we're on the road like this.

It can't be helped. They're all over the place and all over me. When I get back, I'll take a couple of days away from everyone to meditate and cleanse my energy. My brothers are used to this. They've come to expect it.

I stroll off the side as one of the bikini-clad girls with bells tied around her nipples cheers me on from the back of my bike, *Abyss*. When I step up, she reaches up and kisses me before climbing off.

The music is loud, but the cheers are louder. When I look out onto the crowd, I see Duchess standing to the side, and she doesn't look happy. Someone's turned on T.I.'s *Bring 'Em Out*, and people are chanting my name as the music plays.

I ride my bike to the center and do a few burnouts first as green smoke pours out from my wheels, just as I flip the bike onto one wheel and walk it toward the edge of the crowd. Standing with my right foot on the footpeg and my left foot on the seat, I release the handlebars, spinning my bike in fast circles.

Bouncing up, I ride the handlebars on only my rear wheel and shift onto the seat with my front wheel still in the air until I flip the rear wheel in the air again. I look out into the crowd as they scream louder and louder and see Duchess rubbing up against some guy.

Returning my attention to my bike, I hop onto the gas tank and stand upright, riding in circles as Motörhead *Iron Horse/Born to Lose* plays in the background. I perform several more stunts before I return to the burnouts. I pick up more speed until the smoke from my tires turns from a ghostly green to an eerie blue.

The lot is full of smoke so thick that no one can see me. I ride *Abyss* through the smoke, still kicking up more until I've cleared the lot, and I'm on the other side. By the time the smoke dissipates, I'm standing back in the group of onlookers with my brothers.

"Fuck yeah!" Cannon roars along with Snake, Decker, Chainz, End Game, and Cyclone.

Women in short shorts, bikinis, and other flimsy attire run up to me, grabbing at my arms and running their fingers through my hair. It takes focus, strength, and self-discipline to hold still and allow them to do what they want.

An olive-toned woman with raven-colored hair pulls me down and plants her ruby-red lips on mine. They take turns kissing me until one drops down on her knees.

"Ready for your prize?" she giggles.

“Aye, Giggles! They ain’t announced him yet!” Cyclops calls out from the other side.

“Suck! Suck! Suck!” the crowd roars.

The noise gets louder and louder, and only the Ol’ Ladies and a few of the brothers head in the opposite direction. Giggles tug at my jeans.

She’s been trying to get at me since I stepped foot in Dallas.

Kneeling, I grab her hand and pull her to standing.

“Maybe later, sweetheart.”

“Okay. Is that a promise?” she asks.

I wink, smack her on the ass, and head back to my bike as my brothers from the other chapters groan in disappointment. The judges begin to call out our scores, and it’s not long before I’ve been named the winner again for the third year in a row.

After I claim my five-thousand-dollar prize, I go in search of Duchess, but I can’t find her.

“Doc! Have you seen Duchess?” I call out, riding up next to him.

“Uh-uh,” he replies, shaking his head.

“What about you, Tantrum?”

“Nope.”

I ride a few bikes down until I see Turbo. “You seen Duchess, man?”

“Yeah, she was riding on the back of Bio’s bike last I saw her. That wasn’t too long after they announced you as the winner,” Turbo says.

I nod and head back to where the council is gathered. It’s not surprising that Duchess is up under another man. She’s always been that way, pledging her fidelity to me one minute and her eye roving to someone else another. She’s not the type who can be easily satisfied.

“What’s going on?” I ask when I return to them.

Anarchy's wearing a scowl and crooking his neck side to side. "Cappellacci wants a meeting with you when we return."

"Think he figured me out?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Anarchy says.

"Yeah, bro. You were wearing your energy like shining armor that night," Cannon inputs.

Shrugging, I reply, "He'd better be thankful I didn't light that bitch up that night."

"Yeah, well, I need you to hold off on that for a little while longer. Just long enough to find out what we need to know about Roxie's cousin," Cannon says.

"Yeah, bro. Trust me when I say he's gonna get his," Anarchy replies.

I don't like the feeling at all, but I nod and say, "Okay. Set it up."

Anarchy nods, texts on his phone and says, "All right. Let's get Smokey Ridge together and roll out. Time to head back to the clubhouse for one final night of partying."

Everyone who's not already mounted climbs on their steel horses. As we roll past the other chapters that are still hanging out, our members all fall into formation with our crew.

It's not long before we've returned to the Dallas clubhouse, and Cappellacci's heavy on my mind. If I could, I would roll out tonight just to find out what the fuck he wants with me.

I need to release this energy that's got me bound.

We all gather at the back of the compound, where a bonfire is roaring. Everyone is either drunk or high.

"Ready for your prize?" Giggles asks.

"Yeah, let's head up that way," I say, nodding towards the bunker.

"Not right away," she says, dropping to her knees again.

Swear I can't keep this woman off her knees to save my life. She tugs at my belt, and I unloosen it, zip my jeans down, and pull my dick free from my jeans. She wastes no time sucking my shit right into her mouth.

We're not out of the norm here. People are all around us fucking, sucking, and being eaten out. This is our normal flow, but not necessarily mine. I'm generally a private man preferring to handle my business away from the others, but Giggles is impatient. It's not the first time that I've fucked with an audience around, and it won't be the last. It happens back home more often than I'd like.

It doesn't take long to figure out how she got her name because she keeps looking up at me, smiling and giggling while she's sucking my shit down. After a while, it gets the best of me, and I pull myself out of her mouth.

I snatch her up by the hand and flip her over my shoulder. Ass cheeks are on display from the tiny skirt she's wearing with no panties underneath. I smack her ass a couple of times and head back up towards my bunkhouse.

In less than five minutes, my jeans are down around my ankles, my shit is covered, and I'm balls deep inside of her.

I'm not a settling man. There's a darkness inside of me that can't be controlled and isn't good for anyone else to get close to. So, I'll enjoy this life until it ends.

I owe no man no explanation and no bitch no promises.

"Why can't I do that shit?" Cannon grouses as the others talk about today's stunt performances.

Laughing, Rider says, "Look at your big ass. You crunch nails with your back teeth, dude. Gotta be a smaller guy like Phantom that can get that shit off."

"Fuck you," Cannon says, giving Rider both middle fingers.

Anarchy laughs. "Seriously, Cannon. Look at all the guys who did stunt performances today. They're small dudes

without all the bulk you carry.”

“That’s right, babe. We need those guns for other...more important things,” Roxie says, smirking up at him.

I shake my head when he smiles, a smitten fool, and bends down to kiss her and cup her ass.

I slug back a beer as I watch the club whores dance wildly on each other. Some are giving lap dances, but most of the girls dance with each other. They have long since shed their tops, shorts, and panties for those who were wearing them.

“Skanks,” Roxie mutters from her seat on Cannon’s thigh.

“You’re being nice,” Hornet mutters. She’s leaning against Warrior, and he’s caressing her arm. That’s the only time you’ll ever see a soft side of that guy when he’s with his woman.

“Yeah, cuz they’re nothing more than scum buckets,” Mama Bear says, causing Lizzie and Bonnie to laugh.

“All right, girls quit being catty,” Bullet says.

“Why? You’d better not be eying those bitches,” Lizzie says, scowling at her Ol’ Man.

“Only got eyes for you, babe,” Bullet grunts, causing Rider and Cannon to snicker.

Anarchy and Raider are standing on the edge of the group, talking to Cyclops and his Ol’ Lady. Everyone’s having a good time.

My thoughts return to Hadiyah, but only briefly. Duchess falls onto my lap, drunkenly brushing her lips down my neck before coming back up again and pressing them against mine. She grabs my hand, placing it between her thighs and my shit instantly hardens.

Cannon meets my eye over her head, and the other Ol’ Ladies pretend to look away. She’ll never fit in with them, but she doesn’t want to. Of course, Duchess gets along better with the club whores than she does with the Ol’ Ladies.

“Wanna head back to the bunkhouse?” she asks, licking the side of my neck.

I pull back, clasping her hands in mine. “Enough,” I growl quietly.

She stiffens on my lap and tilts her head to get a good look at me. Her eyelids are heavy, and her eyes are red. She’s been doing more than just drinking beer.

“Whacha get into?”

“Nothing,” she shrugs.

“Nothing?”

She smirks at me and goes back to kiss me again. I grab her by the back of her neck, forcing her to stand with me. The others are looking at us, and Duchess knows that I don’t like attention.

“Come on.”

“We’re going to fuck?” she purrs, leaning against me as we walk away from the others.

“Going to do something,” I grunt.

All week

we’ve partied hard, losing ourselves in good times, drinking, and good music. Others have gotten high on their various drugs, but Anarchy doesn’t play that shit with our crew. The most we’ll do is smoke marijuana, but we don’t snort, shoot up, or take pills. It’s what’s got me concerned about Duchess. She knows the rules.

We make it back to the bunkhouse, and she starts stripping off her clothing. I reach out to her and stop her before she can get too far.

“What’re you doing?” she slurs, draping her arms around my neck and pressing herself against me.

“You need to sleep off whatever the fuck you’ve taken,” I grunt, pushing her away from me.

“Oh, come on, Phantom! Live for just once in your life. Have a little fun, baby,” she whimpers, stepping close to me and kissing me on the neck.

“I do. On my terms.”

She cups my crotch and starts stroking it, but I grab her hand and stop her. I push her backward until she falls on the bed. She lays there, splaying her legs open as she giggles and plays with her tits.

I drop down on the chair and drop my head back, closing my eyes. It takes her a minute, but she realizes that I’m not coming to her.

“The fuck is wrong with you, Phantom!”

“You,” I reply in a calm voice.

She knows that when I’ve reached this space, she can’t get to me here. I’ve shut her out because I refuse to argue with anyone. So, Duchess resorts to what she knows best: throwing a tantrum.

I watch as she throws her shit around the room, cursing and screaming. This is nothing new. She gets this way whenever she can’t have her way. Duchess isn’t someone you can hold tightly to. She needs space and freedom to be herself. But being with her when she’s like this isn’t good for me. I learned that a long time ago and almost lost myself in it.

When she’s all done, she crumples to the floor, face messed up with tears and voice hoarse from her wild shrieks. Her shrieks have turned to whimpers, and eventually, she cries herself to sleep. I wait a few minutes after she’s fallen asleep before I pick her up and place her in the bed.

I have to cut my losses and change shit up when we return. Until then, it’s time for me to get some sleep. The plan is to roll out for home tomorrow afternoon.

As I sit on the edge of the bed, I feel a heaviness cloaking me. It’s oppressive to the point I can barely breathe.

Something is about to happen, but what it is, I don’t know. Anger fills me inside, battling with the foreign emotion of fear.

Closing my eyes, I try to chase those emotions away so that I can see clearly, but nothing is coming. I have no idea when, where, how, or who. I just know that some shit's about to go down.

When meditating doesn't help, I crawl into bed beside Duchess and hold her. I've done all I could through the years to protect her from self-destruction, but she's her own worst enemy, and there's nothing I can do about it.

But why do I sense this feeling has nothing to do with Duchess?

18 – HADIYAH



“I need to grab my study guide,” John says, turning at the next light.

John’s studying to become a pharmacy tech. He usually always has that manual with him. When he’s not working and on break or if business is slow, he pulls it out and starts studying.

We’ve made it a couple of blocks away from the shop.

“Can’t you get it tomorrow?” I ask.

“Uh-uh. I got a test in the morning before I come to work. It’ll just take a few seconds.”

When we pull into the parking lot, he asks, “You staying out here or coming with me?”

I look around the parking lot, thankful that he’s offered to give me a ride. I’m not comfortable being in the dark alone, even if I am locked inside of the car.

“I’ll come with.”

John unlocks the door and rushes to turn off the alarm. The security staff left in their cars a couple of minutes before John and I.

I wait at the front of the shop while he heads back to the breakroom.

“Aren’t the guys supposed to be back soon?” I ask, reading a text message from my sister from earlier in the day.

I laugh at the GIF she sent to me.

“Yeah,” John says, walking up behind me. “So, how do you like working here so far?” he says, setting the alarm again.

“It’s okay, I guess. I mean, it’s a job, you know?”

“What do you want to do?” he asks as we step outside of the door, and he closes it behind him.

“I—”

“Don’t move, bitch!” I hear in my ear just as someone hits John on the back of the head, causing him to crumple to the ground.

I scream but quickly stop the moment that the cold metal presses against my temple. I can see the gun from the corner of my eye. Fear flows through me like a raging river as my stomach knots and nausea roils in my belly.

The only thought that comes to mind is, *Not again*. This is so reminiscent of Amina and me being kidnapped seconds after my parents’ murder. I want to fight back this time, but I’ll have to be patient. I need to wait for the right time to strike because if I don’t, I could end up dead.

Anger fuels my patience, though, because I’m tired of being a victim, tired of being the prey. It seems as if trouble has been hounding me since my parents’ murders. Life was good before, but it’s been nothing but hell since.

One of the guys cackles as he says, “This shit is easier than stealing candy from a baby. Gotta fucking key to get in, no need to break in.”

“Muthafucka, shut the fuck up and hurry up and get in so we can get out!” the guy with the gun to my head growls.

Their voices sound familiar, but I’m not sure where I’ve heard them. Either customers who have been here before or maybe even at the diner that I used to work at.

Two other guys are waiting in the shadows. I can see them now with my peripheral vision. They’re wearing all-black clothing and black ski masks.

When the first guy opens the door, they hustle us inside, the other two dragging John.

“What’s the alarm code, bitch?” the one with the gun at my temple growls when they hear the steady beeping of the alarm.

“I...I don't know. I'm not in charge of opening and closing.”

“Bitch! I'ma ask you one last time, and you'd better tell me!” he growls.

“I said I don't know,” I cry out.

He slams me against the wall while the others are smashing the glass display cases and cabinets where we keep products.

“What the fuck is the code!”

Tears fill my eyes then he pauses and tilts his head sideways.

“Ain't this a muh'fuckin' nice surprise?” he says.

The other three run to the back, and I can hear them rummaging through End Game and Phantom's offices, probably searching for money. The bank drop was made an hour before we closed, and we only took credit and debit card sales after that. I hear a couple of gunshots go off.

“Please, just don't hurt me,” I beg.

“Oh, you're gonna love me, sweetheart,” he says. “Past always comes back to haunt you. You can run, but you can never hide.”

What in God's name does that even mean? It confirms that he is familiar with me just as I am familiar with him, but I still have no clue who this guy is.

I look down and to my right, where I can see John's body still crumpled on the floor. I pray that he wakes up before the other guys come out. If somehow the two of us can distract this fool, maybe there's hope that I'll be saved.

“Pretty little thing. I'ma find out tonight if that pussy is as sweet and hot as I think it is.”

“You won't get away with it,” I cry out.

“Wanna bet? You've got a fucking debt to pay, bitch!” he shouts, slapping me.

Just then, the alarm starts going off. It's a silent one, but I see the light on the panel has changed from flashing green to alternating between red and yellow. It's alerting the security company and the police now, so help should be on the way soon.

I pray that it doesn't take much longer, especially when he snatches at my leggings, trying to pull them down from my hips.

"Please! Don't do this to me," I beg, knowing that I can never take another rape.

I survived the other times that I was raped, but when my last captor wanted me to be a willing participant to the clients who purchased a night with me, that was the final straw. Because Amina and I refused to do that, we were chained in that room, beaten, pissed on, and denied food and water.

After twenty-four hours, they would bring us a bottle of water and no food. They would give us the option to participate, and again, we would refuse, only to be beaten. It wasn't in either of us to sell out that way. We'd rather be dead than willingly be some man's whore.

Laughing, the guy says, "Oh, bitch, please. Look at you... you're begging me to stop now, but when you get a load of me, your ass will be begging me not to stop!"

He shoves my pants down despite my jerking and pushing him away. He shoves the gun further up under my chin and then jerks his own sweatpants down.

"What the fuck are you doing?" one of the guys shouts, coming from the back.

"Finna run all up inside this sweet pussy!" he growls as he shoves my legs apart with his foot.

"Dude! We didn't come here for this shit! Did you get the code?"

"Nah, bitch claims she don't know it," he says, swiping the gun between my legs against my core.

Anger fills me, and I want to spit in his face. I stare at him, fury shooting fire from my gaze.

“Then we ain’t got time for whatever this is you think you doing!” another guy says.

“Aye, I’m getting revenge tonight. Me and this bitch go back a ways. Y’all don’t recognize her?”

“Yeah, ain’t that—”

He turns and says to the third guy, “Man, shut the fuck up!”

The moment that he turns his head, I get a glimpse of his tattoo. A black and red snake with a gold tip on the tail. There’s only one person that has that tattoo that I’ve ever run across.

I look around at the other three guys. One is heavysset, and another is average height, but the third is tall and slim. I watch the heavysset guy move towards us; he walks with a slight limp. My gaze turns back to my captor, and I notice something about him that isn’t evident with the others: his ski mask is a bit lumpy in the back as if he might have more hair than the rest of them. As if he might have dreads.

Oh shit! Fresh fear runs cold through my veins, along with the piping-hot sensation of rage. This isn’t going to end well for me. These are those guys who assaulted me the night after leaving the diner, the night before I returned to Duchess’ place.

“Well, we ain’t got time for that shit,” the second guy says.

“I ain’t letting this bitch get away!”

“What the fuck, eva, nig! Look, just take her with us because we gotta get outta here,” the second guy says.

“Yeah, if we ain’t get that code, cops gon’ be here in a minute. Sides, we got what the fuck we came for!” the fourth guy claims.

“What we gon’ do about him?” the guy holding me hostage asks, jerking his head in the direction of John’s body.

“Leave his punk ass there,” the third guy says.

“Aight!”

They start running towards the back door, which is the way that we came in. I know that I can't let them take me away because if they do, I won't survive. I have to find a way to get stuck here. When he starts dragging me down the hall, I fall on the floor, shaking.

“The fuck!”

My tongue hangs out of my mouth, and my legs and arms jerk before I furl one arm as my hand curls into a claw.

“Aye! C'mon, man!”

“The fuck is going on?”

I hear the chaos of the others behind him.

“Damn, dude! She seizing or some shit?”

“I don't know. She just fell the fuck down and started shaking!” my captor shouts.

“She might be in shock. Leave her ass there! We gotta fucking go!”

I force my body to become one taut muscle as I start twitching more frantically until it's a violent shaking all over.

The stampede of their feet running down the hall for the back door is a welcome relief to me.

I hear the back door slam shut. Minutes later, I hear their car engines revving. I don't hear sirens.

I lay on the floor, fear dissipating as I realize that I've just dodged a bullet, literally and figuratively. I pray that John's okay, but I can't find it in me to move right now. Shock, anger, and fear surge through me.

Then comes the realization that they had to be watching this place.

I only want one thing.

I want vengeance.

19 – PHANTOM



I've just finished meditating, trying to cleanse my energy, much the same way that I showered the stench of the road off my body when my phone buzzed. Nothing has helped, and that sense of doom clings to me even now that I'm home.

It all becomes clear when I check my phone. The phone keeps going off, and I see it's the group chat.

RAIDER: *Just got off the phone with Falcon. Says there's been an attack on the dispensary.*

END GAME: *The fuck?*

ANARCHY: *Was anybody there?*

CANNON: *Anyone hurt?*

RAIDER: *John and Hadiyah. Not hurt but roughed up.*

ANARCHY: *My office. Now!*

I throw my phone across the room.

"Fuck!" I thunder.

I need to check on her. The last thing that I want is to stop by Anarchy's office. I need to find Hadiyah to lay eyes on her, just to make sure that she's okay.

She's been through enough shit. It fucks with my head to know that she's just endured more pain on our territory.

While I was away.

And after I left her the way that I did with no apologies and no explanation.

I don't know if she's at the hospital or at Duchess' place. What I do know is that Falcon knows.

I grab a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and throw them on before donning my cut and boots and grabbing a pack of cherry Twizzlers. In less than five minutes, I'm in Anarchy's office. The rest of the brothers file in after me within seconds of my arrival. Each of them, like me, looks angry, tired, and like they need blood to feel complete.

"Who are these fuckers!" End Game demands.

"She says that she recognizes them and could identify them if they were in a lineup," Falcon says.

"She called the cops?" Cannon asks.

"No. She didn't realize that our security system is wired to go directly to my team and that they're under strict orders to not involve the cops. So, she was waiting for them to arrive, but my guys did instead," Falcon answers.

"Where the fuck were they? They should've had their asses at the dispensary until everyone was gone," Raider demands.

"They were. They stayed until they saw her and John get in John's car, and then they rolled out. She said that they didn't leave right away because he was fiddling with his phone trying to set up his playlist. She said when they did leave, they'd only gotten a block away before they turned back for his study guide or some shit," Falcon says.

"Security couldn't have gotten too far," Dime says.

"Far enough. They'd turned off their work phones, and dispatch finally reached out to them on their personal phones by the time the signal came in. By then, the dudes had cleared out," Falcon explains.

"How badly was she hurt?" I ask.

"I think it was more mental than physical. She says she was fine and didn't need to go to the hospital," Falcon says.

"Could be her immigration status," Terminator offers.

“Nah, that’s not it. She’s a US citizen,” Whiz shares.

“How’d you know that? I thought she was from Somalia or the UK or something,” Cannon says.

“Her parents were from Somalia, and their home was in the UK, but she and her sister, Amina, were both born here, hence the automatic citizenship. Anarchy had me do a deep dive on them back when we first rescued them and sent them to Duchess’ house. All the women we rescued,” Whiz adds.

“So, just psychological damage from what she’d already gone through?” Anarchy asks, pulling his hand down his beard while rolling the metal balls between his fingers.

“Pretty much. I’m no doctor, but that’s about all I could tell. Your boy, John, on the other hand, had a big knot on the back of his head where they cold-cocked him,” Falcon shares.

“Where’s she at now?” I ask, biting off a piece of Twizzler.

“Took her to Duchess’ place. She was pretty shaken up. I’ve got men outside the house. You can bet that Duchess ain’t so happy about it,” Falcon says.

I turn around and head out of the office.

“Where the hell are you going?” Cannon shouts after me.

I keep moving forward before I hear Anarchy say, “Back off him.”

I know they’re probably talking about how to handle the hit that went down. I’ll get the details later, but right now, I need to lay eyes on Hadiyah. My only hope is that I don’t run into Duchess.

The last thing that I need is her giving Hadiyah shit for my concern about her. It’s weird, she doesn’t give a damn about me screwing the girls that she hires out, but if I show the slightest bit of concern for another woman beyond sticking my dick in her, she weirds out.

Every muscle in my body aches as I cling to my bike, hugging the curves in the road, bracing myself against the

night wind coming off the Pacific. Despite the issues I know I have to deal with, peace flows through me when I'm riding the way that I am.

Leaning forward on my bike with my face against the wind, I inhale the scent of the cedar and pine trees, the grass, and the dirt. Those scents intermingle with the briny scent of the ocean. It's the earth that grounds me, the earth that makes me feel whole when I'm losing my way.

Living with this pain inside of me that burns, eating away at everything good, is sometimes more than I can bear. Knowing that there's nothing good left inside of me, I try to find the good in others around me, people like Hadiyah.

When they're exposed to or hurt by the ugliness in this world, the only thing that I know how to do is lash out. All I can do is fight for her, fight to protect her. That's what I want now.

When I pull up to Duchess' house, I kill the engine and roll quietly towards the back of the house. When I climb off my bike, I look up at the sky, pissed as hell. This night doesn't deserve to be this beautiful, not when there's so much ugliness and evil lurking all around. Those damn stars shouldn't shine so brightly, shouldn't light the way.

My breathing speeds up as I ball my fists, willing my energy to recede. I haven't had time yet to de-escalate from the trip we've taken, and that's good for no one. I carry all sorts of energy within me from every evil I've seen on the road, from all that I've participated in, and from everyone I've allowed to touch me.

I see a flash of movement in the front window upstairs. Before I can think further, I jog up the steps and tap on the door lightly with my fist. When I get no answer, I knock again and call out, "It's me, Phantom."

I feel the vibrations of her moving around, drawing closer to the door. When I will myself to go completely still, I'm able to hear her light footsteps on the carpet.

“Hadiyah, it’s okay. It’s just me. I promise. I just want to make sure that you’re okay. I’m not going to hurt you, and I won’t let anyone else hurt you,” I vow through the closed door.

Relief runs through me when I hear her removing the chain latch and then unlocking the door. My eyes drink her in when I see her, and it makes me realize that I’ve longed to see her all along since I’ve been away.

Shit! This isn’t fair. I don’t have space for her in my life, and I have nothing good to offer her, but the way that I want to only be around her drives me insane.

My quick scan of her body confirms what Falcon said, that there’s no physical harm to her.

“Can I come inside?”

She nods, takes a step back and opens the door wider for me. When I step inside, I look around, remembering all the times that Duchess and I hung out here in our teens. She was always trying to escape what was going on in the house with her dad and all his women. I, on the other hand, was just trying to escape life. I only hope that Hadiyah has found the same solace that Duchess and I did all those years ago.

I take a seat on the blue couch and set my helmet on the table. Hadiyah tentatively takes a seat on the couch at the opposite end.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” I say.

She presses a hand against her mouth and shakes her head. Closing her red-rimmed, swollen eyes, I can tell that she’s fighting back the tears, which have probably been her constant companion since the assault. When she opens her eyes again, her lashes are wet, and she turns her face towards me.

“Why are you here?”

“You know why I’m here, Hadiyah.”

“Didn’t have to waste your time. Shouldn’t have bothered to come,” she says wryly.

“Look, I owe you an apology for the last time that I was here.”

“You owe me nothing. The only person who owes me anything is me. I screwed up thinking that you’d be different. You told me exactly who you were, and I only owed myself to believe in your words, but I chose to believe the fairytale in my head. I chose to make you a fucking knight in shining armor when nothing could be further from the truth,” she spews.

I drop my head into my hands when she stops ranting.

After a while, she starts up again but on a different topic.

“I’m tired of being the victim. Tired of always having to look over my shoulder. I thought that was a safe place. Better than the diner. Now, I’m not so sure if a safe place exists. I’m scared here. I thought when you knocked at the door that maybe they’d followed me home and were coming to finish me off.”

“Finish you off?” I ask, jerking my head up.

She nods and turns her head away from me. I can’t help myself; I reach out and touch her shoulder. She tenses.

Releasing her, I apologize. “I’m sorry. I had no right.”

She nods. “It’s not you.”

I know that feeling, too, the need to be comfortable with a simple touch but always fearing touch because it represents violation, pain, and discomfort. I know what it feels like to want to be whole but fear that you’ll never be and all your sexual exploits being nothing more than a need to prove yourself, to prove that you’re normal. I’ll never be normal again, and little does she know, neither will Hadiyah.

“What did you mean by ‘finish’ you off?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Hadiyah, it’s the only way that I can protect you.”

“Can you, though? No one’s been able to protect me so far.”

“I’m not just anyone. If there’s anyone in this world that can protect you, it’s me. You’ve just got to be willing to let me.”

“Letting you in is worse, Phantom.”

I sigh. “Just like you’ve got issues from what you’ve gone through, I have my own that I have to deal with. I tried to save you from that.”

She eyes me up and down and says softly, “You did. I’m sorry, I’m just in a foul mood.”

I can’t believe the idea that’s forming in my mind, but I guess it’s not completely insane. Reminds me of what Cannon went through not even a year ago.

“What did you mean by finish you off?”

She remains quiet, so I press harder.

“I need you to tell me what you meant by that statement... finish you off.”

“I wasn’t sure at first because their voices sounded familiar, but I started paying closer attention to little details. At first, it was the way that they moved and the shapes of their body.”

“But you came to an absolute conclusion, didn’t you?”

She nods.

“What was it?”

“The snake. The guy that held me at gunpoint has a tattoo of a snake. A black and gold snake with a red tip on its tail.”

“You know them?”

“I do,” she says softly.

“Hadiyah?” I lean down just a bit to stare at her, forcing her eyes to mine by will alone.

“Yes?”

“Did they hurt you? I mean, I know maybe they did psychologically, but did they...”

“Rape me? No. Not that night nor tonight, but I know that was their intention. He said as much to me. He tried to, but his friends came out, and he stopped. Then there was some arguing, and someone said they had to go before the cops came.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t force you to go with them.”

“They tried to. They were going to until I fell on the floor, pretending to have a seizure. They told him to leave me behind with John. Then I lay there after they left, scared they might come back. I waited for the police, but they never came.”

Tears fall from her eyes, and I wish that I could stop them, as much for her as for myself. I know that if I comfort her, we’ll be right back in that place we were in before, and neither of us can handle it. She doesn’t deserve me nor the hurt I’d bring to her emotionally.

“How long was it before the security team arrived?”

“I don’t know. Five. Ten minutes, maybe. I don’t know why the cops never came,” she says softly, swiping angrily at her eyes.

“It’s because we don’t have our systems wired to connect to nine-one-one. Our security team isn’t set up to call them when something happens either. They were never going to come.”

“How can I feel safe then?” she asks angrily.

“We protect our own, Hadiyah. Those guys couldn’t have known that they were stepping onto Fiery Disciples’ property, or they wouldn’t have done it.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. I just need you to trust me that I’ll protect you. I’ll take care of them.”

“Take care of them?”

“No questions. Just trust.”

“I don’t know. I’m not safe here, not safe in my parents’ homeland. There’s no safe place for me,” she croaks.

I watch as she drops her face into her hands. Her sentiment is similar to one issued by someone else I cared for a long time ago. Someone I loved more than myself.

I can't help myself; I have to touch her, so I rub her back because I know that she needs this. What I don't realize right away is that so do I.

She doesn't tense underneath my touch this time, but she seems to lean into it. I can't help myself. I wrap my arm around her and pull her close to me against my better judgment. I wish that I could wash away her hurt and pain, but perhaps that would be more damaging than not.

Hadiyah needs to feel her hurt and pain and carry it with her because that's what will make her into the woman she was destined to be. That's the only way she'll find strength to never be a victim again.

When she turns into my arms, prompting me to wrap another arm around her, I know she's depending on me right now for strength and comfort. There's no way that I can turn her away, even if I know that I need to.

I feel the need vibrating off her. I feel her need to be accepted, loved and protected.

What I feel far greater than that is something she doesn't even recognize she has. Something so vital that it's as important to her as breathing, and if she does not give life to it, it will eat her alive. Deep down inside of her, beating and breathing like a mystic darkness, is the need for vengeance.

She won't be fulfilled until she gets it.

20 – PHANTOM (BEFORE)



The snacks that I stole lasted the next day, but by the second morning, we were hungry and had nothing left. Ichika slept most of the day away, and I tried to come up with a plan. Later that evening, I saw what I thought was an apparition.

She was beautiful. Long, thick, blonde hair, long legs, and a nice pair of breasts. I wasn't sure if I was seeing visions or not until she kneeled before me and touched my face.

I was half scared of her and half thankful that she was there.

Now I'm second-guessing everything. These bastards look as mean as the ones that we've escaped, but this girl...her name is Duchess. Sounds like a hooker name to me, but what do I know?

Well, Duchess assures me that they'll protect us. If anything, the lead bastard, Tank, looks meaner than a bull, and he and Rogue, the one Duchess calls Daddy, want to know what the hell we're doing on their property.

Rogue keeps repeating they "don't want no trouble." Yet, despite how mean Tank looks, he seems to be the calmer of the two.

*"You run away from some group home or somethin'?"
Rogue asks.*

I shake my head as Ichika clutches my hand. I can feel her trembling with fear. My thumb rubs little patterns up and down her finger, trying to soothe her.

"What're you two doing on our land?" Rogue asks again.

"Daddy, I think they're lost," Duchess says.

“You got some folks we can call?” Tank asks.

I look from him to Rogue before I shake my head. “No, sir. We’ll be fine.”

“Let me holla at ya,” Tank says to Rogue.

The two of them step away before Duchess smiles at me. “My daddy likes to act mean, but he’s a really great guy. Tank, too. They’ll take care of ya.”

“We don’t need that. Like I said, we’ll be fine. We just need some food.”

She watches me closely for a few seconds before she asks, “What happened to you guys?”

Shrugging, I shove my free hand into my pants pocket and squeeze Ichika’s hand with my other. “Just lost our home, that’s all.”

Rogue and Tank return to us, and it’s Tank who speaks up. “Look, kid, I don’t know your story, and I ain’t gotta know it. It’s clear to me that the two of you are in some kinda trouble, and trust me when I say that I’m used to that. But you’re on Disciples property, and we don’t take that lightly. So, you two are going back to the compound with us, and we’ll figure shit out from there. Got it?”

“Yes...yes, sir,” I reply.

“She speaks?” Rogue asks, tilting his head to my sister.

I don’t like the fact that he’s taking an interest in her. The next person who tries to hurt my sister, I vow that I will kill them.

Narrowing my eyes at Rogue, I reply, “Yes.”

“Ain’t heard her say a word since we got here.”

“That’s because she doesn’t have to,” I say.

Rogue chuckles and looks at Tank. “This boy got a mouth on him.”

Tank laughs and says, “Why? Cuz he put your ugly ass in your place?”

Rogue rolls his eyes and heads back to his bike.

“You two ride in the cage with Brains and Duchess. He’ll get you back to the compound,” Tank says.

“Compound?”

“Yeah, it’s...well, it’s the place we live and play at,” he says, winking an eye at me.

I don’t know if I like this. It doesn’t seem like a safe place for Ichika and me to be, but I trust this guy for some reason.

“Aye, Brains. Go straight to bunkhouse number five and nowhere else. You got it?” Tank asks, thumping a big, meaty hand against the top of the car.

The guy says, “Yeah, Prez. I got it.”

The irony is that Brains isn’t too smart at all. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out. The dullness in his eyes, the slack-jawed appearance, and the way Tank speaks slowly to him confirm that theory.

Duchess hops into the back seat of the SUV and looks at me expectantly. I look back at Ichika standing behind me. Her eyes are wide with fear and doubt, and I can hear the soft humming that she does when she gets scared.

Tank is on his bike, but he’s staring at us.

“What’s wrong, kid?”

“Like I said, we’re really fine on our own.”

He scowls at me, and then he closes his eyes, his head slowly rocking back before he sighs. When he opens his eyes again, he gets off the bike and walks to us.

“Hey, kid. I get it. I mean, I know what it’s like to protect someone you love. Me and these guys,” he says, pointing his finger at Rogue and then Brains. “We’re like that. Now, I won’t lie; there are a lot of us back at the compound, but we’re not into hurting kids. If you don’t believe me, just ask Duchess. All I want to do is get some food for you guys and make sure that you’re safe. Kay? Not asking questions or any of that. Just want to get you to a safe place. If you know anything about us,

then you'd know that the compound is the safest place for you in all the state of California."

I think about his words and the feeling that I get interacting with him. My instincts say that I can trust him. When I look back inside the SUV, I can see Duchess' wide-eyed gaze is full of hope.

She found Ichika and I while riding her bike near our campgrounds. It was good seeing someone my age. She asked a lot of questions, but I mostly got her to talk about herself. I've got a talent for that, but after a while, it ran out, and she promised that she could get us some food.

I wanted to leave the minute she left our side, but I knew we wouldn't get far. We're out of food and don't have anything to drink. At the mention of food, Ichika lit up, and she'd been sleeping off and on all day, trying to deal with her hunger.

When Duchess returned with two motorcycles and a car, I was pissed. I could only be so upset, though, because I'd heard the vehicles approaching long before I saw Duchess. Choosing to stay there to see what happened was on me, but I was tired of running and hiding.

"I'm hungry," Ichika whispers.

I look at her again, and she nods. Squeezing her hand in mine, I lead her to the SUV, and I climb inside first, positioning myself between Duchess and Ichika. I don't know this girl, so I only trust her so far.

21 – HADIYAH (NOW)



“You need to come home.”

“It’s not that simple, Amina.”

“You were attacked, Diyah! Not once but twice and by the same men! What’s not simple about that?”

I sigh into the phone, closing my eyes and massaging my temples. Luckily, I’m not on the schedule to work today, so I can have time to get my thoughts in order.

“It’s more than you being attacked, Diyah, it’s...”

“It’s what? Is something wrong?”

“No, I just miss you. I thought when I left that you might do the same. It’s been months, and you haven’t come yet. You haven’t even given any indication that you might come.”

“It’s not in my plans, that’s why.”

“Even after everything that you’ve been through?”

“Yes, Mina, even after everything,” I reply softly.

“I mean, what’s there for you? You moved out of your apartment and quit your job because they were in a rough neighborhood. You started working at a dispensary, selling drugs, and you’ve moved back into that warehouse. What would Hooyo and Aabe say? This isn’t the life that they planned for us, Diyah.”

I think about Phantom, and I know that he’s cautioned me against relying on him.

“You think this is the life that any of us planned? Do you think they planned to be killed in front of our eyes or have us kidnapped, raped, beaten, and—”

“Enough! That’s enough, Hadiyah!”

“No, Amina, it’s not! It’s not enough until we find our voices again until we have our say. We allowed those bastards to rob us of our voices. Well, you know what? I’m tired of being robbed of mine! I’m tired of being the victim, Mina. I want to get my life back, and you need to do the same. We don’t speak of our parents anymore as if they’re taboo because of what happened to them. They would want us to tell their stories, speak up against the outrage, not pretend as if it never happened. Because when we refuse to talk about it, or even acknowledge it to each other, let alone the world, it’s as good as wiping away its existence. I’m not doing that! It’s a shame what happened to them!”

“You don’t think that I know that, Diyah? It hurts me to know that they suffered and didn’t get a chance to protect us, that they robbed Mommy of her dignity and Daddy of his pride. It hurts that we couldn’t protect you...the baby of us. I’m ashamed of that. That’s why I don’t speak of it.”

My sister’s voice has lost its steam, and I can hear her sobbing on the other end. I wish that I could wrap my arms around her, wrap them around her the way that Phantom wrapped his around me last night and offered me comfort like I’ve never felt before.

I recall his earthy scent, along with the crisp, clean cucumber and melon scent that let me know he’d just gotten out of the shower. Memories of how safe I felt in his arms arise, and I know that I never want to rely on anyone to offer me that protection. I need to know that I can protect myself no matter what happens, but damn, it felt so good.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of! It wasn’t your fault, Mina. I mean, what were you going to do? Fight a group of armed men who had guns pointed at our heads and backs? No, the fact that we were never separated and allowed to remain together was the best that you could do. Always promising to keep me in line if they would just keep us together.”

I hear the light humor in her voice. “You were always the feisty one.”

“Yes, but perhaps it was your mild-mannered ways that saved us. My mouth and temper were always getting us in trouble.”

“Yes, they were, but I was just thankful that they didn’t break your spirit. With all that they took us through. The drugs, everything. Do you...do you ever get cravings?”

“No!”

I sigh, rethinking my answer. “I’m sorry. No, I don’t. What about you, Mina?”

“No,” she replies softly.

“Hey, it’s okay if you do. I mean, they were plying us with pills constantly to keep us high, then stronger stuff. I guess it would be normal if you did still have them, but if so, please tell me.”

She’s quiet on the other end of the line, and I want to go there to her, especially when I hear her soft sobs. The breaking tone in her voice when she finally speaks breaks me.

“Sometimes...sometimes I feel like I need something to get me through.”

“Mina. We need to get you some help,” I say.

“I um...I met a friend who happens to be a social worker.”

“Where’d you meet this friend?”

“In my apartment building. She’s been talking to me, helping me through.”

“Maybe I do need to be there,” I reply as my heart breaks inside.

“No, because I don’t want you to come for me. If you come, I want you to come because you need to be here.”

“Mina, you’re struggling with addiction. You need me.”

“No, I need to know that you’re okay. That you’re strong. I have friends here, and Rebecca is probably the best friend that I can ask for. I can call her at any time of the night or day, and she’s right here. I promise that I’ll be fine. It’s just I was

worried that you might be struggling with it after all the things that have happened since I left.”

“No, I’m truly good.”

We sit in silence for a while, lost in our thoughts, as I wonder for the millionth time what our lives would be like now if our parents hadn’t been murdered and we hadn’t been sold into sex trafficking. I know that those thoughts do me no good, but it doesn’t stop them from coming to mind.

“What are your plans, Diyah?”

I think about how everyone’s going on with their lives, but here I stand with broken pieces of a life. Falling in love with a man who’s incapable of reciprocating the emotion. I’m scared to work anywhere, and I know that my talents are wasted.

The only thing that gives me a measure of hope is that someday, those bastards will pay.

Sighing, I lay back on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Resting my forearm over my forehead, I reply, “I don’t know. There’s nothing right now that’s calling me, but I will know when I find the right thing. Do you understand?”

“I do, but there must be something...or someone who makes you want to stay there. Someone who doesn’t make you want to return home to your friends and family.”

Phantom.

Amina has reconnected with old friends and some of our family members since she returned. She has not told them about what we’ve gone through, but they do know about the murder of our parents.

I can’t say that I blame her for not telling the truth because it would be too hard. No one wants everyone staring at them in sympathy with pity in their eyes, not to mention all the questions, the probing, and the thoughts they concoct in their head about how you are or what you’ll become. It’s difficult enough dealing with the nightmares and the memories without adding their burdens.

“I um...I just want to try something new, Mina. I want to forge a new life for myself and see where that leads me. Try something different than I’ve ever tried before.”

“Good luck with that,” she says sweetly.

“Yeah. You, too.”

I don’t know why I haven’t mentioned Phantom to her, but for some reason, he’s always at the forefront of my mind when I question why I do certain things while abstaining from others. I feel connected to him somehow.

“Well, I’m going to end this call. My lunch break is over, and I have to get back to work,” Amina says.

“Okay. You be safe, Mina.”

“I will, and you do the same. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Long after she’s ended the call, the phone is still resting between my shoulders and head. I stare at the popcorn ceiling and make out images there. I’m reluctant to let go of the phone because I feel the need to be connected to someone.

When the phone buzzes against my ear, it jars me awake. I hadn’t realized that I’d fallen asleep. When I look at the phone, I realize it’s not the phone at all. It’s the doorbell.

I rush to answer it and see Phantom standing there.

“Hi.”

“Hey, yourself.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Checking on you.”

My heart swells.

“I’m fine,” I say, opening the door wider for him to enter.

He sits on the couch and I sit beside him, but not too close. Even with the space between us, all I want to do is jump in his arms and straddle him.

“I know that you were off work today, but after what happened last night, I wasn’t sure if you were still good.”

“Good?”

“Need to go to a hospital, talk to someone.”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“The MC will pay for whatever help you need, Hadiyah, so please don’t think—”

“No, I don’t want you to pay for anything. I’m fine.”

Although we remain silent for a while, it’s amazing that I find comfort in just the sound of his breathing and his nearness to me.

“You need more time off than today and tomorrow?” he asks, leaning forward and resting his wrists on his knees.

“No!”

“If it’s about the pay, Hadiyah—”

“No. It’s not about the pay. I just...” I breathe out and close my eyes, trying to figure out what it is.

Maybe it has more to do with wanting to be at work and seeing him, but that doesn’t make sense. Only when I think about it does my heart race in anticipation as to when I’ll see him again.

“I just need to get out of the house. Being at work gives me something to do and keeps me busy. I’m not about to live the rest of my life in fear or being someone’s victim, Phantom. If I do that, then they’ve won.”

He looks away from me and stares at the floor.

“And if you don’t, they still might win,” he grunts out.

“Is that what you think? Do you think that I’m weak? Because of what happened to me, becoming a victim of sex trafficking? Almost being a victim last night? Do you think that I don’t get it? People look at me all the time with curious glances. That’s why I don’t want anyone else to know what happened to me. You. The other club members. Duchess. I see

the pitying glances and how everyone treats me with kid gloves! I don't need that! I don't need that from you, of all people!"

"I don't see you as a victim, Hadiyah. But I get it," he says softly.

"Do you? I don't think so! Because until you've experienced what I have, been subject to someone else's commands and control, and have all power, freedom, and control taken away from you, until you're raped and taken advantage of, you have no idea what it's like!"

"I said, I get it," he grunts again.

I scoff. "You don't have a clue!"

"Don't be so easy to judge others when you don't know their story. Don't know them," he growls.

I'm quiet for a moment, and then I press him for an answer.

"What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what I said," he grunts.

I pull my legs up onto the couch and wrap my arms around them. Turning my head away from him, I press my eyes closed tight, willing the tears to go away. But the moment that he touches my back and rubs, it's over.

They pour out like a flood. Everything is welling up inside of me right now, and I'm having a hard time controlling these emotions.

Unfortunately, Phantom is the person that I feel closest to here in America, though we're not close at all. A part of me feels as if I know nothing about him, but then there's something deep inside that believes I know him better than most. He's the one that I take my feelings out on. He's the one that I want more of.

He's such a kind, soft-spoken guy. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes when he rescued us, I wouldn't have suspected the anger that he was capable of, and yet, I believe the glimpse that I saw was just the tip of the iceberg.

Deep inside, I suspect that he's capable of so much more than my worst nightmares. I believe there's a darkness lurking within Phantom, a darkness that even evil itself fears. And yet, I'm drawn to him. I want to know more.

When he pulls me onto his lap, I don't fight him. I just curl into him, inhaling the leather, mint, and the natural air smell that clings to him from riding his bike.

Phantom just holds me, pressing soft kisses to my hair before I fall asleep in his arms.

22 – PHANTOM



I wasted no time meeting back up with Peaches to confirm the identities of the assholes that terrified Hadiyah and had the gall to fuck with our business. After taking our bikes a couple of streets over, I told End Game to wait with them. He wasn't happy, but as my brother, he had my back no matter what.

I stalked back to where we'd first spotted the boys upon riding into their neighborhood, watching them drink, smoke, and harass the drug addicts and prostitutes. My grandfather, Minato Nakajima, not only taught me patience but also how to be invisible.

People walk all around me, but they don't see me. Those that I allow to see me take for granted that I'm of no danger to them, that I'm just another worker at the local package store owned by the Vietnamese man. To them, we all look alike.

I bide my time as Meechie waddles back into the package store and returns with a six-pack of Budweiser, a bag of chips, and some candy. They take out the six-pack in less than half an hour before they split up and go their separate ways.

Pulling out my phone, I call End Game.

"Dirty Red is headed your way."

"Got it."

We end the call, and I step out of the shadows, walking behind Meechie and Salt. They pass a blunt back and forth between them, tainting the already rank air with the stench of their cheap weed.

Salt's hacking cough erupts into laughter when Meechie says something that I don't hear. They part ways at a rundown apartment complex. I follow Meechie and watch as Salt heads

across the walk. I stick my foot into the door just before it closes on Meechie.

A quick glance over my shoulder and I see Salt stop at the second landing. He pulls a key from his pocket and unlocks an apartment door at the front of the building.

Quickly making my way through the building, I can detect the stench of Meechie and the blunt he's still smoking. I follow the trail until I see him disappear into an apartment on the third floor near the rear.

The door bangs shut, and there's silence on the other side. Not long after, I hear a TV being turned on and then his voice. I listen closely to detect other voices, but there's none, and I know he must be on the phone.

I slide the lock pit set from my back pocket and insert one of the picks into the keyhole. The lock clicks, sending a sense of peace through me. As I slide on leather gloves, I wait several seconds, checking to make sure that he's still on the phone.

Voices and footsteps are heading in my direction, but it also sounds like Meechie is close to the door. There's not much time, and I need to determine what my next steps will be. A glance over my shoulder and I already know the move I have to make.

Slipping away from his door, I peer through the window and spot a landing. I tug at the rusted handle, trying to pry it loose. It won't budge. Leaning my shoulder against the window, I use my weight and strength to pry it open.

I've just slipped through the window, closing it behind me, when I hear laughter. I've barely escaped being spotted. Pressed against the narrow landing, which is merely a ledge, I look to the right, and I can see the window that must be Meechie's bedroom.

There's a loud knock, and I hope it's not on his door. I need to get him alone, but I'll do whatever is necessary to neutralize the threat on Hadiyah's life.

The knocking stops, and I hear a door open and then a woman's voice greeting people. When the door closes, I peer back into the hall window and notice it's empty. It doesn't take long for me to climb back through the window and check Meechie's door again.

He hasn't discovered that it's unlocked, and I can hear him still on the phone.

The door creaks when I open it, and he stops talking. I slip into a closet door and close it, waiting.

"Damn...Nah, I thought I locked my door, but I didn't. Yeah, but so tell me what you're wearing, girl."

He cackles, and I can hear him moving to the back of the apartment. I slip out of the door, checking out the small space. A tiny living area has one couch, a big-screen TV, and a recliner. To the right is a galley kitchen that opens to the living room. Straight down the short hallway are two doors.

I'm assuming one is the bedroom and the other the bathroom. Slipping out of my boots, I make my way down the hallway.

"Aye, girl. I'm 'bout to take a shower, and then I'ma head your way, a'ight?"

Steam pours from the door just ahead to my right, and after a few seconds, a quick peek around the door confirms that he's already in the shower.

I head inside his bedroom and wait for him behind the door. Reaching inside of my pocket, I finger the metal wire hiding there. I wait patiently until I hear the shower turn off before I remove my tool from my pocket.

It's one of my most convenient tools for handling business at the last minute. Roughly two feet long, when uncoiled, there are wooden hand grips at each end for a secure grip.

He's back on the phone by the time he exits the shower, and I can tell it's another female this time when he lies and says he just woke up and he's not feeling well tonight.

I guess it's his lucky night because I'm about to make that wish come true.

Meechie steps inside the bedroom and swings the door closed behind him. I slip out of the shadows, bringing the wire down over his head and around his neck. His hands instantly go up to the wire, but the wire is so taut that there's no way that he can slip his fingers underneath.

I hear the woman on the phone calling his name when the phone crashes to the floor. There's no air coming through his throat; he's clawing at the wire, and his eyes are bulging.

He collapses.

I waste no time getting my boots on and leaving the apartment.

I slip from the dark confines of the building and make a dash across the yard to Salt's building. Loud hip-hop music blasts from an apartment on the first floor, and arguing voices from another apartment down the hall.

A baby's wail erupts from somewhere on the floor above me, the floor that I'm heading to. I ease up the stairs and quickly move to the apartment, where I saw Salt enter earlier.

Pressing my ear against the door, I hear the sounds of a television playing and someone laughing. I listen a while longer and hear no other sounds. Jiggling the handle softly, I'm pleased to find that he hasn't locked his door. Overconfidence doesn't always play in your favor.

The opening of the door makes a soft, nicking sound that can't be heard over the television. Salt sits on the couch with his back to me. Seven quick and slow steps are muffled by the carpet. Lifting my left arm, I pull the gun up and shoot once.

Salt's head bobs slightly to the right, and his body remains upright. Thanks to my furtive movements and the silencer, Salt never knew I was here.

Two more of Hadiyah's enemies have been wiped from the face of the earth.

23 – HADIYAH



It's my first day back at work, and we've been extremely busy. Alicia says it's been like this the past couple of days. It's probably more out of morbid curiosity than anything. People come in to see the place that was robbed while trying to gauge how the staff are reacting.

I was stunned to learn that neither Alicia, Mike, nor John were surprised that the cops hadn't been involved. They said that's not the way that the MC handles things. When I stopped to think about that, it did make sense.

People like them wouldn't want to get the cops involved in anything. I'm no fool. I know that there are special customers who come through here to see End Game from time to time. They're not purchasing your run-of-the-mill marijuana. It doesn't happen often, but it's happened twice since I've been on staff.

End Game and Phantom have been holed up in End Game's office for most of the day. Or at least that's what Alicia says. I haven't seen them since I arrived at work four hours ago, nor have I heard them. I have a feeling something's about to go down.

It's the same tightening in my belly that I used to get when our captors were pulling up stakes to move us to a new location. There was a heavy cloud hanging in the air, an eerie silence, and my inability to eat anything. I never knew what was waiting for us at the next destination or if Amina and I might get split up.

"Well, guys, you're on your own. Good luck with fighting crime and being superheroes," Mike says, wrapping his arms around Alicia and bussing her cheek with his lips.

“Shut up, dude!” she says, pushing him away from her.

“What? You’re gonna miss me,” Mike says, holding his hands out before slipping his backpack further up one shoulder.

“Not really,” she says shyly, and for the first time, I notice what I’ve missed all along: she’s got a crush on this guy.

His gaze goes dark, and he leans in and whispers something in her ear. She blushes red before pushing him away and laughing.

“Good luck in L.A., dude,” John says, slapping hands with Mike and pulling him into a one-armed side hug.

“Thanks, man, but you might wanna keep some of that luck on your side with the way things are going around here,” Mike says, pulling a face.

John shrugs. “We’ll be okay. Sides got a feeling we won’t be getting another visit from those guys,” he replies.

“Yeah, probably not,” Alicia mutters.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, looking between the three of them.

They exchange glances before Mike shakes his head. “I’ve gotta hit the road. Hadiyah, it was nice working with you for the short time that we did. Keep your head up, stack your money, and get out of here as soon as possible.”

With that cryptic message, he turns and heads out the door. I turn to watch Alicia and John, who’re both staring after him. Alicia looks sad, and John appears to be thoughtful.

Shoving my hands in the back pockets of my jeans, I turn to face the two of them.

“Would someone please tell me what all the cryptic messages are about?”

“Are you really that naïve?” John asks, shaking his head.

“Hey, lay off her, okay? She’s not been working here as long as we have.”

“Don’t have to be. I mean, if you live around here, then you know,” he says, scowling.

“Know what?” I ask.

“She’s not from here. Matter of fact, she’s only been here...what a few months?” Alicia asks.

I nod, affirming the lie that I told when I first came to work here. They don’t need to know about the months that I was living out of Duchess’ place while Amina and I were healing.

“It’s just that they’re a motorcycle gang,” Alicia says. “They have their own way of doing things.”

“Like what?”

I already know what she’s going to say, but I want to hear it from her mouth, but John breaks in.

“Not just a motorcycle gang, but a one-percenter, and they don’t take shit about people messing with their money, women, or their compound. So, whoever these guys are...I doubt we’ll be seeing them again anytime soon. Fairly certain they’re in the Pacific,” John says glumly.

I turn to Alicia, who solemnly nods.

“You...you think they killed them?”

“I know they killed them,” John says.

“You don’t know shit,” Alicia hisses. “And you’d better not let them hear you say that.”

“Why would you say a thing like that?” I ask John.

“Because of who they are. They’ve got a rep around here, and people know what they do. Run drugs, guns...people, and they murder.”

“Wait, people? Are you saying they’re into...into human trafficking?” I ask as my belly knots in fear.

“Look, I’ve got a boy who works at this club off Twenty-Eighth and Sixth Streets as a valet attendant. He’s been in here

on a few occasions, and he swears that he has seen them there that weekend they were supposed to be leaving town.”

“So?” Alicia says with a shrug.

“So. That night, the man who owns the club was supposedly bringing women in. Women that were being sold.”

“Again, you said supposedly, doesn’t make it true. Besides, who’s this boy of yours anyway, and why would he be privy to that sort of information?” Alicia asks.

“My boy happens to be my cousin, and he’s not,” John looks over our shoulders toward the back before he goes on. “He had to take a piss, so he left his post and went inside. Used one of the bathrooms upstairs, and when he was on his way back down, somebody opened the door, and he caught a glimpse inside. Said all these girls were in the room looking drugged with no clothes on, being paraded around. He said you could tell they weren’t aware of what was really going on like they were robots or some shit.”

A chill ran through my body because I remember those days. We were high as a kite, but often, I was more alert than anyone ever knew. Not alert enough to make a run for it, but to recall what was being done and who was doing it.

Whenever we left a spot to be taken to this old rundown building where they pimped us out, we were taken in a van with blackout windows. We’d be blindfolded even though we were high as shit.

“Anyway, he says he saw the Fiery Disciples there that night. He thought some shit was about to go down when they arrived, but the only thing that happened was that somehow, they forced their way past the security,” John says.

“If they did kill these guys, it was nothing more than they deserved,” I whisper.

“How can you say that? These were people’s lives, Hadiyah. They should have been taken into custody and processed the legal way...the same way everyone else in this country has the right to,” Alicia says.

For the first time, I see her for what she truly is: the protected princess who's been sheltered and never had to deal with adversity in her life. She's probably working here because Mommy and Daddy Dearest tightened the purse strings, not because she was turned out by her mama after being raped by her stepbrother like Cashmere was, or her mama died of a meth overdose, and her dad is serving life for murder like Maisie.

Alicia has options. She just chooses to complain about the ones she's been given.

"You weren't here," John says.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asks in a snippy tone.

He shrugs and looks at me. "You have no idea what we had to endure."

"Poor John, what did you have to endure? I thought you said you were knocked out," Alicia remarks.

John's gaze meets mine, and I know the truth for the first time. At some point, he came back to me and knew what was happening to me. He was awake before the security team returned but pretended not to be, and perhaps it was for the best. If not, we both may have been killed.

"I don't condone violence either, Alicia, but sometimes... it's necessary," he says.

I bite my tongue, not to say that perhaps it's a code we should all be ready to live by. You have no idea how quickly your life can change in the blink of an eye; one wrong decision, one alternate route, or even a fucking vacation!

"I'm going on break, guys," I say, hurriedly walking away.

I can take neither the pitying gaze in John's eyes nor the judgmental one in Alicia's. I know that she's sympathetic about what we went through. I think the judgment stems from her feelings about our views on the possible murder of those guys.

Honestly, I don't know how I feel about it, if it's even true. A part of me feels some sort of vindication for what those

guys did to me the first night I encountered them and the second. Mostly though? I just feel empty.

I duck into the restroom and use it, washing my face and hands before I step into the hallway again and run right smack into Phantom's chest. He grabs me, holding me steady as I wobble just a little. I know that it's only seconds, but it feels like an eternity when he touches me and I'm pressed against him.

Those feelings are arising in me again, feelings that stir inside of me whenever he touches me. His eyes quickly search mine, and I know that he feels what I do. Phantom doesn't show much expression, but I saw the way his nostrils flared as he inhaled my scent, saw how his jaws clenched, willing himself to take control, and I even noticed how quickly he pulled his fingers away as though singed.

Why won't he allow himself to feel the attraction to me? Why does he fight it? Why hasn't he made love to me again?

"You okay?"

I nod and turn away, walking to the breakroom before I can say another damaging word like I did the other day.

By the time I finish my break, I hear Phantom and End Game's voices in Phantom's office. The door is only partially closed, and I can tell the shop is busy by the level of noise I hear out front. There are only so many customers allowed in the store at once, but I'm sure that John and Alicia both have their hands full.

The venom that I hear in Phantom's voice awakens something within me, and I want to know what's wrong. The desire to stand by his side and protect him the way that he always does me compels me to take steps forward, bringing me closer to his office.

"...knows that you're not feeling this shit. The fucker's not stupid, bro. You don't do a good job of hiding your feelings when it comes to this shit."

"Shouldn't fucking have to."

“I know, bro, but we’re so close. So close to finding out the answers to what really happened to Courtney, finding out who’s behind this sex trafficking ring—”

“Bro! We fucking know who’s behind it! We just need to shut that shit down!” Phantom rumbles.

“Yeah? But fucking knowing and doing something about it is worlds apart. We can’t just rush up in there and end this shit. It runs deep. While there may not be many players to this, you don’t just run into mafia territory and break down their organization. We gotta stick to the plan, and the plan right now is to have your ass meet Cappellacci tomorrow night at his club.”

“I don’t trust it.”

“We know that. That’s why we’ll be there to have your back, even if he doesn’t know it.”

“Just got a feeling some shit’s going down, and it’s a setup,” Phantom grouses.

“Might be,” End Game rumbles. “You in or you out?”

“You know I’m in.”

“He says that he’s got a couple of black girls that he wants you to check out, just to see if they’re your type. Go to this meetup tomorrow. Take the cash Anarchy’s providing, do the buy and get those girls outta there. Make it look believable. Force him to think that you’re into fucking human trafficking.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that, End Game? Huh? Me of all people?”

End Game releases a loud breath and says, “I know, bro. Just go with it for tomorrow night, learn what you can, and get your ass back to the compound safely.”

They remain silent, and I look up the hallway. No one’s coming, so I take the risk and stay a little longer.

“You’re not gonna bring her back, bro. You can never bring her back, and you can’t take away what was done to Hadiyah either.”

My ears perk up at that.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I see how you are about her. You’re hardly here, but when you are, you’re always watching her, super sensitive where she’s concerned.”

“I feel her pain.”

“Exactly! Which is why you need to tread carefully tomorrow night.”

Here’s my opportunity for vengeance.

“Can’t be careful in the face of this bullshit!”

“Just make it believable, man.”

“How, End Game? How the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

I swallow my fear, steel my jaw, and push the door open, stepping inside.

“By taking me. That’s how.”

24 – PHANTOM



“Fuck no! I’m not doing it!”

“Phantom, it may be our only choice.”

“No, Anarchy! The only choice I have is to go alone! I always fucking work alone!”

Besides being the treasurer for my MC, alongside Cannon, I’m one of our top assassins, eliminating any enemy that poses a danger to us. I’ve gone on more solo missions than I have with my MC at my side. I’ll kill for my bros every time because they’re my salvation, the only one that my soul will ever know.

“But you won’t this time.”

“You’re gonna get her killed,” I snarl, placing my fingertips on his desk and leaning close enough to his face to feel his hot breath on my face.

“You won’t let her,” he returns.

I steady my breaths and will my fists to remain unclenched and stare, unflinchingly meeting his hardened gaze.

“She wasn’t meant for this,” I object.

Anarchy lifts a shoulder. “Look, the kid volunteered her services.”

“That’s just it. She’s a fucking kid, Anarchy.”

He angles his head slowly and narrows his eyes at me. A smirk tilts the corners of his lips.

“That’s what this is fucking about, isn’t it? You and her. You’re feeling this broad, Phantom?”

I continue to stare at him, livid at this game he's playing. Slowly, Anarchy stands to his feet and claps his hands in slow succession.

"It's about fucking time someone bought you to your senses. Made you realize you ain't ever gonna make a whore a housewife."

I cut my eyes at him again. "Watch your mouth!"

"Hey! Hey!" Cannon says. "We get it, okay? Duchess has always been there for you. She was a good kid, Phantom, but she ain't that no more. We all know what she is, and you're the only one in denial. Can't be mad at Prez for calling the truth."

I know that Cannon's right, but I don't want to hear that shit. Not right now. Not when she's been blowing my phone up lately, and I've been ignoring her calls. For the first time in a long time, I can't reconcile the shit that's in my heart with what's in my mind.

"Besides, if you want to protect her, then claim her," Anarchy says.

I roll my eyes, ignoring his comment. So much is swirling around inside of me, and it's all locked in with Ichika. I know that it is. And now they're asking me to do this. To put someone else in the line of fire where I may not be able to save her, protect her from the thing that she fears the most.

Damnit! Why the fuck did she offer herself up like a sacrifice right there in front of End Game?

No sooner than I shut that line of conversation down than he not only bit on it and assured her it was a great idea, the bastard texted Anarchy and told him.

"You good?" Cannon asks, his hand still pressed against my chest.

Anarchy has sat back down in his chair.

Pulling a hand down my face, I don't say a word. I just drop down on the couch behind me.

"So, here's the plan," Raider says.

All eyes turn in my direction, though Raider is speaking as if I have the power to veto this shit. If I had, it would all be shut down now, and this conversation wouldn't be happening.

“Hadiyah will go with you tonight. She's got to pose as the woman who'll keep the girls in line for her to get in. She'll train them and make sure they're ready for any potential customers,” he says.

“Okasan.”

“What?” Terminator and Dime ask at the same time.

“Like a mother,” Whiz explains.

“It's a woman who pays for a geisha's training. She's the one that manages her entire career,” I expound.

I'm seething with rage about putting Hadiyah in harm's way like this. I know that Anarchy doesn't give a fuck if he can get his man.

“Okay, so she'll be the Okasan,” Raider continues. “You'll introduce her as such and explain that she's there to help you select the right girl. Gauge how well she thinks the girls might do under her tutelage.”

Anarchy's metal balls clack against one another as he sets them down on his desk and leans slightly forward. Looking between End Game and me, he asks, “Are we certain that she'll be able to identify some people.”

“Possibly,” End Game says. “Look, we all know this world isn't as big as people think. There are some primary money movers, and I'd bet the compound that some of the people she's encountered will be at this exclusive party tonight.”

“Which is why she shouldn't go. They'll recognize her, and our cover will be blown,” I argue.

Cappellacci claims this party is for a select few, and he didn't want the entire MC showing up. He says because I expressed interest in black girls specifically, he decided to bring me in but not the others.

“She can't look like she does now,” Anarchy says.

“We should take Duchess. She’d be better at this than Hadiyah,” I argue. “She’s traumatized already, and she’s been through more since we got her out. Who’s to say that she won’t freak the fuck out when she comes face-to-face with her former captors?”

“She was traumatized by all of this,” Cannon agrees. “I mean, how much more damage do we want to do to the girl?”

“Normally, I’d agree. But you didn’t see her. She was insistent that this was what she wanted. I don’t think we could change her mind if we wanted to. It’s like...she’s got this obsession about being there. May want to do damage to ‘em as badly as my bro here,” End Game says, jerking his thumb at me.

“She needs a disguise,” Anarchy says.

“Yeah, pair her with Duchess and see what she can come up with,” Raider suggests.

“No!” I bite off.

I hate that she lives at Duchess’. Hate that the two of them are in such close contact with each other. Duchess knows who I am and can accept my behaviors. It might destroy Hadiyah, but I can’t be anyone except for who I am.

“I can’t have Duchess knowing about this,” I explain.

“I agree. The less, the better,” Cannon speaks up.

“Okay, then, who’s gonna get her in disguise? One of the Roses?” Dime asks sarcastically.

“Rox,” Cannon suggests. “After all, she doesn’t know everything, but she knows we’re on a hunt for information about her cousin. Besides, it’ll benefit her as much as anyone.”

“He’s got a point,” Whiz agrees, nodding.

“Okay, get her with Roxie and see what you come up with. We’ll be rolling out with you guys tonight,” Anarchy says.

“Wish there was a way one of us could get inside,” Raider says, cricking his neck.

“I can handle myself. Don’t need another bitch to worry about,” I grumble, stalking out of the room and leaving the others to figure their shit out.

I bring my bike to a stop and slowly climb off it. Hooking my thumbs in my belt loops, I look up at the sky. It looks as if it’s going to rain soon despite the sun sitting high in the sky. Maybe the heavens are crying the tears that I no longer can. Tears for a soul that was gone far too soon, a life that never had a chance to live. A soul that left this place before she ceased to exist physically.

Scrubbing my fists against my eyes, I slowly walk a couple of feet to where the marker lies. Slumping down beside it, I rest my back against the hard concrete surface on the opposite side of where she lies.

Closing my eyes, I summon the memories of all the times we returned to this spot. A space that marked the start of new lives for us, or so I hoped. What I learned during that time is no matter how far you run, you can never outrun your past.

You carry it with you like a badge of honor, wounds etched into your soul, marring your heart and everything good within you. And the pain wells up and eats and eats at you until you’re left with nothing but the darkness, nothing but the bitterness. Until there’s no good thing remaining inside of you.

It’s funny. My given name is Hikari, which means “light.” I’ve often thought my mother got that name wrong because there’s no light within me.

My family name is Nakajima, which means “island.”

I haven’t seen any light in a long time. So long that I wouldn’t recognize it if it shined my way. These days, I mostly associate with an island because that’s exactly what I’ve become. Yes, I trust and love my brothers, but I rely only on myself.

We all choose to deal with the darkness in our own way. It’s how we deal with it that will determine the outcome of our lives. Will we survive, or will we give in? Sinking so deep,

falling so far that we're useless to ourselves, and no one can help us.

She fought so hard, she was so strong, and she tried to live with the pain. In the end, the very thing that she tried to use to escape the pain was the very thing that pulled her under.

"I cannot lose another soul. There's nothing that I won't do for my brothers, but what they're asking isn't fair. What's worse is that I know something is going to happen. I feel it in the air."

I drop my head into my hands and slowly pull my fingers through my hair, loosening my ponytail.

"She's not ready for this. Hell, I don't know if I'm ready for this, but this is the way it plays out, you know? This girl brings up feelings inside of me that I can't handle. She makes me want things that I know that I don't deserve. I'm dirty. So fucking filthy, but she's pure. Only she doesn't see herself that way. She thinks because she was someone's victim, she can't be pure. I see the light in her. All the good. Sometimes, I wonder if the shit I do is to try to save you again. To save myself."

I laugh, but it sounds hollow.

"Shit. I can't be saved. My soul was lost a long time ago. The shit I've seen, the things I've done can't be erased."

I look up as the sun disappears behind a group of clouds rolling by.

"Some people say there's a savior...I know you believed, on'na no akachan. I did, too, but...he doesn't want my blackened soul."

I crawl from behind the concrete slab that marks her final resting place. Kneeling beside her grave, I whisper, "You always loved this place. Didn't want to leave when we were discovered."

I look around at the hedge of trees not too far away. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I rest my arms on them.

“I miss you,” I whisper, rubbing my fingers across the moist ground.

I hear the distant sound of a cage coming in my direction. There’s a road just below the hill that I’m sitting on. Our property runs alongside the Pacific, and this side of our property is a couple of miles away from the compound.

People don’t really come out here too much. Don’t know which of my brothers would be rolling out here in a cage, and don’t really know why. Don’t too much give a fuck.

I press my fingers into each letter on the headstone.

One thousand flowers. That’s what her name means. And she was as beautiful, as sweet, and as fragrant as one thousand flowers.

After all, she went through, she was still just as beautiful. My mother got her name right.

I hear the cage come to a stop behind me, but I don’t move. My eyes are trained on the flowers etched all around her name and around the edges of the headstone.

“I can’t lose another soul,” I choke out.

25 – PHANTOM (BEFORE)



“She’s got to be around here somewhere,” I grumble with Duchess by my side.

We’ve been looking for Ichika for the last couple of hours, ever since one of the Prospects said he saw her walking off down the drive and hopping in a cab outside of the gates.

My sister hasn’t been stable since we arrived at the clubhouse three years ago. I thought in time she might settle down, but she hasn’t. She trusts no one, some days not even me. The MC has rallied around us, welcoming us into their folds as if we’re family.

Although I’m prospecting, it’s not the same for Ichika. In some ways, she’s still an outsider, partly because she’s female and partly because she keeps everyone at arms’ length, even Duchess, especially Duchess.

“Hikari?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s check that house over there,” Duchess says, pointing to a dull brown house across the street.

The door appears to be barely hanging on, several windows are boarded up, and the front yard is overgrown with weeds.

“Why?”

Duchess shoots a glare my way, not wanting to say what I know she’s thinking.

“Come on, let’s just...”

Duchess walks across the street, and I stand for a moment, watching her as she jogs up to the house. It's a well-known crack house, and she shouldn't be walking up there by herself. If her dad or Tank knew, they'd have my ass for letting her do it. I can't imagine how they'd react if they knew I let her go on her own.

I jog across the street after her.

"Duchess! Wait!"

She's already knocking on the door and then pushing it open by the time I run up the stairs.

The stench emanating from within is enough to make any normal person sick. I'm not sure that I qualify as normal anymore; I haven't for a long time.

Duchess gags and turns back to the door, and I jump back just in time to avoid her vomiting on me.

A table and some chairs stand in one corner, and across from that, there's a dirty mattress in the middle of the floor. Two men and a woman are sitting in three of the rickety six chairs.

The woman's watching us as her head lolls to one side.

"Hey, have you guys seen—"

One of the men throws a hand up in the air, flashing three fingers and then one, as he mutters something unintelligible. The second man turns back to the crack pipe, more focused on the high than he is on the two strangers who walked through the door.

"You're wasting your time," Duchess mutters, stepping around the mattress and heading towards the back of the small house.

I follow her as she pushes a bedroom door open. There's another mattress in that room and nothing else. Two young girls are smoking crack, and an older guy is shooting dope.

We back out of the room, closing the door behind us as we make it to the second and third bedrooms with no luck.

“Come on, she’s not here,” I reply.

Duchess turns around and starts walking down the hallway. I stop when I see a sliver of light coming from what might be the bathroom door.

“Duchess, wait.”

She turns back as I knock on the bathroom door. When no one responds, I knock again. Duchess leans against the wall with her arms folded in front of her.

My heart constricts in my chest, and I pray that I’m wrong about my instincts. Unfortunately, I never have been before. There’s a strong tightness in my chest and humming through my body.

I knock one final time before I twist the knob. It opens, and my worst fears come to life.

Ichika is lying on the floor with a tourniquet around her arm.

“Ichika!”

I drop to the floor beside my sister, lifting her head from the toilet seat that it was resting on. My eyes go to Duchess, and she kneels beside me, the fear in her eyes as prominent as the fear that rushes through me.

Ichika’s skin is a bluish-purple hue, and her skin is clammy.

“Ichika!” I rumble, shaking her.

My sister’s beautiful brown eyes are glazed over as her eyes bounce from Duchess to me to something else that I don’t see. They close, and I shake her limp body.

“Come on, Ichika. Don’t leave me. I need you,” I cry out.

The sounds coming from her are unnatural, not like the sound of the crackhead in the front room. Hers is more of a gurgling sound mixed with snoring.

“Is she still breathing?” Duchess asks when Ichika’s eyes close.

“Yeah,” I whisper, scared that if I say it aloud, I might tempt fate. “But it’s not steady.”

Her breathing is shallow.

Duchess reaches out and grabs her wrist. “Her pulse is slow. We’ve gotta get help.”

Duchess stands, heading out the door. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I feel the moment that my sister slips away from me, and though I don’t want to acknowledge it, I have no choice.

“Duchess!”

My voice doesn’t sound like my own. The cry wrangled from my throat is eerily ghost-like in sound. Duchess slides back into the bathroom, her eyes wild and her lips parted.

“What?” she whispers.

I shake my head.

“No! Hikari, please don’t say—”

“She’s gone. My sister is gone,” I whisper.

The first tears fall from my eyes.

Tank had men to retrieve my sister’s body from the crack house earlier. The doctor they keep on their payroll declared she died from a heroin overdose. I’ve heard them making plans to bury her in the morning, not even twenty-four hours after her death.

In some ways, I feel as if she was an embarrassment to the MC. Whores they can tolerate, even make them a part of the family. Addicts? Not so much. They don’t tolerate users mostly because they’re always worried that if the brothers use drugs, they’ll dip into the club stash, costing more than they’re making.

I know Duchess’ dad, Rogue, was always worried about it. I’ve heard him and Tank argue about it in the past. Tank has become a father figure to both Ichika and me. If there was any

person she slightly opened up to, it was him, though she kept him at a distance, as well.

I know that her death hurts him because he's tried to do all he could to get her help, including therapy and rehab, but none of it worked.

The only way that I could escape the pitiful glances and expressions of condolences was to leave the house. I stole one of the cages from the property and headed to the only place where I could find peace. Ironically, that's Duchess' house. Not really their house, but the little apartment over their garage out back.

Rogue doesn't know that I spend as much time there as I do. The moment that I showed up, Duchess came running out the kitchen door and followed me up the steps to the unlocked apartment. They never keep it locked.

This is the only place that I want to be right now. The regret, sorrow, loss, I can't take it. I've drowned myself in alcohol, but that didn't help. Now, I'm doing the only other thing that I can.

"Oh, God! Hikari, yes! Yes!" Duchess cries out.

We've never had sex before. I wouldn't take advantage of our friendship that way, but tonight, she's offered herself as a sacrifice to me. Maybe to soothe her pain as much as to soothe mine.

Duchess is precious to me, a person to be protected. I could never protect her from the darkness that exists in me. I use the club whores to exorcise my demons, but they all think that I'm a freak. Half-Japanese and half-Caucasian, I don't fit in here.

My anger, the punishing sadistic sex, it all helps me to feel normal, to believe that there's nothing wrong with me. It pushes away the memories of what the Old Man did to me, making me feel like I was twisted or fucking sick because he would find pleasure in molesting and raping a young boy.

Immersed in the confines of the whores' legs makes me feel like I'm normal. My desires are not for men, young or old, but

for women. Yet, I never knew that I could feel as normal as I feel right now. Being with Duchess like this makes me feel like I could be a normal man in a normal relationship one day.

Everything about us feels so right. The way that she's holding me, her hips rising to meet mine, the way that she kisses me back and how her legs wrap around me. The depth and wetness of her heat welcome me, a sanctuary from the turmoil of the world that I live in.

Her mouth is open wide, accepting my passionate, desperate kisses, her hands greedily roaming over my body until she grasps my dick in her hands.

I look down at where we're connected, her white, pale hand on my sand-colored skin.

"You like the way it feels?"

"Uh-huh," she moans. "Always wondered when you would come to me the way that you go to the whores."

I freeze. Staring into her eyes, I push a lock of blonde hair back from her forehead.

"Why would you ever compare yourselves to them?" I grunt.

She closes her eyes and shuts me out. I lean in, brushing my lips across hers until I bite the bottom one.

"Don't shut me out, Duchess. Why would you compare yourself?"

Shrugging, she opens her eyes. "I...I've wanted you for so long, but you always seem to choose them."

"Because I wanted to protect you."

"From what, Hikari?"

"Me."

"I don't want you to protect me. I just want you," she moans, pumping her hips again and squeezing my dick in her palm.

It's not long before we both succumb to what we're asking of each other. When we do, I know that she's the only one remaining that I'll ever give a damn about. The only one that's left for me to protect.

26 – HADIYAH



The music is loud, and lightly clad bodies are everywhere, dancing, making out, and in some instances, I wonder if they might be having sex. I can't help but gawk until Phantom pinches me.

“Play it cool,” he whispers.

I nod and sip from the glass of bourbon he handed me a while ago.

“Come on,” he says, pushing his drink aside and reaching for my hand. “It's time.”

We make our way from the table that we've been sitting at and weave our way through the crowd. I'm not certain how he knows that it's our time to meet with the people that he's meeting with. I only know that I'm supposed to follow his lead tonight.

As we pass the bar, I get a glimpse of myself, and again, I'm shocked by my appearance. It's a wonder what a trip to the salon can do. Thanks to Roxie, gone is my normally thick, long, curly brown ponytail. In its place is a haircut chopped to just below shoulder length with chunky waves and a red balayage.

Although the haircut transformed my appearance, it's the makeup that has done wonders. Foundation and concealer have gone a long way to disguise the dark circles under my eyes and highlight my naturally high cheekbones. My thick, plush lips now look plump and kissably soft.

I don't look like who I am. And though I've gained a nice amount of weight since being freed, I'm still on the small side. I was never a big girl, to begin with, but starvation during

captivity made my painfully thin frame appear even smaller and made me look unnaturally thin and unhealthy.

I've picked up some pounds since and have returned to my pre-captivity weight, rounding out my ass and thighs quite nicely, but it's the dress that makes me look thicker than I am. A gold, mock neck bodycon dress both highlights and hides everything that I need it to. Three-inch gold heels are the perfect asset while still leaving me a couple inches shorter than Phantom.

When we reach the other side of the club, we stop at a door where a tall, bald man stands. He eyes me, his gaze lingering on my breasts.

"Not here for her. We're here for Cappellacci," Phantom growls.

Finally, the man's eyes jerk from me briefly to sneer at Phantom. I feel the dark energy flowing through Phantom, and I know that he's more dangerous than I can ever conceive. I pray the man moves out of the way and allows us inside without any issues.

He stands aside, opening the door as his gaze turns back to me. I flash a flirty smile and wink at him, all the while drawing closer to Phantom. After all, I'm here to play a role tonight, and showing my true disgust with these people won't get us anywhere.

I know that being here is dangerous, but I've prayed hard about this. I know that it's the right thing to do. If I can save even one girl like me or Amina, it will be worth it. My sister doesn't know that I'm doing this. No one does. Most people would try to talk me out of it, worried that something might happen to me or that I might have a flashback, but I'm not worried about that. I'm stronger than most people know.

The room that we step inside has black walls with gold sconces on them.

Three large, black and blue leather couches are situated around the room, and there are several more armchairs and chaise lounges positioned in various seating arrangements.

At the back of the room is a bar manned by a short guy whose eyes are on us. Straight ahead is a raised platform with a stripper pole and a mirror behind it. The room isn't crowded; only a few guys are in here, and they appear to be security. Other than that, there's...oh shit!

My breath almost ceases, and my step falters only for an instant. On second thought, maybe there's no way that I'll make it through this meeting.

Fear rushes through me, and I doubt that I can carry this out. What the hell was I thinking. I'm almost paralyzed by fear. There's no way that I'm ready for this, and the gumption I once thought I had eludes me.

Damnit! I don't have a choice if I plan to get out of here alive. Not only me but Phantom, too. I glance at him, and a slight frown mars the space between his eyebrows before he returns his attention to the man on the middle couch. He needs me to be strong. He needs me to keep my shit together for him and me.

Placing his hand on the small of my back, Phantom ushers me forward, and I want nothing more than to run my ass out of here. I cannot believe out of all the luck that I would have, I would find myself face to face with the man who was a captor of mine for a small space in time. I expected to see familiar faces, but not this one.

In a room not so different than this over a year ago, I, along with Amina, was paraded before men in nothing but a thong and some heels. I recall the humiliation of being poked and prodded and having my thong removed while I was instructed to bend over and grasp my ankles. I recall not being able to fight back because I was damn near drugged out of my mind, high as a kite, yet still alert enough to recognize what was going on.

I remember being smacked on the ass, fingers sliding in and out of me. And I recall this bastard, who's smiling at me now, being the one that all the other men catered to. The very same man forced one of the other girls on her knees while she took him down her throat in front of the other men.

I recall my sister being called to do the same thing but vomiting before she could carry out the order. At that moment, everything was shut down, and she was beaten. I tried running to her side to help her, but I was dragged from the room, kicking and screaming.

Fear filled me at the thought that I would be separated from Amina. It hadn't happened.

My thoughts return to the present as I hear my "undercover" name being called. It's my middle name, which is actually my father's first name.

"Iman is in charge of the girls, making sure they are trained properly," Phantom says, sitting down and squeezing my fingers in his.

I recall what my role is here, and I sit down beside him, forcing a smile to my lips.

"Iman, this is Martin. Martin Cappellacci," Phantom introduces.

Finally, the man who never had a name in the past now has one. I will not be satisfied until I see his demise.

"And her purpose here tonight?" Martin Cappellacci asks.

"Iman has a great eye for these things. She knows what will bring our MC success and what type of girl would be too much of a hassle to break in. We don't want problems, just money, Martin."

"Ah, yes. I can relate to that. Will there be a problem with us selling women who look like...her?" he hesitates.

"They may look like me, Mr. Cappellacci, but they can never be me. We're here for business, and I know how to separate business from personal. Trust me, a woman as powerful as I am will never fuck over money for emotions. Only weak bitches find themselves victims," I say.

A wicked smile crosses his lips. "Ah, a British accent. How lovely you sound."

I force another smile to my lips. "Much lovelier than the American affectation that you harbor. Cappellacci, that's

Italian. Am I correct?"

He hesitates briefly before a smile takes over his lips. "You are correct."

"Mr. Cappellacci, no need to hide who you are. I much prefer doing business with someone that I can trust. A man who isn't afraid to show who he is," I say as my gaze drops down between his legs.

Phantom leans forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"I am not here conducting business with you, Ms. Iman. I'm here to conduct business with Phantom."

"And yet, here I am."

"She's right, Martin. She's very instrumental in this deal going down tonight. If Iman decides that she cannot work with someone, then we won't be purchasing the girl. In other words, Iman has the final say on how tonight's deal goes down."

"Too many bitches, too much power given away. That's the beginning of a weak organization, Phantom. You'd be wise to advise Anarchy of that, as well."

Phantom sits back on the couch, spreads his arms out along the back, crosses his ankle at the knee, and replies, "Duly noted."

"Would you like something else to drink?" Martin offers.

"No, we're fine," Phantom says, holding up the glass that he's been nursing all night.

I smile and do the same, sitting back and closer to Phantom. The warmth of his body and the lavish leather smell of his cut make me feel safe in the midst of danger.

Martin snaps his fingers, and a tall, brown-haired man arrives at his side. The two speak in Italian, and I notice a smirk on Phantom's lips. I wonder if he speaks Italian, also, and find that, for some reason, it wouldn't surprise me if he did.

The man disappears, and the lights dim only slightly. The music changes to something slower and more intense. I listen half-heartedly as Martin and Phantom discuss money and business opportunities. I take another sip of my bourbon, affecting a bored pose but taking everything in.

A parade of African-American women are bought out. Like my own captivity, I can tell they've been drugged. It's apparent in their stutter steps, their glazed eyes, and the slackness of their mouths. Not one of them is fully alert and participating in this process.

I watch as sickness coils inside of my belly as each of them walks past while Martin encourages Phantom to touch them, squeeze their body parts, and check out their more intimate parts. I can see the hesitation and anger in Phantom's eyes, but then he quickly masks it, his eyes glazing over, much like the girls. He's checked out, and I can't help but wonder if he's thinking of his sister.

Rage fills me, and I want to put a bullet in the head of every man that's in this room tonight, except for Phantom. Perhaps he feels the rage inside of me because he sits back and strokes my thigh.

"Touch them. What? Are you afraid?" Martin asks.

"Not afraid."

"Then what? Tonight, just like that last night we met, you're hesitant, Phantom. I cannot help but wonder if you're really as involved in the process as you pretend to be. If not, then why are you here?" Martin prompts.

"I'm involved."

"Then why not try out the product. If it were a new motorcycle, you'd take it for a test run. Same with these girls. You can try them out. Fuck them, make them give you head, anything. Just do it," he urges.

Phantom stares at the man, his facial and body expression not giving anything away. "Martin, I didn't come here for a fuck fest. I came to buy girls, and I can do that without what

you're suggesting. This is a business deal and nothing more than that."

Martin stares at Phantom for what seems to be a long time before pointing his finger at him.

"Something just doesn't sit right with me about you," Martin says.

"So, what are you saying? No deal?" Phantom asks.

Martin stares at him again, and he asks, "Who in the fuck are you?"

"Wasn't I requested? Who in the fuck are you?"

The entire security team goes on alert, placing their hands on the butts of their guns.

"If you have trust issues, that's respected. We'll leave and let you deal with Anarchy. You can take your trust issues to him. We were strictly here for a business deal, but if that's not going to be the case, we respect that," I intervene, trying to break up the tension.

"Bitches have no place here," the bodyguard closest to us says.

My eyes cut to Martin Cappellacci, who's laid back against the couch, watching all of this play out with humor in his eyes and a smirk on his lips.

"Without bitches you wouldn't have a business or a need to be here," I reply.

The man turns his gun and trains it on me, saying, "One more word, and I'll put a bullet in between your eyes, bitch!"

In a swift move, Phantom is on his feet with the muzzle in his hand. "Don't pull out a gun that you're not ready to use," Phantom growls.

Martin's lips are turning into a sneer, and I see the other men in the room on alert, moving in closer.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" the man growls.

“Sono il tuo peggior incubo,” Phantom says smoothly in Italian, causing Martin and the man’s eyes to bulge.

In a quick transition, Phantom disarms the man, flipping him to land on his back. He uses that same guard to shoot not one, not two, but three men who are coming at him, all the while still holding the brown-haired man’s arm in his.

“Phantom!” I shout when two other men rush from a door near the bar.

He turns, shooting them in rapid succession before he breaks the man’s arm, who is lying on the floor.

Arms wrap around me from behind as Phantom is busy ducking bullets from two other men who have appeared from nowhere. I struggle to break free, but I know who my captor is. That cologne is the same as it was that night. His gravelly voice in my ear is as sickening as it was that night.

“Who the fuck are you really?” Martin growls in my ear, dragging me to another door that I hadn’t seen before.

I cannot let him pull me through that door. Being separated from Phantom might mean my demise, and I’m not ready to go yet. If I do, I swear that I’ll be taking Martin Cappellacci with me.

Reaching behind me, I try to grab his balls, but he’s swifter and stronger than I am, getting out of my reach and pinning my arms between our bodies. I stop fighting long enough for him to relax his hold just a little and long enough for him to trust that, once again, he’s in control.

When he does, I lower my chin to my chest and then rapidly bring it up again, butting him in the nose and mouth with my head. Martin releases only one arm, which is all I need to remove the gun from my thigh holster.

I jerk hard, twisting around in his hold until I’m facing him, pressed against his body. Sickness fills me when a warped grin takes over his features, and his cock hardens against me.

This bastard gets off on taking others’ control, raping women instead of allowing a woman to choose him as he’s

chosen her. That shit ends tonight.

I slide the gun up between us, pressing it into his chest as his eyes narrow in on me.

“You will never get to steal another woman. Never get to force another woman to give your puny white dick a blow job.”

He sneers. “What the fuck are you going to do about it? Just like Phantom says, ‘Don’t pull a gun on someone until you’re ready to use it.’”

“Buona serata, Martin,” I say before pulling the trigger.

His hold eases on me, his eyes going wide as his mouth opens. No words come out, just a gurgling sound before blood appears. As he begins to slump down, I see Phantom standing behind him with his gun raised and a deadly gleam in his eyes.

Martin falls to the floor, the blood on his chest spreading rapidly. That same blood staining my once gold dress.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so,” I mutter. I spit on Martin before stepping over his body.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here because we just declared war on the mafia,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him.

We step over the body of the guard who was initially arming the door from the outside. I’m not sure when he arrived, but as we head for the door, I notice there are several dead men in the room.

We waste no time, slipping out of the door we arrived in. I’m thankful for the loud music and the high partygoers. We slip through the crowd and into the dark night, running across the street and hopping back onto Phantom’s bike, *Abyss*.

27 – PHANTOM



The phone rings in Anarchy's office no sooner than I finish telling him what happened. He presses the button to answer the call on loudspeaker.

“What the hell just happened?” Aiello's voice booms through the room, causing my brothers to look around.

“It seems your man had some issues with Phantom. He personally requested him. Would you like to explain that shit to me?” Anarchy demands.

“Yes. He said that your man Phantom couldn't be trusted.”

“He's a brother. He's part of the Fiery Disciples. If you're saying that you can't trust him, then you can't trust us. What information do you have personally that makes you say that?”

“I have six dead men because of him, so I don't trust him either.”

“So, what are you saying, Aiello?”

“I have some questions of my own. I'll call you back and tell you where we meet. The time and the place.”

A click sounds, and the phone goes silent. Anarchy looks at me after hanging up the phone.

“Are you gonna claim her now?”

Pushing off the couch I leave the office.

Hadiyah is sitting on the edge of the bed when I push the door open to the bedroom.

“Are you sure you're okay?” I ask for the third time.

This time, we're back at the compound in my room. The first two times, we were on my bike, speeding across town. I didn't hesitate until we were on our property, and I took her straight to my place before returning to the clubhouse.

"Why am I here?"

"It's the only way that I can protect you. There were cameras all over that place, and there's no way in hell that you weren't spotted. I have to keep you close to me now."

She stares at her hands and then back at me. I grab her hands in my own, turning her face up with my free one.

"Are you okay, Hadiyah?"

I'm angry at Anarchy and End Game for involving her in this. I'm pissed at myself for not shielding her from this. And worried about her state of mind.

She nods. "Believe it or not, I'm so much better than I've been in a long time."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes."

I nod. I could tell when she hesitated just a minute when we arrived in the VIP suite and she first laid eyes on him.

"Did that bastard ever do anything to you?"

"No. Other girls. He tried to with my sister, but she got sick. He beat her, but no, he hasn't touched me."

All I want right now is to wipe this night away, wash away all her pain and devastation.

"Don't look at me that way, Phantom. Please. I can't take it."

"What way?"

"Like I'm some victim when I'm not. Tonight...I'm glad you let me come. For the first time, I was able to reclaim my freedom from someone who snatched it from me. I promised myself that I would never be a victim again, and I damn well meant it."

“I’m sorry,” I apologize.

“Don’t. This...this blood on my hands,” she says, looking at the stains on her hands. “This represents a new, stronger me. I will never again be afraid of taking a life if it means saving mine or someone that I love.”

“You say that now, but the nightmares will come, Hadiyah.”

Her eyes narrow, and her lips firm up. “Can’t be anything worse than what I’ve been living with since my parents were taken away.”

She takes a couple of steps toward me and rests her hands on my shoulders. “I’m not some weak woman, some victimized chick, Phantom.”

“So, you’ve said before.”

“Never have been; just had to survive despite some unfortunate circumstances. I am strong and a fucking overcomer.”

She catches me off guard when her lips press against mine. My hands go out to clutch her shoulders to stop her from making a grave mistake, but she knocks off one and then the other before pressing her body against mine.

I know that I shouldn’t, but this invitation is too fucking irresistible to turn down. I was already turned on watching her kill that monster, something that I wouldn’t take from her, no matter how badly I wanted to protect her from taking a life. Subconsciously, I knew that she needed to do that to expel her demons and reclaim her identity, but I had her back if she needed me.

Every time I’m near Hadiyah, I want her. I need her, but I know that I can’t release unless I’m able to have sex the way that I’m accustomed to. Yet, she can’t handle me.

My hands lower to her ass, cupping and squeezing it, relishing her moans. She’s a petite woman with a tight but big ass.

There's no mistaking the heat between us, but when I press her backward, I feel her stiffen in my arms. I feel the way that she sucks a breath in, and I know that she's instantly second-guessing this. It's always this way with her. I wonder if she'll ever fully relax and allow me to have control. When she's in control, she's perfectly fine, but the moment that I take charge, she tense up.

Hadiyah has been through too much for her to ever be able to freely relax during sex. Anything resembling force or aggression will likely scare the shit out of her, but that's all I know.

I don't know how to be gentle. It's not inside of me. Neither my mind nor my body holds the capacity to be gentle with another human being, especially during something as intimate as sex. I have to be the aggressor. I must remain in control at all times.

Yet, even my sick demons take a backseat to her. They always will. I release her, stepping back, and I see the regret that fills her eyes. Regret for what, I'm not sure.

"I'm sorry," I apologize.

She shakes her head and takes two steps forward, closing the gap between us again. She reaches out to wrap her arms around me, but not before I grip her wrists tightly and shake my head.

"Stop."

"I'm sorry, Phantom. I...I'm not playing games."

"I know you're not."

"I just need—"

"To take it slow and easy. To be in control," I interrupt. "I know exactly what you need, but I'm not that man, Hadiyah. I can never be. Gentle and slow isn't in me. When I fuck a woman, I take control, and I'm in charge, and no, it's not gentle. It's rough as hell."

She bites her bottom lip and nods. Looking away for a moment, she looks back at me again.

“I can handle that.”

“No, you can’t,” I disagree.

Something lights in her eyes, and she lifts the bloodstained dress over her hips and head and tosses it to the floor. My dick hardens at the sight of her pebbled brown nipples in the coolness of the room.

Hadiyah’s hand spans across her breasts as she tilts her head, watching...no, studying me. Her lips are slightly parted, and her breathing is heavy, intoxicating as she pulls that bottom lip in between her teeth.

“You want me.”

It’s not a question or even a statement but almost a directive. I take the final step, bringing us toe to toe, our skin touching. My hands drop to her ass again.

“I don’t have it in me to be—”

“Fuck me,” she orders, clutching the back of my head and pressing her lips against mine.

This time, she takes control of the kiss, licking at my lips and not bothering to be sweet or gentle the way that she was at first. Our tongues and teeth clash, and she sucks my lip as I bite hers.

“I won’t stop until I’m ready,” I warn her.

“Take me, and don’t you fucking apologize,” she whispers as tears slip from her eyes.

I reach between us, clutching at the tiny strip of lace that has no right to proclaim itself as underwear. She only tenses a little when the ripping sound of the material tearing from her skin fills the air.

Our kiss doesn’t stop, but it intensifies, and there’s only so long that I can hold off. Pulling back from Hadiyah, I grab her by her throat, staring into her sparkling, curious eyes. The look on her face and the raw scent of sex emanating from her body is so tempting.

I know that I shouldn't go down this road with her, but I also know that I can't go back. Not now that I've smelled her scent and had the faintest taste of her.

"Turn around," I order.

She does as I say, facing the bed and window, the curvature of her ass and hips painting a beautiful picture.

Jerking open the drawer to my nightstand, I pull out a couple of condoms and rip one open, palming it in the half-opened package. I toss it onto the bed and unzip my jeans.

My hard cock pulls me in her direction as though having a mind of its own, and while I may want to take the time to appreciate her gorgeous body, all I want is to dip inside of her.

"Hadiyah."

"Don't overthink it, Phantom. I'm not."

I squeeze her ass cheeks with both hands and revel in her subtle sigh. She widens her stance, creating more room for me to stand between her legs. Neither of us are substantially big people. She's petite, and I'm only five-eleven and one-ninety. Pure muscle but not overly big like Cannon, End Game, or Terminator.

When I pull her to stand, pressing her back flush against my stomach, I'm caught off-guard by how perfectly she fits against me, as though she were made for me.

My left-hand presses against the flatness of her belly while my other hand grasps her neck. A soft gagging sound, but she doesn't stop me, which encourages me and incites the flame in me.

I tighten my hand around her neck, squeezing as I close my eyes, dropping my head and pressing my lips to the side of her neck. Baring my teeth, I bite into her neck, and she arches her back, gasping and hissing at once.

I lick over the bite mark that I've left there and push her away from me, smacking her ass as she falls forward onto the bed.

“Hadiyah, my demons are what nightmares are made of, and my darkness runs deep.”

“I don’t care,” she tosses over her shoulder. “I think... you’re exactly what I need.”

Shoving my jeans down and stepping out of them, I grab the condom and free it the rest of the way from the wrapper. Covering myself, I step to her, grab her ass, and roughly shove myself inside of her with no precursor.

This possession and aggression is who I am.

Her only formal introduction to me.

She screams out, removing a hand from the bed and pressing it against her mouth as I take her. Hadiyah tenses and I freeze.

“Hadiyah.”

“I’m okay,” she mutters, but I can hear the fear in her voice.

I pull out of her and take a step back.

“Don’t leave me,” she says, but she doesn’t turn around.

“I can’t be what you need, Hadiyah. I’m sorry,” I grumble.

She spins around, and her tear-streaked face is mangled with disappointment, pain, and regret. “You have no idea what I need, Phantom.”

“I know it isn’t me.”

“So, what...you’re going to walk out on me? Turn your back and run back to one of those other women.”

Guilt fills my insides because that’s exactly what I would do in normal circumstances, but this is anything but normal. For some reason, I want to stay here with her and hold her. I want to reassure her that everything will be okay, but I’m not wired like that. I’m different.

Thanks to my sister and Duchess, I will never be the same. Pair them with my aunt, and I don’t trust women.

“You don’t need to worry about where I’m going, Hadiyah. Told you it was a bad idea from the beginning.”

“Can’t you try?”

“Try what?”

“To be with me in a normal way? To look me in the eyes, hold me, and give me what I need? Can you just be...with me?” she asks softly.

“Just...” she takes a step closer. “Be with me,” she finishes as her hand curves against my jaw.

My eyes close, and I wish things could be different. I want so badly to be the man that she needs, the man she wants me to be, but I know I’m incapable of being him. He doesn’t exist within me.

Hadiyah’s lips cover mine, and she says, “Please.”

I open my eyes to find her staring at me, almost begging me to give her what she needs. I think of all the times that I failed my sister and Duchess and of how I can never go back in time to give them what they truly need.

Here’s this woman standing before me, begging for me to just try. My hand cups the back of her head, and I pull her closer to me, pressing my lips to hers but not making any other move.

Hadiyah takes the first step. She sucks at my bottom lip, licks between the seam and moans. Her careful but persistent prodding is what encourages me to open my mouth to her. Her tongue is soft and warm, her lips sweet and pliable.

With every peck and pass of her tongue, she opens something deeper inside of me, unlocking a host of emotions that I didn’t know I held inside. I want to be the one that doesn’t fail her.

If my actions tonight are the one thing that I do to push her into a safe place in her head and reassure her, then I can give her that. Bending without breaking our kiss, I wrap my arms underneath her ass, lifting her from the floor.

Carrying her back to the bed, I hold her close to me, covering her lips with mine as we face each other side by side.

My hand caresses her back softly, and hers wraps in my hair. She pulls back and stares at me before engaging me in another kiss, moaning and pressing deeper into the kiss.

Hadiyah catches me off guard when she shoves against my chest. I roll onto my back, releasing her, realizing that maybe she isn't comfortable with intimacy at all.

Yet, that's not it. She climbs on top of me and stares into my eyes. Her chest is heaving, and her eyes are wild, questioning, but then comes a certainty with that stare, and she leans into me.

My hands reach for her hips, but she forces my hands back and my arms above my head.

It's then that I realize what she needs. Hadiyah needs to feel that she's in control of this. That she isn't being taken advantage of, and I can relate to that all too well. It's the reason that I can't be intimate with anyone. The reason why sex is always aggressive and demanding is because only then can I be certain I'm in control.

It's the reason that she needs to be on top of me, and I allow her this power. Shifting, she lifts slightly, grabbing me and putting me inside of her as her eyes close.

They fly open again when I reposition slightly to place my hands underneath my head, creating a pillow of sorts. When she realizes that's all I'm doing, her eyes close again, and she resumes settling on me until I'm fully seated inside of her.

It's then that she begins to move slowly, rocking side to side and then back and forth. My eyes close when she's comfortable with movement, and I enjoy the feeling of her seated around me, her pussy lips encasing my dick.

Her face flickers with a thousand emotions, and she almost looks as if she wants to cry but bites her bottom lip instead. Her hands come to my chest and then up to my face, all with her eyes still closed.

When she finally rests her lips against mine, her eyes open, and she stares at me. Our bodies are pressed against each other, her legs folded as she straddles me and our chests and stomachs together.

I want to touch her, but she won't allow me. It's interesting how my rules have been turned back on me, and it doesn't feel so great. I think of the myriad of women I've been with that I didn't allow to touch me, and I wonder if they felt as powerless as I do now, as disconnected.

Her hips rise and fall as she takes me in and pushes me out. Soft moans float on our kisses and murmurs of appreciation.

Finally, Hadiyah pulls back and stares at me.

"Touch me," she says.

Slowly, I unfold my hands from behind my head one at a time and hold them up. She lifts her hands and presses them against mine, her fingertips rubbing mine and then massaging my palms as she stares at me.

"I won't hurt you, Hadiyah. I will never hurt you."

"You almost did."

"But I didn't. I stopped myself. Even if I'm rough with you, I will never hurt you," I grunt.

She nods and links our fingers together, riding me, rolling, and rocking her hips as her warmth encases me. Finally, she takes my hands and presses them against her breasts, allowing me to play with them, rolling her nipples back and forth and lightly tugging them to see her reaction.

She lowers herself, offering her tits to me, and I suck, feasting on her tender delicacies one at a time until she comes to me again, sucking at my lips, kissing me as I lift and thrust into her.

It takes wild restraint to hold back and not take her the way that I want to, the way that I might another woman. Yet, she isn't any other woman. She's precious and gentle and everything that I'm not, everything that I never wanted.

My head aches with the force of keeping my aggression inside. My clenched jaw and my chest are in pain with the force of holding back my true feelings. It takes concentration to be with someone this way rather than just being who I am.

When she cums, it's with her eyes wide, unexpected, and her mouth hanging open. I rest my hands on her hips, jutting inside of her until she's on the edge and releasing.

When she finishes, I pull out of her, rolling her onto her back, and I climb off the bed. Tossing the condom into the trash, I pull on my clothes.

"Where're you going?" she asks in a raspy voice as she sits up on the bed.

I don't speak.

"You didn't even cum, Phantom," she pleads.

When she climbs off the bed, I make an escape for the door, slamming it behind me.

I realize that I never gave her permission to touch me. With that realization comes another.

I don't mind that she did.

And that shit scares the hell out of me.

28 – PHANTOM



“What are you doing here?” Duchess asks, meeting me in the backyard of her house.

Shutting off my motorcycle, I climb off and head for the stairs of the apartment over the garage.

“Hey! You hear me talking to you?” she hisses, running after me as I make my way up the steps to the apartment. Hadiyah stays in.

“Not in the mood for your shit tonight, Duch.”

She hits me in the back as I reach for the door and grabs my arm. When she goes to hit me again, I grab her hand.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I growl.

Her eyes widen, and she wisely takes a step back, massaging the hand that I’ve now released.

“What is it with you? You can’t go breaking into people’s houses.”

I give her a dead stare, not bothering to acknowledge that bullshit.

“She’s not there, you know?” she says as I push open the unlocked door.

“I know.”

“How do you know?” she asks, following me into the bedroom.

I look around the room and then in the closet before coming back to look under the bed. Spotting what I’m searching for, I lay down, stretch an arm under the bed and pull out the duffel bag.

“How’d you know that I was here?” I ask.

Shrugging, she says, “I was sitting on my balcony and heard your bike coming down the street.”

“What do you want?”

“I thought that you might be coming to see me, but that’s not happening. So, curiosity got the best of me. I came to see what you’re up to.”

“What are you doing?” she asks, watching as I start grabbing items from the closet and the dressers to toss inside the duffel bag.

“What does it look like?”

“Looks like you’re packing her bag, but what I don’t understand is why.”

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Hey! Look at me!” she says, stepping in front of me but wisely keeping from touching me.

“What, Duchess?”

“Look at me!” she demands when I avoid her gaze.

I watch as her mouth drops open, and her eyes widen, dawning with understanding.

“Are you serious, Phantom?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Phantom! How could you?”

Sighing, I say, “If there’s something you want to say, say it. Otherwise, I got shit to do,” I grunt.

“You...you fucked her?”

I see the pain in Duchess’ eyes, and I try hard to ignore it. It’s her pain that always pulls me in, dragging me under with her. So deep that I can’t breathe or see on my own.

“I took her in and helped her because you all asked me to. I watched over her and gave her a safe place, and all this time that you’ve been coming around, it was to prey on her? Each

time that you came back and fucked me, was it so that you could get closer to her?”

“No.”

“That’s low. Even for you, Phantom.”

“What’s low is for you to make assumptions to get information out of me. You know that I don’t work like that, Duchess.”

“Does she know that you’ve been fucking me? Genie? The others?”

I turn away from her again and grab a couple more bras, little lacy things, and toss them into her bag.

“If she knew that you were fucking me, she wouldn’t give you the time of day,” Duchess says in a threatening tone.

I’m not so sure that’s true, but I do wonder. She might not have become involved with me knowing that I’ve been with Duchess. Or maybe she does know, and she doesn’t care.

I think about how she felt lying under me and how it felt to be inside of her. My cock hardens again and jerks.

“Even now, you can’t help but react to me,” she says, reaching out to cup my cock and my balls.

I push her hand away.

“You still want me. I was your first love,” Duchess reminds me, her breasts heaving over the emerald-green gown she’s wearing.

“Unfortunately for me, that wasn’t good enough for you,” I say, reminding her why we can’t be together.

“She’s broken, you know.”

“And you’re not? I’m not?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t come from a rough background. Before she was trafficked, her life was just peachy. She’s not like you and me, Phantom.”

I keep tossing items in the bag until it’s full and then head to her bathroom. I grab a toothbrush, deodorant, and a few

other items and stuff them into the pockets of the duffel bag.

“When she’s well, healed from all this, she won’t need you. She doesn’t come from this world, Phantom, nor does she understand it. I get that you’re trying to play hero, and you want to save someone. The way that you couldn’t save Ich—”

I drop the duffel bag, grab Duchess around the throat and walk her backward until she hits the wall. My eyes narrow, and through clenched teeth, I warn, “Don’t you fucking say her name again.”

Her eyes widen and then narrow. “Why? I was her friend, too!”

“No. You were never her friend. You wanted my attention all for yourself, and you were fucking jealous of the relationship my sister and I had. Jealous that we could push everyone out of the world except the two of us.”

Tears fill her wide eyes, and she says, “No, I tried to save you both. I only wanted what was best for you, Phantom. Only loved you.”

“You wouldn’t know love if it rode up on a horse bearing a flag with its name and bent you over and fucked you up the ass.”

“I hate you!”

Sneering and narrowing my eyes, I nod. “I know, Duchess. That’s why we could never be. That’s more like the emotion that I expect to see from you.”

I release her and turn back to the duffel bag.

“Why’re you being so mean to me?” she cries.

“Always the victim, aren’t ya?”

“I’m not. I’m just trying to understand why you always hurt me.”

“You didn’t really give a shit about me, Duchess. I was nothing more than something to taunt your daddy with. He was always busy with the whores and never had time for you. At least not until he saw your fascination with the little half-

breed kid that was new to the compound. Your interest in me spawned your daddy's attention to you and his protectiveness over you. That's all you ever wanted, and our connection served that purpose."

Duchess looks down and away before she says. "It was that way in the beginning, Phantom, but it didn't remain that way. In time, things changed. I did start to care about you, but it scared me. You were always so distant and so...dangerous."

I couldn't deny that because it was the truth, but it was the only way that I knew how to survive.

"Duchess, that's all I had. Always be alert and aware, trust nothing and no one, and protect what was closest to me. At that time, Ichika and you were the closest to me, and I soon learned neither of you wanted my protection."

"I was young, Phantom. I wanted freedom and my Daddy's attention. You helped me to get that attention, but that came with a price, too, one that I wasn't ready to pay. Being so close to you and having a relationship with you felt like I was trapped. I didn't resent you protecting me, just the loss of my freedom. I needed you to protect me."

Shaking my head, I reply, "No, you didn't. No matter how hard I tried, you and my sister always seemed to run in the opposite direction, creating situations that made it impossible for me to protect you."

"I'm not perfect. I just wanted to live my life."

"You wanted to be a whore, Duchess. Same as your mother. That's okay, too, but you couldn't be that and keep me tied to you. I was supposed to remain loyal to you while you went around teasing or fucking every man that paid attention to you. I wasn't that man, Duchess. I'm still not."

"If you think that I hurt you, she'll only do the same. Just like I did, Ichika, and...your aunt. It's what we were bred to do," she says softly. "We're women. We use our sexual wiles and femininity to hook, manipulate, and control men."

Her voice is almost apologetic.

“Maybe so, but you could also use those same powers to strengthen and protect a man. I’m sure there’s a woman out there who knows how,” I say, picking up the duffel bag.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But she ain’t it,” Duchess says to my back as I walk out of the room.

I stop at the doorway and turn back to her.

“When you make peace with your decisions and the woman that you chose to become, you’ll find some measure of happiness, Duchess.”

“Is this supposed to be goodbye?” she asks, laughing and shaking her head.

She looks at me in disbelief, and I stare back at her, unsure of what to say. We’ve been through so much together over the years. During the time that she left Smokey Ridge, I felt incomplete, but since she’s been back, I still haven’t quite felt whole.

I thought I was for a while, but I know that Duchess and I are toxic together. We’re not good for one another, no matter how hard we try or how badly we want it. The only thing we can ever do is destroy one another.

I take a step toward her again.

“Duchess, you saved my life. I will never say goodbye to you.”

She sighs and lowers her head.

“Does this mean that we won’t...”

“We’ve both known for a long time we weren’t good for each other. It’s time to stop playing that game.”

“You love her.”

“I love no fucking one,” I scoff.

She smirks and shakes her head.

“You’ll be back. It’s only a matter of time. No one gets you the way that I do, *Hikari*.”

I eye her closely, my gaze dropping to her lips. I hope that she's wrong, but I'm not so sure that she is.

"You want me," she whispers, her hand touching my hardened cock that's still hard from earlier.

Her lips cover mine, and she presses her breasts against my chest. She grabs my hand and drags it under her gown, where she's not wearing panties. My fingers slip across her slickness, and she arches her hips up towards me.

Holding onto my neck, Duchess gyrates her hips, working them until my fingers are no longer sliding across her moisture but slipping inside of it.

She's hissing and moaning, and my dick is growing harder, betraying me. I recall how Hadiyah was writhing against me not even an hour ago. Hadiyah, whom I left alone and didn't bother to give the rules to, ensured that she was protected from all that could go wrong at the compound. I have to get back.

I pull my fingers free, knowing that I need to go now before I do something that I might regret.

"I may have wanted you, but I can never have you. You've proven that time and time again. Dallas was the last straw for me, Duchess."

"I can't help the way that I'm wired, no more than you can."

"That's where you're wrong. The right woman can bring out the best and the worst in a man. The wrong woman brings out only the worst."

"So, you're saying she's the right woman?"

"The only one that matters to me."

I turn and jog down the steps with the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. Within two minutes, I'm gone again.

29 – HADIYAH



“Where did you go?” I ask quietly when he walks through the door.

I’m standing at the window looking out. When I saw his motorcycle pull up, I knew that it was his despite the darkness. The rest of the men who live in this bunkhouse have been walking back and forth as though their bikes are parked close by.

I saw him carrying something when he climbed off his bike. I don’t turn around to see what it is but keep staring out into the night. The clubhouse down the road is lit up with bright lights, and I can hear the music all the way down here when I open the windows.

“Went back and got you a few things.”

I hear a thud on the floor behind me. I still don’t turn around because I can’t stand for him to see the tears in my eyes. Phantom told me that I couldn’t handle his demons. While I don’t know what they are, I know some of them.

Spending the day with Roxie, she didn’t have a lot to share about Phantom other than that he was very protective and loyal. When we’d returned to the compound before I left with Phantom for the club, Cannon had overheard me complaining about Phantom’s moodiness and how he could often be rude.

In a rare moment of compassion, he’d shared that it wasn’t his fault. I’d argued that Phantom didn’t feel compassion for anyone or could care less about what others suffered. He’d said that Phantom probably sympathized with me more than anyone else could. I’d asked if it was because his sister had been a victim of sex trafficking.

I was stunned when Cannon responded, “Not just her, but him, too.”

I hadn’t expected that at all. Perhaps it was that knowledge that gave me the power I’d yielded when I killed Martin Cappellacci tonight. Something in me wanted to vindicate not only my sister and me and the other victims but also the only man who’d ever protected me aside from my father.

It’s for all those reasons that I will not confront him about how confused I was when he left me, not even bothering to get his release. After all, I was the one that pushed him to have sex. He’d tried to protect me, but I wouldn’t listen. He stayed with me until I’d cum, and then he’d left.

Part of me wondered whether he’d run to another woman when he left me, but that didn’t make sense either.

“Do I repulse you?”

“What?”

“Is it the color of my skin, or my shape, or what I’ve been through? What is it?”

He sighs and walks past me into the bedroom. Finally, I swipe the back of my hand across my eyes and follow him.

What the hell was I thinking, allowing him to enter my body the way that he did?

There’s no bond or connection between us other than that I’ve mistaken him in my mind for some sort of hero, my savior. Truthfully, it was the entire MC who came to our rescue. It was just him that I laid eyes on first. He was the one who acted out the most and seemed extremely protective of us. The only one who came to visit, thereby allowing my mind to trick itself and believe there was some sort of vibe or connection between us.

The last time that I willingly had sex before being trafficked was probably three days before our kidnapping. A guy named Ricky. He was gentle and sweet, but I knew that it wasn’t going anywhere. I’d been set up on a blind date with him by my co-worker, Tina, and we’d had sex after a couple of weeks.

It was easy and good, and so we'd kept on dating, probably until one or both of us found someone we were more compatible with. In the meantime, we filled that void in each other's life. A void where companionship, sex, and having someone at our side while we mingled with friends and their significant others kept the loneliness at bay.

Yet, somehow, with all that I shared with Ricky in the four months that we dated, it paled in comparison to this one intimate night with Phantom. A night that felt incomplete because he refused to let himself go with me.

"You don't need to prove any points with me, Phantom," I say now as he turns on the shower.

I'm leaning against the doorway, wearing a t-shirt of his that says *Kiss* and has a picture of Gene Simmons and the other band members in full makeup.

I admire his tan, lean, but muscular body as he removes his jeans and then his shirt. He's standing there in boxer briefs before he kicks them off, too, and turns back to me. His dick is semi-turgid, and I can't help but wonder who relieved him tonight.

"Was it one of the girls at Duchess' house, or was it Duchess herself?"

"Duchess."

Tears prick my eyes.

"Told you I'm not what you need, Hadiyah."

"Just didn't think you'd be an asshole about it, Phantom."

"I'm not. Just don't know what to do with you."

"What's that mean?"

"You make me feel things that I don't want to feel. Make me want things that I can't have. I'll never leave this life, Hadiyah. I'm a wounded soul. Twisted, tortured, and fucked up."

"So am I."

"Not like me."

“You don’t think that I know this? Yet, I love you anyway.”

His eyes fly to me and widen slightly before he scowls at me, shaking his head.

“I never have problems going from one woman to the next...until you. Duchess was ready to take me tonight. I couldn’t,” he scoffs, shaking his head.

He punches the wall, causing me to wince. “How the fuck did I let you in?”

“You don’t have anything to prove to me, you know. Getting upset and all that.”

I hate that I’m stuck here, but I know there’s nowhere else that I can go now. With everything that happened tonight, I should stay here at the compound, but in the morning, I need to rethink that decision.

Maybe it is time for me to return to the UK. Not that the mafia can’t get to me over there, but somehow, I doubt that I’ll be a priority for them once I’m over there.

“What makes you think I believe I’ve got shit to prove to you?”

My jaw clenches, and I turn away from him.

“Fuck you, Phantom.”

I’ve barely gotten the words out of my mouth, and my foot is on the threshold when I’m snatched backward and pressed against his hard chest. With one muscled arm wrapped around my midsection, I cannot break his hold on me. Phantom is deceptively strong.

I mean, looking at him, you can tell that he is strong, but until you’re locked in some sort of combat with him, sexual or otherwise, it’s easy to mistake just how strong he is.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that,” he says in a low, dark tone against my ear.

“You don’t tell me how to speak. I’m getting out of here because I refuse to stay here with you and your crazy mood

swings. You don't own me, and clearly, I don't own you!" I snap.

He pulls me tighter against his body, and I feel his erection prodding between my ass cheeks. His free hand grips my jaws so hard that it hurts. Tears sting my eyes, and I want to run as fast and as far from Phantom as I can right now.

"No? Who owns you then, Hadiyah? Hmm?"

His breathing is erratic, and his heart is beating wildly in his chest. I can feel it thumping against my back. Once again, I try to free myself from his grip, but he doesn't let go. Instead, he holds me tighter.

"Who the fuck owns you?" he growls.

I'm shaking and fighting back the tears that threaten to overwhelm me.

"Because if you walk the fuck out that door, there are more than a hundred brothers who will be eyeing you, wanting to make you their next conquest. And beyond this compound? Leaving those gates, I can't even describe to you what waits for you on the other side. Make no mistake about it, sweetheart, you killed an associate of a well-known crime family tonight, putting a target on not just your head but mine and my entire fucking MC because they're not gonna let either of us get that off without a fight.

"Now, if you think that your pretty little ass can just walk out that door, prance through those gates, and walk down the street like you could before tonight...then go ahead, be my guest. But first, you need to make a phone call. Tell Amina she needs to make funeral arrangements, and oh, by the way, she's all alone in the world now because her sister just committed suicide."

"I can protect myself!" I cry.

"You can't do shit against the mafia," he retorts.

Finally, he lets me go, and I run into the bathroom, locking the door. I sit on the toilet, pulling my feet up. Hot tears stream down my face, and I struggle to silence my sobs.

What have I done?

Somehow, I convinced myself that I could handle this, that maybe Phantom and I were made for each other. I was wrong, and he was right. His demons are worse than I could have imagined. He's so angry with me right now that I don't feel comfortable in his presence.

Not that I feel as if he might hurt me; I don't. In fact, I don't think that I've ever felt safer than being in his presence.

I remain in the bathroom for another twenty minutes before I get the courage to walk out. When I do, I see him standing in front of the window, the moon outlining him. I glance at the clock and see that it's just after three in the morning. He hasn't lain in the bed yet; it's still made up.

"Get some sleep," he orders, not turning to look back at me.

"I'm not sleepy."

"I said get some rest."

"Why do you think that you can keep bossing me around?"

"When you gave yourself to me that first night, you gave yourself to me. I fucking own you."

"Excuse me?" I scoff.

"You placed your life in my hands at the club. You then turned around and gave me you when I know you're tortured inside, but you dealt with your fears and insecurities all for what? To be with me. I know what was done to you, and I know that's not easy to get over, but you did it for me. Why? Because you want to belong to me. So, now you do."

I roll my eyes.

"Whatever."

"You will do whatever the fuck that I tell you to do from this moment on."

"And you?"

"Will do whatever the fuck I please."

“And whom?”

He walks away from the window, flicks off the bedside lamp, and climbs into bed. I realize he has no underwear on.

“Do you ask this same thing of Duchess?”

He turns, and I see his eyes glowing in the dark. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know plenty nights after you left my apartment, you went to her. I saw you.”

I clear my throat because I’m not sure that I want to tell this part. It’s going to be creepy to him, but he’s staring at me in a way that makes me feel like he’s giving me a truth serum. I have no choice but to be honest.

“Saw the two of you together. Intimately.”

He frowns, turns his back to me, and runs his hands over his head, freeing his long hair from the ponytail that he keeps it in. Thick jet-black locks fall free, sweeping over his shoulder and brushing against the middle of his back.

“You couldn’t understand Duchess and me if you tried.”

“Try me,” I dare, sitting in the bed beside him.

Phantom stares at me for so long I wonder if he heard me. He slides down into the bed after a minute and pulls the covers over his shoulder.

Then, several minutes later, when I’ve given up on him telling me anything, he speaks. He tells me how they met and how she’d saved not only his life but his sister’s. He shares with me their friendship and how she was the one who was with him when he’d found his sister dying from a heroin overdose on a nasty bathroom floor.

I want to reach out and touch him and offer him some comfort, but I know that he won’t receive it. Now I understand why Duchess means so much to him, and I know that I can never compete with that. She will always hold a special place in his heart.

“What separated the two of you? Broke you to the point that you’re not together anymore?”

He’d shared how they spent all their time together, and she was his world. I could clearly see it was no longer that way despite the bond they shared.

“Duchess wasn’t meant for one man. I thought she was mine after she gave herself to me the night that my sister died. That’s when we really became inseparable, spending all our spare time together and making plans away from the MC because that’s what she wanted.”

“And you?”

“I wanted her to be happy and just to protect her. I was loyal to her.”

“She didn’t reciprocate?” I ask in the dark room.

He goes still for a while again, and I wonder if he’s finally fallen asleep. I turn my back to him and stare out the window, silent tears trekking down the side of my face onto my pillow.

“I walked in one night into the apartment that you’re staying at. She and I used to spend a great deal of time there. I was supposed to be on a run with the MC because I was just a prospect then, but at the last minute, plans changed, and I was left behind. Bored with nothing to do, I went to her house, thinking I’d surprise her. Saw the car parked out front, but I thought it was a friend visiting her father or one of his lady friends.

“When I walked into the apartment, I could hear the man grunting, but I didn’t hear Duchess. Thought maybe it was one of the whores that lived in her father’s house until the man called Duchess’ name. I turned back and headed to the bedroom. Saw her on her knees...”

It’s killing him to relive this story, and I’m not sure why he feels that I’m worthy to hear it. Part of me wants him to stop because I can hear his voice is thick with emotion, but the other part of me knows he needs to be free. If I can help carry the burden, I will. I believe there’s more than just about her cheating. So, I remain silent.

“She looked up and saw me, started crying and jumped back. The man turned around and saw me, ordered me out of the room, and Duchess started crying, begging me to help her. I was heading to the door when she said he’d raped her and forced himself onto her.

“Something in me snapped. I thought about the men who’d forced themselves on my sister and others like her. Thought about the man who’d...”

I scoot closer to him in bed, and I can hear what I don’t see. I know that tears are falling from his eyes, but he won’t turn around and allow me to see that.

I tuck my hand under his arm, pinned to his side and begin to stroke his side in slow, soothing motions.

“The man who raped you?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“So, you felt the need to protect her. To get vengeance for the ones that couldn’t?”

He doesn’t speak, just nods.

What happened?”

“He denied it. Said that he was a friend of her father’s was coming to visit him, but Rogue wasn’t home, and she’d come on to him. He claimed he never raped her. All the while, she was calling him a liar and said she’d only been on her knees because he threatened her life and her dad’s. I wasn’t sure who to believe. Duchess started crying and begging me to believe her, telling me that she loved me and would never hurt me.

“I had a choice to make, so I chose her. He saw it the moment that I did, turned around and swung on me. We started fighting, and I was able to eventually get the advantage. Broke his neck, and he died right there.”

I think I’m going to be sick.

“Right there on...on...on the bedroom floor? The bedroom that I sleep in every night?”

He nods. “Everything’s been changed since then. Furniture, floor, light fixtures. Everything. Her dad had the place remodeled.”

That doesn’t change anything for me, and I know that I can’t go back there. Where I’ll go, I’m not sure, but it won’t be back there.

“Do you believe that he raped her?”

“No. I know that he didn’t. It wasn’t until a year later that she confessed he hadn’t raped her, but I always knew. That night, I chose to believe her because she was all that I had. I couldn’t imagine her not being in my life or losing her. I held on tight, maybe too tight, because I ended up pushing her away anyway. She started sleeping around with some of the brothers, and there wasn’t shit I could do about it.”

“Did her father know?”

“Her father knew that she was a whore like her mother. He was a whore, too, and he tried to stop her in the beginning, but there was only so much he could do. Rogue spent more time drinking and screwing the club whores and the ones that he kept at his house than he spent caring for his daughter.”

“That’s so sad. What happened with the man that...that you, um, that died?”

“The man that I killed?”

Phantom flips over onto his back and props his hands behind his head on his pillow.

“Duchess, uh...freaked out and tried to figure out a way to cover it up. I told her we couldn’t and that we needed the MC. I called her dad, who called in Anarchy’s dad, Tank, the Prez at the time. They came and took care of the body and told us we were never to talk about it again.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Not with anyone else. In the beginning, Duchess and I talked about it quite a bit, but after some time, she left for L.A. When she returned, she didn’t want to talk about it anymore. You’re the only other person I’ve spoken with about it.”

“Why do you think that is?”

This time, he does go silent, and he doesn't speak another word.

“Phantom?”

He remains silent.

“Just take a chance on me. I promise I won't let you down.”

“Why didn't you two get back together when she returned from LA?”

“She wasn't mine. She'd been gone too long and became rich men's whores. Duchess broke my trust...my heart. She never wanted to belong to me. She only used me as a means to an end.”

“Are you sure that she never loved you?”

He scoffs. “In her own twisted way, she does, but it hurts to be loved by her.”

30 – PHANTOM



“You look stressed. You need some relief?” Geisha asks, dropping to her knees between my legs where I’m sitting in the pool hall.

She hesitates as her hand hovers at my zipper, waiting for permission to touch me.

“I’m good,” I tell her with a smile.

“You sure?” she asks again, licking her lips.

“He needs something. Balls tight as fuck,” Dime says, rolling his eyes my way.

I lower my gaze to her and say, “I’m fine, sweetheart.”

She stands and sashays to the pool table where Raider and Bullet are playing. Her hands rub Raider’s back, and she tips up to whisper something in his ear. Raider says something that makes both him and Bullet laugh. I watch as she drops to her knees and unzips his pants, and starts to suck him off.

Bullet complains, and Raider hands his cue stick to Snake and turns his attention back to Geisha.

“Why do we accept that?” I ask.

“Accept what?” Dime returns, pulling the long neck of the beer bottle to his lips and taking a long swig.

“The whores. The way that they move around us. I mean, they’re with one of us and then move on to the other. Why don’t we expect more than that?”

Dime snickers. “We’re not more than that. Shit, all I want is my cock sucked and soaked in some wet pussy. I don’t give

a fuck where that pussy's been before me or that mouth or where it's going next. So long as the bitch doesn't give me shit, I'm okay."

"That's what condoms are for," I reply sourly.

"I don't like using 'em," he says, taking another swig.

I shake my head, rolling my eyes before my glance goes to the doorway. Cannon's standing there, jerking his head at me, and walks away.

"Come on, Anarchy's ready for us," I say, pushing back from the table.

Dime grabs his bottle and follows me. "What about that bastard?" he says, jerking his head back to where Raider is at the pool table getting sucked off by Geisha.

"He knows we're supposed to be meeting," I reply, keeping down the hall to Anarchy's office.

Terminator and Whiz are already in there, along with Cannon and Anarchy.

"Where's Raider?" Anarchy asks when Dime and I drop down onto the couch.

"Getting his wanker sucked," Dime chuckles before taking another swig of his beer.

Anarchy hisses out a breath, pinches his nose, and then picks up his phone and dials a number.

"Get your ass in here. Now!" he orders after a few seconds.

"What's the word?" Cannon asks, not waiting for Raider.

"They're looking for the girl. Word is that they want us to turn her over because they know she's with us," Anarchy says.

"Do they know *who* she is?" I ask.

"Specifically? No. They're still under the impression she's someone we use to train the girls. They haven't made the connection between her and Cappellacci yet," he explains.

"Good," Cannon says.

“I have no idea what they’re planning, but you know I believe in the old saying, the best defense is always a great offense.”

“Anarchy, you’re planning on *us* attacking the mafia?”
Dime asks.

“Think we need to be planning on a plan and prepared for a counterattack if they move first. How’s business been with the Volkovs?” Anarchy asks, looking my way.

“Last time that I spoke with them, they seemed happy with Doc’s product. I haven’t heard too much other than that,” I say.

“Why?” Cannon asks.

Anarchy looks up at him. “I’m thinking we need to get in good with them and see how invested they are in us to have our backs in the event of a war.”

“I think we should’ve been having those conversations before we launched the first scud missile,” Cannon says.

“We weren’t prepared for that,” Terminator says.

“I’ll get on the phone with Mikhail and feel him out today,” I say.

Anarchy nods.

“Hadiyah. How’s she responding? Is she okay?”
Terminator asks.

Shrugging, I reply. “Guess she’s all right.”

“You guess?” Anarchy asks, lifting an eyebrow while simultaneously picking up those metal balls.

“Been busy. Haven’t talked too much with her about it.”

“You had all night after the two of you came back, and you reported to me. You told me you’d talk to her about it,”
Anarchy grouses.

How the hell can I tell him that I’d spent half that time fucking her and the other half running away from her?

“Just is what it is. Never know what’s going on in a broad’s head,” I say.

Cannon snorts. “Got that right. As close as Rox and I are, I still can’t figure her out half the damn time. But I don’t mind.”

Terminator snickers at the sappy grin on Cannon’s face.

“We need to know what she’s thinking, Phantom. What her plans are, and what the fuck she’s thinking about doing. We can’t protect her if she’s about to go on the lam. She does know that she can’t return to the shop, right?”

“Anarchy, she’s aware of all that. She’s not planning to go on the run, but she’s also not happy about being stuck here.”

“Yeah, that’s par for the course. Same as Roxie when we had to protect her from that ass-fuck of a husband she was married to,” Cannon gripes.

“I can talk to her,” Dime inputs. “See where her head is.”

I slant a look his way. “She won’t talk to you.”

“Why the fuck not? What’s wrong with me?” he asks.

“What’s right with you?” Raider sniffs, walking through the door with an irritated look on his face.

“Bout time you put that pencil dick away and joined us,” Anarchy says.

Raider shoots a look his way. “Any time Geisha’s involved, I forget everything else.”

“Make her your Ol’ Lady then,” Whiz pipes up from his spot in the corner where he’s been sitting quietly until now.

“Can’t make a hoe a housewife. Shit, Rogue was living proof of that with Duchess’ mom,” Raider says.

All eyes turn my way.

“What?”

“How’s she feel about all this? She knows that Hadiyah’s hiding out here now?”

Nodding, I reply, “Knows she’s here, doesn’t know why.”

“She okay with her being so close to you?” Cannon asks.

“Nothing she needs to know,” I shrug.

“It is if she feels betrayed and turns on you, sending those fuckers to our doorstep,” Anarchy retorts.

“She won’t,” I say, sounding more confident than what I feel. “She’s MC born and bred, through and through.”

“That’s true,” Dime agrees.

“Just figure out where Hadiyah’s head is and make sure she understands the rules and what we expect to be able to protect her,” Anarchy says.

I narrow my eyes at him and make a scoffing noise.

“What? You got something to say? Now’s the time to get the shit off your chest,” Anarchy challenges.

“If you listened to me, we wouldn’t be in this shit in the first place,” I say.

“In what, Phantom?”

“Having the blood of a dead associate of the mafia on our hands. Having to protect her.”

“Way I see it, that would’ve happened anyway since you decided to challenge one of his men,” Anarchy points out.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I could’ve handled myself in that situation without killing Cappellacci.”

“Yeah, that sounded more like revenge killing,” Cannon says.

“It was.”

“I made the call that I felt was best for our MC.”

“No, you listened to End Game instead of me. A man who doesn’t even have all the facts. He’s not a council member, and he doesn’t fucking know her the way that I do,” I argue.

“How’s that?” Raider asks.

Both he and Anarchy’s gaze are focused on me, waiting for an answer.

“I get her. Get the shit she’s been through. Good enough answer for you?”

Everyone grows silent, and I push up off the couch.

“Let me know what our next move will be,” I say, leaving out of the room and heading down the hallway again.

I step outside into the sunshine and run into Roxie.

“Hey, just the man that I want to see.”

“Cannon is in Anarchy’s office,” I gripe.

“No, I wasn’t looking for him. I need you,” she says.

“What can I do for you, Roxie?”

“I just thought that you might want to know that I found Hadiyah on the main road. She was walking down towards the gates. I don’t know what happened last night, but Cannon did tell me that she was under the MC’s protection. It wasn’t easy, but I convinced her to come back.”

“Where is she?” I ask, fear unraveling in my belly.

I can’t be in another situation where I lose a person who’s been entrusted to my care.

“She’s at the cottage with Marlo.”

“Thanks. I owe you,” I say, hopping on my bike to head in the opposite direction than I was going.

“Don’t mention it,” Roxie shouts over the loud roaring of my engine starting.

“Come on in here,” Marlo says, smiling broadly at me with a cigarette dangling from her lips.

I step inside the tiny cottage and see Hadiyah sitting on the couch just under the picture window. Her eyes are wide with uncertainty but are quickly replaced with fear when they land on me.

“Let’s go.”

Lifting an eyebrow, she asks, “Excuse me?”

“I told you to stay in my room when I left.”

“Phantom, I’m not your prisoner.”

“I said, let’s go,” I repeat.

She laughs. “Look, I understand—”

“Phantom, maybe she needs some time to cool off, and you do, too. It’s okay if she stays here with me for a while. I’ll make sure that when she finishes, she comes directly back to you,” Marlo suggests.

I’m prepared to argue back when I swing my gaze Hadiyah’s way again, but she prevents me from having to do it. Standing, she huffs.

“Marlo, thanks for everything. I guess I may as well go with him. I’ll have to sooner or later anyway.”

“All right, doll. If you need anything at all, you know where to find me.”

She smiles and says, “Thanks,” before following behind me.

After climbing on my bike, I order, “Get on.”

“I can walk just fine. I walked here with Roxie.”

I roll my bike the few steps she’s walked and say, “Hadiyah,” in the deadliest voice that I can conjure.

She turns my way. “What?”

“Get. On.”

She bites her bottom lip and shakes her head, but she finally climbs on back. Wrapping her arms around my waist, she presses her face against my back. I close my eyes for just a second before popping them open again and taking off.

When we roll to a stop, and I shut off my bike, I climb off and head to the bunkhouse, not bothering to look back to confirm that she’s following me.

By the time she arrives, I’ve removed my cut and helmet, and I’m sitting on the couch waiting for her. She closes and locks the door behind her before she walks further into the living area and tentatively takes a seat.

“Phantom, I appreciate all that you’ve done for me until this point. You didn’t have to let me go with you last night, but you did. And I thank you for it, but you cannot control me.”

She stares at the carpet beneath her feet.

“I’ve been thinking a lot. It’s not fair that you should be burdened with trying to protect me, and it’s not fair that I brought this trouble on you guys with the decision that I made. I spoke with Amina today, and I’ve decided to return to the UK. It’s the best place for me right now. Going back to teaching and being around friends and my sister will help me get myself together again. I mean, all I’ve been doing here is just existing from day to day. That’s no life for anyone.”

She stops prattling again and stares at her clenched hands in her lap. Hadiyah sits back on the couch, crosses her feet at the ankles and wiggles them back and forth.

“You done?” I ask after a minute.

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to control you. If I were trying to control you, there’d be no mistake about it. As far as you returning to the UK, I can’t tell you what to do, only that you won’t have protection over there. La Famiglia’s arm stretches far, as do their pockets, and there’s no way that you can escape them. They’ll track you down and follow you wherever you go. The only thing that you can do now is stand down and stay here with us. Be under our protection while we handle the situation.”

She drops her head in her hands before looking up and over at me. “I didn’t mean to create these problems for you guys.”

“It doesn’t matter whether that was your intention. Shit happens that we don’t mean all the time. We just have to be prepared to handle the outcome. The best way that I can do that is to know that you’re not gonna be a casualty and that you’re following my orders strictly to keep you safe. I can’t be out there fighting a war while I’m worried about what you’re gonna do and where you’re going,” I say.

Hadiyah pulls her feet onto the couch and wraps her arms around her knees, dropping her head and pressing her face into her thighs.

“Talk to me,” I say.

She shakes her head.

“Why not? You always did before.”

Turning her head sideways, I see the sorrow in her eyes.
“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“I screwed things up by insisting that you have sex with me when...when you clearly didn’t want to.”

Something inside of me lurches at the thought that she thinks I don’t want her.

“Fuck, Hadiyah!”

“What?”

“You’re killing me here. Did you think that I didn’t want you?”

“Yeah, it kind of felt that way, especially when you can’t even cum.”

It’s my turn to drop my head into my hands. “That’s the last thing that is true. I fucking wanted you. I wanted you so badly, and in so many ways, it scared me. I’m never fucking scared, but I scare everyone else. I ran from you, Hadiyah, and I’ve only ever run once before. That was when Ichika and I escaped our traffickers.”

She’s looking into my eyes, and I wonder what she sees.

“It doesn’t explain why you didn’t cum.”

“It does. All while I was inside of you, I started feeling things that I’ve never felt for a woman before, not even Duchess. It scared me, and I knew that I needed to get away from you quickly. Scared that if I allowed myself to feel too much, release inside of you, I’d lose my true self. I can’t afford that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t protect you that way. I’ve lost too many important people and failed them in too many ways. Even Duchess. I lost her, maybe not physically, but I lost her.”

“I didn’t know,” she says softly.

“You’re not like the others. Something about you makes me want to own you, possess you, but you weren’t built for my world.”

“People change, Phantom. They adjust to the circumstances of their lives and the environment they’re in. I’m stronger than you know.”

“I don’t doubt that, but this world is dark. It has the power to shadow out all the light, if not snuff it out completely. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“There’s still light left in you.”

“No. There isn’t,” I say, shaking my head.

“There is,” she says softly, getting up to come and stand in front of me. “I see it.”

“You’re mistaken.”

“I wasn’t mistaken the day that you walked in and saw Amina and I beaten, starved, and shackled, and all you wanted to do was kill our tormentors. I wasn’t mistaken all these times that you came to visit my sister and me when the others didn’t, that it was the concern and a shared understanding that drove you there. Nor have I been mistaken about your attraction to me. All those times you visited Amina and me, you were more drawn to converse with me and pay attention to me, not that you edged her out, but you lit up differently when I spoke or paid attention to you.”

“I can’t be with you the way that you want, though, Hadiyah. Having sex with you the way you need it is a struggle for me. A challenge to keep my hands to myself and not take you roughly, not show you that I was the one in control and that I couldn’t get enough of you. It almost killed me tamping the aggression down.”

“Then don’t. Give me what you have.”

“You saw what happened the last time I tried.”

Hadiyah straddles me, and her lips brush mine. Her hands free my hair from my ponytail, and she bites my bottom lip. She knows that I won’t stand for this because she’s not surprised when I jerk her hair, pulling her head back and biting her neck.

She moans her pleasure while pumping her hips forward, pressing her heat against my crotch.

“I have rules, Hadiyah. Rules that were made to protect me, and you’ve broken every fucking one,” I growl against her throat.

She pulls back, and her heavy-lidded gaze pins me in place. “Rules were meant to be broken.”

I feel the kick and then a hit before I’m jerked from a deep sleep and plunged into the dark wakefulness of the early morning hours.

“Hadiyah,” I say softly.

She’s thrashing wildly in the bed and murmuring something unintelligible. Gently, I shake her again, calling her name. It takes four more tries before she finally wakes.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

I rub her as she shivers and wraps her arms around herself.

“You were having a nightmare, I think,” I say, pulling her into my arms.

She leans into me, closing her eyes. Kissing her head softly, I ask, “What were you dreaming about?”

“Cappellacci.”

“What about him?”

“He was coming after me.”

I kiss her head and squeeze her against me. “He’ll never come after you again. You made sure of that. Hadiyah, look at

me.”

When she does, it breaks me inside to see the tears streaming down her face.

“He can never hurt you again, baby. That’s the reason that I didn’t kill him myself. You need to know that you have the power, and no one can take that from you. Where’d you learn to shoot?”

“Earlier. Before...” she licks her lips and wipes at her eyes. “Before we came back to the compound, Roxie took me to Target...Tantrum’s place.”

“To the gun range?”

She nods. “He thought it was important for me to learn to shoot if I was going to have your back.”

Clenching my jaw, I mentally thank Cannon. As much as I’d prefer to have been the one to do that job, it means a lot to me that my brother not only made sure this woman had my back but that she was also prepared in a way that I couldn’t have done. I was so fucked up about the decision to let her go that I couldn’t get past that.

She starts crying again. “I...I’ve never taken a life.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

“But I’d do it all over again if I had to,” she promises through sniffles.

I rub her back softly and tell her, “You’ll never have to. I promise that I’ll always cover you, Hadiyah.”

“Promise?” she asks, shivering.

I cup her face and stare into her eyes. The feelings that run through me baffle and scare me. I feel a connection to her that I’ve never felt to another. I find that I don’t want to lose her. I can’t possibly walk away from her. If anything, I want to know her better. I want and need more of this woman, who, in some ways, is as innocent as a child, and in others, she’s stronger than most men I know.

“I promise,” I say, kissing her softly.

When she sighs in relief, I tell her, “That doesn’t mean that these bad dreams will end right away. Just know that when they come, I’ll be waiting on the other side to welcome you into my arms.”

She nods, and we lay down. I pull her closer to me, and she rests her head on my chest. She sighs softly when I wrap her up.

“I feel safe, Phantom.”

“I know, darling. I know.”

I remain awake, holding her close, long after she’s sleeping, and softly snoring again.

If I have to remain awake throughout the day and night to protect her, then that’s what I’ll do.

That’s when I know that I’m a goner.

31 – HADIYAH



I always knew that I'd be with a man again someday because I'm a very sexual being. I love sex, and I love the power that it gives me when I'm with a man.

Having that power snatched from me and abused and used against me twisted something within me. It broke me to a certain extent. Not in a way that I was down for the count, though. I always knew that I would come back, and I would come back strong and on my own terms.

Phantom has given me that because despite his need to be in control, he never completely takes it from me. Although he declares he can't be gentle, that's not true either. It's intrinsically ingrained in him.

Phantom pulls my blouse up and palms my bare breasts, his eyes on me, making sure that I'm good with his every move. I arch my back, encouraging him to do whatever he wants or needs to do.

When his head dips and he covers my breast with his mouth, his hair sweeps forward, blocking his expression. However, I don't need to see his face to know that he's finding pleasure in the simple delight of biting my nipple and sucking at my breast. It's evident in the way his hard dick is pressing between my thighs and the groans of gratification eking from his throat.

He moves from one breast to the other before he dumps me from his lap. I land unexpectedly on my knees with my elbows on the couch.

Phantom's arm wraps around me and lifts me up a little higher before jerking my skirt up.

“Goddamn, Phantom! I won’t have any panties left if you keep doing this,” I complain at the sound of my lace panties ripping in his hands.

He bites one ass cheek and then another before he grunts, “That’s the point.”

Sliding one finger and then a second inside of me, he pumps his fingers furiously until I feel his fist bumping against me.

“That’s not enough, Phantom. I want you,” I complain even as I spread my legs and twerk my hips, enjoying the feeling of his fingers inside of me.

Smacking me on the ass, he grunts, “You don’t get to tell me what you want. You fucking earn what I do to you.”

The sting on my ass cheeks and his words are enough to make me want to cum, but not yet. I slowly rock my hips, clenching around the two fingers he has inside of me as he continues to bite my ass. Just as I’m growing accustomed to his fingers inside of me, he removes them and replaces them with his tongue.

“Oh shit!” I scream.

He sucks at me as though I’m his personal lollipop, and his sucks turn into greedy little slurps.

“Ohh, what did I do to deserve this,” I moan into the couch cushion.

His hands grip both my ass cheeks, and he proceeds to bury his face inside of me, my clitoris, his personal treasure, as he nips at and sucks on it. I feel his nose, his lips, and even his chin all working together to bring me pleasure.

Unable to take it anymore as his head rotates in tight circles, I push my ass back, making sure that he catches every single drop as I cum on his tongue.

“Hadiyah,” he says in a warning tone when he’s done.

“Yes, Phantom?”

He smacks my ass hard this time until tears spring from my eyes.

“You’ve been a naughty girl. I didn’t give you permission to cum.”

“Oh...I...I didn’t know.”

“You get permission from me for everything. Is that understood?”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan, still coming down from my orgasmic high.

He moves beside me and sits on the sofa. I push up off my elbows and realize that he’s naked. He’s fisted his thick cock, and he’s stroking it from the base to the bulbous head. Dark, angry-looking veins protrude, and I want to lick each of them.

Lowering to my knees, I take his cock in my hand, pulling it from his grip and lick up the sides and the back. My tongue traces each vein, loving the roped cords and the thickness of each. I feel his cock throbbing in my hand and growing as I work my way up from the base to the head.

When I take him in my mouth, his nostrils flare, and an angry look takes over his face. His hands are planted on the couch on either side of him as though he’s willing himself to remain in control. It’s my mission now to take that control away from him, make him lose his mind the way that he just did me.

My tongue circles his head, running across the slit and sucking out the precum, letting my lips pucker around him before pulling back. Dipping down once again, I take his balls into my mouth, and I gently lick and suck each of them as my gaze meets his.

I wink at him as his mouth parts open, showing a tiny sliver of his tongue. His hips slowly rock up, meeting my mouth’s motion.

“Goddamn, girl!”

Phantom’s hands fist my hair, and he pumps up like crazy. My mouth widens, trying to take all of him inside, but I’m

gagging and struggling. I'm determined to conquer this, so I pull back to the tip, only for him to shove himself deep inside of me again.

I barely miss scraping him with my teeth, and I can see the warning in his eyes that if I were to do that, he'd punish me severely. Maybe I want to know what that punishment might be, but I don't want to hurt him.

"Aww, fuck," he releases in a guttural moan.

His hips are pumping at a rapid pace, and I have to work hard to keep up with him. He wraps his fist in my hair and jerks my head back just before he explodes in my mouth.

His mouth covers mine, and he kisses me, all tongue. I'm surprised because this is the first time that he's initiated this type of kiss between us. Phantom kisses much the way that he makes love: aggressively, controlling, and passionately.

When he finally lets me up for air, he crooks a finger at me and then pulls me to standing.

"It's time to ride," he says.

I climb on him, slowly settling down on his cock until he's fully seated inside of me. The way that he stretches me feels so good, like he's settling in at home.

As I begin to lift and come back down, it hits me.

"Phantom, we're not wearing any protection."

His hand fists in my hair again. "I'm fucking clean. Never fuck a bitch without protection. You're a first."

"Even Duchess?"

His eyes flash in anger. "Even her." Smacking me on the ass hard, he warns, "Never mention her while I'm fucking you. Got me?"

"Mm-hmm," I moan, rising again.

"I know you're clean."

That was the one thing that I confirmed to him in prior talks. Our handlers always made sure to test us for sexual

diseases and insisted we wore protection whenever we were given to customers.

That thought comes rushing back, and for a moment, I disconnect, recalling the times that I was with men that I didn't know and would probably never see again. Men who knew that I was high out of my mind and didn't give a damn. Those same men knew we were being trafficked, and it seemed as if that made it even more exciting for them.

“Hey!” Phantom calls out, arresting my attention and bringing me back to the moment.

“Yes,” I reply softly, pressing my lips against his.

He jerks my head back. “You'll always be present with me in the moment whenever we fuck. You don't get to go back there in your head. You know why?”

I shake my head, my eyes smarting with tears.

“Because you killed that fucker and everything he represented. You took your freedom and life back. Now that you belong to me, nobody will fuck with you again. So, what we've got is just between us.”

I nod and close my eyes against the tears that threaten to fall. Instead, I focus on the slow rocking motions that take me forward and backward and then up and down. When I do open my eyes again, I allow our point of connection to be my focus.

The light tan of his skin is the perfect blend between heavily creamed coffee and the sandy beaches of Curaçao, with just a hint of rosy pinkness underneath. Then there's my darker skin that looks like toasted almonds dipped in honey.

The dark, shiny, onyx pubic hairs that bump up against my almost hairless mound now that it's time for me to shave again is a stark contrast. Just watching our connection causes me to ground down on him.

Phantom holds my hips and lifts, digging into me as he bites his bottom lip and watches me closely.

“All fucking mine,” he sneers as his top lip curls.

“Yes! Yes!” I cry as I cum again.

Phantom lifts me as though I weigh nothing and turns me around. Easing into me from the back, I hear his contented sigh of, “Ahh, yes.”

He slips in and out of my wetness as the slapping sounds of our connection fill the room. I want him to cum this time, I won't be satisfied until he does.

Reaching back, I caress his balls and then clench my pussy around him. Phantom rocks forward, almost losing his balance, and I know that I have him. It's enough motivation for me to twerk up against him as he rubs, caresses, and then smacks my ass cheeks.

In a final desperate move, I reach behind me and grip his dick pumping it as he pumps inside of me.

“Hadiyah,” he gasps, squeezing my hips tightly in his hands.

He slams into me in three hard, angry moves before he pushes himself against me with force and totters, trying to hold his balance. I can feel his cock milking inside of me.

I close my eyes because I'm also not on birth control.

Fuck!

“What are you thinking about?” he asks later as we're curled in bed together.

Phantom pulled out of me and carried me to the shower, where we cleansed ourselves and then fell into bed.

“Hadiyah, I expect whenever I ask you something that you're truthful with me. Don't ever lie, and don't hesitate. I can't protect you otherwise.”

“We...we talked about sexual disease, but neither of us considered birth control.”

He inhales deeply and then releases it as he flips onto his back and stares at the ceiling.

“We didn't. I'm sure, like me, it wasn't far from your mind.”

“No,” I admit.

“We always have the option of taking Plan B,” I suggest.

“Is that what you want?”

Sighing, I say, “Honestly, I don’t know what I want, Phantom. I hadn’t thought about any of this until now. My life is so unsettled, and you state that there’s a gang coming after me. One who has been silent for far too long for my liking.”

“No, baby. Don’t get it twisted. Not a gang, but the mob. Not only are they looking for you, but all of us. That’s not something you need to worry about, though. You let me worry about when and how we hear from them.”

“You will tell me, though, won’t you?”

“Mm-hmm.”

I know he won’t. He’s lying to protect me.

“I’m not stupid, Phantom. This isn’t some love movie or romance book about the hero saves the day and gets the girl. I get that I could be very well dead and gone tomorrow. What kind of life does that leave for a child?”

Phantom flips onto his side, resting his head on his folded arm. He stares at me with those strange, dark eyes as if he’s reading every one of my thoughts.

“You could be, but that’s a reality you face every day whether the mob is on your ass or not. When I tell you to trust me, that’s what I want you to do. This MC doesn’t play by the rules of the world. We make our own rules, and they change to fit whatever we need them to fit. We have two-hundred-fourteen chapters armed and ready to go to war in the blink of an eye. Not to mention, we have friends in high places who’re ready to roll with us on the word ‘go.’ It’s not pretty, it’s not easy, and it’s not fair. It’s also not something that I want you worrying about.”

When I don’t respond, he grabs my chin and says, “All right.”

“Yes.”

“Now, I can tell something else is on your mind. Ask.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Hikari. Hikari Nakajima.”

“That’s beautiful. What does it mean?”

“Light and my last name means ‘island.’”

“How did you get your name?”

“My mom—”

“No. Your other name.”

“My road name?”

I nod.

“It’s the way that I move. My grandfather taught me when I was a little boy how to make myself invisible in plain sight and how to use that to my advantage to catch my enemies by surprise. They never see me coming.”

“Do you have a lot of enemies?”

His eyes darken and narrow before he asks, “What do you think?”

I swallow, wondering what his world is like. I’ve fallen for this man over the last year, and I realize I barely know anything about him, yet, in some ways, I feel we’re kindred spirits.

“Besides, after losing my sister, my brothers claimed that I was a ghost of my former self.”

I want to ask him what he was like before, but the look on his face warns me not to. So, I change the subject.

“You told me that I made you break every one of your rules. What rules?”

He smirks.

“I want to know,” I say, reaching out and running my hand across his bare chest. He’s toned and muscular but not overly so. His body has definition, but he’s not the bodybuilder type.

Glancing down at my hands, his eyes lift again to meet mine, and I find humor in them. That’s rare.

“Number one: Don’t trust any woman.”

“Why?”

“They always betray you. Their emotions are their friends, and they love them more than they can ever love a man.”

“Not true.”

“My experience,” he disputes. “My aunt. My sister. Duchess. Other women.”

“Not me.”

“Remains to be seen.”

“Okay. Rule number two?”

“Never underestimate your enemy.”

“That’s logical. Three?”

“Never let a woman spend the night in your bed.”

This time, I rise on my elbow, looking down at him with a smirk. “Really?”

“Number four. Never allow a woman to touch my body without my permission.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t trust other people’s energy, and it’s important that I protect mine. It makes a difference in how I think, move, and strategize. Negative energy or any energy not in sync with mine can be detrimental to my life to the point of destroying me. Allowing a woman to remain in my bed can jeopardize that energy and make her believe that she has rights she’s not entitled to.”

“Hold up. Let’s go back to the entire idea of touching you. Eventually, she has to touch you, with or without your permission, when you’re having sex, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, what’s the difference?”

“When I give permission, it’s because I’ve prepared myself spiritually against whatever energy they hold. I’ve erected the

mental and spiritual barriers necessary to protect my energy.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Are there any other rules that I should be aware of?”

His jaw clenches, and his eyes shut before they open again. When they land on me this time, it’s almost as if he’s pleading with me to understand. I know this is a biggie for him.

“Never claim a woman.”

“Claim. You mentioned that earlier. What does it mean?”

“In the MC, we have lots of women always around. Some of them are free territory for any man to have. Those are the club whores or Roses, as we call them. They live here for free basically, but they earn their keep by cooking, cleaning, and fucking any of the brothers whenever and wherever they say.”

“Any of them?”

“Any of them.”

“So...what you’re telling me is that there are some women around here that if you walked out this door now and told them to drop their panties and bend over, they’d do it?”

“Well, half the time, they’re not wearing panties,” he says with a smirk, shocking the shit out of me. “Yeah, essentially, you’re right, though.”

“Is that why you won’t let me go to the clubhouse?”

“Exactly.”

“Anyone can be having sex anywhere at any time. Then some other guy, like Cannon perhaps, could come up to a girl five minutes later and do the same, and she’d have to do it?”

“Yeah, cept Cannon wouldn’t have balls left if Roxie found out. He better not be fucking around on her. Which gets us to ‘claiming a woman,’” he explains.

I’m not sure that I’m ready for that concept as I continue to mull the “club whores” over in my head and their role in the MC.

“Claiming a woman is kinda like marrying her but not. To a brother, it’s more serious than marriage. There’s no paper or changing of names. It’s simply when you choose a broad to be yours, and she gets branded. Your name is tattooed on her, letting the world know she’s your property, and you get hers on you somewhere. People know not to mess with her because she’s under your protection. Wherever she goes, people know she belongs to you, hands off.”

“Property? What is this? Slavery?”

A wry smile twists his lips as he clamps a hand on my hip and pulls me to him.

“Wait, no. Let’s talk about this. You mentioned claiming me, and I don’t think that I would like to be anyone’s property.”

He brushes my lips with his and presses his erection against me.

“All this. Whenever you want. However, you want.”

“Really?”

“As deep and as hard as you want,” he promises.

I tap my finger against my chin, pretending to think until he snatches my leg up and rests it over his. When he slides inside of me, I release a tight, low moan.

He fills me up, and I feel as if I’ve come home.

“I’m all yours,” I concede.

He winks and claims me, body, heart, and soul.

32 – DUCHESS/HADIYAH

DUCHESS



I love Phantom. Maybe not the way that a woman traditionally loves a man she might settle down, marry, and start a family with. But I do love him the only way I know how. When I'm with Phantom, he breathes life into me. He's the fire to my ice, and in a perfect world, it would be the two of us until the end of time.

He makes me want to be another woman, but there's the other part of me that knows I have to be true to myself. The part of me that's just like my mom and dad. The part that says I will never be satisfied with one person. I crave men's attention because it makes me feel whole and complete. That's the only time I ever felt whole was when Daddy made me the center of his world.

It seems I've spent a lifetime since then chasing his affections even though he's long since left this world. I doubt that I'll ever feel whole without securing other men's attention, even though I know my issue. Only when men are fawning over me do I feel complete.

I slow down at the gates and smile, "Hi, Kash."

"Hey, Miss Duchess. How have you been?"

"Fantastic. It's been a while since you visited. I know the girls miss you," I say, winking.

The prospects at the MC aren't allowed to screw the Roses until they're patched in. So, my girls get quite a few visits from these gentlemen. Whereas they usually take their men to the hotels, except for a few elite guests, I do allow the prospects to be entertained at my home. After all, they are family.

“I miss them too, Miss Duchess. Tell Aria I’ll be around soon,” he says with a leer.

“I sure will,” I say, waving at him as he opens the gates, allowing me to pull through.

Kash is as far from my thoughts as the Atlantic is from California as I drive up the long, winding driveway. I briefly glance at the clubhouse, and I don’t see Phantom’s bike parked out front, so I drive further down. He’s also not parked in front of his bunkhouse either. That can only mean that he’s away on business.

My heart still aches at the possibility of the end of us. I can’t believe he’s saying goodbye, but he hasn’t called or come by or responded to any of my calls. It has been three and a half months since we saw each other, but I wanted to test the waters to see if he was really finished with me.

Tears sting my eyes, and I turn around and head back towards the clubhouse. Just as I’m about to pull past and leave, I have a second thought. Doing a quick turnaround, I head back towards the bunkhouses but keep going, passing the cottages, until I come to a fork in the road.

The road slopes gently to the right. The soft purr of my engine is all you can hear through the trees. I see the mountain tops over the trees, and I think how perfect this area must be. Cannon gave Roxie her own little piece of heaven.

I slow down and take a left onto a cobblestone road that leads further up the mountain until I come to a nice log cabin. A few cars and a motorcycle are parked out front, and a soft sigh escapes me.

“Good, Roxie’s home,” I say softly, putting my car into park.

I’m not sure who else is here, but I’m certain that Roxie will know how to connect me with Hadiyah. She hasn’t been at the dispensary, and End Game is tight-lipped, but all I could find out from that gossiping chick Alicia is that Hadiyah hasn’t been back to the dispensary, but she doesn’t know why.

She never returned to my apartment, not even just to say, “Thanks for letting me crash for a while, Duch. Or, sorry, I stole your man, Duch, but he’s with me now.” Not even a damn “Boo!”

Although, honestly, I can’t blame her. She had no idea that Phantom and I were fucking around. It’s not something that we aired to the world. The only ones who would know that anything ever existed between us were his MC brothers.

I get out of my car and make my way up the sidewalk. Pulling the large wolf knocker, I drop it a couple of times against the heavy wooden door. Their home looks nice and cozy, with orange lights beaming from the sidelights. Laughter rings out behind the door.

After another knock, I can hear Roxie saying, “I’m coming.”

It took no time at all for Cannon to build this home for her. I remember when she first came to live at the MC, I was shocked. A woman of Roxie’s caliber isn’t the type you’d normally see hanging around an MC, especially not at the clubhouse.

She seems refined and polished. Everything about her is elegant and cultured, except she’s not. Phantom says that she came from a rough neighborhood, and attending college and working at a museum changed her status.

She was married to an asshole who was in politics, but he had a heavy hand in the sex trafficking ring and alleged ties to the mafia.

The door pulls open, and Roxie is standing there with the brightest smile on her lips. It falters briefly before she pulls it together again. Her eyebrows remind me of crawling caterpillars, the way that they squiggle before resting again.

“Hey, Duchess. I hadn’t expected you.”

“Did I disturb something?” I ask, noticing a few women gathered behind her.

“No. I just had a small gathering with some of the Ol’ Ladies. Come in,” she says, ever the gracious host.

I am not fooled by Roxie at all. I know that she had an altercation with Smoke, one of the Roses, who had her sights set on making Cannon her Ol' Man before Roxie came along. From what I've heard, Roxie's no joke.

When I step inside, I see Mama Bear, Marlo, Siren, Bonnie, and Hornet. Last of all, my eyes land on Hadiyah. What the entire fuck is she doing here?

She looks surprised to see me, just as I'm surprised to see her. Has Phantom claimed her? There's only one way to find out.

"I thought you said it was a gathering of the Ol' Ladies," I say to Roxie.

She stops and frowns slightly just before sitting down.

"I did," she says. The "and what about it" isn't said but strongly implied. Shaking my head, I say, "I'm just surprised to see Hadiyah here is all."

"What brings you by, Duchess?" Marlo asks knowingly.

I shrug and take a seat on the chair beside Hadiyah. "I was coming to check on Hadiyah. Turning to her, I say, "I hadn't seen you in a while, and I was just worried."

"Thanks, Duchess. I'm okay. I've been wanting to drop by to see you...and thank you for everything."

Including stealing my man; I want to ask but don't.

She looks different from the last time that I saw her. She's cut her hair, dyed it, and she's wearing makeup now. I can't help but wonder if this is a result of Roxie's influence.

"You look great. I don't think I've ever seen you with makeup before," I share.

"She does look good, doesn't she?" Siren says.

"Thanks," Hadiyah says shyly and softly. "It was Roxie's suggestion months ago and I stuck with it."

I find that I want to like her, but I'm still pissed, hurt, and in disbelief that Phantom chose her over me.

“Girl, please. I just told my stylist to bring out your natural beauty. That’s all Brenda did. It was already there. The high cheekbones, tiny features, gorgeous eyes, and flawless skin.”

Hadiyah blushes under the attention, and Mama Bear’s surly ass chooses that moment to say some grimy shit that has me wanting to pop up out of my seat and whoop her ass. Only I’d be outnumbered if I tried that shit.

“Nothing wrong with making a woman look good for her man. Although, I must admit it’s the inner beauty that a man like Phantom is attracted to. But accenting your beauty doesn’t hurt at all,” Mama Bear says with a wink.

“I heard there’s been talk about him claiming you,” Hornet says. “Least that’s what Warrior said the other day,” she says of her Ol’ Man.

Jealousy fills my insides like a bullet, and I know that if I stay around much longer, I’m going to blow a gasket. These bitches are trying to get under my skin.

“You and Phantom. So, you’re a thing now?” I say.

All eyes turn to Hadiyah. Shyly, she looks away, and I’m reminded of how Phantom can be. Sometimes quiet and aloof, seemingly shy to those who don’t know him. As much as it hurts to admit it, I know they’d be the perfect couple.

“We’re...we’re getting to know each other. He hasn’t claimed me, and I haven’t claimed him. We’re just friends.”

“Honey, please. Friends with benefits. The way that man looks at your ass—” Siren says.

“Is the same way that all the men look at asses, especially with all the naked ones around,” I say sourly.

“That’s not true,” Bonnie says. “He looks at her ass like he wants to own it.”

“Bet he has her screaming like that, too,” Siren giggles.

“Well, now that you mention it. Warrior did tell me that he heard her screaming one night when he was at the bunkhouse. Said he was escorting drunk-ass Rage back up there. Must’ve been getting it real good,” Hornet says.

Sniffing, I dig down deep to ignore these bitches.

“Phantom’s a great guy, ladies. He’s a good friend. He’s thoughtful, caring, and protective. I couldn’t ask for a better friend. All the rest...well, I don’t want to get into that because I respect him too much. A man like Phantom is rare, and I appreciate all that he has done for me. I treasure our friendship, and I don’t want to jeopardize that.”

Her words tug at my heart, and happiness for him blossoms inside of me. He deserves someone who will take care of his heart and love him the way that I’m sure Hadiyah could. I just don’t know that he’s capable of loving anymore.

“Gotta be more than friends. You’ve been staying at his place for a while now,” Siren suggests.

Shrugging she says, “For my protection.”

“Mm, we know how that turns out. Don’t we, Roxie?” Mama Bear says, smirking.

Roxie shakes a finger and says, “Everyone’s story is different. But if she finds with Phantom what I found with Cannon then that’s beautiful and I’m happy for them.”

“He’s a beautiful soul. I’m lucky to know him,” Hadiyah says softly.

“You really care for him, don’t you?” I ask.

She smiles, nods, and says, “I do. He means a lot to me.”

“Well, ladies. I’d better get going. I was coming to check on Hadiyah and since I didn’t know how to contact you, I figured Roxie would,” I say, turning and glancing at Roxie who gives a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

I stand and head for the door.

“Sure that’s all you came for?” Mama Bear asks.

“Mmm, might’ve been trying to reclaim her man,” Hornet says.

“Ladies,” I say, nodding at Hadiyah, Roxie, and Marlo. Then to the rest, I turn and say, “Bitches. Have a good night.”

I walk out of Roxie's door, and I can hear the hissing and claws coming out, but I don't give a fuck. They can all kiss my ass.

"Duchess," Hadiyah's voice calls after me as I step off the porch.

I stop and turn around to watch her as she walks to my car.

"Thank you...for everything."

I nod.

Inhaling deeply, I reach out and take her hand in mine. "Take care of his heart. He's a good friend to me, too. Just don't hurt him, okay?"

She smiles softly, warmly at me, and I decide not to do what I wanted to do originally. I won't start shit by telling her about him and me. If he decides to one day, that's on him, but I'll keep my mouth shut.

"Okay, but just so you know, I would never hurt Phantom. I love that man."

I squeeze her fingers and nod. "Good. Good for you."

She turns and walks back to the porch and joins the other women who are smirking and giggling. Only Roxie looks concerned. Even Hadiyah is somewhat unbothered by my presence.

That's okay, though. I want what's best for Phantom. If he's happy then I'm happy.

If not, then I'll go lie in wait until he returns to me, licking his wounds. He will return in time, and when he does, my legs and heart will be open and waiting.

HADIYAH

When I saw her walk through the door, I had no idea what she was coming to say. I honestly feared she would do or say something to embarrass me, like maybe telling me that Phantom had just left her.

She has no idea that I know about their past, and I don't plan on letting her know that I know. At first, I felt guilty about becoming involved with Phantom, but I no longer do. He needs someone to soothe his heart and comfort him, and Duchess clearly isn't capable of that.

I don't doubt that she loves him or at least cares very much about him. It's just not good for him. If I can care for his heart the way that he needs to, then why shouldn't I? Neither of them was committed to the other, and she's clearly determined to remain a whore.

Not that I'm judging her for the choices that she makes, but I'm sure that he needs so much more. That man needs everything that I have to give, and whatever I don't have, I'll dig down deep and find it.

That's why when he steps inside that evening, I'm standing in the middle of his living room waiting.

"Hey, what'd you get into today?"

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that."

"Hope you didn't listen to any of the Ol' Lady gossip," he teases, removing his cut and then his boots.

"I wouldn't dare. What have you been doing?" I ask, kneeling between his thighs as he sits back on the couch.

"Oh, waiting to return home so that I can get into a little bit of this and a little bit of that."

"Mm," I murmur, unzipping his pants. "Like me?"

"Exactly like that," he says, staring at me through half-lidded eyes.

When his pants are open, and his dick is in my hands, I lean forward and close my lips around him. Phantom slips further down into his seat, allowing me to take more of him to the back of my throat. A satisfied hum slips out of his throat as his eyes narrow.

“Fuck, girl. Why’re you so good?”

“Because you’re good to me,” I mutter around his dick.

He winks, says, “You’re not good at talking around a mouth full of dick. How about we save this conversation for later?”

Laughing, I suck him further and further back until the only sounds escaping my mouth are my hums and moans.

Phantom’s long, tapered fingers find their home in my hair. His massaging fingertips make me close my eyes, and my tongue works its way around his dick, enjoying the salty taste of him.

His dick grows and becomes engorged at the back of my throat, tickling it.

“You love sucking this dick, doncha?”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan around it, feeling the sense of comfort of knowing that I’m in control. Everything that I’m doing is of my own volition. I’m choosing my path and not being forced to.

I am completely and helplessly attracted to this man, deeply in love with him.

Phantom’s eyes open, resting on me as though he heard my thoughts. A question rises in his eyes but then passes away before he grabs my head and begins to pump into my mouth. His thrusts are deep and hard, and I’m choking, but I won’t give up.

It amazes me that though he’s holding my head the way that he is, I’m not scared. It doesn’t intimidate me. I still feel in control.

Within moments thick sheets of cum glide down my throat, and I drink and drink and drink until Phantom cries out.

When he pulls himself from my lips, I lick around him, cleaning him up. He leans forward, cups my chin, and kisses me sweetly.

“C’mere, Hadiyah.”

I take his hands, and he helps me up until I’m straddling him.

“Let’s see how true that shirt is,” he says, indicating his t-shirt that I’m wearing.

It’s a black, short-sleeved tee that says, “You would be loud too if I was riding you.”

His hands cup my ass, and he bites his bottom lip. “No panties, Hadiyah. Someone’s been a bad girl. What have you truly been doing while I was away at work today? Not while you were with the ladies, but after.”

“Playing with myself. Waiting for you to get home.”

“Mm, fuck, you’re making me hard again.”

He’s not lying. As he grips his arousal and presses it against my entrance, I spread my legs wider, trying to make room for him.

We create a sweet, slow cadence as I ride him up and down like on a merry-go-round. He fills me up, and I feel tight, as though he’s my first, but that’s just evidence of his thickness and how hard he is for me. His hand roughly cups the back of my head as he leans forward to kiss me.

“You feel how hard I am for you?” he asks against my lips.

“Mm-hmm.”

“You do this to me, girl. You make me fucking crazy for you, Hadiyah. The way your hips swivel side to side, the way your ass jiggles, and how you ride this dick like it’s yours.”

We tongue each other again before I break away and reply breathlessly, “That’s because it is mine. It’d better be.”

I think about earlier when Duchess came by.

“Unless you’re still sharing it with someone. Like Duchess.”

“Never,” he growls.

“She came by.”

“I know,” he growls.

I ride him harder, frowning at him. “How?”

“Oh, fuck, Hadiyah! This conversation? Now?”

“Yeah,” I moan, trying to hold my orgasm back as I clench my pussy around him.

“She...fuck! She came by the dispensary. Wished us well.”

“Ohhh, shit! Phantom, this dick is sooo good,” I moan, tears escaping my eyes as I close them.

I bury my face in the side of his neck as I rain down on his dick while he thrusts mercilessly inside of me.

When we finish, we remain connected as we catch our breaths. He wraps his arms around me and I feel safe and whole.

“You’re all I want, Hadiyah. I promise you. You’re all I want.”

33 – PHANTOM



The roar of our bikes dies down as we come to a stop. I glance out at the turbulent blue waters and then up at the sky. It's peaceful here. This is a place that hasn't been marred by the ugliness of our world. A place I wouldn't mind coming to meditate.

I wonder how someone like Carmine Aiello found it, definitely off the beaten path. It's not easy to find, and Carmine isn't from around here.

"He's not here," Cannon says.

"Nah, he's here. Just watching and waiting," Anarchy says, tapping a cigarette from his pack and stuffing the pack back into his cut. "Bastard didn't wait for four and a half months just to not show. No, he's been biding his time. Calculating something sinister and we need to be on guard."

Cannon nods but doesn't speak.

"Never underestimate a man like Carmine Aiello," Anarchy says, lighting the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"What the fuck are we waiting for? Let's get the show on the road," Cannon growls.

"Probably making sure that we didn't bring anyone else."

"Yeah, I don't like that at all, insisting we leave everyone behind except for us."

"Yeah, well, he wanted no one except for Phantom and me. Told him I couldn't do that," Anarchy says around the cigarette as he squints against the smoke.

"Too much like a fucking setup, man," Cannon says.

“Yeah? Well, what else are we gonna do? Gotta end this war before it starts, so I don’t mind meeting the man on his terms. We ain’t got shit to hide,” Anarchy answers.

“Still think we should’ve had the others waiting along the road,” Cannon argues.

“Nah. That’s what he’d be expecting. We’re not familiar with this place, and I’m sure he would’ve heard a dozen or so motorcycles coming from miles around. The place is too damn quiet for my liking,” Anarchy sniffs.

“Better to kill people off with no witnesses around to see or hear a damn thing,” Cannon mumbles, flicking a lighter off and on in his fingers.

When he grows bored with that, he picks up a few rocks and starts skipping them over the water.

Anarchy glances at his phone and says, “He’s about twenty minutes late. I’ll give him another ten, and then we’re calling it.”

“He’s coming down the road now,” I speak up from my place under the tree.

Anarchy and Cannon both swing their glances my way, scowling, and Cannon shakes his head.

“Don’t start with that spooky shit.”

Anarchy smirks and tosses his cigarette to the ground, stomping it under his boot.

Despite Cannon’s comment about “spooky shit,” he and Anarchy are both accustomed to my clairsentience.

Another five minutes pass before we hear the roar of an engine coming up the road from us. I stand from underneath the tree, heading back to my bike, as do my brothers.

Cannon and I are both holding our guns while Anarchy’s is still holstered.

“We need to get out of here,” I say.

“What?” Anarchy asks, watching as the car rolls to a stop.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this. We need to leave now,” I say.

“Let’s just hear him out, and we’ll head out as soon as we do. We don’t like what he’s saying, then we’re out of here.”

I shake my head, and Cannon stares at me with a frown on his face. “Anarchy, maybe we should—”

“Aiello,” Anarchy says as the man approaches us.

I take a few steps forward, as does Cannon. We’re standing side by side with Anarchy as the man grins around his pricey Nicaraguan cigar. He’s wearing an expensive Italian suit and shoes with a Hermes tie.

Looking at his Patek Phillippe watch, he says, “Sorry. Ran into a distraction on the way that couldn’t be helped.”

Anarchy nods. “Let’s cut straight to the chase, shall we?”

I eye Carmine’s bodyguard standing behind him, but closer to the car than he is to us. He looks relaxed, deceptively so, which makes me know that I shouldn’t underestimate him or let my guard down.

“I want to know how I will be compensated for the loss of a very valuable man. Martin Cappellacci was worth just over a million dollars to me. And your man’s woman cut him down like a dead dog in the street,” Aiello spits out in disgust.

“It was your man’s life or my guy’s. What man wouldn’t choose his own life over that of another’s?”

“That’s not what my cameras show. The woman took him out.”

“So, what are you asking Carmine?”

“I’m asking that you turn her over.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I speak up.

Anarchy and Cannon both shoot a glare in my direction.

Carmine chuckles. “Just what I expected. She’s got her hooks in you, doesn’t she?”

I resume my silence.

“What’s your price, Aiello?”

“The woman or your man. No negotiations.”

“Can’t do it,” Anarchy says, shaking his head.

“Those are my terms,” he grinds out.

“So, we’re at war?” Anarchy asks lightly.

Carmine Aiello chuckles. “You don’t want war with me, Anarchy.”

“I’m trying to prevent it, but I won’t negotiate under hostile terms.”

Carmine steps away and walks to his man. He whispers something to him before he turns back to us, walking slowly in our direction. The bodyguard gets into the car, closing the door behind him.

“We need to leave,” I repeat under my breath to Anarchy.

“We’re about to,” he says.

We hop on our bikes just as Carmine calls out to us.

“Cannon, how’s Roxanne doing?” Carmine Aiello asks. “Oh, you didn’t think I knew? I happened to know that you all were behind getting rid of Andres Garcia, too. What I don’t understand is the sudden interest in buying girls from me?”

“It was purely business and nothing else,” Anarchy lies.

“One of my men told Martin he recognized Phantom with one of the missing girls from Maxim Tate’s farmhouse. Those girls came from Martin, and he wanted to know what the fuck Phantom was doing with her. At that point, we wanted to know when did the Fiery Disciples get into girls.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Lie to me again,” Carmine says, pulling a gun out.

Cannon and I both pull ours, and Anarchy holds his hands up.

“Aiello, I’ve got no reason to lie to you.”

“Even that’s a fucking lie,” he says.

His voice is calm, unreasonably so, which sends chills down my spine. The back door of the Bentley opens, and out steps a beautiful, African American young woman. Light brown-skinned, with thick, glossy lips on a heart-shaped face. Her long hair flows to her waist. Though she’s curvy, she’s also petite. I know that I’ve seen her picture before, but Cannon confirms it.

“Courtney! What the fuck?” Cannon hisses as the color drains from his face. “Don’t you dare fucking hurt her!” he challenges Aiello.

He lurches forward, but Anarchy grabs his shoulder, holding him in place just in time as she steps up beside Carmine, and he wraps an arm around her shoulder.

Roxanne’s cousin smiles at Cannon and says, “Nice to finally meet you, cuz.”

“We thought you were dead!” Cannon growls beside me.

“Oh, I’m sure Roxie would have preferred that I was, especially since Andres preferred my company over hers.”

“That’s debatable since he sold your ass,” Cannon snipes.

“Or did he?” she challenges.

Carmine leans over and kisses Courtney firmly on the lips, making their connection clear.

“You bitch! You’re the reason we got into this! Looking for you because we thought you were dead, and all along, you’re playing the role of Carmine’s whore! You fucking betrayed your own blood for what?”

“Money and protection,” she says, winking. “Oh, and damn good dick.”

The bitch actually has the nerve to giggle, which sets Cannon off. He lunges forward again, and this time, Anarchy can’t restrain him. I jump in front of both men, but Cannon pushes me aside like a fly. Courtney jumps into the car as Carmine’s bodyguard jumps out, firing his gun.

He misses Cannon, but I watch in horror as Anarchy's body jerks forward, covering Cannon before slumping to the ground.

"Anarchy!" Cannon shouts as I spin around, shooting at the car just as Carmine closes the door on him and Courtney.

The driver speeds off, and I run after the car, shooting as it zig-zags. I know that it won't be long before they'll have to pull over because I've hit a tire and shot out the rear window. Carmine is shooting back as they pull further out of sight.

Rushing to my bike, I stop momentarily as Cannon shouts, "Come on, Anarchy! Get the fuck up!"

I'm torn between getting on my bike and going after them or seeing about my Prez.

"Phantom! Anarchy, what the fuck, dude! We've gotta get the bastards. Get your ass the fuck up!"

Cannon sounds like he's on the verge of breaking, and we can't afford that. Not now.

"Get the fuck up!" he screams.

Pulling out my phone, I dial Doc.

"Phantom?"

"It's Anarchy, Doc. He's been shot."

"Where are you?"

I give him the directions before I reply, "Doc?"

"Yeah?"

"Hurry!"

I end the call and rush back to Cannon, kneeling beside him and Anarchy. His eyes are glassy, but he's struggling to hold it together. Cannon's still holding him, almost as if he's afraid to let go.

"Cannon, let go."

"I'm trying, but he won't get up, man."

"Come on, let's flip him over," I instruct calmly.

We flip him over onto his back. I breathe easier.

“It’s a through and through. You’re gonna be all right. Hang on in there, dude,” I say as much for Cannon’s sake as for Anarchy’s.

Anarchy’s breathing is rapid, and he’s cold and clammy. I notice the color seeping from his face as he turns pale, and his skin has a bluish tint, which I know is a result of the profuse bleeding he’s experiencing.

“He’s in shock,” I tell Cannon when I confirm that his heart rate is rapid.

“We gotta stop the bleeding!” Cannon rasps.

Removing my cut, I pull off my Henley and hand it to Cannon. “Tear it.

He rips the Henley in half and hands it back to me. I place the first half against the exit wound in the front.

“Anarchy, we’re gonna see you through this bro. I need you to hold this shirt in place, and Cannon and I are going to turn you, all right?”

“This is war,” Anarchy breathes lightly.

“Your ass betta get well so we can go on the battlefield together!” Cannon growls as he shifts Anarchy over.

I apply the other half of my Henley to the entrance wound in Anarchy’s back, look up at Cannon and reply, “No doubt,” with a firm nod.

Walking back into my room, I drop to the couch as Hadiyah rushes from the bedroom to me.

“What happened? Is he okay?” she asks in a calm tone, but I feel the worry and fear of her energy surrounding me like a cumulonimbus cloud.

I tell her everything that happened.

“What’s Doc saying?”

“It’s touch and go. He’s still losing a lot of blood.”

“Why isn’t he at the hospital?”

“If he went to the hospital, they would have to report the gunshot wound. Despite all the fucking doctors we’ve got in our pocket, there’s no way that we can keep this shit under wraps. I’m sure Aiello would come after him again. We can’t put all those people’s lives at risk like that.”

“So where is he?”

“Our private treatment facility. It’s a few miles away from here. Doc and another doctor that he did a residency with runs it.”

“Are there enough doctors there? Can he get a blood transfusion?”

“We’ve got a team of doctors on our payroll year-round. Doc ordered us all out of there because we were becoming too much for him to handle. He told us to get ready to donate if it became necessary.”

Tears fall from my eyes, and anger races through my bloodstream like adrenaline. Hadiyah’s arms wrap around me, and she kisses the top of my head.

“He’s going to be okay, Phantom.”

“So fucking tired of loss.”

She lifts my head, placing both hands on either side of my face. “You’re a gentle, beautiful soul. You feel things deeply.”

My jaws clench.

“This pain is ripping you apart,” she says.

I bow my head and close my eyes, but her tiny hands force my head up again.

“I’m here for you, Phantom. Take me how you need to.”

Shaking my head, I reply, “You can’t handle it.”

“I love you, Phantom. I can take whatever you dish out. I’m here for you...to help you heal the way you’ve helped heal me.”

Hadiyah kisses me with an urgency that lets me know that she's begging for me to be well. She's begging for me to get in the right headspace where Anarchy is concerned.

She stands and slowly peels off her tank top denim shorts and removes her thong.

"I'm yours," she says.

Hadiyah grabs my hand, pulling me from the couch and leading me into the bedroom. Slowly, she peels the bloody clothing from my body one item at a time until I'm standing naked before her.

"I need time, Hadiyah."

She looks at me with worry.

"Please. I'm in my head right now, and I need this."

"Okay," she says softly and climbs into the bed.

I sit on the chair opposite the bed and lay my head back, watching her as she tosses and turns. My thoughts take over, taking a trip to the past. Memories of Ichika, Duchess, and life with Anarchy by my side since our teens pass through my mind.

Rage burns me inside, and I get up and head to the living room after she's fallen asleep. Sitting in the middle of the floor, I close my eyes, pushing aside all my thoughts and the energy that I feel until everything becomes still. My body, Hadiyah's energy, the loud music from the clubhouse, and the roar of my brother's bikes outside.

Everything stops, and I become one with the universe. I see Anarchy as I last saw him, lying on the ground and bleeding. Then I see him the way that he was before the shooting, giving orders, talking shit, and laughing.

Finally, I see a new image. Anarchy stands before me as if he's in the room with me. A scowl takes over his face, and he's wearing a bandage around his midsection. Angling his head to the side, he asks, "Are you ready?"

"For?"

“War. I need your strength, Phantom. I need you in the right space.”

Slowly the bandages shed themselves, and there’s no bleeding, only a scar left from the surgery.

“I’m as good as new, see,” he says.

The scar transforms into a tattoo of a Phoenix. His body looks completely healed, and he’s laughing again. Anarchy slowly disappears, and peace settles around me.

In time, I get up from the floor and make it back to the bedroom. I glance at the clock and notice that it’s a little after two in the morning. I’ve been in the living room for more than an hour.

Hadiyah looks so peaceful and well-rested. She used to have nightmares all the time, but she hasn’t had one since she’s been with me.

Climbing carefully into bed so that I don’t disturb her, I lay there watching her. No matter how hard I tried to push her away, she’s never given up on me. She stands strongly about her feelings and risks her psychological balance just to prove her love.

My feelings for her run deep, and I realize that if she can take the risk of loving me, how can I not take the risk back. Baby girl is skilled and strong as hell in her own right. I admire her. She’s beautiful, compassionate, intelligent, and amazing.

Having her at my side is an honor. A woman that I would be proud to claim and call mine. Memories of our first meeting and all the months that I spent by her side getting to know her and her sister, Amina, flash through my mind.

Thoughts about all that she’s been through since her rescue returns, and I know her parents would be proud of the woman that she’s become.

Unable to keep my hands to myself a moment longer, I reach out and touch her hip. She flips in her sleep, facing me with a soft sigh.

My fingertips brush her lips and trace the curvature of her jaw. Long lashes flutter open, and she stares sleepily back at me. A soft smile curves those full lips.

Hadiyah brings her hands to rest on my face, and she kisses me hungrily and passionately. She bites my bottom lip and forces me to open my mouth.

What started as something so sweet quickly is transforming into something more. Hadiyah unleashes the dragon, forcing him to the surface. Arousal takes over, hungry, wild, and demanding, and I can't hold it down any longer.

It baffles me that a woman like her could love a man like me, yet she does.

I move over her, nudge her legs open wider and sink inside of her. My eyes close as her heat grips me tightly. Before I can consider it, I've lost control, jackhammering inside of her as if she were concrete and I was the construction worker.

I pull out of her and move to the edge of the bed, dragging her with me. When we're both standing, I turn her around to face the bed, and I sink into her once more. With a deep arch in her back and her ass spread wider than before, she begins bumping her ass up against me.

Her gorgeous brown ass bounces off me like a basketball dribbled on a court. I slow my pace but not the aggression with which I'm taking her, and she rewards me by gyrating her hips.

I grab her wild hair, jerking her head back and pulling us both to standing. She angles her head and kisses me. In this position, my pumping slows down, but I can feel her squeezing around my length. Though I cannot be gentle at this moment, Hadiyah has found a way to deal with my aggression.

She owns her stake in it, not allowing herself to be lost in my control but going with it and finding enjoyment in it. I'm not a man who believes in kissing, but the way that she kisses me, with tongue and teeth, is as full of aggression as my fucking, and I can accept it.

I pull out of her and switch positions, turning her around to face me. Reaching down, I lift her into my arms, her legs locking around my waist. Her hands are busy in my hair, pulling and twisting. She mimics my every movement, and the heat between us runs wild.

I want to be all over her and inside of her at once. We stumble backward onto the bed, and we're sliding against one another as I slip in and out of her. Hadiyah spreads her legs wide, and I grab her ankles, pushing them back as far as they will go.

Up on my knees, I drive myself forcefully into her once again, watching as the breath expels from her. She reaches up for me, but I evade her grasp, going instead for her breasts, which I bite hard, eliciting another shriek before I do the same to the other.

This time, when I grab her neck, I don't let up but continue to thrust viciously inside of her until she turns ashen and she's grappling with my hands. Even then, I don't let go as my lip curls back in a snarl, and the loud smacking sounds of me fucking her fills the room.

Hadiyah's hips lift from the bed, and she meets me thrust for thrust. She's wet and growing wetter and wilder by the minute. She's no longer clutching at my hands, but her eyes have closed, and I use my free hand to stroke and then pinch her clitoris.

Her left leg kicks out, and she thrashes underneath me.

"Fuck! Oh, Phantom...yes!" she hisses when I release my grip on her neck.

She scoots back, and I tug her towards me until she does it again. This time I don't pull her back but chase her ass up the bed until we reach the headboard. I don't disconnect from her. I brace myself against the headboard and use my other hand to pull her leg up and back.

She's open wide to me now, and I take advantage of it, seating myself fully in her for the first time. Her eyes widen,

and she gasps for air, but I don't let up from the hold that I have around her neck.

My strokes are long, even and controlled, but they go deep.

Tears fill her eyes.

"I can't take it," she gasps as I release her neck just a little.

"You fucking can, and you will. Don't start crying now. This is what you wanted. Take all this dick and take it until I'm done," I order.

My speed picks up with intensity until I can hear her wet flesh sucking me in deeper, and her tears and pleas for me to stop turn into moans begging for more.

I drive myself so deep into the tight, wet confines of her open flesh that I'm grinding my pubic hair against hers. There's no opening between us, just one tight seal of our flesh that makes us one.

With that realization, I know that I can't hold on. I need to get out of her, break this because I can't have this kind of connection with another soul. There's no way that I can protect her from everything waiting to destroy her.

Shit, I can't protect her from me, and I know that I'll have the power to destroy her easier than any other force.

She senses me disconnecting from her, and her eyes fly open. Hadiyah's nostrils flare, and she bites her bottom lip, her face furrowing into a scowl. Reaching for me again this time, she's successful in locking her arms around me and pulling me down to her.

I hold myself inside of her, but she doesn't go still the way that I do. Instead, it's her now fucking me, owning my dick, and taking possession of me. Hadiyah's eyes are determined, pinning me in place as she rolls her hips around and clenches herself around me.

She thrusts wildly up, slamming herself against me, wincing against the pain that I know she feels when my dick stretches her. I remain still, refusing to connect.

“I know your demons, Phantom. They’re the same as mine. The need to reclaim your identity, individualism, and self-control. The need to loudly proclaim your sexuality to the world. You’re not a whore, and you won’t be used or abused. Your body is yours,” she pants.

“Yours to do with what you want,” she cries, still holding onto me and rolling wickedly around me now as if she’s losing control.

“They may have claimed us for a time, but they don’t own us. You have nothing to prove, and neither do I! I’m enough for me, and you’re enough for me. Be enough for yourself,” she cries.

Tears flow down her face, and through her passionate speech, she continues fucking me.

“We need each other,” she hiccups.

“You’re delusional!” I growl, slowly coming back to and rocking my hips forward.

I continue moving until my aggression takes over again.

“No! I’m not! You need me as much as I need you!”

My hands grab her throat again, and I lift, breaking her hold on me. This time, the force I apply to her neck doesn’t offer her the opportunity to speak. She grabs at my hands, and I snarl at her.

“You wanted the fucking demons! Take them!”

I press so hard and deeply into her until she melds with the mattress.

I grab her ankles and lift her again until her back is partially off the mattress. Pushing up onto my feet, I drive deep inside of her until she’s screaming my name repeatedly. I feel her pulsing all around me, and I know that she’s having an orgasm.

Finally, I release inside of her. Not only my orgasm but my tears, my pain, and my heart.

“I love you, Hadiyah. I really love you,” I cry into the side of her neck.

All I can see is Anarchy and an army of our brothers behind him.

This is war!

JAPANESE TRANSLATION

Okan – a pet name for mother like mom, mama, or mommy

Ikou – Let's go

Isoide – Hurry

Ima – Now

On'na no akachan – Baby girl

ITALIAN TRANSLATION

Sono il tuo peggior incubo – I'm your worst nightmare.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's been some time since I started this series. I took a break from it, and at times, I was unsure if I would go on. However, I received several inquiries via email, messenger, and responses to Facebook posts asking if the other Disciples would get their own book.

I've returned and enjoyed taking a foray back into this world. Writing another MC book (Nitro) in an anthology with other authors lit my passion for the MC world again.

Phantom's story was extremely important for me to get out, and I have loved writing every bit of it. I hope that you enjoyed reading how Hadiyah and Phantom found their love and healing as they navigated the dark, cruel world of sexual exploitation and trafficking that they escaped from.

If you or someone you know or love has been a victim or is a victim of human trafficking, you can get assistance by dialing the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888-373-7888).

Thank you for your continued support of my work. Thanks for your reviews, and thank you for taking the time to read this.

Cassie ☐

ABOUT CASSIE

Cassie Verano pens romance for readers of all cultures and backgrounds. Her love of romance is borne from the beauty and joy she sees in the relationships around her. She enjoys creating fiction about women discovering true love and women who aren't afraid to explore their sexuality.

As a professional administrator, she dreamt of the day she could toss her paperwork aside and craft stories that inspired love and romance in women's hearts worldwide. As a wife and mother, she enjoys playing quirky games and singing with her family.

This southern belle is a native Georgia Peach who enjoys reading, writing, and trying different cuisines from around the world. On rainy days, she can be found cuddling under a blanket with a good mystery book in her hands or watching a romance movie on Hallmark or LMN.

Cassie is the other half of the dynamic duo podcast Cozy Sips with C.a.T. with her co-host Tiye Love. They interview other authors on books, life, love, and sex. Their show airs every other Tuesday at 7 PM CST / 8 PM EST. Catch it on YouTube at: <https://bit.ly/3S6lNWC> or Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/CozySips>.

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